

## Prefazione / Preface

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Between 1661 and 1662, Rembrandt<sup>1</sup> painted *The Conspiracy of Claudius Civilis*<sup>2</sup>, depicting a story from Tacitus's<sup>3</sup> *Histories*<sup>4</sup> 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»<sup>5</sup>. 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.

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