

# The Jack-in-the-Box Effect in DeLillo's *Libra*

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The assassination of President John F. Kennedy while riding in an open motorcade through the streets of Dallas, Texas on November 22, 1963 provided a shock to America the reverberations of which continue to be felt today. Don DeLillo took up this event in his historical “fiction”<sup>1</sup> novel *Libra* in such a way as to renew the experience. This paper will explore how DeLillo effectively re-packed the event in order to communicate a semblance of the shock and confusion at that period of time. This exploration will include the methods and techniques that DeLillo used to bring about this re-compressing of that event from which an overwhelming abundance of material “evidence,” hypotheses, and explanations have flourished.

In order to illustrate this compression-to-explosion process, the image of a Jack-in-the-box might be useful because of the rather “fortuitous” number of “Jacks” that are involved in the Kennedy assassination event—especially John F. Kennedy (known as “Jack” to family and friends) who was ostensibly killed by Oswald. Moreover, Jack Ruby was the “Jack” that killed Oswald soon after. Both of those killings were sudden, shocking onslaughts, with Ruby’s attack being very much like a “Jack” springing forth from the packed crowd. Furthermore, DeLillo’s introduction and manipulation of “box” metaphors permeate the text and add considerable weight and force to the power of that image—with the final “box” being the one that a person is buried in.

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<sup>1</sup> This is, of course, “fiction” though it does offer interesting possibilities concerning the real event, i.e. the Kennedy assassination. Nevertheless, DeLillo’s usage of these historical characters is quite compelling.

Obviously, one trouble with the Jack-in-the-box image is that the Jack-in-the-box is a child's toy that is indeed surprising but inherently harmless. However, the Jack-in-the-box image that DeLillo develops in *Libra* is a ferocious instrument of death that springs out of hiding to surprise and kill the target without mercy.

A second problem with the Jack-in-the-box image is that the "Jack" (i.e. Jack Kennedy: killed by Oswald, or Jack Ruby: the killer of Oswald) is not necessarily the killer. However, this inherent irony does not negate the value of the image; rather, it enhances it because DeLillo carefully prepares us for that switch in the Kennedy plot from harmless miss (with the intention of "waking Kennedy up" so that he would order a large-scale reprisal upon Castro's communist regime in Cuba), to a lethal assault with the same intention but which was not undertaken by Lyndon Baines Johnson when he became the new president.

The first of these two important turning points sets up the basic Jack-in-the-box: Jack Kennedy in the open car<sup>2</sup> showing his leadership and courage as he "popped up" in Dallas—a Southern city that was very much against Kennedy's allowance of the Communist regime that had taken over Cuba. The second turning point ironized it as he was shot and killed in his open "box." This additional lethal irony added power to the event and made the shock incredibly profound.

There were three fundamental structural aspects to this deadly Jack-in-the-box. The first was the box with its suppressed Jack, while the second was setting the "device" in motion by winding it up and letting it go. The third, of course, was the moment when the "Jack" popped out in surprise. And then came the unexpected fourth aspect when someone then killed the "Jack" that had just popped out.

Time and space were important features of the pressurization and release

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<sup>2</sup> That is, there was no roof.

of the “Jack” from the box, and DeLillo was masterful in the way he structured his novel to maximize the effect. In Jack Kennedy’s case, his assassination brought the United States together in an unexpected way, and yet it also helped cement Fidel Castro in his communist regime.

Because of the complexity of surprise that was involved, DeLillo did not plot *Libra* in a standard way, but rather established two threads in alternating chapters. One thread covered the life of Oswald from his early teens to his death at age 24 (a range of roughly 12 years). These chapters were titled by the place names of where Lee Oswald was living.

The other thread covered the plotters: three disgruntled former CIA agents<sup>2</sup> who wanted to force President Kennedy to invade Cuba. This thread had a range that began in the second chapter on April 17, 1963 and explicitly joined Lee’s thread in 22 November. However, it should be said that the threads might have joined up during his last stay in New Orleans (i.e. the chapter “In New Orleans” in the second half of the book) when Oswald got involved with Dave Ferrie again. During that time the two different threads got close enough for “Leon” to join in the shooting practice in the woods outside of New Orleans. “Leon” was a false name used by Lee but was not explained as such, which could indicate a closing time difference.

These “plotter” chapters are titled by the particular date within the months’ long progression in the plot to get rid of Kennedy for not trying to retake Cuba. These chapters thus inform the reader of the progress being made in the former agents’ attempt to change President Kennedy’s current acceptance of the status quo, or simply to get rid of him so that a more aggressive president could take his place and fix that “problem.”

The rogue CIA agents’ idea was first considered on April 17, 1963. That particular thread running through the novel covers about seven months<sup>3</sup>, and

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<sup>3</sup> From April 17 to November 25, 1963.

it was developed by three agents to force or trick the American government into launching an assault on Cuba in order to turn Cuba into a democracy again. The plan moved inexorably forward until it reached its deadly culmination and aftermath. Each of the two main threads (Oswald's life and the ex-CIA plotters' progress) was set in a different time period and in different places but both inexorably converged for that fateful day in November.

There was also a third minor thread that was set 15 years after the assassination, and it described the attempt by Nicholas Branch, the curator in charge of the assassination archive, to try to sort out an ever-growing deluge of information concerning that tragic event. He acted as a kind of Sisyphus attempting to sort through the ever-growing mountain of details concerning the event in order to make sense of what took place and why.

Naturally, *Libra* opened with the Oswald thread (or vector) in the chapter entitled "In the Bronx." Though the exact date was not given, it can be surmised by checking Oswald's biographical data against the details found in this chapter. With that in mind, this particular ride on the New York subway would had to have occurred in 1952 or 1953 when he was about 13 years old (which was about 11 years before the assassination). That meant that this vector was about 11 years long with a pace that gathered speed until that terribly brilliant conjoining of the two vectors in the "light and heat" of that tragic 6.9 seconds in Dealy Plaza in Texas.

In this first chapter, an unnamed boy (identified three pages later simply as "Lee") was riding in a subway in New York just to experience the violent rush of power and speed (which proved to be an excellent metaphor for the fast, violent life that he would be carried through until his death at the age of 24). In fact, though, much of this introduction of the main character of the novel was relatively sketchy, but DeLillo did show the boy alone and out of place because he had just moved to New York from the deep South.

Lee quickly became a target because he was different (especially with his Southern drawl), new to New York, and alone. He had to continually fight to survive. Because he wasn't accepted, he often skipped school, and he had no real friends. When he tried to defend a boy who was being bullied, even that bullied boy joined the pack to pick on the outsider, Lee. He was an isolated target in an unescapable "box."

The subway scene was particularly effective in setting up several interconnected motifs. One, of course, was that of the closed space—a kind of box. This "box" (the subway car) had several characteristics that could be viewed as early indicators of his final situation in which he, himself, became the victim of another Jack<sup>4</sup>. Most importantly, though, was the isolation he felt as he watched the people standing on the platform as the train rushed in, stopped, and then took those people to their various destinations, where they got off the train with a purpose in mind. Lee lacked purpose because he was isolated and friendless, thus leaving him to simply observe the life that flowed around him.

However, since he had no real purpose in riding the subway except to experience this underground "adventure," he generally just pressed his face against the window and looked forward through a pane of glass at the very front of the subway in order to experience this new way of looking at the world. In that way, he was separated from everyone by a wall of clear glass that he could see through but that others didn't seem to notice him through:

"He liked to stand at the front of the first car, hands flat against the glass. The train smashed through the dark. People stood on local platforms staring nowhere. A look they'd been practicing for years. He kind of wondered, speeding past, who they really were...They went so fast sometimes he thought they were on the edge of no-control. The noise was pitched to a level of pain he absorbed as a personal test...It did

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<sup>4</sup> i.e., Jack Ruby

not seem odd to him that the subway held more compelling things than the famous city above. There was nothing important out there, in the broad afternoon, that he could not find in purer form in these tunnels beneath the streets.” L,p3-4

The second chapter “17 April” started with the overview from Nicholas Branch in his “book-filled room” as he gathered material in 1988, some 25 years after the event. His room contained a mountain of information that only grew larger and gathered faster. Thus, Branch continually moved further away from the possibility of ever controlling and/or understanding that ever-growing mountain of information.<sup>5</sup>

After that “future” perspective that indicated the impossibility of final closure, the chapter settled back into the initial stages of the second vector noted by Branch that began on that first day: April 17, 1963. This vector covered seven months and about ten days, until the two vectors powerfully joined together offering a more complete focus on the participants involved, the event itself, and its aftermath.

April 17 was the day when the idea of mounting an attack on the president was thought up by Walter “Win” Everett, Jr., and then shared with two co-conspirators, Laurence Parmenter and T.J. Mackey, with the latter co-opting the plot later and transforming it into its final deadly form.<sup>6</sup> This was the vector that will ultimately empower the Oswald vector with energy, means, and then the opportunity for Oswald himself to “pop” from his “box” and enter the flow of history with fatal surprise.

All three of these co-conspirators (i.e., Everett, Parmenter, and Mackey) had worked together in the CIA in the attempt to topple the communist

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<sup>5</sup> Branch’s room has a quickly growing mountain of information concerning the assassination that he cannot keep up with.

<sup>6</sup> They switch the purpose of the assault from one of scaring President Kennedy into action to the actual killing of the him.

regime that Castro had established in Cuba. They shared the experience of the failed invasion at the Bay of Pigs, and this terrible failure caused them to be cut out of any further action concerning Cuba, or the Soviet Union, for that matter. However, they remained supremely interested in the “cause” (i.e., the attempt to bring American Democracy back to Cuba), and so they gathered together to discuss possible alternative actions in an attempt to recover their self esteem as well as their honor and reputation.

All three of them were in Everett's car in the afternoon of April 17 when Win shared his idea.<sup>7</sup> First, he talked about the power of secrets and how they sustained identity and self-awareness, then he stated, “We need an event that will excite and shock the exile community (i.e. the Cubans that were able to escape the takeover by Fidel Castro), the whole country...We want to set up an event that will make it appear they have struck at the heart of our government...This is the idea I've always wanted...It's the high risk we need...We need an electrifying event...We want to set up an attempt on the life of the President...This plan speaks to something deep inside me. It has a powerful logic.”

“Then Parmenter said dryly, “We couldn't hit Castro. So let's hit Kennedy...”

““But we don't hit Kennedy. We miss him,” Win said.”” p27-28

In this way, Win was making this idea a scare tactic in order to provoke a war response. This “surprise” was being plotted in secrecy in a small, private space in a car that was isolated—hidden from onlookers outside. Indeed, it was a metaphorical box that would unleash a surprise in order to shock and motivate. But the surprise was supposed to scare rather than harm, though, ironically, the result was ultimately meant to instigate a lethal military assault on the communist regime in Cuba.

Generally, as Oswald moved through his adolescence, he was forced to live

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<sup>7</sup> Win's idea was simply to scare Kennedy into action.

in small, old cramped apartments with his mom as they moved from place to place because his mom had to constantly settle for short-term low-paying jobs. Lee was almost always left alone, isolated, because the two of them continually had to move to another “box” (another old cramped apartment) in order for his mom to support the two of them. He also stayed inside himself—the ultimate box—because he had difficulty communicating with others due to his constant outsider status as well as his own physical limitations and frustrations brought about by his obvious intelligence that was undercut by dyslexia.

Thus, this third chapter in the book weaved back to Oswald (with his second chapter in the place vector “In New Orleans”). This was his first of two visits to New Orleans (the crucial second visit would occur in the second half of the book). This first stay in New Orleans was centered on his life when he was 15 years old about two years after that New York experience. At this time Lee was clearly becoming more sensitive to racial as well as other social injustices that were imbedded in the American capitalistic society—especially in the South.

This had also energized Lee’s growing fascination with the Russian Revolution as an historical trend. His sense of History and his desire to become a part of a greater historical movement was becoming quite strong because it offered a release from the loneliness he felt from the isolated and demeaning position that he found himself in. He had become aware that he was trapped within an unconscionably oppressive American social system. The psychological development that DeLillo was building here is important because DeLillo had to offer a character that could be crammed into a “box,” be put under extreme pressure and then be manipulated into exploding forth at just the proper time as part of a plot.

A good example of this development can be found on p41 where DeLillo described Lee’s room (part of the “cramped spaces” mentioned on p35) as filled with Marxist books that “were private, like something you find and



hide, some lucky piece that contains the secret of who you are. The books themselves were secret. Forbidden and hard to read. .... He (i.e., Lee) saw himself as part of something vast and sweeping. He was the product of a sweeping history...locked into a process, a system of money and property that diminished their human worth every day, as if by scientific law. The books made him part of something. ...He would need a secret name." And then DeLillo added that opposing aspect of his personality: "In the meantime he read his brother's Marine Corps manual, to prepare for the day when he would enlist." (p41)

Just after that description, DeLillo picked up the narrative again as Lee joined his friend Robert Sproul on a visit to David Ferrie in order to buy a rifle that they later discovered to be broken. In this first clear<sup>8</sup> meeting with Ferrie who would later become an important contact in the Kennedy plot, Lee acquired his first gun—a rifle. Though the rifle proved to be unworkable, the meeting itself set in motion a relationship that would entwine Lee inextricably in the assassination plot.

Meanwhile, trapped in his small space at home and unable to effectively step out into the "flow of history," Lee lived through his books and his imagination. "Nobody knew what he knew. The whirl of time, the true life inside him. This was his leverage, his only control. ... He lay near sleep, falling into reverie, the powerful world of Oswald-hero, guns flashing in the dark. The reverie of control, perfection of rage, perfection of desire, the fantasy of night...like men on movie posters. The dark had a power [the secret in the box] ...Always the men appeared...then the rifle in his hands... the idea of shooting for the gut, to draw out the dying." (p46) He devised secret names, and he fantasized about sex. And, he tried to get his rifle to fire, but he failed and ended up selling the gun to his older brother for much

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<sup>8</sup> As a younger boy, Lee had also been in on one or two of his flights with young boys. Ferrie didn't recognize him because there were other boys ahead of him.

less than he bought it for. He was an intelligent person filled with dreams, but Lee's reality kept delivering failure.

In the next chapter, the conspiracy vector moved nine days from April 17 to April 26, 1963 (i.e., "26 April"). which covered the shaping of the plot and the gathering and organization of various pieces to be used as "evidence" of an attacker. This "evidence" was termed "pocket litter," by Win Everett. This "pocket litter" included the possibility of several shooters, including one fall guy: "one slightly clearer image, perhaps abandoned in his sniper's perch to find his own way out, to be trailed, found, possibly killed by the Secret Service, FBI or local police. ... This kind of man, a marksman, near anonymous, with minimal known history, the kind of man who surfaces in murky places, disappears, is arrested for some violent act, is released to drift again, to surface, to disappear" (p50-51), and a trail of documents that would allow the law enforcement officers to trace him back to Cuba.

In this chapter, David Ferrie joined the plot; and, of course, from the growing biography of Oswald and his just exposed early connection to Ferrie, guns, as well as Oswald's dissatisfaction with the American social structure, it was easy to see how the vectors were already offering the possibility of some "fortuitous" connections from Ferrie's past relationship with boys.<sup>9</sup>

Lee's third chapter "In Atsugi," the longest chapter covering 37 pages, depicted Lee's relatively short military service. This marked a turning point in Lee's life when he was forcibly taught hard lessons about the nature of military service and the complete obedience that was expected. He was still only 17 when he joined the United States Marine Corps because that was the military branch that his older brother had served in, and because he considered the Marines to be the perfect form of military service that

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<sup>9</sup> Ferrie had a reputation of molesting boys.

mirrored his desire for dedication and self-sacrifice for the greater good.

However, this was also a paradoxical choice because so much of his personal politics were caught up in the social issues of equality and poverty, which had led him to study and embrace socialistic principles to the point of being a self-labeled communist. This was, perhaps, one of DeLillo's clearest markings of Oswald's "Libra" quality: A character balanced between two extremes. It created Lee's sense of isolation, being not fully "in" either camp, that further set up barriers that kept him isolated in a self-created box.

Overall, the chapter began and ended with an image of a U-2 flight: First, this chapter opened with a successful landing of the U-2; however, the chapter finished with an image of a plane being shot down, and the pilot parachuting into enemy territory rather than taking the poison he was given to keep him from being taken alive.

In that first paragraph that U-2 was not immediately identified because it was a special plane (later identified as a top-secret U-2) that several unidentified men were watching. One of those Marines was pointed out: "A man stood outside the radar bubble watching with folded arms." Two other men, also unidentified, paused to watch the landing of the plane. A conversation started between the two, though the first speaker remained unidentified while the second speaker was identified as Heindel. The conversation went back and forth five times before the reader was given the probable name of the first speaker, Reitmeyer, which was then clearly identified in the paragraph during several back-and forth exchanges.

Just after Reitmeyer was clearly identified, the reader finally is given Ozzie/Oswald as one of the fellow Marines—probably<sup>10</sup> the first one who was standing "outside the radar bubble watching with folded arms."

This was interesting on several levels: First, the U-2 was, indeed, a spy

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<sup>10</sup> It is not clear which person he is. The author often leaves the chapter openings unclear for the reader. Oswald is a person that is often passed over.

plane that functioned at the very boundary of airplane flight. Its cameras provided photographic glimpses—insight, if you will—behind the closed borders and into the secretive heart of the Communist system in the USSR—especially concerning its ability to attack and defend.

It was also not too far from that historical moment in the Cold War when Francis Gary Powers was shot down flying his U-2 over The Soviet Union and then allowed himself to be captured alive, which gave the Soviets an opportunity to interrogate him concerning his purpose as well as the mechanics of the new high-flying spy-plane.

Besides the cockpit of the U-2 plane, there were several other rooms or boxes in this chapter that further defined the nature of Oswald's inexorable movement toward his shattering "6.7 seconds of heat and light" that await in Dallas. These included the "bubble he (i.e., Oswald) worked in a hot glow" (p.86), the room where Oswald lost his virginity, the box containing the gun he received that he shot himself with in an attempt to escape the ship duty that would remove him from his woman; and finally, his illicit study of the Russian language as well as the Russian style of Communism. Almost all of his study took place in small, closed rooms where he crammed his head with information (and where he also got a case of the clap from the prostitutes that were close at hand).

One "box" also included the mess hall where John Wayne, the movie hero, visited the soldiers to boost morale while Lee looked on bemused by the surreal conjunction of a real movie "hero" —a physical human being—within easy sight and almost within reach...

However, the defining "box" of this particular chapter had to be the brig with its confining rules and cells, one cell of which Oswald was thrown into for "damaging Military property," i.e., himself, when he shot himself in the arm (p.92-93). It was here where he was forced to learn how to survive in the

box.<sup>11</sup>

In the brig he was subjected to severe punishment for breaking extremely rigid rules and restrictions. At times the punishment he had to endure stoically was random, irrational, and sadistic. But he learned to cope and even thrive to a degree under those brutal Marine strictures. He found his place and accepted it.

At this point, DeLillo showed that Oswald had become a perfect tool for whatever machinations lay ahead. This, indeed, was a cruel yet crucial chapter in the making of a proper “Jack” to be taken up by Win Everett and placed in the heart of the secret plan in which the “Jack” would ultimately be in his “box” in the book depository ready to pop out at the right time to shock the nation and the government into action.

The two 1963 conspiracy vector chapters “20 May” and “19 June” mark the introduction of the 23-year-old Oswald into the plot. He had been noticed and recommended as a person who fitted the profile for the role that Win had in mind. Of course, Ferrie was instrumental as the contact person due to his connection already outlined in the Oswald vector when Lee was 15 in the “In New Orleans” chapter mentioned earlier.

Between these two 1963 conspiracy vector chapters is an Oswald vector chapter that covered his detachment from the Marines in 1959 and his subsequent further detachment from his mother and family as he decided to defect to the Soviet Union.<sup>12</sup> At that time, he was 19 years old and had removed himself from both his family and his culture. He had taken on new names like “Hidell” as he constructed an extremely isolated character that had withdrawn into its own dark and secret world—his personal box. In this

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<sup>11</sup> The “box” here was a very strict Marine prison cell that had some sadistic guards in control.

<sup>12</sup> He did this illegally in terms of the USA as well as with The Soviet Union.

chapter even the authorial voice becomes impersonal, distant, and objective. Taking these three chapters together<sup>13</sup>, it was clear that the conspiracy plot vector was looking to incorporate a person like Oswald into its web, while the reader can see him actively detaching himself from the American culture belief system and actually taking real steps to join the Communist system.

This movement was cleverly structured by DeLillo in an ironically interesting way as he was able to show Oswald's movement in the past: leaving America in order to embrace a completely opposite way of life (i.e. the Communism of the Soviet Union), and then he juxtaposed it with Oswald's spring/summer of 1963 movements after his return to the USA as he was being drawn into the plot to assassinate the president because he was the perfectly-formed type: isolated, repressed, dissatisfied, without a strong allegiance to anyone or anything except a self-conceived sense of justice and fair play. And his personal history provided him with the proper "credentials."

Oswald's stay in the Soviet Union was covered in the chapters "In Moscow" and "In Minsk." This experience further defined the walls of his box, his alienation from normal, casual society, and defined his limitations in terms of choice. The experience and its failure also intensified his personal repression.

"In Moscow": "He was a man in history now." (Lee p.149). Both of Lee's stays, first in Moscow and later in Minsk, were marked by his further isolation as well as a mutual rejection of and by the common social network in Soviet society—despite his later marriage to Marina.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Oswald definitely met the criteria that the conspirators were looking for.

<sup>14</sup> Marina was always outgoing and popular, which was just the opposite of Lee. Even after their marriage, she remained quite popular (both in The Soviet Union as well as in the United States) though her husband (Lee) was never able to connect with people in a social way in either country.

Perhaps the most defining situation in Moscow was Lee's confinement to a room for his interrogation stemming from his illegal entry into the Soviet Union in order to defect. Oswald was suspected of being a false defector in order to spy on the inner workings of the Soviet system. Since the US did indeed have a "false-defector" program to do just that, the suspicion was warranted. This created a distance between Lee and the Soviet officials that proved to be impossible to bridge. Even in the society that Lee thought to be the ideal expression of equality and shared humanity, Lee was never fully embraced as a fellow citizen.

Neither could the ordinary Russian people understand him because they could not imagine someone giving up the rich opportunities and material choices that the West had to offer. The Russian people that he worked with simply thought he was crazy. Obviously, this led to further personal isolation.

At one point during the period of time that he was undergoing his interrogation ("In Moscow"), he was "alone" in his small room and attempted suicide. DeLillo presented the event in such a way that the attempt was slowly revealed to be perhaps a fake attempt in order to effect change and/or sympathy. Oswald knew that he was being watched by hidden cameras, and that he would be saved before he could bleed out from the cuts he inflicted on his arm. His interrogators also suspected the falsity of the attempt by linking it to his shooting himself in the arm when he was with the Marines in Atsugi.

The chapter delineating Oswald's stay in Minsk marked the end of the first half of *Libra* (Part I). This chapter found Oswald isolated from others even as he worked alongside them in a Soviet Union factory. He was always an outsider and never accepted as an equal group member. The primary reason for this was that he thought himself exceptional, different—aware of his place in history. He thought himself better than the others, with a better sense of place in the greater Communist movement. However, that only

alienated him from the ordinary people who labored, socialized with each other as ordinary human beings, and enjoyed the fruits of their labor without thought for any “grand plan.” They thought Oswald to be foreign, strange, and a bit off. They couldn’t understand why he would give up the rich, warm and diverse culture of America for the cold, bland sameness of Soviet Russia.

This was also the place where he found Marina—a young woman who lived in that area and who became attracted to him. Naturally, a major factor in Marina’s attraction to him was the idea of the change and color in her life that he would bring, and they eventually got married. However, Oswald still generally held himself back from the natural social camaraderie of his coworkers and held tight to his exceptionalism.

Moreover, he started to take notes, thought of himself as a kind of “false defector,” and started to write a book called “The Kollektive” exposing the defects of the Soviet system. In this way he again placed himself, like that natural Libran, on that border between two opposing ideologies (i.e., the scales of Libra) and neither side believed him to be theirs. This was the isolated “box” he constantly placed himself in.

It was also in this chapter that Oswald was taken to Moscow in order to see and comment on the captured U2 pilot, Francis Gary Powers. Powers was confined to a cell and interrogated by Communist officials, while Oswald was asked to comment on the veracity of his statements.<sup>15</sup> Oswald felt a kinship with the imprisoned pilot. This kinship operated on both physical and imagistic levels, as it harkened back to the Atsugi chapter in which Oswald was held in a small cell. It also picked up on the image of the boundary travelling plane that was introduced at the beginning of the chapter and of its destruction resulting in the capture of the pilot at the end.

Part II began with the conspiracy vector in summer “15 July.” At this time

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<sup>15</sup> Of course, Oswald found Powers to be honest.



in 1963, Lee had been noticed, approached and was being insinuated into the workings of the plot without anything being overtly said. The Oswald life vector was moving more quickly than the conspiracy vector, of course, and in the chapter that immediately followed, we could find Oswald in Texas ("In Fort Worth") during the summer of 1962, which was very close to Dallas where the assassination would ultimately take place.

Therefore, the time and space differential between these two first chapters of Part II showed that the two vectors were closing rapidly as the plot of the novel was compressing towards its fateful singularity on November 22, 1963: the day when that pressurized confinement would, indeed, explode in shocking and deadly force during "Six point nine seconds of heat and light."<sup>16</sup>

During this period of time (i.e., "In Fort Worth" and later "In Dallas") in about July-August of 1962, which was still a bit more than a year from the assassination, Oswald had just returned from the Soviet Union disillusioned, and so he attempted to settle down with his family in the United States. Unfortunately, his sense of unappreciated superiority kept him from becoming integrated into society, even though his Russian wife adapted to it apparently rather well and rather quickly. That ability that she had to meet people and befriend them was just the opposite of Lee who quickly felt isolated. This caused him to lash out at Marina by hitting her.

Lee had difficulty making friends as an adult because he had never learned how to do it when he was a child. This inability was based on his own complex psychology—including his ambivalence and his tendency to hide his true feelings. These were aspects that others were easily able to recognize in him and manipulate for their own purposes. In a way, he was in a box of his own making—perhaps that being a part of his *Libra* character.

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<sup>16</sup> The length of time that the bullets were being fired.

Thus, Lee moved to Dallas in October of 1962, and was living separated from his wife and child who had remained in Fort Worth. While he was doing his laundry one night at a laundromat, Lee ran into a former Marine from Japan, Bobby Dupard, whom he had shared a cell with while in the brig. This meeting ultimately led to “an idea” which was to “put a bullet in General Walker’s head.”<sup>17</sup>

Just after that suggestion, there was a break in the text, and then suddenly we found that Marina returned with a baby in her arms (“little June”), which indicated that she had returned to Lee in Dallas at the end of January 1963. This meant that the two threads were now within about eight months of each other.

A few pages later on March 12, Lee bought an Italian rifle (the Mannlicher-Carcano) in order to kill General Walker (with help from Bobby Dupard). When he took his shot at night, Oswald grazed him but did not kill him. Though Oswald failed in this attempt, he had suddenly become a possible person-of-interest for the rogue CIA operatives who were looking for a “fall-guy” for the attack on Kennedy that was meant to force Kennedy to attack Cuba. Lee Harvey Oswald had now clearly entered the picture.

The chapter “6 September” in the conspiracy thread followed up on the “fall-guy” possibility in an unobtrusive way. The title of that chapter indicated that it was only about six months ahead of the previous chapter in the Oswald thread. The reader also discovered that the setting was “in the bayous west of New Orleans” (thus not in Texas). Moreover, gunfire could be heard as three men practiced. One was Ferrie, the second was a Cuban called Raymo, and the third was “named Leon.”

Of course, “Leon” was actually Lee Harvey Oswald who clearly had now

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<sup>17</sup> This was meant to be revenge for the brutal experience that Dupard and Oswald experienced while in the brig.

joined the group of possible shooters of Kennedy when Kennedy finally took his tour in Dallas. However, the usage of the name "Leon" instead of "Lee" could, indeed, indicate a certain reluctance (or at least a certain anonymity), as well as some masking and/or confusion for the reader at this point.

"In New Orleans" began with an unnamed person ("he") visiting "his father's grave." The reader did learn that the person in the grave was a "man in a gray suit who tips his hat to women." However, the reader didn't learn who that visitor was until the fourth paragraph when we learn that it was Lee visiting his father's grave.

"In New Orleans" was perhaps the pivotal chapter in the novel. It brought the two threads closely together, and placed Lee in the leading position in the group of shooters.

Meanwhile, on his arrival to the city that he probably spent the most time in as he was growing up, he looked for family connections and jobs. He was not afraid to lie should an opportunity arise. And, that opportunity arose almost immediately when Oswald ran into David Ferrie (the Civil Air Patrol instructor) while Oswald was filling out a job application for Guy Banister.

This particular connection would ultimately bring Oswald into the plot to shoot President Kennedy. And by the end of this particular chapter, Lee Harvey Oswald would become the primary figure in the assassination, though he did try to find a way to escape.

This chapter also helped the reader to understand the process of how and why Lee was indeed the "Leon" who was taking "target practice" in the previous chapter.

Every chapter (especially the previous one: "In New Orleans") had been loaded with inter-connected references that bound the plot of the novel together, bound the assassination plot together, and bound Oswald tightly into that plot. However, the chapter entitled "25 September" intensified this

binding procedure even more. The first word of the chapter was "Lee" (p.340) as the reader finds him in Ferrie's room where Lee had gone to find some distance from the cascade of events that he had found himself in.

He told Ferrie that he intended to go to Mexico City (where he wanted to acquire the necessary papers to go to Cuba and thereby escape the ever-building plot). Instead, though, Ferrie worked to seduce him so that Lee would accept him as a sexual partner as well as accept his role in the developing assassination plot. Oswald passively surrendered on both counts.

The last word written by DeLillo describing this particular interaction was from a quoted remark by Ferrie as he commented on the hashish that he had seduced Lee into smoking as a way to lower Lee's resistance so that Lee would acquiesce on both of the other counts (which made three: smoking hashish, then sex, then assassination). That last word that Ferrie mentioned came at the end of three very short sentences just before the Jack Ruby section. Ferrie said that the word hashish was an "Interesting, interesting word. Arabic. It's the source of the word assassin." (p.342)

In the second part of this chapter, we find Jack Ruby and follow his meandering passage: leaving his apartment, visiting his strip club with his dogs, fraternizing with the police, all the while he was constantly popping pills, and incessantly talking on the phone as he struggled to keep his strip club business afloat. Finally, this chapter circled back to the conspiracy as Ferrie met with Banister and updated him on Lee's movements: he was dropped off in Houston and about to catch a bus for Mexico City.

The two vectors were inseparable as we find the next Lee chapter set in Mexico City. The plot, itself, was coming together, its focus was tightening and clarifying while it was also building in intensity. Previously, years (and then months and weeks) would separate the time between Lee chapters and conspiracy chapters, and now Lee had become a major part of the conspiracy, itself. He was still looking for a way to get out of it (i.e., escape to

Cuba via Mexico); however, using various means (including sex as well as flattery), Dave Ferrie made sure Lee would not be able to break away. Also, without telling Lee, Ferrie used the most effective means possible: he simply told the foreign countries that were involved (Mexico and Cuba) to not let him stay (or enter) their countries. Of course, Ferrie did not tell Lee about those efforts to keep him in line.

The chapter "In Mexico City" opened with another post card by Oswald—his idea of a glimpse into the "essence" of the city captured in the confined space of a small card. The words describing the city were paired opposites: "Ancient and modern" (relation to historical position), "Sprawling yet intimate" (spatial configuration), "A city of contrasts" (final generalization). These were directly followed by a self-reference to Oswald, himself: "Leon stands in his room..." (p.355) He had indeed, accepted his role.

"Leon," of course, was the name chosen by Oswald because it was a reference to Trotsky, who went to the U.S.A and then Mexico to escape the Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin. Trotsky was sentenced to death in 1936 in absentia and then assassinated in his home in Mexico City in 1940 (as a reference: Oswald was born in 1939 about a year earlier). With the words described on the postcard, Oswald was trying to connect himself with Leon Trotsky and his life as an exile in Mexico City. Unfortunately for Oswald, he was unable to get permission to travel to Cuba, and he soon ran out of time in Mexico City and (Trotsky-like) was forced to return to his home country.

That same first paragraph "In Mexico City" ended with Oswald connecting with Kennedy: "He [Oswald] enjoys foreign travel, just like the President" thus showing Lee's self-identification with the President. It had become an element that psychologically bound their futures together, at least in Oswald's mind. Yet, the vast difference between Kennedy and Oswald in both personal character as well as military experience and life situation (JFK was born in a very rich and successful family with lots of brothers and sisters each of whom went to the best school and university available) made

for a connection that could've been bridged only by a bullet.

In Trotsky's case, the bullet was "delivered" to Trotsky by the order of Stalin who held all the power in the Soviet Union at that time. However, in Oswald's case, Lee "delivered" the bullet(s) to President Kennedy simply because Lee could be manipulated into doing it by his "friends." Because Oswald lacked life-enhancing friends, and instead only had "friends" who wanted to use him for their destructive agenda of forcing President Kennedy (or his immediate successor if he were to die) to attack the newly created Communist Cuba, Oswald was pulled into their group and given a leading role in their enterprise. Naturally, Oswald ironically preferred Cuba's Communist system and was trying to go there, but he was rebuffed.

Oswald was being carefully played by the conspirators and so was forced to return. This brought him back to the place where he had been training for the attack on Kennedy, and his sense of isolation had become such a prominent fixture in his life that, indeed, he continued on the path to force a change in Kennedy's approach to Cuba. Oswald's "forced" return to the Texas/Louisiana area where he spent time preparing for action, ultimately set the scene for that fatal shot from the Texas Book Depository when the presidential motorcade carried President Kennedy into range of that sixth-floor window and Lee Harvey Oswald alone with his rifle.

The chapter "4 October" was the first part of a relatively long prelude to the assassination chapter that would come in the chapter after the next one (i.e. the relatively long "In Dallas"). After those two chapters, the story would then move into the climatic "22 November"—that day of infamy.

In "4 October", though, DeLillo delivered a relatively quiet chapter focused on some of the different family routines as various people readied for bed. The first part was focused primarily on Win's family as they bedded down for the night. Mary Frances and her husband Win chatted about the upcoming events, especially about President Kennedy's trip to Texas that

was published in the newspaper about a week before.

This was a family in which each had learned to keep secrets. The father, Win, had to because he was involved in a lot of top-secret government areas, and he also had been in on the beginnings of the now fast-approaching attack on President Kennedy. However, that particular plan was meant to be more of a scare tactic rather than an all-out assassination. So, even though his wife (Mary Frances) and daughter (Suzanne) did not know what was going to happen, they were aware of the stress that he was under, and so each did her own "top-secret" things to try to keep him safe without him knowing it.

Win was worried because he had indeed lost contact with one of the key members of the original plan to influence President Kennedy into taking a harder stand towards Cuba. Being left out of the loop like that scared him because he had thus lost complete control and even knowledge of any plans to force Kennedy into taking a much stronger stance against Cuba. Also, Win was aware that the current total silence could indicate that the planners might have decided to simply kill Kennedy and make him appear to be a "victim" of Castro sympathizers.

Moreover, Kennedy had already established his tour of various southern states including Florida, which was first, and it was done without exposing Kennedy to any danger. Kennedy then continued on his tour through Texas including "stops at Houston, San Antonio, Fort Worth, and with the final stop at Dallas." The last of which was to be in an open car. This information was all published in the newspaper. Win was worried indeed, but basically helpless because he was out of the loop.

There was a break in the chapter which then shifted to T-Jay Mackey and Raymo who were the main controllers of the actual assassination plan. They had decided to not attack President Kennedy in Miami but rather they decided to do it in Dallas, Texas. The reader also learned that Mackey and Raymo had lost track of Oswald, but were currently using their "own model Oswald," but they still figured that they would get the original back in time.

Finally, with the parents asleep, the chapter then shifted back to Suzanne who was trying to protect her “Little Figures” (a little clay Indian man and woman given to her by a friend as a birthday present). She liked to keep them safe until the time came when she might need them. And now was the time. This was because she was afraid “her mother and father were really somebody else.”

“In Dallas” is twenty-three pages long and in the place vector. It brings us back to the Oswald family that had settled down in Dallas. Marina had made a lot of good friends and was trying to pick up the English language, while some of her friends were trying to pick up Russian. Marina was also pregnant again.

The group of women that had become friends with Marina shared information about all the necessary stuff that Marina might need for settling in. They also were aware that the move to Dallas meant that Oswald would need a new job, and they all shared possible places that might be hiring. This, of course, led to a possible job at a book warehouse in downtown Dallas, which Oswald was then able to get.

On October 18, he was surprised by a birthday cake: He was then 24 years old. This chapter was loaded with coincidences, both in real life as well as on television, that Lee saw as significant to the plan that his assassination handlers had for him. It was as if he were destined to shoot the President. Oswald also discovered a strong possible motive for killing Kennedy: Shooting Kennedy might convince Castro to let him escape to Cuba and live in a true Communist country. At the same time, he also wrote to the Soviet embassy “and asked about Soviet entry visas”.

Meanwhile, Kennedy’s appearance in a motorcade in Miami was cancelled due to the developing threat there. It all pointed now towards Dallas.

Life, though, blossomed with Marina’s birth of Rachel, even as Lee went to a rally that had Edwin A. Walker as the main speaker. Walker was the man



Lee had taken a shot at and missed some time earlier. Though he considered shooting Walker as a way to attract the attention of Castro and thus be allowed to join the new Cuban revolution, he also realized that Walker was now a broken man and of little value. He had to set his sights higher in order to effect a possible change.

On Wednesday, November 20, David Ferrie surprised Lee as Lee was waiting for a bus, and Ferrie offered him a ride to the Book Depository. As Ferrie drove Lee to his job, Ferrie marveled at the opportunity that Lee was getting because the President of the United States would be passing unprotected under Lee's very window. It was an amazing coincidence, and Ferrie shared the idea that "there is no such thing as coincidence" in order to underscore the opportunity.

In life, this was indeed an incredible coincidence, and that fact made the "opportunity" impossible to resist.<sup>18</sup>

What happened next was unescapable. Chapter "22 November" is an absolute tour de force describing the assassination as well as the chaos that ensued. Indeed, the two vectors had coalesced into a single murderous surge focused on the assassination of President Jack Kennedy by Lee Harvey Oswald (as well as possibly others to ensure that the proper "Jack" was killed). The moment had come for Lee Harvey Oswald to unload his deadly surprise on the "Jack" in the car that had been happily surprising the crowds. Lee took his shots and then made an escape, though he was captured relatively soon.

And two days after that a different "Jack" suddenly popped out, and this time it was Jack Ruby who surprisingly sprung from a group of reporters and onlookers and shot Lee Harvey Oswald (who was already preparing for

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<sup>18</sup> This was/is exactly the type of coincidence that allows alternative scenarios to persist.

the defense he would never get a chance to present) and killed him.

A few days later Lee Harvey Oswald was placed in a coffin (a final box, if you will) and buried in a grave in Fort Worth's Shannon Rose Hill Burial Park. This box was (and still is) meant to keep that "Jack" in his place; however, at one time the grave was opened up and checked to see if the body was actually that of Lee Harvey Oswald, and it was, indeed.