The Channel

Department of English Undergraduate Journal

McGill University

Edited by

Michael Anders

&

Sophie Semeniuk

The Channel

The Department of English Undergraduate Journal
McGill University

Edited by Michael Anders and Sophie Semeniuk

Contents

Letter from the Editors

To commemorate the fifteenth edition of *The Channel* this special edition was conceived as a place where Honours students at McGill and beyond could see their hard work in print. After receiving submissions from students throughout North America, from some of the best universities in the world, the result is something special. We're proud to include two excellent pieces by McGill students—Cedar MacDonald You's analysis of the systems novel in postwar American prose and Haider Ali's breakdown of Brown Romanticism—as well as Helen Halliwell's work on the role of attention in John Clare's poetry, done at the University of California, Berkeley, and Andrew Basile's work on free indirect discourse, done at the University of Pennsylvania.

For sixteen years, we've been publishing some of the best work being written by undergraduates at McGill; being able to say that we've published some of the best work by undergraduates anywhere is an enormous honour. We'd like to express our sincerest thanks to the professors across many universities who made it possible to receive these submissions, the excellent team who have made the last two years so rewarding, and, of course, the authors themselves.

Michael Anders and Sophie Semeniuk

The Systems Novel: Cybernetics, Systems Theory, Paranoia, and Conspiracy in Pynchon and DeLillo

by Cedar MacDonald You
McGill University

To read a text is to be engaged in a system. To make sense of a text, a reader must be able to connect a network of various points which form a whole greater than the sum of its parts to form meaning. There is not just one system involved in reading: there is the system of letters forming words, the system of words forming sentences, sentences forming chapters and plots, and so forth. The reader is also a part of the system, for they must know the words, sounds, and rules of grammar in order to interpret the meaning of the larger system through understanding the constituent parts that comprise it, whether that larger system be a sentence or a novel. In this way, every novel ever written can be thought of as a sort of system. This paper focuses on three novels that are aware of their own systemic qualities: *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity's Rainbow* by Thomas Pynchon, and *Libra* by Don DeLillo. These three novels are examples the "systems novel," a loosely configured genre in postwar American fiction.

       The systems novel is not only concerned with systems of language, but a multitude of systems found everywhere: systems of control, economic systems, communication systems, biological systems, military systems,

social systems, systems of physics, information systems, political systems, and cybernetics. Tom LeClair, who coined the term "systems novelist" (xii) to refer to the works of Pynchon and DeLillo, as well as William Gaddis and Robert Coover, links the novels explicitly with systems theory and cybernetics. LeClair, writing specifically about DeLillo but with an eye on the systems novel generally, argues that its "orientation toward the world, as well as toward fiction, is influenced by and parallels the ideas of "systems theory," a contemporary scientific paradigm that concentrates on the reciprocal—looping—communications of ecological systems (including man)" (xi). Cybernetics and systems theories are ways of understanding how systems operate as systems, rather than as the individual nodes which comprise those systems. They are theories of systems in general, and they can be applied to disparate fields, so long as they are understood in terms of their systemic structure. The systems novelists think in these terms; they consider the emergent properties of the system as a whole—the things that make a system greater than the sum of its parts.

At the most basic level, systems are "complexes of elements standing in interaction" (Von Bertalanffy, *General System Theory; Foundations, Development, Applications* 33). According to this definition, a system is an organizational architecture for understanding connected elements and their gestalt qualities. A system is made up of constituent parts that are connected, in some way, shape, or form, to create a larger unit of organization. This larger, more complex unit of analysis allows those who study the system a better understanding of its structure, function, and emergent properties that would not be easily understood if the constituent parts were examined in isolation. This notion of system is, of course, a very broad definition. A system, depending on the units that one analyses, can be anything from a grouping of molecules arranged in such a way that they form a cell, or a grouping of cells arranged in such a way that they form a person, or a grouping of people arranged in such a way that they form a society. Almost everything can be thought of as a system in one form or another, but the

Systems and Paranoia in *The Crying of Lot 49*

The America that Pynchon depicts in *The Crying of Lot 49* is little more than a series of complex, interlocking systems. They are legal systems, systems of communication and control, transportation and logistics, meaning and belief, haunting and paranoia. The various systems in the novel operate in the background of the narrative action; they function as a systematic and regulated backdrop to what seems on the surface a wildly disorganized and disjunctive narrative. Systems manifest themselves as a series of loosely connected coincidences that all seem to point to some sort of massive, all-encompassing conspiracy known as "the Tristero system." In this section, I will argue that the systems in *The Crying of Lot 49* are unstable semiotic systems of representation and meaning creation that haunt Oedipa. These systems constitute a simulacrum: they become signifiers without signified, communications without meaning. The instability of meaning in communication, and the haunting quality of these systems breed a paranoid mode of reading—the hermeneutics of suspicion morphs into a hermeneutics of paranoia.

Primary among the overlapping systems in *The Crying of Lot 49* is the legal will. The novel opens with Oedipa being named executrix of "the estate of one Pierce Inverarity, a California real estate mogul who … had assets numerous enough to make the job of sorting it all out more than honorary" (1). A legal will is a way of enacting the will of a person on others from beyond the grave. It is a rigid systemization, like a computer program that is executed when a person dies. When Oedipa is named executrix, it is as if the will as a program begins to execute, like a morbid spark that sets off a Rube Goldberg machine. While the novel never explicitly describes the contents of Pierce's will, it does imply that the entire plot of the novel is itself the execution of it. Oedipa is experiencing a world that seems, on the surface, to consist of discrete, random events, but just behind the façade a system connects everything. When she meets with her ostensible co-executor, Metzger, he sees things on the television and constantly remarks, "Inverarity

owned that too" (26). The long invisible tendrils of the Inverarity estate reach, throughout the novel, to every interaction, location, and symbol. The legal will both sets in motion the plot of the novel and remains a logical structure that connects the disparate episodes of the novel.

A will is a both a legal and representational system. It is like a corporation, in the sense of the Latin root word corporāre, meaning "to form into a body" (OED); a will incorporates property and other people into a systematized legal entity that becomes a legal person, though that personhood is merely a legal fiction rather than a physical body. It is an incorporeal corporate person. A will also works like a semiotic sign. That is, it signifies and represents a thing that it is not, namely a person. A dead person's will is a representation of a thing that no longer exists, and so the thing that was represented only exists insofar as the representation of it. The will becomes a person distilled into a system. This is reminiscent of Hobbesian personation, where "a *person*, is the same that an *actor* is...and to *personate*, is to *act* or *represent* himself or another" (Hobbes and Gaskin 106-07). Pierce becomes a sort of Hobbesian artificial person who is represented by Oedipa. She is the Hobbesian *actor*, whose "words and actions [are] owned by those whom they represent" (107), and Pierce is the *author*, who "owneth his words and actions" (107). The problem is that Pierce no longer exists; he dies before the novel begins. Oedipa is a representative who does not represent anything. Pierce is a person who exists only through remnants, systems, and other people, in other words a personation with no person or a corporation with no *corpus*.

In *The Crying of Lot 49*, the representational and semiotic order is inverted. The personation of Pierce is not created by him; rather, it creates him. Jean Baudrillard opens his book *Simulation and Simulacra* with reference to the "Borges fable" (Baudrillard 1) titled "On Exactitude in Science," where cartographers create "a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it" (Borges and Hurley 160). For Baudrillard the map in this fable illustrates what a simulation is and helps distinguish simulation from simulacra:

> Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory — *precession of simulacra* — that engenders the territory, and if one must return to the fable, today it is the territory whose shreds slowly rot across the extent of the map. It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges persist here and there in the deserts. (Baudrillard 1)

The map becomes more real than reality, and the simulation loses what it originally simulated to become a simulacrum. Reality itself begins to decay and is replaced by this self-perpetuating simulacrum.

Pierce is a Baudrillardian simulacrum of a person. There seems to be no "real" Pierce, outside of fictions, representations, and symbols. No information about how he dies is offered, but Oedipa speculates that he might have been "crushed by the only ikon in the house," the "whitewashed bust of Jay Gould that Pierce kept over the bed" (Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* 1). The possibility that he was literally crushed by a bust of a Gilded Age American business magnate, described as an "Ikon," illustrates the supremacy of the symbolic over the real. These businessmen do not exist as real people. They have no bodies, no personalities; they are abstractions, symbols, "Ikons." The only real description of Pierce appears when Oedipa receives a phone call, and he is no more than a disembodied voice speaking over the telephone, doing different caricatures and impressions, never speaking in his own voice (2-3). He literally has no apparent body or personality and exists in reality only through the representations of him in the form of businesses, roads and infrastructure, university endowments, collections and holdings — in short, capital. It is this representation that is hyperreal. Pierce's capital is a map showing glimpses of what once was a real person.

The fictional Southern California town of San Narciso is the prime example of the simulacrum of Pierce Inverarity. It is, for Oedipa,

> less an identifiable city than a grouping of concepts — census tracts, special purpose bond-issue districts, shopping nuclei, all overlaid with access roads to its own freeway. But it had been Pierce's domicile, and headquarters: the place he'd begun his land speculating in ten years ago, and so put down the plinth course of capital on which everything

afterward had been built, however rickety or grotesque, toward the sky; and that, she supposed, would set the spot apart, give it an aura. (Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* 13)

It is a system of concepts, capital, and of other systems, all connected by communications and infrastructural networks. More importantly, this system of concepts and capital is a representation of Pierce. She supposes that it contains his aura, which it does insofar as it is a physical manifestation of his person in the form of capital. Near the end of the novel Mike Fallopian suggests that every inexplicable coincidence and strange occurrence to do with San Narciso and Tristero that Oedipa has been experiencing is an elaborate hoax concocted by Pierce, "maybe something Inverarity set up before he died" (138). She initially rejects this suggestion but then takes it more seriously. Looking at the list of Inverarity's assets, she notes that "the whole shopping center that housed Zapf's Used Books and Tremaine's surplus place had been owned by Pierce. Not only that but the Tank Theater, also" (140). In fact, she discovers that "every access route to the Tristero could be traced back to the Inverarity estate. Even Emory Bortz ... taught now at San Narciso College, heavily endowed by the dead man" (140). She has, as it turns out, been living in a simulacrum of the Pierce Inverarity estate under the will of a dead man. It is his capital, his social relations that live on, like a systematized ghost, haunting her through symbolic communication, driving her to paranoia.

Pierce, and systems in *Lot 49* more generally, are hauntological ghosts. Derrida asks "What is a ghost? What is the *effectivity* or the *presence* of a specter, that is, of what seems to remain as ineffective, virtual, insubstantial as a simulacrum?" (Derrida, *Specters of Marx* 10) and answers himself by coining the term "hauntology" (10), a portmanteau of "haunting" and "ontology"; by this term, Derrida means something that, by the nature of its being, is recursive and haunting. The Inverarity estate is exactly a hauntological specter. Derrida argues that this sort of specter "begins by coming back," in the same way that this novel begins with Pierce coming back to haunt Oedipa. All of the systems in *Lot 49* are these sorts of historical specters, they are designed to be in a constant state of sustaining themselves by constantly returning; they are self-perpetuating hauntological systems.

The Tristero system and the system of Pierce's will are both haunting inherited systems of communication. Oedipa is able to divine that Tristero organization was founded by one Hernando Joaquin de Tristero y Calavera, who claims to be the rightful heir to the Thurn and Taxis postal monopoly and Grand Master title, and who "styled himself El Desheredado, The Disinherited" (132). Both Pierce and Tristero are the remnants of dead people still kept alive through the process of signification and representation, still communicating into the future. In a way, these systems represent ways of communing with the dead. Pierce is represented by his estate, the capital that he accumulated and the physical manifestations of his capital in the world, which take the form of businesses, towns, and various possessions. Tristero is a representation of a long dead, disinherited man, whose legacy is to reclaim his lost property, despite his inability to enjoy it. They are both ghosts of communication systems, power, and intrigue. It seems that Pierce somehow controls systems and communication in San Narciso in the same way that Tristero controlled communications in Europe. This is a supreme power: "whoever could control the lines of communication, among all these princes, would control them" (135). Communication, or the links between objects in a system, give powers of control and communication to the dead.

These haunting systems are modes of communication and the creation of meaning. Southern California is at one point compared to a circuit board, with the "ordered swirl of houses and streets" (14) being analogous to the transistors and circuits of a radio. For Oedipa, "there were to both outward patterns a hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning, of an intent to communicate" (14). All these systems in the novel represent some sort of attempt to communicate, but the meaning is concealed behind this hieroglyph of patterns or signs. These signs and patterns are systems of communication. Language itself must be thought of as a system of hieroglyphs that conceal meaning. Language is the prerequisite system of communication that allows for the reader's interpretation of the text. This is the language as "system of signs" (Saussure et al. 16) described in structural linguistics and semiotics.

A structural understanding of language, as pioneered by Ferdinand de Saussure, posits language (langue) as a structured system of conventional signs. Language uses a system of arbitrary signs that consist of signifier and signified (the relationship of which is termed a "sign") to form meaning through the system (Saussure et al. 67). It is, essentially, one of the hieroglyphs that Oedipa describes. A sign acquires its meaning by virtue of being different from every other sign in the language system. Later critics of Saussure, such as Derrida, contend that the system of language is not so clearly able to produce meaning. Derrida argues that a structure, by virtue of being a structure, attempts to limit "play" (Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" 352), but also that "By orienting and organizing the coherence of the system, the center of a structure permits the play of its elements inside the total form" (352). Systems or structures, due to the fact that they are organized in some way, necessarily have some kind of organizing principle, and this principle can allow for the change, or "play" of meaning within the system.

Derridean "play" creates problems of interpretation in systems of meaning. Oedipa spends much of the novel working on exegesis of the "*The Courier's Tragedy*" (*The Crying of Lot 49* 49) and its relation to the shadowy Tristero system. The fictional puritan sect that Pynchon invents to explain changing the text of *The Courier's Tragedy* (49), the Scurvhamites, think of "Creation" as "a vast, intricate machine" (128). Professor Emory Bortz explains to Oedipa that the Scurvhamites change the text of the play to include references to Tristero for moral reasons: "They were not fond of the theater. It was their way of putting the play entirely away from them, into hell. What better way to damn it eternally than to change the actual words. Remember that Puritans were utterly devoted, like literary critics, to the Word" (128). By shifting the meaning of the play, they create "play" in the system of language. The problems of interpretation inherent in language, the shifting of the signified under the signifier, or the instability of the text both destroy meaning and creates an opportunity for interpretation. In this sense, there is "play" in the system.

In *Lot 49* all systems of communication seem to be flawed, or at least predicated on pure belief in the possibility of interpretation. A prominent motif throughout *The Crying of Lot 49* is the connection between Maxwell's demon—a thought experiment derived from the work of James Clerk Maxwell in which an agent (the "demon") opens and closes a gate between two closed sections that have particles moving at different speeds, only opening the gate for the faster moving ones, and letting the slower moving ones bounce off the door, thereby theoretically reducing entropy in the system, and violating the second law of thermodynamics — and the possibility of communication through information systems.

John Nefastis, a mad Berkeley scientist, invents a literal version of Maxwell's demon in the form of a box. He uses a metaphor of entropy to connect it to information: "entropy is a figure of speech" that "connects the world of thermodynamics to the world of information flow" (85). It remains unclear if Nefastis' device really works; it straddles the line between metaphor, invention, and religious belief. It can only operated by certain people called "sensitives," to whom the demon passes his data and who "must receive that staggering set of energies, and feed back something like the same quantity of information" (84-85) in order to move a piston. Oedipa must communicate with the system, but it requires a certain level of belief, which she seems not to have. She thinks she notices the piston move, but doubts herself: "She had seen only a retinal twitch, a misfired nerve cell. Did the true sensitive see more?" (86). She decides that Nefastis is a hack and that "the true sensitive is the one that can share in the man's hallucinations, that's all" (86). She begins to distrust the process of communication and information flow generally. Distrust in symbolic and abstract systems of communication drives Oedipa to become a paranoid interpreter. What I will call the hermeneutics of paranoia might be understood as an extreme form of what Paul Ricœur called the hermeneutics of suspicion. Ricœur describes the mode of reading he finds in Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud as the "School of Suspicion" (Ricœur and Savage 32), not meaning a philosophical skepticism, but an orientation towards the whole of historical consciousness as a "false consciousness" (33).

For Ricœur these thinkers embody a hermeneutics of suspicion, or a reading of everything as not exactly what it seems: "truth as lying" (32). For example, a Marxist understands a chair as not merely a chair, but as a representation of human labour power expended on raw materials that comes together in the form of a chair. Oedipa employs this mode of reading at an extreme level with a paranoid bent. Not only is truth a lie, but everyone and everything is read as possibly conspiring against her. Reading the symbols of the haunting background systems, she begins to distrust and form a radical hermeneutics of paranoia. The town of San Narciso, her therapist, her husband, random strangers met in bars—all are possibly tied to the conspiracy behind everything. Her inability to communicate the gravity of this conspiracy drives her further into paranoia; she becomes the only one who sees everything.

In an essay titled "Hermeneutics of Suspicion and Postmodern Paranoia," Linda Fisher connects the hermeneutics of suspicion with a paranoid disposition:

> On the one hand, the paranoid manifests an attitude of contempt towards and mistrust of superiors and authority generally. On the other hand, this undermining of authority is answered by the paranoid's insistence that his or her interpretation of events is the interpretation. In other words, the paranoid becomes the only acceptable authority. (Fisher 108)

Oedipa becomes the only acceptable authority on interpretation because she is unable to communicate her experiences to anyone else, and so the clues leading to the Tristero system are left solely to her to interpret. When she tries to communicate her interpretations to reaffirm or dispel them, she is rebuffed, either by sheer coincidence or by possible conspiracy. Driblette for instance, the director of the *The Courier's Tragedy* who decided to add lines about Tristero, mysteriously walks into the ocean. This suspicious death is portrayed as a barrier to communication: "Driblette, she called. The signal echoing down twisted miles of brain circuitry. Driblette! But as with Maxwell's Demon, so now. Either she could not communicate, or he did not exist" (Pynchon *The Crying of Lot 49* 134). No one but Oedipa seems to see evidence of the systems, or if they do, they refuse to tell her. The systems haunt her and her alone.

Every character she tries to communicate with regarding systems becomes unreachable. Her husband, Mucho, takes too much acid and begins understanding all sound as the different frequencies that make it up. Metzger, who was never all that helpful, runs off with a sixteen-year-old. In pure desperation to communicate, Oedipa reaches out to the man from Inamorati Anonymous for a straight answer, but he only answers that "it's too late" (146). Oedipa assumes that he means it is too late for her, when he likely means it is literally too late at night for her to be calling and hangs up. Her paranoid mode of reading becomes its own sort of interpretive system, everything seems connected to the conspiracy so everything must be read as connected to it. Her failure to communicate about the conspiracy with anyone drives her into a lonely subjectivity, where she becomes the only interpretive authority trying, alone, to make sense of the external world.

It is very common for a paranoiac to refer to something controlling everything, some sort of cabal or person who is behind the scenes, pulling all the strings, bearing the pronoun "They." Throughout *The Crying of Lot 49*, "They" is capitalized. It is supposed that the reader is familiar with who or what is being referred to, but in fact it is a paranoid placeholder, a pronoun that only refers to something nebulous. In a passage where Oedipa considers both the possibility that there exists a real conspiracy and the possibility that she is simply a paranoiac, she thinks "Either way, they'll call it paranoia. They." (140). The paranoid "They" does not refer to any particular group of people, but the systems of communication, control, interpretation, and capital just beyond view. The systems of meaning that determine what communication is paranoid rambling, and what is truth. "They" refers to the "Scurvhamite's blind, automatic anti-god" as a system (136), or to "somebody up there" (17) who seems to invisibly control Oedipa's actions. It points to a conspiracy of the inscrutable, shifting systems of communication and control that are characteristic modern life, particularly in America. The simulacrum of Pierce Inverarity, the hauntological system he leaves behind, has "no boundaries" (147); it is America itself. He "[survives] death, as a paranoia; as a pure conspiracy against someone he loved" (148). The Tristero system is

15

exactly like Pierce's will, it is the "secular miracle of communication" (149), the invisible system that haunts and governs all. The tragedy of The Crying of Lot 49 is these conspiratorial systems might not exist, might only be the hallucinations of a paranoiac:

> Another mode of meaning behind the obvious, or none. Either Oedipa in the orbiting ecstasy of a true paranoia, or a real Tristero. For there either was some Tristero beyond the appearance of the legacy America, or there was just America and if there was just America then it seemed the only was [sic] she could continue, and manage to be at all relevant to it, was as an alien, unfurrowed, assumed full circle into some paranoia (150-151).

Tristero might really exist, or Pierce might really have set up a conspiracy against her, but they are nebulous, distant, and intangible. The systems can only be grasped at, groped for, but never fully understood. Communication is not stable enough. What remains is a hermeneutic interpretation that drives readers to paranoia.

The Inverarity estate and the Tristero system are all-encompassing systems that only manifest as symbols, objects, and coincidences to haunt Oedipa. They are semiotic systems, like language itself, that operate on the basis of the so-called secular miracle—communication—and propel themselves forward autonomously, requiring constant interpretation. But these hauntological ghosts, these remnants of dead men and past eras, these systems, cannot be interpreted so easily. Their meanings shift over time, symbols change, words are replaced, and so the signs and symbols of a system lose meaning and become nothing but haunting simulacra of a real that might never have existed in the first place. The conscious subject, Oedipa, haunted by these empty systems of meaning still tries to find the lost meaning, read the meaningless symbols, and interpret them. All she finds is the systems themselves, the empty structures of the simulacra taunting her with their nebulous connections and glimpses of an underlying signified that is no longer there. Her attempt to read in a hermeneutics of suspicion—for a truth behind the lying—leads to paranoia. Finding nothing is only evidence of a conspiracy. Something, someone, "They," must be behind all this.

All these meaningless symbols and haunting systems that govern American life must have some hidden purpose, there must be some conspiracy. But really there is not. There is nothing but the systems themselves.

Systems and Cybernetics in *Gravity's Rainbow*

Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* is a novel modeled on rockets. The title refers to the parabolic arc of a V₂ rocket, and the novel obsesses over rockets and rocketry. *Gravity's Rainbow* is itself structured something like a rocket—or a bomb. It is a tightly packed, highly engineered closed system, that expands outwards like a blast radius. In this case, the blast radius of that bomb is the entire world-system: the novel totalizes the world. Whereas in *The Crying of Lot 49* the systems behind the normal operations of the world remain hidden, in *Gravity's Rainbow* they sit front and center. The novel deals with many of the same sorts of problems — systems, paranoia, capital — but the stakes, the stage, and the gravitas are all elevated to epic proportions. The novel depicts systems, is structured like a system, and itself forms a cybernetic system with the reader. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, everything becomes systematized, from war, to politics, to psychology, physiology, hermeneutics, dreams, paranoia, and of course, rocketry. This section will look at the variety of systems in *Gravity's Rainbow*, particularly through the lens of cybernetics, and show how these systems expand outwards from part to whole. In this paradigm, the contents of the novel, the novel itself, and even the reader are parts of a vast systemic process. Despite the totalizing nature of the systems in *Gravity's Rainbow*, the ultimate output of the system is the rejection and destruction of those very systems themselves; the rocket explodes on impact.

It will be useful, before we delve into the systems of *Gravity's Rainbow*, to have an understanding of cybernetics and systems theory. Cybernetics is a field pioneered, in large part, by Norbert Weiner who popularized the term in his 1948 book *Cybernetics or, Control and Communications in the Animal and the Machine*. The field of cybernetics is a multidisciplinary one; it deals with mathematics, statistics, biology, neurology, mechanics, physics, sociology, and others. The

main aim is the study of control systems, particularly regarding circular processes or negative feedback loops. A useful way for understanding the basic principles of cybernetics can be found in the name itself. Weiner writes:

> We have decided to call the entire field of control and communication theory, whether in the machine or in the animal, by the name Cybernetics, which we form from the Greek [for] steersman. In choosing this term, we wish to recognize that the first significant paper on feedback mechanisms is an article on governors, which was published by Clerk Maxwell[1] in 1868, and that governor is derived from a Latin corruption of [the original Greek]. We also wish to refer to the fact that the steering engines of a ship are indeed one of the earliest and best-developed forms of feedback mechanisms. (12)

The name "cybernetics" (the Greek transliterates as *kubernētēs*) is itself derived from a control system: that of the steersman and the ship. The steersman and the ship are a self-correcting feedback loop that can be analyzed as a system unto itself. The steersman sets a course for the ship, his hand on the rudder and his eyes set on a point on the horizon. He auto-corrects for natural factors such as wind and current to keep the ship on course. For the cyberneticist, the steersman and the ship work as a control system to produce the outcome of staying on course. The negative feedback loop of the steersman correcting the course of the ship as it is altered by external parameters constitutes a system of control, with predictable outcomes. Cybernetics, from its systems-based point of view, forms its own systems ontology. Peter Galison traces this development from the origin of cybernetics—Weiner's work on anti-aircraft predictors—to an ontological system. Wiener learns to conceptualize "the pilot *and* gunner as servomechanisms within a single system" (240). The germ of this idea slowly grows as Wiener realizes this systems logic can be applied elsewhere. He begins to think of human beings as systems, or "black boxes" (246), meaning

---

1. It is worth noting here that Weiner traces the lineage of his own work from Clerk Maxwell, and that Maxwell's Demon plays an important role in thinking of cybernetic systems and feedback loops for both Weiner and Pynchon, as both explicitly reference the thought experiment.

a "unit designed to perform a function before one knew how it functioned" (246), and the human brain as a system of electrical pulses that performs functions. Galison states, "In a sweeping totalization Wiener had, within two years of the end of the war, elevated his AA predictor to the symbol for a new age of man" (253). Ludwig Von Bertalanffy takes this expansion of systems a step further:

> The concept of "system" constitutes a new "paradigm," in Thomas Kuhn's phrase, or a new "philosophy of nature," in the present writer's words, contrasting the "blind laws of nature" of the mechanistic world view and the world process as a Shakespearean tale told by an idiot, with an organismic outlook of the "world as a great organization." ("The History and Status of General Systems Theory" 421).

Once humans and machines are thought of as systems, it becomes clear how everything from the smallest units of matter to the largest scales imaginable can be thought of under the same umbrella; in this sense, systems thinking is truly a paradigm shift. A system after all, is first and foremost a sort of categorization, a relationship of part to whole reminiscent of Aristotelian philosophy.

Von Bertalanffy, in his own project of a general systems theory, which is a logical outgrowth of cybernetics, attempts to generalize the principles of systems themselves. For Von Bertalanffy, the subject matter of General System Theory is "the formulation and derivation of those principles which are valid for 'systems' in general" (*General System Theory* 32). Anything that can be understood via the paradigm of systems can conform to a set of logics about the nature and structure of systems in general. Von Bertalanffy focuses on the structure of systems so as to find out the properties of systems in general: "At first, systems—biological, neurological, psychological or social—are governed by dynamic interaction of their components; later on, fixed arrangements and conditions and conditions of constraint are established which render the system and its parts more efficient, but also gradually diminish and eventually abolish its equipotentiality" (44). In other words,

systems — being the whole in relation to the various component parts — form out of the interaction of the component parts but stabilize into rigid structures with teleological outputs. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Systems arise from disparate nodes but become something greater; they expand and form more rigid structures, whether it be machines, societies, or organisms such as humans.

In the fictive world of *Gravity's Rainbow*, systems form an ontological base. Everything from the individual to the war to the novel itself is predicated on the logic of systems. Slothrop, the novel's most salient character, is a cybernetic creation, a Wienerian "Black Box." Part I of the novel largely deals with various attempts at explaining the fact that, wherever Slothrop has sex, a V2 rocket inevitably falls. Slothrop was classically conditioned by the scientist Laszlo Jamf to get an erection based on a stimulus:

> "But a hardon, that's either there, or it isn't. Binary, elegant. The job of observing it can even be done by a *student*.
>
> Unconditioned stimulus = stroking penis with antiseptic cotton swab.
> Unconditioned response = hardon.
>
> Conditioned stimulus = x.
> Conditioned response = hardon whenever x is present, stroking is no longer necessary, all you need is that x.
>
> Uh, x? well, what's x? Why, it's the famous "Mystery Stimulus" that's fascinated generations of behavioral-psychology students, is what it is. (Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* 86)

This sort of Pavlovian conditioning turns Slothrop into a black box or machinic person who takes an input x and turns it into an erection, which then becomes an explanatory variable to be analyzed. He is conditioned into a human cybernetic negative feedback loop. The different professionals in "The White Visitation" give some different explanations for what might be behind the rocket distributions matching Slothrop's sexual exploits: "Roger Mexico

hinks it's a statistical oddity," while "Rollo Groast thinks it's precognition" and "Edwin Treacle, that most Freudian of psychical researchers, thinks Slothrop's gift is psychokinesis" (87). Pointsman, the Pavlovian, thinks that it is a "reversal of cause-and-effect" (91). The human body is in the process of being systematized, conditioned, turned into a machine with inputs and outputs and analyzed according to various methodologies by these men of science. It becomes a part of a feedback loop, where stimuli are input and physical reactions are output, which in turn create more stimuli and reactions. In Von Bertalanffy's terms "Every living organism is essentially an open system. It maintains itself in a continuous inflow and outflow, a building up and breaking down of components" (*General System Theory* 39). The individual subject himself becomes systematized and analyzed according to cybernetic principles, and also becomes a part of a larger system which can be analyzed in kind.

Near the end of the novel Slothrop fragments, and becomes no longer something recognizable as human: "At last, lying one afternoon spread-eagled at his ease in the sun, at the edge of one of the ancient Plague towns he becomes a cross himself, a crossroads, a living intersection where the judges have to come to set up a gibbet for a common criminal who is to be hanged at noon" (637). Slothrop becomes a crossroads and a launchpad, one which the rocket that he has been chasing can take off from. He is crucified in the sense that he becomes a cross. He becomes so shattered and fragmented that most "gave up long ago trying to hold him together, even as a concept" (755). He is just too remote. He has become only a system, a myth, something that can hardly be held onto conceptually. Bodine, one of the last who can still see him, thinks, "*somebody's got to hold on, it can't happen to all of us—no, that'd be too much... Rocketman, Rocketman. You poor fucker*" (755). The systems ontology of the novel leads inevitably to fragmentation. The systemic bomb or rocket seems to self-destruct and disperse throughout the world.

World War II in *Gravity's Rainbow* is also predicated on a systems ontology. It becomes industrialized death, a machine with its own automatic processes, unconscious and complex. The war is not really a movement of people, or the pursuit of any sort of strategic goals, but a cold machine, not even aware of itself. Rather than being the Clausewitzian "continuation of political intercourse, carried on with other means" (87), the war is an end in itself. Personified, the system of war seems to take on its own agency and requires various economic inputs: "The War needs coal" (135); "The War needs electricity" (136). The war is a system that is greater than the sum of its parts. It is the system itself that requires the ongoing inputs, that continues itself as a process of death. Walther Rathenau, a deceased German statesman, speaking to a séance of German industrialists including IG Farben officials, believes in "The persistence, then, of structures favoring death. Death converted into more death" (169). As the old saying attributed to Cato the Elder, "bellum se ipsum alet" (Livy et al. 34.9 pp. 425) or "the war feeds itself," so does death feed itself as an ongoing and stable process. The war is here a sort of grim negative feedback loop, self-sustaining and constantly growing.

Not just the war, but also the world is caught in this negative feedback loop. In a dream, Kekulé sees

> the dreaming Serpent which surrounds the World. But the meanness, the cynicism with which this dream is to be used. The Serpent that announces, "The World is a closed thing, cyclical, resonant, eternally returning," is to be delivered into a system whose only aim is to *violate* the Cycle. Taking and not giving back, demanding that "productivity" and "earnings" keep on increasing with time, the System removing from the rest of the World these vast quantities of energy to keep its own tiny desperate fraction showing a profit: and not only most of humanity — most of the World, animal, vegetable and mineral, is laid waste in the process. (419)

The serpent represents industrial processes and cybernetic systems. The text makes it clear that "what the Serpent means is—how's this—that the six

---

2. While a throwaway character in *Gravity's Rainbow*, the real August Kekulé, who discovered the chemical structure of benzene, claimed it came to him in a dream as a snake eating its own tail.

carbon atoms of benzene are in fact curled around into a closed ring, *just like that snake with its tail in its mouth, GET IT?*" (420). The world system, the processes of capital and resource extraction, and the war are the ouroboros: the cyclical negative feedback systems of industry and death. The benzene ring is a chemical that is in the plastic Imipolex G, made by IG Farben, and installed in the rocket 00000 that Slothrop spends most of the novel searching for. This industrial process of war, this system, is a machine driven by technology itself: "this War was never political at all, the politics was all theatre, all just to keep the people distracted... secretly it was being dictated instead by the needs of technology" (530). The war is not about political systems, but machinic technological systems which take on agency of their own.

The war expands to cover the world, but eventually implodes and leaves in its wake a defaced world: the postwar landscape of Europe is referred to as "the Zone" (*Gravity's Rainbow* 283). The lawlessness of the Zone is not the destruction of systems, but their final victory. The war was not fought for the victory of one nation over another but was fought in the interest of capital and raw materials. The war is a systemic process, and agency is located in the process rather than in the human element. For Pynchon, the crises of the war "were crises of allocation and priority, not among firms... but among different Technologies, Plastics, Electronics, Aircraft, and their needs which are understood only by the ruling elites" (530). With the war ending and Europe becoming the Zone, these technologies take precedence, as the rocket itself epitomizes. The systems of the war do not disappear; they only fragment and spread to become the very fabric of the world. The interconnecting systems of industry become "*A Rocket-cartel. A structure cutting across every agency human and paper that ever touched it*" (576). The rocket-state or "Raketen-Stadt" (673) is "a State that spans oceans and surface politics, sovereign as the International or the Church of Rome, and the Rocket is its soul" (576). The rocket-state simply becomes the world system; it expands outwards in both time and space. In the fourth and final section, the novel's historical setting—World War II and immediate aftermath—begins to collapse, and cracks of the

future begin to show through. The narrative moves forwards to "1966 and 1977" (754) and jumps to the United States, with the novel ending before the rocket strikes a theatre in LA. The system has become global. The rocket-state, born in the second World War, is not confined to its historical genesis, but rather it is an ongoing process, happening everywhere.

Even more explicitly than with *The Crying of Lot 49*, these systems are cause for a paranoid mode of reading. The paranoid "They" becomes central, and a representative word for a more systemic paranoia. Pirate Prentice, talking to Roger Mexico explains: "Of course a well-developed They-system is necessary—but it's only half the story. For every They there ought to be a We. In our case there is. Creative paranoia means developing at least as thorough a We-system as a They-system—" (650). By separating the paranoid pronouns into We and They, and thinking of it cybernetically, the paranoid pronouns become a universal mode of thinking. It becomes, throughout Gravity's Rainbow, a sort of ideology: a constant point of view that colours the reading and understanding of any sort of action, symbol, or text throughout the novel. Paranoia is the default operating mode of the novel. Katje even becomes "the allegorical figure of Paranoia" (670). Paranoia is not something that is externalized, but it is part of a system, of "We" and "They." The paranoid "They" is predicated upon the "We," and so the paranoia is connected to the creation of self-identity. In *I and Thou*, Martin Buber writes, "There is no *I* taken in itself, but only the *I* of the primary word *I-Thou* and the *I* of the primary word *I-It*" (4), by which he means that the I is defined only in relation to the thou. There is a similar relationship at play with the paranoid "They": "They" can only be defined in relation to "We." The paranoid other is in a systemic relationship with the self, and so it is true in Gravity's Rainbow that both the self creates paranoia, and paranoia creates the self.

The paranoid reader sees "They" everywhere. Again, the paranoid "They" refers less to any particular group of people than to the various systems existing in the world. "They" are processes apart from human control, which nonetheless define human subjectivity. The paranoid "They"

refers to cybernetic systems of control, and as Pynchon writes, "once the technical means of control have reached a certain size, a certain degree of *being connected* one to another, the chances of freedom are over for good. The word has ceased to have meaning" (Pynchon *Gravity's Rainbow* 548). The paranoid person sees these control systems everywhere, and attempts to resist. They read deeply into everything, and everywhere they see systems attempting to control them. In *Gravity's Rainbow* the primary system is the rocket itself. The paranoid "We" become "Kabbalists who study the Rocket as Torah, letter by letter — rivets, burner cup and brass rose, its text is theirs to permute and combine into new revelations, always unfolding" (741). Minutely studied, the rocket becomes a universal signifier for the systems of the world, and is ever-present everywhere. It is read into hermeneutically. For the paranoid "scholar-magicians of the Zone, with somewhere in it a Text, to be picked to pieces, annotated, explicated, and masturbated till it's all squeezed limp of its last drop... well we assumed—natürlich!—that this holy Text had to be the Rocket" (529). If the holy text to be interpreted is the rocket, and the rocket-state has expanded everywhere, then the paranoid reader will study everything—the self, the war, the world systems—as texts which must be interpreted, where the rocket system must be found. This paranoid hermeneutic system applies to the novel itself. *Gravity's Rainbow* is the rocket-text, dense and complex, that the reader must interpret. The systems principles found in the novel, can be generalized not only within the novel, but with the novel. The novel, in conjunction with the reader, forms a system akin to the cybernetic system of the steersman and the boat. Rather than keeping the boat on course, the produced outcome of this system is paranoid hermeneutic interpretation of the text. Individual readings of the novel vary by reader, but the parameters of the form of the novel itself limit these possibilities. The very fact of its being a novel, because of the parameters of a novelistic representation, constitutes a set of guiding rules that the reader must abide by. If the reader drifts off course, in the language of the steersman metaphor, the novel guides them back.

By representing systems in the novel, Pynchon creates an awareness of on the part of the reader that they are themselves in a sort of textual communication system with the novel. David Porush argues that "Pynchon's fictions employ machinery to expose the very un-machine-like machinery of the reader's consciousness at work" (Porush 117). The reader cannot help but get sucked into the sweeping paranoia of the novel, because the reader—as a virtue of being a node in the system of reader and novel—must themselves be trying to interpret the text using the same systems of interpretation as the paranoid. The reader, like Slothrop, must try to figure out the nature of the various objects of paranoia: What is "Imipolex G" (Pynchon 252), and what does it have to do with Slothrop, and the Rocket 00000. Pynchon even seems to give the reader a system for paranoid reading in the five "Proverbs for Paranoids" littered throughout the second and third sections of the novel, which are as follows:

> "Proverbs for Paranoids, 1: You may never get to touch the Master, but you can tickle his creatures." (240)

> "Proverbs for Paranoids, 2: The innocence of the creatures is in inverse proportion to the immorality of the Master." (244)

> "Proverbs for Paranoids, 3: If they can get you asking the wrong questions, they don't have to worry about answers" (255)

> "Proverbs for Paranoids, 4: You hide, they seek." (265)

> "Paranoids are not paranoids (Proverb 5) because they're paranoid, but because they keep putting themselves, fucking idiots, deliberately into paranoid situations." (297)

In representing these systems of reading, Pynchon makes the reader aware not only of the hermeneutic systems and paranoias represented in the novel, but also forces the reader to interpret them using the same sort of paranoid logics that the novel depicts.

Gravity's Rainbow itself questions to what end these systems operate, simultaneously utilizing the logics of systems to undermine those very same logics. The novel asks:

But, if I'm riding through it, the Real Text, right now, if this is it… the bombing was the exact industrial process of conversion, each release of energy placed exactly in space and time, each shockwave plotted in advance to bring precisely tonight's wreck into being thus decoding the Text, thus coding, recoding, redecoding the holy Text… if it is in working order, what is it meant to do? (Pynchon *Gravity's Rainbow* 529)

Pynchon acknowledges that the reader is currently engrossed in the text—in the industrial, cybernetic, systematic process that is reading and interpreting the text—while being unsure what to make of it. The reader must assume that the text itself is in "working order" and so begins the work of interpreting it. The novel itself, the "Real Text," is also the rocket, the bomb; it is a closed system whose primary purpose is to destroy itself. That is it's gestalt function; that is what it is "meant to do." The novel itself then comprises a part of a cybernetic system with the reader, but also works to destroy the system. Each "shockwave" of the novel that brings a wreck into being—decoding, coding, recoding, and redecoding the text—degrades the systems that represent these shockwaves. As Porush puts it: "*Pynchon has designed a mechanism in the form of elaborate systems and metaphors whose purpose is to make the reader aware of that special place beyond systems of codes and information where our humanness resides*" (117). Systems, ultimately, are turned in on themselves and with the same mechanisms that they explode outward and totalize the world, they implode in on themselves so that perhaps they might be moved past. *Gravity's Rainbow* both universalizes systems and is keen to destroy them.

Looking at the novel as a whole, we can see a sort of parabolic arc—the titular rainbow of gravity—of the narrative and of the systems depicted in it. Through paranoid revelation, we see how the systems of the self, the war, the world, and the novel are built from cybernetic principles, expanding recursive designs and feedback loops which explode outward totalizing the world in their logics and processes. Characters like Slothrop reach their paranoid fever pitch as the war climaxes, the novel reaching the vertex of the parabola. It seems there is a system controlling everything, and so the reader develops a logic of paranoid reading; the "We-system" searches everywhere for a "They-system" (650). Everything and everyone becomes systematized, fragmented,

and paranoid, including the reader themselves. The novel can be recognized as a system. It attempts to communicate meaning, but finds only the paranoid hermeneuticist that it has created. The novel begins its descent; the narrative fragments into long digressions and rapid narrative turns; time ceases to be a meaningful measure. Slothrop, like the narrative, explodes, and becomes a sort of fragmented concept. The War ends and becomes the Zone and the Rocket-state. It seems the systems themselves have imploded and destroyed themselves as if they were bombs. The novel ends with the rocket 00000 on the brink of explosion, descending over Los Angeles with the final line: "Now everybody—" (776). As the novel concludes without the explicit explosion of the rocket, it might be worth remembering that if you hear the explosion, it means you are safe.

"The true picture of the past flits by" (255) writes Walter Benjamin in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History." Though he lived and died before the Kennedy assassination, Benjamin could easily be talking about "the seven seconds that broke the back of the American century" as depicted in Don DeLillo's *Libra* (795). The novel simultaneously takes great pains to reconstruct the fragmented and contingent picture of the past, while positing that "To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize 'the way it really was.' It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger" (Benjamin 255). *Libra* is both a fictionalized account of a conspiracy that leads to the assassination of JFK and a biography of the life of Lee Harvey Oswald. Both projects are studies in the construction of systems and the role that they play in human affairs. In Libra the individual subject, the conspiracy, and reality itself are the products of systems. Oswald is a fragmentary subject, constantly being measured, tested, and researched after the fact, but he himself eludes any concrete identity; he can only be understood though various systems of reconstruction. The conspiracy to assassinate the president begins as a conventional conspiracy—men in hidden rooms plotting—but as the system expands it becomes decentralized, escaping control of the plotters and taking on a deathward logic of its own. In *Libra*, reality itself is the product of global systems of communication, business

interests, and intelligence. The project of reconstructing reality from the evidence of these systems is the task of constructing history. It is, ironically, not possible to systematically recreate the systems governing the world, and thus history belongs to the realm of fiction.

Libra begins with Lee Harvey Oswald riding the trains of the New York subway system "to the ends of the city" (637). A passenger "riding just to ride" (637), he bounces around in time and space, although, standing in the front of the car, he thinks of himself in the vanguard of history. The subway system is a good way of thinking about systems in general. You can imagine it sprawling on a map, dividing up space, allowing for new connections to be made where none seemed immediately apparent before. It is also underground, hidden from sight, but perhaps the most vital organ of the city. When Oswald reaches 42nd Street — which is under Times Square, sometimes half-jokingly called the "Crossroads of the World" (Haberman) — he notes that "the subway held more compelling things than the famous city above" (637). This opening scene, Oswald aimlessly riding the subway, secretly gives us DeLillo's methodology. The hidden underlying systems, like subways underneath the entire world, are more important than the flashy spectacles above ground: "There was nothing important out there, in the broad afternoon, that he could not find in purer form in these tunnels beneath the streets" (637). Before describing Oswald riding the subways again at the end of the opening chapter, the narrator remarks, "There is a world inside the world" (645). This world of systems lurks beneath the outward appearances of reality.

Libra's Oswald himself is mapped out like one of these subway systems. He is an isolated, fragmentary character traversing the unseen systems of the world at random. For his entire life, Oswald seems to be riding the metaphorical subway with no destination in mind; he is repeatedly called a "zero in the system" (670; 729; 768; 952). After struggling with some Marxist literature, he begins to see himself "as a part of something vast and sweeping... the product of a sweeping history, he and his mother, locked into a process, a system of money and property that diminished their human

worth every day, as if by scientific law" (671). Skip Willman argues that, "If Marxism enables Oswald to make sense of his alienation, then it also provides him with the possibility of transcending this social fragmentation in the form of the collective subject" (424). Oswald senses his own fragmentation and displaces his human agency onto the systems of the world. He recognizes himself as a zero in the system, a helpless product of history, and surrenders his agency to the systems that created him as such. He sees that his own actions, then, are not acts of free will or individual agency, but products of the system working through him. Throughout the novel Oswald is subject to systems and sees himself as such, to the point where he can hardly be understood as a person, but only as a system of a person: a fragmented, segmented, and dissected subject known by many names and many measurements.

Oswald is constantly being subjected to tests, measurements, and after-the-fact reconstructions based on fragmentary evidence. Everywhere he goes he is tested and studied by various bureaucracies and institutions. Tests ostensibly yield information about Oswald, but really they only work to make him more confusing as a character. His "Human Figure Drawings" are judged "impoverished," yet his psychologist finds him "to be in the upper range of Bright Normal Intelligence" (644). He takes a Russian foreign language qualification test in the military, where he scores the rating of "P for poor throughout" (779). In Russia a doctor and nurse weigh him, measure him, and take "samples of his urine and blood" (779). He is constantly being questioned about what he knows or debriefed by various intelligence agencies. He has "some form of dyslexia or word-blindness," and his "polygraph was more or less chaotic but then it almost always is. *Inconclusive owing to various factors*" (782). These measurements seem to suggest that, if we were just given enough data, we might be able to reconstruct a person's consciousness; that character, in a psychological and fictional sense, might be measured through bodily samples, intelligence ratings, and polygraph tests. But the more we seem to learn about Oswald, the less clear he becomes. All of this factual evidence, all of these tests, evaluations, and physical examinations only make

Oswald more abstract. He becomes a system of information comprised of pieces of paper, mismatched records, diagnoses, and evaluations.

Oswald is, in this way, more system than person. The Lee Harvey Oswald represented in *Libra* is a fictional construct, pieced together from fragmentary evidenced extracted from the historical record; but this logic also applies to the "real," historical Lee Harvey Oswald. We construct our historical picture of Oswald through collected evidence, conflicting accounts, and, perhaps, conspiratorial meddling. DeLillo is making the point that the historical Oswald is as much a work of fiction as *Libra*'s.

The character of Nicholas Branch, a retired CIA officer assigned to the task of writing a secret history for the agency, finds himself perplexed by the overwhelming and contradictory details given about Oswald: "To Nicholas Branch, more frequently of late, 'Lee H. Oswald' seems a technical diagram, part of some exercise in the secret manipulation of history" (970). The conspirators T-Jay Mackey, Lawrence Parmenter, and Win Everett seem to construct a version of Oswald before they even know of his existence: "Win Everett was at work devising a general shape, a life... They wanted a name, a face, a bodily frame they might use to extend their fiction into the world" (679). The conspirators refer to Oswald as "the subject" (756). In "American Blood," an essay published five years before *Libra*, DeLillo suggests that the historical Oswald "often seems a secret design worked out by men who will never surface—a procedural diagram" and that "He is not an actor so much as he is a character, a fictional character" ("American Blood" 1048). Like fiction, history is frequently scraped together from loose evidence and coincidence. At a certain point for Win Everett, it becomes "no longer possible to hide from the fact that Lee Oswald existed independent of the plot" (*Libra* 793).

Like Pierce's will in *Lot 49* or the war in *Gravity's Rainbow*, the conspiracy to assassinate JFK is a system that acts according to its own logic and forms its own reality. It begins as a relatively standard sort of conspiracy of "men in small rooms" (671): disgruntled former intelligence officers and assets plan one last vengeful operation against Kennedy for his handling of the Bay of Pigs invasion in Cuba. The plan is originally to miss the president:

"We want a spectacular miss" (679). As the plot develops the system takes on a logic unto itself. For Parmenter, "Plots carry their own logic. There is a tendency of plots to move toward death. He believed that the idea of death is woven into the nature of every plot. A narrative plot no less than a conspiracy of armed men" (830). His own plot, after leaving his immediate control, is taken on by other groups, notably Alpha 66, a group of armed Cuban exiles who want to assassinate the president. The conspiracy in this way expands outward, takes on a character of its own, and moves towards death.

The plot as a system unto itself gains a certain autonomous quality; it seems to develop its own agency. For Win Everett, the "system still operated as an insulating muse... Secrets build their own networks, Win believed. The system would perpetuate itself in all its curious and obsessive webbings, its equivocations and patient riddles and levels of delusional thought" (654). The plot becomes a self-perpetuating system that moves towards its own goals. The "insulating muse" of the system recalls an epic invocation towards the system; it invokes itself and thus insulates the rest of the world from it while it lurks secretly in the background. The system seems to arise from various unconnected secrets, forming itself from a series of disparate points, before taking on a logic of its own. Michael James Rizza makes the argument that, in *Libra*, "independent actions, seemingly originating from characters, emerge as products of a system, while design emerges out of and despite individual's intentions" (171). The conspirators are, of course, involved in creating the system, but their actions are less important than the structure of the system that they set in motion. Rizza points out that "Rather than a top-down imposition by some grand plotter, order emerges from the bottom-up, as a product of the system" (178). In the case of the plot to kill JFK, this system emerges out of a series on differing interests and skills that align, in just the right way, to that moment at Dealey Plaza in Dallas. Parmenter has "rights, claims, hidden financial involvement in a leasing company that had been working toward a huge land deal to facilitate oil drilling" (661); Guy Banister is a passionate anti-communist; David Ferrie is "interested in the communistic menace. Cuba was an interest" (660).

Some characters have nebulous, shifting political affiliations based on their position in the system. George de Mohrenschildt is constantly all over the globe; he seems to have connections to both communists and Nazis, and he revels in the "discrepancies in his stated history" (683). De Mohrenschildt is the personification of an underground world system of intelligence. He as an asset for whoever needs him. For Branch, de Mohrenschildt is "the multi-national man, a study in divided loyalties or in the irrelevance of loyalty" (686). All of these characters and their various interests in corporate profits, resource extraction, and intelligence operations are the people who make the global system of trade and commerce and profit possible. Any sort of political conviction is only a function their current position in the system, of what they stand to gain. The world system of self-interested actors seems, by supernatural force, to draw these men together, to connect the nodes of the network to set in motion a chain of events that ends with assassination.

These global networks underneath the outward appearances of systems of politics and economics are what Peter Dale Scott calls deep political systems, or "all those political practices and arrangements, deliberate or not, which are usually repressed rather than acknowledged" (7). Scott makes the argument that "a true understanding of the Kennedy assassination will lead not to "a few bad people," but to the institutional and parapolitical arrangements which constitute the way we are systematically governed" (11). Throughout his study of the assassination, Scott comes across many of the same people that DeLillo opts to include in *Libra*. For Scott, these people and the networks that they form — with organized crime, the mob, the CIA, the FBI, the Cuban exiles — are a hidden, loosely connected network of various interests that just so happen to align to kill the president. Scott rejects the lone gunman theory, but he also rejects the idea that there was some conspiracy of men in a dark room, inside or outside of government. Further, he argues that "it is clearly an oversimplification to say that the President was killed by the power structure, the establishment, or even the political system," but instead that "the President was murdered by a coalition of forces inside and outside government … In short, Kennedy was killed by the deep political system" (299).

In *Libra*, the depiction of the plot to kill Kennedy is a deep political event. It is the brief surfacing of this underground political system that opens a window into the deep political systems that undergird the normal workings on the surface. Like the subway system that Oswald rides, the deep political system is a hidden network of connections but remains crucial for understanding the surface level. It is not some shadowy conspiratorial group comprised of Parmenter, Everett, and Mackey that assassinates JFK, but instead it is the deep political networks that produces a plot that escapes any individual's or group's control. In this way the assassination itself can be thought of as what Slavoj Žižek calls "subjective violence," which is "violence performed by a clearly identifiable agent" (1). This violence, according to Žižek, is "experienced as such against the background of a non-violent zero level" (2). This is contrasted to the "objective" or "systemic violence," which is "precisely the violence inherent to [the] "normal" state of things" (2). We might think of deep politics as consisting of both of these types of violence. On the one hand, there is the subjective violence, the clearly identifiable acts that are remembered in history, the death of JFK being the prime example. But there is also deep political objective violence, by means of which the political status quo is maintained. The status quo extends to corporate rights in foreign countries, resource extraction, military training, dealings with organized crime. Subjective violence like the Kennedy assassination tends to grab attention, but these acts of violence open a window into the systemically violent networks of influence and interest inherent to the status quo.

In *Libra* these deep political networks constitute a sort of reality: the world system becomes a Baudrillardian hyperreality and the plot to kill JFK a simulacrum akin to a plot in fiction. For instance, Parmenter executes a coup in Guatemala using "rumors, false battle reports, meaningless codes, inflammatory speeches, orders to nonexistent rebels. It was like a class project in the structure of reality" (746). The signs and symbols of communication fabricated to make it seem as if there was a real coup happening are used to create a real coup. The reality that there was no coup before the communications came from Parmenter is irrelevant because his control of the

of the communications system is more real than real; the communications are a hyperreality. Umberto Eco makes the point that, "Not long ago if you wanted to seize political power in a country, you had merely to control the army and the police. Today it is only in the most backward countries that fascist generals, in carrying out a coup d'état, still use tanks...Today a country belongs to the person who controls communications" (Eco 135). For Eco, it is the structure of communication itself that constitutes power. Political violence hardly even has to be violent; the underlying networks of communication—the "non-violent" zero level kept in place by violent hegemony—are sufficient to enact political change for the benefit of those who control the communications system. Like the Tristero system in *Lot 49*, control of the political system relies on control of the communication system. Reality, in *Libra*, is not simply the events that take place on the surface level, but rather it is the network of communication and information which construct that surface level.

The creation and flow of information and data like those that produce Oswald as "the subject," are themselves the product of deep political interests. Parmenter is at the center of a network these interests: "A curious convergence of motives and holdings. Hotel interests here, gambling interests there... He saw there was a natural kinship between business and intelligence work" (746). These companies and men whose interests control the world system are highly integrated with the CIA (sometimes referred to as "The Company"):

> Parmenter himself could not always tell where the Agency left off and the corporations began... It was a society he recognized as a better-working version of the larger world, where things have an almost dreamy sense of connection to each other. Here the plan was tighter. These were men who believed history was in their care. (747)

This arrangement of deep political connections — men involved in business, politics, and international crime — are simultaneously members of the largest information collection and communications system ever devised: the CIA. Parmenter's wife, Beryl, "saw it as the best organized church in the Christian world, a mission to collect and store everything that everyone has ever said

and then reduce it to a microdot and call it God" (864). The CIA is both a microcosm of the "larger world" and the system of communication that determines it. Everett remarks to his wife that the spy planes, drones, satellites that make up the communication systems are "Like ancient monks, you know, who recorded knowledge, wrote it painstakingly down. These systems collect and process. All the secret knowledge of the world" (703). The CIA is not a conspiratorial group of "men in small rooms" but a network of communication and influence driven by a confluence of different, competing interests raised to the level of a deity. If Oswald is a fragmented subject produced by systems of information collection, testing, and quantification, then the entire world, reality itself, is produced by these systems of communication and information.

Nicholas Branch's task of writing a secret history of the assassination is doomed because of this structure of reality. The task of history is to reconstruct a coherent picture of events, to take evidence of communications and reality and place it into some sort of narrative. But when reality is the unreliable product of mechanical record keeping, of false documents, photographs, and home movies, the project of constructing historical narrative out of it becomes nearly impossible. Branch is constantly taking notes and getting nowhere with his project because "the data keeps coming. Because new lives enter the record all the time. The past is changing as he writes" (900). Branch strays in the infinite possibility of detail of the information that the system produces rather than the structure of the system itself. He is "lost in the Joycean Book of America [the Warren Report], remember — the novel in which nothing is left out" (796). The line between history and fiction begins to blur, history become much less an objective narrative, and much more, as Benjamin suggests, "taking control of a memory as it flashes in a moment of danger."

The epigraph to the second section of *Libra* is a quotation from Jack Ruby: "Somebody will have to piece me together" (825). To piece back together something fragmented—whether a life, a plot, or history itself—is the central theme of *Libra*. Attempting to reconstruct a biography of Lee Harvey

Oswald proves how fragmented he is. The more information that is available
—the more raw data about his life—the less clear Oswald becomes as a human
person, but the more clear he becomes as a system of information. He is
transformed from a subject into a point of data: "a zero in the system." The
plot to assassinate JFK similarly eludes reconstruction because it is itself a
system. It is a system that is part of a larger system of communication and
deep political interests than span the globe, collecting information,
communicating, pursuing self-interested goals. The actual assassination then
is not simply the product of a conspiracy or a lone gunman, but the surfacing
of the deep political system undergirding American life. It provides a lens
through which to view the underground workings of the systems of power
and communication—the "world inside the world"—like a shaft of light
breaking through into the dark tunnels of the subway. History itself must be
pieced together, but this is an impossible task, we cannot know what really
happened, we can only know the systems that might have produced the event.
To approach these is to approach them outside the realm of fact, and so it
must be handled in the realm of fiction. At the conclusion of the novel,
Oswald's mother claims his name: "It belonged to her now, and to history"
(1040). But really, his name, as well as history itself belongs to fiction.

Conclusion

In the systems novel, structure takes precedence over smaller units of
narrative signification. The actual systems found in the systems novels
discussed above are wide-ranging and complex. In *The Crying of Lot 49*
communication systems, systems of legal representation, and systems of signs
and symbols form a sort of American hyperreality and foment a paranoid
hermeneutics. America is depicted as a strange set of overlapping
interconnected networks—a system of systems. In particular systems of
communication, such as the Tristero system and the mail system connected
to it, seem to form their own network of signs and symbols that constitute a
hyperreality, with the underlying "real" ceasing to matter. Attempting to
engage with and understand these communication systems gives rise to the

paranoid reading for "They" behind all of the systems; "They" must be out there, somewhere, controlling everything. Because systems of communication and representation can be found everywhere, the individual who is subject to these systems becomes a highly paranoid reader, searching for meaning and conspiracy that seems to be controlling everything everywhere, but this paranoid reader finds only the structure—the systems of organization and communication that constitute American life.

In *Gravity's Rainbow* the paranoia about systems becomes the modus operandi of interacting with the world, because the world is comprised of systems of control. The systems of industry, military, intelligence, war, politics, science, and hermeneutic interpretation build up from cybernetic understandings of control systems and expand to cover the entire world. Everything from the individual person to the world system becomes a sort of negative feedback loop, a series of continually flowing, circular, self-regulating inputs and outputs. The novel itself functions as a cybernetic system comprised of reader and text, who, like steersman and ship, form something greater than the constituent parts. The system in *Gravity's Rainbow* is also the rocket, which appears everywhere in the novel. The rocket is a metaphor for systems in general: a highly engineered, perfectly ordered system of components that serve a specific function. Like a rocket, *Gravity's Rainbow* is also a highly engineered system that follows a parabolic arc. It explodes in the end, spewing its payload in every direction and simultaneously destroying itself. *Gravity's Rainbow* serves as both an explication of cybernetic control systems, and a bomb dropped onto them.

Finally, in *Libra*, fictional and historical systems merge and become somewhat indistinguishable. Lee Harvey Oswald becomes, through the dual action of his displacement of agency on to the system, and his own systematization via tests, evidence, and the reconstructions of history, less easily understandable as a person, but more understandable as a system of information. In this way, the historical Oswald is almost indistinguishable from the fictional one. History, conspiracy, and the individual subject are the products of systems of flawed historical data, political interest, and

information and intelligence collection. Paranoia moves away from manic conspiratorialism, reading everywhere for the hidden "They" controlling everything, and towards being, very simply, the correct paradigm for assessing the deep political systems underneath the workings of the status quo. History too, becomes a sort of paranoid act. The systems that we use to reconstruct reality, evidence, connection, and biographical data are sometimes unable—as in the case of the JFK assassination—to provide a coherent picture of what really happened. The systems historical systems fail and so the mantle must be taken up in the realm of fiction, contingency, and conspiracy theory.

In the spirit of Von Bertalanffy, I will conclude with some generally applicable theories about the systems novels: a general systems novel theory, if you will. First, the systems novel is both a depiction of systems and is itself a system. It's general structure takes inspiration from the various systems which it depicts. Second, the systems in the systems novel foment extreme paranoia and conspiratorial thinking, because the systems seem to be totalizing in their ability to control; they seem to form naturally, according to their own logics, and move towards their own ends. And finally, every novel is a novel of systems, but the systems novel is the one which is aware of it.

Bibliography

Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. University of Michigan Press, 1994.

Benjamin, Walter. "Theses on the Philosophy of History." *Illuminations*, translated by Harry
    Zohn, 1st ed., Harcourt, 1968, p. 280 p.

Borges, Jorge Luis and Andrew Hurley. *Collected Fictions*. Allen Lane The Penguin Press,
    1999.

Buber, Martin and Ronald Gregor Smith. *I and Thou*. Bloomsbury revelations edition. ed.,
    Bloomsbury Academic, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Pic, 2018.

Clausewitz, Carl von et al. *On War*. Princeton University Press, 1976.

Dale Scott, Peter. *Deep Politics and the Death of JFK*. University of California Press, 1993.

DeLillo, Don. ""American Blood: A Journey through the Labyrinth of Dallas and Jfk". *Three
    Novels of the 1980s : The Names ; White Noise ; Libra*, edited by Mark Osteen, The
    Library of America, 2022, pp. 1045-61.

Derrida, Jacques. *Specters of Marx*. Routledge, 1994.

Derrida, Jacques. "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences."
    Writing and Difference, edited by Alan Bass, translated by Alan Bass, Routledge Classics,
    2001.

Eco, Umberto. Travels in Hyper Reality : Essays. 1st ed., Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986.

Fisher, Linda. "Hermeneutics of Suspicion and Postmodern Paranoia: Psychologies of
    Interpretation." *Philosophy and Literature*, vol. 16, no. 1, 1992, pp. 106-14.

Galison, Peter. "The Ontology of the Enemy: Norbert Wiener and the Cybernetic Vision."
    Critical Inquiry, vol. 21, no. 1, 1994, pp. 228-66.

Haberman, Clyde. "The Century in Times Square." *New York Times*, 1999. https://
    archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/specials/times-square/ts-index.html.

Hobbes, Thomas and J. C. A. Gaskin. *Leviathan*. Oxford University Press, 1998. Oxford
    World's Classics.

LeClair, Tom. *In the Loop : Don Delillo and the Systems Novel*. University of Illinois Press,
    1987.

Livy et al. *History of Rome*. Harvard University Press, 2018.

OED. ""Corporation, N."". *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, https://
    www.oed.com/view/Entry/41833?redirectedFrom=corporation&.

Porush, David. *The Soft Machine : Cybernetic Fiction*. Routledge, 2018.

Pynchon, Thomas. *The Crying of Lot 49*. First Perennial Classics edition. ed.,
    HarperPerennial, 1999.

Pynchon, Thomas. *Gravity's Rainbow*. Penguin, 1973.

Ricœur, Paul and Dennis B. Savage. *Freud and Philosophy : An Essay on Interpretation*. Yale
    University Press, 1970. The Terry Lectures.

Rizza, Michael James. "The Dislocation of Agency in Don Delillo's Libra." *Critique: Studies in
    Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 49, no. 2, 2008, pp. 171-84.

Saussure, Ferdinand de et al. *Course in General Linguistics*. Columbia University Press, 2011.

Von Bertalanffy, Ludwig. *General System Theory; Foundations, Development, Applications*. G.
    Braziller, 1969.

Von Bertalanffy. "The History and Status of General Systems Theory." *The Academy of
    Management Journal*, vol. 15, no. 4, 1972, pp. 407-26, JSTOR, doi:10.2307/255139.

Wiener, Norbert. *Cybernetics; or, Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine.* 2nd ed., M.I.T. Press, 1962.

Willman, Skip. "Traversing the Fantasies of the Jfk Assassination: Conspiracy and Contingency in Don Delillo's 'Libra.'." *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 39, 1998, p. 405+

Žižek, Slavoj. *Violence.* Picador, 2008.