

## MEDIA AND THE REPRESENTATION OF THE PAST: HISTORY AS A SERIES OF ACCIDENTS AND COINCIDENCES IN DON DELILLO'S *LIBRA*

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In her book *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Professor Linda Hutcheon analyses several tendencies in the postmodern representation of the past and concludes that there is a shift in the understanding of historiography, from "an objective and disinterested recording of the past" to "an attempt to comprehend and master it by means of some working (narrative/explanatory) model that [...] grants a particular meaning to the past". This trend is to be regarded in connection with the authors' general distrust of master narratives that promote a "single" or "objective" truth of historical account (a subject previously developed by Jean Francois Lyotard), and with the use of official recordings of historical events together with their creative reinvention, with the aim of filling the gaps these recordings might have and provide an interpretation<sup>1</sup>. On the same note as the debates raised on history and literature by Hayden White, Hutcheon examines whether the historian's role is that of a discoverer or inventor of facts.

Several postmodern narrators of historiographic fiction assume a combination of these two roles and the degree to which they consider themselves "historians" rather than "writers of fiction" varies. Faced with this issue when discussing his novel *Libra*, which takes a retroactive look at President Kennedy's assassination in 1963, DeLillo confesses his intention "to do justice to historical likelihood". He also intends to offer readers the "most obvious possibility" in interpreting the case, which is pointing at a group of anti-Castro followers as being responsible for the plot. Although he admits he could

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<sup>1</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Routledge, London and New York, 2002, p.61

have written the same book with a completely different scenario, he says: "I didn't want novelistic invention to become the heart of the book. I wanted a clear historical center on which I could work my fictional variations"<sup>2</sup>. Yet clarity is hardly present in DeLillo's resolution in the case. Plenty of questions remain unanswered, and rational, cause-effect explanations for the actions of the characters are still to be elucidated.

The persistence of ambiguity is obviously intentional and DeLillo describes it as a trait of the larger social context that characterises America after the events in Dallas. He sees what Barbie Zelizer called "the absence of closure" in the JFK case as the cause for an important shift in the way Americans perceive and interpret reality. The representation of this shift is a central theme in all his novels and he confesses that he could not have written any of them in the world that existed before the Kennedy assassination:

"Our culture changed in important ways. And these changes are among the things that go into my work. There's the shattering randomness of the event, the missing motive, the violence that people not only commit but seem to watch simultaneously from a disinterested stance. Then the uncertainty we feel about the basic facts that surround the case – number of gunmen, number of shots and so on. Our grip on reality has felt a little threatened. Every revelation about the event seems to produce new levels of secrecy, unexpected links, and I guess this has been part of my work, the clandestine mentality – how ordinary people spy on themselves, how the power centers operate and manipulate."<sup>3</sup>

The lack of a clear resolution and the endless number of conspiracy theories released to replace the lack of a comprehensible conclusion in the case that shocked the American public through its brutality and suddenness has contributed to a more general cultivation of uncertainty and a belief in the existence of hidden, conspiratorial aspects of reality. In addition, the case has

2 Anthony DeCurtis, "An Outsider in This Society": An Interview with Don DeLillo" in F. Lentricchia (ed.), *Introducing Don DeLillo*, Duke University Press, Durham, 1991

3 Adam Begley, "Don DeLillo: The Art of Fiction CXXXV", *Paris Review* 128, 1993, p. 275-306.

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demonstrated that historical deeds are not accomplished solely through the use of "massive force", but more and more often through the active performing of discontent from the part of what DeLillo described in his fiction as "men in small rooms". The insignificant individual who silently accumulates frustration and anger, who lives in his closed and compact space, leading a personal struggle and unable to integrate or intervene in society in any major way is also "the nobody who walks out of the shadow and changes everything". "Men in small rooms" are a recurrent presence in DeLillo's fiction. Like Bucky Wunderlick in his girlfriend's tiny apartment in *Great Jones Street*, at the point of committing either murder or suicide; or writer Bill Gray in *Mao II*, struggling with a never-ending novel, trapped between piles of archived documents, but equally ready to get out and mark a significant change by travelling to the other side of the world to negotiate with religious fundamentalists; or Harvey Lee Oswald in *Libra*, living in a cramped apartment with his mother in New Orleans, "reading and waiting, struggling with secret and feverish ideas"<sup>4</sup>.

These "men in small rooms" and their unpredictably violent reactions are used in some of DeLillo's novels to fill the void left behind by the failure of history to provide clear causal explanations. Involved in conspiracies and driven by random choices, "nobodies" such as Oswald have a definitive role in shaping historical events that otherwise prove ambiguous and nonsensical. In DeLillo's own words, Oswald's attempt on Kennedy was based on "elements outside politics and [...] outside history", on "things like dreams and coincidences and even the movement or the configuration of the stars"<sup>5</sup>. Coupled with the anger he accumulated during his entire lifetime against the establishment, the coincidence that the motorcade would be passing right in front of the School Book Depository where he worked ultimately shaped Oswald's decision to kill the President.

The plots and conspiracies in which DeLillo's "men in small rooms" end up being involved are meant to offer alternative explanations to the "official" history's failure to offer a definite conclusion. However, in the end they are equally unsuccessful in providing a satisfactory resolution. As Nicholas Bran-

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4 Don DeLillo, *Libra*, Penguin Books, New York, 1988, p. 41

5 DeCurtis: p. 43-66

ch concludes in *Libra*, "the conspiracy against the President was a rambling affair that succeeded in the short term due mainly to chance". Based on "deft men and fools, ambivalence and fixed will and what the weather was like"<sup>6</sup>, the assassination just happened to be carried out effectively. In the end, the conspiracy theory meant to offer an explanation in the case proves to be nothing more than a series of accidents and contingencies, and the promise of a rational clarification of facts continues to remain unfulfilled. This conclusion reinforces DeLillo's depiction of history as a series of coincidences and random happenings that contradict a causal understanding of historical events and assume a "de-totalization of 'total history'"<sup>7</sup>.

The case of President Kennedy's assassination is particularly relevant for a discussion on how the occurrence of accidents and coincidences is central to DeLillo's view of history, as well as how this topic connects to media's role in shaping the outcome and account of events. As Professor Randall Woods writes in his history of post-war America<sup>8</sup>, Lee Harvey Oswald was arrested on November 22 in Dallas, just one hour after the shootings in the Dealey Plaza which led to serious injuries for President Kennedy. The arrest took place in a different part of the city, where Oswald made an attempt on the life of a police officer. Though a connection between the two crimes seems difficult to establish and would probably require thorough investigation from the part of the police and most likely a few days until a verdict is reached, in just a few hours the entire America became convinced that Oswald was the man who had shot the President. How were two separate crimes linked together and how did Oswald end up being labelled as Kennedy's assassin before any proper police investigation? Not through his confession, we know for sure, but through the persuasive power of the media.

As if press materials had already been prepared in advance, in a matter of hours after the shooting broadcast and printed media initiated reports depicting Oswald as a "deeply disturbed former Marine", who had defected to the

6 DeLillo: p. 441

7 Hutcheon: p. 59

8 Randall B. Woods, *Quest for Identity. America since 1945*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2005

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Soviet Union and had been a member of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee, was a self-professed Marxist, spoke Russian and had a Russian wife<sup>9</sup>. With the McCarthy era still fresh in memory, such arguments led to the immediate conviction of Oswald in the eyes of the American public, long before any police investigation or court of law approached the case.

The interference of print and broadcast media in legal cases and how journalists, through their (often simplistic and uninformed) reporting manage to create pressure on courts of law and finally influence the verdict in controversial lawsuits represent one of the topics approached by Pierre Bourdieu in his book *On Television*. The French sociologist notices how media's self-claimed competence is artificially extended in domains that require a high degree of professional training. Under the economic pressures posed by the functioning of media institutions in a competitive market – where rivalries are fierce not only between outlets, but also between mediums, and there is a constant race for reporting things first and raising issues on the public agenda –, journalists are forced to become overnight experts in a variety of specialised fields, such as medicine, philosophy or law. From the influential position that is granted to them by the television screen, they gain the power to assert value judgements regarding the real experts in such fields. As an example, Bourdieu mentions the initiation of hit parades establishing who is “the greatest French philosopher” or of talk-shows debating cases from highly specialised fields that do not mobilise real intellectuals but only “journalist-intellectuals”, who are formed and exist only on screen. Professionals who have spent considerable time and effort to gain proficient skills in an area are evaluated and judged by the media that oversimplifies facts and references so as to provide a thesis that is easily understood by a majority of viewers who might have other domains of professional interest.

The economic pressures that the journalistic field is subjected to are transferred onto other fields of cultural production by “supporting those actors or enterprises [...] who are most inclined to yield to the seduction of ‘external’ profits precisely because they are less rich in capital specific to the field

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<sup>9</sup> Woods: p. 178

(scientific, literary or other)". In other words, the "journalist-intellectuals" that are used as sources or as "competent judges" for the representation of a certain professional field in the media are in fact those representatives who benefit from low recognition in that field, but are able to present matters in a "short and simple" manner, that allows the public to pass facile verdicts. The effects of this extension of professional competence from journalism to several other fields are criticised by Bourdieu, whose conclusion is straightforward:

"I think television poses a serious danger for all the various areas of cultural production – for art, for literature, for science, for philosophy, and for law. What's more, contrary to what a lot of journalists – even the most responsible of them – say (and think), undoubtedly in good faith, I think that television poses no less of a threat to political life and to democracy itself."<sup>10</sup>

Media's overt authority and reliability to render and analyse events, to construct reality and determine what is newsworthy enough to be covered, and thus enter history, and what deserves to be overlooked and forgotten, leads to a largely random set of criteria for the definition of relevance. When compelled to balance its canonical duties towards the public interest with its economic quest for profit, the media will select those aspects of reality that ensure faster and greater attention from the part of the audience. The spectacular facets of an event and those that are easily comprehended by a large majority of viewers will overcome the factual data and gain pre-eminence in media reporting. As in the case of Oswald described above, the selective presentation of his biography, with an obvious focus on elements that were considered negative and incriminating in the eyes of the American public – such as his manifestly pro-Marxist and pro-Castro views or his defection to the Soviet Union – in connection with recent historical events (the Cold War, the Missile Crisis, the Bay of Pigs invasion), represents a clear example of how the media assumes the role of a symbolic court of law. The "judging" of Oswald

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10 Pierre Bourdieu, *On Television*, The New Press, New York, 1998, p. 10

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11 Guy Debord, *The Soc*

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and the "verdict" of his guilt were the results of a media campaign meant to  
bring more Americans in front of their television sets, increase advertising  
revenues and thus face the economic pressures that media institutions are  
subjected to. As Bourdieu observes, a media system ruled by the continual  
race for increasing market shares determines a transfer of the market pressures  
on the actual consumer, who is supposed to be correctly informed but instead  
receives a media product that has nothing to do with democratic expression  
or public reasoning anymore.

The choices that determine how an event is represented are largely ran-  
dom because they have less to do with the actual content of these events and  
more with their potential of becoming visible or televised, as well as their  
spectacularity. In his book *The Society of the Spectacle*, Guy Debord analyses the  
context and the effects of the primacy of the spectacle on the way in which  
society perceives and processes reality. With a complete monopoly on the  
rendering of recent history, the media does not meet any more obstacles in  
constructing a reality that is lacking any rational foundation and functions  
on the principles of arbitrariness and chaos. In Debord's view, the society of  
the spectacle entails the destruction of both old and recent history and the  
cultivation of certain aspects of the "now" as the single versions of reality that  
are worth paying attention to. Along with this development, the thorough  
and rational description of contemporary events is furthering away from the  
public's perception, establishing a distance augmented by their implausible  
depictions in the media and by their far-fetched explanations and analyses.  
By virtue of its uncontested authority and monopoly in the society of the  
spectacle, media can falsify anything, can hide evidence or silence opposing  
opinions, can derive irrational conclusions and implicitly persuade audiences  
they represent reality. As the fundamental characteristic of the media, the  
spectacle "presents itself as a vast inaccessible reality that can never be ques-  
tioned" and "the passive acceptance it demands is already effectively imposed  
by its monopoly of appearances, its manner of appearing without allowing any  
reply"<sup>11</sup>.

11 Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Hobgoblin Press, Canberra, 2002, p. 8

Apart from explaining the arbitrariness of deciding relevance in the manner in which the JFK assassination was reported in the media, Bourdieu's theories could also serve to account for the quick and dramatic passing of the journalists' judgements onto the audiences. In line with Baudrillard's concept of the simulacra in the rendering of reality by the media, and the subsequent construction of a hyperreality, Bourdieu examines the power of television to produce a "reality effect", to generate trust and mobilise or demobilise audiences. The author registers how, from a tool of recording reality, television becomes one of creating reality: "We are getting closer and closer to the point where the social world is primarily described – and in a sense prescribed – by television"<sup>12</sup>.

With its random means of selecting what is noteworthy and what is not from contemporary reality, media in DeLillo's *Libra* should be regarded as the decisive factor transforming history into a series of accidents, coincidences and contingencies. And this fact is not only visible in how, exploiting the spectacularity of Oswald's arrest, the media managed to generate a nationwide informal verdict regarding his guilt and eventually caused his shooting by Jack Ruby, just two days after the arrest. The randomizing power of media over history is transferred into the way characters perceive their own lives and everyday reality. The constant search for clues that ensure links inside a fragmentary perception of events, following an arbitrary algorithm imported from the media, represents a recurrent trait of Oswald's personality. He never ceases to discover similarities between himself and President Kennedy and seems inclined to read them as signs, although he is not sure how they should be interpreted: "Lee was always reading two or three books, like Kennedy. Did military service in the Pacific, like Kennedy. Poor handwriting, terrible speller, like Kennedy. Wives pregnant at the same time. Brothers named Robert"<sup>13</sup>. A series of other coincidences that seem extracted from the fragmentary language of tabloid media, including a chaotic mixture of relevant and irrelevant data, continue to be registered by Oswald with the concentration yet lack of reasoning of a superstitious person: (i) an article on Castro's decision to charge

<sup>12</sup> Bourdieu: p. 22

<sup>13</sup> DeLillo: p. 336

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<sup>14</sup> DeLillo: p. 436-7

<sup>15</sup> DeLillo: p. 379



the US with plotting assassinations appears in the newspaper right after the day David Ferrie introduced Oswald to the JFK assassination plot; (ii) Castro's guerrilla name was Alex, which represents the Hispanic version of Alek, the name Oswald used while in the Soviet Union; (iii) just as Guy Banister was looking for him, Lee entered his office and asked for an undercover job; (iv) he ordered a revolver and a carbine six weeks apart, but they arrived on the same day. In addition, Oswald is not the only character whose actions seem to be ruled by chance. An equal reliance on the fortuitous power of fate can be found in the way Jack Ruby is portrayed in *Libra*. In one of the key scenes of the novel, where he is preparing for the shooting of Oswald, Ruby makes constant references to "what it is meant to be", seemingly soothing his insecurity by placing his actions in the hazardous hands of destiny. As Oswald, he is trying to make sense of a series of arbitrary signs and happenings, and use them to decipher clues that would command his actions: "He was running late. If I don't get there in time, it's decreed I wasn't meant to do it. [...] If I get in this easy, it means they want me to do it"<sup>14</sup>.

Whereas in the case of Oswald, the registering of all these accidental and largely insignificant twists of fate are part of a search for self-identity, and the failure to find a meaning to them indicates the larger failure to define himself, in the case of Nicholas Branch, the discovery of these "cheap coincidences" causes wariness and the thought that someone might try to "sway him toward superstition". Uncovering the series of murders or suspicious deaths that characters involved in the case become victims of – Win Everett, the head of the plot; Wayne Elko, one of the mercenaries hired by Mackey; Sam Giancana, a friend of Jack Ruby's who was supposed to testify in the case; Bobby Dupard, Oswald's old friend from the Marines and accomplice in the shooting on General Walker; and others –, Branch tries to preserve a clear mind and not get misled by seemingly connected information. When "the Curator" sends him a four-hundred page comparative study of the deaths of Kennedy and Lincoln, he ends up wondering: "Can't a man die without the ensuing ritual of a search for patterns and links?"<sup>15</sup>

14 DeLillo: p. 436-7

15 DeLillo: p. 379

DeLillo's portrayal of history as a series of conspiracies contrived through accidents and coincidences in *Libra* raises a series of questions in connection with the historical imagination in postmodernism. Connecting the discussion with the larger circumstances provided by the media-saturated society, the author redraws the distinction between visibility and knowledge while at the same time blurring the boundary between image and reality.

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**Mass-media și reprezentarea trecutului.  
Istoria ca succesiune de accidente și coincidențe  
în romanul *Libra* de Don DeLillo  
(Rezumat)**

Redarea și interpretarea istoriei într-o societate a abundenței mediaticice și a surplusului imanent de informație reprezintă o temă dezbătută frecvent în critica postmodernă. Fragilitatea barierei între realitate și ceea ce Baudrillard numește hiperrealitate, sau între înregistrarea obiectivă și ficțiunea istoriografică, constituie unul dintre mesajele ce pot fi deslușite în subtextul romanului *Libra* de Don DeLillo. Construit în jurul absenței unui verdict clar în cazul asasinării președintelui american J.F. Kennedy, romanul propune o reficționalizare a evenimentului, provocând tiparul reprezentărilor sale istorice prin aducerea unei perspective interpretative adiționale. Lucrarea de față este îndreptată către sondarea modului de redare a istoriei prin lentila mediatică în *Libra* și utilizează câteva idei teoretizate de observatori critici ai fenomenului media, cum ar fi cea a magnitudinii influenței exercitate de televiziune asupra spațiului public conform lui Pierre Bourdieu, sau conceptul de spectacularitate lansat de Guy Debord. Concluziile analizei sunt îndreptate către legitimarea reprezentării postmoderne a trecutului ca succesiune de accidente și coincidențe în viziunea lui Don DeLillo.

**La média et la représentation du passé.  
L'histoire comme succession d'accidents et de coïncidences  
dans le roman *Libra* par Don DeLillo  
(Résumé)**

La description et l'interprétation de l'histoire dans une société de l'abondance médiatique et de l'excédent de l'information représentent un thème fréquemment débattu par la critique postmoderne. La fragilité de la barrière entre la réalité et ce que Baudrillard appelle hyperréalité, ou entre l'inscription objective et la fiction historiographique, constitue l'un des

messages qui peuvent être distingués dans le sous-texte du roman *Libra* par Don DeLillo. Le roman, construit autour de l'absence d'un verdict clair en ce qui concerne le cas de l'assassinat de J.F. Kennedy, propose la réinvention de l'événement, en provoquant la forme de ses représentations historiques par donner une perspective interprétative supplémentaire. Cet article se propose de sonder les moyens de la représentation de l'histoire de *Libra* par la lentille médiatique et utilise quelques idées théoretisées par les observateurs critiques du phénomène media, comme la magnitude de l'influence exercée par la télévision sur l'espace public, d'après Pierre Bourdieu, ou le concept de spectacularité lancé par Guy Debord. Les conclusions de l'analyse sont concentrées vers la représentation postmoderne du passé comme succession d'accidents et coïncidences dans la vision du Don DeLillo.

**Key-words:** *Ambiguity, Postmodernism, Media, America, Kennedy*

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