

Panel 32
Experimental Narratives

**“Shall I project a world?”: Postmodernist Poetics and the Detective Instinct in
Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49***

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Thomas Pynchon’s 1966 postmodernist novel *The Crying of Lot 49* follows its protagonist Oedipa Maas and her determined yet futile attempts at unraveling various conspiracies related to the estate of multinational business tycoon Pierce Inverarity. Upon initial observation, Pynchon’s novel is largely reminiscent of classic detective fiction and its associated tropes — amongst them are key literary figures such as Sherlock Holmes, C. Auguste Dupin, and Sam Spade — in both form and content. However, this essay proposes an alternative reading of Oedipa Maas as a non-prototypical female detective in mid-1960s America through a sustained analysis of postmodernist poetics (i.e. metafiction, fragmentation, parody) and Pynchon’s engagement with science as metaphor. Concurrently, I challenge the genre of detective fiction as a formulaic product of our literary past and propose the more granular framework of *postmodernist detective fiction* in approaching its narrative construction amidst a world where meaning is rendered unstable and deliberately left open to interpretation. Ultimately, I posit that the existential dread Oedipa experiences indicate a marked move away from the idealized, prototypical detective figure, and towards advocating for a flawed character whose capacity in debunking the Tristero conspiracy is severely compromised. Drawing on a wide range of critical theory from Deleuzian spatialities, in relation to the novel’s schizophrenic form, to extended discussions of “scale dependency” in chaos and system theories, this essay boldly synthesizes three bodies of knowledge — detective fiction as genre, literary postmodernism as aesthetic movement, and science as academic discourse — all by charting the trajectory of one singular character.

Biography

Jaron Lua Jie Long is a recent graduate of the BA (Hons) English Literature Programme at Nanyang Technological University. His research interests span literary and new media criticisms to transmedial approaches and aesthetic innovations in contemporary Southeast Asia. Currently, he is co-authoring a book chapter on audiovisual industries, which will be published by Routledge.