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Jelena Ž. Mandić
University of Novi Sad
Faculty of Philosophy

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FEAR AND PARANOIA AS A POSTMODERN CONDITION IN THOMAS PYNCHON'S *THE CRYING OF LOT 49* AND DAVID LYNCH'S *BLUE VELVET*

Abstract: *This paper centers on the politics of fear and paranoia in Thomas Pynchon's novel* The Crying of Lot 49 *and David Lynch's film* Blue Velvet. *These artists posit narrative critiques of American culture of consumption and history of imperialism, complicating traditional ideas of race and nationhood. They provoke the very roles, rules and institutional practices that shield oppression and unfairness, enable displacement and alienation, deny subjectivity and personal identity. By underscoring a sense of uncertainty and conspiracy, Pynchon and Lynch attempt to understand paranoia as a symptomatic condition of postmodernity. They approach it in terms of the psycho-cultural processes that induce paranoid anxiety within the depthlessness and fragmentation in postmodern society. Throughout their work, they explore the notions of fear and terror, suggesting that America has become a world of paralysis, cultural exhaustion and death. The society's rubbish and its waste, the contact with the disadvantaged, a series of objects which, like the hieroglyphic streets, have to be decoded, represent the path typically chosen by Pynchon and Lynch's major characters. These authors produce images imbued with the apocalyptical chaos and nihilism, referring to the erosion of values, the decline of civility, the denial of truth.*

Key words: *Pynchon, Lynch, postmodernism, fear, terror, paranoia.*

The very word *paranoia* has an "extraordinarily complex medical, psychiatric and psychoanalytic history" (Bersani 2003: 145). Broadly taken to mean "the fear of persecution," the symptoms of paranoia typically include a sense of anxiety, often to the point of irrationality and delusion, a desire for centrality, and the (imagined) loss of autonomy and feelings of disempowerment. Julia Kristeva describes this disruptive capacity of fear, pointing out that "phobia bears the marks of the frailty of the subject's signifying system" (Kristeva 1982: 35). It is a kind of narrative strategy designed to generate fear from existing culturally-motivated anxieties. Functioning as a mode of cultural critique, the generation of terror and paranoia in postmodern American works has formed a distinct aesthetics. With the power to construct hideosity, postmodern artists and writers, Thomas Pynchon and David Lynch as the most prominent among them, employ abjection and excessiveness to redefine their own ideas, transform their political outrage into fictionalised horror, and express their social criticism by giving voice to characters plunged into suspense, perversion and decadence. The preoccupation with images that are alternately bizarre, absurd and surreal, the postmodern politics of otherness, all those marginalised and liminal voices, interrogate the very process by which postmodern works are created. For Pynchon and Lynch, "the real world terrors of war, slavery, colonialism, corporate corruption, the Hollywood industry, and sexual violence ground the horror of their narratives" (Jarvis 1998: 189).

In her theorisation of the postmodern, Linda Hutcheon underlines that "postmodernism teaches that all cultural practices have an ideological subtext which determines the conditions of the very possibility of their production of meaning" (Hutcheon 1988: xii-xiii). For Hutcheon, postmodern culture denotes a questioning from within, constantly assessing all of those notions that were once thought to be "natural" or "unproblematically common-sensical" such as history, individual and communal identity and the relation of language to its referents or texts to other texts (Hutcheon 1988: xii-xiii). Also, Allan Lloyd-Smith discusses postmodernism and its "populist tendency, its lurid, low-rent sensationalism and exploitation of affect, its opening up of tabooed realms [...] its embrace of the fragmentary" and its "use of paranoia" (Lloyd-Smith 2004: 15). He notes cultural anxieties about race, class, gender, and sexuality as well as a rejection of order and hierarchical power systems designed to oppress, exclude, and marginalise. Pynchon and Lynch present the horrors of the everyday, comprehending an ideological subtext based on cultural fears that affect the course and pattern of meaning-making within their narratives, and therefore, revealing the dark side of American identity and history. They initiate fictional worlds that violate epistemological and ontological boundaries. For each of these artists, narrative and conceptual representations are the ground where postmodern deconstruction is made obnoxious and frightening. Moreover, Pynchon and Lynch continually investigate "the geographical imagination [...] which constitute[s] a dissident remapping, of variable effectiveness, of the hegemonic fable of North America as a postindustrial society" (Jarvis 1998: 51). Their strategies of denaturalising and distorting the image of America unveil all the inherent contradictions and apparent paradoxes. Criticising the American heritage by exposing its monstrosity, they present an American limbo of everyday life where the nightmares of reality prevail.

One of the features recurring in the list of characteristics and definitions of postmodernism is a certain degree of self-reflexivity. Linda Hutcheon defines this self-reflexivity, "[. . .] the formal and thematic contradictions of postmodern art and theory [. . .] call attention to both what is being contested and what is being offered as a critical response to that, and to do so in a self-aware way that admits its own provisionality. In Barthesian terms [. . .], it is criticism which would include in its own discourse an implicit (or explicit) reflection upon itself" (Hutcheon 1988: 13). David Lynch's works provoke new reflection and new self-awareness that Hutcheon notes, and he often explores regions beyond the boundaries of ordinary rational consciousness and private self, creating a peculiar sensation of surreality. These aspects of surrealism contribute to the creation of unsettling narrative realities. They express estrangement from the real world, its disruption of both temporal and spatial correlations and its interest in popular art forms. Also, Fredric Jameson defines the postmodern aesthetics, depicting the artistic disintegration of realism within postmodern art, "the making up of unreal history [as] a substitute for the making of the real kind. It mimetically expresses the attempt to recover that power and praxis by the way of the past [. . .]" (Jameson 1991: 369). This conceptual exploration of the unconscious is directly reflected in a strange distortion of the everyday. Thus, the reality imagined by Pynchon and Lynch, the world saturated with the bizarre, radically challenges America's political and social conventions. Through the evocation of terror, Pynchon and Lynch enliven problematic issues and moments in recent cultural and political history, criticising the "power of American culture to penetrate every wall, home, life and mind" (DeLillo 2001: 34). They highlight the condition of present-day American society, in an age of abundant, almost limitless, information and endless sources of fear and paranoia. Their works are defined by dismemberment, deformity, excess, waste and chaos; they are populated by the ghosts of America's important but neglected parts of history whose presence inflicts the horrors upon us. These artists hold up a mirror to the world we are living in today and their narratives offer no form of redemption, forgiveness, no heavenly hope or a sense of closure. They present worlds where these concepts against the terror are simply impossible.

In his works, Pynchon "leaves his readers in no doubt about his attitude toward racism, oppressive economic practices, genocidal violence, skullduggery in high places, and police-state repression. He expresses, in numerous ways, a profound empathy with what he calls the preterite, the left out, the passed over in every form of election (spiritual, economic, racial, cultural)" (Cowart 1980: 4). Also, Pynchon himself relates fear to the corrupt system and regime, criticising politically motivated terror and baseless scare tactics:

> Except for that succession of the criminally insane who have enjoyed power since 1945, including the power to do something about it [the Bomb], most of the rest of us poor sheep have always been stuck with simple, standard fear. I think we all have tried to deal with this slow escalation of our helplessness and terror in the few ways open to us, from not thinking about it to going crazy from it. Somewhere on this spectrum of impotence is writing fiction about it ... (Pynchon 1984: 18-19).

Pynchon's fostering of paranoia within his texts provides examples of strong social commentary. Also, his interest in the systematic political manipulation creates narratives that reproduce the reality in different fictional grounds. Pynchon develops different patterns, which suggest unspeakable conspiracies and disorder, examining the suspicions of technocratic systems. Similarly, in his second novel, *The Crying of Lot 49*, published in 1966, he proposes that "we must ask whether the systems of cultural formation that operate within a given society paradoxically represent both something to be maintained and a process of positive motion toward an 'improved' cultural formation [...] or whether these systems become the sawdust that masks the decay of society [...]" (O'Donnell 1991: 79-80). This novel presents a secret underground postal delivery service, the Trystero (or Tristero) whose existence remains ambiguous throughout the text. The protagonist, Oedipa Maas, an average woman living a simple and rather mundane life, a mediocre inhabitant of a "hyperbolically banalised world," tries to resolve the mystery of Tristero. She struggles to uncover this clandestine postal system, which is in opposition to the officially sanctioned Thurn and Taxis couriers; she interacts with a number of delusional individuals who stand for a repressed reality, seldom visible but always present America that has been marginalised by the dominant institutions:

> For here were God knew how many citizens, deliberately choosing not to communicate by U.S. Mail. It was not an act of treason, nor possibly even of defiance. But it was a calculated withdrawal, from the life of the Republic, from its machinery. Whatever else was being denied them out of hate, indifference to the power of their vote, loopholes, simple ignorance, this withdrawal was their own, unpublicised, private. Since they could not have withdrawn into a vacuum (could they?), there had to exist the separate, silent, unsuspected world (Pynchon 1966: 92).

Oedipa also encounters many references to Tristero – the acronyms WASTE (We Await Silent Tristero's Empire) and DEATH (Don't Ever Antagonize The Horn) and a cryptic symbol of a muted horn. Thus, Pynchon introduces the concept of a sinister anarchic underworld, detecting the self-doubt and paranoia that drives the absolute integrity and legacy of America. It seems that Tristero's very theoretical existence generates a culture of fear. Furthermore, Oedipa finds herself in a liminal position, entangled in the paranoid reality characterised by social marginality. Carolyn Brown describes Oedipa's journey through the night, "Oedipa (as phantom) inhabits the space between death and waste[land]. Her travels throughout the text are as if in Hades, through a topography of phantasms, masks and hallucinations, towards an uncertain destination. Oedipa's wanderings among the dead, the margins, the phantoms, of the landscape of San Francisco, become an encounter not merely with WASTE, but with death (DEATH)" (Abbas 2003: 155). Also, these signs of Tristero's presence refer to Kristeva's notion of the abject, "It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-betweens, the ambiguous, the composite. The traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is a saviour ... Any crime, because it draws attention to the fragility of law, is abject [...]" (Kristeva 1982: 4). The tension Pynchon creates represents the moments of such "composite" practices where the meaning itself collapses through ambiguity. This ambiguous nature is also essentially connected with media, a parallel virtual universe of paranoia and fantasy. Pierce Inverarity, for instance, is a character whose mysterious identity stands for the cultural and economic power of mass media. In the second chapter of the novel, when Oedipa meets Paul Metzger, a lawyer who helps her execute Pierce's will, we find out that Inverarity actually owns several enterprises and major broadcast television networks, and therefore, he directs and controls people's lives. For this reason, it is difficult to distinguish events in Oedipa's reality from events that are manipulated and fabricated. These clear boundaries disappear in the scene where the real Metzger in the room starts a pantomime of the Metzger in the film, imitating many of the gestures and words that Baby Igor says in the film. He introduces Oedipa to a new dimension where everything is doubled by a representation and where the concepts of thermodynamics and information theory "portray societies saturated with technologies that can by turns become liberating or threatening" (Heise, online). Pynchon translates, once again, the notion of entropy into social terms, expressing his concerns about cultural and intellectual decay. He emphasises that entropy in the closed system of American society is increasing promptly, resulting in an identity crisis and people failing to communicate. This lack of cohesion can be seen even in the character of Oedipa's physician, Dr. Hilarious, who shows himself to be in possession of a mind which is "fragmented in the extreme" (Bergh 1997: 2). As he waves a rifle in Oedipa's face, he discusses his desire "to remain in relative paranoia" and to escape the agents who "walk through walls" and "replicate." He is one of Pynchon's societal victims "lost in [his] own individual way in the suddenly unfamiliar frontier of America" (Bergh 1997: 2). His fantasy is for Oedipa another clue that compounds her problem and entangles her deeper into the mystery. Being not capable of finding the information, Oedipa faces more uncertainty over Tristero's system:

> ...either she has indeed stumbled onto a secret organisation having objective, historical existence by which a number of America's alienated and disenfranchised are communicating; or she is hallucinating it by projecting a pattern onto various signs only randomly associated; or she is a victim of a hoax set up by Inverarity, possibly as a means of perpetuating himself beyond death; or she is hallucinating such a hoax... (O'Donnell 1991: 51-52).

Actually, her "sensitivity" makes her the Demon of Pierce's estate. She becomes the demon of American society exactly in the same way that Maxwell's demon is to Nefastis' machine. However, Maxwell's Demon only applies to a closed system while Pynchon's fictional system is constantly expanding to include more and more aspects of contemporary America. Being incompetent sorters, both the reader and Oedipa are in a state of confusion. Also, Oedipa's epiphany on arriving in San Narciso, as she looks at the printed circuit pattern of the streets, reveals the tentativeness of her attempts to obtain the truth. Her first reaction is that it is "less an identifiable city than a grouping of concepts" and she experiences "an odd religious instant" and it seems that the town has "an intent to communicate ... so in her first minute in San Narciso, a revelation trembled just past the threshold of her understanding" (Pynchon 1966: 24). This fact indicates that her desire for a final resolution is deferred; she is waiting for a miracle that Jesus Arrabal, the Mexican anarchist, describes as "another world's intrusion into this one" (Pynchon 1966: 120). At the end of the novel Oedipa, just like the reader, tries to put together the fragments of a chaotic, multi-faceted society, which amplifies the eternal conflict between illusion and reality. At the same time, as Charles Clerc says about Pynchon, a "curious paradox emerges: perhaps illusion is necessary at times in the face of life's too frequent awfulness ... we need our illusions, we need magic – we cannot survive without them because our own pitiable beings are too inadequate to be self-supportive. Beyond the necessity for escape and entertainment, we seek fulfilment, even the identity of other lives, in [literature and] film" (Clerc 1983: 111).

Lynch also builds upon the illusions that pervade the American imaginary; he immerses his audience into alternate narrative realities in order to delineate the terrors of everyday America. Expressing his discontent with the hegemonic practices of the Hollywood industry, Lynch employs ghastly images and disquieting themes, and thus, criticises the industry's "commercial aesthetics." His films present Hollywood as a monstrous place of decadence and human exploitation. They also depict America as a land of excessive cruelty and abuse, undermining the dominant ideologies and institutions that perpetuate oppressive social and political conditions. Lynch reveals the dangers of a "dream factory" that, as Laura Mulvey's analysis of *Blue Velvet* in *Fetishism and Curiosity* (1996) indicates, institutionalises the degradation of women and standardises the language of desire. He gives a severe reprimand to the American dream of unlimited opportunity for prosperity and success, grafting this false promise of plenty onto a narrative of abject terror, fear and paranoia. Throughout his films he conforms the terms of brutality, making Hollywood and its culture of consumption the most formidable brute of all. Also, Norman Denzin analyses Lynch's talent to present the "unpresentable," defined by such things as "rotting, cut-off ears, sexual violence ... insanity, homosexuality, the degradation of women, sadomasochistic rituals, drug and alcohol abuse" (Denzin 1991: 68) as a source of repulsion and horror. Moreover, and most significantly, his paradoxical world of "fearful things" intertwined with America's "peaceful, happy life" signifies his rigorous social commentary.

This capacity to combine the bizarre and the normal, the strange nature of normality itself, can be seen in his cult classic, *Blue Velvet* (1986). Lynch recreates a typical scene from a picturesque American neighbourhood (the image of red roses slightly swaying in front of a white picket fence and a cloudless blue sky), featuring a fireman on the side of the truck smiling and waving at the viewer, sounds of playful children and an old man watering his lawn. The scene culminates with a close-up on hundreds of insects climbing all over each other underneath the surface of this idyllic setting. This small logging town of Lumberton is Lynch's intent upon proving that behind the community's perfect appearance dwells a gruesome criminal underworld of drug, murder and deviant sexual behaviour. Mulvey describes this as "one of *Blue Velvet*'s most significant achievements. Its narrative topographies manage to install a 'nether' world within small-town America [...]" (Mulvey 1996: 138). Lumberton's fetishistic strange world of perversion and sadism demonstrates the dialectics, which marks the soft rendering of cyclical time and pastoral space that constituted a lost America and the actual, more monstrous subculture. The public gives a false sense of security whereas the private is distorted; the society's notion to create an insular environment collapses and the sinister underworld uncontrollably erupts. Exploring the mystery and almost unendurable dread that underlie the American psyche, Lynch translates psychological and dream space into a cinematic experience. He tells the story of a young and naïve man, Jeffrey Beaumont (Kyle MacLachlan), who becomes involved in murder, voyeurism and sadomasochism after he discovers a severed ear in a neighbouring field. Also, his curiosity embroils him in the torture of a local singer, Dorothy Vallens (Isabella Rossellini) and her family. Frank Booth (Dennis Hopper), the psychotic criminal who blackmails Dorothy into sex, is the embodiment of the nightmarish reality lurking under the American myths of hope and sustainability. As he frantically orders Dorothy to perform his sexual (blue velvet) fantasy, he reveals his unpredictable and violent character, symbolically repeating, "Now it's dark." His ghoulishness is further enhanced by inhaling a mysterious gas that seems to fuel his sadistic exhortations. Frank's aggressive desires operate as the discourse that supports the counterpublic. This discourse extends as Frank's behaviour situates explicitly articulated alternatives against the concept of innocuous, small-town America. Throughout the film, Lynch introduces a wide range of perverse characters – Ben (Dean Stockwell), a queer analogue for Frank, performs Roy Orbison's "In Dreams" at the apartment where Frank holds Dorothy's husband and son. His performance of a recording of a performance, a "double removal from natural expression" (Corrigan 1992: 73), presents Baudrillard's America lost in the ultimate simulacrum. As Frank violently applies lipstick, Lynch, once again, recaptures Ben's singing and the simulacrum's terrifying nature, interpreting Orbison's haunting song as a threatening accompaniment to a mobsters' tyranny. Equally haunting is Dorothy's woeful interpretation of Bobby Vinton's "Blue Velvet." Vinton's song, like Orbison's, acquires a new meaning when juxtaposed with a reel of film. It relies upon the symptoms embodying and revealing the dominant social register. Thus, the song's lyrics have a more relevant meaning which implicates the profound pain, both physical and psychological, that Dorothy withstands. Also, the mechanical robin tells us it is a "representation" rather than a "presentation" of reality, it is hyper-real, a mockery. Thus, "what Jeffrey learns by the end of the movie ... is the most contradictory of knowledge: that this neighbourhood is made up of nothing more than fragmentary images that were once meaningfully distinct and motivated but which continuously lose these meanings because they are always in the process of decaying into sameness" (Corrigan 1992: 74). This reconstruction of meaning suggests the ineffable and idiosyncratic nature of aesthetic experience. Although Lynch populates *Blue Velvet* with hideous, almost satanic, characters, these villainous figures are mere reflections of the intensely diabolical and distinctly American horrors of contemporary exploitation and stupefaction. Through his representation of the psychopathic, the grotesque and the perverse, Lynch questions those ideological systems within the society, criticising the concept of cultural normativity and its supporting nostalgia. Instead of simply exposing the seedy underworld of violent gangsters, hard liquor and femme fatales, Lynch creates the superficial and the simulacral. For this reason, Lynch describes *Blue Velvet* as a story about a young man "who lives in two worlds at the same time, one of which is pleasant, the other terrifying"; he seduces his audience by triggering their social and cultural concerns, epitomised succinctly in a swatch of blue velvet, and therefore, he expresses a new kind of idealistic, highly visual and aestheticised relationship to dangerously fetishised things which exist alongside the reality of torture, fear and murder.

Lynch establishes himself as a filmmaker with a distinctive and, at times, disturbing artistic vision. He fuses and fragments images from black-and-white *film noir*, small-town America, graphic violence, severely disfigured bodies and mythic icons being paraded through popular culture. In his relentless critique of Hollywood, he expresses the dangers of a "dream factory" that is engaged in the mass production of prefabricated daydreams. Throughout his career, Lynch has both fascinated and repulsed audiences, revealing his concern over the controlling and corrupt nature of the film industry. In his book *Catching the Big Fish: Meditation, Consciousness, and Creativity*, Lynch explains his position, "It's a joke to think that a film is going to mean anything if somebody else fiddles with it. If they give you the right to make the film, they owe you the right to make it the way you think it should be. The filmmaker should decide on every single element, every single word, every single sound, every single thing going down that highway through time" (Lynch 2006: 60). Exposing the structures that criticise American cultural ideology, his nonconformist status accompanies the fear and paranoia of personal triumph and devastating human tragedy. The statement, "It's a strange world," uttered by Jeffrey Beaumont, conveys these haunting and surrealist images, representing the monstrous and supernatural aspect of existence. Underlying the American psyche, Lynch creates a world that is governed by opposites, where surface and depth, good and evil coexist simultaneously. This dual nature, which pervades *Blue Velvet* brings sublime realms of human experience into the centre of mundane existence. As Lynch says in one of his interviews, it is a "trip into darkness, as close as you can get, and then a trip out. There's an innermost point, and from then on it pulls back" (Olson 2008: 239). This portrait of a nightmarish foundation emphasises and reiterates the main ideas of the film, those of dysfunction of familiar locations and their duality. In the film's resolution, the characters comprehend the dark sides of their town as well as their own selves. Their dream and waking states merge into one another until the very distinction between fantasy and reality is rendered meaningless. The result is an engrossing cinematic universe where an idyllic picture is never without its dark double. The effect Lynch successfully achieves by these and other means is that his films are suffused with paranoia, both between individual characters and by individuals toward the society and institutions in general. He enhances this paranoia to question traditional notions of reality. For Lynch, the nature of cinema, its presentation and understanding of the major concepts is opposed to a literal depiction of reality. In his films, he forces the viewer to constantly reassess "all different" and "all the same" aspects of American culture and society. This cultural and social framework pervades Pynchon's narratives as well. In his works, Pynchon reconstructs the fragmentation and disconnectedness of America, the chaotic universe where characters, in search of meaning, opt for paranoia. Within the fictional context of paranoid, these characters try to extract what they call "hidden patterns," but it seems that the only thing they can detect is their scattered and lost consciousness. Being a significant symptom of current socio-political affairs, Pynchon's use of paranoia expresses the absurdity of existence in the world of perfect uncertainties. Namely, he points out that the civilisation is headed toward the junkyard where meaning and clarity are supplanted by banality. Such a portrayal of American life demonstrates the influence of postwar culture, its commercialism and corporatism; it presents the society, which moves from a state where contrasts and divergences exist to a state where sameness and uniformity dominate. This vision of a world in decline permeates *The Crying of Lot 49*; in this novel, entropy is a "word taken to mean that everything in the universe is running down" (Tanner 1978: 47). Apart from the physical exhaustion of the universe, entropy also affects intellectual discourse. Pynchon believes that in "communication we are always fighting nature's tendency to degrade the organised and to destroy the meaningful, since "greater disorder is associated with greater homogeneity."[1] The entropy paradigm becomes linked with ideas of mass culture and monopolised communications media. For this reason, Pynchon's characters usually seek to reverse the effects of entropy – we see Oedipa Maas trying to understand Pierce Inverarity's tangled legacy, acting like Maxwell's demon in her American microcosm. In this chaotic world, in which the subject is wholly alienated, it seems that Oedipa's identity is preceded and constructed by the system of exhausted capitalist expansion. Pynchon calls attention to these deleterious effects of massive global changes, conveying his pessimistic vision of a mechanised and dehumanised society. He illustrates the violence of contemporary life and offers a scathing critique of America and its dark side of consumerism. Indicating fractures and inconsistencies, Pynchon, being quite similar to Lynch, portrays society's hidden underbelly. This portrayal reveals the ignorance or ambivalence of the nation's actual state of affairs. Both Pynchon and Lynch uncover ways in which social knowledge is established. Their characters are involved in unfulfilled searches for the underlying logic of the world. The very nature of these problems reinforces the notion of a distorted system that refuses to yield concrete or final answers. Distinguishing between reality and fantasy is highly difficult in the confusing environment Pynchonian and Lynchian characters continue to explore. Thus, Pynchon and Lynch give us no way of discerning the complete truth. They show the connection between the death of real communication and the decline of our humanity. The complex and unstable narrative forms they employ reflect uncertainties and alienating effects of the postmodern world. Their works warn us about totalitarianism, which deprives people of their dignity and freedom, presenting the modern organisation of power and its terrible inhumanity.

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СТРАХ И ПАРАНОЈА КАО ПОСТМОДЕРНИСТИЧКО СТАЊЕ У РОМАНУ *ОБЈАВА БРОЈА 49* ТОМАСА ПИНЧОНА И ФИЛМУ *BLUE VELVET* ДЕЈВИДА ЛИНЧА

Резиме

У овом раду разматра се појам страха и параноје у роману *Објава броја 49* Томаса Пинчона и у филму *Blue Velvet* Дејвида Линча. Ови уметници дају наративну критику америчког потрошачког друштва и историје империјализма, укључујући традиционалне идеје о раси и националности. Они осуђују смисао, правила и институционалне праксе које подстичу опресију и неправду, доводе до маргинализације и отуђености, негирају идентитет и субјективност. Истичући осећај несигурности и завере, Пинчон и Линч покушавају да представе параноју као симптоматично стање постмодернизма. Они приказују психокултуролошке процесе који изазивају параноидну анксиозност у површном и фрагментираном постмодернистичком друштву. У својим делима, они истражују појам страха и ужаса, наговештавајући да је Америка постала друштво апатије, културне исцрпљености и смрти. Друштвена маргина, контакт са угроженим слојевима друштва, мноштво предмета које би требало попут хијероглифа одгонетнути, путања је којом се Пинчонови и Линчови јунаци обично воде. Ови аутори стварају слике прожете апокалиптичним хаосом и нихилизмом, указујући на уништење свих система вредности, нестанак људскости, порицање истине.

jelena.mandic@mail.ru