The Kennedy assassination has haunted the American cultural imagination for the last half century. In *Flying in to Love*, for example, the novelist D. M. Thomas interweaves the known facts of the event with outlines of an alternative history in which Kennedy isn’t assassinated, the latter expressing a collective wish fulfillment fantasy on the part of a nation in thrall to JFK’s seductive image. The novel begins with a declaration from a Dallas psychologist that “ten thousand dreams a night . . . are dreamt about Kennedy’s assassination.”¹ And, in fact, the event has been the focus of thousands of books, magazine and newspaper articles, novels, films, paintings, and computer animations, its story told in genres including journalism, memoir, history, biography, government reports, sociological inquiries, popular conspiracy exposés, literary and pulp fiction, museums and monuments, Hollywood film, and avant-garde art.² These retellings evince a sharp divide between those who believe that Oswald acted alone (as the Warren Commission insisted), and those who are convinced that there was some kind of cover-up or conspiracy.

The assassination is now routinely viewed as the mother of all conspiracy theories, the defining event responsible for a widespread and ongoing sense of suspicion that the official version of things is a lie.³ According to an annual opinion poll, three-quarters of Americans trusted their government in the early 1960s; by the early 1990s, three quarters of Americans *distrusted* their government. With respect to the assassination, the overwhelming majority of Americans now believe that it was not the work of a lone gunman but was part of a large conspiracy.⁴

In the immediate aftermath of the shooting, however, it was not obvious that a popular culture of paranoia would be the inevitable reaction to the event. Given the recent experience of the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, as well as decades of FBI director J. Edgar Hoover’s anticommunist scaremongering, the majority of Americans suspected some form of communist conspiracy. We now know that behind the scenes Hoover was – ironically – keen
to downplay any suggestion that Oswald was part of a larger conspiracy, lest embarrassing details emerge about the FBI’s failure to keep a close enough watch on a character who was indeed on their radar. Likewise the CIA, during the Warren Commission’s investigations, dragged its heels on providing any information that might have shed light on the conspiratorial connections swirling around the shooting, such as the obviously crucial revelation that the Kennedy brothers had known about (and perhaps even urged) plots involving the Mafia to assassinate Castro in Cuba. In the immediate hours following the shooting, Lyndon Johnson was panicked lest the killing of Kennedy was the first part of a much wider enemy plot to overthrow the U.S. government. Although it quickly became apparent that this was not the case, the new president remained extremely concerned that any revelations about a Cuban or Soviet connection to the assassination would lead to public demand for retaliation, which could result in a nuclear war. Johnson used the paranoid specter of global destruction to strong-arm Chief Justice Earl Warren and other reluctant politicians into serving on the Warren Commission, and behind the scenes made it clear to all involved that the FBI’s story of a lone misfit gunman was to be the end of the matter. There is reasonable evidence to suggest, however, that LBJ privately continued to believe that there had been some kind of conspiracy.  

The publication of the Warren Commission Report in 1964 indeed succeeded to some extent in quelling public fears. However, from the moment that Jack Ruby shot Oswald many Americans felt an increasing sense of disbelief that the president could have been killed by an insignificant loser like Oswald. As William Manchester, the historian initially endorsed by Jackie Kennedy to write an account of her husband’s death, later commented:

if you put the murdered President of the United States on one side of a scale and that wretched waif Oswald on the other side, it doesn’t balance. You want to add something weightier to Oswald. It would invest the President’s death with meaning, endowing him with martyrdom. He would have died for something. A conspiracy would, of course, do the job nicely.  

The emergence from the mid-1960s onward of critical accounts that challenged the official version of events can in part be explained by the overwhelming mood of national grief, coupled with a sense of the metaphysical mismatch between the grandeur of Kennedy and the pettiness of Oswald. More important, however, was the increasingly realization among a growing network of amateur researchers that the Warren Commission Report had serious flaws. Although at first the “assassination buffs” were concerned with documenting the inconsistencies and contradictions in the official account, later in the 1960s they began to produce full-blown conspiracy
theories, provoked in part by a suspicion that many of the traumatic events of the decade – most notably the assassinations not just of JFK but of Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, and Robert Kennedy – were all connected in a sinister way.

Obsessive interest in these events might in some cases have been the result of a worldview bordering on the clinically paranoid, but it is important to note that conspiracy-minded interpretations were a justifiable reaction to the secrets, lies, and cover-ups that marred the official account. Revelations about skullduggery on the part of the government, the military, and the intelligence agencies began to emerge in the late 1960s, with the publication, for example, of the Pentagon Papers. These revelations only quickened pace with the Watergate hearings and the Church Committee investigations into the CIA in the mid-1970s. If the American government had been involved in madcap plots in collusion with the Mafia to assassinate Castro, the thinking went, then who knew what else they were capable of? Likewise when viewers saw the Zapruder footage for the first time on Geraldo Rivera’s television show in 1975, many were convinced that the official version of events was a blatant lie that had been kept from them for more than a decade – in this case because they were able to see with their own eyes that Kennedy must have shot from in front rather than from Oswald’s position in the Texas School Book Depository behind the president. At least, so it seemed to those convinced of the authority of their own perceptions.

Believing that the Kennedy assassination was part of a larger plot involving a secret government within the government thus came in the 1970s to seem like an entirely rational proposition to many Americans. Moreover, many ordinary citizens felt that it was their duty to investigate the assassination themselves, by keeping up with the rapidly growing library of critical accounts; by delving into the twenty-six volumes of testimony and exhibits that formed part of the Warren Commission Report; or even by undertaking their own detective work. Many of these amateur investigations slid into fanciful scenarios involving multiple shooters, forged autopsy reports, switched corpses, faked footage, and elaborate plots. Their real significance, however, is not the immediate light they shed on the specifics of the assassination, but the collective – albeit often contradictory – challenge they presented to the official version of events. In short, they raised the question of who has the moral authority to tell a nation’s history, particularly if the government is regarded as illegitimate because of the abuses of trust it has committed. Conspiracy theorists of differing stripes pitted their versions against the detailed accounts of the events in Dallas produced by Kennedy aides, biographers, historians, newspaper and television journalists, and official government inquiries.
This produced a competition to provide the most accurate account, with claims to authority based on familiarity, objectivity, immediacy, comprehensiveness, and various other criteria.

As part of this jostling for cultural authority, American novelists and filmmakers have repeatedly returned to the assassination of President Kennedy, sometimes directly but at other times obliquely, and most have tended to challenge the official version of events. Some of the most prominent post-war American novelists – Don DeLillo, Norman Mailer, James Ellroy, and Stephen King – have focused on the Kennedy assassination because it raises fundamental questions about the connection between conspiracy plot and narrative plot, and because it resonates thematically and emotionally with many of their existing concerns. They have all claimed in their own way that the novel is able to provide privileged insights into the event. Norman Mailer, for example, advocated a more radical, democratic approach to the inquiry: “One would propose one last new commission, one real commission – a literary commission supported by public subscription to spend a few years on the case . . . I would trust a commission headed by [literary critic] Edmund Wilson before I trusted another by Earl Warren. Wouldn’t you?”  

One of the problems that these writers have encountered, however, is the sense that the primary sources they are drawing on are already stranger and more unnerving than anything they could write. DeLillo and Mailer in particular acknowledged that the Warren Commission Report might well be the ultimate postmodern novel, dwarfing any of their own efforts. Mailer characterized it as “a prodigious work, compendious enough to bear comparison to the Encyclopedia Britannica (had the Britannica been devoted to only one subject),” a form of “Talmudic text begging for commentary and further elucidation,” and “a Comstock Lode of novelistic material.” DeLillo memorably called the report “the megaton novel James Joyce would have written if he’d moved to Iowa City and lived to be a hundred.”

Although it might appear that the Kennedy assassination pushed American literature toward an aesthetic of paranoia, even before the event novelists including William S. Burroughs, Philip K. Dick, Joseph Heller, Ken Kesey, Thomas Pynchon, and Kurt Vonnegut had explored the idea of the embattled individual as a victim of a vast yet secret system of bureaucratic, medical, media, and even linguistic control. The notion of a vast secret organization controlling an individual’s body and even his or her mind continued to resonate through a wide range of American cultural and political expression both before and after the assassination. This widespread sense of agency panic (in Timothy Melley’s evocative phrase) drew upon the deep well of possessive individualism, such that any erosion of a tightly policed
boundary between self and society is viewed as if it were the result of a conspiracy of social control.  

In its most extreme versions the level of suspicion reaches epidemic proportions, as characters begin to distrust the very nature of reality, suspecting that it is in fact constructed by some mysterious, all-powerful enemy. These more metaphysical writings, which threaten to plunge characters and reader alike into a mise en abyme of doubt, suggest a close connection between paranoia and postmodernism. If, as some postmodern theory has suggested, there is no direct, unmediated access to an agreed-upon reality, then it follows that there is no way of distinguishing for certain between reality and what “They” are trying to make you think is the case – and thus no guaranteed way of telling the difference between a paranoid and a sane interpretation of events.

Kennedy’s assassination gave focus to this preexisting anxiety about the individual’s agency and his or her ability to correctly interpret the nature of reality, generating what many commentators saw as a widespread existential crisis. As Norman Mailer put it, “Since the assassination of John F. Kennedy we have been marooned in one of two equally intolerable spiritual states, apathy or paranoia.”

Richard Condon’s novel Winter Kills (1974) explores these twin spiritual states of apathy and paranoia. His novel projects the Kennedy assassination through the lens of mid-1970s cynicism, telling the story of the younger brother of a murdered president who belatedly tries to get to the bottom of his sibling’s death fourteen years previously. Condon had already explored the idea of a presidential assassination in his 1959 novel The Manchurian Candidate, a tale of a soldier who becomes a mind-controlled assassin after being brainwashed by communists during the Korean War (and who, in an Oedipal twist very much in keeping with the paranoid sense of an imperiled masculinity, was being controlled by his own mother all along). Winter Kills amps up this atmosphere of conspiracy even further, setting up a seemingly endless chain of investigation in which Nick pursues various wild geese in the form of fake confessions, false leads, and double crosses. The novel provides a catalogue of the various theories about the Kennedy assassination that had fallen in and out of vogue by the mid-1970s, conjuring up the specter of a vast yet shadowy conspiracy so powerful and ruthless that it is able to set in motion a mind-boggling play of misdirection. Nick finds out that the man he thought was a police chief implicated in the plot had in fact died years ago, and that the chief’s assistant was himself a fake, as indeed was the oil millionaire who had also offered up a seemingly sincere revelation. Like Thomas Pynchon’s The Crying of Lot 49 (which itself can be read as a parable of the Kennedy assassination), Condon’s novel raises the alarming
possibility that the final truth might never be found, and that the search for a conspiracy ultimately leads to perpetual paranoia rather than insight. But the ever-accelerating free-fall plunge of paranoia is halted in the last few pages of the novel when we learn that, in fact, all the false clues have been deliberately fabricated and planted for Nick by an all-too-real conspiracy of the secret ruling elite led by his father – a superrich, supercorrupt Joseph P. Kennedy figure.

The idea that the Kennedy assassination produced a thoroughgoing crisis of knowledge underpins (albeit at times obliquely) a remarkable cluster of conspiracy thrillers made in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, including Blow-Up (1966), Klute (1971), The Parallax View (1974), The Conversation (1974), Three Days of the Condor (1975), All The President’s Men (1976), and Blow Out (1981). Michelangelo Antonioni’s Blow-Up is one of the most interesting films inspired by the Kennedy assassination, even though it doesn’t actually address the event itself. The story concerns a London fashion photographer (played by David Hemmings) who takes a picture of an unknown couple in a park. When he develops the print, the woman in the shot (in a subtle echo of the Kennedy case) seems to be looking toward a shadowy figure with a gun who is hidden behind a fence. When, like Kennedy assassination researchers, the photographer blows the image up further and further, he thinks he can spot in the blurry shapes a body hidden in the bushes. Like the Zapruder footage and other images that accidentally captured the moment of the Kennedy assassination, the photo in Blow-Up promises to yield the true narrative of a crime. Yet it also raises the possibility that the “murder” visible in the photo is entirely a product of the photographer’s paranoid imagination, the “body” merely the grain of the film stock.

Alan J. Pakula’s The Conversation and Brian De Palma’s Blow Out both function as homages to Antonioni’s New Wave film. The former stars Gene Hackman as an audio surveillance expert who thinks he has captured on tape evidence of a murder committed by the couple he is spying on. He begins, however, to doubt his own perceptions and even his own mind, by the end of the film frantically ripping apart his apartment in an attempt to discover the bugs that he is convinced must be there. Blow Out, meanwhile, tells the story of a sound effects technician played by John Travolta who accidentally records what turns out to be a Chappaquiddick-like incident involving a senator and a car crash off a bridge. In The Parallax View, a newspaper reporter played by Warren Beatty is an accidental witness to the assassination of a presidential candidate, in a story with strong echoes of the assassinations of both John and Robert Kennedy. Beatty’s character uncovers clues to a vast conspiracy that reaches from the sinister Parallax Corporation into the heart of the U.S. government, but his life and his mind
begin to unravel as he becomes obsessed with the case, and he is eventually killed by the shadowy organization that he thought he had penetrated. Each of these films balances subliminal glimpses into a colossal and potentially limitless conspiracy against the possibility that the conspiracy is all in the mind of the obsessive amateur detective haunted by the case in which he has become embroiled. Unlike the traditional detective novel or Hollywood thriller, these gritty exercises in paranoid cynicism offer no satisfying resolutions. Instead they suggest that the ultimate truth of an impossibly vast corporate and government conspiracy (which the amateur investigations into the Kennedy assassination seemed to bring to light) might always remain frustratingly just out of reach. This notion is coupled with the equally disturbing possibility that all the clues are not part of some meaningful if horrifyingly sinister plot but are simply random.

These films thus make clear the connection between the Kennedy assassination and the desire for and distrust of knowledge at the heart of postmodernism. As the narrator of Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* puts it: “If there is something comforting – religious, if you want – about paranoia, there is still also anti-paranoia, where nothing is connected to anything, a condition not many of us can bear for long.” In the wake of the Kennedy assassination additional evidence led not to convergence but to further dispute, producing an infinite regress of suspicion that began to cast everything into doubt – even the fundamental ground rules of proof and evidence. The problem was not that there is too little evidence to solve the case, but too much.

In contrast to these conspiracy thrillers, Oliver Stone’s *JFK* (1991) tries to weave its numerous strands of evidence into a single coherent plot. A residual faith in efficient agency and simple causality remains visible in the film’s whirlwind presentation of just about every conspiracy theory surrounding the case. *JFK* suggests that every seeming discrepancy in the case (such as the shadows on Oswald’s chin in the infamous backyard photos) is not the result of the inevitable messiness of actual historical events but the handiwork of an all-powerful conspiracy: we see unknown hands forging the photos with clinical precision. Stone’s evocation of a vast yet vague “military-industrial complex” plotting to get rid of Kennedy at first resembles the shadowy plots depicted in the other films discussed above. But the conspiracy in Stone’s film is not so much a loose network of intersecting interests as a tight-knit cabal – albeit an improbably far-reaching one that nevertheless operates with the coordination and determination of a ruthless individual or a traditional image of a small group of dedicated plotters.

Literary fiction took up these issues in its own way. Don DeLillo’s *Libra* (1988) provides a fascinating meditation on the problems of agency, causality, and conspiracy in its account of the Kennedy assassination. DeLillo
subsequently took issue with Stone’s JFK because it offered not much more than a “particular type of nostalgia: the nostalgia for a master plan, the conspiracy which explains everything.” Yet establishment critics such as George Will had attacked Libra itself for dabbling in conspiracy theory, claiming that it was a work of a “literary vandal.” On his part, DeLillo argued that fiction might provide some comfort in the face of the crisis of knowledge that the assassination brought about. For DeLillo, “that day in Dallas changed the way we think about the world,” producing what he calls in Libra an “aberration in the heartland of the real” (15). The event had become surrounded by such ambiguity that it had undermined “our trust in a coherent reality,” leading us “to feel that what’s been missing over these past twenty-five years is a sense of manageable reality.” With all the contradictory evidence, the “official documents lost, missing, altered, classified and destroyed” and the “flood of coincidence,” it is no surprise that after the assassination “a culture of distrust and paranoia began to develop, a sense of the secret manipulation of history,” a feeling that had only intensified since. In the “Author’s Note” at the end of Libra, DeLillo insists that “because this book makes no claim to literal truth, because it is only itself, apart and complete, readers may find refuge here – a way of thinking about the assassination without being constrained by half-facts or overwhelmed by possibilities, by the tide of speculation that widens with the years” (458).

One plot strand of Libra provides a self-conscious reflection on the way the case has overwhelmed people’s ability to make sense of it. DeLillo focuses this problem through the fictional character Nicholas Branch, a historian who has been commissioned by the CIA to write the “secret history” of the case for the agency. Branch, a stand-in for both DeLillo and the reader, is in theory in the ideal position to write the definitive history of the assassination thanks to his unrestricted access to all documents. Instead, however, he is floored by the sheer mass of evidence. In the Warren Commission Report, that “Joycean book of America,” Branch discovers that “everything is here”: “Baptismal records, report cards, postcards, divorce petitions, canceled checks, daily timesheets, tax returns, property lists, post-operative x-rays, photos of knotted string, thousands of pages of testimony, of voices droning in hearing rooms in old courthouse buildings, an incredible haul of human utterance” (181). The problem for Branch is that he cannot be sure whether a particular piece of evidence is significant or trivial, and in what conceivable universe all these details could form part of a single plot (in both senses of the word). Branch speculates that the most obvious way to “regain our grip on things” is to “build theories that gleam like jade idols, intriguing systems of assumption, four-faced, graceful” (15) – in other
words, to construct elaborate conspiracy theories. Yet he resolutely tries to avoid this temptation: “There is no need to invent the grand and masterful scheme, the plot that reaches flawlessly in all directions” (58). He reminds himself that he is “writing a history, not a study of the ways in which people succumb to paranoia” (57). But faced by the mountain of suggestive evidence, even he begins to succumb to the vertigo of paranoid interpretation that he had hoped to resist:

The Oswald shadings, the multiple images, the split perceptions – eye color, weapons caliber – these seem a foreboding of what is to come. The endless fact-rubble of the investigations. How many shots, how many gunmen, how many directions? Powerful events breed their network of inconsistencies. The simple facts elude authentication. How many wounds on the President’s body? What is the size and shape of the wounds? The multiple Oswald reappears. Isn’t that him in a photograph of a crowd of people on the front steps of the Book Depository just before the shooting begins? A startling likeness, Branch concedes. He concedes everything. He questions everything, including the basic suppositions we make about our world of light and shadow, solid objects and ordinary sounds, and our ability to measure such things, to determine weight, mass and direction, to see things as they are, recall them clearly, be able to say what happened. (15)

Fifteen years into his task, Branch – faced with this embarrassment of riches – still has not been able to start writing.

For all its self-conscious reflection on the epistemological quicksand surrounding the case, Libra does seem to provide a form of “redemptive truth” and “a sense that we’ve arrived at a resolution.” The novel creates a psychologically plausible account of Oswald as a politically motivated yet ultimately misguided lone gunman, but it also provides an equally believable account of a conspiracy of renegade CIA operatives and Cuban exiles. It might therefore seem that DeLillo is hedging his bets by including both a lone gunman and a conspiracy theory, but the connections and tensions between the two plot lines makes the reader rethink what have come to seem logically and politically incompatible positions. The traditional view of a conspiracy is that it is tight-knit and coldhearted:

If we are on the outside, we assume a conspiracy is the perfect working of a scheme. Silent nameless men with unadorned hearts. A conspiracy is everything that ordinary life is not. It’s the inside game, cold, sure, undistracted, forever closed off to us. We are the ones, the innocents, trying to make some rough sense of the daily jostle. Conspirators have a logic and a daring beyond our reach. All conspiracies are the same taut story of men who find coherence in some criminal act. (440)
In *Libra*, however, the conspiracy is not a “perfect working of a scheme.” Branch, for example, has “learned enough about the days and months preceding November 22 to reach a determination that the conspiracy against the President was a rambling affair that succeeded in the short term due mainly to chance” (441). The initial plan was to stage a spectacular attempt on the president’s life, with a faked paper trail leading back to a fictional patsy with connections to Castro’s Cuba, in order to get the idea of invading the island back on the public agenda after the 1961 Bay of Pigs fiasco. However, at a point that none of the conspirators can quite identify, the plan morphs into a full-blown plot to assassinate Kennedy, not least because Oswald turns up on the conspirators’ doorstep exactly matching the “cardboard cut-out” (339) they had been constructing. At the heart of the conspiracy plot, then, lie a number of uncanny coincidences and happenstance events that undermine the notion that the conspirators are ruthlessly in control of every detail. Unlike Stone’s scarily efficient conspiracy in *JFK*, the plot in *Libra* consists of a loose and seemingly uncoordinated network of low-level intelligence agents. A scene showing an intelligence operation being planned inverts the usual hierarchical pyramid of corporate decision making, since the doctrine of plausible deniability demands that those at the top of the tree have little idea what is happening at ground level. The conspiracy in *Libra*, then, emerges as much from its own inscrutable logic (“secrets build their own networks” [152]) and the complexity of a decentered network as from the intentions of the conspirators.

Lone gunman and conspiracy theories are usually seen as diametrically opposed, but *Libra* shows how both interpretations equally rely on a fantasy that history is the result of the clear-sighted intentions of ruthless individuals, whether alone or in conspiracy with other plotters. The novel reveals that both Oswald and the plotters are not in control of their own actions, as both sides get caught up in circumstances, coincidences, and forces beyond their control. Both the CIA conspirators and Oswald (who wants to think of himself as a lone wolf, albeit one who is in step with the onward march of history) suffer from the paranoid belief that their lives and their thoughts are controlled by external forces, be they the CIA, the media, fate, or the logic of history itself. In compensation they turn to violence to try to restore a sense of agency. The irony, however, is that both the CIA officers and Oswald have internalized images of heroic gunslinging action from Hollywood without entirely realizing it; their innermost desires are already constructed by the mass media.

For DeLillo the wider significance of the assassination is the effect that this postmodern process of mediated experience has had on American society at
large, not least because of endless, numbing repetition in the media of the violent deaths of Kennedy and Oswald. With his attempt to turn himself into a celebrity hero by murdering the television idol president, Oswald becomes “the first of those soft white dreamy young men who plan the murder of a famous individual – a president, a presidential candidate, a rock star – as a way of organizing their loneliness and misery, making a network out of it, a web of connections.” Ultimately “Oswald changed history not only through his involvement in the death of the president, but in prefiguring such moments of the American absurd,” that morbid catalogue of celebrity assassinations, serial killings, and high school shootings over the last five decades.23

For DeLillo is it only in the light of subsequent events and a “condition of estrangement and helplessness, an undependable reality” that the real meaning of the Kennedy assassination becomes clear.24 The assassination, it might be argued, has played a similar role in the career of DeLillo. It is an event that provides the subterranean motivation for much of his work, and which only belatedly comes to the surface:

**DECURTIS:** The Kennedy assassination seems perfectly in line with the concerns of your fiction. Do you feel you could have invented it if it hadn’t happened?

**DELLILLO:** Maybe it invented me… As I was working on *Libra*, it occurred to me that a lot of tendencies in my first eight novels seemed to me to be collecting around the dark center of the assassination. So it’s possible I wouldn’t have become the kind of writer I am if it weren’t for the assassination.25

The same could be said for many of the other artists, filmmakers, and writers who have tackled the Kennedy assassination. With his already evident fascination with violent death, mass culture and celebrity, it comes as little surprise that in the aftermath of the assassination Andy Warhol should churn out a whole series of silkscreen portraits of Jackie Kennedy – portraits that are not so much poignant depictions of the grief of the dead president’s widow as flat reworkings of the saturation coverage in *LIFE* magazine, the tragedy now reduced to a commodity. With its argument that everything went wrong with America when Kennedy was killed because he threatened to pull out of Vietnam, Stone’s *JFK* finally provided the logically and emotionally missing piece in a filmmaking career that up to then had concentrated on the idea that the Vietnam War had unmanned America in general and Oliver Stone in particular. Although Norman Mailer’s massive nonfiction novel *Oswald’s Tale* (1995) departs from his earlier view of the assassination as a conspiracy of reactionary forces against the existentialist glamour of the Kennedy White House, the novel is also a crystallization of many of the concerns that had been circling around Mailer’s writing in the intervening years, including
a fascination with state secrets in general and the CIA in particular, and an obsession with the romantic possibility of individual agency in the face of massive social forces. “Oswald,” Mailer writes, “was a protagonist, a prime mover, a man who made things happen – in short, a figure larger than others would credit him for being.” James Ellroy’s two assassination-related novels also provide an intensification of ideas that had been central to his earlier works. *American Tabloid* and *The Cold Six Thousand* continue chronologically from Ellroy’s LA Trilogy, a pulp-fictional exploration of the seedy side of Los Angeles from the 1940s to the 1950s. For Ellroy the assassination was not the product of pure and clear motives, but the inevitable consequence of an endemic condition of crime, corruption, and compromise in which the Kennedys were as much players as victims. In a similar fashion, Stephen King finally got around to completing his Kennedy assassination novel, *11/22/63*, nearly four decades after he had started writing it in the early 1970s. Like others of his generation, King starts from the emotional pull of wanting history to have taken a different path: “Save Kennedy, save his brother. Save Martin Luther King. Stop the race riots. Stop Vietnam, maybe . . . Get rid of one wretched waif, buddy, and you could save millions of lives.” With the distance of time, however, King’s time-travel alternative history provides him with the narrative structure for working through this fantasy in the light of a subsequently more cynical view of Kennedy.

Alongside the shadow that the Kennedy assassination has cast over the individual careers of significant postwar American artists and writers, it has also come to play a key role in theoretical discussions of postmodernism and paranoia. The cultural critic Fredric Jameson, for example, argues that the Kennedy assassination is significant not because of the political changes it may have brought about, but because as the first global television event it offered a utopian glimpse of a new type of collective experience that emerged from within mainstream mass culture rather than in opposition to it. Jameson sees the assassination as the “inaugural event” of the 1960s and postmodernism, ushering in a world in which experience is never direct and unmediated but always channeled through media representations. Jameson also argues that popular conspiracy thrillers such as *The Parallax View* are revelatory not because they challenge the orthodox version of events, but because, in their self-reflexive attention to technologies of connectivity, they provide an analogy for the totality of global capitalism that, Jameson contends, is impossible to apprehend directly. “Conspiracy theory,” Jameson concludes, “is the poor person’s cognitive mapping in the postmodern age.”

In a similar vein, the media theorist Jean Baudrillard views the Kennedy assassination as marking the beginning of a crisis of representation, the full
import of which would only become clear later. In his account of the way that style has replaced substance in the political arena, Baudrillard suggests that the Kennedy assassination only comes to take on the role of the original moment of trauma with the discovery of its fake copies, those “puppet attempts” on later presidents that provide an “aura of artificial menace in order to conceal that they were nothing other than mannequins of power.”

In effect it is only following the “vertigo of interpretations” surrounding Watergate that we can belatedly posit the Kennedy assassination as the real deal. And yet that sense of vertigo is itself partly an effect of a crisis of confidence that emerged from the Kennedy assassination.

The Kennedy assassination has thus come to function as a convenient fiction, an imagined origin for many of the profound changes in the way that Americans experience reality – changes that in other contexts go by the name of postmodernism. The event thus functions as the primal scene of postmodernism, a symbolically necessary but fantasized cause of the “society of the spectacle” – a period that, as William Burroughs noted, is also marked by the belief that the “paranoid is the person in possession of all the facts.”

NOTES

2 For a survey of different ways in which the assassination has been represented, see Peter Knight, The Kennedy Assassination (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007).
7 See Olmsted, Real Enemies, 111–48.
9 Norman Mailer, Oswald’s Tale: An American Mystery (London: Little, Brown, 1995), 351.
10 Don DeLillo, Libra (New York: Viking, 1988), 181. Subsequent references to this edition are cited in parentheses in the text.
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11 For an account of these and other writers, see Tony Tanner, City of Words: American Fiction 1950–1970 (London: Jonathan Cape, 1971).
15 On Pynchon and paranoia, see Peter Knight, Conspiracy Culture: From the Kennedy Assassination to “The X-Files” (London: Routledge, 2001), chap. 1.
21 DeLillo, “Oswald.”
23 DeLillo, “Oswald.”
24 Ibid.