

“From Faraway California”

Thomas Pynchon’s Aesthetics of Space in the California Trilogy

Ali Dehdarirad



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In copertina | *Cover image: Cedric Letsch, Los Angeles skyline at sunset, Los Angeles USA, December 2019, (unsplash.com).*

Contents

Acknowledgements	9
Abbreviations	11
Preface by Paolo Simonetti. It Never Rains in Pynchon's California	13
Introduction. "The Map is Not the Territory"	21
1. "Some Kind of a Legacy": Pynchon's Postmodernism	21
2. "It All Comes Together" in Pynchon's California: Spatial Turn, Geocriticism, and the Postmodern City-maze	39
2.1. GeoUrbanism: A Dual Approach of Spatial Analysis	45
3. A Journey into the Mind of Literary California	48
4. Fictional Spaces in the California Trilogy and across Pynchon's Work	53
I. "This City that Can Never Be": Pynchon's Vision of (City) Space in <i>The Crying of Lot 49</i>	59
1. The Spatial Dimension in Pynchon's Early Life and Career	59
2. Reading <i>The Crying of Lot 49</i> : A Geocritical Exploration	69
3. From Pynchon's San Narciso to California's Orange County: Inside the "Postmetropolitan Transition"	71
4. A Historical Analogy between the Geographical Development Backgrounds of San Narciso and Orange County	82
5. Understanding <i>The Crying of Lot 49</i> through San Narciso: A Political Landscape of Crisis	86
6. Thirdspace in Pynchon's Oeuvre	90
6.1. San Narciso and Thirdspace: In Search of an Alternative Reality in <i>The Crying of Lot 49</i>	93

II. From Southern to Northern California: The (Im)Possibility of a Postmodern Redemption in <i>Vineland</i>	99
1. 1990: A Turning Point in Pynchon's Work and Spatial Imaginary	99
2. From Early Career to <i>Vineland</i> : Pynchon's Evolving Conceptualization of Space	102
3. Creating <i>Vineland</i> : "Postmetropolitan Transition" and Postmodern Urbanism	105
4. From <i>Vineland</i> 's College of the Surf and Trasero County to California's San Diego and Orange Counties: A Geocritical Analysis	115
4.1. Implications of the Geocritical Analogy: The Space of Politics in <i>Vineland</i>	117
5. Fictional/Mythical Spaces of Thanatoids and <i>Woge</i>	126
5.1. Looking for an Alternative World through Thirdspace	129
6. <i>Vineland</i> 's Ending: A Mixed View on Alternative Realities	132
III. "The Leading Edge of this Postpostmodern Art": <i>Inherent Vice</i> 's Urban and Social Landscape of California	135
1. Toward <i>Inherent Vice</i> : Pynchon's Growing Engagement with Spatiality	135
2. "Postmetropolitan Transition" and "Regional Urbanization" in <i>Inherent Vice</i> : The Question of Postpostmodern Urbanism	137
2.1. From "Extended Urbanization" to Pynchon's Environment: Beyond Postmodernism	142
2.2. Urban Restructuring in <i>Inherent Vice</i> : The Emergence of the City Region	150
2.3. The Urbanization of Injustice in <i>Inherent Vice</i>	158
3. "Under the Paving Stones, the Beach!": Historical/Political Space	161
4. From the Beach to the Ocean: Fictional/Mythical Space	166
5. The Hope of Redemption in <i>Inherent Vice</i>	172
5.1. Reading <i>Inherent Vice</i> 's California for Alternative Realities: Space on a Theoretical Level	174
From West to East in Pynchonopolis	177
Bibliography	185

Preface: It Never Rains in Pynchon's California

*And you can't deny that living is easy
If you never look behind the scenery*

Bad Religion, "Los Angeles is Burning"

In a 2007 essay significantly titled "The Ends of America, the Ends of Postmodernism," Rachel Adams poses a topical question: "If Los Angeles is the city that taught us how to be postmodern, might it also be the place where we begin to imagine what comes after?" (248). The answer given by Ali Dehdarirad in this book is a thundering yes. Not only has the Golden State been culturally associated with noir fiction, Hollywood, and the movies; with drugs, hippies, and the counterculture; more generically, with the "second act" that a writer like Francis Scott Fitzgerald felt was the right of every American life. Since the Eighties, California has been endlessly scrutinized, exploited, discussed, and taken as a paradigm of the postmodern condition by a number of influential scholars such as Fredric Jameson, Edward Soja, Mike Davis, Jean Baudrillard. The reader of *"From Faraway California"* will find in the following pages a comprehensive chart of their ideas and theories related to the topic.

As a matter of fact, many of these analyses were not meant as a compliment to the region: "There is nothing to match flying over Los Angeles," wrote Baudrillard in *America*, before adding that "only Hieronymus Bosch's hell can match this inferno effect" (1988, 51). Davis famously described L.A. as a "fortress" city and an "apocalypse theme park," because in the Nineties "nearly two million Southern Californians were directly touched by disaster-related death, injury, or damage to their homes and businesses" (1998, 7). Yet, according to

Davis, Southern California has always worked as a double paradigm, a "utopia into a utopia," where "prosperity becomes pathology" (Bonchino 83) as soon as its model of violence was exported worldwide by post-apocalyptic novels and films such as *Blade Runner*. This was already true in 1965, when a "native daughter" like Joan Didion managed to pinpoint California's paradoxical nature by describing it as "a place in which a boom mentality and a sense of Chekhovian loss meet in uneasy suspension" (Didion 172).

In his by now classic study on postmodernism, Jameson famously identified two buildings, the Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles and Frank Gehry's house in Santa Monica, as paradigmatic of postmodern hyperspace — or "Californianity" (115), a term he himself invented while surreptitiously (and in a true postmodern spirit) attributing it to Roland Barthes. Jameson was convinced that though the Bonaventure Hotel "reconstructs a nostalgic Southern California in aspic: orange trees, fountains, flowering vines, and clean air," it is just an illusory mirrored surface that aims at reflecting away "not only the misery of the larger city, but also its irrepressible vibrancy and quest for authenticity" (420). In other words, to quote Davis again, "the problem with postmodern theory is that it abolishes the side [of Los Angeles] that regards the real city" (Bonchino 93). One of the merits of Dehdarirad's study is that it deals with Pynchon's California by employing a wide interdisciplinary approach that tackles the "real-and-imagined" space of the region, taking its cue from Soja's theory of "Thirdspace" as well as from the fields of urban studies, geocriticism, and environmental studies.

Pynchon's California trilogy — *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), *Vineland* (1990), and *Inherent Vice* (2009) — is the territory reconnoitered by Dehdarirad in his keen analysis of the author's "aesthetics of space," the *locus* where Pynchon's peculiar "Californianity" emerges as constitutive of his idiosyncratic version of postmodernism, as well as the battleground where such postmodernity is overcome. In fact, Pynchon's California is more than a mere background to the hundreds of characters and situations unfolding in each novel. It is a (mostly urban) social territory painstakingly rendered in every detail — both an accurate historical reconstruction and a reflection on the region's present history. The superimposition of past and present — Pynchon's masterful technique of representing the past in such a way as to open the perception of it up to the present's consciousness, in order to prevent it from being conclusive — finds in his California novels its most original application,

as the author's own trailer for *Inherent Vice* makes clear. Here Pynchon's voice impersonating Doc Sportello, the novel's protagonist, describes the 1970s highways leading from L.A. International Airport to the fictional Gordita Beach, and then immediately corrects himself:

Well, no, actually this *used* to be this... – later on, all this is going to go high-rise, high rent, high intensity... right now, back in 1970, what it is is just high.

Pynchon's California is all here, in this paradoxical superimposition of past and present: "right now, back in 1970." "*From Faraway California*" shows how Pynchon's oeuvre can be also read as a detailed cartographic representation of the evolving West-Coast cityscape during the Sixties and up to the new millennium. In this regard, it is interesting to notice how one of the most relevant U.S. postmodernist writers anticipated some of the major developments in urban studies, such as the postmetropolitan transition and the phenomenon of gentrification.

But there is more. Pynchon's detailed, realistic, and sometimes anachronistic California is deconstructed by its very characters and, especially, its narrators, as soon as it is recreated in the novels. To quote just some examples, in *The Crying of Lot 49*, Fallopian makes fun of the inaccuracy of documentation and all the "bureaucratic morass" of what he calls "Californiana crap" (CL 59), while *Inherent Vice's* narrator makes it clear that "by this point in California history, enough hippie metaphysics had oozed in among surfing folks that even the regulars [...] began to shift their feet and look around for other things to do" (IV 84). Whether the narrator is describing the pot farms of Mendocino, Humboldt, and Trinity Counties (the so-called Emerald Triangle) that serve as a model for fictional Vineland, or the communities of Redondo and Manhattan Beach (where Pynchon supposedly lived for a period) that inspired Doc's Gordita Beach as well as Oedipa's San Narciso, we can be sure that the author and his characters are perfectly aware of what John Freeman calls the "schism – between what California represents in popular imagination and what it is, what it means to live there, to be from there" (xi).

In the second part of the book, Dehdarirad explores those mythic, oneiric territories that surface against the light of California's historical and socio-political dimension. Here we find Pynchon's overheated imagination at its best, when in *Inherent Vice* he describes the lost continent of Lemuria as "the Atlantis of the Pacific," whose survivors

"had settled on the coast of California" (IV 90), or when he describes the eerie machinations of the Trystero in *The Crying of Lot 49*, or the uncanny world of the Thanatoids in *Vineland*. In shaping such alternative spaces, Pynchon digs material out of California's mythical past, its legends and foundation myths. Nonetheless, each narrator metafictionally disrupts these fabrications, exposing their fictionality and ridiculing the characters — and the naive readers — who still trust them. Pynchon is painfully aware that the land in California was twice stolen from the populations who lived there, and that "this coast, this watershed, was sacred and magical," so he concocts "the Yurok people called *woge*, creatures like humans but smaller, who had been living here when the first humans came" (VL 163). Indeed, even if, to imperfectly quote Hammond's popular lyrics, it never rains in Pynchon's California, his West Coast "rang true, sure rang true" — at least, as true as a real-and-imagined historiographic metafictional representation of the utopian/dystopian hyperspace of postmodernism giving gradually way to whatever comes after it may actually be.

In the wake of Brian McHale's much-quoted account of Pynchon's novels as near-punctual milestones of different phases of postmodernism, scholars have tended to consider Pynchon's later works as belonging to a post-postmodernist aesthetics — or even to reread his whole career from a contemporary (and sometimes anachronistic) pre-post-postmodernist perspective. Rightly noting how Pynchon in *Bleeding Edge* has finally moved on by "making fun either of postmodernism or those who theorize it (or both)," Sascha Pöhlmann asks for "a revision of Pynchon's often canonically assumed postmodernism" (2019, 17-18) and identifies *Against the Day* (2006) as the novel that "transcends the aesthetics and cultural concerns of postmodernism with regard to its critique of the national and to its complex attitude toward representation, imagination, and reality" (24). Elsewhere I have argued that *Inherent Vice* marks Pynchon's personal "long goodbye" to the Californian hard-boiled fiction — "those good old-time L.A. murder mysteries" (IV 168-9) — as well as his attempt to "redeem" postmodernist fiction from its paranoid obsession (Simonetti 2012). In 2016, Tore Rye Andersen has included *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) and *Mason & Dixon* (1997) among the novels that testify the emergence of Pynchon's global perspective, while in an insightful 2021 essay he has convincingly demonstrated how *Gravity's Rainbow* anticipated the con-

cepts of Anthropocene and planetarity well before such terms started to circulate in the academic jargon.

Equally far from “erasing” or dismissing Pynchon’s postmodernism and from attempting to resuscitate stale critical paradigms, Dehdarirad’s analysis of the California Trilogy takes its cue from classic theories of the postmodern sensibility as well as from the most recent developments in Pynchon studies to explore the author’s truly “planetary” mapping of California in his fiction. The idea of planetarity, first introduced by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her 2003 study *Death of a Discipline*, was further developed in the 2015 anthology *The Planetary Turn: Relationality and Geoaesthetics in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Amy J. Elias and Christian Moraru. The concept can be described as a critical-theoretical mode that “attempts a move away from the totalizing paradigm of modern-age globalization – and thus a critique or critical ‘completion’ of globalism – as well as from the irony and hermeneutics of suspicion typical of what came to be known as postmodernism” (Elias and Moraru xi). In other words, “planetary humanities” can be perceived as a multidisciplinary field of study that views the planet Earth as a complex reality of people, culture, and the environment deeply embedded in an interplanetary system – a model that, at the dawn of the Anthropocene and in the light of the emergent decolonial/postcolonial divide, is able to acknowledge the oneness of the planet as an alternative “to the arrogance of the cartographic reading of world lit” (Spivak 73).

In this regard, Andersen is certainly right in positing Pynchon along with Cormac McCarthy as a precursor of this planetary dimension in U.S. contemporary fiction, though in his most recent essay he limits his analysis to *Against the Day* and *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Interestingly enough, the plots of both these novels end in California. Thus, we find the “apocalyptic” version of 1960s California in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, where a rocket crashes into a movie theater, and a “noir” version of 1920s California in *Against the Day*, where one of the characters, Lew Basnight, ends up as a private detective, operating in a Los Angeles “that made Chicago seem innocent as a playground” (AD 1046).

In fact, Pynchon’s peculiar real-and-imagined California is already prefigured in his historical novels, especially in *Mason & Dixon*, where at the book’s almost exact midpoint the narrator imagines that the two surveyors might not stop their journey West, but could go all the way until they reach the end of the continent:

Suppose that Mason and Dixon and their Line cross Ohio after all, and continue West by the customary ten-minute increments,— each installment of the Story finding the Party advanc'd into yet another set of lives, another Difficulty to be resolv'd before it can move on again. [...] The under-lying Condition of their Lives is quickly establish'd as the Need to keep, as others a permanent address, a perfect Latitude,— no fix'd place, rather a fix'd Motion,— Westering. (*MD* 682-3)

The Latin word for West, "occaso" (occident), derives from the verb "occidere," to fall, to set, to lie down. In this sense, to go West means always to approach the end, to die. As Nathanael West wrote in *The Day of the Locust*, that is also the place where a large part of society "had come to California to die" (3).

Nonetheless, immediately after the reflection on Mason and Dixon's hypothetical journey — that one is tempted to consider as the symbolic end of (Pynchon's) postmodernism as well as a fulfillment of Spengler's "downfall of the occident," — the narrator opens a new space for planetary possibilities:

Were they to be taken together, themselves light and dark Sides of a single Planet, with America the Sun, an Observation Point on high may be chosen, from which they may be seen to pass across a Face serene and benevolent at that Distance, tho' from the Distance of the Planet, often, Winter as Summer, harsh and inimical. (*MD* 683)

Moving to a planetary perspective from which one could see both sides of the Earth (and California as well), the narrator takes advantage of the other meaning of the word "occaso" as the root for "occasion," implying possibility, opportunity, opening. Thus, it is implied that Mason and Dixon might continue "ever behind the sunset, safe till the next Territory to the West be seen and recorded, measur'd and tied in" (*MD* 334), until they could arrive in a city whose inhabitants worship an invisible God that, after the surveyors' scientific measurements and observations, "turns out to be the new Planet, which, a decade and a half later, will be known first as the Georgian, and then as Herschel, after its official discoverer, and more lately as Uranus" (*MD* 684). Thus, the protagonists' voyage "into the savage Vacancy ever before them" (*MD* 685), their journey towards *occaso* — the end of the continent that mirrors the author's journey to the (bleeding) edge of postmodernism — may bring about the discovery of another planet, that is, the opening of a new frontier.

As already seen, Dehdarirad is always careful to integrate such a cosmic perspective with an analysis of the concrete historical and social developments of “planet California” as it is lucidly represented and somehow foreshadowed in Pynchon’s fiction. In his introduction to *Writing Los Angeles*, David L. Ulin has described the City of Angels as a “idiosyncratic hybrid of the urban and the elemental, a metropolis carved from the desert and ringed by ocean and mountains” (xvi). Truly enough, the present book offers analyses of other privileged spaces of Pynchon’s California — namely, the desert and the beach, with all their political and social implications. Nonetheless, except for a few brief detours, the discourse remains focused on the urban environment, that in our twenty-first century has truly reached a “planetary” dimension. In fact, in 2014, Neil Brenner and Christian Schmid have introduced the concept of “planetary urbanization” as an emergent framework responding to a shift in perspective in the field of urban studies and aimed at finding a new conceptual lexicon to deal with a major reconfiguration of the social and spatial structures of urbanism. In their opinion,

The urban can no longer be understood with reference to a particular “type” of settlement space, whether defined as a city, a city-region, a metropolis, a metropolitan region, a megalopolis, an edge city or otherwise. (Brenner and Schmid 162)

Pynchon had already foreseen such a development in 1966, when he let Oedipa understand that “San Narciso had no boundaries. No one knew yet how to draw them” (*CL* 123), and that “behind the hieroglyphic streets there would either be a transcendent meaning, or only the earth” (125), or maybe, the Earth. In the end, though Bernard Duyfhuizen has argued that all Pynchon’s novels are in some degree “detective” novels, I believe we could reasonably state they are all “California” novels too. Be it the fatal grip of the all-pervasive Trystero, the maternal embrace of Vinland the Good, or the predatory Golden Fang haunting the Golden State, from California there is no escape, because California never ends.¹

¹ David Kipen, in his preface to *Dear Los Angeles. The City in Diaries and Letters 1542 to 2018*, states that “way back when, for a lark, Angelenos used to plant ‘Now Entering Los Angeles City Limits’ signs in faraway places” because in their mind “L.A. had no limits.” Yet, since “a driver only sees an ‘Entering Los Angeles’ sign on the way

Originally conceived as a Ph.D. dissertation defended at Sapienza University in Rome, the present study was reworked and expanded during the Covid-19 pandemic, when its author had no possibility of traveling or doing research outside of Italy. However, as Didion knew all too well, even under normal conditions the trip to California "is one of those trips on which the destination flickers chimerically on the horizon, ever receding, ever diminishing" (131). For this reason, Dehdarirad's study proposes to adopt a "planetary" perspective, far "from faraway California" but very close to the core of Pynchon's inner poetics. The result is a lucid journey into the real-and-imagined space of Pynchon's fiction set in California, America's factory of dreams and nightmares — a journey into the past, present and future of postmodernist literature and urban studies, as well as into the probable future of our own planet.

In fact, in a 2019 article called "The Fires," William T. Vollmann — a writer born and raised in California who is considered Pynchon's brightest heir but who, according to "The Washington Post," looks more like a Pynchon character — reported on "the horrendous Carr Fire," a large wildfire that began on July 23, 2018 and burned 229,651 acres of land in Shasta and Trinity Counties in California. Vollmann described it as an anticipation of what will happen to our planet if the global warming theory is accurate (as it almost certainly is). In this sense, too, California can literally show us not only what comes after postmodernism, but also — and crucially — our near future, no matter how long we deny it or pretend not to see it. Vollmann concludes his reportage with a sentence that may represent the best comment on Pynchon's "planetary" California: "Then Greg and I drove out of the future, although I kept my mask on for much of the way back to Sacramento. The next day there was hardly a tint of gray in the sky" (Freeman 81). Where is rain when we need it most?

Paolo Simonetti

into town, never the way out," it results that "L.A. is the place Angelenos are forever approaching but can never quite get to" (17).

Offering a transdisciplinary journey across Thomas Pynchon's California trilogy, *"From Faraway California"* addresses the representation of (city)space in the *Crying of Lot 49*, *Vineland*, and *Inherent Vice* through "geourban" lenses. Drawing on specific concepts in urban and regional studies, the book provides a thorough examination of Pynchon's spatial imaginary, where the reader comes to understand how his fiction tackles the socio-political and cultural consequences of urban restructuring in the contemporary city and the lives of its citizens. Pynchon's depiction of California is further analyzed from mythical and environmental standpoints to shed light on his planetary vision and (post)post-modernist poetics in the span of nearly half a century.

More broadly, the book's geocritical and urban analyses of Pynchon's fiction indicate what might take place concerning the future of urbanism, toward "planetary urbanization" and the formation of the "city region."

Ali Dehdarirad currently teaches American literature and culture at the Sapienza University of Rome, where he obtained his Ph.D. in English-language Literatures, with a focus on American literature. He has published critical essays on the works of Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, William T. Vollmann, Cormac McCarthy, and Paul Auster. His main research interests include (post)post-modernist and contemporary American literature, urban humanities, geocriticism, California studies, the Anthropocene, and the sustainability discourse.

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