

A woven conspiracy



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Near the end of Thomas Pynchon's 1965 novel *The Crying of Lot 49*, the protagonist Oedipa finds herself at a crossroads after trying to unravel the mystery of W. A. S. T. E., a conspiratorial underground postal system, without finding many tangible results. "It was now like walking among matrices of a great digital computer," Pynchon writes, "the zeroes and ones twinned above... Behind the hieroglyphic streets there would be either a transcendent meaning, or only the earth" (Pynchon 181). Earlier in the novel, however, this discrepancy is not represented as a simple binary. Just pages before, when considering the validity of her suspicions, Oedipa thinks to herself "Either you have stumbled... onto a secret richness and concealed destiny of a dream... Or you are hallucinating it. Or a plot has been mounted against you... Or you are fantasizing some such plot" (170-171). Oedipa equates the existence of W. A. S. T. E. with "transcendent meaning" and "secret richness," but given the later binary description, does this mean she considers the other three options as simply other mundane parts of "only the earth"? Even next to the possibilities of hallucination or an incredibly elaborate practical joke, is the only thing that can make the world more meaningful to Oedipa the existence of something so seemingly unimpressive as a secret mail system? Pynchon combines the arcane imagery of computers and the mundane imagery of much older and more transparent forms of technology to demonstrate the futility of searching for meaning in an increasingly technologized world, especially through technology itself.

Oedipa evokes the imagery of arcane modern technology much earlier in the novel as well, while driving toward San Narciso. Lost in thought, she thinks of the time she had "opened a transistor radio to replace a battery and seen

her first printed circuit,” and finds that the “ ordered swirl of houses and streets... sprang at her now with the same unexpected, astonishing clarity as the circuit card had... there were to both outward patterns a hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning, of an intent to communicate” (24). Here again appears the word “ hieroglyphic,” representing this “ intent to communicate” which she is unable to decipher. But while in this section she is comparing the layout of circuits to the layout of a neighborhood, by the end of the novel this comparison shifts, and the imagery of complex technology comes to be applied to a conspiracy centering around the postal system, an ancient and seemingly mundane form of technology whose functioning should pose little mystery to anyone. Even in the 17th century play *The Courier’s Tragedy* which appears in the novel, a character “ masquerades as a special courier of the Thurn and Taxis family who... held a postal monopoly throughout most of the Holy Roman Empire” so he can appear less suspicious, showing that if the postal system was thought of as such a normal part of life in the 1600s, it should be thought of as even more mundane in the novel’s time, when electronic computers were relatively new inventions (66). However, Oedipa still hinges the existence of “ transcendent meaning” on, and even equates it to, the existence of a hidden system of mail couriers, even in the face of newer and more secretive technologies.

It is also important to note that the postal service is not the first old technology to which Oedipa applies some form of “ transcendent meaning” in the novel. The first, quite early in the novel, is an even older one, the weaving loom. Before going to San Narciso, Oedipa remembers a painting she had seen in Mexico City, “ *Bordando el Manto Terrestre*” by Remedios

Varo, in which there “ were a number of frail girls... prisoners in the top room of a circular tower, embroidering a kind of tapestry which spilled... into a void, seeking hopelessly to fill the void” (21). This makes Oedipa realize “ that what she stood on had only been woven together a couple thousand miles away in her own tower... and so Pierce,” her ex-lover, “ had taken her away from nothing, there’d been no escape.” Here, Pynchon sets a precedent for Oedipa’s later obsession with mail, relating the ancient and relatively simple technology of weaving to not only the idea of some hidden arcane meaning, but also to the idea of purposelessness, represented by the “ void.” As the weavers in the painting attempt to fill it with their embroidery, Oedipa attempts to fill a void of meaning in her life with unraveling a postal conspiracy, perhaps something she too has woven for herself without knowing, but like the weavers’ attempts, Oedipa’s goals may be just as “ hopeless.” The imagery of weaving, in fact, comes back later in the novel. When considering new information that she believes is evidence for the truth of the conspiracy she is chasing, Pynchon writes that “ everything she saw, smelled, dreamed, remembered, would somehow come to be woven into The Tristero.” The choice to bring back the imagery of weaving strengthens the idea that Oedipa is “ weaving” this conspiracy herself, to parallel the women in the painting and fill the void in her own life (81). To say that these things “ came to be woven into” the conspiracy implies that they were not part of it before Oedipa made the connection herself, that Oedipa created this conspiracy herself rather than unravelling one that already existed independent of her weaving.

Despite the comparison of the mysterious nature of modern technology to the perceived transcendent nature of ancient technology at the end of the novel, Pynchon more often describes ways in which modern technology makes life more meaningless instead of ascribing to it some “secret richness.” This further explains Oedipa’s constant attempts to find the same manner of transcendent mystery present in modern technology in older and less mysterious technologies. It also allows Pynchon to show that Oedipa is not the only person negatively affected by the progression of modern technology. For instance, a man Oedipa meets in a club tells her an anecdote about a man who was “automated out of a job,” eventually leading to a suicide attempt (113). When his wife and her lover discover him about to burn himself alive, the lover says “Nearly three weeks it takes him... You know how long it would’ve taken the IBM 7094? Twelve microseconds. No wonder you were replaced” (115). Clearly the machine that replaced the worker removed meaning from his life by taking away his job and his wife, but the lover’s implications are more sinister than just that. The machine was superior to the man, according to him, because the machine would have more quickly arrived at the conclusion that life is meaningless and not worth living, implying that voiding meaning is not simply a consequence of modern technology. Rather, voiding meaning is one of its purposes.

It is also important to note that, early on, on top of persistent references to “weaving,” Pynchon diminishes the possibility that Oedipa’s conspiracy is anything more than the delusion she is afraid it is by establishing her as having issues with mental health, specifically the hallucinations she mentions as one of the possibilities. While on the phone with her psychiatrist,

he tells her “ We want you,” in reference to an experimental drug trial (17). These words evoke an image of a grotesque looking Uncle Sam hanging above her on the ceiling. “ I am having a hallucination now,” she explicitly tells her doctor, noting that she does not want drugs for it. This may similarly stem from the general negativity surrounding modern technologies throughout the novel. Her conversation reminds her of a time when the doctor made a face at her, believing it would have some medical effect, and this replaces the Uncle Sam hallucination with one of her doctor making the same face. The casual way in which Oedipa handles this situation on the phone implies that this is a relatively normal occurrence for her.

Furthermore, the way the hallucinations shift shows that they can be influenced by what Oedipa experiences or thinks about, making everything she sees and gathers as “ evidence” for her conspiracy less trustworthy.

For Oedipa, the weaving loom, and the postal conspiracy she weaves for herself, at least offer the possibility of filling the void with meaning, even if that possibility is hopeless. She attempts to give her life meaning by turning herself into a form of weaving loom, whereas the man in the anecdote lost the meaning of his life by being an inferior form of the IBM 7094. Clearly then, to Oedipa, while older forms of technology may not necessarily help give life a meaning, they can at very least help provide an illusion that there is meaning, whereas the brutal efficiency of newer technologies eliminates that possibility. Oedipa, then, attempts to take the mysterious transcendent elements of these newer technologies and apply them to older, less apparently harmful technologies to negate the harmful nature of modern innovations and make them more meaningful. In the end, though, as

Pynchon implies through Oedipa's hallucinations, behind any delusion or projection of meaning one might experience or create, there is "only the earth," no secret meaning. As hallucination is offered as a negation to the possibility of having "stumbled... onto a secret richness and concealed destiny of a dream," if all Oedipa has found is simply part of a hallucination or fantasy, which is likely, then there is no real escape from the effects of modern technology, just as "there'd been no escape" from the tower in which Oedipa weaves all her delusions. Since modern technology is simply a natural progression from older technologies, no real meaning can be found there aside from distraction and delusion, which is precisely what Oedipa loses herself in throughout *The Crying of Lot 49*.