The Idea Of Paranoia As A Postmodernist Feature In Thomas Pynchon's Historical Fiction Bleeding Edge

Introduction

Postmodern literature is distinguished with the use of metafiction, undependable narration and narrators, fragmentation, paradox, unrealistic plots, parody, paranoia and dark humor. This style of writing came up in the U.S. in the 1960s through the writings of Kurt Vonnegut, Thomas Pynchon, and John Barth. Postmodern authors reject outright meanings in their literary works of any kind and, instead, tend to highlight and celebrate the possibility of multiple meanings, or a complete lack of meaning in their literary works. Postmodern literary styles and ideas contradict, jeer and disregard the principles of modernist literature.

For example: instead of following the typical modernist theory for the meaning of life in a disordered world; postmodern literature, however, abandons, generally playfully, the likelihood of meaning. The postmodern works are often presented as a parody of the modernist literary theory. Thomas Pynchon's novel The Crying of Lot 49 is a good example of postmodernist theory. In this novel, the protagonist's hunt for knowledge and understanding results in puzzlement and the lack of any sort of understanding of the events that occured. Some examples of the techniques used in postmodern literature are:

- Pastiche: taking several ideas from other writings and literary styles and putting them in order to make new styles.
- Intertextuality: The recognition of other literary works in another literary work.
- Metafiction: making readers aware of the imaginary nature of what they are reading..
- Temporal Distortion: The use of irregular chronology and narrative schemes in a story.
- Magical Realism: The inauguration of unreal events into a narrative that is contrarily realistic.
- Faction: The mixing of true documented events with fictional events without telling what is true and what is not

Research Objective

The research objective is to understand and observe the postmodernist features, in particular the idea of paranoia in Thomas Pynchon's Bleeding Edge. Paranoia is a characteristic of postmodernism and Pynchon uses it as a theme to show the subjectivity of reality and how forces of power manipulate it. The protagonist of the novel, Maxine Tarnow says, “Paranoia’s the garlic in life’s kitchen, right, you can never have too much.” when an old friend comes to her and suggests that a computer security company may be working with powerful but unsavoury groups of people and wonders if he’s being too paranoid. Paranoia is a major style used by many postmodern writers, along with a few other styles like metafiction, unreliable narration, self-reflexivity, intertextuality, fragmentation, paradox, unreliable narrators, etc.

Research Problem

A research problem posed here by the research problem is the relation between historicity of the novel and the postmodern themes used by Pynchon. Pynchon writes about the 9/11 attacks and the contemporary idealism regarding the potential of the Internet. In 2013 he wrote about a very recent past and about the historical past of American internet usage, showing just how different the worlds of 2001 and 2013 are. The aim here is to observe the relation between the historicity and the idea of paranoia, the postmodernism theme used by Pynchon.

Methodology

This research paper will address the arena of Postmodernism and Historicity in American Literature. The primary literary text taken is Thomas Pynchon's Bleeding Edge would be analysed thoroughly. The necessary quotations from the literary texts and certain instances will also be taken into account and if need be they will be elaborated as well. Minimum two secondary literary texts would also be referenced side by side. Several oral materials such as seminars and lectures of various critics have also been taken into account. Most importantly a thorough reading of the primary text is necessary in order to highlight the major idea behind the project.

Literature Review

The Idea of Paranoia has always been present in Pynchon's every novel but he notched up the level of paranoia in Bleeding Edge. Bleeding Edge is a novel written by Thomas Pynchon, published by Penguin Express in 2013. It is a postmodern detective story based on the 9/11 attacks in New York City and the history of the internet and how it transformed the world. Set in 2001 New York, the story revolves around Maxine Tarnow, a formerly certified fraud detective who becomes intertwined in a complex web of criminal activity when she takes a new case involving a shady computer security firm, Hashlingrz. With her own unique methods and a loose sense of morals, Maxine must safely negotiate her way through a dangerous array of Russian mobsters, drug dealers, bloggers, hackers, coders, angry entrepreneurs, scent-trackers, Arab terrorists, and more. Maxine also has her two young sons to take care of and ex-husband, Horst, to deal with. Bleeding Edge has received many positive reviews; it has been called "a necessary novel and one that literary history has been waiting for" by Slate.com, a "hilarious, shrewd, and disquieting metaphysical mystery" by Booklist, and "exemplary…dazzling and ludicrous" by The New York Times. The novel was also a New York Times Notable Book of 2013.

Narrated in the third-person with limited omniscient perspective and the dreamlike story begins in New York City, 2001. A woman named Maxine Tarnow, formerly certified fraud detectives, walks her two sons, Otis and Ziggy, to school before going to work, despite them being past the age where they would require an escort. On her way to work, Maxine is approached by a man named Reg Despard, a documentary filmmaker who expresses concern over a shady computer security firm called Hashlingrz. He was hired by Hashlingrz to make a documentary about the company, but is held back by their financial secrecy. Maxine investigates the firm and its young CEO, Gabriel Ice, and learns that the firm's finances don't add up. Ice is known for recruiting new talent, and is suspected to be in business with the federal government as well. Maxine finds that large payments are being made from Hashlingrz to now defunct companies, including a website that has ties to an Arabian money.

One of Maxine’s best friends, Vyrva McElmo, tells Maxine that her husband’s Deep Web tech company, DeepArcher, is sought by Ice. Maxine speaks with Rocky Slagiatt, an investor behind Ice’s enterprises, who expresses concerns about the company’s activity. As she continues to investigate, Maxine contacts March Kelleher, a friend and mother of Ice’s wife, Tallis. March dislikes Ice and has a feeling he’s a criminal. She asks Maxine to interview Tallis. When Maxine does so, she finds that Tallis has suspicions of Ice’s finances, but denies to check into it. Maxine’s leads put her in contact with Nicholas Windust, a government agent who has ties Hashlingrz. Windust insists strongly to Maxine to interrogate her Israeli brother-in-law, Avram Deschler, for information. Rocky introduces Maxine to Igor, a Russian heavy, who is friends with March. Maxine and March give some money to March’s ex-husband, Sid, who then takes the women on his boat for a drop-off but they are pursued by patrol boats down the East River before they make a narrow escape.

Later, Maxine comes across Lester Traipse, CEO of hwgaahwgh.com, which is a discontinued graphics firm that was once purchased by Ice. Traipse confesses that he fears for his life, and later turns up dead on the account of an apparent suicide. With the help of an expert scent trqacking detective, Conkling Speedwell, the smell of “Club 9:30” cologne is detected at the crime scene, indicating the possibility of the apprarent suicide being a murder. Meanwhile, Reg informs Maxine that he accidentally stepped in the wrong room at Hashlingrz Headquarters and found a group of Arabs working on a mysterious device. Reg also sends her the footage he shot of a crew of white men working on a Stinger missile, target-practicing. Maxine relays the tape to March, who proposes that President Bush may have an evil plot under his sleeve, and needs Hashlingrz to realize it. Maxine is cautious of the claim and where the investigation may lead, but pursues it anyway. Later, Maxine learns that Club 9:30 cologne has been discontinued, but Windust still wears it. Maxine thinks Windust must be involved in Traipse’s murder. As she continues her investigation regarding Traipse’s death and Hashlingrz, she is urged to keep her distance. Still determined, Maxine continues and contacts Igor, who puts Maxine in contact with two hackers, Misha and Grisha. Maxine asks the pair to identify the weapons in Reg’s videos. They assure Maxine that the weapons are indeed Stringers, and identify the Arab weapon as a Vircator, which destroys electronic devices by emitting a powerful electromagnetic pulse. Afterwards, March airs Reg’s video on her weblog.

On September 8, 2001, Maxine attends a huge gala for many dot-com companies, which was sponsored by Ice. There Maxine runs into Felix, a teenage hacker who keeps mum about Lester’s death. When days later the 9/11 attacks happen, Maxine is shocked. March blames the American government for the attack, arguing they had known of the attack on the first hand but refused to do anything so that President Bush could declare war and seize power as a dictator. Maxine doesn't believe or support this claim, but the evidence seems to support March’s theory. When Maxine organizes to meet Windust again, she learns he has been killed. Maxine is again warned to give up the case. Later, the Russians confirm to Maxine that Ice has been working for the U.S. government and not with the terrorists as she had originally thought. Maxine also learns that Traipse was killed for siphoning funds to terrorist cells in the Middle East. While Maxine closes her investigation, she never finds out who killed Lester, why Ice was in league with the government to begin with. As the novel ends, Maxine attempts to resume her normal life by allowing Otis and Ziggy to walk to school alone for the first time despite wanting to make them wait for her.

Bleeding Edge is not only the tale of Maxine’s investigation but an analysis of the cultural direction that America is headed in and of the effect the Internet and the 9/11terrorist attacks

have had on the American culture. Pynchon uses the opening and the ending of the novel to portray the development in American youth. The novel starts with Maxine walking her sons, Otis and Ziggy, to school, even though they're old enough where they do not need an escort and ends with an act of independence on the children's part; when Maxine reaches home too late to get them ready for school, she sees that they are about to leave the apartment for school on their own. They had gotten ready on their own and would reach school without her help. Resisting her desire to make them wait for her so she could escort them to school, she instead watches from the doorway "as they go on down the hall. Neither looks back". The children, who represent the younger generation who do not need to be guided by their elders anymore. They represent an independent generation.

It is a dream-like and surreal story, narrated in a third person point of view. Thomas Pynchon is mostly known for his dark humour detective novels. Pynchon's theme and genres mostly include history, music, science and mathematics. As a postmodern author Pynchon employs many characteristics of postmodernism like metafiction, self-reflexivity, unreliable narration, paranoia, and surreal plots, irony, humor. The novel ranges between the postmodern and non-postmodern or metamodern conditions. A lot of postmodern descriptions are provided by Pynchon in every chapter of the novel with plenty of symbols, citations, narrations etc. Despite the postmodern descriptive method, the characters as well as their styles are different – their talk is simplified and aimed at communication, the idea is to give information using the most effective way. When describing the characters Pynchon uses the stereotypization of images in order to make the characters more visible and their descriptions shorter. The association of characters with particular cinema scenes or media persons is also a non-postmodern method. But Pynchon has beautifully used all the non postmodern methods and styles to compliment all his postmodern methods and styles.

Works Cited:

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