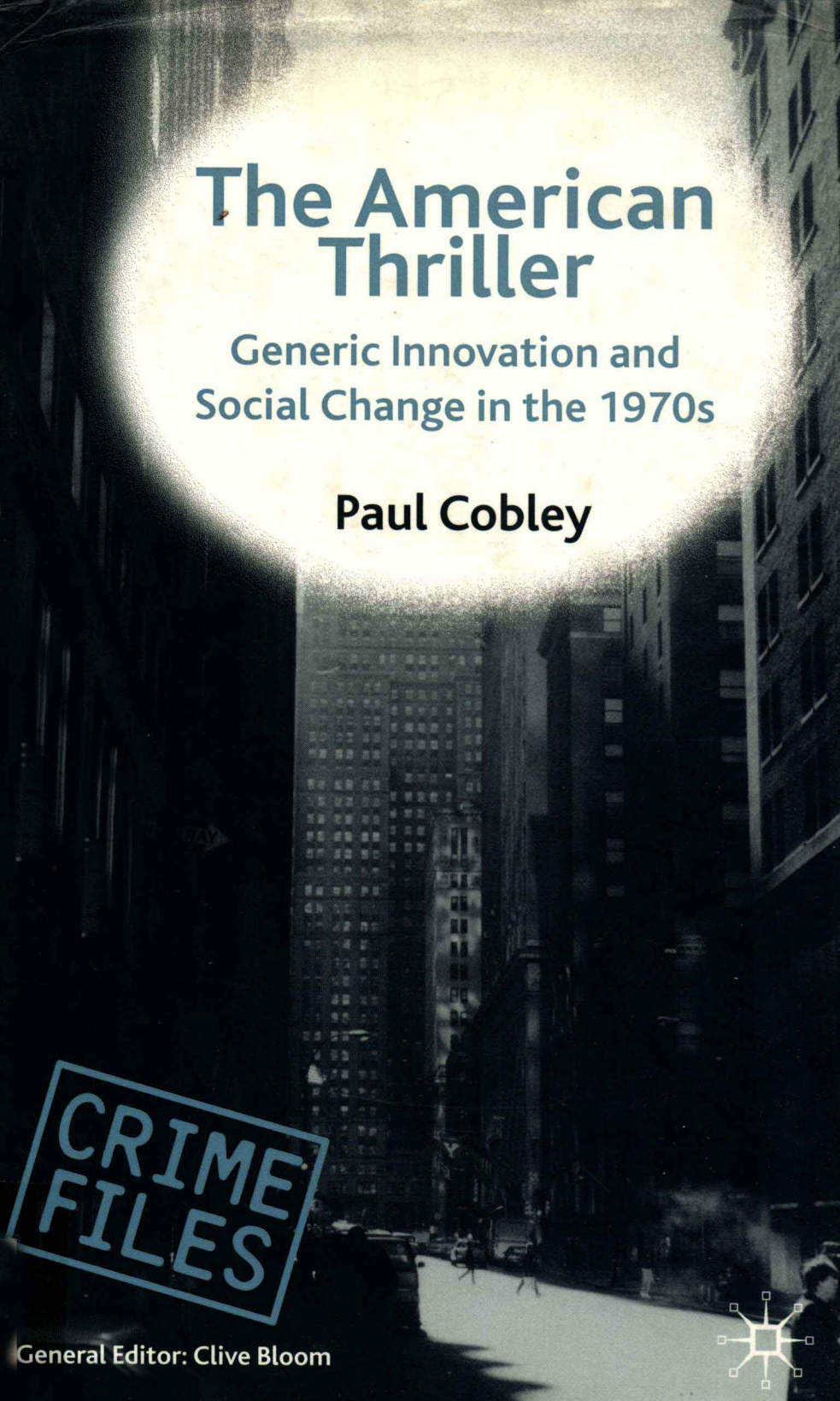
The American Thriller
Generic Innovation and Social Change in the 1970s
Paul Cobley
CRIME FILES
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Paul Cobley
Senior Lecturer in Communications
London Guildhall University

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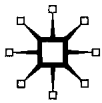

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said that it serves him right for producing the seminal work, *Thrillers*, a book to which contemporary scholars are still in debt. While the book which follows might be able to demonstrate this academic debt quite clearly, it is less able to express the quality of Jerry's personal support over the years. Adam Briggs and Andrew Pepper also read the manuscript and gave indispensable help and advice to top off our many beer- fuelled, but most productive, debates during the 1990s. Friends can often make the best critics.

My most severe critic, however, is Alison Ronald, who is a living reminder to me that there are things that are somewhat more important than the quality of academic writing. Lastly, I must say, of course, that any errors or defects in this book are entirely my responsibility (although I reserve the right to later assert in court that this confession was obtained under duress by a group of embittered NYPD operatives who failed to 'mirandize' me).

Contents

Introduction

Revisiting the recent past

Since the early nineties it has become fashionable to make reference in a number of spheres, and in a way unthinkable in the 1980s, to the decade of the 1970s. A 'glam' revival – or a 'Glam Racket' as the Fall would have it – recruited, in some measure, the likes of Suede, Pulp and Morrissey in pop music. The Sex Pistols re-formed in 1996; disco returned with a vengeance; even prog. rock got another outing. Fashion reappropriated tight-fitting shirts and blouses as well as platform shoes; nylon and polyester made an unexpected comeback. Meanwhile, films like *The People vs. Larry Flint* (1996), *Boogie Nights* (1997) and *Velvet Goldmine* (1998) depicted 1970s America (and Britain in the latter film) as a playground of sexual and sartorial excess. Elsewhere in Hollywood, the egregious Quentin Tarantino rehabilitated 1970s icons such as John Travolta (*Pulp Fiction*, 1994) and blaxploitation goddess Pam Grier (*Jackie Brown*, 1997). Al Pacino, Burt Reynolds and Jon Voight, on the other hand, were rejuvenated without his help.

A plethora of other 1970s-related material is now part of the turn-of-the-century social and entertainment landscape. As Cornershop might say, it seems like the funky days are back again. Except there is always the nagging doubt about any 1970s item consumed in the present that it isn't like it was 20-odd years ago – and, moreover, it never was quite 'like it was' even at the time.

This is a book about thrillers, a very popular genre. It is also about the 1970s. And it is, above all, a book about gaining knowledge of what thrillers were like in the 1970s. Clearly, all of these are problematic enterprises. It is true, of course that, just as with clothes we can procure the old garment or just as with with music we can place the old record on the turntable, we can also get hold of the 1970s thriller and read it thoroughly. But how can we know that the novel, film or TV programme that we read over twenty years after it first appeared means the same as it always did? Even if we were around at the time, how can we know what it meant then?

Although artefacts like garments clearly do have 'meanings', it must be said that the questions that we have asked so far are compounded in their difficulty when we choose to focus on textual objects. Texts are so

rich – sometimes merely by virtue of their length or how long they take to read – that the range and complexity of meanings which accrue to them can be extensive. This does not matter for most people, of course: films, novels and TV programmes are used for more immediate purposes such as entertainment, rather than for a meditation on the manifold significance of textuality. What they 'mean' can, we assume, be extrapolated from our understanding of the plot or structure of the text in question.

Such a 'shorthand' take on meaning is both very common and very necessary if human beings are to manage to get on with their everyday lives. However, it is worth noting that the same reductive tendency can become an escalating habit. Not only are the meanings and import of any text limited by consumptions of it which are not overly involved, but those limitations seem to be greater when the text in question comes from a specific *genre*. A genre text, it is easy to believe, does the same thing every time, no matter how much it professes to be different from all the others. Of course, if this was absolutely true nobody would have any enthusiasm for generic texts (and the strength of such a belief might account for some middle- to highbrow critics' consistent disdain of generic texts). But huge numbers of people do have enthusiasm for generic texts. Can it be the case that audiences are getting fooled all the time?

This book, therefore, is also about the concept of genre. We will need to ask at the outset how the concept can be understood in general, how it has frequently been (mis)understood and how it can be understood in relation to texts produced in the past. Furthermore, if we are to argue that audiences are not getting 'fooled' and are actually undergoing differentiated experiences in their interactions with generic texts, then we need to interrogate the notion of 'generic innovation'. Suggestions for dealing with these matters will run through the body of the book.

What is the thriller?

In the chapters that follow, we will be discussing generic texts in terms of their potential for different meanings and how specific meanings might – possibly – become 'fixed' at any one time. Immediately, then, there is a dilemma faced by our argument. If we suggest that meanings are shot through with the potentiality of transience – that is, they are subject to change over time – then it does not make sense to claim that there is a permanently stabilising entity called genre. If we claim that generic texts are very much geared towards firmly anchoring meaning, then it follows

that the meanings of genres are not really subject to change. It is an intractable problem when stated so baldly. There is, of course, a means to steer a way through the straits which separate the somewhat artificial Scylla and Charybdis that we have just described. Moreover, this can be achieved not only for the genre presently under discussion but also for any broad popular genre, for example romance.

Two of the best analyses of the thriller, Palmer (1978) and Roth (1995), appeared almost two decades apart. Both embrace a wide array of texts and both provide a 'structural' analysis in which thrillers are found to have a basic set of 'structural' components – threats to the social order, heroes, villains, deduction, resolution and so forth – which are repeated in different guises by different texts. None of this, however, sounds at all promising for a study which wishes to address the core thesis of transiency and historically based meanings. In Palmer's analysis, for example, the 'root' meaning of thrillers is to be found in its 'genesis' and its 'structure'. Originating in the early- to mid-nineteenth century, the thriller is found by Palmer to institute a series of textual relations which remain crucial to it throughout ongoing decades. These relations comprise the role of the hero as a competitive individual professional, the threat of conspiracy, the role of the villain in this conspiracy and the restoration of 'social order'. Moreover, these textual relations are also found to be a refracting mirror of capitalist social relations. The thriller is thus a constant dramatisation of capitalism's logical desire to sustain itself and head off challenges to its hegemony. As such, the threat of conspiracy – a threat both to the relations of equilibrium in thriller narratives and to the veneer of capitalist success – is, reductively, the thriller's prime mover.

Now, structuralist theses of this kind can be read in terms of the way that they posit all thrillers as, essentially, the same entity. Each thriller will, thus, be a replay – albeit in fiction – of capitalist social relations. However, a little like Roth, I believe that exactly the opposite of reduction applies here, and this is where panoramic accounts of genres such as those cited come into their own. In the present study we will be operating from the premise that the notion of conspiracy is so wide and accommodating that it *enables* an expansive range of diverse texts. Except when flagrant rip-offs occur, all thrillers are actually totally different, even while still sharing the conspiracy theme. In addition, they will continue to be different for different audiences, in different places and different times. In this book we shall be considering a wide range of texts which all – either directly or sometimes in an exceedingly oblique way – bear connections to the vastly accommodating general theme of conspiracy.

For these reasons we will retain the designation 'thriller' in order – like Palmer and Roth, though for diametrically opposed purposes – to indicate our catholic embrace of narratives. Even so, there are numerous occasions when commentators on popular fiction have chosen more specific designations for the texts that they scrutinize; in the thriller genre these have included ratiocinative tales, Golden Age crime fiction, cosy, hard-boiled fiction, *noir*, and others. These groupings are often known as 'subgenres' and designate the specifics of an area of textual production within a larger genre. Occasionally, commentaries on subgenres are arranged around a narrowed focus because the analysis aims to demonstrate that the subgenre is, in fact, a discrete entity (see, for example, Hilfer 1990). More often, subgenres are explored simply because they exist. But, just as frequently, there is a need to consider subgroupings of a genre – in this case the thriller – in order to be able to present certain patterns as they appeared at a particular moment and to avoid getting bogged down in the discussion of a myriad of disparate connections across a huge genre.

Despite the fact that this book operates with quite a sweeping understanding of the thriller, then, it also divides into chapters on specific subgenres and themes. Indeed, because of the latitude of genre, it must also be said that such a division is doomed to failure. Firstly, subgenres, as will be evident in the forthcoming pages, are decidedly prone to overlaps: they are difficult to divide by themes and motifs and, almost always, this is the case for good reasons. We will return in the Conclusion to why this is especially so for investigations such as the present one which attempt to discover some grounds for historically specific readings. Secondly, the study of subgenres represents a narrowing of focus which does not fairly reflect the breadth of the generic corpus of texts. This is true, of course, of any consideration of popular forms: fiction is produced at such a rate that even an industry as lively as literary criticism cannot manage to keep up with it. There is no easy way out of this dilemma; but one measure I have taken is to provide lists of further reading at the end of Chapters 2–8 which can – again, problematically in taxonomic terms – provide an indication of the subgenre's reach.

These inevitable shortcomings are part and parcel of any endeavour concerned with the exigencies of analysis and the eschewal of reductionism. However, they should not stand in the way of providing pointers to the multiplicity, breadth and diversity of popular fiction as it is caught for a moment in an inquisitive gaze. This is doubly imperative when we stop to consider, as we indicated above, the way in which people's lives

are so often dominated by the postponement of semiotic resources, by the short-circuiting of meaning which enables everyday existence to continue in a manageable fashion.

What is the American thriller in the 1970s?

So far we have said that the thriller genre is a broad entity but we have not mentioned the long-term factors which might be involved in shaping it as a textual phenomenon. As this is a question to do with the writing of literary history, the forging of generic canons and the neglect of historical audiences, the proper place for such a discussion is Chapter 1.

However, we can say something now about the body of texts which are the topic of this book. In order to deal with the questions of past generic output I have taken a case study from a given period. Furthermore, I have done this in an almost wholly arbitrary way. One reason for this is to avoid prejudging a period retrospectively and in a way which is overly instrumental. For example, one might make a judgement about the exact periodization of student activism in the United States, taking this sequence of years as the focus of study and subsequently force fictional texts to fit the identified themes.

Another reason is that general historical analyses of the kind carried out in this book are not equipped to deal with highly specific questions such as whether audiences read Victor Marchetti's *The Rope Dancer* (1974) differently if they read it without knowledge of his subsequent non-fiction espionage exposé written with John Marks, *The CIA and the Cult of Intelligence* (1975), or whether they read both, or either, after the events of Watergate were set in train. Bluntly, the ethnographic resources do not exist to make such an analysis possible.

A further, less academic reason for choosing this period in general is personal: as will I hope be clear from what follows, I am enthusiastic about a great many of the thrillers which are to be discussed.

Quite simply, then, the focus of this book consists of thriller texts from different media which arrived in the public sphere between 1970 and 1980. Some of these are discussed in some detail in the following chapters: non-fiction thrillers, hard-boiled texts, crime narratives, police stories, 'black' thrillers, paranoid narratives and revenge sagas. But once again, we should remember the number of texts which space restraints dictate that we cannot discuss. These include subgenres such as espionage narratives, 'adventures', economic thrillers, disaster thrillers, serial killer sagas, soft-boiled private detective fiction,

legal thrillers, capers, medical thrillers, texts featuring Bond-style secret agents/super spies, heist narratives and martial arts films, as well as various other miscellaneous texts that are even harder to categorise.

What stands out most about a case study of *American* thrillers in this period, however, is the existence of so many discourses in contemporary public life which attest to the genre's currency. If the ample phenomenon which Palmer identifies as pivotal to the thriller, the fear of conspiracy, is considered in relation to American social and political life, it is clear that there are rich pickings to be had. In classic studies, Bell (1964), Hofstadter (1964) and Davis (1971) have demonstrated that conspiracy fears have been at the hub of the American political landscape and that modernity has only served to heighten such fears (see also Chapter 7 below). In the 1970s, a set of historical circumstances transpired whereby articulations of such fears were hard to avoid

Many important political events took place in the early 1970s. The Strategic Arms Limitation talks (SALT 1) were concluded in Moscow in 1972. In the same year Nixon made a presidential trip to China for a whole week, the longest such visit ever made by an American president. In 1973 the CIA destabilized the government of Allende in Chile, leading directly to an extreme right-wing coup, while in the same year Secretary of State Kissinger became inextricably entangled in the crisis in the Middle East. One epiphenomenon of this latter drama was the subsequent fuel crisis which exacerbated the already high levels of unemployment and inflation in the United States. It should also be mentioned that 1973 was the year that Vice-President Spiro Agnew resigned over tax indiscretions similar to the president's own. And woven intricately into the fabric of all these events were the circumstances of the last years of the Vietnam War and the scandal of Watergate.

The 1970s were a time when the material of thrillers – conspiracy, espionage, secrecy, crime and so forth – was a prominent part of other discourses in the social formation in America. Such material came little by little onto the political stage. Moreover, this was a time when public opinion – where it could be gauged – changed *gradually* in response to an accumulation of events, rather than suddenly in relation to a single event. The early 1970s in America was peculiar in that the mechanism of this accumulation became manifest. In a very specific way, the role of certain discourses came to be regarded by the public as crucial where previously they had been taken for granted. And, as history does not reach a conclusion with certain key events, there were constant socio-political problems that were seen to be unresolved.

Vietnam, conspiracy and deception in the making of Watergate as an event

On 18 June 1972, the *New York Times* carried the following report in one of its inside pages:

> Five men said to have been carrying cameras, electronic surveillance equipment and burglary tools, were arrested shortly after 2 A. M. today after a floor-by-floor search that led to the executive quarters of the National Democratic Committee here [the report came from Washington]. The suspects were charged with second-degree burglary.

The event under description was the burglary of the Watergate building, an event whose significance triggered a chain of circumstances which would eventually lead to impeachment proceedings in Congress, followed by the first resignation of an American president. Yet the small-scale misdemeanour described here was the tip of a colossal iceberg of deception and executive corruption.

As was to become clear over a period of years, the break-in at the Watergate was just a small part of a long-running government policy of secrecy which had accompanied the Vietnam War, a policy that was continued, and soon visibly extended, into domestic politics. When such policies became public knowledge it was inevitable that questions would be asked not just about the legitimacy but also about the reasons for such measures. Initial revelations of duplicity entailed that further revelations could be made and that recent political history would therefore need to be reassessed. This, at its lowest level, seems to be the logic of Watergate. Underpinning it was what Arthur Schlesinger (1968) called a 'crisis of confidence' associated with the rapidly growing public unease over the policies pursued in the war, compounded and exacerbated by the widespread secrecy and deception that accompanied them (see also Harward 1974).

A major condensation point for popular mistrust in the years before the Watergate affair was the crisis over the 'Pentagon Papers'. In June 1967, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara set up the 'Vietnam History Task Force', a group of historians, political analysts and military officials in the Pentagon who were to produce a major study of the history of American involvement in Vietnam. Almost four years to the day, and about two and a half years after its completion, this history, known as 'The Pentagon Papers', was leaked to, and subsequently published in, the *New York Times*.

Although the Papers were an historical overview of past policy, they were considered by the Nixon administration to be secret documents. As a result, when they were passed on to the press by Daniel Ellsberg, a Pentagon employee, the White House had considerable misgivings.[1] The official reassessment of the war that the Pentagon Papers embodied went hand in hand with the government's high profile attempts to prevent the Papers' publication (following a legal battle over their initial publication in the *New York Times* they eventually appeared in the *Washington Post*: Ungar 1989, pp. 148ff. As McQuaid (1989, pp. 106–7) shows, Nixon's initial proposals for ending the war were a variation on established Democratic precedents; covertly, however, he not only authorized forays into, and the bombing of, Cambodia but also threatened Hanoi with the tactical use of nuclear weapons (cf. Ellsberg 1974, pp. 68–69).

The pattern of revelations which characterized the American domestic crisis wrought by Vietnam was to be reprised in the Watergate affair, although this time the narrativity of events was, if anything, more visible. The overwhelming characteristic of the affair is one that it shares with thrillers: an irruption into 'normality' which constitutes 'conspiracy' (Palmer 1978, p. 87). However, the kind of conspiracy that Watergate represents renders the theory of conspiracy as an immutable textual structure untenable. One victim of the Nixon policy on secrecy, the correspondent Daniel Schorr, asserts that what was unique to the conspiratorial ideology that informed actions in the period was 'the word *enemy* as used by the Nixon administration' (Schorr 1974, pp. 81–2). Here was a usage quite different from that which exists putatively in the public interest during times of war: in this era it was employed to describe large numbers of the domestic population.

Another factor in the public perception of conspiracy was the *accumulation* of lies and deception. It can be convincingly argued that the continued lying by White House staff only increased public suspicion (see Barber 1977, p. 459; Ehrlichman 1982, p. 303) and, like a ready-made narrative, successive items of information promised more and more. When former presidential appointments secretary Alexander Butterfield revealed at the Senate Watergate hearings that Nixon had taped all his White House conversations, the press capitalized on all the issues that arose from it (see *Washington Post*, 17 July 1973, pp. A16–20; *Time*, 30 July and 20 August 1973). For Senator Robert Byrd the revelation was 'one more shovelful on the dungheap' (*Newsweek*, 30 July 1973, p. 13), a view reflected by the *Washington Post* editorial in its warning that witholding of the tapes indicated 'that the evidence does not in fact

substantiate [President Nixon's] case', that is to say, it seemed to indicate Nixon's role in ordering the burglary and the covert campaign against the Democrats (17 July 1973, p. 17).

When the tape transcripts were finally released at the end of April 1974 and published in the major newspapers and in book form, there were general misgivings over the deletions that had been made during their preparation for the public. The crucial tape of a Nixon–Haldeman[2] conversation from 23 June 1972 was a notable absence from the released transcripts, and later became known by Watergate chroniclers as the 'smoking gun'. The tape, which proved Nixon had knowledge of the post-burglary cover-up from the outset, was eventually released on 5 August 1974, three days before his resignation and nine days after impeachment proceedings had officially started (see Kissinger 1982, p. 1198; Woodward and Bernstein, 1977, pp. 398ff.; Jaworski 1977, pp. 250ff.). If the release of the 23 June tape led to the reassessment of the previous release of the *edited* transcripts, like all the other revelations it also demanded a thorough reassessment of past policies publicly held by the administration.

As fate would have it, on the day that aide Butterfield's revelation of the routine taping of White House conversations was reported, it was also officially announced that Cambodia had been secretly bombed by the US on a massive scale since 1969. The *New York Times* actually broke the story a few days before the official announcement (having carried a story in May 1969 which intimated that heavy bombing of neutral Cambodia was indeed taking place).[3] Now the story was eclipsed in most newspapers by the revelations about the tapes. *Newsweek*, for example, in its first issue after Butterfield's revelations did not even address itself to the Cambodian bombing story. This was a busy time in the coverage of the conspiracy, not only with the news of the tapes but also with former Attorney-General Mitchell's testimony to the hearings throughout July. In spite of the fact that the bombing story was outweighed by the tapes and it concerned a war now thought to be over, it was of no small importance in the overall assessment of the Nixonian conspiracy. The tenor of such assessments was based on their conpiratorial character and their affront to the people (see, for example, Mankiewicz 1973, p. 139). More directly, of course, in his crime against the Cambodian people, Nixon was also fooling Congress, disdaining the American public and acting unconstitutionally.

It was easy to see how covert government acts escalated further secret measures. Daniel Ellsberg enunciated the links between foreign policy, secrecy, surveillance and personal liberties when he described the way in

which Hersh's leaked 1969 story of the Cambodian invasion resulted directly in Henry Kissinger's request for 17 wiretaps (1974, p. 69), one more demonstration that a 'home front' was considered to exist by the administration.[4] The point to be made about the secret bombing in terms of the logic of conspiracy is that it was an issue that did not go away. In fact it returned to the grand arena of the debate through the statements of those Congressmen that called for impeachment in 1974, couched in forthright terms to do with law and professional ethics (see, especially, Drinan 1974, p. 73). Before too long, the secret bombing became part of a catalogue of 'crimes' committed by Richard Nixon (White 1975, pp. 394–7).

The fear of conspiracy, then, has its own specificities and points of investment for each period of history. In the 1970s the 'irruption' into an ordered world is more of a process of accumulated revelations over a number of years. In one sense, it is reasonably clear that public opinion, on the whole, regarded the corrupt shenanigans as part and parcel of the alien world of 'Politics' (see below). In another sense, the drama of government corruption was played out in a public sphere, through the media, and the theme of that drama was that many of those in power were no longer fit to govern. In addition, the new high profile for the tactics of deception emphasized their targeting of the individual. It was not necessarily the case that the bulk of the population felt that it was under threat of investigation nor that it immediately felt the effects of government policies in a direct way. But contemporary accounts of government activities – and thrillers – often stress the dimension of individual covert activities against individuals rather than political subversion in the abstract.

As early as 1970 *Newsweek* reported the discovery of a massive covert army surveillance operation focussed on 'political activists' (4 May 1970, p. 35); similarly, it became known in Washington at a later date that Nixon had compiled his own 'Enemies list' of 'leftist' organizations that he intended to move against under the guise of the IRS (Dobrovir et al. 1974, pp. 23–7). A significant proportion of the population were at risk from surveillance operators or could at least be perceived to be so (Westin 1967). Accounts of government-inspired conspiracies could also utilize the very facts of plots against individuals to inform their rhetoric. At a conference of anti-Nixon Watergate protagonists held in Delaware in 1973, many speakers assessed the whole period in terms of the rights of the individual and in terms of both American political tradition and the constitution (see Harward 1974). Unsurprisingly, one of the conference's main concerns was the First Amendment.

The thriller and discourses of duplicity in the 1970s

Discourses to do with conspiracy were remarkably prevalent in 1970s America, even if it is equally true that the vast majority of individual citizens were not necessarily embroiled in nefarious political plots. It is worth remembering, then, that our purposes in this account of some of the themes of the Watergate affair are certainly not part of an attempt to get at a 'final truth' about the relevant events, even if such a goal would be possible to attain. Nor do we intend to capture a particular kind of Zeitgeist, as is so often attempted by many kinds of history. More pointedly, we hope to demonstrate not so much 'what happened' during the period but to give a sense of 'what was commonly being said in public' in this time.

Almost uniquely, the Watergate affair represents a moment when the press played a central role and where the media can be said to have had an 'effect', if not in the direct shaping of public views at least in the provision of more and more evidence of duplicity for the public to utilize in its own construction of opinion. Probably more than at any other time in American politics, investigative reporting became crucial to the process of assessing the credentials of a president and his administration. In fact, one can go further and argue that, in this period, the press constituted a terrain where a struggle for hegemony over the rhetoric of American democracy was played out. Hentoff refers to the summing up by the judge in the Watergate trial:

> Justice Hugo Black emphasized that through the First Amendment, 'The press was protected so that it could bare the secrets of government and inform the people. Only a free and unrestrained press can effectively oppose deception in government.'
>
> (1973, p. 232)

Ungar (1989, pp. 306–7) concurs with this, and produces figures to suggest that it was precisely the First Amendment that was at issue in the Pentagon Papers case rather than matters of cash or circulation.

From the point of view of the media, the very notion of a free press and broadcasting system, enshrined in the Constitution, was under threat during Watergate and the Pentagon Papers affair. This is not to say that the importance of capital did not play a part in the media's *raison d'être*; however, at this time, the short-term ideological configuration which characterized American political events thrust the First Amendment into the foreground of hegemonic struggle. Clearly, the Nixon administration feared the media and targeted individual journalists such as Jack