A Shadow Underneath: The Secret History of Paranoia, Borders and Terrorism in Postwar American Literature and Film

by

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ABSTRACT

This project explores the contested status of the concept of paranoia by tracing its historical re-articulations through American literature and film. Focusing on two specific themes – borders and terrorism – the dissertation reveals how U.S. fears of collapsing borders and terrorist violence provide precise historical examples of how paranoia reinforces national, social, and individual difference. By recovering paranoia's lost meanings and situating its disputed definitional territory, the dissertation repositions paranoia within a historical framework reconsidering literature and films’ impact shaping the term, aiming to prove, ultimately, that paranoia has a broader, more nuanced history than Freud's hegemonic definition as "repressed homosexuality" and "projection."

The introduction discusses the first English definition of “paranoia” in 1811 – “alienation of mind” and “defect in judgment” – by comparing this definition to other early psychological taxonomies of paranoia and arguing that “paranoia” is a border concept. The first chapter analyzes U.S. postwar nationalism, border paranoia and fears of collapsing nation-state sovereignty in Anthony Mann’s 1949 film Border Incident, a semi-documentary film noir focusing on illegal bracero smuggling in Imperial Valley, California. The second chapter analyzes Paco Ignacio Taibo’s border detective fiction, specifically Frontera Dreams, Leonardo’s Bicycle and Life Itself, as an allegory for postmodern identity. The third chapter analyzes the novel and film Flashpoint, a story about two border patrol agents who find a buried skeleton at the border that they discover later is J.F.K.’s assassin, arguing that the J.F.K. conspiracy substitutes for and, ultimately, replaces the actual conspiracy of border corruption and the illegal exploitation of immigrant workers. The fourth and final chapter situates Don DeLillo’s fiction within
the fall of Cold War nation states and borders, charting the rise of terrorism as a permanent "state of exception" and as the dark side of globalization, modernization and secular society.
INTRODUCTION

Divisions: Paranoia, Space, Difference

Could not this (active) movement of (the production of) difference without be called simply, and without neographism, differentiation? Such a word, among other confusions, would have left open the possibility of an organic, original, and homogeneous unity that eventually would come to be divided, to receive difference as an event – Jacques Derrida

The is a rebel in me – the Shadow-Beast. It is part of me that refuses to take orders from outside authorities. It refuses to take orders from my conscious will, it threatens the sovereignty of my rulership. It is that part of me that hates restraints of any kind, even those self-imposed. At the least hint of limitations on my time or space by others, it kicks out with both feet. Bolts – Gloria Anzaldúa

It remains for the future to decide whether there is more delusion in my theory than I should like to admit, or whether there is more truth in Schreber’s delusion than other people are as yet prepared to believe – Sigmund Freud

This project began through a confluence of planned and accidental events. At first I was curious simply about the history of paranoia prior to Freud. I knew Freud’s analysis of the Judge Schreber case and Freud’s definition of paranoia as “repressed homosexuality” and “projection,” but I knew nothing about paranoia before Freud.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the first English definition of paranoia was in John Barrow’s 1749 Dictionarium Medicum Universale as “delirium,” followed by Dr. Robert Hooper’s definition of paranoia in Lexicon-medicum as “alienation of the mind” and “defect of judgment” in 1811. These definitions did not illuminate my understanding of the concept or seem particularly insightful, but instead pointed to paranoia’s genealogy as a concept and its fascinating history prior to Freud.

While I may have been tempted to write the history of paranoia before Freud, I quickly realized it would impossible to achieve in a dissertation. When September 11th
occurred, the U.S./Mexico border became the site for the twin concerns about
immigration and terrorism and the border seems the perfect example of paranoia’s
historical manifestations and particularities, part of my original discovery of the first uses
of the term “paranoia.” Rather than chart the entirety of paranoia’s prehistory, I felt
examining the discourses of paranoia as they pertain to borders and terrorism would
achieve both purposes: proving that paranoia is a flexible and malleable concept with a
distinct history, not the monolithic concept Freud popularized. Secondly, I feel paranoia
shares formal features with the border and terrorism. Conjoining borders and terrorism
through paranoia is an ideological move that works to contain the threat of a menacing
and contaminating outside world.

This project argues that paranoia is a border concept because the Greek root of the
word itself is fraught with divisions, fusing the words “para,” as “besides” “around” or
“outside,” and “noia” or “nous,” as mind. “Para” as “outside” implies a boundary and a
limit, a province outside the mind, outside reason, physically beyond the pull of the
sanity’s orbit. “Around” works the same as “outside,” with reason and sanity centralized,
and delusion and alienation banished to the outer recesses. However, “para” as “besides”
implies a “next to” or an “adjoining,” an indistinct and blurry border between self and
other, expanding and contracting capriciously at the body’s limits and the horizon of the
other. The fusion of words that creates “paranoia” does not erase the fissures persisting
in the word and the concept. Haunted by this internal differentiation, “paranoia” reveals
the limits of psychological and epistemological certainty, of the province of the mind, of
what the mind can and cannot know, and of the boundaries of conviction.
Paranoia is often a problem of boundary confusion, of the limits of self, and of the differentiation of self from other, subject from object, and individual from group. Daniel Paul Schreber’s *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness* is claimed to be the “most written about document in all psychiatric literature,” (Dinnage xi) and has earned a special place in psychological discussions of paranoia. Schreber published his *Memoirs* in 1903, as he was approaching recovery, but it was Freud’s celebrated paper published in 1911, “Psycho-analytic notes on an autobiographical account of a case of paranoia (dementia paranoids),” that cemented Schreber’s position in the pantheon of psychological literature.

Paul Schreber was born in 1842, growing up to become a lawyer, and then a judge. Schreber was married but had no surviving children after a series of stillbirths and miscarriages. His first breakdown occurred at the age of 42. He recovered and was well until 1893, when at the age of 51, his illness returned and he placed himself in an asylum’s care for the next nine years. The Memoirs were written while Schreber was in Sonnenstein public asylum to help argue for his release.

After two years of legal difficulties, Schreber was released to his family and home, but after his wife Sabine was incapacitated by a stroke, he fell ill again. From that time until his death, Schreber remained in an asylum, where records note that he, “speaks only very rarely with the doctor, and then only that he is being tortured with the food that he cannot eat, etc. Continually under the tormenting influence of his hallucinations” (xiii). Schreber wished to die at home, among friends and family, and away from the asylum and his tormenting doctors, but he did not get his wish and he died alone at the asylum.
Freud bases his interpretation of Schreber’s case entirely on the Memoirs and situates Schreber’s paranoia in relation to a general psychoanalytic framework. Freud argues that Schreber’s fantasy of being turned into a women indicates a repressed homosexual love for his father in the shape of the asylum director Flechsig, who appears throughout the Memoirs as an evil demigod. According to Freud, “the exciting cause of his illness, then, was an outburst of homosexual libido; the object of this libido was probably from the very first his doctor, Flechsig; and his struggles against the libidinal impulse produced the conflict which gave rise to his symptoms” (43). Schreber believed the whole world had been destroyed, except him, and God had chosen him to repopulate the world from his womb. Freud speculates that Schreber’s homosexual wish reveals his life’s devastation – his own wife having failed to produce a living child – and compensates through the delusion that God will start a new race from him. Rather than a desire for men, Schreber’s illness revolves around the father-son matrix underlying psychoanalysis for Freud:

Dr. Schreber may have formed a phantasy that if he were a woman he would manage the business of having children more successfully; and he may thus have found his way back into the feminine attitude towards his father he had exhibited in the earliest years of his childhood. (58)

Perhaps more surprising is Freud’s claim that paranoid delusional systems are a means for the patient to hold the world together:

The end of the world is a projection of this internal catastrophe: his i.e. the paranoiac’s subjective world has come to an end since his withdrawal of his love for it. And the true paranoiac builds it again, not more splendid, it
is true, but at least so that he can once more live in it. He builds it up by the work of his delusions. *The delusional formation, which we take to be the pathological product, is in reality an attempt at recovery, a process of reconstruction.*

Freud’s analysis highlights questions of Schreber’s sexual identity and posits his homosexual attachment to the father as the root cause of Schreber’s paranoia. But on one point he has no doubts at all, namely that he has come infinitely closer to the truth than any other human beings. Thence he immediately passes on to eternity. The thought of it permeates his whole book; it means far more to him than to ordinary men. He feels home in eternity and regards it not only as something which belongs to him by right, but as some thing which is part of him. He reckons in enormous spaces of time; his experiences stretch over centuries. It seemed to him “as though single nights had the duration of centuries, so that within that time there could very well have come about the most fundamental in the whole of mankind, in the earth itself and in the entire solar system.” He is at much at home in universal space as he is in eternity. Certain constellations and individual stars, such as Cassiopeia, Vega, Capella and the Pleiades, are especially close to him; he speaks of them as though they were bus-stops just around the corner. But he is well aware of their real distance from the earth; he has some knowledge of astronomy and does not reduce the size of the universe. On the contrary, it is because they are so distant that the celestial bodies attract him. The immensity of space draws him; he wants himself to be as wide as space, so that he can extend all over it.
In his highly influential study of the correlation between mental insanity and modern life, Louis A. Sass writes that Schreber emblematizes modernity’s conjoining of paranoia’s hyper-reflexivity and alienation, rather than Freud’s reductive analysis of Schreber:

Even to most psychoanalysts, this explanation seems insufficient; the radical transformation in the very structure of Schreber’s existence – that is, the passivization and boundary confusion, what one might call the schizophrenic as opposed to merely paranoid features – have seemed far too extensive and profound to be accounted for on the basis of homosexual content alone. Most psychoanalytic writers have therefore felt the need to emphasize regression of a more profound type.

(245)

While psychoanalytic analyses of Schreber may emphasize a deeper, structural regression, Sass argues, in contrast to Freud’s interpretation, that the attempts to connect Schreber’s paranoia to regressive, primitive instincts fail to consider Schreber’s paranoia as a response to modernity, self-reflexivity, and hyperconsciousness:

Indeed, the very symptoms that seem most obviously primitive – such as his incontinence and his bellowing – turn out to derive from just this hyperreflexivity, a condition that is closely akin, as we shall see, to the configuration of knowledge and power in modern society described in Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*, a work that purports to be ‘a genealogy of the modern soul.’” (Sass 246)
Sass also takes issue with poststructuralist accounts of Schreber, most notably Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guatarri’s *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, which posits a “schizophrenic ethic” celebrating the schizophrenic’s ability to immerse themselves in the world, free from the debilitating neuroses of subjectivity:

Nor does Schreber’s experience resemble that archaic consciousness so often attributed to schizophrenia, with its supposed “more immediate and absolute involvement with [the] physical environment,” its “greater in-the-worldness,” and its diminished “capacity to reflect on the self and on immediate experience and on immediate experience. Indeed, it is one of the great ironies of modern thought that the madness of patients like Schreber should often have been viewed as a regression to wildness or innocence – even, at times, as an enviable escape from the “rationalist repression” of the modern world (as with Andre Breton). The real process, at least in this case, is more like hypertrophy of alienating self-consciousness, and this may have more in common with what Schreber himself diagnoses as ‘a general spread of nervous excitement in consequence of overcivilization’” (Sass 265).

Rather than a primitive or romantic refuge from modernity, Sass claims that Schreber’s paranoia responds to the vicissitudes of modernity. Neither a primitive psychological projection nor a strictly sexual repression, Sass believes that Schreber’s paranoia reveals the consequences of modernity on identity and subjectivity, with the characteristics of self-reflection and reflexivity leading to an “overcivilized” nervousness about identity.
Relying on Schreber as a figure for paranoid modernity, Sass reads the *Memoirs* as an instance where paranoia, madness and modernity intersect and overlap. In fact, paranoia operates less as an organic illness, according to Sass, and more as a reaction formation to the ills of modernization and the power of progress to affect the human psyche. In particular Sass is interested how Schreber’s spatial dislocation, and his sense of collapsed boundaries, blurred borders and geographic disorientation, becomes a feature of daily paranoid life. According to Sass, “Schreber’s memoirs are… filled with descriptions of boundary confusions and passivization… at times Schreber believed that he was as wide as all space, that his boundaries were coextensive with the universe. Yet, he would sometimes maintain that his actions, both physical and mental, were entirely out of his control, sometimes under that of other beings or minds who imprisoned his ‘will power’” (244). Sass goes on to describe Schreber’s spatial paranoia:

> In Schreber’s cosmological-psychological world (which I have argued is an allegory of inwardness), psychological division, introversion, and self-alienation are represented as a psychical kind of distance, a spatial separation between the observing rays (or God) and the observed nerves (not unlike the distance between tower and cells in the Panopticon). Thus Schreber himself speaks of “the spatial conditions of God’s existence; if I may so put it.” (Sass 262)

Paranoia’s dual tendencies – enlargement and privation, delusion and passivization – articulate the conflicted nature of modernity for Sass and its dialectical interplay of bound and unbound narcissistic energy. Paranoia for Sass emblematizes modernity’s paradoxes of identity: the subject caught between the enlargements,
fortifications and strengthening of the ego and, conversely, the alienation, exclusion and mechanization of individuals through modern social institutions and structures. Sass claims, through considering Schreber’s relation to modernity, that paranoia affects identity – confuses boundaries, involves passivization – because it involves a “profound transformations of selfhood, including an exaggerated sense of his own centrality in the universe, a loss of the normal sense of volitional control, and the feelings of fragmentation, dissolution, or multiplication of the self” (244). Paranoia’s double strategy – its exaggeration and dissolution – indicts modernity’s pathologies and its focus on the boundaries of the self. For Schreber, “voluptuousness,” the paranoid process whereby he feels his body as coextensive with the entire universe, does not overcome the anomie and alienation accompanying modernity. Instead, according to Sass, voluptuousness threatens to eclipse the subject’s identity by placing him/her outside the traditional Master/Slave dialectic of recognition:

But voluptuousness also has its dangers, not of separation or fragmentation, but of annihilation. After all, as the passage about seeing the butterfly suggests, Schreber often requires the presence of some watcher to confirm for himself his own existence; and the state of voluptuousness, with its absence of self-division, precludes such confirmation. To be enjoyed, or even tolerated, a nonreflexive state of awareness would need to be able to assume and accept its own existence without constantly checking on itself, and Schreber seems to be incapable of such faith. For, as he explains, ‘every time my thinking activity ceases God instantly regards my mental powers as extinct.’” (263)
Sass points to the tension in paranoia between extension and alienation; paranoid modernity’s dual tendencies. If confirming identity requires self-division, an observing other who confirms and alienates, then “voluptuousness” precludes the confirmation of Schreber’s identity. And, as can be seen in the above passage, Schreber finds such a state literally unthinkable because it nullifies self-reflexivity and awareness. But, perhaps more important, Sass points to Schreber’s personal paradoxes and self-destruction, haunted by an original self-division that Freud only hints at.

*  *  *

Freud connects Schreber’s paranoia with homosexuality at first, but reveals that homosexual narcissism is a stage in the development in all healthy egos. Schreber, however, “lingers” at this stage of narcissism not because he is an actual homosexual, but because he has regressed to this “earlier” stage:

I shall now endeavor to show that the knowledge of psychological processes, which, thanks to psychoanalysis, we now posses, already enables us to understand the part played by a homosexual wish in the development of paranoia. Recent investigations have directed our attention to a stage in the development of the libido which it passes through on the way from auto-erotism to object love…there comes a time in the development of the individual at which he unifies his sexual instincts…in order to obtain a love-object; and he begins by taking himself, his own body, as his love-object, and only subsequently proceeds from this to the choice of some person other than himself as his object. This half-way phase between auto-erotism and object-love may perhaps be
indispensable normally; but it appears that many people linger unusually long in this condition, and that many of its features are carried over by them in to the later stages of their development.

Freud's first use of the term "narcissism" appears in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905) during a discussion of homosexual object choice. Narcissism, for Freud, describes how homosexuals "take themselves as their own sexual object" and "look for a young man who resembles themselves and whom they may love as their mother loved them" (11). Freud’s formulation of narcissism in the *Three Essays* allows him to later claim in the Schreber case (1911) that narcissism is a stage in sexual development between auto-erotism and object choice. According to Freud, the narcissist "begins by taking himself, his own body, as his love-object" (Psychoanalytic Notes 163), which allows the sexual instincts to unify. Freud repeats his argument that narcissism forms an intermediate stage between auto-erotism and object choice in * Totem and Taboo*:

> The hitherto isolated sexual instincts have already come together into a single whole and have found an object. But this object is not an external one, extraneous to the subject, but it is his own ego, which has been constituted at about the same time. (Totem and Taboo, 111)

The concept of narcissism allows Freud to describe the development of the ego, from the early stages of disorganized sexual energies that accompany auto-erotism into the organized sexual libido invested in objects.

In 1914 Freud writes "On Narcissism: An Introduction" and develops the theory of narcissism by integrating narcissism within a general psychoanalytic framework and by linking narcissism to libidinal cathexis. Freud begins the essay by describing
psychotic regression, where the psychotic subject's libido recathects the ego and withdraws cathexis from objects. From his observation of psychotic regression, Freud posits that "an original libidinal cathexis of the ego...fundamentally persists and is related to the object cathexis much as the body of an amoeba is related to the psudeopodia which puts it out" (Narcissism 58). For Freud narcissistic regression is a secondary narcissism, a turning of desire back to the ego by withdrawing desire from previously cathected objects:

This leads us to the conclusion that the narcissism which arises when libidinal cathexes are called in away from external objects must be conceived as a secondary form, superimposed upon a primary one that is obscured by manifold influences (Narcissism 57-8)

This secondary form of narcissism not only designates an extreme form of regression for Freud, it is a permanent structural feature of the subject also. Object-cathexes never fully supplants ego-cathexis, but rather a balance of libidinal energy exists between these two types of cathexis – ego-libido and object-libido: "The ego is to be regarded as a great reservoir of libido from which libido is sent out to objects and which is always ready to absorb libido flowing back from objects" (Quote). Here, Freud takes a radically different approach by describing narcissism as a developmental stage of the individual because narcissism becomes a permanent structural feature of the subject. Freud asserts the permanence of a libidinal cathexis of the ego, which no object-cathexis can completely overcome, and designates this permanent structural feature of the subject's ego-cathexis as "primary narcissism." How are we to make sense of this idea of a primary narcissism when in the same essay Freud is careful to describe a distinction between auto-erotism
and narcissism? Freud claims that the ego does not exist from the very beginning as a unity, but rather a new psychical action has to take place in order to bring about narcissism:

It is impossible to suppose that a unity comparable to the ego can exist in the individual from the very start; the ego has to develop. But the auto-erotic instincts are primordial; so there must be something added to auto-erotism-- some new operation in the mind-- in order that narcissism may come to being (Narcissism 59)

Freud's use of primary narcissism is uncertain; not only is there variation among Freud's work on the topic, there is ambivalence and uncertainty concerning primary narcissism within "On Narcissism."

But how does one describe primary narcissism and its chronological position in the development of the ego? If Freud wishes to preserve the distinction between auto-erotism, where the sexual instincts achieve satisfaction anarchically and independent of one another, and narcissism, where the ego is taken in its entirety as the love object, then infantile narcissism must coincide with the formation of the ego. Narcissism would then designate the phase between auto-erotism and object-love, and subsequently coincide with the first emergence of the unified subject or ego. But as indicated in one strain of thought in "On Narcissism" and developed the second topography, primary narcissism designates a first state of life, prior to even the formation of an ego and epitomized by the life in the womb. Freud uses the example of sleep as a rough analogy for the primary narcissism of intra-uterine existence:

The picture of the blissful isolation of intra-uterine life which a sleeper
conjures up once more before us every night is in this way completed on its psychical side as well. In a sleeper the primal state of distribution of the libido is restored – total narcissism, in which libido and ego interest, still united and indistinguishable, dwell in the self-sufficing ego.

(Introductory Lectures 518-519)

In this example, however, the distinction between auto-erotism and narcissism is completely erased. From “On Narcissism” through his second topography, Freud’s distinction between primary and secondary narcissism becomes increasingly difficult to imagine because primary narcissism designates state without, or prior to, objects. (or the image of an ego which is differentiated from objects)

Why does Freud posit a new stage of primary narcissism prior to the auto-erotic that had always preceded narcissism before? Freud in 1905 describes auto-erotism not as a primal, objectless state of the human being, but as the result of a double, integrated movement: a turning away from functional activities which, initially, were oriented toward a certain objectality, an "object value"; and a turning around of the activity on itself, in the direction of fantasy. (Laplanche 72)

After auto-erotism is well established as the earliest stage of the libido, Freud continues by asking exactly what relationship auto-erotism would have to narcissism. Freud's answer, which I have quoted earlier, is that the "ego has to be developed" and "there must be something added to auto-erotism--a new psychical action-- in order to bring about narcissism" (Narcissism 59). The auto-erotic instincts, therefore, are primordial; drives for which no unity exists. By specifying a certain stage of development from
chaotic, auto-erotic drives to a unified ego as an agency inside the individual, Freud invokes a "mutation through which autoerotism is precipitated into the form of narcissism. Thus narcissism is situated, chronologically or dialectically, after auto-erotism" (Laplanche 73). So why does Freud later insist that a state of primary narcissism would precede auto-erotism, a state in which the ego is self-contained and without objects? Auto-erotism is described as the stage when human sexuality first begins to emerge and narcissism unifies this emerging and inchoate sexuality and gives it form. No matter how "primary" narcissism may be, Freud's definition of auto-erotism would imply that narcissism is prepared by an already complex process.

Primary narcissism is one of Freud's most deceptive notions because he keeps both understandings of primary narcissism open and never fully endorses either view. Freud, in fact, wavers between both definitions of primary narcissism. Either narcissism is an intermediate and developmental stage between auto-erotism and object choice, where the libidinal cathexis of the ego is part of the very constitution of the ego, or primary narcissism is a "hypothetical initial state in which the organism would form a closed unit in relations to its surroundings" (Laplanche 70). Laplanche goes on to claim that "this state would not be defined by a cathexis of the ego, since it would be prior even to the differentiation of an ego, but by a kind of stagnation in place of libidinal energy in a biological unit conceived of as not having any objects" (Laplanche 70). The later view, which first appears in Freud's 1911 paper "Formulations Regarding the Two Principles of Mental Functioning," becomes the prominent view in his later works and remains his use of primary narcissism even after Beyond the Pleasure Principle and The Ego and the Id. In a lengthy footnote to his 1911 work, Freud elaborates and meets the
potential criticism of primary narcissism:

It will rightly be objected that an organization which is a slave to the
pleasure-principle and neglects the reality of the outer world could not
maintain itself alive for the shortest time, so that it could not have come
into being at all. The use of a fiction of this kind is, however, vindicated
by the consideration that the infant, if one only includes the maternal
care, does not almost realize such a state of mental life. Probably it
hallucinates the fulfillment of its inner needs; it betrays its ‘pain’ due to
an increase of stimulation and delay of satisfaction by the motor discharge
of crying and struggling and then experiences the hallucinated satisfaction.
Later, as a child, it learns to employ intentionally these modes of
discharge as a means of expression. Since the care of the infant is a
prototype of the later care of the child, the supremacy of the pleasure-
principle can end in actuality only with complete mental detachment from
the parents. A beautiful example of a state of mental life shut off from the
stimuli of the outer world, and able to satisfy even its nutritional
requirements autistically (to use Bleuler’s word), is given by the bird
inside the egg together with its food supply; for it, maternal care is limited
to the provision of warmth. I shall not look upon it as a correction, but as
an amplification of the scheme in question, if anyone demands by what
devices the system living according to the pleasure-principle can
withdraw itself from the stimuli of reality. These contrivances are only
the correlate of ‘repression,’ which treats inner ‘painful’ stimuli as if
they were outer, i.e. reckons them as belonging to the outer world. (Two Principles of Mental Functioning 22-23)

This primal state of narcissism, in which the individual is closed in upon itself, precedes the differentiation of the ego and its relation with objects. Freud seems to want to derive certain reality functions from the biological monad – such as perception, judgment and communication. Two major difficulties arise if primary narcissism is defined in this manner. The first problem is that if primary narcissism does operate, then Freud has no mechanism of describing how the newborn baby has any perceptual outlet to the external world. The second problem, which we will discuss later, is that Freud lacks the ability to describe how the narcissistic monad that is shut in upon itself has a means of discovering an external sexual object, or more precisely, how to get from ego-drives to sexual drives and describe the progressive development of infantile sexuality.

The practical problem that Freud already points to is maternal care – this clearly is a case of an interaction with an other and seems to belie the self-sufficiency of a narcissistic state. The question need not be whether the infant is aware of his mother as an other or an object apart from him, but more precisely the question of how hallucinations and satisfaction occurs. The narcissistic monad is not self-sufficient since it relies on the mother for the satisfaction of its needs – needs are not satisfied internally, but only through the external care of the mother. Laplanche claims that the internal needs threatening the equilibrium of the monad are not satisfied through hallucination, but rather it is "the imperfection of the system, the hiatus-- however slight-- introduced between need and maternal aid, that would provoke the hallucination" (Laplanche 70). Laplanche believes there are serious misconceptions with Freud's idea of a "primal
hallucination" – an internal idea or image that brings satisfaction prior to an exposure to external reality. The very term hallucination, presupposes a minimal ideational content and consequently a first cleavage...: a cleavage not so much between the ego and the object, or between the internal and the external excitations, but between immediate satisfaction and the signs which accompany every deferred, imperfect, contingent, and mediated satisfaction: that brought by a fellow human creature" (Laplanche 71).

Laplanche continues by investigating further the relation between hallucination and satisfaction. Wondering whether hallucinations arise from need or result from satisfaction of need, Laplanche poses the question in two forms: the hallucination of satisfaction – "the reproduction of the pure feeling of discharge even in the absence of discharge" (Laplanche 71) and satisfaction through hallucination – "by virtue of the very of the hallucinatory phenomena" (Laplanche 71). Describing the former choice as logically inconsistent according to Freud's accounts, Laplanche believes that the latter understanding of hallucination – satisfaction through hallucination – is the most conceivable. Laplanche argues that satisfaction through hallucination is closer to Freud's understanding of what hallucination means since it mirrors his model of dreams:

The dream indeed does not bring the satisfaction of a wish; it is the fulfillment or accomplishment of the wish by virtue of its very existence. But the reference to dreams as well as the very term "wish" imply that the objective correlative of need (food) has already been metabolized into an "object," into a sign that can be introjected in its place. And in that case,
the elements at play in a hallucination entail a quite different dialectic from that which would be permitted by the so-called narcissistic monad (Laplanche 71-72)

Freud's notion of a wish, an understanding which goes back as early as the *Project for a Scientific Psychology* and *The Interpretation of Dreams*, is described as a hallucinatory revival of a past gratifying experience or satisfaction: Dreams follow old facilitations. Freud describes dreams as re-cathexes of prior states of satisfaction or a re-catheting a memory of a past gratifying experience. For our purposes, all experiences of satisfaction are dyadic; that is they require two people, or experiences with objects and others. Freud's basic concept of wish, therefore, depends upon a non-monadic notion of narcissism. If dreams and wishes require a relation to another person, insofar as satisfaction requires another person, then satisfaction registers an original relation to the other. Hallucinations, therefore, would be equivalent roughly to a dream or a wish; where a hallucination is a psychic representation of past satisfactions. A hallucination is the infant’s psychic representation of the difference between need and maternal care, and the trace of that difference, which makes representation possible. Jacques Derrida, in “Différance,” ensures the uniqueness of the term “différance” as both difference and deferral, by answering the question of why “différance” is not called differentiation:

Could not this (active) movement of (the production of) difference without origin be called simply, and without neographism, differentiation? Such a word, among other confusions, would have left open the possibility of an organic, original, and homogeneous unity that eventually would come to be divided, to receive difference as an event
This contrast between “différance” and differentiation applies to Freud's depiction of primary narcissism as an undifferentiated state. Freud conceives of narcissism as a "homogenous unity that eventually would come to be divided," yet what he fails to account for is to what extent the narcissistic monad is already divided, already marked a differentiating trace of its intervallic structure that makes psychic representation possible. There could be no ideational content available to the infant unless it had experienced satisfaction through the other, just as it could not have an image of the ego to cathect narcissistically unless it had already established a relation with others and objects.

So how could there be primary narcissism unless the ego is taken as a love object? In addition, why would the infant need to develop the perceptual apparatus if it is entirely self-sufficient to begin with? As with the difficulties stated above about hallucination, the most glaring difficulty with primary narcissism is that this state could not be defined by a cathexis of the ego since it is prior even to the differentiation of an ego. The formation of the ego would seem to require the constitution of a bodily image. And, in fact, this is exactly what Freud states later in *The Ego and the Id*, where he claims: The ego is first and foremost a bodily ego; it is not merely a surface entity, but is itself the projection of a surface (Ego and the Id 20). In such a passage, Freud sounds remarkable close to Lacan and his theory of the mirror stage, where the unification of the bodily image is predicted on the model supplied by another person. Freud continues to describe how such an ego is formed: "The ego is ultimately derived from bodily sensations, chiefly from those springing from the surface of the body. It may thus be regarded as a mental projection of the surface of the body, besides, as we have seen above, represented the superficies of the mental apparatus" (Ego and the Id 20). In such a passage, the
constitution of the ego is based on the image of the body as it is reflected either in the surface of the mirror or in its relations with other people. Narcissism could then be understood more completely as cathecting this bodily image--a cathexis of the ego, which actually develops and constitutes the ego in the same process. The main point being that the construction of an ego is dependent upon intersubjective relationship by virtue of the ego taking shape through an identification with an other. As a result, primary narcissism could not be maintained as a self-contained, imageless state, independent of intersubjective relationships, instead the developmental process of ego constitution requires an internalization of all intersubjective relations. This process of identification and ego formation is definitely the model Freud is using in other papers from the metaphyscological period, namely, *Mourning and Melancholia*, where Freud seems to be describing a narcissistic identification with the object.
CHAPTER ONE
Dialectics at the Border: Globalization and Paranoia in Anthony Mann’s Border Incident

Today it [illegal immigration] is the greatest peacetime invasion suffered by a country under open, flagrant, contemptuous violation of its laws.
– Mr. Willard F. Kelley, assistant commissioner in charge of the Border Patrol

Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them.
– Gloria Anzaldua, La Frontera: Borderlands

Early during Anthony Mann’s 1949 Border Incident, a film noir, semi-documentary hybrid focusing on illegal bracero smuggling, Pablo Rodriguez, a Mexican immigration agent, and Juan Garcia, a bracero who befriends Rodriguez but is unaware that he is undercover posing as a bracero, arrange to be transported across the border. They meet a smuggler at a crowded marketplace. For seventy pesos, the smuggler provides Rodriguez and Garcia with small flower pins identifying them for transport across the border later that evening. Immediately after the transaction, Rodriguez spots his American partner, Jack Bearnes, wearing a flowery cowboy shirt and a cowboy hat. Posing as a petty criminal escaping into Mexico with stolen immigration cards that he will sell to Parkson, the Anglo boss of the bracero smugglers, Bearnes’ disguise signals Rodriguez that he is the contact man. Rodriguez walks toward Bearnes, lights his cigarette, and informs him of the time and place of the crossing. Although the plaza is swarming with people, crowding the stalls and walkways, the camera cuts to an intimate, tight close up of the exchange between Rodriguez and Bearnes. Garcia looks on in the background, framed between Rodriguez and Bearnes, struggling to comprehend their conversation. He is transfixed by Bearnes’ shirt. In this intense triangle of glances, Rodriguez and Bearnes look at each other and Garcia stares at both but, in particular, at Bearnes’ shirt. As Bearnes hands the book of matches to Rodriguez, the camera cuts
back to a wide shot of the teeming multitude of unemployed braceros engulfing them; Garcia, however, continues to stare at the shirt. After Bearnes leaves, Garcia exclaims, “How beautiful, that shirt.” Rodriguez responds, “Yes, it gives a man distinction.” The plan is in motion. Bearnes and Rodriguez are set to infiltrate the bracero smugglers, Rodriguez as a bracero, Bearnes as a criminal. As they depart the crowded marketplace, the scene slowly fades out.

![Image](image_url)

Pablo Rodriguez (Ricardo Montalban) lights Jacks Bearnes’ (George Murphy) cigarette and relays crucial information about the illegal bracero smuggling ring as Juan Garcia (James Mitchell) looks on in the background.

Garcia’s misapprehension of the shirt’s significance, like his misunderstanding of his position as a bracero in a national ideology and economy intent on maintaining the difference between U.S. citizen and bracero, plays off the meaning of the word “distinction.” The shirt does indeed give “distinction,” as Rodriguez claims, but for more reasons than the film allows Garcia to realize. In a film obsessed with borders of all types, not just the literal border but also the differences and distinctions between bracero and U.S. citizen, the unusual emphasis on the cowboy shirt foregrounds issues of racial difference, nationality and the transmission and circulation of information, goods and, ultimately, the braceros themselves. When Rodriguez and Bearnes both become swept up in the criminal group they are infiltrating later in the film, and Bearnes’ shirt is stolen by the smugglers as a prize, their distinction from braceros is under threat because they
are disconnected from the institutions of law and authority legitimating their roles as officers, as well as guaranteeing their identity.

On the surface, *Border Incident* appears to champion the Bracero Program, the economic productivity of agribusiness in Imperial Valley and the efficient Immigration and Naturalization Services and its officers willing to sacrifice their lives to protect national interests. Despite the semi-documentary sequences’ glowing praise of the economic productivity of the border and the efficient and lawful management of the region, the *film noir* border-crossing scenes issue a stern warning about the dangers of globalization. The border crossing scenes stage U.S. paranoia about economic and ethnic challenges to nation-state sovereignty and identity in the postwar United States by delineating how globalization compromises distinct ethnic, regional, economic, and national differences. At the time of *Border Incident*’s release, postwar attitudes regarding the Bracero Program were changing. The seeming wartime necessity of the contract labor program to fill manpower shortages no longer justified the program, and rising U.S. paranoia surrounding multifarious border problems – security, illegal border crossers and communism – heightened negative public attitudes towards braceros. Reflecting divided public opinion surrounding the Bracero Program, *Border Incident* operates similarly to Mann’s 1947 film *T-Men*, also a semi-documentary *film noir*, which according to Susan White creates a “narrative split… designed to place an unassailable boundary between the lawful and the unlawful in a film in which such boundaries are often in flux” (96). Unlike *T-Men*, however, *Border Incident*’s “narrative split” is forecast as an explicit focus of its content, registering two contrasting and opposed visions of the border. The film’s *film noir* sections stress the border as a dangerous, threatening wilderness, both
natural and unreal, an uncanny space of paranoia. Employing film noir’s visual trademarks – chiaroscuro lighting, crowded mise-en-scène, rapid editing, contrasting shot scale, etc. – these border-crossing scenes are expressionistic visions of the bracero’s paranoia. The semi-documentary sections, in contrast, exalt the border region’s economic and agricultural productivity, praise the Immigration Naturalization Services and officers sacrificing their lives for national interests, and emphasize the healthy, symbiotic relationship of people and nature, braceros working the land and the crops providing its bounty for the American citizens. While the film’s narrative divide replicates these two visions of the border, stressing the dangers of racial and national contamination and employing narrative contrasts to contain the threat of braceros, the film noir sections begin to invade and contaminate the police procedural, semi-documentary sections, slowly seeping into those narrative sections attempting to contain and control the violence of the interior, noir narrative. Over the course of the film and the opening sequence in particular, borders presented as distinct, both visually and physically, are in truth mixed and intermingled, contaminating and infecting each other, the film noir sections merging and blending with the semi-documentary style sections. By the film’s end, when the story returns to the semi-documentary frame narrative, it becomes clear that Border Incident’s narrative divide intends to supplement the porous and weakened transnational border between the U.S. and Mexico.

* * *

Border Incident is director Anthony Mann’s and cinematographer John Alton’s first film for MGM. Mann and Alton previous films were successful – Side Street, He Walked by Night, Reign of Terror, Raw Deal – but it was T-Men, their police procedural
about government treasury agents cracking a counterfeiting ring, which brought Mann and Alton to the attention of Dore Shary, recently hired as executive producer at MGM to reduce costs and increase profitability. Mann’s low-budget yet successful films perhaps were the main reasons for his contract with MGM. But Mann’s sensitive focus on social issues, a trend observable in other postwar films such as *Crossfire, Panic in the Streets,* etc, resonated with Shary’s political sensibilities, even though Shary had recently replaced William B. Mayer, the notorious conservative, as executive studio producer. Cinema’s recent, postwar trend toward greater realism, location shooting, proletarian actors, and social topics mirrored Mann’s already existing aesthetic. He simply had to duplicate the formula.

*Border Incident* is essentially a formal remake of Anthony Mann’s earlier, successful film, *T-Men,* directed for Lions Pictures in 1947. In *T-Men,* federal treasury agents work undercover to crack an illegal counterfeiting operation and are eventually swept up by the criminal ring they investigate. After one agent is discovered and brutally murdered, his partner tracks down the criminals and bring them to justice. Mann’s directing and John Alton’s cinematography inject a heavy dose of *film noir* stylistics – chiaroscuro lighting, odd and oblique camera angles, and rapid editing – into *T-Men*’s documentary, police procedural format. It employs an authoritative voice over, high-key lighting and a glorifying frame narrative, much in the same way that *Border Incident* will combine *film noir* and semi-documentary, police procedural genre to the same effect.

Part of what makes *film noir* so difficult to classify is its unorthodox position within film history and genre. *Film noir* is, of course, a French term coined by film critic Nino Frank in 1946, describing a series of American films from the 1940’s that French
audiences were able to view for the first time. The war had impeded French consumption of these dark, pessimistic films that, to them, signaled the dark side of the American dream. Therefore, part of *film noir*'s definitional conflict results from this transnational naming and identification, but also from the retroactive status of the term itself. For its temporal distance from the object it names in part creates the discipline it investigates.

Some critics have argued that these semi-documentaries are opposed to the central ethos of *noir*, since the stress on law and authority over individual action puts it at odds with *film noir*'s undermining of symbolic law and order. According to Joe Tuska, the semi-documentaries’ focus on “the machinery of official detection – where the individual and the libido tend to be wrapped in, and penned in by, the rules – can be directly counterposed, for example, to the individualism and intuitive action of the private eye” (quoted in Krutnik 207).

Although *Border Incident*'s narrative feels divided in its combination of *film noir* and police procedural, it is in fact a very common combination of style and genre for the postwar period. Semi-documentary, police procedurals are characteristic of *noir*'s middle period (1945-1949) and often focus on “social problems and crime in the streets, corruption and police routine” (Schrader 59). Police procedural, semi-documentaries differ from traditional crime films because they stress “systematized technological investigative procedure” (Krutnik 203) rather than focusing on individuals and couples, which increases the possible narrative complications. Also, in police procedurals detection is not a matter of intuitive action but of “organizational machinery, and a manifest objectivity displaces the pervasive, potentially corruptive subjectivity of the “tough” films” (Krutnik 203).
Rather than regarding these semi-documentary *film noirs* as anomalous exceptions in the history of *film noir*, other critics contend they imitate newsreels popular during wartime, integrating documentary techniques within *film noir* storylines and satisfying the audiences’ demand for greater realism during the postwar period. Arguing that Mann’s films embody these two popular post war film styles, Krutnik claims that semi-documentary *film noirs* occupy an important, if not unusual, place within the history of *film noir*. Discussing an earlier *film noir* by Mann, *He Walked by Night*, Krutnik claims that “the differences between the representational modes of the so-called “*film noir*” and the “semi-documentary”’ are only on the surface, for “the two modes represent different facets of Hollywood’s realist aesthetic during the second half of the 1940’s. It is thus not surprising that film-noir criticism has often excluded the “semi-documentary” as a “noir” cycle proper” (Krutnik 207).

Critics have noted the central relationship between borders and *film noir* and that *Border Incident* fails to differentiate individuals from institutions, leaving open the question of who occupies the space of the border. According to critic Dana Polan, the film grounds the authority of the framing story cinematically, hoping to neutralize the menace of the nighttime, *noir* border scenes that threaten to cross the narrative divide. He claims, “The end shots of the agency bureau in Washington are filmed with the framing symmetry and an even and bright lighting that give the image a clarity and surety that the interior narrative of the film had denied.” For all its “clarity” and “surety,” the legitimating narrative of government institutions that attempt to frame the unlawful border within a space of authority ultimately fails to solidify the narrative’s boundaries and, in effect, continues to be haunted by *noir* images of the border and the solitary,
individual actions of characters set adrift from institutions guaranteeing their power. Although Polan correctly identifies the film’s complicated narrative divide, he fails to recognize how the representations of the noir-like border threaten the framing narrative of the daytime world of institutional authority presented during the opening and closing scenes.

Also claiming that borders are essential to understanding film noir, Eric Lott’s excellent essay, The Whiteness of Film noir, investigates what he believes to be “the specifically racial means of noir’s obsession with the dark side of 1940’s American life” that has been “remarkably ignored” (Lott 542). Arguing for the centrality of racial difference as a shaping force of the “American imaginary,” Lott claims that “film noir’s relentless cinematography of chiaroscuro and moral focus on the rotten souls of white folks…invoked the racial dimensions of this figural play of light and dark” (Lott 453). Lott’s essay investigates specific examples of film noir’s representations of African-Americans, Latinos and Asians in films such as Double Indemnity, Murder, My Sweet, The Lady from Shanghai, and Touch of Evil, leading him to conclude that, “film noir is a cinematic mode defined by its border crossings” (Lott 548). Lott argues that what facilitate these racial crossings are the new technical innovations of movie making. New exposure meters, faster film stock, and better location filming all allowed film noir to capture people’s “fall from (g)race into the deep shadows” (Lott 548). For Lott, racial crossings are figured in terms of light and dark lighting and composition, since “noir’s crossing from light to dark, the indulgence of actions and visual codes ordinarily renounced in white bourgeois culture and thereby raced in the white imaginary” (Lott 548). These racial crossings, however, also threaten the moral and social boundaries of
whiteness, potentially throwing “its protagonists into the predicament of abjec tion” (Lott 549). To counter this threat of abjection, Lott argues that “film noir rescues with racial idioms the whites whose moral and social boundaries seem so much in doubt.” He concludes that, while noir exposes whiteness to the venerable and paranoid threat of racial crossing, ultimately “‘black film’ is the refuge of whiteness” (Lott 546).

What is remarkable about Lott’s otherwise insightful essay is his discussion of Border Incident, where he rightly questions the film’s reversion to blatant stereotypes of Mexicans. Lott offhandedly remarks, “Anthony Mann’s otherwise honorable Border Incident [1949] contains a pair of thuggish Mexican goofs” (561), yet does not discuss the film beyond this superficial gloss on the role of race in the film. Although the film’s focus on border crossing seems particularly apt for his analysis, Border Incident also stages these crossings with heavily stylized film noir visuals, making the film a prime example for Lott to explore the centrality of film noir’s racial ideology. Additionally, Lott’s analysis fails to consider Border Incident’s, as well as film noir’s, idiosyncratic association to genre. The film’s alternation between stylized film noir sections and generic semi-documentary, police procedural sections facilitate a formal analysis of the film and situate the film in relation to genre more generally.

* * *

Recent work on globalization can situate the Bracero Program, initiated during World War II as a response to regional agriculture shortages, as an early instance of nascent globalization and transnational regions of production. Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt’s work on globalization Empire argues that emerging global markets and circuits of production responsible for globalization have ushered in a profoundly changed
international order. These regional centers of economic production and their new, global markets result in a new form of political sovereignty. This new stage of political subjectivity and national sovereignty is referred to as “Empire,” by Hardt and Negri, who claim that “even the most dominant nation-states should no longer be thought of as supreme and sovereign authorities, either outside or even within their own borders” (XI). Empire transforms previous economic systems and their spatial coordinates, particularly nation state boundaries and borders, according to Hardt and Negri, because “Empire emerges from the twilight of modern sovereignty. In contrast to imperialism, Empire establishes no territorial center of power and does not rely on fixed boundaries or barriers. It is a decentered and deterritorializing apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm within its open, expanding frontiers” (XII). It is the first rule of Empire, its “lack of boundaries,” (XIV) which causes this new form political production.

While Hardt and Negri broadly identify the rise of empire with the postwar era, other critics investigate globalizations’ “lack of boundaries” within specific border regions. Arguing that urbanization at the border signals nascent globalization after World War Two, Lawrence Herzog claims that the incorporation of border zones has changed land-use practices and encouraged cross-border trade and development:

A new territorial order emerges in the post-World War II period, one in which boundaries are no longer simply militarized, isolated wastelands at the edge of nation-states; boundary regions have developed autonomous and viable economies; permanent boundary populations centers are no longer the exception but the rule. (3)
Herzog’s claim adds historical force to Hardt and Negri’s arguments by isolating precise border zones, such as the Tijuana – San Diego border, and providing specific examples of economic territories outside the purview of nation states. His focus on the immediate postwar era also situates a detailed historical framework for the discussion of the effects of globalization, as well as provides a context for the discussion of the consequences of the Bracero Program.

In order to understand the Bracero Program more clearly, we need to investigate the context of Mexico-U.S. relations during World War II, just prior to the start of the Bracero Program in 1942. The onset of World War II changed the international dynamics between Mexico and the United States. After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, the United States mounted pressure on Latin America to demonstrate “hemispheric solidarity.” Mexico, while willing to join the Allied cause, had to consider domestic opposition to the war. But when a Mexican tanker, the Potrero del Llano, was sunk by a German submarine as it was steaming with full lights in the Gulf of Mexico on 13 May 1942, Mexico declared war on the Axis powers (Bethell and Roxborough 194). Mexico played a strategic role in the U.S. defensive measure because Mexico was “a cover against possible Japanese attack from the Southwest. The U.S. military wanted radar coverage for the approaches to California and bases for air reconnaissance. There was also concern in the United States that Germany would use Mexico as a base for espionage activities directed against the United States.” (Bethell and Roxborough 194).

But World War II affected the U.S. and Mexico beyond its strategic, defensive cooperation. The principle effect of the war on Mexico was the transformation of its
economy into an appendage of the U.S. war machine. Mexico supplied strategic goods, mainly minerals, to the United States, and in exchange the United States would sell essential goods to Mexico. According to Bethell and Roxborough, the war “saw a substantial reorientation of Mexican trade patterns. In 1937-8 Mexico has one-third of its trade with Europe and 56 percent with the United States. By 1940 the United States accounted for 90 percent of Mexico’s foreign trade. In addition, Mexico was also a major supplier of food for the U.S. market, and provided large numbers of braceros for North American agriculture” (Bethell and Roxborough 194-95).

Beginning in 1942 as a response to perceived agricultural labor shortages created by World War II, the Bracero Program, sometimes referred to as the Mexican contract-labor program, was the mechanism by which Mexicans were sent to work in certain agricultural areas of the United States under a series of bilateral agreements with Mexico that eventually spanned two decades. While prewar attitudes towards Mexican labor were negative and prejudicial, the onset of war and the labor shortages resulting from the war changed public opinion. In response to these labor shortages, public attitudes “toward Mexican and other immigrant workers shifted” (Magana 17). Proponents of the Bracero Program portrayed it as benefiting national interest. According to Mills and Rockoff, such proponents “claimed that the program was good for national defense, would reduce the number of illegal Mexican immigrants, and was good for Mexican-American relations” (Mills and Rockoff 143). However, others criticized the program for its abuses of Mexican workers, comparing it to a slave labor program, with employers having “power and discretion over pay, working and sleeping conditions, and food” (Magana 17-18). Some criticized the program’s bureaucracy, referring to the Bracero Program as
nothing more than officially “managed” or “administered migration (Galaraza). The first stage of the Bracero program ended after the war, however, and by the time this growing and increasingly controversial program reached its peak in the late 1950’s, it had become an institutional feature of U.S. and Mexican agriculture.

While the program continued to have critics and supporters after the World War II, the onset of the Korean War forced a reorganization of labor needs among policy makers. The effects of the Korean War brought about the passage of Public Law 78, which reinstated the recruitment of Mexican Nationals for employment. According to Magana, Public Law 78 “passed with little opposition, and the INS returned to the practice of recruiting and delivering workers to agricultural employers. By the time this labor system ended in 1964, the INS had supplied approximately three million Mexican workers to growers and ranchers in the Southwest” (Magana 18). The passage of Public Law 78 was a significant development in the Bracero Program because it shifted control over braceros to the INS. The INS now became responsible for filling visa applications, allocating visas according to the new system, and using new preference categories for immigrants. The INS was also responsible for creating a central index of names off all immigrants admitted.

After the Korean War, the program continued to be a political issue between Mexico and the United States. On March 2, 1954, Congressmen Hope charged certain Mexican consuls with attempts to set wages higher than the prevailing community standard. And later that year, in January, the matter of legal wage determination was brought to a head by the Border Incident of January 1954, when the U.S. government opened up the border to all wishing to be signed up as a regular bracero. This mass
hiring continued until January 28, when the border closed and the “drying out” ceased (Galaraza 65-67).

Later that same year (1954), however, the United States entered a recession and public sentiment once again turned against Mexican immigrants. The INS began removing Mexican nationals through an “involuntary departure program known as Operation Wetback” (Magana 18). According to Magana, Operation Wetback signaled another change in public attitude towards Mexican Nationals, since, according to the INS, “apprehensions and deportations reached 1.3 million in 1954; by 1959 approximately 3.8 million Mexican nationals were deported.” Operation Wetback was the clearest example of anti-Mexican sentiment against the Bracero Program and indicated the extreme public response to labor, national and ethnic problems. According to Garcia y Griego, Operation Wetback was tacitly sanctioned by U.S. public opinion, which “blamed “wetbacks” for the propagation of disease, labor strikes in agriculture, subversive and communist infiltration, border crimes, low retail sales in south Texas, and adverse effects on domestic labor” (Garcia y Griego 58). The abuses of Operation Wetback elicited criticism from both sides of the border and Congress eventually enacted the Migrant Labor Agreements. Coordinated with Mexico, the objective of the binational agreements was to work together to “recruit laborers and to promote more humane treatment of undocumented immigrants” (Magana 18).

* * *

Nowhere is *Border Incident*’s representational dilemma more explicit than the credit sequences and opening section, which establishes a series of spatial oppositions contrasting heavily stylized, *film noir* border crossing scenes against authoritative
voiceover and official establishing shots of governmental buildings associated with the semi-documentary and police procedural. The film begins with the title and credits overlaying a long shot of a truck urgently speeding past a barbed wire fence traversing a Southwestern desert terrain. A series of dissolves follows quickly, presenting low angle shots of dark mountain ranges and rugged, foreboding valleys. Suddenly, a silhouetted figure of a human appears on a dark, shadowy mountain range, outlined against the backdrop of the twilight sky. At first the shape on the mountaintop is imperceptible, blending into the mountain landscape forming the skyline, the profile limited to the topmost part of the frame, away from the central focus of the screen. However, just as quickly as the image of the man on the mountain appears, the image dissolves into a montage depicting more mountains and valleys. The sequence ends with a long shot of a river curving through a dark valley, acting as a natural border to the harsh desert landscape.

The second scene of the opening sequence introduces a narrative break with the noir vision of the border and signals the film’s first shift to the world of law. A brief montage-like sequence employing voiceover, high key lighting, and daytime, aerial shots of the agricultural fields and canals of Imperial Valley, California resembles the documentary newsreels made popular during World War II. The fields are bright, orderly and well maintained, contrasting visually with the nighttime, noir opening title sequence.
of wild mountain ranges and rocky valleys. Adding to the feeling of human mastery over nature, an authoritative voiceover accompanies the aerial shots, claiming that the “all American canal” represents a “monument to the vision of man.” The voiceover underscores the ability of industry and human ingenuity to transform a “desert wasteland” into a “garden” and “agricultural empire.” Shots of the canal and agricultural grids of Imperial Valley dissolve slowly into each other while the narrator continues to describe the importance of Mexican labor in harvesting the wealth of the land, describing the braceros as a “vast army.” Visually reinforcing this economically framed image of the land, high-angle shots portray a harmonious balance of man and nature. Braceros dot the fields below, blending into the rows of vegetation, as if operating within nature’s rhythms and cycles. The dissolving shots highlight the organized grids of land, the efficient stretch of the canal and the clean plow lines, accentuating an orderly, managed and methodical control of the land.

The documentary section ends with a tracking, high-angle shot of a crowd of braceros behind a chain link fence at an official border crossing section, waiting patiently for the legal status to cross into the United States for work. The voiceover supports the visual and physical captivity of the braceros, claiming that, “most of these braceros obey the laws of both countries and wait at the border to enter the U.S. legally under the treaty
between the Mexican and American governments.” The voiceover continues as the camera, scanning the bracero’s faces, tracks the length of the fence before pausing briefly on a few obscured faces, and then, finally, tracking down the rest of the fence.

The next scene returns to the barbed wire fence of the desert, placing the logic of demarcation and difference guiding the documentary sections in jeopardy through the panic, paranoia and confusion of the border crossers. Reversing the previous scene of braceros waiting patiently behind the official border, the camera tracks along the barbed wire fence from right to left and the voiceover claims, “there are other braceros who come and go illegally, who jump the fence.” The nighttime, barbed wire fence contrasts with the daytime, orderly and policed fence of the previous sequence; the barbed wire indicating a porous and dangerous border. The voiceover concludes that the film is “based upon factual information supplied by the Immigration and Naturalization Service of the United States Department of Justice,” the camera tilting upwards to a territorial sign placed above the fence, warning the would-be crossers: “Crossing Prohibited, United States Territory.”
Braceros approach barbed-wire fence from US territory

Warning sign above barbed-wire fence

Braceros crossing

Scared braceros enter the Valley of Death
As the voiceover drops out, dramatic music rises in volume and three braceros approach the barbed wire fence from a distance, crossing back into Mexico. The editing quickens during this sequence, and the cinematography shifts from close-ups to long shot, disorientating the viewer by emphasizing the bracero’s paranoid point of view. As the braceros approach a dark valley, afraid of the potential dangers that await them, the figure of the man on the mountain appears again, however, this time he watches the braceros with binoculars and signals a group of horse-riding smugglers with a flashlight. The bandits speed off to intercept the braceros and the film cuts back to the braceros’ point of view as they approach the ominous valley. Once the braceros enter the valley, the bandits pounce on them, fighting with them at first, then killing and robbing them before they deposit the braceros’ bodies in quicksand to hide the evidence of their ghastly deed.

![Robbers deposit dead braceros in the quicksand](image)

Taken in its entirety, the opening scene contrasts proper institutions against the paranoia of the unlawful border and braceros lost and disconnected from the institutions that would ensure their safety. Most obviously, the exchange between the darkened, dangerous *film noir* border and brightly lit, bird’s eye view and authoritative voiceover works to place the lawful and unlawful elements of the border in opposition. The fluctuation between these two visions provides the narrative and spatial separation between a series of oppositions guiding the film: Mexican vs. U.S. citizen, economic productivity vs. wilderness, nature vs. technology. While the voiceover provides a sense
of safety and distance from the danger of the film noir border-crossing scene, authorizing a return to the border and minimizing its danger in the process, its sudden evacuation during the border crossing scene proves the voiceover’s authority to be vulnerable and transitory. The viewer has the sense of observing another world, a border different and disconnected from the one represented in the semi-documentary scenes.

Evidence from the screenplay helps establish the film’s representation of the border as a space of uncanny danger and paranoia. The screenplay dating from December 18, 1948 describes the opening shot as “a long desert valley, its floor brilliantly moonlit. Jagged low desert mountains are silhouetted against the moon – a scene of eerie unreality…” It is the opposition between the “eerie unreality” of the border crossing scenes, already established through the silhouetted figure on the mountain range, against the ostensible “realism” of semi-documentary scenes that divide the representations of the border.

Adding to the peculiar confusion of the border is the viewers’ inability to differentiate person from backdrop, as characters become lost in the mountainous terrain, blending in with the rocky canyon walls. The first instance of this intermingling of human and nature is, of course, the shadowy figure of the man hovering within the shadowy mountain ridge, not fully human and not fully differentiated from the mountain. As we begin to see during the opening sequence, the man on the mountain is part of the bracero smuggling group. Yet his threat to the braceros, first emerging from the shadows of the dark land the braceros must cross, then his later connection to the surveillance and murder of the bracero crossers, makes him an important trope of paranoia in the film.
Evidence from the screenplay reinforces the film’s visual collapse of people and landscape. An early version of the screenplay, dated December 9, 1948, claims that “suddenly and startlingly it (the camera) picks out a man half hidden behind a rock buttress, swings across the canyon, and then finds another. They are hard to discern, seem almost to be part of the rocks walls, and, once they are picked out, they become doubly sinister…” *Border Incident*’s opening sequence intentionally plays off the ambiguity between the people and the landscape, equating the danger of the border with the ability to erase the differences between people and the rugged border region.

* * *

In order to strengthen the opening section’s divide between *film noir* and semi-documentary, the rest of the film relies on the thematic opposition between nature and culture to structure and reinforce its narrative logic. The film repeatedly links the braceros with nature and naturalistic imagery, while Anglos are associated with modernization, technology, law and surveillance, which seemingly justifies their “superiority” and distinction from the braceros. In addition to the opening’s aerial shots of braceros dotting the fields, the film abounds with examples of Mexicans identified with nature and equivalent to the land they work. When the Mexican smugglers meet Parkson, the head of the criminal smuggling gang, they are dumbfounded by the modern technology in the office, from the magical workings of the dictograph machine, which they believe to be a television, to the gun-lighter. Another example of the film’s use of the simplistic binary between nature and culture is the flower pin used to signal the smugglers when it is time to cross the border. This “primitive” form of communication – the flowers signify but as signs of nature – as well as the rudimentary sense by which the
pins signify – in contrast to, say, verbal communication – accentuates the film’s racial stereotypes, which assume that the braceros or Mexicans are closer to nature or, in fact, operate in a state of nature. This equation of Mexican with the natural, ultimately, facilitates their dehumanization and transport as laborers and commodities. The Mexicans’ simplicity, their naïve and natural demeanor, make them ripe for such exploitation according to the stereotypes of the film.

While technology and modernization emphasize the cultural, ethnic and national divide between Mexicans and Anglos, the film also stresses the importance of the braceros’ hands, strengthening racial and national stereotypes. Before Pablo is loaded onto a truck transporting him across the border, he must first have his hands inspected for calluses, to insure that he is a bracero. With panic clearly written on his face, Pablo knows he lacks a true bracero’s calluses, yet he quickly concocts a clever story when he is discovered: he is a criminal escaping persecution and imprisonment in Mexico. Pablo asks the smugglers, “Does one have to be a bracero to want to cross the border?” The bandits, confused by the question, eventually accept Pablo’s story and decide to transport him along with the other braceros. This use of hands as distinctive markers occurs again twice in the film, first after Pablo and Juan spend the day working the fields, when Juan slowly begins to realize that Pablo is not actually a bracero and, as a result, offers Pablo gloves to protect his hands. The final reference occurs at the end of the film, when Juan discovers that Pablo is an undercover agent, claiming this fact explains Pablo’s “soft hands.”
Inspecting Pablo hands for calluses before he can cross

The film’s thematic focus on bracero’s hands is not entirely fictional. Fears of illegal immigration were, in fact, a real threat among the media and with American public. A 1954 article in *Life* magazine entitled, “Bulge of Braceros at the Border,” focusing on the lapsed treaty between the United States and Mexico the previous year, details the story of Toni Barreneo, a mining clerk who, according to the article, “transformed himself into a bracero” for quick, American money. Toni roughed-up his hands and created calluses by rubbing a water-hose and pouring formaldehyde on his hands. After working six months and earning 500 dollars, Toni returned to Mexico, rejoined his family and bought a small house, resuming his job as a mining clerk. The article states that Toni is “well educated and speaks good English,” but goes on to stress that he must hide this fact in order to successfully cross into the United States. Additionally, Toni must imitate the braceros’ look and manner, darkening and dirtying his skin in order to be granted a temporary work permit.

The article contrasts Toni’s story with that of Angel Cos, a vaquero (cowboy) who must enter the United States illegally to earn nine times what he would make in Mexico. Even though Angel is more deserving of a work-permit, Angel must illegally travel across the dangerous border region. The article compares Angel’s withered and callused hands, explaining that he has been working since he was four years old, with a picture of Toni’s “transformed” hands. The article, like the scene of Pablo having his
hands inspected, points to the U.S. fears of eliding the difference between U.S. citizen and braceros. Yet the article, like the film, work to reinforce the collapsing difference between Mexican and American by transforming the bracero into an extension of his hands. The focus on hands – the old woman feeling for calluses, the gloves – reveals how the agricultural demands of Imperial Valley equates the bracero with his hands, converting the hands into metonymic signs of racial, economic and national difference. Indicating the signifying power of the border, its ability to transform both people and objects into metaphors and metonyms, the significance of hands reduce the braceros to their labor and, ultimately, fuse them to the land they work. As if tied to the dirt, the fields and the crops they harvest, the braceros are subjugated by the logic of their labor, undifferentiated from the crude products they produce.

Another article from the same period, entitled *Wetback Flood* published in Newsweek 1953, also works to underscore this point. This article, like *Bulge of Braceros*, repeatedly connects braceros with natural phenomenon. This time, however, water and flooding are the predominate images used to stress the threat of the Bracero program to the border.

In contrast to the crowd scenes of braceros and the scenes linking braceros to nature, the land, and their labor, Anglos in the film are united through institutions and connected by modern technology and communication. The clearest example of the connection between technology and surveillance occurs during the film’s opening sequence, when the silhouetted figure framed against the mountain is later revealed to be an Anglo working with the bandits. The shadowy figure, which first disrupts the introduction’s establishing shots, is later connected to technology and power – his use of
the binoculars and flashlight to signals the others – and becomes an early example of Anglos’ dominant and controlling use of technology, especially to the detriment of the braceros.

But more than just connecting technology and surveillance, the shadowy figure initiates a visual pattern the film connects with the border: the paranoid threat of the dialectical collapse of the human and the natural and the urban and the rural, of the human intrusion into nature and the dominance of nature over the human. As an uncanny image issuing from the mountain range, seemingly indecipherable from the landscape, the man on the mountain blurs the boundary between the human and the natural; human power rising from the mountains and the terrible threat of the border region linked to the human that metaphorizes that menace. The figure of the man on the mountain is accorded a type of ontological ambiguity, neither fully natural nor fully human. This ambiguity accords the image its power, the manner in which it stands in as a cipher for the paranoia of the entire border region. The power of the shadow, in essence, resides in its capacity to represent two things while ostensibly signifying neither one entirely, more than just a man on a mountain, more than a shadowy figure haunting the fringes of the mountain range. The figure is transformed, by its oblique and lurking presence, into a pure image, a metaphor more than a man proper, something that represents the border’s power by converting nature into the site of the human, the site of surveillance and observation, the place where culture, civilization and the watchful gaze of institutions reside. However, the film attempts to reestablish this often blurry distinction between nature and culture at other crucial points in the film.

*   *   *
While the film connects the dangerous, indistinct relationship of people and the land to the power of paranoia and surveillance, the film also focuses on the border’s role in marking ethnic, national and racial difference. Juan Garcia’s fixation on Bearnes’ cowboy shirt and Rodriguez’s responds, “Yes, it gives a man distinction,” emphasizes the extent to which the border patrols national distinction as well as other ethnic and economic differences. Pablo’s sense of distinction reveals Bearnes’ difference from the braceros in more than one way. Indicating both racial and economic difference, the shirt reinforces the traditional, stereotypical disparity between Americans and Mexicans, with Americans possessing the economic and racial superiority to legitimately wear such clothes. The flowery shirt, which plays off the signifying function of the flower pin, also implies that Bearnes’ disguise as a criminal operates differently than Pablo’s disguise as a bracero. For Pablo, working undercover necessitates blending in with the braceros, converting him into an anonymous, faceless laborer, and capitalizing on the racial assumptions that “Mexicans all look the same.” Bearnes’ disguise, on the other hand, works according to an opposed logic. His “distinction” allows him to go unnoticed, to be just a typical American, working within the racial and economic stereotypes permitting his undercover investigation to operate successfully.

Bearnes and Rodriguez’s plan to infiltrate the criminal ring backfires, however, when Rodriguez is trapped at the bracero labor camp and Bearnes is captured by Parkson’s hired hands and tortured for the stolen immigration cards, his fancy cowboy shirt stolen by a Mexican. The shirt’s usurpation reveals how all objects and, as we shall later see, people are susceptible to the hazards of circulation. Not only are the stolen immigration
cards, which to this point are still controlled by the authorities, seized by the wrong people, but the shirt now enters into a circulation threatening to become out of control.

At this point in the film’s narrative, the opposition between distinction and circulation is under jeopardy. If distinction operates like a border – a physical indication of difference, separating self from other – then one can begin to see how circulation opposes distinction, threatening to undermine difference. An example of circulation’s dangers occurs early in the film, just after the opening section, when viewers are introduced to the U.S. and Mexican immigration officers. Deciding how to infiltrate the bracero smuggling group, the head Mexican immigration official claims that, “If the criminals work in a circle, we will work in a circle.” Not only does this notion of the circle connect the police to the criminals directly, it undermines the assumed distinctions between law and criminality since the police will openly follow the methods, techniques and approaches the criminal group employs. While Bearnes and Rodriguez mirror the criminal groups’ illegal circulation – braceros circulating across the border to the U.S. and back again to Mexico once they have earned enough money, where they face the risk of being robbed by the very same bandits that smuggled them to the U.S. in the first place – their circulation is initially connected to the official and legitimating authority of the law. The potential for Bearnes and Pablo to be caught up in illegal circulation, however, their case and their lives derailed by this circulation, becomes a real possibility. Circulation’s implicit dangers, indeed the inherent problems of “crossing,” are obvious for not only braceros and criminals, but also for the officers, who, by mirroring the braceros and criminals’ techniques, must “cross” through masquerade and placing the distinctions guiding the law into jeopardy.
The border’s logic of exchange and circulation, however, quickly reverts to a degrading black market of illegal circulation when braceros are literally and metaphorically transformed into objects of exchange. Bearnes’ earlier claim that he runs the risk of becoming a “clay pigeon” is realized in the very next scene as Parkson shoots clay pigeons with a bb-gun, literalizing the previous metaphor. Later, Parkson himself refers in code to the braceros as “curios” over the phone. This reduction of people to mere “curiosities,” the equal to the objects they produce, issues from the very same economic system that fosters productive capitalist exchange and circulation. Yet this nighttime exchange and circulation of braceros replicates its daytime, legal counterpart since both sides – governmental and criminal – employ similar tactics and representations of braceros.

Once Bearnes is discovered as an undercover immigration officer, he is transported to the fields by Parkson’s henchmen to be murdered. Bearnes frantically tries to run away, but is shot in the leg and collapses to the ground before he can escape. Hysterically clawing and gripping at the ground, Bearnes is framed from a low camera angle, pain distorting his face as Parkson’s men drive a tractor over his body. The most violent scene of the film by far and probably one of the most gruesome scenes in all film noir, Bearnes’ murder powerfully reverses the documentary sections’ glowing praise for the economic productivity of the region and the orderly workings of immigration officials and the law. Trampled by the machinery his investigation intends to uphold, the scene of Bearnes’ murder underscores the perverted collusion between agricultural production and the law. In essence, Bearnes is transformed into a “bracero” when crushed by the tractor, experiencing the bracero’s paranoia and fear of being swallowed up by the earth. As
with the opening sequences, when the braceros are dumped into the quicksand pits, Bearnes’ murder underscores the uneasy relationship between the people and the land and the potential of economic circulation to collapse distinction, a fear the documentary sections negate by emphasizing the healthy, productive relationship between the people and the land.

The film’s climatic conclusion revisits the Valley of Death border-crossing scene from the opening sequence. After Bearnes’ murder, Parkson’s smuggling operation is exposed, forcing Parkson to flee with his henchmen before the immigration officials arrive. Deciding to kill Pablo, Juan and the rest of the braceros in the valley of death – the same valley where the bracero crossers were killed during the opening sequence – Parkson is overtaken by his own henchmen and forced to walk the valley of death with the braceros he intended to kill. Parkson, Pablo and the rest of the braceros must walk through the valley, surrounded by Amboy and the other bandits, who scale the mountain ridge, guns in hand, ready to shoot the vulnerable victims. Quoting the visual iconography of the opening sequence, Amboy and the others appear as silhouetted figures blending into the mountain range’s shadow, hovering above the braceros that walk in the valley below. As the braceros continue through the valley, Pablo disarms Parkson and forces him in front of the braceros, placing him at the greatest danger. While the bandits lie in wait for the braceros, Parkson steps into the clearing and tries to warn them, but
before he is heard, or because they do not care, Parkson’s gang shoots him and a battle ensues between the remaining braceros and bandits. Pablo and Juan both struggle with the bandits, fighting for their lives. Pablo kills his assailant, but he falls into a quicksand pit, presumably the same one that consumes the dead braceros during the opening sequence, fighting to free himself as the police and immigration officials rush to the scene. Juan arrives, struggling to pull Pablo from the quicksand, and yet only after the police arrive can they free Pablo.

This return to the Valley of Death from the film’s opening links the border with repetition and death. Just as objects and people circulate during the film, challenging the border’s inviolability, the film’s narrative also circulates and revisits the same scenes and similar spaces, obsessively indexing the places where distinctions break down and the points where paranoia reigns. When Parkson is disarmed and forced to walk the valley of death as a bracero would, he experiences, like Pablo and Bearnes before him, the bracero’s fear and paranoia. This role reversal – Parkson forced to walk with the braceros – reveals how paranoia itself circulates. Already establishing the braceros’ paranoia while crossing the border during the opening sequence, the film carefully stages how paranoia’s circulation is produced by the border, transforming everybody into a potential bracero. Like the emphasis on the quicksand at the beginning and end of the film, paranoia is a figure for the perils of economic circulation, crossing itself in these
instances, suggesting that everyone – bracero, criminals, immigrations officers and law officials – is subject to the paranoia of collapsing differences and dialectical fissures at the border.

After the rescue, the voiceover returns and signals the resumption of the semi-documentary style, calmly and assuredly stating: “And so this action in the desert was concluded. Murder, robbery, rescue. All these things that are true and part of the racket.” The use of “and” and the voiceover present an illusion of continuity, as if the film noir border crossing scenes were observed and controlled by a legitimate authority, organizing the disruptive film noir visuals and jarring editing and dramatic shifts in shot scale. Then, fading into the final section of the film, the camera tracks toward a government award ceremony, Mexican and U.S. flags enclose the event, framing the narrative within the brightly lit, clean, unambiguous mise-en-scene of the previous semi-documentary, police procedural sequences. Pablo receives a medal of consideration from the United States, while Bearnes is posthumously honored by the Mexican government. After the awards are distributed, the film cuts to a superimposed image of a farmer working the fields. The voice over states, “the life in the valley goes on. The food is brought from the earth by the hands of the workers now safe and secure, living under the protection of two great governments and the bounty of God almighty.”
Combining the award ceremony, the superimposed images of braceros in the fields and the narrative surety of the voice over confirming, “The life in the valley goes on,” the film’s conclusion reframes the interior, violent storyline within the restrictive and containing narrative of the police procedural and semi-documentary sequence. The violence of the braceros’ lives is treated as mere exceptions that, perhaps, derail the controlled police procedural genre, but ultimately pose no real threat or challenge to the law. The U.S. and Mexican flags work to visually reestablish the iconography of nationalism to the region, for the flags position the genre within a nationalistic framework guaranteeing the actions of individuals, in this case Rodriguez and Bearnes, whose actions are, for the most part, unmoored from governmental institutions. Yet, we can rightly question the quick and seemingly arbitrary inclusion of the ending frame narrative and, in particular, the deployment of the iconography of governmental, state, and institutional power. The end seems rushed to reestablish order in a film that has denied, for the most part, precisely that order and stability. In a narrative world where circulation threatens the very notion of national state sovereignty, the inclusion of metonyms of national power – flags – seems like a bald-faced attempt to shore up the waning supremacy of nation states jeopardized by the growing role of globalization in late capitalist economies.
CHAPTER TWO

“All This Shit Was Also the Border”: Postmodern Borders in Paco Ignacio Taibo’s Detective Fiction

As we can see from the previous chapter, Border Incident presents a postwar and cold war nationalism tied to a paranoid vision of the border. Paranoia, in that instance, helped solidify and consolidate national fears, worries and insecurities concerning the rise of globalization and the collapse of national state sovereignty. Attempting to contain the violent, film noir vision of the border through recourse to genre, specifically a bi-national, police procedural, Border Incident simultaneously raises the specter of paranoid, postwar national identity in its very gesture to contain the threat through its controlled filmic and narrative representations of both the literal and figurative border between Mexico and the U.S.

Shifting from the immediate U.S. postwar economic and social context, this chapter focuses on perspectives of globalization from the other side, namely Paco Ignacio Taibo II’s Mexican border detective fiction, whose Hector Belascoarán Shayne detective novel Frontera Dreams (1990) and Jose Daniel Fierro novels Leonardo’s Bicycle (1993) and Life Itself (1987) revise and critique Border Incident’s paranoid image of the border. Taibo’s detective fiction, although centering on contemporary Mexican detectives, is not far removed from the film noir ethos of Border Incident. According to Claire A. Fox, Taibo’s fiction is indicative of “the new border detective writing,” which “pays homage to the left existentialism of the hard-boiled writers and Hollywood film noir, especially in its embrace of the city and the hard-boiled anti-hero as its dual protagonists” (185). More than simple borrowing from the hard-boiled detective genre and film noir, Taibo, along
with a new wave of Mexican detective writers, emerged from the political events of 1968 “to Mexicanize the detective and turn criminal investigation into antioffical narratives about national identity and history (Fox, “Left Sensationalists” 186). This chapter argues that Taibo’s border detective fiction – *Frontera Dreams, Life Itself, Leonardo’s Bicycle* – reconfigures the detective and mystery genre to explore the status of identity under globalization and late, postmodernist capitalism. Utilizing the detective genre in a self-reflexive, ironic and postmodern manner, the novels employ various figures of the border to explore the paranoia, contradictions, and inconsistencies of identity, the ironies of past and present, and the failure of narrative to restore a true sense of natural order.

* * *

Paco Ignacio Taibo II was born in 1949 in Asturias, Spain and moved to Mexico in 1958. Taibo has written numerous books, spanning many genres: fiction, detective fiction, and investigative journalism, including historical works, first person memoirs and non-fiction. Taibo has been a key figure in articulating some of the affinities between the so-called critical detective fiction of the United States and that of Latin America. He is the founder and president of the International Association of Detective Writers, and as director of the short-lived pan-American journal, *Crimen y Castigo* (Crime and Punishment) Taibo promoted a close literary kinship among genres in which he himself worked: detective fiction, historical writing, and investigative journalism. (Fox, “Left Sensationalists” 185-86).

Taibo has always aligned himself with radical and leftist causes and his novels reveal these sympathies in their subject matter and scope. This is typical for his generation of writers, since many young artists were inspired by the events in Mexico in
1968. According to Martin, Taibo, like many of his generation, was “galvanized around…a general student strike that lasted 100 days and culminated in the barbarous massacre in Tlatelolco Square in Mexico City. Here the perpetrator was the national government, the same government that later, the very same night of the second day of October, disposed of the bodies of the slain by strewing them onto the deep waters of the Gulf (160). The historical events in Mexico City, as well as the student strikes in Europe and elsewhere, radicalized many artists and directly influenced Taibo’s fiction⁶. Most obviously, the effects of 1968 can be observed in his “radical mistrust of the national institutions which appear bent on serving their own machinations of power against the interests of the working class and the population at large” (Martin 160). As Taibo himself states in ’68, his autobiographical account of the year-long student strike culminating in the Tlatelolco square massacre: “If we were all characters in a novel written on a lousy Olivetti with no ribbon, forever trying to be loyal to a personality that we once invented for ourselves, there can be no doubt that our model was forged in ’68” (10).

The influence of 1968 can also be felt in Taibo’s choice of genres – detective fiction – in particular the use of the hard-boiled detective style established by Dashiell Hammett, which shares Taibo’s “insistent indictment of the system” (Martin 160). Martin continues that, “given the social conditions of Latin America, to expect the kind of stability that would allow for a detective to arrive at a solution through methodology was, Taibo argued, unrealistic, even ludicrous. The current widespread practice of the genre, which favors the ‘hard-boiled’ or ‘noir’ tradition of Hammett, Chandler, MacDonald, with their renegade detectives at odds with the cultural mainstream, with
administrative corruption, and often in direct and painful confrontation with the agents of the law, would grant the appropriateness of his argument” (Martin 160). As with much hard-boiled fiction and film noir, Taibo’s detectives – Hector Shayne Belascoarán and Daniel Jose Fierro – confront corrupt officials, particularly the representatives of law and politics. However, the detectives’ overt references to hardboiled fiction and film noir as a parallel for their actions – sometimes positively, sometimes as incongruous and ill-fitting – deliberately ironizes and distances them from their roles as detectives, something that the chapter will investigate more fully.

The events of 1968 inform the plots of Frontera Dreams, Life Itself and Leonardo’s Bicycle in specific and concrete ways. According to Martin, “the individuals and paramilitary units engaged by the forces of repression to contain student unrest appear in the books as either transformed or unassimilated elements in society that pursue their own opportunistic ends in gangster fashion or are discreetly given positions in the power structure. In both instances, these shadowy remainders of the official counter-offensive take the role of ‘bad guy’ in Taibo’s stories” (Martin 162). In Frontera Dreams, these “shadowy remainders” take the form of an obsessive police official stalking Natalia – Hector’s old girlfriend, now a famous movie star who he is hired to follow – and a group of U.S. paramilitary border enforcers and drug dealers. In Life Itself, Jose Daniel Fierro is a novelist enlisted to protect the fictional border town of Santa Ana from PRI government agents, military units and anti-union capitalists. In Leonardo’s Bicycle, a later Fierro detective story, Jose Daniel tracks down an illegal organ trafficker with connections to cold war Eastern Europe responsible for stealing the kidney of an U.S. female college basketball player. Fierro, most likely a fictional
mouthpiece for Taibo’s own political history, points to the events of 1968 as a necessary step in his political education:

When you have been active for ten years in the catacombs of the pre-1968 Left, when you have lived through experiences like the Santa Anna commune and the eleven months in jail that came afterward, you cannot help having an unpleasant paranoid aftertaste, based on the absolute certainty that the Mexican state’s primary function was to fuck up your life, that its only purpose was to screw its citizens” (16).

Taibo’s villains exploit their positions within corrupt institutional and bureaucratic power, taking political advantage over individuals whom Hector and Jose Daniel Fierro try to protect.

* * *

When satirizing and lampooning its limitations, *Frontera Dreams* presents detective fiction’s conventions as incomplete, outdated or, perhaps worse, tainted by mass culture’s gross commercialism and commodification. The novel frequently points to genre’s failure to be commensurate with, or even reveal, the complexities of real life and the truth of Hector’s investigation. However, the novel is not entirely dismissive of detective genre and, instead, “pays respects” to the genre’s formalism by adhering to its generic parameters and following its recognizable patterns: hard-boiled detective hired to follow a *femme fatale* figure from his past and, in the process, becoming involved in a criminal conspiracy requiring physical violence to solve the case, etc. *Frontera Dreams*’ idiosyncratic relation to the detective and mystery genre, specifically its flaunting of the traditional conventions dictating narrative progression, characters and motifs, while still
retaining a respectful approach to genre, exemplifies the novel’s conflicted approach to the generic boundaries of detective fiction.

*Frontera Dreams* ironic and sometimes distant interaction with the detective genre makes sense when considered in relation to postmodern detective fiction more generally. Sometimes referred to as metaphysical or anti-detective fiction, postmodern detective fiction often stages elaborate investigations of cases that go unresolved, are incomprehensible, or function as a meditation upon grander, more metaphysical themes. According to Merivale and Sweeney:

> A metaphysical detective story is a text that parodies or subverts traditional detective-story conventions – such as narrative closure and the detective’s role as surrogate reader – with the intention, or at least the effect, of asking questions about the mysteries of being and knowing which transcend the mere machinations of the mystery plot. Metaphysical detective stories often emphasize this transcendence, moreover, by becoming self-reflexive (that is, by representing allegorically the text’s own process of composition) (3).

Taibo’s border detective fiction meets all the criteria listed by Merivale and Sweeney – parody, mysteries of being and knowing, self-reflexivity – yet his novels curiously employ the figure of the border and the characters’ discussions of generic borders as the source of the novel’s self-reflexivity.

The clearest example of *Frontera Dreams* conflicted approach to detective fiction – working both inside and outside the genre – is through the epigram. Compounding its own generic confusion as well as the detective genre’s strengths and weaknesses, the epigraph – “If anyone wants to read this book as a simple mystery novel, that’s his
business” (1) – a quote from Argentinean journalist Rodolfo Walsh, positions the rest of
the story within a certain no-man’s-land, an ambiguous space within the detective genre’s
otherwise familiar territory. This epigraph condenses the novel’s concerns regarding
genre and the scope of detective fiction more generally. Quoting Walsh as an epigraph
complicates the rest of the novel not only because it situates Frontera Dreams’ plot in
relation to a narrative and textual space outside its boundaries, but most importantly
because it points to a history, complex and richly articulated, which threatens to
overshadow the novel’s fictional space.

Rodolfo Walsh is an important influence not only for Taibo, but also for a whole
host of Mexican, Central and Latin American authors who grew up after World War II.
Walsh was born in Argentina in 1927. Of Irish and Argentine decent, he was sent to the
Irish school in Capilla del Señor and then to the Fahy Institute in Moreno. He began his
career as a journalist in 1959, working for the agency Prensa Latina in Cuba. Back in
Buenos Aires, he wrote for Panorama, La Opinión and Confirmado. His political
activity led him to the hard-line Montoneros group, where he acted as intelligence officer.
Walsh played a key role in the bombing of the cafetería at the police headquarters on July
2, 1976. On March 24, 1977, the first anniversary of Jorge Rafael Videla’s dictatorship,
he accused the dictatorship in an open letter. The day after three army tanks demolished
his home in the capital’s suburb of San Vicente. He was murdered in broad daylight in
downtown Buenos Aires by a military death squad whose instructions were to capture
him alive, but had to kill him when he pulled a gun to return their fire. His dead body
was dumped into the boot of a car, taken to the notorious Navy Mechanics’ School
(ESMA), gloated over, desecrated and never seen again (Geraghty 2002).

As a novelist and a historian in his own right, Taibo’s work occupies a similar position to Walsh’s own approach, a border zone between fact and fiction, between illusion and reality, by employing fictional techniques to fill in historical detail. Beyond connecting *Frontera Dreams* to the history and tradition of Latin American leftist historical fiction, the epigraph considers the novel’s connection to detective and mystery genres. In a story that will soon prove to be anything but a “simple mystery novel,” the epigraph serves as a prominent warning to the reader’s expectations but, more importantly, functions according to the true meaning of the word “epigraph:” “An inscription, as on a statue or building,” or “A motto or quotation, as at the beginning of a literary composition, setting forth a theme.” Taken from the Greek root, “to write on,” an epigram maintains both meanings – as inscription and frame – and provides a literal and figurative border for the action and events that follow. At the outset the epigram holds out the promise that, at least formally, the narrative will on its initial reading resemble a
“simple mystery novel.” This much seems to be implicit with the epigraph. If the narrative can be mistaken for a “simple mystery novel,” it must, in one form or another, at least resemble one. Otherwise, this case of mistaken identity could not occur. It seems, at least initially, that a reader could be lulled, or perhaps even duped, into mistaking the narrative as a “simple mystery,” somehow tricked by its generic or formulaic appearance; its surface form invoking a type of passive, unreflective consumption. However, the epigraph is tricky because it raises the possibility of one type of reading, one interpretive perspective, only to disregard it in favor of another. By positioning the novel as potentially both inside and outside the mystery genre, the epigraph appears to hold out the promise of multiple interpretive options: we are free, as readers, to regard or disregard the novel’s connection to “simple mystery” by any means we find fit. However, the epigraph curtails these choices in its very gesture of interpretive openness. It may be the reader’s “business” whether or not they choose to regard *Frontera Dreams* as a “simple mystery novel,” but the epigraph’s challenge is clear: it dares the reader to draw distinctions between “simple” or traditional mystery and detective novels and something beyond this simplistic and facile understanding of mystery, transcending the empty formalism and prosaic platitudes of the genre. Daring the reader to go beyond the generic confines and comforts of detective fiction, the epigraph complicates the novel’s relationship to genre by entering it into the space of interpretation and translation, a place where analysis, commentary and critique are already included in the reading, shaping and reception of the events of the novel. As such, the epigraph raises implicit questions about borders by its very position to the narrative since it locates the remainder of the story within a special in-between space,
caught between narrative pressures of the detective genre and yet still finding those conventions ill fitting.

Rather than adhere to the generic dictates and standard tropes of detective fiction — ratiocination, tough-guy masculinity, restoring the social order, etc. — *Frontera Dreams* is intent on satirizing Hector’s role as a detective. The narrator weakens Hector’s position within the narrative by calling attention to it as narrative, self-reflexively positioning Hector as a common reader, rather than trenchant detective: “Hector opted for patience. Stories are told in one way or another, traveling unusual paths. They develop in a way that is hardly natural. They escape and reappear, and the one who determines these erratic journeys is always the narrator and not the listener” (50). Displacing the exploratory drive so crucial to the detective genre, the narrator transforms the stereotype of the astute detective into the image of a receptive reader and listener, from active investigator to passive audience and, in the process, inverts the truth element of stories: the hope that stories, by way of their implied narrative progression, will eventually arrive at a truth. Stories, according to the narrator, may arrive at some sort of provisional truth, but only when revealed by a narrator, and only by first traveling “unusual paths” and “erratic journeys.” Reflecting Héctor’s position within the narrative, this image of a nomadic story, controlled by a narrator who may, perhaps, arrive willy-nilly at the truth, reaching its eventually end, or not finishing at all, overlaps with the narrator’s recurring meta-commentary.

However, these two parallels — Hector’s position within the story and the narrator’s commentary — are, in fact, incongruous. Hector is disjointed and dislocated, set apart from the narrative, neither fully a part of nor an outsider to the world the
narrator describes. The narrator goes to lengths to describe Hector’s in-between status, his inability to differentiate between fact and fiction and, most crucially, his failure to fit into that fictional world he envisions: “Once again, he found himself in the wrong story” (69). Hardly the most reassuring model of a detective, Taibo’s border novels uses irony to destabilize detective procedure and, consequently, the belief in linear, progressive narratives and disinterested reason. When the narrator of *Frontera Dreams* claims, in a moment of deep irony, that a “Mexican detective was by definition a laughable solitary accident,” (9) we sense it is because Hector’s role as both Mexican and detective seriously jeopardizes the epistemological certitude conventionally accorded a private eye.

Faced with the impossibility of catching Natalia and perhaps, frustratingly more so, unable to understand the nature of his investigation, Héctor turns to stories, often popular or mass culture tales, to comprehend the events around him and to provide the coordinates for his actions. More often than not, however, “popular” stories provide false expectations because they never match up with experience:

> Belascoarán, unlike the authors of crime novels, liked complex stories, but only those in which nothing happened. His was not religious but the everyday baroque, possible without wounds or death. He had it up to the balls with violence. Particularly when that violence came down on him.

(106)

Pointing to the incommensurability between literature and reality, the narrator reveals how this gap constitutes the “everyday baroque” for Hector. In contrast to authors who “like crime novels,” Héctor yearns for narrative convolution and difficulty, stories that mask rather than illuminate the reality they describe, converting life into a tale where, in
the end, “nothing happened.” Occasionally these tales provide solace because they, however obliquely, mirror his experience. More often than not, however, Hector fails to match these stories with his experience. This gap between genre and experience, a remainder born from the incongruity between fiction and fact, makes Héctor anxious, isolated and apart from the fictitious realm of comfort he envisions.

While Hector hazards a provisional guess as to the story’s meaning – “That’s what all this goddamned story had to do with” (106) – the narrator underscores Hector’s inability to maintain authorial control over the story and the characters because, ultimately, “it wasn’t Hector’s story; they weren’t his characters” (106). Emphasizing the shift from detective to reader, the narrator curtails Hector’s ability to author his own life. Hector is just another character in the story, often resembling the people he investigates, and like them, without agency, lacking self-sufficiency, unable to make sense of his actions. In a world where history “unravels and shifted,” jeopardizing the means by which people create meaning, the moorings of identity suffer a similar fate; incapable of cogent, coherent subjectivity, Hector is caught between contradictory tendencies – closure and fragmentation, solidification and dispersal – and unable to consolidate the boundaries of identity, its antinomies, and its irreconcilable history. Ultimately, these quotes, like most of the novel’s comments, self-referentially reflect Hector’s inability to achieve any progress with the case. For the reader soon begins to sense that Hector’s preference for complicated tales, or for stories where not much happens, rationalizes his own inaction and lack of understanding. How else is the reader supposed to react to the novel’s ending, indeed, if it ends, since it ends in the most unusual ways? Are we, as
readers, supposed to feel like the narrator and Hector, assuming that, “at the end of the day, the whole story deserved that, an ending without an end?” (110).

In *Life Itself*, the residents of Santa Ana enlist detective novelist Jose Daniel Fierro to protect the town’s union workers from conservative PRI agents and anti-union violence. Fierro sees himself, his life and his new job as sheriff in terms borrowed from hard-boiled literature and *film noir*, such as when he claims to speak “in full Robert Mitchum” (29) voice, or “tried to conduct the whole affair in the purest procedural style of the stories of McBain’s 87th Precinct” (92). Not only does Fierro see himself and his case as issuing from the shadowy realm of *film noir*, the narrator also describes him in cinematic terms: “At fifty yards, Jose Daniel Fierro appears an ungainly character who miraculously broke through the barrier of silent film to arrive alone and desperate in the commercial cinema of the 1960’s: movies about drug running on the border and so on” (60). Like Hector’s experiences in *Frontera Dreams*, Jose Daniel Fierro’s use of genre is fraught with contradictions and historical anachronisms. Genre, it turns out, is a double-edged sword: a useful tool at times, an important hermeneutic, but often it removes the detective’s sense of agency, his ability to author his life. Fierro writes a letter to his wife, explaining the situation in Santa Ana, but presents actual events as fictional, feigned ideas for a later detective novel:

> It is a novel of some very fucked-up crimes, but the important thing is not the crimes, but (as in every Mexican crime novel) the context. Here one rarely asks oneself who done it, because the killer is not the one who wants the death. There is a distance between the executioner and the one who gives the orders. The important thing is usually the way.
And so I think this is the story of various whys. The characters are not…very lucid; they are more opaque.

There is a touch of exoticism: an American, but she always appears out of place, accidental, caught in a story that is not hers.

I would like to work with that, but I can’t identify with those characters.

(156-57)

Fierro’s meta-commentary provides a template for the actions of *Life Itself* and *Frontera Dreams* as well by claiming how context, narrative distance and opaque characters overdetermine the “Mexican crime novel,” something he experiences as “real” in his job as sheriff but which conflicts with the conventions of traditional storytelling. When Fierro writes, “there is a distance between the executioner and the one who gives the orders,” the reader senses he is also referring to writing and authorship more generally, perhaps even the contours of identity itself, because real life, in this case, quickly becomes a “story of whys” and the people operate as characters. Fierro, at the end of the novel, reflects on what he has come to understand, but this truth, in and of itself, avoids the language of literature: “The beauty of the novel is that the sheriff discovers nothing, only that things simply happen. That’s what I like about this novel – that it has no ending, no losing, but is, as I’ve said of my days in Santa Ana, like life itself” (193).

Like the novel’s title, *Life Itself*, this quote demarcates the split between literature and life, and points to a division within the nature of realism, a divide the detective novel perpetuates. For if detective fiction, and in Taibo’s case, politically steadfast detective fiction is committed to realism, what happens when life, people and experiences are opaque and uncertain and resistant to the investigations of literature?
Fierro’s “letter” points to the “accidental” and “out of place,” which he connects to narrative and generic dislocation, something Héctor begins to understand as the “foreignness” of the border in *Frontera Dreams*.

Hector’s lapsed and inadequate detective abilities have much to do with the fact that he is hindered by mass cultural representations of the private eye. Underscoring this point, the novel stresses the extent to which Hector is overdetermined by the popular images of hard-boiled fiction and *film noir*, television and advertising. This sense of cultural invasion seems evident when the narrator, referring to Hector’s futile task, claims: “A phantom detective on the hunt for a phantom woman. Who the fuck would want to hurry under those circumstances? Not even a scriptwriter for California TV” (9). Registering a pessimism toward simple narrative progression, mind-numbing genre and, specifically, popular culture intrusions, the narrator’s remarks indicate how mass culture shapes Hector’s life. And yet, ironically, Hector’s images for his authentic, existential feelings of alienation are culled from the palate of popular culture: “He felt sad, disheartened, alien, a Robinson Crusoe in the middle of the busiest street in Tokyo… Nat letting herself fall into his arms with a Madame Bovary sigh in the middle of the high school stairway was one thing, but this Phantom Woman surrounded by shady characters, each one carrying a history in his pocket that unravels and shifted, was another thing” (106). Powerful, yet cut through with irony, mass culture’s position in the novel seems, in spite of its claims to narrative simplicity, to complicate characters’ identities, actions, and frames of reference. Mass culture’s imposition of narrative and generic regularity, and with it the power of genre to subject reality to order, forces the incongruity the characters experience between their “real” lives and the lives that the movies and
television has led them to expect. Hector, while remaining at an ironic distance, is depicted as a fish out of water, never quite fitting into the Hollywood ideal of detective mysteries and romance: “It was the ideal setting for the move: detective looks for movie star who disappears mysteriously in the middle of a shoot, a movie star to whom he is connected by the fine threads of his absurd recollection” (12). Just as Hector’s only analog for his actions and role as a detective are in terms of genre, film and literature, Jose Daniel Fierro’s ironic identification as a detective in Leonardo’s Bicycle only emphasizes how unnatural his actions have become: “I would believe in characterization. In mise-en-scène. I would have the appearance of an investigator” (121). Yet, Jose Daniel becomes trapped in stories that he, although a crime novelist in his own right, cannot extract himself: “After telling so many stories he had gotten stuck in one. He was a fictional character and he did not know it” (322). Taibo’s border detective novels, therefore, underscore the power of genre and mass culture to shape individuals, yet ironically and self-reflexively refuse that power. These quotes demonstrate the power of genre to make all content ironic by mocking heroism, ratiocination, and romantic love. More than a simple case of movie reality slowly seeping into the everyday reality, saturating the parameters by which we make sense of the world, the influence of cinematic reality seems to have turned the world inside out in the novels.

*   *   *

The narrator describes Hector’s experiences of the border, and the difference between both sides, as radically and irrevocably altered by an uncontrollable state of mediation. Hector’s travels along the region reveal the complex influence of media and television on our sense of borders, boundaries, and distinctions. Following Natalia as she
slowly approaches the San Diego/Tijuana border, Hector “discovered in the chance mirror of a shop window that his beard was growing more rapidly than normal” (28). In a seeming parody of Benjamin’s flâneur, the narrator transforms Hector into the figure of the man of the crowd, spying his image reflected back to him through the store window. Yet the window is not the only surface that reflects we soon find out. Television his supplanted the border but it, in effect, forms a much more formidable barrier:

From the border, the United States is a televised landscape at arms length. A Giant Babylonian supermarket, where the meaning of life might be the ability to buy three distinct models of steam iron on the same day. Hector didn’t think himself a good judge in the area of nations and nationalism. A guy who frequently failed to recognize his image in the mirror wasn’t a good judge of anything. (29)

As with Hector’s earlier emersion in generic tropes and traits from *film noir* and hard-boiled literature, tropes that signal his alienation from the border area and genre itself, here Hector is caught between another, more looming border: the divide between material, economic and social consequences of the border and the mediated, “televised landscape” of the U.S. The U.S. transforms nature and the landscape, according to the narrator, into a simulated reality, a screen and surface that denies depth, erases complexity, and hides the material reality of the intricate social, political and cultural institutions guiding the border. The televised landscape becomes a commercial option, a “giant Babylonian supermarket,” controlled by commodities, products and goods.

Moving from personal reflection to seemingly less decipherable abstractions such as nations and nationalism, the narrator claims that, for all of Hector’s understanding of how
the personal operates, he is unable to speculate on “national identity.” The narrator questions, rightly, the ability of a person who “frequently failed to recognize his image in the mirror.” How could he be “a good judge in the area of nations and nationalism?” Hector’s personal confusion about the self, his inability to achieve any type of recognition, precludes his understanding of nations and nationalism. Self-identity, according to this equation, is opaque, operating as a mere cipher for the economic, cultural, and political actions traversing the region.

The narrator’s and Hector’s depictions of the border, specifically Hector’s claim that the U.S. side of the border resembles a “televised landscape,” complicates traditional debates about the border and border identity because it introduces the component of “mediation,” the complex interface of media, communication, global capitalism, production and consumption, and how they shape human existence. Most immediately, references to the “televised landscape” of the border and the “Babylonian supermarket” of United States consumerism resonate with Jean Baudrillard’s notion of “hyperreality,” “simulation” and the “ecstasy of communication.” Baudrillard argues that the notion of the real has been undercut because “the very definition of the real becomes: that of which it is possible to give an equivalent reproduction…at the limit of this process of reproducibility, the real is not only what can be reproduced, but that which is always already reproduced. The hyperreal (146). Baudrillard believes that reproduction has reached the point where representations have emptied out reality and “the body, landscape, time all progressively disappear as scenes (129). He continues:

The very quotidian nature of the terrestrial habitat hypostasized in space means the end of metaphysics. The era of hyperreality now begins. What
I mean is this: what was projected psychologically and mentally, what
used to be lived out on earth as metaphor, as mental or metaphorical sense,
is henceforth projected into reality, without any metaphor at all, into an
absolute space which is also that of simulation. (128)
Baudrillard argues that the essential nature of representation and description has changed
because television and media disrupt meaning and depth. The television screen, in
essence, becomes the iconic image for mediated culture’s power to flatten and level.
According to Baudrillard:

Something has changed, and the Faustian, Promethean (perhaps Oedipal)
period of production and consumption gives way to the “proteinic” era of
networks, to the narcissistic and protean era of connections, contacts,
contiguity, feedback and generalized interface that goes with the universe
of communication. With the television image – the television being the
ultimate and perfect object of this new era – our own body and the whole
surrounding universe becomes a control screen. (126-27)
Unlike the past, where an individual would develop a sense of self against owned objects
and the world he/she inhabited, the current era of communications and transparency for
Baudrillard force the individual and the scene of individual action to fade. At one time
according to Baudrillard, the subject had depth:

The description of this whole intimate universe – projective, imaginary
and symbolic – still corresponded to the object’s status as mirror of the
subject, and that in turn to the imaginary depths of the mirror and “scene.”
The oppositions subject/object and public/private were still meaningful.
However, the interiority that relies so heavily on the imaginary plentitude of privacy has been lost due to, what Baudrillard calls, the “ecstasy of communication”:

Today the scene and the mirror no longer exist; instead, there is a screen and network. In place of the reflexive transcendence of the mirror and scene, there is a nonreflecting surface, an immanent surface where operations unfold – the smooth operational surface of communication.

One result of the predominance of the “screen and network” is the control of fear that threatens self-identity. However, the screen and network prohibit the necessary dialectic of self and Other so important for the girding of self:

Certainly, this private universe was alienating to the extent that it separated you from others – or from the world, where it was invested as a protective enclosure, an imaginary protector, a defense system. But it also reaped the benefits of symbolic alienation, which is that the Other exists, and that otherness can fool you for the better or the worse. Thus consumer society lived also under the sign of alienation, as a society of the spectacle. But just so: as long as there is alienation, there is spectacle, action, scene. It is not obscenity – the spectacle is never obscene. Obscenity begins precisely when there is no more spectacle, no more scene, when all becomes transparence and immediate visibility, when everything is exposed to the harsh and inexorable light of information and communication. (130)

According to Baudrillard’s description of spectacle and obscenity, the “transparency” and “visibility” of communications renders the hysteria and paranoia of the past obsolete:
If paranoia was the pathology of organization, of the structuration of a rigid and jealous world; then with the communication and information, with the immanent promiscuity of all these networks, with there continual connections, we are now in a new form of schizophrenia...this state of terror proper to the schizophrenic: too great a proximity of everything, the unclean proximity of everything which touches, invests and penetrates without resistance, with no halo of private protection, not even his own body, to protect him anymore (132).

One logical consequence, it seems, of communications’ war on representation is the disappearance of rigid and organized structures, and its pathological obverse in paranoia. Communications and technology interconnect, Baudrillard claims, and these “continual connections” between networks signal the end of paranoia proper in favor of the schizophrenic’s obscene proximity. In contrast to the schizophrenic’s sense of transparency and collapse, Hector’s paranoid fear when crossing the border, especially his sense of “foreignness,” confirms the persistence of paranoia as a form of detection and reading. In addition, Hector’s paranoia is indicative of the mediation, significance and meaning of the border, a meaning and depth that persists in spite of the efforts to transform the border into a flattened television screen.

For all the cosmetics needed to transform the border into a flattened television screen, American mass culture, according to the narrator, has the effect of making others foreigners, of making all things foreign not included in its circuit of commodification and simulation:

Hector observed San Isidro from afar. Over there, he would be a
foreigner. How absurd, to become more or less a foreigner by walking a few yards. Was he a foreigner here? A little more so than Mexico City? Definition of a foreigner: he who feels foreign, he who believes that the tacos he can get right around the corner from his house are necessarily better than those he can eat here, he who upon waking up in the middle of the night feels a strange emptiness, a sense of not belonging to the landscape seen from the window. Okay, he was a foreigner here, too. He didn’t know the landscape, he didn’t feel at home, faced with this touched up Mexican border town. (29)

The border becomes, in this quote, a site where history, nationalism and identity converge and conflict, where contested distinctions are won and lost, in essence, “a land where everyone was a foreigner” (4). Yet for all the influence the characters’ sense of space plays in determining their identity, everyone in the story eventually succumbs to the fact that the border is a metaphysical state – “a strange emptiness” – as well as a material one, something you carry with you: “a sense of not belonging to the landscape.” Hector begins to understand the metaphysical homelessness of the border, proclaiming “Branded. Sickly. Slow. Foreign. That’s what all this goddamned story had to with: being a foreigner” (106). Just as borders produce “foreignness,” borders also reinforce racial and class divisions: “racism is also a detector of precious metals, an inspector of the relationship between wallet and skin color...If we’re poor, then we’re black for sure. All this shit was also the border” (Leonardo’s Bicycle 107-8). This sense of “also the border” indicates a willingness to extend the concept of the border beyond a merely literal sense to a broader, more figurative metaphor for the foreignness, alienation and
estrangement of the border, the sense of spiritual homelessness engendered by the rise of globalization and the decline of nation state sovereignty.

Taibo’s other writings reveal how the concept of “foreignness” is crucial to both his understanding of genre and non-fiction. His record of the political events of 1968, the non-fictional ’68, highlights the feelings of foreignness underlying the students’ political dissatisfaction:

For we were not Mexicans. We dwelled in a smaller city within a vast metropolis. To the east, our enclave’s border was marked by the statue of General Zaragoza, whose raised finger said to us, “Go no further; behind me lie the lands of the real.” To the north, on the Pachuca road, were the statues of the Indios Verdes; beyond them was the wilderness—Apache territory. To the west, the H. Steele clock at the far end of Polanco indicated not only the time but the border of the industrial section. To the south, the laboratories of Tlalpan signaled the other extremity of the known city…All other neighborhoods were foreign to us…We were strangers, too, in history. We did not come from the national past. We did not know why, but for us the past was an international realm that produced novels and revolution, not a local realm belonging to the people…Foreigners in our own country; foreigners in our own history.” (20)

Taibo emphasizes how “foreignness” operates as a material and metaphysical condition, a type of grand alienation, creating borders in its wake. As Jose Daniel Fierro claims in Leonardo’s Bicycle, New York City is the leading example of foreignness because “it
was a city in which virtually everybody felt partially exiled, and everybody generally foreign” (291).

Foreignness, however, is more than spatial and temporal alienation for Taibo’s detectives. It is the fundamental experience of literature and genre, which is why the detectives employ film noir – the example of the foreign par excellence – as a framework for understanding their own dislocated senses of personal identity, agency and self-authorship:

I might not be sure about the place that I, José Daniel Fierro, would have in this plot. I would not know myself as a person or a character. And if that is the way it is, and if there might be some kind of trick or trap, there would be some other sumbitch who would be writing a novel about me, who would be writing about me as a character: the E.T. of the Wild Frontier. (Leonardo’s Bicycle 174-176)

When Fierro or Hector turn to genre – hard-boiled detective literature and film noir – as a shorthand for “foreignness,” for the other, the strange, the inassimilable, the excessive, they do so out of their desire for a critical approach to the border. Employing a pastiche of mass cultural references, Hector and Fierro construct a critical edifice through which to understand the border. Combining popular culture to their own ends, the detectives deploy images, metaphors and generic frameworks to situate and empower themselves as detectives and foreigners: “I am the E.T. of the Wild Frontier, a sort of literary alien, my girl. I’m a writer. I’m a vampire sucking the blood out of other people’s stories. I came to Ciudad Juárez to write a novel.” (233)
When Hector finally reaches the border, he experiences first hand the foreignness of la frontera. Following Natalia as she crosses the Tijuana border into San Diego, Hector waits to enter the “North American territory,” noticing the different types and classes of people also waiting to enter. Hector’s crossing is halted abruptly, however, when a border guard stops him:

“Passporte.”

Hector handed over his crumpled document, which was then inspected with mistrust. The guy looked fixedly at the detective, taking in the bad eye, the small scars on his face, the three-day beard…

“Our computer says you’ve been working illegally in San Jose. I need to ask you to turn in your green card. We’re going to cancel your visa.”

“And what was I supposed to be doing in San Jose?” Hector asked the pseudo-Mexican, whose tone was beginning to make his blood boil.

“You worked in a bakery…En una panaderia.”

“And when was that?”

“Sit down there, please,” said Gonzalez, showing him a yellow plastic chair and disappearing again into the backroom…

“You have to give me your green card.”

“I don’t know San Jose, I’ve never worked in a bakery, and I don’t have a green card. I’ve been to New York three times, and I swear that there’s no Belascoarán in your computer. So, maybe you can tell me if there’s some problem with my visa, and if not, let go of my balls,” said Hector in the most friendly tone he could muster.
“And what are your intentions in the U.S.?” asked Gonzalez.

“To go to the public library in San Isidro and look at the list of pilgrims on the Mayflower to see if there was any Gonzalez,” replied Hector.

“Sientense ahi un momento”

“Me and who else?” asked Hector, surprised by the use of the plural.

Gonzalez ignored him and went back toward the office.

A half-hour later, when Hector had decided to give up on following Natali into the United States, the big-asses black woman returned his passport along with a twenty-four hour visa…

Without a doubt, there were places where he was more of a foreigner than others.”  (32-34)

The narrator signals Hector’s distrust of the guard even before he speaks with him, claiming that Hector “found himself in front of a Tex-Mex – or a Cal-Mex – with the face of a son-of-a-bitch, who sported a patch on the upper pocket of his uniform that identified him as Jess Gonzalez (31). Hector’s suspicions of the guard are strangely preemptive attacks on the guard’s own assumptions of national or racial purity. The fact that Hector knows Gonzalez’s name before his own name is revealed, along with his snide comments about finding a Gonzalez on the Mayflower, proves Hector’s power to “identify” the guard before he can be correctly “identified.” In fact, as we see, the border guards, with their high-tech computers, absurdly believe that Hector is an illegal immigrant baker in San Jose, more evidence that the border does indeed transform everyone into a foreigner.

Hector is not the only estranged character in the novel, however. Everyone seems to feel the effects of the border town: its lure, its mystery, its fate. Drawn by the
irresistible promise of the border, Hector and Natalia’s journey through Tijuana transforms both into flâneurs, or something perhaps more foreign, something like a “recently arrived Martian” (31). The narrator describes the situation:

Like a ship adrift, Hector navigated Avenida Revolucion de Tijuana, with a watchful eye, following Natalia Smith-Corona, on the hunt for clues of what his old friend might be looking for in the city. She dawdled, contemplating the display window of the liquor store. She was like a recently arrived Martian, toting a little kid’s knapsack. They kept on advancing, almost without realizing it, toward the border. (31)

More than just out of place, Hector and Natalia are transported to another world, shifting their ontological reality to the point where commodities displace objects and geography is unstable, since Tijuana is just one more city “without distinction beyond their status at the end of the earth, la frontera” (38). Like Border Incident, which represents the border as a source of ontological ambiguity, Frontera Dreams revisits how the border blurs distinctions through circulation; but unlike Border Incident presentation of the circulation of people – braceros – Frontera Dreams focuses on the circulation of objects – namely, commodities – across the border. Just as the circulation of braceros in Border Incident implied the collapse of human and landscape, with braceros becoming part of the land they worked, in Frontera Dreams the circulation of commodities, prescient of the soon-to-come NAFTA agreements, displaces human and geographic groundings/boundaries, destroying a new host of oppositions: self and other, north and south, etc. The mediated landscapes of the border in Frontera Dreams, populated by commodities, advertising and shopping, obfuscate an individual’s relation to the land and to the self. The border, in
these instances, becomes a site where commodification, globalization and mass culture mediate identity and determine the individual from without, as if through paranoid positioning. The last line from the previous quote – “They kept on advancing, almost without realizing it, toward the border” – underscores the extent to which the border transforms people into consumerist and capitalists zombies – “dawdled, contemplated the display” – alienated yet inextricably drawn to the border. These characters are presented as alienated, not only from the land, the nation, the strange border region, foreigners no matter where they go, but also from their sense of self; their identities as opaque and unforgiving as the land. It is this sense of personal and spatial confusion that extends the border beyond its literal aspects, making the border the space for self-reflection and self-examination, a type of metaphorical frontier of the self. And while the seemingly Romantic and heroic undertones of the self’s confrontation with self, a self-shaping identity and aesthetics, *Frontera Dreams* reveals that the border is no longer a barren region testing an individual’s fortitude. Instead, as *Frontera Dreams* proves, the border levels difference and distinction. No longer a site of national, ethnic and racial difference, the border becomes a collapsed capitalistic space, a place of advertising, billboards, and noise; traditional distinctions no longer observed by language or culture. Both sides are in essence the same. The border’s function as national divide is lapsed, outdated, and flawed from the inside due to the tension between globalization and national sovereignty.

The narrator of the novel seems to propose, however, that no matter how much identity is transformed, and no matter how much the city undergoes modernization, Tijuana remains an ambiguous space that reverts to lawlessness once the evening settles,
subject to the economic imperialism and sexual tourism of its neighbors to the north. The narrator claims:

The city had changed profoundly, modernizing itself. Hotels and shopping malls, even some decent bookstores, had been built. Out of nowhere a local arts center had sprung up, and the newspapers were all readable. Mexico was offering up a new face. But the night returned Tijuana to its role as a gateway city to the other side, gave back its heroically earned fame as a city of vice, a lawless city for the spineless gringo in search of adventure and raunchy sex, exoticism for the dick at some twenty miles from San Diego. (29-30)

Tijuana remains a “gateway city to the other side” in two senses. Defined by its epistemological and ontological ambiguity, Tijuana is a border city giving literal access to the south. But Tijuana also functions as a metaphysical space, providing entrance to the nighttime world of lawlessness, sexuality and vice. Modernization and globalization may have transformed Tijuana into a more “readable” space, but it retains its mystery, its impenetrability, since it can never be fully integrated into the mediated logic of television and consumerism. Tijuana becomes a pocket of imaginary resistance, of pre-capitalist squalor, not offering solace to the fallen world of the United States, but rather presenting an illusory and seedy alternative to a world of seamless postmodern surfaces, of the impenetrable façade of everyday American life.

Hector’s experience of the border directly engages contemporary border theorists, such as Gloria Anzaldua, Cherrie Moraga and Ramon Saldivar, who discuss the border in terms of hybridity, fluidity and contact zones. In contrast to border theorists
who celebrate a fluid identity of the border, Hector is caught between the contradictions of the mediated border and the material reality of his situation, a situation Hector surmises as being one of “foreignness.” When Hector crosses the Tijuana border, he describes it in terms of a televised landscape, a land emptied of its content, as if hallowed out by the very images that come to represent the border – the flâneur, the alien, the foreigner. And yet Hector is equally alienated by his physical environment, the harsh material and economic reality of the border towns – the ethnic poor, the maquiladora workers, prostitutes, sexual tourism – and seems to be keenly aware that these dual, yet contradictory, senses of the border – as hallowed out image and as disenfranchised, third world reality. Hector’s experiences of the border reveal it as a failed dialectic, where material reality and hyperreal excess clash and conflict, yet, ultimately, fail to be properly resolved in the end.

The narrator’s comment divulges the secret power of paranoia and explains, in part, why Hector is attracted to conspiratorial modes of detection: the ability to discern a distinction between surface and depth, mirror and reflection and exterior and interior. Paranoia often unmasks and reveals the secrets hidden beneath surface appearances. Since Hector’s job as a detective is to uncover secrets, he is comfortable with this model/method of reading. Paranoia is both the symptom and solution to the border. While the characters in Frontera Dreams are ineluctably drawn toward the border, repetitively/obsessively crossing and re-crossing the border as if to undo and then gird the boundaries of the self, stories, narratives, and generic analogs are the only response to the character’s paranoid confusion about the self, memory, history and place. While incomplete and incommensurable with the chaotic world it describes, stories and genre
provide provisional attempts to understand and map the individual’s relationship to an increasingly globalized world.

By the end of *Leonardo’s Bicycle*, Jose Daniel Fierro has located the kidney traffickers, outwitting them as a border crosser, and gone back to writing his next detective novel. He understands, however, that the models of detection necessary to solve the case – suspicion, analysis, doubt, and distrust – are equally applicable to models of reading:

I would have to watch out for the shadows, for the shadows and metaphorical accidents in neon-lit Ciudad Juárez…all the pieces would be coming together in a meaningless jigsaw puzzle.

You have to be overindulgent to think that a metaphor is something direct. An arrow homing in on a target painted in black on the wall. It is not. It is dangerous, double-edged material. It is an ambiguous resource. It is the writer who creates it, but it is the reader who interprets it, adapting it to his own very particular aches and pains. You do not even own the ribbon in the printer you use. (174)

His watchfulness for “shadows and metaphorical accidents” points both to his penchant for the *noir*-like world of shadowy streets, duplicitous characters and dangerous females, and for the “metaphorical accidents” that those shadows engender – the self-certainty that metaphors are “arrow[s] homing in on a target,” denoting and referring unambiguously, with no gap between metaphor and reality. This mistaken of metaphor as ownership and control of meaning is not only wrong, it is “dangerous, double-edged material,” an ideological battle for meaning between author and reader. In addition, this suspicion
toward metaphor, ownership, identity and genre indicate a paranoid mode of reading, of investigation.

While the *Frontera Dreams* lacks an ending in the traditional sense, it does end, however, with Hector’s triumph over his adversaries: Hector explodes a silo holding pounds of marijuana and all three of the enemies inside the silo. Yet, strangely, the coda returns to the novel’s beginning – the story of the Chinese border jumper – but this time, Hector witnesses a real Chinese border jumper:

A young Chinese guy, about 25 years old, in myopic lenses with black frames, dressed in black pants and a white long-sleeved shirt buttoned around the neck, was eating a mango on the corner. He watched the little birds that for their part were eating breadcrumbs near the slopes of el Parque Revolucion, a few feet from the North American border. Hector passed by him, envying the greedy way he ate the fruit’s pulp. A Chinaman, but not just any. Obviously a future recordman. The Chinaman got a running start and directed himself towards the green Mesh. He began without hesitation to climb the fence. Hector – a partisan spectator – wished him the best of luck. When the Chinaman flew through the air towards the other side after having cleared the obstacle, the detective turned his back on him. He began to walk towards the bus station. Natalia would have remained suspended in mid-air, immobile, halfway through the dance step. Frozen by the television spotlights and the 35-millimeter film that constituted cinematic magic.
The Chinese guy would have enrolled in the American Dream. Soon he would grow tired of it and would return to jump the fence in the other direction, but for now he had earned his victory. He had jumped, beating the system. Hector preferred stories with a happy ending. (119-120)

This return to a literal Chinese border jumper manifests the novels and Hector’s attitudes toward the negotiations and vicissitudes of identity under global, postmodern capitalism. The novel’s end reenacts, and seemingly materializes, the mythical anecdote discussed at the beginning of the novel, of the seeming absence of heroes in such a jaded, cynical and postmodern world. However, Hector observes a jumper, traversing the border – both actual and ideal/metaphysical – breaking through the mediated reality of the screen. Yet, Hector keeps his Chinese jumper dissatisfied, yearning. This is Hector’s desire: for story over reality, a preference for a happy conclusion, not an ending frozen in time by the freeze-frame action of cinema, but for a story that realizes its desire in its completion, in its fruition.
CHAPTER THREE

Border Conspiracy: The Ideological Reproduction of the Border

Sergio Arau’s 2004 mockumentary A Day Without a Mexican highlights the importance of Mexican labor – both legal and illegal – for the United States economy by staging an elaborate conspiracy: what would happen if Mexicans disappeared from California, vanishing in plain sight? As viewers discover in a truly humorous fashion, the Californian and U.S. economies, businesses, families and individuals all rely on Mexican labor. When the Latinos disappear, chaos ensues. Parodying NAFTA and invoking California’s Proposition 187, which infamously sought to deny public and health benefits to all undocumented aliens and their children, A Day Without a Mexican is filmed in a documentary, newsroom style, focusing on three different families: a Mexican family, a Mexican/Anglo family and the family of a white, state senator who relies on Mexican labor, including a Mexican nanny. Television reporter Lila Rodriguez’s Mexican family disappears and she must try to figure out why she is the only Latino left in California. By the end of the film, Lila discovers that she is an adopted Armenian, explaining in part why she never disappeared, yet she does eventually disappear after claiming that her “heart is Mexican.” What is particularly interesting about the film is the manner in which the conspiracy occurs. Instead of our traditional sense of conspiracy as, say, a criminal conspiracy hiding an illegal activity or event, the film’s conspiracy involves the disappearance or absence of Mexicans, whether a conspiracy has occurred is not clear. The type of conspiracy or paranoia that A Day Without a Mexican subscribes – the absence of an event – to satirize U.S. immigration policy and the effects of globalization immediately brings to mind Jean Baudrillard’s 1995 essay The Gulf War Did Not Take
Place. Baudrillard boldly declares the successful U.S. lead invasion of Iraq in 1991, after Saddam Hussein invaded neighboring country Kuwait for its oil reserves, a political hoax convincing the U.S. public, not of the country’s political and military power but rather the U.S.’s power to stage a potent, if not distracting, media spectacle.

Baudrillard argues the Gulf war, according to his infamous pessimism, staged America’s power over a carefully constructed enemy:

> By contrast, through a kind of egocentric generosity or stupidity, the Americans can only imagine and combat an enemy in their own image. They are at once both missionaries and converts of their own way of life, which they triumphantly project onto the world. They cannot imagine the Other, not therefore personally make war upon it. What they make war upon is the alterity of the other, and what they want is to reduce that alterity, to convert it or failing that to annihilate it if it proves irreducible (Indians). (37)

Rather than war’s traditional intention, which aims at destroying the enemy, Baudrillard argues that the Gulf conflict “creates” the very enemy it intends to destroy. Rather than simply destroy the other, the war presents the illusion of the other, a vital enemy requiring destruction. How is Baudrillard’s model here anything other than the projecting paranoiac, his inner delusions transformed, altered and deployed as if coming from the outside? To what extent does Baudrillard intend this paranoia to operate as a figure for America’s fearful interaction with the threatening world? Perhaps most important is the consideration of A Day Without a Mexican in relation to Baudrillard’s argument about the “Americans” and their “enemy.” For does not A Day Without a
*Mexican* stage a reverse paranoiac fantasy of the type Baudrillard discusses, with the alterity of the Mexican “Other” disappearing. If so, how does this complicate Baudrillard’s notion that conspiracy covers an absent event, the failure of history to appear on the scene? If conspiracies have the power to stage pseudo-events, do they also have the ability to control non-events or absent events?

If we begin with the proposition that conspiracy theory is the greatest conspiracy because it substitutes an all-knowing, totalizing structure, the proverbial men-in-black who pull the strings from behind the scenes, for an inept, incomplete and idiotic social system, then we could say that conspiracy theorists have half the equation correct. The social is indeed broken, but to replace this broken structure with a more powerful, more coherent agents of conspiracy, those who really control things, is merely to fetishize a social lack. There is no power behind broken power, no system better equipped, better prepared, or better ready to take the place of the social antagonism inherent in the social body. In both novel and film versions of *Flashpoint*, the conspiracy of the border that allows drug trafficking, illegal immigration and crime is neglected in favor of a larger conspiracy theory, namely the J.F.K. assassination. The novel and film stage a deconstruction of the border by collapsing the oppositions between Mexico and the United States, showing the oppositions to be mutually constitutive of each other, animating the dialectic between law and transgression at the border. In addition, the novel connects the border to an entire host of oppositions governing the U.S. postwar era, such as communism vs. capitalism, U.S.S.R. vs. U.S., the individual vs. the institution, and later in the novel, the Arab vs. Israeli conflict. While the novel prefers to connect the border to larger, global postwar events, making the border a charged, regional instance
portending future, global trends and histories, the film concentrates solely on the J.F.K. assassination and the border, omitting even the presence of Mexicans from the film. These literary and filmic texts, in part, function in the ideological reproduction of the border.

* * *

George La Fountaine was born November 10, 1934 in Attleboro, MA. After serving as a sergeant in the U.S. Marine Corps from 1952 to 1955, La Fountaine enrolled in classes at the Pasadena Playhouse. He later worked as a lighting director for both television and film before writing for Hollywood from 1968 to 1972. In 1975, La Fountaine published his first novel, *Two Minute Warning*, about the suspenseful world of assassins and the painful recovery of former prisoners of war. Adapted into a Universal picture released the same year as the novel, *Two Minute Warning* tells the story of the Los Angeles coliseum security team’s effort to protect the crowd at a packed Super Bowl game from a crazed assassin out to kill celebrities attending the game.

*Flashpoint* (1976), La Fountaine’s second novel, was adapted and released by Tri-Star the same year. *Flashpoint* tells the story of Border Patrol agents Robert Logan and Ernie Wheeler, who discover a dead body and 850,000 dollars buried in a jeep in the desert. Logan and Wheeler hide the money, planning to later escape the Border Patrol and enjoy their newfound wealth, but when a desert scavenger discovers the body, the army and other government agents are dispatched to the border to resolve the case. As the mysterious response to the dead body escalates, Logan and Wheeler discover that the body in the jeep is one of the killers responsible for the J.F.K. assassination. As witnesses and agents begin dying, Logan and Wheeler suspect that they are in danger.
Wheeler is eventually killed and Logan escapes with the money only after he has killed Federal agents.

The novel introduces Logan and Wheeler during the Border Patrol’s morning briefing. Wheeler is hung-over and tired during the meeting, but when Ron Lacy, a government agent referred to by Border Patrol Distract Supervisor Brook as “our visiting VIP,” begins to explain new surveillance equipment that would enable a virtual border, Logan and Wheeler muster-up the bravado to question the government’s plan and their future as Patrol agents:

“You know Lacy?” Logan asked Ernie under his breath.

“Heard of him. Some candy ass with a head full of bullshit,” Ernie whispered. “Going to tell us how this bureau should be run.” The men were already restless; feet scuffed the floor, chairs squeaked as their occupants shifted in annoyance. Lacy sensed this and went immediately to the first easel. He struck the pointer into the line separating the United States and Mexico. “Two thousand and thirteen miles of border. Patrolled by almost as many men.” The pointer moved up the coast of California. “Chula Vista, seventy miles of border patrolled by just a handful men. Security more effective than a hundred men in jeeps and planes.” Lacy paused dramatically – the new electronic fence! He whipped the card from the easel, beneath it, the same map but with a large fence drawn along the international boundary…“Isn’t that just the old equipment from the McNamara line in Nam?” Patrolman Richards shot out…“It didn’t work in Vietnam and it cost a bundle,” he grumbled…Lacy
cleared his throat before continuing. “Infrared equipment, pressure sensitive devices, underground wires, and highly sensitive microphones go into the making of the ‘electronic fence’ of the future…This metal detector will detect a coin in a man’s pocket”…“They don’t have any coins in their pockets,” Logan announced, toasting Lacy with his coffee cup. “That’s why they run for the border”…“Let me get this straight,” Ernie said, rising to his feet. “What happens to guys like us that are patrolmen? What the hell do we do?”…“I turned down Immigration investigator to stay out there on patrol! Are you telling me I’m going to have to sit in a little room somewhere looking a little red fucking lights.”

(11-12)

This early passage telescopes Wheeler and Logan’s characters as highly individual Border Patrol agents distrusting of governmental hierarchy and bureaucracy. Not only do Logan and Wheeler understand the complicated socio-economic factors behind illegal immigration better than government bureaucrats – “that’s why they run for the border” – they also require the fierce independence of patrol work in the field, away from the office, or “some little room somewhere.” As Logan finally claims to Lacy, when told that the agents “have no choice” over the addition of new technology to the Border Patrol, “Well, sir, may I say for the record – that’s bullshit,” (13) displaying his self-determination. Their questions ultimately express their fear becoming expendable labor, just as the illegal immigrants they capture form a pliable labor pool for globalization. As Logan claims, “I can’t believe they’re going to dump us for some goddamned computer,” to which Wheeler responds, “I ain’t seen a computer that could track a man forty miles!”
The government’s new technology becomes a source of fears about job security because it threatens to replace Logan and Wheeler’s particular skill for border tracking, something that they value highly as part of their identities.

The film version of *Flashpoint* makes the computer screen and surveillance system a larger focus. When Lacy demonstrates the electronic tracking system, a close-up focuses on the computer screen with green grids designating the border region, he claims that a blip on the screen is a “hypothetical illegal alien,” the only illegal alien the viewers see in the film. The most sinister element of this exchange is that this immigrant surveillance technology will turned against Wheeler and Logan in an effort to maintain the conspiracy later in the novel and film, again reinforcing the connection between Logan and Wheeler and the immigrants.

After the morning briefing, Logan and Wheeler are dispatched to a mysterious car in the desert, possibly a car used for smuggling or perhaps just an abandoned car. When they arrive, they are happy to discover two young, attractive females, Emily and Ellen, whose car has broken down on the way to Durbin. Logan and Wheeler can fix the car, but they would like to have dates, so they tell the women they will have to stay the evening at a hotel while their car is being fixed. On a date later that evening, Logan romanticizes their jobs with the Border Patrol:

“Yes, ma’am. This is where I work. This is the last frontier,” he said expansively, his head swinging in the direction of the desert that lay ahead. “This is where the last confrontation between man and the elements will be held. It’ll be out there, without spectators of a cheering
crowd to urge us on. This...is where man’s last battle will be fought.” He
allowed the solemnity of the picture to overcome him.

“My...” Emily sighed.

“Crap!” Ellen sniffed. (19)

Part pick-up ploy, part serious, Logan poeticizes the meaning of the frontier and in the
process becomes swept-up in the fervor of the moment, even referring to the “solemnity
of the picture.” Sounding like a poster-boy for Fredrick Jackson Turner’s thesis on the
closing of the American frontier, Logan claims that the U.S./Mexico border forms the
“last frontier,” a masculine testing-ground for “man” against the “elements.” Logan also
mentions the lack of “spectators” and “crowd,” something that we will see forms an
important part of Logan and Wheeler’s work ethic: they work alone, away from the
bureaucratic structure of the Border Patrol, free from the corrupting influences of cities
and institutions. However, Ellen lambastes Logan’s masculine bluster with a simple,
caustic remark exposing his posturing as bullshit. While the novel and the film stress the
role, imagined or real, the border plays in the shaping of the national ideals, identity and
masculinity, more often than not the border is only a “picture,” a prop, an artificial,
almost meaningless background. Even when Logan and Wheeler discover the body in
the jeep along with the money, Logan confronts the unreality of the experience with a
scene from an old movie:

Logan threw the money container to the hoof of his vehicle. He, too,
sensed the strangeness of the gully. The canyon walls were darker than he
remembered, save for the blinding slash of sunlight. He had the feeling
the wash had slipped to the bowels of the earth, that they were standing in
an immense underground cavern far beyond the reach of sunlight. Logan thought of *King Solomon’s Mines* and the film made in the mid-twenties of poor Floyd Collins buried alive in a Kentucky cave. For a brief, horrifying instant he felt as if the skull were laughing at them. That the skull knew some curse that would keep them from ever enjoying the money. That already some spell was in progress to render them as impotent as the former owner of the treasure.

Logan shook the gothic horrors clear of his head as he pried the lid free. (69)

What starts out as his familiar territory of section seven quickly turns strange and unfamiliar. First, Logan conjures a *film noir*-type image of “strangeness in the gully” and “canyon walls…darker than he remembered” that quickly turns into a scene from a male adventure novel, “slipping to the bowels of the earth,” an “immense underground cavern.” Logan also thinks of the film about Floyd Collins, who was buried while exploring the “sand cave” in Kentucky. All of Logan’s images come from film and narrative, mixing popular culture, myth and fairytales, prefabricated and generic approaches to experience, similar to Hector Shayne’s descriptions of the border in Taibo’s detective fiction. Additionally, the uncanny image of being buried or swallowed up by the cavern in the desert resembles the quicksand pits in *Border Incident* and expresses, in part, sublimated fears about labor at the border. Yet, the novel and film later reveal Logan and Wheelers’ naiveté shattered upon the discovery of the body in the desert.
The novel underscores Logan and Wheeler’s labor at the border, the work connecting them to each other, to the land and to the illegal immigrants who must also battle the elements. The narrator emphasizes this uniqueness of their work and the manner in which it defines their identities:

Section seven belonged to Logan and Wheeler; it was their country, their private domain. It belonged to them as the cities of glass and cement belonged to other men. It had angered them to discover the fresh print of an intruder, especially when the violator was a coyote, a two-legged predator who fed off the desperation of the wetbacks. The coyotes used to invade their domain with false papers, promising the illegal aliens work and wealth, dragging the dehydrated bodies of the poor behind them, then abandoning them to the bureau’s patrolmen at the first sign of trouble. Escaping with their two-and three-hundred-dollar fees intact, these coyotes were the real enemy.

Every Border Patrolman had seen the dead bodies of Mexico’s fine young men, casually left to perish in the desert, discarded by the coyotes because the situation had suddenly turned risky. Left without food or water, trusting childishly to the saints and the coyotes to return and save them. Patient young men claimed by the desert, tolerant, forgiving, serenely confident of their chances, even when death whispered its hot breath in their faces.
Now the coyotes avoided section seven. The risk of capture was too great, Logan and Wheeler’s anger too terrible, the rewards uncertain.

As an area that “belonged” to Logan and Wheeler, section seven rightly forms a “private domain,” an alternative “country” to the real country that has failed them. As with all the border texts we have been examining so far, we find the obvious importance of space and its impact of identity and self-definition. As a result, character’s paranoia tends to be intricately linked to spatial and boundary concerns, the sense of owning space and owning a sense of personal space and how and where they overlap. This strange form of regional appropriation stresses how Logan and Wheeler feel excluded from their own country and labor, like non-citizens, similar to the illegal immigrants who cross the border in order to secure a better, private future. As we will see later, the novel affirms repeatedly the Wheeler and Logan’s association with the illegal aliens. As a “country” and a “private domain,” Logan and Wheeler’s section of the border oddly presages the rise of regional border economies, seemingly free of nation state sovereignty. As with Border Incident and Taibo’s border detective fiction, labor at the border always threatens to escape the control of nation state sovereignty. In fact, such labor and circulation of goods at the border operates outside and in contradistinction to modern nation state sovereignty. However, in Logan and Wheeler’s case, their talents for tracking are at risk because the economic rise of late capitalism or postmodernism, which introduces technological innovations, outsourcing and flexible labor, threatening to replace their labor. When Logan discovers the money in the jeep that promises them future financial
security, both claim that, “we can tell Brook to shove this job up his ass – and his
electronic fence with it.” “Sideways!” Ernie exclaimed excitedly.

After Wheeler and Logan discover the 850,000 dollars in the jeep buried in the
desert, they decide to hide the odd box containing the rifle and fishing rods in the
chimney at the “old Kaufman’s place,” Wheeler and Logan’s meeting place in section
seven, the abandoned ruins and chimney of an old, mysterious house:

The old Kaufman place, located halfway between Durbin and the
border, was a simple stone chimney standing against the sky. That there
ever was or had been a Kaufman family no one locally could remember
for sure. The chimney was the sole tribute to the plucky courage of some
pioneer named Kaufman.

The structure itself was gone. The winds and rain had washed and
blown away all traces of its existence. The sand had crept over its vitals,
hiding the foundation from prying eyes. Burned to the ground by hostile
Indians, some said. An unfinished dreams that began and ended with the
stone chimney, said others. Logan had never met anyone who had known
for sure or even cared. That Kaufman left a stone sentinel in the desert for
them to wonder about was satisfaction enough. (23)

The Kaufman place, only the chimney remaining, operates as a charged metaphor for the
border. As the narrator claims, the chimney is a “stone sentinel in the desert,” the ruins
of a structure without a proper history, which is probably why so many stories proliferate
around the absent structure, some believing it to be a history of violence – “burned to the
ground” – some believing it to be a story of romance and desire – “unfinished dreams.”
The narrator contributes to the myth, claiming the chimney symbolizes the “plucky courage of some pioneer,” similar to Logan’s earlier bluff about the border as the “last frontier.” Ultimately, I want to claim that the border operates as a purely ideological space, an empty space or void that is filled up with competing narratives. Logan’s claim that the Mexican/U.S. border constitutes the last frontier, the testing-ground of identity and personal courage, becomes eclipsed by an increasingly paranoid world, where closing boundaries threaten to swallow up even the supposed pristine, untouched areas of the border. Logan is incensed when he realizes that his border domain is intruded upon, such as when he first discovers the buried jeep in the desert:

The area itself was virginal. No man had left his mark on the wash. This in itself was a pleasurable experience. Logan thought of it as the feeling that must have accompanied the first moon walk. The pleasures of knowing no one had been there before him, possibly since time had begun. He knew prospectors sometimes entered the area, that Indians may have taken refuge in the ravine, but here was just the possibility they had all missed this wash, that he had been the first to navigate its canyon. The thought pleased him, for it enabled him to strike modern man from this gully...he drove past a small oval piece of metal protruding from the bank, gave it a cursory glance, then continued down the wash. He’d gone some sixty yards before his curiosity overwhelmed him. He stopped the jeep, shoved it angrily into reverse, and spun back up the wash.

It was a curiously shaped piece of metal, barely noticeable in the undercurrent of the bank. He sat in the jeep for a long moment
contemplating his first sign of man. Logan was furious at the man who’d defiled the wash. (25-26)

Logan and the reader discover that a white man connected to the J.F.K. assassination has violated the “virginal” area, not an Indian or prospector. Logan’s comparison to the moon landing reinforces the Mexico/U.S. border as a “final frontier,” like the frontier of space. He also sees the border and frontier as a temporal as well as spatial concept: “no one had been there before him, possibly since time had begun.” Like the other characters in the novel, Logan finds solace in the border precisely because it functions as an assumed reflection of self, a self-referring narrative that defines identity.

Richard Slotkin’s *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth Century America* argues for the centrality of the theory of Anglo-Saxon ascendance and superiority rather than Fredrick Jackson Turner’s thesis of the closing frontier in the shaping the American political and cultural ideology. According to Slotkin,

The peculiarities of the American version of this myth/ideology derived from our original condition as a settler-state, a colonial outpost of the European “metropolis.” In America, all the political, social, and economic transformation attendant on modernization began with outward movement, physical separation from the originating “metropolis.” The achievement of “progress” was therefore inevitably associated with territorial expansion and colored by the experience, the politics, and the peculiar psychology of emigration. (10-11)
Thus the progress of American development in the colonies were linked from the beginning to a historical narrative in which repeated cycles of separation and regression were necessary preludes to an improvement in life and fortune. (11)

Conflict with the Indians defined one boundary of American identity: though we were a people of “the wilderness,” we were not savages. The other boundary was defined by the emergence of conflicts between the colonies and the “mother country,” and (later) between the regional concerns of the “borderers” and those of American metropolitan regimes. The complete “American” of the Myth was one who had defeated and freed himself from both the “savage” of the western wilderness and the metropolitan regime of authoritarian politics and class privilege. (11)

The moral landscape of the Frontier Myth is divided by significant borders, of which the wilderness/civilization, Indian/White border is the most basic. The American must cross the border into “Indian country” and experience a “regression” to a more primitive and natural condition of life so that the false values of the “metropolis” can be purged with a new, purified social contract enacted. (14)

What of course happens in Flashpoint reverses of the type of “regression” that occurs in Slotkin’s “Frontier Myth.” Logan undergoes a type of “regression” in the desert, a conflict with “wilderness,” but it results from the discovery of the body in the jeep and
the fact that there is no nature left, nothing untouched by culture. The “regression”
Logan and Wheeler face is a world of paranoia and suspicion, where “everything is
suspect,” where there is no “wilderness,” no “last confrontation between man and the
elements” (19)

While Logan and Wheeler bond as Border Patrol agents, the reader discovers that
this connection extends beyond the workplace, spilling into the sexual realm and
transgressing the border between heterosexuality and homosexuality:

The pilot, Ewing, a full-time cynic, part-time criminologists and
psychiatrist, once told Logan that the fact that he and Wheeler screwed
together, was a further sign of their love for each other. Each time they
penetrated a girl, they were penetrating each other. Each amorous
adventure was a renewal of their own love. Logan’s answer to this was to
laugh as loud and hard as possible. Later he wondered of it were possibly
ture. (58)

While Logan seems remarkable open to the idea of the homosocial bond slipping into a
homosexuality, the novel is acutely aware of the sexual politics of the law, the border,
and conspiracy more generally. When Logan and Wheeler first meet Emily and Ellen,
Logan and Ellen’s verbal exchange leads to Logan’s unintentionally humorous claim that,
“We belong to the Border Patrolmen, we don’t have any balls” (17). The joke is
revealing, however, when considered alongside Logan and Wheeler’s later concerns
about the feminizing aspects of bureaucratic institutions, such as the Border Patrol. The
narrator later mentions that
For Logan, Ernie was closer than any brother he might have had or wished for. It was a closer bond than Logan had found in the service. In Nam there had always been that doubt of someone being snatched unexpectedly away. Here there were dangers, equally shared, tolerated but in control. There were no mines to shatter a friendship, few unseen hazards. Six years of daily companionship and drunken revelry south of the border had married them, more surely than any vow. They’d become so attuned to each other’s thinking that the signs they passed between them went unnoticed by others. (58)

Considering paranoia’s historical links with homosexuality, as with Freud’s Schreber case, I want to spend some time discussing the history of paranoia in psychoanalysis.

Logan and Wheeler reject the threat of homosexuality, or the paring of paranoia with homosexuality, by locating it within the bureaucratic organization of the Border Patrol, who are “chickenshits,” according to Ernie Wheeler, because “they’re bound and determined to shut us up in some little room or have us checking green cards at the border.” (13) Labor becomes the main basis for Logan and Wheeler’s partnership, an expression of their masculinity and independence, the reason they feel a connection to the immigrants they track:

In the six years that followed, the bond grew rapidly. They shared the desert, and the good times equally. They were two men with no past, no future except the present. Willing to except each other for what they were. Logan felt it was this ready acceptance that bound them so closely. The aliens, the very nature of the patrol’s existence, were faceless men also,
with no past or future, only the present. It was an unwritten rule between
them. Ask no questions; never question the future of themselves or their
quarry. (57)

It is the individual’s relation to the land, what Logan refers to as “shar[ing] the desert,
and their “acceptance” of each other that connects them to the immigrants who cross the
border. Like their “quarry,” Logan and Wheeler are “faceless men” with “no past or
future.” And like Immigration agents Rodriguez and Bearnes in Border Incident, once
Logan and Wheeler are embroiled in the conspiracy to hide the J.F.K. assassination, they
are transformed into figurative alien immigrants, fleeing the border surveillance
technology they helped install.

Logan discovers the jeep in the desert after the morning Border Patrol briefing.
Ernie, away from Logan, confronts the negative consequences of the border and the
border economy when he responds to a call about a train hitting a bus carrying migrant
workers:

A deputy was sending traffic around the rear of the train. Two hundred
yards north lay the front of the buys, carried forward under the wheels,
spilling its once-live cargo on both sides of the track. At one time it had
been a faded green farm bus; now it lay broken and split down the center.
The front lay on one side of the train’s heaving engine; the tail section sat
on its rear wheels near the crossing marker. The area was strewn with
parts of bodies – limbs lay under the train wheels, torsos drained into the
dry desert floor, large brown stains pinned the bodies to their last moment
of mortality. (27)
The narrator’s grisly image of mangled Mexican bodies, mechanical parts and desert terrain reveals how real people suffer for a job at the border, often becoming victim to the machines they operate or the land they work. Ernie and Sheriff Kirkland confront Ernesto Pedroza, chief farm-labor contractor, about the deaths, complaining that he uses buses that are “ill-equipped, mechanically unsafe, and overloaded” (29). Wheeler and Sheriff Kirkland can do nothing to Pedroza, because, as Ewing says, “he’s got a lot of clout” (29). The novel emphasizes the curtailed ability of individuals confronting bureaucratic privilege and corruption.

The novel reveals that Ernie Wheeler is a “half-bred” (168) Mexican-American whose uncanny tracking ability as a Border Patrol agent is connected to his race: “‘The reason you track so well,’” Logan explained, “‘is all that Mexican blood in you. Only in Mescalero Apache and the Mexicans can track like that.’” (108) But Ernie’s border identity leads him to be acutely aware of the contradictions of the border, his identity and his job as a Border Patrol agent:

Today the bureau itself seemed a monument to poverty. Ernie’s own actions seemed limited to preventing the poor from reaching the golf of America. The Company, as Logan and Wheeler called themselves, were digging holes in the surf, and each wave rapidly filled their efforts. Digging was no longer sufficient, the tide was moving relentlessly against them. He felt he was spitting into the desert to extinguish the heat. It all seemed so suddenly useless. Even his own life was no meaningless and limited, his working expectancy dreadfully shortened.
Ernie recognizes his complicity in preventing others from reaching their dream, a state of peaceful, independent existence he cherishes so dearly, and this contradiction in part explains why Logan and Wheeler cynically call themselves “The Company,” a ruthless business guided by free-market principles, not law and order.

But it is Ernie’s personal history that provide the most traumatic and painful contractions:

Ernie remembered his mother and father, their own struggles for a place in America. Relegated to the ghettos of poverty, his patents had capitulated to the system, shorn of hope even for their children. It had been a bitter moment of recognition for him, a staggering ruthless actuality that his parents had giving up hope for any of them. That was when he’d made his escape, abandoning them to their small, constricting world. Today he could understand this determination to run to the border and vanish in the faceless crowds of the city. He alone, with the possible exception of Logan, knew what the border represented, that invisible line between parents and children, the distance between hope and despair that separated the strong and the daring from the old and weak. A future free of parental property, of inherited disappointments, crippling pride.

Yet he had tracked them, turned them away. He say the hurt in their eyes, the desperation. He also knew he would see them again, that they would be back with their quiet persistence. The lines at the border were long and someday they would make it. He was standing guard with a net to catch the wind, and it was proving futile. (36).
Ernie talks of his understanding as “recognition,” the “staggering ruthless actuality” of knowing “what the border represented.” Seeing his own parents broken by a system intent on their poverty and subjugation, what he calls “a capitualtion to the system” and a “small, constricting world,” Ernie understands the aliens “determination to run to the border,” for he himself understands the border to be the “invisible line between parents and children,” between “hope and despair,” “strong and daring from old and weak.” The border is not just a physical barrier prohibiting free access between nations, according to Wheeler, it is “parental property, of inherited disappointments, crippling pride,” the shame of ethnicity and poverty forming part of one’s identity. Ernie’s mother crossed the border illegally, and she suffered in her desire to provide for her kids what she lacked herself:

Logan knew Ernie had inherited the dark hair, eyes, and complexion from his mother, a Mexican girl who crossed the border back in the early 1900’s, when the term “wetback” had yet to be coined…she had entered the United States by paying a fee of three cents at the crossing station. Raised seven children, doing her best to see that they were properly schooled, though she herself would never become a citizen, would never learn to read or write. (108)

The film version of *Flashpoint* provides a substantially different picture of Ernie. Most significant is the elimination of his “half-breed” Mexican/American ethnicity, which the novel locates as the source of his excellent tracking ability as well as sympathy with those he tracks. The film, in distinction to the novel, makes Ernie’s sincerity his most dominant characteristic. Logan confides to Doris (Ellen in the novel) that Ernie is
different because, unlike Logan, “he still believes in God and country and his job and
duty.” Logan continues: “I haven’t got what Ernie’s got, which is the brave young notion
that he can do something about it.”

* * *

One mark of the novel’s self-consciousness and self-reflexivity is the characters’
open discussion of paranoia and conspiracies, making the novel seem to follow Fredric
Jameson’s theory that postmodern conspiracy is allegorical. As the mystery of the body
in the jeep becomes more serious, both agents begin to discuss famous conspiracies from
the past and question the nature of conspiracies:

‘Ernie,’ Logan cried in anger, ‘how can you say that after all the
shit that’s come out about Watergate and the CIA and the FBI and the
assassination plots over the world? How can you say that?’

‘That’s exactly what I mean!’ Ernie said swiftly, turning to face
Logan in the seat, a finger under his nose as he pointed out. ‘It all came
out, didn’t it?’

‘You don’t believe there was a guy on the grassy knoll?’

‘No!’

‘Oswald acted alone.’

‘Yes.’

‘I don’t believe you.’

‘You missed the boat, pal’ Ernie grinned. “Every time there’s a
shooting these conspiracy guys come out of the woodwork. The same
thing happened with Bobby Kennedy in L.A. People refuse to believe one
guy can do something like that and get away with it. But that's the only reason it works – one guy does it” (85).

This passage points to a historical shift, real or imagined, in the very nature of paranoia. Logan challenges Ernie’s assumption that paranoia is the work of private individuals and that conspiracy issues from such individuals, as in the case of this passage, Sirhan Sirhan. In a strange reversal of character, Wheeler, the younger and more rebellious of the two agents, skeptically denies the reality of conspiracies and conspiratorial thinking more generally. While Logan, the older Vietnam veteran, seems certain that given past historical examples, such as “Watergate and the CIA and the FBI and the assassination plots over the world,” there is no question that conspiracies exist. Logan’s jaded response is indicative of the later postwar years made cynical by the political scandals of McCarthy and Watergate, the J.F.K. assassination, Vietnam, etc., and the historical precedence of these scandals allow Logan to see conspiracies as the product of groups, structures and organizations, not just lone gunmen, but rather a complicated network of connections. As we will see with Don DeLillo’s Underworld in the next chapter, cold war paranoia involves precisely the shift from individuals to groups that Logan and Wheeler are discussing. Ernie’s claim that “it all came out, didn’t it?” reveals the tremendous differences between their two senses of conspiracy, history and truth. For Ernie, the idea that the “facts” came out during the investigations confirms that there is no conspiracy or cover-up. For Logan, the opposite is the case. That certain “facts” have been revealed only confirms that there is more being hidden.

In an effort to confirm the source of the 850,000 dollars they discovered with the skeleton in the buried jeep, Logan and Wheeler investigate the library’s microfilm for
stories of past bank robberies. Logan, in particular, is drawn to the stories of the J.F.K assassination:

The San Antonio Express began the new year of 1964 with extensive coverage of the Dallas assassination of John F. Kennedy. It recapped that November with photos of the parade route, Texas School Book Depository, Lee Harvey Oswald in custody, Jack Ruby’s shooting the alleged rifle aloft, Ruby awaiting trial for murder, Earl Warren, wounded Texas Governor John Connally, and slain officer Tippit.

Logan tried to skip past the assassination highlights, but he was drawn back to it and found himself rereading the whole calendar of events, beginning with the presidential motorcade.” (81)

This scene in the library, which the film duplicates, depicts Logan as a reader, someone dependent on images and print to understand the past. Logan’s relation to history as image is both empowering and dreaded because although “Logan had total recall of all the words; he sat through the endless torture of repetition as tape after tape of the familiar voice was played and replayed” (82). The narrator continues:

Looking at the microfilm gave him and extraordinary sense power. He alone seemed to know the outcome. He alone knew that Jack Ruby would be dead in just a few years, that others would die. Many of those only remotely connected with the shooting would succumb of natural causes. He felt the power of some great seer, a Merlin, a prophet, able to see that there was no future for any of these people…Like Humpty-Dumpty, many of the Nixon men would be tumbled from office, leaving a long line of
officials awaiting their turn at the bar of justice. Logan knew none of these men could possibly foresee the advancing dangers. He wished he could warn them of what the future held. But it was history now, bound by nature to repeat itself, upping the cost each time it did. (83).

Logan and Wheeler’s friend Ewing was a former pilot for the Border Patrol, and Ernie remembers his own conspiracy theories. According to Ewing:

“But if it wasn’t for wetbacks, we’d have no jobs. Supply and demand, Bob – the great American way. We need the wetbacks. Don’t you see that? We need them to storm our borders and flood through the gates; otherwise we can’t justify our big budget requests to Congress every year. We’re losing the battle of the borders!” he cried in amusement. “The brown horde is sweeping the country-side”…“where would the FBI be without subversives? Where would the Army be without wars? Where would the CIA be without the Russians?...We need more Russian spies! We need more subversion! We can’t afford to lose our juice! Where would Henry be without the Arabs and the Jews? Supply and demand, Bob, supply and demand! If the supply is lacking, we have to create it. We create demands for our services and we do out job so damn well that Congress insists we double our efforts. Democracy in action. Juice, my boy, juice. Thank God for little things, for subversion, for bright college kids who question authority. Thank God for the Black Panthers and the Brown Panthers, the Minutemen and the SLA. Thank God for drugs and murder and wetbacks; otherwise we’d all be pumping gas for the Arabs.”
“I can’t buy that.”

“I know,” Ewing said, exhaling loudly, “all men are created equal…liberty and justice for all…especially for the privileged few. Justice has many corridors, one for the red man, one for the black, one for the brown, the weak, the old, the indigent. But you’re a young man, Logan, a veteran, I assume?”

“Vietnam.” Logan frowned.

“Ah, the last of the great wars. Democracy in action once again. The juice of America against the rind of Communism. That’s what we need, Bob, another good war with plenty of bad guys we can hate, something to take our minds off the internal problems of democracy. Maybe we can kick this Arab thing into a full-scale blowup. What do you think of that?” (141-143)

While Ewing’s comments at times seem like a kooky version of ying and yang, with opposites needing each other in order to exist, he in fact posits something more sinister. Instead of naturally occurring opposition striving for balance and harmony, Ewing’s opposition between “wetback” and Anglo is governed by the laws of “supply and demand.” In a twisted realization of the internal logic of free market societies, Ewing proposes that “drugs and murder and wetbacks” determine politics. For, according to Ewing, “if the supply is lacking, we have to create it. We create demands for our services and we do out job so damn well that Congress insists we double our efforts.” This perverse logic of the border, Ewing believes, is expanded to all global political and economic events – F.B.I. and subversives, Army and war, C.I.A. and Russians, Arabs and
Jews – forming an imbalanced dialectic, a purposeful transgression of the border in order to strengthen the border. Ewing seems to subscribe to the notion that “everything’s suspect,” (196) something Logan discovers by the novel’s end.

In the film version of *Flashpoint*, Ewing’s speech is transferred to Carson, the secretive federal agent, who questions Logan about his desire to hide from everything as a border patrol agent. Carson believes that Logan couldn’t handle the “pressure” of success. Logan replies, “It’s not the pressure man, it’s the politics,” to which Carson responds, “The whole fucking nation is politics…it’s the American way…you think you’ve beaten the political system because you’re hiding at the bottom of it.” Carson dispels Logan’s sense of political disengagement and personal freedom. The border, which Logan assumes is free from the political pressures of Washington, is part of the political game of the U.S., according to Carson, who dismisses the traditional hierarchy of metropolis center and border periphery. Logan again tries to distance himself from the corrupt institutions that make his actions political: “I don’t work for the system, I work for the law.” Carson, like Ewing from the novel, responds by referring to “supply and demand,” but doesn’t exclude law from his criticism: “Oh Christ, you work for the same law that pays all our salaries. The law of supply and demand.”

At the end of the novel, with Ernie dead and Logan on the run, the revelations of the past few days weigh heavily on Logan:

The revelations of the past few days had been staggering. He laughed sardonically at his own naivete. He’d been content to tool along in his jeep, unaware of pressures shaping everyday decisions. Three days away from section seven had opened his eyes to the world that existed outside
his desert sanctuary. A world he strolled through absently, like a
sleepwalker. His world view had blamed the Mexicans for conspiring
against him, ignoring the thought that the conspiracy went far deeper.
This new world was unmanageable. It went beyond Brook, beyond the
Bureau itself. It infected Grillo and the Drug Enforcement officers. It
infected Grillo and the Drug Enforcement officers. It ambushed Cheney
and the FBI. It was a cotton-candy web of duty and service, clutching
tenaciously at all takers, pulling them deeper into the pocket of
bureaucratic conformity, until even the most idealistic among them was
doomed.

He shuddered at the thought. Surely it hadn’t always been this
way! There must have been a time in their lives when men went about
their duty, doing the best possible job they could under impossible
conditions. When had it all changed? he wondered. When did the Grillos
come into our lives? When did they cease to function as servants of law
and order and become tools of political favor? (176)

Logan’s life has been irrevocably altered because it is intruded upon by a “world that
exists outside his desert sanctuary.” A large part of Logan’s revelation involves his past
view of Mexicans, who he has blamed for “conspiring against him.” Now he believes he
understands how the conspiracy runs “far deeper…beyond the Bureau itself.” The
“cotton-candy web of duty and service” is an apt metaphor because the bright, sugary
surface of the “cotton-candy” masks the sticky web that seems to lie beneath: enticing but
messy. Logan sees the lure of conspiracy enticing people into the “pocket of bureaucratic
conformity,” again the emphasis from both Logan and Wheeler about their independent trustworthiness against bureaucratic corruption. Finally, Logan questions whether there ever existed a time when people functioned “as servants of law and order,” and asks, “when had it all changed?” because “surely it hadn’t always been this way!” Logan’s line of questions points to the history of paranoia itself. Like Wheeler and Logan’s earlier argument about the “reality” of conspiracy, Logan’s realization at the end of the novel questions his entire relationship to law, order, truth and historical veracity, the very values he relied upon for his own actions. Notions of “duty” and perhaps more important “doing the best possible job” are under attack, threatened by “bureaucratic conformity” engendered by a conspiracy against “individuality” and self-expression through labor. As Wheeler claims,

Why did they have to tell me about the goddamned fence? Why did they tell me I’d have to spend the rest of my life in some goddamned room waiting for a red light to come on somewhere?” Ernie rolled pained eyes to the smoke-dark ceiling. “I can’t do it!” he cried. “My life don’t amount to a hell of a lot – but, damn it, it’s mine! I’m at rock bottom and it me all my life to get here! (56)

Part of Logan and Wheeler’s revelations involve their understanding that their individuality, their “agency” has been seriously compromised by the shadowy conspiracy far outweighing their ability to act.

I want to return to Logan’s claim about his worldview previously blaming Mexicans in part because it explains the “conspiracy of conspiracy theory.” Logan claims the “conspiracy went far deeper” than his assumed “Mexican” conspiracy. What
exactly does Logan mean by “Mexicans conspiring against him?” When Logan and Wheeler confront Mario Pinedo, the Latino lawyer who represents immigrants, Pinedo claims:

“That money reaches Congressmen and Senators. Our people should be so proud to know their hard earned wages – wages cheated from them by your employers – will travel all the way to Washington. Their stolen wages will elect Senators, Senators who will kill for any bill restricting employers from hiring illegal aliens. For they cannot have that, you see. They need the aliens, just as they need you to round them up at pay time. Ask yourselves, why wasn’t this roundup done earlier? Why wasn’t the White farm raided sooner? Mr. White harvests at the same time every year, just as his father has done and his son will do after he’s gone. No gentlemen – the crop must be picked first! The labor of bending in the hot sun must be completed! The carrots must be on their way to market before the government is allowed to sweep in!” (194)

Pinedo’s meaning of conspiracy is most likely what Logan is referring to when he claims he “blamed the Mexicans for conspiring against him.” (176) Logan recognizes the conspiracy Pinedo speaks about because, according to Wheeler, Logan is one of the only agents who can empathize and understand the immigrants’ plight. But in such a case, Logan would not blame Mexicans for the conspiracy Pinedo describes, he would charge the U.S. employers, politicians and law officials. Regardless, Logan realizes the conspiracy runs deeper than previously thought, extending beyond the bureau and his small world. Once Logan senses the importance of the buried body in the desert and the
shadowy and secretive responses from the government, military and mysterious agents, he identifies even more strongly and more explicitly with the illegal aliens:

Even as he thought about it, Logan knew there was no hope in sight for either them or the aliens. “What the hell’s happening to us? One day we were chasing each other across the desert, content playing grab ass, oblivious to all the inner workings and foreign intrigue of Immigration life, the next moment everything’s suspect, no one can be trusted. What the hell’s happening to us?” (196).

Trapped in a full-blown scheme to hide J.F.K.’s assassination, Logan feels hopeless before such a shadowy and powerful organization conspiring to keep him quiet. This feeling of helplessness links Logan to the “aliens,” since “there was no hope for either,” complacent – “content to play grab ass” – ignoring the “inner workings and foreign intrigue of Immigration life.” What Logan seems to realize, in part, is the agents and aliens’ mutually constitutive competition of “chasing each other across the desert” is harmless and benign compared to the “inner workings and foreign intrigue of Immigration life.” The “Mexican conspiracy” was maybe obvious to Logan, perhaps not too upsetting because he understands the system is broken and that Immigration bureaucracy is incompetent. Yet, the “inner workings and foreign intrigue” of conspiracy runs the risk of making “everything suspect” since “no one can be trusted,” and now, instead of the harmless games of chase across the desert, the border holds real significance and deeper meaning than previously assumed since Logan realizes the political stakes and global, geopolitical significance of the border. The border is a microcosm of globalization, surrounded by global circuits of capitalist exchange that far
exceeds the comprehension of ordinary individuals on the ground. In this way, Logan’s paranoia acts similarly to Fredric Jameson’s notion of cognitive mapping.

Jameson argues that pre-1960’s paranoia expressed concerns about privacy and, while those fears regarding privacy have diminished, contemporary paranoia and conspiracy theories focus on the end or eclipse of civil society and the transition from the private to the corporate:

Since the world system of late capitalism (or post-modernity) is however inconceivable without the computerized media technology which eclipses its former spaces and faxes an unheard of simultaneity across its branches, information technology will become virtually the representational solution as well as the representational solution as well as the representational problem of this world system’s cognitive mapping, whose allegories can now always be expected to include a communicational third term. (10)

Jameson believes that “conspiratorial texts” are a form of cognitive mapping, what he believes is the individuals attempt to map themselves in relation to an increasingly complex late capitalist landscape:

The “conspiratorial text,” which, whatever other message it emits or implies, may also be taken to constitute an unconscious, collective effort at trying to figure out where we are and what landscapes and forces confront us in a late twentieth century whose abominations are heightened by their concealment and their bureaucratic impersonality. Conspiracy film takes a wild stab at the heart of all that, in a situation in which it is the intent and gesture that counts. Nothing is gained by having been
persuaded of the definite verisimilitude of this or that conspiratorial hypothesis: but in the intent to hypothesize, in the desire called cognitive mapping – therein lies the beginning of wisdom. (3)

Cognitive mapping, according to Jameson, replaces older Cold War categories that have transformed due to the rise in nation states:

At a more local level, indeed, what I have called cognitive mapping…was simplified by a Cold War division for which henceforth traditional class categories could largely serve (business classes and managers, factory workers, fieldworkers, and lumpens or unemployed). Now however we revert to a multiplicity of nation states (and fantasmatic nationalisms), not yet culturally and ideologically organized around the categories of the new triumvirate of superstates (the US, Europe and Japan). In the absence of general categories under which to subsume such particulars, the lapse back into features of the pre-World War I international system is inevitable and convenient (it includes all the national stereotypes which, inevitably racist whether positive or negative, organize our possibility of viewing and confronting the collective Other). (3)

After Wheeler has been murdered, Logan returns to Kaufman’s chimney to retrieve the money and flee to Mexico. He removes both metal boxes – the one containing the money, the other containing the fishing rods and rifle – and breaks the fishing rods and examines the rifle. Memories flood back as photo images and Logan begins to understand the conspiracy, but only by honing down the schizophrenic process of rapid photographic and filmic images, what Logan calls “the projectionist:”
He was holding the rifle in the air, the muzzle against the sky, when the projectionist came back to work in his brain. Logan swung his head from side to side, the pictures being replaced one after another, rapidly now, too fast for interpretation. The first was the Capra photo of a Spanish Loyalist at the instant of death. The rifle was in the soldier’s right hand, the arms flung wide, the white shirt bright against the sun as the man died. The next was of Trotsky, the first published picture of Capa’s from Copenhagen, 1931…his own collection of Capa’s photos…Logan tried to shake it away. The projectionist was driving him crazy with pictures, single frames flashing rapidly back and forth, too quickly to be explained. Logan narrowed his eyes on the rifle, sorting through the flashes for the one picture that kept returning. Not Capa, no. Not the Spanish Loyalists, but another man. A man with a hat, holding a rifle in the air. And then another man, small, slight, a newspaper in one hand, a rifle in the other…knew the man with the newspaper who posed for the young wife, rifle in hand, as the shutter clicked. (237-38)

Logan’s memories of the past, rendered in rapid, photomontages, complicate his relation to history because they upend the veracity of the experienced event. Like Logan and Wheeler’s investigation of the past on the library’s microfilm, Logan’s own memories and unconscious are revealed to operate as a panorama of photo and screen images, mediated through the mass media images, television and film. These images, “too fast for interpretation,” “driving him crazy,” are indicative of the “total flow” of postmodernism, the schizophrenic rush of images, simulacra and signs bombarding the
individual’s unconscious. As pure, empty images, “single frames flashing rapidly back and forth,” they move “too quickly to be explained” and, therefore, remain meaningless. Only after “sorting through the flashes,” however, is Logan able to locate the “one picture that kept returning,” zeroing in on the truth mediated through a “posed” picture and a “shutter click.”
CHAPTER FOUR

Breaking the Border: The Terror of the Personal in the Works of Don DeLillo

*Before politics, before history and religion, there is the primal terror – In the Ruins of the Future,*  
*Don DeLillo.*

Near the end of *Underworld* (1997), Don DeLillo’s novel tracing the secret history of weapons and waste in the Cold War United States, the narrator describes Sister Edgar, a paranoid, older nun who helps the homeless in the Bronx and despairs over the inevitable historical change resulting from the end of the cold war:

> She feels weak and lost.  The great Terror gone, the great thrown shadow dismantled – the launched object in the sky named for a Greek goddess on a bell krater in 500 B.C.  All terror is local now.  Some noise on the pavement very near, the stammer of the casual rounds from a passing car, someone who carries off your child.  Ancient fears revived, they will steal my child, they will come into my house when I’m asleep and cut out my heart because they have a dialogue with Satan.  (816)

This litany of complaints, hovering between the narrative voice of Sister Edgar and the narrator, registers the fear of a world overtaken by violence, yet nostalgically yearns for a time when terror meant something otherworldly, a sublime intrusion from an uncanny space beyond the human – “on a bell krater in 500 B.C.” Mythological figures no longer descend from on high because, according to the narrator, “all terror is local,” “the great Terror” is “gone, the great thrown shadow dismantled” (816). “Revived” and “ancient fears” become “some noise,” a hindrance rather than otherworldly terror, part of culture’s general system of beliefs. As presented, Sister Edgar’s half-heartedly accepts ingrained social attitudes of terror, what Stephan Mexal calls “the ubiquity and banality of terror.”
DeLillo, in an interview with NPR, claims *Underworld* depicts “a different kind of distrust and suspicion,” resulting from “the overarching technology that informs our lives, from the vast number of systems-connections that take place beyond our comprehension.” This new form of distrust and suspicion, according to DeLillo, does not entirely abandon paranoia, however. Contemporary society is “more prone to half belief. We tend to half believe everything and have conviction in nothing.” *Underworld’s* narrator describes Sister Edgar’s confidence as shaken by the loss of cold war certainties, but when traditional faiths fail, she turns to a generalized, “half belief:” “It’s not a question of disbelief. There is another kind of belief, a second force, insecure, untrusting, a faith that is spring-fed by the things we fear in the night, and she thinks she is succumbing” (817).

Vincent Descombes’ survey of contemporary French theory, *Modern French Philosophy*, argues that Kojeve’s lectures in France from 1934 to 1939 were largely responsible for bequeathing to twentieth-century French thought, what Descombes refers to as, “a terrorist conception of history” (14). According to Descombes, Kojeve telescopes the motif of terror for twentieth century audiences, especially thinkers in the social sciences, connecting the French Revolution, Hegel’s master slave dialectic and what Kojève considered “the unreasonable origins of reason.” Kojeve’s lectures delineate the trajectory of historical progress and the arc of historical thought as the dialectic interplay of terror and redemption, tyranny and truth, yet he argues this unfolding necessarily involves terror and violence. History, according to Descombes, is played out as a struggle between master and slave, implying the sheer force and power of terror as the motor for the dialectic of history.
As we enter the 21st century, DeLillo’s novels chart the large, seismic transformations of terror, depicting a world in which terrorism supplants terror and the efficacy of terror is reshaped and rearticulated to fit the commodified and hyperrealized world of postmodern advertising, media and television. No longer a sublime threat coming from without, terrorism supersedes terror and is now close-at-hand, implicated in the daily fabric of our lives, radically reshaping how history gets played out in contemporary, postmodern society. *Underworld*, in essence, explores the changing conceptions of terror and terrorism in the later half of the twentieth century, realizing, in essence, what Kojeve refers to as “a terrorist conception of history.”

* * *

*Underworld* covers the bulk of the Cold War era and, fittingly, it charts multiple characters’ relationships to the terrors of nuclear annihilation during the height of the Cold War, as well as fears of uncertainty with the Cold War’s collapse. When Klara Sax, an artist who escaped her married life in the Bronx and had an affair with Nick when he was a teenager, reflects on her memories of the Cold War, envisioning the B-52 bombers carrying nuclear payloads in the sky, she is nostalgic for Cold War certainties since now “many things that were anchored to the balance of power and the balance of terror seem to be undone, unstuck. Things have no limits now (76). Klara reflects on the past and the precarious balance between “power” and “terror,” and like Sister Edgar in the quote at the beginning of the chapter, she assumes in retrospect how this tense symmetry has given way to a world with “no limits now.” While *Underworld* does not deal explicitly with terrorism, like *Players, Libra* and *Mao II*, it nevertheless depicts characters who confront the terrorist remnants and consequences of the Cold War.
For many DeLillo characters, Bill Grey in *Mao II*, James Axton in *The Names*, Kyle and Pammy Wynant in *Players*, terrorism is a modern manifestation and metamorphosis of terror. The rise of post-cold war terrorism is attributable to several factors, according to Brigitte L. Nacos, who states that cold war fears have metamorphosed into a terrorism that is equally threatening:

There are several reasons why terrorism remains one of the more serious problems in the post-Cold War world and threatens to become yet another greater menace. First, the collapse of communism and the end of the bipolar world order resulted in the dismantling of a mechanism that, in strange way, kept terrorism within a manageable range…the fact that this web of terrorism extended deep into the Soviet bloc and fostered political violence against the West provided, at the same time a mechanism of restraint. (198)

Nacos continues by describing terrorism emergence from the ruins of the Cold War, claiming, “the Cold War world order limited the likelihood of disproportional counterterrorism strikes by Western states, most of all the United States, that did not want to upset the balance-of-power arrangement (199). Nacos also claims, "the end of the old world order unleashed nationalist and religious frictions that were suppressed in the past (199). And, according to James Slocum, these “nationalistic and religious frictions” resulting from the end of the Cold War culminate in the rise of Arab Muslim terrorists: “At least since the first World Trade Center bombing of 1993, Arab Muslims have emerged as the foremost post-Cold War antagonists of, and threat to, the West” (Slocum 21).
DeLillo’s non-fiction writings on terrorism, in particular his response to September 11th, entitled “In the Ruins of the Future,” extends Underworld’s motifs to the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, but more broadly positions narrative in relation to globalization, technology and the battle between modernity and the ancient past:

In the past decade the surge of capital markets has dominated discourse and shaped global consciousness. Multinational corporations have come to seem more vital and influential than governments. The dramatic climb of the Dow and the speed to the Internet summoned us all to the live permanently in the future, in the utopian glow of cyber-capital, because there is no memory there and this is where markets are uncontrolled and investment potential has no limit…all this changed on September 11.

Today, again, the world narrative belongs to terrorists.

DeLillo continues with the notion of “narrative” and competing narrative: “Terror’s response is a narrative that has been developing over years, only now becoming inescapable. It is our lives and minds that are occupied now.” Capital, multinational corporations, the Dow, the internet. Future oriented and controlling its own narrative, “cyber-capital” erases narrative of the past. But after September 11th, the future’s power over narrative was suspended, and according to DeLillo, “the future has yielded, for now, to medieval expedience, to the old slow furies of cutthroat religion. Kill the enemy and pluck out his heart.”

But Islamist are not the only group yearning for the past, according to DeLillo, because “the Bush administration was feeling a nostalgia for the Cold War. This is over
now. Many things are over. The narrative ends in the ruble and it is left to us to create the counter-narrative.” But against this rubble, novelists must counter the media saturation of September 11th:

The events of September 11 were covered unstintingly. There was no confusion of roles on TV. The raw event was one thing, the coverage another. The event dominated the medium. It was bright and totalising and some of us said it was unreal. When we say a thing is unreal, we mean it is too real, a phenomenon so unaccountable and yet so bound to the power of objective fact that we can't tilt it to the slant of our perceptions.

DeLillo’s reference to the television coverage of September 11th shouldn’t surprise most readers of his fiction. DeLillo’s novels has always been concerned with the media, the nature of representations and the relation between history and “mediated” history – events recorded or observed through television, video and film.

But what is interesting is DeLillo’s oppositions of “medieval experience” and the “future,” a seeming historical divide he sets up between East and West. While DeLillo contrasts religiosity against capitalism and modernization, he ignores how thoroughly modern groups like Al Qaeda actually are. According to Slocum:

Following from this characterization is his argument that “Al Qaeda is both Western and modern,” “itself a byproduct of globalization’s transnational capital flows and open borders, [its] utopian zeal to remake the world” an outcome of the same Enlightenment creed upon which are
based democratic-capitalism and the neoliberal global free market.

(Slocum 3)

Slocum argues that the “war of civilization” unfairly places technology on the side of the largely Christian West against “the obsolescent, place-bound, local economies, and Muslim religion of the Middle East” (7). He believes this technological/non-technological divide marks as illegitimate the actions of those non-Westerners who embrace aspects of the contemporary global system independently – like Al Qaeda, allegedly employing satellite phones, e-mails, and electronic funds transfers. The perceived result, what political scientist Anatol Lieven memorably calls the “dark side of the global village,” is terrorism that combines premodern cultural values and economic structures with the willfully malign deployment of modern technologies and practices. (Slocum 7)

Gilles Kepel, author of *The War for Muslim Minds: Islam and the West*, argues that the literally meaning of the name “Al Qaeda” as “database” has a metaphorical dimension. The war on terror may have eliminated Al Qaeda’s physical infrastructure, according to Kepel, but it failed to eradicate Al Qaeda’s metaphorically power as a “database:”

Given the stated goal of the war on terror, however, Operation Enduring Freedom was a Pyrrhic victory. Despite the severe blows the Al Qaeda network had suffered – its data seized, many of its activists captured or killed – the elimination of its physical base in Afghanistan did not eradicate Al Qaeda’s effectiveness. Attacks started up once more, and as they increased, the double meaning of the metaphor became clearer: this
organization did not consist of buildings and tanks and borders but of
Internet websites, satellite television links, clandestine financial transfers,
international air travel, and a proliferation of activists from the suburbs of
Jersey City to the rice patties of Indonesia (Kepel 120-21).

In contrast to DeLillo’s decisive divide between Western and Eastern attitudes towards
technology and modernization, terror theorists like Slocum, Lieven, Nacos and Kepel
reveal how modern terrorism employs a contradictory use of technology, embracing
certain aspects of technology while rejecting its consequences.

Many DeLillo novels focus on terror and terrorism, especially the impact of
terrorism on modern society, connection to and dissemination through the media and the
ties between terrorism and paranoia. DeLillo’s earliest novels – Running Dog, Players,
The Names – either overtly concentrate on terrorist plots or indirectly invoke terrorist
groups and organizations that use terror to adapt to modernization. In his Players (1977),
Lyle and Pammy Wynant are both dissatisfied with their lives, and after Lyle witnesses a
man shot on the floor of the Stock Exchange, they quickly become entangled in double
lives: Lyle, helping the terrorist’s plan to bomb the Stock Exchange; Pammy, escaping
with her homosexual friends, and having an affair with Brian. While their traipses
through clandestine groups and secret, sex-filled excursion prove a thrilling alternative to
the stifling boredom of their petty bourgeois lives, both Pammy and Lyle remain
remarkably untouched by violence surrounding their lives. In Running Dog, shadowy
quasi-military groups vie for a pornographic film of a Hitler orgy during his final, bunker
days. In The Names, a security analyst discovers a primitive group living in the caves of
Athens that ritualistically murders individuals based on ancient alphabets.
While DeLillo’s interest in conspiracy and terror is evident in these novels from the seventies and early eighties, it is not until the publication of *Libra* in 1988 that DeLillo explicitly portrays our American obsession with conspiracy. In *Libra*, DeLillo attempts to locate the historical events that conspired in the Kennedy assassination and depicts the effects of these events on our social imaginary. Contrary to DeLillo’s earlier novelistic explorations of paranoia and conspiracy, *Libra* places paranoia at the heart of the American experience after the Kennedy assassination and explores its consequences for our subsequent understanding of agency and identity. For DeLillo, the Kennedy assassination functions as the specific historical moment when conspiracy becomes the dominant attitude for a world undergoing political, economic, and cultural change. DeLillo’s presents the Oswald-Kennedy saga as a period of historical transition for paranoia. While cold war paranoia fixated on extremely powerful individuals, who plot and scheme from positions of authority, and perhaps for sinister, pathological reasons, (J. Edgar Hoover comes to mind), DeLillo’s portrays the Kennedy conspiracy as a de-centered and convoluted system of competing interests and confused motivation.

Timothy Melley describes how the conspiracy in *Libra* “develops because of the CIA has no central command and control” (PG), claiming that the “CIA, although called “The Company” by its agents, does not consist of “organization men” who sacrificed their individuality for a corporate will; it consists rather of renegades and free agents who are regularly subcontracted and often act on their own” (PG). Concluding that Libra undercuts the sense of individual, evil intentions guiding conspiracy and plots, Melley claims that, “while the sum of the acts may appear to reflect an intention of the Agency,
there is in fact a lack of collective will among those who plot Kennedy’s murder in *Libra.*

(157-158)

In *Mao II,* DeLillo explicitly takes up the issue of terrorism, exploring the connection between writers and terrorists and the manner in which terrorism has usurped the novelists’ role in contemporary society. Bill Grey, an aging writer who fears the failure of his current manuscripts, disappears from his engagements as a writer and tries to free a hostage being held by terrorist in Lebanon, in part, because he believes “there’s a curious knot that binds novelists and terrorists” (41). He continues:

> In the West we become famous effigies as our books lose the power to shape and influence…Years ago I used to think it was possible for a novelist to alter the inner life of the culture. Now bomb-makers and gunmen have taken that territory. They make raids on human consciousness. What writers used to do before we were all incorporated.

(41)

Gray and other characters in *Mao II* repeat variations on the claim: “what terrorists gain, novelists lose (157). But, more generally, the novel concerns the intersection of media and terrorism, spectacle and terror. Gray argues that terror unfolds through the media, a competing narrative of modern consciousness:

> Because we are giving way to terror, to news of terror, to tape recorders and cameras, to radios, to bombs stashed in radios. News of disaster is the only narrative people need. The darker the news, the grander the narrative. News is the last addiction before—what? I don’t know (Mao 42).
The novel points to narrative’s collusion with terror and spectacle, as Gray later exclaims, “stories have no point if they don’t absorb our terror” (140). And yet, terrorists surpass the novelist because, “only the terrorist stands outside” (157). When the Lebanese terrorist holding a poet hostage meets Brita Nilsen, the same photographer who photographed Bill at the novel’s beginning, his translator argues that the “creative destruction” of terror shapes modern consciousness in a manner that novelists can no longer achieve: “He is saying terror is what we use to give out people their place in the world. What used to be achieved through work, we gain through terror. Terror makes the new future possible” (235).

* * *

It is not until the publication of the 1997 novel, *Underworld*, however, that DeLillo fully explores the historical trajectory of paranoia in America after World War II. *Underworld* focuses on Nick Shay, a Bronx born Dodger fan, who as an adult revisits past lover, Klara Sax, now a famous 78-year-old artist renovating and painting World War II planes in the desert. After Nick’s father left the family – Nick believes he disappeared – Nick spent time in a juvenile correction facility after arbitrarily shooting George the waiter, an event his psychologist believes is connected to his father’s disappearance. As an adult, Nick lives in Phoenix, working for a waste management corporation, and tries to understand his father’s disappearance. The novel’s sweeping scope also includes Klara Sax’s story, as well as Matt Shay, Albert Bronzini, the Texas Highway Killer, Nick’s hunt for the 1951 Bobby Thompson home run baseball, and J. Edgar Hoover’s response to the Soviet nuclear test and Lenny Bruce comedy sections.
Most male characters in *Underworld* have a troubled relationship to their past, but all have different methods of coping with their past mistakes and personal losses. Nick Shay steadfastly and mechanically attempts to distance himself from his personal past – his father’s disappearance, murdering George the waiter, the Dodgers’ loss – and looks to business, corporations and waste management for the metaphors to escape the Bronx, the past and himself. Nick’s brother Matt compensates for a childhood of failed chess dreams by working on nuclear weapons as an adult. Marvin Lundy, the older baseball collector who sells Nick the Thompson homerun baseball, amasses memorabilia to “shoulder himself against loss” (XX). Even minor male characters, such as Brian Glassic, Nick’s co-worker and Jesse Detwiler, the waste theorist, are portrayed as driven by the need to construct boundaries and borders, celebrating the power of waste management. Even J. Edgar Hoover is presented as a barely below the surface paranoid homosexual, whose repressed desires conflict with a mania for cleanliness and personal boundaries.

*Underworld* does present alternatives to the male character’s paranoid celebration of waste, however. Klara Sax, whom Nick had an affair with as a youngster in the Bronx, is an artist whose work incorporates trash and garbage, although even she yearns for the stability of cold war fear and paranoia. Other female characters are likewise affected by the long shadow of the cold war. Sister Edgar, a Bronx nun, searches for miracles in an area of urban blight called the wall, dreaming of medieval terrors and nuclear attacks.

Nick Shay, the novel’s main character, believes he is shaped by three significant events from his childhood in the Bronx: the disappearance of his father Jimmy (a small
time numbers runner in the Bronx), Bobby Thompson’s home run (The Shot Heard Round the World) to beat the Dodgers in 1951, and Nick’s murder of George the waiter. Nick’s father Jimmy Constanza left the family when he was 11 years old. While the family believes the father left to escape family obligation and gambling debts, Nick idolizes his absent father, in part due to the myth of Jimmy’s prowess with number running and because Nick firmly believes the mafia was responsible for his father’s disappearance and presumed death. Nick still relies on memories of his father to understand himself – “I have a certain distance in my makeup, a measured separation like my old man’s” (275) – and fortify his identity: “Once you’re a made man, you don’t need the constant influence of sources outside yourself. You’re all there. You’re made. You’re handmade. You’re a sturdy Roman wall” (275).

The culmination of these events has left Nick with a desire for self-creation and construction, to move past the personal waste of his life in the Bronx. As a result of these events, Nick prefers to “black out” his past so that he can proclaim himself a “country of one” (275). He even moves to Phoenix from the Bronx, where he grew up, because, according to Nick, “Phoenix was a neater package for me” (341) they do “not let history run loose,” but instead “segregate visible history. They caged it, funded it and bronzed it, they enshrined it carefully into museums and plazas and memorial parks” (86). Nick is intent on maintaining borders of all types: personal, geographical and historical:

How could you have a private life in a place where all your isolated feelings are out in the open, where the tension in your heart, the thing you’ve been able to restrict to small closed rooms is everywhere exposed
to the whitish light and grown so large and firmly fixed that you can’t separate it from the landscape and sky? (341)

Nick’s desire for privacy, for “package[ing]” his interiority, instead of parading his “isolated feelings…out in the open,” stress his personal investment in demarcating the personal from the public. However, this border between private and public spheres is achieved at a price for Nick because his interiority must be “restricted” to “small rooms.” Once his feelings are “exposed,” they are lost in the undifferentiated “landscape and sky,” uncovered to a world where “everything is connected.”

Nick portrays his work in waste management as bordering on the religious and metaphysical, more “waste handlers, waste traders, cosmologists of waste” than hazardous waste managers, requiring a special “religious conviction” because “waste is a religious thing. We entomb contaminated waste with a sense of reverence and dread. It is necessary to respect what we discard” (88). Because the Jesuits taught Nick “to examine things for second meanings and deeper connections,” he declares that “waste has a solemn aura now, an aura of untouchability…a planetary context” (88). When Nick visits a landfill with co-worker Brian Glassic, he marvels at the plastic sheet covering the garbage because, according to Brian, Nick sees waste management “in purer terms. Concepts and principles. Because this is Nick – the technology, the logic, the esthetics” (163):

An immense shimmering sheet, a polyethylene skin, silvery blue…the sight of this thing, the enormous gouged bowl lined with artful plastic…a certain drastic grandeur, even a kind of greatness…this high-density membrane that was oddly and equally beautiful in a way, a prophylactic device…I felt a weird elation. (285)
Nick’s enthusiasm, the “weird elation,” at the waste site mixes the poetic and the everyday, building the commonplaces’ poetic qualities, more confrontation between poet and sublime than waste manger at a landfill. The simple, plastic cover becomes a “shimmering sheet,” a “polyethylene skin,” strangely ethereal and sublime – “shimmering” – and simultaneously base and human – “skin” – lending the scene a “drastic grandeur,” taking on a “kind of greatness.”

Nick is not the only character to revel in the assumed sublimity of waste management. Nick’s partner Brian Glassic regards his job as part of a higher, “esoteric order,” both “adepts and seers, crafting the future…mak[ing] a park one day out of every kind of used and lost and eroded object of desire” (185). When Brian visits a waste site in New York, like Nick he finds the “vast” landfill “invigorating” and “inspiring,” a “sting of enlightenment” while gazing at the “ingenuity and labor, this delicate effort to fit maximum waste into diminishing space” (184). What motivates Brian is his desire “to understand all this…penetrate this secret” (185).

Nick responds to power of capitalism and corporation power to “re-make” himself within the corporate world: “Corporations are great and appalling things. They take you and shape you in nearly nothing flat, twist and swivel you (282). His job in waste management and his organizational attitude reinforce his sense of self:

I still respond to that thing you feel in an office, wearing a crisp suit and sensing the linked grids lap around you. It is all about the enfolding drone of the computers and the fax machines. It is about the cell phones slotted in the desk chargers, the voice mail and the e-mail – a sense of order and command reinforced by the office itself and the
bronze tower that encases the office and by all the contact points that shimmer in the air somewhere. (806)

Nick reacts to the powerful sense of containment and connection the office provides, its “sense of order,” “enfolding drone” and “linked grids,” insulating him from the messy world of memories and waste. Nick describes companies as a “prophylactic” device, like the “polyethylene skin” covering the waste site, protecting the subject from the outside world by emptying interiority:

The corporation is supposed to take us outside of ourselves. We design these organized bodies to respond to the market, face foursquare into the world. But things tend to drift dimly inward. Gossip, rumor, promotions, personalities…all the human lapses that take up space in the company soul.

Nick descriptions praise the “caress of linked grids” and corporate organizing techniques in contrast to a world where “things drift dimly inward.” Corporations and offices are Nick’s escape from his history of loss and regret, achieving what his father never could: “his father could have taken [him]…where people came to escape the hard luck past with its gray streets and crowded flats and cabbage smells in the hallway” (90). Nick relates to organized capitalism as a projection of his own personal relationship to loss. As he claims, “I wanted to be bound to the company. I felt complicit with some unspoken function of the corporation….I wore a crisp suit and grew stronger by the day” (301).

Like the personal and national narratives crucial to the formation of identity, Nick needs “organizing principles to make [him] less muddled.” (735)
Nick’s skepticism towards conspiracy theory does not exclude his own predilection for suspicious narratives. Nick’s brother Matt explains Nick’s penchant for a different type of conspiracy:

He told Janet the story, how Nick believed their father was taken out to the marshes and shot, and how this became the one plot, the only conspiracy that big brother could believe in. Nick could not afford to succumb to a general distrust. He had to protect his conviction about what happened to Jimmy. Jimmy’s murder was isolated and pure, uncorrupted by the other secret alliances and criminal acts, other suspicions. Let the culture indulge in cheap conspiracy theories. Nick had the enduring stuff of narrative, the thing that doesn’t have to be filled in with hearsay. (454)

Matt retells Nick’s story, providing his own gloss on Nick’s psychology, yet is perhaps too dependent upon his older brother to provide an objective analysis. Matt describes Nick’s low-grade paranoia as somehow escaping “a general distrust,” or at least this being Nick’s assumption. Nick, at another point in the novel, insists that he is responsible, believing that “there are no secret forces undermining our lives” (335) and that “history was not a matter of missing minutes on the tape” (82). Matt, however, believes differently, pointing to Nick’s personal history: “Look, it is well within your experience to invent a fantasy of events as you think they transpired or are transpiring. This is not un-up your alley (202). Matt’s story of his father’s disappearance, however, is no more accurate than Nick’s. Matt claims their father left for less mysterious reasons: “No one came for him, Nicky. No one got him and took him away. He left because of us basically. He didn’t want to be a father. Being a husband was bad enough, what a burden, you know, full of obligations and occasions he couldn’t handle” (203).
Regardless, Nick, like most male characters in the novel, maintains a conflicted balance between belief and skepticism:

I believed we could know what was happening to us. We were not excluded from our own lives. That is not my head on someone else’s body in the photograph that’s introduced as evidence. I didn’t believe that nations play-act on a grand scale. I lived in the real. The only ghosts I let in were local ones. (82)

No matter how hard Nick tries to evacuate the painful and traumatic memories, he fails to realize that what he discards comes back to haunt him. Nick restages his losses (the baseball, his father, the murder, etc.) to gain psychological mastery over these debilitating experiences from the past; however, the waste he seeks to avoid rules his life. When Nick visits the Watts Towers, an architectural piece composed from recycled waste, he does not focus on the parallels between his work in waste containment and the sculptor who built the tower. Instead, the work strikes him as an emblem of his missing father:

An idiosyncrasy out of someone’s innocent anarchist visions, and the more I looked, the more I thought of Jimmy…I could imagine him rising this high, soaring out of himself to produce a rambling art that has no category, with cement and chicken wire…I tried to understand the force of Jimmy’s presence here…the power of the thing for me, the deep disturbance, was that my own ghost father was living in the walls. (276-7)

Nick seeks images of his absent father, conjuring his “presence” “out of someone’s innocent anarchist visions,” aware of his projections, his prejudicial search for a
foundational metaphor. Nick’s figure of the totem father resembles Freud’s *Totem and Taboo*, where Freud himself searches for primal myths, the dead father returning with renewed power after his death at the hands of the sons. Nick’s drive toward metaphor pushes him to connect every event to waste and loss in some attempt to understand his life. Nick traces the etymology of the word “waste,” claiming he finds it “an interesting word that you can trace through Old English and Old Norse back to the Latin, finding such derivatives as empty, void, vanish and devastation” (120). Waste vanishes, like his father, but it is also a “void,” an “empty” space for metaphor to appear. The Towers, like all symbolic, totemic objects for Nick, come to symbolize a “desire for something fled or otherwise out of reach” (803). As Nick explains, conspiracy narrative fills in “the story that settles around his name. It was part of the awe that trails a violent death or an unexplained disappearance” (104). Paranoia and conspiracy provide a narrative component to a personal story that otherwise would remain “unexplained,” a “reliable plot for any of these excuses” (207). Nick’s narrative of his father’s disappearance fills in a story “whose narrative is mostly blank spaces” (276).

Nick connects the “devastation” and “void” caused by his father disappearance, the loss at the heart of his own past, to his job building “pyramids of waste,” describing waste management metaphysically: “We build pyramids of waste above and below the earth. The more hazardous the waste, the deeper we try to sink it. The word plutonium comes from Pluto, god of the dead and ruler of the underworld. They took him out to the marshes and wasted him” (106). Nick’s metaphorical gesture attempts to connect waste with the conspiracy of his father’s death, conflating social attitudes toward waste with his own personal “story” about his father. This image of the pyramid, like the Watts Towers
and the office towers that Nick earlier spoke glowingly about, seems to condense all his previous metaphors into a central image: the memories of his father, the sublimity of waste and civilization, and the power of corporations and capitalism.

Nick’s attempt to metaphorize his loss, his invocation of the figure of the pyramid, like the Watts Tower image, is a gesture at stabilizing meaning and halting the metonymic sliding of signification that results from the gap between signifier and signified and lack of a primordial signifier. In this sense, Nick’s tropes and metaphors for his father’s absence function as *points de capiton*, or quilting points, that attempt to anchor signifier to signified through attachment points. In many important respects, Nick’s search for a *point de capiton* resembles Oedipa Maas’ search for the true meaning of Trystero in Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*, a classic example of postmodern “paranoid” fiction. Like *Underworld*, much of *The Crying of Lot 49* concerns itself with problems of interpretation and reading. While Oedipa faces an overwhelming flux of signs, metaphors, and connections, all of which call out for interpretation, she is unable to construct a coherent hermeneutic system that can sort through these signifying chains. However, she believes her search for the meaning of Trystero will provide an interpretive key because it will allow her to read all other texts. Since Oedipa figures her journey in terms of a search for a “central truth,” she assumes that her search will follow the traditional path of a novelistic protagonist. However, reflecting on the power of this central truth, Oedipa questions the ability to fully represent her understanding:

Oedipa wondered whether, at the end of this (if it were supposed to come to an end), she too might not be left with only compiled memories of clues, announcements, intimations, but never the central truth itself, which
must somehow each time be too bright for her memory to hold; which
must always blaze out, destroying its own message irreversibly, leaving an
overexposed blank when the ordinary world came back. (95)

Here we can read the problems of traditional representation, with the disparity between
reality and language complicating any depiction of truth. If a “central truth” is nothing
more than an “overexposed blank” within the signifying chain, the very project of
representation is thrown into crisis. This crisis of representation involves the structural
opposition between the symbolic and the real. While the symbolic fails to fully inscribe
the real, existing only as a blank spot within that representational scheme, the real
nevertheless disrupts the smooth functioning of the symbolic – “blaz[ing] out, destroying
its own message irreversibly” (95) – exposing the lack at the heart of the symbolic order.

However, when “central truths” cannot be inscribed within a symbolic system,
metaphorical approaches to truth become the next best option since they allow the subject
to fill in the gap between real and symbolic. Indeed, many characters in The Crying of
Lot 49 attempt to fix meaning through metaphor, figuring that a metaphorical
understanding of truth is stable and can halt the uninterrupted flow of signifiers that lack
grounding. However, Oedipa soon realizes that metaphors are subject to the same
process of entropy as physical reality:

“Entropy is a figure of speech, then,” sighed Nefastis, “a metaphor. It
connects the world of thermodynamics to the world of information flow.
The machine uses both. The Demon makes the metaphor not only
verbally graceful, but also objectively true.”
“But what,” she felt like some kind of heretic, “if the Demon exists only because the two equations look alike? Because of the metaphor?”

Nefastis smiled; impenetrable, calm, a believer.

“He existed for Clerk Maxwell long before the days of the metaphor” (106).

While Nefastis relies on the power of metaphor to connect different worlds and provide a glimpse into their reality, Oedipa questions the effectiveness of metaphor since she begins to understand that the metaphorical gesture is itself “a thrust at truth and a lie, depending where you were” (129). Oedipa seems to understand how language and epistemology function according to a paranoid model – a provisional attempt to make sense of the world through the projection of metaphors and tropes – “a thrust at truth” – onto the unknown.

While metaphor helps stabilize the subject’s understanding of the world by halting the sliding of signification, Oedipa begins to realize that metaphor is simply an empty signifier, anchoring all free-floating signifiers through an arbitrary similarity. She understands that metaphor ultimately does not halt signification and metonymy, but rather engenders an increasing sense of polysemy and multiple meanings. Instead of facing a single metaphor that connects all signs within a single signifying chain, she is now “faced with a metaphor of God knew how many parts; more than two, anyway” (109). As the complexity surrounding her situation grows, Oedipa begins to understand the function of metaphor in stopping the “flow” of overlapping information, however, she is also aware of the arbitrary function of metaphor: “with coincidences blossoming these days wherever she looked, she had nothing but a sound, a word, Trystero, to hold them
together (109). This understanding of metaphor as an empty signifier mirrors Lacan’s discussion of the *point de capiton*, or quilting point, that halts the metonymic sliding of signification through the knotting together of signifier and signified. The *point de capiton* is thus the point in the signifying chain at which “the signifier stops the otherwise endless movement of the signification” (Ecrits 303) and produces the necessary illusion of a fixed meaning.

Lacan first introduced this term, *point de capiton*, in his seminar on psychoses to account for the fact that despite the continual slippage of the signified under the signifier, there are fundamental attachment points between signifier and signified needed for the subject to remain normal. When these points “are not established, or give way” the result is psychosis (S3 268-9). This explanation helps us understand how it is that in the psychotic experience, “the signifier and the signified present themselves in a completely divided form” (S3 268). Lacan additionally discusses metaphor as the synchronic structure of the *point de capiton*, claiming that its structure “is more hidden, and it is this structure that takes us to the source. It is metaphor” (Ecrits 303).

*     *     *

The characters in *Underworld* do not abandon paranoia altogether. Instead, they seek out historical shifts within paranoia, tracing assumed historical transitions from the stable, albeit rigid, cold war categories of Us/Them to a flexible, postmodern and ironic approach – abandoning the “facile sentiments you might be tempted to shelter in the name of your personal conspiracy credo” (280 emphasis mine). In this way, the characters reflect populists’ attempts to make sense of larger political and social changes. According to Peter Knight, who characterizes *Underworld*’s paranoia as distinctly
postmodern: “a populace’s interest in conspiracy theories is less the result of the externalization of repressed internal conflicts than the internalization into the narrative form of a very real – thought not immediately visible – conflicts in the social realm” (288). *Underworld*, according to Knight, charts paranoia’s modification from the personal to the social and emphasizes how larger political and economic changes account for this transformation. During a drug party with other bomb technicians, Matt Shay wonders whether “the state had taken on the paranoia of the individual or was it the other way around” (465). The confusion over the proper boundary between “state” and “individual,” both blending and bleeding into the other, their pathologies interweaving, assumes the social and political power to infect citizens with conspiracies and plots. The novel’s characters themselves assume this de-centered paranoia reveals social pathology more than individual predilection and results from fragmented, postmodern economic practices: . According to Patrick O’Donnell, “cultural paranoia is not a social disorder, or merely a form of public hysteria framed within cold war politics and correctable by an appeal to historical evidence, but an integral part of what constitutes postmodern history” (149). O’Donnell continues: “DeLillo succeeds in making the novel not where the events of personal lives and those of world historical shifts and movements collide and intersect both accidentally and fatally” (151).

Crucial to *Underworld* is the characters’ sense of economic transition and cultural upheaval attending the cold war era and its transformation to postmodernism. Social geographer and economic theorist David Harvey defines postmodernism as the economic transition from Fordist industrial production to late capitalist flexible accumulation. A system of mass production, Fordism developed industrial standards for production and
consumption in America from 1914 to 1973. Rigidity was the key, according to Harvey, to Ford’s success in production processes. According to Harvey, “Ford likewise did little more than rationalize old technologies and a pre-existing detail division of labour, though by flowing the work to a stationary worker he achieved dramatic gains in productivity” (125). Utilizing Taylor’s *The Principles of Scientific Management*, describing how labor productivity could be increased by breaking down the labor process into component motions and organizing fragmented work tasks according to the standards of time and motion study, Ford realized that “mass production meant mass consumption, a new system of the reproduction of labour power, a new politics of labour control and management, a new aesthetic and psychology, in short, a new kind of rationalized, modernist, and populist democratic society” (126). Fordist mass production was an important economic innovation, according to Harvey, because it allowed capitalism to stave off its inherent contradictions, providing technological advancements allowing greater productivity and increased capital accumulation. After 1945, when state powers helped configure economic production, Fordism reached a “maturity as a fully-fledged and distinctive regime of accumulation. As such, it then formed the basis for a long postwar boom that stayed broadly intact until 1973” (129). Fordism held firm until 1973, providing a growth in the material living standard and stable environment for corporate profits, although Harvey believes “it was not until the sharp recession of 1973 shattered that framework that a process of rapid …transition in the regime of accumulation began” (Harvey 140). Harvey terms this new “regime of accumulation” occurring after 1973, “flexible accumulation.”
Flexible accumulation avoids Fordism’s rigidity by emphasizing the flexibility of labor processes, labor markets, products and patterns of consumption. According to Harvey, flexible accumulation is “characterized by the emergence of entirely new sectors of production, new ways of providing financial services, new markets, and, above all, greatly intensified rates of commercial, technological, and organizational innovation” (147). The transition to flexible accumulation was a necessary economic innovation, due to the “inability of Fordism…to contain the inherent contradictions of capitalism” (142) and offset the rigidity of “long-term and large-scale fixed capital investments in mass-produced systems…labour markets, labour allocation, and in labour contracts” (142). Economic transitions that characterize flexible accumulation, while important in meeting the challenges occurring around 1973 – the abandonment of Bretton Woods, oil crisis, etc, – have had consequences outside the realm of economics. For Harvey, flexible accumulation not only changes the dynamics of capitalist production but also alters human consumption:

Flexible accumulation has been accompanied on the consumption side, therefore, by a much greater attention to quick-changing fashion and the mobilization of all the artifices of need inducement and cultural transformation that this implies. The relatively stable aesthetic of Fordist modernism has given way to all the ferment, instability, and fleeting qualities of a postmodernist aesthetic that celebrates difference, ephemerality, spectacle, fashion, and the commodification of cultural forms. (156)

By linking flexible accumulation with postmodern aesthetics, Harvey accounts for the widespread cultural shift of postmodernism in terms of economic phenomena. Harvey’s sense of economic systems complicity with cultural transformations is essential the
discussion of the characters’ concern with the effects and implications of these shifting
economic regimes on paranoia. \textit{Underworld}’s characters no longer feel paranoia contains
the rigidity that characterized the ideology of cold war America, but instead becomes the
flexible and ironic paranoia that mirrors postmodernism’s obsession with fragmentation
and the ephemeral. Similar to DeLillo’s version of the status of our contemporary
epistemology, in which we are reduced to the level where we “half believe everything
and have conviction in nothing,” \textit{Underworld} describes the effects of late capitalism’s
influence on belief itself, especially the assumed comforts of cold war paranoia and
ideology.

Marvin Lundy underscores how consumerism affects paranoia, stressing how
capitalism and its new, flexible practices determine the search for truth: “The well
springs are deeper and less detectable, deeper and shallower both, look at billboards and
matchbooks, trademarks on products, birthmarks on bodies, look at the behavior of your
pets” (319). For Lundy, the conspiracy of history is not found in secret government files.
Instead, according to Lundy, “the biggest secrets are the ones spread open before us”
(185). Contrary to received notions of paranoia and mystery, where “people sense things
that are invisible,” according to Lundy, secrets are “starting you right in the face, that’s
when you miss it completely” (173). Lundy depicts a world of postmodern paranoia and
belief, where the truth resides in the daily objects and commodities of late capitalism,
seemingly more obvious because of their ubiquity and less detectable because they are
taken for granted. The narrator describes Matt Shay’s sense of paranoia when he realizes
that late capitalism relies on the destruction of the rigid boundaries characterizing earlier
modes of capitalist production:
He was thinking about his paranoid episode at the bombhead party the night before. He felt he’d glimpsed some horrific system of connection in which you can’t tell the difference between one thing and another, between a soup can and a car bomb, because they are made by the same people and ultimately refer to the same thing. (446)

Brian Glassic, Nick’s co-worker, meets Marvin Lundy to inquire about the authenticity of the Thompson homerun baseball. The narrator describes Brian’s trip home and how Brian begins to mimic Lundy, suspicious of surfaces and advertising. According to the narrator, he perceives a paranoid circuit connecting capitalism’s willful destruction of boundaries:

He drove past the spewing smoke of acres of burning truck tires and the planes descended and the transit cranes stood in rows at the marine terminal and he saw the billboards for Hertz and Avis and Chevy Blazer, for Marlboro, Continental and Goodyear, and he realized that all the things around him, the planes taking off and landing, the streaking cars, the tires on the cars, the cigarettes that the drivers of cars were dousing in their ashtrays – all these were on the billboards around him, systematically linked in some self-referring relationship that had a kind of neurotic tightness, an inescapability, as if the billboards were generating reality, and of course he thought of Marvin.

The narrator describes Brian’s sense of the “systematically linked” and “self-referring” power of advertising, rising from waste and garbage to “generate reality” though prefabricated images and brand names on billboards. The “tightness” and
“inevitability” of this advertising system supplants “all these things around him” and
Brian can no longer differentiate where one begins and one ends.

The sense of paranoia operating here is one where boundaries and borders
collapse, where the distinctions between self and other, America and the Soviet Union,
etc, begin to blur. The fear is not of an opaque and unknowable other, but instead is a
fear of being unable to tell the difference. Postmodern capitalism blurs the borders
guaranteeing personal and national identity during the cold war, matching paranoia to
flexible production. A clear example is Nick, who sees his own life as a microcosm for
the postwar American experience. His father’s disappearance, his time in a youth
correctional facility for murder and his move away from his native Bronx to the suburban
banality of Phoenix where he works in waste management all reinforce Nick’s narrative
of personal loss and incomplete redemption that becomes, according to Nick and other
characters, the overarching narrative arc for all postwar American experience. The
novel’s heightened self-reflexivity, exemplified by the character’s highly self-conscious
relation to narrative, fiction and history, treats all events ironically, especially the novel’s
focus on historical breaks and separations – pre-cold war vs. post cold war, etc. Nick
looks for signs indicating historical transformation, seeking clues to understand his
personal life but also seeking larger cultural narratives explaining social change and
transformation: “And I truly thought they were great things, painted to remark the end of
an age and the beginning of something different only a vision such as this might suffice
to augur it” (126).

DeLillo’s self-reflexive characters connect rapid changes in the world’s economy
to social, cultural and personal confusion. Aware of the contradictions of cold war
ideology, these characters sense impending globalization and with it a shift in national ideology:

Foreign investment, global markets, corporate acquisitions, the flow of information through transnational media, the attenuating influence of money that’s electronic and sex that’s cyberspaced…Some things fade and wane, states disintegrate, assembly lines shorten their runs and interact with lines in other countries. This is what desire seems to demand. A method of production that will custom-cater to cultural and personal needs, not to cold war ideologies of massive uniformity. And the system pretends to go along, to become more supple and resourceful, less dependent on rigid categories. (785-86)

Nick’s description of increased economic flow and frenzied information production resembles David Harvey and Fredric Jameson’s definition of postmodern, late capitalism, where flexible modes of accumulation (outsourcing, off-shore companies, part-time labor, etc,) replaces modern Fordist production. This “suppleness” of production, according to Nick, contrasts with the “rigid categories” of the previous mode, unaware that these economic transformations affect the personal and cultural paranoia that distinguish American ideology, since paranoia now also becomes a “method of production that will custom-cater to cultural and personal needs” (785).

Nick, aware of postmodernism’s power, is nostalgic for the older, outdated mode of cold war production, claiming he feels a “kind of homesickness” (795) for the brand name products and “organization men” of the 1950’s. Cold war paranoia, while limited by its “rigid categories” and “massive uniformity,” offers great psychological comfort to
characters in DeLillo’s novels because these older, rigid narratives secure both a sense of self and a coherent national identity. According to Michael Wood, “DeLillo’s explores conspiracy’s legacy or, more precisely, a world bereft of conspiracy, in mourning for the scary, constricting sense the old secrets used to make.”

Most characters in the novel mourn the loss of the rigid boundaries characterizing the cold war and desire the stability and simplicity of those “rigid categories.” Klara Sax, like Nick, reflects upon the past with nostalgic yearning for the certainties of the cold war:

I knew that strategic bombers flew at something like fifty-five thousand feet…I think that is power. I think if you maintain a force in the world that comes into people’s sleep, you are exercising a meaningful power. Because I respect power. Now that power is in shatters or tatters or now that those Soviet borders don’t even exist in the same way, I think we understand, we can look back, we see ourselves more clearly, and them as well. Power meant something thirty, forty years ago. It was stable, it was focused, it was a tangible thing. It was greatness, danger, terror, all those things. And it held us together, the Soviets and us. Maybe it held the world together. You could measure things. You could measure hope and you could measure destruction. Not that I want to bring it back. It’s gone, good riddance. But the fact is…Many things that were anchored to the balance of power and the balance of terror seem to be undone, unstuck. Things have no limits now. Money has no limits. I don’t understand money anymore. Money is undone. Violence is undone, violence is easy
now, it’s uprooted, out of control, it has no measure anymore, it has no
level of values. (75-76)

Marvin Lundy, owner of the Bobby Thompson homerun baseball, who argues with Brian
Glassic about his motivations for wanting to buy the ball, mirrors Klara’s sentiments:

You need the leaders of both sides to keep the cold war going. It’s the one
constant thing. It’s honest, it’s dependable. Because when the tension and
rivalry come to an end, that’s when your worst nightmares begin. All the
power and intimidation of the state will seep out of your personal
bloodstream. You will no longer be the main – what do I want to
say…point of reference. Because other forces come rushing in,
demanding and challenging. The cold war is your friend. You need it to
stay on top. (170)

Both characters are caught between the transformation from an earlier, secure sense of
paranoia to a more unfocused sense of flexible paranoia, one that is fluid and shapes itself
to the complexities of the current world, no longer the monolithic paranoia of the past.

Klara fears power’s unstable manifestations after the collapse of the cold war,
complaining that the collapse of “those Soviet Borders” changed or eliminated power’s
efficacy, it’s “greatness, danger, terror.”
According to Magana, this shifting of immigration oversight occurred again in 1955, in an effort to improve service: “regional offices were established and assigned managerial and supervisory responsibility over field activities” (Magana 18).

According to Basinger, *Border Incident* “moves back and forth between semi-documentary and violent fictional narrative. Like *T-Men*, the entire film is sort of a redefinition of the original narrative space” (69).

It is interesting to note in this context that the Mexican film, *Espaldas Mojadas* 1955, a bracero smuggling film told from the braceros’ perspective, also links the border with cultural inscription. In *Espaldas Mojadoas*, the warning, “God is watching,” is painted on rocks at the border, a warning to would-be crossers. As in *Border Incident*, *Espaldas Mojadas* emphasizes the “surveillance” of the border by unseen forces. This time, however, it is “God” who watches the crossers, not the shadowy man on the mountain from *Border Incident*’s opening sequence.

According to Dimendberg’s analysis of space and cities in *film noir*: “As the tendency toward spatial deconcentration becomes increasingly evident after 1939 in both the actual built environment and the discourses of architecture and planning, what changes in cinematic representation is less the presence of centralized legal authority – no longer monopolized by the police, but just as easily represented by a treasury of FBI agent – nor even a criminal (just as likely a white-collar lawbreaker as a burglar or murderer), but rather the mechanisms of surveillance, now no longer dependent upon synoptic modes of observation such as aerial or panoramic views” (211-12). Dimendberg also claims that 1949, the year of *Border Incident*’s release is a “pivotal” year for transformations of, what he refers to as, “centrifugal spatiality.”

A very common image in Mexican-American literature is being “devoured” by the earth. Tomas Rivera’s *And the Earth Did Not Devour Him* and Helen Viramontes’ *Under the Feet of Jesus* employs such images. It is not surprising given the long history of Mexican agricultural labor.

In Taibo’s own record of the student strike, entitled ’68, he claims: “The May events in France made headlines in all the papers, as had the Prague Spring, the student mobilization in Brazil, the occupation of Columbia University in New York, and the Córdoba uprising in Argentina. Did these idiots really think that some sort of international contagion was at work? Could they believe in the virus that we believed in (sort of)?”

Literary critics has devised other names for this genre besides “metaphysical detective fiction.” In 1972, William V. Spanos coined the term “anti-detective story” to describe narratives that “evoke the impulse to ‘detect… in order to violently frustrate it by refusing to solve the crime” (154). Dennis Porter refined Spanos’s term in 1981 (245-59); and Stephan Tani, who published, in 1984, the first book on what we call metaphysical detective fiction, analyzed, itemized, and further categorized such narratives under the general rubric of “anti-detective fiction.” Yet the adjective “anti-detective” seems slightly misleading. These stories do subvert traditional detective-story conventions, but not necessarily as, in Tani’s words, “a deliberate negation” of the entire detective genre (24). Rather, these stories apply the detective process to that genre’s own assumptions about detection. (Detecting Texts 3)

In *Leonardo’s Bicycle*, Jose Daniel Fierro falls in love with an U.S. college basketball player – Karen Pierce – after watching her on television. He tracks down organ traffickers after Karen is discovered unconscious in Juarez with a kidney missing. Everyone assumes the crime occurred in Juarez, yet Jose Daniel discovers that the operation was in El Paso. Jose Daniel outwits the organ traffickers after his journey leads him to a Bulgarian secret service agent and a CIA backed heroin-smuggling operation dating from the Vietnam era. According to Fox, the novel “explore[s] issues of U.S. imperialism in the age of globalization, at the same time that it offers one model of a viable, albeit asymmetric, U.S.-Mexican partnership” (Fox, “Left-Sensationalist 191). Fox states that the plot of *Leonardo’s Bicycle* becomes a type of “revenge fantasy, by making the victim an innocent U.S. citizen whose kidney is destined for a former
Bulgarian secret-service operative with connections to the CIA. Mexico thus becomes the post-Cold War playground of long-established, mutually destructive First and Second World criminal networks. A cunning, border-crossing Fierro outwits the bad guys on his, and their, own turf” (Fox, “Left-Sensationalist” 191).

9 See Fredric Jameson’s *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* for his discussion of postmodern conspiracy thrillers.

10 Nick’s desire for symbolic inscription, his yearning for a stable and secure masculine identity, resembles other male characters in DeLillo’s work. This theme of ideological interpellation, specifically how ideology positions male subjects within structures, is explored in such novels as *End Zone, The Names, Libra* and *Running Dog*. In both *Running Dog* and *The Names*, government institutions carry out such interpellations and position subjects within ideology. In *Libra*, Oswald “recognizes” himself in the Marine Corp Manual, a material manifestation of ideological interpellation, by reading “deeply in the rules, impressed by the strictness and precision, by the stream of awesome details, weird, niggling, perfect” (42). Ironically, Oswald finds the Marine Core values of discipline and individuality to be “the true life inside him” (46). Similar to Oswald’s interpellation in *Libra*, Gary Harkness in *End Zone* finds himself drawn to the power of structures, specifically football, which engender in Harkness the desire to remake himself as a perfect individual, reducing himself to the essential, free from external distraction. However, Harkness’ desire for mental and physical perfection ultimately leads him to the infirmary. In a manner similar to Nick’s yearning to overcome the abject through bodily perfection, Harkness also wishes to secure the boundaries of his body. Yet, these characters’ aspiration for symbolic identity, the hope of recognizing themselves within an institutionally powerful ideology, eventually leads to an overcoming the male body through a type of metaphorical aphanisis, or fading, of subjectivity. The clearest example of the fading of subjectivity is in *Running Dog*, where Glen Selvy, a government operative who desperately craves self-discipline and sacrifice, ends up a headless corpse in the desert. Returning to *Underworld*, we can see Nick’s “recognition” of his identity within capitalist institutions, his desire for “connection” through office buildings, as an important “organizing principle” of his identity (89). Since Nick is unable to position himself within a paternalistic, familial structure, he must secure a sense of masculine identity through modern capitalism, the only remaining ideology that provides a “sense of order and command” (806). However, in contrast to the aphanisis experienced by other male characters in DeLillo’s novels, the symbolic interpellation that Nick craves ultimately reveals a nostalgia for the masculine ideology of the cold war “organization man,” a longing for an older sense of masculinity and time when “corporation[s]” used to “take us outside of ourselves” (89). This postmodern nostalgia for the stability of cold war masculinity and Fordist economic regimes paradoxically presents a fictional representation of a time that never occurred. Nick’s father was not a typical gray-flannel suited businessman. Instead, his father was a small time mobster who ran numbers in the Bronx. Therefore, Nick’s yearning for an older sense of masculinity and capitalism reveal the extent to which postmodernism has altered the seemingly stable and rigid categories of masculinity and economics.
WORKS CITED


Border Incident. Directed by Anthony Mann


-- Returning as Shadows.


