

Paranoiac Users Caught in the Interpretive Drift —
Pattern-Seeking, Attachment, and the Universal Skill of Misinterpretation

I'm sitting at the dentist's office. I didn't have to write my name on the sign-in form because I mistakenly came here yesterday and filled it out then. The receptionist remembers me and hands me the forms she didn't give me yesterday.

As I'm signing my name, my address, checking the box next to "SULFA" under allergy ingredients—a woman and her potentially adult son enter the office. There are not two open seats next to each other, so he sits next to me and she sits farther down the row. He has with him an iPad and a black plastic shopping bag. An attendant emerges from the depths of the dental office, peaking half her body through the liminal doorway. Everyone looks up. She stumbles over a name and the mother who just walked in seems to recognize it. She stands up, gesturing to her son to remain in his seat as he begins to reflexively mimic her, and follows the attendant.

The son sits back down, rocking slightly back and forth in the black aluminum chair. The plush pleather cushion he sits on squeaks in the way cheap foam cushions do. He anxiously curls the hair just behind his ear, repetitively, unceasingly. He hunches over the iPad in his lap, wrapped in a soft royal blue silicone cover—those ultra-squishy, ultra-dense ones used for children's electronics. His nose is inches from the screen, he is folded over it completely. The phrase "iPad Adult" crosses my mind and I check myself, recognizing the instinct to collapse anything unfamiliar into the nearest category.

After a moment he gets up and walks over to the reception desk. He plucks a business card from the array and sits back down, placing it in his plastic bag. He resumes his fetal posture, tapping at a dark screen that I can't interpret. After a moment he gets up and walks over to the reception desk again. He plucks a different business card from the array and sits back down, placing it in his bag. He resumes his fetal posture, rocking back and forth. The dance repeats two or three more times within a short waiting period. When he seems satisfied with his quest, he brings the plastic bag to his lap, retrieving a dense collection of business

cards, info pamphlets, brochures. I can't make out any of the business titles or subjects without appearing overly inquisitive. He thumbs through them carefully and puts them back in the bag. My name is called and my observation ceases.

As I left this man behind me I remembered a moment from a few weeks ago, at the public library where I intern. My branch serves a primarily low-income user base. I got into a squabble with a regular who, like this man, collected small ephemera. We had received a few stacks of Peanuts bookmarks to be given out at the reception desk.

“Can I get the red one?” she said. I handed it to her.

“Can I get the green one, too?” I handed it to her.

“Can I get the blue one, also?” I raised an eyebrow.

“I gave you a red one and a green one!”

“Yeah, but I need one of each.” Her frail hand extended through the small hole in our plexiglass sneeze guard. I could smell her through the plastic. She was one of many unhoused patrons who spent long hours under our roof. She carried with her a wire shopping trolley full of who-knows-what. She was always nice, albeit entitled.

But I held my position. “These are meant for the kids, anyway, so I've already given you more than I'm s'posed to. Why don't you finally get a library card and check out a book and then you'll have somewhere useful to put the bookmark?” She scoffed at me, flapped her hand in my direction and shuffled away, mumbling something about the mail-system safeguarding discontinued postage.

One of my supervisors rolls her eyes and leans toward me, “They'll take everything you have if you don't watch out”. For some reason her comment wounded me, even though I was not its target.

Both scenes reveal the same underlying pattern: when people lack stable context, they attach to fragments with intensity. Across archival practice, users vary—researchers,

collectors, hoarders, academics, the casually unwell—but the interpretive drift is the same. In various communities I see a distinct compulsion to string together garlands of information, assembling coherence from whatever is available. This response is natural—human, even. When we are given partial structures we build systems to fill the gaps.

The internal phenomenal logic driving individual world-building may be irrelevant, confusing or even abrasive to the archivist, but the ritual remains observable. Derrida calls this phenomenal logic the Archive's "fever".¹ Pynchon calls it anonymous, malignant magic.² An archive inevitably creates a rhizome of interpretive instability that society must metabolize. As a result, those left with great dissonance in their daily lives (the paranoiac, an echo of whom I believe exists within all of us) are left to compulsion: weaving on a loom that makes sense to them, in whatever way possible. Like Oedipa Maas, our fragment-based meaning-making aches for a logic it cannot grasp. A Tristero Logic.

A friend recommended I read *The Crying of Lot 49* soon after he finished it. He'd been caught up in a rabbit hole; he'd followed David Foster Wallace down and found Thomas Pynchon as a Cheshire cat awaiting him below.

"You know how you always say that schizophrenia is the holiest of mental illnesses?"

"Do I say that?" I laughed.

"Maybe not directly. But you always say that schizophrenics are tapping into, like, a spiritual undercurrent of reality, right? And their fault isn't that they're wrong, per se, but that they attach themselves so violently, and get lost." And he was right, there. I do believe that.

Oedipa's story of paranoic descent begins with a paratext into her archive, which behaves exactly as Derrida describes an archive must: as a signature that imprints itself on the architecture of meaning that follows. Pierce Inverarity's will is, yes, a neutral legal document, but for Oedipa, who has been appointed executor by her eccentric and deceased ex-lover, it

¹Jacques Derrida, "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression," *Diacritics* 25, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 9–63

² Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2006), 12.

offers the “exergue”, as Derrida calls it, that will frame her world—the interpretive threshold through which every clue, symbol, and hallucinated conspiracy must pass.³

“Hey,” said Oedipa, “can't I get somebody to do it for me?”

“...Some of it, sure. But aren't you even interested?”

“In what?”

“In what you might find out.”

...What did she so desire escape from? Such a captive maiden, having plenty of time to think, soon realizes that her tower, its height and architecture, are like her ego only incidental: that what really keeps her where she is is magic, anonymous and malignant, visited on her from outside and for no reason at all. Having no apparatus except gut fear and female cunning to examine this formless magic, to understand how it works, how to measure its field strength, count its lines of force, she may fall back on superstition, or take up a useful hobby like embroidery, or go mad, or marry a disk jockey. If the tower is everywhere and the knight of deliverance no proof against its magic, what else?⁴

Pierce's will leaves its “impression,” on the very conditions of archivization that structure Oedipa's experience. The will acts as the Freudian signature does in Derrida's *Archive Fever* analysis, inscribing logic onto the archive. (And yes, it is driven by Freudian impulse as well, as it's all Freudian, obviously, but Derrida has thankfully saved me from the digression.) This logic simultaneously serves as the foundation for and distortion of the archive, generating the interpretive fever that drives the narrative⁵. What Oedipa investigates is never plainly Pierce's estate; she investigates the consequences of entering a world already shaped by a prior inscription, enraptured due to the coincidental jejune lack of coherence in her own daily life and the psychological attachment via her ex lover. Her hermeneutic ordeal is the history of a concept being formed under the pressure of its exergue. As she discovers

³ Derrida, “Archive Fever,” 12.

⁴ Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*, 12.

⁵ Derrida, “Archive Fever,” 15.

Tristero and WASTE—the conspiratorial network and ancient post system—so she drifts into the fever.

But the point of this tangent (and the others that will follow) into literary analysis is not just for critique. Oedipa’s dramatized example of the exergual distortion of meaning conveniently mirrors the behavior of real-life users who encounter systems of information that are already charged, partial, or inscrutable.

Another example from my public library internship comes to mind—and I can assure you, the examples are abundant.

An elderly woman asks for my help with the computer where she’s stationed. Her English is rough and my Thai is nonexistent, but we seem to make it work with eager attitudes and elementary phrasing. She has two thumb drives—one holds an archive of documents she’d like to transfer to the second thumb drive. “Backup,” she explains, “Because they never trust us, and they lie.” She shakes her forefinger in the air and taps it to her temple. Of course, I say. I can help her with that.

The content of the documents are clearly legal. She tries her best to explain which files are important and which aren’t. One, in particular, she says, is incomplete and should not be transferred to the new drive until it is. “My story,” she says, “They can’t see. Not ready.”

After we transfer some necessary documents, the woman seeks my assistance in printing several others so she can take physical notes then scan and reinsert them into the thumb-drive, for evidence. What kind of evidence, I couldn’t say, but from what I gather it seems there is a payout she is legally entitled. Her attempts at retrieval have been dodged or denied or suppressed by whatever law firm she chose as representation. The firm now gaslights her into believing she’s received \$500,000 that she has not received. She does, however, pull up an image from the camera roll on her phone and hand it to me, gesturing for me to zoom in. It’s an image of a \$500,000 check, addressed to her, with some sort of

legal-sounding institution as the payor. She taps her forefinger against the phone in my hand, shakes it in the air and taps it again against her temple, “They lie.”

After printing, scanning, leaving, returning when she needs assistance and nodding in an awkward bow every time she thanks me, the woman at the library has finished her task, for present. She comes to the reference desk and hands me a piece of candy: a brown plastic wrapper with a Thai word on it. I’m apprehensive at first but I eat it, and it’s delicious.

“Tamarind,” she says and hands me two more. She thanks me again and I say, of course, it’s my job. “Yes, but they don’t help,” she says, and this time I think she means the library itself.

“Everyone is so busy,” I say, reflexively.

“They lie,” she says, handing me another tamarind candy and leaving for the day.

In a quick reprise I’d like to insert another excerpt from Pynchon, and then return to my analysis. In it, the character Mike Fallopian is shilling an organization he belongs to.

“You one of these right-wing nut outfits?” inquired the diplomatic Metzger.

Fallopian twinkled. “They accuse *us* of being paranoids.”

“They?” Inquired Mezger, twinkling also.

“Us?” asked Oedipa.⁶

Derrida says that the genesis of an archive, “takes place at the place of originary and structural breakdown of [a] memory.” For each example of archival users I’ve outlined, there exists evidence for this theory. The context of the memory might be concealed for the observer, but it is clearly existent in the user’s headcanon as their daily life is structured and operated according to its motor. The archival impulse exists as a response to loss metabolized through preservation. In each of the real-life user encounters described above, the act of collecting—business cards, bookmarks, thumb drives, scanned documents—within the

⁶ Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*, 35.

context of a lack of abundance or clarity, arises from an experienced rupture in narrative continuity. What appears incoherent or excessive to the external observer is, for the user, an attempt to stabilize. He explains, “there is no archive without a place of consignment, without a technique of repetition, and without a certain exteriority. No archive without outside.” Memory must be displaced outside the self in order to function at all.⁷

The archive in our context produces coherence through repetition, accumulation, and material fixation. These users, through a “logical” misuse of the archive, are in practice enacting its most basic logic. They exemplify Derrida’s assertion that the archive depends on an “outside,” revealing how interpretive systems form precisely where memory can no longer be internally sustained.

Hal Foster’s description of the archival impulse as “a will to connect what cannot be connected” clarifies why fragmentary materials exert such gravitational pull on certain users.⁸ Crucially, Foster frames this impulse as a relational act—“to probe,” “to collate,” “to ascertain.” In this sense, archival engagement becomes less about establishing truth than about negotiating absence. Users drawn to incomplete records are not necessarily attempting to reconstruct a coherent past; rather, they are responding to the affective pressure created by gaps, silences, and misalignments within the archive. The act of bringing disparate signs into proximity—whether legally, spiritually, or conspiratorially—functions as a compensatory mechanism for what Foster calls a “misplaced past.” What remains “for the present” is a provisional structure of meaning assembled from fragments. This framework helps explain why certain archival users persist in repetitive, compulsive acts of collection: the impulse exists to avoid the conclusion of inquiry and consequently sustain relations. Read alongside Derrida’s concept of archive fever, Foster’s account elucidates how the archive actively

⁷ Derrida, “Archive Fever,” 14.

⁸ Hal Foster, “An Archival Impulse,” *October* 110 (Autumn 2004): 3–22, published by The MIT Press.

generates instability, inviting users to participate in ongoing acts of speculative connection rather than closure.⁹

Foster's framing of the archival impulse sharpens the stakes of paranoid interpretation by framing misuse as method. When he writes that the "will to connect can betray a hint of paranoia," he again names the mode of archival engagement driven by compulsion— asking "what is paranoia if not a practice of forced connections and bad combinations" assembled into "my own private archive... put on display?"¹⁰ This formulation clarifies why such users do not experience their practices as irrational. The private archive is not constructed to persuade an external authority. Rather, it stabilizes an internal symbolic order. Foster's claim that these archives "question public ones" extends this logic outward, just like Derrida: paranoid or idiosyncratic archives misread institutional records therefore actively challenging the legitimacy of public archival coherence. By operating as "perverse orders," they expose a weakening in shared interpretive frameworks, where official systems no longer command trust or provide totalizing meaning. In this sense, paranoid archives are symptomatic responses to inherent fragmentation—attempts to reconstruct symbolic authority when public archives fail to metabolize uncertainty.¹¹

Another useful plumb line exists through the literature I've referenced thus far: weighted by Freud. (Again, if you'd like a deeper analysis, feel free to read Derrida's *Archival Fever*.) This weight conveniently and simultaneously acts as the unifier and prism through which Oedipa's drift is once again fractured. In one excerpt from *The Crying*, Oedipa, after exhausting herself in a search for Tristero and finding schizophrenic albeit undeniable evidence, decides to flee from the interpretive drift in search of her old psychiatrist, a man named Dr. Hilarius. Hoping that through his rational and professional advice, she might be able to accept her conspiratorial obsessions as symptoms of an

⁹ Foster, "An Archival Impulse," 15.

¹⁰ Foster, "An Archival Impulse," 21.

¹¹ Foster, "An Archival Impulse," 21.

illness—“some clear result of her several wounds, needs, dark doubles”¹² rather than evidence of a tragic reality. Upon her arrival to Dr. Hilarius’ office, she finds him barricaded behind his desk with a Gewehr 43 rifle, his secretary in hysterics. He lectures them from behind the barricade as police sirens approach in the background.

“Listen,” Hilarius said after awhile, “have I seemed to you a good enough Freudian? Have I ever deviated seriously?”

“You made faces now and then,” said Oedipa, “but that's minor.”

His response was a long, bitter laugh. Oedipa waited. “I tried,” the shrink behind the door said, “to submit myself to that man... tried to cultivate a faith in the literal truth of everything he wrote, even the idiocies and contradictions. It was the least I could have done, nicht wahr? A kind of penance...”¹³

Oedipa eventually ends up in possession of the rifle and turns it on Hilarius, begging him for an explanation for her madness.

“I came,” she said, “Hoping you could talk me out of a fantasy.”

“Cherish it!” cried Hilarius, fiercely. “What else do any of you have? Hold it tightly by its little tentacle, don't let the Freudians coax it away or the pharmacists poison it out of you. Whatever it is, hold it dear, for when you lose it you go over by that much to the others. You begin to cease to be.”¹⁴

Oedipa’s institutional stability is, quite literally, ruptured in this scene, just as our real life users’ stability thus far has similarly been ruptured. She has no other choice than to cling to Tristero, follow down its path and hope that meaning might be revealed to her along the way.

¹² Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*, 107.

¹³ Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*, 109.

¹⁴ Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*, 113.

Many years ago, before I formally (meaning academically and vocationally) began my own descent into interpretive drift, I came across a man at a post office (how...cooidental?). I was in line to drop off a package—some reselling archival fashion escapade I'd recently decided to adopt as a side-hustle. He approached me and complimented my outfit. I said thank you. His own outfit was impossible to ignore. He was small, hunched and disheveled but not dirty. I couldn't have guessed his age if you paid me. Somewhere between seventeen and fifty. He was wrapped in a long military surplus trenchcoat with a plethora of pockets. He was decorated abundantly in tattoos—recalling his image now brings to mind the sailor from *The Crying*, but let's not drift too far into my own conspiracies.

He told me I looked like the type of person who might be interested in escape—he wondered if I often felt lost. At the time, I did, so I told him that.

“But you couldn't just run away, could you? You're responsible for too much, eh?” he said. I agreed. “But you know you're meant to be elsewhere, somewhere a little different,” he prodded, and I shrugged.

He reached his hand into one of the many pockets in his coat and pulled out what, at first, seemed like a rock—those shimmery fool's gold chunks you buy at a gift store nestled into the base of a canyon. But when I took it from him the shape was wrong. It was a smooth conical frustum—like a cone, with its tip cut off, and its primary material was a clear resin. Cast in the substance were...yes, stones, but also gold leaf and a spiral of copper wire. Perhaps chunks of quartz, mahogany obsidian? Layers of small shavings from different metals? I looked at him blankly.

“Use this,” he said, eyes wide. I was clearly confused. “You can transmute your energy—you can get where you're meant to go without even leaving where you're at.” This didn't help my confusion.

“You’re in the wrong timeline,” he explained. I nodded, humoring him. “Here, here...” he trailed off and began searching again in his pockets. He produced an index card filled with writing on both sides. “This explains everything. And my email’s on there, too.” He tapped an illegible area on the index card.

“I can’t just take this, though,” I said, offering the resin object back to him.

“Sure you can,” he encouraged. “I made it, so it’s *just right*. I’ve got hundreds—thousands!” He threw both his hands up in the air. I smiled, amused but apprehensive, thanked him, and watched as he energetically scurried away.

I carried the object home with me. I didn’t fully believe in its power, but I felt like if I refused, I would also refuse the logic that produced it, and that felt like blasphemy. To this day I keep it on a small shelf near other sentimental trinkets and whenever I hear a strange siren echoing from the street below my apartment or a deep, mysterious hum emitting from the walls in my building I feel my consciousness dart to the shelf, remembering its provenance. The instructional card has sadly been lost, but its affect is preserved in the organite. This eccentric artifact represents a private archive condensed into resin: materialized belief, repetition, preservation, and exteriorization. Like the business cards in the dental office, the bookmarks at the library desk, the thumb drives, the scanned documents and Tristero itself, the object functions as a stabilizer. It does not need to be true, necessarily. It just needs to exist.

This, ultimately, is the ethical problem—and the ethical demand—posed by paranoid users. The archivist is trained to distinguish signal from noise, legitimate inquiry from misuse, coherence from excess. But the scenes traced throughout this essay demonstrate that what appears as misuse often adheres more faithfully to the archive’s internal logic than institutional practice itself. Derrida’s “archive fever” is an aberrated amplification: a visible symptom of the archive’s dependence on loss, exteriority, and recursion. Foster’s paranoid

collector, Pynchon's Oedipa, and the users encountered in public institutions all respond to the same structural condition: an archive that promises meaning while withholding closure.

To dismiss these users as irrational is to misunderstand them, the archive, and as a result, the self. Their collections do not aim at consensus or verification; they do not rely on ethics or provenance or a navigable finding aid; they aim at continuity. Public symbolic orders fracture, private archives proliferate. They don't challenge reality so much as they reframe its definition in the dialogue of a more intimate framework. What they reveal is paranoia as the envelope swaddling human vulnerability: the need to assemble fragments into a livable framework.

If there is a lesson here for those within the sphere of archival practice, it is not one of accommodation or indulgence. The lesson is one of observation and recognition. The paranoid user is not outside the archive's logic. They are its most sincere apostle.

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