

The Ideology of Detection in Pynchon and DeLillo

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a rare creature indeed, unfit perhaps for marches and sit-ins, but just a whiz at pursuing strange words in Jacobean texts.

—Thomas Pynchon (CL 104)

The description of Pynchon's Oedipa Maas above might once have served to describe Pynchon critics and, indeed, critics of postmodernism generally. Emphasis on the epistemological and ontological uncertainties of self-reflexive and open-ended texts has for too long distracted attention from their social and political import. Even Marxist critics like Fredric Jameson and Terry Eagleton, who might be expected to be more receptive to the social meaning encoded in complex texts, have characterized postmodern fiction as apolitical pastiche or depthlessness—generalizations as premature as they have been influential. Almost as if in response to these critics, Pynchon has recently published a text (*Vineland* [1990]) so ostentatiously political that it might well prompt a more socially conscious rereading of his entire oeuvre.¹ This essay is a mere prolegomenon to such a rereading, spurred by *Vineland* and by the recent work of critics like Linda Hutcheon and Robert Siegle who have begun to see the formal innovations of postmodern fiction, not merely as intellectual puzzles, but also as responses to social context and as cultural interventions designed to effect change within that context.²

After all, Pynchon's description of Oedipa quoted above actually begins with a "they" who "had managed to turn" Oedipa into that "rare creature indeed, unfit perhaps for marches and sit-ins, but just a whiz at pursuing strange words in Jacobean texts" (104; emphasis added). Pynchon's novel is an investigation into the identity and influence of this "they," into the social forces which have worked to disable more direct means of social protest and left Oedipa feeling powerless, a mere reader of signs in an epistemological muddle. "They" are real people, the ruling class, and the way they disempower Oedipa is through ideology: "a system of representations, perceptions, and images that precisely encourages men and women to 'see' their specific place in a historically peculiar social formation as inevitable, natural, a necessary function of the 'real' itself" (Kavanagh 310).

In such traditional detective fiction as Wilkie Collins's *Moonstone* or Edgar Allan Poe's "Murders in the Rue Morgue," the detective functions as an agent of ideology, working unself-consciously within hegemonic norms to identify and contain any threat to the social order.³ Alternatively, in Pynchon's metaphysical detective fiction, investigators are led to question generically "natural" assumptions regarding the alien otherness of their prey and to begin a meta-investigation into the social forces determining their original search and their very identity as detectives. Thus self-reflexivity becomes ideology critique, with literary-generic norms revealed as enforcing the social status quo and with the detective discovered to be as much subject to as subject of those norms, both victim and enforcer.

The mysteries investigated in Pynchon's meta-detective fictions may be outlined as follows: who or what is V. in V. (1963), the Trystero in *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), Imipolex G in *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973)? It is a critical commonplace to note that the detective figures in these texts, like the readers who accompany them on their searches, find no easy answers and are themselves variously destabilized as a result: schizophrenic Herbert Stencil, phobically avoiding what he desires to approach; Oedipa, perhaps insane, still awaiting the crying of lot 49; and Tyrone Slothrop, epistemologically and ontologically scattered, having himself become a mystery for future detectives to piece together. I would like to sketch briefly here a new way of understanding this familiar psychological-philosophical conundrum. Between individual psychology and the generalizations of philosophy lies the realm of the social. Reading Pynchon's meta-detective fictions in relation to their sociocultural context reveals them to be ideology critiques.

This essay is meant to be neither exhaustive nor definitive; its goal is to suggest and provoke. I focus on the ideology of detection in Pynchon as one way of placing his works in historical context and of linking them with the fictions of Don DeLillo—an approach which reveals much about both authors. There are, of course, other ways to approach these writers, as exemplified in Brian McHale's wonderfully detailed itemization of the ambiguities in Pynchon, or in the recent, highly sophisticated poststructuralist readings of DeLillo. At the risk of being thought reductive and simplistic, I have attempted here to say some blunt things about the politics in Pynchon's and DeLillo's fiction. In analyzing specific texts, I have had to cut some argumentative corners, ignoring some subtleties and qualifications. But in so doing I mean to confront readers with the question: has Pynchon studies spent so much time analyzing ambiguities that it has virtually ignored Pynchon's politics? I hope the following statements will at least have

the virtue of raising the issue of politics in no uncertain terms and will provoke readers to debate the truth of these generalizations.

Stencil tracks V. as the common link among disparate events of death and destruction in the twentieth century. "Events seem to be ordered into an ominous logic" amounting to a "conspiracy leveled against the animate world," and wherever war breaks out, a woman, V., is present (449, 411). Furthermore, Stencil's father "died under unknown circumstances," and his mother mysteriously disappeared; V. may be "his mother" (52, 54). So, like a bad detective, Stencil adopts an "approach and avoid" attitude toward V., wanting to identify the cause of the century's violence and his father's death, but afraid that the answer will strike too close to home, revealing a deadly conspiracy destined to engulf him even as it once, apparently, gave him birth (55).

Unlike Stencil's V., Pynchon's V. is a relentless critique of patriarchal misogyny and gynophobia which never passes up an opportunity to expose Stencil's quest as ideologically motivated and ultimately self-destructive. Though Stencil himself never seems to have his consciousness raised, Pynchon ensures that the reader-detective understands each obstacle to Stencil's pinning the crime on some femme fatale V. as a sign that the ruling fathers are using woman as a scapegoat for their own violent insecurity. Herbert Stencil's search for V. is a "legacy from his father," Sidney Stencil, from whom he inherits both a potentially admirable "imaginative anxiety" about preventing world "holocaust" and a self-destructive tendency to disclaim his own responsibility for the world's ills and to project blame onto women (155, 62, 194). Instinct might tell Stencil that his detection of V. is merely a perpetuation of the patriarchal point of view, that the events he has "Stencilized" onto V. the goddess of death "add up only to the recurrence of an initial and a few dead objects" (228, 445). But, as Pynchon makes clear, "about drives as intellectualized as Stencil's there can be no question of instinct: the obsession was acquired, surely, but where along the line, how in the world?" (226). How indeed, if not by being "caught up" in his father's "compulsive yarning" about the mysterious and deadly female V.? (388).

As "other" to man in the patriarchal perspective, woman is associated with everything outside male control. If "there is more accident to [life] than a man can ever admit to in a lifetime and stay sane," then self-preservation dictates the embodiment of accident—the localization of uncertainty—in women, like "Mothers," who "are closer than anyone to accident"—the unpredictable processes of conception, birth and death (320-21). As a figure for womb and tomb, the woman V. is detective Stencil's forced solution to the

dilemma of uncertainty: if he can pin her down, he can control the world. Thus the search for V. is motivated by a desire to fix uncertainty—to delve into it, study it and stamp it with male order: "As spread thighs are to the libertine, flights of migratory birds to the ornithologist, the working part of his tool bit to the production machinist, so was the letter V to young Stencil" (61). But such a violently, desperately imposed order extends the very disorder it is designed to stamp out, making woman over into a dead certainty in what seems to be the answer to male desire (Stencil's "vile" imagination conjures up a V. with an ever-receptive "vagina of polyethylene" [411]) but in fact only leaves him unfulfilled and alone in an entropically inanimate world of his own making. Stencil's masculinist detective's eye imposes its own mystery on women, then reduces them to an unsatisfying conclusion. Pynchon reveals Stencil's V.-quest for the rake's progress it is by an implicit comparison with Don Juan, who, like Stencil, was "no more able to talk of any mistress's heart than to cease keeping that interminable Catalogue" of his sexual conquests (184).

Even if Stencil never discovers (or keeps repressed) the reason for his "womanhunt," Pynchon gives the reader-detective enough clues to figure it out: "[Stencil's] giving you any clear reason would mean he'd already found her. Why does one decide to pick up one girl in a bar over another. If one knew why, she would never be a problem. Why do wars start: if one knew why there would be eternal peace. So in this search the motive is part of the quarry" (386). To find the meta-detective's true quarry—his own motive for detection—would require Stencil to examine the androcentric assumptions of his V.-quest, to realize that the male desire for control over women (pick-ups) and over other men destroys love and leads to war. As an unconscious member of the patriarchy, Stencil is himself the deadly conspiracy he mistakenly seeks in the woman V. V. is the stencil by which this detective reduces an uncertain combination of life and death to a premature convergence on the latter. In avoiding—even as he approaches—V., Stencil may think he is staving off death, but he is really only blinding himself to patriarchy's fatal assumptions about the female other—assumptions that make his detective's journey or rake's progress itself a kind of death-in-life: "God knows how many Stencils have chased V. about the world." . . . "Is it really his own extermination he's after?" (451). Finding out the real truth behind V. will not confirm Stencil's potency as the Don Juan of detectives, but it might lead instead to the happy extermination of his patriarchal self.

Pynchon's next novel, *The Crying of Lot 49*, takes aim at both gender and class assumptions. This time the meta-detective is female,

and, like both Stencil and her classical namesake, Oedipa is given clues to a truth she would rather not face: she herself is implicated in the plague laying waste the land. A suburban housewife and Young Republican, Oedipa has benefited from—while remaining unaware of—the exploitation and discarding of the underclass by capitalist America. Now, as “executrix” of her former lover the real estate mogul Pierce Inverarity’s will, Oedipa is confronted with the choice between perpetuating the ruling-class division of property (like a good wife) and undertaking a more equitable distribution (9). Related to this choice is Oedipa’s obsessive quest to find the meaning of the Trystero, which may or may not be an alternative postal network by which the dispossessed of America, held incommunicado by the System, secretly commune. Oedipa is a detective trying to read the signs that will enable her to identify the Trystero, but she is also a meta-detective compelled to examine the ideologies that have influenced her particular mode of detection and its chances of success or failure.

Perhaps the main obstacle to solving the mystery is Oedipa’s ambivalence: part of her wants a man in authority simply to tell her “there was no Trystero. She also wanted to know why the chance of its being real should menace her so” (132). Why does Oedipa associate the revelation of the Trystero with a “death-wish” (118)? Because recognition of and sympathy for an empowered proletariat threatens her insulated, upper-middle-class security. Every sign she sees of the muted post horn—symbol of the Trystero’s challenge to conventional communication—makes Oedipa the “private eye” feel more “beat up on,” for it portends an end to the social order to which she has been accustomed all her life while also causing her to question her complacent acceptance of what passes for communication in her society (124).

A “Rapunzel” waiting for someone to free her from her “tower” with his “credit card,” Oedipa has sometimes questioned but never truly doubted the shibboleth that money makes for love and that a passive maiden will find true romance with her strong prince (20). Rather than locate the problem in her own socially conditioned “ego,” Oedipa finds it easier to blame her isolation from true community on “magic, anonymous and malignant, visited on her from outside and for no reason at all” (21). Oedipa’s is a fair description of the prison created by classist and sexist assumptions, but she will never find the key to her cage until she sees that she the detective is already carrying it inside: she has internalized these ideologies.

The “starting point” for an escape from “her encapsulation in her tower” is Oedipa’s “infidelity” (she has married since the end of her

affair with Inverarity) with the lawyer Metzger, though she remains afraid that society would view her instinctive reaching out for love as the act of a “hooker” (44, 26). Opening herself to Metzger’s and the world’s pain (“On the screen New Zealanders and Turks were impaling one another on bayonets. With a cry Oedipa rushed to him, fell on him. . . . His radiant eyes flew open, pierced her, as if she could feel the sharpness somewhere vague between her breasts” [42]), Oedipa braves the loss of her comfortable housewifely self and runs the risk of being taken advantage of; for the movie on TV and the story Metzger tells about his life may be deceitful representations, seduction ploys, and not real cries for help. If Oedipa is afraid to discover the “terrible nakedness” of the Trystero beneath the “breakaway gowns, net bras, jeweled garters and G-strings of historical figuration,” this phobic image conceals from her but reveals to us that what she really fears is her own vulnerability, as in the game of “Strip Botticelli” with Metzger for which she goes to absurd lengths to insulate herself (54, 36).

Oedipa is herself the Trystero: the possibility of her female desire’s fulfillment outside patriarchal marriage and the opportunity for cross-class communication through the distribution of Inverarity’s wealth to the dispossessed and the disinherited. But Oedipa’s feminist search deprives her of paternalistic protection (“they are stripping away, one by one, my men” [153]) and leaves her to fend for herself in an uncertain world of potential lovers or exploiters. Formerly, driving the California freeways, Oedipa may not have been loved, but she was at least “protected from pain,” whereas now that she has become aware of the ghettoized desires “‘Under the freeway,’” she is no longer invulnerable to disappointment or despair (26, 125). Giving America’s poor a share of the “legacy” would not only bring down on her the wrath of the “probate judge” overseeing the execution of Inverarity’s will; it might also provide the underclass the means to take revenge on Oedipa and other capitalists for having exploited them—or so Oedipa’s guilt-stricken conscience fears, much as former Nazi-concentration-camp experimenter Dr. Hilarius imagines Israelis coming to get him (181).

In the end, it is Oedipa’s uncertainty about the consequences of cross-class sympathy and of her own female desire that stymies her search for the Trystero. Epistemological and ontological ambiguity (What is the Trystero? What kind of world does Oedipa inhabit?) is tied to classist and sexist ideology, for Oedipa has been schooled in the repression of potentially threatening—and fulfilling—aspects of herself and her society. As she admits, “I use the U.S. Mail because I was

never taught any different" (111-12). What is harder for her to understand is the socialization still working unconsciously to keep her ignorant.

In *Gravity's Rainbow*, the genre of metaphysical detective fiction carries Pynchon's critique of dominant ideologies into the realm of world politics and the military-industrial complex. Slothrop, an American GI during the Second World War, becomes a "hardboiled private eye" of sorts searching for Imipolex G, the possible "Mystery Stimulus" that causes him to get an erection in areas of London where German rocket-bombs are about to strike (561, 84). Some problematic evidence suggests that Slothrop was conditioned as an infant to become sexually aroused in the presence of this new plastic, developed by the chemist and psychologist Laszlo Jamf, whose goal was to control nature (through synthetics) and human nature (through behavioral conditioning). Slothrop's alleged unconscious lust for Imipolex G, a plastic used in at least one particularly noteworthy V-2, is a metaphor for the ideology of war, the socially conditioned desire that makes men want to fight and kill as proof of their manhood: "Got a hardon in my fist, / Don't be pissed, / Re-enlist— / Snap—to, Slothrop!" (61). Slothrop is the unwitting victim of the imperialists in power, who have colonized his unconscious, so that "THE PENIS HE THOUGHT WAS HIS OWN" is really "like an instrument installed, wired by Them into his body as a colonial outpost . . . representing Their white Metropolis" (216, 285). Slothrop's potentially humane and life-affirming desire is reduced to a lust for conquest as a conditioned reflex, his body territorialized to conform to a phallocratic order: "this may sound odd, but he was somehow . . . *inside his own cock*. . . . Yes, inside the metropolitan organ entirely, all other colonial tissue forgotten and left to fend for itself. . . . He is enclosed. Everything is about to come, come incredibly, and he's helpless here in this exploding *emprise*" (470).

Slothrop's sleuthing after Imipolex G is not self-determined, but driven by an implanted desire to own the phallic force of a rocket-bomb. Near and after the end of the Second World War, the victorious Allies track Slothrop, counting on him to lead them to the German technology whose power they want to monopolize: "The Imipolex question was planted for him by somebody . . . They knew Slothrop would jump for it. Looks like there are sub-Slothrop needs They know about, and he doesn't" (490). Slothrop the detective does not recognize the extent to which his quest is conditioned by others and self-destructive because he himself is caught up in the desire for knowledge as power.

Pynchon exposes the traditional detective as an agent of the System, ideologically motivated to identify the criminal as *other* in the belief that such projection will exculpate the detective himself from responsibility for the crime: "look at the forms of capitalist expression. Pornographies: pornographies of love . . . pornographies of killing, and pornographies of deduction—*ahh*, that sigh when we guess the murderer—all these novels, these films and songs they lull us with, they're approaches, more comfortable and less so, to that Absolute Comfort. . . . The self-induced orgasm" (155). Unlike traditional detective novels, Pynchon's meta-detective fiction reveals the "masturbat[ory]" desire for "*male supremacy*" driving the detective's quest, a selfish desire that is the extension of the "secret lusts" moving the military-industrial complex and the "planet . . . toward a terminal orgasm" (155, 223). Though alternatives to phallocentric sexuality appear (as in polymorphously perverse sex, where there are "no favored senses or organs, all are equally at play," or where it is possible for a partner to come "twice before cock was ever officially put inside cunt" [439, 120]), Slothrop remains hell-bent on conquest, "in love, in sexual love, with his, and his race's, death" (738). It is finally no accident that the "girl-stars" on Slothrop's map "coincide" with the "rocket-strike circles," for Slothrop's patriarchal will to mastery succeeds only in "abolish[ing] all trace of the sexual Other"; it does not ensure the security and perpetuation of life that is his conscious design (86, 85).

Pynchon leaves readers uncertain of Slothrop's fate: does he follow the traditional detective's route to the self-destructive illusion of mastery, to the "*ahh*" of self-induced and terminal orgasm, or is he able to step outside his socially prescribed role as detective and see its complicity with the men in power and their greed for monopolistic control? Pynchon anticipates the critical debate over Slothrop's end, and even satirizes in advance the critical tendency to reduce sociopolitical matters—questions of *ideology*—to mere epistemological or ontological issues. The mysterious "Scatter[ing]" of Slothrop leaves detectives in and of the text trying to resolve contradictory clues to the nature of knowledge and being, believing that if they

knew better what those categories concealed, they might be in a better position to disarm, de-penis and dismantle the Man. But they don't. Actually they do, but they don't admit it. Sad but true. They are as schizoid, as double-minded in the massive presence of money, as any of the rest of us, and that's the hard fact. The Man has a branch office in each of our brains. (712)

As reader-detectives, either we can repeat Slothrop's early mistake of following the line of inquiry laid out for us by the powers that be, refusing to admit to ourselves that they will not reward us with power for our efforts and that their grab for power is its own doom, or we can stop acting as self-destructive agents of a self-destructive ideology, recognize that our ignorance is repressed knowledge, and follow our own intuition to a true understanding of the social determinants that dictated our former thoughts and behavior (as Slothrop may have tried to do in the end). This understanding is itself a kind of change, enabling further revolution (as in the subversive behavior inspired by Slothrop and temporarily enacted by his friends in the Counterforce).

The writer on whom Pynchon has had perhaps the greatest influence is Don DeLillo. Pynchon's and DeLillo's novels are often seen as belonging to a school of paranoid or conspiracy fiction, but to use such terms is to mimic the literary-conservative disdain for politically engaged texts.⁴ The tradition in which Pynchon and DeLillo write might be more positively described as socially conscious metaphysical detective fiction, with William S. Burroughs as an immediate ancestor and William Faulkner as a more distant one. Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, for example, is a self-reflexive and open-ended fiction in which (detective) Quentin Compson comes to no confirmed or self-confirming conclusion, but instead faces his own complicity in Southern society's racism, sexism and classism. Pynchon has praised DeLillo's fiction for taking us "beyond the official versions of our daily history" and "behind all easy assumptions about who we're supposed to be" (SN). DeLillo, in turn, has described Pynchon as the author who, "more than any other writer," has "set the standard" for his generation (TDD 26). For DeLillo too makes detective fiction more socially responsible, interrogating the genre itself as a means of questioning official ontology and easy epistemology, and of provoking social transformation. The remainder of this essay outlines a sociocultural reading of DeLillo's meta-detective fiction as it follows in the tradition of Pynchon's.⁵

In one chapter of Pynchon's *V.*, a Stencilized and Stencil-like figure named Porpentine finds out the hard way that, in assuming the role of spy to further the cause of humanity, he reduces himself to an object fated to carry out a mechanical ritual of pursuit and elimination. Thus, even before Porpentine is shot by one of his adversaries, he has already given himself over to the forces of immachination and inanimateness he had wanted to combat. In a scene recalling the climax of thrillers like John Buchan's *Thirty-Nine Steps* but also influenced by Alain Robbe-Grillet's *chosisme*, Pynchon describes Porpentine's attempt to avert an assassination in a theater. Pynchon satirizes Porpentine's

paranoid fear of the inanimate and his fatalistic response to a supposedly entropic world by narrating the event from a nihilistically indifferent perspective: "A man [Porpentine's quarry] wearing blue spectacles hurries into the second box from the stage end of the corridor. The red curtains, heavy velvet, swing to and fro, unsynchronized, after his passage. The oscillation soon damps out because of the weight. They hang still." As "late summer light" turns everything to a "monochrome orange," "flames . . . colored a brighter orange than the sun" leap from one man's gun—it is hard to tell whose—and a "half-crouched body collapses. . . . At rest the body is assumed exactly into the space of this vantage" (93-94). Porpentine's spying makes him a mirror of his adversary, and the deadly flash with which each attempts to combat the world's growing darkness brings only extinction.

Like Porpentine, Lyle Wynant in DeLillo's *Players* is attracted to spying as a means of restoring individual agency in the face of dehumanizing events. Working on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange, Lyle is a mere cog in the capitalist machine, allowing his own labor to be exploited even as he helps the rich make more money off the working class. The idea of spying for a terrorist organization planning to bomb the Stock Exchange appeals to Lyle's desire for self-empowerment and social revolution, but in joining another organization, in doing his detective work at the bidding of others and not on his own initiative, Lyle once again allows himself to be objectified. In a complex world where "terrorist network" and "police apparatus . . . sometimes overlap," Lyle cannot be sure the knowledge he gains as a spy is being used to further the cause of social justice (116). Instead, double agents in the terrorist organization may be extracting surplus value from Lyle's detective work, selling his secrets back to the very capitalists he opposes.

Like Pynchon's, DeLillo's self-defeating detective is a warning against the prevailing ideology of detection: detectives who do not interrogate the social context in which their detective work occurs may find themselves unwitting agents of the forces their work is intended to counteract. Porpentine's aggressively paranoid detection promotes the entropic forces he is trying to forestall, and Lyle's naively eager detection enables others to capitalize on his work in a way contrary to his and humanity's best interests. Hence the irony by which the more personally involved Lyle gets in spying, the more dehumanized he becomes.

In a satirical mode similar to Pynchon's, DeLillo describes a last view of Lyle from the perspective of an unidentified "we" (DeLillo and his reader-detectives?) who are as pathetically willing as Lyle is to

surrender responsibility for the results of our detective work, for what is done with our secrets. Lyle is waiting to receive further orders from his superior, J. Kinnear, who he knows may be a double agent:

The angle of light is direct and severe, making [Lyle] on the bed appear to us in a special framework, [his] intrinsic form perceivable apart from the animal glue of physical properties and functions. This is welcome, absolving us of our secret knowledge. The whole room, the motel, is surrendered to this moment of luminous cleansing. Spaces and what they contain no longer account for, mean, serve as examples of, or represent. (212)

The aestheticization of detection irradiates it as pure form, cleansing it of the ambiguity of human relations in this complex world. By simply turning over the results of his detection to some authority, the spy can feel absolved of all moral responsibility for the way his knowledge will be used to change—or, more likely, to perpetuate—the present distribution of power in the world. The price Lyle pays for such easy absolution is nothing less than his humanity: "The propped figure [Lyle] . . . is barely recognizable as male. Shedding capabilities and traits by the second, he can still be described (but quickly) as well-formed, sentient and fair. We know nothing else about him" (212).

The need for detectives to examine their own vocation in terms of its social responsibility is stressed in another chapter of *V.* from which DeLillo seems to have drawn inspiration. Kurt Mondaugen, a German engineer stationed in Southwest Africa in the 1920s, is investigating "atmospheric radio disturbances" ("sferics") to determine their source and potential meaning (230). Meanwhile, the Germans ruthlessly suppress a rebellion of the Bondel natives they have enslaved. Mondaugen seeks refuge from this social chaos in trying to decipher order in the sferics, but is frustrated at his inability to understand the message, finding that "His efforts at the code . . . didn't succeed in keeping back the nightfall of ambiguity" (257). Furthermore, the Bondels seem bent on interfering with his investigation, smashing his equipment and—mischievously—"imitating sferics" on their native instruments (234). One night the proto-Nazi Weissmann taunts Mondaugen by showing that the sferics, decoded, spell out Mondaugen's own name and "DIEWELTISTALLESWASDERFALLIST" ("The world is all that the case is") (278).

Here Pynchon gives us the means to critique the ideology of detection which dictates Mondaugen's behavior as an investigator. His detective work is not a refuge from or alternative to the brutal imposition of social order but an extension of same. The German

military want to use whatever information Mondaugen discovers to help them win the next world war, much as "listening in on telephone messages among the Allied forces" almost enabled them to win the first (230). The Bondels smash Mondaugen's scientific equipment because they sense that his knowledge will be put to use in imposing a German order on them. As an investigator, Mondaugen can gain no transcendent perspective on the world's meaning, but must realize that his interpretation is conditioned by his place in space and time (as Wittgenstein's "the world is all that the case is" reminds us). In the end, he does seem capable of an intuitive recognition of the complicity between scientific and military notions of order: he leaves behind his equipment and the German suppression of the Bondels to ride away with one of the natives, who sings a song in a tongue Mondaugen "couldn't understand" but in which he senses a meaning like his own (279).

In DeLillo's *Ratner's Star*, a group of intellectuals in a think tank tries to find meaningful order in "artificial radio source extants" (intergalactic radio signals) while the monopolistic greed of capitalist entrepreneurs like Elux Troxl increases "international tensions" and brings the world to the brink of nuclear war (274, 281). When boy genius Billy Twillig discovers that the "artificial radio source extants" are actually coming from earth's own past (ARSE) and are warnings from our human ancestors not to make the same mistake they did of using knowledge for (self-)destructive power, the other scientific investigators ignore him, considering social messages outside their realm of inquiry, and concentrate instead on using the signals to develop a purely logical language. In what will be no surprise by now to readers familiar with socially conscious metaphysical detective fiction, the think tank turns out to be funded by Elux Troxl, who is using the unwitting scientists to help him develop a "concept-idée of money" to control the world's "money curve," a nefarious goal which may have been furthered by that purely logical (manipulable, instrumentalizable) language (146). Thus does DeLillo urge intellectuals to heed the worldly import (ARSE) of their heady investigations and to reflect on the social motives and purposes of their never-merely-objective inquiries.

DeLillo's most important contribution to the genre of meta-detective fiction is *Libra*.⁶ In this novel, Nicholas Branch is writing an investigative report on the Kennedy assassination. Though critics have sometimes read *Libra* as a traditional detective fiction, confusing DeLillo with Branch, DeLillo has insisted that he is "a novelist, not a private investigator" (OLSS 56). DeLillo maintains the crucial distinction between realist detective fiction, which invites unself-conscious reader

identification with the investigator in his unquestioning pursuit of ideological aims, and anti-realist or meta-detective fiction, which provokes self-examination and ideology critique. Branch's increasing self-doubt (self-reflexivity) and his failure to complete the investigation (open-endedness) are DeLillo's means of focusing readers' attention on the particular social context driving and defining Branch's detective work.

Branch works for and gets all his information from the CIA. He suspects that his CIA contact, the Curator, may be "withholding material from him," perhaps as a way of "protecting something very much like its identity—protecting its own truth, its theology of secrets" (442). Thus Branch's investigation does not occur in a social vacuum: it is ideologically motivated and directed toward protecting the existing power structure.

Branch's intuition tells him that the events leading up to Kennedy's assassination are too complex to be encompassed by any single theory, that "the conspiracy against the President was a rambling affair that succeeded in the short term due mainly to chance. Deft men and fools, ambivalence and fixed will and what the weather was like" (441). But Branch, like Stencil, is a detective who unconsciously adopts the paranoid perspective of the men who came before him (for Stencil, his spy father; for Branch, the CIA), men who believe in a conspiracy theory because it preserves their faith that *they too can become conspirators*. Conspirators seem to have an inside knowledge that makes for power over events: "If we are on the outside, we assume a conspiracy is the perfect working of a scheme. . . . Conspirators have a logic and a daring beyond our reach. All conspiracies are the same taut story of men who find coherence in some criminal act" (440). As DeLillo explains, "Some people prefer to believe in conspiracy because they are made anxious by random acts. Believing in conspiracy is almost comforting because, in a sense, a conspiracy is a story we tell each other to ward off the dread of chaotic and random acts" (DD 56). So it is the prevailing ideology—one paranoiacally fearful but also envious of conspiracy—that drives Branch's desire to "master the data" by reducing them to a single conspiracy theory, one "grand and masterful scheme, the plot that reaches flawlessly in a dozen directions" (442, 58).

Branch is not merely a branch of the CIA; he has enough independence to intuit that his particular mode of detection—the hunt for conspiracy—is ideologically determined. As Branch muses to himself in one scene of ironic self-reflection, "Let's devote our lives to understanding this moment [the Kennedy assassination], separating the elements of each crowded second. We will build theories that gleam

like jade idols, intriguing systems of assumption, four-faced, graceful" (15). But Branch's consciousness is so saturated with his superiors' paranoia that he cannot see that their idea of an all-powerful conspiracy is a myth. Instead, he merely mirrors their paranoia, fearing that his superiors have themselves formed a conspiracy against him: "The case [the investigation of the Kennedy assassination] 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" (445).

This is the last we hear of Nicholas Branch. He ends up "Frustrated, stuck, self-watching," paranoid (181). But only readers who do not distinguish between detective and meta-detective fiction will think *DeLillo* ends up there too. As DeLillo has said, "I don't think *Libra* is a paranoid book at all. I think it's a clear-sighted, reasonable piece of work which takes into account the enormous paranoia which has ensued from the assassination" (OTS 66). DeLillo takes this paranoia into account by writing a metaphysical detective novel that shows up the ideology of detection for what it is: a paranoid fear of conspiracy and a desire to use knowledge to guard and gain more power.

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Notes

¹Or it might not. A surprising number of critics of *Vineland* continued to ignore Pynchon's politics, by devaluing them or by aestheticizing them away. See Keesey, "Vineland in the Mainstream Press."

²For other sociohistorical readings of Pynchon, see Carter; Hite; Keesey, "A Flaw Not Only in Him" and "The Politics of Doubling."

³See Miller on Collins, and Irwin on Poe.

⁴See Lentricchia's defense of DeLillo against right-wing attacks by George F. Will and Jonathan Yardley.

⁵For other socially informed readings of DeLillo that attend to the complexities of detection, see Morris, O'Donnell and Wacker. These critics build on a foundation first laid by LeClair.

⁶In addition to *Ratner's Star*, *Players* and *Libra*, DeLillo's *Running Dog* (1978) and *The Names* (1982) may also be considered metaphysical detective fictions.

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