

## Conspiracy Theory: Chronic Psychoses in Contemporary Metafiction

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Among all the forms of mental extremity, paranoia and schizophrenia seem to be dominant in North American metafiction. The word and the concept of paranoia are among the most controversial in the history of psychoanalysis. Although etymologically paranoia means madness or disorder of the mind, J. Laplanche and J. B. Pontalis define it as a “chronic psychosis characterized by more or less systematized delusion, with a predominance of ideas of reference but with no weakening of the intellect [...]. Along with delusions of persecution, Freud places erotomania, delusional jealousy and delusions of grandeur under the heading of paranoia” (296). It is important to stress that unlike schizophrenia, whose fundamental symptom is *Spaltung* (“dissociation,” “splitting”) and whose typical characteristics include incoherence of thought, action and affection, paranoia is not accompanied by intellectual deterioration (Laplanche and Pontalis 298-9; 409). What is more, the paranoid’s frenzied production of references and connections could result in an uncontrolled acceleration of the intellect. From the point of view of the psychoanalytic establishment, this form of hyper-consciousness leads to a psychotic discourse; in literature it is used by writers, among other techniques, to convey a visionary and prophetic tone in their narratives. However, it is not difficult to find both forms of psychosis in the same work. Indeed, they may also coexist in real life, a circumstance to which Kraepelin and Freud refer using the term “paraphrenia” (Laplanche and Pontalis 299). In contemporary US metafiction it is common to find paranoid narrative voices describing plots and confabulations. The victims of this universal aggression typically are characters who face mental dissociation or disintegration. These personages populate a universe characterized by what Fredric Jameson considers the psychopathology of “the age of corporate capitalism,” an age controlled by multinational corporations and state bureaucracies, where the “older bourgeois individual [unified] subject no longer exists” (15).

In his studies of the history of American politics, Richard Hofstadter provides some pertinent remarks on what he calls “its paranoid style.” According to Hofstadter, this style contemplates “*the motive force*” of history as a colossal conspiracy set in motion by demonic forces of an almost transcendental power. “The paranoid spokesman perceives the fate of his conspiracy in apocalyptic terms—he traffics in the birth and death of entire worlds, whole political orders, whole systems of human values” (qtd. in Sanders 140). This conspiratorial view of history is not an exception in US politics and literature, but a constant premise whose genealogy would transport us back to the Manichean apparatus of the Puritan imagination.

Although many postmodern metafictional works are regarded by critics as representative of the “paranoid style,” I would reserve that label for more extreme cases. In doing so, I will closely follow Hofstadter’s definition, considering in addition the subjects of imagery, structure and form. Literary scholars generally consider paranoia and other forms of mental disturbance simply in relation to theme or characterization, and rarely (except in Pynchon’s case) as the structuring motif of their narratives. According to Hofstadter, the distinguishing feature of the paranoid style lies not in a consideration of conspiracies as sporadic phenomena, but rather in that it assumes the view that a massive conspiracy is the motive force of historical development. Two postmodern US novels fully subscribe to this definition: *Naked Lunch* and *Gravity’s Rainbow*.

The main characters in the works of Burroughs and Pynchon suffer mental disorders characterized by feelings of systematized delusions of persecution. Paranoia recurs in the form of obsessive images and metaphors, but it is also overtly discussed by the narrative voices and by the personages. The organizational patterns of the two novels conform to a paranoid vision in which, under the appearance of chaos, there are hidden systems of order. Public institutions are portrayed as representing crime: education, government, industry, laws, medicine, the military, politics, psychology, race, religion, sex and technology are seen as conspiratorial. As prototypical writers of the late 1950s and 1960s they reveal their fear that our governing power is an inexplicable and abstract conspiracy. Both distrust systems, but not in equal measure. Whereas Burroughs’s novel purports to be radically anti-system (although the fact of its being “systematized” as a novel contradicts such a pretension), Pynchon simultaneously longs for an alternative system (the “counterforce”) and fears anti-paranoia (the absolute lack of connections) more than paranoia itself.

With regards to the selection of an accurate psychoanalytic term, perhaps Kraepelin’s “paraphrenia” would be more appropriate to describe *Naked Lunch*. According to Laplanche and Pontalis, the psychoses of the subject suffering from paraphrenia “are comparable to schizophrenia by virtue of the presence of complex, poorly schematized constructions based on hallucinations and confabulations” (299). Significantly, it is not that *Naked Lunch* fails in the systematization of its narrative construction and motifs, but rather that it professes to be as asystematic as possible. This aspect is achieved by schizophrenic means: drawing from popular culture to create a cartoon-like version of the long-standing Manichean struggle of Good versus Evil and simultaneously inverting or exploding the moral laws and conventions that those popular genres usually assert. Burroughs’s novel resists interpretation even more dramatically than Pynchon’s, especially the kind of interpretation provided by “humanistic literary criticism.” To emplot the novel as a moral satire—as most critics do—implies a consolidation of that which Burroughs tries precisely to undermine: the foundations of ethical dualism.

*Naked Lunch* is constructed on the basis of successive nightmares of domination exerted by strange powers. Good and Evil continue to struggle in the setting of the “Interzone,” an imaginary dystopia described as “the Composite City.” But Good is no longer associated with power and institutions (nation, family, religion), nor Evil with the marginal and the subversive. Most likely the contrary holds true, although the inherent ambiguity of the text refuses to feed our desire for stable meanings. At one level the supreme Evil is linked with the collapse of individual will and identity, rather than with the possibility of any socially condemned immoral act. Addiction is just one of the images for control and annihilation of the self. All mankind appears as a victim of some form of addiction. In this context the body is regarded as nothing but a biological trap, and society is directed by “control addicts.”

Interzone, described as both a single building of infinite rooms and as a polyglot market, is the modern city as a wasteland, in which all the cities, people, and governments of the world are combined in an immense melting pot of commerce, sex, addiction, rivalry, and political manipulation. Its inhabitants spend their time copulating, trading and transacting in a parody of Western consumer societies. Interzone embodies in many aspects Jameson's description of multinational capitalism, which is marked by the exponential growth of international corporations and the consequent transcending of national boundaries. Jameson identifies the new area of commodification for multinational capitalism as preeminently representative itself. In this society the production, exchange, marketing, and consumption of cultural forms—including advertising, TV and the mass media in general—are the central focus and expression of economic activity. *Naked Lunch* links the alienating power of these forms to behavioral psychiatry. In the "Reconditioning Center" humiliating techniques reduce a man to a *latah* who "sometimes injures himself while trying to imitate the motions of several people at once"—a parodic version of the mass man reduced to absolute alienation and schizophrenia under "modern conditioning programs of advertizing and public induced morality" (Mottram 34-5).

All political theories are substituted by "the Algebra of Need." The pyramids of power and richness are built upon the base of the total need for drugs, sex or power, and the traffic of "junk" provides the model of all political and economic empires: "the junk merchant does not sell his product to the consumer, he sells the consumer to the product. He does not improve and simplify his merchandise. He degrades and simplifies his client" (Burroughs vii). Burroughs' political analysis corresponds with the theory of conspiracy: a secret few conspire to manipulate and control the many. Political parties in the Interzone attempt to rule the world through total mental and physical control of the human race; they are control-addicts.

Each of the cultural and ideological components of Burroughs's microcosm undergo the process of simplification that Jameson sees as characteristic of postmodernism. Science and the arts in this universe seem to have been extracted from popular culture. Science in *Naked Lunch* consists of the scientific knowledge popularized by the media. The religious leaders of Interzone are part of the elite that manipulates the masses. The great religions of the world are now reduced to The Prophet Hour, the religion of radio and television preacher—that is, religion as a form of carnivalesque entertainment.

The basic relation between controller and victim is at the center of Burroughs' pop analysis of power and social order. When the human being becomes an addict, he identifies with the virus and regresses to an inferior form of life (frequently an insect). Along with the orgasm of the hanged man, the degrading metamorphoses from man to a subhuman organism are the most recurrent motifs that illustrate Burroughs's mythology of addiction. The criticism of the social institutions of control is enriched as well with the motif of the mad doctor, a stereotype borrowed from cartoons, B-movies and other expressions of popular culture: Dr. Browebek "retired abortionist and junk pusher" (29), Dr. Fingers Schafer, "The Lobotomy Kid" (103), and especially Dr. Benway, director of the "Freeland Reconditioning Center." These doctors seek the absolute control and manipulation of human behavior. Their ideal is *IND*, "Irreversible Neural Damage" and *TD*, "Total Demoralization." In their work they use brain-washing, drugs, and all varieties of humiliation in order to achieve automatic obedience.

In this battleground between the forces of Good and Evil, the political parties play different roles. Among the four parties inhabiting Interzone, the "Factualist" seems to be the only one that tries to subvert the politics of coercion and debasement by controlling all the facets of life. It is not fortuitous that one of the Factualists, William Lee [Burroughs?],

appears in *Nova Express* as the author of *Naked Lunch*: "The purpose of my writing is to expose and arrest Nova Criminals. In *Naked Lunch*, *Soft Machine* and *Nova Express* I show who they are and what they are doing and what they will do if they are not arrested [...]. With your help we can occupy the Reality Studio and retake their universe of Fear, Death and Monopoly—(Signed) INSPECTOR J. LEE, NOVA POLICE" (14).

A reductive interpretation would lead us to consider Bill Lee as Burroughs' *alter ego*, considering the act of writing as a salvational activity, and therefore regarding the author as a sort of comic-strip cultural hero. Nothing is quite so simple in this novel. *Naked Lunch* is not a random collection of popular forms. If it uses the techniques of cartoons, B-movies, pornography and other forms of mass culture, it does so not mimetically but "homeopathically" (see Jameson 59). It appropriates the discourses of popular and mass culture so as to subvert the strategies of power and control which they serve.

The paradox at the heart of *Naked Lunch* lies in the fact that what appears to be an alternative for the characters' mental derangement, the act of disclosing the relations of domination through writing, is short-circuited by the instrument itself of writing, i.e., language. The "evil" virus word and image can hardly offer any salvation since language is frequently considered in this novel as the main threat to individual identity and will. Burroughs's alternative to traditional language is verbal collage: the inventory, the catalogue, the surface, the verbal patterns that proceed by material accumulation. By the middle of the novel an anonymous voice expresses what could very well be considered as the theory of language at work in *Naked Lunch*: "So I got an exclusive why don't I make with the live word? The word cannot be expressed direct, [...]. It can perhaps be indicated by mosaic of juxtaposition like articles abandoned in a hotel drawer, defined by negatives and absence" (116). Like the delusional fantasies of the schizophrenic subject, discourse in *Naked Lunch* follows the metonymic displacement of the signifier rather than the semantic condensation of metaphor.

The organizational pattern of the novel is another token of Burroughs's "schismatic style." The analytic material of the first section ("Naked Lunch on Trial") and the Appendix ("From the *British Journal on Addiction*") contrasts with the oneiric free associations and the verbal shorthand that constitute the bulk of the novel. In these central sections Burroughs achieves the prophetic and visionary tone that characterizes paranoid narratives. His visions are ultimately apocalyptic in nature, revealing the hallucinatory reality of the United States: the "basic American rottenness" that is revealed through the media and the dangers of bureaucracies, which are like cancer or viruses (134-5).

*Gravity's Rainbow* could be labeled "the paranoid's encyclopedia." There is no need to recur to the works of psychoanalysis when discussing this psychosis in Pynchon's novel. The novel itself contains its definition. It also contains a myriad of digressions about varieties of paranoia, paranoid symptoms, "Paranoid Systems of History," and even "Proverbs for Paranoids." Conspiracy theories are represented through allusions to "the Firm," "the Bukharin conspiracy," "the Father-conspiracy," "the teletype plot," "the Masonic plot," "the chemical cartel," "the Rocket-cartel," "the international light-bulb cartel," and "the Meat Cartel."

The structure of the novel demonstrates an increasing concern with paranoia. In one of the last sections we encounter a clarifying definition of this phenomenon. Paranoia means "the onset, the leading edge, of the discovery that *everything is connected*" (703). It is no "coincidence" that this definition is given so late, since its role is really to confirm what the reader has already been discovering throughout the reading. Nevertheless, it is always difficult to determine the limits of coincidence and causality in a work which deliberately subverts them. As a matter of fact, the events in the novel can be explained causally

(history as an actual massive conspiracy) or coincidentally (history as the result of chance). Both positions had already been essayed by Pynchon himself in *V.*, where Stencil and Benny Profane respectively embodied the desperate search for patterns and the realization that everything is an accident. Pynchon subscribes to each of these conceptions in the two ambits of the novel: the System (where everything is fixed) and the Zone (where everything floats adrift). The two possibilities are contemplated within the scope of paranoia (and this is something that could be ironically considered as Pynchon's contribution to the psychoanalytic establishment). Apart from the general sense of paranoia as a non-marked term referring to pervasive connectedness, we are given definitions for two other varieties: "creative paranoia" as the systematic development of a "We-system" as opposed to a "They-system" (638), and "anti-paranoia" which means that "nothing is connected to anything, a condition not many of us can bear for long" (434).

The most important elements in *Gravity's Rainbow* have their counterpart; every definition holds its counter-definition, and for every question the novel offers two alternative and contradictory answers. Pynchon's book recalls the "ideal book" of Borges's *Tlön*, where "every book that does not contain its counterbook is considered incomplete" (28). Pynchon juxtaposes all imaginable varieties of antitheses in terms of plot, characterization and imagery. In fact; the novel's title itself reveals the novel's schizophrenic nature: gravity and rainbow are antithetic phenomena.

Metaphor (the projection of analogies and differences) is the major rhetorical figure that provides the key to an understanding of Pynchon's style. Facing the "breakdown of the signifying chain" (Jameson 26) and the overabundance of signifiers, which are characteristic of the postmodern culture, the artist—like the paranoid—needs to project meaning. Thus, the paranoid's meaning production attempts to work as a compensatory force in a world where representation itself and simulacra are the new area of commodification in multinational capitalism.

Nonetheless, this is not a new phenomenon. What is notable is that in the postmodern US it has been accelerated. In fact, the privileged position that paranoia seems to hold in the American mind has strong historical roots in the Puritan imagination. Pynchon is aware of this fact, and within the novel he provides a network of connections (one more among the hundreds) between conspiracy theory and Puritan theology. Scott Sanders has traced these sources, summarizing the analogues between Pynchon and Puritanism in this way: paranoia=faiht; cosmic conspiracy=God's plan; Gravity=God's will; membership in the Firm=election; exclusion from conspiracy=preterition; multiple narrative patterns=typology; remote control=grace; binary vision=theism/atheism; decadence of history=depravity of man; paranoid self-reference=personal salvation; the Zero=Last Judgment (154). According to the points made by Sanders, the Puritan mind is still alive in new forms. Modern North America looks for new hypotheses that could explain life as the product of a remote control, placing the individual within a plot whose ultimate ramifications are unattainable. Paranoia offers a valid alternative to make creation intelligible again. The paranoid mind sees the world as being organized by dark figures whose powers approach omniscience and omnipresence. It replaces the divine plan with a demonic one (Sanders 139-140).

Following the above-mentioned dynamics of binary oppositions, the book dramatizes two assemblies and disassemblies: the rocket's and Slothrop's, the main character. In the same way the book is assembled and disassembled as we try to read it. As Tanner has pointed out, "reading itself thus becomes a paranoid activity" that is constantly frustrated. The reader has the feeling that he will never achieve a unitary reading, that he will never be able to frame the book (82). *Gravity's Rainbow* both invites and forbids interpretation. Like

the characters, we fluctuate between the system and the zone, paranoia and antiparanoia. The novel warns about the impossibility of being reduced to a single meaning. Thus our reading needs to be both paranoid and anti-paranoid; registering order and disorder, determinacy and indeterminacy, plots and chance. *Gravity's Rainbow* illustrates how those narratives that pretend to gather together fragments and images become increasingly difficult and finally impossible. We are permanently deprived of any sense, without allowing us the rest and assertiveness that any complete narrative brings.

The metaphor of the universe as a theater frames the novel. While the action begins with the evacuation of London during the Second World War under the threat of German rockets, it ends in a theater where the audience—which includes us, the readers—finds itself under the threat of another projectile on the verge of exploding. The conclusion is open-ended. The novel's ambiguity resists closure and, thus, activates the reader's paranoid tendency to seek "other orders behind the visible," while it refuses to predestine his/her response. As Frank Kermode points out, paranoia is "the normal hermeneutic activity in disease" (166). Since the novel justifies paranoid thinking at all different levels (characters, structure, and response), it succeeds in "depathologizing the paranoid structure of thought" (Bersani 101).

In both *Naked Lunch* and *Gravity's Rainbow* the paranoid style of the novels struggles against the impositions of a closed order. Yet their transgressions go beyond the challenge to the literary establishment. The world is contemplated as a conspiracy that must be revealed and destroyed. On a superficial level, Burroughs's Factualists (or the Nova Police in later novels) and Pynchon's Counter-force are two subversive agencies that undermine conspiracies *within* the novel. On a deeper level, *Naked Lunch* and *Gravity's Rainbow* strive to undo postmodernism homeopathically using the methods of postmodernism itself (Kellner 59). These two novels do not simply provide another example of postmodernist schizophrenia: they employ schizophrenia and paranoia in order to disclose and transgress the cultural logic of contemporary US society.

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NOR SHALL DIAMOND DIE:  
AMERICAN STUDIES  
IN HONOUR OF JAVIER COY

Carme Manuel and Paul Scott Derrick, eds.

Biblioteca Javier Coy d'estudis nord-americans

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Universitat de València

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*Nor Shall Diamond Die: American Studies in Honour of Javier Coy*

1ª edición de 2003

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ISBN: 84-370-5531-8  
Depósito legal: V. 1.132-2003

Edita: Departament de Filologia Anglesa i Alemanya  
Universitat de València

Imprime: Artes Gráficas Soler, S. L. – La Olivereta, 28 – 46018 VALÈNCIA