'Like a bird caught in cobwebs': gender and genre in Anglophone conspiracy fiction, 1959-2003

Zita Babarczi

Submitted for the programme of study
Doctor of Philosophy, English Studies

July 2023
University of Stirling

UNIVERSITY *of* STIRLING

Abstract

This thesis examines the gendered dimensions of Anglophone, mainly American, conspiracy fiction in the period from the mid-twentieth-century to the beginning of the millennium. I posit that during this time, literary figurations of conspiracy in genre fiction are used to emplot gendered anxieties directly related to the political gains and losses of second-wave feminism. I trace the conspiratorial questioning, dissolution, and eventual reassertion of the patriarchal status quo through six novels and three genres: the Gothic novels of Ira Levin, the science fiction of Philip K. Dick, and the thrillers of Umberto Eco and Dan Brown.

Levin's fiction exemplifies white, middle-class American women's anxiety that their husbands' real allegiance may lie with patriarchy and not their marriage, literalising patriarchal power as a conspiracy. Dick's novels emplot the anxiety induced by rapidly changing masculine norms, imagining a conspiratorial will as the driving force behind these changes. Eco and Brown query conspiracy's viability to counteract the anxiety generated by the unmooring of gender roles, alighting on essentialist notions of femininity through which a new, updated patriarchy may be inaugurated.

All four authors use the conventions of their chosen genre to colour and modify the core plot element of conspiracy. The mechanics of these generic conventions will be considered in each chapter. I pay further consideration to postmodernism's impact on conspiracy fiction; in particular, the way in which the destabilisation of gender roles (the result of second-wave feminism) and the destabilisation of meaning (the result of postmodernity) becomes enmeshed in the American imagination. These novels depict the loss of traditional gender roles and the loss of faith in a knowable reality as functionally the same: a loss against which patriarchy reasserts itself via conspiratorial means. The politically, emotively, and generically heterogeneous expressions of patriarchy's floundering and reassertion, as it is found in the selected genre texts of mid-to-late twentieth century Anglophone conspiracy fiction, is the topic of this thesis.

Acknowledgements

Many people conspired to make this project possible.

For their generous funding, my thanks go to the Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland and its excellent team, world-class both in professionalism and in kindness.

I'm indebted to my supervisory team, Prof Christine Ferguson and Dr Timothy Jones, for their unerring guidance and immense patience whenever it was not heeded.

I'm grateful to the postgraduate cohort at Stirling for their boundless provision of friendship, coffee, sanity checks, communal grumbles, and pet-based distractions. Maike, Clare, Hanneke, Morven, Emma, Vicky: you made all the difference.

Special mention to Helen for gifting me the most hideous of wristwatches and with it, the conclusion of this thesis.

And finally, to my coterie of mostly-chosen, mostly-human family who kept me afloat during the bad times and cheered me on during the good times. Stephen, Dóra, Becca, and Meg: thank you.

Table of Contents

Introduction: from the devil to the divine

The 'Afterword' of Albert Pionke's *Plots of Opportunity* (2004) anticipates a major focal shift in *fin de siècle* conspiratorial literature.[1] Looking towards the twentieth century, Pionke suggests literature will use conspiracy to interrogate domesticity instead of democracy, writing that from the turn of the century the 'family, it seems, [becomes] the ultimate secret society.'[2] Pionke's claim anticipates the focus of *Like a Bird Caught in Cobwebs*, which examines how Anglophone genre fiction domesticates and genders conspiracy in the latter part of the twentieth century.

The following thesis aims to examine the specificities of conspiracy's domestication, foregrounding questions on what kind of domesticities are being emplotted and to whose benefit. *Like a Bird Caught in Cobwebs* argues that the gendered anxieties within and about domesticity and gendered performance are vital to the study of mid-to-late twentieth century American conspiracy fiction. The present thesis further argues that the coeval nature of gendered anxieties and conspiracy

---

[1] *Plots of Opportunity* argues that literary figurations of secret societies in nineteenth-century British fiction functioned as sites of negotiating concepts of citizenship and democracy.

[2] Albert Pionke, *Plots of Opportunity: Representing Conspiracy in Victorian England* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2004), p. 133.

fiction is especially pronounced in popular fiction, which this thesis centres through its examination of the Gothic, science fiction, and the thriller.

This thesis samples novels from forty-four years of mainly American genre fiction, amounting to a study of three genres, four authors, and six novels selected for their prominent use of conspiracy: the Gothic in Ira Levin's *Rosemary's Baby* (1967) and *The Stepford Wives* (1972); science fiction in Philip K. Dick's *Time Out of Joint* (1959) and *Ubik* (1969); and the thriller in Umberto Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum* (1988, transl. 1989) and Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* (2003). The texts are arranged primarily by their genres and secondarily by chronology, tracing the development of conspiracy fiction from the middle of the twentieth century to the beginning of the new millennium. Gender and genre are the dual foci of my investigation into these novels: gender for the novels' shared preoccupation with gender norms, and genre for giving shape to the gendered concerns binding the selected texts.

Gender becomes my main point of departure from Pionke's statement, as *Like a Bird Caught in Cobwebs* sees gendered anxiety as the common thread running through the chosen novels. While gendered concerns often play out in familial contexts in fiction, it is not only domesticity that the selected novels query but the validity and historical continuity of gender roles against the volatile historical backdrop of the sexual revolution and second-wave feminism in the United States. As such, conspiracy fiction of the American mid-century and beyond becomes the vehicle for foregrounding, containing, negotiating, and occasionally solving gendered anxieties that are characteristic of their time and place. I trace these conspiratorial channellings of gendered anxieties via genre fiction.

In addition to gender, Pionke's 'Afterword' anticipates the importance of genre as well in writing that the 'aura of unreality remains an enduring, if unwitting, legacy of the Victorians' myriad plots of opportunity'; a legacy which fostered 'a long-term fascination with secrets' well into the twentieth century.[3] Genre fiction is extremely pliable in incorporating fantastic elements into its many genres and traditions; as such, it proves to be an accommodating and versatile form for the unreality of conspiratorial plots. Beyond Pionke, it is Fredric Jameson's writing that encapsulates

---

[3] Pionke, p. 134.

best the importance and use of genre in this dissertation. In 'Philip K. Dick, In Memoriam', Jameson writes:

> It may be the very conventionality, the inauthenticity, the formal stereotyping of Science Fiction that gives it one single advantage over modernist high literature. The latter can show us everything about the individual psyche and its subjective experience and alienation, save the essential—the logic of stereotypes, reproductions and depersonalization in which the individual is held in our own time, 'like a bird caught in cobwebs.'[4]

'Like a bird caught in cobwebs'—a quote from *Ubik*—lends this thesis its title because it epitomises the productive tension between subjectivity and stereotypes, literary representation and historical truth, individuals and collectives; all queried by the conspiratorial plots of the novels examined in this thesis.

Jameson singles out science fiction as a privileged site for unearthing 'essential' truths about contemporary literature and culture. However, his observation is just as apt expanded to genre fiction as a whole; indeed, claims of conventionality and inauthenticity are often levelled against popular fiction as definitive features and markers of its artistic inferiority. This dissertation focuses precisely on these tropes and stereotypes of conspiracy fiction—not only their internal logic, in Jameson's words, but their many permutations, subversions, and appropriations within and across the three genres considered in this thesis—as they pertain to gender roles.

I read the gendered typology of the selected genre novels against the shifting political landscape of mid-to-late twentieth century America, with a particular eye towards developments in second-wave feminism and the sexual revolution. I do so because I concur with Jameson: the tropes—particularly gendered tropes—of genre fiction both reflect and inform the wider popular imagination. As we will see, the selected authors draw upon gender stereotypes that are commonplace to their particular historical moment, thereby providing a snapshot of the range of gendered performance available and comprehensible to their readership. This thesis collates these snapshots into a larger historicist collage in pursuit of unearthing the conspiratorial emplotment of gender binaries in flux during the American mid-to-late twentieth century.

---

[4] Fredric Jameson, 'Philip K. Dick, In Memoriam', in *Archeologies of the Future* (London: Verso, 2005) pp. 345–48 (p. 348).

The tropes this thesis considers include the taxonomy of characters commonly found in conspiracy fiction as well as the themes suggested by conspiracy itself, chiefly power and knowledge as well as the throughways between the two. The key questions of this thesis reflect these epistemological concerns. *Like a Bird Caught in Cobwebs* asks: exactly what kind of gendered anxieties are emplotted in the conspiracy fiction of Levin, Dick, Eco, and Brown? How do these works distribute and qualify knowledge within their conspiratorial plots? How does the generic form of these novels impact their use of conspiracy and of gendered tropes? While answering these questions I keep the socio-historical context in mind, treating the novels as complex literary works which reflect and intervene in the culture within which they are embedded: the culture of mid-to-late twentieth century United States characterised by the Cold War, second-wave feminism, postmodernism, burgeoning conspiracy theories, rapid technological advancement, the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement, political assassinations, globalisation, and capitalism.

The principal methodologies of *Like a Bird Caught in Cobwebs* are historicist close reading of texts and feminist theory. The ethos of historicism guided my use of specific theoretical *corpora*, including conspiracy scholarship, cultural criticism, and scholarship of genre, both as popular fiction in general and pertaining specifically to the Gothic, science fiction, and the thriller. Despite my interest in the typology of conspiracy fiction—and admitting the debt genre theory owes to formalism—this thesis does not aspire to be a formalist exercise. I am invested in the schematics of literary texts only as far as they speak to their historical context, intending to use cultural convention to illuminate a median of human experience of their moment.

The pursuit of the typical, the normative—or, rather, what is being positioned as normative—also informed the textual selection of *Like a Bird Caught in Cobwebs*. As we will see, the four selected authors are all paragons of their respective genres, achieving a lasting impact within, and occasionally beyond, the generic boundaries within which they are situated. Furthermore, the novels selected within the *oeuvres* of Levin, Dick, Eco, and Brown emplot specific kinds of gendered anxieties which allow me to trace the range and evolution of conspiracy fiction throughout the forty-four years covered in this thesis. Levin's two Gothic novels covered in Chapter 1 are conspiratorial amplifications of the concerns of second-wave feminism about individual and collective gendered oppression; with outcomes that are similarly bleak but for different reasons. Dick's two science fiction texts in Chapter 2 exemplify the

conspiratorial encoding of masculine anxieties, exploring different gendered strategies through which conspiracy may be defeated or endured. The thrillers of Eco and Brown in Chapter 3 query the ethics of using conspiracy to recover certainty and traditional gender roles but give opposing answers. As such, the selected texts are both typical and different enough that their contrast yields substantial insights into conspiratorial expressions of gender during the middle and late twentieth century.

Naturally, aiming for substantial insight does not mean that *Like a Bird Caught in Cobwebs* encompasses the entirety of notable conspiracy fiction published in English from and after the midcentury. The selected novels are all authored by white men, and the plots and characters included in this thesis are also predominantly—indeed oppressively—white and heteronormative. Despite the heterogeneity of authorship, however, the texts examined in this thesis are all specifically concerned with the gendered dimensions of conspiracy. While these concerns skew towards the masculine, this thesis places feminine anxieties at the forefront by starting with Ira Levin's two novels which absolutely centre on patriarchy's effect on women, mediated via a conspiracy narrative. As we will see in the respective chapters, even in texts where masculine worries dominate, female characters offer a glimpse into gendered assumptions of their time—a glimpse which, by the very peripherality of its subject, showcases Jameson's 'logic of stereotypes' exceptionally well.

The six novels discussed in this thesis were chosen because they represent milestones in the evolution of conspiracy fiction during this period, and often within their respective genres as well. Levin's two novels may be better known via their filmic versions today, but they still have undeniable cultural penetration; furthermore, they were bestsellers and cultural phenomena upon their publication. Dick was a countercultural author who added critical and academic appreciation to his cult status largely posthumously; even so, he only missed the theatrical release of Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982), based on Dick's novel, by a few months, and many more movies were made after the author's death. Eco became the blueprint of the European academic celebrity whose novels were much-awaited literary events during his lifetime, while Brown's novel became a phenomenon seemingly despite its qualities and spawned an entire industry of knockoffs, explainers, and refutations. In short, the novels chosen for this thesis have a cultural staying power that is unrivalled by other authors, regardless of gender.

Feminist theory plays a double role in this thesis, occasionally straddling the line between primary and secondary literature. The reason for this is second-wave feminism's latent tendency to adopt conspiratorial figurations of the patriarchy. It is one of the goals of this thesis to follow the thread of conspiracy-as-patriarchy in the literature of the second wave: for this reason, I discuss contemporary feminist texts at length alongside the selected works of fiction. The position from which I am writing is a feminist one, one that is informed by both the second and the third wave. I understand gender performance in the Butlerian sense, that is, gender as a discoursively negotiated set of behaviours rather than a reflection of immutable biological facts. However, second-wave feminist writing looms large in *Like a Bird Caught in Cobwebs* because of its historical immediacy and, more importantly, because it emblematises the gendered social upheaval against which the conspiracy fiction of the period reacts.

Chapter 1 examines Ira Levin's Gothic conspiracy fiction. Levin's *Rosemary's Baby* is notable for its literalisation of patriarchy as a conspiracy. In Levin's hugely successful novel, patriarchy—and reality—is still largely intact; however, the text already hints at patriarchy's waning power via Rosemary's bitter victory over her husband and the Satanic conspiracy. It is only in *The Stepford Wives* that Levin imagines an outright conspiratorial counterattack on feminism. Levin opts for the Gothic to evoke the dread felt by women who slowly realise their husbands are conspiring against them, amounting to a reflection of contemporary feminism's critiques of marriage and traditional gender roles.

Chapter 2 probes Philip K. Dick's science fiction novels. Dick's *Time Out of Joint* is an early and particularly lucid example of patriarchy's enmeshment with conspiracy. Employing the generic tools of science fiction, *Time* imagines a nation-wide conspiracy which uses suburbia to feminise its men, and which can be only dismantled by the reclamation of a traditional—and typically American—masculinity. In *Time* and, to a lesser extent, in *Rosemary's Baby,* victory over the conspiracy is still possible and thus the ontological destabilisation is still reversible. As such, these novels exemplify a proto-postmodern mode of conspiracy fiction.

The masculine mastery of *Time* is no longer a possibility in Dick's *Ubik*, in which the conspiracy assumes cosmic proportions. Within the six novels, *Ubik* represents a nadir in many ways. For the novel's protagonist, truth, harmonious gender relations, and the conspiracy remain beyond reach, and—in lieu of

dismantling or defeating it—he is forced to assume increasingly feminine coping strategies to survive *Ubik*'s conspiratorial universe. The pessimistic vision of *Ubik* serves as a hyperbolic example of how, in conspiracy fiction, patriarchy's breakdown facilitates the unravelling of reality. Dick's later novel also bears the imprint of a tumultuous decade unsettled not only by feminist campaigning but by protests, riots, state violence, and multiple assassinations, compounding the extroverted suspicion of the Cold War with the internal suspicion of one's own government. In both novels, Dick uses the tropes of science fiction—rockets, cryogenics, interplanetary travel, imagined futures—to create uncertain, anxious realities. Displaying ontological ambiguity in an extreme form, *Ubik* is aligned with the postmodern tradition.

Chapter 3 is dedicated to the thrillers of Umberto Eco and Dan Brown. Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum* is the synergy of late postmodernism and conspiracy fiction, the first among the selected texts to self-reflexively comment on the postmodern destabilisation of reality and the masculine anxiety generated by it. Eco's work is notable for positioning essentialist femininity as the antidote for conspiratorial thinking. *Foucault's Pendulum*, similarly to the previous novels, understands the act of conspiring as a masculine enterprise. However, women are not victimised by the conspiracy (as in Levin) or absent from it (as in Dick): they are immune to the seductive power of conspiracy, but only if their femininity is appropriately corporeal and fertile. Eco's novel is committed to the restoration of patriarchy in order to counteract the harmful effects of conspiracism, which it sees as the ultimately harmful but logical—and intellectually alluring—reaction to the ontological and epistemological instability of late twentieth-century culture.

Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* continues the vector drawn up by *Foucault's Pendulum*. Brown's novel is uniquely duplicitous: while it touts the importance of 'divine' femininity, its conspiratorial historiography amounts to a reenchantment of the patriarchy, with women ultimately reinscribed as men's spiritual helpmeets and carriers of a paternal bloodline. Both Eco and Brown opt for the thriller genre. The thriller's versatile tropes allow these authors to endow their narratives with a realistic sheen. At the same time, Eco and Brown present their conspiracies as exciting intellectual pursuits, marking a break from the emotive charge of previous iterations of conspiracy fiction. In other words, by the end of the century, conspiracy becomes harmless (in Brown at least) entertainment rather than the source of dread and confusion, as it was for the readers of Levin and Dick.

Like a Bird Caught in Cobwebs charts a course from the domestic devil of *Rosemary's Baby* to the faux divinity of *The Da Vinci Code*; from the skewering of patriarchal malice as a conspiracy (Levin), through the utter confusion of a world bereft of patriarchal guidance and the resulting unravelling of the cosmic order (Dick), to conspiracy in service of restoring patriarchy and, consequently, stabilising meaning again (Eco and Brown). If, as Alan Nadel writes, 'the fissure between event and history is broached by narrative'[5] for individuals and wider culture alike, the novels discussed in this thesis become a negotiation of gendered identities and behaviour in the shifting gendered landscape of mid-twentieth-century United States. Jameson's 'bird in cobwebs' gestures towards how these negotiations are often experienced as suffocating and dehumanising, akin to a losing fight against ancient norms. A common theme of the novels is a sense of vague oppression, the feeling of being constrained by an unseen conspiracy which seeks to strip the individual of its bird-like freedom, leaving them to struggle, uncomprehending, in the invisible constraints of tradition and change.

Contexts of conspiracy in postwar American culture and literature

The works examined in thesis are underpinned by four distinct but intertwined historical-cultural fields: scholarly interpretations of conspiracy as a literary and socio-political phenomenon; the Cold War and post-Cold War American political and social contexts, including the protracted cessation of hostilities after the fall of the Soviet Union; second-wave feminist theory and praxis, sexual liberation, and 'women's lib'; and the evolution of postmodernism in literature paralleled by the continuous reappraisal of the boundaries between genre and non-genre fiction by readers, scholars, and authors alike. Each of these processes will be considered in turn, as well as their areas of overlap. First, however, a short examination of the parameters, structure, and common terminology of this thesis is needed.

Conspiracy fiction does not constitute its own genre; rather, I see conspiracy as a genre-neutral narrative element cutting across and beyond genre boundaries. Conspiratorial plots are common in many—perhaps all—genres. However, it is my contention that the three chosen genres contribute the most to the specific aims of

---

[5] Alan Nadel, *Containment Culture: American Narratives, Postmodernism, and the Atomic Age* (London: Duke University Press, 1995), p. 3.

this thesis. The Gothic, science fiction, and the thriller were selected as the most important popular genres which frequently employ conspiracy as a key plot device. Structuring the chapters around two examples from the same genre allows for an in-depth inquiry into the general as well as genre-specific mechanisms of conspiracy fiction, and, at the same time, gives enough breadth to showcase the variety of functions conspiracy performs in these novels. Emphasising this heterogeneity of purpose is one of the chief aims of this study. I wish to highlight that conspiratorial plots have served, in mid-twentieth-century American literature, a wide range of political, emotive, and narrative purposes beyond right-wing paranoia.

1959-2003 are the publication dates of the earliest and latest novels considered by the thesis, demarcating a time characterised by the ascendancy of second-wave feminism in the United States and its subsequent fragmentation and evolution into a plurality of feminisms and, eventually, its dovetailing into the fields of queer and gender studies near the end of the century. This interval also broadly corresponds to the Cold War's middle and final period, as well as the subsequent decade and a half after the fall of the Soviet Union. I chose 2003 as a cut-off year for multiple reasons. First, no discussion of gender and conspiracy fiction can be complete without the global phenomenon of Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, which, as I will argue in Chapter 3, is very much carrying on the legacy of twentieth-century conspiracy fictions. Second, reaching beyond 2003 would have necessitated reckoning with the Iraq War, the war on terror, and the ascendancy of the internet as a medium of mass communication, all of which, I believe, changed the face of American conspiracism in a way that would have disrupted the coherence of this thesis. As such, focusing on the almost five decades between 1959 and 2003 allows me to track the evolution of American conspiracy fiction within a wide enough scope while maintaining historical coherence.

'Anglophone' is a gesture necessitated by the inclusion of Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum*, which, while originally written in Italian, became a bestseller in English translation. The novel is informed by Eco's long-term fascination with American popular culture, becoming a timely extranational intervention into conspiracy fiction as a cultural export of the United States at the end of the Cold War. Eco's novel is relevant, moreover, for its late postmodernist style which relies heavily on intellectual playfulness and self-reflexivity, and for clearly articulating the masculine anxiety over postmodern ontological destabilisation. Eco provides an indispensable bridge

between the mid-century conspiracy fiction of Levin and Dick, and Brown's postmillennial bestseller. Despite not taking place in the United States or being written by an American author, *Foucault's Pendulum* remains highly pertinent to my discussion of American conspiracy fiction.

Conspiracy fiction, conspiracy theory, conspiracy

It is customary to open a study of conspiracies with the assertion that one lives in conspiratorial times, no matter the year. However, the United States in the second half of the twentieth century appears a privileged site for conspiracy scholarship for both the richness of the raw material—as it were—and the burgeoning theoretical tradition written about conspiracies. Of course, conspiracies are by no means exclusive to this time and place, with enduring examples of conspiratorial thinking such as the blood libel predating the Declaration of Independence by centuries. In his seminal essay 'The Paranoid Style in American Politics' Richard Hofstadter acknowledges the long history of 'heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy'[6] in the national public discourse, even as he is interested in the 'possibility of using political rhetoric to get at [the] political pathology' of his present day, including the conspiratorial language of McCarthyism.[7] Writing not long after Hofstadter, David Brion Davis stresses the centrality of conspiracies in the American imagination, tracing them back to 'the popular conceptualization of the American Revolution':

> For if the nation's liberty and very existence had depended on the exposure of a conspiratorial plot to destroy traditional ways of life, one could reaffirm kinship with the Founding Fathers by reenacting the primal resistance to subversion. This may explain why so many Americans have instinctively equated liberty with suspicion, with being on guard, with grabbing up a musket when Paul Revere sounds an alarm through the night.[8]

The Cold War decades fomented the surge of conspiracy narratives in the popular imagination and radically expanded their scope beyond symbolic revolutionary reenactments. This amplification of conspiracism was due to both external and

---

[6] Richard Hofstadter, 'The Paranoid Style in American Politics', in *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1966), pp. 3-40 (p. 3).
[7] Hofstadter, p. 6.
[8] David Brion Davis, *The Slave Power Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969), p. 11.

internal factors. On the global stage, the conflict between the Soviet Union and the United States provided a fertile ground for conspiracy narratives because it was not, by and large, fought on battlefields. As we will see throughout this thesis, conspiracy narratives are antithetical to open shows of strength like warfare; or, put another way, conspiracy is particularly suitable as an expressive vehicle for covert power struggles. As for internal factors, Peter Knight alights on 'the assassination of President Kennedy in 1963 in particular' as the catalyst for conspiracies becoming 'the *lingua franca* of many ordinary Americans' and a 'regular feature of everyday political and cultural life' in the mid-twentieth-century United States.[9] To that, we may add the Vietnam War, Watergate, and, bringing us to the twenty-first century, the terror attacks on the Twin Towers. The tension of the Cold War, then, fostered a resurgence of conspiracism which has been long wedded to American conceptions of freedom and nationhood and which has continued to flourish, in various forms, until our present day.

Neither gender nor genre get the attention appropriate to their impact within the current scholarship; for example, the analyses of Hofstadter or Davis brush up against the gendered undercurrents of conspiracism without interrogating the connection further. Hofstadter's discusses the 'sexual freedom often attributed to' the enemy[10] and the claim that 'Illuminism' was intent on 'the corruption of women' and on the brewing of a 'tea that caused abortion';[11] he does not, however, link this to the wider and very much current American discourse on sexual liberation and the recent legalisation of the contraceptive pill in 1960. Likewise, Davis' assertion of conspiratorial plots haunting the popular imagination of the nation does not make note the masculinist associations of grabbing a musket, that 'traditional ways of life' often denoted the subjugation of women in marriage, or, indeed, that symbolical identification with the Founding Fathers would be unfeasible for the female half of the population (or, indeed, Black or Native Americans of any gender). Genre, likewise, emerges only as an allusion to Henry Longfellow's rousing poem 'Paul Revere's Ride' (1860), in which covert invasion of the country is foiled by the heroic action of a lone man: a synopsis of many conspiracy novels. *Like a Bird Caught in Cobwebs*

---

[9] Peter Knight, *Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to the X-Files* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 2.
[10] Hofstadter, p. 34.
[11] Hofstadter, p. 11.

argues that these conspiratorial fantasies are also, crucially and inextricably, patriarchal fantasies, expressed via the techniques of genre fiction.

'The Paranoid Style' has set the tone of the field for decades, resulting in a body of scholarship generated both during and about mid-to-late twentieth century American literature that tended to discuss conspiracy narratives on Hofstadter's terms: paranoid instead of conspiratorial; universal instead of gendered; mental-cerebral instead of emotional; political instead of belonging to the imagination, entertainment, or the arts; centring suspicion and uncertainty generated by the unresolved structure of paranoid novels instead of the wide variety of emotions expressed through conspiracy in genre fiction. This tradition of conspiracy scholarship tends to relegate genre fiction to the peripheries and privilege the paranoid 'high' literature of Joan Didion, Thomas Pynchon, Joseph McElroy, or Don DeLillo:[12] a striking development considering the many epithets bestowed on paranoia as a 'popular' phenomenon (see Davis above) which nevertheless has rarely been discussed at length via its manifestations in popular literature. (Robert S. Levine's *Conspiracy and Romance* (1989), dealing with nineteenth-century American romance literature, is a notable exception.)

The scholarly tradition's sidelining of gender is similarly salient given that the Cold War years coincided with the second wave of feminism in the United States, providing a historical backdrop too turbulent and significant to ignore. And yet, only recently has the gendered dimension of conspiracy started to receive sustained and pointed scholarly attention via works such as Erin Kempker's *Big Sister: Feminism, Conservatism, and Conspiracy in the Heartland* (2018); Birte Christ's ''What Kind of Man Are You?': The Gendered Foundations of U.S. Conspiracism and of Recent Conspiracy Theory Scholarship' (2014); or Andrew Strombeck's unpublished doctoral dissertation titled 'None Dare Call It Masculinity: The Subject of Post-Kennedy Conspiracy Theory' (2003).[13] *Like a Bird Caught in Cobwebs* engages with and expands on this work. First, however, we must tackle the question on what, exactly, is a conspiracy.

---

[12] For example, in Coale's *Paradigms of Paranoia* and Melley's *Empire of Conspiracy*.
[13] Andrew Strombeck, 'None Dare Call It Masculinity: The Subject of Post-Kennedy Conspiracy Theory' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of California, Davis, 2003). The thesis has been kindly supplied by the author through personal correspondence.

Defining conspiracy fiction

This thesis defines conspiracy fictions as literary texts that feature conspiracy as a focal element in their narratives. The notion of conspiracy sits in the busy crossroad of academic disciplines including political science, law, psychology, narratology, history, epistemology, philosophy, sociology, cultural-, media-, and literary studies, and any combination of these; as a result, interpretations of what constitutes a conspiracy abound. Most definitions are built on the combination of three indispensable characteristics: secrecy, power, and the presence of an in-group. Luc Boltanski writes, for example, that 'the notion of conspiracy refers to solidarities, connivances and personal ties woven surreptitiously for the purpose of seizing power or wielding it in secret.'[14] Similarly, Dentith & Keely argue

> that the most minimal conception of what counts as a conspiracy should satisfy the following three conditions:
> 1. There exists or existed some set of agents with a plan;
> 2. Steps have been taken by the agents to minimize public awareness of what they are up to;
> 3. Some end is (or was) desired by the agents.[15]

Following these examples, I define conspiracy as 'covert group agency', encapsulating three key features: a conspiracy must be secret, otherwise uncovering it would have no effect; it must be a group effort, as a conspiracy of one is merely a villain; and it needs to include a plan, and a will to implement that plan, aimed to influence those outside of the conspiracy. The novels discussed in this thesis all thematise conspiracies.[16]

While this dissertation focuses on literary conspiracies rather than their real-life counterparts, naturally there are overlaps between their mechanisms. As Michael

---

[14] Luc Boltanski, *Mysteries and Conspiracies*, trans. by Catharine Porter (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), p. 35.

[15] M. R. X. Dentith, and Brian L. Keeley, 'The Applied Epistemology of Conspiracy Theories: An Overview', in *The Routledge Handbook of Applied Epistemology*, ed. by David Coady and James Chase (London: Routledge, 2019), pp. 284–93 (p. 285).

[16] As Dentith & Keely note under their definition (see footnote 15), other activities such as 'the organization of a surprise party' also fits these three criteria. The novels discussed in this thesis make conspiracy indispensable to their narrative, allowing them—and, consequently, me—to reflect on the nature of conspiracy at length. As such, I have discounted examples of twentieth-century genre fiction which feature minor, incidental conspiracies such as J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Fellowship of the Ring* (1954) in which the Fellowship technically functions as a conspiracy, or Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince* (1943), the final act of which hinges on a conspiratorial understanding between the boy and the snake.

Barkun writes, the 'conspiracist worldview implies a universe governed by design rather than by randomness,'[17] pointing towards the importance of plot, artificiality, and the disavowal of coincidence. These are central elements to both conspiracy fiction and conspiracy theories. I use 'conspiracy narrative' in cases when a notion or argument is applicable to both. Following Barkun, I use 'conspiracism' or 'conspiratorial thinking' to denote a worldview or, rather, a practice of opting for conspiracy as explanation at the expense of other available interpretations such as coincidence, accidents, or religious predetermination.

The present thesis is about conspiracy fiction rather than conspiracy theories. Nonetheless, studies of conspiracy theories provide an important source to make sense of the fictional representations of conspiracy, since conspiracy theories and conspiracy fiction operate in similar ways. Academic definitions of 'conspiracy theory' have been constructed along similar lines to that of conspiracy: per Clare Birchall, 'conspiracy theory' is 'a narrative that has been constructed in an attempt to explain an event ... to be the result of a group of people working in secret to a nefarious end.'[18] The major difference between Birchall's and my definition is in the assumption of malice, an element which is attached more frequently to conspiracy theories than to real-life historical conspiracies. As Knight writes, '[f]or many commentators, conspiracy theories are by definition deluded, simplistic and harmful.[19] Likewise, Barkun identifies 'conspiracy belief' as 'the belief that an organization made up of individuals or groups was or is acting covertly to achieve some malevolent end.'[20] There is a twofold moral judgement at work in these definitions: once in the attitude of the (imagined) conspiracy theorists, who see wrongdoing at every turn; and once more in the assumption that conspiracy theories are necessarily harmful.

I find the pathologising of conspiracy theories unhelpful for my thesis' goal of providing a discerning reading of the gendered and generic dimensions of conspiracy fiction; one that is decidedly separate from paranoia and paranoid fiction.

---

[17] Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), p. 3.
[18] Clare Birchall, *Knowledge Goes Pop: From Conspiracy Theory to Gossip* (Oxford: Berg, 2006), p. 34.
[19] Knight, p. 11.
[20] Barkun, p. 3.

In disavowing conspiracy as pathology, I follow recent work on conspiracy theories such as Alexander Dunst's, who argues that

> any critique of conspiracy theories should not be based on the moral condemnation of their supposed irrationality … Despite an occasional return to pathologising terminology, this is arguably what underpins most recent studies on the topic—but only at the cost of rejecting any connection to paranoia. Scholars … do this because they find paranoia's ideological baggage of pathology unpalatable, and rightly so.[21]

I do not, in any way, mean to dispute conspiracy theories' potential to cause significant real-world harm. However, I do believe that building on the assumption that conspiracies are *ab ovo* malign would obfuscate this thesis's efforts to probe conspiracy fiction's heterogeneity and versatility. Indeed, the novels covered in this thesis can only be productively read if they are treated as rational reactions to their historical moment, and not as morally or intellectually deficient narratives. Through conspiracy, Levin's novels express women's reasonable fear of being harmed in a heteronormative, patriarchal marriage; Dick's novels rationalise the destabilisation of traditional masculinity and of epistemology during the midcentury; while the thrillers of Eco and Brown domesticate the conspiratorial to turn back the tide of history to more traditional gender roles. Neither the conspirators nor the victims of the conspiracy are mentally ill in these novels: hence my disavowal of pathologising conspiracy.

Like a Bird Caught in Cobwebs will generally steer away from using 'paranoia' and 'paranoid' as definitional or descriptive phrases due to these terms' interpretative unproductivity as 'pathology discourse,' and due to my agreement with scholarly initiatives to 'leave normative judgments to the reader and not weave them into our texts.'[22] A further reason is my understanding of paranoia as a distinct phenomenon from conspiracy. The two are often treated as near-synonyms, or at least as denoting manifestations of the same pervasive suspicion-mindedness: for example, Kathryn Olmstead writes of 'conspiracy theories' as 'paranoid interpretation of history,'[23]

---

[21] Alexander Dunst, 'The Politics of Conspiracy Theories: American Histories and Global Narratives', in *Mapping Conspiracy Theories in the United States and the Middle East*, ed. by Michael Butter and Maurus Reinkowski (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), pp. 293-310 (p. 297).
[22] Jaron Harambam, *Contemporary Conspiracy Culture: Truth and Knowledge in an Era of Epistemic Instability* (New York: Routledge, 2020), p. 21.
[23] Kathryn Olmstead, *Real Enemies: Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War I to 9/11* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 3.

Knight discusses how ideas are 'labeled as conspiracy theories and diagnosed as paranoid,'[24] while Timothy Melley makes the 'culture of paranoia and conspiracy' his chief topic.[25] While these phenomena are indisputably related, I distinguish their fictional representations by the presence of narrative proof; that is, I understand paranoid fiction to feature open narratives where conspiratorial suspicions remain unconfirmed,[26] while under conspiracy fiction I mean narratives which provide closure via the diegetic confirmation for the existence of a conspiratorial plot. In this thesis, I am interested in the latter, making the presence of such confirmation one of my key selection criteria. Discussions of paranoia and paranoid fiction, then, are almost entirely absent from the present thesis. As such, I prioritise scholarly work which speaks to conspiracy narratives rather than paranoia.

The middle of the twentieth century saw the first academic engagements with conspiracism in the works of key theorists Karl Popper, Franz Neumann, and Hofstadter. The work of Popper and Hofstadter has been foundational in establishing the field of conspiracy studies, which they approached via the disciplines of sociology (Popper) and political science (Hofstadter). Neumann is a key source for articulating conspiracy as an expression of anxiety; an approach with which *Like a Bird Caught in Cobwebs* aligns. Neumann's *The Democratic and The Authoritarian State* (1957), furthermore, acknowledges that conspiracism cuts across the political spectrum, steers away from pathologising language, and recognises the family—however briefly—as one loci of conspiracy narratives. Drawing on both Marx and Freud, Neumann writes that the 'conspiracy theory of history' is the belief that 'the distress which has befallen the masses has been brought about exclusively by a conspiracy of certain persons or groups against the people.'[27] This belief originates in a sense of 'true anxiety ... produced by war, want, hunger, anarchy', which is then 'transformed into neurotic anxiety.'[28] Neumann applies his theory expansively,

---

[24] Knight, p. 11.
[25] Timothy Melley, *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America* (London: Cornell University Press, 2000), p. 10.
[26] Two of the selected novels, *The Stepford Wives* and *Ubik*, border on paranoid fiction per this definition. For Levin's novel, the conspiracy is so heavily implied as to make it a certainty. In the case of Dick's novel, the recursive narrative produces a radical uncertainty which is key to my reading of text.
[27] Franz Neumann, 'Anxiety and Politics', in *The Democratic and The Authoritarian State: Essays in Political and Legal Theory*, ed. by Herbert Marcuse (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe [Macmillan], 1964), pp. 270–300 (p. 279).
[28] Neumann, p. 280.

showing that the mechanisms of conspiratorial thinking are applicable to both the 'theory of the Communist conspiracy' or Bolshevism's 'theory of capitalist encirclement.'[29] Neumann covers an astonishingly wide ground which includes the Ku Klux Klan, ancient Rome, the Jesuits, the Huguenots, and John Knox.[30] His formulation of the purpose of conspiracy is succinct and relevant: 'potential anxiety … is actualised by reference to the devilish conspirators: family, property, morality, religion are threatened by the conspiracy.'[31] This definition recognises that conspiracy theories are emotion-driven, that they are often the result of ideological misdirection, and that family—and with it, gender—is often at their emotional core.

The first sustained academic studies of conspiracy fiction came out, perhaps not accidentally, in the period after the Kennedy assassination and the Watergate scandal. Incidentally, these early studies often centre gender and genre more than later iterations of the same topic. Jerry Palmer's *Thrillers* (1978) argues that the two 'absolutely indispensable' elements of the thriller genre are the hero and a conspiracy.[32] Palmer draws attention to highly formulaic gendered behaviour exhibited by characters in a thriller, including the 'isolated, competitive' male protagonist[33] and the female characters functioning as the 'incarnate[s] of sexual temptation.'[34] In order to dismantle the conspiracy, the thriller hero needs to embody a specific kind of masculinity: sexually aggressive, fundamentally lonely, and fiercely self-reliant, epitomised by James Bond.

James Fulcher's article 'American Conspiracy: Formula in Popular Fiction' (1983) devises a formula of the 'American conspiracy novel' as 'a new form of popular fiction' emerging from the 1970s which uses conspiracy as a crucial plot element.[35] This emergence is perhaps not a coincidence in the immediate aftermath

---

[29] Neumann, pp. 284-85.

[30] Neumann frames the pamphlet of 'terrible Calvinist fanatic John Knox' in conspiratorial terms: 'The rule of the Catholic Catherine de Medici, of Marie of Lorraine (the predecessor of Mary Stuart) and of Mary Tudor appears [in *The Monstrous Regiment of Women*] not only as a violation of divine commandment (because God has subjected women to men) but as a genuine conspiracy against the true religion.' Neumann, p. 283.

[31] Neumann, p. 284.

[32] Jerry Palmer, *Thrillers: Genesis and Structure of a Popular Genre* (London: Edward Arnold, 1978), p. 82.

[33] Palmer, *Thrillers*, p. 38.

[34] Palmer, *Thrillers*, p. 35.

[35] James Fulcher, 'American Conspiracy: Formula in Popular Fiction', *Midwest Quarterly: A Journal of Contemporary Thought*, 24.2 (1983), 152–64 (p. 152).

of Watergate. Fulcher does not directly comment outright on the gender politics contained within these novels; he does, however, point to a female 'temptresses' and 'victims' and male protagonists whose initiation into 'professional careers' is a key element of the formula.[36] Robert S. Levine's *Conspiracy and Romance* (1989), while focusing on nineteenth-century texts, is notable for recognising that 'melodrama was a mode most suitable to American writers—particularly romancers and countersubversives—who had a firm sense of living in a culture that was unsettled and unsettling.'[37] As we will see, unsettling becomes definitive for the fiction of Levin and especially Dick.

By the 1990s, the study of conspiratorial fiction was becoming a well-established field. However, studies of paranoia and non-genre texts have started to dominate at the expense of conspiracy and conspiracy narratives. In an essay on Ian Fleming's fiction, Eco examines certain gendered elements of the James Bond novels' recurring formula, including the female character who is initially 'dominated by' the villain but subsequently freed by Bond, who, in the end, 'rests from his great efforts in [her] arms.'[38] Unlike Palmer, Eco remains silent on the Bond novels' sexual politics. He does, however, pass judgement on the politics of using 'stock figures', a sign of 'Manichean dichotomy' which is inherently 'dogmatic and intolerant—in short, reactionary.'[39] *Like a Bird Caught in Cobwebs* argues that conspiracy fiction—including Eco's own—can be reactionary in much the same way and for similar reasons.

Steffen Hantke's *Conspiracy and Paranoia in Contemporary American Fiction* (1994) is another example of a study which prioritises paranoia and non-genre literature. Hantke's work is a comprehensive, large-scale study of twentieth-century American fiction focusing on the—by my taxonomy, paranoid rather than conspiratorial—fictions of Don DeLillo and Joseph McElroy. Hantke's text elucidates on parallels with other genres, including the figure of the detective in crime and

---

[36] Fulcher, pp. 162-63.
[37] Robert S. Levine, *Conspiracy and Romance: Studies in Brockden Brown, Cooper, Hawthorne, and Melville* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 12.
[38] Umberto Eco, 'Narratives Structures in Fleming', in *Gender, Language and Myth: Essays on Popular Narrative*, ed. by Glenwood Irons (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), pp. 157–82 (p. 165).
[39] Eco, 'Narrative Structures', p. 168.

conspiracy fictions and the action-focused nature of (conspiracy) thrillers.[40] Further, Hantke argues that the 'Freudian family romance…serves as the backdrop for conspiracy fiction's central conflict', acknowledging the importance of sexual politics in conspiracy fiction.[41] As an example, he cites 'Robert Heinlein's Cold-War fantasy *The Puppet Masters*' in which 'it is literally the detective's father who threatens to annihilate the son's individuality,'[42] a forerunner to the trope of patriarchal power transfer which appears in most of the novels I discuss. Except for brief asides to Heinlein and generic tropes, the highbrow literary paranoia of DeLillo and McElroy dominate Hantke's study.

The turn of the millennium brought a degree of change in the scholarly exclusion of gender and genre. In his work *Conspiracy Culture* (2000), regarded as a major touchstone of conspiracy studies, Peter Knight dedicates an entire chapter to second-wave feminism and its use of conspiratorial rhetoric. This attention is welcome. Despite the care taken by scholars to account for major events when situating twentieth-century conspiracy theories within their respective cultural landscape, feminism as a whole has been largely neglected, appearing as painfully relevant, yet often relegated to a footnote (a frustration to which this present work partially owes its existence). In the chapter 'The Problem With No Name: Feminism and the Figuration of Conspiracy', Knight suggests that '[m]etaphors of conspiracy ... have played an important role within a certain trajectory of popular American feminist writing' and that 'the figuration of conspiracy has helped produce a coherent women's movement' while, from the 1990s onwards, it 'has also become the source of division between feminist thinkers.'[43] Knight's location of the language of conspiracy in early second-wave feminist texts is warranted, but stops short of probing deeper into the reasons why feminists favoured conspiratorial imagery. *Like a Bird Caught in Cobwebs* covers the conspiracy-as-patriarchy at length in Chapter 1.

Another post-millennial work which has informed my approach, despite the temporal and geographical distance of its subject, is Pionke's *Plots of Opportunity*—

---

[40] Steffen Hantke, *Conspiracy and Paranoia in Contemporary American Fiction* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 1994), p. 13-14.
[41] Hantke, p. 13.
[42] Hantke, p. 13.
[43] Knight, p. 118.

already mentioned in the Introduction—which argues that British conspiracy narratives of the Victorian era used conspiracy to dramatise anxieties about democracy. Pionke reads both fictional and non-fictional conspiracy narratives as centring around a visceral suspicion about those with dual allegiances, for example, those who, in addition to being British subjects, also owed loyalty to another power: Catholics to the Pope, or Freemasons to their order. The concept of dual allegiances will become especially salient in Chapter 1 about Levin's novels, which focuses on a woman's suspicion that her husband may have higher allegiances than their marriage.

Timothy Melley's *Empire of Conspiracy* (2000) introduces the concept of 'agency panic' to the discussion of conspiracy fictions, defined as the 'intense anxiety about an apparent loss of autonomy or self-control—the conviction that one's actions are being controlled by someone else, that one has been 'constructed' by powerful external agents.'[44] While my analysis does not rely on the concept of 'agency panic', Melley's work is valuable for addressing the gendered dimensions of diminished agency. Melley argues that top-down forces of 'social control' such as the government are often imagined in American conspiracy narratives as 'feminizing forces', an observation which underlines the extent of conspiracy as a masculinist literary tradition.[45] '[F]eminization [as] a pervasive and tangible form of disempowerment'[46] becomes apparent in Philip K. Dick's characters in Chapter 2, who imagine social control experienced in suburbia or in the technocratic world of *Ubik* as a domesticating, feminising conspiracy.

Melley's examination of the feminist possibilities of agency panic is a key intervention into the gendered dimensions of conspiracy fiction. However, it is also emblematic of the troublesome ghettoisation of female-authored novels into the category of 'stalker novels.' Melley reads Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* (1969) and Diane Johnson's *The Shadow Knows* (1974) as narratives of stalking, suggesting these novels use the de-individualised figure of the stalker to 'to make visible the violence involved in the production of 'normal' heterosexual relations.'[47] In

---

[44] Melley, p. 12.
[45] Melley, p. 32.
[46] Melley, p. 33.
[47] Melley, p. 132.

doing so, Melley stretches the concept of conspiracy to its limit, since stalking implies a singular malefactor. More troublingly, the focus on stalking restricts female characters' involvement in conspiratorial plots to the singular role of victim of (sexual) violence, which, as I delineate in this dissertation, is far from the only available position for women in conspiracy novels. Melley argues that the 'gender implications of agency panic ... depend greatly on who is articulating it.'[48] Yet, I think authorship perhaps matters less than what kind of oppression is being articulated via the conspiratorial framework. Levin's novels exemplify conspiracy novels which make visible patriarchy's detrimental effects on women both as individuals and as a collective, despite being male-authored.

Up until mid-2010s, only the works of Melley and Knight offered chapter-length analyses of gender in conspiracy fiction. Birte Christ's 2014 chapter titled 'What kind of man are you?' highlights this inattention by arguing that conspiracy theorising is 'a populist intervention into *sexual* politics.'[49] Christ recognises conspiracy as an imaginative vehicle for a 'fear of women's growing power in society and, correspondingly, of the weakening of the American man,'[50] aligning with my hypothesis on the sexual revolution's importance in mid-to-late twentieth-century American conspiracy fiction. Christ also offers a meta-critique of previous scholarship, drawing attention to, for example, the problematic relegation of female-authored conspiracy fiction to the category of stalker novels in Melley's *Empire of Conspiracy*.[51] Christ takes exception at how 'studies mark women conspiracy theorists as gendered and tend to reduce analyses of their conspiracism to gender-specific aspects' as opposed to the male conspiracy theorist, whose maleness is considered irrelevant next to his conspiracy theorist identity.[52] Christ's chapter provided a much-needed intervention into some of the gendered assumptions of previous scholarship, even if slipping into generalisations on occasion.

---

[48] Melley, p. 34.
[49] Birte Christ, "What kind of man are you?': The Gendered Foundations of U.S. Conspiracism and of Recent Conspiracy Theory Scholarship', in *Conspiracy Theories in the United States and the Middle East*, ed. by Butter and Reinkowski, pp. 311-332 (p. 312)
[50] Christ, p. 312.
[51] Christ, pp. 327-29.
[52] Christ, p. 326.

Unstable containments: the United States and the Cold War

If the role of gender in conspiracy fiction has taken a long time to register on the critical radar, the influence of the Cold War has been much more immediately recognised. Indeed, the Cold War context is readily apparent in the earliest novels discussed in this thesis. Published in 1959, Philip K. Dick's *Time Out of Joint* was seeing out a decade increasingly dominated by 'Cold War obsessions' which had replaced such concerns of the early 1950s as the Korean War, McCarthyism, or the 'earlier atomic fears' generated by the memory of Hiroshima and the nuclear arms race with the Soviet Union.[53] However, the immediate postwar years, marked by 'a period of rapid political change in America', left as their legacy 'an intense and all-pervasive anticommunist ideology that perceived communism as a monstrous and monolithic global conspiracy … bent upon absolute world domination.'[54] While Dick never explicitly names the topic of communism, Dick's earlier novel nevertheless capitalised on the contemporary understanding of conspiracy as a totalitarian tool of international politics.

This was also a period of widespread suburban development in the United States, a transition informed by tensions specific to the Cold War. As Daniel Cordle writes, 'the middle-class, suburban family home symbolised the triumph of American capitalism and was both the product and the source of powerful narratives favouring conformity and consensus', becoming, along with the nuclear family residing within it, 'a powerful symbol of an American way of life that had to be defended against the ideology and the nuclear weaponry of the Soviet Union.'[55] At the same time, social commentators such as Lionel Trilling criticised suburbia precisely because of its conformity, which was 'routinely marked as the harbinger of domestic totalitarianism' in 1950s American fiction.[56] Through this homogeneity, the suburbs 'also dictated gendered aspirations and divisions of labour that 'contained' subversion and dissent,'[57] giving rise to gendered criticisms of suburbia in non-fictional works such

---

[53] Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), p. 340.

[54] Boyer, p. 101.

[55] Daniel Cordle, *Late Cold War Literature and Culture: The Nuclear 1980s* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 78.

[56] Deborah Nelson, *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), p. 76.

[57] Cordle, p. 78.

as Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* (1963) or Lionel Tiger's *Men in Groups* (1969) which both lamented the deleterious effects of suburban living on women and men. Set in fictional suburbs, both Dick's *Time Out of Joint* and Levin's *The Stepford Wives* plug into the public conversation around suburbia, narrativising its deadening influence on the gendered self as an external conspiracy of a militaristic government and suburban husbands, respectively.

Alan Nadel designated the postwar period as a culture of containment, circumscribed as the 'privileged American narrative during the cold war.'[58] Containment culture derived 'its logic from the rigid major premise that the world was divided into two monolithic camps' necessitating a continuous and obsessive monitoring of the boundaries between 'the Other and the Same'; a logic which was expanded over the private lives of American citizens as well.[59] Privacy became a highly contested issue under the aegis of containment culture, further informed by technological breakthroughs such as the first successful Soyuz flight in 1968 and the popularisation of prenatal ultrasound, both tapping into fears of illicit surveillance. As Nelson writes, the 'power and mobility of this metaphor of containment were equal only to the power and elasticity of the metaphor of intrusion—the enemy within—which conveyed the uncanny experience of finding one's borders already violated.'[60] The conspiracy narratives of Levin's *Rosemary's Baby* and *The Stepford Wives* give shape to women's fears about the internal enemy, whether that is a neighbour, a husband, or a foetus.

The nineteen-sixties also saw a series of political assassinations from John F. Kennedy (1963), Malcolm X (1965), Martin Luther King (1968), and Robert F. Kennedy (1968), out of which President Kennedy's death 'affected America—and the world—unlike any other single event in modern history.'[61] The Kennedy assassination also spawned innumerable conspiracy theories, precipitating the mainstreaming of conspiracy in American discourse and becoming 'the mother-lode of [a] new conspiracy style.'[62] Knight designates Kennedy's death as a 'point of

---

[58] Nadel, p. 3.
[59] Nadel, pp. 2-5.
[60] Nelson, *Pursuing Privacy*, p. xviii.
[61] William H. Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey: America Since World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 209.
[62] Knight, p. 4.

origin for a loss of faith in authority and coherent causality—the primal scene, as it were, of a postmodern sense of paranoia.'[63] During this decade, the credibility of the United States government was further diminished—both in the eyes of its citizens and on the global stage—by the Bay of Pigs fiasco in 1961 and Vietnam War. Social discontent was widespread, expressed by the many anti-war, feminist, civil rights, and student protests of the decade.

Nadel argues that by 'the mid-1960s, the problems with the logic of containment … had started to be manifest in a public discourse displaying many traits that would later be associated with 'postmodernism'' including 'not only the assertion that history depended on fictional representation but also that frames and roles were arbitrary, and that centered meaning and authority was a myth.'[64] The deteriorating faith in the coherence and competence of authority—expressed on a mass scale via the counterculture and the protests of the 1960s—is heralded, per Nadel, by 'the Bay of Pigs incident' after which 'the return to monologic authority becomes impossible.'[65] The postmodern scepticism towards observable, unitary meanings is most apparent in Dick's *Ubik* and Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum*. While *Ubik* may not have been recognised by its readers—or, indeed, by its author—as postmodern, *Ubik* uses its conspiratorial universe to express total epistemological disintegration and the impossibility of masculine mastery over one's fate.

Foucault's Pendulum was published in 1988, followed by William Weaver's English translation a year later. These years were characterised by endings in the popular imagination; most significantly, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union; and, with the end of the Cold War, 'would also come the end of a political paradigm that had used the Cold War as its anchor and controlling principle.'[66] The United States, while ostensibly victorious, was living with the legacy of Reagonomics and its mishandling of the AIDS crisis. Cordle identifies the late 1980s as 'post-containment culture', in which the height of the Cold War and the 1950s were 'mythologised as the norm against which 1980s domestic and social anxieties (the demise of the family, the rise of 'broken' homes and of a general social

---

[63] Knight, p. 4.
[64] Nadel, p. 3.
[65] Nadel, p. 165.
[66] Chafe, p. 474.

decadence) were judged.'[67] Post-containment discourse was 'nostalgically recuperating and transgressively challenging ideas of family from the earlier period.'[68] *Foucault's Pendulum* and Brown's later *The Da Vinci Code* register this nostalgic impulse via their conspiratorial historiography. Crucially, Eco's novel rejects the premise of using conspiracy as regenerative agent, while Brown's novel embraces it to reenchant modern womanhood. Both novels alight on femininity as the one remaining fixed point from which coherent, authoritative meaning—lost to the turbulence of the Cold War and to the disillusionment of postmodernism—may be extracted.

Like the Kennedy assassination almost four decades prior, the terror attacks on the Twin Towers shook America and the world, becoming a 'defining moment' in United States history by virtue of both the event itself and its later 'political-military ramifications.'[69] And yet, according to Birchall, 9/11 did not immediately instigate a transformation comparable to President Kennedy's death in American conspiracism. Birchall notes the 'persistence of conspiracy rhetoric in the face of potentially paradigm-shifting events', with conspiratorial explanations becoming 'part of an already established logic'; as such, 'September 11…must be thought about as much in terms of continuity as disruption.'[70] *The Da Vinci Code* exemplifies the continuity of conspiracism moulded by the Cold War; in fact, the novel is perhaps more comprehensible in the pre-2001 context than in its own time. Susan Faludi's *The Terror Dream* (2007), written about the post-2001 surge of anti-feminism, argues that the shock of 9/11 ushered in an 'era of neofifties nuclear family 'togetherness,' redomesticated femininity, and reconstituted Cold Warrior manhood. … Scared single women, the media held, were reassessing their independence and heading for the altar; working mothers were 'opting out' for the protected suburbs:'[71] post-containment culture elevated to a fever pitch. Brown's novel returns to the question posited by *Foucault's Pendulum* on the ramifications to the question of whether conspiracy can be used as a recuperative tool, and answers it, unlike the earlier

---

[67] Cordle, p. 80.
[68] Cordle, p. 77.
[69] Birchall, p. 55.
[70] Birchall, p. 56.
[71] Susan Faludi, *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007), p. 3-4.

novel, in the affirmative. In particular, *The Da Vinci Code* seeks to alleviate the historical guilt associated with Christianity and the patriarchy, sanitising these institutions for the new millennium through its conspiratorially enhanced historiography.

Feminisms and conspiratorial models of patriarchy

Like a Bird Caught in Cobwebs is backed by multiple parallel socio-cultural processes, including the development of the scholarship on conspiracy theories and conspiracy fiction and the slow decay of Cold War certainties already discussed. The evolution of second-wave feminism provides a similarly important backdrop. The rhetorical framework of patriarchy-as-conspiracy provides an additional focus to my engagement with the feminist texts of the mid-to-late twentieth century, expanding Peter Knight's original contribution to the topic. This thesis follows the progression of conspiratorial language within and around the second-wave feminist movement to the extent it provides an informative analytical and historical context. This progression can be somewhat reductively summarised as initial deployment, quick disavowal, and later resurgence.

Knight locates a dual impulse in Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* that is part appropriation and part disavowal. The 'problem with no name', according to Knight, appears in Friedan as 'a devastating, tailor-made ideology, part of a cunning and ruthlessly efficient program to persuade women to forgo self-fulfilment through careers in favor of homemaking and childrearing.'[72] Even when Friedan suggests ways to counteract the 'brainwashing' of the feminine mystique, Knight finds 'an unacknowledged sense of a vague but pervasive conspiracy of malign forces hovering over women's lives' permeating Friedan's text.[73] At the same time, however, Knight also argues that '[d]espite the insistence with which this case is made, Friedan repudiates the logic of conspiracy.'[74] Knight draws attention to the tension between these two impulses, suggesting that *The Feminine Mystique* 'opens up the possibility of a conspiracy theory of sexual politics, only for that conclusion to

[72] Knight, p. 119.
[73] Knight, p. 121.
[74] Knight, p.123.

be denied' and that Friedan offers an account of 'patriarchy *as if* it were a conspiracy, without ever fully cashing out the metaphor into literal fact.'[75]

Knight rightly identifies Friedan's use of conspiratorial language but not, I argue, its rationale. Conspiracy provides an accessible shorthand for the systemic characteristics of patriarchy, especially as 'patriarchy' as such was not commonly used in feminist texts until around 1970.[76] Friedan's play with the language of conspiracy is also understandable in the context of timing. *The Feminine Mystique* was published February 1963, more than eight months before the Kennedy assassination which Knight himself pinpoints as the watershed moment in American conspiracism. Friedan conceptualised gendered oppression as a conspiracy because it provided an accessible, eye-catching, popular model for a phenomenon which lacked a proper theoretical backing or even a commonly agreed name in 'patriarchy'. Friedan could thus approximate conspiratorial language without its post-Kennedy cultural baggage of overt suspicion and fringe theorising. However, at no point in history has conspiracy been regarded as anything but a pejorative: it is entirely reasonable for Friedan and subsequent feminist writers to disavow conspiracy lest it undermine and discredit their aims.

However, when Friedan does appropriate conspiratorial language, she does so in the Gothic mode, linking her to Levin's fiction. The chapter in which the Gothic tones are most overt is 'The Sexual Sell', in which Friedan charges ad agencies with the mass manipulation of women. Friedan creates a conspiratorial image of these 'manipulators'—advertising agencies—working for capital. She emphasises that their work is not part of a secret plot, yet the picture she paints is exactly that of a conspiracy: a group of the few (ad agency workers, businesses, marketing) deciding to manipulate the many (American housewives) for their own gain (money), without the knowledge or consent of those manipulated. This act of manipulation is accomplished through acquiring mass surveys of American housewives, providing

---

[75] Knight, p. 124.
[76] The Parshley translation of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949, transl. 1953), which would have been read by early American second-wave feminists like Friedan, uses 'patriarchate' a handful of times. Friedan herself does not use either 'patriarchy' or 'patriarchate', the word 'patriarchal' appears in a quote once in *The Feminine Mystique*. The *Oxford English Dictionary* dates the feminist use of 'patriarchy' to 1970. While 'patriarchy' is used before 1970 in reference to socio-political organisations favouring male power and male lineage, the word appears to have been a predominantly anthropological term. See 'patriarchy, n.', *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/138873> [accessed June 21, 2023].

another key conspiratorial element in knowledge hoarded or acquired via semi-legitimate means. The paragraph in which she describes the sinister ad agencies is telling:

> The energy behind the feminist movement was too dynamic merely to have trickled dry; it must have been turned off.
> ...
> I learned how it happened when I went to see a man who is paid approximately a million dollars a year for his professional services in manipulating the emotions of American women to serve the needs of business. This particular man got in on the ground floor of the hidden-persuasion business in 1945 and kept going. The headquarters of his institute for motivational manipulation is a baronial mansion in upper Westchester. The walls of a ballroom two stories high are filled with steel shelves holding a thousand-odd studies for business and industry, 300,000 individual 'depth interviews,' mostly with American housewives.[77]

This passage has all the hallmarks of conspiracy fiction. It frames the post-war dwindling of feminism's momentum as a result of conscious design as opposed to mere happenstance. It locates the source of power as knowledge which is mined, hoarded, and accessible to a select few. It even situates this wealth of information in a mansion, associating decadent old money dwellings with evil the same way Gothic fiction does. Friedan thus creates an intensely conspiratorial image of the condition of women in 1960s America; one which finds a literal expression in Levin's *Rosemary's Baby* and *The Stepford Wives*. The theatrical elements of the feminine mystique are played for dramatic effect, suggesting that *The Feminine Mystique* aimed to agitate and publicise, and used elements of conspiracy to achieve these goals.

As the second-wave feminist movement gained legitimacy, the language of conspiracy was slowly phased out. Its remnants are still to be found in key liberal feminist texts of the early 1970s, as Shulamith Firestone's *Dialectic of Sex* (1970) and Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1970) use conspiracy to describe the oppressive effects of what today would be called heteronormative family structure. Family as a conspiratorial system appears in Levin's novels as well as Dick's *Time Out of Joint*, which imagines suburban domesticity as a conspiracy of emasculation. Neither Firestone nor Millet appropriate conspiratorial language to quite the same extent as

---

[77] Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1979), p. 197.

Friedan, yet both make cautious use of it. Firestone ascribes the languishing of first-wave feminism to conscious design, writing that it was 'no accident' the achievements of the first wave have been blotted from history books.[78] She does not speculate about the engineers behind this effort, merely gestures towards a possible set of a covert group working in concert, keeping some distance from outright conspiratorial thinking. Firestone may do so because by 1970, feminism's burgeoning theoretical tradition provided enough footing not to slip into conspiratorial frameworks of power.

Firestone and Millet discuss representations of the family in oppressive systems in terms which are recognisable from dystopic fictions such as *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) or *Brave New World* (1932) and which appears in the conspiratorial science fiction of Dick's *Ubik* as well, discussed in Chapter 2. Linking the family to pre-war population growth efforts and postwar fears of an overpopulated planet, Millet reads the 'patriarchal family' as a tool for (patriarchal) 'governments who manipulate population growth' by having 'two choices: making maternity pleasant, or making it inescapable.'[79] The ultimate goal, according to Millet, is 'suppressing and inhibiting female sexuality altogether and converting it into a state-directed process of human reproduction.'[80] In ascribing conspiratorial scheming to state power, Millet registers the paradigm shift of American conspiracism after the Kennedy assassination which increasingly saw the government as a conspiracy against American citizens.

Firestone's discussion of the family centres on its representation as men's last refuge from conspiratorial, de-individualising forces. Firestone describes this trope in emotive terms:

> The family (which, despite its oppressiveness, is now the last refuge from the encroaching power of the state, that provides the little emotional warmth, privacy, and individual comfort now available) would be destroyed, letting this horror penetrate indoors.[81]

Firestone claims the source of tension within dystopian books such as *1984* or *Brave New World* is rooted in the alienation of capitalism creeping into the home as well,

---

[78] Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: Quill, 1993), p. 31.
[79] Kate Millet, *Sexual Politics* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), p. 166.
[80] Millet, p. 164.
[81] Firestone, p. 196.

threatening what little warmth and sense of belonging the worker may feel within his family. Firestone directly tackles the allusions to genre fiction inherent her critique of the nuclear family, writing about how such fiction imagines life characterised by 'cold collectives, with individualism abolished, sex reduced to mechanical effect ... Big Brother intruding into every aspect of private life.'[82] Firestone's ire is directed at the sexism of such imagery which centres domesticity as a refuge for men, disregarding feminism's efforts in opening 'the door of all those pretty suburban houses…to permit a glimpse of uncounted thousands of American housewives who suffered alone.'[83] This critique is literalised in Levin's *Stepford Wives*, in which suburban domesticity becomes the source of danger. However, domesticity re-emerges as an asylum from conspiratorial oppression in the thrillers of Eco and Brown, written near and after the end of the Cold War.

Between the early nineteen-seventies and the end of the nineteen-nineties, both radical and liberal feminists of the second wave increasingly avoided relying on conspiratorial models of the patriarchy. One exception is found in the difference feminism of Mary Daly, whose *Gyn/ecology* (1978) employs associative leaps similar to what Umberto Eco terms 'Hermetic drift'. Eco describes 'interpretive habit' of infinite free associative semiosis as the 'basic principle' built on the assertion that 'the similar can be known through the similar' ultimately amounting to the conspiracist axiom that everything is connected.[84] Daly's similarity to Eco's theory can be seen in Daly's semantic jumps from hagiography to 'Hag-ography' to 'haggard writing', deriving meaning from similarity.[85] A similar conspiratorial element is found in Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* (1986), which frames the 'lost' ritual of Eleusis as the most important of all mysteries. Rich sees the modern equivalent of the mysteries in feminist sisterhood, advocating for a 'a strong line of love, confirmation, and example stretch[ing] from mother to daughter, from woman to woman across the generations,'[86] thus, via this matriarchal conspiracy, offering a countermeasure to patriarchal oppression. The importance Rich gives to Eleusis also

---

82 Ibid.
83 Friedan, p. 21.
84 Umberto Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 24.
85 Mary Daly, *Gyn/ecology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), p. 14-15.
86 Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1976), p. 246.

provides a fascinating contrast with Brown's fictional conspiracy in *The Da Vinci Code*, one which absolutely centres on bloodlines and motherhood but which, as we will see in Chapter 3, uses its ostensibly feminist conspiracy to advocate for a slightly updated version of the patriarchy. These examples highlight that while conspiratorial models of patriarchy are relatively rare, techniques of conspiracy are present in the difference and lesbian feminisms of Daly and Rich even after Kennedy and Watergate makes conspiratorial language hopelessly loaded.

Conspiratorial frameworks are likewise absent from Black feminist texts. Both bell hooks and Audre Lorde opted for a carefully measured language which frames patriarchy as a disembodied system of power as opposed to the covert group agency of influential men. In *Feminist Theory: from Margin to Center* (1984), hooks argues the motive behind violence against women is to be found in 'perverted power relations', 'emotional powerlessness', and 'lack of control.'[87] By pointing straight at power, hooks discards the need for conspiratorial misdirection. In her open letter to Mary Daly, published in *Sister Outsider* (1984), Lorde writes that 'for nonwhite women in this country, there is ... three times the number of unnecessary eventrations, hysterectomies and sterilizations as for white women; three times as many chances of being raped, murdered, or assaulted as exist for white women. These are statistical facts, not coincidences nor paranoid fantasies.'[88] The rhetoric of conspiracy is inappropriate for hooks and Lorde because racial oppression operates via plain force: conspiracy is only intelligible when oppression is covert or its agents are hidden. Black and intersectional feminists saw the root of gendered problems in America's white supremacist capitalist patriarchy and thus had no need for conspiratorial frameworks.[89]

In a way, the reverse is also true: conspiracy narratives are inhospitable to intersectionality. The four authors discussed in *Like a Bird Caught in Cobwebs* dial

---

[87] bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 77.

[88] Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1996), p. 120.

[89] Black feminism's avoidance of conspiratorial frameworks is all the more striking considering the instances when racial oppression did take decidedly conspiratorial forms, such as the Tuskegee Syphilis Study during which Black men were used as test subjects for decades without their consent or knowledge, or the forced sterilisation of Native American, Puerto Rican, and Black women. For an overview of gender, race, and the occasionally conspiratorial language attached to these concerns in twentieth-century United States, see Jennifer Nelson, *Women of Color and the Reproductive Rights Movement* (New York University Press, 2003), especially Chapters 3 and 4; and Linda Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women* (University of Illinois Press, 2002), Part 4.

down questions of race, despite the persistency and intensity of racial tensions during the American mid-to-late twentieth century. Put another way, while the conspiracy narratives examined in this thesis freely emplot one momentous social shift—second-wave feminism—they tend to avert their gaze from the other, concurrent, and equally consequential process of racial liberation.[90] When race does surface, as it briefly does in *The Stepford Wives* and *Foucault's Pendulum*, it is either folded into the text's broader, non-racialised, *de facto* white conspiracy, or the intersectional character—who is both gendered and racialised—is expelled from the narrative without really engaging with the conspiracy as a conspirator or as a victim. The submersion of racial identity under gendered identity appears in *The Stepford Wives* through the character of Ruthanne Hendry, a Black author of children's books who—the novel's final chapters imply—will be the next victim of the Men's Association. Ruthanne's husband readily allies himself with Stepford's all-white conspiracy of men, and Ruthanne's Blackness does not insulate her from being betrayed by her husband, highlighting how, in the conspiracy of *The Stepford Wives*, gendered allegiances overwrite racial ones. The character of Amparo from *Foucault's Pendulum* exemplifies the inhospitability of conspiracy narratives to intersecting oppressions. As I discuss in more detail in Chapter 3, Amparo is essentialised both through her gender and through her Brazilian heritage, prompting her expulsion from the conspiracy narrative.

After the studious disavowal between the seventies and the nineties, conspiracy resurfaces in the works of liberal feminists and postfeminists. Examples of conspiratorial accusations emerge in and about white liberal feminism, in particular as a response to its perceived disarray. Young women's unwillingness to identify as feminists was much discussed, for example, in a 1997 *Times* article which described how 'a generation of young women that undoubtedly benefited from its mothers' militancy now finds itself beginning to question the worth of some of those hard-won victories.'[91] As we will see in Chapter 3 in more detail, Susan Faludi's *Backlash* (1991) discusses the rise in anti-feminist voices in terms which approximate the covert group agency of conspiracies. A more striking development is Faludi's use of conspiratorial accusations to discredit these anti-feminists. Faludi

---

[90] Levin's somewhat more explicit treatment of American Jewishness is covered in Chapter 1.
[91] Jane Shilling, 'Footloose or oppressed?', *The Times*, 17 March 1998, p. 17.

quotes and ridicules the charges made by anti-feminists that feminism is a form of conspiracy, thereby proving them paranoid and unreasonable.

Smearing ideological opponents as conspiracists emerges within feminism as well, for example in Rene Denfeld's *The New Victorians: a Young Woman's Challenge to the Old Feminist Order* (1995). While Denfeld does not use 'postfeminism' in her book to describe her stance, *The New Victorians* generally aligns with the tenets commonly ascribed to postfeminism, such as criticising mainstream feminism for becoming 'totalitarian and inflexible', for 'pursuing an agenda based on an unswerving belief in female victimisation', and for its 'open hostility to heterosexual practices.'[92] Lamenting young women's refusal 'to join the women's movement' and their rejection of 'feminist label', Denfeld wields conspiratorial accusations against contemporary feminism in the United States, chiefly against the high-profile figureheads of white liberal feminism such as Gloria Steinem and Susan Faludi.[93] Young women were disillusioned with feminism, Denfeld argues, because it became too invested in the conspiratorial model of patriarchy and those who '[encounter] feminism today can't be blamed if they feel they've entered a den of conspiracy nuts.'[94] Conspiracy, then, becomes a tool of postfeminist censure by the 1990s in the form of conspiratorial accusations; a way of pinning blame not on a conspiracy *per se* but on those who engage in conspiracism and are thereby deluded and unfit for leadership.

A striking feature of this development is its intelligibility as an internal power struggle: Denfeld does not want to abolish feminism, merely to change its direction. *The Da Vinci Code* enacts a similar manoeuvre via the conspiratorial exorcism of the figureheads of patriarchy, installing, in the end, an updated version of the very same institution. Conspiratorial accusations, then, are especially suitable in cases when the accuser is unwilling to consider the need for structural change because they benefit from the very same structure, as is the case with, for example, patriarchy for Brown's protagonist or mainstream and academic feminism for Denfeld.

---

[92] Sarah Gamble, 'Postfeminism', in *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2006), p. 39.
[93] Rene Denfeld, *The New Victorians: A Young Woman's Challenge to the Old Feminist Order* (New York: Warner Books, 1994), pp. 36-45 (p. 2).
[94] Denfeld, p. 155.

As we have seen, radical and liberal feminisms of the 1960s and 1970s had an ambiguous relationship with conspiracy, exploiting its emotive and theoretical potential as a signifier of diffuse power structures, while at the same time disavowing it as a pejorative cultural marker. Conspiratorial models of the patriarchy are more overt in Friedan's white liberal feminism than Firestone and Millet's radical feminist texts, and are by and large absent from Black feminist scholarship. Conspiracy as a model for patriarchy goes mostly dormant between the 1970s and the 1990s; however, tools of conspiratorial thinking surface in the work of Adrienne Rich or Mary Daly during the 1980s. In the 1990s a new mode emerges in the form of conspiratorial accusations, which takes the form of discrediting attacks against one's opponent within the same structures of power. The process of (Gothic) appropriation and resurgence is mirrored in the texts which bookend present thesis. As we will see in Chapter 1, Levin uses conspiracy for feminist ends, while Brown deploys conspiracy to accuse specific historical actors of instigating and upholding the patriarchal oppression of women. All three chapters, however, discuss gendered performance via the vehicle of generic signifiers, tropes, and conventions.

Genre fiction and the notion of the popular

Like a Bird Caught in Cobwebs focuses on genre fiction in order to correct what I perceive to be an undue emphasis on literary fictions of paranoia at the expense of 'popular' narratives. The overemphasis on middle- and highbrow literary fiction exists despite the frequent descriptions of conspiracy as a phenomenon of popular culture, for example, in Robertson's discussion of the 'commonality between conspiracist and popular millennial discourses,'[95] Olmstead's aside about how '[t]elevision shows and pulp novels also contributed to the 'age of conspiracy,''[96] Fenster's distrust of summary dismissals of 'conspiracy theory as a popular political practice,'[97] or Hofstadter's example of the 'popular left-wing press' as being guilty of using the 'paranoid style.'[98]

---

[95] David G. Robertson, *UFOs, Conspiracy Theories and the New Age: Millennial Conspiracism* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), p. 27.
[96] Olmstead, p. 168.
[97] Mark Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p. 51.
[98] Hofstadter, p. 78.

Discussions of popular culture are often compartmentalised in conspiracy scholarship in much the same way as gender: at best relegated to a singular chapter, at worst banished to the footnotes. Samuel Chase Coale's chapter 'Conspiracy in Fiction' in *Paradigms of Paranoia* (2005) is particularly illustrative of this scholarly tendency. The chapter establishes that conspiracy thrives in popular fiction including Dan Brown's thrillers, 'hard-boiled novels,' 'popular gothic fiction,' 'mystery' and 'religious' novels.[99] The remaining chapters are each dedicated to a literary juggernaut of paranoid fiction: Didion, DeLillo, Pynchon, and Toni Morrison. This structure illustrates how genre fiction is treated as tangential rather than what I see it as: an essential part of the conspiracist literary tradition of the United States in the latter part of the twentieth century.

For critics of the early and mid-twentieth century, the 'popular' signified the opposite or underclass of a purported literary, with studies variably focusing on markers of 'significant creative achievement,'[100] the notion of addiction,[101] or the 'unending sameness' of the culture industry.[102] These writers critiqued the popular for different reasons: Leavis stressed the importance of qualitative discernment of texts which promote an 'awareness of the human possibilities of life';[103] whereas Horkheimer and Adorno lamented the deadening effects of a cultural landscape controlled by capital. Underpinning these critiques, however, is the shared—and by today, outdated—belief that there is a meaningful separation between 'popular' and 'literary' texts.

By the late twentieth century, theories of popular fiction had, by and large, moved beyond simplistic oppositions between the consumer items of 'low' culture and the art of 'high' culture. Stuart Hall took exception to earlier critiques' framing of consumers of popular fiction as cultural dupes, writing that 'the notion of the people as a purely passive … force is a deeply unsocialist perspective.'[104] Clive Bloom in

---

[99] Samuel Chase Coale, *Paradigms of Paranoia: The Culture of Conspiracy in Contemporary American Fiction* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005), pp. 33-52.

[100] F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (New York: George R. Stewart, 1950), p. 2.

[101] Kingsley Amis, *New Maps of Hell: A Survey of Science Fiction* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co, 1960), p. 17.

[102] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), p. 106.

[103] Leavis, p. 2.

[104] Stuart Hall, 'Notes on Deconstructing 'the Popular'', in *Essential Essays: Volume I*, ed. by David Morley (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), pp. 347–361 (p. 353).

Bestsellers understood popular fiction by looking at books with 'phenomenal sales over a very short period of time.'[105] However, Bloom himself admits the problems of a mathematical approach—that is, locating popular novels by tallying the number of copies sold—by pointing to the 'difference between a bestseller, a fast seller and a steady seller,'[106] as well as the unreliability and unavailability of sales data.[107] Yet, Bloom still writes of books with 'real merit' as opposed to 'ephemeral' titles without qualifying what those terms really mean.[108]

By degrees, the notion of the popular became equated with discussions on genre during the twentieth century. Jacques Derrida's 'The Law of Genre' was a key step in this process, and towards establishing genre fiction as a subject worthy of academic inquiry. Relying on the expansive and overlapping meaning of genre/gender in French, Derrida's essay argued that 'as soon as genre announces itself, one must respect a norm, one must not cross a line of demarcation, one must not risk impurity:'[109] that is, in conforming to norms of genre, texts demarcate the borders of their own genre and that of genre fiction as a whole, without which the concept of the 'literary' or non-genre text cannot exist; indeed Derrida denies the existence of a 'genreless text' altogether.[110] Another milestone was Janice Radway's study of the romance. *Reading the Romance* (1984), which, in addition to mapping a highly gendered and much maligned genre, has proved that the assumption that consumers of popular fiction are dupes or addicts is categorically false, since, as Radway argues, readers of the romance cultivate and apply reading expertise while consuming their preferred genres.

Recent scholarship sometimes bypasses defining popular fiction entirely,[111] instead opting to approach the topic via the assumption that if a text belongs to an identifiable genre, it is likely to fall under the wider umbrella of 'the popular.' Ken

---

[105] Clive Bloom, *Bestsellers: Popular Fiction since 1900* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 4.
[106] Bloom, p. 1.
[107] Bloom, p. xviii.
[108] Bloom, p. 1.
[109] Jacques Derrida, 'The Law of Genre', transl. by Avital Ronell, *Critical Inquiry*, 7.1 (1980), 55–81 (p. 57).
[110] Derrida, p. 65.
[111] Examples include the introductory chapters in David Glover and Scott McCracken, eds., *Cambridge Companion to Popular Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Bernice M. Murphy and Stephen Matterson, eds., *Twenty-First-Century Popular Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018).

Gelder goes as far as to assert that 'popular fiction is, essentially, genre fiction.'[112] While there is certainly a broad overlap between the two, Gelder's definition invites obvious counterexamples of novels not usually classed as popular fiction but which do belong to a genre, such as William Faulkner's Gothic novels or Cormac McCarthy's Westerns.

For its specific aims of pursuing gender and genre in conspiracy fiction, *Like a Bird Caught in Cobwebs* aligns with Gelder in equating popular fiction with genre fiction. I further understand popular fiction as displaying a cluster of traits relating to its form, content, and publishing practice. Items of popular culture, including fiction, *generally*: aim for high sales; belong to an identifiable genre; are translatable and often translated across media; have more emphasis on plot than introspection; and their primary measure by consumers is their pleasure-giving capacity.[113] Not all my texts possess all these traits, but they do exhibit enough to treat them as an identifiable, intelligible unit. In formulating this definition, I rely on the work of John Frow and Heather Dubrow on genre.

Frow understands 'genre as a form of symbolic action: the generic organisation of language, images, gestures, and sound' which 'actively [shape] the way we understand the world.'[114] Genre texts, according to Frow, do not "belong' to genres but are, rather, uses of them', and in the process, 'create effects of reality and truth, authority and plausibility.'[115] Frow's ethos becomes useful to my purposes by articulating how the tropes, concerns, and conventions of genre circulate in fiction and everyday discourse in a multidirectional process of negotiation between author, audience, and industry gatekeepers. For example, 'Stepford wife' has become a shorthand for a slavish homemaker, likely derived from Bryan Forbes' movie adaptation of Ira Levin's novel;[116] Levin himself has expressed guilt about possibly launching the Satanic Panic of the 1980s with *Rosemary's Baby*;[117] and a 2005

---

[112] Ken Gelder, *Popular Fiction: The Logic and Practices of a Literary Field* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 1.

[113] For a similar list, see Bernice M. Murphy, 'Introduction', in *Key Concepts in Contemporary Popular Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), pp. 1-14.

[114] John Frow, *Genre* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 2.

[115] Frow, *Genre*, p. 2.

[116] I base this guess on a key difference between the novel and the movie. In the movie, the existence of the androids is confirmed while the novel only implies the women's demise.

[117] Suki Sandler, *Ira Levin: Oral History Memoir*, transcript of interview, The New York Public Library Digital Collections, 12 March 1992, pp. 34-35 <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/598950c0-02e1-0131-cf99-58d385a7b928> [accessed 7 March 2023].

British survey indicated that '64% of readers [of *The Da Vinci Code*] believed that there was some truth to the idea that Jesus and Mary Magdalene had children.'[118] Genre fiction, belieing its purported limitations and ephemerality, can have a profound and long-lasting impact on the non-fictional world.

Aligning with my approach of conspiracy novels as encoded expressions of anxiety, Dubrow argues that 'popular forms provide us with a socially acceptable forum for acknowledging our worries', a prospect which becomes appealing 'precisely because what might otherwise be an unmanageable terror'—in the case of violent genres such as the detective novel or the thriller—'is transmuted into a pleasurable *frisson*.'[119] More importantly, Dubrow argues 'the way genre establishes a relationship between author and reader might fruitfully be labelled a generic contract,'[120] signalled by the conventions of genre which set up a framework of expectations: say, if a movie poster includes a man on horseback and wearing a cowboy hat, we might also reasonably expect cinematic shots of expansive North American vistas, gun violence, and the appearance of Native Americans as befits the Western. Via these signals of expectation, Dubrow argues, 'the generic contract allows us to maintain the appropriate mood and to concentrate on what is most significant about the work.'[121]

Rather than approaching the rules of genre in legal terms, as Derrida's 'law of genre' and Dubrow's 'generic contract' indicates, I prefer to see these constraints as rules of play. I see a ludic quality in the parameters set up by generic conventions, which invites the reader to play along while engaging with the narrative, promising to satisfy some of these expectations and subvert or ignore others. These generic demarcations, I argue, are essential for the enjoyment of genre fiction in a similar way rules are essential for the enjoyment of other forms of play such as sport, establishing a crucial difference between, for example, a game of golf from a stroll in the park. This ludic framework of genre is especially suitable for the present thesis since, as I argue, conspiracy fiction has been a considerable source of entertainment

---

[118] Anna Kaisa Newheiser, Miguel Farias, and Nicole Tausch, 'The Functional Nature of Conspiracy Beliefs: Examining the Underpinnings of Belief in the *Da Vinci Code* Conspiracy', *Personality and Individual Differences*, 51.8 (2011), 1007–11 (p. 1008).
[119] Heather Dubrow, *Genre: The Critical Idiom* (London: Methuen, 1982), p. 33.
[120] Dubrow, pp. 31-32.
[121] Dubrow, p. 31.

in twentieth-century popular culture; a capacity which has been underinvestigated by the academic *corpus* of conspiracy so far.

This thesis traces Anglophone conspiracy fiction throughout the middle and the second part of the twentieth century on these terms: as examples of literary entertainment rooted in multiple generic traditions; as expressions of gendered anxieties reflecting the unsettling of gender roles in the wake of second-wave feminist theory and campaigning; and as barometers of the ontological destabilisation associated with postmodernism. The disparate generic iterations of conspiracy fiction discussed in this thesis reflect the changing status of gender, genre, and conspiracy in American discourse. *Like a Bird Caught in Cobwebs* traces this process by treating conspiracy fiction as a coherent unit of popular fiction, placing these novels in dialogue with each other and with wider socio-cultural currents.

Chapter 1. Ira Levin's feminisms and patriarchy-as-conspiracy in the Gothic tradition

In late February of 1975, *The New York Times* reported on a special screening of the movie adaptation of Ira Levin's *The Stepford Wives* (1972).[1] The event, advertised as 'an evening for wives and other women', was put on by Columbia Pictures 'in the hopes it would drum up interest' among female viewers, for which end they invited over a hundred prominent female artists, authors, producers, and feminist activists, including Betty Friedan.[2] The article reporting the event lays bare a number of assumptions on behalf of Columbia Pictures and *The New York Times*, giving a snapshot of how mass media perceived and chose to communicate to their audience. The phrasing of 'wives and other women', for one, reveals that feminism was sometimes seen as a marital issue; an impression perhaps explained by Friedan's emphasis on the demographic of married (white, suburban) women in *The*

---

[1] Judy Klemesrud, 'Feminists Recoil at Film Designed to Relate to Them', *New York Times*, 26 February 1975, p. 29.
[2] Klemesrud, 29.

Feminine Mystique. Feminism as marital crisis is also true of Ira Levin's novels and plays as well, where husbands habitually conspire against their wives.

The article also reveals the assumption that *The Stepford Wives* must be a feminist movie. The rationale behind this assumption appears to be the movie's female-centred plot ('finally, a movie that is not about two guys and their adventures') and that 'the film includes a consciousness-raising session … and frequent references to the women's movement.'[3] The article's author is correct in pinpointing that the movie, as well Levin's novel, used the nascent second-wave feminist movement as raw material. Yet representing feminism alone does not make *The Stepford Wives* a feminist text, a point made by Betty Friedan quite forcefully when she reportedly declared 'I don't think we should help publicize this movie. It's a rip-off of the women's movement' before walking out of the screening, taking some of the audience with her.[4] Not everybody hated the movie, of course: the evening's host declared that 'I thought sure Betty Friedan would stand up and say, '[y]es, this is just the way that men treat women.'' One audience member agreed, saying 'those men [in the film] were like a lot of men I've known ... They really do want wives who are robots.'[5] It seems that, in the end, the movie *The Stepford Wives* had literalised the metaphor of patriarchal oppression for at least some of those in attendance.

Earlier, we covered second-wave feminism's ambiguous relationship with conspiratorial models of the patriarchy. Some feminists, including Friedan, have made use of conspiracy fiction's tropes—opulent dwellings, mysterious puppetmasters, powerful secrets—while emphatically denying their investment in conspiratorial thinking. This somewhat duplicitous rhetorical manoeuvre was necessitated, I argued previously, by second-wave feminism's not yet solidified cultural capital as a consequential civil movement in 1960s America. By the 1970s, however, the movement has achieved a level of cultural penetration to be secure in its foothold within the American political landscape; a security emblematised by, partly, the burgeoning of feminist theory and partly by a slew of significant legal victories, including the outlawing of sex discrimination in education (Title IX of the Education Amendments, 1972), in credit applications (Equal Credit Opportunity Act,

---

[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.

1974), and in housing (Fair Housing Act, 1974) and the legalisation of abortion (*Roe v Wade*, 1973). By the early 1970s, then, it has become clear—to the feminist movement itself and to its opponents—that the second wave was here to stay.

As such, conspiratorial models of the patriarchy became not only a 'rip-off', in Friedan's words, but an embarrassing reminder of the early years' political insecurity and rhetorical missteps. Friedan's reaction admits that conspiracy-as-patriarchy has had some currency in feminist thinking, and that, by 1974, figureheads such as Friedan sought to permanently distance themselves from frameworks of patriarchal oppression that resembled a conspiracy. Ira Levin was neither female nor publicly associated with feminism in any way, which, perhaps paradoxically, allowed him to fully embrace the model of patriarchy-as-conspiracy and explore its feminist potential in two of his novels, *Rosemary's Baby* and *The Stepford Wives*. Levin, like Friedan, reaches for the Gothic to represent the anxiety of white, middle-class, heterosexual women who are starting to suspect their marriages are not simply unfulfilling but are actively harmful to their wellbeing. In the two novels I discuss in this chapter, Levin literalises and extrapolates this female marital anxiety into a conspiratorial plot against the protagonists' body and soul. In other words, Levin's two novels employ conspiracy to create narrative tension by understanding conspiracy as a diegetically realistic threat, instead of using conspiracy as an inroad towards expressions of anxiety about a perceived ontological disintegration in the vein of *Ubik* or *Foucault's Pendulum*. By and large, these two novels retain a faith in the knowability of reality and as such, they represent a proto-postmodernist mode which I approach through the analogous fiction of Shirley Jackson.

Levin's Gothicism

The conspiracies of *Rosemary's Baby* and *The Stepford Wives* are characterised by the emotive charges of fear and suspicion, making the Gothic a suitable genre for Levin's conspiracy fiction. Conspiratorial elements have been present in the Gothic from its inception in the eighteenth century, the genre's customary lost heirs, secret passages, and tyrannical patriarchs forming a narrative tangle resembling a conspiratorial covert group agency against the heroines of Ann Radcliffe, Charles Brockden Brown, or Horace Walpole. The two novels discussed in this chapter fulfil Norman Holland and Leona Sherman's definition of the Gothic as 'woman-plus-habitation' and its 'plot of mysterious sexual and supernatural threats in an

atmosphere of dynastic mysteries within the habitation.'[6] In both novels, for example, the fate of the heroines is determined by the type of habitation they chose to inhabit: the Gothic apartment building of the Bramford and the sinister suburbs of Stepford. *Rosemary's Baby* and *The Stepford Wives* also qualify as contemporary Gothic fiction, where 'contemporary' may refer to being set in their present historical moment (as opposed to a historicised, distant past), or it may refer to Clive Bloom's definition of 'contemporary' as being published within 'the last hundred years.'[7]

Beyond these rather expansive definitions, however, finding the exact place of Levin within the mid-twentieth-century American Gothic becomes a complex venture. Simon Brown situates Levin as 'part of the vanguard of a transformation in horror that was taking place in the late 1960s and early 1970' in America which 'updated traditional horror monsters … into the modern world.'[8] For Brown, this 'modern literary horror' is clustered around, and best exemplified by, the fiction of Stephen King.[9] Brown's placement of Levin within this tradition is fundamentally sound, yet, it does not account for the strong ties which connect Levin's fiction to other contemporary popular genres and traditions. Sharon Marcus notes how the 'urban plot' of *Rosemary's Baby* allies the novel with 'New York City fiction', in which the 'Horatio Alger character … soars from rags to riches. Though that character was emphatically male, female versions of that tale appeared throughout the 1950s and 1960s in popular novels like Jacqueline Susann's *Valley of the Dolls* (1966) and Grace Metallous's *Peyton Place* (1956).'[10] Discussing *The Stepford Wives* as part of the twentieth-century Suburban Gothic tradition, Bernice Murphy places Levin's novel in company that ranges from Richard Matheson to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003).[11]

Both *Rosemary's Baby* and *The Stepford Wives* align with Joan Lidoff's 'domestic gothic' via their settings and via relying on the 'aesthetic transformation of

---

[6] Norman N. Holland, and Leona F. Sherman, 'Gothic Possibilities', *New Literary History*, 8.2 (1977), 279–94 (p. 279).

[7] Clive Bloom, 'Introduction to the Gothic Handbook Series: Welcome to Hell', *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Gothic*, ed. by Clive Bloom (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp. 1-27 (p. 20).

[8] Simon Brown, 'James Herbert's Working-Class Horror', in *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Gothic*, ed. by Bloom, pp. 275-90 (p. 277, 288).

[9] Brown, 'James Herbert's Working-Class Horror', p. 288.

[10] Sharon Marcus, 'Placing Rosemary's Baby', *Differences*, 5.3 (1993), 121–53 (p. 128).

[11] Bernice M. Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 10-11.

feminine anger'[12] which gains powerful expression in Rosemary spitting in the face of her Satanist-conspirator husband. Levin is excluded, on account of his gender, from the Female Gothic defined by Ellen Moers as 'the work that women writers have done in the literary mode that … we have called the Gothic.'[13] However, Susanne Becker's formulation on the 'feminine Gothic' offers a suitable way to approach Levin's Gothic fiction. Becker's feminine Gothic 'shift[s] the focus from novels written by women—female gothic—to women-centred novels—feminine gothic', refocusing the discussion from authorial gender to the 'gendered subjectivity in the text.'[14] As we shall see in this chapter, Levin's novels explore at length their female protagonists' white, middle-class, heteronormative subjectivity, imagining their experience of mid-century American life as a conspiratorial plot.

The importance of female subjectivity in *Rosemary's Baby* and *The Stepford Wives* links Levin's work to another key subgenre which has been variously called the 'Modern Gothic', 'the Gothic', or the 'gothic romance'. Joanna Russ approaches these novels through their reliably repetitive tropes, including the 'large, lonely, usually brooding House', a 'young, orphaned' Heroine, an older, 'sardonic Super-Male', a gentle and marriage-minded 'Shadow-Male', the promiscuous 'Other Woman' and the narratively indispensable 'Buried Ominous Secret.'[15] Tania Modleski compares Harlequin and Gothic romances, arguing that both 'deal with women's fears of and confusion about masculine behavior in a world in which men learn to devalue women,' and drawing up an oppositional dynamic where 'the Harlequin heroine's feelings undergo a transformation from fear into love, whereas for the Gothic heroine, the transformation is from love into fear.'[16] Both the granular tropes of Russ and the overarching themes of Modleski are present, to a certain degree, in Levin's *Rosemary's Baby* and *The Stepford Wives*: as such, the original audience of the novels would have read them within the context of the Gothic romance.

---

[12] Joan Lidoff, 'Domestic Gothic: The Imagery of Anger, Christina Stead's 'Man Who Loved Children''', *Studies in the Novel*, 11.2 (1979), 201–15 (pp. 201).
[13] Ellen Moers, *Literary Women: The Great Writers* (New York: Doubleday, 1976), p. 90.
[14] Susanne Becker, *Gothic Forms of Feminine Fictions* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), pp. 16-17.
[15] Joanna Russ, 'Somebody's Trying to Kill Me and I Think It's My Husband', *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 6.4 (1973), 666–91 (pp. 668-69).
[16] Tania Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women* (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 52, 54.

A recent chapter by Holly Hirst builds on Russ' and Modleski's analyses, which allows me to account for the discrepancies with the 'Modern Gothic' formula and Levin's two novels discussed in this thesis. Hirst's chapter highlights how previous criticism has oversimplified the gothic romances' complex 'exploration of female inter-relationships' as the rivalry between—to use Russ' taxonomy—the Heroine and the Other Woman.[17] As we will see in this chapter, Rosemary and Joanna draw vital support from their friendships with female peers, and have complex and varied relationships with other, more antagonistic female characters who nevertheless do not conform to the trope of the promiscuous Other Woman. By 'disagreeing with totalising interpretations of the 'dark hero,"[18] Hirst also draws attention to the reductive qualities of previous male typologies; for example, Russ' dualistic model of the domesticated but duplicitous Shadow-Male and the wild Super-Male who is ultimately tamed in marriage by the Heroine. There are only traces of these masculine tropes in Levin's fiction, where unworthy husbands successfully conspire against their wives and conspiring masculine patriarchs—Satan and Dale Coba—remain, due to their lack of sexual or romantic desire for the heroine, untameable and indefatigable.

For the purposes of this chapter, I situate Levin's *Rosemary's Baby* and *The Stepford Wives* more within the tradition of the feminine Gothic as it manifests in the Gothic romance tradition than the male-dominated literary horror exemplified by Stephen King; indeed, Levin's novels could be read as sardonic parodies of the kind of Gothic romances which proliferated in the 1960s and 1970s. *Rosemary's Baby* was read, upon publication, within the context of popular Gothic fiction; included in what one review described as the 'paperback downpour of today.'[19] After praising the novel for its 'insidious, sapping impact', the reviewer bluntly admits that he 'would never have bought it unless it cost five shillings and was on a rack in the local chemists.'[20] At the same time, *Rosemary's Baby* and *The Stepford Wives* have undeniably become part—even if not the most discussed part—of the canon of twentieth-century American Gothic literature. In many ways, then, Levin's fiction

---

[17] Holly Hirst, 'The Gothic Romance', in *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Gothic*, ed. by Bloom, pp. 357-372 (p. 360).
[18] Hirst, p. 363.
[19] Alan Brien, 'The Paperback Urge', *The Sunday Times*, 2 February 1969, p. 51.
[20] Brien, p. 51.

defies easy categorisation: it is neither fully popular nor fully literary; it is canonical but often marginalised; it centres female subjectivity but is written by a male author; it borrows the Gothic tropes, but not the main romantic plot, from contemporary novels of Gothic romance.

Reading Levin's texts as a proto-postmodern alleviates some of these contradictions, providing a critical handle on an author who sits in between categories. Shirley Jackson—another generic misfit with belated critical recognition—provides a useful literary parallel because of these authors' shared interest in emplotting and Gothicising middle-class white women's anxiety in mid-century United States.

Levin, Jackson, and the proto-postmodern

Due to the similarities between the two authors, the recent surge of scholarly work on Jackson provides a suitable inroad for situating Levin in American genre fiction. In particular, Darryl Hattenhauer's study of Jackson as a proto-postmodern author allows me to place Levin's conspiracy fiction on the continuum of postmodern ontological disintegration, traceable throughout the conspiracy novels in this thesis. On this continuum, Levin's *Rosemary's Baby* and *The Stepford Wives* occupy an almost prelapsarian spot as both novels are rooted in a plausible and mundane reality.

Jackson's 'compositional choice', Eric Savoy writes in relation to 'The Lottery' (1948), is 'anchored in the banal textures of everyday life', amounting to a

> a poetic amalgam—at once simple and strange—that brings together a recessive or self-effacing narrative voice; a detached, flat, and cinematic point of view; and the dilation, indeed the perseveration, of the kind of realistic description that is closer to the realism of Balzac than to the excesses of the horror story.[21]

These are eminent traits of Levin's prose as well. Levin's own narrative voice recedes in his novels, giving way to detached, objective descriptions or his female characters' subjective experience. Levin's prose is sparse but functional, with seemingly inconsequential details serving important tasks later. These tasks include plot clues (eg., the arch-conspirator's career with Disney's animatronics in *The*

---

[21] Eric Savoy, 'Between as If and Is: On Shirley Jackson', *Women's Studies*, 46.8 (2017), 827–44 (p. 836).

Stepford Wives), local colour anchoring the text in its time and place (eg., the controversial 1966 'Is God Dead' issue of *Time* magazine and the 1965 papal visit to New York), or elements reflecting the protagonist's personality or state of mind (eg., Rosemary's thoughts while window shopping). Levin's plot-driven, detached, unadorned narrative voice is quite literally cinematic: Roman Polanski's movie adaptation lifts dialogue wholesale from *Rosemary's Baby*, and remains remarkably faithful to the original in set dressing and pacing as well. These elements—banality, simplicity, realism—connect the prose of Jackson and Levin to the late modernist tradition. Furthermore, both authors approach the plight of contemporary, white, middle-class American women through exactly this 'droll domestic reality that … is always already *just about* to spiral into the monstrous.'[22] Or rather, in the case of Levin, the horror of the monstrous compares favourably with the normalised cruelties of traditional, patriarchal marriage: one can uncover a Satanic conspiracy after all, while patriarchy looms much too large for individual solutions.

Both Levin and Jackson write on the threshold of postmodernism. Jackson's position has been described by Hattenhauer, following John Barth, as 'proto-postmodernism', denoting 'late modernist writing that shows traits of what will become postmodernism.'[23] Jackson's proto-postmodernism is neither fully unmoored from reality, like the high postmodernism of Richard Brautigan's *Trout Fishing in America* (1967) or Dick's *Ubik*, nor is it self-referential and metafictional to the degree of Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (1966) or Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum*. The proto-postmodern highlights the faultlines along which observable reality will disintegrate in postmodernism. However, proto-postmodernism's reaction to the ontological and epistemological destabilisation of the late twentieth century is better described as anxious anticipation, in contrast with postmodernism's revelment.

Hattenhauer identifies a key characteristic of proto-postmodernism in the fragmentation of plot and character, resulting in a 'disunified' interiority and narrrative. Hattenhauer's analysis of Jackson's heroines is superbly applicable to Levin's female protagonists as well, in particular, how they

---

[22] Savoy, p. 840.
[23] Darryl Hattenhauer, *Shirley Jackson's American Gothic* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), p. 2.

rarely win, succeed, or transcend. They do not grow as much as they disintegrate. … They exemplify the move from the character as the creator or discoverer of meaning to the character as the captive of meaning.[24]

As we will see in the discussion of Levin's two novels, Rosemary's bitter victory over the Satanic coven comes at a price of total religious and marital disintegration, echoing Hattenhauer's notion of the Jacksonian proto-postmodern's 'unsettling' *dénouements* where 'there is a revelation but it offers no salvation.'[25] The uneasy ending of *Rosemary's Baby* also qualifies as a 'truncated' narrative where 'the plot ends before the story does', approximating but not fully embracing postmodern indeterminacy.[26] While Rosemary can still act, to a certain extent, as a discoverer of meaning, she remains a captive of the meaning imposed upon her by the Satanic coven as the mother of the Antichrist.

The Stepford Wives' Joanna is one step deeper in the oppressive entanglement of meaning: she is replaced entirely by the conspiracy of the Men's Association. Captivity evokes Jameson's 'bird in the cobwebs' and, crucially, the tropes of Gothic entrapment. *The Stepford Wives,* more so than *Rosemary's Baby,* 'trap … characters not only in space but also in time'[27]—temporalities, as we will see in the discussion on Levin's later novel, becoming a major site of power struggle between Stepford's men and women. As such, Levin's proto-postmodern conspiracy fiction exemplifies the early stages of ontological disintegration, where reality is still comprehensible and the conspiracy is still—to a certain degree—solvable, and where the disintegration of characters' interiority, while in progress, remains incomplete.

Robert Genter discusses capitalism as the root cause for the postmodern disintegration of meaning, calling it the 'crisis of representation'—or, following Lyotard, the decline of grand narratives—writing that its 'origins … rested with the historical development of capitalism [which] reduced everything, including human relationships, to monetary exchange.'[28] This crisis of meaning, as we have seen, is

---

[24] Hattenhauer, p. 3.
[25] Hattenhauer, p. 4.
[26] Hattenhauer, pp. 3-4.
[27] Hattenhauer, p. 4.
[28] Robert Genter, 'Proto-Postmodernism', in *American Literature in Transition, 1950–1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 195–208 (p. 202).

also often tied to the increased popularity of conspiracy narratives in the twentieth century, as conspiracies provide a way to counteract the pervasive sense of incertitude. In the following chapters, I discuss the destabilisation of traditional gender roles in the wake of second-wave feminism as an additional vector in this epistemological and ontological breakdown. Conspiracy fiction provides a suitable form to trace this development, because it is inherently concerned with knowledge and power. Genre's use of gendered stereotypes allows me to trace how perceptions and representations of changing gender roles both reflected and contributed to the postmodern destabilization of meaning.

Levin's proto-postmodern Gothic fiction is an appropriate starting point for this discussion because of its dual characteristics: in part, because it opens in a realist *milieu*, presuming the nonexistence of witches, robots, or conspiring husbands, while in part anticipating the postmodern. *Rosemary's Baby* and *The Stepford Wives* demonstrate the change from one to the other, or, rather, the traumatic personal (and female-focused) recognition that a realistic reality—similarly to the payoff women have been promised if they stay within traditional gender roles—cannot be taken for granted anymore. Dick's *Time Out of Joint* predates Levin's novels and has a similar switch from realistic to fantastic. However, Levin's novels ought to be frontloaded for their literalisation of patriarchy as a conspiracy. Patriarchy-as-conspiracy is demonstrably present in the writings of second-wave feminists during the 1960s, paradoxically confirmed by Friedan's protestations against Levin's fictional retelling of the very same conspiratorial framework.

Ira Levin's books wear their themes on their sleeves. An extremely economical writer, Levin chose his titles carefully, summing up their themes in a few words. *Rosemary's Baby*, first and foremost, is concerned with motherhood, Rosemary herself, and domestic spaces, while *The Stepford Wives* focuses on marriage, being a wife and a feminist at the same time, and suburban living. Both novels, it should be noted, centre white, middle-class, heteronormative American womanhood. These two novels map neatly onto two distinct types of conspiracy: conspiracy against the individual (RB), and conspiracy against the collective (SW), informing my treatment of the novels in this chapter. The first half will concentrate on *Rosemary's Baby* and its small-scale conspiracy, including dwellings of the individual and of the nuclear family (the Bramford, Rosemary's apartment, and, as a foil to these, urban streets), isolation (womanhood and motherhood without the net of

family or friendships), and Rosemary's singular youth in the face of an ancient plot. The second half, focusing on *The Stepford Wives*, covers conspiracy as by and against a collective, questions of suburbia as a place of both community and isolation, conspiracy as a countermovement against the mobilisation of feminism, and the power to shape the future on a large scale through the control of children and the media. Taken together, *Rosemary's Baby* and *The Stepford Wives* exemplify conspiracy fiction's capacity to emplot anxieties that are specifically female—even if this femaleness is rather white and affluent—in contrast to the other four novels discussed in this thesis, which are much more preoccupied with masculine anxieties.

Rosemary's Baby and the conspiracy of privacy

In an interview with Levin, the author confessed he found a type of response 'very surprising' regarding *Rosemary's Baby*: 'I've gotten letters from psychiatrists and from doctors who say, This is such a wonderful picture of postpartum depression [both laugh] and postpartum psychosis. I'd say, No, no, she was absolutely right! They really were witches!'[29] The letters from these medical professionals highlight how easy it is to misunderstand the dazzlingly simple conceit at the heart of *Rosemary's Baby*, even by those who are explicitly satirised by the text. Levin's 1967 novel asks: what if all the typical worries of an average mid-century American woman—about her husband's loyalty, about her unexpressed domestic unhappiness, about her baby's health, especially in the wake of the Thalidomide scandal—were not paranoid expressions of a person maladjusted to her 'sex role' but accurate and justified reactions to being surrounded by malevolent patriarchal agents? What if, in short, patriarchy was really a conspiracy?

Today the story of *Rosemary's Baby* is perhaps better known in its 1968 film adaptation directed by Roman Polanski. The movie remained remarkably faithful to the novel, which was a commercial and critical success in its own right; indeed, Levin's biographer credits *Rosemary's Baby* and Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1966) with effecting a 'significant change in the atmosphere in the contemporary literary scene' by recovering 'the gothic for the genteel (or pseudo-genteel) middle ground of best-seller tastes.'[30] While ignoring other successful authors of the Gothic

---

[29] Sandler, p. 34.
[30] Douglas Fowler, *Ira Levin* (Mercer Island: Starmont House, 1988), p. 49.

such as Shirley Jackson, Fowler's statement testifies to Levin's popularity in the late 1960s. The plot of the novel concerns young New York couple Rosemary and Guy Woodhouse, who move to the coveted Gothic apartment building of the Bramford. They befriend Minnie and Roman Castevet, an eccentric but harmless-looking older couple in the Bramford, and their adopted ward, Terry. Rosemary's adjustment to domesticity is disrupted by intrusions from the Castevets, especially Minnie, as well as Terry's sudden suicide. Guy agrees to try for a baby after a sudden illness in a rival results in his first high-profile movie role. As Rosemary later learns, the rival was cursed by the Satanic coven led by the Castevets in exchange for their access to Rosemary, who they secretly designate as the vessel for Satan's offspring. With Guy's collaboration, Rosemary is drugged and raped by Satan at an occult *séance*. Her subsequent pregnancy proves to be difficult and painful, enabled by her obstetrician Dr Sapirstein, who, unbeknownst to Rosemary, is also part of the Satanic coven. Her suspicions of Guy and the Castevets grow as the pregnancy progresses, resulting in the eventual—and partly accidental—accumulation of enough proof of their guilt, prompting her escape from her home. However, she is betrayed by another doctor unaffiliated with the conspiracy. Afterwards, she is imprisoned in her Bramford apartment, where she gives birth to what she believes was a stillborn baby; in reality, the coven takes her and Satan's baby to raise as their own in the Castevet apartment. The novel ends with Rosemary's discovery of the secret passage between their apartments and her reclamation of her Satanic baby.

Rosemary's Baby came out slightly after 1964, designated by Nadel as the endpoint of 'peak cold war America.'[31] The novel is informed by a culture of containment which still exerted profound influence on the United States but was already, clearly, in decay. Conformity 'to some idea of religion, to 'middle-class' values, to distinct gender roles and rigid courtship rituals' as a 'a positive value in and of itself', central to containment culture, still lingered;[32] for example, in Rosemary's unquestioning adoption of the homemaker role after her marriage. Haunting the text is a 'monstrous norm of Family' hatched when, as Pat Macpherson put it, 'pop-Freudianism wed functionalism in post-war mass culture' during the

---

[31] Nadel, p. 4.
[32] Ibid.

1950s.[33] Functionalism, here, refers to a type of gendered analysis dominating public discourse during the mid-century, often preoccupied with defining the 'role' of women and men and offering solutions to feminine discontent in what Friedan condemns as 'the applied field of family-life education.'[34] The result of this totalising norm was, according to Macpherson, 'the paradox that one's role came naturally, and failure to be fulfilled was sign of sickness. So each citizen was set self-policing to enact a 'fulfilled' conformity convincing to others if always fraudulent to oneself. Paranoia proceeds naturally enough from this basic psychic dishonesty, seeking only external screens on which to project the denied self.'[35] Levin provides one such external screen in the Satanic conspiracy of *Rosemary's Baby*.

Betty Friedan was the chronicler of white, middle-class women's rage when they realised their entrapment in Macpherson's paradox and were only offered psychoanalysis as a remedy. In *The Feminine Mystique* Friedan describes Freudian psychoanalysis as part of the problem rather than a solution and a tool of the patriarchy, used to contain (white, middle-class) women within domesticity by making them internalise their discontent as psychological problems. Levin, in *Rosemary's Baby*, offers a biting illustration of this point of the *Feminine Mystique*. In *Rosemary's Baby*, dreams are not obscure signs of internal turmoil but real events and real conversations; sometimes, a Satanic rape is indeed just a Satanic rape. Much criticised by early second-wave feminist writers, Freudian psychoanalysis also gains an indirect mention through the abundance of dream sequences and layman diagnoses of 'prepartum crazies.'[36]

Throughout the novel, authoritarian, top-down sources of knowledge, such as Freudian diagnoses or medical knowledge of male doctors are framed as tools of the conspiracy, while sisterly, peer-to-peer knowledge shared between friends offer a path towards liberation. The novel, then, becomes an excellent case study of conspiratorial epistemologies and a discerning examination on the production and authorisation of knowledge in 1960s America. While *Rosemary's Baby* delivers the Antichrist in its (much-contested) *dénouement*, thereby motioning towards horror on

---

[33] Pat Macpherson, *Reflecting on the* Bell Jar (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 3.
[34] Friedan, p. 118.
[35] Macpherson, pp. 3-4.
[36] Ira Levin, *Rosemary's Baby* (New York: Dell, 1968), p. 198.

a cosmic scale, the novel's main interest lies in Rosemary's personal struggle overcoming her timidity and learning to trust her own judgement, her private worries about her husband, and her individual defiance of the Satanic cult; the scale of *Rosemary's Baby,* then*,* is thoroughly human. The novel thus provides a blueprint of a conspiracy's effect on the individual, asking questions about the spatial settings in which the conspired-against subject finds herself and in which she seeks out, or is denied, knowledge; about the impact of conspiracies on identity; and about the tension between a conspiracy of Biblical timeframes and of a single life – indeed a span of a single pregnancy.

Surveillance and privacy

Rosemary's Baby uses the exteriors and interiors of New York to set up its core tension and the source of its narrative power: that domesticity, understood as a refuge for the middle-class, white segment of America's female population in a patriarchal context, is in fact a source of Rosemary's misery and terror, and the scene of her conspiratorial entrapment. In doing so, Levin draws on a long tradition of domestic Gothic, from Wilkie Collins' *Woman in White* (1859) to the eighteenth-century greats of female Gothic, such as Ann Radcliffe, all of whom used the Gothic to make female suffering visible. Levin's text presents its Gothic tropes with a degree of irony, suggesting an architectural parallel to the novel's conceit: what if things are exactly as bad as they appear to be, and the 'Bramford', the novel's coveted apartment bloc of faded Gothic grandeur, was really a place where ghastly conspiracies ensnared young women.

The 'Bramford' is described as 'a warren of high-ceilinged apartments prized for their fireplaces and Victorian detail' (8) with 'gargoyles and creatures climbing up and down between the windows' (16) on the exterior. These perfectly Gothic details are presented as charming, not foreboding. In fact, we get the sense that Rosemary wants the Bramford apartment *because* of the building's Gothic splendour, as she expresses horror at the thought of living in one of the 'new houses, with neat square rooms that are all exactly alike and television cameras in the elevators' (22). The Gothic trope of the foreboding mansion connects Levin's novel to the contemporary novels of Modern Gothic, as described by Joanna Russ, while also evoking earlier, nineteenth- and eighteenth-century examples of Gothic fiction, from Ann Radcliffe's Gothic romances to Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Fall of the House of Usher' (1839) or

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper' (1892). Somewhat atypically for a Gothic heroine, Rosemary refuses to anticipate archetypal Gothic dangers—deceitful husbands, curses, secret passages—lurking behind the Gothic façade of the Bramford. The building, and Rosemary's romanticising of its Gothic features, sets up a key theme of the novel: the evil baked into certain structures—whether old buildings, patriarchy, or marriage—will exert its power over the individual, especially if the individual thinks herself beyond reach. In Rosemary's revulsion of neat new houses, the novel also touches on fissures starting to form in the logic of the Cold War: conformity as de-individualising homogeneity was linked, in the Cold War imaginary, the 'communist indoctrination to deindividuation'[37] and was therefore suspect.

Rosemary's Baby is emblematic of a similar breakdown in the Cold War concept of the private sphere, the sanctity of which, as Deborah Nelson writes, 'was generally perceived to be the most significant point of contrast between the two regimes' of the United States and the Soviet Union.[38] However,

> if privacy was supposed to symbolize the autonomy, freedom, self-determination, and repose that the citizen of a democracy most valued, it became increasingly evident … that privacy could also represent isolation, loneliness, domination, and routine. Moreover, it was newly obvious that these deprivations of privacy were unevenly distributed; categories of citizens—women or homosexuals—rather than unlucky individuals were banished to the deprivation, rather than the liberation, of privacy.[39]

Rosemary's Baby repeatedly foregrounds the dual nature of privacy, for example, in a phone conversation between Rosemary and her estranged sister. Margaret voices her sense of impending doom: 'I've had the funniest feeling all day long, Rosemary. That something happened to you. Like an accident or something. That you were hurt. ... Stay home tonight, will you?' (72)[40] There is a potent sense of dramatic irony

---

[37] Melley, p. 3.

[38] Nelson, *Pursuing Privacy,* p. xiii.

[39] Nelson, *Pursuing Privacy*, p. xiii.

[40] Rosemary's sister Margaret, like the rest of her family, has distanced herself from Rosemary because of her lapse in Catholicism, her marrying out of faith, and her urban lifestyle. The character of Margaret raises the spectre of a deeply conservative church in general, and of the Second Vatican Council (1962-5) in particular. Thus the text gestures towards the complexities of belonging to an oppressive but protective institution (be that Catholicism or patriarchy), and the changes ancient organisations are making to stay relevant (be that the Vatican Council or Satanism's turn towards the domestic, exemplified by the Castevets).

in this scene, as Margaret is calling on the eve of Rosemary's forced impregnation by Satan. Her intuition is not wrong, yet by urging her to 'stay home', Margaret is unwittingly encouraging Rosemary to stay in the harmful milieu of her home. The phone exchange between the sisters underlines the power of Cold War discourse of privacy, which associated the external world (urbanity, strangers) with danger and the privacy of domesticity with safety, even when such associations did not reflect reality for many women. In Levin's novel in particular, the ideologies of containment and of privacy directly enable Rosemary's ensnarement in the Satanic conspiracy. Domesticity, then, becomes a place of stasis, cocooning Rosemary in her ignorance of the conspiracy in much the same way her body is cocooning Satan's offspring.

Nelson writes of the 'governing paradox' of the Cold War as a fundamental contradiction: 'in the interests of preserving the space of privacy, privacy would have to be penetrated.'[41] Processes of penetration such as surveillance, however, were understood in gendered terms, adding to Rosemary's unwillingness to follow up her growing suspicions. Sharon Marcus demonstrates 'the technical similarities between surveillance and fetal visualization technologies', establishing the gendered difference between the public perception of the act of surveilling depending on the target: 'applied to a mother's abdomen, [the stethoscope] was considered 'legitimate'; applied to a wall, it abetted the disgraceful activity of 'snooping.'[42] Marcus thus claims 'men could lay claim both to privacy and to the aggressive investigative activities or paranoia, while women's privacy, particularly when pregnant, would be blithely invaded and their paranoia either entirely suppressed or stigmatized as delusion.'[43] Due to the gendering of paranoia and of surveillance, including other methods of gathering intelligence, Rosemary is initially unwilling to penetrate the conspiracy either inwardly—by trusting her suspicions and her considerable skills in observation and deduction—or outwardly, by seeking out data externally.

Rosemary's inaction makes her an unusual hero for a conspiracy novel. She is remarkably reluctant to take up the mantle of the 'social detective', in Jameson's parlance, who gradually finds herself 'occupying the intellectual's structural position

---

[41] Nelson, *Pursuing Privacy*, p. xiii.
[42] Marcus, p. 140.
[43] Marcus, p. 132.

by virtue of the premium placed on knowledge or the cognitive' in conspiracy novels.[44] Conspiracy fiction is, Jameson continues, 'perhaps the last contemporary narrative type in which the lone intellectual can still win heroic dimensions.'[45] Neither Jameson nor Fenster formulates it categorically, but the role of the 'lone, heroic investigator'[46] of conspiracy fiction is, as Strombeck correctly states, is 'implicitly… male.'[47] Rosemary's passivity, however, is very much in line with the heroines of Russ' 'Modern Gothic' novels. In a list, Russ defines these female protagonists through the actions they are unable to do, including:

1. Solve an intellectual puzzle …
2. Build a career …
3. Travel and have adventures …
4. Carry out a political conspiracy
5. Head a religious movement
6. Grow up and form her character.[48]

Number 4 is illustrative of the gendering of conspiratorial involvements in mid-century American discourse; however, a more precise entry would include the uncovering of conspiracies as well. This list is further intriguing because Rosemary does, in fact, do all these things apart from building a career. As such, *Rosemary's Baby* stages the remarkable transition of a Gothic heroine who turns, mid-novel, into the 'lone investigator' demanded by conspiracy fiction.

Rosemary has the makings of the investigator via her acuity of perception and deduction. Already in the first chapter, during their viewing of their future apartment in the Bramford, she glimpses a letter on the former tenant's desk which reads: '[g]raceful blue penmanship on mauve paper said *than merely the intriguing pastime I believed it to be. I can no longer associate myself* – and she caught herself snooping and looked up at Mr Micklas turning from Guy. 'Is this desk one of the things Mrs Gardenia's son wants to sell?' she asked' (11). It is evident from this excerpt that Rosemary has a knack for collecting information. Beyond wanting to appear polite, the deft pivot from reading private letters to querying the furniture

---

[44] Fredric Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), p. 38.
[45] Jameson, *Geopolitical Aesthetic*, pp. 38-9.
[46] Fenster, p. 188.
[47] Strombeck, p. 193.
[48] Russ, p. 686.

suggests an awareness that the role of the observant investigator is reserved for men.

The information she collects (the letter) and her coverup (furniture to buy) are both domestic in nature. In the same scene, she notices that one of the heavy secretaries has been moved to block the closet doubling as secret passage. Rosemary is the one to suggest opening the closet and, upon finding a vacuum cleaner and bath towels, is the only person to wonder about the reasons (13). Her concerns are dismissed as unimportant both times by the men around her, and yet, this is the information which allows her to deduce the conspiracy's existence, what role the Castavets play in it, and the hidden door which communicates from her apartment to theirs. Thus while domesticity remains an oppressive milieu, Levin presents Rosemary's feminine, domestic knowledge as a tool of liberation from the conspiracy, creating an alternative to the male lone hero of conspiracy novels. The valuation of feminine knowledges is underlined by the former tenant's mauve paper and graceful handwriting: a sort of proto-*écriture féminine* channelling wisdom from woman to woman.[49]

Anticipating the consciousness-raising sessions from *The Stepford Wives*, peer-to-peer knowledge exchange between women already appears in *Rosemary's Baby*; moreover, it proves to be a vital source of support and a step towards uncovering the conspiracy. During a dinner which she hosts, a group of concerned female friends corner Rosemary to question her unhealthy appearance:

> She was in the kitchen with Tiger, tossing the salad, when Joan and Elise came in and closed the door behind them. … 'Claudia said you had a cramp a while ago.'
> 'I have a pain' she said. 'But it's going to stop soon; it's not abnormal.' …
> 'Every pregnancy is different.'
> 'Not that different,' Joan said. 'You look like Miss Concentration Camp of 1966. Are you sure this doctor knows what he's doing?'

---

[49] Hélène Cixous coined *l'écriture féminine* in 1975 to mean 'women's writing' elaborating that '[w]oman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies—for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal.' The 'fatal goal' is especially pertinent regarding the previous tenant's handwriting, since it is implied that she was killed by the coven after a change of heart. Likewise, being driven away from one's body finds echoes in Rosemary's forced impregnation. Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', trans. by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 1.4 (1976), 875–93 (p. 875).

Rosemary began to sob, quietly and defeatedly. (137)[50]

The friends manage to convince Rosemary that her experience of pain in her own body overrules her doctor's—as we later learn, conspiratorially motivated and false—reassurances. They do so by sharing their own experiences of pregnancy, quite literally shutting Guy out of the conversation ('Hey, let me in,' he said. 'Sorry' Joan said. 'Girls only'), and getting angry at her doctor on her behalf ('*You've been in pain since November and he isn't doing anything for you*? … He sounds like a sadistic *nut'*) (138-39, original emphasis). While Rosemary's personal pain does not quite become political, it does become a community matter for her female friends.

An early, celebratory expression of the feminist need for sisterhood comes from *Sisterhood is Powerful* (1970), an anthology edited by Robin Morgan, which stresses the revolutionary potential of sharing 'concrete personal experiences', affirming that the 'women's movement is a non-hierarchical one. It does things collectively and experimentally.'[51] Morgan's account hits a joyous, hopeful note in asserting how feminism taught women their 'experiences are not our private hang-ups. They are shared by every woman, and are therefore political. The theory, then, comes out of human feeling, not out of textbook rhetoric.'[52] While Rosemary's friends address her in alarm, not in revolutionary zeal, the objective is the same: to share and validate personal experience especially when it goes against wisdom imparted by patriarchal institutions such as the medical field. Sisterhood, as understood by Morgan and depicted by Levin, also shows how both liberal and radical branches of second-wave feminism often excluded non-white, working class women from their understanding of what constitutes womanhood.

Via Rosemary's pregnancy, the novel stages the contemporaneous discourse around the professionalisation of obstetrics by male doctors in mid-twentieth-century United States, during which 'reproductive technology and legal actions colluded to empower the fetus at the expense of the previously sacrosanct pregnant woman.'[53] This engines of this conspiratorial collusion were the '[i]ncreasingly sophisticated

---

[50] As an odd motif in Levin's work, *The Stepford Wives*' Joanna also has a significant revelation about the conspiracy's lies while tossing salad in her kitchen.
[51] Robin Morgan, ed., *Sisterhood Is Powerful* (New York: Random House, 1970), p. xvii-xviii.
[52] Morgan, pp. xvii-xviii.
[53] A. Robin Hoffman, 'How to See the Horror: The Hostile Fetus in Rosemary's Baby and Alien', *LIT Literature Interpretation Theory*, 22.3 (2011), 239–61 (p. 241).

technologies' of obstetrics which 'granted doctors, lawyers, judges, and people in general—although not pregnant women, whose access to their fetuses is presumably already as intimate as possible—greater access to fetuses.'[54] Following Marcus, we have already covered the contemporary anxiety over listening devices which constituted a medical procedure if applied to a pregnant body but amounted to an abhorrent invasion of privacy if applied to someone's home. Advances in imaging technologies extended worries of auditory intrusion into the visual realm, exemplified by 'Nilsson's famous *in vitro* photography series 'Drama of Life Before Birth' in *Life* in 1965,'[55] and by 'the routinization of fetal imaging' after the introduction of ultrasound 'into obstetrical practice [in] the early 1960s.'[56] The result is a hostile takeover of the epistemology of pregnancy by an overwhelmingly male medical body, literalising George Bernard Shaw's oft-quoted quip about how 'all professions'—medicine chief amongst them—'are conspiracies against the laity.'[57]

The conspiratorial nature of this takeover is emblematised in the character of Dr Sapirstein, the doctor labelled a 'sadistic nut' by Rosemary's friends in the kitchen scene. Sapirstein replaces Rosemary's former doctor, Dr Hill, on the recommendation of the Castavets as the top obstetrician in New York; unbeknownst to Rosemary, Sapirstein is also a member of the Satanist coven. On her first visit, Sapirstein tells Rosemary to not 'read books … No pregnancy was ever exactly like the ones described in the books. And don't listen to your friends either. … Any questions you have, call me night or day. Call *me*, not your mother or your Aunt Fanny. That's what I'm here for' (106, original emphasis). Sapirstein's primary aim is to isolate Rosemary so the Satanic conspiracy can control and monitor her pregnant body. However, the doctor's words also align with the contemporaneous valuation of knowledge uttered by male medical professionals over women's lived experience of their pregnancy, as described by Hoffman and Marcus. The parallels between conspiratorial betrayal and medical betrayal are underlined by Rosemary's subsequent treatment by Dr Hill, to whom she turns for refuge after she flees from

---

[54] Hoffman, p. 243.
[55] Hoffman, p. 241.
[56] Rosalind Pollack Petchesky, 'Fetal Images: The Power of Visual Culture in the Politics of Reproduction', *Feminist Studies*, 13.2 (1987), 263-292 (p. 272).
[57] George Bernard Shaw, *The Doctor's Dilemma; a Tragedy* (London: Constable and Company, 1922), p. 28.

the Satanist coven. In Hill's examination room, she tells her story 'quietly and calmly, knowing that any suggestion of hysteria would make him disbelieve her and think her mad' (184), to no avail: while she is resting, thinking she is being fast tracked to a hospital away from the conspiracy, Dr Hill is phoning her husband and Sapirstein. As it is with Rosemary's betrayal by her husband, the real horror is rooted in mundane, real-life gendered injustices rather than the Gothic trappings of curses, witchcraft, or Satanism within the novel.

Despite the centrality of Satan to the narrative, the novel positions religion as an ambivalent and ultimately ineffective antidote to the Satanist conspiracy.[58] Certainly, there are signs that religiosity still wields some real power: the premonition of Rosemary's sister, a still-practicing Catholic, turns out to be correct; Rosemary rules out Sapirstein's involvement in the cult because of his Jewish identity (159); and the coven explicitly targets women who are non-virgins and lapsed Catholics (32) in order to fully pervert the story of immaculate conception. Ultimately, however, the premonition proves to be powerless against the conspiracy, Rosemary is wrong about Sapirstein, and even the coven dismisses the rules which prescribe non-observing Catholics to bear the child of Satan as mere 'prejudices' (79). The blood libel—the historical conspiracy theory which accused Jews of killing and consuming the blood of Christian children—and the Jewish faith surfaces in a similarly ambiguous way. After Rosemary pieces together the identity of her neighbours and realizes they are Satan worshippers, she assumes they want to snatch and kill her baby to use it in their rituals: 'the blood that has the most power is a baby's blood, a baby that hasn't been baptized; and they use more than the blood, they use the flesh too' (158). This suspicion is the essence of blood libel, yet Rosemary trusts Sapirstein, her Jewish doctor, even after she loses her trust in everybody else, including her husband.

---

[58] Out of all Christian denominations, Catholicism is perhaps most prone to attracting conspiratorial narratives and accusations, especially in predominantly Protestant countries. In his chapter titled 'Popish Plots', Pionke discusses the 'language of conspiracy' with which some Victorian authors approach 'English Catholicism' in the nineteenth century (Pionke, pp. 50-51); whilst Hofstadter's first chapter in *The Paranoid Style* follows 'rumors … of a Catholic plot against American values' in various forms across three centuries (Hofstadter, p. 19). Earlier examples of conspiracy-laden players and events in Catholic history include the Jesuits, especially their papal dissolution in 1773, and the trial and execution of Knights Templar leaders in 1307 by the joint forces of Pope Clement V and King Philip IV of France. On the sexual abuse scandal, unfolding in the 1990s and early 2000s, and the way it pertains to *The Da Vinci Code*'s treatment of Catholicism, see footnote 96 in Chapter 3 of this thesis.

The narrative hints at the possibility of Rosemary dismissing Sapirstein as a member of the conspiracy *because* of his Judaism, evoking—and immediately dismissing in polite horror—historical accusations of Jews with Satanic rites and the blood libel. Upon Guy quizzing her if she thinks Sapirstein is in the coven too, Rosemary replies 'No, I don't think he's one of them, … He's—too intelligent.' It is possible Rosemary uses 'intelligent' as a euphemism for 'Jewish', which is quickly taken up by Guy: "And besides, he's Jewish,' Guy said and laughed. 'Well, I'm glad you've exempted somebody from your McCarthy-type smear campaign. Talk about witch-hunting, wow!" (159). The assumption from both appears to be that someone who is Jewish, that is, who already has a religious and ethnic identity, could not possibly be a Satanist as well. Or, rather, Guy frames Rosemary's suspicions of Sapirstein as her backsliding into a specific, middle American, Catholic small-mindedness which she has left behind with her family in favour of the urban heterogeneity of New York.

It is particularly poignant for Guy to invoke McCarthyism, since Jews were often targeted with accusations of being subversives, spies, or communists. Thus accusing Sapirstein is doubly uncomfortable for Rosemary: first, as a Jewish man, he is assumed to be pledged to a higher power incompatible with Satanism; second, such accusation would dredge up a degree of historic guilt in Rosemary about atrocities committed against the Jews, first and foremost the Holocaust. Nearer to the setting of the novel is the 1951 trial and 1953 execution of the Rosenbergs, whose guilt has remained contested up until the end of the century. The Rosenbergs haunt the text in more than one way: the trial in which they were convicted of conspiracy to commit espionage became 'a definitional ceremony in which opposing versions of American Jewish identity competed for ascendancy', especially, Deborah Dash Moore argues, for 'second-generation Jews' and 'those born and bred in New York City,'[59] such as Levin's parents and Levin himself.

Locating the conspiracy: urban, domestic, rural settings

The New York of *Rosemary's Baby* signifies multifaceted meanings attached to urbanity in the contemporary American imagination as a site of both danger and

[59] Deborah Dash Moore, 'Reconsidering the Rosenbergs: Symbol and Substance in Second Generation American Jewish Consciousness', *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 8.1 (1988), 21–37 (pp. 21-22).

liberation. On the one hand, Marcus notes, '[r]eviews of *Rosemary's Baby* consistently identified the novel as a quintessentially New York tale because of its apartment house setting, equating the residential space of the apartment house with the dangers of the city at large.'[60] Further, the novel 'confirms the most paranoid fears of small-town Christian America in relation to New York—that it is a dirty and decadent city filled with non-Christians, a breeding ground for evil, and a place in which young, innocent females are ultimately compromised if not destroyed.'[61] On the other hand, the novel plugs into the contemporary genre of 'New York City fiction' in which 'young women leave small towns for the big cities of New York and Hollywood, where they attain some measure of economic self-sufficiency through jobs in media, advertising, and business.'[62] While the nested nature of the novel's locales—Rosemary's apartment within the Bramford within New York—obscures the exact nature of these locales somewhat, I see a quite straightforward distinction between the geographical epistemologies of the novel; that is, *Rosemary's Baby* associates urbanity with revelation and domesticity with conspiratorial oppression. These associations can be traced through Rosemary's various epiphanies and the places they occur.

Echoing Levin's chagrin about medical professionals' reading of Rosemary as suffering from postpartum depression, Marcus remarks how 'critics have often described Rosemary as 'paranoid'' even though, on the contrary, 'the novel represents Rosemary as insufficiently suspicious.'[63] Indeed, Rosemary is precisely the inverse of the female protagonists of Atwood and Johnson designated as paranoid by Timothy Melley, whose fear remains diffuse and unresolved; Rosemary's fears, in contrast, are diagetically confirmed. Rosemary needs to allow herself to doubt the Castevets and especially Guy before she can comprehend the extent of the conspiracy around her. These moments of doubt invariably come to her in non-domestic settings, such as her trip to Hutch's rural cabin where she thinks of Guy as 'vain, self-centred, shallow and deceitful. He had married her to have an audience,

---

[60] Marcus, p. 123.
[61] Joe McElhaney, 'Urban Irrational: *Rosemary's Baby*, Polanski, New York', in *City That Never Sleeps: New York and the Filmic Imagination*, ed. by Murrey Pomerance (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007), pp. 201– 14 (p. 205).
[62] Marcus, p. 128.
[63] Marcus, p. 132.

not a mate' (89). The rural setting is not enough to counteract the sedative effects of domesticity, and her awakening only becomes complete in the city during the last days of her pregnancy. The transformation of her suspicion into conviction is paralleled by her walk from Tiffany's to her Bramford home, during which she self-consciously clings to the distractions domesticity and traditionally feminine interests offer her:

> Had he been there that evening? At a sabbath…
> She stopped and looked in Henri Bendel's windows, because she didn't want to think any more about witches and covens and baby's blood and Guy being over there....
> There was a great raspberry crêpe dress that looked like a Rudi Gernreich. After Tuesday, after she was her own real shape again, maybe she would go in and price it. And a pair of lemon-yellow hip-huggers and a raspberry blouse…
> Eventually, though, she had to go on. Go on walking, go on thinking, with the baby squirming inside her. (171)

Anticipating *The Stepford Wives*' focus on markers of material success, the high-end consumer goods Rosemary surveys function as distractions from suspicions she is unwilling to admit. The persistence of her denial is partially due to the intrinsic horror of marital betrayal and partially, we might assume, due to an awareness that as a single mother she would be a social and economic outcast with no access to much consumerist sophistication. The desire to remain in denial manifests in a wistful questioning of herself: '[w]hy had she met that stupid Dominick? She should never have gone out today at all' (171)—referring to a chance encounter with one of Guy's colleagues who unwittingly overturns Guy's alibi. The urban streets, then, become a source of danger not because of their association with crime but because they impart unwanted, unasked-for revelation, shattering Rosemary's conspiratorially created domestic bliss.

Naturally, the Satanic conspiracy wants to keep Rosemary ignorant and complacent. However, Rosemary's adjustment to her domestic role incentivises the kind of passivity which primes her to become an ideal victim of the conspiracy. In a way, *Rosemary's Baby* follows white, middle-class women's disillusionment with the cult of domesticity as chronicled by Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique*. Rosemary's self-doubt and investment in denial mirror the 'feminine adjustment' expected from Friedan's interviewees, who, since they could not change the state of the world, forced themselves to adjust instead. Friedan cites Ferdinand Lundberg

and Marynia Farnham's *Modern Woman: The Lost Sex* (1947), a popular instructional tract which encouraged women to attain the traits of 'receptivity and passiveness, a willingness to accept dependence without fear or resentment, … and readiness for the final goal of sexual life—impregnation'—a garbled version of Freudian psychoanalysis, according to Friedan, which eventually resulted in the naturalisation of 'traditional prejudice against women' and their becoming 'part of the conventional, accepted truth of our time.'[64] Crucially, the process of feminine adjustment is largely self-motivated and self-executed: as such, at the same time as adjusting to her domestic role, Rosemary is acquiescing to become an ideal target for the Satanist conspiracy.

Levin compresses the process of feminine adjustment into a short rural interlude, which takes place in a cabin where Rosemary briefly escapes after her forced impregnation. After resolving herself to go back to work and regain her sense of independence, she wakes on her fourth night away feeling that she is

> missing him … What had he done that was so terrible? He had gotten drunk and had grabbed her without saying may I. Well, that was really an earth-shaking offence, now wasn't it? … Sure he was vain and self-centred; he was an actor, wasn't he?
>
> …
>
> That next day she reached what seemed like a sensible and realistic view of things. They were both at fault; he for being thoughtless and self-absorbed, she for failing to express and explain her discontent. (90-91)

Rosemary's initial position is a need for independence, fuelled by self-protection after being violated while unconscious in the name of procreation. In just a few days, she arrives to a state of acquiescence, eager to shoulder half the blame for what should register, even without Satanic interference, as marital rape.[65] Crucially, this process is wholly internal, proving Friedan's thesis about the feminine mystique's deep hold on American women during the 1960s. The cabin scene also highlights a gendered split in who may attain revelation in a rural setting: as we shall see in more detail in the next chapter, Dick's *Time Out of Joint* exemplifies how the wilderness can provide self-assurance and revelation which can weaponised against the conspiracy. This route, however, is unviable for female characters such as Rosemary.

---

[64] Friedan, p. 111.
[65] It should be noted that the United States only began to outlaw marital rape in the 1970s, with Oklahoma and North Carolina to be the last states to do so in 1993.

Literalising feminist critiques of the patriarchy

Rosemary's Baby continues to literalise Friedan's critique of patriarchy and of Freudian theory, which Friedan saw as a handmaiden to women's oppression. Friedan understood Freudianism as wanting to 'help women get rid of their … neurotic desire to be equal', seeing them as 'inferior, childish, helpless, with no possibility of happiness unless she adjusted to being man's passive object.'[66] The text makes Rosemary's infantilism disturbingly overt. In the very first chapter, Rosemary tries to make Guy to do what she wants by '[prying] the phone from Guy's chest and [trying] to push it up to his mouth' while 'whimpering with mock anguish' (7). Friedan understood the feminine mystique to act precisely through this learned infantilism of women, arguing that '[t]he greater her own infantilism, and the weaker her core of self, the earlier the girl will seek 'fulfillment' as a wife and mother and the more exclusively will she live through her husband and children. Thus, her links to the world of reality, and her own sense of herself, will become progressively weaker.'[67]

This 'weak core of self' anchors Rosemary's identity in domesticity, explaining her positively schizophrenic reaction to her suspicion of Guy's involvement in the conspiracy. Chastising herself as 'Idiot Girl' for her suspicions, 'she didn't know if she was going mad or going sane ... if Guy was her loving husband or the treacherous enemy of the baby and herself' (175). Just as cultural patterns barred women from stepping into the role of the 'lone, heroic investigator' of conspiracy fiction, the encouragement of infantilism and domestic enmeshment prohibited women from stepping out of their culturally prescribed locale within the home.

As if following Friedan's thought about the disastrous effects of sheltering girls from the 'tests of reality, and real commitments, in school and the world,'[68] the prospect of employment is posited as the way towards 'independence and self-sufficiency' for Rosemary. Markedly, there is no mention of economic considerations—for example, women's lower pay, or the difficulty to achieve financial self-sufficiency—echoing some of the later criticisms aimed at Friedan by Black feminists, who thought work outside the home alone would not mean liberation for all

---

[66] Friedan, p. 110.
[67] Friedan, p. 278-9.
[68] Friedan, p. 278.

women. For middle-class Rosemary, and for many white feminists during the 1960s and 1970s, work outside the home was understood more as a source of self-esteem and less a question of economic survival. This approach gains a different expression in the type of out-of-house activities, paid or unpaid, in which Levin's heroines engage: pottery classes in *Rosemary's Baby*, photography and illustration in *The Stepford Wives*. While being creative offers genuine satisfaction to these women, it is not enough to anchor their sense of self.[69] The difference between Friedan's unhappy wives and Rosemary is the stakes: the real housewives only open themselves up to unhappiness by their lack of firm grasp on their own identity, while the same 'weak core of self' leaves Rosemary the ideal victim of patriarchy-as-conspiracy.

Although indirectly, Levin also anticipates second-wave feminism's critique of the nuclear family and its detrimental effects on women, an issue taken up prominently by Simone de Beauvoir and Shulamith Firestone. White liberal feminism—but notably, not Black feminism—often staged an attack on the family, seeing it as the main pillar of heteronormative patriarchy. On the origins of patriarchy de Beauvoir writes: 'in primitive times there was no more important ideological revolution than that which replaced matrilineal with patrilineal descent; ... it was affirmed that only the father engenders, the mother merely nourishes the germ received into her body.'[70] This patriarchal sentiment is doubly true for Rosemary, firstly by being picked to be the vessel of Satan's child, secondly by being sold out by her husband, both without her knowledge or consent.

Rosemary's Baby offers a conflicting picture of the patrilineal nuclear family. On the surface, Rosemary's family fits contemporary assumptions and expectations of a normative family as heterosexual, fertile, and traditionally gendered with an older professional husband and a younger homemaker wife. The reality of the plot and, in particular, Guy's character complicate this straightforward image in several ways. By bartering away his wife's body, Guy opts out of the patrilineal descent that traditional marriage implicitly promises men of Guy's situation. While Satan's fatherhood

---

[69] A trend which Shulamith Firestone rather waspishly described as women 'sitting in front of their various easels in tears' (Firestone, p. 38).

[70] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, transl. by H. M. Parshley (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), p. 79.

underlines the importance of patrilineality, Guy trades what Firestone termed 'continuation of name and property which is often confused with immortality'[71] in exchange for success in showbusiness. That Guy can only have one out of those two anticipates the disintegration of patriarchy's implicit promise to men of having both biological and professional immortality, and the question of 'having it all' ubiquitously directed at working wives and mothers in the second half of the twentieth century. Levin thus presents us a view of the patriarchy in line with second-wave feminists' vision of it as an archaic, decaying, occult institution which, besides doing grave damage to women, ultimately betrays men as well.

Levin provides a parodic illustration of the contemporary glorification of motherhood. Friedan writes that this glorification 'seems to be in proportion to society's reluctance to treat women as complete human beings; for the less real function that role has, the more it is decorated with meaningless details to conceal its emptiness.'[72] In the last chapter of the novel, Rosemary accepts her role as the mother of a satanic baby, receiving the adoration of the coven saluting her with 'Hail Rosemary!' and 'Hail Rosemary, mother of Adrian!' (217). That Rosemary, whose body was used without her knowledge and consent, was sold by her husband for the mere promise of career advancement, imprisoned in her home, forcibly sedated, and made to doubt her sanity by the concerted efforts of those around her, is only hailed after she accepts her motherhood amounts to a farcical reenactment of patriarchy's glorification of motherhood.

Multiple readings have been proffered by critics on the novel's ending. Robert Lima sees the ending as 'salutary', heralding the arrival of a new Mary in Rosemary who 'accepts her grotesque motherhood as a divinely instituted mission.'[73] Karyn Valerius rightly—and bluntly—questions Lima's reading by asking '[s]alutary for whom? Certainly not for Rosemary.'[74] Similarly to Lima, Marcus detects the exaltation of maternal femininity, however, she condemns it as a sign of the novel compromising, in the last minute, its steadfast investment in 'Rosemary's

---

[71] Firestone, p. 52.
[72] Friedan, p. 238.
[73] Robert Lima, 'The Satanic Rape of Catholicism in Rosemary's Baby', *Studies in American Fiction*, 2.2 (1974), 211–22 (p. 220).
[74] Karyn Valerius, 'Rosemary's Baby, Gothic Pregnancy, and Fetal Subjects', *College Literature*, 32.3 (2005), 116–35 (p. 129).

subjectivity,' a lapse which 'appears all the more violent for having previously highlighted the many violations which Rosemary has suffered.'[75] Valerius, again, offers a corrective, writing that Rosemary's acceptance of motherhood 'is not necessarily a rejection of feminism by the narrative but can be read as feminist provocation: by gothicizing bourgeois, white pregnancy, it renders maternal self-sacrifice as a horrific resolution to a pregnancy engendered by violence and misappropriation.'[76] In agreement with Valerius, I see the ending as the culmination of the novel's feminist project in literalising the patriarchy as a conspiracy. Read as a deeply sympathetic but pessimistic gesture, the final scene expresses the horror of patriarchal constraints and the hopelessness of becoming aware of its web: even if women heroically unravel the conspiracy, they can never fully escape it. The novel's grotesquely comedic ending suggests a recognition that systemic injustices cannot be remedied by personal triumphs, however hard-won. At the same time, the Levin anticipates a protracted struggle to come both for Rosemary against the coven and women against patriarchy.

In a way, *Rosemary's Baby* is an act of feminist subterfuge committed with the aid of Gothic tropes. The novel appears in the garb of Russ' 'Modern Gothic', but instead of deflecting the blame for gendered injustice onto morally objectionable characters, it offers a bleak survey of everyday monstrosities—from isolation to medical gaslighting and marital rape—which are normalised within mid-century American patriarchy. The novel derives much of its power from the productive contrast between occult and quotidian terrors; more precisely, from creating a story in which Satan appears less immediately reprehensible than the—aside from the Satanism, quite ordinary—doctors, neighbours, and husband of Rosemary.

Another remarkable feat of Levin's text is how it resists the pull of biological essentialism and imagine Rosemary's experience through her corporeality, even as she is going through the archetypically female experience of a pregnancy. Her questions, justifications, doubts, and solutions are very much imagined and executed in a cognitive way, with her corporeality as a pregnant woman a mere background or, at most, an added motivational factor which colour her thoughts and actions. Rosemary also differs from female characters of conspiracy fiction whose knowledge

---

[75] Marcus, p. 148.
[76] Valerius, p. 129.

tends towards the corporeal. As we shall see in Chapter 3, Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum* is notorious for this tendency. In what Clare Birchall correctly calls an 'essentialist gesture', Eco's Lia is consistently 'tied to her active experience of life through the body, as opposed to [her husband's] which appears mediated by the mind.'[77] Levin's Rosemary displays and, I argue, retains through the very end, a remarkably full human subjectivity untainted by patriarchal assumptions and expressing a feminist understanding of the female condition of its time and place. Levin continues the exploration of womanhood in America in his next novel, which is both less optimistic and more overt in its feminist allegiances.

Secret war of the sexes: *The Stepford Wives*

Levin's *The Stepford Wives* moves away from the personal focus of *Rosemary's Baby* and onto the examination of patriarchy as a conspiracy of average men—not just Satanists—directed at women in general. Anna Krugovoy Silver reads 'Bryan Forbes's 1975 suburban Gothic film' adaptation as 'a science fiction rewrite of … *The Feminine Mystique*', seeing the 'themes of *The Stepford Wives* dovetail so closely with those of second-wave feminism that the film can be viewed as a popularization of some of the most persistent concerns of the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1960s and early 1970s.'[78] Crucially, Levin choses the narrative framework of a conspiracy to make these concerns visible, creating a sort of expanded, collective tale of Bluebeard. While I analysed *Rosemary's Baby* along similar lines—that is, as a literalisation of feminist concerns via conspiracy fiction—there are enough differences between the two novels to warrant a similarly in-depth examination *The Stepford Wives*.

Levin's later novel stages its conspiracy narrative within American suburbia, utilising the suburban Gothic to emplot women's conspiratorial containment in the suburbs. This a locale which was entirely missing from *Rosemary's Baby* despite its centrality to Friedan's *Feminine Mystique*, which drew much of its material from the testimonies and experience of specifically suburban (white, educated, middle- and upper-class) American women. A further difference is an expansion of the later

---

[77] Birchall, p. 77.
[78] Anna Krugovoy Silver, 'The Cyborg Mystique: The Stepford Wives and Second Wave Feminism', *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory*, 58.1 (2002), 109–26 (p. 109).

novel's conspiracy to involve conflict between the explicitly gendered groups of the Men's Association and their wives. This conflict is often couched in the language of war. Generally, conspiracy fiction is inhospitable to narratives of open warfare due to conspiracy's defining element of secrecy. However, *The Stepford Wives* uses its conspiracy to imagine gendered conflict as secret warfare simmering under the well-groomed suburban surface. In the *Stepford Wives*, there is sense that the middle-class, mostly white women of Stepford, and feminists in general, are sleepwalking into a war for which they are woefully unprepared, even as they imagine themselves taking up arms in the name of women's liberation. The novel also examines masculinity as a form of club membership, located in a structure from which women are barred: a startlingly on-the-nose representation of patriarchy, and of men who are aware of their privilege and prepared to do anything to shore up their power. *The Stepford Wives* emphasises temporalities, where the stake of the conspiratorial conflict is to control the passage of time. Lastly, *The Stepford Wives* is preoccupied with the ways in which children reenact oppressive gender roles both inside and outside of the sphere of conspiratorial influence.

The plot of *The Stepford Wives* involves Joanna and Walter Eberhart and their two children, who, like many of their white upper-class, professional peers at the time, move to the suburbs. Except for her friend Bobbie, Joanna's attempts at forging a community consistently fails, as the women of Stepford appear uninterested in everything but housework. This Joanna finds especially frustrating since Walter is readily welcomed into the Men's Association of the town. Her unease grows as she discovers Stepford's *hausfraus* were once members of a now defunct Women's Association, which hosted feminist consciousness-raising sessions and a talk by Betty Friedan. After the previously gregarious and somewhat slovenly Bobbie's radical transformation into a Stepford wife, Joanna is finally convinced that the women are turned into robots by the men; however, her attempt to flee the town with her children are thwarted by the Men's Association including her husband. Joanna's final scene is with Bobbie 'standing by the sink with the knife in her hand' after offering to cut her 'finger a little' to ease Joanna's mind about her humanity.[79] Joanna's fate remains diegetically open. However, the last scenes—focalised

---

[79] Ira Levin, *The Stepford Wives* (New York: Perennial, 2002), p. 118.

through Ruthanne Hendry, Stepford's newest housewife—centre on Ruthanne's disquiet in encountering a much-changed Joanna, who seemingly has given up all her ambitions in exchange for becoming a true—likely robotic—Stepford wife.

Communal conspiracy and suburban living

The Stepford Wives' main theatre of conspiracy, as the title clues us in, is the fictional American suburban town of Stepford. While the exteriors of Stepford's houses are rarely described, the town's public buildings are relentlessly similar and clean-cut. Stepford Center, with its 'white frame Colonial shopfronts' is variably described as 'postcard pretty' (10) and, at after it empties at night, as 'stage-setty' (24). The other public buildings, excluding the Men's Association house, include the 'white frame library, and the Historical Society's two-hundred-year-old white frame cottage', suggesting a conscious effort to make the town's public buildings match clean-scrubbed, upper class American aesthetics, as well as hinting at a longer history rooted in a colonial, WASPish, past. Yet, the level of geographical verisimilitude found in *Rosemary's Baby* is missing from the later novel. In making his setting not only fictional but generic, Levin is signalling a move away from the personal and particular of *Rosemary's Baby* towards the public and the generic, making his setting not only Stepford but American suburbia at large. This generalization, in turn, makes it easy to imagine the players of the conspiracy—the wives and the Men's Association—as stand-ins for feminists and the patriarchy.

Patriarchy is embodied in the Men's Association building, where the act of conspiring takes place. It is named as 'the Terhune place' (50) in passing, in what is possibly a reference to Albert Payson Terhune, breeder of collies and prolific author of dog-centred novels; Terhune's late work coincided with Levin's childhood.[80] Terhune was reportedly a fancier of 'racial 'purity' in people and in dogs'[81] alluding to the troubled legacy of eugenics and white supremacy and the resurgence of these during the 'white flight' of Americans, amounting to a 'postwar suburbanization' which 'helped the racial resegregation of the United States.'[82] There are very few details

---

[80] Elizabeth Marshall Thomas, 'Introduction', in *Woof!: Writers on Dogs*, ed. by Lee Montgomery (New York: Viking, 2008), p. 1.
[81] Thomas, p. 1.
[82] Eric Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), p. 14.

offered about the building itself, no doubt because the text is focalised through Joanna, who, in the novel at least, never sees it up close or from the inside. Through Joanna's eyes, we see the building perched 'up on the hill,' having 'a surprisingly comic look to it: a square old nineteenth-century house, solid and symmetrical, tipsily parasolled by a glistening TV antenna' (45). Joanna's perception of Terhune House as comical instead of menacing echoes Rosemary's misplaced excitement about living in the Gothic mass of the Bramford. Further, the Terhune house introduces the theme of underestimating the enemy; just as Stepford's feminist women underestimate their husbands and the lengths they will go to retain their patriarchal power. The fence separating the estate from the town proper is referenced more than the house itself, with the Eberharts' young son Pete admiring it as 'great big fence ... Like in *Hogan's Heroes*!' (12), providing a throwback to the second World War; and with Bobbie remarking that they will 'have to chain [them]selves to the fence' to 'get any action' (19), hinting at the struggle of the suffragettes. The words of Pete and Bobbie point to war and direct action, and both unknowingly stumble upon a truth: that Stepford is a theatre of war.

The Stepford Wives also taps into the possibilities of communal knowledge, in particular, its uses as a tool to unravel the conspiracy. Whereas Rosemary had received vital pieces of information through her friends, Joanna's two revelatory experiences are tied to local, provincial vehicles of knowledge: the local newspaper and the library. In the first instance, Joanna finds an old newspaper by chance from which she learns that not only was there a women's club in Stepford but that it invited Betty Friedan to give a speech. The newspaper represents an impersonal source of knowledge by and for a wider community, unlike Rosemary's close personal friendships. Moreover, Joanna uncovers the scrap of paper when she is moving junk left by the first owner of the house, a Mrs McGrath, who, being 'a thoughtful saver,' left 'boxes and small bundles of hardware and oddments that, though not finds, at least seemed likely to be of eventual use' (36). Mrs McGrath's junk, then, becomes a parodic version of *l'écriture feminine*, passing down a legacy of writing from an assumed widow—no Mr McGrath is mentioned—to Joanna, for whom the newspaper provides a vital piece of information, setting her on a path towards uncovering the conspiracy.

The library is a similarly communal space. The trope of the protagonist descending into the archives in search for knowledge is an extremely common one

in conspiracy fiction and the Gothic; one which finds an echo—possibly even a direct and somewhat parodic echo—of Betty Friedan's conspiratorial language in *The Feminine Mystique*. Joanna visits the library in order to piece together the timeline of the Men's Association's rise and the women's club's decline. The library's cellar which houses the archives of the *Stepford Chronicle* is described as 'small and low-ceilinged' (96), in direct opposition to Friedan's fieldwork in a 'baronial mansion' with a 'ballroom two-stories high.'[83] Where Friedan evoked feelings of opulence and an almost Gothic decadence, Levin opts for domestic bathos with a 'library table and four kitchen chairs, chrome and red plastic' (96). The 'brown-bound volumes jutt[ing] from the bottom shelf all around the room, lying flat, piled six high' (96) are the small-town version of Friedan's 'ballroom two-stories high … filled with steel shelves holding thousand-odd studies.'[84] Just like Joanna, Betty Friedan visits a library on her quest for explanations, 'going back through bound volumes of American women's magazines for the last twenty years' in the New York Public Library in order to track the 'change in the image of the American woman' (32). In both instances, women make use of a public store of knowledge, which, combined with their unique viewpoint and skill in deduction, allows them to uncover a plot. Public knowledge, thus, becomes vital in dismantling large-scale conspiracies.

The women of Stepford fall victim to the conspiracy because they assume their husband's allegiance belongs to them and their family, and not to their masculinist conspiracy. On group belonging, men, and masculine identities, Levin appears to have been inspired by a contemporary and controversial book by Lionel Tiger, explicitly referenced in the last scene of the book when Ruthanne's husband is seen sitting, 'reading *Men in Groups*, his feet in blue socks on the hassock' (122). *Men in Groups* hit the shops and the headlines in 1970, putting forward the theory of 'male bonding', the idea that men form secret societies to satisfy an almost primal need towards forming bonds with another men. The book was an important step in masculinity studies by looking at men as a gendered group, rather than treating men as the ungendered centre from which femininity deviates. However, its overtly biological approach, which builds many of its arguments on primate behaviour, was already contested at time of publication and appears woefully dated today. The

---

[83] Friedan, p. 199.
[84] Ibid.

Men's Association of Stepford seems to be lifted wholesale from its pages, from the last section of the book in particular. In 'Remarks', Tiger comments on the

> effect of male-female differences and the male bonding hypothesis on architecture and town-planning. The layout of houses in new towns and suburban developments may preclude the growth of male bonds in new communities and so curtail the range of social experience available to men in their communities of residence. Succinctly stated, men 'need' some haunts and/or occasions which exclude females. Given the decreasing hours of work, and as potential time at home increases, should not men's huts or their equivalent be constructed? … This may seem to some a retrograde step–in a sense it would be. But some facilities for men, particularly in suburban areas, could provide a useful counterbalance for men to the heavy emotional and temporal demands of nuclear family life.[85]

Tiger advocates for suburbia's deleterious effect on the gendered self at the same time, and in much the same way, as second-wave feminists did; for example, Friedan who lamented the fate of 'women who live in the image of the feminine mystique, [having] trapped themselves within the narrow walls of their homes.'[86] While Tiger acknowledges 'the relative obscurity of the female organizations and their apparent unimportance for the macro-life of the community' in passing,[87] he seems unwilling to extend his analysis beyond examining data regarding trends in female political participation. Whereas 'male-bonding' is examined from every possible angle including the political, there is a silence on *why* is it only men who crave and deserve access to single-gender spaces. Tiger's disinterest in the mechanisms of women's exclusion echoes Dale Coba's cold-hearted 'masculine pettiness' from the film, answering Joanna's queries on their motivation for the conspiracy: 'Why? Because we can.'[88]

The language of war and radical feminism

Through her research of the newspaper and the library, Joanna steps into the role of the lone, heroic investigator of conspiracy fiction much more readily than Rosemary. And yet, like Rosemary, Joanna becomes a 'heroine whose failure to triumph over

---

[85] Lionel Tiger, *Men in Groups* (New York: Random House, 1969), pp. 208-09.
[86] Friedan, p. 296.
[87] Tiger, p. 72.
[88] Bliss Cua Lim, 'Serial Time: Bluebeard in Stepford', in *Film and Literature: A Reader*, ed. by Robert Stam (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 163–90 (p. 173).

those who conspire against her is rooted in her inability to distrust her husband until it is too late.'[89] Rosemary clings to her denial about Guy's guilt because of the precarity of her situation as a young, uneducated, pregnant woman with no family support in New York; however, in the case of Joanna, 'inability' might better be replaced with 'unwillingness'. Joanna's socio-economic status and her association with the liberal feminist movement imparts the illusion of safety on her life; as a result, Joanna's unwillingness to face her husband's participation in the conspiracy is motivated by part naivete, part overconfidence. Having bought into the 'suburban dream', Joanna reasonably expects to have purchased 'not just a home, but hopefully, an entire way of life'[90]; put another way, Joanna assumes bad things—including bad husbands—happen in other, less prestigious neighbourhoods, and happen to other, less educated, less wealthy, less feminist, and less white women. As a result, Lim is justified, to a certain extent, in writing that the Stepford women 'enable their own subjection.'[91] Ironically, Joanna's feminist sentiments become another factor stopping her from getting sufficiently suspicious. Joanna and her friend Bobbie are allied with Friedan's white liberal feminism and its advocacy for gradual change, as signalled by their desire to start a local 'NOW chapter eventually' (20). As such, they have no access to the revolutionary ardour of radical feminism nor to its language of warfare, which may have enabled them to detect in time the covert war waged against the women of Stepford.

Levin makes the image of war quite explicit in the novel's epigraph from de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*, which talks of how '[t]oday the combat takes a different shape: instead of wishing to put man in a prison, woman endeavors to escape from one ... Now the attitude of the males creates a new conflict.'[92] Military language surfaces often in the text, although almost always in an ironic or detached manner. Joanna tries to stave off the deluge of products from the 'welcome wagon lady' jokingly with 'Hold. Halt. Thank you' (1). Joanna and Bobbie imagine themselves as

---

[89] Lim, p. 179.
[90] Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic*, p. 96.
[91] Lim, p. 180.
[92] The full quote and epigraph is as follows: 'Today the combat takes a different shape; instead of wishing to put man in a prison, woman endeavors to escape from one; she no longer seeks to drag him into the realms of immanence but to emerge, herself, into the light of transcendence. Now the attitude of the males creates a new conflict: it is with a bad grace that the man lets her go. He is very well pleased to remain the sovereign subject, the absolute superior, the essential being; he refuses to accept his companion as an equal in any concrete way.' De Beauvoir, Parshley translation, p. 717.

a two-woman 'phalanx' in their efforts to recruit women for the feminist cause (22). After she attempts to run away and gets cornered by the men, they warn her that 'there's a limit to how long [they are] going to stand here parleying' (113). The vocabulary of war is largely absent from the language of key liberal feminists Friedan or Gloria Steinem; in contrast, radical feminists relished the shock factor of violent language. A survey of the subheadings from *Sisterhood is Powerful* helpfully illustrates this tendency: 'Know Your Enemy: A Sampling of Sexist Quotes' is accompanied by 'Verbal Karate: Statistical and Aphoristic Ammunition', while the evocative 'The Hand That Cradles the Rock: Protest and Revolt' could well be writing back to the ending of *Rosemary's Baby*. Two organisational acronyms featured in *Sisterhood is Powerful* make this point even clearer: SCUM stands for 'Society for Cutting Up Men,'[93] while WAR denotes 'Women of the American Revolution.' If the women of Stepford would have been nourished on the language of radical feminism, they might have stood a chance against the conspiracy of the Men's Association.

Mechanical time: patriarchal temporalities

Throughout this thesis I argue that the conspiracies of the novels discussed— excepting *Ubik*, perhaps—tend to work against feminist progress; that is, conspiracy's solution to the gendered anxieties emplotted in these novels is to reinstate traditional gender roles and rigid binaries. In *The Stepford Wives*, this retrospective tendency appears as the desire to stop time. In a way, Stepford is as much a time as it is a place. 'Stepford wife' came to refer to an outdated idea of housewifery, reflecting the novel's persistent preoccupation with time, more precisely, the conspiratorial and patriarchal control of time. The suburbs prove an ideal setting for querying conspiratorial temporalities, because 'in any variety of the Gothic, history–here, the perceived lack of it–is an important element of the Suburban Gothic.'[94] New-built suburban developments had no history which could return in a Gothic case of haunting, no mementoes of past atrocities such as lynchings of Black Americans or Native American massacres. In some way, it is this absence of history

---

93 Quoted from Valerie Solanas' *SCUM Manifesto* (1967, self-published).
94 Bernice M. Murphy, ''Identical Boxes Spreading like Gangrene': Defining the Suburban Gothic', in *A Companion to American Gothic*, ed. by Charles L. Crow (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2013) pp. 315–27 (p. 326).

which haunts the texts, with Stepford's men designating their town as a burial ground for suburban women.

In fact, Stepford appears obsessed with novelty; new things to be consumed, experienced, and appreciated. During an outing the Eberharts visit Stepford's 'large new shopping mall', followed by 'antiques (an octagonal end table, no documents); and then north-south-east-west all over Stepford' to show their children 'their new school'; followed by the 'you'd-never-guess-what-it-is-from-the-outside non-polluting incinerator plant, and the picnic grounds where a community pool was under construction' (10). Stepford seems to have no past: the antique table has no papers, both the shopping mall and the school are 'new', and, previously, the Eberhearts' street is described as 'sapling-lined' (3). Poverty and dirt, two markers of decay—and evidence of a town's history—are similarly absent. Joanna wonders if there are 'needy children in Stepford? She'd seen no sign of any' (78). Cleanliness appears in the absence of anything unsightly with the mention of the incinerator plant, specifically designed to make the ugly parts of suburban life (and, ostensibly, the bodies of the women) disappear. The future only appears as a vague promise in the form of the community pool. In time, the women themselves are made new and eternal, and the humanising process of aging is reserved to the men. The ethos behind the conspiracy of the Men's Association is a cult of the present, aiming for a totalitarian control over the town and its inhabitants by selectively stopping the flow of time. It is true that a fixation on the past, rather than the present or the future, is more common in the Gothic. However, the Men's Association rivals any Gothic villain in monstrosity by restricting aging—and by extension, humanity—to themselves.

The tension between a missing past and a fabricated future manifests rather bluntly in the stopped ageing of women and, in a more sophisticated fashion, via the children of Stepford. Taken together, these two amount to a sense of time snagged, repeating itself in an endless loop—the same looping becoming a shorthand for malfunction in cyborg narratives—where the past has no bearing on the present, and progress, if there is any, is circular.[95] Jane Elliott contextualises the permanent present of Stepford through a reference to second-wave feminism, writing:

---

[95] Jane Elliott, 'Stepford U.S.A: Second-Wave Feminism, Domestic Labor, and the Representation of National Time', *Cultural Critique*, 70.1 (2008), 32–62 (p. 42).

> In the 1980s, feminist literary critics frequently [pointed] out that the lives of female characters [in popular fiction] only possessed a trajectory until marriage, after which nothing of interest—no meaningful change, in other words—was expected to happen to them. ... Popular feminist theorists such as Friedan, on the other hand, were talking about the static time that follows teleological closure as the way American white, middle-class suburban women lived their lives in the 1960s and 1970s. The problem that has no name turns out to be caused by the life that has no more plot: a life stuck in the permanent epilogue-space that follows [the] plot's conclusion. [96]

The replacement of women with immortal and unageing robots literalizes the sense of plotlessness powerfully: frozen in time, the women are robbed of their future and of their humanity. The children of Stepford are similarly constricted in their roles and life paths, yet their situation is even more complicated and, if that is possible, more sinister. The children of Stepford feature in numerous vignettes which, seemingly, do not impact the plot in any way. Yet the function of the children's scenes is to provide a microcosm of what is happening to the adults, as well as to add nuance to the novel's vision of temporalities by turning static time into cyclical time.

In reading the novel as a variant of Bluebeard's tale, Lim asserts how the 'heroine of *Stepford Wives*, alongside her counterparts in Bluebeard stories, *stands on the threshold of a prior fate*: in recognizing what has befallen other women, she sets in motion her own impending destruction.'[97] Tragically, Joanna stands on the threshold of the next generation's fate as well. The very first scene of the novel we are treated to a mundane argument between Pete and Kim, the Eberhart children: ''She kicked me twice,' Pete said, and Kim shouted, 'You changed the channel! He changed the channel!' 'I did not!'' (4). The scene carries the germs of gendered conflict as discussed by feminist critique: men's control over women and those with less power (Kim is the younger child), specifically, control over entertainment; legitimacy of violence as an effort to change the status quo (and the channel); who can appeal and who can lie to authority. Later, the fight is resolved by Joanna, but the truce is marred by the image of Pete lifting 'a strand of [Kim's] hair' and 'winding a finger in the dark strand' (4), suggesting an uneasy connection between conflict resolution and unasked-for, possessive tenderness.

---

[96] Elliott, p. 46.
[97] Lim, p. 170.

83

The kids' vignettes also feed into the novel's underlying theme of warfare. Describing a sleepover at the Eberharts, Levin writes that 'Adam and Pete became, serially, soldiers … explorers ... and Star Trek people in Pete's room—all of them sharing, strangely enough, a single common enemy called Kim-She's-Dim. They were loudly and scornfully watchful, preparing defenses; and poor Kim *was* dim, wanting only to join them' (75). The boys preparing their defences against the clueless Kim mirrors Joanna's situation at the beginning of the novel, naively planning to infiltrate and reform the Men's Association, while the men are plotting to murder and replace her from the start. Similarly to the macro narrative of the novel, Pete and Adam do not have anything against Kim personally; their childish persecution of her is taken for granted not only by them but by Joanna as well. This echoes the horror of Rosemary's realisation that Guy does not at all care for her personality and that he 'had married her to have an audience, not a mate' (116). The same horror is compounded, in the case of *The Stepford Wives*, by its universality amongst Stepford's husbands, as well as their dispassionate demeanour. Conspiracy, then, becomes the antithesis of a 'crime of passion': premeditated and entirely unmotivated by hatred or anger, even in its lethal violence.

In the same year as *The Stepford Wives*' publication, Shulamith Firestone wrote that as a 'civilisation advances and the biological basis of sex class crumble, male supremacy must shore itself up with artificial institutions, or exaggerations of previous institutions.'[98] Firestone singled out the nuclear family as one such institution; however, the Men's Association is likewise one effort to shore up male power, especially if it also controls the family. The children's scenes provide commentary on patriarchy's efforts to sustain itself via installing attitudes which prime the soon-to-be adults to their future roles: conspirator-husband and robot-housewife. After Bobbie's transformation, the distressed Joanna asks Bobbie's son if he has noticed anything, to which he replies that '[s]he doesn't shout any more, she makes hot breakfasts ... I hope it lasts" (91). While the conflicts of the Eberhart children allow ambiguous interpretation—Pete and Kim's fight could be simple sibling rivalry, Pete and Adam's ganging up on Kim could be just horseplay—Bobbie's son is open about how he likes his mother's transformation because it serves his comfort. The

---

[98] Firestone, p. 139.

novel thus underscores the ease with which patriarchy may reclaim the ground lost to second-wave feminism. As such, the children's vignettes support Lim's locating the failure of Levin's heroines in their inability 'to see that patriarchal discourses are never simply retrograde [and] that modernity does not always only banish, but can often colludes with, differing historical forms of misogyny.'[99] The novel's conspiracy literalises and dramatizes this very real tendency of anti-progressive and anti-feminist backlash.

Joanna's semi-professional photography illustrates how the novel's conspiracy is aimed at controlling time. Some two decades after *The Stepford Wives*, Donna Haraway wrote on how the 'technologies of visualization recall the important cultural practice of hunting with the camera and the deeply predatory nature of a photographic consciousness.'[100] Haraway's notion of predatory photography is illustrated by the pivotal scene in which Joanna tries to photograph the Men's Association building. In a common literary metonymy, the scene equates 'seeing' with 'knowing': 'She took the fifty-millimeter lens out of the camera and was putting in the one-thirty-five when headlight beams swept onto the street and grew brighter. She turned and a spotlight blinded her' (45). She is prevented from training her lens—a mechanical eye—on the building by a chatty policeman, and thus prevented from knowing what goes on inside: 'She watched the car for a moment, and then turned to the camera ... Two of [the] upstairs windows were dark now; and another was shade-pulled down to darkness, and then the last one' (46). Not having been completely 'blinded', she senses the truth, that the purpose of the policeman's stop was to stall 'her with his questions' and to allow the Men's Association to pull down the blinds. I have discussed, in relation to *Rosemary's Baby*, how 'privacy' took on gendered meanings during the mid-century; in particular, how female bodies were acceptable objects for medical surveillance by male doctors. In this context, Joanna is prohibited from using a technology of surveillance such as her camera to gather intelligence. By attempting to do so, Joanna also becomes, albeit unwittingly, a competitor to the masculine conspiracy: similarly predatory, invasive, and

[99] Lim, p. 184.
[100] Donna Haraway, 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century', in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 149–82 (p. 169).

technocratic. Photos, furthermore, quite literally arrest time, making Joanna a trespasser on the conspiracy's domain; a transgression which it cannot leave unpunished.

The Stepford Wives sees gendered oppression as a conspiracy which strips women of their individuality and humanity. For Levin in these two novels, conspiracy and marriage both function as a de-individualising machine, made explicit by the unmarried women of Stepford: a widow (a local woman working as a caterer) and a spinster (Miss Austrian, the librarian), both of whom were allowed to grow old and remain flawed. That these women were ignored by the Men's Association and retained their individuality makes very blunt of the point that the ultimate goal of the conspiracy is ownership over the trajectory of women's lives. In the struggle towards liberation, there's a potential for backlash, one which Levin's epigraph from de Beauvoir poignantly touches: it is indeed 'with a bad grace that the man lets her go.'[101] Levin skilfully extrapolated 'bad grace' into a town-wide, murderous cabal of conspiring husbands, dramatising anxieties which de Beauvoir, Friedan, and other second-wave feminists have theorised before him.

A rarely acknowledged detail of The Stepford Wives is the ambiguity of its ending, a striking feature compared with Levin's holding steadfast to the ending of Rosemary's Baby. Unlike in the film versions, we never get confirmation of Joanna's fears about the women of Stepford being turned into robots or see definite proof of Walter's involvement. The last time the text focalises through Joanna is at the end of the penultimate chapter, with Joanna thinking that the knife-wielding Bobby 'simply couldn't be' a robot (134). The final chapter is from Ruthanne's viewpoint, who talks to a Joanna who has apparently given up photography for not being 'especially talented', and who instead spends her time doing housework (137). Levin tried to ensure Rosemary's suspicions and eventual bitter triumph over the coven was not psychoanalyzed away as postpartum disorder, which went in the face of contemporary tendencies to solve everyday, external unhappinesses of women internally, via seeking to change their psyche (therapy) or their bodies (medication). In contrast, The Stepford Wives leaves the reader in a limbo of suspicion, suggesting

---

[101] de Beauvoir, Parshley translation, p. 717. For the full quote see footnote 88.

that in the end, there is no meaningful difference between the dulling effects of marriage and of conspiracy on women.

Using conspiracy and the Gothic mode, Levin's two novels offer valuable snapshots of the public perception of women and of feminism during a time when ideas of femininity and the women's liberation movement were hotly contested. *Rosemary's Baby* offers a sensitive portrait of a mother-to-be in distress, who becomes ensnared in a conspiracy because her upbringing did not equip her with the individuality to stand up for herself to a lying, ruthlessly ambitious husband and those who enable him. In making naivety Rosemary's tragic fault, Levin expresses an empowering message to women, and dramatizes the consequences of not equipping young women with sufficient self-knowledge. *The Stepford Wives,* in contrast, functions more as a warning to women. In framing the struggle for equality as covert warfare and portraying the women as sleepwalking into their fates due to their overconfidence, Levin sounds the alarm to feminists that their fight is not only far from over but barely begun.

Both novels offer a concept of patriarchy as conspiracy. In *Rosemary's Baby*, the patriarchal structures are tangible in Satanism with its virile patriarch in Satan, yet Rosemary is let down by other patriarchal structures: her former faith, which caused her family to abandon her because of her transgressions; her marriage, which allowed for a sizeable differential between Rosemary and Guy's ages, earning power, and social capital; and the medical profession which prioritised the word of Rosemary's male caretakers over her own. Because *The Stepford Wives* deals in generalities, the conspiracy of the Men's Association is paradoxically less tangible and more immediate than the ancient threat of Satanism. The husbands of Stepford, more so than Guy, function as stand-ins for all husbands, suggesting that all married men are to be suspected of owing loyalty to their sex-class interests over their wives. It is understandable that Friedan objected to this suggestion, as she understood that for meaningful change to happen, women and feminists needed men on their side, and that patriarchy is harmful to men as well.

Levin's two novels employ conspiracy to feminist ends, by literalising second-wave feminism's model of patriarchy-as-conspiracy, and showing that everyday cruelties can be greater than any Gothic horror. As I clarified before, conspiracy novels are not necessarily conservative in their gender politics as a rule. Conspiracy itself, however, often lends itself as literary metonymy for reactionary politics in

fiction, as a tool for conserving the past and with it, traditional gender roles. This conservative tendency of conspiracies is well represented in the stoppage of time in *The Stepford Wives*. The next novel discussed in this thesis, Philip K. Dick's *Time Out of Joint*, also takes place in an American suburb frozen in time by a conspiracy. In contrast to suburban white women's condition, however, Dick centres the emasculating effects of suburbia and the gendered strategies of operating under the aegis of a conspiracy.

Chapter 2. Conspiracy and the crises of masculinity: the science fiction of Philip K. Dick

In 1971, literary critic Alfred S. Reid asserted that Ralph Wado Emerson is 'one of the uncelebrated god-fathers of today's protest movement,' citing Emerson's oft-quoted passage which claimed [s]ociety everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members.'[1] One 'idea held in common' by both the countercultural youth and Emerson, Reid argues, is 'the conspiracy theory of a repressive society', which sees authority as 'monolithic and entrenched', 'corrupt and repressive.'[2] According to Reid, young protesters understand 'authority' variably as the 'government', the 'military-industrial complex', 'academic requirements', or—echoing Friedan's Gothic ad agency—as the 'slimy advertising culture' which 'pollutes the source of life.'[3] The 'new-left youth' accuses these seats of power as such: '[t]hey give us busy work or draft us to keep us from getting at the really

---

[1] Alfred S. Reid, 'Emersonian Ideas in the Youth Movement of the 1960's', *American Transcendental Quarterly*, 9.1 (1971), 12–15 (p. 12).
[2] Reid, p. 13.
[3] Ibid.

important issues and values. … Well, we refuse. We want a more meaningful life than the system gives us.'[4] With its government-created, illusionary suburbia and rebellious protagonist hoodwinked by busy-work, Philip K. Dick's *Time out of Joint* (1959) exemplifies 'the conspiracy theory of a repressive society' and counterculture's defiant response to it. Reid makes a pertinent connection between Emerson and the countercultural Dick. Both see society as a feminising conspiracy which deprives men of their individuality and, consequently, of their masculinity.

As we shall see in this chapter, Dick's *Time* draws a close equivalence between uncovering the conspiracy and masculine prowess. Dick's *Ubik*, rather than challenging the premise of a conspiratorial society, will merely offer strategies on how to survive its feminising grasp. In both novels, the conspiratorial emplotment addresses the anxiety of changing norms of masculinity. *Time* continues *The Stepford Wives'* querying of suburban gender roles, turning its attention from women's plight towards men's discontent, but likewise imagining the origins of this gendered unhappiness as a conspiracy. *Ubik* extrapolates the disintegration of traditional gender binaries into a futuristic vision of total ontological breakdown, in which the conspiracy's assassination of the patriarchal paragon (Runciter) results in the unravelling of reality. Dick's science fiction modulates conspiracy to primarily express confusion—as opposed to the Gothic's fear in Chapter 1, or the thriller's awe in Chapter 3—via temporal and dimensional shifts, futuristic settings and technologies, interplanetary travel, and other common tropes of science fiction.

Despite the chronological overlap of the fiction by Levin and Dick in this thesis, Dick's novels are best positioned in the middle due to their transitional nature. More precisely, the Dick novels considered in this chapter represent conspiracy fiction at its most uncertain, bridging the gap between the certain terror of Levin's Gothic conspiracies and the certain wonderment of Brown and, to a lesser extent, Eco's thriller fiction. Science fiction provides a superb avenue for addressing the epistemological consequences of conspiracy—that is, the doubt cast over the knowability of truth—due to the genre's tendency to thematise extrapolative thought experiments and parallel universes.

---

[4] Reid, p. 13.

Science fiction in transition

Like conspiracy, science fiction was in a transitory period during the mid-century. American science fiction 'expanded rapidly' in the 1950s, 'drawing new audiences as a result of changes in the genre's editorship, publishing, and narrative forms.'[5] Science fiction 'reached new literary heights' during the 1950s and 1960s which 'helped position the genre as a central platform for cutting-edge social critique.'[6] These changes resulted in authors of science fiction having 'more freedom than they could possibly have to comment on political conditions in contemporary America' by the displacement of their political commentary to 'other times or galaxies.'[7] The emerging New Wave of science fiction—of which Dick was a key member—made extensive use of this 'Aesopian potential' of a critically often maligned genre.[8]

It is perhaps *The Twilight Zone* (1959-1964) which emblematises best the transformation of science fiction's cultural standing in the United States during the midcentury. Rod Serling's series has been embedded in American culture as the icon of 'Aesopian' science fiction, the series' title becoming a shorthand for uncanny realities. *The Twilight Zone* provided a popular, televised avenue for science fiction authors and contemporaries of Dick such as Richard Matheson and Ray Bradbury; but, curiously perhaps, not to Dick himself, despite the shared fascination with using science fiction to express a waning belief in ontological stability which came to be the hallmarks of both *The Twilight Zone* and Dick's novels. *The Twilight Zone* and other commercial or cult favourites such as *The Outer Limits* (1963-1965) or *Star Trek: The Original Series* (1966-1969) have fundamentally altered science fiction's place in American culture during the nineteen-fifties and nineteen-sixties.

This is not to say science fiction's transition from low-brow pulp to literary fiction was complete. As late as 1979, T. A. Shippey has sought to reinforce the distinction between science fiction and literature based on the former's 'strong conventional quality.'[9] Shippey argued science fiction's 'signs and symbols [are]

---

[5] Malisa Kurtz, 'After the War, 1945-65', in *Science Fiction: A Literary History*, ed. by Roger Luckhurst (London: The British Library, 2017), pp. 130–56 (p. 130).

[6] Kurtz, p. 130.

[7] M. Keith Booker, *Monsters, Mushroom Clouds, and the Cold War: American Science Fiction and the Roots of Postmodernism, 1946-1964* (London: Greenwood Press, 2001), p. 3.

[8] Booker, p. 3.

[9] T. A. Shippey, 'The Cold War in Science Fiction, 1940-1960', in *Science Fiction: A Critical Guide*, ed. by Patrick Parrinder (New York: Longman, 2016), p. 107.

interpretable only through familiarity', making the genre useful only as 'a 'thinking machine' for … people largely without academic support or intellectual patronage.'[10] Shippey points to the trope of 'innovators escaping from governments' across multiple iterations of the genre as proof of science fiction's derivative nature, which, Shippey argues, makes 'literary criticism difficult.'[11] However, critics like Shippey were counterbalanced by others who did see science fiction as a valuable field of literary inquiry. The appreciative voices included Darko Suvin, who theorised science fiction as the literature of 'cognitive estrangement' in his *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1979); Fredric Jameson, who eulogised Dick as one of the genre's greatest authors in 'Philip K. Dick, in Memoriam'; or, indeed, the insurrectionist voices of contemporary colleagues such as Ursula le Guin who repeatedly objected to being pigeonholed as a sci-fi writer throughout her long career.[12]

Literary history today tends to align with Suvin et al.; this thesis certainly does. Unlike Shippey, I find genre tropes of enormous literary value for much the same reason he discounted them. Tracking the genesis, crossovers, permutations, and subversions of genre motifs allows for nuanced historicist readings, forming the basis of focused studies of genre history in the process: both of which are explicit aims of this thesis. Shippey's example of the innovator harangued by the state is particularly germane here as this trope straddles conspiracy fiction and science fiction; indeed it is the basic plot of *Time*. This trope evokes many concerns pertinent to midcentury American culture: diminished trust in the government, the ethics of science, or—via the dream of interplanetary escape—the space race of the 1950s and 1960s. Science fiction, perhaps more so than the other two genres discussed in this thesis, tends to reflect on its immediate historical moment by extrapolating it into the future, even when social critique is not its explicit aim. I see this extrapolative tendency a definitional element of the genre.

Recent scholarship has been working towards refining Suvin's definition. Carl Freedman argues that 'science fiction is determined by the *dialectic* between

---

10 Shippey, p. 107.
11 Shippey, pp. 107-8.
12 For an example see: John Wray, 'Ursula K. Le Guin, The Art of Fiction No. 221', *Paris Review*, issue 206, Fall (2013)
<https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/6253/the-art-of-fiction-no-221-ursula-k-le-guin> [accessed 1 June 2023].

estrangement and cognition', or, more precisely, genre is defined by 'the attitude *of the text itself* to the kind of estrangements being performed.'[13] That is, rather than asking if a text performs cognitive estrangement, a better criterion, per Freedman, would be to ask if the text presupposes an attitude of cognitive estrangement from its reader.[14] I find this definition especially useful for Dick's fiction, because it accounts for the atypical, perfunctory, even careless uses of science fiction tropes dotting Dick's novels. Seen through this lens, the fiction of Dick is less interested in science and cognition than the act of estrangement, for which science fiction proved to be an appropriate genre.

Elsewhere, Freedman argues for a close relationship between conspiracy, capitalism, and science fiction through the case study of Dick, writing that in 'both estranging 'content' and realist 'form,' then, SF closely corresponds to the weird and coherent interpretative systems of the paranoiac.'[15] Dick is a preeminent author of this conspiratorial science fiction, Freedman argues, due to 'his uniquely rigorous and consistent representations of human subjects caught in the web of commodities and conspiracies.'[16] Conspiracy provides an extrapolative framework for a contemporary American society that appears increasingly ruled by capital: this is certainly true for the despairing vistas of *Ubik* where no law remains true for long except those governing commodity capitalism. This thesis expands Freedman's axiom by proposing that Dick's heroes are as much constrained by gender roles as capitalism. Put another way, the science fiction of Dick extrapolates the disintegration of gender roles into the disorienting conspiracies of his fiction, and he does so on exponential scales: from suburbia to the nation and to the solar system in *Time out of Joint*, from Joe Chip's conapt to Luna to reality itself in *Ubik*.

A major literary potency of conspiracy is making formless or unutterable cultural anxieties visible. As we have seen in the previous chapter, in Levin's fiction this anxiety centres around the suspicion that a woman's husband may have greater

---

[13] Carl Freedman, *Critical Theory and Science Fiction* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2000), pp. 16-18.
[14] This characteristic of science fiction aligns with my understanding of genre as a ludic determinant of texts, where the generic rules serve the purpose of readerly enjoyment. See 'Genre fiction and the notion of the popular' in the 'Introduction'.
[15] Carl Freedman, 'Towards a Theory of Paranoia: The Science Fiction of Philip K. Dick', *Science Fiction Studies*, 11.1 (1984), 15–24 (pp. 20).
[16] Freedman, *Towards a Theory*, p. 20.

loyalty to a patriarchal conspiracy than to his wife. The Dick novels this chapter will consider explore the potential of conspiracy narratives to make masculine anxieties visible, in particular, the disintegration of traditional male gender roles instilled in the American public in the post-war period. In *Time Out of Joint*, these anxieties manifest in the everyday defeats of a man living in suburbia but who is disconnected from the heteronormative suburban lifestyle. The covert oppression for which conspiracy functions as a metonymic emblem is found in a militaristic state extracting value from the male subject, seen by the state as only as an asset in a neverending war. For the benefit of this lone individual, the government is willing to build a fake town which Ragle Gumm successfully escapes in the end.

In *Ubik,* Dick creates a world largely unmoored from conventions of American life in the 1960s, discarding customs of gender, habitation, transport, faith, grief and even death but, crucially, not capitalism. At the same time, the novel's time reversal device sees the characters gradually revert back in time, coming to an unstable equilibrium in a vaguely 1940s small town setting. The palimpsestic vision of *Ubik* serves to emphasise how protagonist Joe Chip's masculine inadequacy dooms him to become the victim of a conspiracy in both the future and the past. In contrast, *Time*'s jump into the future—the belated revelation that the plot takes place in 1998 and not, as Gumm and the reader think at the beginning, in the 1950s—points to how traditional masculinity is crucial to defeating a conspiracy. In one sense, *Ubik*'s focal point is disorientation itself, showing us a hostile universe which feels *as if* it was conspiring against its inhabitants, and, to a certain extent, against its readers. The importance of *Ubik*'s decentred conspiracy lies in the way this conspiratorial universe forces the novel's male protagonist to employ increasingly feminine strategies for survival. Dick's two novels allow for the examination of a multiplicity of strategies for the dismantling, escaping, or making peace with the conspiracy.

Masculine crises in context

The masculine crises in mid-twentieth-century United States have been tied by multiple scholars to the humiliation of the Vietnam War. Susan Jeffords that after the era characterised by the Vietnam War, a ''remasculinization' of American culture' has taken place, amounting to the 'the large-scale renegotiation and regeneration of the interests, values, and projects of patriarchy now taking place in U.S. social

relations.'[17] This process of renegotiation was in response to, according to Jeffords, 'the advent of women's rights, civil rights, the 'generation gap,' and other alterations in social relations' resulting in the instability 'of the ground on which patriarchal power rests.'[18] Jeffords chiefly examines novels and films written after the Vietnam War rather than concurrently to it, as *Time* and *Ubik* were. However, many of the techniques of remasculinisation that Jeffords identifies—'shift in focus from ends to means', the 'blurring of … fact and fiction', 'masculine bonding', and the 'feminization of the government'[19]—are already present in Dick's earlier novels, as we shall see in this chapter's discussion of the ontological instability, homosocial bonding, and feminising conspiracy of *Time Out of Joint* and *Ubik*.

Building on Jeffords' work, Suzanne Clark understands feminism as a 'response to the overwhelming hypermasculinity of Cold War culture' in America, and Vietnam as a 'feminizing loss.'[20] However, Clark asserts that '[w]hat appeared as a remasculinization after Vietnam was in some respects the emergence into middlebrow and highbrow culture of identifications with masculinity that had existed in popular culture … all along.'[21] One such pop-cultural example is the fiction of Dick which provides a salient, if not uncomplicated, example of the crumbling of old binaries between 'high' and 'low' culture. Dick's career threaded this contested boundary multiple times, going from failed mainstream novelist to countercultural hero of science fiction to (posthumous) icon of mid-century American literature. Dick's *oeuvre* is pertinent, moreover, for the radical alterity between two novels which both use the narrative framework of conspiracy and are only separated by a decade.

The Cold War, Clark writes, put '[m]anliness itself … on trial.'[22] *Time* and *Ubik* showcase two different ways in which American conspiracy fiction stages the trial of masculinity, with the key difference found in the verdict: in *Time*, manliness can be recuperated, in fact to do so is the only escape from the conspiracy; in *Ubik*, in

---

[17] Susan Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. xi.
[18] Jeffords, p. xi.
[19] Jeffords, p. xiii.
[20] Suzanne Clark, *Cold Warriors: Manliness on Trial in the Rhetoric of the West* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000), p. 15.
[21] Clark, pp. 15-16.
[22] Clark, p. 1.

contrast, masculinity is beyond reach, replaced by increasingly feminine strategies necessary to survive in a hostile, conspiratorial reality. *Time* places much of its plot in the suburbs, with its associated anxieties—familiar from Ira Levin's *The Stepford Wives*—revolving around the 'devastating blow to individuality, diversity, and faith' which these 'suburban institutions' represented in the midcentury American imagination.[23] Dick's earlier novel also exemplifies the 'theme of the individual against the system', a key preoccupation of the period, and the question of 'how to find freedom in a world where every move fits into someone else's plan, and the individual, even under the illusion of acting independently, ultimately exerts no control over his own destiny.'[24] While the tension between collectives and individuals surfaces in Levin's work, *Time* stands out by explicitly tying individualism to an Emersonian, homosocial, frontier-spirited, Beat-infused, thoroughly American masculinity. In contrast, both *Time*'s suburbia and the conspiratorial government behind it are made suspect via signifiers of femininity, intelligible in the context of Vietnam. Jeffords writes how in mid-to-late twentieth century public discourse, the 'the U.S. government and its representatives are argued as feminine not only in their loss of the war but in relation to their inability to retrieve POWs from Vietnam.'[25] The interplanetary war of *Time* is neverending, just like Vietnam appeared to be; the government of the novel, unable to achieve victory through military means, resorts to conspiratorial scheming, similarly to the feminine 'posture of negotiation' of state bodies in Vietnam retrospectives.[26] Jeffords speculates 'it is not accidental that a revived masculinity' allied itself with individualism and imagined state power in feminised terms, since 'so many gains made by women and minorities have been made through legislative or federal action.'[27] It would be somewhat anachronistic to apply this reading to *Time*, written before many of these gains were made. However, the applicability of Jeffords' analysis showcases that the individual/masculine—collective/feminine dichotomy has a much longer history in the American imaginary, going back, perhaps, all the way to Emerson.

---

[23] Chafe, p. 115.
[24] Chafe, p. 128.
[25] Jeffords, p. xiv.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid.

If *Time* shows recuperated—and recuperative—masculinity's victory over a feminine-coded, large-scale conspiracy, *Ubik* probes masculinity's unviability in a conspiratorial universe. This radical change was likely informed by the ever-ongoing Vietnam war and the mounting civil opposition to its continuation, epitomised by the student protests of the late 1960s. The protests, Chafe writes, were symptomatic of the generation gap: that 'the 'best and brightest' of one generation sat in Washington making policies that seemed transparently immoral and stupid to the 'best and brightest' of the next generation.'[28] The protests undermined the consensus that 'decisions in America were made democratically', seemingly confirming 'the radical contention that the very system itself was immoral and oppressive.'[29] *Ubik*'s rudderless reality bears the imprint of the suspicion that neither the system nor its leaders are fit for purpose. The culture of distrust in the 1960s was compounded by a spate of high-profile political assassinations, many of which immediately became lodes of conspiracy theories. The multilayered social crises are, once again, translated as crises of masculinity, evoking two key figures of the decade: John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson, the anxieties surrounding both appearing in spectral form in the men of *Ubik*.

Victories for American second-wave feminism provides another crucial background to *Ubik*'s treatment of gender. The 1960s saw, among other milestones, the foundation of the National Organization of Women, headed by Betty Friedan; the passing of the Equal Pay Act of 1963, which outlawed wage discrimination based on gender; and the legalisation and widespread adoption of birth control.[30] These feminist wins made previous strategies of feminine containment—as employed in *Time*—impossible: femininity could not be sequestered to suburban homes and maternal roles anymore. *Ubik*'s alternative solution amounts to what I come to call the 'ethereal feminine' in Dick's fiction: women safely contained in death, providing just enough discorporate presence to become unattainable objects of male yearning. While postmortem containment made the feminine safe to handle, the liminality of their position—a sort of absent presence—also allied Dick's ethereal women with

---

[28] Chafe, p. 311.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Birth control was made legal for married couples by *Griswold v. Connecticut* (1965); later expanded to unmarried people with *Eisenstadt v. Baird* (1972).

'multiplicity' and 'simultaneity', which, as Jeffords writes, became signifiers of the enemy in representations of Vietnam.[31] *Ubik*, accordingly, features a scheming, cruel female conspirator who would have been inconceivable amongst *Time*'s suburban housewives. The simultaneity of meaning often underpins postmodern texts, making *Ubik* represent a definitive turn towards the cultural mode which will dominate the second half of this thesis: postmodernism.

Peter Knight argues 'the culture of paranoia is inseparable from the culture of postmodernism, not least because they share a paradoxical fiction of origin in the Kennedy assassination' due to a 'distrust of final narrative solutions.'[32] Here, Knight gestures towards the endless reopening of the official answers—which should have finalised that particular narrative—to the assassination of John F. Kennedy and its attendant conspiracy theories. The continuous discarding of narrative explanations is a prominent feature of *Ubik*, and the source of its characteristic effect of ontological disorientation. Christopher Palmer writes that in 'novels such as *Ubik* … Dick carries his sense of ontological and epistemological instability so far as to imagine the condition that we now call postmodern: dominance of the simulacral and eclipse of the natural; blurred boundaries, reality dissolves or nestings, time regressions or unhingings, ravelled failure of the rational.'[33] In a blog post on Dick, Mark Fisher calls *Ubik* 'a sustained meditation on the difference between reality and the Real.'[34] Fisher's wording evokes Luc Boltanski's theory on the 'conspiracy form', whereby 'the social reality as initially perceived by a naive observer … reverses itself and unveils its fictional nature, revealing another much more real reality.'[35] If, as Knight writes, conspiracy narratives are interventions into 'What Is Really Going On,'[36] it is unsurprising that Dick, whose fiction often circles the very same question, has reached for the narrative framework of conspiracy repeatedly during his career. In both *Time* and *Ubik*, the conspiratorial framing is used to gain a handle on the turbulent world of 50s and 60s America, characterised by a contested war, civil

---

[31] Jeffords, pp. 162-3.
[32] Knight, 116.
[33] Christopher Palmer, *Philip K. Dick: Exhilaration and Terror of the Postmodern* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2003), p. 111.
[34] Mark Fisher, 'Ubik as Petit Objet A', *k-punk*, 25 October 2005 <k-punk.abstractdynamics.org/archives/006679.html> [accessed July 2021].
[35] Boltanski, p. 13.
[36] Knight, p. 10.

unrest, widespread disillusionment, and rapidly changing gender roles. Mitigating crises of masculinity, in particular, become strategies of navigating the conspiracy within these novels.

Time and *Ubik* are useful in charting a seismic shift in conspiracy culture of the United States. Knight writes that conspiratorial thinking became in the mid-twentieth century 'not so much an occasional outburst of countersubversive invective as part and parcel of many people's normal way of thinking about who they are and how the world works', singling out the Kennedy assassination of 1963 as the watershed moment for this change in attitudes.[37] Written in 1957 and published two years later, *Time Out of Joint* predates this moment, and as such, can operate unencumbered by the myriad cultural signifiers attached to the idea of conspiracy after the succession of political assassinations in the 1960s. *Time*'s historical position allows Dick to use the narrative framework of conspiracy in a uniquely unapologetic, ontologically stable, and somewhat naïve fashion; that is, to use conspiracy to reformulate and redeem masculinity. This attitude, however, becomes untenable by *Ubik*'s 1969 publication year, after the Kennedy assassination has made the idea of a 'conspiracy' a hopelessly loaded term. One of Dick's better-known works, *Ubik* is wholly dedicated to an ontologically unstable worldview in which conspiracy becomes just another inadequate explanation for 'What Is Really Going On', signifying the negotiation of a discursive landscape which is fundamentally different in its treatment of conspiratorial frameworks than a decade prior.

Both novels plug into the North American tradition which Timothy Melley, in his discussion on Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962) as a piece of paranoid fiction, describes as the 'masculinist version of liberal individualism' in which freedom 'means to be separate from the domestic sphere and protected from a technologically invasive society.'[38] Domesticity, strongly allied with femininity, becomes the main tool by which conspiracy enacts its total control on *Time*'s Ragle Gumm. *Ubik*'s vision of the future features a domesticity devoid of women like the housewives of *Time*, yet even with this absence, domesticity retains its claustrophobic qualities. The women of *Ubik* are comparatively freer than those of *Time*, which allows Dick to examine multiple gendered responses to conspiratorial

---

[37] Knight, p. 2.
[38] Melley, p. 36.

control. At the forefront of the assembled characters is the emphatically undomestic Pat Conley, who nevertheless unites the coercive qualities of marriage (as perceived by the masculinist liberal individualism) and of the invasiveness of technological control—all the while being a co-conspirator. In both novels the conspiracy acts as an invisible barrier between the male subject and a culturally rooted idea of personal liberty.

Dick and gender

Dick scholarship has only sporadically paid attention to the gendered dimensions of his novels, with recent scholarly readings of Dick's male characters focusing on masculinity in flux from the 1950s onward. In an article titled ''Anxious Masculinity: A Comparative Study of Philip Dick's *Scanner Darkly* and Richard Linklater's Adaptation', Azra Ghandeharion links the anxious masculinity of Dick's characters to 'the socioeconomic setting of late 1970s.'[39] Valerie Holliday points to a specifically 'post-atomic' crisis in masculinity and male hegemony,[40] while Ryan Stryffeler mines *The Man in the High Castle* (1962) for its 'idealization of masculinity through its portrayal of the men who make up the German fascist regime.'[41] In an incisive essay, Andrew Hoberek offers a study of the 'occupational masculinity' of Dick's male characters, describing the complex negotiation required by white male workers to harmonise the perceived femininity of their white-collar occupations, the alienating nature of these jobs, and the masculinity of the breadwinner role in post-war United States.[42] Hoberek suggests that concepts of the gendered self, present in Dick's 1959 *Time Out of Joint,* grew from the same soil as Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique,* published four years after Dick's novel. A strength of Hoberek's study is its successful combination of earlier, Marxist readings of Dick, which tended to focus on alienation of white-collar labour, and later readings of gendered expression and masculinity. While these scholarly works laid the foundation for gendered readings of

---

[39] Azra Ghandeharion, 'Anxious Masculinity: A Comparative Study of Philip Dick's Scanner Darkly and Richard Linklater's Adaptation', *Forum for World Literature Studies*, 8.2 (2016), 333–50 (p. 347).
[40] Valerie Holliday, 'Masculinity in the Novels of Philip K. Dick', *Extrapolation*, 47.2 (2006), 280–95 (p. 286).
[41] Ryan Stryffeler, 'Masculinity and Fascism in Three Dystopic American Novels', *Gender Forum*, 47 (2014), para 13.
[42] Andrew Hoberek, 'The 'Work' of Science Fiction: Philip K. Dick and Occupational Masculinity in the Post-World War II United States', *Modern Fiction Studies*, Summer 43 (1997), 374–404.

Dick, in this chapter I argue that they are incomplete without considering conspiracy as metonymy for masculinity in crisis.

Academic texts on Dick's fiction are notable for their inattention to his representation of femininity and, more broadly, the impact of the sexual revolution on Dick's representation of women. Studies on the subject are scant, and perhaps unsurprisingly so: most of Dick's female characters are marginal at best or, more likely, dead. Other authors of conspiracy narratives—such as Umberto Eco or Dan Brown, discussed in the following chapter—use their female characters to channel a motherly, corporeal wisdom in direct opposition to the cerebral knowledge required to participate in conspiratorial plots. In contrast, Dick is drawn towards the ethereal femininity of disembodied women. Dick's ethereal feminine manifests in female characters who only exist in memories or visions; as objects of regret or as short-lived children; or as dead wives assisting their husbands from the afterlife. In Dick's fiction, merely inhabiting a body appears to bar women from being on the right side of the conspiracy. Embodied, sexually available women, when they do crop up, are rarely fleshed out as characters; or if they are, they are invariably villainous; a tendency for which Pat Conley of *Ubik*, or the demanding, mentally frail housewife from *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968) are prime examples. The way in which Dick's not-entirely-alive female characters function in his conspiratorial plots is one of the main focal points of this chapter.

Time Out of Joint: escaping suburbia

Time Out of Joint came at the end of a decade marked with both successes and failures for Dick. His 1955 *Eye in the Sky* had established him as one of the best young science fiction novelists of his time, however, he still harboured ambitions to become a mainstream author, despite the unanimous rejection his non-genre novels garnered—all eight, written between 1952–8.[43] Nearing the end of the decade, Dick 'had come of age as a stylist', according to Sutin, and 'in 1958 he decided, without in the least forsaking his mainstream ambitions, to put that style to work in an SF novel. He called it *Biography in Time*, but Lippincott ultimately published it … as *Time Out of Joint* in 1959.'[44] Marking his holdover hopes of breaking out of the confines of

---

[43] Lawrence Sutin, *Divine Invasions: A Life of Philip K. Dick* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2005), p. 137.
[44] Sutin, p. 137.

genre fiction, *Time* was marketed not as science fiction but as a 'novel of menace.'[45] While avoiding genre labelling may have been a tactic to make *Time* palatable to non-genre audiences, it ultimately backfired: the novel went unnoticed by the mainstream. Genre reviewers, likewise, were less than enthused. The reviews which did appear in sci-fi magazines were quick to claim *Time* as their own, even if their tone varied between lukewarm and appreciative. One reviewer wrote that *Time* is 'a most uneven book' with a 'masterful opening' but an end which merely 'disintegrates,'[46] while another calls *Time* 'a grand job of writing.'[47] The initial flop was followed by decades of critical disinterest in the novel, then a slow push towards reappraisal with two significant swells in the 1980s and 2000s during which *Time* found its way into multiple 'best sci-fi novels' lists.[48] *Time*'s reception history illustrates the extent to which literary criticism has moved on from the summary dismissal of Shippey to a more nuanced view of genre fiction during the second half of the twentieth century.

The novel begins in the suburbs, which, as Christopher Palmer writes, were 'the subject of fierce controversy in the fifties and sixties'[49] and which, as we saw in the previous chapter, proved key in Levin's *The Stepford Wives*. An unusually literal example of the inherent theatricality of conspiracy narratives, *Time*'s Old Town—in which much of the plot is set—is a flimsy pretence: a fake town populated by actors who, by and large unwittingly, play their parts to further the goals of a militaristic government. Old Town is constructed as a neat, mid-sized, American suburban locale of the 1950s. The settlement is designed with the single goal of lulling the novel's protagonist, Ragle Gumm, into a sense of safety so he can work at his rather unusual job: solving newspaper puzzles. Working from the living room of the house of his sister Margo and his brother-in-law Nielson, Gumm is the habitual winner of the 'Where Will The Little Green Man Be Next?' contest published in the local paper,

---

[45] Sutin, p. 138.

[46] Frederick Pohl, 'Review of *Time Out of Joint*', *Worlds of If,* November 1959, p. 98. Reprinted in 'PKD Otaku', ed by Patrick Clark, vol. 3, no date, <https://philipdick.com/resources/journals/pkd-otaku/> [accessed September 2021].

[47] P. Schuyler Miller, 'Review of *Time Out of Joint*', *Astounding Science Fiction*, January 1960, p. 174. Reprinted in 'PKD Otaku', ed by Patrick Clark, vol. 7, November 2002 <https://philipdick.com/resources/journals/pkd-otaku/> [accessed September 2021].

[48] 'Time Out of Joint', Internet Science Fiction Database, <http://www.isfdb.org/cgi-bin/title.cgi?9502> [accessed September 2021].

[49] Palmer, *Exhilaration*, p. 105.

making him a minor celebrity in the town and providing him with a stable income. The uneasy equilibrium of Gumm's life is soon disrupted by uncanny experiences. First, Gumm attributes these experiences to a burnout-induced psychosis but, as the plot goes on, he becomes increasingly convinced that it is the world that is experiencing a breakdown, not him. The latter theory is confirmed in an episode midway through the novel in which Gumm overhears the radio communications between fighter jets—who ought not to be over Old Town in the first place—talking about him as if he was the most important person in the nation, and not a simple man eking out an existence via a newspaper contest.

The existence of the conspiracy thus confirmed, the text's focus changes from the suspicions of the paranoid subject to the strategies of how to escape or dismantle the conspiracy. Gumm tries to leave Old Town multiple times, but he is thwarted with increasing violence on each occasion. He finally escapes with the help of his brother-in-law, and outside, they find the world of 1998: a futuristic police state where teenagers speak in incomprehensible neologisms, the dollar is out of circulation, and Ragle Gumm is indeed of national importance. In the last handful of chapters, it is revealed that Earth is at war with lunar colonists, known as 'lunatics', and Gumm had been in the employ of the defence industry due to his talent in predicting the sites of orbital bombardment. In the past Gumm came to recognise the lunatics' demands for independence as legitimate, but his attempt to defect to the other side was prevented by the government who captured and brainwashed him, finally planting him in Old Town. It is revealed that Old Town was constructed for the sole purpose of cocooning him, and his answers to the 'Where Will The Little Green Man Be Next?' competition predicted where the lunatics would strike. After this revelation, Gumm regains his memories and completes his defection to the lunar side, while his brother-in-law decides to go back to his old life. One might suspect Dick's professional frustrations appearing, transmuted, in his protagonist. Gumm works from home; has a white-collar, but uncommon, job which alienates him from those around him with more traditional careers; and his achievements are restricted—in Dick's case, to his sci-fi short stories—while breakaway success continues to elude him.

Emasculating suburbia and the unpatterned life

While biographical parallels may add depth to the Dick corpus, the major importance of *Time* is found in its uniquely lucid use of conspiracy. In his seminal study of mid-twentieth century American fiction, *City of Words*, Tony Tanner argues

> there is an abiding dream in American literature that an unpatterned, unconditioned life is possible, in which your movements and stillnesses, choices and repudiations are all your own; and that there is also an abiding American dread that something else is patterning your life, that there are all sorts of invisible plots afoot to rob you of your autonomy of thought and action, that conditioning is ubiquitous.[50]

Narratives of conspiracy have a great potency to address the chasm between the idealised dream and a dreaded reality. Or, in other words, these narratives cushion the anxiety generated by the suspicion that not only is the individual influenced by outside forces—ideologies, governments, light beams from outer space—but that the dream of an 'unpatterned life' is no longer attainable, and perhaps it never was. *Time Out of Joint* exemplifies the way in which conspiracy narratives facilitate an escape into the fantasy of the unpatterned life, and it does so in a straightforward, limpid form. Later works of conspiracy fiction often infuse their conspiratorial plots via irony, satire, or ambiguity; with multiple possible reasons for these complications: the cultural dominance of postmodernism which rejected the possibility of Tanner's 'unpatterned life' (*Ubik*), conspiracy's increasing cultural importance in the post-60s United States (Sidney Sheldon's *The Doomsday Conspiracy*), or a greater interest in the thrill of conspiring (Brown's *Inferno*, or *The Da Vinci Code*). Another reason might be that the unpatterned life, in its American literary iteration, presupposes a particular—white, low-to-middle class, able-bodied, male—position, with women and people of colour historically, and systematically, excluded from such radical freedom.[51] Against the backdrop of second-wave feminism and the civil rights movement, aspirations for an unpatterned life increasingly appeared as a hopelessly outdated, exclusionary dream. *Time Out of Joint* and its protagonist, Ragle Gumm, are late examples of this dream.

---

[50] Tony Tanner, *City of Words* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1971), p. 15.
[51] The largely single-author studies within *City of Words* cover 22 writers, out of whom two are female.

Through Gumm, Dick channels 1950s critics of suburbia—including cultural critics John Keats or Lionel Trilling—who excoriated suburban developments and their inhabitants, focusing on their perceived uniformity and shallowness. Murphy writes that 'one of the most deadening characteristics of such communities, Keats felt, was their soul-destroying homogeneity.'[52] Keats called suburban developments 'fresh-air slums' in which houses are identical, just as the people inhabiting them are 'precisely' alike in 'age, income, number of children, problems, habits, conversation … and perhaps even blood type.'[53] Trilling compared the hollowing out of earnest religious feeling to the 'ideal modern house' which merely functions as a 'machine for living' and which can be acquired not through 'struggle' but via 'a growing sense of … practicability and convenience.'[54] To a slew of American intellectuals, the 'whole complex of suburban institutions represented a devastating blow to individuality, diversity, and faith.'[55] Accordingly, Gumm views his neighbours with derision because of their seamless integration into a suburban lifestyle. In an early scene, Gumm's neighbours, the Blacks, come over uninvited and Gumm inwardly scorns them for 'get[ting] on with some new kick' or 'fad' weekly.[56] Following fleeting trends suggests a homogeneity of personality: suburbanites moving and thinking as one. Gumm also scoffs at the repetitive nature of suburban life, making note of how '[e]very clear day [Black] set off on foot, not in his car, striding optimistically along' towards his downtown workplace (19). This homogeneity of time, where every day is the same, is understood to be deadening due to its direct opposition to individualist values of freedom and ungovernability. Gumm's focus on Bill Black's conformity—as opposed to Bill's wife's, Junie's conformism—makes it clear that in *Time*'s understanding of individualism is deeply patriarchal: men ought to resist homogeneity, since it is their individuality that makes them masculine and allows them to resist outside pressures such as a conspiracy.

Via the Gumm-Black contrast, *Time* also taps into male anxieties around the emasculating nature of white-collar jobs, an issue often discussed by contemporary discourse in the same breath as suburbia's degenerating influence. Taking *Time Out*

---

[52] Murphy, 'Identical Boxes', p. 316.
[53] John Keats, *The Crack in the Picture Window* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1956), p. xi.
[54] Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination* (New York: Anchor Books, 1953), p. 18, footnote.
[55] Chafe, p. 115.
[56] Philip K. Dick, *Time Out of Joint* (New York: Bluejay Books, 1984), p. 19.

of Joint as his case study, Hoberek writes how 'suburbia' often 'appears as both expression of and refuge from the conformist world of the white-collar workplace: the place where organization men'—like Bill Black—'find the autonomy, community, and mastery denied them on the job.'[57] Gumm and Black illustrate this dual effect of the suburbs: while Black is seen as emasculated because of his uniformity, his fashionable ways, and office job, Gumm is intensely aware that the domestic mastery of a husband is not available for him, so much so that he initiates an affair with Black's wife. The suburbs of Old Town thus become the arena where social expectations of masculine performance—of living in a nuclear family unit, of leaving the home to go to work every weekday, of providing a certain standard of living—are implicitly enforced, and often enforced by other men. These social pressures are anxiety-inducing to Gumm because of his nonconformism; thus, suburbia becomes a prison-like environment. The novel reimagines this suburb-prison as the result of a government conspiracy, creating a fine example of the power of conspiracy narratives in transforming gendered anxieties with no clear solutions into tangible plots with perpetrators who may be narratively toppled.

Dick's understanding of the nuclear family as the tool of gendered control aligns with critiques of suburban domesticity from white second-wave feminists such as Kate Millet and Betty Friedan. Like Millet, who understood 'the family' as '[p]atriarchy's chief institution' and a tool of 'control and conformity where political and other authorities are insufficient,'[58] *Time* frames suburban domesticity as a tool of conspiratorial control; however, Dick views this control as targeting men rather than women. This is not to say Dick is advancing a feminist critique of the family, only that he takes the pervading sense of suburban degradation and examines its restrictive, stultifying effects on masculinity. In doing so, Dick touches on masculine anxieties around the fad of 'togetherness', of which Betty Friedan wrote: '[c]oined by the publishers of *McCall's* [magazine] in 1954, the concept 'togetherness' was seized upon avidly … For a time, it was elevated into virtually a national purpose.'[59] Togetherness meant a retreat into suburban domesticity for both men and women. It projected the exaltation of domesticity onto the entire family, an image which often

---

[57] Hoberek, p. 382.
[58] Millet, p. 33.
[59] Friedan, 42.

boiled down to derivative images of 'Daddy … out there in the garden barbecuing': editorialised, repetitive, and illusionary.[60] As Friedan writes, however,

> very quickly there was sharp social criticism, and bitter jokes about 'togetherness' as a substitute for larger human goals—for men. Women were taken to task for making their husbands do housework, instead of letting them pioneer in the nation and the world.[61]

Time manifests the anxieties around domesticity's stultifying effect on masculinity via the conspiracy's agent, Bill Black. Black soothes the tension between Gumm and Nielson, Gumm's brother-in-law, about what counts as a real job, and convinces the guilt and anxiety-ridden Gumm that while society (and Gumm himself, 'deep down') may think his work is emasculating, it is really 'creative work… carv[ing] his own future out by his own efforts' (25). By gesturing towards the self-reliance of carving one's own path, Dick evokes the masculinist tradition of American literature and contrasts it with the suburban male. Ironically, Black flatters Gumm by framing newspaper contests as an act of rugged self-reliance, when Black's real goal is—as one of the architects of the conspiracy—to keep him in the complacency of suburbia.

Togetherness and domesticity, then, become key tools of the conspiracy in keeping Old Town's inhabitants, and most importantly Gumm, ignorant of the *real* reality. In doing so, *Time* confirms Friedan's charge that 'critics resented only that men were being asked to share 'woman's world. Few questioned the boundaries of this world for women.'[62] Both *The Feminine Mystique* and *Time*, then, foreground a suburban malaise and its effects on gender roles, and both frame the root cause as if it were the work of a shadowy will behind the scenes. Friedan necessarily must stop short of painting the patriarchy as an outright conspiracy to avoid being dismissed as paranoid. However, as we have seen in the 'Introduction' of this thesis, she often uses conspiratorial language to emphasize the pervasiveness and power of patriarchy's hold on women. Further, Gumm and Nielson's successful escape from Old Town also confirms the claim that 'despite the vogue of togetherness, the ideal depiction of community was not of women and men living in families, but of soldiers

---

[60] Friedan, 42.
[61] Friedan, 42-43.
[62] Friedan, p. 42.

or cowhands joining, through the bond of male camaraderie, to confront the evil of the world'[63] as we will see later in this chapter.

Even before *Time Out of Joint*, Dick's fiction expressed a notable ambivalence about nuclear family, traceable through his realist novels and short stories of the 1950s.[64] Palmer summarizes Dick's stance as

> [i]n defending humanist and romantic values—freedom, imagination, the hope that the child or 'little guy' can make a difference—Dick repeatedly sets his stories in the family, and then suggests that both the family and the small-town or suburban setting which is supposed to centre on the family are vulnerable and unstable, no source of reliable value.[65]

Via a diminished faith in the heteronormative family, Dick's texts are set apart from later iterations of conspiracy narratives which often see the nuclear family as a refuge, untouched by the external corruption of the conspiracy (Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum*); or in which the recovery of the family symbolically coincides with the destruction of conspiratorial forces (Sheldon's *The Doomsday Conspiracy*). As we have seen in the previous chapter, Ira Levin's novels focusing on the female experience of the nuclear family also disavow domesticity as refuge. *Time*'s Gumm loses no real family to the conspiracy, as both his sister and brother-in-law turn out to be brainwashed agents. Likewise, his restoration into family ties by the end of the novel is a lacklustre affair, involving a romance implied, but not consummated, with a lunar undercover agent.

Escape strategies and masculinity

Whereas the first half of the novel focuses on Gumm's suspicion of the conspiracy, the second half's dominant theme is escape, in particular, masculine strategies of escape from the confines of a conspiratorial suburbia. Nina Baym expounds on how mid-century critics of American literature have equated the 'American experience' with an 'inherently male' experience, where 'the role of entrapper and impediment in the melodrama of beset manhood is reserved for women.'[66] *Time* conforms to this ethos and, accordingly, Gumm's escape from 'the cloying pressures of a female

---

[63] Chafe, p. 127.
[64] See Chapters 4 and 5 in Palmer, *Exhilaration and Terror of the Postmodern.*
[65] Palmer, *Exhilaration*, p. 105.
[66] Nina Baym, 'Melodramas of Beset Manhood: How Theories of American Fiction Exclude Women Authors', *American Quarterly*, 33.2 (1981), 123–39 (p. 130, 135).

social order,'[67] represented by suburbia, becomes a study in male strategies of evading conspiratorial control. Key to this evasion are cars and the road, which have, as Baym points out, been peculiarly American methods of taking on the 'quest for unencumbered space.'[68] Accordingly, Gumm first tries to leave Old Town in a taxi and via public transport.[69] These initial attempts fail because they are dependent on strangers (the taxi driver) or companies (the bus service) not being affiliated with the conspiracy—which they are. Incorporating this knowledge, Gumm's second attempt is to steal a car. For the first time, he successfully leaves Old Town and finds himself in nature, with 'hills and dense growth around him' (143). Nature's 'deeply feminine quality'[70] means that it entraps Gumm in much the same way as suburbia: with his car lurching over 'potholes' and spinning out of control, finally 'com[ing] to a rest, half turned over' in the underbush (144). Gumm soon loses his way in the dark, resulting in an anti-climactic scene bordering on the slapstick which may answer to, in a profoundly cynical way, the triumphal ending of Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), which saw Bradbury's hero return to nature and find community in a band of like-minded fugitives. Gumm, however, is sedated and 'hauled into town' (165) with his memories of the trip erased: a lesson in the limits of self-reliance, whether in masculine fulfilment or escaping a conspiracy.

Gumm's third escape attempt negotiates a balance between the insufficiency of self-reliance and the vulnerability inherent in relying on others. Dick frames homosocial bonding as key in escaping the feminised suburbia and the all-powerful conspiracy it represents, suggesting that salvation is found not only in a rediscovered individual masculinity but in the rebuilding of patriarchal structures. Gumm enlists the help of his brother-in-law, Nielson, and together they steal a 'giant two-section' truck from Nielson's workplace and leave Old Town (192). Nielson appears positively giddy informing the bewildered Margo that '[your] brother and I are going on a trip' in the truck and instructing her on what lies to tell Bill Black: 'say you talked to [Ragle] down at the store' (193). The homosociality of the final, successful escape is

---

[67] Melley, p. 32.
[68] Baym, p. 132.
[69] A landmark example of the literary convergence of road travel and masculine bonding is Jack Kerouac's *On The Road*, published in the year before Dick wrote *Time*. Dick had lukewarm feelings about the Beats, writing that he is 'favorably inclined toward *On the Road*, but not the poetry & jazz.' Sutin, p. 150.
[70] Baym, p. 135.

underscored by Margo's explicit exclusion. She is instructed to provide an alibi but not told about the men's plan in any further detail. Moreover, Nielson allows her to think they are escaping 'so that Bill Black can't find [Gumm] and murder him' for having an affair with Black's wife Junie (193). The characters' concerns, then, are determined along gendered lines. The women are occupied with their paltry suburban squabbles—Margo's thoughts go to how 'dreadful' it would it be to 'have Junie Black as a sister-in-law' (194)—exactly as the conspiracy wants them. The men, in contrast, are voicing ontological questions such as 'What are things really like?' and if there is a divine 'logos' underpinning the world, inspiring them to break out of the conspiracy (188). Soon they clear 'gas stations, tawdry cafés' and the 'dreary parade of motels' (196), followed by military checkpoints where the personnel 'without glancing at them … wave[s] them on' (198). Finally, they reach 'the outside … which [they] were never supposed to see or know about' (199): male effort's triumphal escape from the grasp of a feminising suburbia and of the conspiracy.

However, the picture of a new patriarchal order as an antidote to the conspiracy is tempered by the final chapters of the novel. The conventions of American literature which equates suburbia with the stultifying influence of domesticity would dictate that Gumm and Nielson find its benevolent feminine counterpart, the 'beckoning wilderness'[71] at the end of their journey. Yet when Gumm and Nielson arrive at a real city of 1998 they find it bewildering, unwelcoming, and even more sexually delinquent than Old Town. This delinquency is illustrated by their encounter with teenagers who speak in incomprehensible slang, play 'nose-flutes', and whose gangs are ruled by girls with shaved heads, wearing 'suits, oxfords, shirts and argyles' (215). Dick illustrates the alien nature of the real city by inverting the gendered dress code—via the girls' traditionally masculine attire—emphasising just how much of the conspiracy's equilibrium is built on maintaining traditional gender roles. Nielson and Gumm, thus, must confront the fact that while shaking off the conspiracy and reaching the 'outside' may be empowering, it may also lead them to a place unbearably alien.

Time's unwieldy ending foreshadows the 'moment when 'frontier myths' were being found increasingly unacceptable to a generation of scholars and used with

---

[71] Baym, p. 135.

increased negativity'[72] in the US; a moment pinpointed by Kappell as the late 1960s. The heroes of *Time* must make a choice between turning back and (re)assimilating into suburban life or pushing on and turning escape into escapism. Choosing the former, Nielson returns to Old Town. Gumm, in contrast, recovers his memory and joins the lunar colonists, choosing the new frontier and a new community: the reader's last glimpse of Gumm is of him in front of a rocket ship, welcomed by the son of the woman who facilitated his awakening. Here the novel abruptly ends, implying Gumm's success in recovering his masculinity and escaping the conspiracy more by extrapolation than narrative demonstration. Thus neither the wilderness nor the frontier lives up to its promise: in choosing not to show the rocket ship in action or Gumm's integration into the lunar utopia's updated patriarchal order—implied via Mrs Keitelbein and her son—Dick concedes the impossibility of uncomplicated frontier myths.

Time Out of Joint's conspiracy narrative affirms the possibility of an escape from a society which conspires against the manhood of its men, and, as discussed in the section on the unpatterned life, is an uncommonly unironic example of conspiracy fiction. The realist portions of the novel often exist quite apart from its fantastic elements, with the first few chapters of the novel reading very much like Dick's then-unpublished realist novels chronicling suburban ennui and marital alienation.[73] This foreign tone intrudes on the plot later, when Gumm, driving the stolen truck through unfamiliar lands, makes note of how 'a bird skimmed along the surface of the earth, its wings rigid. The bird lighted on a fence' (199). Dick's poetic language hints at a suspicion lurking beneath the triumphant ending to his conspiracy narrative that entrapment (the fence) is never far away from those who, like the bird, seek freedom. Further, the bird imagery is only witnessed by Gumm, and only after he and his brother-in-law leave the feminising space of Old Town, suggesting masculinist associations of freedom and escape. The women of Old Town remain cogs in the machine of the conspiracy, never once entertaining, or even wishing for, escape. It is to them I turn now.

---

[72] Matthew Wilhelm Kapell, *Exploring the Next Frontier* (New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 19.
[73] Suggesting, perhaps, a repurposed manuscript.

Dick's ethereal and celestial female characters

The three key female characters of *Time* are Margo, Gumm's sister; Junie, Bill Black's young wife; and Mrs Kietelbein, an agent of the lunar resistance. Margo and Junie represent two variations of the housewife. The nurturing Margo, well-adjusted to the confines of domesticity is contrasted by her foil Junie, who chafes against her everyday unhappiness by gossiping, stoking marital conflict, and having an affair with Gumm. The third woman of the novel, Mrs Kietelbein, is more of a plot device than a fully-fledged character, and her main purpose is to be Gumm's underground contact and guide to the resistance. Through these three characters, Dick delineates strategies available to female victims of a conspiratorial plot. The male characters experience the conspiracy chiefly as spatial imprisonment: within Old Town, or, more abstractly, as suburban existence as a prison sentence. In contrast, the women are characterised by a fixity in space. As such, the female characters' strategies for reacting to the conspiracy are temporal in nature: embracing suburban stagnation (Margo), inventing an alternative timeline (Junie), or allying with celestial time (Mrs Kietelbein). As housewives, Margo and Junie are both associated with quotidian time.

Feminist scholars have recognised the importance of the quotidian as a source of empowerment and oppression for women. In *Doing Time*, Rita Felski contemplates the gendered characteristics of the quotidian, writing how 'the distinction between 'time's arrow' and 'time's cycle' is also a distinction between masculine and feminine' and, relying on de Beauvoir, affirming that 'repetition is a sign of woman's enslavement in the ordinary, her association with immanence rather than transcendence.'[74] Margo is thoroughly enmeshed in the suburban quotidian, her daily tasks revolving around running the household, taking care of her son, husband, and brother, and petitioning the town's Board of Health 'to clear away those three empty lots … [w]here the kids play after school' because '[i]t's a hazard' (8). Margo takes on the upkeep of her household and of her wider environment, and if she feels 'imprisoned within the remorseless routine of cyclical time'[75] she does not demur. Margo is perceptive enough to stumble upon the truth earlier than the men—'Do you

---

[74] Rita Felski, *Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), p. 82.
[75] Felski, p. 82.

think we are being duped?' (71)—but this revelation comes to her via the 'Consumer's Digest's' warning of 'frauds and misleading advertising' (71). Magazines are a highly gendered medium which, besides sharing Friedan's grave warnings about the advertising world, restrict women's knowledge to sources about consuming and running a household, even if here they accidentally reveal the truth. Similarly befitting her identity as a housewife, when Margo is confronted with living in a sham town, her main questions centre on who is married to whom and for how long, and how many children they have. Furthermore, when Sammy, the son who is in fact no relation to her, cries out at night, she still comforts the boy without hesitation. Margo's reaction of profound indifference towards the conspiracy suggests that adjustment to the oppressive control of suburbia primes women to live under the auspices of a government-wide conspiracy, as the practicalities are much the same. Since the unpatterned life, in Tanner's terms, has always been an impossibility for women there is no reason to seek escape from the conspiracy or from the pressures of suburbia.

Junie Black appears to be included in *Time*'s cast of characters to contrast Margo's well-adjusted womanhood, to occasion scenes of comic relief, and to act as a depository for a more overt kind of misogyny. She is embodied and sexually available, described as 'depraved' for the mildest of innuendos and 'not embarrassed' by her lack of cooking skills (27). As such, Junie combines the worst qualities of Dick's already quite problematic binary character system—as described by Kim Stanley Robinson—becoming a particularly obnoxious example of the 'intense young woman' who is 'both attractive and repellent.'[76] Junie is repeatedly described in diminutive terms—'tiny' with a 'pert, miniature face' (26)—suggesting adolescence and evoking de Beauvoir's concept of beleaguered girlhood. De Beauvoir writes that experiencing female adolescence under patriarchy cultivates a type of person who 'interferes in the destiny of others so that she can count … she tells secrets, she invents others, she betrays, she calumniates … she knows she is without responsibilities, insignificant in this world of men: she makes trouble because she has nothing else important to do.'[77] Just as it does not matter for Margo if she

---

[76] Kim Stanley Robinson, *The Novels of Philip K. Dick* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1981), p. 5.
[77] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex,* transl. by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), p. 427.

lives in a patriarchal or a conspiratorial suburb—both requiring the same skills to navigate—it does not matter for Junie if she is powerless in the real 'world of men', or within the false world of the conspiracy.

While Mrs Keitelbein appears to transcend the quotidian by acting as the agent of the lunar colonists, her accomplishments are undercut by her paper-thin characterisation. We never learn her first name, let alone her maiden name, only her two aliases—Mrs Kesselman and Mrs Keitelbein—and Dick does not focalise her interiority as he does for the other major characters. Her *raison d'être* in the novel is to rescue Gumm, which she accomplishes via the strategic prodding of his memories, first by presenting him with a miniature of his old workplace, then by handing him his own biography. Due to her lack of personality and her main function as a plot device, Mrs Keitelbein is in the same celestial league as Luna and Venus: a feminine-coded entity without a will of her own, existing only to aid masculine self-realisation. This function of celestial femininity is especially pronounced in Gumm's trip to the 'health resorts on Venus' (244), facilitated by his government employers to ease the stresses of war. However, instead of rejuvenation Gumm experiences a radical change of heart, realising the lunar colonists are on the morally just side of the interplanetary conflict. Gumm's journey from revelation (Venus) through memory (Mrs Kietelbein) to self-realisation (Luna) is enabled by a particular kind of femininity, one which is disembodied, seemingly eternal, has no personal needs, demands, or even personhood, and plays the role of a stepping stone in a man's quest towards self-actualisation without complaints. These characteristics place the celestial feminine in stark contrast with the embodied, repetitive, conformist femininity of suburbia, offering a clear judgement on which is preferable. Dick uses the conspiracy to make this value judgement, separating the good/disembodied women and environments from the bad/embodied women by the roles he allows them to play in the conspiracy narrative of *Time Out of Joint*.

A further gendered difference between Dick's characters is the men's prerogative for motion, first coming into focus during Gumm's Venusian revelation precipitated by the philosophy of freedom and movement. During the flight to Venus Gumm marvels how '[t]he greatest tie [of gravity] had ceased to hold him', allowing him to savour 'pure freedom' (244). The experience leads him to articulate his ultimate purpose in life, 'a need that he had never been aware of. A deep restless yearning under the surface, always there in him, throughout his life, but not

114

articulated. The need to travel on. To migrate' (244). Via the vocabulary of freedom and expansion, Dick plugs into the distinctly American tradition of the frontier spirit, his vision clearly reflecting Tanner's 'abiding American dream' for an unpatterned life. Tanner, however, points out an 'inescapable paradox' inherent in the yearning for complete freedom: the 'non-identity of pure fluidity' may be just as threatening as fixity.[78] Tanner continues that 'there can be no identity without contour. But contours signify arrest, they involve restraint and the acceptance of limits.'[79] Dick solves Tanner's fixity/fluidity paradox by imagining a new frontier on Luna, and making the escape from the suburban conspiracy a moral act, quite above concerns of national security, politics, or loyalty. In doing so, Dick takes advantage of the heteronormative gendering of time as described by Felski. Acts which are above the cyclical time of the quotidian, which move the tide of history forward, are coded as masculine; as such, escaping the feminine-coded, stagnant suburbia becomes not only a masculine privilege, but a narrative necessity for Gumm. It is quite unsurprising, then, that Dick's conspiracy narratives think of the feminine in terms of the other, and use femininity and the female characters to signify a specifically un-American type of control, stagnation, and uniformity.

Dick's text ends in a categorical triumph of masculine individualism over the feminised collectivism of the suburban conspiracy, making *Time* an example of the 'melodrama of beset manhood' that often appears in conspiracy fiction. In *Time*, Dick sets up the staples of conspiracy fiction: the quest for truth, reserved for the male characters; the power struggle within, and ultimate rebuilding of, the patriarchy; conspiracy's feminising effect on men contrasted with the virility of its opponents; and the defeat of the conspiracy coinciding with claiming or re-claiming a heterosexual romantic partner. However, Dick's aversion towards embodied female characters—realised most fully in his later novel, *Ubik*—makes a well-developed romantic subplot impossible. Instead, the feminine appears at its most ethereal in Luna and Venus: planets associated with the feminine. Even without heterosexual fulfilment, *Time* is successful in neutralising the perceived ills beleaguering 1950s American masculinity via its conspiracy narrative, chief amongst them the feminising effect of suburbia, the emasculating influence of white-collar jobs, and the eroding trust in a militaristic

[78] Tanner, p. 18.
[79] Tanner, p. 17.

government and its (male) leaders. In doing so, Dick uses conspiracy as a tool of redemption, offering the fable of manhood recovered via the heroic defeat of a conspiratorial society. This clear-cut and naïve position was no longer possible by *Ubik*'s publication in 1969.

The inescapable labyrinths of *Ubik*

A decade after *Time Out of Joint*, Dick created another conspiratorial vista in *Ubik*, which found far more favour with readers and critics than his earlier novel. In the tumultuous years between *Time* and *Ubik*, Dick had two children, three divorces, and a 'third nervous breakdown' which he later attributed to the 'uncopable' pressures of his disintegrating fourth marriage.[80] During this time, Dick appears to have given up writing realist ('mainstream') novels and acquiesced to the label of a science fiction writer, likely influenced by his continued failure to sell his 'long, serious, turgid realist novels' as opposed to the 'short satirical [genre] stories, which were very successful—within the bounds of the science fiction community.'[81] Likewise, the Hugo Award for Best Novel, which Dick won for *Man in the High Castle* (1962), no fewer than three Nebula Award nominations, and the appreciative critical commentary his work received in the mid-1960s[82] likely steered Dick towards embracing genre fiction.[83] The decade was also turbulent on the national level, marked by high-profile political assassinations, an upswell of social movements such as the civil rights movement, the mainstreaming of second-wave liberal feminism, and a widespread disillusionment with the Vietnam War. Despite winning the space race with the 1969 moon landing (itself a mainstay of conspiracy theories), the widespread violence[84] cast a shadow on the decade, making it markedly different to the cautious optimism of the 1950s. The 1960s also saw containment rhetoric losing its currency in American culture. 'Like the narratives it authorized and the nuclear family it valorized', writes Nadel, 'containment culture was thus a product of large, unstable elements—nuclei radiating their detritus. Accumulating to critical mass by

---

[80] Sutin, p. 164.
[81] Robinson, p. 22.
[82] Robinson, p. 135.
[83] The early 1960s marked the definitive end of Dick's mainstream ambitions. In a perhaps too on-the-nose moment that would not be amiss in his own fiction, in January 1963 his 'unsold mainstream novels in one big package [were] dumped on his doorstep' by his publisher. Sutin, p. 173.
[84] Including not only Vietnam and the Kennedy assassination but the Orangeburg massacre of 1968 and the uprising which followed Martin Luther King Jr's death the same year, among other instances.

the mid-1960s, the narratives of containment eventually split one another asunder.'[85] Beyond the 'bounty of waste' Nadel calls 'American postmodernism', the results were a souring of nostalgic visions of the American past and the abandonment of the belief that masculine self-realisation is a viable way to change the world or even one's self. Accordingly, *Ubik* is contaminated by the paranoid suspicion that conspiracies are both ubiquitous and inescapable.

Barry Lewis defines paranoia as 'the threat of total engulfment by somebody else's system' which 'is keenly felt by many of the dramatis personae of postmodernist fictions.'[86] This—perhaps rather yonic—envelopment is contrasted with masculine penetration, especially in the context of mid-century American science fiction where phallic rocket ships abound; a key example being Ray Bradbury's *Martian Chronicles* (1950). The anxiety of total engulfment certainly rings true in the case of Ubik and its protagonist, Joe Chip. *Ubik* is also, as one contemporary reviewer wrote, is Dick at his most Dickian: '*Ubik* couldn't, certainly, be by anybody else. … As usual, it's not until chapter six and some 20 characters later that the narrative starts making sense. This, I should say immediately, is a Dick characteristic that has ceased to trouble me.'[87] Besides being a fan favourite, *Ubik* enjoyed sustained critical acclaim, no doubt influenced by the slow accretion of science fiction's esteem in literary studies during the 1970s. Peter Fitting labelled *Ubik* 'one of the most important SF works of the 1960s' in which 'Dick has exploded and transcended the SF genre;'[88] while Fredric Jameson called *Ubik* 'the most brilliant of all Dick's nightmares.'[89] For many, the genius of *Ubik* lies in its 'satiric and rationally paranoid estrangement of the commodity structure of monopoly capitalism,'[90] pertinent to its historical time and place. However, the novel's indeterminacy proves to be key for the purposes of this dissertation by becoming the most extreme example of the postmodern destabilisation of meaning. *Ubik* exemplifies a conspiracy fiction in which '[r]eality recedes indefinitely, deferring

---

[85] Nadel, p. xii.
[86] Barry Lewis, 'Paranoia', in *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism,* ed. by Stuart Sim (New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 176-77 (p. 176).
[87] Philip Strick, 'Review of *Ubik* and *Maze of Death*', *Speculation*, 29 October 1971, 35–37 (p. 35).
[88] Peter Fitting, 'Ubik: The Deconstruction of Bourgeois SF', *Science Fiction Studies*, 2.1 (1975), 47–54 (p. 47).
[89] Jameson, *Geopolitical Aesthetic,* p. 14.
[90] Freedman, *Critical Theory*, p. 37.

confirmation of [a] conspiracy'[91] beyond the resolution of the narrative. This indeterminacy signals that, unlike in *Time*, neither masculine crises nor their metonymic equivalent, the conspiracy, can be remedied by returning to traditional masculinity. Instead, *Ubik* offers its protagonist the bitter compromise of assuming increasingly feminine postures to survive—but not dismantle—*Ubik*'s all-encompassing conspiracy.

Whereas *Time* had a rigid, conservative vision about the place of women and men in its conspiratorial framework, *Ubik*'s universe of free-floating signifiers does not allow for summary judgements. The significance of *Ubik* as conspiracy fiction lies precisely in its bewildering fluidity: where *Time* uses its conspiracy narrative to justify, rationalise, and solidify assumptions about gender roles within the conspiracy and the wider world, *Ubik* interrogates the effects of a perceived total dissolution of post-war norms of life, including of gender roles, sexual and romantic relationships but also other aspects of life such which impact the self-perception of the gendered subject, such as employment, domesticity, and loyalty. The conspiracy plot of *Ubik* serves a manifold purpose: it is simultaneously a misdirection (by making the reader expect definite answers, then indefinitely postponing the possibility); a tool for setting the tone (in pushing the characters, and the reader, towards a paranoid frame of mind from the start); and a reference for some of the masculinist and misogynist assumptions familiar from the conspiracy narrative of *Time.* Similarly to Dick's earlier novel, *Ubik* interrogates gender through the roles the characters play in the conspiracy; however, while *Time*'s small cast could allow for more in-depth characterisation, the multitude of persons populating *Ubik* produces a shallower look into the interiority of others. This proliferation of characters, however, also leads to a much wider palette in gendered strategies available to the cast of *Ubik* who find themselves in a conspiratorial universe.

Ubik is set in an American near-future where psionics (individuals with supernatural talents such as clairvoyance and telekinesis) and inerts (individuals who can counteract or 'nullify' the psionics) have turned their talents into businesses. The book opens with Glen Runciter, owner of the anti-psi corporation *Runciter*

---

[91] David Seed, *American Science Fiction and the Cold War: Literature and Film* (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 139.

Associates, being lured to a Lunar facility along with many of his best employees by a too-good-to-be-true business opportunity. After a bomb explodes and Runciter is killed, the employees realise they have been victims of a conspiracy. We follow the novel's focal character and Runciter's second-in-command, Joe Chip, in his efforts to unravel the conspiracy behind Runciter's murder. While he and other employees suspect Ray Hollis, the owner of the rival psionic organisation, of orchestrating the murder, they fail to acquire any proof. Compounding Chip's distress, the remaining employees soon begin dying under mysterious circumstances, leaving only piles of dry bones, while items such as coins, cars, and aeroplanes revert to their earlier iterations. Chip starts to suspect something much larger than a simple business rivalry at play, and that reality is breaking down around him.

In the novel's world, it is possible to communicate with the dead, who are cryogenically frozen in a state called the half-life. Early on, the novel introduces Runciter's dead wife Ella, who is stored in a facility for half-lifers known as a moratorium along with others, including an unpleasant, intrusive teenage half-lifer named Jory. At the climactic penultimate chapter, we learn that Runciter is alive and his employees are dead, stored together in the moratorium introduced in the first chapter of the novel. It is also revealed that Jory is behind the mysterious deaths and object reversions, who has the power to create an illusory reality and to consume the life force of those around him. Jory does this with the knowledge of the owner of the moratorium, sketching out another conspiracy built on an understanding between the voracious dead and their enablers. Along with Joe Chip, we learn that the product 'Ubik', which for the first part of the novel only appeared in the extradiegetic advertisement spoofs in chapter epigraphs, is a miraculous 'reality support' invented by Ella to ward off Jory. Ella passes on Ubik to Joe while she prepares to be reborn, while Chip makes peace with his new role as the one to keep the malignant forces at bay in this communal half-life. However, the final chapter throws this resolution into question after Runciter finds a coin in his pocket with Joe Chip's face on it, suggesting that Runciter's reality is breaking down in the same way as Chip's at the beginning of the novel.

Conspiratorial imprisonments

Ubik's denial of a definitive plot resolution received varied reactions. Darko Suvin lamented 'a serious loss of narrative control in *Ubik*' and disapproved of the 'shift

from social to ontological horizons' exemplified by the novel.[92] At the same time, Peter Fitting celebrated *Ubik* as 'a deconstruction of the … formal implications of the classical bourgeois novel', which rests on the reader's expectation that authors of fiction will provide a definitive conclusion by the end of their texts.[93] This radical openness of the plot has been described in terms of imprisonment: Carl Freedman talks of the novel's 'conspiratorially trapped'[94] characters, while Ciarán Kavanagh writes how 'the great isolation imposed by *Ubik*'s unnarrated space'—that is, where its narrative coherence should be—'makes conspiracy theorists of its readers … trapping us in a hermeneutic circle.'[95] Further, Kyle Arnold argues that entrapment is the central theme of Dick's novels written between 1966 and 1968, including *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1966), *A Maze of Death* (1968), and *Ubik*. Arnold argues for biographical reasons behind the theme of entrapment, that is, 'Dick felt helplessly trapped in a reality that was killing him.'[96]

The theme of imprisonment without escape becomes the crucial difference between *Time* and *Ubik*. Whereas Gumm is able to escape by reclaiming his masculinity and thus shaking off the stultifying effects of suburbia, Chip is doomed to exist in a reality that he neither understands nor can influence to a significant degree. Chip's situation, then, is analogous to Margo's and Junie's in Old Town, or Rosemary's and Joanna's in Ira Levin's conspiracy novels. *Ubik* furthers *Time*'s implicit assertion that being stuck, lost, or otherwise hindered is an inherently feminine position; in other words, untangling a conspiracy and being in the know are masculine endeavours, and failing means slippage into a passive, supportive state which is seen as feminine. There is a sense of women as malformed, not-quite-complete men, whereas men who fail to attain a sufficient degree of masculinity—also meaning, in conspiratorial fiction, that they cannot dismantle or at least take over the conspiracy—become *as* women. *Ubik*, then, is an examination of how a male character attempts to maintain his masculinity, while his survival in a conspiratorial world depends on assuming increasingly feminine strategies.

---

[92] Darko Suvin, 'P. K. Dick's Opus: Artifice as Refuge and World View', *Science Fiction Studies,* 2.1 (1975), 8–22 (p. 19).
[93] Fitting, p. 51.
[94] Freedman, 'Towards a Theory of Paranoia', p. 21.
[95] Ciarán Kavanagh, 'Gaze into the Abyme: Navigating the Unnarrated in *Ubik*', *Messengers from the Stars: On Science Fiction and Fantasy*, 4 (2019), 8–25 (p. 20).
[96] Kyle Arnold, *The Divine Madness of Philip K. Dick* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 78.

The chapter introducing Joe Chip frames both his behaviour and his surroundings as intensely feminine and feminising. Like Junie, Chip enjoys gossip, telling his 'pape machine'—a futuristic newspaper delivery system—he wants to 'read about which TV star is sleeping with whose drug-addicted wife', and 'lick[ing] his lips with satisfaction' as he reads about thieves, brawls, and mistresses of royalty.[97] Similarly to the real-life housewives of *The Feminine Mystique* who Friedan describes as being addicted to 'drinks, tranquilizers, sleeping pills,'[98] Chip is routinely 'pizzled on papapot' and yearns for his 'stimulants' and 'soporific' substances (24). Chip is surrounded by appliances which demand money to perform essential functions, including the pape machine, the coffee maker, and the front door to his apartment. Unlike Gumm's ideological imprisonment in feminising suburbia, Chip's confinement is literal and not at all subtle, as the back and forth between Chip and his own front door illustrates:

> The door refused to open. It said, 'Five cents, please.'
> He searched his pockets. No more coins; nothing. 'I'll pay you tomorrow,' he told the door. Again he tried the knob. Again it remained locked tight. 'What I pay you,' he informed it, 'is in the nature of a gratuity; I 'don't have to pay you.'
> 'I think otherwise,' the door said … 'Look in the purchase contract you signed when you bought this conapt.'
> …
> 'You discover I'm right,' the door said. It sounded smug. (28)

This scene of imprisonment, despite its comedic overtones, places Chip in an environment which functions not only as a prison but as a machine of emasculation. The appliances' demand for petty change which he does not have emasculates Chip on two fronts: by locking him inside a feminine-coded space and by reminding him of his inability to provide, and, consequently, of his insufficient masculinity. Chip's chronic lack of money is public knowledge, so much so that business associates warn each other that Chip 'would try to borrow money' from them (102), and even he acknowledges that his hopes of taking over the firm after Runciter's death will 'never come about. … Not for someone who can't manage his own personal fiscal responsibilities' (93). Upon their first meeting, the seductress and conspirator Pat Conley describes Chip—to his face—as a 'little, debt-stricken, ineffective bureaucrat

[97] Philip K. Dick, *Ubik* (London: Gollancz, 2004), p. 24.
[98] Friedan, p. 245.

who can't even scrape together enough coins to pay his door' (36). Thus, Gumm's unconscious anxieties—of being unmanly due to his lack of family, house, or regular job—are not only conscious worries to Chip but are also known to everyone around him.

Chip's confinement and public shame resembles the public perception of Kennedy's successor, Lyndon B. Johnson. Johnson was '[h]aunted by fears of personal inadequacy, profoundly shaped by cultural norms of courage, honor, and manliness', attitudes which resulted in him 'approach[ing] the horrible dilemmas of Vietnam already wrapped in a straitjacket.'[99] Both Chip and Johnson fall short of standards of masculinity inherited from their predecessors, who gained near-mythical status after their untimely—and conspiratorially laden—deaths. Echoing the televised trauma of the Kennedy assassination, Runciter's funeral is 'beamed by satellite over all of Earth' (73). Runciter further resembles the assassinated president by the wistfulness he provokes from previous employees, including Chip. As Chafe writes, 'Kennedy supporters continued to argue that the president, had he lived, would never have tolerated a continuation of American participation in the Vietnam debacle.'[100] As such, *Ubik*'s conspiracy narrative may be described less so as What Is Really Going On (in Knight's parlance) but the endless circling of What-Ifs which never quite slip into the full-blown historical revisionism of, for example, Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*.

In contrast to Chip, Runciter is presented as a paragon of masculinity. When facing the mundane frustrations which debilitated Joe Chip, Glen Runciter simply powers through, jumping queues and securing private comforts via, it seems, sheer willpower. Runciter's tenacious quality emerges during his visit of Ella's moratorium at the very beginning of the narrative:

> 'How is Ella?' Runciter boomed, sounding as if he possessed a voice electronically augmented. 'Ready to be cranked up for a talk? She's only twenty; she ought to be in better shape than you or me.' He chuckled … aloof, but amiable, he propelled Herbert along with him, sweeping his way in great strides back into the chilled bins where the half-lifers, including his wife, lay. (11)

---

[99] Chafe, p. 127.
[100] Chafe, p. 259.

Runciter becomes a larger-than-life masculine ideal through his combination of good nature, designed to put vendors and business partners at ease, a large stature, the audacity to physically grab people and 'propel' them where he wants them to be, and the demanding attitude of a customer who knows his rights. He achieves masculine mastery in the only way feasible in the intensely monetary world of *Ubik*, via becoming a monopoly in his line of business, and he performs the appropriate amount of masculinity to go with that success.

In contrast with Chip, we never see Runciter in a domestic setting. As the epitome of a business-minded man, he appears to exist exclusively in environs dedicated to either making or spending money: his 'big office with its genuine hardwood floor' (54), the moratorium he threatens to sue for their 'shoddy business practices' (21), or the final assignment on the Lunar facility which he accepts because '[t]his kind of business opportunity … happens once in a lifetime' (47), and which ends in the bomb blast and Runciter's apparent death. The conspiracy's success in eliminating Runciter signals a break from the more optimistic vision of *Time* which saw masculinity as an antidote of conspiracism. Runciter's death (and Chip's survival) also complicates the idea that conspiracies are best combated via the values of masculine self-reliance and homosocial bonding. Instead of the sufficiently manly characters escaping and destroying the conspiracy with the tools of masculinist individualism, *Ubik*'s conspiracy preemptively kills those who do not conform.

Chip thus survives precisely because of his insufficient masculinity. In his impotence, immateriality, and lack of authority—he is disobeyed by his own front door, after all—Chip resembles the female protagonists of paranoid novels, who tend to take on shadowy, immaterial qualities. Scholars discuss such novels—Diane Johnson's *The Shadow Knows* (1974), or Margaret Atwood's *Bodily Harm* (1981), for example—as 'stalker novels'[101] or, more problematically, as a "stalked by love' novels.'[102] Under the aegis of an unescapable, in turns violent and uncaring, patriarchy, these protagonists take on attributes of immateriality, characterised by a 'fuzzy boundary between [their] insides and outsides' or like a 'shadow, otherness beat into airy thinness, inside and outside joined in the shadow's single

---

[101] Knight, p. 262.
[102] Melley, p. 119.

dimension.'[103] This radical bodily unbecoming is both feminised and feminising. Runciter, crucially, is described by his untouchable depth: 'inside he did not notice anyone, did not care; it was his body which smiled, nodded and shook hands. Nothing touched his mind, which remained remote' (11). In contrast, Chip is transparent and one-dimensional, his faults obvious to all around him. Further, he is powerless in his quotidian life, let alone on the grand stage of historical time. The hostile, conspiratorial universe of *Ubik* echoes N.'s experience of the patriarchy: the nonconforming like Runciter are eliminated, while those retreating into shadow-like, hapless transparency, as Chip does, are allowed to live. *Ubik* thus signals a profound shift in the concepts of both conspiracy and masculinity: conspiracy comes to signify a world which has wholly unravelled, while traditional masculinity becomes an artefact of the past which can no longer serve the purpose of self-fulfilment nor be weaponised to combat an oppressive system.

Roles for women within a conspiratorial universe

Yet another strategy for survival in a conspiratorial universe is alignment with its cause. In *Ubik*, Dick delegates this role to Pat Conley. Pat is exceptionally young— 'obviously no more than seventeen' (28)—and has a seemingly universal sexual allure, as both Joe Chip and Runciter find her extremely attractive. However, it is through Runciter's eyes that she seems to take on an otherworldly, hyperbolic stature: she has an 'intense, distilled beauty' which 'illuminated that part of the room, igniting it with heavy, sullen fire' (28; 47). Pat is also cruel and manipulative, insulting Chip in a 'neutral but devastating' tone (36) and taunting him during his brush with death. Her talent is changing the present by going back in time, which she uses to further the conspiracy's goal—the assassination of Runciter—via means associated with the feminine. In the first instance, she convinces Chip to hire her via undressing in front of him:

> 'Are you sure you want to do that?' he said. 'Take off your clothes, I mean?'
> Pat said, 'You don't remember.'
> 'Remember what?'

[103] Patrick O'Donnell, 'Engendering Paranoia in Contemporary Narrative', *Boundary 2*, 19.1 (1992), 181–204 (p. 201).

'My not taking off my clothes. In another present. You didn't like that very well, so I eradicated that; hence this.' (35)

Sexuality, domesticity, and marriage are domains in which patriarchy allows women to have power; more accurately, men may perceive women to have power over them. Later, when Runciter asks her to demonstrate her talent, she invents a past where she and Chip had been married for a year, then changes it back again, keeping only 'the silver and jade wedding ring which, in another time track, she and Joe had picked out' (61). There are similarities between Junie Black and Pat Conley, mostly in their youth and sexual allure. However, there is a stark contrast between the framing of Junie as foolish for similar behaviour while Pat Conley is a decidedly monstrous presence in *Ubik*. I argue this difference is partly due to Pat's murderous intentions. Another reason is that until the very last chapters Pat appears to be one of the architects of the conspiracy rather than one of its victims, a status often reserved for men in conspiracy narratives. Moreover, throughout the narrative she retains, even flaunts, her femininity, thereby becoming doubly aberrant: to women, because she possesses real (conspiratorial) power beyond women's customary domestic privileges; and to men, because she is intruding on the masculine privilege of mastering the conspiracy.

Death appears to be the only other viable role for women in *Ubik*'s conspiratorial universe. Ella Runciter is a prime example of Dick's ethereal feminine: 'about twenty' and stored 'in her transparent casket, encased in an effluvium of icy mist, Ella Runciter lay with her eyes shut' (15). Ella's Snow White-esque enclosure taps into a number of brazenly patriarchal fantasies about women who remain forever young, have no will of their own, will stay where they are placed without complaint, and only speak when spoken to.[104] Wendy Wright, Chip's love interest, has qualities which are disquietingly similar to Ella's cold half-life:

'[Wendy's] eyes … looked impassively at everything; [Chip] had never seen fear in them, or aversion, or contempt. What she saw she accepted. [S]he struck him as being durable, untroubled and cool, not subject to wear, or to fatigue, or to physical illness and decline. Probably she was twenty-five or -

---

[104] There is a striking contradiction in Ella's description in the novel. Her eyes are initially described as brown, and then as 'bright and luminous blue' only a page later. It is difficult to know if this contradiction is the result of authorial carelessness, an early sign of ontological breakdown, or an indicator of Runciter's faults as a husband.

six, but he could not imagine her looking younger, and certainly she would never look older.' (63)

The awe of eternal youth, durability, and static femininity suggests that the ideal woman in *Ubik*'s world is as close to dead as possible yet still present if she is needed; she has no complaints or needs yet continues to display her beauty effortlessly. Ella's and Wendy's ethereal femininity is an extreme version of othered womanhood, simultaneously expected to be on-demand and lacking in fundamental humanity. Wendy Wright is, appropriately, the first one to die of Runciter's employees, only to resurface as character motivation for Joe Chip in opposing Jory: 'I can remember what he did to Wendy. That'll keep me going. That alone' (215). Ella is absent from much of the narrative, only to be revealed to be the benevolent entity who helped Chip all along (214). Via their absences and fortuitous resurfacings, Wendy and Ella fulfil a similar function as the celestial bodies of *Time*, existing only to aid Chip's journey towards self-realisation.

The women of *Ubik* resemble planetary bodies in more than one way: like the stars, they are also distant and cold. Distance and coldness are opposed to women's traditional role in the nuclear family as the nurturers of tight familial bonds and domestic warmth, both of which are largely absent from *Ubik*. In their stead, we see loose interpersonal relationships frequently mediated by capital, whether monetised cold-pac technology (Ella, Jory) or cash of the cold hard variety (Pat, Runciter's employees). In her discussion of the cold imagery of *Ubik,* Fabienne Collignon argues that cold was emblematic of the decade in more ways than one: the 1960s saw plenty of discourse on the Cold War, the threat of nuclear winter, and cryogenic technology alike.[105] Collignon interprets the centrality of cold in *Ubik* as 'the prospect of immortal capitalism', amounting to an inescapable 'tomb-world order.'[106] This cold capitalism is most overt in the novel's moratoria. In *Ubik's* world, burials are deemed 'barbaric' (10), and the dead are cryogenically frozen in cold-pacs, suspended in a state of half-life between corporeal death and reincarnation. Besides cryogenic

---

[105] Fabienne Collignon, 'Cold-Pac Politics', in *The World According to Philip K. Dick*, ed. by Alexander Dunst and Stefan Schlensag (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 48–67. Collignon draws, in particular, on Robert Ettinger's *The Prospect of Immortality* (1964), a book which 'considers the practical, legal and ethical issues relating to cryogenics' and Walt Disney's death in 1966, the same year *Ubik* was written (Collignon, p. 57). The conspiracy theories around the cryogenic preservation of Disney's body persist to this day.
[106] Collignon, p. 62.

storage, moratoria also provide the know-how to talk to the dead housed within—for a fee, of course: it is 'a profitable business, operating a moratorium' (10). Seen through the lens of capital, the chill permeating *Ubik* functions as a dystopic warning of capitalism's power to govern familial bonds. The novel also warns that—while *Time* successfully understood and dismantled government oppression when it took the form of a conspiracy—applying the same conspiratorial framework to capitalism, rather than allowing one to comprehend and defeat it, only results in the unraveling of reality.[107]

Government-mandated families are a frequent trope of dystopian fiction, found in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) George Orwell's *1984* (1949), Levin's *This Perfect Day* (1970),[108] and, to a certain extent, Dick's own *Time Out of Joint,* all of which feature a tyrannical government prescribing or otherwise controlling one's familial attachments. Shulamith Firestone critiqued this trope—which she called 'The *1984* Nightmare'—by questioning the habitual contrasting of dystopian 'cold collectives' with 'the family [as] the last refuge [which] provides the little emotional warmth, privacy, and individual comfort now available.'[109] The '*1984* Nightmare' belies masculinist assumptions since to consider the family an unqualified refuge from government tyranny, one must ignore the historical oppression of women within the traditional domestic setting. Firestone satirises this assumption as forcing the 'female principle' to become a ''private' retreat, into which men periodically duck for relief.'[110] This iteration of the trope—female-created domesticity as men's reprieve—is more characteristic of *Time* than *Ubik*. The later novel does exemplify Firestone's argument that the '*1984* Nightmare' is a direct 'exaggeration [of] the evils of our present male-supremacist culture' in which 'women have become like men, crippled in the identical way.'[111] This gender-neutral decay appears most overtly in the character of Pat. However, it is perhaps more accurate to say—especially in the case of Joe Chip—the opposite: that men have become like

---

[107] Which evokes the sentence, most often attributed to Jameson, that 'it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism'—however, even Jameson prefaced this sentence with 'Someone once said…'. Fredric Jameson, 'Future City', *New Left Review*, 21 May/June (2003), 65–79 (p. 76).
[108] Curiously, Levin also named his protagonist 'Chip' in this novel.
[109] Firestone, p. 196.
[110] Firestone, p. 197.
[111] Ibid.

women, displaying the same bewilderment, incomprehension, and powerlessness in the face of a conspiratorial force as female characters often do in conspiracy novels.

By the end of the narrative, both Chip and the reader recognise that the sense of something amiss with *Ubik*'s universe will not be righted by simply unveiling the conspiracy: the problem is much too large. Chip's only hope is to keep Jory at bay with 'Ubik', the mysterious canned substance invented by a 'number of responsible half-lifers whom Jory threatened. But principally by Ella Runciter' (221). Chip is given a certificate for a 'a free, lifetime supply' of Ubik from Ella herself (214), who admits that she has 'a very selfish, practical reason' for aiding Chip: 'I want to have someone whom Glen can ask for advice and assistance, whom he can lean on. You will be ideal' (215). Chip's slippage into feminine passivity is thus complete. After being pushed into situations traditionally relegated to women—lack of money, the acute sense of powerlessness, the frustration of existing in a world controlled by a malignant force with unknown motivations—Chip is ready to replace Runciter's wife. Just like the housewives of Old Town, Chip cannot hope to dismantle completely, or leave behind, his nightmarish reality: his best hope for success is keeping Jory at bay, a goal which places him squarely in feminine, cyclical time.

Yet, the torturous process of Chip's feminisation raises a question: if Joe Chip's feminine qualities enable him to navigate *Ubik*'s inescapable mazes, why not have a female protagonist in the first place? The probable answers are manifold, including Dick's authorial preference for male protagonists, his awareness of the traditionally male readership of the sci-fi market, and his confessed use of 'prototypes', which restricted female characters in his fiction to a handful of (varyingly sexist) tropes.[112] A more likely answer is that Dick is interested in precisely this kind of dilemma: how masculine self-realisation may be attained in a world where everything is adrift, where one is at the mercy of conspiratorial forces beyond one's control, and where all the necessary survival skills are within the realm of the traditionally feminine. For most of the questions it poses, *Ubik* provides no definitive answers. It does, however, portray accurately a profound sense of bewilderment which, attested by the novel's enduring popularity, is an incisive portrayal of

---

[112] Robinson, p. 5.

masculine crises channelled through the narrative framework of conspiracy during the mid-twentieth century.

Immanent and transcendent legacies

The anxiety of one's postmortem legacy provides a compelling junction between *Ubik* and *Time Out of Joint*. A recent scholarly work by Ciarán Kavanagh provides an inroad to the reading of the novels as a masculine anxiety of legacy by proposing a simple solution to Ubik's narrative puzzle: it was all Runciter's dream. After we have seen Ella pass on the responsibility of taking care of Runciter to Chip, Dick shows Runciter leaving the moratorium and finding a coin with Chip's likeness, signaling an ontological breakdown on a level of the novel which, up until the very end, seemed stable. Kavanagh notes how the scholarly consensus has been that the plot of *Ubik* is unsolvable, and intentionally so, channeling scholars' 'interpretive powers' towards 'describing this puzzle rather than attempting to solve it.'[113] Kavanagh here proposes an alternative approach, suggesting that

> *Ubik's* hypodiegesis, encountered after the explosion on the Luna base, is either completely or mostly the mental product of Glen Runciter … By this reading, the plot of the hypodiegesis can be understood as an ego-driven fantasy designed to reaffirm Runciter's self-importance, legacy and, ultimately, to act as a coping mechanism which allows him to avoid dealing with the fact that he has died.[114]

Dick originally titled his earlier novel *A Biography in Time* and, indeed, a key passage in the text is Gumm reading 'the January 14, 1996 copy of *Time* [magazine], with [Gumm's] picture on the cover and [his] biography inside' (189). Gumm reads about his legacy, and Runciter dreams about it, pointing to a gendered understanding of time. Rita Felski talks of masculine time as 'time's arrow', as opposed to a feminised cyclical time;[115] while de Beauvoir writes of man's prerogative 'to forge the future.'[116] Both Felski and de Beauvoir understand the anxiety of one's legacy as a particularly masculine worry. Moreover, the worry is not only *whether* history will remember them, but *how* they will be remembered. While it is true that women are often relegated to cyclical tasks (the upkeep of the household, the caring for others), the

---

[113] Kavanagh, p. 10.
[114] Kavanagh, pp. 10-11.
[115] Felski, p. 82.
[116] de Beauvoir, Borde and Malovany-Chevallier translation, p. 100.

results of this feminine work, despite being immanent, are immediately visible. In reading *Ubik* as Runciter's self-serving dreamscape, where he is the beloved boss, much-missed husband, and quite literally the centre of a (if not *the*) universe, Kavanagh offers us another way in which *Ubik* makes masculine anxieties visible. This egocentric worry is a thread hidden deep in *Ubik*'s ontological labyrinth, a fact which in and of itself is telling: the self-assuredness of male privilege which led Gumm out of the conspiratorial maze is beyond reach for Joe Chip.

     Time and *Ubik* are transitional in multiple ways. *Time* is emblematic of the *before*: that is, before Dick's transition from failed mainstream novelist to a successful science fiction author; before the Kennedy assassination made conspiracy narratives too culturally loaded to use lightly; before the advent of second-wave feminism in the United States; and before traditional gender roles and the meaning of reality had been dissolved by postmodernism. *Ubik* is all that came after. Dick's later novel is conspiracy—and perhaps science fiction, too—at its most confusing, memorialising the ontological disarray that comes after the symbolic dethroning of patriarchy, well before Eco and Brown could offer their correctives.

     Despite *Ubik*'s elevation of women into the circle of conspirators, Dick's gender politics remain regressive, venerating its ethereal women who are as far away from humanity as possible. The exclusion of women from conspiracy, and, ideally, from the bustle of life in general, will continue to be an enduring trope of conspiracy fiction until the twenty-first century. The following chapter outlines how the thriller genre used some of the strategies of Dick's fiction to imagine and narratively neutralise masculine crises via conspiracies. However, large-scale masculine crisis are largely absent in these late twentieth and early twenty-first century texts. While Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum* (1988/9) processes lingering masculine anxiety, conspiracy proves to be a false—and fatal—method of reclaiming it. By 2003, Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* turns its focus back on femininity and its place in a world where the gains of second-wave feminism appear distant, its present aimless, and its future uncertain. Conspiracy, in these later novels, becomes a tool of a traditionalist turn which uses conspiracy to reaffirm reactionary myths of gender, chief among them a purported feminine proclivity for corporeal knowledge and maternal wisdom.

Chapter 3. Recuperative conspiracies: the thrillers of Umberto Eco and Dan Brown

So far, this dissertation has investigated multiple ways in which conspiracies are used to process gendered anxieties in fiction. Ira Levin's novels use conspiracy to make tangible the everyday injustices patriarchy inflicts on women within the domestic sphere, literalising the metaphor of patriarchy as conspiracy. *Rosemary's Baby* and *The Stepford Wives* are powerful representations of the containment of women by impersonal systems (Satanic coven, the Men's Association) as well as the personal complicity of their husbands. Philip K. Dick's novels *Time Out of Joint* and *Ubik* use conspiracy to come to terms with a suspicion that traditional—pre-second wave—modes of performing masculinity are crumbling, and to ponder possible methods through which this masculinity may be reclaimed or renegotiated. In stark contrast to the techno-patriarchal suburbs of *The Stepford Wives*, *Time out of Joint* presents suburbia as an oppressively feminising and conspiratorially enforced milieu, where the state-backed conspiracy may only be dismantled via a triumphant rediscovery of American manliness. The later *Ubik* presents a thoroughly postmodern vision of an undefeatable, boundless conspiracy, where the male protagonist's only avenue towards victory and partially reclaimed masculinity is a

kind of guerrilla warfare against entropy. At the same time, the novel's female characters tend to be absent: preferably dead, or at least ethereal beyond reach. In all these novels, the narrative tool of conspiracy acts as a sorting machine, separating and ranking different types of gendered behaviour and gendered knowledge, according to which behaviours allow for characters to escape from, or better yet, dismantle the conspiracy. Moreover, the heterogeneity—even within one author's *oeuvre*—of conspiratorial plots is a testament to the volatility of meanings assigned to both gender and conspiracy during the relatively short time elapsing between 1959 (*Time Out of Joint*) and 1972 (*Stepford Wives*). This chapter breaks the mould of single-author discussions established so far by covering two novels from two different authors, *Foucault's Pendulum* (1988, transl. 1989) by Umberto Eco and *The Da Vinci Code* (2003) by Dan Brown. These novels also segue from conspiracy's primary emotive charge of fear and confusion, as discussed in previous chapters, to one which queries the possibility of finding joy and salvation via participating in a conspiracy.

Eco is ambivalent about the allure of conspiracy narratives; in fact, *Foucault's Pendulum* can be read as a warning against the siren song of conspiratorial thinking. Moreover, while Eco approaches its topic with a degree of postmodern irony, Brown's text is committed to its project of historical meaning-making, which is to make centuries of patriarchal oppression intelligible via the narrative overlay of a conspiracy. Despite the differences in nationality or the fourteen years which elapsed between their publication dates, Victoria Nelson is correct in identifying a kinship between the novels in observing that '*Foucault's Pendulum* and *The Da Vinci Code* each proceed—one sophisticated and tongue in cheek, the other in deadly earnest—with a manic and completely specious connect-the-dots romp through two thousand years of Western esotericism.'[1] Further, both thrillers thematise gender within their conspiratorial plots.

Asked about having read *The Da Vinci Code* in a 2008 interview, Eco replied, with his characteristic impishness, that Brown 'is a character from *Foucault's*

---

[1] Victoria Nelson, *Gothicka* (London: Harvard University Press, 2012), p. 30.

Pendulum! I invented him.'[2] Eco was referring to the similarities between the conspiracy narrative constructed by his characters and of *The Da Vinci Code*'s core plotline, including the world conspiracy, the involvement of the Knights Templar, or the principle that everything is connected, but he could have equally indicated the use of fertile-corporeal femininity to counteract the postmodern destabilisation of meaning. Dan Brown's novel is, in many ways, the logical heir to *Foucault's Pendulum*, in which the covert turn towards anti-feminism and gender essentialism is made overt; more than that, it is enshrined, sanctified, and celebrated. Both novels see femininity as the site where fixed meanings, perceived to be lost in all other areas of life, may be located. The novels' exact foci differ slightly: *Foucault's Pendulum,* not entirely divorced from concurrent trends in feminist scholarship, privileges women's fertility and corporeality, while *The Da Vinci Code* focuses on the idea of an innate feminine spirituality (the 'divine feminine'). The narrative value assigned to conspiracies proves to be a major difference between the novels. *Foucault's Pendulum*, while registering—even paying homage to—the lure of conspiracies, is ultimately unambiguous in denouncing them as dangerous, malformed methods of meaning-making. In contrast, *The Da Vinci Code* offers its conspiracy as a source of narrative pleasure and a tool of salvation from historical guilt, unchecked by the qualms of the earlier book about the moral, ethical, and epistemological dangers of conspiracism. In many ways, *The Da Vinci Code* answers affirmatively to a question *Foucault's Pendulum* posited but from which it subsequently shied away: can conspiracy ever be deployed to counteract the postmodern destabilisation of meaning?

One reason for the appearance of this recuperative streak as it emerged in the conspiracy fictions of Eco and Brown lies in the notion of endings which seemingly permeated much of American and European culture in the late 1980s. With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Cold War—as it appeared in the novels discussed in this thesis previously—has come to an end; further, 'with its demise would also come the end of a political paradigm that

---

[2] Lila Azam Zanganeh, 'Umberto Eco, The Art of Fiction No. 197', *Paris Review*, issue 185, Summer (2008) <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/5856/the-art-of-fiction-no-197-umberto-eco> [accessed 10 November 2022]

had used the Cold War as its anchor and controlling principle.'[3] After the 1988 presidential election, *Newsweek* registered an 'almost Edwardian sense of decline, in industrial wealth, moral fiber and imperial sway.'[4] The conservative presidency of Ronald Reagan was over, even if its legacy—Reaganomics, the aftershock of the Iran-Contra affair, or the disastrous response to the AIDS epidemic—reverberated well into the 1990s. Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992) is emblematic of endings circulating in Anglophone public discourse, while the short-lived and mostly journalistic phenomenon of the 'new man'—ostensibly replacing an 'old' version of manhood with one which 'helps his wife to cook, clean, and wash the dishes'[5]—expands the epilogic mood into the gendered realm. The death knell of feminism had likewise been sounded both from within the movement and outside of it: early in the 1990s, Susan Faludi writes about the 'end of the women's movement'[6] while in the mid-1990s, *Time* magazine posed the question in striking red-and-black[7] contrast: 'Is Feminism Dead?'[8] The *post-* prefix of contemporary theoretical frameworks such as postmodernism, postfeminism, and postcolonialism likewise points to a perceived *caesura* in history; so much so that John Frow was already writing in the past tense in his 1990 essay 'What Was Post-Modernism?', even as he is problematising the prefix and the periodisation it signalled.[9]

Frow underscores the importance of history and of endings in postmodern fiction, which he expresses rather poetically as the 'contradictory imperative

> to change/to be still;
> to be historical/to be the end of history.'[10]

Frow understands postmodernism to be bound by the dual compulsions of continuous retrospection towards its modernist origins, and continuous innovation to distance itself from these origins. As such, the postmodern's characteristic

---

[3] Chafe, p. 474.

[4] Peter Goldman, 'The Keys to the White House', *Newsweek*, 21 November 1988, p. 16. Quoted in Chafe, p. 473.

[5] Ruth Gledhill, 'Men Spurn Role of Helpmate at Home', *The Times*, 16 November 1987, p.3.

[6] Faludi, *Backlash*, p. 350.

[7] Another famous black-and-red cover is *Time*'s 1966 'Is God Dead?' issue, which makes an appearance in *Rosemary's Baby*.

[8] 'Is Feminism Dead?', cover image, *Time*, 29 June 1988 <http://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19980629,00.html> [accessed 22 November 2022].

[9] John Frow, 'What Was Post-Modernism?', in *Past the Last Post: Theorizing Post-Colonialism and Post-Modernism* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1990), pp. 139–52.

[10] Frow, 'What Was Post-Modernism?', p. 142.

fascination with history is not driven by the desire to understand but to reappropriate: the more the past appears inescapable, the more drastic forms this reappropriation takes. The *Foucault's Pendulum* and *The Da Vinci Code* correspond to Frow's dual imperative by looking back at history and narrativising it via a conspiracy.

In order to look back, both novels draw a clear line of before and after the end of history, occupying the central position with their narrative set in the present. The novels take ownership of history by imposing a conspiracy on the past and, by having their protagonists becoming involved in the culmination of the historic conspiracy, situating themselves in the epicentre of human progress. In doing so, they implicitly assert that past events were conspiratorially influenced (by the Knights Templar, or by the patriarchal Catholic Church), while events after their narrative centre point are free from the control of conspiratorial forces. Their conspiracy narratives, then, enable these novels to organise the tide of history, creating order between the bewildering pluralisms of events and interpretations. The position of mastering history is an inherently authoritative one, the troubling implications of which are recognised and censured by Eco's novel, but which are either glossed over or embraced by Brown's.[11] Furthermore, the novels approach this (literally) authoritative position—of staking a claim to the endpoint of history—through a reinterpretation and reinscription of gender roles, especially femininity.

Both novels were produced in the wake of what Dan Cordle, following Elaine Tyler May and Alan Nadel, calls the 'long 1980s' culture of 'post-containment', characterised by the ambiguous impulses of 'nostalgically recuperating and transgressively challenging [the] ideas' of containment culture proper from 1950s and 1960s America.[12] In the post-containment culture of the 1980s, Cordle argues, the '1950s thus signified and was mythologised as the norm against which 1980s domestic and social anxieties (the demise of the family, the rise of 'broken' homes and of a general social decadence) were judged.'[13] While Cordle's formulation is broadly applicable to the conspiracy fiction of Eco and Brown, some differences are to be found, first, in the novels' historical scope and second, in the exact site of gendered anxiety they seek to address. Eco largely constrains his narrative to the

---

[11] Eco's disavowal of this position is somewhat undercut by his joke of having invented Brown.
[12] Cordle, p. 77.
[13] Cordle, p. 80.

twentieth century, despite toying with European intellectual history of the late mediaeval period onwards. His fiction displays a certain amount of nostalgia for the clearly delineated gender relations of the 1950s, but it is much more invested in a corporeal, fertile femininity which it understands as transhistorical. Eco's novel also registers anxieties of masculine performance familiar from Philip K. Dick's fiction, and uneasily locates its golden age—when men did not appear to be plagued by doubts about their own masculinity—near the end of the second World War.

Although published slightly later than the exact historical moment discussed by Cordle and inhabited by Eco's novel, *The Da Vinci Code* is an extrapolation of both in many ways. Brown's novel expands the temporal scope to include all Christian history, while its ideal femininity—going far beyond the 1950s—approximates the Victorian 'angel in the house', valued most for her spiritual purity and familial pedigree. A key feature of Brown's fiction is the anxiety it addresses via its conspiracy narrative, becoming the first among the novels discussed in this thesis to explicitly target patriarchal guilt. The historical revisionism of *The Da Vinci Code* acknowledges the hurt of patriarchal oppression, while at the same time assigns the blame to the machinations of a conspiracy. As a result, all individual guilt about complicity with patriarchy is absolved at the moment of narrative resolution.

Eco's nationality adds another dimension to this retrospective urge. The 1980s signified the end of a turbulent two-decade period in Italian history known as the 'years of lead' (*anni di piombo*), characterised by acts of terror including bombings, assassinations, and kidnappings. Terrorism, even more so than religion, is implicitly conspiratorial: it is difficult to imagine acts of terror committed without a degree of 'covert group agency'. Italian public opinion further layered the factual conspiracies of terrorism with suspicion cast on official answers and agents like the police or the Italian state itself, or suspecting the involvement of foreign agencies such as the CIA or the KGB.[14] In the real world, conspiracy theories 'enabled the

---

[14] The death of Giuseppe Pinelli is a rather emblematic case study of the period. Pinelli, an anarchist, was picked up for questioning by the police after the initial event of the 'years of lead', the 1969 Piazza Fontana bombing in Milan. During questioning, Pinelli fell to his death from a fourth-floor window of the police station; his death was subsequently ruled accidental. Luigi Calabresi, one of Pinelli's interrogators, was killed in 1972 in a targeted assassination, likely motivated by revenge for Pinelli's death. The real actors behind the Milan bombing and the death of Calabresi were only settled post-2000; in the meantime, the full gamut of possible actors—the Mafia, various right-wing and left-wing extremist groups, the state, foreign agents, and so on—were implicated in the widespread conspiratorial speculation.

political parties to legitimize their own positions and to deflect responsibility.'[15] The fictional texts thematising the 'years of lead' likewise made use of conspiracies within their fictional narratives, and did so with notably Americanised undertones. Hof highlights the film *Piazza Delle Cinque Lune* (*Five Moons Square*, 2003), directed by Renzo Martinelli and starring Kiefer Sutherland, in which the 1976 kidnapping and murder of Aldo Moro is dramatised. In the movie, the 'Red Brigades [responsible for the murder] were portrayed as mere pawns of the American secret service CIA.'[16] Alan O'Leary writes of 'metropolis envy' in contemporary Italian movies whereby filmic identification of the 'Italian *urbs* with the very exemplum of modernity, the American city presents the … political terrorism of contemporary Italy as essential to its *vitality'*; that is, 'the sense of insecurity, the danger of mugging, murder massacres or coups d'état,'—and conspiracies, we may add—'is arguably a source of pride, not regret.'[17] Further, O'Leary writes that 'the remarkable number of female terrorists in these films, proportionally much greater than women's actual participation in the armed struggle, suggests a reading of terrorism as a crisis of patriarchy' and as a reaction against changing gender norms of the 1970s, the 'period in which divorce was introduced in Italy and abortion legalized.'[18] The ways in which Italian texts of the time worked through the trauma of the 'years of lead', then, was very much inflected by American cultural exports, including conspiracy narratives and second-wave feminism.

The two novels display further postmodern traits beyond a fascination with the end of history. Scholars of postmodernism have identified clusters of traits characterising the postmodern, including an 'incredulity toward metanarratives;'[19] 'eclecticism;'[20] the use of 'pastiche' at the expense of parody;'[21] foregrounding 'the process of meaning-making in the production and reception of art' and its 'constant

---

[15] Tobias Hof, 'The Moro Affair - Left-Wing Terrorism and Conspiracy in Italy in the Late 1970s', *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschun,* 38.1 (2013), 232-256 (p. 251).

[16] Ibid.

[17] Alan O'Leary, 'Italian cinema and the '*anni di piombo*'', *Journal of European Studies,* 40.3 (2010), 243-257 (p. 246).

[18] O'Leary, p. 254.

[19] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. xxiv.

[20] Brian McHale, *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodernism (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015)*, p. 1.

[21] Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern* (London: Verso, 1998), p. 4.

attendant irony;'[22] and the way in which 'postmodern fiction presents a challenge … because it requires its reader to be an active co-creator of meaning rather than a passive consumer.'[23] These traits are less overt in Brown's novel than Eco's ironic and self-reflective fiction, however, they are not absent, underlining the continuity between the two texts. In these novels, the narrative tool of conspiracy provides a vehicle for many postmodern traits, enabling the manifold threads that make up history to coagulate into a single narrative and inviting the reader to take part in a playful meaning-making project. Conspiracy becomes a tool of subverting both traditional metanarratives—in Lyotard's sense—and postmodernism's pluralist epistemology, replacing these with one overarching yet novel explanation via historical revisionism. In doing so, these novels also covertly chart an alternative course which rejects both feminist understandings of gender, and—at least seemingly—patriarchal oppression.

Conspiracy thrillers

The reasons why the conspiracy narratives of *Foucault's Pendulum* and *The Da Vinci Code* are best suited to the thriller genre are manifold. The thriller and conspiracy fiction share a precursor in spy fiction, with John Buchan's *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (1915) often cited as an early example of both. One of the earliest and still finest theorists of the thriller, Jerry Palmer, claimed that conspiracy is essential to the genre, writing that '[t]here are only two elements which are absolutely indispensable [to the thriller]: the hero … and the conspiracy.'[24] Palmer's definition underwrites the overarching claim of this thesis that the study of conspiracy narratives ought to pay more attention to popular fiction. However, the 1980s and 1990s appear to be a privileged period for conspiracy as entertainment. As John Caughie writes, 'complex narratives, complete with indeterminate motivations and loose inconclusive endings … have been the increasingly common currency of prestigious popular television crime and conspiracy serials since the 1980s.'[25]

---

[22] Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. x.
[23] Bran Nicol, *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodern Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. xiv.
[24] Palmer, *Thrillers*, p. 82.
[25] John Caughie, 'Television and Serial Fictions', in *The Cambridge Companion to Popular Fiction*, ed. by David Glover and Scott McCracken (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 50-67 (p. 58).

Similarly, Birchall considers the 1990s as a high-water mark period for conspiracy thrillers in popular media, highlighting the commercial success of shows such as *The X-Files* (1993-2002) or *Men in Black* (1997). Birchall understands this period as the 'commodification of conspiracy theory', resulting in a recognisable 'televisual theme' of conspiracism.[26] This conspiratorial theme variably postures as 'political paranoia, as counter-cultural practice, as cool, hacker/slacker aesthetic and as highly commercial, mainstream product.'[27] This process of commercialisation allowed Eco and Brown to recast conspiracy in a friendlier light than Levin or Dick, who saw conspiracy as a source of fear, entrapment, and confusion. In the thrillers of Eco and Brown—albeit to different degrees—starts to assume an enchanting, recuperative sheen.

Dan Brown discusses conspiracy as a titillating, harmless source of entertainment in a comment about Sidney Sheldon's *The Doomsday Conspiracy*, Brown's inspiration for *The Da Vinci Code*.[28] Brown noted how '[t]he Sheldon book was unlike anything I'd read as an adult. It held my attention, kept me turning pages, and reminded me how much fun it could be to read.'[29] This is not to say the novels of Levin or Dick were not exciting; however, *Foucault's Pendulum* and *The Da Vinci Code* signal a shift in the emotional charge of conspiracy fictions considered so far. In the novels of Levin and Dick in the previous chapters, the threat of being caught up in the web of a conspiracy elicited mainly fear, self-doubt, and bewilderment in the characters. These feelings were evoked by the novels' use of the appropriate generic tools: the Gothic's terror and science fiction's techno-futurism. In contrast, *Foucault's Pendulum* and *The Da Vinci Code* aim to titillate by inviting the reader to conspire along. As such, these novels promise narrative pleasure not via the uncovering and

---

[26] Birchall, pp. 37-38.

[27] Birchall, p. 38.

[28] Sidney Sheldon's many novels exemplify the pliability of thriller fiction. Now largely forgotten, Sheldon was at the height of his popularity in the 1980s and 1990s with thrillers that also incorporated elements of the romance and science fiction. As an example, *The Doomsday Conspiracy* (1991) includes a crash-landed UFO, an international conspiracy to utilise alien technology for global mind control, and the protagonist's attempts at winning back his ex-wife. Sheldon is also a standout for modelling an early form of (what today we would call) lean-in feminism, often focusing on a female protagonist's struggle to climb to the top of hostile, male-dominated workplace hierarchies, finding appropriately heteronormative love along the way.

[29] Peter Lattman, ''The Da Vinci Code' Trial: Dan Brown's Witness Statement Is a Great Read', *Wall Street Journal*, 14 March 2006 <https://archive.ph/oJP7y> [accessed 7 March 2023]

dismantling of the conspiracy, as the earlier novels did, but from occupying the position of the conspirator.

Globalisation, the spread of the internet, and an increasingly commercialised knowledge economy provide further grounds for the thriller to recommend itself as the vehicle for a conspiratorial plot. Thrillers often use themes that are intelligible in the context of, or directly lifted from, contemporary (inter)national politics, relying on an action-packed, fast-paced plot to hook and keep their readers.[30] The novels in my focus are both situated near or in the wake of seismic global events: for *Foucault's Pendulum*, it is the end of the Cold War; for *The Da Vinci Code*, the terror attacks on 9/11. The international stage, then, becomes the main arena of conspiracy narratives, enacting a gradual widening of scope from domesticity (*Rosemary's Baby*), through suburbia (*The Stepford Wives, Time Out of Joint*) onto the national stage (*Time Out of Joint, Ubik*).[31] This process of internationalisation was aided by the easy exchange of information, especially after internet access became widespread. Birchall notes that while the 'exchange of knowledge on a mass level is nothing new' and "illegitimate' knowledges'—including conspiracy narratives—'have always been exchanged' locally, the 'velocity and scale of knowledge exchange in the Internet age is unique. Those local, 'illegitimate' knowledges now enjoy mass participation.'[32] Mass participation allowed the tropes of conspiracy narratives to take hold in the popular imagination, ready to be capitalised by the entertainment industry. As a result, the thriller became the dominant mode of conspiracy narratives by the end of the twentieth century.

---

[30] The domestic noir is a notable counterexample. *Rosemary's Baby* by Levin arguably provides an early precedent for this subgenre.

[31] International conspiracies are not new by any means. Nineteenth-century iterations of conspiracy fiction were especially fond of the stock figure of the international villain-conspirator, of which Wilkie Collins' Count Fosco is a classic example (see Chapter 5: 'Italian Union' in Pionke's *Plots of Opportunity*). Conan Doyle's Professor Moriarty is another famous international villain and occasional conspirator (see Boltanski, p. 47). The forger Simonini from Umberto Eco's *The Prague Cemetery* (2020/1) is an ironic Neo-Victorian incarnation of the transnational villain, notable for his fictional involvement with the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. International organisations as automatically suspect of conspiracy have a history in and beyond the nineteenth century, and are often rooted in religious animosity or, more frequently, anti-Semitism. See Hofstadter's *Paranoid Style* about the Illuminati; Jenny Rice's *Awful Archives,* pp. 118-23 and Theodore Ziolkowski's *Lure of the Arcane*, pp. 158-77 about the *Protocols;* and Barkun's *Culture of Conspiracy,* pp. 39-64 on the New World Order phenomenon.

[32] Birchall, p. 5.

Approaching tautology, James Patterson's definition of the thriller involves the assertion that 'if a thriller doesn't thrill, it's not doing its job', elaborating that a 'common ground' of thrillers 'is the intensity of emotions they create, particularly those of apprehension and exhilaration, of excitement and breathlessness.'[33] Excitement is not exclusive to the thriller, of course; however, this 'obstacle race in which an objective is achieved at some heroic cost', Patterson argues, is aimed at not only leaving the reader 'emotionally satisfied but also better informed.'[34] Similarly to detective fiction—and evoking Rosemary's transformation into investigator—the conspiracy thrillers considered in this chapter centralise the process of gathering information. Indeed, Eco pays homage to the detective tradition by styling his protagonist as 'the Sam Spade of culture' (FP, 160). However, instead of identifying a criminal, the plot of *Foucault's Pendulum* and *The Da Vinci Code* focuses on uncovering—or rather, in the case of Eco's novel, constructing—a conspiracy. As such, the kind of information which proves valuable in these novels is less worldly data—in the vein of Sherlock Holmes' hundred and forty types of tobacco ashes—but a kind of semiotic knowledge, concerned with the multi-layered meanings of cultural items and the possible connections between those meanings. Accordingly, both Eco and Brown opted for somewhat atypical, bookish thriller heroes working in publishing and academia, respectively.

Thrillers tend to remain close to plausibility (if not realism), resulting in an abundance of (ex-)military, police, and intelligence personnel amongst the ranks of its protagonists, as these are the professions where violent adventures are at least somewhat plausible. James Bond or Jack Reacher are prime examples of the type of thriller hero who relies on both his abilities of detection and of inflicting violence. In contrast, the protagonists of *Foucault's Pendulum* and *The Da Vinci Code* are historians of art and culture, quite without the military training and arsenal of Ian Fleming's or Lee Child's heroes. This choice reflects the dual influences of the commodification of conspiracy narratives, already mentioned above, as well as changes in the economic and social value attached to different kinds of knowledges coming to the fore at the end of the twentieth century. Birchall argues that '[d]espite

---

[33] James Patterson, 'Introduction', in *Thriller*, ed. by James Patterson (Toronto: Mira, 2006), pp. 9–13 (p. 11).
[34] Patterson, p. 11.

certain similarities in the configuration of knowledge, the knowledge economy and the humanities value knowledge for fundamentally different reasons'[35]; that is, an apparent schism has developed between economically profitable knowledges and the epistemologies traditionally cultivated by the humanities. Seen through this lens, the academic hero of conspiracy thrillers may be the humanities' answer to its own devaluation by the market: a desperate bid to claim a foothold in a capitalist economy which values conspiracies more than it values its art historians. More pressingly, the result of 'the increased commodification of conspiracy theory', as Birchall points out, is 'the aestheticization of accusation and the production of an ironic-sceptical stance.'[36] These are exactly the concerns of Eco in *Foucault's Pendulum*, and part of the reason for his ultimate disavowal of conspiracism.

Feminisms and accusations of conspiracy

The conspiratorial mode in which Eco and Brown operate is paralleled by similar developments in late second-wave feminism in the United States. Conspiracy re-emerges within discourses around a perceived stalling of the movement and the apparent loss of purpose of its white liberal feminist arm in particular. This response is intelligible within the context of ambiguity which characterised the political and social status of women in the United States by the end of the 1980s. The preceding years saw many female firsts—political, cultural, scientific, and more—including the first unshared Nobel prize by a woman (Barbara McClintock, 1977), the first female major general of the United States Army (Mary Clarke, 1978), the first woman on the US Supreme Court (Sandra Day O'Connor, 1981), the first female astronaut in America (Sally Ride, 1983), or the first woman (and first Black American) to achieve ballot access in all fifty states (Lenora Fulani, 1988). Despite these milestones, the feminist movement also had to contend with significant failures, such as being unable to push the Equal Rights Amendment through ratification. Susan Faludi writes about a pervasive 'disillusionment' of American feminists during this time, pinpointing its source to 'the half-gleaned truth that, while we have achieved economic gains, we have yet to find a way to turn those gains toward the larger and more meaningful goals of social change, responsible citizenship, … [and] the building of a mature and

---

[35] Birchall, p. 7.
[36] Birchall, p. 39.

vital public world.'[37] A chapter was closing on what we today know as second-wave feminism, which registered with some contemporary liberal feminists as a sort of enervated bewilderment at the progress they had achieved and how little that sometimes mattered; for example, in Susan Faludi's publications. By the end of the Cold War, it became clear that individual success (in the vein of those female firsts) was the best late second-wave, liberal feminism could offer to American women, and that no structural victory comparable to *Roe v. Wade* (1973) was forthcoming.

By the end of the 1980s, then, feminism—at least its most visible form as white liberal feminism—had achieved the dubious honour of being legitimised enough to be denounced as a conspiracy by its opponents, including the evangelical right and Falwell's Moral Majority. We have already touched on Rene Denfeld's postfeminist discontent in the Introduction, which amounted to accusations of conspiratorial thinking within the feminist movement. In *The New Victorians*, Denfeld denounces the figureheads of American feminism as 'extremists' who have no interest in 'such basic concerns as economic equality,' having been sidetracked by 'antimale sentiment,' political lesbianism, the 'antirape movement,' a retreat into the academe, and a 'victim mythology…which promote women as the helpless victims of masculine oppression.'[38] Contemporary feminism has lost its way, Denfeld argues, when it became too invested in a conspiratorial model of patriarchy:

> Feminist scholarship on the patriarchy may not have originated as a conspiracy theory, but to many women it certainly sounds like one today. By claiming that nearly every aspect of culture is controlled exclusively by men, current feminists implicitly portray our world as one great spiderweb of interconnected plots, all threads held by a faceless enemy whose sole goal is to oppress women.[39]

Denfeld's statement is especially striking given how often early second-wave feminism, notably Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, has constructed a conspiratorial image of the patriarchy. Just like Friedan and Faludi before her, Denfeld then rushes to disavow conspiratorial thinking herself, clarifying that there was no 'sinister conspiracy. Leading feminists didn't sit down at a table and decide, cackling, to 'steer the movement towards irrelevance.[40] Denfeld's book illuminates the ready availability

---

[37] Faludi, *Backlash*, p. xvi.
[38] Denfeld, pp. 10-12.
[39] Denfeld, p. 156.
[40] Denfeld, p. 17.

of conspiracism to be wielded as a rhetorical weapon within the feminist movement.[41]

Denfeld's language and, as we will see, the conspiracy novels of Eco and Brown, are illustrative of the significant shifts in the meaning, deployment, and popular connotations of both conspiracy and feminism. By the last decade of the millennium, conspiracy is tamed, if not domesticated, turning from a source of fear and debilitating confusion into a source of excitement and awe. Charting an opposing course, feminism's public profile was, by all accounts, in disarray. These shifts in the discursive charge of conspiracy and feminism made it possible for the authors of this chapter to craft conspiracy thrillers with outright reactionary gender politics.

The conceit at the heart of conspiratorial models of power—whether endorsed or denounced in others—is the assumption on behalf of the would-be reformers that, if they held power, they would not be corrupted by it; or, to return to the question posited at the beginning of the chapter, that conspiracy can be recuperative to broken systems of power. *Foucault's Pendulum* and *The Da Vinci Code* both operate on this premise, but while the earlier novel rejects the results as monstrous, the later novel eagerly embraces the conspiratorial mode. Both novels use women, femininity, and gender in general to make their case: Eco offers corporeal femininity as a favourable alternative to conspiracism, while Brown's conspiratorial history soothes the guilt and anxiety of patriarchal oppression by infusing it with meaning. We will now turn to this chapter's central question of how, exactly, do the conspiracy thrillers of Eco and Brown facilitate the reenchantment of the patriarchy.

'It is enough to be serene': Umberto Eco and *Foucault's Pendulum*[42]

Second-wave feminism's apparent faltering, a perceived instability of meaning due to postmodernism's pluralistic epistemology, conspiracy as entertainment, and a pervasive sense of endings—these concepts all had commercial and discursive currency at the time *Foucault's Pendulum* was published in 1988. These concerns are all central to the text, however, postmodernism's denial of uncomplicated

---

[41] A striking example of Denfeld's focus on conspiracism is to be found in the index of *The New Victorians*, where the entry for 'Conspiracy theory' simply says: 'See Patriarchy'.
[42] Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1986), p. 97.

interpretations of the world was arguably chief among these. The destabilisation of meaning appears as the missing 'Fixed' Point, the 'place from which the vault of the world is hung:'[43] via this mythical Fixed Point, one may calculate his moral or historical position against postmodernism's all-encompassing fluidity of interpretations. 'The Plan' is the characters' name for their conspiratorial history, which seduces the characters with its false promise of fixity in meaning. The ''world-making' dimension of conspiracy,'[44] apparent in The Plan, provides the conspirators a sense of security in a changing world, accessed via their self-initiation into an ancient lineage of (all-male) occult thinkers. Eco's text is ambivalent about the use of conspiracy narratives to redress uncertainty, at once acknowledging their seductive power and highlighting their dangers. While *Foucault's Pendulum* positions itself as a warning against conspiratorial thinking, ultimately painting it as a futile exercise in meaning-making and a dangerous intellectual mirage, the text is also sympathetic to those enthralled by conspiracy narratives. Further, the fundamental instability of meaning, the resulting anxiety, and the antidotes explored in the novel—conspiracism, creativity, wartime bonding, fertile femininity—are all thoroughly gendered in the novel. Female characters barely register the angst which appears to define the main male protagonists' life, and the corporeal fertility—the serenity of nature—on which the novel alights as an uncomplicated antidote is deeply invested in an essentialist understanding of femininity.

Eco's novel was well-received both in its original Italian and in English, with William Weaver's universally acclaimed translation landing it on the top of American bestseller lists a year after its original release.[45] The plot concerns three friends: Casaubon, Belbo, and Diotallevi, who all work at a Milanese publishing house during an unspecified year in the 1980s. For their own intellectual amusement, they decide to entertain the theories of 'the Diabolicals', their less-reputable authors who dabble in the occult, conspiracies, and alternative histories. Using the unsaleable manuscripts, they try to string all theories into a coherent historical plot which they call The Plan. The game soon turns into an obsession with all three as they attempt

[43] Umberto Eco, *Foucault's Pendulum*, transl. by William Weaver (London: Vintage, 2001), p. 597.
[44] Brian McHale, *Constructing Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 177.
[45] Judith Weinraub, 'Umberto Eco: His Complex Design', *Washington Post*, 26 November 1989 https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1989/11/26/umberto-eco-his-complex-design/f44ed613-0b3c-4137-8b13-0245af795f13/ [accessed 7 March 2023]

to construct the ur-conspiracy theory, evoking George Eliot's Edward Casaubon from *Middlemarch* (1871).[46] This master conspiracy narrative contains all other conspiracy theories, amalgamating into a singular historiography which explains everything between the crucifixion and the second world war, using any historical figure and secret society ever to exist. Up to this point, the novel is a testament to the few positive aspects (often neglected by scholarship) of conspiracy theories: when presented as intellectual entertainment, they can be fun, and they can provide community, as evidenced by the men's bonding over their shared hobby; evoking the homosocial bonding of Dick's *Time Out of Joint* and a tamed version of the Men's Association of Stepford. However, conspiracy theorising appears to be a men-only pursuit, even in this mostly benign form. Casaubon keeps The Plan a secret from his wife out of shame, while Belbo does so out of jealousy; actions through which the men are framed as foolish in the novel. Lia, speaking 'with the wisdom of life and birth' (365), thinks the Plan is futile and dangerous, because '[w]hatever your Diabolicals have discovered is already' there in her pregnant body (361). Moreover, the historiography they pursue is a kind of genealogy of secret societies through the ages, which, in effect, transforms The Plan into an almost exclusively male family tree of occultists and intellectuals; a kind of 'spiritual knighthood' (208). This gendered segregation is partly due to the historical exclusion of women from the secret societies, however, Eco's presentation of The Plan as irresistible speaks to a real draw of male community-building.

The three friends lose control of their theory when Belbo shares it with a client out of spite, pretending to take it seriously: in doing so, he unknowingly calls The Plan to life. The Diabolicals eagerly take up the banner of the ultimate secret society, murdering Belbo by hanging him on the real Foucault's pendulum in Paris. Witnessing Belbo's death, Casaubon flees into the Italian countryside, where he finishes his narration by gazing on the beauty of the hill's 'slopes' and 'rows and rows of vine' (640). The novel ends here, giving the reader no definite resolution on the

---

[46] Edward Casaubon's *Key to All Mythologies* is analogous to Casaubon's yearning for the Fixed Point in its abortive quest for totality and (male) hubris. Both Casaubons exploit their wives' erudition and more practical nature in their quest towards a totality of knowledge, whether in mythologies or in conspiratorial historiography. The name also refers to Isaac and Méric Casaubon, father and son who both worked as classical scholars during the fifteen- and the sixteen-hundreds. The fictional and historical versions of Casaubons thus trace an exclusively male genealogy not unlike the secret Templar brotherhood of *Foucault's Pendulum*.

fate of Casaubon, or, indeed, if Belbo's sacrifice was real at all or the construct of Casaubon's paranoid imagination. In one sense, then, *Foucault's Pendulum* is 'about the risks of effacing boundaries and participating in paranoia';[47] the dangers of weakening the boundaries of the real and opening the door to a real cabal of conspirators with deadly intentions. More interesting for our purposes, however, are the reasons why The Plan proves to be so seductive to the male characters of the novel. The text negotiates its search for alternatives to conspiracism, ultimately locating the one uncomplicated antidote for conspiracism in nature and femininity expressed via Lia's pregnant body and the bountiful hills of Italy.

The novel explicitly links creative and masculine frustrations and presents them as catalysts of conspiratorial seduction. The mechanisms of such steps—romantic disappointment to creative bitterness to becoming enthralled by the conspiracy—are explored via the character of Belbo:

> Humiliated by his incapacity to create (and all his life he had dined out on his frustrated desires and his unwritten pages, the former a metaphor of the latter and vice versa, all full of his alleged, impalpable cowardice), he came to realize that by inventing the Plan he had actually created. He fell in love with his golem, found it a source of consolation. (530)

The initial source of Belbo's disappointment is revealed as his one-sided, childish love towards a village girl, Cecilia. Belbo tries to capture Cecilia's attention by playing a trumpet solo in the local marching band, but he loses out on the opportunity due to the incompetence of his bandmates and because Cecilia, tragically, does not show up that day. This episode of Belbo's life coagulates into a complex metaphor where his frustrated sexual desire, the unattainable woman, and the inability to create art become interchangeable, and where these multi-layered frustrations with art and women are presented as priming Belbo for the seduction of conspiratorial thinking. The transformation of male frustration to conspiracism may be conceptualised via Simone de Beauvoir's theory of the historical binary of male transcendence and female immanence, where 'in all his secular function, in work, in marriage, he aspires to escape … to assert transcendence over immanence, to open up a future different from the one in which his roots are sunk.'[48] Belbo is unable to

---

[47] McHale, *Constructing Postmodernism*, p. 172.
[48] de Beauvoir, Parshley translation, p. 74.

attain transcendence via the usual routes which promise immortality to the male name—art, war, politics, or the patriarchal family name via children—which the text presents as a precondition for conspiracism. Further, Eco's use of the 'golem' foregrounds historical Jewish narratives about male reproduction, drawing attention to the text's oppositional setup between organic and inorganic creation.

Nostalgia for war and masculinity

The novel locates one possible moment of transcendence, which Belbo tries and tragically fails to recreate in his adult life, at a military funeral, which bounds the themes of artistic fulfilment and masculine belonging into one singular motif. After the disappointment of Cecilia's absence, Belbo is recruited to play at the funeral of young soldiers, fallen in the war that has just ended. The novel presents this moment as a pivotal experience in Belbo's life, emphasising its importance via foreshadowing and by nesting it at the centre of multiple framing devices. Thus Belbo's one and only sublime contact with the divine is narrated by Casaubon after Belbo's death, shared with the reader only at the very end of the narrative.

> The final *do* was played after a deep breath, so he could hold it, give it time - Belbo wrote - to reach the sun. …
> He continued holding that virtual note, because he felt he was playing out a string that kept the sun in place. The planet had been arrested in its course, had become fixed in a noon that could last an eternity. And it all depended on [Belbo], because if he broke that contact, dropped that string, the sun would fly off like a balloon. (632)

Via musical performance, Belbo briefly seizes the Archimedean fixed point, one which would counteract the effects of the postmodern destabilisation of meaning and would negate the need for the comfort of conspiracies. The scene of the military funeral is a palimpsestic vision where nostalgia for male belonging, heterosexual desire, and a yearning for the sublime overlap, a connection made clear by Casaubon's narration which states that 'in that moment [Belbo] was possessing Cecilia' (632). The novel sidesteps the objectifying language, presenting Belbo's trumpet note as a transcendent moment and eulogising him as a tragic hero who, unbeknownst to himself, has successfully created 'the only Fixed Point in the universe … with his breath' (632), just as 'God created the world by speaking' (80). Belbo thus becomes a tragic figure despite the destruction caused by his involvement with the conspiracy, including the death of his girlfriend Lorenza and

Casaubon's uncertain fate. Belbo's seduction by conspiratorial thinking is excused, or at least explained, by the desire to recover the sublime that once was his, and which appears lost because the world has moved on from the patriarchy in which such de Beauvoirian avenues of male transcendence were possible.

The novel approaches Belbo's moment in the sun with reverence for the lost sublime, lamenting how he 'did not understand, not then and not later' that '[a]lone among mortals, he was bringing to a conclusion the Great Work' (632). Yet, overall, the novel treats wartime nostalgia with ambivalence and unease; an ambivalence of which Belbo's short spell as part of a children's gang is a good example. Whereas *The Stepford Wives* mirrored the adults' world in the children's vignettes to drive home the timelessness of the Men's Association's conspiracy, *Foucault's Pendulum* sets up a parodic relationship between the world of the children and of the adults. The local kids form gangs within the village; however, territories are formed along arbitrary lines, and the children are fighting a mock war seemingly for its own sake. Both the partisans and the kids' gangs are embodiments of a certain kind of patriarchal power structure: warlike, factional, and rigidly ordered, simultaneously imagined as 'a savage tribe', a military unit, a spiritual collective, and a class identity (114). Young Belbo understands the importance of becoming a gang member, as belonging to a patriarchal order of this kind is presented as the way to build a masculine identity. War makes it necessary to bare one's allegiance, even if the uniforms are 'invented' and belonging is performatively signalled via the colour of 'kerchiefs' and the type of gun one wields (626). To belong to a certain brigade indicates clearly defined values and identity, and a place - hierarchically ordained, yet secure - in the structure of power. However, these memories are coloured with gentle self-mockery over the childish dreams of belonging. The adult Belbo knows the possibility of identity-building via male groups has declined after the war, because there are no ideologies to which one could pledge his allegiance.

By the novel's present day, the brigadiers' way of fashioning masculinity appears distant and near incomprehensible, illustrative of what Walter Benn Michaels discusses as the move away from ideology towards an innate identity at the end of the Cold War.[49] Relying on other authors discussing the end of history

---

[49] Walter Benn Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier* (Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 29.

(Michael Lind, Arthur Schlesinger, Leslie Silko), Michaels writes about the mid-twentieth century understanding of identity in the context of 'what people think (ideology)' or 'what people own (class)'; categorisations which gradually gave way near the end of the century to a more internally-focused understanding of 'what people are (identity).'[50] While internal and external can never be fully separated, Belbo's masculine identity is forged in a wartime context which places heavy emphasis on external displays of masculine prowess and belonging, illustrated by his adoration of the partisans and the deep wounds his early failures leave on his self-image as an artist and as a man. Belbo drives this point home after overhearing Agliè referring to his fellow occultists as being 'joined … by a bond of spiritual knighthood', which prompts a lengthy anecdote about male bonding during wartime (292). The anecdote—about a partisan leader and the town mayor setting aside ideological differences because 'they both thought of Fatherland with a capital F', they were both 'sons of Italy and valiant fighters', and because they both understand the need to provide for a family—further illustrates the importance of patriarchal embeddedness in mooring male identity. It also suggests that, as within the Men's Association in *The Stepford Wives*, male belonging supersedes ideological differences. Belbo's arc thus presents a model of how wounded, out-of-place masculinity makes one susceptible to conspiratorial thinking.

Belbo's early disappointments develop into self-denying bitterness about art and creation in adulthood, which informs his reaction when he finds himself in a conspiratorial plot. Belbo, we are told, 'swore that [he would] never write anything' of his own: after concluding he is 'not cut out to be a protagonist' he decides never to 'inflict a manuscript on the world' (32)—and yet the creative dimension of The Plan seduces him completely. Belbo covets yet denies himself the status of the protagonist, embodying a thwarted masculinity which has been promised the benefits of patriarchy as a child but as an adult could never attain them, either through personal faults or because of the crumbling of patriarchy as a system. Thus *Foucault's Pendulum* presents another male strategy to master the conspiracy and thus reclaim its rightful position as the protagonist of its own life: rather than dismantling it, as did Dick's Ragle Gumm, Belbo becomes its author. Belbo rejects,

---

[50] Michaels, p. 24.

or is rejected by, what the novel understands as acceptable ways of creation: writing his own book, having his own family, playing the trumpet. In doing so he opens himself up to the seduction of artificial ways of creation, such as the deadly historicism of conspiracy theories. However, Belbo's is only one example of conspiratorial masculinity within the novel.

Casaubon maintains a degree of distance from The Plan, perhaps because he participates in approved—sexually reproductive, scholarly—forms of creation via fatherhood and his doctoral thesis. Casaubon is also younger than Belbo by 'almost fifteen years' (49), and thus temporally distanced from the mechanics of fashioning masculine identity in Belbo's more patriarchal, warlike world. Casaubon, too, is seduced by the conspiracy because it represents de Beauvoir's transcendence via the ambition to 'invent the most cosmic [plot] of all' (438), yet he regrets not being able to remain content with the immanence of fatherhood, and not explaining to his fellow Diabolicals 'that the book of life contained no hidden meaning … that the stones in exile and the Holy Grail were nothing but screaming monkeys with their umbilical cord still dangling' (438). Casaubon thus becomes Belbo's less tortured, younger double, who could have escaped the conspiracy by embracing a different, newer, less patriarchal masculinity, closer to the immanence of the feminine. The final scenes of the novel, staged in the serene, bountiful Italian countryside among the 'breast-shaped hills' (113), underlines the redemptive power of making peace with the feminine. The bucolic landscape, with its '[y]ellow peaches that grow only between rows of vines' and its 'tempered ridges of the hills … [which] tell the story of the slow and drowsy stirrings of Mother Earth' (639), provides nourishment for Casaubon, both physically and aesthetically. With Casaubon's last words, and the novel's final sentence—'It's so beautiful'—the text tentatively endorses beauty as a fixed point the characters were after throughout: beauty found in passive, feminine, bountiful nature.

With the character of Agliè, *Foucault's Pendulum* taps into two literary traditions: the bureaucratic villain of thrillers—such Fleming's Dr No or Blofeld—and the patriarch of conspiracy fictions. Amongst the texts covered in this dissertation, Eco's novel is perhaps the most overt about its disapproval of the old guard exemplified by Agliè. As characterised by Jerry Palmer, villains tend to 'appreciate other people insofar as they behave like things' and, consequently, see 'victims as

peripheral objects' and are unmoved by their suffering.[51] The scene where Belbo and Lorenza are sacrificed in the pursuit of a non-existent secret makes the conspiracy's villainy apparent; although at this point the fault is attributed less to the bumbling Agliè and more to those who demand '*[l]e sacrifice humain*' (587). Agliè also represents the patriarch, a recurring figure of conspiracy narratives whose function is to facilitate a generational power transfer from an older to a younger man. The patriarch appears in various forms in conspiracy fictions, for example, as Adrian Marcato of Levin's *Rosemary's Baby* or Dick's Glenn Runciter in *Ubik*. The conspiracy narrative's rendering of the power transfer greatly depends on the text's approval of patriarchy itself, where disapproval tends towards a negative picture of unearned power and weak, unsympathetic characters (Guy Woodhouse, Marcato) and approval, or at least neutrality, results in idolised, larger than life patriarchs and errant heirs (Joe Chip, Runciter). Agliè is presented as a pompous conman who sees conspiracy as a way to gain power and to reduce everything around him to objects he can control—as Palmer's bureaucratic villain would—including knowledge, history, people (especially women), and nature. Eco, thus, distances himself from patriarchal norms to a degree; certainly more so than Brown, as we will see below.

Foucault's Pendulum unambiguously denounces Agliè's domineering brand of masculinist conspiracy as chauvinist and inhumane, showcased via his approach to nature and gardens. Agliè invites a selection of major characters—Belbo, Casaubon, Diotallevi, their employer, and Belbo's girlfriend Lorenza—to a gathering of occultists at an eighteenth-century 'castle of a very well-to-do Rosicrucian' (321), who may or may not be Agliè himself. As they approach the castle via its extensive, terraced gardens, Agliè unfolds the philosophy of how 'the heavenly bodies can be influenced by the form of a garden' because '[e]very aspect of this terrace reproduces a mystery of the alchemist's art' (337). The garden, alchemy, astrology (in the form of heavenly bodies) all point to Agliè's chief concern of 'influence' and power, that is, bending the universe to his will. Literary tradition has long associated gardens with a cultivated, tamed kind of femininity. As Carolyn Merchant writes in *The Death of Nature,* a foundational text of ecofeminist philosophy, the pastoral mode depends 'on a masculine perception of nature as a mother and bride whose primary function was

---

[51] Palmer, *Thrillers*, p. 19-21.

to comfort; nurture, and provide for the well-being of the male.'[52] Merchant continues:

> while the pastoral tradition symbolized nature as a benevolent female, it contained the implication that nature when plowed and cultivated could be used as a commodity and manipulated as a resource. Nature, tamed and subdued, could be transformed into a garden to provide both material and spiritual food to enhance the comfort and soothe the anxieties of men ... In pastoral imagery, both nature and women are subordinate and essentially passive. They nurture but do not control or exhibit disruptive passion.[53]

During Agliè's tour of the gardens it becomes apparent that he sees feminine-coded nature as something to control, cultivate, and exploit for his own benefit. The sentiment extends to his treatment of women as well, as we will see below with the characters of Amparo and Lorenza, who Agliè deems subordinate and too disruptive. Pastoral imagery, as evoked by Agliè, signifies a specific type of gender politics, one which is likely to be characterised by traditionalist gender roles and a narrow range of acceptable female behaviour. Moreover, the terraced gardens also point towards a hierarchical view of gender and of society. Agliè claims 'each terrace could be viewed in its entirety only from a higher one', revealing their meaning to those with the knowledge to read them 'as a book, or as a spell' (338), thereby implying an essential difference between those who read and those who are being read. Adrienne Rich argues against gendered hierarchies—in her case, exemplified by Freudian theory—by similarly using garden imagery, writing 'I do not perceive myself as a walled city into which certain emissaries are received and from which others are excluded,'[54] bristling against the dehumanising tendency of seeing female bodies as territories to control or symbols to decipher. Implicitly aligning with Rich's position, the text condemns Agliè's hierarchical domineering over nature and people as arrogant, exclusionary and, ultimately, deadly.

Reinscribing femininity via conspiratorial possession

Foucault's Pendulum enumerates and evaluates possible antidotes to a pervasive masculine anxiety, generated by the postmodern destabilisation of meaning. One of

---

[52] Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980), p. 8.
[53] Merchant, pp. 8-9.
[54] Rich, p. 63.

these possible antidotes is conspiracism, which the novel rejects in favour of a bioessentialist incarnation of womanhood, and, to a lesser extent, a pastoral vision of a fertile, passive landscape, freely associated with the feminine. Eco settles on a loose binary between urban modernity and rural idyll as the sole remaining measure of truth, holding up the Arcadian beauty of Italian countryside as a counterpoint to the artificiality of conspiracies, while motherhood comes to represent organic creation, the approved opposition to conspiracy theories' malignant, lifeless creativity. While arriving at this conclusion, Eco covertly but consistently links the natural to the feminine, ultimately endorsing the regressive binary of women/nature and men/culture.[55]

This endorsement of a gendered binary of culture versus nature is particularly evident in the novel's depiction of possession, both legal and spiritual. The landscape, when being possessed, is cultivated to the benefit of its owner, as we have seen in the terraced gardens of Agliè: in this case, possession means ownership. In the context of conspiracies, possession reflects how the conspiracy narrative of *Foucault's Pendulum* must be more forceful towards its female characters in order to have them at allocated, 'rightful' places within the conspiracy; whereas with the previous authors, women tended to sleepwalk into the web of conspiracy without ever exiting (Levin) or demurely accepted their place in the suburbs or the afterlife (Dick). Theresa Coletti understands the female characters of *Foucault's Pendulum* in terms of 'erasure', arguing that 'corporeal female presences all but disappear from the world of the novel.'[56] While there is certainly truth to Coletti's reading, erasure does not fully encapsulate what I rather see as a capitulation to the demand of external—patriarchal and conspiratorial—forces to impose meaning on these women's personhood, understood in the novel as a state of possession.

We have already seen how Belbo's moment of the sublime is described by Casaubon as 'possessing' Cecilia (632), however, the main female characters of the novel are all possessed in some way. The most drastic case is Amparo's spirit

---

[55] Sherry B. Ortner explores the nature/culture gender binary in her landmark essay 'Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?'; for further discussion of Ortner see 'Freedom from choice' subheading below.
[56] Theresa Coletti, 'Bellydancing: Gender, Silence, and the Women of Foucault's Pendulum', in *Reading Eco: An Anthology,* ed. by Rocco Capozzi (Indiana University Press, 1997), pp. 300-12 (p. 300).

possession at an occult ritual. Amparo is Casaubon's mixed-raced, Brazilian girlfriend, a Marxist, feminist, and anti-colonialist woman who voices her opinions frequently and without reserve. Yet when she and Casaubon participate in a *umbanda* ritual, Amparo is unable to resist being possessed by an *egun*, a 'spirit of the departed' (182) in whom she does not completely believe. She finds the experience so humiliating that she leaves Casaubon and the narrative completely. After the ritual, the occult patriarch of the novel, Agliè, describes the events to Casaubon as 'the *orixás*, whom [Amparo] has destroyed in her heart, still live in her womb' (215). Agliè thus frames Amparo's possession as the result of her inadequate connection to her body, specifically, her prioritisation of cognitive epistemologies— Marxism, feminism—as opposed to the corporeal knowledges ascribed to women by patriarchy and, often, conspiracy fiction. These gendered epistemological discernments suggest a deeply patriarchal and essentialist view of women. While Agliè is the stand-in figure for conspiracism at its most patriarchal, Casaubon offers no pushback to this framing, and appears to quickly forget Amparo after her exit.

The episode of the *umbanda* highlights the novel's slippage into reactionary values in its handling of women and knowledge. In a commentary about the novel, Eco calls Amparo 'hysterical', suggesting the reaction of horror and embarrassment to being possessed by a spirit entity against one's will is inappropriate.[57] This notion is echoed by Agliè when he describes Amparo as a 'mystic' and a 'lay person', who is 'weaker than we are' (215). It is unclear who the 'we' might be: white Europeans, those with conspiratorial knowledge, or, simply, men. However, Eco also describes the opposite of Amparo's predicament as hysteria, describing how a German psychologist's 'hysterical limbs begged for oblivion' (211) while trying and failing to achieve a state of possession. These female characters—the blonde 'Teuton' and Amparo, who bitterly describes herself as a 'poor dirty black girl' who deserves a 'master' (214)—highlight that for the women of the novel, gender and racial heritage will always overwrite any academic or conspiratorial knowledge. Beyond the deeply misogynistic medical history of hysteria, Casaubon's and Eco's disapproving label is troubling for its implication that these women's distress arises from denying that they are governed by their biology; that is, the German woman will always remain a rigid

---

[57] Umberto Eco, 'An Author and his Interpreters', in *Reading Eco,* ed. by Capozzi, pp. 59-72 (p. 69).

Teuton at heart, and Amparo's racial heritage and womanhood predisposes her for spirit possession, not Marxist theory. The men of the novel, in contrast, are much less biologically determined by their race and gender, enabling them to be citizens of the world and author-participants in a global conspiracy.

Dick's trope of the ethereal or absent feminine, familiar from *Ubik*, makes an appearance in the character of Belbo's on-and-off girlfriend, Lorenza. Whereas Dick's women were absent because they were frequently dead, *Foucault's Pendulum* places the emphasis less on physical absence and more on their unobtainability. Belbo's sexual and romantic desires are couched in terms of frustrated possessiveness. In his memoirs, Belbo writes about his first loves: Mary Lena, remembered as 'blond and haughty and inaccessible'; a nameless girl, 'swiftly lost in the abyss' when she dies in her sleep; and Cecilia, who 'didn't even know' Belbo existed (57-8). The reason they are inaccessible is immaterial, what matters is they are unattainable to Belbo. Lorenza becomes the main narrative figure for the unobtainable via her promiscuity and unreliability, openly flirting with other men and changing plans on a whim.[58] Through idolising Lorenza and all past lovers *in absentia*, Belbo elevates them to the status of symbols. This is not the same as transcendence in the de Beauvoirian sense, most of all because it is externally imposed: Lorenza has no say in what she as a symbol means.

More troubling is the way in which Lorenza and femininity are equated with the secret at the heart of the manufactured conspiracy. The unattainability of Lorenza and the missing fixed point becomes one and the same, the existential anguish felt over both collapsing into one and treated as the governing principle of Belbo's life. Casaubon observes this when he is trying to answer the prompt—'Do you know the password?'—of Abulafia, Belbo's computer:

> [m]aking love to Abulafia, he thinks of Lorenza. So he needs a word that will give him possession of Abulafia but also serve as a talisman to give him possession of Lorenza, to penetrate Lorenza's heart as he penetrates Abulafia's. But Abulafia should be impenetrable to others, as Lorenza is impenetrable to him. It is Belbo's hope that he can enter, know, and conquer Lorenza's secret in the same way that he possesses Abulafia. (41)

---

[58] Not quite the *femme fatale* of thrillers*;* perhaps a *femme frustrante*.

Casaubon then reasons that if Lorenza is the secret, then her secret name—Sophia—must be the key to unlock the computer. Yet the real answer to the prompt is 'no', emphasising that unattainability itself matters more than the unobtainable object of desire. The deification of femininity thus becomes another way in which women are dehumanised, never granted quite the same capacity for participating in humanity as the male characters of the novel.

While Lorenza resists the possessive romance offered by Belbo, she accepts a sort of epistemological possession by Agliè who ascribes meaning to her person. Upon meeting Agliè, Lorenza is seduced by his charm and allows him to call her Sophia, approaching the conspiracy in much the same way as Casaubon, Belbo, and Diotallevi: as 'a game' (302). Agliè's explanation of the Gnostic origins of Sophia—bastardised by a drunk Lorenza as 'I am the saint and the prostitute!' (303)—does not materially differ from the three friends' twisting of history to make it fit their Plan; yet, Lorenza is consistently framed as ridiculous.[59] In subscribing to Agliè's brand of patriarchal conspiracy, Lorenza accepts the mantle of the 'dualistic construction of a mythic femininity'—the saint and the prostitute—even if in parodic form.[60] As such Lorenza represents the ill-advised tactic of women who embrace misogynist systems, either due to naïveté or because they think they can master or exploit them. Lorenza's assimilation turns her, according to an irate and jealous Bilbo, into a 'prostitute' and, rather pointedly, a 'feminist who does public relations' for Agliè's conspiracy (302). For *Foucault's Pendulum*, then, feminism signifies the co-option of patriarchal power rather than its dismantling, signalling the decline of white liberal feminism's prestige by the end of the 1980s.

In the end, Lorenza is drugged, kidnapped, and sacrificed at the frenzied séance during which Belbo is hanged on Foucault's real pendulum, suggesting an inevitability to female suffering when caught up in patriarchal systems such as the conspiracy. Belbo's death allows him to escape 'the error of the world and its movements' and to become, in death, 'the point of suspension, the Fixed Pin' (597), while Lorenza's demise is all the more tragic in its meaninglessness, 'slipping away … as if she had never existed' (501) from Casaubon's memory mere hours after her death. Whereas Belbo leaves his memoir and his death 'is dignified by Casaubon's

[59] If anything, Agliè is more generous than Belbo by including Lorenza in her own deification.
[60] Coletti, 305.

philosophical ruminations', Lorenza's death is not 'accorded any other meaning beyond itself.'[61] In life and in death, Lorenza accepts the meaning ascribed to her by the men around her, and her final cry for sanity and justice—'Are you all crazy? You can't do this!' (595)—comes too late.

Maternal corporeality as counterpoint to conspiracism

Contrasting the deficient femininity of Amparo and Lorenza, Casaubon's wife and mother to their son Lia exemplifies a corporeal, fertile femininity which has the potential to become an antidote for conspiratorial thinking. During the course of the novel, Eco twice uses Lia as a mouthpiece to contrast the abstract, impersonal reasoning of conspiracies with a down-to-earth ontology, rooted in bodily experience. When Casaubon is only 'beginning to wonder' if there is any truth to The Plan, Lia already disapproves of her husband's enjoyment of what he terms a 'great feast of analogies' offered by Diabolical pseudo-wisdom (361). Lia's argument against occult tropes is simple: 'archetypes don't exist; the body exists' (362). Through her fertile femininity, Lia—who is pregnant at this point, presenting an 'inelegant' but 'housewifely' picture—becomes a force of corporeal hermeneutics with which common occult motifs can be explained: 'the cavern, the grotto, the tunnel are beautiful and important' because 'the baby grows' in the belly and 'good, tasty food descends there' (362). The imagery of the 'grotto' and 'tunnel' evokes the cultivated wilderness of the pastoral mode, familiar from Agliè's terraced garden and valued for its exclusivity and pliability; while food gestures towards the fertile landscape of the novel's last scene, appreciated for its usefulness in growing food. On why 'up is angelic and down devilish' or 'high is better than low', Lia answers that 'feet stink and hair doesn't stink as much' and 'it's better to climb a tree and pick fruit than end up underground, food for worms' (362). Thus Lia's female body is presented as already possessing the answers to the questions posed by the occult and the conspiratorial, if one remembers the base realities of life: eating, dying, procreating.

The corporeality endorsed via Lia's character presents a bifold picture of femininity. On the one hand, it approaches late second-wave feminism's cautious reappropriation of the maternal body and the efforts of distancing mothering from the

---

[61] Coletti, pp. 305-06.

essentialist notions ascribed to it through patriarchy. In *Maternal Thinking and Peace Politics*, Sara Ruddick advocates for maternal thinking, understood as 'a kind of caring labor' developed into a philosophy of care, based not on 'fixed biological or legal relationships to children but [on] the work' one is set out to do.[62] Ruddick anchors her argument in corporeality, contrasting, for example, the tradition of ''rational' thinking' with the 'bodily engagement expressed in mothering.'[63] As if arguing against the conspiracy, Ruddick critiques those who are too invested in 'the fantasy of transcendence … imagin[ing] truth abstracted from bodies and a self detached from feelings.'[64] For Ruddick, like Lia, maternal corporeality becomes a philosophy that can counteract the inhumanity and injustice fostered by other, inequitable systems, such as patriarchy or a patriarchal conspiracy.

On the other hand, the text implicitly endorses a 'dualistic model' where 'men seek transcendence through mind; women are bodily immanence and nature.'[65] This patriarchal dualism of nature and culture is evident in how the main female characters are all understood via their body and their sexuality, and often seen via the lens of male desire. As Coletti writes, 'making the body the ground of experience and interpretation proves troublesome, for it precisely the category 'nature' that has reified women's bodies for so long.'[66] A grounding in maternal corporeality allows Lia to be disinterested in conspiratorial hermeneutics, effectively preventing her from entering the conspiracy, but not to exit it or to dismantle it; or, to put it another way, maternal corporeality may inoculate one against conspiracy, but it provides no *post facto* solutions. Equally troublesome is the narrow band of femininity which may act as salvific agent to conspiracy, in effect enshrining a woman in a heterosexual, legally sanctified, fertile, intraracial and intracultural marriage, discarding the efforts of Black and lesbian feminists' (among others) to broaden the scope of socially acceptable femininity.

At its heart, the novel emplots how conspiracies can sate the hunger for a lost fixed point, becoming a fable on the dangers of giving in to conspiratorial seduction. The novel ascribes to its male characters a feeling of terrible lack over the absence

---

[62] Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), p. xi.
[63] Ruddick, p. x.
[64] Ruddick, p. 132.
[65] Coletti, p. 311.
[66] Ibid.

of this missing fixed point, which must be mitigated via various strategies including constructing conspiracy theories. *Foucault's Pendulum* evinces sympathy towards the men's yearning for the absolute, but it is not neutral: the idea of the ultimate conspiracy theory is presented as monstrous and destructive. The novel holds up male bonding during wartime as one possible antidote to conspiracism, accessed via Belbo's childhood memories during the very end of the second world war.[67] Eco's text approaches wartime nostalgia with a similar ambivalence as it does conspiracy. A time of war allows space for traditional, patriarchal masculinities, as well as the heroics of the thriller; and yet Belbo's memories of these simpler times are overshadowed by the horrors of war. Creativity, writing, and acts of creation in general, become another terrain on which these questions of ontological and epistemological disquiet are played out. The text holds up Belbo's art—however abortive—and Casaubon's work as a historian as creative expressions, capable of anchoring them and warding off the lure of conspiracism. Yet the creative pursuits of the novel—art, publishing, alchemy, mechanical engineering—ultimately remain powerless to fully address a perceived disintegration of meaning. Further, creativity is continuously, and rather wistfully, contrasted with women's life-giving ability.

In *Foucault's Pendulum* I see how patriarchy takes stock of the territory lost to second-wave feminism and grapples with a nostalgia for a patriarchal past while being acutely aware of the problematics of its own nostalgia. In one sense, the missing fixed point is nothing more than dispossessed male hegemony, and the world is felt to be out of balance because feminism has upended the traditional binary between feminine 'nature' and masculine 'culture'. By engaging in intellectual, artistic, economic, or political pursuits, women have encroached on forms of creation previously reserved for men, while also retaining, in this regressive system of gender, the specifically female prerogative of organic creation, that is, childbirth. This is why the male characters' creative anxieties are so closely intertwined with gendered anxieties: participating in cultural creation—including conspiracies—becomes a hubristic and unsuccessful attempt a regaining traditional masculinity. The novel heavily qualifies its nostalgia for patriarchy, condemning Agliè's old-fashioned domineering and Belbo's feverish signification of the female body equally.

---

[67] These wartime memories are Eco's own. See: Douglas Merrell, *Umberto Eco,* The Da Vinci Code*, and the Intellectual in the Age of Popular Culture* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 260.

And yet, after these behaviours are discarded, what remains is still a dualistic view of the world; patriarchy tweaked, negotiated, transmuted into a more palatable format, but patriarchy nevertheless.

As we will see in relation to the final novel discussed at length in this dissertation, Brown's novel does not shy away from patriarchal impulses. Where Eco opted for transmutation and palatability, *The Da Vinci Code* aims at reenchanting patriarchy via its conspiratorial veneer.

Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*: reenchanting the patriarchy

Only fourteen years after *Foucault's Pendulum*, Dan Brown uses conspiracy to recuperate patriarchy's image in exactly the way Eco's novel has condemned it—and achieves staggering, global success. *Foucault's Pendulum* ultimately condemns conspiracy as an antidote to postmodern or masculine anxiety, even as it admits its allure; *The Da Vinci Code*, in contrast, wholly exploits conspiracy narratives for its own purposes, namely, the alleviation of historical guilt over women's oppression. Whereas *Foucault's Pendulum* arrives at its gender essentialist conclusions—that the one remaining fixed point in a decentred universe is the female body—almost as a by-product in its search for epistemological certainty, *The Da Vinci Code* makes femininity its key issue from the start. However, despite its nominal focus on the injustice of women's oppression, Brown's novel ultimately endorses deeply patriarchal and conservative concepts of womanhood, circumscribed by the novel chiefly as mother, helper, and arbiter of spirituality for the men in her life.

While none of the authors discussed in this dissertation were unsuccessful commercially or critically, *The Da Vinci Code* surpassed mere success: it became a phenomenon. Dan Brown's novel spent over two and a half years on the *New York Times*' bestseller list,[68] has sold 80 million copies worldwide,[69] and launched its author to the Forbes list of the world's highest paid celebrities for a brief time, into

---

[68] Edward Wyatt, ''Da Vinci Code' Losing Best-Seller Status', *New York Times*, 4 November 2005 <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/11/04/books/da-vinci-code-losing-bestseller-status.html> [accessed 7 March 2023].

[69] Alexandria Sage, 'Dan Brown novel breaks one-day sales records', *Reuters*, 17 September 2009 https://www.reuters.com/article/us-books-danbrown-idUSTRE58E5Q720090917 [accessed 6 March 2023].

the company of writers such as James Patterson, J. K. Rowling, and Stephen King.[70] A juxtaposition of the novel's undeniable success with its glaring flaws—historical and stylistic—has generated a fraught public conversation about the value of genre fiction, what exactly is a 'good' book, and about the measures of artistic achievement. For certain commentators, the sneering tone of some reviews amounted to 'literary snobbery' revealing the critics' implicit assumption that 'thrillers aren't proper literature and the people who read them aren't proper readers.'[71] Others pointed out that Brown 'may not be a great writer, but he's a great something … His books keep readers eagerly turning the pages to find out what happens next.'[72] In summary, the popular consensus seemed to be that Brown may not write good prose, but he writes good thrillers that sell. Conspiracy as entertainment, then, has been fully naturalised by the time of *The Da Vinci Code*'s publication.

The plot of *The Da Vinci Code* revolves around the Catholic church's suppression of Jesus' and Mary Magdalene's marriage and offspring. A secret society called the Priory of Sion has kept the memory of Mary Magdalene alive by guarding proof of the marriage, the legend of which has been transmuted into the story of the Holy Grail. In the present day of the novel, world-renowned and Harvard-affiliated 'symbologist' Robert Langdon is accused of murdering the curator of the Louvre named Jacques Saunière. Langdon's escape is aided by Saunière's estranged granddaughter and French police cryptologist Sophie Neveu, who believes in Langdon's innocence. Together, they follow Saunière's trail of clues while evading both the police and the real killer, an albino monk named Silas. Silas belongs to Opus Dei, a controversial offshoot of the Catholic church, and has a close relationship with a bishop Aringarosa of the same affiliation. Silas, however, is following the orders of a Teacher whose end goal is the discovery and publication of the Priory documents, that is, the proof of the marriage, records of the 'royal' bloodline, and Mary Magdalene's earthly remains. Robert Langdon and Sophie find

---

[70] Forbes' statistic is from 2014. Brown could not replicate *The Da Vinci Code*'s success with his later novels, with *Inferno* (2013) only spending 11 weeks on the bestseller lists compared to *The Da Vinci Code*'s mammoth 136. Consequently, Brown's position on the Forbes list was short-lived, and he dropped off the following year.
[71] Lucy Mangan, 'A word-of-mouth success', *Guardian*, 11 August 2004 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2004/aug/11/1> [accessed 6 March 2023].
[72] Reed Tucker, 'Success symbol', *New York Post*, 20 September 2009 <https://nypost.com/2009/09/20/success-symbol/> [accessed 6 March 2023].

temporary refuge with Langdon's long-time friend and fellow Holy Grail enthusiast, Sir Leigh Teabing, who aids them in escaping to London. However, Teabing is revealed to be the Teacher, the one who masterminded the murders of Saunière and others. Teabing's plans to locate and publicise the Grail documents are thwarted by Sophie and Langdon, who crack the final code and travel to the location indicated, Rosslyn chapel in Scotland. Instead of the Grail, however, they find confirmation that Sophie is the descendant of Christ and that her grandmother and brother, whom she previously believed to be dead, are in fact alive. Langdon learns that the Priory has never planned to publicise the Mary Magdalene documents, because they value the Grail as a 'glorious unattainable treasure that somehow, even in today's world of chaos, inspires us' (504). The epilogue shows Langdon's epiphany regarding the final resting place of Mary Magdalene—it is the Louvre's glass pyramid—and he completes his Grail quest by kneeling at the sacred bones.

The duplicitous female empowerment of *The Da Vinci Code*

From a certain vantage point, *The Da Vinci Code* offers little more than a princess fantasy as far as female empowerment goes. Intriguingly, however, its regressive stance, while not outside the norm in thrillers, is in stark contrast with novel's insistence on foregrounding women's historical oppression. In fact, the novel only mentions feminism and patriarchy once; the former in the oft-quoted utterance by the villain that 'Jesus was the original feminist' (259) and the latter in the summary of its main conceit that 'Constantine and his male successors successfully converted the world from matriarchal paganism to patriarchal Christianity by waging a campaign of propaganda that demonized the sacred feminine' (131). The novel's marketing, Brown himself, and mainstream reviews generally avoided using 'feminism' or 'feminist' in press materials. Religious outlets, however, freely used the label of feminism to attack the book, accusing it of advocating for 'unencumbered feminism,'[73] being a product of a 'feminist agenda,'[74] or simply of 'hyper-feminism.'[75]

---

[73] Steven Tsichlis, 'Debunking The Da Vinci Code', *pravmir.com: Orthodox Christianity and the World*, 29 May 2009 <https://www.pravmir.com/debunking-the-da-vinci-code/> [accessed 6 March 2023].
[74] Kenneth L. Woodward, 'A Quite Contrary Mary', *beliefnet,* 2003 <https://www.beliefnet.com/entertainment/movies/the-da-vinci-code/a-quite-contrary-mary.aspx> [accessed 6 March 2023].
[75] Thomas G. Morrow, The Da Vinci Code: A Critique', *Catholic Faith Alive! Inc.* <https://cfalive.com/pages/the-da-vinci-code-a-critique> [accessed 10 March 2023].

These epithets—especially the use of 'agenda'—paints feminism in a conspiratorial light; an accusation which, as we have seen from Faludi and Denfeld, had traction in American discourse more than a decade before the publication of *The Da Vinci Code*. What is new in these critiques is their underlying assumption that the novel is feminist because of the anti-female conspiracy it posits; further, that the novel is bad because it is feminist. Rudimentary understandings of, and hostile reactions to, feminism have always existed, of course; however, Faludi's 2003 *Terror Dream* registered a 'new legitimacy [to] the ventings of longtime conservative antifeminists, who were accorded a far greater media presence after the attacks' of 9/11.[76]

The terror attacks shifted conspiracism's place in the American cultural landscape, contributing to the perfect storm of *The Da Vinci Code*'s success. On the effect 9/11 has had on the novel, Schneider-Mayerson writes: 'it was the attacks of 9/11 and the resulting domestic political and social atmosphere that turned Brown into one of the most popular authors of all time,'[77] pointing to a breakdown of trust on both internal and external matters which, in turn, led to the proliferation of conspiracies in the US after the attacks. Chiming with Birchall's argument on the increased commodification of conspiracy in the 1990s, Knight noted a few years before 9/11 that 'paranoia has become the stuff of entertainment and philosophical reflection, part of everyday American culture.[78] This increased cultural penetration meant that by the time its publication, *The Da Vinci Code* could exploit the familiarity of conspiracy narratives by making the reader not only a witness but a co-conspirator. The final note asserts that the 'truth' of the 'sacred feminine' must not be publicised, and yet the novel does so to an audience of millions; thus the reader becomes part of the conspiracy—a honorary member of the Priory of Sion—tasked with the covert evangelising of the 'sacred feminine.'[79] In doing so the novel fully embraces the pull factors of conspiracism: the feelings of exceptionalism and titillation of being in an elect group in possession of definitive answers.

The Da Vinci Code also conforms to the phenomenon of increased self-consciousness of conspiracy narratives by the end of the 1990s, described by Knight

---

[76] Faludi, *Terror Dream*, p. 22.
[77] Matthew Schneider-Mayerson, 'The Dan Brown Phenomenon: Conspiracism in Post-9/11 Popular Fiction', *Radical History Review*, vol.111 (2011), 194–201 (p. 197).
[78] Knight, p. 44.
[79] Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code: Special Illustrated Edition* (London: Bantam Press, 2004), p. 444.

as the use of 'very terminology with which it had been diagnosed in the past. … The increasingly self-reflexive 'paranoid' narratives have thus begun to internalize the modes of reading traditionally brought to bear upon them, to anticipate and disarm the authority of expert criticism.'[80] *The Da Vinci Code* performs a duplicitous act by distancing itself from the vestigial bad taste associated with conspiracism while indulging in it wholeheartedly. This distancing includes disparaging remarks about 'conspiracy buffs' and 'conspiracy theories' when referring to the history of the Knights Templar (167); repeating that '[e]veryone loves a conspiracy' (177; 382) and having Langdon's book agent admonish him for his outlandish claims about the sacred feminine: 'Besides, it will kill your reputation. You're a Harvard historian, for God's sake, not a pop schlockmeister looking for a quick buck' (172). The posturing found in *The Da Vinci Code* is substantively different from Eco's postmodern irony, which allowed the earlier novel to entertain its implausible history. Brown's novel, in contrast, uses these remarks to increase the reader's belief in the veracity of the text's claims by signaling that the novel knows its claims are outlandish; in effect adding another layer of conspiratorial sheen to its narrative which invites the reader into the inner circle of its conspiracy.

The novel enacts a similarly duplicitous strategy regarding women's rights. It professes a lukewarm encouragement of a woman's right to equal treatment at work—hardly a radical idea in 2003 France or America—by ventriloquising sexist opinions through Bezu Fache, the police chief in pursuit of Langdon. Fache thinks hiring 'Sophie Neveu was one of [the] biggest mistakes' of the French police, attributes her inclusion not to merit but the ministry's 'attempt to incorporate more women' into the ranks, and assumes his old-fashioned views are an 'inescapable universal truth' (56). Further, Fache views the curbs on his authoritarianism as an act of (collective) emasculation ('*L'émasculation de la Police Judiciaire*', 67). Fache's views are ironised by his antagonistic relationship with the protagonists and by the novel's early hints that he may be the 'Teacher', the ultimate villain of the story.

Coincidentally, the only person who does mention feminism is Teacher/Teabing—the real villain—who asserts that 'Jesus was the original feminist' (259). The ultimate goal of Teabing's conspiracy is the seizure and unveiling of the

---

[80] Knight, pp. 16-17.

Mary Magdalene documents in order to dispel the lies of the Church on the global stage: 'Shall the world be ignorant forever? Shall the Church be allowed to cement its lies into our history books for all eternity? … Something had to be done' (411). There are similarities between Teabing's ambitions and the second-wave feminist project, which sought to expose, from Simone de Beauvoir onwards, patriarchy's essentialist assumptions about an innate feminine or masculine nature. There is a degree of ambiguity regarding exactly why is Teabing is the novel's villain. The murders are briefly and duly condemned, yet the novel presents Silas' death and Aringarosa's hospitalisation as just; the conspiratorial lies are likewise denounced, yet, by the finale, the novel invites the reader into the circle of conspirators. Teabing also aims to violently seize powerful knowledge which does not belong to him. If the novel centred its disapproval on Teabing's ambition to become the arbiter of sacred womanhood, *The Da Vinci Code* may have justifiably claimed some feminist credit. However, the novel performs the exact same arbitration by implicitly positioning itself as the golden middle way on women's rights in rejecting both the overt sexism of Fache and Teabing's violence.

Teabing's villainy, then, originates less in his murderous, conspiratorial, and domineering deeds than his advocacy for action and radical change: his assertion that something 'had to be done' opposing the Priory of Sion's 'doctrine' that 'the Grail should *never* be unveiled' (444, original emphasis). It is this disruptive agitation which makes Teabing akin to a feminist; more precisely, to a caricature of feminism in currency around 2003 as behind the times, needlessly angry, and advocating for change where no improvement is deemed necessary anymore. In a sense Teabing becomes what Sarah Ahmed termed a feminist killjoy, who 'brings others down … by talking about unhappy topics such as sexism'[81] in modern boardrooms or, in Teabing's case, art and history. Teabing's actions would 'disturb the very fantasy that happiness can be found in certain places:'[82] indeed, his advocacy for action is anathema to the Priory's demand for inaction. *The Da Vinci Code*, then, prefers the 'sacred feminine' and its 'mystery and wonderment' (444) to be venerated without upending the status quo. The result is patriarchal oppression's enchantment via the

[81] Sara Ahmed, 'Killing Joy: Feminism and the History of Happiness', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 35.3 (2010), 571–94 (p. 582).
[82] Ahmed, p. 582.

veneer of an exciting, exclusive, and just conspiracy of which the readers are initiates by the end of the novel. There is solace to be found in entering the novel's conspiratorial framework, as it allows the reader to assume the Priory's inaction upon encountering misogyny or other forms of injustice: if one thinks back on the conspiracy against the 'sacred feminine'—if one squints just the right way—the harm inflicted by patriarchy suddenly becomes meaningful; moreover, one may stave off the guilt of this inaction—of not becoming a killjoy—by remembering the novel's strong suggestion that things are better off as they always have been.

The novel's duplicity—touting a pro-woman epistemology via the 'divine feminine' while espousing classical patriarchal values about women's place in the world—becomes comprehensible if put in context of the clash of civilisations discourse of the years following 9/11, and the place of Christianity, freedom, and secularism in the American self-image. As Joan Wallach Scott argues, by the end of the twentieth century secularism became inextricably intertwined with ideas of 'freedom' and 'democracy', including individualism and 'sexual emancipation', often in explicit opposition to stereotypes of Islam as oppressive.[83] While *The Da Vinci Code* does not agitate against, or even mention Islam, it seems significant that the novel narrativises the (by no means original) story of Jesus' relocation to Europe extensively. Moreover, framing Jesus and Mary Magdalene as sexual beings brings them in line with the concept of individualism endorsed by the discourse of secularism, since, as Wallach Scott writes, 'in this discourse, sexual desire is reified; it becomes a natural law outside of history. Since it is the defining attribute of the human, the fulfillment of sexual desire is the most important element of human freedom.'[84] Despite the outrage, the sexualisation of Jesus performs an important, if jingoistic, service: it humanises him for contemporary audiences. Thus, *The Da Vinci Code* is using secularism's connotations with freedom of choice to masque its paternalistic-patriarchal sexual politics, since the women of the novel are presented with very few choices indeed.

---

[83] Joan Wallach Scott, *Sex and Secularism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), p. 156.
[84] Scott, p. 157.

Freedom from choice: women's roles in *The Da Vinci Code*

Via their respective conspiracy narratives, both *Foucault's Pendulum* and *The Da Vinci Code* locate femininity as the antidote to the postmodern destabilisation of meaning. Certitude, for Brown's text, is found not only in feminine-coded nature and women's reproductive capabilities, as it was in *Foucault's Pendulum*, but in the clear delineation of feminine roles as mothers, helpers, and conduits for men's spirituality. In this context, the novel's reification of womanhood via the 'divine feminine' becomes a distraction from the real sexual politics of the novel, which are *de facto* patriarchal. Reaching much further back than Eco's novel, the gendered epistemology undergirding *The Da Vinci Code* is regressive to the point of evoking the nineteenth- and eighteenth-century ideology of the 'separate spheres', defined as the gendered 'division between public and private … which was constantly undermined in practice but remained an organizing principle of both domestic and public worlds.'[85] In the ideology of the separate spheres, the proper place of women was within the private, organised chiefly around the nodes of family and religion; put simply, 'women were to care for their relatives, to improve their menfolk and to bring up their children on a Christian path.'[86]

I do not propose that *The Da Vinci Code* consciously reaches back to Victorian sentiments on gender. However, in its entanglement with the 'sacred feminine' Brown's novel does, in fact, constantly alight on tropes which are familiar from, and intelligible within the context of, the discourse of the separate spheres, such as women's 'natural' suitability for religious sentiment, women as conduits of men's religious transcendence, or the primacy of familial relationships and of breeding, or, in the novel, of bloodlines. One example from *The Da Vinci Code*'s otherwise small pool of female characters is Sister Sandrine, an elderly nun in Paris, who models religious devotion and self-sacrifice by giving her life to protect the Church's sanctity and the Priory's secret (144). Another example is Sophie's grandmother Marie, custodian of Rosslyn Chapel—suspected 'home of the Holy Grail' (491)—who channels uncomplicated, warm domesticity in her welcome of Sophie and Langdon. Both women voluntarily removed themselves from the public

---

[85] Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780–1850* (London: Routledge, 2019), p. xvii-xviii.
[86] Davidoff & Hall, p. 170.

world to serve a holy entity, and both exhibit a mixture of innate feminine knowledge and conspiratorial initiation. Sister Sandrine senses her impending death through her '[w]omen's intuition' (47), before her status as the Priory's 'sentry' and her secret task of notifying the Priory's leaders in case of a breach is revealed (137). During the novel's *dénouement*, Marie similarly fuses conspiratorial and feminine epistemologies by confessing she has 'never officially been privy to the present location of the Grail' but, since she was 'married to a person of enormous influence... and [her] women's intuition is strong', she is able to guess the Grail's present location before Langdon (447). The novel thus ascribes a peculiar way of knowing to women with which they can navigate a conspiracy, one which originates in a vague idea of feminine intuition and their connection to powerful men within the conspiracy. The novel's one recommended route towards female empowerment, then, is a myopic belief in sacred femininity as a 'glorious unattainable treasure' which, even in 'today's world of chaos, inspires' us (444). The other method towards knowledge and power, mirroring the novel's core conceit about Mary Magdalene, is via an advantageous marriage—echoing, yet again, conservative ideas about social advancement for women which would not be out of place in a nineteenth-century novel.

The contradiction between the novel's assertion of women's divinity and their actual place in its narrative has been highlighted by casual commenters and critics alike. In *American Culture Transformed: Dialing 9/11,* Tucker and Walton writes how 'the Priory [of Sion], which seems to be so feminist in nature–given its reverence for the 'Divine Feminine' and its celebration of Mary Magdalene and women in general– is hardly that, when looked at more closely' and how Sophie's 'depiction is, in fact, more in keeping with a conventional portrayal of women than with that of a feminist hero.'[87] Of course, at no point does the novel claim to be feminist. It does, however, pin the ills of the world on the violent oppression of the feminine in a speech by Langdon:

> Mother Earth had become a man's world, and the gods of destruction and war were taking their toll. The male ego had spent two millennia running unchecked by its female counterpart. The Priory of Sion believed that it was this obliteration of the sacred feminine in modern life that had caused … [the]

[87] Bruce Tucker and Priscilla L. Walton, *American Culture Transformed: Dialing 9/11* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 110-1.

> unstable situation marked by testosterone-fueled wars, a plethora of
> misogynistic societies, and a growing disrespect for Mother Earth. (143)

Wars, global misogyny, and environmental collapse are all attributed to a nebulous sense that the feminine side of humanity is insufficiently revered; a schism emblematised by Mary Magdalene's ousting from a leadership role by the early Catholic church, and her purported erasure from Christian history. Besides the tautology of locating the root cause of contemporary misogyny in identical, earlier acts of misogyny, this passage highlights that *The Da Vinci Code* does in fact engage with a key project of second-wave feminism by querying the origins of the patriarchy. Additionally, 'Mother Earth' evokes the pastoral imagery of a feminised— that is, passive and exploitable—nature familiar from Eco's novel.

Walton and Tucker make note of *The Da Vinci Code*'s connection to second-wave feminist themes, writing that the novel's 'account of the Inquisition and its persecution of goddess-worshipping sects is reminiscent of Mary Daly's in *Gyn/Ecology*'[88]; indeed, considering Daly's appropriation of the conspiratorial 'Hermetic drift', discussed in the Introduction, drawing a connection between Brown and Daly is more than justified. Another feminist forerunner is Sherry B. Ortner's seminal essay 'Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?', which explores the reasons behind the 'universal devaluation of women.'[89] Relying on de Beauvoir's work, Ortner finds that this 'pan-cultural second-class status could be accounted for, quite simply, by postulating that women are being identified or symbolically associated with nature, as opposed to men, who are identified with culture.'[90] The result is the cultural 'propensity toward [the] polarized ambiguity' of utter exaltation or utter debasement of the feminine, and a dearth of female representation that remains 'within the normal range of human possibilities.'[91] Ortner laments the circularity of the situation, writing that via its 'efficient feedback system' patriarchal culture will inevitably reproduce the accepted knowledge of its own superiority over (feminine) nature, instead of dismantling the entire dichotomy as false.[92] *The Da Vinci Code*, in contrast, identifies the problem as the insufficient exaltation of women

---

[88] Walton & Tucker, p. 108.
[89] Sherry B. Ortner, 'Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture', in *Woman, Culture, and Society*, ed. by M. Z. Rosaldo and L. Lamphere (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1974), pp. 68–87 (p. 71).
[90] Ortner, p. 68.
[91] Ortner, p. 86.
[92] Ortner, p. 87.

throughout history, departing from Ortner's conclusion that reifying the 'sacred feminine' is just as integral to patriarchy as debasing it is. Brown's use of a conspiracy to explain complex systemic questions such as the origin of patriarchy is illustrative of conspiracy narratives' power to captivate audiences when no easy answers are available elsewhere.

Brown himself explains his investment in the history of patriarchy as a simple query into the reasons why we 'worship the gods of our fathers' today as opposed to the 'gods and goddesses' of ancient history.[93] Not only does this formulation hint at the equation of divinity with supremacy, Brown also betrays—via his explicit statement that his novel 'explores how and why this shift might have occurred, what it says about our past and, more importantly, what it says about our future'[94]—his unfamiliarity with feminist works exploring the origins of the patriarchy, including de Beauvoir's *Second Sex* or Marylin French's four-volume compendium *From Eve to Dawn: a History of Women* (2008). This omission, however, is ultimately unsurprising: just as there is 'no actual goddess character' and 'no representation of a divinity' despite its purported focus on the divine feminine.[95] The novel is likewise disinterested, despite Brown's protestations to the contrary, in a systemic look at historical male dominance both within the realm of spirituality and outside of it. The novel's real concerns lie in a relentless blurring of the lines of systemic and individual via its conspiracy narrative for its own ends, chief among them the shaking off of patriarchal guilt. The text pursues this aim on two parallel fronts: by elevating Sophie's individual struggles to represent the struggles of women everywhere, and by downplaying the systemic harm of the patriarchy as the result of a few, conspiratorial individuals. We shall look at Sophie's arc of deindividuation first.

Sophie enters the narrative of *The Da Vinci Code* as an active agent, introduced as 'a codebreaker' who makes 'her living extracting meaning from seemingly senseless data' (82): a resourceful female character who makes it possible for Langdon to evade police custody, access her grandfather's secret deposit box, and escape Paris with the 'keystone' hiding the novel's secret of

---

[93] Lisa Rogak, *Dan Brown: The Man Behind* The Da Vinci Code*; The Unauthorised Biography* (Robson Books: London, 2005), p. 110.
[94] Rogak, p. 110.
[95] Nelson, *Gothicka*, p. 33.

secrets. Sophie in the first half of the novel is only atypical for a female thriller character for her sexlessness: she is a competent helper but the relationship between her and Langdon lacks the 'aggressiveness' Palmer identifies as the 'keynote of sexuality' in thrillers.[96] In fact there is barely a hint of flirtatiousness until their very last shared scene, making Langdon's role in the novel's central relationship rather paternal.

A provocative contention from 1960 by Leslie Fiedler might still apply to Brown's fiction. Fiedler writes that most male American novelists of the twentieth century tend to 'shy away from … the presence of any full-fledged, mature women, giving us monsters of virtue or bitchery.'[97] The Sophie of the novel's first half may have had claims for mature womanhood, yet, by the end of the novel, she must become a nondescript monster of virtue. Sophie's professional skills are gradually subsumed under the familial knowledge relating to her grandfather. The novel implies that Sophie's career as a cryptologist was heavily influenced by her grandfather's love of word games and codes. Being influenced by the hobbies of one's grandfather is not patriarchy at its most nefarious, of course; the notion does, however, reinforce a pattern of these early scenes which suggest that Sophie's most important knowledge to impart is not her own but her grandfather's: his pastimes, his favourite paintings, his way of thinking. Locating Sophie's value through her closest male relative and his social standing is, by definition, patriarchal, undercutting the novel's purported message about the importance of the feminine.

At the beginning of the novel, Langdon appears as the stand-in character for the reader, following Sophie's cues on how to outsmart their pursuers. Their roles appear to reverse after their escape from Paris—during a dangerous nighttime drive in a stolen truck reminiscent of Ragle Gumm's flight from Old Town in *Time Out of Joint*—and the formerly wily Sophie appears less and less assertive. This personal degeneration reaches its nadir in a scene where Langdon and Teabing jointly educate her on the hidden meaning in Leonardo da Vinci's art, on Mary Magdalene's 'role as the Holy Grail' (253), and how Jesus 'intended for the future of His Church to be in the hands of' his wife (259). Throughout these lectures, Sophie displays a

---

[96] Palmer, *Thrillers*, p. 29.
[97] Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York: Criterion Books, 1960), p. xix.

range of emotions from 'astonishment' (252), becoming 'speechless' (259), 'surprised' (256), and 'overwhelmed' (259) in turns. While Sophie's naivete is incongruent with her background—how can someone, raised by the curator of the Louvre, be ignorant of da Vinci's art?—it is entirely consistent with Sophie's new role as the audience's new stand-in and emblem of a generic womanhood. In the middle of the narrative, then, Sophie's character needs to be scrubbed of its previous markers of individuality so it can be inscribed with new meaning via her initiation into the conspiracy. It is through Sophie's nondescript character that the reader is invited into the inner circle of the Priory's conspiracy. This invitation signals a momentous change compared to the novels discussed previously by Levin or Dick, in which conspiracy invariably evoked fear or confusion. In contrast, the narrative of *The Da Vinci Code* uses conspiracy as a tool of enchantment; as a way to inscribe meaning onto history and femininity in the exact way Eco has condemned it.

In the end, *The Da Vinci Code* exalts a very specific femininity which privileges blood relations, family, and the finding of a home as opposed to experiencing a wider world, a notion which is underlined by Sophie's re-entry into domesticity. Upon meeting her grandmother and brother for the first time since she was a small child, she is overcome with 'the power of the blood coursing through his veins... the blood she now understood they shared' and she feels that 'at last … she was home' (442).[98] This vision of femininity is underpinned by an implied obligation to have children—after all, the Priory of Sion has successfully protected Jesus' bloodline through the centuries. The novel's enshrinement of fertile, heterosexual, domestic women who wield only knowledge which relate to their male relatives makes *The Da Vinci Code*'s sexual politics undeniably, deeply conservative. More than that, by ending Sophie's arc on a note of individual domestic bliss, the novel implicitly denies that female unhappiness can originate in systemic problems, such as the patriarchy, which need systemic solutions—such as feminist political agitation. Instead, the novel reaffirms its commitment to political inaction and its preference for women's retreat to domesticity, offering its conspiratorial overlay of history as a lens through which patriarchal oppression makes sense in the past, present, and future.

---

[98] The focus on 'bloodlines' and heritage also permeates the novel with the faint whiff of another nineteenth-century invention: eugenics.

Divine institutions, guilty individuals

Whereas *Foucault's Pendulum* ultimately rejected conspiracism as a tempting but dangerous way of meaning-making, *The Da Vinci Code* articulates a full-throated endorsement of such a tactic. In particular, *The Da Vinci Code* is invested in exorcising historical and institutional guilt via its conspiracy narrative, whereby harm committed by institutions or systems is assigned to progressively smaller units of organisation, and, finally, to a single individual who can be excised from the narrative, restoring harmony. Stephen J. Mexal talks of the multi-tiered narrative structure of *The Da Vinci Code*, which shifts from what he terms the 'proprietary realism'[99] of the first half, characterised by a pseudo-realism propped up by the constant referencing of real-life data ('[b]uilt fifty-seven feet beneath ground level, the Louvre's newly constructed 70,000 square foot lobby…', 24) to a more 'conjectural' ethos in the second.[100] The main target of *The Da Vinci Code*'s excising function is the suffering caused by the patriarchy, both in the past and the present. The novel starts from the relatively uncontested position that the Catholic Church has historically been a vector of misogyny in perpetrating, theorising, and justifying acts which contributed to women's oppression, citing the burning of 'five million women' as witches and the doctrine of original sin as examples (132). Through the unfolding conspiracy, the guilt of patriarchy shifts from the Catholic Church to its splinter organisation, the Opus Dei. As Sister Sandrine thinks, 'while most of the Catholic Church was gradually moving in the right direction with respect to women's rights, Opus Dei threatened to reverse the progress' by having its female members 'clean the men's residence halls for no pay while the men were at mass' and making them sleep on 'hardwood floors' (47). The next step is the individualisation of guilt, which the novel accomplishes by singling out the Opus Dei Bishop Aringarosa, his devout *protégé* Silas, and the mysterious Teacher as the main conspirators. At this point, the guilt of patriarchy manifests in the conspirators' murderous campaign against the Priory of Sion and their goal of 'destroy[ing] the documents that reveal the great deception', that is, Mary Magdalene's wedding, child, and mission as the head of the early Church (303). And finally, the novel isolates and removes the two main causes

---

[99] Stephen J. Mexal, 'Realism, Narrative History, and the Production of the Bestseller', *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 44.5 (2005), 1085–1101 (p. 1093).
[100] Mexal, pp. 1093-94.

of suffering in the novel, Teacher/Teabing and the monk Silas, who, through their disgrace and death respectively, symbolically remove the taint of patriarchal oppression from the Church.

The Da Vinci Code, then, treats the figure of the Catholic Church in a markedly different fashion than Rosemary's Baby. Levin's novel presented religion as an ineffective relic, ignorant of the arrival of the baby Antichrist and ineffective in protecting Rosemary. In contrast, Brown's novel sees the Catholic Church as an institution capable of redemption. The performative excision of guilt allows present-day individuals to shed their guilt over being complicit in, or benefiting from, patriarchy. If patriarchy is the result of a historical conspiracy (one which, the novel emphasises, grew out of Peter's jealousy of Mary Magdalene: another instance of the novel's emphasis of individual over systemic harm) then the individual is absolved of his responsibility in dismantling patriarchy. As such, The Da Vinci Code's conspiracy narrative serves the function of soothing the anxiety of those beneficiaries of patriarchy who, despite their privilege, do not agree with women's oppression—or dislike thinking of themselves as patriarchal.[101]

The protagonists also blur the systemic and the individual via the Priory of Sion's duplicitous narrative strategy regarding institutional female empowerment. The Priory is a secret society whose goal is to safeguard Mary Magdalene's remains, her secret 'documents', and 'the bloodline of Christ' (267). Guardianship, however, was almost always relegated to male grandmasters, out of whom only four were

---

[101] The novel's compartmentalisation of the Catholic Church's guilt is especially salient in light of the clerical child sexual abuse scandals of the 1990s and early 2000s in Europe and the United States. Rumours of paedophilic priests in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland have persisted throughout the latter half of the twentieth century; however, it was only in 1994 that the first conviction was made. By the publication of Brown's novel in 2003, numerous victims gave public testimonies, further convictions were made, and broadcast programming gave large platform to the issue via Colm O'Gorman's Suing the Pope (BBC) and Mary Raftery's Cardinal Secrets (RTÉ), both airing in 2002. These events made it evident that the problem was systemic, and eventually led to the launch of the Murphy Commission with the aim of uncovering the extent of clerical child sexual abuse in Ireland. Also in 2002, the Boston Globe ran an article series on sexual abuse crimes in the Greater Boston area, leading to a similar reckoning in the United States. As a result, the Catholic Church's reputation as the arbiter of morality was already seriously damaged by the time The Da Vinci Code was published. It is perhaps no wonder that Church officials were hostile to the novel, since, on the surface, it lays yet another accusation of a sexualised, historic sin at the feet of the Church. Fascinatingly, O'Gorman's later documentary Sex Crimes and the Vatican (2006), which covers the global extent of the scandal, hits distinctly conspiratorial notes when discussing the secret Vatican directives related to the institutional policy of suppression and cover-up. These conspiratorial notes hint, perhaps, to a far-reaching influence of The Da Vinci Code on acceptable ways to approach criticisms of the Catholic Church.

women, and all those four led the Priory before the seventeenth century (332-3). The novel's reassurances, then, that 'women held far more honored status within the Priory' (444) rings hollow when honouring does not translate to actual power. The novel attempts to mitigate the suspicious lack of female leadership by asserting that female members always had the ability 'ascend to the highest post from virtually any rank' (444), which creates more questions than it answers: ultimately, we never get to learn how the Priory honours its women, nor what kind of actions or qualities allow them to ascend to a high position.

The key to the novel's concept of sacred womanhood is revealed in the scene where Langdon explains the Priory's secret sex ritual to Sophie, which she witnessed by accident. Langdon historicises 'intercourse' as 'the act through which male and female experienced God' (318): a shared divine encounter. And yet, on further elaboration, this spiritual experience turns out to serve only the male participant, since 'physical union with the female remained the sole means through which man could become spiritually complete' (353). Tucker and Walton notes how this reasoning amounts to equating women to an 'instrument through which 'man' can see God' and the lack of mention of 'women achieving similar insight.'[102] There are two ways to make sense of the novel's reasoning *vis-à-vis* enlightening sex rites: women are either destined to be intermediaries in men's relationship with the divine, or women have no need of transcendence (through sex rites or otherwise) because they exist in a constant state of divinity. The latter possibility evokes Ortner's formulation of the polarized ambiguity of female representation with its unquestioned exaltation of the feminine. However, as we have seen from Brown's mission statement about trying to trace the origins of patriarchal spirituality in *The Da Vinci Code*, divinity and power are closely linked in the author's imagination. As such, the novel may express the astonishingly simple realisation that women have always had the potential for power and the capacity to fully participate in society, but they have been stripped of it by the conspiracy (in the novel) or patriarchy (in reality).

The former interpretation is also anticipated by Ortner, who writes that women's 'intermediate position' can manifest as a function of 'mediation' between 'nature and culture', which still places them 'lower on the scale of transcendence

---

[102] Tucker & Walton, p. 111.

than man.'[103] Neither embodying divinity nor being a conduit for divinity allows women equal footing with men, and both interpretations result in the subtle reinforcement of culture and transcendence as male domains. Women as instruments of men's spirituality is indeed not the emancipatory sentiment one would expect from an institution which styles itself as the historical bulwark against the Church's misogyny, especially when the Church had its own female (albeit sexless) guidance to the divine in the Virgin Mary and countless female saints. In fact, these revelations on the Priory's sexual politics question the necessity of maintaining a secret society when it operates on, and committed to the upholding of, the assumptions of the dominant, patriarchal, culture.

Since the novel's opposing sides are endorsing virtually identical versions of femininity, the familiar trope of patriarchal handover from the older to the younger man is only present in vestigial form in *The Da Vinci Code*. Previously discussed in relation to pairs such as Joe Chip and Runciter in *Ubik*, or Agliè and Casaubon in *Foucault's Pendulum*, the function of this framing is to articulate and assign a value system to the old guard, which the younger men can reject as too outdated, and install their own, updated version of patriarchy instead. Behind these power struggles we tend to find the younger man's anxiety over his own masculinity—Belbo, Joe Chip, and Ragle Gumm are both exemplary of this complex—a problem which is solved by the younger generation's (not inevitable) victory. However, none of the male characters in *The Da Vinci Code* appear to doubt their masculinity, shifting the site of the power struggle from patriarchal authority to interpretive authority; more precisely, the authority to imbue history with meaning. Whether this is an emancipatory gesture or a tyrannical one is muddled by the ambiguity of the novel's ending. On the one hand, the novel declares that secrets must remain secret, thus allowing for multiplicities of interpretations, at least nominally; on the other, it does so after relentlessly imposing a fixed, historically inaccurate, and ideologically laden meaning on history, one which serves mainly to absolve the beneficiaries of patriarchy of their guilt.

The success of *The Da Vinci Code* is an unsettling icon of its time, but not for the reasons highlighted by its contemporary critics, that is, stylistic flaws and

---

[103] Ortner, p. 85.

historical inaccuracies. Rather, I see *The Da Vinci Code*'s main faults in its duplicity and its normalisation of using conspiracism to address individual and institutional injustice in lieu of historical and systemic analysis. Brown's novel professes to have women's issues at its heart, and yet consistently falls back to a regressive ideology of gender in which women are only intelligible as mothers, helpers, and spiritual guides for men. As if parodying second-wave feminism's 'personal is political' slogan, the novel takes institutional and interpersonal feminist issues—say, women's historical exclusion from institutions of power or the casual sexism of Sophie's boss—and melds them into a homogenous, opaque mass of a plot where everything can be made right by uncovering the conspiracy. Additionally, the novel makes the position of the conspired-against subject a source of narrative pleasure, completely decoupling conspiracy narratives from their problematic legacy. When combined, these two manoeuvres—the homogenising of the individual/institutional and the framing of conspiracy as unproblematically titillating—contribute to an emphatic discouragement of looking at historical processes systemically. Instead, the novel encourages an individualised view of history and of historical constructions of power.

And yet, I find it difficult to condemn the novel's many half-informed, misleading sleights of hand wholesale. Global sales figures indicate that the novel was and remains popular in countries that are arguably more patriarchal than those mentioned in this thesis.[104] The novel has been immensely popular in India, for example, even if its core conceit—Mary Magdalene's divinity and the Catholic Church's conspiratorial machinations—cannot be meaningfully transplanted into the local context due to religious differences. Faced with ongoing patriarchal oppression and with the enormity of effort its dismantling would require, *The Da Vinci Code's* invitation to step back, squint, and simply imagine a world where misogyny serves a higher purpose appears seductive indeed.

Out of the two novels, and perhaps all texts discussed in this dissertation, *The Da Vinci Code* is the one that celebrates the idea of patriarchy-as-conspiracy most explicitly. For Eco, patriarchy appears as an uncomfortable residue of a bygone era, one of the reasons—and by far not the most important one—that its nostalgia for a

---

[104] I have relied on Nielsen publishing data acquired through personal correspondence, which shows sales in India outstripping other English-speaking countries such as South Africa and New Zealand by orders of magnitude.

mythical simpler life is tempered with unease and ambivalence. Brown's text, however, makes it its mission to imagine, and consequently solve, patriarchy as if it were a conspiracy. What *The Da Vinci Code* offers is the fantasy of remedying systemic injustice purely by personal intervention. In projecting its conspiracy on the fraught and almost incomprehensibly large and complex issue of women's oppression throughout history, the novel exploits conspiracy's capacity to give easy answers to difficult questions. As a scholar and theorist, Eco soundly rejects this soothing potential of conspiracy narratives as simplistic and ultimately false. Brown, in contrast, peddles easy answers to complex problems in more than one way. The novel's plot posthumously endows women's suffering with meaning, allowing those implicated in historical guilt—men, or individuals belonging to the Catholic church—to emotionally distance themselves. The conspiracy narrative of *The Da Vinci Code*, then, acts as a lightning rod for a generalised sense of guilt generated by the friction between historical injustice and people's cherished belief of personal innocence in said injustice. Conspiracy narratives reconcile the uncomfortable position of admitting the injustice of oppressive system while being their beneficiary, a slight of hand thoroughly, profitably, exploited by *The Da Vinci Code*.

In the novels discussed in this thesis, conspiracy is a tool of social conservatism; that is, it is the channel through which power is relegated into male hands, and femininity is re-contained within traditional gender roles. In some of the novels, such as *Rosemary's Baby* or *Time Out of Joint*, conspiracy remains partially unsuccessful in this reactionary endeavour; in some novels, such as *Ubik*, conspiracy disintegrates reality before patriarchal reassimilation could take place. The thrillers discussed in this chapter are a fitting end point to this arc due to Eco's attempt and Brown's later success in reenshrining the patriarchy via the conspiracy. In a way, it does not matter if the politics of *The Da Vinci Code* are garbled and contradictory: Brown's thriller achieved the logical end point of development in conspiracy fiction, set in motion by midcentury's fascination with conspiracy and reworked by Dick's science fiction and Levin's Gothic.

Conclusions: Conspiracy, gender, genre—and the Mickey Mouse watch

Robert Langdon's Mickey Mouse wristwatch offers a—perhaps rather unexpected—*leitmotif* which traverses the breadth and depth of the concerns, arguments, and fascinations of *Like a Bird Caught in Cobwebs*. Walt Disney and his legacy has been a constant—if out of focus—presence in my discussion of genre, gender, and conspiracy fiction within this thesis. Levin nods towards Disney with the first names of Minnie Castevet and Walter Eberhart, and with the character of Dale 'Diz' Coba, ex-animatronics engineer and Stepford's conspiratorial mastermind. *Time Out of Joint* evokes the simulacral nature of theme parks in its constructed Old Town, while the futuristic regime's slogan of 'One Happy World' may reference the 'happiest place on earth'; that is, Disneyland (228). In *Ubik*, Dick imagines the future will have put 'Walt Disney's head' on the 'fifty-cent' coin (111), while the novel's cold-pac technology might allude to the rumours around Disney's wish for his body to be cryogenically preserved after his death. In *Foucault's Pendulum*, 'Minnie Mouse is Mickey's fiancée' becomes a returning phrase signifying how conspiracy elevates the banal into significance, if not into sublimity (375-76; 398). In *The Da Vinci Code*, Walt Disney is hailed as the 'the Modern-Day Leonardo da Vinci' who 'made it his quiet

life's work to pass on the Grail story to future generations' (271); Langdon, furthermore, is the proud owner of a 'vintage, collector's-edition Mickey Mouse wristwatch' which reliably recurs in Brown's novels featuring the fictional 'symbology' professor (155).

The selected novels' direct or indirect mention of Disney is, of course, not at all surprising: Walt Disney's empire has been a titan of American cultural production—domestically and globally—for a century. The remarkable part is how out of place the Mickey Mouse watch appears to be within the Langdon novels. The other mentions of Disney serve a fairly clear function: to evoke the banal, the lighthearted, the simulacral; a shorthand for a ubiquitous, inoffensive but sometimes vaguely suspicious monopoly of entertainment that is thoroughly American. The Mickey Mouse watch, in contrast, is deeply incongruous with Langdon's intended personal style of scholarly erudition, serving no stylistic or narrative function in the Langdon novels. The most information Brown gives the reader is that the watch 'had been a gift from [Langdon's] parents on his tenth birthday' and that 'Mickey now served as Langdon's daily reminder to stay young at heart' (155). The parents never make an appearance, and neither does the theme of aging, making the Mickey Mouse watch a bafflingly disconsonant yet persistent piece of trivia in Brown's novels.

However, seen within the context of this thesis, Langdon's Mickey Mouse watch might just be the most conspicuous, least subtle expression of the overarching theme of mid-to-late century conspiracy fiction: the impulse to turn back time, to replace, via conspiratorial means, the ambiguity of postmodern, late twentieth-century adulthood with the nostalgic simplicity of boyhood—a 'vintage, collector's-edition' version of the past and with it, traditional gender roles. Women, in these novels, are associated with organic creation—a self-propelling, self-renewing process—and the political and social progress wrought by second-wave feminism. It is unsurprising, then, that the conspiracies discussed in this thesis treat femininity as an obstacle to their nostalgic mission, seeking to contain their female characters via various means including imprisonment in domesticity and suburbia, replacement by androids, cryogenic half-life, corporeal, spiritual, and intellectual possession, or reinstatement into patriarchy's version of sacred motherhood. Only when femininity is properly contained can conspiracy indulge in its retrospective, patriarchal fantasies. It is no wonder *The Da Vinci Code* insists on having time in the hand (on

the wrist) of its male protagonist, even when it makes little narrative or thematic sense to do so.

As we have seen throughout this thesis, genre fiction provides a multifaceted vessel for this nostalgic mission of conspiracy fiction. Levin's Gothic novels emblematise the—mostly white and middle-class—female suspicion that men are much more invested in the patriarchal status quo than they may confess to be. *The Stepford Wives* in particular provides a lucid example of how patriarchy aims to arrest feminist progress via conspiratorial means, entombing gender roles—and women—in a tightly controlled version of midcentury American suburbia. The Gothic's dominant emotive charges of fear and suspicion, and its long tradition of imperiled women within domestic settings make the genre ideal for the purposes of Levin's conspiracy fiction.

Dick uses the extrapolative techniques of science fiction to query the effect of changing gender roles, finding conspiratorial explanations and consequences to the perceived disintegration of traditional masculinity. *Time*'s conspiratorially constructed Old Town feminises its men, who may still vanquish the conspiracy by reclaiming a more traditional, frontier-spirited masculinity. The novel complicates this outlook by problematising both the past and the future. Gumm's wartime memories—on which he built his masculine identity—turn out to be false, and the future he discovers outside of Old Town is unbearably inhospitable to him. Gumm's Pyrrhic victory signals a fundamental doubt over the possibility of reclaiming the past and its traditional gender roles via conspiratorial means.

Ubik expands *Time*'s epistemological doubt into a complete ontological breakdown. If conspiracy eliminates the masculine ideal—as it does in *Ubik* by assassinating Runciter—the whole universe spins out of control, Dick's later novel implies. *Ubik* displays the least amount of faith in the nostalgic mission of conspiracy, framing its time reversals as incontrollable, confusing, and destructive. On the one hand, extrapolating the absence of patriarchal authority into universal annihilation is a gesture that may be called overwrought, perhaps even hysterical. On the other hand, this gesture makes *Ubik* quite egalitarian: the conspiracy consumes all regardless of gender, leaving assimilation the only option for survival. *Ubik*'s recursive narrative framing quite aptly reflects the novel's circular logic of gender and conspiracy: disintegrating gender roles make conspiracy's victory possible, which disintegrates gender roles even further—and so on.

Foucault's Pendulum fundamentally aligns with *Ubik*'s fears about the dangers of conspiracies, seeing them just as uncontrollable and deadly as Dick did. Nonetheless, Eco's novel glances towards the past wistfully, admitting the intellectual and visceral allure of taking control of history by inventing an all-encompassing conspiracy. Like Dick's protagonists, Eco's male characters are bereft of guidance in the wake of the upended gender binaries of midcentury American—and Americanised European—life. Belbo attempts to anchor himself within his memories of the war in the same way Ragle Gumm did; while Casaubon is ultimately unable to distinguish reality from the effects of the conspiracy, just like *Ubik's* Joe Chip. Ultimately, *Foucault's Pendulum* does not believe it can conspiratorially reclaim the past. It does, however, propose fertile, feminine corporeality as the sole characteristic which may insulate one from conspiracy's appeal and its dangers. By glorifying an essentialist version of femininity, Eco's novel opens the door for *The Da Vinci Code's* conspiratorial reestablishment of patriarchal gender binaries.

Instead of arresting or dislodging time, like *The Stepford Wives* or *Ubik*, *The Da Vinci Code* claims authority over history by projecting a conspiratorial metanarrative over the past. As a result, the novel successfully disperses the legacy of guilt attached to patriarchal oppression, attributing the blame to a select few bad actors in the past and the novel's present. Brown's novel continues the trajectory of Eco's gender essentialist gesture, transforming its female protagonist from detective to a vessel of (male) divinity. *The Da Vinci Code* thus completes the reactionary arc of conspiracy fiction, becoming the first truly successful example of the conspiratorial reclamation of the past and of traditional gender roles amongst the novels discussed. In the novels of Levin, Dick, and Eco, the reactionary trajectory of conspiracy remains incomplete or compromised, whether through the bathos of the Satanic coven or the stilted ending of *Time*, for example.

Turning back the hands of time (and of Mickey Mouse) is only one of the socio-cultural processes attached to the conspiracy fiction that I have traced in this thesis. Key amongst these issues is conspiracy's role in conceptualising the postmodern disintegration of meaning. Conspiracy fiction directly addresses contemporary quandaries of truth, legitimacy, power, and authenticity via its very structure, one which is built on the premise that objective truth does exist, but it is hidden by the conspirators for a specific end. In the novels discussed in this thesis, the scope of truth queried by the conspiracy varies greatly. The quandary can be

personal and domestic, as it was for the heroines of Levin and Brown, and for Dick's Ragle Gumm, who were most occupied with the real identities of themselves and of those closest to them.

Conspiracy fiction can also query the reality of domiciles, as we have seen with Levin's Stepford and Dick's Old Town. It can query history, as in the thrillers of Eco and Brown; or, indeed, reality and the knowability of truth itself, as *Foucault's Pendulum* and *Ubik* have done. These novels trace a trajectory of gradual acceptance when it comes to ontological ambiguity. The panic and fear found in Levin and Dick's conspiracy fiction is replaced, by the end of the century, with the dominant note of fascination in Eco and of reverence in Brown, signalling a qualitative shift in literature's emplotment of ontological ambiguities from a source of anguish to a source of titillation. At a time when second-wave feminism was questioning the truth of traditional gender binaries, it is no wonder that the conspiracy fiction of the American mid-to-late twentieth century equated the disintegration of gender roles with the disintegration of reality.

In *Like a Bird Caught in Cobwebs,* I traced the fictional typologies of gendered expression and their attendant epistemologies, as allocated by the conspiracy. I have collated the various ways in which conspiracy fiction apportions corporeal, maternal wisdom to its female characters, the ways in which wisdom counteracts conspiratorial ensnarement, as well as the exceptions to this rule of female corporeality in conspiracy fiction. I highlighted Levin's nuanced view of Rosemary's pregnant body, Dick's tendency to write ethereal, disembodied, non-threatening women, and the slippage towards gender essentialism in the novels of Eco and Brown. I examined how Dick understands passivity in the face of a conspiracy as a feminine position, and how assuming this position becomes a source of distress for Dick's male protagonist. The thesis also covered how the role of the investigator often appears antithetical to femininity in the novels discussed, further underlining how conspiracy fiction genders corporeal epistemologies as feminine, and cognitive epistemologies as masculine.

The present thesis also examined conspiratorial masculinities. I have drawn out the evolution of the changing of the guard motif, during which younger men depose the older, conspiratorial generation, thereby installing a new, updated version of patriarchy. The ubiquitous figure of the patriarch manifests in conspiracy fiction in the figures of Roman Castevet, Dale 'Diz' Coba, Runciter, Agliè, and Teabing. The

patriarch is often a bachelor who is both richer and older than the protagonist, signaling the presence of specifically male anxieties of gendered performance which underpin, as I have argued throughout this thesis, much of conspiracy fiction. The thesis also traced how the act of conspiring slowly became an acceptable masculine position. That is, in the conspiracy novels closer to the midcentury, acting in accordance with the conspiracy's makes one's masculinity suspect—see, for example, Bill Black in *Time*—as the legacy of rugged individualism would demand that a properly masculine character defeat the conspiracy. In contrast, the act of conspiring is within the realm of acceptable masculine behaviour in the novels nearer to the millennium, as Langdon's triumph at the end of *The Da Vinci Code* illustrates.

In line with the act of conspiring, genre fiction also shed some of its cultural stigma by the end of the twentieth century. While Ira Levin is still lamentably underrecognised today, Philip K. Dick has entered the canon of science fiction and American literature as one of its greats, albeit largely posthumously. The ludic postmodernism of *Foucault's Pendulum* intentionally muddled the boundaries between literary and popular fiction, signaling a definitive breakdown of the assumption that there is something inherently inferior about popular fiction. *The Da Vinci Code*'s global success has reignited the discourse around the value of popular fiction, and arguably the resulting discourse has been more nuanced than it would have been half a century ago.

I have also followed the evolution of conspiratorial frameworks of patriarchy in the key feminist texts of the second wave and of the 1990s. Patriarchy-as-conspiracy remains, in these texts, a latent presence. The early second wave evoked a conspiratorial understanding of power for its attention-grabbing quality and for providing an easy mental bridge between personal and systemic injustice. This evocation was often accompanied by disavowal and avoidance, after which the conspiratorial only emerged very occasionally in feminist discourse. By the end of the century, accusations of conspiratorial thinking were weaponised by, against, and within feminism, signalling a wider cultural penetration by conspiracy in late twentieth-century American discourse, compared to the midcentury.

In many ways, the novels which bookend this thesis chart an opposing course. Only a few decades after Rosemary ventured beyond the constraints of domestic knowledge and stepped into the role of the investigator, Sophie renounces her skills and profession as a police officer and rediscovers her happiness in and

through the epistemologies of family and heritage. In *Rosemary's Baby*, patriarchy was made flesh in the figure of the Devil and through the Satanist conspiracy's cruel and exploitative control. In *The Da Vinci Code,* patriarchal power relations are rehabilitated via the novel's exclusive and exciting conspiracy which projects a divine sheen on millennia of systemic and institutional misogyny. Conspiracy's evolution from the devil to the divine in less than half a century is spectacular but by no means sudden or unprecedented. The steps which took us from Rosemary's horror to Sophie's awe are encoded in the conspiracy fictions of Dick and Eco, both of whom, to differing degrees, register a wistful yearning for earlier, more patriarchal, times. Genre fiction's rich toolbox of tropes, stereotypes, and conventions made this dramatic reversal possible.

Bibliography

Ahmed, Sara, 'Killing Joy: Feminism and the History of Happiness', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 35.3 (2010), 571–94

Amis, Kingsley, *New Maps of Hell: A Survey of Science Fiction* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co, 1960)

Armitt, Lucie, *History of the Gothic: Twentieth-Century Gothic* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011)

Arnold, Kyle, *The Divine Madness of Philip K. Dick* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016)

Avila, Eric, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004)

Barkun, Michael, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003)

Baym, Nina, 'Melodramas of Beset Manhood: How Theories of American Fiction Exclude Women Authors', *American Quarterly*, 33.2 (1981), 123–39

Becker, Susanne, *Gothic Forms of Feminine Fictions* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017)

Berberich, Christine, ed., *The Bloomsbury Introduction to Popular Fiction* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015)

Birchall, Clare, *Knowledge Goes Pop: From Conspiracy Theory to Gossip* (Oxford: Berg, 2006)

Bloom, Clive, *Bestsellers: Popular Fiction since 1900* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008)

—— 'Introduction to the Gothic Handbook Series: Welcome to Hell', *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Gothic*, ed. by Clive Bloom (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp. 1-27

Boltanski, Luc, *Mysteries and Conspiracies*, trans. by Catharine Porter (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014)

Booker, M. Keith, *Monsters, Mushroom Clouds, and the Cold War: American Science Fiction and the Roots of Postmodernism, 1946-1964* (London: Greenwood Press, 2001)

Boyer, Paul, *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985)

Bradly Bowers, ed., *The Da Vinci Code in the Academy* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007)

Bridges, Tristan, and C. J. Pascoe, 'Hybrid Masculinities: New Directions in the Sociology of Men and Masculinities', *Sociology Compass*, 8.3 (2014), 246–58

Brien, Alan, 'The Paperback Urge', *The Sunday Times*, 2 February 1969, p. 51

Bronfen, Elisabeth, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (New York: Routledge, 1992)

Brown, Dan, *The Da Vinci Code: Special Illustrated Edition* (London: Bantam Press, 2004)

Brown, Simon, 'James Herbert's Working-Class Horror', in *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Gothic*, ed. by Clive Bloom (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp. 275-90

Burel, Grégoire, Tracie Farrell, and Harith Alani, 'Demographics and Topics Impact on the Co-Spread of COVID-19 Misinformation and Fact-Checks on Twitter', *Information Processing and Management*, 58.6 (2021), 102732

Butler, Judith, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 2007)

Butter, Michael and Maurus Reinkowski, eds*., Conspiracy Theories in the United States and the Middle East* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014)

Carey, John M., Andrew M. Guess, Peter J. Loewen, Eric Merkley, Brendan Nyhan, Joseph B. Phillips, and others, 'The Ephemeral Effects of Fact-Checks on COVID-19 Misperceptions in the United States, Great Britain and Canada', *Nature Human Behaviour*, 6.2 (2022), 236–43

Carrigan, Tim, Bob Connell, and John Lee, 'Toward a New Sociology of Masculinity', *Theory and Society*, 14, 1985, 551–604

Case, Alison A., *Plotting Women* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999)

Caughie, John, 'Television and Serial Fictions', in *The Cambridge Companion to Popular Fiction*, ed. by David Glover and Scott McCracken (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 50-67

Chafe, William H., *The Unfinished Journey: America Since World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015)

Christ, Birte, "What kind of man are you?': The Gendered Foundations of U.S. Conspiracism and of Recent Conspiracy Theory Scholarship', in *Conspiracy Theories in the United States and the Middle East*, ed. by Michael Butter and Maurus Reinkowski (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), pp. 311-332

Cixous, Hélène, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', trans. by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 1.4 (1976), 875–93

Clark, Suzanne, *Cold Warriors: Manliness on Trial in the Rhetoric of the West* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000)

Coale, Samuel Chase, *Paradigms of Paranoia: The Culture of Conspiracy in Contemporary American Fiction* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005)

Cohen, Samuel, *After the End of History: American Fiction in the 1990s* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2009)

Coletti, Theresa, 'Bellydancing: Gender, Silence, and the Women of Foucault's Pendulum', in *Reading Eco: An Anthology,* ed. by Rocco Capozzi (Indiana University Press, 1997), pp. 300-12

Collignon, Fabienne, 'Cold-Pac Politics: Ubik's Cold War Imaginary', in *The World According to Philip K. Dick*, ed. by Alexander Dunst and Stefan Schlensag (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 48–67

Connell, R. W., and James W. Messerschmidt, 'Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept', *Gender and Society*, 19.6 (2005), 829–59

Cordle, Daniel*, Late Cold War Literature and Culture: The Nuclear 1980s* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017)

Crow, Charles L., ed., *A Companion to American Gothic*, ed. by (Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, 2013)

Csicsery-Ronay, Istvan Jr, *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2008)

Daly, Mary, *Gyn/Ecology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990)

Davidoff, Leonore and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780–1850* (London: Routledge, 2019)

Davis, David Brion, *The Slave Power Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969)

de Beauvoir, Simone, *The Second Sex,* transl. by H. M. Parshley (New York: Vintage Books, 1989)

—— *The Second Sex,* transl. by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Vintage Books, 2011)

Denfeld, Rene, *The New Victorians: A Young Woman's Challenge to the Old Feminist Order* (New York: Warner Books, 1994)

Dentith, M. R. X., and Brian L. Keeley, 'The Applied Epistemology of Conspiracy Theories: An Overview', in *The Routledge Handbook of Applied Epistemology*, ed. by David Coady and James Chase (London: Routledge, 2019), pp. 284–93

Derrida, Jacques, 'The Law of Genre', transl. by Avital Ronell, *Critical Inquiry*, 7.1 (1980), 55–81

Dick, Philip K., *Time Out of Joint* (New York: Bluejay Books, 1984)

—— *Ubik* (London: Gollancz, 2004)

Dubrow, Heather, *Genre: The Critical Idiom* (London: Methuen, 1982)

Dunst, Alexander, 'The Politics of Conspiracy Theories: American Histories and Global Narratives', in *Mapping Conspiracy Theories in the United States and the Middle East*, ed. by Michael Butter and Maurus Reinkowski (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), pp. 293-310

Eco, Umberto, *Travels in Hyperreality* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1986)

—— *The Limits of Interpretation* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990)

—— 'Narratives Structures in Fleming', in *Gender, Language and Myth: Essays on Popular Narrative*, ed. by Glenwood Irons (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), pp. 157–82

—— 'An Author and his Interpreters', in *Reading Eco: An Anthology,* ed. by Rocco Capozzi (Indiana University Press, 1997), pp. 59-72

—— *Foucault's Pendulum*, transl. by William Weaver (London: Vintage, 2001)

Elliott, Jane, 'Stepford U.S.A.: Second-Wave Feminism, Domestic Labor, and the Representation of National Time', *Cultural Critique*, 70.1 (2008), 32–62

Faludi, Susan, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1991)

—— *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007)

Felski, Rita, *Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2000)

Fenster, Mark, *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008)

Fiedler, Leslie A., *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York: Criterion Books, 1960)

Firestone, Shulamith, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution (New York: Quill, 1993)*

Fisher, Mark, 'Ubik as Petit Objet A', *k-punk*, 25 October 2005 <k-punk.abstractdynamics.org/archives/006679.html> [accessed July 2021]

Fitting, Peter, 'Ubik: The Deconstruction of Bourgeois SF', *Science Fiction Studies*, 2.1 (1975), 47–54

Fowler, Douglas, *Ira Levin* (Mercer Island: Starmont House, 1988)

Freedman, Carl, 'Towards a Theory of Paranoia: The Science Fiction of Philip K. Dick', *Science Fiction Studies*, 11.1 (1984), 15–24

—— *Critical Theory and Science Fiction* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2000)

Friedan, Betty, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1979)

Frow, John, 'What Was Post-Modernism?', in *Past the Last Post: Theorizing Post-Colonialism and Post-Modernism* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1990), pp. 139–52

—— *Genre* (New York: Routledge, 2006)

Fulcher, James, 'American Conspiracy: Formula in Popular Fiction', *Midwest Quarterly: A Journal of Contemporary Thought*, 24.2 (1983), 152–64

Gamble, Sarah, 'Postfeminism', in *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2006)

Gelder, Ken, *Popular Fiction: The Logic and Practices of a Literary Field* (London: Routledge, 2004)

—— ed., *New Directions in Popular Fiction* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016)

Genter, Robert, 'Proto-Postmodernism', in *American Literature in Transition, 1950–1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 195–208

Ghandeharion, Azra, 'Anxious Masculinity: A Comparative Study of Philip Dick's Scanner Darkly and Richard Linklater's Adaptation', *Forum for World Literature Studies*, 8.2 (2016), 333–50

Gledhill, Ruth, 'Men Spurn Role of Helpmate at Home', *The Times*, 16 November 1987, p. 3

Glover, David, and Scott McCracken, eds., *Cambridge Companion to Popular Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018)

Goldman, Peter, 'The Keys to the White House', *Newsweek*, 21 November 1988, p. 16

Gordon, Linda, *The Moral Property of Women* (University of Illinois Press, 2002)

Hall, Stuart, *Essential Essays: Volume I*, ed. by David Morley (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019)

Hamilton, Geoff, and Brian Jones, eds., *Encyclopedia of American Popular Fiction*
(New York: Infobase Publishing, 2009)

Hantke, Steffen, *Conspiracy and Paranoia in Contemporary American Fiction* (Berlin:
Peter Lang, 1994)

Harambam, Jaron, *Contemporary Conspiracy Culture: Truth and Knowledge in an
Era of Epistemic Instability* (New York: Routledge, 2020)

Haraway, Donna, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New
York: Routledge, 1990)

Hattenhauer, Darryl, *Shirley Jackson's American Gothic* (Albany: State University of
New York Press, 2003)

Hirst, Holly, 'The Gothic Romance', in *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary
Gothic*, ed. by Clive Bloom (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp. 357-372

Hoberek, Andrew P., 'The 'Work' of Science Fiction: Philip K. Dick and Occupational
Masculinity in the Post-World War II United States', *Modern Fiction Studies*,
43.2 (1997), 373–97

Hof, Tobias, 'The Moro Affair - Left-Wing Terrorism and Conspiracy in Italy in the Late
1970s', *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschun,* 38.1 (2013),
232-256

Hoffman, A. Robin, 'How to See the Horror: The Hostile Fetus in Rosemary's Baby
and Alien', *LIT Literature Interpretation Theory*, 22.3 (2011), 239–61

Hofstadter, Richard, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays*
(Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966)

Holland, Norman N. and Leona F. Sherman, 'Gothic Possibilities', *New Literary
History*, 8.2 (1977), 279–94

Holliday, Valerie, 'Masculinity in the Novels of Philip K. Dick', *Extrapolation*, 47.2
(2006), 280–95

hooks, bell, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (New York: Routledge, 2015)

Horkheimer, Max, and Theodor W Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical
Fragments*, ed. by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr (Stanford, CA: Stanford University
Press, 2002)

Hutcheon, Linda, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1988)

'Is Feminism Dead?', cover image, *Time*, 29 June 1988 <http://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19980629,00.html> [accessed 22 November 2022]

Jameson, Fredric, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995)

—— *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern* (London: Verso, 1998)

—— 'Future City', *New Left Review*, 21 May/June (2003), 65–79

—— *Archeologies of the Future* (London: Verso, 2005)

Jeffords, Susan, *The Remasculinisation of America: Gender and the Vietnam War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989)

Kapell, Matthew Wilhelm, *Exploring the Next Frontier* (New York: Routledge, 2016)

Kavanagh, Ciarán, "Gaze into the Abyme: Navigating the Unnarrated in *Ubik*', *Messengers from the Stars: On Science Fiction and Fantasy*, 4 (2019), 8–25

Keats, John, *The Crack in the Picture Window* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1956)

Kempker, Erin, *Big Sister: Feminism, Conservatism, and Conspiracy in the Heartland* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018)

Klemesrud, Judy, 'Feminists Recoil at Film Designed to Relate to Them', *New York Times,* 26 February 1975, p. 29

Knight, Peter, *Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to the X-Files* (London: Routledge, 2000)

Kurtz, Malisa, 'After the War, 1945-65', in *Science Fiction: A Literary History*, ed. by Roger Luckhurst (London: The British Library, 2017), pp. 130–56

Lattman, Peter, "The Da Vinci Code' Trial: Dan Brown's Witness Statement Is a Great Read', *Wall Street Journal*, 14 March 2006 <https://archive.ph/oJP7y> [accessed 7 March 2023]

Leavis, F. R., *The Great Tradition* (New York: George R. Stewart, 1950)

Levin, Ira, *Rosemary's Baby* (New York: Dell, 1968)

—— *The Stepford Wives* (New York: Perennial, 2002)

Levine, Robert S., *Conspiracy and Romance: Studies in Brockden Brown, Cooper, Hawthorne, and Melville* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989)

Lewis, Barry, 'Paranoia', in *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism,* ed. by Stuart Sim (New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 176-77

Lidoff, Joan, 'Domestic Gothic: The Imagery of Anger, Christina Stead's 'Man Who Loved Children'', *Studies in the Novel*, 11.2 (1979), 201–15

Lim, Bliss Cua, 'Serial Time: Bluebeard in Stepford', in *Film and Literature: A Reader*, ed. by Robert Stam (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 163–90

Lima, Robert, 'The Satanic Rape of Catholicism in *Rosemary's Baby*', *Studies in American Fiction*, 2.2 (1974), 211–222

Lorde, Audre, *Sister Outsider* (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1996)

Lyotard, Jean-François, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984)

Macpherson, Pat, *Reflecting on the* Bell Jar (New York: Routledge, 1991)

Makinen, Merja, *Feminist Popular Fiction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001)

Mangan, Lucy, 'A word-of-mouth success', *Guardian*, 11 August 2004 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2004/aug/11/1> [accessed 6 March 2023]

Marcus, Sharon, 'Placing Rosemary's Baby', *Differences*, 5.3 (1993), 121–53

Marres, Noortje, 'Why We Can't Have Our Facts Back', *Engaging Science, Technology, and Society*, 4 (2018), 423–43

May, Elaine Tyler, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 2008)

McElhaney, Joe, '*Rosemary's Baby*, Polanski, New York', in *City That Never Sleeps: New York and the Filmic Imagination*, ed. by Murrey Pomerance (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007), pp. 201–14

McHale, Brian, *Constructing Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1992)

—— *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodernism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015)

Melley, Timothy, *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America*, (London: Cornell University Press, 2000)

Merchant, Carolyn, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980)

Merrell, Douglas, *Umberto Eco,* The Da Vinci Code*, and the Intellectual in the Age of Popular Culture* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017)

Mexal, Stephen J., 'Realism, Narrative History, and the Production of the Bestseller', *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 44.5 (2005), 1085–1101

Michaels, Walter Benn, *The Shape of the Signifier* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004)

Millett, Kate, *Sexual Politics* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000)

Modleski, Tania, *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women* (London: Routledge, 2008)

Moers, Ellen, *Literary Women: The Great Writers* (New York: Doubleday, 1976)

Moore, Deborah Dash, 'Reconsidering the Rosenbergs: Symbol and Substance in Second Generation American Jewish Consciousness', *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 8.1 (1988), 21–37

Morgan, Robin, ed., *Sisterhood Is Powerful* (New York: Random House, 1970)

Morrow, Thomas G., 'The *Da Vinci Code*: A Critique', *Catholic Faith Alive! Inc.* <https://cfalive.com/pages/the-da-vinci-code-a-critique> [accessed 10 March 2023]

Murphy, Bernice M., *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009)

—— ''Identical Boxes Spreading like Gangrene': Defining the Suburban Gothic', in *A Companion to American Gothic*, ed. by Charles L. Crow (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2013) pp. 315–27

—— *Key Concepts in Contemporary Popular Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017)

—— and Stephen Matterson, eds., *Twenty-First-Century Popular Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018)

Nadel, Alan, *Containment Culture: American Narratives, Postmodernism, and the Atomic Age* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995)

Nelson, Deborah, *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002)

Nelson, Jennifer, *Women of Color and the Reproductive Rights Movement* (New York University Press, 2003)

Nelson, Victoria, *Gothicka* (London: Harvard University Press, 2012)

Neumann, Franz, 'Anxiety and Politics', in *The Democratic and The Authoritarian State: Essays in Political and Legal Theory*, ed. by Herbert Marcuse (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe [Macmillan], 1964), pp. 270–300

Newheiser, Anna Kaisa, Miguel Farias, and Nicole Tausch, 'The Functional Nature of Conspiracy Beliefs: Examining the Underpinnings of Belief in the *Da Vinci Code* Conspiracy', *Personality and Individual Differences*, 51.8 (2011), 1007–11

Nicol, Bran, *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodern Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009)

O'Donnell, Patrick, 'Engendering Paranoia in Contemporary Narrative', *Boundary 2*, 19.1 (1992), 181–204

Olmstead, Kathryn, *Real Enemies: Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War I to 9/11* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009)

O'Leary, Alan, 'Italian cinema and the 'anni di piombo'', *Journal of European Studies*, 40.3 (2010), 243-257

Ortner, Sherry B., 'Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?', in *Woman, Culture, and Society*, ed. by M. Z. Rosaldo and L. Lamphere (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1974), pp. 68–87

Palmer, Christopher, *Philip K. Dick: Exhilaration and Terror of the Postmodern* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2003)

Palmer, Jerry, *Thrillers: Genesis and Structure of a Popular Genre* (London: Edward Arnold, 1978)

—— *Potboilers: Methods, Concepts, and Case Studies in Popular Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1991)

'patriarchy, n.', *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/138873> [accessed June 21, 2023]

Patterson, James, 'Introduction', in *Thriller*, ed. by James Patterson (Toronto: Mira, 2006), pp. 9-13

Petchesky, Rosalind Pollack, 'Fetal Images: The Power of Visual Culture in the Politics of Reproduction', *Feminist Studies*, 13.2 (1987), 263-292

Piette, Adam, *The Literary Cold War, 1945 to Vietnam* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009)

Pionke, Albert, *Plots of Opportunity* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2004)

Pohl, Frederick, 'Review of *Time Out of Joint*', *Worlds of If,* November 1959, p. 98. Reprinted in 'PKD Otaku', ed by Patrick Clark, vol. 3, no date, <https://philipdick.com/resources/journals/pkd-otaku/> [accessed September 2021]

Popper, Karl R., *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013)

Redding, Arthur, *Pulp Virilities and Post-War American Culture* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022)

Reid, Alfred S., 'Emersonian Ideas in the Youth Movement of the 1960's', *American Transcendental Quarterly*, 9.1 (1971), 12–15

Rinehart, Dianne, 'Anatomy of a blockbuster: *The Da Vinci Code*', *Toronto Star,* 12 July 2014 <https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/books/2014/07/11/anatomy_of_a_blockbuster_the_da_vinci_code.html> [accessed 12 March 2023]

Rice, Jenny, *Awful Archives: Conspiracy Theory, Rhetoric, and Acts of Evidence* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2020)

Rich, Adrienne, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1976)

Robertson, David G., *UFOs, Conspiracy Theories and the New Age: Millennial Conspiracism* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016)

Robinson, Kim Stanley, *The Novels of Philip K. Dick* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1981)

Rogak, Lisa, *Dan Brown: The Man Behind* The Da Vinci Code*; The Unauthorised Biography* (Robson Books: London, 2005)

Rossi, Umberto, *The Twisted Worlds of Philip K. Dick* (London: McFarland & Company, 2011)

Ruddick, Sara, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995)

Russ, Joanna, 'Somebody's Trying to Kill Me and I Think It's My Husband', *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 6.4 (1973), 666–91

Russett, Margaret, 'Three Faces of Ruth Rendell: Feminism, Popular Fiction, and the Question of Genre', in *Genre* (University of Oklahoma, 2002)

Sage, Alexandria, 'Dan Brown novel breaks one-day sales records', *Reuters*, 17 September 2009 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-books-danbrown-idUSTRE58E5Q720090917> [accessed 6 March 2023]

Sandler, Suki, *Ira Levin: Oral History Memoir*, transcript of interview, The New York Public Library Digital Collections, 12 March 1992, pp. 34-35 <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/598950c0-02e1-0131-cf99-58d385a7b928> [accessed 7 March 2023]

Savoy, Eric, 'Between as If and Is: On Shirley Jackson', *Women's Studies*, 46.8 (2017), 827–44

Schneider-Mayerson, Matthew, 'The Dan Brown Phenomenon: Conspiracism in Post-9/11 Popular Fiction', *Radical History Review*, Fall.111 (2011), 194–201

Scott, Joan Wallach, *Sex and Secularism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018)

Seed, David, *American Science Fiction and the Cold War: Literature and Film* (New York: Routledge, 2013)

Shaw, George Bernard, *The Doctor's Dilemma; a Tragedy* (London: Constable and Company, 1922)

Shilling, Jane, 'Footloose or oppressed?', *The Times*, 17 March 1998, p. 17

Shippey, T. A., 'The Cold War in Science Fiction, 1940-1960', in *Science Fiction: A Critical Guide*, ed. by Patrick Parrinder (New York: Longman, 2016)

Showalter, Elaine, *Hystories* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997)

Silver, Anna Krugovoy, 'The Cyborg Mystique: The Stepford Wives and Second Wave Feminism', *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory*, 58.1 (2002), 109–26

Sim, Stuart, *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 2012)

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in C. Nelson and L. Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988)

Strick, Philip, 'Review of *Ubik* and *Maze of Death*', *Speculation*, 29 October 1971, pp. 35-37

Strombeck, Drew, 'None Dare Call It Masculinity: The Subject of Post-Kennedy Conspiracy Theory' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of California, Davis, 2003)

Stryffeler, Ryan, 'Masculinity and Fascism in Three Dystopic American Novels', *Gender Forum*, 47 (2014)

Sutin, Lawrence, *Divine Invasions: A Life of Philip K. Dick* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2005)

Suvin, Darko, 'P. K. Dick's Opus: Artifice as Refuge and World View', *Science Fiction Studies*, 2.1 (1975), 8–22

Tanner, Tony, *City of Words* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1971)

Thomas, Elizabeth Marshall, *Woof!: Writers on Dogs*, ed. by Lee Montgomery (New York: Viking, 2008)

Tiger, Lionel, *Men in Groups* (New York: Random House, 1969)

'Time Out of Joint', *Internet Science Fiction Database*, <http://www.isfdb.org/cgi-bin/title.cgi?9502> [accessed September 2021]

Trilling, Lionel, *The Liberal Imagination* (New York: Anchor Books, 1953)

Tsichlis, Steven, 'Debunking The Da Vinci Code', *pravmir.com: Orthodox Christianity and the World*, 29 May 2009 <https://www.pravmir.com/debunking-the-da-vinci-code/> [accessed 6 March 2023]

Tucker, Bruce and Priscilla L. Walton, *American Culture Transformed: Dialing 9/11* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012)

Tucker, Reed, 'Success symbol', *New York Post*, 20 September 2009 <https://nypost.com/2009/09/20/success-symbol/> [accessed 6 March 2023]

Valerius, Karyn, 'Rosemary's Baby, Gothic Pregnancy, and Fetal Subjects', *College Literature*, 32.3 (2005), 116–35

van Prooijen, Jan Willem, Joline Ligthart, et al., 'The Entertainment Value of Conspiracy Theories', *British Journal of Psychology*, 113.1 (2022), 25–48

Weinraub, Judith, 'Umberto Eco: His Complex Design', *Washington Post*, 26 November 1989 https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1989/11/26/umberto-eco-his-complex-design/f44ed613-0b3c-4137-8b13-0245af795f13/> [accessed 7 March 2023]

Woodward, Kenneth L., 'A Quite Contrary Mary', *beliefnet,* 2003 <https://www.beliefnet.com/entertainment/movies/the-da-vinci-code/a-quite-contrary-mary.aspx> [accessed 6 March 2023]

Wray, John, 'Ursula K. Le Guin, The Art of Fiction, No. 221', in *Paris Review*, issue 206, Fall (2013) <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/6253/the-art-of-fiction-no-221-ursula-k-le-guin> [accessed 1 June 2023]

Wyatt, Edward, ''Da Vinci Code' Losing Best-Seller Status', *New York Times*, 4 November 2005 <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/11/04/books/da-vinci-code-losing-bestseller-status.html> [accessed 7 March 2023]

Zanganeh, Lila Azam, 'Umberto Eco, The Art of Fiction No. 197', *Paris Review*, issue 185, Summer (2008) <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/5856/the-art-of-fiction-no-197-umberto-eco> [accessed 10 November 2022]

Ziolkowski, Theodore, *Lure of the Arcane* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013)