‘Under the Paving-Stones, the Beach!’

The Epistemics of Thomas Pynchon’s California Trilogy
and Adornian Implications of Conceptualization

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‘I think we need not be overly worried about critically dominating Pynchon’s work; his texts are more than capable of fighting back.’

Martin Paul Eve (2014), 130
Acknowledgements

Writing about Danielewski made me dislike his fiction; writing about Pynchon turned me into an even bigger fan. Whereas the former turned out to be all form/no substance, Pynchon’s fiction quenches every reader’s thirst for jacked up literature. The hardest part of writing this dissertation was not only making sense of Adorno (and, more importantly, subsequently translating it into coherent statements) but eliminating topics to discuss in the California trilogy. The novels I discuss are – even though they’re (rightfully) considered to be ‘Pynchon lite’ – so dense that every single word allows for deconstruction. Due to spatial boundaries (not only that of a dissertation but the fact that I have a smaller word limit than usual, which made me flirt with its upper limit), I had to make serious cuts in themes and examples. My most impactful decision was to almost completely exclude Vineland from this dissertation. Subsequently, deliberately choose for the unorthodoxy of disregarding politics; if I were to allow those, killing my darlings would have been even more nerve-wrecking.

I would like to thank my dissertation supervisor, prof. Dr. Gert Buelens, not only for advising me but for sticking up with my (at times) incoherent or vague topic proposals. Furthermore, I truly appreciate the trust he had bestowed upon me to venture my own way through the jungle of Pynchonian and Adornian academics.
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0. Introduction

John Diebold and Michael Goodwin start *Babies of Wackiness: A Reader’s Guide to Thomas Pynchon’s Vineland* with the following claim:

People read Thomas Pynchon because he's fun. That's why one reads any good novelist, of course, no matter how "literary" or "difficult." Melville is fun, Dickens is fun, Joyce is surely fun. Pynchon, who we rate as one of the greatest novelists of the 20th century, is big fun. Reading his novels can be every bit as challenging (and rewarding) as solving a difficult puzzle. [...] reading his novels can be every bit as challenging (and rewarding) as solving a difficult puzzle. (2002,1)

A comparison with Joyce is not far off: Pynchon’s literary oeuvre is likely one of the most celebrated among fans of American postmodernism, just as Joyce is often considered to be one of the greatest in British avant-garde modernism. This fandom (or at times even cult following), which is vibrant as never before on the internet, translates itself not only into reading and re-reading his novels but also into collaboration of the (pseudo-)academic as well; there are, for example, several fan made per-page-annotated explanatory lists of terminology (e.g. *Babies of Wackiness*, being one among many). ‘Only Pynchon the reader can fully understand Pynchon the author’ is by now an idiom, yet those lists prove themselves not only handy but even necessary when reading his novels as they are littered with references to obscure (predominantly sixties) pop culture and in-depth, anfractuous mathematics and physics – just as Joyce’s encyclopedic novels require a vast knowledge of (primarily) the English language to fully make sense of them.

One can note another striking resemblance between Joyce and Pynchon – the vast amount of academic interest in both writers. Not rarely has been stated that after Shakespeare, Joyce is the most ‘written about’ author in the English language; but analogous to the Shakespeare and Joyce ‘industry’, Dalsgaard, Herman and McHale spot a blooming of academic publishing on Pynchon which is by now leading to the point where they speak of a Pynchon industry or ‘Pyndustry’ (2012,1). 23 PhDs on Pynchon’s fiction were awarded in the
UK alone\(^1\) (Eve 2011), one of which belonging to Martin Paul Eve. The latter wrote both his doctoral thesis (Hostility or Tolerance? Philosophy, polyphony and the novels of Thomas Pynchon, 2012) and an academically published book (Pynchon and Philosophy: Wittgenstein, Foucault and Adorno, 2014) – although some parts overlap - partially on how Pynchon’s work(s) resonate or approach the philosophies of (among others) Frankfurt School’s Theodor W. Adorno. This dissertation will follow in that strain but, while not necessarily challenging Eve’s claims, take a different approach and highlight certain aspects of Adornian philosophy. That being said, what follows is not criticism of or a supplement to his research – instead, I use his work as a welcome (comprehensive) guide to explore other regions of the ‘Adornian Pynchon’ (or ‘Pynchonian Adorno’, as we lightly thread the application-historicism wire (cf. infra)).

The first and foremost distinction is that I will solely focus on Pynchon’s so-called ‘California trilogy’\(^2\), consisting of The Crying of Lot 49 (1966), Vineland (1990) and Inherent Vice (2009). In comparison to his encyclopedic and notoriously difficult novels such as Gravity’s Rainbow (1973), Mason & Dixon (1993) and Against the Day (2006), they (and especially Inherent Vice) are sometimes referred to as ‘Pynchon lite’. That nickname is justifiable but at the same time misleading: although being notably shorter (although Vineland and Inherent Vice and their 400 pages are ‘up par’ with a lot of relatively larger canonized texts) and in some aspects perhaps relatively less complex, the works still manage to construe labyrinthine plots. Furthermore, the density of the texts allows for a large quantity of interwoven themes and motifs.

A loss of complexity and quantity does not translate itself into one of quality, however, and the literary importance and prevalence of the California novels should not be underestimated: The Crying of Lot 49 has a very rich academic history and has been included in the TIME 100 Best English-language Novels from 1923 to 2005 (2010), Diebold and Goodwin state that ‘even Vineland, his most recent, and most accessible\(^3\), novel, has confounded many literate readers’ (2002, 1), and Inherent Vice – perhaps the ‘true’ Pynchon

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\(^1\) That number dates back to 2011, so there might have been additional Ph.D’s awarded since then.
\(^2\) What exactly these novels have in common – aside from the obvious common locative element – and why they are often treated as an entity of research in Pynchon studies is discussed in 2.0.
\(^3\) A statement I disagree with. Of course a [to date] is implied, but The Crying of Lot 49 is in many ways a more ‘straightforward’ and accessible novel – both plot- and themewise.
lite - has recently been adapted to the eponymous movie. Whereas Eve’s work uses Pynchon’s oeuvre as a whole to discover patterns, I will treat the California trilogy as a separate research object. This endeavor offers new and interesting insights in a sub-branch of Pynchon studies, as most of the oeuvre studies tend to take *Gravity’s Rainbow* as the quintessential ‘novel at hand’. I would not call the California trilogy insufficiently examined (especially *Lot 49*) but there is a diminished interest in comparison to *GR, V.* and more recently *Mason & Dixon* and *Against the Day.* Especially *Inherent Vice* has, due to its fairly young age, received relatively little academic attention.

A second discrepancy lies in the method of research (or at least in its outcome): in *Pynchon and Philosophy: Wittgenstein, Foucault and Adorno,* Eve constantly cycles back and forth between Adorno and Pynchon. He stresses the importance of ‘the juxtaposition and intersection of philosophy and literature’ (2014, 5) and ‘suggest[s] the path [of research] to be taken, must tread the space between these chasms of ‘application’ and ‘historicity’’ (6). After all, mere application of philosophy might be the traditional approach but ‘tends to infer a deep parity of thought from mere surface similitude, a grasping of an image that is taken to embody the whole philosophical work’ (5) – and that is true, especially since few other authors so feverishly resist the urge of such a single application; if Pynchon’s work were an application (or image) of philosophical stretches, it would resemble many and none at the same time⁴. A (solely) historicistic approach, on the other hand, would start with the assumption that Pynchon read the theoretical works you attempt to uncover in his writings⁵, or that ‘some form of shared historical Geist is the prerequisite for the possibility of both their writings’ (6)⁶. Eve chooses the middle path not only by means of enacting interaction between Pynchon and several philosophies at once (whilst beforehand warning us of the implications of that limited spectrum) but also by finding equilibrium between his research

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⁴ Eve points out that that is the origin of ‘[forty years of] hostility towards philosophical thought in Pynchon’s work by demonstrating that no single philosophical standpoint has yet to resonate completely with even one of his novels’ (2014,5).

⁵ In a discussion about this matter I had on an online anonymous image board, someone cleverly noted: ‘I’ve a sense a lot of both Pynchon and DeLillo is a response to Adorno’s negative dialectics. I also think that negative dialectics is a response to Beckett’ (Waruso 2016). That statement is open for hefty discussion (Adorno did had keen interest in Beckett and DeLillo’s *White Noise* (1985) substantially echoes *Negative Dialectics* and *Dialectic of Enlightenment,* for example), including the fact that it is the clearest form of the historicising approach that Eve intends.

⁶ That is not to say that more historical readings are faulty; historiographic metafictions such as *Mason & Dixon* are perfect examples that Pynchon’s novels can be read from the historicists point of view.
object, the texts, and subject, its philosophical nature and reading. In this dissertation, I will attempt to honor that path of research but allow for more emphasis on textual analysis rather than its requisites; in short, more Pynchon, less Adorno.

Instead of cycling back and forth between author-philosopher, I will first of all situate the concepts of Adorno’s philosophy that provide fruitful applications when it comes to the California trilogy. Special attention goes to commentary on his *Negative Dialektik* (1966) and *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (1944, together with Max Horkheimer) as those works provide notions and discourses that are surprisingly ‘applicable’ to the three novels. Neither I nor Eve were the first to discuss Pynchon and those two works, as Samuel Thomas already explored Frankfurt School ideas (including negative dialectics) in *Pynchon and the Political* (2007). In that work, Thomas attempts to undo the (at that point) consensus of Pynchon as ‘a dispassionate […] chronicler of entropy and apocalypse’ (73) by exploring both the very abstract (e.g. as his observation of resemblance between Pynchon’s and Adorno’s interpretation of enlightenment (37)) and the very concrete Adorno, translated into the detailed (anti)political.

Despite the very political nature of Adorno’s philosophies and his keen interest in the particular over the abstract (cf. infra), I will try to abstain from discussing (or comparing with) actual, ‘real world politics’ and ideology in Pynchon as it has not only often been done before but because I will make certain useful abstractions of Adorno’s philosophy. In the political Pynchon, hardly anything is left undiscussed — dixit Sascha Pöhlmann:

[I invite] readers to reevaluate Pynchon’s whole oeuvre anew while emphasizing once again its political dimension (2010, 9). Politics are always already global and local in

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7 With the word antipolitical I refer to accusations of antitotalitarianism or hailing counterculture, but those are of course highly political stances themselves.
8 He is, after all, a sociologist as well.
9 Naturally, this is because Pynchon’s novels lend themselves to political analysis. That does not imply that Pynchon is a highly political writer, but a steady stream certain political rhetoric is always detectable in one way or another. Due to the fractured nature of his novels and their resistance of holism, it occurs that critics have trouble finding ‘real world counterparts’ to some of the ideas expressed in his novels. In her conclusion to *Thomas Pynchon and the American Counterculture* (which of course portrayes a highly politicized Pynchon), Freer attributes all characteristics of ‘New Leftism’ (who are not coincidentally very much influenced by the Frankfurt School) to the author (although she bases her claims for the largest part on readings of *Gravity’s Rainbow*) but admits that Pynchon, of all authors, never fails to at least partially mysticize the person-author relationship (55-82; 173-182). After all, he openly proclaimed to be racist in his introduction to the short story collection *Slow Learner* (1984, 3-6) and is more than once criticized for his hetero-normative discourse.
Pynchon’s novels; they are never merely national (which is not to be confused with the local) (22).

This does not mean that I will try to ‘depoliticize’ Pynchon (nor Adorno, in fact); such an attempt is destined to fail. However, I would like to diminish the emphasis on whatever his political strain(s) his novels might portray (no matter how broad or exact) and instead investigate the prominence of epistemological and ontological uncertainty without having political and ideological deductions and consequences interfere. My choice is thus to abstain from two patterns. Firstly, that of highlighting the availability of ‘ready’ politics in his novels. Secondly, the pattern that Adorno himself lays out: the particular\(^{10}\) is the key to the universal and not the other way around, since the ordering of thought is arbitrary (1958, 242). Aside from not wanting to suffocate in the already extensive academic tradition on the political Pynchon, avoiding the ideological has a double motivation: firstly, such abstractions would allow me to engage with Pynchon’s texts more freely and more in-depth, as constant referencing and reformulation of Adorno would impose limitations. Secondly, it allows me to engage more critically with Adorno’s (notoriously difficult) texts and especially secondary texts. The construction of those ‘ready-made’ abstractions will be sufficiently supported by a vast array of resources.

The closest the application of those abstractions upon the texts ever come to politics is his (or rather, their) attack of the culture industry; not only how it top-down deceives and (dis)orders its ‘victims’ but more importantly how it undermines individuality. This is the final chapter of this dissertation – and not coincidentally the least abstract and most directly an ‘application’ of Adorno’s texts – and is the culmination of the preceding more abstruse chapters in which I explore Pynchon’s epistemological and identity crises. The rationale behind ordering the chapters in that way - in order of appearance: crises of knowledge, being and wanting – will become clear in the very first chapter in which I make an attempt to deduce and structure Adornian philosophy so it follows that very pattern. After all, the chapters on Pynchon can be translated to (chronologically) Adorno’s ‘priority of the object’,

\(^{10}\) The particular, of course, in ‘deabstractifying’ the universal in politics. This dissertation is fully particular when it comes to textual analysis.
‘identity theory’ (with special attention to negative dialectics and the concept of nonidentity) and his criticism of the culture industry\(^\text{11}\).

Due to the nature of the three novels I will discuss, I choose to mainly (if not exclusively) focus on close readings of *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Inherent Vice* and only incidentally include *Vineland* into my research. I choose to do so because *Vineland* is by far the most ‘actual political’ of the three and is accordingly treated in academia: Schaub (2012), Green et al. (1994) and Patell (2001) agree that the novel is his most political one in the sense that is was most objectively referring to ‘real life politics’\(^\text{12}\) rather than political philosophy and ideology\(^\text{13}\). Thoreen ultimately summarizes it as follows:

> [...] in his fourth novel, Pynchon returns to the earlier model of the universe, applying it, significantly, not to the onto-epistemological framework adopted by his characters, but to – imagine, of all things – a moral system. [...] It would be difficult, in fact, to mistake this mode of existence as one that is in any way endorsed by Pynchon.\(^\text{14}\) (2003, 55)

Either way, *Vineland*’s pre-Thomas academic history seems to be (justifiably) anchored for a great deal in what Eve would call the historicist path. Furthermore, it is not *Vineland*’s lack but rather *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Inherent Vice*’s surplus of interesting epistemological and identity failure that convinced me to emphasize the latter two. In the end, *Vineland* is the outsider novel of the three; the similarities and discrepancies of the other two make them a more favorable research entity. The claims I make in this dissertation about the California trilogy will always include *Vineland*, although my actual research object is more concerned with what I would call the California hard-boiled duo.

I will point out that nature of epistemological uncertainty in the selected Pynchon novels is construed both plotwise and by means of narratological constructs. Aside from my own findings and close reading analysis, I will use points David Seed’s *The Fictional*

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\(^\text{11}\) Admittedly, Adorno’s *The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception* can hardly ever provide a strictly apolitical reading and a priori makes a promise of avoiding the practical political fail. It is, however, such a marvelous culmination of the two previous chapters and such a ubiquitous leitmotif in Pynchon’s that one cannot justify completely ignoring it when working with Pynchon’s and Adorno’s texts.

\(^\text{12}\) Especially apparent in the novel’s criticism of the Nixon, Carter and Reagan eras.

\(^\text{13}\) Although the concepts of the dystopian/utopian and (anti-)communitarian character are explored to a great extent in respectively Thomas (2007) and Patell (2001), political philosophy remains a topic that I will avoid.

\(^\text{14}\) An example of *Vineland*’s academic commentary in the material rather than the philosophical.
Labyrinths of Thomas Pynchon (1988), John Dugdale’s Thomas Pynchon: Allusive Parables of Power (1990), Danielle Bukowski’s Paranoia and Schizophrenia in Postmodern Literature: Pynchon and DeLillo (2014), Dwight Eddins’ “Probing the Nihil: Existential Gnosticism in Pynchon’s Stories” (2003), Leo Bersani’s “Pynchon, Paranoia, and Literature” (2003) and Worth Hawes “Postmodern Epistemology in Foucault and Pynchon” (1993) made to strengthen my claims. Paula E. Geyh’s Assembling Postmodernism: Experience, Meaning, and the Space In-Between will serve as a theoretical framework that allows me to ‘peel’ the layers of omnipresent paranoia, (non-)existence and uncertainty in the California trilogy. After all, I will argue, the selected novels correspond to the idea that his literature\textsuperscript{15} not only makes ambiguity and miscommunication (one of) their topic(s), plotwise, but that the texts themselves invoke those very concepts to the reader textually and narratologically – a vice-versa effect. For this chapter, I will stick to Lot 49 and Inherent Vice; the two novels share a large amount of characteristics by which they evoke said confusion and I will treat their similarities and differences accordingly.

Subsequently, those texts will help me to translate the effects of an epistemological to an ontological crisis: as paranoia and unknowingness develop, Pynchon’s novels underline not only exterior but also interior ambiguity. I investigate the rendering of such a ‘crisis of being’ in two ways: firstly, by taking a close look at how (an awful lot) of Pynchon’s characters resist the constraints of categorical self-identification\textsuperscript{16} and, more importantly, what the friction between the categorical ‘belongingness’ and nonidentical ‘uniqueness’ implies. Secondly (and consequentially) how those (failed) forms of identification correspond with Pynchon’s portrayal of the underground counterculture\textsuperscript{17}. It is all too obvious that a politicized version of counterculture is one that acts upon (or against) the establishment culture, but the question to which extent its prefix remains valid in the California novels is an important one.

\textsuperscript{15} I dare not say ‘postmodern literature’. ‘We may have to stop calling Thomas Pynchon a postmodern writer. This is not because his works are not postmodern, but because they are more than that, and referring to them with that term only is even more of a simplification than it usually is, and also a misleading one [...] [it is] inappropriate to limit one’s view of these texts to a postmodern framework’ (Pöhlmann 2010, 9-10). By saying so, she echoes Copestake’s (2003) statement that the author ‘can claim to be as far removed from any adherence to critical assertions of literary postmodernism’s identity as he can equally claim to be one of its foremost practitioners’ (9).

\textsuperscript{16} This term is explained in chapter 1.

\textsuperscript{17} Not entirely coincidentally a very prominent aspect of the academic ‘Pyndustry’, as
All too often, counterculture in Pynchon is synonymous with just another form of consensus\(^\text{18}\): one that is ‘miraculous’ instead of ‘bland’ (Schaub 2012, 34). The latter is a little more hopeful yet still partially an echo of what Adorno and Horkheimer stated, considering even the counterculture is/has an industry and that ‘perpetually cheats its consumers of what it perpetually promises’ (1944, 341). Counterculture is therefore not only a response to or consequence of the resistance of top-down conceptualization tactics but at heart, ironically, a likewise creator of false and unsubstantial identity. To help me state my case, I will also make critical use of Freer (2012), Bose (2016), Bersani (2003), Patell’s *Negative Liberties: Morrison, Pynchon, and the Problem of Liberal Ideology* (2001), Ian D. Copestake’s “‘Off the Deep End Again’: Sea-Consciousness and Insanity in The Crying of Lot 49 and Mason & Dixon” (2003), Bernard Duyfhuizen’s “‘Hushing Sick Transmissions’: Disrupting Story in The Crying of Lot 49” and Deborah Madsen’s chapter on “Alterity” in *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Pynchon* (2012).

The final part of this dissertation briefly touches upon another ‘main topic’ in the Pyndustry: that of mass media and pop culture as a means of (not) conforming and, in the Adornian sense, deception of the masses. This is not only the sum of the first two topics (in the end, categorical identification must have some sort of origin) but also the apex of Adornian Pynchon: both have written extensively on the subject – one in the form of fiction, the other in the form of critique. For this chapter I will not only point out Pynchon’s (pretty straightforward) techniques of implementing a pervasive TV and pop culture and an exhausting amount of references thereto into his narratives, but also what implications these have for the epistemological and ontological uncertainties and the sense of ‘belonginglessness’ I have laid out in the previous chapters. For this (admittedly short) chapter, I will present my own deductions but gather support from Aoileann Ni Eigeartaigh’s *‘I Shop, Therefore I Am: Consumerism and the Mass Media in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, Bret Easton Ellis and Douglas Coupland* (2001), Dugdale (1990), Patell (2001), Brian McHale’s chapter on *Pynchon and Postmodernism* in the *Cambridge Companion*  

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\(^{18}\) On a meta-level, Pynchon’s novels (not their texts) and those of his contemporaries do not escape the paradoxical gray zone of counter- and establishment culture: ‘[his] account of branding as a trope for cultural authorship remains implicit, on the one hand encouraging novelists to consider those “unsuspected” yet politically empowering ways in which they might become “particular kinds of public authors” by branding themselves for the mainstream, but, on the other hand, signaling novelists’ complicities with a market for culture that is, at best, indifferent to the power of their claims. (Bose 2016, 93-94)
(2012), David Seed’s *Media Systems in The Crying of Lot 49* (2003) and offer alternative readings from Bose (2016) and Schaub (2012). Lastly, it goes without saying that Eve’s findings will resonate throughout the entire dissertation.
1. Adorno and ‘concept’

The input of Theodor W. Adorno into contemporary philosophy and sociology is in part fueled by his responses to other philosophies. His texts tend to be very difficult, as are the philosophies that his work is mainly concerned with (or ‘against’): the notoriously difficult Kant, Hegel, Popper, Husserl and the at times indecipherable Heidegger. In this chapter, I will briefly (unfortunately, Adorno’s more complex philosophical theories somewhat resist that adjective) draw conclusions from a wide array of secondary texts about his works rather than deduct them from his work; most importantly because Adorno critics have better deduced ‘the gist of it’ than I ever could. My primary source of information will be *Adorno’s Negative Dialectic: Philosophy and the Possibility of Critical Rationality* (2004), in which Brian O’Connor presents a marvelous contemporary look and thoroughly analyzed commentary on the original *Negative Dialektik*. With concerns to his *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, *The Cambridge Companion to Adorno* (ed. Huhn, 2004), *The Adorno Reader* (ed. O’Connor, 2000) and Natalia Baeza’s “Adorno’s ‘Wicked Queen of Snow White’: Paranoia, Fascism, and the Fate of Modernity” (2015) will assist me to make valid abstractions and use these to discover Pynchon’s techniques.

Let it be clear that I will use those abstractions to make claims about Pynchon’s texts and not about the nature of literature. If I were to do so, however, I would have to interact thoroughly with Adorno’s aesthetic theories. ‘Authentic works unfold their truth content, which transcends the scope of individual consciousness, in a temporal dimension through the law of their form,’ (Adorno 1967, 143); works of art themselves correspond to truth and authenticity on an entirely different level than they do in the texts I will discuss. This dissertation is not so much interested in what the crises of knowing, being and wanting imply on a larger epistemological level but rather in how the texts and their plots and characters construe such crises.

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19 And most certainly not in their qualitative implications, which Adorno seemed to enjoy commenting on.
1.1 The priority of the object’s nonidentity

In his book, O’Connor’s ventures into Adorno’s epistemology with two main concerns: the ‘priority of the object’ and the ‘role of subjectivity’. According to Adorno ‘every epistemology is determined by a normative commitment to how the world ought to be,’ he says, and the branch’s trademark subject-object relation is ‘never a neutral report of purely natural responses’ (2004, 1). Adorno does not agree with the subjectivism that has (according to him) infiltrated contemporary philosophy which ‘excludes the possibility of a model of experience in which subject-object reciprocity can be accommodated’ (45). That is to say that those models’ assumption of the priority of the subject bothers him; he prefers the opposite, as according to his philosophy ‘objects are irreducible to concepts’. If they were, they would ‘not be able to encapsulate particularity when employed as the sole meaning-bearing element of our experience’ (46). Adorno shares in that aspect Hegel’s and Kant’s and perhaps even Descartes’ idea of ‘experience’, namely that it exists solely at a moment of judgment (’I think therefore I am’20). Therefore, if objects in the philosophical sense were to be filled with a universal and thus exclude judgment (since it is no longer necessary), experience would be ‘mere awareness’ (idem) – hardly interesting. Hence his fascination for the particular (cf. supra).

To Adorno, the attention for the reciprocal relation between subject and object is crucial. They are each other’s opposite yet inseparable, reminiscent of De Saussure’s piece of paper analogy. As O’Connor points out, ‘mediation’ is a key term he uses to stress the ‘meaning-producing qualities’ of that reciprocity:

[...] subject and object constitute one another as much as [...] they depart from another. [...] [They] reciprocally permeate each other. (Adorno 1966, 142; 176)

If an expression of either subject or object is given, they can be nothing but distorted. Why then, does he make a distinction and gives the priority given to the object? O’Connor lets Adorno answer that question and clarifies:

20 Although sharing the judgement factor with that statement, Adorno would very likely describe Descartes as a philosopher who, unlike him, prioritizes the subject. Furthermore, Descartesian and Kantian philosophy emphasize the juxtaposition of subject and object (e.g. in the form of dualism).
‘an object can be conceived only by a subject but always remains something other than the subject’ (Adorno 1966, 184). It’s reality as what we might call “something to be known” constitutes its independence and, for Adorno, its priority in the epistemic process: ‘the object too, is mediated: but according to its own concept, it is not so thoroughly dependent on the subject as the subject is on objectivity’ (Adorno 1977, 747). Adorno in this regard sees the subject as the “how” and the object as the “what” of the mediational process (idem, 746). It is as the “what” that the object has, according to Adorno, its priority. (O’Connor 2004, 52)

As one immediately notices, the priority of the object does not undo the subject of its importance. This ‘what’ only exists within the mediation, of course – the object carries no meaning without the subject as the agent of the experience instituted by judgment. That moment of experience is nonconceptual (cf. infra, nonidentity), and that is in its essence Adorno’s axiom that goes against subjectivism (cf. supra). Because, unlike what Kant and Hegel say, the subject conceptualizes objects but object and concept will never be the same: no object is simply ‘given’ and/as they are historical and have the potential to change (62).

Let us continue by investigating the essence of what Adorno calls ‘negative dialectics’: nonidentity. He calls them negative, because he emphasizes the importance of that which is freed of all conceptualization\(^\text{21}\). Unlike traditional teleological dialectics (e.g. Hegelianism or in practice, for example, Marxism) not identity but nonidentity (or nonconceptuality) is the core of both reason and reality. Reality, because the nonidentity of objects is that which resists conceptualization, the remainder of the object after conceptualization. Reason, because ‘to think is to identify’ (Adorno 1966, 5) and to give in to identification\(^\text{22}\): ‘a subject thinks under an idealist system, he or she conceives an equality between the concept in the subject’s mind, and the reality that is subsumed under that concept’ (Eve 2014, 131). To conceptualize is to give priority to the subject (as in that transformation of the object, the subject is the agens), to respect the particular of a particular object is to give priority to the object. In short: nonidentity is exactly what confines the particular, both within object and subject, and is the non-conceptual core of both.

\(^{21}\) Of course, he says much more than that. I merely extract the (to this study) meaningful elements.

\(^{22}\) At least, in the construction of truth (cf. supra).
When it comes to literature, it is crucial to note the following: one should consider language an agent of conceptualization, as the notion ‘particularity’ itself can impossibly resist becoming a concept. Or, as Gandesha puts it:

That language lies at the heart of Adorno’s concept of experience is clear in his repeated efforts to set into motion the dialectic between what he called ‘expression’, or that which adheres to the particularity of the object almost to the point of incoherence, and ‘communication’ through concepts that, ultimately, must sacrifice such particularity. (2004, 106)

Language is then much more than what positivists called a ‘medium of representation’. For Adorno, it does not correspond truth for that would equalify object and concept. He chooses to call this ‘identity-thinking’ (107), whereas we can assume that he advocates ‘nonidentity-thinking’ – ironically, a contradictio in terminis.

How, then, do we arrive from such an abstract epistemology to the concrete notions (such as paranoia and uncertainty) we need to make our case with the epistemological and ontological crises in Pynchon? How does the concept of nonidentity relate to the possibility of knowing? All of the above is what Adorno called a ‘metacritique of epistemology’: he ‘refuses any clear separation between what might be called epistemological categories (truth and untruth) and moral ones (good, bad, etc.)’ (Wilson 2007, 69). The nature of truth is not strict (positivism) nor relative but evaluative and experiential. Baeza (2015) calls this the crisis of knowledge23:

The relation of knowledge has become, in Adorno and Horkheimer’s view, a relation between an abstract subject that endows things with meaning and an indeterminate object that has no meaning in itself other than its being the matter that is conceptually ordered by subjective categories. [...] Thus the external world, as an independent bearer of meaning, and thus an active participant in the process of knowledge, is lost and becomes a mirror of the subject. (Baeza 2015)

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23 Although her work primarily draws a comparison between Nietzschean on the one hand and Adornian and Horkheimerean paranoia on the other to ‘apply’ as one of the main reasons of (historical) fascism, she offers great insights in Adornian epistemics.
Furthermore, she notes that the mechanism that Adorno and Horkheimer describe as bringing about the loss of external reality [...] is “paranoid projection” – the mechanism at work in the formation of paranoia, one of the narcissistic neuroses. [...] It identifies projection with a mechanism by which the subject imputes the formal structure of its own mind to reality as a whole, so that external reality appears as a mirror image of the subject. This is the mechanism that creates the epistemic estrangement from external reality [...] (idem)
1.2 The dangers of conceptualization and categorical self-identification

At this point, I would like to make two claims that help me to abstractify Adorno’s take on epistemology to the point where it becomes useful for an analysis of Pynchonian literature. Firstly, since we are not so much interested in truth but rather in perceived truth and truth-forming, the crisis of knowledge in Pynchon corresponds to the problem of identity thinking. Pynchon (especially with his detective-like plots) portrays plots and characters that interact intensely with positivist thinking. More specifically, the objects of a ‘case’ are universalized in ‘problem’ (e.g. crime, conspiracy, etc.) and ‘solution’ (e.g. catching the criminal, uncovering a strict ‘truth’) and conceptualizations ought to always help a ‘case’ forward. Pynchon masterfully deceives both his characters and readers who have conceptualized part of literary experience to a sort of Proppian teleology by installing (what Propp would call) irreducible narrative elements in their most identical form. Epistemological uncertainty is thus ‘evoked experience’ rather than ‘actual experience’, because the characters experiencing such an epistemological crisis are all too occupied with identity thinking. In short: in the novels I will discuss, conceptualization does not bring order in thought but disorder in experience. One can argue that Pynchon stretches Adorno’s metacritique of epistemology to the extreme – whether that is deliberate or not, is a too ‘historicistic’ question.

My second and more abstract derivation of Adorno’s evaluative epistemology comes down to the following: subjects that occupy themselves with conceptualizations of the object will also treat the subject as an object that adheres to (socially grounded) universal principles. The subject thus conceptualizes itself, leading to what I will coin as ‘categorical self-identification’. In line with Adornian philosophy, this is a notion that goes against Kantian dualism because it not only prioritizes the subject (cf. supra) but it also highlights the inherent failure of its application: if the subject treats its subjectivity as the object of its conceptualization, neither can exist without the other because they are (in some sense) the same. Categorical self-identification is treating the ‘self’, the ‘psyche’ as an object and conceptualizing it – with all consequences that follow from that, in particular an alternation of the subjectivity in line with what it “considers itself to be conceptualized as”. It takes
identity thinking to the next level: ascribing a (conceptualized) identity to one’s self and acting upon the premises of that conceptualization.

This may sound puzzling but it is not; a priest, for example, does not only act according to the categorical elements of priesthood (piety, etc.) but applies an identity to the ‘object of his subjectivity’. If he would not do as such, he would merely ‘act like a priest’ and not ‘be a priest’ – identity thinking is more than at ever play here. Pynchon’s characters (especially in *Inherent Vice*) emphasize the failure of categorical self-identification: nearly every subject abides in one way or another to the principle, yet none of them manages to stick to the categorical boundaries their identity thinking implies.24 Surely they may dress, act and even think25 accordingly, but none of them can fully live up to those strictly delineated patterns of identification and conform to the (kind of) cliché identity they attribute to themselves. Their nonidentity or particularity thus manages to have a significant impact on their subjective experience.

It should be clear by now that the first abstraction constitutes a crisis of knowledge (or “how do I know? – what is there to know?” – the unfamiliarity of the object) and the second a crisis of being (or “who is knowing? – who am I?” – the unfamiliarity of the subject), correlating with the epistemological and ontological uncertainty so often topicized by postmodern critics. Although demeaning different aspects of Pynchon’s fiction, those themes are in line with what McHale calls incredulity (‘we no longer place our faith in [...] progress [and] enlightenment’ (2012, 140)) and decentering (‘disintegrat[jion] into a “rubble of distinct and unrelated signifiers (Jameson 1991, 26),” as a consequence and correlative of the decentering of the postmodern subject’ (McHale 2012, 100)). One can regard paranoia, a recurring theme in all of Pynchon’s novels, to reflect both these stances. Due to the intertwinedness of subject and object, an altered look at reality not only affects object (obviously) but subject as well:

The whole world appears as a creation of thought; it becomes meaningful and accessible only by being subsumed under the classifying categories of the mind. The object loses significance and the mind, now suffering from megalomania (as is

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24 If we were to borrow from psychology, one might think of ‘self-fulfilling prophecy’ and ‘self-handicapping’ as two possible outcomes of categorial self-identification.
25 And, as we know, ‘to think is to identify’ (cf. supra).
characteristic in paranoia) stands supreme as the legislator of what counts, meaningfully, as real. (Baeza 2015)

Eve agrees that, according to Adorno, identity thinking substitutes the primacy of the subject:

Adorno sees, therefore, that in the usual mode of identity thinking, for which dialectics is frequently blamed rather than our “[striving] for unity”, the subject is given priority as those aspects of reality that do not fit with the subject’s concept “will be reduced to the merely logical form of contradiction” (Adorno 1966, 5). In this sense, contradiction is no more than “nonidentity under the aspect of identity” […] (2012, 174)

‘A non-identitairian approach’, he explains later, would not “construe contradictions from above” and “progress by resolving them” but would rather “pursue the inadequacy of thought and thing, to experience it in the thing” (Adorno 1966, 153)’ (Eve 2012, 184). A paranoid character, however, will attempt everything in its power to resolve those contradictions. ‘Paranoia symptoms are formed in an effort to rebuild the world, to re-establish rapport with objects and things’, Baeza notes, ‘but the mechanism by which the world is rebuilt is projection, and it leads to the re-construction of the world along a framework in which paranoid delusions hold “the world” together in a rigid system that admits of no contradiction from without’ (2015). The latter is in line with what O’Connor phrases perfectly as follows:

Through his view that the negative dialectic accounts for experience in a way that is uniquely consistent with rationality Adorno seems to operate with a normativity of correctness: in order to get experience right this is what one must think. [...] it is the case that for Adorno the kind of philosophy a person chooses depends on what kind of person they are [...] Of crucial significance here is the claim that understanding – a conceptual activity – is a property of experience, the subject must thereby always be in a conceptual relation to the object. Subject and object do not melt into some kind of nonconceptual unity. Interestingly, the claim to such unity turns out [...] to be an elevation of the subject: the thoughts, feelings, or whatever of the subject are simply elevated to pure truth. (2004, 5-7)
1.3 Mass culture and media: the final form of deception

Adorno wrote excessively on the subject of mass culture and, what he and Horkheimer coined in *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (and more specifically the chapter ‘Enlightenment as Mass Deception’), the culture industry. However, all of those writings have a sociological and political in- and output. In this chapter I will not attempt to avoid that (admittedly unavoidable) sociological foundation but rather try to sift it through the subject-object sieve – what can his (or their) findings contribute to the conceptual disfigurement of the nonidentical and how do the relate to the abstractions made in the previous chapter?

I would like to start with what Adorno puts forward as ‘authenticity’.

To introduce Adorno’s concept, Max Paddison goes full-on semantic: ‘in its most straightforward and everyday sense, the term ‘authenticity’ refers to ‘the real thing’, the original, the unique, as opposed to the illusory, the imitation, the reproduction, the fake, the counterfeit, or the mass produced’ (2004, 201). If one were to take his principle of ‘the nonidentity of identity and nonidentity’ even further than I have discussed so far, he or she can posit the following claim: void of its attributed concepts, the remaining nonidentity is the object’s ‘truth’ (or authenticity). Paddison responds to my claim as follows:

These everyday meanings are also part of Adorno’s use of the term *Authentizität* but are given a turn toward conceptions of ‘truth’ and ‘untruth’ which are critical in orientation. In everyday terms, ‘truth’ can, of course, be taken reasonably simply as ‘true to’ something outside itself, loosely along the lines of correspondence theories of truth. This raises the question: true to what? One version is ‘true to self’, in the sense of inner expression of ‘true identity’, as implied in the aesthetics of expression. (idem)

‘True identity’ flourishes in nonidentities, but the problem with that is the human nature (or society’s illness) to categorize or universalize objects so that those are denied any movement to the surface. Let us return to O’Connor and the normativity of correctness: since the thoughts of the subject are elevated to ‘pure truth’, the search for ‘true identity’ – for

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26 Not the easiest enterprise, as ‘his notion of authenticity is never directly defined or addressed, and its meaning has to be inferred from its relation to other concepts’ (Paddison 2004, 198).
Adorno, an impossible endeavor – becomes ‘goal-directed normativity’ or ‘the way things ought to be’ (O’Connor 2004, 5). The quest (goal-directed at core) for authenticity is a flunked one\(^{27}\), as it ultimately seeks to find truth, which at its turn is a search for a ‘whole’ identity.

The same occurs within the ideas of enlightenment, as they propose the positivistic escape from irrational authority as a norm. Human reason is the path to reason, but that same reason utilizes conceptualization as a means of ordering the world. Accordingly, Adorno and Horkheimer are very critical of the concept and its omnipresence in society:

> Enlightenment, understood in the widest sense as the advance of thought, has always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters. Yet the wholly enlightened earth is radiant with triumphant calamity. (1944, 1)

At the core of enlightenment is not ‘truth’ but the construction of truth, they argue. The categorical self-identification that comes from the individualism enlightenment propagates is thus also a construction; its categorical element constitutes to the ‘creation’ of an identity rather than its ontological “being”, the nonidentity. Consequentially, we should ‘read from [the object’s] features the admission of falseness which cancels its power and hands it over to truth’ (idem, 18). I believe we should read this as follows: applying categorization and conceptualization implies applying ideology, which (of course) by itself cancels out any form of ‘pure truth’.

Criticism of enlightenment (in its current form\(^ {28}\)) does of course not equal an indefinite appraisal of pre-enlightenment thinking, since the authoritarian character of such societies was more apparent and evenly inescapable. However, Goehr takes note of what Adorno defines as a shift in authority – that from delineated figures of authority (God and king, for example) to an authority of construed truth and authenticity:

\(^{27}\) The possibility of knowing the authenticity of the object, not the authenticity or Echt-ness of a work of art. This distinction is crucial, as his sociological works are much more concerned with the latter than with the former.

\(^{28}\) Adorno says that concepts always show historical and sociological progression (O’Connor 2004, 7). It would therefore be unwise to suggest that he and Horkheimer criticise the actual ideas proposed by (for example) Voltaire, as instead they are concerned with how ‘enlightenment thought’ is inserted into and hailed by their contemporary society.
Adorno thinks one of the most hellish aspects of the existing order is that it sustains itself by making people think their society has assumed the only possible and best form, that their interests and desires are being fully satisfied. (Goehr 2004, 235)

Eve paraphrases that by saying that ‘in contemporary, enlightened society, human freedom has been repressed in contravention of the stated purpose of Enlightenment thought’ (2012, 203). The primary agent of that so-called enlightened zeitgeist is pop culture and mass media which allows ‘products [to] become standardized and distribution techniques [to] become rationalized’ (idem). The deception takes place when the subject encounters and re-encounters the same standardized products – culture is no longer produced by society but it produces society. Conformity is the new enlightenment: the historical subject thinks it has been lifted from authority, while the authoritarian tone has merely shifted from what one has to do to what one wants. In Vineland and Inherent Vice, for example, Maragos notes that

[...] television not only plays an important part in the characters’ lives, but makes them adjust those lives to its commands. Most characters, from Prairie and Zoyd to the extreme case of Hector Zuñiga, understand the world through their favorite television series and the conventions of that medium. (2010, 170)

Furthermore, and quintessential to the problem at hand here is that

Pynchon’s America [...] and subsequently the whole world, has reached a state where the rule is: if the TV does not say it, then it is simply not true, or in opposite fashion, if the TV does say it, then it must be true. In our society of the spectacle, as Guy Debord would have it, ‘everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation’ (Debord 1983), and that is where a contaminated truth lies. (Maragos 2010, 170)

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29 Not only ‘pop culture’ as we know it (televised, etc.) but also the reproduction of canonized art. For Adorno, this was strictly negative – he clashes with Walter Benjamin’s notion of ‘the democratization of art’. (Hullot-Kentor 2004, 195)

30 Adorno became interested in this subject when he emigrated to the United States. Coincidentally, he was introduced to mass consumer culture in California – the same setting in which Pynchon’s California trilogy takes place.
Apparently for some, it seems that the most straightforward way to escape these “spoon-fed lies” is to actively denounce them. John Lennon famously said that ‘if everyone demanded peace instead of another television set, then there would be peace’, and that summarizes the concept of the hippie counterculture: an organized (‘everybody’), ideological (‘demanded’) but most importantly counteractive (‘instead’) culture. *Inherent Vice*’s “Bigfoot” Bjornsen, ever so skeptic and sarcastic about nonconformity, would probably summarize counterculture somewhere along the lines of “resist the man, man” – and that is exactly what it attempts: resistance. However, as I shall explore in chapters 2.2.2. and 2.2.3., counterculture abides to the same rules of conceptualization and categorical self-identification as the “sheeple” it distances itself from. Mass media, in its turn, is only the agent of mass consumerism, which ‘is set to continue as a powerful force in contemporary society’ because ‘we need it and its constructions to protect us from an external world which many suspect is nothing but a void’ (Ni Eigeartaigh 2001, 72).

The latter echoes what I have explored in the previous two chapters; the character in Pynchon’s novels require a guide for meaning-giving. Epistemological uncertainty is only superficially resolved by following the ‘reason equals truth’-principle (given to them on a silver platter by media such as television, radio and billboards) and *filling in* their identity as a given commodity through which those same agents communicate. To summarize what will follow, I can say that Pynchon shares Adorno’s conceptions of truth and untruth: subjects conceptualize objects, so that they only make untruthful conceptualizations (that they, accordingly to enlightenment thinking, accept as truth) of “what those are” (crisis of knowledge), subsequently “who they are” (crisis of being) and thus use those means of categorization to constitute “what they need/want/enjoy” (crisis of wanting) - the latter is of course the sum of the former two, the result of the two grand untruths. All three of those crises are forms of deception, and all three of them in themselves are proof of the other two.
2. The California trilogy

In The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Pynchon (2012), Schaub’s chapter on the novels I will discuss is not called “the California trilogy” or anything of the likes, but “The Crying of Lot 49 and other California novels” (30). In lights of the format of the “companion”, this is an obvious choice: Lot 49 is a canonized work by now, whereas the other two novels are (up to this point) barely or never studied outside of Pynchon studies. Since the publication of Inherent Vice, the three have often been read and studied together:

Thomas Pynchon’s longer works wander widely in time and space. [...] His shorter novels, [...] are all set primarily in the time and place in which Pynchon seems to have lived while writing some of them, California in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. The publication of the third such novel, Inherent Vice, in 2009 makes it possible to consider Pynchon’s “California novels” as a distinct group and, more specifically, to examine the significance of the setting, both as it distinguishes these books from his longer ones and as it is used to articulate themes that run through all his work. (Miller 2013, 225)

However, their significance lies not merely in the contrast between his other works but in the specific characteristics the novels share: ‘each is a parable of the American nation. Together they form a mini social and political history of the culture as it devolved from an era of myriad social changes and expanding opportunities to one of conservative reaction’ (Schaub 2012, 30).

Let us start by pointing out the importance of their shared locative element: California – the Southern part of the state, more specifically. Lot 49’s protagonist Oedipa travels to San Narciso and the storylines of Vineland and Inherent Vice take place for the greatest part in Gordita Beach (Los Angeles). Firstly, and most obviously, Southern California serves as a perfect backdrop for stories about counterculture; hippie culture flourished in the state and it was notorious for its high amount of substance addicts. The latter is most prominent in Inherent Vice and Vineland, novels that features passages of avowed drug abuse every two pages. The two novels portray that drug culture twofold: they praise hallucinogens for their liberating qualities and clearly oppose the skepticism of Inherent
Vice) or all-out war on (Vineland) drugs they vividly depict. Lot 49 is less depictive and optimistic about drug culture: protagonist Oedipa and her boyfriend Mucho’s psychiatrist Dr. Hilarius (“nomen est omen”) prescribes acid to relieve his patient’s anxieties, but the psychiatrist eventually loses it and Mucho seems to have lost all interest in his spouse. On the other hand, Oedipa refuses to take the prescribed LSD and becomes even less capable of finding order in the world. Secondly, McClintock and Miller say that California evokes a feeling of ‘hope for an alternative future’:

[California is] a “realm of the subjunctive” [...] In the cultural imagination, California has often played an analogous role; as essayist Richard Rodriguez has written, ‘California has for so long played America’s America. The end of the road. Or a second shot at the future’ (2000, 273). [...] The idea that [...] Southern California holds out a promise of reinvention, of second chances, of alternative lifestyles is a cultural stereotype [...] (2014, 2)

That “realm of the subjunctive” is featured in a previous essay by Miller, in which he explains that to call it subjunctive (as in the opening of possibilities), is to take a middle path between ‘promise’ and ‘postmodern exhaustion’ (2013, 227). It is of course not just by accident that those two concepts respectively rhyme with what I previously called ‘constructing truth’ and the impossibility of finding it through reason. ‘Promise’ requires conceptualization (“opportunity”, a “good” “future”, etc.) just as much as ‘postmodern exhaustion’ denies it. Or, as Miller phrases it, ‘the physical and cultural malleability of the California landscape, though, betrays the ephemerality of such “projections”’ (228).

Another shared aspect is that all three novels take on (partially) the form of detective fiction. While Larry “Doc” Sportello is the only “real” P.I. protagonist, the three novels start with some form of quest: Oedipa Maas get a letter in which she is demanded to execute the will of ex-boyfriend and multimillionaire Pierce Inverarity, “Doc” Sportello’s nap is disturbed as his ex-girlfriend inquires him to find out more about plans to do away with her current lover and real estate mogul Mickey Wolfmann (who some pages later completely disappears, turning the “whodunit”-factor up a notch) and Vineland’s Zoyd Wheeler’s longtime ex-wife and mother of their daughter Frenesi has gone missing.
All of these initial problems are introduced as the starting point of an exciting investigation but eventually become subplots and are resolved anticlimactically. Instead, and this is especially the case in *Lot 49* and *Inherent Vice*, they are simply introductions to the novel’s “actual” plots – in all cases, among the lines of resolving a conspiracy. Or, as Seed puts mentioned about the entire Pynchon oeuvre:

Whereas in the fiction of Chandler Brossard and Kerouac the quest pattern gives the narrative impetus, Pynchon's ambivalence about meaningful goals renders his characters' quests ludicrous. They become pretexts for action or self-perpetuating process. (1988, 8)

For example, we never really see how Oedipa executes Inverarity's will – instead, we find her searching and wandering aimlessly through San Narciso, looking for clues of a secret and underground postal agency by the name of Trystero. “Doc” finds Wolfmann arrested in Las Vegas and the plot never reveals what exactly had happened to him. Furthermore, “Doc” encountered Wolfmann completely by accident as he was on location for another case – related to the “Golden Fang”, a boat/Indochinese crime collective/ideal (we never really get to know) he got obsessed with on his mission to locate Wolfmann. What is even more striking is that these “conspiracy plots” are never fully resolved; in its apex, “Doc” fights off a drug lord who we are to believe is likely no more than a pawn of the “Golden Fang” and we leave Oedipa with a cliffhanger, as she anxiously waits for an agent of Trystero to make a bid on the infamous ‘lot 49’ -Inverarity’s stamp collection.
2.1. Pynchon’s crises of knowledge

2.1.1. Projecting a world: the epistemological problem in The Crying of Lot 49

The primary strategy Pynchon uses to create a crisis of knowledge is to portray his characters’ conspiracy thinking as if it were embedded in an ultimate truth. By doing so, both reader and character experience two transformations of enlightenment thinking: on the one hand, “human reason” dictates the opposite of what the reader reads and the character experiences. After all, few conceptions seem as unlikely as an underground world-wide postal system or a secret criminal organization that successfully infiltrates the money-market with its bills that ‘no matter which denomination, [...] have Nixon’s face on them’ (Pynchon 2009, 117). On the other hand, Pynchon illustrates those conceptions as detailed and trustworthy as possible – not just his characters but his plots construct truths as well.

   Enlightenment dictates that “human reason” is the core of all logic, but that same reason is apparently (who would have guessed?) susceptible to deception – his characters are not robots. In the end, neither reader nor character knows truth from untruth and logic from paranoid impulses. The objects and plot elements we/they encounter lose their final nonidentity when they are conceptualized as “clues”. Haferkamp uses the juxtapositions to make a similar point:

   On the whole, Pynchon creates his universe by complementarizing problematic dichotomies [...] in epistemological terms, by complementarizing the pole of the clarity and distinction and that of obscurity and confusion. Regarding them as distinct and separable poles in counterpoint would only obscure their crucial connections. [...] Once refracted through Pynchon’s lens, it turns out that “reality,” constantly undulating and particulate, comes to connote the clearly indistinct as well as the obscurely distinct, thus enmeshing all sorts of counter-strains in a web of relations to underscore two major characteristics: their diversity and connectivity. (2010, 319-320)
Although Haferkamp does not stipulate it as such, that is a very Adornian thing to say: “reality” (mind the inverted commas) is undulating exactly because of its historical totality (cf. supra).

What Haferkamp describes is exactly what happens in _Lot 49_: the clarity manifests itself in Oedipa’s perception, the confusion in the web of relations she construes. In fact, Oedipa _actively_ searches for distinct objects to weave into her theories. One passage beautifully portrays how Oedipa’s paranoia grows, and how she slightly but steadily no longer requires “logic” to conceptualize incentives as belonging to the category of “Trysterian elements”:

Either Trystero did exist, in its own right, or it was being presumed, perhaps fantasied by Oedipa, so hung up on and interpenetrated with the dead man’s estate. Here in San Francisco, away from all tangible assets of that estate, there might still be a chance of getting the whole thing to go away and disintegrate quietly. She had only to drift tonight, at random, and watch nothing happen, to be convinced it was purely nervous, a little something for her shrink to fix. (1966, 82)

Unfortunately (yet not exactly surprisingly), that does not happen – ‘it took her no more than an hour to catch sight of a muted post horn’ (83); the symbol of the Trystero and its W.A.S.T.E. collective. It is often featured on (fake, Trysterian) postal stamps and Oedipa apparently discovers these all over the city of San Narciso. As the story progresses and the plot thickens (and, one could say, the boundary between distinction and obscurity fades), Oedipa increasingly encounters those muted post horns and other clues leading to the Trystero. Also, as Seed notices, ‘one of the main ironies of _Lot 49_ [is] that the more sensitive Oedipa becomes to information the more chaotic that information becomes. In a whole variety of ways the communication process breaks down entropically towards total disorder’ (1988, 146).

Oedipa’s inability to distinguish constructions from deductions is relative compared to the outright craziness of Dr. Hilarius, who throws a fit near the end of the novel and shoots his rifle at whatever comes at him – except Oedipa. I will pay significant attention to this event, as Oedipa is in this case portrayed as “the voice of (human) reason” who is suddenly at ease with her own (be it perhaps less disturbing) epistemological crisis.
"Oh," said Hilarius, "it's you."

"Well who did you think you'd been...

"Discussing my case with? Another. "There is me, there are the others. You know, with the LSD, we're finding, the distinction begins to vanish. Egos lose their sharp edges. But I never took the drug, I chose to remain in relative paranoia, where at least I know who I am and who the others are. Perhaps that is why you also refused to participate, Mrs. Maas?" He held the rifle at sling arms and beamed at her. "Well, then. You were supposed to deliver a message to me, I assume. From them. What were you supposed to say?"

Oedipa shrugged. "Face up to your social responsibilities," she suggested. "Accept the reality principle. You're outnumbered and they have superior firepower." (1966, 104)

Subsequently, we learn about Hilarius' history as a doctor in Buchenwald that worked on ‘experimentally-induced insanity’ (because, 'a catatonic Jew was as good as a dead one’ and 'liberal SS circles felt it would be more humane') (105). The text allowed for deductions of the Mengelian reference, as before the tale of his past he mumbled about ‘cantankerous Jews’, Israeli conspiracy theories and he ‘sounds like a Gestapo officer’ (8). ‘Deciding what to liquidate and what to hold on to is a wonderful image of memory, shaped by the tension between what is solid and what becomes fluid’ (Della Marca 2010, 254); but Hilarius fails to have a solid perception what is and what is not memory. At the pinnacle of his lunatic rant, the psychiatrist fears that everyone around his tries to bring him to Israel and put him to trial - 'like Eichmann' (1966, 106). In this case, California fails as a “realm of the subjunctive” (cf. supra): on the one hand, it does appear as a haven of the chance to start anew (as Argentina was for Eichmann). On the other, however, it flops when the self-categorized subjects attribute too much to the conceptualizations of their identity. Hilarius’ treatments with LSD, for example, seem mere reproductions of the experiments he and his colleagues performed in Buchenwald:

So they had gone at their subjects with metronomes, serpents, Brechtian vignettes at midnight, surgical removal of certain glands, magic-lantern hallucinations, new drugs, threats recited over hidden loudspeakers, hypnotism, clocks that ran backward, and
faces. Hilarius had been put in charge of faces. "The Allied liberators," he reminisced, "arrived, unfortunately, before we could gather enough data. (105)

‘Faces’ have always seemed an obsession of Hilarius, and in our very first encounter he explains his theory that ‘a face is symmetrical like a Rorschach blot, tells a story like a TAT picture, excites a response like a suggested word’ (8). This is all in line with the abstraction I made earlier: hardly ever is the attribution of qualities and categories as crystal clear as when Hilarius dictates that faces’ nonidenticality, to the perceiver, immediately evokes more than just allowing for reading an expression but that they ‘tell a story’. ‘Rorschach blots’ and ‘TAT pictures’ are then of course the very embodiment of that principle; psychological tests that deliberately require conceptualization. The latter is a form of active conceptualization of the object, which might be an interesting phenomenon on a psychological level but not on an epistemological. Passive conceptualization, however, is a non-deliberate form of making sense and construing knowledge (which then leads to constructions of “truth”); for Hilarius, for example, the discovery of secrets of the psyche is more than a practice – he conceptualizes it as a “goal”.

Oedipa’s sarcastic tone when she comforts Hilarius is a remarkable change of mind, as her own inability to ‘accept the reality principle’ and disturbed state of mind was Oedipa’s incentive to pay her shrink a visit:

She had decided on route, with time to think about the day preceding, to go see Dr. Hilarius her shrink, and tell him all. She might well be in the cold and sweatless meathooks of a psychosis. With her own eyes she had verified a WASTE system: seen two WASTE postmen, a WASTE mailbox, WASTE stamps, WASTE cancellations. And the image of the muted post horn all but saturating the Bay Area. Yet she wanted it all to be fantasy, some clear result of her several wounds, needs, dark doubles. She wanted Hilarius to tell her she was some kind of a nut and needed a rest, and that there was no Trystero. (100)

Hilarius’ response to her confused state of mind is that she should ‘cherish’ the constructions she has built. ‘What else do any of you have? Hold it tightly by its little tentacle [...] for when you lose it you go over by that much to the others. You begin to cease to be’ (106).

31 W.A.S.T.E. is an acronym for “We Await Silent Tristero’s Empire” and is the slogan of Tristerians.
Oedipa has no trouble in acknowledging other’s conceptions as mind tricks (‘Israelis, [...] coming in the windows. If there aren't any, he's crazy.’ (idem)) and is also aware of the possibility that she is simply hallucinating. She deconstructs her own narrative and divides her findings into three possible origins: she is either hallucinating or an observer of an actual underground postal service – one that she has no evidence of, only clues. Lastly, however, she could have unknowingly fallen into one of Pierce Inverarity’s last ‘mind games’. She discusses this with Mike Fallopian, a recurring character:

"Has it ever occurred to you, Oedipa, that / somebody's putting you on? That this is all a hoax, maybe something Inverarity set up before he died?" It had occurred to her. But like the thought that someday she would have to die, Oedipa had been steadfastly refusing to look at that possibility directly, in any but the most accidental of lights. "No," she said, "that's ridiculous." (129)

This Mike Fallopian character is, despite being a relatively minor one, the most blatantly political one. He is the member of the Peter Pinguid Society, a far right-wing organization Pynchon invented to mock ultraconservatives (such as the John Birch Society). In popular culture, conspiracy theories are usually associated with that sort of ‘right-wing nut outfits’ - and indeed, ‘they are accused’ of being paranoids’ (32). In spite of this, Fallopian is one of the few members that do not feed her conspiracy – and the only one to point out that it might all be a trick of Inverarity. Then again, the latter is also a form of attributing identity to clues (as objects). That is proof of the fact that once “truths” are constructed, they can hardly ever be undone of their identity (in the Adornian sense) as to speak out against a conspiracy theory is to merely transform the attributed identity, not undo it.

‘Paranoia,’ Maragos states, ‘is closely linked with the circulation of information and media technologies. The possibility of an all-embracing conspiracy (and the subsequent paranoia) is only viable if there is a communication network to build and support it’ (2010, 32)

32 An adequate term as I indeed perceive her narrative as a construction.
33 Fallopian (and his Pinguid Society) is an interesting character due to his (their) out-of-the-ordinary remarks about politics in general. Without going to far in detail, I should note that he hates capitalism as much as he hate Marxism; although he is keen to find structures and ‘underlying truths’ (34) (cf. Oedipa!) in the core of society – a somewhat more Marxist than conservatie characteristic.
34 ‘Selectively throughout Pynchon’s works, the focus of Pynchonian paranoia rests upon the non-specific ‘They’. In The Crying of Lot 49 it may indeed be ‘The Government’ who will read your mail, in Vineland it is certainly ‘The Government’ who exercise ‘control’ (VL, 220) and in Inherent Vice, it is quite clearly the police who are after Doc’s stash. (Eve 2014, 106)’
Such a communication network is a different way of encapsulating a ‘web of interconnected relations’ (cf. Haferkamp) but to communicate is also to conceptualize (cf. 1.1). The erasure of particularity of objects is exactly what makes them conceptualized: they are made fit to engage within a scheme of thought, and are attributed connections to each other. Of course, to conceptualize does not always entail paranoia or conspiracy thinking – it would render every subjective form of reasoning crazy. However, as is the case with the latter two, ‘Oedipa's efforts to create order collapse because she cannot even identify the basic rules which would make her information meaningful’ (Seed 1988, 146). The most obvious example of this is that the initial incentive of her quest to uncover Trystero was set in motion by a line in ‘The Courier’s Tragedy’, a play directed by (and starring) Randolph Driblette – an unprecedented feeling overwhelms her out of the blue yet the novel never accounts for this:

No hallowed skein of stars can ward, I trow, Who's once been set his tryst with Trystero.

Trystero. The word hung in the air as the act ended and all lights were for a moment cut; hung in the dark to puzzle Oedipa Maas, but not yet to exert the power over her it was to. (Pynchon 1966, 54)

After Oedipa inquires Driblette about the word, he warns her and foresees the rest of the plot35: ‘You can put together clues, develop a thesis, or several, about why characters reacted to the Trystero possibility the way they did, why the assassins came on, why the black costumes. You could waste your life that way and never touch the truth’ (59). Once the fuse is lit, there is no turning back for Oedipa. Several pages later she analyses the play’s text further and lets her imagination run wild:

If she’d thought to check a couple lines back in the Wharfinger play, Oedipa might have made the next connection by herself. (Pynchon 1966, 70)

And after gathering these ‘connections’ (again, the pinnacle of construction), she concludes:

OK. It's unavoidable, isn't it? Every access route to the Tristero could be traced also back to the Inverarity estate. Meaning what? That Bortz, along with Metzger, Cohen,

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35 Driblette turns out to be an expert of the text. An evident conclusion here is that ‘the text’ does not necessarily limit its scope to ‘The Courier’s Tragedy’ be can be an implication for The Crying of Lot 49 as a whole. After all, the plot of the latter is in some way a ‘courier’s tragedy’.
Driblette, Koteks, the tattooed sailor in San Francisco, the W.A.S.T.E. carriers she'd seen that all of them were Pierce Inverarity's men? Bought? Or loyal, for free, for fun, to some grandiose practical joke he'd cooked up, all for her embarrassment, or terrorizing, or moral improvement? (Pynchon 1966, 131)

Ni Eigartaigh’s reading of *Lot 49* implies that Oedipa’s paranoia might be a deliberate choice to escape the banality of it all:

Her desire to be subsumed into paranoia or even insanity can be attributed to the widespread belief among the characters that paranoia, the feeling that you are part of a conspiracy, is infinitely preferable to the opposite state of ‘anti-paranoia’ where nothing is connected to anything else. [...] Some critics believe that paranoia can sometimes constitute a positive force for the characters: [...] the information uncovered by Oedipa, although occasionally frightening and leading eventually to a nervous breakdown, is still better than ‘the drab predictability’ that robs the modern world of a spiritual dimension [...] Pynchon himself regards paranoia as a positive force, elevating his characters from the status of ciphers and making them feel important. (2001, 125)

Later on, she is not fully convinced of the ‘liberating force’ her colleagues speak of for ‘none of the characters who resort to paranoia end the novels in a happy and secure state’ (idem, 126). I want to add to this that this form of ‘liberation’ is exactly what Adorno is wary of in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: just like enlightenment’s liberation of the mind, what Oedipa experiences is just the transformation of oppression. The shackles are not her master’s but her own, no matter how much conspiracy theorists’ would like to believe the opposite. As Oedipa puts it herself, her mental state at the end of the story is ‘oh God, [...] the void’ (36) (132). Bukowski adds to this that ‘for Oedipa, agency could only be understood in relation to a paranoid plot, in terms of whether one believed one had agency (total control in asserting a master narrative) or believed one’s agency to be under threat (under total control by the master narrative)’ (2014, 30). As much as agency, *communication* (or miscommunication) is one of the key aspects of the novel, and it is perhaps due to that that - in the Adornian sense – truths are *constructed* rather than *there*. Miscommunication is the ‘essence’ of the story; it is the

Mind the use of the definite article. It is not ‘a void’ or merely ‘void’.
lack of understanding in her conversation with screenplay director Driblette (cf. supra) that got her to delve into the Trystero tar pit in the first place. When Nefastis cries out loud that ‘communication is key!’ (79), the text allows for this claim on a metalevel: communication between reader and text is in this case one-sided, as are Oedipa’s experiences.

Maragos says that ‘Pynchon’s protagonists are the hunted or the excluded, and they have found themselves unknowingly in the middle of a conspiracy they cannot fully understand, which results in paranoia’ (2010, 179) but I do not fully agree: the novel’s question is not so much as to how the conspiracy affects Oedipa’s paranoia but in what ways her paranoia attributes to the conspiracy. A text is only itself and offers nothing but itself and Pynchon’s narratological (and chronological) elements render the opposite not epistemically impossible (and uninteresting). Due to the Oedipa-centered narration, the reader experiences the same conflicts as the novel’s protagonist. However, the frustration of “not knowing” strikes the reader on a different level. At the end of the story, the cliffhanger is not the only source of dissatisfaction – more importantly, it is the fact that the narration denies its reader any form of “clarity”. Plotwise, the cliffhanger would merely translate itself to the question whether or not Oedipa finally gets an answer to her question about the existence of the Trystero; narratologically, however, a reader wants answers that concern the epistemological (what of all this is true?) rather than the ontological (does the Trystero exist?). With regards to that ultimately ambiguous ending, Seed enjoys Pynchon’s irony:

Instead of resolving the narrative, Pynchon places Oedipa in an audience and by repeating the novel’s title throws the reader back into the text. By this stage in the novel it has become clear that Oedipa’s search [...] is a comically exaggerated imitation of the reader’s own potential anxieties in making sense of the novel. Inevitably these anxieties resolve to a large extent around information since Pynchon takes a constant delight in teasing the reader towards crucial revelations and then denying them. (1988, 123-124)

At least attributing to that ‘making sense’ is the encounter of the novel’s most quoted line, when Oedipa spots the muted trumpet for the very first time:

37 More on this quote and its interesting cotext in 2.2.
38 And perhaps mental issues – she was not purposelessly seeing a shrink for a reason after all:
Under the symbol she'd copied off the latrine wall of The Scope into her memo book, she wrote *Shall I project a world?* (Pynchon 1966, 66)

And that is indeed what she does for the remainder of the novel: project. The line has a long history of interpretations; to me, however, it is (in part) a pun on Plato’s allegory of the cave. Oedipa’s psyche plays a twofold role in this case: she is both the projector and projection receiver. And, to strengthen the analogy, the shadows cast on the walls are conceptualizations of the projected ‘true’ objects – their nonidentity is forever distorted by the shades. Just as she can’t tell the members of the accompanying rock group ‘The Paranoids’ apart at the start of the novel, she loses her ability to tell apart objects from concepts. ‘The novel illustrates that quests for knowledge […] are possible only as fictive representations,’ Simons dictates. ‘[It does] so by highlighting the way in which [Oedipa] attempt[s] to extract meaning from [her] experience by ordering it according to certain plots or patterns’ (2014, 213).

In *The Crying of Lot 49*, the epistemological crisis is one of the psyche, ultimately interior one that feeds itself with outside forces. A superficial question à la ‘Trystero: real or Oedipa’s?’ is futile. In the end, nothing makes sense in its own – just like Oedipa experiences San Narciso to be ‘less an identifiable city than a grouping of concepts’ (12).

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39 One of the many puns in the novel, but a semantically crucial one.

40 Cowart attributes this to Derride: ‘either/or thinking tends to reveal epistemic entrapment, that mutually exclusive binaries are always hierarchical and always invite deconstruction’ (2011, 92).
2.1.2. A doper’s memory: *Inherent Vice*’s epistemic boundary transgressions

‘Paranoia in *Inherent Vice* is’, Michiko Kakutani jokingly says, ‘less a political or metaphysical state than a byproduct of smoking too much weed’ (2009). That statement might not be far off from a plothline perspective but requires some nuance. It is most certainly so that the narrated heights of Sportello’s confusion and conspiracy thinking are portrayed right after he toked a joint or dropped acid, but the reduction of the novel’s epistemological uncertainties Kakutani makes is unjustified. True, the text lacks the ‘paranoia-inducing ontological uncertainty’ of *Lot 49* and gives way to ‘more readily identifiable and explicable fantasy/reality oppositions’, as Malpas and Taylor put forward. ‘Furthermore’, they say, ‘it seems always possible to be certain [...] about the truth or illusion of any particular passage’ (2013, 218). Unlike in *Lot 49*, the reader merely observes (and not co-experiences) Doc’s paranoia as its accompanying hallucinations are broadly announced to be the consequences of yet another marihuana high or ‘the acid talking’ (Pynchon 2009, 102). That loss of uncertainty of the agency of paranoia (cf. supra) is the biggest difference between *Inherent Vice* and *Lot 49*, but on a textual level the novel allows for more insightful readings.

*Inherent Vice*’s epitaph is an essential key to make sense of its epistemics: ‘under the paving stones, the beach!’ For Eve, ‘the beach [...] now holds its own conceptual domination, for no matter how much one reads this ‘karmic adjustment’, it masks a history of horrific racial attacks and property seizure’ (2014, 153). The latter is definitely true, and Eve comments in a later publication on how the epitaph relates to Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: ‘in contemporary, enlightened society, human freedom has been repressed in contravention of the stated purpose of Enlightenment thought’ (2014, 152). The beach – quintessential locative and mythicized element in the novel – is in other words an enchanted concept that is now repressed by progress (in the form of pavement). To translate this even further, one might say that the beach underneath the stones is nonidentical: it is, ultimately, the essence of whatever has been built upon it. It is invisible yet defines the pavement stones; the latter being (analogous to our metaphor) conceptualizations, identity givers – without the beach, however, the stones could never be as they have no foundation. The political (and more specifically, revolutionary) undertone of the epitaph is obvious and can attribute to our reading of the novel, since a return to “nature” (all too often appraised by
the hippie counterculture) in this case also implies the priority of the object. Two birds, one pavement stone.

The epitaph is not a part of the actual text and provides us only with a reflection of its epistemics. In fact, it might be an advise to the novel’s characters who are unable to recognize “the beach” (i.e. deconceptualize their objects, in this case the stones), let alone cast its exteriority away. Of all professions, Doc is a private investigator – a craft that, if anything, requires of its practitioner conceptualization skills that they do not transcend into the boundaries of “untruth”. However, Eve notes,

Doc Sportello is unable to construct even the present as a single moment of unified “truth”, being, on multiple occasions, only “pretty sure” about “what he’d said out loud” (207, 212), complicating the already bi-directional\(^{41}\) temporality of the detective frame. [...] such a rendering of the present [is that of] a fragmented, plural and decentralised reality [...]. (2012, 74)

Fragmentation and decentralization of reality are ultimately postmodern techniques (cf. McHale, supra) to emphasize subjective experience that needs identity thinking to make sense of “truth”. Tofan contributes this to the fact that ‘real(ism) do[es] not exclude the unreal, but the solution to it is found in the occasional hallucinations induced to Doc by the consumption of drugs. The states induced could offer information, at least about the gist of his mind and permit the introduction of surreal, uncanny parts without breaking the (realistic) conventions of the detective story genre’ (Tofan 2015, 729). Certainly, one can notice a break of pattern with the attitude towards hallucinogens in *Lot 49*; together with *Vineland*, the novel is more sympathetic towards drug induced fantasies. Whereas in the former it contributed to alienation, the latter text appraise its meaning-giving qualities – ‘a private eye didn’t drop acid for years in this town without picking up some kind of extrasensory chops’ (Pynchon 2009, 125). That a state of highness might offer information is specifically explicit in one of the only scenes where we witness Doc “full-on” tripping. Most of the other drug induced scenes nearly always seek balance between what is happening and what is not but Doc and long-time friend and stereotypical hippie Sortilege’s LSD trip is

\(^{41}\) Eve sees a similar bi-directionality in the epitaph: it ‘is at least part of the project of Pynchon’s novel, best embodied by the conflation of the beach and paving stones in which, in its repudiation of both linearity and total cyclicity, the final dialectical revelation is unfurled’ (2014, 157).
“completely bonkers”. Firstly, we are introduced to the idea of “pouring information out of an induced high” when we meet Sortilege’s spiritual teacher Vehi:

“Vehi’s okay,” Spike told Doc now, “though he sure does an awful lot of acid.”

“It helps him see,” explained Sortilège.

Vehi wasn’t just “into” LSD—acid was the medium he swam and occasionally surfed in. He got it delivered, possibly by special pipeline, from Laguna Canyon, direct from the labs of the post-Owsley psychedelic mafia believed in those days to be operating back in there. In the course of systematic daily tripping, he had found a spirit guide named Kamukea, a Lemuro-Hawaiian demigod from the dawn of Pacific history, who centuries ago had been a sacred functionary of the lost continent now lying beneath the Pacific Ocean.

“And if anybody can put you in touch with Shasta Fay,” Sortilège said, “it’s Vehi.” (Pynchon 2009, 105)

Later on, Sortilege notes that many of the people that take acid ‘get uncomfortable when we discover some secret aspect to our personality’ (107). This is all the more humorous considering the extremely absurdist description of his trip that precedes that statement. As it turns out, Doc experienced a past life as a being named Xpp, ‘some 3 billion years ago, on a planet in a binary star system quite a good distance from Earth’. The silly story takes up two pages and is mostly hogwash, although one conversation with the beings he meets stands out:

“Oh, and one other thing, [...] the universe? it’s been, like, expanding? So when you get there, everything else will be the same weight, but bigger? with all the molecules further apart? except for you—you’ll be the same size and density. Meaning you’ll be about a foot shorter than everybody else, but much more compact. Like, solid?” (106)

Aside from its comical element in the reference to Doc’s height (“What I lack in al-titude,” Doc explained for the million or so th time in his career, “I make up for in at-titude.” (16)), this excerpt highlights the crucial subject-object balance Adorno speaks of. Rather than
unifying the two (“feeling the universe” is a trope in drug culture), their distinction is exaggerated to the point where it reaches a molecular level.

The statement that Malpas and Taylor make, namely that the context lends a certainty to the truth/fantasy of a specific scene, correlates to the comparison Floris Heidsma makes between the novel’s unreliable narration and the ‘Theatre of the Absurd’. There, ‘spectators see the happenings on the stage entirely from the outside, without ever understanding the full meaning of these strange patterns of events, as newly arrived visitors might watch life in a country of which they have not yet mastered the language’ (Heidsma 2013, 13). He explains:

[It is clear] that Doc is an [a]bsurd character: confined to the patterns, or the lack thereof, that dictate the workings of his reality. It is only through sporadic humorous inclination that Doc fleetingly becomes aware of the absurdity and thus experiences absurd realizations. The reader, however, is continually aware, and therefore, similarly to the spectators of the Theatre of the Absurd, “are thus confronted with a grotesquely heightened picture of their own world: a world without faith, meaning, and genuine freedom of will” (Esslin 1980, 6). (13-14)

One can pure some interesting claims concerning *Inherent Vice*’s epistemic techniques out of this assumption. Firstly, that “his” reality is ultimately a constructed one: a lack of patterns implies, and most certainly in this case, that the novel’s protagonist uses conceptualization as a means of sense-making. Secondly, that a world without those distinct qualities (cf. Oedipa’s ‘the void’) is an undesirable one; hence perhaps Doc’s *tour de force* of finding truth through escapism in its ultimate form – drugs. The fading of the distinction between truth and untruth has a lasting effect on Doc’s psyche. Perhaps that is the reason of his (and his fellow dopers’) constant questioning mode of story-telling – a purely textual element to indicate this is the abundance of question marks (often several within one meaningful sentence) when they speak.

Plotwise, the novel opens up for even more questions. *Lot 49* had relatively little ‘separate’ loose ends (although one might argue that the entire novel is one), while *Inherent Vice* never accounts for its oft occurring and widely varied non sequiturs. For what opens stereotypically as a detective novel, the overall atmosphere only resembles its archetypes
when it comes to the continuation of a quest – neither in its solution nor in the structural elements leading thereto.

[T]he novel operates under a strict set of assumptions, one of the most important being that no matter how obvious elements of the solution to the mystery at the heart of the novel appear, the solution as a whole is not able to be conceived by the reader until the final pages of the novel. This assumption is altered, however, by the fact that Doc, the supposed ‘hard-boiled dick’, narrates parts of the novel, which means that the reader has access to the same mental processes as the character is generically required to solve the mystery by the conclusion of the novel. (Gourley 2011, 282)

Whereas *Lot 49* had Oedipa-centered narration, its less radical Doc-centered counterpart in *Inherent Vice* allows for the reader to see through the (equally less radical) modes of conceptualization and categorization. The epistemological issue at hand is then not so much “what can Doc know?” but “how does he get to know – and is he equally aware of his gray zone between knowing and hallucinating?” Gourley seems to agree; he points out that ‘Doc Sportello is [...] defined not by his assurance that he will solve the mystery, but is rather characterized by his confusion at the shadowy forces, and defined by his inability to come to a coherent explanation for the way the plot plays out’ (283).

Tofan is more optimistic and, in contrast to the inescapable subjectivity mediated by Pynchon’s form of narration, prioritizes Adorno’s object and subsequently seems to give in to the assumption that one can not be without the other:

Pynchon [...] demonstrate[s] once more that individuals are subjects to the complex system of the world with its social, economic, historic, cultural components, and the system cannot be reduced to the desires, concerns, fears or beliefs of all humans, and, like in the case of the inherent vice of the goods, people cannot be held liable for their inherent faults (original sin included). (2015, 729)

‘And,’ he says confidently, ‘there is always hope.’ And indeed, there is. The novel ends in harmony with Doc driving through the fog and in need of following the car in front of him – just like his doper’s memory allows him only to go forward by means of sorting clarity and
obscurity, using an act of distinction (of the particular?) to find his way through confusion (cf. Haferkamp, supra).
2.2. Pynchon’s crises of being

California is in some way analogous to “the new world”, as it, according with its mythical character, opens up for prosperous opportunities. Just like “the new world”, we can reduce its mythical qualities to a land that strips itself and its future inhabitant of their historical categories. In other words – akin to the perspectives of the settlers – California can be “whatever” and Californians “whoever”. In heavily historically embedded books such as *Mason & Dixon* or *Gravity’s Rainbow*, that is not the case;

‘[where] Pynchon’s longer works look back at moments of historical transition in order to unearth the often hidden forces that have shaped our present, the California books show those forces attempting to shape, or rewrite, the world we inhabit’ (Miller 2013, 229)

Therefore the California novels are not only guilty of constructing “truth” but “identity” as well. Whereas dialectical thinking ‘seek[s] to say what something is’, its identitarian counterpart is for Adorno ‘say[ing] what something comes under, what it exemplifies or represents, and what, accordingly, it is not itself’ (1966, 149). ‘Pure identity,’ Eve remarks, is ‘th[e] indifference to each individual life, an indifference that is, in accordance with a Pynchonesque definition of one-way, linear European-time, the dialectical direction of history’ (2014, 33). The Californian void of that history and identity thus desires to be filled in, and Pynchon’s characters do so accordingly.

Identity thinking is the pinnacle of conceptualization (and the instrument at hand in the conceptualization and categorization of objects to clues in the previous chapter), as it is applied to find structure where there is none. In *Lot 49*, Pynchon metaphorically uses the thought experiment of Maxwell’s Demon illustrate how Oedipa should legitimize her construction of truth – and not entirely coincidentally that same metaphor provides a perfect analogy for identity thinking:

“James Clerk Maxwell”, explained Koteks, “a famous Scotch scientist who had once postulated a tiny intelligence, known as Maxwell’s Demon. The Demon could sit in a box among air molecules that were moving at all different random speeds, and sort
out the fast molecules from the slow ones. Fast molecules have more energy than slow ones. Concentrate enough of them in one place and you have a region of high temperature. You can then use the difference in temperature between this hot region of the box and any cooler region, to drive a heat engine. Since the Demon only sat and sorted, you wouldn't have put any real work into the system. So you would be violating the Second Law of Thermodynamics, getting something for nothing, causing perpetual motion.”

"Sorting isn’t work?” Oedipa said. […]

"It’s mental work,” Koteks said. (Pynchon 1966, 64)

Madsen deconstructs Pynchon’s metaphor: the reader ‘seeks to identify elements of [...] fiction’ but ‘the very attempt to “sort” is likely to make your interpretive efforts comply with the theory of entropy in the communications theory sense: the more information you gather, […] the more noise is produced, and the less clear the meaning of the text. A reader of Pynchon […] often ends up enacting the very substance of the text itself’ (2012, 160). The same is true for Adorno’s notion of nonidentity: categorizing produces noise and distracts from what “is” to what “seems”. Oedipa, too, ‘enacts the very substance’ of the Demon: she receives the Nefastis Machine, a practical version of Maxwell’s experiment, but fails to put it to use. Madsen notes that ‘she questions the relationship between the reality of the machine […] in front of her and the scientific metaphor into which she is becoming subsumed’ and that ‘the sorting demon is the point at which [communication’s and thermodynamics’] distinct forms of entropy become connected rather than merely coincidentally alike; entropy consequently becomes a metaphor made “objectively true”’ (161). She concludes by stating that ‘this passage raises the question of true ontology of characters’ (idem), and that uncertainty is exactly what I would like to discuss.
2.2.1. The failure of categorical self-identification

In postmodern fiction, failed categorical self-identification is often used as an instrument with a twofold implication: firstly, it is one of the primary strategies to summon comedic effect. The characters on *The Simpsons* – without a doubt one of the most popular pop culture shows that owe a lot to postmodernist instruments of story-telling – for example, all share the same thing: they are bad at what they do and lack the stereotypical qualities so often associated with their profession/place in society. Secondly, it encompasses alterity, otherness, rootlessness and belonginglessness; think of how *Infinite Jest*’s Hal Incandenza’s unwilling resistance to conformation is arguably the main cause for his mental breakdown. For my encapsulation of how exactly categorical self-identification fails in Pynchon’s novels, I owe a lot to Madsen’s theories about alterity and ‘Otherness’:

Pynchon’s work has represented and complicated diverse contested understandings of identity and alterity by variously undermining and legitimizing them. [...] Alterity names the process by which an “Other” is constructed. It carries the double sense of both the subject position of “Otherness” in which someone is placed and also the adoption of that subject position as the Other’s perspective. [...] Thematically, alterity represents an ontological distinction between self and Other where the Other is marked according to categorical differences of gender, race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, religion and the like. (2012, 146)

Already, Madsen’s text resembles that of Adorno. Firstly, by the *construction* of an entity; secondly, by prioritizing the subject and thirdly, by using categorization as a means of sense-giving. The categories she posits here are very ‘lively’ when it comes to the California trilogy. Genderwise, for example, *Vineland* is perhaps the most interesting novel with Zoyd Wheeler’s cross-dressing and the Harleyite Order, a motor club that actively defies gendered categorization of clothing (“The Sisters? They don't give a shit. They believe whatever they do.”) (Pynchon 1990, 358).

Pynchon works with *around* racial and ethnical categorization when he describes Mickey Wolfmann:
“What can you tell me about Mickey Wolfmann?”

If she took even a second to breathe, Doc didn’t notice. “Westside Hochdeutsch mafia, biggest of the big, construction, savings and loans, untaxed billions stashed under an Alp someplace, technically Jewish but wants to be a Nazi, becomes exercised often to the point of violence at those who forget to spell his name with two n’s. What’s he to you?” [...] I wouldn’t recommend your usual approach. He goes around with a dozen bikers, mostly Aryan Brotherhood alumni, to watch his back, all court-certified badasses. Try making an appointment for once."

“Wait a minute, I ditched social-studies class a lot, but… Jews and the AB… Isn’t there… something about, I forget… hatred?”

“The book on Mickey is, is he’s unpredictable. More and more lately. Some would say eccentric. I would say stoned out of his fuckin’ mind, nothing personal.” (2009, 7)

Aside from being skeptical about categorization, there is another Adornian aspect to this excerpt: the evil of capitalism. Norms and values may be the result of constructions (and especially with groups such as the Aryan Brotherhood), but apparently the lure of cash overrules even the toughest of beliefs. Up until then, one could read this as a scam by Wolfmann – for some reason they did not know he was Jewish, although white still an enemy solely on the basis of his heritage; in this case, identity thinking attributes an entire set of values on the premise of only one categorical element. However, black militant Tariq Khalil shatters that illusion a few pages later:

“When you were inside—were you in a gang?”

“Black Guerrilla Family.”

“George Jackson’s outfit. And you say you did business with who now, the Aryan Brotherhood?”

“We found we shared many of the same opinions about the U.S. government.”

“Mmm, that racial harmony, I can dig it.” (idem, 16)
It are superiority conceptions from the Brotherhood and the Family that for Madsen are nothing more than ‘the artifact or consequence of symbolic signifying systems ‘ (147) and are in the end nothing more than proof of categorical self-identification’s and counterculture’s failure (cf. infra). Furthermore, she notes,

The postmodern ontological instability of identity categories in Pynchon’s writing is generated in large part by the discourses of alterity that the narratives use to dramatize and engage issues of racial legitimacy. The liberal humanist conception of identity as a stable, inherent core of self is deconstructed as an illusion and strategy of control in these narratives. (2012, 153-154)

Of course, that is also a very Adornian thing to say. One might rephrase the last sentence a political fashion of ‘the priority of the object institutes the importance of the object’s nonidentity.’

‘Characters who refuse the unified categories of identity or subjectivity,’ Madsen continues in line with everything we have seen so far, ‘potentially represent a strategy by which to elude conditioning and control’ (idem). In Inherent Vice, few character actually live up to any form of categorization: Doc is an untrustworthy private eye who thinks more as a more hippie than as a “law abiding citizen”, “Bigfoot” believes he is the only non-corrupt force in the LAPD while the end of the novel tells us that he’s nose-deep in all sorts of plots, Blatnoyd is supposedly a doctor but is perhaps the most disturbed spirit of all and the tough Aryans turn out to be soft-boiled eggs. Even Shasta Fay renounces her categorical self-identification by clothing, perhaps the most visible form of conceptualization: whereas she used to always wear ‘sandals, bottom half of a flower-print bikini, faded Country Joe & the Fish T-shirt’ – in popular culture an outfit conceptualized to straight outta Woodstock – she shows up to Doc in ‘flatland gear, hair a lot shorter than he remembered, looking just like she swore she’d never look’ (1).

This technique of portraying perhaps fills in both of the implications I attributed to categorical self-identification. One might argue that the characters in the novel are simply

42 This remark covers Pynchon’s entire oeuvre. His historiographic metafiction is more concerned with racial legitimacy than the California novels.
“reduced” to their struggle of conformation to the group to which think they belong. Tofan sympathizes with that strain of thought, but highlights its importance for the plot:

The characters in this novel, however, are decidedly less three-dimensional. With the exception of Doc, who has a vague, poignant charm, they bear less of a resemblance to the fully human heroes of *Mason & Dixon* than to the flimsy paper dolls who populated much of his earlier fiction: collections of funny Pynchonian names, bizarre tics, weird occupations and weirder sexual predilections. [...] Three-dimensional or not, the federal agents, doctors, officers, vice dolls, surfers, musicians, draft dodgers, all the characters in the novel gather and disband, all connecting and intersecting, loving or hating each other, designing a story, a multi-branched plot.

(2015, 728)

Another character blatantly guilty of conceptualizing his persona and acting accordingly is *Lot 49*’s Dr. Hilarius. From his speech, we can deduct that because he worked as a Nazi, he must be evil in some sort of way. Not evil in the eyes of others, but the bearer of an evilness in character – a self-conceptualized malice. On the other hand, then, does he argue that his obsessions with Freud – a Jew – would make him ‘not a real Nazi’ (Pynchon 1966, 105). He is perhaps the only character in the novel that takes categorical self-identification to its extremes; he acts and thinks accordingly to the identity he has bestowed upon himself. An extraordinary given, especially since the categorical element of ‘Nazi’ is one that conflicts with (also conceptualized) moral values.

Ultimately, Oedipa is the character where the failure is perhaps the most detectable. As for a summary of her character at the start of the novel, Eve says that ‘Oedipa is a ‘self-described young republican’ who, despite being ‘politically conservative’ also ‘takes lovers outside her marriage, cavorts with The Paranoids – a young, pot-smoking, Beatles wannabe garage band’ – but who, ultimately, ‘refuses to be part of her Freudian psychologist’s experimentations with LSD’ (2014, 51-52). As Macleod rightfully concludes, ‘Pynchon presents Oedipa as a “whole” character before she becomes fragmented by her daunting investigation’ (2014, 18). This rhymes with Jameson ‘decentered’ subject that is, in the end, nothing more than ‘rubble of distinct and unrelated signifiers’ (cf. supra). Pre-Tystero Oedipa (if we can call her that) is, despite her irregularities with being a young Republican, self-
centered: conceptualized subjectivity rules over truth-forming. After all, why should she construe “truths” if she can construct an “identity”?

The distinctness of what characterizes her is metaphorized and parodied by Pynchon when he, in the form of a slapstick sketch, lets her put on layers upon layers of clothes before she engages in a game of strip poker (23). Although the actual game never takes place, we can still interpret this scene as follows: like an onion, she could have peeled off layer by layer, only to find the “naked” Oedipa underneath. Stripped (in both meanings) of how she identifies (clothes) herself, the subject is all that remains; hence the recurring motif of mirrors. In one occasion, she walks up to one and ‘tried to find her image in the mirror and couldn’t. She had a moment of nearly pure terror’ (21). It forebodes her solipsistic trials - terror is exactly what will continue to haunt her: the disturbance from within. The latter is juxtaposed to horror, a term Fallopian uses to name whatever his ‘underlying truth’ is – either way, it is experienced as an exterior force of danger; the primary incentive for counterculture.
2.2.2. Counterculture: the response

One could define the essence of counterculture as “opposing mainstream or establishment culture by disagreement”. In the California novels, that is exactly what they are at the core: the Trystero is primarily used by outcasts who combat the monopoly of the postal system, hippie culture in *Inherent Vice* reduces the Nixonian regime and police culture to corruption and looks for other ways of living and *Vineland*’s People’s Republic of Rock ’n Roll emphasizes community in an ever individualizing world. At the level of epistemics this implies that authoritarian sense-giving or truth construction (law and its enforcement, religion, etc.) are deliberately ignored; they attempt to discover a ‘real alternative’ (Schaub 2012, 33).

The Trystero conspiracy is perhaps a bit of an oddball in its own “category”: whereas conspiracy theories are (in general) more concerned with top-down control (and their generalized metaphysics of society subsequently become an incentive for counterculture), the Trystero and the W.A.S.T.E-system ‘opposed the Thurn and Taxis postal system in Europe’ (82). Accordingly, Maragos states that conspiracy theories are defined by ‘the struggle between the upper echelons and the people who stay outside the dominant communication networks, those who belong to a past world and cannot keep up with the modern way of things [...] and it is true that the alleged enemy is almost invisible’ (2010, 173). Oedipa’s conceptualizations do not go so far as to call Trystero an enemy, and most likely because of her theory’s unusual form. This is in line with what Berressem says about Pynchon’s general love for the unusual and out of the ordinary: ‘*[Lot 49]* unveiled, for Oedipa Maas as much as for the reader, a counterculture operating in the interstices of official power and lines of information – a counterculture made up of preterites [has-beens] and losers, a group for whom Pynchon reserves, throughout his work, most of his sympathy’ (2012, 169).

The nature of counterculture does not allow for depoliticization, but the opposition towards grand narratives\(^\text{43}\) of meaning-giving and categorization is more interesting to our cause. Every counterculture develops a similar set of epistemics: whether it be the far-right (such as the Pinguind society), the far-left (e.g. hippie culture) or a group that posits itself

\(^{43}\text{Not necesarilly in the Lyotardian sense.}\)
outside of this dichotomy (*Vineland*’s TV-addicted Thanatoids, for example), they all posit themselves against the norm. Subsequently, they construct their own categorization of identities (of both subjects (e.g. ‘people of color’) or objects (‘the government’, etc.)) and assert themselves into the belief that their way of sense-giving bears a form of “truth” – not only in themselves, but also *because* they oppose what is considered the “norm”. Schaub comments on this:

Efforts to plot Pynchon’s cultural politics along some spectrum from left to right, however, encounter a degree of incoherence. Lot 49 disparages the “symmetry of choices,” of “zeroes and ones,” of a “right and left,” but the space between these extremes is occupied by the consensus culture of government and business that the novel represents as monopolistic and oppressive, a culture that has “conditioned” the citizenry to the “silence and paralysis” Oedipa encounters upon entering San Narciso. (Schaub 2012, 32)

That is what counterculture “offers” to people: escaping the pressure of society and abidance to constructed norms. According to that idea, what society, media, government and religion portray as “reality” is no more than constructed truth. The people that flunked the ‘suburban middle-class’ (idem) system – by their choice or otherwise – are more likely to be attracted to such alternatives.

Subsequently, Schaub notes that ‘Oedipa’s biggest, most lushly blossoming fantasy, the metaphor combining her isolated encounters into the idea of an alternative society “congruent with the cheered land,” is Trystero’ (36). That remark almost inevitably leads to a comparison between Trystero and Prospero from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* – not only do the names sound alike, Prospero also reigns over a mythical (cf. supra) entity whose origin stems from and whose nature defines an escape from normative culture. California loses its function as a ‘subjunctive space’ and Oedipa ‘must suspend possible interpretations of her reality and open herself to experience in the world’ – even if that means giving up on a relatively normative life (Elias 2012, 130). Bose summarizes this as follows:

*[Normativity is] commodification and suppression of the individual, [Pynchon’s] depiction of the Trystero also fantasizes about modes of cultural authorship and demotic communitarianism that draw on the brand’s “in-group” assets (its logo,
slogan, mascot, chant, etc.) in order to figure forth spaces for collective identification—spaces that, as sociologist Adam Arvidsson puts it, answer to the political “homelessness” of postmodern subjects. (Bose 2016, 4)

The engagement with and portrayal of counterculture in *Lot 49* differs in many ways from that in *Vineland* and *Inherent Vice*. In the latter two, Pynchon seems ‘less interested in the possibilities for alternative communities than in the Althusserian focus upon mechanisms that maintain the status quo, strategies that hold things in place’ (Schaub 2012, 36). The Golden Fang, for instance, seems more concerned with accumulating wealth and street dominance than actual resistance of the state; they even have their own version of the mainstream’s normative elements (e.g. currency, business plans, etc.). Whereas the Trystero is a secret and hidden entity, hippie culture in comparison is omnipresent in California’s sixties and early seventies and has some strict categorical elements that those who adhered normativity could easily recognize. In *Inherent Vice*, this is even to the extent where “the mainstream” actively uses conceptualizations of the ‘hippie pothead freak’ (Pynchon 2009, 209) for their own benefit.

Doc reached for the tube, switched it on and flipped to one of the off-network channels dedicated to long-ago TV movies and unsold pilots, and sure enough, there was the old hippie-hating mad dog himself, moonlighting after a busy day of civil-rights violation, as pitchman for Channel View Estates. “A Michael Wolfmann Concept,” it read underneath the logo. [...] Maybe the producers of these Channel View spots were desperate enough to be counting on some audience recognition. [...] Bigfoot showed up on camera wearing getups that would have embarrassed the most unironical hippie in California, tonight’s being an ankle-length velvet cape in a paisley print of so many jangling “psychedelic” hues that Doc’s tube, a low-end affair purchased in Zody’s parking lot at a Moonlight Madness sale a couple years ago, couldn’t really keep up. Bigfoot had accessorized his outfit with love beads, shades with peace symbols on the lenses, and a gigantic Afro wig striped in Chinese red, chartreuse, and indigo. (9)

Doc and his contemporaries seem to know about these techniques and spot their danger. At one instance, he and Sortilège consult a Ouija board with the question where to ‘find dope’.
Yet another of Doc’s highly unorthodox instruments of gathering “truth” – later in the novel, it also appears that the address the board spells is, you will never guess, a Golden Fang HQ. What follows is yet another example of the curious escapist epistemics of the novel, the board spells out a telephone number they dial.

“Howdy, dopers,” cooed a female voice, “we’ve got whatever you need, and remember—the sooner you get over here, the more there’ll be left for you.”

“Yeah like who’m I talking to? Hello? Hey!” Doc looked at the receiver, puzzled. “She just hung up.”

“Could’ve been a recording,” said Sortilège. “Did you hear what she was screaming at you? ‘Stay away! I am a police trap!’” (Pynchon 2009, 164)

This signals more than just another instance of paranoia, as it features one of the primary “problems” with counterculture: its accessibility from outside forces. Hippie culture was met with drastic categorization but was, ironically, at the same time reduced to looks and attitude. It was also a less delineated and communitarian group such as the People’s Republic of Rock ’n Roll in Vineland or the Trystero. Anyone who applied and identified with its conceptualizations was open for membership, and perhaps even Bigfoot’s miserable caricature begs the question: why would anyone who does not know the man think he is not a hippie? Perhaps the truest form of counterculture in Inherent Vice is embodied by the Manson cult, which had left its scars on characters of the mainstream, reactionary and hippie culture all the like - therefore being as much “contra” as a subculture could be.
2.3. Pynchon’s crises of wanting: culture industry

For Desmond, McDonagh and O’Donohue, counterculture goes through three phases: that of authenticity (in compliance with Adornian authenticity (cf. supra), but also in the literal meaning of the word – a sincere and meaningful expression), its ‘mediation as mainstream-culture seeks to reproduce and re-integrate it’ and ‘the driving tendency behind counterculture’ that it ‘is not identity or sameness but othering or difference’ (2000, 244). I owe these abstractions to Bradshaw, Sherlock and McDonagh (2004), and in line with the deconstruction they make of music in commercials, I would like to take a look at counterculture from that particular angle.

The exemplary Californian hippie culture in Inherent Vice, for example, is authentic by origin. Authentic as in heartfelt, not in what Adorno would call Authentizität – although it might correspond to what Paddison ‘true to self’ (cf. supra), if we disregard that “the self” is a conceptualized identity. It is mediated by mainstream culture at the very moment it features in any form of mainstream production; the classic footage of dancing hippies at Woodstock might be a point in time where mediation took place. Lastly, we arrive at the point where it becomes a part of stereotypical ‘American culture’, together with cowboys, truckers and hillbillies. In this last step, it loses all of its authenticity; once subsumed by mainstream culture, resistance to it is futile.
2.3.1. Counterculture: the paradox

According to Bradshaw, Sherlock and McDonagh, for Adorno ‘the process of pseudo-activity’, in this case engagement with pseudo-counterculture, ‘as where people, who not yet fully reified, seek to distance themselves from the mechanism of [...] reification by becoming more active consumers and exploring [...] alternatives however all they succeed in doing is further integrating themselves into fetishism’ (2004, 4-5). Even though Adorno’s writings can all be read in an anti-authoritarian context, the countercultures Pynchon portray hardly live up to anything deconceptualized – but perhaps that is not the point of counterculture. While the goal of countering the mainstream is acquiring ‘liberty’, most countercultures are too vividly protesting their ‘unliberty’ to enjoy the former. Disregarding explicit ‘unliberty’, it also corrupts their ideas implicitly as ‘fighting for freedom’ prioritizes the subject (“what do I want?,” not “what do I have?”) and in the Marxist sense robs them of precious leisure time.

In Countering the Counterculture, Manuel Martinez says that the juxtaposition of personal mobility, neo-imperialism and communion ‘highlights the omnipresence of an American individualist atomism and isolation that cripples the democratic impulse and leads to political and theoretical dead-ends for those “countercultural” or dissenting movements that were influenced by the Beats’44. Subsequently, he notes the ‘paradoxical desire to escape the constrictions of organization through a strategic appropriation of marginal positions and subjectivities, while at the same time erecting a defensive perimeter to hold off the growing demands of the previously marginalized’ (2003).

Epistemologically, this comes down to the failure of prioritizing the object in a setting of negative dialectics. If it were to strictly follow Hegelian dialectics, culture versus counterculture would resolve the in assimilation of the two or victory of one over the other; instead, as we saw what happened with the sixties counterculture, it could in spite of its enormous dimensions not make the difference it deemed necessary. Au contraire: outcomes of Hegelian dialectics are negated when we witness the sublimation and engulfment of one over the other, therefore negating any ‘positivistic outcome’. Martinez emphasizes that the

44 E.g. hippie culture
search for liberty is found both in reactionary (such as Fallopian’s Pinguid Society) and revolutionary (hippie culture, Trystero) countercultures. In the long run, they become cultures that apply the same instruments of categorization:

both varieties of social strategies—dissenting, self-marginalization and “reactionary” conformism/corporatism—were manifestations of a fear of the growing visibility and demands of women and minorities, and of the restrictions inherent in organized life. Ultimately, both reactionary and radical strategies had in common the articulation of a neo-individualism, and the call for the creation of an individualist space protected from the demands of the "other." (Martinez 2003)

The binary dimensions classic politics work with (left versus right, communitarian versus individualistic, etc.), hardly left any option for a “real alternative”. ‘If left, right and center are unacceptable, diversity and possibility must be found in a different version of “consensus” that shares more with aspects of new age libertarianism than with liberal pluralism’ (Schaub 2012, 32).

According to Cowart, Pynchon is aware of that inherent failure, as he states that the author ‘does not indulge in superficial moral categorizing. He avoids the simplistic depiction of prelapsarian and blameless counterculture souls ensnared by emissaries from the Great Satan in Washington, D.C. […] In Lot 49, Pynchon contemplates the paradoxes of dispossession and preterition in the land of promise’ (2011, 107). Both critics say roughly the same thing: although “members” (if we can call them that) of countercultures reduce their message and goal to resistance, they are playing the same game as that which they oppose. Even explicitly anti-authoritarian countercultures (e.g. anarchism or libertarianism), the identity of the conceptual notion of authority is merely transformed from an exterior authoritarian voice (e.g. government, police) to an internal one – the constructed “truth” that one governs his own and that authority/governing is a natural evil.

That conclusion is Dialectic of Enlightenment and Negative Dialectics in its most extreme form (and, perhaps, at their core) and is a continuation of the failures of communism and optimistic Marxism Adorno comments on in the introduction of Negative Dialectics (1966, 18). Pynchon interacts with and portrays counterculture in a similar way: secluded counterculture always becomes hierarchical, open counterculture misses its point.
Not entirely unlike the Manson cult, the locatively secluded People’s Republic of Rock ‘n Roll is communitarian by choice but engages in personality cults by heart. More specifically, Weed Atman (what’s in a name?) unwillingly acts as an authorial figure and is hailed as a martyr after his death:

Not only was nobody thinking about the real situation, nobody was even brainlessly reacting to it. Instead they were busy surrounding with a classically retrograde cult of personality a certain mathematics professor, neither charismatic nor even personable, named Weed Atman, who had ambled into celebrity. (205)

Ni Eigartaigh attributes one of the grand failures of counterculture to their anticlimactic aftermaths. Although this is a historicistic reading, the countercultural in Pynchon is always reflective of “real world politics”:

What is interesting about many of Reagan’s supporters - bearing in mind that in his re-election of 1984, he captured all but the home-state of his opponent, Walter Mondale - is that many of them must have been converts from the countercultural movements of the late 1960’s and early 1970’s. This sacrifice of ideology in favor of the material rewards offered by Reagan’s economic policies is but one of the themes addressed by Pynchon’s Vineland: ‘First thing all new hires found out was that their hair kept getting in the way of work. Some cut it short, some tied it back... Their once ethereal girlfriends were busing dishes or cocktail-waitressing’ (Pynchon 1990, 321). The reason so many ex-hippies entered into mainstream life can perhaps be attributed to the soul-destroying cynicism that stemmed from the many crises [the counterculture has been through] (2001, 12)

Proof of this is that the messages and heritage of Civil Rights and other countercultural movements ‘inspired for optimism’ when they introduced radically new ideas but were ‘fully assimilated in the mainstream’ in the nineties (13). It defines the political landscape through

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45 ‘The shape of the brief but legendary Trasero County coast, where the waves were so high you could lie on the beach and watch the sun through them, repeated on its own scale the greater curve between San Diego and Terminal Island, including a military reservation which, like Camp Pendleton in the world at large, extended from the ocean up into a desert hinterland. At one edge of the base, pressed between the fenceline and the sea, shimmered the pale archways and columns, the madrone and wind-shaped cypresses of the clifftop campus of College of the Surf.’ (Pynchon 1990, 204)

46 ‘Pynchon perceives [...] the political legacy of the 1960’s. specifically the fact that the promises made by the counterculture to alleviate poverty, abolish racism, and so on, went unfulfilled.’ (132)
the fact that ‘the right didn’t need to persecute the left because the counterculture children’ ultimately ‘wanted the authority that was voted into office’ (Schaub 2012, 36).

In spite of the reconnaissance of the concept’s paradoxes, Pynchon definitely seems optimistic about the opportunities of countercultures to provide and alternative. Although this is a simplistic deduction, but if his novels were to be brought down to a hero-villain setting, the heroes would without exception be the torch bearers of the countercultural movements; or at least be critical of enlightenment thinking in the same way Adorno and Horkheimer are. Vineland sympathizes with its outcasts of society and demonizes the police forces, and Inherent Vice portrays naïve but good-at-heart hippies against a corrupt police force and corporatism in the form of Wolfmann and the Golden Fang (which apex is to be located in the ‘fight’ scene between Doc and big shot drug dealer Adrian Prussia). Due to its epistemological undecidedness, The Crying of Lot 49 offers a multivalidity of readings in that setting: fragmented versus young republican Oedipa, Oedipa versus the Trystero mystery or, if it were in fact all a set-up, Oedipa versus Inverarity, the list goes on. Lot 49 offers an interesting case because due to its maximized levels of paranoia and solipsism, anyone stands in the way of the plot’s unravelment – even, one could say, reader and author.
2.3.2. Mass culture equals mass deception

Conceptualization and identity thinking need an agent. Throughout history, these have always been top-down authorities such as priest or king, but never has the dictator of what is “truth” and “untruth” been so democratic and its authoritarian character so easy to misinterpret as in the era of mass media. In *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer point out the highly deceptive nature of television and corporatism: our ‘choices’ are merely ‘cheats’ to control society’s concepts and subsequently use those conceptualizations to market (1944, 363).

‘Los Angeles, more than any other city, belongs to the mass media,’ said Pynchon in his essay “A Journey into the Mind of Watts” (1966 (2)), but the same could go for the entirety of Southern California. In *The Crying of Lot 49*, the noise in communication (cf. supra) is often caused by television or non sequitur advertising and one could read into the text that “truth” is thus on a textual level deliberately muffled away between the large array of other stimuli. When Dr. Hilarius has his *moment de gloire* at the end of the novel, his monologues are disturbed by attempts of media crews (including Oedipa’s boyfriend Mucho’s radio station KCUF) to get a glimpse of what is going on. Early on in the novel, it seems as if the answer to all dilemmas could be resolved, but once again television interferes:

"Do you know," Metzger said, "Inverarity only mentioned you to me once."

"Were you close?"

"No. I drew up his will. Don’t you want to know what he said?"

"No," said Oedipa, and snapped on the television set. (Pynchon 1966, 17)

What follows is an absurd conversation in which Metzger claims to be the (boy) protagonist in the movie that is just on. And at that point already, we get a glimpse her paranoid nature: ‘Either he made up the whole thing, Oedipa thought suddenly, or he bribed the engineer over at the local station to run this, it’s all part of a plot, an elaborate, seduction, plot’ (18).
Perhaps most literal example of a “deception” by mass media in the California trilogy can be found at the start of Vineland. In order to get back on the mental disability checks list, Zoyd Wheeler annually jumps through a glass window at a scene where local media are filming. The deception here lies in a clever detail, but it are exactly those details that pile up and form conceptualizations or attribute to a greater narrative:

Zoyd eyeballed himself in the mirror behind the bar, gave his hair a shake, turned, poised, then screaming ran empty-minded at the window and went crashing through. He knew the instant he hit that something was funny. There was hardly any impact, and it all felt and sounded different, no spring or resonance, no volume, only a sort of fine, dulled splintering. *…+ (Pynchon 1990, 11)

Zoyd caught sight of Hector squatting in front of the destroyed window, among the glittering debris, holding a bright jagged polygon of plate glass. [...] Like a snake he lunged his head forward and took a giant bite out of the glass. Holy shit, Zoyd frozen, he's lost it — no, actually now, instead Hector was chewing away, crunching and slobbering, with the same evil grin, going "Mmm-mm!" and "¡Qué rico, qué sabroso!" [...] Zoyd had tumbled, he was no media innocent, he read TV Guide and had just remembered an article about stunt windows made of clear sheet candy, which would break but not cut. That's why this one had felt so funny — young Wayvone had taken out the normal window and put in one of these sugar types. [...] (12)

[Later,] [t]hey sat together on the floor in front of the Tube [...] “Alerted by a mystery caller, TV 86 Hot Shot News crews were there to record Wheeler's deed, which last year was almost featured on 'Good Morning America.' "Lookin' good, Dad." On the Tube, Zoyd came blasting out the window, *along with the dubbed-in sounds now of real glass breaking*. (15, emphasis added)

This is only one tiny piece of disinformation, but deception by television is one of the novel’s major themes. The Thanatoids, yet another subculture but an inherently less political one, are the primary example of how mass media has corrupted lives:

"What's a Thanatoid. OK, it's actually short for 'Thanatoid personality.' 'Thanatoid' means 'like death, only different.'" [...]

61
"Uhk ee ahkhh uh akh uh Oomb," said the kid through a big mouthful of Takeshi's food.

"'But we watch a lot of Tube,'" DL translated. While waiting for the data necessary to pursue their needs and aims among the still-living, Thanatoids spent at least part of every waking hour with an eye on the Tube. "There'll never be a Thanatoid sitcom," Ortho Bob confidently predicted, "'cause all they could show'd be scenes of Thanatoids watchin' the Tube!" Depending how desperate a sitcom viewer might be feeling, even this could've been marginally interesting had Thanatoids not long ago learned, before the 24-hour cornucopia of video, to limit themselves, as they already did in other areas, only to emotions helpful in setting right whatever was keeping them from advancing further into the condition of death. (170-171)

When Schaub states that ‘Vineland’s satire,’ although this applies to Inherent Vice too, ‘goes beyond Adorno and Horkheimer’s critique of top-down culture industry to indict the citizenry itself,’ he means that Pynchon’s characters do not show enough resistance to those deceptions of mass produced culture. Even the most revolutionary of characters set aside their ideals of ‘long-term social change’ to satisfy their ‘sexual and material desires’ (2012, 36). Individualism trumps the communitarian character of counterculture when getting high (Zoyd, Doc, etc.) and having intercourse (e.g. Frenesi’s betrayal) become the ends, not the means.

Inherent Vice, as well as Vineland and Lot 49, is absolutely loaded with references to songs and movies that play on respectively radio stations or television sets. Also, as is the case with Oedipa, these become not only deceptions (in the sense of “meaning-givers”) but forces of distraction as well. Without going into too much detail, I would like to exemplify this with perhaps instance we know of Doc’s apartment where the television is not on but still plays a significant role. After killing mob boss (or pawn) Adrian Prussia and his swastika-covered bodyguard Puck Beaverton, Doc has to ditch the heroin from that crime scene that Bigfoot has planted in his car. What is already a comical and slapsticklike scenario becomes further exaggerated when Doc leaves the smack in a television set box with his permanently stoned neighbor Denis:
He happened to notice that the carton he’d pulled out of that dumpster in the dark had once held a twenty-five-inch color TV set, a detail he had no cause to think about till next day when he dropped in on Denis about lunchtime and found him sitting, to all appearances serious and attentive, in front of the professionally packaged heroin, now out of its box, and staring at it, as it turned out he’d been doing for some time.

“It said on the box it was a television set,” Denis explained.

“And you couldn’t resist. Didn’t you check first to see if there was something you could plug in?”

“Well I couldn’t find any power cord, man, but I figured it could be some new type of set you didn’t need one?”

“Uh huh and what . . .” why was he pursuing this? “were you watching, when I came in?”

“See, my theory is, is it’s like one of these educational channels? A little slow maybe, but no worse than high school...” (Pynchon 2009, 330-331)

Denis is subsumed in television culture to the point where it is not what is on the “Tube” that is deceptive but rather the television set itself. This is where a crisis of wanting is at its peak: he has become used to the stimuli offered to him by media channels, and that those stimuli are in nearly all cases capable of solving his needs (cf. Adorno’s comments on the availability of everything in capitalist societies). The process slowly turned upside down, and Denis focuses on wanting what he gets instead of getting what he wants. The television set (and mass culture in its totality) have conditioned him to deceive his wishes for what is on the screen rather than have his wishes partially fulfilled by what he gets to see. In that sense, the “authoritarian” mainstream culture and its agents have conceptualized Denis in a way – by making the decisions of conceptualizations and categorizations of everything else for him. Enlightenment, Adorno would likely say, is ultimately debunked here: reason is no longer man’s incentive, it is commodity.
3. Conclusion

Uncovering this relation between Adorno’s fiction and Pynchon’s California trilogy is not the most straightforward task, as one first has to decipher both texts and subsequently unearth their underlying resemblances. In the California novels, Pynchon is what I would like to call “all show and no tell”, which enhances the possibilities for discovering epistemics from the protagonists’ perspective but complicates any deductions for the distance between text and reader.

By now, the “path” I have taken should feel like obvious one. The priority of the object Adorno is so fond about, has its resemblance in the fact that I choose to discuss Pynchon’s characters’ exterior reality (or at least what they think is exterior, for the texts are clever enough to never make entirely certain whether something is happening in- or outside one’s mind) before investigation subjectivity and meaning-giving to their interior reality. Whereas the former marks an epistemological crisis on behalf of ontology, the latter presupposes the opposite: the characters experience a crisis of “being” (not necessarily in the metaphysical sense, although that is food for thought in Lot 49) because they are unable to fully make sense of the world. In counterculture and mass media, lastly, these crises are “resolved” in the way that their meaning-giving entities now take concrete forms. Of course, there is no real (optimal) resolution since it offers a somewhat pessimistic view on the matter.

In retrospect, the California novels follow the same logical structure: its characters cannot make sense of themselves because they can not make sense of the world OR they believe they can make sense of the world and themselves through spoon-fed patterns of conceptualization by television, advertisements and a fetish with enlightenment thinking. When I say that Pynchon is Adornian, I do not mean that he resolves Adorno’s critiques. Instead, he topicizes them and exaggerates their implications by applying narrative elements of confusion and therefore abiding to epistemological uncertainty.

The sublimation of that uncertainty in Pynchon’s mode of story-telling on the one hand and Adornian philosophy on the other finds itself in skepticism of positivist thinkers. Where Adorno’s disapproval of positivism is overt in his works, Pynchon uses more subtle
techniques in his California novels. Oedipa’s novel-defining *Aha-Erlebnis* when she first hears the word Trystero is such an instance; it defies the notion that logical empiricism is the only form of epistemics and sense-giving. The same happens when Doc successfully finds meaning in drug-induced hallucinations and playing with a Ouija board: he thinks out of the ordinary boundaries of categorization (as otherwise, those experiences are conceptualized as meaningless or superstitious). Hope Harlingen successfully deconceptualizes “death” as a state of non-being when she has a feeling that her husband Coy never died. That same Coy Harlingen, on the other hand, uses the techniques of society’s conceptualization to his advance when he successfully deceives – just like an actor on a TV screen – nearly all subsets of cultures that are at hand in *Inherent Vice*.

That brings us back to the novel’s epitaph, whose words I believe are analogous with the entire correspondence of Adorno’s philosophy in Pynchon’s novels: ‘under the paving-stones, the beach.’ Nonidentity might never be fully ‘uncovered’, but Pynchon’s characters that have at least a slight understanding of identity thinking can manipulate it to their advance. Lifting the paving-stones is an impossible task, but it is a merit to recognize their existence and to have a vague sense of what is underneath: ‘the beach’. The paving-stones leave their imprint, but in the end it all ‘washes away when the tide kicks in’ (Pynchon 1990, 141).
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