‘Welcome to Our Structure
We Hope You Will Enjoy Your Visit Here’

Labyrinthine Narratives as a Means of Satire in Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity’s Rainbow*

Tiina M. Kortelainen, Spring 2013
Master’s Thesis/ English Philology
Department of Modern Languages,
University of Helsinki
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Abbreviations

L49 The Crying of Lot 49
GR Gravity’s Rainbow
SL Slow Learner
Introduction

Labyrinthine complexity characterizes Thomas Pynchon’s fictions, and serves as an integral part in creating the mood and style of which the author is known for. Pynchon’s world is defined by pervasive paranoia, widespread conspiracies, and confining structures to the extent that it is easy to imagine the author as the maze architect, ironically urging the reader to enjoy his/her frustrating quest of trying to understand the author’s labyrinths. Such is also the descent into the maze for one of Pynchon’s most famous characters, Lieutenant Tyrone Slothrop, the protagonist of Gravity’s Rainbow (1973), as he is urged to “Enjoy His Visit” (GR 194) in the maze that confines him, and not only shatters his identity but also leaves the confused reader piecing together the pieces, and finding a way out of the confusion. Obviously to claim to have grasped the works of Thomas Pynchon in a comprehensive way would be an overstatement, and any study conducted to pinpoint authorial meaning on the notoriously reclusive writer’s works is bound to be only speculative at best. Despite this, the author’s growing body of works continues to fascinate commentators, and new speculative criticism keeps explaining the intricacies of Pynchon’s texts.

This thesis concentrates on two of Pynchon’s earlier books: The Crying of Lot 49 (1966) and Gravity’s Rainbow, both of which have been studied a great deal since their initial publication. Even though both novels are in many ways products of their time, and can be said to mirror the attitudes and concerns of the 1960s and 1970s, the books are nevertheless topical even today, and have attracted contemporary readings. In addition to this, the labyrinthine and encyclopedic structures of the two

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1 The two books are probably the most studied of Pynchon’s works; The Crying of Lot 49 mainly because it is Pynchon’s shortest novel and among the most accessible of his works. Gravity’s Rainbow, on the other hand, is notorious for its complexity, and continues to fascinate commentators as it is considered Pynchon’s masterpiece. Consequently, the novel is also considered to be one of the most important books written in the twentieth century, although it was famously deemed by the majority of the Pulitzer Prize jury upon its publication as being “unreadable, turgid, overwritten and in parts obscene” (See Peter Klhss’ much-cited piece “Pulitzer Jurors Dismayed on Pynchon” in New York Times 8 May (1974): 38).

2 Gravity’s Rainbow, for example, attracted new interest after the terrorist attacks of September 11th 2001, as Pynchon’s grim vision of “the Light that hath brought the Towers low” (GR 760) came to be considered eerily prophetic by many. For post-9/11 discussion of the book, see e.g. David Rando’s article “Reading Gravity’s Rainbow after September Eleventh: An Anecdotal Approach,” or Inger H. Dalsgaard’s discussion of the novel in “Something to Compare It to Then: Rereading Terror in Coincidences Between Pynchon’s Germany and America’s 9/11.”
novels have been noted by several critics; in fact, this recurring stylistic tendency which runs throughout Pynchon’s works has been widely discussed in critical discourse for decades. However, despite the notion of the texts’ apparent labyrinthine qualities, the maze itself as a metaphor has not been addressed as much as could be expected on the grounds of Pynchon’s complexity.

Since the structuring of the stories seems to be of such importance in the author’s works, it can be argued that it serves certain purposes, and perhaps intends to attract attention to specific details which the author wishes to highlight. Keeping this in mind I will look at the ways in which the labyrinthine structures of both Lot 49 and Gravity’s Rainbow highlight Pynchon’s recurring literary themes as well as affect and frame the characters’ motivations, and what effect this has on our reading of the novels. Furthermore, I will also incorporate the commonly acknowledged notion that Pynchon is a satirist in my study, and link the discussion of the highlighted themes in the labyrinthine narratives to the way in which Pynchon uses this particular narrative approach to convey satirical ideas.

The first chapter concentrates on The Crying of Lot 49, which aspects make it labyrinthine, and how the maze-like form helps to support the novel’s satiric themes. Hence introducing, and applying the trope of the maze serves as a way to understand how critical readings can better establish the connection between the narrative form Pynchon characteristically employs, and the satiric content of his works. The critical assessment of The Crying of Lot 49 reveals how Pynchon’s textual mazes are constructed around dichotomies that criticize polarized options by suggesting that logocentric extremes are equally restrictive. With this Pynchon raises the theme of the excluded middle, which satirizes the oppressive status quo built around dichotomies. However, when the narratives are understood through the concept of the maze, it also becomes evident that the unattainable mid-option eternally keeps one from reaching a definitive significance by denying the reaching of the labyrinth center – the ultimate meaning to the satire.

Using a similar definition of a labyrinthine narrative as with Lot 49, the maze-like satire of Gravity’s Rainbow is discussed in the following chapter. This discussion also takes into account another key motif, the mandala, and examines how Pynchon’s use of these two reflective symbols and narrative circularity not only foregrounds the labyrinthine aspects but also further highlights the satiric content of
the novel. Since *Gravity’s Rainbow* does not allow mastery over the narrative, it denies the feeling of being in control from both the characters and the reader. However, as a meditative symbol of unity the mandala can be seen as a way to resist the ambiguous control, which is highlighted by the narrative form.

In addition, although the scope of this study is mainly formalist, I will also elaborate some of the key issues that work against a conventional reading. The idea of the labyrinth will serve as a way to problematize readings that attempt to set a definite meaning to Pynchon’s novels. Understanding Pynchon’s works as textual mazes is suggested to serve as a starting point for finding new ways to read the author’s satires because conceptualizing the texts as narrative labyrinths inevitably leads to their deconstructive mutability, and offers an unlimited number of possible pathways through their satiric labyrinths.

**Pynchon’s Style and Aspects of His Writing**

There are certain aspects of Pynchon’s works that have continued to garner attention from critics and lay readers alike to the extent one cannot help but speculate about them, and to insist that there is some kind of conscious pattern on the author’s part. One of the most salient of these is the labyrinthine complexity of the author’s stories, and his constant referring to mazes. Although the lengths to which Pynchon takes the maze-like qualities of his fiction is certainly noteworthy, this is nevertheless nothing new in literature. In fact, as Margaret M. Bolovan points out, the image of the “mythical maze” has been persistent for centuries, and it has been used in various ways by numerous authors (2). Despite this, she continues, in the Western literary tradition the image is known mainly through the myth of the Cretan Labyrinth and its

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3 The concept of the labyrinth and its uses in literature is often noted in critical discourse. Notable scholars to have studied mazes and their cultural representations, especially in literature include, for example, Wendy Faris, Donald Gutierrez, Penelope Reed Doob, Margaret M. Bolovan, and Northrop Frye.
However, even though the concept of the labyrinth bears such heavy connotations with ancient mythology, it has proved to be especially useful for modern and postmodern authors, and the motif is often used to denote the complexity of the processes of the modern world (Faris 2). Consequently, the concept of labyrinth has been used to describe the works of such modernist and postmodernist authors as Jorge Luis Borges, James Joyce, Umberto Eco, John Barth, and Paul Auster, to name but a few.

But how does the abstruse labyrinthine construction manifest itself in Pynchon’s fictions, and what sort of implications does it have? Bolovan sees “ordered chaos,” which is created through “constantly shifting images” as a feature of a labyrinthine text, and points out that in such a text there are “numerous intertwining paths… contained in a single form” (3). This definition applies to Pynchon’s works, where the author’s stories are full of convoluted plot lines, with a multitude of characters adding another layer to the labyrinthine narratives. Since the stories often have a number of characters – many of which appear only once and have very little narrative purpose – and subplots, they appear to have a labyrinth-like construction with multiple dead-ends and parallel story lines. Arguably, it is this aspect which makes Pynchon’s narratives especially challenging and complex for the reader. Furthermore, Pynchon’s characterization of his randomly appearing

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4 Bolovan also points out that although the terms ‘maze’ and ‘labyrinth’ have come to be used synonymously, the word ‘labyrinth’ bears more connotations to the Labyrinth of Crete, and the myth of Daedalus and Icarus (2). For the purposes of this study I will use both terms interchangeably as I am not that concerned with the mythical aspects and connotations of the labyrinth, but instead apply the concept to make sense of the complexity of Pynchon’s narratives, and the confusion they create. Furthermore, Pynchon’s mazes differ from the ones of Greek mythology in that they seem to offer no way out. Unlike Theseus who used the thread given by Ariadne to find his way out of the Minotaur’s labyrinth, the characters and readers of Pynchon are left with no such logical guiding thread through the maze.

5 Pynchon’s literary influences and forerunners have also been speculated upon by scholars, and comparisons are often made, especially with James Joyce and Jorge Luis Borges. Alfred MacAdam, for instance, has argued that The Crying of Lot 49 is modeled after Borges’ short story “The Approach to Al-Mu’tasim” (“El acercamiento a Almotásim,” 1936) (560). Furthermore, Pynchon’s preoccupation with the labyrinthine Argentine writer seems to be persistent as he, for example, writes: “We are obsessed with building labyrinths, where before there was open plain and sky. To draw ever more complex patterns on the blank sheet. We cannot abide openness: it is terror to us. Look at Borges” (GR 264). Despite the similarities in the works of Pynchon and his predecessors, his writing seems to go further in many ways. Newman points out that Pynchon’s fictions accentuate “the inherited ways of classifying experience,” and demonstrate that “all systems of classification… [serve as] contributing factors to the chaos of experience rather than aids to functioning within it” (95). He sees Pynchon’s parodies as going further than those of Joyce, for example, in that Pynchon not only parodies the limitations of literary expression but extends his critique to all systems of ordering to demonstrate that all attempts at recording life are a form of “rigidification and repression” (95).
characters is often quite thin, which again detaches the reader from the text, and makes it a challenge to follow the many twists and turns of the stories. In addition to this, the characters’ names are often bizarre to the point that it adds to the alienation effect, and in many cases makes it hard to identify with the characters. This can arguably increase the reader’s confusion when approaching Pynchon’s narratives. Also, the fact that Pynchon tends to combine historical facts with fantasy-like narration in his books blurs the distinction between fact and fiction, and again potentially keeps readers detached from the text.

Another obvious aspect of Pynchon’s labyrinthine complexity is the informational density, which is a feature that has been addressed by numerous critics. Often the author’s works are described as encyclopedic fiction, which is a term introduced in Pynchon studies by Edward Mendelson in his article “Gravity’s Encyclopedia” (Käkelä-Puumala, Autolla 188). Indeed, Pynchon’s stories are very dense in details and ideas, and often contain references to a wide range of subjects, particularly to science. However, it is not just the informational density and the complex story lines that make Pynchon’s texts multilayered and labyrinthine: David Seed also reminds us that the author’s novels contain ironic allusions to their own artificiality, although he also calls into question the level of the author’s self-reflexiveness, and argues that the informational overflow of Pynchon’s fictions

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6 Since not much is known of Pynchon as a private person, scholars often circulate and acknowledge the few known biographical details in order to make sense of the author’s fictions. For instance, the fact that Pynchon studied engineering physics at Cornell University in the 1950s before his writing career, and the fact that he worked as a technical writer for Boeing Company before the publication of his first novel V. (1963) are often brought up to somehow elucidate the author’s recurring interest in science. Also, since scientific and technological terminology and imagery are so prominent in Pynchon’s works, the author is often mentioned in studies which aim to bring together the study of literature and science. (See e.g. Science and Literature: Bridging the Two Cultures (2001) by David L. Wilson and Zack Bowen, and Literature and Technology (1992), edited by Mark L. Greenberg and Lance Schachterle.)
counter-balances the self-referentiality\(^7\) (11). Certainly, Pynchon’s fictions cannot be considered merely self-reflexive, and this feature alone cannot be said to bring out the labyrinthine complexity, and its subsequent implications. If anything, the information overflow further detaches the reader from the texts, while also partly diverting attention from the self-referentiality of the narratives.

One way to explain Pynchon’s alienation effects is to argue that they foreground the limitations of original literary expression or our reliance on fixed modes of ordering. However, the themes and questions he raises with the combination of labyrinthine and self-referential fiction, and extreme informational density in fact work together. Pynchon’s works are full of recurring themes and motifs which are connected to, and logically add depth to the labyrinthine narration. Themes and ideas such as paranoia, entropy and Luddism are often present in Pynchon’s fiction: they markedly inform the stories, and also the characters’ behavior. Since these themes challenge established structures, and represent them in a way that provokes confusion, it is clear that Pynchon is aiming to highlight them for a specific reason. Seed remarks that Pynchon is distrustful “of the procrustean patterns into which information is forced,” (11) and, as a result, his works are full of information which forces the reader to feel “entrapped within a labyrinth of reference” (11) in the same way his characters feel themselves to be. For the reader encountering such confusion, then, the natural reaction is to try to apply some model to “explain” the text, to “reassert mastery over [it],” for example to simplistically categorize it as postmodern (McHale 62). However, if the reader forcibly tries to apply some logical and rational model to the works, one is forced to see that Pynchon renders that pointless by undermining the stability of established systems, and our reliance on them. It is obvious that Pynchon wants to draw attention to patterns and

\(^7\) Nevertheless self-referentiality plays an important part in Pynchon’s fictions as the author often cross-references his novels, and alludes to his previous works thematically. For example, Pynchon’s “California trilogy,” consisting of The Crying of Lot 49, Vineland (1990) and Inherent Vice (2009), forms a picture of California throughout decades, and can be seen as “a mini social and political history of [American] culture as it devolved from an era of myriad social changes and expanding opportunities” (Schaub, California novels 30). Also, several characters have appeared in Pynchon’s writings throughout his career, which adds to the self-referentiality: for example, Wendell “Mucho” Maas from Lot 49 resurfaces decades later in Vineland; Clayton “Bloody” Chichlitz continues from V. to Lot 49, and later appears in Gravity’s Rainbow; Kurt Mondaugen and Lieutenant Weissmann both appear in V. and Gravity’s Rainbow, Seaman “Pig” Bodine makes his first appearance in an early short story Lowlands (1960), then later resurfaces in V. and Gravity’s Rainbow, and seafaring characters with the last name Bodine also appear in both Mason & Dixon (1997) and Against the Day (2006). This cross-referentiality arguably contributes to Pynchon’s labyrinthine style as it helps to build an intricate maze of reference where one is forced to look for connections.
structures, and the way in which individuals react when they feel themselves to be trapped in such structures, as well as how we rely on these structures, and act within the limitations they set us. The author’s use of the labyrinth motif, and his careful construction of textual mazes underlie the limitations of fixed modes of ordering which are continually criticized in his novels.

Furthermore, it seems that Pynchon, like other labyrinthine authors, is highly aware of the fact that the modern world is increasingly complex and multifaceted, and explores this complexity through elaborate and confusing narratives. Therefore, the trope of the labyrinth is a useful entry point to Pynchon’s writing. Not only is it fitting to describe the author’s convoluted way of telling the stories, but it also describes the effect they have on the reader: when reading Pynchon the reader inevitably feels as though he or she is lost in an elaborate maze, trying to find some logical way out. Hard as this confusion might be to take, one plausible way to deal with the feeling is to take Pynchon as a satirist, and the stories as ironically complex attacks against our dearly held established systems.

**Pynchon as a Satirist**

Although Pynchon’s works are darkly comedic, sometimes even to the point of verging on the brink of good taste, the author seems to want to raise important societal issues by means of absurdity, and, as Seed reminds us, Pynchon’s works represent cultural criticism masked by comedy (11). However, the author’s satires are extremely paradoxical, and, as Kharpetian points out, the studies which address the genre of Pynchon’s works are often either questionable, or the problem of genre is not addressed (14). The complexity and depth of Pynchon’s texts is probably one of the main reasons why some of the studies on the satiric aspects are slightly elementary, and can overlook questions of form altogether.

While critics such as MacAdam, Decker, and Weisenburger are unanimous in labeling Pynchon as a satirist, and the author is noted for using irony, wit, and derision as weapons for attacking stupidity of all kinds, a great deal of earlier research was done without fully acknowledging the persistency of the satiric form which the author employs in his writing, and which supports the satiric content. To explain the complexity critics like Kharpetian and Käkelä-Puumala have come to
apply the term Menippean satire\(^8\) to explain the convolution and depth of Pynchon’s works. What is remarkable about the author’s use of satire in the Menippean tradition is that only a few other North American authors – among them such postmodern writers as Barth, Gaddis and Vonnegut – have applied it in their works (Kharpetian 17). Moreover, no other writer has been as persistent in using this form as Pynchon throughout his writing career. Kharpetian, for example, acknowledges the persistence of the form in Pynchon’s works, and aims to provide in his extensive study a generic model which helps to categorize Pynchon’s literary style in terms of its Menippean features, and their relation to postmodernism (17-18). Käkelä-Puumala also discusses Pynchon’s Menippean style, and lists features like the mixing of genres, the parodying of erudite dialogue, and the playful attitude towards death as features of Menippean form in Pynchon’s works (Autolla 173).

Although the pervasiveness of this satiric form in Pynchon’s works is now a widely acknowledged fact in academic discussion, and although the work of such scholars as Kharpetian and Käkelä-Puumala combines insightfully questions of form and satiric intent, it still partly fails to address the complexity of Pynchon’s texts. For example Kharpetian’s study, which remains one of the most comprehensive studies on Pynchon’s use of the Menippean form is lacking in some important areas: even the author himself acknowledges the fact that his research does not take into account political and deconstructive methodologies, and suggests that the work of Frederic Jameson or Jacques Derrida could be applied to understand Pynchon’s complexities, and, for example, to understand Pynchon’s linguistic politics. These critical approaches, he admits, could offer new insightful ways of approaching Pynchon’s “radical view and form” both sympathetically and critically (18). Indeed, he raises an important issue for future research, one that has been addressed to a degree in Pynchon studies already. For example, the February 1984 special issue of *Pynchon Notes* was entirely devoted to deconstructive readings of *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Also, critics like Alec McHoul and David Wills (1990) have approached Pynchon’s

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\(^8\) Menippean satiric form originates from the Syrian Cynic and satirist Menippus (c. 340-270 B.C.), and was later introduced into Latin cultural life by the Roman scholar Varro (116-27 B.C.) who was greatly influenced by Menippus’ work. The satiric form is characterized by the structurally loose combination of prose together with verse interludes, and was originally used to satirize philosophical adversaries (Kharpetian 29). In Pynchon’s case the use of the Menippean form can be seen especially in the author’s distinctive way of combining philosophical prose with limericks and songs. Furthermore, such typically Menippean characteristics as encyclopedic, epideictic, and fantasy-like narration, extended parodies, and the use of popular proverbs characterize Pynchon’s style.
paradoxes and contradictions from a Derridean point of view. Since the discussion of this overlooked area of Pynchon studies has already been started, it would be useful to bring together the research that combines form and content – such as criticism that takes the Menippean approach – and introduce ideas from the deconstructive studies into this framework.

One of the problems with Kharpetian’s study is, as Weisenburger has noted, that he holds the traditional formalist view that satire is understood as a normative and generative discourse which aims to rebuke human folly as determined by authorized norms (Rev. 581). In this sense, Pynchon’s works could be understood as not radically subverting established norms, but in fact confirming them. However, taking Weisenburger’s approach to satire, it can also be argued that Pynchon’s labyrinthine satires are subversively degenerative in questioning all forms of discourse, and the part they play in reifying, and sustaining oppressive hegemonies. Because of the discrepancy between Pynchon’s narratives, and the way academic research responds to their paradoxes, there remains a need to develop the neglected areas of research further in order to understand better the various meanings the texts can potentially have.

Aims of the Study

Previous study has acknowledged both Pynchon’s labyrinthine style, and his satiric voice but often questions of form have been overlooked as research has focused primarily on meaning instead of also looking at the way in which Pynchon’s texts work (Kharpetian 17). However, those studies conducted on the formal aspects, and Pynchon’s authorial intent have also been rather limited in their scope as research, such as that of Kharpetian or Käkelä-Puumala, chooses to light upon the complexities of the texts primarily to prove Pynchon a devoted Menippean satirist. Furthermore, critics like William Gleason, who also bring together discussion of both form and content, do so mainly to discuss Pynchon’s texts in relation to literary postmodernism. What is more, the labyrinthine elements of Pynchon’s writing have been studied from the point of view of analyzing the author’s development as a writer. Mark D. Hawthorne, for example, has looked at Pynchon’s early short stories, and traced the author’s preoccupation with mazes to his prentice work.
In short, a great deal has been done in the critical discussion concerning both meaning in Pynchon’s works, and the form of his narratives. However, the way in which these studies have been conducted has not sufficiently combined these two areas of research in a way that would better establish the connection between form and satiric intent. Therefore, rather than simply accepting Pynchon’s narratives as Menippean satires, and listing the formal features of the texts that support this finding, or reducing the author’s works to a study of their postmodern elements, the formal labyrinthine aspects should be looked at from a slightly different perspective; one that not only addresses questions of meaning, but also takes into consideration the labyrinthine form of the works. By conducting a study that addresses both of these, I aim to suggest that the labyrinthine narration not only leads to, and serves as an integral part of the satire of The Crying of Lot 49 and Gravity’s Rainbow, but that it also brings forth larger questions of the texts’ relation to the contemporary world by implying that the normative binary classifications by which we obsessively order the world are equally restrictive, and that the labyrinthine structures that define our understanding of the world sustain oppressive status quo. Approaching Pynchon’s fictions through the concept of the maze allows one to understand better the worldview projected by his Byzantine satires, yet the idea of the labyrinth also allows one to understand how the ambiguity of the author’s narratives works in a way that eternally defers the satiric meaning, and creates new pathways through the maze.
1. The Labyrinthine Satire of *The Crying of Lot 49*

In the autobiographically revealing introduction of his 1984 collection of early short stories titled *Slow Learner* Pynchon famously regarded his second novel as a lapse in his authorial growth. He expressed his disdain by claiming that when writing *The Crying of Lot 49* he clearly “seen[ed] to have forgotten most of what [he] thought [he had] learned [about writing] up till then” (*SL* 22). Simple as the book may be when compared to the author’s other works – for example there is only one major protagonist, and there are no major permutations in narrative time – its confusing labyrinthine construction, which can make it hard to understand, has been noted by commentators (e.g. Adams, Gleason, Seed). Unlike Pynchon himself, critics also hail the book as being “a compact, unified work,” and that it can be considered substantial enough to stand on its own “as a commentary on American culture” (Newman 67-68).

*The Crying of Lot 49* is a novel that follows a quest although the object of that quest becomes increasingly ambiguous as the story progresses. The central protagonist, Oedipa Maas, is a bored Californian housewife whose suburban existence is filled with cooking, and mundane Tupperware parties, and whose life consists of an endless succession of days which appear to be “more or less identical” (*L49* 2). It is not until she learns that her late former lover Pierce Inverarity has appointed her as the co-executor of his will that Oedipa slowly starts to break out of her meaningless and confined Rapunzel-like existence, and begins her quest which not only reveals Inverarity’s legacy, but also at the same time leaves her and the reader without any certain closure on the true findings or the actual meaning of the search. Furthermore, as the story addresses important questions about the structures that define our society, Oedipa’s confusing quest “also becomes the reader’s quest to come to terms with his or her culture” (Newman 69).

The story of *Lot 49* is told in the fashion of detective fiction although Pynchon is clearly making light of the conventions of the genre. Like numerous other critics, McHale points out that the novel mimics the clue-following traditions of detective fiction as it is centered “around problems of the accessibility and circulation of knowledge, the individual mind’s grappling with an elusive or occluded reality” (147). However, the novel can be said to extend in many ways the late-modernist
mode, in which McHale positions the text along with *V.* (194) because of the extreme ambiguity of the quest, and its results. When compared to the problems of traditional hardboiled detective fiction protagonists of such authors as Dashiell Hammett or Raymond Chandler, Oedipa’s situation is arguably different in many ways. Thompson, for example, sees the novel’s quest as a shift towards postmodernism, and maintains, consequently, that in *The Crying of Lot 49* the “uncertainty suffered by Philip Marlowe or Sam Spade has intensified” to the extent that it “has become the human condition” (171). Therefore, rather than simply being a quest involving the protagonist, it appears that the postmodern labyrinthine structure which Pynchon employs extends the confusion and paranoia of the individual to better represent the condition of society at large. Following this line of argument allows one to connect the satiric intent, and the novel’s form.

**A Critical View of *Lot 49* as a Maze**

As it is clear that the ambiguity of the narrative creates confusion both in the reader approaching the text as well as the characters who Pynchon represents, research often discusses different aspects of the novel’s labyrinthine indeterminacy that contribute both to Oedipa’s, and the reader’s confusion. Seed, for example, points out that like in the case of *V.*, “uncertainty plays a crucial role” in the novel, and that “the reader’s sense of the text is complicated so as to make a clear overview well nigh impossible” (116). In this respect the most obvious level of the book’s labyrinthine construction is the story level with its numerous false clues, and obscurely linked events. In addition, what further elaborates this are Pynchon’s lengthy historical explanations detailing the developments of European and American postal courier systems, and the extensive and explicitly obscure story-within-a-story sequence explaining the plot of Richard Wharfinger’s mock-Jacobean revenge play “The Courier’s Tragedy.” Details like these – although seemingly essential to the understanding of the narrative – serve as further diversions from the actual story line, which is supposedly about Oedipa’s persistent quest for the truth about the legacy of Pierce Inverarity, and her trying to get to the core of the maze by solving the mysteries that surround her.

However, it is problematic whether Oedipa reaches the core of the maze. Interestingly, Bolovan points out that although labyrinths “are generally conceived of
as having a center,” this destination is seldom reached, and the concept of “the excluded center” is therefore often associated with labyrinths (15). She argues that reaching the middle point usually suggests either death or metamorphosis. Furthermore, she maintains that this quest to reach the center can only perpetually lead back to itself as there is only “yet another quest” found in the middle. In Oedipa’s case her reaching of the center – the ultimate truth about her quest – is questionable as well. She clearly goes through a metamorphosis of some kind as she begins to connect with the world around her, whereas before she “had never really escaped the confinement of [her] tower” (L49 11). Nevertheless her findings are so obscure that they can only, at best, lead back to themselves: even though she finds out a great deal about the underground WASTE postal system, and the mysterious Tristero/Trystero behind it, she cannot be sure what she has stumbled upon in the end, and feels like she is “walking among matrices of a great digital computer,” among “the zeroes and ones” which never permit her to pin down the final truth about it all (L49 150).

As Oedipa’s options are binary – always being a case of either/or – it is impossible to determine which option is the right one. Therefore, it appears that the story itself, when interpreted as a maze, can be termed a multicursal labyrinth. Even Oedipa, who so often fails to understand what is going on around her, acknowledges the fact that she is stuck in a labyrinth, and talks about the center of the maze, the dreaded “excluded middle” that “she had heard all about,” which is to be considered “bad shit, to be avoided” (L49 150). If she reaches the center, this revelation, like Bolovan’s argument suggests, can only lead back to itself. Furthermore, the omitted resolution in the end makes sure there is no closure for the reader as well, which is why the reader is also stuck in a perpetual loop of trying to reach the core meaning of

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9 Like Hermann Kern (1982, 2000) and Penelope Reed Doob (1990) before her, Bolovan distinguishes between unicursal and multicursal labyrinths, and maintains that contemporary writers apply both images in their works (18). Furthermore, she points out that contemporary writers like Marguerite Yourcenar, for example, “draw on traditional myths of the past but transform these myths to express the contemporary cultural consciousness,” and thus recontextualize labyrinthine imagery (13). The main difference between a unicursal and a multicursal maze is the number of possible options available: whereas the simple unicursal model has only one possible path which inevitably leads to the center, its multicursal counterpart has several paths and false options distracting the search for the center. Another key difference is that multicursal mazes suggest the controlling hand of the labyrinth architect, who creates and essentially controls the wanderer’s confusion, while the wanderer takes on a more active role in overcoming his/her confusion in a unicursal maze (Hawthorne 79, 85).
the story. Like Oedipa, the reader can only postulate connections without actually reaching an assurance that these options are real instead of being forged and imaginary.

Although Seed, for example, has addressed the ambiguity of the labyrinthine story line, there have been studies, such as those of Gleason or Adams, which also take into account the textual and formal levels of Pynchon’s labyrinthine prose. Gleason acknowledges the author’s maze-like writing in *Lot 49*, and he points out that “labyrinths lace the novel” both in symbolic and literal sense (84). In his study he discusses the labyrinthine aspects of *The Crying of Lot 49*, and focuses his study on Pynchon’s narrative design, sexual dynamics, and symbolism to illustrate that the concept of the maze is also applied by North American postmodern authors. While his study mainly intends to elaborate the concept of postmodernism, it nevertheless offers valuable insights into what makes the narrative of *Lot 49* so abstruse.

One of Gleason’s key points is his discussion of Pynchon’s elaborate writing style which renders the text convoluted. He points out that although much of the text is characterized by “terse detective-fiction patter,” Pynchon frequently interrupts his sentences with dashes, parentheses, and semi-colons, or backtracks, and adds layers to his prose (87). By doing this, Gleason suggests, the author imitates on the narrative level the indeterminacy and ambiguity which Oedipa feels. This explanation seems plausible as Pynchon’s circuitous sentences often require rereading, and backtracking to get the sense of the meaning behind them. Furthermore, it also increases the reader’s feeling of being stuck in a maze when approaching the text, and also guides the reader to identify with Oedipa’s situation by creating a feeling of being confused. Gleason even goes as far as to propose that the convoluted sentences “suggest… alternate paths in the maze” (88). This, again, would suggest an infinite number of possible alternatives found in a multicursal labyrinth in which one is compelled to choose continually between several conceivable options, and therefore feel uncertain at every turn.

In addition, it is not only these stylistic aspects that contribute to the labyrinthine atmosphere of the novel since Pynchon’s way of setting out the events also echoes the labyrinthine complexity. For example Oedipa’s visit to the Yoyodyne plant is described as painfully confusing, and causing her a desperate need to be rescued: “She began to wander aisles among light blue desks, turning a corner now
and then. Heads came up at the sound of her heels, engineers stared until she’d passed, but nobody spoke to her. Five or ten minutes went by this way, panic growing inside her head: there seemed no way out of the area” (L49 66-67). Indeed, the novel has several instances of this kind where the surroundings are described as maze-like, and which ultimately support the labyrinthine story thematically. Also, as Rachel Adams points out, Pynchon has a tendency to use catalogues, lists, and narrative diversions in the novel which echo the maze-like ambiance by which the author describes Oedipa’s surroundings (252). Therefore, both the textual arrangement, and the form of the novel support the labyrinthine atmosphere of the book’s narrative. In other words, the narrative labyrinth of Lot 49 works subtextually: not only does it structure the detective story about assembling diverse clues but it also informs the text itself which can be seen as a multicursal labyrinth (Hawthorne 86).

Another key to understanding the novel’s labyrinthine complexity is acknowledging Pynchon’s use of a narrative voice which is different from Oedipa’s. The narrator’s voice adds to Pynchon’s convoluted prose as it is often textually complex and rambling. Also, this additional voice is not specified or characterized in any way, but it nevertheless suggests authority over the events, and the text in terms of the extent of its consciousness. These two voices, however, merge in the text as the narrative voice frequently comments on the events and Oedipa’s situation in a way that makes it difficult to distinguish between Oedipa’s thoughts, and the narrator’s awareness. In fact, the difference is so subtle that critics disagree on the role, and the point of view of the narrator. Kharpetian, for instance, maintains that the narrator’s viewpoint is limited primarily to Oedipa’s point of view (85). However, this can be challenged to a certain extent since in many cases the narrative voice seems to possess an awareness that extends Oedipa’s understanding; at times it is as though the narrator is viewing the events in retrospect from a vantage point that somehow allows a better understanding of the narrative maze. The narrator’s voice, for instance, reveals from early on that Oedipa’s search is going to be more arduous than she would ever imagine, as it states: “So began… her attendance at some unique performance, prolonged as if it were the last of the night” (L49 39-40).

But the narrator’s awareness does not render the narrative maze unicursal because it is so ambiguously aligned with Oedipa’s own thoughts – and because it is
mixed with Oedipa’s point of view it could even be argued that the narrator is somehow speaking “through” Oedipa, which leads to the awakening of her awareness (Gleason 89). This relationship can be seen especially when Oedipa’s final realization of her options draws closer. Just before Mike Fallopian confronts Oedipa whether she understands the possibility of the incidents being simply Inverarity’s hoax, the narrator’s voice observes: “She sensed what he was going to say and began, reflexively, to grind together her back molars” (L49 138). Interestingly, the narrator foreshadows Oedipa’s subsequent physical symptoms as later the “fillings in her teeth [begin] to bother her” (L49 141). As her physical symptoms gradually get worse, the immediate connection between the narrator’s voice and Oedipa’s pains is even more highlighted: “The toothaches got worse, she dreamed of disembodied voices from whose malignance there was no appeal” (L49 144). It appears that the narrator’s comments affect Oedipa’s condition, and it could be argued that Pynchon is alluding to the well-known urban legend that tooth fillings can pick up radio signals, and suggests that Oedipa does indeed hear some kind of voice inside her head during the narrator’s insights, which affects her awareness on some level.

Even if Oedipa does not consciously understand at first what the situation is, the narrator’s observations perhaps help make things clear for her. Only after the narrator’s insights can she finally admit to herself that her options for solving the Tristero/Trystero mystery are limited to four symmetrical alternatives: either there really is a secret delivery system or she is merely hallucinating its existence, or the whole mystery is a plot against her or she is fantasizing such a hoax (L49 140-41). However, because of the complex “narrative ventriloquy” which Gleason postulates, it is often difficult to notice how far Oedipa’s own awareness extends in the course of the novel. This makes it hard for the reader to maintain clear-cut dramatic irony, and also perhaps to decipher the satiric targets of the novel. Consequently, as the text does not allow the reader unrestricted mastery over it or its characters, it again renders the narrative more maze-like and disorienting.
Lot 49 as a Satire

Apart from the labyrinthine complexity of the novel, another major aspect is its satiric tone, which markedly governs the narrative. It hardly comes as a surprise that this aspect of Lot 49 seems equally indeterminate as the tangled story itself, which often leads the critics astray when determining Pynchon’s targets of mockery, or the satiric form the author is using to convey his ridicule. In fact, the ambiguous and digressive labyrinthine structure is probably one of the major reasons why critics have had difficulty placing The Crying of Lot 49. Together with the author’s eccentric combination of dense philosophical themes and offbeat humor it is easy to see why the novel can be misleading. However, the eclectic combination of humor and philosophical prose is a typical feature of Menippean satire, although it should be noted that many features of Menippean satire are also typical of postmodern literature in general, which makes the categorization of Pynchon’s works problematic. Fixing a specific mode like Menippean satire to describe Lot 49 can therefore limit our understanding of the complexity of the text in a way that does not fully take into account the implications of the labyrinthine structure.

That said, what are the aspects that make the novel a satire of any kind, and against what exactly is Pynchon’s criticism aimed at? Towards the end of the story Oedipa has a sudden realization when she understands what Inverarity has left behind: she finally sees that “the legacy was America” all along (L49 147). Undoubtedly, American society is the most prominent target of the novel, and unlike Gravity’s Rainbow, which can be argued to represent in many ways a more European mindset, Lot 49 is clearly more focused on describing how a contemporary American individual experiences reality (Saariluoma 217). When discussing America, especially California, as the satiric target of the novel, critics have singled out the economic, political, and cultural circumstances of the 1960s (Decker 142). Throughout the novel Pynchon refers extensively to people, things, and popular culture, which not only set the time period but also frame Oedipa’s confusing situation. For example, when Oedipa goes to visit Professor Emory Bortz at San
Narciso College, she encounters “undecipherable” posters advocating “FSM’s, YAF’s, [and] VDC’s” \((L49\ 83)\). The acronyms refer to Free Speech Movement (a 1964 student protest movement against the repression of the University of California, Berkeley administration), Young Americans for Freedom (an organization which endorsed conservative values as opposed to liberal ideologies), and Vietnam Day Committee (a left-wing protest movement which opposed the Vietnam War), respectively (see e.g. Hellmann 193). Oedipa, however, being a repressed product of the 1950s, feels out of place in this highly political campus environment, as for her generation “nerves, blandness and retreat” are “a national reflex to certain pathologies in high places” \((L49\ 83)\).

However, it is not just American society that gets its share of criticism: although the text may be more explicitly expressive on the downsides of American culture, the narrative of Lot 49 also attacks universal ideas, such as our reliance of the act of naming as a way of constructing, and attaining identities through language (Newman 5). Naming in Pynchon’s world allows the characters to make sense of the world around them, yet the selective process of coining metaphors, as Newman points out, is frequently sterile, and leads to the construction of abstract hierarchies that define individual value (5-6). For example, when Oedipa meets the old sailor who suffers from DT’s, the initials that define this “trembling unfurrowing of the mind’s plowshare” become a metaphor, and this process of metaphor-making is at the same time “a thrust at truth and a lie, depending where you [are]: inside safe, or outside, lost” \((L49\ 104-105)\). Oedipa is distressed by the process as she herself “[does] not know where she [is]” \((L49\ 105)\).

Moreover, commentators often note that Pynchon’s vehicle for directing attention to the downsides of the criticized realities is using binary juxtapositions which portray the ridiculed aspects in a satirical light, and depict especially America as lacking diversity and being sterile. Pynchon uses such binary oppositions as the US Mail/ the WASTE system, male/female, paranoia/anti-paranoia, and

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10 The pun on the name San Narciso cleverly recontextualizes Greek mythology in contemporary setting. Not only does Pynchon suggest narcissistic self-absorption of Californians, but he also refers to the etymology of the Greek word by portraying the city as a numb and drugged character: “What the road was, [Oedipa] fancied, was this hypodermic needle, inserted somewhere ahead into the vein of a freeway, a vein nourishing the mainliner L.A., keeping it happy, coherent, protected from pain” \((L49\ 15)\). Also, the myth of Echo and Narcissus is further elaborated by the fact that Oedipa is staying at the Echo Courts motel, and she is compared to the nymph on the motel’s sign \((L49\ 16)\).
capitalism/socialism to bring forth themes and ideas which underline the satiric intent of the text, and raise questions about American society as well as Western worldviews in general. The resulting contrasts between the conceivable options highlight the oppression of American society, and satirize the status quo (Kharpetian 91). In this sense, *Lot 49* becomes a fictional attack which can be argued to somehow challenge and make good the pervasive sterility and oppression of American society by means of satire. Also, by highlighting the way we use oppositions to order the world, and to categorize experience, Pynchon seems to suggest that we exclude the invigorating middle from ourselves by limiting the options to the extremes by which we understand our lives. He shows that thinking in terms of opposites leads one to think one option is better than the other even though by opting to an extreme, one excludes the continuum between the either/or dichotomy. Therefore, although the binary pairs suggest contrasts which serve as metaphors or introduce a sense of plurality, the text also ambiguously suggests that the polarized options are not that far from each other, and that the either/or options are equally restrictive and oppressive. This raises questions of the limitations of logocentric conceptualizations of the world.

Furthermore, Pynchon’s preoccupation with binary divisions can also be seen in the way he puts his characters in situations which permit only two options: either the characters can assimilate and participate in the chaotic world which they face, or they must revert to solipsism, and isolate themselves to an immutable and safe environment (Newman 6). In terms of satire it is interesting that both extremes are depicted as essentially self-deceptive, and lead nowhere; again hinting at the futility of thinking in terms of polar opposites. Oedipa’s options in the maze are depicted as being polarized and restrictive as well: the structure in which she finds herself entrapped confines her, and she cannot know which one of her options could lead to a satisfying solution. Oedipa realizes she needs to “[teach] herself to breathe in a vacuum” as she is trapped in “the void” between the conceivable options (*L49* 141). No matter how well she tries to adapt to the maze, and learn to communicate in this environment, her efforts do not lead to any clear closure.

To underline the satirical point of the informational and communicative stagnation which defines the oppression Pynchon characteristically employs the metaphor of entropy; a term which has become central to Pynchon criticism. The
term is used by the author ambiguously throughout his works both in the sense of thermodynamics and information theory. In Lot 49 these two types of entropy are used in contrary, yet complementary ways which metaphorically tie the concept to a cultural context. According to Newton’s second law of thermodynamics all closed systems gravitate towards disorder, uniformity, and inactivity (i.e. maximum entropy). However, in information theory the concept of entropy is understood as a measurement of the efficiency of a system in transmitting information (i.e. maximum entropy suggests low information rate and ineffective communication). Therefore, if entropy is at a maximum in the thermodynamic sense – meaning the system is in a state of chaos and uniformity – it means that informational entropy is at a minimum, as certainty is at its maximum (see e.g. Kharpetian 102-03 and Seed 36-37).

This inverse metaphorical use of the term has the function of supporting the satiric intent of the narrative, and rather than merely being Pynchon’s elaborate diversion technique or a joke at the reader’s expense, the metaphor supports the detective and metaphysical rhetorics which structure the novel: the more Oedipa finds out during her quest, the greater the uncertainty becomes (Kharpetian 106). She begins her quest optimistically, thinking that she is able to “create constellations” and to bring “order” to the situation (L49 72). However, as she gets more involved with the mysteries she faces in the “slick labyrinth” she finds herself in, she begins to have moments of self-doubt more often, and cannot even be sure whether things really exist, or if she just fails to communicate effectively (L49 134).

Paradoxically, the more information she gains about the Tristero/Trystero, the greater is the chaos and disorder which she faces: to her all seems connected yet in the end nothing adds up. Once the world around her moves from chaotic mutability towards some kind of order, Oedipa is forced to face entropy while striving to make sense of the multitude of confusing signs she encounters, and equivocally the information both increases her understanding as well as hinders her finding any final resolution. The entropic and exponential increase of information only reveals new pathways in the complex maze she finds herself in, and leads her desperate search back to itself. After figuring out that all of America is part of Inverarity’s legacy, Oedipa realizes that because of the endless information she has gathered, the original “symmetry of choices [begins] to break down,” and starts “to go skew,” and she can no longer know which option is the right one (L49 150). In other words, there is no
indication in her labyrinth which path to take. Against the law of the excluded middle, the information illogically and ambiguously poses another option for the alternatives she is faced with, which means her search can never come to its end. Her options go beyond the binary alternatives of solipsism and assimilation she begins with – which disturbs both cultural and personal entropy (Newman 74). Hence entropy becomes a trope which is essential to understanding the satiric point about informational staleness, and the resistance to polarization. It also simultaneously supports the labyrinthine narrative thematically. Interestingly, as dualities inform the novel, both thematically and in terms of the plot, they are also a key to approaching the satiric message of the book as the text opens up “excluded middles” by subverting the possibility of basing one’s interpretations of reality around dichotomies. The binary pairs which are an important part of the labyrinthine qualities of the novel also tie in with its satiric themes, and thus bring together the form of the novel, and its contents.

**Form Meets Content: Binary Pairs and Satiric Intent**

Kharpetian notes that the sterility which Pynchon criticizes is illustrated in *Lot 49* especially in constituted systems of communication like the postal system, and forms of media such as television and radio. He points out that in the novel these systems exclude all diversity and meaning from the “wasteland of official uniformity” which they form (85). Indeed, forms of communication do not encourage meaningful passing of information in *Lot 49*. On the one hand characters have a hard time distinguishing reality from fantasy, like Oedipa, who confuses Metzger and Baby Igor, the character he played in films as a child, when watching his film *Cashiered* on television. She even looks for “reflectors, microphones, [and] camera cabling,” upon their first meeting, assured that “They, somebody up there, [are] putting her on” (*L49* 17). On the other hand, the characters are so obsessed with television that they fail to connect meaningfully with others, and the world around. For example, the Maas’ family lawyer Roseman is so preoccupied by a television show that he insists on destroying the career of its fictional trial lawyer Perry Mason (*L49* 9). Since the commentary on systems of communication is emphasized, it could be argued that Pynchon is critiquing modern forms of communication which, while paradoxically
increasing and establishing connections, potentially decrease the information which is passed on through them since the connections themselves do not necessarily increase the informational content. In this sense the movement from chaos towards order again affects informational entropy in a negative way.

The official governmental postal service is also depicted as oppressive and controlling. When Oedipa receives a letter from Mucho, which she later suspects had something to do with WASTE, she notices the government stamp urging one to “REPORT ALL OBSCENE MAIL TO [one’s] POTSMASTER” (L49 33). Bothered by the spelling mistake, she points it out to Metzger who retorts: “…let them [make misprints]. As long as they’re careful about not pressing the wrong button” (L49 33). Although this suggests governmental control, it is left unclear whether Mucho is involved with the Tristero/Trystero, and whether the official governmental postal service suspects something, and is controlling the contents of letters. Also, later on when Oedipa suggests to Genghis Cohen, the philatelist in charge of assessing Inverarity’s stamp collection, that they expose their information about Thurn and Taxis to government officials, Cohen points out: “I’m sure they know more than we do” (L49 79).

It seems that modes of communication do indeed form some kind of “official uniformity,” like Kharpetian points out, and limit expression despite the seemingly growing chances of communication. Kharpetian points out, however, that Lot 49 presents two binary choices which offer alternatives to the sterility among the forms of communication: “metaphor (and, equivocally paranoia) and a communicative plenitude represented as anarchy” (85). Interpreted this way the WASTE mail system can be seen to offer some kind of a fertilizing alternative to the governmental mail monopoly, and to increase the amount of information available. Yet it should be noted that ultimately both communicative options are pointless, and go nowhere, thus offering no real replenishment to the sterility. Although “copping out” by using WASTE mail is an alternative to the controlling monopoly of the US Mail, the communication sent through it is essentially meaningless, because the individuals in the system, like Mike Fallopian bitterly admits to Oedipa and Metzger, “get fined” if they fail to participate, which forces them to send letters with no meaningful content (L49 39). It appears that rather than offering any specific alternatives to the lack of
communication, Pynchon raises the problem of all communicative forms sustaining and reifying the pervasive sterility.

Paranoia is one of the key themes highlighted by the labyrinthine storyline as the maze-like construction of the story leaves both the characters and the reader pursuing false leads endlessly, effectively making it impossible to distinguish between fictions and reality. Moreover, it offers a logical option for reacting to the ambiguous situation, and it is not only Oedipa who acts paranoid as many of the other characters seem to be profoundly distrustful of their surroundings as well. For example, Oedipa’s therapist Dr. Hilarius threatens Oedipa with a gun, and refuses to come out of his office; Miles, Dean and Serge call their band The Paranoids; Yoyodyne employee Stanley Koteks acts as though suspicious of someone eavesdropping him at the workplace, and so on. However, Pynchon pairs up paranoia with anti-paranoia, and the characters alternate between these two options in their confusing environment: either they believe that everything is connected, and that some unspecified instance – referred to as They – is behind everything, or that the things that happen do not have a specific meaning, and are not orchestrated by Them.

Oedipa’s paranoia is described in detail since her reacting to the situation makes up most of the story. Towards the end of her quest she wonders whether there really is a Tristero behind the legacy of America, or whether there is just the country itself in which case her only option to deal with it, to make herself “at all relevant to it,” and to be able to “continue” would be to sink into paranoia (L49 150-51). Paranoia, for Oedipa, seems a natural way to deal with apparent meaninglessness, and her inability to come to terms with the options she perceives. Furthermore, the labyrinthine narration, which frames her confusion, highlights her option of paranoia. Hence, for Oedipa, paranoia seems to be the thread which allows her to find her way through the maze – which otherwise would only have an unlimited number of paths to take, and no possibility to choose between them. This could be interpreted as Pynchon’s commentary on how the complexity of the modern world encourages paranoia and insanity as ways to deal with one’s life. However, the fact that the characters are given the option of anti-paranoia, and the fact that Oedipa never fully makes up her mind whether she is truly “in the orbiting ecstasy of a true paranoia” (L49 150) or not, again brings out the possibility of the excluded middle. It seems that the maze-like world which Pynchon creates denies a closure by defying
extremes, which leaves both the reader and the characters eternally hovering between the two options of paranoia and anti-paranoia, ultimately feeling even more confused.

In addition, another source of ambiguity and satire in *Lot 49* is the indeterminacy of sexual dynamics, which Gleason sees as bringing together “certain elements of the labyrinth and language play limned” (94). One way of approaching and understanding the labyrinthine structure, and the satiric meaning is to look at the way in which sexual dynamics work in the text, and bring forth questions that support the satire. Like Gleason, many commentators have noted Pynchon’s punning of the male characters’ names. For example, the paronomasiac names of Mike Fallopian and Stanley Koteks both suggest feminine fertility, and contrast with Oedipa’s actual femininity. But Oedipa’s identity is not fixed either as she takes on a multitude of roles during the course of the story: she is presented as Rapunzel (after the Brothers Grimm fairytale), Oed (suggesting a desexed/ resexed version of Oedipus), Arnold Snarb (at the gay club The Greek Way), Grace Bortz (upon feeling pregnant), Mrs. Edna Mosh (when Mucho alters her name to make it sound right on the radio), Margo (a companion to Inverarity’s Lamont Cranston/ The Shadow figure), a heroin(e), and a nymph (Gleason 94). Critics often see this indeterminacy of sexual dynamics as Pynchon’s commenting on the gender system. In Kharpetian’s view the America of *Lot 49* is dominated by the oppressive “U.S. Male,” and the figurative and metaphorical uses of femininity not only suggest fertility, but also discard the misogynist tradition of satire (97). Furthermore, Gleason suggests that since men provide the clues to Oedipa in her investigation of “the alternate mail (male?) system… [Pynchon] compels us to ask whether the alternate mail system is in fact a female one (an “other” system) or just another (male) system” (94). The indeterminacy of sexual dynamics blurs the distinction between sexes, making it difficult to distinguish between One/Other.

However, although it is the men that provide Oedipa the clues in her search, and the character of Pierce Inverarity is initially the whole reason behind Oedipa’s quest, this pervasive male character serves another important role in Pynchon’s satire. Many commentators have been keen to read Pierce Inverarity as an epitome of

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11 Kotex is an American brand of feminine hygiene products.
American capitalism, and Pynchon’s commenting on the exclusionary nature of ownership in the U.S. The name of the character hints at the permeating quality which defines Inverarity’s assets, and although not much is told about Inverarity, his character is defined through details which suggest that his wealth and power have been achieved through questionable means. For example, he is characterized by the ownership of the “whitewashed bust of Jay Gould,” the robber baron whose statue serves as the “ikon” above Inverarity’s bed (L49 1-2). Also, notable about the character is that although he does not make an appearance during the course of the novel, his presence is nevertheless always present in the form of ownership as he is described owning most of the places which Oedipa and the other characters visit. This suggests that Pynchon views ownership in capitalist America as being exclusive to a limited group of powerful people, and mostly invisible to the general public. Furthermore, Pynchon suggests that the average working person does not have much power: Yoyodyne employees, as Stanley Koteks tells Oedipa, are forced to “[sign] away the patent rights to any inventions [they] might come up,” which “stifles [the] really creative engineer” (L49 67).

Although capitalism is represented negatively in the novel, it should also be noted that Pynchon makes an important point about the two extremes of industrial capitalism and socialism. Mike Fallopian tells Oedipa and Metzger about the Peter Pinguid Society which is an obvious send-up of the American extreme right-wing association John Birch Society. As Metzger questions the logic of the Peter Pinguid Society, which is supposed to differ from the ideas of the John Birch Society, Fallopian replies: “You think like a Bircher… Good guys and bad guys. You never get to any of the underlying truth” (L49 36). Interestingly, both Marxism and industrial capitalism are “part of the same creeping horror,” like Fallopian tells Oedipa and Metzger, since industrial capitalism inevitably leads to Marxism (L49 37). Again, the text opens up another excluded middle which satirizes the status quo, and raises the question of polarities which define and limit our understanding.

**Limitations of a Formalist Reading**

Since the binary ambiguities of the labyrinthine narrative raise the issue of the excluded middle, uncertainty comes to symbolize the excluded center of the maze.
However, if one is to take a traditional approach in categorizing Pynchon’s fictions as satires, it requires one to fix a specific meaning to this excluded middle. What is hinted to be found at the problematized center, according to one view, for example, is “the revelation of the disinherited” of America (Kharpetian 88). Taking this approach, the inconclusiveness of the novel could be said to bring forth the idea that the disinherited of America have been “excluded by official history” (Kharpetian 88-89). This means that the ambiguous exclusion, which defines Pynchon’s maze, could be argued to have a distinctively fixed meaning.

While defining the novel’s message like this is by no means completely wrong, it nevertheless poses problems of interpretation. In fact, many of the limitations of a formalist reading become evident when they are explored though the binary tensions, and the labyrinthine construction. Since these defining features bring the search for the meaning endlessly back to itself, they also make the search for the satiric meaning ambiguous and iterative. Or, as Pynchon incisively reminds the reader: “You can put together clues, develop a thesis, or several... You could waste your life that way and never touch the truth” (L49 62-63). Therefore, although Pynchon seems persistent in taking the side of the oppressed, a traditional view of the ambiguous duality seems rather limited when explored through the concept of the labyrinth. It also does not give a comprehensive explanation of the maze-like construction, which facilitates the satire in the text. So instead of limiting the idea of the excluded middle to somehow only represent the downtrodden masses of American society, and the satire as Pynchon’s attempt to correct the situation within authorized norms, the labyrinthine construction, and the binary pairs could be explored further in a way that clearly acknowledges that from another perspective Pynchon’s works defy rigid categorization, and question all forms of discourse, and the part they play in sustaining the oppressive hegemony.

In order to fix a term like ‘satire’ to describe the Pynchon’s fictions, one should recognize the fact that the author’s works question normative signifiers by attacking restrictive extremes, and blurring the distinction between one/other. One should also take into account that his labyrinthine narratives resist the attaining of a fixed center – which ambiguously defers the finding of the satiric meaning, and opens up new excluded middles of possible meaning. The binary nature of the maze with its excluded center suits this approach especially well since in modern use “images of
the labyrinth [are] often… more directly concerned with the search for signification” (Bolovan 14). However, the multifaceted nature of the symbol also makes the search for signification extremely problematic, and the quest for reaching the center is always inevitably iterative since the search loops back to itself perpetually. Therefore, the labyrinth can be seen as a discursive formation of endlessly changing signification. What is more, language can also be seen as a multicursal labyrinth because of its endlessly changing signification, and the symbol of the maze can therefore be used to represent metaphorically the same linguistic system which is used to describe it (Bolovan 19).

If the maze is used as a signifier for *Lot 49*, it not only shapes the text, but it also leads to its deconstructive mutability. In this sense individual readers can follow Oedipa’s search in different directions, which means that there is an unlimited number of possible pathways contained in a single narrative. When the concept of the maze is applied to *The Crying of Lot 49* the reader can thus follow the motif either in order to search for meaning – or to deconstruct it. Even though traditional formalist research, which for the most part defines this study as well, acknowledges Pynchon’s labyrinthine prose, it often only intends to search for meaning, not to deconstruct it. For this reason there is still a great deal of work to do within the studies which aim to bring together form and meaning in Pynchon’s works.

As the ambiguous binaries and the excluded middles show, a strictly formalist approach cannot fully address the complexity of Pynchon’s labyrinthine texts. Also, the studies which combine both form and intent do not explicate the binary tensions, and the iterative labyrinthine construction of *Lot 49* well enough. Therefore, a less structuralist approach could help solve many of the unanswered problems which these complexities create. Using the concept of the maze as a way to understand the ambiguity of Pynchon’s labyrinthine narratives, it is possible to find new fresh ways to read his satires, and to find underlying contradictions, which expand our understanding of the subversive content, and the complex form that highlights it.

**Conclusion**

Although Pynchon is considered notoriously complex, and the term ‘labyrinthine’ has been used to categorize his prose, the wealth of the author’s satires can be
approached even more comprehensively by studying them through the concept of the maze. Breaking down different aspects of *The Crying of Lot 49* reveals just how far the author takes his use of this fascinating motif in construing the narrative: with it Pynchon not only defines the maze-like surroundings of his confused and paranoid characters, but by extension he also forces his readers to consider the mindlessness and limitations of the structures that define our understanding of modern life.

The maze of *Lot 49* can be understood to work subtextually both on the level of the novel’s form, as well as its textual arrangement. Moreover, a defining feature of this labyrinth is that it can be termed distinctively multicursal, consisting of binary either/or options that both deny closure, and suggest an ambiguous form of control beyond the reach and understanding of both the characters, and the reader. Since this convoluted satiric form denies closure by suggesting an infinite number of potential pathways through the maze, it problematizes the reaching of the maze center, and a definite resolution to the story. This can be argued to lead to the novel’s deconstructive mutability, which allows one to find an unlimited number of pathways through Pynchon’s literary construction. As there is no definite way out of the maze the narrative creates an endless loop where the reader must ask himself or herself perpetually what is at the heart of the maze – and what one wants it to be.

However, although this arguably in some sense gives the reader control, and freedom to choose one’s own way, it does not change the fact that looming somewhere in the corridors of Pynchon’s maze is always another, elusive form of control, and the labyrinths, by which the author defines the complexities of the modern world, are essentially power structures that deny full authority over them no matter what method is applied. But the author seems equally powerless in the face of these inherent structures that define the world: “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,” he confesses, and somewhere along “this spectrum of impotence is writing fiction about” (*SL*18). It is this helplessness that is highlighted by the inability to reach the elusive center of the maze, which not only potentially fixes meaning but also deconstructs it, and Pynchon came to emphasize this feature even more in his next novel *Gravity’s Rainbow*. 
2. The Labyrinthine Satire of *Gravity’s Rainbow*

Pynchon’s gargantuan third novel, *Gravity’s Rainbow*, takes the convolution and thematic density of its predecessor *Lot 49* to a new level, and in its monstrous complexity also exemplifies the recurring labyrinth motif with painstaking detail. However, with *Gravity’s Rainbow* Pynchon’s labyrinth-building reaches the extent that it often intimidates readers to not even enter the maze. Unsurprisingly, given the complexity of the book, readers commonly give up on it, and opine, for example, that the novel’s “sequences of words and paragraphs [make] no sense,” and are “in no special order” (Leverenz 229). Some even believe Pynchon himself, according to an oft-quoted but dubious anecdote, was confused by his own drug-induced creation in retrospect, and going through some of the book’s sequences could not understand what he had meant by them (Siegel 92). Nevertheless, the book is not quite as unapproachable as could be hastily assumed, and its sequences do indeed make sense. McHale, for example, notes that *Gravity’s Rainbow* is not incoherent, but in fact has “a proliferation of plots, to the point that ‘plot’… acquires the punning sense of ‘conspiracy’ as well as ‘intelligible sequence of actions’” (62).

That said, the labyrinthine qualities of *Gravity’s Rainbow* are prominent, and the novel’s thematic concerns can therefore arguably be discussed in relation to this salient feature. Newman points out that “Pynchon’s labyrinthine plot and elusive center respond to the sense of relativity that informs contemporary philosophy,” and that the novel emphasizes the fact that “all plots are fictions, imaginative constructs to order a world that tends towards disorder” (91). “Both structure and style illuminate theme,” he continues, “for the culture is in disarray, suffering paroxysms of self-annihilation” (91). In essence, *Gravity’s Rainbow* depicts those established structures which help us order the chaos around us, and at the same time not only repress and entrap us but also distort power relations by dividing people to oppressors and the oppressed. Like *Lot 49*, the novel’s textual maze problematizes the reaching of a fixed center – the ultimate resolution and meaning to the story – and instead presents the readers and the characters with an exhaustingly circuitous and perpetual search for the right path to follow. Furthermore, as in the case of Oedipa’s quest in the labyrinth that surrounds her, Pynchon again draws attention to numerous binary either/or options and pairs (white/black, inside/outside, zero/one,
paranoia/anti-paranoia, We/Them etc.), which are similarly central to the construction of the multicursral textual labyrinth, and convey the satiric point about the oppressive status quo by ambiguously opening up excluded middles. The binary pairs also highlight the limitations of thinking in terms of polarized options the same way they do in Lot 49, yet deny a reconciliation of the extremes in some middle ground, as the labyrinthine text denies the reaching of the maze center. In short, Pynchon is essentially doing the same with Gravity’s Rainbow as with Lot 49: the book employs similar narrative techniques – albeit on a highly more complex level – and uses the maze as one of its central motifs in order to construct and frame a satire, which calls into question our reliance on ordering structures, and the way in which we act within the limits they set us.

The targets of Pynchon’s satire are so numerous that it may be a challenge for the reader to pinpoint them. Kharpetian observes that with its Menippean amplitude Gravity’s Rainbow attacks such official cultural institutions as “philosophy, science, art, history, politics, economics, psychology, and sociology” (109). Pynchon criticizes these systems by showing the way they universally lead to oppression and power hierarchies, which calls into question especially Western way of life. Therefore, it has been pointed out that Gravity’s Rainbow attacks the Western world, and depicts its degeneration, which leads to the rise of “the Nazi consciousness” that “erases national and historical boundaries to infect the world” (Newman 129). What is more, this satiric target remains “unitary and identifiable” despite the maze-like structure of the text (Kharpetian 109). In fact, since the thematic concerns remain clear despite the confusing structure, it can be argued that, like in the case of Lot 49, the disorienting construction of Gravity’s Rainbow actually highlights the satiric message, and serves as an essential part of it. However, it is not only the labyrinth motif that contributes to the novel’s ambiguity, and helps to foreground its satiric content as Pynchon uses another similar symbol to complement the labyrinthine narration, and to further add depth to the formal elements of the labyrinthine satire.

Although the maze-like qualities of the text are apparent, and critics like Kharpetian and Newman acknowledge them, it has also been argued that Gravity’s
Rainbow follows a distinctively circular pattern, and is formed like a mandala\(^{12}\) (Weisenburger, Companion 9). It is noteworthy that both the labyrinth and the mandala are defined by an absent middle, and juxtaposed either/or options. Since the symbols share these significant similarities, one can argue that Pynchon’s emphasis on these motifs serves the purpose of deepening the satiric message. Hence the analogies between the two structuring symbols merit further research that could bridge the gap between studies that acknowledge Pynchon’s labyrinthine prose, and research that acknowledges the author’s use of the mandala (e.g. Weisenburger, Muste). This chapter will take a look on how the labyrinth – together with the closely related mandala symbol and narrative circularity – manifests itself in Gravity’s Rainbow, and how the novel’s multitude of narratives can be seen as attacking established Western institutions with the combination of these two similar symbols, as well as ambiguously depict the downfall of the Western world.

Chapter one addressed the labyrinthine elements of The Crying of Lot 49 both in terms of textual formation and satiric content in order to highlight the connection between Pynchon’s narrative form and his intended satiric meaning. Assessing the complementing mandala motif in connection with the subtextual maze-like aspects of Gravity’s Rainbow reveals yet another layer to Pynchon’s complex labyrinthine satires, and further foregrounds the function of the labyrinthine features, and the absence of an attainable fixed center. Since the circular mandala symbol highlights the unattainable center just like the labyrinth, it also allows one to establish a meaningful connection between the mandala and the maze, and understand the satiric implications of the juxtaposition of these two symbols as they can both be argued to underline the key theme of control. The labyrinth corresponds to the mandalic features outlined by Weisenburger and Muste, and the mandala could be considered

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\(^{12}\) The mandala (lit. circle in Sanskrit) is a circular image used in both psychology and religious practices. For example, in Tibetan Buddhism the symbol is used as a reflexive device that aids meditative practice and concentration (Jung 3). In his study Jung observed that the mandala also occurs as a self-healing device in the minds of patients that suffer from emotional distress caused by irreconcilable options as it brings together contradictory elements around a shared central point (3-4). The mandala symbol is often pictured as consisting of one or several circles within a square (Berry 107). As such it is an image of harmony, and can be thought of as “a symbol of opposites held in delicate equipoise” (Weisenburger, Companion 10-11). In addition, not only can the symbol be thought of as representing unity, it can also be seen as a “symbol of separation” since the contending circles it portrays represent opposing forces (Muste 164). In this sense the symbol comes close to the binary either/or options, which are an essential part in establishing a multiscursal textual maze. The mandala is also very similar to the labyrinth in that it is associated with contemplation and making an inner journey, with the elusive center representing the core of the self-realization.
another key motif to explain the novel’s complexity along with the maze. If it cannot quite be considered solely the motif that would explain the complexity completely, it nevertheless conveniently brings together the novel’s form and content, and offers an entry point to the paradoxes of the narrative.

Pynchon’s juxtaposing of the meditative mandala symbol with the multicursal textual maze highlights the satiric message of the novel: in *Gravity’s Rainbow* the mandala suggests man’s longing for unity and restorative wholeness, yet the multicursal maze, which the author contrasts with the circular mandalic imagery, highlights Western rationalization, and the oppressive complexity of the modern world. Whereas the labyrinth that defines the modern world essentially denies both for the reader and the characters the feeling of being in control of one’s surroundings and the text, the mandala comes to symbolize the resistance to the ambiguous forms of control. The multicursal maze of *Gravity’s Rainbow* underlines the fact that restrictive systems of ordering keep up power imbalance and oppression, and permit one to find unity and harmony in the world. This in turn renders the mandala a futile attempt to gain the feeling of being in control of the maze that defines modern existence.

However, in terms of the satiric meaning the excluded middle, which the maze shares with the mandala, can also be argued to represent the indeterminacy of the fate of the Western world: although the indefinite openness gives hope of taking a corrective path, the vertiginous iteration of the search back to the center ambiguously also gives little hope of choosing another way. The combination of the mandala and the maze emphasizes the ambiguous and unattainable center to the extent that the satire can be argued to break down itself in its intrinsic inconsistency, which allows individual readers to follow their own paths through Pynchon’s narrative maze the same way as with *The Crying of Lot 49*.

First, although the act of doing this is inevitably reductive, it is useful to define what *Gravity’s Rainbow* is about since there are so many narrative lines in the novel. In order to be able to link the concept of the mandala critically to the maze it is also useful to briefly elaborate further which aspects of the book make it a distinctively multicursal labyrinth, and serve as entry points for the reader, who “will want cause and effect” (*GR* 663) in making sense of the satiric and maze-like complexity.
Entering the Maze: On Finding a Guiding Thread

Like *The Crying of Lot 49*, *Gravity’s Rainbow* can arguably be seen as a multicursal labyrinth with a proliferation of false clues and dead ends that constantly lead both the reader and the characters astray, resulting in a feeling of being trapped, confused, and paranoid. Consequently, the novel “becomes a shifting environment within which it becomes more and more difficult for [the reader] to orientate himself [or herself]” (Seed 205). The narrative is complicated by various methods such as informational overflow, sudden analepses and prolepses, and fantasy-like sequences which take place in the characters’ dreams or memories. In addition, the Menippean use of proverbs and limericks aligned with philosophical prose again characterizes Pynchon’s text, and characters often burst out singing farcical songs. In many instances the narrative voice shifts perspective, mood, and tone, which destabilizes the narrator’s point of view, and makes it challenging for the reader to follow the rapid shifts in focalization.

In terms of its basic structure, *Gravity’s Rainbow* is divided into four main parts, and under these sections the novel is further divided into seventy-three unnumbered episodes, which are separated by squares resembling film sprocket holes.\(^{13}\) The book’s meticulous form together with Pynchon’s emphasis on different systems of ordering (numbering, language etc.) further supports the labyrinthine prose since it builds up a complicated maze of reference in which it is easy to

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\(^{13}\) The function of the “sprocket holes” is brought up in critical discourse from time to time, and the reason behind them, and their possible relation to cinema is speculated upon. Cowart sees filmic references as Pynchon’s way of suggesting that neither film nor life are “more or less real than the other” (32). Other theories have been presented as well, and it has been pointed out that the original manuscript was written on engineer’s quadrille paper (Weisenburger, *Companion* 1), which means that the relationship between the squares and the original manuscript could be speculated upon. It should be noted, however, that the framing squares were originally not Pynchon’s idea, as they were suggested by the publisher’s production department (Mendelson 193). Nevertheless – whether the frames have anything to do with film or not – movies are an essential part of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, and Pynchon’s use of filmic devices plays an important part in the novel: we have “always been at the movies (haven’t we?)” (*GR* 760). Pynchon reminds the reader, and underlines the pervasive role of cinema in our societies. Seed notes that the characters’ environments are defined by film, and by this Pynchon draws attention to the effect of cinema in shaping our “behavior and patterns of fantasy,” which eventually leads to routine-like behavior modeled after the “culturally determined patterns” presented to us in films (178-79). Furthermore, Schaub points out that “sitting in its circular can… film is a model of continuity we can project [perpetually] but not experience,” and that the connection between film, and our lives serves as “an allegory of free will and determinism” (*Voice* 45). It appears that filmic references are an important part in establishing the iterative labyrinthine story of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, which, like *Lot 49*, draws attention to established structures that both define and entrap people, and shape their behavior.
become trapped in, and start looking for connections frantically in order to assert mastery over the narrative. It also draws attention to the systems by which we obsessively define the world around us, yet in its complexity the novel at the same time underlines the futility of applying any of these systems of ordering since the informational overflow proves it reductive.

As the novel contains several entangled plots and subplots it is hard to distinguish the connections between them. One of the main reasons for this complexity, and the “progressive knotting into” (GR 3) of narrative strands is the number of characters in the novel: the calculation reaches some four hundred (Newman 89). Because of the variety of viewpoints, and narrative voices resulting from this medley of characters, no single way of construing the events gets unrestricted emphasis, which adds to the labyrinthine ambiguity of the novel, and keeps the reader at distance. Moreover, the majority of characters are not full, and they merely make brief and fragmentary appearances that do not characterize them much – again adding to the reader’s confusion. Among this variety, however, certain characters stand out, and provide access points for the reader in construing a guiding chain of events.

The character that comes closest to being the protagonist is Lieutenant Tyrone Slothrop, an American intelligence officer, whose mission for revealing the connection between himself, and the V-2/Rocket 00000/The Schwarzerät forms the main line of action – one that is arguably the most accessible for the reader since the plot line is followed somewhat chronologically throughout the novel, and with it a great deal is also revealed of Slothrop’s character, background, and ancestry. Because of the characterizing description the narrative line serves as a guiding thread for the reader so that he or she is able to patch together at least one key story line among the confusing multitude of plot twists. Indeed, Slothrop’s need to establish a meaningful connection between the present and the past essentially forms the basic quest of the narrative, which means that the center of his maze is suggested to be that “epiphanic point in both time and space” where Slothrop would finally understand “the full meaning of his search, life, and world” (Hite 22). Pynchon highlights the search for the revealing center by referring to “Holy-Center-Approaching” (GR 508), yet “the pattern of the quest,” as Hite reminds, “is an infinite approach” for all of
Pynchon’s questing heroes, which means that Slothrop, too, never reaches a conclusion (22).

Although Slothrop comes closer than ever to some kind of a revelation when he reaches the Mittelwerk\textsuperscript{14} V-2 missile factory in Nordhausen, and “feels a terrible familiarity” of being in “a center he has been skirting, avoiding as long as he can remember” (\textit{GR} 312), he nevertheless does not find true closure. Like in the case of Oedipa’s desperate quest, paradoxically the more information Slothrop gathers about his situation, the less the mystery adds up, and in the end Slothrop is left crying and reminiscing the “days when in superstition and fright he could make it all fit” (\textit{GR} 626). Hence the labyrinthine construction together with the concept of entropy\textsuperscript{15} frame the main character’s actions in \textit{Gravity’s Rainbow} much like they do in \textit{Lot 49}.

The maze-like structure together with the convoluted story line of Slothrop’s quest also underlines the key thematic concern of the book: different forms of control. Since this key theme runs throughout the novel, and is also closely connected to the main story line, and the search for the unattainable center, it serves as another entry point for the reader. Seed points out that both cultural and genetic conditioning – of which the novel gives many examples – diminish the characters’ independence (179). Slothrop is a clear example of such power relations and control as he is revealed to have been manipulated all his life by external forces: it is revealed that his father sold him as a baby to Dr. Laszlo Jamf, a behavioral psychologist, in order to finance Slothrop’s later Harvard education (\textit{GR} 286). The infant Tyrone was then used in the testing of Imipolex G, “an aromatic heterocyclic

\textsuperscript{14} The German name Mittelwerk translates as “Central Works,” and thus no doubt further extends Pynchon’s emphasis on the importance of centers.

\textsuperscript{15} It could be argued that Slothrop’s name further supports the theme of entropy, and makes him the epitome of the concept because the first letters of his name possibly refer to the second law of thermodynamics (Kharpetian 135). However, Kharpetian points out that Pynchon’s name-giving does not follow a regular pattern in \textit{Gravity’s Rainbow}, but rather links names with specific relevance with ones that bear no significant meaning. He argues that instead of following a fixed naming pattern Pynchon instructs his readers “by means of metaphor,” which serves as “a counterentropic linguistic device” (135). In Kharpetian’s view the irregularity in naming could thus be seen as suggesting “nonsystemic” alternatives to a closed system (135). Some names, nevertheless, can be argued to extend the labyrinthine theme. For example, Blodgett Waxwing’s name possibly bears connotations to the Labyrinth of Crete, and the myth of Daedalus and Icarus. Furthermore, Sir Stephen Dodson-Truck and his wife Nora are a likely Joyce reference, and Pynchon’s subtle reference to literary maze-building.
polymer”\textsuperscript{16} (GR 249), which later came to be used in the construction of the “insulation device[s]” of rockets (GR 242). As Jamf conditioned the child to be aroused in the presence of Imipolex G, Slothrop is able to predict rocket strikes as an adult, which makes him a valuable guinea pig, and target of control for both sides of the war. Although all this informs Slothrop’s quest, Pynchon at the same time also ambiguously hints at the possibility of Jamf having never existed (GR 261, 738), which makes Slothrop’s quest and condition even more indefinite.

It also makes it demanding for the reader to gain power over the text and define what is depicted as real and what is not, what exactly controls Slothrop, and what is to be found at the heart of the maze. Moreover, the misleading ambiguity suggests the controlling hand of the maze architect, which further defines the novel as a multicursal labyrinth. As such the text renders any attempt to gain control over the confusion pointless since the narrative form suggests that it is essentially the maze architect that controls the confusion. For the characters and the reader to get the sense of managing the complexity, the narrative would have to be structured as a unicursal maze that has only one path leading to the resolution. But this would diminish the ambiguous control, and despite the remaining complexity, potentially render the search for the center a meditative and self-empowering journey that ends in a conclusion.

Many of the novel’s characters seem to sense their innate lack of control, and thus there are many characters that subordinate others one way or another. Slothrop’s controlling is not only defined by Jamf’s equivocal presence. Whether Jamf exists or not, the same kind of victimizing external force represented by his character takes a wide range of forms in Slothrop’s later life: it is embodied, for example, by the British Pavlovian psychologist Edward W.A. “Ned” Pointsman, who sees his deterministic experimentation with Slothrop as his chance of winning the Nobel Prize. As part of his experimentation Pointsman tries to manipulate Slothrop to “illuminate racial problems” (GR 75), and is also involved in a scheme in which Slothrop is “expose[d] to the German rocket” (GR 82), and the mysterious “Schwarzgerät,” which allegedly contains “the Imipolex G device” (GR 292).

\textsuperscript{16} Weisenburger points out that Pynchon’s reference to heterocyclic chains serves as a metaphor for the regressive structure of the novel itself as the structure of a polymer is defined by endlessly repeatable units (Companion 133).
The Rocket 00000, which contains such a device, the S-Gerät, is not only important to Slothrop and the plot line that follows him since other characters’ actions are also closely related to the weapon, and it has specific relevance that is connected to the confusion, and loss of power the characters feel in their labyrinthine environments. For example, the German rocket engineer Franz Pökler, who works on the Schwarzgerät comes to see the rocket as a way of finding his way in the maze: “When [Pökler] began to dream about the Rocket with some frequency, it would sometimes not be a literal rocket at all, but a street he knew was in a certain district of the city, a street in a certain small area of the grid that held something he thought he needed. The coordinates were clear in his mind, but the street eluded him” (GR 399-400). The rocket is similarly important to Oberst Enzian and the Schwarzkommando, an underground German resistance movement, which is equivocally first depicted as being the propagandistic invention of the British Intelligence unit “Operation Black Wing” (GR 74), and then later suggested to exist as “real black rocket troops” (GR 276) somewhere in the Zone. It seems that the Hereros, too, lack power in the Zone, as they feel themselves to be “confused and uprooted” (GR 563), and “split off from the old tribal unity” (GR 318). Therefore, they are building their own rocket, the 00001, which is similar to the preceding rocket marked by the quintuple zero. As a tool of transcendence the rocket represents for the Hereros a way to deal with the surrounding confusion and oppression, and to somehow rise above one’s situation. In a similar way it is for Pökler a way to “transcend” and to “leave the earth” (GR 400), and for Slothrop the rocket is what the Tristero/Trystero is for Oedipa – the missing piece that he hopes will make sense of his quest.

Slothrop grows tired of being the target of control, however, and manages to escape from Pointsman after taking off to his mission in the Riviera, where he loses his identity, begins his wandering in the Zone, and gets stuck in a labyrinth of “teeming cycle of departure and return” (GR 198). On his journey towards the maze center, Slothrop experiences a metamorphosis like Oedipa, yet it is similarly problematic whether he reaches this revealing middle point: after taking on a series of protean aliases during his adventures in the Zone, his character disintegrates entirely, leaving Slothrop’s fate unresolved. Like Oedipa, it appears that he never manages to escape from the maze, and can only repeat his search for the elusive
center infinitely. The labyrinth of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, however, exceeds that of *Lot 49* in that it depicts a convolution so dense it breaks up the protagonist. This could suggest that Pynchon wants to emphasize even further the futility of trying to make sense of the complexities of the modern world.

In addition, it is not just Slothrop who wanders in a maze-like construction as several other characters are trapped in their own private labyrinths one way or another – even those characters seemingly in control of others. Although some characters appear to control others, they are nevertheless equally affected by power relations. For example, the reader is told that “behaviorists [like Pointsman] run these aisles of tables and consoles just like rats’n’mice,” (*GR* 229), yet Pynchon leaves the reader wondering “who watches from above, who notes *their* responses” (*GR* 229). Pointsman acknowledges that in his professional life as a psychologist he has been on “a journey more and more deviant, deliciously on, into a labyrinth of conditioned-reflex work in which only now, thirteen years along the clew, he’s beginning to circle back, trip across old evidence of having come that path before” (*GR* 88). He realizes that he is not in control of the maze, and cannot find solace at its center as there is always some higher instance above him: They “wait in the central chamber, as [Pointsman] draws closer… They own everything: Ariadne, the Minotaur, even, Pointsman fears, himself” (*GR* 88). Since Pointsman does not feel like he is in control, he obsessively tries to “have a go at the Minotaur” (*GR* 143) by solving Slothrop’s mystery, although he also realizes the ensuing “dander of seduction” (*GR* 144) that could potentially lead him “down the garden path by symmetry” (*GR* 144) when solving the case unavailingly. However, the Imipolex G mystery, and the recognition resulting from it presents itself as an exit for him, “the door, one he’s imagined so often in lonely Thesean brushings down his polished corridors of years” (*GR* 141).

The theme of control is therefore closely related to the multicursal labyrinthine narrative since it emphasizes how the characters feel trapped in a confusing structure, which is beyond their own control. It also offers an explanation to Pynchon’s use of the mandala, which can be thought of as a symbol that aims for restorative unity, and works as a self-healing device that assists the characters’ resistance to the ambiguous control. As a symbol that brings together irreconcilable options around a center point it helps the characters to tolerate the confusion of the multicursal maze that permits
one to choose between the numerous paths. The combination of the mandala and the maze also brings into question the ultimate satiric meaning of the narrative, but since the forms of control that distress the characters are so ambiguous, it is also clear why it can be difficult to pinpoint the variety of targets Pynchon’s satire attacks.

**Labyrinthine Structure as a Frame for Satire**

Since the structure of the book is so confusing with analepses, dizzying focalization, multitude of characters, informational overflow, and other labyrinthine qualities, it is quite a challenge to discuss its maze-like design comprehensively in a way that also sufficiently takes into consideration the satiric implications of the form. Consequently, Kharpetian observes that often questions of form are overlooked as it is thought that “no one critical endeavor can exhaust [the book’s] possibilities entirely” (108). Furthermore, Seed acknowledges that analyzing *Gravity’s Rainbow* inevitably “work[s] against the values” of the book “whose rhetoric and associational method are peculiarly resistant to discussion” (158). He maintains that the novel presents the reader with two options for facing the challenge: either one is forced to choose “unacceptable silence,” or to address the difficulties presented by the book in a way that breaks up “different aspects of the novel” (158). The latter, of course, is what much of the critical discussion is inevitably forced to do, and as a result several approaches to the book’s form and structure have been suggested.

Despite the ambiguity of the protagonist’s fate, Slothrop’s quest – together with the conjoined subplots – touches upon a number of themes that relate to the key theme of control. Drawing from Mendelson’s discussion of the encyclopedic nature of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Newman points out that the novel addresses a wide variety of thematic concerns commonly found in encyclopedic fiction: the heroic quest in order to gain knowledge, to save society, and to achieve self-growth; the inconclusiveness of this knowledge due to the unpredictability of the world; the purpose of freedom; treacheries between generations; the uses and mistreatments of language; man’s mistreatment of nature and the ensuing corruption; solipsism and its pitfalls; mutability as the sole form of stability in life; the connectedness of natural and supernatural, and ignoring what history has taught us (95-96).
However, as Newman points out, none of these themes reaches any final conclusion in *Gravity’s Rainbow* (96). We never get a clear closure on what finally happens to the “offshoots of [Slothrop’s] original scattering” as the last vague reference only points to album credits of him playing the harmonica and the kazoo “on the only record album ever put out by The Fool, an English rock group” (*GR* 742). We also never learn a way out of the corrupting systems of ordering, which the textual maze depicts, and are infinitely forced to go “off on another of [our] senseless and retrograde journeys,” not knowing whether the forking path in the maze leads “to Happyville, instead of Pain City” (*GR* 644-45). As in the case of Oedipa’s search for the ultimate meaning that would define her quest in the labyrinth that confines her, *Gravity’s Rainbow* yields to no definitive answers to its characters or to its readers, which means that the search for the core of the maze can only loop back to itself iteratively. Although there is a hint of an existing “Holy Center,” which the characters and the readers are invited to approach, reaching this point is problematized and endlessly deferred by the maze-like form of the novel, and the intertwined symbolic imagery which governs it.

By inducing paranoia and uneasiness in the reader by denying closure, the iterative labyrinth structure, which even the characters note, is a major aspect in supporting the key theme of control that highlights the satiric targets of the novel. These include all those systems, which are essential to Western worldviews and values: for example, science, psychology, philosophy, religion, language, history, and economics. In *Gravity’s Rainbow* science is used for creating destructive technology, those “bright angel[s] of death” (*GR* 760) that fall upon us, leaving people paranoiacally unadjusted, and frightened, wondering whether destruction will “come in darkness” or whether it will “bring its own light” (*GR* 4); Psychology is used to control and condition people like animals as “Fox” has become a “generic term for any patient” (*GR* 47), and people are driven to paranoid insanity by weakening their sense of the “ideas of the opposite” (*GR* 48-49); Religious beliefs

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17 Mircea Eliade’s idea of the return to the Holy Center is often brought up in critical discussion concerning Pynchon’s characters’ search for the center (see e.g. Schaub and Seed). Eliade argues that the Center can be thought of as “the zone of the sacred,” which means that “symbols of absolute reality (trees of life and immortality, Fountain of Youth, etc.)” are thought to exist at a center (17-18). He points out that the journey to this center is often considered a “difficult road,” such as seen in the difficulties of “wanderings in labyrinths” and “difficulties of the seeker for the road to the self, to the ‘center’ of his being” (18). Hence the Holy Center can be understood to refer to both the maze and the mandala motif.
are imposed on colonized people who are “tormented by missionaries into a fear of Christian sins (GR 99), and Western religiousness is depicted as a form of death that has forced the colonized people to abandon and “snare [their own faith] in words” for the “scholarly white who seemed so in love with language” (GR 99) to the extent that the colonized people have become “Europeanized in language and thought” (GR 318); Language is defined by “German mania for name-giving” that separates “the Creation finer and finer,” and forces the “namer more hopelessly apart from named” (GR 391); History writing sustains power structures as history is merely taught and seen “as sequences of violence, battle after battle,” which keeps up “mass death’s… stimulus to just ordinary folks,” and cleverly masks “the real business of the War [which] is buying and selling” (GR 105), as Pynchon points out; Financial life is depicted as corrupted, and based on a power imbalance, and cartels and conspiracies define world economy, like the story of Byron the Bulb18 reveals (GR 647-655).

Moreover, power and control in Gravity’s Rainbow is another case of either/or, which draws attention to the structures and criteria that create and sustain the powerful/powerless division. Pynchon seems to suggest that all systems of ordering are dictated from the point of view of the oppressors – the rich and powerful Elect,19 the anonymous They – that have put themselves on a pedestal, and from there are imposing their restricting structure on the less influential, the Preterite. “Shit, money, and the Word, the three American truths” (GR 28) are what guide the elect in their mission to control. What is more, the structures which order our conception of life inevitably seem to bring out such hierarchies and behavior that divide people into the powerful and the powerless. For example, the way in which the Western man is depicted to view himself reveals how power imbalance is created and sustained through polarized Western conceptions of justified privilege, and assumed superiority. Whereas the “dusky natives” (GR 317) of colonies are depicted as being

18 Many of the events in the novel are overseen by a lightbulb, and Pynchon’s various bulb references can be understood to be referring to Byron. Kharpetian suggests intriguingly that Byron the Bulb may in fact be Pynchon’s projection of himself as the satirist exposing the reader to “a pattern to events,” while cynically being aware that in the end his satire lacks the power to truly reform the situation (112). Moreover, the ever-present observing bulb could be thought of as the Labyrinth Master that is the only one able to see the satirized ideas and patterns clearly from above.

19 The Elect/Preterite dichotomy refers to the Calvinist idea of dividing people to those elected to salvation by God, and those not. Kharpetian points out that Calvinism is strongly linked with the rise of capitalism and the founding of America in the sense that poverty and inactivity are considered signs of preterion by Calvinist standards whereas wealth and industriousness signify election (121).
savages, and Western “feelings about blackness [are] tied to feelings about shit,” and the latter with “putrefaction and death” (GR 276), assumed European rationality and racial superiority is characterized by the purity and sublimity of “cathedrals, white marble statues, noble thoughts” (GR 317). But the preterite native people are not merely seen as “maids,” “field-hands” or “laborers” (GR 317). They also serve as the Other onto which the elect Western people can project their own repressed desires while also seeing the colonized preterites as being animalistic. The repressive systems of ordering, which mask the savageness of our own highly organized societies justify the division of people to abusers and victims: “Colonies are the outhouses of the European soul, where a fellow can let his pants down and relax, enjoy the smell of his own shit” (GR 317). Pynchon again makes a point about logocentric conceptualizations sustaining oppression as it is pointed out in the novel that the elite and preterite “define each other” (GR 495).

It can be argued that power relations and emphasis on control highlight the elect/preterite dichotomy. Kharpetian argues that this Calvinist binary division has two narrative purposes in the novel. First, it is linked with Slothrop’s Puritan ancestry, and thus offers an explanation to preterite Slothrop’s “totalizing paranoia,” which serves as “an example of satire’s excessively ordered society,” and resembles “the absolute either/or framework of elect and preterite” (126). Schaub, too, notes that in Gravity’s Rainbow paranoia serves as a contemporary equivalent to “the Puritan’s providence” (Voice 89). Indeed, Pynchon draws a connection between Slothrop’s suspicions and his background as “it’s a Puritan reflex” to look for “other orders behind the visible,” which is “also known as paranoia” (GR 188). Therefore, during his adventures Slothrop begins to feel as though he is controlled by an unspecified evil force, Them, and becomes exceedingly paranoid when he realizes that “the plot against him has grown” (GR 237). However, Pynchon again creates an excluded middle and pairs up paranoia with its contrary option. “Slothrop feels himself sliding onto the anti-paranoid part of his cycle” (GR 434), and begins to envision only two existing possibilities: “Either They have put him here for a reason, or he’s just here” (GR 434). Hence Slothrop’s paranoia opens up an ambiguous excluded middle between the options of everything having a reason behind it, or things happening at random. The same way as Oedipa is driven to the extremes of paranoia and anti-paranoia by the possible existence of the Tristero/Trystero,
Slothrop is distressed by the existence of the Firm, and Them running it. As in the maze of *Lot 49*, the option of paranoia is represented as “comforting” and “religious” (*GR* 434) as it gives meaning to one’s confusing existence.

Along with paranoia, another key theme that creates an excluded middle, and is highlighted by the emphasis on control is race. It also foregrounds the second narrative purpose of the Calvinist Elect/Preterite division: it is connected to the South-West African Hereros\(^\text{20}\) that form the Schwarzkommando, and “provides the rationalization for genocidal colonialism” (Kharpetian 121-22). “In its political form,” Kharpetian notes, “repression entails racist colonialism” in the sense that the victims of racism are not only seen by the oppressors as “brute and alien other” but also as “unrepressed” and “unsystematized,” which necessitates the denial of their freedom (113). Pynchon links subjugation with contrived power structures on several occasions, and suggests that oppressors proclaim themselves as the elect, and see their own organized structures as a confirmation of their privileged position. He suggests that man’s obsessive need to control chaos by creating hierarchies and systems of ordering essentially leads to oppression. Thus the elect are depicted as ruthlessly imposing structures even in the form of death on those instances that are not considered organized enough: “Death [is] the source of Their power” (*GR* 539), and the Dodo birds’ insufficient “details of Design” are used as an excuse that mitigates their extermination (*GR* 110). This also foreshadows the eradication of the Hereros, as Kharpetian points out (122-23).

Käkelä-Puumala reminds that the reason behind the Hereros’ collective and self-willed extermination in the Zone is often suggested to be “death-promoting European culture” and colonialization (*Other* 158). This would imply that the power

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\(^{20}\) Pynchon’s referring to the killing of the South-West African Hereros by the German colonists is based on a historical fact, as is often noted by critics (e.g. Käkelä-Puumala, Kharpetian, and Weisenburger). The Hereros were a Bantu tribe living in the German Empire protectorate, which later became the Republic of Namibia. They rebelled against their German oppressors in 1904-07, and the uprising led to a genocide in which the majority of the Herero people were exterminated. In his letter to Thomas F. Hirsch Pynchon clarifies his fascination with the Hereros’ history, and explains how he sees the Herero genocide of 1904 “as a sort of dress rehearsal for what happened to the Jews in the ’30’s and ’40’s,” and how understanding these past events “could be vitally important to people’s understanding of what’s going on in the world these days” (Seed 240, 243). Pynchon was so fascinated with the Hereros that he picked up the topic first in *V.* and continued the discussion in *Gravity’s Rainbow*. In *Gravity’s Rainbow* the Schwarzkommando mainly consist of the descendants of the original African Hereros, and are now referred to as the Zone-Hereros, or “collectively as the Erdschweinhöhle,” and they live underground near the Mittelwerk missile factory in Nordhausen (*GR* 315).
structures Pynchon describes with his labyrinthine narrative are so strong that they leave no other option for the powerless but to exterminate themselves. However, Käkelä-Puumala also acknowledges the ambivalence of the suicide mission, and proposes that it can be seen as “a challenge to the power structures of the Zone” (*Other* 158). She maintains that Pynchon’s juxtaposition of the “premodern [Herero] culture” with its mandalic villages, and modern “technoscientific European culture” with its mandalic rockets and launching switches not only contributes to the subversiveness of the suicide mission by positioning “tribal conception of death against the operational death of the war machine” but also means that the two cultures “can be seen only through each other” (*Other* 158-59). Therefore the rocket, which the Herero are building, becomes a form of subverting power hierarchy. Käkelä-Puumala’s argument could be further extended by also arguing that premodern culture, and the mandala that defines its values, should be evaluated against, and in relation to modern culture, and the multicursal textual labyrinth that Pynchon defines it with.

The maze and the mandala are both used to elaborate the satiric message, but they have one crucial difference: whereas the maze robs the characters of their sense of being in control, the mandala aims to subvert oppressive power hierarchies. Therefore, the mandala becomes an essential tool in resisting different forms of control, which are highlighted by the labyrinthine narration, and its emphasis on ordering structures that sustain and create power imbalance. In essence, by foregrounding power relations with the paranoia-inducing labyrinthine narration Pynchon is able to show the negative sides of the established structures of our societies by representing them as oppressive, and as masking the source of power behind abstract concepts, and contrived binary divisions. Since the power remains ambiguous and uncontrollable in the multicursal maze, the narrative compels the apprehensive reader to ask who is controlling who – and for what effects. In short, the iterative quest in the maze highlights confusion and paranoia endlessly, which foregrounds structures that control and repress. This creates the need, both in the characters and the reader, to find ways to deal with the ambiguous control. Therefore the mandala serves as an attempt to resist and endure the regulation.

In *Gravity’s Rainbow* the oppressed members of the society are forced into a repressive mold “because They need our terror for Their survival” (*GR* 539). To
highlight this themes like paranoia and control are underlined by the labyrinthine narrative, which further guides the reader to not only make sense of the various satiric targets, but also perhaps allow him or her to better decipher connections between characters, and their viewpoints. This also allows one to connect the confusion to the overall form of the novel, which is not only defined by the idea of the labyrinth but also employs the mandala in order to highlight an elusive middle that lies at the center of Pynchon’s maze-like satire. Since the two symbols, which single out the satiric targets are so closely tied with the satiric theme of control, they seem to be logical extensions of each other, and therefore support the contents of the satire together.

**Holy-Center-Approaching: The Mandala as a Satiric Aspect of the Maze**

Although the basic formation of the novel can be divided into parts and episodes, the symbolic overall form of the novel has proved to be more difficult to approach. Despite the apparent labyrinthine features it has been argued, for example, that the novel follows an arch-like pattern, and that “the parabola of the rainbow becomes a parabola of the arch of history” (Newman 91). Weisenburger, on the other hand, maintains that the book does not have a rainbow-like arch shape, but rather a distinctly circular narrative design (*Companion* 9). He traces Pynchon’s various references and rich imagery, and points out that the novel’s “narrative chronometrics” are actually “plotted like a mandala,” and the four quadrants of the construction built around dates of the Christian liturgical calendar (*Companion* 9-10). He notes that many of the episodes in the book are circular, and that the mandala motif recurs in the novel along with other related circular symbols such as wheels, windmills, and buttons, for example (*Companion* 10-11).

Weisenburger’s argument is that the novel’s ambiguous shape has various connotations. It, for example, raises the idea of redemptive salvation but at the same time denies this by reducing it into “a red herring” since it does not “resolve [the]

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21 It should be noted, however, that rainbows are actually circular although the full circle is not seen because the horizon limits the view. A fully circular rainbow can be seen from a high enough altitude (e.g. on an airplane). Should the arch of the rainbow symbolize the arch of history, the notion of the above-view would suggest that the repetitiveness of history is only perceived by those who can observe events from above, i.e. those in power.
antinomy” between the anticipated salvation and perdition (Companion 10). Hence, following Weisenburger’s line of argument, the novel’s mandalic circularity can be understood to contribute to the inconclusiveness of the novel, and due to this feature also thematically support the satiric implications of the ambiguous labyrinthine form, and the unattainable center. The mandala that serves as a tool against the labyrinthine confusion is therefore an integral formal element along with the multicursral maze.

Another critic to point out the pervasiveness of the mandala symbol is John M. Muste. He maintains that it is one of the key symbols that structure and explain the thematic aims of Gravity’s Rainbow, although he also acknowledges that it by no means explains the novel comprehensively (163). Muste’s discussion does, however, address the key theme of control that is emphasized by the labyrinthine narration. He sees the mandala motif as a key to understanding the characters’ resistance to being controlled by some higher instance. Muste argues that in Gravity’s Rainbow the four contending forces of the mandala relate to the four available options that the characters have “for dealing with the modern world which is controlled by immensely powerful forces, whose aim, whether primary or tangential, is to control everything and to annihilate individuality” (176). These options, he suggests, are love, resistance, transcendence, and acceptance of preterition, yet none of these alternatives can be thought of as the path to salvation as “all of them are so thoroughly discredited one way or another” (176). Muste maintains that although Pynchon “shows us the virtues and limitations of each” option, he “makes no choices among them” (164). Therefore Muste’s approach to the mandalic form of the novel also highlights the absence of a conclusion, and corresponds to Weisenburger’s argument that Gravity’s Rainbow “approaches, but avoids closure” since it “refuses to dish up [a] totalizing signifier” (Companion 11).

While Weisenburger and Muste are by no means wrong in postulating the importance of the mandala, it could be argued that the labyrinthine complexity and the maze motif together reveal yet another layer to Pynchon’s complex satire, and help to understand the satiric functions of the mandala on a deeper level, and in a wider context. Just like the center of the maze, which is not easily reached, the mandala and its unattainable center are also “at the heart of the mystery of Gravity’s Rainbow” (Muste 176). But in order to better understand the significance of the mandala, it should be contrasted with the maze. The elusive center that the symbols
share is a key to understanding how the novel works as a satire, and why Pynchon juxtaposes the mandala and the multiscursal labyrinthine narration that permits conclusion, and control over the confusion. At the same time the mandala helps to understand the workings of both Pynchon’s labyrinthine prose and the characters’ actions better.

Even though the mandala can be seen as a device that helps to tolerate and somehow bring together the distressing, irreconcilable, and abstract paths of the labyrinth, the multiscursal maze, and in effect the modern world, ultimately denies any sense of power. The characters, whose actions are tied to labyrinthine imagery and confusion stemming from their surroundings, nevertheless come to see the mandala as a salvation: Pointsman, who is pained by the realization of some higher instance controlling the maze, tries to overcome the feeling of powerlessness by finding mandalas that bring together the irreconcilable options. Not only does Slothrop become “the door” (GR 141) Pointsman imagines to lead to the correct pathway in the maze, he also becomes for Pointsman an “interface” (GR 144), a mediating center point that draws together otherwise irreconcilable opposites, and helps Pointsman to achieve at least some sense of control. As such Slothrop is for the distressed Pavlovian “a survival, if you will, of a piece of the late Dr. Jamf himself, past death, past the reckoning of the, the old central chamber you know….” (GR 168). In this sense Pointsman’s mandala is a tool of transcendence, which according to Muste’s view is one of the ways in which the characters apply the symbol in order to resist control. Later upon Slothrop’s disappearance Pointsman loses this guiding light, and again must find a mandala to alleviate the pain of dealing with abstract control. He delves into delusions of grandeur, where he instead sees himself as a union of opposites, “Yang and Yin” (GR 278), since this allows him to tolerate the loss of power resulting from Slothrop’s disappearance.

It is obvious that the characters find the confusing environment intolerable, and must find ways to deal with it. Like Muste suggests, the option of transcendence is tied to the concept of the mandala. But Pointsman not only uses the mandala to deal with ambiguous control as he also seems to use it as a way to get to the center of his own maze. However, Weisenburger agrees with Hite, and notes the futility of Pointsman’s attempt to approach the unattainable Holy Center: although the psychologist, for example, in his dream “set[s] out leftward” (GR 137) in a mandalic
way in order to learn more about the situation – hence setting out to the direction of the unconscious, and also towards the labyrinth’s center\(^{22}\) – reaching the central point is ultimately impossible for him (Companion 82-83) the same way as it is for other characters. What is more, Muste reminds that although Slothrop is likened to a mandala, and even he during the course of the novel understands it “as his own sign,” the “temptation to see [the symbol] as an answer [to explain the full meaning of the novel] must, like all other temptations offered by the book, be rejected” (172). However, even though the symbol is alone insufficient to explain the novel, it helps to understand the ambiguity of the narrative.

Since the rocket, and the ambiguous control it is strongly linked with, has such great importance for the confusing narrative, its significance should not go unnoticed. In fact, another key mandala can be found in the rocket, which is important to the Herero in their subversive resistance to the Zone’s labyrinthine power relations. The same way as Pointsman’s interface, the recurring image of the mandala in the form of the rocket is for the Hereros a way to deal with the intolerable confusion of being the target of abstract control. When the rocket is viewed from above or below its four fins can be seen as the four contending directions on each side of the center (GR 563), which links the Schwarzkommando rocket to the mandala symbol: “Vectors in the night underground, all trying to flee a center, a force, which appears to be the Rocket… which is able to gather violent political opposites together in the Erdschweinhöhle” (GR 318). Furthermore, the image of the mandala is associated both with the Herero villages, and the Schwarzkommando in general since the Hereros have come to use it as their insignia; their mandalic symbol portrays the A4 rocket’s launching switches (GR 361).

The Herero villages are “built like a mandala” (GR 321), which means that the construction of the village is circular, and contains a sacred circle at the center where the cattle is kept. Around it the village itself is further divided into four counterbalanced parts that are assigned to different people and purposes: “Birth, soul,

\(^{22}\) Turning left is “the common procedure for discovering the central point of certain labyrinths.” Borges reminds in “The Garden of Forking Paths” (22). Jung notes that generally movement towards left signifies a movement towards unconscious while rightward movement indicates a path towards consciousness (36). He also points out that counterclockwise movement is likened to chaos and being sinister, whereas clockwise movement is associated with being “correct” and “rightful” (36). Moreover, Weisenburger points out that Pointsman’s movement to the left corresponds with labyrinthine mandalas (See Figure 4 in Jung’s Mandala Symbolism) in which the counterclockwise movement leads to the center (Companion 82-83).
fire, building. Male and female, together” (GR 563). Hence the mandalic construction signifies unity and harmony in the Herero culture. The mandala counterbalances polarities and opens up an option in the middle, which not only ordains the options around it but also makes it impossible to choose one option over another without opting for another extreme, and thus creating imbalance. Pynchon’s paralleling of the weapon and the mandalic Herero village, which represents unity, harmony and a reconciliation of opposites, seems to serve the purpose of highlighting the satiric aims of the novel by drawing attention to the fact that the oppressive labyrinthine Zone distresses the characters to the extent that they need to come up with ways tolerate the ambiguity and control. Therefore, the image crops up when the Hereros are later involved with the secret-weapons program, where they spot the familiar mandala symbol again. Since the Hereros feel like they cannot be in control of the Zone’s labyrinths, the rocket’s mandalas become important to them. “You can see how we might feel [the rocket] speak to us… we knew that our destiny was tied with its own,” the Herero chief Andreas Orukambe explains to Slothrop (GR 563).

But just like Slothrop’s or Pointsman’s attempts to reconcile the paradoxes of their lives, the Hereros’ attempt to achieve the same kind of unity as they had in their native African villages becomes impossible due to the complexity that defines the modern Western world. Enzian realizes that the maze and its infinitely multiplying pathways work against the mandalas they try to build up in order to survive in the labyrinthine Zone: “Thousands of details, any one of which carries the chance of a fatal mistake. Enzian would like to be more out of the process than he is—to be able to see where it’s going, to know, in real time, at each splitting of the pathway of decision, which would have been right and which wrong. But it is their time, their space, and he still expects, naively, outcomes the white continuum grew past hoping for centuries ago. The details… swirl like fog, each particle with its own array of forces and directions… he can’t handle them all at the same time, if he stays too much with any he’s in danger of losing others” (GR 326-27). What is more, Enzian realizes that he cannot fight the abstract power in the maze effectively: “He has the odd feeling, in moments of reverie or honest despair, that he is speaking lines prepared somewhere far away (not far away in space, but in levels of power), and that his decisions are not his own at all, but the flummeries of an actor impersonating
a leader. He has dreamed of being held in the pitiless emprise of something from which he cannot wake .” (GR 327).

Essentially the Zone appears to be a nightmarish place where one cannot find a way out, and if one is to opt for the mandala in order to achieve the necessary unity, the ever-increasing pathways render this attempt ambiguous. Although the mandala has similarities with the labyrinth symbol, the maze cannot be considered quite as unifying and harmonious if it is a multicursal labyrinth like those of Pynchon’s literal mazes – the journey to the center is hardly empowering or restorative. Since the formal elements of Pynchon’s fictions make his narrative labyrinth distinctively multicursal, the journey to the unifying center is never as simple and meditative as with the mandala, and the characters’ desperate need to use the symbol as a unifying way to deal with the unresolvable ambiguity becomes a pointless task. But no matter how fruitless the characters’ use of the mandala proves out to be, the symbol nevertheless – just like paranoia and insanity – serves for them as some kind of a way to deal with the pressures of being the target of ambiguous control, which is highlighted by the textual maze. However, even though Pynchon in Gravity’s Rainbow proposes a mandalic way to deal with the ubiquitous control of the modern world, he nevertheless leaves it up to the reader to achieve unity between the opposing options (Muste 164). Therefore the symbol leaves the ultimate satiric meaning open, and thus supports the ambiguous multitude of potential paths in the maze.

A System of Violation

As with Lot 49 and its narrative maze, the Byzantine construction of Gravity’s Rainbow equivocally seems to suggest a potential for the reconciliation of opposites through dichotomies, yet it consistently refuses to offer a finite answer by denying a fixed middle option. Moreover, Muste points out that recognizing the centrality of the mandala helps to break down the common notion that the book is dialectical in its structure (176). The problem with the dualist either/or approach, he continues, is that it suggest that a reconciliation can be found somewhere between polar opposites, although the ambiguity of the novel clearly denies such a possibility. In Muste’s view this misconception is based on “our traditional Western view of possibility…
[which] denies the existence of anything between (or beyond) the zero and the one” (176). Similarly Mendelson draws attention to the limitations of thinking in terms of rigid dichotomies, and points out that “possibilities of freedom” exist “between and outside” the available two options, although the book does not reveal these possibilities easily (185). It is precisely this ambiguity that the labyrinth and the mandala share that allows several interpretations of the narrative.

Pynchon juxtaposes the mandala with the labyrinthine System that revolves around increasing structures and control. In this way he ambiguously both suggests that the mandala offers a way to resist the controlling structures, and that since it is implemented in the overpowering maze-like world, it is essentially useless in offering a way out of the situation. Therefore the labyrinth ambiguously seems to deny the positive features of the mandala. Whereas the mandala as some kind of meditative tool suggests a movement towards reconciling opposites, the informational overflow of Pynchon’s maze characteristically goes against this tendency. The “solemn binary decisions” (GR 411) the characters and the readers have to make in order to find their way in the confusion do not allow an unrestricted path to the labyrinth’s center, which complicates the peace of mind that the mandala promises. Pynchon’s recursive narrative maze highlights the fact that oppressive systems of ordering guide people to look for “hidden shapes” and “rational formulas” (GR 412), and hence complicate the process of finding some kind of primordial unity.

The ambiguity which defines Pynchon’s juxtaposition of the two symbols can be seen, for example, in one of Pökler’s dream sequences. The sequence paints a picture of a polarized world on a course towards imminent destruction: “Living inside the System is like riding across the country in a bus driven by a maniac bent on suicide” (GR 412). It is a world which “demand[s] that ‘productivity’ and ‘earnings’ keep on increasing with time,” and in this process the System drains of its energy “not only most of humanity” but also “most of the World, animal, vegetable and mineral” (GR 412). The world, Pynchon seems to suggest, is on its way to an end in the form of heat death (i.e. maximum thermodynamic entropy). But the System is discussed ambiguously in relation to Kekulé’s dream of the “Great Serpent holding
its tail in its own mouth” (GR 412), which serves as a way to highlight the paradoxical message. The reader is told that the image of the circular serpent originally suggested that “[the] World is a closed thing, cyclical, resonant, eternally-returning” (GR 412). However, this idea, as Pynchon points out, has come to be used in a cynical and mean way as it has been “delivered into a system whose only aim is to violate the Cycle” (GR 412). By contrasting the mandala and its original position as a unifying symbol, and the futile way in which the symbol has come to be used in the labyrinthine environment, Pynchon highlights the fact that the mandala no longer stands for its original meaning as the natural cycle of things. Neither does the symbol seem to suggest definitively that the course of events could be changed, and the end avoided.

But although outlook is not good for Their System that must “sooner or later” come to its end “when its addiction to energy has become more than the rest of the World can supply” (GR 412), Pynchon nevertheless ambiguously brings some hope in the situation in the original meaning of the mandala, which “define[s] to us the loss of” a gone “locus of innocence” (GR 413). The labyrinthine violation of the original cyclical system works as a critique against the power structures of the Western world, and the persistence of the mandala in some sense promises a possibility for a change. Gravity’s Rainbow reminds the reader that “we had been given certain molecules, certain combinations and not others --- we used what we found in Nature, unquestioning, shamefully perhaps – but the Serpent whispered, ‘They can be changed, and new molecules assembled from the debris of the given….’” (GR 413). But the ambiguity equivocally gives hope of something better: “Can anyone tell me what else [the Serpent] whispered to us? Come – who knows? You” (GR 413). It seems that Pynchon leaves it for the readers to figure out which path to take, and the fact that the book does not yield a final resolution of any kind allows one to find several possible paths through the maze. “There is time” (GR 760), the closing moments just before the end of the novel remind despite the impending doom. The reader is seated at the movie theater, waiting for the rocket to

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23 Pynchon refers to German chemist Friedrich August Kekulé von Stradonitz (1829-96) who famously had a dream about a snake eating its own tail. The dream made Kekulé realize the cyclical structure of the benzene molecule, and his findings “revolutionized chemistry” (GR 410). The Ourobouros symbol, as the serpent is referred to, signifies unity, cyclicality, and eternal return.
hit, yet Pynchon omits closure, and the quest turn back to itself. Some hope remains that it is up to the reader to find a way to avoid the seemingly inevitable.

**Conclusion**

*Gravity’s Rainbow*, just like *The Crying of Lot 49*, has been noted for its dense labyrinthine structure, and the significance of the motif has also to a degree been addressed in terms of the novel’s thematic contents. But although the image of the maze is significant in terms of the novel’s assumed meaning, the symbolic overall form has also garnered different approaches. For example, it has been argued that the novel follows an arch-like shape, and that it is circular. In addition, along with the maze, another structural key motif has been identified to be the mandala, a meditative image that represents balance and unity as it juxtaposes opposite options around a shared center point. Therefore the mandala shares some key features with the maze: both motifs are defined by an unattainable center and binary either/or options. Based on the similarities of the symbols it is therefore possible to draw a connection between them, and to argue that Pynchon uses these two motifs together in *Gravity's Rainbow* in order to deepen the satiric implications of his complex narrative. Moreover, the author’s use of the mandala further highlights the labyrinthine qualities of the text, and the absence of an attainable center.

One of the main themes, which the maze-like form of the text supports, is control in its various forms: the labyrinth of *Gravity’s Rainbow* does not allow mastery over it, and the formal elements of the novel induce uneasiness and paranoia. The maze-like narration is therefore one of the key elements in singling out the satiric targets of the novel, which encompass virtually all those established structures and systems by which we define our lives. Moreover, as Pynchon’s labyrinths are essentially power structures, they highlight both the reader’s and the characters’ sense of not being in control of one’s surroundings. This creates the need for a symbol that allows one to resist the ambiguous forms of control, which are highlighted by the maze. Hence the labyrinthine elements facilitate the use of the mandala, and explain why Pynchon juxtaposes the two symbols. Whereas the labyrinth that defines the modern world denies power from the individual, the
mandala comes to serve as a desperate attempt to try to gain back some sense of control over one’s life.

However, the novel leaves it ambiguous whether the mandala can make any significant difference in the situation. When the characters try to use the symbol as a way to deal with their confusing environments, and the ever-increasing forking pathways of decisions, it seems that the complexity of the maze-like world renders their attempts futile. Nevertheless this cannot be said to be a finite answer as Pynchon also ambiguously hints at the possibility that the world is not on its way to an inevitable doom since the mandala serves as a reminder that there are alternate paths through the maze. Even though it is possible to say on the one hand that Pynchon’s satire is pessimistic about the fate of mankind, one can also on the other hand see how the labyrinthine satire allows one to see some hope in the future. Since *Gravity’s Rainbow* ends on an ambiguous note, the reader is left finding the center of the maze. It is this infuriatingly elusive point that defines the satiric meaning in Pynchon’s novel – and essentially allows one to choose whether the forking path leads to salvation or perdition.
Conclusion

Many labels have been put on Thomas Pynchon’s fictions over the years. Whether one considers him to be a postmodernist, a Menippean satirist, a deconstructionist, or some kind of “a prophet of doom and miscommunication” that combines a wide variety of subjects and theoretical fields “in order to orchestrate the gradual decline of Western civilization” (Berressem 169), one thing remains clear nevertheless – and that is the complexity of his multi-layered narratives. Not only are his fictions informationally dense, contain convoluted sentences, and complex focalization, they also lead both characters and the readers astray in the ever-increasing pathways of possible options one could choose from. One can therefore justifiably term Pynchon’s fictions as being subtextually labyrinthine: the novels employ the motif of the maze both in terms of their textual arrangement and their form. Moreover, the key characteristic of Pynchon’s mazes is that they are built around juxtaposed binary options that increase the number of pathways available in the labyrinth, and also sustain the paranoia and uneasiness, which define the author’s novels.

This ambiguity and the unattainable center resulting from the increasing options are features that Pynchon’s novels share. As this discussion of The Crying of Lot 49 and Gravity’s Rainbow reminds us, Pynchon’s satiric fictions can be termed multicursal labyrinths. Notable about this feature is that it does not allow complete mastery over the texts, which means that both the characters of the two novels as well as the readers become endlessly trapped in Pynchon’s recursive and maze-like structures. We are left with Oedipa in the auction, and waiting for the rocket to hit us in the movie theater, but no definite and redeeming closure ever comes. It is therefore impossible to argue what the ultimate satiric meaning of this open-endedness is as Pynchon’s mazes only loop back on themselves, and simply leave both the reader and the characters with more questions than answers. Rather than being mere quests to find the ultimate authorial intention, the labyrinthine structures of both Lot 49 and Gravity’s Rainbow can be argued to be more about the journey through the maze, and the way in which one chooses one’s pathways in the labyrinth in order to interpret the equivocal satiric meaning.

But how should one read Pynchon’s fictions then, and come to terms with the fact that the ultimate meaning in his novels is endlessly deferred? Obviously one can
on the one hand define the meaning of both Gravity's Rainbow and Lot 49, and the labyrinth proves to be a suitable entry point for this. However, on the other hand, the paradoxical and recursive construction of the novels always forces one to disagree with oneself, and discard any attempt at reaching a terminal conclusion; the revealing insight is undeniably insufficient. The satiric content of Pynchon’s works inevitably remains as elusive as the center point of his narrative mazes. Hite notes that acknowledging the insufficiency of any single interpretation brings about different ways of construing the author’s texts. She notes that one way of looking at the complexity is to see “Pynchon’s central insight [as being] intrinsically inexpressible” (23) because language fails to convey the author’s intended meaning. In this view, Pynchon’s novels can be thought of as mere “attempts to create conditions favorable to revelation” because as “linguistic structures they fall short of revelation themselves” (23) in that they cannot signify something that resists signification. Conversely, another way to approach the complexity is to hold the view that Pynchon’s use of the unattainable center allows the reader to tolerate textual chaos and inconsistency since it at the same time both keeps up the reader’s expectation, and deflects the supposition that the narratives mirror chaos (Hite 24). In this sense the structural trope of Pynchon’s fictions plays on the expectation that there should be a resolution even if this is unavailable, and therefore the novels mirror a prominent tendency in Western culture where man tries to resolve chaotic heterogeneity by turning it into unity (24).

What makes the labyrinth such a convenient entry point in reading Pynchon is that it allows one to interpret the author’s fictions in a formalist way as well as deconstruct the novels’ meanings. Since the maze falls naturally somewhere between these two options, it allows a multitude of possible readings. Because of this ambiguity there remains a great deal of work to do in terms of discussing Pynchon as a satirist. Although the term labyrinthine has been attributed to Pynchon’s fictions in critical discussion, the actual uses of the maze symbol itself could still be discussed further, and the motif’s possible relation to the satiric content could be explored more. Hence the maze should be re-evaluated in Pynchon studies, and the uses of this symbol in Pynchon’s fictions explored further.

But in the end, does the path through the maze lead to impending doom or not? Based on the textual evidence of Pynchon’s novels one cannot surely say the author
chooses to opt for either option. More or less his narratives seem to serve as some kind of eye-openers that hopefully compel the reader to ask which path one would hope to take. Even though there is hope, the restrictive labyrinthine structures ambiguously counter-balance this: the world is so maze-like and confusing that power seems to belong to some abstract instance, and the real decisions appear to be made in higher places, whereas “most of the rest of us poor sheep,” as Pynchon reminds, are “stuck with the simple, standard fear” (SL 18-19). It is precisely this ambiguous helplessness of waiting between possible options that both The Crying of Lot 49 and Gravity’s Rainbow capture with their labyrinthine complexity. It is helpful to think that Pynchon, too, seems to view himself as being equally trapped, and that he sees writing as his way of positioning himself on the “spectrum of impotence” (SL 19) that results from the restricting options that the complexity poses – since no doubt does one’s search for the meaning in Pynchon’s labyrinthine fictions, or any fiction for that matter, also lie somewhere on this very same spectrum.
Bibliography

Primary Sources

Secondary Sources


