

NOTES ON THE NATURE OF CONSPIRACY

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“For there either was some Tristero beyond the appearance of the legacy America, or there was just America and if there was just America then it seemed the only way she could continue, and manage to be at all relevant to it, was as an alien, unfurrowed, assumed full circle into some paranoia.” Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*

POLITICAL THEOLOGY

Conspiracy theories are an old phenomenon, but a modern term, coined in Karl Popper’s book “*Open Society and Its Enemies*” from 1945. What nowadays is called a conspiracy theory chiefly applies, since the publication of the Rosicrucian manifesto “*Fama Fraternalitatis*” in the early 17th century, to secret societies like the Rosicrucians, Freemasons and Illuminati, since the 19th century in to whole parts of the population like Jews, nowadays also to Muslims or, reciprocally in political Islam, to Christians. Religion is a conspiracy in the most literal sense of the word, a gathering and fabrication of spirits, or ghosts. Conspiracy theories thus target the gray areas between religion and politics, belief and power.

Their ground assumption is the existence of esoteric as opposed to exoteric politics just as in esoteric versus exoteric religion; in other words, that there is a hidden politics underneath or opposed to publicly visible politics, or – particularly in antisemitic conspiracy theories – that there is esoteric politics in exoteric and esoteric religion. Conspiracy theories are thus prime examples of political theology as defined by Popper’s adversary Carl Schmitt. They are reverse-engineered political theology that do not merely describe, but practically apply the concepts of the esoteric and the exoteric much like American neo-conservatism applies Leo Strauss’ assumption of an esoteric truth in political philosophy.

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If religion is a conspiracy, then theology is conspiracy theory and vice versa, conspiracy theories are theologies that have shifted from cultural explanations of nature to cultural explanations of culture; human explanations of how mankind works, as opposed to human (but disguised as divine) explanation of how divine power works. Modern conspiracy theories, in other words, are the oxymoron of secular belief systems.

SEMIOTICS

These theologies are, above all, interpretations of signs: In Western religions, interpretations of nature as symbolic, as a divine sign that emanated from the divine word. In modern conspiracy theories, it is the attribution of signs – words, images, sound bites as recorded primarily by mass media – to one coherence and all-comprehensive meaning, connecting signs of diverse origins against a common sense that considers them unrelated. As abundant webs of interrelated signs, where everything corresponds to everything, and every detail has a higher meaning, conspiracy theories are hyper-semioses and what Umberto Eco calls “overinterpretation”; in his novel “The Pendulum of Foucault”, he writes, aside from its pulp fiction, precisely such a semiotics of conspiracy theories as hybrids of interpretation and political theology.

Conversely, Christian and Jewish theology have a strong element of semiotic paranoia since they trace every material phenomenon to the creation through the word of god. Pop cultural conspiracy theories like in Robert Anton Wilson’s “Illuminatus” could be called semiotic plays with political theology which ultimately reverted to proper political theology once they were taken, for example by 1980s German computer hacker Karl Koch, for face value and a Straussian esoteric revelation of the true machinations of world power. – In hacker culture, paranoia of political world conspiracies steered by Illuminati or Freemasons still continues to exist.

PARANOIA

“Siehst Du den lichten Streif da über das Gras hin, wo die Schwämme so nachwachsen? Da rollt abends der Kopf. Es hob ihn einmal einer auf, er meint’, es wär ein Igel: drei Tag und drei Nächte, er lag auf den Hobelspänen. - Leise: Andres, das waren die Freimaurer! Ich hab’s, die Freimaurer!” (Georg Büchner, Woyzeck, 1837)

To make sense of anything and everything is a narcissistic proposition insofar it traces all signs back to one entity, and one conspiracy; this is why conspiracy theories are either monotheistic in their structure, or at least based on systematic theology. In psychoanalytic terms, they are paranoid semiotics, with paranoia being a form of irrationality that is perfectly if not overly rational: irrationality relying on rational methods of drawing seemingly logical, coherent and persuasive conclusions from observations and facts, or rationalization that becomes irrational because it doesn't accept irrationality, and contingency. On the level of rhetoric, this often entails inclusions of seemingly unrelated observations while filtering and keeping only those that fit a preconceived theory.

SUBLIME

Far from being merely a clinical psychosis, paranoia is the open modus operandi of whole industries: "Only the Paranoid Survive", for example, is the title of the autobiography by the co-founder and long-term CEO of the Intel corporation, Andrew Grove. Likewise, IBM and Microsoft are famous for their paranoid marketing strategy of spreading "FUD", or "fear, uncertainty and doubt" about competing products and companies, the emotions and sentiments that conversely complement semiotic over-rationalization of conspiracy plots. They describe the aesthetic dimension of conspiracy theories, in the literal meaning of aisthesis as perception, sentiments and subjective judgement.

Since the Latin rhetoric of Pseudo-Longinus and the 18th century aesthetic theory of Edmund Burke, the sublime is the aesthetic register of fear, uncertainty and doubt. Longinus, Burke, later Immanuel Kant and romanticist artists like Caspar David Friedrich and William Turner identify the sublime with forces of nature: storms, lightning, mountain ranges and canyons, dark woods. In the 19th century, gothic novels turn the horrors of nature into human-made horrors of culture, a tradition continued up to *The Name of the Rose* and *The Da Vinci Code* with their combinations of the gothic tale with murder plots and political conspiracy. It might not seem coincidental that the first large-scale conspiracy theories, such as the antisemitic "Protocols of the Elders of Zion", have appeared since the 19th century, too, using the sublime as the trope of an aesthetic politics: infinite, branching out, threatening, overwhelming.

In his book “The Postmodern Condition” from 1979, Jean-François Lyotard identifies a “postmodern sublime” based on subjective experiences, and a human condition, of contingency. The conspiracy theory novels of Thomas Pynchon, Robert Anton Wilson, Umberto Eco and Dan Brown do not only exemplify a “postmodern” permeability of popular and high culture, but also – especially in Wilson’s hacker cultural perception – the thin line of paranoia, between reflecting and submitting to contingency.

UNDERGROUND POLITICS

From Latin rhetoric to dark romanticism and abstract expressionist painting, the sublime has been generally identified as anti-beautiful, anti-classicist and therefore anti-mainstream. Gothic still exists as a subculture today. Conspiracy theories, with their paranoid sublime, likewise are a counter-cultural phenomenon, underground wherever they contradict official history and construct alternative realities. Disrupting common-sense truth, they show how things can be interpreted radically differently, amounting in the best cases to practical epistemological critique. For these reasons, conspiracy theories have been tactically employed in subcultures, both analytically, as readings, and synthetically, as fabrications, such as the collective identity and media phantom Luther Blissett. At the same time, it exemplifies a translation of Pynchon’s, Wilson’s, Eco’s and (perhaps) Brown’s conspiracy fictions into a social practice, and as a critical reversal of the escalation of fiction into belief: dubbing itself a “conspiracy” first, it ended up with the publication of the historical novel “Q”, thus ultimately containing itself as fiction and putting the lid on any paranoid political theology that otherwise might have grown out of the project.

OVERGROUND POLITICS

The affinity of conspiracy theories and postmodern condition does not exhaust itself in the sublime: while a single conspiracy theories claims an alternative truth, conspiracy theories in their whole state that there is not one, but an infinite number of truths whose rule depends on power and, especially in the case of counter-truths, persuasiveness. Just as Nietzsche stated in his 1873 fragment on “Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense”, truth is rhetorical:

What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms – in short, a sum

of human relations which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are; metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power; coins which have lost their pictures and now matter only as metal, no longer as coins.

While Nietzsche claims to offer an “extra-moral” perspective on truth, it nevertheless contains a morality: That truth, as a rhetorical fabrication, cannot be trusted. Although Nietzsche’s respective claim marks a blind spot in the logic of this statement – similar to the paradox of the Neoist slogan “belief is the enemy” –, it also points out where conspiracy theories become problematic: At the very point where they are trusted, and believed.

Thomas Pynchon’s novel “The Crying of Lot 49” from 1966 tells of an underground, conspiratorial postal system of which, until the end, it is not clear whether it exists in reality or just in the imagination of its main protagonist. The system communicates the message of an alternate reality by its mere existence and mythological history. Its counter-cultural network includes a Neo-Nazi Mike Fallopian and the white supremacist Peter Pinguid Society. At this point, the conspiracy plot is no longer romantic, but reflects gray zones between underground and overground politics; the underground, and what later was romanticized by Deleuze, Guattari and electronic art as a “rhizome”, is no value in itself.

NETWORKS

If conspiracy theories create webs of meanings by considering anything related to anything, they construct networks. The network as such is a structurally paranoid figure of thought, or at least one that invites conspiracy theories. The Internet as the electronic network of networks thus is the perfect embodiment of conspiracy theories, including the popular urban legend that it was designed by the U.S. military to withstand a nuclear strike.

MEDIA THEORY

No other discipline has spun this urban legend more often than media theory. Media theory itself has paranoid tendencies first of all by its

inflation of the term “medium” to the degree that virtually everything ends up being a medium, including senders and receivers, light bulbs and guns, angels and altar bread. If everything is a medium, it is easy to conclude that we are surrounded and permeated by media. And since McLuhan’s assumption that the medium is the message, media theorists believe that the medium is the creator rather than the purveyor of a message, a tool with its own agenda.

Therefore, media theory tends to describe technology not as something cultural and constructed, but as an autonomous agent that has taken over and programs culture, not unlike the science fictions of Blade Runner, Robocop and Terminator. Critical theory thus turns into a belief system that puts technology where gods and demons once used to be. It becomes all the more questionable once it transforms from a heretic provocation against goodie-two-shoes humanities into an institutional doctrine.

One could, admittedly, criticize this critique as paranoid itself. But thinking of “media” as a whole as one big conspiracy might put conspiracy theories to productive critical use.