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The Beat Cops of History; or, The Paranoid Style in American Intellectual Politics

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Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory, Volume 66, Number 2, Summer 2010, pp. 149-167 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/arq.0.0065

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PHILLIP E. WEGNER

The Beat Cops of History; or, The Paranoid Style in American Intellectual Politics

> Would you sacrifice yourself to change the future?
>
> *The X-Files*

> You and I Robert have observed history. Time has been our glass. We are in history now, living in it, making it. Implicated? I am on a grail quest!
>
> *The Da Vinci Code*

I TAKE AS MY STARTING POINT IN THIS PAPER THE FACT that the present moment has witnessed a resurgence of the production of the privileged socio-political genre of paranoia, the conspiracy narrative. From recent high profile films such as the remake of the Cold War classic, *The Manchurian Candidate* (2004), *The Constant Gardener* (2005), *Syriana* (2005), *State of Play* (2009), *Watchmen* (2009), and the adaptation of one of the most widely read popular conspiracy narratives of all time, *The Da Vinci Code* (2006) (a film about which I'll have a few things to say in the final section of this paper), to the collective project of organizations such as Scholars for 9/11 Truth and David Horowitz's Students for Academic Freedom, the conspiracy narrative has become once again a prominent aspect of contemporary American culture.

There are a number of factors that could account for this rise in conspiracy visions—the violences of corporate globalization; the events of September 11, 2001; the emergence of the new security state; the documented activities of the Bush administration; and the general climate of fear, suspicion, and paranoia accompanying the global War on Terror, first envisioned and brought into being by prominent members

Arizona Quarterly Volume 66, Number 2, Summer 2010
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ISSN 0004-1610

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of the Project for the New American Century.[1] While these factors all, of course, contribute significantly to a situation propitious to conspiracy narratives, I want to explore how this efflorescence also sheds light on current debates about the future of work in the university in general, and the humanities and American Studies in particular. The protagonist in any conspiracy narrative is what Fredric Jameson calls "the social detective," a figure who "will either be an intellectual in the formal sense from the outset, or will gradually find himself/herself occupying the intellectual's structural position by virtue of the premium placed on knowledge or the cognitive by the form itself (perhaps the last contemporary narrative type in which the lone intellectual can still win heroic dimensions)" (*Geopolitical* 38–39). Thus, all conspiracy narratives, focused as they are on the flow and use of information, are about intellectuals, and the form has some surprisingly interesting things to teach about the current role of intellectuals in the university.

I begin by looking at two earlier classic American conspiracy narratives—Philip K. Dick's late 1960s masterpiece, *Ubik* (1969), and an episode from the sixth season of the hit television show, *The X-File*s (1993–2002)—both of which offer useful insights into the narrative form. Conspiracy narratives, as Ed White suggests in his reading of eighteenth century versions of the practice, engage in a project of "mapping the relations of force and trying to make sense of a social formation. . . . The conspiratorial project maps structures in order to determine the flow and texture of culture" (17, 22). In this regard, contemporary conspiracy narratives represent an undissolved remainder, or what Jacques Derrida calls a "specter," of a modernism haunting postmodern culture wherein such deeply narrative forms of critical engagement become increasingly difficult. And as Jameson notes, the "insistence on *narrative analysis* in a situation in which the narratives themselves henceforth seem impossible is [a] declaration of intent to remain political and contestatory" (Foreword xx). Contemporary conspiracy narratives thus offer among other things a popular form of an oppositional politics akin to the modernist, or more precisely post-postmodern, 1990s critical projects of Derrida's "hauntology" or Jameson's "cognitive mapping." And yet, in what I show to be their formal contradictions, these two paradigmatic conspiracy narratives unveil the limitations of this form—limitations that then point toward an even deeper kinship with the cultural formation Jameson elsewhere names a post–World War

II "late modernism." Finally, the film adaptation of *The Da Vinci Code* makes evident, against the grain of such canonical statements, discussed in detail by White, as David Brion Davis's "Some Themes of Counter-Subversion: An Analysis of Anti-Masonic, Anti-Catholic, and Anti-Mormon Literature" (1960) and Richard Hofstadter's more well-known, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics" (1964), that contemporary conspiracy narratives are fundamentally liberal in their orientation—a claim that I have no doubt some readers will take as a form of conspiracy thinking in its own right. Indeed, the difficulty of discussing the conspiracy narrative is that it works like Nietzsche's category of *ressentiment*: the claim that anyone is guilty of practicing it rebounds back to implicate whoever makes the accusation in the first place.[2]

What inaugurates the "conspiracy plot" in both of my paradigmatic cases is a simple realization: as Dick's protagonist, the downtrodden everyman Joe Chip, puts it, the recognition that "Something is wrong" (55). In the case of Dick's novel, this apprehension emerges out of a series of odd discoveries—a sealed packet of stale cigarettes, out-of-date phone books, obsolete currency appearing in circulation, putrefied packaged food, and a bizarre ad on a matchbook cover—all of which disturb Joe Chip's sense of the solidity and coherency of the everyday. As a result of his investigation, that is, his effort to reconstruct the deeper links between these disparate phenomena, Joe ultimately realizes that he and his colleagues were mortally wounded in an explosion, and, rather than witnessing the actual regression of their 1992 present back to 1939, they are "outside of time entirely," occupying the realm of the undead Dick names "half-life" (160). (The plot device of regression also enables Dick to offer a devastating commentary on the selective memory of nostalgia. For example, although Joe at first is taken by the "palpable touch of sturdy realism" available in the less fully commodified world of 1939, he soon comes to recognize that it is accompanied by less admirable traits: "'I never actually heard the term "n——" used,' Joe said, and found himself appraising this era a little differently, all at once. I forgot about this, he realized" [Dick 139, 149].) In this future world, technologies have been developed that enable those near death to be put into a state of suspended animation, extending the life span of their disembodied consciousness for many years. However, their life forces, like the radioactive isotopic process from which Dick takes this term, continue to decay.

Moreover, Joe discovers during the course of the novel that in the twilight world of half-life, malevolent entities exist that feed on others' life-force, thereby accelerating this entropic process. These entities "kill" Joe's friends, and nearly succeed in doing him in as well. Only the mysterious substance of the book's title, Ubik, momentarily wards off this artificially induced accelerated decay, a conceit that enables Dick to offer a wonderful parody of contemporary advertising slogans in the epigraphs of each of his chapters: "*Perk up pouting household surfaces with new miracle Ubik, the easy-to-apply, extra-shiny, non-stick plastic coating. Entirely harmless if used as directed. Saves endless scrubbing, glides you right out of the kitchen!*" (76). Meanwhile, in the outer world, a global industry has sprung up around the storage and care of these bodies, the Beloved Brethren Moratorium, complete with facilities that enable those in the living world to communicate briefly with half-lifers.

Very much in the spirit of Dick's other fictions, we realize during the course of the novel that the existence of half-lifers differs little from those on the outside, the latter also now living lives completely enclosed by technology and corporate commodity culture.[3] Joe has to pay to use household appliances or gain access to his "con-apt"—at one point early on his door refuses to open until he puts in "five cents" (23)—and everyone in this world faces an invasion of their consciousness by corporate-owned telepaths. This is, of course, unless they can afford to pay for the protection—"an anti-talent for every talent" (38)—offered by competing firms such as that of Joe's employer, Glen Runciter and Associates. In this way, Dick's novel takes up that supreme operation of the science fiction genre that Darko Suvin, drawing in turn upon Bertolt Brecht's modernist theorizations, calls "cognitive estrangement:" the generation of a fictional alternative world (cognition) that enable the reader to see their own in a startlingly new light (estrangement) (4). Science fiction itself, I have argued, is thus, like Brecht's dramatic work, a hybrid form, a "realist modernism."[4] The reader of science fiction becomes much like the students of the various conspiracies within the text, making connections, synthesizing information, and coming to new realizations about the "truth" that is out there in their world.

More familiar today will be the many levels of conspiracy that run through *The X-Files*, though here, unlike this particular Dick novel, and more akin to earlier classics of the form, these conspiracies are those of mysterious state and quasi-governmental agencies (the old

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nation-states having apparently all but disappeared by Dick's imaginary 1992). However, in the particular episode that I want to talk about—entitled significantly, "Monday," and which originally aired February 28, 1999—the conspiracy plot takes a different form, one that has the advantage of staging in condensed fashion the inner workings of the larger structural conspiracies of the series as a whole. In this episode, the show's protagonists, the FBI investigators of the paranormal Fox Mulder (David Duchovny) and Dana Scully (Gillian Anderson), meet a woman named Pam, whom we learn is the girlfriend of Bernard, a down-on-his-luck janitor turned bank robber. In turning to crime, Bernard seems to seize control of his destiny: when Pam tries to dissuade him by warning that he will lose his job, Bernard replies, in an echo of Marx and Engel's well-known adage at the climax of *The Communist Manifesto*, "Like there's a big future in mopping floors, like that's something to lose." And indeed, throughout the attempted bank robbery, characters note repeatedly that in this unpredictable situation he is the one finally in charge, the "boss." Moreover, Bernard bears out his new status when, after the inadvertent intervention of Scully and Mulder (the latter entering the scene to deposit his pay-check), he triggers the explosives he has strapped around his chest, and thereby kills everyone in the bank—including Mulder and Scully. However, as the viewers, we witness all these events in the opening minutes of the episode, and after the credits, we return to the beginning of this Monday morning, only to see the entire cycle unfold again.

Later in the episode, Pam confronts Mulder and tells him her realization, akin to that of Joe Chip, that "something went wrong on this day the first time around." As a result, they have all been locked in an endlessly repeating temporal loop: we witness four complete loops, see the part of a fifth, and Pam informs us this has happened thousands of time before. This is an old device in science fiction literature, and it is also at the heart of the popular films *The Terminator* (1984) and *Twelve Monkeys* (1995), as well as the non-SF *Groundhog Day* (1993) and *Run Lola Run* (1998).[5] In the case of this *X-Files* episode, while minor variations are possible in each loop (sometimes Mulder goes to the bank first, other times Scully), the larger chain of events remains in place: Mulder's waterbed springs a leak; he needs to deposit a check; Bernard enters the bank; Scully and Mulder appear; the police are called; the bomb explodes; and everyone perishes. And with each resolution, we

are brought back to the beginning of what we now recognize as a particularly awful version of that particularly awful moment, Monday morning. For Pam, the first reader of the conspiracy—that is, the only one who really understands what is going on—such a situation of endless repetition is, she declares, "hell."

Interestingly, in a way very much like Dick's novel, this plot enables an estranging glimpse of the "truth" of contemporary everyday life. For Pam's personal hell serves in this episode as a figure of powerlessness, the fate of being trapped in empty compulsive rituals of work and consumption, that defines life in post-industrial America (a theme also at the heart of the cult hit film, *Fight Club* [1999], released only months after this episode originally aired).[6] Even more interestingly, a similar empty repetitiveness is revealed as part of the fabric of the daily lives of *The X-Files* protagonists. In a unique moment of realism in the series, we witness the true banality of Mulder's life, his struggles with his landlady, the breakdown of his cheap possessions, and his paycheck-to-paycheck financial straits. Meanwhile, Scully is first encountered while attending a mind-numbingly boring department meeting, wherein the audience momentarily glimpses the true bureaucratic nature of FBI work. Scully, as much as any of us, joyfully welcomes any excuse to escape from this interminable situation, even though it is exactly this desire that will lead to her death. Jameson suggests a similar narrative logic at work in Franz Kafka's great modernist conspiracy fiction, *The Trial*: "The moral would now seem to be that the worst is better than nothing at all, and that nightmares are a welcome relief from the work week. There is in Kafka a hunger for the sheer event as such in a situation in which it seems as rare as a miracle; in his language, an avidness to register, in a virtually musical economic notation, the slightest tremors in the life world that might betray the faintest presence of something 'taking place'" (*Postmodernism* 309).

In *The Trial*, *Ubik*, and *The X-Files*, the recognition that "something is wrong" inaugurates a critical interpretive process wherein the work's representative intellectual attempts to construct a relational narrative web in which apparently disparate and disconnected fragments are reassembled into a coherent whole: as Joe Chip puts it, the aim is to "spot a connective link between these five occurrences . . . or whatever you want to call them. These five things that are . . . wrong" (103). Pam too attempts to map the relationship between the various events that occur

this particular morning, and she believes she has successfully done so when she declares to Mulder that his entering the bank is the key. What emerges in each case, in other words, is a form of what Jameson describes as the "project of totalization," "the making of connections between various phenomena" (*Postmodernism* 332, 403). Indeed, it is not the conspiracy itself, but this narrative operation that produces these relationships, something evident throughout Dick's oeuvre and in the larger narrative of *The X-Files* as a whole.

The protagonists' realization in each of these plots that "something is wrong" also resonates with Derrida's invocation in *Specters of Marx* of Hamlet's "The time is out of joint," suggesting that Hamlet is the very prototype of the modern "social detective" intellectual, a figure whom Salvador Dali describes in the earlier moment of modernism as the paranoid-critical thinker. Architect Rem Koolhaas, in his *Delirious New York*, further elaborates upon Dali's preferred "Paranoid-Critical Method" (PCM). Koolhaas argues that the aim of such an interpretive strategy is to produce a synthetic "delirium of interpretation" whose harvest is one of previously "unsuspected correspondences, analogies, and patterns," compressed "to a critical point where they achieve the density of fact" (238). The narratives generated by such a method, Koolhaas suggests, are significant because they are at once critical, or disruptive of the status quo, and, even more significantly, potentially productive of the new, precisely in the closure of a situation where, "Everything is known, including that which is still unknown." Thus, "The PCM is both the product of and the remedy against that anxiety: it promises that, through conceptual recycling, the worn, consumed contents of the world can be recharged or enriched like uranium, and that ever-new generations of false facts and fabricated evidences can be generated simply through the act of interpretation. The PCM promises to destroy, or at least upset, the definitive catalogue, to short-circuit all existing categorizations, to make a fresh start" (241).

All these narratives suggest that such a "delirium of interpretation" is an indispensable precondition for the actions needed to transform the present. Moreover, to act in this way is to possess the agency, or individual freedom, that the deterministic structure of the conspiracy, no less so than modern corporate culture, would seem to eliminate. Evan Watkins also argues that what he calls the "pedagogical rather than epistemological" function of conspiracy narratives turns on the

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desire for agency (117). And yet, at least in the examples I discuss here, it is less clear whether what results is Watkins' "agents of change." A fundamental contradiction emerges in these conspiracy narratives that separates them from the kin strategies of hauntology or cognitive mapping (and it may be these latter that are in fact the real focus of Watkins and White's analyses). For while the operation of mapping illustrated in the conspiracy narrative occurs on the level of what Jacques Lacan names the Symbolic or the big other (A), the collective intra-subject plane of language itself, the emergent political agency it produces is still always locked on the plane of Lacan's Imaginary—that is, within the individual and her or his relationships with others. And this in turn makes the ostensible project of the conspiracy narrative—the setting of things aright, an operation based precisely upon the new knowledge the mapping operation sets forth—dissolves into sheer fantasy, a destination at which we can never arrive.

Or, as we should more precisely put it, one at which we should not arrive. For in these narratives, the end of the journey comes increasingly to be cast in a negative light. As already evident in the "endings" of *Hamlet* and *The Trial*, the conclusion of this mapping operation, and thus the termination of the interpretive process, is at one with the moment of death; or, as Don DeLillo puts it in one of his reflections on paranoia and conspiracy, "All plots tend to move deathward" (26). This is borne out brilliantly by this particular *X-Files* episode: we ultimately learn that what has quite literally thrown time out of joint is Pam's failure to die during the botched bank robbery. History begins its normal course only when Mulder brings her into the bank and she is accidentally killed by Bernard—an event whose radical singularity, whose unexpected nature, she notes with the dying observation, "This never happened before." Similarly, in Dick's novel, Joe Chip's growing knowledge of the "plot" in the half-life world nearly results in his destruction. Think too of the last scene in the great 1970s conspiracy film, *The Parallax View* (1974): Joe Frady's (Warren Beatty) successful mapping operation leads to his destruction by the very conspiracy he has nearly exposed. This, Jameson argues, is "not because [the conspiracy] has some special form of 'power' that the victims lack, but simply because it is collective and the victims, taken one by one in their isolation, are not" (*Geopolitical* 66).

All this suggests that there are in fact two different forms of "death" that are at play in these conspiracy narratives. The first is the one I have already invoked: this would be the intolerable death of the critical investigator that ends the challenge to the conspiracy, a death that would seem to be at one with the end of history itself (and hence, this highlights the fact that one of the generic predecessors to conspiracy is the classical dystopias of Evgeny Zamyatin's *We* [1921] or George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four* [1949]).[7] However, there is a second form of death that is also possible, and occasionally realized in conspiracy narratives: this would be the death of the conspiracy itself, with its investigator successfully bringing it to the light of day. Jameson maintains that such resolution occurs only in the "cheapest" examples of the genre (*Geopolitical* 32). Compare, for example the ends of two recent conspiracy films set in Africa, *The Constant Gardner* and *Blood Diamond* (2006): whereas the former ends with protagonist Justin Qualye (Ralph Fiennes) accepting the utter futility of his efforts to expose a global pharmaceutical corporation's illegal drug testing program in Africa and waiting passively for his "regrettable death" at the hands of approaching hired thugs, the latter concludes with images of an outraged Europe, now awakened to the crimes of "conflict" or "blood" diamond mining in Africa, enacting sweeping legislation to bring it to an end.

Whatever its melodramatic flaws, the conclusion of *Blood Diamond* does hint at the nature of this second form of death, the settling of debts and setting things aright, when projected onto a collective historical and political stage. It is nothing less than the deeply modernist event of revolution, a consideration that remains as scandalous for a postmodern ethics as it was for an earlier post-war late modernist "liberal imagination" (to use Lionel Trilling's great phrase). Slavoj Žižek has pointed out that a revolution is a situation characterized by a kind of symbolic death, or more precisely, the real death of a symbolic order, the moment when the "hole in the big other, the symbolic order," becomes "visible," and hence the collective fiction that sustains our subjectivities "collapses" (1, 234). The commitment, or "fidelity," to these forms of revolutionary change is what Alain Badiou in his recent study of modernism, *The Century*, refers to as the "passion for the real," the project to "make man, here and now" (32). In "Monday," interestingly, the figuration of this passion for the real is split between two characters, Pam, the one who wishes to set history back on its proper track, and Bernard. The

latter especially—portrayed as bearded and wild-eyed, wearing a green army jacket, his chest wrapped in high explosives, a fanatic willing to die for his cause (and, of course, to take others with him)—becomes a figure of the Terrorist, the dominant and perhaps only image available in the contemporary popular culture imagination of militant political commitment.

Crucially, however, *both* deaths are deferred in the conspiracy narratives I am discussing here. Dick eschews any narrative closure at the conclusion of *Ubik*. In the novel's penultimate chapter, Joe Chip learns both the name, Jory, of the entity feeding on the other half-lifers, and of the existence of a counter-force, Ella (the half-lifer wife of Joe's boss), who has dedicated her existence to containing Jory's power. However, her time to pass out of half-life has nearly arrived, and she asks Joe to take up her role as protector of the realm. When Joe agrees, he wonders if he ever might finally "defeat" Jory. Ella responds, "Maybe in time you can learn ways to nullify him. I think that's really the best you can hope to do; I doubt if you can truly destroy him" (206). Moreover, she points out that even if he did, there are other Jorys in the half-life world. Thus, Ella concludes, "This battle goes on wherever you have half-lifers; it's a verity, a rule, of our existence" (207). The unending struggle of the classic conspiracy narrative is thereby ratcheted up to an ontological, if not metaphysical principle. Dick reiterates this conclusion on the level of the plot itself, calling into question even this provisional "resolution" of the conspiracy; and the last line of the book leaves the reader in a state of suspension not unlike that of Joe, "This was just the beginning" (216). With this open-ended conclusion, Peter Fitting notes, "the reader of *Ubik* is refused any such final, definitive interpretation. . . . There is no satisfactory single interpretation of *Ubik*, my own included; and the reader's traditional response—the discovery of that interpretation—is frustrated" (155–56).

Similarly, Scully and Mulder never quite arrive at the truth "out there," to recall *The X-Files* famous slogan, that Pam in this particular episode, at least, finds. This structurally necessary interminability also accounts for the deep sense of dissatisfaction we have when extended conspiracy television plots—think of the 1960s *The Prisoner*, or the 1980s *Twin Peaks*—are brought to a close. This is because television is the privileged medium of the conspiracy narrative; or, to put it another way, the conspiracy's "total flow" is also the very narrative logic of this

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medium.[8] The explosion of conspiracy narrative films in the late 1950s and early 1960s, as well as the appearance of novels like Dick's and even more famously Thomas Pynchon's, may be understood as some of the first attempts to think though the logic of what was rapidly becoming the dominant cultural medium.[9]

Fundamental to the conspiracy narrative, as these two texts make so brilliantly clear, is a substitution of this Symbolic death or commitment to an "ethics of the real"—in short, radical politics—with the "bad infinity" of the incessant conspiracy investigation.[10] This substitution results in a third form of death at work in these narratives, a kind of living death that Lacan names in his 1959–1960 seminar, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, the "place between two deaths."[11] This is the case in Dick's novel—Ella notes that Joe's fight against Jory will be a tremendous "burden" and it will guarantee that the dissolution of his life force, "the weariness and cooling off," will come sooner rather than later (207). Moreover, the realm of half-life itself serves as a spatialization of Lacan's temporal locale. And it is equally so in the larger plot structure of *The X-Files*: Mulder and Scully, as the show bears out again and again, must sacrifice any personal life or chance at happiness in their fight to keep the conspiracy from effectively ending history. These plots thus also bear out the connection between the conspiracy narrative and the classic ghost story: the ghost, like Hamlet's father, Joe Chip, or Pam, is doomed to inhabit an ahistorical halfway place until the initial trauma that has produced the haunting has been resolved. That resolution is, of course, impossible in most ghost stories, resulting in the very interminability of the haunting.

However, as this particular episode of *The X-Files* makes clear, the role of the social detective is also as an agent of order, one who in the end still supports the status quo against more radical challenges posed to it. Indeed, in "Monday," Mulder momentarily changes his position in the series' narrative scheme, becoming the embodiment of the system rather than a force aimed at challenging its continuation. For here, it is Mulder who takes control of the situation back from Bernard, first revealing to Bernard his knowledge of the latter's intent (the same fear of the dominant order's ability to read our deepest desires we see in Dick's novel), and then offering him the option to "change his fate" by walking out of the bank (interestingly, a similar option, to walk away from the X-Files, is exactly what the "smoking man" and other mysteri-

ous agents of the ruling powers offer Mulder). Of course, to accept this offer would be to concede to the ultimate impossibility of changing one's conditions in any fundamental way—an expression of a powerlessness in the face of authority that Bernard finally acknowledges when, failing to shoot Mulder and hitting Pam instead, he falls to his knees, and this time, does not detonate his explosives.

The fundamental trope reigning over conspiracy is thus that of irony, a "dissembling or hiding what is actually the case" (Abrams 135). Jameson identifies irony as the supreme ideologeme of a post–World War II late modernism, a way to contain an earlier high modernist commitment to the Absolute, or revolution, however it is manifest. This irony is, Jameson suggests, "also a way of unifying opposites; and with it you can at one and the same time believe in the importance of politics and embrace everything we might lose if we indulged in political practice" (*Archaeologies* 179). Thus, as an expression both of the intolerability of the present order and a deep anxiety in the face of what might be involved in trying to actually change things, conspiracy narratives keep one suspended in the liminal zone of the undead specter, haunting the present and at least keeping open alternative possibilities while not quite giving way to the "death drive" of social, cultural, and/or institutional change.

And here we arrive finally at the interest of the film adaptation of *The Da Vinci Code*—for in this film we see the identification of those who in the contemporary university, no less so than in an earlier moment of late modernism, occupy the place of the conspiracy thinker. In this film, the social detective is quite literally a university intellectual, best-selling author and Professor of Religious Symbology at Harvard, Robert Langdon (Tom Hanks), swept up following a lecture in Paris into a centuries old conspiracy. True to Jameson's claim with which I opened this paper, part of the interest of this film—and no less so than in Ron Howard's earlier *A Beautiful Mind* (2001)—lies in its efforts to portray intellectual work in a heroic light. Indeed, the scene of a passionate discussion of early Church history (the exposure of whose dangerous truths might be the real reason for the violent conservative assault on the film) between the American and British historians, Langdon and Sir Leigh Teabing (Ian McKellen), has more dramatic energy than any of the more conventional chase sequences. Both intellectuals are involved, as stressed in the declaration from Teabing that I used as

one of the epigraphs for this essay, in a "grail quest." However, we soon learn that what each man imagines to be the ends of this quest is very different indeed.

The plot of the film unfolds through a personification of the three possible forms of death that I have identified at work in all conspiracy narratives. On the one hand, we have the sinister character-couple of Bishop Aringarosa (Alfred Molina) and his murderous partner, Silas (Paul Bettany). These men, as representatives of the conservative Catholic organization Opus Dei, remain deeply committed to maintaining the current status quo, or even restoring a lost one, at whatever the human cost. They thus embody the often hidden and terrible violence, Antonio Gramsci's "apparatus of state coercive power," necessary for any social order to perpetuate itself (12).

Yet, what remains unremarked upon in much of the controversy over this film is that this first "evil" couple is mirrored in a second, that of historian Teabing and his servant and henchman, Remy Jean (Jean-Yves Berteloot). The latter at first seem the polar opposite of the former, for their goal is to expose Opus Dei's conspiracy, and in so doing destroy a centuries-old status quo. Teabing's "passion for the real" is to reveal the truth of the "dark con," the long hidden secret of Jesus's union with Mary Magdalene and their founding of a royal blood line that continues into the present day, a secret whose suppression underwrites the Church's power. Teabing's revolutionary act will thus rupture the continuity of the past, and dissolve the symbolic order of Christianity. With this, Teabing declares, "The dark con can be exposed. Mankind can finally be set free. And we can do it, Robert. The three of us."

However, this declaration occurs only after Teabing has drawn a gun upon Langdon and his companion, Sophie Neveu (Audrey Tautou), in order to coerce their assistance in the execution of his revolutionary plan. The film intercuts his speech with a sequence in which Silas accidentally shoots Aringarosa, is shot in turn by the police, and dies by the side of his beloved Bishop. This cross-cutting reinforces the central lesson of the film: Teabing is no less murderous, destructive, and contemptuous of the lives of individuals who stand in his way than Aringarosa and Silas—the former ready and willing, as the old adage goes, to break any eggs to make his revolutionary omelet. (This includes his partner, as Teabing has already by this point murdered Remy Jean.) By stressing the identification between what are coded as two "queer"

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couples—and Lee Edelman demonstrates the deep connection between queer figures and the death drive—the film ultimately drives home the liberal conclusion that the extremes of both conservative and radical activisms are equally dangerous.

Over and against both these positions stands the film's hero, Langdon, described in a way that suggests his direct link back to his predecessors, Joe Chip and Mulder and Scully. Late in the film, we learn that Langdon had once been characterized by a colleague (who turns out to have been another Knights Templar) as "a flatfoot. A beat cop of history. A dumb policeman who just does his job day after day." And yet, it is precisely in his fidelity to this role of the intellectual—to observe history rather than to try and make it, to be named, as Langdon is by Sophie Neveu, among "those who protect"—that Langdon successfully navigates the Scylla and Charybdis of the two extremes represented by Aringarosa-Silas and Teabing-Remy Jean. In the film's conclusion, Langdon gets to have it both ways: becoming a Knights Templar—something literalized in the film's final scene when he kneels before the tomb of Mary Magdalene, who he alone realizes is buried under the Louvre—he thwarts Opus Dei's latest efforts to bring history to an end; but he also defers indefinitely the revolution dreamt of by Teabing that would occur with the unveiling of the Holy Grail, who turns out to be none other than his companion throughout the film, Sophie Neveu. It is thus this "normal" heterosexual couple whose values—for Neveu too indefinitely defers at the film's conclusion from announcing her lineage and thus unleashing a crisis of global proportions—are clearly superior to those of either of our queer pairs.

In taking up this ironic stance, Langdon becomes a manifestation of what Jameson describes as the late modernist intellectual, the "ideologist of modernism" who flourishes in the early Cold War American university, and who is represented by such historical figures as Clement Greenberg (Jameson's example), Trilling, Davis, and Hoffstadter; or in the interpretive framework of the "republican synthesis" challenged by White.[12] These "ideologists of modernism (as opposed to its genuine practitioners), from Greenberg to Adorno, and passing through the American New Criticism, are in agreement that the concept of culture is the true enemy of art as such; and that if one opens the door to 'culture,' everything currently reviled under the term of cultural studies

pours in and leaves pure art and pure literature irredeemably tainted" (Jameson, *Singular* 177). Culture, Jameson goes on to contend, represents a "blurring of boundaries," a space of "mediation," and if "one feels a malaise in the face of this blurring of the boundaries, an anxiety about the indeterminacy in which it necessarily leaves the work of art itself, it then becomes crucial to break the link, to sever this dialectical movement, to challenge and philosophically to discredit the concept of culture, in order to protect the space of art against further incursions or contamination" (177–78). "It is with this late modernism," Jameson later notes, "that postmodernism attempts radically to break, imagining that it is thereby breaking with classical modernism, or even modernity, in general and as such" (210).

However, Jameson goes on to argue that this late modernist intellectual stance has once again risen to prominence in the present, in the form of those who advocate a "return" to Literature or "the canon," as well as the calls for a renewed commitment to disciplinarity, aesthetics, ethics, or what Marjorie Levinson describes critically as a "normative formalism:" a "campaign to bring back a sharp demarcation between history and art, discourse and literature, with form . . . the prerogative of art" (Levinson 559). (And need it be said here that this is not the same thing as denying the importance of investigations being done in the present moment on questions of ethics, aesthetics, and disciplinarity?) For example, in her 2006 MLA Presidential Address, Marjorie Perloff extolls us "to trust the literary instinct that brought us to this field in the first place and to recognize that, instead of lusting after those other disciplines that seem so exotic primarily because we don't really practice them, what we need is more theoretical, historical, and critical training in our own discipline" (662). In this approach, it is Literature, or Ethics, or the Aesthetic, that becomes the liminal space between two deaths—and think back to such classic demonstrations of this position as Cleanth Brooks's New Critical reading of Randall Jarrell's "Eighth Air Force" in his great essay, "Irony as a Principle of Structure": "But in this poem, the affirmation of man's essential justness by a Pilate who contents the people as he washes his hands in blood seems to me to supply every qualification that is required. The sense of self-guilt, the yearning to believe in man's justness, the knowledge of the difficulty of so believing—all work to render accurately and dramatically the total situation" (740).

In this way, these new ideologists of an old late modernism, like any other conspiracy intellectual—be they Joe Chip, Fox Mulder, Dana Scully, Robert Langdon, Lionel Trilling, Richard Hofstadter, or Marjorie Perloff—struggle vigilantly to keep at bay two extremes. In our current case, theses extremes are represented, on the one hand, by a corporatization and instrumentalization of the university, in which reflective critical engagement, let alone the work of what Fred Moten and Stefano Harney call "subversive intellectuals," has little place in the standardized, basic skill, pre-professional training, and entertainment complex that is the University, Inc.;[13] and on the other hand, by the challenge of humanist radicals and subversive intellectuals—the popular front of cultural studies, historicism, theory, multiculturalism, interdisciplinarity, and political criticism, all brought together, for us on this occasion at least, under the aegis of that truly mongrel, monstrous, and queer field of American Studies.[14] The latter champions much to the chagrin of the new late modernists a thoroughgoing transformation of our scholarship, teaching, and even our institutions—offering a challenge first to how we read, then to what we read, and finally, to the contexts in which such reading takes place. Need it be said, then, that the solution offered by the new late modernists to the challenges we all face is as imaginary as that found in any other conspiracy narrative?

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NOTES

1. For a discussion of the Project in the formation of a neo-conservative global political agenda, see Harvey.

2. For a now classic discussion of the role of *ressentiment* in modern literature, see Jameson, *Political Unconscious* 201–05, 267–71.

3. For a superb discussion of the relationship in Dick's fiction between paranoia, conspiracy, and commodity fetishism, see Freedman.

4. See Wegner, "Jameson's Modernisms" and "Ken MacLeod's." For a classic discussion of the way the open-ended form of *Ubik* "deconstructs" the expectations of the bourgeois novel, see Fitting.

5. See Wegner, "I'll be Back: Repetitions and Revisions in the *Terminator* Films" in *Life Between Two Deaths* 60–84.

6. See Wegner, "Where the Prospective Horizon is Omitted: Naturalism, Dystopia, and Politics in *Fight Club* and *Ghost Dog*" in *Life Between Two Deaths* 117–36.

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7. For a discussion of the end of history vision in these particular literary dystopias, see Wegner, *Imaginary Communities*.

8. For the notion of television as "total flow," see Williams.

9. The connection between Pynchon's fiction and television is discussed in McHale.

10. For an effective related discussion of the potential interminability of the "collector" logic at work in various forms of conspiracy thought and literature, as well as the possibilities for the conspiracy to open up onto new forms of collective action, see Beal.

11. I explore this concept in some detail in *Life Between Two Deaths*.

12. Apter makes a similar link when she writes that the "world system mapped by Pynchon and DeLillo's psychogeographical 'out there' coincides with an American paradigm of onewordledness hatched in the 1960s at the zenith of the Cold War" (386).

13. There is a link as well between the figure I am describing as the conspiracy intellectual and Moten and Harney's "critical intellectual": "Never having to confront the foundation, never having to confront antifoundation out of faith in the unconfrontable foundation, critical intellectuals can float in the middle range" (108).

14. The occasion I refer to here is that of the University of Florida's 2008 Annual American Cultures Symposium, "Futures of American Studies." For a program of the presentations, see <http://www.clas.ufl.edu/users/pwegner/conferencewebpage.html>. For an important recent exchange on the question of disciplinarity in American Studies, see Deloria and the responses by Singh and Halberstam; and for a related discussion, see Emery. Finally, for two indispensable studies of the systematic nature of the conservative assault on this kind of work and on the public university more generally, see Bousquet and Newfield.

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