
Samuel Chase Coale. *Paradigms of Paranoia: The Culture of Conspiracy in Contemporary American Fiction*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005. 258p.

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“Everyone loves a conspiracy,” asserts Dan Brown in *The Da Vinci Code*. Earlier, in Don DeLillo’s *Running Dog*, a character declares, “This is the age of conspiracy...the age of connections, links, secret relationships.”

Samuel Chase Coale’s study joins many well-known (and sometimes controversial) works on conspiracy and paranoia published in the last fifteen years by writers like Daniel Pipes, Mark Fenster, Timothy Melley, George Marcus, Patrick O’Donnell, Devon Jackson, Paul T. Coughlin, Michael Barkun, and Robert Alan Goldberg. It contributes to a world of conferences, journals, and websites focused on conspiracy and paranoia and reflects a prominent feature of popular discourse: endless speculation about NSA spying, oil cabals, Saddam Hussein and 9/11, JFK’s assassination, Iran-Contra, Princess Diana’s death, Oklahoma City, Waco, or Ruby Ridge. Current fascination with conspiracy and paranoia has even affected the English language, with additions like “conspiracism” (Frank P. Mintz) and “conspiracy chic” (Justin Raimondo).

In the first chapter of *Paradigms of Paranoia*, Coale notes the instability of postmodernism, a view of the world in which everything is “relational, debatable, elusive, and precarious” (3). He suggests conspiracy as an “antidote” since it explains the world, with everything becoming “a sign, a clue, a piece of a larger puzzle” (4). Paranoia, he argues, is central to conspiracy in that it offers explanation: it becomes “a metanarrative of deceit and deception unmasked” (5). But Coale’s most interesting contribution to the study of conspiracy and paranoia is his concept of the “post-modern sublime”: that is, a glimpse of truth, not *the* truth, but *a* truth with all its ambiguity, mystery (not mystification), despair, “elation and terror” (8). Coale’s own excitement and pleasure with the concept—the notion that meaning (validation) lies in the process of seeking—is clear both in his opening chapter and Epilogue.

Chapter 2 offers general remarks on the nature of conspiracy in popular culture, with emphasis on its relationship to the apocalyptic tradition. Coale identifies Jim Marrs’ *Rule By Secrecy* as the “quintessential text” (22) of the 1990s, Hal Lindsey’s *The Great Planet Earth* as the dominant text of the previous decades. Chapter 3 focuses upon conspiracy theory in popular fiction: in formulaic works where carefully described conspiracies counter postmodern uncertainty, including hard-boiled novels and gothic fiction. But more than half of the chapter considers the works of

Tim O'Brien, Paul Auster, and Robert Stone—authors some would be uncomfortable in categorizing as “popular” writers.

Most of Coale's study, however, focuses upon Joan Didion, Don DeLillo, Thomas Pynchon, and Toni Morrison. In Chapter 4, Coale explains that Didion's works, often about actual conspiracies, embody a tension between conspiracies (that can be rationally traced) and the texts' fragmented, disjointed structures. Didion's characters tend to be self-absorbed and numb; the style of her prose a “compulsive ritualism” (61), repeating images and phrases, creating rhythm and cadence. Coale outlines the evolution of Didion's style, with the first self-conscious narrator appearing in *A Book of Common Prayer* and the self-conscious narrator becoming Didion herself in *Democracy*, *The Last Thing He Wanted*, and *Miami*. Coale worries that fictional possibilities lessen in *Miami* as conspiracy becomes “reality” rather than “perception” (87).

Coale's chapter on DeLillo is the longest in *Paradigms of Paranoia* and is heavily dependent upon excellent quotations from a wide range of critics as well as statements by DeLillo about his work. As a result, the discussion is not as clear and directed as that on Didion. Coale quotes DeLillo to the effect that JFK's assassination “invented me” (88), leading to the uncertainty and conspiracy in his work. Coale suggests that this emphasis, a rational emphasis, creates a tension with a second purpose DeLillo describes, to create open-ended works of (religious) mystery. Coale also notes that “dark details” (91), distrust, menace, and paranoia characterize DeLillo's fiction, with a sense of dark, unknown powers behind the scenes. He offers a detailed discussion of *Libra* and *Players*, then describes *Mao II* as the “stylistically bleakest” (118) of DeLillo's work. The “grand magnificent” (119) *Underworld* most completely realizes DeLillo's juxtaposition of paranoia and possibility.

Chapters 6 and 7 are stylistically different from the previous chapters, casual and familiar—e.g., “I,” “let us” (136)—and offer somewhat recycled readings, not attempting to interpret the evolution of the canons of Thomas Pynchon and Toni Morrison. The chapter on Pynchon is organized by individual sections—on *Crying of Lot 49*, *Gravity's Rainbow*, *Vineland*, and *Mason and Dixon*—rather than the thesis-guided structure based in themes, literary strategies, and authorial development in the Didion and DeLillo chapters. Coale mentions the extensive literary criticism on Pynchon's works but integrates fewer critics into his discussion than he had with DeLillo. He states that Pynchon “continues to tower over postmodern novelists” (177), describes him as the “godfather” of the conspiracy novel, and considers *Gravity's Rainbow* a “triumph” of the conspiratorial and paranoid (154). The chapter on Morrison quickly moves into a detailed discussion of *Paradise*, followed by a

middle section generalizing about Morrison's work, and then a detailed section on *Beloved* before a short concluding section on *Jazz*. The effort to link patriarchy and race into the postmodern-conspiracy-paranoia schema has interesting possibilities but is not persuasive.

In his Epilogue Coale returns to a discussion of postmodernism and his concept of the "postmodern sublime"—with its "open-ended fluidity and the spirited pursuit of elusive meaning and significance" (136); and one wishes that the concept had been more clearly and fully developed in the chapters on Didion, Pynchon, and Morrison. The choice of authors in chapters 4 through 7 is not clear. Why these authors? Specifically, what do they have in common or how are they different? The thought occurs that the reason Didion and Morrison are included is the criticism made of Coale's earlier work on the romance, *In Hawthorne's Shadow*, that female writers were neglected, black authors ignored. The emphasis on the relationship between Calvinist roots and postmodern conspiracy and paranoia is predictable but troubling since it does not address the increasingly complex view of American "roots" that gives Calvinism a minor role.

Like other writers, Coale believes that American fascination with conspiracy and paranoia arises partially from a deep craving in the American public for freedom, individualism, even transcendence, in a world increasingly institutionalized on the one hand and uncertain, ambiguous, and fragmented on the other. His concept of the "postmodern sublime" identifies one of the strategies contemporary authors use to reconcile this tension. A fuller examination of the concept as the human condition—perhaps with reference to Norman Cohn's work, discussed in an end-note—would be rich indeed. ✱