

Description, Historical Reference, and Allegories of America in Thomas Pynchon's *Inherent Vice*

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Thomas Pynchon's Inherent Vice, the concluding novel in his California trilogy exhibits a curious allegorical structure of California and, by extension, America, by way of descriptions of historical reference. This paper argues that these descriptions constitute a system that reflects the contemporary moral and political anxieties of post-postmodern fiction in the immediate context of the novel's publication. What is more, the text employs Pynchon's "stylistic, residual postmodernism" in order to put forth a powerful cautionary tale when relying on and reconfiguring the generic codes of noir.

Keywords: narratology / American literature / postmodernism / post-postmodernism / Pynchon, Thomas: *Inherent Vice* / narrative technique / description / allegory / noir

Thomas Pynchon's *Inherent Vice* of 2009, his final piece in what critics refer to as his California trilogy, revisits a crucial rupture in American political and cultural history. A late addition to the series (*The Crying of the Lot 49* was published in 1966 and *Vineland* a quarter of a century later), Pynchon's blend of California *noir* and historiographic metafiction is significantly set during Ronald Reagan's second term as governor of California, and after the capture of the Manson family. Thus, as Casey Shoop (Shoop, "Thomas Pynchon, Postmodernism") argues, *Inherent Vice* offers a retrospective understanding of an experimental phase in what came to be known as Reaganomics under his presidency (see: Niskanen), and accounts for the divided public perception of the counterculture. Combining Pynchon's hallmark of paranoia as a mode of understanding (Bersani) with elements of historiographic metafiction (Hutcheon) and the California *noir* in Chandler's style, the novel adopts a curious third person singular, point-of-view narrator, transposed into Sortilège's voice-over in Paul Thomas Anderson's 2014 film adaptation. The novel's mode of narration, as well as the film's voice-

over, mark a conscious intent upon allegorizing what critics, by default, recognize in Pynchon as the struggle between the “Elect” and the “Preterite” for claiming the true American heritage (see the narrator’s remarks on Slothrop’s tract “On Preterition” in Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* 555). The narrative consciousness balances between allegory, *noir*’s “gritty realism” and historical accuracy in keeping a double distance from the *diegesis*. This can best be illustrated by how descriptions—atmospheric, historic *and* allegorical—work in *Inherent Vice*.

In what follows, I will demonstrate (1) how perspective and voice are separated in these descriptions, (2) how this separation is due to retrospective historical knowledge about the era, and (3) how the perspectival difference is downplayed by the supposedly ironic narrative voice, (4) only to reinforce or undermine historical accuracy at will in an attempt to strengthen allegorical messages. These textual features, in turn, will underline the tendency to which critics—M. P. Eve and R. E. Kohn, together with Nicoline Timmer and Diana Benea, among others—refer to as “post-postmodern” sensibility in Pynchon’s work starting with *Vineland*. This post-postmodern sensibility can be seen as “a drive toward intersubjective connection and communication, and also [as] a sense of ‘presence’ and ‘sameness’ ... performing a complicit and complicated critique on certain aspects of postmodern subjectivity” (Trimmer 13) in *Vineland* (1990). In the case of *Mason & Dixon* (1997) it is highlighted as “a newfound concern for the family and community,” “an increasing visibility of spaces of alterity and the politics of informing our relationship with the Other,” while *Against the Day* (2006) exhibits “an incipient ethic of responsibility.” *Inherent Vice* (2009), however, displays “a marked interest in questions of social justice and moral duty,” and, in turn, “rehumanizes” the subject (Benea 143–144).

In line with the suggestions that Pynchon’s output shows post-postmodern sensibilities, I will argue that the description of landscapes, either diegetic or pictorial, provides a system for making sense of California or “America” in *Inherent Vice*. As Casey Shoop argues in an essay on the connection between Jameson’s articles on postmodernism and Chandler:

California is so often imagined as the site of postmodernism, in both its ecstatic and its nostalgic incarnations. Los Angeles becomes [during the period of time between Jameson’s two articles on Chandler] the center of a spatial allegory for the seemingly irresolvable tension between the critical urge to map social totality and the burgeoning acknowledgment that such a thing is no longer possible. (Shoop, “Corpse and Accomplice” 207)

In line with Shoop's observation, I will provide an analysis of three distinct examples, where the landscape is described as a counterpoint to the indiscernibility of the social structure represented by the novel's notorious Golden Fang, either a schooner, a tax haven for dentists, or an Indochinese heroin cartel, or all of these at once, constituting—possibly—a vertically organized crime syndicate to produce, import, and distribute drugs as well as to control their social and market penetration, and also to provide treatment for side-effects of substance abuse, whether psychological or dental. The three instances, significantly, are Larry Doc Sportello's drive to Santa Monica; his encounter with the depiction of what he understands is supposedly the first colonial encounter with the valley of California; and his journey from the scene on his way home and beyond, into an imaginary future. These descriptions can be seen as imaginative attempts to re-conceptualize the social structure marked by the often violent real estate speculation characterizing the region, a tendency marked by segregation and disappearance of ethnic neighborhoods (as indicated by Tariq Khalil's story and the telling name of Mickey Wolfmann's "Channel View Estates" in the novel).

The first example is Larry "Doc" Sportello's drive to Santa Monica, indicative of how the description of scenery, which is normally an atmospheric device, is turned into an historically accurate account of how political contexts have shaped the perception of the landscape. The scene is filtered through the narrative consciousness under the influence, the very narrative mode of *Inherent Vice*, as the acronym for Location—Surveillance—Detection, Doc's private investigative agency, located in the same building with a thinly disguised drug distribution center may indicate. Thus, the trip itself is that of a consciousness whose perspective seems to be close to Sportello's point of view despite the obvious separation of voice. This divide between point of view and voice is also in line with how the ironic tone of the passage is intent on downplaying the historical difference in knowledge between the narrator's supposedly diegetic point of view and the reader's extradiegetic and historically distant position.

ON CERTAIN DAYS, DRIVING INTO SANTA MONICA WAS LIKE having hallucinations without going to all the trouble of acquiring and then taking a particular drug, although some days, for sure, *any* drug was preferable to driving into Santa Monica.

Today, after a deceptively sunny and uneventful spin up through the Hughes Company property—a kind of smorgasbord of potential U.S. combat zones, terrain specimens ranging from mountains and deserts to swamp and jungle and so forth, all there, according to local paranoia, for fine-tuning battle radar

systems on—past Westchester and the Marina and into Venice, Doc reached the Santa Monica city line, where the latest mental exercise began. Suddenly he was on some planet where the wind can blow two directions at once, bringing in fog from the ocean and sand from the desert at the same time, obliging the unwary driver to shift down the minute he entered this alien atmosphere, with daylight dimmed, visibility reduced to half a block, and all colors, including those of traffic signals, shifted radically elsewhere in the spectrum. (Pynchon, *Inherent Vice* 50)

The passage's opening with the double entendre of "trip" extends to the ambiguity of perception under the influence: the view of the landscape is filtered through paranoid rumor and hazy observations, adding to the implausibility of the narrator's drive along the coast. Yet the detail mentioned in passing about "the Hughes Company property" attributed to local paranoia is precise enough to anchor the episode historically. As Casey Shoop remarks,

virtually the entire infrastructure of Southern California, from freeways to waterways, depended on federal funding, the defense industry, the lifeblood of its regional economy, subsisted entirely on government contracts, of which "California received fully twenty-five percent." (Shoop, "Thomas Pynchon, Postmodernism" 72–73)

When the text refers to federal funding in support of Californian businesses in the arms trade as "local paranoia," it indeed presents a possible historical account for how Reagan's second term as governor may have been sponsored by federal money. Given the historical distance between the narrative time frame and the date of the novel's publication, the "preterite" theory about the abuse of power seems all the more plausible in the light of Housing and Urban Development scams under Reagan's presidency that came to light in the 1990s. Pynchon's retrospective account of the end of the counterculture also attributes the restructuring of the landscape to the New Right in that "this homegrown revolution from the right organized around the protective ethos of entitlement: suburban retrenchment, anticommunism, privatization, military spending, small government, and (less advertisably) racism" (Shoop, "Thomas Pynchon, Postmodernism" 69–70). It is not difficult to identify in these elements the major motives *Inherent Vice* shares with the other pieces in the California trilogy, notably with *The Crying of the Lot 49*. Thus, atmospheric descriptions similar to the above quoted passage from the novel—emphasized by the shift of colors as in a hallucination or, alternatively, in a film sequence indicating a nostalgic reference to the past—acquire referential potential, by virtue of the

distance between the point-of-view narration and its historical distance to the context of reading well beyond the time-frame of the narrative. This distance is marked by how the narration posits the knowledge it renders as paranoid, thereby paradoxically maintaining the historical authenticity of the point-of-view narration, and by the stylistic choices in the narrative voice that keep a distance from the content rendered thereby. One may be tempted to suggest that conspiracy theories are presented in a curious light in *Inherent Vice*, something that the 2014 film adaptation takes full advantage of by its choice of filters reminiscent of the color technologies of the historical period in question. The complexity of the description in question testifies to how Pynchon makes full use of the postmodern pastiche *and* irony in order to lay claim to an historical narrative with a potentially referential claim, yet maintaining its uncertainty—the very sign of the post-postmodern, according to McLaughlin (McLaughlin, “Post-postmodern discontent”).

The second description in the series constituting an overarching allegory of America is when *Inherent Vice*—like other pieces in the California trilogy—explicitly evokes allegorical images of California, the final destination and elaboration of manifest destiny. Both in *The Crying of the Lot 49* and *Inherent Vice*, these instances are centered around paintings, Remedios Varo’s “Bordando el Manto Terrestre” [“Embroidering the Earth’s Mantle”], and an unidentified mural of the Portolá expedition of 1769 to the valley of California, respectively.¹ The description of the latter bears some resemblance to the above quoted passage in its emphasis on color and the reconstruction of states of consciousness.

In a room off the lobby where they sent Doc to cool his heels was a mural depicting the arrival of the Portolá expedition in 1769 at a bend of the river near what became downtown L.A. Pretty close to here, in fact. The pictorial

¹ That the scene itself is allegorical of California may be suggested by what seems to be the deliberate historical inaccuracy of Pynchon’s description here: the Portolá expedition had originally set out for Monterey, which they did not recognize on their way based on the earlier, and quite exaggerated, descriptions, so when heading further north, they got as far as what they believed to be, based on Sir Francis Drake’s previous account, San Francisco Bay. Yet Drake’s description had also been mistaken by the expedition, and Portolá’s claim gave the name to what is San Francisco Bay today. This is probably a historical case of the palimpsest, a reading Pynchon can make full use of, no matter if substituting Los Angeles for San Francisco had been done deliberately or otherwise. The historical palimpsest serves a similar function to the one outlined above in relation to the description of the drive to Santa Monica. The allegory of California, and by extension, America is created by the gesture how the text repeats the inaccuracies of the colonizers.

style reminded Doc of labels on fruit and vegetable crates when he was a kid. Lots of color, atmosphere, attention to detail. The view was northward, toward the mountains, which nowadays people at the beach managed to see only once or twice a year from the freeway when the smog blew away, but which here, through the air of those early days, were still intensely visible, snow-topped and crystal-edged. A long string of pack mules wound into the green distance along the banks of the river, which was shaded by cottonwoods, willows, and alders. Everybody in the scene looked like a movie star. Some were on horseback, packing muskets and lances and wearing leather armor. On the face of one of them—maybe Portolá himself? there was an expression of wonder, like, What's this, what unsuspected paradise? Did God with his finger trace out and bless this perfect little valley, intending it only for us? Doc must have got lost then for a while in the panorama, because he was startled by a voice behind him. (Pynchon, *Inherent Vice* 343–344)

As if to provide an explanation to the scene, Crocker Fenway, representative to the Golden Fang reclaiming their property from Doc, comes possibly the closest to fully explicating the central allegory of Pynchon's *oeuvre* about the struggle between the "Elect" and the "Preterite," associating the former with the sense of entitlement corresponding to the colonizer's gaze in the mural, explicates the meaning of the complex image in very simple terms.

"It's about *being in place*. We—" gesturing around the Visitors' Bar and its withdrawal into seemingly unbounded shadow, "we're in place. We've been in place forever. Look around. Real estate, water rights, oil, cheap labor—all of that's ours, it's always been ours. And you, at the end of the day, what are you? One more unit in this swarm of transients who come and go without pause here in the sunny Southland, eager to be bought off with a car of a certain make, model, and year, a blonde in a bikini, thirty seconds on some excuse for a wave—a chili dog, for Christ's sake." He shrugged. "We will never run out of you people. The supply is inexhaustible." (Pynchon, *Inherent Vice* 347)

This time, the descriptive emphasis shifts from the deliberately vague historical reference to a state of mind or consciousness, which is exposed by the narrative as criminal in its intent, and cynical in attitude. The Golden Fang do not simply exploit people as human resource for their own purposes, but they literally lay claim to an empire composed of bodies. As Puck Beaverton, accomplice to the organization's assassin Adrian Prussia, explains, Adrian is always caught but is never charged, because the corrupt LAPD depends on federal money in line with its annual clearance rate, and his victims end up in pieces in support columns for the highway overpasses, thereby giving new meaning to the Reaganite expression "pillar of the community" (Pynchon, *Inherent Vice*

323). If the New Right's claim to entitlement is allegorized in *Inherent Vice* as the Golden Fang, it follows that Reaganomics sports an economy in which the empire of the "Elect" is literally built over the body of the "Preterite." Indeed, Adrian Prussia kills a "client from the LAPD Vice Squad" whose intel on "a sex ring" "would be enough to bring down the administration of Governor Reagan." Adrian volunteers his services to the Department "as a good American," as someone who "had always voted Republican" (321). Thus, the activities of the Golden Fang do not only invest the mural with allegorical meaning, but also connect the idyllic image of valley of the river in its "Elect" interpretation to the New Right. These ties are established by the figure of Adrian Prussia as well as through Vigilant California, a fictional patriotic organization. One night, Larry Doc Sportello falls asleep in front of his television set only to wake up and witness a rally featuring Nixon, who delivers a feverish speech about "Fascism for Freedom." When Doc compares the face he sees on TV to the fake twenty-dollar bill found by the FBI and connected to operation of the Golden Fang, he can claim that "[t]he two Nixons looked *just like photos* of each other!" (Pynchon, *Inherent Vice* 120).² Once again, what seems to be atmospheric description in the form of a mural rendered from Larry Doc Sportello's perspective, condenses the many motives of the narrative, cuts to the heart of the very organization of the diegetic reality and, thus, of the central allegory of the novel. It is of importance here that the ways in which the text layers historical references onto its narrative and allegorical design are characteristic of the postmodern, yet utilized in the service of post-postmodern sensibilities. In this specific instance, the central allegory about the struggle between the "Elect" and the "Preterite" for the true meaning of America does not only expose the cynical attitude and criminal intent of the former, but, as it will become explicit in the third passage I will quote, extends the allegory historically: from the mystical and mythical continent of Lemuria in the past that can only be experienced in a vision (Pynchon, *Inherent Vice* 108–110) through the present moment of the narrative depicting the demise of the counterculture, and to the foreseeable future marked by the publication of the novel in 2009.

The third description from *Inherent Vice* reveals how exactly atmospheric description acquires an allegorical dimension only to give way

² The fake twenty-dollar bill is a clear sign of a possible conspiracy, as only dead presidents are allowed to be represented on US currency, and Nixon is alive within the timeframe of the narrative. He died in 1994, and subsequently made it onto a US one-dollar coin in 2016, together with two other presidents that year—Gerald Ford and Ronald Reagan.

to historical reference outside the time frame of the novel and into the future. The narrative concludes with symbolic recuperations, with Doc's having reconstructed the family romance of the Harlingens' and inadvertently taken revenge for Christian F. Björnsen, a.k.a. Bigfoot's partner—what Benea reads as “a marked interest in questions of social justice and moral duty” (Benea 143–144). The trajectory of his story makes Doc sensitive to the suffering of others, he seem to have understood his own entanglement with his ex-girlfriend, Shasta, whose return had initiated his investigation in the first place. Thus, the text, despite its postmodern elements and generic leanings seems to satisfy all the requirements for qualifying as post-postmodern. But at the end Doc sets off on yet another journey, an individual ride home, symbolically away and to the south, and into the future.

Doc figured if he missed the Gordita Beach exit he'd take the first one whose sign he could read and work his way back on surface streets. He knew that at Rosecrans the freeway began to dogleg east, and at some point, Hawthorne Boulevard or Artesia, he'd lose the fog, unless it was spreading tonight, and settled in regionwide. Maybe then it would stay this way for days, maybe he'd have to just keep driving, down past Long Beach, down through Orange County, and San Diego, and across a border where nobody could tell anymore in the fog who was Mexican, who was Anglo, who was anybody. Then again, he might run out of gas before that happened, and have to leave the caravan, and pull over on the shoulder, and wait. For whatever would happen. For a forgotten joint to materialize in his pocket. For the CHP to come by and choose not to hassle him. For a restless blonde in a Stingray to stop and offer him a ride. For the fog to burn away, and for something else this time, somehow, to be there instead. (Pynchon, *Inherent Vice* 368-369)

This ride references both of the above described journeys in that it is in the exact opposite direction to Doc's first trip to Santa Monica, and lacks a clear destination, similarly to the historical Portolá-expedition and in contrast to the fictional arrival of the colonizers in the allegoric mural in the club for the Elect. The passage aims at dismantling the significance of ethnic and racial difference crucial to the colonizers' allegory and a key issue in the struggle for the meaning of America, and, for the Elect, for material resources. That the idea of racial difference is central to colonization (the importance of “who was Mexican, who was Anglo”) is further supported by the example of Tariq Khalil in the novel, and Pynchon's signature journalistic piece, “A journey into the mind of Watts” (Pynchon, “A Journey into the Mind of Watts”). On the one hand, this misty conclusion of the novel is atmospheric as well as allegorical in referring beyond the narrative's time frame. The refer-

ence to atomized individuals tailing one another on the highway, about to run out of gas, the thwarted hope of erasing the significance of racial and ethnic differences, of free drugs and casual sex, of change in general for the better, all these extend into an allegory of the “Preterite” view of America. At the same time, each of the elements in the allegory signals the bleak changes yet to come immediately after the precise historical moment the novel set out to capture: just over the apex of the counter-culture, after the capture of the Manson family, when new conservative political forces are gearing up to institutionalize change at federal level. What the novel posits as Doc’s hopes and desires is quickly to be dismantled in the oil crisis of the early seventies (the possibility of his running out of petrol), destroyed through hypocritical campaigns against drug users (the forgotten joint that does not materialize in his pocket) and mainstream appropriation of free love as pornography (no blonde in a Stingray offering a free ride),³ undermined by Watergate, by the repercussions of Reagan’s presidency, well beyond their imme-

³ Cook accuses the novel of “pornification,” and argues that “Since Pynchon’s 1970 requires sexual liberation as an inseparable component of its frisson, *Inherent Vice* both succumbs to a prefeminist sexual nostalgia trip, and becomes a palimpsest overwritten with four subsequent decades of sexual codes. This retrograde inflection makes it possible both to fetishize ‘presentable’ short-skirted female hordes and instil in them the drive to erotic variations entailed in twenty-first-century Californian porno industry scripts. It seems that this Californication of sexuality has, in this late Pynchon novel, overtaken and neutralised the taboo-breaking sex still evident in *Vineland* and *Against the Day*. Where these novels dramatized female submissiveness (and only occasionally their assertiveness) as an exceptional vice which, in individuals like Lake Traverse and her great-grandniece Frenesi Gates, is both emblematic of and inherent in elect/preterite power relations, *Inherent Vice*’s California is a state where the mass of women know that sexual availability and versatility are expected of them as matter of course, and must hope to encounter Doc Sportello and not Charlie Manson. It speaks for the power of the Californian mediated sex industry’s ubiquitous products that they evince the potential to suborn a writer whose earlier works did as much as any to locate the description of the sexually extreme at the forefront of the counter-culture” (Cook 1160–1161). However, I think his description applies rather to the film than to the novel’s sexual politics, which seem to maintain the difference between what Cook identifies as “four subsequent decades of sexual codes” and a historical take on the generic codes of the California *noir*. Women are rather presented as exposed, and not for purposes of titillation, but for a demonstration of how vulnerable they might have been even during the sexual revolution. The reference to the “restless blonde in a Stingray” and “offering a ride” for Doc is more of a romantic fantasy modelled on the Harlingens’s happiness and his own misfortune with Shasta than a “palimpsest overwritten with four subsequent decades of sexual codes.” If anything, *Inherent Vice* ultimately emphasizes this almost hopeless desire to reconstruct the family romance despite historical circumstances.

diate contexts, possibly affecting the present of the publication of the novel. Pynchon's historiographic metafictional narrative in this respect blends well together with the California *noir*, whose distinctive features, among others, are the omnipresence of crime and corruption, i. e., inherent vice literally, and a pointedly gritty realism in its portrayal, features that the novel combines and utilizes to outline a powerful cautionary tale.

Although *Inherent Vice* was almost invariably received as, to quote Michiko Kakutani's review, "Pynchon-lite" (Kakutani, "Another Doorway"), a toned-down version of the author's high postmodernist preoccupations, I tend to strongly disagree, if not in the interpretation itself, than at least in evaluation. I see how Pynchon's prose in *Inherent Vice* almost seamlessly combines the generic code of *noir* with postmodern poetics and the compelling presence of an American postmodernist historical consciousness that, according to Shoop, we are only beginning to fathom. Indeed, the central element of *noir*, the omnipresence of crime and corruption in society, is the central trope of *Inherent Vice*, one that is made redundant by the many textual layers, referential and figurative, in the allegory of California/America. But Pynchon counters the omnipresence of crime with an almost humanistic use of postmodern poetic playfulness, and this is probably why critics often see the final piece of the California trilogy as part of an ongoing shift in Pynchon's late literary output towards "post-postmodern" sensibilities. These tendencies are marked by what Diana Benea (143–144) calls "the tension between a stylistic, residual postmodernism" and newly found topics: "concerns for the family and community," an "increasing visibility of spaces of alterity," "the politics informing our relationship with the Other," an "incipient ethics of responsibility," and, in the case of *Inherent Vice*, "social justice and moral duty." However, I hope to have demonstrated how these new themes are not independent of expert ways of creating descriptions that are constructed as atmospheric, allegorical and having referential claims at the same time, and how, despite critical claims, Pynchon's aesthetics is *not in tension, but rather in line with* his supposedly "stylistic, residual postmodernism." In the case of *Inherent Vice*, the critical contradiction emerges from how we tend to read the novel itself, and the way in which we relate to the (post-)postmodern dilemma of the "seemingly irresolvable tension between the critical urge to map social totality and the burgeoning acknowledgment that such a thing is no longer possible" (Shoop, "Corpse and Accomplice" 207).

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Opisi, zgodovinske reference in alegorije Amerike v romanu *Inherent Vice* Thomasa Pynchona

Ključne naratologija / ameriška književnost / postmodernizem / postpostmodernizem / Pynchon, Thomas: *Inherent Vice* / pripovedna tehnika / opis / alegorija / noir

Inherent Vice, sklepni roman kalifornijske trilogije Thomasa Pynchona, izkazuje nenavadno alegorično strukturiranje Kalifornije in Amerike nasploh skozi opise z zgodovinskimi referencami. Članek dokazuje, da ti opisi tvorijo sistem, ki odraža sodobne moralne in politične skrbi postpostmoderne romanopisja v neposrednem kontekstu izdaje romana. Poleg tega roman vključuje Pynchonov »stilistični, zastareli postmodernizem«, da bi načel močno svarilno zgodbo, pri čemer se hkrati opira na genetične kode žanra *noir* in jih obenem rekonfigurira.

1.01 Izvirni znanstveni članek / Original scientific article
UDK 821.111(73).09Pynchon T.