

LIVING AND WRITING ON THE EDGE IN DON DELILLO'S *LIBRA*

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Abstract More than fifty years after his tragic death, John F. Kennedy continues to fascinate and incite the interest of a large public. The American Camelot endures, despite numerous and various revisionist historiography evaluations of JFK's presidency and personal life. Conspiracy thinking underlies both the idealistic and the unflattering views of the Kennedy image and has proved to be a considerable factor in the proliferation of this cultural construct. However, very little has been written on the psychological, social and cultural mechanism which keeps the JFK flame burning. Don DeLillo is the only American novelist who transcends the mere sensationalist side of the Kennedy assassination toward a personal, yet historically informed, fictional analysis of November 22nd 1963 and its aftermath, in his 1988 novel *Libra*.

Keywords John F. Kennedy, historiography, truth, revisionism, conspiracy thinking, imagination, public opinion, Modernism vs. Postmodernism.

For over half a century, John F. Kennedy's memory has been the subject of numerous inquiries, historical and fictional, and has attracted a great amount of controversy, which only speaks of the wide interest in possibly the most iconic American public figure to date. Few have attempted to understand and further explain this popular fascination with the Kennedy image and even fewer have interrogated its roots and the forces which propelled the 35th president of the United States to mythological status. Don DeLillo is the only American novelist who has tackled the Kennedy assassination beyond the readily available sensationalist angle and with the end in view to expose the intricate process of mythmaking and the role of the imagination and personal representation for individual and national narratives.

In 1988, a quarter of a century after John F. Kennedy was murdered, Don DeLillo published his ninth novel, *Libra*. In his alternative account of the event, its

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causes and aftermath, DeLillo brought together three parallel, eventually converging stories: a biography of Lee Harvey Oswald, a CIA plot meant to result in the near assassination of president Kennedy and the actual assassination of Castro, and the efforts made by a retired secret service agent to write a secret history of the assassination for the CIA.

Libra is divided into twenty-four chapters, of which half tell the story of Lee Harvey Oswald's life between 1956 and 1963 and are titled after the places where he spent these seven years. The other chapters cover the plot against Kennedy and are named after the dates that mark its development between April and November 1963. A temporal gap inevitably occurs between the two narrative strands that run parallel to each other, but is eventually bridged, as Oswald comes into contact with the conspirators, in April 1963.

The first two chapters and the titles they bear are significant for both the content and the narrative strategy of the book. Content wise, the first chapter, *In the Bronx*, clearly points to Lee Harvey Oswald as the protagonist of the novel and to his status of a misfit, a figure of the underworld, riding the subway daily, in an attempt to meet other lonely frustrated people. The second chapter, *17 April*, offers the reader a clue early in the novel about the main reason why, in this fictional world, Kennedy was killed: it was Kennedy's failure to make amends for the Bay of Pigs Invasion of April 17th, 1961, which resulted in what was probably one of the greatest embarrassments of US foreign policy. As far as the narrative strategy is concerned, the two chapters seem to make of *Libra* yet another novel with multiple beginnings in the tradition inaugurated by Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*. However, as the reading advances and the plot, in both senses of the word, unfolds, the two beginnings converge, toward the end, in a story that defies ultimate closure and invites the reader to re-visit a world made of and at the mercy of words.

Both Oswald's biography and the conspiracy narrative are subordinated to Nicholas Branch's account, meant to provide the CIA with satisfactory answers to the questions raised by the Kennedy assassination. The function of this character, who is ontologically superior to all the characters in the novel, whether they are based on real people or they are invented, is to endorse a small-scale conspiracy.

In *Libra*, the original plot is directed against Castro and not against Kennedy. Win Everett, a demoted CIA agent, who, after the Bay of Pigs fiasco, is forced to leave the foreground and teach at Texas Woman's University, cannot reconcile with being relegated to a petty job and searches for a solution to make the administration go back to Cuba. He needs what he calls an "electrifying event" and he finds it, or, rather, stages it: an attempt on the President's life, in Dallas, that would point to the Cuban Intelligence Directorate. Kennedy must be scared into overthrowing Castro: "We don't hit the President. We miss him. We want a spectacular miss."¹ However,

¹ Don DeLillo, *Libra* (Penguin Books, 1991), 27–28.

T-Jay Mackey, one of Everett's fellows, secretly alters the initial plan: he recruits Ramon Benitez and Frank Vasquez from the growing community of Cuban exiles in Miami, and Wayne Elko, a soldier of fortune, but fails to inform them that the shooting has to be a miss and not a hit.

The conspirators need a scapegoat and when Win Everett has devised a profile for him, by a lucky coincidence, George de Mohrenschildt, a CIA-related businessman and Guy Banister, former FBI agent, come up with Lee Harvey Oswald, a Marine who defected to the Soviet Union, lived in Minsk, married a Russian woman and, back in the United States, distributes "Hands off Cuba" leaflets and makes no secret of being a leftist.

In the scenario advanced by DeLillo in *Libra*, the first bullet, which hit Kennedy in the throat, is fired by Oswald, from the Texas School Book Depository. His second bullet misses Kennedy, but hits Governor Connally. He then aims for the third time, shoots, and, as he fails again, he has time to see Kennedy's head blow off and is struck by the idea that he might have been set up. It was the Cuban exile, Ramon, who, from behind the fence on the Grassy Knoll, fired the fatal bullet. From here on, *Libra* follows the official version of the Warren Report Commission: Oswald kills police officer J. D. Tippit and then is apprehended by the police in the Texas Theater. Finally, he is shot by Jack Ruby, in the basement of the Dallas police headquarters, in front of a national TV audience.

Libra's plot, both the story and the conspiracy, complied with the cardinal military rule of KISS: Keep It Simple, Stupid! and, as such, evolves within plausible boundaries. Even if DeLillo's novel revises the Warren Report with fictional tools, it is, nevertheless, a piece of "minimalist revisionism." Upper-case Conspiracy would have been at odds with the realistic context described in *Libra*. By the same token, Oswald had to miss; otherwise, he would have contradicted himself and the novel would have lacked in thematic coherence.²

Oswald's final miss is yet another failure in the long range of failures that make up his life. In the end, even if he wished so much to become a historical figure and a constitutive part of his times, that is, to take his life into his own hands, Oswald lends himself to the circumstances that created him and, ultimately, to chance: "He misses because he is Oswald... the antihero can't even be a hero himself. Oswald has to know he has not killed the president. Another failure. It is the overwhelming theme of his life... Oswald would not have walked two blocks to shoot at the president. But the president came to him."³

In what might be interpreted as one of several ways of debunking the Camelot myth, DeLillo chose Lee Harvey Oswald as the thematic centre of the novel,

² David T. Courtwright, "Why Oswald Missed: Don DeLillo's *Libra*", in *Novel History*, ed. Mark C. Carnes (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001), 84–85.

³ Don DeLillo, "The Fictional Man", in *Novel History*, 92.

rather than President John F. Kennedy. Oswald undergoes an identity crisis and needs to project it on the nameless, faceless people he sees everyday in the subway. He has to check his troubles against a group of people because by transferring his fear and discontent with society, he is reassured to belong, to be a cog in the wheel. He needs to experience anger within a framework which he creates and of which he then becomes part. Ironically, when he finds himself in Minsk and has the chance to be just a brick in the wall, as he has wished, he suddenly realises he wants to dream the American dream: "He is a loner seeking connection in the United States, and he is a 'comrade' seeking individuality in the Soviet Union."⁴ An excerpt from one of Oswald's letters to his brother, which DeLillo chose as an opening to the novel, suggests that Oswald's need to become integrated in the larger flow of History is a key theme of the story: "Happiness is not based on oneself, it does not consist of a small home, of taking and getting. Happiness is taking part in the struggle, where there is no borderline between one's own personal world and the world in general."⁵

If life could be compared to a circle, then Oswald could be pictured as the centre and the circumference of his own circle. He is the lead character of the stories he himself has devised. His obsession with making projects of his self and trying to enact them reaches its climax toward the end of the novel, when Oswald is satisfied to have become part of History and to have found his goal, i.e., to analyse his assassination of the president. But Oswald did not live to enjoy self-discovery. The way he died, though, was consistent with the way he lived: he died watching himself die, he was actor and witness to his own assassination by Jack Ruby: "He could see himself shot as the camera caught it. Through the pain he watched TV (...) Through the pain, through the losing of sensation except where it hurt, Lee watched himself react to the angering heat of the bullet."⁶ The same uncanny effect is aimed at when another character, the wife of a CIA agent, suddenly realises that Oswald can actually see himself die, and, thus, makes everyone watching his accomplice to the murder of the President:

There was something in Oswald's face, a glance at the camera before he was being shot, that put him here in the audience, among the rest of us, sleepless in our homes— a glance, a way of telling us that he knows who we are and how we feel, that he has brought our perceptions and interpretations into his sense of the crime. (...) He is commenting on the documentary footage even as it is being shot. Then he himself is shot, and

⁴ Christopher M. Mott, "Libra and the Subject of History," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 35 (1994): 131–145.

⁵ DeLillo, *Libra*, 1.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 439.

shot, and shot, and the look becomes another kind of knowledge. But he has made us part of his dying.⁷

This brief moment of communion in violent death probably best explains DeLillo's description of the Kennedy assassination as "the seven seconds that broke the back of the American century." In Timothy L. Parish's words, "he goes from a writer of a plot he cannot complete to being an actor in a plot he did not write."⁸ Oswald's validity as a character is guaranteed by his writer persona. This was most apparent in his so-called "historic diary", a piece of writing DeLillo found "enormously chaotic and almost childlike", unlike a surprisingly "intelligent and articulate" radio appearance he made in 1963.⁹ To call Oswald a writer, even a "failed" one, based on a number of letters and some reading notes on Marx, Lenin and Trotsky is too much, unless the word is used in a broader sense to designate the notion of "plotter." However, in DeLillo's scenario, he ends up being just a pawn and a scapegoat.

It is a common narrative strategy, especially in the case of novels with a metafictional propensity, for an author to insert a representative of his own in the text, in order to orient or, as the case may be, disorient the reader with respect to which interpretive path he or she should follow. Usually, the delegate of the author is an artist, particularly a writer. Timothy L. Parish believes that "Oswald is the writer in *Libra* who compels and ultimately best represents DeLillo's own authorial interest in the story" more so than two other characters: Win Everett, the demoted CIA agent who initiated the whole shoot-but-don't-kill-the-President plan, or Nicholas Branch, whom the CIA authorised to go through all the evidence and write the secret story of the assassination. I would argue that a novel like *Libra* does not encourage such a reading simply because even as it advances an alternative explanation of the assassination, it does so within a fictional framework that challenges closure: to intimate that Oswald is the delegate of the author in the text is to force the reader within an interpretive enclosure, which goes against the inner logic of the novel and is dangerous because of the nature of the association. Rather, I would argue that it is Nicholas Branch who echoes DeLillo's "voice" in the text and his modernist take on historiography.

Parish attributes the whole responsibility for *Libra*'s network of conspiracy to Don DeLillo's imagination. He authors this version of November 22nd 1963 with all its interpretive ramifications – a rather superfluous statement to those who have no difficulty in discriminating between a factual and a fictional account. Surprisingly enough, there still are such people among well-read readers. The inability or

⁷ Ibid., 447.

⁸ Timothy L. Parrish, "The Lesson of History: Don DeLillo's Texas Schoolbook, *Libra*", *Clio* 30. 1 (2000): 1–23.

⁹ Anthony DeCurtis, "'An Outsider in This Society'. Interview with Don DeLillo", in *Introducing Don DeLillo*, ed. Frank Lentricchia (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1991).

unwillingness to accept the aforementioned difference underlies George F. Will's *Shallow Look at the Mind of an Assassin* review of *Libra*, published in *Washington Post*, on September 22nd, 1988.

George Will characterised Don DeLillo's *Libra* as "an act of literary vandalism and bad citizenship," an "exercise in blaming America for Oswald's act of derangement" "valuable only as a reminder of the toll that ideological virulence takes on literary talent."¹⁰ Will accuses DeLillo of inconsistency because on the one hand he stated in the final *Author's Note* that he had not tried to provide "factual answers" and, on the other hand, in an interview claimed to have developed "the most obvious theory" that "does justice to historical likelihood."¹¹ However, the two statements are mutually reinforcing. Will misread the phrase "historical likelihood", because he focused on the word "historical", whereas DeLillo's argument centres on the concept of "likelihood", the understanding of which is the key to the whole debate. The "as if" logic of fiction is the issue at stake and George Will failed to read *Libra* for what it is: a novel. Here is the *Author's Note* that DeLillo placed at the very end of the novel to create and maintain the suspense effect:

This is a book of imagination. While drawing from the historical record, I've made no attempt to furnish factual answers to any questions raised by the assassination. Any novel about a major unresolved event will aspire to fill some of the blank spaces in the known record. To do this, I've altered and embellished reality, extended real people into imagined space and time, invented incidents, dialogues and characters. Among these invented characters are all officers of intelligence agencies and all organised crime figures, except for those who are part of the book's background. In a case in which rumors, facts, suspicions, official subterfuge, conflicting sets of evidence and a dozen labyrinthine theories all mingle, sometimes indistinguishably, it may seem to some that a work of fiction is one more gloom in a chronicle of unknowing. But because this book makes no claim to literal truth, because it is only itself, apart and complete, readers may find refuge here_ a way of thinking about the assassination without being constrained by half facts or overwhelmed by possibilities, by the tide of speculation that widens with the years.¹²

¹⁰ George F. Will, "Shallow Look at the Mind of an Assassin", *The Washington Post*, September 22, 1988, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1988/09/22/shallow-look-at-the-mind-of-an-assassin/f8a4c3c6-8355-43c3-8a04-03d6588688e6/>. Accessed on 01 November 2016.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² DeLillo, *Libra*, 458.

Although this statement leaves no room for an interpretation of the nature of the account, Will read *Libra* as a piece of historical writing. His critique takes a moralizing turn when he argues that novelists drawing on historical events should be true to life: they should be “constrained by concern to truthfulness, by respect for the record and a judicious weighing of probabilities.”¹³ And when self-censorship does not work, George Will feels that it is his duty to warn the reading public against the harm a book like *Libra* might do. Based on a character’s definition of “history” as “the sum total of what they aren’t telling us,” Will counts DeLillo among the “paranoiacs” and “conspiracy addicts.” But again, he fails to realise that this is a conviction of a character, i.e., a paper being living in an imaginary universe more or less tangential to the real world, and that a character’s thoughts and feelings should not be attributed to the author. A one-to-one character-author correspondence is counterproductive first of all because an author cannot be identified with each and every character and second, because an author is ontologically superior to the figments of his or her imagination.

Will goes on to say that DeLillo, as the representative of the American left, saw the Kennedy assassination as “the turning point in consciousness” for Americans and the event that fueled Americans’ scepticism about historical objectivity. The President was killed – sad, but true. The President is dead – long live the President. Oswald was killed – justice was done. Oswald is dead – long live America! The Warren Commission Report came out and questioning an officially established truth is an unpatriotic act. This, in short, is George Will’s argument. His major criticism is that DeLillo pictured America as a sick society that breeds extremism and conspiracies” and Oswald as “a national type, a product of the culture.”¹⁴ It is true that DeLillo placed Oswald within a social and political context, which could not be but America in the late fifties and early sixties, but he did not portray Oswald as a national type— that is too far-fetched. Will goes as far as to suggest that DeLillo’s definition of a writer as “the person who stands outside society, independent of affiliations (...) the man or woman who automatically takes a stance against his or her government” almost associates a writer with an assassin. A parenthetical note— “Henry James, Jane Austen, George Eliot and others were hardly outsiders.” – comes down to saying: either you are with us, or you are out of the canon. It is Will’s belief that DeLillo’s political affiliations make him “a good writer and a bad influence.”¹⁵

In an interview which appeared in *Rolling Stone* magazine one month after George Will’s review, Don DeLillo emphasised the purely fictional nature of the scenario he advanced in *Libra*. However, he made it clear that the fictional scaffolding he raised was undeniably steeped in facts:

¹³ Will, *Shallow Look*.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

If I make an extended argument in the book it's not that the assassination necessarily happened this way. The argument is that this is an interesting way to write fiction about a significant event that happens to have these general contours and these agreed-upon characters. It's my feeling that readers will accept or reject my own variations on the story based on whether these things work as fiction, not whether they coincide with the reader's own theories or the reader's own memories (...) I wanted a clear historical center on which I could work my own fictional variations.¹⁶

If there is an ideal reader for the Warren Commission Report, then that is Don DeLillo, because he actively read the twenty-six-volume report before he set to write what he called "a work of imagination." Someone who has done so much research work must have his own opinion about the Kennedy assassination, although *Libra* makes no claim to historical objectivity. Without denying the importance of history as a discipline or the validity of historical writing, DeLillo's endeavour proves that novelists do have a say not only in universal matters of the heart, but also in historical matters. Asked what fiction offers to people that history denies them, DeLillo answered that "fiction rescues history from its confusions (...) providing the balance and rhythm we don't experience in our everyday lives, in our real lives (...) finding rhythms and symmetries that we simply don't encounter elsewhere."¹⁷

The Kennedy assassination has given rise to a great number of conspiracy theories and continues to challenge the minds of people looking for an answer, or, rather, the answer. DeLillo argued that this event has left an indelible stamp on the American collective psyche which has never recovered from the shock: "We seem much more aware of elements like randomness and ambiguity and chaos since then (...) we've developed a much more unsettled feeling about our grip on reality."¹⁸ Moreover, due to the extensive media coverage of this tragedy, Americans have become aware of what DeLillo calls "a sense of performance." This has been taken to the extreme by such people like Arthur Bremer and John Hinkley who "have a sense of the way in which their acts will be perceived by the rest of us, even as they commit the acts."¹⁹

This explanation cannot be conceived by people like George Will simply because it is an attack on the American way of life and the values it entails, such as the ideas of objectivity, justice, truth and progress; it is equal to saying that something is rotten in the United States and that would violate the City-upon-a Hill-

¹⁶ Anthony DeCurtis, "'An Outsider in This Society'," 50.

¹⁷ Ibid., 56.

¹⁸ Ibid., 48.

¹⁹ Ibid., 49.

dearly-held myth. The same way of reasoning accounts for the “lone gunman” explanation, which is rooted in the archetype of the individual, and overrules the possibility of a plot or conspiracy in the case of the Kennedy assassination. To accept that more than one person can be held accountable for the murder is to admit that America has degenerated to the level of the European way of solving conflicts. No wonder that George Will perceives a work of *fiction* like *Libra* as a threat and that he favours the banishment of the artist from the perfect State, so much like in Plato’s fashion.

The blatant ignorance of, or refusal to distinguish between historical and fictional modes of reference reiterates the old Plato/Aristotle conflict over the concept of “mimesis.” In the last book of *The Republic*, Socrates gives his reasons for having banished “imitative poetry” and the “imitative tribe” from the ideal state. Taking a bed as an example, Socrates describes the three levels discernible in the structure of each and every object: the original level is that of the ideal bed, created by God, the second level is represented by an actual bed made by the carpenter, who imitates God, and on the last level stands the poet or painter’s bed, which is nothing but a second-rate copy. In Socrates’ view, an artist doesn’t have full knowledge of the object he tries to reproduce and the artistic product has no value in itself because it is two times separated from the truth. Imitation is not a serious activity because it draws upon the “rebellious principle” or the irrational part of the soul and impresses undesirable emotions upon the audience. The immediate consequence is that the audience will identify with and imitate what it sees. The only poetry that Socrates will allow in the State is “hymns to the gods and prayers to famous men.” He concludes that “the imitative art is an inferior who marries an inferior and has inferior springs.”²⁰

Aristotle, on the other hand, believes that “it is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened, but what may happen, what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity. The poet and the historian differ not by writing in verse or in prose. The work of the historian Herodotus might be put into verse and it will still be a species of history, with meter no less than without it. The true difference is that one relates what has happened, the other what may happen.”²¹ As far as tragedy is concerned, if it produces within the audience such feelings as fear and pity, it also turns them to good account, in the sense that these feelings also produce a purgation and thus an elevation of the soul during the aesthetic experience or what Aristotle calls “catharsis.”

²⁰ Plato, *The Republic*, Book X, trans. Benjamin Jowett, <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.11.x.html><http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.html>. Accessed on 01 November 2016.

²¹ Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. S. H. Butcher, <http://libertyonline.hypermall.com/Aristotle/Poetics.html>. Accessed 25 November 2016.

George Will's fallacy is that he dismisses fiction drawing on the historical record as a threat to common sense and denies the novelist the right to address controversial issues. Contrary to Will's belief, a novel like *Libra* rejects any claim to objectivity, without arguing against the idea of historiography. As DeLillo himself has explained, the novel might offer the reader a stay against the confusion raised by the assassination at least for the actual time of reading. But it can also prompt him or her to read history.

Apart from the morally and politically-oriented conflict that it raised, *Libra* became an object of dispute between literary critics that consider it to be another example of postmodernist fiction, more precisely of what Linda Hutcheon termed "historiographic metafiction", and those who argue in favour of it being a modernist novel.

As the very name points out, "historiographic metafiction" displays a hybrid nature due to its double orientation: it represents the meeting point of two opposite notions: art for life's sake and "art for art's sake." On the one hand, it is concerned with history and with the way in which the past has come down to us, and, on the other, it feeds on itself, due to its metafictional bias. Linda Hutcheon argues that such a narrative reconsiders the relationship between historiography and fiction, and concludes that they do not stand apart, due to the former's claim to objectivity and the latter's tendency to depart from and distort reality. On the contrary, historiography and fiction come together on account of their being mere discourses and, as such, prone to subjectivity. Since they are both products of the human mind, which is time-, space- and ideology-conditioned, neither can escape the personal touch inherent in any form of discourse. The fact that historiography sets forth with the end in view to offer an objective, credible picture of 'what really happened' does not exempt it from participating to a discursive experience. It only establishes degrees of fictionality among forms of discourse. After all, the very notion of picture cannot be conceived of independently of a beholder and a certain point of view, hence its built-in subjectivity. Fiction and historiography have a common intention. Broadly speaking, they are attempts to nibble at the strangeness of the past. They both endeavour to render coherent a chaotic reality, by translating it into a familiar language. Because they both use language as a means of expression, their communicative effectiveness is one of degree.²²

Postmodernist literary critics term *Libra* a postmodernist novel because it draws on what they consider to be the first postmodern event in American history and because it uses postmodernist techniques to deal with it. Dallas, November 22nd, 1963, had often been referred to not only as a turning point in the twentieth-century, but also as the event that ushered in the postmodern era. It is the point in

²² Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism. History, Theory, Fiction* (London, New York: Routledge, 2003), 41.

time and space that engendered a culture of violence and, at the same time, a nostalgic longing for lost innocence.²³ Norman Mailer reads the Kennedy assassination as the moment since which “we have been marooned in two equally intolerable spiritual states, apathy or paranoia,” while Frederic Jameson interprets it as having raised the curtain on what he calls “a collective communicational festival.”²⁴ Drawing on Linda Hutcheon’s distinction between “events” and “facts,” that is, the real, historically accountable happenings and the historicised recording of them, which is time-, space-, and ideology-conditioned, Jameson suggests that the assassination established what had before been only a tendency, namely, the ascendancy of facts over events, as the media, especially television, gained more and more importance and influence in society.²⁵

Carmichael argues that *Libra* plays upon this cultural phenomenon extensively and that it dramatises this crisis of representation that historiography continues to undergo. Furthermore, the critic maintains that DeLillo illustrates the shift from the modernist to the postmodernist paradigm most clearly in the narrative strand dedicated to Nicholas Branch and his efforts to write a secret history of the Kennedy assassination for the CIA. The retired agent characterised the Warren Report as “the Joycean Book of America” and “the megaton novel James Joyce would have written if he’d moved to Iowa City and lived to be a hundred” and the event that prompted it as having generated “an aberration into the heartland of the real.”²⁶ One of the paradigmatic features of postmodernism is the crisis of the subject and, consequently, of language. In this respect, Oswald’s own writings reproduced in the Warren Commission Exhibits, with their broken syntax, misspellings and malapropisms, are, in Carmichael’s view, additional proof that *Libra* draws on the postmodernist thematic repertoire.

Other literary critics, prominent among them Glen Thomas, insist on the postmodernist quality of narrative and character construction in *Libra*. For example, Win Everett’s plot rebels against its author, assumes its own life and ultimately kills him; the plan is challenged by Mackey’s retaliatory urge and by historical fact, since the initial miss turns into a hit. At the character-level, Oswald is the one most extensively analysed within postmodernist parameters: he is the marginal, de-centred figure, who lives his life in claustrophobia inducing spaces, struggles to become part of capitalised history and writes his way into a framework more coherent than the one he experiences daily, even though his texts are inarticulate

²³ Thomas Carmichael, “Lee Harvey Oswald and the Postmodern Subject: History and Intertextuality in Don DeLillo’s ‘Libra’, ‘The Names’, and ‘Mao II’”, *Contemporary Literature* 34. 2 (1993): 204–218.

²⁴ Norman Mailer and Frederic Jameson cited in Carmichael, “Lee Harvey Oswald and the Postmodern Subject”, 207.

²⁵ Carmichael, “Lee Harvey Oswald and the Postmodern Subject”, 208.

²⁶ DeLillo, *Libra*, 72.

and, at times, incomprehensible. Oswald's divided personality is most apparent at the end of the novel, when he is killed by Jack Ruby. The uncanny effect of his death is that he is portrayed as subject of and simultaneously witness to his own dying.²⁷ It is noteworthy that Glen Thomas's theoretical and interpretive leanings transcend the content and penetrate the language of his critical discourse. For example, he refers to Oswald's troubled character in terms of a "dispersed, split and fragmented sign," obviously drawing on the jargon of poststructuralist linguistics.²⁸

N. H. Reeve, too, admits that the aftermath of November 22nd, 1963 displays characteristics of postmodernism: inconclusiveness, scepticism about all-encompassing narratives and the proliferation of such questions as: who actually shot Kennedy? Was it from the Texas School Book Depository or from behind the fence on the Grassy Knoll? Was there a lone gunman or a conspiracy that should be held accountable for the murder?²⁹ Notwithstanding these features partaking of the postmodernist paradigm, Reeve makes an even stronger case for the modernist bias that underlies even the most paranoid of theories: the belief in and the craving for "the pure and the uncontaminated"—this appears to be the driving force behind the plotters in *Libra*, as well as behind all those who still try to solve the Kennedy mystery.³⁰

Rather than considering *Libra* a piece of postmodernist fiction, and, more specifically, another example of the flourishing genre of "historiographic metafiction," Reeve believes that DeLillo's alternative account of the Kennedy assassination shares in the humanist, modernist endeavour to deal efficiently with chaos and to set the individual and collective consciousness at rest. By definition, "historiographic metafiction" purposely blurs the difference between history and fiction and questions authoritative and authorised historical truth. *Libra* goes beyond this rationale because, on the one hand, DeLillo uses historical evidence quite substantially, even as he draws attention to the fictionality of his account, and, on the other hand, there has never existed an undisputed explanation of the Kennedy assassination: the Warren Report raised question marks and suspicion from the very day of its release. Therefore, it would be fair to say that *Libra* is modernist in content and message, but postmodernist in technique and treatment.

The modernist vs. postmodernist debate is ultimately a purely theoretical dispute that can never be resolved, simply because different critics use different criteria by which they label literary works as belonging to one or the other aesthetic code. Whether one favours the content or the narrative strategies in deciding where

²⁷ Glen Thomas, "History, Biography and Narrative in Don DeLillo's *Libra*", *Twentieth Century Literature* 43. 1 (1997).

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ N. H. Reeve, "Oswald our Contemporary: Don DeLillo's *Libra*", in *An Introduction to Contemporary Fiction*, ed. Rod Mengham (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 135.

³⁰ Ibid., 138.

to place a work of fiction is another reason why this technical conflict cannot be settled.

Although the distinction between form and content is possible only for methodological and analytical reasons, I believe that the return to thematic criticism in recent years can partly be accounted for by works like *Libra*, which, far from neglecting the formal aspect and far from serving a propagandistic purpose either, do have a powerful message that cannot be overlooked.

In the case of *Libra*, the subliminal message has to do with the relationship between history and fiction. DeLillo's novel draws on the historical record and, what is more important, on a controversial event. As a "work of imagination," it is both world-reflecting and self-reflexive in a well-balanced proportion. Rather than endorsing an attitude of scepticism and distrust about the possibility of reaching a satisfactory explanation or about the use of undertaking such an endeavour, *Libra* reflects the individual's hope for and belief in a world that makes sense. Fiction and historiography, DeLillo implies, complement each other in the attempt to give shape and order to the world we live in.