

ANALYSIS

Libra (1988)

Don DeLillo

(1936-)

“But Oswald’s attempt on Kennedy was more complicated. I think it was based on elements outside politics and, *as someone in the novel says, outside history*—things like dreams and coincidences and even the movement or the configuration of the stars, which is one reason the book is called *Libra*.... When I hit upon this notion of coincidence and dream and intuition and the possible impact of astrology on the way men act, I thought that *Libra*, being Oswald’s sign, would be the one title that summarized what’s inside the book.”

Don DeLillo
Interview
South Atlantic Quarterly 89 (1990)

“George Will took time out to write an article on *Libra* in which he called DeLillo a literary vandal for writing about real people, a bad citizen for suggesting that Kennedy’s murder was not the act of a ‘lone gunman’ but the production of a conspiracy, and a bad influence because a lot of people were now apparently reading DeLillo. Will’s charge of literary vandalism and bad citizenship (What is this anyway, China?) is the latest frightened judgment—with a long American history—delivered upon writers critically engaged with particular American cultural and political matters, writers with terminal bad manners who refuse to limit themselves to celebratory platitudes about the truths of the heart, and who don’t respect the definitive shibboleth of literary culture since the eighteenth century—the sharp and deadly distinction between fiction and nonfiction.... [Postmodernists do not respect that distinction.]

Will is no lone gunman either: A few weeks before, a Pulitzer prize-winning columnist for the *Washington Post*, who writes under the name of Jonathan Yardley, had similarly described DeLillo’s efforts to imagine the lives of real people as ‘beneath contempt.’ Yardley is angry because he thinks DeLillo has somehow cheated, that thanks to a conspiracy of literary radicals he has ‘quite inexplicably acquired a substantial literary reputation’; Yardley is convinced that *Libra* ‘will be lavishly praised in those quarters where DeLillo’s ostentatiously gloomy view of American life and culture is embraced’... Brandishing the literary theory of Eudora Welty, Cumaean sibyl of the new regionalism [This is a Postmodernist critic insulting a great Modernist by reducing her to a ‘regionalist.’], who declares that fiction must have a ‘private address.’ Yardley accuses DeLillo of committing an ‘ideological fiction.’ By ideology he means...any point of view which traces any problematic action to an institutional, structural, or collective cause, rather than to a personal one... Or, as Will puts it: DeLillo’s is ‘yet another exercise in blaming America for Oswald’s act of derangement’....

For the media political right, which believes that America is good and that only individuals go astray (the homeless bring it on themselves, as Reagan used to say), that DeLillo is something of a traitor to his country. In the words of a *New Criterion* soldier who preceded both Will and Yardley in this vein, DeLillo thinks ‘contemporary American society is the worst enemy that the cause of human individuality and self-realization every had’.... If anyone ‘is guilty of turning modern Americans into xerox copies, it is Don DeLillo’.... DeLillo does to Oswald what we, for good or for ill, do every day to our friends, lovers, and enemies: He interprets him, he creates a character.”

Frank Lentricchia, ed.
New Essays on White Noise
(Cambridge U 1991) 3-5

“*Libra* (1988), brilliantly synthesizing a fictional biography of Lee Harvey Oswald with a plausible account of a conspiracy to kill President John Kennedy, earned nearly as many critical plaudits and even

more commercial success than *White Noise*. Although distinct in both theme and structure, it shares with *White Noise* a self-reflexive consideration of our need for plots.”

Mark Osteen, ed.
White Noise: Text and Criticism
(Viking Penguin/Critical Library 1998) xi

“Studies of *Libra*, which identify it as a postmodernist text, typically stress its rendering of Lee Harvey Oswald as the construct of media discourses and its focus on the loss of the (historical) referent and the constraints of textuality. And yet for all its evident postmodern concerns, there is a current of thinking in the novel that is highly resistant to any postmodernizing account of it... We read of ‘patterns [that] emerge outside the bounds of cause and effect’; ‘secret symmetries’; ‘a world inside the world’; ‘A pattern outside experience. Something that *jerks* you out of the spin of history.’ Clearly, repeated invocations of invisible, trans-historical forces which shape human affairs do not amount to a *postmodern* rejection of empiricist historiography. Rather, this is the stuff of metaphysics, not to say the occult....

Libra appeals to the truth and sovereignty of ‘the deepest levels of the self,’ that is, the levels of ‘dreams, visions, intuitions.’ Indeed, alongside those readings of the novel that point to its postmodern rendering of the subject without psychic density—‘an effect of the codes out of which he is articulated’; ‘a contemporary *production*’—we must reckon with the book’s insistent focus on ‘another level...on some deeper plane,’ on that which ‘speaks to something deep inside [one]...the life-insight.’ Such appeals to insight or intuition are common in Romantic literature and conform with Romanticism’s depth model of subjectivity. That model is premised on the belief that truth lies ‘furthest in,’ that is, in the domain of the ‘heart’ or ‘purer mind’; the belief that truth can only be accessed by the ‘inner faculties,’ by ‘inward sight,’ or, recalling the American Romantics, by ‘intuition.’ ‘[W]here,’ Emerson rhetorically inquired, ‘but in the intuitions which are vouchsafed us from within, shall we learn the Truth?’ (*Nature*). The comparisons may be schematic but, still, are close enough to indicate that the mindset of *Libra* is neither consistently nor unequivocally postmodern....

What are the ideological implications of DeLillo’s Romantic metaphysics? A common reading of Romanticism understands its introspective orientation in terms of a ‘politics of vision.’ This is to say that, first, Romantic introspection may be seen as an attempt to claim the ‘inner faculties’ as an inviolable, sacrosanct space beyond the domain of industrialization and the expanding marketplace. Second, the persistent appeal to the visionary ‘faculty’ of ‘insight’ or ‘intuition’ or ‘Imagination’ supplied Wordsworth, Blake, and others with a vantage point from which to critique the utilitarian and positivist ethos of capitalist development. But the crucial component of the ‘politics of vision’ is the concept of what M. H. Abrams has called ‘the redemptive imagination.’ Abrams notes how Blake repeatedly asserts that ‘Imagination...is the Divine Body of the Lord Jesus’...

What needs to be added here is that this faith in the ‘redemptive imagination’ is premised on an idealist assumption that personal salvation can be achieved primarily, if not exclusively, at the level of the individual psyche. Indeed, this focus on salvation as chiefly a private, spiritual affair tends to obscure or diminish the role of change at the institutional level of economic and political practice as a *precondition* for the regeneration of the subject.... [For this critic, politics should replace religion and the State should replace the free individual.] DeLillo’s appeals to the visionary serve to affirm an autonomous realm of experience and to provide a standard by which to judge the spiritually atrophied culture of late capitalism.” [You can always spot a Marxist by that signature phrase “late capitalism.”]

Paul Maltby
“The Romantic Metaphysics of Don DeLillo”
Contemporary Literature 37.2 (Summer 1996) 258-77

“In some respects, it picks up from DeLillo’s 1977 novel, *Players*, in which people cavort as within a film: as actors who screen themselves and then play the reel back to see who they are. They observe, view, scrutinize. *Libra* is the more mature book in the way it carries over the idea of the filmed act: Lee Harvey Oswald becomes a character acting out the role of the man who is supposed to assassinate the President, but who misses and becomes the fall guy. Everyone in the novel has a role: Kennedy himself plays the figure who must be assassinated, part of an event staged for the sake of its dramatic complexities. Similarly, the

conspiratorial forces, the CIA, the John Birch society, the Minutemen—all of them terrorist organizations—are also players. The arena is huge, nothing less than the Presidency, but there is no immediate reality to it; it is all a plot in a novel or long-playing stage piece. Its climax is the assassination, the end of Act IV, with the final act yet to be worked out.

In this scenario, Oswald is a small-bit actor who, like a minor Shakespearean character, vanishes from the stage when others take over. According to DeLillo's theory, and it is not to be confused with Oliver Stone's, which implicated everyone in sight, the CIA was active in manipulating Oswald. Present CIA and former ones who had defected to right wing organizations made him their puppet. Kennedy had failed them in their assessment of Cuba, and he was letting Castro win, or at least survive. Kennedy had taken on qualities of Shakespeare's Julius Caesar, and for the greater good of the country, he had to be eliminated. The novel limns the unraveling of conspiracy within conspiracy. What drives the conspiracies is the hatred of Kennedy, but what drives *Libra* is DeLillo's ability to make credible the various forces setting up Oswald. Rather than pointing fingers, the novel is deeply political in a broader sense: that the breakdown of order is a reflection of the disorder and anarchy implicit in the highest levels of the American ruling class....

It doesn't matter if DeLillo is correct about the Kennedy conspiracy [*Really?*]; it may not have gone the way he says. [Liberals want to see a rightwing conspiracy because Kennedy was killed by a Communist and liberals are implicated by their support of Communists since the 1930s.] What does count is that he sees American life as having conspiratorial undercurrents which *might have led* to Kennedy's assassination. The details are exaggerated, the claims hyperbolic; but the point is distrust of all official explanations. The validity of DeLillo's point is the way in which America shapes itself through a drifting loner like Oswald and the disaffected elements which are part of America's underground. The mythicized loner or drifter who was once the gunslinger (Clint Eastwood), the ex-marshal (Glen Ford), the unattached cowboy or westerner (Randolph Scott, Gary Cooper, Alan Ladd) is now a very different kind of animal: a man ready to go underground, to do whatever arises, but on *someone else's* terms. [Oswald is a hero?]

Oswald has his counterpart everywhere; so that even if he was alone assassin, he carried out an act innumerable others applauded or would have done had they the means or the courage of their convictions. That drifting, anarchic loner floating free of all safeguards and support systems—in another phase, the serial killer—is the element conspiratorial groups can count on. He is a reflection of themselves: the person or group so disaffected, so confused about his own identity he (rarely she) becomes the tool of ideological forces. Oswald desires to emerge, to be somebody or something; and yet every move he makes for self-improvement moves him ever deeper into the plans others have for him. He is the fly, they the spider, their plans the web; and he is entrapped, does their work, and is rubbed out. Hoping for success, he becomes American failure. He lacks the touch for true deception.

'Libra' is an ambiguous word and title. Foremost, it refers to the sign of the zodiac under which Oswald was born, October 18, making him a Libran. Libra in the zodiac, the seventh sign, stands for balance. But it also suggests the word for freedom, the root of liberation, and, by extension, emergence. Even as plotters Ferrie and Shaw are planning to entrap him, Oswald hopes to turn the zodiac sign into a kind of freedom for himself. He thinks he will help Castro by killing Kennedy, whose government has been plotting to assassinate or remove the Cuban leader. Oswald, however, becomes the weapon whereby the anti-Castroites can eliminate Kennedy, who might, they fear, break bread with Castro and betray the opposition. Also involved is the Mafia, which looks back nostalgically to the days when Havana was wide open for gambling, prostitution, and other gang sports. Intermixed with this, as noted, are disgruntled ex-CIA and present CIA—for whom Oswald makes the perfect sacrifice. Among other things, he has been filmed or observed at each stage of his journey toward November 22. He is on his way into a culture of death, the 'deeper plane' the insider Ferrie speaks of.

Oswald is driven by films, two in particular, *Suddenly*, with Frank Sinatra, and *We Were Strangers*, with John Garfield. Both involve assassination. In the first, the Sinatra character seizes a typical American home in order to set up a base to assassinate the visiting President; and only the family, that part of traditional America, can thwart Sinatra and save the chief executive. In the second, the Garfield character plots to assassinate the Cuban dictator (then Machado) and blow up his entire cabinet. 'Lee felt in the

middle of his own movie. They were running this thing for him. He didn't have to make the picture come and go. It happened on its own in the shaky light, with a strand of hair trembling in the corner of the frame. John Garfield dies a hero. He has to die. This is what feeds a revolution.' When Oswald is caught, he is himself in a movie house, following a plan in which he is to meet Wayne Elko, at a movie called *Cry of Battle* with Van Heflin. Elko, another insider, is planning to kill Oswald, not to help him escape. The conspiracy itself, a kind of film, features Oswald's manipulators as set directors attempting to create order out of disparate and disorderly events. As DeLillo states, 'A conspiracy is everything that ordinary life is not. It's the inside game, cold, sure, undistracted, forever closed to us. We are the flawed ones, the innocents trying to make some rough sense of the daily jostle. Conspirators have a logic and daring beyond our reach....'

The external voice in all this is a researcher named Nicholas Branch, who, after the Warren Commission has done its job, is trying to make sense of the evidence. Branch's work has been contracted for the CIA's 'closed collection.' Yet he senses the CIA is withholding key information. He recognizes that, while he is being used by the CIA to provide an inside, secret report on the assassination, he is in fact being excluded from what he needs. Branch suspects he is being caught up in a deep conspiracy against *him*, against his efforts. By the late 1970s, the time of Branch's research, the plot has deepened into further conspiratorial recesses, with the CIA attempting to create more distortions. We should not dismiss this as paranoia... Conspiracies seemed to have taken over the postwar government, perhaps going back to Lyndon Johnson's deceptive use of the Gulf of Tonkin incident as a way of misleading Congress and the American people into entering the conflict with North Vietnam...

In this, Oswald stands no chance, caught as he is between desire for self-definition and the extremes of ideology and behavior. He thinks he is constructing the kind of rope by which he can raise himself, and meanwhile the rope is waiting to hang him. DeLillo has cast his novel like the great classical tragedies, in which events provide a vise which traps the person who hopes to use them to his own advantage.... Oswald, at the lowest end of the scale, a loser, loner, drifter, a failure at everything he tries, is brought up against a man who has succeeded in everything, the President. DeLillo is aware of the parallelism, even of the doubling: both loser and winner have children at about the same time, both have brothers named Robert, both are gunned down. In this vision of America, where lowest and highest touch in conspiracy and acts of terrorism, differences only point up similarities. For Oswald, the assassination is his way of touching greatness, the low and the high and mighty finally encountering each other. By dying young, Kennedy helped create the Camelot myth; by living longer, all the sham would have destroyed him as it destroyed successive Presidents. Oswald's destiny, in this strange equation, is the same as Kennedy's, despite great differences of birth and family; a shooting provides the great democratic equalizer.

As for the shooting—that shooting!—Oswald maintains his first shot hit Kennedy in the back, not killing him; his second hit Governor Connolly; and his third missed. The shot that blew out Kennedy's brains came from someone else in the crossfire of shooters set up by conspiratorial forces. One need not accept this interpretation—although Oswald's marksmanship was suspect, especially given the time frame—in order to see where DeLillo is going. He has set out to do nothing less than to carve out what America is, where conspiracy and terrorism and shooting are the elements which bring us all together. Nothing like an assassination to create community. People grieve, bewail the fates, reach for transcendence through prayer. They feel good." [Atheist mockery]

Frederick R. Karl
American Fictions 1980-2000
(Xlibris 2001) 91-96

Michael Hollister (2014)