4.4
CONSPIRACY IN AMERICAN NARRATIVE

Timothy Melley

Introduction
Conspiracy has always loomed large in American culture. Not only was Colonial American rhetoric frequently animated by conspiratorial demonology, but, as numerous scholars have shown, conspiratorial suspicion was a normative feature of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century political thought. It should be no surprise, therefore, that so many durable American literary works explore suspicion, hidden plots and organised systems for social or political control. What is more striking, however, is the veritable explosion of literary and cultural interest in conspiracy that characterised the period beginning roughly in 1960 (see Fenster 1999; Melley 2000; Knight 2000; O’Donnell 2000). Not only did conspiracy become an explicit organising principle in the most celebrated fictions of the post-Kennedy era, but this literature frequently embraced self-conscious paranoia as a reasonable response to state and corporate power.

In this chapter, I sketch this development from the colonial period to the present, arguing that the post-war American ‘culture of paranoia’ reflected a serious crisis of public knowledge fomented by a mushrooming security state, corporate capitalism and mass-mediated society. In emphasising the period after 1960, I do not mean to suggest that conspiracy is not a significant theme of earlier periods but, rather, that the intense and self-reflexive post-war embrace of ‘paranoid’ subjectivity marks a major shift in the cultural meaning of conspiracy. The post-war culture of conspiracy was fuelled by a new journalistic emphasis on the excesses of the Cold War security state and the rise of a new scholarly discourse that defined and delegitimated what is now commonly called ‘conspiracy theory’ (see Thalmann 2019; McKenzie-McHarg 2019). It is no accident that cultural interest in conspiracy mushroomed at almost the same moment that Richard Hofstadter defined the ‘paranoid style’ in 1965 as an aberrant and politically dangerous form of political speech. Yet, the post-war literature of paranoia differed markedly from both the Cold War demonology of Hofstadter’s ‘paranoid style’ and the ferment of what is now commonly dismissed as ‘conspiracy theory’. As I will suggest below, the post-war literature of paranoia was suspicious even of its own suspicion, yet it embraced the apparent irrationalism of paranoia as a creative, workable stance against the mystifying power of large institutions, public relations schemes, state propaganda, disinformation, advertising and other forms of mass mediated deception and social influence.
Plotting conspiracy

Conspiratorial ferment has long animated American thought. As early as 1693, Cotton Mather’s *The Wonders of the Invisible World* described some female residents of Salem as a ‘terrible Plague, of Evil Angels’ engaged in ‘An Horrible Plot’ to ‘Blow up, and pull down all the Churches in the Country’. This sort of paranoid ‘demonology’, as the political scientist Michael Rogin (1987) termed it, has repeatedly marked periods of crisis in American political history. Demonology is an essential form of Anglo-American identity formation that is rooted in the scapegoating of racialised populations and has resurfaced in response to the Indigenous peoples of North America, European immigrants of the late nineteenth century, Cold War communists and jihadists in the wake of the attacks of 11 September 2001.

In his landmark 1964 essay, ‘The Paranoid Style in American Politics’, Richard Hofstadter associated this sort of rhetorical ferment with the tendency to see ‘a “vast” or “gigantic” conspiracy as the motive force in historical events’ (25; 29). While he did not use the phrase ‘conspiracy theory’, his essay helped to establish the modern sense of that term and to delegitimate it as a pathological and dangerous form of mostly right-wing political speech (Hofstadter 1965). Yet, as Bernard Bailyn, Gordon Wood, Michael Butter and others have shown, the tendency to formulate theories of conspiracy was rather commonplace in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century U.S.A. (see Bailyn 1967; Wood 1982; Butter 2014). Assertions of conspiracy were widespread, among both elites and commoners, and they were widely accepted as a reasonable way of thinking about power, politics and even social influence more generally. As the dean of early American letters, Ralph Waldo Emerson, put it in his definitive 1841 essay, ‘Self-Reliance’, ‘Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members’ (1841: 261).

It should thus be no surprise that conspiracies figure significantly in American fiction and drama. The discovery of secret plots is in some ways a natural topic for fiction. While there is an important distinction between literary plot (the organisation of events in a narrative) and complot (the gathering of people to enact a secret plan), plotting is a primary activity of the fiction writer. The unearthing of a secret complot, moreover, has long been a standard literary plot, and there is no shortage of such plots in popular American writing. Melodrama, with its emphasis on the heroic rescue of wronged innocents, has been a particularly consistent source of conspiratorial complot. Overwrought stories about schemes to defraud, deflower or harm unwitting commoners have been popular throughout American history. Narratives in the demonological tradition, which constitute a particular type of melodrama, have regularly imagined complex plots against the nation or some portion of its citizenry by a range of distant institutions and groups: Satanists, the Catholic Church, the Masons, European bankers and so on.

However, not all American literary explorations of suspicion and conspiracy have taken melodramatic form. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a number of writers described economic and social structures as if they were organised plots. In *The Octopus* (1903), for instance, Frank Norris attempted to represent monopoly capitalism and corporate power as a unified organism with a single locus of planning and control (Knight 2017). Other notable American fiction explored the problem of suspicion by generating ambiguity about threatening events or possible plots. Charles Brockden Brown’s *Arthur Mervyn* (1799), the tales of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville’s ‘Benito Cereno’ (1855) and *The Confidence Man* (1857), Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s ‘Yellow Wallpaper’ (1892) and Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), to name only a few, foreground a type of ‘paranoid’ suspicion. Of course, the term ‘paranoia’ is anachronistic when applied to most of these texts, which predate modern psychoanalysis, and none of these authors explicitly invokes the notion of paranoid suspicion. Yet, all of these works are essentially about what Sigmund Freud (1911) saw as ‘the mechanism
of paranoia': The psychic projection of internal mental content (intentions, emotions and suppositions) onto the world during the process of interpretation. The characters of Poe, Gilman and James repeatedly seem to perceive imaginary projections of their own guilt and desire as real events and objects. Yet, these authors often restrict themselves to a first-person perspective, refusing to confirm the insanity or sanity of their protagonists. Melville’s ‘Benito Cereno’ taunts readers to detect the barely hidden signs of an ingenious slave rebellion masked by the placid but odd behaviour of everyone aboard a distressed slave trading ship. The novella’s protagonist, an affable and kind-hearted, but thoroughly racist, ship captain who has come to the distressed vessel’s aid, is anything but paranoid: His good-natured racism prevents him from recognising the signs of conspiracy all around him. But the novella’s reader is thus challenged to adopt the requisite suspicion to recognise the complot before it explodes into violence at the end of the tale. Melville’s Confidence Man similarly challenges its readers to recognise the hidden motives behind its protagonist’s glib social deceptions. These texts ask readers to engage in something like paranoid suspicion: A recognition that significance lies just under the visible surface of the fictional world, that apparent coincidences are in fact the result of prior design. They do so, moreover, to reveal the power of social convention to normalise racism and mask social violence.

Literary plots that foreground psychic projection and interpretive social dilemmas thematise something already at work in all literary texts: The discernment of patterns that lie just below the surface of social life is akin to the discernment of literary significance beneath the ‘surface’ of the text. The literary, in other words, always invites a form of suspicious, or revelatory, reading. As critics including Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003) and Rita Felski (2015) have explained (and critiqued), literary interpretation has long been understood as something akin to paranoid interpretation. It is rooted in the modern cultural logic that Paul Ricoeur (1970: 32) first described as the ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’, the tendency of the great modern systemic thinkers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to focus on reducing ‘the illusions and lies of consciousness’. Indeed, as John Farrell persuasively argues, paranoia is the ‘dominant concern in modern literature, and its peculiar constellation of symptoms – grandiosity, suspicion, unfounded hostility, delusions of persecution and conspiracy – are nearly obligatory psychological components of the modern hero’ (2006: 5). In short, the paranoid quest for knowledge is central to the canon of Western literature from Don Quixote to Rousseau and beyond.

A new paranoid style

If American literature has always been engaged in the study of suspicion, it came to the very centre of American letters in the post-Kennedy era (see Fenster 1999; Melley 2000; Knight 2000; O’Donnell 2000). Beginning in the 1960s, an extraordinary array of notable American writers made conspiracy and paranoia the central theme of their work – among them, Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, Margaret Atwood, Joan Didion, Kathy Acker, Allan Ginsberg, Vladimir Nabokov, William S. Burroughs, William Gibson, Philip K. Dick, Ralph Ellison, Ken Kesey, Ishmael Reed, Joseph Heller, Diane Johnson, Norman Mailer, William Gaddis and Joseph McElroy. For these figures, conspiracy was not simply complot or a metaphor for interpretive suspicion, it was an explicit cultural logic for thinking about systems, networks and complex social structures. For Don DeLillo (1978), the period after President John F. Kennedy’s assassination, was ‘the age of conspiracy’ and the time in which ‘paranoia replaced history in American life’. Many notable writers of this era embraced what Thomas Pynchon (1973: 25, 638) called ‘creative paranoia’ and ‘operational paranoia’ as a reasonable form of social engagement in the post-war regime of Cold War state secrecy and consumerist public relations. Suspicion, even
potentially paranoid suspicion, the imagination of connections and plots without solid proof, was increasingly seen as an enabling, even necessary, way of understanding a mass-mediated world. As William S. Burroughs (1977: 159), the high priest of post-war American paranoia, put it, ‘A paranoid is a person in possession of all of the facts’. The ‘best minds of [this new literary] generation’, to borrow the phrase of the Beat Generation poet Allan Ginsberg (1956), mounted social critiques that they knew would be perceived as ‘madness’, ‘paranoia’ and radical claptrap. In so doing, they popularised confessions of ‘paranoia’ as a way of expressing suspicion about official narratives and corporate propaganda. Over the next 60 years, the stigma of mental illness fell away from the term ‘paranoia’, and Americans became increasingly comfortable labelling their own suspicions ‘paranoid’ without any sense of self-criticism or pathology. So powerful was this trend that it eventually led to what Peter Knight (2000: 75) terms ‘the routinization of paranoia’ – a postmodern normalisation of ‘paranoid scepticism … in which the conspiratorial netherworld has become hyper-visible, its secrets just one more commodity’.

Thomas Pynchon gave paranoia one of its most memorable definitions in 1973 when the narrator of *Gravity’s Rainbow* called it ‘the leading edge of the discovery that everything is connected’ (1997: 703). Twenty-five years later, in his own magnum opus, *Underworld* (1997), Don DeLillo reaffirmed the status of Pynchon’s phrase as the official slogan of post-war paranoia; in an increasingly networked society, his most suspicious character notes, ‘Everything is connected. All human knowledge gathered and linked, hyperlinked’. If the tendency to see social connections was a hallmark of paranoid thinking, DeLillo suggests, then it had become literalised in the structure of the Internet and the lived experience of quotidian American life (1997: 827).

Notable American fiction began to register this idea beginning in the late 1950s in ways that exceeded the general Western literary investment in paranoid reason. This new literature of paranoia was marked by several major propositions: First, a sense that conspiracy is not merely complot but an essential way of theorising the power of institutions (such as corporations, cartels, state agencies, knowledge systems and social networks) to influence historical events, public perceptions and individual behaviour; second, that such institutions had radically depleted individual human agency through new techniques of mass communication and social control; third, that extreme suspicion or ‘paranoia’ might be well-suited to discerning the nature of this power structure and therefore should not be shunned as a pathological condition; and finally, that fiction had a major social role in the exploration of possible hidden plots, connections and systems of meaning. This final proposition entailed the creation of sophisticated narratives that simulated, for readers, the difficulty of discerning actual conspiracies and plots. This fiction was distinctly different from the form of narrative Hofstadter described as the ‘paranoid style’. It was endlessly suggestive but often refused to assert definite plots, which often seemed to elude human comprehension, ultimately out of reach, difficult to see, know or prove.

Post-war paranoid literature was deeply interested in conspiracy as an organising principle and a theme, but it rarely conceived of conspiracy in the traditional sense of a small group of subversives or plotters who literally ‘breathe together’ (conspirare). Rather, like academic social theory, it tended to understand ‘conspiracies’ as the work of large organisations, technologies or systems – powerful and obscure agencies that in many senses are the very antithesis of the traditional conspiracy. This conception entailed the imagination of social systems as if they were superhuman agents – coherent, wilful actors with the capacity to execute vast plans with godlike efficiency. This view of conspiracy was rooted in a burgeoning sociological imagination, and it required the form of thinking that Karl Popper dismissed in 1945 as ‘the conspiracy theory of society’ – the view that major social and economic events are planned by the ‘direct design … of powerful individuals and groups’. The major problem with this form of interpretation, Popper argued, is that it misunderstands the complexity of social events (1971: 94-5).3 Hofstadter’s
Conspiracy in American narrative

examples, moreover, rarely allege traditional conspiracies (e.g. the plot to kill Caesar or the plot of the 9/11 bombers) but rather point to a giant machinery of influence. This quality is particularly evident in Hofstadter’s Cold War examples, which assert not secret plots but widespread ideological controls. Like Popper, Hofstadter notes that the paranoid style often attributes quasi-divine powers to the enemy and that it often fears that an entire ‘apparatus of education, religion, the press, and the mass media is engaged in a common effort to paralyze the resistance of loyal Americans’ (1965).

Such claims are rooted in an all-or-nothing form of thinking I call ‘agency panic’ – the anxious view that one has fallen under the influence of an external agency – that one has been ‘programmed’, ‘brainwashed’, or converted into an automaton by some organisation, system or mysterious agency. They also tend to imagine the erosion of their own self-control but also to project autonomy and personhood onto social systems. In moments of agency panic, individuals imagine that social systems possess the will and self-control that seems depleted from themselves. The system is personified as ‘them’. It appears to ‘think’, to have motives, to act with ruthless precision.

It is important to recognise two things about this notion. First, it reaffirms the tenets of an Enlightenment liberal individualism – that individuals are autonomous agents in control of their own thoughts and action – but it imagines these capacities at the level of the social order rather than the human individual. Second, it is a reaction to the sense that Enlightenment individualism cannot adequately explain the power of social institutions on human behaviour, thinking or social efficacy. The idea that ‘society’ (or some large subset of it) is ‘conspiring’ to govern social events is, paradoxically, a defence of the idea that individuals should be independent agents, free from social regulation. When faced with evidence that they are in fact influenced by social structures, corporate messages or state regulations, the paranoid subject clings to an embattled individualism, shocked at the apparent depletion of individual agency. Rather than adopting a more compelling, structural theory of social control (such as one finds in Marxism or sociology more broadly), the conspiratorial model projects the ideal qualities of the individual – rationality, intentionality and self-control – onto the social order itself, eventually seeing it as a wilful and malevolent being: A ‘them’. Ironically, then, it is the frantic desire to theorise social regulation that pushes the conspiracy theorist to defend a set of concepts that cannot account for social regulation – except as a form of total and magical control (Melley 2000).

Perhaps no post-war American writer evinced this way of thinking more than William S. Burroughs, whose 18 novels and many essays relentlessly explore paranoia as a method for understanding and resisting social controls. For Burroughs, ‘nothing happens in this universe … unless some entity wills it to happen’ (1985a: 101). Burroughs adopts what he calls ‘the “so-called primitive” tendency’ (102) to blame all apparent accidents on a malicious agent. In this view, there are no accidents, everything is connected and apparent coincidences are really the result of wilful activity that is simply hidden to consciousness. The savvy individual must thus be attuned to the hidden structural connections between events. One of the perverse results of this view is that even trivial social events take on the qualities of plot, and motive seems to reside everywhere. ‘Take a walk around the block’, Burroughs suggests:

Come back and write down precisely what happened with particular attention to what you were thinking when you noticed a street sign, a passing car or stranger or whatever caught your attention. You will observe that what you were thinking just before you saw the sign relates to the sign. The sign may even complete a sentence in your mind. You are getting messages. Everything is talking to you.

(1985a: 103–4)
This paranoid logic reverses what Max Weber called the modern ‘disenchantment of the world’. If a street sign can complete one’s thoughts, then the agent who ‘thinks’ such thoughts is not a human being but a supra-human communication system that includes individuals and social structures. It is this view of eroded human agency that induces Burroughs’s perpetual sense of paranoia and panic. Indeed, Burroughs suggests that anyone engaging in his little exercise will ‘become paranoid’ (104) in a defensive attempt to ward off external control.

Burroughs’s alarm about external control derived partly from his lifelong struggle with heroin addiction and withdrawal, which was a major subject of his many novels, stories and essays. Burroughs’s characters are addicted not only to drugs, but also to commodities, images, words, human contact, power and even control itself. Burroughs understood addiction as a form of spiritual and bodily possession. ‘I live’, he wrote, ‘with the constant threat of possession, and a constant need to escape from possession, from Control’ (1985b: xxii). Burroughs explicitly rejected the Freudian notion that fears of possession and suspicion of coincidence are a projection of internal psychic content onto the world. In place of this modern, psychoanalytic understanding of suspicion, coincidence and control, he embraced a premodern understanding of demonic possession:

My concept of possession is closer to the medieval model than to modern psychological explanations, with their dogmatic insistence that such manifestations must come from within and never, never, never from without. (As if there were some clear-cut difference between inner and outer). I mean a definite possessing entity. And indeed, the psychological concept might well have been devised by the possessing entities, since nothing is more dangerous to a possessor than being seen as a separate invading creature by the host it has invaded.

(1985b: xix–xx)

Burroughs here suggests first that the difference between the inside and outside of persons is not clear-cut, but also that he is possessed and controlled by external agents. The ‘subject’, as a doctor puts it in The Soft Machine (1961), ‘is riddled with parasites’ (85). For Burroughs, who once worked as an exterminator, the idea of parasitism induced panic in which any sign of diminished voluntarity seems to indicate a complete transfer of agency from self to social order. ‘When it comes to bedbugs’, he writes, the ‘only thing is to fumigate’ (1973: 6).

Burroughs was in fact so worried about external possession that even his own thinking came to seem suspect, potentially hacked and controlled by outside influences. In response, he began to use a ‘cut-up technique’ adapted from the work of the artist Brion Gysin. In his essay ‘The Invisible Generation’ (1967), Burroughs explains this strategy of arbitrarily chopping up and reassembling passages as a method of resistance to social controls. The cut-up technique reintroduces the accidental into texts or even thoughts that might be controlled by external influences, thereby short-circuiting the power of social messages. The cut-up illustrates the hyper-individualist impulse of paranoia. While the technique’s dictum – ‘everybody splice himself in with everybody else’ – (212) generates a fragmented, postmodern subject, it does in order to defend the individual (and individualism itself) from social systems that even powerful humans have ‘no control over’.

Burroughs’s dread of external controls was extreme but hardly unique. Post-war American literature, observed Tony Tanner in 1971, was thick with ‘dread that someone else is patterning your life, that there are all sorts of invisible plots afoot to rob you of your autonomy of thought and action’. This view was expressed in both popular and sober scholarly forms. In 1950, the Yale sociologist David Riesman declared the formation of a new kind of ‘other-directed’
Conspiracy in American narrative

American subject, increasingly susceptible to external influences. In 1956, Don Siegel’s iconic film *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* literalised this notion and, over the next decades, American fiction began to depict all manner of ‘programmed’ and ‘brainwashed’ persons: Addicts, automats and ‘mass-produced’ figures (Riesman et al. 1950). Many post-war narratives depict characters who feel they are acting out parts in a script written by someone else, or who believe that their most individuating traits have been somehow produced from without. Thomas Pynchon’s Mucho Maas, of *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966: 104), becomes ‘less himself and more generic … a walking assembly of man’, and *Gravity’s Rainbow* is premised on the possibility that its protagonist’s sexual desire has been conditioned as part of a state-corporate espionage programme. In numerous novels, Margaret Atwood’s characters re-enact classically feminine behaviour, even though they know it is harmful and undesirable to them. In *Libra* (1988), Don DeLillo’s historical novel about the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, Lee Harvey Oswald feels that his participation in Kennedy’s murder has been scripted in advance by powerful forces beyond his control. An astonishing number of post-war novels concern figures who feel they must defend themselves against powerful and dangerous institutions – the corporatised military of Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22*, the ‘Astonist’ culture industry of Ishmael Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo*, the ‘combine’ of Ken Kesey’s *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, the vast network of state-corporate networks (‘Them’) in Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Margaret Atwood’s ‘men’, and the ‘priestly’ C.I.A. of Don DeLillo and Norman Mailer (see Knight 2000; Melley 2000; O’Donnell 2000). If such novels imagined frightening forms of institutional influence, they did so self-consciously, making paranoia and conspiracy explicit themes and matters of epistemological uncertainty. Mailer and Pynchon were, in the words of literary critic Frank Lentricchia (1991), the ‘shamans of the paranoid novel’ (205). They organised their narratives around political suspicion that ambitiously limned the forms of collusion between corporate and state power. They also mapped the spectrum of political suspicion, from consumerist zombification on one end to radical suspicion on the other. ‘Since the assassination of John F. Kennedy’, Mailer noted in 1992, ‘we have been marooned in one of two equally intolerable spiritual states, apathy or paranoia’. Pynchon relentlessly explored these rival ‘spiritual states’. His paranoid masterpieces, *V.* (1960), *The Crying of Lot 49* (1963) and *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973), cantered on self-proclaimed paranoids (Herbert Stencil of *V.* and Edward Pointsman of *Gravity’s Rainbow*), but also set their obsessive interpretive zeal into relief against the comic apathetic counterparts (*V*’s ‘human yo-yo’, Benny Profane, and Tyrone Slothrop of *Gravity’s Rainbow*). Pynchon’s work is most notable for its refusal to resolve the tension between these positions. His suspicious characters frequently believe they have stumbled upon a massive plot involving a vast social, communicative and economic network, but they are never able to confirm its existence. Still, they are willing to embrace paranoia as a way of apprehending a sublime array of social relations too complex to bring fully into view. Unlike the practitioners of the demonological ‘paranoid style’, then, Pynchon offered a form of suspicion at once grandiose and self-scrutinising. His ‘paranoia’ was a self-conscious approach to the problem of public knowledge in a regime of state secrecy and corporate capitalism (see Jameson 1990). Other sophisticated post-war novels also explored paranoia in a self-effacing way, emphasising interpretive uncertainty, the difficulty of confirming hidden connections. Margaret Atwood and others framed misogynist violence as a coordinated system of oppression rather than an endless series of unrelated attacks. In novels such as *Bodily Harm*, *The Edible Woman*, *Lady Oracle* and *Surfacing*, Atwood’s protagonists feel they are being stalked by a man (possibly their lovers). Although they are ultimately unable to determine who their stalkers are or whether they exist, Atwood suggests that their fears of being watched or hunted are a reasonable response to normal, heterosexual relationships. Indeed, the figure of the anonymous stalker allows Atwood to solve
a pressing theoretical problem: How to represent the immense system of institutions, discourses and practices that contribute to violence against women. Joan Didion, similarly, used her own experience as a register of larger social patterns and pressures. Her essay ‘The White Album’ (1979) recounts a personal breakdown she suffered amid growing anxiety in Vietnam-era Los Angeles. In the wake of grisly murders committed by Charles Manson and his gang, Los Angeles, she feels, has become a place where ‘all connections were equally meaningful, and equally senseless’. Her struggle to understand and explain how social events are related induces panic attacks that land her in a hospital. Didion describes her illness as ‘paranoia’, but it is too self-effacing to fit the clinical criteria for that term. It is better seen as a crisis of interpretation; a frustrating inability to account for outbursts of social violence that seem too patterned and meaningful to be merely ‘random’.

Along with Don DeLillo, Didion would become the most incisive literary diagnostician of the Cold War national security state. Her novels A Book of Common Prayer (1977), Democracy (1984) and The Last Thing He Wanted (1996) repeatedly returned to the problem of public knowledge in a regime of state secrecy. In each, a privileged American woman in a colonial setting is torn between relationships with a major public figure and a covert agent. Each novel is narrated by a savvy, cynical female journalist in the mould of Didion herself. As in ‘The White Album’, these narrators struggle to piece together the secret actions of the male clandestine agents in the novel, and thus they often narrate their own failure to tell the story they intended to tell. But, they also develop a form of cynical suspicion modelled on the thinking of clandestine agents. In Democracy, for example, the narrator describes the thinking of the novel’s C.I.A. officer:

To Jack Lovett, all behaviour was purposeful, and the purpose could be divined by whoever attracted the best information and read it most correctly. A Laotian village indicated on one map and omitted on another suggested not a reconnaissance oversight but a population annihilated…. A shipment of laser mirrors from Long Beach to a firm in Hong Kong that did no laser work suggested not a wrong invoice but a trans-shipment, reexport, the diversion of technology to unfriendly actors. All nations, to Jack Lovett, were ‘actors’, specifically ‘state actors’ (‘nonstate actors’ were the real wildcards here, but in Jack Lovett’s extensive experience the average nonstate actor was less interested in the laser mirrors than in M-16s, AK-47s, FN-FALs …).

(Didion 1984: 35)

Interestingly, Didion’s narrator shares this view. The apparent ‘unpredictability of human behaviour’, she declares, is an illusion. There is actually ‘a higher predictability …, a more complex pattern discernible only after the fact’ (205). This view is a version of William Burroughs’s proclamation that ‘nothing happens in this universe … unless some entity wills it to happen’ (1985a). Here, however, critical suspicion, or paranoia, is specifically harnessed to the problem of the secret security state. Citizens who are prohibited from knowing about state secrets must attempt to discern their signs in public information. A view that casts suspicion onto apparent accidents and discrepancies in the public record seems increasingly reasonable in a world where the state deliberately conceals its defence of the realm from the citizens of the republic.

**Periodising post-war paranoia**

The post-war American literature of paranoia marked a major shift in the cultural work of suspicion. Its flourishing in the late 1950s and early 1960s may seem to confirm Hofstadter’s sense
that an age-old form of demonological suspicion was in full resurgence (see Butter 2014). But, it is essential to note how strikingly different the post-war literature of paranoia is from Hofstadter’s ‘paranoid style’. For Hofstadter, the paranoid style is marked by a sense of grievance and ‘persecution’ (1965: 4); a defensive resistance to disconfirmation (or ‘falsifiability’ as Karl Popper called it); a pedantic quality in which an ‘elaborate concern with demonstration’ and ‘heroic strivings for “evidence”’ (36) compensate for the conspiracy’s power to hide its activities; and, finally, a faulty sense of historical causality. ‘What distinguishes the paranoid style’, says Hofstadter, is the absence of an ‘intuitive sense of how things do not happen’ (40).

But, there is a more important, unstated component of Hofstadter’s paranoid style: It is fundamentally melodramatic. Melodrama is often misunderstood as a sentimental populist genre. But, as Linda Williams (2018) has persuasively argued, melodrama is the dominant narrative form of our age (see also Anker 2014). It is not a genre, it is a mode, like tragedy or comedy. It, in fact, replaced the fated structure of tragedy with a Manichean ethical framework that pits dastardly villains against innocent victims and selfless heroes. It revolves around a ‘morally legible’ sense of good and evil, stock villains, victims and heroes, a nostalgic sense of the past and a breathless pace that heightens the need for urgent heroic action.

It is critically important to distinguish the melodramatic demonology of Hofstadter’s ‘paranoid style’ from what I have been calling the post-Kennedy-era ‘literature of paranoia’. The latter body of work is notably unmelodramatic. In sharp contradistinction to the quasi-religious conviction of the Cold War ‘paranoid style’, the post-war ‘literature of paranoia’ is self-aware, tolerant of unknowing and morally complex. Unlike the wide-eyed true believers of the paranoid style, authors such as DeLillo, Didion, Mailer and Reed meditate on the problem of suspicion, frequently interrupting and questioning their own narratives. Didion repeatedly suggests that she lacks the strength or moral clarity to craft a narrative. Pynchon and Burroughs undermine not only the notion of the hero but of individuality itself. They treat cells, organs and physical objects as characters. The protagonist of Pynchon’s Gravity’s Rainbow literally and physically disintegrates across Europe. Sophisticated paranoid film thrillers like The Conversation and The Parallax View moved away from melodramatic conventions to a more sublime and terrifying sense of an institutional power that can never fully be grasped. The confident and terrifying conspiratorial allegations of the paranoid style can usefully be contrasted to Don DeLillo’s decidedly unmelodramatic conception of a possible conspiracy against President Kennedy:

If we are on the outside, we assume a conspiracy is the perfect working of a scheme…. 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…. But maybe not. Nicholas Branch thinks … that the conspiracy against the president was a rambling affair that succeeded in the short term mainly due to chance.

(DeLillo 1988: 440)

In Libra, DeLillo suggests that both a lone gunman and a small group of conspirators independently planned Kennedy’s assassination, and that both sets of plans changed multiple times for a variety of reasons, including individual motives, accidents and human failings. DeLillo resists the melodramatic notion of a ‘vast’ and diabolical cabal executed by a monolithic organisation – the mafia, the K.G.B., the C.I.A. – but also resists the notion that we should accept the official state
explanation – that Kennedy was killed solely by Lee Harvey Oswald and that suspicions to the contrary must be dismissed as mere conspiracy theories.

In emphasising these examples, I do not mean to suggest that popular melodrama, including demonological melodrama, disappeared in the years after 1960. On the contrary, it continued to be a remarkably salient aspect of contemporary culture. But, even the conspiracy melodrama changed markedly in the 1960s and 1970s. While the demonological tradition emphasised foreign plots, post-war U.S. conspiracy melodrama increasingly depicted malfeasance by the U.S. government and Western corporations. As James Fulcher (1983) notes, the 1970s saw the development of a ‘formula’ conspiracy novel in which events themselves:

Are manipulated and staged by other characters deliberately to violate the protagonist’s sense of the way things are. Indeed, what often causes the protagonist to lose trust is that the incidents are staged by members of the American government to conceal the way things are from the protagonist and, for that matter, the American public.

(Fulcher 1983: 153–4)


The rise of such narratives marked a major shift in both Cold War ideology and American conspiracy discourse. This shift occurred shortly after the 1963 assassination of John F. Kennedy. The Kennedy assassination not only marked the end of a heroic Camelot narrative about the young president but the birth of a substantial new body of conspiracy theories promulgated not by tin-foil-hat-wearing gadflies but by journalists and academics of some reputation and stature. Over the next 15 years, an astonishing outpouring of discourse critical of the excesses of the U.S. national security state and the handling of the official investigation into Kennedy’s death raised troubling questions about a possible conspiracy to kill the president and/or to cover up state malfeasance. Soon, the assassination became a prominent public event that was routinely understood through rival ‘lone gunman’ and ‘conspiracy theories’. The year of Hofstadter’s ‘Paranoid Style’ and the Warren Commission Report into the assassination of John F. Kennedy, 1964, was also marked by the publication of mainstream journalistic critiques of the national security state, chief among them Thomas Wise and David Ross’s *The Invisible Government* (1964). It was also the year in which Stanley Kubrick’s *Dr Strangelove* savagely satirised the security state and the logic of Cold War demonology. It was, in short, a historical pivot point in culture of the Cold War, one in which American conspiracy discourse shifted away from the McCarthyite ‘demonology’ of international enemies and toward the critique of state and corporate power. One of the great ironies of Hofstadter’s essay is that all of his major examples of the paranoid style concern external threats to the nation – the Masons, the Illuminati, communists – and yet, almost the moment the essay was published, the emphasis of American conspiracy theories shifted to internal enemies and plots. The most salient and durable American conspiracy theories since 1964 are about the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the Apollo moon landings, alleged U.F.O. cover-ups around Area 51 and the attacks of 9/11. All express suspicion about the deceptions and powers of the U.S. security state.

It is important to note that this fundamental change in the nature of American conspiracy discourse coincided precisely with the discursive ‘invention’ of conspiracy theory – that is, the
Conspiracy in American narrative

claim that 'conspiracy theory' and 'the paranoid style' are a recognisable, aberrant and pathological form of political discourse. While the form of thinking we now call 'conspiracy theory' is quite old, the notion that it constitutes an identifiable cognitive error ('conspiracy theory') is relatively new, dating roughly to Popper's use of the term in 1945. It is particularly notable that Hofstadter delivered 'The Paranoid Style' as a lecture at Oxford literally on the eve of Kennedy's murder. As a Google N-gram shows, the phrase 'conspiracy theory' came into widespread usage during the years between Popper's *Open Society* (1945) and 1972. Its use surged amid debate over the *Warren Commission Report on the Assassination of John F. Kennedy*, which was published in 1964, two months before 'The Paranoid Style' appeared in *Harper's Magazine* (see McKenzie-McHarg 2019). In the ensuing decade, a vibrant cultural debate about Kennedy's murder would repeatedly frame the case as a contest between the 'lone gunman theory' and various 'conspiracy theories'.

In the decades leading up to Kennedy's murder, a number of other American sociologists and historians — including Daniel Bell, Seymour Lipset, Talcott Parsons and Edward Shils — preceeded Hofstadter in expressing concern about Cold War-era conspiracy mongering. The stakes seemed high during the Cold War for maintaining an idealised account of the U.S. public sphere as a model of rationality, openness and transparency. Paradoxically, as Shils brilliantly observed in *The Torment of Secrecy* (1956: 77), it was this American ideal of transparency and openness that made Americans overreact to the 'threat of secret machinations'. The 'paranoid style' was one such overreaction. During the rise of Senator Joseph McCarthy and then, later, Senator Barry Goldwater, stamping out this form of demonological excess seemed a reasonable way of protecting democratic institutions.

But, beginning in the 1960s, the national security state itself began to seem an even larger overreaction. 1964 was the year in which two prominent investigative reporters, Thomas Wise and David Ross, published their prominent critique, *The Invisible Government*, warning that the U.S. had established a parallel secret state headed by an out-of-control C.I.A. committed to undemocratic political manipulation around the world. A wave of embarrassing public disclosures soon followed, suggesting that the C.I.A. and U.S. military planners were out of control, routinely lying to the American public, which learned in turn that the U.S. had planned a massive false flag operation at the Bay of Pigs in Cuba, that widespread suspicions and inconsistencies haunted the assassination of President Kennedy, that the U.S. military had produced a massive study (the 'Pentagon Papers') showing that the Vietnam War was strategically flawed and doomed to failure, that President Nixon had ordered C.I.A. operatives to steal campaign information from his rivals and so on. In short, the early 1960s marked an inflection point in Cold War history. A growing number of intellectuals, mainstream journalists and thought leaders began to question the notion of 'total cold war', raising concerns that state secrecy had gone too far, seriously undermining democratic rule. During this period, the public grew increasingly concerned about a massive and growing national security apparatus charged with the conduct of covert operations, propaganda and psychological operations around the world. What had begun as a small exception to democratic oversight in 1947, when the C.I.A. received its charter, would grow by 2010 to a vast clandestine apparatus: 17 intelligence agencies, 28 other federal agencies, 1271 sub-bureaus, costing $75 billion per year. A primary function of this apparatus was what might be called 'conspiracy theory': The security state was expected to suspect, describe and stop plots against the state. However, its growing capacity for official suspicion also stimulated public suspicion about its activities. Ironically, then, just as Hofstadter succeeded in delegitimising conspiratorial explanation, the American public began to grow anxious about an 'invisible government', the critique of which would require the form of suspicion cast into doubt by Hofstadter's critique of the paranoid style. It is no accident that U.S.
Cultural narratives of suspicion changed character radically around the time Hofstadter published his essay. The dominant post-war American conspiracy theories express anxiety about the deceptions and powers of the U.S. security state.

Conclusion

The post-war literature of paranoia addressed two crucial intellectual problems of the Cold War era. The first was an epistemological problem, a sense that it had become difficult to know what is real and true in the world. The other was a problem of agency, a sense that complex institutions and forces might manipulate and control individual action and thought. In facing both of these challenges, the literature of paranoia resisted the melodrama of the ‘paranoid style’. It used paranoid suspicion not as a demonological tool but as a way of imagining individual resistance to corporate and collective pressures. Heller’s ‘paranoid’ bombardier, Yossarian, stays alive in part because he believes that ‘everyone’ is trying to kill him, an overtly paranoid view that seems increasingly sound as *Catch-22* unfolds. The hackers of William Gibson’s novels recognise forms of state and corporate disinformation and redeploy them for their own purposes. Ishmael Reed’s satire of conspiracy theories, *Mumbo Jumbo*, reveals the systemic racism connecting what are often said to be shameful historical episodes.

The post-war literature of conspiracy and paranoia, in other words, was driven by a sense that knowledge and power are inextricably linked, and that to be ‘paranoid’ means rejecting the normalising ideology of the powerful. In this sort of regime, cynical reason flourishes. Everyone assumes that the game is rigged, that ‘They’, whoever ‘They’ are, are keeping something from us and there’s little to be done. Is it any wonder that so many leading American literary figures made paranoia and conspiracy central to their work?

Notes

1 See Knight (2017) for a compelling account of *The Octopus* in relation to conspiracy.
2 Projection, according to Freud, is ‘the most striking characteristic of symptom-formation of paranoia’ (1911: 66).
3 Popper also clearly felt that this sort of historical interpretation was resistant to ‘falsifiability’ – the criterion at the heart of Popper’s programme for distinguishing science from pseudoscience.
4 Tanner observes that, ‘since the Cold War, a large number of Americans have come to regard society as some kind of vast conspiracy’ (1971: 427).
5 Jameson argues that conspiracy theory is a crude attempt to map the structure of late capitalism.
7 As McKenzie-Mcharg (2019) shows, the term ‘conspiracy theory’ has a much older history, notably in nineteenth-century legal discourse. My claim is that the contemporary popular notion of ‘conspiracy theory’ as a categorical form of irrational thought was established after the Second World War.

References

Conspiracy in American narrative


439


