PLOTTING THE SIXTIES:
THE CULTURE OF CONSPIRACY IN THE USA

PETER KNIGHT

D.PHIL.

UNIVERSITY OF YORK

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND RELATED LITERATURE

SEPTEMBER 1995

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my supervisors, Hugh Haughton and Joseph Bristow, for their generous support during my doctoral studies.

This project was completed with the kind financial assistance of my parents, and of the British Academy. I would also like to acknowledge my gratitude to the British Association of American Studies, and the F.R. Leavis Fund at the University of York, for travel grants which enabled me to conduct research for Chapter 1.

Thanks to co-conspirators Kate Davies, Eduardo Limbert, Paul Whitty, and Heather Middleton; I'm grateful also to John Arnold, Lara Perry, and the Work in Progress seminar.

A slightly shorter version of Chapter 2 is forthcoming in *Cultural Studies*.

ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores how the discourse of conspiracy shaped and was itself shaped by the cultural and political landscape of the USA during the 1960s. It focuses on the popular engagement with notions of conspiracy in four key areas, namely postmodernism, feminism, the counterculture, and gay rights. Broadly speaking, it traces the way those groups who had previously been the object of demonological scrutiny began in the sixties to tell conspiracy theories about those in power—and about each other. It is concerned with "plotting" both as a form of conspiratorial organisation, and as a narrative device. Through close readings of the poetics of conspiracy in both factual and fictional texts, this thesis aims to bring together "realist" and "symbolist" approaches to the "paranoid style" in American culture.

It consists of four interrelated case studies, each of which examines key texts from around 1963, in conjunction with works from the 1990s which rethink the earlier representations. The first chapter explores how conspiracy theories have mounted a challenge not just to the official "lone gunman" version of the assassination of President Kennedy, but to the "authorised version" of the 1960s themselves. Through a reading of Don DeLillo's *Libra* (1988) and Oliver Stone's *JFK* (1992), I argue that narratives about the conspiratorial activities of the authorities have contributed to a crisis in the authority of narrative, making the Kennedy assassination both a symptom and a cause of a postmodern culture of paranoia. The second chapter considers the figuration of conspiracy in popular American feminist writing, from Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) to Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth* (1990). I argue that conspiracy tropes have functioned not only to link the personal and the political, but also to establish a series of implicit divisions within American feminism. The next chapter traces the emergence of a self-conscious engagement with the culture of conspiracy in the sixties through the career of Thomas Pynchon. I then examine what has happened to the conspiracy culture of the sixties, through an analysis of *Vineland* (1990). I argue that the earlier paranoid "depth" of secrecy has been flattened out by the proliferation of the signs of mass culture. The final chapter concentrates on the highly idiosyncratic paranoid fictions of William S. Burroughs. My aim is not so much to diagnose him as to locate his writings within postwar discourses of homosexuality, drug addiction and disease. I examine how his novels of the sixties rework the notion of paranoia as an externalisation of private fears by highlighting the internalisation—and even the literal incorporation—of public surveillance. I then consider the possibilities and pitfalls of reading Burroughs in the light of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and conversely, of reading his novels as a map of the contemporary culture of body panic.

INTRODUCTION

This dissertation explores the ways in which the discourse of conspiracy shaped and was itself shaped by the cultural and political landscape of the USA during the 1960s. It focuses on the popular engagement with notions of conspiracy on many fronts but in particular in four key areas, namely postmodernism, feminism, the counterculture, and gay rights. Broadly speaking, it traces the way those groups who had previously been the object of demonological scrutiny began in the sixties to tell conspiracy theories about those in power—and about each other. As the linguistic equivocation in my title suggests, this thesis is concerned with "plotting" both as a form of conspiratorial organisation, and as a narrative strategy for organising and shaping a reader's trajectory through a text. In short, it deals with the interplay between historical and rhetorical structures, culture and narrative.

In addition to examining how various intellectual, cultural and social developments were informed by, and transformed, the language of conspiracy during the sixties, I also examine the replotting of that decade in the 1990s. The meaning of the sixties has become fiercely contested in many contemporary debates—frequently in conspiratorial terms. In the disputes about political correctness, for example, commentators from the right have argued that the academy was infiltrated by left-wing radicals in the sixties; some left-wing writers have countered this suggestion with the charge that the PC campaign has been deliberately orchestrated in order to dismantle the social gains (primarily in the areas of racial and sexual equality) made during the sixties.[1] In a similar fashion, some commentators from the Moral Right have characterised the HIV/AIDS epidemic as the consequence of—and even a punishment for—the "permissiveness" of the sixties. Margaret Thatcher, on the other side of the Atlantic but very much in tune with Reaganite America, gave open voice to what many privately believed:

> We are reaping what was sown in the sixties. The fashionable theories and permissive claptrap set the scene for a society in which the old virtues of discipline and self-restraint were denigrated.[2]

In short, the legacy of the sixties has become a key issue in recent political and cultural struggles. By studying the discourse of conspiracy during the sixties in conjunction with recent reconfigurations of that period, this dissertation aims not only to reassess some of the decade's emerging social movements and key texts, but also to cast light on the rhetorical manœuvres and assumptions which structure current thinking about the

---

[1] The key texts of the anti-PC campaign I have in mind are Allen Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987); Roger Kimball, *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990); and Charles Sykes, *Profscam: Professors and the Demise of Higher Education* (New York: St. Martin's, 1988). A representative selection of pieces anatomising the logic of the debates is included in Jeffrey Williams, ed., *PC Wars: Politics and Theory in the Academy* (London: Routledge, 1995).

[2] Quoted in Jeffrey Weeks, *Sexuality and its Discontents: Meanings, Myths, and Modern Sexualities* (1985; London: Routledge, 1993), p.18.

sixties.

All four chapters therefore have a dual temporal focus. The discussion in each case begins with a cultural artefact from around 1963, a year which, for many commentators, marks the beginning of "the sixties," and a new phase in the history of conspiracy theory in America. For instance, a photo-essay entitled, *The Way We Were: 1963, The Year Kennedy Was Shot*, outlines how "the shock of hearing that news made a permanent psychological marker in time, emotionally separating the time before the assassination and the time after," such that "irresistibly to some it is a turning point: the moment the first ominous minor chord darkened the music of American life for our generation."[3] Or, for example, in an article on postwar American conspiracy film, James Palmer and Michael Riley claim that:

> Conspiracy theories have often found a place in the American consciousness, but it is hard to think of a time when they have been more virulent or pervasive than in the period since the wave of political assassinations that began with that of President Kennedy in 1963. In recent years, . . . something like political and social paranoia has invaded our national life, becoming a perversely familiar presence.[4]

Having begun by discussing four very different examples of conspiracy culture from around 1963, each chapter then considers items from the late eighties and early nineties which replay or rethink the earlier representations. The first chapter looks at the postmodern crisis of political and narrative representation in accounts of the assassination of President Kennedy from the time it occurred, before going on to explore the replotting and reshooting of the event in two recent fictional versions, namely Don DeLillo's *Libra* (1988), and Oliver Stone's *JFK* (1992). The next chapter investigates the by turns avowed and disavowed engagement with conspiracy theory in popular American feminist writings, focusing the argument around readings of Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* (1963), and Naomi Wolf's updating of that ground-breaking work in *The Beauty Myth* (1990). In the third chapter the discussion of the emerging (counter)culture of conspiracy is framed by Thomas Pynchon's first novel, *V.* (1963), and his latest work, *Vineland* (1990). The final chapter examines William S. Burroughs' fictions of body panic, and involves a reading of his work from the early sixties—in particular the four novels samples of which were made available in the collection *Dead Fingers Talk* (1963)—through the lens of the HIV/AIDS crisis of the eighties and nineties, and David Cronenberg's film adaptation of Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* (1992).

The present inquiry into the language of conspiracy in and of the 1960s participates in a history of debate about the paranoid style of American culture. There

---

[3] Robert MacNeil, ed., *The Way We Were: 1963, The Year Kennedy Was Shot* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1988), p.8.

[4] James W. Palmer and Michael M. Riley, "America's Conspiracy Syndrome: From Capra to Pakula," *Studies in the Humanities*, 8 (1981), p.21.

have been two major approaches to the discourse of paranoia, namely (in Michael Rogin's terminology) realist and symbolist studies.[5] Realist investigations of political demonology were pioneered by the Progressive historians, and date back to the period between the two World Wars.[6] They are concerned to show how the language of countersubversion is used by those in power (in collusion with the media) to further their own ends through the suppression of dissent. Conspiracy theories, on this model, serve to mark out as undesirable and "alien" all those who would pose a threat to the interests of the élite, in order to legitimate and facilitate the suppression of the latter, with, for example, the use of "red scares" to justify anti-labour legislation. Whereas the realist analysis emphasises material economic structures and rational political objectives, the symbolist approach concentrates on how that reality is perceived and distorted. This model was developed by the so-called pluralist or consensus historians from the late 1950s onwards. Works such as Richard Hofstadter's seminal *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (1963/1965) and David Brion Davis's *The Fear of Conspiracy* (1971) develop accounts of the repeated outbreaks in American history of demonological rhetoric in provincial or marginal groups, whose paranoid fears and desires are seen as a threat not to those deemed alien to the American political consensus (as the realists argue), but to the maintenance of a stable society. Whereas Hofstadter, for example, viewed the rise of McCarthyism as a product of small-minded, back-water populist prejudice run riot, Rogin, in an early work on *The Intellectuals and McCarthy* (1955), argues that Hofstadter et al. failed to take into account how élitist factions of the Republican Party latched onto McCarthyism to further their own political ends.

It is therefore apparent that the mode of analysis will influence to a large degree the choice of research materials. On the realist model, priority is given to sources which document the visible and conscious aims of those mobilising the language of conspiracy. This approach is usually concerned with the territory of the political mainstream, and the key issues of class, race and sex/gender. The symbolist model, on the other hand, focuses on a symptomatic reading of the psyche of the proponents of a conspiracy theory; its analysis privileges the imagery, narrative structures and unconscious implications of paranoid writings. It tends to take its examples from the more extreme fringes of American political life.

---

[5] Michael Rogin, "American Political Demonology: A Retrospective," in *Ronald Reagan, The Movie; and Other Episodes in Political Demonology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp.272-300. In formulating these issues, I have also found useful Russell Reising, *The Unusable Past: Theory and the Study of American Literature* (London: Methuen, 1986), Geoffrey Cubitt, *The Jesuit Myth: Conspiracy Theory and Politics in Nineteenth-Century France* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), and Eric Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda, *Moral Panics: The Social Construction of Deviance* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).

[6] Examples of realist studies would include Charles Beard, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* (1913), Leo Huberman, *The Labor Spy Racket* (1937), and the literary criticism of V.L. Parrington.

The symbolist paradigm has itself been developed in two distinct ways. The first variation is produced in the work of historians like Hofstadter, who draw their objects of study from political pamphlets, inflammatory tracts, speeches in Congress, and so on (the work of Hofstadter is discussed in more detail in Chapter 3 below). The other possibility is represented by studies of American *literature*, such as Tony Tanner's influential *City of Words*. In the Introduction to that remarkable survey of American fiction from 1950 to 1970, Tanner argues that:

> there is an abiding dream in American literature that an unpatterned, unconditioned life is possible, in which your movements and your stillnesses, choices and repudiations are all your own; and that there is also an abiding American dread that someone else is patterning your life, that there are all sorts of invisible plots afoot to rob you of your autonomy of thought and action, that conditioning is ubiquitous.[7]

Much of Tanner's book is taken up with a discussion of the attempt by American heroes—and behind them, the novelists—to free themselves from dependence on the controlling patterns of others. Tanner's analysis of "this quite fundamental and inescapable paradox" places him in the tradition of literary scholarship which reads American literature as a sequence of attempts by the rugged individualist hero to escape out of social constraint out into the adamic wild. Works such as Richard Chase's *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (1957) and Leslie Fiedler's *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960) give priority to the romance tradition in American literature, of the self in isolation from the threatening forces of society and history.[8]

My choice of materials for this study has been influenced by both the realist and the symbolist approaches, and, within the latter camp, by both the historical and the literary versions. In Chapter 1, for example, in addition to novels and films I have looked at works of history, government enquiries, and magazine articles concerning the Kennedy assassination. Furthermore, the materials are taken from both the mainstream and from the "fringe" of American culture. The chapter follows the realist paradigm in that it discusses the social effects of conspiracy theories of the assassination, how they participate in larger debates about political and historical representation, and the uses to which they have been put in mobilising political interests. But it is also concerned to discuss the rhetorical manœuvres and unconscious narrative mechanisms of both the fictional and the historical accounts.

My aim, however, is not merely to take the best of both options, but to rethink the logic by which they are constituted as two distinct positions. I take issue with each approach in several ways. The problem with the realist method, I would argue, is that it cannot account for why some élitist proponents actually seem to believe in the content of their conspiracy theories—over and above the instrumental purpose they may serve.

---

[7] Tony Tanner, *City of Words: American Fiction 1950-1970* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1971), p.15.

[8] In *The Unusable Past* Reising maps out the connections between the Counter-progressive historians and the New Critics of the middle years of the century.

President Reagan's War on Drugs, for example, in many ways served to legitimate heavy-handed military interference in both Latin American countries and black inner-city ghettos in the States during the 1980s; despite the campaign's utility in furthering long-standing American objectives, the fervour of the moral panic seems inexplicable without reference to the deep-rooted racial fantasies and tensions which it exploited. Although it is extremely important to draw attention to the insidious political uses to which the language of conspiracy is put, it is also vital to understand how certain conspiracy theories speak to existing concerns and fears which cannot be explained purely in terms of rational, conscious interest. In the case of HIV/AIDS, for example, unless we have an account of the ongoing logic of homophobia and anti-drug hysteria in American society, the moral panic surrounding the epidemic will appear as an inexplicable outbreak, much like a disease itself. This is not to deny that the Moral Right (in cahoots with the media) has used the epidemic to further its own aims; in order to comprehend the popularity and power of its demonising of gay men and drug users, however, it is necessary to understand the campaign in terms of a longer history of discourses about the body, the family, and the nation. My purpose in focusing on the unconscious and symbolic aspects of some conspiracy theories is therefore to make them more, not less, cogent. To make a position explicable is not necessarily to make it justifiable, but to refuse to investigate the deep structures of such arguments only serves to foreclose on the possibility of engaging with and resisting their immense popular attraction as sense-making structures. Furthermore, realist studies have traditionally concentrated on the nefarious use of conspiracy theories by those in power. By contrast, in the present study we will also come across populist strategic appropriations and adaptations of conspiratorial discourse which aim to undermine the manipulations of the powerful. At the same time as unveiling the rational objectives of those who stand to gain from moral panics, it is therefore also crucial to keep alive the possibility that conspiracy theories might be used rationally and intentionally against those very groups.

By analysing how certain images and rhetorical structures in "factual" historical materials cohere with, modify and exacerbate wider concerns, I am in effect bringing the realist position much closer to the symbolic approach. In an analogous fashion, but from the opposite direction, my readings of fictional texts are intended to make the psychic and the symbolic less idiosyncratic, by connecting them up to larger and more central issues of American cultural history. Whereas Tanner, for example, is interested in writers like Pynchon and Burroughs for their individual style and unique vision, I strategically endeavour to minimise the abnormality and extremism of their paranoid fantasies, in order to reconnect their private imagery and narrative technologies with the broader picture of public life. Similarly, if the romance tradition of American literary history conceives of the hero as a "lone gunman" (to borrow a famous term from the Kennedy case), then my readings of postwar writings emphasise the ways in which the

individual psyche is implicated in the larger plot of society and history, even if those terms do not fully cohere into a full-blown conspiracy theory. In short, conspiracy theories can serve as transcoding metaphors which draw together the political dimension of personal experience, and, conversely, the personal motivations of political engagement (this argument is developed more fully in Chapter 2 in connection with the figuration of feminist imagery in feminist writings).

A major methodological dilemma for studies of the politics and poetics of paranoia involves the relationship between the factual basis of a conspiracy theory and its mythical dimensions. Both the realist and the symbolist approaches to the paranoid style in American politics and literature tend to bracket off the content of particular conspiracy theories. Neither interpretive strategy is especially concerned to discuss the "facts" of the case. For example, in an essay on fears of invasion in American culture, Eric Mottram begins by pointing out that since the British left in 1814, the national boundaries of the continental USA have only been invaded once, namely by Pancho Villa. Mottram argues that "the case is therefore neurotic, shifting into the pathological, and therefore dangerous, and increasingly so."[9] It is true that some progressive historians begin by refuting the allegations of a certain demonological scare (such as the "Atom-spy" accusations centred on the Rosenbergs in the 1950s), but their main emphasis is on the interests which the language of conspiracy serves, whether the conspiracy theories are true or false. Symbolist historians usually have even less to do with the "truth" of the matter, since their principal purpose is to investigate the psychological mechanisms which animate the process of scapegoating. In both cases it is assumed that conspiracy theories are exaggerated, distorted—if not entirely false—representations of history. In previous eras, in effect, it has been a reasonable working assumption that demonological upsurges such as anti-Semitism and anti-Catholicism are in need of explanation rather than corroboration, since they are ideological constructs, in the sense of imaginary and even fantastical representations of the real conditions of society.

But in the USA from the 1960s onward, I would argue, it is far less plausible to ignore the factual claims made by certain conspiracy theories. I must acknowledge that I find, for example, some conspiratorial versions of the Kennedy assassination distinctly plausible. The post-Watergate climate of revelation and confirmation thus presents a particular challenge for an analysis of the discourse of conspiracy, since it is no longer so easy to discuss the psychological mechanisms or political consequences of a position to which one is simultaneously attracted. Recently the project of cultural studies has in fact turned its attention to the question of the status of the intellectual in relation to the object of investigation. In her article on *Star Trek* fanzines, for example, Constance Penley discusses the difficulties she encountered in attending Trekkie

---

[9] Eric Mottram, "Out of Sight But Never Out of Mind: Fears of Invasion in American Culture," *Blood on the Nash Ambassador: Investigations in American Culture* (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1989), p.138.

conventions as both scholar and fan, critic and participant. The *Cultural Studies* collection in which Penley's article appears contains several heated exchanges on the issue of the intellectual-as-fan which the latter's contribution raised. For instance, in response to John Fiske's suggestion that David Glover and Cora Kaplan's paper occupies the traditional intellectual role of "privileged readers" of a popular genre, Kaplan accuses Fiske of creating a "Manichean division between sympathetic populist fan-niks, and sinister, snooty Privileged Readers."[10] I would agree with Kaplan that this is an unhelpful and misleading distinction. It is surely possible to be both sympathetic *and* critical; indeed, a sympathetic allegiance can be a consequence of a critical engagement with a subculture. Giving credence to the content of a conspiracy theory does not therefore prevent a study being made of its historical origins, rhetorical resonances, psychological mechanisms, social significances, and ideological consequences.

In this way it becomes necessary to read the language of conspiracy in post-sixties America in both a literal and a metaphorical fashion, or, in other words, to take seriously the content of a particular conspiracy theory, at the same time as instituting a serious analysis of its formal inflections and narrative pleasures. Each of the chapters of this study, however, finds evidence that the categories of the factual and the fictional become unstable at crucial points. My intention is therefore not so much to give equal weight to the material and the rhetorical, but to investigate, on the one hand, how the rhetorical produces material effects, and on the other, how the very category of the material is itself rhetorically constructed.[11] What is to count as a piece of factual evidence or fictive embellishment cannot be decided in advance, but results from the negotiations between plausibility and possibility which conspiracy theories carry out. Furthermore, in each of the case studies there are examples of the literalisation of what had previously been understood in a metaphorical way. Sometimes this takes the form of a deliberate and parodic materialisation of paranoid fears. In Chapter 2, for instance, I discuss Lavender Menace, a lesbian feminist group of the early seventies formed and named as a mocking confirmation of widespread fears at the time that lesbianism constituted what Betty Friedan called a "lavender menace" to the women's movement. In other cases, however, history produces a disturbing literalisation of fictional conspiracy theories. Chapter 4, for example, describes how some of Burroughs' fantastic scenarios of viral invasion became instantiated in the scientific reports in HIV/AIDS epidemic. My purpose in reading together both fictional and factual texts is

---

[10] Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula Treichler, eds, *Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1992), p.224.

[11] In developing this approach I have been influenced by Judith Butler's discussion of the "materialisation" of the category of the physical in *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (London: Routledge, 1993), and by Andrew Ross's argument in *The Chicago Gangster Theory of Life: Nature's Debt to Society* (London: Verso, 1994) that what counts as the "natural" is always politically and rhetorically constructed.

therefore not so much to contextualise or confirm the former by reference to the latter, but to uncover the ways in which each mode reflects upon, and is refracted by, the logic and poetics of conspiracy theory.

A study of conspiracy theory in the 1960s must also confront the issue of whether to select research materials from popular or "highbrow" sources. The decision will in part be dictated by the distinction between the realist concern with mainstream issues, and the symbolist tendency to investigate more marginal examples. But since it is of course possible for some of the central issues of society to be encoded in high culture, and, conversely, for some extremist examples of the paranoid style to be popular, the selection of research materials still remains an issue. It is certainly plausible that the postmodernisation of culture since the sixties has made it increasingly difficult to maintain the high/low distinction, even if the borrowings and cross-overs have not been entirely reciprocal.[12] What is more significant, however, is that key texts of this period institute, explicitly or otherwise, conspiracy theories *about* the threat of mass culture. In an analogous fashion to the previous argument, then, I want to claim that the dichotomy between élite and popular conspiracy culture needs to be rethought in the light of recent conspiracy theories which serve to demarcate the boundary between the sophisticated and the vulgar. In other words, examples of conspiracy theories cannot easily be taken from or placed upon either side of this heuristic division, since they are themselves one of the representational strategies by which the distinction is itself configured.

Choosing materials for an investigation of the culture of conspiracy presents one final methodological difficulty, namely the risk that such a study may also mirror the hermeneutic strategies of conspiracy theories. As forms of historiographic knowledge, conspiracy theories in part aim to expose the hidden agendas of history by linking together seemingly unconnected details into a coherent plot. They function by reinterpreting the accidental and the coincidental as part of a co-ordinated scheme. They enable every detail of social and cultural life to be read in theory as a clue to an invisible but pervasive force. In this light it is possible to see how a study of the discourse of conspiracy is also in danger of also producing a conspiracy theory of conspiracy theories. Under the gaze of the conspiracy-conscious researcher, each item of culture can yield itself up to re-examination for traces of the logic of conspiracy. Moreover, I want to argue, the sixties witnessed the development of a self-reflexive awareness of conspiracy theory (as opposed to conspiracies) as a distinct cultural phenomenon. Previously unrelated novels, political tracts, works of history, films, magazine articles, and so on, can become linked together into a unified rewriting of cultural history. For example, in Brian McHale's discussion of postmodern conspiracy

---

[12] In addition to Fredric Jameson's panoramic survey, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), I have in mind Linda Hutcheon's *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1989).

fictions which depict the creation of a conspiracy as an "ontological side-effect" of its prior representation, he finds that "there are a number of instances of ontological side-effects that are uncannily akin to those in [Umberto Eco's] *Foucault's Pendulum*, indicating not the direct influence of one text on another . . . but rather an internal logic that, inhering in the postmodernist repertoire itself, manifests itself differently in different texts."[13] While not wholly conspiratorial, the idea of an uncanny logic, which influences seemingly unconnected texts, gestures towards a paranoid view of literary history as a story of secret influences and hidden forces. The possibility of a tentative conspiracy theory of culture becomes more apparent if the materials are all gathered from a single period—not to mention a single year. It is as though there existed if not exactly a coordinated cabal, then certainly a hidden logic, or, in the title of one recent work of conspiracy theory which draws on an old image, an "unseen hand" which "manipulates" cultural production.[14]

This unseen influence corresponds to the Althusserian diagnosis of "expressive causality," the notion that each part of a totality somehow expresses its inner essence. In *The Political Unconscious*, Fredric Jameson neatly summarises the implications of this view:

> The fullest form of what Althusser calls the "expressive causality" . . . will thus prove to be a vast interpretive allegory in which a sequence of historical events or texts and artefacts is rewritten in terms of some deeper, underlying and more "fundamental" narrative, of a hidden master narrative.[15]

An examination of the conspiratorial logic of various cultural items from around 1963 might therefore be in danger of constructing a "hidden master narrative" not only for that year, but also, implicitly, for the post-1960s period as a whole. Although in many ways my concern will be to highlight a sometimes unrecognised dependence on the logic of conspiracy theory in social and political formations of that era, the dissertation as a whole does not reveal conspiracy as the "expressive causality" of the sixties, or of 1963 in particular. It avoids such a narrative in three ways. Firstly, as the Kennedy chapter will argue in detail, the positing of 1963 as a decisive year in American life is in part an effect of subsequent events which the assassination of JFK helped to bring into focus. In other words, the master narrative of innocence and experience into which the sixties are frequently written has a confused and contradictory causality, such that the decade's beginning is partly an effect of its "ending"—tragic or otherwise—in the present. The form of the present study further emphasises this problematic teleology in

---

[13] Brian McHale, *Constructing Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp.180-81.

[14] A. Ralph Epperson, *The Unseen Hand: Introduction to the Conspiratorial View of History* (Tucson, AZ: Publius Press, 1985).

[15] Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (1981; London: Routledge: 1986), p.28. Jameson attempts to rethink the notion of a historical "period" in the light of his analysis of Althusser in "Periodizing the 60s," in *The Ideologies of Theory*, 2 vols (London: Routledge, 1988), II, pp.178-210.

the way that the four chapters play over the same chronological celluloid strip of cultural history, producing different takes on the same "film" with each showing.

Secondly, the four case studies do not produce a single, unified picture of the cultural logic of paranoia in the sixties, but rather accounts of the various ways in which the language of conspiracy is enmeshed in larger debates, so that it sometimes enforces and sometimes undermines those wider concerns. So, for example, paranoid fears about the connections between gay men serve to structure the political conspiracy theory of Stone's film, *JFK*; conversely, Burroughs' conspiratorial associations of same-sex desire are played down in Cronenberg's film adaptation of *Naked Lunch*.

Lastly, it is not my contention that paranoia constitutes the "inner essence" of the *Zeitgeist*, since conspiracy theory is only one of many discourses which plays a significant role in articulating and delimiting life in sixties America. Figurations of conspiracy are not the unique key to unlock, for example, the development of feminism in and after the sixties, yet an analysis of this rhetoric can shed light on otherwise hidden tensions and tendencies in the women's movement. In summary, then, while the focus on 1963 clarifies some of the connections and antagonisms between the various writers and movements under discussion, it also emphasises the discontinuities and incommensurabilities of cultural artefacts whose only common denominator is that they appeared in the same year.[16]

*

To date there have been no full-length studies of paranoia in the 1960s, although there have been articles on the concern with the conspiratorial aspects of the decade in relation to DeLillo, Pynchon and Burroughs.[17] The value of the present study, I believe, is to focus attention on the rhetorical strategies and narrative structures in some of the key fictional, historical and theoretical plottings in and of the 1960s.[18] My inquiry into the poetics of conspiracy is situated at the intersection between three related fields, namely histories of the paranoid style in American culture, characterisations of sixties/postmodern American fiction, and surveys of the decade and its rewriting. It begins by investigating the constitution of 1963 through the culture of paranoia constellated around the assassination of President Kennedy. I argue that the

---

[16] In his Preface to *Twentieth-Century America: The Intellectual and Cultural Context* (London: Longman, 1991), Douglas Tallack begins by pointing out the "bewildering" variety of items listed in his Chronology for a sample year. "The aim," he argues, "should not be to smooth out the kind of discontinuities evident in the entry for 1933, but to examine them "as a distinctive problem of twentieth-century America (p.xiv).

[17] I discuss the designation of the sixties in general and the decade's literature in particular as a "golden age of paranoia" in Chapter 3.

[18] Although most surveys of the 1960s focus on either the literature or the history of the period, Robert S. Levine in *Conspiracy and Romance: Studies in Brockden Brown, Cooper, Hawthorne and Melville* (CUP, 1989) provides a useful model of an analysis that attends to the continuities between fiction and history in terms of genre and narrative.

assassination forms the primal scene of postmodernism and, metonymically, of the construct which passes under the sign of "the sixties." A close reading of *Libra* and *JFK* shows that the facts of the conspiracy plot are always implicated in and formulated by the narrative structures of plot in which they are inscripted. Furthermore, though obviously a brute, material event, the shooting of JFK and the instantly and endlessly replayed shooting of Lee Harvey Oswald "live" on national television are significant as inaugural moments in the formation of the mediated "reality" of postmodern society.

The second chapter takes up the issue of what is to count as the real or the representational in a discussion of feminism's engagement with the figuration of conspiracy. It argues that popular American feminism has increasingly been caught up in a crisis of representation over the last three decades, in which its terms and images—in particular its fraught engagement with the figure of conspiracy—have repeatedly needed to be reconfirmed and rematerialised. Through a detailed analysis of books by Betty Friedan and Naomi Wolf, the chapter concludes that the notion of conspiracy has also served to implement a series of implicit divisions within feminism, which emerge in the self-conscious textual anxieties generated by the term "conspiracy theory."

The next chapter follows up on the suggestion that a self-aware diagnosis of a certain mode of argument *as* a conspiracy theory must now be factored into any account of the history of the paranoid style of American culture. In particular it reads the novels of Thomas Pynchon in conjunction with and as a reflection on a developing tendency in popular and academic discussions to identify the practice of conspiracy theorising as such. I argue that the sixties are not so much the "age of paranoia," as the era in which such diagnoses became part of the political and cultural landscape of America. In addition to its focus on the culture of conspiracy, this chapter continues the analysis of conspiracy theories of mass culture broached by the previous chapter. I read Pynchon's *Vineland* as a commentary on and a product of the implosion of the cultural logic of paranoia in the face of the global saturation of signs in the nineties, a situation which, the novel suggests, has been brought about by the domination of mass media.

The final chapter picks up on the free use of the psychiatric terminology of "paranoia" in the preceding chapters, and discusses the pre-history of these terms together with the psychological intricacies and social parameters of Burroughs' fictions of corporeal horror. Burroughs' novels feature distinct and disturbing paranoid fantasies which draw on society's nightmares about the body's powers and pleasures. My aim is less to diagnose him than to understand how his conspiratorial writings support and undermine larger debates about homosexuality, drug addiction and disease. In the first half of the chapter I argue that as much as Burroughs' novels work to psychologise the mechanisms of history, they also serve to historicise the institutions of psychology; furthermore, his writings also satirically materialise some of society's most paranoid fears. In the second half of the chapter I read Burroughs' sixties fiction of body panic through the lens of the HIV/AIDS epidemic of the 1980's and '90s. I argue

that, on the one hand, the epidemic has brought about a deeply disturbing literalisation of the latter's fantastical scenarios of corporeal paranoia. On the other hand, his novels uncannily anticipate and prescript some of the scenarios of bodily infiltration, drug addiction, viral epidemic and sexual paranoia in which the HIV/AIDS epidemic has been written.

CHAPTER 1

PLOTTING THE ASSASSINATION: JFK AND THE PRIMAL SCENE OF POSTMODERNISM

In the thirty years since the assassination of President John F. Kennedy over 5000 books, articles, and films have appeared which engage with the event. If anything, the 1990s have witnessed a boom in the assassination industry; half the books on the *New York Times* top-ten bestseller list in early 1992 were about the case.[1] Significantly, all of them promoted conspiracy theories of one kind or another. This chapter will explore how conspiracy theories have mounted a challenge not just to the official "lone gunman" version of the assassination, but to the "authorised version" of the 1960s themselves. Narratives about the conspiratorial activities of the authorities have contributed to a crisis in the authority of narrative, making the Kennedy assassination both a symptom and a cause of a postmodern culture of paranoia. This crisis of political and historical representation, I want to suggest, becomes particularly acute with accounts which merge narrative plot and conspiracy plot.

The first section briefly outlines how the assassination has been plotted in a variety of cultural forms, from government inquiries to investigative journalism, and from museum exhibits to fictional re-enactments. The second section examines in detail two recent fictionalised versions of the shooting (Don DeLillo's *Libra* (1988) and Oliver Stone's *JFK* (1992)), both of which became the centres of fierce debates about the fictionalisation of history. Having examined how their narrative plots by turns confirm and undermine their conspiracy plots, the third section goes on to argue that there is a similar disruption in narratives of postmodernism, in which the Kennedy assassination is itself deeply imbricated. Finally I suggest that Freud's theory of the primal scene offers the most profitable way to plot both the assassination and postmodernism.

LONE GUNMAN

The official "lone gunman" version of the assassination was very quickly established. Within an hour and a half of the assassination, Lee Harvey Oswald had been arrested by police at the Texas movie theatre in connection with the murder of Police Officer J.D. Tippit which had taken place some thirty minutes earlier. Later that same evening at the Dallas Police and Courts Building Oswald was charged with the murder of the President.[2] Two days later, after Oswald had himself been shot by Jack Ruby, Dallas District Attorney Henry Wade gave a press conference in which he outlined the progress of the investigation. Several witnesses had seen Oswald in the

---

[1] See Stephen E. Ambrose, "Writers on the Grassy Knoll: A Reader's Guide," *New York Times Book Review*, 2 February 1992, pp.23-25.

[2] Oswald was in fact initially accused of conspiring with Communists to take the life of the President, though these charges were quickly dropped. Reported in the BBC Timewatch documentary broadcast on 22 November 1993.

"sniper's lair" in the School Book Depository, Wade announced, and his palm print was found on the rifle which had been hidden there. The gun had been purchased in Oswald's name, and he was seen carrying a long package into work that morning.[3] Within forty-eight hours, then, the "official" version of the assassination as the work of a lone gunman, Lee Oswald, had been fixed.

On November 29th President Johnson appointed a commission to investigate the assassination, chaired by Chief Justice Earl Warren. The FBI and the Secret Service each conducted enquiries and handed over their lengthy reports to the Warren Commission by the middle of December. The Commission began hearing testimony in February, and finally produced its 888-page report in September 1964, though the twenty-five accompanying volumes of evidence and testimony were not released until the following month. It concluded that Oswald had carried out the assassination alone. "The Commission has found no evidence," the Report announced, "that either Lee Harvey Oswald or Jack Ruby was part of any conspiracy, domestic or foreign, to assassinate President Kennedy."[4] Having emphatically denied any conspiratorial involvement, the Commission argued that "to determine the motives for the assassination of President Kennedy, one must look to the assassin himself" (*RPC*, 22). And, having examined "his family history, his education or lack of it, his acts, his writings, and the recollections of those who had close contacts with him" (*RPC*, 22), it concluded that:

> Oswald was motivated by an overriding hostility to his environment. He does not appear to have been able to establish meaningful relationships with other people. He was perpetually discontented with the world around him. Long before the assassination he expressed his hatred for American society and acted in protest against it. . . . He sought for himself a place in history . . . His commitment to Marxism and communism appears to have been another important factor in his motivation. He also had demonstrated a capacity to act decisively and without regard to the consequences when such action would further his aims of the moment. Out of these and the many other factors which may have molded the character of Lee Harvey Oswald there emerged a man capable of assassinating President Kennedy. (*RPC*, 423)

As one Commission staff lawyer allegedly complained, this list reads like a series of clichés from a TV soap opera.[5] Although the Report reassured its readers that "the Commission does not believe that the relation between Oswald and his wife caused him to assassinate the President," it draws on a host of other pop psychology favourites in its portrait of Oswald as a disaffected loner. With its dual emphasis on Oswald's

---

[3] "Dallas Prosecutor's News Conference," *New York Times*, November 26th, 1963, p.14.

[4] *Report of the President's Commission on the Assassination of President John F. Kennedy* (Washington, DC: Unites States Government Printing Office, 1964), p.21. References to the Report (abbreviated as *RPC*) are hereafter cited in parentheses in the text.

[5] Reported in Bob Callahan, *Who Shot JFK?: A Guide to the Major Conspiracy Theories* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), p.35.

political sympathies and his maladjustment, the Commission was caught between, on the one hand, the need to make some sense of the assassination for the general public by ascribing to Oswald rational political motives, and, on the other hand, the desire to conclude that the killing of an American president was an inexplicable and psychopathic act. So the assassination, on this view, was simultaneously the work of a dissatisfied but otherwise unremarkable American, and something no right-minded American would consider.

This dilemma over Oswald's rationality and responsibility has continued throughout the three decades of research. "Lone gunman" theories in particular frequently pathologise the assassin. For example, Gerald Posner, author of the 1992 study, *Case Closed*, which revived interest in the single assassin version, asserts that "Lee Harvey Oswald, driven by his own twisted and impenetrable furies, was the only assassin at Dealey Plaza on November 22, 1963."[6] But conspiracy theories, whether of the left or the right, likewise discount Oswald's agency, seeing him as a victim of forces beyond his knowledge or control—"just a patsy," as Oswald famously shouted to news reporters in the Dallas Police Building. A few commentators, however, have tried to restore some content to Oswald's "impenetrable" action. Alexander Cockburn, writing in the *New Statesman & Society* in 1993, argues that, however misguided, "Oswald acted out of radical political motives," in a pre-emptive strike against the President whom some suspected even then of ordering CIA plots to kill Castro.[7] As Cockburn points out, it is in this light that we can make sense of Malcolm X's sardonic comment in response to the news of the assassination, that "the chickens have come home to roost."

Since Oswald was effectively "silenced" by Ruby, many commentators feel obliged to read between the lines of Oswald's actions, to find out what he was trying to "communicate" by the assassination. The Commission's attempt at amateur psychology was only the first of many. Dr Renatus Hartogs, who had conducted a psychiatric evaluation on Oswald as a teenage truant, argued in *The Two Assassins* that Oswald had assassinated the substitute father figure of Kennedy out of a repressed Oedipal desire for his own mother.[8] Kerry Thornley, a would-be novelist and friend of Oswald during his Marine Corps days, presented the assassin as a dedicated intellectual.[9] Even Gerald Ford, Commission member and future president, produced a

---

[6] Gerald Posner, "It Was Him All Along," *Mail on Sunday* , 2 October 1993, p.13.

[7] Alexander Cockburn, "Propaganda of the Deed," *New Statesman & Society*, 19 November 1993, pp.30-31. Similarly, in an early article on the assassination , I.F. Stone urged his readers to "ask ourselves honest questions," such as "how many Americans have not assumed—with approval—that the CIA was probably trying to find a way to assassinate Castro?" Stone recognised that through tacit support of such covert operations, "we all reach for the dagger, or the gun, in our thinking when it suits our political thinking to do so" (I.F. Stone, "We All Had a Finger on That Trigger," *I.F. Stone's Weekly*, 9 December 1963, p.1-2).

[8] Dr Renatus Hartogs, *The Two Assassins* (New York: T. Cromwell, 1965).

[9] Kerry Thornley, *Oswald* (Chicago: New Classics House, 1965).

biography of Oswald. *Portrait of the Assassin* was not much more than a recapitulation of the Warren Commission's findings, although it did offer some behind-the-scenes glimpses of the Commission struggling to make sense of the claims that Oswald had been an FBI undercover agent.[10] One implication of this surprising admission is that Oswald was more than he seemed: every seemingly incoherent action and contradictory gesture could be reinterpreted as a part of a deliberate cover story, a possibility which the Commission choose to ignore in favour of an Oswald scarcely in control of his own feelings.

These biographies aim to make sense of the assassination by making sense of Oswald. The concern to read Oswald is never very far from a desire to diagnose him. The authors of a 1970 textbook on paranoia, for example, include an appendix which offers thumbnail case histories not only of Oswald, but of all those who had carried out or attempted assassinations on American presidents or presidential candidates.[11] Drs Swanson, Bohnert, and Smith point out how Oswald's childhood "was disrupted by the death of his father prior to the subject's birth," and how "his mother was suspicious, grandiose and had unrealistic beliefs." They proceed to reveal that Oswald was "a slight man, 5'7" in height," and that "he did not work but read many books, including John Kennedy's biography." Reviewing previous and subsequent presidential pot-shots, Swanson et el. find a similar pattern in each of the stories. We learn, for example, that Charles Guiteau, who killed Pres. Garfield in 1881, was "of slight build and 5'5" tall. He had had an erratic work record and relied on swindling and theft to support himself." If this were not enough to diagnose him as paranoid, it also emerges that he "sulked and daydreamed, was litigious and had grandiose ideas of starting a newspaper." But perhaps his principal manifestation of paranoia was that he "dropped out of high school at age 18 [only 18?] and spent the remainder of the year reading the Bible." This psychological blueprint is repeated for the majority of the ten "lone gunmen." All the assassins, according to Swanson et al., "were nationally displaced individuals"; furthermore, "all had an erratic work adjustment," "all were slim and between 5' and 5'8"," and "all had a paranoid diagnosis at the time of their homicidal act." The obvious conclusion must surely be that most of the assassins were poor immigrants on poor diets, with an understandable—and often explicitly articulated—grudge against a country that failed to live up to their expectations. For example, Leon Czolgosz, who killed William McKinley in 1901, declared in his last words that, "I killed the President because he was an enemy of the good people. I am not sorry for my crime." The logic and rhetoric behind the Warren Commission's firm denial of

---

[10] Gerald Ford, *Portrait of the Assassin* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1965).

[11] David Swanson, Philip Bohnert and Jackson Smith, *The Paranoid* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1970), pp.378-94. There have, of course, been many Presidential assassination attempts since 1970: an attempt on Nixon, two on Gerald Ford, one on Reagan, Bush's claim that a group of Iraqis plotted to kill him, and, most recently, we might want to include the mysterious light aircraft that crashed into the White House in 1994.

political or conspiratorial motives also governs the retrospective positing by Swanson et al. of paranoia as the "predominant cause" of all presidential assassination attempts. According to the latter, in each case any political meaning of an assassination is emptied out into the language of personal pathology. Likewise in a 1971 collection of essays by social scientists, *Assassinations and the Political Order*, three essays seek to explore, in the words of one of the titles, "the psychopathology of assassination."[12] But the volume also broadens the discussion into questions of social psychology and sociology, with articles on the culture of violence in America and other countries.[13] In both cases, assassination becomes slightly more explicable if regarded as the result of either a personal or social malaise. The hope is that, once identified and theorised, this pattern of violent "self-realization" can be prevented. The collection, it must be noted, developed out of the work of the editor, William J. Crotty, as co-director of the Task Force on Assassination and Political Violence of the National Commission on the Causes of and Prevention of Violence.

The attention in both the Swanson and Crotty volumes to the history of political assassinations in the USA takes its place within a larger debate about the "Americanness" of lone gunmen, which developed soon after the shooting of President Kennedy. In the *New York Times* on November 26th, 1963 Foster Hailey wrote that:

> there is one clear distinction between most of the attempts to kill Government figures in other countries and those in the United States. In Russia and Japan the assassinations generally were the culmination of the detailed plans made by well-organized groups, usually involving high Government figures. The motivations were political, or nationalistic. In the United States, in all except two cases, the attempts were made by a single person often without advance planning, and often without any real grievance against the personage attacked. That seems to have been the case with Lee Harvey Oswald, the killer of President Kennedy.[14]

Likewise *Time* magazine declared that "assassination has never been an instrument of politics in the USA."[15] Some disagreed with this perversely patriotic conclusion. Thomas Buchanan, for instance, writing in *l'Express*, countered *Time*'s assertions that "the three assassins whose bullets killed the Presidents Lincoln, Garfield and McKinley were lonely psychopaths," pointing out that there was evidence of political motivation

---

[12] The three essays are: Lawrence Zelic Freedman, "Psychopathology of the Assassin"; David A. Rothstein, "Presidential Assassination Syndrome: A Psychiatric Study of the Threat, the Deed, and the Message"; and Thomas Greening, "The Psychological Study of Assassins," in *Assassinations and the Political Order*, William J. Crotty, ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), pp.143-266.

[13] See in particular William J. Crotty, "Assassinations and Their Interpretation within the American Context," and Ivo K. Feierabend, Rosalind L. Feierabend, Betty A. Nesvold, and Franz M. Jaggar, "Political Violence and Assassination: A Cross-National Assessment," in Crotty, pp.3-140.

[14] Foster Hailey, "Lone Assassin the Rule in U.S.; Plotting More Prevalent Abroad," *New York Times*, 25 November 1963, p.9.

[15] Unnamed author, "The Earlier Assassins," *Time*, 29 November 1963, p.16.

in each example—and even a conspiracy in the case of Lincoln.[16] In the light of this debate about the national styles of political assassination, it is therefore significant that the first critical responses to the contradictions apparent in the Kennedy case came from European journalists, or those writing in European journals. Buchanan was soon joined in his attack on the official version, both of the Kennedy case and of America's political history, by Nerin E. Gun, Leo Sauvage, Hans Habe, and Joachim Joesten. It was almost as if the rugged individualism of the American dream demanded that even assassins must be perceived as lone agents, with conspiracies and their subsequent conspiracy theories belonging to European tradition. So, for example, the American historian, Richard Hofstadter, added an additional footnote to the revised version of his paper, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," which was first delivered in Oxford in early November 1963, and then published in *Harper's Magazine* in 1964. "Conspiratorial explanations of Kennedy's assassination," writes Hofstadter, "have a far wider currency in Europe than they do in the United States."[17] Coup d'états were felt to be part of an alien tradition; American presidents were shot by disaffected and paranoid loners, products of a small-minded, populist and violent streak in American politics. The irony was that the intelligence agencies of the American government were indeed plotting the overthrow of foreign leaders by assassination. American exceptionalism once again proved to be a comforting myth.

From the outset the liberal and radical left was divided on what to think about the assassination. For some, belief in a conspiracy was part of the "paranoid" mentality which had dominated the McCarthyite years of the Cold War, and was therefore to be rejected. Hofstadter is quick to locate conspiracy theories about the event as either a European or minority political phenomenon in his concern to attack the "paranoid style" as a dangerous and unwelcome tendency in American political life. With his reference to "a far wider currency in Europe," he is probably alluding to the formation by Bertrand Russell of a "Who Killed Kennedy Committee", whose members included Michael Foot, Hugh Trevor-Roper, William Empson, John Arden, J.B. Priestley and the film director Tony Richardson. In an article in the September 1964 issue of the radical journal, *The Minority of One*, Russell represents the other possibility of critical response, which appeared first in Europe but quickly spread to America. Russell declared that "the official version of the assassination of President Kennedy has been so riddled with contradictions that it has been abandoned and rewritten no less than three

---

[16] Thomas Buchanan, *l'Express*, February 1964; cited in Callahan, *Who Shot JFK?*, pp.21-22.

[17] Hofstadter goes on to claim that "no European, to my knowledge, has matched the ingenuity of Professor Revilo P. Oliver of the University of Illinois," who was eventually dismissed from his post for his far-right allegations that JFK was shot by the International Communist Conspiracy because he was becoming too "American." Hofstadter's basic argument—that the paranoid style is favoured only by minority movements in America—is therefore only confirmed by this apparent counter-example. Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (New York: Vintage, 1967), p.7.

times."[18] He went on to allege that "photographs, evidence and affidavits have been doctored out of recognition," and that "the FBI, the police and the Secret Service have tried to silence key witnesses or instruct them in what evidence to give." In short, Russell argued that the composition of the Commission was bound to produce a biased report, if not a cover-up. It was the duty of intellectuals to oppose the orthodox version of events.

Russell's article was, however, immediately countered by the independent political columnist I.F. Stone in his one-man newsletter, *I.F. Stone's Weekly*. Like Hofstadter, Stone made clear that the left should have no truck with political demonology:

> All my adult life as a newspaperman I have been fighting in defense of the Left and of sane politics, against conspiracy theories of history, character assassination, guilt by association and demonology. Now I see elements of the Left using these same tactics in the controversy over the Kennedy assassination and the Warren Commission Report. I believe that the Commission has done a first-rate job, on a level that does our country proud and is worthy of so tragic an event.[19]

Stone was not the only commentator on the critical left to be totally convinced by the Warren Commission's work, and to be relieved that America was not about to be absorbed in an escalating spiral of mutually assured destruction by the assassin's bullet. Herbert L. Packer, writing in *The Nation*, admired the "conscientious and at times brilliant job the commission has done," in the way that it "admirably fulfilled its central objective by producing an account of the circumstances under which President Kennedy was assassinated that is adequate to satisfy all reasonable doubts."[20] Even when the editors of *The Nation* published an essay on the contradictions which emerged from a close reading of the delayed volumes of testimony, they prefaced Fred J. Cook's piece with the reassurance that they still shared Herbert Packer's original conclusions about the success of the Report.[21]

Yet it was not only leftist commentators like Stone, Packer and the editors of *The Nation* who expressed satisfaction with the Commission's findings. Political affiliations became confused over the assassination. Establishment magazines like *Time*, for example, announced that "the Report is amazing in its detail, remarkable in its judicial caution and restraint, yet utterly convincing in all of its major conclusions."[22] Likewise *Life* proclaimed that "the Report is a great public document that reflects credit

---

[18] Bertrand Russell, "16 Questions on the Assassination," *The Minority of One*, 6 September 1964, pp.6-8.

[19] I.F. Stone, "The Left and the Warren Commission Report," *I. F. Stone's Weekly*, 5 October 1964, p.1-2.

[20] Herbert L. Packer, "The Warren Report: A Measure of the Achievement," *The Nation*, 2 November 1964, p.295.

[21] Fred J. Cooke, "Some Unanswered Questions," *The Nation*, 13 June 1966, p.705.

[22] Unnamed author, "The Warren Commission Report," *Time*, 2 October 1964, p.19.

on its author, and the nation it represents."[23] The Report, and the "lone gunman" theory it detailed, gained enormous credence in the United States in the first years after its publication. The *New York Times* printed the entire Report in a special supplement, and went on to publish selections from the hearings in a Bantam paperback which sold a million copies. In many ways the Warren Commission succeeded in allaying fears that the assassination was the work of Soviet or Cuban forces, which was perhaps one of President Johnson's immediate concerns only a year after the Cuban missile crisis. Only 29 percent of Americans believed Oswald acted alone before the Warren Report was released; after its findings became public in late 1964, 87 percent believed the Commission's version.[24] In a period of intense Cold War paranoia, it was therefore expeditious to believe that political assassinations were not in the American tradition. But in its concern to reassure the America public, the Warren Commission Report demonstrated an almost paranoid concern to dispel any suggestion of conspiracy.

CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Since the Warren Commission Report was felt by so many to be "utterly convincing," proponents of the "lone gunman" version began to speculate on the motives of those who "refused" to accept the Commissions findings. In his article in *The Nation*, Herbert Packer expressed this concern when he argued that "what the Warren Commission has done is to refute or render irrelevant the speculations of those who, out of whatever aberrant needs, still refuse to believe that Oswald, Ruby and the Dallas authorities were what they appear to be and not something more sinister."[25] Since then many commentators have focused attention on the "aberrant needs" of conspiracy theorists. In the same way that Oswald's action is viewed as making sense of his life, conspiracy plots are regarded as making sense of what would otherwise appear as a brutally random act. William Manchester, author of the classic elegy, *Death of a President*, summed up in a letter to the *New York Times* in 1993 what for many had become a standard analysis of conspiracy approaches:

> if you put the murdered President of the United States on one side of a scale and that wretched waif Oswald on the other side, it doesn't balance. You want to add something weightier to Oswald. It would invest the President's death with meaning, endowing him with martyrdom. He would have died for *something*. A conspiracy would, of course, do the job nicely.[26]

---

[23] Loudon Wainwright, "The Book for All to Read," *Life*, 16 October 1964, p.35.

[24] Gallup opinion polls cited in Max Holland, "After Thirty Years: Making Sense of the Assassination," *Reviews in American History*, 22 (1994), p.203.

[25] Packer, "A Measure of the Achievement," p.299.

[26] Cited in Holland, "Making Sense," p.192. In D.M. Thomas's assassination novel, *Flying in to Love*

According to this reasoning, then, conspiracy theories satisfy a psychological need, and the proliferation of books and articles on the JFK case only serves to demonstrate how great the shock of the assassination was to the American psyche.

Yet with the publication of the full twenty-six volumes, a few writers found nagging inconsistencies between the evidence and the Commission's conclusions.[27] For them, what needed explanation was not so much the dark psychology of either Oswald or even those who refused to accept the "official" version, but the Commission's motives in papering over the cracks in its own Report. There arises a situation, then, in which a psychologised account of how conspiracy theories satisfy the needs of those unable to come to terms with the tragedy is matched against a picture of how the Warren Commission tried to satisfy the needs of an American public anxious about the collapse of the political system.

Conspiracy theories about the assassination gradually became more popular. In addition to the articles by European correspondents, those in *The Nation* and a whole series in *The Minority of One* during 1964 and 1965, the first two major books criticising the Commission's conclusions appeared in the summer of 1966. Both Edward Jay Epstein's *Inquest* and Mark Lane's *Rush to Judgement* examined the contradictions and inconsistencies in the "official" version.[28] The investigation into the Warren Commission's actions and motives formed a critical mirror of the Commission's own investigation of the assassin. Epstein explored how the Commission dealt with allegations that Oswald worked for the FBI, how it developed the single bullet theory, and how it rejected the account of two FBI agents present at the autopsy which contradicted the official report by the pathologist. He came to the conclusion that the Commission was inevitably undermined by its desire to establish the whole truth, but to do so without compromising national security—an impossible task if, as many have claimed, Oswald was involved with various intelligence agencies. Epstein argued that "there was thus a dualism in purpose." If the "explicit purpose was to ascertain and expose the facts, the implicit purpose was to protect the national interest by dispelling rumours."[29] Epstein's reconstruction of the Commissioners' motives thus produced an account of duplicity that was patriotic, even if ultimately

---

(1992; London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1993), Sister Agnes, a nun obsessed with the Kennedy shooting, expresses the logic of this position in a more colloquial fashion: "History was what happened to you—to Sister Agnes, to quiet Tessa Mason, a hard-up teacher's daughter—and it made no sense. It began to make a glimmer of sense if you could see that death as the result of a conspiracy—a plot" (p.165).

[27] Most people's access to both the findings and the hearings was through two selective editions put out by the *New York Times*. In *Accessories After the Fact: The Warren Commission, the Authorities and the Report* (1964; New York: Vintage, 1992), Sylvia Meagher pointed out the many ways in which the selections in the edited version avoided many of the inconsistencies which were apparent in the full-length version.

[28] Edward Jay Epstein, *Inquest: The Warren Commission and the Establishment of the Truth* (London: Hutchinson, 1966), and Mark Lane, *Rush to Judgement: A Critique of the Warren Commission's Inquiry into the Murders of President John F. Kennedy, Officer J.D. Tippit and Lee Harvey Oswald* (London: The Bodley Head, 1966).

[29] Epstein, *Inquest*, p.xii.

misguided.

In Mark Lane's version, however, the Commission was dictated less by inherently contradictory conflicts of interest, than by an outright desire to cover up the truth. In his re-examination of aspects such as the "magic bullet" theory, the capability of Oswald as a marksman, and the eye-witness testimony which pointed to a second gunman on the grassy knoll, Lane developed not only a conspiracy theory about the assassination of President Kennedy, but also a second conspiracy about the subsequent cover-up by the various intelligence agencies.

The doubling of conspiracies was compounded in future research by the discovery of evidence of Oswald doubles who kept on appearing in the months leading up to the assassination.[30] In addition to these numerous sightings, contradictory portraits of the assassin emerged: he was both a Castro supporter, and part of the anti-Castro campaign; both a committed Marxist, and a member of the violently anti-Soviet White Russian exile community in Dallas; and both an intelligence agent and someone under surveillance by the intelligence agencies. The more evidence that was gathered, the less things seemed to add up—unless one held the doubly paranoid belief that the contradictions had been the deliberately planted as false clues. The increasingly detailed research into the six seconds of the assassination seemed to promise some form of final resolution, but it only succeeded in ramifying outwards into the larger time frame of the postwar period, and into the larger interconnections between intelligence agencies, organised crime and Cold War politics.[31]

The case for a conspiracy reached a new level of public exposure in 1967 with New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison's indictment of businessman Clay Shaw for conspiring with other anti-Castro activists to murder the President.[32] The case didn't reach court until 1969; it lasted five weeks and was thrown out by the jury in less than an hour's deliberation. Both Garrison and his conspiracy theories were discredited as the work of an egomaniac with political ambitions, and the upper hand once again returned to the advocates of the "lone gunman" theory. So, for example, in 1967-68 Attorney General Ramsey Clark convened two panels to review the medical testimony of the Warren Commission which had ignored the autopsy X-rays and photographs, an omission which had prompted much criticism.[33] But the Clark Panels only reconfirmed the Warren Commission's conclusions that Kennedy and Connally had been shot from

---

[30] For a representative account of Oswald's doublings see Matthew Smith, *JFK: The Second Plot* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1992).

[31] Such an argument is made by Peter Dale Scott, *Deep Politics and the Death of JFK* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

[32] Jim Garrison, *On the Trail of the Assassins* (1988; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992).

[33] U.S. Dept of Justice, "1968 Panel Review of Photographs, X-Ray Films, Documents and Other Evidence Pertaining to the Fatal Wounding of President John F. Kennedy on November 22, 1963 in Dallas, Texas," rpt. in Harold Weisberg, *Post Mortem: JFK Cover-Up Smashed* (Frederick, MD: H. Weisberg, 1975).

the rear and from a downwards angle, with no evidence of a second trajectory, and hence a second assassin.

The critics of the "lone gunman" version were relegated to the world of the tabloids and small press "crackpot" publications, until the emergence of revelations about the covert and illegal operations of intelligence agencies in connection with Watergate. In response to pressure from the media, Congress formed the Rockefeller Commission in 1975 and then the Church Committee in 1976, to investigate the domestic and foreign activities of the FBI and CIA.[34] Amongst the many findings were disclosures about Operation Mongoose (the CIA's continuation of the supposedly defunct campaign to regain Cuba), along with its covert contract with various Mafia figures to assassinate Castro. Although both committees included denials that there was any involvement by the intelligence agencies in the assassination of President Kennedy, there was sufficient public concern for Congress to re-open the investigation with the formation of the House Select Committee on Assassinations, which looked into the murder of President Kennedy, as well as the shooting of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King in 1968.[35] The Report (another large 14-volume effort) appeared in 1979, and concluded that though Oswald had fired the fatal shots, there was a 95 percent probability that a second gunman had fired from the grassy knoll. Without producing conclusive evidence of a conspiracy, the Committee recommended that the Justice Department look into the affairs of Mafia members Santos Trafficante and Johnny Roselli. Like so many other potential witnesses in the Kennedy case, both these men died violent deaths before they could give testimony, a phenomenon which then spawned a whole new group of conspiracy theories about the silencing of witnesses.[36]

Throughout the eighties and into the nineties new books and articles continued to appear, and old ones were reprinted. By 1993 roughly 80 percent of Americans—including even President Clinton and Vice-President Al Gore—believed in some form of conspiracy theory about the assassination.[37] Nearly every major television station and newspaper ran special features during the week of the thirtieth anniversary, but there was no consistent pattern to the coverage. Some concentrated on assessing the legacy of Kennedy; others recycled some of the more popular conspiracy theories; but

---

[34] U.S. President's Commission on CIA Activities Within the United States (Rockefeller Commission), *Report to the President* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1975); U.S. Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with respect to Intelligence Operations, (Church Committee), *Alleged Assassination Plots Involving Foreign Leaders*, Interim Report (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1975); and *The Investigation of the Assassination of President John F. Kennedy: Performance of the Intelligence Agencies*, Book 5, Final Report (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1976).

[35] U.S. House of Representatives, *Report of the Select Committee on Assassinations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1979).

[36] For an account of the fate of witnesses, see, for example, Anthony Summers, *The Kennedy Conspiracy* (1980; revised edn., London: Warner, 1992).

[37] Opinion polls cited in "The Death of a President," *Economist*, 9 October 1993, p.133. Report about Clinton and Gore in Callahan, *Who Shot JFK?*, p.147.

quite a few published versions of Posner's 1993 vindication of the "lone gunman" theory, *Case Closed.*

The opinion polls I have cited seem to tell a story of a loss of innocence, as Americans came to believe that the political process could have been interrupted by a conspiracy, and even that the government could have plotted against its own citizens—not to mention its own president. But the development of accounts of the assassination has not proceeded along a straightforward narrative line from innocence to experience. Even the story of official investigations is convoluted. The first government inquiry found no evidence of conspiracy, nor did the second or third. The House Select Committee in 1979 was prepared to admit some form of Mob involvement, but in 1982 the Justice Department asked the National Academy of Sciences to review the acoustical evidence. Having found what it took to be grave errors in the 1979 Report, the Justice Department once again formally closed the case in 1988.[38] Then in response to the public outcry and heavy lobbying following Oliver Stone's 1992 film, *JFK*, Congress passed the President John F. Kennedy Assassination Records Collection Act (1992) which ordered the release of all files pertaining to the case, subject to a security vetting procedure. If the government has never agreed on how to read the assassination, nor have its critics. As we have seen, it has remained hotly contested from the outset whether it is more "naive" to believe in the "lone gunman" version or a conspiracy theory. Each side psychologises the other, and each denial of conspiracy is taken as further proof of the existence of a cover-up conspiracy. There is no firm guarantee in advance what will be the political valency of any interpretation of the assassination. What can be agreed on, however, is that research into the Kennedy assassination has offered an increasing challenge to conventional histories and politics. It also provides a vehicle for expressing popular distrust of the authorities. Even Congress came to take seriously the language of conspiracy, as it contested the political territory of expertise with its own intelligence agencies. In short, the investigation and presentation of minute particles of evidence in Dealey Plaza became an extremely visible though displaced figuration of a larger crisis in political and historical authority during and after the sixties.

PUBLIC ACCESS

We have seen, then, how the details and meanings of the assassination are disputed by many different parties: by the authorities and their experts (consisting of judges, senators, security chiefs, lawyers, scientists, criminal investigators, etc.), by political commentators, by independent researchers from a variety of backgrounds, by

---

[38] Reported in Summers, *The Kennedy Conspiracy*.

biographers, by academic psychologists and sociologists, and so on. With the increasing volume and technical difficulty of evidence relating to the assassination, the question of who is qualified to analyse the case and who has access to the materials becomes an important issue. I now want to consider how the case has been constructed in cultural forms which have an oblique relationship to the protocols of scholarship and evidence underpinning the examples outlined above. Before going on to look at how the case has been presented in fictional formats, I want to consider how the assassination is constructed in a number of institutions which range from the official to the unorthodox. So far the uneven development of discussions about the assassination has been plotted into a circuitous chronology which unravels itself over the last three decades. This development could—in another meaning of the term—be plotted geographically across the United States, with an account of the institutional locations of the various archives, museums and libraries relating to the case. In brief, the further west one travels, the less orthodox the resources.[39]

The official repository for all materials deemed to be relevant to the case is the annex of the National Archives, a huge new building forty minutes from downtown Washington, DC, on the outskirts of the University of Maryland campus. Under the terms of the JFK Act the government is working on releasing approximately 800,000 pages of records, but the total amount of all related materials could reach as high as three million pages, if, as some researchers claim, there is a vast interrelation between all of the postwar assassinations, cover-ups, and intelligence agency activities.[40] The sheer amount of material deters any "amateur" research into the Kennedy case, even before the complexity of the medical, ballistics and acoustical evidence is taken into account. This situation is hardly improved by the organisation of the collection: the visitor to the National Archives is shown into a room that is empty except for half a dozen extremely confusing lists of the materials with their approximate shelf length in feet. The staff are too busy processing the collection to assist the researcher, who is placed in the circular position of having to know in advance what to look for. Many of the documents are, in any case, so heavily blacked out by security censors that they no longer contain any significant information.

Also in Washington are the independently run Assassination Archives and Research Center. Housed in three small offices in a crumbling Victorian brownstone building, the Center is managed by Jim Lesar, an attorney specialising in cases involving the retrieval of documents through the Freedom of Information Act. The AARC mission is to "acquire, present and disseminate information on political

---

[39] As with every detail of the Kennedy case, this geographical plotting itself tells a story. In *The Yankee and Cowboy War* (Kansas City: Sheed Andrews and McMeel, 1976), Carl Oglesby argues that the sequence of events from Dallas to Watergate is part of a larger transfer of power from the East to the West coast.

[40] Information on the potential size of Kennedy files is from the Assassination Archives and Resource Center (Washington, DC), "Newsletter," 1993.

assassinations," and it extends its services to scholarly researchers and "crackpot" theorists alike. It was instrumental in the campaign that led to the signing of the JFK Act, and under the terms of the Act it receives a copy of all new documents released to the National Archives—a bonus that was beginning to backfire as the offices were rapidly running out of space when I visited them in December 1994. Amongst its holdings the AARC lists "some twenty four-drawer file cabinets which contain voluminous records pertaining to political assassinations," and more than 2000 books on conspiracies of all kinds.

Next comes The Sixth Floor Museum in Dallas, on the top floor of what is now the Dallas County Administration Building. Occupying the site of Lee Harvey Oswald's alleged "sniper's lair," the Museum presents its materials (in the words of its leaflet) to "help those who remember come to grips with a powerful memory, and educate younger audiences about an unforgettable chapter in American history." Although obviously having a vested interest in the "lone gunman" version, the museum does give space to some of the conspiracy theories. Its main focus, however, is more on the legacy of Kennedy as a president than the details of his death. What is important about the museum is that it is a popular site (1.5 million visitors a year) where people can interpret the assassination in their own way, which for many involves writing "their recollections and thoughts in memory books," and visiting the shop to purchase anything from videos to "I'm just a patsy" badges. It is tempting to dismiss immediately such commercialisation of the case, but the very accessibility of the museum speaks to the fact that the "official" resources are so inaccessible. Making sense of the assassination is something on which the experts do not have a monopoly.

Finally in this westwards journey through assassination sites we arrive at the Mae Brussell Library, which was last located in Seaside, California. Brussell, shocked to the core by the Kennedy assassination, gave up her life as a Californian housewife to become a full-time conspiracy researcher, eventually ending up with her own regular radio programme, broadcast from a small listener-funded radio station in the Monterey peninsula area.[41] After her death in 1988 (she believed she had contracted cancer as the result of a CIA plot), Brussell's personal library and notes—which purportedly document the existence of a secret network of Nazi-influenced power in the USA—became the object of controversy in the various attempts to establish a research centre in her name. I was informed by the woman who took over Brussell's radio slot that her personal library was safe in storage "in somebody's garage," but she could not reveal

---

[41] Jonathan Vankin gives a brief biographical sketch in *Conspiracies, Cover-Ups and Crimes: Political Manipulation and Mind Control in America* (New York: Paragon House, 1991), pp.86-100. Other details are included in several local newspaper profiles: Judith A. Eisner, "Mae Brussell: Fears 'Hidden Government' Plans Assassinations," *The Pine Cone* (Carmel-by-the-Sea, CA), 21 September 1972, pp.43-44; David Cole, "Fascinating Search for Fascist Conspiracy," *Herald* (Monterey, CA), 18 January 1976, magazine section, pp.15-17; and an obituary in *Herald*, 4 October 1988.

where.[42]

Brussell's hidden library is interesting in that it represents the boundary between the official and the unorthodox, the professional and the amateur. Her work is located on the fringes of the "crackpot" and the scholarly. Brussell's writings and collections mark the cross-over point between conspiracy theory as a factual representation of What Is Really Going On, and conspiracy theory as a figurative, allusive articulation of the interconnections of social and economic power through the displaced documentation of a shadowy cabal. Her few published articles proceed by the cumulative interweaving of names and institutions, which do not quite amount to a firm conspiracy, but Brussell's rhetorical manœuvres nevertheless create an atmosphere of nervous anticipation and patterned expectation.[43]

LITERARY COMMISSION

Mae Brussell's legacy is situated in the contested territory that forms the borderlands between fact and fiction. In general, the Kennedy case has seen more than its share of official versions which turn out to be fabrications, factual allegations which read like nothing so much as fiction, and fictional accounts which turn out to be more accurate than any non-fictional theory. An example of a factual account that reads like fantasy is the privately printed pamphlet by James M. Beasely and Jerald Lee Cockburn, "The Assassination Festival of Jacqueline the Praying Mantis" (1971), which argues that the murder ultimately represented the fulfilment of a century-old grudge between the French Bouvier and Irish Kennedy clans. Or there is a privately printed 1964 book, *The Quest for Truth: (A Quizzical Look at the Warren Report), or How President Kennedy Was Really Assassinated*, by Southern Californian swimming pool engineer, George C. Thomson. It argues that 22 shots were fired at President Kennedy, and in the cross-fire five people were killed, including Officer J.D. Tippit, who was in fact impersonating JFK. According to Thomson, Kennedy escaped, and was seen a year later attending a private birthday party for Truman Capote.[44] Is this a product of wish fulfilment or creative investigation? Does Beasely and Cockburn's account transform the Kennedy presidency into a historical romance, or were the "Camelot" years lived through that genre at the time? What are these authors really trying to say? These and other improbable accounts seem to demand interpretation, in

---

[42] The woman (who did not want to be named) apparently lived just further up the Californian coast in Aptos. The 1994 edition of *Pynchon Notes* revealed that Thomas Pynchon's last driving license was taken out in Aptos, CA.

[43] See, for example, Mae Brussell, "The Nazi Connection to the John F. Kennedy Assassination," *The Rebel*, 22 November 1983, pp.22-35.

[44] Cited in Callahan, *Who Shot JFK?*, pp.143, 63.

the same way that Oswald's actions are perpetually in need of further explication. Neither wholly factual nor explicitly fictional, these conspiracy theories perhaps say more about their authors' political fantasies than they do about the assassination. They also tell a story about the professionalisation of knowledge with regard to conspiracy research. Rather than rejecting the methods of documentation associated with "official" versions, alternative accounts often strive to mimic those very standards. The content might present a radical challenge to orthodoxy, but the form remains indebted to the very modes of historical inquiry which its authors repudiate.

If "fringe" research is ambiguous in its relationship to factual evidence, other cultural engagements with the assassination have been more open about their status as fiction. In a review of Mark Lane's *Rush to Judgement*, Norman Mailer called for the establishment of a Writers' Commission to replace the Warren Commission. "One would propose one last new commission," Mailer writes, "one real commission—a literary commission supported by public subscription to spend a few years on the case." He goes on to declare that he "would trust a commission headed by Edmund Wilson before I trusted another by Earl Warren. Wouldn't you?"[45] In many ways Mailer's challenge has been fulfilled over the last three decades, with a large number of novels, plays, poetry and films about the Kennedy case. For some authors the fictional format has undoubtedly allowed them to pursue speculations without the threat of libel. For others, though, fiction has allowed a popular engagement with the case that is at least partially freed from the strictures of evidence and legal argumentation.

Two of the most interesting assassination novels are by thriller writer Richard Condon. The first of these was *The Manchurian Candidate*, first published as a novel in 1959, and turned into a film in 1962.[46] The story involves a political assassination carried out by an ex-army officer who is brainwashed by the communist Chinese. After the Kennedy assassination, many people were disturbed by the seemingly prophetic nature of the book/film. Condon himself was invited by *The Nation* to comment on the similarities between his novel and the Kennedy case. He found parallels between Oswald and his protagonist Raymond Shaw in terms of their unpopularity, and their mutual inheritance of paranoid suspicions from the mother, and their resentment of authority. Condon also found discrepancies, noting that whereas Shaw had been programmed by the enemy, Oswald was merely a product of America's culture of violence.[47] But during the 1970s Congressional inquiries, revelations emerged about the CIA's Project ARTICHOKE, which had unsuccessfully tried during the fifties to create brainwashed assassins. Fiction turned out to be uncannily closer to fact than it

---

[45] Norman Mailer, "The Great American Mystery," *Book Week Washington Post*, 28 August 1966, pp.1, 11-13.

[46] Richard Condon, *The Manchurian Candidate* (1959; Harpenden: No Exit Press, 1993); *The Manchurian Candidate*, dir. John Frankenheimer (1962).

[47] Condon, "Manchurian Candidate in Dallas," *The Nation*, 28 December 1963, pp.449-50.

was intended to be. Condon produced a second assassination novel in 1974 (turned into a film in 1979), which responded to the climate of suspicion and distrust at the time of Watergate.[48] In *Winter Kills*, the dead President's brother spends the entire novel pursuing one conspiracy theory after another, each of which at first seems entirely convincing. All in turn prove to be red herrings, and the novel thus sets up the possibility that the truth can never be reached. But the plunge into the abyss of epistemological scepticism is halted in the last few pages of the novel when we learn that in fact all the clues have been deliberately fabricated and planted for Nick, the President's brother, by a real conspiracy of the secret ruling élite led by his father. In this way the novel toys with the idea of an endless deferral of ultimate revelation and an insuperable instability of knowledge, only for this hermeneutic experiment to be recuperated at the last minute in the name of realism, causality and agency.[49]

Other engagements with the assassination, however, have not offered such an easily assimilated explanation for the staginess and contradictions of the evidence. An alternative canon of assassination literature has emerged, in which the emphasis is less on producing a plausible account, than on exploring the implausibilities of the case, and defamiliarising its litany of established terms and points of reference. In this category might be placed J.G. Ballard's *The Atrocity Exhibition*, which includes, for example, a surreal version of events, entitled "The Assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy Considered as a Downhill Motor Race."[50] Or there is D.M. Thomas's *Flying in to Love*, a "postmodern" novel which attracted much criticism for its scene of a nun masturbating to the Zapruder film.[51] But this episode is no more strange than the fact that avant-garde film-makers in New York in the early seventies were circulating a bootlegged copy of the Zapruder footage intercut with hardcore porn. Their aim was to shock viewers into viewing the film as a highly charged representation rather than a transparent documentary record of the event.[52] Jello Biafra's "magic bullet music lyrics" for the punk group, The Dead Kennedys, likewise focused on the fascination with violence that the case attracted. Other writers have dealt with the unreality that now seems to hang over the event. Robert Anton Wilson and Robert Shea's *Illuminatus!* trilogy, for example, gratuitously mixes plausible and apocryphal

---

[48] Condon, *Winter Kills* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1974);*Winter Kills*, dir. William Richert (1979).

[49] A similar recuperation is performed at the end of *The Manchurian Candidate*. For most of its length the novel is a vicious satire on the kind of right-wing Cold War paranoia represented by Senator McCarthy, but at the end it turns out that the Senator's wife is not part of the ultra-right but is in fact in the pay of the Russians, thereby seeming to justify the very paranoia that has been the target of the novel's satire.

[50] J.G. Ballard, *The Atrocity Exhibition*, revised edn., with a Preface by William Burroughs (1970; London: Flamingo/HarperCollins, 1993), pp.122-25.

[51] For example, Maureen Freely, "Wet Dreams in Dallas: *Flying in to Love*," *Independent on Sunday*, 2 February 1992, p. 28.

[52] Discussed in a BBC Late Show special on the Zapruder footage, screened during the week of the thirtieth anniversary, 22 November 1993.

conspiracy theories, such as the world being secretly controlled by the Dealy Lama whose hideout is beneath the Dealey Plaza. The ludicrous proliferation of suspicion and revelation in the novel is fuelled by the belief that "illumination is on the other side of absolute terror," until paranoia is the only sane response to contemporary politics.[53]

One of the most intriguing rewritings of the assassination is Derek Pell's *Assassination Rhapsody*, published in 1989 in the Foreign Agents series by Semiotext(e). In some of the pieces which make up the collection, Pell processes the language of the Warren Commission Report through a series of defamiliarising permutations and fragmentations with the aid of a thesaurus: "For a soldier armed with a rifle bang situated on the sixth level of a building bang in a Southern State of the U.S. bang (area, 267,339 sq. mi.—pop., 7,711,000; capital, Austin), a book used for study in schools bang, a place where things are put for safe-keeping, anything that is built, the attempts to hit bang with a missile were at a slow-moving object that is shot at bang bang bang, proceeding on a downward slope in virtually a straight fine strong cord with a hook bang used in fishing, with the arrangement in a straight line of the member bang of a medieval band of hashish-eating Moslems," and so on the account proceeds.[54] For Pell, the assassin's shots produce a literal interruption in the flow of language, a disturbance between signifier and signified which dislocates the relationship between fact and fiction.

*

MIXING FACT AND FICTION

The Kennedy assassination, then, has become a site of cultural contestation between the official and the unorthodox, the popular and the scholarly, and the factual and the fictional, in which political allegiances can never be guaranteed in advance. I now want to explore in more detail the cultural politics surrounding two recent and popular fictionalised re-plottings of the Kennedy assassination, namely Don DeLillo's *Libra* (1988) and Oliver Stone's *JFK* (1991). Both became the centres of fierce debates which spoke of larger anxieties about Kennedy, the sixties, and questions of literary and political representation. DeLillo received surprisingly harsh newspaper reviews for his novel. In his column for the *Washington Post*, Jonathan Yardley attacked him for creating in *Libra* an "ideological fiction," an analysis which focused as much on the novel's literariness as its "ideological" bias. In the same newspaper, George Will accused DeLillo of being a "bad citizen" and a "literary vandal" who dared to distort

---

[53] Robert Shea and Robert Anton Wilson, *Illuminatus!* (New York: Dell, 1975; repr. 1988), p.278.

[54] Derek Pell, *Assassination Rhapsody* (New York: Autonomedia/Semiotext(e), 1989), p.47.

one of America's most sacred memories.[55] The vehemence of the attack on DeLillo exceeds what might be expected in the light of its adoption of a critical conspiracy theory involving renegade CIA agents and anti-Castro forces. What seemed to rile critics was its very fictionality. Similarly, unfavourable reviewers of *JFK* were incensed by the "mixing of fact and fiction" in the film's now infamous mingling of authentic assassination footage with artfully reconstructed documentary clips.[56] The *Washington Post* and *Time* began a fierce assault on *JFK* whilst it was still in production. As a *Washington Post* headline put it, *JFK* was a "Dallas in Wonderland."[57] As with DeLillo, the conspiracy theory the film espoused was far from new (mostly it was a recycling of Garrison's case), yet the film seemed to touch a nerve that factual presentations of the same case had missed. Why should fictional rewritings of the assassination cause such concern?

PLOTS

Both DeLillo and Stone addressed the question of the fictional status of their works. In various interviews and op-ed pages, Stone was keen to reiterate the factual, historical premises of his film.[58] He did not take too many liberties with the evidence, he said, "because the material is important and sacred to the public."[59] When confronted over some of the details, however, he conceded that his film functioned more as a "myth," to counter the "myths" of the Warren Commission Report. For Stone, then, *JFK* was intended as a factual contribution to the debate, up to the point when he was forced to use the notion of a deeper truth of fiction in order to defend the fabrications contained in the film.

Whereas Stone tried to fudge the issue of its status as fiction, DeLillo engaged with the question more directly; indeed, the notion of fabrication forms one of the

---

[55] Frank Lentricchia discusses the reception of *Libra* in "The American Writer as Bad Citizen," in *Introducing Don DeLillo*, ed. Frank Lentricchia (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 1991), pp.1-6.

[56] For an account of the media coverage of *JFK* see Art Simon, "The Making of Alert Viewers: The Mixing of Fact and Fiction in *JFK*," *Cinéaste*, 19 (1992), 14-15. Somewhat surprisingly, two review essays in the *American Historical Review* praised the film for its historical accuracy. Marcus Raskin, "*JFK* and the Culture of Violence," and Robert A. Rosenstone, "*JFK*: Historical Fact/Historical Film," *AHR*, 97 (1992), 487-99, and 506-511.

[57] Other films have appeared in the last decade which also involve the Kennedy assassination, yet none has provoked anything like the passions which attended the release of Stone's film. The list includes *The Parallax View* (1974), *Love Field* (1992), *In the Line of Fire* (1993), *Ruby* (1992), *Malcolm X* (1993), and a feature-length episode of *Quantum Leap* broadcast on BBC2 on the assassination thirtieth anniversary in 1993.

[58] Oliver Stone, *New York Times*, 3 February 1992, p.A14, and 2 April 1992, p.B4; *The Nation*, 18 May 1992, p.650.

[59] Quoted in Gary Crowdus, "Clarifying the Conspiracy: An Interview with Oliver Stone," *Cinéaste*, 19 (1992), 25-27.

major themes of *Libra*. As if anticipating the stormy reaction *Libra* was to provoke in some reviewers, DeLillo was concerned in his first major interviews to explain why he had decided to rewrite the assassination as a novel. He had in fact first dealt with the Kennedy and other presidential shootings in an essay he wrote for *Rolling Stone* in 1983, five years before *Libra* was published. When asked why he had expanded and transformed the essay into a novel, DeLillo replied that:

> When I did the 1983 piece in *Rolling Stone*, I began to realize how enormously wide-reaching the material was and how much more deeply I would have to search before I could begin to do justice to it. Because I'm a novelist, I guess I defined "justice" in terms of a much more full-bodied work than the nonfiction piece I had done, and so I began to think seriously about a novel.[60]

There is, however, something disingenuous about DeLillo's tautological confession that he wrote about the assassination in a novel because he is a novelist.

He reveals more about what "doing justice" to the case involves when he goes on to talk about the Nicholas Branch character in *Libra*, who is a retired CIA researcher, commissioned by the Agency to write the secret history of the assassination:

> Branch feels overwhelmed by the massive data he has to deal with. . . . He despairs of being able to complete a coherent account of this extraordinarily complex event. I think the fiction writer tries to redeem this despair. Stories can be a consolation—at least in theory. The novelist can try to leap across the barrier of fact, and the reader is willing to take that leap with him as long as there's a kind of redemptive truth waiting on the other side, a sense that we've arrived at a resolution. I think fiction rescues history from its confusions. . . . So the novel which is within history can also operate outside it—correcting, clearing up, and, perhaps most important of all, finding rhythms and symmetries that we simply don't encounter elsewhere.[61]

DeLillo here suggests an almost religious purpose for fiction. Literature provides consolation, redemption, resolution and hidden symmetries for those in despair in the information age. The novel offers the reader confronted with too much data the possibility of transcending the chaos of the mundane, into a pleasurable world of narrative coherence and resolution. Once again this will turn out to be a disingenuous reply in the light of what *Libra* manages to perform, but for the moment I want to follow up DeLillo's suggestions about the role of fiction, and in particular the historical connections between novel plots and conspiracy plots.

Several critics have told a similar story about the emergence of literary plots in the eighteenth century as secularised versions of the Christian eschatological plot.[62]

---

[60] Anthony DeCurtis, "'An Outsider in This Society': An Interview with Don DeLillo," in *Introducing Don DeLillo*, p.49.

[61] DeCurtis, "'An Outsider in This Society,'" p.56.

[62] See for example Robert Caserio, *Plot, Story and the Novel: From Dickens and Poe to the Modern Period* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1979), Leo Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1990), Lennard J. Davis, *Resisting Novels: Ideology and Fiction* (New York

Belief in God as Providence, so the story goes, ensured that every aspect of the creation made sense, that every detail and twist of history was a clue to the larger and harmonically structured divine plan. But once belief in God began to disappear (with the rise of the Enlightenment), so a substitute had to be found for the all-embracing plot of Providence. This was found in novel plots as much as conspiracy plots, both of which presented history not as a product of divine will, but as an effect of rational, purposeful human plotting.

In *Libra* the narrator offers the following thoughts on conspiracy as an affirmation of rational agency:

> If we are on the outside, we assume a conspiracy is the perfect working of a scheme. Silent nameless men with unadorned hearts. A conspiracy is everything that ordinary life is not. It's the inside game, cold, sure, undistracted, forever closed off to us. . . . Conspirators have a logic and a daring beyond our reach. All conspiracies are the same taut story of men who find coherence in some criminal act.[63]

Conspiracies, on this model, are self-realised fantasies of perfect, teleological agency, fantasies of masculinist control. With their figuration of heroic agents uncovering conspiracies, thrillers and detective novels can be seen to offer aesthetic compensations for the lack of such agency in "ordinary life."[64] Both the creation and the uncovering of plots can become a way for men to organise and shape their desires into a "taut story." In *Reading for the Plot*, Peter Brooks expands on the idea of the organisation of pleasure in and through plotting. Noting that the plot of much modern fiction is a conspiracy plot, Brooks argues that plot does not merely relate disparate elements into one coherent and meaning-granting structure. It also shapes the path of desire through time, moulding the reader's motivation to "read forward, seeking in the unfolding of a narrative a line of intention and a portent of design that hold the promise of progress towards meaning." The notion of progressing forwards towards meaning—narrative teleology—is given a strongly sexual inflection. Brooks writes of narrative desire as "the arousal that creates the narratable as a condition of tumescence, appetency, ambition, quest, and gives narrative a forward-looking intention." Plot becomes a device for creating and constraining this phallic desire for progress and end-orientation. It therefore comes as no surprise that Brooks' analysis is principally derived from a study of the "great nineteenth-century narrative tradition" of male novelists.[65]

---

and London: Methuen, 1987), Leo Braudy, "Providence, Paranoia and the Novel," *ELH*, 48 (1981), 619-37, and John A. McClure, "Postmodern Romance: Don DeLillo and the Age of Conspiracy," in *Introducing Don DeLillo*, pp.99-116.

[63] Don DeLillo, *Libra* (1988; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989), p.440. All page references to *Libra* hereafter cited in parentheses in the text.

[64] A good example of a novel which fetishises the hard-man "inside game" is James Ellroy's assassination novel, *American Tabloid* (London: Century, 1995), which opens with Howard Hughes shooting up by TV light.

[65] Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), p.xiii, p.103 and p.xi.

The shared sexual and religious dynamic of both literary plots and conspiracy plots ensure that they become impossibly tangled in their mutual emergence in the wake of the Enlightenment. Lennard Davis adds a further twist to this tale, a story which, it must be noted, is itself heavily implicated in the forms of detective plotting which require the retrospective discovery of a dead body—and here it is the death of God—in order to trace the hidden agenda to history. Davis suggests that novel plots differ from traditional *mythos* plots of epic and classical drama, and that they emerge with the rise of the Enlightenment.[66] The new kind of plotting comes about when the traditional communally owned story-structures are replaced by the novel-as-commodity. The plot is the selling feature that demarcates the latest novel as a novel commodity. It is no coincidence, Davis argues, that the rise of the novelistic form of plot coincides with the rise of the notion of private property (plots of land), with the corresponding notion of intellectual property, and authority instituted in the copyright laws.

The etymology of the word "plot" in the *OED* suggests that all three senses of "plot" might be intertwined. The sense of "plot" as "a sketch or outline of a literary work" makes its first recorded appearance in 1548. This meaning is an extension of the earlier usage of the idea of a mapping out (of a "plat," a parcel of land, itself an earlier word still). The conspiratorial sense of the word makes its first recorded appearance around 1575, and is in fact a case of mistaken identity. The *OED* explains: "It might be even more correct to view *plot* in this sense as short for *complot* [the French word for a conspiracy plot] under the influence of the sense 'plan, scheme or device.'" The confusion becomes popularised into permanence following the Gunpowder Plot. But the chronology is suggestive: the literary usage of the term antedates the conspiratorial one by a quarter of a century, indicating that maybe the latter was modelled on the former. This would suggest that the modern sense of political conspiracy was derived from an understanding of the attractions of the aesthetic resonance and shaping provided by literary plots, producing a mutual dependence of history and its representations—perhaps, even, a disturbance in the causal plot of history, with the representation preceding the event.

THE DOUBLE LOGIC OF *JFK*

I now want to examine in detail how these notions of plot and the compensations of fiction work themselves out in *JFK* and *Libra*. As we have seen, conspiracy theories rescue history from its confusions by restoring a myth of ruthlessly efficient agency—albeit at the price of making the believer a paranoid *victim* of

---

[66] Davis, *Resisting Novels*, pp. 201-205.

historical events plotted in secret. The proliferation of conspiracy theories about the Kennedy assassination suggests that the only thing worse than the spectre of a hidden agenda to history is the possibility that history is composed of random events—and, the argument continues, there can be few events more brutally random than the killing of Kennedy by a "lone nut gunman." Stone's film can be viewed as an over-compensation in the face of this possibility, since, in the world of *JFK*, nothing happens by accident. The bullet-proof bubble-top of the presidential limousine, the film suggests, was left off on the treasonous orders of the conspiring Secret Service agents. The car slowed to a virtual standstill after the first shot, and just before the fatal last shot, not because the Secret Service driver was stunned into confusion, but because it was part of the incredibly devious planning of the conspirators. *JFK*'s conspirators take care not only of the minor details, but they also have the grand sweep of history in their grasp. The argument of the film is that the conspirators planned to replace Kennedy with the more bellicose Johnson in order to promote their military-industrial interests through the escalation of the Vietnam war. In Stone's version of history there are no accidents, no coincidences, and no signs of incompetence in the assassination and its subsequent cover-up. What cannot be tolerated is the conclusion reached by Nicholas Branch, the internal CIA historian in *Libra*: "He has learned enough about the days and months preceding November 22, and enough about the twenty-second itself, to reach a determination that the conspiracy against the President was a rambling affair that succeeded in the short term due mainly to chance. Deft men and fools, ambivalence and fixed will and what the weather was like" (441). Whereas for Stone there must be either total coherence or total randomness, DeLillo is keen to keep alive both possibilities at the same time, playing one off against the other.

Stone's disbelief in anything other than insidiously masterful agency speaks in an older language of historical causality, a mode of thinking which itself played an important role in the history of the Cold War. Senator McCarthy made the definitive statement of this attitude in the post-war period:

> How can we account for the present situation unless we believe that men high in this government are concerting to deliver us to disaster? This must be the product of a great conspiracy, a conspiracy on a scale so immense as to dwarf any previous such venture in the history of man. A conspiracy of infamy so black that, when it is finally exposed, its principals shall be forever deserving of the maledictions of all honest men. . . . What can be made of this unbroken series of decisions and acts contributing to the strategy of defeat? They cannot be attributed to incompetence.[67]

Both Stone and McCarthy rely on a notion of effective, conspiring agency to underpin their analysis of how the path of history has been deflected from what each sees as its rightful course. They also rely on a model of causality that features individual action as

---

[67] Senator McCarthy, *Congressional Record*, 82nd Cong., 1st sess. (June 14 1951), p.6602; quoted in Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style*, p.8.

the sufficient antecedent to subsequent effects. *JFK* presents the Vietnam war, the student and race riots, and the assassination of Robert Kennedy as part of an "unbroken series" of events which the assassination conspiracy set in motion. The Present Situation, for Stone as much for McCarthy, is the result not of a complex and overdetermined set of events, processes and representations, but the inexorable consequence of purposeful decisions by individual agents.

The revival of faith in rigorous agency is compounded in *JFK* by its borrowings from hard-boiled detective fiction. When Garrison first submitted to the publishers a draft of *On the Trail of the Assassins*, on which Stone's film is based, it was a "straightforward" presentation of the case. But he was persuaded to rewrite the book, making it into more of a detective story, into a "chronicle of the experiences of one man who tried to get to truth about the murder."[68] Garrison takes eagerly to the genre, and his self-stylisation as a real-life Philip Marlowe carries over into *JFK*, with its heroicisation of the rugged individualist detective. In both the book and the film the "lone gunman" theory is rigorously repudiated, only for it to return in a displaced form as Garrison's Lone Detective. In keeping with its hard-boiled detective fiction fantasies of lone agency, the film contains many other noirish elements, not least in its lighting: Garrison (played by Kevin Costner) is frequently haloed by a glaring brightness, whose obvious connotations of moral and intellectual clarity are contrasted with the murky scenes of the New Orleans "gay underworld" and the shadowy glimpses of Pentagon meetings.

There is, however, a narrative counter-current in *JFK* which works against the McCarthyite model of historical agency and causality. The detective fiction structure which gives the film its forward-moving pace and narrative drive towards the "resolution" of the case in the final courtroom scene also produces a backwards-spiralling movement which undermines and delays its narrative drive. In conventional detective fiction the episodes of the investigation lead on teleologically to the ending, set in motion and motivated by the desire to solve the initial crime. But the ending is also a ghostly, anticipated presence at the beginning. It is the conclusion that allows the beginning of the sequence of events to be identified as such; only in a completed sequence can the significance of individual episodes be grasped as so many clues to the reconstruction of the underlying story. Once the ending has been reached, no incident or detail will appear as arbitrary or accidental. The ending therefore seems to demand a return to the beginning, in order to at last insert all the details and confusions into one coherent story. In *JFK* there is indeed a gradual progression of discovery through the investigation to the revelations in the courtroom. The direction of the film, following the life of Garrison, leads from innocence to experience. But the final court sequence pieces together and replays the fragments of the assassination with which the film

---

[68] Garrison, *On the Trail of the Assassins*, p.xi.

began. The ending thus begins to revise and colour the beginning. The initial chaos of the opening scene's black and white camera and gun shots in Dealey Plaza retroactively transform themselves into the comparative clarity and colour of the Zapruder film, which Garrison shows to the jurors. What seem like unintelligible and meaningless fragments at the beginning are coalesced into significance by Garrison's narrative commentary at the end of the film. The ending thus spreads its influence backwards over the narrative, initiating a retrograde movement that undermines the strong end-orientation which Brooks, for example, views as "the basic 'pulsation'" of plot. As much as the opening event of the assassination determines the chain of detection, those events are themselves replotted by the subsequent detection; the beginning determines the ending, but it is the ending that shapes the beginning as a necessary origin.

Jonathan Culler detects a similar "double logic" at work in the Oedipus story, a narrative with which *JFK* has much in common. The first "logic" Culler discovers in *Oedipus Rex* is the forward-moving process of detection. The murder of the father-king is the episode that sets in motion future events and determines their significance. In *JFK* Kennedy's death results in Garrison's investigation. It also is the unknown origin behind Garrison's current sexual and political dissatisfaction, becoming a necessary but hidden cause which works its logic out in the course of the film. The second "logic" Culler identifies is one whose influence seeps backwards from the ending. The original murder in *Oedipus Rex* is not merely a causal origin, but also symbolically and aesthetically necessary, demanded by the narrative coherence of the play. As Culler explains:

> Oedipus himself and all his readers are convinced of his guilt but our conviction does not come from the prior revelation of the deed. Instead of the revelation of a prior deed determining meaning, we could say that it is meaning, the convergence of meaning in the narrative discourse, that leads us to posit this deed as its appropriate manifestation.[69]

Instead of a prior event being the cause of significance for subsequent happenings, it is as if the unbearable significance felt by Oedipus in the present of the play "causes" him to imaginatively posit the original event. Culler concludes: "here meaning is not the effect of a prior event but its cause." Translating this analysis into *JFK*, we see how Garrison feels the need to posit a grand, tragic event, an origin for the decline of both Jim Garrison and America. The state of decline felt by Garrison is so pronounced that only a correspondingly momentous original murder can do justice to the grandeur of his feelings. In *JFK*, the rhetoric of treason and the references to Kennedy as Hamlet Senior are matched only by the John Williams score, whose bombastic, funereal title music underlines the way in which the film recreates JFK as the fallen warrior-king.

The Oedipal sub-text of the assassination also produces a disturbance in the

---

[69] Jonathan Culler, "Story and Discourse in the Analysis of Narrative," in *The Pursuit of Signs* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), p.174.

"proper" teleological path of Garrison's sexuality. In *JFK*, one effect of the assassination is Garrison's loss of heterosexual desire for his wife, played by Sissy Spacek (Kevin Costner plays Garrison). She complains that he cares more about Kennedy than herself, as he sits up all night, poring over the details of the Warren Commission Report with fetishistic interest. The homoerotic desire that Stone's Garrison feels for Kennedy (but can't admit) manifests itself in two ways. The first is in Garrison's Hamlet-like obsession for the figure whom he eulogises in speech as the "slain father-leader," a retrospective idealisation of the young, beautiful President. The second way in which a repressed homosexuality returns to haunt the case is the emphasis Garrison places on the perversion of the New Orleans conspirators. Although *On the Trail of the Assassins* hardly makes reference to the New Orleans gay underworld, Stone lavishes much visual attention—another form of fetishism—in the scene of the confusedly intertwined and decadent bodies of Shaw, Ferrie (two of the principal conspirators) and a black servant, filmed in close-up and edited into a frenzied montage.[70] The strength of Garrison's case in the film seems to depend on proving the improper connections between Shaw and the CIA in Washington. But the film insinuates that the improper connections were not the complex association of military and industrial vested interests, but the "perverted" sexual coupling of the conspirators. The film thus presents homosexual association as both the *result* of the assassination (in Garrison's fixation on the fallen father-king, and his loss of desire for his wife), and also the *cause* of the assassination. For Stone, the assassination becomes the event that un-manned America.[71] But the weight of repressed homosexual desire felt by Garrison in the present of the film also leads him to posit retrospectively the assassination as the slaying of a father-king by the primal (homosexual) horde. The effect of the assassination "produces" its cause. The play of sexual desire in the film thus sets in motion a double logic that serves to undermine the notion of plot as masculine heterosexual desire striving towards its proper conclusion that Brooks, as we have seen, characterises as a "condition of tumescence, appetency, ambition, [and] quest."

---

[70] Michael Rogin develops a similar argument about the homophobic impulse in *JFK*, in "Body and Soul Murder: *JFK*," in *Media Spectacles*, Marjorie Garber, Jann Matlock and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, eds (London: Routledge, 1993), pp.3-22. In *Scandals, Scamps and Scoundrels: The Casebook of an Investigative Reporter* (New York: Random House, 1992), James Phelan makes the accusation that Garrison in fact believed the assassination was a "gay thrill kill."

[71] The un-manning of America is a familiar theme in Stone's work. In *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989), for example, Vietnam is the episode that induces the impotence of the Ron Kovic character, a patriotic young soldier who returns from Vietnam physically, sexually and emotionally paralysed. *JFK* thus acts as a postscript to *Born on the Fourth of July*, making Vietnam not an unhappy accident that befell America, but the direct result of a homosexual plot.

"YOU'RE A COINCIDENCE"

In *JFK* the two narrative logics work against one another, producing a series of attempts to disguise the tensions which nevertheless return in the displaced realm of the sexual. *Libra*, on the other hand, separates out the two logics into two distinct plot lines. It maintains them uncannily side by side, resisting the temptation to synthesise the two into one smooth narrative flow. The chapters alternate between the two plot lines, which, unlike *JFK*, are not structured by a detective frame. The first plot is the story of Lee Harvey Oswald, a confused yet passionate young man who, in order to get Cuba to take an interest in him, decides—with a little prompting from the "real" conspiracy—to take a pot-shot at the President. The second plot line features the conspiracy of renegade CIA operatives who want to get Cuba back on the agenda, and so decide to stage a (failed) assassination attempt whose deliberately planted clues will point back to pro-Castro interests. The two plot lines seem to converge inexorably, but in the final analysis they do not cohere. The novel circumvents the limited choice between a lone assassin and a conspiracy theory by including both Oswald as "crazed" gunman, and a conspiracy of government agents. *Libra* revives the "lone gunman" option, only to create an Oswald who is less "alone" than we would ever have imagined, as he is re-inserted into the vast social fabric of America. Oswald is both a lone agent in control of his actions, and a pawn of the conspiracy. *Libra* utilises a conspiracy theory which evokes, but ultimately undermines, the notion of effective plotting on which *JFK* relies. DeLillo's novel shows the intimate connections and contradictions between the two theories, never quite allowing either to establish itself as fully convincing, thereby transforming both versions.

Like *JFK*, the CIA conspirators in *Libra* initially offer a picture of clinically efficient agency. We see semi-retired CIA operative Win Everett (a DeLillo creation) crafting the life of a fictional patsy out of "pocket litter," feeling once again "marvellously alert, sure of himself" (145). "These are men," as one of the conspirator's wives thinks to herself, "who believed history was in their care" (127). The plot on the President's life provides the conspirators with an opportunity not only to shape history, but also to regain the teleological shape that their lives seemed to have lost after the failure of the Bay of Pigs operation. The conspiracy in *Libra* thus promises to build towards the taut plot which *JFK* delivers.

But the conspiracy slips out of its initiators' control. The first disturbance of Everett's careful plans is caused by the plot taking on a momentum of its own. Instead of preparing for a "spectacular miss," Everett realises, the plot takes on a life of its own as it turns into a full-blown assassination attempt. The CIA operative theorises this tendency in the following way:

> Plots carry their own logic. There is a tendency of plots to move toward death. He believed that the idea of death is woven into the nature of

> every plot. A narrative plot no less than a conspiracy of armed men. The tighter the plot of a story, the more likely it will come to death. A plot in fiction, he believed, is the way we localize the force of death outside the book, play it off, contain it. (221)

This passage repeats earlier formulations by DeLillo characters of the notion that "all plots tend to move deathward,"[72] and it provides a very close echo of Brooks's analysis of plot as the necessary circuitous route from Eros to Thanatos, in an attempt to wrest some meaning for life in the face of death.[73] DeLillo goes one stage further than Brooks, and links fictional plots up to the conspiracy plots which the conspirators use to shape their lives and history. Everett's forebodings of course come true, and the fact that the reader can hardly avoid knowing that this prophecy will be fulfilled heightens the sense of inexorability. In *Libra* the personal designs of the conspirators are taken over by the impersonal force of narrative dynamic, leaving us to feel that the CIA is misnamed: not exactly central, not particularly intelligent, and hardly in control of its own agency.

There is, however, a much more significant and disturbing challenge to the conspirators' sense of agency and the teleology of the plot: Lee Harvey Oswald. The incisive, rational planning of the CIA operatives is confounded by Oswald, who turns up on their doorstep, matching exactly their pre-scripted and fictional patsy. Oswald is a living coincidence who walks right into the middle of the conspiracy plot. Coincidences cause embarrassment to most historians, and the Kennedy assassination has more than its fair share.[74] In *JFK* coincidence is always the sign of a conspiracy. In the film the District Attorney and his deputy go to the quarter of New Orleans where Guy Banister, private detective and linchpin in the anti-Castro movement, had his offices, which turns out to be the same building which housed Oswald's "Fair Play for Cuba" office for a time. Looking around, they see in close proximity buildings used by the CIA, Naval Intelligence, the FBI and Banister. For the two investigators there can be no such thing as an idle coincidence, and they immediately connect all the addresses

---

[72] Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (1984; London: Picador, 1986), p.26.

[73] "We emerge from reading *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* with a dynamic model that structures ends (death, quiescence, nonnarratability) against beginnings (Eros, stimulation into tension, the desire of narrative) in a manner that necessitates the middle as detour, as struggle toward the end under the compulsion of imposed delay, as an arabesque in the dilatory space of the text. The model proposes that we live in order to die, hence that the intentionality of plot lies in its orientation toward the end even while the end must be achieved only through detour." Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, p.108.

[74] Some of the coincidences surrounding the assassination are intriguing, whilst others are wildly gratuitous. As part of his study of the history of the Illuminati, Neil Wilgus spends some time in spelling out some of the seemingly incomprehensible coincidences and interconnections in the Kennedy case. For example, he doesn't comment upon the intriguing fact that "Nixon, having attended a convention of Pepsi-Cola executives in Dallas, leaves for New York an hour before the assassination and was one of the few people who later forgot where he was at the time" (Neil Wilgus, *The Illuminoids: Secret Societies and Political Paranoia* (Albuquerque: Sun, 1980), p.222). In the gift shop at the Lincoln memorial in Washington I picked a list of coincidences between the Kennedy and Lincoln assassinations ("reproduced on antiqued parchment that looks and feels old"), which includes gems such as "Lincoln's secretary, whose name was Kennedy, advised him not to go to the theatre; Kennedy's secretary, whose name was Lincoln, advised him not to go to Dallas."

into one big interconnecting conspiracy. Bizarre coincidences often seem to bear the stamp of the literary, forming part of the "compression and numinous sheen" which Win Everett believes distinguishes real from fictional life. The more he becomes involved in the intricacies of the assassination plot, the more he is convinced this distinction is untenable:

> We lead more interesting lives than we think. We are characters in plots, without the compression and numinous sheen. Our lives, carefully examined in all their affinities and links, abound with suggestive meaning, with themes and involute turnings we have not allowed ourselves to see completely. (78)

In a sentence which could be read as characterising DeLillo's project as much as his own, Everett believes he "would show the secret symmetries in a non-descript life" (78). In the form of "secret symmetries," coincidences are part of the apparatus of comforting compensation and redemption which the novel can provide. But the coincidences of *Libra* resist the recuperation which *JFK* performs, resolutely undermining the kind of rational and realistic conspiracy theory the CIA-conspiracy half of the book might be trying to generate.

The process by which Oswald ends up on the conspirators' doorstep is far from obvious. He drifts through life, and it is only through a long series of chance connections and events that he ends up in New Orleans in the office of Guy Banister. The conspirators are then forced to realise that "it was no longer possible to hide from the fact the Lee Oswald existed independent of the plot" (178). Most of the conspirators refuse to dwell on the strangeness of this fact, but it is vitally important for David Ferrie, the manic, homosexual ex-airline pilot, a sufferer from alopecia, and, in DeLillo's rendering, a believer in the all pervasive power of cancer and coincidence. Ferrie informs Oswald that "they" are interested in the "signs that you exist," or, in other words, "evidence that Lee Oswald matches the cardboard cut-out they've been shaping all along." In this way *Libra* offers a convincing, realistic explanation for the artificiality which hovers over much of the evidence, with its scenes of the CIA plotters fabricating clues to a fictional patsy. But it turns out that Oswald actually exists, matching his pre-scripted double. What is remarkable about *Libra*, then, is that having alerted the reader to the inherent fictionality of the case, it manages to make this atmosphere of fabrication a condition of "ordinary life." As we have seen, Richard Condon's *Winter Kills* holds out the promise of an ineradicable instability of historical fact, only to restore faith in rational causality at the last minute. Conversely, *Libra* offers a convincing explanation for the strangeness surrounding the assassination, only then to undermine its plausibility through the narrative sleight-of-hand which duplicates the plotting, leaving the rational explanation in limbo.

Ferrie becomes the spokesman for this disturbance of causality. He tells Oswald that: "'You're a quirk of history. You're a coincidence. They devise a plan, you fit it perfectly. They lose you, here you are'" (330). Yet for Ferrie "coincidence"

is just a convenient word: "'we don't know what to call it, so we say coincidence. It goes deeper'" (172). There seems to be no cause and effect story that could account for—in rational terms—just how Lee Oswald comes to match his forged counterpart. "'I've studied patterns of coincidence,'" Ferrie says to Lee on the second of their three fortuitous meetings. "'Coincidence is a science waiting to be discovered. How patterns emerge beyond the bounds of cause and effect,'" he concludes (44).

Yet coincidence is less of a science than an intrusion of the irrational into the scientific world. The novel's title refers in part to the notion of astrology as a science of strange coincidences and hidden determinations. Coincidence is a force which all characters in the novel feel to varying degrees. Some are alive to its language, others try to resist it. It is perhaps another description of the feeling for which the term "paranoia" is merely a convenient shorthand. Branch believes that he is "writing a history, not a study of the way in which people succumb to paranoia" (57). Perhaps, *Libra* suggests, a history of contemporary America just is a study of the ways in which people cope with coincidence, how they resist or encourage the attractions of paranoia. The emphasis on the paranormal and strange forms of causality in *Libra*, however, does not subsume the rational and teleological plot of the conspirators entirely into its power. In the final analysis Kennedy is killed by a group of determined and more or less co-ordinated conspirators, for which we can trace a reasonably clear and coherent cause-and-effect story. But it cannot also be denied that Lee Oswald, in DeLillo's version, is a living coincidence, for whom there is no all-encompassing plot that would explain away his anomalous presence. The rational history of the assassination plot is forced to co-exist uneasily with an illogical disturbance of that plot.

Not only does the entrance of Oswald into the conspiracy plot produce a disturbance of its teleological narrative logic; his own life story is itself stretched out between his desire for the narrative coherence of destiny, and the dispersal of that intention into aimless, inconsequential details. DeLillo manages to pull off a remarkable narrative feat in *Libra*, in that despite the reader's certain knowledge of the ending and Oswald's own attempts to plot his life, the involvement of Oswald in the assassination still comes as a surprise. The even-numbered chapters of *Libra* feature the preparations of the conspirators, and carry as titles dates in the months leading up to 22nd November: "26 April," "20 May," etc. The odd chapters, on the other hand, consist of episodes from Lee Oswald's life, and are headed by place names: "In the Bronx," "In New Orleans," and so on. The conspiracy plot is marked by a chronological tightening, as the increment between dates becomes less and less in the approach to 22 November. But the Oswald chapters drift geographically, only hitting upon Dallas at the end, as if by accident. The novel starts with a few scenes from Oswald's adolescence in the Bronx. We see him playing truant and riding the subway, trying to read Marx and Trotsky in the local library, and we hear his interior monologue as he lives cooped up with his mother Marguerite. The events of Lee's life are never

quite the momentous ones we would expect from a boy heading towards tragedy. We read about him joining the Marines, being sent to Japan, even about his having sex for the first time, but these episodes never coalesce into the inexorable teleology and destiny that a presidential assassin ought to command. The episodes are too diffuse, too full of inconsequential details; in short, they lack the "compression" of a plotted life.

The young Oswald desperately wants to feel the force of such a plot in his life. Serving a term in the brig in Japan, he imagines himself as Trotsky, waiting in a small room in exile for the force of history to sweep over him: "he tried to feel history in the cell. . . He could see how he'd been headed here since the day he was born" (100). DeLillo's Oswald repeatedly provides a narration (both to himself and to an absent friend) that situates itself within the grand teleological plot of Marxism, trying to conjure up a purposiveness which life always seems to deny him. He also narrates his own actions as he performs them, utilising the language and generic conventions of the thrillers he reads. Oswald casts himself as a mean, purposeful agent:

> He lay near sleep, falling into reverie, the powerful world of Oswald-hero, guns flashing in the dark. The reverie of control, perfection of rage, perfection of desire, the fantasy of night, rain-slick streets, the heightened shadows of men in dark coats, like men on movie posters. (46)

But Oswald's life never quite turns out like the pre-scripted version, not even in the case of the assassination. As he becomes entangled in the conspiracy, he begins to feel that "summer was building towards a vision, a history" (322). Even though he does not feel that he is exactly in control of this destiny ("He felt he was being swept up, swept along"), he does feel that he is a willing and witting instrument of the plot. But the plot does not turn out to be what Oswald expected at all. He believes he is a lone assassin striking a blow for "little Cuba" that will make Castro welcome him with open arms. Yet just as he is about to fire a third and fatal shot from the Texas School Book Depository, Kennedy's head explodes. The one last thing which Oswald has latched onto to give his life shape and meaning has been taken out of his hands: there are other snipers. He realises that he has been a dupe; in the famous phrase he utters on being arrested, "I didn't kill no-one—I'm just a patsy." His life slips from thriller into farce: the genre in which he tries to live his life is not the one in which his story unfolds.

The confusion with which Oswald's life ends produces several narrative effects in DeLillo's version of events. The first thing to notice is that the lack of a clear ending means that there is a corresponding absence—or, more accurately, a belatedness—of origin in the story of Oswald. The opening scene of the young Lee riding a subway car does not present itself as a point of origin, as a moment retrospectively imbued with significance, recognisable as the time when it all began. In fact, the conventional teleological marker, "that was how it all began," appears belatedly, some 317 pages into the novel, after Oswald is already deeply embroiled in the conspiracy plot: whatever "it" is, its moment of definition is long overdue.

The second consequence of the missing sense of an ending to Oswald's life concerns the welter of incidental details which are scattered throughout the novel. The detritus of his life is not retrospectively translated into significant clues, but instead remain just trivial facts. We learn exactly what the parakeet cage was like that Oswald gave his mother, just which make of car it was in which he travelled to New York in 1948, precisely how much the coat cost which he bought with his first wage packet, and so on. Though precisely the kind of details which flesh out conspiracy theories, these details refuse to add up to any revelation, resisting incorporation into an all-embracing plot.

The incidental and the trivial are not confined to Oswald's story alone. They also seep into the conspiracy plot, simultaneously invoking but undermining the generic conventions of the thriller. When, for example, Win Everett is forging the documents for the fictional patsy the scene is narrated in the following way: "He unscrewed the top of the Elmer's Glue-All. He used his X-Acto knife to cut a new signature strip from a sheet of opaque paper" (147). Why "X-Acto"? Why "Elmer's"? Or, similarly: "Then Mary Frances [Win's wife] in her Viyella robe began to remove things from the table, a series of light clear sounds hanging in the air, discreet as hand bells" (19). What is the significance of its being a "Viyella" robe? If this had been written by Thomas Pynchon, there would doubtless be a paranoiacally convoluted story to be told which linked all three products up into some vast multinational chain, whose clandestine activities played a significant role in the plot. But in *Libra* these details refuse to coalesce into such a plot. Perhaps this is no more than a realist rhetoric of verisimilitude, but somehow it seems to matter that it should be a Viyella robe. Yet there can be no conceivable plot which could accommodate all these details as clues.

In a literal way, however, there is indeed a hidden hand behind some of the incidental details in the novel. As we have seen, Win Everett works on "script[ing] a person or persons out of ordinary pocket litter" (28), producing a fabrication which is full of "local color, background, connections for investigators to ponder" (138). Some details, then, are there because they have been placed there. But there is a meta-fictional explanation for the air of pre-scriptedness that lingers over the novel, over and above its exploration of the fictiveness of "ordinary life." It must be remembered that many of the seemingly incidental details and turns of phrase in *Libra* are taken from the copious pages of the Warren Commission Report. DeLillo's novel therefore reads as a palimpsest, in which traces of clues from the original investigation show through, producing a ghostly determination for all that is said and thought. Through the voice of Nicholas Branch, the CIA historian in *Libra*, DeLillo offers his recognition of the Report as one of the great works of modern writing:

> There is also the Warren Report, of course, with its twenty-six accompanying volumes of testimony and exhibits, its millions of words. Branch thinks this is the novel James Joyce would have written if he'd moved to Iowa City and lived to be a hundred.

What still amazes Branch is that "everything is here":

> Baptismal records, report cards, postcards, divorce petitions, canceled checks, daily timesheets, tax returns, property lists, postoperative x-rays, photos of knotted string, thousands of pages of testimony, of voices droning in hearing rooms in old courthouse buildings, an incredible haul of human utterance. (181)

There is no easy division to be made between irrelevant foreground minutiae and the real underlying forces of history: whatever there is, is all here on the surface, both intensely significant and impossibly trivial at the same time. Pulling on the thread of the assassination reveals not the last thirty years of American history, but the entirety of America, from photos of Oswald's pubic hair to old shoes and pyjama tops. The death of a President is matched by the death of the biographical subject, with the identity of the assassin dispersed amid the welter of trivial evidence.

*

THE PRIMAL SCENE OF POSTMODERNISM

In *Libra*, then, DeLillo deconstructs the master-narrative of the Warren Commission Report, re-reading its central plot about the assassination of the President as if it were the first postmodernist novel. It is an encyclopaedic fiction whose wealth of details, discourses and images cannot be held together by an overarching mythic code or a master plot. Its mixture of the extremely serious with the utterly trivial begins to blur the boundaries between high and low culture.[75] Moreover, one of its central pieces of evidence is a representation of the event, the now legendary home-movie shot by Abraham Zapruder. Like the Zapruder footage, the assassination itself has become endlessly displayed, bought, sold, and replayed, turned into countless representations, commodities, and museum "experiences."

The Sixth Floor museum carefully recreates out of fully authentic-looking period details the scene the police discovered at the south-east window minutes after the assassination, only to reassure visitors that none of the exhibits are originals. Perhaps the same could be said of the original assassination: with the proliferation of second-by-second accounts of what took place in Dealey Plaza, access to the brute event before or outside of its endless mediated versions proves to be an illusory goal. On the twenty-fifth anniversary of the assassination crowds gathered, as they do every year, in Dealey Plaza in a form of unofficial memorial ceremony. Some were taking photos of people taking photos, while others held up "original" photos from 1963 in order to see how the

---

[75] A claim for the Warren Report as postmodernist novel is made by Harold Jaffe in his Introduction to Pell, *Assassination Rhapsody*, pp.7-8.

real thing lived up to its representations; everywhere tourists and sympathisers jostled with the TV cameras recording the "event."[76] The assassination marks a significant moment in the history of the society of the spectacle, since it is one of the first events to be experienced as a *media* event. Vast numbers of Americans were hooked to their TVs during that long weekend which culminated in the shooting of Oswald by Jack Ruby live on TV. It has been estimated that on average each person watched 32 hours of TV that weekend. The memory of where they were when they heard the news that Kennedy had been shot is for many the only thing which unites America. An entire cultural memory is based on the reception of media news. The landscape and community of America (and many other parts of the world) was replaced by the mediascape of television, which billed itself as a substitute form of community for the (illusory, nostalgic) consensus which had been shattered by Kennedy's assassination.[77]

Libra is alive to both the endless mediation of the assassination after the event, and the saturation of images and representations in the environment in which the action takes place. "Viyella" and "X-Acto" are the realistic details of a culture whose reality is the world of commercials. Brand names form part of the interior monologue of characters whose inner lives are saturated with the external world of television, films and books. Oswald carries out the shooting at the same time as imagining the event on TV, and he tries to live his life through thrillers and movies. Representation becomes the guarantor of a reality that is but a ghost of itself: "Lee walked home . . . past hundreds of tourists and conventioneers who thronged in the light rain like people in a newsreel" (40); and "He watches John Wayne talk and laugh. It's remarkable to see the screen laugh repeated in life. The man is doubly real" (93). Things are only felt to be real, if they resemble their representations: the crowd at Love Field airport in Dallas are thrilled to find that Kennedy "looked like himself, like photographs" (392).[78] It perhaps is not surprising that the assassination comes to be plotted as a thriller since, in DeLillo's version, its two principal characters, Kennedy and Oswald, both read James Bond novels.

The Kennedy assassination might therefore be convincingly written into a story of postmodernity, as the first global event which is thoroughly subsumed into the logic of the image.[79] *JFK* strives to mask the difference between the fabricated documentary

---

[76] See Nick Trujillo, "Interpreting November 22: A Critical Ethnography of an Assassination Site," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 79 (1993), 447-66.

[77] The term "mediascape" comes from Arthur Kroker and David Cook, "Television and the Triumph of Culture," in *The Postmodern Scene: Excremental Culture and Hyper-Aesthetics*, Arthur and Marilouise Kroker, eds (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), pp.267-79.

[78] Along with various other members of the English faculty at Duke University, Frank Lentricchia has produced a thorough-going analysis of the Baudrillardian aspects of DeLillo's world. See especially Lentricchia, "*Libra* as Postmodern Critique," in *Introducing Don DeLillo*, pp.193-215. Although I agree with many of the readings contained in this essay, I would argue that Lentricchia's account of *Libra*'s mediascape is more deterministic than DeLillo's novel warrants.

[79] Fredric Jameson, for example, puts forward this view in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of*

and the "real" footage, a task it performs so well that it only exacerbates the blurring of the distinction between the two, thereby undermining its attempt to get at What Is Really Going On. Conversely, *Libra* draws attention to this process, in its presentation of the assassination as an "aberration in the heartland of the real" (15). In interview, DeLillo emphasised the importance of the assassination as a moment of rupture: "I think we've all come to feel that what's been missing over these past twenty-five years is a sense of manageable reality. Much of that feeling can be traced to that one moment in Dallas."[80] For DeLillo, the assassination marks the origin of a crisis of faith not just in the "official version" of events told by the government report, but in the legitimating narratives of reality itself. The assassination is, in short, one of the key events that postmodernised America.

Yet this narrative of postmodernisation returns us to the "manageable" codes of realist causality. It becomes just one more story of the loss of innocence into which the Kennedy years have been repeatedly plotted. This tale of lost innocence manifests itself, for example, in the 1993 thriller, *In the Line of Fire*, in which—for the first time in his career—Hollywood hard-man Clint Eastwood cries on screen. Eastwood plays Frank Horrigan, an ageing Secret Service agent, whose duty in the Kennedy motorcade 30 years ago in Dallas should have been to throw himself in front of the President and to "take the bullet." Horrigan's tears are occasioned not only by his eternal regret that he hesitated at the fatal moment, but also by his sense of nostalgia, a feeling that the current President is just not worth taking the bullet for. The obvious moral of the film is that despite the current incumbent's self-conscious promotion of the Kennedy parallels, Clint would never cry for Clinton.

Agent Horrigan is not the only one to inscribe the assassination into a personal account of lost innocence. For example, Robert J. Groden, the "technical consultant" to *JFK*, turned eighteen on the day of the assassination and has been trying to come to terms with the event ever since. In his writings he explicitly links his own personal coming of age to the process of public enlightenment about the workings of power in America.[81] In a similar vein, DeLillo believes that the assassination played a key role in his formation as a writer:

> DECURTIS: The Kennedy assassination seems perfectly in line with the concerns of your fiction. Do you feel you could have invented it if it hadn't happened?
>
> DELILLO: Maybe it invented me. . . . As I was working on *Libra*, it occurred to me that a lot of tendencies in my first eight novels seemed to me to be collecting around the dark center of the assassination. So it's possible I wouldn't have become the kind of writer I am if it weren't for

---

Late Capitalism (London: Verso, 1991), pp.354-55.

[80] DeCurtis, "'An Outsider in This Society,'" p.48.

[81] Robert J. Groden, "The Killing of a President," *Arena*, Autumn 1993, pp.120-35.

the assassination.[82]

There is, however, something puzzling about the causal influence the event exerts over DeLillo's life. In an obvious sense the assassination functions as an initial impetus for his life as a writer, something which galvanises him into chronicling the emergence of postmodern America. Yet the Kennedy assassination, as it appears in *Libra*, is also the logical culmination of his career as a writer of paranoid thrillers. While DeLillo claims the shooting invented him as a writer, it was also something waiting to be invented by him as the teleological conclusion of the concerns building throughout his œuvre. This hesitation brings us back to the double logic of the Oedipal story. On the one hand, the Kennedy assassination acted as a hidden motive whose true import remained obscure. On the other hand, it was only during the writing of *Libra* that the assassination belatedly emerged as a thematically necessary moment, around which DeLillo's career as a writer coalesced. In other words, it was only in the paranoid atmosphere which the Kennedy assassination helped to induce in America that DeLillo's writing could take shape. As much as the assassination becomes a moment of origin for a new mode of cultural and political existence in America, it is also only intelligible in the light of subsequent assassinations and revelations. It is therefore significant that *Libra*, in addition to its portrayal of conspirators, double agents, spies and assassins, documents a self-conscious sub-culture of experts in paranoia, consisting of conspiracy-readers, historians and decoders. In a similar fashion, the study of presidential assassins by Swanson et al. discovered paranoia as the motivation not only for Oswald's act, but also for the entire history of political assassinations in America. The Kennedy case, therefore, produces a culture of paranoia in the light of which previous events come to be rewritten as products of paranoia. Paranoia becomes both the symptom and the cause of the political crisis of legitimation DeLillo explores. In summary, then, if the Kennedy shooting is a cause of the breakdown in American reality, it is also an effect of the very effects it brings about.

The retrospective translation of the Kennedy assassination into the language of postmodern paranoia manifests itself most clearly in DeLillo's preliminary survey of presidential assassinations for *Rolling Stone*. DeLillo looks in detail at the shooting of President Reagan by John Hinckley, a "self-created media event." Hinckley claims he was motivated by his obsessive watching of the film *Taxi Driver*, which was based on the case of Arthur Bremer, who, having watched *Clockwork Orange,* stalks first Richard Nixon then George Wallace. Caught up in a web of representations, Hinckley shoots President Reagan, an event which, as DeLillo describes it, "was pure TV, a minicam improvisation."[83] It is only in the light of this subsequent, de-realised version

---

[82] DeCurtis, "'An Outsider in This Society,'" pp.47-48.

[83] DeLillo, "American Blood: A Journey through the Labyrinth of Dallas and JFK," *Rolling Stone*, 8 December 1983, p.24.

that DeLillo is able to re-read the signs of a life saturated with mediated images which he discovers in Oswald's case. Similarly, in Jean Baudrillard's account of the translation of political power into its simulation, the Kennedy assassination only comes to take on the contours of "originality" with the discovery of its fake copies:

> Power can stage its own murder to rediscover a glimmer of existence and legitimacy. Thus with the American presidents: the Kennedys are murdered because they still have a political dimension. Others—Johnson, Nixon, Ford—only had a right to puppet attempts, to simulated murders. But they nevertheless needed that aura of an artificial menace in order to conceal that they were nothing other than mannequins of power.[84]

There is perhaps even a measure of nostalgia in DeLillo and Baudrillard's construction of the Kennedy assassination as the limit case of modernist authenticity before politics finally gave way to postmodern simulation. Yet this political nostalgia only comes about through a disruption of causal narratives of progress, be they of the assassination itself, or of the development of theories about the assassination. We might agree, then, with Jean-François Lyotard's paradoxical conclusion that "a work can become modern only if it is first postmodern."[85] The Kennedy assassination only takes on an aura of modernist solidity in the light of the postmodernist crisis of narrative authority and official versions which it helped bring about.

It has become a standard criticism of theories of postmodernism that the proclamation of the end of metanarratives is itself just one more metanarrative.[86] This logical contradiction is felt to be a serious flaw. But the contradictory plottings we have found to be implicated in the Kennedy case should lead us to suppose that any narrative of the rational, coherent, teleological origins of postmodernity must be shadowed by a counter-narrative which snakes its way backwards through time and into the realm of the psychic and the symbolic. The assassination of President Kennedy can be read neither simply as a moment of causal origin, nor entirely as a totally mediated episode of history which drifts free from its moorings in factual evidence. In conclusion, then, I want to suggest that it functions as the primal scene of postmodernism.

In his case histories, most notably that of the Wolfman, Freud sought explanations for the current troubles of his patient in an event of early childhood which would later be transformed into a trauma.[87] In the Wolfman case Freud began to

---

[84] Jean Baudrillard, from *Simulacra and Simulations*, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton and Philip Beitchman, in *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, Mark Poster, ed. (Oxford: Polity, 1988), p.177.

[85] Jean-François Lyotard "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?," repr. as the appendix to *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p.79.

[86] See, for example, Brian McHale, *Constructing Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1992).

[87] Sigmund Freud, "From the History of an Infantile Neurosis (The "Wolf Man")," [1918], in *Penguin*

speculate that the original moment which caused the ensuing neurosis was the infant witnessing his parents having sex. This primal scene was a moment of horror whose significance derived from its role in the Oedipal drama of jealousy of the father's possession of the mother. Its effects, Freud argued, might not necessarily be felt at the time, but it becomes a hidden source of motivation in subsequent psychic events. In later revisions of the Wolfman case, however, he began to suggest the possibility that the primal scene might not have actually happened, but instead be part of the transpersonal phylogenetic inheritance out of which fairy stories emerge. The initial cause of subsequent meanings may instead be an illusory event, a product of the psyche which "needs" this type of symbolically weighty explanation to make sense of its present situation. In other words, whether the event was real or imagined, it had the same effects.

Oliver Stone's film restages the Kennedy assassination as a primal scene, as part of his struggle to work through an Oedipal relationship about the legacy of the sixties in America. As we have seen, the film is caught between two narrative logics—one motivated by rationality and coherence, and the other by fantasy and desire—neither of which can totally subsume the other. The therapeutic dynamic of the film leads the viewer towards the restaging of the primal scene in the courtroom ending. As with Freud's case histories, the primal scene is less a real event than a necessary illusion: the initial seven seconds of horror that are finally revealed at the end of *JFK* consist not of the assassination itself, but of its representation in the Zapruder home movie. *JFK* re-shoots the original crime, yet what is being recreated is less the assassination as it "really" happened, than a simulation of the existing footage by which we know the case already. In the final courtroom scene, the Garrison character screens the Zapruder footage to a shocked jury (and often a shocked present-day cinema audience), showing again and again the fatal moment when the bullet penetrates Kennedy's head. Garrison intones the words "back and to the left" as we view the footage. The instant of penetration is toggled back and forth, making the president jerk to and fro in a macabrely sexual moment of repeated annihilation. For Stone this is not any ordinary primal scene, we must remember, but one in which the embodiment of American virility is penetrated by the dark forces of a homosexual conspiracy.

What *JFK* struggles to repress and *Libra* endeavours to explore are the mutual interruptions between the dual narrative logics of coincidence and causality. In *Libra* David Ferrie comments on these subterranean connections between the two plot lines:

> "Think of two parallel lines," he said. "One is the life of Lee H. Oswald. One is the conspiracy to kill the President. What bridges the space between them? What makes a connection inevitable? There is a third line. It comes out of dreams, visions, intuitions, prayers, out of the deepest levels of the self. It's not generated by cause and effect like the other two lines. It's a line that cuts across causality, cuts across time. It

---

Freud Library, 15 vols (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), IX, pp.227-366.

> has no history that we can recognize or understand, but it forces a connection." (339)

Whereas *JFK* strives to downplay this "third line," *Libra* taps into the connections which dreams, visions and intuitions make between the "lone gunman" story and a conspiracy theory, and between fact and fiction. For DeLillo, plotting the Kennedy assassination involves investigating not only the facts of the case, but also its attendant fantasies, desires and paranoia. In *JFK* Garrison holds out the promise of reaching a factual resolution to the meaning of the case. *Libra*'s Nicholas Branch represents the opposite pole of total despair that any conclusion can ever be reached. *Libra*, however, occupies a position that "cuts across causality, cuts across time," in its attention to both the factual and the symbolic aspects of the case. And this is the mode of detective investigation which Freud's analysis of the primal scene forced him to embrace. Although beginning to suspect that an imaginary event could have as much force as an actual one, Freud was still left with a residual desire to know what really happened. "I should myself be glad to know," he informs the reader, "whether the primal scene in my present patient's case was a fantasy or a real experience."[88] Likewise, the desire to know (in the subtitle of a recent book) The Ultimate Truth about the Kennedy Assassination is not diminished even if one believes, as the narrator of D.M. Thomas's postmodern assassination novel declares on its opening page, that "fiction is a kind of dream, and history is a kind of dream, and this [novel] is both."[89] Instead, following Freud, we perhaps need to understand the event *as if* it were a fantasy in order to do justice to its complex transactions between fictional and conspiratorial plotting.

---

[88] Freud, "The 'Wolf Man,'" p.360.

[89] D.M. Thomas, *Flying in to Love*, p.3.

CHAPTER 2

NAMING THE PROBLEM: FEMINISM AND THE FIGURATION OF CONSPIRACY

In the previous chapter we saw how conspiracies theories about the Kennedy assassination participate in and produce narratives of postmodernism. This chapter will consider how the language of conspiracy has shaped, and has been reconfigured by, American feminism since the 1960s. Furthermore, whereas the emphasis in the first chapter was on the meanings and functions of *plot* in accounts of the case, the present chapter will focus on the *figuration* of conspiracy in feminist writing. Metaphors of conspiracy, I want to argue, have played an important role within a certain trajectory of popular American feminist writing over the last thirty years in its struggle to come to terms with—and come up with terms for—what Betty Friedan famously called the "problem with no name." The engagement with notions of conspiracy in feminist writings has, however, produced ambivalent effects. On the one hand, conspiracy tropes have been crucial not only in organising questions of blame, responsibility and agency, but also in linking the personal and the political in one transcoding metaphor around which a women's movement might coalesce. On the other hand, images of conspiracy establish a series of implicit divisions within American feminism. As much as the idea of conspiracy has helped feminism forge its identity through the naming of an enemy, it has also become the site of an unspoken intellectual elitism, producing a situation in which "academic" feminism ignores, repudiates, and contains its "popular" other, by which I mean that trajectory of American feminism typified by writers like Betty Friedan and Naomi Wolf.[1]

Chapter 1 focused in particular on fictional accounts of the Kennedy assassination which are positioned on the border between fantasy and history. In contrast this chapter will proceed mainly through readings of non-fictional feminist texts over the last thirty years. In doing so, I am concerned to read them *as if* they were fictional works, concentrating on the sources, functions and effects of their rhetorical manoeuvres. Some critical attention has recently been given to "mad housewife" fiction of the sixties which describes women's experience of living in a prison, a trap, or a conspiracy.[2] These critics work with the assumption that the novels can only say what it feels like, whereas the theoretical writing (either of the time or of the present)

---

[1] I am using "popular" to designate not so much the degree of popularity (although the two books I concentrate on, *The Feminine Mystique* and *The Beauty Myth*, were both bestsellers), but rather the way in which a certain tradition of "middlebrow" American feminism is marked out as "popular" precisely because of its modes of address and rhetorical structures, one of the most favoured of which, I am arguing, is the trope of conspiracy. Since writing this chapter, I have come across an excellent article by Jennifer Wicke in which she argues that "to the extent that academic feminism has an opposite, it is not movement feminism per se, but the celebrity pronouncements made by and about women with high visibility in the various media." Instead of immediately vilifying "celebrity feminism" as "a realm of ideological ruin," counsels Wicke, "we must recognize that the energies of the celebrity imaginary are fuelling feminist discourse and political activity as never before." Jennifer Wicke, "Celebrity Material: Materialist Feminism and the Culture of Celebrity," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 93 (1994), p.753.

[2] See for example Gayle Greene, "Mad Housewives and Closed Circles," in *Changing the Subject: Feminist Fiction and the Tradition* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991); Paulina Palmer, *Contemporary Women's Fiction: Narrative Practice and Feminist Theory* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989); and Pat Macpherson, *Reflections on "The Bell Jar"* (London: Routledge, 1991).

can name the problem for what it really is. For example, in *Changing the Subject*, Gayle Greene declares that "Friedan is so accurate a chronicler of white middle-class women's experience in these years that *The Feminine Mystique* provides historical documentary for what the novels portray fictionally."[3] Unlike Greene, however, I believe that a struggle over figuration takes place in the "historical documentary" as much as in the fiction, and is perhaps more significant precisely because it is less noticeable and less noticed. What I am concerned to explore are the terms and narratives—and the notion of conspiracy in particular—by which a certain tradition of American feminism has constituted its project since the sixties. As Elizabeth Weed writes in her introduction to the collection of essays, *Coming to Terms*: "the terms of feminism are given to it by the social formations on which it is produced, and feminist practice becomes an ongoing theoretical and political process of reinscribing or dismantling those terms."[4]

In the first section of this chapter I examine Friedan's appropriation of the language of brainwashing and conspiracy in *The Feminine Mystique*. I then go on to trace in the second and third sections the gradual literalisation of these figures of conspiracy in feminist writing in the latter half of the 1960s and into the '70s. Drawing images to describe the situation of housewives from a panoply of Cold War themes, "proto-feminist" writers of the early sixties edged towards a claim that the personal is *like* the political, but that was still a long way off from the position of radical feminists in the late sixties, for whom, in a new understanding of both terms, the personal *was* political.[5] And it is even further removed from the position reached by cultural feminists in the 1970s and '80s, when the last hint of comparison drained out of the metaphor as the two terms became co-extensive, making the personal quite literally the political.[6] The fourth section then examines in detail how feminism's engagement with

---

[3] Greene, *Changing the Subject,* p.58.

[4] Elizabeth Weed, "Introduction: Terms of Reference," in *Coming to Terms: Feminism, Theory, Politics*, Elizabeth Weed, ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), p.xvi.

[5] Carol Hanisch coined the phrase in her article, "The Personal is Political" (1968), in *Notes From the Second Year*, Shulamith Firestone and Anne Koedt, eds (New York: New York Radical Women, 1970). By "radical feminism" I mean the kind of feminism which arose in America from about 1967. Ellen Willis defines the movement in the following way: "radical feminists coined the terms 'sexism' and 'sexual politics' to express the idea . . . that sexuality, family life, and the relations between men and women were not simply matters of individual choice, or even of social custom, but involved the exercise of personal and institutional power and raised vital questions of public policy. Sexism, the movement contended, was neither the natural expression of sexual differences nor a set of bad attitudes or out-moded habits but a social system—embedded in law, tradition, economics, education, organized religion, science, language, the mass media, sexual morality, child rearing, the domestic division of labor, and everyday social interaction—whose intent and effect was to give men power over women." Ellen Willis, "Foreword" to Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-75* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p.x.

[6] "Cultural feminism" designates the kind of feminism which came to the fore in America in the 1970s (although its roots can be traced back to the late '60s). Lynne Segal, for example, defines cultural feminism as a movement which "celebrates women's superior virtue and spirituality and decries 'male' violence and technology." Segal, *Is the Future Female?: Troubled Thoughts on Contemporary Feminism* (London: Virago, 1987), p.231.

the figuration of conspiracy reaches a crisis point in the nineties with Wolf's *The Beauty Myth*, which can be read as a replotting of Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*.[7] In the final section I consider how recent repudiations of the language of conspiracy by feminists informed by psychoanalysis, poststructuralism and cultural studies are themselves caught up in a network of paranoid exclusions within the broad project of American feminism.

THE PROBLEM WITH NO NAME

In the previous chapter we came across the figure of Mae Brussell. In a local newspaper profile, Brussell described how she had been "just a housewife, interested in tennis courts and dancing lessons and orthodonture for my children," until the shooting of Lee Harvey Oswald live on television prompted her into investigating the assassination.[8] From the little I have been able to glean about Brussell, it is possible to see how her life tells an important (if somewhat unusual) story. Brussell's transition from housewife to full-time work via a divorce had become by the end of the sixties a familiar narrative of women's lives. For Brussell, the changing circumstances of her life were connected with her belief that America was in the grip of a vast conspiracy of powerful men who would stop at nothing to further their ends. Although in Brussell's case conspiracy and proto-feminist concerns are linked in a fairly literal way, I want to argue that the growth of feminism in this period is intimately bound up with comparable notions of conspiracy.[9]

As with the development of conspiracy theories about the Kennedy assassination, the feminism of the early sixties was marked by a growing conviction that what at first appeared isolated incidents of oppression were in fact connected into a much larger systematic plot. Moreover, as various accounts of the Kennedy assassination have retrospectively constructed 1963 as the year in which America lost its innocence and woke up to the currency of conspiracy, so feminism has come to see

---

[7] Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women* (1990; London: Vintage, 1991), and Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992)

[8] Judith A. Eisner, "Mae Brussell: Fears 'Hidden Government' Plans Assassinations," *The Pine Cone* (Carmel-by-the-Sea, CA), 21 September 1972, pp.43-44.

[9] Though unusual, Brussell's life story holds strong parallels with another exemplary narrative of the 1960s, namely Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966). I discuss Pynchon's novella in more detail in Chapter 3, but for the present it is sufficient to note that *Lot 49* is the tale of a Californian housewife, Oedipa Maas, who becomes initiated into the world of conspiracy theories when she is called upon to sort out the legacy of a tycoon who seemed to own the whole of America. She substitutes the labyrinth of paranoia for the claustrophobia of suburbia, as she begins to make connections between various groups of dispossessed and outcast citizens. In *Vineland*, Pynchon's 1990 update on California, we learn that Oedipa and her DJ husband had separated in 1967 after an amicable divorce.

the same year as the moment of its (re)awakening.[10] Accounts of women's fiction and the women's liberation movement return to that year as a significant moment of emergence in the history of contemporary feminism, pointing out that 1963 saw the publication of, for example, Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*, and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*.

Friedan's book was an immediate success, staying on the *New York Times* best-seller list for nearly two years. The popularity of *The Feminine Mystique* was no doubt due in part to its lively style. In many places the book reads like a thriller, with Friedan as the lone detective chasing up the clues to the mysterious mystique.[11] She describes how she listened to middle class housewives talking about their dissatisfactions with married life, until "gradually I came to realize that the problem that has no name was shared by countless women in America."[12] At the end of her first foray into suburbia, for example, she writes that:

> I reported back to my guide and said that while all four seemed "fulfilled" women, none were full-time housewives and one, after all, was a member of his own profession [namely psychoanalysis]. "That's a coincidence with those four," he said. But I wondered if it *was* a coincidence. (205)

As the search continues, so the little voice of doubt—presumably the one which also speaks to Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe—becomes more insistent, as the pieces of the puzzle fit together:

> These were fine, intelligent American women, to be envied for their homes, husbands, children, and for their personal gifts of mind and spirit. Why were so many of them driven women? Later, when I saw this same pattern repeated over and over again in similar suburbs, I knew it could hardly be a coincidence. (207)

As with researchers into the Kennedy case, Friedan reads coincidences as signs of an underlying conspiracy. She finds "many clues by talking to suburban doctors, gynaecologists, obstetricians, child-guidance clinicians, pediatricians, high-school guidance counsellors, college professors, marriage counsellors, psychiatrists, and ministers" (28). What the clues reveal is a concerted effort by welfare, educational and media institutions to manipulate women in the post-war period into returning to a life of

---

[10] The retrospective positing of 1963 as a year of transition for women receives popular figuration in films such as *Love Field* (1992), in which a Southern blue-collar housewife, obsessed with the glamorous life of the Kennedys, is compelled to drive all the way to Washington to pay her repects to the dead President on that fateful weekend. On this voyage of discovery, she learns to respect not only the black man who ends up helping her, but also to respect herself as an independent woman.

[11] Friedan has continued to use this idiom and narrative structure for each of her subsequent books. In *The Second Stage*(1981; London: Sphere, 1983), Friedan describes how she began to realise that women in the seventies were being led astray not by the feminine mystique, but by the *feminist* mystique of career-and-family. And in *The Fountain of Age* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1993) Friedan's "historical Geiger counter" detects "clues" about the "age mystique" (p.ix).

[12] Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, p.17. Further page references cited in parentheses in the text, abbreviated to *FM* where necessary.

domesticity, despite the gains which Friedan attributes to the "first wave" of late Victorian and early twentieth-century feminism.

In trying to "fit together the puzzle of women's retreat to home" (181), Friedan develops the notion of the feminine mystique. It amounts to a devastating ideology, part of a cunning and ruthlessly efficient programme to persuade women to forgo self-fulfilment through careers in favour of home-making and child-rearing.[13] Friedan describes, for example, how "Freudian theories were used to brainwash two generations of educated American women" (109). Even more disturbing, the "feminine mystique has brainwashed American educators" (155), those very college professors who themselves brainwashed their women students into expecting no more than a home and a husband out of life.

In developing an account of a conspiracy to brainwash American women into domesticity, Friedan draws on one of the key terms of Cold War politics. The word (which is a translation of a Chinese phrase) came into popular usage in the USA in the wake of the scandal that, among the Allied troops captured in Korea, only Americans had apparently succumbed to the enemy programme of propaganda and indoctrination. Although a U.S Army report on the incident concluded that it was mainly poor morale that accounted for the disproportionate rate of collaboration in the American contingent, it was popularly believed that brainwashing must be a deadly efficient technique of psychological warfare.[14] The term conferred a scientific legitimacy on suspicions that no American soldier in his right mind would wittingly choose the alien ideology of Communism; the only thing that could account for the shocking sight of American servicemen co-operating with the enemy was the belief that their minds had been taken over by force. The concept of brainwashing became popularised in novels and films such as *The Manchurian Candidate* (1959/1962), which portrayed the assassination of a presidential candidate by a brainwashed US army officer.[15]

In *The Feminine Mystique* the idea of brainwashing creates a picture of women as innocent victims of a scientific process of mind-manipulation by external forces. Friedan describes "American housewives around forty [who] have the same dull lifeless look" (222); similarly, she writes about the "vacant sleepwalking quality in a thirteen year-old girl in a Westchester suburb," a zombified child who acted "like a puppet with someone else pulling the strings" (246). These descriptions were familiar from

---

[13] Friedan always prefers the formulation "mystique" to the word "ideology." Her reluctance to name the problem as ideological can in part be understood in the light of Daniel Bell's announcement two years later of the exhaustion of such political thinking and rhetoric, in *The End of Ideology* (New York: Collier-Macmillan, 1965).

[14] For the history of the term "brainwashing," I am drawing on J.A.C. Brown, *Techniques of Persuasion: From Propaganda to Brainwashing* (1963; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), and David Bromley and James Richardson, eds, *The Brainwashing/Deprogramming Controversy* (New York and Toronto: Edwin Mellen, 1980).

[15] Richard Condon, *The Manchurian Candidate* (1959; Harpenden: No Exit Press, 1993); film dir. by John Frankenheimer, 1962.

accounts of the brainwashed soldiers in Korea. In the same way that accounts of brainwashing in Korea played down un-American sympathies, so too does Friedan's book imply that any undesirable beliefs which would seem contrary to the best interests of women (as defined by Friedan) must have been planted into their brains by the feminine mystique. Although Friedan seems to open up the possibility that women might have complicitous and "politically incorrect" desires, the notion of external infiltration in fact serves only to confirm her faith in the fundamental innocence and rationality of women. "It is easy to see the concrete details that trap the suburban housewife," Friedan writes. "But the chains that bind her in her trap are chains that are made up of mistaken ideas and misinterpreted facts, of incomplete truths and unreal choices" (28). The feminine mystique, on this view, is merely a set of false beliefs, which can easily be set straight once the relevant facts are produced. Not only is lengthier education conducive to more and better orgasms, Friedan claims, but it is the only thing that will really break these mind-forged manacles. Although she may be infiltrated by bad ideas, for which the media, the psychologists and the professors are to blame, the American housewife is still fundamentally her own woman: such is the hidden persuasion of *The Feminine Mystique*.

Yet at crucial moments in Friedan's text this conspiracy scenario—which relies on a clear separation of inside and outside, self and other, victim and perpetrator—becomes compromised. If a woman is brainwashed into the false ideals of the feminine mystique by external influence, Friedan suggests, then she could also be conditioned into accepting a "new identity." The concluding chapter of *The Feminine Mystique* adopts the imagery of brainwashing in its proposals for the creation of the New Woman: "drastic steps must now be taken to re-educate the women who were deluded or cheated by the feminine mystique"; there is also talk of "a concentrated six-week summer course, a sort of intellectual 'shock-therapy'" (323-24). If positive images of femininity as much as negative ones need to be implanted from without, then there is precious little left to constitute an essential core of authentic personality.[16]

In a similar fashion, Friedan acknowledges that "a mystique does not compel its own acceptance" (160), suggesting that there must have been some form of collaboration:

> For the feminine mystique to have "brainwashed" American women of nonsexual human purposes for more than fifteen years, it must have filled real needs in those who seized on it for others and those who accepted it for themselves. . . . There were many needs, at this particular

---

[16] In her persuasive re-reading of *The Feminine Mystique*, Rachel Bowlby makes a similar point: "Friedan is constantly caught in this contradiction, which can be smoothed over only by accepting the arbitrary distinction between true and false dreams—between those that are from within and correspond to the 'human' potential, and those that are from without and are imposed by the manipulators of the 'feminine mystique.'" Rachel Bowlby, "'The Problem With No Name': Rereading Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*," in Bowlby, *Still Crazy After All These Years: Women, Writing and Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1992), p.87. Bowlby also draws attention to the conspiratorial aspects of Friedan's book, but does not elaborate this observation.

> time in America, which made us pushovers for the mystique: needs so compelling that we suspended critical thought. (160)

The scare quotes around "brainwashed" signal an awareness that the idea of mind-manipulation is, after all, only a metaphor. The rigid conspiratorial division into Them and Us cannot be maintained, and Friedan must instead look to an account of the hegemonic orchestration of women's needs and desires. But these needs are "so compelling" that "critical thought" is suspended, making the acceptance of the feminine mystique a seduction scene in which a woman's desires are so intense that she is no longer able to think straight: she becomes a "pushover," an easy conquest. In this way Friedan's rhetoric works repeatedly to contain the dangerous possibility that women might be co-operating with the enemy, by implicitly reasserting a picture of women as victims of a male conspiracy.

Though at times in danger of undermining itself, Friedan's appropriation of the Cold War language of a brainwashing conspiracy does succeed in producing a transcoding metaphor which conjoins the "personal" aspect of women's lives to the "political" realm of national issues. This strain of imagery produces an account of sexual politics which reinterprets all aspects of personal experience into a coherent causal story of patriarchal institutions conspiring to keep women trapped in domesticity. In many ways, then, Friedan's appropriation of Cold War scenarios formed a breakthrough for feminism in its recognition of the political dimension of personal experience.

Yet while Friedan's choice of imagery enacted a reconfiguration of the political landscape of the late fifties/early sixties, it was also very much in line with contemporary fears about the containment and contamination of the national body.[17] Friedan claims that the feminine mystique is of national concern, but only when it impinges on traditional male-defined politics. She argues that "there are frightening implications for the future of our nation in the parasitical softening that is being passed on to the new generation of children as a result of our stubborn embrace of the feminine mystique" (244). For Friedan, the spread of homosexuality is not "unrelated to the national embrace of the feminine mystique" (239). The "parasitical softening" caused by the feminine mystique leads to an increase in the "overt manifestations" of homosexuality, which is "spreading like a murky smog over the American scene" (240); the feminine mystique is likewise figured as a toxic cloud from a fifties horror movie, which "feeds on the very facts which might contradict it, and seeps into every corner of the culture" (53). The "national" and "stubborn embrace" of the feminine mystique is also the embrace of the smothering mother, for, as Friedan explains, "the mother whose son becomes homosexual" is usually not the "emancipated woman . . . but the very paradigm of the feminine mystique . . . who attaches her son to her with

---

[17] For an account of this rhetoric, see Andrew Ross, "Containing Culture in the Cold War," in Ross, *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 1989), pp.42-64.

such dependence that he can never love a mature woman" (239).

Friedan's analysis participates in a debate which stretches back to books like Philip Wylie's highly-influential 1942 treatise on the decline of the American male, *Generation of Vipers*, in which he coined the term "momism" to capture his sense that a cloying femininity was to blame for turning American sons into un-American "sissies." Wylie was convinced that America was "a matriarchy in fact if not in declaration."[18] These fears of invisible threats to the national body become encoded in numerous Cold War novels and films.[19] On the one hand, motherhood was the site of sanctity which must be protected from alien invasion; on the other, mothers were represented as the source of internal infiltration in the form of a domestic surveillance which threatened to tame the individuality of American men, turning them into the faceless masses of totalitarian society. This nexus of ideas can be seen, for example, in *The Manchurian Candidate*. When Raymond Shaw is brainwashed into becoming a Communist-controlled assassin, he undergoes an "invasion of his person": "they are inside your mind now . . . you are a host body and they are feeding on you."[20] It turns out that his own mother is the "Queen of Diamonds," the Communist agent who is controlling him as an assassin. The final scene of revelation alternates between maternal tenderness and sexual predation. "She took his hand and kissed it with burning devotion," and "she held his face in her hands and stared into it tenderly." But then "her long fingers dug into his shoulders and pulled him to her on the chaise, and as her left hand opened the Chinese robe she remembered Poppa and the sound of high rain in the attic when she had been a little girl, and she found again the ecstatic peace she had lost so long, long before."[21] Raymond's mother embodies a realm of lost innocence that is far removed from national politics; yet she is also the very agent of its destruction, a figure in whom maternal and Communist infiltration merge. Likewise for Friedan, although women are the victims of a male-orchestrated conspiracy, they also constitute a serious and subversive threat to the nation. In this way, Friedan's figuration of conspiracy opens up a new avenue for feminist politics, while at the same time re-inscribing *The Feminine Mystique* into an entrenched discourse of matriphobia.

We have seen so far how Friedan's engagement with the style and language of a Hollywood version of Cold War politics is both enabling and restricting. What makes her use of these culturally available narratives even more problematic, however, is that at the same time as *The Feminine Mystique* borrows from mass culture, it also develops an attack on the culture industry. Nowhere does Friedan revel more in the narrative

---

[18] Philip Wylie, *Generation of Vipers* (1942; London: Frederick Muller, 1955), p.53.

[19] Michael Rogin provides an excellent survey of these cultural artefacts in "Kiss Me Deadly: Communism, Motherhood, and Cold War Movies," *Representations*, 6 (Spring 1984), 1-36.

[20] Condon, *The Manchurian Candidate*, p.225.

[21] Condon, *The Manchurian Candidate*, p.286. At the end of the book, the manipulating mother becomes the victim of her son's assassination attempt.

technologies of the thriller than in the chapter in which she gains access to the secret files of an ad-agency boss. This enables her to name clearly whom she holds responsible for the brainwashing of women. Contrary to what we might expect (given the vehemence of her attack on Freud), "the practice of psychoanalysis . . . was not primarily responsible for the feminine mystique." "It was," she declares, "the creation of writers and editors in the mass media, ad-agency motivation researchers, and behind them the popularizers and translators of Freudian thought" (111).

In seeking to lay the blame for social ills on a deliberate conspiracy by the practitioners and managers of the culture industry, Friedan participates in a line of analysis developed by the Frankfurt school (in particular, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer), as well as anti-Stalinist intellectuals such as C. Wright Mills, Dwight MacDonald and Clement Greenberg.[22] Common to all is the belief that elements of mass culture, ranging from Hollywood films to advertisements, are capable of manipulating the mind of the unsuspecting consumer.[23] So-called low culture is always far from innocent, the argument goes, because of its ability to gradually wear down the consumer—Adorno uses the image of a record groove—into a state of passive receptivity and conformity that is just one stop short of totalitarianism.[24] By contrast high art always requires an effort from the spectator, insuring that s/he will be on the look out for its "hidden persuasions," thereby protecting art from contamination by both bourgeois art and mass culture. Society is thus rigorously divided into those who actively plot and scheme, and those who are the victims of such machinations; that is, between those who can read between the lines, and those who are condemned to read the same story everywhere.

In developing her case, Friedan draws in particular on Vance Packard's *The Hidden Persuaders*.[25] Like Packard, she is horrified at the potential power advertisers wield in shaping the hearts and minds of consumers. Where Packard emphasises the clinical efficiency of the "ultra-modern techniques" of "Motivation Research" (which

---

[22] For an overview of these debates I have drawn on the selections of essays in Bernard Rosenberg and David H. White, eds, *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America* (New York: The Free Press, 1964), as well as discussions by Ross, *No Respect*, and Christopher Brookeman, *American Culture and Society since the 1930s* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1984).

[23] In "Adorno in Reverse: From Hollywood to Wagner," Andreas Huyssen attempts to read Adorno against the grain, arguing that "contrary to what one often hears, [Adorno's culture industry concept] cannot be reduced simply to a notion of brainwashing or manipulation." Huyssen recognises, however, that "the double danger of Adorno's theory is that the specificity of cultural products is wiped out and that the consumer is imagined in a state of passive regression." Adorno's notion of the power of the culture industry bosses to determine meanings—their cohesion and efficacy as a conspiracy—is not acceptable to Huyssen, if "one begins to analyze in detail the signifying strategies of those cultural commodities and the mesh of repression and wish fulfilment, of the gratification, displacement and production of desire which are invariably involved in them and in their reception." Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986), pp.20-24.

[24] The record groove image is from Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry as Mass Deception," in Adorno and Horkheimer, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (1944; London: Verso, 1986), pp.120-67

[25] Vance Packard, *The Hidden Persuaders* (London: Longmans, 1957).

turn out to be no more than crass Freudian generalisations), Friedan, as we have seen, lends a patina of scientific credibility to her argument by adopting the language of brainwashing. And just as Packard seems to believe every single claim about the efficacy of advertising made by the "admen" in their trade magazines, so too does Friedan repeat as fact the comments that are made to her "in confidence" by an anonymous source in the advertising industry: both are in effect duped by the industry's own promotion of its influence.

Although very much in line with Packard's analysis, *The Feminine Mystique* contributes a specifically feminist twist to the conspiracy theory of mass culture. Friedan emphasises the gendered separation of agents and victims with her account, for example, of the systematic collaboration between the advertising industry and the editors of women's magazines. She is in no doubt as to the effectiveness of the advertising agency/women's magazine conspiracy to brainwash women:

> It all seems so ludicrous when you understand what they are up to. Perhaps the housewife has no-one but herself to blame if she lets the manipulators flatter or threaten her into buying things that neither fill her family's needs nor her own. But if the ads and commercials are a clear case of *caveat emptor*, the same sexual sell disguised in the editorial content of a magazine or a television programme is both less ridiculous and more insidious. Here the housewife is often an unaware victim. (202)

Though tempted to blame women for (literally) buying into the feminine mystique, Friedan is ultimately concerned to point out how the devious advertising campaigns are targeted specifically against women. The crowning moment of realisation in *The Feminine Mystique* comes with the discovery that during the post-war period of rapid suburban expansion women spent three-quarters of the household budget. Friedan therefore asks pointedly, "why is it never said that the really crucial function, the really important role that women serve as housewives is *to buy more things for the house*?"(181; emphasis in original). With her insistence that women are the main victims of the conspiracy of mass culture, Friedan's work initiates a line of feminist analysis which draws attention to the sexual politics of capitalism. Several commentators have described how, in the latter half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth, mass culture and commodification were repeatedly figured as a feminising, castrating threat to the strength of a nation.[26] *The Feminine Mystique* works against this alignment of mass culture with femininity, with its argument that women are not so much in league with the culture industry, as the special targets of its brainwashing. Later feminists have continued to concentrate on this "special relationship" between women, commodities and advertising, often with the same assumption that women are at the mercy of a ruthless conspiracy to brainwash them

---

[26] See, for example, Ann Douglas, *The Feminisation of American Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), and Huyssen, "Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism's Other," in *After the Great Divide*.

into the stupified condition of shopping automata. As Rachel Bowlby points out, in the same way that advertising has tended to concentrate its campaigns on women, so feminism has targeted marketing as a special site of attack.[27]

The price to be paid for this rethinking of the feminisation of mass culture, however, is a replication and reinforcement of the gendered roles of agent and victim. In *The Feminine Mystique*, the more women are seen as victims of the "sexual sell," the more the male advertising bosses are credited with cunning efficiency for orchestrating the campaign. Friedan's conspiratorial analysis thus produces a paradoxical situation, in which the more comprehensive the revelation of systematic manipulation, the less likely it becomes that women can do anything about it, or will even be encouraged to do so, if the odds are stacked so much against them. Moreover, it remains obscure why some women—and Friedan herself provides the obvious example in the book—have managed to escape the trap of the feminine mystique. On the one hand, then, the inscription of the feminine mystique into a conspiracy scenario serves to put the spotlight on those responsible for the worst excesses of consumer exploitation, reversing the traditional pattern of blame associated with the feminisation of mass culture. On the other hand, far from getting at "what is really going on," it only succeeds in mystifying the relationship between consumer capitalism and women's desires.

It must be noted, however, that Friedan's commitment to the logic of conspiracy is far from straightforward. Halfway through the book, Friedan finally fits the last piece of the puzzle together, realising that "somehow, somewhere, someone must have figured out that women will buy more things if they are kept in the underused, nameless-yearning, energy-to-get-rid-of-state of being housewives" (181). Just in case we might begin to expect a place, date and face to be fitted to that anonymous "figuring out," Friedan cautions us that "it was not an economic conspiracy directed against women." Similarly, having spelled out the insidious uses to which pseudo-Freudian theories were put in fifties America, Friedan disavows the possibility that they amount to a conspiracy. "It would be ridiculous," she admonishes the reader, "to suggest that the way the Freudian theories were used to brainwash two generations of educated American women was part of a psychoanalytical conspiracy" (109). And, as we have seen, Friedan also acknowledges the possibility that women must have needed or desired the mystique in some fashion for it to have been so successful. It is therefore significant that in this attenuation of the conspiratorial model of ideology, Friedan places the word "brainwashed" in scare quotes for the first time, signalling her ambivalence towards the literalness of the image.

But why is Friedan so adamant in rejecting the notion of a conspiracy? Her vehemence must be read in part as a meta-linguistic attempt to regain control of the

---

[27] Bowlby, "Soft Sell: Marketing Rhetoric in Feminist Criticism," in *Still Crazy after All These Years*, p.96.

figurative language through which her argument has proceeded. She must insist that it would be "ridiculous" to believe in a conspiracy theory, precisely because her text has already opened up that possibility. It must also be remembered that for left-liberal intellectuals in the post-McCarthy—but pre-Kennedy assassination—context in which *The Feminine Mystique* was written, conspiracy theories were a mark of an unacceptable political demonology. Perhaps also motivating Friedan's explicit rejection of conspiracy is an awareness that her analysis of the political dimension of women's personal experience was in danger of not being taken seriously as a work of scholarship. Not only does Friedan excoriate popular culture, but she also seeks to avoid contamination by mass cultural forms and figures in her own text. The book opens up the possibility of a conspiracy theory of sexual politics, only to deny it. In summary, then, we might say that *The Feminine Mystique* offers an account of what would come to be known as patriarchy *as if* it were a conspiracy, without ever fully cashing out the metaphor into literal fact.

THE LANGUAGE OF CONSPIRACY

In the decades following *The Feminine Mystique*, however, the various figurations of conspiracy in feminist writing increasingly became statements of fact. Whereas for Friedan the notion of brainwashing still carries a measure of scientific specificity, tempting her to place the term in scare quotes, in subsequent feminist writings it detaches itself from its moorings in Cold War ideology, becoming a dead metaphor, absorbed into feminist orthodoxy, and no longer noticeable as figurative language. For example, the New York Radical Women, protesting about the Miss America competition of 1968, handed out leaflets which asked, "What is so ignored as last year's Miss America?" Their answer to this rhetorical question was that the beauty competition "only reflects the gospel of our society, according to Saint Male: women must be young, juicy, malleable—hence age discrimination and the cult of youth." The real problem, however, is that "we women are brainwashed into believing this ourselves!"[28] Or, for instance, Patricia Mainardi, writing in 1975 about the nitty-gritty of who does the housework even in a so-called liberated household: "Then an interesting thing happened [when she asked her partner to share the housework]. I can only explain it by stating that we women have been brainwashed more than even we can imagine."[29] So now the notion of "brainwashing" can explain everything: not only why women want to be young and beautiful, but also why they end up doing more

---

[28] New York Radical Women, "No More Miss America! Ten Points of Protest," in *Sisterhood Is Powerful*, Robin Morgan, ed. (New York: Random House, 1970), p.523.

[29] Patricia Mainardi, "The Politics of Housework," in *Sisterhood Is Powerful*, p.433.

housework even in a supposedly equal household. In a 1975 article entitled "Brainwashing—The Facts," Alice Embree summarises all the different ways in which men—mainly through the culture industry—manipulate women.[30] What is slightly surprising, however, is that after the title, Embree doesn't use the term "brainwashing." So common had the figure become by 1975, it would seem, that it was not in need of explanation, justification, or, as with the Friedan example, inverted commas: it had become a statement of fact.

In her recent survey of "proto-feminist" fiction of the sixties, Paulina Palmer endeavours to account for the prevalence of conspiracy images in the writing of that period. She does this by confirming—in a tone which combines historical authority and confessional intimacy—the accuracy of those figurations of "what many women feel living in a phallocratic culture." "There can be few women," she asserts, "who, at some time or other in their lives, have not experienced the frightening sense of being trapped in a conspiracy of male domination."[31] But, in a similar fashion to Friedan, having asserted that most women in early sixties suburbia had the experience of living in a conspiracy, Palmer goes on to acknowledge that "in material terms this notion of a 'conspiracy' may be a simplification and exaggeration." Potentially simple-minded and exaggerated, the notion of conspiracy in the early sixties was perhaps, in Palmer's words, no more than "a projection of imaginative reality," a metaphor which merely gestured towards women's experience. Yet, having set out such a characterisation of the trope of conspiracy, she immediately performs a double-take, suggesting that "it may not be, in fact, the exaggeration which it first appears."[32] Palmer's tergiversations between a literal and metaphorical understanding of conspiracy imagery map out in miniature the convoluted development of feminist debates on figuration in the decades following Friedan's first book.

In the late sixties, some feminist writers were concerned not merely to express their experience, but to present a co-ordinated account of What Was Really Going On: the task was not so much to name the problem as to name the oppressor. Conspiracy and its related tropes became a focus of debate between feminist groupings in the question of who or what was basically to blame for "the oppression of women." The three most cited candidates were, as the analysis of the time framed it, individual men, women in complicity with male institutions, or "the system." Each of these positions is given an airing in Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*, a ground-breaking and popular work of literary criticism which attempted to sketch out an entire history and theory of patriarchal domination. Millett makes clear that men have all the power, and they are in

---

[30] Alice Embree, "Brainwashing: The Facts," in Redstockings, eds, *Feminist Revolution*, (New York: Random House, 1979), pp.178-92.

[31] Palmer, *Contemporary Women's Fiction*, p.69.

[32] Palmer then goes on to justify this claim by pointing to Lévi-Strauss's discussion of the exchange of women in kinship systems, of which men are the beneficiaries. The reader is left unsure as to where she finally stands on the matter of conspiracy. Palmer, *Contemporary Women's Fiction*, p.69.

league with one another to keep the situation that way:

> our society, like all other historical civilizations, is a patriarchy. The fact is evident at once if one recalls that the military, industry, technology, universities, science, political office, and finance—in short, every avenue of power within society, including the coercive force of the police, is entirely in male hands.[33]

Such categorical pronouncements leave the reader in no doubt of the existence of a vast conspiracy of male domination. Even though this fact may be "evident," however, the way in which men control women is, for Millett, not quite so directly coercive:

> We are not accustomed to associate patriarchy with force. So perfect is its system of socialization, so complete the general assent to its values, so long and so universally has it prevailed in human society, that it scarcely seems to require violent implementation.[34]

The fact that there seems to be little evidence of direct machination by the conspiracy only serves to confirm that it is more ruthless and more pervasive than had previously been suspected. So effective is it, that it has managed to remain invisible and undetected for the whole duration of history.

As well as an analysis of the institutions that make up the patriarchal conspiracy, and a more social-psychological approach that talks of the "system of socialization" which causes women to accede to their allotted "sex role," Millett also launches explicit attacks on particular men, namely Norman Mailer, D.H. Lawrence, Henry Miller and Sigmund Freud. Whereas Friedan averred that it would be "ridiculous" to call the institutionalisation of psychoanalysis a conspiracy, for example, Millett is not afraid to make such accusations about Freud. Millett's analysis hesitates between holding these particular men individually responsible for the contemporary configuration of sexual politics, and viewing them as symptoms of a much larger process of social determination of which they are also in some measure victims.

The internal tensions and contradictions in Millett's *Sexual Politics* became visible in the late sixties with the formation, fragmentation and repositioning of radical feminist groups, which defined their differences through their manifestos. Groups such as Cell 16 of Boston and The Feminists of New York favoured talk of conditioning and internalised oppression, employing a vocabulary of brainwashing, self-surveillance, infiltration, complicity and double agency to account for why women seemed to believe in and conform to stereotypes of their inferiority and submissiveness. What became known as the "pro-woman" line, on the other hand, explicitly rejected such conspiracy-minded psychological talk in favour of "external" factors, thereby removing blame from individual women. For example, the Redstockings, a break-away group from the NYRW, declare in their 1968 manifesto that "women's submission is not the result of

---

[33] Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (1970; London: Virago, 1993), p.25.

[34] Millett, *Sexual Politics*, p.43.

brainwashing, stupidity or mental illness but of continual, daily pressure from men."[35] If women seem to collaborate with their oppression, "pro-woman" feminists like the Redstockings maintained, it is only because they are reluctantly forced through circumstance into making complicitous compromises in order to survive. In the manifesto they go on to argue that:

> Attempts have been made to shift the burden of responsibility from men to institutions or to women themselves. We condemn these arguments as evasions. Institutions alone do not oppress; they are merely tools of the oppressor.

In effect, then, the Redstockings aimed to replace the abstract and metaphorical language of brainwashing with a particularised and literal naming of the enemy. According to this logic, believing anything less plays into the oppressor's hands.

What made these debates about the figuration of patriarchy even more fraught, however, was the increasing suspicion that women's groups had been infiltrated by real double agents. So, for example, when in the autumn of 1968 the NYRW began to disintegrate, some of the original members, feeling that their former tight-knit camaraderie had in fact been deliberately undermined, began to talk about the presence of *agents provocateurs* and double agents. Patricia Mainardi, a member of the inner circle of NYRW who went on to form the Redstockings, looked back on those meetings in an interview during the late 1980s:

> As the movement grew, so did the number of women whose commitment to the women's liberation movement was more tenuous. Your feeling was that these were people who were there to stop anything from happening. I would not be the slightest bit surprised [to discover] that there were agents and reactionaries there.[36]

Radical feminists thus had to confront the possibility that the very meetings in which discussion of the conspiracy of patriarchy was on the agenda were themselves subject to the all-too-literal conspiracies of the CIA and FBI. When the Redstockings reformed in 1973 (after an absence of several years), they devoted much of their energy to denouncing what they now saw as a liberal plot to take-over the radical feminist movement. The desire to construct what had gone wrong in the sixties in terms of a literal, personalised conspiracy reached its apotheosis when the Redstockings began to accuse Gloria Steinem and *Ms.* magazine of being involved with the CIA.[37] Talk of the

---

[35] The Redstockings, "Manifesto," reprinted in *Sisterhood Is Powerful*, pp.533-36.

[36] Interview with Mainardi, cited in Echols, *Daring to Be Bad*, p.99.

[37] For an account of these events see Echols, *Daring to Be Bad*, pp.265-69, and Ellen Willis, "Radical Feminism and Feminist Radicalism," in Sohnya Sayres et al., eds, *The 60s Without Apology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), pp.91-118. See also Frank J. Donner, *The Age of Surveillance: The Aims and Methods of America's Political Intelligence System* (New York: Random House, 1981), pp.150-55 and 268-75; and Carol Hanisch, "The Liberal Takeover of Women's Liberation," in *Feminist Revolution*, pp.163-64. The original article, "Gloria Steinem and the CIA," was included in the 1975 version of the Redstockings' *Feminist Revolution*, but was edited out for legal reasons under publisher influence when Random House produced an abridged version in 1979.

literal surveillance carried out under COINTELPRO (the government's conspiratorial counter-intelligence programme) thus co-existed uneasily with a more metaphorical understanding of hegemony as a form of complicitous self-surveillance.

Many feminists at this time therefore found themselves caught between a desire to create a new set of terms, and a need to continue to appropriate the language and ideas of an older, more literal, and more male-identified form of political activism. The problematic engagement with the language of conspiracy takes place within a wider struggle during the sixties over an appropriate language for feminism. During the decade the definition of feminism proceeded by a series of systematic analogies with other oppressed groups. In the same way that the "first wave" of feminist action in America was based on an analogy with the oppression of slavery, so too did the "second wave" of feminism arise in the context of the civil rights organisations in the early part of the decade.[38] Articles produced by the increasingly vociferous women's caucuses in the New Left characterised the situation of women in terms of race, class, and even caste.[39] These analogies would see their culmination—partly through a logic of "more oppressed than thou" prevalent in the Movement—in "The Fourth World Manifesto" of 1971. Towards the end of the sixties, however, the tendency to describe the condition of women through analogy with other groups was lessening. This was in part due to the fact that feminists had exhausted the available metaphors—they had gone off the scale of comparisons. The waning of a reliance on borrowed language was also the result of a new belief (originating in black militancy and separatism) towards organising around one's own oppression—and in one's own terms.

The development of consciousness-raising sessions as a feminist strategy in the late sixties and early seventies must therefore be understood in conjunction with this movement away from a borrowed language. The aim of consciousness-raising was in part to allow women to speak in their own voices, from personal experience rather than the language of male "experts" on women's issues.[40] Thus the Radicalesbians, a feminist group of the early 1970s, seeking to intensify the process of consciousness-raising, insisted that women divest themselves of all that is not woman-centred. "What is crucial is that women begin disengaging from male-identified response patterns," they argued. "In the privacy of our own psyches, we must cut those cords to the core."[41] But the project of finding a self beneath the acculturation often produced a

---

[38] For accounts of the development of the second wave of American feminism I have drawn on Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), and Flora Davis, *Moving the Mountain: The Women's Movement in America Since 1960* (New York: Simon and Schuster: 1991).

[39] Echols tells this story in *Daring to Be Bad*; see also Stanley Aronowitz, "When the New Left Was New," in *The 60s Without Apology*, pp.11-43.

[40] Kathie Sarachild outlines the rationale of consciousness-raising in "Consciousness-Raising: A Radical Weapon," in *Feminist Revolution*; Alix Kates Shulman discusses the implications of the technique in "Sex and Power: Sexual Bases of Radical Feminism," *Signs*, 5 (Summer 1980), 590-604.

[41] Radicalesbians, "The Woman-Identified Woman" [1970], in *Radical Feminism*, Anne Koedt et al., eds

distinctly paranoid discovery. As Elizabeth Weed writes, "the widespread practice of consciousness-raising groups in the 1960s and early 1970s did much to generate one of feminism's most important recognitions: that one's desires may not be one's own, that what one calls one's self may be constructed elsewhere."[42] Moreover, feminism was beginning to find that its language was not its own.

Where some feminists reacted to this discovery by seeking to expunge all trace of a male-identified political vocabulary, others enacted a satirical appropriation of that language. In the late sixties groups like WITCH [Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell] and the Lavender Menace injected a measure of humour and anarchic confusion into this already tense situation. Robin Morgan and Florika of NYRW formed WITCH in the summer of 1968 partly in response to the success of the Yippies. One of WITCH's first actions, for example, was to put a "hex" on Wall Street, recalling Abbie Hoffman's throwing money at the Stock Exchange the previous year. WITCH's formation and choice of name was also an ironic-yet-serious allusion to The Conspiracy, a.k.a the Chicago Seven, a group of activists who were at this time on trial before the House UnAmerican Activities Committee for allegedly inciting a riot at the 1968 Democratic Convention. The HUAC was brought back into the limelight for the first time since the McCarthy years as part of the government's heavy-handed attempt to break the power of the increasingly militant Movement. Referring to the fact that the HUAC had not included any women in the subpoenas to appear before the Committee—a list which included Abbie Hoffman and the founder of the Yippies, Jerry Rubin—Ros Baxandall of WITCH asked, "How come we, the real subversives, the real witches, aren't being indicted?"[43] Her question is both a demand to be taken seriously by the exclusive all-male club of "real subversives," and an insistence that the "metaphorical" conspiracy of feminism would in the long run be more subversive than the macho posturings of what Baxandall referred to as the "boys' movement." In this way, the rhetoric and rationale of WITCH provided both a mocking debasement of the conspiracy mania of the masculinist New Left, and an implicit recognition that repressive government policies were once again being mobilised under the justification of "counter-subversion" in cases like the trial of the Chicago Seven. Similarly, though most of their street actions consisted of merry pranksterism, WITCH were also quick to announce in a more serious vein that "WITCHes must name names, or rather we must name trademarks and brand names."[44] Joking talk of conspiracy thus co-existed uneasily with a literal desire to name names.

The formation of Lavender Menace tells a similar story of the parodic

---

(New York: Quadrangle, 1973), pp.240-45.

[42] Weed, *Coming to Terms*, p.xv.

[43] These details about WITCH are drawn from *Daring to Be Bad*; Baxandall is cited on p.97.

[44] Some of WITCH's flyers and "spell poems" are reprinted in Morgan, ed., *Sisterhood is Powerful*, pp.545-50.

appropriation of the rhetoric of conspiracy at the turn of the decade. A group of lesbian feminists staged a disruptive protest at the 1970 Congress to Unite Women, adopting the tactic of embracing many of the accusations made against lesbianism by liberal feminists and those outside the movement. They called themselves the Lavender Menace in response to a comment made by Betty Friedan at this time about the potential infiltration of lesbians—a "lavender menace"—within the women's movement.[45] Satirically confirming the charges made against them, they declared in their first resolution that "Women's Liberation is a lesbian plot."[46] The formation of Lavender Menace served to materialise the demonological fears of feminists like Friedan, ensuring that, as one of their slogans put, "I am your worst fears / I am your best fantasy." Within the feminist movement at the beginning of the seventies, then, groups like WITCH and Lavender Menace turned the language of conspiracy back against its originators (both macho revolutionaries and liberal feminists), disrupting the distinction between the literal and the metaphorical.

THE CONSPIRACY OF LANGUAGE

If the break-up of radical feminism towards the end of the sixties was in part marked by a parodic recycling and deflation of the language of conspiracy, the emergence of cultural feminism in the seventies was caught up in an inflationary circuit of literalness which saw the notion of patriarchy as a conspiracy solidified into factual statement. And whereas some radical feminists had countenanced the possibility that women could be conditioned ("brainwashed") into collaboration with patriarchal institutions, cultural feminists maintained the position that all men are entirely guilty of creating a conspiracy to control women, who are all innocent victims.

Probably the most influential proponent of this position is Mary Daly. In *Gyn/Ecology* Daly makes it clear that America—and perhaps the whole world—is organised by a male supremacist conspiracy. She insists that being logical "would require that we admit to ourselves that males and males only are the originators, planners, controllers, and legitimators of patriarchy."[47] For Daly, "the fact is that we live in a profoundly anti-female society, a misogynistic 'civilization' in which men collectively victimize women" (29). No detail of social arrangement is accidental; Daly goes on to declare that, "within this society it is men who rape, who sap women's

---

[45] Friedan was quoted by Susan Brownmiller, "Sisterhood is Powerful," *New York Times Magazine*, 15 March 1970, p.140.

[46] Quoted in *Daring to Be Bad*, pp.214-15. The Congress is also discussed in *Over the Rainbow: Lesbian and Gay Politics in America Since Stonewall*, David Deitcher, ed. (London: Boxtree, 1995), pp.36-38.

[47] Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (1978; London: The Women's Press, 1984), p.29. References to *Gyn/Ecology* are hereafter cited in parentheses in the text.

energy, who deny economic and political power." Patriarchy "appears to be 'everywhere'": not only have "outer space and the future . . . been colonized," but patriarchal control "is also internalized, festering inside women's heads, even feminist heads" (1). In *Gyn/Ecology*, the conspiracy of male power is total.

Daly repeatedly insists on the brutal facts of patriarchal power. She explicitly counsels against collapsing a literal understanding of the male-supremacists' plot back into metaphorical talk of abstract forces:

> women—even feminists—are intimidated into Self-deception, becoming the only Self-described oppressed who are unable to name their oppressor, referring instead to vague "forces," "roles," "stereotypes," "constraints," "attitudes," "influences." This list could go on. The point is that no agent is named—only abstractions. (29)

Despite her insistence on literal facts instead of abstractions, *Gyn/Ecology* is often densely metaphorical. Before going on to examine some of the features and functions of Daly's experimentation with language, it will be worth pausing briefly to reflect on the relative status of such literal and metaphorical descriptions of patriarchy. Daly develops two important strains of imagery which serve as replacements for a psychology of women's behaviour. One line talks of possession and exorcism, making patriarchy a devilish force: "It is women ourselves who will have to expel the Father from ourselves, becoming our own exorcists" (2). Another cluster of images plays off notions of brainwashing, mind-manipulation and alien control to explain why women sometimes are their own worst enemies. Daly writes about "fembots," defined as "Daddy's little daughter-robots, who dutifully titter on command, when he pulls their puppet-strings" (17). The scenarios of *Gyn/Ecology* might therefore be placed alongside the work of Ira Levin, a thriller writer who seems to specialise in plotting female paranoia. *Rosemary's Baby* (1969; film version 1969), for example, tells the story of a young New York housewife who becomes convinced that her neighbours are spying on her and that people are trying to interfere with her unborn baby.[48] The ironic twist, however, comes with the revelation that her paranoia turned out to be justified: her entire circle of friends, including her husband, are part of a Satanist cult who have succeeded in impregnating her with the anti-Christ. Levin's next novel, *The Stepford Wives* (1972; filmed in 1975), features a pleasant American suburb in which the women are all model housewives, belated epitomes of the feminine mystique.[49] It eventually turns out (more ambiguously in the novel, less so in the film) that the women look and act like "fembots" precisely because they *are* female robots. The Men's Association has been running a programme to trade in their real wives who had become too much of a handful when—horror of horrors—they had even invited Betty Friedan to speak. In

---

[48] Ira Levin, *Rosemary's Baby* (New York: Random House, 1967). Sharon Marcus provides a compelling analysis of the logic of female paranoia in this novel, in "Placing *Rosemary's Baby*," *differences*, 5 (Fall 1993), 121-53.

[49] Ira Levin, *The Stepford Wives* (London: Michael Joseph, 1972).

replacement, the men manufacture mechanical dolls, who are Disneyland versions of the diligent housewife, with larger breasts and smaller behinds, "too nicey-nice to be real." Only, they *are* real in the world of the novel. Once again the protagonist's paranoia is confirmed, and her metaphorical suspicions are materalised into literal fact. Although Daly and other feminists at this time began to insist on the literalness of their descriptions, they must always be seen against the kind of actualisation enacted in Levin's fiction. There is more than one way of construing the "fact" that patriarchy is a conspiracy, and more than one way of placing the division between the literal and the metaphorical.

It is significant, therefore, that *Gyn/Ecology* reflects self-consciously on language. The book forms a remarkable attempt to escape through linguistic creativity from what Daly considers to be the "mind-poisoning" of patriarchy, which has even infected the women's movement. "This book," states Daly, "can be heard as a Requiem for *that* 'women's movement,' which is male-designed, male-orchestrated, male-legitimated, male-assimilated" (xvi). Daly endeavours to create not just a new form of woman-centred politics, but a new form of feminist language which is not designed, orchestrated or legitimated by men. Whereas earlier feminists like Friedan were concerned to identify the problem with no name, Daly comes to see naming itself as the problem. For Daly, then, what is significant is that women are "unable to *name* their oppressor" (29; emphasis added). The point is, Daly warns, "no agent is *named*"; and recognising that patriarchy amounts to a conspiracy requires not only "the courage to be logical," but also "the courage to *name*." Literally naming the agents of patriarchy therefore becomes an important act in itself.

The emphasis on finding the right words and naming things for what they are is crucial to Daly's project, for she portrays language itself as a patriarchal trap. In addition to her use of the language of conspiracy, Daly turns her attention to what might be termed the conspiracy of language. She writes about the "hidden agendas concealed in the texture of language," going on to argue that "deception is embedded in the very texture of the words we use, and here is where our exorcism can begin" (3). Daly uses various strategies in her campaign to combat the conspiracy of patriarchal language. One method is to revalorise the very terms which have been used against women. Daly takes the figure of witches, for example, and turns the negative associations of the word into a positive model for feminist activity. Daly aims to rewrite the "deception plotted by the male-supremacist scriptwriters" by (re)creating a new mythology—a new plot—for "Lesbians/Spinsters/Amazons/Survivors" (20). Unlike the playful feminists of WITCH, however, Daly always takes her reappropriation of the term seriously.

A second tactic is the creation of woman-centred counterparts for male terms and characteristics. In place of men's "own paranoid fears" (29), for example, Daly offers the notion of "pronoia," or positive paranoia, which she defines as "seeing/making new patterns of perception as preparation for the latter/deeper stages of

Journeying" (401). "Pronoia" is just one of the countless new coinings Daly employs in *Gyn/Ecology*. Her prose is shot through with a series of neologisms, which aim to bring about in miniature a disassembly and recombination of the patriarchal conspiracy which is believed to inhere in the individual sign itself, rather than discourse as a whole.[50] In addition to new words, Daly also concentrates on the etymology of key terms. Her analysis, however, is often directed less to the deep cultural histories embedded in certain words, than to the surface appearance and literal inclusion of particular syllables. "Manipulation," for example, reveals within itself the word "man." Daly's emphasis on particular signifiers indicates a shift towards a literal-minded view of language in the 1970s, in which individual words can come to cause social effects.

This concern with the material and the literal effects of representation was fundamental to the campaigns against rape and pornography which began to dominate feminist activism from the late seventies. The feminist literature on these topics is too large for me to discuss in detail here, but I want to outline a few important issues which arise from these interlocking campaigns. The first is that the language of conspiracy became indispensable to the analysis of rape, in books such as Susan Brownmiller's *Against Our Will*. Brownmiller defined rape as the "conscious process of intimidation by which *all men* keep *all women* in a state of fear," establishing a Manichean division of society into men who are all guilty and women who are all victims.[51] In an analogous fashion to the way belief in a lone gunman was superceded by analyses of systematic conspiracy in American society, feminist analyses of rape began to describe it as the "all-American crime," and as the principal fact of patriarchy which ensures "the perpetuation of male domination over women by force."[52] In addition, the Cold War paranoid figuration of bodily invasion, infiltration and contamination returned as literal descriptions, as the female body became not a displaced metaphor for the political, but the very site of politics itself.[53] Whereas the language of conspiracy in feminist writings of the early sixties formed an appropriation and reconfiguration of contemporary politics, its use by feminists in the eighties produced disturbing echoes of long since discredited sexual and national politics.

The second point is that pornography became theorised not just as a representation of an act of violent sex, but as a violent act in itself. In this way the distinction between the literal and the metaphorical was strategically collapsed, thus

---

[50] Meaghan Morris makes a similar argument in "A-Mazing Grace: Notes on Mary Daly's Poetics" in Morris, *The Pirate's Fiancée* (London: Verso, 1988), especially pp.40-43.

[51] Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1975), pp.14-15.

[52] Susan Griffin, "Rape: The All-American Crime" (1970), in Griffin, *Rape: The Power of Consciousness* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), pp.3-22. The second quotation is from Brownmiller, p.209.

[53] Sharon Marcus discusses some of the metaphors of rape in her defence of a poststructuralist analysis of rape. Marcus, "Fighting Bodies, Fighting Words: A Theory and Politics of Rape Prevention," in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott, eds (London: Routledge, 1992), pp.385-403.

producing an insistence that pornography is not just like rape, but is rape itself; and that rape is not just like violence, but is violence itself. Once again, naming becomes a political act. As Andrea Dworkin comments in the introduction to her book on pornography, a man "actively maintains the power of naming through force and he justifies force through the power of naming."[54] By the eighties, then, the issue of naming the problem had been replaced by the problem of naming.[55]

Lastly, the emphasis on the causal power of pornography to incite men to violence—a view summed up by Robin Morgan's slogan, "pornography is the theory, and rape is the practice"—in effect marked a return to a conspiracy theory of mass culture, except that now it was men rather than women who were the duped and robotic consumers of ideological messages.[56] Andrew Ross, in his study of intellectuals and popular culture, explains that during the 1980s "the vestigial Cold War opposition between the advanced minority of an 'adversary culture' and the monolithically victimized mass was being played out by the new feminist intellectuals," leading to the "moral panic and conspiracy mania that are shared features of the discourses of both anticommunist and antiporn intellectuals."[57] In the antirape and antiporn campaigns, then, the language of conspiracy and a conspiracy theory of representation became intertwined, producing an unexpected return to earlier formulations in the discourse of paranoia. Whereas Friedan had chosen her metaphors from culturally available narratives of Cold War politics, the replication by feminists in the eighties of this language now carried with it a burden of anachronism and nostalgia. The uneasy alliance in the eighties between the pro-family stance of the Moral Right and antirape and antiporn feminists therefore begins to make some sense. Both reproduced the conspiratorial language and ideas of the fifties in their portrayal of women as innocent victims of male violation.

CRYING WOLF

So far we have seen how a certain trajectory of popular American feminism in the 1960s formed a coherent sense of its own identity through the representation of a coherent, conspiring enemy. In the seventies and eighties, the status of these figurations of conspiracy became increasingly problematic, as the emphasis shifted

---

[54] Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (London: The Women's Press, 1981), p.18

[55] In the late eighties there arose the issue of whether "date rape" was "real" rape or not. For a sample of this debate, see Camille Paglia, "Rape and Modern Sex War" and "The Rape Debate, Continued," in Paglia, *Sex, Art, and American Culture* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), pp.49-74.

[56] Morgan's comment is made in "Theory and Practice: Pornography and Rape," in *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography*, Laura Lederer, ed. (New York: Morrow, 1980), pp.134-40.

[57] Ross, "The Popularity of Pornography," in *No Respect*, pp.186-88.

from the representation of a conspiracy theory of patriarchal institutions, to a conspiracy theory of representation. In the late eighties and early nineties, I now want to argue, the issue of what is literal and what is metaphorical becomes crucial to a larger political and cultural debate within feminism itself.

I want to look in some detail at Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth* (1990), a text which is particularly relevant to this story since it forms an up-dating of Friedan's original classic.[58] Wolf tells a parallel story to Friedan's account of an ideological backlash against the previous gains of feminism. For Wolf, "the more legal and material hindrances women have broken through" in "the two decades of radical action that followed the rebirth of feminism in the early 1970s," "the more strictly and heavily and cruelly images of female beauty have come to weigh upon us."[59] And, like Friedan, Wolf often begins to present this not as a congruence of diverse historical forces, but the result of conscious planning, particularly by the advertisers and the very industries which stand most to gain from such a return to domestic virtues. At times Wolf is explicit about her rewriting of Friedan for a new generation, with, for example, a recapitulation of the scenario of women being duped into the stupified condition of Stepford Wives, automata who have been programmed to spend money no longer on their homes but on their bodies. "To paraphrase Friedan," writes Wolf, "why is it never said that the really crucial function that women serve as aspiring beauties is *to buy more things for the body?*" (66; emphasis in original). At other times, however, Wolf is less specific about her intellectual inheritances, with the result that *The Beauty Myth* reads more as a palimpsest of the last thirty years of feminism, in which the faint outlines of previous positions and figurations are still visible. The history of feminism's "coming to terms" remains sedimented within the body of Wolf's text, but keeps resurfacing at key moments.

The Beauty Myth is punctuated by moments of textual anxiety over what is to be understood metaphorically, and what is to be taken literally. Wolf frequently insists that many of the tropes she employs to describe women's oppression by the beauty myth are no such thing: she means them literally. "Electric shock therapy is not just a metaphor," she warns (250). Wolf presumably means that the manipulation of women's minds is not just comparable to ECT, but is sometimes actually instantiated by shock therapy. A similar hesitation between the literal and the metaphorical occurs in a comparison between the physical mutilation of slaves and the "employment demand for cosmetic surgery" (55). "The surgical economy is no slave economy, of course," explains Wolf, but adds that, "in its demand for permanent, painful and risky

---

[58] It is thus interesting to note that the front cover of the 1993 Penguin paperback edition of *The Feminine Mystique* bills it as "the classic text of the modern women's movement which exploded the *myth* of *The Feminine Mystique*" (my emphasis). In this strangely tautological advertisement, the title of Friedan's "classic" is translated into the approved buzzword of the nineties.

[59] Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*, pp.9-10 (further page references cited in the text). Considering Wolf's debts to Friedan, it is odd that she should date the "rebirth" of the feminist movement from the 1970s.

alteration of the body, it constitutes—as have tattooing, branding, and scarification in other times and places—a category that falls somewhere between a slave economy and the free market." Wolf seems caught "somewhere between" a desire to produce elaborate comparisons and figures, and an awareness of feminism's long history of making itself a distinct project that cannot be collapsed into other terms.

As the book progresses, Wolf engages in an endless process of bolstering up her rhetorical claims: when the comparisons seem to fall short and lose their force, Wolf redoubles her insistence. Tellingly, the closer to her own personal experience she comes, the more this strategy intensifies. In her heartfelt discussion of eating disorders Wolf is less equivocal, more certain that women's oppression is not somewhere between the metaphorical and the literal, but constitutes instead a literalisation of the metaphorical:

> Women must claim anorexia as political damage done to us by a social order that considers our destruction insignificant because of what we are—less. We should identify it as Jews identify the death camps, as homosexuals identify AIDS: as a disgrace that is not our own, but that of an inhumane social order. Anorexia is a prison camp. One fifth of well-educated American young women are inmates. Susie Orbach compared anorexia to the hunger strikes of political prisoners, particularly the suffragists. But the time for metaphors is behind us. To be anorexic or bulimic *is* to be a political prisoner. (208; emphasis in the original)

Wolf first advocates regarding anorexia *as* political damage. The fact that this observation must be claimed rather than merely stated suggests that such comparisons are more for strategic reasons than a mere desire to describe the situation of anorexic women in itself. Next she suggests making comparisons with other analogous groups; the movement is towards a more complete identification, but the figure still remains a simile ("as Jews," "as homosexuals"), if only in form alone. Finally, feeling herself to be beyond metaphor in an extreme situation for which Orbach's comparisons are no longer adequate ("the time for metaphors is behind us"), Wolf insists on a total identification between eating disorders and political imprisonment. The element of comparison in the original metaphor is cancelled out.

The implications of Wolf's rhetorical insistence on full identification in her metaphors have received much criticism—as have Friedan's comparisons of being a suburban housewife with living in the Nazi concentration camps.[60] The reiteration of the equivalence between the personal and the political leads to an erasing of any differences that might inhere in the various cases she mentions. Can anorexia "be" a prison camp in the same way that Auschwitz was a prison camp? Could a PLWA or a

---

[60] See, for example, Bowlby's comments in "Re-reading *The Feminine Mystique*,"p.78. Like figurations of conspiracy, holocaust metaphors have become a favoured trope within feminism, and they have similarly attracted much debate. Sylvia Plath and Andrea Dworkin, have likewise both become notorious for their use of concentration camp comparisons. These metaphors implicitly refer back to one of the founding conspiracy mythologies of our time, namely the Nazi myth of a Jewish conspiracy which helped legitimate a literal, systematic conspiracy to exterminate the Jews.

concentration camp internee escape their 'prison' through a recognition of the false images of homosexuality or Jewishness, in which, by Wolf's logic, they are trapped? The comparisons are surely ill-conceived, but the passage is nevertheless revealing in its focus on the problem of figuration itself. The declaration that "the time for metaphors is behind us" cuts both ways. It draws attention to Wolf's sense of redoubled urgency in a time of backlash, in which rhetorical circumlocution is a luxury that feminism can no longer afford. History, as far as Wolf is concerned, has in effect played a sick joke on women, turning their once figural language into literal fact. But the assertion also manifests an anxiety about language itself, speaking of a thwarted desire to match description with experience, to reach an unmediated realm beyond representation. The implication is that language—metaphor in particular—has repeatedly failed to do justice to feminism's project to make people see how things really are. Figuration, it would seem, has become an enemy of feminism, conspiring against women, and preventing them from being understood.

Wolf is weighed down by the last three decades of feminist writing, which have become littered with dead or absorbed political metaphors, requiring an ongoing forging and strengthening of new comparisons. For example, in the second chapter, which forms an extended comparison between the Beauty Myth and the worst aspects of religious cults, Wolf points out that "what has not been recognized is that the comparison should be no metaphor" (88). She continues:

> The rituals of the beauty backlash do not simply echo traditional religions and cults but *functionally supplant them.* They are *literally* reconstituting out of old faiths a new one, *literally* drawing on traditional techniques of mystification and thought control, to alter women's minds as sweepingly as any past evangelical wave. (88; emphasis in original)

In such passages the author of *The Beauty Myth* finds herself in the position of crying wolf: this time, the frenetic italics seem to say, it's really real, no longer a false alarm, no longer a metaphor. The movement towards a literalisation of the figurative has pushed the language of her feminism to a crisis point, in which the more Wolf insists on the non-figural nature of her assertion, the more it draws attention to its rhetorical status. The more her words slip from control, the louder she must shout them.

It is therefore extremely significant that the one image which Wolf doesn't insist on is the figure of conspiracy. *The Beauty Myth* begins with the following epigraph from Ann Jones:

> I notice that it is the fashion . . . to disclaim any notion of male conspiracy in the oppression of women . . . "For my part," I must say with William Lloyd Garrison, "I am not prepared to respect that philosophy. I believe in sin, therefore in a sinner; in theft, therefore in a thief; in slavery, therefore in a slaveholder; in wrong, therefore in a wrongdoer."[61]

---

[61] The passage in fact comes from Ann Jones's Foreword to her *Women Who Kill* (New York: Ballantine,

If this passage is quoted approvingly—and Wolf's page of epigraphs would be a strange place to introduce such irony if the excerpt is not meant to set the tone for the coming analysis—then we might expect a book on "How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women" to contain much denunciation of "male conspiracy." Yet, like Friedan, Wolf's work exhibits a self-conscious cautiousness in connection with the term "conspiracy." Turning to the Introduction we find that Wolf is suddenly reluctant to call the Beauty Myth a literal conspiracy. Having just listed examples of the "now conscious market manipulation" of the "$33-billion-a-year diet industry, the $20-billion cosmetics industry, the $300-million cosmetic surgery industry, and the $7-billion pornography industry," Wolf insists that "this is not a conspiracy theory." And, having described how the backlash "ideology that makes women feel 'worth less' was urgently needed to counteract the way feminism had begun to make us feel worth more," she then announces that this view "does not require a conspiracy" (17-18).[62] In the Introduction Wolf does use the phrase "cultural conspiracy," but places it in scare quotes. She is prepared to embrace many other extravagant characterisations of the beauty myth, but feels obliged to signal her distance from conspiracy theories.

Although conspiracy theories are expressly rejected in *The Beauty Myth*, the narrative structure of personification on which conspiracy theories rely makes a return—even in the very passages in which the repudiations are made. Conspiracy theories allow the possibility of apportioning blame for what might otherwise appear a series of unconnected and overdetermined events, attitudes and practices. They betray an attraction to the notion of reading history personally, of seeking a hidden cause behind every event, and behind every cause an evil conspirator who deliberately plots those events; in short, of giving a name to the faceless "problem." Wolf begins by pointing out that it is the *idea* of repressive beauty, rather than any particular item in the list of guilty industries, that is doing the damage. What to call this "idea," however, emerges as a problem in her prose. Following Henrik Ibsen she sometimes calls it a "vital lie" told by society to itself. Using the work of psychologist Daniel Goleman, she talks about "necessary fictions" and "social fictions that masqueraded as natural components." The title of the book, in a modulation of Betty Friedan's famous title, calls it the beauty *myth*. And, in the least precise formulation of all, when she claims

---

1981), pp.vii-xviii. Noting that "among academic historians and literary historians" it "seems to be incumbent upon the author to say that readers who gain the impression from the book that men as a group have done something unpleasant as a group to women as a group are entirely mistaken," Jones concludes that, "if this book leaves the impression that men have conspired to keep women down, that is exactly the impression I mean to convey; for I believe that men could not have succeeded as well as they have without concerted effort" (p.xvii).

[62] In a remarkably similar passage in the Introduction to *Backlash*, the book that consolidated the analysis of contemporary anti-feminism started in *The Beauty Myth*, Susan Faludi performs the same kind of rhetorical manœuvre. Having just given a brief overview of the many elements of the "backlash" that her book is to deal with, she then warns the reader that "these phenomena are all related, but that doesn't mean they are somehow co-ordinated," Faludi drives the point home: "the backlash is not a conspiracy, with a council dispatching agents from a central room." Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (New York: Crown, 1991), p.xxii.

that the beauty backlash does not require a conspiracy, she qualifies it by adding, "merely an atmosphere" (18).

But having removed all trace of malicious conspiratorial agents in these careful circumlocutions of what—if this were not a book directed towards the American popular market—might be termed ideology, patriarchy or hegemony, Wolf then describes how "the resulting hallucination materializes." At the very moment of insistence on materiality, then, literal conspirators give way to figurative ones, as the text becomes crowded with prosopopeia. "No longer just an idea," Wolf continues, "it [i.e. the beauty myth] becomes three-dimensional, incorporating within itself how women live and how they do not live." The verb forms once again are active, conjuring up the spectre of a meta-conspiracy, an ideology with a human face, as we hear how "it [the contemporary backlash] has grown stronger to take over the work of social coercion that myths about motherhood, domesticity, chastity, and passivity, no longer can manage."[63] In the tone of Senator McCarthy sounding the alarm about a personified version of the Communist peril infiltrating America, Wolf goes on to tell how "it is seeking right now to undo psychologically and covertly all the good things that feminism did for women materially and overtly." But just at the end of the Introduction this rhetorical return of the disavowed trope of prosopopeia is itself inverted, in a move invoking what can now only be described as a meta-meta-conspiracy. In a reversion to a sinisterly anonymous passive verb form, Wolf explains how, "after the success of the women's movement's second wave, the beauty myth was perfected to checkmate power at every level in individual women's lives." But by whom was it perfected? Just when we had a grip on the Beauty Myth (to capitalise it in the same way that Wolf capitalises Friedan's phrase, the "Feminine Mystique") as a Frankenstein's monster, a fabricated mish-mash of cultural attitudes and images at once grotesque and desirable, so now we need to be on the look out for the shadowy scientist himself, malevolently fulfilling his conspiratorial projects through the cunning manipulation of the poor dumb monster of the Beauty Myth. In this way, each repudiation of a conspiratorial mode of analysis returns us to an even more paranoid formulation, as each abstraction of agency is refigured into an act of deliberate contrivance by shadowy agents.

---

[63] Compare, for example, Faludi's portrayal of the Backlash: "In the last decade, the backlash has moved through the culture's secret chambers, traveling through passageways of flattery and fear. Along the way it has adopted disguises . . . It manipulates a system of rewards and punishments . . . Cornered, it denies its own existence, points an accusatory finger at feminism, and burrows deeper underground . . . The backlash line blames the women's movement" (Faludi, *Backlash*, p.xxii).

THE CONSPIRACY OF THEORY

In the concluding section of this chapter, I want to consider why *The Beauty Myth* should manifest such anxiety about figuration in general, and the figure of conspiracy in particular. It is doubtless due in part to Wolf's self-conscious rewriting of *The Feminine Mystique*, which, as we have seen, likewise exhibits a wariness about identifying its argument as a conspiracy theory. And, given the three decades of feminist struggle with the problem of naming which intervenes between the two books, it is not surprising that Wolf should betray a redoubled cautiousness in acceding to an image which by the nineties has a long and troubled history. With the collapse of Eastern European communism at the end of the eighties, Wolf's reluctance to characterise her strategy as a conspiracy theory must surely also be understood in the context of post-Cold War scepticism about this apparently out-dated political rhetoric, in the same way that Friedan's downplaying of conspiracy takes place in the post-McCarthy intellectual backlash against political demonology. Moreover, there are surely strong parallels between the Eisenhower era which Friedan describes (her initial moment of revelation comes "one April morning in 1959"), and the Reagan/Bush years in which Wolf's analysis takes shape, not least in the way that the individual presidents gave institutional legitimation to a paranoid rhetoric of national security at a time when détente was supposedly the official policy.

Yet these explanations do not fully make sense of Wolf's vehement claim that, despite appearances, her argument is not a conspiracy theory. What must also be taken into account, I believe, is Wolf's implicit recognition that conspiracy theories are a mark of the unscholarly. When in her second book, *Fire with Fire*, Wolf declares that "it's time to say fuck you, I'm gonna have footnotes, I'm gonna have breasts," her anxiety seems as much about not being taken seriously by "academic" feminism as it is a challenge to the anti-feminist backlash.[64] Although her message is obviously that in the nineties there should be nothing remarkable about being a woman with ideas, she seems as keen to emphasise the presence of her footnotes as the fact that she is a feminist. It is therefore important to note that the language of conspiracy is frequently associated with crackpot theorists like holocaust revisionists and assassination buffs; researchers like Mae Brussell, for example, are always careful to point out that they are investigative researchers, and not conspiracy theorists. In a certain sense, the concept of a conspiracy theory functions more as an accusation of unprofessional research, compounded by the fact that the main cultural outlet for conspiracy theories is in popular thrillers and detective fiction. And here we must recall that Wolf, like Friedan, directs her most impassioned attacks on the culture industry; indeed, they both

---

[64] Wolf, *Fire with Fire: The New Female Power and How It Will Change the 21st Century* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993), p.201. As with Friedan's second book, Wolf transfers the charge of conspiracy from patriarchal institutions of the backlash to certain feminists whom she calls "victim feminists."

construct what amounts to conspiracy theories of advertising and the media. At times, then, Wolf's anxious denial of conspiracy theories is motivated by what seems to be a paranoid fear of being contaminated by this popular, unscholarly logic.

What makes this situation more complicated is that "academic" feminists have positioned themselves precisely in opposition to the conspiracy theorising of "popular" feminists like Wolf. For example, one of the "three insights" which conclude Lynne Segal's analysis of feminist strategies for the future is, quite simply, "the recognition that women's subordination is not a result of a conscious conspiracy by men."[65] If we can clear up this embarrassing tendency, Segal seems to imply, we will be well on our way to ridding feminism of its persistent attraction to such annoying patterns of analysis. "We" in this case refers to those who, like Segal, feel that the project of "radical feminism" begun in the sixties has been hijacked by what has passed under the sign of "cultural feminism," a distinction which can be mapped onto the high theory/grass roots activism divide. Segal's forthright repudiation of conspiracy theories—combined with a hint of attraction to such explanations—is, I want to suggest, typical of the fraught relationship between academic and popular feminism.

There are several reasons for the repudiation of conspiracy theories by academic feminists. In Mica Nava's recent reassessment of theories about advertising, she notes how "current theories of culture and subjectivity take much more seriously notions of personal agency, discrimination and resistance, as well as (drawing on psychoanalysis) the contradictory and fragmented nature of fantasy and desire." This "new, more nuanced understanding of subjectivity," Nava goes on to explain, is crucial to "recent critical refutations of the notion that the media and advertising have the power to manipulate in a coherent and unfractured fashion and represent a move away from the notion of mass man and woman as duped and passive recipients of conspiratorial messages designed to inhibit true consciousness."[66] Feminists like Nava who are sympathetic to cultural studies have begun to employ the language of desire, fantasy and identification in place of conspiracy theories of, say, mass culture or Freudian psychoanalysis. Instead of a paranoid fear of infiltration, contamination, and indoctrination by external forces, emphasis is placed on the way that people use culture to create meanings, as much as having meanings imposed on them from above by the culture industry. These "refutations" of conspiracy theories, I would suggest, have been integral in shaping the kind of feminist cultural studies performed by critics such as Nava.

Furthermore, feminisms informed by psychoanalytic accounts of subjectivity and poststructuralist theories of language position themselves precisely in opposition to the notions of psychology, agency and causality on which conspiracy theories rely. For

---

[65] Segal, *Is the Future Female?*, p.231.

[66] Mica Nava, *Changing Cultures: Feminism, Youth and Consumerism* (London: Sage, 1992), p.165.

example, in her reassessment of *Sexual Politics*, Cora Kaplan draws attention to the way that Millet's analysis amounts to a conspiracy theory of Freudian analysis. Kaplan argues that "Millett . . . had to reject the unconscious, the pivotal concept in Freud, and something common to both sexes, because she is committed to a view that patriarchal ideology is a conscious conspiratorial set of attitudes operated by men against all empirical evidence of women's equal status in order to support patriarchal power in office."[67] Kaplan's accusations are doubly significant because, in her view, what popular feminist conspiracy theories of patriarchy fail to provide is any account of the workings of the unconscious and desire in social formations. Conspiratorial versions in effect cash out the unconscious into the rational and the deliberate, producing a deterministic and thoroughly efficacious portrait of social agency. "What distinguishes psychoanalysis from sociological accounts of gender," writes Jacqueline Rose, "is that whereas for the latter, the internalisation of norms is assumed roughly to work, the basic premise and indeed starting-point of psychoanalysis is that it does not."[68] What Rose's position suggests is that there should no longer be an unproblematic adherence to conspiracy theories of patriarchal history, for the concept of the unconscious will always act to undermine the conscious, coherent and entirely efficacious picture of a conspiracy. In this way, the accusation of using a conspiracy theory has joined that list of untenable feminist positions which includes essentialism and functionalism, marking a boundary between sophistication and vulgarity—indeed, the very mention of the word "conspiracy" is often enough to end discussion.

Viewed from the other side of the divide, however, it is academic feminism which is the problem. Some feminists have even characterised poststructuralism itself as a cunning conspiracy by male theorists and their female dupes. Just when women as subjects were beginning to receive attention from historians, the argument goes, along came poststructuralism which "conveniently" announced that the subject was a fiction anyway.[69] The accusation of a conspiracy of theory speaks of the divide between feminists who concentrate on the literal and material dimensions of male oppression in cases such as pornography and rape, and those theorists whose emphasis is on the figurative and the representational. In the introduction to *Bodies that Matter*, Judith Butler talks about "the exasperated debate which many of us have tired of hearing." Butler is referring to stock criticisms of poststructuralism—such as "'If everything is discourse, what about the body?'"—in which an insistence on the literal prevents any

---

[67] Cora Kaplan, "Radical Feminism and Literature: Rethinking Millett's *Sexual Politics*," in Cora Kaplan, *Sea Changes: Essays on Culture and Feminism* (London: Verso, 1986), p.21.

[68] Jacqueline Rose, "Femininity and its Discontents," in *Sexuality and the Field of Vision* (London: Verso, 1986), p.90.

[69] For accounts of this argument see Pamela Moore and Devoney Looser, "Theoretical Feminism: Subjectivity, Struggle, and the 'Conspiracy' of Poststructuralisms," *Style*, 27 (Winter 1993), 530-58, and Patricia Waugh, "Modernism, Postmodernism, Feminism: Gender and Autonomy Theory," in Waugh, *Practising Postmodernism/Reading Modernism* (London: Edward Arnold, 1992).

discussion of how the very construction of the category of the material is caught up in a series of powerful political exclusions.[70] For Butler, what is to count as the material is never guaranteed in advance.

What really exasperates Butler, however, is "when construction is figuratively reduced to a verbal action which appears to presuppose a subject," leading "critics working within such presumptions . . . to say, 'If gender is constructed, then who is doing the constructing?'" In other words, "where there is activity, there lurks behind it an initiating and willful subject," and, Butler continues, on such a view "discourse or language or the social becomes personified."[71] In effect, Butler is taking issue with the tendency of feminists like Wolf to find deliberate conspirators lurking behind any social processes. Butler's focus on the trope of prosopopeia is, as we have seen, born out in the case of *The Beauty Myth*. Yet what Butler fails to take into account in her argument against the personification of agency is any sense of the narrative pleasures which it affords. The prose of Friedan, Wolf and Faludi offers some of the dramatic popular pleasures associated with the plots, characters and scenarios of thrillers. Their popularity as feminists is in part due to their use of popular generic conventions.

A bizarre situation arises, then, in which academic feminism leads the way in displaying a sympathetic and perceptive approach to popular culture, yet reserves an often unacknowledged antipathy towards popular feminism for its attraction to the popular charms of conspiracy theory. Conversely, popular feminists such as Wolf and Faludi repudiate the term "conspiracy" in their desire to be taken seriously, even as they succumb to the attractions of personification and usher in a barely disguised version of the conspiracy theory of mass culture. In this way, conspiracy becomes not so much the indication of an already-existent natural division between the popular and the scholarly, but the site and the very structure of a series of shifting exclusions, silences and moments of rhetorical crisis through which a division between a vulgar and a sophisticated feminism is effected.

The language of conspiracy has produced divisions and exclusions not just between academic and popular feminism, but also within popular feminist writings. Quite simply, it seems that it is always other women who are brainwashed. This sense of superiority—of having transcended the historical and intellectual forces in which others are still immured—manifests itself in the contradictory positionings effected by the pronoun "we." The use of a collective "we" in feminist writing answers an understandable desire to assert a solidarity, to forge a sisterhood to oppose patriarchy. Yet, conversely, the use of the first person plural produces an implicit self-legitimating polarisation between those who are subjected to the conspiracy to brainwash women, and those who are strong and wise subjects, able to recognise, criticise, and even to

---

[70] Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (London: Routledge, 1993), p.6.

[71] Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, pp.6-9.

transcend it. As we have seen, Friedan mainly discusses the brainwashing of American women in the third person plural, giving the impression that—as she openly admits—once she was brainwashed by the feminine mystique, but now she has escaped the conditioning. Occasionally, however, she does use the first person plural, as for example when she says: "there were many needs, at this particular time in America, that made *us* pushovers for the mystique: needs so compelling that *we* suspended critical thought" (*FM*, 160; emphasis added). Friedan's momentary alignment with the duped majority sits uneasily with her self-promotion as the heroic lone detective who has managed to uncover the secret conspiracy. In a similar fashion, Kate Millett's occasional use of the collective pronoun jars with her objective analysis of what has happened to other women. Millett writes about how "traditional beliefs still invade *our* consciousness and affect *our* thinking to an extent few of *us* would be willing to admit," yet there is little suggestion that Millett's own consciousness has been invaded.[72] By contrast, in the SCUM (Society for Cutting Up Men) manifesto Valerie Solanas irreverently lambasts feminist gestures towards solidarity which belatedly accompany the revelation of cultural brainwashing. "SCUM," her manifesto announces, "is too impatient to hope and wait for the de-brainwashing of millions of assholes."[73]

By the time of *The Beauty Myth*, the problem of the collective pronoun has become pervasive. Sentence after sentence of Wolf's prose enacts a basic but contradictory division between those who are duped and those who are in the know. Usually in the first half of the sentence she quotes a fact or figure about the oppression of women, phrasing it in the objective third person plural, only in the second half to effect an identification with that oppression through her use of the collective pronoun. Sometimes this has a disconcerting poignancy, particularly in the chapter on anorexia when Wolf reveals that she had suffered from eating disorders as a teenager: "they" could indeed include "me." But in many other places the shift of pronominal stance mid-way through a sentence positions Wolf uneasily both on the inside and the outside of the brainwashing conspiracy: "If *those* women who long to escape can believe that *they* have been subjected to a religious indoctrination that uses the proven techniques of brainwashing, *we* can begin to feel compassion for ourselves rather than self-loathing; *we* can begin to see where and how *our* minds were changed" (*BM*, 128; my emphasis). As Tania Modleski points out, however, the desire to position oneself clearly "outside" ideology is misleading. "Today," writes Modleski, "we are in danger of forgetting the crucial fact that like the rest of the world even the cultural analyst may sometimes be a 'cultural dupe'—which is, after all, only an ugly way of saying that we exist inside ideology, that we are all victims, down to the very depths of our psyches, of political

---

[72] Millett, *Sexual Politics*, p.46; emphasis added.

[73] Valerie Solanas became famous for her assassination attempt on Andy Warhol in 1968. Solanas, *Scum Manifesto* (1968; London: Phoenix Press, 1991), p.25.

and cultural domination (even though we are never *only* victims)."[74] The tension in Wolf's syntax thus gestures towards her contradictory positioning as both duped and knowing, with the trope of conspiracy producing complex negotiations between and within each of the terms.

In the same way that *The Beauty Myth* almost inevitably constructs its own category of the culturally duped, so too it is very hard not to regard feminists like Wolf as dupes of their *Zeitgeist*, unthinkingly spouting the language of the day, victims of modes of thought which "we" have now seen through. Not only can it become easy to dismiss "popular" feminism of the present as the work of those immersed in various ideologies to which "we" are immune, but there is an equally common conviction of having gone beyond the primitive ideas of feminism's past. Jane Gallop, in her re-reading of some of the now more ignominious collections of feminist theoretical essays from the seventies, draws attention to the tendency to dismiss the writings of the past as embarrassing mistakes, the products of women who inevitably become characterised as "cultural dupes." She describes moments in her classes when discussion was foreclosed with the exchange of knowing grimaces, when her "audience assumed that [she] was describing an error of earlier days, a foolish . . . stance, that we were comfortably beyond, thanks to the poststructuralist critique." What Gallop discovers in such moments is "a notion of our history as a simple progress from primitive criticism to ever better and more sophisticated."[75] How to read the works of early sixties feminists like Friedan becomes a real problem. One possibility, as in Wolf, is to recycle the former analysis of the sixties, struggling to make its terms and figures fit into a new context in the nineties. Another possibility is simply to view them as mistaken analyses which have now been superseded. What I have attempted to do in this chapter, however, is to understand how popular feminists from Friedan to Wolf have engaged with the figuration of conspiracy, and how its logic continues to function in feminist writing today, not least in the construction of the very category of the popular.

---

[74] Tania Modleski, *Feminism Without Women: Culture and Criticism in a "Postfeminist" Age* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), p.57.

[75] Jane Gallop, *Around 1981: Academic Feminist Literary Criticism* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp.136, 79. Bowlby, in "Rereading Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*," likewise points out the blindnesses of a feminist criticism which can on the one hand attack masculinist myths of progress, yet, on the other, unwittingly reinscribe such narratives into an implicitly teleological history of feminist theory.

CHAPTER 3

THOMAS PYNCHON: THE CULTURE OF CONSPIRACY AND THE CONSPIRACY OF CULTURE

In the first two chapters we saw how conspiracy theories about the "official versions" of events (namely the Kennedy assassination and sexual politics) have contributed to the development of postmodernist and feminist challenges to orthodoxy since the 1960s. These two movements have participated in a widespread popular appropriation of the language and narrative form of conspiracy theory over the last three decades. This chapter will trace the emergence of this self-conscious countercultural engagement with the "paranoid style in American politics" through the career of Thomas Pynchon, whose novels have played a significant role in the development of a popular culture of conspiracy.

The first part of this chapter outlines some of the influential characterisations of the sixties as an age of paranoia, with Pynchon as one of its principal exponents. Instead of diagnosing Pynchon's first three novels as symptoms of the sickness of the age, I locate each of them within their particular historical moment in the developing diagnosis of conspiracy culture. Pynchon's novels, I suggest, are not just one more contribution to a vast culture of conspiracy ranging from popular thrillers to national politics. Instead they form part of an emerging self-reflexive debate on conspiracy theory as a recognisable form of historical explanation.

The second half of the chapter examines in detail what has happened in the nineties to the sixties concern with conspiracy, through a reading of Pynchon's fourth novel, *Vineland* (1990). Pynchon's first novel for nearly two decades tells a story of various counterculture characters of the sixties and their troubled survival through to the Reagan era. Most reviewers found the language and style of paranoia—previously Pynchon's most distinctive trait—to be missing from this novel. This absence made *Vineland* a success for some critics, a failure for others; significantly, it was Pynchon's first real bestseller. I want to argue that the apparent absence of conspiracy is particularly significant, because in the nineties Pynchon's intricate and highly self-conscious reworkings of conspiracy theories are in many ways no longer viable. In this novel hidden depth is replaced by visibility and obviousness, making obsolete the mode of literary detection which has sustained an industry of Pynchon criticism over the last two decades. In brief, I read *Vineland* as both a diagnosis and a symptom of a world in which the paranoid "depth" of secrecy has been flattened out by the proliferation of the signs of mass culture. The substitution of the self-conscious semiological paranoia of the earlier novels for the saturation of commodity culture might have made *Vineland* a popular success, but, I want to argue, in a final twist of irony *Vineland* reproduces what amounts to a conspiracy theory of popular culture.

THE CULTURAL LOGIC OF PARANOIA

Many commentators have agreed in identifying paranoia as one of Pynchon's most distinctive traits. Articles by Scott Sanders, Louis Mackey, Antonio Márquez and Leo Bersani focus, respectively, on "Pynchon's Paranoid History," "Paranoia in *Gravity's Rainbow*," "Paranoia, Pynchon, and Preterition," and "Pynchon, Paranoia, and Literature."[1] Likewise, Morris Dickstein's sympathetic commentary on the cultural experiments of the sixties, *Gates of Eden*, argues that "Pynchon's sensibility, like that of some earlier Beat figures . . . strikingly foreshadowed the mood of young people in the late sixties." For them, according to Dickstein, "paranoia, like radicalism, drug-taking, and communal life, was both a rejection of the official culture and a form of group solidarity, promising a more fully authentic life-possibility."[2]

Pynchon has been identified as one of a handful of novelists who captured—if not inspired—the mood of a generation. He is frequently inserted into a developing canon of paranoid novelists. Márquez imagines "future literary historians looking back and categorizing this period as 'The Golden Age of Paranoid Literature,'" and in many ways this has already happened, not least with *City of Words*, Tony Tanner's highly influential survey of American fiction between 1950 and 1970.[3] Tanner confidently identifies the mood of the times. In a remarkably close parallel with Paulina Palmer's comment on women's paranoid relation to patriarchy (which I discuss in Chapter 2 above), he asserts that "there is no doubt that during the last two decades a large number of Americans have come to regard society as some kind of vast conspiracy."[4] As we saw in the Introduction, Tanner finds a version of the dialectic of paranoia—fear of social and linguistic constraints coupled with a dread of formlessness—at work in most of the fiction of this period. "Most of the American heroes," Tanner explains, "share one dread—of being 'taken over' by some external force, of being assimilated to an alien pattern not of their choosing, of being 'fixed' in someone else's 'reality-

---

[1] Scott Sanders, "Pynchon's Paranoid History," *Twentieth-Century Lit.*, 21 (1975), 177-92; Louis Mackey, "Paranoia, Pynchon, and Preterition," *Sub-Stance*, 30 (1981), 16-30; Antonio Márquez, "'Everything Is Connected': Paranoia in *Gravity's Rainbow*," *Perspectives on Contemp. Lit.*, 9 (1983), 92-104; Leo Bersani, "Pynchon, Paranoia, and Literature," *Representations*, 25 (1989), 99-118. See also Mark Siegel, *Creative Paranoia in "Gravity's Rainbow"* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1978), and Steven Best, "Creative Paranoia: A Postmodern Aesthetic of Cognitive Mapping in *Gravity's Rainbow*," *Centennial Review*, 36 (1992), 59-87.

[2] Morris Dickstein, *Gates of Eden: American Culture in the Sixties* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), p.125.

[3] Márquez, "'Everything Is Connected," p.92.

[4] Tony Tanner, *City of Words: American Fiction 1950-1970* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1971), p.427. See also Raymond Olderman, *Beyond the Wasteland: A Study of the American Novel in the 1960s* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972): "When a man of the sixties feels he has lost control of his own life, when he thinks no single individual can influence large public events, when he feels he can no longer cope with the irrationality of public and private affairs . . . he begins to find accidents in the pattern of fortune—mysteries in the indifference of fact. Or, perhaps, he does discover . . . a fearful belief in the absolute malicious force of Conspiracy" (p.119).

picture.'"[5] Although Tanner is perhaps unique in claiming something akin to paranoia as the dominant mode in postwar fiction, other commentators have concurred in his creation of a canon of paranoid writers. Raymond Olderman, John Kuehl, Tony Hilfer, Pat O'Donnell and Brian McHale all place Pynchon at the core of their list of what Hilfer, taking the term from the pop group in Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49,* calls "the Paranoids."[6] In Fredric Jameson's panoptic survey of contemporary cultural forms, "Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capital," he names William Burroughs, Ishmael Reed and Pynchon as prime examples of postmodern literature. Jameson draws attention to what he disparagingly calls "the omnipresence of the theme of paranoia as it expresses itself in a seemingly inexhaustible production of conspiracy plots of the most elaborate kind in the postmodern age."[7] Although the link is not explicitly made, we are presumably meant to infer that Pynchon *et al.* are key postmodernists because they contribute to the omnipresence of paranoia as a key component of postmodern culture.

Jameson is not the only critic to develop an account of what might be termed the cultural logic of paranoia. As with Jameson's article, there is some confusion in other accounts of the era of paranoia as to the exact historical framework of this cultural development.[8] "Other centuries have only dabbled in conspiracy like amateurs," claim Carl Graumann and Serge Moscovici, the editors of a volume by social psychologists and historians entitled *Changing Conceptions of Conspiracy.* "It is our century," they continue, "which has established conspiracy as a system of thought and a method of action."[9] Some theorists have characterised the whole of the modern period as "the age of paranoia," in which, following suggestions by Lacan, paranoia is constitutive of

---

[5] Tanner, *City of Words*, p.109.

[6] Olderman, *Beyond the Wasteland*; John Kuehl, *Alternate Worlds: A Study of Postmodern Antirealistic American Fiction* (New York: New York University Press, 1989); Tony Hilfer, *American Fiction Since 1940* (London: Longman, 1992); Pat O'Donnell, "Engendering Paranoia in Contemporary Narrative," *Boundary 2*, 19 (1992), 181-204; Brian McHale, *Constructing Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1993). A canon of conspiracy films has also been constructed; see, for example, James W. Palmer and Michael M. Riley, "America's Conspiracy Syndrome: From Capra to Pakula," *Studies in the Humanities*, 8 (1981), 21-27, and Fredric Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, and London: BFI, 1992).

[7] Jameson, "Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review*, 6 (1984), p.80.

[8] Jameson conspicuously chooses his examples of postmodern literature (namely Pynchon, Burroughs, and Ishmael Reed) from the 1960s, but draws on the architecture and experimental video work of the 1980s in other parts of his discussion of the cultural logic of late capitalism.

[9] Carl F. Graumann and Serge Moscovici, eds, *Changing Conceptions of Conspiracy* (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1987), p.153. Two philosophers of psychology have argued along similar lines that paranoia is now indistinguishable from the normal functioning of theoretical activity; Yehuda Fried and Joseph Agassi, *Paranoia: A Study in Diagnosis* (Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel, 1976). Likewise Edward Jayne argues that paranoia is the dominant principle in modern fiction, in "The Dialectic of Paranoid Form," *Genre*, 11 (1978), 131-57; for an analogous argument see Leo Braudy, "Providence, Paranoia, and the Novel," *ELH*, 48 (1981), 619-37.

normal subjectivity in capitalist society.[10] Others focus explicitly on the sixties as the time on which this cultural sensibility becomes especially significant. For example, several contributors to the *Social Text* collection, *The 60s without Apology*, discuss the conspiratorial dimension of that decade. The authors of the ironic "Lexicon of Folk-Etymology" explain that, "in the practice of overt politics, the term 'paranoia' was applied when fear and anxiety analogous to that encountered in drug use were manifested intrapsychically."[11] Herb Blau, another contributor to the collection, concludes that, "it was conspiracy theory which dominated perception in the 60s, for good reason or wrong, almost more on the left than on the right."[12] From a very different political perspective, John Carroll, a sociologist writing in the late seventies, identifies the sixties youth movements as the prime site of emergence of "the paranoid personality." "This decade appears as peculiarly paranoid," he argues, "when one considers the accumulated diversity, intensity and persistence of the revolt against inherited authority."[13]

It has become a common manœuvre in Pynchon criticism to cite one of the many articles on paranoia as "the metaphysic of the age," and then to slot Pynchon into that "metaphysic" as one more example of the overproduction of paranoid thrillers, albeit distinctly highbrow ones.[14] What I would argue instead is that Pynchon's novels are indeed a complicitous contribution to the culture of conspiracy, but, more importantly, they are part of a wave of critical reflections *on* that culture. Though there is much truth to the claim that the sixties were marked out by paranoia, what is perhaps more significant is the emergence at this time of self-reflexive definitions of the culture of conspiracy, which identify it, name it, and criticise it. Conspiracies and conspiracy theories might have well have played a part in many periods of social crisis throughout history; what happens in the fifties and sixties is that the very notion of a conspiracy theory as a form of historical explanation and an indicator of a political sensibility becomes theorised, discussed, parodied, and finally incorporated as part of common currency. So instead of characterising Pynchon as merely one more exponent of paranoia, I think we should view his novels as participating in a larger process of cultural diagnosis.

Three articles in particular are cited in characterisations of Pynchon and other novelists as exponents of the paranoid style in literature, namely Richard Hofstadter's

---

[10] See, for example, Teresa Brennan, "The Age of Paranoia," *Paragraph*, 14 (1991), 20-45, and Carl Freedman, "Towards a Theory of Paranoia: The Science Fiction of Philip K. Dick," *Science-Fiction Studies*, 11 (1984), 15-24.

[11] Ralph Larkin and Daniel Foss, "Lexicon of Folk-Etymology," in *The 60s without Apology*, Sohnya Sayres et al., eds (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p.375.

[12] Herb Blau, "From '(Re)Sublimating the 60s,'" in *The 60s without Apology*, p.318.

[13] John Carroll, *Puritan, Paranoid, Remissive: A Sociology of Modern Culture* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977), p.80.

[14] The phrase comes from Márquez, "'Everything Is Connected,'" p.92.

groundbreaking essay "The Paranoid Style in American Politics" (1963), an article by an unnamed author in *Esquire* entitled, "Wake up America!" (1966), and an essay on "Paranoia" in *Harper's Magazine* (1974). In what follows, I want to read Pynchon's first three novels alongside these articles. Rather than regarding these three diagnoses of the cultural logic of paranoia as providing interchangeable explanations of Pynchon's novels, my concern is to locate each novel and its counterpart article within a more precise historical moment, thereby identifying three stages in the development of a self-aware debate on the paranoid style. In brief, Pynchon's novels display a movement from a satire on "Their" paranoia during Cold War, to an appropriation of the language of paranoia by the "We" of the counterculture in the latter half of the sixties.

(i) *V.*

Pynchon's first novel, *V.* (1963), has much in common with an influential article of the same year, written by the American historian Richard Hofstadter. First delivered as a lecture in Oxford during the fateful month of November 1963, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics" has become a favourite of Pynchon criticism, with its neat summary that "the distinguishing thing about the paranoid style is not that its exponents see conspiracies or plots here and there in history, but that they regard a 'vast' or gigantic conspiracy as *the motive force* in historical events."[15] Sanders, Márquez and Kuehl, for example, all quote this definition in order to characterise if not Pynchon himself, then certainly the world-view of his characters and of the novels themselves. Attention needs to be focused, however, on the conditions of emergence of Hofstadter's analysis: why were historians producing psychologised diagnoses of political styles at this time (that is, in the period after the highpoint of McCarthyism, but before the increasing reliance on conspiracy theories in the wake of the Kennedy assassination)?

Hofstadter proceeds by taking isolated examples from American history since the revolution, in order to trace in those significant moments the formation of a paranoid style which, in Hofstadter's view, produces a damaging, populist challenge to the stability of the pluralist consensus of American political life. Like Hofstadter's article, *V.* is also constructed out of a series of seemingly isolated historical episodes. The only thing these diverse events have in common is that Herbert Stencil, the son of a diplomat and the embodiment of the paranoid style in public officials, believes they provide evidence of "The Big One, the century's master cabal . . . the ultimate Plot Which Has No Name."[16] The title character V. in all her various manifestations is,

---

[15] Richard Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," in *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (New York: Vintage, 1967), p.29.

[16] Thomas Pynchon, *V.* (1963; London: Picador, 1975), p.226. Page references to this edition will be cited hereafter in parentheses in the text, where necessary in the form of (*V.*, 226). In the quotations from Pynchon's texts I have added square brackets to my ellipses in order to distinguish them from the

somewhat improbably, implicated in each of the following historical snapshots: "she" appears as Victoria Wren in Egypt (just before the Fashoda Incident), and in Florence (during violent urban unrest in the years at the turn of the century); as Vera Meroving in Southwest Africa (in 1922); as the Bad Priest (during the siege of Malta in the Second World War); as the woman known simply as V. (in Paris the year before the First World War broke out); and as Veronica the beatified sewer rat (in the present of the novel, namely late fifties New York). V. starts off as no more than "the recurrence of an initial and a few dead objects" (445) and by the end she becomes "a remarkably scattered concept" (389). Each of these seemingly strategic moments of social and economic crisis also represents a significant moment in the buried history of the paranoid style, occurrences marked out for example by "those grand conspiracies or foretastes of Armageddon which seemed to have captivated all diplomatic sensibilities in the years preceding the Great War" (155). *V.* becomes both a test-case of the possibilities of reading between the lines of history, and an examination of the historical emergence of that mode of paranoid reading.

The novel also develops a continuous, complicitous dialogue with Modernist literature and art. John Dugdale, in his exhaustive discussion of Pynchon's allusions to writers such as Conrad, James, Rilke, Eliot, Frazer and Joyce, explains that "this reading of Modernism is informed by the observation of the resemblance between its practices and those of the conspiracy theorist who sees shapes beneath 'the surface accidents of history,' and makes grand patterns out of 'any cluster of phenomena,' and detects alliances and agreements where the myth-maker sees connections."[17] Stencil's desire to find a unifying thread to history is pulled apart not only by the diversity of historical moments, but also by the sheer profusion of narrative tones, styles, literary parodies and points of view. This happens most notably in Chapter 3 ("In which Stencil, a quick-change artist, does eight impersonations"), which fragments Pynchon's earlier short story, "Under the Rose," into loosely interlocking narratives focalised through seven characters, most of whom are local by-standers and accidental witnesses to the "main action"—unaware that there even is a plot to assassinate the British Consul. The effect of these narrative "quick-changes" is to disperse the linear concentration of John Buchan-style British spy stories into a myriad of non-Western impressions and lives, defying the reader to sort out the "relevant" clues from the wealth of incidental details. In the final section of the chapter the task is taken to its extreme conclusion, when the narration assumes an impersonal and inhuman "vantage point," which turns out to be the exact place where Porpentine's shot body comes to rest (94). The difference between figure and ground is eliminated, when the fatal shot becomes merely "a flame . . . in the area of the other's right hand," and the Jamesian figures in the patterned carpet are turned to a "monochrome orange" in the light of the

---

frequent ellipses in the original.

[17] John Dugdale, *Thomas Pynchon: Allusive Parables of Power* (London: Longman, 1990), p.114.

setting sun. In this way the paranoid style of a "stencilized" reading is at one and the same time necessary for piecing the narrative of a culture together, and singularly pointless. In the beat scene of fifties New York Stencil's antiquated conspiracy theories hold as much weight as the apocryphal stories of crocodiles in the sewers, which is indeed where Stencil ends up pursuing his quest for V.

Pynchon's first novel thus takes seriously the idea of the paranoid style as a method of historical interpretation and literary composition which has actively contributed to the destructive events of the twentieth century. Yet it also ridicules Stencil's quest as the work of a bizarre outsider whose sights are turned towards the past and to European forms of political intrigue. Hofstadter's analysis displays a similar tension. On the one hand, he is keen to show that the paranoid style is far from an individual mental aberration, since it has been taken seriously in a variety of historical situations, and across the political spectrum. On the other, the majority of Hofstadter's examples are taken from minority, "fringe" politics. The presentation of the paranoid style as a dangerous historical development is thus coupled with a recognition that most of its proponents were not in the mainstream of political power. As I outlined in the Introduction, Hofstadter is one of several American historians and political scientists in the late fifties and early sixties whose emphasis turned to the irrational basis of politics instead of the conscious, material interests of its participants. Countersubversion came to be understood more in terms of displaced, unconscious fears that crystallised into a conspiracy theory, than as a fully intentional scheme which conveniently used scare stories to promote political goals. In short, psychological categories seemed to offer better purchase on the waywardness of recent politics than purely economic ones. *V.* participates in this movement towards a definition and a diagnosis of the paranoid style in history. Significantly, it is Eigenvalue, Stencil's dentist and substitute psychoanalyst, who gives the clearest—and clearly satirical—diagnosis of Stencil's condition:

> Cavities in the teeth occur for good reason . . . But even if there are several per tooth, there's no conscious organization there against the life of the pulp, no conspiracy. Yet we have men like Stencil, who must go about grouping the world's random caries into cabals. (153)

Hofstadter is careful to point out that he is less concerned to take issue with the specific content of each conspiracy theory, than to identify a recurrent "way of seeing the world and expressing oneself." But, as he admits, "the term 'the paranoid style' is pejorative, and it is meant to be."[18] Both Hofstadter's article and Pynchon's novel make more sense if we remember that the previous year, 1962, had seen the world pushed to the brink of nuclear war with the Cuban missile crisis. On top of this, the memory of McCarthyism was still fresh, even if it was now regarded as an aberration in the normal workings of American politics. Both Pynchon and Hofstadter—albeit from

---

[18] Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style," p.5.

different perspectives—participate in a wider attack by sixties intellectuals on the institutionalised culture of paranoia that dominated Cold War politics, in which the conspiratorial imagination had first to be classified in order to license subsequent denunciations.[19]

Both *V.* and Hofstadter's paper were written before the Kennedy assassination, which upped the stakes in any discussion of the paranoid style. As we saw in Chapter 1, within a decade of the event those Americans who didn't believe in a conspiracy were in a minority. From being a mark of extreme but influential politics promoted by those on the fringes of power, the paranoid style became a popular and perhaps indispensable cultural sensibility. In brief, the sixties witnessed a shift from conspiracy theories being told by the authorities about the people in the name of countersubversion, to conspiracy theories being proposed by the people about abuses of power by those in authority. *V.* is part of this history.[20]

(ii) *The Crying of Lot 49*

Pynchon's second novel, *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), marks the mid-point of this transition, and, as we have already seen in Chapter 2, its plot bears structural similarities to some features of the aftermath of the Kennedy assassination: an American housewife chases up clues in connection with the death of a man whose legacy seemed to include the whole of America. It is significant that, unlike Herbert Stencil who is an outsider on the fringes of political authority, Oedipa Maas is an American housewife, married to a used car salesman turned DJ. Conspiracy becomes

---

[19] It comes as no surprise, then, to find that Karl Popper's collection of essays, *Conjectures and Refutations*, also published in 1963, contains several "refutations" of what he terms the "conspiracy theory of society," which is "the view that whatever happens in society—including things which as a rule people dislike, such as war, unemployment, poverty, shortages—are the results of direct design by some powerful individuals or group." Popper rejects this picture of historical causation, arguing that "the conspiracy theory of society cannot be true because it amounts to the assertion that all events, even those which at first sight do not seem to be intended by anybody, are the intended results of the people who are interested in these results." Likewise in *V.* the possibility of a historical conspiracy organised through *virtú*, the Machiavellian principle of personal will, is matched against the emergence of the sheer complexity of events, impressions, retellings and unconscious fears which go to make up a historical Situation (as Old Stencil capitalises it). Karl Popper, "Prediction and Prophecy in the Social Sciences," in *Conjectures and Refutations* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963; first published in *Library of the 10th International Congress of Philosophy*, 1, Amsterdam, 1948), 336-46.

[20] Ingrid Walker Fields tells a version of this narrative in her unpublished thesis, ""Paranoia, Politics, and the Popular Imagination: Conspiracy in Contemporary American Literature" (unpublished PhD diss., University of California, Santa Cruz, 1993; abstract in *DAI*, 53 (June 1993), 4325A). She argues that the second half of this century has witnessed a transformation from governmental conspiracy theories about internal enemies, to popular conspiracy narratives about a government conspiring against its own people. What Walker Fields omits from this story is the crucial factor of the self-reflexive theorising of conspiracy theories as a cultural phenomenon during this period. Furthermore, she gives too much credence to the notion that in a postmodern political climate "we" have been disinherited from "our cultural memory." I would argue instead that in addition to mounting a broad challenge to the orthodoxy of a shared "cultural memory," conspiracy theories have also produced complex alignments and antagonisms both between and within the various constituencies of the counterculture.

part of suburbia, and in the years between *V.* and *Lot 49* the focus of attention shifts from Europe and New York to the West Coast. *Lot 49* reads as a journalistic survey of the LA scene in the summer of '64, and portions of the novel were in fact published in *Esquire* magazine in 1965. The book is a sharply humorous sampling of the rapidly changing *Zeitgeist*, and one of the new fashions Pynchon identifies is the emergence of paranoia as a popular, but zany, cultural language. The novel is full of self-conscious references to paranoia, not least with a would-be Beatles-style pop group called The Paranoids. At the same time, there are still some quick satires on the kind of minority political fanatics studied by Hofstadter and his colleagues; for example, Mike Fallopian, a member of The Peter Pinguid Society, even more right-wing than their (real-life) rivals the Birch Society, engages in a ridiculous exchange of paranoid one-upmanship with Oedipa Maas and the lawyer Metzger, the co-executors of Pierce Inverarity's will:

> "You one of these right-wing nut outfits?" inquired the diplomatic Metzger.
> Fallopian twinkled. "They accuse *us* of being paranoids."
> "They?" inquired Metzger, twinkling also.
> "Us?" asked Oedipa.[21]

The accusation of paranoia flies back and forth in the novel, with everyone in on this self-conscious cultural joke. The narrator at one point discusses Oedipa's education in the fifties, "at a time of nerves, blandness and retreat among not only her fellow students but also most of the visible structure around and ahead of them, this having been a national reflex to certain pathologies in high places," felt by "those dear daft numina who'd mothered over Oedipa's so intemperate youth" (71)—and here the narrator goes on to mention, by their first names, Secretaries of State Forrestal and Dulles, and Senator McCarthy. What are these "pathologies in high places" that, like the Tristero conspiracy which dominates the novel, don't even have to be spoken out aloud? Surely a strong contender is paranoia, and the diagnosis of the paranoid style has by now become so familiar as to be almost affectionate.

As the diagnosis of paranoia shifts from Them to Us, Oedipa finds herself in the position of spelling out the four possibilities concerning the Tristero conspiracy: there is an underground conspiracy, or she has hallucinated it; there is a plot to make her think there is a conspiracy, or she is "fantasying some such plot, in which case you are a nut, Oedipa, out of your skull" (118). Well-acquainted with the vocabulary of popular Freudianism through her analyst, Dr Hilarius (himself possibly in the advanced stages of LSD-induced paranoia), Oedipa knows what the diagnosis will be. "Change your name to Miles, Dean, Serge, and/or Leonard [that is, The Paranoids], baby," she advises her reflection in the vanity mirror; "either way, they'll call it paranoia" (117). Paranoia

---

[21] Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966; London: Picador, 1979), p.32. Further page references to this edition will be cited in parentheses in the text, with the abbreviation *Lot 49* where necessary.

becomes caught up in self-reflexive loops of epistemology and power, so that They can use a diagnosis of paranoia to further Their devious ends. Ironically, Oedipa's paranoia prevents her from seeing that self-knowledge of her own paranoia might be the very thing which could short-circuit the diagnostic labyrinth in which she feels trapped. Knowing that her thoughts are delusional might paradoxically provide Oedipa with a critical leverage against the threat of engulfing paranoia. By the mid-sixties, then, the popular awareness of paranoia as a cultural phenomenon had to be factored into any account of conspiracy culture. By the middle of the decade the historians of the paranoid style were in danger of themselves being diagnosed by the popular political forces which they had earlier anatomised.

With its wry commentary on the translation of paranoia as a fifties political style into the affected anxieties of a sixties Californian housewife, *Lot 49* at times speaks in the same idiom as an article from *Esquire* magazine of the same year, entitled, "Wake up America! It Can Happen Here! A Post-McCarthy Guide to Twenty-three Conspiracies by Assorted Enemies Within." The article has been used to "explain" Pynchon, but, once again, the article is itself in need of explanation. Wedged between the tail end of a discussion on "the calculus of sex" and adverts for the Relax-A-Cizor waistline reduction device, the guide adopts the dryly humorous tone of What Every Bachelor Needs To Know. It scarcely needs to provide any commentary in its outlines since, in a "post-McCarthy" age, the assorted conspiracy theories speak for themselves—the article ends snappily with the throw-away, "And that's what's happening, baby."[22] In her use of the hip address, "baby," Oedipa tries hard to match the nonchalance that we find in *Esquire*'s treatment of paranoia. Included in the list and garish cartoon illustration of the twenty-three "enemies within" there are several familiar to the world of *Lot 49*: there is of course the Kennedy assassination (always present but never mentioned in *Lot 49*); the Zip-Code Plot, in which the Jewish-controlled "Post office or the Commissar . . . will know exactly where you are, what you are doing and who is with you because you have been branded on . . . the right hand" (note in *Lot 49* the old sailor with a tattooed sign of WASTE, the alternative postal system (87)); the Flag-Stamp Intrigue, which finds extremely suspicious a 1963 U.S. stamp that omits the words "U.S. Postage" (think of the discovery by Oedipa and Genghis Cohen the philatelist of anomalous U.S. stamps(66-68)); the threat of Hypno-Subversive music from groups like the Beatles (compare Pynchon's British Invasion-style combo, The Paranoids); and the Mental-Health Conspiracy, which aims to dupe Americans into believing that only European doctors are "competent in the field of insanity" (consider Dr Hilarius's murky past as a concentration camp doctor(95)). Pynchon's novel, however, cannot be explained away by comparing it to *Esquire*'s "Guide," not the least because *Lot 49* satirises the popularised language of paranoia

---

22 "Wake up America! It Can Happen Here! A Post-McCarthy Guide to Twenty-three Conspiracies by Assorted Enemies Within," *Esquire*, May 1966, p.165.

advanced by such articles. It is both a product of and a reflection on the moment in which paranoia becomes identifiable and available as a form of popular historiography.

Unlike the "Guide" in *Esquire*, *The Crying of Lot 49* is not content merely to anatomise the turn to conspiracy; it also seeks to assess the political value of this new cultural language. In part Pynchon's second novel continues the troubling critique of the paranoid hermeneutic which he had begun in *V.* In chasing up tiny clues to the Tristero conspiracy which Oedipa discovers in the legacy of tycoon Pierce Inverarity, she draws on her fifties college training in the detective reading skills of New Criticism, pursuing arcane references in obscure works of literature. With another gesture towards an anonymous They, the narrator explains that, "they had managed to turn the young Oedipa into a rare creature indeed, unfit perhaps for marches and sit ins, but just a whiz at pursuing strange words in Jacobean texts" (71-72). *Lot 49* points towards the inadequacies of those reading habits Pynchon himself was schooled in with his English B.A. at Cornell during the late fifties, and the novel indeed becomes caught up in the marginalia and footnotes of history as Oedipa herself gets involved with Genghis Cohen (the philatelist) and Emory Bortz (the literature professor). After Oedipa's brief escape from the claustrophobia of suburbia when she goes out "on the road" in San Francisco, the return to these academic modes of inquiry seems merely to serve the purpose, as Christopher Lasch argues in his harsh critique of Pynchon, of "hiding the obvious behind a veil of obscurity."[23] Lasch's arguments against the turn to paranoia in American culture are forceful, but *Lot 49* does begin to consider, however complicitously, the possibility that Oedipa's quest for some transcendent but arcane revelation is an enormous red herring, such that she fails to notice the obvious social ills around her which need no conspiracy theories to explain them. The Bomb is one obvious but unspoken presence in a Southern California dominated in the sixties by the aerospace (that is, rocket) industry. The seedy story of Department of Defense weapons contracts for household-name firms is told in the glee sung at the Yoyodyne shareholders meeting. "Bendix guides the warheads in, / Avco builds them nice" (57), and so the list of the West Coast's open secret continues, a story Pynchon knew only too well from his time as a technical writer at Boeing Aerospace in Seattle in the years 1960-1962. In his introduction to *Slow Learner* Pynchon comments on the "simple, standard fear" of the Bomb, stating that "there was never anything subliminal about it, then or now."[24] Yet in *Lot 49* there is at times a "ritual reluctance" to name this commonly shared fear, which becomes displaced into the Tristero conspiracy, and especially "The Courier's Tragedy," with its atmosphere of apocalyptic imminence: "[n]otice how often the figure of death hovers in the background"(107) of the illustrated

---

[23] Christopher Lasch, *The Minimal Self: Psychic Survival in Troubled Times* (1984; London: Picador, 1985), p.159.

[24] Pynchon, *Slow Learner* (London: Picador, 1984), p.20-21. Dugdale discusses the Bomb as a latent symbol in Pynchon's work (*Allusive Parables*, pp.157-64).

edition of the play, Bortz advises. Oedipa, the narrator informs us, "was to have all manner of revelations," not about Pierce or herself, but "about what remained yet had, somehow, before this, stayed away" (12), and, "if only she'd looked," she "might have found the Tristero anywhere in her Republic, through any of a hundred lightly concealed entranceways" (124).

Lot 49 simultaneously broaches and ignores the possibility that the "disinherited" of America are not the once-aristocratic Tristero (now transformed into the malcontent meritocracy of Yoyodyne's pointless postal system), but the blacks, Mexicans, Chinese, gay men, deaf-mutes, and other disadvantaged groups whom Oedipa glimpses on her night's wandering. In the same year that *Lot 49* was published, Pynchon wrote an article in the *New York Times* about Watts, the site of race riots in Los Angeles the previous year. In "A Journey into the Mind of Watts" he argues that "what is known around the nation as the L.A. scene exists chiefly as images in a screen or a TV tube, as four-color magazine photos, as old radio jokes, as new songs that survive only a matter of weeks. It is," Pynchon continues, "basically a white Scene and illusion is everywhere in it."[25] The world of *Lot 49* is made up of these "illusions," which draw its inhabitants away from the obvious: in the article Pynchon suggests that the black ghetto of Watts was a revolution waiting to happen, a fact, like Watts itself, ignored by most white residents of L.A.

In addition to its various satires on conspiracy theories, *Lot 49* touches on the possibility that paranoia might provide a model for connecting or plotting together as an alternative counter-conspiracy all those left out of mainstream American society. The people Oedipa comes across—the non-white night inhabitants of San Francisco, kids in freight cars, squatters in lean-tos and junkyards, drifters, walkers along the road at night, random voices on the phone, the old sailor, the young wino W.A.S.T.E. carrier, a facially-deformed welder, and so on—all coalesce into a ghostly scarcely visible mirror image of the ubiquitous Inverarity conspiracy. Before her night on the streets of San Francisco, "she might have wondered what undergrounds apart from the couple she knew of communicated by WASTE system. By sunrise she could legitimately ask what undergrounds didn't" (86). As much as Oedipa's paranoia sidetracks her from the obvious, it also leads her to discover the existence—even if still imaginary—of a counter-conspiracy, as a "calculated withdrawal, from the life of the Republic, from its machinery" (86).

(iii) *Gravity's Rainbow*

Whereas *Lot 49* only briefly introduces the potential of a counter-conspiracy into its post-McCarthy satires on Cold War paranoia, *Gravity's Rainbow* produces a

---

[25] Pynchon, "A Journey into the Mind of Watts," *New York Times Magazine*, 12 June 1966, p.78.

full-blown exploration of this possibility. *Lot 49* describes the summer of 1964, and marks the beginnings of the counterculture, with demonstrations in Berkeley's Sproul Plaza and experimentation with LSD. At the end of the novel Oedipa moots the suggestion that "perhaps she'd be hounded someday as far as joining Tristero itself" (*Lot 49*, 125). By the time *Gravity's Rainbow* was published in 1973 the adventure of the counterculture was nearly over. In the final section of the novel, "The Counterforce," Pirate Prentice outlines what holds this Counterforce together. "Creative paranoia," Prentice explains, "means developing at least as thorough a We-system as a They-system."[26] Although the novel is set in "the Zone," the chaotic terrain of Germany at the close of the Second World War, the merry pranks of the Counterforce speak to the time and place in which the whole narration is embedded: a movie house in L.A., managed by the Nixon figure, Richard M. Zhluub. The Counterforce becomes a loose affiliation of the various victims of "the Firm," like Roger Mexico, Seaman Bodine and Tyrone Slothrop, who unite in scenes of mayhem, such as the anarchic episode in which they disrupt a boardroom meeting by pissing over the assembled dignitaries and businessmen (636-37).

As Dickstein observed, paranoia becomes as integral to the counterculture as the use of drugs, and *Gravity's Rainbow* fully recognises that the two are intimately connected. The central plot of the Zone section involves Slothrop's mission impossible to recover a consignment of hash from the Potsdam enclosure, and many of Slothrop's moments of paranoia coincide with his use of drugs (voluntary or otherwise), as the narration becomes lost in layers of narcotic fantasies. When, for example, Slothrop is searching for the dealer Säure Bummer ("Acid Bummer," i.e. bad trip), the debris of Berlin begins momentarily to assume scary configurations, "whose smooth masks . . . speak their entire meaning, all of it right out on the surface" (436). Slothrop's shadow on the arches of the ruined tenement block become paranoid projections, as he begins to see a vast and threatening horror-movie throat. He also spies the words "DIE, SLOTHROP" written in red neon, with the Herero's rocket mandala in the sky above. These fleeting paranoid hallucinations crystallise into minatory forms, but then melt away. The "ominous" heaps of reinforced concrete ready to tumble one moment become merely "black spaghetti" curls of iron in the next (434). Reefer "papyromancy" (442), along with "dreams, psychic flashes, omens cryptographies, drug-epistemologies" (582) becomes part of the Counterforce's armoury of creative paranoia:

> We have to look for power sources here, and distribution networks we were never taught, routes of power our teachers never imagined, or were encouraged to avoid . . . we have to find meters whose scales are unknown in the world, draw our own schematics, getting feedback, making connections, reducing the error, trying to learn the real function.

---

[26] Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973; London: Picador, 1975), p.638. All page references to this edition will be cited hereafter in parentheses in the text, with the abbreviation *GR* where necessary.

. . zeroing in on what incalculable plot? (521)

The alternative epistemologies which cluster around drug-use hold out the promise of zeroing in on the plots of power that are normally left unexamined. But the "mindless pleasures" of drugs also serve to undermine the temptations of paranoia.[27] *Lot 49* briefly raises the possibility in the shape of Mucho Maas that large quantities of LSD might function as a resistance to the solipsism of paranoia, precisely by dispersing or "dissipat[ing]" (100) the personality that would be at the centre of any persecution.[28]

Gravity's Rainbow carries this suggestion to the extreme with the final fragmentation of Slothrop, who "is being broken down . . . and scattered" (738).[29] The narrative enacts this dispersal, with its profusion of styles and rapid changes between genres. Randomness of narrative plotting comes to work as a resistance to the over-determination of conspiracy plotting. For example, when Slothrop leaves his s/m hideout with Greta on his mission to find Säure Bummer, his own trajectory through the Zone (and, by extension, the progress of the plot) is described as "wandering," "ambling," and "mosey[ing]" (433-36). A rigid hierarchy of plots is hard to establish, as even a simplified plot summary demonstrates: Slothrop's excursion to connect with his dealer at first appears as an interlude in his cinematic encounter with Greta, but it begins to take on a life of its own; back-tracking a little, we remember that Slothrop is only with the ageing film actress because he woke up there after Tchitcherine had captured and drugged him during the Potsdam hash rescue mission; but Slothrop only went on the dope deal because he happened to meet Bummer whilst looking for information about the Rocket. Slothrop's Rocketman adventures, although starting off with a seemingly random combination of a costume and a chance meeting, soon takes on a logic of its own, in the same way that so many of the metaphors and extended figures of this novel take on a life of their own. In the Zone the reader, like Slothrop, begins to lose sight of the "master plot" of the Rocket amidst all the Chinese box hallucinations:

> A few hours later Slothrop wakes up, and wonders where he is going.
>
> Well, to find that Säure Bummer, soon as this rain lets up, give the man his hashish. But what then? Slothrop and the S-Gerät have grown to be strangers. He hasn't really thought about them for a while. Hmm, when *was* that? (434)

For Slothrop it was the day before yesterday; for the reader it is several hundred pages. The plots drift into each other, creating a "moiré, a new world of flowing shadows,

---

[27] "Mindless Pleasures" was the title Pynchon originally proposed for *Gravity's Rainbow*. Tanner discusses this fact in his *Thomas Pynchon* (London: Methuen, 1982), p.78.

[28] When Dr Hilarius is doing his convincing impersonation of *Dr Strangelove*'s Col. Jack D. Ripper, he explains to Oedipa that, "'There is me, there are others. You know, with LSD, we're finding, the distinction begins to vanish. Egos lose their sharp edges. But I never took the drug, I chose to remain in relative paranoia, where at least I know who I am and who the others are'" (*Lot 49*, 94).

[29] Leo Bersani explores the dispersal of personality as a resistance to paranoia at length in "Pynchon, Paranoia, and Literature."

interferences," which is, the narrator informs us, the result when "a paranoid meets a paranoid" (395).

If the discourse of paranoia is occasionally surrounded by a "ritual reluctance" in *Lot 49*, in *Gravity's Rainbow* it becomes omnipresent, transformed, for example, into a brash Broadway tune: "Pa—ra—nooooiiiia, Pa-ra-noia! / Ain't it grand ta see, that good-time face, again! / Pa-ra-*noi*-ya, boy oh boy, yer / Just a bit of you-know-what / From way back when!" (657). Paranoia is endlessly and outrageously discussed, theorised, and utilised, from the five "Proverbs for Paranoids," to the many narratorial definitions of this hermeneutic. "Paranoia," we are told, "is nothing less than the onset, the leading edge of the discovery that *everything is connected*, everything in Creation, a secondary illumination" (703); it is, in other words, "a Puritan reflex of seeking other orders behind the visible" (188); and, "if there is something comforting—religious, if you want—about paranoia, there is also anti-paranoia, where nothing is connected to anything, a condition not many of us can bear for long" (434). These analyses of the Puritan heritage of the paranoid style sit alongside revelations that, in the world of the novel at least, much of the paranoia is justified. Just about every character is paranoid in one way or another, which is hardly surprising since the novel is overflowing with the intricate conspiratorial details of the inter-war cartels involved in rocket development.[30] Tyrone Slothrop, for example, becomes convinced that "the Firm" are controlling his fantasies, which is not so unreasonable since the baby Tyrone was indeed the object of experimentation by the I.G. Farben cartel (or, in another variation, he is the victim of a conspiracy to make him think that he has been thus controlled (738)). In this way an investigation of the psychological mechanisms of Their paranoia is coupled with the appropriation by the Counterforce of that language.

Whereas Hofstadter is concerned to expose and implicitly criticise the paranoid style in American politics, and the authors of the *Esquire* guide to twenty-three conspiracies humorously take that critique for granted, an article from *Harper's* magazine of 1974 documents the emergence of paranoia as a countercultural sensibility. Hendrik Hertzberg's and David McClelland's article, entitled "Paranoia: An Idée Fixe Whose Time Has Come," acknowledges that paranoia is both a "recent cultural disorder," and a "natural response to the confusion of modern life," in other words, both the official policy of the Cold War, and a popular response to that political framework.[31] Like *Gravity's Rainbow*, this article understands paranoia as an important language which is spoken across the political spectrum. The authors characterise the Nixon presidency as "a Golden Age of political paranoia," in which "the paranoid strategies of projection, denial, and the use of code language with private meanings . . . have been

---

[30] Dale Carter pieces together this story in *The Final Frontier: The Rise and Fall of the American Rocket State* (London: Verso, 1988).

[31] Hendrik Hertzberg and David C.K. McClelland, "Paranoia: An Idée Fixe Whose Time Has Come," *Harper's* June 1974, p.52.

played out on a national scale."[32] They also discuss the appropriation and proliferation of the language by those who would be the targets of Nixon's countersubversion. "Hippies," they claim, "could no more communicate their thoughts without 'paranoia' and 'paranoid' than they could eschew 'like,' 'y'know,' and 'I mean.'"[33] Significantly, Hertzberg and McClelland turn to Pynchon's novels for further elucidation of this "idée fixe," producing a feedback loop of self-reflexive cultural diagnosis between Pynchon and popular magazines. This loop becomes even more circular in, for example, Márquez's essay on Pynchon, which maps out the contours of the latter's paranoid style by citing Hertzberg and McClelland, which itself relies on Pynchon for its formulation of "this recent cultural disorder." Pynchon's fiction provides evidence for a diagnosis of the culture, but then that diagnosis is used to classify and clarify Pynchon's works.

Gravity's Rainbow increases the stakes in the contest over who is to perform cultural analysis. The narrator warns that (in Michael Rogin's terminology which I outlined in the Introduction) a symbolic rather than a realist understanding of history might well play into Their hands:

> By way of the Bland institute and the Bland Foundation, the man has had his meathooks well into the American day-to-day since 1919. Who do you think sat on top of that 100-miles-per-gallon carburetor, eh? sure you've heard that story—maybe even snickered along with paid anthropologists who called it the Automotive Age Myth or some shit—well, turns out the item was real, all right, and it was Lyle Bland who sprang for those academic hookers doing the snickering and the credentialed lying. (581)

By the early seventies, then, the psychoanalytically-informed diagnosis of the paranoid style, which had proved an important intellectual tool in coming to terms with the irrational prejudice fuelling domestic policies of countersubversion and foreign policies of mutual suspicion, sat uneasily alongside accusations that this very form of analysis only served to further Their interests. In the decade between Pynchon's first novel and his third, conspiracy theories had mutated from a political style in need of explanation, to a self-conscious and necessary working assumption for the counterculture.

VINELAND: PARANOIA REVISITED

We have seen, then, how Pynchon's first three novels contribute to an emerging debate on the Cold War culture of conspiracy, mapping out the dangers and possibilities of the paranoid style. In the second half of this chapter I want to explore what happens to the self-reflexive cultural logic of paranoia in Pynchon's fourth novel, *Vineland*,

---

[32] Hertzberg and McClelland, "Paranoia," p.53.

[33] Hertzberg and McClelland, "Paranoia," p.52.

published as the Cold War was coming to a close.[34]

(i) Mindless Pleasures

Towards the end of 1989 rumours began to circulate in academic and literary circles that Pynchon's long-awaited new novel was about to be published. In the 17 years since his last novel, *Gravity's Rainbow*, Pynchon had come to be regarded by many critics as one of the most important novelists in post-war America—and, as we have seen, one whose name was synonymous with paranoid conspiracies. Whatever this new novel was ostensibly about, it would inevitably amount to a symbolic story about the fate of the sixties, and about the fate of the paranoid style, even if by default. As it turned out, the novel was explicitly a story about the fate of various ex-hippies struggling to survive in the dark years of the Reagan era. *Vineland* became one more contribution—albeit an extremely ambiguous one—to the by now familiar thirtysomething genre, one more plotting of the lives of sixties radicals who in various ways sold out or were betrayed. Yet it was also a novel in which Pynchon's trademark focus on paranoia was apparently missing.

The critical reception of Pynchon's fourth novel was divided, and the key issue seemed to be *Vineland*'s substitution of joking references to mass culture in place of the notoriously erudite conspiratorial allusions in the earlier novels. On the one hand, *Vineland* was favourably reviewed by the majority of newspaper critics, and the novel became Pynchon's first real commercial success, staying on the *New York Times* bestseller list for nearly four months in 1990. Its popularity with readers and some newspaper critics was probably due to its straightforwardness in comparison with Pynchon's earlier highly intricate and allusive conspiracy fictions. Terrence Rafferty in the *New Yorker* found it "the clearest novel Thomas Pynchon has written to date," and Christopher Walker in a letter to the *London Review of Books* characterised it as "Pynchon's most user-friendly novel."[35] Designating it a Main Selection, the American Book-of-the-Month Club emphasised that *Vineland* was "eminently scrutable, richly accessible, enormously readable," in an attempt to reassure readers for whom Pynchon had become a by-word for convoluted obscurity—a specialist in what one reviewer labelled the "highbrow conspiracy thriller."[36]

But for others the novel was an anti-climax after 17 years of waiting and false rumours. Wendy Steiner, writing in the *Independent*, thought *Vineland* a "parody of

---

[34] Pynchon, *Vineland* (1990; London: Minerva, 1991). All page references to this edition will be cited in parentheses in the text.

[35] Terence Rafferty, "Long Lost," *New Yorker*, 19 February 1990, pp.108-112; Christopher Walker, "Thomas Pynchon's *Vineland*," *London Review of Books*, 8 March 1990, pp.4-5.

[36] J. Anthony Lukas, "*Vineland* by Thomas Pynchon," *BOMC News*, April 1990, p.3; Donna Rifkind, "The Farsighted Virtuoso," *Wall Street Journal*, 2 January 1990, p.A9.

Pynchon's genius," with "inventiveness reduced to gimickry, high comedy become wisecracking, emotional power shrunk to sentimentality." The book, she concluded, "is a great disappointment."[37] Christopher Lehman-Haupt in the *New York Times* commented that "it's a little as if Upton Sinclair had been captured by ninja warriors and lived to tell the tale to an R. Crumb high on acid."[38] Disappointment with the novel seemed to go hand-in-hand with the perception, as Lehman-Haupt put it, that "Mr. Pynchon's paranoia seems to have eased." Although some critics still found Pynchon to be promoting paranoid plots (for example, Salman Rushdie, and Paul Gray in *Time* magazine),[39] most were struck by the comparative absence of "that nexus of ideas with which he is most frequently associated—namely the linkage of plot, quest, knowledge and apocalypse."[40]

Frank Kermode's article in the *London Review of Books* commented at length on Pynchon's trademark theme of paranoia, a feature which Kermode himself had analysed years previously in an article which was influential in establishing Pynchon in the canon and making *The Crying of Lot 49* one of the most frequently taught books on English degree courses in the States.[41] In his review Kermode reminds us that Pynchon "explores, more intensively maybe than anyone else has ever done, the relation between fictional plot and paranoid fantasy." *Vineland*, however, came as a disappointment to Kermode, not so much because it dropped these concerns altogether, but because it merely repeated them "in a manner even more bitter but also less guarded by irony, less cogent." Yet what disappointed Kermode more than anything about *Vineland* was its endless references to popular culture and the detritus of everyday life. He wished the novel had contained a glossary, since he found it frustrating that so many of the references were lost on him; what made it worse, he complained, there is no reference volume in which he could look up the brand names, the slang and the TV trivia. This is a significant comment, because Pynchon's previous novels have generated an entire academic industry devoted to explicating the arcane and improbably learned allusions (there are companion volumes to both *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Lot 49*).[42] "It will be remembered," Kermode warns, "that the paranoia of the earlier books always sought sign-systems, not only interesting in their extraordinary complexity and extent but also

---

[37] Wendy Steiner, "Pynchon's Progress: Dopeheads Revisited," *Independent*, 3 February 1990, p. 30.

[38] Christopher Lehman-Haupt, "*Vineland*, Pynchon's First Novel in 17 Years," *New York Times*, 26 December 1989, p.C21.

[39] Salman Rushdie, "Still Crazy After All These Years," *New York Times Book Review*, 14 January 1990, pp.1, 36-37; Paul Gray, "The Spores of Paranoia," *Time*, 15 January 1990, pp.69-70.

[40] Walker, "Pynchon's *Vineland*," p.5.

[41] Frank Kermode, "That Was Another Planet," *London Review of Books*, 8 February 1990, pp.3-4; Kermode, "Decoding the Tristero," in Edward Mendelson, ed., *Pynchon: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1978), pp. 162-66.

[42] J. Kerry Grant, *A Companion to "The Crying of Lot 49"* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1994); Steven Weisenburger, *A "Gravity's Rainbow" Companion* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1988).

menacing." For Kermode, *Vineland* proved a disappointment precisely because it replaced (in his view) the complex and wide-ranging focus in the earlier novels on semiological paranoia with the mindless pleasures of mass culture. In the critical reception of *Vineland*, both sides agreed, then, that paranoia had given way to pop culture. What I want to argue, however, is that the apparent absence of conspiracy from *Vineland* is part of a meaningful continuation of Pynchon's dialogue with paranoia. More importantly, the "easing of Mr. Pynchon's paranoia" is directly connected with the story *Vineland* tells about the increasing saturation of mass culture.

In order to show the significance of the connection between the end of paranoia and the triumph of mass culture, the following section will elaborate a running comparison between *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Vineland.* The differences between these two novels are instructive, since both form Baedekers of the cultural landscape of California twenty years apart, with the later novel catching up on the life histories of some of the characters in the earlier one (the first is set in the summer of 1964, and the second in the summer of 1984).

(i) Beyond Paranoia

Unlike Pynchon's previous novels, the plot of *Vineland* is not itself a conspiracy plot. *V.* sets on collision its two main stories, namely the development of the "the plot that has no name" and the beat scene of fifties New York. *The Crying of Lot 49* has the shape of a detective story which uncovers clues towards the Tristero conspiracy. *Gravity's Rainbow*, though it disperses its narratives amid a welter of discourses and derailings of the plot, pieces together the story of The Firm's conspiratorial control of pre-war industries in general and Tyrone Slothrop in particular. By contrast, *Vineland* consists of a series of interrelated stories that reach back from the present into the past but refuse to coalesce into a single conspiracy theory.

The present action of the novel, which takes place in the summer of 1984, sees sixties survivors Zoyd, Frenesi, and their daughter Prairie, being chased by their long-time enemies, drug enforcement agents Brock Vond and Hector Zuñiga. As this story proceeds, we gradually learn about events at the People's Republic of Rock and Roll at the tail end of the sixties, tales of DL Chastain's ninja training in post-war Japan, stories of Frenesi's parents' in McCarthyite Hollywood, and her grandparents' time in the labour unions of the thirties. The novel does feature a few "Pynchonesque" moments, like the mysterious giant footprint which wipes out the labs of "shadowy world conglomerate Chipco" (142), or the sinister mid-flight raid by unnamed forces on Zoyd's night crossing to Hawaii—though these episodes are closer to Godzilla and sci-fi movies than the John Buchan or Raymond Chandler scenarios of the first three novels. But the narrative events are never totally overshadowed by the pervasive presence of conspiracy which would link together all characters and events of the novel

into a coherent plot. Whereas Pynchon's first three novels were shaped—however satirically—by the codes of the detective fiction and thriller genres, the latest novel turns for its structure to romance. Where Oedipa Maas's detective mission promises to expand outwards to involve the legacy of the whole of America, Prairie Wheeler's quest is for her mother. Oedipa leaves the domestic scene in search of the political; by contrast, Prairie must uncover the political story of Frenesi's activities at the end of the sixties in order to recover the domestic. The treatment of the romance genre in *Vineland* is, like that of the thriller in the earlier novels, a mixture of borrowings and reworkings, producing an acknowledgement of both the attraction and the constrictions of this popular form. The classic denouement of the romance—the revelation of the protagonist's true parentage—is in *Vineland* played out as farce. In what should be the final, cataclysmic tableau, Brock Vond descends from the sky in his new guise as "Death from Slightly Above" and reveals his true identity to his "daughter" in the clearing, only for him to be yanked back up into the helicopter. The revelation leaves Prairie nonplussed, as she coolly retorts that "'you can't be my father, Mr. Vond, my blood is type A. Yours is Preparation H'" (376). The only secret revealed at the end of the novel is that there are no secrets left.

Unlike a conspiracy theory in which the aim is to show that "everything is connected," the narrative of *Vineland* operates in line with DL and Takeshi's principle of Karmic Adjustment, which aims to avoid the "danger of collapsing [everything] into a single issue" (365). Pynchon's new aesthetic principle is a process of *entanglement.* The novel shows DL, Zoyd and Prairie as they each, at different times, "clumsily piec[e] the story together" (282)—and this is what the reader also has to do. There are many pieces to this jumbled jigsaw, not least the countless mini-narratives about what happened to each of the characters after the sixties were over. To tell the story of one character's life the narrator has to tell the story of them all. In place of a series of clues which promise to lead towards a grand revelation, *Vineland* relies on a series of "endless tangled scenarios" (284). We learn of how Frenesi and her new husband Flash become "tangled in an infinite series of increasingly squalid minor sting operations" (72); in the computer files at the Sisterhood of Kunoichi Attentives headquarters digital versions of Frenesi and DL exist, "woven together in an intricacy of backs covered, promises made and renegotiated," and so on (115); DL's old teacher Inoshiro Sensei prepares her "to inherit his own entanglement in the world" (180); the story of the finances of Vato and Blood, the tow merchants, is connected with "Specter's tangled financial saga" (182); at the Thanatoid Roast '84, "Thanatoid wives bravely did their part to complicate further already tangled marriage histories" (219); in Hollywood Frenesi's mother, Sasha, became "entangled in the fine details of the politics in the town at the time" (289); and when DL and Takeshi finally get it together in a penthouse high over Amarillo the moment is framed by "a fractal halo of complications that might go on forever" (381).

Entanglement has always been a distinctive characteristic of Pynchon's work; in *Lot 49* Metzger explains that "our beauty lies in this extended capacity for convolution" (21), and the first page of *Gravity's Rainbow* announces that "this is not a disentanglement from, but a progressive *knotting into*" (3). But whereas the narrative threads in the first three novels were—however improbably and satirically—all knotted into the workings of a "master cabal," in *Vineland* there is only an increasing complication. Likewise Pynchon has consistently manifested a talent for complexity in his sentence construction. We might compare, however, the much-quoted ending of *Lot 49* with the closing scenes of *Vineland*. In the former the sentences, like the choices they outline, arrange themselves into a semblance of binary clarity: "Either Oedipa in the orbiting ecstasy of a true paranoia, or a real Tristero" (126). By contrast in *Vineland* the rambling, convoluted syntax remains till the end:

> A tour bus, perhaps only lost in the night, swept in with a wake of diesel exhaust and waited idling for its passengers, some of whom would discover that they were already Thanatoids without knowing it, and decide not to reboard after all. There were free though small-sized eats for everyone, such as mini-enchiladas and shrimp teriyaki, and well drinks at happy-hour prices. And the band, Holocaust Pixels, found a groove, or attractor, that would've been good for the entire trans-night crossing and beyond, even if Billy Barf and the Vomitones hadn't shown up later to sit in, bringing with them Alexei, who turned out to be a Russian Johnny B. Goode, able even unamplified to outwail both bands at once. (384)

In *Vineland* sub-clauses proliferate, intervening in the flow of the sentence; brand names and pop references pile up like so much prosaic lumber to be fitted in; phrasal verbs are separated from their prepositions, producing only a sense of anticlimax when they are finally reached; in short, the yearning towards a revelation of the previous novels is replaced by a cluttering up in this one.

Entanglement becomes the structuring principle of *Vineland*, I would argue, because it has become impossible to maintain the kind of Manichean oppositions between Them and Us which structure conspiracy fictions. The possibility that the We of the counterculture might end up working for Them had already been raised towards the end of *Gravity's Rainbow*, but in *Vineland* betrayal becomes a key theme.[43] The paranoid divisions between Them and Us blur and re-emerge and become confused once more through three generations of political compromise and betrayal. As well as the main stories of Frenesi's and others' co-option into the snitch system which mark the demise of the paranoid certainties of the counterculture versus the government,

---

[43] In *Gravity's Rainbow* there is, for example, the scene in which Pirate Prentice confronts the fact that he might unwittingly have been a double agent for the other side (542); there is also the startling jump-cut forward to an unspecified time when a "spokesman for the Counterforce" admits "in a recent interview with the *Wall Street Journal*" that "'We were never that concerned with Slothrop *qua* Slothrop'" (738); Roger Mexico likewise daydreams of "the failed Counterforce, the glamorous ex-rebels . . . doomed pet freaks," with the suspicion that "They will use us. We will help legitimize Them, though they don't need it really, it's another dividend for Them, nice but not critical" (713).

Vineland also establishes a series of narrative parallels and echoes which reinforce this point, without connecting the stories into a single conspiratorial plot. So, for example, many of the men in the novel—Zoyd, Hector, Brock, Takeshi, Weed Atman, Hub Gates—are separated from their wives/lovers, whichever side they are on. The domestic makes symbolic links beneath the political, with marriages, friendships, and even long-standing antagonisms establishing complex networks of indebtedness and complicity. In a similar vein, as much as Brock Vond is the embodiment of Their collapsing surveillance system, he himself is under surveillance by his superiors. It is ironically Vond's participation in the economy of paranoia that contributes to the devaluation of its political currency. The political landscape of *Vineland* produces many unlikely alliances and temporary rapprochements which work against the grain of the clear loyalties of the paranoid generation of the sixties. To a certain extent paranoia has become a redundant language in a world whose sides have become inextricably fused.

The time for paranoid illumination is also past, in a novel that is marked out by its sense of belatedness. *Lot 49*, for example, closes in suspense in the auction room, as Oedipa—and perhaps the sixties more generally—wait for a grand revelation that will transform the mundanity of suburban America. By the time of *Vineland*, the final years of the sixties and whatever "transcendent meaning" (*Lot 49*, 125) they brought with them are long since passed; whatever Oedipa was waiting for has already happened. *Vineland*'s opening word is "later," and its starting point is "later" in all senses: after the auctioneer's crying of lot 49, after the nuclear apocalypse hovering over the final scene of *Gravity's Rainbow*, and, in a novel published some five years after its "present," beyond even the apocalyptic year of 1984.

To gain a sense of how the promise of paranoia has become out-dated and routinised we might compare the opening paragraphs of *Lot 49* and *Vineland*. The former novel begins in the following way:

> One summer afternoon Mrs Oedipa Maas came home from a Tupperware party whose hostess had put perhaps too much kirsch in the fondue to find that she, Oedipa, had been named executor, or she supposed executrix, of the estate of one Pierce Inverarity, a California real estate mogul who had once lost two million dollars in his spare time but still had assets numerous and tangled enough to make the job of sorting it all out more than honorary. Oedipa stood in the living-room, stared at by the greenish dead eye of the TV tube, spoke the name of God, tried to feel as drunk as possible. (*Lot 49*, 5)

The news that Oedipa is to sort out Pierce Inverarity's legacy arrives as a mysterious and anonymous intrusion into the mundanity of her life as a Californian housewife; significantly, it remains unclear whether she finds out from a telephone call, a normal letter, or via some more secretive mode of communication. The enigmatic arrival of the announcement is perhaps an example of what Jesús Arrabal the anarchist calls a "miracle," which are "intrusions into this world from another" (*Lot 49*, 86). Chasing up

the clues in Pierce's will affords Oedipa glimpses of worlds and words unknown to her in the hermetically sealed world of Kinneret-Among-The-Pines. Her life of Tupperware parties up till this point is marked by an absence of paranoid significance, an "absence of an intensity" (12); as yet there are nothing like the "flinders of luminscent gods glimpsed among the wallpaper's stained foliage" (87) which she will strain to see with the old sailor once she has become "sensitised." Oedipa turns to the three possible comforts in her life—the TV, religion, and alcohol—but each remains mute. Paranoia will come to offer Oedipa some form of consolation, however compromised, for the loss of the "direct, epileptic Word" (81), in the shape of the Tristero conspiracy's "promise of hierophany"(20).

Vineland likewise begins with the arrival of a communication on a Californian summer's day, some twenty years later:

> Later than usual one summer morning in 1984, Zoyd Wheeler drifted awake in sunlight through a creeping fig that hung in the window, with a squadron of blue jays stomping around on the roof. In his dream these had been carrier pigeons from some place far across the ocean, landing and taking off again one by one, each bearing a message for him, but none of whom, light pulsing in their wings, he could ever quite get to in time. He understood it to be another deep nudge from forces unseen, almost surely connected with the letter that had come along with his latest mental-disability check, reminding him that unless he did something publicly crazy before a date now less than a week away, he would no longer qualify for benefits. He groaned out of bed. (3)

Hippie no-hoper Zoyd Wheeler struggles towards some kind of revelation in his dream about the message-bearing carrier pigeons, perhaps suffering from the same inability as his tripping companion Van Meter, who "had been searching all his life for transcendent chances exactly like this one the kids [whose dreams are like García Márquez tales] took so for granted, but whenever he got close it was like, can't shit, can't get a hardon, the more he worried the less likely it was to happen" (223). The "light pulsing" in the message-bearers' wings might refer us back to the "pulsing stelliferous Meaning" (*Lot 49*, 56) that Oedipa feels on the threshold of unveiling, but for Zoyd the paranoid's moment of illumination has always remained just out of focus. He describes how he "keep[s] tryin' to find out" through psychokinesis where Frenesi is, through "try[ing] to read signs, locate landmarks, anything that'll give a clue, but—well the signs are there on street corners and store windows—but [he] can't read" (40). For Oedipa the announcement of Pierce's death opens up the promise of discovering a "secret richness and concealed density of dream" (*Lot 49*, 117), even if that quest turns out to be a red herring. By contrast, for Zoyd the "deep nudge from forces unseen" comes to him in a dream, which he automatically takes to be prophetic in a vague way. But it turns out to be nothing more mysterious than the arrival of his disability check, which acts as the annual guarantee of compliance with Drug Enforcement Agent Brock Vond's contract to keep him away from his former wife, Frenesi.

Whereas the announcement at the start of *Lot 49* signals Oedipa's induction into

the world of paranoia and surveillance, for Zoyd this is only "another nudge" in what has become a routinised and mundane surveillance operation over the last dozen or so years. He merely groans his way out of bed to start one more day. When the Tubal Detox doctor asks whether Zoyd has had the paranoid feeling of being persecuted for some time, Zoyd replies that "in Hector's case fifteen or twenty years" (43). From its promise of sudden illumination in *Lot 49*, paranoia in *Vineland* has become like background radiation, a permanent but inactive presence in Zoyd's daily life. The "Nixonian Reaction" ensured that "betrayal became routine," with "money from the CIA, FBI, and others circulating everywhere, leaving the merciless spores of paranoia wherever it flowed" (239). Likewise surveillance has become automated and anonymous; as Flash, informer and Frenesi's new husband, complains: "we're in th'Info Revolution here. Anytime you use a credit card you're tellin' the Man more than you meant to" (74). Even worse, paranoia seems to have become an irrelevance in a land whose TV shows turn "agents of government repression into sympathetic heroes," made worse by the fact that "nobody thought it was peculiar anymore, no more than the routine violations of constitutional rights these characters performed week after week, now absorbed into the vernacular of American expectations" (345). The forces of evil have not disappeared, but the discovery of their existence no longer comes as a moment of sudden insight. On the penultimate page, in the midst of the final build up towards the seemingly happy ending with the return of lovable mut Desmond, the narrator presents a picture of the implacable forces of evil fixed into a classical tableau: "the unrelenting forces that leaned ever after the partners into Time's wind, impassive in pursuit, usually gaining, the faceless predators who'd once boarded Takeshi's airplane in the sky, the one's who'd had the Chipco lab stomped on, who despite every Karmic Adjustment brought to bear so far had simply persisted, stone-humorless, beyond cause and effect, rejecting all attempts to bargain or accommodate," and so on (383). Instead of becoming the focus of attention, these "unrelenting forces" form a stone frieze, a carved backdrop against which the "endless tangled scenarios" of *Vineland* are told.

Because the "faceless predators" have become routine, the novelty and critical edge of paranoia as a countercultural language have been lost. *Vineland* affords glimpses of a time when paranoia was as much a sign of fashion as "miniskirts, wire-rim glasses, and love beads" (198). For example, on a Hawaii-bound flight in the early seventies Zoyd is non-plussed when a sinister craft docks alongside in mid-Pacific, helmeted officials board the plane and someone with a "blond hippie haircut" takes refuge in Zoyd's in-flight band, welcoming him "smoothly" with "'Man's after you, eh'" (65). In *Lot 49* The Paranoids are a novice band hoping for a recording contract; in *Vineland* we learn incidentally that at the highpoint of the "Nixonian Reaction" they were playing the Fillmore Stadium (308)! As the novel frequently stresses, fashions and musical tastes are expendable, and by 1984 The Paranoids have been replaced by

the "sonic apocalypse" (55) of Fascist Toejam and the novel's resident band, Billy Barf and the Vomitones. For Zoyd's teenage daughter, Prairie, paranoia is just one more antiquated accessory of her "hippie-freak parents" (16) and their friends, another item which signifies the sixties, "an America of the olden days she'd mostly never seen, except in fast clips on the Tube meant to suggest the era, or distantly implied in reruns like 'Bewitched' or 'The Brady Bunch'" (198). She is "leery as always of anything that might mean unfinished business from the old hippie times" (56), and when her father expresses excessive concern for her safety on that summer day in 1984, she asks him, "'Sure this ain't pothead paranoia?'" (46).

Paranoia has become passé, however, not merely because it is part of a now out-dated drug scene, but because everything turns out to be true.[44] In a version of Oedipa's long night of paranoia in San Francisco when signs of the Tristero appear wherever she goes, Zoyd has the feeling that on every one of his errands in Vineland that summer's day everyone else is out to get him. He insists that "it wasn't pothead paranoia—but neither was Zoyd about to step inside this bank" where "colleagues at desks could be seen making long arms for the telephone" (46). In *Lot 49* there is hesitation and suspense surrounding Oedipa's moments of paranoia—is there really a conspiracy, or is she suffering from mental delusions? By contrast in *Vineland* the moment of doubt has passed, and fears of conspiracy are shown to have been always already justified. Thus whereas *Vineland* is staged under the sign of the factual, *Lot 49* continuously teeters on the edge of metaphors which never quite solidify into literal statements. Clauses beginning "as if" multiply endlessly, leaving Oedipa and the novel on the cusp of revelation:

> So began, for Oedipa, the languid, sinister blooming of The Tristero. Or rather, her attendance at some unique performance, prolonged as if it were the last of the night, something a little extra for whoever'd stayed this late. As if the breakaway gowns, net bras, jewelled garters and G-strings of historical figuration that would fall away were layered dense as Oedipa's own street-clothes in that game with Metzger in front of the Baby Igor movie; as if a plunge towards dawn indefinite black hours long would indeed be necessary before the Tristero could be revealed in its terrible nakedness. (*Lot 49*, 36)

In *Lot 49* the moment of waiting is indefinitely prolonged, as if, in the language of calculus which the novel itself explores, the "vanishingly small" increment between the literal and the metaphorical were endlessly subdivided without ever fully bridging the gap (*Lot 49*, 89).

In *Vineland*, on the other hand, the fictive has been collapsed into the factual;

---

[44] Pynchon himself has commented on the significance of the change from a sub-culture associated with cannabis, speed and LSD to the rave scene based on Ecstasy: "[with MDMA] the circuits of the brain which mediate alarm, fear, flight, lust, and territorial paranoia are temporarily disconnected. You see everything with total clarity, undistorted by animalistic urges. You have reached a state which the ancients have called nirvana, all seeing bliss." Cited in Douglas Rushkoff, *Cyberia: Life in the Trenches of Hyperspace* (London: Flamingo/HarperCollins, 1994), p.110.

Lot 49's striptease of history has given way to an endless visibility. Zoyd, Flash, Frenesi, DL and the other members of the former 24 fps film collective all live their lives after the moment of revelation in the sixties, in a world in which everything has endlessly been exposed. 1984 sees a revival of their paranoia, but this time round all their suspicions are immediately shown to be factual in the context of the novel: Zoyd, Frenesi and Flash have been cut off from the witness protection payments; the film archives are publicly burnt; Brock is putting the heat not only on Prairie, but also on the Vineland cannabis growers in a personal offshoot of Reagan's War on Drugs, testing the "personal paranoia thresholds" (221) of the Holytail planters.[45] *Lot 49*'s "as if" collapses straight away into the dull actuality of "there is."

The logic and context of this transition can be seen more clearly in a passage from *Flicker*, a novel published in 1992 by Theodore Roszak, another survivor of the sixties counterculture. Roszak was the author of the extremely influential study, *The Making of a Counter Culture* (1970), which anatomised the political logic of the youth movements of the late sixties as a rebellion against technocracy.[46] *Flicker* is narrated by a film studies academic imprisoned on a desert island. He was placed there after he discovered too much about the Orphans, an ancient theocratic conspiracy which plans not only to spread their Manichean doctrine by using the subliminal flicker of film-frames, but also to lead the world, through the development of technology, to what they consider to be its correct conclusion, namely mass destruction. In the following scene the narrator discusses his recent discoveries with Angelotti, an Orphan pretending to be a friend, who eventually betrays the narrator:

> "The next war will be the last war . . .
>
> "We agree, don't we, this is no fantasy? This is the news of the day. The movie we are watching is one mad rush toward annihilation. Yet think of the genius that has gone into this production! The machines, the medicines, the instruments that explore the great world and the small. Think how much has been perverted, twisted, poisoned. How are we to account for this, for the amazing coherence of this terrifying scenario? Can it be purely fortuitous? Or is there not obviously a design here before us, the design of a story? If a person knew nothing whatever of the orphans, might he not in a moment of frightening insight say to himself, 'It is *as if* someone has planned it'? But you and I know better, don't we? We can say, it is *because* someone has planned it."[47]

Like *Flicker*, *Vineland* is written at a time when everyone "knows better," and paranoid

---

[45] Frenesi jokes with a neighbour that it must be just a computer error, "but then, paranoid, decided not to repeat what she'd heard from Flash" (86); in a return to the old days of the 24 fps film collective, Ditzah tells her sister Zipi that "we all have to be extra paranoid" (262) when they find out that various members of their old group have gone missing; and under DL's guidance, Prairie must quickly learn paranoia as a necessary defensive weapon.

[46] Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970).

[47] Roszak, *Flicker* (London: Bantam, 1992), p.564.

speculation has been replaced by epistemological resignation. The paranoid suspicions held by the counterculture have all been confirmed, and conspiracies theories about the government conspiring against its citizens are taken for granted. Carl Oglesby, a New Left student in the sixties who subsequently became a radical historian, sums up the situation with his dictum that "conspiracy is the normal continuation of normal politics by normal means."[48] The two decades since the publication of *Gravity's Rainbow* conspiracy have witnessed the following: the revelations about Watergate; the discovery of anomalies in the official versions which has led to a proliferation of conspiracy theories about the assassinations of the Kennedys, Martin Luther King and Malcolm X; the emergence of details about COINTELPRO, the government's counter-intelligence programme; the October Surprise arms-for-hostages scandal and the Iran-Contra hearings—and so on. Thus in *Vineland* we find that Watergate has lost its aura of revelation, with its translation into *The G. Gordon Liddy Story* (339), just another late-night made-for-TV movie (starring Sean Connery), about the life of the CIA operative involved not only in the Watergate break-in but also in the Bay of Pigs (and possibly the Kennedy assassination), and who is now a Rush Limbaugh-style talk radio host. Likewise the government's conspiracy against its own citizens has become so visible that the Bureau is obliged to place a Wide Load sign on the back of the lorry when they move Weed Atman's COINTELPRO file around. Special Agent Ribble of the Witness Protection Programme asks Flash if he's "'notice[d] how cheap coke has been since 1981'" (353), insinuating a conspiracy theory which even as well-versed a paranoid as Flash is still naive enough to find incredible: "'Roy! Is you're sayin' the President himself is duked into some deal? Quit foolin'! Next you'll be tellin' me George Bush'" (353). The joke, of course, is that by the time of the publication of the novel the story about the connections between Reagan, Bush, the CIA, drugs, arms, the Contras and Iraq had all been endlessly displayed on TV with the Oliver North hearings. There is no longer any excuse for believing that the government doesn't operate secret policies. "In those days," the narrator of *Vineland* comments sardonically about the sixties, "it was still unthinkable that any North American agency would kill its own citizens and then lie about it" (248). The irony is that where conspiracy theories might have been a critical mode of narrative for an emergent counterculture in the sixties, by the time of *Vineland* so much has been exposed that they are no longer necessary.

What makes it worse in *Vineland* is that power no longer feels the need to hide itself, or work through secret agencies. The film archive of 24fps, for example, is burned publicly in a suburban neighbourhood. Reagan's War on Drugs becomes heavy-handed, with Brock's troops "terrorizing the neighborhood for weeks, running up and down dirt lanes in formation chanting 'War-on-drugs! War-on-drugs!' strip-

---

[48] Carl Oglesby, *The Yankee and Cowboy War: Conspiracies from Dallas to Watergate* (Kansas City: Sheed Andrews and McMeel, 1976), p.15.

searching folks in public [. . .] acting, indeed, as several neighbors observed, as if they had invaded some helpless land far away, instead of a short plane ride from San Francisco" (357). The action takes on cartoon proportions with the Campaign Against Marijuana Production (CAMP), led by the neo-Nazi Count Kommandant Bopp, who requisitions the whole of Vineland airport in an increasingly visible operation. It begins to look like a national-emergency operation (co-ordinated with the invasion of Nicaragua) is being prepared, but even these plans are not kept hidden: "copies of these contingency plans had been circulating all summer, it wasn't much of a secret" (340).

As we have seen, many critics balked at the obviousness of the politics in *Vineland*, but I would argue that obviousness has become an aesthetic response to a situation in which the hidden agendas of politics are "not much of a secret." In essays on *Gravity's Rainbow* and Umberto Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum*, Brian McHale develops an argument about what he terms "meta-paranoia."[49] Modernist texts invite paranoid readings, he argues, because they encourage readers to discover secret analogies between events, hidden significances, concealed allusions, and so on. After "the New Critical institutionalization of Modernism," he continues, "paranoid reading comes to be taken for granted, assumed to be *the* appropriate norm of reading." What is the reader then to make of "*post*modernist texts," McHale wonders, "which assume and anticipate paranoid reading-habits on the part of their readers," with their representation and thematisation of paranoid reading in the form of conspiracy theories? McHale advocates the idea of meta-paranoia, which would involve "some form of paranoiacally skeptical reading *of* those paranoid structures" which make up a book like *Gravity's Rainbow*.

I would argue, however, that McHale's schematic analysis of postmodern paranoia cannot address the logic of texts like *Vineland*, in which the very strategy of "paranoid reading" is no longer available because what has previously been hidden has now been made manifest. In *Vineland* there is an emptying out of paranoid allusions, since its signs of pop culture only point to other signs and images, locked in their own claustrophobic world of TV listings. This semiological dead-end produces a flattening out—perhaps even a reversal—of surface and depth. In many ways there is not much left for a critic like Frank Kermode to do, since the "interpretations" are all there on the surface; in *Vineland*, mass-produced objects speak for themselves. In order to read for the "unconscious" of *Vineland*, it now becomes necessary, I would suggest, to focus on precisely the notions of obviousness, surface, and visibility.[50]

---

[49] Brian McHale, "Modernist Reading, Postmodernist Text: The Case of *Gravity's Rainbow*," "'You Used to Know What These Words Mean': Misreading *Gravity's Rainbow*," and "Ways of World-Making: on *Foucault's Pendulum*," in *Constructing Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp.61-86, 87-114, and 165-187.

[50] Some critics have discussed DeLillo in these terms. Pat O'Donnell, for example, explores the disappearance of paranoia into obviousness in DeLillo, in "Obvious Paranoia: The Politics of Don DeLillo's *Running Dog*," *Centennial Review*, 34 (1990), 56-72. Likewise, John McLure traces DeLillo's rewriting of the romance genre in an age devoid of secret spaces, in "Postmodern Romance: Don DeLillo

So whereas *The Crying of Lot 49* holds out the possibility of "another mode of meaning behind the obvious," a form of secret, revelatory understanding which promises, however mistakenly, to yield up the final truth about America, in *Vineland* there is only the obvious. *Lot 49* considers the possibility of a "transcendent meaning" that will be found "behind the hieroglyphic streets" (125), a concern that manifests itself in the repeated figurations of uncovering, revelation, and, as we saw in the extract above, striptease. Even if the hope of a countercultural hidden "underground" of outsiders connected by a secret tradition proves illusory, the novel itself nevertheless manages to introduce a "ritual reluctance" into the mundane language of suburban California; in "The Courier's Tragedy" when "things get really peculiar," a "gentle chill, an ambiguity, begins to creep in among the words" (48). *Lot 49* opens out the glossy present of 1964 through its intertextual references to literature, art, science, history, and science, into the endlessly-expanding labyrinth of the Borgesian library.[51] Even if, as Oedipa worries, there is after all "only the earth" and not "another set of possibilities" (125), the Californian landscape has been transformed and illuminated in the course of the novel. But in *Vineland* it begins to seem that after all there might be "only the earth." When Ralph Wayvone Sr., the San Franciscan mafia boss, stands daydreaming in his coastal-view garden one foggy morning, "the fog now began to lift to reveal not the borderlands of the eternal after all, but only quotidian California again, looking no different than it had when he left" (94).

At times *Vineland* seems to hold out the hope of some hidden enclave in Vineland County—"about the last refuge for pot growers in North California" (220)—which would escape the legal and financial constraints of the outside world. The hinterlands consist of "regions unmapped" (173), a fact which temporarily hinders the otherwise inexorable clamp-down led by Kommandant Bopp's army. For the Yuroks, the indigenous people of this land, Shade Creek had always signified "the realm behind the immediate" (186). But this echo of the aspirations towards otherworldliness in *Lot 49* is long since gone, as are the native Indians; the "invisible boundary" which concealed "another intention" (317) has been dug up and paved over by cable TV developers. There are—or soon will be—no spaces left for secrets, mysteries, or any other form of resistance to the technorationalisation of "the spilled, the broken world" (267) of the Californian landscape. Throughout *Vineland* there runs a sub-plot about the disenchantment of California (and, as the title of the novel suggests, of the "legacy" of America), an on-going tale of development, encroachment, yuppification and commodification. So, for example, the former hard-core union enclave has vanished: we learn about the transformation of a logger's bar into a New Age haven where

---

and the Age of Conspiracy," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 89 (1990), 337-53.

[51] Dugdale's *Allusive Parables of Power* provides probably the best account of *Lot 49*'s intertexts. Pynchon's first three novels of course contain many engagements with mass culture, but in *Vineland* there are scarcely any references to anything else.

"dangerous men with coarsened attitudes [. . .] were perched around lightly on designer barstools, sipping kiwi mimosas" (5).[52] Even spiritual secrets have been turned into commodities: the Buddhist mandalas of *Gravity's Rainbow* become translated into the "pizza mandala" at the Bhodi Dharma Pizza Temple in downtown Vineland (45); the life-long training in oriental techniques undergone by DL Chastain has been made redundant by the fact that "today, of course, you can pick up a dedicated hand-held Ninja Death Touch calculator in any drugstore" (141); and the Sister Attentive of the Kunoichi retreat is more concerned with "cash flow" than spiritual matters (153). Not only do sixties fashions like the miniskirt make a return, but the "big Nostalgia Wave" (51) sweeps up the sixties themselves, turning the political ambitions of the decade into nothing more than a fashion, "as revolution went blending into commerce" (308). In the same way that spirituality and politics are doomed to transparency as commodities, so too are the hidden recesses of Vineland's topography finally marked out for development. We learn, for instance, about "valleys still in those days unknown except to a few real-estate visionaries, little crossroads places where one day houses'd sprawl" (37); we hear "an industrious roar that could as well have been another patch of developer condos going up" (191), and the sound of birds battles against the "distant wash of freeway sound, the concrete surf" (194). When Zoyd and Prairie first arrive in "Vineland the Good" they find a world "not much different from what early visitors in Spanish and Russian ships had seen," but "someday this would all be part of a Eureka-Crescent City-Vineland metropolis" (317), because "developers in and out of state had also discovered this shoreline" (319).

The hidden depths and concealed realms which might permit countercultural fantasies of conspiracy and paranoia have thus all but disappeared in the world of *Vineland*. Everything has become exposed, and it is in this light that we can make sense of the re-surfacing of those characters like Frenesi and Flash who had gone underground at the end of the sixties. When Frenesi hears of names being deleted from the computer list of informers she hypothesises first that they have either died or been made to disappear, but then she speculates that "'maybe they went the other way, surfaced, went up in the world again'" (88). More frightening than the possibility that various of their friends have vanished down into the repressive depths of the state machine is the knowledge that they might have had the perversely comforting cloak of surveillance removed, returning them to the total visibility of the "upper world" (90). On this reading, then, the final failure of the sixties underground culture comes about not through any of the conspiratorial fantasies of apocalypse which the counterculture espoused, but because there is nowhere left to hide.

---

[52] The filming of *The Return of the Jedi* in Vineland County was what changed the loggers bar, but movies themselves have been overtaken by the process of yuppification found in the Noir Center movie-theme shopping mall , which "runs to some pitch so desperate that Prairie at least had to hope the whole process was reaching the end of its cycle" (326).

(iii) "Conspiracy Theory is Démodé"

We have seen, then, how in *Vineland* paranoia becomes routinised and made redundant, and how secrecy is turned inside out into obviousness. I'd now like to explore what has happened more generally to the discourse of conspiracy—and the self-aware debate on that discourse. Once again my aim is not to diagnose how or why "Mr. Pynchon's paranoia has eased," but to locate Pynchon within a wider rethinking of the political and aesthetic possibilities of paranoia as a cultural language.

We might begin by looking at one account of how "the pagan innocence and idealism that was the sixties remains and continues to exert its fascination on today's kids."[53] Cyberpunk magazine *Mondo 2000*, whose "scouts are out there sniffing the breeze," argues that the true inheritors of the counterculture today are the "whole new generation of sharpies, mutants and superbrights" who are the pioneers of the cybernet. The magazine could therefore report at the end of the eighties that "eco-fundamentalism is out, conspiracy theory is démodé, drugs are obsolete." Though a little heady on the "new whiff of apocalypticism across the land," the editors nevertheless stake out the new frontiers of countercultural politics for the nineties as a cyberterritory which will not be plotted by conspiracy theories. Less prophetic, but probably more in tune with the uneven development of cultural sensibilities, the *Covert Culture Sourcebook* includes a section on conspiracy theory, listing books on topics as incommensurate as the Lockerbie bombing and "The Secret History of the New World Order."[54] Within the catalogue as a whole, conspiracy is sandwiched between entries on The Body and Death, each becoming merely one more style in this cornucopia of fringe culture. The collection perhaps gestures towards the formation of a rainbow coalition of radical America, in the belief (as its blurb puts it) that "everything interesting is out at the edges. Sparks kick up when opposing edges meet. Sometimes hot edges fuse, creating something wild and new . . . That's covert culture." Yet, in its random sampling of "the edges," it seems to substitute the content of each critical position for an aura of alternativeness. The same process of homogenisation is at work in numerous alternative bookstores in the States. In the Amok bookstore in Los Angeles, for instance, *The Unseen Hand: An Introduction to the Conspiratorial View of History* finds its home on the shelves next to, say, magazines on body piercing, and scholarly works on black politics.

In many ways, then, conspiracy has become not so much out-moded as out-numbered. It now takes its place in a supermarket of New Age beliefs and practices, ranging from artificial life to zine culture, each no less—but also no more—significant

---

[53] Queen Mu and R.U. Sirius, editorial, *Mondo 2000*, 7 (Fall 1989), cited in Andrew Ross, *Strange Weather* (London: Verso, 1991), p.163.

[54] Richard Kadrey, *Covert Culture Sourcebook 2.0: Further, Deeper, Stranger Explorations of Fringe Culture* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994).

than its rival products. Thus in a periodical published from Santa Rosa in the eighties called *Critique: A Journal of Conspiracy and Metaphysics*, the list of contents for issue number 25 included: "Holistic medicine and the Islamic Worldview; Drugs and Profit in the Third World; Eating Culture; Food as Junk Commodity; Sufi Healing in a Mystical Community; Medicine and Metaphysics; Notes on the Dervishes; Some Journalistic Hoaxes; Michael Ledeen and the Iran-Contra Scandal; Money Subversion is No Accident; Nuclear Fallout and Cancer; The Coming Ice Age; Secret Societies in the Life of Karl Marx; A Metaphysical Approach to Understanding Relationships; Ramtha; Channeling and Deception; and Dealing with the Mystics." The only thing these articles have in common is that, in some fashion or other, they question consensus reality—in the words of the journal's motto, taken from Noam Chomsky. The possibility of critique, however, seems to diminish in proportion to the proliferation of nonconformist cultures. Paranoia as a form of cultural resistance has condemned itself into obsolescence by the very profusion of conspiracy theories. In an ironic twist on *Mondo 2000*'s proclamation of the replacement of the culture of paranoia by the exploration of cyberspace, perhaps the true home of conspiracy theories is now the Internet, with half a dozen newsgroups and e-zines dedicated to conspiratorial matters—not to mention the hacking activities which "freed" some of the information from security service computers in the first place. Alongside established genres like the Kennedy assassination and the Illuminati, unmoderated newsgroups like alt.conspiracy receive several hundred postings a day, with contributions ranging from the latest speculation about the "double blast" in the Oklahoma bombing, to indiscriminate rants about a world take-over by the Trilateral Commission. The sheer volume and incommensurability of the articles resembles the process of commodification running through *Vineland*, such that every aspect of history and society will sooner or later be turned into a conspiracy theory. This countercultural language looses its force at the moment when it becomes ubiquitous.

Pynchon's *Vineland* can thus be seen to participate in a wider discussion by the Left of the paradox that conspiracy theory failed precisely because it became too successful. In his essay, "Cognitive Mapping," which functions partly as a postscript to the 1984 article on postmodernism, Fredric Jameson roundly condemns conspiracy theory and its fictional enactments. "Conspiracy," writes Jameson, "is the poor person's cognitive mapping in the postmodern age; it is a degraded figure of the total logic of late capital, a desperate attempt to represent the latter's system, whose failure is marked by its slippage into sheer theme and content."[55] Two important arguments are contained in Jameson's seemingly off-the-cuff remarks. The first is that in calling conspiracy fictions the "poor person's cognitive mapping," he points towards the popular appeal of an aesthetic form which seemed to hold out radical promise. Yet the

---

[55] Fredric Jameson, "Cognitive Mapping," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), p.355.

phrase demonstrates the kind of élitist distrust of popular theorising present in feminist writings, such that conspiracy theory becomes the mark of difference between the popular and the academic. Pynchon's first three novels, I have suggested, yield a similarly complicitous critique of popular thrillers and detective fiction as both enticing in their promise to get at What Is Really Going On, and distracting in their ability to mask the obvious behind a veil of seemingly important details.

The second component of Jameson's comment is that conspiracy theories are "degraded" forms of analysis not so much because they ignore the political and economic story, but because they obsessively focus on it, saturating the "theme and content" of contemporary culture with the paranoid style. Furthermore, as Pat O'Donnell argues in an article on the "culture of paranoia" in Norman Mailer, Joseph McElroy, Diane Johnson, Don DeLillo and *Lot 49*, Pynchon's novel "can be said to foster paranoia, as well as to fabulate it." As much as paranoia functions as a resistance to the dominant culture, it also ends up "comply[ing] with its advancement."[56] The effect of this self-replicating overload of paranoia in both fiction and theory, Jameson suggests, is to convince readers of their powerlessness:

> What happens is that the more powerful the vision of some increasingly total system or logic—the Foucault of the prisons book is the obvious example—the more powerless the reader comes to feel. Insofar as the theorist wins, therefore, by constructing an increasingly closed and terrifying machine, to that very degree he loses, since the critical capacity of his work is thereby paralysed, and the impulses of negation and revolt, not to speak of those of social transformation, are increasingly perceived as vain and trivial in face of the model itself.[57]

Jameson's complaint is thus not so much about the actual content of paranoid depictions of panoptical society, as their tendency to undermine the desire for action. His argument takes place within a movement over the last decade which has sought (as the title of a book by Baudrillard puts it) to "forget Foucault," or at least the way Foucault had been read as a theoretician of panoptic surveillance systems.[58] Andrew Ross (like Jameson, a member of the *Social Text* collective) spells out clearly the argument that an excessively conspiratorial mapping of the postmodern surveillance state ends up leaving people resigned to their fate:

---

[56] O'Donnell, "Engendering Paranoia," pp.192-93. I agree on the whole with O'Donnell's conclusion, but would argue instead that Pynchon takes the idea of paranoia furthering Their ends as his starting point.

[57] Jameson, "Postmodernism," p.86.

[58] See for example Frank Lentricchia's analysis of Foucault in *Ariel and the Police* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), and "In Place of an Afterword: Someone Reading," in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin, eds (Chicago and London: Chicago University press, 1990), pp.321-38: "for Foucault undisciplined and anarchic individuality may be precisely the unintended effect of a system which would produce individuality as an object of its knowledge and power, but which instead, and ironically, inside its safe, normalized subject, instigates the move to the underground where a deviant selfhood may nurture sullen schemes of resistance to a world in which paranoia is reason, not madness."

> What I have been describing are some of the features of that critical left position—sometimes referred to as the "paranoid" position—on information technology which imagines or constructs a totalizing, monolithic picture of systematic domination. Whilst this story is often characterized as a conspiracy theory, its targets—technorationality, bureaucratic capitalism—are usually too abstract to fit the picture of a social order planned and shaped by a small, conspiring group of centralized power elites.[59]

Ross is dubious about conspiracy always being the best story to tell, for it recreates precisely the mentality and conditions that it is warning us against. He too advocates what amounts to a strategic non-deployment of conspiracy metaphors in order to write oneself out of the victim's slot. "The critical habit of finding unrelieved domination everywhere," Ross continues, "has certain consequences, one of which is to create a siege mentality, reinforcing the inertia, helplessness and despair that such critiques set out to oppose in the first place." On this view, then, the effect of paranoia is to promote the very social conditions which make people paranoid in the first place.

The argument turns paradoxical—and here we return to the territory of *Vineland*—in those characterisations of postmodernity which confirm that everything really was connected after all. Ross, for instance, talks about the vast connections of vested interests in what he terms the "media-military-industrial complex." The irony is that although these links exist, none of it was planned by a conspiracy, and there is no one in control. Terry Eagleton, for example, observes that postmodernism is just a sick joke at the expense of modernism. "Reification," he argues "once it has extended its empire across the whole of social reality, effaces the very criteria by which it can be recognized for what it is and so triumphantly abolishes itself, returning everything to normality."[60] In effect, "postmodernism persuades us to relinquish our epistemological paranoia," because it becomes unnecessary when the distinction between figure and ground, original and copy, or secrecy and visibility has been erased.[61] In a similar vein, Jameson theorises "late or multinational or consumer capitalism" as "the purest form of capitalism yet to have emerged, a prodigious expansion of capital into hitherto uncommodified areas." This "purer capitalism of our own time," he continues, "thus eliminates the enclaves of precapitalist organization it had hitherto tolerated."[62] Jameson goes on to argue that the final saturation of the commodity logic has penetrated the last sites of modernist resistance located in Nature, the Unconscious, and the Third World. As we saw with *Vineland*, paranoia paradoxically becomes redundant when everything finally is connected, tied up into the global capitalist market, when everything—even secrecy, be it of information or landscape—becomes available and

---

[59] Ross, *Strange Weather*, p.96.

[60] Terry Eagleton, "Capitalism, Modernism and Postmodernism," in *Against the Grain* (London: Verso, 1986), p.132.

[61] Eagleton, "Capitalism, Modernism and Postmodernism," p.144.

[62] Jameson, "Postmodernism," p.76.

visible as a commodity.

If Hofstadter and the articles in *Esquire* and *Harper's* constitute the discursive terrain which Pynchon's first three novels map out and are themselves located within, then it might be claimed that, along with the alternative culture proliferation of conspiracy theories considered above, the work of Jean Baudrillard provides a theoretical and rhetorical analogue to *Vineland*. Baudrillard's account of the hyperreality of, say, presidential assassinations (which I discussed in Chapter 1) suggests that the paranoid logic of conspiracy theories has become redundant. He claims that the total saturation of the commodity-as-sign empties it of any depth of meaning; the result is that "we no longer partake of the drama of alienation, but are in the ecstasy of communication." This ecstasy, Baudrillard argues, is:

> no longer the obscenity of the hidden, the repressed, the obscure, but that of the visible, the all-too-visible, the more-than-visible; it is the obscenity of that which no longer contains a secret and is entirely soluble in information and communication.[63]

Baudrillard traces this historical shift from secrecy to visibility through pathological metaphors. He declares that hysteria and paranoia have been replaced by schizophrenia, a characterisation of postmodernity which Jameson and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have also expounded in their own ways.[64] "Projective paranoia" as "the pathology of organisation" has turned into schizophrenia as "an immanent promiscuity and the perpetual interconnection of all information and communication networks." Pynchon's latest novel shares similarities with Baudrillard's account of the transformation of paranoia into the ultra-visibility of schizophrenic culture, but it gives far more context and detail than the apocalyptic abstraction of the latter's analysis. *Vineland* also plots a more uneven tale of development, in which the language of paranoia coincides and impinges upon the newer condition of schizophrenia.

---

[63] Jean Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*, trans. Bernard & Caroline Schutze (New York: Semiotext(e), 1988), p.22.

[64] See, for example, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. R, Hurley, M. Seem, and H. Lane (London: The Athlone Press, 1984). Jameson writes that "I have found Lacan's account of schizophrenia useful . . . as description rather than diagnosis . . . I am obviously very far from thinking that any of the most significant postmodernist artists . . . are schizophrenics in any clinical sense" ("Postmodernism," p.71). His exploration of the postmodern aesthetics of schizophrenia sits uneasily with his analysis of the "omnipresence of the theme of paranoia" in the same essay. I think we can make more sense of this apparent contradiction (without having to latch onto some compromise formulation like "paranoid schizophrenia") if we return to the temporal anomaly I discussed in n.8 above. The novelists Jameson discusses could be seen as representatives of an earlier attempt to make sense of the hyper-production of information in global capitalism, before a schizophrenic relinquishing of epistemological control became a more appropriate cultural response. It must also be noted that several recent articles have tried to criticise postmodernism as a paranoid hermeneutic, but I have been less convinced by their rather abstract, philosophical arguments than by Jameson's more historically grounded analysis. "Postmodernity and Paranoia," Editorial, *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 27 (1990), 89-90; William Bywater, "The Paranoia of Postmodernism," *Philosophy and Literature*, 14 (1990), 79-84; Linda Fisher, "Hermeneutics of Suspicion and Postmodern Paranoia: Psychologies of Interpretation," *Philosophy and Literature*, 16 (1992), 106-114.

(iv) The Whole World Is Watching

In tracing the development of the culture of paranoia through Pynchon's four novels, we have seen how in the nineties it is transformed (in Jameson's term) into an empty pastiche of its sixties potential. In this final section I want to explore the treatment of television in *Vineland*, because it both continues and disrupts this line of reading. The novel produces such a concerted portrait of the dominance of television that, in a final irony, it ends up producing a conspiracy theory of TV as the cause of conspiracy theory's demise.

A brief account of *Vineland*'s engagement with television might highlight some of the following features in a novel, as Frank Kermode complained, saturated with pop culture.[65] Most of the major characters are shown sitting in front of the TV, as if this were the one activity they all have in common; Ortho Bob, one of the Thanatoids, Vineland's ultimate zombified couch-potatoes, jokes that "'there'll never be a Thanatoid sitcom [. . .] 'cause all they could show'd be scenes of Thanatoids watchin' the Tube'" (171). The dialogues and the interior monologues of nearly all the characters are shot through with references to all kinds of commodity culture, but the most important of these—as the novel insistently capitalizes it—is the Tube. The inhabitants of *Vineland* choose their comparisons from the world they live in, namely the endlessly mediated environment of television.[66] Not only are the voices of characters saturated with TV talk, but the narrator also turns to the Tube for comparison and elucidation.[67] The action of *Vineland* takes place in a short-circuit television world, in which the gap between "real" life—itself already a simulation—and its TV adaptation is increasingly diminished.[68] The New Age homeopathic motto of the National Endowment for Video Re-education is, fittingly, "Transcendence through

---

[65] For a more exhaustive account of television in *Vineland* see Brian McHale, "Zapping, the Art of Switching Channels: On *Vineland*," in *Constructing Postmodernism*, pp.115-41, and Johan Callens, "Tubed Out and Movie Shot in Pynchon's *Vineland*," *Pynchon Notes*, 28-29 (1991), 115-41.

[66] For example, Zoyd describes his "inner feelings" to Frenesi during their tense meeting in Hawaii, saying that he "'feel[s] like Mildred Pierce's husband, Bert'" (57); "'You think I'm one of these kids on Phil Donahue," Prairie complains to DL (103); Vato and Blood the towtruck duo argue whether the story of DL and Takeshi will turn out to be a sitcom or a "Movie of the Week where the dude has an incurable disease" (179); Roscoe, Brock's sidekick, likewise declares after a particularly hair-raising mission that it "'feel[s] like we been in a Movie of the Week!'" (271).

[67] A list of examples might include the following: the relationship between Zoyd and Hector is characterised as "a romance over the years at least as persistent as Sylvester and Tweety's" (22); each year at marijuana harvest-time the Vineland County sheriff, Willis Chunko (an "old media hand"), shows up "as sure a precursor of the season as the Jerry Lewis telethon" (220-21); and when DL and Takeshi are using the Puncutron machine—in a whole episode that itself resembles nothing so much as a ninja movie anyway—they "lie hooked up side by side like actors in a brain-transplant movie" (165).

[68] Here we might point to the TV movie of the previous year's NBA play-offs (371); the case of Millard Hobbs who started out as an actor doing commercials for a lawn company and ended up becoming his character, the Marquis de Sod; the "primal Tubefreek miracle" of Frenesi's fantasy highway patrolman materialising just as she settles down to masturbate in front of a CHiPs rerun; Zoyd's annual transfenestration that is staged for TV; and the narrator's ironic questioning of the Tubal Detox clinic's measure of success—"What kind of 'outside world' could they be rehabilitating him for?" (336).

Saturation" (335).

In addition to this aesthetic of saturation, *Vineland* contains a more direct—that is to say, more obvious—attack on the Tube. The novel develops two interrelated versions of a dystopian argument against popular culture. The first is summed up by the Tubal Detox clinic's house hymn, every bit as comically forthright as the Yoyodyne glee in *Lot 49* and the paranoia show-tune in *Gravity's Rainbow*:

> Oh . . . the . . . Tube!
> It's poi-soning your brain!
> Oh, yes. . . .It's dri-ving you, insane!
> It's shoot-ing rays, at you,
> Over ev'ry-thing ya do,
> It sees you in your bedroom,
> And—on th' toi-let too! (336)

As much as it is a medium for entertainment, the Tube is also a sinister instrument of panoptical surveillance that "sees you in your bedroom." This paranoid vision of the TV of course owes a lot to Orwell's *1984*, an intertext never too far away in a novel whose present action takes place in that much-discussed year.[69] Hector is watching TV late one night, when—fittingly—right in the middle of *The G. Gordon Liddy Story* he "saw the screen go blank, bright and prickly, and then heard voices hard, flat, echoing" (339). With what begins to look like a test run for the declaration of martial law, Hector feels that it is "as if the Tube were suddenly to stop showing pictures and instead announce, 'From now on, I'm watching you'" (340).

On the other hand, television is also figured as a less direct means of control, forming at best an addiction, and at worse a freely chosen poison. And here the obvious model is Huxley's *Brave New World*, which imagines a world in which the clumsy mechanisms of oppression have been replaced by the carefully manipulated power of mass entertainment. The final irony of the government's counterintelligence programme to break-up the counterculture comes in *Vineland* with the announcement that Brock Vond's Political Re-education Program [PREP] camps have been defunded because, as Hector explains, "they did a study, found out since about '81 kids were comín in all on their own askín about careers" (347). TV takes its place—albeit a supremely important one—in a whole armoury of stultifying activities: "sooner or later Holytail was due for the full treatment, from which it would emerge, like most of the old Emerald Triangle, pacified territory—reclaimed by the enemy for a timeless, defectively imagined future of zero-tolerance of drug-free Americans all pulling their weight and all locked in to the official economy, inoffensive music, endless family specials on the Tube, church all week long, and, on special days, for extra-good behavior, maybe a cookie" (221-22).

---

[69] The dystopian aspect of *Vineland* is discussed at length by M. Keith Booker, "*Vineland* and Dystopian Fiction," *Pynchon Notes*, 30-31 (1992), 5-38.

This dystopian view of the power of television to dupe its passive viewers into conformity resembles nothing so much as a return to the attack on mass culture mounted by fifties intellectuals such as Clement Greenberg, Dwight MacDonald and C. Wright Mills, writing in magazines like *Partisan Review* and *Dissent*. As we saw in Chapter 2, in their view mass culture was to be distinguished from older and more authentic forms of folk culture, in that it was a vehicle for top-down domination by the "lords of kitsch" who could manipulate the masses into automatic consumption. This position in effect amounted to a conspiracy theory of mass culture, which expressed concerns about America heading towards a Stalinised version of totalitarianism, in which the people were easily shaped into political conformity. In *Vineland* this debate is still alive for the older generation at the Traverse-Becker get-together: "other grandfolks could be heard arguing the perennial question of whether the United States still lingered in a pre-fascist twilight, or whether that darkness had fallen long stupefied years ago, and the light they thought they saw was coming only from millions of Tubes all showing the same bright-colored shadows" (371). Whether 1984 turned out to be only a dress rehearsal, or whether the struggle has been lost years ago, the conspiracy of television is still being taken seriously, both by those old enough to remember the world without it, and by the novel as a whole. *Vineland* represents a strange temporality, then, in which conspiracy theories of mass culture are given an airing in a novel which at the same time presents a world in which the language of conspiracy no longer makes any sense—not least because the depth of paranoia has been flattened out by the saturation of images pumped out by the Tube. It is almost as if one last conspiracy theory—out-moded, nostalgic, ironic—is necessary to account for the demise of the cultural possibilities of paranoia.

Vineland returns to the conspiracy theory of mass culture, I believe, because it is concerned to test out some of the competing popular explanations for the failure of the sixties revolution. Three candidates are offered: the first is the story of government infiltration; the second is represented by Brock Vond's "genius" insight that there were "in the activities of the sixties left not threats to order but unacknowledged desires for it" (269); and the third involves television as a mammoth distraction. As Prairie's boyfriend, Isaiah Two Four explains to an uncomprehending Zoyd:

> "Whole problem 'th you folks's generation, nothing personal, is you believed in your Revolution, put your lives right out there for it—but you sure didn't understand much about the Tube. Minute the Tube got hold of you folks that was it, that whole alternative America, el deado meato, just like th'Indians, sold it all to your real enemies, and even in 1970 dollars—it was way too cheap." (373)

Isaiah's analysis highlights the many characterisations of television in *Vineland* as a "distraction," admittedly only one of many, but nevertheless the most ubiquitous and insidious. In a conversation between Mucho Maas (a survivor from *Lot 49*) and Zoyd on his way up to Vineland at the end of the sixties, the record company impresario

speculates on how the State will nullify the radical acid visions of the counterculture. "'They just let us forget,' " Mucho argues, "'give us too much to process, fill up every minute, keep us distracted, it's what the Tube is for'" (314). Although the narrator ends the conversation with the disclaimer that "it was the way people used to talk," the argument is still very much alive in *Vineland.*

In *Vineland* the success of television becomes the ultimate revenge on countercultural hopes. Until the College of the Surf debacle, the 24 fps collective maintained a wide-eyed faith in the power of film as a countercultural weapon. Their belief reflects a common opinion of the time that to expose the actions of state to viewers would be sufficient to precipitate, if not its collapse, then certainly the demise of those practices. In the counterculture of the late sixties and early seventies, Vietnam became the focus for these aspirations. Former SDS [Students for a Democratic Society] leader, Tod Gitlin, tells the story of the "ideological domestication" of the peace protests by the nightly news coverage in his 1980 book, *The Whole World Is Watching*, the chant of the SDS when in front of the cameras.[70] The phrase speaks of an appropriation and reversal of the paranoid fear of surveillance (They have Us in their panoptical gaze), into a possible weapon of the counterculture (We are monitoring Their activities). What we find in *Vineland* is that, contrary to Gil Scott Heron's seventies anthem "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised," the sixties revolution was indeed televised, turned into a six-part mini-series, and repeated every year—or perhaps it was done as a TVM with Hector's "zippy working title, 'Drugs—Sacrament of the Sixties, Evil of the Eighties'" (342).[71] *Vineland*'s frequent representations of people watching the television ironically suggest that the whole world was indeed watching—glued to the Tube—and that was the downfall of the sixties protests.

The dystopian, conspiratorial account of mass culture is, however, only one line of representation in *Vineland*, albeit, like the Tube itself in the novel, a very visible and intrusive one. As much as *Vineland* presents an attack on the "mindless pleasures" of mass culture, it also betrays an enormous affection for them. It is rumoured that Pynchon had assistance from friends for the arcane research in his first three novels. But with *Vineland* one can feel fairly certain that Pynchon did all the research himself, sprawled out in front of the Tube on countless late nights. One solution to the riddle of what Pynchon has been doing during all those years of silence—surely he cannot have spent 20 years working on *Vineland*?—is perhaps prefigured towards the end of *Gravity's Rainbow*. The reading of Tyrone Slothrop's tarot cards "point openly to a long and scuffling future," which is enough "to send you to the tube to watch a seventh

---

[70] Tod Gitlin, *The Whole World Is Watching* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).

[71] Several critics have pointed out how *Vineland* establishes a dichotomy between the revolutionary power of film, and the mind-numbing trap of television. See, for example, McHale, "The Art of Zapping," Callens, "Tubed Out and Movie Shot," and David Thoreen, "The Economy of Consumption: The Entropy of Leisure in Pynchon's *Vineland*," *Pynchon Notes*, 30-31 (1992), 53-62 (Thoreen also makes reference to the ironic reversal of Gil Scott Heron's claim).

rerun of the Takeshi and Ichizo Show, light a cigarette and try to forget the whole thing" (*GR*, 738). Zoyd's dream of "carrier pigeons . . . landing and taking off again one by one" (3) at the start of *Vineland* suggests that repeats of those lovable kamikaze pilots' TV show have been showing ever since—Takeshi in fact becomes one of the main characters in *Vineland*. As Frank Kermode laments, there is no short cut to gaining an encyclopaedic familiarity with pop culture. Dr Deeply of NEVER describes Hector's case to Zoyd as "'one of the most intractable cases any of us has seen [. . .] Known in our field as the Brady Buncher, after his deep although not exclusive attachment to that series'" (33). When Zoyd in reply begins to remember "'ol' Marcia" with a little too much alacrity, Deeply gives him a piercing look and suggests that Zoyd should give the detox clinic a call himself. As with Zoyd, the suspicion lingers that Pynchon knows just too much about TV for comfort. As much as *Vineland* constitutes a diagnosis of TV culture, then, it might also be another symptom of its logic.[72]

Like the "guerilla elements" which add an extra letter S to Sid and Ernie's skywritten banner proclaiming a "Drug Free America," thereby "changing the message some" (342), *Vineland* retains an unrepentant exuberance in the depiction of all those "mindless pleasures" which the novel simultaneously calls into question—thereby changing the novel some. Apart from the usual triumvirate of sex, drugs and rock'n'roll, *Vineland* revels in the vocabulary and paraphernalia of fast food, fast cars, fast-forward culture, and so on. As much as popular culture is characterised as the State's means of pacification of its people, it also is figured as a site of something resembling resistance, precisely because its exuberant mindlessness goes against the grain of the Reagonomic culture of constraint and utility. In Mucho Maas's end-of-the-sixties analysis of things to come (angled to be all the more credible because he predicts that one day Reagan will be President), he claims that "soon they're gonna be coming after everything, not just drugs, but beer, cigarettes, sugar, salt, fat, you name it, anything that could remotely please any of your senses, because they need to control all that" (313). His response is to pre-empt that clamp-down by "renounc[ing] everything now." *Vineland*, by contrast, written in a time when no conspiratorial "they" is necessary in a culture of self-policing through diet and health obsessions, plays up the possibilities of "mindless pleasures" as a defence against the encroachment of a "zero tolerance" America.

In conclusion, then, I want to suggest that *Vineland* constructs a picture of its author as both a fan and a critic of mindless pleasures, as someone who still wants to tell conspiracy theories at a time when they no longer make any sense. In this way *Vineland* takes its place alongside other replottings of the sixties by "survivors" of the

---

[72] Since completing this chapter I have watched *The Brady Bunch Movie* (1995). With its near perfect anachronistic recreation of the TV family in present-day America, the film manifests an obsessive nostalgia for the suburban innocence of the sixties (i.e. before the "turmoil" of the struggles for racial and sexual equality). The popularity of the film suggests that a large part of American society has a deep attachment to that series and all that it signifies.

decade and its aftermath. Indeed, the project of cultural studies, which itself emerged in the sixties and is now undergoing a process of plotting its own history, has attempted to do justice to being both a fan and a critic.[73] We have seen in this chapter how Theodore Roszak's novel, *Flicker*, reads as an affectionate homage to the movie culture the author is obviously extremely familiar with, while also producing a conspiracy theory about the insidious effects of entertainment technology. A similar mini-narrative could be told about Tod Gitlin, whose first book tells a story of media co-optation, but whose subsequent book, *Inside Prime Time*, struggles to avoid conspiracy theories about the manipulation of audiences by programme controllers for advertising markets. On the whole the book presents a picture of audiences as "sophisticated enough to recognize that media images are stereotypes"; but Gitlin also argues that television is an extremely potent source of ideology, which is "nothing more or less than a set of assumptions that becomes second nature; even rebels have to deal with it."[74] Former sixties "rebels" have been dealing with it, and Pynchon's strategy in *Vineland* is to resurrect a conspiracy theory of mass culture alongside an obituary of the cultural logic of paranoia.

---

[73] On being both a fan and a critic, see Constance Penley, "Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and the Study of Popular Culture," in *Cultural Studies*, Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula Treichler, eds (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 479-500. The volume also contains many examples of cultural studies turning its attention to its own history.

[74] Gitlin, *Inside Prime Time* (New York: Pantheon, 1985), pp.249, 333.

CHAPTER 4

BODY PANIC:
WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS AND THE POLITICS OF PARANOIA

So far in this study I have used the term "paranoia" to designate no more than a widespread interest in conspiracy theories in and of 1960s American culture. As we saw in the previous chapter, many other commentators have likewise bracketed off any psychological content to the concept of paranoia. Richard Hofstadter, for example, announces that in using the expression "paranoid style," he is not "speaking in a clinical sense, but borrowing a clinical term for other purposes."[1] Although Hofstadter makes it plain that his interest is more in a political style than a clinical pathology, his analysis does occasionally gesture towards psychosexual factors. In particular he calls attention to how "the sexual freedom often attributed to [the enemy], his lack of moral inhibition, his possession of especially effective techniques for fulfilling his desires, gives exponents of the paranoid style an opportunity to project and freely express unacceptable aspects of their own minds."[2] Hofstadter goes on to suggest that in the paranoid style repressed sadomasochistic imaginings of illicit sex are projected onto the bodies of the demonised but desired enemy. This chapter will explore in more detail Hofstadter's hints towards a psychology of conspiracy which is worked out through fears and fantasies about the body.

In particular it will concentrate on the work of William S. Burroughs, a writer who, along with Pynchon, has been described as one of "our most complex literary paranoid spokesmen."[3] Burroughs' novels develop a highly idiosyncratic and lurid mythography of paranoid fantasies which tap into feelings of disgust and desire about the body. My aim, however, is not so much to diagnose him as an extreme and even psychotic proponent of the paranoid style, as to locate his writings within postwar discourses of homosexuality, drug addiction and disease. My readings therefore strategically play down the disturbing bizarreness of Burroughs' highly individual imagery and plots, in order to draw attention to the way they cohere with and comment upon contemporary debates about the social control of the body's pleasures, functions and failures.

The first half of this chapter begins by discussing how Burroughs' writings of the 1960s empty out the psychoanalytical notion of paranoia as a private delusional system into a materialist analysis of institutional structures of persecution and control. Not only do Burroughs' novels portray these forces of domination working on the body, I argue, they also characterise the body itself as a conspiratorial threat to the self. In effect these novels rework the notion of paranoia as an externalisation of private fears by highlighting the internalisation—and even the literal incorporation—of public surveillance. I then go on to explore how Burroughs produces a further twist to the

---

[1] Richard Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," in *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (New York: Vintage, 1967), p.3.

[2] Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style," p.34.

[3] John Kuehl, *Alternate Worlds: A Study of Postmodern Antirealistic American Fiction* (New York: New York University Press), p.232.

logic of paranoia, with his carnivalesque scenes of junkies and queers (in the titles of two of this novels), which function as satirically exaggerated materialisations of American society's worst fears.[4]

The second half of this chapter considers the possibilities and pitfalls of reading Burroughs in the light of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and conversely, of reading his novels as a map of the contemporary culture of body panic. On the one hand, the epidemic has brought about a deeply disturbing literalisation of the latter's fantastical scenarios of corporeal paranoia. On the other hand, his novels uncannily anticipate and prescript some of the scenarios of bodily infiltration, drug addiction, viral epidemic and sexual paranoia in which the HIV/AIDS epidemic has been written. In short, Burroughs' grotesque mythography has come to look less fantastic over the last decade. Reading Burroughs in the 1980s and '90s is problematic, I therefore want to suggest, because his novels construct entirely literal conspiracy theories about viral epidemics, at the same time as they anatomise the conspiratorial metaphors and narrative logic in which viruses are inscripted. In this section I read elements of Burroughs' novels together with selections from the already copious literature on the HIV/AIDS epidemic. This strategically "literal-minded" and loaded re-reading has two purposes. The first is to make Burroughs' conspiratorial variations more intelligible, by connecting their imagery and plotting to current debates about identity, sexuality and body boundaries. The second aim is to investigate how the latter's extreme dramatisations of paranoia can perversely come to function as guides to remapping the individual and the social body in the age of AIDS.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF CONSPIRACY

The term "paranoia" dates back to Hippocratic times, though originally it conveyed only a non-specific sense of insanity, literally meaning "beyond reason."[5] Notions of chronic suspiciousness and excessive religiosity occur in various classical writers, but it was only in the eighteenth century, in the work of writers such as Kant, that the concept began to crystallise into what we might now recognise as paranoia. The late Victorian proto-psychoanalyst Emil Kraepelin is generally credited with being the first to define the constellation of attributes which constitute the clinical understanding of paranoia as an illness.

Freud offered the first complete psychoanalytical analysis of the mechanisms of paranoia. He developed his theory through a reading of *Memorabilia of a Nerve*

---

[4] Burroughs, *Junky* (1953; Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1977), and *Queer* (1985; London: Picador, 1986).

[5] The origins of the term are traced in D. Swanson, P. Bohnert and J. Smith, *The Paranoid* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1970), and W. Meissner, *The Paranoid Process* (New York: Jason Aaronson, 1978).

Patient by Daniel Paul Schreber, published in 1903. Schreber was a high-ranking judge who became convinced first that his physician was plotting to turn him into a woman in order to sexually abuse him, and then that God had specially chosen him to be the unique redeemer of the human race through a process of sexual transformation which involved God's rays beaming into the judge's anus. With Schreber's descriptions of his pleasure in defecation and his habit of "standing before the mirror or elsewhere, with the upper portion of my body bared, and wearing sundry feminine adornments," it comes as no surprise that Freud posits sexual repression as the cause of the Senatspräsident's illness.[6] He goes on to put forward the hypothesis that the various manifestations of paranoia—delusions of persecution, erotomania, jealousy, and apocalyptic nightmares—result from unconscious transformations of the basic, but untenable, proposition that "*I* (a man) *love him* (a man)."[7] On this view, paranoia is based therefore on a repressed (male) homosexuality, in which the forbidden love for a fellow man exceeding the bounds of companionship becomes inverted into hatred, and projected onto the surrounding community.[8] In other words, the paranoiac's construction of reality is delusional, driven out of kilter by the unconscious frustrations of homosexual desire.[9]

For Burroughs, however, paranoia is less a manifestation of repressed fantasies, than an accurate and necessary cognitive stance in contemporary society. "The paranoid," Burroughs once observed, "is the person in possession of all the facts."[10] The "facts" he has in mind are those about the operations of power by élite and governmental forces, culled from his reading of newspapers, magazines and *National Enquirer*-style conspiracy revelations. For example, Burroughs had been accused for many years of paranoia in his insistence that the magazine *Encounter* was subsidised by the CIA; when it was finally revealed that it had been, Burroughs felt vindicated on the principle that, in J.G. Ballard's version of the apocryphal saying, "the psychotic is someone who really knows what's really going on."[11] In an essay on "Freud and the

---

[6] Sigmund Freud, "Psychoanalytic Notes on an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia (Schreber)," *Case Histories II*, Penguin Freud Library, 15 vols (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), IX, p.151.

[7] Freud, "Schreber," p.200.

[8] Naomi Schor discusses the gender implications of Freud's theory in "Female Paranoia: The Case for Psychoanalytic Feminist Criticism," *Yale French Studies*, 62 (1981), 204-219.

[9] It must be noted, however, that Freud himself demonstrates moments of uncertainty as to the veracity of paranoid delusions. Noting the parallels between details of Schreber's delusions and his own theories of libidinal cathexes, Freud (paranoiacally?) insists that he "can nevertheless call a friend and fellow-specialist to witness that I had developed my theory of paranoia before I became acquainted with the contents of Schreber's book." Freud concludes the case history with a moment of doubt, declaring that, "It remains for the future to decide whether there is more delusion in my theory than I should like to admit, or whether there is more truth in Schreber's delusion than other people are as yet prepared to believe" ("Schreber," p.218).

[10] Quoted in Eric Mottram, *William Burroughs: The Algebra of Need* (London: Calder & Boyars, 1977), p.159.

[11] J.G. Ballard, endorsement on the back cover of Burroughs, *The Place of Dead Roads* (1983; London:

Unconscious," Burroughs follows up on this insistence on a material explanation for what might be taken as a manifestation of paranoia. If a paranoiac hears voices, he argues, it is because those voices have been deliberately planted:

> Now the psychiatrists tell us that any voices anyone hears in his head originate there, and they do not and cannot have an extraneous origin. The whole psychiatric dogma that voices are the imaginings of a sick mind has been called into question by voices which are of extraneous origin and are objectively and demonstrably there on tape. So the psychotic patients may be tuning in to a global and intergalactic network of voices, some using quite sophisticated electronic equipment.[12]

For Burroughs, presidential assassins like Sirhan Sirhan are not isolated lunatics suffering from the personal pathology of paranoia (which was the view held by the psychiatric textbook that I discussed in Chapter 1 above). Instead he speculates that the CIA has the ability to plant suggestive voices in a potential assassin's head (*AM*, 94-95, 117). In a similar fashion, a review of one of Burroughs' novels made the accusation that "Mr. Burroughs for all his worldliness seems to succumb to the 'secret forces at work' syndrome that characterizes so much countercultural thinking." Burroughs refused to accept the charge that he suffers from a "syndrome," replying curtly that "the Watergate scandals would seem to indicate that forces which for good reason would prefer to remain secret are indeed at work" (*AM*, 194). Whereas Freud argues that paranoia operates by a projection of internal desires onto the external world, Burroughs is determined to show how those forces are "really" out there.

In his novels of the sixties Burroughs develops his position that the paranoid is in possession of all the facts. Although *Naked Lunch* and the novels of the Nova trilogy (*The Soft Machine*, *The Ticket That Exploded*, and *Nova Express*) fragment the linear coherence of plot, underpinning these novels there is a cosmic conspiracy that has been in place from pre-historic times, and continues to structure society into the science-fiction future.[13] In the fictional landscape of Interzone (first outlined in *Naked Lunch* and elaborated in subsequent novels), it is the task of the Factualists (and later the benign Nova Police) to expose what is really going on in the "naked lunch" of power politics. Ascertaining the "facts" is never an easy matter, however, since the Nova conspiracy is in control of producing what is taken as normality in its Reality Studios.

Flamingo/HarperCollins, 1993). For the details of the *Encounter* episode, see the biography by Ted Morgan, *Literary Outlaw: The Life and Times of William S. Burroughs* (1988; London: The Bodley Head, 1991), p.450.

[12] Burroughs, *The Adding Machine: Selected Essays* (1986; New York: Arcade, 1993), p.59. Further references will be abbreviated to *AM*, and included in parentheses in the text.

[13] Burroughs, *Naked Lunch* (1959; London: Flamingo/HarperCollins, 1993), *The Soft Machine* (1961; New York: Grove, 1993), *The Ticket That Exploded* (1962; London: John Calder, 1985), and *Nova Express* (1964; New York: Grove, 1992). References to each of these editions will be placed in parentheses in the text, with the respective abbreviations *NL*, *SM*, *TTE*, and *NE*. The complicated publication history of each of these novels is related in Jenni Skerl, *William S. Burroughs* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1985). In brief, the first three were each first published in Paris; *Naked Lunch* only appeared in the USA in 1962, and became the subject of one of the last major literary censorship trials; each novel was revised several times in the course of their reprinting in the 1960s.

"The scanning pattern we accept as 'reality,'" the narrator of *Nova Express* announces, "has been imposed by the controlling power on this planet, a power primarily oriented towards total control" (*NE*, 53); likewise, in *The Ticket that Exploded* the narrator informs the reader that "the reality film has now become an instrument and weapon of monopoly" (*TTE*, 151). From what Agent Lee has been able to uncover, the basic story involves a struggle between the Senders, the Liquefactionists and the Divisionists to gain control of society.[14] Each party seeks to dominate by obliterating dissent into conformity. The Divisionists replicate identical copies of themselves, so that "eventually there will only be one replica of one sex on the planet" (*NL*, 133). The Liquefactionists aim to absorb all opposition. "It will be immediately clear," Agent Lee informs the reader, "that the Liquefactionist Party is, except for one man, entirely composed of dupes, it not being clear until the final absorption who is whose dupe" (*NL*, 131). The Senders, led by Salvador Hassan O'Leary, plot to bring the world under their unilateral control through telepathy, until a situation of totalitarian obedience is produced. In this way, Burroughs' scenarios of apocalyptic conspiracy are very much in line with the anti-Stalinist attacks on the increasing homogenisation of American society in the fifties and sixties. They are also part of a much longer tradition of American libertarianism, encapsulated in Emerson's aphorism that "society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members."[15] Burroughs' novels, I want to argue, reread this proposition so as to place emphasis on the way that society conspires against the manhood, or masculinity, of some of its members.

Burroughs develops this analysis with a pointed attack on bureaucracy as the major channel through which society seeks to shape and control "deviancy." The Nova conspiracy operates not so much by directly coercive displays of force as through the continual and pervasive attention of bureaucratic management. Dr Benway, a character who appears in various guises across Burroughs' œuvre, is the chief functionary of the bureaucratic process. In Annexia (a parodic version of a Scandinavian welfare state) the mad doctor is called upon to implement a programme of "Total Demoralization." His "first act was to abolish concentration camps, mass arrest and, under certain limited and special circumstances, the use of torture" (*NL*, 31). The reason, he explains, is that brutality is "not efficient." In the place of direct force, he constructs "an arbitrary and intricate bureaucracy so that the subject cannot contact his enemy direct" (*NL*, 31). The state of Annexia employs an array of Kafkaesque methods of panoptical interference in the life of its citizens, supposedly in the name of an all-embracing care:

> every citizen of Annexia was required to apply for and carry on his person at all times a whole portfolio of documents. Citizens were subject to be stopped in the street at any time; and the Examiner, who

---

[14] "Lee" is the pseudonym Burroughs used for the publication of his first novel, *Junky*. The name is taken from his maternal grandmother.

[15] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in *Essays* (1841).

> might be in plain clothes, in various uniforms [. . .] after checking each paper, would stamp it. On subsequent inspection the citizen was required to show the properly entered stamps of his last inspection. [. . .] New documents were constantly required. The citizens rushed from one bureau to another in a frenzied attempt to meet the impossible deadlines.[16] (*NL*, 31-32)

The Nova conspiracy's plans for enforced consensus thus work themselves out through the bureaucratic pacification of citizens on a mundane and daily basis. The force of the satire in *Naked Lunch* and its subsequent variations is frequently against bureaucracy, which Benway characterises as "a cancer, a turning away from the human evolutionary direction of infinite potentials and differentiation and independent spontaneous action" (*NL*, 111).

Burroughs' concern in this quartet of novels is therefore to show that fears of persecution are not something to be explained away or read as symptoms of neurosis, but are fully warranted responses to state control of private pleasures through "forms of disciplinary procedure" (*NL*, 33). Benway's Foucauldian vocabulary is appropriate, since the novels highlight in particular the institutional mechanisms of disciplinary control of illicit sexuality and drug use. The four novels replay variations on two key scenarios, namely the Customs Shed and the Examination Room, which I now want to explore.

The Customs interrogations operate on a principle of invasive but arbitrary scrutiny. The following example is taken from *Naked Lunch*:

> Lee swallows a handful of tranquilizing pills and steps into the Pigeon Hole customs shed. The inspectors spend more than three hours pawing through his papers, consulting dusty books of regulations and duties from which they read incomprehensible and ominous excerpts. [. . .] They go through his papers with a magnifying glass. [. . .] "Maybe he figures to sell them for toilet paper. Is this crap for your own personal use?"
> "Yes."
> "He says yes."
> "And how do we know that?"
> "I gotta affidavit."
> "Wise guy. Take off your clothes."
> "Yeah. Maybe he got dirty tattoos."
> They paw over his body probing his ass for contraband and examine it for evidence of sodomy. They dunk his hair and send out the water to be analyzed. "Maybe he's got dope in his hair." (*NL*, 138)

The principal object of the shakedown is drugs, but the random search aims to uncover not so much actual merchandise as signs of Lee's *being* a drug user. The Customs Officers proceed as if a lifestyle were incorporated into the very fibre of his hair. They seek further evidence in his writings, and, through the association of narcotic with sexual "deviancy," in signs of his being homosexual which they "read" in his tattoos

---

[16] In the quotations from Burroughs' texts I have added square brackets to my ellipses in order to distinguish them from the frequent ellipses in the original.

and his anus.

The fictional variations of the Customs Shed scenario are based on an episode which Burroughs recounts in the collection of interviews, *The Job*:

> In December, 1964, I returned to the States and was detained three hours at customs while narcotics agents read my notes, letters and diary. Finding no narcotics, they then informed me that I was subject to fine and imprisonment for failing to register with the Department when I left the country, and failing to inform the customs officer of my narcotics record on my return. The law requiring addicts to register only applies to those who have been convicted under [. . .] the Harrison Narcotics Act or the Marijuana Act of 1937. I have been arrested twice in the United States. [. . .] In neither case was I convicted. In any case, this law would seem to make it a crime *ever to have been* an addict.[17]

With the criminalisation of identity in place of individual acts, paranoia becomes a permanent condition, a result of a constant self-policing. As the Appendix to *Naked Lunch* points out, a feeling of paranoia can result from taking or withdrawing from certain drugs. It is significant that for Burroughs the *content* of these paranoid drug-induced nightmares usually gestures back to threat of police persecution as an ever-present possibility. In *The Soft Machine*, for example, the young junk-sick explorer Carl finds himself in a town square deep in the South American jungle, surrounded by a horror-movie version of the border formalities:

> A man in a moldy grey police tunic and red flannel underwear one bare foot swollen and fibrous. [. . .] He gasped out the word "Control" and slipped to the ground. A man in grey hospital pajamas eating handfuls of dirt and trailing green spit crawled over to Carl and pulled at his pants cuff. [. . .] From all sides they came pawing hissing spitting: "*Papeles*," "*Documentes*," "*Passaport.*" (*SM*, 103-104)

Likewise, the frozen moment of terror when the Customs Officer's hand hesitates an inch from the false bottom of his suitcase becomes a permanent threat that punctuates dream sequences and cut-ups in *Naked Lunch* and the Nova trilogy: "frozen forever hand an inch from the false bottom" (*NL*, 158), and, "the track gave out forever an inch from the false bottom" (*SM*, 47). Less important than any particular police inspection is the fact that "control measures conjure up phantom interrogators who invade and destroy your inner freedom" (*The Job*, 108); in other words, the real threat of police persecution conjures up subsequent paranoid delusions.

In the same way that during the Customs Shed incident police attention shifts from illegal narcotics to prohibited sexuality, a verbal elision is created from the "false bottom" of the suitcase to the victims' untrustworthy (because secretive) "bottom." Burroughs continues his reflections on the encounter with US Customs in 1964 with an acknowledgement that "penalizing a state of being, apart from any proven legal act, sets a precedent that could be extended to other categories of 'offenders.'" Though in

---

[17] Daniel Odier, *The Job: Interviews with William S. Burroughs* (1974; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989), p.147. Further references are cited in parentheses in the text.

interview Burroughs denies a connection between homosexuality and drug addiction, his novels establish structural similarities between the criminalising of addiction and the pathologising of homosexuality.[18] In an anticipation of Michel Foucault's analysis in *History of Sexuality* of the privileging of identities over acts in the creation of the category of "the homosexual," Burroughs' medical Examination Room routines focus on the creation of a paranoia about *being* a certain sexual identity.[19] In *Naked Lunch*, for example, young Carl Peterson is summonsed before the ubiquitous Dr Benway, now ensconced in the Ministry of Mental Hygiene and Prophylaxis in Freelandia:

> "What on earth could they want with me?" he thought irritably. . . . "A mistake most likely." But he knew they didn't make mistakes. . . . Certainly not mistakes of identity. (*NL*, 148)

Peterson's sexual identity is precisely the issue in this medical examination, which aims to ascribe a scientifically fixed label to the young man's "condition." Benway explains how the State regards "sexual deviation" as "a misfortune . . . a sickness . . . certainly nothing to be censored or uh sanctioned" (*NL*, 150). The examination is a mixture of Kafka's *The Trial*, and Razumov's interview with Councillor Mikulin in Conrad's *Under Western Eyes*.[20] Benway's turn-of-the-century mannerisms and academic euphemisms barely conceal the threat implicit in the meeting. Medical knowledge works hand-in-glove with legal powers; indeed, half way through the routine the "examination" transforms into a police interrogation about drug contacts, a preview of the Hauser and O'Brien tough cop/con cop shakedown routine later in the novel.

The effect of the "enveloping benevolence" (*NL*, 149) and seeming scientific dispassion of the interview is to create in Peterson a hostile suspiciousness, first towards a gay tourist who sees him coming out of the Institute, and then towards his own self. When he provides a semen sample for the Kleiberg-Stanislouski semen floculation test (whose name keeps mutating in Kafkaesque fashion) he feels that "something was watching his every thought and movement with cold, sneering hate, the shifting of his testes, the contractions of his rectum" (*NL*, 153). Paranoia in these

---

[18] Burroughs' denial of a connection between homosexuality and drugs is made in *The Job*, p.121. However, in his fictional writings key images forge links between the two. Associations are made between penetration by a needle and by a penis. In *Naked Lunch*, for example, there is a routine about how "the President is a junky but can't take it direct because of his position. So he gets fixed through me. . . . From time to time we make contact, and I recharge him. These contacts look, to the casual observer, like homosexual practices, but the actual excitement is not primarily sexual" (*NL*, 64).

[19] In particular, Foucault argues that, "as defined by the ancient civil or canonical codes, sodomy was a category of forbidden acts; their perpetrator was nothing more than the juridical subject of them. The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form [. . .] Nothing that went into his composition was unaffected by his sexuality. It was everywhere present in him: at the root of all their actions because it was their insidious and indefinitely active principle; written immodestly on his face and body because it was a secret that always gave itself away." Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1: *An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990), p.43.

[20] Burroughs describes the transformations he performs on Conrad in "Cutting Up Characters" (*AM*, 189-91).

scenes thus comes from the internalisation of the panoptical gaze of the state in connection with homosexuality, rather than the projection of personal fantasies onto the external world. In other words, in Burroughs' novels paranoia is not so much a consequence of repressed homosexuality, as a justifiable reaction to the state's desire to exercise its power in order to "cure" or suppress homosexuality. Likewise, it is the proscription of certain activities as forbidden pleasures that produces in citizens the paranoid fear that the State will discover their secret. In Annexia a mentalist is employed to guide police "to whatever the man wishes to hide: a tube of vaseline, an enema, a handkerchief with come on it, a weapon, unlicensed alcohol" (*NL*, 32). The only defence against this fear of discovery of one's secret or repressed activity is to make everything as overt as possible, so that "they" do not have a hold over you. "Needless to say," Benway acknowledges, "the sex humiliation angle is contraindicated for overt homosexuals" (*NL*, 36). A programme of deliberate over-exposure therefore forms part of the aesthetic strategy of *Naked Lunch* and its sequels. In *The Soft Machine*, for example, Uranium Willy issues orders for a counter-attack against the Nova Mob, and "his plan called for total exposure" (*SM*, 151). Ostensibly it is a call for the exposure of the power structures of a "rigged universe," but it can also be read as a rallying cry to put an end to shame through an explicit presentation of sex. In *The Job* Burroughs makes clear the logic of this approach, with his observation that "it is precisely this breakdown of shame and fear with regard to sex that the Nixon Administration is all out to stop so that it can continue to use shame and fear as weapons of political control" (*The Job*, 11).

Instead of seeking to understand the psychology of paranoia, then, Burroughs' novels of the early sixties investigate and expose the politics of conspiracy. His strategic and satirical materialisations of psychological categories need to be read alongside contemporary discourses, such as the work of the anti-psychiatry movement whose aim was to replace psychoanalytic profiles of patients with an analysis of the institutional frameworks which simultaneously create and constrain those "pathological" identities.[21] For example, in a 1962 paper which rethinks the psychological notion of paranoia, E. M. Lemert writes that:

> the general idea that the paranoid person symbolically fabricates the conspiracy against him is in our estimation incorrect or incomplete. Nor can we agree that he lacks insight, as is so frequently claimed. To the contrary, many paranoid persons properly realize that they are being isolated and excluded by concerted interaction, or that they are being manipulated.[22]

---

[21] In 1968 Burroughs was invited to participate in "The Dialectics of Liberation," a conference organised by the anti-psychiatry movement, headed by R.D. Laing and David Cooper, at which Stokeley Carmichael, Angela Davis, Paul Goodman and Herbert Marcuse also spoke. See David Cooper, ed., *The Dialectics of Liberation* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968).

[22] E.M. Lemert, "Paranoia and the Dynamics of Exclusion," in *Human Deviance, Social Problems, and Social Control* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1967), p.207.

Lemert goes on to argue that it is the very real threat of psychiatric institutionalisation which creates a more than understandable sense of persecution in some people—which then necessitates their hospitalisation.

Burroughs' novels push this materialist analysis even further: not content merely to critique the psychology of conspiracy theory, they produce a conspiracy theory about the institution of psychology. The repeated scenes of psychiatric intrusions in the lives of Burroughs' characters lead to the suggestion that the mental health and medical institutions have a vested interest in maintaining a certain percentage of the population as patients. In *Naked Lunch*, for example, Dr Benway expounds the theory that, unlike an anarchic cooperative, a state "bureau operates on the opposite principle of *inventing needs* to justify its existence" (*NL*, 111). When Peterson turns up at the Ministry of Mental Hygiene and Prophylaxis he is shown straight into Benway's office, leaving him with the suspicion that it is "as if he had nothing to do but wait for me" (*NL*, 149). Peterson's paranoiacally egocentric reading of the situation is in a certain sense accurate, since Benway needs to create patients in order to sustain his business as a doctor. Likewise, in an essay on "Sexual Conditioning," Burroughs discusses the fact that it was not until "December 3rd, 1973, [that] the American Psychiatric Association decided that homosexuality would no longer be considered a mental deviation" (*AM*, 88). Noting that many members saw this decision as a "psychiatric Watergate," he observes wryly that "they just don't like to see any prospective patients escaping; it could start a mass walk-out." In the novels institutions such as the APA become figured as a vast bureaucratic conspiracy, fuelled by the need to pathologise as many people as possible in order to further the range of its own power. For Burroughs, narcotics agents likewise have a vested interest in seeing not the eradication of "drug abuse," but its proliferation. First the police "create a narcotic problem then they say that a permanent narcotics police is now necessary to deal with the problem of addiction" (*SM*, 51). Throughout his writings of the sixties Burroughs manifests an unswerving faith in the apomorphine cure for heroin addiction; he even acknowledges that without it he would not have been able to complete *Naked Lunch*. Finding that the Federal Drug Administration in America refused to promote or permit this cure, Burroughs speculated that it was being deliberately suppressed by the narcotics police who have a vested interest in maintaining their livelihood. "Addiction can be controlled by apomorphine and reduced to a minor health problem," the narrator of *Nova Express* states; "the narcotics police know this and that is why they do not want to see apomorphine used in the treatment of drug addicts" (*NE*, 51-52). More than a question of vested interests, though, he argues, "drug laws are a pretext to extend police power, expand police personnel, and set up a police state with the aid of a controlled press" (*The Job*, 68). For Burroughs, then, moral panics about drugs and homosexuality serve the purpose of furthering the interests of the élite. It is not drugs

or homosexuality that are the problem, but the social panic they arouse.[23]

What is significant about Burroughs' scenarios of institutional conspiracy is that they reverse the usual direction of Cold War demonology which read "deviancy" as a sign of "un-American activities."[24] Instead of picturing "dope fiends" and "sex queens" (*NL*, 176) as an un-American threat to society, *Naked Lunch* and the Nova trilogy focus attention on the ways in which American society is a threat to those who have been included in the category of "deviancy." In addition to their conspiracy theories about the politics of demonology, these novels add a further twist to the logic of Cold War conspiracy. Whereas many gay writers and campaigners in the fifties and sixties were concerned to dismantle the characterisation of homosexuality as an un-American activity through an insistence on the "normality" of homosexuals, Burroughs enacts a parodic confirmation of the most wildly paranoid fears.[25] In his novels of this period the language of agents, contacts, secret signs, covert codes, shady assignations and hidden messages is taken from the homophobic world of espionage thrillers, and reapplied to the politics and practices of gay cruising and scoring for drugs in the bathhouses and on the street corners of Interzone. In *The Soft Machine*, for example, Jimmy, who is dressed in "banker drag" so as to preserve anonymity, goes out on a mission, the purpose of which is contained in the elusive messages punctuating the text: "come and jack off," "passport vending machines," "Came to the World's End Pissoir and met a boy with wide shoulders," and so on. The narration then elides into secret agent mode as Jimmy—code-named K9—goes out on the pick-up: "K9 had an appointment at the Sheffield Arms Pub but the short wave faded out on the location—Somewhere to the left? or was it to the right?" (*SM*, 53-55). During an era in which secrecy was taken as a manifestation of guilt, Burroughs' fictional heroes make a virtue out of the historical necessity of being undercover agents. "Homosexuality is the best all-round cover story an agent can use," comments Bill the junky when he is forced into hiding after he escapes from Hauser and O'Brien of the narcotics police in *Naked Lunch* (*NL*, 170-71). In the novel as a whole, however, it might be more accurate to claim that the conspiratorial language of secret agents is a necessary cover story for a homosexuality which is regarded as a threat to straight society.

---

[23] In their sociological classification of moral panics, Eric Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda identify this position as the "élite theory" of moral panics (*Moral Panics: The Social Construction of Deviance* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994)).

[24] The making of homosexuality into an "un-American activity" in the McCarthyite era is discussed in John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), David Savran, *Communists, Cowboys, and Queers: The Politics of Masculinity in the Work of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992) and Lee Edelman, "Tearooms and Sympathy; or, The Epistemology of the Water Closet," in *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp.148-170.

[25] Accounts of the rejection of pathological notions of homosexuality by the gay community are included in D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*, esp. pp.15-22, and Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).

The novels work to confirm fears about the transmission of secrets by homosexuals connected by ties of sexual recognition instead of national loyalty. Burroughs argues that "what we call love is a fraud perpetrated by the female sex, and that the point of sexual relations between men is nothing that we could call love, but rather what we might call *recognition*." (*The Job*, 118). In *Naked Lunch* we read, for example, about how "two agents identified themselves each to each by choice of sex practices foiling alien microphones, fuck atomic secrets back and forth in code so complex" (*NL*, 164), and about how "boys jacking off in the school toilet know each other as agents from Galaxy X" (*NL*, 165). Far from seeking to break the Cold War association of homosexuality with treason, then, Burroughs' novels serve to exacerbate those fears, making the case that homosexuality *is* a threat to the American ideologies of family and nationality. Because "no society tolerates overt rejection of its basic tenets," Dr Benway argues in *Naked Lunch*, "homosexuality is a *political* crime in a matriarchy" (*NL*, 41), and, in Burroughs' distorted mythology, America *is* a matriarchy (*The Job*, 122).

From *Naked Lunch* on, Burroughs' novels perform a strategic confirmation and materialisation of society's worst fears about "deviants" as a way of imagining a counter-conspiracy. In the opening section of *The Ticket that Exploded*, for example, a Technical Sergeant describes how his unit is being decimated by the "Sex Skin habit" which produces a frenzy of homosexuality amongst the men. "This situation," he radios back to Base Headquarters, "has given rise to what the head shrinkers call 'ideas of persecution' among our personnel." He seems to be suffering from "ideas of persecution" himself, for he reports that, "as I write this I have barricaded myself in the ward room against the 2nd Lieutenant who claims he is 'God's little hang boy sent special to me' that little shave tail I can hear him out there wimpering and slobbering" (*TTE*, 5). Towards the end of the novel, however, these archetypically Freudian symptoms of a paranoid fear of homosexuality are in fact confirmed by the outbreak of a full-blown mutinous conspiracy. Panic reports are sent back to Base Headquarters about "patrols cut off light years behind enemy lines," who have been completely taken over by the Sex Skin habit. The final straw comes with the closure of the Shitola bathhouse, where the dandified young officers have been quartered:

> We had our Castro period and then all the mad queens from camouflage camped about in Vietnam drag designed for maximum exposure of misappropriated parts. And of course the FLN girls were to be seen buggering each other on every street corner. I mean we were getting it and getting it steady. So we began to convene in tense graceful clusters of incipient conspiracy. Then came the order that inflamed us to open revolt: 'The Shitola baths are closed until further notice.'" (*TTE*, 195)

Cold War collapses into camp costume drama, with the celluloid from the decade's war zones becoming mixed up with an eighteenth-century romp, hip street slang ("we were getting it") spliced with decadent parlance ("tense graceful clusters"). All the military's worst fears about homosexual infiltration are confirmed, as the Nova campaign breaks

into an open revolt by street queens.

Each of the novels of the Nova trilogy contains glimpses of the formation of a counter-conspiracy of "deviants," a homoerotic alliance between all Burroughs' pulp fiction heroes. This imaginative materialisation of society's worst fears operates by a similar appropriative logic to the feminist/lesbian antics of WITCH and Lavender Menace at the close of the 1960s (see Chapter 2 above); in Burroughs' case, however, the macho rhetoric of conspiracy is undermined by a homoeroticisation of the decade's Boy's Own antics. According to Burroughs, writing can act as a literal pre-scripting of the future, such that the writing of a scenario can become the blueprint for it happening (*The Job*, 28). Some scenes in the Nova trilogy indeed prefigure the Stonewall riots in New York in 1969, when the patrons of a gay bar fought back against a police raid, an incident which marks a transition of gay politics from a politics of assimilation to a militant insistence on difference.[26] The glimpses of "tense graceful clusters of incipient conspiracy" in Burroughs' novels of the sixties find their apotheosis in *The Wild Boys* (1971), in which there emerges an unashamed science-fiction envisioning of a counter-conspiracy of "junkies" and "queers":

> We intend to march on the police machine everywhere. We intend to destroy the police machine and all its records. We intend to destroy all dogmatic verbal systems. The family unit and its cancerous extension into tribes, countries, nations, we will eradicate at its vegetable roots. We don't want to hear any more family talk, mother talk, father talk, cop talk, priest talk, country talk *or* party talk. To put it country simple, we have heard enough of that bullshit.[27]

From this novel on, the invocation of a counter-conspiracy of "deviants" becomes one of the principal concerns of Burroughs' fiction, in which the message is increasingly that the Wild Boys are straight society's worst nightmares come true: homosexuality is just cause for panic, since, if Burroughs had his way, the Wild Boys would take over the planet—and colonise space. The "open secret" of the closet therefore becomes the open secret of a counter-conspiracy, a deliberate, if camply parodic, materialisation of straight society's most paranoid fears.[28]

---

[26] Burroughs also witnessed a materialisation of his ideas in the Chicago Democratic Convention riots in 1968, which (along with Jean Genet and scriptwriter of *Dr Strangelove*, Terry Southern) he covered for *Esquire* magazine (Burroughs, "The Coming of the Purple Better One," *Esquire*, November 1968, pp.89-91). In his article Burroughs describes the scenes as a generic, even transhistorical, revolt of alienated youth. In typical Burroughsian fashion, he later retracted his earlier enthusiasm for these late sixties riots: "the violent student rioting of the late sixties was largely instigated by electronic mood-control devices that were derived from the psychic discoveries of [the CIA's] Project Pandora. The riots, it is now evident, were the first phase of a massive plot" (*AM*, 151).

[27] Burroughs, *Wild Boys* (1971; New York: Grove Press, 1992), pp.139-40.

[28] The materialisation of paranoia received a further twist in the 1980s and early '90s. In her study of the mutual circuits of identity construction in postmodern politics, Cindy Patton notes that "in the new right literature [of the 1980s], lesbian and gay men graduated from a covert conspiracy to an open and audacious lobby." Patton goes on to argue that although this transformation meant in effect that lesbian and gay men had been recognised and accepted as a political force, the new right could now predicate its identity on its reinterpretation of the proud performativity of coming out as an unwitting confession of perversity. "If coming out says, 'We're queer, we're here, get used to it,'" Patton writes, "new right

THE SOFT MACHINE

So far we have seen how Burroughs' novels of the sixties satirically materialise the category of paranoia, deflecting attention from the psychology of an individual onto those institutions which exercise control over the bodily pleasures of citizens marked out as deviant. In key episodes of these novels society seeks to exert control through a disciplining regime of the body; yet they also repeatedly figure the body as itself part of those conspiratorial forces. In particular, control is not just out there in political structures, but is wired into the inside, encoded into the very flesh of the body. In this section, then, I want to explore how *Naked Lunch* and the Nova trilogy display an obsessive concern to evade all forms of physical influence, in an escape attempt that is ultimately doomed to failure since incarnation itself is represented as a conspiracy. This concern with the vulnerability and treacherousness of the body and its boundaries—a fixation which, if it were not such an overloaded term, we might call paranoid—represents a further inversion of Cold War demonology. Burroughs' novels enact a literalisation of those McCarthyite metaphors which displace fears of national invasion onto fears of bodily infiltration. So, for example, whereas Stanley Kubrick's 1963 film, *Dr Strangelove*, features the parodically paranoid Col. Jack D. Ripper who speaks of fluoridation as a Communist plot to destroy "our precious bodily fluids," Burroughs' novels take seriously the threat of both metaphorical and literal corporeal contamination.

Burroughs' scenarios of body panic can be loosely sorted under two headings, namely incorporation and infiltration. The scenarios of incorporation are developed mainly in *Naked Lunch.* For example, Bradley the narcotics agent develops an addiction to pushing junk which takes on a repulsive form. A young junky describes how Bradley came on to him:

> "Most distasteful thing I ever did stand still for. Some way he make himself all soft like a blob of jelly and surround me so nasty. Then he gets wet all over with green slime. So I guess he come to some kinda awful climax. . . . I come near wigging with that green stuff all over me, and he stink like a rotten cantaloupe." (*NL*, 27)

Called into the District Supervisor's office, Bradley envelopes and digests the D.S. with a "schlup," giving off a "narcotic effluvium, a dank green mist that anaesthetizes his victims and renders them helpless in his enveloping presence" (*NL*, 29). In these scenes Bradley transforms into a junky, a figure of social repulsion whose abject need and servility takes on a three dimensional form (or rather, formlessness), producing a literal assimilation of his victim. With the Liquefactionists, this loss of clear distinction

---

identity appropriates this to say, 'We knew it,' and to society, 'We told you so.'" Cindy Patton, "Tremble, Hetero Swine!" *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, Michael Warner, ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p.146.

between self and other takes place at the microscopic level, in a process involving "protein cleavage and reduction to liquid which is absorbed into someone else's protoplasmic being" (*NL*, 74). As Tony Tanner suggests in his reading of Burroughs, the focus on the disgusting viscosity of the "green slime" and "reduction to liquid" displays a physical horror of body boundaries becoming indeterminate, of bodies literally being absorbed into the power of another.[29] Unlike critics such as Tanner, however, I would argue that Burroughs' portrayals of this primeval horror are always hooked into wider circuits of social meaning. At times in *Naked Lunch* the fear of physical incorporation by green slime is, for example, linked to matriphobic fears of dependence, smothering, and even cannibalism.[30] In the routine "AJ's Annual Party," for instance, a character called Mary "bites away at Johnny's lips and nose and sucks out his eyes with a pop," then "she lunches on his prick," before drawing him into her "with a suction of hungry flesh" (*NL*, 85-87). But the horror of engulfment also arises in many sexual and narcotic situations leading to a loss of differentiation, or whenever a person in power takes over and uses someone weaker; it is not permanently linked to ideas of feminisation. For example, the Interzone bestiary includes green-jellied Reptiles who hook themselves up to the Mugwumps, liverless creatures which "secrete an addicting fluid from their erect penises which prolongs life by slowing metabolism" (*NL*, 54). The image suggests an addictive sexuality which preys off the life-fluid of the Mugwumps. In "Hassan's Rumpus Room," the companion piece to "AJ's Party," the enveloping exploitation is reversed, in a sadomasochistic hanging of a native boy by a Mugwump. The scene functions as a projected version of the sexual economy of Interzone/Tangiers, in which the expatriates—the narrator included—literally live off the backs of the young native boys, staving off old age through the purchase and extraction of youth:

> The Mugwump pulls the boy back onto his cock. The boy squirms, impaled like a speared fish. The Mugwump swings on the boy's back, his body contracting in fluid waves. Blood flows down the boy's chin from his mouth, half-open, sweet, and sulky in death. The Mugwump falls with a fluid, sated plop. (*NL*, 70)

As much as they represent vulnerability, the Mugwumps also act as a projection of the author's own self-loathing of his sexually rapacious desires which ooze out of him and take over other people. This scene suggests there is a need to be on the alert not only

---

[29] Tony Tanner, *City of Words: American Fiction 1950-1970* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1971), esp. pp.117-119.

[30] In *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), Elizabeth Grosz discusses the matter of slime as a preliminary to her analysis of bodily fluids. She takes issue with Mary Douglas's claim that "viscosity repels in its own right," since "stickiness is clinging, like a too possessive dog or mistress." Grosz argues that "it is not that female sexuality is like, or resembles, an inherently horrifying viscosity." Rather, she claims, "it is the production of an order that renders female sexuality and corporeality marginal, indeterminate, and viscous that constitutes the sticky and the viscous with their disgusting, horrifying connotation" (pp.194-95).

for the assimilative tendency in others, but also for the uncontrollable fluidity of one's own desires.

In addition to scenarios of incorporation, Burroughs develops a series of images of parasitic invasion. A crude version comes in the shape of the candiru, which is "a small eel-like fish or worm about one-quarter inch through and two inches long patronizing certain rivers of ill repute in the Greater Amazon basin." It will "dart up your prick or your asshole or a woman's cunt *faute de mieux*, and hold himself there by sharp spines" (*NL*, 47). The candiru presents the threat of a literal take-over of the sexual organs, and becomes an enemy weapon in the Nova war to gain control of an individual. In the "Atrophied Preface" the narrator, William Seward, announces his heroic intentions, which include the promise to "banish the candiru from your swimming pools" (*NL*, 178), or, in other words, to kill off the parasite of invasive sexuality which can remain hidden in victims, controlling them against their will.

For all its deviousness, the candiru represents an identifiable enemy which can be grasped and removed from a victim; Johnny, for example, "extracts a candiru from Mary's cunt with his calipers" (*NL*, 86). Other parasitic invaders, however, are less easy to combat, since they become absorbed into the individual. As the process of infiltration becomes more sophisticated, the task of escaping control requires redoubled vigilance. There is the admonitory tale, for example, of the "'climactic buboes," a "virus venereal disease" that "passes to the lymph glands of the groin, which swell and burst in suppurating fissures, drain for days, months, years, a purulent stringy discharge streaked with blood and putrid lymph" (*NL*, 46). The body begins to rebel, overflowing its boundaries, its disgusting behaviour dictated by the viral invader. Since "males who resign themselves up for passive intercourse to infected partners [. . .] may also nourish a little stranger," the only solution, the narrator warns, is "to stop panting and start palpating," that is, to replace ecstatic passion with a "paranoid" prophylaxis (*NL*, 46-47).

In *Naked Lunch* and the Nova trilogy Burroughs reworks and refines the notion of the virus as a model of external control taking over and recoding an individual's self will, producing a rebellion of the flesh. In the political set-up of Interzone it is the Senders who are "The Human Virus." We are informed that "techniques of Sending were crude at first" (*NL*, 132): they implanted their will into people's heads with the literal installation of a "miniature radio receiver," such that "the subject [could be] controlled from State-controlled transmitters." But the notion of ideological transmission becomes more refined with the advent of the Human Virus, since it means that ideas can be encoded into an individual; *The Soft Machine*, for example, describes how, in the future of the "war between the sexes," children (known as "the Property") are encoded with a "life script" from the moment of conception, with "poison virus agents trooping in and out at all hours" (*SM*, 154). For Burroughs, what is significant about a virus is that it works by taking over of the DNA of a cell, replacing the original

information with its own, such that the resulting diseased cells look like the host cells, but act as fifth colonists inside the body (see, for example, the extended scenario of "desperate 5th colonists" in *TTE*, 51-52).

Drug addiction is represented as a special kind of virus, namely the "junk virus." On this view, certain drugs function as an "alien substance" (*NL*, 191) which "take over" (*The Job*, 148) the will of an addict at the cellular level, with, for example, the liver becoming "literally . . . preoccupied" by a "morphine metabolism" (*NL*, 189). Kicking the habit becomes virtually impossible, since "the addict stands by while his junk legs carry him straight in on the junk beam to relapse" (*NL*, 8). Like a virus, heroin turns the body of an addict into a puppet obeying the dictates of need. Heroin addiction then becomes the model for other forms of seemingly involuntary behaviour, which escalate by an "algebra of need" (*NL*, 12). *The Ticket That Exploded*, for example, features rightness addicts, control addicts, pushing addicts, heavy metal (i.e. nuclear) addicts, orgasm and sex addicts—and the narrator even characterises writing as an addiction (*TTE*, 198). In the same way that the notion of addiction is extrapolated through the algebra of need, so the logic of the virus is extended to cover all forms of behaviour. In both cases the invading force gains access to the individual through a point of physical vulnerability, a "tissue of predilection." In *The Ticket That Exploded*, Inspector Lee is informed that "in order to invade, damage and occupy the human organism," a virus "must have a gimmick to get in" (*TTE*, 58). The body's pleasures therefore become its weaknesses, making the task of preventing corporeal take-over all the more difficult. No one can be trusted—least of all oneself.

What makes the "Human Virus" impossible to eradicate is that its "gimmick" is language. "The word is now a virus" (*TTE*, 49), the narrator of *Ticket That Exploded* announces, or, put the other way round, "in the electronic revolution a virus *is* a very small unit of word and image" (*The Job*, 14). According to Burroughs, the word is a parasitic organism that has remained undetected because it has reached a state of relative symbiosis. Like other viruses, though, it threatens to take over the host. "The word may once have been a healthy neural cell," but "it is now a parasitic organism that invades and damages the central nervous system" (*TTE*, 49). Language is described as a voracious creature (along the lines of a Mugwump) which threatens to engulf an individual. "The Word," the narrator of the "atrophied Preface" to *Naked Lunch* announces, "will leap on you with leopard man claws, it will cut off fingers and toes like an opportunist land crab, it will hang you and catch your jissom like a scrutable dog, it will coil around your thighs like a bushmaster and inject a shot glass of rancid ectoplasm" (*NL*, 180-81). The virus forces host cells to replicate identical copies of itself, or, in other words, to further the process of cultural homogenisation and wipe out individuality by making people obey the instructions of those in control.

In effect, then, Burroughs produces an ultra-deterministic conspiracy theory of culture, in which the messages written into the mass media, pornography and pulp

fiction transfer themselves to the spectator like a virus, becoming inscripted into the viewer-victim's nervous system.[31] The Nova trilogy outlines how the method of control has remained basically the same, from the repetitious cycle of the Mayan Calendar in the hands of the priests, to the "images and word" that are "the instruments of control used by the daily press and by such new magazines as *Time*, *Life*, *Newsweek*," and so on (*The Job*, 59).[32] In *The Soft Machine*, for example, the news is written in advance by an "IBM machine," which "controls thought feeling and *apparent* sensory impressions" (*SM*, 149). Conversely, the section "1920s Movies" turns a series of homoerotic initiation scenes into porn films, the details of which are, "record[ed] on the transparent flesh of present time": "slow 1920 finger rubbing vaseline on the cobra lamps, flickering movie shadows into the blue void. pulling finger rolls a cuneiform cylinder. Lens eye drank the boy's jissom on yellow light" (*SM*, 137).

A series of key images develops the notion of the body being encoded through word and image. The body is described as a "soft machine," a "soft typewriter" that is "composed of thin transparent sheets on which is written the action from birth to death" (*TTE*, 159).[33] Similarly, it is a "ticket" on which is punched at the moment of conception the viral instructions for the whole of life (*TTE*, 78). According to the narrator of *The Ticket That Exploded*, "a tape recorder is an externalized section of the human nervous system" (*TTE*, 163); in the "electronic age" the body becomes a robot, controlled by electronic tapes which splice together bodily functions and cultural imperatives. All aspects of embodied existence—thoughts, memories, desires, sense impressions—are thus susceptible to the inscription of control. In effect, then, to be incarnated is to be controlled. Discussing his mentor's work, Allen Ginsberg recognised that for Burroughs "the body itself may be a by-product of a large scale conspiracy by certain forces in a prison universe made out of parent matter."[34]

Having identified the body as the site of a cosmic conspiratorial struggle, Burroughs outlines in the Nova trilogy a series of techniques to escape its control. "As you know," the District Supervisor informs Agent Lee in *The Ticket That Exploded*, "inoculation is the weapon of choice against virus and inoculation can only be effected

---

[31] With his descriptions of mass media as an exteriorised nervous system, Burroughs connects at many significant points with the work of Marshall McLuhan. Tanner discusses the intersections between the two writers' "defensive, even paranoid attitude towards all forms of communication" in an appendix to *City of Words* (pp.441-45), but curiously does not mention McLuhan's "Notes on Burroughs," *The Nation*, 28 December 1964, pp.517-19.

[32] It must also be noted that Burroughs finds the potential for resistance in popular culture; precisely because it does not speak in the language of the authorities, it can accidentally reveal what's really going on. In Benway's talking asshole routine in *Naked Lunch*, he concludes that such scenarios create "the sex that passes the censor, squeezes through between bureaus, because there's always a space *between*, in popular songs and Grade B movies, giving away the basic American rottenness" (*NL*, 111).

[33] In *Soft Machine: Cybernetic Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1985), David Porush locates Burroughs' image in a tradition of (paranoid) characterisations of the human and the mechanical, which includes Schreber's depictions of invasive contraptions.

[34] Quoted in Mottram, *The Algebra of Need*, p.198.

through exposure" (*TTE*, 10). Burroughs' compositional techniques in the sixties indeed amount to a process of inoculation, a scientific programme of exposure to a weakened form of the images, phrases and scenarios which have most hold over him, so as to gradually build up resistance to their power. One method of cultural inoculation involves repeating and re-ordering the word combinations which have been most deeply imprinted on his memory: "rectal mucus and carbolic soap," "idiot Mambo," "dropped his shorts grinning and his cock flip out and up," "shirt flapping in a wind," "moldy jockstraps," "young boys need it special," "maze of penny arcades and dirty pictures," "*Sauve qui peut*," and so on. It is not so much the smell of the moldy jockstraps which seems to produce involuntary memories, associations and yearnings as the very combination of those words. As Burroughs explains, key "word combinations produce certain effects on the human nervous system" (*The Job*, 28). The repetition of these phrases represents something along the lines of Pavlovian de-conditioning, which becomes one of several techniques for personal liberation. In *The Ticket that Exploded*, for example, the narrator recommends exercises "to maintain a state of total alertness during sexual excitement," such as "jacking-off while balancing a chair" (*TTE*, 75-76). Burroughs' narrators dispense many practical tips, making his writings sometimes more like a Scientology instruction manual for dismantling the conditioned mind than a novel.

In a similar fashion, having understood that the "grammar of virus has the same unalterable order" (*The Job*, 206), the task is then to cut up and rearrange that viral script. In the sixties novels Burroughs carries out a recoding of the cultural DNA with his experiments of literally cutting up and resplicing his own texts and tapes with those from a wide range of cultural sources. The aim is to break up the "lines of control" which in Burroughs' view program the body, in order to bring about a carefully controlled randomisation of the pre-scripted universe. In the "1920s Movies" routine in *The Soft Machine*, for example, one of the countless scenes of homoerotic initiation is gradually cut up with other scenes, namely jungle adventures in Panama, adolescents jacking off in St Louis, science fiction bathhouses, and so on. The syntax of desire is broken down into the pure grammar of sexual combination: "'I-you-me-fuck-up-ass-all-same-time-four-eyes,'" "'We flick-fluck I-you-film-tracks through rectal mucus and carbolic soap,'" "'I-you-me fuck up neon blind fingers phantom cleavage of boy impressions Witch Board of Present Time,'" and so on (*SM*, 138-39). At the end of the section, the scenes are pared down to their component elements, permutated and separated out into four different camera scripts for a porn movie. The aim of the Nova trilogy, then, is to effect an escape, or, more accurately, a "disintoxication" (*The Job*, 138), from the patterns of fear and desire which are most deeply embedded in the physical body. The sheer proliferation of Burroughs' experiments, however, seems to suggest that the programme of disintoxication is always on the point of relapse. No amount of paranoid suspicion towards the body can be enough.

At key junctures Burroughs' fictions of hyperbolic paranoia threaten to collapse in on themselves. The scenarios of bodily invasion represent in a problematic way the body itself as the enemy—though it is hard to specify who or what it is conspiring against. All forms of addiction and viral invasion are to be rigorously distrusted and exorcised in this Burroughsian model, but this seems to include one's most intimate and personal attributes. *The Ticket That Exploded* for example, includes the following bulletin from the benign Nova Police's "Rewrite Department" which spells out the operational tactics of the Nova conspiracy:

> The point at which the criminal controller intersects a three-dimensional human agent is known as "a coordinate point"—And if there is one thing that carries over from one human host to another and established identity of the controller it is *habit:* idiosyncrasies, vices, food preferences—(we were able to trace Hamburger Mary through her fondness for peanut butter)—a gesture, a special look. (*TTE*, 57; *NE*, 56)

In Burroughs' mythology a parasitic virus attacks the host at precisely those "coordinate points" of habit and taste which would ordinarily define the individuality of the self. All habits are conceived of as drug habits (or viral diseases, which for Burroughs amounts to the same thing). Addiction and viral invasion become the explanation for all behaviour, whether desired or reviled. The individual therefore becomes a ventriloquist's dummy on both counts, either spouting out the ideologies of the evil enemy, or mindlessly mouthing the formulae of the friendly partisans, with, for example, the endless repetition in the Nova trilogy of the apocalyptic rallying cry of "Word falling—photo falling—Time falling—Break through in Grey Room" (*TTE*, 104). And if, as Burroughs insists, the only thing not pre-recorded in this pre-recorded world are the pre-recordings themselves, then the only possibility for resistance is to replace bad tapes with good ones. In this way, the very free will which is the treasured object of Burroughs' "paranoid" dramas begins to fade, as responsibility—for good or ill—is endlessly displaced onto alien chemicals and idea-viruses.[35]

If the very workings of one's body are signs of enemy infiltration, and if all behaviour is dictated by "criminal controllers" through addiction and viruses, then there seems very little left of the self to be protected from alien infiltration. In *The Job* interviews, Burroughs states that the aim of his literary experiments is to "achieve complete freedom from past conditioning" in order to release "the self that one is, apart from imposed thinking" (*The Job*, 21, 89). Yet, paradoxically, the more his fictions insist on "separating yourself from the 'Other Half'" of conditioned reactions, the less substantial the remaining half becomes. For Burroughs, the only solution to this problem is the dissolution of the body, encapsulated in his campaign to get "out of time

---

[35] Without mentioning Burroughs, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick develops a similar argument in "Epidemics of the Will," in *Incorporations*, Jonathan Crary and Sanford Kwinter, eds (New York: Zone, 1992), pp.582-95, rpt. in Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp.130-42. In developing my reading of this aspect of Burroughs' writing, I have also drawn on Linda Singer, *Erotic Welfare: Sexual Theory and Politics in the Age of Epidemic* (London: Routledge, 1993).

and into space," that is, out of the temporal limits of physical desire and need, into the unconstrained purity of space. In effect, Burroughs argues not so much for the liberation as for the obliteration of the embodied self.

*

In the first half of this chapter I have tried to demonstrate how Burroughs' fictions of body panic perform a series of strategic reversals and materialisations of Cold War paranoia. In the following part I will consider the ways in which the HIV/AIDS epidemic has to a certain extent produced a literalisation of Burroughs' fictional scenarios. The epidemic has generated systematic fears about the body, producing what Arthur Kroker has called a "body McCarthyism" for the 1980s and '90s.[36] I want to argue that a close attention to Burroughs' fictions of body paranoia offers important insights into the panic generated by the AIDS crisis, and, conversely, that the AIDS epidemic demands a rereading of Burroughs. By reading Burroughs alongside some of the writings about HIV/AIDS, my aim is not to embed the former in the context of the latter, but to explore how both participate in larger circuits of meaning about sex, drugs and paranoia. I will concentrate on three aspects in particular. First, the problematic politics of conspiracy theories of epidemics which hesitate between the literal and the metaphorical. Second, the networks of signification in which disease is situated. And finally, the blurring of "paranoid" body boundaries as a way of replotting the microscopic, individual and social body.

PLOTTING AIDS

In many ways Burroughs' conspiratorial figurations of homosexuality, drug addiction and viral paranoia gain an unnervingly prophetic relevance in the light of the HIV/AIDS crisis. Rereading his novels of the sixties and seventies can prove to be a poignant activity. For example, in a review of Edmund's White's *The Burning Library*, which contains a 1981 interview with Burroughs, Lucy Hughes-Hallet finds a "melancholy dual significance" in the fact White could listen to Burroughs speculate about a virulent new epidemic without either man seeming to be aware of the epidemic that was taking shape at that very time.[37]

---

[36] The notion of a "body McCarthyism" is discussed by Arthur and Marilouise Kroker in "Panic Sex in America," in *Body Invaders*, Kroker and Kroker, eds (London: St. Martin's Press, 1987), pp.10-13. Deborah Lupton, for example, summarises the media construction of a besieged body in *Moral Threats and Dangerous Desires: AIDS in the News Media* (London: Taylor and Francis, 1994).

[37] Lucy Hughes-Hallet, "Art, Passion and Gossip," *Sunday Times*, 10 July 1994, section 7, p.4. White's interview ("This Is Not a Mammal: A Visit with William Burroughs") is in *The Burning Library: Writings on Art, Politics and Sexuality, 1969-1993* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1994), pp.107-114.

White was interviewing Burroughs just after the publication of the latter's *Cities of the Red Night*, the first part of a new trilogy.[38] The novel, which was written in the latter half of the seventies in New York, seems to anticipate some of the details of the AIDS crisis which was just reaching public awareness at the time of its publication. It is composed of three loosely interwoven narrative strands. The first involves an eighteenth-century Boy's Own fantasy adventure of gay pirates living in proto-anarchist communes. The second consists of a science fiction story of the ancient Red Cities in the Gobi desert, which reads as a satirical version of the decadent late-seventies New York gay leatherbar and Fire Island scene. And the third is a present-day hardboiled detective fiction tale of a mystery viral epidemic which seems to strike gay men, and which is associated with homosexual promiscuity, lethally infectious sperm, and the smell of amyl nitrate poppers. Each of these items became key issues in the early years of the AIDS epidemic. Much was made of the fact that AIDS-related illnesses were first discovered in gay men, indicated by the fact that the first name for the syndrome was GRID, or Gay-Related Immunodefficiency. Furthermore, a lot of time was spent investigating the epidemiology of the syndrome, with early effort being focused (often with "paranoid" urgency) on gay bathhouses; aspects of the "gay lifestyle" such as the use of poppers; and the possibility that sperm itself was infectious (a view popularised in the phrase "toxic cock syndrome").[39]

Even more intriguing than these elements, however, is the conspiratorial plot in which the epidemic is framed in Burroughs' novel. The disease is caused by the B-23 virus, which seems to result from top-secret biowarfare research carried out by the CIA and the Countess de Vile in her South American hideout. In a boardroom debriefing scene, Doctor Pierson, working for the CIA, tries to cover up the true nature of the virus, but it emerges that the idea of using B-23 to produce a "selective pestilence" (*CRN*, 86) is still under consideration. The targets of such an attack seems obscure, but Pierson offers several hints:

> I question the wisdom of introducing Virus B-23 into contemporary America and Europe. Even though it might quiet the uh silent majority, who are admittedly becoming uh awkward, we must consider the biologic consequences of exposing virgin genetic material already damaged beyond repair to such an agent, leaving a wake of unimaginably unfavourable mutations all ravenously perpetrating their

---

[38] Burroughs, *Cities of the Red Night* (1981; London: Picador, 1982). Page references to this edition are cited in parentheses in the text, with the abbreviation *CRN*.

[39] Randy Shilts gives an account of the late seventies New York/Fire Island scene, as well as details about the early investigations into a possible connection between AIDS and poppers, in *And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic* (1987; Harmondsworth: Penguin: 1988); Paula Treichler discusses the nomenclature of "AIDS" and the "killer sperm" theories in "AIDS, Gender, and Biomedical Discourse," in *AIDS: The Burdens of History*, Elizabeth Fee and Daniel M. Fox (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp.200-202; Gerald M. Oppenheimer gives an overview of the epidemiological investigations, in "Causes, Cases, and Cohorts: The Role of Epidemiology in the Historical Construction of AIDS," in *AIDS: The Making of a Chronic Disease*, Elizabeth Fee and Daniel M. Fox, eds (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), pp.49-83.

kind. . . ." (*CRN*, 33)

Pierson's euphemisms leave it unclear whether Virus B-23 would be used *against* the silent majority, with the resulting danger that the disease would turn them into depraved homosexual fiends, or whether it is the gay population that is to be decimated, with the risk that the mutant victims would "ravenously perpetrate their kind." What is clear in the novel, however, is that gay men are falling ill mysteriously, and that there are good reasons to believe that the disease was deliberately manufactured.

One of the most popular and persistent conspiracy theories about the AIDS epidemic is the speculation that the HIV virus was produced as part of the US government's secret chemical-biological warfare (CBC) project.[40] Burroughs in fact endorses this theory in a sardonic comment in his satirical "Thanksgiving Prayer" of 1986. In this acerbic prayer he unleashes a tirade that gives thanks, amongst many other things, for "laboratory AIDS."[41] Reading *Cities of the Red Night*, it can seem that there is a lot of truth to Burroughs' earlier expressed belief that "events are pre-written and pre-recorded and when you cut word lines the future leaks out" (*The Job*, 28). But Burroughs' "prediction" of a conspiratorial scenario for the AIDS epidemic can be explained in a more mundane way if we remember that from the early sixties on he was preoccupied by the possibility of viral warfare. The Nova trilogy, for example, is based

---

[40] Various researchers have latched onto the record for June 9th 1969 of the House of Representatives Subcommittee on Department of Defense Appropriations. Dr Donald MacArthur, Deputy Director of the DOD's Research and Technology testified that "molecular biology is a field that is advancing very rapidly, and eminent biologists believe that within a period of five to ten years it would be possible to produce a synthetic biological agent that does not naturally exist and for which no natural immunity could have been acquired," a disease which, he later added, "might be refractory to the immunological and therapeutic process upon which we depend to maintain our relative freedom from infectious disease." To this prophetic testimony is added the fact that AIDS was first detected amongst sexually active gay men in New York and Los Angeles, with the first appearances of the disease being traced back to 1979—a year after just over a thousand "non-monogamous" gay men from New York were involved in a test programme for a new hepatitis vaccine. By 1984 nearly two thirds of that cohort had died from AIDS-related illnesses; similar tests had been carried out in other major American cities, with similar "coincidental" mortality rates. HIV, it is believed, was deliberately manufactured in the Army's Biological Warfare Laboratory at Fort Detrick in Maryland, and tested out on unsuspecting gay men through the hepatitis vaccine test programme. These theories were reported in a New Delhi newspaper, picked up by the Soviet Press, and repeated in the *Sunday Express*. Researchers also unearthed a 1972 World Health Organisation (WHO) bulletin of 1972, which urged that, "an attempt should be made to ascertain whether viruses can in fact exert selective effects on immune function, e.g. by effecting T cell function as opposed to B cell function. The possibility should also be looked into that the immune response to the virus itself may be impaired if the infecting virus damages more or less selectively the cells responding to the viral antigens." The connection is made between the fact that seroprevalence of HIV was highest in those parts of Africa which had been the subject of a smallpox vaccination programme administered by the WHO. These twin stories of biowarfare experimentation were embellished by many other details about the close connections between military and institutional medical research in the area of viruses. These details are taken from G.L. Krupey, "AIDS: Act of God or the Pentagon?," in *Secret and Suppressed: Banned Ideas and Hidden History*, Jim Keith, ed. (Portland, OR: Feral House, 1993), pp.240-55; substantially the same details are recounted in John Fiske's discussion of conspiracy theories on black radio: "Blackstream Knowledge: Genocide," in *Media Matters: Everyday Culture and Political Change* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), pp.191-216. Fiske draws on Alan Cantwell, *Queer Blood: The Secret AIDS Genocide Plot* (San Francisco: Aries Rising, 1993).

[41] Burroughs, "Thanksgiving Prayer, 1986," rpt. in *Mondo 2000: A User's Guide to the New Edge*, Rudy Rucker, R.U. Sirius, and Queen Mu, eds (London: Thames and Hudson, 1992), pp.196-200.

on the viral take-over of the population by the Nova Mob, whose forces include the pulp fiction villain Countess de Vile. Burroughs bases his fictional experiments in part on his reading, which involves both scientific treatises and news exposés. In *The Job* he comments, for example, on the news in the early 1970s that a synthetic gene particle had been manufactured, leading to the possibility in the near future of viral warfare (*The Job*, 14). For Burroughs, if that possibility existed, it would not be long before a government—and the U.S. government in particular—tested it out.

More significant than the specific details of the case, however, are the ways in which Burroughs' fictional enactment of a conspiracy theory about an epidemic reflects on the AIDS crisis. The first thing to note is that stories about the lab manufacture of an AIDS-like epidemic wholeheartedly counter the widespread tendency in the mainstream press to blame gay men and drug users, on account of their "unnatural" practices, for the disease which was first known in medical circles as WOGS—the Wrath of God Syndrome.[42] A theory about a conspiracy against gay men sets itself up in opposition to those Moral Right conspiracy theories which link the spread of AIDS to gay "promiscuity." By the mid-1980s the accusation that the sixties—and the "sexual revolution" in particular—were to blame for many of America's troubles had become widespread. For Gene Antonio, author of *The AIDS Cover-Up?*, the AIDS epidemic provides confirmation that "permissiveness" and "promiscuity" did not form the solution to social problems through a liberation of the oppressed libido, but were in fact their very cause:

> AIDS, it is argued, is merely an incidental biological party spoiler. If it were not for the worrisome possibility of personal and societal self-extinction, everyone could have continued wallowing in libertinism and perversion *ad infinitum ad nauseam* without negative consequences . . . There is a fundamental premise lacking in the get-to-know-your-partners-first and crank out the condoms response to the AIDS and venereal disease epidemics. It is the glaring reality that the lax sexual mores of Western culture have proven destructive to the social fabric of civilization, apart from any of the infectious diseases accompanying promiscuity.[43]

In support of his suspicion that "this new sexual freedom is not what people are led to believe," Antonio quotes Dr Armand Nicoli, a "Harvard therapist," who concluded as early as 1965 that "somehow there has been a great deal of deception going on. Somehow a lot of people have been deluded."[44] It does not take Antonio long to name

---

[42] Treichler discusses the naming of AIDS in "AIDS, Gender, and Biomedical Discourse," p.198; see also Cindy Patton, *Sex and Germs: The Politics of AIDS* (Boston: South End Press, 1985), pp.22-24.

[43] Gene Antonio, *The AIDS Cover-Up? The Real and Alarming Facts about AIDS* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), p.194.

[44] Dr Armand Nicoli, *Essays on Love* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 1978), p.35; quoted in Antonio, *The AIDS Cover-Up?*, p.195. To match Antonio's claim that the threat of casual (heterosexual) transmission of AIDS has been played down there is Michael Fumento's conspiratorial argument that the possibility of heterosexual transmission has been deliberately exaggerated. Fumento, *The Myth of Heterosexual AIDS* (New York: Basic Books, 1990).

the culprits in this conspiracy to dupe the American public into giving up "Biblical standards of sexual morality": it is "homosexual activists and their sympathetic allies in the media" who have conned America into accepting these "grossly insanitary, pathological behaviors."[45]

In addition to the lab-manufacture and gay-plague theories, AIDS has been written into many different conspiracy theories, ranging from accusations that it is a capitalist plot to create new markets for pharmaceutical products, to a *Pravda* cartoon that shows a Russian scientist handing over a vial of HIV to a CIA officer in return for money.[46] While the HIV/AIDS epidemic has created new constellations of paranoid fears, it has also been interpreted in the light of many existing demonological stories. Many commentators have found in the epidemic a powerful symbol which "confirms" their suspicions about homosexuality, drug use, and so on. What makes one story about the origin of AIDS more plausible than another is far from straightforward. In some gay communities the possibility of an intelligence agency conspiracy was taken as a serious possibility from the outset, for the alternative explanations were scarcely credible. A gay doctor in San Francisco, for example, reacted to the news about AIDS in the following way:

> A disease that killed only gay white men? It seemed unbelievable. I used to teach epidemiology, and I had never heard of a disease that selective. I thought, they are making this up. It can't be true. Or if there is such a disease it must be the work of some government agency—the F.B.I. or the C.I.A.—trying to kill us all.[47]

For this doctor at least, the idea that his government might be trying to kill him was a frighteningly plausible scenario. Certain conspiracy theories about the origin of HIV, I would argue, need to be recognised as popular forms of representation which can have a strategic effectiveness in contesting the monopoly of knowledge held by the political and medical authorities which has marked the AIDS crisis. Questions of credibility in these circumstances have less to do with precision of evidence than with notions of cultural resonance. In many ways the theory about African men either eating, having sex with or being bitten by a green monkey—once the "official" version of the origin of the origin of HIV—holds as much verifiability as the lab-manufacture story.[48] Both stories gained popularity because they spoke to and articulated already existing fears and fantasies. The theory about the government plotting against socially marginal

---

[45] Antonio, *The AIDS Cover-Up?* , p.190.

[46] In "AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse: An Epidemic of Signification," in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism*, Douglas Crimp, ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), Treichler enumerates some of the ways in which AIDS has been characterised; out of her list of 38 items, roughly a third amount to conspiracy theories (pp.33-34). The *Pravda* cartoon is reprinted in Krupey, "AIDS: Act of God or the Pentagon?," p.240.

[47] Cited in Treichler, "An Epidemic of Signification," p.48, n.37.

[48] On the green monkey theory, see Patton, "Inventing African AIDS," in *Inventing AIDS* (London: Routledge, 1990).

communities finds its "confirmation" not in the revelation of documents from the past, but in an awareness *in the present* that the public health authorities and the government remain unconcerned as long as the disease does not threaten the "general population." Conspiracy theories about AIDS—Burroughs' highly fictional version included—should therefore not be dismissed out of hand. Their factual allegations are always part of a much larger context of socially contested meanings, in which factual accuracy is not the only concern. They say as much about social epistemology as they do about epidemiology. Even if the theory about the lab manufacture about AIDS turns out not to be true (though with the intelligence agencies' strategy of "plausible deniability" the matter could never be finally disproven), it is a plot which strategically brings together several important narrative threads in the history of "deviancy" and the state.[49]

VIRAL CULTURE

Some of the most powerful writings on AIDS have started from the premise that—as I have been arguing in the case of conspiracy theories—the "facts" are themselves enmeshed in a whole range of cultural, political and scientific discourses. Paula Treichler, for example, insists that we "cannot . . . look 'through' language to determine what AIDS 'really' is." Rather, she concludes, "we must explore the site where such determinations *really* occur and intervene at the point where meaning is created: in language." Treichler therefore argues that "the AIDS epidemic—with its genuine potential for global devastation—is simultaneously an epidemic of a transmissable lethal disease and an epidemic of meanings or signification."[50] This position has been taken up by a variety of critics, including Douglas Crimp, Lee Edelman, Cindy Patton, Susan Sontag, Simon Watney and Judith Williamson.[51] Burroughs' theories of the viral logic of cultural transmission are therefore obviously extremely relevant to the discussion about HIV/AIDS. In his view a virus is never "purely" a physical organism or "merely" a cultural fiction, but is instead an incarnation of the word which materialises cultural imperatives (about sexuality, reproduction, family, nation, and so on) in the body. That is, a virus is simultaneously a fact and a

---

[49] In *Policing Desire: Pornography: Aids and The Media* (London: Methuen/Comedia, 1987), Simon Watney counsels against conspiracy theories of media-induced moral panics, since, he argues, the attack on gay men is not a sudden and inexplicable outburst, but is part of a much longer and much larger history of oppression structured by the discourses of family and nation. While I would agree with Watney's Foucauldian analysis, I would also argue that conspiracy theories can organise hopes, desires and fantasies as a form of popular political resistance.

[50] Treichler, "Epidemic of Signification," p.33.

[51] In addition to the works by Watney (cited in n.49 above), Edelman, and Williamson (cited in n.52 and n.53 below), see Crimp, "How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic," in Crimp, ed., *AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism*, and Sontag, "AIDS and Its Metaphors," in *Illness as Metaphor* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989).

value, and therefore needs to be understood in both material and semiotic terms.

For Burroughs, then, the task of investigating and tackling a virus combines both medical and cultural intervention. In *Cities of the Red Night*, for example, Clem Snide's enquiries into the mysterious B-23 virus and its young gay victims lead him from forensic examinations of the decapitated corpses, to a short manuscript entitled "Cities of the Red Night," which tells the story of the ancient cities. But the book turns out to be merely a copy, and Snide is commissioned by the Venusian Iguana twins to recover the original. In response to the detective's scepticism about the need for the originals, the Iguana sister replies that:

> "Changes, Mr Snide, can only be effected by alterations in the *original.* The only thing not prerecorded in a prerecorded universe are the prerecordings themselves. The copies can only repeat themselves word for word. *A virus is a copy.* You can pretty it up, cut it up, scramble it—it will reassemble in the same form." (*CRN*, 151)

In *Cities of the Red Night* fighting the B-23 virus therefore becomes inextricably linked to challenging the cultural "prerecordings" in which the origins and transmission of the virus are fixed. The copies of this book-within-a-book "are composed in a variety of styles and periods":

> Some of them seem to stem from the 1920s of *The Great Gatsby*, old sport, and others to derive from the Edwardian era of Saki, reflecting an unbearably flawed boyishness. There is an underlying current of profound frivolity, with languid young aristocrats drawling epigrams in streets of disease, war, and death. There is a Rover Boys-Tom Swift story line where boy heroes battle against desperate odds. (*CRN*, 151-52)

It is Snide's task to stop these powerful cultural scripts falling into enemy hands, and he decides to do this by fabricating the complete originals. He speculates that the originals "may contain the truth, which these books cover with a surface so horrible and so nauseously prettified that it remains impervious as a mirror . . . and as misleading" (*CRN*, 152-53). Book III of Burroughs' novel emanates from Snide's rescripted version of the "originals." What it reveals are the sexual violence and panic which are "prettified" by the Boy's Own stories, and brought back to the surface by Snide, Burroughs' substitute novelist figure. Only by recombining the viral pattern of the "original," Snide believes, can the power of these narratives of masculinity—and the B-23 virus—be defused. For Burroughs, as well as for Treichler, Patton, Watney and other critics, fighting viruses is as much a matter of reshaping dominant narrative descriptions as it is a question of obtaining medical prescriptions.

What Burroughs' novels contribute in particular to these arguments is their self-awareness as fictional constructs. In *Cities of the Red Night* the story of the B-23 virus is plotted in a self-consciously fictional way. For example, the novel contains within itself two further books entitled "Cities of the Red Night," namely the pamphlet of the Iguana twins, and the fabricated version produced by Clem Snide. The final section of

the novel operates as a series of Chinese boxes, in which the story of the Cities is framed and reframed, first as a dream by three American boys recovering from a drug overdose in a Greek hospital, then as play contained within a vast gymnasium, and finally as a story written by Audrey Carsons, one of the characters within the stories of the Red Cities. In this novel Burroughs once again deploys his trope that "reality" is a film produced by those in power, and there are many references to cinematic and theatrical mechanisms.

Most importantly, there is the scene in which Snide is kidnapped and taken to the headquarters of the CIA-friendly Countesses. The episode is a hammed-up version of a James Bond story. At the heavily-guarded secret hideout the renegade, shadowy forces of evil have established a rocket-launching pad as part of an insidious and improbable plan to take over the world through selective biowarfare, repopulating it with thirty "ideal specimens of white Anglo-Saxon youth" (*CRN*, 180). At the centre of the scene is one of those set-piece dialogues in which the villains reveal to the hero their devilish plans (they are going to dispose of him anyway). Doctor Pierson outlines the plot to Snide, and reveals that they want him to join their campaign:

> The table of thirty boys flashed in front of my eyes. "Pretty neat. And you want me to write the scenario."
> "That's it. You've written enough already to get the ball rolling." (*CRN*, 181).

Snide is called upon to help pre-script the story of a viral epidemic, which is itself already heavily indebted to the codes of pulp fiction genres. By repeatedly fictionalising in very self-reflexive ways the stories in which viral epidemics are told, Burroughs' novels serve to bring to light the political process of "naturalisation" which surrounds the medical discussion of disease. In her essay, "Every Virus Tells a Story: The Meanings of HIV and AIDS," Judith Williamson seeks to highlight "the wider sense in which AIDS takes its place within the narrative systems along whose tracks events seem to glide quite naturally."[52] Lee Edelman develops this approach in "The Plague of Discourse: Politics, Literary Theory, and 'AIDS,'" arguing that:

> the "AIDS" epidemic . . . serves as the breeding ground for any number of figural associations or projections whose virulence derives precisely from their naturalized presentation under the aspect of literality. Indeed, . . . the most disturbing feature of the Western discourse on "AIDS" is the way in which the literal is recurrently and tendentiously produced as a figure whose figurality remains strategically occluded—and thus a figure that can be used to effect the most repressive political ends.[53]

Novels such as *Cities of the Red Night*, I would argue, consistently refuse to naturalise the fictional scenarios in which disease is written, thereby producing a strategic

---

[52] Judith Williamson, "Every Virus Tells a Story: The Meanings of HIV and AIDS," in *Taking Liberties*, Erica Carter and Simon Watney, eds (London: Serpent's Tail, 1989), p.69.

[53] Lee Edelman, "The Plague of Discourse," in *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory* (London: Routledge, 1994), p.80.

repoliticisation of the discourse of medicine.

In addition to their emphasis on the virology of culture, Burroughs' novels focus attention on the culture of virology. His scenarios of viral invasion are scripted in an exaggerated version of the language and style of Cold War thrillers and science fiction, but the development of virology and immunology were themselves caught up in the cultural logic of those times. In her summary of the history of these two branches of science, Cindy Patton explains how both were recognised as independent disciplines only in the postwar period when new technology could "prove" the existence of the microscopic organisms which each theorised. Moreover, Patton continues, "immunology came to public attention in the 1960s"; Burroughs, for example, mentions in *The Job* reading *The Mechanisms of Virus Infection*, a collection published in 1963 which aspired to present a "balanced picture of the present state of knowledge . . ., together with free speculations and discussions about much that remains to be discovered."[54] Patton describes how in the 1960s "immunology provided the grammar for the shifting dominant metaphors of disease from offense to civil defense":

> Increasing concern with domestic unrest and lingering Cold War paranoia demanded that our immune systems should conform to a policing and confessional ideology which suggested, *not* that the Commies had got through the door, but rather that there was a more general weakness within the body politic. . . . Autoimmunity—a condition in which the body "attacks" itself—created a theoretical problem, but the anxious sixties culture had a ready answer. . . . Pathology was no longer conceived in terms of an assault by an overwhelming enemy, but as a slow degeneration that occurred after the tolerant host had diminished its controls or surveillance.[55]

What Patton's brief history demonstrates is that science borrowed heavily from sixties narratives of invasion, infiltration, and, finally, uneasy assimilation. But it is also important to note that Cold War politics legitimated its claims by reference to the "natural" sciences of virology and immunology, with talk of defending the national body from alien invaders and infiltrators. A self-perpetuating loop of justification establishes itself, then, in which politics naturalises its project by appeal to a science that had drawn its terms from contemporary politics.[56] In summary, I want to suggest that Burroughs' exaggeratedly fictional cross-contamination of both discourses drives a wedge into the circuits of exchange between the literal and the figural, and the natural and the political.

---

[54] Wilson Smith, ed., *Mechanisms of Virus Infection* (London: Academic Press, 1963), p.vii.

[55] Patton, *Inventing AIDS*, p.60.

[56] The mutual naturalisation of medicine and politics has continued in the AIDS era. In Donna Haraway, "The Biopolitics of Postmodern Bodies: Constitutions of Self in Immune System Discourse," and "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism, in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Free Association Books/Routledge, 1991), Donna Haraway discusses the postmodernisation of immunological metaphors, from the language of battlegrounds to images of Star Wars/Gulf War-style information technology in the form of the military's new doctrine of C^3I (communication-command-control-intelligence).

BLURRING THE BOUNDARIES

The AIDS crisis has been written into a whole series of interlocking divisions which have structured public perceptions and policies about the epidemic: not only between the natural and the political, but also between the innocent and the guilty; the so-called "general population" and the "at risk" groups; gay and straight; official knowledge and pseudo-science; the material and the informational; the human and the viral; host and parasite; the self and the non-self, and so on.[57] Although the conspiracy scenarios deployed in *Cities of the Red Night* and the Nova trilogy serve to destabilise the relationship between the natural and the political, in many other ways Burroughs' work is organised by a comparable series of Manichean divisions, generated by the countless scenarios of incorporation and invasion which threaten the vulnerable self. The conspiracy theory about the B-23 virus, for instance, represents it as a totally alien enemy, the responsibility of an evil other, a manœuvre which is necessary in order to posit a purely victimised "us." In this final section I want to argue that at critical junctures Burroughs' texts produce a breakdown of these "paranoid" distinctions, and that this failure to maintain body boundaries is ultimately a more productive strategy of resistance than an ever more insistent manning of the barriers. In particular, I want to look at how these distinctions begin to blur first at the microscopic level, then in relation to the individual body, and finally in the realm of the social body.

(i) *Horror Autotoxicus*

Many discussions of the HIV virus have figured it as an invading agent in a vicious war fought out in the "inner space" of the body. For example, a *National Geographic* article entitled "Our Immune System: The Wars Within" includes pictures (under the caption "Cell Wars") of macrophagocytes enveloping a bacterium in a photograph that looks like nothing so much as an episode from *Star Wars*.[58] The article uses a militarised language of enemies and invasion:

> Besieged by a vast array of invisible enemies, the human body enlists a remarkably complex corps of internal bodyguards to battle the invaders. They can cleanse the lungs of foreign particles, rid the bloodstream of infectious microorganisms, and weed tissue of renegade cancer cells.[59]

When it comes to discussing HIV, the body-as-battlefield becomes fused with elements from an espionage tale:

---

[57] Treichler offers an exhaustive list of the binary oppositions which have structured thinking about AIDS, in "An Epidemic of Signification," pp.63-64.

[58] Peter Jaret, "Our Immune System," *National Geographic*, June 1986, pp.702-35 (the photographs are by Lennart Nilsson).

[59] Jaret, "Our Immune System," p.702.

> Many of these enemies have evolved devious methods to escape detection. The viruses that cause influenza and the common cold, for example, constantly mutate, changing their fingerprints. The AIDS virus, most insidious of all, employs a range of strategies, including hiding out in healthy cells. What makes it fatal is its ability to invade and kill helper T cells, thereby short-circuiting the entire immune response.[60]

The inert virus is imbued with malicious agency, while the self is repeatedly metonymised into ever more microscopic particles of defence, forming immunological homunculi which are figured as miniaturised special agents. This kind of anthropomorphised plotting of alien invasion is familiar to us from Burroughs' apocalyptic Nova campaign, with his call to "fight cell by cell through bodies and mind screens of the earth" (*NE*, 59). In the sixties, Burroughs characterised himself as a "cosmonaut of inner space," and in the Nova trilogy the body indeed becomes a miniaturised cosmic battlefield, fought over by opposing intergalactic agents.[61] "Patrolling is, in fact, my principal occupation, the narrator announces in the "Atrophied Preface" to *Naked Lunch*, but the fight for the body seems doomed, "because all Agents defect and all Resisters sell out" (*NL*, 163). Unlike the kind of scientific popularisations of cell warfare represented by the *National Geographic* article, Burroughs' scenarios are always in danger of collapsing the distinction between the vehicle and the tenor in the metaphorical contract. His comparisons can take on a life of their own, so that viruses become metaphors for invasion just as military invasion provides the metaphorical vehicle for viral activity.

Moreover, whereas the dramatisations of the immunological conflict in (popular) scientific discussions often mask the strangeness of conceiving of the self-as-macrophagocyte, Burroughs' self-consciously science-fictional imagery of the body serves explicitly to defamiliarise the self that is under attack, to make it as "alien" as the invading virus.[62] So, for example, the most intimate bodily functions come under scrutiny:

> The realization that something as familiar to you as the movement of your intestines the sound of your breathing the beating of your heart is also alien and hostile does make one feel a bit insecure at first. Remember that you can separate yourself from the "Other Half" from the word. The word is spliced in with the sound of your intestines and breathing with the beating of your heart. (*TTE*, 57)

The task becomes to make unfamiliar what seems most natural about the body. In order better to defend the self, it becomes necessary to encourage, as it were, the

---

[60] Jaret, "Our Immune System," p.709.

[61] Burroughs coins the phrase "cosmonaut of inner space" in "Censorship," *Transatlantic Review*, 11 (Winter 1962), p.6; cited in Skerl, *William S. Burroughs*, p.72.

[62] See, for example, Elizabeth Martin's discussion of the self-horror a group of students expressed when she showed them a documentary about sperm cells "invading" and surviving in the "hostile environment" of a woman. Martin, "Body Narratives, Body Boundaries," in *Cultural Studies*, Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula Treichler, eds (London: Routledge, 1992), pp.409-23.

immunological concept of *horror autotoxicus*, a horror of the self.[63] The narrator recommends a programme of violent defamiliarisation of the workings of the body, which involves recording the sounds of bodily processes, then "splic[ing] your body sounds in with air hammers," so as to "blast jolt vibrate the 'Other Half' right out into the street" (*TTE*, 50). This process of defamiliarisation is developed in the "soft typewriter" imagery, which serves to make strange both body and machine. This figuration of the body as a biological machine captures a sense of it as incarnate information; fused at the level of DNA, the categories of the material and the semiotic, the natural and unnatural, become blurred.

In crucial ways Burroughs' fictions of cell-by-cell resistance undermine the humanist faith in self-possession which animates his libertarian project of escaping externally imposed control. In a moving passage from the "Atrophied Preface" to *Naked Lunch* the narrator recognises that penetration and possession by alien influences are not necessarily momentary disasters, but a permanent condition:

> "Possession" they call it. . . . Sometimes an entity jumps in the body—outlines waver in yellow orange jelly—and hands move to disembowel the passing whore or strangle the neighbor child in hope of alleviating a chronic housing shortage. As if I was usually there but subject to goof off now and again. . . . *Wrong! I am never here*. . . . Never that is *fully* in possession, but somehow in a position to forestall ill-advised moves. . . . Patrolling is, in fact, my principal occupation. . . . No matter how tight Security, I am always somewhere *Outside* giving orders and *Inside* this straight jacket of jelly that gives and stretches but always reforms ahead of every movement, thought, impulse, stamped with the seal of alien inspection.[64] (*NL*, 174)

For Burroughs, then, the body is simultaneously something you have, and that which you are. It is both a treacherous "straight jacket of jelly" in which you are trapped, and a fortress to be patrolled. In his writings the dividing lines between "self" and "other," "here" and "there," and "inside" and "outside" are continually being renegotiated, contested, and resisted. Burroughs never gives up on the vigilant patrolling of the boundaries of his body, but neither does he ignore the insight that, at the microscopic level, the permeability and the alterity of one's own body ensure that what is to count as the self cannot be guaranteed in advance. In this way, Burroughs' novels rethink the fiction of a self-identity in isolation from society, at the same time that they promote a strengthening of the immune system's powers of recognition of non-self. His fictions

---

[63] Paul Ehrlich's theory of *horror autotoxicus* is discussed in Arthur M. Silverstein, *A History of Immunology* (London: Academic Press, 1989), pp.160-189.

[64] In the Introduction to *Queer*, Burroughs discusses how he "live[s] with the constant threat of possession, and a constant need to escape from possession, from Control" (p.18); in particular, he attributes the shooting of his wife in the infamous William Tell incident to possession by the "Ugly Spirit." In his biography of the writer, Barry Miles gives an account of Burroughs' participation in a native American sweat lodge ceremony designed to rid himself of the spirit which he claims has haunted him since the shooting in 1951. Miles, *William Burroughs: El Hombre Invisible* (London: Virgin, 1993), pp.261-65.

thus produce the kind of immunological remapping of the body which Donna Haraway argues is vital in the age of AIDS. Haraway claims that, in addition to militaristic scenarios of the protected and isolated self,

> immunity can also be conceived in terms of shared specificities; of the semi-permeable self able to engage with others (human and non-human, inner and outer), but always with finite consequences; of situated possibilities and impossibilities of individuation and identification; and of partial fusions and dangers. The problematic multiplicities of postmodern selves, so potently figured *and* repressed in the lumpy discourses of immunology, must be brought into other emerging Western and multi-cultural discourses on health, sickness, individuality, humanity, and death.[65]

I would argue that Burroughs' fictions indeed bring together scientific and cultural narratives about the body, which serve to provide new mythologies of the self in the age of AIDS.

(ii) Just Say No

The "just say no" logic of the 1980s and 1990s has brought with it a fanatical quarantining of the self in general, and of gay/drug-using individuals in particular.[66] The widespread and often fantastical panic about the "exchange of bodily fluids" in the era of AIDS has produced spectacles such as the use of protective rubber gloves by San Francisco police force at the 1983 Gay Freedom Day Parade.[67] Noting that an opinion poll "showed that an enormous number of people believe that homosexual intercourse can cause AIDS even if neither party had the virus," Burroughs commented, "Now that's an immaculate conception!"[68] As we have seen, his novels frequently stage scenes of horror in the face of an invasion or incorporation of the self by another. I now want to argue, however, that in a series of key themes and techniques they also open up the possibility that throwing a *cordon sanitaire* around oneself might ultimately be futile, and even undesirable.

The first example of interpersonal merging I want to explore arises from the countless bathhouse scenes in Burroughs' novels. During the eighties the issue of closing bathhouses was fiercely debated. Medical commentators and public health officials painted lurid pictures of bathhouses as "breeding zones" of diseased

---

[65] Haraway, "Biopolitics," p.225. In "Of AIDS, Cyborgs, and Other Indiscretions: Resurfacing the Body in the Postmodern," in *Essays in Postmodern Culture*, Eyal Amiran and John Unsworth, eds (OUP, 1993), pp.37-56, Allison Fraiberg develops Haraway's notions of permeable selves in her discussion of the ambiguous politics of keeping bodies "discrete" in the era of AIDS.

[66] Goode and Ben-Yehuda outline the main contours of the War on Drugs in Chapter 12 of their *Moral Panics*.

[67] Details about this incident are recorded in Shilts, *And the Band*, pp.334-35.

[68] "Burroughs: On Tear Gas, Queers, *Naked Lunch*, and the Ginsberg Affair," an interview with David Ehrenstein, *Advocate*, 581 (16 July 1991), p.43; cited in Edelman, *Homographesis*, p.257, n.15.

promiscuity. While some gay writers and activists such as Randy Shilts concurred in closing down the bathhouses as a necessary measure for survival of the urban gay communities, others have insisted that the bathhouses were an integral and important feature of radical gay sexual politics.[69] In his autobiographical account of the bathhouse culture of New York in the 1960s Samuel Delaney seeks not to "romanticize that time into some cornucopia of sexual plenty," but rather to keep the memory—and therefore the possibility—alive for a future that is currently scarcely imaginable:

> What is the reason, anyone might ask, for writing such a book as this half a dozen years into the era of AIDS? Is it simply nostalgia for a medically unfeasible libertinism? Not at all. If I may indulge in my one piece of science fiction for this memoir, it is my firm suspicion, my conviction, and my hope that once the AIDS crisis is brought under control, the West will see a sexual revolution to make a laughing stock of any social movement that till now has borne the name.[70]

Foucault, for instance, speculated in an interview that the public's horror of bathhouses was tinged with fascinated jealousy at the lack of regulation and boundedness in the relationships between gay men:

> I believe it is politically important that sexuality should be able to function as it functions in the bathhouses. There you meet men who are like you, who are like what you are for them: nothing other than bodies with which combinations, fabrications of pleasure are going to be possible. You cease to be imprisoned in your own face, in your own past, in your own identity. It is regrettable that such sites do not still exist for heterosexuals.[71]

Burroughs' depictions of bathhouses tap into both sides of this debate. The narrator of *Nova Express* warns the reader in the opening debriefing that "Their Garden of Delights is a terminal sewer," "a man-eating trap that ends in green goo" (*NE*, 6). Although the narrator warns the reader to "stay out of the Garden of Delights," the novel repeatedly shifts into scenes of homoerotic combinations. On the one hand, the blurring of body boundaries is always liable in Burroughs' cosmography to mutate into horrific scenes of cannibalistic violence. On the other hand, the proliferating permutations of bodies and pleasures offers a model of escape from the rigid constrictions of the conventional self into a transpersonal zone of polymorphous identity. In particular, a sense of mystique is reserved for the descriptions of anal penetration, in which the "exchange of bodily fluids" seems to produce a momentary exchange of identity, brought about by the ejaculation in one man's anus appearing to spurt out of the other's penis. More significantly, these orgasms bring not only a temporary "jump" into another's body, but

---

[69] For an overview of the debates, see Crimp, "How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic," and Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" in *AIDS*, Crimp, ed., pp.197-222.

[70] Samuel Delaney, *The Motion of Light in Water: Sex and Science Fiction Writing in the East Village, 1957-1965* (New York: New American Library, 1988), p.175.

[71] Michel Foucault, "Le Gai Savoir," *Mec*, June 1988, p.36; quoted and translated by Savran, *Communists, Cowboys, and Queers*, p.163.

a jump cut in the textual narration, a change of scene and time.

The bathhouse scenes are often punctuated by ritual hangings, which likewise function to violently disrupt the borders of personal identity:

> I saw him reach up with an obsidian knife and cut the rope held the platform and I fell and silver light popped in my eyes like a flash bulb—I got a whiff of ozone and penny arcades and then I felt it start way down in my toes these bone wrenching spasms emptied me and everything spilled out shit running down the back of my thighs and no control in my body paralyzed, twisting up in these spasms the jissom just siphoned me right into Xolotl's cock and next thing I was in his ass and balls flopping around spurting all over the floor. (*SM*, 17)

In an obvious way (albeit ignored by most critics), these episodes relate to hardcore s/m practices of erotic strangulation. They also form a vivid emblem of involuntary action, a lack of control over the boundaries of one's bodily fluids, combined with a corporeal rebellion of spontaneous erection and orgasm which takes over not only the victim, but also the spectators through the viral logic of pornography. Furthermore, for Burroughs the hanging enacts the basic exchange of exploitative sexuality, in which the surplus value of energy is literally "creamed off" youth by those in power, a situation which is made all the more stark by the colonial framework of many of the hangings, in which native boys are hanged by older expatriates. Yet in spite of this model of violent sexual politics, the hanging scenes also disturbingly offer a mythology of out-of-body experience. The moment of orgasm is both a flash bulb which imprints physical conditioning on the photographic paper of the body (because "sex and pain *form* flesh identity" (*TTE*, 130)), and also a moment of escape from identity, through a transposition into another body. The hangings are thus a brutal means of breaking open the bodily prison to transplant the self into a new environment and historical period; they come to represent, in effect, a form of time-travel. The narrator of *Cities of the Red Night* explains the logic of this forcible rupture of the self from its moorings in the here and now:

> a difficulty in organ transplants is that they are rejected as a foreign body. Drugs must be administered to suspend the rejection. In this case, the shared experience of being hanged will dissolve the rejection that would otherwise occur, giving rise to the phenomenon of multiple personalities, where only one personality can occupy a body at one time. The hanging experience acts as a solvent. The two personalities will blend into one. (*CRN*, 137)

In *Cities of the Red Night* a blending of personalities is also achieved via the head decapitation experiments, and, in *The Ticket That Exploded*, with the descriptions of the U.S. Army's experiments with sensory deprivation tanks. These tanks induce a "loss of body outline, awareness and location of the limbs occurs quickly, giving rise to panic in many American subjects" (*TTE*, 84). In each of these cases, the permutation of personality forms a positive, if disturbing, release from the prison of identity into the

freedom of "communal anonymity."[72]

This possibility finds its most developed exploration in Burroughs' linguistic experiments with cut-ups. These can take the relatively simple form of a splicing together of his own text with that of another writer, producing a textual analogue of the head-swapping experiments in *Cities of the Red Night.* So, for example, in *Nova Express* a student counsellor is called on to write a legal brief for a trial about the biological take-over by one life form of another through the control of the oxygen supply. The submission to the Biological Court is "a preparation derived from one page of Kafka passed through the student's brief and the original statement back and forth until a statement of biologic position emerges" (*NE*, 138). Kafka's paranoid visions of bureaucratic control are biologised and mythologised into Burroughs' science fiction scenario. In the combined result phrases from each of the three sources are still recognisable, but the new hybrid version takes on an identity of its own. The hybrid becomes a "third mind," as the title of Burroughs' "explanatory" book on his writing method terms it.[73]

These linguistic experiments in effect reconceive the notion of "collaboration," from a mark of failed immunological resistance (when the body's defence system lets in the enemy), to a model of artistic cooperation and mutation. Burroughs' "collaborations" range from literal shared projects (principally with Brion Gysin), through comparatively simple splicings such as the Kafka piece, to the complex cut-ups of the Nova trilogy. These latter examples weave together phrases from Burroughs' own writings (both previous novels and the work-in-progress), immediate sense impressions, and the many strands of his reading: literature (principally, T.S. Eliot, Shakespeare, Rimbaud, and Graham Greene), popular and alternative science (including Wilhelm Reich, and L. Ron Hubbard's Scientology), pulp fiction (such as *Amazing Stories*, detective fiction, westerns, and science fiction), and mass culture (for instance, advertising slogans, popular songs, pornography, and graffiti). In an essay entitled "Les Voleurs," Burroughs describes how he had "been conditioned to the idea of words as *property*—one's 'very own words'" (*AM*, 20). Once he had abandoned this idea, he felt free to instigate a shameless campaign of plagiarism of the phrases, ideas and characters which struck him in his reading and general experience. In a spoof manifesto (written in collaboration with Brion Gysin) he encourages the artist to get "out of the closet and into the museums, libraries, architectural monuments, concert halls, bookstores, recording studios and film studios of the world. . . . *A bas l'originalité,* the sterile and assertive ego that imprisons as it creates" (*AM*, 21). For

---

[72] Robin Lydenberg uses the phrase "communal anonymity" in her discussion of Burroughs' intertextuality, in *Word Cultures: Radical Theory and Practice in William S. Burroughs' Fiction* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1987), p.49; in a similar fashion, Geoff Ward writes about Burroughs' "random and promiscuous coupling of phrases," in "William Burroughs: Literary Outlaw," *Cambridge Quarterly*, 22 (1993), p.351.

[73] Burroughs (with Brion Gysin), *The Third Mind* (New York: Viking, 1978).

Burroughs, then, cut-ups provide an escape from the treasure houses of individuality into an anonymous intertextuality, the literary equivalent of the bathhouse.

Language becomes a "common vocal apparatus" in which characters form, merge, and dissolve:

> Sooner or later The Vigilante, The Rube, Lee The Agent, A.J., Clem and Jody The Ergot Twins, Hassan O'Leary the After Birth Tycoon, The Sailor, The Exterminator, Andrew Keif, "Fats" Terminal, Doc Benway, "Fingers" Shafer are subject to say the same thing in the same words to occupy, at that intersection point, the same position in space-time. Using a common vocal apparatus complete with all metabolic appliances that is to be the same person - a most inaccurate way of expressing *Recognition.* (*NL*, 175)

Because they say the same things, their bodies and their characters come to occupy the same time-space in moments of textual intersection. The strict boundaries of self and non-self dissolve at the microscopic level of linguistic recombination and mutation. For all his aspirations to immunisation, Burroughs' "original" sentences and those he has "copied" become fused, and stylistic identity becomes unstable, as the social totality is incorporated into every cell of the body of text. Although much of *Naked Lunch* is concerned with "paranoid" attempts to avoid assimilation or infiltration, the shared intersections of discourse reduce the chances of Burroughs' numerous carny characters and autobiographical disguises being apprehended or "recognised" by the enemy. On this view, a rigid insistence on separateness can be as threatening as the loss of personal definition.

Burroughs' novels therefore form highly ambiguous texts for the "just say no" decade. Although, as Sheila Jeffreys asserts, Burroughs is "the darling of the counterculture" and the sexual revolution of the 1960s, it is important to remember that his fierce attack on prurience is countered by an equally adamant distrust of all sexual pleasures.[74] As much as his writings make the case for sexual freedom, they also enact a struggle towards a freedom *from* sexuality. Furthermore, while (in Geoff Ward's phrase) the "random and promiscuous coupling of phrases" gestures towards a non-figural "promiscuity" whose absence is lamented by gay commentators from Delaney to Foucault, it also brings about a rethinking of what promiscuity might mean. For the notion of promiscuity only takes shape against a background of stable relationships and stable identities, and Burroughs' experimental zones of behaviour and language call both categories into question.

(iii) Recognition

In the AIDS epidemic the fear of immunological and personal contamination

---

[74] Sheila Jeffreys, *Anticlimax: A Feminist Perspective on the Sexual Revolution* (London: The Women's Press, 1990), p.76.

has been replicated in various ways on the social level. It was not until Thanksgiving 1987—some six years and 25,644 known deaths into the epidemic in America—that President Reagan ordered the Department of Health and Human Services, as he so tellingly put it, "to determine as soon as possible the extent to which the AIDS virus has penetrated our society."[75] This comment expresses the logic of containment which sees the HIV virus as a promiscuous sexuality which threatens to violate the clean body of the American populace. AIDS became inscribed into a rhetoric which divides society into "*our* population" (read: white, straight, monogamous, non-drug-using, family-centred), and the so-called "four-H risks groups," of homosexuals, heroin addicts, Haitians and haemophiliacs. These classifications came under strain, however, first when it emerged around 1983 that women and babies were HIV positive (that is, it could be amongst "us"), and then in the summer of 1985 when it was disclosed that Rock Hudson was being treated for AIDS-related illnesses (which was taken to mean either that one of "us" could turn out to be "one of them," or that the disease could spread to the "general population").[76] The cover story of *U.S. News and World Report* in January 1987, for example, announced that "suddenly the disease of *them* is the disease of *us*."[77]

These confusions over "safe"/"at risk" categories contributed to a crisis of recognition as the strategy of containment came under stress. Senator Jesse Helms insisted that "the logical outcome of testing is a quarantine of those infected," while the columnist William F. Buckley proposed that "everyone detected with AIDS should be tattooed in the upper forearm, to protect common needle users, and on the buttocks to protect victimization of other homosexuals."[78] For some Americans, then, recognising a homosexual or a drug user has become of paramount importance, in order to maintain the shakily constructed notion of an "innocent" "general population." This could only be possible if homosexuality and drug use were fixed identities which encouraged disease, rather than there being a set of practices and acts by which transmission of infection can take place unless precautions are taken. As we have seen, although Burroughs' writings present graphic depictions of homosexuality and drug addiction, they also work to destabilise the rigid classifications which have allowed the persecution of some people under these categories.

In a more general way, his novels interrogate the concept of recognition. For

---

[75] Quoted in Crimp, "AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism," in *AIDS*, Crimp, ed., p.11.

[76] Treichler ("AIDS, Gender, and Biomedical Discourse") and Patton (*Sex and Germs*) discuss the gendering of AIDS in the early eighties. Richard Meyer discusses the reconstruction of Rock Hudson's life and death in "Rock Hudson's Body," in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories* , Diana Fuss, ed. (London: Routledge, 1992), pp.259-88.

[77] Cited in Treichler, "AIDS, Gender and Biomedical Discourse," p.193.

[78] The Jesse Helms comment is cited in Crimp, "AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism," p.8; William F. Buckley, Jr., "Crucial Steps in Combating the AIDS Epidemic: Identify All the Carriers," *New York Times*, 18 March 1986, p.A27.

Burroughs, recognition is both a necessary part of the immunological defence of the self, and a misrepresentation of the possibilities of escape into the "common vocal apparatus" of language. It is also both the paradigm for sexual relationships between men, and a source of anxiety when mutual recognition fails.[79] In Burroughs' writings these dramas of recognition and rejection are not purely autobiographical, but are presented as part of a larger social crisis of knowledge of homosexuality. In *The Soft Machine* for example, one routine features the Public Agent, a violently homophobic character in the style of Mike Hammer. The Agent receives his "instructions from street signs, newspapers and pieces of conversation," as if the imperative to persecute queers and junkies is written into the culture surrounding him. He describes his current assignment, which involves "intercept[ing] blue movies of James Dean before the stuff gets to those queers supporting a James Dean habit":

> The first one of the day I nailed in a subway pissoir: "You fucking nance!" I screamed. [. . .] And I sloughed him with the iron glove and his face smashed like a rotten cantaloupe. Then I hit him in the lungs and blood jumped out his mouth, nose and eyes, spattered three commuters across the room huddled in gabardine topcoats and grey flannel suits under that. The broken fruit was lying with his head damning the piss running over his face and the whole trough a light pink from his blood. "I can smell them fucking queers," I sniffed warningly. "And if there's one thing lower than a nance it's a spot of bloody grass." (*SM*, 27-28)

The Public Agent prides himself on his supposedly unerring powers of recognition, which seem to depend on a metonymic compression of the "smell" of homosexuality, sodomy, "shit" [=junk], and public toilets.[80] Yet, for all his attempts at containment, he is unable to prevent the whole trough turning a "light pink," as homosexuality overflows its bounds. The phrase "rotten cantaloupe" echoes the description in *Naked Lunch* of Bradly the Buyer who engulfs the young rentboy in green slime, with a "stink like a rotten cantaloupe" (*NL*, 27). The extreme violence is thus associated with the fear of incorporation, of losing a clear distinction, in this case, between gay and straight. In the novel this scene is cut up immediately, with the resulting rearrangement

---

[79] *Queer* provides a poignant fictionalised account of Burroughs' unrequited passion for the Allerton character with whom he travelled to South America in search of yage; the novel contains many scenes of "misrecognition" between the novelist and his companion.

[80] Burroughs' novels occasionally make a connection between paranoia and scatology. In *The Soft Machine*, for example, a cut-up sequence momentarily crystallises into a courtroom scene, with a judge sentencing someone who stands "accused of soliciting with prehensile piles" (*SM*, 169). The prosecution seems to consist of a "paranoid ex-Communist" whose rantings hint at a Mafia-Moscow conspiracy to create homosexual pollution: "'I want you to *smell* this bar stool . . . Stink juice, and you may quote me has been applied by paid hoodlums constipated with Moscow goldwasser.'" In this light it is worth noting some of the contributions to the longest running series of letters in the *TLS*, in response to a review of *Dead Fingers Talk*, the week before Kennedy was shot in November 1963. The anonymous reviewer wrote that "struggling upstream through [the book] is not unlike wading through the drains of a big city" ("Ugh . . .," *TLS*, 14 November 1963, p.919). Edith Sitwell, for example, joined in the debate, writing that "I do not wish to spend the rest of my life with my nose to other people's lavatories" (*TLS*, 28 Nov. 1963, p.993).

producing a hiatus of recognition:

> Piss running over his face. Don't know who I work for. I get mine from his blood, newspapers and pieces. "I can smell them fucking the air the way a vulture will." In any case bloody grass. I sloughed him with the iron room and strangled him like a rotten cantaloupe. [. . .] I was the blood jumped out his mouth, nose receding flesh to finish. [. . .] So I am public agent and the whole trough a light pink instruction from street. (*SM*, 28-29)

In this distorted variation, the queer-basher now receives a "light pink instruction from the street," as if he were automatically attracted to the scene of sodomy. It is now ambiguous whether it is instructions from "newspapers and pieces," or whether it is something else which he gets from "his blood." More confusing still, we read that "I was the blood jumped out his mouth," a disjunction which suggests, in the surreal logic of the unconscious that the cut-ups can reveal, that the Agent is already incorporated into the body of his victim, or even that his own identity has bled into a homosexual form. The loss of grammatical coordinates means that "I" am now both the "public agent" *and* the "whole trough."

Within the logic of *The Soft Machine* as a whole, the Public Agent chapter is set against the Private Eye routine: the reverse image of the public recognition of queers as a threat is the private recognition of desire between gay men, albeit a desire that is implicated in the complexities of the Nova conflict. Clem Snide the "Private Ass Hole" is on the trail of Johnny, who is involved in the international erotic strangulation plot. The boy "gave me the sign twisting his head to the left and up" in the imitation of a hanging, and Snide "gave him the sign back" (*SM*, 75). The Nova Police then catch up with the Private Eye (whose loyalty is far from clear), and they look through the photos in his files, exclaiming "'there's one of them'" (*SM*, 76). Snide continues his quest in Rome, and at a camply decorated gay bar he gives "the sign" to a "boy very dark with kinky hair," who comes back with the detective to his hotel. As the boy sucks himself back into shape after orgasm, he declares warmly, "'I can see you're one of our own'" (*SM*, 78). The moment of sexual connection is far from straightforward, however, because the boy turns out to be working for the Contessa di Vile, one of the principal orchestrators of the Nova heat. Yet the "secret" signs of queerness can also offer the basis for the formation of a counter-conspiracy, literally "breathing together" with shared desire. In Burroughs' writing, then, erotic recognition represents a dangerous and subversive counterpart to the homophobic identification of deviancy as something to be smashed.

In these recodings of the agent-hero, Burroughs latches onto the contradictory poles of secrecy and obviousness which Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick identifies as structuring the epistemology of the closet. She perceives that homophobic knowledge frequently vacillates between the wisdom that "it takes one to know one," and the

assertion of the queer-basher that "I know one when I see one."[81] Sedgwick goes on to argue that much anxiety has been aroused in Western society in this century by the need to maintain the impossible dividing line between what she terms "homosocial" behaviour and homosexual activity. On this model, nothing brings men closer together than shared homophobia, but that very proximity can generate desires which threaten to undermine the rituals of male entitlement. Men can experience what Sedgwick terms "homosexual panic" either from the waywardness of their own same-sex desires, or from the fear of becoming the object of such desires. "Because the paths of male entitlement," Sedgwick explains, "required certain intense male bonds that were not readily distinguishable from the most reprobated bonds, an endemic and ineradicable state of what I am calling male homosexual panic became the normal condition of male heterosexual entitlement."[82] Burroughs' reworkings of all-male adventure genres destabilise this heavily policed dividing line, producing confusions both between and within the dual logic of homosexual recognition. He performs a kind of cultural sabotage on popular fiction genres—spy, detective, empire-adventure, comics, sci-fi, Western, porn, and so on—with the result that the male heroes transgress the line between manly company and outright gay sex.[83] Or, to put it another way, he transforms the *Amazing Stories* of his youth into gay porn, bringing back to the surface what those tales strove so hard to repress.[84] Typically in his novels, the unspoken barrier between the homosocial and the homosexual quickly dissolves as the young pirates, spacemen, explorers, imperial administrators, spies, and detectives merge fluidly together in homoerotic couplings. Far from seeking to clarify categories of gender and genre, then, Burroughs' writings actively produce crises of recognition.

It is therefore significant that some commentators have experienced difficulty in "recognising" Burroughs as a gay writer. Norman Mailer, for example, manifests most clearly the convoluted process of adaptation and recontainment that is necessary for him to come to terms with Burroughs. On the one hand, Mailer describes in a 1954 essay why his villains were always homosexual:

> I did not *know* any homosexual because obviously I did not want to. It was enough for me to recognize someone as homosexual, and I would cease to take him seriously as a person. . . . I always saw him as at best ludicrous and at worst . . . sinister.[85]

---

[81] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

[82] Sedgwick, *Epistemology* , pp.184-85. Her discussion arises from a reading of *Billy Budd*, which is a frequent intertext in Burroughs' work.

[83] For a discussion of the contradictions of masculinity in empire adventure tales, see Joseph Bristow, *Empire Boys: Adventures in a Man's World* (London: Harper Collins, 1991).

[84] For background material on the genre of *Amazing Stories* I have drawn on Paul A. Carter, *The Creation of Tomorrow: Fifty Years of Magazine Science Fiction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), and Andrew Ross, "Getting Out of the Gernsback Continuum," in *Strange Weather: Culture, Science and Technology in the Age of Limits* (London: Verso, 1991), pp.101-36.

[85] Norman Mailer, "The Homosexual Villain" (1954), in *Advertisements for Myself* (London: Andre

On the other hand, Mailer was forced to admit that:

> Burroughs may be gay, but he's a man. What I mean is the fact that he's gay is incidental. He's very much a homosexual, but when you meet him that's not what you think of him."[86]

It is precisely the ambiguity in knowing what to think of Burroughs that makes his novels valuable in the age of AIDS. As much as they "confirm" society's worst fears about junkies and queers, they also serve to disrupt the logic by which those "identities" are recognised.

In this chapter I have been arguing that Burroughs' conspiratorial variations offer a critical leverage on the "paranoid" modes of thinking which have structured the AIDS epidemic. I have also implicitly been claiming that his works take on especial significance in the light of AIDS. One effect of my deliberately skewed reading of Burroughs through the lens of AIDS is that it focuses attention on his homosexuality and drug addiction. In the last decade other commentators have, however, sought to play down these aspects of Burroughs' writings. For example, in her 1987 monograph on Burroughs, Robin Lydenberg scarcely mentions homosexuality or drug use, let alone AIDS.[87] Homosexuality is always cashed out as sexuality or the play of textual desire; she writes, for example, about the "communal anonymity" of textuality, without signalling that there might also be a more literal form of collective coupling in the gay bathhouses, whose future was very much at stake in the mid-eighties. To criticise Lydenberg for her failure to engage with these issues is perhaps unfair, since it is her expressed aim to bypass the moralising debates surrounding Burroughs in order to focus on his radical linguistic strategies. But her frequent references to the radical political potential of Burroughs' work rings hollow if it functions at such a level of abstraction that it does not impinge on "issues" like AIDS.

David Cronenberg's 1992 film adaptation of *Naked Lunch* likewise tones down Burroughs' depictions of homosexuality and drug use. In the case of drugs, Cronenberg reveals that he didn't want viewers to have Nancy Reagan's "Just Say No" slogan in mind when they watched the film, so he stripped the film of any references to real drugs, substituting bug-powder addictions instead. Similarly, Cronenberg has denied that he had any special AIDS parables in mind with *Naked Lunch*, or his previous films which feature Burroughsian scenarios of body panic.[88] The effect of

---

Deutsch, 1961), pp.200-205.

[86] Quoted in Morgan, *Literary Outlaw*, p.581.

[87] Lydenberg, *Word Cultures*. In a similar fashion to Lydenberg's own lengthy discussion of the talking asshole routine, Wayne Pounds offers a Bakhtinian reading that is wholly de-sexualised. Pounds, "The Postmodern Anus: Parody and Utopia in Two Recent Novels by William Burroughs," *Poetics Today*, 8 (1987), 611-29.

[88] The film critic Mitch Tuchman observes that, "without Burroughs, Cronenberg may be without imagery." For details about Cronenberg's life and influences, see the collection of interviews, *Cronenberg on Cronenberg*, Chris Rodley, ed. (London, Faber and Faber, 1992). The comment from

Cronenberg's desire to create universalist, metaphysical studies of disease is to empty out the specificity of the involvement with HIV/AIDS by drug using and gay communities which (along with blacks) have born the burden of the epidemic disproportionately in the USA and across the world.[89]

Stripped of its specificities of sexual and narcotic logic, Cronenberg's adaptation of Burroughs' novels becomes a portrait of the artist as a young man, turning the writer's life (especially his marriage) into a parable of artistic freedom.[90] Cronenberg has defended his interpretation, arguing first that the film reflects Burroughs' own ambivalence about his "deviant" sexuality in the fifties, but then, more pertinently, that:

> I'm male and my unconscious fantasies are male . . . I've talked about admiring *Naked Lunch*. One of the barriers to my being totally 100 per cent with William Burroughs is that Burroughs' general sexuality is homosexual. It's very obvious in what he writes that his dark fantasies happen to be sodomizing young boys as they are hanging.[91]

Cronenberg goes on to insist that, "I'm not afraid of the homosexuality, but it's not innate in me."[92] In Cronenberg's 1990s reworking of Burroughs, homosexuality is not "innate," it is just an arbitrary fantasy Agent Lee "happens to" choose upon. In this chapter I have attempted to demonstrate, however, that fantasies such as the hanging scenes are not—or rather, not only—arbitrary and inscrutable products of a lone writer's twisted imagination. They are, I believe, vital to the structure of Burroughs' conspiratorial mythography, which itself presents paranoia about queers and junkies as a central dynamic in postwar America.

If the sexualised politics of conspiracy are omitted from one film of 1992 in which they should feature, then in another film from the same year they are included

---

Tuchman is quoted on p.155. On Cronenberg's conspiratorial poetics, see Fredric Jameson, "Totality as Conspiracy," in *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press; London: BFI, 1992).

[89] Over eighty percent of HIV-positive people in the world are believed to be black; and as many as half of the gay men in New York might be infected (figures cited in Fiske, *Media Matters*, p.191, and Watney, *Practices of Freedom*, p.xvii). It is important to note, of course, that such classifications are not mutually exclusive.

[90] Richard Dellamora provides a detailed critique of Cronenberg's heterosexualisation of Burroughs, in *Apocalyptic Overtures: Sexual Politics and the Sense of an Ending* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994); Andrew Parker makes a similarly persuasive case in his analysis of Cronenberg's adaptation, "Grafting David Cronenberg: Monstrosity, AIDS Media, National/Sexual Difference," in *Media Spectacles*, Marjorie Garber, Jann Matlock and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, eds (London: Routledge, 1993), pp.209-31. In "The Wrong Body," *Sight and Sound*, 2.1 (1992), 8-10, Amy Taubin likewise concludes that, "brilliant as it is, Cronenberg's *Naked Lunch* never resolves the incompatibility between the heterosexual drive of its narrative and the remnants of Burroughs' homoerotic fantasy. The amazing insect typewriter, which collapses desire for buggery with paranoia about being bugged, could never have produced the encounter between William Lee and Joan Frost" (p.10).

[91] *Cronenberg on Cronenberg*, p.99.

[92] *Cronenberg on Cronenberg*, p.162. Cronenberg offers this as a reason for the fact that "I probably want women in the film."

when by all rights they should have had no place. As we saw in Chapter 1, Oliver Stone's *JFK* inserts a homosexual component into the assassination plot, fabricating a gay hustler as a key witness, as well as implicating the conspirators by showing them entwined in a surreal montage of bodies in a gay orgy. Cronenberg's recent replotting of Burroughs as an icon of countercultural freedoms, whose homosexuality was just a convenient disguise, is surely dictated by the same logic which leads to Stone's implicit insistence on a necessary connection between homosexuality and a plot to "un-man" America.[93] There is thus a noticeable lack of symmetry in these reassessments of the sixties: when a scapegoat is required to account for the AIDS epidemic or the assassination of JFK, gay promiscuity and drug abuse are put forward as the prime culprits; but when Burroughs is championed as a forerunner of the sexual and literary freedoms of the sixties, his sexual and narcotic preferences are quietly subsumed into the language of universal personal freedoms.[94]

It is of course extremely problematic to make any kind of link between homosexuality, drug use and AIDS; much of the best writing on the epidemic has in fact attempted to counter the "natural" ease with which these associations are forged.[95] In one respect it is therefore highly appropriate that Lydenberg and Cronenberg should chose to ignore the relevance of Burroughs' work to an analysis of the demonological discourse surrounding HIV/AIDS. In the same way that the acts rather than the "identity" of an individual are what counts in HIV transmission, so too is it plausible that Burroughs' "identity" as a homosexual and a heroin addict is not relevant to an understanding of his writings. Yet to fail to engage with the centrality of these two aspects of Burroughs' writings is to lose the opportunity of examining why the connections between private pleasures and public fears have been made so persistently and paranoiacally in the era of AIDS and the War on Drugs in particular, and in postwar America more generally.

---

[93] There are other possible points of comparison between the public discourse surrounding the AIDS epidemic and that of the JFK assassination. Much lab time has been spent in trying to find the "magic bullet" drug to combat the virus; similarly, much of the early investigations were preoccupied with finding the "Patient Zero," the epidemiological equivalent of the "lone gunman" in the Kennedy case. In the same way that evidence of multiple causal origins of AIDS led to the abandoning of the hunt for a "Patient Zero" in the case of AIDS, so too is the Warren Commission Report now read by some researchers not so much as an indictment of a "lone gunman," as a document of the unpredictable and at times bizarre coincidences spreading back through time and out across the nation from those seven seconds in Dallas. Finally, in the same way that investigation into the Kennedy assassination uncovered networks of power, corruption and vested interests, so too has the epidemiology of AIDS revealed institutionalised prejudice and fossilised patterns of unequal burdens.

[94] Michael Goodman, for example, notes that *Naked Lunch* was "the last work of literature to be proscribed in this nation's struggle between its belief in free expression and its Puritan heritage." Goodman, *Contemporary Literary Censorship: The Case History of Burroughs' "Naked Lunch"* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow, 1981), p.1.

[95] See, for example, Patton's section on "Degaying AIDS: The Queer Paradigm" in *Inventing AIDS*, pp.116-20; see also Simon Watney's rethinking of this position, "Re-gaying AIDS," in *Practices of Freedom: Selected Writings on HIV/AIDS* (London: Rivers Oram, 1994), pp.153-55.

CONCLUSION

In tracing through the culture of conspiracy in the USA since the 1960s, the preceding chapters have revealed a story of uneven and at times contradictory development. We have seen how the Cold War language of conspiracy has been requisitioned, rewired and upgraded in the formation of new social constituencies. But we have also seen how the logic of conspiracy has expressed and produced antagonisms between and within these movements. Both Betty Friedan and William Burroughs, for example, employ the paranoid style in their discussion of the threat posed by American motherhood, yet neither, it hardly needs to be said, would endorse the other's position. The postwar period has thus witnessed not simply a popularised reversal of conspiracy theories told *by* Them to ones told *about* Them, but a fragmentation and proliferation of demonological rhetoric in entirely new areas.

At the same time as an increase in the creation of conspiracy theories, there has also surely been an unprecedented increase in the likelihood of conspiratorial surveillance and control of citizens, with the rise of the National Security state. Paranoia has become both a necessary diagnosis of a political mode dominated by fantasy, and a justifiable response to the conditions brought about by Cold War logic. Nuclear proliferation might thus have resulted from the institution of paranoia as a national policy, but paranoia now seems a suitable reaction to the threat of nuclear annihilation. As the joke goes, I may be paranoid, but that doesn't mean they're not out to get me. The possibilities for paranoia have become endless, but the culture of conspiracy, I have been arguing, cannot simply be mapped onto a historical account of the new world order as a vast interlocking plot. Although the distinction between demonological fantasy and investigative accuracy has been eroded in this period, this does not mean that we should either blithely accept or reject all conspiracy theories on principle. I have been claiming instead that we must call into question the dominant interests that are served in fixing certain boundaries between the orthodox and the alternative, the literal and the metaphorical, the plausible and the speculative, and so on.

We have also seen how the 1960s represent an important departure in the history of the paranoid style, in the way that the very concept of a conspiracy *theory* becomes recognised, classified and popularised. Postmodern novelists such as DeLillo, Pynchon and Burroughs combine an attention to the content of conspiracy theories with a self-conscious reflection on the epistemological contrivances of that mode of historical explanation. Moreover, as my reading of Pynchon's *Vineland* suggested, it is now at least conceivable that the modernist desire for depth and secrecy has collapsed in on itself in a postmodern hyperrealisation of the sign-as-clue, such that paranoia is simultaneously more necessary than ever (since the globe has reached new levels of sinister connections), and entirely pointless (because all signs are endlessly made visible). Alongside Lyotard's pronouncement of and call for the end of master narratives, there must also be placed the multiplication of conspiracy theories which function as distorted and displaced substitutions for those traditional metanarratives.

As we saw in examples such as *The Manchurian Candidate*, history has come to resemble its fictional representation, as the literary depiction of paranoid fears has become caught up in a complex circuit of exchange with, and materialisation of, the factual.

In addition to the postmodernisation of conspiracy theories, however, there remains the possibility of older, more direct revelations of conspiratorial activities. As I write this conclusion, the trial of O.J. Simpson is reaching its final stage. Through the language of conspiracy, the case has brought into the light the dramatic polarisations that the issue of race still produces in American society. Opinion polls have consistently reported that while only a quarter of white Americans believe the former football star is not guilty of murdering his ex-wife and her friend, three quarters of the African American population are convinced that O.J. was the victim of a police conspiracy to frame him. The extremely detailed scientific DNA evidence in the case must be set alongside, for example, the plausibility of a cover-up by the Los Angeles Police in the light of the Rodney King incident (it is, of course, quite possible that although O.J. committed the murders, there was also a police conspiracy to fabricate evidence). The dramatic splitting of opinion in the United States along lines of colour must also be reconfigured in terms of class (O.J. was of course extremely wealthy) and gender (many feminists continue to be alarmed that the victim, Nicole Brown-Simpson, is left out of the picture in a case that is as much about the "private" matter of domestic violence as it is about the public issue of race). In the limited scope of this study there has not been space to address directly the issue of racial paranoia in postwar America, the politics of which, as the foregoing example suggests, is always present and always extremely complicated. An examination of this question would have to bring together an analysis of the origins of the complex history of sexualised fantasies of race with an investigation into the actual effects of these deep-seated prejudices; it would also have to take into account the strategic materialisations of society's worst fears about its demonised others with the formation of black militant and separatist organisations, without losing sight of the stories of "real" conspiracies and cover-ups orchestrated against these organisations. Materials for such a study might include the wildly conspiratorial novels of Ishmael Reed such as *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), or Spike Lee's counterpart to Stone's *JFK*, namely *Malcolm X* (1993), along with, say, the documents of and white reactions to the Black Panthers.

In addition to working in an analysis of racial paranoia, an exhaustive survey of the culture of conspiracy in the new social movements of the 1960s would also have to tackle the emergence of environmental concerns, which have frequently been inflected through the logic of conspiracy. This would be particularly revealing, since models of ecological causality and complexity produce new paradigms for plotting agency and responsibility. Furthermore, as the release of the film *Outbreak* (1995) demonstrates, conspiratorial scenarios of viral manufacture are now imbricated with concerns about

environmental manipulation.[1]

We must therefore conclude that there is no single key which would unlock the nature of conspiracy theories in postwar America. If we were to take the issue of drugs, for example, it quickly becomes apparent that there are several different stories which must simultaneously be taken into account. We might begin with a materialist analysis of the causal association between certain narcotics and a feeling of paranoia. But the existence of this well-documented connection does not tell us whether illegal drugs created or captured the mood of a generation. In addition to a discussion of the rhetorical sources and effects of anti-drug hysteria, there would also have to be an investigation of drug users' fear of persecution and prosecution for using illegal substances. And as we saw in the Burroughs chapter, the representation of "controlled substances" as alien chemicals which take control of the brain is itself reliant on paranoid conceptions of the isolated and immune self. We would also have to take seriously Burroughs' argument that drugs constitute a real threat to conventional society since they can induce alternative epistemologies which promote an implicit questioning of what constitutes "reality," and of whose interests are served through the maintenance of a monopoly of knowledge about that "reality." Finally, an account of the sixties drug culture would also have to investigate the particular economic and political hidden agendas associated with certain substances. As Jay Stevens demonstrates in *Storming Heaven*, the story of LSD cannot ignore the involvement of the CIA.[2] In one final twist of complexity—a kind of conspiratorial intertextuality which in the course of this study has both amused and amazed me—we would also have to consider the claim that Lee Harvey Oswald visited the office of the New Orleans district attorney in October 1963 in order to ascertain the legality of importing LSD into the USA for the purposes of starting a social revolution—the main source of that drug in 1963 being, of course, the CIA.[3]

Each example of conspiracy theory cannot therefore be decided in advance, but must be examined and reframed in a series of interlocking analyses. The study of conspiracy culture in postwar America must combine both the realist and the symbolist approaches to the paranoid style, through an analysis of the connections between conspiracy plots and narrative plots. It necessitates attention to historical, political, economic, psychological and rhetorical factors, in an attempt to understand not only how each of these realms impinges upon the paranoid style, but also how each of these categories is itself reconfigured by and through the culture of conspiracy.

---

[1] *Outbreak*, dir. Wolfgang Petersen (1995).

[2] Jay Stevens, *Storming Heaven: LSD and the American Dream* (1988; London: Flamingo, 1993).

[3] This claim was outlined by Martin A. Lee, Robert Ranftel and Jeff Cohen, in *Rolling Stone*, 3 March 1983; reported in Bob Callahan, *Who Shot JFK?: A Guide to the Major Conspiracy Theories* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), pp.110-11.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

(List of Works Consulted)

Aaron, Daniel, "How to Read Don DeLillo," in Lentricchia, ed., *Introducing Don DeLillo*, pp.67-82

Adams, Jad, "There's Nothing Like a Good, Wicked Plot," *i to i*, October 1992, pp.12-15

Adorno, Theodor and Max Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry as Mass Deception," in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (1944; London: Verso, 1986), pp.120-67

Agel, Jerome, ed., *The Radical Therapist* (New York: Ballantine Press, 1971)

Ambrose, Stephen E., "Writers on the Grassy Knoll: A Reader's Guide," *New York Times Book Review*, 2 February 1992, pp.23-25

Amiran, Eyal, and John Unsworth, eds, *Essays in Postmodern Culture* (Oxford: OUP, 1993)

Antonio, Gene, *The AIDS Cover-Up?: The Real and Alarming Facts about AIDS* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987)

Ballard, J.G., *The Atrocity Exhibition*, revised edn., with a Preface by William Burroughs (1970; London: Flamingo/HarperCollins, 1993)

Banner, Bob, "Statement of Purpose," *Critique: A Journal of Conspiracies and Metphysics*, 26 (1990), p.2

Barker, Adam, "Cries and Whispers: What is a Paranoia Movie—Looking at Work from Coppola to *JFK*," *Sight and Sound*, 1.10 (1992), 24-25

Baudrillard, Jean, *Selected Writings*, Mark Poster, ed. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988)

———, *The Ecstasy of Communication*, trans. Bernard & Caroline Schutze (New York: Semiotext(e), 1988)

Bell, Daniel, *The End of Ideology* (New York: Collier-Macmillan, 1965)

Bell, Michael, "How Primordial is Narrative," in Nash, ed., pp.172-98

Bell, Pearl K., "DeLillo's World," *Partisan Review*, 59 (1992), 138-46

Bennett, Tony, ed., *Popular Fiction: Technology, Ideology, Production, Reading* (London: Routledge, 1990)

Berressem, Hanjo, *Pynchon's Poetics: Interfacing Theory and Text* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993)

Bersani, Leo, *The Culture of Redemption* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990)

———, "Is the Rectum a Grave?," in Crimp, ed., pp.197-222

Bérubé, Michael, *Public Access: Literary Theory and American Cultural Politics* (London: Verso, 1993)

Best, Steven, "Jameson, Totality, and the Poststructuralist Critique," in Kellner, ed., pp.333-68

———, and Douglas Kellner, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations* (London: MacMillan and Guildford Press, 1991)

———, "Creative Paranoia: A Postmodern Aesthetic of Cognitive Mapping in *Gravity's Rainbow*," *Centennial Review*, 36 (1992), 59-87

Billig, Michael, "Anti-Semitic Themes and the British Far Left," in Graumann and Moscovici, eds, pp.115-36

Blackstock, Nelson, *COINTELPRO: The FBI's Secret War on Political Freedom* (New York: Vintage, 1976)

Blau, Herb, "From '(Re)Sublimating the 60s,'" in Sayres et al., eds, pp.316-20

Bloom, Allen, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987)

Bloom, Harold, ed., *Thomas Pynchon's "Gravity's Rainbow"* (New York: Chelsea, 1986)

Booker, M. Keith, "*Vineland* and Dystopian Fiction," *Pynchon Notes*, 30-31 (1992), 5-38

Born on the Fourth of July, dir. Oliver Stone (1989)

Bowlby, Rachel, "'The Problem With No Name': Rereading Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*," in Bowlby, pp.76-94

———, "Soft Sell: Marketing Rhetoric in Feminist Criticism," in Bowlby, pp.95-106

———, *Still Crazy After All These Years: Women, Writing and Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1992)

Bradbury, Malcolm, and Howard Temperley, eds, *Introduction to American Studies* (London: Longman, 1989)

Braudy, Leo, "Providence, Paranoia and the Novel," *ELH*, 48 (1981), 619-37

Brennan, Teresa, *Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1989)

———, "The Age of Paranoia," *Paragraph*, 14 (1991), 20-45

Bristow, Joseph, *Empire Boys: Adventures in a Man's World* (London: Harper Collins, 1991)

Bromley, David G., and James T. Richardson, eds, *The Brainwashing/ Deprogramming Controversy: Sociological, Psychological, Legal and Historical Perspectives* (New York and Toronto: Edwin Mellen, 1983)

Brooke, "What's Wrong with Sex Role Theory," in Redstockings, eds, pp.84-85

Brooke-Rose, Christine, "Ill Locutions," in Nash, ed., pp.154-71

Brookeman, Christopher, *American Culture and Society since the 1930s* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1984)

Brooks, Peter, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (1984; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992)

Brown, J.A.C. , *Techniques of Persuasion: From Propaganda to Brainwashing* (1963; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983)

Brownmiller, Susan, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1975)

Brussell, Mae, "The Nazi Connection to the John F. Kennedy Assassination," *The Rebel*, 22 November 1983, pp.22-35

Buckley, William F., Jr., "Crucial Steps in Combatting the AIDS Epidemic: Identify All the Carriers," *New York Times*, 18 March 1986, p.A27

Burroughs, William, *Junky* (1953; Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1977)

———, *Naked Lunch* (1959; London: Flamingo/HarperCollins, 1993)

———, *The Soft Machine* (1961; New York: Grove, 1993)

———, *The Ticket That Exploded* (1962; London: John Calder, 1985)

———, *Nova Express* (1964; New York: Grove, 1992)

———, "The Coming of the Purple Better One," *Esquire*, November 1968, pp.89-91

———, *Wild Boys* (1971; New York: Grove Press, 1992)

———, with Brion Gysin, *The Third Mind* (New York: Viking, 1978)

———, *Cities of the Red Night* (1981; London: Picador, 1982)

———, *The Place of Dead Roads* (1983; London: Flamingo/HarperCollins, 1993)

———, *Queer* (1985; London: Picador, 1986)

———, *The Adding Machine: Selected Essays* (1986; New York: Arcade, 1993)

———, "Thanksgiving Prayer, 1986," Rucker et al., eds, pp.196-200

———, *Western Lands* (1987; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988)

Butler, Judith, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990)

———, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (London: Routledge, 1993)

———, and Joan Scott, eds, *Feminists Theorize the Political* (London: Routledge, 1992)

Bywater, William, "The Paranoia of Postmodernism," *Philosophy and Literature*, 14 (1990), 79-84

Calendrillo, Linda, "Cloaks and More Cloaks: Thomas Pynchon's *V.* and the Classic Spy Novel," *Clues*, 5 (1978), 58-65

Callahan, Bob, *Who Shot JFK?: A Guide to the Major Conspiracy Theories* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993)

Callens, Johan, "Tubed Out and Movie Shot in Pynchon's *Vineland*," *Pynchon Notes*, 28-29 (1991), 115-41

Cameron, Deborah, ed., *The Feminist Critique of Language* (London: Routledge, 1990)

Cantor, Paul, "Friedrich Nietzsche: The Use and Abuse of Metaphor," in Miall, ed., pp.77-88

Carroll, John, *Puritan, Paranoid, Remissive: A Sociology of Modern Culture* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977)

Carroll, Noel, "Conspiracy Theories of Representation," *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 17 (1987), 395-412

Carter, Dale, *The Final Frontier: The Rise and Fall of the American Rocket State* (London: Verso, 1988)

Carter, Erica, and Simon Watney, eds,*Taking Liberties: AIDS and Cultural Politics* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1989)

Carter, Paul A., *The Creation of Tomorrow: Fifty Years of Magazine Science Fiction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977)

Caserio, Robert, *Plot, Story and the Novel: From Dickens and Poe to the Modern Period* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979)

Cawelti, John G., *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976)

Chambers, Judith, *Thomas Pynchon* (New York: Twayne, 1992)

Chambers, Ross, *Story and Situation: Narrative Seduction and the Power of Fiction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984)

Chomsky, Noam, *Chronicles of Dissent: Interviews with David Barsamian* (Stirling: AK Press, 1992)

Chow, Rey, "Postmodern Automatons," in Butler and Scott, eds, pp.101-20

Christopher Lasch, *The Minimal Self: Psychic Survival in Troubled Times* (1984; London: Picador, 1985)

Clarke, Brian M., Editorial, *Undercover*, June 1993, p.4

Cockburn, Alexander, "John and Oliver's Bogus Adventure," *Sight and Sound*, 1.10 (1992), 22-24

———, "The Kooks Have It," *New Statesman & Society*, 17 January 1992, p.14

———, "Propaganda of the Deed," *New Statesman & Society*, 19 November 1993, pp.30-31

Cohan, Steven, and Linda M. Shires, *Telling Stories: A Theoretical Analysis of Narrative Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1988)

Cole, David, "Fascinating Search for Fascist Conspiracy," *Herald* (Monterey, CA), 18 January 1976, magazine section, pp.15-17

Collins, Max Allan, *In the Line of Fire*, based on the screenplay by Jeff Maguire (London: HarperCollins, 1993)

Condon, Richard, *The Manchurian Candidate* (1959; Harpenden: No Exit Press, 1993)

———, "Manchurian Candidate in Dallas," *The Nation*, 28 December 1963, pp.449-50

———, *Winter Kills* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1974)

Connor, Steven, *Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989)

———, *Theory and Cultural Value* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992)

"Conspiracy Theorist Mae Brussell Dies of Cancer," *Herald* (Monterey, CA), 4 October 1988, p.17

Cooke, Fred J., "Some Unanswered Questions," *The Nation*, 13 June 1966, pp.705-15

Cooper, David, ed., *The Dialectics of Liberation* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968)

Crary, Jonathan, and Sanford Kwinter, eds, *Incorporations* (New York: Zone, 1992)

Crimp, Douglas ed., *AIDS: Cultural Analysis - Cultural Activism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988)

Crotty, William J., ed., *Assassinations and the Political Order* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971)

———, "Assassinations and Their Interpretation within the American Context," in Crotty, ed., pp.3-53

Crowdus, Gary, "Clarifying the Conspiracy: An Interview with Oliver Stone," *Cinéaste*, 19 (1992), 25-27

———, "The Allen Dulles Memorial Bibilography of the 10 Best Books on the JFK Assassination," *Cinéaste*, 19 (1992), p.35

Crowther, Hal, "Clinging to the Rock: A Novelist's Choices in the New Mediocracy," in Lentricchia, ed., *Introducing Don DeLillo*, pp.83-98

Cubitt, Geoffrey, *The Jesuit Myth: Conspiracy Theory and Politics in Nineteenth-Century France* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993)

Culler, Jonathan, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature* (1975; London: Routledge, 1992)

———, *The Pursuit of Signs* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981)

D'Emilio, John, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983)

"Dallas Prosecutor's News Conference," *New York Times*, November 26th, 1963, p.14

Daly, Mary, *Gyn/Ecology The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (1978; London: The Women's Press, 1984)

Davis, David Brion, ed., *The Fear of Conspiracy: Images of Un-American Subversion from the Revolution to the Present* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972)

Davis, Flora, *Moving the Mountain: The Women's Movement in America Since 1960* (New York: Simon & Schuster: 1991)

Davis, Lennard J., *Resisting Novels: Ideology and Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1987)

de Man, Paul, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979)

———, *The Resistance to Theory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986)

DeCurtis, Anthony, "'An Outsider in This Society': An Interview with Don DeLillo," in Lentricchia, ed., *Introducing Don DeLillo*, pp.43-66

Deitcher, David, ed., *Over the Rainbow: Lesbian and Gay Politics in America Since Stonewall*, (London: Boxtree, 1995)

Delaney, Samuel, *The Motion of Light in Water: Sex and Science Fiction Writing in the East Village, 1957-1965* (New York: New American Library, 1988)

Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. R. Hurley, M. Seem and H. Lane (London: The Athlone Press, 1984)

DeLillo, Don, *The Players* (1977; London: Vintage, 1991)

———, *Running Dog* (1978; London: Picador, 1992)

———, *The Names* (1982; London: Picador, 1987)

———, "American Blood: A Journey Through the Labyrinth of Dallas and JFK," *Rolling Stone*, 8 December 1983, pp.21-22, 24, 27-28, 74

———, *White Noise* (1984; London: Picador, 1986)

———, *Libra* (1988; Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1989)

———, *Mao II* (1991; London: Vintage, 1992)

Dellamora, Richard, *Apocalyptic Overtures: Sexual Politics and the Sense of an Ending* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994)

Denning, Michael, *Cover Stories* (London: Routledge, 1987)

Dickstein, Morris, *Gates of Eden: American Culture in the Sixties* (New York: Basic Books, 1977)

Dipple, Elizabeth, *Plot*, The Critical Idiom Series (London: Methuen, 1970)

———, *The Unresolvable Plot: Reading Contemporary Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1988)

Dollimore, Jonathan, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault*

(Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991)

Donner, Frank J., *The Age of Surveillance: The Aims and Methods of America's Political Intelligence System* (New York: Random House, 1981)

Donougho, Martin, "Postmodern Jameson," in Kellner, ed., pp.75-95

Douglas, Ann, *The Feminisation of American Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977)

Dowell, Pat, "Last Year at Nüremberg: The Cinematic Strategies of *JFK*," *Cinéaste*, 19 (1992), 8-12

Dr Strangelove, or, How I learned to Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb, dir. Stanley Kubrick (1964)

Dugdale, John, *Thomas Pynchon: Allusive Parables of Power* (London: Longman, 1990)

Dworkin, Andrea, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (London: The Women's Press, 1981)

Eagleton, Terry, "Capitalism, Modernism and Postmodernism," in *Against the Grain* (London: Verso, 1986), pp.131-48

———, "Estrangement and Irony," *Salmagundi*, 73 (1987), 25-32

Echols, Alice, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-75* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989)

Eco, Umberto, *Foucault's Pendulum*, trans. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc. (1989; repr. London: Picador, 1990)

———, Richard Rorty, Jonathan Culler, and Christine-Brooke Rose, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* (Cambridge: CUP, 1992)

Edelman, Lee, *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory* (London: Routledge, 1994)

Eisenstein, Hester, *Contemporary Feminist Thought* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1984)

Eisner, Judith A., "Mae Brussell: Fears 'Hidden Government' Plans Assassinations," *The Pine Cone* (Carmel-by-the-Sea, CA), 21 September 1972, pp.43-44

Elam, Diane, *Romancing the Postmodern* (London: Routledge, 1992)

Ellroy, James, *American Tabloid* (London: Century, 1995)

Embree, Alice, "Brainwashing: The Facts," in Redstockings, eds, pp.178-92

Epperson, A. Ralph, *The Unseen Hand: An Introduction to the Conspiratorial View of History* (Tucson, AZ: Publius Press, 1985)

Epstein, Edward J., *Inquest: The Warren Commission and the Establishment of the Truth* (London: Hutchinson, 1966)

Evans, Sara, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights*

Movement and the New Left (New York: Vintage Books, 1979)

———, *Born for Liberty: A History of Women in America* (New York: The Free Press, 1989)

Ewen, Stuart, *All Consuming Images: The Politics of Style in Contemporary Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1988)

Eysenck, Hans J. and Glenn D. Wilson, eds, *The Experimental Study of Freudian Theories* (London: Methuen, 1973)

Faludi, Susan, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (New York: Crown, 1991)

Farr, Robert M., "Self/Other Relation and the Social Nature of Reality," in Graumann and Moscovici, eds, pp.203-218

Featherstone, Mike, "Postmodernism, Cultural Change, and Social Practice," in Kellner, ed., pp.117-39

Fee, Elizabeth, and Daniel M. Fox, eds, *AIDS: The Burdens of History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988)

———, eds, *AIDS: The Making of a Chronic Disease*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992)

Feierabend, Ivo K., Rosalind L. Feierabend, Betty A. Nesvold, and Franz M. Jaggar, "Political Violence and Assassination: A Cross-National Assessment," in Crotty, ed., pp.54-140

Ferraro, Thomas J., "Whole Families Shopping at Night!," in Lentricchia, ed., *New Essays on "White Noise,"* pp.15-38

Fields, Ingrid Walker, "Paranoia, Politics, and the Popular Imagination: Conspiracy in Contemporary American Literature" (unpublished PhD diss., University of California, Santa Cruz, 1993; abstract in *DAI*, 53 (June 1993), 4325A)

Firestone, Shulamith, and Anne Koedt, eds, *Notes from the Second Year* (New York: Radical Women, 1970)

Fisher, Linda, "Hermeneutics of Suspicion and Postmodern Paranoia: Psychologies of Interpretation," *Philosophy and Literature*, 16 (1992), 106-114

Fiske, John, "Blackstream Knowledge: Genocide," in *Media Matters: Everyday Culture and Political Change* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), pp.191-216

Ford, Gerald, *Portrait of the Assassin* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1965)

Foucault, Michel, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1970)

———, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1: *An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990)

Freedman, Carl, "Towards a Theory of Paranoia: The Science Fiction of Philip K. Dick," *Science Fiction Studies*, 11 (March 1984), 15-24

Freely, Maureen, "Wet Dreams in Dallas," *Independent on Sunday*, 2 February 1992, p. 28

Freiberg, Alison, "Of AIDS, Cyborgs, and Other Indiscretions: Resurfacing the Body in the Postmodern," in Amiran and Unsworth, eds, pp.37-56

Freud, Sigmund, "Psychoanalytic Notes on an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia ("Schreber")" (1911), trans. James Strachey, rvd. Angela Richards, in Penguin Freud Library, 15 vols (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), IX, pp.131-226

———, "From the History of an Infantile Neurosis (The "Wolf Man")" (1918 [1914]), in *Case Histories II*, trans. James Strachey, Penguin Freud Library, 15 vols (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), IX, pp.227-366

———, *Totem and Taboo*, in *The Origins of Religion*, trans. James Strachey, Penguin Freud Library, 15 vols (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), XIII

Fried, Yehuda, and Joseph Agassi, *Paranoia: A Study in Diagnosis*, no. 50 of the Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science (Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel, 1976)

Friedan, Betty, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992)

———, *The Second Stage* (1981; London: Sphere, 1983)

———, *The Fountain of Age* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1993)

Frow, John, "The Last Things Before the Last: Notes on *White Noise*," in Lentricchia, ed., *Introducing Don DeLillo*, pp.175-92

Fukuyama, Francis, "The End of History?," *The National Interest*, Summer 1989, pp.3-18

Fulcher, James, "American Conspiracy: Formula in Popular Fiction," *Midwest Quarterly*, 24 (1992), 152-64

Fumento, Michael, *The Myth of Heterosexual AIDS* (New York: Basic Books, 1990)

Fuss, Diana, ed., *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories* (London: Routledge, 1992)

Gallop, Jane, *Around 1981: Academic Feminist Literary Criticism* (London: Routledge, 1992)

Garber, Marjorie, Jann Matlock and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, eds, *Media Spectacles* (London: Routledge, 1993)

Garrison, Jim, *On the Trail of the Assassins* (1988; Harmonsworth: Penguin, 1992)

Gitlin, Tod, *The Whole World Is Watching* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980)

———, *Inside Prime Time* (New York: Pantheon, 1985)

———, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (1987; revised edn, New York: Bantam, 1993)

Goode, Eric, and Nachman Ben-Yehuda, *Moral Panics: The Social Construction of Deviance* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994)

Grant, J. Kerry, *A Companion to "The Crying of Lot 49"* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1994)

Grauman, Carl F., "Conspiracy: History and Psychology—A Synopsis," in Graumann and Moscovici, eds, pp.245-50

———, and Serge Moscovici, eds, *Changing Conceptions of Conspiracy* (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1987)

Gray, Paul, "The Spores of Paranoia," *Time*, 15 January 1990, pp.69-70

Green, Geoffrey, Donald J. Greiner, and Larry McCaffery, eds, *The Vineland Papers: Critical Takes on Pynchon's Novel* (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1994)

Greene, Gayle, *Changing the Subject: Feminist Fiction and the Tradition* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991)

Greening, Thomas, "The Psychological Study of Assassins," in Crotty, ed., pp.222-66

Griessinger, Andreas, "Social Conflict and Conspiracy in Nüremberg 1789-1797," in Graumann and Moscovici, eds, pp.137-49

Griffin, Susan, *Rape: The Power of Consciousness* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979)

Groden, Robert J., "The Killing of a President," *Arena*, Autumn 1993, pp.120-35

Groh, Dieter, "The Temptation of Conspiracy Theory, or: Why do Bad Things Happen to Good People. . .," in Graumann and Moscovici, eds, pp.1-37

Gross, David, "Marxism and Resistance: Fredric Jameson and the Moment of Postmodernism," in Kellner, ed., pp.96-116

Grossberg, Lawrence, Cary Nelson and Paula Treichler, eds,*Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1992)

Grosz, Elizabeth,*Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994)

Guetti, James, "Aggressive Reading: Detective Fiction and Realistic Narrative," *Raritan*, 2 (1982), 133-54

Hailey, Foster, "Lone Assassin the Rule in U.S.; Plotting More Prevalent Abroad," *New York Times*, 25 November 1963, p.9

Hanisch, Carol, "The Personal is Political," in Agel, ed., pp. 152-157

Haraway, Donna J., *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Free Association Books, 1991)

Hartogs, Dr Renatus, *The Two Assassins* (New York: T. Cromwell, 1965)

Harvey, David, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Inquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989)

Hawkins, Harriet, *Classics and Trash: Traditions and Taboos in High Literature and Popular Modern Genres* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990)

"He Shot JFK: Oliver Stone Looks Back in Anger," Editorial, *Independent*, 18 January 1992, p.14

Hertzberg, Hendrik, and David C.K. McClelland, "Paranoia: An Idée Fixe Whose Time Has Come," *Harper's Magazine*, June 1974, pp.51-60

Hilfer, Tony, *American Fiction Since 1940* (London: Longman, 1992)

Hitchens, Christopher, "On the Imagination of Conspiracy," in *For the Sake of Argument: Essays and Minority Reports* (London: Verso, 1993), pp.12-24

Hite, Molly, *Ideas of Order in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1983)

Hoberman, J., "When Dr No Met Dr Strangelove," *Sight and Sound*, 3.12 (1993), 16-21

Hofstadter, Richard, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (1966; New York: Vintage, 1967)

Hole, Judith, and Ellen Levine, *Rebirth of Feminism* (New York: Quadrangle Books, 1973)

Holland, Max, "After Thirty Years: Making Sense of the Assassination," *Reviews in American History*, 22 (1994), 191-209

Horne, Haynes, "Jameson's Strategies of Containment," in Kellner, ed., pp.268-300

Houston, R. "*Flying in to Love*," Review, *New York Times Book Review*, 11 October 1992, pp.13-14

Hughes-Hallet, Lucy, "Art, Passion and Gossip," *Sunday Times*, 10 July 1994, section 7, p.4.

Hühn, Peter, "The Detective as Reader: Narrativity and Reading Concepts in Detective Fiction," *Modern Fiction Studies*, 33 (1987), 451-66

Hutcheon, Linda, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1988)

———, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1989)

Huyssen, Andreas, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986)

In the Line of Fire, dir. Wolfgang Petersen (1993)

Inglehart, Robert, "Extremist Political Positions and Perceptions of Conspiracy: Even Paranoids Have Real Enemies," in Graumann and Moscovici, eds, pp.231-244

Jacques-Chaquin, Nicole, "Demoniac Conspiracy," in Graumann and Moscovici, eds, pp.71-86

Jaffe, Harold, Introduction, *Assassination Rhapsody*, by Derek Pell (New York: Semiotext(e), 1989), pp.7-10

Jameson, Fredric, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (1981; London: Routledge, 1989)

———, "Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *NLR*, 146 (1984), 52-92

———, "Review of *The Names*," *Minnesota Review*, 22 (1984), 116-22

———, Foreword, in Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984, repr. 1991), p.vii-xxi

———, "Cognitive Mapping," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), pp.347-58

———, "Periodizing the 60s," in *The Ideologies of Theory*, 2 vols (London: Routledge, 1988), II, pp.178-210

———, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991)

———, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, and London: BFI, 1992).

Jaret, Peter, "Our Immune System," *National Geographic*, June 1986, pp.702-35

Jayne, Edward, "The Dialectics of Paranoid Form," *Genre*, 11 (1978), 131-57

Jeffreys, Sheila, *Anticlimax: A Feminist Perspective on the Feminist Revolution* (London: The Women's Press, 1990)

Johnson, Barbara, *A World of Difference* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987)

Johnston, Sheila, "Reel Life: Escape To Reality," *Independent*, 17 January 1992, p.19

Jones, Amelia, "'She Was Bad News': Male Paranoia and the Contemporary New Woman," *Camera Obscura*, 25 (1991), 297-320

Jones, Ann, *Women Who Kill* (New York: Ballantine, 1981)

Kadrey, Richard, *Covert Culture Sourcebook 2.0: Further, Deeper, Stranger Explorations of Fringe Culture* (New York: St. Martin's, 1994)

Kaplan, Ann E., ed., *Postmodernism and its Discontents: Theories, Practices* (London: New Left Books/Verso, 1989)

Kaplan, Cora, "Radical Feminism and Literature: Rethinking Millett's *Sexual Politics*" in *Sea Changes: Essays on Culture and Feminism* (London: Verso, 1986), pp.15-30

Kappeler, Susan, *The Pornography of Representation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986)

Keith, Jim, ed., *The Gemstone File* (Atlanta: IllumiNet Press, 1992)

———, *Secret and Suppressed: Banned Ideas and Hidden History*, (Portland, OR: Feral House, 1993)

Kellner, Douglas, ed., *Postmodernism/Jameson/Critique* (Washington: Maisonneuve Press, 1989)

———, "Jameson, Marxism, and Postmoderism," in Kellner, ed., pp.1-42

Kennedy, Florence, "Institutionalized Oppression *vs.* The Female," in Morgan, ed., pp.438-446

Kermode, Frank, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (1966; Oxford: OUP, 1977)

———, "Decoding the Tristero," in Mendelson, ed., pp. 162-66

———, "That Was Another Planet," *London Review of Books*, 8 February 1990, pp.3-4

Kimball, Roger, *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990)

Kroker, Arthur, and Marilouise Kroker, eds, *The Postmodern Scene: Excremental Culture and Hyper-Aesthetics* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986)

———, eds, *Body Invaders* (London: St. Martin's Press, 1987)

———, "Panic Sex in America," in Kroker and Kroker, eds, *Body Invaders*, pp.10-13

Kruglanski, Arie W., "Blame-Placing Schemata and Attributional Research," in Graumann and Moscovici, eds, pp.219-230

Krupey, G.L., "AIDS: Act of God or the Pentagon?," in Keith, ed., pp.240-55

Kuehl, John, *Alternate Worlds: A Study of Postmodern Antirealistic American Fiction* (New York: New York University Press, 1984)

Lakoff, George, and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980)

Landry, Donna, and Gerald MacLean, *Materialist Feminisms* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993)

Lane, Mark, *Rush to Judgement: A Critique of the Warren Commission's Inquiry into the Murders of President John F. Kennedy, Officer J.D. Tippit and Lee Harvey Oswald* (London: The Bodley Head, 1966)

Larkin, Ralph, and Daniel Foss, "Lexicon of Folk-Etymology," in Sayres et al., eds, pp.360-79

LeClair, Tom, *In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987)

Lederer, Laura, ed., *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography* (New York: Morrow, 1980)

Lehman-Haupt, Christopher, "*Vineland*, Pynchon's First Novel in 17 Years," *New York Times*, 26 December 1989, p.C21

Leitch, Vincent B., "Postmodern Culture: The Ambivalence of Fredric Jameson," *College Literature*, 19 (1992), 111-22

Lemert, E.M., "Paranoia and the Dynamics of Exclusion," in *Human Deviance, Social Problems, and Social Control* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1967)

Lentricchia, Frank, "In Place of an Afterword: Someone Reading," in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin, eds (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1990), pp.321-38

———, ed., *Introducing Don DeLillo* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991)

———, ed., *New Essays on "White Noise"* (CUP, 1991)

———, "The American Writer as Bad Citizen," in Lentricchia, ed., *Introducing Don DeLillo*, pp.1-6

———, "*Libra* as Postmodern Critique," in Lentricchia, ed., *Introducing Don DeLillo*, pp.193-215

———, "Tales of the Electronic Tribe," in Lentricchia, ed., *New Essays on "White Noise,"* pp.87-113

Leon, Barbara, "Consequences of the Conditioning Line," in Redstockings, eds, pp.66-70

Levin, Ira, *Rosemary's Baby* (New York: Random House, 1967)

———, *The Stepford Wives* (London: Michael Joseph, 1972)

Levine, George, and David Leverenz, eds, *Mindful Pleasures: Essays on Thomas Pynchon* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1976)

Levine, Robert S., *Conspiracy and Romance: Studies in Brockden Brown, Cooper, Hawthorne and Melville* (Cambridge: CUP, 1989)

Love Field, dir. John Kaplan (1992)

Lukas, J. Anthony, "*Vineland* by Thomas Pynchon," *BOMC News*, April 1990, p.3

Lupton, Deborah, *Moral Threats and Dangerous Desires: AIDS in the News Media* (London: Taylor and Francis, 1994)

Lydenberg, Robin, *Word Cultures: Radical Theory and Practice in William S. Burroughs' Fiction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987)

Lyndon, Neil, *No More Sex War: The Failures of Feminism* (London: Sinclair Stevenson, 1992)

Lyotard, Jean-François, *The Postmodern Condition*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984)

MacDonald, C.M., "The Politics of Paranoia: America and the Americans," *History Today*, 34 (1984), 5-9

Mackey, Louis, "Paranoia, Pynchon, and Preterition," *Sub-Stance*, 30 (1981), 16-30

MacNeil, Robert, ed., *The Way We Were: 1963, The Year Kennedy Was Shot* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1988)

Macpherson, Pat, *Reflections on "The Bell Jar"* (London: Routledge, 1991)

Madsen, Deborah L., *The Postmodernist Allegories of Thomas Pynchom* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1991)

Mailer, Norman, "The Homosexual Villain" (1954), in *Advertisments for Myself* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1961), pp.200-205

———, "The Great American Mystery," *Book Week Washington Post*, 28 August 1966, pp.1, 11-13

Mainardi, Patricia, "The Politics of Housekeeeping," in Morgan, ed., pp.447-454

Malcolm X, dir. Spike Lee (1993)

Marcus, Sharon, "Fighting Bodies, Fighting Words: A Theory and Politics of Rape Prevention," in Butler and Scott, eds, pp.385-403

———, "Placing *Rosemary's Baby*," *differences*, 5 (1993), 121-53

Marcuse, Herbert, *One Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (1964; London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968)

Márquez, Antonio, "Everything is Connected: Paranoia in *Gravity's Rainbow*," *Perspectives on Contemporary Literature*, 9 (1983), 92-104

Mars-Jones, Adam, "Conspiracy Of Violence," *Independent*, 24 January 92, p.16

Martin, Elizabeth, "Body Narratives, Body Boundaries," in Grossberg et al., eds, pp.409-423

Martin, Richard, "Clio Bemused: The Uses of History in Contemporary American Fiction," *Sub-Stance*, 27 (1980), 13-24

McCaffery, Larry, ed., *Storming the Reality Studio: A Casebook of Cyberpunk and Postmodern Fiction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992)

McClure, John A., "Postmodern Romance: Don DeLillo and the Age of Conspiracy," in Lentricchia, ed., *Introducing Don DeLillo*, pp.99-116

McHale, Brian, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1987)

———, *Constructing Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1992)

McLuhan, Marshall, "Notes on Burroughs," *The Nation*, 28 December 1964, pp.517-19

Meagher, Sylvia, *Accessories After the Fact: The Warren Commission, the Authorities and the Report* (1964; New York: Vintage, 1992)

Meissner, W.W., *The Paranoid Process* (New York: Jason Aaronson, 1978)

Mendelson, Edward, ed., *Pynchon: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1978)

Mepham, John, "Narratives of Postmodernism," in Smyth, ed., pp.138-55

Meyer, Richard, "Rock Hudson's Body," in Fuss, ed., pp.259-88

Miall, David S., ed., *Metaphor: Problems and Perspectives* (Brighton, Harvester Press, 1982)

Michael Goodman, *Contemporary Literary Censorship: The Case History of Burroughs' "Naked Lunch"* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow, 1981)

Miles, Barry,*William Burroughs: El Hombre Invisible* (London: Virgin, 1993)

Millett, Kate, *Sexual Politics* (1970; London: Virago, 1993)

Mitchell, W.J.T., "From CNN to *JFK*," in *Picture Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp.397-416

Modleski, Tania, *Feminism Without Women: Culture and Criticism in a "Postfeminist" Age* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991)

Molesworth, Charles, "DeLillo's Perfect Starry Night," in Lentricchia, ed., *Introducing Don DeLillo*, pp.143-56

Moore, F.C.T., "On Taking Metaphor Literally," in Miall, ed., pp.1-13

Moore, Pamela, and Devoney Looser, "Theoretical Feminism: Subjectivity, Struggle, and the 'Conspiracy' of Poststructuralisms," *Style*, 27 (1993), 530-58

Moretti, Franco, "Clues," in *Signs Taken For Wonders: Essays in the Sociology of Literary Forms*, trans. Susan Fischer, David Forgacs and David Miller (London: Verso, 1983), pp.130-56

Morgan, Robin, ed., *Sisterhood Is Powerful* (New York: Random House, 1970)

———, "Theory and Practice: Pornography and Rape," in Lederer, ed., pp.134-40

Morgan, Ted, *Literary Outlaw: The Life and Times of William S. Burroughs* (1988; London: The Bodley Head, 1991)

Morris, Meaghan, "A-Mazing Grace: Notes on Mary Daly's Poetics" in *The Pirate's Fiancée* (London: Verso, 1988)

Moscovici, Serge, "The Conspiracy Mentality," in Graumann and Moscovici, eds, pp.151-69

Moses, Michael Valdez, "Lust Removed From Nature," in Lentricchia, ed., *New Essays on "White Noise,"* pp.63-86

Mottram, Eric, *William Burroughs: The Algebra of Need* (London: Calder & Boyars, 1977)

Myers, Kathy, *Understains: The Sense and Seduction of Advertising* (London: Comedia, 1986)

Nash, Cris, ed., *Narrative in Culture* (London: Routledge, 1990)

———, "Slaughtering the Subject: Literature's Assault on Narrative," in Nash, ed., pp.199-218

Nava, Mica, *Changing Cultures: Feminism, Youth and Consumerism* (London: Sage, 1992)

Nelson, Cary, and Lawrence Grossberg, eds, *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988)

New York Radical Women, "No More Miss America! Ten Points of Protest," in Morgan, ed., pp.521-24

O'Donnell, Patrick, "Obvious Paranoia: The Politics of Don DeLillo's *Running Dog*," *Centenial Review*, 34 (1990), 56-72

———, "Engendering Paranoia in Contemporary Narrative," *Boundary 2*, 19 (1992), 181-204

Odier, Daniel, *The Job: Interviews with William S. Burroughs* (1974; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989)

Oglesby, Carl, *The Yankee and Cowboy War* (Kansas City: Sheed Andrews and McMeel, 1976)

Olderman, Raymond M., *Beyond the Wasteland: A Study of the American Novel in the 1960s* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972)

Oppenheimer, Gerald M., "Causes, Cases, and Cohorts: The Role of Epidemiology in the Historical Construction of AIDS," in Fee and Fox, eds, pp.49-83

Ortony, Andrew, ed., *Metaphor and Thought* (CUP, 1979)

Outbreak, dir. Wolfgang Petersen (1995)

Packard, Vance, *The Hidden Persuaders* (London: Longman, 1957)

Packer, Herbert L., "The Warren Report: A Measure of the Achievement," *The Nation*, 2 November 1964, pp.295-99

Paglia, Camille, *Sex, Art and American Culture* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992)

Palmer, James W., and Michael M. Riley, "America's Conspiracy Syndrome: From Capra to Pakula," *Studies in the Humanities*, 8 (1981), 21-27

Palmer, Jerry, *Thrillers: Genesis and Structure of a Popular Genre* (London: Edward Arnold, 1978)

Palmer, Paulina, *Contemporary Women's Fiction: Narrative Practice and Feminist Theory* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989)

Parker, Andrew, "Grafting David Cronenberg: Monstrosity, AIDS Media, National/Sexual Difference," in Garber et al., eds, pp.209-31

Parker, Patricia, "The Metaphorical Plot," in Miall, ed., pp.133-58

Patterson, Lee, *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (London: Routledge, 1991)

Patton, Cindy, *Sex and Germs: The Politics of AIDS* (Boston: South End Press, 1985)

———, "Tremble, Hetero Swine!" in Warner, ed., pp.143-77

———, *Inventing AIDS* (London: Routledge, 1991)

Pawling, Christopher, ed., *Popular Fiction and Social Change* (London: MacMillan, 1984)

Pearce, Richard, ed., *Critical Essays on Thomas Pynchon* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1981)

Pell, Derek, *Assassination Rhapsody* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1989)

Penley, Constance, "Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and the Study of Popular Culture," in Grossberg et al., eds, pp. 479-500

Peslikis, Irene, "Resistances to Consciousness," in Morgan, ed., pp.337-39

Pfeil, Fred, *Another Tale to Tell: Politics and Narrative in Postmodernist Culture* (London: Verso, 1990)

Phelan, James, *Scandals, Scamps and Scoundrels: The Casebook of an Investigative Reporter* (New York: Random House, 1992)

Plant, Sadie, *The Most Radical Gesture: The Situationist International in a Postmodern Age* (London: Routledge, 1992)

Popper, Karl, "Prediction and Prophecy in the Social Sciences," in Popper, pp.336-46, (first publ. in *Library of the 10th International Congress of Philosophy*, 1, Amsterdam, 1948)

———, "Towards a Rational Theory of Tradition," in Popper, pp.120-35 (first publ. in *The Rationalist Annual*, 1 (1949))

———, *Conjectures and Refutations* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963)

Porter, Dennis, *The Pursuit of Crime: Art and Ideology in Detective Fiction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981)

Porush, David, *The Soft Machine: Cybernetic Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1985)

Posner, Gerald, "It Was Him All Along," *Mail on Sunday*, 17 October 1993, p.13

"Postmodernity and Paranoia," Editorial, *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 49 (1990), 480-88

Pounds, Wayne, "The Postmodern Anus: Parody and Utopia in Two Recent Novels by William Burroughs," *Poetics Today*, 8 (1987), 611-29

Pruitt, Dean G., "Conspiracy Theory in Conflict Escalation," in Graumann and Moscovici, eds, pp.191-202

Pynchon, Thomas, *V.* (1963; London: Picador, 1975)

———, "A Journey into the Mind of Watts," *New York Times Magazine*, 12 June 1966, p.34+

———, *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966; London: Picador, 1979)

———, *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973; London: Picador, 1975)

———, *Slow Learner* (London: Picador, 1984)

———, *Vineland* (1990; London: Minerva, 1991)

Quantum Leap, BBC2, 22 November 1993

Radicalesbians, "The Woman-Identified Woman," in Koedt et al., eds, pp.240-45.

Rafferty, Terence, "Long Lost," *New Yorker*, 19 February 1990, pp.108-112

Raskin, Marcus, "*JFK* and the Culture of Violence," *American Historical Review*, 97 (1992), 487-499

Redstockings, "Manifesto," in Morgan, ed., pp.533-36

Redstockings, eds, *Feminist Revolution* (1975; New York: Random House, 1979)

Reising, Russell, *The Unusable Past: Theory and the Study of American Literature* (London: Methuen, 1986)

Rich, Adrienne, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," in *Blood, Bread and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979-1985* (1986; London: Virago, 1987), pp.23-75

Ricoeur, Paul, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. Robert Czerny (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978)

Rifkind, Donna, "The Farsighted Virtuoso," *Wall Street Journal*, 2 January 1990, p.A9

Rimmon-Kenan, Shlomith, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (London: Routledge, 1989)

Rodley, Chris, ed., *Cronenberg on Cronenberg* (London, Faber and Faber, 1992)

Rogin, Michael, "Kiss Me Deadly: Communism, Motherhood, and Cold War Movies," *Representations*, 6 (1984), 1-36

———, *Ronald Reagan, The Movie; and Other Episodes in Political Demonology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988)

———, "Body and Soul Murder: *JFK*," in Garber et al., eds, pp.3-22

———, "*JFK*: The Movie," *American Historical Review*, 97 (1992), 500-05

Roiphe, Katie, *The Morning After: Sex, Fear, and Feminism* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1993)

Rose, Jacqueline, "Femininity and its Discontents," in *Sexuality and the Field of Vision* (London: Verso, 1986), pp.83-104

Rosenberg, Bernard, and David H. White, eds, *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America* (New York: The Free Press, 1964)

Rosenstone, Robert A., "*JFK*: Historical Fact, Historical Film," *American Historical Review*, 97 (1992), 506-511

Ross, Andrew, *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 1989)

———, *Strange Weather: Culture, Science and Technology in the Age of Limits* (London: Verso, 1991)

———, *The Chicago Gangster Theory of Life: Nature's Debt to Society* (London: Verso, 1994)

Roszak, Theodore, *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970)

———, *Flicker* (London: Bantam, 1992)

Rothstein, David A., "Presidential Assassination Syndrome: A Psychiatric Study of the Threat, the Deed, and the Message," in Crotty, ed., pp.161-221

Rowbotham, Sheila, *Women in Movement: Feminism and Social Action* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992)

Ruby, dir. John MacKenzie (1993)

Rucker, Rudy , R.U. Sirius, and Queen Mu, eds, *Mondo 2000: A User's Guide to the New Edge* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1992)

Rushdie, Salman, "Still Crazy After All These Years," *New York Times Book Review*, 14 January 1990, pp.1, 36-37

Rushkoff, Douglas, *Cyberia: Life in the Trenches of Hyperspace* (London: Flamingo/HarperCollins, 1994)

Russell, Bertrand, "16 Questions on the Assassination," *The Minority of One*, 6 September 1964, pp.6-8

Sage, Lorna, *Women in the House of Fiction: Post-War Women Novelists* (Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1992)

Sanders, Scott, "Pynchon's Paranoid History," *Twentieth-Century Literature*, 21 (1975), 177-92

Sarachild, Kathie, "Consciousness-Raising: A Radical Weapon," in Redstockings, eds, pp.145-50

Savran, David, *Communists, Cowboys, and Queers: The Politics of Masculinity in the Work of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992)

Sayres, Sohnya et al., eds, *The 60s Without Apology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984)

Schlesinger, Arthur, "*JFK* and Vietnam," *TLS*, no.4639 (1992), p.19

Schor, Naomi, "Female Paranoia: The Case for Psychoanalytic Feminist Criticism," *Yale French Studies*, 62 (1981), 204-219

Scott, Joan W., "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," in Weed, ed., pp.81-100

———, "'Experience,'" in Butler and Scott, eds, pp.22-40

Scott, Peter Dale, *Deep Politics and the Death of JFK* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993)

Sebestyen, Amanda, *'68, '78, '88: From Women's Liberation to Feminism* (Bridport: Prism, 1988)

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990)

———, "Epidemics of the Will," in Crary and Kwinter, eds, pp.582-595

Segal, Lynne, *Is the Future Female?: Troubled Thoughts on Contemporary Feminism* (London: Virago, 1987)

———, and Mary McIntosh, eds, *Sex Exposed: Sexuality and the Pornography Debate* (London: Virago, 1992)

Sharrett, Christopher, "Debunking the Official History: The Conspiracy Theory in *JFK*," *Cinéaste*, 19 (1992), 11-14

Shea, Robert, and Robert Anton Wilson, *The Illuminatus! Trilogy* (1975; New York: Dell, 1988)

Shilts, Randy, *And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic* (1987; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988)

Shulman, Alix Kates, "Sex and Power: Sexual Bases of Radical Feminism," *Signs*, 5 (1980), 590-604

Shumway, David, "Jameson/Hermeneutics/Postmodernism," in Kellner, ed., pp.172-202

Siegel, Mark, *Pynchon: Creative Paranoia in "Gravity's Rainbow"* (Port Washington: Kennikat Press, 1978)

Silverstein, Arthur M., *A History of Immunology* (London: Academic Press, 1989)

Simon, Art, "The Making of Alert Viewers: The Mixing of Fact and Fiction in *JFK*," *Cinéaste* 19 (1992), 14-15

Simpson, Amelia S., *Detective Fiction from Latin America* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1990)

Singer, Linda, *Erotic Welfare: Sexual Theory and Politics in the Age of Epidemic* (London: Routledge, 1993)

Skerl, Jenni, *William S. Burroughs* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1985)

———, and Robin Lydenberg, eds, *William S. Burroughs at the Front: Critical Reception 1959-1989* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991)

Smith, Matthew, *JFK: The Second Plot* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1992)

Smith, Paul, *Discerning the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988)

Smith, Wilson, ed., *Mechanisms of Virus Infection* (London: Academic Press, 1963)

Smyth, Edmund J., ed., *Postmodernism and Contemporary Fiction* (London: Batsford, 1991)

Solanas, Valerie, *Scum Manifesto* (1968; London: Phoenix Press, 1991)

Sontag, Susan, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Octagon Books, 1982)

———, *Illness as Metaphor* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989)

Steiner, Wendy, "Pynchon's Progress: Dopeheads Revisited," *Independent*, 3 February 1990, p. 30

Stephanson, Anders, "Regarding Postmodernism—A Conversation with Fredric Jameson," in Kellner, ed., pp.43-74

Stevens, Jay, *Storming Heaven: LSD and the American Dream* (1988; London: Flamingo, 1993)

Stone, I.F., "We All Had a Finger on That Trigger," *I.F. Stone's Weekly*, 9 December 1963, pp.1-2

———, "The Left and the Warren Commission Report," *I.F. Stone's Weekly*, 5 October 1964, pp.1-2

Stone, Oliver, "Warren Panel Findings Should Stir Outrage," *New York Times*, 3 February 1992, p.A14

———, *The Nation*, 18 May 1992, p.650

Summers, Anthony, *The Kennedy Conspiracy* (1980; revised edn., London: Warner, 1992)

———, "Who Killed JFK? The Unstoned Version," *Independent*, 18 January 92, p.27

Swanson, David, Philip Bohnert and Jackson Smith, *The Paranoid* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1970)

Sykes, Charles, *Profscam: Professors and the Demise of Higher Education* (New York: St. Martin's, 1988)

Tallack, Douglas, *Twentieth-Century America: The Intellectual and Cultural Context* (London: Longman, 1991)

Tani, Stefano, *The Doomed Detective: The Contribution of the Detective Novel to Postmodern American and Italian Fiction* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984)

Tanner, Tony, *City of Words: American Fiction 1950-1970* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1971)

———, *Thomas Pynchon* (London: Methuen, 1982)

———, *Scenes of Nature, Signs of Men* (CUP, 1987)

Taubin, Amy, "The Wrong Body," *Sight and Sound*, 2.1 (1992), 8-10

"The Death of a President," *Economist*, 9 October 1993, p.32

"The Earlier Assassins," *Time*, 29 November 1963, p.16

The Manchurian Candidate, dir. John Frankenheimer (1962)

"The Mysterious Career of Lee H. Oswald," Timewatch documentary, BBC 2, 20 November 1993

The Parallax View, dir. Alan J. Pakula (1974)

"The Warren Commission Report," *Time*, 2 October 1964, pp.19-23D

"The Zapruder Footage," Late Show special, BBC2, 22 November 1993

Thomas, D.M., *Flying in to Love* (1992; London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1993)

Thoreen, David, "The Economy of Consumption: The Entropy of Leisure in Pynchon's *Vineland*," *Pynchon Notes*, 30-31 (1992), 53-62

Thornley, Kerry, *Oswald* (Chicago: New Classics House, 1965)

Treichler, Paula, "AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse: An Epidemic of Signification," in Crimp, ed., pp.32-70

———, "AIDS, Gender, and Biomedical Discourse," in Fee and Fox, eds, pp.200-202

Trujillo, Nick, "Interpreting November 22: A Critical Ethnography of an Assassination Site," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 79 (1993), 447-66

U.S. Dept of Justice, "1968 Panel Review of Photographs, X-Ray Films, Documents and Other Evidence Pertaining to the Fatal Wounding of President John F. Kennedy on November 22, 1963 in Dallas, Texas," rpt. in Weisberg

U.S. House of Representatives, *Report of the Select Committee on Assassinations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1979)

U.S. President's Commission on CIA Activities Within the United States (Rockefeller Commission), *Report to the President* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1975)

U.S. Senate, Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with respect to Intelligence Operations (Church Committee), *Alleged Assassination Plots Involving Foreign Leaders*, Interim Report (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1975)

———, *The Investigation of the Assassination of President John F. Kennedy: Performance of the Intelligence Agencies*, Book 5, Final Report (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1976)

Vankin, Jonathan, *Conspiracies, Cover-Ups, and Crimes: Political Manipulation and Mind Control in America* (New York: Paragon House, 1991)

Wainwright, Loudon, "The Book for All to Read," *Life*, 16 October 1964, p.35

"Wake up America! It Can Happen Here! A Post-McCarthy Guide to Twenty-three Conspiracies by Assorted Enemies Within," *Esquire*, May 1966, pp.92-93, 162-165

Walker, Christopher, "Thomas Pynchon's *Vineland*," *London Review of Books*, 8

March 1990, pp.4-5

Ward, Geoff, "William Burroughs: Literary Outlaw," *Cambridge Quarterly*, 22 (1993), 339-54

Warner, Michael, ed., *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993)

Warren Commission, *Report of the President's Commission on the Assassination of President John F. Kennedy* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1964)

Watney, Simon, *Policing Desire: Pornography, Aids and The Media* (London: Methuen/Comedia, 1987)

———, *Practices of Freedom: Selected Writings on HIV/AIDS* (London: Rivers Oram, 1994)

Watts, Cedric, *The Deceptive Text: An Introduction to Covert Plots* (Brighton: Harvester, 1984)

Waugh, Patricia, *Feminine Fictions: Revisiting the Postmodern* (London: Routledge, 1989)

———, ed., *Postmodernism: A Reader* (London: Edward Arnold, 1992)

———, "Modernism, Postmodernism, Feminism: Gender and Autonomy Theory," in Waugh, ed., pp.189-204

Weed, Elizabeth, ed., *Coming to Terms: Feminism, Theory, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1989)

———, "Introduction: Terms of Reference," in Weed, ed., pp.ix-xxxi

Weeks, Jeffrey, *Sexuality and its Discontents: Meanings, Myths, and Modern Sexualities* (1985; London: Routledge, 1993)

Weisberg, Harold, *Post Mortem: JFK Cover-Up Smashed* (Frederick, MD: H. Weisberg, 1975)

Weisenburger, Steven, *A "Gravity's Rainbow" Companion* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1988)

Whalen, Jack, and Richard Flacks, *Beyond the Barricades: The Sixties Generation Grows Up* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989)

White, Edmund, "This Is Not a Mammal: A Visit with William Burroughs" in *The Burning Library: Writings on Art, Politics and Sexuality, 1969-1993* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1994), pp.107-114.

White, Hayden, *The Content of the Form* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987)

Wicke, Jennifer, "Celebrity Material: Materialist Feminism and the Culture of Celebrity," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 93 (1994), 751-78

Wilgus, Neal, *The Illuminoids: Secret Societies and Political Paranoia* (Albuquerque: Sun, 1980)

Williams, Jeffrey, ed., *PC Wars: Politics and Theory in the Academy* (London: Routledge, 1995)

Williamson, Judith, "Every Virus Tells a Story: The Meanings of HIV and AIDS," in Carter and Watney, eds, pp.69-80

Willis, Ellen, "Radical Feminism and Feminist Radicalism," in Sayres et al., eds, pp.91-118

———, Foreword, in Echols, pp.v-xiv

Wilson, Elizabeth, *Hidden Agendas: Theory, Politics, and Experience in the Women's Movement* (London: Tavistock, 1986)

Wilson, Robert Anton, *The Illuminati Papers* (Berkeley: Ronin Publishing, 1990)

———, *Right Where You Are Sitting Now: Further Tales of the Illuminati* (Berkeley: Ronin Publishing, 1992)

Winter Kills, dir. William Richert (1979)

WITCH, various documents, in Morgan, ed., pp.538-56

Wolf, Naomi, *The Beauty Myth How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women* (1990; London: Vintage, 1991)

———, *Fire with Fire: The New Female Power and How It Will Change the 21st Century* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993)

Wood, Michael, "There's Daddy," *London Review of Books*, 13 February 1992, pp.6-8

Wulff, Erich, "Paranoiac Conspiracy Delusion," in Graumann and Moscovici, eds, pp.171-189

Wylie, Philip, *Generation of Vipers* (1942; London: Frederick Muller, 1955)

Zamansky, Harold S., "An Investigation of the Psychoanalytic Theory of Paranoid Delusions," in *The Experimental Study of Freudian Theories,* Hans J. Eysenck and Glenn D. Wilson, eds (London: Methuen, 1973), pp.297-316