Educational Administration: Theory and Practice
2024, 30(11), 2925-2933
ISSN: 2148-2403
https://kuey.net/

Research Article

Politics of Conspiracy: Ideology, Surveillance, and the Cold War in Don DeLillo's *Libra*

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Citation: Dr Sudhir V. Nikam, et.al (2024). Politics of Conspiracy: Ideology, Surveillance, and the Cold War in Don DeLillo's *Libra*, *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 30(11) 2925-2933
Doi: 10.53555/kuey.v30i11.11095

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Don DeLillo's *Libra* (1988) reimagines the assassination of President John F. Kennedy through the lens of Cold War paranoia, exploring how systems of surveillance and ideological manipulation shaped American consciousness in the late twentieth century. Set amid the turbulent politics of the 1960s, the novel reconstructs the assassination not as an isolated act of violence but as a manifestation of deeper institutional anxieties rooted in the Cold War's culture of secrecy. Through his fragmented narrative and multi-perspectival storytelling, DeLillo exposes how ideology becomes a tool of control and how the surveillance state transforms individuals into both subjects and agents of conspiracy. This paper argues that *Libra* dramatizes the collapse of historical certainty and critiques the myth of American freedom by revealing the entanglement of power, paranoia, and narrative construction. Engaging with theories of postmodernism (Lyotard, Jameson, Baudrillard), ideology (Althusser), and surveillance (Foucault), the study situates *Libra* as a quintessential postmodern critique of the Cold War order and its lingering effects on identity and truth.

Keywords: Conspiracy, Surveillance, Ideology, Cold War, Don DeLillo, Postmodernism, American Fiction

Introduction

Don DeLillo stands as one of the most incisive chroniclers of late twentieth-century America, a novelist whose works interrogate the intersections of power, history, media, and myth. Emerging during a period marked by cultural disillusionment and technological expansion, DeLillo's fiction reveals a sustained preoccupation with the invisible networks that shape political and personal realities. From *White Noise* to *Mao II*, his novels confront the anxieties of modern existence—mass communication, terrorism, identity crises, and the dissolution of meaning. *Libra* (1988), perhaps his most overtly political novel, revisits one of the most traumatic episodes in modern American history: the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. Yet, beyond its historical reconstruction, *Libra* becomes a profound meditation on the mechanisms of ideology and surveillance that defined the Cold War and continue to resonate in the postmodern condition.

Set against the backdrop of the Cold War—a time of espionage, nuclear dread, and ideological bifurcation—*Libra* depicts the entanglement of state power, conspiracy, and individual agency. The novel blurs the boundaries between historical fact and fictional invention, constructing a speculative narrative that reflects how history itself becomes a contested and manipulable text. The assassination, in DeLillo's hands, is not merely a crime or political act but a symptom of a society saturated by paranoia and secrecy. This is a world where surveillance extends beyond physical observation into the psychological domain, where ideology operates as both a mask and a mechanism of control.

The Cold War era fostered a pervasive culture of fear, rooted in the binary logic of capitalism and communism, democracy and dictatorship, freedom and control. Within this ideological framework, surveillance emerged as both a protective and oppressive tool—justified by the rhetoric of national security but functioning as a means of normalizing subjection. DeLillo captures this duality in *Libra* through his portrayal of intelligence agencies, covert operatives, and the ordinary individuals drawn into the machinery of conspiracy. The novel's fragmented structure mirrors the disintegration of coherent historical narrative, reflecting a postmodern skepticism toward official truths.

The central figure, Lee Harvey Oswald, epitomizes this entrapment within ideological and surveillance systems. DeLillo presents Oswald as a man caught between competing political identities—a self-fashioned Marxist, a disillusioned Marine, and an unwitting pawn of larger forces. His alienation and desire for significance make him both subject and product of the Cold War's ideological machinery. Through Oswald's story, DeLillo explores how personal narratives are subsumed by the grand narratives of power and history. The individual becomes a cipher within the complex circuitry of surveillance and propaganda, where agency dissolves under the weight of institutional manipulation.

The paper therefore examines how DeLillo's *Libra* transforms the historical event of Kennedy's assassination into an allegory of Cold War paranoia and postmodern disillusionment. The study is guided by the following questions:

- How does DeLillo reconstruct Cold War paranoia through the Kennedy assassination narrative?
- In what ways does *Libra* reveal the intersection of ideology and surveillance in shaping individual identity?
- How does DeLillo's fiction critique the American political system and its myth of freedom?

To address these questions, the paper employs an interdisciplinary theoretical framework drawing from postmodernism, ideology, and surveillance theory. Lyotard's notion of incredulity toward metanarratives, Jameson's idea of the cultural logic of late capitalism, and Baudrillard's simulacral aesthetics provide the postmodern foundation. Althusser's theory of ideological state apparatuses and Foucault's concepts of power and panopticism further illuminate the mechanisms through which ideology and surveillance operate in the novel. The comparative reference to DeLillo's *Mao II* underscores how his broader oeuvre engages with the politics of control, visibility, and representation in the late modern world.

Ultimately, this paper argues that *Libra* exposes the recursive nature of Cold War politics—where ideology and surveillance not only govern the state but infiltrate the consciousness of its citizens. DeLillo's narrative structure, shifting viewpoints, and metafictional commentary underscore the impossibility of recovering a singular truth. The novel thus becomes a critique of both historical certainty and political morality, portraying a society ensnared in its own systems of observation and deception. In doing so, *Libra* transcends its historical setting to offer a timeless reflection on the entanglement of power, knowledge, and human vulnerability in the age of information and control.

Literature Review

Don DeLillo's *Libra* has attracted extensive critical attention for its bold reimagining of one of the most contested moments in American history: the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. Critics have approached the novel through multiple frameworks—historical, political, cultural, and postmodern—recognizing it as a paradigmatic text of late twentieth-century American fiction. The Kennedy assassination, as DeLillo reconstructs it, becomes more than an event; it becomes a cultural text through which the ideologies of the Cold War, the structures of surveillance, and the rhetoric of conspiracy are exposed and interrogated.

DeLillo's *Libra* situates itself within what Linda Hutcheon describes as "historiographic metafiction", a postmodern mode that "refuses the natural or common-sense methods of representation" while foregrounding the constructed nature of history (Hutcheon 5). The novel rewrites history not to recover a lost truth but to reveal how narratives—political, media-driven, and fictional—shape collective memory. DeLillo's America of the 1960s is haunted by secrecy and surveillance, a nation defined by what he calls "the rain of data" (DeLillo 181). The text thus becomes a palimpsest of historical rewriting, where the past is mediated through competing ideological frameworks.

Critics such as Frank Lentricchia argue that *Libra* "embodies the moral imagination of history" in which "fiction becomes a vehicle for exploring the ethical dilemmas of knowledge and power" (Lentricchia 45). This moral imagination is inseparable from the Cold War's pervasive paranoia. As Tony Tanner notes, DeLillo's fiction "captures the deep anxieties of a society that suspects its own institutions" (Tanner 233). The Cold War's ideological polarization—democracy versus communism—provided fertile ground for conspiracy narratives, a theme DeLillo transforms into a commentary on the crisis of representation in postmodern America.

The theme of conspiracy has long been central to DeLillo's fictional universe. Mark Osteen observes that in DeLillo's work, "conspiracy becomes both a metaphor and a structure," suggesting the interconnectedness of political systems, individual psyches, and textual networks (Osteen 117). In *Libra*, the assassination plot evolves not as a linear chain of events but as a labyrinthine web of intentions, coincidences, and manipulations. This narrative form parallels Jean-François Lyotard's idea of "incredulity toward metanarratives," wherein the totalizing narratives of modernity collapse into fragmented micro-histories (Lyotard xxiv). DeLillo's narrative thus embodies postmodern skepticism toward any singular version of truth.

Fredric Jameson's notion of "the cultural logic of late capitalism" also illuminates *Libra*'s conspiratorial texture. Jameson contends that postmodern culture is marked by a "waning of historicity" and a substitution

of simulacra for reality (Jameson 18). DeLillo mirrors this condition through the endless mediation of the assassination, where the event itself dissolves into an archive of televised images, intelligence reports, and conflicting testimonies. As John N. Duvall notes, "*Libra* dramatizes how the spectacle of assassination becomes the very condition of history's legibility in postmodern culture" (Duvall 63). The assassination is both the origin and the erasure of meaning, reflecting Baudrillard's claim that "we live in the ecstasy of communication" where signs replace reality (Baudrillard 80).

DeLillo's *Libra* is deeply concerned with the ways in which ideology shapes consciousness and behavior. Drawing on Louis Althusser's concept of ideological state apparatuses, one can read the novel as a portrayal of how individuals internalize the state's dominant ideology through institutions such as the military, media, and intelligence agencies (Althusser 143). Lee Harvey Oswald's ideological instability—his oscillation between communism and patriotism—embodies the contradictions of Cold War subjectivity. Oswald's attempt to author his own narrative ("I will write the story of my life") becomes an act of resistance against the ideological scripts imposed upon him (DeLillo 103). Yet, as Althusser suggests, ideology functions precisely by giving individuals the illusion of autonomy.

From a Foucauldian perspective, *Libra* exposes the micro-physics of power operating within surveillance networks. Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* conceptualizes surveillance as a form of disciplinary power that "induces in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility" (Foucault 201). DeLillo translates this into the realm of Cold War espionage, where visibility itself becomes a form of vulnerability. The CIA, FBI, and shadow organizations in *Libra* exemplify the panoptic gaze that structures both political and personal life. As David Cowart remarks, "DeLillo's vision of surveillance extends beyond the state—it infiltrates the very consciousness of his characters" (Cowart 92).

The Cold War's ideological polarity sustained a culture of suspicion that DeLillo captures with uncanny precision. As Peter Knight argues, *Libra* is "a novel about the epistemology of conspiracy," examining how people make sense of an increasingly incomprehensible political world (Knight 12). In this context, conspiracy becomes a mode of cognition—a way of restoring meaning in an age of uncertainty. Yet DeLillo resists the reduction of conspiracy to madness or delusion; instead, he portrays it as the logical extension of a society obsessed with control, secrecy, and surveillance.

The historical moment DeLillo reimagines—1963—was marked by both technological optimism and existential dread. The threat of nuclear annihilation and the rise of television created what James Berger calls "a paranoid aesthetic" where every image concealed an invisible truth (Berger 58). In *Libra*, this aesthetic manifests in the tension between private subjectivity and public spectacle. The novel's intricate layering of perspectives underscores the impossibility of distinguishing the real from the fabricated, echoing Baudrillard's notion that "the Gulf War did not take place"—that is, events are experienced primarily as mediated signs (Baudrillard 39).

DeLillo's narrative technique reinforces his thematic concerns. His fragmented chronology, polyphonic voices, and metafictional commentary destabilize conventional realism. According to John Johnston, DeLillo "constructs history as text—an unstable and contested site where the real and the imagined coalesce" (Johnston 152). *Libra*'s oscillation between official archives and speculative fiction exemplifies what Brian McHale terms the ontological poetics of postmodernism—"the shifting focus from epistemological questions of knowledge to ontological questions of being" (McHale 10).

In *Libra*, history is not recovered but reassembled; meaning emerges through the gaps and contradictions between competing narratives. This structural indeterminacy becomes DeLillo's critique of modern political systems that depend upon secrecy and manipulation. The assassination, as represented in the novel, is both a literal and symbolic event—the convergence of ideology, surveillance, and the postmodern loss of referential truth.

Analysis and Discussion

Historical and Cultural Context

Don DeLillo's *Libra* is embedded in the tense ideological climate of the Cold War, a period characterized by the bipolar division between capitalism and communism, liberty and control, democracy and dictatorship. This binary world order shaped the collective psychology of postwar America, giving rise to a culture of suspicion and political anxiety. The Cold War was not merely a geopolitical contest but also a conflict of representations—of ideas, values, and myths. As Fredric Jameson observes, the era produced "a kind of cultural paranoia" wherein ideology was experienced as everyday reality (Jameson 65). *Libra* reflects this condition by dramatizing the psychic and political effects of living within an apparatus that constantly mediated truth and secrecy.

The American ideology of liberty—so deeply enshrined in its national consciousness—was paradoxically accompanied by a pervasive fear of infiltration and subversion. DeLillo's fictional reconstruction of the Kennedy assassination unfolds in a society that defines itself through contradiction: the simultaneous exaltation of freedom and the necessity of control. The novel's protagonists, from the disillusioned Marine Lee Harvey Oswald to the intelligence operatives shaping covert plots, inhabit a world where every action is shadowed by ideological surveillance. As Oswald reflects, "Everywhere he looked he saw plots and schemes.

He could not tell where one stopped and another began" (*Libra* 122). His perception mirrors the collective psyche of an America entrapped by its own binary logic—freedom justified through fear.

Propaganda and psychological warfare played central roles in sustaining Cold War ideology. Through media and information networks, both superpowers manufactured narratives of truth and threat. Jean Baudrillard's notion of simulation aptly describes this phenomenon: reality becomes indistinguishable from its representation. In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard writes, "The Cold War itself was a fiction, a gigantic script of mutual deterrence" (Baudrillard 54). *Libra* captures this artificiality through DeLillo's portrayal of intelligence agencies scripting history as performance. The "plots" in the novel—both literal and metaphorical—echo the state's effort to sustain ideological equilibrium through fiction. DeLillo thereby reveals how power is maintained not only by coercion but by narrative control.

DeLillo's America is also one defined by mass media saturation. Television, newspapers, and intelligence bulletins become tools of psychological management. As Nicholas Branch, the retired CIA historian in the novel, laments, "There's too much life to assimilate. Facts, rumors, secrets—an excess of everything" (*Libra* 181). The deluge of data, while promising truth, produces only confusion—a postmodern anxiety where meaning collapses under its own abundance. Linda Hutcheon's concept of historiographic metafiction clarifies this paradox: postmodern fiction "problematizes the very possibility of historical knowledge" (Hutcheon 13). DeLillo, by reimagining the Cold War within the labyrinth of information and disinformation, demonstrates how ideology becomes a form of narrative production.

The assassination of President John F. Kennedy in 1963 remains one of the most profound ruptures in the American national psyche. In *Libra*, DeLillo transforms this event into a metaphor for the fragmentation of historical identity and the loss of collective innocence. The assassination functions not only as a historical tragedy but as a cultural trauma that exposes the instability of American ideals. As Frank Lentricchia notes, *Libra* is "a meditation on how a nation lives its myths through its murders" (Lentricchia 49). The death of Kennedy shattered the illusion of American exceptionalism, revealing the violence embedded within its own political structure.

DeLillo's reimagining of the assassination as a conspiracy dramatizes what Peter Knight calls "the cultural logic of suspicion" (Knight 17). The collective obsession with conspiracy after 1963 was symptomatic of a society unable to reconcile its ideals with its realities. The proliferation of competing theories—ranging from lone-gunman hypotheses to CIA involvement—signaled the erosion of public trust. In *Libra*, this paranoia manifests through the narrative multiplicity itself: the novel unfolds across overlapping viewpoints, contradictory accounts, and speculative reconstructions. As Branch admits, "He is lost in the data… in the swirl of event and counter-event" (*Libra* 243). The reader, like Branch, becomes ensnared in a web of epistemic uncertainty.

The Warren Commission Report**,** the official account of the assassination, epitomizes the state's attempt to impose narrative order upon chaos. Yet DeLillo subverts this authority by exposing how such narratives conceal rather than reveal truth. The report, in the novel's symbolic economy, functions as an ideological artifact—what Althusser would call a "state apparatus" designed to reproduce belief in institutional legitimacy (Althusser 147). By rewriting the assassination through fiction, DeLillo engages in an act of counter-history, challenging what Michel Foucault describes as the "regime of truth" produced by power (Foucault 131). The novel thereby becomes a site of resistance, a textual space where official history is destabilized through narrative experimentation.

The assassination, moreover, embodies a deeper existential crisis—the recognition that history itself is vulnerable to manipulation. The repetition of images of Kennedy's death on television, replayed endlessly, transformed trauma into spectacle. In this sense, *Libra* anticipates Baudrillard's critique of media simulation: "We are witnessing the liquidation of the real" (Baudrillard 11). The event is no longer experienced as history but as hyperreality—a reproduction that obliterates the original. DeLillo captures this transformation in his meticulous blending of archival realism and imaginative reconstruction, making *Libra* both a novel about history and a novel against history.

The Cold War witnessed an unprecedented expansion of surveillance systems, from the technological apparatuses of the CIA and FBI to the psychological mechanisms of ideological conformity. DeLillo's *Libra* situates this surveillance culture at the heart of American life, portraying a society where visibility is synonymous with vulnerability. The intelligence networks in the novel—obsessively monitoring, decoding, and manipulating—reflect what Foucault describes as the panoptic model of power: "to induce in the subject a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (*Discipline and Punish* 201).

Characters in *Libra* live under the gaze of both the state and the media. Oswald, for example, becomes the ultimate product of surveillance—his life monitored, recorded, and reconstructed through endless files and photographs. Yet, paradoxically, he also seeks to make himself visible through acts of defiance and performance. DeLillo captures this irony when Oswald muses, "He wanted to be seen, to be known, to enter the picture" (*Libra* 147). His desire for recognition within a surveillant world underscores the psychological effects of constant observation: the internalization of control.

Public distrust in institutions after 1963 further deepened this surveillance anxiety. As David Cowart observes, DeLillo's fiction reveals "a world in which the technologies of observation have outstripped the capacities of human understanding" (Cowart 89). The proliferation of data becomes both a means of governance and a

source of paranoia. The post-assassination era—marked by Watergate, Vietnam, and domestic espionage—confirmed the extent to which the American state had become its own watcher and watched. DeLillo's *Libra* anticipates the information age's dilemmas: privacy, authenticity, and the collapse of individual agency under the weight of systemic visibility.

DeLillo's Libra: Fictionalizing History

DeLillo's *Libra* reimagines the Kennedy assassination not as a closed historical fact but as an ongoing narrative process. Through the character of Nicholas Branch—a retired CIA historian attempting to write the "secret history" of the assassination—DeLillo constructs a meta-historical commentary on the impossibility of knowing the past. Branch's "room of theories," cluttered with documents and files, becomes an allegory of postmodern historiography. He admits, "He has too much information, more than he can process, more than he can remember" (*Libra* 241). His paralysis reflects Lyotard's claim that in postmodernity, the proliferation of knowledge leads not to enlightenment but to incredulity toward total explanation (Lyotard xxiv).

Linda Hutcheon's concept of historiographic metafiction aptly captures DeLillo's strategy: "the interweaving of historical fact with fictional invention to question the authority of both" (Hutcheon 121). DeLillo does not seek to rewrite history as truth but to expose the conditions under which history itself is written. By fictionalizing the gaps between known facts, he reveals how history is constructed through interpretation, omission, and desire. *Libra* thereby performs what Foucault calls "the archaeology of knowledge," excavating the discursive formations that produce official narratives (Foucault 135).

DeLillo's structural complexity also invites comparison with James Joyce's *Ulysses*, another modernist experiment in reconstructing fragmented identity. Critics such as John N. Duvall have called *Libra* a "Joycean Book of America," wherein DeLillo, like Joyce, attempts to map the national consciousness through narrative form (Duvall 67). Just as *Ulysses* transforms Dublin into a microcosm of the modern world, *Libra* transforms Dallas into a symbolic geography of America's political and psychological fractures. Both novels share a fascination with the interplay between individual subjectivity and historical destiny.

DeLillo's "reconstruction" is therefore not about discovering the assassin's motive but about understanding the conditions that make such an act possible. In his reimagining, conspiracy becomes an epistemological problem—a symptom of postmodernity's obsession with causality in a world where meaning is perpetually deferred. As Nicholas Branch realizes, "The truth lies somewhere between the files, in the space where the data doesn't quite meet" (*Libra* 287).

One of DeLillo's central insights in *Libra* is that truth itself has become pluralized, fragmented into competing narratives. The official history of the assassination—the Warren Report—competes with conspiratorial accounts, each claiming authenticity. This multiplicity exemplifies Baudrillard's notion of the simulacrum, in which representation replaces reality to the point that "there is no longer a distinction between the map and the territory" (Baudrillard 1). In *Libra*, the "truth" of Kennedy's death is less an event than a constellation of stories, each erasing the other.

DeLillo's narrative structure embodies this epistemological crisis. Through shifting perspectives—Oswald, Branch, Everett, Parmenter—the novel simulates the experience of reading a conspiracy: every answer generates new questions, every explanation reveals another concealment. The narrative's recursive logic mirrors the logic of the Cold War itself—self-justifying, endless, and paranoid. As Althusser argues, ideology functions not through direct coercion but by structuring what is thinkable within a given historical moment (Althusser 170). DeLillo's novel dramatizes this insight by showing how even dissent becomes absorbed within ideological containment.

Information overload, a recurring motif in DeLillo's oeuvre, reaches its apotheosis in *Libra*. The novel's fragmented narration parallels what Jameson describes as the "schizophrenic temporality" of postmodern culture—a disjointed sense of time and history (Jameson 25). The Kennedy assassination becomes, in this sense, not an event of the past but a continuous present—forever replayed, reinterpreted, and repackaged. The result is epistemic collapse: knowledge becomes indistinguishable from speculation.

DeLillo's *Libra* thus functions as a metafictional critique of modern information culture. Nicholas Branch's futile research becomes emblematic of humanity's condition in the data age: trapped between an excess of knowledge and a deficit of meaning. As he concludes, "There is no reason to believe anything except that someone has made it up" (*Libra* 302). This sentiment captures DeLillo's ultimate insight—the impossibility of separating truth from fiction in a world governed by ideology, surveillance, and simulation.

Ideology and the Construction of the Enemy

Don DeLillo's *Libra* dramatizes the Cold War as not merely a political confrontation but a vast ideological theater in which both individual and collective identities are produced through mechanisms of power and representation. Following Louis Althusser's concept of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), which include the media, education, religion, and cultural institutions, the American Cold War narrative can be understood as a system that "interpellates" subjects into ideological conformity (Althusser 143). In *Libra*, DeLillo exposes how these apparatuses construct "the enemy"—Communism, Cuba, and the Soviet Union—not only as external threats but as essential to maintaining the coherence of American identity.

The ideological conflict between capitalism and communism generated a binary worldview sustained through propaganda and media representation. The myth of American liberty depended on its opposite—the fear of infiltration and subversion. This ideological dualism mirrors the logic of Cold War politics, where "freedom"

itself became a commodity marketed through images and slogans. As Fredric Jameson observes, postwar American culture turned ideology into spectacle, producing "a collective investment in images of freedom and threat" (Jameson 49). DeLillo's novel captures this atmosphere through the paranoia and theatricality surrounding intelligence agencies and public discourse.

The construction of the "enemy" is evident in DeLillo's portrayal of the U.S. government's obsession with Cuba and the Soviet Union. Oswald's brief defection to the USSR and his later involvement with pro-Cuban movements serve as allegories for the ideological schizophrenia of Cold War America. As Win Everett remarks in *Libra*, "You need a villain to make the drama work" (DeLillo 27). Everett's fictional plan to stage a failed assassination attempt on Kennedy, later spiraling into real tragedy, allegorizes how ideology manufactures its enemies to sustain its narrative logic.

Kennedy himself occupies an ambivalent symbolic position. To the American public, he embodies the myth of youthful hope, progress, and democratic idealism. Yet within DeLillo's fictional framework, he becomes a victim of the same ideological contradictions that sustain this myth. His assassination signifies what Jean Baudrillard calls the "death of the real"—the moment when history becomes indistinguishable from its media simulation (Baudrillard 42). The televised assassination, endlessly replayed, turns Kennedy into an icon devoid of substance, his death the ultimate spectacle of Cold War ideology.

The ideological apparatuses in *Libra* are not confined to governmental institutions but permeate the collective unconscious of the nation. As David Cowart notes, DeLillo's fiction "reveals how ideology operates not as doctrine but as atmosphere—an invisible architecture of thought" (Cowart 95). This invisible architecture shapes both public perception and private behavior, rendering the Cold War less a geopolitical contest and more a psychic condition—a collective obsession with control, secrecy, and surveillance.

Lee Harvey Oswald, the novel's central figure, embodies the fragmented consciousness of the Cold War subject, caught between competing ideological systems. DeLillo reconstructs Oswald not as a mere assassin or scapegoat but as an ideological product—a man shaped and reshaped by the symbolic machinery of his age. His oscillation between Marxism and American patriotism reveals the contradictions inherent in Cold War subjectivity.

Oswald's fascination with Marx and Lenin, his attempt to defect to the USSR, and his later disillusionment with both communism and capitalism dramatize what Althusser describes as the process of ideological interpolation—the illusion of individual agency within systemic structures (Althusser 170). When Oswald declares, "I want to live in a world that is mine" (DeLillo 83), his desire for autonomy only reinforces the ideological web that confines him. His readings of Marx and Orwell become acts of self-fashioning through textual ideology; he seeks meaning through words that have already been co-opted by larger discourses of power.

DeLillo captures this through his characterization of Oswald as both author and subject, both historian and participant. His ambition to write an autobiography titled *The Diary of Lee Harvey Oswald* reflects what Linda Hutcheon calls "the postmodern compulsion to narrate the self through history" (Hutcheon 11). Yet, as DeLillo shows, Oswald's narrative collapses under the weight of contradiction. His identity becomes a site of struggle between the ideological imperatives of the state and the fragmented voice of individual consciousness.

The novel's description of Oswald's "whirl of time" (DeLillo 317) functions as a metaphor for historical determinism and ideological confusion. Trapped within a spiraling narrative of coincidence, surveillance, and manipulation, Oswald becomes both the instrument and victim of ideology. His assassination of Kennedy—or participation in its orchestration—thus becomes less an act of personal will than the culmination of ideological conditioning. As John Johnston suggests, "Oswald's agency in *Libra* is both produced and negated by the very systems he believes himself to oppose" (Johnston 161).

DeLillo's treatment of Oswald resists moral judgment. Instead, he renders him emblematic of what Slavoj Žižek calls the "subject of ideology"—one who sees through the illusion yet continues to act within it (Žižek 28). Oswald's tragic isolation and failed rebellion mirror the condition of modern man in a world where politics, media, and history converge into a single, self-perpetuating narrative machine.

VI. Surveillance, Paranoia, and the Machinery of Control

The network of intelligence operatives in *Libra*—Win Everett, David Ferrie, T-Joy Mackey, and others—functions as DeLillo's representation of the bureaucratic paranoia that defined the Cold War. Their shadowy world of plots, leaks, and counterplots embodies what Michel Foucault describes as the "panoptic regime of power"—a system where control is maintained through the constant possibility of surveillance (Foucault 201). DeLillo's depiction of Everett's "file rooms, stacks of reports, coded cables, and photographs" (DeLillo 37) evokes the labyrinthine structure of bureaucratic knowledge. The CIA and FBI appear less as instruments of protection than as machines producing narratives—narratives that create enemies, justify control, and perpetuate secrecy. As Win Everett remarks, "History means nothing if it cannot be rewritten" (DeLillo 48). This statement encapsulates DeLillo's critique of intelligence culture: surveillance not only observes but also constructs the reality it purports to monitor.

Ferrie's monologue on "the third line of intuition and dreams" (DeLillo 267) extends the notion of surveillance into the metaphysical. He suggests that control transcends politics, permeating thought, coincidence, and destiny. In this way, DeLillo transforms Foucault's disciplinary power into what Jean

Baudrillard might call the "hyperreal surveillance" of the postmodern condition—where the distinction between observation and imagination collapses (Baudrillard 98). The conspirators in *Libra* act not merely as political agents but as participants in a metaphysical system of control, a world where every act is already foreseen and rehearsed within the logic of paranoia.

DeLillo's narrative structure mirrors this surveillance logic. The novel's shifting perspectives, intercut timelines, and polyphonic voices create an aesthetic of fragmentation that mimics the disorientation of living under constant observation. As Peter Knight observes, "*Libra*'s form enacts the paranoia it depicts, implicating the reader in the network of surveillance and suspicion" (Knight 115). By rendering history as an archive of competing fictions, DeLillo exposes how power sustains itself through the illusion of hidden truth—a truth that can never be fully known, only endlessly pursued.

The Cold War's psychological landscape was dominated by fear—of nuclear annihilation, ideological contamination, and political betrayal. DeLillo's *Libra* translates this fear into a narrative structure of control and repetition. The novel's pervasive sense of dread reflects what Mark Osteen terms "the cultural logic of paranoia," where "control and chaos become indistinguishable" (Osteen 124).

In *Libra*, fear operates as both a political strategy and a psychic mechanism. The state's use of secrecy, propaganda, and surveillance produces a population that internalizes control. As Foucault argues, "The perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary" (Foucault 202). DeLillo dramatizes this through the way ordinary citizens—like Oswald and Everett—become agents of their own surveillance, perpetuating the very system that oppresses them.

This politics of fear anticipates contemporary forms of global control. DeLillo's portrayal of Cold War surveillance prefigures the post-9/11 security state, where technological monitoring, data collection, and mass media manipulation have become normalized. As James Berger notes, "DeLillo's world is one in which the apparatus of security becomes indistinguishable from the production of terror itself" (Berger 71). In this sense, *Libra* transcends its historical setting to articulate a prophetic vision of the modern surveillance society.

DeLillo critiques the American intelligence community not as a corrupt anomaly but as the logical extension of Enlightenment rationality—the belief that knowledge equals power. In *Libra*, this belief mutates into obsession: knowledge proliferates endlessly, but understanding recedes. Nicholas Branch, the retired CIA analyst tasked with compiling "the complete history of the assassination," becomes a tragic figure of epistemological exhaustion. Surrounded by "a room of theories" (DeLillo 181), Branch's work epitomizes the futility of total knowledge. As he confesses, "There's no end to what you can learn. Because there's no end" (DeLillo 184).

Branch's paralysis mirrors the reader's own confrontation with DeLillo's labyrinthine narrative. The more information accumulates, the less meaning it yields. This is DeLillo's ultimate insight into the machinery of control: the system does not merely conceal truth; it replaces it with infinite data. As Baudrillard writes, "Information devours its own content. The meaning of meaning disappears" (Baudrillard 95).

By the novel's conclusion, DeLillo transforms the Kennedy assassination into a meditation on the crisis of knowledge in the age of surveillance. The political merges with the metaphysical: control becomes not only an institutional mechanism but a condition of being. DeLillo's vision, as John Duvall argues, "locates paranoia not at the margins of American life but at its very center" (Duvall 77). The nation's identity depends on the narratives of threat and protection it constructs, ensuring that the machinery of control remains perpetually in motion.

Violence, Anxiety, and Terror

In *Libra*, Don DeLillo situates violence not as an aberration but as the grammar through which the political unconscious of America articulates itself. The assassination of President Kennedy is the ultimate performance of this political language, where murder becomes both a ritual and a revelation. Violence becomes a means by which power speaks and society confronts its own fractures. Kennedy's body, repeatedly replayed in the Zapruder film, becomes what Jean Baudrillard calls "the hyperreal image," an endlessly reproduced spectacle detached from its referent (Baudrillard 11). The assassination, rather than silencing discourse, generates an infinite narrative industry of suspicion, commentary, and simulation. DeLillo presents the murder not as an isolated event but as the culmination of systemic violence—political, ideological, and media-induced—that defines the Cold War psyche. Violence, thus, becomes America's tragic semiotics, a spectacle that signifies the breakdown of collective faith in truth, progress, and morality.

Lee Harvey Oswald emerges in *Libra* as a tragic subject of existential anxiety. His oscillation between Marxism and American capitalism mirrors his fragmented identity—a man without stable belonging. DeLillo explores Oswald's alienation through interior monologues and historical reconstruction, transforming him into a postmodern "everyman" adrift in a universe of competing ideologies. His personal alienation transforms into political violence as he seeks to inscribe meaning onto history through the act of assassination. As Fredric Jameson suggests, the postmodern subject suffers from "a new depthlessness" where identity is mediated entirely through systems of power and representation (Jameson 6). Oswald's "whirl of time" encapsulates this loss of temporal and moral orientation. His violence becomes an act of existential authorship—an attempt to reassert agency in a world ruled by impersonal institutions. DeLillo thereby converts the assassin's anxiety into an allegory of late-modern dislocation.

DeLillo's *Libra* prophetically extends Cold War paranoia into the domain of global terrorism. The same architecture of fear, surveillance, and symbolic violence that defines Oswald's world reappears in post-9/11 America. In later novels such as *Mao II* and *Falling Man*, DeLillo portrays terrorism as communication—a globalized performance of violence that fulfills the same ideological functions as the Kennedy assassination. "The future belongs to crowds," writes DeLillo in *Mao II*, echoing the transition from political conspiracy to mass-mediated terror (DeLillo 16). *Libra* anticipates this future, where state surveillance and individual rebellion become mirror images. The assassin and the terrorist occupy the same symbolic space: both are products of ideological saturation and the hunger for significance in an age of simulation. Thus, DeLillo's novel transcends historical fiction to forecast the moral and political anxieties of global modernity.

DeLillo's Political Vision and Postmodern Ethics

Libra functions as DeLillo's ethical interrogation of how history is constructed, mediated, and consumed. His political vision dismantles the mythology of American innocence by exposing the complicity between ideology, intelligence, and media. Through metafictional techniques and polyphonic narration, DeLillo blurs the boundary between fact and fiction, forcing readers to confront the instability of historical truth. The novel's central ethical question—whether fiction can redeem or distort history—reveals DeLillo's ambivalence: while narrative offers understanding, it also risks perpetuating illusion. As Linda Hutcheon observes, postmodern historiographic metafiction "reinstates historical referentiality while simultaneously questioning it" (Hutcheon 122).

DeLillo's portrayal of the intelligence community as a self-referential system of control recalls Foucault's notion of panopticism, where power operates through surveillance and normalization (Foucault 200). The convergence of ideology and technology in *Libra* illustrates how individuality dissolves within systemic networks. The novel's moral force lies in its insistence on human vulnerability amid such machinery. DeLillo's fiction becomes a counter-history—a moral inquiry into how societies manufacture meaning through violence and fear. Ultimately, *Libra* stands as a postmodern epic of America's loss of innocence, offering not certainty but a warning: when political ideology and media simulation converge, truth becomes indistinguishable from fiction, and ethics fade into spectacle.

Findings

Don DeLillo's *Libra* dramatizes the politics of conspiracy as a narrative of fractured subjectivity, ideological manipulation, and systemic paranoia rooted in the Cold War imagination. The novel dismantles the illusion of coherent history by transforming the Kennedy assassination into a textual labyrinth where ideology and surveillance converge. Through a postmodern lens, *Libra* exposes how power operates not merely through institutions but through representations—media, myth, and narrative itself.

Louis Althusser's theory of the Ideological State Apparatus illuminates the function of ideology in shaping both the collective and the individual consciousness. DeLillo portrays the Cold War as a cultural condition in which the state manufactures "the enemy" to sustain national unity and political legitimacy. Communism, Cuba, and Soviet Russia become ideological constructs necessary to define American identity. The figure of John F. Kennedy, idealized as the emblem of hope and renewal, simultaneously embodies the contradictions of this mythic narrative—his assassination becomes both the collapse and reaffirmation of national ideology (Althusser 172).

Within this ideological machinery, Lee Harvey Oswald emerges as the quintessential subject—an individual caught between two competing systems. His readings of Marx, Lenin, and Orwell represent an attempt to self-fashion an ideological identity amid historical confusion. DeLillo transforms Oswald's oscillation between capitalist America and communist idealism into a metaphor for Cold War dislocation. The "whirl of time," as described in the novel, symbolizes not merely Oswald's psychological turmoil but also the historical vertigo induced by competing truth regimes.

The novel's portrayal of surveillance reveals Foucault's notion of panopticism at work in the American intelligence system. Figures like Win Everett and David Ferrie embody the bureaucratic paranoia that sustains institutional control through secrecy. The surveillance network becomes self-perpetuating—its purpose no longer national defense but the maintenance of its own authority. DeLillo extends this surveillance into metaphysical domains, suggesting that the "machinery of control" encompasses dreams, intuition, and imagination itself.

Violence in *Libra* functions as a political language—a means through which ideology manifests its breakdown. The assassination, replayed endlessly through television and cultural memory, transforms the President's body into a national text—fragmented, consumed, and commodified. DeLillo's narrative links the spectacle of political violence to the postmodern condition of anxiety and alienation. Oswald's existential emptiness mirrors the collective unease of a society where meaning has dissolved into media simulacra (Baudrillard 12).

Finally, *Libra* anticipates the logic of contemporary terrorism and global surveillance. The paranoia that defined the Cold War persists in the post-9/11 world, where ideology, technology, and fear continue to shape political consciousness. DeLillo's prophetic insight lies in his depiction of violence as communication—a language through which modern power speaks and reproduces itself. In this sense, *Libra* is not merely a

historical reconstruction but a moral inquiry into the postmodern condition of control, complicity, and eroded individuality.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Don DeLillo's *Libra* transforms the Kennedy assassination into a profound meditation on power, ideology, and human vulnerability. The novel dismantles the myth of American exceptionalism by revealing the ideological and bureaucratic forces that manufacture both violence and meaning. Through its portrayal of conspiracy as systemic logic, *Libra* bridges Cold War paranoia with contemporary global anxieties. DeLillo's narrative vision underscores how surveillance, media, and ideology collaborate to produce reality, blurring the line between history and simulation.

The ethical core of *Libra* lies in its demand for awareness—the recognition that truth in a postmodern world is not discovered but constructed. DeLillo's warning resonates in the twenty-first century, where political narratives and digital surveillance replicate the same structures of control. Ultimately, *Libra* is not a novel about who killed Kennedy but about how America killed its own innocence. It stands as DeLillo's most compelling reflection on the moral cost of conspiracy, urging a reawakening of responsibility in an age where spectacle has replaced history.

Don DeLillo's *Libra* stands as a profound meditation on the interplay of ideology, surveillance, and violence in late-twentieth-century America. By blurring the boundaries between history and fiction, DeLillo transforms the Kennedy assassination into an allegory of systemic control and existential despair. The novel reveals how individuals like Oswald are not simply agents of chaos but products of ideological conditioning and historical circumstance. Ultimately, DeLillo's political vision is both critical and ethical: he warns that when power is mediated through fear and surveillance, truth itself becomes a casualty. *Libra* thus transcends its Cold War context to articulate a postmodern ethics of awareness—one that resists conspiracy by confronting the mechanisms of meaning that sustain it.

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