

## Media on Target in the Global System: Military Strategy and Narrative Practice

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Spywork, undercover work we invent a society where it's always wartime. The law has a little give.

Don DeLillo, *Libra*<sup>1</sup>

Is not War merely another kind of writing and language for political thoughts? It has certainly a grammar of its own, but its logic is not peculiar to itself.

Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*<sup>2</sup>

The background of my essay is constituted by the evolving significance of *targeting* as it is currently linked to a *now* of the global military system—in the context of media-technological hegemony having entered an ambiguous relation with the new world order of the *post*-Cold War. Yet, as my essay will suggest, this is, in fact, a much too schematic view of contemporary geopolitical power.

Clausewitz's famous statement, "[w]ar is nothing but a continuation of political intercourse, with a mixture of other means,"<sup>3</sup> establishes a connection between the form of violence called *war* and the contract between individuals and organizations that exists *politically* only if it can prevent, through rhetoric and policy, the outbreak of such violence. Carl Schmitt, the famed conservative legal scholar, who points to the utter antagonistic nature of any political relation, sees Clausewitz's thesis as a threat to the autonomy of the political, which, according to Schmitt, is based on the friend-enemy distinction.<sup>4</sup> If political conflicts can no longer be distinguished from military ones, this may also point out to the emergence of global power relations that the Schmittian legal fiction of the *jus publicum Europeum* cannot contain. Michel Foucault suggests that "politics sanctions and reproduces the disequilibrium of forces manifested in war,"<sup>5</sup> hence his reversal of Clausewitz's formula, "politics is the continuation of war by other means,"<sup>6</sup> the core statement of Foucault's seminar *Society Must Be Defended*, his most concise reflection on biopolitics and governmentality.

The fictional scenario created by DeLillo in *Libra*, particularly the idea of "a society where it's always wartime" and where "the law has a little give" (64) is yet another adaptation of Clausewitz's point. In DeLillo's novel, however, clandestine military operations and secret conspiracies, not *politics* per se, are the 'continuation of war by other means.' If this hypothesis potentially indicates an underside to Foucault's anti-sovereignty narrative, it also identifies in the political myth of conspiratorial power the source of political fantasies that will not submit to governmentality, "the art (and later the science) of managing bodies and things, life and wealth."<sup>7</sup> According to the fiction of conspiracy, politics withdraws from the public sphere. Sovereignty, as Jean-Luc Nancy defines it—"the power of execution or the power of finishing as such, absolutely so and without any further subordination to something else (to another end)"<sup>8</sup>—also retreats in the ambiguous zone of conspiratorial power.<sup>9</sup> My claim is not only a speculation derived from reading DeLillo's novel, but the result of "a modern mutation in the thinking of war" made clear by Clausewitz's insight. In other words, the "classical way of thinking about war as ... extreme expression of sovereignty is now set at a distance in more or less confused manner."<sup>10</sup>

Before we pursue this point further, we need to consider another theoretical narrative, which considers *war* in the context of media-technology revolution. This argument is evident in moments

of prophetic exaltation that we often encounter in the writing of media theorists: “true wars are not waged over people or fatherlands,” writes Friedrich Kittler, “but rather between various media, communications technologies and data streams.”<sup>11</sup> In other words, the meaning of history is written neither within public or behind-the-scenes politics, but by a secret technological underside of human civilization, which intensifies in 20<sup>th</sup> century, as modern warfare sets the stage for the mass production and distribution of storage, transmission and computing media.<sup>12</sup> This fundamental thesis, which takes various formulations throughout Kittler’s work, comes as the result of a reflection on technical media that substitutes the cultural-anthropological paradigm (interpretation in terms of “bodily prosthesis”) with Claude Shannon’s mathematical model (interpretation in terms of entropy). At the same time, the thesis is derived from reading the postmodern Jeremiad, *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1972). In Thomas Pynchon, the author of the book, and Boeing engineer turned writer, Kittler finds a fellow thinker of media ontology: “War was never political at all, the politics was all theater, all just to keep the people distracted ... secretly, it was being dictated by the needs of technology ... by a conspiracy between human beings and techniques, by something that needed the energy burst of war.”<sup>13</sup> In the Kittlerian-Pynchonian universe, Clausewitz’s claim is, at best, anachronistic.

In order to understand the relevance of Clausewitzian theory to the global media and military system, we need to discuss political targeting during and after the Cold War. The notion of “targeting” does, in fact, bring into focus a model of rational-strategic thinking present in practices from various fields of contemporary life—military, marketing, medicine, politics and writing—which aim to master the occurrence of the unforeseeable. Samuel Weber astutely notes, however, that “whereas targeting tends to generalize momentary control of a situation qua opportunity and project it indefinitely upon the future, it can wind up exposing itself all the more destructively to the unforeseen.”<sup>14</sup> In a much narrower sense, my essay thus confronts—in Samuel Weber’s terms—“the militarization of thinking”. Whereas drone targeting has emerged in the past years the hegemonic media-warfare response to terrorism, my essay does not attempt to solve the legal and ethical questions opened by this military strategy, but rather to show that the conflict between “communication technologies and data streams” is fueled by an imaginary of power that is irreducible to its technological materiality. The imaginary of power is thus what links the logic of warfare-media (communication technology generated by strategic rationales and the Pentagon’s support of its development) and the information/entertainment system whose media apparatus relies on the continuous engagement of its spectators-citizens in narratives of temporal and spatial displacement.

The war in Iraq emerged, for example, from a tragic policy error—from an overconfidence in military might and intelligence technology. Following the case analyzed in detail by Samuel Weber, we note that “singular strike” that was meant to kill Saddam Hussein, the Iraqi dictator, from a distance, changed the initial U.S. war plans, thus relying on a window of opportunity that proved just as illusory as the administration’s war goals. In the aftermath of September 11, “the directly targeted killing of foreign adversaries, once rejected as beyond the pale, has [thus] become a prominent issue in debates over U.S. security policy.”<sup>15</sup> In the case of Iraq, the confusion of tactics and strategy is, however, not simply caused by the “fog of war” (the metaphor used by Clausewitz to designate the unreliable character of all war intelligence). Rather, the logic behind the failed killing of Saddam Hussein had already been inscribed in the dangerous fantasy that led the Bush administration—a brief war followed by a democratic happy-ending of spontaneous order. At the dismantling of this fantasy, images of a disruptive civil war contradicted the presumed logic of media-warfare that was established during the Gulf War of the early 1990s. As the Iraq War appeared off target, unable to

envision itself as a netwar that would successfully weaken transnational terrorist networks, it could only repeat a bloodless media spectacle, remediated as if initially made for TV or Hollywood.<sup>16</sup>

The new means of war incorporate, however, the military thinking that enabled democratic states to target so-called bad leaders. Building on Derrida's analysis of rogue states, Samuel Weber has linked the problem of illegitimate or rogue sovereigns to Christian theology, an idea we will explore in the second part of this essay. Weber also shows, in a discussion that resonates with *Libra*, that the word *rogue* appears in our political vocabulary in the context of the JFK assassination. He writes: "long before the term *rogue* was used to delegitimize foreign states, it was used to designate elements working within the domestic state apparatus but outside the official chain of command and control."<sup>17</sup> *Libra* displays the plan to assassinate the President as a continuation of the clandestine war against Castro, but DeLillo's prophetic insight in the negative theology of Cold War politics derives from imagining the rogue military power at the heart of American democracy involved in games of double deception that are only partially representable.<sup>18</sup> The conspiracy-network described in the novel is thus an unstable structure. As the site where a subversive action is organized, the conspiracy does not have the logistic support of the military apparatus and relies therefore on the mobility of the partisan or guerilla warfare. In other words, the conspiratorial plan must be differentiated from the institutional organization of a military conflict that, in a specific political context, privileges the assassination of foreign leaders.

With its focus on rogue secret agents, paramilitary groups, the Soviet propaganda machine and a young American's failed attempt to fulfill its socialist fantasy, Don DeLillo's *Libra* constitutes an exemplary literary study of the political in the Cold War. The novel should not simply be considered a model for an ideology critique of American contemporary politics and media culture, but also a literary discourse that, through a speculative fiction about the Kennedy assassination or a fictional biography of Lee Harvey Oswald, enacts a political parable about institutional secrecy and its exceptional legal status as the core of democratic sovereignty.<sup>19</sup>

Moreover, DeLillo's interest in the advancement of military technology and the emergence of the Information Age makes his contribution to the concept of the political all that more relevant. Pursuing victory in the Cold War, at any cost, America appears as a "target of opportunity" for secret groups and their political, economic and military interests. In his view, the institutional structure of secrecy has a predominantly military dimension, as it allows for military solutions to political problems. The idea that we live in a society dominated by wartime, as one character says at the beginning of the novel, resonates with Carl Schmitt's observation from 1962 that in "Cold War situations [the partisan] becomes a technician of the clandestine battle, a saboteur, a spy."<sup>20</sup> *Libra's* cast of dubious characters, T.J. Mackey, Win Everett, Larry Parmenter and David Ferrie, should not be confused with the partisan and its irregular fighting; in their network, the conspirators act, however, in a similarly ambiguous space, neither properly military nor properly political. The idea of Cold War as an objective antagonism between democracy and communism is intentionally turned around from the start: the frozen conflict between the U.S. and USSR is displaced into a different political tension, into a political antagonism that permeates *Libra's* world as a whole: its deep structure can be assumed by various signifiers such as racism or anti-communism, but the novel's only way to represent its basic unrepresentability is to appeal to a floating (i.e. confusing) signifier: conspiracy. DeLillo is also very much aware that any representation of a political situation cannot be done from a position of absolute objectivity. In DeLillo's account of the shooting in Dallas, for instance, the limit of the event's representability is included in the narrative as part of a literary montage. The goal (i.e. the target) of his prophetic intervention is to see through the reality of

November 22, 1963, whose scripted political ceremony ended up in a surprising violent act that was caught on camera by Abraham Zapruder. His goal is not simply to show that conspiracy masks the real antagonisms of American society, but also that this social fiction (that is, the figure of an invisible master, or of a parallel power) is itself embedded in the two most significant Cold War narratives about democratic sovereignty: the technological-political language of military targeting and the theological-political language of secrecy. Two sides of the same coin!

The novel describes the complicated narrative interconnection of bizarre coincidences and conspiracy scenarios that lead to Lee Harvey Oswald's involvement with a group of CIA agents (helped by pro-Cuban paramilitary factions) plotting to shoot the American president during an official visit to the South. The subversive action does not only originate in CIA structures, but is also a belated effect of the Agency's secret anti-communist operations, more specifically The Bay of Pigs (1951), Kennedy being held responsible for the military fiasco of the secret anti-Cuban mission. The initial master of the plot, Win Everett, relies, at a basic organizational level, on the existing structure of government secrecy. As one character from DeLillo's novel *Running Dog* said, "this is the age of connections, links, secret relationships."<sup>21</sup> *Libra* envisions the process of de-politicization of modern states by describing how clandestine operations become the center of military strategy in the Cold War—a fiction which echoes the role of military contractors and private security companies such as the infamous Blackwater Corporation in the war against terrorism. At the same time, the novel shows how this military-political apparatus is legitimated by a theological notion of secrecy that secures the democratic state against its proper regime of law.

### **Kafka in Dallas**

As DeLillo suggested, Lee Harvey Oswald decided to shoot at the American President simply because he had the opportunity to do so. Is there a central Kafkaesque moment designates the emergence of the "American absurd"? The Kafkaesque situation—the absurd scenario of modernity's impersonal forces—exposes the underside of *Libra's* postmodern investigation into the CIA's secret missions in Latin America (more specifically the Bay of Pigs invasion) and the targeting of foreign leaders (a military strategy that has become, in recent years, part of the American "war against terror"). This "American tragedy" has two protagonists, the American president murdered by a sniper and the man accused of killing him, Lee Harvey Oswald. According to *Libra*, the intersection of the expansive conspiratorial network and Oswald's already fictionalized self is the main cover-up operation that cannot find its way into the official conclusions of the Warren Commission. Its proper literary meaning is derived from DeLillo's own narrative intervention, summarized in the essay "The American Absurd": "Oswald would not have walked two blocks to shoot at the president. The president had to come to him, and this is what happened, ruinously on November 22."<sup>22</sup>

Because the President of the United States had become a "target of opportunity," to use Samuel Weber's term, DeLillo sees Oswald's murderous act as a prefiguration of the American absurd. This peculiar prophecy draws attention, from a literary perspective, to the culture of suspicion and violence that has contaminated American politics since the early 1960s:

The twentieth century was built largely out of absurd moments and events. In time we had to invent an adjective, European and literary, that might encapsulate the feeling of impending menace and distorted reality and the sense of a vast alienating force that presses the edges of individual choice. These things are Kafkaesque. In America it is the individual

himself, floating on random streams of disaffection, who tends to set the terms of the absurd.<sup>23</sup>

The event is absurd only insofar it cannot be accounted for and as long as it cannot be represented, either politically or culturally. The etymology of the term absurd (Lat. term *absurdus*, inharmonious, tasteless, foolish) shows a metaphysical sense in which all events are absurd since they are believed to ruin a preexistent order or harmony. DeLillo differentiates between the European and the American absurd, yet he needs a literary term to designate the reality brought about by the event. He relates his short presentation of American life to the fictional world created by Franz Kafka, the inventor of modern literary conspiracy. The radical literary imaginary invented by Kafka is thus the only mirror in which the limit of our experience of the political appears as such, marked by violence, chaos, and confusion, even in an America in which “the individual” —and perhaps individualism— “sets the terms of the absurd.”<sup>24</sup>

DeLillo claims the Kennedy assassination “invented” him as a writer, hence contributing to the formation of his particular literary expression. In Peter Knight’s view, DeLillo’s acknowledgment proves that the traumatic moment in Dallas constitutes the “primal scene of postmodernism,” that is to say, “the confusing and contradictory events in Dealey Plaza which have been reshot and retold in countless media repetitions come to serve as an appropriate primal scene for the cultural logic of late capitalism that is dominated by the simulated spectacle.”<sup>25</sup> In “The American Absurd,” the literary effects of the assassination are as significant as the use of a modern literary term, the Kafkaesque, to designate Oswald’s act. The assassination (the primal scene of postmodernism) becomes accessible only as mediated by the modern literary imagination. DeLillo’s postmodernism, the traumatic event of November 22, 1963 and Kafka’s prose are linked by a notion of opportunity that deserves a closer analysis. “Opportunity” no longer refers to the idea of blind chance (or, radical contingency) but to “the time, condition, or set of circumstances permitting or favorable to a particular action or purpose.”<sup>26</sup>

The notion of a “target of opportunity” was recently used by Samuel Weber to analyze the beginning of the recent war in Iraq: “In order to seize the opportunity that apparently presented itself on March 19 [the information concerning the presence of Saddam Hussein at a specific Baghdad location] the American war plan had to be modified, and the start of hostilities advanced by at least twenty-four hours.”<sup>27</sup> The new plan, beginning now with a “singular strike” aiming at the Iraqi sovereign leader, would be successful as long as the American military managed to seize the opportunity offered by the target. In what precise sense can we use this notion of targeting to discuss DeLillo’s novel about the death of another sovereign, the American president? What does it mean to shoot at the sovereign of a democratic state as compared to attempting to kill an ill-famed Iraqi dictator in a “singular strike”? Why is the target of opportunity significant in understanding conspiratorial organization and its fictional double, conspiracy theory?

*Libra*’s narrative fiction privileges the Bay of Pigs invasion, the political and military fiasco that affected the lives and careers of the CIA agents who helped organize the cover-up military action against Castro. Two years after this event, DeLillo’s character Win Everett finds himself excluded from the center of power of the intelligence community. He develops a plan to return to active duty, trying the back door of the agency: he invites two friends from the “good old times” of The Bay of Pigs invasion to Dallas and comes up with a conspiracy proposition:

We need an electrifying event. JFK is moving toward a settling of differences with Castro. On the one hand he believes the revolution is a disease that could spread through Latin America. On the other hand he's denouncing guerilla raids and trying to get brigade members to join the U.S. Army, where someone can keep an eye on them. ... We want to set up an event that will make it appear they have struck at the heart of our government. This is a time for high risk. I'm saying be done with half measures, be done with evasion and delay. ... You've been waiting for this every bit as much as I have. ... We want to set up an attempt on the life of the President. We plan every step, design every incident leading up to the event. (27)

An attempt to assassinate the American President blamed on the Cubans opens a new "window of opportunity" to strike Castro. The aim of the plot is thus to create an event, originally planned to take place in Miami that would justify American interference in Cuba. The conspirators' task can only be achieved by using a simulated target (JFK) in order to prompt an attack on Castro. Implicitly, the U.S. is the simulated target that opens the way for new military actions against Cuba. Win Everett's dialectical mastery cannot be missed: in order to achieve geopolitical supremacy in Latin America (synthesis), the U.S.—represented here by a group of patriotic CIA agents—needs to negate itself, to strike at the heart of its own sovereignty. This dialectical construction is, from the start, a mere simulacrum, since eventually the Cubans would appear responsible. Beyond this play of truth and concealment, Win Everett's rhetoric offers interesting insights into the rationale of preemptive action.

In a world at risk for Atomic conflict, the political doctrine of preemptive action did not play a central part in official American foreign policy, as it does now, in the aftermath of the Cold War. Rather, the "strategy of multilateral deterrence ... had ... been accepted by postwar American governments as a basic principle in dealing with other nations."<sup>28</sup> Cold War history proves, however, that quite a few exceptions were made to this principle and that intelligence operations functioned under a different political rationale, whose central idea was to act with urgency, i.e. to act now: "If we want a second invasion, a full-bore attempt this time, without restrictions or conditions, we have to do something soon. We have to move the Cuban matter past the edge of all these sweet maneuverings" (27). There can be no justification of preemptive action, even in the context of a secret operation, without the long-term goal or ideal. In the Cold War context, this refers to a strategic geopolitical game, to securing a new frontier of separation between two mortal enemies.

In its initial conception, the fictional plan in *Libra* relies entirely on a successful simulation: the creation of a false target (JFK) and a detour leading back to a real one (Castro). The "powerful logic" (28) of the plan also consists in staging a "spectacular miss": "We don't hit the President. We miss him. We want a spectacular miss" (51). The plot can achieve its aim only if the American President survives the assassination attempt. Win Everett imagines a political theater where the principle of sovereignty remains intact and is, in the long run, safeguarded through this unauthorized military action. As the director of this performance, Win Everett casts the President (the sovereign) in the role of a passive protagonist, which is key to ensure a political outcome that serves American interest in Latin America. DeLillo's novel starts off with the President as the potential protagonist of Win Everett's comic farce. This comic farce becomes tragic, once the plot is no longer under Win Everett's control, and Kennedy constitutes the real target.

In order to "extend their fiction into the world" (50), to transgress the limit of the literary, the conspirators need something more than a simple intention to act. Win Everett's project relies on a

different protagonist, the fall guy of the false conspiracy. For DeLillo, the conspiracy scenario (i.e. the real-existing conspiracy) appears as the double of literary narrative. The man they will sacrifice needs to be reduced to “a name, a face, a bodily frame” (51), to a set of predicates that correspond to the imaginary scenario coined by Win Everett; a hollow man must be the perpetrator of a hollow plot.<sup>29</sup>

What Win Everett needs in order to secure his plan is not a person but a *persona*. In his creative thrust, he dreams of a general typology, from the start dependent on a literary imaginary: “This kind of man, a marksman, near anonymous, with minimal known history, the kind of man who surfaces in murky places ... is arrested for some violent act, is released to drift again, to surface, to disappear”(50). The conspirators desire someone who can serve as surface of inscription, a figure who can easily be appropriated by the conspiracy, without being part of the group responsible for the creation and incarnation of the plot. When talking to Oswald, David Ferrie makes sure that the conspirators are not named and that the infamous “they” (the figure of the Other of the Other, in Lacanian terms) corresponds to the over-determined meaning of coincidence. *Libra* embraces the fascinating power of absurd coincidence, as DeLillo has been drawn towards interpreting history (and its enigmatic protagonists) via modern literature. In “The American Absurd,” DeLillo considers Lee Harvey Oswald, the only “known” protagonist of the November 22 events as “a figure out of modernist literature, an American variation of Beckett’s sad and wailing Krapp, whose last tape (in this case) is secretly fabricated by KGB or the FBI.”<sup>30</sup>

### **Zapruder’s Film and Literary Montage**

The success of the conspiracy (in DeLillo’s novel) depends on the ability to identify the right “window of opportunity.”<sup>31</sup> In the new political and technological conflict of “the war on terror”, military thinking seems to rely on the basic rationale of conspiratorial groups, that is, to approach their enemy mainly as a target of opportunity. According to Ward Thomas:

[G]uerilla movements’ success against more powerful foes has been striking. Transnational terrorist organizations present an even more difficult challenge: not only are there no easily identifiable armed forces to engage in combat, there are seldom specific geographic locations around which the threat is centered. ... Perhaps out of frustration, states confronting non-traditional foes have proved more willing to employ non-traditional means, including targeted killings.<sup>32</sup>

We can use DeLillo’s fictional scenario to compare military targeting in the war against terrorist networks and the targeting model used by secret organizations (with involvement from intelligence agencies) during the Cold War. DeLillo links the practice of targeting authorized under the umbrella of government secrecy during the Cold War<sup>33</sup> to the plot against the American President. In today’s situation, in a transnational context dominated by the global development of terrorist networks, the secret military operations of the Cold War, for instance, the attempts on Castro’s life in the 1950s and 1960s, become part of the official US policy of preemptive action, the main political and ethical rationale for targeting foreign leaders. According to a 2002 National Security Strategy document, “[g]iven the goals of rogue states and terrorists, the United States can no longer solely rely on a reactive posture as we have in the past... We cannot let our enemies strike first.”<sup>34</sup>

While we can easily read this novel as a preemptively prophetic strike against the sovereignty model legitimated under President George W. Bush after 9/11, a more interesting interpretation of *Libra* can be produced by focusing on the question whether, in examining the grammar of military and

conspiratorial targeting, DeLillo is able to write a narrative that is not governed by the sovereign goal.<sup>35</sup> To put it briefly, *Libra*'s target is not to expose the sovereign-historical truth of the Kennedy assassination but to present, in the form of a literary montage, a response to the enigma of the President's death. For the postmodern writer, the potentiality of the plot (i.e. its window of opportunity) actualizes itself in a concrete set of spatial-temporal coordinates, a place and a moment to achieve its end. As DeLillo shows in *Libra*: "Plots carry their own logic. There is a tendency of plots to move toward death" (221). This statement reminds us of a scene from *White Noise* in which Jack Gladney discusses the attempt on Hitler's life:

All plots tend to move deathward. This is the nature of plots. Political plots, terrorist plots, lovers' plots, narrative plots, plots that are part of children's games. We edge nearer death every time we plot. It is like a contract that all must sign, the plotters as well as those who are the targets of the plot.<sup>36</sup>

Every plot constitutes an organization of one's actions in a temporal sequence. This ordering principle can only achieve an actual structure, by following the logic of finitude (the beginning of any real or imaginary story needs the confirmation of its end). In this sense, targeting (consideration, surveillance, localization) is not simply specific to military-political thinking, but is in fact part of the process of narrative elaboration.

According to Jean-Luc Nancy, in the Western tradition there are two conceptions of the end, which correspond to two Greek terms:

*Skopos* is the target [*la cible*] that one has in one's sight and at which one takes aim; it is the goal presently and clearly offered to an intention [*une visée*]. *Telos*, by contrast, is the fulfillment of an action or of a process, its development up to its end. [It] can also designate the summit, the apex, or, again the supreme power of sovereign jurisdiction... *Skopos* is the draw of the bow, *telos*, life and death.<sup>37</sup>

This distinction is a central aspect of DeLillo's rewriting of the plot against JFK; the novel differentiates between the target (*skopos*) of conspiracy and its long-term goals (*telos*), between the revenge plot against the American President motivated by Mackey's symbolic debt and the political plan to oust Castro. In the last episodes of the novel, the conspirators disappear from the book, as their political plan to create an anti-Cuban military operation dissipates. They have perhaps become themselves the target of a more powerful and better-organized plot. DeLillo chooses to conclude the book by following Oswald's path in the Dallas labyrinth, between two deaths; in this context, any notion of *telos* has collapsed, and the novel focuses on the significance of *skopos*.

The semantic richness of this Greek term, and of the verb *skeptomai* (to consider, to examine, to watch out for)<sup>38</sup> is preserved in at least two English words relevant to DeLillo's novel: telescope (or riflescope) and horoscope (Oswald's actions are linked to David Ferrie's obsession with astrology). The term thus refers to the direct aiming of the gun, but also to the aiming of the film camera. The visual recordings of Kennedy's and Oswald's deaths do not constitute a way out of the labyrinth, but the evident interfering presence of a telescopic gaze. While Zapruder is not mentioned by name in the novel, the following paragraph discloses his presence in the crowd:

Someone with a movie camera stood on the abutment over there, aiming this way, and the man in the white sweater, hands suspended now at belt level, was thinking he ought to go to

the ground, he ought to fall right now. A misty light around the President's head. Two pink-white jets of tissue rising from the mist. The movie camera running. (400)

According to the Italian director Pier Paolo Pasolini, the visual document filmed by Zapruder on November 22, 1963 is “the only possible film of Kennedy's death, all the other points of view are missing: that of Kennedy and Jacqueline, that of the assassin himself and his accomplices, that of those with a better vantage point, and that of the police escorts, etc.”<sup>39</sup> In DeLillo's literary version of the assassination scene, some of these viewpoints are not missing; they simply run counter to each other, as the text indicates a desire to mention them all: Jacqueline Kennedy's voice of panic, the Secret Service messages (appearing in the text in italics), Zapruder's vision and Raymo's (the Alpha 66 conspirator) preparing the rifle for the fatal shot. With the exception Zapruder's film, all these other visual-narrative glimpses of the event tell a story from the perspective of someone not present in the scene. The text becomes a cinematic play with very few subjective shots. While this literary composition would be different from the one envisioned by Pasolini, who imagined “a footage shot from all those points of view... a series of long takes that would reproduce that moment simultaneously from various viewpoints,” it does create, however, under DeLillo's own strategy, “a type of montage.”<sup>40</sup>

Accordingly, DeLillo describes America's fall in the infernal geography of violence by reenacting the shooting in Dealey Plaza as a literary montage. This scene allows DeLillo to seize the opportunity of a literary technique to describe the diffusion of the political (the enthusiastic community greeting the President) in the experience of social alienation, chaos and confusion. The text follows the disintegration of language, as the void of the assassination takes over Dallas. In DeLillo's own words, “[t]he book becomes one headlong scream towards November 22.”<sup>41</sup>

Parts of the story are narrated through Oswald's eyes. This scene should “provide the ideal narrative vantage point from which to produce a conclusive interpretation of the case... but instead the text hovers somewhere between a lone gunman and a conspiracy theory.”<sup>42</sup> In *Libra*, the access to the panoramic view from the sixth floor of the Texas School Depository gradually passes into a close-up image seen through Oswald's riflescope. Oswald's viewpoint corresponds to the imaginary situation described by Pasolini, a subjective shot (the ambiguity is intentional), offering itself to the reader as *present*, albeit a different one than Zapruder's. After shooting twice and only wounding the President, Oswald acknowledges the presence of “a white burst in the middle of the frame, [a] terrible splash, a burst” (110). And the narrator (Oswald) goes on to explain what he has seen: “Something came blazing off the President's head. He was slammed back, surrounded all in dust and haze. Then suddenly clear again, down and still in his seat. Oh he's dead, he's dead” (110).

We can consider Oswald's encounter with the abyss of the Other as the moment when DeLillo includes the limit of the visual space within its representation as a symbolic field.<sup>43</sup> In this blurring of boundaries Oswald is riveted to the Other, to *something* more than him, which is also inseparable from him. Taken by surprise in the very instance of his criminal act, Oswald realizes he had been “tricked into the plot” (400), that he is only a witness of the crime against the President or the conspiracy against America. Later in the novel, Oswald is killed in front of the camera; his death plays on TV over and over as a sign of political panic and collective anxiety: “There was something in Oswald's face, a glance at the camera before he was shot, that put him here in the audience ... 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” (447). These scenes bring forward DeLillo's own desire to create a narrative in which the notion of targeting dissolves in the complex assemblage of

images and voices making up the impossible films of the assassinations. In this sense, the writer's aims correspond faithfully to the filmmaker's reflections on the presentation of reality:

There are so many unreliable eyes and ears (or cameras and tape recorders) which record an irreversible event, one which appears different to each of these natural organs or technical instruments (shot, countershot, establishing shot, medium shot, close-up, and all other possible camera positions). Each of these presentations of reality is extremely impoverished, aleatory, almost pitiful, if one realizes that it is only one among many.<sup>44</sup>

Let me turn, as a way to conclude, to Giorgio Agamben's philosophical examination of the state of exception—the secret core of the paradigm of politics/government in the Western World. He has not considered the significance of political secrecy or the Cold War specificity of the early 20th century legal concept of constitutional dictatorship. As Clinton Rossiter shows, quoted by Agamben, “[i]n the Atomic Age upon which the world is now entering, the use of constitutional emergency powers may well become the rule and not the exception.”<sup>45</sup> According to DeLillo's novel, the government's monopoly on secrecy is a new political reality, corresponding to the bi-polar fragile stability of the Cold War, an idea that is well documented historically.<sup>46</sup> For Guy Banister, the subversive (i.e. dangerous) secrets used to be created outside the state apparatus by underground groups once able to manipulate history. The mythical power and influence of secret societies is over, now that “the government ... has a lock on the secrets that matter” (69). As Guy Banister adds: “All the danger is in the White House, from nuclear weapons on down” (69). The Atomic Bomb as the ultimate secret becomes here the central trope designating the Cold War as the historical referent to the democracy of suspicion. The President's right to decide what is kept outside the democratic (i.e. public) scrutiny represents the specific Cold War meaning of *exception*. The idea of secrecy involves a sociological notion of exception that needs to be distinguished from Schmitt or Agamben's juristic concept. As Simmel noticed, “the secret gives one a position of exception; it operates on a purely social determined attraction. It is basically independent of the content it guards but ... is increasingly effective in the measure in which the exclusive possession is vast and significant.”<sup>47</sup> At a more abstract level, DeLillo's novel describes the confrontation between two types of secrecy. One model constitutes the ground of sovereignty; the other denies the sovereign right to decide what cannot appear in the public space. In consequence, Guy Banister's motto illustrates the virtues of conspiratorial secrecy: “Strip the man of his powerful secrets. Take his secrets and he is nothing”(68). The plot against America relies on creating an *exception* to the already enforced state of exception government secrecy has acquired under the historical conditions of the Cold War. In this sense, the enigma of Kennedy's assassination constitutes a secret for the CIA, as well as, an event originating in the secret underground of anti-communist military operations conducted by the same agency.

Joan Copjec's discussion of Pier Paolo Pasolini's remarks on Zapruder's film is particularly relevant for my attempt to relate DeLillo's novel to recent theoretical debates centered on the political logic of the exception and the retreat of sovereignty. In an essay entitled “What Zapruder Saw?” she wrote:

One wonders if Pasolini did not catch a glimpse in this footage of the assassination of America's premiere legal authority, the tearing of his flesh, of a perverse relation to the law—a relation in which the law is no longer regarded as necessary but fallible (because it has to be represented by particular policies and persons), but is viewed instead as an infallible contingency. In the latter case, the punishing and humiliation of the law's representative

would aim not at installing a new law, but preserving the certainty of the law's truth and would thus replace the autonomy of the citizen-subject with a determination to carry out the duty spelled out by a heteronomous edict.<sup>48</sup>

The film of Kennedy's death is the postmodern image of a gratuitous violence against the law, as the only way to touch the law is by "tearing the flesh" of the human being who symbolically (and democratically) incarnates it. This event occurs in a world where the political structure of the state is no longer fueled by a theological principle of continuity. In the aftermath of the democratic revolution and the consolidation of American sovereignty on the secular ideas of symbolic representation, this theological principle is no longer at stake, and a possible identification of the sovereign with "bare life"<sup>49</sup> occurs without any religious obstacles. What makes possible this identification is the very technological structure of our social space, the persistence of films and recordings, bringing to the present the estranging image of the past: The Zapruder Film is one of these documents, "powerfully open, ... glary and artless and completely steeped in being what it was, in being film. It carries a kind of inner life, something unconnected to the things we call phenomena" (*Underworld* 495).<sup>50</sup> The visual image of Kennedy's death isolate, in its material body, the excess of the American President's bare life and institutes a void too frightening, not to acquire a mystical status.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Don DeLillo, *Libra* (New York: Penguin, 1988), 64. All subsequent citations will appear in the text.

<sup>2</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (New York, London: Penguin Classics, 1982), 402.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 402.

<sup>4</sup> Following Rodolphe Gasché, we learn what is at stake in Schmitt's critique: "If, indeed, there is continuity between war and politics, then the differences constitutive of classical European public law collapse. The formula amounts to a blurring of the clear distinctions made between war and peace, friend and enemy, but also neutrality and nonneutrality [Clausewitz's] formula thus opens the way for abolishing contained war... It opens the door for a state of peace that has become indistinguishable from war, not only from the Cold War but also from the current undeclared war of and against terrorism..." See Rodolphe Gasché, "The Partisan and the Philosopher," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 4.3 (2004): 30.

<sup>5</sup> Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended, Lectures at the Collège de France*, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2004), 16.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>7</sup> Leerom Medovoi, "Global Society Must Be Defended. Biopolitics without Boundaries," *Social Text* 91.25, no. 2 (Summer 2007): 57.

<sup>8</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, trans. Robert Richardson and Anne O'Byrne (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 120.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>11</sup> Friedrich Kittler, *Literature, Media, Information Systems*, ed. John Johnston (Amsterdam: OPA, 1997),

30.

<sup>12</sup> See Friedrich Kittler, “Media Wars: Trenches, Lightning, Stars” in *Literature, Media, Information Systems*.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow* (New York: Penguin, 1973), 521.

<sup>14</sup> Samuel Weber, *Targets of Opportunity* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 18.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>16</sup> Netwar is defined by “network-based conflict and crime ... Various actors ...include familiar adversaries who are modifying their structures and strategies to take advantage of networked designs—e.g. transnational terrorist groups etc.” *Networks and Netwars: The Future of Crime, Terror, and Militancy*, eds. John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt, (Washington. D.C.: Rand Publications, 2001), 6.

<sup>17</sup> Samuel Weber, “Rogue Democracy and the Hidden God,” in *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Postsecular World*, eds. Hent de Vries and Lawrence Sullivan (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 395.

<sup>18</sup> *Libra* attests to DeLillo’s familiarity with the legal and political complications (or even contradictions) entailed by making secret intelligence operations central to the Cold War doctrine of security. In this sense, the novel confirms DeLillo as a reader of famous *The Evolution and Organization of The Federal Intelligence Function: A Brief Overview (1776-1975)*, known as *The Church Committee Reports*. The plan to assassinate Castro, “Operation Mongoose involved propaganda and sabotage operations aimed toward spurring a revolt of the Cuban people against Castro. Measures, which were considered by top policy makers, included incapacitating sugar workers during harvest season by the use of chemicals; blowing up bridges and production plants... Consideration and approval of such measures may understandably have led the CIA to conclude that violent actions were an acceptable means of accomplishing important objectives.” Senate Select Committee to Study Government Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities, *Alleged Assassination Plots Involving Foreign Leaders. An Interim Report* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1975), 274. This text documents the assassinations attempts against “Patrice Lumumba of the Congo, Cuba’s Fidel Castro, Rafael Trujillo of the Dominican Republic, the Diem brothers of Vietnam, and General Rene Schneider of Chile.”

<sup>19</sup> If in *Libra*, DeLillo comes close to what Giorgio Agamben has recently designated as “the fiction that governs this arcanum imperii [secret of power]” in *State of Exception*, that is, the very idea that at the “center of the democratic state lies the state of exception,” his novel offers a fascinating image of this secret of power, which preemptively questions the very foundations of Agamben’s argument: “[the state of exception] as an essentially empty space, in which a human action with no relation to the law stands before a norm with no relation to life.” Giorgio Agamben. *The State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 86.

<sup>20</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Theory of the Partisan: Intermediate Commentary on the Concept of the Political*, trans. G.L. Ulmen (New York: Telos, 2007), 25.

<sup>21</sup> Don DeLillo, *Running Dog* (New York, Picador, 1978), 111.

<sup>22</sup> Don DeLillo, “The American Absurd,” *Harper’s Magazine*, February 2004, 34.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>25</sup> Peter Knight, *Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to the X Files* (London, New York: Routledge, 2000), 112.

<sup>26</sup> OED, definition of “opportunity.”

<sup>27</sup> Weber, *Targets of Opportunity*, 2.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>29</sup> DeLillo explores the difference between character and individual, between fictional typology and subjective singularity. As the French word for character (i.e. personage) indicates, the character is based on a limited number of features (physical appearance, moral virtues, biographical details), brought together by the composition of a literary persona (etymologically, a mask). In contrast, the individual is always more than the sum of his predicates. As singularity, the subject needs to be considered as the surplus or the irreducible excess over his attributes. This argument allows a notion of subjectivity founded on the impossibility of creating a unifying whole, relying instead on the constitutive gap or secret.

<sup>30</sup> Don DeLillo, "The American Absurd," 3.

<sup>31</sup> Samuel Weber, *Targets of Opportunity*, 5.

<sup>32</sup> Ward Thomas, "The New Age of Assassination." *SAIS Review* XXV (Winter-Spring 2005): 30.

<sup>33</sup> For a historical overview of this issue see also Stephen F. Kott, *Secret and Sanctioned: Covert Operations and the American Presidency* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996). President Ford signs an order against assassination plots in February 1976, after the Church Committee released its report.

<sup>34</sup> *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (September 2002), 15.

<sup>35</sup> I am following Jean-Luc Nancy's rhetorical question here: "How [is one] to think without end, without finishing, without sovereignty?" *Being Singular Plural*, 133.

<sup>36</sup> DeLillo, *White Noise* (New York, Viking, 1985), 26.

<sup>37</sup> Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, quoted in Weber, *Targets of Opportunity*, 5.

<sup>38</sup> Weber, *Targets of Opportunity*, 6.

<sup>39</sup> Pier Paolo Pasolini, "Observations of the Long Take," *October* 13 (Summer 1980), 3.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-4.

<sup>41</sup> Kevin Connolly, "An Interview with Don DeLillo," in *The Brick Reader*, eds. Linda Spalding and Michael Ondaatje (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1991), 266.

<sup>42</sup> Knight, *Conspiracy Culture*, 110.

<sup>43</sup> In this sense, Lacan's notion of the gaze corresponds to "the white burst" seen by Oswald at the center of the frame: "The gaze is presented to us only in the form of a strange contingency, symbolic of what we find on the horizon, as the thrust of our experience, namely, the lack that constitutes castration anxiety." Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI. The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (New York, London: Norton, 1998), 86.

<sup>44</sup> Pasolini, "Observations on the Long Take," 4.

<sup>45</sup> Clinton Rossiter, *Constitutional Dictatorship: Crisis Government in the Modern Democracies* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1948), quoted in Agamben, *The State of Exception*, 9.

<sup>46</sup> There are numerous moments in recent history when the idea of justifying political action on the basis of emergency powers was publicly condemned: "We reject absolutely any notion that the United States should justify its actions by the standards of totalitarianism. Of course, we must defend democracy. But in defending it, we must resist undermining the very virtues we are defending" (*Alleged Assassination Plots Involving Foreign Leaders. An Interim Report*, 258).

<sup>47</sup> Georg Simmel, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, trans. Kurt H. Wolff (New York: Free Press, 1950), 333.

<sup>48</sup> Joan Copjec, "What Zapruder Saw" in *Imagine There's No Woman: Ethics and Sublimation* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002), 230.

<sup>49</sup> I am using Agamben's concept loosely here, without implying that the *homo sacer* doctrine coined by Roman law is still active in our legal system.

<sup>50</sup> Don DeLillo, *Underworld* (New York: Scribner, 1995), 495.