Subjectivity and History in Don DeLillo's *Libra*

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Abstract

Don DeLillo's *Libra* has been widely acclaimed as a masterpiece of postmodern fiction. Its depiction of Lee Harvey Oswald as a socially constructed subject, as well as its questioning of the distinction between the two genres of history and fiction, makes the novel conform fairly well to postmodern notions of ambivalence, intertextuality, and death of the subject. Examining *Libra* in a more critical manner, this paper appraises not only the strengths of the novel but also its limitations. The problematic of subjectivity is discussed in the first section and that of postmodern history in the second.

Key Words: *Libra*; the postmodern; subjectivity; history writing

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It is ironic to see how a work like Don DeLillo’s *Libra*, which is generally considered full of ambiguity and contradiction, has been interpreted with striking uniformity and consensus. Since its publication in 1988, *Libra* has been widely acclaimed as a masterpiece of postmodern fiction. Its depiction of Lee Oswald as a socially constructed subject, as well as its questioning of the distinction between the two genres of history and fiction, makes the novel conform fairly well to postmodernist notions of ambivalence, intertextuality, and death of the subject. The importance of Frank Lentricchia’s 1989 essay\(^1\) cannot be overestimated in its launching of this postmodernist reception of DeLillo. After Lentricchia, more and more critics have read *Libra* from postmodernist viewpoints and seen the text as an illustration of the constructed nature of subjectivity and the fictive nature of history. In most cases, *Libra* has been praised mainly for its postmodern impulse to dismantle autonomous subjectivity and objective historiography. One effect this postmodernist reading produces is an ironic tension between celebration of a text due to its relentless ambiguity and unambiguous reception on the part of critics. Postmodern emphasis on indeterminacy, irony, and multiplicity has been so uncritically hailed that they seem to become transcendent criteria packaged and circulated in the academic marketplace.

Examining *Libra* in a more critical manner, this paper appraises not only the novel’s strengths but also its limitations. Although postmodernism’s anti-essentialist impulse has a liberating potential, its mechanical overuse runs the

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risk of reifying a critical strain of thought into a set of formulaic rules. Like postmodern theories, Libra has deficiencies that, unfortunately, have not been adequately dealt with. Through a more critical reading of both the text and its postmodern reception, I hope that we may refrain from treating Libra and postmodernism as, respectively, a completely unproblematic text and an infallible method of literary and cultural analysis.

This paper is divided into two sections. First, I discuss the problematic of subjectivity in Libra. Oswald’s desire and subjectivity in the novel are depicted as mainly constructed by three forces: James Bond novels, Marxism, and, above all, TV and film. Although such a postmodern account demystifies a coherent, humanist self, its treatment of the human subject seems too mechanical and one-dimensional. Rather than a person capable of negotiating with his environments, Oswald becomes a mere plaything of discursive formations and social institutions. In the second section, I focus on the issue of postmodern history, asserting that a postmodernist view of history and fiction is both emancipating and conservative.

The Postmodern Subject

Critics have argued that Lee Oswald in Libra is a fluid, de-centered, and split subject whose desire and consciousness are constituted by and scattered across linguistic systems, discursive formations, and cultural institutions. An individual with no inherent thoughts and ideas, he is a completely passive receptacle of cultural values and ideologies. In this analysis, Oswald is a socially produced object vulnerable to the interpellation of the ambient apparatuses. Lentricchia is the first, and one of the most important, critics of this postmodernist trend to argue that Oswald is “the product [...] the plaything even, of Hollywood’s image
factories. Unlike JFK, Oswald is the genuine American article” (“Critique” 199). Following Lentricchia’s lead, Christopher Mott contends that Oswald “becomes a subject, an object of a historically determined ideology. In this case, he is the object of the Cold War ideology with all its myths and narratives” (137-38). Using Lacan’s psychoanalytic theory, Thomas Carmichael judges Oswald as an effect of “an intertextual network of endlessly dispersed and displaced writing” (211). Insisting that Libra is an anti-naturalist novel, Paul Civello nevertheless reaches the conclusion that Oswald is a product of mass-media society, in which his “individual consciousness [is] absorbed within the encompassing field of the cultural consciousness” (55). What these critics have in common is that they praise DeLillo’s text because it casts light on a constructed, even determined Oswald. In Skip Willman’s words, Oswald is “a necessary product of our very social system” (624, italics mine).

Indeed, both the strengths and weaknesses of DeLillo’s historical fiction lie in its well-nigh mechanical depiction of Oswald as “a necessary product of our very social system.” While a deterministic critique of Oswald undermines the popular myth of the “lone gunman” theory, it threatens to put human beings in a social iron cage with no exit. For me, DeLillo’s strategy of deconstructing the individualist myth is mainly achieved by spotlighting the role of institutions and technologies in shaping one’s desire, ideas, and consciousness. In Rene Girard’s term, a person’s desire is not autonomous but “mimetic.” And it is identification with the socio-cultural models of desire on the part of the individual that also disrupts social equilibrium.

In Deceit, Desire, and the Novel, Girard proposes that desire is not constituted by a linear relationship between the desiring subject and desired object. A third party is always present, who functions as a model or master for the subject’s identification. For Girard, one’s desire for a certain thing is always mediated by another person who wants it. On the basis of Freud’s model of the (male) child
who identifies with the father and thus makes the mother an object of desire, Girard extends Freud’s account of the triangular family structure to a larger cultural sphere (9-52). In the postmodern era in which models of desire in the fields of sports, fashion, and entertainment, etc., are mass-manufactured by the culture industries of radio, TV, and film, people’s desire tends to be more easily manipulated by these technologies.

Consistent with Girard’s de-centered account of human desire, Oswald’s ideas and world-views in Libra are always mediated by printing technology and, above all, imaging technology. For instance, as a person endowed with extraordinary media charisma, President Kennedy is an ideal model for collective identification. Just as Amadis de Gaul plays the role of an ideal model/mediator for Don Quixote, Kennedy is such a model for both Oswald and his wife, Marina:

She wondered how many women had visions and dreams of the President. What must it be like to know you are the object of a thousand longings? It’s as though he floats over the landscape at night, entering dreams and fantasies [...] He floats through television screen into bedrooms at night. He floats from the radio into Marina’s bed. (L 324)

As an “object of a thousand longings,” the image of Kennedy epitomizes cultural ideals: he is healthy, determined, and brightened by a “white smile” (L 392). He is therefore a perfect model for Oswald’s identification. Whatever Kennedy wants, Oswald considers desirable. The President is not simply the Father of the United States; he is also the Father of desires:

He read somewhere that the President liked James Bond novels. He went to the branch library [...] and took out some Bond novels. He
read that the President had acquainted himself with works by Mao Tse-tung and Che Guevara. He went to the library and got a biography of Mao. He got a biography of the President which said that Kennedy had read *The White Nile*. (L 317-18)

The books Oswald reads may be grouped into two kinds: popular fiction like James Bond novels and works by Marxists like Mao Tse-tung and Che Guevara. These books become precious for Oswald not because of their intrinsic values, but because of Oswald’s mimetic identification with the Kennedy-model that makes them valuable.

(A). James Bond Novels

The James Bond novel might have provided for Oswald, if not for Kennedy as well, a convenient, stock framework for a conspiracy-ridden Cold War era. As is well known, the fictional world created by Ian Fleming is most often structured around the eruption of crisis and its successful resolution. Suspense arises in the course of seeking that solution, sending the detective, the British secret agent James Bond, in pursuit of the origin of crimes and disorder. Society imagined in Fleming’s espionage novels can well be understood by the binary terms of criminals and innocent people, those empowered by secret and evil conspiracies and those who are their victims. Furthermore, the resolution of social problems is always made possible by a witty, humorous, and bold-spirited individual. Oswald’s world-view may well be characterized by such naïve dichotomies between good and bad, between social problems and their resolution by (white and male) individuals. Mediated by Fleming’s fiction, Oswald experiences the world as a secret text that can always be decoded by the individual. More to the point, he is both a secret agent unraveling mysteries and a villain empowered by secrets.

This oversimplified understanding of society as a dualistic structure of appearance and reality, a secret code and its decoding, is already appropriately
suggested at the novel’s beginning by the contrast between the subway and the city: “the subway held more compelling things than the famous city above. There was nothing important out there […] that he could not find in purer form in these tunnels beneath the street” (L 4). Ever since his youth, Oswald sees the world as a dyad consisting of the public domain exemplified by the city and the secret realm epitomized by the underground tunnel. While most people tend to be duped by visible facts, knowledge of the underground provides for Oswald a sense of power and control: “The dark had a power […]. The view down the tracks was a form of power. It was a secret and a power” (L 13). The relationship between secrets and power can also be found in his use of the alias “Hidell,” much like James Bond’s 007: “Take the double-e from Lee. Hide the double-l in Hidell. Hidell means hide the L. Don’t tell” (L 90). Oswald’s conceptualization regarding the working of power is naïve and mechanical, for it is imagined as always hidden somewhere: in an alias, in a small room, in a secret plot, in the working class, or in a Marxist work. Similar to that portrayed in the Bond novel, power for Oswald seems to be a material presence, a thing that can be traced to an “origin.”

The subway episode, however, is ironical in that while Oswald perceives reality as a simple dyad, DeLillo complicates the issue and places him in complex underground tunnels. The social formation, as the image of the tunnel suggests, is structured as an interwoven network without a clearly locatable “origin.” While Oswald is unable to map out the labyrinth-like social systems, society already positions him as a deluded subject: “They [subway trains] went so fast sometimes he thought they were on the edge of no-control. The noise was pitched to a level of pain he absorbed as a personal test. Another crazy-ass curve” (L 3). Ignorant of the workings of the system that puts him “on the edge of no-control,” Oswald fantasizes himself as someone in control, while in fact being situating in and off-balanced by a “crazy-ass curve.” Despite his effort to figure out real relations, Oswald’s cognition ends up being an ideological reproduction of Fleming’s
 espionage novels.

(B). Marxism

Oswald’s mimetic identification with Bond is complicated by his simultaneous interest in Marxism. For if Fleming’s popular fiction provides for Oswald a convenient but imaginary model for interpreting reality, Marxism seems to be a stronger influence on his thinking and behavior. In other words, if Oswald’s desire to be a “lone gunman” has something to do with his reading of the Bond novel, how shall we account for his apparent identification with Marx, Trotsky, and Lenin? The Warren Commission Report, for instance, highlights Oswald’s identification with and commitment to Marxism as the major cause of his “hostility to his environment” (qtd. in Willman 625). In Libra, DeLillo actually stresses Marxism as a significant mediator for Oswald’s desire. In one episode, a small, shabby room in which Oswald lives is transformed into something splendidly romantic. This transformation is achieved mainly through his identification with the Marxists who, like himself, were also once enclosed in small rooms: “These were men who lived in isolation for long periods [...] feeling history in the room [...] History was a force to these men, a presence in the room. They felt it and waited” (L 34). Identification with the masters makes Oswald’s act of reading a pleasurable experience: the books “alter the room,” even though they are “[f]orbidden and hard to read” (L 41). It seems that Marxist thought, not Fleming’s fiction, is the main factor shaping Oswald’s identity.

A closer look at Libra, however, shows that this is not quite true. Rather than singling out Marxism as the main cause, DeLillo casts Oswald into multiple forms of culture, both high and low. The constellation of these forms overdetermines Oswald’s thinking and desire, with mass media, not Marxism, as the most determining instance. In the novel, Oswald is portrayed as a manufactured product of popular culture, such as Fleming’s and H. G. Wells’ popular fiction, Life and Look magazines, action/adventure movies like Red River,
Suddenly, and We Were Strangers (L 269, 206, 369-70). Meanwhile, Oswald also reads canonical literary works supposedly belonging to the realm of high culture: works by Walt Whitman and George Orwell (L 94, 106). Oswald’s reading of Marxism, accordingly, may be more fruitfully grasped in a cultural milieu in which the interpenetration of high and mass culture was being aggravated since the 1950s, if not earlier. Instead of serving a small, elitist group, this newer form of culture was profit and public-oriented. Production of cultural artifacts, in this manner, was becoming less and less distinct from industrial manufacturing of commodities, as both were marked by principles of standardization, rationalization, and conformity. Ads, soap operas, situation comedies, Westerns, and action/adventure films gradually became dominant cultural forces. To say this, however, is not to say that people no longer read “classic” works produced by printing technology. It is rather that these works, for better or worse, could not avoid being received as commodities and processed as easily consumed articles of trade. The revolution brought about by the culture industry, therefore, was not only manifest in the aestheticization of everyday life, but also in the mass production and distribution of commodified ideas and consciousness.

Such mechanical reproduction of a wholesale consciousness constitutes the historical bedrock of Oswald’s act of reading. At such a historical juncture, Whitman and Marxism are reread/rewritten as popular fiction celebrating American individualism and heroism, and the authors of Capital and Song of Myself as heroic individuals one sees in a Western. Indeed, the context in which Oswald reads Song of Myself is worthy of our attention (L 94). His reading of Whitman’s poem immediately after seeing the Western hero John Wayne in person suggests that, for Oswald, the movie star and the poet embody the same cultural ideal, i.e.,

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independent and heroic selfhood. The nineteenth-century literary work, that is, is made equivalent to the twentieth-century Western, so much so that Whitman almost becomes a figure of Wayne, and Wayne the fulfillment of Whitman:

[...] he watches John Wayne a moment longer, thinking of the cattle drive in Red River [...] the deep sure voice of aging John Wayne, the voice with so many shades of feeling and reassurance, John Wayne resolutely to his adopted son: "Take 'em to Missour, Matt." Then rearing mounts, trail hands yahooping, the music and rousing song [...] all the glory and dust of the great drive north. He reads Walt Whitman in hospital ruins. (L 93-94)

Likewise, Wayne's glorious cinematic image may serve as a mediator when Oswald reads Marxist theory. Taken out of historical context, Marxists are juxtaposed with Western heroes, with "rearing mounts, trail hands yahooping, the music and rousing song [...] all the glory and dust of the great drive north." The language of Marxism, moreover, is as attractive as the heightened, imagistic language in action/adventure films: "He [Oswald] found names in the catalogue that made him pause with strange contained excitement. Names that were like whispers he'd been hearing for years, men of history and revolution" (L 34). Throughout Libra, both Marxists and Marxist terms like "history," "revolution," and "class struggle" are invested with an extremely romantic aura. Despite the difference of political stance between Marx and Wayne, Oswald seems to have no problems mixing them together. And the person emphasizing the importance of revolution and class struggle could well have been the one shouting "Take the masses to Cuba, Matt." The model of Oswald's identification, in short, is less the Marxist per se than the American hero produced by Hollywood image factories:
He lay near sleep, falling into reverie, the powerful world of Oswald-hero, guns flashing in the dark. The reverie of control, perfection of rage, perfection of desire, the fantasy of night, rain-slick streets, the heightened shadows of men in dark coats, like men on movie posters. (L 46)

What Oswald illustrates is a hybrid or composite identity. He is a Marxist in language and self-esteem, but an ascetic Western hero in so far as his world-outlook is concerned. The well-known picture which he takes shortly before the assassination clearly shows this point: “He posed in a corner of the yard, the rifle in his right hand, muzzle up, butt end pressing on his waist, just inches from the holstered .38. The magazines, the Militant and the Worker, were in his left hand, fanned like playing cards” (L 278). In Lentricchia’s words, Marxist Oswald “will become […] postmodern Oswald—a man who wants to, and does enter the ‘world in general,’ not through striking a blow in class warfare, however, on the side of the working oppressed, but by entering the aura” (“Critique” 197).

(C). TV and Film

That imaging technology is important in shaping Oswald’s subjectivity can also be observed in the formal composition of Libra. The historical novel mainly consists of three narrative plots: Oswald’s biography, Win Everett’s plot to assassinate JFK, and the historian Nicholas Branch’s writing of the secret history of the assassination. What is less noticeable is that Oswald’s biography is not of a traditional kind. A traditional biography often begins with someone’s birth, then moves on to his/her childhood, adolescence, adulthood, old age, and probably ends with his/her death. An ideological underpinning of this chronological or teleological account is that life is a continuous, evolving, and progressive process. In order to know a certain person’s experiences, ideas, and beliefs, we should start from the “beginning,” that is, the moment when s/he is born.
Such a chronological narrative, which traces a person’s identity to an “original” moment, is abandoned in *Libra*. The text jumps back and forth between different temporalities: between Oswald’s life and Everett’s secret plot, and between these two men’s secret lives and Branch’s belated study of them. Most importantly, DeLillo’s construction of Oswald’s life does not proceed from the latter’s birth, but from his early adolescence in the Bronx. The novel opens with “This was the year he rode the subway to the ends of the city, two hundred miles of track” (*L* 3). Later on we know it is the year when Oswald is a sixth- or seventh-grade student (*L* 12). With this opening, *Libra* shows that the choice of “origin” in any biography is actually arbitrary, for it can also be allocated to Oswald’s birth, to the day he enlists in the US Marines, or to the moment when he decides to defect to Russia.

DeLillo’s selection of Oswald’s early teen years as the starting point, however, may be understood by the author’s intention to situate Oswald in an ideology-laden Cold War era and, above all, in the networks of imaging, especially television culture that had emerged since the late 1940s and early 1950s. Oswald’s paranoid, conspiratorial world-view thus rendered is inseparable from the dominant Cold War ideologies and from the arrival of a newer form of media or television culture. The origin, if any, of Lee Harvey Oswald’s identity does not reside in 1939, the year when he is born, but in the year 1952 or 1953, when the terror-ridden anti-communist atmosphere of McCarthyism coexisted with the happy consumerism propagated on TV, which was invented in the late 1940s. The birth and coming maturity of this television culture, that is, is complicit with the ideological thrust of anti-communism and that of mass consumerism. Moreover, the broadcasting of soap operas, situation comedies, spy movies, and Western

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3 For a more comprehensive study of television culture, see, for instance, John Fiske, *Television Culture* (London: Methuen, 1987).

4 Ironically, it is this anti-communist atmosphere that makes secret acquisition of Marxist thought a source of conspiratorial pleasure for Oswald. Marxism, in other words, is like a holy grail the romantic hero wants to procure, precisely because it is “Forbidden and hard to read” (*L* 41).
action/adventure movies on TV also helped disseminate such ideologies as family solidarity, conspiracy theory, patriotism, and American individualism. It is into this media-saturated society that Oswald is born as a constructed self.

In the beginning, there is TV. Poor as the Oswald family is, it has a TV set. Oswald and his mother, Marguerite, are first shown watching TV programs in their shabby basement room:

They watched TV, mother and son, in the basement room [...]. They were not wanted anymore and they moved to the basement room in the Bronx, the kitchen and the bedroom and everything together, where blue heads spoke to them from the TV screen [...]. Thursday nights he watched the crime shows. *Racket Squad*, *Dragnet*, etc. (*L* 4-5)

Moreover, Marguerite’s repeated emphasis on her loyalty to the United States and her identification with its values, such as family and patriotism, suggests that, like Oswald, she is an effect of the TV culture:

[... ] we are a family that has never been able to stay together [...]. Now, about does he [Oswald] live a healthy American life? I would answer as such, your honor, that there are many fine and well-to-do citizens living all around us but that the French Quarter has its vagrants and others [...]. His future and his dream is the United States Marines [...]. I was a popular child, your honor. I was raised by a father with five other children to be happy and patriotic. I have made my best effort to raise my boy in this manner, regardless. (*L* 48-49)
But it is Oswald who provides the clearest specimen of a socially constructed and splintered subject. Not surprisingly, he wants to become a spy (L 131), but he also imagines himself as a Marxist, a happy consumer, and a lone gunman. A composite of mass cultural formations, Oswald is always already a byproduct of imaging technology. For instance, the moment he learns that he will become a father, he recognizes himself as a standard middle-class father purchasing toys for his child, with probably a smiling, satisfied wife by his side. No longer identifying with the lower classes, he wishes to be a happy consumer and the kind of middle-class father shown on the screen:

When Marina told him she was pregnant he thought his life made sense at last. A father took part. He had a place, an obligation [...]. He told her the stores in America were incredibly well stocked, full of amazing choices. Whatever a baby needed, all you had to do was find the nearest department store. Whole departments for babies. Whole stores, babies only. You’ve never seen such toys. (L 206-7)

Among these heterogeneous models of identification, it is the Western hero that is most appealing to Oswald. In DeLillo’s account, Oswald looks like a vulnerable person who can hardly resist the alluring heroic images on TV. The seductive nature of these heroic images is obvious in the episode when Oswald watches Suddenly and We Were Strangers in his living room shortly before the assassination. Both films concern attempted assassinations: of President Eisenhower and of the Cuban dictator Machado respectively (L 369-70). The movies speak directly to Oswald’s unconscious desires, making him both nervous and excited. Before this episode, Oswald has still not reached a final decision about whether or not to shoot Kennedy. However, the call of the films is so strong that Oswald feels they must have been made exclusively for him. His social role
and identity are already scripted:

He felt connected to the events on the screen. It was like secret instructions entering the network of signals and broadcast bands, the whole busy air of transmission […]. They were running a message through the night into his skin […]. Lee felt he was in the middle of his own movie. They were running this thing just for him. \((L\ 370)\)

The movies are more real than the empirical world. They are about him, and "[e]verything that happened was him" \((L\ 385)\). The world becomes a filmic text and Oswald a screen hero (or heroic villain) not unlike Frank Sinatra in *Suddenly* or John Garfield in *We Were Strangers*. Destined to be a filmic character, Oswald ultimately becomes a scripted shooter of the scripted president, namely, JFK.

\((D)\). *Postmodern Subjectivity: A Critique*

As has been suggested, both the strengths and weaknesses of *Libra* lie in its presentations of Oswald as an all too-perfect postmodern subject bound to be a spy, a Marxist, a consumer, a middle-class father, and, above all, a shooter of JFK. It is true that a socially constructed account of the self more or less deconstructs the myth of the lone gunman propagated by, for instance, the Warren Commission Report, in which social contradictions are annulled by the sweet ideology that what exists is a healthy and harmonious society. A postmodern explanation uncovers the ideological underpinnings of a world-view which conveniently attributes social problems to evil, aberrant, and sick individuals, maintaining that beyond the personal there is a socio-cultural that is probably imperceptible but always overdetermining.

One possible risk of such a model, however, is its smuggling of a metaphysical origin into its theory, only this time with the origin displaced from a unitary, self-sufficient subject to surrounding cultural forces. A *constructed* self
may not necessarily be equal to a determined self who is totally helpless because of
the manipulation of discursive formations and social apparatuses. Overemphasizing the complexity and omnipotence of an omnipresent Other, moreover, threatens to foreclose the possibility of resistance or intervention on the part of the individual. A too perfect postmodern theoretical model, in other words, somehow fails to take into account that a subject may exist in a non-synchronous relation with the socio-cultural.

As in Foucault’s depiction of the self, in which the technologies shaping the body and the self are portrayed as so intimidating as to make resistance a ridiculously improbable conjecture, DeLillo’s characters seem to be irreparably disciplined by society’s panopticon gaze. From Jack Gladney, Babette, Heinrich, and Willie Mink in White Noise to Oswald in Libra and Karen in Mao II, DeLillo has consistently imagined characters entrapped by all-encompassing forces. They either live in fear (Jack and Babette), in a disoriented way of life (Karen), or in an oriented life founded on mis-recognition (Oswald and sometimes Karen). Sometimes a character simply abandons him/herself in the funhouse of these forces, as illustrated by Murray Jay Siskind in White Noise. Most of DeLillo’s characters, in short, are marked by either a sense of relentless vulnerability or of Baudrillardean “ecstasy.” While social networks are imagined as overwhelmingly omnipotent, the individual is unfairly reduced to a passive object. Like the alien

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5 The late Foucault had modified his pessimistic view about the relationship between technology and the body, claiming that “there is no relationship of power without the means of escape or possible flight. Every power relationship implies, at least in potenta, a strategy of struggle” (794). Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” Critical Inquiry 8 (1982): 777-95. The problem, however, is that such oppositional strategies did not materialize in his histories of madness, diseases, and sexuality.

6 See Mark Edmundson, “Not Flat, Not Round, Not There: Don DeLillo’s Novel Characters,” Yale Review 83 (1995): 107-24. For Edmundson, DeLillo’s characters, such as Karen, Heinrich, Marguerite, and Lee are people with no subjectivity. DeLillo’s novels, according to Edmundson, are critical in the sense that they alert the reader to the presence of pervasive apparatuses that shape the self. My position, however, is that such portrayal still seems to be too mechanical and one-dimensional.
monsters in some SF films, DeLillo’s imagination of social power is so horrifying that paranoid fear seems to be the most reasonable human response. Perceptive as he is about the workings of power, DeLillo has problems imagining alternative subjects.

To say this, however, is not to suggest that a constructed account should be abandoned. What is important is rather to conceptualize a more active model, so that the subject may not be so helplessly stuck in a one-way street modality of power and social relations. It is after all the gap between the individual and the social, rather than their mimetic uniformity, that opens up a space of negation. This is by no means an easy task, but one which a critical writer like DeLillo cannot evade. In his interview with Adam Begley, DeLillo said that literature in most cases is “neutralized” and “incorporated” by society, and this is “why we need the writer in opposition, the novelist who writes against power, who writes against the corporation or the state or the whole apparatus of assimilation” (Begley 290). DeLillo’s portrayal of the social apparatuses is without doubt admirable. What needs to be imagined is a more dynamic interaction between these apparatuses and a substantial self capable of negotiating with them, in however limited a form.

Postmodern Writing: From History to Stories

A few months after Libra’s publication, George Will, a political columnist for the Washington Post, launched a ferocious attack on the novel. For Will, the JFK assassination was purely a result of “Oswald’s act of derangement,” but DeLillo’s treatment had intimated that “America is a sick society that breeds extremism and

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7 For a more positive model that emphasizes the constructive as well as inventive aspects of subjectivity, see Judith Butler’s “Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity,” Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader, ed. Mary Eagleton (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996): 367-73.
conspiracies and that Oswald was a national type, a product of the culture” (A25). Far from being a truthful account, Libra was henceforth an “ideological,” i.e., distorted, representation of historical figures and events. Historical fiction, Will demanded, should be faithful to facts: “Novelists using the raw material of history—real people, important events—should be constrained by concern for truthfulness, by respect for the record and a judicious weighing of probabilities” (A25). For Will, one serious flaw of Libra was that it allowed the author’s leftist ideology to predominate over “a judicious weighing of probabilities.”

Will’s short but powerful comments contain a couple of important points deserving our attention. The first point is about the nature and function of literature. For Will, Libra is an ideological, not literary work in that it falsely describes a single person’s “derangement” as a symptom of social disease. By suggesting that everyone is potentially an Oswald, DeLillo not only lets his leftist ideology corrupt his work, but also exerts a bad influence on society. Reminding us of Plato’s condemning decree that poets should be expelled from the Republic of Reason, Will labels Libra as “an act of literary vandalism and bad citizenship” (A25). Central to Will’s argument, to put in a nutshell, is that literature should be ideology-free and should not contaminate a presumably healthy society (as if this were not an ideology).

The second point raised by Will is about the problem of writing history, namely, how to represent things of the past. Not surprisingly, Will’s position is that history is based on “raw material,” i.e., historical facts, and that the task of the historian is to record them accurately and truthfully, so that it may not be colored by ideology. The presupposition of this belief is that both historical figures and events are objective and empirically verifiable, and that they can be “judiciously weighed” by the observing subject. The past is already there waiting for people’s faithful translation into words. We can call this position a mimetic conception of historical writing, or historical realism.
The contention central to the first point, that DeLillo’s work is an act of “literary vandalism and bad citizenship,” has already been strongly criticized by Frank Lentricchia. A far cry from an anomaly in the American literary cannon tradition, the critical spirit displayed in *Libra* was for Lentricchia an essential part of that tradition. Theodore Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy*, John Dos Passos’s *U.S.A.*, E. L. Doctorow’s *Ragtime*, Robert Coover’s *The Public Burning*, among many other, are instances of these writers’ refusal “to limit themselves to celebratory platitudes about the truths of the heart” (“American Writer” 3). As for Will’s assertion that historical fiction should be mimetic, Lentricchia had nothing to say but the brief rebuttal that “the sharp and deadly distinction between fiction and nonfiction” is a “shibboleth of literary culture since the eighteenth century” (3).

Lentricchia’s enlistment of *Libra* as a “legitimate” text underscores the politics involved in the formation of the so-called literary canon. The decision about what should and what should not be deemed “classic” is actually bound up with a set of value judgments that are tied up with the decision-maker’s race, ethnicity, gender, and class position. Whether a “good” literary work should reproduce or interrupt the existing social relations is not an abstract question but one of a historically specific kind. In this respect, one contribution of postmodernism to literary studies derives from its critical questioning of transcendent values and totalizing forms of knowledge, which mask ideology-laden positions in an ideology-neutral language.

However, postmodernism also creates some problems, as reflected in Lentricchia’s statement that traditional distinctions between fiction and non-fiction no longer make any sense in contemporary society. Indeed, one primary impulse of postmodernism is to deconstruct all binary terms. Hayden White, for instance, proclaims that historical writing is actually indistinguishable from fictional
narrative. Both involve an interpreting and selecting process, and both employ “tropes” or figures of speech such as metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony in representing events. Although such a view may cultivate a more critical attitude toward cultural artifacts and liberate people from the mythic yoke imposed by the so-called official or truthful history, it also leaves many problems unsolved. For if the principle of historical truthfulness can be completely thrown into the dustbin, then one can say that Hitler was really a victim, not victimizer, and that the Holocaust, the bombing of Hiroshima, and the Gulf War were nothing but simulated images. To tell about one’s traumatic experience, which is real on the part of the traumatized, would hence become meaningless. And all histories of the oppressed—women, people of color, the Third World, gays and lesbians—would dissolve in a playful postmodernist impulse. When postmodernism contents itself with a display of formal differences, discontinuity, and indeterminacy, it runs the risk of replacing a potentially subversive form of thinking with an ecstatic reproduction of the status quo.

Postmodern writing of history is thus trapped within a double bind. On the one hand, it recognizes the incommensurability between writing and history, signifier and signified. All writing is traumatic in that it is marked by an internal incompleteness, and all truths disseminated by language are not what they claim to be. On the other hand, postmodernism should be careful not to go too far by saying that history is nothing but an inter-textual effect. For many people, the painful feeling and memory are “real,” and it is in most cases the privileged few looking from “a God’s eye point of view” that can afford a frivolous deconstruction of history and fiction, real and unreal. Postmodern history, accordingly, is torn

between the contradictory impulses of a formalistic self-consciousness and the consciousness of the historical real. Overemphasizing the role of one at the expense of the other can easily lead to either playful relativism or authoritarian dogmatism.

Tensions between fiction and history, text and context, cultural representation and historical sublime inform DeLillo’s *Libra*. On the one hand, DeLillo perceives that writing is always a belated or deferred activity which can never exhaust its referent, i.e., history, as illustrated by his frequent allusions to such notions as mystery, secret, and ambiguity in *Libra*. Instead of claiming an imaginary totality, the novel inscribes a sense of incompleteness into a self-reflexive, open-ended form. On the other hand, *Libra* does not lapse into complete playfulness containing only metafictional formal innovations. What makes a story unspeakable is not simply its implications in the linguistic signification system, but above all the presence in it of historical suffering that cannot be transmitted through language or vocalized in public.

DeLillo’s dialectical move between language and power, text and context, unfortunately, has not been given due attention. Most critics overemphasize the deconstructive aspect of *Libra* to the degree that the historically “real,” though unspeakable, dimension is largely neglected. History in *Libra* is thus “always and nothing more than a narrative construction” (Thomas 108); it is an “endless trace and differance” (Carmichael 204). For me, excessive glorification of the relative dichotomy of the historical and fictional (Johnston 338) is like chopping a lion’s claws for the purpose of public exhibition in the circus. No longer a wild and unpredictable animal, it becomes a beautiful and well-tamed pet. The working of hegemonic power and the historically inflicted pain are the lion’s claws of both *Libra* and postmodernism most often trimmed by (academic and middle-class) critics.

As a postmodern text, *Libra* concerns the narrative dimension of history as
well as the historical dimension of narrative. While the presence of the historian Nicholas Branch and the open-ended form of the novel conform to the poststructuralist conceptions of history and fiction, the figure of Marguerite Oswald reveals DeLillo’s awareness that some sufferings are both in need of and beyond representation. The unspoken (her)stories deconstruct DeLillo’s *Libra* as a finished (male) text.

(A). *Nicholas Branch, or Writing the Impossible*

One major function of Nicholas Branch in *Libra* is to illustrate the perplexing intertwining of history and representation, subject and object. A historian hired by the CIA to write “the secret history of the assassination of President Kennedy” (*L* 15), Branch is a modern seeker of historical truth lost in a postmodern labyrinth of writing. Desperate to figure out the “causes” of historical occurrences in his archive, he is trapped in a Borgesian library. He is a living embodiment of the poststructuralist dissolution of distinction between history and representation, the real and the cultural. The first time Branch appears, he is adrift, even drowned, in an ocean of signifiers:

Nicholas Branch sits in the book-filled room, the room of documents, the room of theories and dreams. He is in the fifteenth year of his labor and sometimes wonders if he is becoming bodiless […]. There are times when he can’t concentrate on the facts at hand and has to come back again and again to the page […]. This is the room of growing old, the fireproof room, paper everywhere […]. Sometimes he looks around him, horrified by the weight of it all, the career of paper. He sits in the data-spew of hundreds of lives. There’s no end in sight. (*L* 14)

Just as Oswald’s subjectivity is mediated by cinematographic signifiers, Branch’s
understanding of history is filtered through the postmodern scene of writing. The past is a mystery-laden absence, which triggers a human desire to fill it with language. The gap between language and history, however, can never be completely bridged. One source of Branch’s frustration comes from his realization that the so-called historical truth is somehow endlessly displaced by historical information, and that “[t]here is no end in sight.” At the end of the novel, he still cannot begin writing his “secret history.”

A traditional type of historian, Branch deems history as consisting of events that can be properly translated into a meaningful narrative containing a beginning, a developmental process, and an end. For him, history has a pattern, and one can properly allocate the part in a meaningful whole: “Branch sees again how the assassination sheds a powerful and lasting light, exposing patterns and links, revealing this man to have known that one, this death to have occurred in curious juxtaposition to that” (L 58).

This belief is shaken when he notes that such patterns are human-made orderings imposed upon random events, and it is possible, Branch suspects, that “the conspiracy against the President was a rambling affair that succeeded in the short term due mainly to chance” (L 441). Conspiracy theory evidences not so much the objective existence of order as a longing for meaning and order. It is a convenient way of interpreting reality, which projects all negative things (crimes, violence, terrorism, sex, social conflicts, etc.) onto imaginary enemies. Through such projection of real abjection onto an imaginary origin, society maintains its narcissistic self-image:

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, cold, sure, undistracted, forever closed off to us. We are the flawed
ones, the innocents, trying to make some rough sense of the daily jostle. Conspirators have a logic and a daring beyond our reach. All conspiracies are the same taut story of men who find coherence in some criminal act. (L 440)

Unable to detect the inner patterns of historical occurrences, Branch is stuck in the accumulating books. His only solace is the fragmentary notes he takes, which probably will never be transformed into a coherent history:

He takes refuge in his notes. The notes are becoming an end in themselves. Branch has decided it is premature to make a serious effort to turn these notes into coherent history. Maybe it will always be premature. Because the data keeps coming. Because new lives enter the record all the time. The past is changing as he writes. (L 301)

There is no proper time to start writing. Any time “will be premature” because writing is always a belated activity. While Branch may never start to write, the surrounding written books have secretly transformed him into an old man. Fairly soon he will become a man of history, finished and retired by writing.

That Branch’s notes will probably never materialize into history makes us wonder whether or not this fictional historian is Don DeLillo’s alter ego. Indeed, a few similarities are discernible between the two. Both are concerned with the task of writing history in small rooms, and both attempt to construct a narrative out of overwhelming historical data. Their conceptions regarding the nature of history or historiography, however, are significantly different. An empirical historian, Branch believes that historical occurrences should and can be systematically assimilated into a coherent narrative. DeLillo, in contrast, does not
aspire to a contradiction-free narrative. While contingency, ambiguity, and uncertainty are undesirable elements that should be expelled from the closed system of Branch’s ideal historiography, they are consciously inscribed within the postmodern novelist’s fiction. The main thing that distinguishes a modernist from a postmodernist writer/historian, in other words, is the latter’s acknowledgement and preservation of the textual and social abject, as is exemplified by the figure of Marguerite Oswald.

(B). Marguerite Oswald: from History to Stories
In “Motherhood and Postmodernism,” Terry Caesar complains that if postmodern fiction has not been able to abandon the figure of the mother, neither can it really redeem her. Examining representations of motherhood in Libra, Doctorow’s Billy Bathgate, and Pynchon’s Vineland, Caesar asserts:

The mothers in these male narratives appear in more degraded than idealized forms. It hardly seems to matter, for example, whether Oswald ever trusted his mother or even that he had one. Marguerite herself is a marginal, barely coherent figure, scarcely able to cope with the circumstances of her own life. (121)

Flawed by a lack of comprehensive explication as Caesar’s discussion of Marguerite is, hers is one of the very few essays that engage the sexual politics of DeLillo’s fiction. As a male writer, Caesar observes, DeLillo is limited by his capacity to represent women.

More to the point, DeLillo’s capacity to represent female, non-white, and non-middle class characters is quite limited. Their existence as individuals, as critics have noticed, is often unfairly compromised by an author who is so desperately intent on expressing his insightful ideas at the cost of reducing these
characters to his mouthpieces. However, compared with DeLillo’s treatment of women in his earlier novels, such as Sullivan in *Americana*, Pammy Wynant in *Players*, and Babette Gladney in *White Noise*, Marguerite is already a more substantial, even likeable maternal figure. Her presence at least shows the male writer’s increasing, though probably belated, awareness of an Other. She appears in “more degraded than idealized forms,” but it seems that such degradation is not an *essential* or *inherent* part of her self, but is a consequence of historical oppression. A degraded figure in society, Marguerite faithfully remains degraded in fiction, for one can hardly represent an idealized Marguerite without sacrificing some of her historical degradation. In order to represent a debasing social relation, in other words, one may resort to a debased, not sublimated, form of representation. She is old, ugly, destitute, and socially depraved. That is why she efficiently pollutes the sugar-cloaked ideology of a healthy, wealthy, and euphonious society, exemplified by the American dream that has attracted a large amount of immigrants to America. In an interview with Anthony DeCurtis, DeLillo claimed that it is this discrepancy between promise and unfulfillment in American society that characterizes Oswald’s life: “His life in small rooms is the antithesis of the life America seems to promise its citizens: the life of consumer fulfillment” (52).

Marguerite is no pretty woman, nor does she become like Jay Gatsby in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*. Wishing to secure a job to support her family, she is perpetually turned down by a society presumably full of opportunities. In New York, she is fired because they said she did not use deodorant. This was not true because she used a roll-on every day and if it didn’t work the way it

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said on TV, why should she be singled out as a social misfit? New York was not behind the times in strange smells. (L 38)

Indeed, the presence of Marguerite in Libra is like a stinking smell insuppressible by any ideological deodorants. Her digressive, de-centralizing mode of speech in the courtroom contaminates legal (male) discourses founded on reason and logic. While “proper” legal discourse consists of simple and direct statements, deemed the most appropriate way of conveying the so-called truth, Marguerite always tells stories seemingly unrelated to truths. Instead of giving direct answers to questions, she tells anecdotes of her life.

Among her various life experiences, her failed marriage with Mr. Ekdahl is a significant, traumatic event to which she persistently returns:

I love my United States but I don’t look forward to a courtroom situation, which is what happened with Mr. Ekdahl, accusing me of uncontrollable rages. They will point out that they have cautioned us officially. I will tell them I’m a person with no formal education who holds her own in good company and keeps a neat house. We are a military family. This is my defense. (L 6-7)

A couple of things are worthy of attention. First, Marguerite’s speech frequently refers to the difficulty of raising children without a father: “I cannot say enough how hard it is to raise boys without a father” (L 48). Hard as she tries to play the role of a good mother, her family is forced to live “in the meanest of small rooms” and in a neighborhood with “gambling on the street” and “prostitutes by the galore” (L 11, 48). Her speech, in other words, is constantly driven by the desire to articulate and make visible the social forces to which a woman’s life is subjected. Her language implies that in order to know the Oswald family, one must know the
unjust sexual, economic, and social relations against which it emerges.

The passage also indicates Marguerite’s identification with the Law of the Father, and with American values such as family and patriotism: “I love my United States,” “We are a military family. This is my defense.” Elsewhere she proudly asserts that “I was raised by a father with five other children to be happy and patriotic,” and that she has done her best to give Oswald “a healthy American life” (L 48-49). Meanwhile, Marguerite’s marginalized position also makes her particularly sensitive to the existing social relations that prevent her and her son from really becoming healthy and wealthy Americans. Social depravation grants her a vantage point to see the world in a more accurate, i.e., demystified, manner. From the position of an underdog, she tells stories different from those of, say, males, the middle-class, or the jury. ¹² Recognizing that the hegemonic discourse represents Lee Oswald as a social deviant, she desperately needs to tell different stories about him. Her emphasis on socio-economic factors shows her desire to fight/write back the general consensus about Oswald, which is purely a psychologizing account of a historical being. Negative representations of her son, that is, make her aware of the intertwining of power and knowledge: that what is generally called true knowledge is actually locally produced, but universally

¹² Marguerite’s suspicion of representations in general and “official” representations in particular is apparent in her interview with Jean Stafford. The interview opens with Marguerite’s statement that she was ‘not a mother defending her son,’ but was ‘speaking for history,’ since history, she is persuaded, has been deformed by the press and by the report of the Warren Commission’s inquiry into President Kennedy’s assassination, which is ‘all lies, lies, lies.’ (4)

One reason that official histories are “all lies” for Marguerite is that they are told by the socially privileged people. She says:

‘All the news mediums said he [Oswald] was such a failure in life. A failure in life?’ she cried out in stunned disbelief. ‘He was twenty-four years old when he was murdered! The attorneys that are interviewing these witnesses make a hundred to a hundred and fifty dollars a day and they never lived this type life. […]’ (8)

Through a more literate person like Stafford, Marguerite wished that her project of writing a different history of her son might be completed. See Jean Stafford, A Mother in History (NY: Farrar, 1966).
valorized as objective Truth. The discursive field is a battlefield, and those who conquer not only decide the fate of Lee Oswald, but the association that name provokes in people's minds, even decades after his death.\textsuperscript{13}

Marguerite's strong desire to enter this discursive battlefield is apparent in her insistence on writing. After Oswald's defection to Russia, she plans to write a book: "I have done my research. I had a lot of extenuating circumstances because of your defection [...] I can write what's mine [...] I have a right to my book" (L 228). As a woman/mother, she knows fairly well that history is mostly written by males: "the truth is that the mother is neglected. If you research the life of Jesus, you see that Mary mother of Jesus disappears from the record once he is crucified and risen. Where is the mother who raised the boy?" (L 453). For her, each moment is a moment of danger because it has always been the male victor, in this case the Warren Committee, who writes history. Her sensitivity to unequal power relations is evident in another episode, when the image of Oswald's assassination by Jack Ruby is broadcast on TV. Deprived of the right to watch by the male FBI agents who guard her, Marguerite and her daughter-in-law, Marina, are also deprived of the right to know:

So then they showed it on television in the room but Marina and I were not shown the sequence. They made us sit behind the television and the agents all crowded around in front and watched [...] And fifteen men crowded in to watch on the other side. They gave us coffee and they watched. (L 450)

\textsuperscript{13} Such writing impulses can also be found in Oswald's writing of the Historical Diary (L 149-56). There are, accordingly, at least three people in Libra who feel the need to write: Nicholas Branch, Lee Oswald, and Marguerite Oswald. Even Win Everett's secret plot can be taken as a form of writing. The simultaneous existence of these heterogeneous, sometimes unfinished, writing makes DeLillo's work a postmodern, dialogic text.
Marguerite’s writing, like Branch’s, is an incomplete project, an absence that never materializes into book-form. Her desire to speak is nonetheless expressed through the pen of a male novelist. DeLillo’s deep sympathy for Marguerite, his willingness to listen to her stories, is apparent in the last chapter (L 448-456). After Oswald’s death, Marguerite tells the Commission that “I have many stories, your honor. I have stories I am sure you do not know. I am the mother in the case” (L 449). Her will to tell stories is counterbalanced by a sense of its impossibility: “I cannot state the truth of this case with simple yes and no. I have to tell a story [...] There are stories inside stories, judge [...] But I cannot pin it down to a simple statement” (L 449-50). Whereas the goal of the dominant discourse is to “pin down” one’s identity by stating “facts,” Marguerite contends that a person’s life history cannot be reduced to simple facts, and that truth has to be found in stories that take full account of the historicity of facts, not facts per se.

Marguerite’s intention, to put it another way, is to tell “stories inside stories that the press is unaware” (L 452). But how? She says that she will write her son’s history with the aid of a camera: “I will wear a camera and make a photographic record of Lee’s life, getting houses and rooms on the record [...] I will wear a camera. I will time his movements on the fatal day” (L 450-52). But when would she press the start button and record? When he defected to Russia? When he got married? Or when he began reading Marxism? What makes an event so “significant” that it must be recorded and what makes another “insignificant”? Finally, even if all the things of one’s life can be recorded by an omniscient observer, the produced object is not history, but a series of fragmentary and unrelated historical raw data best called a chronicle. The cinematographic or photographic realism proposed by Marguerite, like any other literary form, still cannot represent Lee Oswald without leaving some unsolved problems.

What Marguerite wants to tell are stories that probably can never be exhausted
by representation. She is a modern version of the ancient mariner in Samuel T. Coleridge’s poem, and her repetition compulsion testifies to the presence of traumatic experiences. Repeatedly asking the absent judge to “listen to me. Listen,” Marguerite can only use words to express experiences, while feeling at the same time the unbridgeable rift between the two (L 453-55).

It is with Marguerite’s failure to articulate a coherent story, however, that the authority of any totalizing historiography is put into question. She is a Derridean “supplement,” a margin that de-centralizes the center and unsettles totality. Her failure is an indictment of the discourses that claim to “pin down” history by erasing ambiguities. That her stories are not fully articulated does not necessarily mean that they are actually appropriated by the hegemonic discourses, as Magali Michael claims:

In the end, sociohistorical forces, including the all-pervasive media, are too powerful for both Lee and Marguerite Oswald. They are victims, in the sense that their attempt at self-construction—through their stories or histories—are covered over, rearranged, co-opted by these larger and often invisible forces. (148)

Instead of a completely “co-opted” victim of “the all-pervasive media,” Marguerite, with her insuppressible smell and unchained cacophony, is not so easily contained. So long as her will to tell stories persists, and so long as the reader of Libra recognizes this will, it is always too early to talk about a pervasive co-optation.

Libra is not a finished, self-enclosed work, and its polyphonic multiplicity is irreducible to any single voice and closed structure. The novel shows that historical memory is a battlefield on which different groups struggle to utter their

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voices, of which Marguerite strives to become a combating member. Her presence, moreover, is evident of an Other that is beyond the assimilation of any closed form of writing. As Diane Elam claims, “History cannot be written, as such; but this does not make us nihilists. Rather we should recognize that history will have been written, whether we like it or not” (66). This sense of “will have been” is why we should treat Libra not as a finished work, but as an incomplete text that will have been rewritten, by Marguerite and by critics sympathizing with her.\footnote{After an unusually careful reading of this paper, Professor Chiu Kuei-fen pointed out insightfully that my interpretation of Marguerite Oswald has actually made her a fairly active character capable of returning the gaze of the social technologies that shape or condition the self. Marguerite embodies, in other words, the existence of a resisting subject, or agency, which, however, I claim to be absent in Libra in the first part of the paper. While acknowledging a probable theoretical inconsistency, even contradiction in my argument, I would like to treat such inconsistency as a symptom of the limitations of some versions of postmodernism in general. A fully depthless, free-floating postmodern subject incapable of preserving a distance from ambient apparatuses is itself a myth. In Libra, however, such distance between the individual and the social is resultant of a traumatic experience, for Marguerite’s recognition of postmodernism’s false totality is gained mainly from Oswald’s death and public representations about him. The traumatic real, which may be called postmodernism’s Other, unsettles the postmodern symbolic. To put in another way, postmodern subjects like DeLillo’s Oswald, which I discuss in the first part of this paper, are both exclusive of and constructed by an abducted (m)other, i.e., Marguerite. Though not being able to wholly resolve the theoretical inconsistency that Professor Chiu pointed out, I nevertheless hope to read this “blindness” more fruitfully as one necessary step toward demythologizing some versions of postmodernism.}

(C). Coda: The Illusion of the End

Just as the “beginning” of Libra is arbitrarily selected, the novel’s “ending” is provisional, not final. DeLillo’s self-conscious dismantling of his own writing as a self-enclosed total system is manifested in “The Author’s Note” at the end:

This is a work of imagination. While drawing from the historical record, I’ve made no attempt to furnish factual answers to any questions raised by the assassination. Any novel about a major unresolved event would aspire to fill some of the blank spaces in the known record. To do this, I’ve altered and embellished reality,
extended real people into imagined space and time, invented incidents, dialogues, and characters. (L 458)

It is common to read this note as an illustration of DeLillo’s postmodern sensibility that there is no distinction between fiction and history. Rather than an objective, value-free account of historical occurrences, historical writing actually involves a process of interpreting and selecting. Implicated in the social position of the historian, historiography is therefore inevitably colored by his/her ideological beliefs. The boundary between history and fiction, in short, is imaginary, not real.

What is less noticeable is the curious position the note occupies in the novel. If we take it literally as a note from the author, i.e., from the “Don DeLillo” who also wrote *Americana*, *White Noise*, and *Mao II*, then it is an addendum to, not an essential part of, the text known as *Libra*. “The Author’s Note,” in this view, is outside of the text’s production of meaning. It is a reflection on how the text was produced and how it should be read. This note, one might say, delimits the text, conferring on it a certain form. While some incidents and dialogues in the text are fictive, the author’s note is real in that it designates the text as a “work of imagination.” Henceforth, DeLillo’s text should end with “It belonged to her [Marguerite] now, and to history,” rather than “To do this, I’ve altered and embellished reality, extended real people into imagined space and time, invented incidents, dialogues, and characters” (L 456, 458).

But is it possible that the “Author” in “The Author’s Note” is not the man who wrote *White Noise* and *Mao II* but a fictional character masquerading as an author, much like Norman Mailer’s third-person presentations of “Mailer” in *The Armies of the Night*? Is it possible that the note is still inside the process of meaning production of *Libra*, not outside? The note, according to this view, does not explain much on how the text should be understood; it only pretends to do so. *Libra* may be an imaginative work, as the cunning character pretending to be the
author instructs, but it may also be a historical work containing historical pain, which is nevertheless outside imagination. What is important is that there is no authoritative reading that can control the text’s dissemination of meaning. *Libra*, therefore, is not a closed work. It does not have a proper beginning, nor a proper ending, although it assumes the appearance of a beginning and an end. The author’s note is scripted as inside the text, not as a post-script.

**Conclusion:**

If there is one common thread that unites the diverse definitions of what is called the postmodern, it may be the questioning of any belief system that claims to be universally applicable to all regions and immutable to historical changes. The Cartesian thinking subject and the Hegelian Spirit are probably the two most apparent instances of such transcendent systems that have dominated the Western world. It is against such conceptualizations of the subject as coherent and autonomous, and of history as continuous and universal, that *Libra* can be considered a postmodern novel. However, postmodernism’s liberation of humans, especially those from non-Western other worlds, from the yoke of an authoritarian subject and totalizing History also produces some side effects. In *Libra*, the postmodern self is rendered as so helplessly enmeshed in networks of social systems that any possibility of an intervening subject is unfairly excluded. Moreover, postmodernism’s absolute endorsement of multiplicity and difference runs the risk of fostering a relativist, even nihilist view of history. Balancing the postmodern scene of writing with an awareness of social inequality is therefore an extremely difficult task a critical postmodernist writer must assume. It is the preservation of such tension that marks *Libra* as a critical, albeit limited, postmodernist fiction.
Works Cited


論德利羅小說《天秤座》
中的主體與歷史書寫

林建光*

摘要

许多批评家都认为德利罗的《天秤座》是一本很成功的后现代小说。在人物刻画方面，小说将主角 Lee Harvey Oswald 視為社會機制、意識型態、以及各種論述生產的產物，本身缺乏自主或主體性。在歷史書寫方面，批评家們指陳《天秤座》解構小說與歷史的差異，並體現「歷史即小說」這個後現代的基本命題。本文目的在於指出這類後現代閱讀的不足與盲點，進而對其提出修正。前半部分探討後現代主體問題，後半部分則強調歷史的小說性以及真實性。

關鍵詞：《天秤座》 後現代 主體 歷史書寫

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《奧林匹克》餘小異譯述

高麗史學與體育主張中

譯者

在體育的發展中，餘小異譯述的《奧林匹克》是體育史和體育理論中重要的一環。這本書涵蓋了奧林匹克運動的歷史背景，從最初的起源到現代奧運會的發展，詳細闡述了奧林匹克運動的價值觀和意義。從書中可以看出，體育不僅僅是運動，更是一種文化，體現著人類對公平競爭和互助友愛的崇高追求。本書的譯述，為研讀奧林匹克運動史的讀者提供了寶貴的參考資料。