

Resisting the Postmodern Historical Vision: Imag(in)ing History in Don DeLillo's *Libra*ⁱ

Silvia Caporale Bizzini

The danger is that this reaffirmation can be perverted, usually by monopolistic elites, into a mistificatory discourse which serves to uncritically vindicate or glorify the established political powers. In such instances, the symbols of a community become fixed and fetishized; they serve as lies.

--Paul Ricoeur

I

The society of images and of finance capital has had a profound echo in the definition of the cultural parameters that control our lives in this era of late capitalism. One of the concepts that has to be taken into serious consideration is that which goes together with the dangerous theorisation and praise of the globalized society of the spectacleⁱⁱ we are living in: the gradual negation of history and the fictitious construction of an eternal present. In this context, as Scott Wilson (1995) suggests, history is defining itself through its absence from the cultural construction of reality. The dislocation of the presence of history from our lives—and here Wilson is following Foucault (1990)—leads us, as social subjects, not to be able to recognise the origins of the technologies of the self that have shaped us as individuals within a group.

It is in this sense that I will attempt a reading of Don DeLillo's *Libra* (1988), a novel on the assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy that the American writer published in 1988. *Libra* opens up a space for a character, Lee Harvey Oswald, who has *not* been completely written out of history, but who, in DeLillo's interpretation of the event, was portrayed according to both the rules of the hegemonic discourse and the society of the spectacle. My aim in this paper is to show how, in *Libra*, Don DeLillo questions and rewrites not only history, but the images that have forged the American consciousness in relation to JFK's assassination and the (imag/inary) identity of Lee Harvey Oswald. In this novel he seems to get closer to a materialistic interpretation of the representation of history while using ambiguously some of the postmodern parameters of investigation which usually mark his observation of contemporary American society. In order to carry out my analysis, I will borrow Fredric Jameson's recent insights into postmodern visual culture: I will first focus on how DeLillo narrates the historical process in relation to the construction of subjectivity—and the role that social subjects play in the negotiation between the collectivity and the individual—and then, in the concluding part of this paper, I will consider Fredric Jameson's analysis of the notion of the visual construction and definition of the historical process in relation to Don DeLillo's call for history in *Libra*.

II

The analysis of the process of de-historization of experience which goes together with what we have come to know as postmodern society has become, in the last fifteen years, a promising field of investigation and intellectual resistance to a notion of culture which is becoming more and more related to finance capital and a globalized vision of experience. One of the most widely known analyses of postmodernity understood as a cultural product is the one that the American cultural critic Fredric Jameson has carried

out over the last fifteen years.ⁱⁱⁱ From the beginning of his research, he signalled two main characteristics that distinguish postmodern society as such: the transformation of reality into images and the understanding of time as a perpetual present.^{iv} Jameson considers the literary critic's reading of the text as a political act and he is strongly suspicious of a vision of interpretation which considers only the subject's dimension while leaving aside the analysis of the negotiation between individuality and collectivity. Jameson's latest work has brought him closer to a theorization of history that, apparently, reminds us of the poststructuralist transformation of history into textuality. He is willing to find a point of contact between the postmarxist position, which understands history as a textual process (representation), and the classical marxist standpoint which sees history as the materialization of the 'Real'. Now, Jameson still declares that history is *not* just a textual process, but he also admits that we can get to the interpretation of the 'Real' only through textuality, that is to say through the documents and testimonies that reach us in form of texts. An analysis which, paradoxically, is similar to DeLillo's observation of contemporary society in *Libra* and the ways it relates to its cultural myths while weakening the understanding of the historical process. In his essay "Transformations of the Image in Postmodernity,"^v Jameson delves deep into his analysis, relates the culture of the visual to the crisis of reading and considers it as an attack on the written word.

He is obviously not alone in his intellectual enterprise. The French philosopher Guy Debord, for example, shares Jameson's perspective and in his *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* refers briefly to the overwhelming power that the abuse of the computerised society has on the crisis of reading. Debord suggests that the act of reading implies the capacity of being able to judge what we are reading and decode the message the text transmits (Jameson calls it 'ethical criticism'). The overwhelming presence of a reality which is constructed only through images weakens, in general terms, the productive power of language and lessens the chances that the viewer/individual has to build up his or her personal opinion of reality through dialogic interaction with other individuals. This is what Stephen Best writes in reference to Guy Debord's brilliant and desperate argumentation on the society of the spectacle: "With the erasure of historical memory and knowledge, Debord, argues, the cascade of images and events instantly recedes to the remote realm of the forgotten and unverifiable" (Best xii).

Don DeLillo has concentrated his intellectual project on the analysis of post-modern society within the field of narrative discourse and has carried out powerful and committed analyses of the cultural phenomena that have plagued the end of the century such as the society of the spectacle and images; according to Arnold Weinstein: "DeLillo ... emerges as the poet laureate of the media age, for he understands the crucial role that television plays in the American environment ..." (Weinstein 301). The writer's narrative production has focused since its beginning on the necessity to understand and negotiate with contemporary reality in a way that considers realist modes of writing as well as the need to expose the post-modern condition of existence in Western society (Keesey 1993; Weinstein 1993).^{vi} As Frank Lentricchia underlines: "... [his] books are hard ... they are the montages of tones, styles, and voices that have the effect of yoking together terror and wild humour as the essential tone of contemporary America" (Lentricchia 1). Don DeLillo's characters, for example, represent men and women who are trying to come to terms with their lives and with the world that surrounds them. At the same time, they are representative of the necessity to question contemporary reality and, as such, they try to reconstruct their own subjectivities through a quest which problematizes the 'meaning'

of their own existence and goals in life. In *Libra*, DeLillo's characters come to life through the narrativization of history, in *White Noise* they are the protagonists of the ironic interpretation of contemporary intellectual thinking and society, while in *Mao II* they are representative of the intellectual frustration and the impossibility to act that the writer feels. This is what DeLillo declares in an interview: "What I try to do is create complex human beings, ordinary-extraordinary men and women who live in the particular skin of the late twentieth century" (in Begley 304). Following DeLillo's words, we can affirm that his characters represent the materialisation of a certain disorder and of an ontological shipwreck but, as Winfried Fluck puts it "... contrary to first impressions, DeLillo is not Baudrillard. Revealing perhaps a major difference between literary theory and creative writing, he is not just interested in out-analysing everybody else, but in dealing with the problem of how we can acknowledge such new realities and still continue to live with them" (Fluck 80).^{vii}

Libra is apparently organised in a fragmented way, as it stresses the confusion and uncertainty that floats around the events that took place in Dallas.^{viii} The novel is the result of the serious investigation DeLillo carried out on what happened the day of John Fitzgerald Kennedy's assassination. He published his findings for the first time in 1983 in "American Blood: a Journey Through the Labyrinth of Dallas and JFK." This essay appeared in *Rolling Stone* and according to some critics, it can be used as a guide to the novel and its complicated plot (Carmichael 1993; Weinstein 1993; Mott 1994). Anyway, the main source of inspiration for *Libra* comes from the 26 volumes of the Warren Report and the FBI report on the facts of the 22nd of November in Dallas.

Libra is a novel that problematizes the construction of historical understanding in relation to social identity and the society of the spectacle. The confusing and confused reality that surrounds the assassination is represented in fictional, and imaginary, terms by DeLillo through the structure of the book. The fragmented organisation of the text disperses the centre of meaning and, as a consequence, identifies in the story areas of difference and discontinuity that allow the reader to rethink the given historical interpretation of the events and problematize the whole way of constructing the hegemonic historical vision. From this perspective, we agree with Malcolm Bradbury when he suggests that: "...in late modern culture, from high to low, where contention and multi-culturalism prevail, no representation is permitted the condition of innocence" (Bradbury 19).

The novel is structured around two main plots: the life-story of Oswald, who is the real protagonist of the novel, and the narration of the events which took place during the seven months preceding Kennedy's assassination. These two narratives finally converge when DeLillo reconstructs the circumstances of November 1963. Inside the main narratives we find various subplots which become essential to the understanding of the writer's thesis. As Happe (1996) points out, this apparently confused and confusing textual structure is the key to understanding the formal organization of the novel as the fragmented organization of the text slowly emerges as a well organized narrative. It is through the presence of these subplots that the reader learns about the projects of the CIA to kill Fidel Castro after the failure of the *Bay of Pigs*'s attack; we also meet Carmine Latta, a fictitious *mafioso* interested in destroying Castro because of the economic interests he has left on the island. Finally, apart from Oswald and Jack Ruby, a number of characters who belong to the CIA, basically men who cannot accept the failure of the

Bay of Pigs. Fidel Castro, Oswald, Ruby, the secret services, the Mafia, President Kennedy and DeLillo's personal interpretation of the events, as in a kaleidoscope, all form a mosaic that the reader constructs while reading the book; according to Christopher Mott: "To incorporate these stories into his text, DeLillo employs what we might call a dialogic narrative, a narrative expressed on the 'voices' of the characters, themselves figures representative of specific ideologies in our recent history" (Mott 133).

III

Throughout the novel, every character's discourse becomes thus the materialisation of his or her symbolic position. While reading *Libra*, what really shifts is the gaze of the spectator as s/he is given not only the unidimensional perspective of television but the wide sample of histories and 'origins' which construct the story. As we have already stressed, the readers realise that the narration is not linear, but that various interests become involved: Oswald's story and obsessions, the constant presence of the Mafia, the secret services, the anti-Castro movement and Jack Ruby. Right at the beginning of the novel we learn of the complicated plot DeLillo has imagined to suggest an interpretation of the events. DeLillo introduces two characters, Laurence Parmenter and Win Everett; both men belonged to the select group of six soldiers who were supposed to start the Bay of Pigs attack. They cannot accept the failure of the operation and the idea of Castro being still firmly in power, so they plot a fake attempt to assassinate President Kennedy in order to prevent him from negotiating with Castro:

'The movement needs to be brought back to life We need an electrifying event. JFK is moving toward a settling of differences with Castro'... '... I am convinced this is what we have to do to get Cuba back. This plan has levels and variations I've only begun to explore but it is already, essentially right. I feel its rightness. I know what scientists mean when they talk about elegant solutions' There was a silence. Then Parmenter said dryly, 'We couldn't hit Castro. So let's hit Kennedy. I wonder if that's the hidden motive here.' 'But we don't hit Kennedy. We miss him,' Win said (*L* 27-28).^{ix}

And another quotation—one with connotations that remind the reader of Debord—in which it is demonstrated as reality is cynically constructed and the spectacle is being prepared:

They wanted a name, a face, a bodily frame they might use to extend their fiction into the world ... someone who would be trailed and possibly apprehended Spanish-speaking men, Mexican, Panamanian, trained specifically for this mission in Cuba ... to be trailed, found, possibly killed by the Secret Service, FBI or local police. Whatever protocol demands Mackey would find this man for Everett. They needed fingerprints, a handwriting sample, a photograph. Mackey would find the other shooters as well. We don't hit the President. We miss him. *We want a spectacular miss* (*L* 50-51. My emphasis).

In the second chapter of part one, '17 April,' the author introduces the character of Nicholas Branch, a retired CIA senior analyst who is in charge of studying the material and the evidence collected on President Kennedy's assassination. A mysterious man, that he knows as the Curator, sends him all the material he is supposed to analyse

and decode in order to give an explanation of what happened in Dallas. The task is overwhelming and full of blind spots, but the Curator has most of the answers. This mysterious character seems to know the ‘truth’ and any time that Branch gets stuck in his titanic task, the Curator is able to produce the right document at the right time in order to redirect the investigation. It is not by chance, then, that François Happe stresses the phonetic similarity between the words Curator and Creator while affirming that such similarity can only mean “... that we are the creatures of those who inform us” (Happe 29). In this sense, Paul Ricoeur (1986) points out that the power of language (and images) and that of imagination are able to construct a reality that can or cannot correspond to the way things really happened. More likely, they forge a fictitious reality that *has* to fit within and become a part of the construction of the ‘social imaginary.’ A mythified version of historical events produces and reproduces—and I use both words in materialistic terms—a collective understanding of these events, it erases the chance of individual answers and prevents the appearance of fissures within the dominant historical vision. As Richard Kirney suggests: “The use of ‘social imaginary’ as an ideological recollection of sacred foundational acts often serves to integrate and legitimate a social order ... by ritualising and codifying its experiences in terms of idealised self-images, recollected from the past, a society provides itself with an ideological stability; a unity of collective imagination which may well be missing from the everyday reality of that society” (Kirney 158).

Branch’s study is filled with books, reports and papers about the assassination and it is from the closeness of his room that the reader is pushed towards a confused world peopled with a myriad different characters. The novel becomes a collective representation of contemporary American society and often reminds the reader of John Dos Passos’s *USA* as the various characters appear and take shape both in their private and public dimension. We not only get Oswald’s story, but we become familiar with the names of a number of people that form a wider net and, through DeLillo’s words, open a fissure in the (hi)story that belongs to the ‘social imaginary.’ It is through the documents collected in Branch’s study that we come across some of the public figures that have filled the chronicles of contemporary history in the last four decades. We can easily situate the origin of the narration in the records Branch studies day after day, month after month and while DeLillo’s narration jumps back and forth on the time line, his characters’ stories emerge from the written material Branch studies night and day.

Can we interpret the character of Branch as the author’s *alter ego*? Maybe it is a possible way of looking at it if we consider some of DeLillo’s declarations on the process of the creation of *Libra*. This is what he said to Adam Begley in 1993: “The first draft of *Libra* sits in ten manuscript boxes. I like knowing it’s in the house. I feel connected to it. It’s the full book, the full experience containable on paper” (Begley 281), and

I was looking for ghosts, not living people. I went to New Orleans, Dallas, Fort Worth and Miami and looked at houses and streets and hospitals, schools and libraries—this is mainly Oswald I’m tracking but others as well—and after a while the characters in my mind and in my notebooks came out into the world. Then there were books, old magazines, old photographs, scientific reports, material printed by obscure presses Then there was the *Warren Report*, which is the *Oxford English Dictionary* of the assassination and also the Joycean novel.

This is the one document that captures the full richness and madness and meaning of the event, despite the fact that it omits about a ton and a half of material (Begley 291-92).^x

If we focus on Branch's attitude towards the amount of written documents he is examining and compare it with DeLillo's long quotation about his research and recollection of sources and information, the similarities of both men's search for an explanation comes clearly to light: "Nicholas Branch sits in the book-filled room, the room of documents, the room of theories and dreams ... Nicholas Branch in his glove-leather armchair is a retired senior analyst of the Central Intelligence Agency, hired on contract *to write* the secret history of the assassination of President Kennedy" (*L* 14-15. My emphasis). Nicholas Branch, as well as the author, needs to run away from the ready-made official version of what happened in Dallas. Both of them believe that the 'truth,' or at least a different reading of the events, will come out of the documents they are studying. Writing and written materials seem to represent the key to the text. Now, if we consider Fredric Jameson's analysis of postmodernity in relation to Modernism, from "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" to the essay "The Aesthetics of Consumer Society," we can affirm that, from his perspective, the media's transcription of reality goes against the modernist (and as he stresses, revolutionary) need for writing a new way of understanding the world and human relations. This is what he points out in "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism": "What has not been taken into account by this view, is however, the social position of the older modernism, or better still, its passionate repudiation by an older Victorian and post-Victorian bourgeoisie ..." (Jameson 1984: 56). On the contrary, the postmodernist stress on images as opposed to writing does not fulfil a real need for a revolutionary change as the culture of postmodernism is representative of the commodification of the aesthetic production. In short, what Jameson is concerned about is that the shift from writing to the visual condemns us to: "... obliterate traditions of the kind which all earlier social information have had, in one way or another, to preserve" (Jameson 1998: 17).

In this sense, Branch has to write his interpretation of the assassination,^{xi} DeLillo is writing his, while Oswald takes shape in front of the reader's eyes through his own notes, postcards and his almost obsessive need to keep a diary and write himself through it: "Aboard the *SS Maasdam* he kept on writing. Rotterdam to New York. He wrote speeches he might one day deliver as a man who'd lived for extended periods under the capitalist and communist systems. He wrote a foreword to "The Kollektive." He wrote a sketch titled "About the Author" (*L* 213). This desperate analysis of the relationship between individuals and collectivity, and the impossibility to negotiate it, can be overcome through writing as it is only the written material which has been left behind that can be used to fight back the imaginary construction of history and give the American people the chance to reflect on their past. In an article written in 1997, Don DeLillo declared that: "In a period of empty millennial frenzy, we may begin to see a precious integrity in the documents of an earlier decade or century" (DeLillo 1997: 62). The call to writing as opposed to the mystifying use of images which is presented in *Libra* situates, in Jamesonian terms, DeLillo closer to a modernist writer than to a post-modernist one. At the same time, DeLillo's cold analysis of this part of the history of the United States, which symbolizes a wider look at the nation's phantoms and hidden fears, reminds us of Jameson's words on his critique of contemporary American culture and society: "...yet American, postmodern culture is the internal and superstructural expression

of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world: in this sense, as throughout class history, *the underside of culture is blood, torture death and horror*" (Jameson 1984: 57. My emphasis).

Oswald keeps a diary and calls it an 'Historic diary'^{xii} because, after being accepted as a Soviet citizen, he himself admits that: "He was a man in history now" (L 149). It is this 'Historic diary' that leads the reader through Oswald's Soviet experience and disillusionment. He writes to define himself for the generations to come, but if his own writing cannot help him to escape from alienation, DeLillo's imaginary reconstruction of the events gives him the chance to let the people know Lee Harvey Oswald's other identit(ies). Oswald the child brought up in a deprived environment, the son, an unfortunate and desperate man, who seeks unsuccessfully to belong to a group. DeLillo's writing defies the rules of the society of the spectacle which has constructed the one dimensional individual the media have made famous and 'real' for the public:

Stateless, world-blind, still a little desperate, he got up in the middle of a spring night and wrote the Historic diary. He wrote in two sittings, breaking for coffee at 4:00 A.M. He wanted to explain himself to posterity. People would read these words someday and understand the fears and aspirations of a man who only wanted to see for myself [sic] what socialism was like. It was his goodbye to Russia. It signified the official end of a major era in his life. It validated the experience, *as the writing of any history brings a persuasion and form to events*. Even as he printed the words, he imagined people reading them, people moved by his loneliness and disappointment, even by his wretched spelling, the childish mess of composition. Let them see the struggle and humiliation, the effort he had to exert to write a simple sentence. The pages were crowded, smudged, urgent, a true picture of his state of mind, of his rage and frustration ... (L 210-11. My emphasis).

Then he compulsively starts writing his autobiography. Lee Harvey Oswald's private and public history can be followed by Branch through the material written on Oswald and by Oswald. He became a Marxist at a very early age, but at eighteen, paradoxically, joined the US Marine Corps. At this point Oswald is sent to Japan where he decides to leave the Marines and flee to the Soviet Union where he becomes a Soviet citizen. Once his Russian adventure comes to an end and he is back in the States, with his Russian wife and child, he is contacted by the CIA and involved in the Kennedy affair. This story is narrated through a number of sources, from Oswald's own notes to the medical reports compiled by the Russian secret services when, at the beginning of his stay in the Soviet Union, he tries to commit suicide so as not to be sent back to the States: "Branch thinks this is the megaton novel James Joyce would have written if he'd moved to Iowa City and lived to a hundred. Everything is here. Baptismal records, report cards, postcards, divorce petitions, cancelled checks, daily timesheets ... thousands of pages of testimony ... an incredible haul of human utterance" (L 181).

As Magali Cornier underlines, even Marguerite, Oswald's mother, is conscious of the power of the written text and strenuously strives to reappropriate her own discourse through writing: "She actively participates in her own self-construction by narrativizing her life story or history, which has been covered or silenced by the world at large: "I can write what's mine" and "I have a right to my book" (Cornier 147). Writing is an

instrument used to (re)construct the historical vision, it becomes a way to defy the society of the spectacle and dislocate the gaze from the fake trichotomy Kennedy/Oswald/Ruby to a wider and more complex reading of President Kennedy's assassination. What has been presented as a simple and straightforward act of madness becomes a complicated and fragmented representation of a society that finds its power of representation and construction of mythical figures on the power of the image, regardless of any serious historical analysis. Oswald seems to be conscious of this when he asks his wife Marina to take a picture of him. It is a picture where the written word 'Militant' goes together with his own image with a rifle in his hands. Words and images together can help build the 'official' version of Lee Harvey Oswald and a deadly trap:

He posed in a corner of the yard, the rifle in his right hand, muzzled up, butt end pressing on his waist, just inches from the holstered .38. The magazines, the Militant and the Worker, were in his left hand, fanned like playing cards. She snapped the shutter. He posed one more time, the rifle in his left hand now, the magazine held under his chin with the word Militant visible above the fold, his shadow trailing to the wooden gate and *his thin smile carried forward by light and time into the frame of official memory* (L 278-79. My emphasis).

In Oswald's and Kennedy's stories, history and television have given the public a round character, the 'killer,' the Foucauldian parricide: Lee Harvey Oswald. Everything fitted, perfect and doubtless. Images transmitted time and again of JFK's assassination, helped to materialise the figure of the killer and provided the public/crowd with his public execution; as Lentricchia reminds us: "... on that weekend of 22 November 1963, Lee Oswald—the name he was known by to that point—thanks to the fathering power of the media becomes rebaptized, forever now 'Lee Harvey Oswald,' a triple-named echo of another media child, 'John Fitzgerald Kennedy'" (Lentricchia 9).^{xiii} Experience is thus codified within the collective with no space left for an individual answer.

In *Libra*, DeLillo problematizes the relationship that the individual maintains with the collectivity in a way that connects the act of writing to the idea of what, according to Irving Howe, is a political novel: "The political novel ... is peculiarly a work of internal tensions. To be a novel at all, it must contain the usual representation of human behaviour and feeling; yet it must also absorb into its stream of movement the hard and perhaps insoluble pellets of modern ideology" (Howe 20). The dichotomical division of thought and the ideological code related to such division is deconstructed in *Libra* while, at the same time, the novel retains the necessity to rethink historically the role that individuals play in constructing collective thinking and in social and political action; as Christopher Mott suggests, Oswald is: "... a loner seeking connection in the United States, and he is a 'comrade' seeking individuality in the Soviet Union" (Mott 137). Most of DeLillo's characters live and suffer this paradoxical situation, as in the case of Raymo, a Cuban that first fought on Castro's side and then decided to abandon Castro to fly to Miami. This is what he says: "Then the communists appeared, entering the unions and rural committees. Castro gave them legal status. There were MiGs in crates waiting for Cuban pilots to learn how to fly them. *Think in collective terms was the cry. The individual must disappear*" (L 186. My emphasis).

The structure of the novel helps the reader to understand the individual without losing sight of the collectivity. Oswald's discourse takes shape through his writing and

through his mother's words—the only character to use the first person narration as Magali Corner points out—but, at the same time, we are witnesses of the questioning of the myth of the lonely gunman. Collective action is problematized and presented to stress how reality can be ambiguous and “assassination is one of the extreme but logical expressions of the course of daily life” (Lentricchia 18). The project of Fidel Castro's assassination (wanted by the Mafia and part of the secret services); the project of President Kennedy's faked assassination; Oswald's attempt of assassinating General Walker are just a few examples of this way of understanding life. The idea of collective action is often linked to conspiracy, annihilation and death: Kennedy's death, Oswald's death but also the death of most of the people involved in the story. A situation which is not recognised by the official investigation: “In 1979 a House select committee determined there was nothing statistically abnormal about the death rate among those who were connected in some way to the events of November 22” (L 57). Collective action is then also related to the fictitious plot DeLillo imagines, but eventually the collective of people involved in it—*The Collective* is also the title of the book Oswald tries to publish—is itself dismantled definitely and, apparently, methodically: “A printout of the names of witnesses, informers, investigators, people linked to Lee H. Oswald, people linked to Jack Ruby, all conveniently and suggestively dead” (L 57).

IV

On the whole, what the reader sees represented in DeLillo's work is the anxiety and incoherence that mark a certain contemporary discourse, a veiled, and at times not so veiled, attack on the lately widely theorised absence of history. The mystical declaration of the ‘death of history’ goes together with the elimination of origins, and relates to the construction of an everlasting present such as the one described, just to name an example, by George Orwell in *1984*. One of the ideas I find useful to explore and relate to DeLillo's depiction and critique of postmodern society is what Fredric Jameson defines as ‘The Nostalgia Mode,’ which is a way of trivialising the historical experience. ‘The Nostalgia Mode’ is understood as the (postmodern) representation of History (in Jamesonian terms, like saying the representation of the ‘Real,’ that is to say of society itself^{xiv}) through a number of culturally accepted stereotypes which can be more easily found in the field of, for example, ‘nostalgia films’ than in serious historical investigation. The result of such a trivial process is twofold: on the one hand, we get a simplification of the historical process while, on the other hand, history is absorbed by the culture industry (Hollywood, in this case), transformed into a commodity and, as a consequence, into a simulacrum of itself.

In Jameson's theorization, the incapability of dealing with history, understood also as a collective experience, is related to what he calls ‘the aesthetics of consumer society’ and to the role that the media play in the construction of reality.^{xv} The frenetic rhythm of information which bombards the public has led us not to be able to retain our past and pushes us to live in an eternal present, a concept that we can also find in the writings of Guy Debord. In *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, the French philosopher underlines how the spectacle construes our everyday reality by incessantly talking on a certain subject, then this same subject is left aside by the laws of the society of the spectacle and disappears as if it had never existed. Its place will be taken by something else. Jameson delves deep into this analysis and, according to him, what we are experiencing is: “... an alarming and pathological symptom of a society that has become incapable of dealing with time and

history ... we seem condemned to seek the historical past through our own pop images and stereotypes about the past, which itself remains forever out of reach” (Jameson 10). Corporate media and the ‘society of the spectacle’ can appropriate history and give their interpretation of it back, erasing and substituting realities and individualities. They can carry on a methodical erasure of historical knowledge and situate the society they re/present within a historical void and construct an everlasting present and, as François Happe suggests referring to *Libra*: “The source is constantly receding, there is no traceable origin” (Happe 30).

Fredric Jameson relates the power of the image to the idea of what he calls “the visual dimension of contemporary culture.” As he stresses in “Transformation of the Image in Postmodernity,” the ‘look’ has been studied from basically three perspectives. Jean Paul Sartre studied it from a philosophical perspective in *Being and Nothingness* (1944) while Michel Foucault worked on the mechanisms of its bureaucratization and the reification of Otherness. The French philosopher’s starting point was *Madness and Civilization*, but then his intellectual project moved on to consider the technologies of the self chiefly through the analysis of the power/knowledge relationship. Now, according to Jameson, these two initial moments have come to an end to make room for a third one that materializes in the postmodern visual and cultural experience. This last moment not only uses the gaze to construct the ‘Other’ in philosophical or cultural terms, but it uses its visual dimension to wrap up our society in such a complete way that it has changed our perception of time and space. So the historical process and/or the idea of history as a collective experience disappear to give space to a narrativization of ‘the Real’ that cannot cope with its contradictions through writing, as the modernists did, but which needs its visual dimension to construct a reality that otherwise would not exist: “Social space is now completely saturated with the culture of the image; the utopian space of the Sartrean reversal, the Foucauldian heterotopias of the unclassed and unclassifiable, all have been triumphantly penetrated and colonized, the authentic and the unsaid, *in-vu, non-dit*, inexpressible, alike, fully translated into the visible and the cultural familiar” (Jameson 1998: 111).

Following these patterns of thought, what we finally get from reading *Libra* is the questioning of a world that has lost its memory, or has not been allowed to have one, as the historical reality has been constructed through images which suggests one single way of facing it. For that reason, this reality becomes the only known and possible one. As a consequence of this, the assassination of President Kennedy is then transformed into an inexplicable event, the result of a mad man’s action; as Steven Best suggests: “Rather than concretising history in narrative and popular memory, culture, in its degraded, commodified form, serves to induce amnesia and thwart collective action” (Best xii). The assassination becomes something that simply happened, is crystallised into the conscience of a whole nation and that, as a result, transforms both the victim and the parricide into unquestioned and unquestionable myths. It is at this point that the past is annihilated while the present fuses into the future through “narratives that secure their meaning and identities within time” (Best xii). The call to history that obviously comes out of DeLillo’s literary production openly relates the whole question to the terrain of both culture and politics.^{xvi} His politicisation of reality does not refer to minority discourses or to the histories of marginalized sectors of society, at least not openly or directly,^{xvii} but it reinstates history into a wider discourse. The novel loses its individual dimension and participates in the questioning of the construction of the hegemonic historical consciousness (or lack of it). As DeLillo states: “The novelist does not want to

tell you things you already know about the great, the brave, the powerless, the cruel. Fiction slips into the skin of historical figures. It gives them sweaty palms and head colds and urine-stained underwear and lines to speak in private and the error of restless nights. This is how consciousness is extended and human truth is seen new” (DeLillo 1997: 63). This is an intellectual strategy that opens the way to the possibility of rewriting the lives of those who have been cancelled by History and whose chance to rewrite themselves has been annihilated by the ‘death of history’; these individuals have been frozen in a position that does not allow them to decolonize their subjectivity by reinterpreting their origins, as the disappearance of history has cancelled them for good. In Benjaminian terms, we could say that the acceptance of the declaration of the ‘death of history’ denies the victims of History the use of a voice and the chance to put together their own historical knowledge. DeLillo’s narrativization of history is a way to recuperate dissenting voices and opinions that the official version of President Kennedy’s assassination has erased from the general consciousness of the American people.

Notes

1. The research leading to the publication of this essay was made possible by a Research Project (PB98-0181) financed by the *Comisión Interministerial de Ciencia y Tecnología (Ministerio de Educación y Cultura)*.
2. I am aware that ‘globalization’ or ‘globalized society’ are difficult and ambiguous concepts to use. Critics and analysts do not agree on the notion of globalization, but it is not the purpose of this paper to participate in the discussion about this issue. Henceforth, when the term is used, I mean ‘a matter of transnational domination and uniformity’ (Fredric Jameson, preface, *The Cultures of Globalization* xiii). An essay I strongly recommend is Masao Miyoshi’s “Globalization, Culture and the University,” *The Cultures of Globalization*, eds. Fredric Jameson & Masao Miyoshi [Durham: Duke UP, 1998] 247-70).
3. The essays he has published in the last two decades on postmodern society were collected and published in 1998. See *The Cultural Turn* (London: Verso, 1998). For a general introduction to Fredric Jameson’s critical project see Silvia Caporale-Bizzini, “La teoría literaria dentro de la Crítica Cultural,” *Historia de la Crítica Americana del Siglo XX*, ed. Ricardo Miguel. Forthcoming.
4. See his essay, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” *The Cultural Turn* (London: Verso, 1998) 1-20.
5. In *The Cultural Turn* (London: Verso, 1998) 93-135.
6. Douglas Keeseey underlines: “Each of his [DeLillo’s] six novels of the seventies plays some variation on a standard literary genre: autobiography (*Americana*), sports novel (*End Zone*), rock novel (*Great Jones Street*), science fiction (*Ratner’s Star*), espionage thriller (*Players*), spy novel and western (*Running Dog*). In the eighties, DeLillo began to employ innovative forms of his own devising: *The Names* is an original version of interaction fiction; *White Noise* is an experimental mixture of the college novel, the domestic novel, disaster fiction, the crime novel, and social satire; and *Libra* is a fictionalised biography. Finally, *Mao II*, DeLillo’s first novel of the nineties, might be described as the autobiography of an alter ego, the writer DeLillo is afraid he might become” (Keeseey vii). Since Keeseey’s study, Don DeLillo has published *Underworld* (1997), *Valparaiso: a Play in Two Acts* (1999), two short stories, “The Angel

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- Esmeralda” published in *Esquire* in May 1994 and “Sputnik,” published in *The New Yorker* in 1997. Both are included in *Underworld*.
7. Arnold Weinstein compares DeLillo to another French intellectual, Roland Barthes: “DeLillo’s cumulative project resembles at times that of Roland Barthes, especially the Barthes of *Mythologies*, for he is scrupulously attentive to the ways in which belief and passion are displaced, renamed, formatted, and commodified in a materialistic age” (Weinstein 290).
 8. See François Happe, “‘Jade Idols’ and ‘Ruined Cities of Trivia’: History and Fiction in DeLillo’s *Libra*,” *American Studies in Scandinavia* 28 (1996): 23-35.
 9. The edition I quote from is: Don DeLillo, *Libra* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991).
 10. François Happe underlines how DeLillo’s references to James Joyce in the book and when he talks about the novel, are not casual. This is what he observes: “Oswald plays with the letters of his name as with alphabet blocks ... it ... aims at reminding us—as Joyce does in *Finnegans Wake* with the name of Anna Livia (DeLillo constant references to Joyce are not coincidental)—that a name is a sequence of letters, and as such, lends itself to unlimited manipulation. The Oswald of *Libra* is made of letters. He is text” (Happe 33). The Joycean references in the text are underlined also by Douglas Keeseey, who points out how “If DeLillo’s short stories are his *Dubliners*, and if *Americana* is his *Portrait of the Artist*, then *Libra* is DeLillo’s *Ulysses*, the masterpiece of his maturity” (Keeseey 194).
 11. “The documents are stacked everywhere. Branch has homicide tests and autopsy diagrams. He has the results of spectrographic tests on bullet fragments. He has reports by acoustical consultants and experts in blur analysis” (*L* 59).
 12. See, for example, the fragments of the ‘Historic Diary,’ quoted by DeLillo on pages 98-99.
 13. Douglas Keeseey quotes from an interview granted by President Kennedy’s father: “Joseph Kennedy, Sr., once remarked about his son’s campaign, ‘We are going to sell Jack like soap flakes,’ and President Kennedy himself is known to have admitted, ‘We couldn’t survive without TV’” (Keeseey 167).
 14. See Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious. Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Meuthen, 1981).
 15. “The informational function of the media would thus be to help us forget, to serve as the very agents and mechanisms for our historical amnesia” (Jameson 1998: 20).
 16. “We have a rich literature. But sometimes it’s a literature too ready to be incorporated into the ambient noise. This is why we need the writer in opposition, the novelist who writes against power, who writes against the corporation or the state or the whole apparatus of assimilation. We’re all one beat away from becoming elevator music” (DeLillo in Begley 290).
 17. “Although no ethnics have central roles in DeLillo’s fiction, the social distance of his upbringing contributed, I believe, to his double view of American life, its promises and mythologies, an appreciation of its rich potentialities and an ironic sense of its excessive failure” (LeClair 14).

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