



Complotto Conspiracy

Se il lavoro dei semiotici sulle teorie del complotto ha uno scopo, non è quello d'indicare, da un punto di vista supposto come neutrale, chi ha ragione e chi ha torto, chi sta cospirando e chi no, chi ha creato una falsa teoria del complotto e chi svela un segreto socialmente pericoloso. Lo scopo della semiotica è, piuttosto, quello d'indicare le condizioni discorsive che favoriscono la proliferazione del pensiero complottista o anti-complottista e, allo stesso tempo, quello di suggerire come riformulare il conflitto in un quadro discorsivo diverso, che non si limiti a creare retorica polemica ma getti le basi per l'azione sociale. Il problema delle teorie del complotto, infatti, da un punto di vista semiotico non risiede nella loro presunta fallacia logica o scientifica, ma nel fatto che esse sono un mezzo per esprimere una preoccupazione sociale che, altrimenti, resterebbe inespressa, vale a dire, l'angoscia verso la crescente decostruzione delle conoscenze nelle nuove arene digitali. Semiotici e altri studiosi sociali dovrebbero pertanto operare non per il ridimensionamento di tali teorie pensate come cospirative, ma per la creazione di uno spazio collettivo in cui la confusione evidente dell'attuale comunicazione digitale possa essere problematizzata, discussa e possibilmente reindirizzata verso soluzioni più convenienti.

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In copertina
Rembrandt (1661-2) *Congiura di Giulio Civile* (Tradimento dei Batavi), olio su tela, 196 cm x 309 cm, Stoccolma, Nationalmuseum.

ISSN 1720-5298-20

euro 35,00

ISBN 978-88-548-9931-5



Complotto / Conspiracy

ARACNE

COMPLOTTO CONSPIRACY

a cura di / edited by
Massimo Leone



LEXIA. RIVISTA DI SEMIOTICA

LEXIA. JOURNAL OF SEMIOTICS

23-24

Lexia

Rivista di semiotica

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Sede legale / Registered Office

CIRCE “Centro Interdipartimentale
di Ricerche sulla Comunicazione”

con sede amministrativa presso

l’Università di Torino

Dipartimento di Filosofia

via Sant’Ottavio, 20

10124 Torino

Info: massimo.leone@unito.it

Registrazione presso il Tribunale di Torino
n. 4 del 26 febbraio 2009

Amministrazione e abbonamenti /

Administration and subscriptions

Aracne editrice int.le S.r.l.

via Quarto Negroni, 15

00072 Ariccia (RM)

info@aracneeditrice.it

Skype Name: aracneeditrice

www.aracneeditrice.it

*La rivista può essere acquistata nella sezione
acquisti del sito www.aracneeditrice.it*

*È vietata la riproduzione, anche parziale, con
qualsiasi mezzo effettuata compresa la fotocopia,
anche a uso interno o didattico, non autorizzata*

I edizione: giugno 2016

ISBN 978-88-548-9931-5

ISSN 1720-5298-20

Stampato per conto della Aracne editrice
int.le S.r.l. nel mese di giugno 2016 presso
la tipografia «System Graphic S.r.l.» 00134
Roma – via di Torre Sant’Anastasia, 61

«Lexia» adotta un sistema di doppio referag-
gio anonimo ed è indicizzata in SCOPUS-
SCIVERSE

*«Lexia» is a double-blind peer-reviewed journal,
indexed in SCOPUS-SCIVERSE*

Lexia. Rivista di semiotica, 23–24
Complotto

Lexia. Journal of Semiotics, 23–24
Conspiracy

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via Quarto Negroni, 15
00072 Ariccia (RM)
(06) 45551463

ISBN 978-88-548-9931-5

*I diritti di traduzione, di memorizzazione elettronica,
di riproduzione e di adattamento anche parziale,
con qualsiasi mezzo, sono riservati per tutti i Paesi.*

*Non sono assolutamente consentite le fotocopie
senza il permesso scritto dell'Editore.*

I edizione: giugno 2016

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Prefazione / Preface

MASSIMO LEONE*

Between 1661 and 1662, Rembrandt¹ painted *The Conspiracy of Claudius Civilis*², depicting a story from Tacitus's³ *Histories*⁴ also known as “the Batavian rebellion” (Fig. 1).

According to the Roman historian, Civilis «collected at one of the sacred groves, ostensibly for a banquet, the chiefs of the nation and the boldest spirits of the lower class [. . .] and bound the whole assembly with barbarous rites and strange forms of oath»⁵. While acknowledging the superior intelligence (for a native) of the Batavian leader, Tacitus skillfully describes the assembly as a treacherous conspiracy: the secrecy of the reunion; the “barbarous” rites; the “strange” forms of oath; etc. In transposing into a painting this verbal imagery of secrecy and deviance, Rembrandt offers one of the first modern instances of visual conspiracy theory: the chromatic tonalities of the canvas transmit the impression of a scene immersed in dim light, horizontally traversed by the luminous line of the massive table on which the “strange” oaths are being uttered. Reddle hues predominate all around, on the wall in the background as well as in the garments of many conjurers, presenting the viewer of the painting with an image that exudes the chromatic promise of blood to be treacherously shed. Figures of conspiracy, then, abound: surly gazes converge toward the symbolical core of the scene, the crossing of blades initiated by Civilis, but all around and at the margins of the scene also cups of

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1. Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn; Leiden, Dutch Republic (now the Netherlands), 15 July 1606 — Amsterdam, Dutch Republic (now the Netherlands), 4 October 1669.

2. Oil on canvas; 196 cm × 309 cm; Stockholm, Nationalmuseum.

3. Publius (o Gaius) Cornelius Tacitus; Gallia Narbonensis (currently South of France), 55–8 — Rome, 117–20.

4. *Historiae*, c. 100–10.

5. 4.14–15; Engl. trans. W.H. Fyfe (1912).



Figure 1. Rembrandt (1661–2) *The Conspiracy of Claudius Civilis*, oil on canvas, 196 cm × 309 cm, Stockholm, Nationalmuseum.

wine are raised, as though to hint at the inevitable intoxication of conspiracy. One figure among all particularly stands out: following Tacitus’s physiognomy, which is meant to parallel the face of Civilis with that of other rebels and enemies of Rome (Sertorius, Hannibal, etc.), Rembrandt directs all the topology of the scene toward the sinister mono-eyed face of the leader, immobile in an expression of poisonous resolution.

Rembrandt’s painting should be visually kept in mind by all those who share a concern (be it scholarly or political, or both) for conspiracy theories. Since the Roman antiquity, and certainly even before, the plans of action of enemy forces have been described and depicted not simply as plain prefiguration of acts, but as treacherous conniving, held in secret and cemented by unknown, barbaric rituals. “Constructing the enemy” often implies, through history, the projection and propaganda of an imaginary in which what is hostile is also dangerously and barbarically secret.

In his visual wisdom, Rembrandt could not overlook the symbolical importance of the detail handed down by Tacitus: the only eye that Civilis opens on the scene of the conspiracy. What does this only eye mean? Certainly, it bestows a certain monstrosity on the face of the Batavian leader, thus contributing to depict him as an alien force in society, as a traitor and as a conjurer. However, the only eye also

underlines that which the visual conspiracy theory sees in the supposed mentality of conspirators: the uni-directionality of their gazes; the fact that, unlike “normal” people in society, they do not look at the whole of reality but select into it a single line, the project that will lead to their triumph and to the consequent disruption of society.

But again, is this mono-eyed character of conspiracies an intrinsic one or is it rather the denigrating feature that an opposite ideology attaches to any collective project likely to engender it? Is the conspiracy in the only eye of Civilis or rather in the only eye that Rembrandt’s painting, and Tacitus’s history before him, lends to the spectators, forcing them to perceive Civilis and his acolytes as a gang of dangerous conspirators?

One of the philosophically most interesting aspects of the area of study tentatively called “conspiracy theories” is that it presents itself as inexorably and paradoxically multi-leveled: there is the supposed conspiracy in history, such as that of Civilis who wants to overthrow the Roman yoke and federates all allied forces around him through binding rituals; there is the supposed visual conspiracy theory, which attributes a pernicious intention to the gathering of enemies, depicting it with monstrous and treacherous features; but there is also the meta-level of the scholar who, by analyzing Tacitus’s historical text or Rembrandt’s visual rendering of it, considers them part of a broader and more encompassing conspiracy, meant at discrediting an enemy faction. However, why not complicating further this superposition, and surmise that scholars too are part of an even broader conspiracy, which surreptitiously aims at seeding doubt in the customary, predominant account of history, a sort of revisionism that relativizes the perspective of the winner and reevaluates, for political purposes, the gaze of the defeated ones, showing that they were not conspirators but “freedom fighters”? Why, for instance, in recounting the history of Italian Risorgimento — the historical process that led to the independence of the current Italian state — Italians do not talk of conspiracy when dealing with “carboneria”, the secret insurgent movements that eventually defeated the Austro-Hungarian domain?

That is one of the main challenges that students of “conspiracy theories” must face: can we look at them with both eyes, and realize that they all share some intrinsic logical features, as the very first creators of the expression “conspiracy theory” (Popper, etc.) believed? Is there an inherently logical fallacy in conspiracy theories? Or, on the contrary,

are we doomed to look at conspiracy with one eye only, as we were the symmetrical counterpart of *Civilis*, forced to see conspiracy or conspiracy theories every time that plans of actions, or the theoretical account of them, does not align with our ideology and desires?

The essays collected in this monographic issue of *Lexia* do not cultivate the wild ambition to solve this riddle once and for all. They rather seek to cast a fresh look at the issue of conspiracy, conspiracy thought, and conspiracy theories, through combining semiotics and other qualitative methods. Whereas the essays take distinct stances as regards the logical sustainability of such or such theories, they all share a common concern in trying to pinpoint the conditions in which conspiratorial thinking proliferates: financial and economic crises entailing major disruptions of the labor market and massive unemployment; the reconfiguration of social and communicative relations through the rapid evolution of unprecedented digital media; the consequent shifting of political models; above all, the radical change of the meaning of social relations, not only those among people but also those among facts: when the socio-semiotic system of ties that binds the elements of reality together and shapes them into a more or less coherent semiosphere starts to disintegrate, the result is often the emerging of a myriad of ideological contrapositions that feed, in their turn, the various levels and meta-levels of conspiratorial thought. On the one hand, anti-system political leaders promote the emergence of a new representation of reality, in which occult conspiratorial forces are finally unmasked; on the other hand, pro-system agencies see a conspiracy in the conspiracy thoughts of their adversary or denigrate them as mere illogical fantasies.

For instance, there seems to be no point of contact between those who believe that the importance of vaccines is artificially inflated by conspiratorial pharmaceutical companies and those who call these theories “conspiracies”, or even accuse them of being part of a political conspiracy aimed at subverting the democratic arena and taking possession of it through heterodox and often violent rhetorical means. Nevertheless, the lack of this point of contact has not a logical but a semiotic nature. It is not through ‘scientifically’ demonstrating that the former are wrong and the latter are right, or vice versa, that this dividing trend in society will disappear. It would be foolish to believe that people disagree and fight with each other because they believe in

discrepant conspiracy theories; on the opposite, one has often the impression that people believe in discrepant conspiracy theories exactly because they want to disagree. They want to somehow vent and also give vent to the tension that underlies society, and that does not find other semiotic frameworks of expression.

Therefore, if the work of semioticians on conspiracy theories has a purpose whatsoever, is not that of indicating, from a supposedly superior vantage point, who is right and who is wrong, who is conspiring and who is not, who is creating a fake conspiracy theory and who is unveiling a dangerous social secret. The purpose of semiotics is, rather, that of indicating the discursive conditions that encourage the proliferation of such conspiratorial or anti-conspiratorial thinking, and simultaneously also the more difficult purpose of suggesting how to reframe conflict in a different discursive framework, one that does not simply create rhetorical conflict but casts the basis for social action. For example, the problem of conspiracy theories on vaccines, from a semiotic point of view, lies not in their supposed logical or scientific fallacy, but in the fact that they are a means to voice a social preoccupation that would, otherwise, remain unexpressed, that is, anguish toward the increasing deconstruction of scientific and also medical knowledge in the new digital arenas. Semioticians and other social scholars should, therefore, operate not for the debunking of such supposed conspiracy theories, but for the creation of a collective space in which the evident confusion of present-day digital scientific communication could be raised as a problem, discussed, and possibly redirected toward more convenient solutions.

As it has been pointed out by art historians, Rembrandt's canvas contains an odd detail. There is one more sword in the painting than Batavians holding them. Rembrandt often introduced such bizarre, visually illogical clue in his paintings (for instance, the double "right hand" in *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp*, 1632) so as to stimulate a meta-reading of them. In this case, interpretation is quite open, but one direction for it could be the following: in depicting a famous conspiracy, and in visually interpreting the historical conspiracy theory of Tacitus, Rembrandt detached himself from it by visually suggesting, through the presence of this extra sword, that conspiracy often contains an element of violence that cannot directly and univocally be attributed to an agent. We see the conspiracy with

the mono-eyed point of view that ideology, the *Histories* of Tacitus, and Rembrandt's political clients lend to the viewer of the canvas; it is a mono-eyed point of view that mirrors the mono-eyed vision of the supposed conspirator *ad infinitum*. And yet, in these reflections of accusations and hostilities, Rembrandt drops a puzzling semiotic clue: what if this contraposition was actually the result of a sword that is there but that nobody holds; a sword that is a symbol of unnamed violence, circulating through society and calling for conspiracies and anti-conspiracies while remaining completely anonymous? Such is, perhaps, the most precious suggestion that, with usual irony, Rembrandt offers for the study of the subject of conspiracy: do not look at who supposedly holds the sword, but concentrate, rather, on the sword that nobody holds, and that nevertheless remains there, in the center of the scene, instigating violence and counter-violence, conspiracies and accusations of conspiracies, divisions and enmities, until someone (a painter, a semiotician) will be lucid enough to ask the fundamental question: "but really, why are we fighting?"

The articles of the collection are divided into three broad sections, "Semiotics of Conspiracy"; "Geographies of Conspiracy", and "Themes of Conspiracy". Most of them were presented at the two symposia that the University of Potsdam (Prof. Eva Kimminich) and the University of Turin (Prof. Massimo Leone) organized respectively in March 2–4, 2015 and June, 9–10, 2015. Our deepest gratitude goes to all those who took part in these events or contributed to their organization. Our moved thoughts go also to Umberto Eco, who accepted to participate in a roundtable at the end of the Turin event, and to give a *lectio magistralis* on conspiracy theories on the occasion of the laurea *ad honorem* that was conferred to him on the same day.

Some other articles were received and selected through an international call for papers. All contributions went through double-blind peer-reviewing and editorial reading.

Both the volume and the symposia benefited from a DAAD grant, in the framework called "Hochschuldialog mit Südeuropa" (2015). We thank the DAAD for such generous support, as well as the administrative staff of the Universities of Potsdam and Turin that so effectively worked for its management.

PARTE I

LA SEMIOTICA DEL COMLOTTO

PART I

THE SEMIOTICS OF CONSPIRACY

Anti-Semitism (and Now Anti-Zionism) as Prototype of Conspiracy Theory

A Theoretical and Textual Approach

UGO VOLLI*

TITOLO ITALIANO: L'antisemitismo (e adesso l'antisionismo) come prototipo di teoria del complotto: un approccio teoretico e testuale

ABSTRACT: This paper is divided in two parts, one theoretical and one textual and historical. The first one analyzes the seminal proposal of a “conspiracy theory of society” made by Karl Popper in 1945 and some dictionary definitions. A general scheme of conspiracy theory is proposed and then developed in semiotic terms, showing that every conspiracy theory is linked to a second conspiracy, that of the “theorist”. In the second part, anti-Semitism is presented as the prototype of this double plot situation, with the help of some Biblical texts: from many centuries ago until now, haters of Jews have used the theory of a potential Jewish conspiracy in order to attempt at eliminating them. Five theses about the link between conspiracism and anti-Semitism are presented in the conclusion.

KEYWORDS: Conspiracy; Anti-Semitism; Conspiracism; Conspiracy Theory; Narrative Program.

1. Theoretical approach

In order to give a useful contribution on this matter, semiotics must carefully distinguish between actual conspiracies and paranoid conspiracy thinking (sometime denominated “conspiracism”), the result of which is often described by the expression “conspiracy theories”

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(albeit somehow inaccurately from a semantic point of view, because there is no actual theoretical dignity in these “theories”). This expression was introduced by Karl Popper in a marginal but important observation in his seminal book *The open society and its enemies* (first published 1945, now 2013):

I shall briefly describe a theory which is widely held but which assumes what I consider the very opposite of the true aim of the social sciences; I call it the “conspiracy theory of society”. It is the view that an explanation of a social phenomenon consists in the discovery of the men or groups who are interested in the occurrence of this phenomenon (sometimes it is a hidden interest which has first to be revealed), and who have planned and conspired to bring it about. This view of the aims of the social sciences arises, of course, from the mistaken theory that, whatever happens in society—especially happenings such as war, unemployment, poverty, shortages, which people as a rule dislike—is the result of direct design by some powerful individuals and groups. This theory is widely held; it is older even than historicism (which, as shown by its primitive theistic form, is a derivative of the conspiracy theory). In its modern forms it is, like modern historicism, and a certain modern attitude towards “natural laws”, a typical result of the secularization of a religious superstition. The belief in the Homeric gods whose conspiracies explain the history of the Trojan War is gone. The gods are abandoned. But their place is filled by powerful men or groups—sinister pressure groups whose wickedness is responsible for all the evils we suffer from—such as the Learned Elders of Zion, or the monopolists, or the capitalists, or the imperialists. I do not wish to imply that conspiracies never happen. On the contrary, they are typical social phenomena. They become important, for example, whenever people who believe in the conspiracy theory get into power. And people who sincerely believe that they know how to make heaven on earth are most likely to adopt the conspiracy theory, and to get involved in a counter-conspiracy against non-existing conspirators. For the only explanation of their failure to produce their heaven is the evil intention of the Devil, who has a vested interest in hell.

Conspiracies are among historical facts, a kind of actually realized or attempted political actions (with more or less success: there are successful conspiracies and failed ones, which happen to be the large majority). In history, of course we often find people secretly plotting in order to harm or kill their enemies, take power, become the boss, gain money they don’t deserve, but also in order to obtain freedom from a foreign power or overthrow a dictator. Think of Brutus & co

against Julius Caesar; of Pazzi family against Lorenzo de' Medici, of Lambert conspiracy against Cromwell etc. There are often "bad", but also "good" conspiracies, as the one attempted by the "White rose", a German secret society which tried to kill Hitler in 1944.

On the contrary "conspiracy theories" are discourse moves used in some communicative situations and consisting in explaining some unpleasant features of reality as the result of a conspiracy; "conspiracism" is the habit to using this kind of communication moves and false explanations.

In order to understand better this distinctions from a semiotic point of view, it is useful to start the analysis with some dictionary definition of the word "conspiracy". Conspiracy is

a) an evil, unlawful, treacherous, or surreptitious plan formulated in secret by two or more persons; plot; b) a combination of persons for a secret, unlawful, or evil purpose (<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/conspiracy>);

c) a secret plan made by two or more people to do something that is harmful or illegal; d) the act of secretly planning to do something that is harmful or illegal (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conspiracy>).

Out of these definitions we can easily obtain some shared semantic features of "conspiracy": it is something

- a) secret, surreptitious;
- b) made by a group;
- c) illegal, evil, treacherous, harmful;
- d) realized or planned not necessarily realized

Some comment is necessary:

- A conspiracy is secret but to whom? Of course not to those taking part in it. If some people "unmask" a plot in front of an audience, as conspiracy theorists always claims to do, the conspiracy is no secret for them nor any more for their audience — but necessarily, before being "discovered", the plot had to be secret: it was something in stealth among us. This idea of an enemy within is a strong beginning for this kind of paranoiac thinking.

- there is a necessary collective dimension of every conspiracy: a single enemy is not enough. So who claims of unmasking a conspiracy is obliged to explain how the group was assembled, what its members had yet in common before enacting the conspiracy. Because the conspiracy is always a minority action, this preliminary character that qualifies the conspirators must be something that make them different from us (the majority, the people): for instance ethnic origin, political position, family, religion etc. This attitude of group profiling easily leads conspiracy theorist to single out minorities as authors of the plots they pretend to unmask.
- The illegality of a conspiracy is established by taking the point of view of those against whom it is directed. Therefore, when one speaks of conspiracy, he is already taking a position: a narrative one (stating who is the hero and who are the enemies) which is the ground for a political standing.
- what matters for conspiracy theorist in attributing to a certain course of actions or to a group the guilt of conspiracy is its project — not only the past actions or these in act in the present, but also those that the alleged conspirators might try in the future, or just as possibility: “they could act so and so”. This displaces the conspiracy in the field of public’s fantasy or fear, beyond the scope of actual actions. There are many examples of historical situations characterized by a popular “big fear”: for instance what happened in the beginning of French Revolution and shortly before, masterfully analyzed by Georges Lefebvre (1932). On the contrary an achieved and successful conspiracy can easily described afterward as “liberation” or “getting rid of criminals” etc.; the failed plots, who could overthrow the power but were not able to do it, are of course described as conspiracies, at least by their enemies. Hence conspiracies are always presented and judged mainly as dangers and chances, not as accomplished actions. This is the reason why this indictment is always very difficult to reject.

For the moment, let consider this frame from an abstract, semiotic point of view: in a narration a conspiracy is a narrative program which is secret from the point of view of the subject/hero and therefore

of the reader; evil and harmful, following the axiology related to the same point of view; made by people who are perceived as a minority group. Let us elaborate this point. We must consider that usually narrations (also third person narrations, if their focalization is internal, in the terms of Genette [1969]) are exposed from the point of view of a hero/subject or from that of the helpers (who consider the hero's narrative program legitimate and good and any resistance to its achievement evil/harmful). This suture to the hero and the consequent positive assessment of his program is a very usual position for the reader, who in the beginning does not know who and how many are the possible resisters or adversaries (the group of opponents), but suspects at all times that someone is plotting to disrupt his hero's action: this somewhat anxious uncertainty is necessary to render the story interesting and the positive solution joyful (for the hero and for the reader).

So it is evident that from a semiotic point of view that a sort of conspiracy theory is a very common or even necessary presupposition in every participatory reading of a story, and more specifically that the role of conspirator is a position regularly attributed by the participant of naive reader (Eco's "first level reader") to the antisubject and of his/her helpers (adversaries of the subject). Narrations are always about conflicts, where we feel placed next and we are led to support the part narratively closer, that one of which we know the moves — usually the hero. Enemies, adversaries, competitors are necessarily mysterious — and evil. What they do against "our hero" is always somehow a conspiracy.

Of course, the axiology and the related conspiracy theory could be easily inverted, just changing the narrative look and choosing another hero. Seen from a distance and without a participatory look, indeed, in a narration we could often easily discern not one but two or more conspiracies: one for every subject or group competing for the value-object. If a subject is looking for a treasure or for a loved person, and others want the same, the subject is a harmful intruder for them, as they are for him/her. If some group is fighting for its freedom, the enemy is an oppressor for them but they are a treacherous rebel for this enemy. In the *Odyssey* we are called on to see (from Odysseus' point of view, strongly backed by Homer) a conspiracy of the Suitors, eager to steal his wife and the kingdom; but (for the Suitors, who are

not backed from the narrator) there is an evil plot of a stranger; they don't know his identity and don't care about his rights, but eventually they see that he tries to harm their good life and social role. Hamlet narrates the conspiracy of Claudius (from the point of view of Hamlet and therefore of Shakespeare — or rather the other way around); but you might be willing uncover Hamlet actions as a plot (from the point of view of Claudius).

In this contest it is very clear that discovering conspiracies (or pretending to unmasking them) is a very good way to support an opposite conspiracy. Or rather one could say that the strategy of characterizing the interests, the narrative project and even the existence of others as an evil conspiracy is a good strategy for letting one's narrative project prevail, at least in the minds and hearts of readers.

In the conspiracy theory there is a double-level semiotic opposition — with a relevant actantial chiasm. At the enunciated level, “they”, the conspirators (a secret and evil group) are the antisubject of “our” legitimate activity. But at the enunciation level, “we”, the unmasking subject (the narrator, the reader, a represented “good” group), are the antisubject of their “evil” activity. One must note here two relevant consequences. This double level is often shown by the fact that there are two conspiracies within the conspiracy theory: the attributed one (the one of the alleged conspirators), and the realized one, by the alleged unmaskers. Their actions have the same critical qualities of every conspiracy: secret, group, use of illegal means etc.

What matters most for me here is a multilayer structure of knowledge and believing, which is generated by the narration and for a conspiracy theorist can take the character of conspiracy. In every narration there are different frames or layers of knowledge, or if we want come back to Eco's (1979) terminology, different possible worlds:

- a) what the characters know and/or believe (or rather: (1a) what we understand they know and/or believe, (1b) what they say to know and believe, (1c) what the author makes us believe they know and belief);
- b) what the author knows or wants about the possible word he or she is narrating;
- c) what the readers come to know and believe in different time of the reading;

- d) what the critical reader (or “second–level reader, in Eco’s terminology) come to know and believe.

There is a complex strategic interplay of these different levels, which can become conspiracy–like. For instance at a certain point Othello knows that Desdemona loves him, but later he believes he knows that she betrayed him (this constituting a conspiracy against him with Cassio and possibly Emilia), and we know that in reality it was Iago who conspired against him and that Desdemona is actually innocent; if we are second–level readers, we can wonder if Shakespeare exploited racial and gender stereotypes in order to mislead us etc. This is obvious in “artificial narratives”. As we saw, according to Claudius, Hamlet is a subversive troublemaker, possibly allied to Fortinbas, conspiring in order to overthrow him. According to Creon, Antigone is a rebel, according to the Trojans Achilles and Odysseus are bloodthirsty invaders, etc.

Of course this kind of analysis could be more elaborated, going on in the path of deconstruction. One could observe that here, with my previous remarks, I put myself (or pretend “naturally” to be) at a third level, meta–unmasking the “unmaskers”. I act (or pretend to act) as a cognitive meta–ant subject. But someone, for instance Umberto Eco (for instance 1979), could counter my statements about Homer and Shakespeare, noting that I am just “using” and not correctly “interpreting” the text. This possible observation could be certainly relevant, already in literature and fiction (“artificial narratives”), at least if the goal of the analysis is understanding those stories, as they were written and loved by generations of readers.

But in in what Eco (1979), following Van Dijk, calls “natural” narratives (i. e. history, journalism, all that refers to the real world and not just to fictional ones)? Here the question is more engaging, because it entails a judgment about our real world, thus a possible political engagement. We have to be careful, because conspiracy theories are popular tools in political struggles, both in positive and negative form, namely qualifying as conspiracy the simple existence of people apparently opposed to the power, or denying that illegal secret political actions are conspiracy.

Often, it is difficult to discern between political action and conspiracy. When Lenin secretly decided with his comrades to take power

(illegally, of course, according to Russian law of that time, and harming the other parties), was it a conspiracy? A Czarist judge would probably have thought this way, and so did “bourgeois” witnesses and historians. The propagandists of the revolutions, including some famous chroniclers as John Reed (1919), argued the opposite. The same could be said more or less for every revolution. And when later Stalin invented and harshly repressed many (alleged) conspiracies (those of Trotzki, Bukharin, Kamenev etc, until the antisemitic alleged “doctor’s plot” [Brent & Naumov 2003]), the majority of European “pregressive” intellectuals (for instance Jean Paul Sartre) took position supporting those conspiracy theories

Conspiracies are usually judged negatively by the public. Therefore the conspirators mostly deny to be engaged in a real, or “bad” conspiracy, trying to justify their conspiratorial behavior by giving reasons against their enemies, attributing them evil, illegality etc. — namely telling people that the victims, not they, are involved in a conspiracy. They were just resisting it. This way, conspiracy often presents itself as reaction against an another (attributed) conspiracy. Ascribing conspiracies to the enemies is often the first step to disqualify and later destroy them. In history, theories of conspiracies are not just gossip or childish play, they are powerful political devices, weapons for civil wars and (actual) conspiracies.

2. The antisemitic prototype

The longest and most popular conspiracy theory in the history of Western (and also Muslim) culture is the anti-semitic one. I will not follow here the complex and substantially unfounded distinctions between antisemitism, anti-Judaism, anti-Zionism, Judeophobia and the various forms of ancient and modern hatred for the Jews, be it religious, political, racial, economic, literary. Nor will I explain why antisemitism is not generically hate of a (nonexistent) “Semitic race”, but only specifically hatred directed against Jews. The discussion of these questions being not possible here, I can only refer to the very large scientific literature about this problem (cf. for instance Ben Sassun 1976, Niremberg 2013). Let’s define here antisemitism simply

as hate of the Jews and the will to destroy them as individual or as a people with its own identity and culture.

Anti-Semitic persecutions were always justified by progressively elaborated theories of a “Jewish conspiracy”, a “Jewish danger”. The real and homicide persecution of the Jews, often organized by different political powers, including the Catholic Church, were justified by attributing to the Jews evil collective actions or projects as the “deicide” of Jesus, the refusal to recognize the truth of Christianity (or Islam or Communism) killing kids for taking their blood, poisoning wells, being “parasites”, “capitalist”, “revolutionary”, trying to rule the world or actually ruling it, etc. Namely in this frame there was a Jewish conspiracy behind all the ills of the world. Antisemitism was presented as the action of unmasking this conspiracy and fighting against it.

Why the Jews? Jews are a small group, often dispersed among another people, but able to maintain its different identity, language, religion, habits. So they are perceived as different and secret. But they are also *among* “us”, indistinguishable from “us”, behaving mostly like “us”, speaking “our” language etc. while keeping different, following a different religion and different habits and laws, eating other foods etc. In the antisemitic discourse they have collective goals that are their, not ours, and therefore must (or just could) be evil. They can become a danger, just because they are different among us, they are they and not us, but they are mixed among us. This idea of the Jewish conspiracy is very old and widespread: analyzing it here is impossible because of its vastity. The series of authors who shared and spread this antisemitic conspiracy theory is very long, from Tacitus to Augustine, from Ambrose to Muhammad, from Erasmus to Luther, from Voltaire to Kant, Wagner, and of course Hitler. So, antisemitism is certainly the oldest conspiracy theory living today, and in some way it is the prototype of all those theories. Of course I am not claiming that there are no conspiracism independent from antisemitism. Popper for instance in his seminal page, that I quoted before, speaks of the conspiracies attributed by Homer to Greek gods. Many other examples are easy to find. But antisemitism is the most detailed and developed conspiracy theory, the most diffused and ancient one. Therefore it became the model of many other similar theories, from the persecution of the Templars, to the witch hunt, down until the political repressions of the

last century. The construction of the figure of the alleged conspirators, the attribution of secret links, the centrality of the charge of perfidy, etc. are very similar. And often among the alleged conspirators some Jew were included, or they were unjustly accused of being Jewish.

It is interesting to consider that there are very early representations in Jewish scriptures of these antisemitic conspiracy theories, beginning in the book of Exodus (which was written, following different scientific opinions, between -X and -VII C.). It is useful to consider these early self-descriptions by the victims of conspiracism, not because they have to be necessarily considered as reliable historical evidence; the historical value of the Bible was discussed for centuries and this is not the place just to sum up this debate. But it is extremely interesting to consider these passages as clues of a real historical experience, expressions in which the victims have kept memory of the persecution they underwent.

The most important instance is found in Exodus 1: 9–14:

And he [the Pharaoh] said unto his people: ‘Behold, the people of the children of Israel are too many and too mighty for us; come, let us deal wisely with them, lest they multiply, and it come to pass, that, when there befalleth us any war, they also join themselves unto our enemies, and fight against us, and get them up out of the land.’[. . .] And the Egyptians made the children of Israel to serve with rigour. And they made their lives bitter with hard service, in mortar and in brick, and in all manner of service in the field; in all their service.

The suspect of a possible future conspiracy serves as a pretext for the actual deadly persecution. We can read also an Egyptian version of the same history, even more conspiracy style, narrated by Flavius Josephus (1926 p. 258–259) quoting the Egyptian priest Manetho (living around 280)

Under the pretext of recording fables and current reports about the Jews, he (Manetho) took the liberty of introducing some incredible tales, wishing to represent us (the Jews) as mixed up with a crowd of Egyptian lepers and others, who for various maladies were condemned, as he asserts, to banishment from the country. Inventing a king named Amenophis, an imaginary person, the date of whose reign he consequently did not venture to fix . . . This king, he states, wishing to be granted . . . a vision of the gods, communicated his desire to his namesake, Amenophis, son of Paapis (Habu), whose wisdom and knowledge of the future were regarded as

marks of divinity. This namesake replied that he would be able to see the gods if he purged the entire country of lepers and other polluted persons.

«Delighted at hearing this, the king collected all the maimed people in Egypt, numbering 80,000, and sent them to work in the stone-quarries on the east of the Nile, segregated from the rest of the Egyptians. They included, he adds, some of the learned priests, who were afflicted with leprosy. Then this wise seer Amenophis was seized with a fear that he would draw down the wrath of the gods on himself and the king if the violence done to these men were detected; and he added a prediction that the polluted people would find certain allies who would become masters of Egypt for thirteen years. He did not venture to tell this himself to the king, but left a complete statement in writing, and then put an end to himself. The king greatly disheartened».

The details of the two narrations are very different, but there are some very important similar elements. What is interesting for us in this first account of the antisemitic conspiracy theory, is the idea of people living “among us”, but different, becoming powerful and well connected who could become dangerous and therefore must be eliminated before they get the opportunity of attacking. The attribution of a conspiracy is the premise for an attempted genocide.

The same frame present itself in the book of Esther (written in IV or III C. BCE). Let us consider the story in its steps (<http://www.bible-history.com/oldtestament/bookofesther.html>):

- a) Queen Vashti, the wife of the Persian ruler Ahasuerus, is deposed for her refusal to appear before the guests of the king (Esther 1);
- b) The choice of Esther as Queen, after an involved process of selection (Esther 2:1–20);
- c) Mordecai discovers a plot against the life of the king (Esther 2:21–23);
- d) Haman’s plot to destroy the Jews (Esther 3–4). Because of the refusal of Mordecai to pay homage to Haman, a man “above all the princes” in the Persian government, the latter influenced the King to issue a decree calling for the extermination of the Jews. Mordecai persuaded Esther to intervene, at the risk of her life, on the Jews’ behalf;
- e) Esther’s successful petition (Esther 5–8:2). Finding favor with

Ahasuerus, Esther revealed the heinous plot of Haman. The result was that Haman was hanged and Mordecai received his long-deserved honor for having saved the king's life;

- f) The deliverance of the Jews (Esther 8:3–9:16). Although the decree of the King concerning the Jews could not be rescinded, it was counteracted by the issuing of another decree which allowed the Jews to defend themselves;
- g) The Feast of Purim (Esther 9:17–32). To celebrate their deliverance, the Jews instituted the feast of Purim. This feast is still observed and is a time of great joy among Jews;
- h) A description of Mordecai's greatness (Esther 10): <http://www.bible-history.com/oldtestament/bookofesther.html>.

There is plot and counterplot and counter-counterplot . . . But only the attempt to exterminate the Jews is ideologically motivated, this way (Esther 3):

8. And Haman said unto king Ahasuerus: There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of thy kingdom; and their laws are diverse from those of every people; neither keep they the king's laws; therefore it profiteth not the king to suffer them. 9. If it please the king, let it be written that they be destroyed.

This is the Hebrew text. It is worth considering the longer Septuaginta version (3:13b-13g), which is clearer

Whereas I reigned over many nations, and had brought all the world under my dominion, I was not willing to abuse the greatness of my power, but to govern my subjects with clemency and lenity,[. . .]. But when I asked my counsellors how this might be accomplished, one [. . .], Aman by name, Told me that there was a people scattered through the whole world, which used new laws, and acted against the customs of all nations, despised the commandments of kings, and violated by their opposition the concord of all nations. Wherefore having learned this, and seeing one nation in opposition to all mankind using perverse laws, and going against our commandments, and disturbing the peace and concord of the provinces subject to us, We have commanded that all whom Aman shall mark out,[. . .] shall be utterly destroyed by their enemies, with their wives and children, and that none shall have pity on them. [. . .] That these wicked men going down to hell in one day, may restore to our empire the peace which they had disturbed.

The point is the same of the Exodus. Those to be exterminated are attributed an evil plot against the kingdom and the whole mankind. The conspiracy presents itself as a counter-conspiracy. But, for one reason or the other, it fails and what prevails is the counter-counter-conspiracy led by Mordechai (or in the Exodus by Moshe), which in fact gives freedom and life to the oppressed.

But why do they have to be exterminated? Because they are “a people scattered through the whole world, which used new laws, and acted against the customs of all nations, despised the commandments of kings, and violated by their opposition the concord of all nations” (Esther). Because they are “too many and too mighty for us” (Exodus). Well, not as many and as powerful as “we” are, but enough to become a possible antisubject in a possible future story. The same pattern will be repeated many times in history, up to Hitler and to the current charges against “the Jewish finance” and Israel. But then there is another charge. In a mythical past they refused to recognize our laws, our Prophet, our Messiah, our Party. From a semiotic point of view, we should remark that in these conspiracy theories, the first step is a cognitive modality: some people is singled out because they “refuse to recognize the Truth” (what “we” know as the Truth) and therefore they should be blind or evil. The second step is a practical one: being insensible to the Truth they could perform the Evil, they are dangerous and wicked. But before that there is a negative identity (“not to be”): they are dangerous because they refuse (or even cannot, for “racial” reasons, as it was decided in Christian Spain after the ouster of the Jew, well before the Nazi Germany) to deny themselves in order to become part of “us”, tu let “us” assimilate them. Being other, the Other, is their sin.

Conspiracy theories are cumulative, they persist in time and get ever more detailed.

This happened for antisemitism, which went from the Egyptians to the Romans and then on to the Fathers of the Church and to the general Christian society, until the Shoah. In the beginning it is very simple: 1. Jews are powerful, 2. they follow their laws, not ours 3. therefore they could be dangerous 4. They must be destroyed.

Progressively this kind of thoughts become more complex. For instance there are “figures” (in the semiotic sense) of the Jews that are used for supporting the antisemitic theory of conspiracy, as the spider,

the puppet, the octopus, the multitude of mouths, the leash — and also the Star of David, used a sign of a secret identity or the strange story about the “wandering” of Jews as a punishment for their “lack of faith”. They are attributed negative physical characteristics, such as the stink and a long nose, or moral ones like lust and insensitivity. There are typical allegations against the Jews which express antisemitism, such as the blood libel, that Jews kill the children to use their blood to knead the unleavened bread they use for Easter, poison wells, spread diseases, starve the people, practice usury.

All of these items were developed in some precise time of time, most of them in Christian medieval and modern Europe. But they are yet in use today, albeit mostly against the State of Israel (“the Jew of nations”). To give just one example, the blood libel has become the false accusation for Israel to collect the organs of the dead bodies of Arabs killed in defense operations to make trade of them.

It is useful quoting here the European “working definition of Anti-Semitism (<http://www.antisem.eu/projects/eumc-working-definition-of-antisemitism/>):

Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities.

In addition, such manifestations could also target the state of Israel, conceived as a Jewish collectivity. Antisemitism frequently charges Jews with conspiring to harm humanity, and it is often used to blame Jews for “why things go wrong”. It is expressed in speech, writing, visual forms and action, and employs sinister stereotypes and negative character traits.

Contemporary examples of antisemitism in public life, the media, schools, the workplace, and in the religious sphere could, taking into account the overall context, include, but are not limited to:

Calling for, aiding, or justifying the killing or harming of Jews in the name of a radical ideology or an extremist view of religion.

Making mendacious, dehumanizing, demonizing, or stereotypical allegations about Jews as such or the power of Jews as collective — such as, especially but not exclusively, the myth about a world Jewish conspiracy or of Jews controlling the media, economy, government or other societal institutions.

Accusing Jews as a people of being responsible for real or imagined wrongdoing committed by a single Jewish person or group, or even for acts committed by non-Jews.

Denying the fact, scope, mechanisms (e.g. gas chambers) or intentionality of the genocide of the Jewish people at the hands of National Socialist Germany and its supporters and accomplices during World War II (the Holocaust).

Accusing the Jews as a people, or Israel as a state, of inventing or exaggerating the Holocaust.

Accusing Jewish citizens of being more loyal to Israel, or to the alleged priorities of Jews worldwide, than to the interests of their own nations.

Examples of the ways in which antisemitism manifests itself with regard to the State of Israel taking into account the overall context could include:

Denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination, e.g., by claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavor.

Applying double standards by requiring of it a behavior not expected or demanded of any other democratic nation.

Using the symbols and images associated with classic antisemitism (e.g., claims of Jews killing Jesus or blood libel) to characterize Israel or Israelis.

Drawing comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis.

Holding Jews collectively responsible for actions of the state of Israel.

Antisemitism is thus also today the prototypical conspiracy theory. I would like to conclude this paper by proposing four thesis about this point:

- a) Every form of antisemitism (including Christian and Islamic anti-Judaism, anti-Zionism etc.) includes a form of conspiracy theory;
- b) Antisemitism is the most ancient and constant form of conspiracy theory and therefore constitutes its prototype;
- c) Antisemitism did not end with the World War II, it continues and flourishes today;
- d) Conspiracy theories aren't just another form of folk tale, they are a form of communication war. The same is true for antisemitism. There is someone who knowingly spreads it — even if they sincerely believe in it;
- e) The figures of “classical” antisemitism are used now, in updated but well recognizable form, in order to isolating, blaming, demonizing the State of Israel.

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About Grounding, Courting and Truthifying

Conspiratorial Fragments and Patterns of Social Construction of Reality in Rhetoric, Media and Images

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TITOLO ITALIANO: Fondazione, seduzione e processi di veridizione. Frammenti conspirativi e modelli della costruzione sociale della realtà nella retorica, nei media e nell'immagine

ABSTRACT: The article considers the meaning of conspiracy as communicative phenomenon interpreting or (re)constructing social realities. Due to a bundle of various interacting societal and technological developments, conspiracy has educed far-reaching effects, gaining a momentum that can be hardly controlled, particularly on the internet. In order to carve out a model visualizing the mechanisms of reinterpretation and the strategies facilitating the implementation of conspiratorial thinking into the process of reality construction itself, the article analyzes one of a range of conspirative websites (*Political Incorrect News*), which claims to provide 'true information'. On the one hand, in the framework of sociocultural constructivism, the article takes into consideration the socio-political conditions for the development of conspiratorial constructions and the possibilities of their diffusion in the media. On the other hand, from the semiotic point of view, the adoption of an enlarged model of semiosphere underlines the interpretative patterns of conspiracy and their connectivity to existing constructions of social reality so as to deliver insights concerning the pre-orientation of the semiosis in conspiratorial thinking.

KEYWORDS: Socio-Semiotics; Semiosphere; Sociocultural Constructivism; Modularization of Reality Construction; Mental Meeting.

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1. Prolegomena

As background for the rising of conspiratorial interpreting, two developments have to be taken into consideration. On the one hand, the increasing individualization of our society, by which the interpretation authority on official interpretation content has been more and more dissolved. On the other hand, the development of new communication techniques has initiated a profound societal change with regard to how information is handled. Mistrust in official authorities, as well as in official information has resulted in the claim that everyone holds views of current events and of course also in the claim that these views are the only true ones. Ever since the First Persian Gulf War, but especially since the beginning of the European Financial Crisis, an increase in individual interpretation attempts can be noticed. It is the result of a growing skepticism about politics among citizens and their doubting the truth content of official information. This explains the rising production of constructions of social realities and reality excerpts with a conspiratorial nucleus. Thus conspiratorial interpreting in time has become a part of the everyday self-evident handling of information for whose part it has gained popularity. In consequence, we are confronted with a variety of different points of view competing with each other. The construction of reality, which was previously bound to unquestionable aggregation of power, seems to be crumbling in a mosaic of interpretation proposals — those in turn give individuals the impression that they could or would have to construct realities themselves. Therefore, the boom of conspiracy theories (CTs) has particularly to be seen as connected to the increasing information supply in the internet. Countless websites suggest to their visitors that they have finally found the truth and the real causes behind the disturbing developments. At the core, there is thus a competition between interpretation patterns within the semantic field of societal reality construction — a semantic field which is already stretched by the media. Thus we have to focus less on CTs as narrative entities, but on fragments of conspiratorial interpreting, exploiting and interrelating all kind of information and interpretations of information spread by the media.

2. Theoretical approach

According to Umberto Eco (cf. article of Massimo Leone in this volume), the knowledge of our social reality is based on stories, offering interpretation patterns for understanding and acting in everyday life. CTs are also interpretation patterns which refer to events, developments in social reality and to individuals of public life. They are thus to be seen as a component of social reality construction, as has already been pointed out also by the sociology-of-knowledge point of view (cf. Anton/Schetsche 2011 and Anton/Schetsche/Walter 2014), anchored in a constructivist model of culture and society. As a start, we therefore take the model of S. J. Schmidt who considers culture in general as an operating system (Kulturprogramm) for society steering all communicative, interpretative, evaluative and narrative processes, thus the clusters of perception of social realities, social groups, events or developments which always are connected with differentiation and evaluation. (cf. Schmidt 2014: 39–41, 45–67, Schmidt (Viehoff) 2015: 159–167, 193–194) This operating system is providing the semantic categories and the central cognitive concepts for differentiation and interpretation. They offer its members guidelines for evaluating and visualizing the naming of perceptions or differences in advance and with this also for the practices of everyday life. It is therefore about the process of orientation in semantic space which, in a way, creates its own ontology via the prerequisites of its setting and the setting of its prerequisites. This operating system is to be seen as a collective construction kit for reproducing and securing a common world view as well as its fundamentals of behavior. To this end it must be reproduced by the individual. The latter thus has to be conceived as a scene of the production of meaning, from which also deviant applications of the collective construction kit are emanating. (cf. Schmidt (Viehoff) 2015: 166) In semiotic terms this means that semiosis should be seen as a crucial point for the construction of social realities. Within a society having a sophisticated system of media, the constructiveness of the common view of social realities is going hand in hand with a multi-level observation, which causes on the one side the unobservability of the whole cohesion of the construction. On the other side in an individualized society doubting its own interpretive agencies, the individual as intersection point of social systems — and in our case more

precisely of various interpretation patterns — consequently becomes more active in observing and in producing digressive interpretations of social realities. In the case of an exploitation of those digressive interpretations, generally recognized interpretations of social realities can be undermined, so that a decomposition of the common view of social developments can be set in motion.

For the analysis of the social surface of this operating system manifest in cultural rules, rites and laws, illustrated by myths, metaphors and pictures, suitable concepts have already been presented, particularly within discourse analysis, cognitive linguistics and semiotics. The analysis of social paradigms (Foucault (1966) 2012) and key metaphors shows how social discourses and their patterns can influence people's world views by shifting the evaluative categories of the construction of social reality, of the self and the other through linguistic or pictorial means. On a cognitive level Max Black has, within the framework of Filter Theory that is based on synoptic thinking, described the interaction of implication systems in metaphorical transmission (cf. Black 1962, 1983). In pointing out the phenomena of mapping and framing, Lakoff, Johnson and successors (cf. Lakoff, Johnson 2011, cf. Schröder 2012) have alluded to the principle of conceptualization as inherent to the process of thinking and to bodily experience as well. It is in turn connected to the metaphorical transmission processes of hiding and highlighting, used particularly in political discourses (cf. Wehling, Lakoff 2009). Within therapeutic application, reframing has since also been popularized as NLP (Neuro-Linguistic programming), based on the idea that by changing linguistic patterns, the perception of oneself, of the other or of specific situations can be changed (cf. Walker 1996). NLP has often been criticized as pseudo-science, but recently its effects have again become subject of research.

Within Lotman's concept of semiosphere (cf. Lotman 1990) Schmidts' conceptualization of culture as an operating system can be visualized and inspected in a holistic perspective. As a semiotic space, assembling every sign system, used and produced by a society, arranged in various subspheres, which compete with each other by a permanent transfer of their elements, the semiosphere allows the insight in the processes of transfer. It is situated in the spaces of the contact aureoles in between the subspheres, conceived as a sum of bilingual filters of translation (cf. Lotman 1984: 290). Thus like Schmidt Lotman conceives of the system

as the starting point for the creation of any text, as well as world views, images of the self or of the other etc.. Schmidt underlines also the fact, that any programmatic set does only exist in its application, meaning that the individuals' interpretations can have much more impact than is admitted by so called objectivist reflection, hiding the importance of semiosis. In a socio-semiotic setting, which combines Lotman's concept of semiosphere with the structural semantics of Greimas (cf. Persello 2016), the development of CTs and their interaction with regard to the semiosis can be unfolded. Hence, with Greimas' semiotic square the nature of Lotman's translation can be specified as a transformation having a precise ambition: the confrontation of two opposite narratives and their internal programmatic settings in order to appropriate and dominate.

Concerning semiotic research targeted on CTs, the combination and reframing of interpretation clusters is described by the notion of code text (cf. Madisson 2014). The code text is to be understood as a base narrative which consists of two logics: one of a mythological and Manichean kind (the world is in a constant battle between good and evil) and a descriptive one (the conspirators are a highly organized subgroup, striving for world domination, the destruction of their enemies, etc.). Such code texts are then combined with specific contexts. By purposefully employing symbols and metaphors, relations are created between pop-cultural, everyday knowledge set pieces, as well as mythical and modern fiction-fantasy narratives and historical events or scientific interpretation patterns (cf. Madisson 2014; Hubbes 2010).

Since CTs against the background of sociocultural constructivism are to be seen as a shifting of the perception of social realities by telling competing stories, all claiming the absolute truth, these approaches have to be theoretically combined and enlarged for the description of how current interpretations of sociopolitical events are modified to suit the recipient of the message — so that he or she can incorporate them into the propagated conspiratorial interpretation pattern, destined to be itself adapted by the recipient; in short: how the reconstruction of reality construction is organized and simultaneously, with regard to the recipients, how it is masqueraded as their own autonomous act of cognition of reality and detection of truth.

3. Websites for ‘alternative’ information and terminological propositions for the description of the generation and implementation of conspiratorial interpreting

Since around 2005, there has been a boom of websites claiming to provide the pretended true information as well as true interpretations of sociopolitical events. Around 120 of them have been monitored in Germany because of their anti-Islamic statements. Their argumentation strategies have therefore been analyzed within the scope of gauging the danger of their discriminative effects (cf. Schiffer 2009). But these websites are also a gold mine for the creation of CT discourse, as can also be seen with the example of PEGIDA (cf. Dizdarević/Hamdi in this volume).

In the following, one of this websites, PI News (Politically Incorrect News), is analyzed in order to show how the interpretation of facts and events and thus the construction of reality of their website visitors can be influenced. What is demonstrated is the structure of a construct’s reconstruction of social reality excerpts and the strategies of the associated processes of re-interpretation as well as last but not least the strategies which facilitate the implementation of the “PI truths” in the website visitors own work of reality construction. Thus, we have to deal with a fragmentation of reality constructs and a resemantization of reality elements with the purpose to change the construction of their meaning. For this, first of all a common ground is necessary. It is produced by disposing of a selection of reality elements, social subjects, interpretations generally discussed in media and politics, popular pictures and common citations — which we call modules — as well as an equally important set of semantic differentiations for the re-evaluation. With all of this a semantic space is created, into which the website visitors have to be invited. We call this courting. Once entered in the semantic space, a process can be triggered, which we call grounding — meaning that the visitor can look for modules compatible with his own fears, hopes or speculations. Grounding needs therefore a kind of mental meeting point. It is about keywords of public discussions teasing the website visitor. At these meeting points transmission and re-evaluation processes are initiated, because in this moment two constructs are present and the new one has to be truthified. Grounding, courting, re-evaluation and truthifying thus are

the basic stages of the process for the re–construction of constructions of reality. They can concur.

In the following analysis, I focus on the structure of the semantic space of PI News and its meeting points to describe in detail how grounding, courting, re–evaluation and truthifying is happening on this website. This means how semantic differentiations are re–evaluated, how the interpretations of events, images of the self and of the other are foisted on website visitors, and how their reflection is navigated by the keywords, the code text and the pictures. (For the technosemiotic functions on the level of the website’s lay–out, providing the connection points to other websites cf. Erdmann in this volume.)

4. Analysis of the website *Politically Incorrect News*

PI News was launched in 2004 and contributed to by Stefan Herre, Udo Ulfkotte and Willi Schwend, chairman of the Federal Association of Civil Movements (Schiffer 2009: 357). As the most popular right–wing populist and islamophobic hate–speech blog, it has been classified as dangerous for the pluralistic society. In October 2015 the website therefore has been subject to an intentionally provoked DDoS attack (Denial of Service), but instantly reacted with an emergency blog service for its supporters. Therein the breakdown of the website was explicated as a war against the German People and as a sign of a beginning dictatorship:

The federal government has declared war on the German people and has both the media and the asylum lobby as strong allies. The freedom of speech shall be de facto abolished in social networks, such as Facebook, [...] PI — as a “battleship for freedom of speech” — therefore is a thorn in the side of Quran–adherents, their lobbies, the left opinion–fascists, as well as the dictatorship currently in the making, which have all been verbally attacked and realistically depicted by us for many years.¹

As the citation illustrates, all kinds of characteristics ascribed to conspiratorial thinking are observable on this website. It sums up the

1. In January 2016 PI–authors criticize being blocked again because of their ‘unadjusted coverage’ on the incidents during New Years’ Eve 2015 in Cologne (young women had been sexually abused and robbed by refugees).

nucleus of the CT, its keywords and the self-image of the PI-makers. The home page's headline first of all gives an overview to the website visitor: Home, Contact, Guidelines, PI wants you, PI-groups, PI-TV, Make a donation, Publishing on PI and PI in English; these categories are to be seen as the main modules. On the vertical right and left side of the webpage different submodules are available. In the main module Guidelines the website creators do not only explain their motivation and goals, they also provide the keywords of the code text. The first text points out a basic right for information and individual opinion and criticizes the political correctness of the mainstream media, which are responsible for deficient or falsified information. Distancing themselves as an in-group, the creators underline their commitment for the right to information and individual opinion. Therefore, they want to pick up taboo topics in order to contradict the dictate of political correctness. Hence, we can formulate the following statement as the basic code text of the conspiratorial reasoning of this site: the political correctness of mainstream media is the origin of deficient or falsified information. This code text self-empowers PI administrators and supporters to search for allegedly true information. Thereby, a legitimization of a search for the truth, as well as an authority over the truth of the presented alternative interpretation patterns is initiated.

Psychological research on CTs already pointed out that the construction of CTs is raising the self-esteem of conspiracy theorists and creating in- and out-groups (cf. for example Hebenstreit 2010). Additionally, their supporters attest them the competence of screening the only true interpretation of ongoing events. Thus, the dichotomy of false and true follows the dichotomy of bad and evil, providing also the PI visitors with an aura of truth — they become something akin to warriors for the truth and fighters for basic rights. This is illustrated by some other links, such as the one to the German Defence League, which is pretending to fight against all fascist ideologies. This is visualized by the picture of a chevalier with escutcheon and weapons (last access June 2015), currently (January 2016) you can see a chevalier in armament with the angry slogan of the local league of Hildesheim: “Stop the invasion. Otherwise we will do it”.

As another important characteristic of CTs, it has been stated that while at the same time they present a culprit, they provide a release for this act of denomination. We find this strategy of release in the

next paragraph entitled “Constitutional law and human rights” of the Guidelines. It details why the basic rights are in danger: apparently due to multiculturalism eroding our civil rights. Multiculturalism is — as is specified — the acceptance of Islamic ethics and culture which at the same time are generating parallel societies. Those in turn are denying the western basic rights. Therefore, as the authors conclude, the principles of Islamic thought not only influence German citizens, but also media and politics. This explains, from the perspective of the PI creators, why official media present crimes like forced marriage and honor killing as cultural assets. They thus distance themselves from this kind of politically correct reporting. They do not want to bow to multiculturalism, but instead take their duty as citizens (that is, as patriots) seriously, which consists of showing solidarity with all the people who do not want to ignore what is supposedly really going on, namely the Islamization of Germany.

In conclusion, the PI creators point out again that mainstream media information is based on political correctness and starry-eyed idealism, and that everybody who says what is really going on will automatically be defamed. Here, we can clearly observe a previously mentioned characteristic of CTs: that while at the same time they present a culprit, they also provide a release for this act of denomination. Concurrently, prejudice is presented as observation of a claimed societal truth.

It is not astonishing that the next paragraph is entitled “Against the Islamization of Europe”. The PI contributors present Europe again as indoctrinated by the Islamic thought, law and culture. By juxtaposing mosques, forced marriages and honor killings, as well as juxtaposing immigration of Muslims and Sharia, they are drafting a climate of danger and violence for women, Jews and Christians, reminding the website visitors of the fact that in Islamic countries there is no freedom of opinion and information, meanwhile also reminding them of the fact that the Jihad is targeting the absorption and domination of Western culture. Additionally, they also warn that this goal is prescribed by the Quran.

The code text can thus be enlarged now as follows: The political correctness of main stream media supports multiculturalism and therefore is pro-Islamic. Thus, it is a citizen’s duty to criticize the pro-Islamic self-censorship of mainstream media in order to prevent

the Islamization by divulging information allegedly suppressed by mainstream media. The dualist good and evil — or right and wrong — scheme is evident. We also find it at the bottom of the page visualized by cheerleader figures in sexist comic style wearing T-shirts with banderoles: “Maria instead of Sharia” and “Islamophobic but sexy”. In the course of 2015, the growing number of migrants is observably used as evidence for an advanced Islamization of Germany and its dangers for German people. The latter is proven with faked reports about migrants assaulting Germans, particularly the elderly, and touching or even raping women. The aggression against women in Cologne mentioned above therefore has been particularly welcome to PI’s authors as they could be interpreted as further proof within the framework of their xenophobic argumentation and their coverage which is politically incorrect but true in their eyes.

The keywords ‘right for information’, ‘right for true information’, ‘political correctness’, ‘multiculturalism’ and ‘Islamization’ are the pillars of the code text and the common theme of all reasoning presented in the various submodules of the site. Thus, they are the meeting points where re-interpretation and re-evaluation takes place. In order to do this, suitable contexts in the sense of implication complexes have to be provided for a shift in meaning and in constructs of social reality.

Let us analyze the function of these keywords. The right to information is a general property and as meeting point gathers many citizens since it appears neutral. This meeting point is therefore especially apt for courting. It is due to this that PI features a special category (as one of the main modules) trying to motivate the website visitor to participate. It has the title: “PI wants you! Good noses wanted!” By this, website visitors are motivated to become active and provide the page with information which is not presented in the mainstream media. By using the metaphor good nose, PI creators advance website visitors a good sense of truth, as the good noses are employed in crime detecting. In using this metaphor, the website visitor as potential informant enters the aura of working for justice and is released from any denouncement in advance.

The front picture — the teaser of this category — contains itself a message. By using the well-known Uncle Sam motif recruiting soldiers, the importance of each single person is highlighted, who

at the same time enter an army fighting for the truth. The various battalions of this army are summed up in the category PI Groups showing a map of the local groups in Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Czech Republic and listing the respective contacts.

The deduced keyword ‘right to true information’ evokes an additional implication complex: that of independent thinking, which is repeatedly triggered in several submodules, for example by the link to a book illustrating why most people cannot see the truth: *The most popular brainwashing techniques of globalization fans*. It exploits in a CT-typical way the enemy image, that the conspirators are using as brainwashing techniques for blinding the masses (cf. Dizdarevic/Hamdi in this volume, Heading 2.3). The description of the book is mashing together popular techniques such as the above mentioned Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP), common psychological terminology and citations of literature or films, like 1984 from George Orwell or *The Matrix* (1999) directed by Andy and Wachowski, into a conspiratorial argumentation which intends to show website visitors how they are programmed in their perception through politics and its politically correct information. For this purpose, metaphors are used which create a pattern of two possible self-perceptions: namely as a victim of the conspiracy or as an autonomous, self-liberating individual: “The strategies of external control and decision-making for citizens that were not dealt with within the NLP literature . . . show you how and why your legs are pulled”. The German metaphor for pulling someone’s leg is to pull someone by the nose. The text uses the expression pulled by the nose ring. The metaphor nose ring suggests that an inherently strong individual, represented by the bull, is put before the cart through brainwashing by foreigner-friendly democrats.

The way this programming takes place is explained via the virus-metaphor, illustrating how brainwashing works:

Those mental viruses circumnavigate the consciousness, turn off the individual thought process and deactivate the very survival mechanisms that the evolution has given us (individuals, communities, nations or societies). They can thus be lethal.

**Fremd-Herrschaft -
braucht die demokratische Sprach-Zensur.**


Denkfabriken	Nachrichten-Agenturen
	<p>Unermüdlich arbeiten NWO-Hiwis, Denkfabriken und Nachrichten-Agenturen (für die Medien) daran, Dein Gehirn begrifflich zu waschen. Ihre Aufgaben – z.B.:</p> <p>Sie geben irreführende Begriffe vor: „Flüchtlinge“ statt „Illegale“ oder „Invasoren“. Warum? - Ein Begriff schafft ein bestimmtes Bild in unserem Kopf - und löst entweder ein mittels-erbetschendes oder ein Verteidigungs-Gefühl und Verhalten aus.</p> <p>Sie machen aus Kritikern an Verbrechen der Demokraten „Rassisten“: So wird „opa“ künftig nicht mehr von „Asylgegnerne“ oder „Asylkritikern“ sprechen, sondern deren »Motive oder Gesinnung in jedem Einzelfall möglichst konkret benennene“! (Homburger 10.2015)</p> <p>Sie löschen Begriffe und geben neue Worte vor: dpa entrussifiziert die deutsche Ukraine-Berichterstattung. Seit März 2015 ist die ukrainische Schreibung von Eigennamen die einzig erlaubte.</p> <p>Sie löschen Begriffe komplett aus dem kollektiven Gedächtnis: „Selbstbestimmungsrecht des Deutschen Volkes“ Oder – wann hast Du zuletzt davon gehört?</p>
Gefällt Dir die Neu-Sprech-Gedanken-Polizei?	

Figure 1. Submodule of PI-News: *Foreign rule needs democratic censorship of language. Do you like the Newspeak mind police?*

These mental viruses are, as is suggested, the ‘globalization virus’ as well as the ‘guilt virus’. The former is coupled with the keyword multiculturalism, the latter with political correctness, which prevents the truth from being reported. In order to receive the truth, people thus first have to deprogram themselves. Since the feeling of guilt is “reserved for idiots”, there are links to further information on the vertical right-hand side of the webpage, proposing for example a “psycho-political communication coaching”, entitled “German liberation psychology”, offered by Wolfgang R. Grunwald², “director of the Institute for research on political brainwashing and liberation psychology” or a link to the blog “Impulses for lateral thinkers and self-liberation”. The last site in allusion to Orwells’ romance offers a translation of “Newspeak notions” used in politically correct information and a “Newspeak mind police” (Fig. 1) commenting on the true meaning of notions used in mainstream discourses.

2. The ex-business-manager, ex-lobbyist and NLP-Master calls himself an expert for commercial and political communication.

The meeting point ‘right for true information’ thus is a place of a deprogramming. And as is shown in the call “Detox yourself!”, deprogramming is equated with detoxication — from politically correct information of course. The website visitor, who is called to cooperate, hereby acquires instructions for his own actions, for example: “Throw the enemy’s effective psycho war weapon out of your life — the TV. The same goes for mainstream newspapers!” The latter are also depicted in the category Guidelines, namely the main German daily newspapers. As alternative source of information, PI provides its own PI TV documentaries and a list of books edited by the publishing companies Kollateral and J. Fischer. The PI TV documentaries stage current events in CT-specific scenarios and imply immediate danger. On the homepage of the named publishing companies, visitors are addressed with “Be courageous and use your intellect”. The titles of the published books correspond with the code text and the keywords of the PI News site, for example: “Black book of the alternative lying press”. “How the alternative media drive us into a socialist global government”. People who buy this books are, as is suggested, members of millions of Germans who realize that journalists are bought and thus that the mainstream press cannot be trusted. There are also several books about the world power America and its conspiratorial plans, or about the regime of the Rothschild family, as well as about the new wave of migration, which of course is linked to Islamization, and the therefore as absolutely necessary predicated patriotism. By reading these books one will become an insider, as is indicated.

Enabled to know and to recognize the truth, (convinced) website visitors themselves and their personal interpretations are truthified. This turns them into heroines and heroes who enlighten the blinded masses, even when they are defamed for it, as illustrated by a photo posted on December 29, 2014 (Fig. 2, not available anymore).

It was taken at a PEGIDA demonstration in December 2014 and selected as the press photo of 2014 by the PI administrators. The detailed interpretation beneath suggests the user a reversal of categories of good and bad. This is discussed within the context of self-image and enemy image:

A female PEGIDA demonstrator with a flag of Germany walks alone towards the Black Block [left protesters] — she’s stopped by a policeman.



Figure 2. Pictorial submodule of PI-News: PEGIDA demonstration in December 2014, selected as the press photo of 2014 by the PI administrators.

For our politicians she is a ‘trouble maker’, she belongs to the evil of this country. The good people on the other hand are the black guys in the right part of the picture. For us, this brave woman is a heroine [. . .]. A brave demonstrator with the colors of our freedom, a policeman, who knows the distribution of power here, and on the right the minions of power, of the Gaucks and Merckels, eagerly waiting to land the first punch. For us, this symbolic picture is the press photo of 2014.

The photo editing directs this heroism through a golden–red lighting of the row of houses in the back, as well as through the risen heroine that in the end is the defamed victim. PI’s authors use photos purposefully for an emotional highlighting of the nucleus of their CT and particularly of the role models, since they are the idealized prototype of the courted website visitor.

Let us come back to the keyword ‘political correctness’. Its re-evaluation is fueled by the connection with ‘multiculturalism’, which is leading back to the central message: the apprehended ‘Islamization’. It is truthified by various submodules of the webpage. First of all with a counter for the dead bodies connected to Islamist suicide attacks and by a series of personal reports in the categories “My way to the critique of Islam”, “Like I experienced the enrichment of culture [Kulturbereicherei]” and “My love for Germany”. In the first one, avowed critics of Islam report their alleged experiences with Muslims who disdain Christian values and German Culture, or with having been

called a “Christian pig” which made them change their formerly naive and trustful mind as do-gooders. The notion “Kulturbereicherei” is to be understood ironically. It reduces and taunts the argumentation imputed to the globalists and left democrats arguing for multiculturalism. “My love for Germany” provides confessional texts from Polish, Dutch, Indonesian or Ukrainian immigrants. On the one hand, most of them point out that they encountered no problems with integration and that helpful Germans made their start into a new life easier. On the other hand, they criticize other foreigners, particularly Turkish and Arabian Muslims, because of their unwillingness to integrate, which is why they should not live in Germany. Last but not least, there is the example of a Portuguese on the issue of the German feeling of guilt because of Hitler — thus reminding the attentive website visitor of the “guilt virus”, explained in the submodule analyzed above, and illustrating its effects. She therefore warns Germans against Islam, as it is “more than a religion”, by appealing to the pride of being German, and she even promises to leave Germany for the sake of Germany and Germans in case of a potentially necessary politics of expulsion:

I live as a foreigner in Germany, I go to work and thus earn the money to be able and allowed to live here. I pay my taxes and also the parental share for my child’s place in kindergarten. I’m glad that I may and can do this [...] but I can’t understand you Germans [...] where is your pride? Do you still think that you have to take responsibility for something that none of you has done? I also take pride in my country in spite of the existence of a Mr Salazar [...] can’t you be proud of your country because there was a Mr Hitler? Please realize that Islam is not just a religion [...] Islam says about itself that it will replace previous forms of government. Do what is best for your country and your values [...] and should the consequence be the claim “foreigners go home”, I would freely return to my home country, just because Germany and the Germans have grown on me and I don’t want this Germany ceasing to exist.

By this kind of modules authenticating the predications by allegedly lived experiences, xenophobia and nationalism are not only suggested but legitimized. They are also implicitly hidden in the valuation of the keywords by legitimizing political incorrectness as the gateway for truth, as has been explained above. Facebook comments show that this message is well received (cf. Erdmann in this volume).

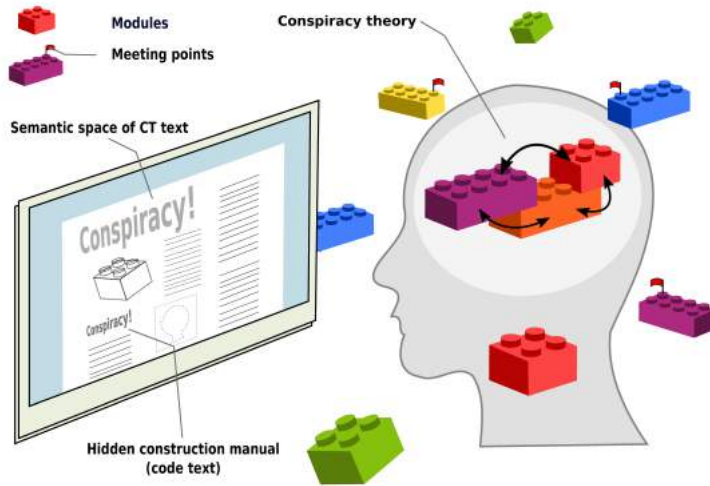


Figure 3. Structure of reconstruction of construction of social reality and the process of pre-orientation of semiosis

5. Conclusion

Let us sum up: The structure of conspiratorial reconstruction of construction of social reality excerpts and the process of reinterpretation and implementation can be schematized by a set of lego pieces (Fig. 3).

The kit delivers social realities by formulating them in simplified modules; on the one hand they offer common knowledge pieces, implications and interpretations, on the other hand the CT typical re-interpretations are offered, characterized by a specific code text for organizing the modules provided by the website into a set of bipolar semantic categories for (re)evaluation; last but not least they provide personal reports generating authenticity for the main predications in order to truthify them³. The interpretation of reality and reality excerpts which can be constructed therefrom is pre-oriented through this, meaning infiltrated by alternative — in our case conspiratorial — constructs. The pre-orientation of semiosis happens:

3. Not all strategies could be analyzed here, for example the thruthifying by citations of familiar politicians by being re-contextualized or deformed.

- via the choice of content from the offered exchangeable modules (for predications, for authentication of predications, for re-interpretation and re-evaluation of interpretations) within the PI website as a subsphere.
- via the code text which insinuates the combination and chaining of modules
- via the marking of the modules with teasers in behalf to become mental meeting points for an argumentative pre-orientation of the website visitors' cognition.

That is, they are, on the semantic level, marked with generally known highly discussed keywords, quotes, metaphors, neologisms (like "Kulturbereicherei") or image motifs, which grab the attention.

The cognitive work of the courted website visitor thus is merely to combine the right sets of categories with the implicated complexes presented by the modules in the secluded semantic space of the PI website. The contents of the modules and submodules correspond with themselves; some of them are transmitting predications and interpretations, others are destined to truthify the main predications and the keywords of the conspiratorial interpretation as could be observed with the analysis of pretended autobiographical letters and reports or by an allegedly scientific research. The thereby generated constructions can vary, but they are all made with the same material, thus they cannot deviate much from the code text, being the hidden construction manual.

Thus the website visitors as potential adherents are given the impression that they develop their own reality construct themselves based on the detection of a truth, hidden or falsified by mainstream information, which is permitting them the allegedly 'true' interpretation. This effect is on the one hand achieved by providing apparently broad and impartial information. On the other hand by inserting an alternative programmatic set for the evaluation of this information. In terms of socio-semiotics this is what happens in the contact aureoles between sub and main spheres of the semiosphere: the transformation or reinterpretation of interpretations of social realities into deviant ones. It happens in the sense of a directed application of the Greimasian semantic square and its dichotomist structure, opposing a politically incorrect reporting (connected with the danger of Isla-

mization, legalized xenophobia and patriotism) to the main socially agreed programmatic set of a politically correct reporting (connected with multiculturalism, globalization and do-gooding as result of a successful brainwashing).

The last but nevertheless important observation, which can be made, is that PI's authors are impacting the process of semiosis by externalizing its mechanism, the latter thereby becomes a blind spot. Thus, step by step the combinations and possible interpretations of the implicative complexes provided as a modularized construct of social reality, meaning a construct reduced in simplified knowledge and information packages, are steered — even if or precisely because the website visitors is given the impression of being deprogrammed or deprogramming themselves.

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Fondamentalismo, anomia, complotto

La semiotica di Umberto Eco contro l'irragionevolezza interpretativa

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Behind the hieroglyphic streets there would either be a transcendent meaning, or only the earth.

Thomas PYNCHON (1966) *The Crying of Lot 49*, ch. 6

ENGLISH TITLE: Fundamentalism, Anomie, Conspiracy. Umberto Eco's Semiotics against Interpretive Unreasonableness

ABSTRACT: If one had to summarize the core of Umberto Eco's philosophical inquiry in one sentence, or slogan, it would be reasonable to argue that most of his work has been devoted to investigate the limits of interpretation. This inquiry entails two dimensions; on the one hand, a theoretical line: showing that signs, texts, discourse, and culture in general are not always open to the proliferation of meaning, but produce signification in ways that are regulated by societies through established patterns. These codes of interpretation can be continuously negotiated and renegotiated, but nevertheless hold a central place in the processes through which meaning is created, shared, and circulated in societies. The second dimension, a moral one, intertwines with the first. Not only do patterns of interpretation exist; they must also hold for social communication to be possible. A society that does not share any codes, and does not impose any limits to interpretation, is a disintegrating society, where human beings are progressively deprived of what defines and enables them as social and political animals, that is, language.

KEYWORDS: Conspiracy Theories; Umberto Eco's Interpretive Semiotics; Fundamentalism; Anomie; Reasonableness.

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1. Eco *versus* Brown

Umberto Eco, uno dei padri della semiotica contemporanea e tra i più grandi semiotici di tutti i tempi, si è spesso confrontato con il tema delle teorie del complotto. Molti dei suoi romanzi, per non dire la totalità di essi, ruotano attorno a questo nucleo tematico. In alcuni casi, le teorie del complotto costituiscono l'intera trama del romanzo, come ne *Il pendolo di Foucault* (1988), il quale è senza dubbio il miglior testo narrativo mai scritto sulle teorie del complotto, le loro dinamiche interne, e le loro assurdità sociali. Umberto Eco è anche, risaputamente, uno dei critici più feroci di Dan Brown. A prima vista, le opere dei due autori si assomigliano: entrambi attingono all'erudizione storica e culturale al fine di progettare trame investigative intricate. In realtà, gli approcci di Brown e di Eco al mistero e al complotto non potrebbero essere più diversi. Eco rappresenta narrativamente le teorie del complotto in modo da coprirle di ridicolo, e incoraggiare i suoi lettori a disfarsene quali mere sciocchezze. Dan Brown, al contrario, non satireggia le teorie del complotto ma le alimenta, promuovendo una loro più ampia circolazione nella società e, cosa ancora più inquietante, elevandone lo statuto epistemico. Ai lettori "cooperativi" de *Il pendolo di Foucault* di Eco viene richiesto di ridere delle teorie del complotto; i seguaci de *The Da Vinci Code* di Dan Brown sono invece titillati a credervi e diffonderne il contagio. Questo è il motivo principale per cui Eco ha costantemente criticato Brown. La critica del primo al secondo reca un messaggio morale che non solo è visibile nei romanzi di Eco, ma risuona, sotto veste diversa, nel suo fondativo lavoro teorico.

2. I limiti dell'interpretazione

Se si dovesse riassumere il nucleo della ricerca filosofica di Umberto Eco in una sola frase o in un solo slogan, sarebbe ragionevole sostenere che la maggior parte del suo lavoro è stata dedicata a indagare i limiti dell'interpretazione (Eco 1990). Questa ricerca comporta due dimensioni; da un lato, una linea teorica: dimostrare che i segni, i testi, i discorsi, e la cultura in generale, non sono sempre aperti alla proliferazione di significato, ma producono senso in modi che sono regolati dalle società attraverso modelli consolidati. Questi codici interpretativi

possono essere continuamente negoziati e rinegoziati, ma comunque occupano un posto centrale nei processi attraverso i quali il senso viene creato, condiviso, e diffuso nelle società. La seconda dimensione, morale, s'intreccia con la prima. I modelli d'interpretazione non solo esistono; essi devono anche reggere nel tempo e nello spazio affinché la comunicazione sociale sia possibile. Una società che non condivide codici, e non impone alcun limite all'interpretazione, è una società in disgregazione, dove gli esseri umani sono progressivamente privati di ciò che li definisce e li abilita come animali sociali e politici, vale a dire, il linguaggio.

La posizione teorica di Eco, e ancor più l'etica ermeneutica che ne deriva, sono stati talvolta etichettati come conservatrici, o addirittura come reazionarie. Niente di più sbagliato. Eco è stato un critico franco, per esempio, delle ermeneutiche testuali dei fondamentalismi religiosi, soprattutto quando, adottando il letteralismo, essi sostengono che una, e una sola interpretazione di un testo sacro è possibile (Eco 1992). Questo atteggiamento interpretativo imposta solo apparentemente rigidi limiti al modo in cui un testo — che si considera emanazione diretta dalla trascendenza — può essere utilizzato per la produzione e la circolazione di senso ulteriore (Leone 2012b). In realtà, negare che interpretazioni alternative di un testo sono possibili è altrettanto irragionevole, dal punto di vista di Eco, dell'affermare che ogni interpretazione di un testo è possibile. La prima posizione rifiuta l'idea che possa darsi una molteplicità di modelli culturali che codifichino e decodifichino il significato sociale; la seconda ammette questa molteplicità, ma non contempla modi inter-soggettivamente ragionevoli per scegliere fra le alternative, o perlomeno classificarle (Leone 2016). La maggior parte del lavoro teorico di Eco, così come la sua controparte finzionale, può essere vista come un sofisticato, monumentale tentativo di smantellare concettualmente queste posizioni, mostrandone il pesante carico di conseguenze morali.

Come si mostrerebbero le società in cui queste due linee ermeneutiche dovessero predominare? Un gruppo umano dominato da un'etica interpretativa fondamentalista sarebbe molto probabilmente repressivo (Leone 2014). Purtroppo, questo scenario non è solo finzione, ma ha ricevuto molte incarnazioni nel corso della storia. È all'opera anche in numerose società contemporanee. Ovunque un testo sacro o un corpus di testi sacri sia istituzionalmente ritenuto il

pilastro immateriale della società, si sviluppa una burocrazia interpretativa al fine di collegare il potere e il suo controllo sugli individui. Idiosincrasie che non si allineino con il modello imperante vengono scartate, represses, perseguitate. Modi di vita che non siano conformi alla norma, e considerati come pura derivazione dalla trascendenza senza mediazione umana, sono fuorilegge, banditi, i loro fautori forzatamente convertiti o sterminati. Una società che adotti un'ermeneutica interpretativa fondamentalista frustra l'innata propensione umana alla creatività e alla costruzione d'infinita alternative.

Tuttavia, l'opera di Eco sottolinea con uguale se non maggiore veemenza i rischi derivanti da un'etica ermeneutica che non riconosca alcun metodo legittimo per la valutazione comparativa delle interpretazioni. Secondo questo punto di vista, non solo i testi sacri, ma anche i codici legali, per non parlare dei testi di finzione, sono aperti a qualsiasi tipo d'interpretazione, senza confini in grado di porre un limite, o almeno una serie di limiti, a tale proliferazione. Come è noto, Eco ha identificato in una certa interpretazione del decostruzionismo di Derrida, soprattutto nella sua versione statunitense politicizzata, la principale fonte di tale stile ermeneutico (Eco 1992). Nietzsche può esserne considerato come il primo sostenitore moderno: esistono solo interpretazioni, non fatti.

Ci si potrebbe chiedere, allora, come sarebbe una società in cui predomini questa prospettiva. Non sarebbe una società repressiva nello stesso modo in cui lo sarebbe una società fondamentalista. Nessun modello interpretativo radicale vi designerebbe gli *insiders* e gli *outsiders*, i potenti e i reietti. Al contrario, si potrebbe avere l'impressione che, in una società decostruzionista, qualsiasi cosa potrebbe andare, dai comportamenti sessuali al gusto letterario, dalle interpretazioni giuridiche alle scoperte scientifiche. In questo campo, tuttavia, Ronald Dworkin sembra unirsi a Eco nell'esprimere una preoccupazione per le pesanti conseguenze che tale utopia decostruzionista potrebbe sortire sull'ordine sociale (Dworkin 1982). Un'ermeneutica senza limiti, infatti, non sarebbe in grado di gestire i conflitti interpretativi. Si provi a immaginare, con Dworkin, un giudice che, nel condannare un imputato all'ergastolo, affermi che la sentenza deriva da un'interpretazione dei fatti, ma che altre interpretazioni sarebbero possibili ed egualmente valide. Oppure s'immagini un medico che prescriva un ciclo di chemioterapia, adottando la stessa posizione ermeneutica. Le vittime

legali o mediche di tale atteggiamento interpretativo ne sarebbero inorridite, chiedendo un risarcimento giuridico o un secondo parere medico.

L'esempio indica che una società in cui le interpretazioni non siano mai priorizzate non è né una società senza potere, né una in cui la repressione del più debole scompare magicamente. Al contrario, è un modello di società in cui repressione e violenza proliferano senza centro, seguendo un contagio irrazionale (Leone 2015). Da un certo punto di vista, mentre il potere fondamentalista è relativamente facile da rilevare e contrastare, quello decostruzionista non lo è, in quanto nessuna burocrazia specifica lo gestisce. Potere, iniquità e squilibri ingiusti saltano fuori in modo casuale, secondo schemi che sono difficili da mappare, dal momento che non rispondono a un'agenda pubblica, ma a pregiudizi privati non strutturati, i quali sono, tuttavia, facile preda di manipolazione. Alla fine, le agentività più potenti trionfano nelle società decostruzioniste come in quelle fondamentaliste, ma lo fanno più surrettiziamente, senza milizie.

Uno dei grandi contributi di Umberto Eco alla discussione su questo tema è consistito nel mostrare che entrambi gli atteggiamenti ermeneutici dovrebbero essere scartati non solo in considerazione delle loro conseguenze politiche essenzialmente antidemocratiche (repressione dispotica / repressione anarchica), ma anche in termini teorici e, quindi, obbiettivi. Il modello di semiosi di Charles S. Peirce, come viene interpretato da Eco, offre un terreno concettuale per la promozione di una società in cui i limiti non sono né imposti né decostruiti, ma ragionevolmente e inter-soggettivamente negoziati (Eco 1975).

3. I fondamenti semiotici della ragionevolezza interpretativa

Il modello di semiosi elaborato da Peirce rende giustizia a due caratteristiche quintessenziali della cognizione umana. Da un lato, gli esseri umani sono intrinsecamente inclini alla proliferazione del senso (Leone 2011). Lo schema attraverso il quale Peirce ha cercato di cogliere questa tendenza è aperto. Si apre all'infinito: ogni segno punta verso un ulteriore segno, e così via e così via, senza possibile battuta d'arresto. D'altra parte, gli esseri umani pretendono allo stesso

modo verso la stabilità: la semiosi si cristallizza in abiti che guidano le cognizioni, le emozioni, e le azioni umane. Il problema delle due linee interpretative sopra esposte è che neglisono la dialettica tra queste due funzioni cognitive egualmente essenziali e avvalorano solo una di esse. Nell'ermeneutica fondamentalista, un unico abito viene selezionato come dominante. La semiosi è bloccata in un interpretante rigidamente codificato, immaginato come totalmente conforme alla struttura intrinseca di un testo sacro. Qualsiasi tentativo di riattivare il motore della semiosi introducendo interpretanti alternativi viene annullato — spesso con violenza — attraverso la burocrazia ermeneutica. Gli esseri umani che vivono sotto il giogo di un unico insieme di abiti, rigidamente canonizzato, esperiscono, di solito, una profonda alienazione. Essi sono spinti a trasformarsi in macchine, per le quali le alternative risultano impossibili (Leone 2012a).

Tuttavia, anche la società decostruzionista manca la dialettica tra semiosi e abiti, sebbene in questo caso solo la prima venga sottolineata, mentre i secondi vengono scartati. Per il decostruzionista politico, qualsiasi abito è un nemico da respingere attraverso l'esercizio di ulteriori semiosi. La bella creatività che gli esseri umani esprimono nella poesia contemporanea incarna l'utopia di una società auto-governata, in cui le differenze di continuo proliferano magicamente e si compongono in un'armonia multiforme, iridescente. Questa presa di posizione etica e politica, però — mentre lodevolmente reagisce al conservatorismo e alla repressione autocratici — trascura che anche la poesia ha le sue regole e i suoi codici, e che gli esseri umani tendono a classificare per merito i propri poeti così come gerarchizzano i principi giuridici o le ricette economiche. Ma la conseguenza peggiore dell'adottare un'ermeneutica decostruzionista non è tanto l'anarchia letteraria — che taluni potrebbero trovare anche divertente — quanto l'instabilità cognitiva. Una vita senza abiti è un caos insopportabile. Una società senza modelli interpretativi è tale per cui è probabile che vi emerga a ogni passo il conflitto, e a ogni passo rischi di rimanere irrisolto.

Tra un modello ermeneutico che impone l'abito e ostacola qualsiasi semiosi e un modello ermeneutico che impone la semiosi e ostacola qualsiasi abito, la semiotica di Eco promette una terza via: lo sviluppo di un metodo che sia in grado di selezionare le interpretazioni e classificarne le qualità. Da questo punto di vista, la semiotica interpretativa soddisfa le esigenze filosofiche anti-nietzscheane del nuovo

realismo, in quanto fornisce alle sue pretese filosofiche una metodologia. Secondo il nuovo realismo, non è vero, come Nietzsche e i suoi interpreti decostruzionisti affermano, che non esistono fatti, e che solo le interpretazioni imperano. Il filosofo nuovo-realista sottolinea l'importanza della realtà, e quindi dei fatti, nel guidare i movimenti della vita sociale (Ferraris 2012). Il semiologo interpretativo non si occupa principalmente di fatti, dal momento che, per definizione e tradizione disciplinari, la semiotica si concentra sulla semiosi, e non sull'ontologia che presumibilmente la sottende (Eco 1997). Tuttavia, le interpretazioni veritiere sono i fatti della semiotica. La realtà che i nuovi filosofi realisti reclamano altro non è, dal punto di vista semiotico, che *la rete di abiti interpretativi che una comunità inter-soggettivamente e ragionevolmente accetta come modelli-guida in una certa fase della sua evoluzione storica e culturale*. Si potrebbe anche sostenere che il vantaggio della semiotica di Eco, rispetto alla nuova filosofia realista, è che la prima meglio della seconda sfugge a qualsiasi tentazione di abbracciare un modello fondamentalista come abito imperante. Infatti, ciò che i nuovi filosofi realisti chiamano "realtà" è, per i semiotici, un modello d'interpretazione particolarmente consolidato. La semiotica quindi non respinge indiscriminatamente l'affermazione di Nietzsche, ma la qualifica insistendo sul fatto che le interpretazioni possono essere classificate, e che, come Peirce per primo intuì, la prioritizzazione delle interpretazioni è esattamente ciò che si traduce in una sensazione di realtà. Due questioni principali sono quindi in gioco. In primo luogo: qual è la posizione delle teorie del complotto e dei loro sostenitori in relazione ai diversi atteggiamenti ermeneutici esposti finora. In secondo luogo: qual è il contributo specifico della semiotica nel contrastare i rischi del fondare una società sul concetto di complotto.

4. I nemici dell'interpretazione ragionevole

Il notevole successo delle teorie del complotto nelle società odierne non può essere spiegato in relazione a sole ragioni socio-politiche ed economiche. Una caratteristica di queste teorie che è stata spesso trascurata è che esse sono in grado di procurare un certo piacere estetico. Analogamente al pettegolezzo o alle leggende metropolitane, le teorie del complotto prosperano anche grazie alla noia. Coloro che

ricevono le formulazioni di queste teorie vengono staccati d'improvviso dalla razionalità soporifera del discorso mediatico *mainstream* e istantaneamente trasportati in un nuovo scenario, che assomiglia a un romanzo giallo o a un film di spionaggio. Di fronte a una nuova teoria del complotto, il pubblico è portato ad abbracciare la convinzione che nulla è come sembra. C'è sempre una verità più profonda da scoprire sotto la superficie della storia. Il piacere estetico di questa convinzione deriva da una sorta di micro-legittimazione. Gli psicologi sanno molto bene che il successo dei segreti, e l'impossibilità paradossale di mantenerli che da esso risulta, deriva dal piacere che le persone sentono quando si comunica loro qualcosa che non è di pubblico dominio. Dai pettegolezzi tra amici a quello raccolto dalle riviste, tale piacere in ultima analisi deriva da un'idea illusoria d'inclusione, che comporta anche un'esclusione corrispondente. La comunicazione di un segreto determina immediatamente una separazione tra *insider* e *outsider*, tra coloro che sanno che cosa realmente sta accadendo e quelli che, al contrario, continuano a vivere in una beata ignoranza della realtà (Quill 2014). Corollario di questo meccanismo è che le teorie del complotto, per essere efficaci, non devono essere comunicate attraverso i canali tradizionali. Operano in quanto chi le riceve e assorbe può coltivare l'illusione che solo questi, e un piccolo numero di altri adepti, siano depositari della verità.

La maggior parte delle teorie del complotto — come quelle che sostengono che c'è una lobby globale la quale cerca di asservire il genere umano attraverso sostanze chimiche rilasciate da aerei — sono così poco supportate da prove scientifiche da essere spesso facilmente ridicolizzate dal discorso scientifico e mediatico *mainstream*. Tuttavia, tale derisione in realtà promuove le teorie del complotto piuttosto che denigrarle. Per i loro sostenitori, infatti, essere ridicolizzati dalla "massa ignorante" costituisce un'ulteriore prova di appartenenza a una élite illuminata, al gruppo di pochi che sanno davvero dove sta la verità. Il piacere estetico alla base delle teorie del complotto è quindi quello di una deviazione dal pensiero dominante, la quale crea ipso facto una comunità di salvati, cui è affidata la missione di comunicare la verità a coloro che sono invece asserviti dal potere e vivono nell'ignoranza. Questo effetto estetico è il risultato di un meccanismo semiotico. Astrattamente parlando, può essere descritto come una versione particolare dell'ermeneutica decostruzionista. Come

l'ermeneutica della decostruzione respinge qualsiasi abito interpretativo, sostiene che è un'imposizione del potere, ed opera per il suo smantellamento, allo stesso modo, le teorie del complotto insinuano che le credenze sociali e politiche tradizionali non sono altro che abiti velenosi che lobby potenti instillano nei cittadini. Inoltre, come il decostruzionismo, così il pensiero complottista mira alla riattivazione della semiosi, principalmente denigrando le verità tradizionali come bugie pubbliche.

Si deve tuttavia sottolineare, a onore del decostruzionismo, che un'importante sfumatura differenzia questo quadro teorico dallo sviluppo consueto delle teorie del complotto. Queste non sono mai poetiche. Non pretendono che ogni abito possa essere decostruito attraverso la continua riattivazione della semiosi illimitata, come la poetica di Derrida tipicamente suggerisce (Derrida 1967). Al contrario, le teorie del complotto più banalmente sostituiscono l'abito corrente, sostenuto dalla comunità scientifica e socio-politica, con quello di una minoranza, solleticandone la sensazione di esclusività. Allo stesso tempo, le teorie del complotto prendono a prestito dal decostruzionismo l'idea che ogni contro-argomento possa essere smontato da un'ulteriore declinazione della stessa teoria del complotto, e così via secondo un andamento ciclico.

In conclusione, la risposta alla prima domanda di cui sopra (qual è il principale atteggiamento ermeneutico dei teorici del complotto?) è che essi abbracciano una versione banalizzata dell'atteggiamento decostruzionista verso gli abiti interpretativi. Decostruiscono le credenze tradizionali, ma solo al fine di sostituirle con visioni alternative consortili. Prima di affrontare il secondo problema, cioè, il ruolo della semiotica nei confronti delle teorie del complotto, bisognerebbe sollevare la questione dei motivi per cui l'emozione estetica legata a questo pensiero sociale alternativo non è distribuita in parti uguali nel corso della storia, ma emerge con maggiore rilevanza in determinati contesti sociali e culturali. In altre parole: se segreti, voci e idee cospirativi intrinsecamente infondono piacere estetico — in quanto legittimano i loro sostenitori attraverso il senso di appartenenza a una minoranza privilegiata di salvati — perché mai le teorie del complotto prosperano solo in alcuni periodi della storia? Rispondere a questa domanda equivale a formulare ipotesi che spieghino il successo, nella storia, degli atteggiamenti decostruzionisti. Diversi ordini di spiega-

zioni sono possibili. La frammentazione della società è sicuramente un elemento importante. Più i membri di una società si percepiscono come individui isolati — che non appartengono ad alcun gruppo socio-culturale in particolare, non aderiscono a nessuna organizzazione politica, e sono privi di qualsiasi abito interpretativo forte — tanto più essi saranno preda di complottisti che li designano come la loro nuova comunità, come membri di una minoranza illuminata che deve lottare per resistere alla sottomissione degli ignoranti al pensiero *mainstream*. Nel contesto europeo attuale, per esempio, in cui l'ultimo decennio ha visto un inesorabile declino del potere modellizzante di formazioni politiche tradizionali come i partiti o i sindacati, nuovi leader sono stati facilmente in grado di emergere e plasmare la loro base elettorale attraverso la creazione o la circolazione di teorie del complotto. In alcuni casi, la designazione di un colpevole aumenta il potenziale identitario di queste teorie, dal momento che federa un gruppo contro un nemico. Tuttavia, un elemento-chiave del successo delle teorie del complotto contemporanee, il quale le distingue dalla loro versione moderna e pre-moderna, è che esse non hanno più bisogno di un colpevole. Si potrebbe invece sostenere che il vero colpevole delle attuali teorie del complotto sia la maggioranza stessa, il *mainstream*, e tutti gli abiti che cristallizzano un consenso sociale.

5. L'eredità semio-etica di Umberto Eco

La semiotica non è uno strumento politico. I semiotici non dovrebbero impegnarsi pro o contro gli atteggiamenti culturali e sociali. Tuttavia, i semiotici che analizzano le loro società non possono chiudere gli occhi. Al contrario, essi devono mettere la loro metodologia al servizio della consapevolezza pubblica. Al momento, questa consapevolezza pubblica include anche il ruolo delle teorie del complotto nello sviluppo della società. Che tipo di società è quella in cui le teorie del complotto proliferano e legittimano i loro creatori, che accumulano, così, leadership simbolica e politica? Le conseguenze del prevalere, nella società, di un'ermeneutica decostruzionista sono già state fatte notare: una collettività che non si dota di modelli inter-soggettivi e ragionevoli per il consolidamento degli abiti interpretativi è inevitabil-

mente una società caotica, in cui i conflitti costantemente sorgono e non vengono mai ricomposti.

Come è stato sottolineato in precedenza, però, il pensiero complotista e la decostruzione non sono la stessa cosa. Il primo è una versione grottesca della seconda, e porta a una sorta di dispotismo demagogico. Una società dominata da teorie del complotto, infatti, non è solo una società conflittuale, dove il pensiero tradizionale è continuamente minacciato da alternative complottiste. Più pericolosamente, una società del complotto è una in cui il potenziale inquisitivo della decostruzione viene disinnescato in modo sistematico. In effetti, una società in cui il pensiero tradizionale non è mai messo in discussione da eventuali visioni alternative, dallo smantellamento degli abiti interpretativi e dalla riattivazione della semiosi, è essenzialmente dispotica. I critici, e i semiotici tra loro, hanno il dovere di sfidare il pensiero e le credenze tradizionali. Quando ciò non accade, la società va alla deriva pericolosamente verso l'ermeneutica fondamentalista.

Tuttavia, il problema delle teorie del complotto più in voga è che sfidano il pensiero tradizionale imponendo nuovi abiti interpretativi la cui costruzione, però, si presuppone che non conduca mai alla formazione di un'audience *mainstream*. In altre parole, le teorie del complotto sono versioni alternative della realtà il cui scopo non è quello d'introdurre un nuovo abito interpretativo condiviso, ma prosperare in modo parassitario sulle spalle del pensiero ufficiale. I teorici del complotto non vogliono soppiantare gli *opinion leader* tradizionali, perché questa sostituzione eliminerebbe l'elemento-chiave della loro forza, che è la capacità di vellicare l'opinione pubblica con la prospettiva della segretezza. Il primo pericolo potenziale delle teorie del complotto consiste quindi nella loro tendenza a depotenziare qualsiasi tipo di visione alternativa della realtà. Le teorie del complotto pare introducano più libero pensiero nella società, ma in realtà lo fanno rifiutando un quadro comunicativo comune intersoggettivo e ragionevole, trincerandosi in un'auto-indulgente posizione di minoranza. Esse contribuiscono, dunque, alla natura incrollabile delle versioni tradizionali della realtà. Per esempio, è molto probabile che la CIA sia ricorsa a metodi non convenzionali, discutibili, e talvolta illegali nel corso della storia; tuttavia, le teorie del complotto che accusano la CIA in realtà non ne minacciano la portata operativa; al contrario, contribuiscono al suo status d'indiscutibilità. La conseguenza peggiore

che deriva da questo atteggiamento è che i colpevoli designati dalle teorie del complotto non possono essere difesi ragionevolmente, dal momento che sono accusati con argomenti che di solito sfuggono a qualsiasi controllo razionale. Ciò è particolarmente preoccupante se tali colpevoli non sono identificati nelle potenti istituzioni della società (il governo, i servizi segreti, la polizia), ma in minoranze quantitative o qualitative (gli Ebrei, gli Arabi, i migranti).

Quindi, la questione di determinare il ruolo e l'effetto delle teorie del complotto nella società si riduce alla necessità di distinguere tra teorie critiche e complottiste, tra ermeneutica decostruzionista ed ermeneutica del complotto. Tuttavia, tale distinzione non può essere fatta in termini di contenuti. Deve esserlo in termini di modelli argomentativi. Le teorie del complotto, cioè, non mostrano la loro natura in quello che dicono, ma in come lo dicono, nella retorica specifica che esse adottano per comunicare un alone di segretezza, creare un'élite simbolica, e riprodurre la separazione tra inclusi ed esclusi, che è strumentale per l'esistenza parassitaria degli stessi complottisti.

Qui sta il ruolo principale della semiotica: individuare le linee retoriche e argomentative attraverso le quali le teorie del complotto vengono create e alimentate nell'immaginario sociale. Nessun semiologo più di Umberto Eco ha fornito agli analisti culturali strumenti teorici sofisticati e potenti per portare avanti tale compito urgente.

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Imposed Interpretation

Querying Contemporary Literary Criticism

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TITOLO ITALIANO: Interpretazione forzata. Un'indagine sulla critica letteraria contemporanea

ABSTRACT: Imposed interpretation is one of the basic characteristics and fallacies of the contemporary western literary criticism. It happens throughout the process when diversified theories of extra-literary origins and even scientific rules penetrate into the interpretative discourse of literature. Its symptoms include making biased judgments about a text's value or meanings with a pre-taken stance, forcing new but absurd interpretation upon old classical works through reversed routes of cognition, re-locating a text by distorting its language or transplanting alien concepts. Imposed interpretation leads criticism far away from the ontological existence of literature, and now its methodological imperfections are getting more and more apparent, like the reversion between practice and theory, misplaced relationship between the concrete and the abstract, and the split between the part and the whole. For the discursive construction of contemporary literary criticism, it is necessary and essential to strive for systematical and balanced development. Criticism should on the basis of absorbing progressive elements of the times be conscious of its multi-dimensional growth and the integration of theories and practice. The future of literary theories lies in their practicality to literary creation.

KEYWORDS: Interpretation; Hermeneutics; Semiotics; Deconstructionism; Overinterpretation.

Since the beginning of the 20th century, for more than 100 years, the modern western literary criticism has fundamentally questioned and deconstructed people's old understanding about "literature".

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Important thoughts and schools, many theorists and critics, have undoubtedly constituted the driving force to steadily push forward contemporary literary criticism. However, looking back at the 100 years' development of the western literary criticism, we can equally find many imperfections, faults and fallacies in addition to its glorious achievements. Some problems are so closely related to the foundations and essence of literature that if not dealt with cares they might harm or even uproot the legitimacy of literary criticism. It is far from rare to see in contemporary literary criticism deeds like cutting the present from the past — history and tradition, conceitedly negating other critical groups' merits, swaying from one theoretical extremity to another, ignoring the value of actual literary experience and separating critiques from the real life, exhausting meanings of literary texts with paranoid methods and languages, struggling for discursive dominance and blindly defending the dogmas of one particular school. To learners and practitioners of literary criticism in China, they are easily led astray by their biased understanding about the western theories during the past three decades. And what's more, their too ready and too stiff borrowing and copying of the western theories have turned the spreading of the western theories and thoughts into a "vicious circle" in which one misunderstanding of the original is followed by another and one abusive usage leads to the next, so finally the lack of ontological recognition of the word "literature", a fallacy already there lying under the building of the contemporary western criticism, is exaggerated again in China and apparently reflected in our critical practice in these years. In fact, this "vicious circle" has long been realized by the Chinese academia and many critics have made introspection about it. However, what is the fundamental defect of the contemporary western criticism? How to logically identify the fundamental defect, or the Achilles' Heel of the whole system, and find an exact term to fix it? The finding out of the fundamental defect, as well as the naming of the defect in words, can be said the biggest theoretical challenge to Chinese literary academia today, a challenge demanding the critics' research in depth and arguments in a comprehensive framework. This paper tries to do some experimental works in this direction. For this purpose a core concept — *imposed interpretation* is proposed. The following illustration is developed around this core concept, using this term as a clue to understand the development

of modern literary criticism. Methodologically speaking this paper will try to find some consensuses about criticism by combining empirical observations with rational induction and deduction, and in doing this a new perspective is expected to be found for the systematical construction of contemporary literary criticism.

The term “imposed interpretation” refers to the critic’s practice of deviating from the discourse of the text under scrutiny, dispelling the signification system of literature, taking his theoretical stance and mode of interpretation before his close reading and interpretation and fitting the text stiffly to his own theoretical assumption and conclusion. Let me first of all explain roughly about this definition. “Deviating from the discourse of the text” means that the critic does not focus on the content of the text, but turns his critical attention to the employment of certain theoretical languages not so related to the text. The discourse and the text are so independent of each other that we might say the text is used by the critic as a tool — like an excuse to spread his doctrine or a footnote to serve his theory. “Dispelling the signification system of literature” means that the critic interprets literary texts or literary phenomena not with the language of literature, but with languages of philosophy, history, sociology or that part of cultural studies irrelevant to literature. His research is almost empty of literary reference, let alone theories of literary quality. To him, a literary text is not a literary text, but a political, historical or social text instead. “Taking his theoretical stance and mode of interpretation before his close reading and interpretation” means that before the real process of reading and interpreting a text, the critic has decided a stance to prove in his mind, and then examine, choose and judge texts from this stance and for the sake of this stance. The textual material he uses is inferior to his stance, working around it as the stance’s testimony. It is purely his stance not the text that gives rise to his criticism. Theoretical stance is the core of his interpretation. Besides stance, interpretative mode can also be a hidden priority set before the real process of interpretation. A pre-set interpretative mode is like a template for the text to be embedded in. Factors of the text not fitting to it, however important, are cut out. Imposing interpretation with a pre-set mode is a faulty skill more frequently seen in the application of scientific theories in literary studies, like linguistic, mathematical and physical theories. “Fitting the text stiffly to his own theoretical

assumption and conclusion” refers to a critical attitude of teleology in essence. Texts are interpreted not for the purpose of digging out their deep meanings, but for going back to certain theoretical intention and conclusion designed by the critic in advance. Conclusion exists before interpretation happens, and critical reading turns out to be a process of finding proofs for the conclusion and then realizing the critic’s subjective intention. “Intention” and “conclusion” are two different yet linked steps of this sequence: a critic holds an “intention” first; then he draws a “conclusion” from this intention; then he looks for texts that can lead to his conclusion and prove his theoretical intention. Intention decides conclusion and conclusion demands textual analysis in consistent to it.

Here we can see the main difference between my concept of “imposed interpretation” and Umberto Eco’s “overinterpretation”: imposed interpretation is reflected not only in an excess of interpretation, but also in the interpreter’s motive and interpretative mode. These two concepts indicate different motives: overinterpretation still focuses on the “sacred” text itself, while imposed interpretation is more for proving theories than for exhausting the meanings of the text. And they have different interpretative modes: overinterpretation, poor or not, does not take a theory as its standpoint, neither will trim text to fit the theory; but imposed interpretation starts from a theory, treating it as a given condition to select and interpret texts. With final conclusion preceding textual reading, imposed interpretation follows a reversed sequence of criticism making, which naturally deprives the criticism of its ground.

Imposed interpretation has three characteristics. They are:

- a) *forced inclusion of the extra-literary*, which means transplanting theories or interpretative modes from other disciplines in force, thus wiping out the ontological qualities of the category named as “literature” and finally leading literary criticism away from the discursive scope of literature;
- b) *subjective assumption prior to interpretation*, which means a critic has already in his mind some subjective assumptions or theoretical stance to prove, so he ignores the original intention of the text and forcibly attaches certain meanings and value to the text;

- c) *reversed route of cognition*, which refers to the frequently reversed sequence of criticism, when interpreter sets out his criticism from some presupposed theories or arbitrary conclusions, not from the text itself, and thus his interpretation turns out to be self-referential.

1. Forced Inclusion of the Extra-literary

In contemporary literary criticism, forced inclusion of extra-literary languages is a common phenomenon. Northrop Frye once says that in his eyes, whether Marxist, Thomist, liberal-humanist, neo-classical, Freudian, Jungian, or existentialist, they are all proposing, not to find a conceptual framework for criticism within literature, but to attach criticism to one of a miscellany of frameworks outside it (Frye, 1957, p. 6). Generally speaking, among the important critical trends of the last century, except formalism and new criticism, basically all the other theoretical schools have more or less transplanted elements from other disciplines and proposed many terms, jargons, concepts and cognitive models so alien to the traditional literary studies. When theories and cognitive models originally not the least of literary reference are borrowed or directly copied by critics as material to develop their unconventional criticism, the meanings of literary criticism in the ontological sense is at the risk of being undermined. Not only so, the long acceptance of the alien fields' intrusion has changed the configuration of contemporary literary criticism. It is noticeable that in these years, when profound changes are occurring all the time to the world's geopolitical, economic and cultural lives, when many issues are emerging as controversies involving conflicting interests of different communities, the criticism offered by the discipline named as "literature" is more and more relying on the input of the other disciplines to update its discursive power. The input of the other disciplines, realized by discursive imitation, transplantation, direct diversion and so on, constitutes the most basic driving force to generate our contemporary criticism of literature.

Considering the extra-literary origins of contemporary literary criticism, three kinds of origins can be roughly generalized here. The first kind are disciplines also belonging to a broader category of human

sciences and historically more closely related to the studies of literature, like philosophy, history, linguistics and etc. Philosophy is especially the reservoir of thoughts continuously stimulating the expansion of literary criticism. Some prominent trends and schools in philosophy avail themselves of literary materials to fulfill their theoretical construction and manifest their instructive power. Jacques Derrida admits in his *Writing and Difference* that he often makes use of literary texts to develop his thoughts of deconstruction (Derrida, 2001, p. 20). Conversely, literature also makes use of the other disciplines. As Richard Rorty points out, it was the department of English, not the department of philosophy, that was opening more and more courses of philosophy. So Rorty proposes that the so-called “literary theories” are actually intentional and systematic attempts to politicize the functions of literature (Rorty, 1992, p. 98).

The second origin are theories springing up in political, social and cultural movements and affairs. Theories for the purpose of serving movements usually take on the color of avant garde and advocate actions. Once introduced into the territory of literature, they open a new and inspiring horizon for literary critics to run for. Feminist criticism initiated by feminist movements, postcolonial criticism and theories based on the worldwide anti-colonial struggles and liberation, Roland Barthes’ change from structuralism to post-structuralism triggered by the May 1968 Events in France, queer studies rising from people’s gradual attention to gender identity and sexuality, ecocriticism nowadays popularly used as a kind of correction to the worsening environmental situation, all these provide sufficient examples to show the continuous interplay between literary criticism and the outside agendas.

The third origin are the multitudinous observations, explanations, principles and methods in the world of natural sciences. The findings of the natural sciences are believed to be objective, reliable and probably universally true, so they are borrowed by literary critics who intend to sharpen their critical weapons and interpret texts in a more accurate, reliable and rational manner. This “scientific turn” can be seen in the semiotics’ usage of the mathematical matrix to analyze literary texts, the ecocriticism’s transplantation of the Chaos Theory and the geocriticism’s incorporating the study of geographical space and time into its critical practice.

The routes for extra-literary influence entering into the world of literary criticism can also be divided into three kinds. The first kind is by formula shift, which is conspicuously seen in the semiotic criticism. Algirdas Julien Greimas, one of the most important semioticians and the leading figure of French structuralism, introduces a structuralist analyzing method called Greimas Semiotic Square for the study of narratology. His semiotic square extracts four key elements from any narrative text. These four elements are paired concepts constituting four corners of a square which is to map the logical conjunctions and disjunctions relating to the plot. This method relies on a belief that it is the interrelations among these four elements — contrary, complementarity and contradiction — that push the story going forward.

The second kind of route is by inter-disciplinary transference. Hermeneutic criticism developed by Hans-Georg Gadamer from the hands of Heidegger is in essence an expansion of the philosophical hermeneutics. In order to set up an ontological hermeneutics different from the conventional methodological hermeneutics before the 20th century, Gadamer turns his eyes to literature and arts. He has clearly explained the reasons for his trying every means to explore people's experience of arts: the experience of arts playing a decisive role in his philosophical hermeneutics; the experience of arts providing an appropriate measurement to understand the essence of understanding; the experience of arts also saving us from a misunderstanding that understanding is a dominant tyrant (Gadamer, 1989, p. 357). "Gadamer's study of arts is not from an arts critic's research needs and interest. Instead, it is part of his hermeneutics building" (Zhu, 2005, p. 277). Obviously, it is for the better development of philosophical hermeneutics that Gadamer turns his attention to literary studies. His aim is to enrich hermeneutics by referring to literature and to prove the meanings of philosophical interpretation by literary interpretation.

The third route is *trans-disciplinary borrowing*. This borrowing route is most distinctly reflected in the criticism of space theory. Being a professor of geography himself, Mike Crang uses geographical terms, concepts and methods to study literary texts and opens a new dimension of interpretation. In his *Cultural Geography*, he proposes, "What is perhaps more interesting is seeing how certain places and spatial divisions, are established within the literary text. This comes through

both in the plot, character and autobiography of the authors. ... The creation of a sense of home — and homeland — is a profoundly geographical construction in a text. Such a ‘base’ is vital to geographical knowledge about the imperial and modern worlds” (Crang, 1998, p. 47). Using his cultural geography to decode the meanings of space in literary works, he re–interprets *Odyssey*, the ancient Greek epic, and *Les Miserables* of Victor Hugo. To *Les Miserables*, he comments, “The novel can thus be read as using the landscape to suggest a geography of knowledge, by the state about the potentially rebellious poor, and thus also a geography of state power” (Crang, 1998, p. 50).

Many textual techniques are involved if we want the trans–disciplinary crossings natural, smooth, traceless and fitting specific contexts well. Either using extra–literary theories to create literary signifiers or using literary material to serve theories of other disciplines, demands superior theoretical manipulative capability and keen interest in literature and arts.

One frequently used technique is “discursive replacement”. By replacing the most primary language of a text with another kind of language — language from certain extra–literary origin, this technique leads critique to an elaboration of some extra–literary theory. This technique might be labeled as “discursive regeneration” as well. It is particularly noteworthy that this regenerated discourse is usually not of the most primary intention of the text, or not of the most possible intention of the author. First the background of understanding is changed, then the analytic language gets changed, and finally the target text is situated into a new framework of meaning–making.

The second technique can be labeled as “rigid embedding”, which mainly refers to a kind of straight and stiff copying of extra–literary theories. This technique usually first breaks the text’s structure into pieces to change the original reference of the text. Then it pushes the whole interpretative work into the formulas or logical chains of extra–literary theories. It seems like that the validity of a theory is proved through text reading, but in fact the validity has been set there before the critique’s textual reading. It is quite like embedding a text forcibly into an already existed theoretical ground. We say that it is “forcibly” because those of the constitutive elements of the text, not in conformity with the a priori theory, are wiped out, and the decoding process is handled with the interpreter’s arbitrary will.

Another technique which is very similar to “discursive replacement”, but still a little different, is “word attachment”. Discursive replacement happens on the level of interpretation as a whole, while word attachment happens on an inferior word level and in rhetorical details. Word attachment refers to the input of words from other disciplines into literary criticism — words of concepts, notions, terms, jargons and so on. Despite of the denotation and connotation gaps between these words and the object texts, they are borrowed in order to create a new dimension of interpretation. There are two kinds of attaching methods here. One is “paste”, like the cut-and-paste method in electronic writing. By directly pasting a word from some other discipline, a formal similarity is established. Then this formal similarity might lead to an equivalence in meaning. The other kind is “analogy”. By finding an analogy between a borrowed term and the hidden but innate meaning of the text, the critic gradually plants the text in the field of some extra-literary theories.

One more textual technique worth mentioning here is “history relocation”, that is anachronistically applying today’s theories to the past literary texts or events, using the present as criteria to judge the past. Whenever the text is born and whatever the core content of the text is, it must be interpreted in the light of some later generation’s perspectives and theories. It should be admitted that relocating history might add certain color of avant garde to old texts and even enhance old texts to a new and higher level of significance, but still such a technique should be handled with great care for its tendency of neglecting historically determined elements.

We can take an example of ecocriticism here to think about the functions of the above-mentioned textual techniques. *The Fall of the House of Usher* is Edga Allan Poe’s well-known tale. This short and horrible story has drawn many critics’ attention since it was published more than 100 years ago. Interpretations about it vary, but it is commonly agreed that the story is about people’s rationality and subconsciousness, the inscrutable *inside* of our being. However, the ecocentred reading of our time, by contrast, focuses on the *outside*, on house and its environment, and finally reaches conclusions about eco-system damaged beyond repair (Barry, 2014, pp. 250–251). Here is how this critical approach proceeds. The first step is “discursive replacement”. Although the story itself is a narrative about people —

their relationship, behaviors and souls, the ecocritical reading treats it as an ecological text about environment, by interpreting the story's backgrounds descriptions (like the environmental and climate descriptions) as the most crucial content of the story, thus change its motif and interpretative system. The second step is "word attachment". All the scattered descriptions about the environment in the story are collected together by ecocritical reading, and then specific items are singled out and given emblematic correlatives of ecology. For example, the ancient house is no more a house, but the emblem of entropy (a kind of negative energy within systems which tends towards breakdown). The falling down of the Usher house is not the final disaster of a building and a family, but a symbol of the Black Hole of universe. The mind of young man Usher is also an entropy, radiating negative energy. Usher's morbid sensitiveness to light and sound represents a system against the Nature, and so on and so forth. "Rigid embedding" is also used in this critique. After naming the emblems and images from an ecocritical point of view, all these elements and attached names should be organized into an ecological narrative. Otherwise, the reconstructing work by an influential theory cannot be said finished. Finally, if such an ecocritical reading is rendered as if it were historical truth, it is anachronistically fitting a literary work of previous age to a theory of subsequent age. After all, ecology ideas like entropy and Black Hole had not come into being when Poe wrote this story.

The practice of forced inclusion of the extra-literary has three characteristics. The first characteristic is its *forcefulness*. Forcefulness is shown in its borrowing discourses from other disciplines and planting them in the soil of literature. Forcefulness is also shown in its textual analysis, when the interpreter tries to match the intention of the text to his own theoretical intention, no matter what is the possible intention of the text and what responses the text might arouse. Yet, even with great forcefulness, this matching-up work still might fail, and then it is the turn of the second characteristic — *deconstruction*, deconstructing text to leave space for new arrangements of meanings. Here the logic goes like this. If a critic's emphasis is to use an extra-literary theory to interpret a text, then his starting point is the theory and the text is subordinate to it. But the truth is that more often than not, texts, especially classical works, come into being earlier than

our days' popular theories. It is no exaggeration to say that no text can fit all kinds of theories well. However, in order to achieve his theoretical purpose, the interpreter must find means to force the text into the framework of the theory of his choice. How to interpret the text at his own free will? Here comes the third characteristic — *replacement*, replacing the normal understanding of the text with new sayings. There are replacements of the text's theme — replacing it with a new one, as well as replacement of the text's original character design — inviting a marginal character to the center of the stage, as if he is the text's hero. Replacement turns text into theory's servant. Forcefulness, deconstruction and replacements, these three characteristics are of linear proceeding sequence: because the interpretation is interpretation in force, deconstruction is a need to mend the gap; following deconstruction, it is naturally discursive replacement.

Obviously, forced inclusion of the extra-literary theories always leads to the practice of turning a blind eye to the constitutive elements of the text under scrutiny and bending the text's themes or reference to suit the needs of theories originated from other disciplines than literature. Often the result is double failures: literary criticism fails to explain target texts, while target texts fail to prove theories and criticism. Gradually literary criticism is losing its "literary" quality. Thinking about the ill effects of forced theoretical application, two questions still need further clarifying here.

The first question is, should the inclusion of extra-literary theories be taken as illegal, when the tendency of cross-disciplinary clashes and trans-disciplinary integration are so evident today and researches breaking the traditional disciplinary limitations are providing the main driving force for social progress? We must admit that from a constructive point of view, trans-disciplinary tendency and practice have definitely broaden the vision of contemporary literary criticism and paved new ways to a multi-dimensional critical space. This is good for contemporary literary criticism to go beyond its circular arguments on literariness in the narrow sense and bring more layers of meanings to its social value. However, we shall at the same time not forget that compared with the external theoretical facilities, the intrinsic motivation is much more important for the sustainable development of literary criticism, and this intrinsic motivation is nothing but literary practice by writers. So, literary criticism should first of

all come from literary practice. Also, expansion by unbalanced dependence upon the extra-literary theories is also a self-evident proof of the weakness of contemporary literary criticism. Its weakness lies in its lack of creative mind to find new discourse, to name new things, and to condense new theories in literary works and practice. To put it shortly, contemporary literary criticism fails to use the language of literature to enhance people's feelings about their being. Once again it is emphasized here that the admit of the negative aspect of trans-disciplinary theoretical borrowing is not equal to cutting off literary criticism from the other disciplines and being contended with its own discursive echoing. Trans-disciplinary researches can be vigorous platforms for new theories come into being, and the whole development of literary criticism throughout the 20th century is exactly guaranteed by this trans-disciplinary tendency. The main reason against forced inclusion of extra-literary theories and research models is that we must respect the principal characteristic of literature. Different from philosophy, history, mathematics and many other disciplines, literature is the expression by words of people's ideas, emotions and consciousness in literary ways. Literary ways feature *individuality*, the individual's mind power. How can we measure individuality with something uniform? When we try to get the core of a literary work via some extra-literary methods and theories, the basic facts of its literariness shall not be violated. To literary criticism as a whole, its borrowing from other disciplines to generate new critical theories will not succeed in the true sense unless the borrowing practice is based on and judged by the critics' knowledge about the uniqueness of literary creation. Without the knowledge about and respect to literature itself, any literary theory will sooner or later be lifeless. If the theories literary criticism has fully equipped with fail to interpret literary texts, the existence of theories will be questioned and mocked and the very discipline of literature will meet its serious crisis. Blind transportation of theories is harmful. The Sokal Affair, an impressive anecdote in the 20th century literary critical history, is a thought-provoking case of this harm (Ivi, p. 281). In 1996, Allan Sokal, an American physics professor submitted an article to *Social Text*, an academic journal of postmodern cultural studies. This article was a hoax article, aiming to test the journal's academic vigor. The journal did not identify the mistakes about common science in the article or the nonsense

connections Sokal established between science and postmodernism. Sokal's hoax article was published, and on the day of its publication, Sokal revealed the truth to another magazine. The whole world was shocked at this news. According to Sokal's words, part of his purpose was to show his dissatisfaction with literary criticism's abusive usage of new terms of mathematics, physics and other scientific fields. The irony of Sokal Affair shall be taken as an alert that literary criticism must be careful in its borrowing of extra-literary theories. Trans-disciplinary borrowing might be more suitable and safer if it happens on the research method level, instead of direct usage or repetition of the others' discourse.

The second question is, once a new interpretation to a target text has taken shape, to what extent can we use this new interpretation to re-understand and re-write history? This question is very similar to an everlasting concern of hermeneutics. If we take a long enough time span into our consideration, any understanding to a text is tentative. Nietzsche, Heidegger and Gadamer all share this view, especially Gadamer who thinks every kind of interpretation is just adding more meanings to a text instead of finding the meaning (Gadamer, p. 426). So it is reasonable that the meaning of a text is drifting, changing, refusing to be fixed. A methodology called "critical presentism" rising at the threshold of the 21st century tries to read the past with the present, emphasizing the present reading and meaning of a historical text. This is a response against various modes of historicist literary studies, including the relatively late schools of new historicism and cultural materialism (Barry, 2014, p. 288). The critical method of reading history through the lens of the present is not necessarily problematic, for it provides more space for literature to play its present-day social roles. But, presentism and historicism are two bifurcate roads after all. The dimension of concrete history shall not be totally ignored even in our teleological reading of an old text. To understand a text historically is in essence to understand the text's original discursive scope, and this scope is a given condition for our analysis into the text. Should a presentist revision of the past violate this given condition, the critique will turn out to be a groundless fallacy. Critical presentism, if manipulated well, can add new meanings to an old text, but it cannot go too far to evidently distort the writer's original reference or to judge the meanings of a text with modern notions forcibly and

awkwardly.

So, when we look back at old texts in the light of new theories, we must be alert of theoretical abuse. New readings can be taken as a kind of compensation to, not a replacement of, the primary text itself. Maybe there is indeed something in accordance to a critic's theoretical presupposition. But if this "something" is just an accidental coincidence or vague fragments of the writer's thoughts, how can we take it as the writer's serious concerns expressed on purpose and then to redefine the most fundamental motif of the text? New theories give critics new light to read old texts, but if a critic wants to re-evaluate everything and finally adapt the text, he is quite beyond his critical authority. A primary text is a primary text. Interpretations are interpretations. They are not identical. The primary text cannot speak for itself. It cannot declare its own interpretation as the most authoritative understanding. Interpretations are always from the critics' individual points of view. So the smoothest logic should go like this: text first, understanding second; text determining understanding, understanding depending on text; the absence of text naturally leading to the absence of sensible understanding.

It is undeniable that in certain contexts, theoretical borrowing from extra-literary disciplines has played positive and important roles. Yet, proper and effective employment of extra-literary theories is not possible without a necessary condition, that is the theory should be able to arrive at the nature of literature. There are three layers of meanings in this "arrival at the nature of literature".

The first meaning is that the theory refers directly to literary works and it belongs to the tradition of literature. Traditional literary theories and criticism focus on texts and comment on the texts' literary styles and aesthetic values. They refer directly to commonly agreed works of literature and they should be consequently regarded as literary theories and criticism. However, this tradition is interrupted by the concept of "critical theory" which emerges in the 1960s western society and has gained great popularity since. This concept is not, or mainly not, for exploring the meanings of literature. It is not interested in texts, especially literary texts in a narrow sense. It cares about theories. The "theory" of "critical theory" is not confined to literary studies. Actually it is much more intended for interpreting things beyond literature. It outlines a trans-disciplinary area. Even

if this area starts from literature, it now has gone beyond the world of literature and targets at issues and theories of philosophy, history, anthropology, sociology, political science and so on. But on second thought, it might be more exactly to say critical criticism does not target at theories either. Its exclusive interest is in the “society” — the material world that is not constituted by abstract theories. Since literature is not the main interest of today’s “critical theory”, it is obviously a fallacy to replace traditional literary criticism with it. In order to see this fallacy more clearly, let’s once again look into the influencing relationship between the field of literature and the external theories. We can roughly divide their mutual relationship into two kinds: using literature to interpret external theories and using external theories to interpret literature. Using literature to interpret theories not of literature is the most commonly seen practice of “critical theory”. Freud’s using Greek tragedy *Oedipus The King* to support his psychological theory is a far evidence. Fredric Jameson bases his book *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* on his meditation about classical works by Gustave Flaubert, Joseph Conrad, George Gissing and etc. Although he makes excellent analysis into some literary text, and his unique ideas are indeed a special and instructive contribution to the enrichment of literary theories, his *The Political Unconscious*, in essence, should not be taken as a book of literary theory or criticism. It would be more accurate to call it a critical book about modernist theories. Both his starting point and ending point are not in literary things. He is a theorist using literary material to serve his theoretical purpose. As to using external theories to interpret literature, whether it belongs to literary criticism depends on whether the theories really point at and belong to literature. The direction a theory pointing at is where it belongs to. Difference of emphasis exists between pointing at literature or at another research field. Take feminist criticism for example. If its emphasis is on specific literary texts defined as feminist writing, it is feminist literary criticism. If it is using literary texts to advocate feminist theories, it is feminism, which expands into the field of literature but should not be treated as literary criticism without differentiation. In short, if an interpretation is made in the light of some extra-literary theory and finally it goes too far in the theory that it loses its focus on literature at all, then this interpretation is an imposed interpretation if it still insists on its being literary criticism.

The second consideration for a theory's arriving at the nature of literature or not is whether the theory can be settled down in the study of literature for long and serve the needs of literature. The result of settling down is an effect, a judgment, a sign. Viewed as a whole, the western literary criticism of the 20th century has introduced many theories from the other disciplines, but those adopted and used as long established theories of literature are few, and those developed into fine theoretical systems are even fewer. Terry Eagleton says that there are two familiar ways in which any theory can provide itself with a distinct purpose and identity: either it can define itself in terms of its particular methods of enquiry; or it can define itself in terms of the particular object that is being enquired into (Eagleton, 1983, pp.171–172). With a reference to his criteria, what theories borrowed from extra-literary origins can be said of literary purpose and identity? What methods become effective common methods of reading literary texts? We are kept being provided with concepts and categories by certain great “-isms”, but how many trends have proven sustainable and systematic? New Criticism might be an exception. But how about the other borrowed theories? Are they all suitable for the studies of literature?

Third, literary theory exists in a literary way. What is a theory's literary way of existence? The point is literary theory should be concrete theory that can be put into specific interpretation of text. Compared with theories of the other branches of social sciences, especially with philosophy, literary theory deals with literature, which concerns neither everyday social phenomena nor abstract conception and cognition. Literary theory focuses on the rules and history of literature, specific methods of creating and analyzing literary texts. If a literary theory does not care about textual or aesthetic things, but show great zeal to criticizing the society, constructing ideas about issues not of literary concern and participating in Hegel's purely spiritual activities, can it be still labeled as “literary” theory? Needless to say, theories need evolution, evolution based on practice and in accordance with practice. Literary criticism is a form of practicing literary theories, as literary creations and phenomena are. Theory and criticism are two interwoven entities. Theory is always reflected as theory for criticism, and criticism is always reflected as criticism by theory. Without theory, criticism would have been extinct long ago. Incapable of penetrating

into criticism, theory would be too far away from literature. This is dialectic of the triangular relationship among criticism, theory and literature.

2. Subjective Assumption Prior to Interpretation

The phrase “subjective assumption” is the key to understanding how an imposed interpretation takes its shape. It refers to the practice that a critic interprets a text’s meanings or evaluates its significance not by strict logic deduction, but by certain preconceptions and a priori arguments in their mind. A critique made out of subjective assumption usually has its political stance, mode of interpretation or theoretical conclusion first, therefore the whole critical text is nothing but a textual design to prove his assumption. Subjective assumption damages criticism by lowering it to the level of footnote making to theories or social agendas. Subjective assumption is very likely to bring three logic “traps” into critical texts.

The first trap is *pre-taken stance* before interpretation, which means that a critic has already taken his stance of argument or political gesture before his seemingly objective reading into a literary text. In fact, his main purpose is not to tell the main idea of the literary text but to declare his idea, to express his attitude, to show his concerns about something quite possibly not literary at all. Especially when affairs and theories not of literature are directly used by the critic, his stance and intention will be more self-evident. Contrary to the common understanding that a critic should find his ideas or draw his conclusions from literary texts, critic with political stance ready in his mind tries to find literary texts to satisfy his stance. He has a stance first, then critical standards fitting his stance well, and then literary texts fitting his standards well. Both the literary texts he chooses and the interpretative process he takes serve his initial standpoint. The reason for using literary texts to fulfill an extra-literary agenda lies in the value of literature. As literary creations can reach the broadest readers and the deepest feelings, the use of literary elements can greatly enhance a pre-taken stance’s influencing and convincing power.

The second trap is *pre-set mode of interpretation*, reflected as a critic fitting a literary text into an analyzing formula and then abstracting

out meanings rather stiffly. Usually in this kind of critical trap, the critic seems to be very confident about the analyzing formula he chooses, holding it universally true and capable of covering any literary text. Among the diversified schools of contemporary literary criticism, literary semiotics is the one that most features using analytical formula to draw meanings from texts, especially when it borrows formulas from physics or mathematics. Overwhelmed by formula methods, literary theories and criticism will no more work as the artistic expression of human thoughts and emotions. When criticism is simplified into applying formulas to literary texts and literary texts are thus solidified into dry relationship factors, the happiness and inspiration derived from reading experience will be driven out and the critique turns into a boring labor of solving mathematical problems.

The third trap is *predetermined conclusion*, which refers to the situation of conclusion preceding textual analysis. Obviously such a conclusion is not out of a critic's close reading into a target text and logical deduction. Not for explaining texts, but for proving certain arranged conclusions, it is a reversed order to normal interpretative process. It starts from the ending point — the conclusion, and goes all the way back to the initial point — the primary texts. The predetermined conclusion works like a deliberate tour guide, leading a critique involuntarily moving to a designed place.

Elaine Showalter, as one of the most famous feminist critic, occasionally shows the problem of subjective assumption in her feminist criticism. She likes re-interpretating literary texts in history and her feminist perspective often works as a pre-taken stance in her re-interpretation. Her critical essay written in the 1980s, *Representing Ophelia: Women, Madness, and the Responsibilities of Feminist Criticism*, makes an anti-conventional reading to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. She rejects the traditional criticism of taking Hamlet, the hero, as the focus of textual analysis, and puts Ophelia, Hamlet's fiancée, a supporting character in the drama, into the center of her understanding of *Hamlet*. In this article Showalter proposes that Ophelia's being neglected in criticism is not an accidental phenomenon but the outcome of patriarchal order. "The alteration of strong and weak Ophelias on the stage, virginal and seductive Ophelias in art, inadequate or oppressed Ophelias in criticism, tells us how these representations have overflowed the text, and how they have reflected the ideological character

of their times” (Showalter, 1985, p. 91). Showalter believes a feminist view to interpret Ophelia iconography is very important. After surveying a variety of art forms of representing Ophelia, Showalter asks, “how should feminist criticism represent Ophelia in its own discourse? What is our responsibility towards her as character and as woman?” (Ivi, p. 78) “To liberate Ophelia from the text, or to make her its tragic center, is to re-appropriate her for our own ends” (Ivi, p. 79).

The purpose of Showalter’s tracing into Ophelia’s historical discourse is definite. First, to change previous standards and re-evaluate this drama from a feminist point of view. In the view of feminists, any literary text can be read as a text about woman and femininity, no matter what the author’s original idea is and what the discourse he lives in is. In fact, not just in individual literary works, but literary history as a whole need to be re-read and re-written. To feminist critics, women experience is the most important standard of assessing literary value. Feminist position is their pre-taken stance and the beginning of their critique making. This clear-cut frontier is extremely necessary to shape the ground of feminist criticism.

The second purpose of Showalter’s feminist reading is to re-evaluate characters, “to re-appropriate her for our own ends”. By inviting the previously marginalized and distorted female characters to the center of stage, standing there in spotlight as representatives of women, feminist criticism finds a proper channel to express its revolting thoughts against the patriarchal order and male dominating system.

The third purpose is to re-interpret the theme of *Hamlet*. It is no more a story of a prince’s difficult revenge. It is actually a story of an invisible girl named Ophelia, and this story is in essence a piece of hidden history. Maybe, Shakespeare produces this hidden history on purpose, which is a good proof that Shakespeare is conscious of patriarchy and a good proof of long existed feminist thoughts in literary history as well. To Showalter, her criticism is her duty for the struggle for women.

However, under her subjective critical design, Shakespeare’s classical work is subverted. Though Shakespeare just gives a few touches to Ophelia: her turning up in only 5 of the total 20 scenes and the love between Hamlet and her is ambiguously mentioned by several lines for flashback, she must be examined again with a new light. So some details, details neglected by the previous *Hamlet* criticism, are picked

out and their specific implications are uncovered. For example, the flowers Ophelia wears when she goes mad suggests double images: one is innocent blooming, indicated by the virginal rose of may; the other is whorish contamination indicated by wild flowers and herbs. The “weedy trophies” and phallic “long purples” which she wears to her death and her disordered hair all images associated with femininity and sexuality. Her death in water is especially a reference to female elements. “Drowning ... becomes the truly feminine death in the dramas of literature and life, one which is a beautiful immersion and submersion in the female element. Water is the profound and organic symbol of the liquid woman whose eyes are so easily drowned in tears, as her body is the repository of blood, amniotic fluid and milk” (Ivi, p. 81). Showalter’s defense for women is also made by creating a textual coalition with other feminist critiques. She borrows deconstructive words and symbols from the French psychoanalytic criticism, saying that when Hamlet is joking with Ophelia that there is nothing between maids’ legs, this “nothing” is actually a symbol of Ophelia’s, as well as women-in-general’s state of being. “Deprived of thoughts, sexuality, language, Ophelia’s story becomes the story of O — the zero, the empty circle or mystery of feminine difference, the cipher of female sexuality to be deciphered by feminist interpretation” (Ivi, p. 79). Be it textual analysis or theoretical reference, the purpose of Showalter is quite clear. It is to prove that in the long history of literature and arts, women are systematically contemned, insulted and tortured. They are the object of contempt and misreading. So far as feminism has illuminated, the images of women need to be reconstructed, either by disclosing the male’s violence or by enhancing the female’s fighting spirit. Not only so, feminism should also be widely used as a criterion to judge literary practice and effects. However, the problem, or the “trap” of a pre-taken stance arises here. Can the feminist judgment about Shakespeare’s gender position fit his actual mind well? When feminist criticism is applied to Shakespeare, shouldn’t there be more legitimate proofs to guarantee its interpretative correctness? Compared with Showalter’s paper about *Hamlet*, one of the most representative feminist critical works, *The Madwoman in the Attic: the Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, written by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, makes a much more general and far-reaching critical attack to the dominant male’s voice

in literary history. These two female literary critics scrutinize how the nineteenth-century male writers have created female characters and two categories of woman image are identified by them: the angel and the monster. Both kinds are distortion and depression made by man's society to women. Both are the reflection of the deep-rooted prejudice against women in patriarchal ideology. To Gilbert and Gubar, text abuse and text harassment to women are all-pervasive in the literary history, and they provide abundant examples to their feminist criticism (Gilbert, Gubar, 1992, pp. 271–297). The influence of this book is powerful, especially its efforts to totalize individual cases into the historical phenomenon of male centrism and uplift feminist criticism to the status of being universally effective. But, in spite of welcoming it, we still need to think hard how much convincing power the practice of categorizing writers by genders can possess?

Where shall we start our critiques? From which shall we draw conclusions: from close reading to text or from the so-called theoretical consciousness?

One proposal is that theory is just a perspective to contemplate text. That is true. When we are making criticism, we need a cutting angle to enter into the text, a perspective. Criticism without perspective is not possible or serious. But, how do we choose or decide a perspective? The most reliable method is from text, from literary works. Imagine a text as a mountain, and now you are looking at this mountain. Theory is the angle of your eyes watching the mountain, that is your perspective. If you want to have a good view of the mountain, you have to find a good position. When you are looking for a good position, you naturally take the whole mountain — its height, form and structure into your consideration. Subjective assumption in interpretation is faulty, because it is like turning a blind eye to the mountain's specific features and stubbornly staying in an inappropriate observation spot. No wonder the true face of the mountain is revealed. Though some angles are faulty (too far away from a good and true view), we must admit effective angles are by no means singular. There should be multiple perspectives to observe the mountain to enrich our knowledge about its "true face". Similarly, there should be multiple cutting angles to make criticism. Different theories bring new lights to a text and find new meanings. I am not proposing a self-contradictory argument here. Admitting multiple perspectives is not equal to ad-

mitting every perspective is of no problem. Ancient Chinese poet Su Shi (苏轼 1037–1101) leaves us a famous poem about seeing different sides of a mountain from different perspectives: “Looking from the side it forms a range, from the end it forms a peak; From everywhere looking at the mountain, it’s never the same” (横看成岭侧成峰, 远近高低各不同). But what if it is a perspective from which you can only vaguely see the mountain, or even worse that you cannot see it at all? Such a perspective is my metaphor for inappropriate theory which ignores or distorts text. Here comes the matching problem between theory and text. But, how to judge whether they are matching or not? The core standard for judging a theory matching or not is not how influential or popular the theory is, but to what extent the texture of the text can be explained by it. In order to tell the texture of the text, it is necessary to study the text thoroughly and comprehensively, viewing it as a whole.

Certainly theory can shed guiding light on criticism. But, if theory becomes critic’s pre-taken stance and in order to advocate the stance critics add something neither can be found nor justified in text, then theory will stop playing its enlightening role and even lose its objectivity and legitimacy. We might well imagine that if we extend the practice of pre-taken stance to our understanding of literary history, then we might try to re-interpret or re-write the whole history with just one kind of theory and its discourse, as if this theory were the only language that can decode history. Should we interpret literature in this way, where will the truthfulness lie — the truthfulness of either history as a text or a text as history? Theoretical assumption, if handled rather stiffly as a screening tool in our selection of literary material, will cause the problem of imposed interpretation, interpretation that goes beyond the boundary of literary criticism. It is true that criticism involves multiple perspectives and interpretations, but it should avoid pre-taken stance, for critics holding them will be too easily to draw conclusions detached from texts’ real content and backgrounds. Or let me put it in another way, critics can take stance and have attitudes, but their stance should be reasonable, resulting from objective analysis. In order to explain the problem of “pre-taken stance” more accurately, four questionable points should be clarified here.

The first question is what is the difference between “knowledge background” and “pre-taken stance”. There should be no argument

that a critic's mind is not "tabula rasa" in John Locke's words. Both Gadamer's "prejudice theory" and Jauss' concept of "horizon of expectation" are telling us that reading is not a 100 percent innocent thing. Can a critic give up his prejudice ultimately and set out his critical journey with a transparent mind? A subject's knowledge background is how much he is equipped with relevant knowledge. To human beings, knowledge is the necessary condition of their cognition practice, including reading. For example, he must know certain words if he wants to read and he must follow common logic if he wants to express himself. Such knowledge is not the "pre-taken stance" I am against.

Gadamer's words of "prejudice" and "fore-conception" point at an individual's knowledge model, firmly held yet constantly revised by him. His knowledge model is influenced and determined by both collective and personal factors, like the historical phase he is in, his national, ethnical and cultural identities, his educational and social backgrounds and his past experience. Though he is not conscious of his knowledge model, this model is where his cognition starts. His fore-conception cannot change his cognition object, so fore-conception alone cannot decide cognition result. Gadamer is quite aware of this limitation. He says that in order to realized understanding, one should remain "open to the meaning of the other person or text" and hold an as-a-matter-of-fact attitude, because, using Gadamer's words, "a person trying to understand something will not resign himself from the start to relying on his own accidental fore-meanings, ignoring as consistently and stubbornly as possible the actual meaning of the text [...]" Gadamer believes that interpretation (hermeneutics) should not be controlled by one's accidental fore-meaning, not to mention his consistently and stubbornly sticking to it and ignoring facts and truth of his object. As to the dialectic relationship between "prejudice" and meanings, Gadamer's attitude is like this, "The important thing is to be aware of one's own bias, so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one's own fore-meanings" (Gadamer, 2010, p. 381-382)¹.

1. The English translation of Gadamer's direct quotation also refers to an English version of *Truth and Method* translated by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall. (Gadamer, Hans-Georg, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall,

Jauss' concept of horizon of expectation is very similar to Gadamer's fore-conception. Both refer to a projected cognition model before reading practice; both possessed by us subconsciously; both cannot change the hard facts about their objects at their free will. However, they are also different. Fore-conception is one's psychological readiness for cognition, while horizon of expectation is one's expectation about certain results, which is more specific and purposeful. When it occurs that reality does not fit fore-conception or expectation, the former will revise its conceptions and add this revision to its knowledge model, while the latter will adjust its vision to adapt to reality and open a new horizon.

Neither prejudice theory nor horizon of expectation is identical to my "pre-taken stance", which indicates the a critic's subjective and deliberate choice of meanings. Before studying specific literary text, a critic has already chosen his argument and taken his critical stance; then he tailors his argument with supportive details from the literary text, even though these details might be distortions to the primary text. Stance leads to actions. A critic might adapt primary text and revise reality just because of his stance. These aggressive gestures are his sensible choice. Stance refuses changes. It intervenes text and manipulates interpretation. Because pre-taken stance is always a strong theoretical conscious leading to actions, it is more powerful than fore-conception in critical practice.

In short, different from Gadamer's fore-conception which is always ambiguously revealed, imposed interpretation has its clear stand and definitive goal to achieve. Gadamer's prejudice might extend aimlessly to any directions, while a pre-taken stance focuses on specific direction or directions. Besides, Gadamer's prejudice occurs accidentally and naturally in a criticastancel text, not so much on purpose. But a pre-taken stance has a purpose. The difference between Jauss' "horizon of expectation" and pre-taken stance is also apparent: the former refers to the readers' aesthetic expectation, while the latter refers to the critics' theoretical evaluation; the former prefers to see "what a piece of literary work should be", while the latter prefers to talk about "what a piece of literary work must be". Obviously, critique with pre-taken stance is critique developed from certain designed theory

instead of literary text. Thus they easily fall into the state of imposing meanings or values to literary works in force and turns literary works into theories' witnesses. A critic's pre-taken stance can draw literary works and practice over to their sides and be their partners, while his knowledge background will not function in this way. That is where the main difference of the two concepts lies.

The second is the difference between "theoretical guidance" and "pre-taken stance". It is good to have appropriate theories to guide one's research. Could it be that theoretical guidance is a kind of pre-taken stance? Where can we draw a line between well-suited theoretical guidance and ill-fitting stance? This is perhaps where their biggest difference lies: the former, referring to the guiding light offered by theory for a critic's outlook and methodology, only serves as an apparatus for orientation, not like the latter, which are specific arguments and conclusions taken for granted before objective analysis. In actual critical practice, theories providing "theoretical guidance" should observe facts and facts are in turn in the position of correcting theories. But pre-taken stance is not so factual and objective. They perform as established criteria of reading and interpreting, with innate formulas and conclusions. Researches led by pre-taken stance even bend facts to observe theories. They set criteria for selecting facts and tailoring facts to suit their formulas and conclusions.

Friedrich Engels has a clear yet profound view about such formula like theories. At the end of the 19th century, a school of young critics and writers participated actively in the German Socialist Movement and they made copious critical attacks from a rigid perspective of materialism to social movements happening in Germany then and in history. However, many of their judgments and conclusions prove wrong. To their incorrectness, Engels comments that if materialist philosophy is used not as an enlightening method to study history but as a fixed formula, and historical facts are tailored in order to fit in this formula, then the so-called materialism will change to its own opposite (Marx, Engels, 1995, p. 688). Engels further emphasizes that theories should not be used as providing "stereotypes" or "labels" to various things, for such usages prevent researches in depth. Back to the understanding of historical development through materialism, Engels says that it is necessary for researchers to make a thorough study into history again, to study in details the conditions for various social

situations, and then basing on these condition find corresponding political, juridical, aesthetic, philosophical and religious views about societies (Ivi, p. 692). This is the way to attain the correctness of historical materialism. Engels' words are a three-fold reminder for us: first, theories are not formulas or labels that can be so easily stuck to things; second, any research with theoretical guidance shall never or ever ignore the importance of studying the research target's whole existing conditions and situations; third, a critic should naturally get his findings from facts, not forcibly using theories upon things or tailoring facts to satisfy his theories' needs. Otherwise, theories will go to the opposite of their initial meanings of existence. The dividing line is rather clear here: theoretical guidance taking theories as methods of understanding things and respecting and allowing facts to correct theories; while pre-taken stance using theories as formulas and tailoring and distorting facts to prove theories. One is scientific, while the other is formula like.

Engels' comments reflects the main points differentiating theoretical guidance of historical materialism from forced inclusion of extra-literary theories: the former used as a theoretical orientation, the latter a fixed mode; the former based on facts and adjusting itself to facts, the latter on its mode and tailoring facts to fit its mode; the former for seeking historical rules, the latter for proving theoretical correctness. Yes, obviously Marx and Engels are analyzing texts from the stance and in the method of historical materialism. But they are not labeling texts with theoretical terms and making imposed interpretation, as reflected in their employment of historical and aesthetic methods always mingled with their close reading into the texts, and their drawing of conclusions always from textual contents.

The third questionable point is the possibility of a uniform mode of criticism. The "scientific turn" of contemporary west literary criticism has taken great efforts to search for theories or critical modes capable of transcending their time and space and being equally effective to all texts and phenomena. Semiotics and narratology are two research directions typical of this turn. What they are striving to find are the dominant factors and uniform forms in the world of literature as well as of human beings in order to organize a pattern universally true to explain multitudinous phenomena. According to Fredric Jameson, structuralist seeking of superior "uniformity" is only

an illusion as he says mockingly that structuralism is essentially a replay of the Kantian dilemma of the unknowability of the thing-in-itself (Jameson, 1997, p. 89). Science of human arts, especially the study of literature, is fundamentally different from science of natural world on the aspects of research object and research route. Natural science targets at the objective material world, whose existence and operating rules are almost wholly independent of people's wills. Scientific workers' personal preference and emotions cannot change their research objects' beings. Even research methods must be the same as they should be. Literary creations are subjective things as they are the results of writers' individual spiritual activities. Since literary texts are controlled by writers' thinking and feelings, and thinking and feelings are free and abstract things that cannot be regulated once and for all; the structures, language and narrative forms of literary creations are naturally should not be interpreted or distorted by constantly identical formulas and theoretical molds. Besides, life is full of vicissitudes, and writers' feelings and understanding to life are indeed vulnerable to sudden changes and backward development. Critical formulas or molds cannot accommodate literary texts as reflections of their creators' big inner changes.

The fourth questionable point is the fairness of criticism. Speaking from the sense of epistemology, the most primary condition of criticism making is an ontological awareness of the text's existence. This awareness includes three aspects or levels: 1) what is written in the text, which is the most objective part of the text; 2) what the author intends to represent and whether his representation is in agreement with his intention; 3) what are the actual effects of the text, such as readers' understandings or response, and whether the effects are in agreement with the author's intention. These three aspects are the most basic elements of fair evaluations. The fairness of criticism centers on the fairness of his attitude to the texts. If imposed interpretation is made for the sake of certain theories, the fairness of criticism will be harmed or even lost. There is a concept of critical ethics involved here. A fair textual analysis should be in accordance with the text's content and the author's original intention. We take those written in the text as the text's content; while to those not written or represented in the text, we cannot take them as content for granted. Critical ethics is even more desired in our attitude to the author. When a critic is

trying to force his own will upon a text by deciphering out meanings neither obviously intended by the author nor definitely proved by any trace in the text, he is actually violating critical ethics. Of course on the other hand, the complexity of a text demands the complexity of its critiques, and the ambiguity of literariness eludes the capture of correct meanings. There might be a great gap between the author's original intention and his actual textual representation, which asks for debates and identifying works in depth. Possibly, a critic knows a text better than the author himself, for he can identify something already existing in the text but not realized by the author yet. Between epistemology and ethics, there is a space big enough to hold all these debates and explorations. Imposed interpretation is not operated in this space. It sets a pre-determined conclusion as the goal of its elucidation, then press what is not written in the text into the text and what is not intended by the author onto the author. Such a critic is so strong-willed that he offends both the logic procedures of epistemology and the rational principles of critical ethics. In conclusion, the fairness of criticism is guaranteed by correct method of epistemology and basic respect to critical ethics.

3. Reversed Route of Cognition

Reversed route of cognition refers to the inverted order happening in the process of theoretical construction and critical analysis, which starts from the concepts and categories of certain theory and goes all the way back to the theory itself. It is circular reasoning, proving a theory by the theory itself. To put it more precisely, this kind of criticism first takes a theory as its cutting angle to go into text. Then following the theory, it cuts text into pieces. Certainly these pieces are in line with its theoretical purpose, so these pieces are collected together to prove the theory's legitimacy in turn. From another perspective, we might say that reversed route of cognition is also an upside-down mistake in its handling of part-whole relationship. It uses its limited view and partial knowledge to replace the grand whole picture, and replaces thorough textual analysis with inaccurate imagination. Reversed route of cognition is definitely a wrong route of epistemology. It moves from theory to practice though logically spea-

king it should move from practice to theory. Contrary to the normal rule of drawing out conclusions from practice, it is using conclusions to fragmentize and emasculate texts. Reversed route of cognition is the epistemological cause of imposed interpretation.

Reversed route of cognition leads to many problems of logical disorder, of which the following three are especially noticeable.

First, it reverses the relationship between practice and theory. Theory comes from practice, and literary theory should grow up in its learning from literary practice. To this, J. Hillis Miller writes in his essay that great works of literature are likely to be ahead of their critics. “They are there already. They have anticipated explicitly any deconstruction the critic can achieve. A critic may hope, with great effort, and with the indispensable help of the writer themselves, to raise himself to the linguistic sophistication where Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, George Elliot, Stevens, or even Williams are already. They are there already, however, necessarily in such a way that their works are open to mystified readings” (Miller, 2008, p. 269). It should be an unquestionable statement that theories of literature spring from literary practice (i.e. works of literature). However, in the development of contemporary western literary criticism, this statement is a question, a big question.

There are some phenomena confusing and misleading our judgment.

The first phenomenon is that some literary theories are transplanted directly from extra-literary disciplines, and these theories have spread widely, seemingly of great influence. This phenomenon leaves us a false impression that theories can come from theories. Eagleton says in the Preface to his *Literary Theory*, “As the book itself tries to demonstrate there is no ‘literary theory’, in the sense of a body of theory which springs from, or is applicable to, literature alone. None of the approaches outlined in this book, from phenomenology and semiotics to structuralism and psycho-analysis, is simply concerned with ‘literary’ writing” (Eagleton, 1983, p. vii). But I won’t so easily take Eagleton’s words as truth. He is just describing a phenomenon. We can easily find converse examples. On one hand, there indeed exist theories springing from literature alone. For example, many

remarks and theories in the ancient Chinese poetics is purely from literature and for the literature, though they can also refer to and interplay with the outside world. On the other hand, there indeed exist theories whose coverage is so limited that they should not be used beyond their proper sphere. Of course, limited or not is hard to tell and we cannot exclude a theory's possibility of influencing other fields. But normally we shall not exaggerate a theory's radiation into other disciplines. Nor shall we go too far to make an ironic scene that the main force of the practitioners of a discipline are not experts of this disciplines, but of some other ones. Theories not of literary origin but captured by the contemporary western literary criticism are doomed to be washed out by the new tides, if they cannot get proper transformation in its qualities to fit literary practice in depth. The changing of literary theories in our times has constantly proven this.

The second phenomenon is that some important schools of thoughts set out criticism from theories and they use theories to operate anatomy on texts, forcing texts to prove theories. This leaves a false impression as well, as if theory can precede practice and higher than life. Theory and practice, the reciprocal relation between them can be viewed from two perspectives. One perspective is reality. Speaking from reality, practice is obviously higher than theory because it has more special and direct effect on changing the objective world. The other perspective is universality, or uniformity, or totality. From this perspective, some people believe that theory possesses more universality and thus is higher than practice. To them, theory is revealed as a guide to practice. But, in fact, practice has universality, too. Practice tells us principles true or not true. If the external conditions are similar, same practice can quite possibly reproduce same results, and this sameness is where universality lies. The universality of theory comes from the universality of practice (Lenin, , 1974, p. 230). According to the virtues of epistemology, the order between practice and theory should never be reversed.

The third disturbing but common phenomenon is that negation from one theory to another theory is not based on literary practice and reality, but purely on intellectual deconstruction. This kind of negation leads to a misunderstanding that theories can get their growth and strength simply by speaking and playing within themselves.

In fact, even if we are talking about a true case of a theory negating another theory, it still needs to find its foundation in practice. Marx and Engels have said the same thing, “The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a practical question” (Marx, Engels, 2009, p. 500). Out of his insistence upon practice’s priority, Engels criticizes Feuerbach of isolating from historical practice. Feuerbach tries to negate Hegel’s theory of morals by advocating an abstract ideal human “love”. To this, Engels points out, “In short, the Feuerbachian theory of morals fares like all its predecessors. It is designed to suit all periods, all people and all conditions, and precisely for that reason it is never and nowhere applicable” (Marx, Engels, 1995, p. 240). Even when Derrida has succeeded in using deconstruction methods to undermine the concept of logocentrism and accelerated the replacement of structuralism by post-structuralism, his achievements should not be taken as an evidence to the legendary power of destruction a theory can obtain. Hayden White has a sarcastic comment on Derrida, “He regards his own philosophy as a transcendence of the structuralist problematic, but he is wrong; it is its fetishization” (White, 1977, p. 85).

The entire focus of attention of theory must be practice. If not founded in practice, if based on theoretical construction alone, if produced from theories chasing theories, a theory would be a rootless existence. A theory can realize its growth by logical induction and deduction, but its coming into being, its birth, is sheer out of practice, practice against which a theory must be tested. Theory originates from practice. The growth of any theory must depend on literary practice and experiences.

Second, it leads to misplaced relationship between the concrete and the abstract. This misplacement is reflected in two opposite ways of handling concrete-abstract relationship in criticism. One way is setting out from abstract theories and then dismantle or transform specific texts to find material to justify the presupposed theories, instead of moving from concrete literary practice and gradually rising to abstract theories. The other way is refusing and resisting the abstract intellectual work, using fragmented reading to replace abstract theoretical construction. Virtues of theory, like universality, integrity and stability

are thus impaired. The right concrete–abstract relationship should go like this: criticism starts from the concrete things and attends to them all the way, rising from specific analyses to the abstract and general level; then the abstract, though originating from the concrete, provides guidance to the concrete in turn. Specific analyses and case studies should be enhanced to the abstract and general level. Otherwise, they would stop at being fragments of limited significance. Semiotic literary criticism is one example of the abstract kind. It starts from turning literary expressions into emotionless and senseless “signs”, and then using methods resembling mathematics to do formal analyses into the texts. The basic focus of literary semiotics is not of literary concern. In Greimas’ study of narratology with semiotic methods, we can see his abstract inference overwhelms his objective textual analysis. Roland Barthes goes even far in abstract semiotics. Dispelling traditional concerns about authorship and signification system in criticism, he argues that signs are signs and they do not represent anything other than themselves. He even proposes that interpretation should be made only from specific literature context and any reference to the world out of the text is not trustworthy (Fangtong, 1990, p. 738). To literary semiotics, abstractness is both the beginning and the end. All the textual details are at the service of something abstract — abstract idea or abstract signification, working as evidence demonstrating it.

Interpretations moving from the abstract to the concrete have apparent imperfections.

The first imperfection is the emptiness of content, which happens when concrete details of a text are silenced and enveloped in the criticism’s seeking for abstract things. This problem is especially serious in the case of deconstructive reading through abstract signs. This kind of reading distills complicated messages about thoughts and feelings in the text and renders the text as a pile of boring signs. With piles of signs as its critical results, the text breaks into pieces, into unavoidable fragments of content and thoughts. Michel Foucault criticizes Derrida of always “remaining exclusively textual”. He says, “As an interpreter and critic, he leads us into the text from which, in turn, we never emerge. Themes and concerns that transcends the parameters of textuality — above all, those that are related to questions of social reality, institutions, and power — remain fully imperceptible from the standpoint of this rarefied, hyperlinguistic framework” (Wolin, 1992,

p. 200).

Second, if we admit literature is in its essence aesthetic and it is a unique creative world of human expression, we should then agree to the statement that the concrete is more important than the abstract to literature. In other words, in the strictest sense, literature is not an abstract existence. Literature is concrete texts. Without concrete texts, without specific analyses into specific literary texts, there would be no tangible existence of literature. Interpreted by senseless and emotionless signs, the quality of literature would definitely melt away and understanding would be a mystified thing. Once again I would like to refer to Hayden White's comments on Derrida here. White criticized Derrida of attacking the whole critical enterprise and bewitching understanding by an infinite play of signs. White says that reading is traditionally regarded as a talent which all men in principle possessed, and reading is therefore as an ordinary human activity. But now, he says, under the imperative to mystify reading, reading takes on the magical qualities and is seen as a privilege of a few exceptional intelligence (White, 1977, pp. 107–108).

The third imperfection is the extremities it might cause. Sometimes this kind of reading sticks to one simple abstract method and uses this method to rather rigidly interpret diversified texts. Another practice contrary to it — too much indulgence in specific text analysis — is also narrow-minded. Miller is a skillful critic who has made disintegrated readings into a huge amount of books and endowed abundant analyses of images to these books. However, Miller's deconstructive criticism is also problematic, which tends to disintegrate an originally organized text into small parts and pieces, like a boy disassembling his father's watch but unable to restore it (Miller, 2008). Such kind of deconstructive reading cancels out the wholeness of a text as well as the abstract messages that we can reasonably draw from the text. To understand and interpret literature in this way is to dismantle meaningful texts into broken pieces and lay them there in disorder. After all, only in an organic wholeness can the parts play their roles. For the same logic, interpretation, however subtle and clever, is not faithful and cannot justify itself if it drifts away from the text. Scientific criticism is pretty aware that there should be an overall framework governing the understanding of the text's specific elements. With a general knowledge of the text in his mind, a critic goes into the

text's texture and details and try to find out the interplay taking place among them. Furthermore, "the abstract" under discussion now must be abstraction to a sensible level, based on the empirical knowledge about factual and concrete particulars. Deconstruction is necessary, but we should not just stop at it. The purpose of deconstruction is still for meaning seeking, meanings abstracted from dismantled pieces and bringing about spiral evolution. If there is no integration and reconstruction of meanings following on, the value of the deconstruction is confined to merely a technical one — deconstruction for the sake of deconstruction, not a *literary* one. When the focus of criticism moves away from literary deconstruction to technical deconstruction, imposed interpretation can be expected to happen.

Third, it leads to the split between the part and the whole. In the construction of theoretical system, many theories and schools of literary criticism cannot provide an organic part-whole relationship in their interpretative methods, thus fail to create a relatively integrated and self-contained system for themselves. Some theories and schools start from their focus on textual parts and they do not go beyond their initial concerns for textuality in the later development. They confine themselves stubbornly to the close reading of the text's atomic elements. Their practice is seeing the parts but not the whole. On the contrary, some theories and critical schools start from the whole, the general grasp of the text, and their interpretation tends to be rather vague and inexact, for their general and macro approaches to reading texts always ignore researches into textual details and are fond of groundless imagination and association. Take the New Criticism for example. It absolutely emphasizes on the pure "inside study" of literary texts, cutting out any linkage with the thoughts and theories of the outside world, especially theories of social and historical criticism. This is where the narrowness of the New Criticism lies. Hans Robert Jauss argues in his aesthetics of reception that literary history is composed of nothing but how literary works are received by the readers. His emphasis on the reception side of literature is also a rejection of other literary elements and relevant studies. Such a refusal is not only negligence to the value of other theories, but also self-imposed isolation, limiting itself to a disadvantageous position to

play more roles in literary history. Moreover, critical schools should be conscious of the part–whole relationship existing in their attitudes toward tradition and history. If the whole past history is regarded as a broad background picture, then certain historical times, including the time we are now in, are part of the wholeness of the picture. When one important kind of theory claims itself to be a totally new one, emerging like a sudden fracture zone in the history of literary study and not belonging to the chain of tradition, it is a misconstruction about its value and a wrong self–cognition. Ever since the Formalism in literary criticism, the main trends of the western critical theories are turning their attention from the author to the work. Researches about the author are decreasing, until in the end sayings like “the author is dead” are so popular. In the popularity of such sayings, the necessities and benefits of social and historical researches are forgotten. Structuralism is deconstructed by post–structuralism. Looking back at the fracture–like clash brought by deconstruction, Derrida comments, “Deconstruction was not primarily a matter of philosophical contents, themes or theses, philosophemes, poems, theologemes or ideologemes, but especially and inseparably meaningful frames, institutional structures, pedagogical or rhetorical norms, the possibilities of law, of authority, of evaluation, and of representation in terms of its very market” (Derrida, 1983, pp. 44–45). Deconstruction is a sheer subversion not only to literature, but also to the past value system as a whole. Sometimes, even on individual theorist we can see the symptom of such a fracture–like negation to one’s past self. J. Hillis Miller is a typical example. His personal critical experience has gone through different stages and styles: from the New Criticism to ideological criticism, then to deconstructionist criticism. His continuous self–denials are the embodiment of his perspiration and uplifting pursuits, of course. But meanwhile his changes are also the reflection of endless changes happening all the time in the west literary criticism, like tides of the sea forever chasing or being chased by the other tides.

Still there are two questions needing more clarification here. The first question involves the *construction model* of the western literary criticism. Contemporary western literary criticism features rapid changes and diversities, among which many theoretical schools aiming at resisting the traditional and the popular. In order to achieve their aims, they often first set up an orientation, then cut into the aca-

democratic frontier of that orientation from a specific angle, and then focus all their critical attention on a core issue of this frontier. This model of theoretical construction is a common practice, whose emphasis is on bombarding at the focal point only, neglecting the work of wholeness seeking, system building and other points covering. It is a model developed from a negative attitude, brave in negating something before it. Its merits are obvious — fostering the fighting spirit of criticism and stimulating revolutionary thoughts. However, the disadvantages of this construction model are also obvious, and they are destructive, too. This aggressive model favours theories heading for essentialization and fragmentation, and essentialization and fragmentation will finally result in deconstruction. Too much deconstruction consequently brings doubts to the meanings of literary criticism and the whole discipline of literature. Since forced inclusion and transplantation of theories from other disciplines is the main route of producing theories in contemporary criticism, some theories are so alien to the study of literature that we can barely find any connections and resonance among these theories. The gaps between different theories, the conflicts among diversified schools of thoughts, the paradoxes within a theoretical system and the self-contradictions of an individual theorist, all these add much uncertainties and vagueness to the future of criticism. Currently, any intention to grasp the world of theories from an one-dimensional perspective is illusory. Since so, here comes the second question: can we say from the construction model of contemporary criticism that literary theories and criticism should not expect the wholeness of system at all?

What is the relationship between individual theories and the whole theoretical system? What should the part-whole relationship be in the world of critical theories? As it has been proved by facts that if it is a mature discipline, theories circulating in it should be capable of combining with each other to form into a more or less organic system. Within this system, there are different academic directions, distinguishing from each other yet compensating with each other. During the developments of theories in this system, theories of one direction might go faster than theories of the other directions, and this direction, as well as the theories belonging to it, will be the avant garde and can even play a leading role in this discipline. But, right behind the pioneering job of this direction, theories of other directions

should follow up from their perspectives in order to get a balanced development and gradually establish a comprehensive system mature enough to cover all the fundamental and crucial questions of the discipline. So researches of different directions of this discipline should keep proportional development, basically to the same level and depth. If one direction breaks the balance, taking sudden and radical steps forward, or if different directions separates from each other, seeking no common discourse, the whole system would be under unhealthy, unstable and incomplete growth. It is always such problems that cause a discipline to be in eternal crisis: contradictions which have no ultimate "right" or "wrong" solutions; debates which last forever for the lack of common criteria, pointless negations which are made to each other. When finally the legitimacy of theory is under question, the development of theory will be deteriorated to empty talk. The part-whole relationship in a theoretical system is somewhat like what Roman Ingarden has observed from aesthetic experience. He says that the true work of art exists as a complex constructed entity, a synthetic of aesthetic values, and any treatment of one aspect of the aesthetic values alone is not to the point. To him, aesthetically significant qualities are qualities existing in the aesthetic object itself, and appear only at the moments when the object as a whole is regarded as an aesthetic piece (Ingarden, 1988, p. 278). Applying his aesthetic vision to the study of literary theories, wouldn't we find the same principle? Judging from the theoretical development of the 20th century, the conspicuous emerging of some theories and critical schools does not necessarily mean that their founders are determined to deny or abandon the work of systematic construction. They are also pursuing the wholeness of theories, only that the wholeness they want is of duality. On one side, they strive for the wholeness of their own theories, hoping to have an organic system. On the other side, they want their theories to be able to replace the other theories and gain absolute ideological dominance. Deconstructionism deconstructs the central and all the past theories of rational tradition. If the past others should be deconstructed for their centrism, how about deconstructionism itself, which has taken the central position in its dispelling of the others? Looking back at the changes of theories: formalism, the New Criticism, structuralism, postmodernism, cultural studies and the New Aestheticism, we can ask such a question: is there any a critical

school who chooses not to present itself by negating history, not to achieve its own wholeness and dominance by opposing the others? A grown-up discipline should be a systematically developed one. How can we judge whether it is systematically developed or not? Well, from two dimensions. Diachronically speaking, it is capable of absorbing all relevantly valuable fruits in history and consciously availing itself of the fruits in its theoretical construction. Synchronically speaking, it is capable of absorbing progressive elements from multiple sources of its time, melting itself with those elements together to wrought out a new and better system. “Being systematically developed” does not merely refer to the development in quantities or scales, it refers much more to a balanced development, with theories of different directions equally growing, strengthening and interplaying. For systematical development is a kind of inner driving force for theories as well as an important sign of a discipline’s maturity. Any intention of using one-dimensional and partial theories to replace the whole organic system will finally go into a hopeless failure.

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Il discorso del complotto

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ENGLISH TITLE: The Discourse of Conspiracy

ABSTRACT: In a society where experience is increasingly being sacrificed in favor of knowledge and in which being the object of communication is the only guarantee of existence, it is normal to assume that even conspiracies become ‘speeches’. After briefly examining the characteristics of society in terms of the relationship knowledge–experience, the article analyzes the discursive forms through which even the most baseless conspiracy theories can become plausible and, at the same time, dangerous.

KEYWORDS: Discourse; Fiction; Faction; Journalism; Obvious; Sociology; Socio-Semiotics.

1. Il discorso come complotto

Occuparsi del “Discorso del complotto”, anziché del discorso “sul” complotto, significa trascurare la natura delle trame ordite da un gruppo di cospiratori a questo o a quel fine e concentrarsi sui discorsi che hanno la pretesa di svelare quelle trame, reali o fittizie che siano, soprattutto fittizie. In pratica, ci interesseremo prevalentemente delle teorie complottiste e del modo in cui queste teorie, ponendosi linguisticamente e semioticamente come “discorso” e come “testo” diventano veri e propri atti linguistici, vere e proprie azioni socialmente rilevanti, veri e propri complotti fatti di parole.

Il discorso del complotto nasce quando la società non offre un sufficiente grado di verità. L’onnipresenza dell’ipotesi del complotto

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non è sintomo di una società paranoica, bensì di una società che ha visto diminuire esponenzialmente le possibilità di accesso alla verità fattuale, a causa dell'aumento, parimenti esponenziale, della rilevanza di ciò che non è esperibile. Il mondo rurale di cent'anni fa non era più incline al vero di quello tecnologico di oggi, ma conservava il valore della verità per la banale impossibilità di mentire sugli aspetti davvero importanti dell'esistenza. In un'economia di sussistenza non si può immaginare di mentire sull'abbondanza o la scarsità dei raccolti, così come in un villaggio di duecento abitanti non si può mentire sul tasso di criminalità, sulla sicurezza del vivere, sull'andamento del clima. Gli spazi della menzogna si limitavano all'ambito del non osservabile. Si poteva mentire sulle cause delle pestilenze (come ci mostra magistralmente il Manzoni) solo perché queste risiedono nell'infinitamente piccolo, oppure si poteva mentire in relazione alla dimensione metafisica, ma sulla realtà tangibile la società non poteva che essere sincera. Come questa situazione si sia evoluta è ben chiaro negli scritti di Georg Simmel (1992), pp. 24–25:

nei rapporti molto semplici la menzogna è molto più innocua per la sussistenza del gruppo che non nei rapporti più complicati. L'uomo primitivo, che vive all'interno di un ambiente ristretto il quale soddisfa le sue esigenze con la propria produzione o con la cooperazione diretta, che riduce i propri interessi intellettuali alle proprie esperienze o alla tradizione unilineare, ha una panoramica e un controllo più facili e più completi sulla propria esistenza che non l'individuo appartenente a una cultura superiore. [...] La nostra esistenza moderna si fonda molto più di quanto si creda — dall'economia che si trasforma sempre più in economia fondata sul credito, alla scienza in cui la maggioranza dei ricercatori deve avvalersi di innumerevoli documenti altrui che non possono essere direttamente controllati — sulla fiducia nella sincerità degli altri. Noi basiamo le nostre più importanti decisioni su un complicato sistema di rappresentazioni, la maggior parte delle quali presuppone che ci si fidi di non essere ingannati. Ne consegue che nelle relazioni moderne la menzogna diventa qualcosa di molto più catastrofico, che mette molto più in questione i fondamenti della vita, di quanto non avvenisse prima. Se ancora oggi tra noi la menzogna sembrasse un peccato assolutamente veniale come lo era per gli dei greci, i patriarchi ebrei o gli insulani dei mari del Sud, se la suprema severità del comandamento morale non tenesse lontani da essa, la strutturazione della vita moderna che è un'"economia creditizia" in senso molto più ampio di quello economico sarebbe completamente impossibile.

La nostra stessa esistenza è sospesa tra l'assoluta necessità di credere, senza la quale non possiamo mettere in atto alcuna azione sociale, e l'altrettanto assoluta necessità di dubitare che ci deriva dall'esperienza della menzogna subita (ma, ovviamente, anche di quella agita). E la necessità di dubitare ci porta a elaborare una miriade di discorsi sul complotto, cioè sulla verità e sulla sua mistificazione.

2. Rappresentazione e falsificazione

Molti discorsi del complotto perderebbero ogni credibilità se fosse possibile, per la gran parte dei loro destinatari, passare dal discorso all'esperienza, cioè trasformare il mondo possibile della narrazione complottistica in un mondo reale. Ma che cos'è l'esperienza? Intuitivamente, possiamo dire di aver esperito una realtà nel momento in cui essa, e non la sua rappresentazione, è ricaduta sotto il dominio dei nostri sensi. Da sempre la rappresentazione verbale della realtà suscita più dubbi che fiducia, da sempre il racconto e il resoconto richiedono un'accettazione molto cauta, ma la contemporaneità ci ha indotto a dubitare anche di quella che sembrava la forma più oggettiva di riproduzione del reale: l'immagine generata meccanicamente. La visione, in passato prova suprema e inconfutabile della verità (basti pensare a detti come "Vedere per credere"), perde, nella nostra epoca, la sua connotazione di certezza e si assoggetta a tutti gli inganni della mediazione, della conoscenza. In centocinquant'anni di fotografia, in poco più d'un secolo di cinema e in circa mezzo secolo di televisione, abbiamo imparato che le rappresentazioni visive, anche quelle più oggettive all'apparenza, in fondo non differiscono molto dalle narrazioni, abbiamo imparato che una rappresentazione non riproduce, ma costruisce; pertanto, il sigillo dell'esperienza non può essere apposto che su acquisizioni della realtà operate dai nostri sensi in maniera non mediata. Più la tecnologia avanza nella creazione di rappresentazioni fedeli (fotografie e riprese ad altissima definizione, audio chiarissimi), più crescono le possibilità di falsificazione (fotoritocco elettronico, sintetizzazione vocale...) se non di creazione ex-novo di realtà virtuali.

L'unico confine alla straordinaria potenza delle rappresentazioni sembra allora essere la relazione diretta tra il nostro corpo e il mondo

circostante; l'esperienza, scacciata dalla conoscenza, si rifugia in quella residuale porzione della nostra vita dove gli occhi vedono cose che stanno per se stesse e non per altre cose (ma esistono davvero oggetti privi di valore segnico?), dove le onde sonore che giungono al nostro timpano non sono frutto di sintesi o di registrazione, dove la tattilità non è simulata: tutto il resto è dominio dei media.

Questo confine ideale tra realtà mediata e realtà non mediata ha poi un corrispettivo fisico, una precisa demarcazione di spazi. A segnare il limite estremo della rappresentazione è la superficie su cui essa si dispone per darsi a noi, il supporto necessario alla materia segnica per manifestarsi: la tela del quadro, la carta fotografica, lo schermo da proiezione, il teleschermo, il monitor del computer sono le superfici sulle quali l'immagine prende forma per offrirsi alla visione, ma sono anche, al tempo stesso, le barriere che separano la rappresentazione del reale dal reale.

Lo schermo è ciò che ci difende dall'irruzione del conosciuto nella sfera dell'esperito, la distanza fisica tra noi e lui è anche una distanza di sicurezza che ci impedisce di confondere la visione dell'oggetto con la visione della sua rappresentazione.

Tutto questo è vero fino ad oggi, è vero nel cinema, nella televisione, perfino negli attuali mezzi multimediali, ma c'è una nuova frontiera che le tecnologie sembrano voler abbattere: la frontiera della visione. A parziale ridimensionamento di quanto detto in precedenza, il vedere non ha ancora perso del tutto il suo potere di veridizione; se la sola visione non basta a garantire l'autenticità di ciò che appare sullo schermo, essa, nel momento in cui si allarga alla sala cinematografica o alla stanza che contiene il televisore o il computer, è in grado, se non altro, di dirci ciò che è schermo e ciò che non lo è, ciò che è o può essere finzione e ciò che invece è sicuramente realtà. Vedere, dunque; vedere lo schermo e vedere i suoi limiti, e poi vedere il buio quale presenza silenziosa del reale durante l'esibizione dell'immaginario. Ed è proprio la visione del buio intorno allo schermo che le nuove tecnologie cercano di eliminare e senza quel buio si perde la distinzione tra reale e rappresentato. Le tecnologie delle quali stiamo parlando non sono futuribili, o almeno, pur necessitando di sostanziali migliorie, lasciano già oggi intuire le loro potenzialità. Pensiamo alle più semplici tra esse, agli occhiali con micro-schermi e ai caschi per la realtà virtuale; si tratta di strumenti che, sebbene non ancora diffusi su larga scala,

sono da tempo usciti dalla fase di pura sperimentazione. Tanto gli occhiali quanto i caschi sono accomunati da un utilizzo che implica il completo isolamento visivo dal mondo circostante, l'assoluta prevalenza della rappresentazione e l'annullamento del contesto di fruizione. La visione cede il posto all'immersione e questa è indubbiamente la tendenza dei media digitali, specie nel campo dell'entertainment: la negazione della visione, il superamento del ruolo dello spettatore nasce da qui.

Ma forse non è neppure necessario aspettare il futuro prossimo per raggiungere quella condizione di immersione che assegna all'esperienza un ruolo puramente residuale. Negli ultimi cinque o sei anni, l'evoluzione delle tecnologie mobili ha imposto nuovi modelli di comportamento: se prima c'erano luoghi e tempi per la visione della realtà e altri luoghi e altri tempi per la visione, su schermo, della rappresentazione, oggi gli occhi di milioni di persone restano fissi allo schermo anche durante una camminata in città, durante un viaggio in treno, durante una conferenza o una lezione.

3. Finzionale vs. Fattuale¹

La continua immersione nell'universo delle rappresentazioni mette in gioco costantemente la dialettica dubbio-fiducia; continuamente noi dubitiamo della veridicità di ciò che viene rappresentato, ma, al tempo stesso, non avendo alcun strumento esperienziale per dirimere il dubbio, non ci resta che la resa a un atteggiamento di fiducia vigile, salvo poi diminuire progressivamente la vigilanza per l'eccesso di fatica che essa implica; altrimenti detto, capire se ciò che ci viene proposto come realtà lo è veramente diventa talmente faticoso che ognuno di noi decide, su base puramente fideistica, cosa è credibile e cosa non lo è. Per questo motivo, più la società si fa complessa e inespugnabile e più la finzione narrativa contenuta nel discorso del complotto riesce a rendersi credibile almeno quanto altri tipi di costruzione della realtà (quanto l'informazione giornalistica, ad esempio).

1. Il contenuto di questo paragrafo riprende e sviluppa alcuni temi già presentati in Perissinotto (2008)

Cominciamo a parlare di questa contaminazione a partire dalle posizioni di Habermas (2006), p. 196:

le informazioni in genere finiscono per essere assoggettate a travestimenti vari, vengono assimilate ai racconti (news stories) nel taglio come nei dettagli stilistici; la severa separazione di fact e di fiction viene abbandonata sempre più frequentemente. Informazioni, servizi e persino articoli di fondo attingono al repertorio della produzione amena, mentre, d'altra parte, i pezzi letterari mirano in modo strettamente "realistico" a duplicare la realtà esistente sussunta del resto secondo un cliché precostituito, e sopprimono i confini tra romanzo e reportage. La tendenza che così si annuncia nella stampa quotidiana è già assai progredita nei moderni mezzi di comunicazione di massa: l'integrazione dei campi, un tempo separati, della pubblicitaria e della letteratura [...] comporta un particolare dislocamento della realtà, per non dire un caotico aggrovigliarsi dei livelli di realtà. Nel comune denominatore del cosiddetto human interest si sviluppa il *mixtum compositum* di un materiale ameno insieme accettabile e gradevole, che sostituisce tendenzialmente l'adeguatezza alla realtà con la fruibilità e fuorvia al consumo impersonale alla distensione invece di guidare all'uso pubblico della ragione.

In Habermas domina l'idea che l'elemento narrativo massificato corrompa la percezione del reale; un elemento narrativo che, oggi, più che nella narrativa di genere o in quella popolare, è individuabile nell'immenso flusso narrativo dei social network, i quali, a loro volta, contaminano i mezzi di informazione tradizionali. Da questo flusso nascono le mille teorie del complotto.

L'attitudine diffusa a cercare sempre disegni oscuri dietro il verificarsi degli eventi nasce dalla non accettazione di quegli stessi eventi e delle loro motivazioni ufficiali. Non accettiamo la versione governativa sugli accadimenti dell'11 settembre perché ci fa male l'idea che una struttura raffinata come quella della difesa statunitense sia così vulnerabile; dunque ci pare più rassicurante credere nelle oscure trame di qualche lobby americana, poiché questo significherebbe che la potenza economica e militare nella quale l'Occidente ha riposto ogni sua speranza non è poi, nel suo complesso, così debole. Non accettiamo di credere all'origine naturale del virus HIV perché ci fa male pensare che questo organismo mutante e letale sfugga completamente al controllo dell'uomo: meglio ritenere, come fa il premio Nobel Wangari Maathai, che il virus dell'AIDS sia stato creato in labo-

ratorio per essere usato come arma chimica. Paradossalmente quindi l'ipotesi del complotto risulterebbe più rassicurante di quella della sua assenza, perché sposterebbe le responsabilità dei fatti verso parti della società che ci sono più note, più familiari, non necessariamente per conoscenza diretta, ma per una lunga consuetudine mediatica e finzionale: lo scienziato pazzo che crea armi letali o il finanziere che corrompe i politici e i servizi segreti ci sono più noti (o almeno lo erano fino agli inizi del millennio) di quanto lo sia stato l'enigmatico (e fino al 2001 sconosciuto ai più) Bin Laden. Il discorso del complotto si nutre di stereotipi e trova dunque un habitat naturale nell'ignoranza.

4. I complotti della menzogna

Qualunque complotto si basa necessariamente su una negazione della verità, ma questa negazione può assumere due forme: l'occultamento, cioè il segreto, o la falsificazione, cioè la menzogna. Chi cospirò contro Hitler o contro Cesare tentò di tenere segrete fino all'ultimo le proprie intenzioni: il complotto come segreto condiviso entro una ristretta cerchia di iniziati (torneremo più tardi su questo aspetto). Al contrario, chi complotta contro la società inventando complotti inesistenti più che il segreto usa la menzogna, la falsificazione della realtà. Certo, è probabile che, per mantenere il segreto, Bruto abbia dovuto mentire a Cesare, ed è altresì probabile che chi diffonde scientemente menzogne complottiste mantenga il segreto sulle reali ragioni di questa sedicente "contro-informazione", ma, anche contemplando la compresenza di entrambi gli ingredienti, l'opposizione segreto vs. menzogna ci è utile per comprendere il funzionamento sociale del discorso del complotto.

La grande forza dei complotti della menzogna risiede nel fatto che le posizioni degli anti-complottisti sono perfettamente ribaltabili in senso complottistico, cioè che qualsiasi tentativo di smontare una teoria complottistica può essere smontato con la semplice accusa di organicità al complotto stesso. Vediamo qualche esempio.

Una delle più classiche dimostrazioni della fallacia delle teorie della cospirazione è fornita dall'utilizzo, in particolare da parte del nazismo, dei Protocolli dei Savi di Sion², un'operina frutto di plagi e collazioni

2. Per un approfondimento di questo tema si veda Cohn (1969).

di testi vari che venne spacciata come documento ufficiale di una misteriosa organizzazione rabbinica per il controllo economico e mediatico del mondo. Se da un lato questo caso dimostra in maniera esemplare come la tesi della congiura sia destituita di ogni fondamento reale, dall'altro, proprio le conseguenze determinate dalla diffusione del libello, conseguenze che includono lo sterminio di milioni di ebrei, confermano che i complotti funzionano ed esistono: il vero complotto, quello antisemita, consistette nel far credere (e in questo senso fu un complotto mediatico) che il falso complotto, quello dei "Savi di Sion", fosse vero.

La menzogna diventa complotto quando viene socialmente condivisa, quando, a livello collettivo, prevarica i diritti della verità determinando conseguenze concrete che vanno al di là della semplice negazione del vero. In questo senso, i "complotti della menzogna" sono dei veri e propri atti linguistici performativi nell'accezione che dà Austin (1983) a questi termini. Riprendendo le parole dello stesso Austin, possiamo affermare che, più che mai, nella formulazione mediatica di un complotto della menzogna il "dire" (nella particolare forma del mentire) è un "fare", è un produrre azioni socialmente rilevanti. Gli esempi di questi complotti della menzogna sono innumerevoli, dall'Editto di Costantino, il falso medievale che legittimò (e fu questa la conseguenza concreta del "dire") il potere temporale della chiesa cattolica, alla notizia sulle armi segrete di Hitler, che indusse a continuare una guerra ormai perduta, fino al finto massacro di Timisoara, del 17 dicembre 1989, che diede una delle spallate decisive al regime di Ceausescu. Soffermiamoci proprio su quest'ultimo esaminandone la ricostruzione fatta da Claudio Fracassi (1996), pp. 95-97:

La prima fonte della notizia era stata anonima: un non ben identificato "viaggiatore cecoslovacco" proveniente dalla città romena di Timisoara, i cui allarmati racconti furono riferiti prima dall'agenzia di stampa ungherese Mti, poi dalla tv di Budapest, e infine, di rimbalzo, dalla radio di Vienna. Quel 17 dicembre 1989 era una domenica, giorno di disperata carenza di notizie nelle redazioni giornalistiche di tutto il mondo. Il lunedì successivo, dunque l'episodio — che peraltro aveva un suo qualche fondamento visto che a Timisoara il venerdì precedente c'erano stati effettivamente scontri sanguinosi tra i dimostranti e la polizia di Ceausescu — trovò spazio nelle cronache. [...] La prima cifra degli assassinati fu di "trecento, quattrocento

persone". A fornirla erano, nelle cronache, "un medico ungherese", oppure "uno scrittore romeno". Finché venerdì 22 dicembre, per la prima volta, comparve, in un dispaccio dell'Adn, la cifra che poi resterà fissata nella storia "4600 morti a Timisoara". [...] Il gioco delle cifre riferite da fonti improbabili, per quanto suggestivo e utile a dare corpo agli articoli, sarebbe forse rimasto tale se non fossero arrivate dalla tv ungherese (presto ripresa da tutte le reti televisive del pianeta) le immagini delle "fosse comuni di Timisoara". Si trattava di strazianti immagini girate di notte, alla luce delle torce elettriche. Appena esumati, ancora in parte ricoperti di terra, si vedevano molti cadaveri allineati: quasi tutti avevano una lunga ferita, dall'alto in basso sul torace, frettolosamente ricucita. Il corpo di una donna dall'età indefinibile giaceva supino con la stessa atroce ferita sul petto e sul ventre e sopra di lei c'era il minuscolo cadavere di una bimba, apparentemente appena nata. [...] La verità delle "cose viste" rese credibile la menzogna delle "cose sentite".

Si seppe poi, quando si spense l'ubriacatura mediatica, che le vittime degli scontri di Timisoara erano state complessivamente alcune decine. Si rivelò [...] che le salme riesumate dal "cimitero dei poveri" e riprese nella notte dalle telecamere erano in tutto tredici: corpi di sventurati barboni, alcolizzati, emarginati — sepolti nei mesi precedenti, senza cassa e senza croce, dopo una rapida autopsia (la ferita sul petto). Si accertò che il corpicino "strappato al grembo della mamma" era quello di Christina Steleac, deceduta per congestione, a casa sua, due anni e mezzo di età il 9 dicembre 1989. La "madre" sventrata, invece, era la settantenne Zamfira Baintan, una anziana alcolizzata morta di cirrosi epatica l'8 novembre.

Fondamentale, per il ristabilimento della verità, fu il lavoro di alcuni giornalisti e la confessione del custode di un cimitero. Questi rivelò che alcuni cadaveri ripresi dalla televisione erano stati riesumati appositamente dal cimitero dei poveri, nel quale egli lavorava, mentre altri erano stati prelevati dall'istituto medico legale qualche giorno prima. Disse inoltre di aver raccontato la verità a diverse persone, fra le quali alcuni giornalisti, e che nessuno aveva voluto dargli retta.

Il custode del cimitero non è quindi stato creduto ed è stato annoverato tra i complottisti vetero-comunisti. Dunque, il discorso del custode sul complotto, che costituisce un tentativo di disvelamento del complotto stesso, genera, attraverso un altro discorso del complotto, un immaginario complotto di secondo grado. Basta avere un minimo di dimestichezza con le triadi di Peirce per rendersi conto come il discorso del complotto sia un chiarissimo esempio di semiosi illimitata: ogni discorso del complotto è interpretante di un altro discorso del complotto e a sua volta oggetto di un ulteriore interpretante. La presa di coscienza di questa semiosi illimitata ci costringe ad arrenderci di fronte alla straordinaria e destabilizzante potenza del discorso del complotto.

5. L'ovvio, il dubbio, la menzogna

Continuiamo a parlare di complotti della menzogna esaminando, attraverso un esempio meno drammatico di quello precedente, l'uso di una strategia discorsiva volta a impiegare la forza destabilizzante del dubbio per infrangere la solidità dell'ovvio (in senso comune e non in senso barthesiano), per minare alla base un sistema di significazione socialmente condiviso. L'esempio è scelto, tra i milioni presenti in Rete, per la sua semplicità, ma anche per la sua rilevanza numerica: un video con oltre un milione e mezzo di visualizzazioni solo nella versione italiana.

Il video in questione è accompagnato, su youtube, dal seguente testo:

Bevi COCA COLA? Allora DEVI guardare questo video! SCONVOLGENTE! Quando ho fatto questo esperimento non avrei mai creduto che sarebbe potuto accadere tutto questo. Credo sia importante che la gente sappia cosa mette dentro il proprio corpo tutti i giorni. Se avrai ancora il coraggio di berla dopo questo video, almeno saprai cosa bevi e non potrai lamentarti delle conseguenze! Enjoy (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3o-JUAW6ejo>).

Sedicente autore del filmato (che in realtà sembra riciclato da una fonte straniera) è tale Daniele Penna, personaggio molto noto a complottisti e anticomplottisti per le sue decine di interventi che rimestano nel consueto limo che va dalle scie chimiche allo spionaggio delle nostre attività personali da parte di servizi segreti stranieri. Le immagini, accompagnate da una colonna sonora incalzante in stile film dell'orrore, mostrano come, dopo due ore di ebollizione, un litro e mezzo di Coca Cola si trasformi in una poltiglia appiccicosa che incrosta la pentola, una poltiglia che Penna, attraverso una scritta in sovrimpressioni, compara al catrame.

Di per sé, il video e il suo apparato testuale, sarebbero solo un'ennesima dimostrazione di stupidità, ma i suoi processi di costruzione del senso sono estremamente interessanti.

Se esaminiamo testo e paratesto del video, ci accorgiamo che Daniele Penna non mette mai in campo una vera menzogna, ma crea un'ipotesi di complotto insinuando dubbi su ciò che, in quanto ovvio, non dovrebbe suscitare particolare perplessità. La prolungata ebollizione di un liquido zuccherino determina, ovviamente, la formazione di

un deposito denso di caramello; per trasformare la rappresentazione di questo processo del tutto naturale in qualcosa di “Sconvolgente!”, l’autore utilizza alcuni semplici espedienti di alterazione del senso. In primo luogo, la musica associata al video determina un senso di tensione, di suspense, e lo fa semplicemente sfruttando le competenze intertestuali dello spettatore e in completa assenza di qualsiasi elemento in grado di creare tensione narrativa ad esclusione delle frasi poste in apertura e in chiusura: «Osserva cosa immetti nel tuo corpo a ogni sorso» (apertura), «La gente ha il diritto di sapere cosa beve!» (chiusura). Né l’una, né l’altra frase affermano che il contenuto della Coca Cola è nocivo, ma, inserite intertestualmente nel un flusso comunicativo del discorso del complotto, esse si prestano a una interpretazione ben precisa, interpretazione corroborata dall’evidenziazione di una somiglianza (innegabile) tra il caramello e il catrame. Il testo di accompagnamento del video ha quindi un significato denotato estremamente aperto, ma, al tempo stesso, un significato connotato che va così direttamente nella direzione della minaccia collettiva da determinare l’oblio del buon senso e da far crescere il sospetto del complotto. In altri termini, i complottisti trasformano l’ovvio da elemento ad interpretazione obbligata, in elemento infinitamente sovrinterpretabile; potremmo dire che lo schema di ragionamento su cui fanno leva è quello della Lettera rubata di Edgar Allan Poe: se il modo migliore per nascondere una lettera rubata è quello di metterla in tutta evidenza, il modo migliore per nascondere un segreto è nell’ovvio, là dove nessuno andrebbe a cercare sfumature di senso. Usando categorie più strettamente semiotiche, potremmo dire che i complottisti inducono il loro pubblico a diffidare dell’interpretazione dell’ovvio (così rigida da sembrare predisposta dal potere), per passare all’uso di esso e con l’uso, la semiotica di Eco (1979, 1990) ce lo ha dimostrato ampiamente, si può dare al testo (in questo caso le immagini della Coca Cola che si condensa) qualsiasi tipo di significato (la dimostrazione di un complotto contro la salute dei cittadini ordito dai poteri economici). In tal modo, il discorso del complotto introduce anche la componente iniziatica che, come abbiamo detto, è tipica dei complotti basati sull’occultamento: coloro che sanno estrarre dall’ovvio un senso secondo, il senso nascosto, rientrano in una ristretta cerchia di iniziati che, avendo gli stessi poteri conoscitivi dell’altrettanto ristretta cerchia di chi avrebbe ordito il complotto, è in grado di smascherare le trame

che qualcuno vorrebbe occulte. Siamo di fronte a un gioco di specchi, a un rimbalzare di segni che, nell'illimitato processo di semiosi, hanno da tempo perduto il loro referente nel mondo reale.

6. L'efficacia fattuale della finzione complottistica

Ma, avviandosi verso la conclusione, è opportuno tornare, con una certa inquietudine, sul discorso del complotto come insieme di “segni efficaci” (nella concezione di Louis Marin, 1986). Il discorso del complotto, quello che ipotizza un complotto inesistente, è tutt'altro che privo di conseguenze. Partiamo da una considerazione di Umberto Eco (2007), p. 302:

Un complotto, se efficace, prima o poi crea i propri risultati, diviene evidente. E così dicasi del segreto, che non solo di solito viene svelato da una serie di “gole profonde” ma, a qualunque cosa si riferisca, se è importante (sia la formula di una sostanza prodigiosa o una manovra politica) prima o poi viene alla luce.

Il problema è la distanza che intercorre tra il “prima” e il “poi”. Che una mistificazione venga scoperta prima o dopo aver prodotto i suoi effetti non è per nulla indifferente.

Nel periodo intercorso tra il 17 dicembre 1989, data della falsa strage di Timisoara, e le rivelazioni circa il vero andamento dei fatti, la notizia della strage ha agito con estrema efficacia nel determinare gli eventi politici che hanno trasformato l'Europa dell'Est.

Allo stesso modo, il discorso sull'ipotetico complotto dei Savi di Sion prima di dimostrare tutta la sua infondatezza ha giustificato l'Olocausto. Tra “prima” e “dopo” qualche differenza c'è. Senza contare che un discorso del complotto non è mai falsificato una volta per tutte, dal momento che basta confutare l'autorità di chi lo falsifica per restituirgli intatta tutta la sua forza corruttrice della realtà. Se vogliamo condensare in un'immagine mitologica il senso della semiosi illimitata del discorso del complotto possiamo pensarlo come l'Idra di Lerna: ogni volta che una testa viene amputata (ogni volta cioè che il discorso viene smentito), ne nascono altre due (altre due tesi che bollano di complotto la smentita del primo complotto). Difficile immaginare

qualcosa di più inquietante dell'Idra, specie se si considera la velocità con cui, nell'era di internet, possono ricrescere le due teste.

Un secondo motivo di inquietudine è dunque legato alla diffusione telematica dei discorsi complottistici, in particolare di quelli che fanno leva sull'ovvio. Abbiamo visto, con l'esempio del video sulla Coca Cola, quanto sia semplice richiamare l'attenzione di un milione e mezzo di persone su una minaccia del tutto inesistente; esaminando i commenti degli utenti possiamo ipotizzare (e la precisione è abbastanza irrilevante) che un dieci per cento di quanti hanno visto il video sia stato convinto della sua veridicità: si tratta di un numero straordinariamente grande di persone.

Inoltre, il moltiplicarsi esponenziale dei falsi allarmi genera un certo effetto "al lupo, al lupo"; sommersi da migliaia di falsi complotti, i cittadini sono sempre più in difficoltà nel riconoscere le poche voci veritiere e documentate, le poche "gole profonde" che, realmente informate sui fatti, potrebbero contribuire a sventare i complotti veri. Il dubbio che attraversa la società attuale non concerne la presenza o meno di "gole profonde", ma la destituzione di credibilità che può essere operata ai danni di esse. Ciò che ci chiediamo costantemente, angosciosamente, non è se qualcuno dirà la verità, ma se avremo i mezzi per riconoscerla. E qui giova soffermarsi ancora su Simmel (1992), p. 22:

Ogni menzogna, per quanto il suo oggetto sia di natura obiettiva, induce essenzialmente in errore sul soggetto che mente, poiché fa sì che il bugiardo nasconda all'altro la vera rappresentazione in suo possesso. La specifica natura della menzogna non nasce dal fatto che la persona ingannata si fa un'idea sbagliata della cosa (questo la equiparerebbe a un semplice errore), ma dal fatto che viene mantenuta in errore sull'intima opinione della persona che mente. Veridicità e menzogna sono quindi della massima importanza per i rapporti interpersonali. Le strutture sociologiche si differenziano fra loro nel modo più caratteristico per la quantità di menzogne che vi vengono attivate.

L'unico antidoto al discorso del complotto rimane dunque la conoscenza, quella profonda e documentata, quella che la superficialità dei nuovi media e dei social network in particolare sembra voler cancellare definitivamente.

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La inflación de la sospecha

El discurso de las teorías de la conspiración*

RAYCO GONZÁLEZ**

La fuente inequívoca de la vida social es la estafa.

ERVING GOFFMAN

ENGLISH TITLE: The Inflation of Suspicion: The Discourse of Conspiracy Theories

ABSTRACT: Conspiracy theories often take the State as a suspicious actor playing the role of the opponent and acting against its own citizens. These discourses are built upon presuppositions and innuendos affording a mono-causal and pan-deterministic plot where all historical facts are triggered by one cause only: conspiracy. The essay focuses on the features of suspicious figures in conspiracy theories and their connections to other cultural presuppositions and innuendos forming a textuality that establishes the veridictional strategy of conspiracy plots. The diffusion of conspiracy theories jeopardizes the meaning of the State since they usually attribute to it the role of the traitor or that of the trickster. As a case study, the essay proposes an analysis of the mockumentary *Operación Palace* (2014) falsely revealing that the coup d'état on February 23th 1981 was schemed by the Spanish State so as to preserve its recent democracy.

KEYWORDS: Semiotics; Conspiracy Theories; Suspicion.

* Este trabajo se presenta dentro del proyecto de investigación I+D de excelencia *El periodista como historiador del presente. Análisis del documento en las nuevas formas de la información* (CSO-2014-55527-P).

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1. Papá Noel y otras conspiraciones benévolas

Todos hemos sido en alguna ocasión víctima de una conspiración de algún tipo. Consideremos, por ejemplo, las innumerables conspiraciones que padres, abuelos, tíos y demás familiares han urdido generación tras generación, para lograr engañar a sus hijos, nietos y sobrinos a propósito de la existencia de Papá Noel, los Reyes Magos, el Ratoncito Pérez, la Befana, etc. Todos estos casos comparten una característica: la víctima, con el paso del tiempo, se transforma en conspirador. ¿Podríamos considerar incluso estas conspiraciones como un rito de paso de la infancia a la madurez? Quizás no sea del todo exacto tratar estos encubrimientos como conspiraciones (la mayor de toda la historia sería la de hacer creer en la existencia de Papá Noel, en palabras de Lévi-Strauss [1952]), ya que no reciben una sanción social negativa.

En todo caso, este ejemplo a modo de introducción nos permite hacer un énfasis necesario en la distinción entre las conspiraciones reales y las teorías de la conspiración. Profundicemos en el caso del ser imaginario Papá Noel, cuya condición “real” no nos es revelada más que después de indagaciones y descubrimientos, voluntarios o involuntarios. En definitiva, preguntémonos: ¿cómo descubrimos que Papá Noel es una fabricación¹ o un simulacro sostenido por millones de conspiradores?; ¿cómo es posible que millones de niños en el mundo crean en su existencia: es el resultado del efecto de una conspiración perfectamente orquestada o del efecto de su disfraz, cuyos elementos, como la barba perfectamente blanca, la gruesa panza de anciano y el elegante abrigo a juego con su gorro, generan lo contrario precisamente de una sensación de realismo?

Los modos en los que se llega al conocimiento de la verdad son

1. Goffman (1974: 89 y ss.) define fabrication como la actividad social enfocada intencionalmente por uno o varios individuos para inducir a otro u otros a poseer una creencia falsa sobre la realidad. Goffman destaca la idea de tener malas intenciones, aunque también incluye la posibilidad de que existan fabricaciones benévolas. De igual modo, distingue dos puntos de vista de la acción: el fabricator (el conspirador), para quien lo que ocurre es la fabricación misma, es decir, él puede observar que se trata de una construcción; y la víctima, para quien lo que transcurre durante la fabricación es aquello que es fabricado. Goffman nombra a la víctima con varios términos de la jerga común inglesa, como dupe (inocente), sucker (incauto), etc., que incluyen este matiz de “engañado” y “burlado”, que se intenta mantener también en el presente artículo.

básicamente dos. El primero de ellos es cuando un indulgente padre desvela voluntariamente los secretos, tejidos con mentiras y fingimientos (la estrategia de lo que es y no parece se elabora con tácticas de lo que parece y no es), en los que el niño ha creído durante años. El segundo, y quizás más común, es aquel en que el niño realiza una dolorosa pesquisa que le permite unir las piezas de tan complejo puzzle. Complejo, porque nuestra mirada ha sido educada para creer en la existencia de Papá Noel: una prueba de ello la tenemos tanto en la frecuente decepción que suele traerle al niño o en el sentimiento de superioridad de aquel otro que, en posesión de la verdad, se mofa de quien todavía la desconoce. Cada pequeña táctica, enmarcada en una estrategia global de persuasión, está perfectamente orquestada. Su complejidad se debe también a una credulidad colectiva que inhibe cualquier atisbo de sospecha: los adultos cometen grandes imprudencias lingüísticas y de comportamiento, actuando de manera temeraria, tal vez porque saben muy bien que la credulidad del niño se construye en un saber compartido contra el que el niño solo puede sospechar y contra el cual no osaría enfrentarse. En definitiva, parece que solo la confesión definitiva, cuando el adulto habla abiertamente del secreto frente al niño, rompe con toda actitud de alerta y de sospecha previa en el engañado.

En casos puntuales, el niño puede cerciorarse de tales lapsus y comportamientos anómalos, refinando así su pesquisa. De este modo, uno comienza a observar multitud de detalles que permitan definir una posición epistémica: ¿debo o no creer en lo que veo o he visto?, se pregunta el niño. En esa situación, pocos serán quienes apoyen la indagación en una situación como esta: los padres y otros familiares cercanos rechazarán toda duda y declinarán participar de tales sospechas. Toda autoridad negará cualquier conocimiento. . . Los padres se saben poseedores de una autoridad epistémica sobre sus hijos, hasta que estos descubren haber sido víctimas de una benévola conspiración que culmina con la transformación de rol actancial y de rol temático, inaugurando así una nueva etapa de la vida: la víctima se convierte en conspirador. Al contrario, generalmente la víctima o el objeto de una conspiración no suele acabar nada bien. . .

En fin, solo se consigue una prueba concluyente cuando uno se convierte en un nuevo conspirador, participando así de las maquinaciones de los adultos: como en cualquier sociedad secreta, lo que la

mantiene es el secreto compartido frente a quien no lo posee, que claramente es el niño crédulo. Así se apacigua nuestra decepción y nuestro probable enfado. Incluso puede darse el caso de quien al vivir el juego del otro lado, preferiría mantener todavía aquella ingenuidad ya perdida.

Sabemos todos que esta es una importante experiencia semiótica en nuestras vidas, en la que vemos signos de una realidad ilusoria, un régimen de secreto, pero un día, gracias a una confesión o por acumulación y ordenación de pruebas, nuestra actitud cambia y, entonces, empezamos a atisbar esa realidad escondida. Y, de hecho, podríamos decir que esto es un rito de paso: se revela un secreto y cambia nuestro punto de vista y nuestra propia actitud hacia una determinada realidad, que ahora sabemos que ha sido simulada. Pero, además, nos plantea otro problema no exento de interés: ¿puede existir una conspiración benévola?; o, dicho con otras palabras: generalmente se entiende el término “conspiración” con valor negativo o de carácter malévolo, sin embargo, ¿acaso no es posible pensar en una declinación opuesta?

2. Sospecha y conspiración

Bajo la concepción del poder como una conspiración benévola o valor positivo, algunos autores como Alain Dewerpe (1994) y Luc Boltanski (2012) analizan las formas de relación entre el Estado, en su concepción liberal, y el individuo. Por ejemplo, Dewerpe llega a hablar incluso de una actitud de “sospecha cívica estructural” hacia el estado por parte del individuo, lo que estimularía también formas de interacción y de discurso, que podrían tener su correlato en las formas de interacción y de discurso en el caso de Papá Noel.

En cualquier caso, para poder aceptar un hipotético estado de sospecha debemos definir claramente qué significa sospechar. Para ello, primeramente analizaremos el concepto mismo de sospecha y, posteriormente, describiremos sus procesos de interpretación, atendiendo en especial a dos textos concretos: principalmente analizaremos *Operación Palace* (2014), un falso documental sobre una conspiración benévola orquestada por todo el Parlamento español, que, por supuesto, nunca ocurrió; y también trataremos como comparación *Las sombras*

del 11M (2006), un documental que cuestiona el sumario judicial de los atentados terroristas del 11 de marzo de 2004 en Madrid.

De acuerdo con el Diccionario de la Real Academia, ‘sospecha’ significa: “imaginar algo por conjeturas fundadas en apariencias o indicios”; también como “desconfiar de algo o de alguien”; y, por último, como “considerar a alguien como autor de un delito o falta”. Lo que salta a la vista inmediatamente son dos detalles que se pueden resumir en una sola frase: la sospecha implica la virtualización (“imaginar”, “conjeturas”, “apariencias”, “considerar”) de algo con valor negativo (“desconfiar”, “delito”, “falta”).

La sospecha se sitúa en los límites entre las modalidades epistémica y alética, como el umbral que sella la definitiva entrada al espacio de la posibilidad, rechazando así el de la probabilidad. Según Greimas (1983), la hipótesis implica un juicio epistémico entre dos polos: probable e improbable. Y la culminación de la hipótesis es la verificación, que nos sitúa en la modalidad alética, es decir, en el juicio entre lo posible y lo imposible. La hipótesis entra dentro del campo de la acción individual, mientras que la verificación se sitúa en el espacio de lo social. Este proceso semiótico tiene que ver, sin duda, con la categoría modal de la veridicción, que opone lo verdadero a lo falso, ya que se relaciona con el referente, objeto no semiótico y extra-discursivo, y con una isotopía narrativa aislada susceptible de poder establecer su propio nivel de referencia (Lozano 1987: 196–207; 2013). En este sentido, veremos más adelante cómo la sospecha es una isotopía de ciertos textos, manteniendo en suspensión determinados saberes.

Es por esta razón por la que se establece una para-sinonimia entre ‘sospecha’ y ‘desconfianza’². Precisamente, la falta de verificación es un atributo del estado de sospecha. La virtualización de un saber, todavía solo probable, implica también una determinada actitud discursiva, manifestada mediante el uso de determinados verbos modales como ‘creer’, ‘considerar’, ‘imaginar’, etc. El sujeto mantiene una cierta cautela respecto a sus juicios, aunque ya se ha proyectado uno o un conjunto de saberes de valor negativo. Goffman (*ibid.*: 304) diferencia, en efecto, la sospecha de la duda, siendo ambas dos versiones posibles

2. En inglés se llega incluso a definir ‘suspicion’ como ‘cautious mistrust’, es decir, una cautelosa desconfianza. La cautela implica ese estado epistémico de la hipótesis, donde nuestra desconfianza no está verificada, ya que los saberes virtualizados que hipotizamos no han sido actualizados.

de la ambigüedad: la sospecha implica la posibilidad de que alguien hurte una información que incumba o que pueda ser relevante para el sujeto que sospecha.

La sospecha se sitúa en un paso entre la virtualización de un saber desconocido aunque intuido y su actualización. La sospecha es la transformación de un estado de probabilidad a su verificación en el plano del discurso. La cuestión es cómo podemos describir ese proceso y si podemos hablar de un estado de virtualización que nos permitiera contrastar, eventualmente, un estado de sospecha.

El verbo 'sospechar' proviene del verbo latino 'suspectare', verbo iterativo³ de 'susplicere', compuesto del prefijo sub- y del verbo 'spectare' ('ver', 'observar', 'contemplar'). La raíz latina nos permite subrayar la relación con la percepción, con las apariencias, con lo sensible, que posee la sospecha. No obstante, se trata de una determinada declinación de la mirada: es una mirada télica, dirigida a una finalidad, que podríamos enunciar como un ver para saber (frente a otro tipo de miradas, como la estética, por ejemplo). En esta mirada dirigida se encuentra la autoconciencia de una carencia: se presiente la existencia de un conocimiento que nos afecta, por tanto, sentimos el deber de subsanar tal carencia.

La acción de sospechar conlleva una iteración de la acción de conjeturar o de hipotizar. La sospecha se prolonga en el tiempo mediante un ininterrumpido acto de imaginar la probabilidad de algo, ante la cual el sujeto requiere su confirmación o su anulación. La actualización de la virtualidad de ese conocimiento es, precisamente, su desvelamiento o su descubrimiento, que permitirá dar un juicio veridictivo satisfactorio.

La ausencia de pruebas incrementa la sospecha, ya que su presencia permitiría la verificación, en términos de Greimas. Habría que recordar aquí que la prueba, como el referente, sería, en principio, un objeto no semiótico y extra-discursivo, aunque cabría entenderlo, en nuestro caso, como una isotopía, es decir, como un elemento recurrente dentro del plano del contenido. De forma semejante, en el discurso de la historia observaba Roland Barthes (1967: 175) que no

3. En gramática, el verbo iterativo se refiere a una misma acción repetida sucesivamente. 'Tirotear', 'correr', 'deambular' son ejemplos de verbos iterativos, porque la acción de tirotear es la repetición de un tiro o disparo, la de correr es la de numerosos pasos repetidos a una cierta velocidad, etc.

se trata de un referente histórico que existe externo al discurso, sino que el referente se construye dentro del discurso y es, en definitiva, el mismo plano del significado al que reenvía⁴. En el caso de la caza de brujas, por ejemplo, el miedo colectivo puede generarse por causas ignoradas por la propia sociedad y es precisamente esa ignorancia la que crea un objeto mitificado causante del miedo, la bruja (Lotman 2008). La ignorancia guarda una especial relación con la sospecha, porque en definitiva “quien sabe, no sospecha y quien sospecha, no sabe” (Castilla del Pino 1998: 19). Cuando se sabe que no se sabe surge la necesidad de la explicación: se virtualiza entonces un saber secreto que reclama su derecho a ser actualizado.

Umberto Eco (1990: 78) habla de un síndrome de sospecha cuando un sujeto ‘sospechante’, en el afán de plantear constantemente hipótesis y conjeturas que proyectan informaciones secretas detrás de todo discurso, detecta en cualquier elemento del discurso un indicio de ocultación. El paranoico es la figura del sujeto que padece tal síndrome. El paranoico no es quien simplemente nota que un cierto elemento o varios elementos cualesquiera están en un mismo contexto, sino quien realiza una acción muy concreta a partir de dicha observación: preguntarse o conjeturar misteriosas razones o causas que han permitido que ese elemento o esos elementos estén en un mismo contexto. El paranoico es quien ve también conspiraciones recurrentemente. Recuerda Boltanski que no hay mucha diferencia entre el espía y el paranoico, pues ambos están en la praxis del constante simulacro, como también en la estrategia de hacer que cualquier cosa signifique cualquier cosa (Sherman 2010: 156–171).

Esta diferencia entre las interpretaciones sana y paranoica es la base

4. Roland Barthes dice textualmente: “el referente está separado del discurso, se convierte en algo exterior a él, en algo fundador, se supone que es el que lo regula: es el tiempo de las res gestae, y el discurso se ofrece simplemente como historia rerum gestarum: pero en ningún momento, es el mismo significado el rechazado, el confundido con el referente; el referente entra en relación directa con el significante, y el discurso, encargado simplemente de expresar la realidad, cree estar economizando el término fundamental de las estructuras imaginarias, que es el significado. Como todo discurso con pretensión “realista”, el de la historia no cree conocer, por tanto, sino un esquema semántico de dos términos, el referente y el significante; la confusión (ilusoria) del referente y el significado define, como sabemos, a los discursos sui-referenciales, como el discurso performativo; podría decirse que el discurso histórico es un discurso performativo falseado, en el cual el constativo (el descriptivo) aparente, no es, de hecho, más que el significante del acto de palabra como acto de autoridad”.

de dos de las categorías principales de la praxis semiótica. Al aludir a los límites de la interpretación, Eco proclama el *modus*, es decir, la medida. La sospecha no es necesariamente patológica: también el doctor, el científico, el historiador y el detective necesitan ejercitar la sospecha en sus respectivas profesiones. Pero sus hipótesis, con los saberes que estas proyectan o virtualizan, se mantienen dentro de una medida racional, tanto en sus premisas como en sus conclusiones.

Este estilo paranoide de pensamiento es característico de todo discurso conocido como “teoría de la conspiración”. Desde Richard Hofstadter (1964), pasando por Peter Knight (2000), hasta Luc Boltanski (ivi), entre otros, todos los autores que han analizado la relación entre paranoia y conspiración han destacado la siguiente particularidad: el discurso fuerza las conexiones entre hechos y líneas del relato sin atisbarse nunca un fin. Se prolonga *ad infinitum* la sucesión de vínculos lógicos y causales temporales, creando una progresiva tensión hacia una conclusión que nunca es. En términos de semiótica de la cultura, podemos decir que las teorías de la conspiración están modeladas por conexiones lógicas y causales, es decir, la prueba se construye mediante el número progresivo de conexiones o de sospechas: el número de conexiones es proporcional a la fuerza de la prueba. Su inflación permite pasar de lo doxástico a lo epistémico, de la mera opinión a la certeza.

La inflación de sospecha coincide también con una particular imagen del mundo: cada elemento mantiene siempre una conexión aparentemente lógica con otros, todo está determinado entre sí. Esta compleja articulación conlleva una mirada pan-determinista del mundo, donde todo está motivado, a semejanza de la literatura fantástica (cfr. Todorov, 1970: 81–83). El efecto del discurso se construye sobre la idea de que el plano de las apariencias esconde el plano de la inmanencia, lo disfrazado de lo que no es.

Para construir tal efecto, lo cual conforma la clave del discurso de las teorías de la conspiración, se juega con los lenguajes connotativos en sentido hjelmsleviano, que según Greimas conforman el sentido común de toda cultura: lo que es innecesario explicitar. La extrema consistencia de las conexiones entre los elementos que componen los discursos de las teorías de la conspiración tiene dos consecuencias: en primer lugar, un efecto de mayor tensión, debido a que su equilibrio es precario; y, en segundo, los criterios lógicos y causales sobre los que se

sostiene el discurso quedan en el espacio de lo no-dicho, reforzándose así la idea de la innecesariedad de su explicitación. De alguna forma, los criterios de construcción de la argumentación conformarían el espacio del sentido común del discurso.

3. Teorías de la conspiración

Se podría oponer, por tanto, las teorías de la conspiración a las conspiraciones. Las primeras son discursos que se construyen sobre la inexistencia de pruebas o de evidencias, generando un aumento de las sospechas sobre un sujeto o una institución que hurta determinada información para actuar en la clandestinidad o en la ocultación. Las segundas son casos históricamente comprobados o reconocidos. Mientras las teorías de la conspiración funcionan precisamente en la ausencia de saber, en la virtualización de una posibilidad de que una conspiración haya acontecido o se esté produciendo, la conspiración es un saber actualizado. Nos movemos siempre en el mismo universo cognitivo, el del creer y el del saber: duda, sospecha, conjetura, imaginación, etc.

Las teorías de la conspiración argumentan haber revelado un plan secreto. Necesitan la aprobación del destinatario, que se convierte en juez de la posibilidad de los hechos supuestamente secretos. Su mecanismo se basa en la pervivencia en otros discursos, que podríamos llamar oficiales, de lo 'inexplicado': la ausencia de explicación de ciertos hechos en esos discursos es lo que mantiene vigente una teoría de la conspiración. En muchos casos se crean lagunas o fisuras argumentativas en los discursos oficiales; en otros, son los espacios de hechos inexplicados los que fermentan nuevas teorías de la conspiración, como es el caso del asesinato de John F. Kennedy. La tensión entre los discursos oficiales y las teorías de la conspiración no se puede resolver, hasta el punto que podemos decir que ambos se necesitan mutuamente. Cada teoría de la conspiración vive en los intersticios argumentativos del discurso oficial, en una forma de parasitismo discursivo. La primera rellena los huecos de los segundos, pero la explicación conspirativa niega y rechaza la oficial, conviviendo así en una respuesta negativa mutua. La versión conspirativa y la oficial

de cualquier hecho, en esa forma dialógica, pasan a convertirse en saberes virtualizados.

Las teorías de la conspiración se mueven dentro del universo de las creencias. Su estrategia de persuasión es la de obligarnos a cuestionar otros discursos, despertando de esta forma una necesidad por desvelar la verdad, es decir, de persuadir al destinatario que se encuentra en el espacio de lo epistémico (/probable/, /improbable/, /cierto/, /incierto/) y haciéndole despertar la necesidad de pasar al espacio de lo alético (/necesario/, /contingente/, /posible/, /imposible/). En este punto no encontramos diferencia alguna entre el trabajo de historiadores y detectives. Por su parte, las teorías de la conspiración no aspiran a ser probadas, sino que, al contrario, mantienen viva la desconfianza respecto a otras narraciones o discursos sobre los hechos, que así desmienten⁵. Las teorías de la conspiración despiertan la necesidad de desvelar engaños en ciertos discursos, proyectan así una indagación hermenéutica sobre las narraciones históricas. En palabras de Goffman, toleramos lo inexplicado, pero no lo inexplicable. Y, de hecho, en el núcleo mismo de las teorías de la conspiración se hallan ciertas verdades que son consideradas inaccesibles. Y mientras se las considere inexplicadas, las teorías de la conspiración mantendrán, según cada caso, su vigencia.

4. Crisis y teorías de la conspiración: *Operación Palace* (2014)

En un periodo de crisis social, política y/o económica, los nexos causales entre hechos parecen romperse y es entonces cuando comenzamos a pensar que una instancia oculta se encuentra involucrada en el transcurso de la historia misma. Como en la cruel aunque benévola experiencia de Papá Noel, la inflación de la sospecha da pábulo a la aparición de teorías de la conspiración, porque adoptamos así una

5. En su obra *Naming the Witch* (2005), James Siegel analiza las acusaciones de brujería que ocurrieron en Yakarta (Indonesia) durante las revueltas de 1998 que obligaron a dimitir al dictador Suharto. Como conclusión, Siegel plantea que la “bruja” es un efecto de un acto de habla (*speech act*), en la terminología de J.L. Austin. Igualmente, las teorías de la conspiración no son más que un efecto de *speech acts*: solo existen en los discursos y en forma de dialogismo *in praesentia*, esto es, introduciendo explícitamente en su propio discurso otras narraciones sobre el mismo hecho o el mismo conjunto de hechos que pretende desmentir.

determinada actitud epistémica hacia el Estado: si sabes que el Estado miente, entonces debes poner al Estado bajo sospecha. Cuanto más crece la intensidad de las sospechas, mayor aceptación cultural recibirán las teorías de la conspiración. El Estado mismo se convierte en un conspirador. ¿Podemos considerarlo de mera casualidad al observar la reiterada coincidencia de momentos de crisis y el auge de las teorías de la conspiración? Uno de los puntos que con mayor énfasis subraya Luc Boltanski (2012) a propósito de las conspiraciones es que el Estado construye y conserva una cierta normalidad mediante la continuidad de una serie de líneas causales en la experiencia individual de la vida cotidiana y en el discurso histórico. Cuando lo casual aparece, se rompe esta causalidad normal y entonces el mundo deviene un enigma o misterio. Es en ese momento cuando empezamos a hacernos preguntas sobre los hechos, indagándolos, mostrando dudas y sospechas, porque el mundo se nos presenta así como un conjunto de signos que necesitan ser descodificados. Dewerpe llama a esta indagación una especie de “delirio criptológico”.

Un caso muy conocido en España es el del *mockumentary* titulado *Operación Palace*. Emitido el 13 de febrero de 2014 en el programa Salvados de la cadena La Sexta, este falso documental sirvió como efémeride del intento de golpe de Estado perpetrado en un mismo día del año 1981, que terminó fracasando. Muchos son los discursos que han intentado explicar este acontecimiento a partir de los datos a los que se ha tenido acceso, pero el éxito en la explicación total se ha topado siempre con un espacio de sombras en el que, entre otras cosas, encontramos la conspiración militar, la Operación Galaxia, que lo propició y cuyos nombres principales permanecen ignorados aún hoy. *Operación Palace* toma como modelo o hipotexto otro *mockumentary* anterior muy conocido, *Dark Side of the Moon*, en el cual se exponía la teoría de que la llegada del hombre a la Luna con la misión Apolo XI fue una gran conspiración comisionada por el presidente Richard Nixon y que las imágenes fueron rodadas en estudio por Stanley Kubrick, quien por entonces estaba rodando precisamente 2001. Odisea en el espacio. En todo caso, *Operación Palace* se presentaba como un documental con una sólida investigación. Durante los días previos, los medios se hacían eco de esta emisión, anticipando que el periodista y director del programa, Jordi Évole, había obtenido una información de gran valor alrededor de la conspiración militar del 23-F.

Según la historia narrada, el Gobierno de Adolfo Suárez planeó un falso golpe de Estado. De esta forma, la retransmisión de Televisión Española en directo desde el congreso habría sido previamente ensayada y dirigida por el director de cine José Luis Garci, quien habría recibido el Oscar a la mejor película extranjera con su *Volver a empezar* (1981) como reconocimiento a su colaboración. De hecho, Operación Palace plantea que la diplomacia española habría ejercido una gran influencia para que Garci conquistara la estatuilla de la Academia americana.

El montaje del programa combinaba un conjunto de testimonios con grabaciones de archivo, fundamentalmente del archivo de Radio Televisión Española, y una voz en off explicaba la trama. Asimismo, entrevistas a importantes políticos españoles que fueron diputados nacionales electos en 1981 y habrían participado, por tanto, en la conspiración. De acuerdo con el argumento del documental, el plan habría sido aprobado igualmente por el rey y se habría intentado reemplazar de esta forma el Gobierno de Adolfo Suárez por otro de unidad nacional. Con este golpe de Estado fingido o ficticio se habría intentado obtener la legitimación del proceso democrático recientemente instaurado en España.

Es importante subrayar que no podemos considerar este discurso como una teoría de la conspiración *sensu stricto*, aunque sí es la parodia de una supuesta reafirmación de ciertas especulaciones entorno al intento de golpe de Estado de 1981 que se habrían ido desarrollando a lo largo de los años. De esta manera, el texto copia estrategias propias de las teorías de la conspiración, a las que daría así una respuesta definitiva. En fin, se trataría pues de la verificación final, que en realidad no sería más que una burla. Pero, ¿de qué se burla este falso documental? Pues precisamente de las teorías de la conspiración y de sus estrategias persuasivas. En este sentido, se refuerza la verosimilitud de la trama al abrirse el mockumentary con la desclasificación de nuevos documentos oficiales que habrían servido de punto de partida para la investigación fingida cuyo culmen sería, así pues, el propio falso documental. Estos nuevos documentos desclasificados cuestionan los documentos registrados del asalto al congreso y otros, que habrían sido tomados como los documentos verdaderos de lo acontecido. De esta forma, se releen las grabaciones televisivas del congreso desvelando detalles aparentemente anecdóticos que ahora se convierten en

clave fundamental de lectura de lo que ocurrió. Se activa, así pues, un síndrome de sospecha en el espectador, quien pasado un cierto tiempo está dispuesto a desconfiar de todo lo que había creído ver en los documentos anteriormente considerados oficiales.

Decíamos anteriormente que el programa tomaba como hipotexto otro documental anterior, *Dark Side of the Moon*. Sin embargo, en cuanto a la historia que narra, Operación Palace podría ser comparado a *Operation Gladio* (1992), un documental que se emitió originalmente en la BBC británica y que desveló la existencia de un ejército secreto de la OTAN y de la CIA compuesto por ex agentes de la Gestapo.

La parodia del discurso de las teorías de la conspiración se observa en algunas estrategias de *Operación Palace*. Por ejemplo, las constantes citas de vídeos televisivos y de fotografías de archivo o de medios de comunicación de la época son acompañadas por una voz en off que suele repetir preguntas semejantes a estas: “pero, ¿fue realmente así?”, “¿cómo es posible que el periodista⁶ viese la insignia de un teniente coronel de la Guardia Civil desde su posición en el Congreso?”. En el discurso de una teoría de la conspiración cualquiera no se respondería a estas preguntas. Cuestionar las versiones institucionalizadas de los hechos, pero sin responder a las sospechas creadas, es precisamente la estrategia fundamental de las teorías de la conspiración.

Esto es lo que también ocurre en otro documental, *Las sombras del 11M* (2006), a propósito de los atentados terroristas perpetrados en Madrid el 11 de marzo de 2004. En él no se plantea nunca una versión alternativa a la versión que daba el dossier del juez instructor del caso. Se limita, no obstante, a cuestionar esa versión anterior. De hecho, se inicia con una voz narradora que dice: “dos años después, una lectura detallada del sumario judicial revela que aquella versión está plagada de sombras”. Todo lo que se afirma es que algo se esconde detrás de la Historia. Por ejemplo, se nos dice: “pero lo que realmente choca en los informes policiales es un detalle que parece haber pasado desapercibido y que era lo más desconcertante: el informe de la inspección del apartamento en Leganés decía que el cadáver de uno de esos siete terroristas⁷ apareció “con los pantalones del revés”. ¿Qué

6. Se refiere aquí al telecronista que retransmitía en directo la sesión desde el Congreso de los Diputados en Televisión Española.

7. Se refiere a los terroristas que se suicidaron el 3 de abril de 2004 tras ser rodeados

sentido tiene que aquel terrorista tuviera los pantalones mal puestos? A lo largo de aquella intensa tarde habría tenido tiempo más que de sobra para vestirse bien. ¿Es posible que alguien lo hubiese vestido después de muerto? [...] Lo cierto es que la versión oficial de lo ocurrido en Leganés ese 3 de abril de 2004 se ensombrece tras una lectura detallada del sumario”. Como se observa, la teoría de la conspiración sobre los atentados se construye sobre una “lectura detallada” de una versión oficial anterior, en este caso un sumario judicial. Esa lectura se caracteriza precisamente por someterse a un régimen de síndrome de sospecha.

Este documental, cuyo discurso se puede enmarcar dentro de las teorías de la conspiración, construye su estrategia en un constante interrogatorio sin respuestas de otro texto anterior que es tomado como versión oficial de un hecho o de un conjunto de hechos. En *Operación Palace*, por su parte, cada pregunta es respondida por uno o varios supuestos testigos directos. La probabilidad se construye gracias a la credibilidad de dichos testigos: políticos de diferentes espectros ideológicos del periodo en cuestión y periodistas de un excelente prestigio aparecen en el *mockumentary*.

Otra característica importante de la estrategia es la correlación de hechos históricos sin vínculos causales ni temporales aparentes. El argumento del *mockumentary* lo que parece explicar no es el intento de golpe de Estado sino el Oscar que recibió José Luis Garci y su vínculo con el 23F.

También se cuestiona las lagunas causales y lógicas que aparecen en la versión oficial, intentando convertir las faltas de pruebas en una prueba en sí misma de la existencia de una conspiración. Así lo que se consigue es el efecto contrario: deja de existir el hecho completamente azaroso y la historia se nos presenta como una secuencia de hechos altamente causales. De este modo podríamos decir que las teorías de la conspiración proyectan en el mundo una mirada pandeterminista (Todorov 1970), en la que ningún hecho escapa a la causalidad. Otro ejemplo más: en el *mockumentary* se señala lo altamente improbable que no exista ninguna grabación del asalto militar de las instalaciones de Radio Televisión Española. Se nos dice, por el contrario, que no hay grabaciones porque no hubo tal asalto.

por la policía en el apartamento franco en el que estaban.

Ligado a este pandeterminismo, la estrategia que domina el discurso lleva a vincular entre sí lapsus lingüísticos y comportamentales y aparentes coincidencias, haciéndolas ver como errores de un plan completamente previsto, por tanto dentro de un trasfondo de acciones motivadas que escapan al puro azar. Todo hecho tiene una causa definida. Por ello, aunque nos resulten inciertas, toda crisis debe ser motivada y determinada por causas. Y qué mejor que colocar un gran agente conspirador en la posición de causa general de la crisis, que estaría entonces motivada por las acciones ocultas del Estado, imagen perceptible de ese agente.

5. Operación Palace y el valor del Estado

Finalmente nos gustaría analizar brevemente los efectos que *Operación Palace* produjo durante su emisión el 23 de febrero de 2014. Sin duda, las reacciones más inmediatas se produjeron en las redes sociales, donde se pudo comprobar la eficacia veridictoria del discurso. Después de la emisión del *mockumentary* se admitía con un intertítulo que todo se trataba de un juego narrativo y que nada de todo lo que se había dicho era verdad. Algún importante joven político español llegó a escribir en Twitter: “Ojalá lo que dicen en el documental no lo hubiésemos leído antes en investigaciones serias... a espabilar, que nos toman el pelo”.

Muchos fueron los que se sintieron decepcionados y reaccionaron borrando inmediatamente los tuits, reconociendo incluso la ingenuidad de haber creído toda la historia que se contaba y luego atacando furiosamente al programa. Estas reacciones lo que demuestran es que el texto había sido eficaz, obligando al espectador a colocarse en la posición del crédulo.

Otros simplemente felicitaron al programa por haberles hecho creer en algo tan inaudito e improbable. En la mayoría de estas reacciones quedaba expresada una desconfianza hacia el Estado, que era mencionado como un sujeto conspirador. Es también verdad que la conspiración planteada en *Operación Palace* tenía un objetivo socialmente aceptado, el del mantenimiento de la democracia, aunque con medios de dudoso valor social.

Quizás la crisis de confianza se deba a la atribución en el plano axiológico de un valor negativo. Esto puede deberse en buena me-

didada a la acumulación de experiencias negativas recientes de la crisis económica. En todo caso, el semema Estado parece incluir el sema “tramposo” o incluso “conspirador”⁸. Recuerda Alain Dewerpe que en los inicios del sistema liberal, el siglo XIX, políticos como François Guizot hablaban del Estado como el arte de conspirar para el bien. Recientemente Julian Assange (2006) publicó un artículo “Conspiracy as governance” donde señala a los partidos Republicano y Demócrata estadounidenses como los grandes grupos de conspiradores de la historia. De hecho, afirma Assange que el gran desarrollo de las comunicaciones ha permitido que los conspiradores hayan cambiado los medios para conspirar. Antes se usaba el asesinato, ahora el hurto y la custodia de la información⁹. *Operación Palace* propone una idea

8. Se puede recordar aquí la definición estructuralista de Estado que da Pierre Clastres (1974), quien lo restringe a la esfera de los tres tipos de la comunicación o de intercambio sobre cuyos lazos se sostiene toda comunidad humana, según Lévi-Strauss: el intercambio económico, el intercambio lingüístico y el intercambio de mujeres. En función de una serie de privilegios socialmente otorgados a un grupo que constituye el poder político, el Estado debe definirse como espacio externo a las reglas socialmente establecidas para dichos intercambios, dándole así una posición privilegiada y excepcional respecto a la norma. Quienes forman partes del Estado no deben cumplir necesariamente con el principio de reciprocidad del don–contradón, sino que el Jefe de Estado, por ejemplo, debe recibir aunque no devolver el valor de lo recibido. Por otra parte, el poder político ejerce la palabra sin necesidad de obtener respuesta: los discursos políticos, en todas sus formas posibles, generalmente poseen un carácter unidireccional. Esta característica otorga al Estado un uso de la palabra excepcional respecto al normal intercambio lingüístico de su comunidad o de su cultura. Por último, en muchas culturas el representante o los representantes del Estado tienen el derecho a la poliginia, por ejemplo, contraviniendo la norma matrimonial existente en su cultura. Por un lado, esta definición de Clastres nos permite escapar a la definición monolítica de la sociología, para la que el Estado es una forma de organización soberana que ostenta el monopolio de la violencia, que nos obligaría a declinar el Estado exclusivamente en su forma coercitiva. Y, por otro lado, la interpretación del Estado como “tramposo” o “conspirador” puede vincularse fácilmente a una esfera de uso desviado o privilegiado de las normas que rigen las formas comunicativas. El Estado se funda sobre una serie de privilegios y es observado como espacio fronterizo, que protege a la sociedad frente a la naturaleza. Esta función protectora, señalada también por Clastres, está también presente en el trabajo de Boltanski, quien describe al Estado como un agente que mantiene una cierta realidad o una cierta normalidad en el transcurso de los hechos sociales.

9. El privilegio de palabra al que aludíamos en la nota anterior, también queda manifiesto en el caso Cablegate de WikiLeaks, donde se proponía el algoritmo “a más información, más transparencia y a más transparencia, más democracia”. Lo que parece ser el Cablegate, más que un acto de transparencia, es un ataque a ese espacio privilegiado del poder, donde se ejerce su particular derecho de palabra. Se usurpó así su derecho al secreto y, como efecto, se generó la idea de una trama conspirativa al evidenciarse un espacio secreto del poder. En definitiva, a más transparencia, más opacidad (cfr. Lozano2014) y el efecto de la

semejante de Estado: un sujeto que engaña mediante la difusión de información falsa y la custodia de la verdad de los hechos.

Además, en España durante la reciente crisis económica se dieron a conocer informaciones sobre gobernantes y altos cargos políticos vinculados a la corrupción, el fraude fiscal, etc. Todo ello ha actualizado una desconfianza hacia los actuales representantes del Estado, hasta el punto que algunos nuevos partidos han propuesto renovar el “régimen de 1978”, año de la proclamación de la última Constitución democrática que abrió la transición política desde el Franquismo. Al usar el término de valor negativo “régimen”, se señala constantemente que los actuales representantes han gobernado para ellos mismos desde la llegada de la democracia. Hay que devolver las instituciones a la ciudadanía, dicen. *Operación Palace* traza un retrato del Estado cercano a esta idea negativa de manipulación de la información y de uso restringido de las decisiones políticas.

En el caso de Papá Noel, con el que iniciamos el presente recorrido, nuestra posición de víctima pasó a transformarse en el de sujeto conspirador. La figura de Papá Noel es un medio de socialización, ya que es una figura mítica que castiga y premia, ordenando la conducta. Ello nos lleva a considerar la conspiración contra los niños como algo positivo. En las teorías de la conspiración, el ciudadano suele ocupar la posición del oponente, dentro del esquema actancial. ¿Hay realmente una crisis del sentido de Estado? Es muy probable que estemos renegociando su significado. Al menos podemos decir que existe un resentimiento y un descontento ciudadano (incluso una actitud de “sospecha cívica” en palabras de Dewerpe) que pueden hacernos ver una conspiración detrás de toda institución estatal. Igual que Yuri Lotman (2008) nos mostró que no eran las brujas la causa del miedo colectivo durante el siglo XVI, sino que es un miedo de origen incierto lo que cristalizó en la aparición de la figura de la bruja, también en el caso de la conspiración es la sospecha ante hechos de causalidad incierta o completamente inesperados la que impele a la construcción de una figura mitificada, la de un gran conspirador: el Estado.

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Suspicion, Denunciation, Revolt

On Textual Particularities of Conspiracy Theories

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TITOLO ITALIANO: Sospetto, denuncia, rivolta. Sulle particolarità testuali delle teorie del complotto

ABSTRACT: In the article I reflect on the textual status of conspiracy theories (CTs) from a semiotic point of view. First, I conceptualize CTs as a phenomenon characterized by conjectural/speculative meanings (deriving from an abduction process) concerning issues of disruption (infringement and deception). Documents play a decisive role in these messages because they are explored as record devices through which one may infer something and/or manage veridictive strategies to support it. In this first part, I also propose the existence of two major CTs' categories, distinguished according to the abductive operations that specifically underpin them: the 'objective' CTs, supported by facts, and the 'subjective' ones, merely based on personal views. In the second part of the paper, I propose a semiotic background for the study of the CTs' textualities, in keeping with the Semiotic French School. Such epistemic background allows one to outline some of the main axiological, narrative, and discursive specificities behind CTs, which are therefore conceived as a kind of 'textual genre'. From this semiotic perspective, I conclude that CTs are not just messages of complaint, anger, and confrontation but also strategic texts of (re)mobilization.

KEYWORDS: Conspiracy Abductions; Semiotics of Conspiracy Theories; Conspiracy Axiology; Conspiracy Narrative; Conspiracy Discourse.

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1. Conspiracy theories: opening remarks

CTs are that kind of texts whose specificity presents some difficulties of recognition. Sometimes, are recognized as textual practices of deciphering mysteries/puzzles, finding some relationship with detective or mystery stories. Consist of messages characterized by conjectures, speculations. Other times, CTs are identified by the topics they report. Here are those texts about betrayals, complots and frauds.

When not uttered by reference to specific contexts such as those related to news production (news stories), literature (mystery novels) or specific movie genres (thriller), CTs are considered to be a meaning making practice socially devalued. This stigmatization is often found in the most general contexts, eg., the ones of political combats as well of the daily language practices. When it is intended to dub someone as unrealistic, delusional, paranoid it is used the following expression: “There you are with your conspiracy theories”. It is as if these discursive practices were received as implausible, unrealistic.

Despite the need to assure a more consistent epistemic background, we formulate the hypothesis about the role played by of the anxiety in the CTs creation and spread because what is underlining these complaint speeches against the complots and the trick is a fear of the disorder, an anxiety concerning the disrespect of a commitment already agreed; the scare of a chicanery, a betrayal, the phobia about the disintegration of an order (social, political, economical, sporty, . . .) aggravated by the boldness of the imposture. Hence the thematic about the plot, the betrayal about something that was secretly subverted and which is linked with a suspicion activity. Always concerns the reversal of the institutions values on anti-values, as well the institutional, social and intersubjective protocols and controls on abject realities with their own social actors transformed on anti-subjects (traitors, opportunistic, incompetent. . .). This whole dynamics of negativity is the hallmark of any CT.

2. Conspiracy theories as conjectural textualities

Every CT is a theory in the prospect of being a speculative text (concerning a negative topic — a complot as a disruptive phenomenon).

In short, it is a conjecture, a cognitive process determined by the abduction.

By ‘abduction’ we conceive what Charles Peirce considered to be “this singular assumption instinct” (Peirce, 1929: 281, apud Truzzi: 19) or the inclination to entertain hypothesis (Truzzi: 20). Any CT abduction is a speculation on what Umberto Eco has designated as the “effect of a particularly vicious cause (which in fact could be defined as a violation of the rules in vogue)” (Eco 1991: 226). This means, that any CT’s topic has always a disruptive specificity; it is defined by a negative axiology.

One of the scopes of this essay implies to highlight how abduction, conceived as a conjectural practice, is behind any CT. That is the reason why we decided to explore the Umberto Eco’s studies on the abduction operations classification based on the Aristotle’s Posterior Analytics and on a very interesting text of Voltaire: *Zadig* (Eco 1991: 219–243). Such essay was important for our purposes because it will allow us to make some distinctions within the textualities of the CTs. Here are this ones resulting from hyper, hypo and meta-codified abductive processes or that others which are merely the product of hypo-codified and creative abductions.

2.1. *CTs based on hyper-codified abductions*

Under hyper-codified abductions, the conspiracy theories are speculations about complots resulting just from an inventory of indexical signs (indexes) or symptoms where reality is conceived as the manifestation domain of several phenomena in which only some are inferred as ‘disruptive signs’. The scope of these theories is the world itself that is always abducted as ‘corrupted’, ‘inverted’, in short, as a ‘pathologic’ entity.

In what consists this hyper-codified abduction process? Merely on an inventory of signs: disruption symptom detection or index investigation with respect to a set of codes or of «encyclopedias» that guarantee their existence as «signs» — things that report others. Sherlock Holmes, endowed with a peculiar semiotic intelligence that only admitted what could be useful for the inquiry, dominated some of them. For example, those about types of cigars and of tracks. In the case of CTs, the «encyclopedias» always present a contractual/legal/normative spe-

cificity: they are sets of combinations, of commitments that generate rights and obligations, expectations and hopes for the parties involved. These normative «encyclopedias» are seen as the fundamentals by which the phenomena of the (ir)regularity / (il)legitimacy may be detected or investigated. By them hyper-codified abduction processes are nothing more than a mere registration of symptoms and indexes.

2.2. *The Hypo-codified abductions status under CTs*

If hyper-codified abduction was connected to an exercise of the detection, in turn, hyper-codified abduction is linked to a suspicion practice.

Before the facts, it is necessary to move forward to a version of the infraction *modus operandi* as well to the offender identity, a version in which someone risks an effective connection between the symptoms and indexes already inventoried and certain subjects identified as the infractors. This is why Umberto Eco stated that the hypo-codified abduction always implies a ‘textualization procedure’ — a consistent registry of a range of propositions (previously determined by a reference/extensional value) about the same topic — a theme, an ‘aboutness’ conceived as «what-is-around-something» (Eco 1991: 235). In CTs the topic is recurrent: an infraction and an infractor. In addition to this one, other still exists with an ubiquitous status due its presence was verified in the most diverse cultures and literary productions (Propp, 2003): the theme of the imposture. Under this hypo-codified abductive perspective, this topic is closely connected with a resentment registry about a traitor’s demystification, denouncement and punishment.

Considering the hypo-codified abduction as a sort of «version of the facts», as a «believing-to-be»¹ which specificity is very subjective, then its existence imposes the emergence of criteria of validation which are no longer extensional. This personal «version of the facts» must make sense, to be plausible (and not necessarily to ensure a reference). Umberto Eco stated that the key measure of this plausibility

1. In this paper it was used the Greimas and Courtés’ English semiotics terminology as it is in the *Sémiotique. Dictionnaire raisonné de la théorie du langage* and also in the 1982 Indiana University Press’ American translation

is the probability. From all the alternative versions it will be acceptable that one provided with more level of alethic necessity (having-to-be) or possibility (not-having-not-to-be). Sherlock Holmes suspected of somebody, not necessarily because he thought he had to be guilty, but because there was a great deal of possibility of being it after all indexes and symptoms concerning other agents have excluded them as unlikely (Truzzi 1991: 75).

About this particularity of plausibility it should be noted, however, that CTs hypo-codified abductions are characterized precisely by their non-plausibility and this is a very interesting hallmark. The landing on the moon was an hoax; American Republic is dominated by aliens or by reptiles; Elvis Presley is alive and kicking and so on. It seems that is not the probability that is the 'engine' of this abductive process and the foundation of the CTs' narratives, but precisely the not probability, the unheard, the dazzling exception, contributing for the establishment of a fragile relationship of the addresser towards the addressee.

Under these so personal and extraordinary interpretations, facts become modalised by the veracity and not strictly anymore by the true; by the ways of 'saying' connected with a range of communication processes criteria. Besides the ones of referentiality other variables become also relevant such the ones concerning the contexts in which the relationships between the addresser and the addressee are settled as well what both consider to be the optimal conditions for a true, false, lie or secret discourse (veridictive contract). An interesting decalage between addresser and the addressee is always established in the CTs. He is in possession of a set of symptoms and indexes about an offense, an offender and a traitor that he considers to be true (hyper-codified abduction). However he has created a version for the addressee (hypo-codified abduction) which isn't yet enough plausible or else are the CTs' own topics that are characterized by their extraordinary extravagant scale. It is precisely under this décalage that relies the usual CTs' pragmatic stigmatization classified as delusional narratives, because the facts or the ways in which are communicated, are not enough convincing, forcing the addresser to increase his emotive ethos to a level where he becomes a kind of Cassandra crying truths which for him are absolutely evident.

2.3. *CTs Meta-codified abductions vs CTs creative abductions*

It is under the meta-codified and in the creative abductions that the previous versions of the facts already conjectured (hypo-abducted) are checked. The messages are again enriched by an extensional dimension as if the (im)plausibility of the versions had to be supplemented by the facts. The 'textualized worlds' must be sustained by the reality. The certitudes or the probabilities (the believing-to-be or the not-believing-not-to-be meanings) must be supported by empiric verification.

It is necessary to distinguish meta-codified abductions from creative abductions. In the first ones, the text derives from a personal assumption for its verification by the facts. Some indexes and symptoms, previously registered under the process of hyper-codified abduction, and organized in a personal version (hypo-codified abduction) are (or are not) empirically verified. In turn, under the creative abductions these assumptions are not based on previous symptoms, neither on indexes. They are strictly subjective assumptions, prejudgments about which someone tries to seek phenomena to confirm them. This is why there is an alethic determinism, a fundamentalism in such reports, as if the world only could exist to confirm personal assumptions of disruption.

Creative abductions imply that reality must suit the thoughts and not vice-versa. In CTs based on creative abductions everything is useful to confirm the (im)plausibility of the conjectures already hypo-abducted: the polar star, a spot on the skin, a track, and so on. It is the real world that conforms to a mangled mental world — one that is fictionalized — and not unlike, this fictional world that is verified by a (disrupted) reality.

The polarity underlying meta-codified abductions and creative abductions implies the existence of conjectures (hypo-codified abductions) based on facts or on mere speculations. This dichotomy is relevant and it lies at the heart of an objective or of a strictly subjective suspicion, one which is based on a mere feeling.

Where is the foundation of this dichotomy?

Whereas the CTs hypo-codified abductions are embodied on a suspicion process; whereas, from a textual/linguistic point of view, the suspicion activity always is relied on the past (imposing the classi-

fiction of any CT under the field of a sanctionary narrative program), then what is in focus is the contractual legitimacy of a certain performative program. And this evaluation may present an objective and real basis or a strictly subjective and imaginary one.

In *Del Sentido II. Ensayos Semióticos* (*Du Sens II. Essais Sémiotiques*), specifically in the chapter on the semantic status of the anger, Algirdas Greimas enables us to explain this dichotomy from the existence of two types of expectation situations adjacent to two contracting processes types (manipulation programs). The situation of simple expectation (connected with effective contracting processes) and that of fiduciary expectation (reporting imaginary contracting processes) (Greimas, 1989: 257–262).

The first stem from expectations connected with effective clauses founding rights and duties for the parties involved in the manipulation program. These clauses embody pathemic states of expectation that are more or less satisfied according the later performative success of the agents. What is abducted in the CTs are symptoms or indexes of performative disruptions of this effective clauses and explored as prosecution evidences. In contrast, under the fiduciary expectation — adjacent to an imaginary contracting process (and thus connected with an idealization of what should be the manipulation program, a set of hopes and a range of very personal rights) — these symptoms and indexes don't exist anymore. They are replaced instead by personal skeptic conjectures about what was the performance of the others and what it should be; a set of speculations inscribed in a pathemic framework of hopelessness. These personal feelings are connected with a subjective pessimism which finds its meaning under a mode of communication no longer interactive (addressed to the other) but strictly 'expressive' (centered on the self). Under this communicative context, CTs become very personal discourses with all the peculiarities arising of an exercise of a paranoid and a neurotic imagination ("There are you with your persecution complex!"). Don Quijote is the most paradigmatic example of this negative imagination.

3. Textual specificities

Let us focus on some CTs fundamentals from an analytical angle focused on the Semiotics French School's theories: Algirdas Greimas (1989, 1993, 1983), Jacques Fontanille (2014), Joseph Courtes (1979), Diana Luz Pessoa de Barros (2002, 2005), José David Garcia Contto (2011), José Augusto Mourão and Maria Augusta Babo (2007). The purpose is to identify the most relevant specificities concerning CTs as a textual genre.

3.1. *Axiological particularities*

CTs are characterized by those themes of a contractual mangling and the accusation of someone. Although, from a narrative point of view, they are under a cognitive sanction trajectory (concerning a suspicion, a distrust) and a retributive one (connected with a prosecution praxis), its genesis (its 'being') always reports to past manipulation programs. The purpose is to abduct how a performative program was inconsistent with what was settled within that manipulative program. From a 'contractual being' what is abducted is a performative 'not being'. This is the reason why the practical purpose of each CT is the discovery of the offenses and of the offenders as well its prosecution and punishment.

The first axiological configuration reports a range of positive values and a euphoric pathemic framing which inscribes any CT under the field of meta or creative abductions. Usually this configuration is connected with the triumph of the discovery and with a veridictive dynamics of a 'lie demystification'. From the performative program — which is apparently regular (the 'seeming') it is unmasked how its manipulative foundation is mangled (the 'not being'): "Eureka!". Here is the puzzle solution; the reconstitution of the offense and of the offender. By contrast, the second axiological configuration is symmetrical. It is negative, dysphoric, concerning the moral evaluation of the offense and the culpability of the offender. The puzzle solution (a mere cognitive finding) gives now rise to the charge framed by a negative passionate environment which is typical of the dissatisfaction or disappointment. These emotions may also give way to shock whenever the offender's performance was also classified as disguised.

He becomes not only a traitor but also an impostor. From a discursive point of view, shock favors a strongly emotional and reproachful record associated with the scandal.

3.2. Narrative particularities

The narrative subject around which revolve the conspiratorial text is classified as an anti-subject. Who is he? What did he do?

He is both a rebel and an impostor. He is a rebel from the perspective of being someone who abdicated or betrayed the commitments to which he had submitted himself under the manipulation programs. Someone with performative skills to impose a domain of personal freedom (the one of the 'being able to do') or of independence ('being able not to do'). From a strategic perspective, thus from a unilateral point of view — that that is the one of that subject trying to manage the manipulation program —, these states are the fundamentals of manipulative dysfunctions. In addition, this rebel subject is also rated as an impostor. Not only had the authority to resist the manipulation strategies, but also the enough skills to camouflage such resistance. The rebellion is hidden by an alleged compliance, requiring the performance of a camouflage. This feature will lead to a narrative program with a veridictive dual nature: on the one hand, it is inscribed in the field of the appearances (the 'seeming') — it presents a conformity value; on the other it is connected with the domain of a personal resistance by which someone performs a rebellion exercise (the 'not being').

In discursive terms, the narrative polarity rebellion / imposture will be embodied in a set of dramaturgical roles that will coat the actor simultaneously with a subversive and a sly ethos.

3.3. Discursive particularities

As the textual core of CTs is connected with that narrative programs of cognitive and retributive sanctions, and by that means they present a double dynamic (the one of the offense and of the offender discovery as well of his prosecution and symbolic punishment), then their discourse is characterized by a set of recurring specificities. They are presented three, resulting from an exploratory discourse analysis.

3.3.1. The isolated position of the addresser

In the CTs messages it is usual the existence of someone who proclaims a truth about an offense or an offender, a betrayal, which is often extraordinary or not plausible. Here is an interlocutive situation that imposes the adoption of several veridiction strategies for the legitimization of a subjective belief. Not only those that involve the mobilization of extrinsic evidences — if there is any — but also of intrinsic evidences, by which the (im)plausibility speech necessarily requires a performative commitment of dramaturgical nature. The addresser strives to mean a personal sincerity, resulting on an increasing emotional speech. Here he is as a Cassandra crying in the wilderness of the desert or as the Restelo's Old Man (Camões, Portugal, 1525–1580) He is the announcer of misfortunes that are totally transparent, evident. How is it that only he can see them?

3.3.2. The dialogism of mobilization

Although the discursive locus of this addresser is very fragile — connected with very personal convictions — its legitimacy is evaluated by that one of the addressee who never is considered as a neutral witness. This means that CTs are not exclusively a discourse of symbolic prosecution and punishment, a veridictive message about someone's guilt, but also a mobilizing discourse. The addresser refuses to be satisfied with a mere addressee's acquiescence about an infraction. He wants more: to shake him from his inertia, to urge him to a (re)action. This feature is relevant because it presupposes a strategic specificity on any CT, one by which the messages become part of a mobilization rhetoric to raise a protest or a fighting behavior.

3.3.3. The speech of disqualification

Because, from an axiological point of view, there is a negative environment and, from pathemic point of view, a dissatisfaction and a disappointment framework, then the discursive record is one of disqualification where the grotesque plays an important role. It is supported by a hyperbolic and a metaphorical language with oxymoron

and paroxysms — symptomatic figures of passion and, at same time, of an inter-subjective mobilization.

The grotesque involves the figurativization of social actors, institutions, even the very own genesis of that primary contractual manipulation programs (therefore, the past agreements, combinations, treaties) as shocking realities. It requires a dysphoric imagination characterized by a more or less explicit registry of lessening, of kneeling, with the purpose of arousing disgust (*bathos*). Here is a strategic purpose rooted under the manipulative modalities of intimidation to induce the disgust due the reversal of the «being» on the «not being» and a subsequent reactive conduct of «reparation»; here is how the demystification and prosecution plots are complemented by a speech of abjection consisting on the downgrading and the revolt towards some institutions and certain social actors.

These features are relevant because they allow to explain how CTs messages presuppose a practical aim relating with the foundation of (an)other program of manipulation. They are not messages strictly characterized by just a shocked discourse, but also by a (strategic) speech of renovation or even of overcoming of the agents and institutions. That is why we have considered how conspiracy discourse is closely connected with the ancient *To Prepon* of the Greeks (a form of beauty with practical and persuasive purposes) or, specially, with the *Decorum* of the Romans (an aesthetic practice endowed with moral purposes) (Sodr e e Paiva, 2002: 17–18). Firstly, it is necessary to accuse, them to induce the shock to produce the confront and, finally to induce the (re)action.

4. Conclusion

Conspiracy theories are textual practices of suspicion and accusation through which someone performs a cognitive or a retributive practice: he suspects and accuses. His judgment and punitive exercises fall on a subject who is rated as a traitor and punished as an impostor. On the one hand, he is an offender who betrayed the commitments to which he had undergone; on the other hand, he is that person who tried to hid such treachery.

From a textual semiotic point of view, this sanction will result on a conjectural textuality through which it is exercised a suspicion. Hence

the importance of the abduction and simultaneously of a registry of resentment and blaming. These textual directions facilitate a strongly passionate, hyperbolic and grotesque discourse dynamics, complemented by an allegedly objective, impartial registry associated with veridictive strategies to overcome the implausibility. This is an important feature in the CTs because usually the messages do not report what remains after eliminating the improbable and the unnecessary — as is happens in the detective deduction — but precisely in all about the unprecedented, the extraordinary, the extravagant. In addition, when the allegations and the charges are not anymore supported by documents that may ensure the link between what is spoken and the reality, CTs become reduced to a subjective discourse about very personal convictions. This specificity contributes for a communicative dynamic in which the addresser finds himself alone proclaiming evidences that only he sees. The message becomes less argumentative, but strongly emotive, more visual than verbal, in which the demonstration is replaced by a spectacular and a grotesque exhibition of a personal version of the facts. What is at stake here is a discursive practice connected with an expressive mode of communication determined by conditions of validity which are no longer exclusively related to the truth but also to the veracity.

In addition to an accusative dimension against which the CTs present a strategic vocation (are messages in which are prepared new manipulation programs with other clauses or involving other subjects), it is also relevant to highlight their cognitive aspects. CTs are assumption and conjectural texts. We classified such procedures as abductive from the works of Charles Peirce, Umberto Eco and Marcello Trussi. Depending the various types, which are nothing more than means of conjecture, two main CT categories were identified. Those based on facts supported by documents assumed as records of the reality; and those that are highly subjective assumptions, feelings, within which the documents became key strategic resources to institute in the addressee's convictions very personal versions. These conspiracy theories are not anymore based on facts, but the addresser appeals them for support their own convictions. Firstly, someone suspects about something; afterwards goes to the world to discover what contributes to support his pre-concept. Under this context, facts are transformed into veridictory resources used to legitimize certain

convictions. Both categories presuppose the existence of distinct abductive operations under which the status of the documents acquire peculiarities. In the case of hyper and meta-abductions they become symptomatic or indexical records of mangling situations, enabling to sustain their assessment or verification. Already, on the other hand, with respect to hypo-abductions and especially creative abductions, their status is merely intensional. Inscribed under the rhetorical field of intrinsic evidences, the documents are united under the same vocation: the one of to make believe about a ‘non being’ — something or somebody not only extraordinary / extravagant but also illegitimate.

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PARTE II

LE GEOGRAFIE DEL COMLOTTO

PART I

THE GEOGRAPHIES OF CONSPIRACY

Technological and Semiotic Code Structures of Conspiracist Thinking Online

PI News from a Media-Related Point of View

JULIUS ERDMANN*

TITOLO ITALIANO: Strutture del codice tecnologico e semiotico del pensiero
complottista in rete: PI News in prospettiva mediologica

ABSTRACT: The article examines the anti-Islamic blog website PI News from the point of view of media studies, with the aim of deciphering the importance of the website's technological and semiotic code structures for the development of conspiracist thinking. First, the article claims that, although PI News presents itself as an alternative media website, it does not conform to classic definitions of alternative media. With the exception of the moderated comment section, the website does not allow the interactive participation of users. Second, the article points out that the code architecture of PI News triggers conspiracist thinking by primarily presenting mainstream media articles that are remediated on the website. A mosaic of conspiracist meaning, the article contends, is not only created by rhetorical structures but also by multimodal and structural enhancement, by hyperlinks that work as proofs and authentication, by user-generated content and feedback via comments, as well as by intermedial performativity in Social Media. The technosemiotic embedding of original news articles creates an underlying suspicion without providing a coherent model of explanation. The content of the website predisposes conspiracist thinking by presenting a corrective point of view to the mainstream media and by calling on the receiver to contribute a possible theoretical explanation or 'enigma'.

KEYWORDS: Internet Studies; PI News; Alternative Media; technosemiotics.

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1. Online patterns of conspiracist thinking

Mediation of information on the Internet becomes continuously easier to access, and to generate, but at the same time also more complex. On the one hand, terms like “user generated content” and intuitive web design refer to a simplified usage with more outcomes. On the other hand, the interrelations between web projects and other sites, the intermodality and interaction between different types of content become more elaborate: Interfaces guiding to Social Networks and overall taxonomic structures (or folksonomies, cf. Alby 2007) enhance the possible structures of old-fashioned hypertext.

This new mediality of the Internet also shapes the functioning of websites that publish parts, fragments or suggestive patterns of conspiracy theories (CTs). The most prominent German anti-Islamic website with tendencies to CT thinking is Political Incorrect News (PI News)¹. This weblog presents extracts from official news coverage, while concurrently speculating about collaborations of public institutions or political organs, and about the threat of Muslim overpopulation in western countries. These speculations are not an explicit dimension of conspiracist thinking (cf. Kimminich’s chapter in this volume), they are rather a hidden structural supposing. Articles on PI News represent what we have called “fragments” and “patterns” of an alternative social construction of reality that is also based on the attribution of CT structures to a homogeneous or more or less heterogenic group of enemies. Thus, we have to deal with texts that, on the one hand, stimulate the identification with a certain approach of thinking the world, and that, on the other, promote alternative accounts to reality.

The paper aims at analyzing these suggestive procedures as medial and therefore technological as well as semiotic structures. Hence, structural codes and contexts become important. The paper foregrounds the pragmatic reception of such websites, instead of analyzing from a rhetoric and textual point of view².

On these grounds, the paper first of all situates PI News among other websites which have an ambiguous relation to the class of “clas-

1. <http://www.pi-news.net> [accessed December 1, 2015].

2. For a detailed pragmatic–textual analysis, cf. Kimminich’s chapter in this volume.

sic alternative media websites”. It is to ask whether they also imply the ethical and collective dimensions of general alternative online media. Subsequently, the paper analyzes the framing of PI News concerning its relation to “mainstream media” in order to understand its double standard of dealing with official news sources. In a final step, the pragmatic, collective sharing, spreading, commenting, and negotiation of articles, as well as their technological embedding and intermediality will be closely considered.

2. Alternative media vs. mainstream media

PI News presents itself as “alternative news web pages”³ and claims to be different than mainstream media. In a list that has been created by the website ranking machine alexa.com, PI News is situated among other web portals. As Alexa⁴ only registers web pages that are statistically correlative (based on other user’s traffic), we can resume the common features of PI-news by correlation to other websites as the follows:

- Neo-nationalism;
- Against the power of the European Union;
- Oppositional to the actual political system in Germany;
- Against islamization of Germany / Europe, islamophobic;
- Against leftist politics;
- Against mainstream media and press.

Those common features contextualize PI News beyond mainstream media in the realm of classic concepts of “alternative media” claiming the same right of freedom of expression.

According to Leah Lievrouw (2011), alternative media are characterized as follows:

- They are interventionist by subverting common-ground thinking and presenting oppositional meaning.

3. Cf. <http://www.pi-news.net/2014/12/pi-auf-platz-2-der-alternativen-nachrichten-seiten-in-deutschland/> [accessed December 1, 2015].

4. <http://alexa.com/> [accessed December 1, 2015].

- Reading their contents requires subcultural literacy in order to understand oppositional meaning-making.
- They often present the contents ironically in order to establish an artificial distance to the official meaning.
- They are ephemeral, not institutionalized media.
- They function on a collaborative base, and they present heterotopic content that includes a large scale of different social groups as potential addressees.

Insofar, PI News may appear as alternative media. It may be an interventionist attempt to deconstruct common political meanings. In its self-framing in the website header, PI News states to offer „news against the Mainstream”, and to be „pro-American, pro-Israeli, against the Islamization of Europe and in favor of human rights according to the German constitution”⁵. In most cases, PI News publishes commented snippets of newspaper articles, quotations of public persons, and links to official sources. Via commenting and recontextualization, an alternative world view is constructed. With this mixture of news coverage and an anti-hegemonic point of view, the website seems to integrate within the range of Independent Media Center (IMC).

IMCs like Indymedia present counter-information to the established media in order to visualize an alternative point of view that is coined by a socio-cultural ideology and a strong political account (cf. Kidd 2003). As most “mainstream” online media resources, IMCs make use of tags and categories to provide a knowledge structure that organizes the archive of published articles. Such tags and categories aim at future retrieval, the contribution to a conceptual cluster, attention-seeking, and the expression of opinions (cf. Marlow et al. 2006). Whereas Indymedia puts a focus on the retrieval and contribution function of taxonomy by using tags like “Business”, “Crime”, “Global”, “Indy”, “Movies”, “Politics”, and “Pop Culture”⁶, PI News uses tags and categories in order to discredit official media coverage or politics: The term “Lügenpresse” (in English “Lying press”) that was already used in Nazi Germany, the label “Propaganda” or again “Swindle”, and “Political correctness”. Tags also use anti-Islamic neo-

5. Cf. <http://www.pi-news.net/> [accessed December 1, 2015].

6. Cf. <http://indymedia.org/> [accessed December 1, 2015].

logisms like “Dhimmitude” (cf. Schiffer 2009) and “Eurabia” (cf. Hafez 2013).

In the case of PI News, tagging and categorization do not permit to effectively retrieve or reframe articles. There is no general listing of actual tags and hyperlinks only refer to the last twelve articles that were uploaded to the tag. The polemic tagging mostly serves purposes of attention-seeking and the expression of opinions. Tags join the semantic dimension of commented articles — they intensify the reframing of official news coverage by discrediting hegemonic structures of the information society, or they directly focus on (Islamic) conspiracy, as it is the case with “Dhimmitude” or “Eurabia”. This denial of legitimacy is part of the website’s code text as legitimate source of information against mainstream conspiracies (cf. Eva Kimminich’s chapter in this volume).

3. From alternative media to a conspiracist blog

When it comes to the framing and goals of alternative web projects like IMCs, as considered by Rainer Winter (2010), PI News differ from the traditional concept of alternative media: Alternative media aim at showing different and marginalized perspectives. They therefore use the Internet in order to establish social diversity, plurality, and social progress through the democratization of knowledge, the pluralization of positions, meanings, and sources. This also results in a collaborative website architecture, where — on different levels of participation — every user can upload and publish content to the portal (cf. Pickard 2006). The work of the editorial team concentrates on moderation and light editing of proposed articles (cf. Platon & Deuze 2003).

PI News is likewise pretending to be a collaborative project (cf. Kimminich’s chapter in this volume), but is in reality based on a non-collaborative blog architecture, which is also stated in PI News guidelines⁷. That means users cannot directly publish own articles or media resources. Proposals for articles must be submitted to an editorial team. Most articles are de facto written by the editorial team or by guest authors. The main user interaction field is the comment

7. Cf. <http://www.pi-news.net/leitlinien/> [accessed December 1, 2015]

option underneath every article. PI News has moderators for comment sections and claims not to publish comments that are offensive or feature hate speech, political extremism, calls for violence, but also mainstream or leftist ideology. The comment section is closed after 48 hours following the publication of the article. A disclaimer underneath every comment section states that PI News is not responsible for opinions of commenting users.

We can hence state that this news website cannot clearly be labeled as “alternative media” in the collaborative and utopian sense of the word. It does not set up an alternative account as another open perspective on the world. Although it is legitimized by an anti-mainstream-media discourse, this discourse is ambiguous for two reasons: First, as Sabine Schiffer (2010) has shown for the islamophobic ideology of PI News, the website often reveals perspectives that belong to the common ground in Germany’s public opinion. It does not defend radical alternative ideas belonging to a minority. And second, PI News entirely relies on news coverage from established media as a base and reference for their articles (cf. Kimminich’s chapter in this volume). PI News maintains a blurry relation of authentication to the mainstream media — the quotations serve as authentication, but also as alienation strategy. This dialectical relation between authentication and alienation is the main feature of the website: It uses the ambiguous reference to mainstream media as its main code text for conspiratorial argumentation (cf. Kimminich’s chapter in this volume). PI News is not presented as alternative to, but rather as corrective of official media coverage.

This double strategy results in a decontextualization of original media material (cf. Schiffer 2010: 368). Content is republished and yet recontextualized on the blog website. Schiffer therefore speaks of an aggregation of loose content. In doing so, the website avoids explicit meanings and opinions. The explicit meaning of an article, the construction of an enemy and of a general world view, is a result of a structural synopsis by the reader. But technical infrastructure provides a perceptual framework of meaning. For example, hyperlinks can add another meaning layer to a text (cf. *ibid.*: 371). Hence, a hypothesis of the following analysis is that PI News uses a suggestive technical infrastructure or suggestive technosemiotic framing in order to stimulate a conspiratorial meaning.

4. From a reservoir of fragments to a mosaic of meaning

Processes of technosemiotic embedding and collective processing are results of the technological mediality of websites like PI News. Features of technological mediality influence the subjective making of coherent meaning. Since most modern websites provide interactional and collaborative elements as well as features for quick sharing and dissemination of content, the interaction with the user, the embedding of content into the code or “architecture” (cf. Lessig 1999) of the website, and the medial contextualization of content increasingly becomes an important component of meaning-making (cf. Erdmann 2015; De Ridder 2013).

First and foremost, PI News is a reservoir for content fragments and for information bits (cf. Kimminich’s chapter in this volume). But it provides a suggestive infrastructure relying on four technological-pragmatic axes:

- a) Multimodal and structural enhancement;
- b) Hyperlinks as proofs and authentication;
- c) User generated content and feedback via comments;
- d) Intermedial performativity in Social Media.

In the following analysis of an exemplary article⁸ from PI News, these different axes will be illustrated.

4.1. Multimodal and structural enhancement

The technological and narrative structure of the website permits users to embed the article into a coherent world view with conspiratory tendencies. The article taken as example is entitled “Merkel: Germany is an immigration country”. The textual information is dominated by a photomontage that shows German chancellor Angela Merkel as a clown. A brief summary of an article from well-known German newspaper FAZ can be found below, in which Merkel points out that Germany is an immigration country and needs immigrants as skilled

8. <http://www.pi-news.net/2015/06/merkel--deutschland--ist--ein--einwanderungsland/> [accessed December 1, 2015].

workers. Therefore, she argues, Germany must intensify its welcoming culture. The content of this article does not provide a clearly negative statement; it is to be seen as a quasi-neutral news report. But: Apart from this content, the article is tagged with the category “Bunte Republik” (“colorful republic”). The keyword denounces the German ideology of multiculturalism as a central national debate since the late 1990s. As the article is, via the website’s architecture, directly related to the opener picture and the keyword “colorful republic”, its content becomes part of Merkel’s general pro-migration-politics — and here nonsense-politics.

The contextual multimodal information serves as a framework and question mark — concepts such as “colorful republic” or “dhimmitude” and other keywords are not explained on PI-News. Likewise, photos, graphics, and montages on PI-news are mostly not concretized by a display title. Picture descriptions are a feature of common newspapers and news websites. Those general concepts and pictures function as structural elements — media contents are embedded into the editorial policy or the code text of PI News and are assembled within other articles that deal with the same subject. Furthermore, the content of the article is framed in a suspicious perspective. Multimodal information and keytags add a meta-information that claims a critical distance to the reported facts. It functions as an examination: Is this another step to Merkel’s pro-migration politics? Will she continue this way? Are migrants an inherent part of German society?

Multimodal bits of information can also add another frame to the text, as is the case for the referenced YouTube video⁹ at the end of this article. This video, starring controversial German journalist Hendrik M. Broder, states that Merkel prosecutes the extermination of the German race and intensifies the migration to Germany. The video is entitled “Government wants to eradicate Germans”.

The meaning of the article is thus not constituted on the content level, but on its technosemiotic enhancement through embedded multimodal content, the categorization that clearly criticizes a dominant ideology of political class, and the general recontextualization of an article originating from mainstream media within a website

9. Cf. Video on YouTube “Regierung will Deutsche ausrotten”, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A7fq_DZ6wUo [accessed December 1, 2015].

that states to offer an alternative world view by debunking official mainstream structures of meaning.

4.2. Hyperlinks as authentication and explanation

Whereas tag keywords and internal links have the function to structure and to integrate the article into the website's existing content, external links are used as authentication strategies. PI News constantly avoids giving explicit political positions. Authentication via links that refer to newspaper articles allows to combine a factual dimension (in the given example, the "excerpt from FAZ" proves the actual position that Angela Merkel gave in an interview) with a critical delimitation. Other external links (the embedded video) provide counter-perspectives to the given content, prove that Merkel's position is wrong and part of the liquidation program of the German nation and people.

4.3. User-generated content and feedback via comments

The article does not stand alone: It is enhanced by the inscription of collective reading processes that can be found in the comments section below the article: Readers propose a coherent interpretation of the seemingly neutral article. Those comments tend to construct a powerful small caste of politicians that make decisions ignoring the needs and opinion of the people; others stress the GDR background and thus totalitarian character of Merkel. In fact, those comments are crammed with hate speech, clear enemy images and scapegoating. Focused groups and persons are Ms. Merkel, the class of politicians, but also "negroes" or "welfare scroungers".

The comment section therefore becomes a strategic discursive place where people add the missing explicit dimension by attributing their subjective meaning to the text. It is striking that the more than 160+ comments in the example are entirely homogeneous — no alienated world view appears, no critical dimension against the implemented code text of the article. Even though PI News claims not to be responsible for the comments and their authors, apparently only positive comments are allowed and a critical stance is not perceived as a potential function of the comments section.

We can therefore suppose that the visible positive orientation of the comments is an important strategic part of the article page. Comments help to frame the article while giving potential readings.

4.4. *Intermedial performativity in Social Media*

PI News does not only publish its articles on own blog websites, but it also uses the possibly large scale of coverage that is inherent to Social Network Sites (SNS's) like Facebook (cf. boyd 2010). In SNS's, technosemiotic functions of meaning-making are multiplied: Users dispose of a quasi-automatic, one-click Like-button that not only states individual appeal to a content, but also helps to generate public exposure. Furthermore, content can also be disseminated to individual user networks through the sharing option. In the example in question, the Facebook-entry has been shared 25 times¹⁰.

Like many collaborative website architectures, Facebook also provides a comment section below the published content, but comments gain visibility differently than on PI News blog page: Comments that receive more likes are to be seen as dominant interpretations of the article and are therefore easily adopted. In a filtered "Top comment" view of the comment section — the standard setting for Facebook pages — most prominent comments are published on top. This infrastructural logic improves the visibility of prominent, shared and most liked comments; a function that is not implemented on PI-news blog website. In the example, those comments represent Merkel as a betrayer of the German people (another Nazi term). On the SNS page of PI News, comments are also strictly moderated. No alternative or critical stance can be found, which is even more striking as the network clearly not only consists of fans of PI News but also of many critical opponents.

Their presence in Social Media is another axis for PI News' suggestive architecture. Although the Facebook page is not directly linked on the original blog site, neither embedded via Facebook API web interface, Facebook provides not only a large scale for their articles (which are normally reposted on Facebook with the same pictures and

10. Cf. <https://www.facebook.com/PI-News-301052173379665>, Post from June 2, 2015, 14:35h [accessed December 1, 2015].

links). The most important feature of Facebook is the creation of visible networks that congregate supporters of, for instance, anti-Islamic conspiracist thinking (cf. Shooman 2014).

As for the comments on the website, it is an important part of PI News' discursive strategy to avoid a critical visibility on own pages. Webpage and Facebook page become a gathering space for an imagined community (cf. boyd 2010) of critical supporters — a space without interfering voices. This imagined community becomes visible via Facebook's Like and Share function. Liked articles and comments not only stand out between other content on the page. Likes, shares, and comments also flag content that is relevant to and constitutive for the community. Via websites and Social Media accounts, communities of CT thinking are build.

5. Mediated framing and performed suspicion

We can conclude that technosemiotic enhancement and the engraving of the following social communication and negotiation of meaning have different purposes: First and foremost, those options help to disseminate the content and broaden the visibility. But the article itself does not provide an alternative perspective on the news content, and hence cannot be labeled as a clear attribution of conspiracy or rather a CT.

The technosemiotic functions on the level of the websites provide junctures of existing alternative interpretations and world views. This can be seen in an incorporation of mainstream news coverage into the frame of an anti-mainstream website. Particular markers and labels like the PI categories contribute to shaping the reading of the given article. Furthermore, the exhibition of existing interpretations to the content in the comment sections enables a guided lecture of the content. By using Social Media, some readings are prominently exposed and dominate the general possibility of alternative interpretations. We can say that technosemiotic functions on the Internet as well as collective reading establish a new "dominant cultural order" (Hall 2001) that restricts the possibilities of meaning-making by implicitly offering structures of explanation and ready-made enemies.

The semiotic and technical code structures of PI News create a new genre of CT thinking. It suggests a critical perspective based on CTs and populist argumentation. PI News must therefore be situated as a first level of CT thinking, it contains traces of suggestive systems and explanation models (Anton 2011: 29) that nevertheless remain implicit. We thus have to deal with a second order of CT thinking: Possible explanation structures are proposed but not concrete, they are reinforced by user comments and technical embedding, but still remain implicit.

We can therefore conclude that these medial genres of suggested CT thinking transform the basic concept of suspicion that, according to Meteling (2009), is an inherent feature of CTs: CTs generally attribute signs and meanings to something that is typically invisible and unordered. The attribution of a conspiracy in case of no visible conspiracy implies a basic ground of suspicious thinking. Hence, the CT assumes that the conspirators want to remain invisible and inaccessible (cf. *ibid.* 182). CTs therefore develop a “complicated dialectics of visibility and invisibility” (*ibid.* 205). They constantly avoid a clear separation between reference and imagination.

Meteling suggests applying Roland Barthes’ notion of hermeneutic code to CT texts. Hermeneutic codes are textual elements, where a question that calls for a solution is articulated. Once the enigma is established, the revelation of its truth becomes the final goal of the text. That is why CTs mainly consist of a hermeneutic action which finds solutions to detailed problems that constitute the narrative background for every CT plot (Barthes 1970).

Considering again the website of PI News, we may conclude that we cannot clearly speak of a hermeneutic code. Those corrective news portals can be specified as rather factual discourse — there is no oscillating interdependency between fiction and factuality — excerpts of true news-coverage are presented as evidence for an initial suspicion. But the underlying suspicion is never explicitly revealed. Or to adapt Barthes’ terms: The solution and truth is supplied, but the enigma is missing.

Thus, we must deal with an invisible and inherent, performed suspicion. The attribution of given explanations to an initial suspicion is performed by the reader. PI News, as well as other populist news portals, only provides connection points between news content and

CT models of world views. Suspicion, as the underlying code text of every CT, only becomes visible when readers provide written records of their attribution. Comments and technological features of Social Network Sites (likes, shares) are a means for reporting this reverse act of meaning-making.

In the realm of existing nationalist or islamophobic CTs which state the dominance of either Muslims or migrants in western countries (with the help of local governments, media, and industry), websites like PI News hold an important linking function. They generate new publicity and followers, they provide a technical infrastructure to combine different news articles, and hence create a condensed network of meaning without providing explicit positions. They serve as frames for and starting points of CT thinking.

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Always the Same Old Conspiracy Story

On Jürgen Elsässer's Narrative Voyage from Left to Right

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TITOLO ITALIANO: Sempre la stessa vecchia teoria del complotto: sul viaggio narrativo di Jürgen Elsässer dalla destra alla sinistra

ABSTRACT: The recently rising influx of refugees to Germany contributes to fuel fears among conservatives that migrants might change the cultural make-up of the country. This has opened up opportunities for certain individuals to spread, about migrants, xenophobic conspiracy theories that extremists then use to justify violence. The essay contends that these narrations are dangerous, for they create and/or reinforce enemy images of migrants and spread racist thought and action. By employing Mari-Liis Madisson's semiotic model of how conspiracy theories create meaning, the article focuses on the case of one public figure producing such rhetoric: Jürgen Elsässer. Three of Elsässer's texts stemming from different social contexts are cross-examined: one from his leftist past and two right-wing texts from his more recent PEGIDA-allegiance. Elsässer easily interweaves facts and public fears so as to create conspiracy theories, which in the past were about an alleged neofascist Germanization of Europe and more recently focus on the presumed threat of Islamization and Americanization of the continent. The article shows how an author of conspiracy discourse can deliver fuel for public fears through a cunning rhetoric, which retains conspiratorial narrative patterns and concurrently obscure the author's shift of political allegiances.

KEYWORDS: Conspiracy Theories; Germany; Jürgen Elsässer; Right-Wing; Left-Wing.

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1. Introduction

We are experiencing a surge in conspiracy theories (further: CTs). They have a certain appeal to us in their ability to seemingly explain away all the evils of this world by employing simple to digest theories and remedies. While at times ridiculous and harmless, very often they are the motor of negative change in society, taking any form from xenophobic hate speech to legitimization for wars and ethnic cleansing. It is of no surprise then that certain individuals might take the opportunity to use CTs and their popularity in order to push their personal agendas. While this article is too short to prove the real intention behind CT authorship, it will at least showcase German publicist and agitator Jürgen Elsässer's voyage from the far left to the far right of the political spectrum over the course of over 20 years. After a brief theoretical introduction to CTs (1.) and our approach (2.), we analyze three of his texts (3.) in their social context and how his conspiracy-theoretical rhetoric both retains narrative constants and changes according to context and audience. The uniting characteristic of the three texts is that within all of them Elsässer constructs an imminent threat to Europe's identity by an inside or outside enemy, through either a Germanization, Islamization, or Americanization.

2. Conspiracy Theories

CTs are a form of interpretative pattern which in times of inexplicable change or catastrophes may offer simple solutions (Reinalter 27ff). Kimminich defines a CT's meaning as a mainly "communicative phenomenon", which results from an increasing "individualization of our society [while] the interpretation authority on official interpretation content has increasingly been dissolved" (cf. Kimminich 2016, in this volume). CTs have to be analyzed by taking into consideration societal context, as well as the interrelations to other prevailing interpretations. They are not the same as conspiracies. The term theory is misleading, as these possible musings on conspiracies are not theories in a scientific sense, grounded in worthwhile evidence or sound conclusions. At

least some aspects of their argument are either at fault with evidence or logic (Reinalter 21f)¹.

In CTs, various scientific and other forms of knowledge² are interwoven. CTs about e.g. the Jewish people require an extensive knowledge in history or various social sciences in order to be disproved. Furthermore, unmasking CTs requires an additional awareness about cultural stereotypes and enemy images that have existed for a long time and do not necessarily constitute factual knowledge (cf. Hubes).

We do not think that validity is of no concern to us, especially since CTs sometimes have a harmful effect on society, yet we acknowledge that the fact-checking is best left to the experts of the particular field. In the past, there have been scores of examples for reports and narratives, that had been labeled CTs to stifle criticism, which have eventually proven to be true, such as e.g. the Watergate affair (cf. Norton et al. 904–907). As CTs are “systems of collective imagination” (Groh as qtd. by Schönemann 11) which always emphasize the hidden secret behind the official story, they are often reluctant to deal with criticism — depending on the conspiracy theorist’s rhetoric. Proving said CTs wrong is thus often a futile endeavor (*ibid.*). What we can do however, is to analyze the construction of CTs as interpretative patterns. Inspired by both semiotics and sociology of knowledge, the imperative of CTs will here be seen as “shifting perception of social realities” and modifying the evaluation of events to “suit the recipient of the message — so that [they] can [be incorporated] [. . .] into the propagated conspiratorial perception pattern” (Kimminich 2016, in this volume).

Conspiratorial narratives have existed throughout history and some of the first systemic examples of widely-adopted CTs within medieval Europe include the anti-semitic assumption of conspiracy by Jews (cf. Anton 37–41) as well as the witch hunts (cf. Schönemann 18f).

Such narrations have enjoyed a growing popularity throughout the 20th century, defying the results of an increase in education, political emancipation and democratization, and may occur in religious world

1. The confusion in terms here lies in the layman understanding of the word theory. Cf. Reinalter (19–22) for a detailed examination of the terms theory and CT, as well as alternative terms, i.e. conspiracy hypothesis, mythos or ideology. For the sake of recognizability, we will stick to using CT.

2. As proposed by Sociology of Knowledge (Cf. Anton 25–31).

views, as well as secularized ones. Witch hunts are still an existing metaphor for improper trials, which may have resulted from CTs. The Red Scare for instance resembled its medieval role model, yet occurred within an enlightened and relatively secular modern society (Norton et al. 835–837; Jaworski 21).

One reason for such a pervasive upsurge in CTs is the fact that real government conspiracies have come to light — such as with the aforementioned Watergate example. Another factor are the oversimplified accounts of complex social phenomena in mass media, which are also helping the creation of hastened conclusions (Jaworski 28f). This lack of information and trusted sources meets with the new abundance of information on the Internet, which has consequently shattered the usually state, media or university bound privilege of knowledge generation. This breeds skepticism and makes CTs more visible, while at the same time opening them for public criticism.

We agree with Jaworski (13ff) that CTs are not just paranoia, even though there seem to be psychological predispositions for CTs. However, psychology strictly differentiates between paranoia and CTs, with the former being a symptom of mental illness (*ibid.*). One problem with pathologizing CTs is the possible dismissal of CTs as paranoid fabrications without their proper discourse or analysis. It is counter-productive, as the conspiracy theorist is left with their CT unchallenged and it is scientifically sloppy, since only a psychologist or similar expert should diagnose paranoia.

As Shermer suggests, our evolved tribal tendencies of the past make us «form coalitions with like-minded members of our group and [...] demonize others who hold differing beliefs» (6).

Hebenstreit expands on similar observations of in-group vs out-group creation, whereby in terms of complex social paradigms human beings transfer this need of knowing who is in- and who is outside onto today's vastly more heterogeneous social groups (59 ff). And while this process might have seemed failsafe once, it became faultier in a more diversified society. The stranger thus became an easy scapegoat. This shows how CTs are not just harmless fantasies, but can also employ social actors with considerable political force³.

3. The entire campaign of the Bush administration preceding the Iraq-War was technically speaking an unfounded CT backed up by massive propaganda, resulting in the loss

Philosophically, this in-group/out-group approach can be traced back to the manichean schemata of good vs. evil found in the Abrahamic religious tradition (Groh 40ff), — whereby the in-group is automatically assumed as being good and the negative features are projected onto the out-group. It may be used to improve the self-image of the own group. The metaphysical tradition of lore and religion also allows one to assign even supernatural attributes to the enemy image. Additionally, said manichean world view of good and evil entails the solace that no world event can be a product of randomness (*ibid* 43; Reinalter 24f). As factual knowledge is lacking and events become too complex to fathom, this can be a reassuring mechanism. The bogeyman created by said in and outgrouping is seen as the perpetrator of the CT and can stem from a wide range of subjects from ethnic groups to extraterrestrial beings.

In conclusion, it can be said that CTs exist in vast varieties and may range from very simple to rather complex⁴ (cf. Pipes 45–53).

3. Madisson's Semiotic Model of How Conspiracy Theories Create Meaning

Madisson (273–300) makes use of semiotic conceptualizations to develop an encompassing model which explains the way conspiracy theories create meaning.⁵ She sets out from Yuri Lotman's two categorical modes of consciousness, the mythological and the non-mythological/descriptive one, which are both combined within conspiracy theories. The first one perceives the world binarily as one of allies and enemies, good and evil, order and chaos, etc., while the second one sees the world as very coherent and applies overdeterministic models of causation wherein everything is causally connected and both Self and Other are clearly structured. These two inherently contradictory modes of how meaning is created can coexi-

of innocent lives and political chaos (cf. Goodman 2005).

4. In one super conspiracy for instance, alien lizards, the Queen and Nazis are hidden on the Moon and woven into a vast network of conspirators with a complicated set of goals. This is the actual CT of the documentary *Mondverschwörung* (Frickel 2011).

5. Other semiotic approaches to CTs have been developed by Cobley 2004, Fenster 2008 & Hubbes 2010.

st within a given conspiracy theory since they are bound together by a specific code–text, i.e. a meta–narrative of how certain evil groups conspire against the innocent Self (cf. *ibid.* 273ff).

3.1. *The Code-Text as Organizing Principle for Conspiracy Theories*

According to Yuri Lotman, the core narrative or code–text of a CT is a particular «textual system with a rigid syntactic order [. . .] [including] various sub–structures» (qtd. in Madisson 292). It bears universal features which show up in any given conspiracy theory and always «tells the story about evil lurking behind particular events, while its constituent parts, such as the delineation of the specificity of the enemy, the connections of particular events with other events, outlines of the victims etc.» can stem from very different sources and cognitive paradigms (*ibid.* 293).

Thus, even highly contradictory elements and discourse fragments can be combined through the code–text. For instance mythological homomorphism on the one hand, i.e. the assumption that the root cause of evil of the conspirers is visible at all levels and behind any event, person, organization etc. is merged with descriptive relations, such as cause and effect, chronology etc. on the other. Such a code–text has to be in line with the cultural memory of a given society to be accepted as valid and enables its adherents to apply it “without much reflection to any given confusing event” (*ibid.* 294). Madisson builds on Lotman and makes out the two modes of signification, or meaning–creation which are always at work within CTs with the conspirers being seen as evil and their deeds always being perceived as systematic (see fig. 1 for a visual representation). Such a delineation of the enemy is always a central part of every conspiracy theory and also functions according to the two logics.

3.2. *The Mythological Mode of Signification and the Enemy as Non–own*

According to Lotman, an atmosphere of distress and fear causes the habitual patterns of thinking and perception to not function properly and archaic models of consciousness reawaken. Mythological consciousness is usually found within non–literary, oral cultures, where everything that is known is tied to a sacral order recounted in a global

metanarrative of a binary world of good vs. evil, friends vs. foes etc. Chance, coincidence or diverse reasoning do not exist in this mode of thinking, since everything is seen to happen for one singular reason: the eternal fight between good and evil. This quasi-religious world view enables its believers to immediately recognize new events as part of the sacral metatext. This type of thinking is semantic, i.e. everything carries meaning and the closer an event is to the core narrative the higher it is in the hierarchy of signification (cf. *ibid.* 286ff).

The enemy image as non-own is directly derived from this archaic mythological type of thinking, which always dominates the CT discourse in acute crisis, when its adherents are still very much under shock and in fear and their emotions have not yet been tied to a clear collective, descriptive narrative. At this point in time, the culture “requires non-structures, an unordered, chaotic outside in order to function” (*ibid.* 282). This enemy as a non-own is constructed as the Other with which the Self shares no common features at all and there is no shared language to even describe the two realms. Accordingly, this mythological enemy image is anti-individualist, meaning that any single actor within the larger group of conspirers is always seen as only representing the attributes of the larger collective. By perceiving the outside as chaotic and illegitimate, the culture perceives itself as well ordered and legitimate (cf. *ibid.* 282f.)

3.3. *The Descriptive Mode of Signification and the Enemy as Anti-own*

The descriptive mode of signification is tied to the non-mythological consciousness which according to Lotman is based on a hierarchy of different signs and language systems, such as «cause and effect, chronology and logic, etc.» (*ibid.* 290).

The explanations within this mode are very much based on highly systematic and complex arguments and are very over-deterministic with no room for chance. According to the *pars pro toto* logic, here even the smallest of details is perceived as an essential part of the grand scheme. One part of this logic of signification is that often times a pseudo-scientific language, as well as ways of proving and arguing are employed. Evidence is presented, commonsensical explanations are disproven, predictions are made, and statistics are given, bibliogra-

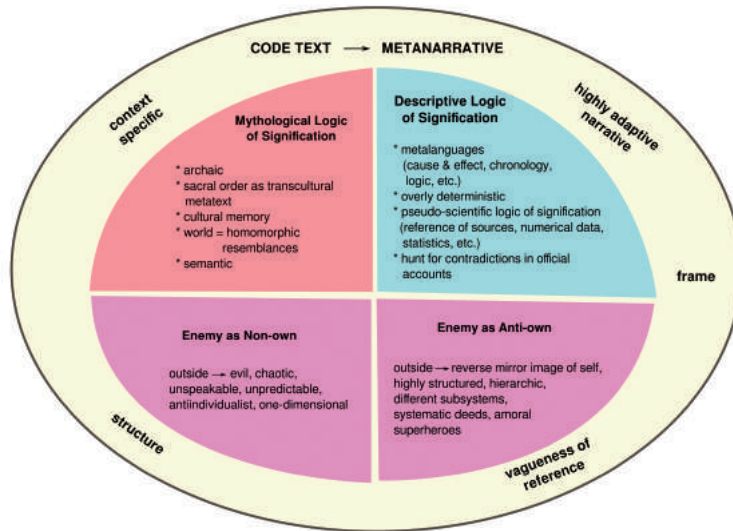


Figure 1. Visual schema of Madisson's model of CT meaning creation.

phical remarks are made, etc. However, the conditions under which the CT would be falsifiable are never named.

The enemy image corresponding to this type of meaning creation is that of the enemy as anti-own, with the enemy being perceived as a hierarchically ordered system of various subgroups, which all fulfill specific tasks within the larger plot. The structuring principles of the anti-own are perceived to be the exact reverse image of those governing the Self. Also, the enemies are often times perceived as omnipotent and amoral superheroes, who are rational and effective and believed to have infiltrated the highest governing institutions of the Self, having used brainwashing techniques on most of the people (cf. *ibid.* 283).

The mythological and descriptive mode of meaning creation and their corresponding enemy images are inherently contradictory, but narratively bound together by the code-text of the CT. This theoretical model will serve for and structure the analysis of the different conspiracy theoretical texts by Jürgen Elsässer in chapter 3.

4. Analyses

4.1. Jürgen Elsässer

Jürgen Elsässer was formerly known as a journalist for various leftist print and online media, such as *Konkret*, *Junge Welt*, *Allgemeine jüdische Wochenzeitung* et al. (“Zur Person Jürgen Elsässer”). After initiating a so called National Front (Volksfront) against the “Anglo-American financial capital” in 2009, his contract with the socialist daily newspaper *Neues Deutschland* was cancelled (“In eigener Sache”). Since then, he has sided with the political right (Radke, “Bewundern, leugnen, abstreiten. . .”) while claiming to gather critical citizens regardless of political affiliation (COMPACTTV, “Jürgen Elsässer am 9. Mai 2015 in Berlin”). He concurrently started publishing the Compact series of books, which expanded into a magazine in 2010 (“Zur Person Jürgen Elsässer”). The magazine presents alternative theories to current events — we deem many of these theories to be CTs. Throughout his publishing career he has equally sided with different political movements and before analyzing the three texts in the following we situate them in the respective social context.

4.2. Case 1 (1995): *Elsässer, the Anti-German Movement and the “Germanization of Europe”*

During the 1990s, Elsässer was one of the earliest proponents of the Anti-German movement, a leftist current by self-definition, which sees German nationalism as inherently evil and the American and Israeli nations as good. The Anti-Germans derive the core of their world-view from the German guilt regarding World War II and the Holocaust atrocities. With their slogan “Germany never again” their demands include splitting up Germany as far as possible, getting rid of German nationalism and standing in complete solidarity to Israel and its protector, the USA. They therefore neither have an encompassing systemic critique of capitalism, nor nationalism at their intellectual base, but a clear black and white scheme of good Allied Forces vs. evil German nationhood (Van Hüllen; James).

Within the book *Had the Führer Lived to See This* (35ff), published by the Anti-German magazine *konkret*, Elsässer lays out a conspiracy

narrative about the Germanization of Europe in an article carrying the same title. He sketches out part of the code–text within the first sentence of the article: «German foreign policy has, since the times of the German Kaiserreich, followed two lines [...]: The first line is that of an economic interpenetration of Europe, the other is one of territorial annexation» (*ibid.* 35). According to Elsässer, these two mechanisms are in the interest of the evil conspirers, i.e. the German capital and work consecutively. This means that if economic interpenetration does not work, annexation through force will be carried out.

4.2.1. Mythological Logic, Cultural Memory and Enemy as Non–own

According to the anti–individualist orientation of the mythological logic of signification (cf. Madisson 273–300), Elsässer fleshes out this narrative by simply equating different groups of alleged conspirers with one another. Claiming that the first line of economic interpenetration has been «embodied during World War I by politicians like Naumann, later Stresemann, till [German] reunification Genscher» (*ibid.* 35), Elsässer introduces the new narrative with an invitation to re–evaluate German history. He also invites the reader to adhere to the new narrative by alluding to cultural memory and equating current politicians with the Nazis in an anti–individualist manner, diminishing differences between the perceived conspiring groups: «The [2nd] strategy of annexation was pursued by politicians such as Ludendorff [...] later it was the Nazis, today it is the German national current in and outside the CDU/CSU».

4.2.2. Descriptive Logic and the Enemy as Anti–own

The descriptive logic prevails within this text, as Elsässer clearly portrays the conspirers as a hierarchically ordered group with different subunits and specific tasks according to the two lines of firstly economic interpenetration and secondly annexation. The politicians carrying out the first line of foreign policy are acting in the interest of the German capital «able to compete globally, e.g. during the Weimar era the electronics and chemical industries» (*ibid.* 35). The second line is determined by the string pullers as the German capital “not able to

compete [globally], the heavy industries, which would have lost out against competition in case of further free trade policies”. By making out these different strategies and subunits of the Other as anti-own, Elsässer reaffirms the code-text and establishes pseudo-causal connections by employing the language systems of logic, causality and chronology.

Within the book, he also constructs a clear in-group of the Anti-German movement, calling for a «small radical minority [and] different forms of action» (*ibid.* 75) and closes the article calling the reader to acknowledge the urgency of the narrative with a clear scenario of an immediate military danger for Europe: «Meaning either Europe will be tailored according to German interests — or we will try again what we have tried between 1871 and 1945» (*ibid.* 38).

4.3. Case 2 (2015): *Elsässer, PEGIDA and the “Islamization of Europe”*

PEGIDA is a registered NGO and the German acronym for the Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the Occident, which also spells its main goal (“PEGIDA Facebook Page”). In just a few months, they gathered thousands of supporters, while inspiring rallies under similar names in other German cities (Baumgärtner, “The End of Tolerance? Anti-Muslim Movement Rattles Germany.”). Some of its supporters commit violent outbursts mainly against refugee housing. PEGIDA however claims to oppose only extremism in Islam, not the religion itself (“PEGIDA Facebook Page”). Even if it is not always openly advocating right-wing extremism, it certainly stands to reason that PEGIDA attracts proponents of it (Kauschke, “Noch besteht Gefahr”).

The connection to PEGIDA will be shown on Elsässer’s article published in his own magazine *Compact* (“Terror Target Europe” 9–12; “Blood Trail to London” 13–15) on the Charlie Hebdo attacks (further: the Attacks). It stipulates that Anglo-American and Islamist forces jointly conspire against European nations. This code-text is a structuring framework for the whole article and already named within the title and subtitle:

Terror Target Europe — The Paris attacks make it clear that the War has arrived from the Middle East right at our doorstep. The dark spawns of

Islamism, supported by the Anglo-American secret services, threaten not only France (*ibid* 9).

The US and UK governments and their secret services supposedly ordered the terrorist act to undermine sovereign nationhood and further weaken Europe in the global struggle for power by a continuous Islamization. Thereby, Elsässer ideologically aligns himself with PEGIDA — indirectly inviting the reader into the in-group. The code-text is later formulated as rhetorical questions, with which he lures readers into adhering to the CT, making them think they had arrived at conclusions themselves and additionally preventing accusations of false claims (*ibid.* 13).

4.3.1. Mythological Logic and Enemy as Non-own

Christian references of evil are used to describe the enemy, naming the attackers the «most sinister spawns of Islamism, supported by the Anglo-American secret services» (*ibid.* 9), or «the most sinister spawns of Sunnism» (*ibid.* 11), and Elsässer thereby combines different conspirer modules. Old fears of historic enemy images are projected onto the new conspirators, speaking of the Muslim Brotherhood, «whose interweaving and claims of world domination more or less parallels those of the Communist International» (*ibid.* 10).

Within the last subtitle *The Patriots' Moment* Elsässer alludes to the in-group PEGIDA as a resistance to what Elsässer metaphorically calls the *Ancien Régime*, thereby assigning the movement the role of the French Revolution (*ibid.* 12, 13).

4.3.2. Descriptive Logic and Enemy as Anti-own

The code-text claims the Anglo-American commanders of the attack profit from Europe's Islamization, since the continent is thereby eliminated as a global competitor. The Islamists also benefit by gaining control of the continent. An enemy image is thus constructed wherein the conspirators are depicted as a hierarchically structured collective (cf. Madisson 2014, Schönemann 2010). Elsässer employs e.g. simple parent-child-metaphors to portray these relations between Anglo-American forces and Islamist groups: «Suddenly, the US-

administration didn't have to feed up small Sunni groups as partners»; «IS is a foster child of US secret services» (“Terror Target Europe” 10).

In the same issue another article shows this hierarchy through image layout. On two consecutive pages (“Blood Trail to London” 13f) photos of James Bond and the MI6 headquarters fill the upper third of the page, while smaller images are placed below these in the margins, depicting the perpetrators' Islamist accomplices (see last paragraph of this subsection).

The James Bond movie *Skyfall* stands for the corruption of British secret services, whereas their headquarters on top of the page are accompanied by a photo of the hate preacher and alleged MI5 protégé Abu Hamza with the caption: «The two preachers of hatred were protected by the MI5 for over a decade» (*ibid.*).

In line with the logic of *pars pro toto*, the two main collectives, Anglo-Americans and Islamists alike, are purposefully left open to achieve interpretive flexibility. An exaggerated stereotyping is used, for example when describing the attackers as a personification of all Muslims or all Sunnis: «It cannot be refuted: the killers were Muslims» (*ibid.* 9). Sunnism is thus simply equated with Wahhabism and Salafism (*ibid.* 10). With a multitude of personified sub-collectives of the conspirators, Elsässer paints a coherent picture of a logistically and organizationally overpowering enemy by equating amongst others: American imperialism, Barack Obama, US administration, Great Britain, NATO, US imperialism, MI5, MI6, CIA, or: Brothers Kouachi, Al Qaida, jihadists, Sunni brothers, Islamists, convicted terrorists, IS, etc.

4.4. Case 3 (2015): *Elsässer, the “Americanization, Israelization and Islamization of Europe”*

In a speech which Elsässer gave on May 9th 2015 (COMPACTTV, “Jürgen Elsässer am 9. Mai 2015 in Berlin”) in front of a right-wing protest entitled “Together for Germany” (Duwe, “Reichsbürger scheitern beim Sturm auf den Reichstag”), he combines many of his earlier CT modules into an eclectic grand narrative to be able to court both PEGIDA, as well as the newly established PEGADA (Patriotic Europeans against the Americanization of the Occident). The concrete social context here is that of a Neo-Nazi/Reichsbürger movement, a xenophobic conspiracy theoretical following, claiming that Germany

has been under occupation since World War II by the Allied Forces, as there has never been a formal peace treaty. Additionally, the basic constitutional law of the Federal Republic of Germany is believed to be not valid, but actually the constitution of the German Reich of the Pre-Nazi era should still be so, since it was never formally abolished. Also, there is the claim that the Federal Republic of Germany is nothing but a private enterprise, which is being controlled mainly by the US government.

The larger code–text which Elsässer lays out throughout the long speech is that the USA and its many institutions and agents, Western and Islamist forces and the German government, conspire against a patriotic self–determination and the union of the German and Russian people by keeping Germany an occupied country and causing an Islamization, an Israelization and first and foremost an Americanization of Europe.

4.4.1. Mythological Logic, and the Enemies as Non–own

The way Elsässer constructs the mythological meaning of the larger CT within this speech is by employing various CT modules which easily link with cultural memory. One example for this is an equation of modern day surveillance with National Socialist dictatorial control of the German people. He depicts the enemy–images as homomorphic resemblances: «[T]he new NS dictatorship is the NSA dictatorship» (COMPACTTV, “Jürgen Elsässer am 9. Mai 2015 in Berlin”). He also employs the imagery of a monstrous kraken to stress their overwhelming power: «This kraken has the planet in its grip with the help of Google and other Internet giants and prepares it for the blows of the American military» (*ibid.*). Equally, Elsässer restates the well known Federal Reserve Bank (Fed) module wherein all imperial actions by the US are reduced to the makings of the Fed, personifying the evil. This oversimplified, agency–based reasoning neglects any systemic and structural understandings of reality: «1913 [...] the great financiers of Wall Street united to bring a paper money monster into life, without a productive basis, only able to survive through theft of resources from independent states anywhere in the world. And those who oppose this monster will be covered with war. It has been like this for a 100 years» (*ibid.*).

4.4.2. Descriptive Logic and the Enemy as Anti–own

Again, in line with the descriptive logic of signification, Elsässer depicts the conspirers as different subgroups which fulfill specific tasks and stand in a clear hierarchy: «We will not stand by and observe how our Shotgun Uschi [German Minister of Defence Ursula von der Leyen] is once again sending our sons and daughters to Stalingrad to die there, this time as ordered by Monsanto and Exxon for the profits of American genetics and oil industries». In this speech, 20 years after the first case was published, Elsässer reverses the roles and names the American capital as the string pullers, while depicting German capital as inherently good and victimized.

The in–group and mission statement he constructs complete the CT-imagery and are used to frame the whole speech including an immense variety of allusions to popular phrases: «My name is Jürgen Elsässer and my target group is the nation. My goal is a national front, we can also call it Querfront [third position politics], as it should represent the cross section of the populace [. . .] all united for national sovereignty of Germany, our traditions and peace [. . .] against the cold war, the sanctions and for a new friendship of Berlin and Moscow». (*ibid.*) And he closes his speech by again appealing to all European nations and by indirectly alluding to the Communist Manifesto’s famous finishing line: «Nations on an eye to eye level, from Lisbon to Vladivostok. Patriots of all countries and religions: unite! We are the people! We are strong and we will come back!» (*ibid.*).

5. Conclusion

A wide variety of conclusions can be drawn from the analysis of these diverse examples. Even though Elsässer went from one end of the political spectrum to the other throughout the decades, his narrative structures remain very similar. He always adheres to a clearly conspiracy–theoretical world–view with imminent threats to Europe, explicit enemy images and precise mission statements of having to overcome and eliminate the different groups of conspirers.

While in the first example the danger stems from a dawning Germanization of Europe with the evil German capital controlling Ger-

man politicians, the second example evokes an impending Islamization caused by the Anglo-American string-pullers controlling the Islamists. Finally, within the third case the major threat stems from an Americanization, Israelization and Islamization of Europe with financial and US capital behind the transatlantic powers, who control the German government, the Anti-fascist movement, etc. What unites these different CT discourses is their decisive agency-theoretical orientation with no room for systemic understandings of capitalism or structural analyses. They also share absolute social categories of good vs. evil with no further distinctions. Equally, Nazi references to delegitimize the political opponent remain a recurrent theme throughout the years, as do Islamophobic tendencies, which unite the three social contexts of the narratives from the Anti-Germans to the Pegida and neo-Nazi crowd.

While the narrative structures are very similar, the rhetoric does change. This in turn can be attributed to a radicalization on Elsässer's part on the one hand, with him employing many more tropes and mythological enemy-images in the later cases. On the other hand, social and media context surely play an additional role in determining the form and style of the presented CTs. The first example remains pseudo-scientific while being published in a leftist-intellectual context, the second one — published in Elsässer's right-wing populist magazine *Compact* — is already a lot more lurid in its forms of expression. The final case of his speech in front of a neo-Nazi/Reichsbürger crowd exceeds the other two concerning the ubiquity of mythical enemy images and metaphors. It is also characterized by an abundance of conspiracy theoretical fragments being combined into one grand scheme. Thus, the dualistic world-view, which is a clear sign of radical CTs, is central in all three cases, proving that conspiracy theoretical elements are interchangeable and the overall narrative structure is thus highly adaptive to actually changing realities as long as the basic narration of conspiracy remains the same.

Furthermore, in the context of rising violence and radicalization of Germany's right wing movements, the danger of such CTs cannot be understated. The task of deconstructing and countering narrations with such dualistic world-views and enemy images remains a central task for societal forces and academia alike.

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NWO Conspiracy Theory

A Key Frame in Online Communication of the Estonian Extreme Right

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TITOLO ITALIANO: Teorie del complotto nel New World Order: un quadro-chiave nella comunicazione online dell'estrema destra estone

ABSTRACT: The essay concentrates on NWO conspiracy theories, a framework that, to members of extreme right online communities, has become a very influential tool for mapping social reality. Extreme right NWO narratives represent a decadent world, in which the malicious structures of the élite secretly undermine the nation states, the white race, traditional gender roles, etc., in order to retard people's "natural" values and ability for critical thinking and to subjugate them under the élite's global totalitarian regime. The viability of NWO conspiracy theories is guaranteed by their high capacity for semiotic modeling. The framework of NWO allows interpreters to depict their ideological opponents (e.g., political establishments, minority groups, mainstream media) as malevolent or, at least, as ignorant forces manipulated by conspirators. At the same time, it is a tool by which extreme rightists can identify themselves as moral and sagacious. The essay aims to explicate how NWO conspiracy theories are constructed in online environments. Besides a theoretical explanation, it provides examples that illustrate central NWO frames, which currently proliferate in the online network of the Estonian extreme right. The essay also shows how the NWO framework enables individuals to connect seemingly incompatible or even controversial discourses and signifiers into a single syncretic interpretation. In order to explain these positions, the essay relies on Juri Lotman's concept of code-text and on Mary-Laure Ryan's framework of hypermedia narrative.

KEYWORDS: New World Order (NWO); Conspiracy Theory; Online Communication; Estonian Extreme Right; Hypermedia Narrative; Code-Text.

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1. Introduction

Many researchers have outlined that the online environment is key to survival of extreme right ideas in a post-war era where liberal democratic worldviews and the protection of the rights of minorities have become socio-cultural norms (Castells 2009, p. 94; Daniels 2009, pp. 110–11; Kaplan et. al 2003, pp. 154–155)¹. Vernacular online communities, based on similar worldviews, can operate as polarization machines because they help to confirm and thus amplify people's antecedent views (Sunstein 2009, p. 24). Generally, extreme right grassroots-networks do not have the ambition to develop into revolutionary mass movements which will have the goal of systematically undermining the ruling structures (Griffin 2003, pp. 28–29). Extreme right networks may offer ready-made solutions and narrative frames for particular individuals «in search of grand narratives and total truths by transforming ill-defined resentments and hatreds into a personal sense of higher mission to “do something about it”» (Griffin 2003, p. 47). One central frame of interpretation that dominates in extreme right grassroots communities is the narrative of New World Order (NWO) conspiracy².

The aim of this study is to explicate the logic of the construction of NWO interpretations from the point of view of cultural semiotics. It is important to note that this approach does not have the purpose of resolving the existence of particular conspiracies nor does it aim to judge the adequacy and validity of particular interpretations of social reality. Also, the perspective of cultural semiotics does not imply appraising conspiracy theory as a beneficial or harmful cultural phenomenon³; it rather treats it as a specific organization of infor-

1. This work was supported by the IUT2–44, Marie Curie International Research Staff Exchange Scheme Fellowship within the 7th European Community Framework Programme (EU-PREACC project) and PUT44.

2. It is important to stress that NWO conspiracy theories do not proliferate only in extreme right networks, there exists numerous versions of NWO theories articulated by left wing extremists or by interpreters who do not accentuate their political agendas at all. This article however, concentrates on NWO conspiracy theories that are articulated in extreme right online communication.

3. Both trends are present in academic research on conspiracy theories: many authors treat conspiracy theory as paranoid style e.g. an inadequate or irrational, sometimes even pathological practice of interpretation (see Hofstadter 1967, Pipes 1999; Popper 1972; Sho-

mation. The object of cultural semiotics is the functional correlation of different sign systems (Ivanov et. al 1998, p 33) and the goal of its studies is to explain how different sign systems model reality and how they co-function. It is important to stress that cultural semiotics is not interested in reality in its entire diversity but rather in sign-based models of this reality; and in most of the cases those models tend to be simplifying (M. Lotman 2001, pp. 216–217). This study approaches conspiracy theory as a specific model or interpretational frame of social reality that treats various (unpleasant) events or phenomena as “the result of a group of people acting in secret to nefarious end” (Birchall 2006, p. 34).

This article focuses on the semiotic mechanisms that function as a basis for constructing the NWO explanatory frame, widespread in extreme right communities, which depicts the systemic eradication program of the white race, nation states, traditional family, etc. Those frames are noteworthy because of their ability to connect seemingly incompatible or even controversial discourses and signifiers into a single syncretic interpretation. This study also explains an at first sight paradoxical situation that in vernacular online communities where text-creation is significantly influenced by the interactive participation of multiple authors and the plurality of different hypertextual threads; predictable and rigid tendencies of interpretation still tend to dominate. Besides explicating the general semiotic logic of NWO interpretations this article maps some of the central topics of meaning making processes in the online communication of the Estonian extreme right. The examples of NWO conspiracy theories were selected during non-participatory observation in the Estonian extreme right network, performed from September 2012 to the end of April 2015. Taking into account the number of visits, activeness and the concentration NWO ideas, I analyzed content from the following blogs: *Rahvuslane*⁴ [The Nationalist]; *NS blogi*⁵ [NS blog]; *EESTI RAHVU-*

walter 1997; Wood 1982). The opposite approach attributes to conspiracy theory a certain legitimacy as a countercultural discourse. Conspiracy theory is understood as a framework which enables individuals to facilitate constructive and democratically transparent communication and articulate one’s doubts about dominant institutions and regimes of truth (see Birchall 2006; Bratich 2004; Dean 2002).

4. <http://rahvuslane.blogspot.com/>.

5. <http://staapo2.wordpress.com/>, since summer 2013 available at new address

SLIK BLOG⁶ [Estonian Nationalist Blog]; and social media groups Eesti Käkikeerajate Liit⁷ and [The Union of Estonian Skulduggers] and Vabamõtteleja⁸ [The Freethinker].

2. Conspiracy theory as a frame of extreme right meaning creation

Umberto Eco has argued that in many cases the extreme right worldview is based on an obsessive idea of international conspiracy. Extreme rightists are often preoccupied with the idea that they are surrounded by hostile forces but they also worry about the expansion of those forces into inner-structures (Eco 1995, p. 72). Conspiracy theory is a quite handy rhetorical tool for rationalizing the extreme right worldview for its believers but also for other people. It gives extreme rightists a chance to translate their feelings of intolerance, fear, anger and moral superiority that exist mainly at the level of essential conviction into a more tangible and explicit language that is transferable also to the others. Juri Lotman has pointed out that the processes of articulating cultural fears are classically characterized by: (1) an idea that the majority is endangered by some minority; and (2) that the minority can accomplish its malicious plans by communicating in a covert way, by using secret codes (Lotman 2007, pp. 58–60). Conspiracy theory connects the idea of decadent forces, acting in secret, with timely topics and actual (unpleasant) events. Lotman (2007, p. 64) has outlined that the main feature of conspiracy is that the majority is personified in the figure of a helpless child who is a victim of dangerous enemies. Sketching an immoral, malignant and very powerful enemy, acting undercover, makes it possible to present the interpreter's own views as something ethical, transparent and justified. On the other hand, it also allows explanation of why the attempts of extreme rightists to turn the world back to the course of "truth" and "morality" are constantly failing.

<http://koobas.net/>

6. <http://rahvuslik.blogspot.com>

7. <https://www.facebook.com/EKKL.org>

8. <https://www.facebook.com/vabamotleja>

Conspiracy theories, articulated by the extreme right, usually fit under the label of New World Order (NWO) (Ballinger 2011, p. 102; Bratich 2008, pp. 125–126; Fenster 2008, p. 72). It is somewhat ironic that the notion of NWO reached into the commonsense of the masses via speeches that George Herbert Walker Bush gave during the Gulf War (January 1991). Bush referred to the NWO as a new peaceful liberal democratic world that has overcome polarized rhetoric models and is mobilizing the forces of different states for providing peace, security, freedom and the power of law as universal endeavors of human kind (Spark 2003, p. 538). In fundamentalist anti-establishment informational space (of the radical-conservative Christians, the extreme right, the radical left) NWO quickly acquired a very strong semantic charge: it was seen as a pivotal point in the history of the genesis of a global totalitarian regime (Fenster 2008, p. 72). Ideas of decadent global control started spreading like a wildfire, especially after the articulation of systemic NWO conspiracy theory in Pat Robertson's book „The New World Order”, published in 1991 (see Fenster 2008, p. 200; Castells 2009, p. 96). As NWO had become a notorious code-phrase⁹ that evoked ideas of malignant conspiracy, it soon vanished from the vocabulary of politicians (Spark 2003, p. 538).

To put it very briefly, NWO conspiracy theory talks about dreadful acts of a malicious covert group (which is usually believed to be absorbed into a global economic and political elite) whose goal is to create a global centralized regime: Totalitarian One World Government. Extreme right interpreters see the undermining and ridiculing (their) sacred and solid identity markers (race, national sovereignty, nativism, (Christian) morality, traditional family and gender roles, etc.) as the principal means of NWO conspiracy. It is believed that this kind of undermining is organized in order to transform people into a nebulous global mass with mixed bloodline and disoriented values that is not able to think independently and fight against the totalitarian NWO system (see Madisson, Ventsel 2015, p. 18). The following quotation represents the NWO framework, spreading in the extreme

9. The term New World Order, especially when it appears in the utterances of public authorities, still evokes similar interpretations. Estonian extreme right authors were quite alarmed when the annual Lennart Meri conference that took place on May 24–26, 2013 had a title “The North-South Split — Managing a New World Order”. They interpreted it as an obvious indicator of the prominence of NWO forces in the Estonian administration.

right network, in a quite accurate way:

And of course, the identity and individuality must be taken away from a nation. It will be replaced with multiculturalism i.e. the lack of culture. Also, elementary morality and traditions that have been the characteristics of normal society and human nature will be liquidated. Instead, abnormal views are imposed. The force of law and a silent guidance are used for that, also children are brainwashed already at kindergarten and later at school.¹⁰

It is often believed that the final goal of the NWO conspiracy is the Orwellian world where a total control over the movements and even the thoughts of people is achieved (Ballinger 2011, p. 64; Suits 2012, p. 35).

NWO conspiracy theories have an extremely syncretic nature, they tend to mix fragments of Illuminati, Zionist, and Masonic plots (Ballinger 2011, p. 14). In terms of conspiracy theory studies NWO is a super conspiracy that models a far reaching pyramid structure of evil that has affected the course of history for a long time (see Barkun 2003, p. 4). The top level of the pyramid is often quite vaguely articulated, e.g. in the Estonian extreme right online communication the most powerful manipulators are sometimes referred to as the Controllers, the Masters, (international) elite or the top globalists. Alasdair Spark points out that the uppermost level of the hierarchy is understood as some very powerful, almost supernatural dark force. In some cases certain enemy groups, pulling the strings, are also articulated, e.g.: 1) the Zionists or ZOG (Zionist Occupation Government) a classic enemy from extreme right demonology, and 2) the Bavarian Illuminati, a secret society often connected with the cult of Lucifer (Spark 2003, p. 537). The Estonian extreme right network refers to both groups but very often the uppermost level is believed to be connected with two particular families: Rockefellers and Rothschilds, widely known for international enterprises, especially dealing with banking.

It is believed that the second layer, the henchmen of the secret cabal, is absorbed into the most influential structures of global political and economic nomenclature. Structures that have less power in global scale (for example the Estonian government) are also seen as

10. <http://rahvuslik.blogspot.com/2014/06/rootsid-tostavad-pead-vagivaldsed.html#more>.

minor sub-branches of the decadent system. One extreme right author points out that the Estonian government is also actually a Zionist Occupation Government that is ready to make every wish of its Jewish master come true¹¹. The main structures, being accused of having the status of henchmen of conspirators, are international organizations: The United Nations; the World Trade Organization, NATO, the European Union, especially the European Commission, the International Monetary Fund, The World Bank, the Trilateral Commission; The Bilderberg Group, The Club of Rome, etc. Other important areas, assumed to be strictly manipulated by the secret cabal, are institutions related with (mass)media, education and healthcare (see Spark 2003, p. 538; Song 2006, p. 481).

The lowest and widest layer of the pyramid is believed to be occupied by the mass of ignorant “ordinary citizens” that are unwittingly under the influence of the NWO system and thus alienated from independent thinking and moral principles (Castells 2009, p. 96). Estonian extreme right authors see themselves also as victims of totalitarian global order but they feel superior than the masses because they can see through the complex manipulations of the corrupted system and they also are constantly working to disclose the conspiracy and to make the others “open their eyes”. Actually, they think that they have done a good job in making people aware of the malignant NWO conspiracy, even so good that the global controllers feel threatened. One article proudly states that:

Estonia is the world's leading country in the sense of percentage of people who know that 9–11 was an inside job of the global elite. And the elite is panicking about that. As well as Estonian secret government and quite a few bribed politicians and magnates who are deceptively representing the people.¹²

11. E.g. see the following postings: <http://rahvuslane.blogspot.com/2014/03/matti-ilves-salajuudid-sionistid.html>, <http://rahvuslane.blogspot.com/2013/10/matti-ilves-laulupidudele-luuakse.html>.

12. <http://rahvuslane.blogspot.com/2014/04/bilderbergi-kohtumiste-avalikustamine.html>.

3. NWO conspiracy theory in the online communication of the Estonian extreme right

As indicated above, NWO rhetoric enables individuals to declare war on the doctrines of tolerance, liberalism and cosmopolitanism by depicting a malicious plan of creating a multicultural society which leads or has already led to eradication of some particular nations/nation-states or the white race in general (see Fekete 2012, p. 5, Griffin 2003, p. 45; Hainsworth 2008, p. 67, Sommer 2008, p. 314). In the following, I outline the most common NWO sub-topics of the Estonian extreme right network and I also explain how conspiracy theories have adapted to the signification peculiarities of online media. It has been argued that the internet functions like a Petri dish for conspiracy theories (Fenster 2008, p. 1) and that the possibility of hyperlinking matches remarkably well with conspiracy theorists' inclination to create all kinds of associations between seemingly separate events, agents and phenomena (see Bell 2001, pp. 170–171; Dean 2002, pp. 97–98).

Robert Glen Howard has pointed out that when interpreters regularly visit specific sites that are connected by shared interests or values they create “vernacular webs”. Frequent communication in vernacular webs increases the perception of continuity and consistency of ideas and thus deepens vernacular authority, which is perceived as valuable because of its non-institutional or so-called participatory status (Howard 2013, pp. 79–80, 82). In vernacular webs of skeptical knowledge there emerges a permutation of so-called typical elements and key topics of conspiracy explanations which are syncretically combined when suspicious events occur (see Barkun 2003, p. 183). During my non-participatory observation in the Estonian extreme right vernacular web I identified three (of course, it is a rough generalization) dominant topics of the NWO that seemed to recur in different representations.

- a) A conviction that 9/11, the Great Recession, the Boston Marathon bombing, the War in Eastern Ukraine, the Syrian Civil War, the outbreak of Ebola, the rising number of refugees in Europe as well as many other globally or locally alarming socio-cultural developments, accidents and catastrophes are seen as inside jobs of global elite. It was understood that those

events were primarily designed for legitimizing strict control methods (e.g. mass-surveillance program PRISM and other data mining programs) that endanger the inviolability of private life and also for causing an atmosphere of chaos and a mentality of fear and disorder that retards the rational decision making of ordinary people. The additional aim of organizing such events is connected with the idea that it allows conspirators to acquire the wealth of citizens, states and banks and thus make them financially weaker and more easily manipulable¹³.

- b) Global warming is seen as deceitful propaganda, spreading via schools and corrupted media systems. Actually climate is understood to be cooling down. The main goal of this misconception of global warming is to make people pay rapacious carbon dioxide taxes, so the global elite can acquire more control of the resources of states and ordinary people¹⁴.
- c) Ideologies, deviant from the point of view of radical nationalism, e.g. feminism, multiculturalism and egalitarianism are understood to be elaborated by the NWO system. For example, it is often expressed that feminism makes women repudiate their natural needs and manners and the global elite is spitefully propagating it to cause the extinction of traditional and moral ways of living. Inter alia, authors stress that it has induced the acceptance of sexual minorities, family nihilism, and a general inclination towards relativism and toleration of everything¹⁵. It is sometimes pointed out that the Frankfurt School (also known as cultural Marxists in the extreme right vernacular web) has made a significant contribution to spreading such degene-

13. See illustrative examples of this sub-topic: <http://rahvuslane.blogspot.com/2014/09/hando-tonumaa-kui-vastuseks-on-soda.html>; <http://rahvuslik.blogspot.com/2014/03/uro-valetab-vaites-et-eestis-on-el-i.html>; <http://rahvuslane.blogspot.com/2015/03/david-icke-lahis-ida-konflikt-pohineb.html>.

14. See illustrative examples of this sub-topic: <http://rahvuslane.blogspot.com/2013/04/matti-ilves-kliima-soojenemise-asemel.html>; <http://rahvuslane.blogspot.com/2014/10/ajatu-usa-fuusik-globaalne-soojenemine.html>; <http://rahvuslane.blogspot.com/2014/12/kas-mage-vesi-erastatakse.html>.

15. See illustrative examples of this sub-topic: <http://rahvuslane.blogspot.com/2013/11/naisliikumine-kui-uuemaailmakorra.html>; <http://koobas.net/2013/03/24/ajaleht-pedemees/>; <http://rahvuslik.blogspot.com/2015/02/riiklik-homopropaganda-lastele-sinu.html>.

rate ideas. As one blogger puts it: «Cultural Marxists are trying to control the society by manipulating the language, media and educational system, and they are achieving their goals by using censoring–techniques, known as “political correctness”». The decreasing number of white children and the maximization of “tax slavery” are seen as the main goals of those deviant ideologies¹⁶.

Previously outlined sub–topics illustrate that NWO plots succeed in uniting seemingly incongruous discourses (e.g. the discourse of law, education, gender, economy, security, geology, etc.) and signifiers (the Frankfurt School, the number of the white children, PRISM, banks, feminism, the Boston Marathon bombing, the educational system, carbon dioxide taxes, etc). Additionally, it is important to point out that in their meaning creation extreme right webs combine various means of hypermedia. The primary specifics of hypermedia texts reside in using hyperlinks which allow the connection of various kinds of text fragments, e.g. a hypertextual whole may incorporate verbal, visual, acoustic and inter–semiotic elements (Landow 2006, p. 3). Estonian vernacular webs of the extreme right aggregate large numbers of hyperlinks which combine various semiotic modes and multiple informational sources. For example there are represented: scanned historical documents: articles, photographs, agreements from museum archives, essays, book fragments, comments and other kind of textual material, contemporary white power music and adaptations of old soldier songs, and various radio shows (foreign and local), many kinds of pictorial information which ranges from scanned war photographs to memetic reaction photoshops and rage comics which are used for illustrating daily politics and ridiculing ideological opponents, and heterogeneous audiovisual representations are used (mostly via links to Youtube), e.g. filmed lectures or movies. The extreme right vernacular communication also often has an international dimension. It is a widespread practice to refer to content of like–minded thinkers from all over the globe. Estonian extreme rightists share mainly links to Scandinavian and Russian content as well as some sites that are

16. <http://koobas.net/2015/01/04/kultuurimarksistid-suudistavad-koiki-oma-vastaseid-vihkamises/>.

predominantly in English, e.g. Alex Jones' blog Infowars and David Icke's blog are frequently quoted. By sharing links to other sources of the vernacular web of the extreme right, the authors spread each other's content (sometimes bloggers present information in foreign languages and add their translations, synopses and comments) and also present their sympathy and acknowledgement of some sites.¹⁷

The heterogeneous nature of extreme right (hyper)text creation is, besides using different semiotic modes, also illustrated by the tendency to combine material from fundamentally different informational spheres. This aspect is supported by the above mentioned listing that pointed out that the vernacular web of the extreme right may present fragments from historical archives and contemporary memetic material basically next to each other. Several studies (Howard 2013, pp. 81–83, Friedlander 2008, p. 182, Laas 2011; Landow 2006, p. 232, Soukup 2008, pp. 14–16 etc) have noted that the text processing opportunities of hypermedia, e.g. convenient replicability, transformability and the possibility to easily adapt texts/ text-fragments into new associations, facilitates bricoleur authorship. Texts are often constructed of material that previously exists on the web. That kind of bricolage tendency allows crossing the borders between different textual spheres. Extreme right online representations may present content from institutional spheres of information (e.g. from sites of public institutions or homepages of private companies, newspaper articles, academic publications etc) but also from less institutional spheres (e.g. Wikipedia articles, blogs, forum commentaries, postings of different social networking sites, etc.), from artistic and commodity texts, from individual and collective creation, etc. It is noteworthy that extreme right authors do not often explicate how the particular links or text fragments are connected with the general message of their posting.

Thus, the informational sphere, including postings which discuss different aspects of NWO conspiracy, does not constitute a coherent textual system. Several researchers of hypertext (Eco 2003, Ryan 2004, p. 342) have argued that the way how a particular interpreter navigates the web-like textual complex can be paralleled with the way how a reader approaches an encyclopedia or a database. Lev Manovich has

17. See the explanation of phatic online-communication in Andreas Ventsel's article in present issue of *Lexia*, pp. 227–230 and Madisson, Ventsel 2017).

even claimed that it would be useful to understand the database as a primary symbolic form of the era of computer mediated communication. The form of the database functions as a list of some objects and different fragments of this list are not regulated by a linear logic or a central organizing principle (Manovich 2001, p. 225). These considerations lead to the question: how is it possible that in a maze of information which does not have a clear structure and which aggregates various kind of discourses and ways of modeling extreme right interpreters still very often reach predictable clusters of interpretation which connect the ultimate cause of all kind of events and phenomena with the idea of malignant NWO conspiracy? In the following I try to explain the logic of the development of NWO interpretation by relying on Marie-Laure Ryan's approach of hypermedia narrative and the concept of code text from cultural semiotics.

4. The semiotic logic of constructing NWO interpretations

Ryan points out that usually the interpreters of hypertext imply that a textual network is a set of information where to look for certain things but not a constituent storyworld where to immerse oneself. The vast majority of the interpreters will approach hypertextual systems as some kind of information jigsaw puzzle. Interpreters try to put the whole picture together of the text fragments that they reach in quite random order. They try to match every fragment with a general narrative pattern that is gradually developed in the interpreters' mind. One can pause while putting pieces of the jigsaw puzzle together. The same logic applies in the case of interpreting the hypertext. Interpreters can construct a general mental whole in many steps which constantly improve their initial vision (Ryan 2004, p. 342). Ryan also stresses that approaching a hypertextual informational maze as a narrative is likely when the interpreter is already familiar with the general plot. It functions like putting a magnifying glass on certain aspects of a story. New information is added to the familiar plot as a complementation of some of its nuances or it is dismissed as insignificant (Ryan 2006, pp. 149–150).

For example some particular text fragment, presented in extreme right web, may specifically concentrate on details of the nature

of some specific expert groups, e.g. conspirators who have specialized in manipulating the media, affecting the educational system, undermining certain nation states, coordinating the work of different international organizations (e.g. NATO or United Nations), organizing financial crises, etc¹⁸. At the same time some other fragment may confirm the conviction of the inhumanly evil nature of conspirators, e.g. one posting outlines that cancer, autism, retardation, Alzheimer's and Parkinson's disease are often caused by the conscious actions of conspirators (The Bilderberg Group, The Council of Foreign Relations, The Trilateral Committee, The Club of Rome), namely that they are responsible for poisoning vaccines and contaminating food in order to weaken the white race¹⁹. Particular interpreters may not consider all postings of a certain web page significant, s/he may dismiss them as biased, inessential, controversial etc. But representations that seem significant to a particular interpreter, e.g. if they confirm his/her previous suspicions or add some new nuances, then they find their place in his/her general vision of conspiracy. The interpretation of hypertextual mazes as sub-plots of NWO conspiracy theory becomes possible and likely because of interpretational frames that already exist in the conceptual horizons of members of the extreme right vernacular web. Previously known fragments of presented content (e.g. the phrase NWO, events like 9–11, financial crises, some key characters, like the Trilateral Committee, NATO, WTO or Estonian President Toomas Hendrik Ilves) activate a frame of associations that is characterized by extremely adaptive causal structure, so it enables individuals to connect seemingly incoherent elements. Lotman's concept of code text helps to explicate how NWO interpretations are connected with the collective memory of the extreme right community. Also, it allows explanation of what kind of communicative functions that kind of seemingly redundant meaning making exhibits.

According to Lotman a code text is a textual system that originates from the collective memory of a particular culture. A code text is certain kind of interlink that, instead of being an abstract collection of

18. E.g. see <http://rahvuslane.blogspot.com/2015/03/david-icke-lahis-ida-konflikt-pohineb.html>.

19. <http://rahvuslane.blogspot.com/2010/12/vanglaplaneet-kirjutab-legaalsed-m%C3%BCrgid.html>.

rules for constructing a text, is a textual system with a rigid syntactic order. The different signs of a code text can be divided into various sub-structures, but despite this the code text remains unambiguous “for itself”: «on its own level, the code text is a unitary phenomenon in both content and expression». A code text unites into a unitary text elements which, for a so-called outsider perspective, would remain unconnected. For a bystander a code text may appear as a diffuse aggregate, but for those for whom the code text functions as a text of collective memory, it becomes an essential landmark for interpreting multiple events (Lotman 2006, pp. 245–246). The frame of conspiracy theory can be treated as an important code text of the extreme right informational sphere. Its text (message) is: this (i.e. in the case of some particular event that is often perceived as unpleasant/dangerous) has something to do with conspiracy (i.e. is some realization of a malicious plan of a covert NWO group). The relatively universal role of the code text of NWO conspiracy theory in the context of mapping and valuating different events can be explained by the very high modeling potential of conspiracy theory.

The NWO code text of conspiracy theory allows the connection of events which have happened in various times, places and involves different actors that seem incompatible for a bystander. Representations of NWO super conspiracy enable individuals to avoid all kinds of ambivalence and randomness; every detail and event (it can be natural disaster, social conflict, disease etc) is presented as an elaborated part of an enormous system of a global conspiracy (Armstrong 2009, p. 231; Barkun 2003, p. 3; Champion-Vincent 2007, p. 105). According to Marina Grišakova the modeling of events can be based on various types of causality. Natural causality which is characterized by explicating logical and physical relations and causality reduced to intentionality; are two most clearly distinguishable types. This causality, based on intentionality, is very complex and it is usually difficult to depict it in an unequivocal and clear manner because human motivations and intentions tend to be interwoven and thus it is hard to decide what is actually responsible for causing a particular change (Grišakova 2010, pp. 56–57). Interpretations referring to conspiracy present the intentions of conspirators in a very homogeneous and clear-cut way: evil. Conspiracy theorists usually believe that the secret cabal, organizing actions that are threatening the general well being, is well

aware of the harmful consequences of its deeds. Namely, conspirators are perceived as essentially sinister because of their conscious evil-doing. NWO narratives do not usually ask questions about historical or socio-cultural contexts that have affected some tragic events. It is understood that a horrible thing happened, first and foremost, because there are evil forces behind it. The conviction of the evil intentions of conspirators functions as an effective organizing principle and is perceived as a factor which has motivated the course of the whole of history (Fenster 2008, p. 103; Hofstadter 1967, p. 29). It does not mean that conspiracy theories neglect the natural causality of particular events. Quite the opposite. The dimension which explicates how a particular event happened in specific (physical, social, historical, etc.) conditions is sometimes depicted in an incredibly detailed way. The reason why conspirators are perceived as extremely dangerous and omnipotent is that interpreters presume that they have the capacity to apply natural causality for serving their evil intentions, and they do it in so sophisticated a way that most people would never notice it.

Thus NWO conspiracy theory acknowledges the diversity of various phenomena/reasons but, at the same time, it assumes that different events are motivated by evil as the ultimate and all-embracing cause. As various dimensions of reality are perceived as parts of the same system of evil, the attributes that are essential for distinguishing such structures are vague²⁰. Conspiracy theory may explicate a particular reference (e.g. local or global manipulators of NWO systems, e.g. Toomas Hendrik Ilves or Herman Van Rompuy) but it will be added to an endless row of the signs of the NWO system of evil. Leroy Dorsey (2002, p. 449) has outlined that conspiracy theories tend to deform the malevolent structures that they want to outline. Antagonists thus have the face of an all-encompassing evil rather than the face of different social groups or persons (Madisson 2014, p. 295).

20. I have explained the vagueness of reference in conspiracy theories more thoroughly in another publication, see Madisson 2014: 294–296.

5. Deepening the significance of conspiracy

As demonstrated before, the NWO code text is one of the key frames of interpretation of the extreme right vernacular web. It allows the development of quite coherent interpretations that connect very different, sometimes even controversial, informational spheres and modalities. In the following I explicate the semiotic function of seemingly redundant communication (in the sense of providing new information) that refers constantly to conspiracy in the light of a concept of code text.

Lotman has outlined that text is functionally used as a code rather than a message when it does not add new knowledge but translates an already existing message into a new system of meanings (Lotman 2001, p. 30). Peet Lepik has emphasized that in the case of code text we have to distinguish: (1) the level of natural language and (2) the level of cultural text. Of course, in the level of natural language code text has semantics but as a cultural text it does not include new information. Rather it functions as a pure syntagmatics or secondary code (Lepik 2007, p. 79). Conspiracy theories share an invariant system of relations which originate from collective memory. In concrete interpretations this invariant frame is filled with particular content but if we consider it from the analytical level then in different NWO interpretations the interpreter is re-experiencing the same initial frame that s/he previously knows.

The interpreter notices something obscure, suspicious, unpleasant, etc., about some particular phenomenon and the code text of conspiracy theory, previously existing in his/her interpretative horizon, is a likely frame according to which the experience can be modeled and related with the structures of cultural memory. Lotman has pointed out that when the supplementary code and the message which is in the language of everyday experience start to interact then the secondary semantics appears above them. It is formed of the shifts of re-transformation which happen in the light of the supplementary code (Lotman 2001, p. 28). Conspiracy theory functions as a trigger of cultural self-organization, as a supplementary code. It converts everyday experience into its fixed structural units which give it the features of a new (and more meaningful) message (Lotman 2001, p. 22). The interpreter relates his/her instant observations with elements of the code text. Lepik (2007, p. 193)

has stated that the specific structural characteristic of a code text is the authoritative sphere of reference which objects locate in an axiologically higher sphere than everyday meanings (experiences). One important aspect of the NWO communication, is that not only the events that are perceived as a result of conspiracy become more meaningful but also the conspiracy itself will become more confirmed and significant because of frequent interpretations.

6. Conclusions

The extreme right vernacular web holds a syncretic corpus of hypertexts that consists of various fragments that have different modalities and that belong to different or even incompatible discourses and spheres of meaning. Nevertheless, there seems to occur a quite coherent or even predictable tendency of interpretation that reduces socio-cultural developments to NWO conspiracy. Extreme right interpreters put together the full picture of NWO from informational pieces that they encounter in quite random orders. Every fragment of information is correlated with the NWO code text that is already on the interpretational horizon of the members of the extreme right community. If those fragments seem relevant, e.g. if they add some details about the sub-systems of the secret cabal, or confirm the evil nature of the global elite, then they will be added to the previously existing frame. It is important to note that the process of re-appearance of the NWO interpretational frame is paralleled with the growing significance of the associations provided by this frame.

The vast modeling capacity of NWO conspiracy theories becomes possible because it is based on the code textual set of relational associations which originates in the collective memory of the extreme right network. The code text of NWO conspiracy theories functions as a specific textual invariant which maintains that behind all kinds of (unpleasant) events or phenomena there is a conspiracy, i.e. a set of covert activities organized by the malicious global elite. Those interpretations are driven by a causality that is reduced to intentionality. Namely, conspiracy theories depict a world where the ultimate cause of almost every socially significant event is connected with the evil will of conspirators. Conspiracy theories also rely on descriptive

or natural causality (e.g. natural laws and relations of logic) but it is usually assumed that the sinister elite is very capable of using those relations for their own benefit.

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Conspiracy as Politics of Historical Knowledge

Italian Terrorisms and the Case of *Romanzo di una strage*
Piazza Fontana: The Italian Conspiracy

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TITOLO ITALIANO: Il complotto come politica della conoscenza storica: i terrorismi in Italia e il caso di *Romanzo di una strage/Piazza Fontana: The Italian Conspiracy*

ABSTRACT: The article explores conspiracy theories through the interpretative category of the “politics of knowledge”. It argues that conspiracy theories can play the role of a form of knowledge construction for dealing with past historical events and have as their reverse particular forms of ignorance (in particular, secret). The article draws on a semiotic perspective on conspiracy — in particular, on Umberto Eco’s and Jacques Rancière’s reflection on semiosis and knowledge — but departs from the pathologizing approach to conspiracy predominant in the literature. The case study of the article is the representation of Italian terrorisms in Italy — the so-called “years of lead” — and the conspiracy narratives that are used in the elaboration of the different “unknowns” related to them. By describing the different cultural responses to terrorist violence, the article places conspiracy in a broader cultural and historical context, in which the film *Romanzo di una strage/Piazza Fontana: the Italian Conspiracy* (Marco Tullio Giordana, 2012) is analyzed as one of the most recent examples of conspiracy narratives. By representing the piazza Fontana bombing and “stragismo” as the result of a very complex conspiracy, the film exculpates the Italian society at large from any responsibility as regards the violence that marked the 1970s; through the three protagonists (Luigi Calabresi, Aldo Moro, and Giuseppe Pinelli), the movie puts the audience and its different political and memory constituencies in the position of victims.

KEYWORDS: Terrorism; Years of Lead; Memory; Conspiracy; Piazza Fontana.

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1. Introduction

Italian Republican history is marked by a very common and widespread interpretative attitude that some call the “pathology of the secret” (Fasanella, Pellegrino and Sestieri 2008, pp. 16–17), and which is very frequent in the representation of Italian political terror of the 1970s and 1980s. The piazza Fontana (1969), Brescia (1974) and Bologna (1980) bombings, Aldo Moro’s kidnapping and assassination (1978) — to mention just some of the events of that period — are depicted as “misteri d’Italia”, a representation that uses a conspiratorial mode and that constitutes a sort of mythology in popular culture (Lombardi 2011). According to the Zanichelli dictionary, in 1974 Italians started using a neologism for describing the attitude of those who look for what is secret: *dietrologia*, the discourse of those who look for what is behind the happening of an event. And actually “*dietrologia*”, more than “*complotto*”, is the most appropriate Italian translation for the English word “conspiracy”, at least for that which concerns Italian culture in the XX century.

Different genres and narrative formats have used the conspiracy mode as a hermeneutical tool in order to textualise those historical events which are marked by a series of “unknowns”. The noir and the police procedural in cinema and literature have created a collective imaginary that plays an important role in the construction of memory; similarly, cinematic investigations have helped in visualising the “labyrinth of *stragismo*” (Wood 2012), the right-wing terrorist attacks.

What I propose throughout this paper is that conspiracy can be analysed and interpreted as a specific kind of politics of knowledge. In other terms, it is an interpretative practice that produces and deals with “unknowns” and tries to make sense of them: firstly, by envisioning a certain production and distribution of knowledge in society; secondly, by representing identity, agency and intentions of those who supposedly hold the power to govern events; thirdly, by offering vicarious forms of truth, when other discursive regimes — particularly the judicial and the political — and subjects — particularly the State — fail or are considered not sufficiently trustworthy or reliable, as in the case of the “years of lead” in Italy. When they are used to construct a memory of the past, conspiracy narratives make the historical events knowable and usable in the public sphere and are a way to make sense

of the past and of history.

In order to make this argument, the article brings together a semiotic approach to the study of conspiracy and historical events and the literature on the Italian cultural response to terrorism, finally focusing on a case-study: piazza Fontana and the movie *Romanzo di una strage* (Marco Tullio Giordana 2012), internationally released as *Piazza Fontana: the Italian Conspiracy*. In the next section I will outline my approach to the study of conspiracy, which departs from pathologising and truth-functional perspectives. In the third section, I will make reference to different cultural responses to Italian terrorisms in which I would like to contextualise the study of conspiracy. In this context, I will analyse *Romanzo di una strage/Piazza Fontana: the Italian Conspiracy*.

2. Conspiracy as production and distribution of knowledge and ignorance

The semiotic approach to conspiracy is very much marked by Umberto Eco's literary and philosophical work. For instance, in Eco's last novel (2015), the journalist Romano Braggadocio embodies the conspiracy approach to history. In the turn of 1992, the year of the fall of the First Republic, Braggadocio explains contemporary Italian history and its mysteries — including terror attacks such as piazza Fontana, piazza della Loggia and Peteano — as the conspiracy of Benito Mussolini (Eco 2015, pp. 181–185). According to Braggadocio, the duce actually survived WW2 and was the puppet master behind those dreadful events. Maybe to prompt the paranoid interpretation of the reader, this revelation is told in chapter XV entitled May 28, which is a very peculiar day in Italian history: the day of the 1974 terrorist attack in piazza della Loggia (by the right-wing terrorist organization Ordine Nuovo) and of the 1980 assassination of the journalist Walter Tobagi (by the left-wing terrorist organization Brigate XXVIII Marzo). Looking at Eco's production, we can see in the experience of terror the biographical and historical core that prompted the philosopher to reflect semiotically on conspiracy.

On the one hand, Eco starts reflecting on paranoia in the 1970s on newspapers and magazines analysing terrorists' texts (e.g. in 1975

now in Eco 1977, pp. 155–158, in collaboration with Paolo Fabbri, and in 1978 now in Eco 1983, pp. 109–113). These categories will return to be semiotically defined in the 1980s and 1990s. Already mentioned in the *Lector in fabula* with the reference to the interpretation of Moro's letters from captivity (Eco 1979, p. 85), the spy story, conspiracy, secret and paranoia will become objects for a semiotic theorization (in particular Eco 1990).

On the other hand, since *Il nome della rosa*, I see in Eco's literary work a reflection about the good rules (the abductions of William of Baskerville) and interpretative drifts (those of Braggadocio) for the construction of knowledge about disorder, disruption and violence (murders in a monastery or terrorism in a country). In an interview released on October 15 1980, although denying any connection between the *Il nome della rosa*'s plot and Moro kidnapping and assassination, Eco admitted that he started writing the novel as a form of reaction to the kidnapping, to reflect upon the incapacity of the intellectual to produce knowledge that could influence events and «to represent an intelligence that struggles with a labyrinth» (Lilli 1995, p. 85, my translation).

In the same years, the whodunit — the genre of *Il nome della rosa* —, the noir and the police procedural were some of the strategies and genres that were used to give a narrative shape to Italian contemporary history as conspiracy. Such production can actually be interpreted as a cultural response to terror. In other terms, and this is the thesis of this article, conspiracy can be interpreted as a tool for dealing with the historical experience of Italian terrorisms, a way to produce knowledge about it.

However, my position departs from an assumption that is very much present in Eco's first works on conspiracy: a pathologising approach. In his study of the hermetic semiosis and its legacy in the Western philosophical tradition, Eco sketches two kinds of interpretation: "healthy" vs "paranoid" interpretation (1990, p. 53). This dichotomy structures Eco's approach to conspiracy that is dominant both in the semiotic and non-semiotic literature: from Richard Hofstadter's seminal work (1965) to Fredric Jameson's position (conspiracy as a "poor person's cognitive mapping" [Jameson 1988, p. 356]), conspiracy narratives are described as a pathological style of reasoning that distorts reality, in an extension of the psychological model to society at

large. Such approach is quite controversial (see on this Boltanski 2012, pp. 262–273; Fenster 2008; Urbano 2012; Demaria 2015, p. 15) and also suggests (more or less explicitly) a truth–functional and judgmental interpretative framework where conspiracy belongs by definition to the domain of falsehood. I think that such an approach is not useful to fully understand the social and political role of conspiracy theories; indeed, it prevents us from analysing the many functions of conspiracy. My proposal is to imagine conspiracy theory as a specific form of knowledge that deals with specific forms of ignorance or unknowns.

In order to make this argument, I draw on Jacques Rancière’s philosophical position. According to Rancière, each form of knowledge — e.g. historical, judicial, scientific — has always “a particular ignorance as its reverse” and is always constructed on a double level: “it is an ensemble of knowledges [connaissances] and it is also an organised distribution [partage] of positions” (2006, p. 3). The knowledge that is constructed in conspiracy narratives needs to produce its own unknown: the secret. In Greimas’s terms, secret is the effect of meaning of being and not–seeming, it is what is but does not appear (Greimas 1989). However, the secret is a necessary but not sufficient element to define a conspiracy narrative. We need also to understand what type of distribution of knowledge conspiracy implies. While what is “totally unknown” is something that nobody knows, the effect of secrecy is produced by the fact that there are those that do not know and those who know, as a result of a power disparity. In this sense, conspiracy is a politics, as it performs practices of division and interdiction (you are not allowed to know), and it is about knowledge: it constructs the unknown as secret and distributes knowledge in the narrative world between those who are not allowed to know and those who know and actually govern the world. Conspiracy narratives rely thus on a system of positions that constructs a differential access to knowledge in the narration, in which some are able and allowed to access reality and truth, while others are not.

Conspiracy narratives allow the spectator/reader to have access to knowledge, and whether such knowledge is true or not is not interesting in this perspective. From a semiotic perspective, what is really at stake here are the different meaning effects that these narratives produce (including truth as an effect of reality). Sometimes conspiracy narratives “represent a failure in the hegemonic process

because they signal the inability of a power elite to impose its own view of events and history” (Wood 2012, p. 32); other times, they work as a cathartic ritual by freeing the audience of any responsibility for events; other times still, “what pretends to be a privileged access to the truth is in reality its opposite: the mythically–inflected manifestation of an inability to orient oneself in a complex social system” (O’Leary 2011, p. 50).

3. Terrorisms, forms of unknowns and forms of knowledge: from imagination to dietrologia

At the end of the film *Romanzo di una strage/Piazza Fontana: the Italian Conspiracy*, a text provides the spectator with information on piazza Fontana’s history¹, trials and the deaths of Luigi Calabresi, Giuseppe Pinelli and Aldo Moro:

La strage di piazza Fontana non ha colpevoli [. . .]

Aldo Moro è stato assassinato dalle Brigate Rosse il 9
maggio 1978

[The piazza Fontana bombing has no culprits. . .

Aldo Moro was killed by the Red Brigades on May 9
1978]

These two descriptions epitomise two different constructions of events linked to “black” (right–wing) and “red” (left–wing) terror, their unknowns and the use of conspiracy narrations to deal with them. The description of events that are linked to red terror usually follows the linguistic structure “X killed Y” or “Y was killed by X”, where X is the organization (e.g. Brigate Rosse, Prima Linea, Nuclei Armati Proletari) and Y the victim (e.g. Moro); the description of events that are linked to black terrorism usually follow the structure “A bomb exploded at Y” or “A bomb killed Y people” where Y is a

1. On piazza Fontana and its historical context see Cento Bull (2007).

place (e.g. the Bologna railway station, piazza Fontana, piazza della Loggia, etc.) or the number of victims.

In other terms, these two kinds of terror produce different unknowns. While conspiracy narrations on red terror are about the puppet master(s) who pulled the strings in the event, black terror appears as actions with no human agency: grammatical subjects in sentences are objects (like bombs). While the symbolic seal of red terrorism is the five-pointed star of the *Brigate Rosse*, which stands for a group of people, black terrorism is iconised by the hole caused by the bomb in the piazza Fontana Banca dell'Agricoltura or by the picture of the Bologna railway station clock, stopped by the explosion at 10.25 (Antonello and O'Leary 2009, p. 7). In media representations "the public remains mystified about the roots, manifestations, and solutions to terrorism [...] and puts such incidents in the category of the "wrath of nature," much like an act of God or a freak of nature" (Farnen 1990, p. 123). This element comes from the different communicative strategies of the two terrorisms: while red terrorism has claimed its actions with a very aggressive communicative strategy, black terrorism elected to remain always anonymous in the attempt to destabilize the political system and make the blame fall upon left-wing organizations. As Andrea Zhok argues, piazza Fontana and black terrorism slaughters are explicitly designed "as a form of lie" (2012, p. 134).

As Eco's reflections testify, the two terrorisms asked for the mobilization of different forms of knowledge and know-how. In those years the question was: which is the form of knowledge that can help us in understanding the "reality of reality" (Boltanski 2012)?

Pierpaolo Pasolini's response was particularly powerful and since then has shaped the ways writers and intellectuals try to elaborate knowledge about violence and power (today for example with Roberto Saviano's *Gomorra*). Pasolini claimed the use of the literary imagination as a tool for dealing with the unknowns related to terrorist attacks:

I know [...] I know the names of the slaughter in Milan on 12 December 1969. I know the names of those responsible for the slaughter in Brescia in 1974 [...] I know, but I have no evidence, I do not even have clues. I know them because I am an intellectual, a writer, one who seeks [...] to imagine all the facts that are not known or that are kept silent (Pasolini 1974, now in Pasolini 1975).

This text was published on the “Corriere della sera” on November 14 1974 with the title “Cos’è questo golpe, io so” [what is this golpe (coup d’état), I know] and republished in *Scritti corsari* with the title “Il romanzo delle stragi” [the novel of the massacres]. Pasolini does not take the role of the investigator: he imagines as an intellectual and artist, refusing any reference to the clue or the evidence as epistemological tools.

Pasolini was murdered one year after that article and his legacy and figure was used and claimed in a re-elaboration of the epistemic modalities that he described in it for dealing with violence and the “labyrinth of stragismo”. However, many of those who used Pasolini’s legacy and article have gradually shifted towards two directions², sometimes co-present: on the one hand, towards what we can call, with Carlo Ginzburg (1979), the evidential paradigm of the investigation; on the other hand, towards the role of testimony, which has recently assumed a victimary connotation (De Luna 2011; Giglioli 2014). For instance, Francesco Zuconi (2010) shows how in *L’affaire Moro* (Sciascia 1978), Sciascia’s narration was constructed around the axis of the secret, paving the way to “dietrologia”. Sciascia’s book is one of the examples of how the conspiratorial mode has spread across the spectrum of cultural responses to political violence: from highbrow cultural products to mid- and mass-cult examples like *poliziotteschi*. The novel *Romanzo criminale* by Giancarlo De Cataldo (2002), which has been turned into an acclaimed feature film and TV series, has first used the Pasolini reference within a clear conspiratorial narrative frame (Fabbri 2011).

I am going to analyse *Romanzo di una strage/Piazza Fontana: the Italian conspiracy*, which makes a clear reference to Pasolini’s seminal text, through this cultural and historical genealogy. The film tries to deal with the unknowns of black terrorism using a conspiracy narrative framework. But it also needs to elaborate a form of truth which is offered both as the truth deriving from the investigations and as the truth of the victims: Luigi Calabresi, Aldo Moro, and, partially, Giuseppe Pinelli.

2. On this topic see also Mazzarella (2011).

4. Piazza Fontana: The Italian Conspiracy. Investigative knowledge and the truth of the victims

The movie is divided into ten chapters that I summarise very briefly:

- a) Hot autumn: the movie is historically contextualised within the period of demonstrations and protests that followed 1968;
- b) The innocents: representation of the piazza Fontana slaughter;
- c) The parallel investigation: the undercover spies who operate among anarchists and neo-fascists are heard by intelligence agencies and police officers;
- d) The red lead: anarchists are officially blamed for the attack;
- e) The interrogatory: Pinelli falls from the window of Calabresi's office and dies;
- f) Raison d'état: Moro reveals to the President of the Republic Saragat what is behind the terrorist attacks and the role of some elements of the state but decides to make it secret to save Italy from a civil war;
- g) The Veneto lead: the neo-fascist responsibilities emerge clearly;
- h) To tell the truth: the trial for the death of Pinelli is opened and another truth about piazza Fontana emerges from the investigation;
- i) Explosive: clues about different types of explosive that were used in the slaughter emerge;
- j) High tension: meeting between Calabresi and the head of one of the Italian intelligence agencies (the ufficio affari riservati). Calabresi elaborates the "double bomb" hypothesis. The movie ends with the murder of the police officer.

The narration starts with the names of the victims of the piazza Fontana slaughter and with the representation of the death of the policeman Antonio Annarumma, who is considered the first victim of the years of lead, during a demonstration in November 1969. Luigi Calabresi is called to go to the place of Annarumma's death, while in Rome the Minister of Foreign Affairs Aldo Moro starts his day with a confession to a priest in which he declares to be ready to be the first victim of a cathartic catastrophe (on the role of the ritual of confession in cinematic representations see Tagliani 2014). The third protagonist

introduced at the beginning of the movie is anarchist Giuseppe Pinelli, who decides to expel fellow activist Pietro Valpreda, accused of being too violent, from the Milanese movement. These first minutes clearly inscribe the movie within a victimary narration, setting the identity of the three protagonists: Calabresi, Moro and Pinelli.

Calabresi and Pinelli are actually victims according to specific political constituencies. Pinelli is the victim of state violence for the left-wing movements (Dario Fo [1970] has dedicated to him one of his most internationally recognised plays); Calabresi epitomises the figure of the victim for the centre-right wing and catholic movements, being for the Church also a servant of God (a process of beatification is currently ongoing); Moro is obviously the victim *par excellence* of those years but within a contradictory transformation of his image that is also present in the movie: as Pezzini (2011, pp. 74–75) argues, Moro represented in the 1960s and 1970s the face and the language of the power of the Christian Democrats, but after his assassination he was transfigured into the character of a Greek tragedy.

Around these three characters we see the world of conspiracy that is represented or evoked everywhere and is forged by the Italian domestic intelligence agencies, members of the armed forces and right-wing organizations. In the background are the foreign powers: the US foreign intelligence agencies and embassy and a Southern Europe which in Portugal, Spain and Greece was marked at that time by the (neo)fascist dictatorships of Salazar, Franco and the Greek military junta.

The movie also represents a grey area that includes the Head of the State Giuseppe Saragat and the Prime Minister Mariano Rumor, together with very controversial figures like that of Junio Valerio Borghese, author of a last minute aborted coup d'état in 1970, who calls piazza Fontana's perpetrators 'macellai, non soldati' (butchers, not soldiers). From chapter three, the narrative engine is represented by the investigations, from which a very complicated tangle of lies emerges. In this context the role of producing a trustful form of knowledge is given to Calabresi, Moro and Pinelli.

Calabresi interrogates Pinelli. Since Pinelli resists and tells a true version of the story that does not satisfy the corrupted part of the police, Calabresi is ordered to invent a lie and fabricate a false document to oblige Pinelli to confess the anarchist culpability in the piazza

Fontana slaughter. Calabresi refuses to obey and while Pinelli “falls accidentally” from a window, he is in another office destroying the false document that had to deceive the anarchist.

The creation of false documents is also at the centre of a meeting between Moro and a carabinieri officer that reveals to the minister how different organs of the state are lying in order to deceive the public opinion and the “good” part of the state. Moro receives the results of another investigation that reveals the conspiracy behind the terrorist attacks, in which neo-fascist terrorists acted on behalf of other and more powerful subjects.

Moro reports the investigation’s results to Saragat but decides to keep the document secret in the name of the survival of the Republic. This narrative node is important in articulating the two Moros that Pezzini (2011) describes, the man of power and the victim of power: in that scene Moro as man of power sacrifices himself and his integrity in order to save the nation.

The ending of the movie offers its trustful knowledge on piazza Fontana. Calabresi is violently attacked both from left-wing organizations and from some parts of the state. According to a false document, fabricated in some ministry and delivered to the press, Calabresi would be a CIA agent and this makes his position very difficult in the face of the public opinion. Before his death, Calabresi meets the head of one of the Italian intelligence agencies. Calabresi tells his hypothesis: not one but two bombs. A bomb was left by the anarchist and was not intended to kill. The second bomb was left some minutes after by the neo-fascists and was intended to kill and put the blame for the slaughter upon the anarchists. The head of the intelligence agency confirms Calabresi’s version but actually clearing the anarchists from any responsibility: the first bomb was placed by the neo-fascists while the second, and bloodiest one, was ordered by foreign powers with internal complicities. The piazza Fontana slaughter would be thus the result of a series of almost embedded conspiracies, whose final agency sits with foreign powers and in particular NATO and the US with some neo-fascists organizations and elements of the state. What does such conspiracy version of history imply?

Firstly, conspiracy performs here a very large process of absolution for Italians and for what has happened since piazza Fontana. The causes of the piazza Fontana slaughter and of the years of lead at

large would not sit with Italian society but are to be found outside, in the actions and agency of obscure foreign powers, even if with the collaboration of some internal conspirators.

Secondly, the film allows us to identify Italian society at large as a victim. As Daniele Giglioli (2012) argues in his *Critica della vittima*, conspiracy narrative is always victimary as its aim is to identify a group of people that is behaving against “us”, with malevolent intentions. The victimary role of Calabresi, Pinelli and Moro is here pivotal. In fact, they represent different political (and memory) constituencies in order to allow different audiences to perform a process of victimization. In other terms, through Calabresi, Pinelli and Moro, spectators belonging to a very large political spectrum are allowed to feel victimised by external conspiracies.

Eventually, the movie promotes the production of a trustful knowledge again, through the roles of the victims. In order to be cathartic and work as a form of knowledge production, conspiracy narratives have to produce a form of truth. As I tried to describe here, truth-telling is a practice belonging to the victims (and martyrs).

5. Conclusion

Through the analysis of the cultural response to terrorisms in Italy in the 1970s, this article has put conspiracy narratives related to the so-called “years of lead” in a broader category: that of the politics of knowledge in the representation of past violent events. My proposal has drawn on a semiotic reflection, and in particular on Eco’s works on conspiracy theories and Rancière’s philosophical work on aesthetics of knowledge. However, it has departed from the pathologizing approach, which does not allow to analyse properly the different meaning effects such theories produce in society and their occasional and potential cultural function.

In the specific Italian context, the Italian terrorisms have produced different unknowns that demanded the deployment of different forms of knowledge and regimes of truth. Conspiracy theories are one of them, and cut across the Italian cultural spectrum. My reading of *Romanzo di una strage/Piazza Fontana: the Italian Conspiracy* describes the different meaning effects that a conspiracy theory, as a politics

of knowledge, tries to attain on behalf of its audience: an absolution of Italian society at large; a process of vicarious victimization of the audience through an identification with the three protagonists; the production of a form of (trustful) knowledge that uses the victims to produce a reconciliatory and cathartic effect.

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The Velopoulos-Liakopoulos Phenomenon

A Semiotic View of the Explosion of Greek Conspiracy Theories and Urban Legends in the Economic Crisis

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TITOLO ITALIANO: Il fenomeno Velopoulos-Liakopoulos: una prospettiva semiotica sull'esplosione di teorie del complotto e leggende metropolitane in Grecia durante la crisi economica.

ABSTRACT: The essay examines the explosion of conspiracy theories and urban legends during the Greek crisis since 2008 as a development that has been prepared at least since the late 1980s, with the introduction of private TV-channel ownership rights, the reorganization of the populist Right in Greece, as well as with the combination of imported conspiracy theories, mostly from the UK and the US, with elements of Hellenic history, archaeology, mythology, and popular stereotypes. The essay focuses on the discourses created by two particular proponents of these theories and provides background information on the political and economic reasons behind their success and diffusion. The essay proves that, in Greece the theorists of conspiracies are well-known people and advocate their positions publicly and strongly. Hellenocentric stances based on Archeolatry are invoked as rhetorical means to resist the emerging insecurity.

KEYWORDS: Conspiracism; Greece; Crisis; Archeolatry; Hellenocentrism; Semiotics.

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1. Introduction: the position for the superiority of the Greek Civilization

In late 1980s, the first private television stations were established in Greece allowing people to express their opinions, which would not be expressed otherwise that freely. However, this situation also allowed people with extreme or absurd opinions to express themselves. In this framework, some fans of conservatism in Greece, who identified with the right-wing, extreme-right, even centre-right political parties in Greece, took advantage of the concept of Greek civilization superiority. They appeared in private television aiming at justifying that position, by stressing the risk of the Greek civilization being threatened by many enemies, each for their own reasons. The position about the superiority of the Greek civilization was based on a series of opinions, the most important of which, I believe, are the following:

Contemporary Greeks are the offspring of Ancient Greeks. That position is the answer to Jakob Philipp Fallmerayer's (1984 [1835]: 39) claims that after the long co-existence of Greeks with other peoples, mainly Slavs (*ibid*: 45) and Albanians (*ibid*: 72–73), the genetic authenticity of Greeks has been compromised, based on certain passages of Byzantine historical writers. The advocates of Greek superiority use scientific facts. For instance, according to a world research conducted by the University of Stanford, the University of Pavia, and other universities, the DNA of modern Greeks accounts for 99.5% Caucasian race without a Mongolian trace, although there were 400 years of slavery (see Semino et al. 2004).

The Greek nation is unique because it is linguistically unique. Indeed, the Greek language, which belongs to the Indo-European family of languages, is one of the few languages with historic continuity as linguists confirm that it has been spoken continuously in the same geographical area since ancient times. Christidis (1999: 89–90) typically state that «[...] the wholeness of the Greek language is re-interpreted as a historical uniqueness that proves the superiority of the Greek language against the other European languages, which it fertilized»¹.

Indeed, the influence of the Greek language on the other European,

1. All these translations from Greek into English are our own.

mainly, languages was important. As a self-evident position, very often, the conspiracists in Greece — and not only them — use the two speeches of Professor of Finance and interim non-party Prime Minister of Greece Xenophon Zolotas at the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development in 1957 and 1959 respectively. His English-speaking speeches are considered historic and worthnoting because they included mainly terms of Greek origin.

The Greek language was perhaps the first *Lingua Franca* in the world, it was used to write the Gospel, and for that reason it is considered together with the Hebrew and Latin languages, according to the Catholic Doctrine, one of the sacred languages of Christianity. As Petrounias (1993: 132) mentioned, «the religious currents of the era and especially Christianity used the most common language, Greek, to expand. Without the previous expansion of the Greek language, it would not be possible for Christianity to expand, but then the fact that the new religion used the Greek language, helped the further expansion of the language». Actually, many Greeks consider that in the Gospel is recorded one more point in favour of the importance of the Greek civilization. In particular, it is mentioned that when Jesus was informed by His students Andrew and Philip that the Greeks have come to listen to Him, He uttered that «the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified» (Matthew 16, 24–25, Mark 8, 34–35).

The Greek civilization is the basis of western civilization. It is also a self-evident position which is adopted by the intellectual tradition of Europe, a continent and a civilization which owes its name to Greek Mythology. The influence of the Greek civilization is recorded in different times of world history. So, in relation to Roman times it is recorded that «[...] the general impression that people have about Roman and Greek is that Roman culture is basically derived from Greek culture» (McGeough 2004: 297), and even the clear position which is pretty popular in Greece that «the Romans conquered Greece with their army, but the Greeks conquered them with their culture»². But in Byzantine years, Cunningham et al. (2015: 208) state with great precision the influence of the Greek language and the Greek civilization.

As has been previously mentioned, conspiracy theories in Greece

2. In fact, not few researchers characterize this interaction as “open conspiracy” between the Roman and the Greek aristocracy (Crawford 2006 [1978]: 194).

have as a common resultant the fact that the superiority of the Greek civilization is threatened mainly by peoples who contributed less to the world civilization, are envy of the special position of Greeks, and/or attempt to vanish them or reduce their contribution to the world civilization adopting some of their creations or their history. Actually, it is people whom the Greeks would consider humiliating to be compared with. In particular, Christidis (1999: 91) records the opinion that «Hellenism and Greekness are at risk by the northern underdeveloped usurpers and the Europeans — foreigners — who do not understand our historic rights, although we — that mythical “we” — were the ones who civilized them».

The attempt of the Slav-speaking inhabitants of FYROM (Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia) to claim emblems and the history of Macedonians as theirs is part of this framework, although it is known that, first, they are Slavs and Slavs descended to the Greek territory in the 6th century AD, and, second, that they speak a Bulgarian dialect, a fact that led Bulgaria to recognize them as a state but not as a nation, and Lubcho Georgievski, FYROM former prime-minister, to receive a Bulgarian passport³. There is a similar attempt by Turkish guides to present Greek and Roman antiquities of Small Asia as Turkish monuments, a fact that has caused the sarcastic comments of Greek tourists and of tourists of other nationalities.

Herzfeld (2016: 13–14) states that «in the past many Greeks felt indifferent or even loath for any suggestion that compared them with other (and especially non-European) peoples». Herzfeld (*ibid*) purports that «this fact alone however proves how strong has been the influence of egocentrism that wanted Greeks molded by the norms of western countries». But why would a people who proclaimed «all in good measure» and considered non-Greeks as savages (even if this related to the Other's language) want to compare oneself with some civilizations but not with others? Could it be that this conspiracy notion was imported to the Modern Greek culture? To answer this question we should first answer what exactly we mean by “conspiracy theories”.

3. Sapountzis & Condor (2013: 748), in their research concerning Greek conspiracy theories about the establishment of FYROM, observe that «[i]n the interview context, respondents often used conspiracy narratives to present Greek concerns over the establishment of FYROM as a legitimate reaction to realistic (material) threat, rather than as motivated by “mere” concerns over identity threat».

2. Theoretical approaches to conspiracy theory and urban legends

In everyday life, the expression conspiracy theories is connected connotatively to something concealed that is the result of superior processes that common people cannot control and access. The term conspiracy theory was introduced by Karl Popper (1949: 83), who described it as:

Whatever happens in society—including things which people as a rule dislike, such as war, poverty, shortages—are the results of direct design by some powerful individuals or groups. This view is very widespread [...] and in its modern form, it is the typical result of the secularization of religious superstitions [...] the place of the gods on Homer's Olympus is now taken by the Learned Elders of Zion, or the monopolists, or the capitalists, or the imperialists.

The above definition indicates that religion, politics, and economy are the three parameters on which a conspiracy theory can be built on. Over the past few years, the first two parameters seem to have been superseded by the last one as the idea that religious wars and political changes have an economic background has been increasingly adopted. However which person, which group, or even which country has the power for something like that? If we consider correct the viewpoint that after the collapse of the Soviet Union the United States remained the only superpower in the world (to justify the nickname “world’s leader” for the U.S. president) it is natural to relate first to the U.S. leadership the conspiracy theories⁴. As Tuckett (2004: 2) states «[m]any major events, for better or for worse, have occurred as the result of people behind the scenes who have held the keys to the actions of the world. Startling discoveries, often stretching far back into history, can affect the very way our Western thought processes and behavior patterns are conducted».

That is why Byford (2011: 3) states that «[t]hroughout the world conspiracy theories have also become a popular means of articulating an opposition to the forces of international capitalism, globalisation,

4. Similarly, the phrase “divide and rule” attributed to UK politics suggested its unofficial participation in political, economic, and religious turmoil in various parts of the planet.

America's military and political supremacy, and the more general rise of a transnational political order». For Byford (2011: 4–5):

Conspiracy theories are said to constitute a distinct culture — conspiracism — which encompass a specific system of knowledge, beliefs, values, practices and rituals shared by communities of people around the world [...] the conspiracy culture is defined (but also sustained) by the tendency among conspiracy writers to regurgitate, revamp and apply to new circumstances the body of knowledge, the explanatory logic and rhetorical tropes expounded in texts, books, or pamphlets written and published by conspiracy theorists in the past.

Very close to the concept of conspiracy theory is the term urban legend or myth⁵, which dates back to 1960. Wilton (2004: 2) specifies that «[u]rban legends do not get their name because they necessarily refer to events that supposedly happened in cities. Rather, they are called that because they are tales, usually cautionary, told by people who live in our modern, urbanized society».

As we will see next, the Greek case contains elements of both cases. We will also find that a source of the Greek theories of conspiracy and/or urban legends is the failure of a continued impact by a civilization that flourished in the antiquity, as is commonly believed, continued to flourish and influence indirectly the world thought in the Roman and Byzantine years, but did not manage to keep influencing — at least to the same degree — the world and European reality after the collapse of the Byzantine Empire during the Ottoman dominance.

3. Leading Conspiracy Theories and Urban legends in Greece: a representative survey

It is worth–noting that although the private television spread various conspiracy theories in the Greek public, these theories did not become the scope of broad scientific research in Greece, perhaps because of their exaggeration, or even of the metaphysical element involved in their expansion. Zizakou (2014) mentions that Greek conspiracy theories and urban legends tend to find lies and distortions behind a

5. For Barthes, myths are the dominant ideologies of our time, a set of values, and truth is no guarantee for them (Barthes 1973 [1957]: 123).

lot of significant personalities and stories. Antoniou et al. (2014) found in their recent survey that urban legends and conspiracy theories have increased in the last years and are attributed to the low social trust of Greeks and the lack of education. According to their data:

- a) 75.25% of the people who participated in the survey believe that the Greek economic crisis was planned by various non-institutional centers;
- b) 68.66% support the theory that the drug against cancer has been found but not made available to the public yet;
- c) 58.74% claim that the attack on the twin towers was the result of a well-organized plan of the U.S. to impose its foreign policy;
- d) 27% of the survey participants also believing that Neil Armstrong's moon landing in 1969 was staged in a remote location;
- e) 60.86% of the survey respondents believe that Costas Simitis has Jewish origins.

As we observe in the results of the survey by Antoniou et al. (2014), the Greeks seem to be intrigued by conspiracy theories and urban legends that involve mainly the international scene, but also those that relate to the Greek reality. The graphs of the survey indicate that conspiracy thinking is very popular to those with primary, high school, lyceum education, and in the age group 25–44 years. The combination of youth and lower educational level seems to favor the expansion of conspiracy theories and urban legends, and I believe that it is a global fact, not only Greek. What happens, however, when the factor “economic crisis” in Greece is added?

4. Conspiracy theories in Greece and crisis

During different types of crisis, political, economic, social, a wide-spread phenomenon is observed, an outbreak, in terms of conspiracy theories and urban legends. Especially for Greece, Mylonas (2011: 83) states that:

The financial crisis has multiplied and exacerbated belief in conspiracy theories. [...] Increasingly the conspiracy theories circulating in Greece

have ceased to be plausible, while also multiplying in number. Thus, while in the past an event would usually have two interpretations, the official and the conspiratorial, nowadays it has three or four, if not more, competing explanations. The financial crisis has evolved into a real economic crisis, expressing itself in job loss and diminished purchasing power for the average Greek. This has led the population to new levels of uncertainty about the future, which provides a fertile ground for conspiracy theories to emerge and spread.

Technology development contributed highly to the spread of these theories since through the electronic press and the social media there is a chance to widely spread these theories and especially through the anonymity of a nickname. For Keely (1999: 116), «[a] conspiracy theory is a proposed explanation of some historical event (or events) in terms of the significant causal agency of a relatively small group of persons — the conspirators — acting in secret». However, as we will see next, although the description of Greek conspiracy theories has secrecy as its main characteristic, those who spread them not only they are anonymous but also they strive for large publicity. How is this explained?

As we will see next, this choice is based on the fact that these theories glorify indirectly the glorious past of the Greeks, by empowering national conscience, operating in a unified way for the nation, and infusing a vision to younger generations. As in the Old Testament, the prophets who prophesied the fate of Israel were accepted by the people as carriers of the Holy grace, and their words were the lodestar for the Hebrew nation, I would dare claim that similarly the representatives of archeolatry and the Byzantine Empire are faced positively by a large part of the Greek people.

The economic crisis in Greece is a favorable condition for their expansion as the common denominator is the supremacy of the values and the way of thinking of our ancestors. So it is not accidental that the slogans of public demonstrations studied during the financial crisis (Kourdis 2012) indicate the emergence of a new national integration paradigm, based on a revival of the classicist values. This is why slogans are condensed historical memory (the struggle of Greeks in 1821 against the Ottomans, in 1940 against the Italians, and in 1967–1974 against the colonels' junta).

It is interesting, as we will see next, that the economic crisis fueled the Greek readership with new theories about new enemies of Hellenism — as, for instance, the Germans who are accused on a European level of orchestrating the economic crisis — although negative stereotypes were revived about them, in place of the positive stereotypes that existed.

Especially for the Germans, the fact that in Germany there is a numerous Greek community that transfers to Greece the positive image that it receives from a people who is disciplined, hardworking, with social welfare, a very good education system, and a very good healthcare system, resulted in the negative stereotypes structured for the only time this people came in contact with the Greek people, during World War II, mainly through the press, mainly TV and printed, to revive stereotypes long forgotten and discarded.

5. Hellenocentrism and archeolatry

The conspiracy theory I will present is Hellenocentrism/Archeolatry. It should be mentioned that apart from Hellenocentrism as conspiracy theory there was also Historical Hellenocentrism, a cultural–literary movement in early 20th century Greece and had nothing to do with the conspiracy theories⁶. Vayenas (1997: 45) defines Hellenocentrism as «[...] a conviction of the uniqueness of the Greek element and its superiority over everything foreign — a conviction that usually leads elevating Greekness to the level of an absolute value». Metsos & Mossialos (2000: 336) speak for «[...] a country used to seeing itself as the centre of the whole world suffering from what has been termed as the syndrome of Hellenocentrism». The term Hellenocentrism refers to the movement or wave of people and literature that express views compatible with the syndrome of Hellenocentrism. This trend seems to be represented by Kyriakos Velopoulos.

The term Archeolatry refers to followers of the ancient Greek religion and/or admirers of the ancient Greek civilization. Mouzelis (1978:

6. For Vayenas (1997: 46), Hellenocentrism is a kind of traditionalism that excludes some of the most well-known writers of the time and overemphasizes the discovery of a 'silenced' Greek tradition (such as the writings of the general of the Greek Revolution for Independency Ioannis Markiyannis, the popular art of Theofilos, etc.).

147) defines Archeolatry as «obsessive preoccupation with and blind admiration of everything ancient». Currently, the term is often used for generic movements about the superiority of ancient Greeks, in various TV shows⁷. As in mainstream conspiracy theories, Archeolatrists are classified into religious and anti-religious enthusiasts. Some conspiracy theorists of Archeolatry, such as Dimosthenis Liakopoulos, are devout Christians believing that true Orthodoxy can protect and guide the people against the anti-religious New World Order. On the other hand, there are factions who oppose Christianity, which they consider a part of the Zionist plot to exterminate the original Ancient Greek religion.

5.1. *The Kyriakos Velopoulos' case*

Kyriakos Velopoulos is a 51-year old Greek politician and former parliament member, and television personality. Born in Germany, his parents were immigrant peasants. He studied journalism. He is a member of the Academy of the Greek language in Germany and a member of the Union of Writers of Northern Greece. He was a member of ONNED, the youth organization of the Right Party New Democracy (ND) until 1988, and ideologically defines himself as belonging to the 'patriotic ND'. He was a member of the Popular Orthodox Rally, the nationalist populist party of Georgios Karatzaferis, and in the 2007 parliamentary elections he got elected as deputy of Thessaloniki with the political party LAOS. In 2012, a number of former deputies of the populist and fairly Eurosceptic radical right-wing LAOS, among them Kyriakos Velopoulos, deserted their party in order to join the New Democracy party⁸.

As a journalist he has worked in a number of radio and television stations, such as TV Thessaloniki, Ermis, Best, Top, Orion, TeleAsty, where he presented his two major shows The parliament and Greek Vision, in which he promotes his books (see fig. 1). He is a cofounder

7. See <http://www.thenile.co.nz/books/Books-LLC/Epsilonism-Epsilon-Team-Kyriakos-Velopoulos/9781158654550/>.

8. This political movement was covered by the conspiracy facet that «[t]he leader of LAOS, Giorgos Karatzaferis, reacted to this development by suggesting that the US and Israeli embassies in Greece were seeking to destroy his party» (Vasilopoulou & Halikiopoulou 2014: 134).



Figure 1. Kyriakos Velopoulos promoting his books

of the Hellenocentric association “Δίαυλος Ελλήνων” (Channel of the Greeks).

The titles of his books are typical of his ideology. Below there are Velopoulos’ most important books from 2008, when the economic crisis burst out, until now when the world economic crisis has been transformed since 2010 into a purely Greek crisis. It is also worth mentioning that during the last decade Velopoulos promoted greatly the book, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, published in Greece by several extreme-right-wing publishers such as Ouranos and Mpimpis.

In 2008, he republished the book *Μακεδονία και Ὑβρεις* (Macedonia and offenses)⁹ by Kadmos editions in Thessaloniki. In this book, Velopoulos “reveals” all the statements by Greek politicians from the past till now about the fight against provocative FYROM inhabitants and foreign anti-Greek centers. Velopoulos attempts to shed light on the dark sides of this national problem in relation to people who pull anti-Greek strings and act within Greece against the Greek nation. In my point of view, a historic linguistic perspective proves that FYROM inhabitants are of Greek origin but unfortunately of the so-called Janissaries, whereas certain documents reveal the obscure role of people beyond suspicion who voluntarily or not betray Macedonia behind the scenes while on stage they speak differently.

In 2008, he publishes the book *Ελλήνων μυστικά* (Greeks’ secrets) with Kadmos editions in Thessaloniki. In this book, the achievements of the ancient Greek spirit are described, which the whole world prai-

9. See <http://www.biblionet.gr/main.asp?page=results&Titlesid=104289>

ses and celebrates as these have unique features, and are portrayed in the Arts, Sciences, History, Literature, Philosophy, with a strong human element. According to the writer, the ancient Greek civilization is by definition an advocate of the highest good — spiritual freedom, and the cogitation and insightfulness of ancient Greeks penetrated successfully all the fields of knowledge, and had fruitful outcomes which the humanity has been enjoying ever since¹⁰.

In 2009, the book *Η Ελλάδα του 21ου αιώνα. Γεωστρατηγική — Γεωπολιτική Αλήθειες και ψέματα* (Greece in 21st century. Geostategy — Geopolitics. Truths and Lies) was published by Kadmos editions. In a time of directed information, the writer aims for the book to become a treasure of knowledge for the pure Greek citizen and the historian of the future, who would like to study unknown sources for the Greek — and beyond — issues of the 21st century. Some of the topics addressed are: the clash of civilizations, global government, the dirty war of pharmaceuticals, the shocking data about “green growth” and GMO products, the confidential Kissinger report, the Treaty of Lausanne, Russia, Putin and the neoByzantine Sendersky circle, and the geostrategical place of new Russia¹¹.

In 2010, the book *Η Ελλάδα στην παγκόσμια σκακιέρα της γεωπολιτικής* (Greece in a world chess game of geopolitics) was published by Kadmos editions. The book states that countries, small or large (in power or territory), run a race of empowering their role irrespective of the price their peoples have to pay, and focuses on how the Big Powers act in a framework of instability and insecurity worldwide¹².

In 2010, Velopoulos’ book *Epsilonism: Epsilon Team* was published by Books LLC in the USA in English. *Epsilonism* describes an eschatologist conspiracy theory trend, usually (but not always) revolving around the so-called Epsilon Team, called that way by its emblem that is a Delphic Epsilon “Ε” [“epsilon” is the fifth letter of the Greek alphabet] connected back to back (see fig. 2). The term was introduced and propagated approximately around 1997 through Greek magazines

10. See <http://www.politeianet.gr/books/9789608184862-belopoulos-kuriakos-kadmos-ellinon-mustika-127592>.

11. See <http://www.zougla.gr/books/article/i-elada-tou-21ou-eona-geostratigiki-geopolitiki-ali8ies-ke-psemata>.

12. See <https://www.ianos.gr/i-ellada-stin-pagkosmia-skakiera-tis-geopolitikis-0243029.html>.

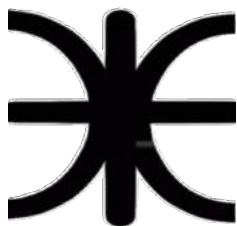


Figure 2. Epsilon Team' symbol

and books whose subject is conspiracy theories and the paranormal (for instance, the Delphic Epsilon appears on ancient Greek monuments, on Inca monuments, but also on UFOs)¹³. Usually, Greeks refer to this conspiracy theory as “epsilonism” in a disapproving manner¹⁴. The Epsilon Team is viewed as a secret retaliation weapon meant to attack and destroy anyone “threatening” Hellenism¹⁵.

In the book *Χρεωκοπία και κερδοσκόποι* (Bankruptcy and profiteers) published by Kadmos editions in 2011, the author accuses the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the European Central Bank and the credit rating agencies of their leading and also obscure and misleading role in the structure of world economic reality, calling the readers to help Greece to free itself from the bankruptcy of the spirit in the present and in the future of the country¹⁶.

In 2012, the book *Η επόμενη μέρα. Προτάσεις για την οικονομία. Μαζί μπορούμε* (The next day. Proposals for the economy. Together we can make it) published by Kadmos editions involves the state of big fear for the exit of Greece from the eurozone and the euro by addressing the question if there is a solution for the suffering country or the absolute destruction is the only way¹⁷. In 2013, Velopoulos

13. See <https://sites.google.com/site/programmeepsilonproject/greek-epsilon-team>.

14. See <http://www.thenile.co.nz/books/Books-LLC/Epsilonism-Epsilon-Team-Kyriakos-Velopoulos/9781158654550/>.

15. One of the main researchers of Group E, Gialourakis (1998: 189) mentions that «the members of the Group are members of secret Greek brotherhoods that hold in their hands all the secrets of the Secrets, such as mind reading, beaming, the philosopher's stone, prediction of the future, the secrets of the soul (psychogenesis and immortality), knowledge of the secret scripts, lost civilizations, but also mystical languages».

16. http://www.biblionet.gr/book/176613/Βελόπουλος,_Κυριάκος/Χρεωκοπία_και_κερδοσκόποι.

17. See http://www.kadmos.org/contents/el/d2_politiki_epikairoτητα_03.html.

publishes the book *Η κερκόπορτα της προδοσίας* (The back door of treason) where he develops that in Greece there are Greeks with a glorious past, who love their country more than their own life, but also people who live literally at its expense¹⁸. In 2013, the book *Η Ελλάδα στη δίνη της παγκόσμιας σκακιέρας* (Greece in the swirling world chess game) was published by Kadmos editions. Velopoulos addresses the inhuman reality the Greek people has experienced over the past few years, which is due to the geopolitical place of Greece, according to him, and its energy resources. In relation to its energy resources, a clandestine war has been set in the world economic–political chess games, unparalleled with any other in world history¹⁹.

In 2014, the book *Η Ελλάδα της κρίσης* (Greece in crisis) is published by Kadmos editions. The author stresses that all the developments in the wider area of the Mediterranean are totally connected with the issues of the Greek EEZ, energy and the large volume of deposits in the basin of the Mediterranean. A number of scientific findings prove that Greece has made huge mistakes in relation to the mapping and delineation of its EEZ, and in the search for and extraction of hydrogen. Also, the writer mentions the fuel of the future, gas hydrates, which is in abundance in Greece. There is extensive mention to Papandreou family and the crimes committed during their governance and how, based on them, Greece reached the bankruptcy stage. Data are provided to show that the Greek political leadership is driven by the German leadership. There is also mention to the death of the Archbishop of the Greek Orthodox Church, Christodoulos, whose role in internal affairs was crucial, and data are revealed about the fall of the former prime–minister Konstantinos Karamanlis, the role of the secret services and the issue of wiretappings related to the government of that period²⁰.

In 2014, the writer publishes the book *Πριν το τσουνάμι της Ελλάδας* (Before Greece's tsunami) where he explains why Greece is led to a definite bankruptcy, what exactly the country's lenders want,

18. See <http://www.malliaris.gr/H-KEPKOΠOΠTA-THEΣ-ΠPOΔOΣIAC-978-960-6851-55-1>.

19. See <http://www.malliaris.gr/H-EΛΛAΔA-CTH-ΔIHTH-THEΣ-ΠAΓKOCMIAΣ-CKAKIEPAC-978-960-6851-63-6>.

20. See <http://www.malliaris.gr/H-EΛΛAΔA-THEΣ-KPICTHEΣ-978-960-6851-73-5>.

which the geostrategical role of Greece is, and which the claims of the international capital from our country are in terms of fossils and ports. In the book, there is also mention of the political party Golden Dawn, Islam, and Turkey. Going through international agreements and treaties, it is proved that the memorandums signed and the way they were imposed on Greece are illegal. The innovation of the book is that it includes sample documents which the readers can use to defend oneself legally against bank forfeiture and debts to the National Insurance Organization (IKA in Greek) and the revenue tax office²¹.

In 2016, Velopoulos' book *Το 4ο Ράιχ είναι εδώ Η διάλυση της Ευρωπαϊκής ιδέας* (The 4th Reich is here. The dissolution of the European ideal) was published by Kadmos editions, where the writer addresses the powerful narrative of the European values on which the structure of a unified Europe was based. Unified Europe is a unique undertaking in the political history of humanity, whose strengths are tested and seems to have reached its limits. Germany plays an important role in this course of Europe and, as indicated by the facts, it does not seem interested in returning to the noble ideas once strived for by Europe²².

5.2. *Dimosthenis Liakopoulos' case*

Dimosthenis Liakopoulos lives in Thessaloniki. He set up his own publishing company and bookshops in Athens and Thessaloniki for the promotion of his own books. These bookshops are now closed. He keeps a website with online book sales.

In his TV shows (see fig. 3) and internet publications, he presents a conspiracy theory that is quite unusual. Being a high-school teacher of physics, his work relates to mechanical engineering, electricity, thermodynamics, mathematics, nuclear science, the philosophy of natural science as well as optical fibres, microelectronics and astrophysics. His work consists of apocalyptic texts and novels which combine commonly acceptable data with mythical and legendary texts, and data from unverified and unknown sources. Specifically, he uses: Ancient Greek literature, references to people he allegedly met while doing

21. See <http://www.protoporia.gr/prin-to-tsoynami-tis-elladas-p-398013.html>.

22. See <https://www.ianos.gr/to-40-raix-einai-edo-0362239.html#tab-description>.



Figure 3. Dimosthenis Liakopoulos promoting his books

his military service in the NATO forces, undefined sources on today's Brotherhood of Darkness.

Liakopoulos is considered to be the most famous member of the Epsilon Team. He combines data from various sources, passes them through the filter of a Christian Orthodox teaching, and concludes that the Hellenic race has played and will play a significant role in History. Liakopoulos seems to take advantage of the pride of the Greek people in its origin and the fact that Greece has maritime borders with Catholic Italy, the headquarters of Papism, on one side and on the other with Muslim Turkey, which occupies the capital of the modern Greek state, Constantinople.

One of his most important publishing works which continued in the period of crisis is the multi-volume edition (0–55 volumes) of the work *Γιατί και πως ζουν ανάμεσά μας* (Why and how they live among us). One of the basic theories Liakopoulos develops is that of the supremacy of the Russian technology which will bring the 'blonde nation' of the Russians to world power again, under President Vladimir Putin. According to this theory, Russian will need five months to dominate in the upcoming World War III thanks to its hyper-weapons. Orthodox Christianity will spread throughout the world and the Russian Empire, under the guidance of the Greek nation, will bring peace to the world.

Another popular theory of Liakopoulos is that of Elohim and

Nephelims. According to Liakopoulos, past-life regressions to Atlantis show a struggle between two groups of people: the ones who were exclusively attached to the satisfaction of their senses and to material goods, the so-called “Sons of Belial”, and the “Sons of the Law of One”, who were spiritual beings and were trying to save the world from annihilation through meditation and teaching. Belial is one of the kings of the Nephelim, the half-human half-animal creatures who posed as gods to many ancient civilizations. Belial has a human body and the head of a wolf and belongs to the race of the Malcheh, the giant wolf people. The Nephelim were born out of the union of 201 fallen Elohim (angel-like shapeshifters) with terrestrial women²³.

Elohim and Nephelims theory does not seem useful any more, while it was successful in the past decades. The new economic situation needs answers and theories concerning the new role of Greece next to a new super power, such as Russia, outside the E.U and NATO. But why would such a fantasy make sense? Within the new power blocs being formed in the world (Russia, China and Brasil), such ideas seem to many people to answer many questions about what is happening today.

6. Conclusions

For Keely (1999: 116), «[...] a conspiracy theory need not propose that the conspirators are all powerful, only that they have played some pivotal role in bringing about the event. They can be seen as merely setting events in motion». We observe that in Greek conspiracy theories and urban legends nations are usually involved, which are powerful in terms of politics and military (USA, Russia, Israel), and finances (Germany), and pull the strings by involving less powerful states (Turkey, FYROM, Albania).

Also, in general, conspiracy theories and urban legends do not have well-known theorists to spread them for fear of becoming a public laughing stock by those who will not believe them and who are considered by conspiracists that they usually control the media.

23. See <http://www.spiritualinsight.gr/en/the-council-of-the-light-and-dark-forces/62-to-simvulio-tu-fotos-ke-i-dinamis-tu-skotus>.

However, we also observe that in the case of Greece, this is not true. The theorists of conspiracies are well-known people and advocate their positions publicly and strongly. They are Hellenocentric issues based on Archeolatry and on a semiotic level we can claim that the past is recalled as a force of resistance to the emerging insecurity.

These two conspiracy theorists, Velopoulos and Liakopoulos, combine history with contemporary issues. Their ideas hardly follow official scholarly premises or religious positions. A dominant aspect of their communication skills, which also explains their success, is their eloquence, passion, simplicity, and friendliness that support a style of defense against 'evil'. This is the best mechanism of communication with a nation 'in crisis' feeling the injustice of sudden and unexplained poverty. These theories have existed since at least early nineties and now they are almost mainstream acceptable views. On a social level, the results of these theories create networks of power in the media which then goes to the parliament.

It is true that in a country of the European North, as Greece is, suffering from the economic crisis, the reader of conspiracy theories and urban legends would expect the demonization of Germany as the country which, as widely believed, manages informally the European Union and imposes the rules of financial policy to it, as happens to all other EU member states facing similar problems. But Archaeolatry and Hellenocentrism underplay in Greece this reaction to stereotypes which the media revive and spread, and continue to characterize the theories and legends that already existed before the crisis. It would be too hard to flourish a conspiracy theory against Germany with solid ground in Greece since the German people only came in contact with the Greek people once, during World War II. I believe that if in the end a conspiracy theory or an urban legend about Germany in Greece emerges, then the harm done to the European ideal will be immense but, hopefully, reversible.

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Cyprus and Conspiracy Theories after the Troika Levy in 2013

EVRIPIDES ZANTIDES*

TITOLO ITALIANO: Cipro e le teorie del complotto dopo le imposizioni della Troika nel 2013

ABSTRACT: Conspiracy theories have many different forms and have been observed in a wide variety of different countries and cultures. Many significant political and social events have been shown to co-occur with conspiracy theories and various studies suggest that people are likely to endorse and define them for a number of reasons. The article aims to discuss how and why these speculations seem plausible to some people. It focuses on conspiracy theories related to the 2013 Cyprus Financial Crisis.

KEYWORDS: Conspiracy Theories; Financial Crisis; Troika Levy; Cyprus 2013.

1. Introduction

In contemporary society, people are frequently faced with events that threaten the social order, such as terrorist attacks, wars, and economic crises. These events sometimes give rise to conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories are an attempt to explain the ultimate causes of events as secret plots by powerful forces, rather than as overt activities or accidents (McCauley and Jacques, 1979). Why people believe in conspiracy theories? Sunstein and Vermeule (2009) suggested many different reasons: The first reason is that human beings lack personal or direct information; they must rely on what other people think. In

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some domains, people suffer from a “crippled epistemology”, in the sense that they know very few things, and what they know is wrong. The second reason is that rumours and speculation are inevitable whenever a bad event has occurred. They mention that «[m]ost people are not able to know, on the basis of personal or direct knowledge, why an airplane crashed, or why a leader was assassinated, or why a terrorist attack succeeded, or why many people stayed in an area despite what turned out to be an imminent natural disaster» (*ibid*, p. 213). The third reason lies in the fact that sometimes a conspiracy theory is not only accepted by people with low thresholds for its acceptance but as the informational pressure builds, many people, with somewhat higher thresholds, begin to accept the theory too, mentioning that «[. . .] when many people hold that belief, those with even higher thresholds may come to accept the theory, leading to widespread acceptance of falsehoods» (*ibid*, p. 214). The fourth reason is that sometimes «[. . .] people profess belief in a conspiracy theory, or at least suppress their doubts, because they seek to curry favour. Reputational pressures help account for conspiracy theories, and they feed conspiracy cascades. In a reputational cascade, people think that they know what is right, or what is likely to be right, but they nonetheless go along with the crowd in order to maintain the good opinion of others» (*ibid*, p. 214) or their reputation. The last reason they refer to, is that «[i]nformational and reputational cascades can occur without any particular triggering event. But a distinctive kind of cascade arises when such an event is highly salient or cognitively “available”» (*ibid*, p.215). The aforementioned reasons that attempt to explain why and when conspiracy theories rise provide useful information that can be used to interpret and clarify a series of such cases. Additionally, Douglas and Stutton (2011) conducted a study in order to investigate why people endorse conspiracy theories. Their results suggest that «[. . .] people would be more likely to endorse conspiracy theories to the extent that they project their own willingness to conspire onto the alleged conspirators» stating also that «[. . .] people who have more lax personal morality may endorse conspiracy theories to a greater extent because they are, on average, more willing to participate in the conspiracies themselves» (*ibid*, p.550). Another study by Van Prooijen and Jostmann (2013, p.109) revealed that «[. . .] the perceived morality of authorities influences conspiracy beliefs particularly when people

experience uncertainty' claiming that 'they found evidence for this in the context of both an existing conspiracy theory as well as in the context of people's ad hoc conspiracy belief formation following a fictitious newspaper article» and «[a]s such, their findings represent a robust phenomenon that generalizes across different conspiracy theories and suggests that subjective uncertainty and the perceived morality of authorities jointly influence people's tendency to believe or disbelieve in conspiracy theories» (*ibid*, p.113). They also remark that «[u]ncertainty leads people to be more attentive to the morality of authorities' actions, which subsequently influences belief or disbelief in conspiracies» (*ibid*, p.114). Moreover, in their study, Bost and Prunier (2013, p.118) «[...] tested the prediction that conspiracy beliefs will strengthen as the apparent motive of the alleged conspirators strengthens». Their findings suggested that «[...] participants tended to examine conspiracy claims critically» and that «[w]hen asked to evaluate fictional conspiracy theories, participants regarded the claims as relatively implausible, and were sensitive to the quality of the direct evidence; claims with supporting documentation, such as e-mail or financial records, received higher likelihood ratings than claims supported only by hearsay or vague recollections» (*ibid*, p.123). On the other hand, all participants were influenced similarly by information about the outcome for the alleged conspirators. Furthermore they comment that «[t]hrough the stories contained no information about whether the conspirators had intended to gain, or were even aware in advance that they could gain from the event, participants rated the conspiracy claims as more likely to be true if the alleged conspirators had experienced a positive outcome than if they had not» and that «[t]he fact that post event gains were equally as convincing as direct evidence in this study suggests that participants over-relied somewhat on apparent motive as evidence for the theory» (*ibid*, p.123). However, some researchers propose that the endorsement of specific conspiracy theories depends to a large extent on individual differences in the general tendency to adopt such beliefs, that is, a general conspiracy mentality. This term was originally phrased by Moscovici (1987) who understood the notion of conspiracy as implying «that members of a confession, party, or ethnicity [...] are united by an indissoluble secret bond. The object of such an alliance is to foment upheaval in society, pervert societal values, aggravate crises, promote defeat, and

so on». (p. 154). As such, a conspiracy mentality then describes the general propensity to subscribe to theories blaming a conspiracy of ill-intending individuals or groups for important societal phenomena or, in more abstract terms, the tendency to subscribe to «general conspiracist beliefs» (Swami et al., 2010). According to Moscovici (1987), conspiracy is the work of a minority because the minority is alien and it is «either composed by foreigners or it is financed by and in league with foreign powers» (p.151). He claims that it is easy to distinguish «the hand of the stranger» behind the beliefs and actions of a minority. However, Moscovici (1976) identified a specific way through which minority may exert influence. For Moscovici, ‘minority influence’ is the form of social influence that is attributed to exposure to a consistent minority position in a group. Minority influence is generally felt only after a period of time, and tends to produce private acceptance of the views expressed by the minority.

However, Imhoff and Bruder (2014) remark that individual differences in conspiracy mentality have important consequences as they predict negative attitudes such as prejudice against powerful societal groups.

It is obvious that the subject of conspiracy theories is a complex one and involves social, psychological and political dimensions that seem to have the power in influencing and promoting specific meanings.

2. Conspiracy theories behind the Troika levy in Cyprus during March 2013

Much has been said throughout the socio-political history of Cyprus in respect of conspiracy theories, especially during the country’s decolonisation period from Great Britain (1955–1959), and since its state independence in 1960 until today. Throughout the time however, historical evidences have provided information that diminished the proliferation of such theories, therefore it seems more appropriate for this paper to discuss current conspiracy theories, that still remain in conspiracy level, and in particular the ones that deal with the Troika levy in 2013. A good overview of what happened in March 2013 is described by Theocharides (2013) on the blog of Global Center for Political Finance as follows:

[...] Cyprus became the epicentre of a financial storm that threatened markets in Europe and many other regions of the globe. The Eurogroup (meeting of the Finance Ministers of the Eurozone) helped to initiate the financial crisis on March 15th by formulating a plan involving a bail-in of depositors across all banking institutions (foreign and local) in Cyprus, in order to save the country's banking system and in particular the two biggest banks: Laiki Bank and Bank of Cyprus (BOC, hereafter). The decision called for a levy (haircut) of 6.7% for all insured deposits (less than €100,000) and 9.9% for all uninsured deposits (above €100,000) in order to raise €5.87 billion needed for their recapitalization. The agreement also called for an extra bailout package of €10 billion for the country's fiscal needs over the next several years as well as for recapitalization of other banks and cooperative institutions. This was the first time that a bail-in approach was used by the Troika (comprised of the European Central Bank (ECB), the European Commission, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in dealing with the Eurozone's sovereign debt and banking crisis, and it rattled financial and currency markets across the globe. A few days later, the Cypriot parliament decided to vote against this package to help the country, causing an even bigger stir of markets, fearing of an eventual bankruptcy of Cyprus. Then, on March 25th a new and final decision was reached that closed down Laiki Bank, wiping out all uninsured deposits, transferring Laiki's assets and liabilities (insured deposits and funding taken through the Emergency Liquidity Assistance (ELA) of the ECB) to BOC, and applying a massive haircut on the uninsured deposits of BOC (ended up to be 47.5%) in order to recapitalize the bank.

This of course has provided, other than distress to the people, a prosperous field for conspiracy theories to grow. The decision was announced by the mass media, without any notice (or any other proactive sign), to investors and depositors on a Saturday morning when the banking system was closed for a long weekend including green Monday that followed, causing unsafety, ambiguity, anger and shock. Theocharides (*ibid*) has also commented that,

Although most of the blame of what transpired in Cyprus lies on Cypriot shoulders, at the same time, the way the Troika handled the Cyprus' economic problem was by no means effective. This was the first time that a bail-in with substantial haircuts for depositors was used to solve a European sovereign debt and banking crisis, and left a precedent that rattled the trust to the banking system, not just in Cyprus but also in other Eurozone countries. Instead of using the European Stability Mechanism to recapitalize banks directly and thus break the link between a banking crisis and a sovereign crisis, they decided to shut down one of the banks and enforced the other

one to recapitalize using their depositors' money. The banking sector, so vital for the economy, has lost its credibility and will take a lot of time and effort to regain it.

In respect of the Troika levy in Cyprus during March 2013, we can argue that there are mainly five dominant conspiracy theories expressed in many online forums, social networks, blogs and everyday discussions. These were around a variety of 'scenarios' and in particular, they could be aligned as follows in random order:

- a) "Punishment" of the Republic of Cyprus by the EU in respect of the rejection of the 2004 Anan plan referendum that was held among Greek-Cypriots in the Republic of Cyprus and Turkish-Cypriots in the occupied areas of the island (note that in 1974, a coup was staged in Cyprus by the military junta, then in power in Greece, for the overthrow of the then President of Cyprus, Archbishop Makarios. Turkey used this excuse to launch an invasion in Cyprus in which the Turkish troops eventually occupied and still do, 37% of the island's territory) The 2004 Anan plan was a United Nations proposal aimed to resolve the aforementioned problem:

The EU has been frustrated and angry with the Greek Republic of Cyprus since 1974. The EU was led to believe that both North and South Cyprus would agree to the terms of the Annan Plan and that the island would be re-united. Referenda took place in both parts of Cyprus. Voters in North Cyprus were in favour of reunification by a large majority, but voters in the South rejected the Annan plan. In the South, the government, church and most of the media publicly criticised the Annan plan and promoted its rejection. This was badly received in Brussels. (Hardy 2013)

- b) "Punishment" of the Republic of Cyprus by the US as it prevents the negotiation processes of Turkey to become member of the European Union.

The ongoing and persistent hostility of the Greek Republic of Cyprus towards Turkey's application to join the EU has been a severe strain on relations between the EU and Turkey. The increasing importance of Turkey as an economic power in the Middle East and its crucial role in a resolution of the conflict in Syria have led the US to broker better relations between

Turkey and Israel. The US has been quietly working behind the scenes to smooth the path for Turkey's accession to the EU. While the Obama administration can claim some success in the recent thawing of relations between Turkey and Israel, the predictable intransigence of the Greek Republic of Cyprus has been a source of ongoing irritation in both Washington and Brussels [...]. (*ibid.*)

- c) "Teach" the Republic of Cyprus about "who is the boss" and remind the importance of respecting hierarchy in seeking money when needed. As a member of the European Union, the Republic of Cyprus should first consult the EU/Troika and not act autonomously.

The response of the Greek Republic of Cyprus to mounting financial pressures was to seek and secure a 2.5bn euro loan from Russia in 2011. This was an attempt by the government to circumvent the Troika and its financial disciplines. (*ibid.*)

- d) "Show" the Republic of Cyprus the economic benefits of a possible reunification of the island in respect of the natural gas resources that were located at the southern coast of Cyprus. Greek and Turkish Cypriots should benefit from the gas resources regardless of where they live—free or occupied areas.

Turkey has now positioned itself as a savior for the island of Cyprus and are likely to benefit from the conspiracy. The Turks have made proposals for the exploitation of the natural gas resources—Firstly, the island becomes a united state of Cyprus and there is joint exploration of the resource. Secondly, Greek and Turkish Cypriots form a joint committee to exploit and market the resource, or thirdly, there becomes a permanent two state solution for the Cyprus problem. (*ibid.*)

- e) Other people claimed that all these happened in order for German Chancellor Angela Merkel to terminate any money laundering taking place in Cyprus.

According to Dempsey (2013) «[...] in the end, German Chancellor Angela Merkel to get what she wanted: an end to the endemic system of money laundering and corruption in Cyprus». Such a decision of course would inevitably followed by several political consequences, «even at the cost of further deterioration of relations between her and

Russian President Vladimir Putin since» (*ibid.*). Dempsey (2013) also remarks that,

Russians will almost certainly bear the brunt of the levy. Russian companies and individuals hold between €20 billion and €25 billion, or around one-third of the total bank deposits in Cyprus, according to reports. For a country with a GDP of €18 billion, that said a lot about the island's dependence on foreign investors, of which Russia is one of the leaders. . . . Some analysts suggested that the EU should have involved Russia in resolving the Cypriot crisis. In practice, that would have given Russia a seat at discussions among eurozone countries. But German politicians were decidedly against the idea. Merkel, who had very cool relations with Putin and was highly critical of his country's human rights record and corruption, agreed. However, she also recognized Putin's reluctance to rescue Cyprus, which has been a long-term supporter of Russia. For any kind of Russian involvement, Germany would have insisted on an end to Russian money laundering in Cyprus. Merkel had received a detailed, confidential report by the German Federal Intelligence Service stating that an EU rescue plan could benefit Russian oligarchs, who had deposited €20 billion in Cypriot banks. Since the report was leaked, opinion polls showed that a strong majority of Germans wanted Merkel to take a tough stance against Cyprus. For the public, this particular euro crisis was inextricably tied to Russian oligarchs, money laundering, and the lack of transparency in the Cypriot banking system.

3. Conclusion

Like all conspiracy theories, unless scientific historic or other forms of accepted evidences are provided, they remain fictional at the use of their audiences. People can define, start, recycle and shape conspiracy theories to provide explanations and answers for various types of questions and needs. In the case of the Troika levy in Cyprus during March 2013, the main focus of the theories was developed around the Cypriot problem of the Turkish invasion in 1974, as well as in respect of the geopolitical dimensions that this subject takes in terms of its solution and overall political power. In general, the need of telling and distributing conspiracy theories in Cyprus, with regard to the financial crisis in 2013 and the Troika levy, seem to appear for 'consoling' destructive experiences that deal with loss of money, property and political power.

Previous examples provide a strong support on how different conspiracy theories as a cultural phenomenon are associated with prejudice and negative attitudes. So how are we to deal with conspiracy theories? In a governmental level, Sunstein and Vermeule (2009) gave us five ways conspiracy theories can be dealt: 1) Governments can ban the conspiracy theories, 2) they can tax those who disseminate the theories, 3) the government can engage in counter speech, in an attempt to discredit the theories, 4) they can hire private parties to engage in counter speech, and 5) they can engage in informal dialogues with those disseminating the theories. Sunstein and Vermeule think that the best way is to combine 3, 4, and 5 through cognitive infiltration of the conspiracy group.

Another way to deal with conspiracy theories is through the educational system in all stages. Conspiracy theories arise because people are not often able to understand and explain unpredicted situations, something that can be rather superstitious and unreasonable. Students and individuals need to develop, during their education years, critical thinking skills. They would then become more judgmental with conspiracy theories using historical, scientific, and socio-cultural evidences, as well as develop skills, abilities, and values critical to assess everyday life.

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PARTE III

I TEMI DEL COMLOTTO

PART III

THE THEMES OF CONSPIRACY

Vuotare il sacco

MAURIZIO FERRARIS*

ENGLISH TITLE: Letting the cat out of the bag

ABSTRACT: The essay investigates the conspiratorial dimension of Heidegger's political philosophy and relates it to its notorious adhesion to Nazism. Heidegger, the essay claims, believed in the existence of a metaphysical Jewish conspiracy and reacted to it by concocting his own conspiracy, a series of sibylline texts whose political content would have been manifest after the foreseen defeat of Bonn's government. The essay also ponders on the reasons for which this dimension of Heidegger's thought was not only ignored but also frequently dissimulated by his post-WWII commentators, including, and perhaps above all, by those who belonged to leftist ideologies.

KEYWORDS: Heidegger, Black Notes, Hermeneutics, Politics, Metaphysics.

I. Coming out

Pare che avanti negli anni Heidegger avesse confidato a un assistente «non ho ancora tirato fuori i gatti dal sacco» («die Katze noch gar nicht aus dem Sack gelassen»). Il detto si lega a un altro modo di dire piuttosto diffuso in Germania: «ich kaufe doch nicht die Katze im Sack», ovvero «non compro certo il gatto chiuso nel sacco» (cioè senza vederlo), che rimanda ai tempi in cui al mercato si spacciavano gatti per conigli. Insomma “non compro a scatola chiusa”. L'affermazione di Heidegger si può intendere così: la situazione non è ancora chiarita, ci sono ancora sorprese in serbo. E magari: «non ho ancora vuotato il sacco».

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Alla luce dei *Quaderni neri* pubblicati — con un coming out che è la circostanza più rivelativa in tutta questa vicenda — per esplicita disposizione di Heidegger, tutto diventa più chiaro: Heidegger non aveva ancora vuotato il sacco, il mondo filosofico aveva comprato la sua filosofia a scatola chiusa. Ci sarebbe da ironizzare, nello stile di Bernhard nel *Nipote di Wittgenstein*, quando i parenti austriaci di Wittgenstein sostengono (nessuno è profeta in patria) che il suo pensiero è tutto un bluff e che è riuscito a convincere gli inglesi di essere un grande filosofo, ma non è così semplice.

Il segreto di Heidegger non è il nazismo: da decenni è noto che l'adesione di Heidegger al movimento fu tutt'altro che un incidente, "una fesseria" (*eine Dummheit*), come sosteneva lui nel dopoguerra e senza molta convinzione (poco mancava che la definisse "una ragazza"), ma durò almeno sino a Stalingrado, e in realtà anche dopo, come dimostra la scelta di pubblicare questi quaderni. Questa, a mio parere, è la vera e grande novità. All'inizio del dibattito successivo alla pubblicazione dei *Quaderni neri* si è letto da qualche parte che sarebbero stati "scoperti", come una rivelazione incresciosa, ma si tratta di un errore e più esattamente di una razionalizzazione, nata dal fatto che appare inconcepibile che Heidegger avesse realmente predisposto la pubblicazione di questi scritti che mescolano nazismo, antisemitismo e culto paranoico del segreto.

2. Ermetismo

Di qui, a mio avviso, la domanda fondamentale: come è possibile che un uomo che era già stato processato, e costretto ad abbandonare l'insegnamento per qualche anno, a causa della sua compromissione con il nazismo, abbia dato la disposizione di far uscire questi quaderni di tenebra dopo la pubblicazione della sua opera omnia? Tanto più che in questi quaderni si trova, per così dire, il cifrario che rende possibile la decodifica (come vedremo) di molti dei suoi ermetismi? Sembra un gesto di parresia poco consono al carattere di Heidegger («finché può, mente», diceva Hannah Arendt) e insieme di autodenuncia, una volontaria auto-umiliazione che compromette definitivamente il tentativo di riabilitarlo e di vedere nel nazismo un elemento estrinseco rispetto

alla sua filosofia. Dunque, perché? A mio parere per due motivi, uno storico-politico e l'altro filosofico.

Sul piano politico, Heidegger era persuaso che la Germania di Bonn non avrebbe avuto una vita più lunga della Germania di Weimar, e che all'uscita dei quaderni il vento della storia sarebbe già tornato a soffiare nel verso giusto (per lui). Era del resto anche la convinzione di Hitler nel suo testamento politico: quando la grande cospirazione ebraica che aveva decretato la catastrofe del suo progetto fosse stata finalmente debellata, il mondo avrebbe compreso la sua grandezza.

Il motivo storico-politico è la premessa del motivo filosofico. Heidegger è sempre stato ermetico, e deliberatamente, per la delizia dei suoi interpreti ma anche per un motivo più sostanziale. Scriveva nel dopoguerra: «Non è dal 1927, dalla pubblicazione di *Essere e tempo*, che ho iniziato a osservare il silenzio nel pensiero, ma in *Essere e tempo*, e anche prima, e sempre». E nei quaderni neri spiega che il suo messaggio non è «mai, e a ragion veduta, comunicato in maniera immediata», e che Noi restiamo nel fronte invisibile della Germania spirituale segreta». Era il principio di Hitler in *Mein Kampf* (letto e postillato da Heidegger): «Tedesco, impara a tacere!». Questa segretezza rispondeva, nelle intenzioni di Heidegger, a un'altra segretezza, quella della «guerra spirituale segreta» condotta dall'ebraismo, a cui si deve rispondere con un'altra guerra mistica e filosofica.

Ora davvero tutto è più chiaro: l'insistenza di Heidegger sul *po-lemos* come essenza del mondo, la definizione mistica della verità come *alètheia*, cioè come non-nascondimento (quanto dire: viviamo anzitutto in un mondo di ombre e di inganni, e solo al veggente è data la verità), l'idea che la storia della metafisica fosse un destino di decadenza a cui la Germania era chiamata a reagire sono pezzi di questa strategia. Totalmente immerso nella sindrome del complotto ebraico, Heidegger risponde con un complotto fatto in casa: scrivere dei testi misteriosi, poi pubblicarli in gran parte dopo la morte (in vita Heidegger pubblicò relativamente poco, in gioventù preferiva essere considerato il re segreto della filosofia tedesca), e infine, quando il grande corpus ermetico fosse stato alla luce del sole, in una Germania risolleatasi dalla catastrofe, dare alle stampe la chiave ermeneutica, la stele di Rosetta che consentisse di decifrare il vero significato di tutto l'arduo (e a mio avviso futile) meditare sull'Ultimo Dio, l'Evento, l'Abbandono, il *Gestell*, il *Geviert*, la *Lichtung* e l'Essere che non è l'essere

dell'ente.

Questa interpretazione, lo riconosco, sembra ispirata alle tesi del "nazismo magico". Ma, da una parte, è storicamente provato che il nazismo aveva una componente mistica, che risultava perfettamente consona allo spirito di Heidegger, così legato alla Germania segreta, al manierismo spirituale e sensuale di Angelus Silesius, agli oscuri sermoni di Meister Eckhart. D'altra parte, senza postulare questa componente mistica, risultano incomprensibili affermazioni come quella contenuta in *Che cosa significa pensare?*, secondo cui "non abbiamo ancora incominciato a pensare", quasi che tutta la storia, sino a quel momento, non fosse stata che una copertura, un equivoco, una macchinazione. E perché è così grave che «la mancanza di Heimat» possa diventare «un destino mondiale», come leggiamo nella *Lettera sull'umanismo*? Perché significherebbe che hanno vinto i «nomadi semiti».

Visto che il *Brief* è una lettera indirizzata nel 1946 a Jean Beaufret e avvia tutto il recupero postbellico di Heidegger in Francia e a sinistra, il segreto nasconde anche una sorta di sberleffo: Beaufret lo riabilita, e traduce i suoi testi che ispireranno un grande filosofo ebreo come Derrida e un grande poeta ebreo come Celan, Frédéric de Towarnicki, combattente alleato, va a Freiburg nel 1945 insieme ad Alain Resnais per dargli la solidarietà della cultura nel momento della massima disgrazia politica, e Heidegger continua ad alludere al complotto ebraico.

Sembra di leggere un libro di Gide. Però adesso tutto è, non dico chiaro, ma comprensibile, a cominciare dall'apparentemente assurda decisione di disporre la pubblicazione di questi quaderni. Essi sarebbero usciti in un tempo in cui, forse, il "pensiero calcolante", che Heidegger attribuisce essenzialmente all'ebraismo, sarebbe stato sostituito da un "pensiero meditante". Prima di quel giorno, la segretezza sarebbe stata di rigore. E fa uno strano effetto, alla luce di tutto questo, pensare a Pietro Chiodi, partigiano di Giustizia e libertà, intento a tradurre *Essere e tempo*, misurandosi con una prosa che, come abbiamo visto, Heidegger definisce come deliberatamente escogitata per «osservare il silenzio nel pensiero». Davvero uno strano effetto, una ironia sinistra, che diventa tanto più forte se si considera che, come leggiamo nei quaderni, Husserl non aveva capito *Essere e tempo* perché era ebreo, cioè senza patria, non radicato nella *Heimat* e non accasato nella *Hutte*.

3. Antisemitismo

Si è detto che quello di Heidegger è un “antisemitismo metafisico”. L’espressione ha qualcosa di curioso. Anzitutto, che l’antisemitismo sia metafisico non toglie che sia antisemitismo bello e buono (a ognuno la sua specialità: Goering aveva un antisemitismo aeronautico, Goebbels un antisemitismo mediatico, e Heidegger un antisemitismo metafisico). Come tale, questa affermazione è la caricatura di un’altra affermazione ben più seria, di Derrida in *Dello spirito* (1987).

Qui Derrida osserva che il nazismo non è l’irruzione di qualcosa di estraneo al mondo dello spirito, e che affonda le sue radici nei punti più alti della cultura europea:

Il nazismo non è nato nel deserto. Lo si sa bene, ma bisogna sempre ricordarlo. E anche se, lontano da ogni deserto, fosse spuntato come un fungo nel silenzio di una foresta europea, l’avrebbe fatto all’ombra di grandi alberi, sotto il riparo del loro silenzio e della loro indifferenza, ma nel medesimo terreno. Non redigerò il catasto di questi alberi che formano in Europa una immensa foresta nera, non ne enumererò la specie. Per ragioni essenziali, la loro presentazione trascende lo spazio di una semplice mappa. Nella loro fitta tassonomia, porterebbero il nome di religioni, di filosofie, di regimi politici, di strutture economiche, di istituzioni religiose o accademiche. In breve, di ciò che si chiama confusamente la cultura o il mondo dello spirito. (*De l’esprit*, Galilée 1987, p. 179)

Fin qui, tutto bene. Ma se appunto passiamo dalla tesi alla sua caricatura, quella dell’ “antisemitismo metafisico”, le cose cambiano. Insistere sul fatto che l’antisemitismo ha una radice culturale significa introdurre una sorta di determinismo: se sei intellettuale, con una certa formazione, e magari se sei tedesco, non puoi che essere antisemita e filonazista. Il che è assurdo: il caso Dreyfus è avvenuto a Parigi, Auschwitz era in Polonia, e Thomas Mann, che parlava la stessa lingua di Heidegger, si oppose fermamente al nazismo e fu costretto all’esilio. Aggiungerei che insistere sull’antisemitismo metafisico comporta un indugiare nella prolissa e poco interessante produzione di Heidegger successiva a *Essere e tempo* e ai testi immediatamente circostanti, come *I problemi fondamentali della fenomenologia* o *Kant e il problema della metafisica*, che tuttavia non aggiungono niente al libro del 1927 ma sono particolarmente interessanti per discutere dell’antisemitismo di Heidegger.

4. Politica

Se sull'antisemitismo — metafisico o meno — di Heidegger non ho molto da aggiungere, vorrei aprire un capitolo su cui invece non si è ancora ragionato abbastanza. Nessuno ha mai pensato a fare di Thomas Mann un eroe della sinistra, mentre il rettore nazista di Friburgo lo è stato, almeno in Francia e in Italia. Come è possibile? Prima della pubblicazione dei *Quaderni neri* Gianni Vattimo ("La Stampa", 2/6/2012) ha sostenuto che Heidegger era nazista ma non razzista. Vien quantomeno da chiedersi: ammesso e non concesso che si possa dare il caso di un nazista non razzista, non è già abbastanza grave essere stati nazisti e continuare a esserlo, come riconosce Vattimo quando con approvazione osserva che Heidegger non ha voluto essere un filosofo "democratico" (tra virgolette) e "disciplinatamente atlantico"? A occhio si direbbe che è grave, molto grave.

Eppure proprio quelle virgolette a "democratico" e a "disciplinatamente atlantico" suggeriscono il motivo per cui non solo si è sottovalutato il nazismo di Heidegger ma lo si è letto come un autore di sinistra. Come si spiega che Heidegger abbia realizzato — come una sorta di Lili Marleen speculativa, e senza muovere un dito — la singolare operazione di traghettare nella sinistra postmoderna parole d'ordine, termini e concetti che appartenevano alla visione del mondo nazista? Come si spiega che il massimo successo di quella che un contemporaneo, Lévinas, definiva «la filosofia dell'hitlerismo» abbia avuto luogo a sinistra e non a destra, e dopo la guerra? L'arcano si svela abbastanza facilmente.

Da una parte, parlare nel dopoguerra, a destra e in Germania, di autori nazisti come Heidegger, Jünger, Schmitt (e di un loro riferimento comune, Nietzsche) sembrava implausibile, nel momento in cui la cultura tedesca era, comprensibilmente, interessata a voltar pagina. Diversamente andavano le cose in Francia e in Italia, ed è così che si spiega l'edizione di Nietzsche di Colli e Montinari, così come il rilancio di Heidegger prima in Francia (spesso in funzione anti-sartriana, a partire dalla Lettera sull'umanismo), poi in Italia. Questo sdoganamento (è il caso di dirlo, visto che comporta un passaggio di frontiere, e poi un ritorno in Germania attraverso la Francia e gli Stati Uniti) suscitava le ironie di un uomo di spirito come Jünger, che osservava di aver trovato tutte le sue opere nella biblioteca di Mitterrand, ma

che del resto c'erano già tutte nella biblioteca di Hitler.

Tuttavia, a mio parere, c'è un secondo motivo più determinante. Nel dopoguerra, è come se la sinistra avesse avvocato a sé il monopolio del politico. Politica e sinistra erano coestensive, dunque ogni pensatore del politico, fosse pure il giurista di Hitler, come Schmitt, diventava fruibile a sinistra. Il merito principale dell'analisi di Faye in *Heidegger. L'introduzione del nazismo in filosofia* (che proprio per questo si differenzia da precedenti studi sul nazismo di Heidegger) sta nell'illustrare con chiarezza e profondità è l'intima struttura politica del pensiero di Heidegger, che lo rendeva particolarmente riciclabile in un'epoca iper-politica come il Sessantotto. La storia e la decisione sono l'unica realtà (cosa che era in sintonia con quel funesto antirealista che è stato Hitler, ma anche con quegli antirealisti più benintenzionati che proclamavano la necessità della immaginazione al potere), si tratta di combattere l'oggettività in nome della solidarietà, il freddo intellettualismo in nome del radicamento in una comunità di popolo: «Questo interrogare, attraverso cui il nostro popolo sopporta il proprio essere storico, lo patisce nel pericolo, lo conduce sino alla grandezza del suo compito, questo interrogare è il suo filosofare, la sua filosofia».

Questo movimentismo filosofico appare molto evidente in un seminario del '34 omesso dalla "Opera completa" (che dunque, osserva giustamente Faye, è tale solo di nome) così come in un seminario su Hegel del medesimo periodo, dove l'intento fondamentale di Heidegger è politicizzare in massimo grado l'argomento, per cui, per illustrare la tesi della identità di razionale e reale, decreta che il Trattato di Versailles non è reale. L'insistenza sulla storicità, intesa come quel divenire che può giustificare qualunque cosa, è la chiave di volta del costruttivismo heideggeriano, che si traduce, in sostanza, in un trionfo della volontà di potenza. Quando i postmoderni hanno sostenuto che qualunque tesi e qualunque verità devono essere indicizzate alla loro epoca lo facevano con intenti emancipativi, ma ripetevano l'argomento di Heidegger in difesa del *Führerprinzip*. Desideroso di trasferirsi a Monaco per stare più vicino a Hitler (come si legge nella corrispondenza con la Blochman), forse almeno in una occasione *ghost writer* del Führer, Heidegger opera una continua trasposizione del presente nell'eterno, del politico nel metafisico, e viceversa.

5. Metafisica

Per quella che non è certo l'unica ironia della ricezione heideggeriana, la decostruzione della storia dell'essere in cui si impegna Heidegger dopo *Essere e tempo* diventa un modo, per lui e per i suoi seguaci, di continuare a parlare, ininterrottamente, di metafisica. Il capovolgimento del platonismo è un modo per parlare di Platone e per rilanciare l'idea del filosofo—re e dell'illuminato; l'essere che non è l'essere dell'ente e che non si identifica con il sommo tra gli enti diventa un modo per parlare dell'Ultimo Dio; proprio come, inversamente, parlare di *polemos* significa vestire in panni greci la mobilitazione totale di Jünger. La complessità, la perversità della strategia è duplice. Da una parte, superare la metafisica è per l'appunto un modo per renderla onnipresente, come quando Heidegger sostiene che Aristotele è implicato nel funzionamento del motore diesel. Dall'altra, l'aria eternizzante che spira sull'Olimpo filosofico viene a coprire riferimenti politici e contingenti tutt'altro che metafisici.

Così, nutrita, sul palco, da Eraclito e Platone, Aristotele e Cartesio, Kant e Hegel, e dietro le quinte o nel camerino da Dostoevskij, Jünger, Spengler e chissà chi altro, la storia dell'essere disegnata da Heidegger nei seminari su Nietzsche degli anni Trenta e Quaranta ne rilancia tutta l'ontologia fatalistica e titanica, tranne il riferimento alla scienza. Anzi, ciò che vien proposto è tutt'altro: un Nietzsche aquila solitaria in dialogo segreto con altri grandi, un sacrificato come Hölderlin che attende riscatto dalla nuova contingenza storica. Per il resto, abbiamo una fusione di Nietzsche e di Jünger, una accentuazione del dinamismo: si tratta di superare la metafisica, la quale si caratterizza come oblio dell'essere, confuso sotto gli enti e con gli enti, per vincere il nichilismo pensando veramente l'essere.

Heidegger propone la questione dell'essere in termini insieme geopolitici e teologici. Da una parte, c'è il tema del nichilismo eroico, dell'accettazione risoluta della fine degli dei. Stretto tra Oriente e Occidente, fra Stati Uniti e Russia (scriverà Heidegger nella *Introduzione alla metafisica* del 1935), il popolo metafisico per eccellenza si prepara a un nichilismo eroico — come ricordava Farias, il paragone sarà rilanciato, *mutatis mutandis*, dal premier iraniano Mahmud Ahmadinejad, che in gioventù era stato discepolo di Ahmad Fardid (1909–1994), che si proclamava “compagno di strada” di Heidegger. Dall'altra, c'è l'at-

tesa dell'ultimo Dio, di un nuovo essere che ritorni a guidare con il decisionismo di un Führer un mondo secolarizzato.

Non è un caso che i seminari su Nietzsche procedano di pari passo con gli abbozzi per i *Beiträge*, in cui si parla appunto dell'essere come evento, e si allude misteriosamente alla figura di un ultimo Dio, di un Dio a venire destinato a salvare la terra dal nichilismo, e un po' a sorpresa (ma confermando i sospetti sull'identità storica dell'ultimo Dio), nel § 74, si menziona la mobilitazione totale jüngeriana. In effetti, in Heidegger il cortocircuito tra l'eterno e il presente è sempre all'orizzonte. Ad esempio, il tempio greco di cui Heidegger parla in un altro scritto del 1935, *L'origine dell'opera d'arte*, era stato, nelle prime versioni pubbliche della conferenza, lo Zeppelinfeld di Norimberga, allestito in stile classicheggiante (si ispirava all'altare di Pergamo) per accogliere il discorso di Hitler, che anche qui Heidegger identifica con il divino. Il che, chiudendo il cerchio, getta una luce sinistra sulla sua dichiarazione del 1966 secondo cui «ormai solo un dio ci può salvare».

Il tratto distintivo di questa ontologia dinamica in cui, sotto il segno dell'evento, essere e nulla coincidono, è, per così dire, il passo di marcia, con un tono che è strettamente d'epoca, tanto è vero che si ritrova in quell'altra grande dottrina nichilistica che è la *Teoria generale dello spirito come atto puro* di Gentile, concepita, nel 1916, sull'onda dell'entusiasmo per l'ingresso in guerra. Lo stesso entusiasmo che troviamo, nei corsi heideggeriani sul nichilismo, quando viene celebrato il crollo della Francia sotto i colpi delle armate corazzate del Generale Guderian: «In questi giorni noi stessi siamo testimoni di una misteriosa legge della storia, cioè che un giorno un popolo non è più all'altezza della metafisica scaturita dalla sua stessa storia, e questo proprio nell'attimo in cui tale metafisica si è mutata nell'incondizionato». E più avanti, con un ragionamento che ricorda Goebbels quando denuncia il terrorismo dei bombardamenti angloamericani: «Se oggi, per esempio, gli Inglesi distruggono le unità della flotta francese all'ancora nel porto di Orano, da punto di vista della loro potenza ciò è del tutto "giusto"; infatti significa soltanto: ciò che è utile al potenziamento della potenza. Con ciò è detto al tempo stesso che noi non possiamo mai né mai dobbiamo giustificare questo modo di procedere; ogni potenza, dal punto di vista metafisico, ha la sua ragione. E soltanto per impotenza passa nel torto».

6. Ermeneutica

Non stupisce che, molto prima che Heidegger vuotasse il sacco, i suoi interpreti si siano dovuti impegnare in un processo di denazificazione, che ha avuto tante vie. Anzitutto quella storico-grammaticale, per cui a leggerlo bene, a capirlo e a metterlo in contesto, si scioglierebbero tutti gli equivoci. Così François Fédier, che negli *Scritti politici di Heidegger* postilla la chiusa della allocuzione del 17 maggio 1933 in cui Heidegger scrive: «Alla nostra grande guida, Adolf Hitler, un *Sieg Heil* tedesco» con parole che sembrano uno scherzo di cattivo gusto: «Ancora oggi l'espressione "Ski Heil" — senza la minima connotazione politica — viene impiegata, tra sciatori, per augurarsi una buona discesa» (p. 329 della traduzione italiana, Casale Monferrato, Piemme 1998). Questa trasformazione del *Sieg Heil* nello *Ski Heil* ha dell'inquietante, soprattutto se si considera che il *Wink*, il "gesto" o "cenno" con cui l'Ultimo Dio, nei Contributi alla filosofia, annuncia la possibilità di un "altro inizio" e di un superamento del nichilismo è, con ogni probabilità, il saluto nazista.

Ma c'è anche stata — e continua a esserci, per strano che possa apparire — una via mistico-allegorica, che traducendo in modo incomprensibile il gergo heideggeriano produce una denazificazione per confusione. Come ad esempio nel caso del brano riportato più sopra, che è stato reso non trent'anni fa, bensì l'anno scorso, come segue: «Questo interrogare, nel quale il nostro popolo aderisce il suo genitoriale adessere, ossia lo tiene erto per entro la tentazione e fa sì che esso si erga nell'extraneum della nobiltà del suo incarico, questo interrogare è il suo filosofare, la sua filosofia» (*Che cos'è la verità?* edizione italiana a cura di Carlo Götz, Milano, Christian Marinotti Edizioni, 2011). Con questa ermeneutica anche gli ordini di manovra di un Sonderkommando sul fronte orientale possono essere trasformati in poemi simbolisti o in ricette di cucina.

E cosa dire poi del *Discorso di rettorato*, il cui titolo, di solito tradotto pianamente e inequivocabilmente con *L'autoaffermazione dell'università tedesca* è stato ritradotto con *La quadratura in se stessa dell'Università tedesca*? E che contiene, fra i tanti, un passo dove l'unica cosa (forse) comprensibile è la voglia di menare le mani, o, alternativamente, di tagliare il bilancio? «Solo la lotta mantiene aperto l'antagonismo e impianta nell'intero corpo dei docenti e degli allievi quell'intona-

zione fondamentale a partire dalla quale l'autosquadrantesi quadratura in se stessa dell'Università autorizza il risoluto inquadramento senziante di sé a trasformarsi nella genuina capacità di far quadrare autonomamente il proprio bilancio».

L'ammirazione fa stravedere, o non vedere, e questo non vale solo per Heidegger. Per esempio, in *Mon cœur mis à nu* Baudelaire scrive «Bella congiura da organizzare per lo sterminio della razza ebraica. Gli ebrei, bibliotecari e testimoni della redenzione» (*Œuvres complètes, texte établi, présenté et annoté par Claude Pichois*, 2 voll., Gallimard, Paris, 1975–1976, vol. I, p. 706). Parole spesso a dir poco sottovalutate: Claude Pichois, il curatore, commenta il passo dichiarando che «qualsiasi antisemitismo è da escludersi», mentre Benjamin nel *Passagen-Werk*, J40,1 le minimizza classificandole come “gauloiserie”. Non diversamente, Roberto Calasso, direttore editoriale della Casa Editrice Adelphi ha sostenuto, a proposito del *Nietzsche* di Heidegger tradotto dalle sue edizioni nel 1994: «Nel *Nietzsche* il giudizio di Heidegger sul nazismo è trasparente e devastante» («Nietzsche, ultimo scontro», conversazione con Antonio Gnoli, *La Repubblica*, 16 ottobre 1994).

7. Filosofia

Ovviamente a questo punto, e in conclusione, ci si può chiedere: che cosa ha a che fare tutto questo con la filosofia? Di che cosa ci stiamo occupando, ad esempio, in questo volume? Dell'antisemitismo di un tedesco del secolo scorso, o di un grande filosofo? So che molti, forse la maggior parte di coloro che sono qui, ritengono che Heidegger non sia un grande filosofo, e che l'antisemitismo, il nazismo, e tutto sommato l'inconsistenza filosofica che Heidegger rivela quando incomincia a parlare della storia dell'essere, negli anni Trenta, colpisca già *Essere e tempo*. Io non sono di questo avviso. Se riconosciamo che non si fa filosofia con le buone intenzioni, dobbiamo anche riconoscere che non si fa filosofia con le cattive intenzioni, e che l'opera, alla fine, è quello che conta. Per quanto oscura, contestabile e in ultima istanza Kitsch sia la categoria del “grande filosofo”, resta che per esserlo un libro basta e avanza, e Heidegger quel libro lo ha scritto. O, se può spiacere (il che è legittimo) dare il titolo di “grande filosofo” a un na-

zista, diciamo che *Essere e tempo* è un grande libro, e imbarchiamone l'autore sull'ultimo treno per Norimberga.

Performing and Communicating Conspiracy Theories

Stalinist Show Trials in Eastern Europe during the Cold War

UTE CAUMANN^{*}

TITOLO ITALIANO: Messa in scena e comunicazione delle teorie del complotto:
processi–farsa stalinisti nell’Europa dell’Est durante la Guerra Fredda.

ABSTRACT: The essay considers the meaning of conspiracy theory in state sanctioned politics in the Soviet sphere of interest during the First Cold War. At that time, Stalinist show trials, following the Moscow Purge Trials of the late 1930s, were transferred to East Central Europe. Show trials are no judicial lawsuits; there are performative acts as well as media events. They offer an elaborate and refined narrative — in order to destroy someone politically and morally by means of fabricated recriminations, but also as a means to reinterpret history in conspiratorial terms. Against the background of historical case studies from Stalinist Czechoslovakia and Eastern Germany, the essay focuses on two aspects which are related to the circumstance that conspiracy theories are meant to be disseminated amongst a given society: that, first of all, they are staged before a local audience and then, secondly, communicated — with the help of written texts, voice and visualization — to a wider audience outside the courtroom.

KEYWORDS: Political Trial; Show Trial; Criminal Procedure; Historical Case Study; Stalinism.

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1. Introduction

In November 1952, the show trial of Rudolf Slánský called worldwide attention to Prague. It was a high profile trial as a former general secretary had been arrested on charges of so-called «conspiracy against the state»¹. As the verdict had been decided on beforehand, outside the courtroom, the trial was not about an adjudication of a (criminal) case, which means, it was no trial in a juridical sense (Allo 2010: 52). Show trials as the Slánský one were in fact only the tip of the iceberg of post-war Stalinist terror, because show trials were extremely demanding, as well as risky. By no means were they necessary to have a person executed, which could be (and was) done through purely administrative processes.

Stalinist show trials were staged for different reasons. They were performances in order to destroy someone politically and morally by means of fabricated recriminations. They were about the narrative and staging: the trials resorted to conspiracy theories, and they did so in order to explain the world. This is put into effect in a defined place and time, with the help of a multitude of participants and a centrally planned dramaturgy.

The Prague trial was by no means a singular event. Similar stagings took place in other countries of the Soviet sphere of influence. This article focuses on the Socialist satellites in the Eastern part of Europe from a historical perspective. It explores — against the background of historical case studies — two aspects which are related to the circumstance that conspiracy theories are meant to be disseminated amongst a given society: that, first of all, they are staged before a local audience and then secondly communicated — with the help of written texts, voice and visualization — to a wider audience outside the courtroom.

2. Historical context

During the so-called First Cold War, the late 1940s and the 1950s, conspiracy theories served to support the state. It was the leading

1. Of the more than 100.000 victims out of a population of 14 million, the smallest part — about 200 — was sentenced in show trials.

Communist elites who turned to these interpretive patterns as an answer to the overall crisis, but also as a solution to specific problems — to economic, social and political problems. In the Czechoslovak case, the social acceptance of the leading role of the Communist Party was gone by the time of the Slánský-trial², whereas in other People's Democracies, it had never been achieved in the first place.

However, with Stalin being the victor in the Second World War, the local Communist Parties received their legitimisation otherwise. And with the help of so-called Soviet security advisors, the pseudo-legal concept of the Great Purges was transferred to Western satellites — the precondition being an implementation of the Soviet judicial system. This meant implementing a legislation that was shaped in the USSR in the 1930s in opposition to the, until then, valid concept of legal nihilism. The new definition in the words of the Soviet Institute of Law — following the position of Andrey Vyshinsky³ — reads: «The law is the overall sum of the rules of conduct that express the intentions of the ruling class [. . .]. Implementation of these rules is guaranteed by the power monopoly of the state» (Wyschinski 1953: 76). Law thus was to become «the instrument of state administration and the state-driven change of society» (Brink 1979: 355).

Furthermore, the international dimension of the Cold War led to the convenient theory of the «growing intensity of class struggle». To establish the “enemy” within, local Party leaders collaborated with the secret police. But who was targeted as an “enemy of the people”? Communist members of the International Brigades of the Spanish Civil War, leading members of pre-war — now exiled — democratic parties, non-communist resistance fighters during the Nazi occupation experienced in underground work, soldiers having fought within the ranks of the Western allies, as well as members of the Catholic Church. In short: people with contacts or even networks in the West.

2. After the war, the Communist Party had won elections without manipulating the electorate: it gained victory in the 1946 elections (one third of Parliamentary seats); the February 1948 Communist coup d'état, supported by the USSR, focussed on the theory of “intensified class struggle”, relying on students, peasants, lower-middle class citizens.

3. See below.

3. Showtrials

Looking for a definition of the term ‘show trial’, often referred to in scholarly journals as well as in the popular press, one is left with rather unsatisfactory results: no coherent or consistent meaning seems to be attached to it (Allo 2010: 43). On the one hand, a show trial represents a form of media trial insofar as both share the importance of the media and the public inside and outside the courtroom. Also, a show trial can be seen as a political trial in the sense that it deals with charges of public political interest. However, following the legal theorist Otto Kirchheimer, we are dealing with a very special form of political trial, eliminating opponents and adversaries according to some «prearranged rules», thus providing a «prefabricated and alternative reality» — an «admixture» of real occurrences and fictitious happenings (Kirchheimer 1961: 6, 106)⁴. Kirchheimer calls it a “Stalin–type trial” (Kirchheimer 1961: 97, 104). In his classic study on post–war political trials in Eastern Europe, George Hodos uses the term “show trial” in an even narrower sense when restricting himself to trials of leading communists only. The aim, according to Hodos, was «to personalize an abstract political enemy, to place it in the dock in flesh and blood [...]» (Hodos 1987: xiii).

To that aim show trials offer an elaborate and refined narrative of fabricated crime. This can be observed in the hundreds of pages of the published proceedings. What they offer, and I follow German historian Dieter Groh in that, is logic, coherence and a «causal nexus [...] superior to reality» (Groh 1987: 2). Let me give you one example in the notion of Anti-Zionism (read Anti-Semitism) and the relations with Israel. Initially, Moscow had hoped to make Israel an ally in the Near East and supported Czechoslovak secret policy of arms exports. By 1952, following Israel’s orientation towards the United States, this (secret) policy turned out to have been a mistake. In the Slánský-trial narrative, however, this mistake of Party policy appears as a crime — as a crime of anti-Party conspiracy, as a crime committed according to a plan (Leites and Bernaud 1954: 387). Insofar, show trials are suitable objects of research when communicating conspiracy

4. For the fusion of facts and fiction in conspiracy theories, cf. Anton (2011: 14) and Meteling (2008: 15).

theories is brought into focus. This holds true for a number of reasons. I restrict myself here to two major points: first, to their performative character, second, to show trials as media events.

4. Performativity

Show trials can be seen as performative acts. In these cases, conspiracy theories are presented — mostly in a courtroom, sometimes even in a theatre⁵. Many contemporaries noticed the theatricality of these events, and researchers have done so since. If we follow this notion, we have to take into account the script, the production and the casting of roles, but also the performance on stage, the individual presentation as well as the danger of the unforeseen in this live event (Fischer-Lichte: 2012: 57, 75). Let us go back for a moment to the Great Purge trials of the 1930s, which at that time divided the contemporaries. An English reviewer published the following misjudgement of what he called a “faithful transcription”: «No one [...] could still believe that the whole proceedings were staged and that some playwright wrote the 580 pages in advance for the defendants to act»⁶. It is interesting to see how the same reviewer perceived the state prosecutor’s behaviour, namely that «in general Vishinsky, instead of putting leading questions to them [the accused, UC], invited them to tell their own stories»⁷.

Andrey Y. Vyshinsky, Stalin’s chief prosecutor and known for his prominent role in all three Moscow Trials, could rely on the accused and their preparation in multiple rehearsals to memorize the scripts. Vyshinsky’s performance presents not only a dialogue with the defendants or witnesses, as is to be expected of state prosecution, it

5. As can be seen in the first East-German show trial, the so-called trial of Herwegen, Brundert and accomplices, taking place in April 1950 in the then biggest German theatre, the Saxony-Anhalt Theatre in Dessau in front of an audience of more than 1200 people. Cf. Prozess Herwegen, Brundert und Komplizen, [online: www.schauprozesse.de, June 5, 2015].

6. Dudley Collard in his review on behalf of the Royal Institute of International Affairs: Review of the Court Proceedings of the Pjatakov-Radek-trial of 1937. In: *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1931–1939)* Vol. 16, No. 4 (July 1937), pp. 639–641, at p. 639f.

7. Collard, Review, p. 640.

also presents a simulated dialogue with the audience, essentially a monologue:

[...] a question may arise, which, indeed, some people have actually raised, namely: How can these people who fought for socialism for so many years, people who blasphemously called themselves Bolshevik Leninists, be accused of these monstrous crimes?⁸

Needless to say, he gives an answer to that question. It is the pretext for an elaborate narrative, a state-sanctioned narrative of a “great conspiracy”. The theatrical climax belongs, however, to the defendants and their confessions. But the trial is not about individual guilt and physical liquidation; it is about the reinterpretation of history in conspiratorial terms.

This trial sums up the struggle waged against the Soviet state and the Party [...]. This trial [...] has once again revealed the face of real, genuine Trotskyism — this old enemy of the workers and peasants, this old enemy of socialism, loyal servant of capitalism [...] this trial has reminded and shown us all the main stages of the historical path traversed by the Trotskyites and Trotskyism, which spent more than 30 years of its existence on preparing for its final conversion into a storm detachment of fascism [...].⁹

And in the trial of Bucharin in 1938, Vyshinsky states:

In the light of the present trial, these facts, already covered with the dust of archives, again revive and begin to speak in the loud voice of an impeacher demanding that the culprits be called to account [...] before the tribunal of history [...].¹⁰

History is thus retold. It is retold in a performative act, an act of exposure, of un-veiling, un-masking. This turned out to be the model for the post-war satellite-state trials as well. In Prague, chief prosecutor Josef Urválek referred to the significance of this performance:

8. Report of Court Proceedings: The Case of the Anti-Soviet Trotskyite Centre: heard before the Military Collegium of the Supreme Court of the U.S.S.R., Moscow, Jan. 23–30, 1937. Moscow: People’s Commissariat of Justice of the U.S.S.R., 1937, p. 472.

9. Report of Court Proceedings: The Case of the Anti-Soviet Trotskyite Centre, 1937, p. 460, 463.

10. Report of Court Proceedings in the case of the Anti-Soviet „Bloc of Rights and Trotskyites”. Moscow: People’s Commissariat of Justice of the U.S.S.R., 1938, p. 646 (Italics, UC).

Our People's Democratic court has so far never dealt with a case of criminals like those who today are in the dock. Day by day the Czechoslovak people have witnessed a chain of treason without parallel in the country's history.¹¹

It was a dichotomous view of the world that state prosecution and judges unveiled: a world of darkness and evil, of infamous crimes to destroy the bright world of working people, the «architects of a beautiful future»¹². But there was, according to Urválek, a way out:

It surely wasn't easy, to uncover them. [...] They really reached the peak of hypocrisy, when they hid their dark past before the Party and the whole nation and masked their infamous work of diversion [...]. They succeeded in this masquerade, but in the end their alien inside was uncovered.¹³

The performative act of unveiling is fundamental in the conspiratorial narrative. In the case of the show trials, justice and theatre reveal their dislimitation (Kossmann 2012: 288). It was for the audience to hear and see: a performance with a fatal ending for the defendants, but with a placable ending for the audience inside and outside the courtroom. Placable, because answers were given: answers to help understand the drawbacks in the hope for a new and better life in Socialism.

In the performative act, the use of language creates reality (Sasse 2003: 23; Kossmann 2012: 304). The speech of the prosecutor and the confessions of the defendants are substitutes for the lack of evidence. The audience is included in the performative act and plays an active role. It is a participation that evolves into complicity¹⁴.

11. Proceedings of the Trials of Slansky, et al. in Prague, Czechoslovakia, November 20–27, 1952 as broadcast by the Czechoslovak Home Service, p. 254 (Italics, UC).

12. Translation from the (longer) German court proceedings: *Prozess gegen die Leitung des staatsfeindlichen Verschwörerzentrums mit Rudolf Slánský an der Spitze*. Prag: Justizministerium, 1953, p. 598.

13. Translation from the (longer) German court proceedings: *Prozess gegen die Leitung des staatsfeindlichen Verschwörerzentrums mit Rudolf Slánský an der Spitze*. Prag: Justizministerium, 1953, pp. 636f.

14. For "participation" cf. von Saldern 2003: 442–475; for the role of the audience Fischer-Lichte 2012.

5. Communicating conspiracy theories

Show trials are media events. Their dramaturgy is aimed at scandalizing the populace with the help of effective mediation. Therefore, the visual as well as the oral impact needs to be taken into account. Let us begin with the latter.

5.1. *Orality*

First of all, it should be mentioned that orality is constitutive for criminal procedure itself. This also holds true for Socialist criminal procedure. It is interesting to see that in the Soviet Union, Vyshinsky, the prosecutor, also played an important role as chief lawyer. Now, Vyshinsky in his law textbooks referred to his prosecution speeches so that long oral passages were canonized in written form (Wyschinski 1955). His major body of work on criminal law was still in use after the war, and much of this written work was translated and strongly influenced the satellites. His oral contributions in the Moscow Trials thus were taken over in East European law textbooks¹⁵. As, for instance, in the case of this revealing passage:

[...]. We have a conspiracy, we have before us a group of people who conspired to bring about a coup d'état, who organize themselves and for a number of years carried on a conspiracy which connected the conspirators with foreign fascist forces. [...] A conspiracy, you say, but where is the program? Have the people a written program? [...] You say there is an organization, [...] but [...] where is the material evidence of their conspiratorial activities — rules, minutes, the seal, and so forth and so on?

I am bold enough to assert, in keeping with the fundamental requirements of the science of criminal procedure, that in cases of conspiracy such demands cannot be put. You cannot demand that cases of conspiracy, of coup d'état, be approached from the standpoint: Give us minutes, decisions, membership cards [...]: You cannot demand that conspirators have their conspiratorial activities certified by a notary. No sensible man can put the question in this way [...].¹⁶

15. In German for use in the GDR: Wyschinski 1955: 281. Also in a Polish version: Wyszynski 1949.

16. Report of Court Proceedings: The case of the anti-Soviet Trotskyite Centre 1938: 512.

Vyshinsky's understanding of dealing with conspiracy and the question of evidence presented the guideline for post-war trials in Eastern Europe.

But there is a second aspect. The significance of orality, of oral forms and strategies of creating a community can also be observed in more popular forms of written speech. In fact, popular images, as presented in the trials, migrated into the press¹⁷. Let me give you a few examples of text passages published during the Slánský trial. The populace, the masses, seem to speak with a single voice. Under the heading *The whole country is infused with the voice of hatred and contempt for the gang of spies and traitors* one could read: «In disgust we listened to the cold-blooded and cynical confessions of the greatest criminal, Slánský»¹⁸. Under the title *Joyfully we are heading for work*, Ms R. Eminger wrote a letter to the editor. To achieve authenticity, it seemed to be important to give a name and affiliation.

Every human being pursuing honest work, every worker, craftsman, technician and clerk today sees clearly why we had a whole clutch of difficulties with material and cadres [...]. R. Eminger, spokesperson for the Elektroporzellan factory Žacléř¹⁹

To quote a last passage under the title *In deep gratitude*:

The state procurator's speech, which we listened to in the courtroom, was an indictment by all of the working populace". [...] Helena Löflerová, deputy of the National-Socialist Party.²⁰

There are plenty more comments like these passages from the Communist Party's mouthpiece *Rudé Právo*. As so-called comments from the courtroom and letters to the editor they formed an important part of the media campaign accompanying the trial. The vocabulary is revealing as it is associated with orality: listening, speaking. The

17. German theorist of literature Murašov has done research, on reports from the courtroom and letters to the editor, as presented in the Soviet press and he found narrative techniques fostering a collectivity of verbal experience. Murašov 1998: 90.

18. «Celou zemí zní hlas nenávisť a opovržení k bandě špiónů a zrádců». *Rudé Právo* 1952, 11/22, p. 1.

19. «Jdeme vstříc radostné práci». *Rudé Právo* 1952, 11/25, p. 1.

20. «Veliká vděčnost». *Rudé Právo* 1952, 11/27, p.1. The name National-Socialist Party is misleading, as it is in fact the Czechoslovak Social-democratic Party.

message is clear: Czechoslovak society is listening, and it is answering in a single voice. It is this voice from outside that chief prosecutor Urválek referred to inside the courtroom. Notwithstanding that all this was prearranged, the audience might have got the impression that the prosecutor took up the people's will in his final speech.

The hearts of the working people are filled with deepest indignation and just anger. [...] The innumerable messages received by the court during the past few days have displayed the firm resolution of the people to undo the damage caused by the agents of the imperialist in the shortest possible time. [...] The ranks of the Communist Party are closer than before.²¹

Creating a feeling of indignation was part of the campaign. Thousands of supportive resolutions were sent to the Communist Party from various organizations and institutions from all over the country demanding death sentences. In this respect, the show trial of Rudolf Slánský is meant to convince the outside world, the Western Capitalist warmonger world, as well as the People of being a close, united community.

Orality in communicating conspiracy theories is also closely related to radio transmission. My third example comes from an East German show trial: the trial of Silgradt and others, that is of the alleged "accomplices" of the so-called „fascist putsch". In June 1954, four men were accused of conspiracy and espionage in connection with the uprising in East Berlin and other places in the GDR in June 1953.

In this case, the radio brought courtroom atmosphere to the workplaces and the homes of the masses. It was, however, not done directly through live transmissions. The material for distribution throughout the Republic was cut into a feature. Thus, live recordings taped during the trial are part of a story presented by a narrator, which in turn is framed by a second voiceover — a commentator speaking directly to the audience. This is not the place to give details of the elaborate plot, broadcast in a two-hour feature, but to illustrate the efficacy of the broadcast with a short passage.

Allow us at this place, dear audience, to remind you of earlier events. In front of this court was stood, only a short while ago, someone bearing the

21. Proceedings of the Trials of Slansky, et al. in Prague, Czechoslovakia, November 20–27, 1952 as broadcast by the Czechoslovak Home Service, S. 254, 292.

name of Burianek, and a little later someone called Kaiser. Murder was their trade. Both had one thing in common: to prepare, with the help of explosives, incendiary devices, poison and terror a certain day, to prepare the fortress for the storm. The day was Day X, the fortress the German Democratic Republic. But neither Burianek nor Kaiser came up with this idea. Others were behind this, others of whose existence they were aware, but whom they hadn't met in person. Others, who, one could almost say, designed their ideas with scientific accuracy. And that brings us back to Dr. Silgradt at the Council for Questions of the Runification of Germany.²²

This is an excerpt from the narrator's text. Of the names mentioned one is important: Dr. Silgradt, the main defendant. He worked for the so-called *Forschungsbeirat für Fragen der Wiedervereinigung*, an inter-ministerial council, whose task was to gather expertise for the Bonn government concerning the future transformation of the GDR, after the so-called Day X. As such, the Council presented the ideal cast for the "General Staff" of the upheaval. However, archival material shows this was actually not the case. The council did plan for Day X — a term it used itself —, but when that day came in June '53, the Council was taken by surprise, and had to adjust its policy (Roth 2000: 45, 97). Although the transcript shows only a short excerpt of the broadcast, it reveals the central elements one would expect from a narrative of conspiracy: a group of conspirators, the secrecy of those behind pulling the strings, the evil plan. And, at the end of the feature also the uncovering of the "conspiracy":

[Narrator] Thus, they made use of everything that could be mobilized among the enemies and opponents of progress. The Fifth Column that over the last 40 years has tried again and again to break the power of the working class from within. This Fifth Column, which in trying suffered defeats again and again, this Fifth Column took action on June 17th, 1953 und will do so again in future. They found their judges. They will find their judges. And they will finally be judged then. 'Ruin' is written on their flag.

[Commentator] That was our second summarizing report of the trial of the agents Silgradt, Mangelsdorf, Földner and Gassa before the Supreme Court of the German Democratic Republic. Production Hanna Pustol and Dieter Mendelsohn.

22. GDR Radio Feature: „Bericht vom Prozess gegen die Agenten Silgradt, Mangelsdorf, Földner und Gassa“. Source: Deutsches Rundfunkarchiv.

[Narrator] Things are never as finely spun.²³

With this last remark, the narrator refers to a popular proverb. At this point, radio as a medium of secondary orality makes use of primary oral culture, that is — according to Walter Ong — of a culture untouched by writing and maintained by formulaic expressions, by repetition, identification and participation (Ong 1971: 286f; Ong 1980: 210). As if to highlight this, the narrator gives away only half of the proverb «Things are never as finely spun. . . » [«Es ist nichts so fein gesponnen. . . »], obviously assuming that the audience is able to complete the saying: «[. . .] they will always see the light of sun» [«[. . .] es kommt doch an das Licht der Sonnen»].

The commentator taps into the audience's knowledge of something from the realm of primary orality. Once again, community experiences itself by means of verbally constructed participation. The phenomenon of conspiracy theory in mind, it is interesting to reflect on the notion of Walter Ong that primary oral culture “tends to break down issues into simple polarities in terms of good and evil, ‘good guys’ and ‘bad guys’” (Ong: 1980: 200). Insofar, orality seems to be a very suitable means of communicating conspiracy theories. There is reason to argue that it should be taken into account more often than has been the case.

5.2. *Visuality*

The visual aspect of communicating conspiracy theories, I would argue, is underestimated too. Not only images in the sense of metaphors, but also pictures as materialized graphic images, can effectively transmit the conspiratorial message. This holds true for photography, film, posters, caricatures and comics — each, however, in its own specific way. They are visual media, by which the spectator is in a position to recognize the ‘enemy’. This is, to begin with, achieved with the help of textual framing (brochures, journals, comics), but also by sub-text in the sense of implicit knowledge. In case the spectator does not recognize the ‘enemy’ — because he doesn't look like a

23. GDR Radio Feature: «Bericht vom Prozess gegen die Agenten Silgradt, Mangelsdorf, Földner und Gassa». Source: Deutsches Rundfunkarchiv.



Figure 1. O. Štembera (1952) «Well, this monster got caught in our ship's propeller», *Dikobraz*, 50

traitor — the common knowledge of „the real face hiding behind the mask” will work. Let us take a closer look at a few examples from the above-mentioned Czechoslovak and East German trials.

As for the Slánský trial, two political cartoons shall illustrate the interrelation of (key) texts and the visual narrative. The pictures were published during the trial in the leading Czechoslovak satirical magazine *Dikobraz* (porcupine) (Fig 1).

At that time, along with the picture, people could read — in the hurriedly published proceedings as well as in the press — the words of chief prosecutor Urválek (Fig. 1):

This trial has enabled the Czechoslovak people not only to see the moral baseness of the accused in its full nakedness, but also to realize the full extent of the danger that threatened the country [...] It has also become clear that many obstacles and difficulties which one thought were just accompanying the development toward Socialism, were, in fact, the outcome of deliberate disrupting activities of the accused. Like polyps of a thousand arms they adhered to the body of the republic, to suck in its blood and its power.²⁴

24. Translation from the German version of the court proceedings: *Prozess gegen die Leitung des staatsfeindlichen Verschwörerzentrums mit Rudolf Slánský an der Spitze*. Prag: Justizministerium, 1953, p. 599.



Figure 2. L. Haas (1952) «The Trial of the leadership of the Anti-State Conspiratorial Centre has ended; The masks are torn», *Dikobraz* 49

The Slánský trial also made use of a popular image, often referred to by Vyshinsky: of the masks that are torn off. Slánský himself made use of the metaphor in his last word:

The enemy within the castle wall is the most dangerous enemy, because he can open doors. I was an enemy within the Communist Party, within the Czechoslovak state, within the entire peace camp. [...] I had to put on a mask, in order to be able to survive as an enemy within the castle wall. I spoke unlike I thought and I acted.²⁵

25. Translation from the German version of the court proceedings: *Prozess gegen die Leitung des staatsfeindlichen Verschwörerzentrums mit Rudolf Slánský an der Spitze*. Prag: Justizministerium, 1953, p. 658.

The cartoons show how the oral and the visual are interrelated to bring the message of the now unveiled conspiracy to the public. In the first case, it is achieved by illustrating the metaphor of the ship (the Czechoslovak People's Republic) as the positive model in a successful confrontation with the monster, all defendants organically bound together as part of one body, with Slánský the head. The second cartoon relates to the international, Cold War perspective, as it focuses on the iron curtain. From behind the wall, imperialist warmongers (the US capital and military) conspire with the (treacherous) Yugoslav leader Tito, to jointly pull the strings to make their Czechoslovak bandogs (the defendants — in the foreground Slánský recognizable from his eyebrows — as the 'enemies' within) ruin the state, but luckily being unmasked by the trial's scriptwriters. Here caricature functions as a means of propaganda from above, paving the way for the official narrative of a great conspiracy. Caricature is most efficient in connecting fact and fiction. The art historian Ernst Gombrich rightly calls it a "weapon" in the cartoonist's hand:

The cartoonist can mythologize the world of politics by physiognomizing it. By linking the mythical with the real he creates that fusion, that amalgam, that seems so convincing to the emotional mind. (Gombrich 1978: 139)

Let us return once again to East Germany. The Trial of Silgradt and others was not only broadcasted on radio, but also accompanied by visual media. In this case, the plot was communicated through newsreels, but also with the help of cover-illustrations (Fig. 3).

This is a brochure published a year after the June uprising, at the time of the trial. The cover, a photomontage, takes up very effectively one of the most popular images of conspiratorial thinking: the image of the mastermind, the one who pulls the strings. If you know about the plot — and at that time you would know about the plot — the illustration will have a high affective efficacy. You will know who the puppets are, as well as who the mastermind is. Of course, the pictorial narrative is less elaborate than the textual narration. But there are other qualities, bearing in mind its associative logic: a conspiracy theory thus visualized is recognizable immediately, it is easy to remember and stays in the mind for a long time.

Probably less arguable is the phenomenon of visual narrativity



Figure 3. «Who pulled the strings? The Putsch of June 1953 and its background». Cover illustration, Brochure *Wer zog die Drähte? Der Juni-Putsch 1953 und seine Hintergründe*, Photomontage, 14 x 20 cm, 77 pp., numerous Illstr., Kongreß-Verlag, Ausschuß für Deutsche Einheit (Ed.), Berlin (GDR) (1954)

when it comes to multi-phasic pictures. The following example is taken from the Soviet satirical magazine “Crocodile” [Krokodil], produced by the publishing house of the Party’s mouthpiece Pravda, and at that time very popular (Fig. 4).

The comic strip was published before the trial, but it neatly illustrates the narrative that was developed in the GDR — as in the Soviet Union — right after the June uprising and that was retold in the trial. The subtitle *Our illustrations of the news in American press and radio* makes it a sort of dialogue between East and West on the nature of the uprising. The pictures highlight the position of the Socialist camp and they outplay the text (which equals the oral), making a fool of the characters in the comic strip as well as of Western politicians and



Figure 4. Comic strip: *Day X — Our illustrations of the news in American press and radio*: 1) “The uprising began spontaneously” 2) “The whole population of the German Democratic Republic participated”; 3) “Peasants”; 4) “Workers”; 5) “Intelligencija”; 6) “The Bonn government declared its sympathy with the victims of June 17th”; source Ju. Fedorov, “Den’ IKC — Naši illjustracii k soobščenijam amerikanskoj pečati i radio”; comic-strip: soviet satire magazine *Krokodil*, August 10, 1953

media on the whole. Thus, the visual not only communicates the alleged “truth”, but also fights the enemy by ridiculing him. What is presented here is the master narrative — the tale of the “fascist putsch” — that the Trial of Silgradt and others presented in all theatricality.

6. Conclusion

To sum up: Show trials can be seen as a forum, where conspiracy theories are presented to a local audience, as well as to a wider audience outside the courtroom. To achieve this, the scriptwriters worked out an elaborate narrative. In cooperation with media experts strategies and materials were developed to reach the populace:

- by publishing the proceedings — that is in a pseudo–documentary genre;
- by remastering live performances in radio features;

— by visualising with the help of cartoons or comics.

The narrative had a basic formula. It presented a group of enemies working together to undermine and destroy the Socialist camp. The confessions of the mostly internal, sometimes external, “enemies” played a central role onstage, in the act of un–masking. The defendants had to renounce and confess, seeking what was called just punishment for themselves. Their performance was obviously worth the risk — after all it was deviation from the script that could produce a critical moment in the trial.

Show trials did inflict terror on individuals, but the show was not only a localized one, for the courtroom alone. In this respect, they had an important didactic function. By presenting a real person — the defendant — as enemy of the state, an abstract political enemy was personalized, a story told and history rewritten. The message was simple enough to be understood by everybody. It was presented in a performative act, in the act of unveiling the master narrative of a “great conspiracy”. It created an atmosphere of relief and at the same time had the chilling effect of intimidation, thus exposing the dysfunctionality of conspiracist thinking in the long run.

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Storie di complotti e miti a bassa intensità

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ENGLISH TITLE: Low Intensity Conspiracy Myths

ABSTRACT: In the system or the galaxy of contemporary myths (which I define as low intensity myths because of some characteristics that differentiate them as objects of consumption and personal choice more than collective rituals), the theme of conspiracy has a multifarious presence. On the one hand, it is one of the main subjects in urban legends, which often offer an alternative explanation of official truths; on the other hand, it has been the key for the success of works such as *The Celestine Prophecy* or *The Da Vinci Code*, with their reconstruction of world history in terms of fiction that “might have been” true. In these and other forms (including espionage stories) the representation of conspiracies is a sort of mythical current whose power is based not so much on the credibility of the stories it tells as on the fact itself that they are presented as counter-narrations, more consistent than any reality and disguised in many possible forms.

KEYWORDS: Myth; Low Intensity; Urban Legends; Counter-Explanation.

I.

Quello che mi interessa discutere qui è il ruolo che i racconti di cospirazioni hanno nel sistema di quelli che chiamo i “miti a bassa intensità”.

Definisco così i miti prevalenti nel sistema delle comunicazioni contemporaneo, che rispetto a quelli ad alta intensità propri ad esempio della tradizione classica o anche di molti popoli extra-europei sono caratterizzati:

- non tanto da comportamenti rituali–celebrativi quanto da attività di coscienza o inconsapevole consumo;

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- da una collocazione non in un mondo caratterizzato da radicale alterità qual è l'universo sacrale, ma in un universo che è il nostro stesso o gli è strettamente contiguo;
- da una cornice non rigida come quella che il cerimoniale pone attorno al mito classico, ma porosa e permeabile;
- da una moltiplicazione di storie “nuove e sempre uguali”, perché non si può vedere tante volte lo stesso film ma si può vedere infinite volte la stessa forma.

In realtà secondo la mia analisi i miti a bassa intensità sono attraversati sempre da una tensione perennemente irrisolta tra la spinta da una parte all'antropocentrismo, all'insediarsi nei luoghi e nei tempi dell'ordinario, fino a mettere a rischio il senso stesso del mito che sta nel fare da ponte tra il vissuto e il cosmo, e il riproporsi dall'altra parte dei temi intrinsecamente mitici della morte e della possibile immortalità, del mondo astrale insieme vicino e inattuabile, e del mistero in tutte le sue forme.

I racconti di cospirazione, che collegano la verità del vissuto e quella sempre incerta ma sempre indispensabile dell'informazione con il mistero e con un livello diverso di verità (spesso connesso con universi “ad alta intensità”, carichi di cerimonia e di mistero), si collocano quindi nell'universo di cui parlo. Però credo non si debba parlare di “un” modello mitico unitario (come si può parlare di un modello mitico unitario per i vampiri almeno fino ad Anne Rice, o per il gangster classico), ma di una pluralità di modelli, che certo spesso si intrecciano e sovrappongono tra loro ma hanno diversa origine e sono almeno in parte distinti. È a questo che vorrei dedicare il mio intervento. In particolare, voglio dimostrare che i temi cospirativi sono presenti in più punti di quella che chiamo la galassia della bassa intensità, non stanno in un singolo genere o in un singolo medium; e vorrei tracciare una sorta di geografia di queste presenze.

2.

Ho provato in un libro che sto scrivendo a delineare una mappa di quella che chiamo la galassia della bassa intensità, non tanto per un omaggio a McLuhan che pure mi ha insegnato moltissimo, quanto

perché in generale è proprio della miticità il carattere magmatico che ne accompagna la genesi e tutta la dinamica («La mitologia è essenzialmente qualcosa che si muove» scriveva Friedrich Schelling); questo vale tanto più per quelli che abbiamo chiamato i miti a bassa intensità, proprio per le caratteristiche che abbiamo prima individuato: più che di culto istituzionale sono oggetto di fabbricazione industriale; sono comunque presentati come liberamente scelti per il piacere del consumo invece che rispettati sulla base di regole rituali; sono diretti, per riprendere ancora un'espressione di Warshow, a self made men più che a figli della tradizione.

La galassia della bassa intensità secondo la mia interpretazione è fatta di racconti che si incarnano in generi, dal poliziesco al non morto ecc., o derivano da storie-progenitrici che si vengono ripetendo un po' rinnovandosi un po' ripetendosi (dal dott. Jekyll a Don Giovanni); è fatta di quelle narrazioni ricorrenti che sono state battezzate con un'espressione entrata nell'uso "leggende metropolitana" e anche delle componenti mitiche di tanti racconti giornalistici; è fatta di miti politici dalla nazione alla rivoluzione, ma anche di quelli che chiamo "nuclei mitici" e che attraversano tutta la nostra immaginazione, dall'amore romantico all'idea del genio che animato da una sorta di scintilla divina, nuclei che sono un po' dappertutto nella cultura di massa, senza essere collocabili in un solo e specifico quadro narrativo.

I temi della cospirazione, del «rovescio della storia contemporanea», per usare non casualmente un'espressione di Balzac (che al fondo del suo immenso affresco sociale vedeva una trama anzi due trame opposte, quella maligna dei Tredici e quella "buona" dei Fratelli della consolazione) possiamo trovarli in diversi punti della nostra galassia. Proprio questa pluralità di collocazioni, e nella complessità degli scambi tra l'una e l'altra, fa sì che la pretesa di una lettura univoca delle storie di cospirazione sia semplicistica e conduca a veri e propri errori.

3.

Cominciamo dalle leggende urbane: è in questo complesso universo che viene dato spazio e credibilità alle storie che si presentano come spiegazioni alternative alle verità generalmente accolte, a cominciare

da quelle relative a congiure, complotti, supposte menzogne a cui tutti crederebbero.

La dinamica di circolazione di queste leggende è del tutto affine a quella delle voci che corrono, o dei rumors per riprendere l'espressione inglese, tanto che una distinzione netta tra i due fenomeni è spesso difficile. Tra le caratteristiche che accomunano le leggende urbane alle voci, oltre naturalmente all'oralità e (com'è appunto caratteristico dell'oralità) al riadattamento operato man mano dai narratori, vi è il fenomeno che possiamo chiamare dei "due o tre gradi di separazione", per cui il racconto trae credibilità in genere non dalla testimonianza di chi racconta ma dell'autorità attribuita a una persona terza, da cui il narratore stesso l'avrebbe sentito direttamente o attraverso un ulteriore passaggio intermedio.

Per quanto riguarda più in specifico le leggende urbane, per certi aspetti possiamo dire che in pochi punti della galassia mitica il principio che fa incontrare il nuovo con il sempre uguale è portato più all'estremo. L'azione del narratore di leggende urbane mira anche e spesso soprattutto a un "effetto", cerca di creare una suspense seguita da un colpo di scena.

Nello scambio orale la potenza delle storie di congiura è dovuta soprattutto alla circolazione orale e socializzata, dove meno possono essere sottoposte al vaglio della possibile falsificabilità, dove il confronto è maggiormente personalizzato, e l'irrisione all'ingenuità di chi crede alle verità ufficiali si presenta come difficile da sopportare per chi rischia di fare, appunto, la figura dell'ingenuo. Le verità ufficiali messe in questione possono essere le più varie: la storia del falso sbarco sulla luna come quella secondo cui Otis Redding non era morto in un incidente aereo ma era stato ucciso dalla mafia timoroso di un simbolo di indipendenza nera, fino agli accordi occulti con le "potenze" più varie; ma niente impedisce di riprendere in questa chiave storie di cospirazione ebraica per il dominio del mondo. Le forme possono essere anch'esse relativamente diversificate: in molti casi sono simili alla fiaba, brevi racconti chiusi, con una morale più o meno esplicitata (magari nella conversazione-commento che segue); in altri salgono verso il mito vero e proprio, sottolineando gli elementi di mistero ancora irrisolto e il carattere super-umano di alcune componenti della storia, ad esempio quando la cospirazione coinvolge figure "non terrestri"; mentre altre volte la leggenda si maschera da voce, da "falsa

notizia” per riprendere l’espressione di Marc Bloch, appena accaduta.

Nella circolazione del leggendario metropolitano, comunque, questa storia “altra” è tanto più suggestiva solo in quanto si presenti come nuova, almeno in parte, altrimenti svanisce l’effetto-sorpresa; solo in quanto tra gli ascoltatori ci sia almeno qualcuno che non la conosce. E chiede solo quello che Brunvand chiama un *half believing* che nel contesto dello scambio orale è sufficiente e anzi se diventasse troppo ossessiva la volontà di convincere rischierebbe di spezzare il clima di scambio che accompagna questo tipo di racconti. Poi però come accade per tutti i miti, alcuni di questi si dissolvono o restano solo nella conversazione come la storia della baby sitter cannibale, o le barzellette, mentre altri prendono piede e resistono, fino a dotarsi di una cornice più spessa, fino anche a connettersi con miti più strutturati.

È, si può dire solo in parte scherzando, la vendetta che l’oralità si prende sulla scrittura. Il racconto orale non è tanto un gioco di società condiviso quanto piuttosto una sfida lanciata, a una verità dominante ma ritenuta falsa, da una minoritaria ma che si presenta come la sola credibile e che mira a rovesciare le credenze condivise. Ma c’è una differenza importante, e sta nel fatto che le vere e proprie leggende urbane hanno spesso forma di racconti calati nell’attualità ma di più lunga durata. Per ricorrere a una formula, potremmo dire che mentre le voci sono, secondo la definizione sottile ed efficace del sociologo nippo-americano Tamotsu Shibutami, *improvised news*, narrazioni costruite di eventi presentati come di attualità, le leggende urbane sono *improvised myths*. Una “verità” che conta proprio sull’effetto-sorpresa: credevi che le cose andassero in un modo, ora ti racconto tutta un’altra storia.

4.

La cospirazione può assumere un valore e un senso molto diverso allorquando si fa vero e proprio mito politico, propugnato in forma organizzata e in funzione di legittimazione o (più spesso) di delegittimazione. In questi casi si tratta di racconti tendenzialmente organici, anche se è caratteristico del mito un aspetto di incompiutezza e di ambiguità, come chiariva ancora una volta Schelling; e la diffusione è tipicamente organizzata. Inoltre in questa veste il racconto

di cospirazione tende in generale a perdere la vaghezza misteriosa che generalmente l'accompagna nel racconto orale, e a divenire, al contrario, ossessivamente coerente, spesso scalare, dal piccolo episodio alla visione del mondo: la coerenza della paranoia naturalmente ma anche dell'ideologia.

Il mito politico è essenziale alla politica contemporanea, e non certo solo ad alcune correnti ideologiche: è al centro dello stato nazionale come dei progetti socialisti. Forse il mito più duraturo della storia moderna è stato appunto una "grande narrazione" politica, quella della rivoluzione, un racconto volto insieme al passato perché ogni rivoluzione veste panni antichi, e al futuro anzi al Futuro perché al centro dell'idea di rivoluzione c'è una frattura nel tempo.

Il racconto di cospirazione è ricorrente come racconto di de-legittimazione del potere o di una parte politica o di un frammento di società avverso e non certo da una parte sola: non starò qui certo a parlare dei Protocolli dei Savi di Sion, ma anche la definizione marxiana dello stato come "comitato d'affari della borghesia" ripetuta come dogma per più di un secolo implica l'esistenza di un livello occulto della politica, inevitabile e innegabile ma insieme leggibile solo "sotto" l'ufficialità, di accordi mai alla luce del sole.

Tanto è spesso casuale per scelta e legato all'effetto-sorpresa e al gioco della conversazione il racconto orale della cospirazione, tanto nel mito politico la narrazione si fa invariabilmente "storia", e chiede di rileggere alla sua luce decenni o secoli, per minare alla base la legittimità di uno stato o per esaltarla contro un presunto nemico occulto. Per farsi storia ha bisogno di documenti, falsati o re-interpretati, e di sistemi di insegnamento-apprendimento non casuali. Lo si vede per fare un esempio relativamente lontano nella battaglia del presidente messicano Calles per un'educazione che contemplava la lettura della storia del Messico in termini di potere occulto della Chiesa; a cui corrisponde la lettura cattolica della presidenza di Plutarco Elias Calles, che era in effetti massone, come punto di approdo di una cospirazione massonica per il potere.

Un esempio estremo e tragico di lettura cospirativa della storia in quanto mito politico l'abbiamo nei verbali degli interrogatori di Moro da parte delle Brigate Rosse. Le loro domande, incalzanti e precise in apparenza quanto fumose nella sostanza, miravano a ottenere risposte certe: quando, dove, in quali riunioni, erano stati decisi i piani d'azione

dello Stato, delle multinazionali, delle alleanze militari. Le risposte di Moro, involute nella forma quanto puntuali nel contenuto, sfumavano, precisavano, smentivano.

La domanda, cui si risponde, tende a prospettare un'evoluzione della Nato che tenderebbe a volgersi verso una strategia antiguerriglia. Però, conoscendo un poco i tempi e modi di consultazione, pianificazione, attuazione di eventuali misure militari, si può escludere che un enorme organismo come la Nato abbia potuto mettere a punto in un tempo così limitato efficaci organismi a tale scopo e per giunta eccedenti le finalità dell'alleanza che implica grandi organismi operativi.

In sostanza, ripeteva fino all'esaurimento Moro, non c'è mai stato un grande complotto, il potere è fatto di un lavoro continuo, di consultazione, pianificazione, attuazione, aggiustamenti successivi. La NATO e la DC, il grande capitale e gli interessi degli agrari o dei commercianti, non hanno mai stabilito una volta per tutte un piano d'azione, hanno continuato sempre in parte a negoziare, tra loro e con altri (inclusi il PCI, i sindacati, l'URSS), in parte a usare strumenti, anche inconfessabili, per farsi i propri affari.

Per le Brigate Rosse, la rappresentazione del potere data da Moro era, più che inaccettabile, inconcepibile. Il loro mondo era guidato da un grande centro di decisione unificato, da un piano unitario: lo chiamassero "piano del capitale" o — con la più famosa delle loro sigle — SIM, Stato Imperialista delle Multinazionali. Questa idea di potere e di stato, questo mito politico, era la loro stessa ragion d'essere. Il loro presunto contro-potere, clandestino e responsabile solo di fronte a se stesso, si giustificava nella loro logica come risposta a un sistema di potere che immaginavano segreto e privo di regole. Di più, il grande complotto che imputavano a Moro e alla DC era il rovescio perfettamente speculare dello Stato che sognavano di costruire, e al quale improntavano scrupolosamente le loro procedure, fatte di prigionie senza carceri, di interrogatori senza difesa, di condanne a morte senza appello. Il potere immaginario che attribuivano al governo democristiano era il loro vero modello, come per il partito nazista (lo ha capito per prima Hannah Arendt) il sognato potere della Germania sul mondo altro non era che un'imitazione del potere tutto immaginario degli ebrei narrato dal più falso di tutti i documenti, i Protocolli dei savi di Sion.

5.

Ma la polarità tra i due modi d'essere del racconto della cospirazione che ho descritto fin qui non esaurisce l'insieme. Perché la galassia mitica contemporanea include anche un terzo aspetto: dei nuclei narrativi che possiamo definire "trasversali", e che si manifestano in una varietà di forme, dalla biografia al romanzo, alla serie televisiva. Accade ad esempio con le storie di gangster che fanno per così dire regolarmente la spola tra la realtà urbana e racconti a volte tragici a volte picareschi, o con quelle dei geni inventori tra biografie più o meno romanzate, storie tecnologiche, pubblicità.

Parliamo quindi, dopo la cospirazione–leggenda urbana e la cospirazione–mito politico, della cospirazione–romanzo. Se è vera la frase di Novalis per cui «noi viviamo (nel grande e nel piccolo) in un gigantesco romanzo», questo non è completo senza una verità seconda, o anche terza oltre la superficie della narrazione.

Non è casuale il richiamo che ho fatto sopra a Balzac: il tema della congiura e delle società segrete contribuisce nella *Comédie Humaine* a dare quasi un significato ulteriore all'intreccio continuo di vite che "fa concorrenza allo stato civile", a definire un terzo livello di narrazione oltre a quello dei protagonisti delle diverse storie e a quello che insieme inventa e mette in scena una società. Nelle sue storie inoltre la società segreta sembra una sorta di proiezione ambivalente del romanziere, il soggetto nascosto che muove tutte le pedine, come accade del resto, sia pure in termini differenti, anche nel *Meister*.

Si potrebbe fare una storia del romanzo e poi del film tra otto e novecento centrata sul ripresentarsi della cospirazione e delle società segrete come figure del racconto, dai *Tredici* all'Incanto del lotto 49 e oltre. Un posto va dedicato naturalmente al romanzo di spionaggio, che è fondato sul segreto come centro del potere moderno, come arcanum quasi-sacrale dello stato: dove la morte diventa vero e proprio sacrificio sull'altare di questo potere ma al tempo stesso lo svelamento del segreto ne può mostrare la povertà. In questo genere l'intensità è sempre per certi aspetti alta sempre per altri bassa, racconta i rituali misterici contemporanei ma dal punto di vista di chi penetrandoli ne diventa parte e in qualche misura sacerdote, ma insieme, svelandoli, ne dimostra la miseria. Ma un ricordo, in questo cenno al nucleo mitico delle cospirazioni e delle società segrete come tema del romanzo,

vorrei dedicarlo all'Uomo che fu Giovedì di Chesterton, che con una sorta di Lettera rubata delle società segrete smonta il meccanismo conspirativo, e insieme svela fino in fondo la portata perfino sacrale che resta nel mito.

6.

Negli ultimi vent'anni due episodi indicano il potenziale ricongiungersi del racconto conspirativo in quanto romanzo con il mito politico e anche in quanto word of mouth, all'interno di quella nebulosa New Age che ha in parte rimescolato la galassia mitica facendone la base di una concezione semi-religiosa ma sempre a bassa intensità, nella logica della religiosità self service intuita già tempo fa da Robert Bellah. Penso a due testi per certi versi assai diversi per altri molto simili come La profezia di Celestino e Il codice Da Vinci, che fondano proprio su una visione paranoica il loro successo, all'incrocio tra una fiction dichiarata e un'altrettanto esplicita proposta di adesione. A separarli sono le dinamiche del successo, in un caso legato al passa parola e al long selling, nell'altro al lancio editoriale nella logica del best seller classico; la rappresentazione del sociale, che nella Profezia è tardo-movimentista (il protagonista era "stato preda dell'idealismo sociale degli anni Sessanta e Settanta e persino degli interessi spirituali degli anni Ottanta"), nel Codice élitaria per uno snobismo di massa; il fatto che la Profezia propone una forma di superstizione dichiarata, con tanto di illuminazioni e di mercato secondario di agende ecc., mentre il Codice è soprattutto una furba operazione commerciale. Ma a unirli, facendone l'uno la continuazione per molti aspetti dell'altro, è il fatto che al centro di entrambi c'è una pretesa, e per molti versi analoga, controstoria. Ed è la scelta di collocarsi sul terreno della fiction, una scelta di bassa intensità esplicita. Alle iniziazioni si accede senza nessuna fatica che non sia leggere qualche pagina senza doverci neppure credere. In entrambi i casi, quella che ci viene proposta è una nuova forma di "religione del libro": non più il culto di un grande libro sacro destinato a durare nei secoli, ma il culto poco impegnativo di un best seller che durerà se va bene una decina d'anni. Una religione dell'instant book.

Siamo di fronte a un ricongiungimento dei diversi modelli che citavo prima? Direi di sì, soprattutto nel caso di Celestino, che dei due è il vero fenomeno. Trasmissione da bocca a bocca, linea “politica” esplicita, scelta di definirsi romanzo ma congiunta come dicevo con forme di superstizione relativamente dichiarata. Questo ricongiungimento è parte di una tendenza diffusa, alla sovrapposizione dei generi e anche dei modelli mitici. Ma questi, per quanto possano occasionalmente incontrarsi come in questi casi, devono essere tenuti distinti per comprenderli sul serio.

7.

Un’ultima nota. Coloro che ritengono che la circolazione di storie di tipo cospirativo sia spiegabile solo in termini di psicopatologia sociale dovrebbero ricordare che la “grande cospirazione”, in generale, non esiste ma di complotti ce ne sono ogni giorno; che spesso le narrazioni di questo tipo colgono frammenti di verità inserendoli in (e dando credibilità a) narrazioni complessivamente false. In questo caso l’espressione *half believing* può acquistare un ulteriore significato, in parte diverso e complementare a quello tracciato da Brunvand: è un credere che divide, che spacca, che non può essere generalizzato.

Nessuna storia di cospirazione ha effetto se non c’è una “falsa verità” da rovesciare, che può e deve godere di un credito diffuso perché il suo rovesciamento si presenti come una spiegazione significativa e come una narrazione affascinante. Come un mito.

Unreal Realities

An Approach to Conspiracy Theories Based on the Sociology of Knowledge

ANDREAS ANTON*

TITOLO ITALIANO: Realtà irreali: un approccio alle teorie del complotto basato sulla sociologia della conoscenza.

ABSTRACT: For a long time, science has regarded conspiracy theories were regarded as a dubious topic. The few studies that have dealt with this theme have defined conspiracy as a social problem that must be repressed. The essay proposes an alternative approach, based on the premises of Sociology of knowledge of Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann. Conspiracy theories are described as a specific form of knowledge that holds both negative and positive potential. According to this perspective, the truth of a conspiracy theory is mainly based on processes of social construction of reality.

KEYWORDS: Conspiracy Theories; Social Problems; Sociology of Knowledge; Orthodox and Heterodox Knowledge.

I. Conspiracy Theories as a Problem

For a long time, there was a strange discrepancy between the social importance of conspiracy theories and the more or less not existing research on them. The main reason for this seems to be the fact that conspiracy theories are considered to be a dubious topic. Many scientists seem to be afraid of damaging their reputation by dealing with this issue. Therefore, conspiracy theories have been neglected by

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science for a long time. The few academics, who nevertheless dared to engage in conspiracy theories, distanced themselves very clearly from this research topic. It almost seems that they were afraid of being denoted as one of those conspiracy theorists which had the reputation of being paranoid at least since the book *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (1964) by Richard Hofstadter. So, the main perspective on the topic conspiracy theories was not only to preserve the distance to this subject, but also to discredit this social phenomenon.

Since the 1990s conspiracy theories became increasingly a subject of social science, but mainly in the 'tradition' of previous work. From this perspective, conspiracy theories conceptually are considered to be an illegitimate form of knowledge, because they claim to know something about conspiracies, which do not exist in reality. From this point of view, conspiracy theories seem to be problematic in a triple sense:

- First, it is claimed that conspiracy theories are based on false knowledge, unproven allegations or invented suspicions.
- Second, it is assumed that the belief in a conspiracy theory suggests doubts on the mental health of the believer.
- Third, conspiracy theories are problematic because they are a political threat. From this point of view, conspiracy theories are the base for irrational, politically extreme attitudes and therefore, a political menace.

According to this review, conspiracy theories appear as a kind of social disease that must be treated. So it is not surprising that the discussed possible causes of conspiracy theories in the majority of scientific studies are provided in a problematizing, negative or even pathologizing context. The following list gives an overview of various approaches discussed to explain the emergence and spread of conspiracy theories:

- Richard Hofstadter (1964) speaks about a Paranoid Style as a cause of Conspiracy Theories.
- Karl Popper (1945) calls Conspiracy Theories a Secularization of religious superstition.

- Other authors speak about Distrust, fear, feelings of futility and helplessness, obedience to authority, low self-esteem and discrimination as reasons for the belief in conspiracy theories (e.g. Goertzel 1994, Abalakina-Paap et al. 1999).
- Daniel Pipes (1997) wrote in terms of Conspiracy Theories: «How the Paranoid Style flourishes and where it comes from».
- Dieter Groh (1999), a German historian, describes structural elements of clinical paranoia as an explanatory model for collective conspiracy theories.
- Some authors discuss pathogenic disorders in early childhood parent-child relationship as reasons for the belief in conspiracy theories (e.g. Maaz 2001).
- And finally, it is often discussed that a “Conspiracy mentality” is a product of an authoritarian personality or of confusion and disorientation in phases of crisis (e.g. Pfahl-Traugher 2002, Heins 2005).

All these diagnoses have in common that they are characterized by the understanding of conspiracy theories as illegitimate and problematic knowledge. The axiomatic assumption that conspiracy theories are always factually false is usually already expressed in the base definition of the individual scientific authors, writing about conspiracy theories. Daniel Pipes, for example, argues that, in essence, a conspiracy theory is simply a conspiracy that never happened, that it is “the nonexistent version of a conspiracy.” That means that conspiracy theories are completely wrong and imaginary from the outset. Based on this premise, these theoretical explanations focus primarily on the reconstruction of inherent structural features of conspiracy theories, by which the cognitive deficiency of conspiracy theory thinking can be demonstrated. So, conspiracy theories are principle subject to an epistemic naivety. From this point of view, conspiracy theories are mono-causal, outwardly completed and simplified explanations that reduce complex events to manageable interpretations.

Without a doubt, the problematic aspects of conspiracy theories should deserve a special consideration in scientific analysis of conspiracy thinking. Nevertheless, a fixation on these aspects leads to a one-sided perspective. David Coady (2006), a US-American philosopher, verbalized this as follows: «I will argue that although many

conspiracy theories are flawed, this does not justify such dismissive attitudes. While it is true that excessive willingness to believe conspiracy theory is an intellectual vice, it is also true that excessive reluctance to believe them is an intellectual vice» (115).

Conspiracy theories have not only negative but also positive potential. It makes it too easy if one examines only the negative potential of conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories contain much more than this. We will not develop a comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon, if we don't examine all the aspects that go with it. For this we need a neutral perspective that does not reject conspiracy theories a priori as paranoid nonsense.

2. A new perspective on conspiracy theories

I want to suggest a new perspective on conspiracy theories (described in detail in Anton 2011), based on sociology of knowledge, essentially formulated by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann's in their Book *The Social Construction of Reality* (1967). From this specific view, the approaches to conspiracy theories I mentioned are analytically misguided. If we want to analyze a particular form of social knowledge, it does not make any sense to define this knowledge as false or illegitimate knowledge from the outset. So, it would make no sense to define Catholicism as nonsense, if we want to analyze and understand why so many people are Catholics. Behind the mentioned approaches are specific ideas of psychological and political norms that are always socially determined and therefore cannot be generalized. The fundamental problem of such essentialist approaches on conspiracy theories is that they implicitly or explicitly take over common sense classifications of mass media. However, within the mass media, the term conspiracy theory is not used in a scientific way. In the public discourse, the term "Conspiracy theory" is rather used as a rhetorical device to stigmatize and discredit dissenting opinions.

In other words: The term "conspiracy theory" and the associated attributions are always a part of the fight for the power to define social reality. Whether something is considered as a fictional conspiracy theory or as a real conspiracy depends on processes of social construction of reality. This process of division into true and false does

not necessarily need any objective facts. This means that conspiracy theories can be described scientifically only by a relational perspective. An important feature of conspiracy theories is that they are located in opposition to accepted constructions of reality. In terms of sociology of knowledge, one could say: conspiracy theories are heterodox realities. This means that their construction of reality is not consensus.

I would like to illustrate this with an example: the conspiracy theories in terms of 9/11. Their identity as a conspiracy theory obviously depends on their antagonistic relationship to the “official” and socially recognized conspiracy narration of the US government and the mainstream media. This relationship is significant for the current use of the term in the social and academic field. And truly, the term “conspiracy theorist” has evolved to the point where it is little more than a label for people, who believe, or are interested in investigating, any proposition which conflicts with an officially sanctioned or orthodox belief. Indeed, the expression is sometimes used by such people, even when their so-called conspiracy theory does not involve a conspiracy at all. The expressions “conspiracy theory” and ‘conspiracy theorist’ are the respectable modern equivalents of “heresy” and “heretic”; these expressions serve to castigate and marginalise anyone who rejects or even questions orthodox or officially endorsed beliefs.

If scientific authors take the concept and the discrediting and stigmatizing concept related to conspiracy theories out of the political arena, they reproduce the degrading social attributions and give them a scientific character. This is a classic case of an unreflective scientific reproduction of popular opinion. In opposition to this, an approach based on sociology of knowledge has to focus on the processes that divide knowledge in heterodox and orthodox forms. An important aspect of this perspective is that knowledge is always socially determined and cannot be reduced to ‘objective facts’ in a positivistic sense. In relation to conspiracy theories, this means that the main question is what conditions cause that they are held as true or false by the people and the media.

In terms of a definition of the term ‘conspiracy theory’ that reflects considerations from the field of the sociology of knowledge, this means that the veracity of conspiracy theories cannot be determined by definition.

To meet this requirement, I propose the following conceptual

differentiation that can be understood as ideal types in the sense of Max Weber:

- A heterodox conspiracy theory is a belief system or explanatory model which describes current or historical events, collective experiences or the development of a society as a whole as the result of a conspiracy. The existence of this conspiracy is not accepted by the majority of the population, the leading media or other important institutions.
- An orthodox conspiracy theory is a belief system or explanatory model, which describes current or historical events, collective experiences or the development of a society as a whole as the result of a conspiracy. The existence of this conspiracy is accepted by the majority of the population, the leading media or other important institutions.

The only thing that distinguishes the two categories is their social acceptance. Which conspiracy theory in a society at a particular historical moment is regarded as heterodox and which as orthodox is a question that can only be answered empirically and not by definition. Both categories represent extreme points of an analytical continuum on which empirical cases of conspiracy theories can be positioned.

3. Conspiracy theories as special a form of knowledge

The enormous variety of conspiracy theories make it difficult to make any general statements about them. Using the sociological perspective that is not primarily concerned with the truth and concrete contents of conspiracy theories, some matching characteristics can be distilled that justify the approach to describe conspiracy as a specific form of knowledge with its own attributes. So we can come to a general definition of conspiracy theories:

A conspiracy theory is a special (heterodox or orthodox) form of social knowledge, which describes current or historical events, collective experiences or the development of a society as a whole as the result of a conspiracy. As socially constructed knowledge conspiracy theories fulfill the function of generating subjective meaning in respect to human experiences and actions.

From this perspective, the main social function of conspiracy theories is to understand events and collective experiences meaningfully which otherwise could not be integrated into existing world views, beliefs or, generally speaking, constructions of sense. Thus, there is no fundamental difference between orthodox and heterodox conspiracy theories: real conspiracies and fictional conspiracies differ only by their degree of social acceptance. While the former are considered to be political reality, the latter will be rejected by the majority of members of society and the mainstream media. In other words: if there is a real conspiracy behind a conspiracy theory, it is determined in the discourse, e.g. in mass media. What is considered as a conspiracy theory today may be a real conspiracy tomorrow. What is considered as a real conspiracy today could turn out as a conspiracy theory tomorrow.

This theoretical perspective on conspiracy theories also allows basic assumptions regarding the origin of conspiracy theories: A conspiracy theory occurs, when an individual or collective experience can better be embedded in existing world views with the assumption of a conspiracy than without. Thus, the background for the rise and spread of a conspiracy theory can be, for example, political ideology, a specific world view, a prejudice, but also a fundamental distrust of authority, a critical or skeptical attitude or simply the common sense.

Therefore, conspiracy theories have not only negative but also quite positive potential. Provided they have a minimum level of plausibility, they are no more or less wrong than other political theories. It is absolutely important to point out the dangerous potential of conspiracy theories: they can — historical examples are sufficiently available — be used to justify totalitarian power and domination, oppression and destruction. They can generate prejudices and misconceptions about certain events or legitimize politically extreme opinions. But, they also can serve to detect real actual conspiracies, fraud or abuse of power and disclose economic manipulations, or political corruption. They can reveal secret knowledge; carry suppressed or discredited opinions and disclose previously unknown relationships.

I am speaking, therefore, not only because of theoretical but also because of sociopolitical reasons against a general allowance of conspiracy thinking and the associated pathologizing of the protagonists of such interpretations. The dominant public and academic thesis of

a cognitive deficit as an explanation for conspiracy theories is not an appropriate analytical approach to this complex cultural phenomenon. Based on the described sociological conceptualization of the phenomenon, there seem to be essentially five factors that have influenced the conspiracy thinking in modern times significantly:

First: The cultural knowledge of the existence of real conspiracies in politics and business: It belongs to the socially accepted knowledge assets that political, military or economic conspiracies have always influenced the course of history. Examples are the successful assassination plot against Julius Caesar in 44 BC, the failed assassination attempt on Adolf Hitler on 20th of July 1944, or the so-called Watergate scandal, which costs US President Nixon his office in 1974. The idea of real successful conspiracies is a basic component of our cultural knowledge — and makes a variety of other conspiracies for many people possible or probable for many people. In other words: since the conspiracy is a real option for action in our cultural context, events that are influenced by humans can in principle always be interpreted as a result of conspiratorial action.

Second: The general mistrust of parts of the population in terms of integrity and democratic attitude of political, economic and military power elites: In recent decades, state-supported military or covert operations were repeatedly revealed (for example the so-called Gladio affair) that had clearly no democratic legitimacy and that disregarded the rule of law and ethical guidelines for state action clearly. In addition, conspiracies within economic structures were known, in which the corresponding actors acted in a moral dubious or clearly criminal way.

Third: The wish for plausible explanations for unexpected events in the social environment: Improbable and unexpected political and economic developments or decisions that are difficult to explain in terms of the interpretations offered by the mainstream media are generating a demand for alternative explanations. Ultimately, such alternative explanations even appear to be more equitable than the dominant reality in traditional public understanding of political, social and economic developments. The plausibility of alternative reality description appears greater, the deficit the explanatory power of the Orthodox interpretation is. In short: The strength of heterodox interpretations is caused by the weakness of Orthodox descriptions.

Fourth: The possibility of a largely uncontrolled circulation of opposing (heterodox) beliefs and opinions through the network media: The Internet allows an almost unlimited circulation of opposing (heterodox) interpretations — the separation between producer and consumer of media interpretations is repealed. The distribution of content is global, happens in real time and uses social networks to generate attention for culturally undesirable or even prohibited content. An editorial review or control of the content provided on the Internet is rather limited and usually has no effect. There is virtually no censorship. For these structural reasons, the internet is the ideal platform for the dissemination of culturally marginalized information, heterodox interpretations and differing descriptions of reality. This creates the possibility of an open-ended competition between orthodox and heterodox reality concepts (including conspiracy theories), which remained largely excluded in the traditional mass media dominated public.

All together, these factors create conspiratorial interpretation of current or historical decisions, events and processes. They also decide on the position on the above outlined continuum between orthodox and heterodox conspiracy theory of a particular conspiracy theory to a concrete historical moment. In this context, it is difficult to weigh the mentioned theoretical determinants. Which factor may play a dominant role and how the interaction of the different factors is, can only be answered empirically for individual cases.

In summary, the model presented suggests a critical but open examination of the contents of conspiracy theories without an overhasty condemnation. This means that conspiracy theories should not only be studied in terms of their dangerous potential, but also according to emancipatory potential. This argument is the more weight, the more uniform and formed the Orthodox reality of a society is.

In scientific terms, the aim is to present an alternative theoretical model for understanding the conspiracy thinking in our present society from a perspective based on sociology of knowledge and to include conspiracy theories into the set of recognized objects of scientific research. That conspiracy in this way, would perhaps not be as scandalous as before, is a Risk that I like to accept. And open Democracies should, in my opinion, accept that too.

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Political Potentiality of Conspiracy Theories

ANDREAS VENTSEL*

TITOLO ITALIANO: Le potenzialità politiche delle teorie del complotto

ABSTRACT: The web connects like-minded people on a global scale. It widens communication possibilities for spreading ideas by overcoming socio-economical restrictions inherent to old media. Thus, Internet is often understood as a new public sphere, which helps to advance the ideals of democracy. On the other hand, its role in encouraging specific niche-communities — often accompanied by the radicalization and polarization of identification — cannot be ignored. This means that online communication allows the development of new kinds of communities, which differ from previous forms of power (publicly institutionalized). These communities are located in the gray area between the private and the public sphere. The article explains the formation of this kind of community in relation to conspiracy theories. The specifics of communication in these communities are explicated through relying on the concepts of auto-communication and anti-culture (from cultural semiotics) and with reference to Roman Jakobson's concepts of dominant and phatic language function.

KEYWORDS: Conspiracy Theories; Political Discourse; Phatic Function of Language; Cultural Semiotics; Auto-Communication.

1. Introduction

The aim of this article is to show how the meaning making that is characteristic of conspiracy theories functions in hypermedia and

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how this process can be explained as political activity.¹ As argued by Lister and other cyber-theorists of digital forms of information — storage, access, and manipulation have led to major changes in the way information is produced, formed, received, and used (Lister et al 2003, p. 16). Compared with old media hypermedia has questioned the fundamental importance of linear text — creation and facilitated a way to collective authorship (Friedlander 2008, p. 182) and makes it possible to ignore the classical limitations of genre (Landow 2006, p. 60). For instance, units of information may be dispersed across different websites or pages within a particular website. Hypertexts can combine verbal, visual, acoustic and inter-semiotic elements (Landow 2006, p. 3). Still, as we can see in the case of conspiracy theories, important communicational nodes or centers of signification are still formed that organize the meaning making of the online communicators (Kress 2005, p. 4; Landow 2006).

In this article I treat conspiracy theory as a specific type of communication process. Ontologically, I presume that the objectivity of social relations, identities, objects, etc., is constructed within discourse/text (Laclau, Mouffe 1985; Lotman 2001). It means that culture, economy, power-relations and society can all be analyzed as discourses/texts, created by the articulation of different elements (objects and practices) by which social relations and identities as meaningful entities are formed (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). This treats the political potential of conspiracy theories in a broader sense because «The problem of the political is the problem of the institution of the social, that is, of the definition and articulation of social relations in a field crisscrossed with antagonism» (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, p. 153). In this article conspiracy theories are treated as a specific articulation of social relations.

Most studies² that deal with explaining the political aspects of conspiracy theories approach them as irrational and inadequate practices of interpretation. The most important pioneer of this approach is Richard Hofstadter and his book *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*

1. This work was supported by the IUT2-44 and Marie Curie International Research Staff Exchange Scheme Fellowship within the 7th European Community Framework Programme (EU-PREACC project).

2. They acknowledge that conspiracy theory is significant cultural practice but they also stress its inadequacy in the context of mapping actual social relations (Madisson 2012, p. 13. See also Jameson 1988; 1992, Keeley 1999, Melley 2002, Mason 2002).

and Other Essays (1967). Hofstadter emphasizes that conspiracy theories are mostly created by political extremists who declare that the major part of the society is an uninformed populace which does not have free will and which can easily be manipulated by the political elite. Hofstadter's approach divides politics into rational and irrational: the former manifests a primarily pluralistic ideal of democracy and the latter characterizes those who jeopardize that ideal and who are mainly labeled as paranoid extremists with populist political rhetoric (Hofstadter 1967). Conspiracy theory is also treated as pathological rhetoric and an extremist way of thinking by Karl Popper (1972); Gordon S. Wood (1982), Daniel Pipes (1999) and Michael Barkun (2003). These approaches have often been criticized for having a too skeptical and negative position towards their research objects. They often accuse the creators of conspiracy theories of being irrational, of a propensity to create panic and of approaching different manifestations of conspiracy theories in a too homogeneous manner (Madisson 2012, p. 12).

This study distances itself from making decisions about the rationality or adequacy of conspiracy theories. Firstly, the political discourse (also democratic) as a whole is usually not built on only rational meaning-making. Political identity is first and foremost a collective identity which develops in the form of a discursive community.

Second, discussion of the correspondence of conspiracy theories with reality requires a particular basis for identifying adequacy and inadequacy. Such an approach would need a different repertoire of analysis than the one offered by cultural semiotics. The aim of this article is to find semiotic mechanisms that prevail in the meaning making of conspiracy theories and not to ask about the overlap with "reality". Previously, conspiracy theories have been studied from the semiotic perspective by Paul Cobley (2004), and also by Cary William Spinks, who explicates it by relying on Peirce's concept of abductive logic (1991). Umberto Eco has explicated conspiracy theories as hermetic semiosis (1990). The latest semiotic approaches to conspiracy theories in academic literature are Mark Fenster's (2008) and Mari-Liis Madisson's (2012; 2014).

This article has a mostly theoretical orientation and its main goal is to offer a framework that explains some characteristics of meaning making in conspiracy theory that are developed in online media

and which make this kind of communicative practices political. The problem is approached by relying on concepts of dominant, auto-communication and phatic function.

2. Conspiracy theory from the point of view of semiotics

Conspiracy theory has been defined as an explanation of an unpleasant event as being the result of a conspiracy. “Conspiracy theory is a proposed explanation of some historical event (or events) in terms of the significant causal agency of a relatively small group of persons — conspirators — acting in secret” (Keeley 1999, p. 116). According to Svetlana Boym, the dedicated creators of conspiracy theories have a heightened sense of mission and have been expelled to subcultures unknown to the general public, much like the conspirers themselves, but nevertheless attempt to thwart the schemes of the conspirators (Boym 1997, p. 7).

Mari-Liis Madisson has stated that the adaptive system of relations in conspiracy theory expresses an evil nature of a secret cabal, but its specific parts; e.g. the articulation of different sub-systems of conspirators, temporal and spatial relations of particular events, logical and causal connections with other events etc., may be comprised of various structures with different levels of discreteness. Conspiracy theories do not normally depict events as the result of unhappy coincident or tragic accidents. They rather see that dreadful events are motivated by an ultimate and indisputable cause — morally corrupted intentions of a covert group of conspirators. Conspiracy theories not only explain why awful things happen, but usually also explain how those events happened (the level of explication of course varies in different interpretations). The acts of the evil cabal are placed into the so-called actual world: particular events of conspiracy are equipped with chronotopic relations, conspirators are organized in sub-systems that have various kinds of expertise and references in actual (public/private) institutions, and principles of manipulation and brainwashing techniques are sometimes explained in an extremely nuanced manner (Madisson 2014).

From the point of view of cultural semiotics the following crucial characteristics of conspiracy theory can be outlined. Conspiracy theo-

ry can be explained as a specific mechanism of meaning making — it is a semiotic unity whose basic feature is boundedness. Non-semiotic phenomena or texts of other semiotic systems become actual to a semiotic unity only if they are translated into the language of this unity, that is: only when non-semiotic facts are semiotized (Lotman 2005, p. 209). From the perspective of cultural semiotics, the semiotic sphere³ can only come into contact with the extra-semiotic sphere (the radical outside) by the bilingual mechanism of the border which 1) sets measures for the intrusion of information, 2) filters outside information, and 3) sets off the mechanism of reprocessing outside information into the inside (Lotman 2005, pp. 208–209). The semiotic sphere 1) enters into the dialogues, 2) pushes some sign processes to the periphery, thus declaring them irrelevant, 3) forgets some processes, which then lose their function within the semiotic system, and 4) destroys — the semiotic sphere (culture) and declares some processes as its antipodes, as anti-cultural phenomena (Ivanov et al, 1998).

Conspiracy theory draws together different informational spaces that vary in the sense of informational space and activity. In that kind of communication semiotic unity will arise on the level of self-description and will start to contrast itself with other, so-called outer spheres. If we draw parallels with other online communities then we can refer to many theorists who outline that hypermedia enables the connection of people with similar interests from all over the world. A widespread tendency is to move towards specific international niche-communities that are often characterized by radical and polarized identity (see Castells 2009; Sunstein 2001). The following sections explain what kind of characteristics make the meaning-making of conspiracy theories specifically political.

3. Antagonism as a dominant of conspiracy theory

As mentioned above, any formation of social identities necessarily involves inclusion/exclusion relations and «associated discursive contestation, where discourse is understood as a contingent and partial

3. This article treats the concept of discourse and the concept of culture as text (on the point of view of cultural semiotics) principally overlapping.

fixation of meaning that constitutes and organizes social relations (including identities, objects, and practices)» (Dahlberg 2011: 861). The communication of conspiracy theorists is characterized by strongly polarized identity creation and is organized by an important dominant: the opposition of us and them. That kind of significant opposition has a concrete function in the process of constitution of semiotic unity because «the dominant may be defined as the focusing component of a work of art: it rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components. It is the dominant which guarantees the integrity of the structure» (Jakobson 1971a, p. 82). Core structures are usually strictly organized and, as they are dominant, they also arise in the arena of self-description. Lotman maintains that self-description usually elicits dominants and builds a unified model which becomes a code of self-cognition and self-deciphering of a particular whole (Lotman 2010, p. 64).

Of course, the articulation of identity, based on opposition, and belief in its relevance, varies in different cases, but it is a characteristic that is typical of all kind of conspiracy theories. The informational field of conspiracy theories usually shares in common the conviction that the vast majority of contemporary social processes are the immediate result of a malicious conspiracy. It is assumed that the world is subordinated to a greedy and morally corrupt (in most of interpretations it is perceived as implicitly malicious) elite, acting in secret, whose ultimate goal is to establish its global authoritarian regime. According to Griffin, global cultural homogenization, globalizing economics and massive migration are seen as signs of the success and pervasiveness of the conspiracy. Usually conspiracy theorists do not only limit themselves to just expressing the decadence of the existing world order, but they also articulate ideas for how to radically reform the present situation (Griffin 2002, p. 28). In academic discourse that kind of conspiracy theory is usually referred as New World Order theories (conspiracy theorists also use the term NWO). NWO conspiracy theories combine classical plots and antagonists of conspiracy theories: Freemasons, political elite (global and local), Jews, Catholics, aliens etc. The accessibility and easy spreadability of hypertextual sources have diversified that spectrum significantly (Dean 2002, pp. 97–98; Fenster 2008, pp. 160–161). According to Michael Barkun New World Order conspiracy theory (NWO) helps to connect elements

that are seemingly incompatible. It may combine elements of mainstream politics, pseudo-science, fragments of spirituality etc. NWO conspiracy theory constitutes a framing narrative that includes almost all ideas that are present in countercultural fields of knowledge of fringe politics (Barkun 2003, pp. 182–184). It makes the believers of conspiracy theory see causal relations between events that have taken place in different times and spaces and that normally seem completely separate for an outsider⁴ (Madisson, Ventsel 2015).

The antagonistic nature of meaning-making of conspiracy theorists may be explained by the framework of culture–anti-culture. ‘Anti-culture’ can be seen as a type of counter-culture relegated to the ‘inner’ point of view of cultures which, attaching a strict principle of normativity (correctness) to their systems of expression, regard deviations in the order of expression as disruptive of the order of meaning, rather than meaningless. From the point of view of own culture anti-culture is understood as a sign-system which is dangerous to culture. Lotman and Uspenski explain that in some cases all structures that are opposed to right culture may be understood as the concerted system of wrong.

[...] within the conditions of a culture oriented primarily towards expression and represented as an aggregate of normative texts, the basic opposition will be “correct–incorrect”, i.e., wrong ([...] this opposition may approximate, even coincide with, the opposition “true–false”). In the latter case, culture is opposed not to chaos (entropy) but to a system preceded by a negative sign. (Lotman, Uspenski 1978, p. 219)

The polarized elements of anti-culture — culture are both subject to the symmetrical principle of reduction (Lepik 2007, pp. 69–71, 74–76). Conspiracy theories articulate heterogeneous elements (characters, events, conditions) by their connection with Evil structures (Madisson 2014). They are all understood as something that needs to be disclosed or eradicated. So, some agents/social structures are demonized as Evil, as the antithetic enemy of us. Interpreters that be-

4. Many researchers have pointed out that conspiracy theories have a predictable/redundant principle of organizing information; e.g. it has been stressed that they allow individuals to map their (tragic) experiences in the light of “ready-made” cultural frames (Dorsey 2002, p. 451), typical plots (Barkun 2003, p. 7), universal narrative schema (Vincent 2006, p. 44), frame (Fenster 2009), or code text (Madisson 2014).

lieve in conspiracy theories do not share any kind of common ground with conspirators. This is illustrated by the opposition that depicts us and them (enemies): lightness–darkness, nationalism–cosmopolitanism, prosperity of culture — cultural disaster, honesty–corruption etc.

It is crucial to note that this kind of identification practices, dominating in online–communication, are not treated as some kind discursive mediation of pre–determined identity. If that was the case then absolute evil would always have one fixed reference. On the contrary, the embodiment of the function of evil is principally contingent and it depends on the sociopolitical situation (Madisson 2014), but the structure for constructing the enemy is based on the model of culture — anti–culture. The level of self–description of conspiracy theorists implies a corrupt society and the decadence of harmonic society is explained by malicious and systematic acts of conspirators. The reason for the projection of a harmonic society can be explained by the (often unaware) perception of the dangers of the revolution of information and communication technology. Lotman has indicated that new things, artefacts that originate from outside the tradition, have increased symbolism. It can be said that the semiotics of things generates the mythology of things (Lotman 2007, p. 87). They are interpreted as signs of disaster or prosperity. Thus, we have to agree with Mosco who claims that big changes in culture «paired with the sublime is the process of demonization, which also encases its object in a transcendent aura, particularly when it is applied to technology» (2004, p. 24).

The information overflow, diversity of different kinds of interpretational processes, their qualitative indistinguishability, as well as the technologically complex nature of hypermedia itself, have often led to the increasing fragmentation of society. It entails a surplus of information that cannot be coherently positioned. Collective fear is not a direct reaction to a particular threat. It is rather the recognition of signs of potential danger (M. Lotman 2009, p. 210). According to Willman, «conspiracy theories presuppose a fallen society, whose failure constitutes itself as a harmonious whole and must be explained; the conspiratorial narrative resurrects the possibility of society even as it traces its demise through the agency of hidden forces» (2000, p. 28). From the point of view of the conspiracy theorists fallen society is caused by decentralized and scattered nature of hypermedia texts

and also by new forms of surveillance and control that are possible in online environments⁵. For the conspiracy theorist the antagonistic figure of conspirator signifies a sharp gap between the ideological representation of a harmonious society and the actual experience of society, which cannot be grasped with his/her cognitive frames in other ways. Agents from outside (conspirators) enable conspiracy theorists to explain social conflicts and deviations from ideal communal life and are thus needed for creating a meaningfully coherent world. Political antagonism and politics (articulated discourse about conspiracy theory) that try to eliminate this conflict mutually presume each, because every practice of politics is based on exclusion, which establish new political antagonisms.

Meaning making dominated by the antagonistic division between us and them (or own and alien) helps to understand the prevailing logic of conspiracy theorists, but it does not explain the socio-cultural basis of the kind of relatively static process of signification that often regenerates itself. The following section introduces the peculiarities of communication, organized by conspiracy theories, and we can highlight two important dominants: 1) the prevalence auto-communicative meaning making and 2) the central role of the phatic language function, which is used for compensating the low proportion of information in conspiracy theories.

4. Auto-communication as mechanism of creating political communion

The online-environment facilitates collective authorship, where topics are likely to be commented on, specified, supplemented, questioned, disputed etc. Interactivity is closely connected with the core characteristics of networked culture, like: participatory culture (Erstad, Wertsch 2008), citizen or grassroots journalism (Atton, Hamilton 2008), and mass self-communication (Castelles 2009). Despite the fact that theorists of conspiracy theories tend to stress it in the level of

5. In Estonia the cases of ratification meetings of ACTA and Snowden's affair found a vast public feedback. Both cases were also with associated with NWO (in some representations) (see Madisson, Ventsel 2015 and Madisson in present issue).

self-description, we cannot treat them as a version of the classical citizen or grassroots media because they are essentially quite unwilling to respect the plurality of different viewpoints (Madisson, Ventsel 2015). They are not characterized by the desire for dialog or synthesis, but rather the concentration and fixation of already existing views, so they tend to navigate in a quite hermetic and homogeneous informational space. Conspiracy theory rather functions as a trigger for cultural auto-communication. The following section shows what kind of semiotic mechanism functions as a basis of auto-communication.

Juri Lotman distinguishes two types of communication: I-I and I-(s)he. In actual communication situations they appear together in an intertwined manner, but at the analytical level it is possible to distinguish the prevalence of one or the other. Auto-communication may be observed mostly in cases where the addressee/receiver of a message is a larger community, e.g. a nation, or humanity in general. Auto-communication is not so primary at the level of the individual (Lotman 2010, p. 73). In the system of "I-I" communication in the case of conspiracy theorists the carrier of the information remains the same, but the message itself is reformulated and gains new meaning. This kind of auto-communicative process can happen because the new — other— code is added: a message in natural language is introduced, followed by a supplementary code of purely formal organization. This supplementary code has a syntagmatic construction and is either totally without semantic value or tends to be without it. Tension arises between the original message and the secondary code, and the effect of this tension is the tendency to interpret the semantic elements of the text as if they were included in the supplementary syntagmatic construction and have thereby acquired new, relationary meanings from this interaction. The communicational system of "I-(s)he" allows transmission of information at a constant extent (the classical communication situation where somebody transmits a message to a partner of dialog). The message itself does not change. What changes is the number of receivers of this message, but in case of "I-I" communication there takes place the qualitative transformation of information that leads to the reformulation of I itself (Lotman 2000, p. 22). In that case the message is being reformulated into different categories. Not new messages, but new codes come in. The sender and receiver melt together in the same individual (Lotman 2000, p. 29).

There arises a tension between the message and a new / secondary code (e.g. economical, juridical etc). Lotman stresses that the secondary code tries to release the elements that were initially significant from their general linguistic semantics, but it is never done in a complete manner (Lotman 2000, pp. 28–29). In communication between believers of conspiracy theories built upon an antagonistic polarization between friend and enemy (conspirators), the “I-I” communicational type is dominant. A constant process of meaning making takes place here, but its vocabulary is pre-given in a limited number of stereotypes and it does not allow an exchange of information. The selection of information, organized by auto-communication, implies that the system is opened only for connections that are already well-known to the addressee. New fragments of information are placed in an inner semiotic sphere of conspiracy theorists and it leads to a cultivation of already existing associations (Madisson 2016; Madisson, Ventsel 2013). They are, in turn, previously existing connections, but additional value is added to the fragments of information, by giving them a place in the world-view of the conspiracy theorist. If we have in mind that «. . . the essence of a personality may be thought of as an individual set of socially significant codes» (Lotman 2000, p. 22), then the choice of code and the passage of interpretations of a personality, navigating the field of conspiracy theories, is guided by auto-communication. Events are interpreted according to a very limited number of samples. The signs of international conspiracy are seen behind various local and global events (Madisson 2016; Madisson, Ventsel 2013). The switches between legal (e.g. juridical frames of information freedom in the internet), historical (e.g. the expression of worries about criminalizing Holocaust revisionism/ denial), philosophic-ethical (e.g. questioning the cultural acceptance of minorities, like homosexuals), political (e.g. explaining the success of leftwing parties in parliament elections) codes will lead to a qualitative deepening of the conviction that there exists a powerful and global New World Order conspiracy (Madisson in present Lexia). Thus, we can say that in addition to provoking antagonistic us-them relations, the meaning creation of conspiracy theory also has an orientation towards auto-communication.

5. Phatic function of conspiracy theories

As previously indicated, typically the receiver already knows the content of the conspiracy theory. Of course, particular variants of conspiracy theory may add some new aspects (novel factors and unknown events), but they are usually matched with a pre-existing framework of interpretation. At the analytical level there is a little difference if the figure of conspirator is filled with minority groups, people with other skin color, Jews, Muslims, NATO, or big corporations. They all refer to an absolute evil that is behind particular antagonisms. Thus, we can say that the semantic exchange that takes place in that kind of communication is not very remarkable, but it is compensated by another important function: the facilitation of a strong communal bond. It is of note that the phatic language function (by Jakobson) has an important role in communication that is based on developing or exchanging conspiracy theories.

According to Jakobson the phatic language function predominates in, for example, communication that is based on the exchange of ritual formulas (of politeness) and whose only aim is to continue communication. The phatic function is directed to contact, «a physical channel and psychological connection between the addresser and the addressee, enabling both of them to enter and stay in communication» (Jakobson 1976, p. 113). Although Jakobson differentiates six language functions, he also notes that usually language serves several functions simultaneously, so it is more useful to talk about the prevalence of some functions (Jakobson 1976, p. 115).

Jakobson deals mostly with linguistic examples, but he also emphasizes that «this pragmatic approach to language must lead *mutatis mutandis* to an analogous study of the other semiotic systems: with which of these or other functions are they endowed, in what combinations and in what hierarchical order» (Jakobson 1971b, p. 703). Thus we can treat also visual texts that are exchanged in online communication-based conspiracy theories as as examples of phatic communication. Namely, conspiracy theorists tend to exchange audio-visual messages (e.g. secret signs and symbols, worn out formulas, icons and pictures in a wider sense, pieces of songs) which do not exhibit informational value for the other members of the community, but are very important in the sense of maintaining the community. This kind of signals,

phatic posts and other small, micro-symbols indicate the recognition of one's interlocutor (presence and validation) as a potential communicative partner (Radovanovic, Ragnedda 2012, p. 12). Andra Siibak has explored the communication of Estonian extreme rightists on the web-page *rate.ee*. Estonian extreme rightists have started to use various secret codes; e.g. number combinations, acronyms or fragments from meaningful texts (e.g. song lyrics, poems, aphorisms, etc., but also inside jokes and phrases exchanged in offline context). Those messages seem meaningless to a wider public, but insiders who know these codes can exchange their private messages in quite public channels, e.g. social networking sites, blogs, forums etc. (Siibak 2014, pp. 220–224). Here, the primary (linguistic) meaning becomes almost irrelevant. These expressions are rather used for fulfilling the social function. The social function can be understood as establishing an atmosphere that fosters private and public interactions between two communication partners. The phatic communication reflects the acceptance/non-acceptance of the communication partner or his/her social status and thus, it provides indexical information for social categorization to negotiate the relationship, in particular, their relative status, roles and affectivity to reinforce social structure (Radovanovic, Ragnedda 2012, p. 13).

Lotman has also stressed that in auto-communication the growth of syntagmatic connections (inside the message) neutralizes primary semantic connections and in some cases the message may act as an asemantic text with complex syntagmatic organization. This kind of texts has a tendency to become the organizer of random associations which particular individuals carry in their mind (Lotman 2010, p. 138). Auto-communication fosters processes which change texts into meta-texts, words and images of inner-speech become indexes (Lepik 2007, p. 78). The previously described secret signs of conspiracy theorists may be changed during the communication in time, but new secret codes and symbols will appear here in a similar phatic communication function. Thus we cannot say that phatic communication totally lacks meaning. Phatic communication requires, in many cases, recognition, intimacy, and sociality, which are the cornerstones of all kinds of communities. On the other hand, the connection becomes more meaningful and words become more redundant (Miller 2008, p. 395).

Lotman stresses that a system oriented towards auto-communication

does not feel estranged by stereotypes. It rather has a strong propensity to turn texts into stereotypes and to identify “high”, “good”, and “real” with “stable” and “everlasting” (Lotman 2000, p. 33). Auto-communication has the potential to generate qualitatively new information, but it also has the potential to become a deepener of previously existing connections. In our case, conspiracy theorists recognize the appearance of NWO conspiracies behind different levels of individual experiences, and that kind of auto-communication makes the conviction of the existence of conspiracy become more clear and extensive. Also, the dominance of the phatic function supports auto-communicative processes in communication based on exchanging conspiracy theories. It explains the seemingly paradoxical situation where in online communication that offers multiple viewpoints, people are still encapsulated into hermetic spheres of information (Madisson, Ventsel 2015). That kind of tendency is caused by the fact that online communication is often rather dominated by affirming and fastening social relations and not so much by exchanging new information. That kind of situation becomes possible because auto-communication and the prevalence of phatic communication support and reproduce each other.

6. Conclusion

This study explicated auto-communicative and phatic orientations of identity creation in conspiracy theories. This kind of co-presence articulates meaning making within conspiracy theories as a political activity. Not all cases of domination of auto-communicative and phatic function are necessarily political. Radovanovic and Ragnedda point out that the phatic function is flourishing in social media (e.g. Facebook) and they stress that usually phatic messages of social media do not express disagreement or conflict. This tendency is supported by the presence and wide usage of the like-device. It is important to note that there is not a similar device for indicating reluctance (Radovanovic, Ragnedda 2012, p. 12). On the other hand, the political nature of phatic communication still depends on the context because it is easy to imagine an anti-Semitic or racist picture which expresses the political sympathy of the author.

Communication, based on the exchange of conspiracy theories, can be categorized as a political practice if it exhibits all three dominants: 1) antagonistic opposition between conspirators and conspiracy theorist who tries reveal their covert actions; 2) meaning-making that is oriented towards auto-communication, which tends to confirm previously existing convictions about the presence of conspiracy, and 3) the domination of phatic communication that supports auto-communication and facilitates the fastening of communal ties. This kind of auto-communicative system excites great mental activity in the form of recognition of different appearances of the same phenomenon behind radically dissimilar occurrences. On the other hand, auto-communicative systems are not dynamic enough to meet the needs of human society (Lotman 2000, p. 35).

The analysis of this kind of quasi-political communities maps the peculiarities of online communication at a more general level. It could be asked, what kind of modes of signification prevail in the process of forming discursive communities; how do the specifics of dominance influence signification strategies; and how can we distinguish online and offline communication within the same community? That approach may also open the way for creating a typology of communication tendencies. It would explicate the communication and dynamics between different communities, but also explain the conflicts that are caused by the specifics of communication.

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“Tell Me What You [Do Not] Eat, and I Shall Tell You What You Are”

Food, Health and Conspiracy Theories

SIMONA STANO*

La farmacia domestica è in cucina.
Lo stesso piatto può essere un balsamo od un
veleno.¹

FRANCESCO CHAPUSOT, *La vera cucina casalinga*,
1851

TITOLO ITALIANO: “Dimmi cosa [non] mangi e ti dirò chi sei”. Alimentazione,
salute e teorie del complotto

ABSTRACT: A well-known aphorism by Brillat-Savarin (1825) states: “Tell me what you eat, and I shall tell you what you are”. In fact, food represents a fundamental component of life, encompassing different spheres and moments. It provides not only the energy the body consumes, but also the very substance of the body. Moreover, from a subjective point of view, people often believe or fear, adhering to a sort of magical thinking, that food acts on their organism or on their identity by analogical contamination, integration, or impregnation (Fischler 1988). That has become particularly evident in contemporary foodscapes, mainly according to a ‘negative logic’ that would require rephrasing Brillat-Savarin’s aphorism as follows: “Tell me what you *do not* eat, and I shall tell you what you are”. Lately, food habits forbidding the consumption of specific ingredients (e.g., vegetarianism, veganism, etc.) or even biological molecules and other nutritional materials (e.g., gluten-free movements, protein-based diets, etc.) have spread and become increasingly visible, further

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1. “Your kitchen is your pharmacy. A same food can be either a medicine or a poison” (our translation).

enhancing the importance of taboos for both the sociocultural order and the processes of identity building. At the crossroad of physiology and medicine, on the one hand, and the sociocultural dimension, on the other hand, food defines people's identity primarily in negative terms, through prohibitions and restraints. The essay deals with the recent spread of gluten-free movements and with the vertiginous increase in gluten sensitivity rates, which have resulted in the diffusion of conspiracy theories that explain these phenomena as caused by the globalization of markets and the misuse of genetic modifications. The analysis of relevant case-studies leads to describe the features and internal mechanisms of the specific rhetoric underlying such discourses, also relating to more general observations on conspiracy theories.

KEYWORDS: Food; Identity; Conspiracy Theories; Health; Communication.

1. Introduction

A well-known aphorism by Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarin (1825) states: "Tell me what you eat, and I shall tell you what you are". In fact, food represents a fundamental component of our life, encompassing different spheres and moments. It provides not only the energy our body consumes, but also the very substance of our body (cf. Stano 2015). Moreover, according to Claude Fischler (1990), from a subjective point of view, people believe or fear that food acts either on their organism or on their identity by analogical contamination, integration, or impregnation.

This fact has become particularly evident in contemporary foodscapes, mainly according to a "negative logic" which would require rephrasing Brillat-Savarin's aphorism as follows: "Tell me what you *do not* eat, and I shall tell you what you are". Recent decades have seen the spread and increasing visibility of food habits forbidding the consumption of specific ingredients (e.g. vegetarianism and veganism), or even biological molecules and other nutritional materials (e.g. gluten-free movements, proteins-based diets, etc.), further enhancing the importance of taboos for both the sociocultural order (see Douglas 1966; 1984) and the processes of identity building. Hanging in the balance between physiology and medicine, on the one hand, and

sociocultural dimension, on the other hand, in contemporary societies food defines men’s identity primarily in negative terms, through prohibitions and restraints. And it is likely to give rise to various conspiracy theories, further stressing the connection between food behaviours and health.

2. The “Gluten Conspiracy”: The Five Stars Movement

The recent spread of gluten-free movements and vertiginous increase in gluten sensitivity rates have resulted in the denunciation of a real conspiracy theory originating from the globalization of markets and the misuse of genetic modifications.

On October 29, 2013, for instance, the Five Stars Movement’s representative Loredana Lupo drew the attention of the Italian Parliament to coeliac disease, asking for new measures intended to promote the safeguard of all the people who suffer from such a disease, as well as to increase public awareness on this issue², which — as Lupo states — “concerns more than 10,000 new sick people every year only in Italy” (our translation).

A real conspiracy theory emerges from the politician’s very first words: Lupo opens her speech saying “Today, instead of focusing on coeliac disease as a disease, we should rather conceive it as a normal consequence of the modern processes of globalization and hyper-industrialization of the food system” (our translation). In order to support such an idea, she goes on recalling Brillat-Savarin and Feuerbach’s mottos: “We are what we eat. In our daily life we do not pay enough attention to what we eat, and only rarely we understand that the food that we consume will become part of us and will affect our chemical, biological, and energetic processes” (our translation). Hence she distinguishes between “products that are suitable for our nature and products that are not” (our translation), pointing out that, while the former bring benefits to our body, the latter generally cause its “pollution” and “decay”.

2. A video of this meeting is available at the link <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CLNKw2JzAQo>.

Gluten, evidently, is of the second type. “But what is gluten?” — Lupo rhetorically asks — “It is a protein that can be found in some cereals; a macro–element that for years has been subjected to genetic selections in order to improve its technical features rather than enhance its qualitative properties” (our translation). Again, the focus is put on the negative effects of modernity and technology: “People do not suffer from such a disease since their birth, but only after few years, because of the bad nutrition they are used to” (our translation). Precisely these words, together with the complaint concerning the more than 10,000 new cases of coeliac patients each year (only in Italy), reveal an important fact, namely that the politician is confusing *coeliac disease* — which is an autoimmune disorder that, although becoming manifest from middle infancy onward, occurs exclusively in genetically predisposed people — with *non-coeliac gluten sensitivity* (NCGS) — which, on the contrary, is usually less severe and not genetic, does not involve autoimmune comorbidities, and is affecting an incredibly increasing number of people (although no biomarker for diagnosing it is available) (see in particular Ludvigsson *et al.* 2013; Volta *et al.* 2013; Elli *et al.* 2015; Fasano *et al.* 2015; Schuppan *et al.* 2015; Vriezinga *et al.* 2015).

3. “Gluten Is a Silent Killer”: David Perlmutter’s *Grain Brain*

A similar theory is presented in David Perlmutter’s best–seller *Grain Brain* (2013).

The cover of the book (Fig. 1) reveals the central isotopy characterising it: the link between food — and especially grains, which find here expression in the figure of the bread — and the human body — and especially the brain, which plays a crucial role in the author’s reasoning. Evidently we have here a reference to Brillat–Savarin’s motto, which is in fact explicitly mentioned in the epigraph³ opening Chapter 2.

3. In this respect, it is also very interesting to notice that each chapter is opened by a quote, generally referring to various fields, from science to literature and cinema.

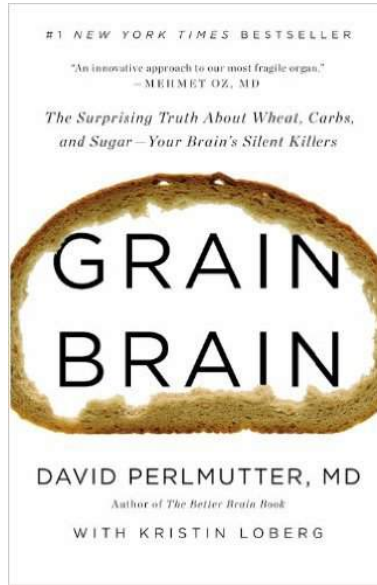


Figure 1. David Perlmutter’s *Grain Brain* (2013), cover

The contents reveal a series of semantic marks that recur frequently in the text, originating other powerful isotopies:

— *A Real Change.*

Recurrent expressions such as “cornerstone” (p. 28, 40, 64, 400) and “new way of life” (p. 272, 296, 401) are used to “reveal” a “surprising” and “mesmerizing truth” (p. 89, 363, 400, 401), which will bring readers to a “real change”. Such a change, evidently, is a positive one (e.g. “Jog your genes to build a better brain”, p. 242, 401), and opposes the negative effects of grains (i.e. our “enemies” (p. 16, 63, 89, 153, 400), whose dangerous power is remarked various times: “how gluten robs you and your children’s peace in mind” (p. 189, 400), “killer” (p. 8, 63, 79, 213), “silent germ” (p. 12), “silently destroying your brain” (p. 7), “silently harming you right now” (p. 20), etc.

— *Safe Past vs. Dangerous Present.*

Since the book’s introduction (p. 5–19), a strong opposition is established between past and present time:

If you could ask your grandparents or great-grandparents what people died from when were growing up, you'd likely hear the words "old age". Or you might learn the story of someone who got a nasty germ and passed away prematurely from tuberculosis, cholera, or dysentery. What you won't hear are things like diabetes, cancer, heart disease, and dementia. [...] Today, those single diseases tend to be the kind that go on and on in a chronic, degenerating state and involve multiple complications and symptoms that accumulate over time (p. 5).

No reference is made to the problem of diagnosing such diseases, which are described as direct consequences of modern diets and habits: "modern grains are silently destroying your brain" (p. 7), acting as "terrorist groups" — we find here a reference to war and terrorism, which is another recurring element in the text. Furthermore, Perlmutter tells us that "This isn't science fiction; it's now documented fact" (p. 7, 160). Definitely, he is the "game-changer" (p. 8) who is going to reveal us the "sad but true" (p. 36) story about our daily life.

— *Action vs. Fate.*

The author directly addresses his readers through a remarked *embranchage*: "Let me prove it to *you*. Then it's up to *you* to decide if *you*'ll take this all seriously and welcome a brighter, more disease-free future. *We*'ve all got a lot to lose if *we* don't heed this message, and to gain if *we* do" (p. 19 [our emphasis]). His message, therefore, is clear: "The fate of your brain is not in your genes. It's not inevitable" (p. 6); on the contrary, "it's in the food you eat", since "brain dysfunction starts in your daily bread" (p. 7). And his book is going to prove it to us (e.g. "I'm going to prove it", p. 7; "Let me prove it to you", p. 19).

To this purpose, Perlmutter tries to confer a scientific character upon his reasoning by making extensive use of schemes and diagrams, whose sources, however, are not described in details. What is more, he mixes up histograms, bar graphs, pie charts, scatter plots, drawings, and even humour cartoons (Fig. 2), therefore subverting common standards for scientific writing.

SEVEN BRAIN-BOOSTING SUPPLEMENTS



“The high-carb diet I put you on twenty years ago gave you diabetes, high blood pressure, and heart disease. Oops.”

Figure 2. A cartoon used to make fun of conventional medicine

There are also several quotes, including scientific studies that are presented as new, innovative, original, etc. — that is, that have not been officially recognised by scientific authorities yet —, and even literary references.



Figure 3. Perlmutter’s webpage (<http://www.drperlmutter.com>)

Finally, it is interesting to consider Perlmutter's webpage (Fig. 3), which is often mentioned in the book: he introduces himself as an "empowering neurologist". Such an "empowerment", which is described as a real "mission", consists "not only [in] provid[ing] information that relates to specific medical issues, but even more importantly, information that reveals the keys to maintaining health and preventing disease".

Polychromy also suggests the idea of a change, which is further enhanced by the verbal expression used to introduce David Perlmutter: "brain changer".

4. *Wheat Belly Total Health: The "Health Crusade" by William Davis*

Another remarkable case is William Davis' *Wheat Belly* (2011), re-edited as *Wheat Belly Total Health* (2014).

On his website (Fig. 4), the author is presented as a "Cardiologist" (that is, a doctor and a scientist, as it is also suggested by the white coat and the stethoscope that he is wearing in the picture in the webpage header, as well as by the acronym — "dr." — preceding his name), an "Author" (with a direct reference to his books), and a "Health Crusader" (namely a sort of warrior fighting a holy war). What is more, his success is remarked by a dedicated section ("Success Stories"), as well as by his reassuring smile.

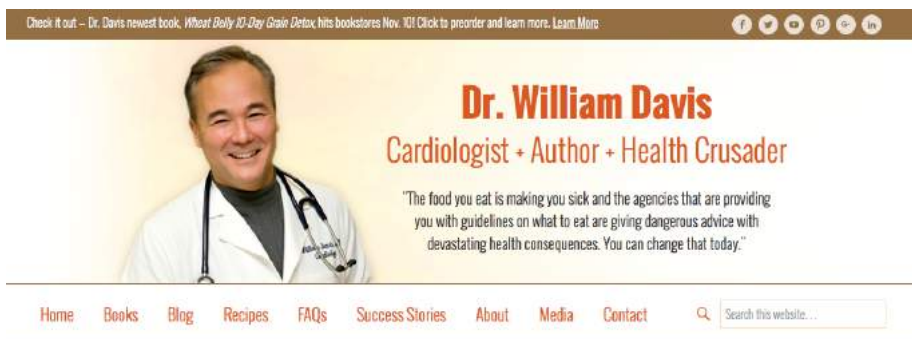


Figure 4. Davis' webpage (<http://www.wheatbellyblog.com>)

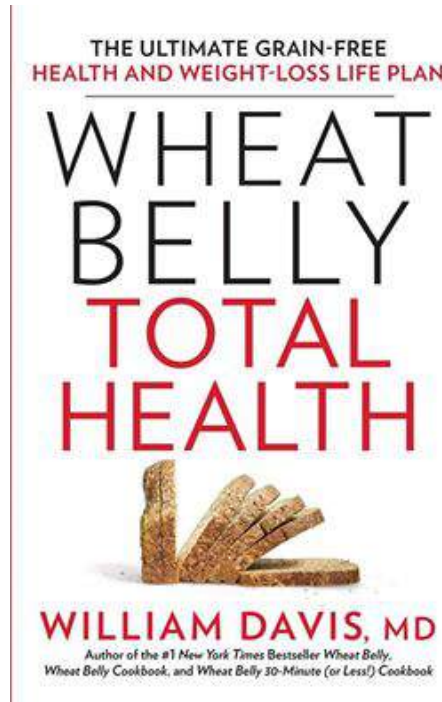


Figure 5. William Davis' *Wheat Belly Total Health* (2014), cover

As regards to Davis' book *Wheat Belly Total Health*, the cover (Fig. 5) is noteworthy: the iconic code invites readers to make bread “fall”, while the verbal language (which is characterised by a significant chromatic alteration) clarifies what they will achieve by doing so, that is, “Total Health”. Davis calls his readers to a change, as his dedication clearly states: “To all the readers who have the boldness, courage, and conviction to rebel against conventional dietary advice and discover what real nutrition can do for human health” (p. 3).

Both titles and subtitles insist on ideas such as “full recovery” (p. 6), “restoration” (p. 273, 277, 290, 297, 298 302, 306, 314, 315, 413, 415, 450, 468, 502, 531, 548, 554, 620, 621, 639, 640, 643, 645, 724, 732), and “total health” (p. 6, 7, 9, 16, 18, 19, 20, 22, 23, 24, 25, 27, 28, 29, 31, 120, 276, 396, 422, 562, 565, 577, 590, 624, 745, 755), which is here described as “the natural state of human life” (p. 5). The focus therefore is on the risks associated with modernity and the so-called “agribusiness” (p. 13, 15, 18, 43, 44, 46, 102, 104, 107, 129, 130–137, 177, 223, 225, 243, 244,

346, 483, 674, 743, 744, 823), which has further increased the negative effects of what Davis calls “Frankengrains”: “The seeds of grasses, known to us more familiarly as ‘grains’ or ‘cereals’, have always been a problem for us nonruminant creatures. But then busy geneticists and agribusiness got into the act. That’s when grains went from bad to worse” (p. 43).

His “crusade” is precisely aimed at teaching us how to prevent such risks and “freed” ourselves from the “dirty work” of conventional medicine and the mass media, which try to hide them (p. 15). This, of course, implies a drastic change, consisting in the elimination of “all grains” (with emphasis significantly put on the word “all”). According to Davis, total health depends on us; and his book is intended to provide his readers with “empowering strategies” which will bring them to full recovery, that is, “to regain control” (p. 259, 698) and be the “king[s]” or “emperor[s]” (p. 19) of their life. This will lead them to evident results:

You see it in smoother skin, a flatter tummy, freedom from leg swelling, as easy gait, and ease and vigor of motion in all directions. It’s also reflected internally through deeper sleep, less-turbulent menstrual cycles, freedom from headaches, and problem-free digestion. In addition to less-disruptive menstrual cycles, women can enjoy improved fertility and reductions in perversely high estrogen levels, and they get reacquainted with the concept of feeling good most or all of the time, rather than just once in a while or not at all. Male sexual performance improves as men enjoy lower levels of estrogen, higher levels of testosterone, and reduction of embarrassing large breasts (p. 24).

In order to prove such statements, Davis provides some examples and “success stories” (which mainly correspond to those appearing on his website). These are in fact the only sections providing exact data on weight loss and other aspects related to (individual) improvements, while only vague information is offered as regards to the general discussion (e.g. the author generally refer to “many cases”, without providing precise numeric data). Furthermore, the last part of the book insists on several “additional steps” that are necessary to achieve total health, admitting that it is not all about grain elimination.

Finally, as regards to the enunciative level, it should be remarked that, in this case too, quotations are largely used (also including va-

riations of titles of novels such as “50 shades of grey”, which here becomes “50 shades of grain”), together with recurrent embrayages, which are used to emphasise the reader’s role in the described “salvation process”.

5. Conclusion

These examples suggest the presence of a real “conspiracy theory” concerning gluten and grains, which is based on some crucial elements:

- an “evolutionary theory” claiming human beings’ possibility (and need) to regulate nutrition, by carefully (and totally) avoiding some foods;
- a sharp contrast between the past, described as idyllic, and the present, which is instead characterised by the “devil of agribusiness”;
- a peculiar relationship between Nature — that is, our body — and Culture — which takes on two different connotations: on the one hand, (i) a negative culture, corresponding to agribusiness and the lies of conventional medicine and science; on the other hand, (ii) a positive culture, consisting in the specific competence of “enlightened” and unconventional doctors, and enabling “natural (and total) health”.

As regards to the enunciative level, these elements find expression in a large use of metaphors, hyperboles, and quotations, as well as in the attempt to establish a scientifically validated discourse — which, nonetheless, generally lacks consolidated data and reliable sources. Great importance is also commonly attributed to personal experience, which is used as an evidence of success, while scientifically recognised data tend to be scarce.

5.1. Debunking the “Gluten Conspiracy”

Several scholars have tried to make such mechanisms evident. Let us consider, for example, *Against the Grain: Should You Go Gluten Free?*

by Michael Specter (2014), a journalist mainly dealing with medicine, biotechnology, and agricultural resources. In this article, Specter first of all points out the difference between coeliac disease and gluten sensibility:

For people with celiac disease—about one per cent of the population—the briefest exposure to gluten can trigger an immune reaction powerful enough to severely damage the brushlike surfaces of the small intestine. People with celiac have to be alert around food at all times, learning to spot hidden hazards in common products, such as hydrolyzed vegetable protein and malt vinegar. Eating in restaurants requires particular vigilance. Even reusing water in which wheat pasta has been cooked can be dangerous.

Until about a decade ago, the other ninety-nine per cent of Americans rarely seemed to give gluten much thought. But, led by people like William Davis, a cardiologist whose book “Wheat Belly” created an empire founded on the conviction that gluten is a poison, the protein has become a culinary villain. [. . .] David Perlmutter, a neurologist and the author of another of the gluten-free movement’s foundational texts, “Grain Brain: The Surprising Truth About Wheat, Carbs, and Sugar—Your Brain’s Silent Killers,” goes further still. Gluten sensitivity, he writes, “represents one of the greatest and most under-recognized health threats to humanity.”

Nearly twenty million people contend that they regularly experience distress after eating products that contain gluten, and a third of American adults say that they are trying to eliminate it from their diets. [. . .] The syndrome has even acquired a name: non-celiac gluten sensitivity.

Such a distinction, as we remarked above, was not very clear in Lupo’s speech, and it seems somehow concealed in Perlmutter and Davis’ books, which recognise it, but try to reduce its importance, blaming those who disregard gluten sensitivity (i.e. conventional medicine and dietetics).

Another interesting point in Specter’s article is the attention attributed to FODMAPs:

But there is more to wheat than gluten. Wheat also contains a combination of complex carbohydrates, [. . .] called FODMAPs, an acronym for a series of words that few people will ever remember: fermentable oligosaccharides, disaccharides, monosaccharides, and polyols. Not all carbohydrates are considered FODMAPs, but many types of foods contain them, including other foods [. . .]. Most people have no trouble digesting FODMAPs, but these carbohydrates are osmotic, which means that they pull water into the intestinal tract. That can cause abdominal pain, bloating, and diarrhea (*ibid.*).

Recalling relevant research in the field, the journalist therefore concludes: “FODMAPs seem more likely than gluten to cause widespread intestinal distress, since bacteria regularly ferment carbohydrates but ferment protein less frequently”. However — he denounces — they “are not as trendy as gluten and not as easy to understand” (*ibid.*).

Also Alan Levinovitz, in his book *The Gluten Lie: and Other Myths About What You Eat* (2015), aims at unveiling the conspiracy theories concerning coeliac disease and other “myths” about food. Since the very first pages of his book, he clearly states that he is not a doctor, but a scholar in religious studies and contemporary culture who wants to decipher the functioning mechanisms of such processes.

Opposing science to myth and real scientists to gurus, Levinovitz argues that “The problem is that running a few studies doesn’t ‘prove’ or ‘conclusively show’ anything. Good nutrition science depends on the long, slow accumulation of data over many, many studies, something scientists themselves know very well” (p. 36).

This is why he defines Perlmutter and Davis “false prophets”, also highlighting that none of them is a leader in his field, and much lesser an expert in nutrition science (Davis is a cardiologist, Perlmutter a neurologist). His conclusion, therefore, is that “fiction, not food, is the real demon” (p. 44). And he calls for a change: “Everyday foods don’t have life-giving or death-dealing properties. Grocery stores aren’t pharmacies. Your kitchen isn’t stocked with silent killers, and the charlatans that make a living on false promises and uncertain science need to be revealed for what they really are” (p. 23).

In order to do so, he traces a brief history of coeliac disease, introducing elements that are totally absent in the previously analysed texts, and pointing out that shocking measures — such as the so-called “banana diet” — were adopted to cure such a disease mainly because of commercial interests and false prophecies. Finally, the author suggests that the efficacy of such processes can be explained in terms of “magic thinking”, even though he does not enter much deeper into this issue.

5.2. Magic Thinking, Science, and (Meta-)Conspiracy Theories

Among the major scholars who have dealt with magic thinking, James George Frazer, in *The Golden Bough* (1890) sets out his theory of “magic”, conceived as the first step of a complex process, and descri-

bed as “a spurious system of natural law as well as a fallacious guide of conduct; it is a false science as well as an abortive art” (III, § 1). According to Frazer, such a system is based on “sympathy” between things, which can follow a law of similarity (such as in the case of voodoo, where we have *homeopathic* magic) or rather that of contact (for which objects have an influence on one another even after being separated). Magic thinking plays an important social role, since it is based on the establishment of laws, taboos, and rules of belonging and exclusion. Without getting down to the details of Frazer’s theory, which has also been strongly criticized by different scholars (such as Wittgenstein), it is sufficient for the purposes of this paper to note that magic thinking is described by this scholar as a real *cognitive* operation, which is complementary to other forms of knowledge such as science and religion.

In *Magic, Science and Religion* (1925), Bronislaw Malinowski recalls Frazer’s studies to present magic as a “pseudo–science” ([1954], p. 67). He also describes better its role in knowledge, by making reference to the *myth*: according to Malinowski, the myth represents the basis of social organization and of knowledge itself, since it expresses, enhances and codifies people’s beliefs. In other words, myths come into play when no pragmatic or rational logics can be used to describe the world and facts surrounding us.

Claude Lévi–Strauss (1958) further develops this theory, not only by revealing interesting observations about how we should consider and analyse myths (whose occasional unclearness is only apparent), but also by introducing a concept that plays a crucial role in the particular type of myths (or conspiracy theories) with which we have dealt so far: the so–called “effectiveness of symbols”.

The cure would consist [...] in making explicit a situation originally existing on the emotional level and in rendering acceptable to the mind pains which the body refuses to tolerate. That the mythology of the shaman does not correspond to an objective reality does not matter. The sick woman believes in the myth and belongs to a society which believes in it. [...] The sick woman accepts [the] mythical beings or, more accurately, she has never questioned their existence. What she does not accept are the incoherent and arbitrary pains, which are an alien element in her system but which the shaman, calling upon myth, will re–integrate within a whole where everything is meaningful.

Once the sick woman understands, however, she does more than resign herself; she gets well. But no such thing happens to our sick when the causes of their diseases have been explained to them in terms of secretions, germs, or viruses. We shall perhaps be accused of paradox if we answer that the reason lies in the fact that microbes exist and monsters do not. And yet, the relationship between germ and disease is external to the mind of the patient, for it is a cause-and-effect relationship; whereas the relationship between monster and disease is internal to his mind, whether conscious or unconscious. [. . .] The shaman provides the sick woman with a language, by means of which unexpressed, and otherwise inexpressible, psychic states can be immediately expressed. And it is the transition to this verbal expression—at the same time making it possible to undergo in an ordered and intelligible form a real experience that would otherwise be chaotic and inexpressible—which induces the release of the physiological process, that is, the reorganization, in a favorable direction, of the process to which the sick woman is subjected ([1963] pp. 197–198).

Instead of opposing magic and science, therefore, it would be better to conceive them as two parallel modes of acquiring knowledge, requiring the same kind of mental operations, which — according to Lévi-Strauss (1962) — “differ not so much in kind as in different types of phenomena to which they are applied” ([1966], p. 13). Up against the impossibility of conventional science to provide holistic and comprehensive explanations, myths and symbols come into play. In other words, whether we call it a *placebo* or rather a *nocebo* effect — since in the previously analysed cases abstinence from specific foods is said to have positive and healthy effects —, such processes have important outcomes not only on people’s mind, but also on their body.

This fact seems to be mainly disregarded both by coeliac crusaders — who force Brillat-Savarin’s aphorism into deterministic views and reject conventional science *a priori* — and their debunkers — who instead seem to completely deny the role of mythical and symbolic operations in health-related processes. This, in turn, originates a peculiar phenomenon: while unveiling the conspiracy theory according to which coeliac disease is an effect of globalization and modernity, its debunkers argue that the current emphasis on such a disease is a “lie” manipulating people for commercial purposes. Hence the first conspiracy theory (“CT1”) becomes the fulcrum and at the same time the justification of a second conspiracy theory (“CT2”), in a sort of “meta-conspiracy” that, in its turn, is likely to open the way to new

conspiracy theories, in a process of *unlimited semiosis* that risks degenerating in an endless series of references to other theories, thus further fomenting the eternal fight between the “scientific” and the “mythical” paradigm.

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Upsetting National Events and Conspiracy Narratives in Contemporary Italian Literature

JENNY PONZO*

TITOLO ITALIANO: Avvenimenti nazionali sconvolgenti e narrative del complotto nella letteratura italiana contemporanea.

ABSTRACT: In the history of a nation, upsetting events sometimes threaten its identity. Often, conspiracy theories work as counter-narratives contrasting the reassuring official accounts of such shocking happenings. Fictional literature is one of the main channels for the diffusion of conspiracy theories. Starting from such premises, the essay focuses on a corpus of Italian novels written in the last sixty years. They refer to four of the most upsetting moments of Italian national history (Risorgimento, the fall of Fascism, the “lead years”, and the passage from the first to the second Republic). The analysis concentrates on novels by Umberto Eco, Andrea Camilleri, Leonardo Sciascia, Rino Cammilleri, Carlo Alianello, and Luciano Bianciardi. It singles out different types of conspiracy narratives in contemporary Italian literature, each one characterized by peculiar recurrent motifs and characters. The essay, therefore, sets the premises for a semiotic study of conspiracy as literary genre.

KEYWORDS: Conspiracy; Italian Literature; National Identity; Semiotics; Narrative.

I. Conspiracy narratives

In the history of a nation there are upsetting events that threaten the sense of national identity itself. Generally, institutions and citizens

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tend to organize these facts in reassuring narratives¹ working as a form of self-protection. It is nevertheless possible to hypothesize that such difficult moments generate not only reassuring accounts but also, as a sort of byproduct, a big number of the peculiar narratives called “conspiracy theories”². Literature is one of the main channels of their diffusion. In this paper, I will therefore address some representations of conspiracy in contemporary Italian literature.

Although stories of conspiracies and of mysterious secret societies exist since the antiquity³, scholars tend to consider conspiracy theories as a typically modern phenomenon, or they underline that today they are assuming a new importance⁴, mainly by offering a kind of “quasi-religious” alternative to the declining grand narratives:

[...] the idea of conspiracy offers an odd sort of comfort in an uncertain age: it makes sense of the inexplicable, accounting for complex events in a clear, if frightening, way. [...] by offering a highly adaptable vision of causality, conspiracy theory acts as a “master narrative,” a grand scheme capable of explaining numerous complex events [...]. Most conspiracy theories are virtually impossible to confirm — yet this built-in impediment to certainty is precisely why they have flourished in an age supposedly marked by the disappearance of grand explanatory schemes and master narratives. Because they are so difficult to confirm, they require a form of quasi-religious conviction, a sense that the conspiracy in question is an entity with almost supernatural powers. In fact, the term “conspiracy” rarely signifies a small, secret plot any more. Instead, it frequently refers to the workings of a large organization, technology, or system — a powerful and obscure entity so dispersed that it is the antithesis of the traditional conspiracy. “Conspiracy,” in other words, has come to signify a broad array of social controls. (Melley 2000, p. 8)

[...] the “conspiracy theory of society” [...], which is more primitive than most forms of theism, is akin to Homer’s theory of society. Homer conceived the power of the gods in such a way that whatever happened on the plain before Troy was only a reflection of the various conspiracies on

1. See Anderson (1983) and his theory of the “reassurance of fratricide” and Renan (1991).

2. Taguieff (2005), for example, underlines the connection between the moments of deep historical change, such as the French Revolution, and the flourishing of a plurality of conspiracy theories. On the conspiracy theory as a narrative see Martinelli herein; Fenster (1999), chap. 5.

3. Pagán (2012); Roisman (2006); Eco (1993).

4. See Knight (2000), pp. 1–22; Fenster (1999); Ceserani (2003).

Olympus. The conspiracy theory of society is just a version of this theism, of a belief in gods whose whims and wills rule everything. It comes from abandoning God and then asking: 'Who is in place?' His place is then filled by various powerful men and groups — sinister pressure groups, who are to be blamed for having planned the great depression and all the evils from which we suffer. (Popper 2006, p. 13)

Given such premises, the present study focuses on a corpus of novels published in Italy in the last 60 years. It will neither consider the science–fiction conspiracy⁵, which seems a less explored branch, possibly derived from American cultural influence, nor will it consider ancient plots. It will instead focus on a sample of novels presenting an account of some of the most upsetting events in Italian national history: 1) the Risorgimento (the national unification period, 1820s–1870s); 2) the end of Fascism; 3) the “Anni di piombo” (“lead years”, terrorism in the 1970s); 4) the passage from the first to the second Republic (1990s).

Novels treating such key historical events using conspiracy narratives are analyzed in order to point out some recurring motifs and characters, and to introduce a reflection on the possibility of a study of conspiracy as a genre in Italian literature.

2. Umberto Eco: *Il cimitero di Praga* and *Numero Zero*

The Prague Cemetery (2011) and *Numero Zero* (2015) involve all the above–quoted key moments. Eco (2011) concerns, even if not exclusively, the *Risorgimento*, while Eco (2015) is set in the 1990s and treats the fall of Fascism and the “lead years.”

Eco’s thought on conspiracy theories is well known: the only dangerous conspiracies are those that emerge publicly. A conspiracy whose effects are unknown is a failed conspiracy, or it is a fake, maybe invented by a dictator to mislead public opinion. As it has often been observed, Eco wrote some of his novels deliberately playing with symbols, motifs and stereotypes of “authentic” conspiracy literature. In

5. E.g. the novel for kids *Luciani* (2010).

Eco's intention, writing novels that represent the distorted mentality leading to conspiracy theories should be a way to exorcise them⁶.

In Eco (2011) we can find a declaration of conspiracy poetics. The protagonist is an old spy recalling his life. Grown up by a grandfather persuaded of the existence of a Jewish conspiracy for the conquest of the world, passionate reader of feuilletons full of tricks, the young Simonini is impressed by Dumas's novel *Giuseppe Balsamo*. This reading makes him aware of the underlying structure, or "Universal Form" (p. 77), of all conspiracies:

Let us imagine conspirators who come from every part of the world and represent the tentacles of their sect spread throughout every country. Let us assemble them in a forest clearing, a cave, a castle, a cemetery or a crypt, provided it is reasonably dark. Let us get one of them to pronounce a discourse that clearly sets out the plan, and the intention to conquer the world. . . I have known many people who feared the conspiracy of some hidden enemy — for my grandfather it was the Jews, for the Jesuits it was the Masons, for my Garibaldian father it was the Jesuits, for the kings of half Europe it was the Carbonari, for my Mazzinian companions it was the king backed by the clergy [. . .] and so forth. Who knows how many other people in this world still think they are being threatened by some conspiracy? Here's a form to be filled out at will, by each person with his own conspiracy. (Eco 2011, pp. 77–78)

This intuition leads Simonini to produce the fake known as the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. He is a sordid, paranoid and cruel character, partially based on the stereotype of the *grande vecchio*, the big old man, the master plotting in the shadows⁷. However, contrarily to the recurring figure of the old master, well represented e.g. in Camilleri (2007, see below), Simonini is not able to fully control the consequences of his actions. He is not aware of the huge impact that his *Protocols* will have in the 20th century.

Both Eco's novels are characterized by dark and dull settings, and in Eco (2015) a character called Romano Braggadocio embodies, in an almost caricature style, the paranoid who sees conspiracies everywhere. The narrator Colonna, a failed writer, ex-editor and translator, describes Braggadocio highlighting "filthy" (p. 35) aspects of his physio-

6. On Eco's position and on the big debate it produced see Riotta and Eco (2005); Magris and Eco (2010); Tosatti (2010); Mattioli (2011); Taguieff and Paoli (2011).

7. Riotta and Eco (2005); Taguieff (2005); Kelman (2012).

gnomy⁸. Braggadocio has adopted a radical philosophy of suspicion, due to the certitude of living surrounded by a constant deceit (e.g. «The newspapers lie, the historians lie, the TV today lies [...] I don't trust anything anymore. We live in the lie and, if you know that they lie, you must live in the suspicion. I suspect, I always suspect»⁹). As a consequence, the goal of his life is to find out the truth and to bring it to light (pp. 42, 47).

Not only is Braggadocio paranoiac, but he also seems to be affected by the illness Eco spoke about in different occasions by quoting Borges's character of Funes el Memorioso. Funes was a man that remembered everything, and he was "a perfect idiot", because he was not able to select and hierarchically organize the information he received¹⁰. Indeed, Braggadocio is persuaded that everything is connected (pp. 48, 152), and that the smallest detail can have a crucial meaning. This is a characteristic trait of the conspiracy mentality¹¹.

Starting from the presupposition that the "common vulgate" (p. 104) is too simple to be true, Braggadocio builds his own account of the Italian postwar history. His interpretation is based on two main factors. The first one is an abnormal logic, typical of that «interpretive disorder that revolves around questions of control and manipulation» (Melley 2000, p. 16) called paranoia. The second factor is necrophilia. Braggadocio is irresistibly attracted not only by sinister places, but also by all sort of human remains. In Braggadocio's vision, all the history of Italy after World War II depends on the motif of Mussolini's death. Mussolini does not represent the hidden mind guiding history; he is rather the object of the history, especially as a dead body. As Simonini's obsession with the Jews comes from his grandfather,

8. For example: «Gli occhi di Braggadocio brillavano, sembravano illuminare la teoria dei teschi che ci attorniano, le sue mani tremavano, le labbra si coprivano di saliva biancastra, mi aveva afferrato per le spalle [...]» (Eco 2015, p. 180).

9. My translation, no English version available yet. «I giornali mentono, gli storici mentono, la televisione oggi mente. [...] Non mi fido più di niente [...] Viviamo nella menzogna e, se sai che ti mentono, devi vivere nel sospetto. Io sospetto, sospetto sempre» (Eco 2015, pp. 41-42).

10. See e.g. Eco (2011b). We can see this tendency of Braggadocio in the episode concerning the cars' advertisements, which he cannot help learning by hearth. The numerous and detailed data concerning the cars haunt him and ultimately make him think that the whole car industry is a conspiracy against him (p. 47).

11. See on this regard Knight (2000), chap. 4.

Braggadocio's mania seems to come from his family history, from his father's involvement with fascism.

According to Braggadocio, after the fall of fascism, Mussolini, with the Vatican's help, secretly flies to Argentina, where he lives for 25 years. A lookalike is killed in his place and his body is publicly exposed. Mussolini's return is the nucleus of a golpe against the government acted in 1970 and involving numerous secret societies. The golpe fails because of the old Mussolini's death during the long travel back to Italy. From that moment on, deprived of their central symbol, the secret societies change their strategy and begin a series of terroristic actions: «[...] the shadow of Mussolini, deemed dead, dominates all the Italian events from 1945 [...], and his actual death provokes the most terrible historical period of this country, involving stay-behind, CIA, NATO, Gladio, the P2, the mafia, the services, the high military headquarters, ministers [...] presidents [...], and of course most part of the extreme left terroristic organisations [...]»¹² After having traced this story, Braggadocio enthusiastically states that he is the only one who has been able to understand the truth (p. 181). Maybe his name, evoking a boaster, alludes precisely to this presumption.

Braggadocio thinks that some secret societies are still active. Indeed, after revealing his theories to Colonna, he is mysteriously murdered. Colonna, infected by Braggadocio's disease, starts seeing conspiracies everywhere and feeling persecuted. He recovers thanks to his friend Maia and to a BBC program showing partial truths concerning the dangerous secret that he knows. The partial and trivialized revelation of the secret both neutralizes and better conceals it. Colonna reduces therefore his paranoia to a «calm distrust of the world»¹³ and he decides to come back to his insignificant but safe old life of translator.

In the end, Colonna and Maia pessimistically reflect on the reason why conspiracy theories find scarce resonance in Italy. Italians have lived too many historical upsetting events, such as invasions, massacres, raids. Being used to stories of “daggers and poisons”, they are

12. «[...] l'ombra di Mussolini, dato per morto, domina tutti gli eventi italiani dal 1945 [...], e la sua morte reale scatena il periodo piú terribile della storia di questo paese, coinvolgendo stay-behind, CIA, NATO, Gladio, la P2, la mafia, i servizi, gli alti comandi militari, ministri [...] e presidenti [...], e naturalmente buona parte delle organizzazioni terroristiche di estrema sinistra [...]» (Eco 2015, p. 186).

13. «Calma sfiducia nel mondo che mi circonda» (Eco 2015, p. 218).

immune to all shocking revelations and always ready to suspect that they are false. They just worry about how to evade taxes and do not care about what the rulers do, because they give their corruption for granted (p. 215). The growing indifference is a symptom of moral decay. According to Colonna, in a near future all the worst actions will be performed publicly and ashamedly (p. 217), “en plain air” and without “baroque chiaroscuro, counter–reform stuff”.

Due to both his novels deliberately playing with conspiracy motifs and his theoretical declarations, Eco is the Italian author more directly related to conspiracy theories. But the conspiracy theme can be found in many other contemporary works, which present a set of recurring traits, as the following short review will show.

3. Camilleri: the *grande vecchio*

Immortale odium (2007) is a thriller set in the years following the Risorgimento and containing all the classic ingredients of conspiracy, such as secret societies, mysterious symbols and dull scenarios. Two Catholic priests inquire into the murder of a group of masons involved in the profanation of Pope Pius IX’s corpse. The killers are the members of a secret society aiming at causing a new world war in order to reaffirm the power of the Church, whose terrestrial kingdom has been conquered by the newborn Italian State.

A clear opposition is traced between the Church, which represents the good, true religion, and the Revolution, which tries to destroy the Church to install the full sovereignty of man over himself. The new liberal ruling class is represented as an esoteric sect publicly proclaiming the virtue of reason but secretly practicing all sorts of spiritualist rituals and witchcraft. This elite is organized as an “Anti-Church,” as the “Church of the Progress and of the Reason” (pp. 196–197).

Several chapters of the novel are devoted to a mysterious character, an old man with a decrepit and demoniac appearance, who explains the history of the Risorgimento to a silent interlocutor. Just near the end the reader learns that the old man is called Nubius, and that, since he is close to death, he has summoned a priest, not to obtain the absolution, but to tell him that the Church is going to be overthrown.

According to Nubius, the whole Risorgimento is determined by a hidden revolutionary mind, which is the author of a plurality of conspiracies and is able to orientate history thanks to a foresight capacity that no one else owns. Nubius reports murders and crimes with pleasure and no regrets. After revealing how the Bourbons, the Savoy, Garibaldi and all the agents of the Risorgimento have been manipulated, he says that the national State is just a step in the long history of revolution. Concealed behind false ideologies spread by propaganda, revolution uses utopias to induce naïf idealists to act in favor of its hidden aims. But it has no defined goal, being instead an end in itself. The end or revolution is revolution itself, i.e. the instauration of a religion of man instead of the religion of God (pp. 130–131).

Masonry is just one of the provisional tools used by revolution, destined to be soon overcome. Nubius also speaks of the esoteric propensities of many revolutionaries, including Garibaldi (who accepted the direction of a spiritualist society and wrote a letter to praise the Antichrist, pp. 171–172). He considers the “occultist stuff” as a contingent and risible accident, while he is the everlasting enemy of the thrones and of the Church: «None has ever known who was hidden behind that name. But he was the gray eminence behind every conspiracy, the puppet master above every plot. [...] For many he was just a myth [...], a way to confuse the [old Italian kingdoms’] polices inducing them to think that [...] they could just cut the branches but never arrive at the tree. But he actually existed»¹⁴.

In the last chapter Nubius is represented as the embodiment of an idea. A growing contrast is traced between his more and more weak and miserable body, and his spirit, immortal and endowed with a tremendous energy:

His voice was now shriller [...], now deep and cavernous. Of course it came from him, but in certain moments it seemed like it was not his own [...], as if someone else was using him as a mask [...]. In such moments, even his head, his hands, his shoulders seemed to be moved by invisible

14. «Nessuno ha mai saputo chi si celasse dietro a quel nome. Ma era l’eminenza grigia dietro a ogni complotto, il burattinaio sopra ogni congiura. [...] Per molti era solo un mito [...], un modo per confondere le polizie inducendole a pensare che con i loro arresti tagliavano solo rami senza mai poter risalire all’albero. Invece, esisteva eccome» (Cammilleri 2007, pp. 259–260).

strings. He spoke, and there you saw a poor, asthmatic [...] old man, the shrunken spectre of the adult man he used to be. He spoke, and there he assumed the appearance of a demonic, powerful, evil sculpture.¹⁵

Due to his immortal spirit, Nubius can forecast the future. He has planned and started a process that cannot be stopped or changed. In a moment of transfiguration, in a sort of epiphany, Nubius reveals his identity. He is the personification of Revolution and Anarchy:

I am not the momentary upsetting of the public order, [...] nor the conspiracy plotting in the dark, nor the substitution of a dynasty with another [...]. I am not Luther [...], nor Robespierre, nor Babeuf, nor Mazzini, nor Kossuth. These people are my sons but they are not me. These things are my works but they are not me. These men and these things are transitory facts, but I am a permanent state. I am the refusal of every social and religious order not established by man and of which he is not both the king and the god. I am [...] the philosophy of rebellion, the politics of rebellion, the religion of rebellion. I am Prometheus unchained; in a word, I am Anarchy, because I am God overthrown and substituted by man. This is why I am called Revolution [...]. And my registry or battle names are not important, because I am eternal and I existed before and will exist after this body's death. [...] But by now the path is traced and it will be impossible not to follow it. By now every effort can just slow down the avalanche, not stop it. It will go straight toward its ultimate end, which is all and nothing. A cosmic laughter.¹⁶

15. «[...] la sua voce si faceva a volte più stridula e gracchiante, altre profonda e cavernosa. Proveniva da lui, certo, ma in determinati momenti si aveva l'impressione che non fosse sua [...], come se un altro lo usasse da maschera [...]. Anche la sua testa, le sue mani, le sue spalle sembravano in quegli istanti come tirati da fili invisibili. Parlava, ed ecco un povero vecchio asmatico [...], spettro rinsecchito dell'uomo adulto che doveva essere stato una volta. Parlava, ed eccolo assumere l'aspetto di una scultura demoniaca, possente, malefica» (Cammilleri 2007, p. 382).

16. «Io non sono il momentaneo sconvolgimento dell'ordine pubblico [...], né la congiura che cospira nell'ombra, né la sostituzione di una dinastia con un'altra [...] Non sono Lutero [...], né Robespierre, né Babéuf, né Mazzini, né Kossuth. Costoro sono miei figli ma non sono me. Queste cose sono opere mie ma non sono me. Questi uomini e queste cose sono fatti transitori ma io sono uno stato permanente. Io sono il rifiuto di ogni ordine religioso e sociale non stabilito dall'uomo e del quale egli non è re e dio tutt'insieme. Io sono [...] la filosofia della ribellione, la politica della ribellione, la religione della ribellione. Io sono Prometeo scatenato; in una parola, io sono l'anarchia, perché io sono Dio spodestato e sostituito dall'uomo. Ecco il motivo per cui mi chiamo Rivoluzione [...]. E il mio nome anagrafico o quello di battaglia non hanno importanza. Neanche chi adesso ti parla ha importanza, perché io sono eterno e c'ero prima e ci sarò dopo che questo corpo sarà morto. [...] Ma ormai la via è tracciata e non si potrà non seguirla.

Nubius is moved by his hatred, which confers much more power and invulnerability than love and allows one to act alone (p. 386). The regime forecast by Nubius is “cryptocracy” (p. 389), the most radical and absolute despotism: «A unified humanity, without barriers and frontiers, without religious trammels» (pp. 386–387), led by secret rulers:

Some clowns will be placed on the stage to act as presidents, ministers, heads of the government, and they will be more than happy to lend their faces and their wooden heads in change of a fistful of privileges and some crusts thrown to their vanity. But none will ever know who really rules. [. . . N]ot because the true power will be hidden, but because, on the contrary, it will be under everyone’s eyes. And, as all the evident things, it will not be seen. [. . .] This leadership will never be overthrown because one would not know whom to shoot.¹⁷

The conclusion of the book leaves the reader with a doubt, leading him or her to wonder if Nubius’s prophecy is totally absurd or not. Like Eco (2011), Cammilleri (2007) is based on the motif of the big old men manipulating history in the shadows. However, while Simonini is represented just as an old man suffering from various psychological disturbs, Nubius appears as a sort of supernatural power, as a miserable body possessed by an evil immortal spirit.

4. Hydra organizations

In Italian literature, the motif of the complex plot organized by a hidden head is present not only in the novels explicitly related to the conspiracy theories, such as Eco (2011) and Cammilleri (2007), but also in the novels concerning mafia. Such texts are characterized by

Ormai ogni sforzo potrà solo rallentare la valanga, non fermarla. Essa andrà verso il suo fine ultimo, che è tutto ed è niente. Una risata cosmica» (Cammilleri 2007, pp. 385–386).

17. «Alcuni pagliacci li si metterà in primo piano a fare i presidenti, i ministri, i capi di governo, e saranno più che contenti di prestare le loro facce e mettere a disposizione le loro teste di legno in cambio di un pugno di privilegi e qualche crosta gettata in pasto alla loro vanità. Ma chi comandi davvero non si saprà mai. [. . . N]on perché il vero potere sarà occulto ma perché, al contrario, sarà sotto gli occhi di tutti. E, come tutte le cose evidenti, non si vedrà. [. . .] Questo comando non sarà mai [. . .] abbattuto perché non si saprebbe a chi sparare» (Cammilleri 2007, pp. 389–390).

a different kind of anxiety, which is not based on sinister, macabre and esoteric elements, but rather on realism. Indeed, they represent facts that are disturbingly similar to those reported by newspapers and history books.

An example is provided by *I pugnalatori* (Sciascia 1976). The members of the so-called “sect of the stabbers” kill contemporarily thirteen people in different places in Palermo. They are low-class men hired by a secret head, the powerful prince of Sant’Elia, who is so haunted by the desire of having even more power that he organizes terroristic actions aimed at undermining the government. While the poorest stabbers are executed, the prince remains untouchable, and he keeps his status and privileges. Although it is set during the Risorgimento, the text is full of references to the “lead years.”

In numerous mafia novels (e.g. Sciascia 1961; Camilleri 1999) we can find conspiracies whose head is discovered, but it proves to be undefeatable. Even if the truth is found out, the frightening conclusion is that there is a sinister agent that cannot be stopped and keeps free to act his plots and crimes. There is no protection against him. This sense of vulnerability, of impossibility to protect oneself against evil, the presence of evil in everyday life, together with the realism and the similarity with actual situations and events, provide such novels with their peculiarly uncanny, disquieting side.

5. The desecration of conspiracy

Nevertheless, in many other cases the motif of conspiracy does not present such dramatic traits. Especially in the literature concerning the Risorgimento, the conspiracy tendency appears as a sort of national vice, typical of sly characters who are depicted with contempt, but often in caricature tones. We can think e.g. of Calogero Sedàra in *Il Gattopardo*, who made proselytes for the future Italian regime: «[...] up and down the whole district he went like a bat; by trap, horse, mule, foot, in rain or sun; and whenever he passed secret groups were formed, to prepare the way for those that were to come. He’s a scourge of God, Excellency, a scourge of God» (Tomasi di Lampedusa 2007, p. 116).

Another example is provided by the characters of Coronato and Forgogna in Alianello (1963), two notables ruling a southern town during the Risorgimento. Coronato and Forogna are described in caricature tones both in their appearance (the one tall and thin, the other short and fat) and their behavior (e.g. they hurry up changing the statues and portraits of the kings in their home at every change of regime). They are corrupted, involved with the mafia, and they plot with every party that seems to be prevailing at the moment, sometimes even with two parties at the same time. They are always moved by their individual material interests. Even if they raise contempt, these village conspirators are very different from the omnipotent and maleficent big old man. On the contrary, their very same pettiness can sometimes inspire a hilarious irony.

We can therefore say that, in Italian literature, the conspiracy is often de-sacrated, in the sense that it is deprived of its «misterium tremendum et fascinans» (Otto 1917). This happens by means of the ironical representation and the caricature reduction of the plots and of their agents, or by exasperating the paranoia and the distort logic that inform the conspiracy theories¹⁸. A third desecration strategy is the ironic highlighting of the conspiracies' collateral effects and by-products. This last strategy reduces conspiracies to a human and very fallible dimension. Andrea Camilleri provides us with a masterpiece of the account of the conspiracies' collateral effects in his *Il birraio [brewer] di Preston*.

6. Camilleri, the brewer and Karl Popper

According to Popper (2006, p. 13), «[...] a conspiracy never [...] turns out in the way that is intended» In social life, we hardly «[...] produce precisely the effect that we wish to produce, and we usually get things that we do not want into the bargain. Of course, we act with certain aims in mind; but apart from these aims (which we may or may not really achieve) there are always certain unwanted consequences of our actions; and usually these unwanted consequences cannot be eliminated» Popper's position could thus be defined as a theory of

18. As Eco himself explains about his novels, see Eco and Magris (2010) and above.

the byproducts of conspiracy. Camilleri's *Il birraio di Preston* seems a perfect literary representation of such a theory.

Set in Sicily shortly after the *Risorgimento*, the novel is based on three conspiracies (C) with tragicomic collateral effects. The episodes are narrated in an apparently casual order, but we can identify the three conspiracies as the pivots of the action. The "foreigner" Florentine prefect of Montelusa, Bortuzzi, states that the theater of the nearby Vigata must be inaugurated with the opera *Il birraio di Preston*. The inhabitants of Vigata are hostile to this order because of an old rivalry with Montelusa. Bortuzzi asks therefore the mafioso Ferraguto to employ every stratagem to ensure the success of the representation (C1). The members of the society "Circolo cittadino di Vigata" decide in their turn to conspire against the representation (C2):

"And we're supposed to inaugurate our new Vigata theatre with an opera by this mediocrity just because our distinguished prefect is besotted with him?" [...]

At this point Canon Bonmartino got up from his chair, ran over to the windows, and drew the curtains to make the room dark, while Headmaster Cozzo lit a lamp. The men then gathered in a semicircle around the light. And Dr. Gammacurta, in a baritone voice, intoned: "Suoni la tromba e intrepido".

The first to join him, as if written into the score, was the commendatore. One by one, all the others followed. Standing round, hands linked as in a chain, looking one another in the eye, they instinctively lowered the volume of their song.

They were conspirators. They had become so at that very moment, in the name of Vincenzo Bellini.

The Brewer of Preston, the opera by Luigi Ricci imposed on them by the prefect of Montelusa, would never play.¹⁹ (Camilleri 2014, pp. 17–18)

The agitator Traquandi is sent to Vigata by the Mazzinian party,

19. «E noi dovremmo inaugurare il nostro teatro di Vigata con un'opera di questa mezza calzetta solo perché il signor prefetto amminchiò? [...] A questo punto il canonico Bonmartino si susì dalla seggia, corse alle finestre, tirò le tende a fare scuro, mentre il preside Cozzo addrumava un lume. Attorno a quella luce si ritrovarono tutti a semicerchio. E il medico Gammacurta attaccò con voce da baritono: "Suoni la tromba e intrepido...". Primo gli si unì, come da partitura, il commendatore. Poi, uno a uno, tutti gli altri. In piedi, taliandosi occhi negli occhi e stringendosi a catena le mani, abbassarono d'istinto il volume del canto. Erano congiurati, lo erano diventati in quel preciso momento nel nome di Bellini. *Il birraio di Preston*, opera lirica di Luigi Ricci, imposta dal prefetto di Montelusa, non sarebbe passata» Camilleri (2010), pp. 24–26.

with the complicity of members of the parliament. His task is to exacerbate the tension created by C₁ and C₂ in order to provoke a national scandal aiming at undermining the government (C₃). C₃ is a byproduct of C₁ and 2. The night of the representation, the spectators boycott the show by mocking the opera. The prefect prohibits them from leaving the theater before the end of the show, but people are suddenly panic-stricken and they attack the prefect's guards. Some hours later, when everything is over, Traquandi sets fire to the theater.

Each conspiracy fails but causes a big number of unplanned and unwanted effects. Bortuzzi and Ferraguto apparently meet their goal, because the representation takes place. However, the soirée ends up in a disaster that ruins Bortuzzi's career and provokes Ferraguto's death (discredited and weakened, he is killed by a more powerful mafioso). The Vigatesi cannot impede the representation, and they just obtain the destruction of their new theater. Many people are hurt and three people die. The police heads secretly kill Traquandi, because they fear to be accused of not having stopped the terrorist in time, and thus they unwittingly thwart the national scandal planned by the Mazzinians.

The three conspiracies also generate a series of collateral consequences connecting in bizarre causal chains events and characters that have apparently nothing to do with each other. For example, a young widow living in the house next to the theater dies because of the smoke provoked by the fire during the first night of love she was having after many years of loneliness; the engineer Hoffer is happy to have the opportunity to try the machine he has invented to extinguish the fire and, since he leaves home, his son Gerd can spend an unusual night; the stevedore Turiddru, who lives in a squalid room with his numerous family, saves his mother from fire, but he loses the house he dreamt to move in with his wife and sons. The honest doctor Gammacurta disobeys the order to stay in the theater until the end of the show. He exists by the backdoor, but a guard thinks he is a burglar and shoots him: the honest man is paradoxically killed as a criminal. These are just a few instances showing that this novel is not far from Popper's principle: social action often takes unexpected directions, in spite of human efforts to control the events. This is also made evident by the fact that the key event, the battle in the theater, is not directly caused by the different conspirators, but rather by a chain of fortuitous events:

- a) A guard falls asleep and, by pressing his musket, he involuntarily shoots.
- b) When she hears this noise, the soprano, very nervous because of the spectators' mockeries, awfully cracks.
- c) The musicians, scared by these strong noises, suddenly throw away their instruments and run away. The fall of the instruments, amplified by the theater's acoustics, seems the rumble of an earthquake.
- d) The spectators are panic-stricken by the supposed earthquake but, when they try to run away from the theater, they find the exits blocked by the guards. A big brawl starts.

The narration of such clumsy conspiracies and of their inevitably distorted direction is ironical and funny, but with a touch of pity for their innocent victims and for the fragility of human life, ultimately governed by a haphazard fate. Camilleri's narrator shares with Colonna and with Bianciardi's narrator the "vice of quotation" ("il vizio della citazione", Eco 2015, p. 19). This aesthetic propensity for intertextuality can be related to the taste for the allusion, for the abundance of semi-hidden clues, and to the axiom "everything is connected" that are typical traits of the conspiracy mentality.

7. Bianciardi and the paranoid style

Les visions conspirationnistes sont indissociables d'une rhétorique de la dénonciation dont le premier caractère observable est un «style paranoïde», comme si l'obsession du complot allait de pair avec un délire d'interprétation, susceptible d'être lui-même le symptôme d'une structure psychique paranoïaque. Le paranoïaque élimine l'incertitude, systématise la méfiance et généralise le soupçon [...]. (Taguieff (2005), p. 102)

Bianciardi's novel *Aprire il fuoco* (2005, 1st ed. 1969) is a good example of the "paranoid style" characterizing the conspiracy theories as a general semiotic style but also, more specifically, as a literary genre. The protagonist and narrator lives in exile after having participated in revolutionary actions and having been taken to trial five times by a corrupted judiciary system. Even if he mentions the names of some of his personal antagonists, his main enemy is a whole system, made

of powers without a face, of banks and tribunals that oppress the individual depriving him of his rights and of his goods. As Eco's *Colonna*, the narrator is a failed editor and a translator. He lives in a hybrid time melting the Risorgimento with the 1960s: for example, Milan is still under the domination of Austria as in the 1850s, but the protagonist watches TV and he translates Henry Miller's novels. He has obsessive persecution feelings. For instance, he only leaves home disguised as a hunter, a seller or a teacher, because he fears to be recognized by the ubiquitous "oppressor's spies" (p. 28).

From time to time, the narrator has to leave the quiet village of his exile to hand in the translated books in Milan. Such occasions exacerbate his paranoia. The city is an "enemy land" where «many people suffer and sweat under the oppressor»²⁰. Milan is metaphorically defined as an orchard, where the protagonist waits for his martyrdom as Jesus in the Gethsemane: during the train journey to Milan one can recognize «the signal of the orchard, when you have to get ready [...] and proceed toward the door [...] But always try not to be seen and, if anything, meditate upon this orchard signaled many times by the writings on the wall, or on the top of the smoky city's shining neotowers. Ask yourself, brother, which orchard we are talking about, and [...] you will finally understand that it's the Gethsemane, where the son of man sweated blood»²¹. The protagonist sweats blood as well. He explains that the scientists call "hematidrosis" this phenomenon caused by violent emotions or fears, and that they connect it to hysteria, a disease that he fiercely denies to suffer from, because it is typically feminine.

The narrator presents the mentality of the radical suspect that we found in Eco's characters, especially in Braggadocio. Like Simonini, he is obsessed with the disguise and he is a double, or split, character: Bianciardi's narrator lives between past and present, Simonini has a double personality (Simonini and Dalla Piccola). Eco (2011, 2015) and

20. «Basta un colpo d'occhio per capire che siamo in territorio nemico, dove patisce e suda tanta gente sotto l'oppressore» (Bianciardi 2005, p. 959).

21. «[...] il segnale dell'orto, quando devi prepararti [...] e avviarti nel corridoio verso la porta. [...] Ma tu cerca sempre di non farti vedere e medita semmai su questo orto più volte segnalato dalle scritte sui muri, o in cima alle neotorri lustranti della città affumata. Chiediti, fratello, di quale orto si stia qui parlando, e [...] lo capirai, finalmente, che è l'orto del Getsemani, dove il figlio dell'uomo sudò sangue» (Bianciardi 2005, p. 959).

Bianciardi (2005) follow an aesthetics of paranoia, characterized by a hallucinated style, an absurd logic, unusual connections between events and bizarre associations of ideas. The stream of consciousness (Bianciardi) and the diary (Eco 2011) are literary forms that well suit such an “interpretive disease”.

This aesthetics of paranoia seems typical of male characters whose forefathers can be found in Western literature at least from the 18th century. In her book, which focuses on German literature, Johnson writes:

Men of melancholy or enthusiastic temperament, as represented in late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature and psychology, were prone to feel themselves at the mercy of other, uncanny men with “special powers” akin to those to which Freud refers in his essay on “The Uncanny:” we think of others as uncanny not only when we think of their intentions as evil, but when we believe that they have special powers. These powers, however, are nothing supernatural and in fact only exist in the mind of the melancholy man, who lives in a liminal uncanny lack-of-home. [...] the male protagonists of the novels [William Lovell by Tieck and *Der Geisterseher* by Schiller], all of whom exhibit “hysterical” symptoms, are convinced that they are victims of conspiracies. To be sure, they are handicapped by nature; they suffer from an excess of sentiment [...]. But their psychological and social doom is sealed by their perceived victimization at the hands of others — lovers, friends, brothers, fathers, and secret societies. (Johnson (1994), p. 147)

According to Johnson, this paranoia is characteristic of a “male hysteria” recurring around 1800. Indeed, despite his denial, Bianciardi’s protagonist seems to show all the symptoms of this disease. If we consider the corpus analyzed herein, we can observe that all, or most of, the characters connected to conspiracy, both theorists and agents, are men. Italian contemporary literature seems therefore to show a mainly masculine conspiracy paranoia, which is probably the legacy of an older literary tradition.

8. Towards a semiotic study of conspiracy as a literary genre

As Eco demonstrates, it is possible to theorize a “Universal Form” of conspiracy, i.e. a basic narrative structure functioning as the revelation

of obscure plots led by powerful enemies hidden in sinister settings. Such a structure underlies many textual forms circulating in our culture, as multimedia discourse (Internet, TV, newspapers), pamphlets and, of course, novels. There are many studies — mainly, but not only, American — focusing on the recurring traits of the novels based on conspiracy²². Such researches induce us to hypothesize that it is possible to tackle the narrative of conspiracy as a specific literary genre.

Nevertheless, the study of the small corpus of novels presented herein shows a various and nuanced landscape. In contemporary Italian literature, the narration of conspiracy crosses different literary genres, thus assuming different traits and tones, from the tragicomic tale (Camilleri, Alianello) to the socio–historical denounce (Sciascia), to the classic conspiracy theory with uncanny characters and settings (Eco and Camilleri).

In order to get to a more precise typology of the conspiracy genre in Italy, a systematic study of an extended corpus of novels is needed. Semiotics can offer useful analytic tools to such a research. The main traits of both literary and non–literary conspiracy theories have all been central subjects in semiotics:

- a) Agency. The problem of agency is central to the conspiracy theory, which typically focuses on issues of power and is full of mysterious agents opposed to a subject trying to understand their secret plots.²³
- b) Binary oppositions. A conspiracy theory implies the revelation of a secret plot.²⁴ Secrecy is a fundamental element. The contrast between being and appearance is the first of a series of key oppositions that characterize conspiracy mentality: lie / truth, good / evil, light / darkness, individual / society.
- c) Passions. The passion ground of conspiracy is constituted, on the one hand, by the fears of an individual that theorizes the conspiracy and, on the other hand, by the desires and passions

22. See e.g. Levine (1989); Hantke (1994); Wisnicky (2008); Micali (2003).

23. Coady (2006); Melley (2000), pp. 16–26; Byfort (2011), chap. 4. For an overview of the semiotic theories on agency, see Leone (2009).

24. Coady (2006). The study of binary oppositions is one of the main traits of structuralism, and it can be afforded for instance with the “semiotic square” (see e.g. Greimas 1966).

(often hatred and/or avidity of richness or power) attributed to the conspiracy agents. The dominating passion in conspiracy narratives is anxiety, amplified by sinister and uncanny settings and characters.²⁵ Nevertheless, such stereotyped passions are sometimes reversed by an irony that is made possible by the reference to a well codified genre²⁶.

- d) Manipulation and interpretation. Manipulation is highlighted in every conspiracy theory. The mentality of radical suspect derives from the persuasion of being manipulated and it is linked to paranoia, which, as we have seen, can be defined as an interpretive disease, as an abnormal semiosis.²⁷
- e) Counter-narrative. A conspiracy theory is defined in opposition to an official narrative. It implies the opposition of a “self” to a hostile and menacing social order²⁸. Conspiracy theories can therefore be studied as a system of clashing ideologies.

Each of these components can be the object of a semiotic analysis aimed at a literary typology of conspiracy. On the thematic level, when compared for example to American culture, Italian literature seems less concerned with the sub-genre of the big Ufo-alien conspiracy. It is instead more attracted to an imagery rich of secret sects, which have been actually abundant in Italian history and have raised a persisting curiosity on their aims and actions. There are Catholic and revolutionary conspiracies, supernatural personifications of Evil and painfully realistic accounts. However, a typically Italian irony is often ready to downplay the big conspiracy, reducing it to the messy plot of sly but clumsy “arruffoncelli” (“wheeler-dealers,” Alianello 2011, p. 51).

In view of more extended analyses, we can therefore state that, in Italy, conspiracy narratives have peaks corresponding to key traumatic historical events that shake the nation. Such narratives have two main functions. On the one hand, they work as counter-narratives that,

25. Wisnicki (2008), chap. 1. On the semiotics of passions see Greimas and Fontanille (1991); Del Marco and Pezzini (2008).

26. Coady (2006).

27. On interpretation see e.g. Eco (1990, 1992, 2007).

28. Coady (2006). For an overview of the semiotic study of ideology and for a more detailed analysis of the novels treated herein, see Ponzo (2015).

albeit frightening, provide an alternative explanation to the scarcely persuasive official or institutional version. However, on the other hand, the ironic reduction of conspiracy exorcizes paranoia and irrational fear. What we have called the “desecration” of conspiracy seems to prevent Italians from a serious adhesion to narratives and beliefs that in other cultures take sometimes the form of an alternative religiosity.

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Il misterioso Holden

Ipotesi semiotica per un complotto

ALESSANDRA CHIAPPORI*

Voleva che i lettori approcciassero le sue opere in maniera totalmente vergine, totalmente libera. E questo era un intento nobile. Ammirabile. Ma era anche, all'improvviso me ne resi conto, impossibile. Per J.D. Salinger, quantomeno. Nessuno, nessuno poteva approcciare i suoi libri senza averne un'idea preconcetta. Senza avere un'idea preconcetta di lui.

JOANNA RAKOFF, *Un anno con Salinger*

ENGLISH TITLE: The Mysterious Holden: A Semiotic Conspiracy Theory

ABSTRACT: The essay analyses through semiotics the circulation of conspiracy theories related to the fandom of J.D. Salinger's novel *The Catcher in the Rye*. Such conspiracy theories link some of the contents of the novel and certain traits of the biography of its author to the manifestation of violent behaviors among Salinger's fans and readers. The essay explains the genesis of such conspiracy theories as depending on the vicious circle between misinterpretation of the novel by some readers and misinterpretation of their behaviors by some social commentators.

KEYWORDS: J.D. Salinger; *The Catcher in the Rye*; Conspiracy; American Paranoia; Aberrant Interpretation.

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1. Introduzione

Nel marzo 2015 esce *I giovani*, raccolta di racconti di un Salinger alle prime armi, ancora inedita in Italia. Un'operazione editoriale parte da un piano dettagliato portato avanti dalla fondazione cui Salinger ha affidato il compito, dopo la sua morte, di monitorare le pubblicazioni degli inediti e di presiedere all'edizione delle proprie opere¹. Ma anche una novità di notevole portata mediatica: da decenni non veniva pubblicato alcun lavoro dell'autore del Giovane Holden, intorno al quale gravitava — alimentata negli anni e sedimentata nell'immaginario comune — la leggenda dello scrittore recluso, una narrazione fatta di segreti e misteri legati alla sua vita, ai suoi libri e alla sua storia. Una storia che, secondo Berselli (2010: online) «è in fondo la storia di una sparizione perfetta. Un libro, al massimo due, un'opera irripetibile e generazionale come Il giovane Holden (*The Catcher in the Rye*). E poi leggende, incontri segreti, rincorse, misteri». Serino (2015: online) parla di “un autore diventato di culto, letto ogni anno da centinaia di migliaia di lettori in tutto il mondo, che per questo libro ha sacrificato tutta l'esistenza con una vita a (s)comparsa. Ormai nel mito la sua riservatezza”. La pagina celebre di letteratura rappresentata da Holden e l'insolita biografia del suo autore permettono una riflessione sul pensiero complottista. Il romanzo, per l'intreccio di vicende cui è inestricabilmente legato, costituisce un unicum intorno al quale hanno preso vita fenomeni semiotici di vario tipo. A caratterizzarlo è innanzitutto il titolo, nella versione originale *The Catcher in the Rye*, un gioco di parole incentrato sulla canzone di Robert Burns, *Comin' Through the Rye*, di cui Holden, il protagonista del romanzo, storpia il secondo verso. La traduzione letterale in una lingua — e in una cultura — differente da quella originale non riuscirebbe a rendere le sfumature semantiche adombrate da questo riferimento letterario modificato, ecco perché nelle versioni tradotte *The Catcher in the Rye*

1. Il controllo di Salinger sulle proprie opere si contraddistingue nel mondo editoriale per capillarità, severità ed estrosità: l'autore stesso, e dopo la sua scomparsa la fondazione da lui appositamente creata, monitorava ogni passaggio della pubblicazione, insistendo affinché nessun contratto prevedesse, per esempio, la cessione di diritti cinematografici né la possibilità di porre figure in copertina, motivi per cui in ogni parte del mondo le opere di Salinger hanno tutte una copertina bianca. Sulla mania di controllo di Salinger cfr. Hamilton, 2001, p. 209.

ha subito spesso rifacimenti notevoli, diventando l'italiano *Il giovane Holden* o, per esempio, il francese *L'Attrape-Coeurs*. Si tratta dell'unico romanzo mai pubblicato da Salinger, la sua storia editoriale porta con sé misteri e leggende legati ai contenuti, alle scelte dell'autore e alla sua biografia.

A riaccendere interesse su questa narrazione, rafforzando un immaginario, nel 2014 Einaudi promuoveva la nuova traduzione del romanzo e negli Stati Uniti era da poco uscito Salinger, un documentario realizzato da Shane Salerno (2013) costruito dopo anni di ricerche allo scopo di scoprire perché Salinger avesse smesso di pubblicare, perché fosse scomparso e cosa avesse scritto negli ultimi 45 anni. La rappresentazione dipinge lo scrittore come un recluso che dal 1965 si è ritirato in una casa nel New Hampshire continuando in realtà a comunicare e interagire con i fans. È questo atteggiamento a far sì che lo stesso Salinger, con la propria decisione di vita, abbia creato e offerto al pubblico il mito di se stesso, rafforzandolo con un'ossessione per la privacy cresciuta parallelamente alla morbosa curiosità del mondo esterno e dei media. Il documentario di Salerno evidenzia il meccanismo di rafforzamento, nel racconto intorno a Salinger, di alcune isotopie tematiche che ruotano intorno al segreto e al mistero da svelare. Un filone tematico che si ritrova nelle teorie del complotto, fervide e numerose in quegli stessi Stati Uniti culla del culto salingeriano.

L'intento di questo lavoro non sarà dunque quello di effettuare un'analisi semiotica de *Il giovane Holden*, quanto di concentrare l'attenzione sui meccanismi di senso che hanno fatto di questo romanzo e del suo autore i protagonisti di una teoria del complotto capace di agire oltre i confini del testo. Sebbene la storia di Holden presenti diversi agganci a tipiche situazioni complottiste (la pazzia, la paranoia, la diversità, la grande contrapposizione tra verità e falsità), ciò che nel corso dei decenni ha fatto di questo romanzo un simbolo, un mito e, in virtù di questi caratteri, anche un'arma, è principalmente la rappresentazione che ne è stata data, intrecciata a malfunzionamenti semiotici con ricadute tragiche sulla realtà.

2. Ipotesi di complotto

Il film *Conspiracy Theory* (1997) presenta un interessante rimando al Giovane Holden che innerva l'intera struttura narrativa e che sottolinea il suo legame con i temi del complotto. La storia è quella di Jerry, tassista newyorkese ossessionato dai complotti di cui conosce perfettamente tutte le teorie, dalla presenza di droga nelle tubature della città, agli elicotteri della CIA dotati di silenziatore. Proprio la CIA, protagonista di svariate storie di complotto, svolge un ruolo di primo piano, avendo selezionato in passato alcuni soggetti da trasformare in automi umani allo scopo di uccidere senza ricordare nulla. Jerry era tra questi soggetti, ha infatti problemi psichiatrici, paranoie e ossessioni forti: vorrebbe denunciare i suoi persecutori e per questo si rivolge a una funzionaria del ministero della giustizia, Alice, che finisce per essere coinvolta insieme a lui in una sorta di inseguimento-complotto. Tre momenti, in particolare, fanno esplicito riferimento a Holden. Nel primo Alice e un presunto agente FBI trovano il libro tra gli effetti personali di Jerry. Nel secondo Alice, entrata a casa di Jerry, scopre una collezione di copie del libro che tuttavia il proprietario non ha mai letto. Infine Jerry, durante l'ennesimo inseguimento, viene ingannato dal libro stesso: la traccia del suo acquisto fa scattare l'allarme alla CIA, che lo trova e lo cattura. Come afferma Zaccurri (2000, p. 225), lo sceneggiatore Brian Helgeland «assegna al Giovane Holden un ruolo centrale nella trama di Ipotesi di complotto. Il libro di Salinger è infatti l'oggetto che Jerry porta sempre addosso, come un amuleto».

Il film contribuisce e isola alcune suggestioni che rimarcano il legame del libro di Salinger con il complotto. Innanzitutto allontana dalla mera letteratura e dà modo di considerare il "fenomeno Salinger" (Hamilton, 2001, p. 15) da un punto di vista mediatico. La rappresentazione che ha coinvolto i discorsi sul libro e su Salinger è significativa dell'elevazione a culto di Holden e del continuo crescere della leggenda su Salinger, autore schivo. Ma il film fornisce anche lo spunto per osservare quanto Il Giovane Holden sia radicato nella cultura americana: lo si legge a scuola ed è quasi scontato che faccia parte del patrimonio letterario di ciascun americano. Americana è anche la paranoia di Jerry (non a caso il nome dello stesso Salinger). È una visione del mondo che rintraccia complotti, fa emergere misteri, collega fatti apparentemente distanti e sembra caratterizzare gli Stati

Uniti (cfr. Barkun). Il quarto suggerimento che il film offre riguarda uno scavalco dei confini del testo, causato da un regime di adesione intima da parte di personaggi disturbati che pensano il testo destinante di azioni concrete. Non è dunque un caso se il Jerry del film dedicato al complotto ricalca Holden nell'aspetto — indossa sempre un cappellino —, nel rifiuto della società americana, nella promozione di un pensiero libero e creativo contro l'omologazione.

3. *The Catcher in The Rye*

Unico romanzo mai pubblicato da Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye* esce il 16 luglio 1951 dopo una lunga e travagliata lavorazione. Esordio di straordinario successo, riceve subito recensioni positive, viene riconosciuto come libro più innovativo dell'anno e già nell'ottobre successivo all'uscita risulta al quarto posto nella classifica dei best sellers. Viene inoltre selezionato come libro del mese ed è ristampato diverse volte. Il successo prosegue: il romanzo inizia a essere preso in considerazione dal mondo accademico e in pochi anni è già dichiarato libro di culto. Nel 1968 è annoverato tra i 25 libri più venduti dalla fine dell'Ottocento e ancora oggi vende duecentomila copie annuali in tutto il mondo. Dal 1951 non ha mai smesso di attirare lettori, diventando un classico della letteratura americana, parte integrante della cultura del dopoguerra (cfr. Hamilton 2001, Salerno 2013).

Se, secondo la definizione di Italo Calvino «I classici sono libri che esercitano un'influenza particolare sia quando s'impongono come indimenticabili, sia quando si nascondono nelle pieghe della memoria mimetizzandosi da inconscio collettivo o individuale», il giovane Holden è annoverabile tra la categoria. È tra i libri consigliati nell'età scolare e risulta una sorta di manifesto dell'adolescenza, età che per la prima volta viene circoscritta e definita. Testo fondamentale per intere generazioni che si identificano nel personaggio, Holden è l'antesigano del Selvaggio Marlon Brando, anticipa l'era della controcultura, dei beatniks, è un adolescente in guerra contro una società da cui si sente alienato. È un senso di alienazione che viene universalizzato e accolto dal pubblico di massa, che elegge Holden come personaggio capace di esprimere un'età contraddittoria e problematica.

Le contraddizioni plasmano il discorso del libro e allo stesso modo il discorso intorno al libro e al suo autore: Salinger faceva parte di quell'upper-middle class che contesta criticandone attraverso Holden i valori e lo stile di vita. Come Holden guardava con sdegno la superficialità e l'ipocrisia della società, ma era viva in lui l'ambizione di scrivere qualcosa che non fosse semplice letteratura di massa. Finisce però con il contraddirsi, scrivendo un libro culto adorato dalle folle, e il cui protagonista mente più volte («sono il bugiardo più pazzesco che abbiate mai incontrato. Una cosa mostruosa» Salinger, 2014, p. 20), ma conferma di detestare l'ipocrisia.

Una breve analisi del romanzo evidenzia le caratteristiche che più ne confermano la potenza simbolica, e che giustificano l'interpretazione aberrante alla base dell'ipotesi di teoria complottista che riguarda *The Catcher in the Rye*. Sul piano della manifestazione lineare, ciò che colpisce è il linguaggio nuovo, diverso, intessuto di parlato e di termini gergali e volgari, al contempo celebrato dalla critica e censurato. I temi principali² ruotano intorno all'ipocrisia, alle contraddizioni dell'adolescenza e all'alienazione. Holden è un bugiardo cronico, ma si scaglia contro l'ipocrisia della società, una contrapposizione che ne fa un disadattato, patologicamente affetto da una depressione che lo porterà nella clinica in cui si trova in apertura e chiusura di romanzo. Dal tema dell'ipocrisia discendono diverse isotopie, che innervano il romanzo e ne fanno una storia molto forte e potente, la contrapposizione tra individuo e società, la verità e la falsità fanno inoltre parte della struttura tipica del complotto. Anche il regime enunciazionale crea un particolare effetto di senso: Holden parla in prima persona rivolgendosi a un lettore al quale dice esplicitamente di non voler dire tutto. È lui a conformare il proprio destinatario e a manipolare il discorso, evitando coscientemente di dire alcune cose: «Se davvero volete sentirne parlare, la prima cosa che vorrete sapere sarà dove sono nato, e che schifo di infanzia ho avuto, e cosa facevano e non facevano i miei genitori prima che nascessi, e altre stronzate alla David Copperfield, ma a me non va di entrare nei dettagli, se proprio volete la verità. [...] Vi racconterò giusto la roba da matti che mi è capitata

2. Presente e forte, nonché parzialmente collegato al tema dell'ipocrisia, è anche il tema dell'infanzia, la cui figura principale è la sorella Phoebe, simbolo dell'innocenza che Holden sa essersi persa nel mondo adulto.

sotto Natale, prima di ritrovarmi così a pezzi che poi sono dovuto venire qui a stare un po' tranquillo».

Holden è protagonista di una storia di cui è l'eroe perdente. L'ideologia che connota il percorso del soggetto da lui rappresentato sul piano figurativo, contrapposta all'assiologia dominante della società, non riuscirà a imporsi, e lo soggiogherà. È destinato a perdere, ammalarsi e a fallire sia a scuola, da cui scappa, sia nel suo progetto di passare qualche giorno a New York non scoperto dai suoi, e ancora in ogni micro azione che intraprende nel breve periodo in cui la storia si svolge. Al livello semionarrativo profondo si ritrovano le forti opposizioni binarie che caratterizzano non solo Holden ma molte storie di complotto. In particolare, come si è visto dalla rapida analisi del livello discorsivo ed enunciativo, la contrapposizione principale è quella riprodotta dal quadrato della veridizione, e al cuore delle teorie del complotto, quella tra essere e apparire, tra verità e falsità.

Oltre al testo ci sono poi la biografia dell'autore e la narrazione mediatica che la accompagna. Le due storie sembrano condividere molte delle isotopie tematiche, dal disturbo psichico all'alienazione, caratteristiche di Holden e di Salinger al contempo, tanto da alimentare, in un aberrante passaggio tra testo ed extra testo, la rappresentazione del testo come entità maledetta. Lo stesso Salerno (2013), così come già molti biografi e giornalisti, assume infatti l'identificazione tra autore e personaggio come chiave di lettura del complotto generato intorno a Holden.

4. Un romanzo cult

Zaccuri (2000, p. 223) definisce *Il Giovane Holden* un "cult book per eccellenza", mentre Shields e Salerno (2014, p. XI) notano che l'opera di Salinger «ha un peso culturale e una capacità di penetrazione che nella letteratura moderna sono rimasti quasi ineguagliati». Nel giro di pochi anni Holden diventa il libro che tutti devono aver letto, il libro più venduto e il più censurato a causa della carica ribelle ed eversiva che il suo protagonista difende. Il romanzo viene interpretato come antiamericano, non solo per il linguaggio offensivo ma per l'immoralità e la perversione. È un libro che dà voce al disagio, e per questo motivo Salinger diventa il portavoce dei giovani, il loro guru. Secondo Shields

e Salerno (2014, p. 315) «Holden divenne la parola d'ordine di un club segreto e sovversivo, e la società sembrò dividersi tra chi conosceva il romanzo di Salinger e chi no». Proponendo un modello culturale alternativo alla società americana, il romanzo accresce la propria forza simbolica fino a diventare un mito nel senso barthesiano (Barthes, 1957): viene connotato con valori aggiunti, che nel caso di Holden hanno a che fare con i giovani, la ribellione, l'opposizione contro la falsità dilagante della società di massa occidentale (cfr. Hamilton, 2001, pp. 202–203). A figurativizzare la ribellione concorre per esempio, dentro al libro, il rifiuto di Holden per il cinema, odio condiviso dall'autore ed espresso con divieto imposto alla riproduzione cinematografica di qualsiasi sua opera (cfr. Salerno 256), dice Holden in apertura «Se c'è una cosa che odio è il cinema, non me lo dovete nemmeno nominare» (Salinger, 2014, p. 4). I contenuti fortemente simbolici e la parallela narrazione sulla vita dell'autore creano intorno al romanzo una sorta di leggenda (Hamilton, 2001, p. 214): «non molto tempo dopo il suo esordio, J.D. Salinger diventerà un simbolo della sacralità della letteratura onorata nel silenzio e, insieme, un narratore amato e celebrato da intere generazioni di lettori» conferma l'introduzione italiana a *I Giovani* (Salinger, 2015).

Come per i fenomeni di culto, anche nel caso Holden possono essere identificate alcune caratteristiche del meccanismo di senso mitico, a loro volta causa di letture aberranti. Holden presenta innanzitutto un seguito di lettori appassionati. Non si limita a essere un best seller, ma riesce ad avere un impatto sulla vita dei lettori, un'influenza più o meno forte sui singoli ma allo stesso tempo sulla società, la cultura e sulla rappresentazione che un'intera generazione dà di sé. La forza simbolica del culto — in questo caso del libro — può anche sfociare in un sentimento di fascino perverso e degenerato incanalato in una sorta di ossessione da menti disturbate. Come il culto religioso, anche il culto del romanzo si collega alla sfera religiosa, secondo modelli narrativi e valoriali condivisi con il sistema delle teorie del complotto. La forza simbolica di Holden si fa contenitore di un sentimento di rifiuto e ribellione molto più grande del libro stesso, che diventa il testo di riferimento per una sorta di nuova religione.

In merito all'aspetto religioso del fenomeno di culto, secondo Ugo Volli (2012, p. 35) «attraverso il culto, il fedele acquista una qualche intimità col divino, impara a conoscere le sue storie e il suo carat-

tere — anche se separazione e trascendenza continuano a essere la principale definizione di ogni forma di divino [...] il culto avvicina ai suoi profeti, a chi ne ha avuto rivelazione». Salinger, voce ispiratrice dietro le pagine del libro, è noto per la propria fuga dalla scena pubblica. Per decenni resta distante dal mondo dei riflettori mentre moltissimi lettori e giornalisti, guidati da diverse ragioni, esplorano il New Hampshire per cercarlo, riconoscendo in lui, in modo distorto, la divinità dietro al culto del Giovane Holden. Nel culto religioso rientra inoltre la lettura di testi, un'attività che consente alla comunità raccolta intorno alla divinità di organizzare i propri valori, in questo caso rappresentati nella storia di Holden. «Per essere sistematico, il culto si esplica in una serie regolata di pratiche, per l'appunto i riti, che sono da pensare come le modalità di comportamento in cui il culto si esplica. Il culto è sempre espresso da un fare, non è mai semplicemente una condizione cognitiva o affettiva» (Volli, 2012, p. 36). Quando il culto si accompagna a una credenza forte, l'adesione ai valori della storia-religione si trasforma in azioni, di cui il libro e il suo autore-divinità sono destinanti. Infine, il culto nell'era moderna diventa culto della merce, feticismo. In questo caso l'oggetto è un libro dalla forte carica simbolica, intorno al quale si costruisce una sorta di comunità con i propri riti e pratiche, utili a mettere in scena i valori espressi dal testo e condivisi da chi si oppone alla società americana.

Queste osservazioni evidenziano un legame tra il culto e il moderno cult, definizione alla quale risponde Holden. Se infatti il culto è sacro, il cult ha una dimensione profana, che eleva a culto divino pratiche e testi della cultura di massa: «il culto richiama il sacro e mette in gioco un altro mondo: le sue credenze e riti. Il cult richiama il profano e mette in gioco questo mondo, trascendendolo ma riferendosi alle sue aspettative, pratiche e ai suoi testi. Il culto dipende dai dogmi e dalle credenze, mentre il cult nasce dai gusti e dalle sensibilità» (Berzano, 2012, p. 236). Al centro di entrambe le forme di ritualità restano valori e forti relazioni simboliche, che si accompagnano a una forte carica emotiva, collante della comunità che si rispecchia nella credenza. (Berzano 2012, p. 237) si riferisce a questa comunità come a un fandom: «una collettività che si riconosce in un insieme di conoscenze, atteggiamenti, identificazioni, pratiche riferite a un personaggio, film, uno stile di vita. Sia la comunità istituzionale che il fandom contribuiscono a creare il cult. Il fandom riproduce e mantiene il cult, così

come il rito riproduce e mantiene il mito. Il fandom, quindi, eleva a cult individui, pratiche e testi della cultura profana. Ma è attraverso il cult che l'universo dei fans acquisisce un'identità collettiva» (Berzano 2012, p. 237). Il fandom si riconosce nell'insieme di valori e pratiche riferite all'oggetto di massa — il libro — e mantiene, riproducendolo, il cult, così come una ritualità riproduce una mitologia. Ma soprattutto presuppone (cfr. Scaglioni, 2006) una prossimità, un'adesione entusiastica e un'interpretazione del testo. Se il testo è il destinante di ogni azione del fandom, quest'ultimo può però degenerare (nel senso etimologico del deviare dall'origine) la propria interpretazione, dando luogo ad atti efferati e guidati dalla fascinazione di un fittizio rapporto intimo con l'autore o la star coinvolta. In questa semiosi impazzita e lettura aberrante giocano un ruolo decisivo disordini di personalità e malattie psichiche che si inseriscono come amplificatori devianti di una dimensione affettiva del testo centrale per la sua fruizione e interpretazione.

Dal libro al suo autore, dal fandom a reali fatti di cronaca: Il giovane Holden porta con sé la nomea di "libro maledetto", ad alimentare il complotto per il quale negli anni Ottanta è ritornato diverse volte sulla scena pubblica come manuale per killer. La carica eversiva e il forte valore simbolico espresso dal testo e interpretato da un fandom molto coeso si è fatta licenza di uccidere. Sono quattro i casi che le cronache annoverano e a cui i media hanno dato risalto, costruendo una storia parallela ma legata a Holden e Salinger, fatta di paranoia e di elementi tipici delle teorie complottiste. Il primo a sparare in nome del Giovane Holden è un supplente, ossessionato dal libro, che colpisce uno studente con cui aveva avuto un alterco, tiene in ostaggio la classe e infine si uccide. Nel dicembre 1980 avviene il fatto più eclatante: Mark David Chapman spara a John Lennon e lo uccide, Holden sarà la sua difesa in tribunale. Non si ferma qui la scia degli omicidi compiuti contro personalità di spicco da menti malate, tutte caratterizzate dall'età, compresa tra i 20 e i 25 anni, e dal tenere in una mano la pistola e nell'altra il libro di Salinger. John Hinckley sparerà a Reagan e al suo addetto stampa, dichiarando che il suo gesto è spiegato tra le pagine di Holden, e infine Robert Bardo ucciderà l'attrice Rebecca Shaeffer con lo stesso mandante.

5. La leggenda di Salinger

«Non raccontate mai niente a nessuno» sono le parole con cui Holden conclude il romanzo (Salinger, 2014, p. 251), parole che sembrano, ancora una volta, poter uscire dalle pagine del libro e investire la biografia dell'autore, innescando quel cortocircuito al contempo mediatico e alimentato dal fandom per cui il senso del libro viene deviato e applicato alla vita reale. La rappresentazione che Salerno (2014) fa di Salinger, la più recente e documentata attualmente disponibile, vede l'autore rispettare il consiglio di Holden. Avvolto nel silenzio, nel segreto e nel mistero circa la propria attività per più di quarant'anni, Salinger appare come un recluso ossessionato dalla possibilità che qualcuno possa spiarlo o disturbarlo. Conferma questa visione Hamilton (2001, p. 9) che scrive di Salinger «era, in tutti i sensi, invisibile, come morto, e tuttavia conservava, agli occhi di molte persone, una vera e propria forza mitica. Era famoso per non voler essere famoso. Dichiarava di aborre qualsiasi tipo di indagine pubblica ed era diventata per lui una pratica abituale quella di diffondere solo qualche falso indizio». Ma, Shields e Salerno (2014, p. XII) lo evidenziano «lungi dall'essere un recluso, intrattenne anzi un costante dialogo con il mondo, in modo da rinforzare la percezione della sua reclusione».

Questa osservazione ritiene l'isolamento di Salinger parte di un più ampio e consapevole progetto di comunicazione volto a perpetuare il mito di se stesso, una narrazione che condivide alcuni aspetti con le storie di complotto e il diffuso discorso sulla paranoia presente in tutta la cultura — non solo letteraria — americana. Così come nei complotti, nel ragionamento di Salerno sulla cosciente manipolazione avviata da Salinger con il proprio stile di vita mancano fonti dirette ed è forte il modello narrativo legato al mistero. Se il ritiro nell'anonimato è in realtà qualcosa di organizzato, è facile pensare che sia finalizzato al mantenimento di una leggenda progettata a tavolino: dagli anni Sessanta molti giornalisti e fan, convinti della natura pubblicitaria delle scelte dell'autore, danno vita a una serie di appostamenti rocamboleschi in cerca dello scoop. Quella del reclusive author è un'etichetta inventata dai giornalisti stessi che, con le esperienze di caccia alla notizia, di svelamento del mistero e del segreto, costruiscono a loro volta un'ulteriore rappresentazione giustificatrice del mito di partenza. Nella quarta di copertina del corposo volume di Salerno, che affianca il documen-

tario, si paragona la ricostruzione della vita dell'autore a un "thriller letterario", segno di adeguamento alla retorica del mistero per cui la biografia di Salinger sarebbe pervasa di segreti, falsità e complotti attraverso i quali la tensione del pubblico sarebbe tenuta in vita dal costante fascino dell'enigma da svelare. Non è una novità il fatto che biografie votate alla privacy lontano dai riflettori abbiano nutrito l'immaginario delle storie, in letteratura e non solo: Greta Garbo, con il suo ritiro, sconvolse il pubblico, e allo stesso modo Thomas Pynchon, noto autore americano, vive nel segreto alimentando intorno a sé ricerche, dibattiti e un costante clima di irrisolto, il medesimo che ruota intorno al misterioso nom de plume della scrittrice Elena Ferrante. La storia di Salinger è inoltre stata rielaborata per dar vita alla storia di un altro scrittore isolato, il protagonista di Scoprendo Forrester, figura che già nel nome omaggia l'autore del Giovane Holden e di cui, nel film, si mettono a nudo i segreti e il passato. Salerno evidenzia, poi, il ruolo svolto dai disturbi psichici, quelli di Salinger, successivi all'esperienza drammatica sul fronte di guerra, ma anche quelli di Holden, come ricordato prima sofferente di depressione e ricoverato in una clinica. Una caratteristica che accomuna, ancora, Holden e il suo autore, a solidificare una semiosi aberrante che si inserisce a sua volta nel discorso sulla paranoia e l'ossessione americana per il complotto.

Sulla sovra copertina di *Franny e Zoey*, uscito nel 1961, viene riportata una frase dal racconto che sembra rispecchiare le idee di Salinger: «è mia destabilizzante opinione che l'anonimato–oscurità di uno scrittore sia la seconda più preziosa proprietà che gli venga data in prestito durante i suoi anni di attività». Ritiratosi a Cornish nel 1953, dal 1965 Salinger non pubblica più nulla, permettendo alla tensione tra la sua vita privata e quella pubblica di scrittore di un libro di successo, di crescere a dismisura. Salinger «non si suicida — secondo Hamilton (2001, p. 196) — ma fa la cosa che più ci va vicina: scompare, smette di vivere nel mondo, si rende semipostumo. Puoi parlare di lui, ma non puoi parlare con lui». È un atteggiamento che, secondo la retorica del mistero e della paranoia che si è visto essere già ampiamente condivisa dal libro e dal suo autore, appare come la volontà di nascondimento di qualcosa che deve restare segreto. E i manoscritti di Salinger mai pubblicati, di cui è stata confermata l'esistenza, alimentano nell'opinione pubblica la tensione e la curiosità per la rivelazione di questo segreto, tenuto nascosto per decenni.

Se, come affermano Shields e Salerno (2014, p. XI), «J.D. Salinger trascorse dieci anni a scrivere *Il giovane Holden* e il resto della sua vita a rimpiangere di averlo fatto», è pur vero che, non pubblicando altro, Salinger è diventato autore di un testo universale. Da qui l'ulteriore forza mitica che è andata caricando il potere simbolico del romanzo, un unicum che, visti i molteplici legami tra contenuto e vita dell'autore, sembra parlare al pubblico, coinvolgendolo intensamente dal punto di vista emotivo. Il successo della leggenda dell'autore schivo e isolato si alimenta parallelamente al libro e al suo successo. Ammantarsi di mistero nella società dello spettacolo è la via più semplice per attirare l'opinione pubblica: il silenzio di Salinger non ha fatto che alimentare il suo mito, mentre l'isolamento ha garantito la funzione contraria.

Dopo la pubblicazione di *Holden*, il complesso meccanismo semiotico attivato da una parte dal testo stesso, dall'altra dal fandom e dalle sue devianze criminali e, infine, dalla vita dello stesso autore, ha dato vita a un'epica dal sapore complottista, sempre in bilico tra una rappresentazione mitica, falsa, e una reale dei fatti, dunque veritiera. Un ambiente simbolico — una semiosfera — fertile per le teorie sul complotto.

6. *Bad boys, bad readers*³

La storia di Holden non sarebbe forse quella odierna se a caricare di ulteriore forza simbolica un libro già potente, con una comunità di lettori assiologicamente orientata e un autore dalla biografia curiosamente ricalcata sui valori del libro, non fossero intervenuti gli episodi criminali menzionati sopra. Lettori dalla personalità psicolabile e colpevoli, a monte dei delitti, di una lettura e interpretazione aberrante del testo, questi personaggi si sono identificati nell'alienazione raccontata da Holden decidendo di non attenersi, nella loro immedesimazione, alla narrazione, in cui il soggetto accetta passivamente ciò che lo circonda senza agire ma venendo sopraffatto dalla realtà, e hanno sparato. In virtù di atti efferati come questi, Holden entra di diritto tra

3. La formula è tratta da Whitfield, 1997, p. 569, dove l'autore si sofferma sul successo di Holden tra il pubblico adolescenziale e tra i fanatici che, sulla scorta del fascino esercitato dal libro ne hanno fatto un'arma, ricollegandosi quindi agli episodi criminali che hanno visto protagonista il libro.

i protagonisti di un mondo letterario intessuto di ossessioni e paranoie che caratterizza la letteratura americana. Non a caso Zacurri (2000, pp. 223–25) dedica un intero capitolo del suo volume sulla paranoia nelle narrazioni di massa americane alla “sindrome Holden” ritenendo che si tratti di «un libro che può diventare pericoloso se non viene letto con il dovuto distacco, se la porta stregata della letteratura rimane aperta troppo a lungo e il lettore finisce dentro il romanzo. Non era successo così anche a Don Chisciotte e a madame Bovary?» (Zacurri, 2000, pp. 39–40). Il fenomeno legato all’interpretazione aberrante di Holden dimostra come talvolta «la letteratura [possa diventare] la porta d’ingresso in un regno maledetto» (Zacurri, 2000, p. 26), e come i confini del testo possano perdere nitidezza e aprire a interpretazioni fallaci facendo leva «su una sorta di preconsoscenza dei testi i quali, a causa del contesto del tutto inusuale in cui vengono collocati, assumono un significato nuovo e niente affatto rassicurante. L’idea di letteratura che ne deriva corrisponde, nel migliore dei casi, a un sapere collocato in una sfera lontana dalla normalità dell’esistenza» (Zacurri, 2000, p. 21).

I criminali hanno perso il senso del romanzo: da storia, artefatto di una cultura del secondo Novecento, Holden è stato reinterpreto fuori contesto e coinvolto in un percorso di senso aberrante. La notorietà di alcuni coinvolti — Lennon, Reagan — e il ripetersi del fatto ha dato via alla nuova isotopia, quella del romanzo dal sinistro potere, mandante di omicidi. Miscelata con i temi del romanzo, con il mito e il culto ad esso legati, con la storia dell’autore, questa nuova storia sul e del Giovane Holden ha finito per avvalorare ulteriormente una rappresentazione a toni complottisti in cui il romanzo è messo al bando perché veicolo di temi legati alla ribellione, di controversie e dell’imprevedibile azione di personaggi psicotici e disadattati. Se il mito alimenta il mito, anche questi fatti di cronaca non sono semioticamente esauriti nel loro svolgersi, ma hanno attivato una nuova spinta simbolica. Aumentando il mistero e la carica di enigmatico fascino intorno al romanzo, aumentano anche le vendite del libro e quel sistema così massificato e ipocrita aborrito da Holden, da Salinger, dagli assassini, non fa che riprodursi in un sistema a circuito chiuso, come del resto si conferma quello della macchina aberrante a toni complottisti, basato sulla fallace idea di continuità tra fiction e realtà. Murakami, traduttore di *The Catcher in the Rye* in giapponese, sancisce la presenza di due sistemi di senso in conflitto e costante

frizione dietro al romanzo e al suo successo, il libro per lui «ha una qualche connessione con la tenebra nella mente delle persone, e questo è veramente importante. È un grande libro ma, allo stesso tempo, Salinger era inchiodato in quel sistema a circuito chiuso. Salinger è in un sistema aperto in quanto scrittore, ma penso che il suo libro sia ambivalente tra un sistema e l'altro. Credo che questa sia una delle ragioni della sua forza» (in Mondadori, 2014, p. 5).

Una forza che è costruita nel testo grazie a una carica patemica particolarmente intensa e al regime enunciazionale che vede Holden rivolgersi direttamente a un tu, identificabile non troppo difficilmente come il suo lettore. Un espediente con il quale avvicinare da un lato il lettore-interlocutore al personaggio e, dall'altro, esibire una manifesta coscienza della finzione letteraria. Come Holden è autore dichiarato delle proprie sensazioni e pensieri, così vicini a quelli del lettore medio, così Salinger si dimostra compartecipe a quel mondo. Illuminante l'affermazione di Joanna Rakoff nel suo libro che, seppure romanzato, ricalca fatti autentici su Salinger:

Quando si legge un racconto di Salinger la sensazione non è tanto quella di leggere un racconto, quanto di avere Salinger in persona che ti sussurra le sue storie all'orecchio. Il mondo che crea è al tempo stesso palpabilmente reale e spaventosamente intensificato, come se girasse per il mondo con le terminazioni nervose scoperte. Leggere Salinger significa compiere un gesto di tale intimità che, a volte, subentra del disagio. (Rakoff, 2015, p. 230)

Holden stesso — ancora una volta il rimando è dall'extratestuale al testo — affermava l'esigenza di un rapporto con i libri non limitato al testo, nella falsa idea di una corrispondenza tra autore modello e autore reale, tra fiction e realtà: «Mi fanno impazzire i libri che quando hai finito di leggerli vorresti che l'autore fosse il tuo migliore amico, per telefonargli ogni volta che ti va» (Salinger, 2014, p. 23).

7. Manipolare, ingannare, raccontare

Attraverso la letteratura possono circolare in società discorsi nei quali vengono affermati o contraddetti valori. Sono discorsi custoditi in testi narrativi, emotivamente coinvolgenti o meno, dotati spesso di un valore aggiunto dal punto di vista espressivo. Ma, in quanto narrazioni,

sono responsabili allo stesso modo della circolazione di falsità all'interno di ogni manifestazione culturale. I testi letterari selezionano, raccontano, stringono con il lettore un implicito patto di finzione in cui agisce una sospensione dell'incredulità: inevitabilmente, dunque, mentono. Il complotto si basa sul medesimo meccanismo semiotico elementare: ricostruire un ordine basato su una struttura e una logica narrativa. Fabbricando l'illusione di un mistero su Salinger e il suo libro culto secondo i meccanismi della retorica del complotto, sono stati i media a creare e far circolare la teoria del libro maledetto, connettendola a un'agentività che, a dispetto della fiction, è diventata reale.

Il libro è stato così personalizzato e dotato di intenzionalità come il soggetto — un destinante in questo caso — di una storia che ricalca molte delle caratteristiche delle cospirazioni per cui poteri sotterranei agiscono in nome di individui singoli nella società. Ogni teoria del complotto è spesso incentrata sulla presenza di un'agentività, solitamente un potere autoritario o un personaggio nascosto, fautore di un progetto delittuoso: Salinger, la sua vita e il suo libro-mito, sembrano incarnare questa figura. La trama criminale colpisce persone o istituzioni secondo un disegno occulto, ed è ciò che nella storia di Holden sembra poter fare il libro stesso, in nome del quale vengono uccise star o minacciati presidenti. Inoltre, un altro aspetto ricorrente in ogni storia di complotto è la presenza di assiologie binarie che, con riferimento al quadrato della veridizione, contrappongono il regime del segreto al pubblico, la falsità e la verità, l'individuo e la società. Sono opposizioni presenti nel testo, nella storia relativa alla biografia dell'autore, e nelle motivazioni che hanno spinto i criminali ad agire. La tensione tra i due poli opposti si esprime con un'angoscia e una paranoia che affliggono il protagonista, individuo solo davanti alla società.

L'estetica della paranoia, condivisa dal lettore medio e unita a uno stile interpretativo aberrante perché basato su un percorso di costruzione del senso privo di fondamenta, garantisce la rappresentazione dei fatti che riguardano Holden in forma di complotto. Lo stesso stile interpretativo, unito a reali problemi psichici, dà invece vita a gesti folli nella realtà. Ad agevolare il processo di creazione della retorica complottista concorre la base simbolica presente intorno al romanzo: Holden fa ormai parte della mitologia letteraria per una serie di

motivi interni ed esterni al testo. Ma anche l'inconscio collettivo, si è visto, partecipa di questo processo semiotico, presentando la paranoia come estetica diffusa soprattutto nel modo di interpretare i fatti. Gli Stati Uniti sono certo un contesto favorito e socialmente predisposto a un tale atteggiamento (cfr. Panella, Grammanetieri), si pensi ai casi presidenziali Watergate e Kennedy, nei quali i media hanno avuto un ruolo preminente nello svelare i segreti. Nell'immaginario collettivo americano è diffusa una tendenza alla paranoia e al sospetto costante che ciò che appare non sia ciò che è, tale cultura popolare agisce sulla connotazione del mito e del complotto, favorendo un circuito che alimenta reciprocamente immaginario e prodotti di fiction. La singolare vita di Salinger e la quasi totale assenza di fonti, prove e testi dell'autore, hanno inoltre favorito la ricerca di indizi e segni utili ad alimentare la teoria del complotto. In questa direzione hanno agito i giornalisti, in cerca di verità alternative rispetto alle apparenze: il fascino del segreto e lo svelamento hanno dato vita a una retorica molto efficace.

La costruzione complottista sarebbe dunque un problema eminentemente semiotico, fatto di narrazioni e interpretazioni, "non raccontate mai niente a nessuno" consiglia Holden nella chiusura di un libro la cui interpretazione crea un cortocircuito di senso e assume vita propria come uso deviato nella realtà. Se la letteratura ha il fondamentale scopo di fornire istruzioni e informazioni sulla realtà attraverso inferenze e ipotesi, in un fruttuoso passaggio dalla fiction alla realtà, nel caso di Holden la base mitica è così forte da invertire il processo, riverberando un mito sociale sulla storia, riletta e re-interpretata alla luce della nuova credenza. Una credenza che, secondo la tipologia di Bertrand (2000), si potrebbe classificare come un credere accolto, un regime di adesione al testo così forte da fondere il lettore ad esso, una sospensione della finzionalità che annulla i confini tra il testo e la realtà costruendo un mondo possibile in tutto e per tutto uguale al reale. Il lettore viene inghiottito dal romanzo, fino a non distinguere più cosa sia fiction e cosa no.

Il testo può al contempo diventare destinante di azioni non incluse entro i suoi confini, e alimentare, con questa interpretazione sbagliata, una rappresentazione complottista a base mitologica ben lontana dal significato primo. Quale resta, dunque, il ruolo della letteratura e dell'immaginario all'interno del grande e polimorfo habitat dei discorsi

sociali e delle rappresentazioni mediatiche? Il caso di Holden dimostra quanto la letteratura possa essere influenzata dalle altre rappresentazioni, evidenziando la potenza simbolica di un linguaggio non più letterario ma prevalentemente mitico. Ne deriva una forma di “autismo mediatico” tale per cui, attraverso i testi letterari e mediatici, ogni utente aderirebbe a un regime discorsivo sulla base di una coincidenza di ideologie, senza più considerare gli elementi paratestuali, finendo quindi per essere fagocitato e ingannato dal testo.

Della potenza degli effetti di senso testuali e degli inganni della comunicazione e delle false interpretazioni sembrava pienamente cosciente Salinger in *Seymour. Un'introduzione*, del 1963 uno dei pochi racconti pubblicati dopo Holden. Buddy Glass si esibisce qui in un monologo in cui si rivolge esplicitamente al lettore, giocando ancora con l'enunciazione tanto da indurre la critica a identificarlo con la voce di Salinger. Si tratta, semioticamente, di un esercizio di metanarrativa teso a esplicitare i meccanismi letterari. Buddy mette il lettore a confronto con il potere della narrativa e dell'enunciazione: come Salinger, anche lui manipola, inganna, racconta attraverso le parole e il linguaggio, strumenti di trasformazione della realtà. Ecco allora emergere il senso della dedica posta in apertura al volume: «se esiste ancora al mondo un lettore non professionista — o qualcuno che legge e basta — chiedo a lui o a lei, con indicibile affetto e gratitudine, di dividere questa dedica in quattro con mia moglie e i miei figli».

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Trolls, Hackers, Anons

Conspiracy Theories in the Peripheries of the Web

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TITOLO ITALIANO: *Trolls, Hackers, Anons*: Cospirazioni e complotti nelle periferie del Web.

ABSTRACT: Conspiracy theories permeate through every level of the Web. The semiotic features of this medium lead to mistrust, misunderstanding, and aberrant interpretations entailing a mythological approach to meaning. The essay investigates the relations between conspiracy theories and the semiotic features of a peculiar area of the Web: its peripheries. In particular, the essay focuses on the so-called “A-culture”, hosted in the boards of sites such as *4chan* and *8chan*. In order to study the semiotic dynamics that promote the rise of conspiracy theories, the essay singles out a particularly challenging case study: the violent Web dispute about video games and feminism, known as *#GamerGate*.

KEYWORDS: Web and Internet; Conspiracy Theories; Play; *#GamerGate*.

1. Introduction

Michael Barkun in *A Culture of Conspiracy* (2003) outlines three principles of conspiracy theories: 1) nothing happens by accident; 2) nothing is at it seems; and 3) everything is connected. The first principle is strictly connected with what says Matthew Dentith (2014): a conspiracy theory is the attempt to explain a significative event with a significant cause — which, as Dario Martinelli reminded us, is one

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1. In the Meetings on Meaning 2014–2015, dedicated to Semiotics of Conspiracy Theories.

of the basic needs to whom humanity answer with the creation of myths. Conspiracy theories, therefore, are products of a desperate need of meaning facing the inability to easily interpret reality.

The second principle — on deception — is also firmly connected to semiotic activities: if nothing is what it seems, it means that everything is a symbol, or a clue, of something else. We can see the roots of this concept from the etymology of the word “conspiracy” itself, which means to “blow together” or to “whisper together”, implying, on the one hand, secrecy and on the other hand, conventionality among the conspirators.

Finally, the third principle, relates to an other word, often used to describe conspiracy theories: plot. This etymon, also used in many other languages to indicate conspiracies (“complot” Spanish, “Koplott” German) literally means to be “bent”, or “bent together” and therefore bound together. The word “plot” is also connected with the textile area, indicating “fabric”, or “cloth”, and to the textual area (from the latin “textus”, that means “fabric”, again) referring to the disposition of events in a narration. Similarly, the Italian word “trama” indicates, at the same time, a machination, the intricacy of a piece of cloth, and a story. Conspiracy theories, hence, seem to be inextricably related to weaving — as much as narration is.

In addition, there is one last word, semantically connected to these, “web”, which nowadays is used to metonymically indicate one of the most important infrastructure of our time: the World Wide Web, the enormous hypertext² that contains much of the information exchanged on the Internet.

Arguably it may be no accident, therefore, if the Web is one of the most productive cradles of conspiracy theories, being the very metaphor that we use to understand it, deeply connected with the genesis of conspiracies. Additionally, the Web also features characteristics that match perfectly with Barkun’s other two principles, consisting in a hypertext at the same time puzzling and soaked of secrecy.

In this paper we will approach the relationships between conspiracy theories and the semiotics features of a very peculiar area of the Web: its peripheries. In particular we will focus on the so-called A-culture (Auerbach 2012) hosted in some boards of sites such as 4chan and

2. As in Nelson (1965): a multi-pronged digital text which parts are connected by links.

8chan. In order to investigate the semiotic issues that promote the rise of conspiracy theories, will dedicate a paragraph to a particularly challenging case study: the violent Web dispute about video games and feminism, known as #GamerGate.

2. The Peripheries of the Web

In this chapter we will approach the Web with the tools and theories of semiotics of culture, which are, in my opinion, particularly indicated to map such a complex and ever changing reality such as the one that the Internet hosts. I have already proposed such approach on the pages of this very journal (Thibault, forthcoming), therefore this paragraph will be dedicated to a brief recap of its main assumptions, in order to be able to continue with our investigation.

2.1. *The Semiosphere of the Web*

The word “periphery” that I used to indicate a precise and characteristic area of the Web, is obviously borrowed from Juri Lotman’s theory of the semiosphere — i.e. the smaller working semiotic mechanisms, the minimum unit of semiosis (Lotman 1990) that surrounds every single culture. The semiosphere, hence the semiotic space of a culture, appears to both enclose the Web and be overtaken by it. On the one hand, the texts forming the Web are undoubtedly part of the culture, but, on the other hand, however they are not limited to a single culture³.

The Web, therefore, has to be considered as a transversal set of texts, delimited by the overlapping of the immense hypertext of the Web and the semiosphere. The presence of the Web in a single culture, hence, is determined by the intersections between its semiosphere and the hypertext, and therefore will be a two-dimensional section of a sphere. This section, however, follows the general organization and structure of the whole semiosphere, and presents all the features and dynamics described by Lotman in his works: the hierarchy

3. Let’s think at social networks such as Vkontakte or renren, which are internal to the Web but external to the semiosphere of western culture

between a rigid, but influential center and a free and dynamic periphery, the continuous movement of textualities from the latter to the first, the existence of an external border working as a porous space of translation and so on.

Regarding the Web, the periphery — described by Lotman as the most innovative, dynamic, and fertile area of culture, but also limited to a minority of individuals — hosts what we can generally call “subcultures”, including fandoms, religious sects, political extremists and, subcultures connected to the concepts of geekiness and nerdism. Their websites and texts are generally unknown to the majority of the public, and their ideologies are more often than not opposed, or at least alternatives, to those that we can find at the center.

2.2. *The Internet*

The situation that we have described, with the Web present in every area of culture, represents only our current situation. When the Internet was a novelty, known only to a small circle of experts, it was a peripheral phenomenon — as happens to all cultural innovations limited, at the beginning, to a set of individuals and/or to the younger generations.

When the Web was born a small community of users arose, strictly connected with geek and nerd subcultures, formed by individuals that, for passion or for profession, happened to surf in the all new World Wide Web. This community shared a system of values and of ideologies (notably including a radical separation between reality and virtual world) and a strong feeling of belonging to the medium.

With time, however, the Web underwent to a process that made of it of central importance in the semiosphere, maybe the most important medium of all. From the peripheries, the Web has been deformed towards the center of the semiosphere (see Lotman 1985). Millions of new users started surfing and the Web itself changed greatly. Not much of the original Web is still existing today.

The Web subculture, nevertheless, survived and it is still situated in the periphery of the semiosphere, mostly gathered around forums and imageboards such as gaia online⁴ or the infamous 4chan. The latter

4. Even if fairly unkonwn to the public, gaia online, forum dedicated to manga and

is an imageboard founded in 2003, whose users interact in complete anonymity sharing and commenting images, generally employing a wide range of highly formalized practices of textual production and sharing. Most of the Internet memes (Marino 2015) were invented there and, even if not much famous, it has a large influence, in the Web and even outside it — the infamous collective of hackivists known as Anonymous was born on 4chan’s random board /b/.

This part of the peripheries of the Web and its pragmatics is generally referred to by its users with the synecdoche “the Interent”. In this chapter, we too, hence, will use (improperly) the expression “the Internet” to refer to the same area as opposed to “the Web” representing the whole World Wide Web.

2.3. A-Culture

Auerbach (2012) renames “A-Culture” the subculture hosted on the Internet and tries to outline the features of this community and its users. He argues that the members of A-culture, are often individual suffering of a social stigma — as the aforementioned geek and nerds, but also Japanese otaku — that find in the Web a new home in a sort of parallel reality, where their stigma and separation from reality becomes something to be proud of. This pride, according to Auerbach, becomes the typical form of elitism that can be found in the Internet (see also Thibault forthcoming).

The “elite of the elite”, the most prominent examples of members of the A-culture are the Anons, the anonymous users of some boards of 4chan and 8chan — notoriously /b/, /v/ and /baphomet/.

A-Culture has the features of what Lotman defines a culture oriented towards the expression (i.e. a culture that believes that what is outside of it is wrong) and in particular, Anons strongly oppose the websites of the center of the semiosphere because such sites promote the Web as a prosthesis of real life. The identity of their users is strictly connected to their offline identities (e.g. the selfie, a way to “translate” oneself into the Web) which represents all the Internet hates: sharing

anime is believed to be the most prolific forum in history, with the highest number of post, among which one that counts more than a million pages of comments. In this case the hybridization between different subcultures is self evident

real data, not protecting one's identity, and mixing the real to the virtual.

2.4. *The Web between play and reality*

Peripheral Web is based on the fundamental distinction between Web and every day reality. The economy of unreality described by Auerbach is the core of the Internet: suspicion it's its natural consequence, and offense a way to protect it.

The Internet claims and protects the Web's unreality refusing any contagion with reality and antagonizing users and websites that promote such confusion. However, even if the Internet is structured as an alternative space to reality, with different values and ideologies, this distinction doesn't make it ontologically any less real than other parts of the Web. What we are facing, thus, is a different semiotic domain, and in particular a playful one.

The playful character of the Internet is intrinsic both to the texts it produces (e.g internet memes) and to its pragmatics (every interaction between users is oriented to jokes, irony, or complicity).

However, this feature of the Internet and of its texts is rarely communicated, but its taken for granted, making for an external viewer extremely difficult to correctly interpret it. The metacommunication of the playful intentions — for Bateson (1959) essential to any play — is entrusted to the context: for an internet user everything on the Web is a joke and should not be taken seriously. This also explains why the Internet is often seen from outsiders as a place of the Web full of harassers, misogynists, homophobes and porn maniacs oriented to violence, hate speeches and sadistic practices.

If we consider the Internet as inherently playful, then, we can claim that two different semiotic domains — the playful and the real⁵ — are competing to be hegemonic over the Web. The results of this quarrel, as we will see, can lead to significant misunderstandings.

5. Which is, of course, a rhetorical and narrative construction as well as the playful one.

3. The rules of the Internet: a constitution

3.1. *Welcome to the Internet*

The Internet's conscience of the separation between online and offline (which is absent in websites like Google or Amazon) is one of the things that makes the peripheries of the Web semiotically interesting, as it entails the awareness of the uniqueness of online communication. Tracing a sharp boundary between online and offline allows the users of the Internet to discern and describe more thoroughly the features that characterize it. These descriptions assume, of course, the form of the texts that are massively produced in these areas of the Web: Internet memes.

A particularly interesting meme is the so-called list of the "Rules of the Internet". This list, born in 2006 in the random board /b/ of 4chan, is both prescriptive and descriptive and mainly sarcastic and ironic. However, this meme sketches an interesting portrait of the Internet and of the Web in general. In this paragraph, therefore, we will focus on some of them, and in particular to those pertaining to anonymity and to the economy of suspicion — in other words: those related to conspiracies.

3.2. *The rules*

The first two rules of the Internet: «Rule 1. Do not talk about /b/» and «Rule 2. Do not talk about /b/» are clearly a parody of the "rules of the Fight Club" from the homonym film by David Fincher (1999). Their connection with conspiracy theories is self-evident: on the one hand they reveal a taste for fiction about conspiracies, on the other hand they are also symptomatic of a certain measure of xenophobia: these rules state that the community must be concealed from the outsiders who are perceived as potential dangers.

The next rules are «Rule 3. We are Anonymous» and «Rule 4. Anonymous is legion». They are also born as a joke: as most people on 4chan posted as "Anonymous" soon someone started to pretend that Anonymous was a single person, even if manifold (hence the diabolical claim of Anonymous being legion). These rules underline the importance of anonymity, which was common in the primordial Web,

but nowadays fought off by all the Web's big companies. Anonymity is, again, a typical trait of conspirators or, at least, to their more "romantic" images. The fact that the group of hackivists called "Anonymous" (born on 4chan and whose name was a direct reference to the Rule 3) uses as symbol the mask of Guy Fawkes — well known British conspirator and whose mask is used also by the eponymous character of *V for Vendetta* (James McTeigue, 2006) — is another proof of the Anons' love for conspiracy narratives.

Partially connected with the idea of conserving anonymity on the Internet is also the «Rule 30. There are no girls on the Internet» that can be interpreted as reinforcement of Rule 3: anonymity has no gender, no one should ever reveal it's own sex in 4chan (Manivannan 2013). On the other hand, however, this rule can be also interpreted in another (non exclusive) way, as stating that anyone claiming of being a girl on the internet is probably not — as well as everyone claiming to be a child is in reality an FBI agent, as another popular meme says. This concept dates back to the original Web, when the female users were very few, and many men exploited the complete obscurity of the empiric author to pretend to be females. Again, we are facing a culture of suspicion, in which nothing is what it seems, and the rule is to doubt in every occasion. On the same line is «Rule 32. Pics or Didn't Happen» that requires to provide proof for every claim made on the Internet, that will otherwise considered false.

Masks and unmasking appear therefore to be central to the Internet ideology, probably because deeply rooted in the medium itself. The empirical author being irremediably out of reach, the semiotic competence of the Web is (or has been) mainly the ability of interpreting correctly its hidden intentions and objectives. The Web makes it really easy for everyone to create their own mask, and thus, celebrating unmasking, "the rules of the Internet" are celebrating the ability to understand and use correctly the medium.

4. Roles and communities of the Internet

In order to be able to investigate the dynamics of Internet conspiracies, a last order of premises is needed, regarding their actors (in a Greimasian sense). In the next few paragraphs I will briefly approach

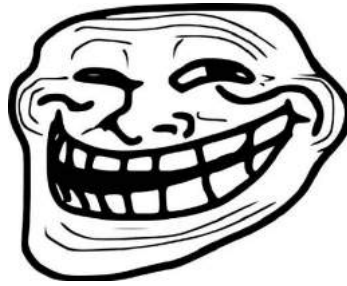


Figure 1. Trollface, meme used to explicit one's playful intention after trolling

some of the most important groups of users of the peripheries of the Web and try to sketch a sort of “semio-ethnography” of the Internet. These groups are often delineated by the pragmatics of their Web interactions, more that by any other feature. In other words, these groups are designated by thematic roles defining their communicative characteristics.

4.1. *Trolls*

“To troll” means to advocate in an aggressive and often illogical way an unpopular opinion, in order to start an argument with other users. The troll doesn't try to convince its interlocutor and will not change opinion: its sole goal is creating and maintaining conflict, and the more the argument becomes heathen, the better for the troll. Nowadays, the term “trolling” is used for any form of aggressive deception and hoax on the Web, if the goal is the troll's fun. This led some scholar to dramatically define trolls as “the sadists of the Internet” (Buckels, Paulhus e Trapnell 2014) and, more in general, to the idea that trolls are disturbed individuals.

From a semiotic perspective, a troll is someone who exploits the impossibility to reach the empiric author of a message typical of the Web, to hide his identity and his intentio, behind a very well defined (even caricatured) model author in order to delude the receiver of the message. The playful nature of this practice is evident, as it deals with illusion (from the Latin *ludere*, “to play”) and fun. This form of play isn't new, of course, it is what is generally called a “joke” (from the Latin *iocus*, meaning “fun”, “jest”), but, if for many jokes the

point is exactly the revelation of its playful nature (let's think of candid cameras), trolls do never reveal their true intentions.

Even if most trolls are part of A-culture, they generally operate on very central websites: primarily the Youtube comment section, followed by Twitter, Facebook and Tumblr. There are attempts of trolling also in the boards of 4chan, but they have a lot less success: after all there are two rules of the Internet that explain clearly how to deal with trolls: «Rule 11. All your carefully picked arguments can easily be ignored» and «Rule 14. Do not argue with a troll — it means that they win».

Even if the rule “Don't feed the troll” is universal, many of the users of the central areas of the Web do not have the competences to identify and avoid trolls, and therefore fall into their traps. This competence, is the competence is a semiotic domain (and, in particular, in a playful semiotic domain) and it is a fundamental trait required of any user of the Internet. The ability to understand if someone is trolling you, and hence to ignore every provocation, avoiding to become a “lulcow”, reflect the understanding of the playful nature of the Internet.

What we are facing, therefore, is the result of the war between two different conceptions of the Web, one as prosthesis of the real world, and another as virtual playground, free from every social norm. Trolls don't communicate their playful intentions, because on the Internet «Nothing has to be taken seriously» (Rule 20). The Web, according to them, is meant as a place to play into, and those who don't understand it and make the mistake of taking things seriously deserve to become lulcows, and to be “milked” for fun.

The Internet however, is peripheral, and the number of users that know the “true nature” of the Web is exiguous. Knowing this “secret” becomes for them being part of a sort of conspiracy, where only an elected few know what is really happening, while the others' judgment is clouded. That's why 4chan and Anonymous often employ trolling for their raids against people or organizations (as the famous raid against Scientology)⁶. In this way the troll become the agent of a conspiracy and uses the weapons of irony and sarcasm to fight those who fail to understand that the Web is only one big joke.

6. See also the Italian online joke “Gattini per Salvini”, a quite successful raid consisting in posting images of cats, the “true rulers of the internet”, on the internet accounts of extreme right politician Matteo Salvini.

4.2. Hackers

The hacker is thematic role much loved by the Internet and a quite common trope in many works of fiction, mainly focusing on him as a young genius (see *War Games*, John Badham, 1983) or a mystic figure (especially in *The Matrix*, Laurence and Andrew Wachowski 1999). Real life hackers are individuals capable of exercising an unusual control on the medium and to break its rules, generally in order to acquire information. They do not simply use the medium to communicate, but they can communicate with the medium, and hence manipulate it.

Really skilled hackers, however, are rather few, and the importance of this thematic role is more a mythological one than a social one. This role fascinates the Internet, not only with fiction, but also thanks to famous real life hackers and activists like Julian Assange, the founder of Wikileaks. The prestige of this role among the users of the Internet is probably due to its two major characteristics: the first one is the outstanding computer science competences he possesses; the second one is its ability to unmask, to manage the revelations. The latter is strictly connected with the economy of suspicion that permeates the Internet, from this perspective a hacker is mainly a debunker, someone capable of see under the surface and to reveal conspiracies by unmasking the actions of the conspirators and finding the proofs.

One of the easiest — and therefore more common — actions linked to hacking is doxing, which is the act of discover the real identity of a Web user and share online is data: personal address, family composition, e-mail, contact and, sometimes, even passwords. Doxing has a clear intimidating nature, displaying the force and ability of the hacker and leaving the victim exposed and defenseless. However, most of the times these information are used only to make fun of the victim, who will receive online-ordered pizzas at home in the middle of the night or will be unwillingly subscribed to many spam mailing lists. In other words: doxing is used to bring trolling outside the Web into the real world.

It could seem an oxymoron that people valuing very much anonymity are so willing to unmask others and reveal their identities online. I think that there are three, non exclusive possible interpretations that may allow us to understand better what is doxing:

- doxing is a test of someone’s hacking abilities, and thus is part of the qualification of the subject;
- doxing can be interpreted as a performance that excludes from the Web individuals that do not protect well enough their identities. At the same time it denounces the risk of sharing data on the Web, and claims the latter for those embracing anonymity;
- doxing may be seen as an invasion of the real world by the playful space of the Web. It brings trolling in real life, overturning the balance of power between real and virtual, and affirming the superiority of the latter.

4.3. Gamers

This is a quite vast thematic role, semantically derived by the action of playing video games. According to recent studies playing video games is mostly an adult occupation, and women play almost as much as men⁷. The prototypical image of the “gamer”, however, is completely different, and has its roots in an early stage of gaming and in an assimilation between the stereotypes of gamers and nerds. From this perspective gamers are often described as white teens with no social life who are generally porn-obsessed obese virgins. These stereotypes are still astonishingly alive and played an important part in the #GamerGate quarrel.

On the other hand, not every video game player consider himself or herself a gamer — term that, in fact, is not well defined. In many websites and boards populated by gamers, as the board /v/ of 4chan, there have been many discussions of what is to be a “gamer”. Many, for example, have criticized studies reporting that more adult women play video games than teenage boy (source: Entertainment software association), claiming that playing Candy Crush Saga as a pastime doesn’t make someone a gamer. If some of the criticisms to these quantitative analysis may have a point, they are also the sign of the strong xenophobia that permeates the gamers’ subculture. For many years very strong prejudices against gamers were quite common, and video games were thought to hurt the brain or to induce violence, even if recent studies claim the exact opposite (Ferguson 2014 and

7. <http://phys.org/news/2015-12-women-men-video-games.html>.

Przybylski 2014). This social stigma, thus, has probably boosted the cohesion of the group and reinforced the suspicion and hostility towards anyone outside the group.

The similarities between the subculture surrounding the Internet and the gamer's subculture may seem many. However, these two groups only partially overlaps, and many similarities are mainly due to the fact of their being communities situated in the periphery of the semiosphere. Gamers are not a primarily online community, but, at the contrary, considers themselves to be gamers also in everyday life.

4.4. *Sockpuppets*

Sockpuppets are deceiving enunciative devices typical of the Web. The term is used to indicate accounts reporting false information and hiding the identity of the user behind them. Sockpuppets are fake virtual prosthesis, marionettes, and may be used for many reasons: to troll avoiding recognition, to overcome a ban, to pretend to be of another sex or race, or to undermine an position in an argument by claiming to support it and making meaningless points. The same individual can use different sockpuppets at the same time, manipulating the perception of its individuality and presenting himself like multitude — a sometimes very useful meaning effect.

From a semiotic standpoint a sockpuppet is a particularly articulated and explicit model author that the empiric author employ to influence, through techniques on *émbrayage*, his model readers.

As for conspiracies, the mere existence of the possibility of creating a sockpuppet encourage suspect and mistrust on the Web, hence the actions taken by the most central Websites against all fake accounts.

4.5. *Social Justice Warriors and Feminazis*

On the Internet the expression “Social Justice Warrior” indicates Web users that hypocritically exploit the promotion of social justice as a way to ask for attention and to improve their offline image. The website Encyclopedia Dramatica, a Wikipedia parody describing the Internet, in the page dedicated to Social Justice claims:

The main purpose of SOCIAL JUSTICE is not to enact actual change or forward progress. If it were, no one would give a fuck. In fact the primary reason for its existence is to allow white people to impress other white people with how accepting and totally sensitive they are. Due to being over privileged teenagers with too much time on their Internet hands, they have never actually experienced OPPRESSION. So, they merely wing it. Utilizing their caresonas to yell at others about how they are ruining other peoples lives with harmful blog posts.⁸

This is a form of identity crafting that is strongly antagonized by the Internet. Needless to say that accusing someone of being a Social Justice Warrior is a very easy way to delegitimize his or her position and arguments, without actually engaging with them. However, again, the basic idea that on the Internet nothing has to be taken seriously, and that the Web is not the place in which to fight effectively for social justice may bring most of its users to believe that anyone defending liberal ideas on the Web is loosing its time.

One of the main issues of #GamerGate, as we will see, is feminism which, especially in its online forms, on the Internet is often coarsely associated with Social Justice Warriors. Because of the general ignorance on the topic (one of the common argument is: «if it is about equality, why isn't it called equalism?»), of some hard-to-believe hoaxes (as the false news of a feminist aborting her male child to avoid to “give birth to a monster”⁹ or the fake feminist movement to abolish “father day” orchestrated by 4chan¹⁰) and of some undeniable exaggeration (like the journalist shaming scientist Matt Taylor for his shirt in an interview about the successful mission of space probe Rosetta) the Internet is often not a feminist-friendly place, when not openly misogynistic on the topic.

Things, however, are more complex than it might appear. Emma Watson, for example, who is considered being the “crush of the Internet”, is a outspoken feminist, and her speech at United Nations (in September 2014, as Goodwill Ambassador for UN Women) was generally appreciated also from many users of the Internet. In addition, some feminist, as Christina Hoff Sommers, have taken the side of the

8. https://encyclopediadramatica.se/Social_justice.

9. Original blog post: <http://injusticestories.com/i-aborted-my-baby-because-it-was-a-boy/>.

10. <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/events/endfathersday>.

gamers in #GamerGate, and are quite popular among them.

Hence, following (unintentionally) another kind of rule of the Web, the Godwin Law¹¹, the term “Feminazi” was born, in order to distinguish the Social Justice Warrior feminists and the “men haters” from the “true feminists” who advocate equality. The oversimplification and general confusion is blatant, but it is symptomatic: when a community based on communicative practices have to face a political idea the latter can appeal to some of its users and be disliked by others. In order to keep the community united, the idea is either articulated in one positive and one “nazi” side easy to deal with, or translated to a mere fact of communication pragmatics.

5. The #Gamergate: a case study

The #GamerGate controversy is an heterogeneous and extremely complex internet flamewar that started in august 2014 and to the day, it hasn't completely ended. What I will do in this paragraph is to try to outline the development and the features of this controversy¹² and to investigate how they were affected by the patterns typical of conspiracy theories and by the semiotic and communicative characteristics of Web communication in general, and the Internet's in particular.

The controversy has been extremely animated — death threats have been received in both sides — and has taken place mostly on Twitter, where between August and November the hashtag #GamerGate alone has been used 2 million time: almost 50000 times a day. Also the Wikipedia page of the controversy has become for some time a battlefield resulting on mass bans. The comment sections of many blogs and websites that have dedicated entries and articles to the subject has also become quite often hosting spaces of the discussions, again with many bans and, sometimes, explicit regimes of censorship.

11. «As an online discussion grows longer, the probability of a comparison involving Nazis or Hitler approaches 1».

12. The reconstruction will be based on the narrations about them build by the two sides (Kotaku, Gamasutra ecc on the one hand, Knowyourmeme and Enciclopedia Dramatica on the other) and on my personal, and hopefully more objective, observation of the phenomenon. I monitored the hastags #GamerGate, #Stopgamergate 2014 and #notyourshield from September 2014 to February 2015, when the controversy reached its peak.

5.1. *Genealogy of flame war*

What was the principal subject of all these discussions? It would appear that the main topic was the nature itself of the factions, in particular of the #GamerGate movement. On the one hand, people hostile to GamerGaters accuse them of being a misogynist hate group attacking women in the video game industry in order to intimidate them and preserve the straight, white, male hegemony in the world of digital playfulness. The people that identify under the banner of the #GamerGate, on the other hand, refuse these accusations, claiming to be a diverse movement (the hashtag #notyourshield has been created and supposedly used by women, minorities and homosexual that identify with GamerGaters — although the reality of these claims has been put into question by critics claiming that these accounts are, in fact, sockpuppets) fighting against corruption and dishonesty in the media.

It is clear that the narrations of the two sides of the quarrel are extremely different. In order to try to shed some light on the birth of such narratives, we will here try to reconstruct, very briefly, the events that made explode the quarrel.

In August the 16th 2014, Eron Gjony publishes a blog entry about Zoe Quinn, award-winning game developer with whom he was in a romantic relationship until that moment. In his blog Gjony claimed that Quinn had many affairs while still being with him, some of which with video game journalists — one of them being part of the jury that assigned the award to Quinn. To support his claims he published a series of screenshots which he claimed showed messages between him and Quinn.

The day after, Internet Aristocrat, a quite influential youtuber, released a video about the “Quinnspiracy theory”. In this video Internet Aristocrat accuses Quinn to be «using sex to influence journalists and for portraying herself as a victim to receive donations and support»¹³.

The reaction of this video and to Gjony blog entry where twofold. On the one hand many people started to question how her personal relationships affected her career, and if judges and video game journalists could still be considered trustworthy. In the subsequent days Quinn was victim of many ferocious and violent attacks, insults and even death-threats on the Web (mainly on twitter, but also on Tum-

13. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S4bILqkO7DY>.

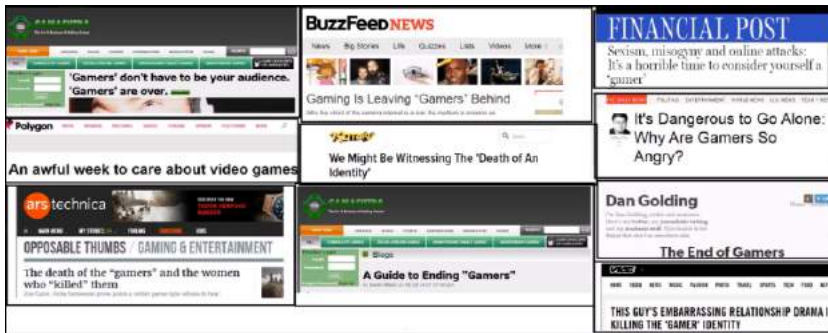


Figure 2. “Gamers are dead” blog title collection

blr). On the other hand, many people have been supportive with her, and accused Gjony of being misogynistic and of having written his accusations with the sole intentions to punish Zoe Quinn for having left him. In these days the hashtag #GamerGate was firstly created.

Few days later, the 28th — also following a wave of criticisms, mixed again with insults and threats received by feminist youtuber Anita Sarkeesian in response of a series of videos focusing on misogyny in video games — all the most important new websites and blogs dedicated to digital games (The Financial Post, Ars Technica, The Daily Beast, The Stranger, Beta Beat, Gamasutra, Polygon and Kotaku) dedicated articles and entries to the end of the identity of the “gamer”, accusing them to be a spoiled hate group of misogynists and online harassers, and stating that game developers shouldn’t consider them their target audience, anymore (Fig. 2).

The synchronicity of the response has been immediately interpreted as the proof of a conspiracy (“everything is connected”) and the discovery of a mailing list, called “gamejournopros” in which the authors of these articles were discussing how to respond to the vicious attacks against Zoe Quinn has been seen by many GamerGaters as a confirmation of their suspicions. 4chan’s board /v/, dedicated to video games become the basis for a counter conspiracy, in which GamerGaters coordinated attacks, actions and trolling operations. At least at the beginning, however, the majority of the posts on /v/ invited to avoid threats and insults, and focused on how dismantle the conspiracy they believed was held against them. One of their first actions has been to write to the companies that were advertised in the websites that had claimed the

“gamers” dead, menacing to boycott them if they continued to support the websites that, they claimed, were attacking their very consumers. This strategy proved itself successful, in a certain measure, entailing the cancellation of several contracts, among which those held by Intel.

Insults and threats however, continued, and soon where answered with other insults and other threats: rapidly the quarrel become a proper flame war, fought with screenshots, doxings, accuses of being sockpuppets or trolls and banning requests.

Most of the blogs dedicated to video games joined the cause of the “anti-gg”, while their opponents gained the endorsement of different personalities, as British tech journalist Milo Yiannopoulos and feminist writer Christina Hoff Sommers. Since then the attention to the quarrel started to slowly decline, but the flame war still hasn’t seen an end.

5.2. *Doxing, lies and paranoia*

The quarrel per se it is not very interesting, at least from a semiotic perspective. There are, however, two aspects of this quarrel, that in my opinion are worth further investigation. The first one is a cultural one: the two sides of the dispute seem to be absolutely unable to understand each–other systems of values and ideologies, and their semiospheres seem to be too different to allow any dialog. On the one hand many of the GamerGaters’ claims show a complete ignorance not only about feminism, about its history and ideas, but also about journalism, seeing as a conspiracy the fact that journalists might communicate and discuss their ideas between them, and even pursuing agendas different from pleasing their customers¹⁴. On the other hand, the anti-gg are blatantly unable to understand the workings of the Web. Redditor Spawnpointgard, on Reddit¹⁵ provided a lucid analysis of this cultural gap from the Internet’s point of view:

Like any problem, SJWs attempt to solve the troll issue by “raising awareness”.
To people who don’t understand the Internet (like every major news outlet),

14. Which probably tells us something about the state of digital capitalism and of the economic system of immediate feedback and online ratings.

15. https://www.reddit.com/r/KotakuInAction/comments/2sy4q3/a_history_of_chan_culture_and_how_it_relates_to/.

SJWs look like courageous individuals finally taking a stand against online harassment. To us, they look like morons trying to feed the trolls to death.

If you're the target of online harassment, don't promote it. Don't even respond to it. Don't be anyone's lulcow.

The second semiotically interesting aspect of this quarrel, is the importance that the characteristics of the medium play in the creation of opposite narratives which often reflects a conspirative way of thinking. We have already claimed that the fact that the empirical author of any online message is unreachable and hidden lead to question his nature, his identity and his agenda. In the narrative of the Web, this is mirrored by the impossibility to connect actors and actants, to identify with certainty who did what. A few days after the publication of the Quinnspiracy video, for instance, Zoe Quinn claimed to be the victim of an hacker attack and a doxing: a post on her Tumblr revealed her telephone numbers and was signed “/v/”. Eventually, blogger The spectacular spider-girl¹⁶, stated that, in her opinion, the doxing was staged and accused Quinn to be behind it. The spectacular spider-girl claimed that, seen Tumblr security features, which would disconnect multiple users on to the same account, it should had been impossible for Quinn to denounce the hack from her own hacked account. Additionally she stated that nobody from /v/ would never write the board's own name with an unacceptable capital letter, suggesting that Quinn herself staged her own doxing to gain more support. The virtual impossibility to proof or disproof this new conspiracy theory makes its acceptance inevitably a matter of faith, and only reinforces the existence of two different, incompatible narratives.

Interestingly enough, when to months later the personal data of game designer Brianna Wu were released publicly on /v/, the reaction of the Anons to the doxing where of two kinds: firm condemn of any doxing and ironical skepticism — many Anons responding something like: «Brianna, please, we don't care about your data. Stop pretending to be a victim».

16. <http://thespectacularspider-girl.tumblr.com/post/95179284529/zoe-quinn-fake-doxxhack>.

6. The ineffable nature of the Web

Without denying that online harassment is a problem — and a big one, what we are facing is a tremendous amount of texts, mostly contradictory, supporting two (if not more) different narrations with claims that cannot be verified by any means.

We don't really have any real data in our hands. Numbers can easily be faked¹⁷ and are, thus, insignificant: if identifying a single sockpuppet is, sometimes, easy, when one have to deal with hundreds of them it may become impossible. We also can't unequivocally interpret the *intentio auctoris* behind any of these texts, nor discern between honest authors and trolls supporting the same cause. In some cases, someone may use sockpuppets to cause more naive users to follow, honestly, their example.

Even if it is possible, sometimes, to reconstruct the goals and identity of the author of a text on the Web, being sure is generally a very difficult task, often requiring good computer skills. Most of the times, therefore, the user's approach to the interpretation of online texts is necessarily uncritical and based only on trust. If the latter is misplaced, then, being prey of hoaxes may be extremely simple.

Finally, the coexistence of different semiotics domains on the Web, poses an additional obstacle to straightforward online communication. The same messages can be radically different in different context or with different intentions, and the corpus of any online conversation, frequently, composed by hundreds or thousandths of texts, especially in social media, can be extremely heterogeneous and hard impossible to interpret.

All this semiotic issues increase suspicion, mistrust and misunderstanding on the Web, often resulting in the spur of conspiracy theories, which in this chaotic set of uninterpretable texts offer a simple way out from this interpretative impasse.

For this reason it is fundamental that Web users — and most of all Web scholars — approaching similar topics, especially when the Internet is involved, are fully aware of the twofold nature of the

17. There are evidences showing that Anons often started their campaigns mobilizing thousandths of fake Twitter accounts, see, for example: <http://arstechnica.com/gaming/2014/09/new-chat-logs-show-how-4chan-users-pushed-gamergate-into-the-national-spotlight/>.

medium. A single semiotic competence is not enough to be able to interpret and study the Web: a conflict permeates it and opposes two different online forms of life (Fontanille 2015), one associating online practices with real life, and the other with freedom and playfulness. Any attempt at approaching the Internet without recognizing this two-faced semiotic nature (the existence of two different frames of context) will be irremediably flawed.

It is indispensable, then, to remember that the Web is, unavoidably, a virtual place and not an extension of society. It might be used as one and it can be a mirror of society, but it doesn't necessarily do so. Failing to see the difference between reality and the Web, eventually brings to aberrant decoding and hence it easily entails mythological explanations and, thus, conspiracy theories.

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History as We Know It

Conspiracy and Historical Narrative through *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*

VINCENZO IDONE CASSONE*

TITOLO ITALIANO: La storia così come la conosciamo: complotto e narrativa storica in *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*.

ABSTRACT: History is often believed to have been shaped by conspiracies. Through the semiotic analysis of the videogame *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*, the essay seeks to shed new light upon the link between conspiracy narratives and historical representation. The focus lies on three points: historical ontologies involved by conspiracy theories and history as a discipline; similarities and differences in the cognitive processes of historical and conspiratorial understanding; relations between social groups and the development of historical representations subject to conspiratory logic.

KEYWORDS: Conspiracy; *Deus ex*; History; Narrative; Temporalities.

1. Introduction

History has always been a privileged environment for conspiracy theories (Knight 2003), whether conspiracies are believed to stem from significant historical events, whether historical events are considered to be as a result of different conspiracies, able to shape history as we know it. It is possible to conduct some preliminary remarks on the relationship between history and conspiracy theories, focusing on the last three words of the title of this essay (*we/know/it*).

Starting with that last word, it is worth pointing out that history will not be discussed through an ontological perspective in this essay,

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but instead in light of a semiotic approach. As noted by Greimas (1976) and Lozano (1991), the term “history” is endowed with a double meaning: it can be seen as the sum of all events (a reified meaning), and consequently their narration and/or description; or it can be defined as the discipline that deals with that reconstruction, thanks to its textual products. As for some disciplines there is an overlap between the field of discipline and discipline itself.

Turning to the next word, “know”, we can consider the processes through which the past (and its development) is known. Here, a second duplicity stands. On the one hand is the cognitive process of historical disciplinary discourse and its criteria, which results in the form of speech used for this reconstruction (historical essay etc). On the other hand is the cultural representation of history that every human community creates, with its own characteristics; resulting in the development of historical narratives and the integration of this in the memory and culture of societies. According to Lotman and Uspensky (1973), this process belongs to the fundamental autodescription of cultures.

Finally, the last word, “we”. This can be said to be connected to the previous points: the collective subjectivity involved in this cognitive process, and therefore the relationship between the historical imaginary and the community involved, the way in which the selection and memory of events depends on the characteristics of different societies. Last but not least, the members of history as a discipline with their organizations, connections between them and their criteria, tools and theories used by historical discourse in a specific environment.

This essay will now focus on these three points (historical ontologies; process of understanding; relationship with the subjectivity involved) starting from the analysis of a videogame: *Deus Ex Human Revolution* (DE:HR), which can be considered a paradigmatic text that can be used to reflect on the relationship between history and conspiracy.

2. The world of *Deus Ex*

2.1. The saga

Third title of the homonym series of W-RPG (*Deus Ex*), DE:HR is a prequel to the story told in the progenitor. The narrative begins in

2052, in a cyberpunk world in which the protagonist (JC Denton) is one of the first bio-engineered soldiers from UNATCO; instructed to eradicate the threat of terrorism and to prevent the spread of the virus Death Grey, which has infected most of the world's population. Following the traditions of conspiracy clichés, it is discovered that the virus is actually produced by the authors of the vaccine, a secret cell of the Illuminati (Majestic 12) that plan to use both for world domination.

In the following game (set a few years after the first) the world has fallen into a new Dark Age, known as “The Collapse”, in which para-religious organizations (the WTO, the Order, the Templars, Apostlecorp) have achieved transnational power at the expense of States. The States have been reduced to city-states, due to the destruction of the global communication network. Several organizations are plotting in the shadows to use the protagonist, a clone of JC Denton, in order to carry out their plans for world domination.

Within the history of the series, it was decided that the third installment would be a prequel, set 25 years before *Deus Ex*. This choice freed the narrative from the problems of interacting with multiple endings of predecessors, but resulted in the difficult task of imagining a setting that was both consistent with the saga of the world but featuring its own “historical” personality; a plot integrated in the fictive continuous but at the same time a turning point in the series. The developers decided to return to the previous state of evolution of the universe of DE, cybernetics, linked to mechanical prosthesis (augmentations) which, during the first episode, were about to be supplanted by the new (and less invasive) nanomachines. The most interesting choice was to tie this “historical period” to a precise chronological reference, that of a Renaissance (quasi-baroque, actually) style that is as much an aesthetic horizon as a cultural one. It is the way the world DE reads and interprets itself. In the early years of cybernetic implants, the world is living a second Human Revolution that the creators of the game have called *Cyber Renaissance*¹.

1. As stated by Christian Nutt for Gamasutra, available at http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/6462/a_cyberrenaissance_in_art_.php [last accessed 11/12/2015].

3. Cyber renaissance²

Game developers coined the concept of Cyber Renaissance to portray both the historical period and the game's aesthetics. According to the Art Director, J.J. Belletéte, the choice was the outcome of the comprehension of the Renaissance as the moment when people begin to study the human machine and view the body as a central gear of a complex system.



Figure 1.

2. By viewing both the teaser trailer and full trailer, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mjhkpTWIBuA>, and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hoRwOux7Ofw&list=FLvm4qka_PKAiaxwvq-8lT3g&index=4 it is possible to observe the results of this choice, and make some preliminary remarks.

The trailer features clear quote from the Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp (1631) and also the De Humanis Corporis Fabrica Librorum Epitome of Andrea Vesalius (1542). In the teaser we see a swift sequence of alternating pictures from the Anatomical Studies of Da Vinci, the Icarus of Draper and, finally, the sign H + symbol of Transhumanism.

For the architecture, clothing and design, it is clear that it was complex work to adapt the cyberpunk aesthetic to a Renaissance–esque and Baroque–like one. The designers have used gold and black shades (showing a strong affinity with the *Blade Runner* movie), geometric shapes and linear perspective, along with a more flamboyant and “impact” spin devoted to Baroque elements, combining all of this with contemporary influences in the dress design of video games.

This design, however, is not all–encompassing. There are many elements of continuity with cyberpunk and contemporary dress/archi-



Figure 2.

itecture design. These, we can assume, were intended to reconnect the environment to a more foreseeable future and to the cyberpunk universe. We can thus see places, clothing and architecture that are in opposition to the Renaissance style mentioned above. For example, underground and metallic traits recall a present of industrial decay, bonded to characters opposed to this cyber Renaissance rhetoric (e.g. Purity First, Humanity front).

The world of DE:HR is considered a historical moment in which the figure of the man, as in the Renaissance, is at the centre of the universe and has the ability to determine its own destiny (*Homo Faber Suae Fortunae*). This is particularly evident in the trailers, through the presence of an ideology of planning, non-limited agentivity (as in trailer: “who we are is but a stepping stone to what we can become” “they cannot stop us, they cannot stop the Future”). The pro-enhancement rhetoric of David Sarif, the tycoon of Sarif Industries, is linked to the certainty of granting a better future for all mankind, a future that will eradicate inequalities and biological differences, letting man to be



Figure 3.

truly master of his own development. Yet the very pictures, through interaction of different temporalities, seem to contradict or overthrow these statements by presenting at the same time the conspirator theme.

4. First considerations

4.1. *The clash of temporalities (it).*

- a) From what has been observed, it can be seen as the fictitious setting make clash and interact different temporalities: Interpretation of the present in the light of the Renaissance (Cyber Renaissance), as already mentioned;
- b) Mythical quotations and reinterpretations: The trailer plays with the myth of Icarus, partly confirming it and partly overruling it. The DE series features strong links with biblical or mythological elements. For example, the initials of the protagonist of the first DE are JC; his brother is Paul; the new hero is Adam; the adjuvants and opponent AIs are Daedalus and Icarus, who later merge together in Helios.



Figure 4.

- c) Priority with respect to the timeline of the saga: The cybernetic manipulations are the premise of nanotechnology and eugenics; HR also features many internal cross-references and quotations (Adam is the genetic parent of JC and other characters are involved in the entire time period). Continuous reference to events of “our” present and the inclusion of ethical and political issues contemporary to the publication of game (August 2011). Among the main topics of public debate were the Occupy Wall Street protests and the growing concern for stem cell research and cell manipulation (GMOs, cloning etc).

So far, it is possible to draw some preliminary conclusions with reference to the three previous points mentioned. Uspenski (1988) showed how every society develops a general temporal ontology within its cultural autodescriptive model, especially through the fundamental typological opposition between a linear-oriented time (typical of historical discourse) and a cosmological time, circular and linked to mythological discourse.

The same author recalls that linear time and cosmological time may coincide, leading us to assume that society cannot just build a single temporal representation, but needs to create a network of different temporalities. Sometimes these may be super-structured by a dominant code, sometimes they may not be integrated and may even be in contradiction. Through the example of Lotman’s medieval Russian Chronicles, interpreted by Lozano (1991), the difference between news and ancient history is clear:

While for contemporary consciousness history, understood as the sum of real events, is reflected in a set of various texts, each of which has only a certain aspect of reality, for medieval Russian chronicle was instead the text, the written equivalent of life as a whole [...] The record was isomorphic to reality: the annual registration of the facts allowed to build a final text without limit, which grew steadily along the time axis (ie the earth). In contrast, modelings based on the principle of cause and effect forced to mark the end of the text: it is the passage from the chronicle the history and fiction. (Lozano 1991: 96; translation mine)

First, modern history would require the existence of more than one text that was able to describe the development of time in its

entirety. Secondly, history would replace a text with no term limit with a principle of conclusion (the narration) based on the principles of cause and effect.

In DE:HR, a multiplicity of temporality is not immediately connected to a single representation of history. Following Foucault (1984) and Didi-Huberman (2007), eterochronic and anachronistic reasoning it is at work here. This presents the problem of the representation of history through the multiplication, overthrow and clash of representations based on different syntagmatic logics: linear, circular, oscillatory, euphoric, dysphoric, and tensive.

4.2. *Conspiracy, history and detectives (know).*

The reference to conspiracy can be seen early on in the trailer, but in the whole game it develops on three levels: A triggering conspiracy, in which an attack by mysterious soldiers at the lab where Adam is head of security takes place. This results in the death of a Sarif scientist and his transformation into a cyborg without him knowing, in order to avoid death. The player knows the effect of this conspiracy but not the instigators nor the goals. Conspiracy charges, affirmed by Purity First. These terrorists believe that Sarif Industries (and the protagonist) is plotting to control people through augmentations. The developers have produced promotional videos for viral marketing, inspired by contemporary conspiracy theorists³. The systemic conspiracy, which is the last plot twist. This indicates the arrival of a systemic conspiracy, with a multiplication of hidden plots by different factions, each pursuing their own schemes to promote themselves (Sarif Industries, Humanitarian Front, Illuminati) and to hinder others.

Following the dynamics of movie conspiracy theory, as described by Martinelli⁴, the protagonist of DE becomes a detective in search of traces of the machinations, whose viewpoint coincides almost completely with that of the player. The narration of the conspiracies becomes possible only through the interaction between the process of inquiry and the homologation of viewpoints between main character

3. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=akaosrU8Rto>.

4. «Temi e processi narrativi nella rappresentazione del complotto», *Incontri sul senso* 2015 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kqB78suoRIM>.

and reader. In this sense, the narrative of conspiracy is able to unveil its (hi)story.

Both Eco (1991) and Lozano (1991) observed that the circumstantial paradigm is not limited to detective stories, but it is closely implied in the cognitive work of historians:

These two procedures [historical analysis and detective investigation, A/N] are very similar, because the detective tries to reconstruct the development of an exceptional series of past events up to find their author, who does everything to be backseat, while the scientist tries to speculate on the causes of other events, or that have occurred exceptionally or more and regularly occur. (Eco, 1991: p. 12, translation mine)

Lozano, on the other hand, discusses the similarity of historical work and that of the detective through the concept of the circumstantial paradigm as developed by Ginzburg (1979). This starts from the example of three “historians” as Giovanni Morelli, Sherlock Holmes and Freud, who share the need to observe and reflect starting from the most unexpected and unconventional trails, from testimonial “wastes”, less prone to ideological or voluntary falsification.

Strangely enough, everything seems to link historical analysis to typical features of conspiracy thinking (Barkun, 2003). The use of seemingly insignificant particulars, outside the frames of common sense, as well as the hypothesis of mystification of “official” traces or sources, are all features ascribed to the (il)logical conspiracy reconstructions.

If the logical framework of conspiracy seems to be close to many of the procedures typically used by the circumstantial paradigm, this is due to the fact that both feature at their core the trust in the existence of “something”, whose tracks are followed and interpreted. It can be said that something has happened, and this involves a purpose and sense of mission in the detective.

Confidence in the event is the first element allowing us to shape a picture from statistically infrequent, generally marginal and fragmentary elements. The concept of event is the beginning of these methods of interpretations, as we have seen in the citation of Eco. The use of the event as a basis for historical reasoning is highlighted by De Certeau (1973):

What then is the event, but what we must suppose in order to make possible

an organization of documents? It is the means by which we pass from disorder to order. It does not explain at all: it allows the explanation. Authorizes to put an intelligibility. It is the tool — but often the too easy explanation — for understanding. “Something must have happened” there, and because of that it is possible to build a sequence, or switch from one to another regularly. With this procedure, once presumed the “disquieting familiarity” in the empty box called “event”, a “cause” of history” can be thought. (De Certeau 1973, p.121 translation mine)

However, Lozano (1991) stated that the contemporary historical discipline started to question the problematic nature of the event, assuming opposing positions regarding its importance, its relation to the interpretation, the possibility of a non—evenemential history, and the central link between the events with narration. This was mentioned previously as a central element of “modern” historical discourse.

4.3. *History is ordinary people (we)*

Let’s go back to the relationship between historical reconstruction and cultural identity, whose connection is hereby illustrated by Uspenski (1988):

So a meaning is assigned to the events: the text of the events is read by the social community. [...] It organizes the information itself, resulting in the selection of significant facts and establishing the links between them: what is not described in this language can be considered as if not acknowledged at all by social receiver, it is out of its field of view. (Uspensky, 1988, p. 11, translation mine)

In the world of DE, through the presence of a hegemonic historical narration, there is no place for a unique narration shared and accepted by the whole society as the only possible interpretation of events. The sense of the mission of the protagonist / player is what allows him (and only him) to differently explain the contemporary horizons. In addition, the presence of more or less explicit conspiracies makes the text of contemporary events less clear and less easy to decipher.

In this sense, the main factions and social groups read the world differently depending on which historical rhetoric they are supporting. They assume continuous conspiracies by the other factions, which

destroy confidence in information received. Lotman (2009) argues how, in conflictual times, the semiotic degree of a cultural system increases because conflictual (explosive) events can be read through different interpretations / translations. This bestows opposite meanings to the same events. As a result, the community is fragmented and social stratification is intensified.

In addition, people's inability to explain and interpret events means that the act of selecting and constructing events is delegated to the intermediary role of global broadcasters. The world-casted news of Picus TV embodies the globalized broker of facts and interpretations. Local revolts that take hold in Detroit, and urban and underground chatter which can be heard during missions, acts only at a local level and via hearsay.

As a result, social fragmentation is linked to the absence of preliminary trust conditions; supported by the possibility of negotiating and selecting contemporary events. This opens the way to the logic of the conspiracies and systemic doubt (or its opposite, the belief in any coherent narrative).

5. Developments and final

5.1. *Story, narrative, plot*

Towards the end of the game, another plot twist reveals the third level of conspiracy. Behind the attack at Sarif lies an Illuminati plan for total control of augmentations, obtained through a mixture of systematic manipulation of media, the spread of anti-augmentations rhetoric, control of the market and paramilitary action intended to eliminate rivals. Hugh Darrow, inventor of the augmentations technology, is now afraid of the consequences of his invention (seeing himself as a modern Daedalus). He pretends to ally with them to devise his own plot. This triggers a global crisis at a meeting in Antarctica, where the central figures in the augmentations debate are in discussions. The player, once he reaches the platform, can confront the stance of the various factions and, once solved the crisis, can decide to broadcast a message worldwide. He can choose what truth to reveal to the world to explain the crisis; thus being part of a conspiracy himself.

As in storytelling, the privileged viewpoint is granted to the player and is bound to a logic of narrative relevance as well as to the conclusion of the story. The narrative, be it a movie or a text, concludes the process of infinite interpretation, which Fenster (2008), recalling Peirce's Infinite semiosis, ascribes to conspiracy theories' logic.

This process of closing a textual narrative program, characterized as a continuous process of desire (search for truth), is not, however, typical only of conspiracy theories, but also common to the historical discipline in particular. Even assuming the uniqueness of the event, there is never a moment in which the disciplinary discourse runs out or is completed, just as there is not a systemic conspiracy theory explaining the whole movement of all conspiracies in history. The narrative form is typical of both processes, so it aims to close and only temporarily satisfies this endless process of interpretation.

In this way, in the game's endings⁵ the ideology underlying the action of the player is turned into a final message (chosen from four) through a montage of images and video footage. The voice of Adam is in the background, explaining the reasons behind his actions and explaining his final choice about the truth to be revealed. This will be the "truth" according to whatever faction the player decided to support: Darrow's, Sarif's, Taggart's, or his own.

Videos and images are thus used to frame and strengthen the rhetorical discourse of the protagonist. Each final video carries a unique and all-encompassing interpretation of human history, including source fragments in a speech as evidence for the truth / reality of the speech itself.

Following this reasoning, we can assert that the game features another level of conspiracy than those initially identified, which may be labelled the conspiracy of historical discourse. Each of the characters / factions on the one hand supports the Cyber Renaissance rhetoric, in order to appeal to some values to be pursued in the present (whether technology, human morality, equality etc). At the same time, however, every faction secretly destroys this rhetoric from within; surpassing it in a "future" point of view. During the final (optional) conversations with the characters, each one confesses his position. Darrow rereads

5. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vHvTI9l5Xjo> (last accessed 11/12/2015).

the dialectic of enlightenment and proposes a return to the ethical value of myths; Sarif argues for a darwinian view of progress as opposed to a pan-Renaissance humanism, Taggart supports the concept of enlightened despotism against humanist egalitarianism.

Each of these positions “exceeds” chronologically the myth of Cyber Renaissance and destroys the metaphorical reasoning on which the reality of DE lied. Cyber Renaissance is a self-description of DE:HR history, which is both symbolically appropriate and socially necessary, but basically ideological, in the full sense of false consciousness. Reinterpreted through these conversations, the rhetoric of the game endings seems less shiny, more pragmatic and located. At the same time, it is a dehistoricized perspective, in which history becomes a supporting argument to appeal to moral, ethical and pragmatic values that are hypostatized into an abstract age, in an end of history time.

5.2. *The conspiracy of historical discourse*

The game endings allow two final reflections on the relationship between historical representation and conspiracy theories. First of all, the process of closing of history is linked to that described by Walter Benjamin (1997), comparable to the phases of translating explosions in Lotman’s theory the rereading of past history according to the needs of the present:

The semiotically highlighted events lead then to picture history, to align the earlier events in a time series. Thus is the historical experience shaped, which is not identified with the real knowledge deposited (accumulated) gradually over time [...] but it is in the relationships of cause and effect identified in terms of synchronicity (existing at a given moment) [...] Later other incidents may occur, to suggest a new interpretation of historical experience or its reinterpretation. (Uspensky, 1988, p.15, translation mine)

Hence the second point, related to the adequacy of the symbolic discourse of conspiracy theories, reported by Fenster (2008) in his reading of Jameson. The relationship between the individual and history in the narrative of conspiracy theories is an attempt to shape a unique and all-encompassing scenery for relations of power of the twentieth century. An example of both is offered by Aaronovitch

(2010), describing the reactions to Spike Lee documentary, *When the Levees Broke*, about the devastation left by Hurricane Katrina:

That so many black residents believe that the levees were purposely blown up is a result of their historical experience and their continuing sense that their safety and well-being will be sacrificed. In other words, the possible untruth of the allegations was making less important than the bigger truths revealed by them. (Aaronovitch, 2010, p.215)

The plot of historical discourse is thus the paradox by which history can never tell its meaning. Rather, it can only be read and interpreted in textual form to legitimize, contradict or convey messages that are being built by societies through a logic of symbolic adequacy. This is useful to create their own identity and not to investigate an unknown otherness, as pursued by historical discipline.

6. History as We Know It: Conclusions

6.1. *Society, history, conspiracy (we)*

In the game endings, the source material is thus used as the support for a speech neutralizing history itself, using it and dissolving it into achronic ethics. The construction of a symbolic adequacy on the historical horizon is more important than preservation of the otherness of history. In the case of DE:HR, this is due to an end of the world speech. We could say that the end of history corresponds to history's ends. To express meaning, it has to conclude or close its narration and act as a tool for the birth of a non-historical discourse originating from society.

From the point of view of conspiracy theories, the end of history is often a central element of the conspiracy rhetoric. Barkun (2003) considers conspiracy theory as a form of improvisational milleniarism. Fenster (2008) argues that it is a popular eschatology. These systems of belief read the history, imagining its end, to constitute a fictional community, present or future, establishing at the same time a sense of mission originating from the sharing of beliefs and correct behaviour. They reflect the cultural picture that the community creates to assume

a legible and clear orientation of the historical process. That is, a path that leads to the end of history as we know it.

Indeed, Barkun (2003) cites as secularized forms of millenarianism some ideologies of history as positivism, Marxism or Nazism. Secular visions of a perfect future, fuelled by the belief in a transcendent force different from religious, each promising the future to some especially worthy group.

From the point of view of the construction of community identity, a certain kind of historical narrative and recent systemic conspiracy theories share this tendency to expunge history from history itself, as a means of strengthening or creating communities. According to Knight (2003), this would explain why the US is the country where, for the last forty years, the conspiracy theories have caught on more; due to the typical sense of mission embodied by the American dream.

Based on the premise that the lack of a shared historical representation would sharpen the fragmentary perception of social identity, we are now observing how conspiracies and narratives are brought together by the chance to strengthen a sense of community by getting rid of the complexity of historical narration, by postulating its conclusion and partially contradicting the logic of the historical discipline.

6.2. *The logic of the discourses (know)*

The picture becomes more complex by looking once again at cognitive processes. Conspiracy theories, according Fenster (2008), use this popular eschatology to:

Provide an accessible and comprehensible, all-encompassing narrative frame or metanarrative that can explain the past, the present, and the future for a mass audience [...] Popular eschatology thus serves as a form of historiography, articulating and circulating a method of historical interpretation, a general theory of historical agency, and an underlying conceptual structure that makes human history intelligible. This historiography is distinct, yet however, from the theory and method of research practised by professional historians; rather, much of contemporary eschatology serves as a form of popular historiography that seeks to provide an overarching theory of history in an accessible format in order to call readers to action in the practice of interpreting history. (Fenster, 2008 p.198–99)

On the contrary, history as a discipline in the twentieth century has turned towards a problematic view of historicity. It is more and more considered as a specific and limited discipline; based on the relationship between scientific discourse and narrative competence, centred on the problems of the event, abandoning positivistic theories in favour of statistical, economical, symbolical and sociological explanations.

From this point of view, conspiracy thinking is unable to distinguish (hi)stories told in texts from the historicity of texts. It ends up considering the event as a given, naturalizing it; superimposing value systems and criteria of selection of past societies with that of current ones. In this way, marking the departure from historical discourse as a discipline, and instead coming closer to the historical narration as an un-mediated reading and memory of cultures.

6.3. *History as such? (it). Conclusions*

What remains of the ontology of history in this link between conspiracy theories, community self-description, the multiplicity of historical representations and disciplinary discourse? There seems to be some link between the ontology of postmodern history (what has been called end of history, or the end of the great narratives), the emergence of conspiracy theories, and millenarianism and fideistic processes.

The concept of postmodernism has among its main points the end of grand narratives (Lyotard, 1979). This is often linked to the end of history as advocated by Francis Fukuyama (1992), which seemed to support the idea of an historic moment in which societies are no longer able to reconstruct unique narratives, and cannot lay the foundations for a representation of the historical process.

Maybe the emergence of conspiracy theories lets us tackle the issue from another point of view. If the end of history corresponds to history's ends (that is, there comes a time when the purpose of history is to conclude to meet the community symbolic adequacy), we can say that the end of history does not match the end of (hi)stories, or hegemonic narratives. Which does, however, suffer a double transformation:

- History as a discipline is dominated by history as a communitarian narrative. Its procedures are increasingly being parasitized

by the logic of the narrative and the movie narration in a short circuit that, I add, is needed for the closure of history itself.

- The historical community narrative flattens itself on the patterns of historicity or contemporary thinking. It seems plausible that models belonging to mythical discourse, as described by Uspenski (1988) on the one hand, and contemporary systems of values on the other, are progressively determining the meaning of history.

This success of specific traits of myths and narrations, together with the search for a unique frame meeting symbolic adequacy, are the key elements of the success of conspiracy theories as a form of dehistoricized story-telling, and at the same time as its suppression and overtaking.

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«It's all the President's Fault»

Tricks, Conspiracies, and Corruption in the American TV Series Set
at the White House: *Homeland* and *Scandal*

FEDERICA TURCO*

Sospettare, sospettare sempre, solo così trovi
la verità.

Non è così che ci dice di fare la scienza?

UMBERTO ECO, *Numero Zero*

TITOLO ITALIANO: Tutta colpa del Presidente. Intrighi, complotti, corruzioni
nelle serie TV americane ambientate alla Casa Bianca: *Homeland* e
Scandal

ABSTRACT: The essay analyzes through semiotics some TV series about
USA politics (i.e. *Scandal* and *Homeland*), trying to describe the cultural
models emerging from these texts and the collective imaginary they
create/refer to. The essay also seeks to detect the rhetorical devices used
to describe conspiracies.

KEYWORDS: Conspiracy; Secrecy; Cultural Models; Narratives; TV Series.

1. Talking about “conspiracy”

In the next few pages I would like to discuss the rhetorical use of
a complex concept such as “conspiracy” in the construction of the
plot of some American TV series, in order to understand the inner
narrative principles of the concept itself.

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Therefore, I'll start with a short excursus on the definition of the term "conspiracy" and on the meaning of this concept according to literature; then I'll highlight the main features of two series, Homeland and Scandal, both set at the White House; finally, I'll try to lay down some recurring elements emerging from them.

Dictionaries¹ show many different definitions of the term "conspiracy", most of which describe the phenomenon as a secret agreement between two or more persons with the purpose of modifying, subverting, radically changing a regime, a State, a political profile, sometimes employing violent and coercive means. Some definitions also refer to the possibility to commit a crime or accomplish legal purposes through illegal actions.

In these definitions we can notice a first series of elements for a semiotic overview on the concept of conspiracy: the presence of a group of people; the secrecy; the changing of the system as the main purpose of the action; the connection with the political environment; the issue of legality / illegality; the imprecise plot and so on.

We can find the same ingredients in the scientific literature concerning conspiracy, too.

In his book *A culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, Micheal Barkun claims that

despite the frequency with which conspiracy beliefs have been discussed at the end of the second millennium, the term conspiracy itself has often been left undefined, as though its meanings were self-evident. This has mostly originated the negative feature of the word. [...] The essence of conspiracy beliefs lies in the attempts to delineate and explain evil and, the author specifies, a conspiracy belief is the belief that an organization made up of individuals or groups was or is acting covertly to achieve some malevolent end. But this have positive effects too: a conspiracist worldview implies a universe governed by design rather than by randomness. (Barkun, 2003, p. 3)

Then, Barkun continues with a list of three basic principles of any conspiracy:

- nothing happens by accident: as we said, conspiracy implies a world based on intentionality, in which accident and coinciden-

1. See, for example, the Oxford Dictionary, the Macmillan Dictionary and, in Italian, the Devoto-Oli.

- ce have been removed. Anything that happens occurs because it has been willed. A fantasy world, far more coherent than the real one can be generated, in the most extreme scenario;
- nothing is as it seems: conspirators want to deceive, in order to disguise their identities or their activities;
 - everything is connected: since conspirators' world has no room of accident, patterns are believed to be found everywhere.

Somehow, this conspiratory vision is both frightening and reassuring: it is frightening because it magnifies the power of evil, but, at the same time, it is reassuring because it promises a world that is meaningful, rather than arbitrary.

Obviously, in Barkun's theory, conspiracy and secrecy seem indissolubly linked: conspiracy involves two different forms of secrecy: one concerns the group itself (a group may be secret or known), the other concerns their activities (secret or known). The combination of these positions originates 4 different possibilities:

- secret groups acting secretly, such as the Illuminati organization or the famous anti-semitic forgery named the Protocols of the Elders of Zion;
- the second type lies outside conspiracy theories proper, for it concerns groups that, while concealing their existence, nonetheless act openly, such as the philanthropic ones.
- then we have known groups with secret activities. These organizations usually exist at two different levels: the one is relatively open, while the other is hidden to the larger public. The first level usually masks the second (e.g., the Masons, and all Intelligence Agencies, such as the CIA or KGB);
- the last type combines known groups with known activities: e.g., free associations, parties, groups of interest, and so on.

We have to add that, according to Barkun himself, the belief in conspiracy theories is an act of faith, and does not correspond to a concrete evaluation of proofs or evidences. And this is the reason why conspirators can go beyond the paradox to be among the few ones who can see a reality that nobody else can perceive.

		ACTIVITIES	
		Secret	Not Secret
GROUP	Secret	I Illuminati	II Anonymous philanthropists
	Not Secret	III Masons	IV Democratic political parties

Figure 1. Secrecy versus Openness (Barkum, 2003, p. 5).

A certain number of Authors theorises a strong and systemic connection between conspiracy theories and paranoia, meant not just as a clinic personality disorder, but as a kind of social and political attitude widely prevailing nowadays. In a book published in 1965, for example, the American historian Richard Hofstadter claims that this link is originated by the common way to construct their inner narrative system, their plot. As a matter of fact, just like a conspirator, the political paranoid believes that each hostile circumstance is directed not against himself or herself personally, but against a whole nation, culture, way of life, and that the consequences of such circumstance would affect not him/herself only, but millions of people (Hofstadter, 1965). Exaggeration and distortion become, thus, the norm and this apocalyptic² vision of life spreads everywhere³.

In this context, it is important to come back to the notion of “enemy”, as developed by Umberto Eco in his dedicated, illuminating essay (Eco, 2011). According to the semiotician, the presence of an enemy in an individual’s life is necessary to define his/her own personality, and to assess the value system in which he/she moves (in the very moment in which I have to face my enemy, I can show and confirm my own values). This is the reason why people create enemies even

2. The use of this term is taken from the famous Eco’s vision of mass cultural system: the apocalyptic intellectual rejects mass culture as “anti-culture” and, generally, refuses to see any positive benefit from such innovations as cinema, television, fiction, and so on. In the same way, the paranoid, thanks to his/her intellectual capacity to imagine a reality others do not see, considers the “normal mass vision” (that is confident in people) as a distorted one, with no positive effects.

3. On this topic, see also Melley (1999) and Carter (2012).

though they do not have a real one and these made-up enemies are always pinpointed within groups of people we do consider different from us⁴: enemies are the ones who are “other than us” and who behave differently from us.

With this imperfect and short excursus on “conspiracy” in our mind, we can now move on to the analysis of the TV series that I have scrutinized for this paper. The first one is *Scandal*.

2. *Scandal*: an enemy within

Scandal is an American political thriller television series starring Kerry Washington. Created by the screenwriter and director Shonda Rhimes, it debuted on the American broadcaster ABC on April 5th, 2012. The show takes place in Washington D.C. and focuses on Olivia Pope's crisis management firm, Olivia Pope & Associates, and on White House staff affairs.

The main character, Olivia Pope, has been a very trustworthy collaborator of the USA President and the purpose of her present firm is to help in hiding any type of action, problem, or scandal of the American upper-class and protecting the public image of the nation's elite. As we can read in the official page of the series, on the ABC website,

Olivia Pope is a fixer. The best in D.C. A title earned first by getting an underdog candidate elected President. What makes Olivia Pope the best is that she doesn't fix problems. She fixes clients. She fixes people. They come to her at their lowest moment. On the worst day of their lives. Covered in blood, on the verge of conviction. . . when rock bottom is in sight and there's nowhere left to turn they come to Olivia Pope for salvation⁵.

Sometimes, this “fixing role” just implies the necessity to tell credible stories in order to conceal unmentionable secrets, but some other

4. It is known that the topic of “otherness” is fundamental in different branches of knowledge. We can remember here the work of Paul Ricoeur (1984, 2004) and, in a semiotic perspective, the positions and the theories developed by Juri Lotman and, in general, the semiotics of culture (Lotman and Uspenskij, 1975). The fear of the “Other” is the base of quite large phenomena as racisms, sex and gender discriminations, nationalisms, anti-semitism, and so on.

5. <http://abc.go.com/shows/scandal/cast/olivia-pope> (last access: 10.28.2015).

times it involves the necessity to hide corpse or kill enemies. All of this is fair in politics, when the ultimate end is the preservation of a whole system, the USA Government, that is considered as a higher and unalienable entity.

Around Olivia we find the staff of Pope & Associates: some of them are lawyers, who are also called “the gladiators”, who seem to have some dark experience in their past to be hidden, too.

All the first season of the series develops around the personal story of these characters. Episode after episode, case after case, we discover the reason of Olivia’s departure from the White House (a sexual and sentimental, never ending affair between her and the President) and we discover details about her collaborators, as well.

Even if we have to overlook, by necessity, most of the details, there are few things we can already say about this series.

First, the whole first season of *Scandal* develops around a precise thematic area: secrecy. Episode after episode our concern about what we are seeing increase and our doubts about the reliability of the given information grow. We may name it “the unseen and the untold” issue: throughout all the episodes, we have the constant feeling that there is something missing or that we cannot see. We are made conscious that there is a kind of Big Brother, an omniscient *deus ex machina*, manipulating the puppet strings, and this concealing is somehow represented as a theme of the plot itself, and, consequently, as a value.

A second key point of these episodes is the presence of a “team”: a group of people that works together, with a common objective (the maintenance of the structured power system) that is clear for all the members of the group. As we said, in our story this team is named “the gladiators”:

Harrison: I’m not a baby lawyer. I’m a gladiator in a suit. Because that’s what you are when you work for Olivia. You’re a gladiator in a suit. Do you want to be a gladiator in a suit? You gotta say it. Queen: I want to be a gladiator in a suit (Season 1, Ep. 1).

Are we Gladiators, or Are we bitches? (Season 3, Ep. 1).

You’re a gladiator. Gladiators don’t run. They fight. They slay dragons. They wipe off the blood. They stitch up their wounds, and they live to fight another day. You don’t get to run (Season 3, Ep. 16).

I didn't even get a chance to be her gladiator because no one bothered to let me know that she was missing, that she was in trouble, that she needed me. All the times. All the times that she saves me. All the times. I would save her, David. I would go over a cliff for her (Season 4, Ep. 12).

Well, you know, once a gladiator, always a gladiator, right? (Season 4, Ep. 13).

The fact that Olivia's team is named "the gladiators" (Olivia calls them so, but also each member of the group identifies him/herself with this term, proving his/her own complete acceptance of the role) reminds, obviously, a semantic sphere concerning the fight, the strain, the struggle, but also the inevitability: you cannot choose to be a gladiator or not and, furthermore, if you are a gladiator, you cannot choose when to fight. It is someone in charge who decide about your life. In other words, The Sender is external to the Subject: it is the social-political-civil system, the society itself that needs gladiators (or their actions and their way to arrange things) for its own survival. This seems to be the chief message of the series.

The third feature is the strict connection with the political environment. Olivia doesn't help ordinary people, she has links just with people from the American establishment.

For example, in the first season, we meet: a Russian Ambassador; a famous metresse whose clients come from the political environment; a White House apprentice accused to be the President's lover; a South American dictator, and so on.

Finally, the single stories of all these people suggest another important issue of the series, that is the boundary of legality. Olivia acts beyond and above law, she helps innocents and criminals, the gladiators act out of the social rules because they have "higher purposes": purposes that ordinary people cannot understand or cannot even see nor conceive. It is the classical staging of the «end that justifies the means». And this end is never personal, or subjective; it is collective, it is social. It is the necessity to reorganize (or to maintain) the social system itself.

As we can see, these features correspond to the elements I have listed as the key concepts for a semiotic overview of conspiracy: the group, the secrecy, the radical change, the political environment, the illegality, the imprecise plot. It is not difficult to recognize all these elements in the description of Scandal I've tried to give.

What is missing in the series is the conspiracy itself, or, better, the evidence of the presence of a conspiracy. But soon *Scandal* reveals this aspect too. During the second season, we are finally informed about all those untold and unseen that we perceived during the first one. There are two conspiracies under and above the actions of each character of the story:

- the first one concerns the irregular election of the President of the United States (election that Olivia contributed to rig when she was the press agent of Fitzgerald Grant);
- the second one concerns the existence of a secret intelligence agency named B613, that, apparently, is under the command of the US President, but that, in fact, acts with an illegal, unlimited liberty.

These two narrative lines push the series on during all the subsequent seasons and, in my opinion, they set up the entire elementary structure of meaning of the series. Let's go deeper through them, a little bit more.

The first point is connected with the issue of power: how can a single man lead a state or the entire world? How can he legitimate this power, that is, at the same time, a political one (the authority or jurisdiction to act for personal or collective purposes) and a philosophical one (the ability to influence attitudes and behaviours of humans)?

Max Weber (1922) distinguishes three ideal types of political leadership (referred to three types of domination, legitimisation or authority):

- the charismatic domination (familiar and religious); i.e., the power of God;
- the traditional domination (patriarchal, patrimonial, feudal); i.e., the power of Napoleon;
- the legal domination (modern law and state, bureaucracy); i.e., the power of Constitution.

In his view, every historical relation between the rulers and the ruled contained such elements and they can be analysed on the basis of this tripartite distinction.

So, the question is: what group should a President who has been elected with a trick belong to?

Concerning the second point, the events connected with B613 not only are linked to the issue of the legality of political power, but they are linked to the one of identity: who is who?

In his lessons on the philosophy of communication (2008), Ugo Volli talks about the concept of identity and asserts that it refers both to the way an individual considers and establishes him/herself as a part of social groups and to the set of rules, habits, and traditions he/she uses to relate to along with others. In this sense, identity is something that has a kind of memory: it remains across time, it has a past, a present, and a future.

In *Scandal*, we have a certain number of characters who seem to be something but that are, in reality, something else: Olivia's father is not an ordinary curator of antiquities at the Smithsonian (this is the way he introduces himself), but the person in charge of B613; Jake Ballard is not an anonymous marine, but a spy for both President Grant and for B613; Huck is not just one of the faithful and loyal gladiators but he has been a torturer for B61; and so on, in a never ending list of confusion and exchange that lie at the basis of the narrative construction of the conspiracy in the fiction.

We can conclude this short analysis by saying that *Scandal* sets up its value structure around the juxtaposition between two main values: being and seeming. If you take a look at the left part of semiotic veridictory square, you can find the secrecy: it is here, on the tension line between being and not-seeming that the narrative inner mechanism of this series is constructed: nothing is as it seems, nothing happens by accident, everything is connected (Barkun, 2003).

3. Homeland: an enemy outside

The second series I would like to discuss in this short text is *Homeland*, that is usually defined as a political thriller and that has been broadcasted in America since 2011.

The subject of this fiction is not original, but it is inspired by the Israeli series *Hatufim* (Prisoners of war, in the English version).

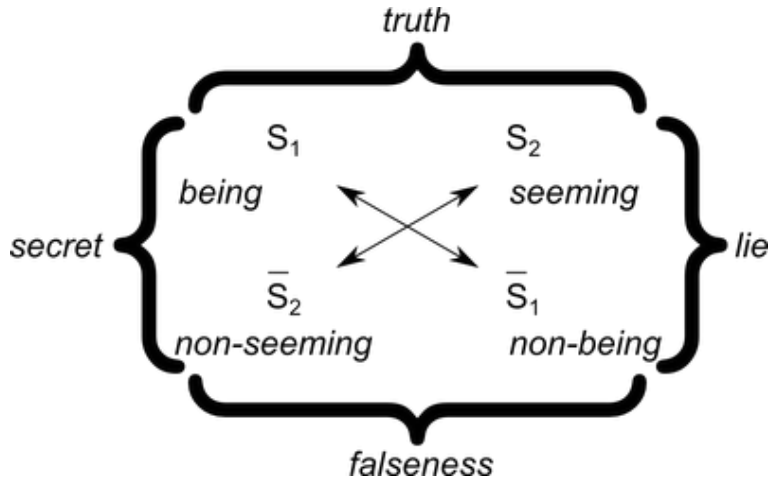


Figure 2. The semiotic veridictory square

The series stars Claire Danes as Carrie Mathison, a Central Intelligence Agency officer with bipolar disorder, and Damian Lewis as Nicholas Brody, a United States Marine Corps Scout Sniper. Mathison had come to believe that Brody, who was held captive by al-Qaeda, as a prisoner of war, has been brainwashed by the enemy and posed as a threat for the United States.

This is the main nucleus of the story: Carrie is alone. She is the only one to see this truth that others cannot even imagine. And she can see it because of her insanity. The film establishes a clear link between the ability to imagine absurd and inconceivable worlds and madness. The hero is alone against who is plotting to the detriment of the American political and military establishment; the hero cannot be comprised by normal people, since normal people have not got the capacity to imagine, to foresee the consequences of their own actions, to pretend, to disguise their selves, to catch opportunities etc. They have no metis, as Ugo Volli would suggest (2008).

This fiction tackles the connection between conspiracy theories and paranoia that we have been discussing above (Hofstadter, 1965) and, in my opinion, the core meaning of the narration lies right in this connection (the presence of a declared, even if secret, mental disease of the main character of the plot), as it explains, justifies, and describes the conspiracy and its role in society.

This case is opposed diametrically to the previous one: there, in Scandal, we have seen how conspiracy may emerge from the inside of the establishment and the American political system; here, in Homeland, the conspiracy is, if anything, external. This latter type is the enemy described by Eco: someone who is different from us and who threatens the system from another place (in particular, in this case, the violent and unknown enemy is al-Qaeda or Islamic terrorism in general).

In 2013, Jesse Walker published an interesting book entitled *The United States of Paranoia. A Conspiracy Theory*. Walker talks about five primary myths that underlie America's conspiracy folklore. He clarifies that the use of the word "myths" has not to be connected to a fictional characterization of the stories, but to their repetitiveness, and recurrence. Somehow, this is Lévi-Strauss' (1958, 1978) idea of myth, according to which the working principle of myths is not in their content, but in the relations they set up.

Therefore, these five myths are:

- The Enemy Outside, who plots outside the community's gates;
- The Enemy Within, comprising villainous neighbours who can't easily be distinguished from friends;
- The Enemy Above, hiding at the top of the social pyramid;
- The Enemy Below, lurking at the bottom;
- The Benevolent Conspiracy, which isn't an enemy at all: a secret force working behind the scenes to improve people's lives.

According to this typology, in Scandal we have the enemy above and within, in Homeland we have the enemy outside.

One may say that Nicolas Brody is not an outsider; he is an American marine, with an American family and American friends.

Actually, the truth is that Brody was a marine. But the imprisonment he underwent changed him deeply, and the fiction repeatedly insists on this point: he converted to Islam and totally believes to be different from Americans (many scenes of the series try to give a point at this, via figurative and isotopic strategies). He has an intimate and familiar relationship with the al-Qaeda commander and he is convinced that his role in American history is to revenge the death of al-Qaeda commander's son (killed by an American drone).

It is hard to write about these kind of themes in these days⁶ without using a rhetorical approach to terrorism, religion, and the supposed diversity between humans, but it is necessary to analyze in depth the narrative construction of the series to understand the inner values it tries to set-up and spread.

According to myself, the key word that we may use to describe this text is: “revenge”.

As I’ve already underlined in previous works (Turco, 2011, 2013), revenge is an interesting category, because it is a kind of behaviour that goes beyond temporal limits. It originates from something in the past, goes on in the present, and prepares itself for the future realization. In our fiction, the revenge acts as a kind of balance for passions; during the organization of his revenge plan, Brody can find serenity and the belief he is about to realise his own narrative program: the Subject, deprived of his own Object, plans his conjunction with a new Object that is a substitute of the previous one. And this new Object is revenge itself.

In *Homeland*, revenge is the value used to establish the tension between “me” and the “other” (cf. Fig. 3), and to explain the central matter of the plot, which is “otherness” itself (another key point of conspiracy’s essence). This “otherness” is constructed, most of all, by means of the religious system of beliefs: on the one hand (which, in fiction’s logic, would be the right one, namely the laic, fair, and equal), we have the Americans and the US system; on the other one, we have terrorists, who act in the name of a God with corrupted and conspiratory purposes.

Somehow, in this fiction, revenge is a category that becomes an ideology, which we may describe, in semiotic terms, as the syntagmatic arrangement of values and their actualization in a quest. Subjects desire values, which become the object of the quest. Their selections and setting up as goals define an ideology. Once the quest is accomplished, we no longer talk about ideology: the notion of ideology contains a permanent quest that is reflected in the actantial structure of its own narration.

6. Paris has been attacked by ISIS terrorists few days ago (on 13th November, 2015) and, while I’m writing, in Bruxelles, a massive police action has been launched in order to identify the bombers after several days of lockdown at the highest level of alert in France, Belgium, and all Europe.

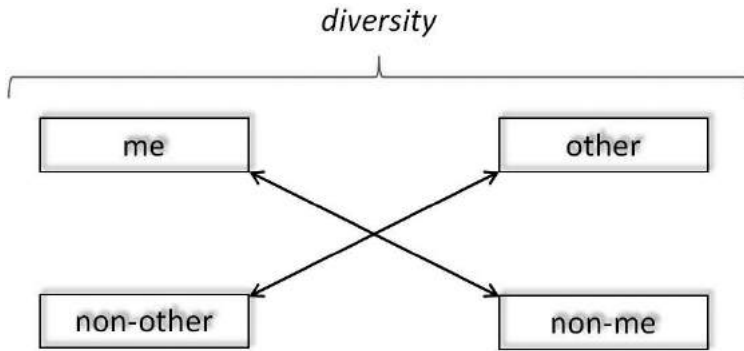


Figure 3. The semiotic square of "Otherness"

The tension between "me" and the "other" in our fiction is built on the assumption that religion is an ideology: the stories and the actions people do "in the name of Faith" are a continuous representation of moral values as goals to be achieved. Even revenge and violence, as a means to achieve the revenge, become Objects to be desired by the Subjects of narrations.

As Massimo Leone underlines (2007), the expression "religious violence" can assume different meanings, depending on the contents of the terms that compose the syntagm, and depending on the relationships between these contents. We can define as "religious" that kind of violence the Subjects perform "in the name of" a transcendent system of beliefs; but the religious dimension of a violent action is also inextricably interconnected with other cultural and social dimensions, like politics, language, social and economic class etc.

According to Leone, a religious tradition allows violent actions when it is used as a depository of elements meant to build and differentiate individual or group identity from the external social reality.

In *Homeland*, Brody is right the depository of this diversity, because he has been an American (and he has shared American values and behaviours) and now he is an Islamic terrorist (and he shares with al-Qaeda new values and behaviours). The friction point lies in the fact that while terrorism is described as a religious organization, the US are, instead, shown as liberal, laic, and superpartes. The only possible point of contact between these two perspectives is Carrie Mathison,

who is assumed to be liberal, laic and honest, as Americans, but who shares madness with the terrorists and this become the strategic key for her interpretation and prevision of their violent actions.

4. Some conclusions

The analysis I presented here may suggest some ideas about the rhetorical construction of the representation of conspiracy in TV series. I think there are at least 4 useful issues to address:

- The use of the rhetorical device of *mise en abîme*. These stories are always constructed like Chinese boxes, whose joining and overlapping and mixing contribute to the creation of the meaning of narrative programs. A program is just the part of another program that is part of another program that is part of another, and so on. Again, everything is connected (Barkun, 2003).

At a meta-textual level, this organization stages a kind of critique to the television language itself and of its capacity to reach reality foundations, because TV language refers to another language, that refers to another language, that refers to another, and so on.

- We want to believe. Conspiracy is a word we are willing to believe to. It is a problem of textual cooperation (and of pertinence, somehow). Differently from other fiction, where we can perceive as fantasy facts that are presented as true, here we do the more radical experience to perceive as plausible facts that are described as invention of the imagination. And this is possible because conspiracy theories are much more stronger that we can think. They're not a minority belief, but they are innate in our common interpretation of society.
- As a consequence, I think it is correct to interpret these fictions as a part of a wider contemporary cultural model. We assume that cultural models are recurrent discourse configurations that are capable to give coherence to entire sign encyclopaedias. Upon cultural models we do create our own vision of the world

- and society. And this is the reason why cultural models expand and broaden and become part of collective imaginary, indeed.
- I think that the narrative coherence of these fictions is given by the use of hyperbole. They give us so many details that we cannot verify them one by one (I mean, we cannot separate them from the context, in order to evaluate their reliability or truthfulness) and, in the end, we believe to the whole as if it were really connected.

Finally, we can say that in these stories the hermeneutics of suspect seems to be the only way to comprehend what is happening. In a world that is described as divided into two permanent and unmoving parts, the good and the bad ones, everyone tries to demonstrate to be good, forgetting that in our society everyone is bad, more or less.

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Il contagio cospirativo sui social media

Ebola e la narrazione delle teorie del complotto

MARTA MILIA*

ABSTRACT: The Conspiratorial Contagion in the Social Media: Ebola and the Narration of the Conspiracy Theories

ABSTRACT: The essay focuses on the development of conspiracy narratives, with special attention to the evolution of mythologies in social networks. Stories of plots concerning health issues, and specifically of narratives about the Ebola virus, have carved out a significant space in the scenario of digital media. In 2014, in the regions of north–western Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Nigeria, thousands succumbed to the virus; according to the “Centers for Disease Control and Prevention”, it caused the most serious outbreak of hemorrhagic fever in history. As in the case of previous epidemics (AIDS, SARS, and so on), the massive spread of Ebola too was accounted for by numerous conspiracy theories. The essay analyzes processes and narratives that lie behind them, focusing on Facebook pages and Twitter accounts that boosted the diffusion of such mythologies.

KEYWORDS: Conspiracy Theories; Ebola Virus; Sanitary Plots; Social Networks Conspiracies; Viral Narrations.

1. Uno sguardo sulla teoria del complotto

La nascita delle teorie cospirative è strettamente legata a rilevanti avvenimenti storici (de Haven-Smith, 2013) che condizionano e spesso modificano politica, rapporti economici e sociali propri delle nazioni dove hanno avuto luogo. Il termine stesso, *Teorie Cospirative* o in

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inglese, *Conspiracy Theories*, secondo De Haven-Smith (2013), è stato utilizzato per la prima volta proprio in relazione a uno dei più gravi avvenimenti nella storia degli USA, ovvero l'assassinio del presidente J.F. Kennedy nel 1964. Il termine racchiudeva in sé tutte quei "rumors" e le versioni alternative in opposizione alla conclusione stilata dalla Commissione Warren, incaricata delle indagini sull'omicidio. Com'è noto Lee Henry Oswald fu individuato come unico responsabile. Il termine tuttavia ha assunto nel tempo una connotazione negativa (Quaglia, 2007): il riferimento a queste teorie, infatti, ai giorni nostri parole come "complotto" e "cospirazionista" sono strettamente connesse a quelle spiegazioni alternative e allo scetticismo nei confronti di una versione ufficiale su un determinato fatto, teorie prive di fondamento e non del tutto verificabili con strumenti oggettivi. Nello studio delle caratteristiche che accomunano la narrazione delle teorie cospirative, è possibile individuare un filo conduttore che secondo il sociologo Michael Barkun risiede nella «convincione che un'organizzazione fatta di individui o gruppi agisca di nascosto per raggiungere un fine malevolo» (*Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, 2013, p.3). Agire segretamente, specie in gruppo, per nuocere o raggiungere un fine a scapito di qualcun altro è quindi il fulcro della pratica cospirativa. Prendendo come punto di riferimento le definizioni precedenti e il testo di Barkun, possiamo quindi tracciare un profilo delle caratteristiche che accomuna la dinamica di evoluzione delle teorie del complotto.

- La versione ufficiale non è mai trasparente. Niente è come sembra. Le informazioni fornite dai media tradizionali e dalle fonti istituzionali non ci dicono tutta la verità (sospetto nell'autorità)
- Un gruppo potente, influente, come un'organizzazione statale o parastatale, trama all'insaputa di un gruppo tendenzialmente più debole, depistando e distruggendo qualunque indizio o fatto che possa ricondurre all'azione cospirativa e ai suoi responsabili (occultamento e segretezza)
- Le narrazioni o versioni alternative che ne derivano, spesso contorte e molto articolate, contrastano la verità ufficiale, dando vita a vere e proprie mitologie in opposizione alle masse che credono invece nella verità ufficiale.

Le pratiche narrative, quindi, sono alla base delle mitologie conspirative. Basti pensare alle numerose produzioni cinematografiche, televisive, letterarie (Arnold, 2008), nate proprio dalla suggestione di argomenti caldi, misteri storici irrisolti, scenari futuri apocalittici. Uno dei temi che maggiormente caratterizza le narrazioni sulla cospirazione è certamente la paura. Runcini (2012), ne *La paura e l'immaginario sociale nella letteratura*, afferma infatti che la paura è uno tra i meccanismi più incisivi sui quali verte la produzione letteraria. Se considerassimo la narrazione complottista un genere letterario, questa affermazione le sarebbe congeniale. La paura come chiave, isotopia dei più importanti meccanismi conspirativi.

Il mondo contemporaneo è costellato di avvenimenti drammatici, e mai come in questi ultimi anni lo spettro del terrorismo (specialmente dall'11 settembre in poi) condiziona in modo considerevole il palinsesto dei telegiornali, le pagine social, la letteratura e il cinema (Rondini 2015), acuendo la sensazione di paura e di insicurezza causata dagli attacchi terroristici, si pensi all'eccidio nella redazione di Charlie Hebdo e alla strage di Parigi del 13 novembre 2015. Intorno ad alcuni di questi drammatici avvenimenti, si sono evolute nuove teorie conspirative e con esse si sono le isotopie correlate alla paura, come ad esempio, l'insicurezza, il contagio (terrorismo con armi batteriologiche). Occultamento, segretezza, sospetto, paura, dubbio, paranoia (Hofstadter, 1965) sono alcune delle isotopie che ricorrono nella narrazione di una teoria conspirativa. Ma come può una narrazione di questo tipo essere realmente efficace e suscitare interesse, instillare il dubbio dell'utente nei confronti "nella versione ufficiale"?

Paura e dubbio da soli non bastano. È opportuno mettere in atto una vera e propria strategia comunicativa che attiri e interessi realmente. La manipolazione e la persuasione sono due delle componenti fondamentali di questo processo narrativo (Sibona 1981) che si snoda attraverso l'instaurarsi di un rapporto di fiducia tra il lettore-utente e il teorico che "spiega" il complotto. L'occultamento di alcune informazioni all'interno di un testo al fine di suscitare interesse, ma al tempo stesso la promessa di rivelare dettagli che gli organi di comunicazione convenzionali "non sveleranno mai" (basti consultare il titolo della pagina Facebook di nocensura.com "Cose che nessuno ti dirà") si

1. <https://www.facebook.com/nocensura/?fref=ts>

rivela come strategia vincente: la voluta impersonalità e ricercata oggettività dell'enunciatore nell'affrontare gli interrogativi proposti a un attante, cioè al ricevente (Sibona, 1981) riguardo argomenti di ordine scientifico o presunto tale, come ad esempio le teorie cospirative sorte attorno al caso Ebola, le quali verranno illustrate in seguito.

Questo meccanismo potrebbe inscrivere in quello che Greimas (1979) definisce "fare persuasivo" ovvero "la convocazione da parte dell'enunciante di ogni sorta di modalità miranti a far accettare, da parte dell'enunciario, il contratto enunciativo proposto" rendendo quindi incisiva ed efficace la comunicazione. Nel caso delle teorie cospirative, un'ulteriore spinta verso la stipulazione di un patto di fiducia tra lettore e teorico esperto delle cospirazioni, arriva attraverso quello che il linguista e filologo Chadwick individua come "desiderio di far parte di una cerchia ristretta alla quale ogni segreto è svelato"². Essere quindi i protagonisti e i depositari dei segreti che si celano dietro una verità preconstituita e assimilata dalla massa in contrapposizione a chi aderisce alla versione alternativa, scomoda per i gruppi che detengono il potere e tessono le trame degli avvenimenti che condizionano la nostra società.

2. Ebola e la diffusione dei social-complotti

Secondo il Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, la mortalità a causa delle febbri emorragiche ha raggiunto tra agosto e novembre 2014 numeri tragicamente elevati rispetto alle precedenti epidemie, superando i confini geografici del continente africano e arrivando anche in Europa e America. In una reazione a catena innescata dalla condivisione sistematica delle notizie su Ebola attraverso i social media oltre che i tradizionali sistemi di informazione, hanno preso piede e prosperato numerose teorie del complotto. Sulla rete diversi siti e pagine social sono passati dall'annunciare il massiccio incremento di contagi a notizie inquietanti basate su numerosi ipotesi cospirative, la maggior parte delle quali basate sulla creazione in laboratorio del

2. <http://espresso.repubblica.it/opinioni/la-bustina-di-minerva/2014/09/02/news/il-complotto-sui-complotti-1.178439>.

virus da parte di alcuni scienziati americani³.

I social media rappresentano infatti l'ultima frontiera per il propagarsi di nuove teorie cospirative e l'immediatezza con le quali vengono condivise e trasmesse, attraverso un processo che si potrebbe definire di "mormorio" digitale. Le isotopie ricorrenti e condivisibili in questo caso sono lo spettro del contagio, la morte, l'invisibilità del nemico. Da un punto di vista comunicativo il virus diventa un simbolo molto potente (Rondini 2015): è invisibile, estremamente aggressivo, letale. Il timore di essere contagiati spinge sempre più utenti ad aderire a mitologie cospirative che possano soddisfare il loro interrogativi. Il far parte della cerchia ristretta di chi si informa "realmente", depositaria di verità osteggiate e affossate dai gruppi di potere, è in netto contrasto con tutti coloro che invece assumono come attendibili le narrazioni ufficiali, alle quali fanno riferimento in virtù di prove oggettive e verificabili (create a tavolino da quelle stesse organizzazioni che cospirano contro la società).

L'analisi di queste teorie è stata eseguita partendo la consultazione di numerose pagine Facebook, Twitter e notizie dei principali quotidiani italiani. Secondo l'agenzia italiana WatkinsMedia, che si occupa dello studio delle tendenze che circolano sui social media, i tweet contenenti la parola "ebola" condivisi tra il gennaio 2014 e ottobre dello stesso anno sono stati 149.281. L'utilizzo del termine su twitter però, ha avuto un forte incremento a partire da aprile, per un totale di oltre 200 indirizzi digitali dedicati all'epidemia di febbre emorragica⁴. Tra questi appunto ci sono anche i tweet cospirativi.

Le pagine Facebook italiane analizzate e riportanti le teorie sulla cospirazione sono diverse decine, ma tutte rimandano in genere a siti dedicati al mondo nelle narrazioni cospirative. Tra questi troviamo:

- <http://informatitalia.blogspot.it>;
- <http://www.lantidiplomatico.it>;
- <http://www.nocensura.com>;
- <http://www.disinformazione.it>;

3. <http://informatitalia.blogspot.it/2014/10/il-piu-importante-quotidiano-liberiano.html>.

4. <http://www.watkinsmedia.com/watkinsmedia/>, <http://www.lastampa.it/2014/10/12/tecnologia/ebola-lallarme-epidemia-nei-tweet-italiani-uFg76JVojiEMk7gt5JNhyI/pagina.html>.

— <http://www.informarexresistere.fr>.

Le pagine Facebook create per questi siti, riprendono quasi tutte uniformemente la stessa notizia, diffusa dal quotidiano liberiano Daily Observer⁵ il 9 settembre 2014. L'articolo, intitolato "Ebola, AIDS Manufactured By Western Pharmaceuticals, US DoD?" riporta la firma del dottor Cyril Broderick, professore di patologia vegetale di origini liberiane e docente all'università del Delaware. Secondo costui e il virus Ebola sarebbe in realtà un organismo geneticamente modificato e creato nei laboratori del dipartimento della Difesa negli Usa. Questa affermazione — come si legge nell'articolo — troverebbe conferma e trarrebbe ispirazione da un testo pubblicato nel 1996 da Leonard Horowitz intitolato *Emerging Viruses: AIDS and Ebola — Nature, Accident or Intentional*. Il testo rimanda inoltre a un'altra delle più gravi emergenze sanitarie della storia contemporanea ovvero la diffusione dell'Aids, attorno alla quale sono state concepite altrettante teorie cospirative. Entrambi i virus secondo il testo, sarebbero stati creati negli Usa durante la Guerra Fredda come armi batteriologiche per poi verificarne l'efficacia in Africa. Il 1972 sarebbe la data alla quale far risalire il primo ingresso di Ebola in Zaire, per mezzo di alcuni agenti della CIA.

Nell'analisi dell'articolo è importante evidenziare alcuni aspetti che ci forniscono delle tracce sulla tecnica narrativa. Il primo elemento riguarda l'autore dell'articolo: il fatto che questo sia un uomo di scienza, professore universitario, erudito appunto, potrebbe infondere una certa sicurezza in chi legge, rispondendo al patto di fiducia tra autore e lettore: "Fidati io so".

Un altro aspetto tipico della narrazione cospirativa risiede nel rimando a precedenti narrazioni concatenate: il tema della malattia infettiva creata a tavolino che, con la teoria cospirativa nata dopo il caso Aids, ha generato nuove teorie figlie, tra le quali appunto quella incentrata su Ebola. Il riconoscimento dell'organizzazione segreta che programma e quindi crea a tavolino un piano di sterminio servendosi delle lobbies farmaceutiche, altra grande categoria inserita in numerose teorie della cospirazione sanitaria. Un ulteriore elemento

5. <http://www.liberianobserver.com/security/ebola-aids-manufactured-western-pharmaceuticals-us-dod>

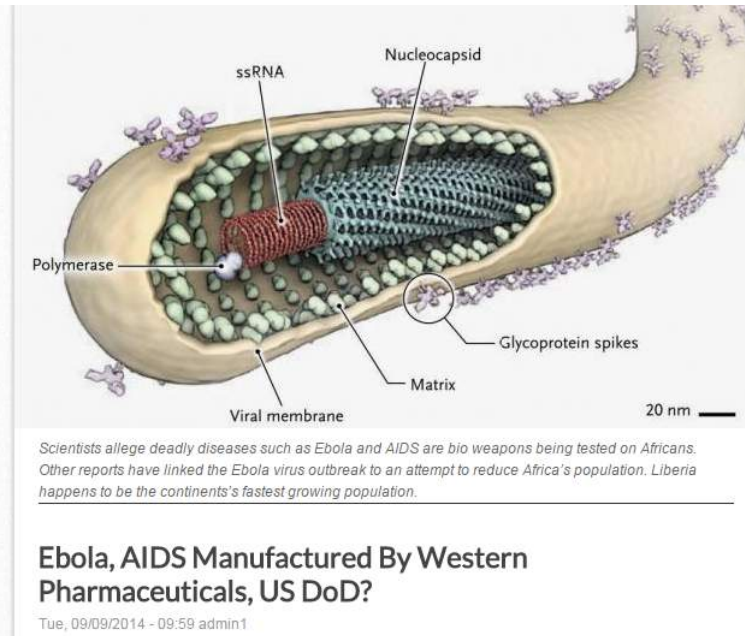


Figure 1.

narrativo che incide nella credibilità della teoria risiede nella componente iconica dell'articolo, corredato da un'immagine scientifica (Fig. 1).⁶

L'immagine, che riporta la riproduzione del virione responsabile del virus Ebola, è molto articolata e propone il dettaglio delle varie componenti corredate da una serie di termini provenienti dalla nomenclatura scientifica specifica. Questa scelta narrativa non è certamente casuale e l'immagine dona maggior valore al testo, potenziandone la carica semantica e rimandando a contenuti specifici che inducono a credere in chi legge che il testo, essendo così dettagliato, non possa che risultare credibile. Insieme a questo articolo altre immagini simili sono facilmente reperibili nei siti sopraccitati e il contenuto dell'articolo è quasi sempre riportato integralmente. La narrazione che, come abbiamo appurato, risulta efficace, attira sulle pagine Facebook dedicate

6. Immagine tratta dall'articolo al seguente link <http://www.liberianobserver.com/security/ebola-aids-manufactured-western-pharmaceuticals-us-dod>.

numerosi utenti (basti consultare il numero di like per pagina)⁷. Le stesse pagine sono incisive e di facile individuazione in quanto sono costruite a partire dall'impatto visivo (un esempio su tutti la pagina Facebook di "Nocensura.com") (Fig. 2).

Il sottotitolo della pagine rimanda poi al discorso dell'esclusività e della segretezza (Cose che nessuno ti dirà). L'immagine raffigurante un uomo con bocca, occhi e orecchie occultati da mani sconosciute, sembra voler suggerire la volontà di ostacolare appunto una libera visione critica sui fatti del mondo, che invece verrà svelata dai contenuti della pagina.

La diffusione delle teorie del complotto in rete ha però incontrato un nuovo livello comunicativo. Queste narrazioni sono diventate esse stesse notizie, scavalcando quindi il fatto scatenante, l'epidemia. Ciò a riprova del fatto che la diffusione delle teorie cospirative attraverso i media digitali è avvenuta a una velocità molto elevata, influenzando il processo di notiziabilità. Basti pensare all'articolo pubblicato dal Corriere della Sera l'11 ottobre 2014⁸ «Ebola e le teorie del complotto: dagli zombie al demone bianco. Con il diffondersi del virus aumentano, in rete e non solo, anche le teorie della cospirazione che riguardano la febbre emorragica».

La narrazione nella narrazione, in questo caso, prova che la portata della "viralità", della diffusione di queste pratiche è imponente, in grado di influenzare la comunicazione a più livelli.

Le narrazioni cospirative nate in seguito all'esplosione dell'epidemia, come abbiamo visto, hanno trovato terreno fertilissimo e prospettato nel mondo dei social media. Perché questo canale sembra essere così funzionale alla diffusione di notizie alternative, al "contagio" cospirativo? Ciò induce a pensare quindi che nell'aderire a un discorso di tipo cospirativo, l'utente manifesti un atteggiamento quasi fideistico in relazione alle notizie "rivelate", considerate assolutamente attendibili sulla diffusione volontaria e pianificata da parte di un

7. <https://www.facebook.com/nocensura/> piace a 1.002.480 persone, <https://www.facebook.com/informareXresistere/?fref=ts>, piace a 732.236 persone, <https://www.facebook.com/Informatitalia/> piace a 139.953 persone, <https://www.facebook.com/LAntidiplomatico-330568890322517/?fref=ts> piace a 58.859 persone. Ultima visita della pagine 15 dicembre 2015.

8. http://www.corriere.it/esteri/14_ottobre_11/ebola-zombie-1ceb4cd4-5127-11e4-8503-ob64997709c2.shtml.



Figure 2.

gruppo di potere di un virus letale. L'adesione a trame intricate e connesse secondo le quali niente è stato generato da coincidenze, potrebbe trovare una giustificazione nelle parole di Karl Popper (1973) che ne *La società aperta e i suoi nemici* p. 353, parla infatti

di come la teoria cospiratoria della società nasca nella convinzione che la spiegazione di un fenomeno sociale consista nella scoperta degli uomini o dei gruppi che sono interessati al verificarsi di tale fenomeno (talvolta si tratta di un interesse nascosto che deve essere prima rivelato) e che hanno progettato e congiurato per promuoverlo. Questa concezione deriva, naturalmente, dall'erronea teoria che, qualunque cosa avvenga nella società — come la guerra, la disoccupazione, la povertà, le carestie, che la gente di solito detesta — è il risultato di diretti interventi di alcuni individui e gruppi potenti.

Il “mormorio” digitale, ovvero tutta la serie di miti sulle possibili verità che non ci è dato conoscere si diffondono esponenzialmente in rete molto più velocemente grazie a una semplice pratica, la condivisione “consapevole” del contenuto, caratteristica descritta da Jenkins (2013) in *Spreadable Media*. La diffusione delle teorie cospirative attraverso Facebook e Twitter avviene infatti dopo una scelta operata da parte del lettore. La possibilità di discutere con altri utenti, e non soltanto assumere le teorie cospirative “passivamente”, spinge l'utente a un approccio molto più attivo e contribuisce alla narrazione diffondendola attraverso più piattaforme, fruibili da altri utenti facenti parte della “cerchia ristretta di chi si informa realmente”. Si potrebbe quindi parlare di un “coinvolgimento transmediale” degli utenti che si fanno essi stessi portatori e creatori di nuove narrazioni.

Il processo cospirativo che ha circondato le notizie su Ebola nei mesi di maggiore intensità di questo fenomeno, è quindi legato alle scelte degli utenti e al valore che questi attribuiscono alla narrazione. Le competenze, le esperienze di ciascuno, vengono messe alla prova davanti ai link che propongono una verità altra che catalizza l'attenzione, idealizza un nemico comune, lo costruisce secondo parametri precisi, e, molto spesso, è un nemico interno (Eco, 2011), ovvero facente parte della nostra stessa società (nel caso delle teorie cospirative su Ebola il nemico è appunto rappresentato dagli Stati Uniti). La promessa, però di far parte di una cerchia esclusiva che a sua volta mette in atto una sorta di cospirazione contro i governi, le multinazionali e altri gruppi di potere, rende l'utente parte attiva della seconda cospirazione: si pone esso stesso dei dubbi, fa delle congetture, le condivide con altri membri della cerchia, (rappresentata dalle pagine Facebook complottiste, blog, siti web dedicati) manipolando e rimaneggiando le teorie preesistenti. Si innesca così un processo di semiosi illimitata, un effetto

domino che dà origine a nuove mitologie che a loro volta daranno il via a nuovi dubbi che altri utenti decideranno di condividere oppure contestare, il tutto con un semplice clic del mouse.

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PARTE IV
RECENSIONI

PART IV
REVIEWS

Recensione di José Enrique Finol
La corposfera: Antropo-semiótica de las cartografías del cuerpo

Ediciones CIESPAL [Estudios Culturales y Teoría de la Mediación, 2],
Quito, 2015. ISBN: 978–9978–55–128–8; 319 pp.

MASSIMO LEONE*

Da quando Vladimir I. Vernadskij, nel 1926, divulgò il concetto di “biosfera”, già coniato dal geologo austriaco Eduard Suess alla fine dell’Ottocento, le scienze umane — specie a seguito del fortunato neologismo lotmaniano, “semiosfera” — sono state inondate di “sfe-re” relative agli elementi più svariati. Oramai, qualunque oggetto del discorso può ricevere il suffisso “-sfera” e indicare una dimensione dell’esistente socioculturale in cui tale oggetto si articola e, nelle sue varietà e tipi, circonda il soggetto analitico. Nonostante il termine sia stato ampiamente abusato, usi giustificati di questa pratica neologistica non mancano di affiorare di quando in quando, ed è certamente il caso della “corposfera” che dà il titolo al bel libro di José Enrique Finol, ultima fatica del semiologo venezuelano. Figura tra le più rinomate della semiótica internazionale, ricercatore di spicco in America Latina, Finol è notissimo per studi che combinano semiótica e discipline antropologiche attorno a temi che riguardano l’attualità della comunicazione, in special modo nel continente americano. Dotato di un retroterra interdisciplinare, di una curiosità multiculturale, e di uno stile caratteristicamente sobrio, preciso, e al contempo seducente, Finol, attualmente a capo di una nuova struttura di ricerca in Ecuador, si propone in questo volume di sviluppare una variegata “antroposemiotica” delle cartografie del corpo, vale a dire di tutti quei dispositivi di scrittura, codifica e decodifica che circondano il corpo nel suo vivere quotidiano. Missione impossibile, si dirà, se non che Finol l’affronta

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con consueta arguzia, dividendo il suo incedere in otto capitoli che progressivamente perimetrano e penetrano il soggetto di studio. Nel primo, intitolato “I saperi sul corpo”, l’autore dipana una conoscenza enciclopedica e approfondita delle “scienze umane del corpo” per dimostrare che esse lasciano uno spazio vuoto e insondato proprio per quel che riguarda il vissuto di senso e significazione degli stati e delle azioni corporali; la proposta è quella di “vedere il fenomeno corporale come parte di una storia, di una cultura, e di una società, però anche come il risultato di una serie complessa di operazioni di significazione che lo contraddistinguono come messaggio, come spettacolo, come senso” (p. 39). L’articolazione del metodo volto a cartografare la semantica del corpo inizia nel capitolo successivo, dedicato, appunto, al concetto di “corposfera”. Finol propone di studiarla come intreccio di quattro dimensioni: 1) il corpo–linguaggio, ovvero un sistema di segni; 2) il corpo–oggetto, ovvero i discorsi su di esso; 3) il corpo–spazio, cioè in quanto scenario di altri segni; e 4) il corpo–riferimento, vale a dire oggetti modellati dal corpo, la mera esistenza dei quali lo “racconta”. Il libro non si limita a una prospettiva astratta ma, in una serie di paragrafi agili e avvincenti, fornisce una moltitudine di esempi attraverso una segmentazione in chiave “comunicativa” del corpo, nella quale il volto, lo sguardo, i capelli, il torso, i genitali, etc. si trasformano da semplici parti corporali in microtesti da analizzare semioticamente in relazione a un preciso ambiente comunicativo, dall’uso del *trasero* nella pubblicità alle nuove fogge comunicative della peluria umana. L’idea di fondo che il capitolo segue è che l’analisi del “corpo in sé” sia fondamentale per approdare a quella di un’analisi del “corpo per gli altri corpi”, e che l’un aspetto non sia, in realtà, che il rovescio della medaglia dell’altro. È quanto si prefigge di appurare il terzo capitolo, consacrato a “Immaginari, frontiere e limiti delle semiotiche del corpo”. Fedele al suggerimento di Lotman, qui Finol intraprende di delineare i tratti e le dinamiche della “corposfera” proprio investigandone le zone di confine, le tensioni e gli sfrangiamenti, come quando si concentra sulle “mitologie del corpo sano” o su quelle, sempre più attuali, che attorno al corpo costruiscono nuove promesse di una longevità indefinita. Il capitolo dunque articola ulteriormente il concetto di “corposfera”, intesa come “congiunto di linguaggi che si originano, attualizzano e realizzano grazie al corpo” (p. 125), proponendo una tipologia dei suoi confini: 1) morfologico, ad esempio il limite fra le articolazioni ossee,

pertinentizzato da molte lingue naturali; 2) orografico, in cui confini più sfumati si disegnano e agiscono semioticamente al di sotto e al di là dei limiti morfologici, come quando il lembo di pelle fra bocca e naso diviene perno e superficie di una particolare espressione facciale; e 3) geografico, nel senso del rapporto fra interiorità ed esteriorità, ove l'autore distingue fra azioni corporee "transitive", le quali si affacciano come comunicative sullo schermo del corpo, e azioni "intransitive", che invece sono vissute solo nella propriocezione. Uno dei contributi più interessanti del capitolo è però quello di osservare come questi limiti siano continuamente negoziati, e spostati in modo a volte anche radicale dai nuovi fenomeni di cultura e comunicazione. Ne deriva la conclusione che "queste frontiere semiotiche che abbiamo preso in rassegna non sono muri, ma sono, al contrario, demarcazioni mobili, sottoposte al fiume interminabile delle forze dei nuovi segni, dei nuovi miti e riti che si dibattono nell'arena del sociale e che costituiscono la cultura [...]" (p. 140).

Per meglio comprendere queste dinamiche semiotiche di continuo riposizionamento dei confini corporali, Finol dedica l'intero quarto capitolo alle "Modalità del corpo: spazio e movimento, ritualità ed erotismo", costituito da una carrellata di esempi illuminanti, ciascuno provvisto di uno sguardo semiotico innovatore su un aspetto della semiotica corporea; nella sezione dedicata a "Corpo macchina e corpo digitale", per esempio, Finol propone un'efficace articolazione di questo complesso campo semantico, distinguendo fra "robot", "cyborg", "clone" e "avatar" a seconda delle operazioni semiotiche cui sottopongono il corpo — cioè "replica", "mescolamento", "identità", "sostituzione" — ma anche a seconda delle diverse forme di "sacralizzazione" che tale gradualità implica, dalla sacralità assoluta del corpo alla sostituibilità totale dell'avatar. Il quinto capitolo, "Corpo, estetica, ed edonismo" affronta sia il tema spinoso della semiotica del dolore (cui Umberto Eco ha dedicato i suoi ultimi sforzi di studioso, purtroppo incompiuti, ma che segnalano l'estrema rilevanza del tema), sia il suo contrario edonistico, il corpo trionfante dell'*ego-surfing*, della caccia spasmodica alla propria immagine nel web. Concludono il volume tre capitoli nei quali Finol torna su alcuni suoi "cavalli di battaglia", vale a dire argomenti sui quali si è spesa buona parte della sua carriera di studioso, semiologo, e antropologo: la struttura del gesto corporale nelle cerimonie pubbliche; la ritualità dei concorsi di bellezza, sui

quali Finol ha pubblicato pagine memorabili; i testi funerari. Ognuno di questi capitoli conferisce però un respiro teorico maggiore agli studi precedenti di Finol sugli stessi argomenti, in quanto li inserisce all'interno di una "semiotica della corposfera" che abbraccia ormai tutti gli aspetti della significazione corporale, sistematizzati all'interno di un libro che, sia pur dotato di uno stile agevolissimo, non mancherà di diventare un punto di riferimento per gli studi sul corpo.

Publicato nella elegante veste tipografica della serie "Studi culturali e teorie della mediazione", per i tipi delle "Edizioni CIESPAL" (il centro di ricerche equatoriano sulla comunicazione, uno dei migliori in tutta l'America Latina, in cui Finol è attualmente ricercatore di punta), *La corposfera* è un libro che deve essere presente nella biblioteca di ogni semiologo interessato al funzionamento comunicativo del corpo e soprattutto ai nuovi fenomeni di senso che riguardano questo elemento centrale delle nostre vite. Scritto con brio e rigore, il volume si distingue specialmente per quello sguardo multiplo che José Enrique Finol, esploratore delle culture indigene d'America, delle enciclopedie europee, e del loro prodotto meticcio nel variegato campo di segni dell'America Latina, sa poggiare su tutti gli oggetti delle sue ricerche, rivelandone tratti salienti e a un tempo inaspettati.

Recensione di Sémir Badir, *Épistémologie sémiotique*
La théorie du langage de Louis Hjelmslev

Honoré Champion [Bibliothèque de grammaire et de linguistique,
44], Parigi, 2014. ISBN: 978–2745–32–999–5; 411 pp.

MASSIMO LEONE*

Sémir Badir, ricercatore presso il Centro Nazionale delle Ricerche Belga, è uno dei più noti semiologi in lingua francese, universalmente apprezzato per la raffinatezza e precisione dei suoi scritti e dei suoi interventi. Specialista di linguistica e semiologia strutturale, con *Épistémologie sémiotique — La théorie du langage de Louis Hjelmslev* dà alle stampe un libro ambizioso, che riassume il risultato di ricerche decennali sul linguista, semiologo, e glossematico danese, costituisce un'interpretazione a tutto tondo della sua complessa teoria del linguaggio, e insieme propone una visione personale della semiotica, imperniata sull'esclusività della sua epistemologia.

Il volume, pubblicato dalla prestigiosa casa editrice parigina Honoré Champion, è diviso in sette capitoli, preceduti da un'introduzione, seguiti da una conclusione aperta che l'autore intitola "senza conclusione", nonché da un utile apparato che comprende un inedito in inglese di Louis T. Hjelmslev e la sua traduzione in francese, "Procédure glossématique"; una ricca bibliografia; due utili indici, dei nomi e delle nozioni.

Sin dall'introduzione, Badir precisa il suo ambizioso progetto, che non è meramente quello di fornire una nuova interpretazione degli scritti hjelmsleviani, o una loro originale sistematizzazione, ma di estrarne una teoria per così dire "totale" che restituisca alla semiotica il suo statuto di epistemologia interdisciplinare (o persino "sovradisciplinare"). Secondo l'autore, infatti, "ciò che sfugge [...] ai semiotici è l'origine

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di questo potere di attualizzazione dei concetti hjelmsleviani. Questo potere non deriva soltanto dalla loro propria forza immaginativa, per quanto la si eserciti. Esso deriva dal fatto che il pensiero di Hjelmslev contiene una teoria” (pp. 9–10, trad. nostra). In contrasto con le posizioni “contro il metodo” alla Feyerabend, Badir ammette, sì, che vi è un carattere idealizzante nell’opera di Hjelmslev — carattere che fa della sua epistemologia un’utopia — ma sostiene anche che ciò che distingue questa utopia linguistica da una semplice ideologia aprioristica è proprio il fatto di presentarsi come un cantiere aperto di problemi da risolvere. Nei capitoli successivi, il volume si propone d’identificare alcune di queste questioni, e di dar loro una risposta, sia pure in via ipotetica.

Dopo alcune pagine dedicate all’apparato filologico del libro — assai precise e utilissime, visto lo stato caotico nel quale versa la filologia degli scritti di Hjelmslev — il primo capitolo si dipana attorno a un difficile esercizio di sdoppiamento: da un lato, l’autore si chiede quale sia l’angolo concettualmente più appropriato per abordare la teoria dello studioso danese. Dall’altro lato, è nella stessa teoria di Hjelmslev che Badir cerca una risposta, identificando giustamente questa teoria principalmente come una teoria dell’interpretazione. Il suggerimento proposto dal ricercatore belga è di spostare l’attenzione dai dati dell’interpretazione, solitamente invocati per proclamare la pertinenza di tale o talaltro aspetto della teoria hjelmsleviana, alle sue condizioni. Aggiungendo un ulteriore livello di complessità, tuttavia, Badir sceglie di condurre la discussione sulla centralità delle condizioni nei processi interpretativi utilizzando come caso di studio la nozione di connotazione e le sue applicazioni. Il cerchio si chiude in maniera virtuosa: per interpretare correttamente Hjelmslev, Badir ricorre alla teoria hjelmsleviana dell’interpretazione, e tuttavia questo riferimento gli permette di ritornare meta-linguisticamente sulla teoria stessa, esplicitando le condizioni in base alle quali un concetto hjelmsleviano di portata più generale, quello di “connotazione”, debba essere interpretato. Ne deriva una schematizzazione delle condizioni d’interpretazione del concetto di connotazione in Hjelmslev secondo più livelli: 1) Interpretazione secondo il senso comune; 2) interpretazione testuale intrinseca; 3) interpretazione intrinseca non strettamente testuale; 4) interpretazione estrinseca. A fianco e al di là di questi livelli, Badir ne propone un quinto, che in realtà approfondisce quello dell’interpretazione intrinseca, suggerendo che il testo

principale nel quale Hjelmslev definisce il concetto di connotazione — uno dei più sfuggenti e, dunque, abusati dell'intera semiotica —, vale a dire i *Prolegomeni*, fornisce esso stesso l'indicazione di una sua lettura ideale nel segno della formalizzazione; a queste condizioni intrinseche d'interpretazione "formale" del testo hjelmsleviano, Badir si adatta dunque definendo la connotazione come basata sulla "possibilità costante, per l'analista, di produrre un testo che renda conto di ciò che egli vuole attribuire al connotatore, di modo che il testo ne risulti una parafrasi adeguata" (p. 34). Quest'analisi del concetto di connotazione, però, non è in Badir fine a sé stessa, ma è invece la leva d'Archimede che gli consente di proporre un passaggio dall'interpretazione della teoria di Hjelmslev come teoria del linguaggio a un'interpretazione in cui tale teoria si apre invece alla possibilità di diventare il fondamento di un'analisi universale della conoscenza, ovvero un'epistemologia. È proprio nel cogliere il funzionamento della connotazione e del metalinguaggio, infatti, che la teoria linguistica di Hjelmslev diventa una teoria semiologica, tale passaggio filologicamente compendosi, secondo Badir, nella transizione dai *Prolegomeni*, celebrata opera del linguista danese, all'opera rimasta inedita in vita dell'autore *Sprogteori. Résumé* ("sintesi di teoria del linguaggio").

Se il primo capitolo del volume è dedicato ai "Dati", o piuttosto ai "Fondamenti" dell'interpretazione hjelmsleviana, il secondo è intitolato "Teoria" e si prefigge di rispondere a tre domande: 1) Che cos'è una teoria del linguaggio?; 2) Quale concezione di teoria è adottata da Hjelmslev?; 3) Quale funzione si può attribuire a dei prolegomeni? Il percorso di risposta intrapreso da Badir in realtà non fa altro che dare fondamento all'ipotesi epistemologica elaborata nel capitolo precedente. Infatti, se i *Prolegomeni* vi si trovano interpretati come un tentativo di costituire un'interfaccia teorica fra la teoria del linguaggio, e in particolare la linguistica, e la teoria della conoscenza, o epistemologia generale, il *Résumé* vi è allora concepito come testo che condensa un passaggio teorico successivo, in cui la teoria glossematica si dà per fondata, e può allora divenire la base per la costruzione, o almeno per la proposizione, di una componente universale in grado di fondare la costituzione delle scienze. In termini più semplici, Badir cerca di dimostrare in che modo la linguistica di Hjelmslev si fa semiotica, senza perdere il suo carattere cogente, ma invece radicando la propria dignità epistemologica nella teoria del linguaggio.

Nel terzo capitolo, “Semiotica”, Badir persuade il lettore, con perizia a un tempo filologica e teorica, che questo passaggio si può compiere in quanto, per Hjelmslev, l’oggetto della teoria non è semplicemente la lingua ma la semiotica, di cui la prima non è che specificazione. Al contrario di Saussure, infatti, Hjelmslev sceglie di utilizzare il termine danese “*semiologi*” come designazione dell’oggetto della teoria, più che come designazione della teoria stessa. Il capitolo ospita dunque un’approfondita analisi dei diagrammi hjelmsleviani, la quale è intesa proprio a dimostrare come un meta-linguaggio alternativo a quello verbale s’installi nella teoria di Hjelmslev e consenta, di fatto, la definizione dell’oggetto “semiotica” in contrapposizione a quello delineato dalla nozione di “mutazione”. La semiotica risulta dunque essere (definizione 24 del *Résumé*) “una gerarchia in cui ognuna delle componenti ammette un’analisi ulteriore in classi definite per mutua relazione, in tal modo che ciascuna di queste classi ammetta un’analisi in derivati definiti per reciproca mutuaione”. Badir interpreta il posizionamento epistemologico reciproco di “mutuaione” e “semiotica” in Hjelmslev sostenendo che, se la mutazione è in definitiva caratterizzata da una proporzione (a è per b ciò che a_1 è per b_2 , e viceversa), una semiotica è “un oggetto di cui l’analisi conduce allo stabilirsi di una proporzione”. Ma questa definizione non fa che designare in astratto le classi che compongono l’oggetto “semiotica”, vale a dire i piani del linguaggio. Allo stesso tempo, attraverso la sottile distinzione fra “interpretazione continua” e “interpretazione ulteriore”, questa definizione consente di articolare la vulgata della ricezione hjelmsleviana (quella che s’insegna ormai in tutti i corsi di semiotica strutturale, secondo cui l’oggetto semiotico si disporrebbe sui due piani dell’espressione e del contenuto), sottolineando che “una semiotica è una gerarchia i cui piani sono in relazione reciproca in funzione delle proporzioni nelle quali entrano i loro derivati” (p. 121, trad. nostra). Ma a tale definizione Badir aggancia anche la necessità di ancorare lo stabilirsi di due assi, per cui alla fondazione di una gerarchia proporzionale deve collegarsi una divisione previa che l’articoli in due complessi d’analisi: quello del sistema e quello del processo.

Il quarto capitolo (“Testo”), anch’esso illuminante, ripercorre l’emergenza del testo come oggetto–quadro dell’analisi semiotica hjelmsleviana. Le difficoltà che ineriscono a questa scelta sono, in primo luogo, l’indistinzione fra tale oggetto e i mezzi della sua conoscenza; in

secondo luogo, l'indistinzione fra l'oggetto e i suoi costituenti. Ma, al di là di ogni definizione banalizzante, Badir conclude che, in Hjelsmlev, il testo non è mai considerato come un oggetto particolare. Ciò che si coglie in esso è, invece, "un oggetto *generale*, vale a dire un oggetto che assomiglia [...] a degli oggetti particolari e che, assomigliando loro, li costituisce in un certo modo per la conoscenza" (p. 149). D'altra parte, Badir ci tiene a sottolineare che, in Hjelsmlev, questa accezione "epistemologica" di testo comunica con quella corrente, rigettando tuttavia ogni approccio "prototipico" così come ogni "naturalizzazione" dei testi. È invece attraverso la dialettica fra formalità e sostanze del testo che Badir propone di specificare l'operatività del testo epistemologico.

Dopo una fulminea sintesi del percorso condotto nei capitoli precedenti, il quinto, "Metasemiotiche" si pone il problema, centrale in semiotica, di "stabilire la procedura di un'analisi semiotica, facendo astrazione di ogni particolarità collegata al testo, in modo che la procedura corrisponda a una deduzione, di valore universale" (pp. 185–6, trad. nostra). Appoggiandosi allo schema di lettura del *Résumé* proposto nell'introduzione di Francis Whitfield alla traduzione inglese dell'opera, Badir riflette sulla tipologia delle operazioni metasemiotiche, sottolineandone non tanto la scientificità, quanto appunto il carattere "-meta", ossia il fatto che l'oggetto d'analisi ne divenga di fatto il contenuto semiotico. Che l'oggetto possa divenire tale, dunque, dipende dalla sua struttura interna, e dal fatto che essa risponda alle sette condizioni individuate da Hjelsmlev, alcune delle quali sanciscono la pertinenza dell'oggetto (gerarchia, relazione e mutazione), altre la specificano (denotazione I, scienza, denotazione II), mentre altre ancora ne evidenziano la manifestazione e il senso. Ma l'analisi metasemiotica di un passo delle *Strutture della sintassi* di Noam Chomsky consente a Badir di dimostrare che, "dal punto di vista dell'analisi metasemiotica, un testo di linguista è un testo come gli altri" (p. 244, trad. nostra).

Tale disarmante conclusione è in relazione a un "impensato" della teoria semiotica, che Badir affronta nel suo sesto capitolo, "Espressione", appunto. L'autore si cimenta con quello che è, per certi versi, lo "scandalo" della teoria formale del linguaggio e del senso, ossia l'incidentalità della manifestazione espressiva; Hjelsmlev infatti non si stanca di ripetere che la designazione reciproca di espressione e contenuto è puramente formale, come se la prima non avesse essenza

alcuna a distinguerla dal secondo. È sul carattere controintuitivo dell'asimmetria di questa interdipendenza che s'interroga Badir, il quale riprende il famoso esempio e caso di studi del "linguaggio semaforico" per evidenziare che le qualità precipue del piano dell'espressione in un certo senso emergono in relazione alle stesse operazioni che si effettuano per articolarlo, per distinguere, ad esempio, fra una manifestazione espressiva pura e semplice e una vera e propria realizzazione. Tuttavia, sebbene sul piano analitico si dia l'impossibilità di accedere a un contenuto senza partire dallo studio della sua espressione, Badir si pronuncia a favore delle virtù semiotiche del mantenimento di un'idea formale di simmetria fra i piani del linguaggio, in quanto consente di aprire la strada, ad esempio, all'analisi di linguaggi che siano "multi-piano", e che, dunque, non prevedano semplicemente una dipendenza fra piano dell'espressione e piano del contenuto. Il capitolo si chiude con la rianalisi di due casi di studio hjelmsleviani, quella del carillon del Big Ben e quella della tastiera del telefono (numeri 0-9), ma anche con un accenno al fatto che si possa sviluppare un'esplorazione simmetrica delle specificità del piano del contenuto rispetto a quelle del piano dell'espressione nell'ambito fenomenologico.

Chiudono il volume un capitolo accessorio, il settimo, che tenta una valutazione in chiave hjelmsleviana dell'epilinguistica di Antoine Culioli, e una "non-conclusione", in cui l'autore rifiuta sia una storicizzazione che un'attualizzazione del pensiero hjelmsleviano e, al contrario, ne sottolinea il tono utopico, il carattere lussuoso di elucubrazione deduttiva.

Il finale del libro è poetico; in esso risiede, forse, tutto il senso della sua operazione: sottolineare la dignità dell'astrazione, al di là delle sue ricadute pratiche, al di là delle sue cadute teoriche, significa affermare un principio che è innanzitutto etico, quello di un'indipendenza del pensiero che, in fin dei conti, è l'anima che scrive e fa girare le pagine migliori della storia, non solo della linguistica e della semiotica ma, forse, dell'umanità intera.

Épistémologie sémiotique rispecchia ed esalta questo principio nel suo essere un libro difficile, denso, per pochi, astratto ma non astruso: vi si coglie, in tutte le sue raffinate circonvoluzioni, quell'idea di purezza della conoscenza che, per quanto utopica, rimane forse il lascito migliore della linguistica strutturale, della glossematica di Hjelmslev, della semiotica di Greimas. Si tratterà forse di una purezza

inadeguata al mondo? Essa rimane nondimeno sublimemente musicale, gradevolissima all'ascolto per chi ha l'orecchio aduso a tali note intemporalì. Va riconosciuto a Sémir Badir di averne saputo distillare di squisitamente rarefatte nel suo importante volume.

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is one of the first German researchers on Hip Hop in France and francophone Africa, founded partially by the VolkswagenStiftung. She conceives Hip Hop as toolbox of cultural technics, useful for reconstructing identity, community and society. A part of her publications on rap's effects on identity, socialization and social empowerment (*Rap: More than Words*, 2004; *Identitätsbildungsstrategien in der Vorstadt- und Hip-Hop-Kultur*, 2003; *Rap-republics: Transglobale Gemeinschaften und alternative Formen der Wissensvermittlung*, 2007; *Autobiographie und Authentizität: Selbst(er)erzählung und Wirklichkeitsentwürfe in Songtexten französischer Rapperinnen*, 2012; *A Third Space for Dissent: Raps Peripheral Semiosphere, its Making and Effects*, 2013). Her last research project took place in Tunisia in February 2013 (*Rap in Tunesien: Revolution oder Evolution?*, 2013).

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Saman Sebastian Hamdi Profilo biografico-scientifico.

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Eating the Other. *Translations of the Culinary Code* (2015). She has presented many papers at national and international conferences, also organising and co-directing several scientific events and research projects. In 2014 Dr. Stano was awarded the title of “Expert in Philosophy and Theory of Languages” from the University of Turin. In recent years she has collaborated as adjunct professor, lecturer, examiner and supervisor of undergraduate and graduate students with several universities in Italy and abroad (e.g. University of Turin, University of Palermo, eCampus University, Kaunas University of Technology, Università della Svizzera Italiana, etc.). Moreover, she has delivered semiotic and cultural analysis for international agencies and private organisations.

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Federica Turco successfully completed a PhD in Semiotics at University of Torino. After her degree in Science of Communication, with a graduation thesis about the relationship between media events, urban image and semiotics of space, she has conducted a doctoral research concerning the representation of women in Italian serial TV fiction and putting forward her own model for a gender-oriented analysis of audio-visual products. She has collaborated, as a researcher, with several Research Centres of the University of Torino and with local cultural associations, where she has conducted researches on: social communication campaigns, communication strategies of local governments, equal and gender studies, mega event communications, media and public opinion. Currently she is responsible in charge for communication at CIRSDe, The Research Centre for Women's and Gender Studies of the University of Turin, and she teaches in courses of Semiotics, Semiotics of Gender and Sociosemiotics at University of Turin and at the European Institute of Design of Turin. Among her last publications: "La vittima e il carnefice. Ovvero degli scontri di "genere", dei ruoli tematici e del sistema di sguardi nel cinema italiano contemporaneo", in Ferraro G. and Santangelo A. (eds) *Uno sguardo più attento. I dispositivi di senso dei testi cinematografici, I Saggi di Lexia*, Roma, Aracne, 2013; "Soggetti di confine: ruoli, europeità e visual culture", *E | C*, Palermo, n. 15-16/2013; "Corpi in movimento. Rivendicazioni femminili", in Turri M.G. (ed) *Femen, la nuova rivoluzione femminista*, Milano-Udine, Mimesis, 2013; "Dalla performance all'azione. The artist is present: Marina Abramović", in *Lexia Nuova Serie*, n° 17-18/2014; "Aborto. Dal corpo delle donne alla legge e ritorno", in Caffo L. and Taddio L. (eds) *Radicalmente Liberi*, Mimesis, Milano, 2014.

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« *Lexia* », the international, peer-reviewed journal of CIRCe, the Center for Interdisciplinary Research on Communication of the University of Torino, Italy, invites contributions to be published in issue n. 25 of the new series.

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« *Lexia* », le journal international peer-reviewed de CIRCe, le Centre Interdépartemental de Recherche sur la Communication de l'Université de Torino, Italie, lance un appel à soumissions d'articles à publier dans le n. 25 de la nouvelle série.

« *Lexia* », la revista internacional peer-reviewed de CIRCe, el Centro Interdepartamental de Búsqueda sobre la Comunicación de la Universidad de Torino, Italia, invita artículos a publicar en el n. 25 de la nueva serie.

L'argomento del prossimo numero è "Semiotica dell'aspettualità".

Le sujet du prochain numéro est « Sémiotique de l'aspectualité ».

El tópico del próximo número es el siguiente: "Semiótica de la aspectualidad".

Topic / Tema / Sujet / Tópico**The topic of the forthcoming issue is “Semiotics of Aspectuality”**

The traditional object of semiotics, the sign, stems from a selection. The signifying side of the sign never simply reproduces the signified one but singles out an aspect of it. “Aspect” (from the Latin “*aspicere*”, “to look at”) etymologically designates what appears, what presents itself to the eyes, as well as the way in which this presentation takes place. In English, “aspect” enters the language in the late 14th century as an astrological term, indicating the relative position of the planets as they appear from earth (i.e., how they ‘look at’ one another).

Generally speaking, the aspect in semiotics is everything that pushes reality to turn into signification “in some respect”. The word “respect”, famously chosen by Peirce in his canonical definition of the sign, may be regarded as a cognitive variant of the word “aspect”. If “aspect” is a particular way of looking at things, “respect” is a particular way of thinking of things. The respect is the inward counterpart of the aspect. The aspect is the outward counterpart of the respect. However, both refer to the same process: meaning derives from selection, and looking is the model and utmost metaphor of it. Peirce’s distinction between “dynamic object” and “immediate object” could not make sense without involving some form of aspect or respect. Indeed, most interpreters of Peirce describe the immediate object not as some additional object distinct from the dynamic one but merely as some “informationally incomplete facsimile of the dynamic object generated at some interim stage in a chain of signs” (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy). The fact that this “facsimile” is incomplete is the consequence of the fact that some cognitive and cultural forces shape the sign into the result of a series of aspects and respects, highlighting certain qualities of the dynamic object while playing down or simply ignoring some other qualities.

If “aspect” (and, more precisely in Peirce, “respect”) is a general feature of any semiotic dynamic, “aspectuality” is both an object and an area of investigation that has traditionally focused on one particular domain of it (“an aspect of the aspect”, one might say): time. Of all the categories of dynamic objects that undergo their transformation into immediate objects through selection of an aspect, time is the one

that most attracted the attention of scholars. Early reflection on verbal language encouraged linguists to maintain that words do not limit themselves to represent the time of reality, distinguishing between what occurs before and what occurs after, but also to represent this time from a particular point of view, as though projecting a ‘verbal eye’ into the linguistic depiction of reality. Already the Indian linguist Yaska (ca. 7th century BCE) dealt with this feature of verbal language, distinguishing actions that are processes (*bhāva*), from those where the action is considered as a completed whole (*mūrta*). The observation that many verbal languages contain mechanisms that enable speakers to represent the time of an action according to different aspects of it has led to the development of a specific area of linguistic study, that of “grammatical aspect”, which considers the aspect as a grammatical category that expresses how an action, event, or state, denoted by a verb, extends over time. Traditionally, scholars distinguish among different aspects depending on how they represent the lasting of a process (durative or punctual), its completion (perfective or imperfective), the stage of it (inchoative, intermediate, terminative), its potential iteration (singular, iterative, cyclical), etc. Although most reflection on the grammatical aspect concerns verbs, scholars have long realized that the qualities of the time of reality can be verbally rendered also through other semantic means, including adverbs or specific lexical choices.

Since the beginning, the study of aspectuality was carried on for both theoretical and practical means. On the one hand, it is abstractedly interesting to find out how each language (underlain by a specific linguistic ideology) provides speakers with a series of options as regards the representation of the temporal qualities of reality. On the other hand, it was soon evident to scholars that choice among these options often results in a rhetorical effect: verbally casting light on a process so as to highlight its initial, terminal, complete, incomplete, etc. character is often a means to lead the receiver and interpreter to specific pragmatic conclusions. To give an example, contemporary online journalism often adopts an aspectuality of emotions that is diametrically different from that of classical ‘paper journalism’; social networks are full of expressions such as “you’ll be outraged when you’ll realize what the politician X said”, inviting the reader to click on the often enticing image attached to the message. Such and similar

expressions vehicle and simultaneously provoke a receptive dynamics in which prejudiced emotional reaction to the facts precedes the cognitive awareness of them (readers are led to be outraged before knowing what they are outraged about, somehow relying on the “outrage deposit” that sits in society and that is automatically activated through fiduciary adhesion to the journalist’s proposed interpretive framework).

The centrality of aspects and respects in the definition itself of the sign, both in Peirce’s and Saussure’s tradition, the accumulation of insights on verbal aspects in the history of grammar, and the study of aspectuality in structural linguistics have given rise, in contemporary semiotics, to a specific interest for aspectual dynamics. This interest has manifested itself on two different but intertwined levels. On a more specific level, semiotics, and especially the Greimassian school, has focused on the narrative implications of aspectuality. In the Greimassian model, substantially in keeping with the previous and parallel linguistic literature, aspectuality is an over-determination of “temporalization”, that is, the construction, through enunciation, of the temporal framework in which the action of narration is situated and imaginarily takes place. Indeed, while in most Indo-European languages temporalization consists in the narrative projection of a present, a past, or a future, aspectualization specifies such projection by focusing on a specific aspect of it. To give an example, in Italian as well as in other Romance languages, sport journalists characteristically relate soccer actions (which have already occurred in the past, and are therefore complete) by using not perfective verbal forms (“al trentesimo minuto del primo tempo, il giocatore ha passato il pallone”, “at the thirtieth minute of the first half, the player passed the ball”), but bizarrely adopting imperfective verbal forms (“al trentesimo minuto del primo tempo, il giocatore *passava* il pallone”; ““at the thirtieth minute of the first half, the player was passing the ball”). The pragmatic effect of this aspectual distortion consists in transmitting to receivers the feeling that the soccer action, albeit by definition complete, is still going on under their eyes as if in slow motion, empowering, hence, the evocative ability of the journalist’s discourse.

It is precisely in order to account for these rhetorical effects that Greimassian semiotics developed a systematic study of narrative aspectualization. At the same time, in keeping with Saussure’s ambition

to conceive semiology as a generalization of linguistics, Greimassian semioticians have also explored the second level of investigation on aspectuality, by considering whether the analytical framework elaborated so as to explain temporal aspectuality could be generalized in order to explicate also non-temporal forms of aspectuality, such as ‘spatial aspectuality’, for instance. In the Greimassian school, such generalization of the study of temporal aspectuality took place mainly through the introduction of the so called “observer actant”. As is well known, the Greimassian school conceives meaning as essentially stemming from cultural oppositions that find their expression in narrative forms. Relying on previous intuitions by Propp, Lévi-Strauss, and others, Greimas analyzed narratives as structures characteristically composed by a certain number of narrative roles or “actants” (subject, object, sender, receiver, adjuvant, and opponent). Thus, meaning in society circulates through stories in which the correspondent value, embodied in an object, is pursued by a subject encouraged by a sender and sanctioned by a receiver, helped by an adjuvant and contrasted by an opponent (often at the service of the parallel but inverse narrative program of an anti-subject). Subsequent followers of the Greimassian school, however, and in particular Jacques Fontanille, realized that, so as to fully account for this narrative structure, a further actant should be introduced in it, a sort of ‘abstract eye’ that observes the action of the story by focusing on a particular aspect of it. Changing the perspective of this “observer actant”, the rhetorical meaning of a narrative can be substantially altered.

In an epoch in which both global and local representations of time and space seem to undergo a dramatic shifting, *Lexia*, the international journal for semiotics published by CIRCE, the Center for Interdisciplinary Research on Communication at the University of Turin, Italy, calls for papers inquiring on the semiotics of aspectuality. Papers dealing with either (or both) of the two levels mentioned above are welcome: on the one hand, articles may inquire into the specific semiotics of temporal aspectuality, focusing on the way in which the various kinds of present or past discourse represent and rhetorically shape the receiver’s interpretation of action in time. On the other hand, articles may seek to extend the semiotic framework for the study of temporal aspectuality into different and broader domains, concerning the aspectuality of space or that of non-verbal languages.

A non-exhaustive list of potential themes include:

- a) the history of reflection on aspectuality in linguistics and/or semiotics;
- b) relations, similarities, and differences between the linguistic and the semiotic analysis of aspectuality;
- c) the notions of “respect” and “dynamic/immediate object” in C.S.S. Peirce;
- d) the analytical framework of temporal and non-temporal aspectuality in the Greimassian school of semiotics;
- e) the notion of “observer actant”;
- f) the rhetoric of aspectuality in old and/or new media;
- g) aspectuality in non-verbal discourses (music, visual communication, gestural languages, etc.)
- h) aspectual ideologies in cultural semiotics: articles on the prevalence of such or such ‘aspectual regime’ in specific societies and cultures;
- i) specific aspectual ‘figures’: beginnings; conclusions; reiterations; completions; incompleteness; durations; instantaneity; etc.
- j) specific moral or religious connotations of aspectual representations (genesis, apocalypse, rebirth, eternal return, catastrophe, etc.).

L’argomento del prossimo numero è “Semiotica dell’aspettualità”

L’oggetto tradizionale della semiotica, il segno, deriva da una selezione. Il lato significante del segno non riproduce mai semplicemente quello significato, ma piuttosto ne individua un aspetto. “Aspetto” (dal latino “*aspicere*”, “guardare”) etimologicamente designa ciò che appare, ciò che si presenta agli occhi, così come il modo attraverso il quale siffatta presentazione avviene. In inglese “aspect” entra nella lingua verso la fine del XIV secolo come termine astrologico, che indica la posizione relativa dei pianeti per come appaiono dalla terra (ossia: come si “guardano” a vicenda). In termini generali, l’aspetto in semiotica è qualsiasi cosa spinga la realtà a convertirsi in significazione “sotto qualche rispetto”. La parola “rispetto”, notoriamente scelta da Peirce

nella sua definizione canonica di segno, può essere considerata come una variante cognitiva della parola “aspetto”. Se “aspetto” è un particolare modo di guardare alle cose, “rispetto” è un particolare modo di pensarvi. Il rispetto è la controparte interna dell’aspetto. L’aspetto è la controparte esterna del rispetto. Tuttavia entrambe si riferiscono allo stesso processo: il significato deriva da una selezione, e l’atto del guardare ne è modello e più precipua metafora. La distinzione peirciana fra “oggetto dinamico” e “oggetto immediato” non avrebbe senso senza considerare qualche forma di aspetto o di rispetto. Invero, la maggiorparte degli interpreti di Peirce usa descrivere l’oggetto immediato non come una sorta di oggetto addizionale distinto da quello dinamico ma come “facsimile informazionalmente incompleto dell’oggetto dinamico generato in qualche stadio provvisorio in una catena di segni” (*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*). Il fatto che tale “facsimile” sia incompleto è conseguenza del fatto che alcune forze cognitive e culturali hanno modellato il segno come risultato di una serie di aspetti e rispetti, mettendo in luce determinate qualità dell’oggetto dinamico e minimizzandone, o semplicemente ignorandone, delle altre.

Se “aspetto” (e, più precisamente in Peirce, “rispetto”) è una caratteristica generale di ogni dinamica semiotica, “aspettualità” ne è nel contempo un oggetto e un’area di investigazione tradizionalmente focalizzata in un particolare dominio (si potrebbe dire: “un aspetto dell’aspetto”): il tempo. Di tutte le categorie di oggetti dinamici che subiscono la loro trasformazione in oggetti immediati attraverso la selezione di un aspetto, il tempo è quella che ha maggiormente suscitato l’attenzione degli studiosi. Le prime riflessioni sul linguaggio verbale hanno incoraggiato i linguisti a ritenere che le parole non si limitino a rappresentare il tempo della realtà, distinguendo fra ciò che avviene prima e ciò che avviene dopo, ma che pure rappresentino tale tempo da un particolare punto di vista, come a proiettare un “occhio verbale” nella raffigurazione linguistica della realtà. Già il linguista indiano Yaska (ca. VII secolo a.C.) ebbe a trattare questa caratteristica del linguaggio verbale, distinguendo azioni che sono processi (*bhāva*) da quelle dove l’azione viene considerata come un tutto (*mūrta*).

L’osservazione per la quale alcuni linguaggi verbali contengono meccanismi che consentono ai parlanti di rappresentare il tempo di un’azione secondo differenti aspetti ha condotto allo sviluppo di una

specifica area dello studio linguistico, quella dell'aspetto grammaticale, che considera l'aspetto come categoria grammaticale esprimente il modo nel quale un'azione, evento, o stato, denotati da un verbo, si estendano nel tempo. Tradizionalmente, gli studiosi distinguono differenti aspetti in base a come questi rappresentano la durata di un processo (durativi o puntuali), il suo compimento (perfettivi o imperfettivi), il suo stadio di completamento (incoativi, intermedi, terminativi), le sue potenziali iterazioni (singolari, iterativi, ciclici), etc. Sebbene buona parte delle riflessioni sull'aspetto grammaticale siano relative ai verbi, gli studiosi hanno da tempo compreso come le qualità del tempo della realtà possano essere rese verbalmente anche attraverso altri mezzi semantici, come gli avverbi o specifiche scelte lessicali.

Sin dai suoi albori, lo studio dell'aspettualità è stato condotto nel contempo su binari teoretici e pratici. Da un lato, è interessante in termini astratti comprendere come ogni linguaggio (che sottintende una specifica ideologia linguistica) fornisca ai parlanti una serie di opzioni per rappresentare le qualità temporali della realtà. Dall'altro, è stato presto evidente agli studiosi che la scelta di una delle opzioni suddette spesso si traduce in un effetto retorico: gettare luce verbalmente su un processo in modo da evidenziarne il carattere iniziale, terminale, completo, incompleto, ecc. costituisce spesso un mezzo per portare il ricevente e l'interprete verso specifiche conclusioni pragmatiche. Per fare un esempio: il giornalismo online contemporaneo spesso adotta un'aspettualità emotiva diametralmente opposta a quella del classico "giornalismo su carta"; i *social network* straripano di espressioni come "sarai indignato quando realizzerai cosa il politico X ha affermato", le quali invitano il lettore a cliccare sull'immagine, spesso allettante, allegata al messaggio. Queste e simili espressioni veicolano e simultaneamente provocano una dinamica ricettiva per la quale una reazione emotiva pregiudiziale ai fatti precede la consapevolezza cognitiva di questi (i lettori sono condotti all'indignazione prima di conoscere che cosa li indignerà, in qualche modo attingendo da un "deposito d'indignazione" sociale che viene attivato automaticamente attraverso l'adesione fiduciaria al quadro interpretativo proposto dal giornalista).

La centralità degli aspetti e dei rispetti nella definizione stessa di segno, e nelle tradizioni perciana e saussuriana, l'accumulo di approfondimenti sugli aspetti verbali nella storia della grammatica, e lo

studio dell'aspettualità nella linguistica strutturale hanno dato origine, nella semiotica contemporanea, a uno specifico interesse verso le dinamiche aspettuative. Tale interesse si è manifestato su due livelli diversi ma intersecati. Su un più specifico livello la semiotica, e specialmente la scuola greimasiana, si è focalizzata sulle implicazioni narrative dell'aspettualità. Nel modello greimasiano, sostanzialmente in linea con la letteratura linguistica precedente e parallela, l'aspettualità è una sovra-determinazione della "temporalizzazione", ovvero la costruzione, attraverso l'enunciazione, di un quadro temporale nel quale l'azione della narrazione è situata e immaginariamente accade. Infatti, mentre in buona parte delle lingue indoeuropee la temporalizzazione consiste nella proiezione narrativa di un presente, un passato, o un futuro, l'aspettualizzazione specifica tale proiezione focalizzandosi su uno specifico aspetto di questa. Ad esempio: in italiano, così come in altre lingue romanze, i giornalisti sportivi caratteristicamente raccontano le azioni calcistiche (che sono già successe in passato, ergo sono complete) non usando forme verbali perfettive ("al trentesimo minuto del primo tempo, il giocatore ha passato il pallone"), bensì bizzarramente adottando forme verbali imperfettive ("al trentesimo minuto del primo tempo, il giocatore passava il pallone"). L'effetto pragmatico di tale distorsione aspettuale consiste nel trasmettere ai riceventi la sensazione che l'azione calcistica, pur dato il suo completamento, si stia ancora svolgendo sotto i loro occhi come in una sorta di *slow motion*, catalizzando quindi l'abilità evocativa del discorso giornalistico.

È precisamente al fine di tenere conto di tali effetti retorici che la semiotica greimasiana ha sviluppato uno studio sistematico delle aspettualizzazioni narrative. Allo stesso tempo, in linea con l'ambizione saussuriana di concepire la semiologia come generalizzazione della linguistica, i semiotici greimasiani hanno anche esplorato il secondo livello d'investigazione dell'aspettualità, valutando la possibilità di estendere il framework analitico elaborato per spiegare l'aspettualità temporale anche verso forme aspettuative non-temporali, come ad esempio l'aspettualità spaziale. Nella scuola greimasiana tale generalizzazione dello studio della temporalità aspettuale è avvenuta principalmente in forza dell'introduzione del cosiddetto "attante osservatore". Come noto, la scuola greimasiana concepisce il significato come essenzialmente derivante da opposizioni culturali che trova-

no la loro espressione in forme narrative. Basandosi sulle intuizioni precedenti di Propp, Lévi-Strauss, e altri, Greimas analizzò le narrazioni come strutture caratteristicamente composte da un determinato numero di ruoli narrativi o “attanti” (soggetto, oggetto, destinante, ricevente, aiutante e opponente). Il senso, dunque, circola nella società attraverso storie nelle quali il valore corrispondente, incorporato in un oggetto, è perseguito da un soggetto spronato da un destinante e sanzionato da un destinatario, aiutato da un aiutante e contrastato da un opponente (spesso al servizio del parallelo, ma inverso, programma narrativo di un anti-soggetto). Tuttavia, i discepoli di Greimas, e in particolare Jacques Fontanille, hanno poi compreso che, per tenere conto appieno di tale struttura narrative, era necessario introdurre un ulteriore attante, una sorta di “occhio astratto” che osserva l’azione della storia focalizzandosi su un particolare aspetto. Cambiando la prospettiva di questo “attante osservatore”, il significato retorico di una narrazione può essere sostanzialmente alterato.

In un’epoca in cui le rappresentazioni sia globali che locali del tempo e dello spazio sembrano subire uno slittamento drammatico, «Lexia», la rivista internazionale di semiotica pubblicata da CIRCE, il Centro Interdipartimentale di Ricerca sulla Comunicazione dell’Università di Torino, emana un *call for papers* sul tema della semiotica dell’aspettualità. Sono graditi articoli concernenti uno o entrambi i livelli menzionati in precedenza: da un lato, gli articoli possono indagare la semiotica specifica dell’aspettualità temporale, mettendo a fuoco il modo attraverso cui vari tipi di discorsi, presenti e passati, rappresentano e modellano retoricamente l’interpretazione del lettore circa l’azione nel tempo. Dall’altro lato, gli articoli possono proporre un’estensione del framework semiotico per lo studio dell’aspettualità temporale verso domini differenti e più ampi, relativi all’aspettualità dello spazio o a quella dei linguaggi non verbali.

Alcuni (ma non gli unici) potenziali temi di ricerca sono:

- a) la storia della riflessione sull’aspettualità in linguistica e/o semiotica;
- b) le relazioni, le similarità e le differenze fra l’analisi dell’aspettualità dal punto di vista linguistico e semiotico;
- c) la nozione di “rispetto” e di “oggetto dinamico/immediato” in C.S.S. Peirce;

- d) il framework analitico dell'aspettualità temporale e non-temporale nella scuola semiotica greimasiana;
- e) la nozione di "attante osservatore";
- f) la retorica dell'aspettualità nei media vecchi e/o nuovi;
- g) l'aspettualità nei discorsi non-verbali (musica, comunicazione visiva, linguaggi gestuali, etc.);
- h) le ideologie aspettuative nella semiotica della cultura: articoli sulla prevalenza di questo o quel "regime aspettuale" in specifiche società e culture;
- i) specifiche "figure" aspettuative: inizi; conclusioni; reiterazioni; completamenti; incompletezze; durate; istantaneità; ecc.;
- j) connotazioni morali o religiose specifiche delle rappresentazioni aspettuative (genesi, apocalisse, rinascita, eterno ritorno, catastrofe, etc.).

Le sujet du prochain numéro est « Sémiotique de l'aspectualité »

L'objet traditionnel de la sémiotique, le signe, dérive d'une sélection. Le côté signifiant du signe ne fait pas que reproduire le côté signifié, mais il circonscrit un aspect de celui-ci. « Aspect » (du latin « aspice-re », « regarder ») désigne étymologiquement ce qui émerge, ce qui se donne à voir (aux yeux), la manière avec laquelle cette représentation s'offre. En anglais, « aspect » apparaît à la fin du 14^e siècle comme un terme astrologique, pour indiquer la position des planètes par rapport à la Terre (c'est-à-dire comment elles se « regardent » mutuellement). De manière générale, « aspect » en sémiotique désigne tous les éléments qui rendent la réalité signifiable « dans quelque rapport ou à quelque titre », selon la célèbre définition du signe par Peirce : « A sign is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity ». Le mot anglais *respect* choisi par Pierce dans sa définition canonique du signe peut être considéré comme une variante cognitive du mot « aspect ». Si « aspect » signifie une manière particulière de voir les choses, *respect* est une manière spécifique de penser les choses. Le *respect* est la contrepartie intérieure de l'aspect, et l'aspect est la partie extérieure visible du *respect*. Néanmoins, les deux concepts se réfèrent au même processus : la signification dérive d'une sélection, et le regard est son modèle et sa plus grande métaphore. La

distinction établie par Pierce entre les « objets dynamiques » et les « objets immédiats » ne peut pas opérer sans tenir compte de certaines formes d'aspect ou de respect. En effet, bien des interprètes de Pierce décrivent les objets immédiats non pas comme des objets additionnels distincts des objets dynamiques, mais plutôt comme des « facsimilés informatifs mais incomplets inspirés par les objets dynamiques à un stade intermédiaire de la chaîne des signes » (“informationally incomplete facsimile of the dynamic object generated at some interim stage in a chain of signs” [*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*]). Le caractère incomplet de ce « facsimilé » est la conséquence du fait que des forces cognitives et culturelles ont élaboré le signe en une série d'aspects et de *respects*, en relevant certaines qualités dynamiques de l'objet, mais en occultant ou en ignorant d'autres.

Si l'« aspect » (et plus précisément, selon la terminologie de Pierce, le *respect*) est une caractéristique générale de toute dynamique sémiotique, l'aspectualité est à la fois un objet et une aire de recherche qui s'est traditionnellement focalisée sur un aspect de l'objet lui-même (un aspect de l'aspect pourrait-on dire) : le temps. Parmi toutes les catégories d'objets dynamiques qui évoluent en objets immédiats à cause de la sélection d'un aspect, le temps est celui qui a le plus retenu l'attention des chercheurs. Les premières recherches sur le langage verbal ont encouragé les linguistes à établir que les mots ne se limitent pas à définir le temps de la réalité, en distinguant entre ce qui précède et ce qui suit, mais qu'ils représentent également le temps d'un point de vue particulier, comme si un « œil verbal » était projeté dans la description linguistique de la réalité. Déjà le linguiste indien Yaska (~ 7^e siècle avant J.-C.) s'est positionné sur ces problématiques du langage, en distinguant les actions qui sont des processus (*bhāva*), de celles où l'action est considérée dans son ensemble (*mūrta*). Le constat que nombre de langages verbaux développent des mécanismes qui permettent aux locuteurs de représenter la temporalité d'une action suivant différents aspects de celle-ci a conduit au développement d'une aire spécifique des études de la linguistique, celle dite des « aspects grammaticaux ». Cette sous-discipline de la linguistique considère l'aspect comme une catégorie grammaticale qui exprime comment une action, un événement ou un état donné par le verbe, se répercute sur le temps de l'action. Traditionnellement les chercheurs distinguent entre différents aspects dans leur manière de représenter la durée

d'un processus (continu ou ponctuel), son achèvement (perfectif ou imperfectif), son aspect (inchoative, intermédiaire, terminatif) et son itération potentielle (singulative, itérative, répétitive), etc. Bien que la plupart des développements sur les aspects grammaticaux concernent des verbes, les chercheurs se sont aperçus depuis longtemps que les caractéristiques de la temporalité du réel peuvent être rendues par le biais d'autres moyens sémantiques, en incluant des adverbes ou des choix lexicaux spécifiques.

Depuis ses débuts, l'étude de l'aspectualité a été développée pour des raisons théoriques et pratiques. D'une part, il est très intéressant d'un point de vue théorique de découvrir comment chaque langage (soutenu par une certaine idéologie linguistique) fournit aux locuteurs une série d'options en ce qui regarde les possibilités de représentation des caractéristiques de la réalité. D'autre part, il est devenu très tôt évident pour les chercheurs que le choix parmi ces options résulte souvent d'un effet de rhétorique : attirer verbalement l'attention sur les effets d'un processus en mettant l'accent sur son début, sa fin, sa complétude ou son inachèvement, etc. est souvent une manière de conduire le destinataire et interprète à un certain type de conclusions pragmatiques. Par exemple, le journalisme en ligne contemporain adopte souvent une aspectualité des émotions qui diffère diamétralement de celle du journalisme classique ; dans les réseaux sociaux, on trouve souvent des expressions comme « vous serez indigné quand vous saurez ce que le politicien X a dit », qui invitent le lecteur à cliquer sur l'image souvent attrayante jointe au message. De telles expressions véhiculent et en même temps provoquent des dynamiques de réception dans lesquelles une réaction émotionnelle basée sur des préjugés précède la connaissance (les lecteurs sont conduits à être indignés avant de savoir pourquoi, car d'une certaine manière ils puisent au « dépôt d'indignation » qui réside au sein de la société et qui est automatiquement activé par le biais de l'adhésion fiduciaire au cadre interprétatif proposé par le journaliste).

La centralité des aspects et des *respects* dans la définition même du signe dans les traditions de Peirce et de Saussure, le progrès de la connaissance sur les aspects verbaux dans l'histoire de la grammaire, et l'étude de l'aspectualité par la linguistique structuraliste ont engendré l'intérêt spécifique que la sémiotique structurale porte aux dynamiques aspectuelles. Un tel intérêt se manifeste à deux niveaux

différents mais entremêlés. Au niveau plus spécifique, la sémiotique, et spécialement l'école greimassienne, s'est concentrée sur les implications narratives de l'aspectualité. Dans le modèle de Greimas, substantiellement en ligne avec la littérature linguistique précédente et contemporaine, l'aspectualité est une sur-détermination de la « temporalisation », c'est-à-dire la construction par l'énonciation du cadre temporel dans lequel l'action de la narration est située et dans lequel on imagine qu'elle ait lieu. En effet, tandis que dans la plupart des langages indo-européens la temporalité repose sur la projection narrative d'un présent, d'un passé et d'un futur, l'aspectualisation spécifie cette projection en se concentrant sur l'un de ses aspects particuliers. Par exemple, en italien, tout comme dans d'autres langues romanes, les journalistes sportifs typiquement rapportent des actions de football (qui ont déjà eu lieu dans le passé et sont donc complètes) non pas en utilisant des formes verbales perfectives (« al trentesimo minuto del primo tempo, il giocatore ha passato il pallone », « à la trentième minute de la première mi-temps, le joueur a passé le ballon »), mais ils adoptent bizarrement des formes verbales imperfectives (« al trentesimo minuto del primo tempo, il giocatore *passava* il pallone », « à la trentième minute de la première mi-temps, le joueur *passait* le ballon »). L'effet pragmatique de cette distorsion aspectuelle consiste à transmettre aux destinataires la sensation que l'action de football, bien que terminée par définition, continue toujours sous leurs yeux comme au ralenti. Cela augmente la capacité évocatrice du discours du journaliste. C'est précisément pour expliquer ces effets rhétoriques que la sémiotique Greimassienne a développé une étude systématique de l'aspectualisation narrative. En même temps, en ligne avec l'ambition saussurienne de concevoir la sémiotique comme une généralisation de la linguistique, les sémioticiens greimassiens ont aussi exploré le deuxième niveau de l'enquête sur l'aspectualité. C'est-à-dire qu'ils se sont demandés si la grille analytique élaborée pour expliquer l'aspectualité temporelle pouvait être généralisée pour expliquer également des formes d'aspectualité non-temporelle, comme par exemple l'aspectualité « spatiale ». L'école greimassienne a généralisé l'étude de l'aspectualité temporelle surtout en introduisant l'« actant observateur ». L'école greimassienne, c'est bien connu, théorise que le signifié dérive essentiellement des oppositions culturelles qui sont exprimées dans des formes narratives. Sur la base des intuitions précé-

denes de Propp, Lévi-Strauss et autres, Greimas analyse les narrations comme des structures typiquement composées d'un certain nombre de rôles narratifs ou « actants » (sujet, objet, destinataire, adjuvant, opposant). Par conséquent, le signifié circule dans la société par le biais e récits dans lesquels la valeur incarnée dans l'objet correspondant, est poursuivie par un sujet encouragé par un destinataire et sanctionné par un destinataire, aidé par un adjuvant et mis en difficulté par un opposant (souvent au service du programme narratif parallèle mais diamétralement opposé d'un anti-sujet). Cependant, les disciples de l'école greimassienne, et en particulier Jacques Fontanille, ont ensuite compris que, afin d'expliquer complètement cette structure narrative, il fallait introduire un actant ultérieur, une sorte d'« œil abstrait » qui observe l'action de l'histoire en se concentrant sur l'un de ses aspects particuliers. En changeant la perspective de cet « actant observateur », le signifié rhétorique d'une narration peut subir une altération substantielle.

Dans une époque où les représentations globales et locales du temps et de l'espace semblent changer dramatiquement, « Lexia », la revue internationale de sémiotique publiée par CIRCE, le Centre Interdisciplinaire pour la Recherche sur la Communication de l'Université de Turin, Italie, lance un appel à contributions sur le thème de la sémiotique de l'aspectualité. Les contributions concernant un ou plusieurs des axes de recherche mentionnés ci-dessus sont les bienvenues. D'un côté, les articles peuvent étudier la sémiotique spécifique de l'aspectualité temporelle en se concentrant sur la façon dont différents types de discours présents et passés représentent l'action dans le temps et modèlent rhétoriquement l'interprétation du destinataire. De l'autre, les articles peuvent chercher à étendre le champ de l'étude sémiotique de la temporalité aspectuelle à des sujets différentes et plus amples, qui concernent l'aspectualité de l'espace et celle de langages non-verbaux.

Une liste non exhaustive de thèmes potentiels inclut :

- a) l'histoire de la recherche sur l'aspectualité en linguistique et/ou en sémiotique ;
- b) relations, similarités et différences entre l'analyse linguistique et sémiotique de l'aspectualité ;

- c) les notions de *respect* et d'« objet dynamique/immédiat » chez C.S. Peirce ;
- d) l'analyse de l'aspectualité temporelle et non-temporelle au sein de l'école greimassienne de sémiotique ;
- e) la notion d'« actant observateur » ;
- f) la rhétorique de l'aspectualité dans les média traditionnels et/ou dans les nouveaux média ;
- g) l'aspectualité dans les discours non-verbaux (musique, communication visuelle, langage gestuel, etc.) ;
- h) idéologies aspectuelles en sémiotique culturelle : articles sur la prévalence de tel ou tel « régime aspectuel » dans des sociétés et cultures spécifiques ;
- i) « Figures » aspectuelles spécifiques : commencements ; conclusions ; réitérations ; achèvements ; inachèvements ; durée ; instantanéités ; etc.
- j) connotations morales ou religieuses spécifiques des représentations aspectuelles (genèse, apocalypse, renaissance, retour éternel, catastrophe, etc.).

El tópico del próximo número es el siguiente: “Semiótica de la aspectualidad

El objeto de estudio tradicional de la semiótica, el signo, se origina a partir de una selección realizada por el propio significante. El significante del signo, en este sentido, no se limita a reproducir el significado, sino que selecciona uno de sus aspectos. El “aspecto” (del Latín *aspicere*, “mirar”) designa etimológicamente lo que aparece, lo que se presenta a los ojos, así como la forma en que esta presentación se realiza. En el idioma inglés, la palabra “*aspect*” entra en uso a finales del siglo XIV como un término astrológico que indica la posición relativa de los planetas según como se ven de la tierra (es decir, según como se “miran” a sí mismos). En términos generales, en semiótica, el aspecto es todo lo que hace que la realidad se convierta en una significación “en algún respecto a”. La palabra “respecto”, elegida por Peirce para su definición canónica del signo, puede considerarse como una variante epistémica de la palabra “aspecto”. Si el “aspecto” es una forma particular de mirar las cosas, el “respecto” es una forma particular de

pensar las cosas. El término “respecto” es la contraparte introspectiva del aspecto. El aspecto es, valga la redundancia, la contraparte exterior del término “respecto”. Sin embargo, ambos se refieren al mismo proceso en donde el significado deriva de una selección, y el acto de mirar es su modelo y su metáfora máxima. La distinción de Peirce entre “objeto dinámico” y “objeto inmediato” no tendría sentido sin la intervención de alguna forma de “aspecto” o de “respecto”. De hecho, la mayoría de los intérpretes de Peirce describen el objeto inmediato no como un objeto adicional distinto del dinámico, sino solo como una “copia informativamente incompleta del objeto dinámico generada en alguna etapa intermedia de una cadena de signos” (*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* -traducción propia). El hecho de que esta “copia” sea incompleta es la consecuencia del hecho de que algunas fuerzas cognitivas y culturales dan forma al signo como resultado de una serie de “aspectos” y “respectos”, destacando ciertas cualidades del objeto dinámico y restando importancia (o simplemente ignorando) a otras cualidades.

Si el “aspecto” (y, más precisamente, en Peirce el “respecto”) es una característica general de cualquier dinámica semiótica, la “*aspettualidad*” es, a la vez, un objeto y un área de investigación que tradicionalmente se ha centrado en un dominio particular de la misma (“un aspecto del aspecto”; también se podría decir): el tiempo. De todas las categorías de objetos dinámicos que se transforman en objetos inmediatos a través de la selección de un aspecto, el tiempo es el que más ha atraído la atención de los estudiosos. Las primeras reflexiones sobre el lenguaje verbal llevaron a los lingüistas a afirmar que las palabras no se limitan a representar el tiempo de la realidad (distinguiendo entre lo que ocurre antes y lo que ocurre después), sino también a representar dicho tiempo desde un punto de vista particular, como si se proyectara un “ojo verbal” en la representación lingüística de la realidad. El lingüista indio Yaska (aprox. VII siglo a.C.) se ocupó, a partir de lo anterior, de la precitada característica del lenguaje verbal, distinguiendo las acciones que son procesos (*bhāva*), de aquellas en las que la acción se considera como una totalidad completa (*mūrta*). La observación de que muchos lenguajes verbales contienen mecanismos que permiten a los hablantes representar el tiempo de una acción de acuerdo con diferentes aspectos de la misma, ha dado lugar al desarrollo de un área específica de estudio lingüístico, la del “aspecto gramatical”, la cual

considera el “aspecto” como una categoría gramatical que expresa cómo una acción, un evento o un estado, denotado por un verbo, se extiende a lo largo del tiempo. Tradicionalmente, los expertos distinguen entre diferentes aspectos dependiendo de la forma en la que representan la duración de un proceso (durativo o puntual), su finalización (perfectivo o imperfectivo), sus etapas (incoativo, intermedio, terminativo), su potencial iteración (singular, iterativo, cíclico), etc. Aunque la mayoría de las reflexiones sobre el aspecto gramatical se refieren a los verbos, los estudiosos han destacado anteriormente que las cualidades del tiempo de la realidad pueden ser verbalmente expresadas, también, a través de otros medios semánticos, incluyendo adverbios o elecciones lexicales específicas.

Desde el principio, el estudio de la *aspettualidad* se ha llevado a cabo por medios teóricos y prácticos. Por un lado, desde una perspectiva abstracta, es interesante averiguar cómo cada idioma (bajo una ideología lingüística específica) ofrece a los hablantes una serie de opciones en relación a la representación de las cualidades temporales de la realidad. Por el otro lado, los estudiosos comprendieron prontamente que la elección entre estas opciones genera, a menudo, un efecto retórico: el análisis verbal de un proceso para poner en relieve su carácter inicial, terminal, completo, incompleto, etc., es, muchas veces, un medio para llevar el receptor e intérprete a conclusiones pragmáticas específicas. Por ejemplo, el periodismo contemporáneo adopta a menudo una *aspettualidad* de emociones que es diametralmente diferente a la del clásico “periodismo de papel”; las redes sociales están llenas de expresiones tales como “te indignarás cuando te des cuenta de lo que dijo el político X”, invitando al lector a hacer clic en la imagen, muy a menudo tentadora, que acompaña el mensaje. Tal y similares expresiones conllevan a, y al mismo tiempo provocan, una dinámica receptiva en la que una reacción emocional prejuiciosa a los hechos precede su comprensión cognitiva (los lectores son empujados a indignarse antes de conocer la razón por la cual están indignados, de alguna manera atingiendo al “depósito de indignación” que se encuentra en la sociedad y se activa automáticamente a través de la adhesión legataria al marco interpretativo propuesto por el periodista).

La centralidad de los “aspectos” y “respectos” en la definición misma del signo (tanto en la tradición de Peirce como en la de Saussure), la acumulación de observaciones sobre los aspectos verbales en la

historia de la gramática y el estudio de la *aspectualidad* en la lingüística estructural han originado, en la semiótica contemporánea, un interés específico en el estudio de las dinámicas aspectuales. El precitado interés se ha manifestado en dos niveles diferentes, pero interconectados. En un nivel más específico, la semiótica, y especialmente la escuela greimasiana, se ha centrado en las implicaciones narrativas de la *aspectualidad*. En el modelo de Greimas, sustancialmente de acuerdo con la literatura lingüística anterior y paralela, la *aspectualidad* es una súper-determinación de “temporalización”, es decir, la construcción, a través de la enunciación, del marco temporal en el que se sitúa e imaginariamente tiene lugar la acción de la narración. En efecto, mientras que en la mayoría de las lenguas indoeuropeas la temporalización consiste en la proyección narrativa de un tiempo presente, pasado o futuro, en la aspectualización dicha proyección se precisa, centrándose en uno de sus “aspectos” específicos. Por ejemplo, en italiano, así como en otras lenguas romances, los periodistas deportivos cuentan de forma característica las acciones de fútbol (que ya han ocurrido en el pasado, y por lo tanto están cumplidas) no mediante el uso de formas verbales perfectivas (“al trentesimo minuto del primo tempo, il giocatore *ha passato* il pallone”, “en el minuto treinta del primer tiempo, el jugador pasó la pelota”), sino adoptando extrañamente formas verbales imperfectivas (“al trentesimo minuto del primo tempo, il giocatore *passava* il pallone”; “en el minuto treinta del primer tiempo, el jugador pasaba la pelota”). El efecto pragmático de esta distorsión aspectual consiste en transmitir a los receptores la sensación de que la acción de fútbol, aunque por definición ya cumplida, aún continúa bajo sus ojos como si fuera en cámara lenta, potenciando, por lo tanto, la capacidad evocadora del discurso del periodista.

Es precisamente con el fin de tener en cuenta estos efectos retóricos que la semiótica greimasiana desarrolló un estudio sistemático de la aspectualización narrativa. Al mismo tiempo, de acuerdo con la ambición de Saussure de concebir la semiología como una generalización de la lingüística, los semiólogos greimasianos han explorado el segundo nivel de investigación sobre la *aspectualidad*, considerando si el marco analítico elaborado para explicar la *aspectualidad* temporal podría generalizarse con el fin de explicar, también, las formas no temporales de *aspectualidad*, como por ejemplo la “*aspectualidad* espacial”.

En la escuela greimasiana, tal generalización del estudio de la *aspectualidad* temporal se desarrolló principalmente a través de la introducción del así-llamado “actante observador”.

Como es bien sabido, la escuela greimasiana concibe el significado esencialmente como el producto de oposiciones culturales que encuentran su expresión en formas narrativas. Basándose en aproximaciones anteriores de Propp, Lévi-Strauss y otros, Greimas analizó las narrativas como estructuras característicamente compuestas por un cierto número de funciones narrativas o “actantes” (Sujeto, Objeto, Destinador, Destinatario, Ayudante y Oponente). Por lo tanto, el significado en la sociedad circula a través de relatos en los que el valor correspondiente, encarnado por un objeto, es perseguido por un sujeto, el cual es animado por un destinador y sancionado por un destinatario, ayudado por un ayudante y contrastado por un oponente (a menudo al servicio del programa narrativo paralelo, pero opuesto, de un anti-sujeto). Seguidores posteriores de la escuela greimasiana, sin embargo, y, en particular, Jacques Fontanille, se dieron cuenta de que, para poder explicar completamente esta estructura narrativa, hay que introducir en ella un *actante* más, una especie de “ojo abstracto” que observa la acción del relato, centrándose en un aspecto particular de la misma. Si cambia la perspectiva de este “actante observador”, el significado retórico de una narrativa puede quedar sustancialmente alterado.

En una época en la que ambas representaciones globales y locales del tiempo y del espacio parecen sufrir un cambio drástico, *Lexia*, la revista internacional de semiótica publicada por el Centro Interdepartamental de Investigaciones sobre la Comunicación (CIRCe) de la Universidad de Turín (Italia) invita a una reflexión sobre la semiótica de las *aspectualidad*. En particular, se convoca a la presentación de artículos que propongan o traten uno de los dos (o ambos) niveles mencionados anteriormente: por una parte, los artículos pueden investigar la semiótica específica de la *aspectualidad* temporal, centrándose en la forma en la que los distintos tipos de discurso presente o pasado representan y dan forma retóricamente a la interpretación del receptor de la acción en el tiempo. Por otra parte, los autores pueden intentar ampliar el marco semiótico del estudio de la *aspectualidad* temporal en ámbitos diferentes y más amplios, por ejemplo, en relación a la *aspectualidad* del espacio o la de los lenguajes no verbales.

Una lista no exhaustiva de posibles temas incluye:

- a) la historia de la reflexión sobre la *aspectualidad* en la lingüística y/o la semiótica.
- b) las relaciones, similitudes y diferencias entre el análisis lingüístico y semiótico de la *aspectualidad*.
- c) las nociones de “respecto” y “objeto inmediato/dinámico” en C.S.S. Peirce.
- d) el marco analítico de la *aspectualidad* temporal y no temporal en la escuela greimasiana de semiótica.
- e) la noción de “actante observador”.
- f) la retórica de la *aspectualidad* en los medios de comunicación de masas y digitales.
- g) la *aspectualidad* en los discursos no verbales (la música, la comunicación visual, los lenguajes gestuales, etc.).
- h) las ideologías aspectuales en la semiótica de la cultura: artículos sobre la prevalencia de tal o cual “régimen aspectual” están presentes en sociedades y culturas específicas.
- i) análisis de específicas “figuras” aspectuales: inicios; conclusiones; reiteraciones; terminaciones; inconclusión; duraciones; instantaneidad; etc.
- j) análisis de específicas connotaciones morales o religiosas de las representaciones aspectuales (génesis, apocalipsis, renacimiento, eterno retorno, catástrofes, etc.).

Schedule / Calendario / Calendrier / Calendario

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- December 15, 2016: deadline for contributions
- 15 dicembre 2016: deadline per i contributi
- 15 décembre 2016: date limite pour les articles
- 15 diciembre 2016: fecha límite para los artículos

- January 15, 2017: deadline for referees
15 gennaio 2017: deadline per i revisori
15 janvier 2017 : date limite pour les réviseurs
15 enero 2017: fecha límite para los revisores
- March 15, 2017: deadline for revised versions of contributions
15 marzo 2017: deadline per le versioni rielaborate dei contributi
15 mars 2017: date limite pour les versions révisées des contribu-
tions
15 marzo 2017: fecha límite para las revisiones de los artículos
- June 15, 2017: publication of « Lexia » n. 25.
15 giugno 2017: pubblicazione di « Lexia » n. 25
15 juin 2017: publication de « Lexia » n. 25
15 junio 2017: publicación de « Lexia » n. 25

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Languages / lingue / langues / lenguas:

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Finito di stampare nel mese di giugno del 2016
dalla tipografia «System Graphic S.r.l.»
00134 Roma – via di Torre Sant'Anastasia, 61
per conto della «Aracne editrice int.le S.r.l.» di Ariccia (RM)