The Spectacle of the False Flag

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5 | The Spectacle of Conspiracy

‘Everything is supposed to be something. But it never is. That’s the nature of existence.’ —Don DeLillo

Modernity can perhaps be usefully understood as the perfect inversion of the Roman Empire—in the place of the spectacle of brutality, we collectively witness/endure the brutality of the spectacle. For parapolitical scholars such as Scott, the traumatizing infliction of the cognitive dissonance that is the grotesque body of the deep event becomes virtually identical with the social consciousness of the Society of the Spectacle: ‘the spectacle’s domination has succeeded in raising a whole generation molded to its laws.’ This inconvenient truth of (post) modern History accounts for not only the scarring traces of the lurking presence of the clandestine but also the emergence of the discourse of ‘conspiracy theory’ as the dominant epistemo-political apparatus of the era of spectacular power; for Debord, the psychic result of the integrated spectacle is that ‘we live and die at the confluence of innumerable mysteries.’ Any radical criminology that takes seriously the notion of criminal sovereignty must

1 See Wilson, ‘Crimes Against Reality’.
2 Debord, Comments, 7.
3 Ibid, 55.
therefore also need to come to terms with what I might call the ‘political economy of cognitive dissonance’, which rests upon two central modes of spectacular production. The first is ‘the conceit of the illusion of transparency’: the (seemingly) unlimited free-flow of (apparently) uncensored information—currently the main trading commodity of the consumer (-ist) media industry/service provider—is itself the camouflage of the networks of parapolitical governance. Herein, the importance for the clandestine of the virtually unlimited corporate penetration of all domains of the garbage dump of ‘social media ‘simply cannot be overestimated. The second is the exceptionally risk-adverse nature of contemporary forms of governance, both public and private, that Debord denotes as the ‘fragile perfection’ of the Society of the Spectacle.

Once it attains the stage of the integrated spectacle, self-proclaimed democratic society seems to be generally accepted as the realization of a fragile perfection. So that it must no longer be exposed to attacks, being fragile; and indeed is no longer open to attack, being perfect as no other society before it. It is a fragile society because it has great difficulty managing its dangerous technological expansion. But it is a perfect society for governing...Wherever the spectacle has its dominion the only organized forces are those which want the spectacle. Thus no one can be the enemy of what exists, nor transgress the omerta which applies to everything.5

4 Cognitive dissonance may be defined as ‘a psychological phenomenon occurring when new ideas or information conflict with previously formed ideologies, accepted beliefs, and corresponding behaviours.’ Manwell, 854.

5 Debord, Comments, 21.
A conspiracy of a silence of a very unique kind, one which is served not by censorship but by an unregulated (free market?) proliferation of speech that renders critical theory impotent ‘not because it is in hiding but because it is hidden' by the ponderous stage-management of diversionary thought.' The integrated spectacle is the ideal medium for a strikingly Debordean notion of disinformation which is tantamount to ‘ordinary’ speech acts within the spectacular domain; ‘disinformation now spreads in a world where there is no room for verification.’ In reality, Debord’s disinformation is no different from gossip, the free dissemination of unverified informal knowledge. In a Cultural Studies' work infused with quasi-Debordean insights, Knowledge Goes Pop: From Conspiracy Theory to Gossip (2006), Clare Birchall outlines the historical coupling of gossip as semi-legitimate social praxis with the saturation of popular consciousness with mass media (digital or otherwise).

For rather than gossip interrupting the knowledge economy—and that economy’s associated neo-liberal open market and erosion of the value of knowledge beyond a notion of ‘utility’—gossip could also be thought to facilitate and be facilitated by the rise of information networks and the knowledge economy…We seem more and more comfortable…with the idea that knowledge cannot be traced back to an ultimate source (as is often the case with gossip). We seem more and more willing to allow information to accrue simply through circulation. If we read or hear something enough in enough contexts, it will as-

7 Ibid, 48.
8 A difficult to define discipline, but one which might usefully be thought of as the University-based vanguard of the totalizing commodification of popular culture—Situationism ossified as academic ‘discourse’.
sume the status of knowledge in spite of an absence of authority or method of verification. A great deal of knowledge today seems to have taken on something of the status of gossip. It is neither true nor false, knowledge or non-knowledge, but somewhere [sic] in between.\(^9\)

It is obvious that what is commonly known as conspiracy theory is, in many critical respects, both structurally and functionally identical with gossip—the exteriority that guarantees the boundaries of ‘legitimate’ or ‘orthodox’ forms of political reason and speech.\(^10\) Within both of the classic (and negative) works on the discourse of conspiracy—that of Karl Popper\(^11\) and Richard Hofstadter\(^12\)—conspiracy theory is deployed as a form of al-

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9 Birchall, 126. For cyber-technology and the high speed circulation of ‘false’ derivatives commodities as the cause of the GFC see Wilson, ‘Criminogenic Cyber-Capitalism’ generally. Compare Birchall with Jodi Dean on digital information: a ‘world where more information is available, and hence, a world where we face daily the fact that our truths, diagnoses, and understandings are incomplete—click on one more link, check out one more newscast, get just one more expert opinion…[We] should expect large-scale feelings of anxiety, suspicion and conspiracy theorizing.’ Cited in Husting and Orr, 142. At issue here, of course, is not the nature of the true but the social value of Truth; knowledge as commodity equals (self-) validation.

10 ‘The category conspiracy theory polices the borders of legitimate versus risible statements, and intellectually competent actors versus paranoiacs.’ Husting and Orr, 141.

11 The purpose of conspiracy theory is ‘exactly the opposite of the true aim of the social sciences…It comes from abandoning God and then asking: “Who is in his [sic] place?” His place is then filled by various powerful men and groups—sinister pressure groups, who are to be blamed for having planned the great depression and all the evils from which we suffer.’ Popper, 14. For an effective rebuttal of Popper’s summary dismissal, see Pigden generally.

12 ‘Although American life has rarely been touched by the most acute varieties of class conflict, it has served again and again as an arena for uncommonly angry minds…I call it the paranoid style simply because no other word adequately evokes the qualities of heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy that I have in mind.’
terity that ensures the validity of the accepted thing through the perpetual verification of difference(s) with the refused thing.\textsuperscript{13} What is less obvious, however, is the degree to which disinformation has evolved into a form of ‘cultural material’ of an entertainment industry that constitutes its own form of spectacular governance. Although hardly a Situationist, the work of neo-Marxist literary theorist Frederic Jameson is of great usefulness on this point. Whether in literary or cinematic form the ‘conspiracy text’, for Jameson, is a key sign of the cultural hegemony of the geo-political unconscious, that which ‘now attempts to re-fashion national allegory into a conceptual instrument for grasping our new being in the world.’\textsuperscript{14} Every text constitutes a political fantasy of some kind, recapitulating the social totality of the ‘political unconscious’, that which sets the parameters of the collective imaginary.\textsuperscript{15} This has never been more so the case than in our contemporary post-modern era,\textsuperscript{16} with the unbounded hyper-commodification of all cultural forms acting as the aesthetic complement to globalization and the institutionalization of a world-wide corpo-

Hofstadter, 3.

13 See Birchall Chapter Two and Three generally. See also Husting and Orr on the rhetorical deployment of the term ‘conspiracy theorist’ as a category of deviant personhood; ‘Much discourse about conspiracy has become almost inseparable from Hofstadter’s creation of the paranoid mind. His “conspiracy theorist” has become a condensed symbol saturated with constellations of taken-for-granted meanings.’ Husting and Orr 133 and 140.

14 Jameson, 3.

15 ‘For Jameson, every text is at its most fundamental level a political fantasy which in contradictory fashion articulates both the actual and potential social relations which constitute individuals within a specific political economy.’ MacCabe, xi.

16 ‘Post-modernism is not fundamentally a question of subject-matter or themes but of the full entry of art into the world of commodity production.’ Ibid, xii.
rate network.\textsuperscript{17} The master political fantasy of our glo­
balized contemporaneity is paranoia on the international
plane and conspiracy theory at the national level: the ex­
pansion of political space into infinity (globalization)
permits the emergence of the parapolitical ‘nameless’
(the unseen, that which is beyond perception). As Jame­
son shows, the necessary cultural precondition to the
discourse of conspiracy theory is communication, expe­
trienced (or endured) in social terms as connectivity. Is
there any faction or sub-state entity of any kind in the
world that exists in a state of incommunicability with
any other? Anyone in the world, including the private
citizen, can ‘conspire’ with Joseph Kony and The Lord’s
Resistance Army—all that one needs is access to the In­
ternet. Not surprisingly, the conspiratorial text ‘whatever
other messages it emits or implies, may also be taken to
constitute an unconscious, collective effort at trying to
figure out where we are and what landscapes and forces
confront us in a late twentieth century whose abomina­
tions are heightened by their concealment and their bu­
reaucratic impersonality.’\textsuperscript{18} As a cultural artefact of post­
modernism, then, Jameson’s conspiracy theory bears two
signature characteristics. Firstly, it displays a remarkable
affiliation with Birchall’s association of conspiracy-theo­
ry-as-gossip with Cultural Studies. Secondly, and more
importantly, it represents an attempt ‘to think a system
so vast that it cannot be encompassed by the natural and
historically developed categories of perception [local; na­
tionalist] with which human beings normally orient
themselves’—in other words, the \textit{sublime}.\textsuperscript{19}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{17} Jameson, 4.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid, 3.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid, 2.
\end{flushleft}
‘Twice as big as you can imagine…’: 9/11

‘We’re beyond politics now.’ —Richard Nixon (Anthony Hopkins) in NIXON

Debord’s reading of the conspiracy transgresses onto dangerous ground for it is precisely within this space of the order of magnitude of both the spectacle and the parapolitical—or, in simpler terms, the ‘size’ of the conspiracy—that the grotesque is revealed as the dark twin of its (falsely) assumed opposite: the sublime. The architect of the onto-epistemological foundations of what is laughingly known as ‘The Enlightenment’, Immanuel Kant, ‘doubles’ as Modernity’s premier aesthetician. This should come as no surprise, as Kant’s entire metaphysical system ultimately serves an end both aesthetic and epistemological: to organize the World in such a way as to make it the grounds for objective understanding and absolute knowledge; in other words, to thoroughly serve ‘the purposive’—in Heideggerian terms, the reduction of both Self and Object to ‘correctness’.

For Kant, the perception of the world (‘the transcendental deduction’) requires a synthesis of what appears before us within both time and space. The synthetic project of ‘pure Reason’ requires three operational concepts, or ‘unities of synthesis’: apprehension, reproduction, and recognition. Within the Kantian scheme, all knowledge and understanding is ultimately anthropocentric, in that all things must be reduced to ‘units of measure’ that are compatible with Human understanding.

20 The sub-heading is taken from Frank Miller’s seminal graphic novel The Dark Knight Returns (1985), the first volume of which features the airborne attempt by psychotic gangster Harvey ‘Two-Face’ Dent to blow up Gotham City’s Twin Towers—just one of many striking anticipations within the popular culture of the 1980s and 1990s of September 11 2001.
(cogito); ‘A tree [the height of] which we estimate with reference to the height of a man, at all events gives us a standard for a mountain…’21 The categories of pure Reason guaranteeing both the unity of phenomena as well as the ontological unity of the perceiving subject constitutes the ‘transcendental unity of apperception’22; ‘In other words, it is not so much that I perceive objects; it is rather my perception that presupposes the [unitary] object-form as one of its conditions.’23 For Kant, ‘the real (synthetic) formula of the cogito is: I think myself, and in thinking myself, I think the object in general to which I relate a represented diversity.’24 Therefore, the operations of the a priori categories of synthetic understanding need to be supplemented by the work of an additional faculty, Judgment, which is responsible for subordinating all of the inherent ‘sensible diversity’ of spatio-temporal objects to the operational requirements of the synthetic categories of transcendental Reason; ‘The only use which the understanding can make of these [concepts] is to judge by means of them.’25 From this follow two consequences, one phenomenological the other aesthetic. In terms of the former, the human body itself is the final source not only of the units of measurement but of the operational constraints of the synthetic categories of Pure Reason.

This primary (subjective, sensory, immediate, living) measure proceeds from the [human] body. And it takes the body as its primary object…It is the body which erects itself as a measure. It

21 Kant, 118.  
22 Smith, xvii.  
23 Ibid, xvi.  
24 Deleuze, Kant’s Critical Philosophy, cited in Smith, xvi.  
25 Kant, cited in Smith, xvi.
provides the measuring and measured unit of measure: of the smallest and largest possible, of the minimum and the maximum, and likewise of the passage from the one to the other.  

In terms of the latter, the ‘lived evaluation’ of space-time imparts a necessarily aesthetic dimension to judgment, as the operation of perception is inseparable from the appreciation and evaluation of form, which is the domain of the ‘aesthetic’ properly defined; ‘All estimation of the magnitude of objects of nature is in the last resort aesthetic (i.e., subjectively and not objectively determined).’  

And it is the intrinsically aesthetic nature of judgment that gives rise to one of Kant’s seminal concepts: the sublime. Although an aesthetic concept, the sublime is not identical with the beautiful; it is, in fact, antithetical to it. Whereas the beautiful dwells within the realm of intuition—that is, the natural accordance of the spatio-temporal object with the synthetic categories of cognition—the sublime is better understood as a form of sensory trauma, the catastrophic, or chaotic, sundering of the immediacy of perception from the transcendental unity of apperception.

The Sublime, on the other hand, is to be found in a formless object, so far as in it or by occasion of it boundlessness is represented, and yet its totality is also present to thought…that which excites in us, without any reasoning about it, but in the apprehension of it, the feeling of the sublime, may appear as regards its form to violate purpose in respect of the Judgment, to be unsuited to our

26 Derrida, 140.
27 Kant, cited in Smith, xviii.
28 ‘Natural beauty…brings with it a purposiveness in its form by which the object seems to be, as it were, pre-adapted to our Judgment, and thus constitutes in itself an object of satisfaction.’ Kant, 102-3.
presentative faculty, and, as it were, to do viol­
ence to the Imagination; and yet it is judged to be
only the more sublime. \textsuperscript{29}

Two aspects of Kant’s notion of the sublime and their
relevance to the grotesque are particularly important.
Firstly, as we would expect, the Kantian sublime is re­
markably, almost viscerally, phenomenological in na­
ture: ‘Nature is therefore sublime in those of its
phenomena whose intuition brings with it the Idea of its
infinity.’ \textsuperscript{30} Essential to the concept of the sublime is not
merely the heightening of the \textit{cogito}’s self-awareness of
the grounding of perception upon the Body, but the ab­
ject ‘insult’ inflicted upon the anthropocentric unit of
measurement: ‘We call that \textit{sublime} which is \textit{absolutely
great…what is great beyond all comparison…the sub­
lime is that in comparison with which everything else is
small}.’ \textsuperscript{31} Secondly, the subjective experience of the sub­
lime is not the objective perception of the immediately
unassimilable sensible diversity of the sublime object
but rather the traumatic inducement of a crisis of confi­
dence in the witness’ existential faith in the efficac­
y of judgment.

\textit{[T]rue sublimity must be sought only in the mind
of the [subject] judging, not in the natural Object,
the judgment upon which occasions this state…
Consequentially it is the state of mind produced
by a certain representation with which the reflect­
ive Judgment is occupied, and not the Object, that
is to be called sublime…\textit{the sublime is that, the
mere ability to think, which shows a faculty of the

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid, 102-3.
\textsuperscript{30} Kant, 116.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid, 106 and 109.
mind surpassing every standard of Sense.\textsuperscript{32}

Where Kantian aesthetics and parapolitical analysis part ways is at the aesthetic dis-juncture that renders the sublime and the grotesque irreconcilable: Kant ultimately preserves the \textit{cogito} by investing the unities of synthesis with the potency to ultimately reduce all phenomena to the requirements of Reason, while parapolitics, following the logic of the grotesque, ultimately seeks to shatter faith in the rationality of the political. But what phenomenologically unifies the two poles is the irreducible element of visceral trauma. Scott’s reflections upon 9/11 clearly demonstrate this: the chaotic irruption of a clandestine reality through that catastrophic event resulted in the

\begin{quote}
[C]reation of a partly illusory mental space, in which unpleasant facts, such as that all western empires have been established through major atrocities, are conveniently suppressed. (I suspect in fact that most readers will be tempted to reject and forget [parapolitical events]... as something which simply ‘doesn’t compute’ with their observations of America.) I say this as one who believes passionately in civilization, and fears that by excessive denial our own civilization may indeed be becoming threatened.\textsuperscript{33}
\end{quote}

The great practical joke that Debord plays on the ‘progressive’ politics of the Enlightenment (about whose long-term prospects he came to increasingly despair during the last years of his life) lies with the incontrovertible proof he provided that the future of Democracy

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid, 117 and 110.

\textsuperscript{33} Scott, \textit{Deep Politics and the CIA Global Drug Connection}, 2-3. I will discuss the parapolitical trauma of 9/11 in more detail below, this chapter.
belongs to the Right. Since at least the time of Karl Marx it has been the supreme conceit of the Left that it is the true vanguard of History precisely because only it was able to correctly decipher the objective laws of History; it was always able to act more quickly than the Right because it was able to predict more accurately—or, to see the Future sooner. Understood in terms of imagery and perception, it becomes clear that the political equation between Left and Right is reducible to more foundational issues of perception, speed, velocity, and acceleration: who sees first strikes first and, just as in War, ‘wins’. Speed itself, therefore, facilitates change of a wholly ‘virtual’ form of reality that effectively supersedes the notions of legality and political accountability. The crucial point—a supremely Debordean one—is that it is not the Right but the Left that has become reactive; ‘the establishment of spectacular domination is such a profound social transformation that it has radic-

34 Just as it was, ironically, the ultimate fate of Situationism to become just one more commodity for ‘chic’ or ‘hip’ consumerism, as pseudo-Situationist slogans of (narcissistic) rebellion—“take your dreams for reality”—became a central feature of corporate advertising in the mid-1980s. ‘In a telling inversion the Situationists…became the role model of the hedonistic, conspicuous consumer of contemporary city life, perfectly in tune with a culture that feeds on contradiction and contrast, that advertises through anti-adverts and that promotes art through anti-art…What now could be the point of an avant-garde when, within the capitalist economy, transgression and shock were recognized as necessary stimulants towards increased consumption?’ Ford, 157-8. Wark dates the beginning of the appropriation of radical philosophy by consumerism with the appearance of the ‘paperback’ industry—the mass production and consumption of universally circulated texts—in the 1950s. Wark, 77. Absolutely nothing, not even ‘poetry in the street’, can ultimately evade capture by Capitalism, which is both fast-moving and wholly predatory; after all, it was Walt Disney himself who said “If you dream it, you can do it.”

35 As McKenzie Wark expresses it, ‘Hegel’s owl of Minerva no longer flies at dusk, because the shotgun of Dick Cheney fired at first light.’ Wark, 153.
ally altered the art of government. This simplification, which has quickly borne such fruit in practice, has yet to be fully comprehended in theory.\textsuperscript{36} The wider parapolitical implications of speed as the ‘rate’ of political perception are made clearly manifest by the comments of an anonymous White House aide to the journalist Ron Suskind. Discussing the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, the aide said that ‘guys like him’ were ‘in what we call the reality-based community’, which he defined as people who ‘believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality.’

We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you’re studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—we’ll act again, inventing other new realities, which you can study too, and that’s how things will sort out. We’re history’s actors…and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.\textsuperscript{37}

Which complements Debord perfectly.

\textsuperscript{36} Debord, \textit{Comments}, 87. Compare this with Debord’s much earlier clarion call to the orthodox Left made in 1957: ‘In a given society, what is termed culture is the reflection, but also the foreshadowing, of possibilities for life’s planning. Our era is at heart characterized by the great distance at which revolutionary political action lags behind the development of the modern potentialities of production, which demands a superior organization of the world…Capitalism is devising new forms of struggle… [that has] been able to preserve familiar social relations in the great majority of highly industrialized countries, thus depriving a socialist society of its essential material foundation.’ No doubt Debord had Jackie Gleason and ‘The Honeymooners’ in mind when he wrote that ‘One of the reasons for the American working class’s incapacity to become politicized should likely be sought amidst this abundance of televised baseness.’ Debord, ‘Report on the Construction of Situations’, 29 and 46.

\textsuperscript{37} Ron Suskind, ‘Without a Doubt’, \textit{New York Times}, 17 October, 2004, cited in Klein. This brings to mind the words of Celine: ‘For the time being only the facts count and even this for not much longer.’ Cited in Virilio, \textit{Desert Screen}, 49.
Not only are the subjected led to believe that to all intents and purposes they are still living in a world which in fact has been eliminated, but the rulers themselves sometimes suffer from the absurd belief that in some respects they do too. They come to believe in a part of what they have suppressed, as if it remained a reality and had still to be included in their calculations. Their backwardness will not last long. Those who have achieved so much so easily must necessarily go further. It should not be thought that those who have been too slow to appreciate the pliability of the new rules of their game and its form of barbaric grandeur, will last forever like some archaism in proximity to real power. It is certainly not the spectacle’s destiny to end up as enlightened despotism.  

The Debordean notion of political victory as the fruit of the shaping of perception is central to the work of contemporary critical theorist Paul Virilio, much of whose oeuvre may be not misleadingly understood as an open-ended gloss on The Society of the Spectacle; ‘To progress would be to accelerate…After the century of the Enlightenment, there would be the century of the speed of light and soon, our own century—the century of the light of speed.’ Virilio closely follows Debord in equating spectacular power with the death of a genuinely progressive discourse; he approvingly quotes Saint Augustine who, when commenting upon the public seduction of theatrical spectacles, caustically remarked that as ‘One sees oneself in those who seem transported by such objects, one soon becomes a secret actor in the tragedy.’ And for Virilio there can be no greater

38 Debord, Comments, 87-8.
39 Virilio, Ground Zero, 15. Emphases in the original.
40 Ibid, 40.
tragedy today than the emergence of the ‘ideal type’ of a new breed of the criminal sovereign, what we might term the ‘parapolitician’: the ‘media tycoon’, enshrined in cinematic culture as Citizen Kane and embodied in real-time as Silvio Berlusconi, the once (and perhaps yet again) Prime Minister of Italy.  

Berlusconi’s ‘capture’ of the Italian State was an act of inherently spectacular power.  

It is not the least of the ironies of Berlusconi’s criminal sovereignty that he hid ‘in plain sight’. As in a mafiosi’s selective reading of Poe’s ‘The Purloined Letter’, Berlusconi ‘escaped’ into the public domain precisely in order to avoid the detection (=prosecution) of his (private) criminal/covert identity. Yet, this self-same act of parapolitical ‘camouflage’ effected the optical re-configuration of the Italian government into a simulated ‘virtual state’. So uncannily perfect is the fusion of simulation with spectacle in Berlusconi’s Italy that if this parapolitician did not exist, Virilio would have found it necessary to invent him.

41 Ginsborg, 138.  
42 See generally Wilson, ‘Crimes Against Reality’.  
43 In the words of Fedele Confalonieri, president of Berlusconi’s television company Mediaset, ‘If Berlusconi hadn’t entered politics, we would have ended up sleeping under a bridge, on trial for Mafia crimes.’ Stille, 138.  
44 The more one studies Berlusconi the more he assumes the guise of a living parody of the power criminal. Not the least of his spectacular propensities is his frequent use of fake quotations. ‘If you want to convince someone [Berlusconi] told his sales force, make up a quotation and attribute it to some renowned authority. “So use this method: ‘As Bill Paley of CBS says. As Plato said. As Abraham Lincoln said’…Who’s ever going to go and look it up? ...People are incredibly gullible, they love quotations.”’ Stille, 16. The same technique is a central feature of Al Pacino’s hyper-kinetic portrayal of the arch-gangster boss ‘Big Boy’ Caprice in Warren Beatty’s 1990 film Dick Tracy. Unnervingly, Caprice makes frequent bogus references to both Plato and Lincoln.
[T]he election of Silvio Berlusconi as head of the Italian government in 2001 has opened up a trans-political era of a new kind. After his failed try-out of 1994, ‘Il Cavaliero’ has in fact just carried out a coup détat, and Italy has just toppled over into a two-party system of the third kind in which the alternative is no longer between classical Left and Right, but between politics and media...No longer content with occupying the stage of daily life with its great (‘Big Brother’-style) game shows, telereality is now invading the sets of the Res publica. And for the first time in Europe we are looking on, mesmerized, at the unprecedented victory of the champion of telecracy over representative democracy’s man, the triumph of audience ratings over universal suffrage.45

Of critical importance to the radical criminologist is the notion of the parapolitician as the site of a convergence between clandestine agency and the alteration of political perception through cinematic technique.

To grasp the real importance of the ‘analyser’ that speed, especially audio-visual speed, now represents, we must turn again to the philosophical definition: ‘Speed is not a phenomenon but a relationship between phenomena.’ In other words it is the very relativity or transparency of the reality of appearances, but a ‘spatio-temporal transparency’ that here supersedes the spatial transparency of the linear geometry of the optical lenses—hence the term trans-appearance to designate the transmitted electronic appearances, whatever the space interval separating them from the observer. This subject or subjugated observer thus becomes inseparable from the observed object, because of the very immediacy of the interface, of the aptly named ‘terminal’, that perfects the extension and

45 Virilio, Ground Zero, 30.
duration of a world reduced to man-machine com-
mutation, where the ‘spatial depth’ of perspectival
gometry suddenly gives way to the ‘temporal
depth’ of a real-time perspective superseding the
old real-space perspective of the Renaissance.\textsuperscript{46}

In an unintentionally revealing interview with journalist
Alexander Stille, Berlusconi re-presented himself as the
incarnation of the post-Debordean telematic analyser:
Berlusconi’s official position within the public state is
determined by his unofficial domination of virtually all
forms of televiusal communication. This yields a ‘cog-
nitive dissonance’ of parapolitical dimension—as Stille
himself clearly perceives.

I...found Berlusconi to be psychologically one of
the strangest people I had ever met. I had never
before interviewed anyone who told so many ob-
vious untruths with such enthusiastic conviction\textsuperscript{47}
...in grappling with Berlusconi’s curious relation-
ship with factual truth, it began to dawn on me
that what I was encountering was a deep anthro-
pological difference. My obsession with factual
accuracy, documentation, objective truth was all
part of my baggage as a print journalist, the quaint
and naive and old-fashioned credo of the age of
Gutenberg and the Enlightenment, while Ber-
lusconi is a man of a different age, of the age of
television and mass media, in which image and
perception are all that really matter. Berlusconi is
decidedly a creature (and creator) of the post-
modern world where it doesn’t matter what actu-
ally happened, but what people think happened.
‘Don’t you understand,’ he told one of his closest
advisors, ‘that if something is not on television it
doesn’t exist. Not a product, a politician or an

\textsuperscript{46} Virilio, \textit{Polar Inertia}, 56-7.
\textsuperscript{47} Stille, 18.
idea.’ And because the things we were discussing—his conflicts of interest, the crimes of which he and his associates have been accused (and, in some cases convicted)—have not been aired in Italian television, they, too, did not exist.48

Although every politician utilizes television as a political instrument, Berlusconi is the first parapolitician to evidence a belief in television as a social force, in a manner unnervingly reminiscent of Futurism.49 The ‘true’ irony of Berlusconi’s tele-Futurism—a revolutionary form of post-Democratic governance in which politics is effectively reduced to trivia, or ‘e-tainment’50—is the speed in which it transits from the epistemological (simulation) to the ontological (the absence of Being), an irony that is only furthered when we recall that the temporal site of the emergence of the Dual State is the Italian Renaissance. It is not a coincidence that the virtual re-presentation of the State-as-optical-phenomenon was spawned by the same ‘Re-Birth’ that gave us modern politics and linear perspective. As Virilio observes, Renaissance painting (linear perspective; depth) lays the foundation for the Enlightenment ‘anthropic principle, which regards the existence of any observer as inseparable from the existence of rationally observed phenomena’51. The elaborate civic rituals of Il Stato established the iterability of the State as both an agent of perception and as an object of sight: public procession generated the simulacra of the ‘transparent’ State, whose Truth/Be-

48 Ibid, 20.
49 Ginsborg, 33, 92-3, 185-7 and 189-90.
50 Contemporary identity politics’ might best be understood as the North American variety of this—both Fox News and MSNBC as pseudo-journalist ‘infommercials’ targeted at rival groups of consumers.
51 Virilio, Polar Inertia, 51. See Cubitt for ‘Virilio’s claim that Renaissance geometry was the basis for all subject-object relations and therefore of all critical thought and ultimately all human values.’ Cubitt, 86-92.
ing was commensurate with its entry into the collective gaze of *Il Popolo.* Berlusconi as a post-Futurist ‘virtual prince’ provides the parodic gloss upon Renaissance civic ritual: his procession through public space is commensurate with his parapolitical manipulation of judicial and parliamentary immunity. Berlusconi’s public representation is itself the highly self-conscious—if not cynical—parapolitical simulation of lawful authority. The space that separates the Renaissance ritual *Stato* from Berlusconi’s ‘virtual state’ is the difference between the illusory and the delusional; ‘The state’s only original existence is as a visual hallucination akin to dreaming.’ The political crisis of legitimacy of the disappearance of the Italian public state into the (politicised) aesthetics of the ‘virtual state’, occasioned by Berlusconi’s dual capture of both the government and the media, is the real-time occurrence of the epistemic crisis of Renaissance epistemology described by Virilio.

This *indirect light* [of telecommunications] is ulti-

52 Muir 1981 and Trexler 1980. In placid Venice, ‘the ducal procession was the constitution’ (Muir, 190), while in volatile Florence public processions ‘were used after aborted conspiracies and when illegitimate governments were toppled’ Trexler, 337. Compare the accounts of Muir and Trexler with Debord’s critical comments on the documentary film in his own anti-documentary *Critique of Separation,* produced in 1961: ‘Society broadcasts to itself its own image of its own history, a history reduced to a superficial and static pageant of its rulers—the persons who embody the apparent inevitability of whatever happens.’ Debord, *Critique of Separation,* 33.

53 Here, I adopt Peter Sloterdijk’s definition of cynical reasoning as especially appropriate for Berlusconi’s Italy. ‘Cynicism is enlightened false consciousness. It is that modernized, unhappy consciousness, on which enlightenment has labored both successfully and in vain. It has learned its lessons in enlightenment, but it has not, and probably was not able to, put them into practice. Well-off and miserable at the same time, this consciousness no longer feels affected by any critique of ideology; its falseness is already reflectively buffered...It is the stance of people who realize that the times of naïveté are gone.’ Sloterdijk, 5.
mately the result of the fusion of optics and kinematics, a fusion which now embraces the whole range of ocular, graphic, photographic and cinematographic representations, making each of our images a kind of shadow of time—no longer the customary ‘passing time’ of historical linearity but the ‘exposed time’ which...surfaces. This is the time of Niepce’s photographic development, the time of the Lumiere Brother’s cinematographic resolution of movement, but now above all the time of videographic high definition of a ‘real-time’ representation of appearances which cancels the very usefulness of passive (geometric) optics in favour of an active optics capable of causing the decline of the direct transparency of matter. What is inordinately privileged by this process is the indirect (electro-optical) transparency of light or—to be even more precise—of the light of the speed of light...Thus, after the nuclear disintegration of the space of matter which led to the political situation that we know today, the disintegration of the time of light is now upon us. Most likely, it will bring an equally major cultural shift in its wake, so that the depth of time will finally win out over the depth of spatial perspective inherited from the Renaissance.\footnote{Virilio, \textit{Polar Inertia}, 61.} \footnote{Jones, \textit{The Dark Heart of Italy}, 127-8.}

One can scarcely hope for a better Debordean metaphor than ‘the disintegration of the time of light’. Within Berlusconi’s virtual state, political meaning, or ‘truth’, had been suspended by the optical negativity of the telematic. Herein, the ‘Dual’ State—a metaphorical composition of space, crime, and light (deep = dark = crime)—disappears through the sensory bombardment of the high-speed circulation of post-political simulacra.\footnote{Virilio, \textit{Polar Inertia}, 61.} \footnote{Jones, \textit{The Dark Heart of Italy}, 127-8.} As with Stille’s mournful invocation of the obsolete cognitive
tools of the Enlightenment, any lingering normative outrage over the parapolitical substance of the Dual State is unveiled as yet one more archaic metaphysical superstition.

The idea that the real forces behind or underneath the screen can be revealed is...based on the presumption that the media themselves do not have power, but instead are tools in the hands of manipulating third parties...the quest for hidden power not only underestimates the feature of media power, it also sticks to the rules of old power, which has in fact disappeared within the media.\textsuperscript{56}

Here I am reminded of Jean Baudrillard’s famous account of the alibi: the substitution of the false image as validation of the perceived absence of the thing-that-is-true. For Baudrillard, the two-party system is an ‘alibi’ for the one-party state; in Italy, the parapolitical one-party state is the ‘alibi’ of both the multi-party system and the transpolitical spectacle that it both spawns and is sustained by. Once again, we encounter Tunander’s admonition of the failure of liberal political discourse to encounter parapolitical tele-reality. With the criminal sovereign Berlusconi as our exemplar, we can now appreciate more readily the criminological relevance of Virilio’s radical and subversive optics.

To admit that for the human eye the essential is invisible and that, since everything is an illusion, it follows that scientific theory,\textsuperscript{57} like art, is merely a way of manipulating our illusions, went against the political-philosophical discourses then evolving in tandem with the imperative of convincing the greatest number, with its accompanying

\textsuperscript{56} Geert Lovink cited in Cubitt, 142.

\textsuperscript{57} Political Science?
desire for infallibility and a strong tendency towards ideological charlatanism. Publicly to point to how mental images are formed, including the way their psycho-physiological features carry their own fragility and limitations, was to violate a state secret of the same order as a military secret, since it masked a mode of mass production that was practically infallible.\textsuperscript{58}

If the correlation between spectacular power and speed-politics is correct, then the entire phenomenon of parapolitics, quite literally, can be viewed in terms of optical considerations of ‘high resolution’ or ‘high definition’ as factors governing the invisibility of the power crime ‘event’; a constant, and rapid, alteration between foreground and background, between the visible and the invisible.\textsuperscript{59} Conversely, the state, as the final arbiter of all definitional thresholds of criminality, may be re-conceptualized in terms of its existence as an ‘optical effect’; juro-political truth is mediated through surveillance and transparency. Virilio has made this point clearly through a striking example taken from the modes of political control developed during the French Enlightenment.

It is no longer the body of the army that passes back and forth in tight ranks beneath the regard of the intendant, now it is the inspector general that files past in review of the provinces, aligned as in a parade. Yet the repetition of these reviews that triggers the unfolding of the regional film is only an artifice, only a cinematic special effect which benefits the itinerant observer. Perceiving the sequence of geographic locations in this isolated fashion, the general loses sight of the local realities and immediately demands the reform of the

\textsuperscript{58} Virilio, \textit{The Vision Machine}, 23.

\textsuperscript{59} Virilio, \textit{Negative Horizons}, 26-38.
common law in order to advance the administrative standard.\textsuperscript{60}

The state is ‘real’ precisely to the degree that it is capable not only of perception but, also, to the same degree and in the same manner, that it is capable of being perceived. The state, in order to be ‘real’, must necessarily exhibit some degree of virtuality;\textsuperscript{61} not the ‘de-realized’ projection of an illusory reality, but ‘a change of identity, a displacement of the centre of ontological gravity of the object considered’.\textsuperscript{62} The paradox, then, of the ‘surveillance society’ is that its optical hegemony, the expansion of surveillance always stands in inverse relationship to the visibility of the State. The State creates its own virtual existence through time by means of the continuous recirculation of the externalized signs of its visibility through space; the processions of the intendant’s entourage through the geo-spatial territory of the state \textit{both sees and is seen}. This ritualistic act of mutual constitution, however, serves as the grounds of a dangerous metaphysical ‘trap’ for the state: in effect, the reality of the state is reduced to its virtual \textit{appearance}. Here, of course, ‘real’ means ‘lawful’. The prejudice of modern Liberalism is that the mutual conditionality of the reality and the legality of the state is guaranteed by the state’s co-determinate existence with the visible, or ‘public’, realm, the onto-epistemological encumbrance inherited from the linear perspective of the Renaissance.\textsuperscript{63} In fact,

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{60} Ibid, 68.
  \item \textsuperscript{61} Kroker, 44-50.
  \item \textsuperscript{62} Levy, 26.
  \item \textsuperscript{63} The Enlightenment’s ‘prejudice’ in favour of the optical may be the ideological basis of Liberalism’s refusal of ‘conspiratorial’ views of the State. The universal criticism of ‘conspiracy theory’ is ‘lack of evidence’; that is, the absence of visible, and, therefore, detectible historical traces. See discussion above, this chapter.
\end{itemize}
every State is a parapolitical entity that auto-defines its own parameters through its control over the discourse of legality and the praxis of visibility.\textsuperscript{64} It is important to recall here that International Law lacks a formal theory of the State. Instead, it substitutes hermeneutics—the close reading of the sign-systems of the State—for a juridical ontology. The resultant metaphysical lacuna allows for the occupation of the empty discursive space of the rule-of-law State by the parapolitical, and intensely heterogeneous Dual State. Virilio, like Debord, is highly cognizant of this parapolitical truth: ‘The State apparatus is in fact simply an apparatus of displacement [déplacement], its stability appears to be assured by a series of temporary gyroscopic processes of delocalization and re-localization’.\textsuperscript{65} The demarcation of the political body of the state rests largely upon its successful deployment of its arsenal of optical devices. Panoptical technique and its variables, most crucially its velocity, serve as the parameters within which the state regulates the politics of appearance; ‘What we see arises from what is not apparent.’\textsuperscript{66} Such control of a high-velocity virtual reality would operationally double as the control of the invisibility, or ‘disappearance’ of the parapolitical reality. And Virilio himself could not improve upon the final paragraph of \textit{Comments on the Society of the Spectacle}.

We must conclude that a changeover is imminent and ineluctable in the co-opted cast who serve the interests of domination, and above all manage the protection of that domination. In such an affair, innovation will surely not be displayed on the spectacle’s stage. It appears instead like lightning,

\textsuperscript{64} See generally Wilson, ‘Deconstructing the Shadows’.
\textsuperscript{65} Virilio, \textit{Negative Horizons}, 56.
\textsuperscript{66} Ibid, 136.
which we know only when it strikes. This changeover, which will conclude decisively the work of these spectacular times, will occur discretely, and conspiratorially, even though it concerns those within the inner circles of power. It will select those who will share this central exigency: that they clearly see what obstacles they have overcome, and of what they are capable.  

As the reader may be aware, the year 2001 marks two seminal events in the operation of spectacular power: the election of the politician of spectacle Berlusconi and a major architectural disaster in New York City. 

On September 11 2001, the Manhattan skyline became the front of the new war. The anonymity of those who initiated the attack merely signals, for everyone, the rise of a global covert state—of the unknown quantity of a private criminality—that ‘beyond-Good-and-Evil’ which has for centuries been the dream of the high priests of an iconoclastic progress.

For Virilio—as for Debord if he were alive today—the two catastrophes signify a remarkable cultural convergence. 

As the attack on the World Trade Centre was being broadcast live, many TV viewers believed they were watching one of those disaster movies which proliferate endlessly on the TV screens. It was by switching channels and finding the same pictures on all the stations that they finally understood that ‘it was true’. 

67 Debord, Comments, 88. 
68 Virilio, Ground Zero, 82. 
69 Ibid, 38 fn. 5. A personal anecdote might be in order here. In February 2010 I was in New York City for the first time since 9/11. Naturally, I
The spectacle of the Twin Towers serves as the primal imagery of The War on Terror, experienced on the national plane as an irrevocable shift in the constitutional balance of power to the Executive, commensurate with a parallel acceleration of executive/military decision-making. ‘Let us make no mistake about it, the modernity of “Big Brother” and its clones is the direct successor to the multi-media presentation of the Gulf and Kosovo conflicts... an image strategy which preceded the perfectly orchestrated strategy of the terror attacks of September 2001’ says Virilio.

Here as elsewhere, what is troubling about the covert state of trans-national terrorism—that unknown quantity—is its growing subordination to a techno-scientific progress which is, itself, un-authored and dependent on the development of its own audiovisual media and platforms. The scientific imagination ultimately suffers the same fate as ‘e-tainment’; it comes to resemble that of those TV viewers who thought the attacks on the World Trade Centre on September 11 was merely another disaster movie, or that of Islamist suicide attackers no doubt dying happy at becoming actors in a global super-production in which reality would tip over once and for all into electronic nothingness.

Scott’s distinctive parapolitical poetics and his emphasis upon the irrationality of the Dual State are strikingly psycho-analytical in nature, creating (perhaps deliber-
ately) a series of meaningful associations: repression, denial, the unconscious, guilt, transference. Missing though, but synonymous with all of the above, is the notion of *dream*. Revealingly, ‘dream’, in German, is *traum*, which evokes ‘trauma’; trauma, in turn, is etymologically derived from the Greek word for ‘wound’, a rupturing-by-force that serves as sign of combat and violence. If the essence of neurosis is conflict, then every act of repression is a self-inflicted wound; every dream that symbolically announces the presence of the repressed is a signifier of trauma.

**The Situation of the Mass Media**

‘The world is going to ruin... [and] man’s feeling of superiority triumphs in the expectation of a spectacle to which only contemporaries are admitted.’—Karl Kraus

‘All experts serve the State and the media and only in that way do they achieve their status.’

Although Debord does not actually reduce the Spectacle to mass media, the instruments and channels of mass communication have emerged as the uncontested arena for the staging of both the spectacle and any possible situation; ‘Rather than talk of the spectacle, people often prefer to use the term “media”. And by this they mean to describe a mere instrument, a kind of public service which with impartial “professionalism” would facilitate the new wealth of mass communication through the mass media...’

The cultural truth of mass media within the Society of the Spectacle is fundamentally identical

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73 Debord, *Comments*, 16.
74 Ibid, 6.
with Jameson’s notion of the political unconscious as social totality: ‘For the final sense of the integrated spectacle is this—that it has integrated itself into reality to the same extent as it was describing it, and that it was reconstructing it as it was describing it.’

To test the validity of this hypothesis, I will now examine several of the key depictions of two of my spectacular events—JFK/DAL-LAS and NIXON/WATERGATE—as ‘media events’. I will ignore the third false-flag, LBJ/TONKIN, precisely because it has not been the object of either literary or cinematic re-presentation, a telling historical omission that no doubt reflects that spectacle’s status as a thoroughly proven conspiracy; since it is completely known, it cannot serve as an example of the parapolitical sublime that acts as the indispensable aesthetic conceit of the conspiracy text.

**THE UNKNOWN QUANTITY (OF A PRIVATE CRIMINALITY): LIBRA**

‘That’s only fitting because in this city at this particular time, black is white is black. In other words, people are playing havoc with the categories.’—Don DeLillo, LIBRA

The most striking thing about Don DeLillo’s LIBRA (1988), by far the most artful post-modernist novel ever written about conspiracy (with the possible exception of Thomas Pynchon’s The Crying of Lot 49), is the uncanny manner in which it inhabits the landscape of the grotesque as first assayed by Kayser. It is, in fact, the

75 Ibid, 9.
perfect literary exemplar of two of the three signs of the grotesque. The first is ‘the grotesque as the estranged world’: ‘It is our world which has to be transformed. Suddenness and surprise are essential elements of the grotesque.’ The second is ‘the Grotesque as a Play with the Absurd’, signified by the operational hegemony of determinism (natural or otherwise) and the concomitant manipulation of reality by occult forces: ‘the unity of perspective in the grotesque consists in an unimpassioned view of life on earth as an empty, meaningless puppet play or a caricatural marionette theatre.’ Although ostensibly about the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the novel is in fact a literary free-for-all with the defining tropes of the genre of the crime novel, defined by Tony Hilfer in the following manner.

‘The central and defining feature of the crime novel is that in it, self and world, guilt and innocence are problematic. The world of the crime novel is constituted by what is problematic in it’…A crime novel maneuvers its reader into various forms of complicity, managing to subvert the reassurances of the detective novel by ‘put[ting] the signification process into doubt or even exploit[ing] the gap between socially accepted signification and ultimate reality.’

Consistent with its narrative foregrounding of the liminal and the nomadic, the crime novel adopts a strictly anti-representational approach to language and reason, in which the ontologically privileged is not sameness but difference; as a result, to the degree that ‘the crime novel puts the signification process into doubt or even exploits the gap between socially accepted signification and ultimate reality, it subverts the reassurances of the detective

76 Tony Hilfer, cited in Sherwin 52 fn. 50. Emphasis in the original.
novel,’ which, by contrast, is ultimately predicated upon the intelligibility of both World and Self. The postmodernist implications of crime fiction has perhaps been most thoroughly explored by Baudrillard, in his seminal essay entitled (not surprisingly), *The Perfect Crime* (1996).

The perfect crime is that of an unconditional realization of the world by the actualization of all data, the transformation of all our acts and all events into pure information: in short, the final solution, the resolution of the world ahead of time by the closing of reality and the extermination of the real by its double.  

As we should expect, *LIBRA* is the literary drama that enacts Baudrillards’s radically anti-Humanist anthropology.

The main narrative conceit of this conspiracy text is that Dealey Plaza was the (in part, unintentional) outcome of a series of overlapping networked linkages between retired and middle-level CIA officers and American paramilitaries who were operating small teams of Cuban snipers. Apart from Lee Harvey Oswald himself, the three main protagonists are disguised literary composites of historical actors: Walter Everett, Jr., who is ‘really’ Richard Bissell, innovator of the U-2 spy plane program and director of planning for ZAPATA; Laurence Parmenter, a hybrid of Tracy Barnes, Bissell’s Assistant Director of Plans for the Cuba Project, and Theodore (aka, ‘The Blond Ghost’) Shackley, director of JM/WAVE; and T.J. Mackey, a synthesis of CIA case

77 Tony Hilfer, cited in ibid, 48.
79 There is, in fact, a partial overlap between Everett/Bissell and
officer Grayston Lynch and paramilitary/mercenary William (aka ‘Rip’, ‘Carlos’, ‘Alligator’, and ‘Tinka’) Robertson. It is Everett/Bissell, artfully doubling as a pseudo-parody of mainstream conspiracy theory, who announces the grand strategy of the false flag.

‘The movement [the Cuba Project] needs to be brought back to life. These operations the Agency is running out of the Keys are strictly pinpricks. We need an electrifying event. JFK is moving toward a settling of differences with Castro. On the one hand he believes the revolution is a disease that could spread through Latin America. On the other hand he’s denouncing guerilla raids and trying to get brigade members to join the U.S. Army, where someone can keep an eye on them. If we want a second invasion, a full-bore attempt this time, without restrictions or conditions, we have to do something soon. We have to move the Cuban matter past the edge of all these sweet maneuverings. We need an event that will excite and shock the exile community, the whole country. We know Cuban intelligence has people in Miami. We want to set up an event that will make it appear they have struck at the heart of our government. This is a time for high risks. I’m saying be done with half-measures, be done with evasion

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Parmenter/Shackley; DeLillo has it that it was Everett who ‘was putting people of his own into Zenith Technical Enterprises [based on the University of Miami campus in the early 1960s], the burgeoning Miami firm that provided cover for the CIA’s new wave of operations against Cuba.’DeLillo, 24. It would be doing DeLillo’s extraordinary novel disservice by treating it as a literal ‘reconstruction’ of the secret history of JFK/DALLAS, the moral conceit that ultimately destroys Stone’s bombastic JFK; the novel’s real significance, as I will show, lies in its sophisticated application of Debordean discourse.

80 For the direct parallels between Mackey and Lynch, compare DeLillo at 70-3 with Rasenberger, 230-3.

81 Albarelli, 249-52.
and delay."^{82}

`Some things we wait for all our lives without knowing it. Then it happens and we recognize at once who we are and how we are meant to proceed. This is the idea I’ve always wanted… We want to set up an attempt on the life of the President. We plan every step, design every incident leading up to the event. We put together a team, leave a dim trail. The evidence is ambiguous. But it points to the Cuban Intelligence Directorate. Inherent in the plan is a second set of clues, even more unclear, more intriguing. These point to the Agency’s attempts to assassinate Castro. I am designing a plan that includes elements of both the American provocation and the Cuban reply^{83}… We script a person or persons out of ordinary pocket litter. Shots ring out, the country is shocked, aroused. The paper trail leads to paid agents who have disappeared in Venezuela, in Mexico. I am convinced this is what we have to do to get Cuba back. The plan has levels and variations I’ve only begun to explore but it is already, essentially, right. I feel its rightness. I know what scientists mean when they talk about elegant solutions. This plan speaks to something deep inside me.^{84} It has a powerful logic. I’ve felt it unfolding for weeks, like a dream whose meaning slowly becomes apparent. This is the condition we’ve always wanted to reach. It’s the life-insight, the life-secret, and we have to extend it, guard it carefully, right up to the time we have

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82 DeLillo, 27.
83 This from a professorial office in the basement of Texas Women’s University, where Everett had been retired/exiled to following the ‘fiasco’ of the Bay of Pigs.
84 Reputedly, Bissell’s ‘idea of fun was reading railroad timetables and rate schedules from around the world, many of which he committed to memory.’ Rasenberger, 58.
shooters stationed on a rooftop or railroad bridge.’

There was a silence. Then Parmenter said dryly, ‘We couldn’t hit Castro. So let’s hit Kennedy. I wonder if that’s the hidden motive here.’

‘But we don’t hit Kennedy. We miss him,’’ Win said.  

In classic noir fashion (which the novel is very much a knowing parody of) a ‘fly-in-the-ointment’ soon (and unexpectedly) emerges: the more that operational control is conferred to the low-level Mackey, who begins to move towards the Cubans and the cipher-like ‘Leon’ Oswald—who functions throughout the novel as an inverted double of JFK—86—the more homicidal the original

85 DeLillo, 27-8. The notion of the shooter deliberately missing JFK (or merely wounding him) is, of course, completely consistent with the false flag scenario offered by both DeLillo and myself (he as a plot device, me as a criminological hypothesis). The minimal requirement for a successful false-flag was a public spectacle of parapolitical significance, although JFK’s death may have served as the guarantee of the desired outcome (plus pay back). See Hancock, 219-20 and 298. I confess to a personal fondness for a theory propounded by the television series Quantum Leap: that Oswald’s intended target was Jacqueline Kennedy; fitting this into the false-flag scenario, we can speculate that the President’s grief at the loss of the First Lady would provoke a homicidal rage against Castro. This ‘theory’ has two advantages: firstly, it is consistent with a series of complaints that Oswald made several weeks prior to Dealey Plaza concerning alleged FBI harassment of his Russian émigré wife Marina, raising the possibility of Jacqueline as the pay back (Shenon, 26); secondly, it would confirm Oswald’s reputation as a terrible marksman and his Mannlicher-Carcano rifle as a pathetic weapon—he was gunning for Jackie but kept on hitting Jack.

86 ‘Coincidence. Lee was always reading two or three books, like Kennedy. Did military service in the Pacific, like Kennedy. Poor handwriting, terrible speller, like Kennedy. Wives pregnant at the same time. Brothers named Robert.’ Ibid, 336. The mimetic logic that culminates in Oswald’s deliberately murderous act is that he is actually eliminating his own Other. The metaphysical joke, of course, is that in the assassin’s sleep-waking semi-consciousness it is Oswald who is the original and Kennedy
plot becomes. This is revealed with great clarity through the meditations of ‘Frank Vasquez’ (a composite of possible second shooters Eladio del Valle Gutierrez and Sandalio Herminio Diaz Garcia) on assassination with a telescopic lens.

On his fourth day with Castro he shot a government scout, aiming through a telescopic sight. It was uncanny. You press a button and a man drops dead a hundred meters away. It seemed hollow and remote, falsifying everything. It was a trick of the lenses. The man is an accurate picture. Then he is upside down. Then he is right side up. You shoot at a series of images conveyed to you through a metal tube. The force of a death should be enormous but how can you know what kind of man you’ve killed or who was the braver and the stronger if you have to peer through layers of glass that deliver the image but obscure the meaning of the act? War has a conscience or it’s ordinary murder.⁸⁷

A literary touch that Debord would take to heart: neither a completely false form of consciousness nor a mere question of technology, the spectacle is ‘far better viewed as a weltanschauung that has been actualized, translated into the material ream—a world view transformed into an objective force…the spectacle epitomizes the prevailing model of social life.’⁸⁸ Strikingly, LIBRA’s two onto-epistemological premises are essentially Debordean: (i) the spectacle (which is the social totality of contemporary Reality) is inherently indeterminate and therefore, ‘infinite’, or ‘endless’; and (ii) the sum total of the copy, an ironic twist of Baudrillard’s perfect crime, which is ‘the extermination of the real by its double…’

⁸⁷ DeLillo, 297-8.
The perceptual apparatuses within the Society of the Spectacle are exclusively governed by a thoroughly cinematic imaginary that creates the (false?) consciousness of psychically meaningful coincidence, or synchronicity (‘the occult forces’ of Kayser’s ‘the Grotesque as a Play with the Absurd’). The infinity of the spectacle is personified by Nicholas Branch, ‘retired senior analyst of the Central Intelligence Agency’ and ‘covert’ historian of the JFK assassination whose real (but unstated) function is to re-assemble all available data on Dealey Plaza in order to insure its ultimate indecipherability.

Branch must study everything. He is in too deep to be selective.

He sits under a lap robe and worries. The truth is he hasn’t written all that much. He has extensive and overlapping notes—notes in three-foot drifts, all these years of notes. But of actual finished prose, there is precious little. It is impossible to stop assembling data. The stuff keeps coming. There are theories to evaluate, lives to ponder and mourn. No one at the CIA has asked to see the work in progress. Not a chapter, a page, a word of it.

The governing conceit here is that the inherent unreadability of Dealey Plaza—ordinarily the prime sign of the inherent meaninglessness of a given event—is, even if

89 Ibid, 15.
90 ‘The case will haunt him to the end. Of course they’ve known it all along. That’s why they built this room for him, the room of growing old, the room of history and dreams.’ Ibid, 445. Although the primary unifying thread, both narratively and metaphysical, of the novel, the scenes with Branch only occupy a total of seventeen pages: 14-16, 57-60, 298-302, 376-79, 440-45.
91 Ibid, 59.
only by serendipity, the mark of Everett’s design to create a hermeneutical ‘cloud of unknowing’ that is itself the signifier of the deeper design—which ultimately cannot be reconstructed. The irony is only deepened through Branch’s wholly asymmetrical (and non-dialogic) relationship with the invisible but seemingly omniscient Curator who continually sends him more data but never requests a final (or ‘finite’) summation of the truth. Branch’s narrative function, in essence, is to serve as an ironical juxtapose to Everett’s pseudo-providential manipulations.

There’s something they aren’t telling him. The Curator delays, lately, in filling certain requests for information, seems to ignore other requests completely. What are they holding back? How much more is there? Branch wonders if there is some limit inherent in the yielding of information gathered in secret. They can’t give it all away, even to one of their own, someone pledged to confidentiality. Before his retirement, Branch analyzed intelligence, sought patterns in random scads of data. He believed secrets were childish things. He was not generally impressed by the accomplishments of men in clandestine service, the spy handlers, the covert-action staff. He thought they’d built a vast theology, a formal coded body of knowledge that was basically play material, secret-keeping, one of the keener pleasures and conflicts of childhood. Now he wonders if the Agency is protecting something very much like its identity—protecting its own truth, its theology of secrets.\textsuperscript{92}

And, of course, the presence of Theology—or, more subversively, the Theology of Presence—is precisely

\textsuperscript{92} Ibid, 442.
what leads into the novel’s second major metaphysical gimmick: the ubiquity of synchronicity and ‘high strangeness’.

Branch has become wary of these cases of cheap coincidence. He’s beginning to think someone is trying to sway him towards superstition. He wants a thing to be what it is.\(^93\) Can’t a man die without the ensuing ritual of a search for patterns and links?

The Curator sends a four-hundred page study of the similarities between Kennedy’s death and Lincoln’s.\(^94\)

The most fundamental metaphysical paradox of the Society of the Spectacle is that it is both radically empirical (‘sight is all that there is’) and radically idealistic (‘all seeing is conveyed through the collective consciousness

\(^93\) A sentiment which is neatly inverted by the brutal, and irreducible, materialism of the ‘pornography’ of the autopsy photographs and post-mortem reports that ‘flood’ Branch’s office. ‘He doesn’t know why they are sending him this particular grisly material after all these years. Shattered bone and horror. That’s all it means to him. There is nothing to understand, no insights to be had from these pictures and statistics, from this melancholy bullet with its nose levelled and spread like a penny left on trolley tracks. (How old he is). The bloody goat heads seem to mock him. He begins to think that this is the point. They are rubbing his face in the blood and gunk. They are mocking him. They are saying in effect, “Here, look, these are the true images. This is your history. Here is a blown-out skull for you to ponder. Here is lead penetrating bone.” They are saying, “Look, touch, this is the true nature of the event. Not your beautiful ambiguities, your lives of the major players, your compassions and sadesses. Not your roomful of theories, your museum of contradictory fact. There are no contradictions here. Your history is simple. See, the man on the slab. The open eye staring. The goat head oozing rudimentary matter.” They are saying, “This is what it looks like to get shot.”’ Ibid, 299-300.

\(^94\) Ibid, 379.
of mass media’) simultaneously. The ‘default’ position of such an interminable alterity is, of course, the cinematic, which all of the characters of LIBRA are hopelessly enslaved to. T.J. Mackey, for example, remembers—and, therefore, ‘re-lives’—the entirety of the Bay of Pigs in expressly cinematic terms: ‘The memory was a series of still images, a film broken down to components. He couldn’t quite make it continuous.’ Under the aegis of spectacular power, neither Thought nor Meaning are lost—rather, they are both thoroughly subsumed under ‘Editing’; the truth/meaning of any event is identical with the ‘correct’ re-assemblage of the tele-reality within the correct sequence, both optical and libidinal. Everett himself makes the duality of the Society of the Spectacle, both ocular and erotic, clear to his wife.

‘U-2 planes. The planes that spotted the missiles the Soviets were putting into Cuba. We used to call the photos pornography. The photo interpreters would gather to interpret. “Let’s see what kind of pornography we pulled in today.” Kennedy looked at the pictures in his bedroom as a matter of fact…I’ll tell you what it means, these orbiting sensors that can hear us in our beds. It means the end of loyalty. The more complex the system, the less conviction in people. Conviction will be drained out of us. Devices will drain us, make us vague and pliant.’

In a world that is wholly ocular, paranoia becomes the only form of ‘connectivity’ available to us—the close reading of visual sequences for the purposes of estab-

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95 Debord’s onto-epistemology closely resembles that of George Berkeley: every sensation is an idea and every idea is a sensation, perfectly conceived.
96 Ibid, 72.
97 Ibid, 77.
lishing the true nature of the relationship between Self and Other. Not only are all of the major characters in *LIBRA* wholly given over to a paranoid ‘world-view’ (an occupational hazard within national security work) but they employ paranoid reconstructions as a narcissistic/infantile form of emotional gratification. In Jungian terms, an unexpected coincidence (real or imaginary) that induces a profound psychic transformation is known as synchronicity and, synchronicity, as should be obvious, is very much a matter of the psychic editing of an interrupted and inherently chaotic flow of sensory input. This becomes clear in a conversation between David Ferrie (portrayed in the novel as the ‘waking’, rational Self of the somnambulistic Oswald) and the Mafiosi Carmine Latta (Carlos Marcello) and the generic Tony Astorina.

Tony said, ‘Speaking of Cuba, a couple of weeks ago I dream I’m swimming on the Capri roof with Jack Ruby. The next day on Bourbon Street, who do I fucking see? You talk about coincidence.’

‘We don’t know what to call it, so we say coincidence. It goes deeper,’ Ferrie said. ‘You’re a gambler. You get a feeling about a horse, a poker hand. There’s a hidden principle. Every process contains its own outcome. Sometimes we tap in. We see it, we know. I used to run into Jack Ruby now and then. What was he doing in New Orleans?’

The seduction of ‘tapping into’ the cosmic joke of synchronicity is, of course, the moment of supreme danger

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98 The Mob owned Capri Hotel in Havana.
99 Ibid, 172.
for the parapolitical scholar, just as it perennially is for Nicholas Branch: at the precise instant that ‘conspiracy theory’ discourse enters into the mainstream media it is instantaneously appropriated by the operatives of the universalist circulation of ‘freedom of information’ and subsequently transformed into just one more ‘spectacle’. As Debord has theorized and as I have (partially) demonstrated, the revealing of clandestine truth(s) invariably provokes the counter-move of disinformation.

THE ULTRA-IDIOCY OF NAÏVE REALISM: JFK

‘Remember, fundamentally people are suckers for the truth, and the truth is on your side, bubba.’—Colonel X (Donald Sutherland) to Jim Garrison (Kevin Costner), in JFK

‘In a world that has really been turned on its head, truth is a moment of falsehood.’—Guy Debord

‘I’m lost boss. What are we saying here?’—Bill Broussard (Michael Rooker), in JFK

Perhaps the greatest parody of Frank Capra’s Mr. Smith Goes to Washington (1939; Columbia Pictures) humanly conceivable, Oliver Stone’s (aka, ‘the Wagner of Hollywood’100) film JFK (1991; Warner Brothers) has been described by the Kennedy dynasty’s greatest toady Arthur Schlesinger Jr. as “…a virtuoso exercise in postmodernist film making.”101 The choice of the word ‘postmodernist’ is illuminating, for that elusive term is the

100 Robert Sam Anson in Stone and Sklar, 209.
101 Stone and Sklar, 393.
key to interpreting Stone’s monumental and bombastic epic, a cinematic spectacle that is not only a media event in its own right, but the source of a parallel spectacle of public discourse that operated concurrently within the journalistic establishment. Anyone who spends any time investigating Dealey Plaza comes to recognize clearly the ultimate political issue at stake in Dallas.

How we make sense of the assassination of John F. Kennedy is directly related to how we make sense of American public life…The events of Nov. 22, 1963, have thus become a kind of national Rorschach test of the American political psyche. Those six seconds of gunfire in Dallas’ Dealey Plaza serve as an enigmatic inkblot into which we read our political concerns.102

The assassination is not simply an unclassified fragment of parapolitical reality but the fulcrum of a crisis of political legitimacy.

That’s no small part of the reason why Stone and the conspiracy theorists are contrasted so fiercely today. Those who do believe Oswald acted alone are not only defending the anti-conspiratorial theory advanced by the Warren Commission. They are also defending the credibility of senior US government officials, the integrity of US law enforcement and intelligence agencies and the capabilities of the national media. (If there was a conspiracy, then the media has thus far failed to uncover it.) The lone-gunman theory of Kennedy’s death, in its own way no less implausible than some of the conspiracy theories, depends on confidence in the legitimacy of national political authority.103

102 Jefferson Morley in Stone and Sklar, 231.
103 Ibid, 232. Compare this with the insight of arch-conservative pundit
It is worth mentioning here the release by the CIA in January 1967 of a directive to its numerous contacts and assets within the media on how to proceed in framing the parameters of the debate over conspiracy theory. I provide the most relevant portions below.

CIA document 1035-960 [4 January 1967]\(^{104}\)

RE: Concerning Criticism of the Warren Report

1. This trend of opinion [46% of the American public did not think that Oswald acted alone] is a matter of concern to the US government, including our organization. The members of the Warren Commission were naturally chosen for their integrity, experience, and prominence. They represented both major parties, and they and their staff were deliberately drawn from all sections of the country. Just because of the standing of the Commissioners, efforts to impugn their rectitude and wisdom tend to cast doubt on the whole leadership of American society. Moreover, there seems to be an increasing tendency to hint that President Johnson himself, as the one person who might be

William F. Buckley: ‘The general scepticism on the question who killed JFK is really in the nature of a cognate question: who really ordered Watergate? Who really was guilty of aggression at the Tonkin Gulf? Who really started the Cold War? What were the motives of the Founding Fathers?’ Cited by David Klinghoffer in ibid, 286.

104 The ‘book dispatch’ was written by Western Hemisphere Division Chief Bill Broe at the request of Richard Helms. Morley, 243. See Lane, 114-18. Lane offers this account on the CIA’s penetration of the mass media: ‘This is the method now employed. An independent publication is chosen to mask the source. A CIA puppet is placed there and given an impressive title. The CIA then provides the propaganda. It appears as an independent concept when published. The CIA, employing its official website, cia.gov, then cites the “independent” writer and the “independent” publication as the source as it spreads its false allegations throughout the world. In the intelligence world some refer to this as sheep-dipping. Their wolf had been dipped into a sheep’s bath and came up smelling quite neutral.’ Lane, 105.
said to have benefited, was in some way responsible for the assassination. Innuendo of such seriousness affects not only the individual concerned, but also the whole reputation of the American government.

2. Action

a. To discuss the publicity problem with [?] and friendly elite contacts (especially politicians and editors), pointing out that the Warren Commission made as thorough an investigation as humanly possible, that the charges of the critics are without serious foundation, and that further speculative discussion only plays into the hands of the opposition. Point out also that parts of the conspiracy talk appear to be generated by Communist propagandists. Urge them to use their influence to discourage unfounded and irresponsible speculation.

c. A conspirator…would hardly choose a location for a shooting where so much depended on conditions beyond his control; the route, the speed of the cars, the moving target, the risk that the assassin would be discovered. A group of wealthy conspirators could have arranged much more secure conditions.

e. Oswald would not have been any sensible person’s choice for a co-conspirator. He was a ‘loner,’ mixed up, of questionable reliability and an unknown quantity to any professional intelligence service.\footnote{105}

The release of \textit{JFK} in December of 1991 ignited an outburst of journalistic opprobrium of such intensity that it

\footnote{105 Ibid, 115-17.}
can only be likened to a sort of ‘moral panic’, the sort of counter-culture gossip-mongering that normally accompanies shock realizations of Satanic ritual abuse or repressed memory syndrome. I reproduce some of the most outstanding examples of the vituperation of the official commentariat below; note the ‘sliding’ conflation of otherwise incompatible agendas—moral(istic), political, and artistic.

Whether or not it is a gift, artistic talent conveys a responsibility. Those who can sway emotions ought to know what they are talking about, lest emotions be swayed towards foolishness.¹⁰⁶

But [JFK] is not parody,¹⁰⁷ and it is not funny. It could spoil a generation of American politics just when sanity is returning.¹⁰⁸

And it is the business of those who do care about the future generations, to worry, if they wish, about how Stone’s legacy is a dose of heightened distrust and paranoia.¹⁰⁹

The children of the video age get their information more from images than from words. They tend to believe uncritically what they see… They’ll swallow JFK whole. Society cannot police art for inaccuracies; film makers are free to take whatever liberties they wish. But society can denounce bogus history—and study honest his-

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¹⁰⁶ John Margolis, in Stone and Sklar, 189.
¹⁰⁷ This is incorrect; JFK can be very easily read as a carnivalesque inversion of a Frank Capra film.
¹⁰⁸ Daniel Patrick Moynihan, ibid, 331. The film was released in December 1991, so presumably the return of political sanity refers to the presidential election of Bill Clinton.
¹⁰⁹ Chicago Sun-Times, in ibid, 332.
tory. That means reading, critically. Otherwise, Hollywood becomes the culture’s historian by de­fault.\textsuperscript{110}

The rancor over \textit{JFK} arises from around the real­ization that historical lies are nearly impossible to correct once movies and television have given them credibility.\textsuperscript{111}

Although many in the media have lambasted the movie as a travesty of history…many moviegoers probably will not read their critiques, and the movie version is likely to become their reality. Numerous studies show that when people have no independent information on a subject…a mention in the media is more likely to be powerful, more likely to be remembered and more likely to be in­fluential.\textsuperscript{112}

In an age when most young Americans have no sense of history or geography and don’t like to read much, there is the real potential that Oliver Stone’s spine-tingling mythopoetic [sic] of John Kennedy’s tragic death will replace the Warren Commission as the next popular perception.\textsuperscript{113}

One of the most insightful responses to this avalanche of panicked bile was that offered by Bob Katz, channeling the spirit of Berlusconi a full ten years before the actual event.

Who but an ivory-tower pedant still believes in the primacy of ‘facts’? The so-called facts are as

\textsuperscript{110} Brent Staples, in ibid, 312.
\textsuperscript{111} Brent Staples cited by Edward S. Herman, in ibid, 450.
\textsuperscript{112} Katharine Seelye, 373.
\textsuperscript{113} Robert Hennelly, in ibid, 415.
susceptible to the sleek techniques of promotion and spin control as the new Infiniti or candidate Dan Quayle. Our Age of Innocence with respect to the truth is over; history will be whatever the majority of people—and our proxy, the viewing public—chooses to believe. Lacking all faith in our ability to discover truth, we raise our hands in abject surrender to await polling results.\textsuperscript{114}

The ‘truth’ of our post-modern condition (‘the children of the video age’) is not that no one is able to differentiate between truth and falsehood; it is, rather, that everyone has been traumatized by the omnipresence of simulation and simulacra. Therefore, by default, ‘truth’ becomes reduced to a commodity, the value of reality validated not by an objectivist epistemology but by the economic imperative of the un-decidability of a subjectivist freedom of consumer choice. The crisis of the post-modern condition is not one of perception, but of value; not the nature of Reality but the (exchange-) value of Truth. It is quite true, as Debord indicates, that ‘Spectacular domination’s first priority was to eradicate historical knowledge in general; beginning with just about all rational information and commentary on the most recent past.’\textsuperscript{115} But it is also and equally true that ‘the reign of the perpetual present’\textsuperscript{116} becomes our historically ‘correct’ domain of reference through the valorization of life-as-freedom-of-choice. The authentic grounds of the moral panic within the anti-Stone media campaign is not that \textit{JFK} ‘distorts’ the truth of Dealey Plaza in any significant (long-lasting) way, but that it

\textsuperscript{114} Bob Katz, in ibid, 280.

\textsuperscript{115} Debord, \textit{Comments}, 13-14.

\textsuperscript{116} ‘As much as any single feature, Debord sees the core of the spectacle as the annihilation of historical knowledge—in particular the destruction of the recent past. In its place is the reign of a perpetual present.’Crary, 463.
demonstrates how easily a possible deep event can be transformed into, and commodified as, ‘entertainment’. The capacity of the film for disinformation, even if wholly unintentional, is directly proportionate to the extent of its embedding within the circulatory capillaries of the mass media.

The prospect that an issue deep and dear will be adjudicated by the carnival barkers of Tinseltown is indeed troubling…The unsolved murder of the century has entered the realm of myth…History as defined by box-office returns may strike many as a deplorable development, but we have been heading in that direction a long, long time.\textsuperscript{117}

And, of course, as Jameson well understood, the seductive appeal of ‘being in the know’ (or counting oneself as ‘hip’ to use James Ellroy’s terminology, a neo-noir crime writer who is acutely aware of the drawing power of voyeuristic occultism) is identical with the ‘promise of a deeper inside view [that] is the hermeneutic content of the conspiracy thriller in general…’\textsuperscript{118} DeLillo makes exactly the same point through the mouth of the perenni­ally hapless Nicholas Branch.

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. We are the flawed ones, the innocents, trying to make some rough sense of the daily jostle. Conspirators have a logic and a daring beyond our reach. All conspiracies are the same taut story of

\textsuperscript{117} Bob Katz, in Stone and Sklar, 281.

\textsuperscript{118} Jameson, 15.
men who find coherence in some criminal act.\textsuperscript{119}

As Jameson further demonstrates, the entirety of the historical weight assigned to Dealey Plaza (including this book that you are reading) rests upon the labyrinthine overlapping between JFK and the Press, especially television journalism.

[W]hat ensured the well-nigh permanent association of assassination in general with this particular historical one was the experience of the media, which for the first time and uniquely in its history bound together an enormous collectivity over several days and vouchsafed a glimpse into a Utopian public sphere of the future which remained unrealized…henceforth assassination and the question of the media are representationally related and mutually implicit (in ways in which they were not in popular or collective representations of Sarajevo, for example, or of Lincoln’s death).\textsuperscript{120}

The real aesthetic paradox of \textit{JFK}, that ultimately undermines the film’s claim to serious cinematic art, rests with its stylistic incoherence that is a direct result of a skewed attempt to unify two inherently incompatible literary and filmic genres: the crime story and the detective story. The basic pattern of the detective film, in stark contrast to the crime film which radically relativizes both Truth and the World, is the \textit{search}.

These tales have… ‘goal-oriented plots’, patterns of action to which investigation is key. Mysteries and detective films often mete out clues in small, progressive portions, so that the viewer’s process

\textsuperscript{119} DeLillo, 440.
\textsuperscript{120} Jameson, 47-8.
of discovery parallels the investigator’s. Sometimes…they conceal the object of the search, such as the villain’s identity, as long as possible…At other times the goal of the search is clear from the start, and the investigator’s job is to find the thing that is missing.\footnote{121}

The epistemological frame of the detective film is a strictly representational theory of language, yielding a hero-protagonist who reassures ‘us of an ultimate rationality, “a benevolent and knowable universe,” “a world that can be interpreted by human reason, embodied in the superior intellect of the detective”…The detective’s skill is precisely the ability to code “seemingly unrelated data into a coherent system of signs, a text identifying the malefactor.”\footnote{122} Therefore, the function of the detective hero ‘is to guarantee the readers’ absolution from guilt. This is basic to the genres’ wish fulfillment…What matters is the detective’s revelation, not the murderers’ punishment, for in this myth of rationality truth takes priority over justice.\footnote{123} If the detective film has a philosophical prejudice, it is naïve realism, ‘the tendency to believe that oneself always sees and responds to the world objectively, and thus when others do not agree, it is because their cognitions or behaviors are not based on reality.’\footnote{124}

\textit{JFK}’s fatal flaw, and Stone’s lethal conceit, is that the film aspires to be a post-modernist detective story; its almost operatic deployment of the pseudo-documentary technique subliminally asserts itself as objectively factual, and, therefore, as historically accurate. Yet, its entire
content, both substantive and stylistic, clearly marks it as a crime film; the text of JFK is the detective story, while the sub-text is the noir tale of criminality. In many ways, JFK resembles the seminal ‘true crime’ but post-modernist documentary by Errol Morris, The Thin Blue Line (1988) which concerns the false conviction of an apparently innocent man for the killing of a Texas highway patrolman; both films suffer from the same stylistic incoherence through the self-undermining fusion of post-modernist film making with a strictly modernist epistemology and morality. Richard C. Sherwin has provided some exceptionally insightful criticism of Morris’ work.

But on an allegorical level, the film depicts a battle that rages back and forth, moment by moment, across a thin blue line of representational order. It is a battle against chaos, fate, and deception, forces that could easily destroy human agency and makes individual responsibility impossible. Metaphorically, the film asks a fundamental and daring question: Who (or what) polices meaning? It is a daring question that Morris does not quite see through. For in the end, the [post-modern] counterplot does not take hold.¹²⁵

‘In Morris’ film the truth is knowable’¹²⁶; yet the cinematic ‘tension’ within the film that Sherwin rightly identifies is precisely the incommensurability between the detective and the crime genres. The Thin Blue Line’s

[Parodic, post-modern, self-conscious images are eventually overwhelmed by the linear detective plot. The viewer resists the invitation to find problems in the film’s linear plot. We refuse to entertain the possibility that the purported ‘docu-

¹²⁵ Sherwin, 64.
¹²⁶ David Denby, cited in ibid, 53 fn. 53.
mentary’ nature of the film is itself merely another dramatic re-enactment. We reject the parody and prefer to play it straight. 127

Why does the text, in the end, overwhelm the sub-text? Here the moral and epistemic relativism (or the ‘immorality’) of post-modernism is thwarted by the political morality (and moralism) of the legal drama: the discovery of Truth and the triumphant elevation of Innocence. The sub-text/counter-plot ‘fails in the same way that skeptical post-modernism is likely to fail in law and lawyering generally.’

In a legal context, the reality that it portrays is aesthetically and psychologically untenable. In matters of life and death, whether it be the execution of the accused or the possibility of his killing again, we instinctively reject the message of skeptical post-modernism. Human traits like prejudice, deceit, greed, abuse of power, and the reality of a deliberate frame-up are things we can understand. But mystification, time’s circularity, fate, and coincidence defeat the practical demands of human judgment. 128

Which is, of course, absolutely no problem for DeLillo, whose conspiracy text faithfully abides by the narrative requirements of the crime genre, albeit in extreme form. But it proves artistically fatal for Morris, as it does for Stone, who is also excavating the truth concerning a murder in Texas.

Chaos is disorienting and unpleasant, especially in matters of life and death. Decisions of such consequence are no time for epistemological  

127 Ibid, 70.  
128 Ibid.
conundrums or aesthetic musings. Thus, once nestled in the sobering frame of a criminal trial, storytelling fictions such as Morris’ self-consciously cartoonish images and their playful interference with the linear documentary have a boomerang effect. These caricatures of reality only send us running back to the ‘truer’ reality, the reality that the linear plot alone is able to provide. Faced with untenable disorder on the one hand, and a meaningful drama on the other, there is no choice.\textsuperscript{129}

Sherwin’s final judgment of \textit{The Thin Blue Line}—that its ‘aesthetic and psychological failures offer a cautionary lesson about the art of persuasive legal story-telling: the law has little use for the kind of skeptical, radically subversive post-modernism that has been featured of late in some legal and much non-legal scholarship\textsuperscript{130}—can equally be levelled against \textit{JFK}, although within a slightly different aesthetic context. Although Morris details a conspiracy, it would be doing violence to Jameson’s terminology to classify \textit{The Thin Blue Line} as a conspiracy text. Stone’s film, however, is gloriously so and, as a narrative of a wounded survivor’s account of a traumatic encounter with a deep event, must comply with the aesthetic directives concerning the representation of the grotesque. But the internal incoherence exhibited by \textit{The Thin Blue Line} is doubled in the case of \textit{JFK}: the incompatibility of Truth with Relativism is compounded by the irreconcilability of two views of the grotesque violently forced into a single but dis-unified narrative: ‘the grotesque as the estranged world’ (‘It is our world which has to be transformed. Suddenness and surprise are essential elements of the grotesque’) and the

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{129} Ibid, 71.  
\textsuperscript{130} Ibid.}
grotesque ‘as an Attempt to Invoke and Subdue the Demoniac Aspects of the World’ (‘In spite of all the helplessness and horror inspired by the dark forces which lurk in and behind our world and have the power to estrange it, the truly artistic portrayal effects a secret liberation. The darkness has been sighted, the ominous powers discovered, the incomprehensible forces challenged’).

The first issue that must be dealt with, then, is the problem of Stone’s undigested post-modernist (self-) reflexivity. In part, JFK’s aesthetic incoherence is not just due to Stone but to the nature of the original spectacle itself—the televised nature of the event(s) and the penetration of Dallas by the audio-visual, not least Abraham Zapruder’s spectacular 8mm home movie.\(^{131}\) and the traum-

\(^{131}\) Cultural material of clearly dubious value; when viewed for the very first time without preconception one realizes immediately that this ‘proof’ provides no certainty as to the number, rate, or direction of shots fired. Even worse, the notorious ‘head splatter’ frames allow for no clear determination of the bullet’s trajectory; when I saw the film for the first time (while watching JFK), my initial impression was that Kennedy had been shot from the front but from the left, not from the grassy knoll which was to his right. I believe that the greatest forensic value of the film is that it strongly hints at a discernible time gap between President Kennedy’s throat shot and Governor Connally’s back shot. The film indicates that Kennedy was shot through the throat no sooner than at frame 210 and Connally shot through the shoulder/back at no later than frame 240, a time gap of close to two seconds; the ‘single-bullet theory’ offered by the Warren Commission, which establishes Oswald as the lone gunman, requires that the bullet that exited Kennedy’s throat entered Connally’s shoulder. In any event, the absolute earliest that Connally could have been shot at was at frame 207; most likely he was shot at some point between frames 207 to 225. Given that the muzzle velocity of the sniper’s bullet was 2200 feet per second, and that it would have entered Kennedy’s body at 2000 feet per second and exited Kennedy’s body at 1900 feet per second, both Kennedy and Connally would have had to have been shot simultaneously—a time gap of anything above the infinitesimal is troubling. If we place Kennedy’s neck wound at frame 210 and Connally’s shoulder wound at 225, this is a difference of 15 frames—well short of simultaneous. In the alternative, if we abandon the
matic on-air assassination of Oswald by Jack Ruby, was ideal stimulus to the post-modern imagination. Making things worse was the narrative unreliability of the official version, the Warren Commission Report, an unstable admixture of disclosure and cover up; as Todd Gitlin has argued, the ‘more corrupt the public language, the more people want the luxury of suspending disbelief. For all our post-modern sensibilities, our everyday cynicism, we want to believe there remains a truth that hasn’t been re-touched. Curiously, no one believes in truth like a person surrounded by liars.’

Those who are enraged at Oliver Stone’s film *JFK* for its heavily fictionalized blending of various assassination theories are missing the point. As Stone has apparently grasped in his blockhead populist way, the JFK killing has been fiction for a long time. It is the creation myth we use to understand the discords of contemporary America: the tale of the fall from grace, for which we keep vainly seeking redemption. If it hadn’t happened, we would have had to invent it… But it was on that autumn day in Dallas that post-modernism came here to roost. Dallas seemed like a magic trick, or the culmination of some elaborate practical joke; it traumatized us because we couldn’t figure out how it worked. We still feel that if we go through it one more time we’ll see the concealed wires leading to the book depository window, spot the clown on the grassy knoll, decode single bullet, this means that Oswald would have had to re-cycle, aim and fire his weapon and then actually hit both Connally and Kennedy with separate shots in under a maximum time of two seconds, a physical impossibility. Shenon, 254 and 262-71. Although he publicly endorsed the findings of the Warren Commission, until the end of his life Connally maintained that he was hit by a separate shot; he also insisted that only three shots were fired and that they all came from the rear. Ibid, 270-5.

132 Todd Gitlin, in Stone and Sklar, 454.
the umbrella man’s secret message. But it’s still
the same stale pie in our face, all over again.\textsuperscript{133}

But the turbulent waters of Dallas are only roiled further
by Stone’s own auteur-like conceit, a manifestation of
his narcissistic self-identification as Jim Garrison’s real
life double. Over the years Stone’s own self-commentary
on \textit{JFK} has proven voluminous, running every known
rhetorical position imaginable, from the pejorative to the
self-exculpatory. Here is Stone on the post-modernist na-
ture of History.

What is history? Some people say it’s a bunch of
gossip made up by soldiers who passed it around
a campfire. They say such and such happened.
They create. They make it bigger, they make it
better. I knew guys in combat who made up shit.
I’m sure the cowboys did the same. The nature of
human beings is that they exaggerate. So, what is
history? Who the fuck knows?\textsuperscript{134}

Next is Stone on History as Trauma.

The murder of President Kennedy was a seminal
event for me and for millions of Americans. It
changed the course of history. It was a crushing
blow to our country and to millions of people
around the world. It put an abrupt end to a period
of innocence and great idealism.\textsuperscript{135}

Finally, there is Stone on History as Myth.

Unlike children’s fairy tales, myths have always
expressed the true inner meaning of human
events. Myths are dynamic. They reinterpret his-

\textsuperscript{133} Andrew O’Heir, in ibid, 270-1.
\textsuperscript{134} Oliver Stone cited by Robert Sam Anson, in ibid, 208.
\textsuperscript{135} Oliver Stone, in ibid, 199.
tory in order to create lasting, universal truths. For example, artists for centuries have tackled exactly the same historical and religious stories and produced a Christ with a thousand faces. From Griffith to Kubrick, moviemakers have operated on the principle that the dramatic force of story transcends the ‘facts’. With JFK, we are attempting to film the true inner meaning of the Dallas labyrinth—the mythical and spiritual dimension of Kennedy’s murder—to help us understand why the shots in Dealey Plaza still continue to reverberate in our nightmares.\(^{136}\)

The personal trauma undergone by Stone while in Vietnam is self-servingly repeated by Jim Garrison in a scene that was deleted from the theatrical release.

Jim: Just think... just think. What happened to our country... to the world... because of that murder... Vietnam, racial conflict, breakdown of law, drugs, thought control, assassinations, secret government, fear of the frontier...\(^{137}\)

By this time it should be obvious to even the most casual viewer that JFK actually works as a cinematically splendid act of gossip—both in high and low places. Stone, like Morris, chaotically mixes fragmentary truths into the narrative structure of the epic, resulting in the hyper-inflation of (crypto-documentary) reality, now re-presented as an un-true Truth (‘we are attempting to film the true inner meaning of the Dallas labyrinth’) that fortuitously is identical with Myth (‘the mythical and spiritual dimension of Kennedy’s murder’). This reaches its epitome (epiphany?) in Jim Garrison’s seemingly interminable summation to the jury of the Clay Shaw trial—

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136 Oliver Stone, in ibid, 356.
137 Stone and Sklar, 183.
not only is this one of the longest monologues in the history of film, it is also marred by the pummeling, or ‘bullet-like’, nature of Kevin Costner’s delivery.

**Jim:** The President was murdered by a conspiracy planned in advance at the highest levels of the United States government and carried out by fanatical and disciplined Cold Warriors in the Pentagon and CIA’s covert operation apparatus—among them Clay Shaw before you. It was a public execution, and it was covered up by like-minded individuals in the Dallas Police Department, the Secret Service, the FBI, and the White House—all the way up to and including J. Edgar Hoover and Lyndon Johnson, whom I consider to be accomplices after the fact.\(^{138}\)

According to Stone, ‘Contradictions are the nature of reality.’\(^{139}\) In his discussions of *JFK* over the years, he has made occasional reference to Akira Kurosawa’s masterpiece *Rashomon* (1950), that supremely artful presentation of four inherently incompatible but equally persuasive accounts of a single event, a murder. What Stone seems to have forgotten is that a film narrative such as Kurosawa’s requires the unmediated juxtaposition of the conflicting narratives and antagonistic voices of the diverse witnesses—precisely what *JFK* fails to provide. Instead, *JFK* is aletheia (the detective story), the uncovering of a concealed truth which, like the infamous ‘magic bullet’, remains inexplicably pristine. Stone’s self-proclaimed (and mass marketed) filmic capture and faithful reproduction of the ‘inner meaning’ of Dallas is, through his bombastic cinematic vehicle, irreversibly transformed into spectacle. And, quite suitable

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\(^{138}\) Ibid, 177-8.

\(^{139}\) Stone in ibid, 200.
for Stone’s own purposes, the moral panic of the journalistic establishment (whether they were following CIA directives or not), because they were circulated as part of the ‘media event’, passively collude with that self-same spectacle, tantamount to a form of disinformation.

But perhaps the greatest artistic ‘give away’ of JFK is the one narrative technique that has drawn the most ire not only of media pundits but conspiracy researchers—the hyper-inflation of the size, scope and complexity of the conspiratorial machinery. On the one hand, the density of the evil plot (or the vast breadth of the grotesque landscape) is simply a by-product of naïve realism—the cover up has been so extensive the now unconcealed truth must be of commensurate magnitude. More perniciously, the bogus erudition displayed by the director is nothing more than a calculated sensory bombardment designed to blot out any realization in the mind of the audience that Stone is nothing more than the huckster purveyor of conspiracy gossip. Debord appreciated very well the underhanded intent of information overload: ‘There is a contradiction between the mass of information collected on a growing number of individuals, and the time and intelligence available to analyze it, not to mention its actual interest.’ At times Stone even appears to be partially conscious of his own onanistic gamesmanship; this may explain his decision to (merci-

140 Curiously Stone’s technique of cinematic hyper-inflation ironically parallels Jim Garrison’s judicial one. ‘Some of his staff became alarmed about his behavior. He would call meetings, then disappear into the men’s room for a while, emerge with a new theory and send aids to try to prove it.’ Kenneth Auchincloss, Ginny Carroll, and Maggie Malone, in ibid, 293. For a compelling critique of Garrison, see James O’Byrne, in ibid, 234-40.

141 Debord, Comments, 81. Perhaps Stone’s key error is that he conflates Phase I of JFK/DALLAS with Phase II; if we assume that the killers were also the liars, then conspiratorial overload necessarily results.

**Johnson:** First we had your charge that the Cuban exiles killed the President, then the Mob, then you said the oil billionaires did it, then you said the Minutemen and the Ku Klux Klan collaborated to do it, now with your latest theory seems to be that the CIA and the FBI and the Pentagon and the White House all combined in some elaborate conspiracy to kill John Kennedy. Let me ask you, is there anyone besides Lee Harvey Oswald who you think did not conspire to kill the President?¹⁴²

What we may hold to be ‘disinformation by accident’ is also clearly present in another deleted scene, where Lyndon Johnson is personally issuing commands to the Dallas Police Department.

[Director’s Notes] *At the Dallas police station, Dallas Police Captain Will Fritz takes a call from a high official in Washington. In the background we notice Lee Oswald continuing to be questioned by federal agents. We hear Johnson’s distinctive Texas drawl but we never see him.*

**Jim (voice over):** No legal counsel is provided. No record made of the long questioning.

**High Official voice:** Howdy there, Cap’n. Thanks for taking care of us down there in Dallas. Lady-bird and I will always be grateful.

**Fritz:** Thank you, Mr. President. We’re doing our

¹⁴² Stone and Sklar, 142.
best.

**High Official voice:** Cap’n, I know you’re working like a hound-dog down there to get this mess wrapped up, but I gotta tell you there’s too much confusion coming out of Dallas now. The TVs and the papers are full of rumor ‘bout conspiracies. Two gunmen, two rifles, the Russkies done it, the Cubans done it, that kinda loose talk, its scarin’ the shit outta people, bubba’. This thing could lead us into a war that could cost 40 million lives. We got to show ‘em we got this thing under control. No question, no doubt, for the good of our country…you hear me?

**Fritz:** Yes, sir.

**High Official voice:** Cap’n, you got your man, the investigation’s over, that’s what people want to hear.

[Author’s Notes: *Call to Capn. Fritz. Dallas Police Chief Jesse Curry told the Warren Commission: ‘…nobody would tell me exactly who it was that was insisting “just say I got a call from Washington and they wanted this evidence up there,” insinuated it was someone in high authority that was requesting this.’* [WC 4H, p. 195]]

143 Significantly, the first of the Oswald-as-Communist-agent conspiracy theories that began appearing in the *Washington Post* on the morning of November 23 were all floated by the DRE, operating under Phillip’s oversight. Morley, 207 and 212. This was not the DRE’s first attempt to manipulate public opinion as part of an effort to incite a U.S. invasion. In late October 1962, the *Washington Star* printed a headline story ‘Exiles Tell of Missiles Hidden in Cuban Caves/Refugees Give Location of 7 Camouflaged Sites for Rockets’, indicating that the Russians had left some nuclear missiles behind in Cuba; the ‘Exiles’ were members of the DRE and the writer of the article was Jerry O’Leary Jr, a CIA asset and a very close friend of David Phillips. Morley, 142-3.
And it is disinformation that underlies the central story arc of the film: the transposition of conspiratorial intent from Cuba to Vietnam, which narratively requires the existence of a sublimely vast but wholly invisible clandestine apparatus. An avowed Kennedy-phile, we can easily understand Stone’s motive in inverting the ambiguous and contested historical record concerning NSAM-273: the death of JFK as the failure of the Sons of Light in their contest against the demonic aspect of the world symbolized by Vietnam flows seductively into the myth-poetic grandeur that provides JFK with its stunning dramatic power. It is also a remarkably hagiographic way of ennobling Kennedy’s gory murder (‘a ghastly pink cloud of bone, blood, and brains...’\(^{145}\))—being killed for having attempted to pre-empt the Vietnam War is glorious; being executed for failing to assassinate Castro merely makes one the ‘patsy’ of gangsters.\(^{146}\) This transposition takes place in three distinct stages. The first is the announcement of the false-flag.

\(^{144}\) Ibid, 175.
\(^{145}\) Morley, 204.
\(^{146}\) See Russo, generally. Another personal anecdote if I may: my first thought after exiting the theatre in Hollywood that was showing JFK in December 1991 was that Stone should have done a straight adaptation of DeLillo’s LIBRA. In fact, it appears that Stone successfully campaigned to stop the production of such a film, telling the assigned director Phil Joanou that “‘my film’s more cinematic than yours.’” Robert Sam Anson in ibid, 219-20.
FLASHBACK to David Ferrie’s apartment

Ferrie [Joe Pesci]: It won’t be long, mark my words. That fucker’ll get what’s comin’ to him. And it can be blamed on Castro. Then, the whole country’ll want to invade Cuba. All we got to do is to get Kennedy out in the open.147

The second is when the false flag is inverted; this takes place in a scene between FBI agent ‘Frank’ (Wayne Tippit) and Garrison investigator Bill Broussard (Michael Rooker).

Frank: Look, we know Oswald didn’t pull that trigger. Castro did. But if that comes out, there’s gonna be a war, boy—millions of people are gonna die. That’s a hell of a lot more important than Jim Garrison. [Suddenly] Godammit, look at me when I talk to you. You’re too goddam self-opinionated, now shut up. If you got a brain in your thick skull of yours, listen to me. Listen real hard.148

The third, the uncovering of Vietnam-as-Truth occurs in two separate scenes with ‘Colonel X’ (Donald Sutherland), who is supposed to be Colonel Fletcher Prouty. In the original screenplay, this scene, the narrative crux of the film, was divided into two parts, the first half at the exact mid-point, the second half serving as the conclusion—and which also delivered the ‘big payoff’, by revealing the identity of the mastermind of Dealey Plaza, ‘General Y’: Edward G. Lansdale, the nominal head of OPERATION MONGOOSE (which was actually being run by Robert Kennedy).

147 Stone and Sklar, 70.
148 Ibid, 105.
**COLONEL X, PART ONE**

X: That’s the real question isn’t it—‘Why?’—the ‘how’ is just the ‘scenery’ for the suckers…Oswald, Ruby, Cuba, Mafia, it keeps people guessing like a parlor game, but it prevents them from asking the most important question—Why? Why was Kennedy killed? Who benefitted? Who has the power to cover it up?

**COLONEL X, PART TWO**

X: I think it started in the wind. Money—arms, big oil, Pentagon people, contractors, bankers, politicians like LBJ were committed to a war in Southeast Asia. As early as ‘61 they knew Kennedy was going to change things…He was not going to war in Southeast Asia.

**NOTE:** in the original screenplay, the following scene was the end of the film; in the theatrical release, it was moved towards the middle of Garrison’s summation to the jury.

[Director’s Notes] **FLASHBACK TO the White House, 1963. Johnson sits across the shadowed room with [US ambassador to Vietnam Henry Cabot Lodge] and others. His Texas drawl rises and falls. He signs something unseen** [NSAM-

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149 Note the deliberate downplaying of the Cuba Project the closer we move to the final revelation.
150 Ibid, 110.
151 Presumably an oblique reference to NSAMs 56 and 57 and Kennedy’s unwavering commitment to counter-insurgency warfare in neo-colonial struggles. See above, Chapter Two.
152 Ibid, 180.
Johnson [Tom Howard and John William Galt]: Gentlemen, I want you to know I’m not going to let Vietnam go the way Cuba did. I’m personally committed. I’m not going to take one soldier out of there ‘til they know we mean business in Asia… (he pauses) You just get me elected, and I’ll give you your damned war.

X (voice over): …and that was the day Vietnam started.

* CUT TO* Documentary footage of—US Marines arriving in full force on the beaches of Danang, March 8, 1965...as another era begins and our movie ends.  

These two scenes, when combined with the deleted Johnson scene, yield Stone’s most brazen conceit: all of the speculation concerning Cuba and the false-flag is itself a higher form of disinformation, skillfully manipulated by the conspirators of *both* Phase I and Phase II to disguise Vietnam as the true purpose of JFK/DALLAS that much more effectively—so effectively, in fact, as to be virtually untraceable within the historical record. But the worst is yet to come.

Just before the Final Credits, this dedication:

*DEDICATED TO THE YOUNG,*  
*IN WHOSE SPIRIT THE SEARCH FOR TRUTH MARCHES ON.*

As Jim Garrison says elsewhere in the film, ‘...about as subtle as a cockroach crawling across a white rug.’

153 Ibid, 183 and 184.  
154 Ibid, 73.
‘What’s the dope on the Watergate?':
All the President’s Men

‘Garage freak? Jesus, what kind of a crazy fucking story is this?’—Ben Bradlee (Jason Robards), All the President’s Men

Artistically superior to JFK in almost every way, Alan J. Pakula’s film adaptation of the Bernstein and Woodward (aka, ‘Woodstein’) book All The President’s Men (1976; Warner Brothers155) succeeds where Stone’s epic fails precisely because it deliberately maintains narrative consistency with the onto-epistemological requirements of the detective story. Although Robert Redford, the producer and lead actor of the film, instantly recognized the story’s quality as a detective thriller, it is Jameson, in his incisive discussion of the movie, who makes the essential aesthetic observation: the ‘detective story presupposes an absolute distinction between the story of the crime and the story of its resolution: here the distance between the two has been reduced to an absolute minimum by the positing of a “crime” as informational and media-centered as its own solution.’156 In clear compliance with Jameson’s requirements for the conspiracy text, All the President’s Men ostensibly treats with the same forms of the grotesque as does JFK: ‘the grotesque as the estranged world’ and the grotesque as ‘an Attempt to Invoke and Subdue the Demonic Aspects of the World’. But the film’s slide into the realm of spectacle (and dis-

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155 All of my references to the film version are taken directly from the Two-Disc Special Edition released in 1976, including several documentaries about the making of the film and a scene-by-scene voice-over version with commentary by producer and lead actor Robert Redford.

156 Jameson, 68.
information) is equal to that of Stone’s Wagnerian cinematic bombast, even though it takes place on a more refined level and operates in a far more subtle way: namely, through the transition from book to film, or, in this case, from film to book. As historical fact, it was Redford himself who convinced Woodward and Bernstein to write the book from their own perspective (‘two young journalists fighting to uncover the truth’) as opposed to their original idea which was to deal with the effects of the unfolding of the Watergate scandal on the White House). Not only was the book version of All the President’s Men self-consciously framed in terms of cinematic genre(s) prior to its initial production, it was deliberately written with anticipation of the future screenplay (by William Goldman) in mind—in effect, a movie tie-in before the fact.\textsuperscript{157} In other words, the alleged ‘truth’ of the official version of the journalistic investigation, which I have already shown to be almost certainly falsified in many vital respects,\textsuperscript{158} is doubly compromised by the self-referential (and narcissistic) need to recast the real-life story in terms of film narrative. Take for example the beat-cop like delivery of the voice-over for the theatrical promo.

\textit{The story of the two young reporters who broke the Watergate conspiracy...They tripped over clues. And piece by piece they solved the greatest detective story in American history.}

Compare this with Redford’s explanation for one of the defining and powerful visual conceits of the film, periodic long shots and aerial views that draw our attention to smaller foreground characters who are always visual-
ly juxtaposed against a monumentalist architecture/ urban landscape\(^{159}\): ‘To contrast the hard work they [Woodstein] were doing, way, way, way down at the bottom of things, against the State, the city, even the administration…’. Now compare this with Woodstein’s self-portrait of Woodward in the opening scene of the book version.

Woodward had worked for the Post for only nine months, and was always looking for a good Saturday assignment, but this didn’t sound like one. A burglary at the local Democratic headquarters was too much like most of what he had been doing—investigative pieces on unsanitary restaurants and small-time police corruption. Woodward had hoped he had broken out of that; he had just finished a series of stories on the attempted assassination of Alabama Governor George Wallace. Now, it seemed, he was back in the same old slot.\(^{160}\)

Without batting an eye, and apparently impervious to irony, Ben Bradlee holds forth on Woodstein’s investigative journalism: ‘It’s the longest shot I’ve ever seen in journalism.’ Which is my point exactly: it was such a long shot that it could not actually be one. A double layer of disinformation now comes into view: not only do Woodstein dissemble in order to conceal their own clandestine activities—All the President’s Men was a counter-conspiracy (uncover the cover-up) of an antecedent conspiracy (the cover-up) which was itself a conspiratorial act undertaken in reaction to an even earlier conspiratory act

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159 Monumentalism may be usefully defined as the architectonic expression of the will-to-totality.

160 Ibid, 13. Given the involvement of both Coulson and Hunt with Bremer and the possible status of the Wallace shooting as a deep event, this might be a more significant admission than has been previously realized.
acy (the sabotaged burglary, which although classified as a failure was really a success)—but their concealment conforms to the dramatic and narrative requirements of Tinseltown, which, precisely because they are cinematic, acquire a greater veracity through strict compliance with the movie-goers’ expectations of the expose film as ‘truth.’ Jameson has elaborated on this unrecognized ‘double movement’ brilliantly.

But the originality of _All the President’s Men_ is to have staged its chain of events virtually from the outset as the struggle between two conspiracies, two collectivities, two supra-personal organizations; the plumbers versus the newspaper: the White House versus the _Washington Post_; the voices on the telephone versus the in principle equally disembodied voice of ‘Deep Throat’; the amoral arrogance of the Nixon officials versus the equally brutal and ruthless determination and ambition of the young reporters.¹⁶¹

This is clearly demonstrated by the striking visuality of the newsroom of _The Washington Post_, the only set in the film that is fully lit; Jameson deduces (probably correctly) that Pakula thinks that ‘the _Post’s_ openness and harsh fluorescent lighting is the sign of Truth itself and everything uncomfortable about it: actually, its light is fully as unnatural as the darkness, and is also in some sense a replay and an unfolding of the primal offices at the Watergate with which we began.’¹⁶²

¹⁶¹ Jameson, 67.

¹⁶² Ibid, 75. To the best of my knowledge, no critic of the film, including Jameson, has drawn any attention to what is for me one of the most striking features of many of the scenes in the film: the prominence given to framed portraits or paintings, most notably the centrally placed presidential photograph of John F. Kennedy in Democratic Party Headquarters. These may be visual puns—a double entendre on ‘truth’ as the framing of a story and the conflicting stories of the warring
The political unconscious of post-modernism, epitomized by the conspiracy text requires the re-working of the triptych of the classical detective thriller (the detective/hero, the criminal/villain and the victim) as *collectivities*. Collectivization of dramatic personae is necessary because all agency in a globalized world-system is corporate. Within this banal materialist observation lies concealed a subversive aesthetic truth that was very much operative in *NIXON/WATERGATE*—the unfolding of the spectacle of Watergate is identical with the suspension of the possibility of any possible future repetition. The spectacle of Watergate proves the efficacy of the rule of law through the judicial removal of the enemy within, yet the clandestine agency at work was to effect an extra-judicial *coup d’etat*: the highest proof that ‘the system works’ was the covert appropriation of the system by private agency. On the level of personal agency, the gumshoe-like dogged individualism and beat-cop heroism of the solitary investigators constitutes not a new dawn of investigative journalism but its precise moment of expiration; what stands out to us, ’the children of the video age’, in watching this film is the historical *obsolescence* of what Redford freely admits are the ‘dramatic weapons’ of Woodstein: telephone, type-writer, tele-type, and notebook, all of which become ‘stronger’ over the course of the film as the investigators approach their goal, but remain objects ‘which the hermeneutic of detection at once transforms into traces and signs.’ For Jameson, following Walter Benjamin, the dramatic deployment of ‘archaic technology’ constitutes a primary means of ‘signaling the lost and, by now, irrelevant past.’

*collectivities as the ‘framing’ of the other.*

164 Ibid, 76.
At any rate, it seems clear that, in *All the President’s Men*, the representability of this narrative material is somehow deeply related to what is already archaic about it, to what is already secretly no longer actual, what is outmoded and already old-fashioned, whether or not the participants or indeed the first viewers are aware of it. It is as though somehow the film bore on itself in a kind of calibration the rate of the trajectory of its own contents into the distant past, the heroic legendary moment of a vanished medium, the newspaper, a news sensation that was always somehow in its generic nature a fairy tale.\(^{165}\)

As we should expect, the ‘grand moment’ of both the book and film version, the union of the dramatic and the clandestine, and the spectacle’s victorious collapsing of knowledge into gossip is the handling (framing?) of Deep Throat. According to the promo,

> *It was a plot device worthy of a Cold War spy thriller: a shadowy figure, the keeper of the secrets of a national crime, reveals snippets of information to the man struggling to crack the case. Had Hollywood invented it, no one would have believed it.*

Of course, to a very real degree Hollywood did invent it, even more so if we understand Woodstein to have been writing the first treatment of a screenplay in the form of a journalistic novel. The first reference to Deep Throat in the book version is oblique, almost concealed: ‘Woodward called an old friend and sometime source who worked for the federal government and did not like to be called at his office. His friend said hurriedly that the break-in case was going to “heat up,” but he wouldn’t

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\(^{165}\) Ibid, 77.
explain and hung up.’¹⁶⁶ Deep Throat is not formally announced in the text until almost fifty pages later.

Woodward had a source in the Executive Branch who had access to information at CRP [Committee to Re-Elect the President] as well as at the White House. His identity was unknown to anyone else. He could be contacted only on very important occasions. Woodward had promised he would never identify him or his position to anyone. Further, he had agreed never to quote the man, even as an anonymous source. Their discussions would be only to confirm information that he had obtained elsewhere and to add some perspective.¹⁶⁷

As was more or less faithfully reproduced in the film version, the source, now explicitly identified as Deep Throat, later expresses an interest in an alternative mode of communication; ‘At first Woodward and Deep Throat had talked by telephone, but as the tensions of Watergate increased, Deep Throat’s nervousness grew. He didn’t want to talk on the telephone, but had said they could meet somewhere on occasion.’¹⁶⁸ Woodward’s investigative success with Deep Throat prompts a rueful response from Bernstein: ‘Back at the office, Woodward went to the rear of the newsroom to call Deep Throat. Bernstein

¹⁶⁶ Bernstein and Woodward, 23.
¹⁶⁷ Ibid. Which leads directly to two of the most egregious examples of disinformation in the book version: in the footnote at 112 we read that ‘No dissatisfied FBI agent or CRP employee had ever come to Bernstein or Woodward offering information.’; at 177, an unnamed FBI Agent informs Bernstein that ‘‘We went to everybody involved in the money [the slush fund]…we know that 90 percent of your information comes from the Bureau files. You either see them or someone reads them to you over the phone.’’
¹⁶⁸ Ibid, 71.
wished he had source like that. As if by magic, he gets one: the mysterious woman (Delphic Oracle?) known only as ‘Z’. Bernstein makes first contact with ‘Z’; absolutely no context or background is provided.

The woman was in a position to have considerable knowledge of the secret activities of the White House and CRP…She refused to be interrogated, and laid down the ground rules: she would point the reporters in the right direction to help them fill in some of the right names in the right places—certain hints, key avenues to pursue. She would answer questions only in the most general way, if at all. Much of what she called her ‘message’ might seem vague, partly because even she didn’t understand things completely, and because the information would be difficult to sort out.

This scene appears almost verbatim in Redford’s film, except for the fact that the message is not attributed to ‘Z’ but to Deep Throat; the depiction of Bernstein’s first encounter with ‘Z’ is transposed in toto to Woodward’s first nocturnal (and underwordly) interview with Deep Throat (Hal Holbrook), who, however, is equally oracular to the mysterious woman.

“Your perseverance has been admirable,” she said. “Apply it to what I say.”

169 Ibid, 76.

170 ‘The reporters returned to more conventional sources. A few nights later, Bernstein signed a Post car out of the office garage and drove to an apartment several miles away. It was about eight o’clock when he knocked on the door. The woman he was looking for answered, but when he told her his name, she did not open the door. She slipped a piece of paper underneath it with her unlisted telephone number written on it. “Call me later this evening,” she said, adding “Your articles have been excellent.”’ Ibid, 211-12.

171 Ibid, 212.
Bernstein, who had no idea what to expect, thought she sounded like some kind of mystic.172

A case of camouflage by transposition?

Or as Robert Redford put it, ‘Tremendous signs all over the place.’

172 Ibid. Even worse for the conspiracy junky, just like the iconic ‘Play it again, Sam’, the equally iconic ‘Follow the money’ is never actually said by anyone, in either the film or the book; the source of the cliche is provided in a statement delivered by yet another nameless lawyer who is an associate of E. Howard Hunt’s lawyer, William O. Bittman: “The money is the key to this thing.”’ Ibid, 34.