ABSURD REALISM IN POSTMODERN AMERICAN FICTION: WALLACE, PYNCHON, AND TOMASULA

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Dedication

To:

The arms that taught me to war

The hearts that taught me to love

The minds that taught me to dream

- and the lips that taught me to keep moving

Olufemi Aiyegbusi

Abstract

In this thesis, I examine absurd realism as a literary subgenre in postmodern American fiction. I define the concept of absurd realism, focusing on the features that characterize it as a postmodern subgenre. I also look at its relationship with other subgenres of literature such as realism, absurdism, magical realism, and satire. Through the analyses of three postmodern novels: David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*, Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, and Steve Tomasula's *TOC: A New Media Novel*, I illustrate how the features of absurd realism portray a postmodern world pervaded by boredom and chaos. I also consider how these texts convey the absurdity of human existence through the use of everyday characters, events, and setting. In summary, this thesis focuses on how the absurd occurrences and bizarre characters that exist within these books portray, in both literal and metaphoric senses, the complexity of the postmodern world.

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Chapter 1: Absurd Realism in Postmodern Fiction

This thesis investigates a unique form of writing style displayed in postmodern texts from the late 1960s to the present. Perceivable in works by famous authors such as Thomas Pynchon, David Foster Wallace, and Don DeLillo, this style fuses features of realism and the absurd into a single literary work to project an extreme version of reality. This fusion has been called "absurd realism" by Michael Meredith. In this work, I develop this concept as a literary subgenre that merges the features of absurdism and realism to portray an exaggerated reality. I identify features of literary works that fall into this category and most importantly, I indicate distinguishing characteristics that set absurd realism apart from preceding genres such as theatre of the absurd, realism, magical realism, and satire. I explain how, as a subgenre, absurd realism relates to other literary subgenres. I consider the cultural and historical shifts leading to this absurd portrayal of reality, and how these shifts have affected the content and structure of conventional narrative styles. Furthermore, I examine the portrayal of absurd realism in these three novels: David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King* (2011), Steve Tomasula's *TOC* (2009), and Thomas Pynchon's *The crying of Lot 49* (1966). I focus on how each of these novels presents realistic events while portraying, just like the existentialists and absurdists, the purposelessness and meaninglessness of human existence, and I argue that these novels illustrate, in both a literal and metaphoric sense, the complexity of the world.

The Aesthetics of Absurd Realism

Literature mirrors its time; it reflects the prevalent events in its era, and shapes how we understand these events. For instance, works written during the English Renaissance are marked by the rejection of medieval thinking, a break-away from the

Catholic Church, social hierarchy, the intellectual movement of humanism and scientific

revolution, and the emergence of France, Spain, and England as powerful territorial

monarchies (J.E. Luebering 15-17). In the same vein, literary works in the Victorian era

reflect the dramatic socio-economic change and improvement in trade conditions, rapid

extension of colonization to Asia, Africa, and the West Indies, and the relocation of

imperial power and western civilization from France to England (Martin Hewitt 4-9). In

the modern age, literary works portray the effects of the World Wars amd the Great

Depression on the world. Also, postmodern literature is distinguished by technological

developments, the development of new genres that express social change, popular

culture, chaos, and paranoia. As literature continues to evolve in accordance with new

movements and concerns, writers continuously attempt to capture these concerns in their

works.

In contemporary fiction, absurdity as a theme is frequently expressed, though not

exclusively; this theme suggests that we are trapped in a chaotic and fragmented modern

world and cannot escape the feeling of alienation and displacement. Recently, many

writers seem concerned with absurdity in modern life; they recognize that situations and

experiences in life are much more complex than they used to be in centuries past—the

wars and insecurity experienced by modern human beings are beginning to take a toll,

resulting in a state of paranoia and disorder. Charles Harris argued in the 1970s that

recent sociological theories argue convincingly that "we are a lonely crowd of

organizational men, growing up absurd . . . we face a loss of self in a fragmented world of

technology that reduces man to the operational and functional" (17). This belief

corroborates what has gradually become the focus of many postmodern authors; as Harris

notes, recent American novels convey the sense that "ours is an absurd universe, chaotic and without meaning" (7). Many writers of such absurd novels attempt to present an understanding of this hopeless situation that pervades the modern society, giving insights into how one can adjust to this new way of life. In *The Age of Absurdity: Why Modern Life Makes It Hard to Be Happy*, Michael Foley explains how an array of both manmade and natural factors account for the chaos in contemporary society. Such factors, he claims, range from wars and natural disasters, to the mundane activities of human beings, like the endless consumption of goods and the elusive pursuit of happiness. He points out that though these activities are presumed to enhance the quality of life, what they do in reality is reduce the meaningfulness of life, decreasing life to a state of existential angst and self-loathing. Foley suggests that the way to survive in this postmodern world is to accept and embrace chaos as an integral part of existence—finding solace in its absurdity.

In literature, the absurd is defined frequently in terms of what it is not, "it is neither a literary movement nor a historical moment; it is neither confined by period, nor by genre" (Gavins 62). Likewise, absurd realism is defined in similar terms. In his manifesto "For the Absurd," Michael Meredith states that absurd realism:

> Is not against Realism or Humanism. It's not Abstraction or Formal Logic or Positivism. It's not art for art's sake, and it's not about heteronomy of life, of urbanism, of function. . . . Absurd Realism produces a space in which the search for meaning in something both vague and concrete is highly encouraged. No stable grid, no absolute datum. Language itself is in continual transformation and renegotiation through its use, misuse, and need for our strange construction of ontological relevance. (9-14)

Absurd Realism and Existentialism

Themes in novels of absurd realism correspond with those of existential philosophers like Friedrich Nietzsche, Søren Kierkegaard, and Martin Heidegger. These philosophers were concerned with discerning the proper way to live; revealing the basic truths about human nature and the universe; raising ethical questions about life and offering logical solutions that might help humans find a meaning in life; and expressing the incongruity of the absurd universe in which humans now exist. They all seem to agree that "since no God exists to rely on, man must rely upon himself" (Harris 31). Nietzsche's famous statement "God is dead" in *Thus spoke Zarathustra* refers not to the literal death of a supernatural being who pushes the world towards progress, governs human life, and creates meaning, but to the death of reason and meaning brought about by human actions, and the end of the role of the God-belief as the source of meaning and morality. For Nietzsche, this has resulted in the existence of human beings in isolation and alienation (Guignon and Pereboom xv). Flynn writes that Kierkegaard defends the notion that the individual, and not society, is responsible for giving meaning to life. Often called the "father of existentialism" because of the manner in which his works exhibit a compelling mixture of discourses that cut across disparate fields such as philosophy, psychology, literary criticism, and theology, Kierkegaard's existential thrust is illustrated in the way he reshapes and conceptualizes Greek mythological and Biblical figures to depict the absurdity in modern human condition . In his *Edifying Discourses*, Kierkegaard reinforces Christianity's "inverted dialectic" which implores that the individual exercise "double vision" by focusing on the spiritual opposites of worldly concepts, like seeing hope in hopelessness, prosperity in adversity, and strength in weakness. He suggests that

the way to survive in a chaotic and disorderly world is to draw strength from within rather than from the society. While these philosophers appear concerned about similar subject matters, they realize "that life does not follow the continuous flow of logical argument and that one often has to risk moving beyond the limits of the rational in order to live life to the fullest" (5).

As existentialism as a movement continued to progress, existentialists had wide-ranging notions about objective truths and how one should embrace isolation and alienation. While Camus posits in *The Myth of Sisyphus* that the absurd exists when man fails in his quest to find meaning in life: a failure that creates absurdity as all reasons for existence are eroded by the futile search for order in a chaotic world (21-28). Heidegger suggests that the creation of an authentic state of being resides with the individual (Ricoeur 172). However, Nietzsche tries to convey a sense of how the states of alienation and isolation have resulted in a profound and unredeemable breakdown of conventional thoughts and attitudes. The phrase "God is dead" reinforces Nietzsche's notion that the traditional conceptions of an "absolute" are no longer believed, and where these old ideas about an "absolute" have failed, they have not been replaced by new god-termed rules (Guignon and Pereboom xvi). These old ideas about a transcendent basis of meaning and value in life, embedded in the beliefs of the cosmos of the Greeks, the God of Christianity, the Humanism and Reason of the Enlightenment "have been found to be only transient human constructs with no binding force in telling us how we ought to act or what we ought to strive for" (xvi). Therefore, by Nietzsche's standards, since all these fixed ideas about an "absolute" and existence are no longer believed, all knowledge is subject to interpretation and there is no "'original' noninterpreted text" (Flynn 16).

On the literary front, existentialism is mostly portrayed in the works of Jean Paul

Sartre, Albert Camus, and Franz Kafka. Like the philosophers, who interpret the absurd

as a state of existence, Camus regards the absurd as a "condition of existence [that is]

explored through fiction, rather than a fictional form in itself" (Gavins 63). For instance,

in his essay, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (1942), Camus questions whether there exists any

meaning to human endeavours. For him, the Sisyphian situation is an allegory of the

absurd condition of human existence in which, like Sisyphus, man is torn between his

passion for life and "the unspeakable penalty in which the whole being is exerted towards

accomplishing nothing" (108). Given the absurdity in the conflict between man's desire

for significance and the realities of an unfriendly world, Camus suggests that suicide—a

confession of life as worthless—is the only way out of man's misery.

No matter the logical standpoint from which existentialists argue, there are five

themes that resonate throughout their works. These themes, though expressed in different

ways, project the same ideas on life, time, and the purpose of man in life. The first is that

existence precedes essence. Originated by Jean-Paul Sartre, the phrase "existence

precedes essence" has become a classic expression that captures the core of existentialist

philosophy. Sartre places a lot of importance on the individual and his ability to decide

between what is right or wrong in a world of moral chaos. He suggests that human nature

or personality (essence) is determined by the choices the individual makes as she copes

with the conditions of life (existence). Contrary to religious and mythological beliefs like

the Greek notion that human essence is predestined by supernatural forces, Sartre holds

that the human nature is not shaped by uncontrollable forces, or predestined purpose;

rather, human essence emerges based on experiences and choices made. In his famous

1945 lecture "Existentialism is a Humanism," Sartre suggests that one is accountable for the choices one makes in life. To Sartre, everyone is like a *tabula rasa* at birth: we are born as a clean slate on which our experiences help us write. Therefore, a person's identity takes shape not from predetermined essence, but from experience and perception. He asserts that the individual must first define himself, because his essence begins to manifest only after he has been able to assert himself as an independent entity (Sartre 28).

The second theme is the absurdity of the human condition. Camus, Nietzsche, and Kafka suggest that the absurd lies in the fundamentally irrational nature of the world. They focus mainly on the despair human beings experience as they attempt to apply reason to a chaotic and irrational world. They suggest that human beings, forced to rely upon themselves for their values rather than any fixed rules, make choices in the absence of absolute and objective guides. Hence the "absurdity of existence" occurs as man struggles to live a life of meaning and purpose in a chaotic and uncaring world. For instance, in Kafka's *The metamorphosis*, the protagonist achieves a state of self-identification only after he was transformed into an insect. His journey through this helpless state helps him to realize the inherent selfishness in human nature and the futility in selflessness. Thus, the realization of the irrationality of the world guides the protagonist to a point where he is able to create a balance between his obligations to himself and the society.

The third theme often expressed in existential works is the futility in the pursuit of meaning. Existentialism is centered on the individual and his pursuit for meaning and happiness in an indifferent and hopeless universe. Existential philosophers focus on the daunting issue of determining what constitutes a meaningful way of life in a world where

purpose has become obscure amidst the social and economic pressures that produce superficiality and conformism.

The fourth idea often conveyed in existential works is that the individual is an independent and free entity. Existentialists argue that man is a free agent, and some of them, like Jean-Paul Sartre, take this further by stating that there is no sovereign being responsible for man because man is a free entity who "first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world—and defines himself afterward" (Priest 29). This is premised on the fact that an individual can stand back from her life, ponder on her choices, and make meaningful decisions that will affect her life. In this sense, individuals are as responsible for their acts because they are free entities.

The last theme borders on ethics; it is the belief that personal morality supersedes social morality. Though each existentialist understands the ethical, as with the concept of "freedom" and "faith" in his own way, the underlying concern is to invite man to examine the authenticity of his life and of that of his society.

The concept of the absurd is notoriously vague. Despite the number of works dedicated to absurdism since the mid-twentieth century, definite universal, stylistic, or temporal boundaries are yet to be set around it. As Joanna Gavins notes, "the absurd has been identified in texts as diverse as Greek tragedy and multimodal science fiction, and in works of authors from Amis to Voltaire" (62). In contemporary literature, authors like John Barth, J.D. Salinger, Don DeLillo, and Thomas Pynchon also reflect the absurd in their works, and their themes express the same existentialist principles—human's struggle to give meaning to a chaotic world in which we find ourselves. Harris notes that these authors' "vision of an absurd universe not only constitutes the theme of their novels

but is reflected as well by the ways they manage incidents, characterization, and language. The form and content becomes a kind of metaphor for their concerns" (8). In most of their works, the absurdity of life is suggested not only by the ridiculously exaggerated characters and the events, but also the non-sequential arrangement of plot. They introduce the concept of the absurd into their fiction by embracing non-linearity and integrating multiple concepts that illustrate "a complicated blending of system and distribution, formalism and flux, procedure and process, in its composition" (Conte 32).

The absurdist elements in the fiction of the authors examined in this essay differ from those in the Theatre of the Absurd. The most obvious difference is stylistic. Fictional works express the fundamental assumption that the "human experience is fragmented, irritating, [and] *apparently* unredeemable (Galloway ix). However, the surfaces of their works are "far more conventionally 'realistic' than anything found in the avant-garde drama" (ix). Rather than depict man in a disoriented state of crisis as a result of the incomprehensible world in which he finds himself, Pynchon, DeLillo, Wallace, Salinger, and Barth create in their works characters and events with which the lay person on the street can relate. Thus, in their representation of the absurd, they present characters and events in a realistic way, because while they express some traits of the avant-garde Theatre of the Absurd, such as the purposelessness in human existence, and the presentation of character in perplexing circumstances, their style tends more towards the mid-nineteenth-century realism. Through the fusion of the absurd and realism, these absurd realist authors portray the experience of man as extreme, discontinuous, and fragmented—but less so when compared to the dramas of Beckett and Ionesco or the novels of William Gaddi and Lawrence Ferlinghetti. However bizarre the events and

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characters they write about are, they are still part of what Galloway refers to as a "recognizable humanistic tradition" (x).

Absurd Realism and the Fusion of Genres

The fusion of literary genres is not peculiar to the contemporary authors discussed in this essay or the literary subgenre within which I situate their works; it is a practice that has been in existence for some time. Jacques Derrida notes in his essay "The Law of Genre" that literary art, the novel in particular, has evolved over the years giving rise to different and dynamic genres that cannot be boxed into strict conventional definitions (57-64). This implies that at some point during the creation of a literary work, authors may step outside the borders of the genre within which they operate to borrow features from other genres, in order to present their intended meaning or for aesthetics. These reasons which may account for the cross-border merging of literary traits into a single work of art result in the creation of subgenres that do not exclusively fit into conventional or established categories. As identified by Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, literary narrative styles are either illustrative or representative: a work of art that attempts to replicate reality, such as satires and other psychological narratives, is representative, while that which suggests or conveys an aspect of reality, like fantasy and other philosophical narratives, is illustrative (372-373). They assert that meaning in fiction is a function of two worlds: the fictional world created by the writer and the real world; and that we understand narratives by establishing a relationship between these two worlds. Therefore, meaning is achieved through symbolic suggestions or through replication of reality (82). Scholes and Kellogg explain that the illustrative narrative is a symbolic allusion to a part of reality because it is "stylized and stipulative, highly dependent on

artistic tradition and convention," while the representational narrative attempts to duplicate reality by continually reshaping and revitalizing "ways of apprehending the actual" (84). The difference between these two ways of deriving meaning is that while the representational narrative seeks to achieve a more generalized mimetic world, the illustrative aims at only suggesting an aspect of the real. For instance, Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), though not an actual account of an individual's experience, is presented as a real occurrence, thus achieving a generalized mimetic connection between the fictional world of the author and that of the reader. On the other hand, Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954) focuses more on the presentation of the evil inherent in human nature rather than situating the story in a representational manner. Philip Stevick suggests, while summarising Scholes and Kellog's position, that fiction should be judged in relation to experience; he explains that while some "kinds of fiction come remarkably close to pure pattern, some remarkably close to history. . . some fiction refers only to aspects abstracted from experience while other fiction seeks a more-or-less direct imitation" (370). However, in the bid to draw connections between reality and art, artists continue to create diverse genres that are unique in their own style to both illustrate and represent reality within cultural movements and historical periods.

Absurd realist works are both illustrative and representative in their form as they swing between the absurd, the fantastic, the satirical, and the realistic, selectively integrating some of the features of these genres. Authors of such works attempt to create works that imitate reality—by situating the works within realistic domains—and that also illustrate psychological aspects of the replicated reality. These works present an interpretation of reality that is in close alignment with prevailing contemporary views.

For example, the setting revolves around ordinary people like civil servants, military officers, students, and addicts as they go about their daily lives. This gives a realistic outlook to absurd realist novels because they represent a readily recognizable reality. On the other hand, not only are the events in these novels illustrative of certain contemporary concepts, the characters themselves are "fragments of human psyche masquerading as whole human beings" (Scholes and Kellogg 88). The characters in Wallace's *The Pale King*, for instance, symbolize various psychological struggles the postmodern individual contends with; they typify the loneliness and boredom that pervades contemporary society.

As a result of writing both representative and illustrative novels, absurd realists who have authored novels written within the last six decades have not operated within the confines of conventional generic categories; rather, they have transcended restrictive borders of all kinds. Harris states that "if contemporary novelists are to portray absurdity effectively in a world which already accepts absurdity as a basic premise, an everyday fact, they must find new ways to present their vision" (19). John Aldridge also argues for the identification of "a new set of filters" because a contemporary novelist, he explains, can no longer be confined to a superficial examination of customs and norms, but must undertake a thorough exploration of all appearances in order to portray a true picture of the world (145). Absurd realism is not a complete departure from realism on the one hand, and the theatre of the absurd on the other, but rather a remodelling of their attributes. On one hand, absurd realism, like the mid-nineteenth-century realism which aims to reflect everyday life, portrays characters and events as plausible. Just like realist writers such as Henry James, Charles Dickens, and D.H. Lawrence who render reality

closely and in comprehensive detail by emphasizing characters over action and plot, the characters in absurd realist texts are much more centrally placed in the texts than their actions and the plot. While portraying them in situations that may be extreme but remain psychologically permissible, absurd realist authors provide insight into their psyches and their interpretations of their bizarre life. This style is unlike realism, which presents a snapshot of life. As Alison Lee puts it, realism encourages "a particular way of looking at art and life as though there was a direct correspondence between the two" (3). The theoretical principle that governs realism is that art should portray "things as they really are, in the sense of portraying objectively and concretely the observable details of actual life" (5). Since realism, as explained by Ian Watt, "begins from the position that truth can be discovered by the individual through the senses" (12), the depiction of the true reality is not only dependent on the imagination and interpretation of the individual author, but also on the reader's understanding. Therefore realism is empirical, since its interpretation is not only in the kind of experience portrayed but also in how that experience is understood. The critical approach by realists, then, is to understand the artist's interpretation of reality with the assumption that experience is universal. Lee explains that this premise is contradictory because "as soon as there exists [an imaginative] frame for reality, anything that is within that frame ceases to be 'reality' and becomes artifact" (5). She reinforces this point using Magritte's painting "The Human Condition" as a point of reference. Within this painting is a painting of a landscape seen through a window. This painting presents two levels of reality: the painting itself, and the painting of the landscape which is the real view. Lee explains that because the view of "the 'real' is

framed within a painting, it ceases to be real and becomes instead an imaginative construct" (5).

The style adopted by absurd realist writers is similar to this imaginative representation of reality. These writers concern themselves with the individualistic interpretation of life; they do not stick solely to the elaborate details of life as a mirror of reality, but project inferences of the real through these believable, but exaggerated characters and events. They achieve this with the assumption that the absurd man becomes free the moment he recognizes his own absurdity, and as authors, it is their responsibility to serve as the conduit between man and that realization.

On the other hand, absurd realism also borrows extensively from absurdist literature and philosophy. The theatre of the absurd that emerged alongside the avant-garde before and after World War II explores the themes of purposelessness, meaninglessness, and arbitrariness through characters whose identities are unstable. Writers like Kafka, Beckett, Pinter, and Ionesco use satire and dark humour to present the experiences of their characters as they find themselves in perplexing circumstances. For example, in Becket's *Waiting for Godot* (1953), two men converse in a repetitive and fragmented dialogue while they wait endlessly and in vain for Godot, a vague, undefined acquaintance whom neither of them can recognize and who is expected to bring them some undisclosed "message." Becket shows the hopelessness and isolation of humanity through the recurring events and experiences of his characters. It must also be mentioned that the theatre of the absurd which takes its origin from the idea of absurdism prevalent in the writings of early existential philosophers who focused on the futility of human endeavours, surfaces in works without logical construction and rational ending. Despite

the almost inseparable themes that are expressed in existentialism and the theatre of the absurd, there is a basic distinction between them, and this is shown in Martin Esslin's argument, summarized by Harris, that "the former presents absurdity in a 'form of highly lucid and logically constructed reasoning,' whereas the latter 'strives to express its sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought" (20).

Apart from extensively borrowing from realism and the absurdist literature and philosophy, absurd realism is related to other literary genres such as magical realism and satire. In fact, the line between these categories of writing styles may be slightly fuzzy as each of these genres attempts a recreation of reality in its unique way. While absurd realist and magical realist texts use the fantastic to varying degrees, satirical texts infuse grave situations with humorous elements with an inclination towards surrealism. This is because fantasy, which used to be "the exclusive province of art, everyday intrudes itself into the world of reality" (Harris 19). "The combination of fantastic events with realistic presentation results in reader disorientation," Harris suggests, because "the reader is forced to adjust his expectations" to accommodate, understand, and relate with this absurdity (28).

The line between reality and fantasy continues to fade away as authors attempt to expand and deepen "social appearances and surfaces" to "take into account the chaotic multiplicity of meaning" (Aldridge 145). Psychological verisimilitude, however, is more pronounced in absurd realism than it is in the other genres. Satirical works usually appeal to common sense and simple logic and adopt open insult as a means to incite or avert change, while magical realist texts are known to merge the fabulous with the real.

Magical realism situates the marvelous world within the real world, creating a co-existence between the fantastic and the actual. Absurd realist literature, in contrast, rarely addresses either prevalent social issues or traditional customs; rather, it outlines the chaos, alienation and nihilism that characterize contemporary society. Neither does it shift between worlds or employ the use of the marvelous.

Characteristics of Absurd realism

Although Absurd realism bears the generic features of postmodern fiction, there are a number of other features that make it a unique and experimental genre. These include the portrayal of human alienation and isolation in a realistic form, fragmentary plot structure, presentation of heightened reality, the use and misuse of language, and the fusion of various genres to achieve an experimental style and technique that follow no particular theory.

Since absurd realism projects a heightened version of reality in it attempts to create a simulacrum of the real world, novels belonging to this genre express the idea of human being's alienation which the author presents. They also demonstrate the experimental styles and techniques the author adopts to guide readers to preconceived conclusions. In terms of structure, styles, and techniques, works that fall within this category follow no particular structure or theory, and traditional plots and neatly tied–up endings are absent. David Dooley writes that through multiplicity of meaning and the complexity of human existence, contemporary works of the absurd reflect the absurdity that results from the world's degeneration (8). As stated earlier, they mix realistic, satirical, and fantastic features together to illustrate the futility of human existence by the portrayal of human conditions as extreme and bizarre. Contemporary writers that adopt

this writing technique—such as Wallace, DeLillo, Pynchon, Foer, Smith, Barth, Salinger, Bellow, and Rushdie—create characters that encounter absurdity as a result of tragic events that drive them into extreme and unusual situations. Absurdity is suggested by outrageous events and twisted characters: a blind old man who drives with the help of a deranged dog (Foer); a promiscuous U.S officer whose sexual exploits are trailed by a bomb during World War II (Pynchon); a boy who changes his complexion at will (Pynchon); a government agency populated by psychics (Wallace); a contemporary family's struggle with paranoia resulting from the fear of death, and the use of Dylar, a fictional drug assumed to treat this anxiety (DeLillo); a POW who travels through time, witnessing his own birth and death over and over again (Vonnegut); and a man who digs a hole so deep that he could travel to the past through it (Tomasula).

James Wood calls works by these writers "hysterical realism" owing to their "extreme" portrayal of reality. He says that the conventions of realism are not abolished but, on the contrary, exhausted and overworked. These "big, ambitious novel[s]" create true-life characters in extreme circumstances who endure the unimaginable and humanly impossible stories that happen to them; and though these authors' style of writing seems evasive of reality by bending towards the paranormal, they borrow extensively from realism (Wood *par.*4). The exaggerated abilities accorded to these characters heighten their sense of isolation and alienation, rather than endearing them to their societies.

On the other hand, Galloway considers the exaggerated depiction of reality as an ingrained part of contemporary society. He explains that since the extent to which contemporary humans experience a sense of isolation and alienation seems to have

progressed over time, it is only logical that the depiction of the absurd as an intrinsic

aspect of reality in contemporary fiction will equally intensify. Galloway states that:

> Since the words 'absurd' and 'alienated' have become such popular catchalls for
> the analysis of contemporary literature, it should perhaps be observed that literary
> critics no doubt often commit an unfortunate if understandable *lese-majeste* in
> regarding the theme of alienation as the unique province of the contemporary
> artist, disregarding, as they do, the very fabric of tragedy and much that is best and
> most viable in romance fiction, but their instincts are surely right, for with
> increasing frequency and persistence many contemporary writers will seem to
> suggest that alienation is not the result of the confrontation of a unique human
> spirit with a particular set of essentially external conditions, but that it is the fate
> of any and all men who think and feel with any intensity about their relationship to
> the world which surrounds them. Therefore, man does not become alienated . . .
> alienation is his birthright. . . . Thus, if contemporary alienation is not different in
> kind from that of previous ages, it is at least different in degree and, because it
> frequently presupposes the irrelevance of conventional value systems,
> significantly different in the results which it presupposes. (14)

In most cases, however, the difference between the portrayals of alienation in fiction

across ages is both in kind and degree. Contemporary authors, as stated earlier, adopt a

slightly different style because they depict a heightened form of reality by merging

genres. Thus, they employ subtle means of portraying the absurd; expressing it as the

underlying message, yet hiding it within an extensive labyrinth of fragmentary plot,

leaving it up to the readers to navigate their way to the central idea. Their approach to the

absurdity in human existence is not as evident as that of the authors of the theatre of the

absurd, who present absurdity in the way the events in the plays unfold. For instance,

Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming* (1965), Eugene Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano* (1950),

and Samuel Becket's *Waiting for Godot* (1953) focus primarily on the futility of the

human condition, but they also portray this notion through events that are in themselves

absurd.

In the following chapters, I explore absurd realism in selected postmodern

American texts. I consider recent trends in the literary world that have contributed to this

mode of writing, and the factors—such as the residual effects of World War II, civil unrest and political struggles, faith and religious beliefs, paranoia, and other psychological conditions—that have sustained the existence of this genre hybrid. Essentially, I focus on the ways in which language, characters, and events suggest the absurdity in human existence. I also examine the extensions of existential thought and how postmodernism has played a role in their depiction in these texts. I am interested in features that are borrowed from other literary genres and how these features are combined to create an absurd realist work.

In Tomasula's *TOC,* I examine the existentialist ideas in its experimental style and themes, investigating how these translate in social terms to the state of chaos in the contemporary society. I reflect on how multimodal platforms contribute to the work's suggestion of the futility in existence. Likewise, in Wallace's *The Pale King*, I consider his depiction of the world through the various absurd experiences of the IRS employees and how the complex psychological challenges he imposes on his characters as they struggle with boredom and heightened concentration, suggest that the possibility of the coexistence of different motives and emotions in the human mind allows for the existence of the absurd. In these two texts, I explore the effect of experimental writing on contemporary literature, exploring how experimentation in literature is used to convey absurd realism.

In Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, I give a close analysis of the use of language to shape meaning and experience. I consider Pynchon's manipulation of language and meaning to depict an exaggerated human existence as an absurd realist feature, essentially because this adds to the broad picture of the purposelessness of human

existence. I approach this text from the angle of structuralism, highlighting how the theoretical standpoints of structuralists can be used to understand how language is used to portray alienation and isolation in absurd realist works.

Finally, I conclude by showing how each of these works has explored the notion that the contemporary individual exists in an existential universe, where the meaning and purpose of life seem lost. I lay emphasis on their combination of facts and fiction to blur the lines between the real and the unreal in an attempt to express the futility in human endeavours.

Chapter 2: Boredom and Chaos in Postmodern Absurd Realist Novel: David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*

In this chapter, I consider absurd realism as a literary subgenre emerging from postmodernism, focusing on aspects of the postmodern culture that enabled the development of such a hybrid genre. Then, I examine the portrayal of a postmodern contemporary society that is pervaded by boredom, chaos, and absurdity in David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King* (2011). I look at how Wallace projects absurd realism by presenting characters and situations that are realistic, yet absurd in certain ways. I explore the expression of existentialism and paranoia, focusing on how the fusion of both concepts characterizes absurd realism in the novel. Furthermore, I trace the loop between boredom-induced concentration and chaos as reflected through these characters.

Understanding absurd realism as an off-shoot of postmodernism requires a good grasp of the postmodern ideological concept. The term "postmodern" refers to a variety of meanings and calls attention to its own contradictions and uncertainties. Postmodernism has been considered an historical period extending from the 1960s to date, a period known for the "upheavals in the international economic system, the Cold War and its decline, the growth of suburbs as a cultural force, the predominance of television as a cultural medium and the rise of computer" (Gey et al xi). It is also conceived in terms of a grouping of ideas, experimental artistic styles, and unique conceptualization of themes.

The discussion about what postmodernism is extends across and beyond academic discourse, and cuts across diverse spheres and circles. Paula Geyh et al point out that "from the producers of the Christian Broadcasting Network's *700 Club*, who in January

1996 published a 'fact sheet' denouncing postmodernism as an amoral pseudo-religion, to the creators of *The Simpsons*, who have sardonically advertised their hit television series as 'noveau postmodernism for the Masses'" (x), many groups have responded to the term in different ways, each attempting to understand it as it best relates to their own ideology. Even within academic circles, debates about the boundaries and theoretical constructs of postmodernism continue to grow. A number of critics—such as the American linguist, Noam Chomsky—have criticised postmodernism because of its vagueness and the indistinct definition provided in what he calls the "gibberish" writings of its scholars. In his essay on postmodernism, Chomsky was "curtly dismissive" of postmodernist intellectuals like Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, and Julia Kristeva, who propounded some of the philosophies and theories guiding postmodernism (Chomsky n.p. *par* 12). He points out that these intellectuals have failed because firstly, they cannot explain in clear terms and without difficulty the concepts of postmodernism, and secondly, interested scholars cannot easily read and understand these concepts on their own. Chomsky questions "the principles of their theories, on what evidence are they based, [and what] they explain that wasn't already obvious, etc" (*par* 13). He claims that "these are fair requests for anyone to make [and] if they can't be met, then [he]'d suggest recourse to Hume's advice in similar circumstances: to the flames" (*par* 13).

While Chomsky's take on postmodernism appears contemptuous, his argument is not against the usefulness or purposefulness of the concept in general, but against the principle that postmodernism lacks a fixed criteria and dogma. His views about the

indefinite application of the term "postmodernism" is shared by Dick Hebdige, who also

refers to it as a "buzzword" because of its lack of precision. Hebdige writes:

> When it becomes possible for a people to describe as 'postmodern' the décor of a
> room, the design of a building, the diagesis of a film, the construction of a record,
> or a 'scratch' video, a television commercial, or an arts documentary, or the
> 'intertextual' relations between them, the layout of a page in a fashion magazine
> or critical journal, an anti-teleological tendency within epistemology, the attack
> on the 'metaphysics of presence', a general attenuation of feeling, the collective
> chagrin and morbid projections of a post-War generation of baby boomers
> confronting disillusioned middle-age, the 'predicament' of reflexivity, a group of
> rhetorical tropes, a proliferation of surfaces . . . when it becomes possible to
> describe all these things as 'Postmodern' (or more simply using a current
> abbreviation as 'post' or 'very post') then it's clear we are in the presence of a
> buzzword. (181-182)

Hebdige contends that, as years go by, it becomes increasingly difficult to state in simple

and clear terms what postmodernism is, simply because the term has been extensively

stretched across diverse disciplines and boundaries. The term merely may simply be a

synonym for avant-garde, and fail to refer to a specified period, tradition or style.

Consequently, in a hundred years to come, works regarded as postmodern today may no

longer qualify.

However, other critics like Perry Anderson have argued that the divergent

meanings of the term "postmodernism" appear contradictory only on the surface, as the

underlying thematic preoccupation reflects the reality of contemporary society. In his

book *The origins of Postmodernity*, Anderson gives a detailed historical account of the

origin of the postmodernism and provides insights into a number of conditions—social,

political, economic, and cultural conditions—"that may have released the postmodern"

(vii). He focuses, among other things, on the intellectual contribution of Frederic

Jameson to the development of postmodernism. He shows how Jameson's recognition of

a shift in the ideas that govern capitalism in the post-war world—a change induced by the

dominance of multinational capital and the "consumer society"—called forth a new kind of criticism. Anderson argues that Jameson's attempt to make sense of the complexity and changes of the new stage of consumer capitalism ushered in new discourses of postmodern thought. He also considers the contributions of Jean-François Lyotard, Ihab Hassan, Jürgen Habermas, and Charles Jencks to the development and conceptualization of postmodernism, acknowledging how their works have created a point of view through which the contemporary society can be understood.

Essentially, there have been such arguments about the genre and boundaries of postmodern literature because of the wide range of features such works exhibit. As Gey et al explain, the "traits include pastiche; the incorporation of contradictory 'voices' within a single work; fragmented or 'open' forms that give the audience the power to assemble the work and determine its meaning; and the adoption of a playful irony as a stance that seems to prove itself endlessly useful (x). This list represents only a fraction of the features of postmodern American fiction; it leaves out a variety of other traits such as metafiction, multiplicity of meaning, paranoia, what Linda Hutcheon calls "historiografic metafiction" (fictionalization of actual historical events and characters as seen in Thomas Pynchon's *Mason and Dixon* (1997)), and what Jameson refers to as "technoculture" and "hyperreality." While paranoia, fragmentary plot, multiplicity of meaning are common features of most postmodern texts, not all postmodern literature exhibits all the postmodern traits. Each author adopts only the features that best represent the issues she intends to address. For instance, Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985) is more concerned with paranoia and media saturation; Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000) portrays the complexities of cultural hybridity and the integration of diverse beliefs

within society; Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* (1972) focuses on the effects of war on human existence and the futility of free will, and Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) explores the relationship between truth and reality, and the structuralist view that language, and the meaning attached to it, is a construct of the society. All these postmodern novels are driven by different thematic preoccupations, with each representing a faction of contemporary society.

The novels mentioned above portray the absurdities embedded in contemporary postmodern society, but they project these absurdities as an aspect of reality. While their themes correlate with that of absurdism, their modes of portrayal rely on characters and instances that are realistic. The novels express absurdism through themes that question the nature of existence and showcase the chaos in contemporary society. Their works portray the new social realities of contemporary society, such as the effects of technological developments and modernization, brought about by the unprecedented symbiosis between literature and popular culture. They experiment with the conception of their ideas and, in some cases, the materiality of their texts. While some adopt the use of technological devices, as seen in Steve Tomasula's *TOC* (2012), others like David Foster Wallace, Mark Danielewski and Chris Ware in *The Pale King*, *House of Leaves* (2000), and *Building Stories* (2012), respectively, experiment with the physical appearance of their novels.

Wallace is known for his innovative writing. His novels combine various writing styles and voices, dense, complex and plotless narratives, and a notable use of explanatory footnotes and endnotes. For example, his *Infinite Jest* (1996) includes 388 numbered endnotes, some of which themselves have extended footnotes. This novel is his

most acclaimed work because of its volume and convoluted plot. The novel, which is over a thousand pages long, deals with issues such as depression, family disintegration, political tension, sports, and popular culture. *Infinite Jest* revolves around the missing master copy of a film cartridge that is so powerfully entertaining and addictive that it captivates its viewer until they die of dehydration. Wallace uses the quest for this film cartridge to depict the struggles with addiction and its effects on the human psychology. He presents the plot of this novel in an absurd, yet realistic manner, by assembling a vast cast of characters suffering from various forms of addictions, and mental illness as a result of abuse endured at the hands of family members.

Wallace explores absurdity by focusing on the frustration and struggle to cope with the mundane day-to-day activities, the futile attempt to escape life, and the struggle to adjust to a media-saturated society. In his novels and collections of short stories, Wallace presents characters that have amplified existentialist views that align with absurd realism. He projects the belief that solipsism is an intrinsic, though an unacknowledged, part of human condition, and he tries to warn against this in his works. In most of his novels, he regards boredom as a psychological phenomenon, and treats his seemingly boring characters like dynamic, complex and invigorating people. For Wallace, boredom harbors the key to freedom because it involves a state of heightened self-consciousness. In his lecture speech at Kenyon College, Wallace states that "the really important kind of freedom involves attention, and awareness, and discipline, and effort, and being able truly to care about other people and to sacrifice for them, over and over, in myriad petty little unsexy ways, every day. That is real freedom" (*par* 14). Wallace suggests that the way to survive in an environment where the human being is threatened by the conservative

capitalism, resides in living and enduring whatever it is that one does until one begins to derive some satisfaction from it.

Like most of his works, Wallace's *The Pale King* is an absurd realist text. It is about the Internal Revenue Service Regional Examination Center (REC) in Peoria, Illinois, in 1985. The agency is populated by workers with bizarre personalities that evolved through unique complex circumstances experienced by each of them earlier in life. Wallace gives a detailed account of the unconventional experiences of these troubled hyper-real characters. He focuses on the various combinations of psychological issues, childhood trauma, financial circumstances that bring them together as accountants under the agency. Through depicting the IRS and its workers in this light, Wallace expresses the boredom, alienation and chaos that characterize contemporary society. Although Wallace committed suicide before completing the novel, *The Pale King*, as pieced together by Michael Pietsch, posits that a heightened consciousness can be achieved when boredom is converted to concentration. The novel also exhibits Wallace's signature style of invented words and acronyms that refer to a variety of fields, long multi-clausal sentences in page-long paragraphs, lengthy explanatory footnotes often rendered in academese, and a narration that is a "brilliant manipulation of technological argot"(Yeh *par. 17*). *The Pale King* describes characters' experiences through a reader-patience-testing stream of consciousness. A style that critics like James Wood believe is periodically pushed to extremes (24). An example of Wallace's detailed description of seemingly insignificant things and the use of such descriptions later on as adjectival phrases is the description of the shoes of the girlfriend of a character's Jesuit roommate: "pointy-toed leather cowboy boots decorated with flowers—that is, not cartoons of flowers or isolated floral designs

but a rich, detailed, photorealist scene of some kind of meadow or garden in full bloom, so that the boots looked more like a calendar or greeting card" (211). A few pages later, he reduces the elaborate description to an adjectival phrase when he refers to her as "the girl with the meadows on her boots" (214). With such elaborate descriptions, which he later reduces to just a phrase, he defines his characters with minimal interference with the plot.

Despite its unfinished, fragmented state, the novel depicts an America submerged in tedium, monotony and meaningless bureaucratic rules and regulations that seem to erode its citizens' sense of civic responsibility. In a sense, Wallace attempts to "spin" this into a positive situation, possibly into a spiritual opportunity by describing characters who convert boredom into enlightenment. The ability to pay attention to mundane details that are ordinarily trivial, by Wallacean standards, is a trait of an elevated mind. By actively engaging the mind with the environment—even if the environment consists of tax returns, fluorescent lights and styrofoam cups—tedium becomes a space of sublime awareness. As Claude Sylvanshine says, it is the decision between "what you gave attention to vs. what you willed yourself not to" (12) that transforms boredom into a state of "awareness".

Wallace's characters are absurd in many ways. For instance, the author claims that the novel is a memoir made into a fictional novel for legal reasons, and "David Wallace," the supposed author, is later mistaken for a higher ranking employee also named David Wallace. The "author," David Wallace, becomes a product of the personnel system: his profile is merged with the higher ranking David Wallace due to the multipronged debugging effort to upgrade personnel systems, which means that his

history as a separate entity is erased. There is also Leonard Stecyk, a pathologically nice official, who sent out 316 invitations to his eleventh birthday "*BLOWOUT BASH*," but had only nine guests show up, because everyone hates him in a complex way, "one that often causes the haters to feel mean and guilty and to hate themselves for feeling this way about such an accomplished and well-meaning boy, which then tends to make them involuntarily hate the boy even more for arousing such self-hatred (32). Claude Sylvanshine, a "data mystic" who has not only a "dramatically relevant foreknowledge" of things, but also the ability to remember ephemeral, useless, undramatic, distracting irrelevances like "the fact that someone they sit near in a movie was once sixteen cars behind them on I-5 near McKittrick CA on a warm, rainy October day in 1971" (118). There is David Cusk who is constantly embarrassed by his own heavy sweating, and who sweats even more each time he obsesses about not sweating. The narcissistic Meredith Rand, a beautiful tax examiner with a history of "cutting," is unable to believe in the authenticity of other people's reactions to her because she assumes that all males are drawn to her beauty alone. Her attitude symbolizes the psychological fears, such as the ephemeral state of beauty, time, and life, which we entertain about ourselves but try to ignore. She bonds with her aspergic colleague, Shane Drinion, who levitates in his chair when totally absorbed in mundane things, during a Happy Hour cocktail in an irony-laden discussion. There is also the religious and suicidal Lane Dean who marries his pregnant high school girlfriend and, despite having no amorous feelings towards her, stays married to her out of obligation to his son. Chris Fogle, who, in a long monologue similar to that of Clamence in Albert Camus' *The Fall*, describes in a discomfortingly hilarious manner his journey through the divorce of his parents, his father's horrific death, his mother's

identity crisis, his Jesuit roommate in college, his recreational drug abuse which he referred to as "doubling," and his decision to pursue a career in the IRS. Toni Ware, a pretty woman, recounts her eerie experience of playing dead in order to escape death at the hands of her mother's killer.

 Intermittently appearing are seemingly irrelevant one-off characters, some of whom are nameless. There are also disconnected chapters of unnamed interlocutors such as the boy with the ambition to kiss every part of his body, his father who battles with his sisyphean cycle of torture, and Mr. Manshardt's absurd baby whom Sylvanshine hates.

Each character is realistic but extreme, and some live on the verge of the paranormal. Their absurdity is an emergent effect of their assembly between the covers of a single novel, along the corridors, and inside the cubicles of one IRS workplace. These characters and disjointed chapters come across as a depiction of reality. Though they seem not to have any significance in the development of the plot, they contribute to the chaotic picture of the human existence that Wallace tries to create as he writes with "a voice that seemed to be a condensed form of everyone's lives" (David Lipsky v).

As these IRS workers daily cope with the difficult complex task of tax audit, they take up the heroic responsibility of providing order in a chaotic world by collecting and organizing a torrential flow of information despite the monotonous nature of the work which Lane Dean describes as "boredom beyond any boredom," and in a moment of suicidal thought, compares to hell:

> He felt in a position to say he knew now that hell had nothing to do with fires or frozen troops. Lock a fellow in a windowless room to perform rote tasks just tricky enough to make him have to think, but still rote, tasks involving numbers that connected to nothing he'd ever see or care about, a stack of tasks that never went down, and nail a clock to the wall where he can see it, and just leave the man there to his mind's own devices. (379)

Wallace suggests, in ways similar to Camus' existential stance, that the absurdity of life does not necessarily require suicide. These characters find a meaning that justifies their existence through their banal work. They cope with this tedium not because they are unwearied, but because of the effect their absurd experiences have had on them. Wallace further explains in the novel that the key to survival in the modern world lies in "the ability, whether innate or conditioned, to find the other side of the rote, the picayune, the meaningless, the repetitive, the pointlessly complex. To be, in a word, unborable . . . If you are immune to boredom, there is literally nothing you cannot accomplish" (438). Thus, these characters seem to have attained a level of self-awareness that makes them immune to boredom and enables them to notice minute things.

Having experienced extreme and absurd realities, Wallace's characters find themselves in a double-bind situation in which they struggle to adapt to the perpetual paradoxical circumstances they encounter. For example, Cusk's phobia, resulting from his frequent sweat attacks, makes him sensitive to room temperature. His feedback-looped struggle to control this situation is a kind of schizophrenic condition caused by the interplay of genetic, neurological, and emotional factors. It manifests after a prolonged exposure to a contradictory pattern of interaction.

The characters repeatedly experience a contradiction between their psychological and physical states that is invisible to others: Cusk's recurring sweat attacks, Toni's dead stare, Meredith's cutting, the increasing chain of mistresses of the boy's father, the confined claustrophobic, the citizens' civic decline and consumer behavior are all examples of the struggles between states. These victims are faced with conflicting demands on different rational planes that cannot be ignored or escaped. Hence, Wallace's

characters have developed a coping mechanism that is simultaneously active and passive. Hopelessly trapped in a web of confusion, they become extremely anxious individuals who search continuously for consistency and something to fill the vacuum: a search that has made the IRS agency an attractive workplace. Occasionally they display a rage of innocence: an unpredictable and intense anger triggered by seemingly insignificant actions or events, followed by the threat of violence. Toni Ware's violent outburst and threat to kill Lotwis and his family, resulting from the misconstrued complaint about her dogs, seem to reveal the borderline rage displayed when an individual's existence is believed to be at risk. From Wallace's point of view, the world is full of borderline individuals trying to find a point of orderliness in this complex system that is made up of both chaos and fixed boundaries (232). Thus the "key," he suggests, is not only to survive the drudgery of working for the IRS, but to survive modern life by becoming an existentialist of a rare kind—to become one of the few people who set the boundaries and are able, like Shane Drinion and the boy who is determined to kiss every part of his body, to withstand that pain of boredom and determination. These people "achieve and sustain a certain steady state of concentration, attention, despite what they are doing" (547). Like Fogle, they have conquered the directionless drifting and laziness of nihilism and its simulated freedom that provides an unreal choice: freedom to "choose 'whatever' because it didn't really matter" (223).

Despite the tediousness represented in the novel, Wallace's crucial recurring call to individual responsibility cannot go unnoticed. In a tribute to the author, James Mason says that Wallace's works seem to say "I don't like this aspect of how our culture has progressed, and I don't know what to do about it, but maybe acknowledging that this

exists in myself may somehow make it better or easier for all of us" (McSweeney's

Internet Tendency). Thus, in most of Wallace's works, one observes the Kierkegaardian

philosophy that the individual is solely responsible for giving meaning to his or her own

life and for living that life passionately and sincerely, in spite of many existential

obstacles and distractions including despair, angst, absurdity, alienation, and boredom. In

contrast to the perspective on boredom by contemporary theorists like Robert Roberts

who, according to David Kangas, see it as being in an absorbed state of disinterestedness,

Kierkegaard regards boredom as a state of mind that creates a profound awareness and

self-consciousness:

> In boredom the excess of time over meaning opens up and manifests itself. This
> involves the experience of discovering the way that self-consciousness is *not* the
> origin of meaning, does *not* reign sovereignly over its temporality *cannot* enable
> itself. It is the experience of being *unable* to flee oneself toward an object (an
> interest) and so of being 'stuck' to oneself. (287-289)

Wallace takes this notion further by proposing that whatever meaning an individual gives

to his or her own life, such a meaning should make a positive impact on the society so

that, with each person's awareness of a personal truth, the society is collectively

advanced. He explains that invariably, such a sense of collective responsibility will

eradicate that new wave of nonchalance that makes it acceptable for people to decide "on

a personal levael that it's all right to abdicate our individual responsibility to the common

good and let the government worry about the common good while we all go about our

individual self-interested business and struggle to gratify our various appetites" (136).

This kind of change in people's orientation ultimately results in situations he describes

where a "lady gets stabbed over off the river, houses up and down the block hear her

screaming, nobody even sets foot outside" (142). Wallace seems concerned about the

orientational change in the contemporary society. He states:

We don't think of ourselves as citizens in the old sense of being small part of something larger and indefinitely more important to which we have serious responsibilities. We do still think of ourselves as citizens in the sense of being beneficiaries—we are actually conscious of our rights as American citizens and the nation's responsibilities to us and ensuring we get our share of the American pie. We think of ourselves now as eaters of the pie instead of makers of the pie. (136)

This gradual change in our perception about the society and the sense of entitlement that pervades the postmodern world is existentialist. Like other absurd realist authors, Wallace's underlying message resonates with the existentialist notion of the futility of the human condition, but he adds that the gradual progression towards that existential state is a function of the society and not the individual. In his essay on Kafka, he examines the place of meaning and truth in a contemporary society overridden by the love for entertainment and popular culture to the extent that it becomes difficult to grasp the whole essence of human existence. He state that "No wonder [we] cannot appreciate the really central Kafka joke—that the horrific struggle to establish a human-self results in a self whose humanity is inseparable from that horrific struggle" (Wallace 26).

What Wallace reveals is that in spite of this detachment from communal responsibility, one achieves a heightened self-consciousness similar to what Jameson calls "intensities" when boredom is embraced. Self-consciousness results from the ability to "pay close attention to the most tedious thing you can find" and also completely ignore all forms of restriction "like the dog ignores the chain that holds him down" (117). In the same vein, he alludes to the inherent problems of postmodern America—like the excessiveness of drug-induced consciousness that has pervaded its culture. For example, his "doubling" character, Fogle, admits that: "You couldn't spend all your time taking Obetrols and sitting there doubled and aware and still expect to take care of business effectively" (186). This selfish individual liberalism has possessed the citizens and

created a consciousness of duty only to "themselves" rather than a collective duty to that society. This liberalism seems responsible for the rise of a complex system where citizens are in a form of "stare" from which they only snap out when their rights and privileges are at stake. Like Baudrillard, Bell, and Jameson, Wallace, in this novel, is concerned with a culture industry that has placed consumption over production. Thus, this novel echoes the Marxist argument that the post-industrial culture has become dominated by image creation—"a way to look cool to the others in your generation you wanted to impress and get accepted by" (145). The novel suggests that the society is responsible for producing individuals overwhelmed by infantile desires. Wallace implies that boredom has given rise to the chaos that humanity now has to endure. The patterns of the citizens' tax returns reflect this "self-interest" induced chaos; since people have devised various manipulative means of tax evasion because of their ability to concentrate, the "attitudes about paying taxes seem like one of the places where a man's civic sense gets revealed in the starkest sorts of terms"(141). By concentrating on the papers to unveil the hidden appearances of evasion in returns, IRS officials get to perform the heroic duty of dealing with basic humanistic instincts like selfishness and greed. They not only see the chaos and civic decline through these returns, but they are also an active part of it. For example, no one notices that Blumquist has been dead for four days while still sitting at his desk, because they all just bury themselves in their returns, hardly interacting with one another, engrossed in their daily work life pattern of turning pages. Dean, in the words of Kierkegaard, finds it "*strange that boredom, in itself so staid and solid, should have such power to set in motion*" (385, italics in original) such a complex state.

The novel suggests that boredom is an intricate part of the contemporary society, and rather than pull people together—like the picnics and happy hour events the IRS workers hold—it promotes alienation and isolation. It encourages disconnection and disintegration, leading up to a state of isolation. The novel echoes Kierkegaard's concept of boredom in his *Either/Or*:

> Since boredom advances and boredom is the root of all evil, no wonder, then, that the world goes backwards, that evil spreads. This can be traced back to the very beginning of the world. The gods were bored; therefore they created human beings. Adam was bored because he was alone; therefore Eve was created. Since that moment, boredom entered the world and grew in quantity in exact proportion to the growth of population. Adam was bored alone; then Adam and Eve were bored *en famille*. After that, the population of the world increased and the nations were bored *en masse*. To amuse themselves, they hit upon the notion of building a tower so high that it would reach the sky. This notion is just as boring as the tower was high and is a terrible demonstration of how boredom had gained the upper hand. (qtd. in Wilson, *par.* 3)

Through an "anti-confluential, turbulent, multitudinous representation of systems and experiences" Wallace's novel on the chaos and disenchantment evident in the contemporary society offers a depiction of the real world (Benzon 112). Wallace suggests that various motives and emotions may coexist in the human mind, and that within this paradox, the absurdity of existence lies. This is portrayed in the contortionist boy's goal to kiss every part of his body—a goal that represents any other form of pursuit by every whole person in reality. The key to achieving goals, Wallace posits, is to push through tedious and incredible discomfort until there is a comforting satisfaction similar to Toni Ware's unblinking stare.

Despite the absurdity of the human condition, Wallace says that there can be happiness. In the notes at the end of the novel, he writes that "Drinion is *happy* . . . It turns out that bliss—a second-by-second joy + gratitude at the gift of being alive, conscious—lies on the other side of crushing, crushing boredom" (546). Using the IRS as

a kind of case study, Wallace effectively harmonizes observable mundane reality with equally observable real-world complexity. He examines how one survives in real life, and portrays life as it is—a phenomenon that is made of boredom, concentration, complexities, and the absurdities caused by human intelligence and awareness—and through this, paves way to happiness and satisfaction.

Chapter 3: Absurd Realism and Structure in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*

Absurd realism, like existentialism and absurdism, poses the challenge of vaguely defined boundaries. Its evolution from postmodernism further complicates the assignment of fixed rules or all-inclusive features by which the genre can be analysed. In this chapter, I critically examine absurd realism through the lense of De Saussure's structuralism and I provide an understanding of the rules that drive the genre. I argue that, although structuralism has been overshadowed by recent, more revolutionary theories, such as poststructuralism and deconstruction, it is essential to the study of systems in postmodern American fiction. I show how structuralism has provided, amidst the complexities and unpredictability of the postmodern era, a way to profile fiction, where certain works of American fiction are modelled after a structure that depicts an absurd form of realism. My analysis in this chapter is based on Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966).

Structuralism is centred on identifying, understanding, and analysing the model of a system; it is about binary relationships: signs and concepts, the signified and signifiers. I examine how meaning derived from these relationships depends on the knowledge of language. One of the arguments made against structuralism by post-structuralists is that there is no single way of observing or understanding a concept or an idea. They argue that the complexity in human behaviour prevents the development of a fixed structure that can be used to study interactions between a system and the people living within that system. The key players of post-structuralism—such as Derrida, Barthes, Lacan, Foucault, Kristeva, and Butler—redefined literary structures until several genres exhibiting parallel patterns began to emerge. Most of these theorists and literary critics

based their assumptions on the complexities of the postmodern society. The breakdown of borderlines, multiplicity of meaning, interaction of high and low culture, and creation of experimental arts made the postmodern era the ideal "lab" for the post-structuralists.

As a theory, structuralism deals with the analyses of systems. It focuses more on the rules that produce the text rather than on the text itself. Unlike New Criticism, which considers the text an entity by omitting authorial intention, and draws evidence exclusively from the text, thereby understating the relevance of cultural history to the meaning of the text, structuralism attempts to release the text from the psychology of subjectivity and perception. Structuralists suggest that the text is not intended to inspire through subjective interpretation; rather, it should be an instance for the analytic appraisal of a system. Saussure proposes that linguistic competence is significant to the analysis of any social or cultural phenomena because the structure of every system is built on language. Therefore, the study of structuralism as a literary theory is significant in the study of the evolution of literary criticism. Since literature is produced through the use of language, structuralism provides a methodology for the identification and categorization of texts that follow certain rules of narrative coherence. By this, competent speakers of a language, when exposed to a text, are able to recognize and comprehend the phonetic sequence they read and give meaning to the text.

Absurd realism relates to structuralism because they create meaning within a similar linguistic context by exploring the interpretation that resides between the sign and the signified, and the situation of literariness within the context of language analysis. Despite the connection between absurd realism and structuralism, there are significant differences to the way and manner absurd realists and structuralists view the place of

meaning in a text. Structuralists attempt to define meaning in a text by observing the

binary relationships evident in it. By their standards, the production of meaning is

dependent on the structure of the genre. This contradicts the stance of absurd realists; like

post-structuralists, they believe that the text and its meaning are inseparable entities, and

a text is capable of having multiple unrelated meanings. Since absurd realism has no

definite layout, meaning is not exclusively derived from structure. Therefore, according

to structuralists, the analysis of a literary text is not interpretive; it specifies how the text

corroborates a predictive range of meanings that are based on the rules of a system.

Absurd realists hold that a text should not just have a connotative meaning, but should

also allow the creation of multiple interpretations. Yet, structuralists are not against the

concepts of absurd realism; they understand that just as the individual develops linguistic

competence through use of speech, which enables understanding and interpretation of

phonetic sequences, a literary critic develops skills through experience and mastery that

allows reading and analysis of a literary text by converting linguistic sequences into

literary structure. In this view, the literary critic derives meaning from the text by

understanding the literary structure it is modelled upon. Jonathan Culler states that:

> The text has structure and meaning because it is read in a certain way. Structure
> cannot be discovered without the help of a methodological model. To read a text
> is not to make one's mind a tabula rasa and approach it without preconceptions;
> one must bring to it an implicit understanding of the operations of literary
> discourse which tells one what to look for. (132)

Going by Culler's suggestion on the identification and analysis of structures, an absurd

realist text must be approached bearing in mind the distinct features that set this genre

apart from others. The reader of absurd realist texts should expect to identify recurrent

patterns and motifs—such as characters dealing with extreme circumstances, a non-

sequential plotting of events, and the existential notion of the futility in human

condition—in relation to meaning.

Absurd realism may be productively approached from the structuralist perspective

because postmodern artists and critics are known for questioning belief systems that

claim universality and transcendence; their criticism is aimed at underacknowledged

assumptions and precepts upon which disciplines and institutions have constructed their

authority (Geyh, Leebron, and Levy xx). For instance, Nietzsche says that authenticity is

disputable; he questions the universality of truth on the premise that whatever truth there

is exists within the construction of the society (Dale 95). Most postmodern critics launch

their debates on the platform of Derrida's theory of deconstruction, in which he

propounds that there is no fixed way through which a text or any concept may be

understood. Thus, narratives that do not conform exclusively to the structure of any

specific genre—such as absurd novels—and create multiple layers of meanings are better

understood under the deconstructive critique of meaning. In most of such novels,

characters struggle with paranoia as they try to apply reason to a chaotic world or resolve

a mystery. For instance, Delillo's *White Noise* portrays a society caught up in the

relentless drone of advertising and consumer culture, and his characters are driven to

extreme situations they are obsessed with death. In Wallace's *The Pale King*, discussed in

the previous chapter, the IRS, a government agency, seems to be the ideal work place for

people with odd personalities that developed from some of the unique and complex

circumstances they faced earlier in life. Likewise, Oedipa Maas, the protagonist in

Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* embarks on a quest to resolve a mystery by following

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clues that seem to lead to more questions than answers. These novels follow the pattern of absurd realism as they exhibit chaos and paranoia that pervade contemporary society.

As noted in previous chapters, the essential feature of absurd realism is that it projects an extreme version of reality by combining the traits of realism and absurdism. Texts in this hybrid genre depict the world's degeneration by adopting the use of realistic, satirical, and sometimes fantastic features to illustrate the futility in human existence. Analysing absurd realist texts with a fixed set of rules may prove difficult, because as a genre, it overlaps with other genres. However, adopting the structuralist's approach to the creation of meaning in absurd realism gives a semantic analysis of the relationship between the signifier, in this case the text, and the signified, the meaning in absurd realist texts. As in literary analysis, the reader is the intermediary between the signifier and the signified. She treats the writer's concepts as signs and interprets these based on the cultural milieu upon which the text is built, which includes attitudes, general dispositions, and events. In examining literature as signs, she reads it as a product of the society, created in accordance with various presumptions, procedures and traditions that are imbedded in that culture. She does not ignore the underlying meaning in a text; rather, she treats it as a reflection of both personal experiences and experiences yet to be encountered. What the absurd realist does is create an extreme reality in the novel that the reader receives as signs and interprets as indicative of the society. Where the suggested sign is not relatable to the reader's personal experience, the reader accepts the sign as a signifier of some conditions within the society.

One of the early writers of postmodern American novels with an extreme portrayal of reality is Thomas Pynchon. Since the 1960s when his first work was

published, Pynchon has enjoyed an impressive, somewhat ambiguous, critical reputation because his works are radically different from the great novels of the American tradition. The first three of his novels, which were published within the space of a decade, had thematic similarities: metaphoric entropy and paranoid individuals, relationship between language and textuality, and documentation of history and reality. Many of his works are quest narratives; for instance in *V.* (1963), the plot extends from the search for sewer crocodiles to the elusive identity of *V.*; in *The Crying of Lot 49*, the protagonist searches for a secret underground postage system called the Trystero; and in *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), characters search to explain how a promiscuous U.S officer's exploits seem to be geographically connected to bombing sites during World War II. Pynchon uses allegorical devices, such as flat characters, odd names, and schematized action, to present a simulacrum of reality that tends towards the absurd. His works, like those of DeLillo and Wallace, create an awareness of the effects of modernization on contemporary culture. His narratives explore the connection between the sign and its suggestive meaning by illustrating that the individual lives within a linguistic system where meaning is socially determined.

Like most of Pynchon's other works, *The Crying of Lot 49* reflects an absurd reality by embracing non-linearity and integrating multiple concepts that illustrate the fluidity of meaning. Through the use of networks and information technology, Pynchon creates a narrative style that attempts to explain the world in terms of what Emily Apter refers to as "Oneworldedness," a concept that "imagines the planet as subject to 'the system' and wants to disable plans of escape" (370). This concept fails "the optimists

(left or right) by endorsing the idea that there are legitimate reasons to be paranoid in a world bent on civilizational self-destruction" (370).

James Wood criticises stylistic patterns in recent postmodern American fiction. He says that authors like Rushdie, Wallace, Pynchon, Smith and DeLillo portray "hysterical realism" because of their "extreme" depiction of reality, exhaustion of the conventions of realism, and their larger-than-life characters who endure the unimaginable (*par* 4).Wood's criticism is quite similar to that of Chomsky on postmodernism. He claims that these authors have fundamentally failed in their depiction of the human condition. Wood criticizes their exaggerated account of reality stating that:

> [R]ecent novels by Rushdie, Pynchon, DeLillo, Wallace, and others have featured a rock musician who, when born, began immediately to play air guitar in his crib (Rushdie); a talking dog, a mechanical duck, a giant octagonal cheese, and two clocks having a conversation (Pynchon); a nun called sister Edgar who is obsessed with germs and who may be a reincarnation of J. Edgar Hoover, and a conceptual artist who is painting retired B-52 bombers in the New Mexican Desert (DeLillo); a terrorist group devoted to the liberation of Quebec called the Wheelchair Assassins, and a film so compelling that anyone who sees it dies (Wallace). (*Par* 3)

In his book, *The Irresponsible Self: on Laughter and the Novel,* Wood calls for a conscious moral seriousness in recent fiction and mocks critics who regard the extremities in these works as evidence of great imaginative power (180). He finds it amusing that "again and again, books like these are praised for being brilliant cabinets of wonders" despite their assortment of stories, and "many weird and funky characters" (180). In his criticism of this absurd representation of reality, however, Wood does not consider historical or cultural changes across all other forms of arts, like films, that inform changes in fiction, or even real events that might have inspired fictional writers to author serious fiction that "avoids plumbing the depths of character, leaving it to the reader to suppose that they just want to entertain, or attract notice, which is, after all, the

goal of the hysteric, from a culture that has taught them to aim low" (Staiger 11). Neither

does he consider the implied meaning that lies beneath their absurdity, nor how such

derived meanings relate to the representation of contemporary society.

Scholes and Kellog take a different position; they refer to these works as

"fabulations" because authors present a less realistic and more artistic kind of narrative

that emphasizes plots that go far beyond conventional preoccupation, and uses character

and motivation to revive a presumably more traditional dimension of literature: story

itself. They take the position that "different kinds of fiction stand in different relations to

experience, that some kinds of fiction come remarkably close to pure pattern, some

remarkably close to history, [and] that some fiction refers only to aspects abstracted from

experience while other fiction seeks a more-or-less direct imitation" (370). Like the

structuralists, these authors hold that language is a literary medium and they explore this

medium "by philological analysis, translation, grammatical and syntactical explication, in

order to get at the message, the 'meaning,' the semantic level that lay beneath it" (White

380).

Pynchon reveals the artificiality of the novel as a work of fiction. In *The Crying of*

Lot 49, projection of the real through the lens of the absurd explains his use of an array

of popular styles—adventure tale, science, and detective fiction. As Jeffrey Staiger says:

> The novel's leapfrogging genres show characters to be a pure function of style,
> the outcome of a code that can be switched on and off at any time at the whim of
> the author. The novel would seem to be written to confirm another postmodern
> doctrine related to those specified above: that there is no truth, no origin, just
> copies of copies, and so on. (648)

In the process, *The Crying of Lot 49* itself becomes a paradox. The confusion of symbols

and the struggle to provide a definite interpretation of them as not resolved as they might

be in a realistic novel. However, the text does suggest links between concepts, so that

most elements work together towards a surprisingly cohesive structure. The

"leapfrogging" plotline guides the reader towards the existential connotations lying

beneath the disconnected plot, the perplexing situations of the characters, and the bizarre

events.

Pynchon uses absurd and suggestive names to draw striking connections to other

subtle interpretations. Critics have tried to make sense of the names of the characters and

places in *The Crying of Lot 49*; many of the names are not very realistic and they all seem

to carry at least some sort of symbolic meaning. Usually, realistic authors are subtle about

names that hint certain ideas, but Pynchon gives his characters names that spark

associations. The protagonist's name, Oedipa, more than all other names in the text, is an

obvious reference to the Sophoclean Oedipus. David Kirby and Michael Seidel agree that

Oedipa is a feminine version of Oedipus because, like Oedipus, she searches for answers

about a dead man (188). As the inquiry into the death of King Laius leads to a series of

self-discovery for Oedipus, Pierce Inverarity's death, which is referenced at the

beginning of the novel, sets off the series of events that sends Oedipa on a delusional

search for meaning. Oedipa's quest to uncover the meaning of "Pierce's attempt to leave

an organized something behind after his own annihilation" produces many unanswered

questions and clues (Pynchon 64). On the other hand, James Dean Young argues that

Oedipa has no correlation with Oedipus because her failure to meaningfully solve the

mystery of the Lot 49 shares no characteristics with Sophocles' myth. He claims that if

any correlation exists at all, it would be an ironic ore, because Oedipa's journey does not

mirror Oedipus quest (72). On another extreme, in "A Note on Pynchon's Naming," Terry

Ceaser suggests that the name, Oedipa Maas, has an auditory semblance to "Oedipus my ass" (5).

Also, Oedipa's nick-name, OED is an acronym for the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED). This suggests that she is an existential fountain of meaning, representing different aspects of everyone's life and condition. She represents the human attempt to create order in a disorderly world. Despite suspecting that she might be a victim of a hoax at the end of the novel, she still sits patiently awaiting the call of Lot 49.

Like Oedipa, her husband's name, Mucho Maas, sounds like "Macho Mass," and his obsession with his appearance gives a picture of the stereotypical, overwhelmed modern American male who has no job satisfaction. His name also indicates his propensity towards excess—"much." When introduced, Mucho is recovering from working as a used car salesman—a job that was an "exquisite torture to him" because of a hyperawareness of "what *that* profession had come to mean" (12). He is distressed by the meanings heaped upon used car salesmen such that he makes excessively ridiculous efforts to be the anti-used car salesman. What keeps him in his job is that he "believed in the cars;" however, this belief, too, is founded on "excess" (13). Mucho believes and invests too much meaning into the cars, reading them metaphorically as "metal extensions of themselves [the owners], of their families and what their whole lives must be like" (13). Consequently, the cars become "automotive projection[s] of somebody else's life," which people exchange for other cars "as if it were the most natural thing," and the owners are rendered "shadow[s]" (13). The cars are substituted for their owners who are mere projections. Mucho, who reads metaphor into everything, becomes an embodiment of metaphor. With the aid of LSD, Mucho can "listen to anything and take it

apart again. Spectrum analysis, in my head. I can break down chords, and timbres, and words too into all the basic frequencies and harmonics, with all their different loudnesses, and listen to them, each pure tone, but all at once" (116). In performing this spectrum analysis, he can isolate the smallest parts of the whole into their primary components. As a result, Mucho as an individual disappears, becoming "an assembly" of different personalities (114). While his person is the aggregation of parts, he becomes a "more generic" version of the postmodern man.

Pierce Inverarity also has a ludicrous nature. Inverarity, with its echoes of Veritas, the Roman goddess of truth, ironically suggests the elusiveness of truth. The name also sounds like "piercing variety" or "peers in variety;" an identification that could be supported by Pierce's use of many different voices and vast array of dissimilar land-holdings. His absurd decision to leave behind a vast, and mysterious estate for Oedipa to sort out, seems reminiscent of proto-God figures, such as the Father in Swift's *Tale of a Tub,* whose sons, Peter and Martin, rewrite his will—*The Bible*—to suit their own ends, or Godot in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, who is also supposed to supply all the answers yet is incommunicado.

Another name is that of the psychotherapist, Dr Hilarious. He claims that he cured a case of hysterical blindness with his alarming number 37, the "Fu-Manchu," which involved "slanting the eye up with the index fingers, enlarging the nostrils with the middle fingers, pulling the mouth wide with the pinkies and protruding the tongue" (9). Dr Hilarious' eventual psychological breakdown is a portrayal of postmodern American paranoia.

While the names seem to offer some insight into these characters' psychology, their sheer absurdity—Dr. Hilarious, Mike Fallopian, the Paranoids, San Narciso, Mucho Maas— is indicative of satire. Using unrealistic and obviously symbolic names, Pynchon mocks an American culture that he nonetheless seems to find interesting. From another perspective, the names are an indication of language as a literary message. Following the absurdist criticism that treats language as a problem lingering "indefinitely on the surface of the text, in the contemplation of language's power to hide or diffuse meaning, to resist decoding or translation, and ultimately to bewitch understanding by an infinite play of signs" (White 380), Pynchon explores the nature of associating situations and names so closely together that multiple meanings are derived from such pairing. In general, he seems to suggest that any type of meaning can be inferred from the information provided in a text, such that "the text becomes an all-inclusive category of the interpretive enterprise; that or else the text is conceived to exist nowhere at all, to disappear in the flux of language, the play of signs" (381).

Like other characters in absurd texts, Oedipa is constantly in perplexing situations as she follows clues that she believes will lead her to the meaning of Tristero and W.A.S.T.E. Throughout her labyrinthine journey, Pynchon illustrates the structuralist theory of language. He explores the relationship between the signifier (the physical manifestation of symbols, in this case, the word) and the signified (meaning) to suggest multiple meanings in the novel. He suggests that since language has lost its representational capacity, and reality appears as an absurd play of words, attempts to find coherence beyond the order of words fail. Therefore, like Oedipa, everyone searches for pattern in a chaotic world where the absurd and reality cannot be distinguished from one

another. This theoretical proposition implies that meaning is important both in relation to the particular and specific reading of the text, and in the context of reading in the vast web of many other possible interpretations.

Pynchon uses numerous thematic paths, such as chaos and order, free will and determinism, chance and necessity, life and death, fiction and reality, to create binary structures in the text. These create a tension that underlines the absurdist's theme of the meaninglessness in human existence. By making an ordinary suburban housewife embark on a quest for meaning, he proffers skepticism about the possibilities of fixed meaning or true revelation. Serpell Namwali writes that "the oscillation between meaning and non-meaning not only loosens our hold on significance, but also leavens our interpretative tenacity with jaunts into the absurd" (232). Oedipa's duty to serve as an executrix takes her through a set of episodes that could have occurred in almost any order. She tackles the underlying meaning behind structures that may or may not point to a form of historical conspiracy—a Jacobean drama, a drawing in a public toilet, stamps from Pierce's collection—all suggesting the presence of a counter-organization called the "Tristero System." This search of elusive facts supports Pynchon's themes of fragmented truth, history, and communication. However, it is not the simple presence of these signs that determines their organization into particular patterns; it is Oedipa herself who is responsible for imaginatively structuring potential coherent plots around them. Right from the beginning, Roseman, Oedipa's lawyer, finds it weird that she has been named executrix by her ex-boyfriend, and thus assumes that there must be some mystery that the dead boyfriend wanted her to uncover. This prepares one for the possibility of subsequent

unusual events. It is only fitting that Oedipa emerges out of her complacent housewife lifestyle of Tupperware parties and Muzak into a chaotic system beyond her capabilities.

Pynchon attempts to follow the rules of the postmodern American cultural system by portraying an aspect of the realities within this society—a society submerged by the overflow of information. He examines the paranoia that pervades society as a result of excessive information. He uses signs and symbols that give useful information and superfluous disorienting details in the order in which Oedipa encounters them, to emulate the often random transmission of information in real life. Oedipa becomes overwhelmed by the multiple possibilities of the meaning that can be drawn out of a chaotic mass of information of the Tristero and W.A.S.T.E. She attempts to process the coexistence of more plausible interpretations of the signs that are either deliberately left for her as clues or that she encounters by chance. She continues to see the muted post horn everywhere and wonders whether "she has indeed stumbled onto a secret organization having objective, historical existence . . . ; or she is hallucinating it by projecting a pattern onto various signs only randomly associated; or she is the victim of a hoax . . . or she is hallucinating such a hoax . . ." (150). The dilemma of thinking about all four possibilities increases her paranoia; she begins to live with the fear that the "revelations" proffered by her search could "expand beyond a certain point" and possibly "grow larger than she" (150).

As the novel progresses, it becomes difficult to rely on Oedipa's point of view; her delusions about the signs and symbols she encounters at random make her an unstable and unreliable narrator, and also makes it hard to differentiate between what is real and what are her fantasies. For example, at the airport, she eavesdrops and observes people,

making assumptions that she believes might make her clues add up. She watches a weird

scene unfold in which an uncoordinated boy kisses his mother passionately on the lips

using his tongue. His promise to write and his mother's advice to write by WASTE

because "the government will open it if you use the other" makes Oedipa paranoid (100).

There is no explicit information about what the mother and son meant by "WASTE," but

Oedipa, in her disoriented state of mind, is quick to believe they are part of the few

individuals who still communicate through the underground courier system.

Pynchon embroiders his style with metaphysical connotations, figural wizardry,

and harsh vernacular frankness to project an exaggerated reality. For example, in playing

"voyeur and listener," Oedipa encounters some other extreme forms of personalities:

> a facially-deformed welder, who cherished his ugliness; a child roaming the night
> who missed death before birth as certain outcasts do the dear lulling blankness of
> the community; a Negro woman with an intricately-marbled scar along the baby-
> fat of one cheek who kept going through rituals of miscarriage each for a different
> reason, deliberately as others might the ritual of birth, dedicated not to continuity
> but to some kind of interregnum; an aging night-watch man, nibbling at a bar of
> Ivory Soap, who had trained his virtuoso stomach to accept also lotions, air-
> fresheners, fabrics, tobaccos and waxes in a hopeless attempt to assimilate it all,
> all promise, productivity, betrayal, ulcers, before it was too late. . . (100)

Pynchon seems to justify Oedipa's attempts to make sense of a senseless world by

imposing bizarre characterizations on these people. Her delirious walk through San

Narciso demonstrates the insanity of the search for "meaning" in a meaningless universe.

Pynchon portrays the pointlessness of human existence and also demonstrates that "in a

world where all things are equatable in their significance, it thus follows, that all things

then become equatable in their insignificance as well, creating a cosmos where there is so

much meaning that there is then no meaning at all" (Graham *par* 4).

The juxtaposition of two different social classes—the well-to-do (like the mogul,

Pierce) and the wretched—reflects the reality of postmodern American society. This

reality is presented in the text as a space of communication enclaves that is built by the individuals living within it. At one end, the enclosure of the self is suggested by the imagery of closed systems and towers: Oedipa's identification with one of the female characters in Remedios Varo's painting symbolises the impossibility of escaping from one's own self. Thus, the only option is an existential resignation—a helpless acceptance of the situation or circumstance in which one finds one's self.

Another way by which Pynchon draws a connection between the meaning of human existence and the existence of information in the contemporary culture is the absurd game played by Pierce which leads Oedipa to John Nafastis' Maxwell's Demon. Pynchon uses this machine to synthesize the fields of thermodynamics and information theory together into a mysterious unity. As Nefastis explains to Oedipa, the joining of these disciplines creates a closed system in which entropy thrives. He says that "entropy is a figure of speech, then, a metaphor. It connects the world of thermodynamics to the world of information flow. The machine uses both. The Demon makes the metaphor not only verbally graceful, but objectively true" (85). He makes a connection between heat engines and communication with the striking similarity of the respective mathematical representations of these two areas: "The equation for one, back in the '30's, had looked very like the equation for the other. It was a coincidence" (84). He regards this chance similarity and its relation to his Machine as a great nexus: "The two fields were entirely unconnected, except at one point: Maxwell's Demon" (84). With this mathematical insight, Nefastis is another of Pynchon's paranoiacs; apparently "The word [entropy] bothered him as much as 'Trystero' bothered Oedipa" (84). Thus, Nefastis suggests that just as the individual particles in a closed system tend toward greater disorder, so too

does the interaction between people and the massive information they consume drive the universe toward entropy. He seems to suggest that the entire universal system moves towards chaos in the same way a closed system moves toward entropy.

Pynchon's realism is propelled by signs, significance, and interpretations; it suggests reading as a process of decipherment, of connecting the clues even though the connecting links appear weak and unreliable. By so doing, a tension is created as the search for meaning evolves, which provides a true picture of our attempts to make sense of history. In *The Crying of Lot 49*, Pynchon argues that the necessity to create and perceive significant patterns in all that we read and do is inherent in everybody. People are driven to see connections between the events of their own lives and the larger external events that unfold and eventually make up history, and these connections are the "signs." They are the outcome of the meaning generated from the "signifiers" provided through the text. Pynchon suggests that the need to make sense and perceive patterns of significance in the text, life and history can easily become the activity of the paranoid, who is torn between the frantic fear that in the end, nothing makes sense, and the desperate desire to see plots, connections, and significance everywhere.

Chapter 4: TOC: The Absurd Realist as an Experimental Existentialist.

Absurd realism in its basic form is experimental in nature. As a genre, it introduces new ways of casting characters, plotting events, and employing language in ways that generate a different way of writing, reading, and interpreting texts. This chapter considers absurd realist tendencies in Steve Tomasula's experimental digital novel, *TOC: A New Media Novel*, by exploring the intricate relationship that exists between time and language, the fusion of genres, representational characterization, and the fragmentary plots.

Experimental texts reflect innovation in style, subject, or character representation by changing the conscious parameters of literature, both for readers and writers. The idea of experimental literature questions the ideals of traditional fiction; it queries conventional ideas and probes the set of rules that govern the norm. Rules make it easy to classify works into specific genres. As Amy Devitt explains, the knowledge of how genre works is a basic part of human life, because genre significantly impacts the way people use language, and how they read and write both literary and nonliterary texts. The knowledge of rules help to give new perspectives and approaches to "how people operate and have operated within their societies and cultures" (1-2). Based on Carolyn Miller's definition of genre as a "social action associated with recurrent situation," Devitt notes that the genre as a mold keeps changing in conformity with the interests and perspectives of the people who participate in shaping its form (2-3). Of course, the acceptance of a genre as the standard against which other works are compared is based on the acknowledgement of the genre's formulae and subject matter as the norm. When a genre

or style becomes an established norm, newly invented styles that emerge from it are accounted for under the umbrella of experimental literature.

Right from the humorous works of Laurence Sterne in the eighteenth century, and those of Virginia Woolf and James Joyce in the early twentieth century, to the works of Thomas Pychon, Jorge Borges, and John Barth in the twentieth-century, and more recent twenty-first-century works of David Foster Wallace, Steve Tomasula, Mark Danielewski, and Jonathan Safran Foer, the concepts and material design of fictional works have changed several times. Fictional works have become "unfettered improvisation and rigorous application of rules, accidental composition and hyper-rational design, free invention and obsessively faithful duplication, extreme conceptualism and extreme materiality, mulimediality and media-specificity" (Joe Bray et al. 1). All of these and many others, such as being "'born digital' and being hand-made," are ways of being experimental in literature, and this diversity of experimental modes cuts across literary practice from the eighteenth century to date (1). As suggested by Bray et al, one feature that is common to all experimental literatures is that these works raise fundamental questions about the nature of art itself, questioning what it is, what it could be, its functions, limitations, and possibilities (1). As Bray et al suggest, "experimentation makes alternatives visible and conceivable, and some of these alternatives become the foundations for future developments, whole new ways of writing, some of which eventually filter into mainstream itself" (1). It is a cyclical process: writers invent new ways of writing, and these new ways are regarded as experimental until they become accepted as the norm (Devitt 88). This cyclical feature is most evident in mainstream literature at all periods, especially the postmodern era, and this has caused many critics,

like Jean-François Lyotard, to argue that postmodern literature is synonymous with experimental literature.

When one considers the extent of cultural change that pervades works of art that emerged after the modern era, one understands why anything regarded as postmodern is labeled experimental. This is partly because of the fluid boundaries around most postmodern concepts. As Brian McHale argues, nothing about postmodernism is certain, resolved or uncontentious:

> not its provenance, nor its scope, nor what category of 'thing' it is (a period? a style? a movement? a 'condition' of culture?,) nor its relation to modernism, the date of its presumed onset . . . its significance and value, its politics, its degree of complicity with late capitalism, whether or not it has ended yet, whether or not it really happened. (141)

He claims that given the unique qualities of pop art, fiction, architecture, and paintings that emerged in the late 1960s, it becomes crucial to set them apart from previous works, not just by dates and period, but by some other qualitative description such as "experimental." Postmodern artists create works that focus more on the external aesthetics than the internal and psychological focus of the avant-garde. However, there have been debates on whether or not postmodern art is experimental. In *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature*, Brian McHale discusses this controversy in his essay "Postmodernism and Experiment." He recalls the unsettled dispute on this matter between J. F. Lyotard and Charles Jencks. On one hand, Jencks advocates a postmodern eclecticism associated with the popular, suggesting that the core feature of postmodernism itself, which embraces playfulness and manipulation of styles,

encourages the assumption that postmodern works are experimental. On the other, Lyotard proposes a postmodern experimentalism rooted in modernism, claiming that experimentalism is not peculiar to postmodernism, as literature itself has evolved through popular experiments. This second claim raises questions about what the convention is in literature, and what makes such conventions the standard, since it is assumed that every literary shift emerges as a product of experiments. Perhaps the notion of equating postmodernism with experimental literature is not about the theories that govern the evolution of the postmodern art, but more about how the postmodern art is viewed in relation to time. McHale explains that "the person on the street who consumes the products of postmodern culture seems to be of two minds about it. On the one hand, postmodernism is widely reputed to be 'difficult'; on the other hand, nearly everything has been identified at one time or another as 'postmodern'" (141). He refers to Gitlin's sense that to the ordinary man anything new and dynamic is postmodern: "Disneyland, Las Vegas, suburban strips, shopping malls, mirror-glass building facades etc" (141).

Now, the absurd realist writer as a postmodern writer is caught in the web of this debate: is the absurd realist just a postmodern writer or an experimental writer because he writes in the postmodern age? One thing that is evident in most absurd realist works is the creation of a new technique through the combination of features from existing genres. The playful, yet weighty, manner in which the absurd realist presents her themes and represents characters may be regarded as experimental; but above all, the subversion of genres to create a unique mode, and the relative newness of the period in which these works are written, renders the absurd realist a postmodern experimental writer. Such

writers push further the boundaries of literature into new territories, borrowing from others to make-up their own distinctive style.

Authors of absurd realist novels are concept-driven; they adopt an unusual structure of narration that draws attention to itself as having an inherent meaning that is a part of the story. They also write about characters and events in a manner that differs from traditional ideas, thereby drawing attention to the writing mode as an absurd, yet realistic, manner of representation. The main characters in such texts are depicted as perplexed souls seeking answers to the meaning of existence. Rather than deliver a discernible story, the writer rambles on about details that appear irrelevant to the main plot, stacks up irrelevant or distracting sideline plots, and often times interrupts the flow of thought by addressing the reader directly. Also the writer playfully uses language in manners that twist the meaning and syntax of words in unexpected ways; printed pages in such works may be used in dynamic forms to corroborate plot lines or suggest new ideas, and the text may reel with different fonts, spacing, and images. Prominent examples of such texts include Tomasula's *Vas: An Opera in Flatland* (2002), Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000), Chris Ware's *Building Stories* (2012), and Safran Foer's *Tree of Codes* (2010) to mention a few. Apart from the experimental plots and characterizations in these works, their physical appearances are also altered and modified in a way that may suggest alternative plot lines.

Given that absurd realists exhibit existentialist traits in their works, asserting that the absurd realist is an experimental existentialist suggests two distinct ideas: that the absurd realist experiments with existential tenets, and that the absurd realist is an existentialist who experiments with her works. Both ways, she breaks conventions either

through extreme conceptualization or through material design. While a number of contemporary American authors may be recognized as absurd realists who experiment with existential themes, not all of them experiment with the material design of their works. It can be argued that prior to the emergence of the digital age, experimental writers were limited to introducing new concepts in their works without really changing the material design or physical appearance of the text. Texts were mainly distributed in print and whatever manipulation the author introduced was limited by the form of production. However, in the last twenty years, a number of experimental literatures have assumed a different outlook by integrating the emergence of computers and digital technologies. With the existence of multiple channels and platforms now available to writers through which texts can be presented, experimental writers are no longer constrained by form. The last two decades have witnessed an increase in the number of texts presented on digital platforms; some of these include Cuitlin Fisher's *These Wave of Girls* (2001) and Kate Pullinger and Joseph Chris' *Inanimate Alice* (2005). Experimental digital texts are not necessarily absurd realist. While digital texts are experimental in material design, not all digital texts exhibit experimental tendencies in thematic conceptualization.

A recent experimental author who notably exhibits traits of existentialism in his works is Steve Tomasula. Tomasula has come to be well known in recent years for his innovative literary works. With every publication, Tomasula experiments with his material design and style, but his dominant theme remains consistent in his works: in his novels, he explores the relationship between humans and the environment, and his major theme is the evolving relationship between art, science, and human beings. His works

explore ways in which contemporary discourses, science, and technology create new

problems, meanings, and futures for humanity, art, and particularly, the art of fiction.

Tomasula repeatedly challenges what we know or what we think we know about our

world and our existence; his works reflect on how we represent our assumptions and how

these assumptions shape our lives. For instance, in one of his popular novels, *Vas*,

Tomasula creates what Cristina Iuli refers to as a:

> Polysemic narrative in which literature, visual art, design, specialized scientific
> and disciplinary knowledge converge giving rise to questions about the status,
> function, and the genesis of the literary object and the specific form of knowledge
> it generates, its relation with iconicity, the identity and adaptability of the novel as
> a form of art and a cognitive device in the post-biological, media-ubiquitous, and
> multiply coded environment we inhabit. (64)

What Iuli describes above is similar to what Tomasula does in *TOC*—except that while

Vas is a codex print text, *TOC* is a digital text. Tomasula introduces paradoxical notions

about universal concepts in the bid to induce an existential way of viewing these

concepts; the characters and events in his works are grouped in suggestive patterns that

mirror these contradictory concepts. For instance, in *Vas*, the protagonist represents the

digital age man who is subjected to anatomical alterations as a result of social pressure,

while the Australopithecus represents the primitive stage of human beings. Through these

representations, Tomasula showcases the evolution of humans from the nascent stage to

the stage of cyborgism, and this probes the composition of the modern human anatomy.

The main characters' decisions to alter their bodies raises the question of whether the

current human anatomy is as a result of natural evolution or the various possible

alterations were made by humans to their anatomy in past years. Tomasula predicts a

future in which human existence is replaced by technological devices. He achieves this

through the graphic illustrations of squares and circles placed at the inner corners of

pages 348-36; in these illustrations, the square and circle inscriptions disappear leaving just the television and sound systems in their place.

This paradoxical concept is likewise exhibited in *TOC*. Tomasula uses Augustine's quotation on time in the epigraph as a background to the text's critical outlook on the relationship between the concepts of time and language: "What then is time? If no one asks me, I know; if I want to explain it to a questioner, I know not" ("Introduction"). The text projects through the collective examination of multimodal tools that the meaning of time and its relative concepts of "past," "present," and "future" are constructs of the language system that exists within a society. Time and what we think of it, or how we relate to it, emanates from the societal representations. Bearing in mind that the combination of materials via diverse media constitutes the creation of meaning in a multimodal narrative, the reader may analyze the narrative as a work that expresses the effect of time passage on the evolution of humans. This is suggested in the eight short video clips that the reader unlocks by dropping the pebble in the drawer labeled "Logos." The whispering voice laid over the film creates the impression that through interaction with technology, anatomy of human beings has become an extension of technological devices. This interaction, aimed at improving the quality of life and optimizing the use of time, leads to a shift in manner of thinking in people. According to the narrator, the big corporations were the first to notice this new manner of thinking, and, to them, it was an opportunity to maximize their profit. Even though the new "manner of being" reduces the sense of humanity in people, it increases the consumption of goods and services which ultimately increases the profits of the producers. This view resembles Jean Baudrillard's view on the postmodern consumer society. Baudrillard

argues that we exist in a consumer society where the need for products is no longer dictated by the consumers; rather, producers have conditioned the needs of the consumers to what they produce (85-90).

Absurd Realism in *TOC*

The features in *TOC* correspond with the qualities of the absurd realist genre. As an absurd realist text, the novel borrows extensively from genres of other periods, such as the nineteenth-century realism, the twentieth-century magical realism, and absurdism. These genres are fused together into the plot to present a unique material that answers only to its own rules. Aspects of magical realism are exhibited in the story of Queen Ephemera and the child-like stories of the man who digs a hole into the past and the woman who climbs a ladder into the future ("Logos"). These fantastic stories are merged with an otherwise mundane, realistic environment. While the magical exists as an integral part of the novel, elements of realism are also built into the narrative, such as the story of the Vogue model in "Chronos." This story presents an objective reality of the despair embodied in the struggles of postmodern life. Absurdism is likewise reflected in the stories of the mythical tribes living on the Island. By combining specific characteristics of each of these genres in the plot, *TOC* reworks our conventional ideal of the novel. It creates a form of realism that borders on existential notions by revealing a philosophic conundrum of existence that prompts us to query the constructed meaning of time and language: "how is it possible for a day to start at dawn and also at midnight" (Introduction).

TOC presents the existential notion that there is no fixed truth to the concepts of time and language: time changes languages, and language in turn changes how we relate

with time. This view is conveyed not only in the content of the novel, but also in its materiality. As a digital text, *TOC* suggests that our preconceived notions about the materiality of texts have significantly shifted in the past two decades due to the advent of internet technology and consumer computing. Ruth Page and Bronwen Thomas state that "technological innovations from the 1980s onward have been pivotal in providing an alternative to the conventions of print media narrative, allowing those working in narrative theory to scrutinize the nature of narrative production and reception from a fresh perspective" (1). In response to this new wave of change, new words and phrases have been created that best describe and define these innovative works, such as cross media narratives, multimodal literatures, multiplatform texts, enhanced storytelling, and others (Carlos Scolari 586). Writers like Henry Jenkins, Andrew Burn, Gunther Kress, Theo van Leeuwen, Ryan Marie-Laure, and Claire Lauer have also defined the concept of multimodality, categorizing multimodal works into groups, on the basis of how they differ from traditional texts, particularly in terms of the frames within which they can be analyzed.

Going by such classifications, *TOC* is a multimodal digital novel that combines text, graphics, and video in an interactive environment. The story begins with a short video animation showing a galaxy sparkling in deep space and the voice of a narrator who narrates the mythological story about the controversial birth of Chronos and Logos. The narrator then invites the reader to participate in the outcome of the unfolding story by choosing which of the mythological brothers should win a historical battle for power. This invitation, of course, has nothing to do with the tussle for power; rather, it is an invitation to choose the plot sequence. To begin reading or watching the narrative,

depending on the choice the reader makes, the reader deposits a pebble into one of the labelled boxes on the screen and, from this point onwards, the reader largely determines the sequence of the narrative.

Regardless of the narrative sequence the reader maps out, the paradoxical relationship between time and language forms the central theme of the text. Although the novel has three parts—the story of the Vogue model in "Chronos," the stories of The Peoples in "Logos," and the stories of the tribes on the Island—these stories can be regrouped into four distinct categories that effectively portray the inconsistency in the meaning of time and language: the mythological distant past, the stage of awareness, the paradoxical present, and the cyber organic future. These four parts present an account of the hypothetical collapse of time. The parabolic stories in each category reflect the various stages of human evolution in time and space: from the primitive age to the advent of modernization, and from the emergence of technology right to its repercussive effects on the postmodern individual.

The stories in the mythological distant part are similar to folktales about the origin of human life, and these are presented in two sets of stories: the introductory story that describes the tussle for the power between Chronos and Logos, twin sons of Ephemera, and the stories of the time-driven tribes who live on the Island. Like the biblical story in Genesis, where human greed and lust for knowledge cause Adam and Eve to be expelled from the Garden of Eden, these stories are an origin myth of language and time.

The epic narratives of the "people" and "not people"—two tribes who engage in an epic existential battle for prominence—speak of the time when people lived in

accordance with natural cycles and processes. The stories about life on the Island

represent the human nature; they showcase a part of human existence that derives

contentment from living in sync with nature. Although the text, right from the very

beginning, establishes the contentious relationship between time and language, as seen in

the dead-lock battle for the throne by Chronos and Logos which was caused by the

chrono-logic twist in the events surrounding their birth. That "one was born early Friday

morning; an hour later, after crossing into a new time zone, the second son was born on

Thursday night," (Prologue) suggests inconsistency in the value of time; it portrays that

time's effect on human life changes according to the importance attached to it by

language.

Tomasula's view on the inconsistency of time is rooted in the existentialists'

concept of temporality expressed in the works of Martin Heidegger, Immanuel Kant, and

Edmund Husserl. Time, for these philosophers, is the essential mode of human

experience. It is more encompassing than space because, as Hans Meyerhoff puts it, time

"applies to the inner world of impressions, emotions, and ideas for which no spatial order

can be given" (1). According to Heidegger, the meaning of time is relative and subject to

human experience (40). This implies that one's notion of time is dependent on the things

of one's concerns (Paul Ricoeur 172). "Preoccupation," as Heidegger calls the things one

cares about, determines one's sense of time. Like J.L. Austin and other philosophers of

language, Heidegger acknowledges the relationship between language and the state of

"Being." For him, language is pivotal to the understanding and interpretation of

experience and time (41).

This Hedeiggerian view of time is exemplified in the manner of living of The People. Everything works quite well within the notion of temporality the TIC and TOC peoples had conceptualized; they live their life only in the present, believing that if any truth can be found in human existence, it is in the acceptance of "now" as the only relevant state of existence. This state of existence, they realize, can only be achieved by living in the present, because to them, "philosophical concepts such as 'yesterday' and 'last week' or 'tomorrow' and 'next week' are wholly arbitrary in that they all mean 'not now'" ("Newcomers to The People"). Also, since they believe that "the past, future and present are all-together as one," ("The People- TIC"), in their language, "tenses were never born" and they have no "words, grammar or symbols that refer to time or any of its forms" ("Birth of Tenses"). These two tribes relate with time in reference to the state of natural elements such as the movement of sand and water; however, like the opposite spaces they occupy, their views about "the present" are extreme contrasts. While the TIC people who live on the east line of the Island are a future people, because they focus on gradually building their world to the point when the system will collapse, the TOC who occupy the west side of the Island are the past people who believe that the only way to understand the future is by seeing into the past ("Goodbye to the Past"). For the TIC people, "the future is the life-giving force . . . therefore; the present can only be referred to in terms of the future as when they say 'Not Tomorrow.' There are no words in their vocabulary that refer to the past except 'Death,' which they believe to be the body's release of the future" ("The Future's Release"). On the other hand, the present holds a whole different meaning for the TOC people; to them, "the past is the life-giving force . . . [They] believe that the present is most accurately referred to in terms of the past, as

when they call today 'Yesterday's Child.' There are no words in their vocabulary that refer to the future except 'Death,' which they believe to be the end of history ("Good-bye to the TIC and TOC tribes"). These are perceived by each of the other tribes as living in what "will be/ was the Dead Zone" ("Exiles from the TI/OC"). Though rejected by their people for questioning the present notions of time, they remain an integral part of existence on the Island as they represent simultaneously the past and the future of the TIC and TOC people respectively.

While the stories of the inhabitants of the Island corroborate the three-fold partition of time into past, present, and future with each tribe occupying a state of time, the story of Ephemera and her sons implicitly critiques the separate stances of time. Both sets of stories show the intricate link between the temporal and the verbal; they point to the view that our notion of time is inseparable from language. They also portray the innate need in the individual to establish terms by which concepts are defined, and the existential pursuit to give logical explanations for existence.

The characters in the second category, the stage of awareness, show a perception of time and language that differs from that of the characters in the mythical distant past. Their stories, unlike those in the previous group, represent the intrinsic need for relevance in humans, brought to the fore as they strive to innovate a time-stopping machine. Recounting the gradual pile up of parabolic events that lead to the catastrophic future, the twenty four stories in this section, unlocked by dropping the pebble in the Logos box and catching the colorful dots that run across the surface of the box between crosshairs, suggest the emergence of modernization. The creation of the Influencing machine—a form of artificial device that is meant to take over from the natural flow of time—and the

increased search for knowledge and answers that suddenly engulfed the life of The

People mirror the advent of the age of invention. This shift in focus from the natural to

the artificial, as suggested by the text, is founded on the individual's awareness of the

ephemeral structure of natural time; thus, in "Logos," a man who feels himself

"vanishing as morning mist dissipates with the rising sun" ("Escaping the Influence,

2024") is overcome by fear as he realizes the transient nature of beauty as time goes

through its cyclical variations. This fear is so widespread among The People that some of

them make desperate attempts to build devices (like vats of still water) to stop the flow of

time. For instance, a man dug a hole so deep he could visit the past; a woman climbed a

ladder way up to the sky in order to visit the future; another woman invented the

Influencing machine in the hope of controlling beauty and preventing ageing, affluent

men in the society control the chronological sequence of time through the use of the

difference machine. All these events corroborate the existential notion that all the efforts

of humans are futile, as all these characters soon come to one conclusion: life "is to be

understood as a metaphor or myth . . . [and its] true meaning would emerge if [one] could

only puzzle out its contradictions" ("Visiting the Past").

 In the paradoxical present, *TOC* projects some of the contemporary predicaments

of the postmodern individual. The story, like other stories within the text, revolves around

time and its importance to decision-making. It suggests that not just language, but also

the experiences of humans define time. This ideology is demonstrated in the constant

reference to the passage of time by the unnamed protagonist: "every machine is a time

machine," "[time could] regulate all reality, yet could not regulate itself," a pocket watch

is a "cosmos in miniature," and "time is a division, experience degraded into symbol and

measure" ("Chronos"). The only story in this category is accessed by unlocking the Chronos box, and the continuously flowing black and white animation, with narration by a female voice supported by two other voices, focuses on the unnamed vogue model and her dilemma. Impregnated by her twin brother while her husband laid in a coma, she ponders over the decision to either shut off the apparatus that keeps her brain-dead husband's "organic machine" alive, or abort the incestuous fetus. The unstoppable nature of time creates anguish and despair in her, as the night before she is to decide whether to abort the life in her womb or the life of the "organic machine" that used to be her husband, she sets "her clock before going to bed with terror in her heart" ("Chronos"). In her hopeless state, she acknowledges that the manipulation of time by artificial devices had not solved people's problems and "if one had any control whatsoever over what happened in a single moment, then the problem of living will be much like the creation of a narrative . . . one would make up their narrative by living it" ("Chronos"). For her, those sheltered from the agony associated with the flow of time are the ones existing within the realm of the "time of the damned" otherwise known as "God's time"—those lying in a state of unconsciousness, a clockless time, escaping the crushing torment of time. These are protected from "the epidemic called 'time serving'" and the "exhaustion of time" caused by human innovations.

Although the thematic elements that run through *TOC* are built on the inconsistencies in the meaning of time and language, the novel reiterates that what we believe to be true is relative to the passage of time. For instance, the Vogue model thinks about her act of incest within the context of biological explanations provided by scientists. Admittedly, she may have gone against the origin of time by having carnal

knowledge of her own blood like Oedipus, yet, unlike Oedipus, she feels no guilt because, to her, having carnal knowledge of her twin brother is "a form of masturbation." She believes that Oedipus' sense of guilt results from the meaning attached to incest which is a function of societal linguistic structure. Such definitions, according to her, supported "the vision he'd been given of the absurdity of going against time by thrusting himself back towards the source of his origin". Unlike Oedipus, she justifies her actions with the scientific explanations that having the same chromosomes as her twin "makes it possible for a sister to have intercourse with her brother" ("Chronos"). This justification emphasizes the consequentialist notion that there is no fixed opinion about specific situations because "what is being revealed as a true content of time is merely a dimensionless present" ("Chronos"). Perceptions constantly shift over time creating diverse possibilities of reality, and this shift is achieved only through the convenient manipulation of language.

One unique aspect of this story, aside from revisiting the contentious relationship between time and language, is that it establishes that what we think of time is inseparable from the concept of self. As Meyerhoff states: "we are conscious of our own organic and psychological growth in time. What we call self, person, or individual is experienced and known only against the background of the succession of temporal moments and changes constituting his biography" (1). The notion that self is revealed through experiences in time is also the central idea in this section; what creates the absurdity in existence, as the novel projects, is not just in people's efforts to find answers to their state of being, but their unending struggle to guide the events of their lives towards a desired future. The Vogue model's address to her reader clearly expresses this: "the wisdom of mortals

consists, as I think you know, not only in remembering the past and apprehending the present, but in being able, through the knowledge of each, to anticipate the future" ("Chronos"). This idea is approximately similar to what Heidegger refers to as the "preoccupation" of human beings, which is the same as what the vogue model understands to be the struggle to identify and gain control over one's "defining moment." Such apprehension, the novel suggests, throws one into "the hollow between knowing-TIC and living-TOC" ("Chronos").

The last of the categories, the cyber organic future, consists of eight hyperlinks arranged at the top of the screen once all the stories in "Logos" have been unlocked. Each link contains a short video clip that expresses the effect of time passage on the evolution of human beings. Like the characters in *VAS*, the whispering voice laid over the film narrates how the human anatomy has become an extension of technological devices. Also, the voice explains that the invention of mechanical devices such as the "Influencing machine" has led to the creation of other devices proposed to imitate the human eye, which mimics human intelligence ("Further Testing"). "The apparatus" as this device is called "is distinguished, above all, by its human form easily recognized despite many non-human characteristics" ("The Procedure"). The last of the clips, "Dr Fuse's Theory of Historical Progress," suggests that all these scientific creations and experiments are a part of evolution. When reviewed from the same standpoint, these clips represent the development of human beings into a technologically enhanced being whose overdependence on time and mechanical devices detracts from their essence so much that the core of their being fades away like the whispering voice. They portray human beings as gradually progressing into a state of dystopia, where everything about human life

degenerates into a chaotic mess. In the last clip, the ringing phone and the tapping sound of a man's approaching footsteps, which gradually increases as the man breaks into a run and then crashes to the ground while still reaching for the phone, portray the frantic effort of man to catch-up with time even at his own peril. Like all the other sections, the stories in this section reinforce the role of time, and its shifting form in the individual's gradual development into a "manner of being" that resolves around the speed of time (The Mosaic of Time).

Apart from the existential ideas projected in these four sections, the traits of absurd realism are quite conspicuously displayed in other forms, such as the fragmentary plots and characterization. While each section focuses on various aspects of the relationship between time and language, they all contribute to the buildup of the idea that in one's existential pursuit to give meaning to existence, natural processes have been altered and outweighed by mechanical devices. Also, the portrayal of characters in a constant state of despair as evident in absurd realist works is exemplified in the characters of the Vogue model and The Peoples. Despite their attempts to order reality, they come to the realization that "time is always present" and if any truth exists in the existence, it is not in the struggle to alter or order reality, but in the ability to embrace one's state of being, and accept temporality as an essential feature of existence

By touching on absurd realist tendencies, *TOC* creates an experiential connection between the reader and the characters, events, and circumstances. Readers may relate these to personal experiences; they experience a cathartic moment as they see a reflection of themselves unfold in the narrative. Louise Rosenblatt, a reader-response theorist, in

her book *Literature as Exploration*, proposes that the expression of feelings is a response "event":

> The special meanings, and, more particularly, the submerged associations that these words and images have for the individual reader will largely determine what the work communicates to *him.* The reader brings to the work personality traits, memories of past events, present needs and preoccupations, a particular mood of the moment, and a particular physical condition. These and many other elements in a never-to-be-duplicated combination determine his response to the peculiar contribution of the text. (30-31)

TOC touches on a number of issues that are universal to humanity: aspirations and hopes, loss and isolation, rejection and depression, life and death, facts and fables, and the arbitrariness of life and time. All these experiential concepts are embedded in the short stories in the text: the woman "who claimed she could visit the future by building a ladder so tall she could climb into the sky" ("Visiting the Future"); the man who dug a hole so deep he could slide into the past ("Visiting the Past"); the woman who invented a device that could store time ("Origins of the Difference Machine 1"); the mythological story of the two tribes whose philosophers each believed that in order to sustain a sense of belief in the society, they had to invent the existence of the other tribe because there was no proof of their existence ("The People—TIC " and "The People—TOC"); and the woman who recoiled from the community because she could no longer endure being taunted by the people after the unsuccessful invention of a time-controlling device ("Origins of the Difference Machine 1"). All these philosophical stories and their epiphanic resolutions tend to align with the essence of human endeavours, providing an alternative perspective on how to deal with the challenges of life, and encouraging the reader to identify and empathize with these characters.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

In this thesis, I have explored absurd realism as a postmodern hybrid genre. By focusing mainly on stylistic qualities, such as characterization, plot, language, theme, and action, I have examined absurd realism as a portrayal of extreme realities in a broad spectrum of narratives, with emphasis on three novels: *TOC*, *The Pale King*, and *The Crying of Lot 49*. I have also distinguished between the features of absurd realism and other genres such as satire, magical realism, and theatre of the absurd. In addition, I have discussed absurd realism as an experimental genre, the exploration of which provides new insights into the analysis of some innovative postmodern texts. I also presented a philosophical basis for absurd realism by discussing the creation of meaning through the use of language, and demonstrated, through examples, how the structuralist concepts of the signified and the signifier are used to project an image of extreme realities in the postmodern world. Furthermore, I lay emphasis on the presentation of existential tenets in absurd realism, and also show how the two concepts differ in some regards. Essentially, I have explored how the authors discussed in this thesis make efforts to understand and unravel the complexity in society by suggesting through exaggerated confluences of events and characterizations that absurdity is an inherent part of the human nature.

Given the emergence of novels that present absurdities in mundane daily activities of individuals, it has become imperative to have a paradigm that explains current cultural conditions in postmodern works, especially fiction written within the past three decades. As discussed already, such novels project the absurdity in human existence despite setting their plots within realistic domains. Authors of absurd realist works create a seamless blend between a moderate representation of reality (particularly the mundane

aspects inherent to it) and an exaggerated and bizarre depiction of circumstances with which human beings contend.

Robert McLaughlin observes that novels written within the last three decades reflect a paradigm shift that responds to an exhaustion of American postmodernism and the dominance of popular culture. He states that this shift in writing mode marks the transition into a new cultural era which he calls "post-postmodernism." In his essay on "post-postmodernism," McLaughlin explains that this cultural movement is "marked by an increasing political and social conservatism and by the pervasive influence of American television's socially stultifying adoption of postmodern self-referentiality" (222). He suggests that "post-postmodernism" is a unique period that houses the development of multiple styles and its authors— such as David Foster Wallace, Richard Powers, Denis Johnson, and Susan Daitch, among others—work within "a culture and aesthetic constructed by postmodernism from which they seek to breakout" (213).

Contrary to McLaughlin's view, I examine these same authors (although Pynchon belongs to early postmodern era, his works reflect the traits of absurd realism just as much as the works of late postmodern authors) as working within the modalities of postmodernism, because they emphasize the traits associated with postmodernism, even though they seek to break out of that structure by redefining postmodernist paradigms. Their novels do not negate the features of postmodernism, nor do they assume new features that cannot be accounted for under the umbrella of postmodernism. For instance, McLaughlin's principal characteristic of "post-postmodernism" claims that authors like Wallace, Franzen, and Remski attempt a "killing of the postmodern father" in their writings by parodying early postmodern fiction. What McLaughlin ignores is that parody

itself is a core feature of postmodernism. Postmodern works create a simulation of reality that projects what Baudrillard describes as "hyperreality." In absurd realism, hyperreality is used as a means to simulate a referential world within which the extreme is situated. For example, in Pynchons's *The Crying of Lot 49*, elements of mystery, history, pop culture, counterculture, and science are combined to create a parody of the cultural preoccupations of the 1960s. Rather than situate his characters and events within a familiar setting, Pynchon creates a fictional city called San Narciso, by which he alludes to San Francisco, and he imposes on this fictitious city, a chaotic postmodern culture. Also in *TOC*, Tomasula parodies how human beings respond to temporality as a process—graspable through experience and intuition—and temporality as measured or scientific time (Hayles *par* 1). Through the parabolic short stories in the text, Tomasula mocks the inconsistency in the creation of meaning, and also imitates the catastrophe emanating from evolutionary processes caused by the interactions between humans and technological devices.

In discussing other characteristics of "post-postmodernism" such as "escaping discourse" and "living with the limits of knowledge," McLaughlin fails to distinctly differentiate between his proposed new era and postmodernism. He seems to admit that despite the strangeness of their collective style, these "post-postmodern" authors exhibit postmodern characteristics. Perhaps McLaughlin intends to say that works written within the last three decades modify, yet preserve the essence of postmodernism. For instance, authors like Wallace and Pynchon associate the loss of narrative coherence, which is an essential postmodern trait, to the loss of being in their novels: the inconsistency in the plot of *The Pale King* portray the loss of purpose the characters struggle with. Thus, such

novels project an absurd version of reality by modifying or elaborating postmodern features, rather than by abandoning them. This is the rationale that underlies my consideration of absurd realism as a postmodern hybrid genre, rather than a genre that breaks out of the postmodern era.

The authors discussed in this thesis are just a few of those who adopt the absurd realist style in their novels. Writers such as Salinger, Bellow, Updike, Heller, Vonnegut, Barth, Barthelme, and Styron have been considered by Harris and Galloway as contemporary writers of absurdism. In Galloway's *The Absurd Hero in American Fiction*, and Harris' *Contemporary American Novelists of the Absurd*, the focus is more on the portrayal of existentialist concepts like alienation and the absurdity of human existence in the novels of these authors. What Harris and Galloway do not emphasize is the use of realism as a reinforcement strategy by these contemporary authors. Rather, they regard the adoption of new narrative techniques by these authors as a means to ridicule earlier narrative styles such as realism (Harris 25). Contrary to the perspective from which Harris and Galloway examine these contemporary authors, I define the style of these writers from the perspective of the absurd, but I also show that their exhibition of the absurd resides within the framework of realism.

The focus of absurd realist authors, as discussed in this work, explores the idea that the contemporary individual exists in an existential universe, where the meaning and purpose of life seems lost. Thus, human beings are forced into a state of isolation and alienation as they struggle to find a purpose for life. However, the concepts of isolation and alienation, as portrayed by absurd realists, differ from that of existentialists. While existentialists view alienation as an intrinsic, inescapable aspect of human existence,

which hinders the individual from finding meaning in an absurd life, absurd realists see it as the conflict between the individual and the environment. For instance, Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (which is not realist in any sense) supports the existential notion of alienation. In the novel, Gregor's sense of alienation is caused by forces that are beyond his control as he wakes up one morning and realizes that he has become an insect. Thus, his isolation is a result of his bizarre transformation and not because he exists in a chaotic world. In contrast, Wallace's characters in *The Pale King* feel a sense of isolation because they live in a world that drives people to a state of disconnectedness. These characters become alienated, not by natural design, but by the struggle to cope in a world overturn by violence and hostility. For example, Cusk, one of the IRS officials, continuously battles with his stress sweat because he fears ostracization by the society. Toni Ware masters her "dead gaze" to escape from predators, and Dean remains a geek despite the hostility he receives for his acts of kindness.

Tomasula's *Toc* is similar to these works as it also presents alienation as the tension between the individual and the environment. In "Chronos," the Vogue model's dilemma is a response to the fast changing world in which she exists—a world that favours younger people. She feels alienated from the society because she realizes that her decision—either to abort the baby or pull her husband's life support plug— will become her "defining moment, [a] fixed in consciousness," that will give her life a signifying trajectory and meaning ("Chronos"). Unfortunately, she realizes that reality cannot be ordered as one cannot predict the narrative of one's life. She tackles alienation by justifying her actions—incest and adultery—based on the constantly changing society's standard on these practises. In a sense, she struggles, not against her conscience, but

against the society's constantly reconstructed beliefs about time and actions. Likewise, in Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, Oedipa's alienation results from being overwhelmed by a world that is constantly under the influence of drugs, populated by manics, and submerged by illusions and conspiracies. As she tries to resolve the mystery of the Tristero, she becomes lost in a web of clues that continues to build up, but leads to ambiguity and confusion instead of insight. All these characters exist like pawns in a system too vast to be understood, and their continuous attempts to fit into the system further estrange them from it. Eventually, they attain some kind of order and learn to live with the externally induced conflicts.

Absurd realist writers, such as DeLillo, Smith, Rushdie, and Foer suggest that "the extreme" is a part of reality, and it becomes magnified as individuals struggle to exist in a world where conformity with preconceived standards is the acceptable way of life. These authors present the notion that "man moves away from his customary and orderly life, experiences his inner desperation and disorientation and recognizes the mere randomness and pointlessness of his staggering daily existence as well as the problems and unsolvable riddles of the world" (Hoffmann 190). Apart from the multi-layered themes in their works, absurd realist present a world where "suffering, pain, bewilderment, the absence of cause and effect constitute the substantive matter of a reality" (Trachtenberg 36). However, the meaning in absurd realist texts tends to be lost within the exaggerated style of presentation, even though the underlying aim of these authors is to generate meaning by structuring some of their elements to suggest social satire (127). Harris notes that the combination of fantastic events with realistic settings in absurd realist works results in reader disorientation (28). It evokes in the reader, Harris

states, "a response to the absurd," guiding the reader to observe and accept the universe's absurdity, not only in the traditional existential way, but in a way that awakens rather that inures (37).

Regardless of the texts I have chosen in this thesis, an excursion into the universality of absurd realism is likely to be a worthwhile venture, and the next logical step in distilling a reliable definition of its essence, by embracing more stylistic variability. A cross-cultural examination will be an opportunity to observe reactions to what McLaughlin calls the "various worldwide constructions of postmodernism" in reference to the particular social backgrounds from which those constructions emerge. Also, such an examination can further explore ideas developed in this thesis with emphasis on the sociological drivers of literary paradigms. It may also highlight contexts that are exclusive to specific cultural settings and how they shape the representation of extreme realities.

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