Bulletin of the *Transilvania* University of Braşov
Series IV: Philology and Cultural Studies • Vol. 10 (59) No. 2 – 2017

Intertextuality and Thomas Pynchon's entropy

Aura SIBIȘAN[1]

This paper discusses relevant aspects raised by Linda Hutcheon in her famous book A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction, and aspects of Thomas Pynchon's work that illustrate intertextuality through the discussion of a scientific concept in a literary work – entropy. The view towards intertextuality has been changed since the 1969 essay of Julia Kristeva. The exploration of scientific visions of the world is a major concern for Thomas Pynchon. Entropy has become an important metaphor of the contemporary world's tendency towards redundancy and incoherence. Pynchon's vision is revealed through his complicated plots, his idealistic characters and a questioning narrative voice. The short story "Entropy" and aspects of the novel "V" are further discussed in the paper. The image of literature as a network of texts was intensified by Derrida's argument about the "impossibility of living outside the text".

Keywords: *intertextuality, entropy, history, postmodernism, communication, mock-identities*

1. Intertextuality

Linda Hutcheon's text, "Intertextuality, Parody and the Discourses of History", published in 1988 in *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* discusses the literature of postmodernism from a complex perspective, a cultural, rhetorical, interdisciplinary view. Linda Hutcheon starts by connections with history, referring to postmodern literature, that presents an intersection between history and fiction. This type of fiction rewrites literature and mirrors the "world", actually different visions of the world.

Fiction offers perspectives on reality, and at the same time it draws on previous fictional texts, intersections with other literary works were quite common in world literature. In postmodern literature, more than in any other time, fiction itself becomes an important theme. So writers dwell upon the fact that they write literature, they are self-aware and self-conscious. The effect of this self-awareness is the metafictional dimension of their texts. John Barth, for example, in *The Floating Opera*, uses the narrator who communicates with the reader quite often.

Before Linda Hutcheon, Umberto Eco wrote about" the revisiting of the past, with irony, without candour", which is typical for a postmodern writing. Umberto

[1] Transilvania University of Braşov, aura.s@unitbv.ro

BDD-A28079 © 2017 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:56:47 UTC)

Eco as a writer, in *The Name of the Rose* and *Foucault's Pendulum*, argued that the revisiting of history proves to be an excellent source and material for fiction. John Barth and Thomas Pynchon, belonging to the first generation of postmodern American writers, wrote metafictions that are historiographic at the same time. Salman Rushdie, Carlos Fuentes, John Fowles, E. L. Doctorow are mentioned by Linda Hutcheon as writers that refer to the "world", that create fictions that discuss the nature of literature, of sense-giving, the limits of fiction and the endless exploration of the human mind.

John Fowles, in *French Lieutenant's Woman*, presents a love story from the XIXth century, and at the same time discusses the mentality, the psychological realities of the XIXth century from a XXth century perspective. The novel is a perfect illustration of the concept historiographic metafiction.

The modern project considered that the work of art was an autonomous object, self-sufficient, making sense for the receiver in itself. The receiver did not need a lot of context, a lot of explanations about the origin of the work of art, the conditions of creation, the influences of the writer, the economic and social realities of the time when the writer/author lived. The modern art product had unity in its parts.

As a reply, the postmodern product does not need to be only autonomous, cut off from the world. The postmodern artist wants to give the receiver a flavour of the context in which the 'artistic object' was created.

For Linda Hutcheon parody is a form of ironic rupture with the past. Irony signals the difference from the past and at the same time affirms the connection with it. This double movement is one of the aspects that gives postmodernism the paradoxical nature it has. On the one hand, being subversive towards the past, institutions, meta-narratives, the 'grande histoire', to use Lyotard's term. On the other hand, depending on those very terms for its existence. To deny and to affirm, at the same time.

Intertextuality is based on the Bakhtinian terms of polyphony, dialogism and heteroglossia.

In Renaissance, when the novel has its origins, the artists that were attentive to the voices of the citadel, with bourgeois, peasants, noblemen, aristocratic people driving in expensive carriages through marketplaces laid the foundations of the novel as a genre. 'Polyphony' refers to the many voices that are expressed in the literary work. 'Dialogism' denounces the correlation, interrelations between different layers of society, different perspectives on reality. These layers were voiced in the novel, that was fundamentally a democratic genre. 'Heteroglossia' is a term linked with 'polyphony', it refers to the discourses that were diverse in the novel.

Linda Hutcheon discusses literature in its correlations with history, the arts, cultural phenomena, linguistic and semiotic theories.

The tension between context and text seems to be definitory for the crystallization of postmodernism, and contemporary literature in general. The context is confining, but necessary for a correct positioning of the text. I do not think that a literary text

BDD-A28079 © 2017 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:56:47 UTC)

can be really understood and interpreted without the larger frame of the context of origin. On the other hand, a focusing exclusively on the context does not give account of the richness of the text itself. The vision of the text being in a web of texts, in a reseau, defines very well the interdependence of the texts belonging to literature, history, psychology, sociology for a certain cultural paradigm. If we go back to T. S. Eliot's text on "Tradition and the Individual Talent", we see that the ideas around the definition of the text as a result of the intersection of different texts is not new, was not invented by the postmoderns, be them writers or critics. The postmoderns emphasized the fluidity of the text, the correlations that exist in the process of creation itself. Few writers expressed this better than Michel Foucault:

> "The frontiers of a book are never clear-cut: beyond the title, the first lines, and the last full-stop, beyond its internal configuration and its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network." (Hutcheon an, 261)

One example of postmodern intertext is Thomas Pynchon's work, with the intersection between scientific concepts and literature. The illustration of the concept **entropy** through fictional constructs is a proof of the fact that the postmodern text always leads to another meaning, another symbol, another text.

In this paper I will further present the concept **entropy**, as understood by the American writer Thomas Pynchon, and then illustrations of this concept from his fictional work.

1.1. Defining entropy

The term entropy comes from physics and is related to the second law of thermodynamics. In the field of physics it deals with energy that tends to flow spontaneously in order to be concentrated in one place, out of which it spreads out and becomes diffused. Entropy represents the result of this flow of energy, that generates disorder from order. Therefore, the degree of disorder in a system is measured by the entropy of a physical system.

This definition can be applied to any kind of system or organization, not only to a physical system. We can refer to the entropy of the world, of the entire universe. In his *Entropy and Art: An Essay on Disorder and Order*, Rudolf Arnheim argued that:

> The increase of entropy is due to two quite different kinds of effects: on the one hand, a striving toward simplicity, which will promote orderliness and the lowering of the level of order, and, on the other hand, disorderly destruction. Both lead to tension reduction. (Arnheim 1971, 52)

BDD-A28079 © 2017 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:56:47 UTC)

Everything we do tends to have a certain order, but the more ordered something is, the more entropy increases: "order is a necessary condition for anything the human mind is to understand" (Arnheim 1971, 1). The idea of disorder is left aside, but it does exist. It is a microscopic disorder that appears, and that is entropy. Thus,

> Entropy theory is indeed a first attempt to deal with global form and not with structure. All it says is that a large sum of elements may have properties not found in a smaller sample of them. (Arnheim 1971, 22)

The question that might arise is, what does this theory have to do with art in general and with literature, in particular?

There are people who found the essential beauty in entropy, and one of them is Thomas Pynchon. Arnheim's idea about the relation between entropy and art seems to be interesting:

> Now, the work of art also represents a state of final equilibrium, of accomplished order and maximum relative entropy, and there are those who resent it. But art is not meant to stop the stream of life. Within a narrow span of duration and space, the work of art concentrates a view of the human condition; and sometimes it marks the steps of progression, just as a man climbing the dark stairs of a medieval tower assures himself by the changing sights glimpsed through its narrow windows that he is going somewhere after all. (Arnheim 1971, 56)

According to this quotation, any work of art as a final product coming out from the author's mind represents not only the order he/she reached in arranging all the ideas and images, but also has a dimension that is related to entropy. This means that as soon as it is ready, it begins to lose its importance as representing the author's perspective. Its value begins to fade away first for its creator and after being seen, read or perceived by the public, for each one of us. As a matter of fact, art cannot stop the stream of life, on the contrary, it is a way of marking the progress and the flow of life.

In another paragraph, the same author mentioned that art would be a manifestation of man's striving for order. Art could be interpreted as being a form from the point of view of man's instinct for order, for patterns, it could also be content from the point of expressing the human condition, and as a reflector of human existence at its highest. Therefore, meaning, value, significances – these are subjected to the effects of entropy, are not set in tablets of stone, as the expression goes. Arnheim continues by arguing that disorder is increasing in the universe, and this affects all humans and all the activities. But, from experiences in the field of psychology, therapy, art and all social sciences the suggestion will be that basically everything is heading towards order; people are striving towards order in what they

BDD-A28079 © 2017 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:56:47 UTC)

are and create. So, there appears a deficiency. From the fact that works of art deal with both order and disorder, a gap is being created, a deficiency of which the theory of entropy takes advantage. Between the two extremes the hole created could be the perfect place for comments on the works of art representative for each pole, but it could also be the place where the idea of entropy in literature could be found. The gap is where our idea of order in art receives shape out of which the process of disorder appears just like a cause-effect relationship. Entropy is in between these two states: where order ends and disorder begins acting like a trigger element. Entropy appears at the borderline between order and disorder, between the humanly constructed order and the natural tendency towards disorder.

Thomas Pynchon is a famous American writer who illustrated this complex theory in his writings. He introduced a limited, rational idea into the unlimited, idealistic world of literature.

2. Entropy in the volume *Slow Learner*

The concept of entropy seems to be best illustrated in the short story published in the volume *Slow Learner* (1984), with this very title. What other piece of writing if not the short story "Entropy" should be taken into consideration at the starting point? First of all because it carries the name of the phenomenon that appears in Thomas Pynchon's writings and thus, the concept of entropy seems to be better illustrated. Pynchon got the idea of explaining this physical term in literature, writing about his initial preoccupations in the field of physics and engineering, and he managed to create a connection between these two different fields.

Pynchon takes the idea of entropy, that energy tends to spontaneously move from order to disorder, and applies it to human beings, culture and society. The result is the creation of characters that have the tendency to travel aimlessly, to seek what they cannot find and to end up more confused than when they started. The definition of entropy seems to represent the structure on which Pynchon builds his stories and the essence of everything he has written.

The short story "Entropy" is the first work in which he uses the concept entropy as a metaphor of the world. The story is about two events that take place at the same time into an apartment house: the never-ending party that tends more and more towards chaos and, at the second floor, the couple that sealed themselves into a hothouse, a closed system. The contrast between the two situations provides the theme of the story. On the first floor, Meatball Mulligan tries to restore order to the party reversing the natural trend of things, by slowly and patiently calming down the guests, which would appear to be against the principle of entropy. On the second floor, Callisto tries to prevent the disorder feeding his feeling that the world was going to be extinguished by a "heat death". He tries to bring a bird to life by keeping it to his chest in the idea that by giving his heat to the bird, it could fly again, but the

BDD-A28079 © 2017 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:56:47 UTC)

sick bird eventually dies destroying the ecological balance in the room. Aubade, Callisto's girlfriend, destroys the closed system of the hothouse by smashing a window after she becomes aware of the imminence of entropy, of heat death.

On the one hand a character tries to fight it and cannot, and on the other hand a character does not knowingly try to stop it and succeeds.

Callisto ends up in a sort of entropic state of sameness, while Meatball ends up with an orderly apartment. Callisto's fear that "the hovering, curious dominant of their separate lives should resolve into a tonic of darkness and the final absence of all motion" underlines the fact that contemporary society is moving towards some final state, where individuality no longer exists, and ideas, thoughts and energies have all been distributed so that no more interaction takes place and all creative motion will cease.

Pynchon is very explicit in his use of entropy as a metaphor in this short story. It is not difficult to depict the elements that show the function of entropy; while Callisto is trying to keep the energy from spreading away, thus maintaining a certain order by locking himself and Aubade in the hothouse, Meatball finds himself at the other pole, because he produces chaos and facilitates the spreading of energy, by his never- ending party. Judith Chambers said that for exploring the theme of entropy Pynchon was inspired not only by works belonging to famous names in the field of thermodynamics such as Rudolf Clausius or Willard Gibbs, but also alludes to Norbert Wiener's book on information theory – *The Human Use of Human Beings.* This book examines the impossibility of sending information from transmitter to receiver without having leakage or intruding noise that causes distortion and redundancy, which are aspects of entropy.

Having these theories in mind, Pynchon used them to "draw his characters, establish the setting, inform the language and imagery, and direct the action.", as Chambers points out (Chambers 1992, 24). Having in mind the idea of the foreign particles that may appear when transmitting a message, the same critic sustains that "the story moves contrapuntally back and forth" (Chambers 1992, 25), from Meatball's flat to Callisto's hothouse. This statement comes in relation to another interesting idea that the critic suggests. She relates to the thought experiment of the scientist Clerk Maxwell, called "Maxwell's Demon", which the critic considers as the organizing principle of the short story "Entropy". Chambers considers the two apartments as Maxwell's two chambers in the experiment: Meatball, the one with the party, represents the cold molecules while Callisto represents the hot ones. Pynchon would be the demon whose writing of the story replicates the sorting of these "molecules" into different rooms.

In Meatball's apartment, the random collection of people represents the cold and disconnected molecules. At the other pole, Callisto's apartment is filled with hot molecules; inside the hothouse he has created an enclave of order in the city's chaos, where he tries to maintain a constant 37 degrees Fahrenheit. Indeed, Pynchon seems to be the intrusion in the structure of the two situations, by simply reporting what

BDD-A28079 © 2017 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:56:47 UTC)

happens there. This is how Maxwell attempted to counter entropy, by separating hot and cold molecules and ensuring a fluctuation in temperature. This process fits very well Pynchon's short story "Entropy", as J. Chambers observes in her study.

Pynchon uses entropy from two perspectives: as a physical theory applied in Callisto's experiment, and as a metaphor of the acceleration of spiritual disorder and chaos in the contemporary world.

According to Radu Lupan, one of our best specialists in American literature, just as in the universe entropy increases to the extent to which the available energy for mechanical work decreases, so in contemporary society spiritual energy decreases, and causes an increase in disorder and decline (Lupan 1988, 42).

The idea of death is a major theme of Pynchon's entire work, and it is another perspective from which the short story can be analyzed. As the writer's perspective on death is rather different from the classical one, one finds the idea of cosmic decay and of time moving irreversibly towards death prevalent in his work. It is death that "extends beyond the demise of individual", as Charles Harris points out (Harris 1971, 76).

This entropic process of the running down of the universe is translated by Pynchon into social terms as well, creating out of man a small universe that "undergoes continuous decay" (Harris 1971, 77). He is influenced not only by the surrounding world, but also by his own mind, so it is decadence that comes simultaneously from the outside and the inside. Therefore the critic affirms that "Pynchon's concern with a deteriorating humanity constitutes what may be called his entropic vision" (Harris 1971, 78).

Indeed, this short story can be taken as a metaphor for death, or even better as possible human responses to death. Meatball seems to be careless in front of death and by not giving attention to the outrageous party; he seems to ignore also the idea of death, not to speak of its imminence. On the other hand, Callisto and Aubade offer us a more intellectualized attitude towards death. They are more preoccupied with this matter because, in order to escape the chaos that produces deterioration, they transformed their apartment into a hothouse. When they observe that the temperature outside has remained the same for a few days, Aubade breaks the window of their enclave, as she considers that the moment of order has arrived: "when 37-degrees Farhenheit should prevail both outside and inside, and forever…" (Pynchon 1984, 292).

Callisto is the one who cannot cope with death because he refuses the idea from the beginning, and this is one of the reasons why he created the hothouse, to be isolated from the entropic tendencies that were a threat to his apartment, to his own created order. Callisto considered that death came from the noise outside, from the chaos, and this is why he thinks the bird died. Trying for three days to warm it in order to be able to fly again suggests that he cannot accept death.

Another theme in this short story is communication, that step by step leads to inhumanity. The lack of communication is very well suggested, first of all by

BDD-A28079 © 2017 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:56:47 UTC)

Mulligan's party attended by people of all kinds who, because of the noise and the differences between them cannot get along and cannot understand one another. Tony Tanner suggests, in his famous study on Pynchon, that "as Pynchon's story indicates, total noise – total chaos – would mean just no communication at all" (Tanner 1982, 33).

Not even Mulligan is able to talk to them, and this is due to the noise and chaos, but also to his uncertainty whether to try to do something about the problem or not. This dualism can be interpreted as a choice of fixing the problem or not, of being involved nor not. Indifference is, obviously, another aspect of contemporary society, and another facet of entropy.

On the other hand, Callisto's attitude of solitude and loneliness brings again into attention the lack of communication, the distancing from the outer world, the difficulties in self expression. Aubade is the only human being that Callisto can relate to.

Ambiguity is a key word in describing this text. It comes from the use of scientific terms in referring to psychological phenomena, in explaining himself, in the case of Callisto. Only apparently this is a paradox. By giving a lot of details, by over- explaining, Pynchon creates the effect of anguish, of quiet despair, of depression. There is also the ambiguity of the plot, the setting, of the action – if any.

Irrelevance comes from the choice of language and the way of transmitting the message by means of a highly intellectualized vocabulary.

Leakage can be related to the idea of flow that is present throughout the story: the never-ending party where the energy for partying one expects to fade away; Callisto's broken window in the end suggests another flow, that of hot molecules, but both aspects lead to the same process of entropy.

An encoded language like the one Pynchon used offers the readers the sensation of ambiguity, irrelevance and redundancy, but not at the expense of the pleasure of text decoding and interpretation.

3. The Novel *V* – Symptomatic for Pynchon

Moving on to Pynchon's novels, readers face structures that are more complicated and more open to different interpretations, and one of these novels is *V*. It is much acclaimed by critics and received the Faulkner First Novel Award in the same year it was published, 1963.

As Judith Chambers notices, "If Pynchon (1984, 22) does not always manage in his early stories to *listen to the voices… around him* and to breathe his own unique kind of life in his writings, in *V*. he does just that" (Chambers 1992, 41).

Indeed, *V.* is a very complex novel, and even if at the beginning the impression is of a usual 60s novel, arriving at the end one may be more puzzled than it would have been expected.

BDD-A28079 © 2017 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:56:47 UTC)

The first chapters of this novel develop a plot easy to follow, but it becomes more complicated towards the end. There are several plots to be followed with apparently no connection between them, and this makes *V.* a complex structure. Several stories develop in front of the reader's eyes, and in so many different places; the Whole Sick Crew and Benny Profane's adventures at his different jobs, Stencil's desire to find V. whatever or whoever it might be, traveling from one place to another in search for clues, be them real journeys or imaginary ones.

Stencil and Benny Profane seem to be the center of the plots that readers have to decode in order to come up with a meaning of the book.

Everything in this novel is put under the sign of illusion and uncertainty, as Charles Harris observes: "…uncertainty forms a predominant characteristic of *V.* …the reader of Pynchon's novel can never be sure of exactly what he sees. Part of this uncertainty results from the ambiguous manner in which the novel is narrated." (Harris 1971, 79-80).

According to Harris one reason for the ambiguity of the book is Pynchon's narrative technique, but only partially. I think that the events do not seem very credible and the characters do not manage to gain the readers' trust because of their acting and their insecurity. On the other hand, this is not a realistic novel, and precisely - Pynchon parodies the mechanisms of literary convention and literary credibility.

Uncertainty can be identified easily in the central figure of one of the major plots in *V.* – Herbert Stencil. He tries to restore order in the chaos around him by building a bridge between world, history and himself in order to find his own identity. He seems to be in a continuous search for finding a note in his father's journal about the mysterious V. Even V. comes from the past, it is a disturbing heritage from his father. This could be the element of connection to the past, to the history that Stencil returns to during his voyage.

In his attempt of reconstructing the historical truth, as Manfred Putz suggests (Putz 1995, 147), Stencil wants to find out what or who V. is referring to in that letter. He tries to obtain a coherent image of the events by combining different informative dates that come from persons who had seen V., or all kind of documents such as journals, postal cards, or different reports.

The words that belong to his father and act as a trigger element for Stencil's search are: "There is more behind and inside V. than any of us had suspected. Not who, but what: what is she. God grant that I may never be called upon to write the answer, either here or in any official report" (Pynchon 1963, 52).

Stencil travels not only almost all over the world in search for some clues related to V., but he also travels in time, and this is why different history episodes can be traced in the pages of the book inside the plots. Stencil has the characteristics of a detective, typical of Pynchon's stories, who tries to bring to life different episodes from history. It may seem that those episodes have nothing to do with the purpose of the search, but they always come to the center of the search, that is V. In some cases,

BDD-A28079 © 2017 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:56:47 UTC)

Stencil acts as if he was present at the events that brought him a meaning for the letter; for instance when he projects himself in 1898 witnessing Victoria Wren's activities in Alexandria and Cairo. She was a possible candidate for V., and Stencil becomes so involved in his search that he pulls the readers in that fictional hole. The problem of course is that the reader can never be certain which fact really happened and which are Stencil's projections of his imagination.

Charles Harris quoted John H. Hunt who says that "What is seen in Pynchon's novel is deliberately obscured rather than illuminated…" (Harris 1971, 81).

This sense of obscurity applies particularly to the letter V. It receives so many definitions and possible interpretations, and seems so spread out that it is impossible to reach a definite answer/image.

Who is V.? In the book, V. appears in many ways and shapes and in different periods of time and history. First she appears as Victoria Wren in Cairo in 1898, and in Florence in 1899; then she is Vera Meroving at a party in South-West Africa in 1922. During World War II she is found disguised as a priest in Malta where there are reasons to believe she died. But the reader cannot know for sure, this is a Pynchon novel.

We next read about her to be in Paris in 1913, where she is simply called V. Her last appearance as a woman is in the end of the novel, in the epilogue, again in Malta, but this time in 1919, as Veronica Manganese.

Behind all these identities, V. is still "a letter, an initial, a sign, a shape which can be seen anywhere…", as Tony Tanner points out (Tanner 1982, 44). Thus, it might also be V-Note jazz club, Venezuela, Valleta, Vesuvius, a land called Vheissu, the Venus of Botticelli etc. All these are allusions made in the text.

Charles Harris comes up with other interpretations of V.:

> "the mysterious letter seems also to stand for the 'V' of perspective lines made by lights on a receding street, the 'V' of migratory birds".
>
> (Harris 1971, 81).

Critics have speculated that V. could also represent the idea of woman in general, the mother, possibly the mother of us all.

There is biographical information about Stencil in the novel, when the reader is first introduced to him, that when he was born, in 1901, Victoria died and he was brought up by his father. Thus V. could be Stencil's mother. From this point on, his search is filled up with other meanings. He could be in search for his lost mother, or only of the way she died. This is like "the traditional quest for some ultimate truth or goal – or grail", as Tony Tanner suggests (1982, 44). It is normal to wish to know your roots, and perhaps he is looking for his real identity.

Finding what V. stands for he would have found his own identity, and probably his own place in the world. In the end, Stencil does not find the real identity of V. , only clues about its possible existence in one place or another. What

BDD-A28079 © 2017 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:56:47 UTC)

Stencil wants to find is the truth about V., the essence of V. seems an uncertainty. Stencil does not realize this, that uncertainty is the real answer. He could not cope with this, so the book ends with Stencil finding another clue about a certain V. in another corner of the world (in Stockholm) and he prepares to go there.

Stencil is meant only to be in a continuous search of himself and of the meanings of V. Tony Tanner points out that Stencil is pursuing "an unidentifiable "who" and an indescribable "what" (Tanner 1982, 45).

Therefore, everything related to the letter V. could have been just an obsession, an adventure of the mind. Stencil does not really think of the end of his search, what matters for him is the search itself, the journey and not the destination.

The readers who are caught up in Pynchon's universe try to find the answers that Stencil is looking for. It is an unusual search because, as Tony Tanner suggested, his life depends not on the success but on the failure of the quest. As a matter of fact, modern writers are in a permanent search for expressing the inexpressible.

At a deeper level, Stencil can be regarded as an alter ego of the writer, of Pynchon himself, and the novel *V.* can be considered an *ars poetica*.

When Stencil says at some point in the book that he found paper and pencil, and began to write the sentence, actually he gives the image of the writer. Pynchon made the effort to create ambiguity, therefore to make possible different interpretations of the same pages, the same phrases and images.

Stencil's perception of the world around him is somehow narrow, because everything he comes across translates in his own language, that is in clues and signs of the possible existence of V. Events seen through his eyes are not credible because he is not capable of making a distinction between events or facts that are truly related to his search and the ones that happen normally around him without a hidden meaning.

Pynchon is not concerned with a historical reality that has to be rendered as such, but he focuses on the dilemmas that characters face with, due to the historical events that are not clear to them. Manfred Putz sustains at some point of his demonstration that Pynchon tried to render the wonderings of a mind that did not want to accept the entropic history, and the impossibility of reality to be known just as it is. All the time the systems of interpretation interfere with the process of perception as such.

On the other hand, Benny Profane seems to be more open minded, more receptive in his relation with the reality around him. He has several jobs, meets all kinds of people, but in the end he learns nothing about himself and the world. The idea represented by Benny Profane is that of decadence in point of communication, love and egocentrism. He does not have a purpose, be it as absurd as Stencil's. He is just another yo-yo man as the rest of the Sick Crew. Actually, Profane's and Stencil's destinies are similar to the game of yo-yo. Profane seems to be walking in a never-ending present fighting with the problems of an alienated existence, in a

BDD-A28079 © 2017 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:56:47 UTC)

world characterized by an overwhelming chaos. Profane is in search for something, just like every other character in Pynchon's writings. He is in search of himself on the streets of the twentieth century. Profane does not evolve because all the streets he walks on drive him to the same place, that is an enclosure. Actually the enclosure is in his own mind, and he cannot surpass it, to the end of the novel. He continues to live the chaos around him without understanding what really happens, and with no possibility of changing anything. Probably this is the reason why in the end Profane tries to lose himself in the stream of some uncoordinated events.

Obviously, the character's name is relevant. It suggests a feature of Pynchon's anti-heroes: they are presented as people without a definite interior shape, nothing from the outside can touch or destroy them. At the same time, they cannot be agents, active people in their own lives. They lose, but they cannot be destroyed. It is one of the paradoxes created by Pynchon in his universe.

Judith Chambers refers to the differences between the two characters and she names them "two halves of one empty issue" (Chambers 1992: 48). None of them seems to be more than the physical appearance, as none of them is interested in doing something completely; Stencil does not really want to find the true identity of V., and Benny Profane is not interested so much in what happens around him, but in understanding his own identity. What brings the two of them at the same level is their response to V., in the sense suggested by Judith Chambers, that they did not understand the essence of V. and did not recognize V. inside them. They could represent the two poles of entropy: Profane could be the chaos, the flowing energy, while Stencil may represent order, as he is trying to establish a certain order by assembling the pieces of information about V.

The word that relates Profane to V. is 'disassembly', as Tony Tanner suggested. At some point in the plot he thinks of the disassembly of a machine, and how this is similar to what happens to V. Stencil also has several mock-identities; his personality spreads out in order to find its unity in the same place as history. That is, everywhere and nowhere at the same time. At the same time, 'machine' may be the trigger element for another interesting perspective on this novel. This is the road to deconstruction, inanimateness, mechanized people and eventually, death. The idea of decadence can be noticed in all the situations in the book. The way in which characters live and act suggests a misery, a physical one, and an internal one. All of them could be characterized as yo-yo people, who have no purpose in life, no desire to make their lives meaningful. They act as machines, as objects; they all seem mechanized, no longer human beings. They are all in search of annihilation, of the void, of the absurd, just like Stencil, but each of them in their own way: the Sick Crew by partying all the time, Benny Profane looks for it on the streets of New York by means of the odd jobs he takes, and Stencil by questioning about V. permanently. While all the clues seem to be put together, they fall apart immediately. Stencil tries to gather clues, but by running from one place to another, in fact he moves closer and closer to the uncertainty he apparently runs away from.

BDD-A28079 © 2017 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:56:47 UTC)

Is there such a clear connection between the plot of this novel and the process of entropy? Comparing this novel with the short story "Entropy", one could say that there is no apparent connection between them in point of the use of entropy. While in the short story the concept taken from physics is very well explained by a plot that functions as a metaphor of entropy, in the novel *V* an illustration of it seems hard to depict at a first glance. Probably Pynchon considered that in "Entropy" it was too easy to find the representation of the concept, and thus he decided to encode it further. This had been at hand because it is a novel and a larger plot, action, perspective(s) and view are required.

The entire novel can be considered as an explanation and exemplification of the road that leads towards death, and by presenting the characters in so many weird situations, Pynchon illustrates "cosmic decay, the running down of time as we know it, the death, in short, of the universe." (Harris 1971: 76-77).

All the incidents from history indicated by Pynchon could also be considered an aspect of the continuing universal entropic process.

Pynchon made of *V* a novel filled up with codes, symbols and difficult, diverse situations for his characters; something that gave the readers new issues to think about and to question whether this book is or is not based on entropy. But discussing these codes, symbols and situations would make the subject for another paper.

4. Conclusion

As a provisional conclusion, everything seems to fall apart in his book. Because of the undertainty that reigns over it, terms like dispersal, deconstruction and reconstruction appear to be of great interest. Stencil tries to reconstruct by connecting all the clues he finds in order to create an identity. When all the clues seem to be put together, they fall apart. Stencil tries to gather the clues, but by running from one place to another, in fact he increases the uncertainty he wanted to disperse in the first place.

"Reconstruction is also deconstruction", these are the words of the famous Tony Tanner, and tied closely to this idea is the use of the entropic vision in this book.

The paper investigated important aspects of intertextuality and the facets of entropy that are relevant for literary structures, such as Thomas Pynchon's writings. Entropy appears at the borderline between order and disorder, between the humanly constructed order and the natural tendency towards disorder. The paper also dealt with the discussion of the short story "Entropy", published in Pynchon's volume *Slow Learner*. This was followed by aspects of the novel *V*, where uncertainty can be identified easily in the wonderings of the central figures – Herbert Stencil and Benny Profane. The first tries to restore order in the chaos around him.

BDD-A28079 © 2017 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:56:47 UTC)

References

Arnheim, R .1971. *Entropy and Art: An Essay on Disorder and Order*. Berkeley-L.A. London: Univ. of California Press.

Chambers, Judith. 1992. *Thomas Pynchon*. New York: Twayne Publishers.

Harris, Ch. B. 1971. *Contemporary American Novelists of the Absurd*. New Haven, Connecticut: College and University Press Publishers.

Hutcheon, Linda. 1988. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory and Fiction*. London: Routledge.

Hutcheon, Linda. 2003. "Intertextuality, Parody and the Discourses of History." In *Theories: A Reader*, ed. by Sean Matthews and Aura Taras Sibişan, 257-280. Pitesti, Bucuresti: Paralela 45.

Lupan, Radu. 1988. *Moderni si postmoderni*. Bucuresti: Ed. Cartea Romaneasca

Putz, Manfred. 1995. *Fabula identităţii*. Iaşi: Ed. Institutul Cultural European.

Pynchon, Thomas. 2000. *V*. Bucuresti: Univers.

Pynchon, Thomas.1984. *Slow Learner*. New York: Little, Brown and Comp.

Tanner, Tony. 1982. *Thomas Pynchon*. London and New York: Methuen.

BDD-A28079 © 2017 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:56:47 UTC)