

**“WHERE EVERYTHING
CONVERGES TO A
POINT”:
CONSPIRACY AS
NARRATIVE MODEL IN
DON DELILLO’S
FICTION¹**

*Paula Martín Salván
Universidad de Córdoba*

This article examines the role played by conspiracy in Don DeLillo’s fiction. As the author of novels in which plots are often central thematic elements, he has been frequently associated to this term in academic writing. My aim is to go beyond the usual political and sociological readings of conspiracy in his work in order to offer a rhetorical and narratological interpretation. I will claim that conspiracy can work as a principle of organization in his novels, determining narrative structures and reading strategies. I will analyze the figurative language associated to conspiracy and the ways in which it can be said to shape the narrative structure of many of DeLillo’s novels. Finally, the ethical implications of this kind of narrative will be briefly addressed, following the idea that conspiracy in fiction can offer relief to the anxiety and uncertainty provoked by particular historical events.

Keywords: Postmodernism, Narrative, US History, Conspiracy, Plot, Secret, Community, Paranoia, Metonymy, Metafiction.

¹ Some of the ideas developed in this article were presented as “work in progress” at the 8th SAAS Conference held in A Coruña (2007), with the title “Breathing Together: Rhetorics of Conspiracy in Don DeLillo’s Fiction.”

INTRODUCTION

Don DeLillo's work has been closely associated to conspiracy for the past three decades. One can think of the petty office and domestic conspiracies in *Americana* (1971) or *White Noise* (1986) as well as the intricate governmental plots in *Libra* (1988), *Running Dog* (1978) or *The Names* (1982). His acclaimed novel *Underworld* (1997) has been read as a catalogue of conspiracy theories of all kinds (Knight 2000:230), and in some sections of his last published novel, *Falling Man* (2007), he adopts the perspective of one of the terrorists who planned and executed the 9/11 attacks. He even received the dubious honor of being named the "chief shaman of the paranoid school of American fiction" by an imaginative reviewer (Towers 1988:31).

The aim of this article is to examine the role conspiracy plays in the narrative work of Don DeLillo. My intention is not so much to assess the explicit thematic presence of that topic in his novels but to explore the narratological consequences of that presence. On the one hand, I would like to examine the way in which conspiracy as a theme present in many of DeLillo's texts produces the recurrence of specific rhetorical patterns associated to it. Ideas of secrecy or connectivity closely related to the notion of conspiracy are typically codified in particular images, which I would like to investigate. On the other hand, the topic of conspiracy tends to impose a particular narrative structure that is repeated in many of DeLillo's novels. I will analyze this narrative pattern, in order to evaluate to what extent the kind of novel that results from it can be read as a metafictional commentary on the novels and the process of reading them.

In the rhetorical analysis that I would like to perform I will draw from most of DeLillo's novels in which conspiracy has an explicit thematic role, from *Great Jones Street* (1973) to *Falling Man*. Nevertheless, I would like to focus on those novels where this thematic presence has consequences for the narrative structure of the text. As part of my initial hypothesis, I would claim that the novels in which the language of conspiracy imposes most clearly a "conspiratorial narrative pattern" are mainly *Libra*, *Underworld* and *Falling Man*.

The issue of conspiracy in DeLillo's work has received wide critical attention on the part of authors such as Patrick O'Donnell, Peter Knight, John McClure, Timothy Melley or Steffen Hantke. My line of argumentation in this article draws on the preliminary work by these authors, and specifically on their

insight into what O'Donnell (1990, 1992) and Knight (2000, 2002) have called "conspiracy culture" and its influence on DeLillo.

The importance of conspiracy in DeLillo's fiction from a thematic perspective seems to be beyond doubt. It should be noted, however, that most critical readings of his work in connection to this topic tend to remain on the thematic level, performing recurrent plot analyses of the novels that concentrate on sociological and political aspects. I would like to propose a reading of conspiracy in DeLillo's work that goes beyond the thematic, suggesting that it might work as rhetorical organizer in his novels, determining narrative structures and reading strategies. The work on this field by J. Hillis Miller, Peter Brooks and Ricardo Piglia will be crucial for my understanding of conspiracy as textual strategy.

When arguing for the importance of conspiracy in DeLillo's work, most of these authors tend to relate it to two general issues. Conspiracy can be considered to be a keyword in the field of Postmodernist fiction and it also plays a central role in American culture in general. The first aspect has been noticed by Patrick O'Donnell, who made a list of the American authors associated to Postmodernism who have used conspiracy as a topic for their novels: "Norman Mailer, Philip Roth, Joseph Heller, Robert Coover, Thomas Pynchon, Diane Johnson, Joseph McElroy, John Barth, Kathy Acker, Saul Bellow, Marge Piercy, Don DeLillo, William Gaddis, Ishmael Reed, and Margaret Atwood" (1992:181). This literary connection justifies the frequent association of DeLillo with authors such as Pynchon or Coover. The second aspect, which was analyzed in the seminal work by Richard Hofstadter *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (1967), has also been highlighted by DeLillo's critics. Peter Knight stated that "the history of the United States is a history of conspiracy-minded countersubversion" (2002:3), while Frank Lentricchia claimed in *Introducing Don DeLillo* that American conspiracy culture extends as far back as Emerson and Thoreau (1991:5). Lentricchia is tracing a line that would link DeLillo's aesthetics of conspiracy to Ralph Waldo Emerson's dictum in *Self-Reliance* (1841): "Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members."

DeLillo's work can be said, therefore, to stand at the crossing point between these two cultural frameworks, Postmodernism and American conspiracy culture. I agree with both ascriptions, but I am more interested in the specific narrative and rhetorical shape the issue takes in DeLillo's work than in justifying or tracing back this lineage. I think the kind of pattern that can be found in his work does not specifically spring from this literary ancestry, but that it is contained in the semantic and rhetoric richness of the term "conspiracy" itself. I will favor the view that figurative language has the power to generate new knowledge, to shape the way we structure reality in new ways,

rather than a causative genealogic explanation to the presence of particular elements in DeLillo's work. In this sense, I will be following the wake of ideas about figurative language expressed by authors such as Hans Blumentberg and, specially, J. Hillis Miller.

THE RHETORIC OF CONSPIRACY

I would like to begin my analysis with a close reading of two quotations from DeLillo's work. The first one is taken from the novel *Running Dog*: "This is the age of conspiracy [...] This is the age of connections, links, secret relationships [...] Worldwide conspiracies. Fantastic assassination schemes" (1978:111). The second one is from "American Blood", a 1983 piece on the JFK assassination published in *Rolling Stone*: "What has become unraveled since that afternoon in Dallas is not the plot, of course, not the dense mass of characters and events, but the sense of a coherent reality most of us shared. We seem from that moment to have entered a world of randomness and ambiguity, a world totally modern" (1983:22).

The texts from which these passages are extracted are central to any analysis of conspiracy in DeLillo's work. In *Running Dog*, he weaves an intricate conspiratorial net linking CIA agents, Washington senators, art dealers and pornographers in search of an erotic film supposedly shot in Hitler's bunker. In "American Blood: A Journey through the Labyrinth of Dallas and JFK", he speculates about the JFK assassination and its impact in the American collective imagination.²

Both fragments may be read as DeLillo's rhetoric of conspiracy in a nutshell. Several key ideas can be underlined: In the first place, the notion that the conspiracy marks a turning point in History: "this is the age", "we seem from that moment to have entered a world [...] a world totally modern." In the second place, the accumulation of terms such as "connections", "links" and "relationships" points to the importance of connectivity in any articulation of conspiracy. This concept is echoed in the "dense mass of characters and events" mentioned in the second passage. Finally, the ideas of secrecy ("secret

² This text was written five years before the publication of *Libra*, DeLillo's novel on Lee Harvey Oswald and the JFK assassination. In the novel, DeLillo goes back to some of the ideas that were sketched in this essay. For this reason, it has been considered as part of the preparatory work for the writing of the novel.

relationships”) and hidden truth (“what has become unraveled”) are mentioned in the texts. A spatial formulation of reality as divided into two separate realms, secret and apparent, can be hinted at here. This formulation may be confirmed in the notion of “ambiguity” mentioned at the end of the second passage, pointing to a reality liable to be interpreted in different ways.

This initial reading will be used as framework from which to analyze the rhetorical formulation of conspiracy in DeLillo’s fiction. To begin, a brief etymological and lexicological review of the term “conspiracy” may be useful in order to check to what extent DeLillo’s ideas about this topic are contained in the semantic background of the terminology he uses.³ The idea of conspiracy as a yarn linking together a mass of people and events suggested in the passage from “American Blood” leads directly to the etymological sense of the word. “To conspire”, from the Latin word “cumspirare”, means “breathing together.” A notion of community being created out of the conspiratorial activity is suggested here, and it will have a great rhetorical impact in DeLillo’s fiction, as I will try to illustrate. Current definitions of the term in several dictionaries point in the same direction. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, to conspire is “to join in a secret agreement to do an unlawful or wrongful act or an act which becomes unlawful as a result of the secret agreement.” The idea of secrecy mentioned previously reappears in this definition, but it is absent from other formulations. In the Oxford English Dictionary, “conspiracy” is defined as “Combination of people for an unlawful or reprehensible purpose; an agreement so to combine, a plot” Both definitions imply a plurality of agents (to join in a secret agreement, combination of people) to carry out a crime (unlawful, wrongful, reprehensible). Moreover, both of them insist on the notion that it is the plan itself and not necessarily its implementation what grants conspiracy its criminal status.⁴

What seems to be entirely absent from any definition of conspiracy is the idea of conspiracy as historical breaking point, present in DeLillo’s formulation. In the two passages quoted before conspiracy is claimed to be a political and epistemological mode that became dominant at a specific moment in History. In

³ See Miller 1992:32: “Etymology does say something about the procedure involved in naming that presumed entity. Identification of the root metaphor identifies the figurative transfer that was necessary to develop the conceptual term for the entity in question.”

⁴ This notion is supported by the early legal formulations of conspiracy in British law. In 1305, conspiracy was defined as “confederacy or alliance for the false and malicious promotion of indictments and pleas, or for embracery or maintenance of various kins” (Wright 1887:5-6). Later on, with the “Poulterers case” in 1611, conspiracy was established as a crime independently of its success (Wright 1887:6).

DeLillo's work, this moment is recurrently the Kennedy assassination.⁵ He refers to it in *Libra* as “the seven seconds that broke the back of the American century” (DeLillo 1988:181), and he has publicly acknowledged its importance for his work:

Maybe it invented me. Certainly, when it happened, I was not a fully formed writer [...] As I was working on *Libra*, it occurred to me that a lot of tendencies in my first eight novels seemed to be collecting around the dark center of the assassination. So it's possible I wouldn't have become the kind of writer I am if it weren't for the assassination. (DeCurtis 1991:48)

Since that afternoon in Dallas, we could paraphrase, America entered the age of conspiracy. This chronology of recent history in DeLillo's fiction coincides with some theorizations of Postmodernist literature that take the same historical event as landmark to indicate a generational rupture. Malcolm Bradbury, for instance, does it in *The Modern American Novel* to mark the end of a literary generation: “When Kennedy was tragically assassinated in Dallas in 1963 a brief era seemed to end” (1992:197). Peter Knight refers to it as “the primal scene of postmodernism” (2000:114) and ratifies its importance for American culture in general: “For most Americans recent history is divided into before and after the Kennedy assassination” (2000:78).

“After the Kennedy assassination” means for DeLillo entering a reality split into two epistemological levels: the secret and the apparent. His novels are full of images opposing underground life to visible reality. Metaphors related to liquid flowing under earth and to light and vision threatened by darkness are characteristic of this formulation: “the well-springs [...] deeper and less detectable” (DeLillo 1997:319).

In *Running Dog*, this dual organization of reality in terms of what happens “in broad daylight” and what takes place “underground” is structured around the description of two organizations, PAC/ORD and Radial Matrix, the first one hiding the conspiratorial activities of the second:

This was PAC/ORD territory, *on the surface* [...] *Beyond* that, however, the Senator's investigating committee had learned that PAC/ORD had a *secret* arm, a kind of *cover* setup known as a proprietary [...] The only *overt* connection between PAC/ORD and Radial Matrix... (DeLillo 1978:73-74; emphasis added)

⁵ Some people may have expected that after 9/11 DeLillo would have reconsidered his articulation of recent history. The novels he has written since 2001, however, have made no explicit formulation of this, although in the essay “In the Ruins of the Future”, written shortly after the attacks, he claimed that “all this changed on September 11” (2001:33).

The double-sided spatial organization is here repeatedly suggested by the oppositions of terms such as “cover” and “overt.” In connection to this, two characters mention in *Underworld* the Italian word “dietrologia”, “the science of what is behind an event” (DeLillo 1997:280).⁶ Conspiracy is articulated on a rhetoric of invisibility and opacity that brings together the fields of epistemology and politics. The secrecy of a conspiracy opposes the official discourse on truth and knowledge as clarity and enlightenment.⁷ Conspiracy is usually perceived as a threat to the ideally transparent practice of democracy, and is often described as subterranean, underground. In DeLillo’s fiction, secret obscure plots that unbalance the legitimacy of what happens at official level constantly threaten the political realm of public knowledge:

The true underground is where power flows. That’s the best secret of our time... The presidents and prime ministers are the ones who make the underground deals and speak the true underground idiom. The corporations. The military. The banks. This is the underground network. This is where it happens. Power flows under the surface, far beneath the level you and I live on. This is where the laws are broken, way down under, far beneath the speed freaks and cutters of smack. (DeLillo 1973:231)

Karl Marx and Fyodor Dostoyevsky can be named as just two of the many authors who have participated in the development of this “underground life” *topos* in Western thought. Along the same lines, in *The Political Unconscious* (1981), Fredric Jameson gave it a formulation which comes close to DeLillo’s in its understanding of what he calls a “hidden master narrative” (1981:28): “It is in detecting the traces of that uninterrupted narrative, in restoring to the surface of the text the repressed and buried reality of its fundamental history, that the doctrine of a political unconscious finds its function and its necessity” (1981:20). We can read DeLillo’s quotation in *Libra* almost as an echo of this idea: “There’s always more to it. This is what history consists of. It’s the sum total of all the things they aren’t telling us” (1988:321).

For DeLillo, the Kennedy assassination would belong precisely to this level of History. The perfect conspiracy would be absolutely invisible, totally subterranean, leaving as its only trace the “black hole” it opens in the body politic (sometimes, a bullet hole in the body of a dead president). This is perceived by DeLillo as a chiasm in our perception of reality, an opening into the flow of underground truth, alternative to the official discourses produced by

⁶ The term does actually exist in Italian, and it can be defined as the “exasperated analysis of political events in order to find the real causes that determined them.”

⁷ The association between truth and light in Western epistemology can be traced back to Plato, as noted by Martin Jay (1993) or Richard Rorty (1979).

power structures, yet truer to history than them, as one character claims in *Players*: “the pulse of history is always underground” (1977).

Taking one step further in this analysis, I would claim that this rhetorical articulation slides over another fundamental distinction repeatedly traced in DeLillo’s novels. I am talking about the division of characters (and people in general) into two separate groups: those who belong to the realm of the conspiracy, part of the underground flow, and those who stay outside, unable to grasp the subterranean truth. This can be said to be a social division between conspirators and paranoids. The first ones are often said to be “in the know.” The second inevitably feel as the manipulated victims of evil forces operating beyond their reach. A couple of quotations from DeLillo’s novels can serve to illustrate this: “Our big problem in the past, as a nation, was that we didn’t give our government credit for being the totally entangling force it was. They were even more evil than we imagined” (1977:104); “If we are on the outside, we assume a conspiracy is the perfect working of a scheme. Silent nameless men with unadorned hearts. A conspiracy is everything that ordinary life is not. It’s the inside game [...] forever closed off to us” (1988:440).

This distinction draws on a rhetorical articulation that became very common during the Cold War, when the dialectics Us-Them became a popular expression for the US-USSR opposing forces. This rhetorical articulation has been analyzed by John McClure (2002), who observes a historical change in the American view of the matter that seems crucial for DeLillo’s narrative: the shift from an understanding of conspiracy as external threat to an idea of conspiracy as the internal cankering of the body politic, that is, as an internal conspiracy directed against the nation’s own leaders or citizens. In other words, McClure argues that, in the work of authors such as Pynchon or DeLillo, the Us-Them distinction is subverted when the former “Us” becomes a source of conspiracy, turning into an inside “Them” (McClure 2002:255). Thomas Pynchon provides probably the best commentary on this new conspiratorial dialectics in *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973): “Of course a well-developed They-system is necessary—but it’s only half the story. For every They there ought to be a We. In our case there is. Creative paranoia means developing at least as thorough a We-system as a They-system” (Pynchon 1973:638).

DeLillo’s work participates of this rhetorical articulation, particularly in his most recent novel, *Falling Man*. In the brief sections of this novel that are narrated from the perspective of Hammad, the young terrorist, the distinction Us-Them is quite frequent: “Amir said simply there are no others. The others exist only to the degree that *they* fill the role *we* have designed for them. This is their function as others” (2007:176). He had already used it in a previous text on

9/11, “In the Ruins of the Future”, with a similar intention: “We are rich, privileged and strong, but they are willing to die” (2001:33).

This categorization points to one of the aspects that was underlined in the aforementioned definitions of the term “conspiracy”: the idea of the conspiracy bringing together a group of people, thus creating a kind of community. As Mark Osteen has noted in connection to DeLillo’s fiction, “the conspiratorial group creates a sense of community” (Osteen 2000:158). Again, in *Falling Man*, DeLillo writes from Hammad’s point of view: “They were strong-willed, determined to become one mind. Shed everything but the men you are with. Become each other’s running blood” (2007:83).

Links, connections, relationships are some of the terms mentioned in the previously quoted passage from *Running Dog*, as well as in most dictionary definitions of “conspiracy” Conspiracy implies collectivity, always referring to two or more individuals or events joined together, concurring to the same end. This idea suggests the existence of what we may call a community of conspirators. This community has as its main aim the creation of the conspiracy itself; they constitute a community of secret sharers. Conspirators are joined together to plot, to plan, and in the act of conspiring they get entangled into their own creation:

They felt things together, he and his brothers. They felt the claim of danger and isolation. They felt the magnetic effect of plot. Plot drew them together more tightly than ever. Plot closed the world to the slenderest line of sight, where everything converges to a point. (DeLillo 2007:174)

Conspirators breathe together, as the etymology of the term indicated, and the product of their exhale is a collective verbal product that will exert a change upon reality: a plot. Moreover, the output of conspiratorial activity —the aforementioned underground flow— is necessarily one that establishes itself in opposition to public official discourses, and is often associated to spurious linguistic forms such as rumors: “We were all linked together in a vast and rhythmic coincidence, a daisy chain of rumor, suspicion or secret wish” (DeLillo 1988:57).

Passages such as these suggest that the connections linking together the community of conspirators result in the creation of an alternative discursive reality: the plot itself. In *Libra*, conspiracy is described in these terms: “What a sense of destiny he had, locked in the miniature room, creating a design, a network of connections” (DeLillo 1988:277). The description of plots as nets interconnecting apparently random phenomena is used as recurrent definition of conspiracy in DeLillo’s narrative. It could be claimed that the idea of connectivity is equally applied in DeLillo’s fiction to the people involved in a conspiracy and to the apparently arbitrary events it links together. From a

rhetorical perspective, it can be said to operate on a metonymic basis. This was noted by Patrick O'Donnell when he defined "conspiracy culture" in terms of a "hyperbolic metonymization of reality" (1992:182), that is, as the constant connectedness between things. According to what he says in "American Blood", the kind of relationships established among the phenomena involved in a conspiracy is not based on a causal logic. The logic is one of contiguity: apparently random events and people joined together, "breathing together": contact is necessary among the constituents of a conspiracy, and that contact is marked by contiguous order. Contiguity, proximity of some kind among those phenomena is what allows for the connections among them, thus replicating the workings of the rhetorical figure we call metonymy.

All the elements that have been examined so far—ideas of secrecy, fluidity, underground life, community, contiguity of random events—come together in one final concept related to conspiracy: the conspiracy theory. As it was mentioned at the beginning, DeLillo perceives the Kennedy assassination as an epistemic breaking point. The event destroyed the previous perception of reality as an orderly clear system, and provoked a general "sense of randomness and ambiguity." In this context, conspiracy theory is presented as an attempt to bring back that coherent perception of reality, providing order and intention to the disordered mass of events. Metaphors recurrently associated to the attempt to disclose a conspiracy draw on the rhetorical language that has already been explored. A plot can be unveiled (brought back to light), solved (recuperating fluidity) or unknotted (reconstructing the linearity of events). Conspiracy theory brings together several rhetorical threads, superimposed on one another, but not continuous. On the one hand, discovering a conspiracy is understood as an act of throwing light on truth, unveiling a secret reality. Edwin Walker mentions in *Libra* "a plot we can't uncover" (1988:283). This implies the existence of the underground realm mentioned before, turning the investigation of a conspiracy into what Fredric Jameson referred to as "restoring to the surface of the text the repressed and buried reality of its fundamental history" (1981:20). On the other hand, uncovering a plot means unraveling or disentangling it, and also dissolving the obstacles on the way to truth. In this articulation, the attainment of truth is a matter of pursuing a smooth thread.

This notion of "conspiracy theory" leads to the consideration of the narrative effects this rhetoric of conspiracy has in the structure of DeLillo's novels, as I will try to assess in the next section.

CROSSING LINES

The need to investigate the already mentioned chiasm in the reality continuum is what triggers the plot in most of DeLillo's novels. His concern about conspiracies tends to focus on epistemological and hermeneutical aspects, so that conspiracies are often described in his novels as models of interpretation. A recurrent motif in the conspiracies DeLillo portrays is that of the plot seen from the outside by a keen investigator. The paradigmatic example of the research process thus triggered can be found in *Libra*, where Nicholas Branch, retired CIA agent, carries out an endless revision of the documents related to the Warren Report. “After the crime comes the reconstruction”, he says (1988:434). The detection mechanism is initiated, one that will have the conspiracy theory as its material archive. Searchers and investigators of all kinds are frequent characters in DeLillo's novels: Glen Selvy in *Running Dog*, James Axton and Owen Brandemas in *The Names* or Marvin Lundy in *Underworld* are good examples of this. In all these cases 1034, their efforts will be directed toward the reconstruction of an apparently random sequence of events focused on an object or situation around which the narrative plot revolves. Just as in *Libra* the Kennedy assassination centers the plot, in *Running Dog* it is the mysterious film shot in Hitler's bunker, in *The Names* it is a strange series of ritual murders and in *Underworld* it is the baseball owned by the protagonist, Nick Shay.

At this point the multiple meanings of the term “plot” should be briefly brought into consideration. At least two of those meanings, plot as the plan or main story (as of a movie or literary work)” and as “plan for accomplishing a usually evil or unlawful end” have been already mentioned in this article. This coincidence will allow me to introduce a metafictional turn for the interpretation of conspiracy in DeLillo's novels. The epistemology of conspiracy explored in his fiction favours the kind of metafictional reading proposed by Peter Brooks in *Reading for the Plot* (1984), J. Hillis Miller in *Ariadne's Thread* (1992) and Ricardo Piglia in “Tesis sobre el cuento” (1988). Their work highlights the already mentioned overlapping of the different senses of “plot” and explores it in ways I consider illuminating for the understanding of the issue under discussion. The three authors have noted the overlapping between the ideas of narrative and criminal plot (the Spanish term “trama” in Piglia's case), and they have used it in order to propose a model for the interpretation of literary texts in which hermeneutic processes of reconstruction take place at an intradiegetic or explicitly thematic level. In other words, they have theorized the way in which detective fiction, for instance, can be read as a model of interpretation for fiction in general. Furthermore, they have reflected on the way in which descriptions of the hermeneutics of reading tend to incorporate the language of detection and investigation to their theoretical terminology.

According to both Brooks and Piglia, the fictional process of detection has its real counterpart in the hermeneutic process pursued by any reader (Brooks 1984:25; Piglia 2001:15-16). In *Reading for the Plot* Peter Brooks defines the function of plot as “the active repetition and reworking of story in and by discourse” (1984:25). Similarly, a detective’s role is to reconstruct—rework—a crime that has already taken place. The double meaning of most terms referring to both processes of detection and reading is crucial for the understanding of this analogy. J. Hillis Miller points out: “all the words for narrative line or diegesis: dénouement, curve of the action, turn of events, broken or dropped thread, line of argument, story line, figure in the carpet—all the terms, in short, assuming that narration is the retracing of a story that has already happened” (1992:320). Detective fiction deals with the process of reconstruction of a crime, just as reading in general is the re-tracing of a narrative line.

This parallelism could be expanded in order to apply it to DeLillo’s fiction. Following the logics of the analogy that has just been traced, the roles of conspirator and investigator could be assimilated to those of the criminal and the detective. Conspirators and writers could be said to be creators of plots that need to be disentangled by conspiracy theorists and readers. In “How to Read Don DeLillo”, Daniel Aaron points in this direction when he mentions “the analogy between the conspirator and the writer” (Aaron 1991:80). This aspect was explored by DeLillo in *Libra*, where the conspiratorial activities are described in terms of literary creation: “Everett was at work devising a general shape, a life. He would script a gunman [...] Mackey would find a model for the character Everett was in the process of creating [...] They wanted a name, a face, a bodily frame to extend their fiction into the world” (DeLillo 1988:50). Similarly, in *Running Dog*, agent Glen Selvy is described as a reader: “In the current parlance, Selvy was a reader. He was reading Senator Percival” (DeLillo 1978:28).

Following this rhetorical thread, it could be claimed that the process of interpretation carried out by both readers and investigators has as its main aim the reconstruction of a coherent plot or storyline. The reader, in charge of disentangling the dense mass of events and characters, will perform a hermeneutic task of detection to provide a consistent conspiracy theory, that is, an articulate interpretation of the story: “One detail follows another in the process of reading until finally an overall meaning emerges as a triumphant solution of the enigma by the detective-reader” (Miller 1992:230). The final effect is, in Miller’s terms, “the retrospective revelation of the law of the whole” (1992:18). Similarly, Ricardo Piglia claims at the end of “Tesis sobre el cuento”:

El cuento se construye para hacer aparecer artificialmente algo que estaba oculto. Reproduce la búsqueda siempre renovada de una experiencia única que nos permita ver, bajo la superficie opaca de la vida, una verdad secreta [...] Esa iluminación profana se ha convertido en la forma del cuento (1988:58)

Interestingly, both Miller and Piglia use the same kind of rhetorical language that has already been analyzed in connection to conspiracy: the effect of reading is the unveiling of a hidden truth, and it comes as the result of a process of connecting pieces. This shared rhetoric facilitates, to some extent, the kind of an alogy that I am trying to advocate here. In DeLillo’s novels, the creation of an ideally consistent conspiracy theory would work as metaphor for the whole reading process.

In *Libra*, DeLillo offers his fictional account of the JFK assassination, his personal conspiracy theory, presented as a comforting ordered structure against ambiguous reality: “Stories can be a consolation [...] I think fiction rescues history from its confusions [...] it attempts to provide a hint of order in the midst of all the randomness” (DeCurtis 1991:56). Peter Brooks explains the success of this kind of narrative structure in terms of the Freudian need for closure that is fulfilled each time the reader manages to produce such an articulate reading:

The desire of the text (the desire of reading) is hence desire for the end, but desire for the end reached only through the at least minimally complicated detour, the intentional deviance, in tension, which is the plot of narrative” (1984:104). In his final note to *Libra*, DeLillo claimed the “formal pleasures” of closed structure for his novel: “Because this book makes no claim to literal truth, because it is only itself, *apart and complete*, reader might find *refuge* here. (1988: “Note”; emphasis added).

Fredric Jameson has often referred to conspiracy theories as attempts to provide a totalizing interpretation of reality that will bring forth the kind of hermeneutic comfort mentioned by DeLillo: “A paranoid world is the *opposite* of an ‘absurd’ or meaningless one: in the former, every detail, every sparrow that falls, the make and model of every car that passes you, people’s expressions—all that is programmed in advance and part of the basic conspiracy; the world is if anything too meaningful” (Jameson 1984:118). The kind of comfort provided by conspiracy—or rather by the attempt to untie a conspiracy—is precisely what DeLillo’s characters often demand. In *Underworld*, he makes his protagonist Nick Shay state: “All I wanted from the system was method and regularity [...] We weren’t worth much if the system designed to contain us kept breaking down” (1997:503).

DeLillo’s novels, however, cannot be dismissed as simple paranoid tales offering comprehensive interpretations of the terrible ambiguities of our

contemporary world. Quite on the contrary, many of them explore the limits of the model I have proposed by forcing the hermeneutic process of detection they invoke. In *Libra*, Nicholas Branch describes the Warren Commission Report as “the megaton novel James Joyce would have written if he’d moved to Iowa City and lived to be a hundred” (1988:181). Joyce might actually have worked as the perfect inspiration for DeLillo’s own fiction, where the excess of information often prevents the retrospective unveiling of the whole plot. The excessive perception of metonymic contiguity can provoke the hermeneutic collapse of the narrative, or what Umberto Eco called “paranoiac interpretation” (Eco 1992:48). Conspiracy, as the perfect teleology towards a totalizing structure, tends to dissolve in the semiotic process of the conspiracy theory, just as the truth about the JFK assassination is said to disappear in the wild mass of language of the Warren Report: “Everything is here [...] an incredible haul of human utterance. It lies so flat, hangs so still in the lazy air, lost to syntax and other arrangement, that it resembles a kind of mind-spatter, a poetry of lives muddled and dripping in language” (DeLillo 1988:181).

Every conspiratorial system generates an excess of signifiers, of traces that need to be assimilated to a single plotline if truth is to be found: the plot has to be reduced to one single thread, one storyline. J. Hillis Miller highlights in *Ariadne’s Thread* the importance of this image of the line in any interpretive process: “The image of the line tends always to imply the norm of a single continuous unified structure determined by one external organizing principle” (1992:18). Several novels by DeLillo can be said to adopt a narrative structure in which this image works as organizing principle. Conspiracy imposes a narrative structure on them that is based on the contiguity of plot elements, what Piglia calls “crossing points” between apparent events in any story. In these novels, conspiracy plays a central role from a thematic point of view; they make use of the kind of rhetorical language that has been previously examined and they can be read according to the metafictional model I have proposed. The three most relevant texts in this sense are *Libra*, *Underworld* and *Falling Man*.

Libra exemplifies the idea of the plot as a sinuous intertwining of three lines leading toward an ending we all know beforehand, when the three will converge. Chapters are distributed according to two parallel narrative lines: one follows the vital trajectory of Lee Harvey Oswald and the other follows the lives and conspiratorial activities of the agents involved in the Kennedy assassination. The two lines overlap at some moments, particularly when Oswald becomes more and more involved in the JFK conspiracy. The final clash, nevertheless, takes place only in the final chapter of the novel, describing minutely the assassination and its aftermath. What is most interesting, however,

is not so much the structure itself, but the way in which DeLillo seems to describe it when he writes about a third line being traced in the novel:

Think of two parallel lines. One is the life of Lee H. Oswald. One is the conspiracy to kill the President. What bridges the space between them? What makes a connection inevitable? There is a third line. It comes out of dreams, visions, intuitions, prayers, out of the deepest levels of the self. It's not generated by cause and effect like the other two lines. It's a line that cuts across causality, cuts across time. It has no history that we can recognize or understand. (1988:339)

This third line, which is not verbally materialized in the novel, would be the one followed by the readers in their attempt at reconstructing the whole sequence of events, bringing the other two together. Most curiously, it is the same line CIA agent Nicholas Branch has to follow when facing the colossal task of restructuring the information contained in the Warren Commission Report. As it has already been noted, “bridging the space” between the two main lines will prove an impossible task for agent Branch.

In *Underworld*, DeLillo seems to recuperate and enlarge this idea. The author himself has explained the structure of the novel:

It's about memory, and the way in which the past is constantly with us. To me, since you mentioned quantum physics, the most interesting aspect of the book's structure, and the one I found most satisfying, is the way in which there are two time structures. There is a huge mass of time sweeping backwards from the 1990s to the 1950s, but at the same time there are these little quantum pieces representing the three Manx Martin chapters. They're set apart from the rest of the book by black pages, so that you can hold the book shut with the spine away from you and actually see these demarked fragments. And these chapters move forward, like a sort of underground stream, a time-line, representing not a huge sweeping period of time, but just one day. What happens is that at the end of the third episode, these two time-lines connect, so that there is a dovetailing of these two otherwise completely different schemes. And this, finally, is the kind of thing I write for. (Williams, 1998)

The inverted chronology followed in the main storyline (spanning from 1992 to 1951) turns the reading of the novel into an exercise in reconstruction. The final objective of this process would be the re-establishment of the link between the two ends of the story. This is what DeLillo seems to allege when he talks about “dovetailing.” However, that final connection is never rendered explicitly in the novel, only in the reader's mind. Again, we would be talking about a missing thread that would lend continuity to the storyline.

In *Cosmopolis*, we find the same kind of double time-line structure. In this case, the novel does not explicitly deal with the topic of conspiracy, but the

pattern I am trying to illustrate is still present. Moreover, the specific form this pattern takes in this novel seems to have been rigorously transposed to DeLillo's latest one, *Falling Man*, in which conspiracy does play a central role. Two narrative lines run parallel again in *Cosmopolis*. One of them follows the protagonist, Erik Packer, in his limo journey across Midtown Manhattan. The other one collects the musings of one Benno Levin, a character apparently unrelated to the main storyline, under the heading "The Confessions of Benno Levin." Both characters, and again, both lines, will come together in the final chapter of the novel, when the connection among them is unveiled and Levin murders Packer at the end of his journey to a barbershop in the Bronx. Victim and criminal are therefore presented in a parallel way, although they will not meet each other until they reach the end of their respective storylines.

This structure, as I have mentioned, is reproduced in *Falling Man*, DeLillo's 2007 novel on 9/11. The novel begins in the moments immediately after the impact of the first plane on the North Tower of the World Trade Center, and it then follows the escape from disaster of Keith Neudecker. His reconciliation with his family and the different strategies developed by each of the characters trying to overcome the traumatic experience occupy the main storyline in this case. There is a second narrative thread, however, that has received ambivalent critical response. This second line focuses on Hammad, member of the terrorist cell responsible for the attacks. As he had already done in *Libra*, DeLillo mixes here literary speculation with historical documentation, combining the fictional Hammad with the real Mohamed Atta, mentor of the first and mastermind of the attacks in DeLillo's view. This part of the novel received some negative reviews and some critics consider it unnecessary.⁸

Nevertheless, this second storyline constitutes one step further in the kind of narrative structure under scrutiny in this article. As in *Libra* or *Cosmopolis*, the "Hammad sections" of the novel work as narrative and ethical counterpoint to the main storyline. As in *Underworld*, they provide an alternative time-line for the novel. In this case, reconstructing the period of time before the attacks, from the point of view of those who planned them. Finally, as in the three previously analyzed novels, the two lines come together in this one, though in an unexpected way. From the moment Hammad is introduced, readers are led to expect that his trajectory and Keith's will cross at some point. As in other

⁸ See Frank Rich in *The New York Times*: "When *Falling Man* sporadically leaves Keith and Lianne behind to retrace 9/11 from the point of view of the hijackers, that spell is broken. These brief interruptions seem potted, adding little beyond mellifluous writing to the journalistic record." Also Toby Litt in *The Guardian*: "DeLillo's 9/11 terrorists read like a weak echo of earlier DeLillo gangs [...] There is a definite decline in the quality of the writing."

novels, it will happen in the last chapter, when Hammad, on board the plane that is about to crash into the North Tower, says his final prayers and fastens his seatbelt:

A bottle fell off the counter in the galley, on the other side of the aisle, and he watched it roll this way and that, a water bottle, empty, making an arc one way and rolling back the other, and he watched it spin more quickly and then skitter across the floor an instant before the aircraft struck the tower, heat, then fuel, then fire, and a blast wave passed through the structure that sent Keith Neudecker out of his chair and into a wall. He found himself walking into a wall. He didn't drop the telephone until he hit the wall. The floor began to slide beneath him and he lost his balance and eased along the wall to the floor. (2007:239)

The narrative crossing point is turned into a literal clash, rendered explicitly in the text as a sudden change of perspective, from the plane to the building, from Hammad's to Keith's point of view. In *Falling Man*, DeLillo seems to apply the idea of connections and crossing points explicitly to the structure of the novel itself.⁹ The end of the novel works as the perfect illustration for the narrative structure I have been pursuing in this article; a structure where the ideas of connectivity, alternative levels of reality, and the act of bringing together series of unrelated events are given literary substance, constituting the principle of organization for the shaping of narrative itself.

CONCLUSION

In a 1983 interview, DeLillo stated in connection to his novel *Ratner Star* (1976): “I was trying to produce a book that would be naked structure. The structure would be the book and vice versa. I wanted the book to become what it was about” (LeClair 1983:86). I would claim that DeLillo has never abandoned this early idea, and that he has continued to apply it to other texts. This is what happens in the novels I have discussed in the previous section: the structure of the texts exemplifies or illustrates what the novels talk about, their thematic concerns and the figurative language associated to them. Although similar narrative structures based on the idea of “crossing points” were already present in earlier texts like *Running Dog* or *Players*, it seems that the pattern has

⁹ It should be noted, moreover, that lines, threads and other related metaphors are notably abundant in this novel, but that is an issue that would require detailed attention and it will have to be discussed at some other time.

become more prominent in the later novels, as I have tried to illustrate. I would say it has become particularly visible in *Falling Man*, and in this sense the novel can be read as a corollary of all previous attempts.

Conspiracy, therefore, can be said to be a strong organizing trope in DeLillo's fiction. It provides a rich rhetorical field that can be applied to narrative form, giving shape to the novels in ways that seem to confirm the workings of the figures associated to it. The symmetry between thematic and structural realms, moreover, allows for a kind of metafictional turn that makes the novels work also as models of interpretation of reality and of fiction. By way of conclusion, I would like to point in this direction and argue that the treatment conspiracy receives in DeLillo's fiction could be said to spring from the author's consideration of his ethical role in society.

DeLillo seems to suggest in his final note to *Libra* that fiction can produce the same effect on real life as the processes of investigation carried out in any of his works. The novel is presented, in this light, as an alternative interpretation of a historical sequence of events that have remained "unknotted", and the author advocates the notion that fiction can have a calming effect in people concerned with the sort of "ambiguous reality" produced by historical events like the Kennedy assassination. The novel is thus seen as a therapeutic and hermeneutic tool: working as a model for the interpretation of reality that can have a comforting effect under specific circumstances. The question remains whether it is always right or necessary to offer the "hermeneutic comfort" of conspiracy against the confusions of history. This has been an issue of debate around DeLillo's fiction for a long time, but it may become extremely relevant for the reading and interpretation of the increasing number of novels dealing with 9/11, many of which will inevitably be read as refuge or consolation "in the midst of all the randomness."

REFERENCES

- Aaron, Daniel. "How to Read Don DeLillo." Ed. Frank Lentricchia. *Introducing Don DeLillo*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991: 67-81.
- Bradbury, Malcolm. *The Modern American Novel*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.
- Brooks, Peter. *Reading for the Plot*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984.
- DeCurtis, Anthony. "An Outsider in This Society: An Interview with Don DeLillo." Ed. Frank Lentricchia. *Introducing Don DeLillo*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991: 43-66.
- DeLillo, Don. *Great Jones Street*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973.

- *Players*. New York: Knopf, 1977.
- *Running Dog*. London: Picador, 1999 (1978).
- *The Names*. New York: Knopf, 1982.
- “American Blood: A Journey through the Labyrinth of Dallas and JFK.” *Rolling Stone* (8 December 1983): 21-28, 74.
- *Libra*. New York: Viking, 1988.
- *Underworld*. New York: Scribner, 1997.
- “In the Ruins of the Future.” *Harper ’s* (Dec 2001): 33-40.
- *Cosmopolis*. London: Picador, 2003.
- *Falling Man*. New York: Scribner, 2007.
- Eco, Umberto. *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*. Ed. Stefan Collini. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.
- Hofstadter, Richard. *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*. New York: Vintage, 1967.
- Jameson, Fredric. *The Political Unconscious. Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. London: Routledge, 1981.
- “Reviews: Don DeLillo. *The Names*. Sol Yurick. *Richard A.*” *Minnesota Review* 1984: 116-122.
- Jay, Martin. *Downcast Eyes. The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth Century French Thought*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993.
- Knight, Peter. *Conspiracy Culture: From the Kennedy Assassination to “The X-Files”* London: Routledge, 2000.
- ed. *Conspiracy Nation. The Politics of Paranoia in Postwar America*. New York: New York University Press, 2002.
- LeClair, Tom. “An Interview with Don DeLillo.” Eds. Tom LeClair and Larry McCaffery. *Anything Can Happen. Interviews with Contemporary American Novelists*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1983: 79-90.
- Lentricchia, Frank, ed. *Introducing Don DeLillo*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991.
- Litt, Toby. “The Trembling Air.” *The Guardian* (May 26, 2007). Feb 29, 2008.
URL: <<http://books.guardian.co.uk/reviews/generalfiction/0,,2088344,00.html>>.
- McClure, John. “Forget Conspiracy. Pynchon, DeLillo and the Conventional Counterconspiracy Narrative.” Ed. Peter Knight. *Conspiracy Nation. The Politics of Paranoia in Postwar America*. New York: New York University Press, 2002: 254-273.
- Miller, J. Hillis. *Ariadne’s Thread. Storylines*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992.
- O’Donnell, Patrick. “Engendering Paranoia in Contemporary Narrative.” *Boundary 2* (1992) 19: 181-204.
- *Latent Destinies: Cultural Paranoia in Contemporary U.S. Narrative*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2000.

- Osteen, Mark. *American Magic and Dread: Don DeLillo's Dialogue with Culture*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000.
- Piglia, Ricardo. "Tesis sobre el cuento." *El murciélago* 1 (1988): 56-58. Rpt. in *Formas breves*. Barcelona: Anagrama, 2000.
- . *Crítica y ficción*. Barcelona: Anagrama, 2001.
- Pynchon, Thomas. *Gravity's Rainbow*. New York: Viking, 1973.
- Rich, Frank. "The Clear Blue Sky." *The New York Times Sunday Book Review* (May, 27 34th 2007). Feb 29, 2008.
URL: <<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/27/books/review/Rich-t.html>>.
- Rorty, Richard. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979.
- Towers, Robert. "From the Grassy Knoll." *The New York Times Book Review* (1988): 13.
- Williams, Richard. "Everything Under the Bomb." *The Guardian* (Jan 10, 1998). Feb 29, 2008.
URL: <<http://books.guardian.co.uk/reviews/generalfiction/0,6121,96807,00.html>>.
- Wright, R. S. *Law of Criminal Conspiracies and Agreements*. Philadelphia: Blackstone, 1887.