

## Is Oedipa Human or Post Human?:

Highway, Automobiles, and Human in *The Crying of Lot 49*

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### Introduction

As Norbert Wiener uses the term “Cybernetics” to explain the relationship between human and technology in *The Human Use of Human Beings*, human body is an essential element in his theory. In the book Wiener represents the desperate view that computer technology observes human behavior. He also says that human is incorporated into the totality of the networking system and, as the result, loses its reality. Under these circumstances, physical body is overlooked because computer technologies regard the abstracted information as being more important. In *How We Became Posthuman*, Katharine Hayles presents the concept of “embodiment” as the countermeasure against cybernetics.

Embodiment never coincides exactly with “the body,” however that normalized concept is understood. Whereas the body is an idealized from that gestures toward a platonic reality, embodiment is the specific instantiation generated from the noise of difference. Relatives to the body, embodiment is other and elsewhere. . . .  
(Hayles 196)

Hayles emphasizes the difference between the body and embodiment. She argues that in daily life “the body” is homogenized and detached from “the specific instantiation.” On the other hand, “embodiment” has the contextual factor including a specific time, space, and customs and so on. Investigating “embodiment,” Hayles explores the possibility of the body that has contextual knowledge which is never normalized and assimilated into the conceptualization. Examining the effectiveness of these previous researches of Wiener and Hayles, this paper will deal with Thomas Pynchon’s second novel, *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), considering the social background of the 1960s and the relationship between human and technology at that time.

#### 1. Social Background and the significance of California in the 1960s

It is obvious that the 1960s in America witnessed a turbulent period. Everyone can give many examples to show it. For instance, there were many African-American civil rights movements, The assassination of John F. Kennedy, and anti-Vietnam war movements, to name a few. In addition, the 1960s is the period of the progress of mobility. The Interstate Highway System is a representative example.

As with the Interstate Highway System, Stephen Hock points out that “Eisenhower was also a key figure in the creation of the Interstate Highway System, having signed into law the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956. Eisenhower’s interest in developing an American freeway system was motivated by its potential for national defence” (Hock 213). Originally, the system was designed to develop the national defence and to shorten people’s travelling time. The Highway covering the continent like blood vessels accelerates the flow of people and materials. Concurrently, this system has the alternative side to which people pay little or no attention. Hock also argues that there is “a potential that he realized during World War II by observing the success of the German autobahn” (Hock 213). Thus, behind the image of the highway system lies the success of the Nazi system. To sum up, in the era from the 1950s to 1960s, the United States developed the distribution system dramatically and, as the result, it was incorporated into the networking system. Pynchon’s representation of San Narciso, a fictional city and located in south California reflects this social background. He describes the city as follows:

San Narciso lay farther south, near LA. Like many named places in California it was less an identifiable city than a group of concepts-census tracts, special purpose bound-issue districts, shopping nuclei, all overlaid with access roads to its own freeway. (Pynchon 14)

This passage is often quoted in Pynchon studies. Hence, Pynchon represents the city as “a group of concepts-census tracts.” In addition, the feature of San Narciso is characterized by the words related to capitalism such as “special purpose bound-issue,” “shopping nuclei,” and so on. Therefore, Pynchon expresses the freeway in San Narciso as abstracted networking system without concrete substance.

Under certain circumstances, some people are excluded from the system. Regarding people, Pynchon illustrates that “For an hour she [Oedipa] prowled among the sunless, concrete underpinnings of the freeway, finding drunks, bums pederasts, hookers, walking psychotic” (Pynchon 125). This cited passage indicates that the excluded people are living

under “the freeway” and, at the same time, these people such as “drunks,” “bums pederasts,” “hookers” and “psychotic” seem to be poor. Moreover, Pynchon argues that the poor men and women are excluded by the capitalist economic system and are standing under the freeway quietly. In fact, as with California in the 1960s, Thomas Heise explains on the description of California in the 1960s in the following way:

What was being erased from view and from memory in the 1960s were space, voices and everyday textures and details of so called underworld communities in Los Angeles. The city was clearing away in the name of progress and urban renewal. (Heise 171)

Heise argues that the progress of urban system removed the “underworld” people. Pynchon also describes this removal in *The Crying of Lot 49*. In this novel, freeway is given a symbolic role of networking system which produces excluded people and bereaves them of “specific time and space and customs.” Using Hayles’s phrase, California in the 1960s was “disembodied” by the highway system.

## 2. Automobiles

As Oedipa Maas, the main character, often travels in her car, the cars have an important role in this novel. When *The Crying of Lot 49* was published in 1968, Marshall McLuhan also published *Understanding Media*. In this book, he also argues that the automobile has great effects on the relationship between human and technology. McLuhan illustrates the relationship along with his key concept of “extension” in the following way:

For forty years the car had been the great leveler of physical space and of social distance as well. The talk about American car as a status symbol has always overlooked the basic fact that it is the power of the motorcar that levels all social difference and makes the pedestrian a second class citizen. . . . The simple fact about the car is that, more than any horse, it is an extension of men that turns the rider into a superman. (McLuhan 240)

In this passage, McLuhan argues that the development of automobile reduces the physical distance between places. On the other hand, he also emphasizes the fact that automobile “makes the pedestrian a second class citizen.” By contrast, the drivers are transformed into “superman.” McLuhan regards these situations as “extension of men.” In short, the

technology of automobile enhanced the human's ability to move remarkably. Like McLuhan, Pynchon also describes the car as "an extension of men." However, Pynchon expresses it from his own original view point:

[H]ow could he [Mucho] not, seeing people poorer than him come in, Negro, Mexican, cracker, a parade seven days a week, bringing the most godawful of trade-ins: motorized, metal extensions of themselves, of their families and what their whole lives must be like, . . . inside smelling hopelessly of children, supermarket booze, two, sometimes three generation of cigarette smokers, or only of dust. . . . (Pynchon 8)

Here, Pynchon explains that Mucho Mass, Oedipa's husband, used to work as a used car dealer. These passages give a detailed description of the used cars to readers—Pynchon uses "extension" in a different way—"metal extension." While McLuhan uses the word as a metaphor to explain the enhancement of the human ability, Pynchon uses the phrase, by "metal extension," not only to show the extension of the human capacity but also the integration between human and technology. Furthermore, the used cars are described as private space. Inside a car, "smelling hopelessly of children" and "cigarette smokers, or only of dust" remains. Therefore, Pynchon uses the inside of an automobile as a symbol to depict the driver's lifestyle. Although Pynchon illustrates the conceptualized aspect of the Highway system, he gives a very specific representation of the automobile. Regarding this, John Urry states as follows:

About one quarter of the land in London and nearly one-half of that in Los Angeles is devoted to car-only environments, where in a sense the public spaces involved in urbanization have been swamped by automobility. . . . car-environments or non-places are neither urban nor rural, local nor cosmopolitan. They are sites of pure mobility within which car drivers are insulated as they dwell within the car. (Urry 193)

As Urry explains, in 1960s Los Angeles, cars had a great impact on the city. In particular, they made the roads of urban cities into a space for movement. In this situation, the roads lost the function as a space to communicate each other. On the other hand, some drivers "dwell within the car." As a result, cars were regarded as their private space. At the end of this novel Oedipa Maas gets off her car and remembers "walkers along the roads at night, zooming in and out of headlights without looking up" (Pynchon 124). The highway system prompts

people to use the cars. However, these technologies also sever the connections between people.

### 3. Oedipa's Quest.

In *The Crying of Lot 49*, "paranoid" is one of the most important terms. What is "paranoid"? In the afterword of the Japanese translation of *The Crying of Lot 49*, Yoshiaki Sato argues that "the paranoid means the people who spread the invisible connections around themselves with suffering from delusions of persecution" ("49 no tebiki" in *Keibai namba 49 no sakebi*, Sato, 245). As Sato mentions, a "paranoid" constructs imagined connections around him/her. At the end of this novel, Dr. Hirarius says to Oedipa that "with the LSD, we're finding the distinction begins to vanish. But I never took the drug, I chose to remain in relative paranoia, where at least I know who I am and who the others are" (Pynchon 124). Thus, in Pynchon's works, a "paranoid" maintains their independent subjectivity by keeping the connections with someone. Throughout the novel, Oedipa Maas investigates, like a detective, the existence of the "Tristero" which is an underground postal organization. In her research, she knows that there is important information about "Tristero" in a book, and ask the owner, Dribletto, to show it. However, he tells her that the book was lost and also makes his point:

'You guys, you're like puritans are about the Bible. So hang up with words, words. You know where that play exits, not in that file cabinet, not in any paperback you're looking for, but'— a hand emerged from the veil of shower-stream to indicate his suspender head— 'in here. That's what I'm for. To give the spirit flesh. The words, who cares? But the reality is in this head. Mine. I'm the projector at the planetarium, all the closed little universe visible in the circle of that stage is coming out of my mouth, eyes, sometimes other orifices also.'  
(Pynchon 54)

Dribletto says to Oedipa that there is a real world not in words but in their heads. In other words, he regards their thoughts, ideas, and concepts as the real world that exists in his mind. The actor, through the stage, transforms his thoughts and concepts into concrete things like a "projector at the planetarium?" Thus, Oedipa is influenced by Dribletto's statement, and begins to ask herself "shall I project a world". In short, Oedipa Maas comes to realize that she connects her fragmentary information in her mind and creates the network which can be understood by someone. According to Grant's *Companion to the Crying of Lot 49*, "'Maas,' is

the Afrikaans word for ‘web’ or ‘net’” (Grant 4). With regard to Oedipa’s networking, Miccoli argues as follows:

Oedipa is aspiring to be more machine-like. She equates herself with a projector, thus holding herself up to a technological standard which she has no hope of actually achieving. In keeping with the projector metaphor, Oedipa feels that being able to project her world would be akin to understanding it. (Miccoli 45)

As Miccoli illustrates, this part shows us that Oedipa wants to become like a machine. To become a machine-like something, it is necessary to understand the world correctly.

As described above, “paranoia” indicates that people maintain their independent subjectivities by keeping connections with something. Moreover, it means people create network in the world to recover the totality of the world. In this point, the relationship between “paranoia” and “projector at the planetarium” becomes clear. However, to be more machine-like and to become “the projector at the planetarium” also suggests human’s impossibility to recover the totality of the world and loss of physical bodies. Regarding this point, Oedipa “disembodies” her physical bodies to “embody” her thought, ironically. In this situation, what should Oedipa do to be human?

At the end of this novel, Oedipa walks “down a stretch of railroad track next to the highway” and find out to be “the hard, strung presence she stood on.” Moreover, she notices “other squatters who stretched canvas for lean-tos behind smiling billboards all the highways” (Pynchon 124). In these passages, Oedipa travels down the street not with automobile but with her foot. On the streets where human walk, the concrete space and time which represent people’s livelihood are “embodied,” while on the highway they are excluded and “disembodied.” Throughout *The Crying of Lot 49*, it is difficult to judge what “Tristero” means and whether it exists or not. However, it is clear that Oedipa can choose either the highway or the street. Therefore, in *The Crying of Lot 49*, Los Angeles in the 1960s, the relationship between human and technology intensified whereby human and technology are in a see-saw battle.

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