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Miłoszewski's A Grain of Truth as a Non-classical Conspiracy Narrative

Beata Koper, Jakub Misun

In Zygmunt Miłoszewski's *A Grain of Truth*,¹ the main crime plot deals with a triple homicide. Near the remains of a woman whose throat has been slashed, the police find a strange knife, defined by Teodor Szacki, the officer in charge of the investigation, as a "razor-machete." The knife turns out to have been originally used in Jewish ritual slaughter. This clue immediately directs suspicion toward a Jewish perpetrator. And because this takes place in Sandomierz, where to this day there hangs in a church a picture depicting the legendary extraction of blood from Christian children in order to make matzoh from it, the Jewish thread has dramatically heightened resonance. "I think it's all very odd and theatrical," Szacki remarks with regard to the knife. "Even with squalid crimes of passion, every drunken thug remembers to take the murder weapon with him. I don't believe it was left in

¹ Z. Miłoszewski, *A Grain of Truth*, trans. Antonia Lloyd-Jones, London 2012.

those bushes by accident.”² If a traditional investigation involves attaching signs to their signifieds – and is therefore fundamentally a semiotic operation – then the overly obvious presence of a murder weapon by the body tells the experienced detective to double-check the simplest interpretation.

Szacki frequently underscores the fact that he is conscious of a certain theatricality in the criminal's arrangements relating to the crime, working to conceal his true motives and identity: “Very interesting, but none of that is of any significance. Whoever planted the ritual knife wants us to get involved in all that – paintings, history, legends, so we'll start traipsing around churches, sitting in libraries and talking to academics. It's a smokescreen, I have no doubt.”³ It becomes clear even to less seasoned readers of detective stories that the Jewish theme in connection with the murders is merely a distraction. Finally, however, a suspect is apprehended... a policeman with Jewish ancestry. The story goes as follows: Commissioner Wilczur killed three people because they were descendants of people who during the Second World War harmed or refused aid to his Jewish parents. His mother died in childbirth because the daughter of the midwife who came to help her was frightened by a barrel standing near the entrance, so the two women fled the Wajsbrot home. The father, a doctor, who could have helped with the birth, was arrested on charges of false denunciation, as a result of which he committed suicide. Three innocent people in Sandomierz

² *Ibid.*, pp. 37, 38.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

have thus now been made to pay for the indolence, superstitiousness, and anti-Semitism of their forebears. The fact that such a convoluted story managed to convince not only the police but also the media and public opinion testifies merely to the fact that the Sandomierz dwellers of Miłoszewski's book would have bought any old hogwash as long as blame was placed on the Jews.

Though the history toward which the murder tries to direct the detective is referred to by Szacki as “that blasted anti-Semitic legend of blood,”⁴ in reality that legend relates to an old conspiracy theory that claims to explain what happens to missing Christian children: they are abducted by Jews, to be murdered and used in religious rituals. If, however, we look at Szacki's behaviour from the perspective of considering his investigative methodology, the theory of the Jewish provenance of the culprit in light of the clues found seems rational. If the motive for the crime was revenge, clearly marking the crime with indications of Jewishness makes sense to the extent that the avenger wishes his vengeance to have broad reverberations. That is indeed what happens in the novel.

Detectives in crime stories are united by their faith in the semiotic interpretation of signs.⁵ Such interpretation involves joining observation to some general laws regulating a given type of sign. Thus arises a classic syllogism, with a minor premise (Czubaj names the example

⁴ Miłoszewski, *A Grain of Truth*, p. 365.

⁵ Here I make use of Mariusz Czubaj's thesis in his book *Etnolog w mieście grzechu. Powieść kryminalna jako świadectwo antropologiczne*, Gdańsk 2010, pp. 190–201.

of Holmes and a certain kind of shoes), a major premise (only fishermen wear this type of shoes) and a deduction (ergo, the character who wears such shoes must be a fisherman). This way of thinking can be effective under one condition: that the social structure is transparent and its indicators unchanging. Such an assumption can, however, somewhat charitably be called naïve. After all, Sherlock Holmes himself knows that the criminal's basic defensive strategy relies on the use of such indicators of social structure in such a way as to direct investigators' thinking toward a false trail. On the other hand, there is no established method that would allow real clues (left unintentionally) to be easily distinguished from clues planted by the murderer. Hence, the impression of theatricality that Szacki gets does not conclusively prove that the evidence is fake. The possibility of roles being played means that common sense – if that category can be used to refer to the deductive logic of explaining a case – often leads us down the completely wrong track. That is why it often seems that detectives behave in an irrational manner, falling into paranoia based entirely on the apprehension that some parts of the puzzle fit only outwardly, only through a direct shift toward social conventions of signification. Does the same thing not occur with those who devise conspiracy theories?

“By conspiracist narratives, speaking generally, I refer to stories which express a belief that – contrary to widely held views – essential information concerning public affairs

remains hidden due to activity by a group of individuals covertly collaborating with each other for the purpose of obtaining some advantage at the cost of the greater common interest”⁶ – thus Franciszek Czech initially defines the subject of his analysis. Detective narratives are usually constructed in such a way that the crime is identifiable as an “action” with its particular “actor.” Thus, within a certain procedural framework, a single actor is assigned to an action. When conspiracist narratives are concerned, things can get much more complicated. In a fundamental sense, they seek other culprits, that “group of individuals covertly collaborating with each other,” most often those who are responsible for producing the “official,” symbolically empowered narrative regarding the causes of events. Often, however, what happens is that conspiracy theories ascribe intentional agency where in fact chance, coincidence, or a sociostructural process is at work, where, in fact, intention or plan is difficult to discern or establish. This is how Karl Popper, discussed in Czech’s book, formulated the problem: “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

⁶ F. Czech, *Spiskowe narracje i metanarracje*, Kraków 2015, pp. 12–13.

dislike – is the result of direct design by some powerful individuals and groups.”⁷

According to Popper, to find conspiracy and intentional agency where an accident, a completely contingent event, has occurred, means to transfer the metaphysical narrative of divine agency and omnipotence onto imagined or real groups of people. The classical conspiracy metanarrative also requires a kind of “paranoid language”⁸: the psychologization that has developed in assessments of conspiracy theories over the years has made it increasingly easy to ascribe mental illness to the authors of such explanations, treating those authors as incapable of “rationally” evaluating facts. As we noted earlier, this rationality has more in common with the symbolic universe in which it is created: the conclusions that we choose to believe in issue from earlier premises regarding the word and social structures. In the final analysis, therefore, a person who questions the official version of events is also questioning the procedure by which truth is produced in given conditions and at a given historical moment.

In the Sandomierz of the novel, widely shared anti-Jewish beliefs cause the majority of the population to find semiotic interpretations based on those beliefs convincing and logically coherent. In this context, Szacki, who declares that events have been erroneously linked to each other, begins speaking in a paranoid language. “I could tell

⁷ K. R. Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, Princeton 2013, p. 306; [in:] F. Czech, *Spiskowe narracje i metanarracje*, pp. 35-36.

⁸ See F. Czech, *Spiskowe narracje i metanarracje*, pp. 87-89.

that was the right way to think”⁹ – this is the language of insinuation, without proof. In a most intriguing convergence, both the anti-Semitic theory of Jewish vengeance and the true – according to Szacki– story of the triple murder are presented at various stages of the investigation as what can be called conspiracy theories. Not, obviously, a conspiracy by the authorities or an all-powerful organization, not one that influences the course of world history,¹⁰ but still, according to a possible metanarrative, a conspiracy theory can also be defined as “an explanation of particular local events, by no means necessarily an all-embracing conspiracy.”¹¹ In this sense, “Jewish vengeance” would mean that the murderer – though a lone killer is unlikely – acts in the name of a group, carrying out its long-standing plan (murdering Christians, seizing power, and so on). Szacki, however, denying the semiotic “evidence” suggesting a Judaeo-centric narrative, uses the language of premonitions and intuition to weave a paranoid counter-narrative. Szacki’s theory, undermining the idea of “Jewish vengeance,” does not point to any particular conspiracy, but is aimed at the broad popularity of anti-Semitic beliefs, which has led to a situation where the theory of “Jewish vengeance” easily becomes validated. He thereby constructs a counter-narrative, which in the Sandomierz context looks 1) less rational (Jewish vengeance is paradoxically easier to argue) and 2) has no evidence in its favour, only “a sense of uncertainty about the real course of historical events and what it signifies, what

⁹ Miłoszewski, *A Grain of Truth*, p. 365.

¹⁰ See J. Tazbir, *Protokoły Mędrców Syjonu. Autentyk czy falsyfikat?*, Warszawa 1992, p. 9.

¹¹ F. Czech, *Spiskowe narracje i metanarracje*, p. 66.

the official version of events is, and even about whether it is at all possible to have a logically coherent historical report”¹² – the features attributed to what Franciszek Czech calls non-classical conspiracist metanarratives. Or critical theories, which shall be discussed in further detail below.

Non-classical conspiracist metanarratives reject several basic premises that formed a part of earlier definitions. Conspiracy theory functions here as a possible explanation of events. The definition thus loses its evaluative character. It does, however, assume “enormous reserves of skepticism toward official knowledge.”¹³ As Hannah Arendt, cited by Czech, writes: “[t]he object of the most varied and variable constructions was always to reveal official history as a joke, to demonstrate a secret sphere of influences of which the visible, traceable, and known historical reality was only the outward façade erected explicitly to fool the people.”¹⁴ If the anti-Semitic interpretation functions in Miłoszewski's novel as legally valid, Szacki finds himself in the opposing position. In *A Grain of Truth*, the bad intentions of alleged “Jews” are perceived as official “knowledge.” In this sense, the “secret sphere of influences” about which Arendt writes is precisely the anti-Semitism that – due to its popular acceptance – reinforces its “knowledge” on the subject of the Sandomierz murder, and that knowledge falls on fertile ground, quickly becoming official history, widely believed. Thus Szacki's theory that there is no conspiracy paradoxically

¹² Ibid., p. 230.

¹³ Ibid., p. 55.

¹⁴ H. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Orlando 1976, p. 333; quoted in Czech, p. 52.

finds itself in the position usually occupied by conspiracy theories, fulfilling the same function in relation to the official version. Szacki sees anti-Semitism where public opinion in Sandomierz finds a logical explanation for the three murders.

A non-classical conspiracy narrative also posits that what motivates the construction alternative theories regarding important events is not paranoia. Czech quotes Fredric Jameson on the essence of conspiracist thought: “It constitutes a manifestation of ‘the poor person’s cognitive mapping in the postmodern age; it is a degraded figure of the total logic of late capital, a desperate attempt to represent the latter’s system.’”¹⁵ Czech continues: “it is the properties of fluid, late modernity – the lack of transparency in public institutions, anonymous systems of experts, obscure connections among business, politics, and media, and revelations that appear from time to time about the secret services – provoke the adoption of conspiracist optics.”¹⁶ It appears that the reasons enumerated above also form the bases for both the theory of “Jewish vengeance” and Szacki’s alternative explanation. However, in the first case, the social order allegedly threatened by the Jews is something of value that needs to be restored. For Szacki – in keeping with non-classical conspiracist metanarrative – this social order is what Czech would call “an oppressive system that functions through the concealment

¹⁵ F. Jameson, *Cognitive Mapping*, [in:] *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. C. Nelson and L. Grossberg, Urbana 1988, p. 356; [in:] F. Czech, *Spiskowe narracje i metanarracje*, p. 89.

¹⁶ F. Czech, *Spiskowe narracje i metanarracje*, p. 91.

of its essence.”¹⁷ The essence of the social system in Miłoszewski's novel is anti-Semitism, which produced the official knowledge about the crime, the theory of “Jewish vengeance,” in which Szacki himself also believes until nearly the final pages of the novel. That simple reversal, however, the placement of Szacki in the position of the unmasker of the “conspiracy” among the anti-Semites of Sandomierz, does not contradict the idea that Szacki's explanation contains many features resembling a conspiracy theory in its non-classical definition.

Szacki's version nonetheless can also be seen as a critical theory aimed at uncovering a possible plot by anti-Semites, who themselves are the constructors of a conspiracy theory concerning Jews. Both Jews and anti-Semites play the role that Popper attributed to earthly inheritors of theodicy: “[t]he 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.”¹⁸ There undoubtedly exists or exist a person or persons guilty in the deaths of the three victims. However, the subjects of accusations of a “Jewish conspiracy” or “anti-Semitism” are much harder to identify. Probably neither of these groups made an explicit agreement to become anti-Semites or become Jewish murderers. Though that provides no basis for ruling out either that the crime was committed

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 94.

¹⁸ K. R. Popper, *The Open Society*, p. 306; quoted in F. Czech, *Spiskowe narracje i metanarracje*, p. 36.

by a Jew or that the anti-Semites are responsible for the theory of the three murders rejected by Szacki.

From these considerations, we may conclude that conspiracy theories and crime-solving procedure have two features in common: 1) mistrust of official versions suggested by “evidence” or the authorities, and 2) an effort to establish guilt, a search for perpetrators that arises in the course even of evidently accidental occurrences. “The paranoid’s interpretation of history is in this sense distinctly personal: decisive events are not taken as part of the stream of history, but as the consequences of someone’s will”¹⁹– writes Richard Hofstadter, quoted by Czech. And this discovery of “someone’s will” is the clue found both by authors of conspiracy theories and by detectives who often see an “accident” as a screen arrayed by the criminal around the facts of the case. The more distracted, fluid, and obscure the “world of postmodern capitalism” or the “deep state of anomie”²⁰ appear, the harder it is to separate accidental processes from intentionally planned ones. Nevertheless, when Szacki accuses anti-Semitism, he is attempting to be a social critic, which paradoxically brings him closer to the authors of conspiracy theories. Czech here cites the following highly relevant declaration by Bruno Latour: “in both cases again [of conspiracy theories and critical theory] it is the same **appeal to powerful agents hidden in the dark** acting always consistently, continuously, relentlessly. Of course, we in the

¹⁹ R. Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, Cambridge 1963, p. 32; quoted in F. Czech, *Spiskowe narracje i metanarracje*, p. 47.

²⁰ F. Czech, *Spiskowe narracje i metanarracje*, pp. 94-95.

academy like to use more elevated causes – society, discourse, knowledge-slash-power, fields of forces, empires, capitalism—while conspiracists like to portray a **miserable bunch of greedy people** with dark intents, but I find something troublingly similar in the structure of the explanation, in the first movement of disbelief and, then, in the wheeling of causal explanations coming out of the deep dark below. What if explanations resorting automatically to power, society, discourse had outlived their usefulness and deteriorated to the point of now feeding the most gullible sort of critique? Maybe I am taking conspiracy theories too seriously, but it worries me to detect, in those **mad mixtures of knee-jerk disbelief**, punctilious demands for proofs, and free use of powerful explanation from the social neverland many of the weapons of social critique. Of course conspiracy theories are an absurd deformation of our own arguments, but, like weapons smuggled through a fuzzy border to the wrong party, these are **our weapons** nonetheless. In spite of all the deformations, it is easy to recognize, still burnt in the steel, our trademark: Made in Criticalland.”²¹

The inhabitants of “Criticalland” – among whom we also include detectives – have in common these same weapons: mistrust, suspicion, searching for clues, flinging accusations. From this perspective there is not much to distinguish Marx’s “industrial capitalists” or Szacki’s “anti-Semites” from “the Jews” or “the American govern-

²¹ B. Latour, “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern,” *Critical Inquiry* 2004, 30:2, pp. 229-230; quoted in F. Czech, *Spiskowe narracje i metanarracje*, p. 82. Emphasis ours.

ment.”²² Each of them is a vaguely defined group of individuals responsible for some event or other.

In such cases, however, the principle of attribution of agency that operates in the case of the triple murder revealed at the end of *A Grain of Truth* turns out to be unavailing: there is no localized culprit against whom an accusation can be made. Here we are faced with what is probably one of the largest deceptions of (classical, naturally) detective stories: the presentation of a crime as mainly the result of actions by villainous individuals.²³

Causative agency in detective stories is often an offshoot of a Cartesian vision of the subject which they adopt: a thinking thing (*res cogitans*), an independent initiator of action, separate from the world (*res extensa*), sovereign in its decisions, but also bearing individual responsibility. The subject, defined thus, lay at the foundation of liberal democracy and the legal system binding within it. This is also the subject Karl Popper has in mind when he states that monopolists or imperialists should not be burdened with blame. In this ontological vision, one cannot, for example, punish a nation for its sins. The nation, as a non-subject, cannot commit crimes.

²² D. Shariatmadari, *The Truth Is Rushing Out There: Why Conspiracy Theories Spread Faster Than Ever*, The Guardian, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/26/the-truth-is-rushing-out-there-why-conspiracies-spread-faster-than-ever> (28.02.2016).

²³ See R.A. York, "Agatha Christie: 'sila rozumu'", trans. J. Misun, *Kultura Popularna* 2/2012, pp. 18–25.

The authors of conspiracy theories, like exponents of critical theory, use such collective designations, not refraining in any instance from formulating indictments in the language of the law, which after all cannot sentence “capitalists” for the poverty of workers. Non-classical conspiracist metanarrative, according to the quotation above from Latour, is, however, capable of appreciating these subjectless indictments: “conspiracy theories force us to search for better explanations of social phenomena. When an explanation not resorting to conspiracy has been perfected as a result of a discussion with adherents of conspiracy theories, we may consider that useful.”²⁴ In this sense, conspiracy narratives play an important role in expressing what remains invisible to observers whose search is limited to determining individual guilt. The injustice (caused by capitalists, socialists, corporations or governments) articulated in the language of conspiracism has made us rethink a concept of agency that inhibits the possibility of burdening such collective subjects with responsibility.

The first shifts took place in the field of the study of history. Attempts undertaken by Fernand Braudel to establish the influence of geographic factors on historical processes,²⁵ as well as newer texts dealing with plants as a factor in historical change,²⁶ have led scholars to reach the following conclusions:

²⁴ F. Czech, *Spiskowe narracje i metanarracje*, p. 86.

²⁵ See A.W. Nowak, *Podmiot, system, nowoczesność*, Poznań 2011, p. 190.

²⁶ See e.g. R.C. Foltz, *Czy natura jest sprawcza w znaczeniu historycznym? Historia świata, historia środowiska oraz to, w jaki sposób historycy mogą pomóc ocalić Ziemię*, trans. A. Czarnačka, [in:] E. Domańska (ed.), *Teoria wiedzy o przeszłości na tle współczesnej humanistyki*, Poznań 2010, pp. 631–659.

Subjecthood understood as causative agency can thus not be separated from the conditions that are necessary for an act of subjective agency to come into being. The subject becomes a network of subjective relations, a multi-element network of mediations. Agency is 'woven into' the fabric of collectivity, i.e., into the complex network of nonhuman elements, 'things,' interactions, social relations, etc. The active subject cannot be 'separated' from that which made possible the effect of subjective agency. For example, there is no way for the person writing these words to be 'separated' from the networks that make possible that act."²⁷

In his analyses of the theories of Pierre Bourdieu, Bruno Latour, or Amitai Etzioni, Andrzej W. Nowak writes about subjecthood as a "thickening of relations"; moving away from essentialization of the subject as an objectively existing entity, he proposes the formulation subjective-objective, which does not mark precise boundaries between them:

Causative subjecthood is thus one of many 'participants' who create historical existence; it is one of many variables that influence the dynamic self-organization of the whole. Habitus allows us to understand the individual subject as the result of a trajectory of historical contingencies, including microhistorical (biographical) ones.²⁸

²⁷ A.W. Nowak, *Podmiot, system, nowoczesność*, p. 216.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 250.

Therefore, no such thing as isolated individual agency exists; action is always collective, it assumes the use of human and nonhuman allies. The subject becomes a “hybrid, a tangle of things and actions, of the dynamic of systemic functional determinations and the dynamic of historical existence’s self-organizing ontology.”²⁹

Because the law does not acknowledge the ontology of social existence defined in this way, detectives are unable to present “anti-Semites,” “capitalists,” or other collective suspects before a court. Moreover, in terms of individual agency certain crimes become invisible because they cannot be defined as concrete actions that directly resulted in tragic consequences. For this reason, one of the crimes in Miłoszewski’s novel is only signalled towards, and cannot be meaningfully labelled within genre convention. I refer to the murder of Wilczur’s mother and father, the Wajsbrots. In theory, none of the suspects in the case had a hand in their murder. The indictment can only be formulated in the language of conspiracy theory, treated as a hypothetical conditional: if the prison warden, the midwife or the informer made a deal whose aim was to have the Wajsbrots killed, they would be guilty in the couple’s deaths. That is nonetheless probably not what happened. We need a language of conspiracy theory capable of insinuating: “they are guilty of conspiracy,” in order to see that – despite the lack of legal justification – we cannot pass over the actions of those three characters indifferently.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 256.

Critical theory, as mentioned by Nowak, attempts to describe the conditions of guilt and responsibility: no agency is purely that of a subject (the subject is empty), and thus nobody should be condemned as an individual for the deeds they have perpetrated (they have always had many human and nonhuman allies). Scholars pose a question entirely legitimate in its premises: can there be such a thing as an unintentional conspiracy? Or, put differently: what causes a completely undetermined coincidence to occur? The problem was captured adeptly by Ralph Waldo Emerson, whom Czech quotes: “[s]ociety everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members.”³⁰ Is a conspiracy by all of society possible?

The answer cannot be stated in the language of the penal code. That is why the detective novel is usually unable to articulate the guilt of other “allies” involved in a crime. We see an increasing number of crime novels, however, that see this collective, structural culprit, an accomplice to the narratologically crucial crime. To name one example, that is the case in the first part of Stieg Larsson’s *Millenium trilogy*,³¹ in which the social structure, not only the individual, stands accused. The purpose of such a move, however, is not the restoration of order through judgment of the offense. That would follow the conservative premise of the classical detective narrative: before the perpetration of the individual crime, everything in the society was in the best possible order. Instead, the purpose of this

³⁰ R. W. Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” [in:] *The Complete Works*, Vol. II. Essays: First Series, Boston 1904, <http://www.bartleby.com/90/0202.html> (11.11.2016).

³¹ S. Larsson, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, trans. R. Keeland, New York 2008.

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new approach is to re-envision social life in such a way that – to use Latour's language – just and non-predatory relations can stabilize.

translated by Timothy Williams

Conspiracy in the Dialectic of Enlightenment

Jan Molina

With the fall of twentieth-century totalitarianisms, students of conspiracy theories developed a prognosis according to which belief in such theories would gradually lose its political importance and be fed upon only at the margins of discourse.¹ That optimistic vision was, however, brutally checked by the early years of the twenty-first century. In reaction to important and tragic events, from the attacks of September 11, 2001 to the current refugee crisis, successive conspiracy narratives have only multiplied; according to reliable research, four million Americans believe that the world is ruled by Lizard People, reptiles from space.² The White House is forced to issue a public assurance that it is not planning to invade Texas,³ France has introduced special courses in schools to

¹ D. Pipes, *Conspiracy. How the Paranoid Style Flourishes and Where It Comes From*, New York 1999, p. 184.

² J. Williams, *Conspiracy Theory Poll Results*, Public Policy Polling, 2.04.2013, <http://www.publicpolicypolling.com/main/2013/04/conspiracy-theory-poll-results-.html> (6.03.2016).

³ *Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest*, White House, 29.04.2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/04/29/press-briefing-press-secretary-josh-earnest-42915> (6.03.2016).

combat the growing belief in conspiracies among pupils,⁴ and pro-Putin propaganda is working full steam to advance conspiracy narratives in the realm of public opinion, exposing alleged perfidy on the part of the West.⁵ In Poland, too, the conspiracy-centred mentality is thriving, although – in keeping with the traditional national imagination – the role of the villain is played here not by space lizards but by Jews, Russians, and Germans, to whose company Muslims have also been recently added. Two years ago, the Polish Minister of the Environment, before assuming his post, addressed a question to the Prime Minister about the possible advisability of producing *chemtrails* – smog left in the sky by planes, believed by adherents of conspiracy theories to contain specific chemicals that cause impotence and serve the purpose of artificial population control.⁶

Journalistic analyses of conspiracy theories usually suggest two causes for this state of affairs. First, cynical manipulators who promote conspiracy narratives in public opinion to achieve their own ignoble ends are unmasked. Such an interpretation, obviously, indirectly confirms the existence of powerful conspiracies, merely shifting the source of the machinations elsewhere. The second cause indicated is a general decline in the level of public debate,

⁴ N. Vallaud-Belkacem, *Journée d'étude "Réagir face aux théories du complot"*, education.gouv.fr, 9.02.2016, <http://www.education.gouv.fr/cid98418/journee-d-etude-reagir-face-aux-theories-du-complot.html> (6.03.2016).

⁵ J.C. Castellón, *Panowie świata. Dzieje teorii spiskowych*, trans. J. Partyka, Warszawa 2007, p. 254.

⁶ J. Szyszko, Interpelacja nr 16893, 2.04.2013, <http://www.sejm.gov.pl/sejm7.nsf/InterpelacjaTresc.xsp?key=0A8244A2> (6.03.2016).

a lack of critical thinking, reinforced by the negative influence of the internet, inundating its users with unverified assertions. Anne Applebaum, warning against the internet activity of trolls controlled by the Kremlin, quotes a Twitter campaigner (whose handle is @AvoidComments), advising: “You wouldn’t listen to someone named Bonerman26 in real life. Don’t read the comments.”⁷

The above diagnosis is no doubt correct on many points, but appears not to explain why, among the many un-, quasi- and pseudoscientific forms of content available it is precisely conspiracy narratives that so easily persuade contemporary audiences. In order to understand what is driving the rescrudescant popularity of conspiracy theories, we must reach considerably deeper and return to the beginning of the formation of the cultural and political paradigm of Modernity, together with its project of emancipation of the individual subject. That analysis leads to the conclusion that thinking in categories of conspiracy is a reversal, permanently attached to Modernity, of its emancipation process. Against the background of the broadly defined dialectic of the Enlightenment – containing both truly emancipatory moments and dangerous sources of objectification – a long process is constantly taking place. It involves the expansion of the conspiracist mentality, which likewise has its own internal dynamic, in which an unflagging tension exists between

⁷ A. Applebaum, “Another Reason to Avoid Reading the Comments,” *The Washington Post*, November 28, 2014. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/anne-applebaum-another-reason-to-avoid-reading-the-comments/2014/11/28/b37a9f30-7722-11e4-a755-e32227229e7b_story.html?utm_term=.819c002d557d (13.10.2016).

the emancipatory, subjectifying element and objectifying constraint. It seems that the mutual dependency of these two processes is not accidental, that both processes are conjoined within a peculiar interdependence which constitutes the hidden mechanism of modern history, guaranteeing their transition from the level of theory to that of political practice.

Sources of Modern Subjectivity

“Sapere aude! Have courage to use your own reason,” Immanuel Kant wrote in 1784 in his programmatic work *The Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?* He proceeded to explain that “Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-imposed immaturity.”⁸ A century and a half earlier, Descartes, commonly seen as the father of the modern concept of subjectivity, called for all statements to be brought before the tribunal of one’s own reason, and Francis Bacon discovered that reasoned knowledge constitutes power, allowing us to break free of dependence on Nature and render it obedient to human beings. “Enlightenment, understood in the widest sense as the advance of thought, has always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters,”⁹ Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno concluded. At the same time, those philosophers who glorified Reason – from Bacon, through the French *philosophes*, to Hegel – underscored that individual emancipation could not take

⁸ I. Kant, “What Is Enlightenment?” [in:] *On History*, trans. L. W. Beck, Indianapolis 1963, p.3; I. Kant, “An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?” [in:] *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays: on Politics, History, and Morals*, trans. T. Humphrey, Indianapolis 1983, p. 41.

⁹ M. Horkheimer, T. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, ed. G. S. Noerr, trans. E. Jephcott, Stanford 2002, p. 1.

place without the rationalization of social space, without mastering what we may, using the categories of critical theory, call the irrational nature of social life. Only when functioning in a reasoning reality is a person able to realize his or her causative subjectivity, and thus also truly anticipate the consequences of their actions.

In the construction of modern subjectivity sketched here, there nevertheless exists a fundamental internal fissure. On the one hand, the Cartesian subject, this thinking thing, has been defined as a substance, inextendible and indivisible, which as a result – in the course of the evolution of philosophical thought – was supposed to lead to the rise of the superindividual construction of Kantian transcendental reason, acquiring an increasingly social character in successive interpretations. On the other hand, it is hard not to perceive that Descartes also describes the subject in psychological categories, applied to the particular, individual person. The philosopher, after all, evokes that famous night between the 10th and 11th of November, 1619, when, lying on top of a brick oven in a Bavarian hut and playing with philosophical speculations, he came up with the formula *Cogito ergo sum*.¹⁰ Readers of the *Discourse on Method* can have no doubt that it is he, the thinking subject, and thus a particular, individual person, who poses questions and ponders outcomes as he presents a statement before the tribunal of his own reason. This second, individualistic tradition of interpreting subjectivity lies at the foundation of the liberal political

¹⁰ R. Descartes, *Discourse on the Method and Meditations*, trans. L.J Lafleur, New York 1960, p. 18.

philosophy of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. That philosophy, starting from postulates of empiricism, is based on a “possessive” concept of the subject.¹¹ According to it, the person is understood as a concrete, reasoning biological being. He or she is born free primarily because they are, from birth, the owner of their own biological organism, and in further succession, in the process of living life, biologically, they acquire the right of ownership to everything that their organism “colonizes” from the world’s resources. The power of the biological organism, the equipped might of reason, allows them to rule over reality, and constructions of the social contract have as their only task the protection of this innate subjectivity in the space of interactions with other individuals.

It is true that Horkheimer and Adorno indicated some fundamental threats to the project of emancipation that resulted from the growing claims of instrumental reason, but Jürgen Habermas, in continuing the traditions of the Frankfurt School, has defended the ideals of the Enlightenment by placing an emphasis on reasoned communication, meant to counteract the threat of the individual’s objectification. Apart from these philosophical controversies, it seems that the category of agency and the postulates of ruling over Nature and rationalization of social interaction represent fundamental categories of modern subjectivity.

¹¹ T. Melley, *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America*, Ithaca 2000, p. 14. Melley cites C.B. Macpherson as the progenitor of the concept of “possessive individualism.”

Conspiracy Theories and the Dialectic of Emancipation

Conspiracism, based on the principle of Manichaeism, subordinates all of reality to an imagined struggle between good and evil, thereby ruling out utterly any possibility of detached description.¹² Without entering into particular problems of what defines a conspiracy theory, one can name its basic elements. Sebastian Duda writes: “What is a conspiracy theory? The question seems easy to answer. Intuition tells us it is an interpretation of facts that contradicts officially acknowledged explanations, and whose chief element is the belief in great influences on what is happening in the world and history, various conspirators seeking to hide their activities from public opinion.”¹³ Janusz Tazbir adds that the conspiracist vision of history is “not merely interest in these kinds of plots, but attributing decisive significance to them. This is usually related to a disregard for or negation of other causative factors.”¹⁴ Jerzy Topolski further notes that instead of mass processes, these theories see action by smaller groups or individuals.¹⁵

It appears obvious that conspiracy theories understood in these terms have been seen by scholars as contradicting Kant’s formulation of the Enlightenment postulate of rational subjectivity, which represents a condition of emancipation. By treating each event as the result of in-

¹² L. Zdybel, “Teorie spiskowe” jako fenomen globalny: analiza krytyczna i metakrytyczną,” *Kultura – Historia – Globalizacja* 14/2013, p. 322.

¹³ S. Duda, “Historia spisków, historia lęków,” *Więź* 3/2015, p. 183.

¹⁴ J. Tazbir, *Protokoły mędrców Syjonu. Autentyk czy falsyfikat?*, Warszawa 1992, p. 9.

¹⁵ J. Topolski, *Teoria wiedzy historycznej*, Poznań 1983, p. 156.

tentional action, they become inscribed in what we may call, using Horkheimer and Adorno's terms, the anthropomorphic logic of myth, against which the Enlightenment did battle. They propagate a false image of the world, rendering rational knowledge of real historical processes impossible. By the same token, they can serve as a perfect tool of manipulation, useful both for would-be despots and for existing regimes seeking to direct social discontent into safe channels. The classical theory of conspiracy narratives, drawn from, among other places, the research of Karl Popper, saw in "conspiracy theory society" a real threat to the realization of the ideals of the open society.¹⁶

Scholars were fairly quick to observe a connection between the popularity of conspiracy theories and a certain psychological type. They refer to the paranoid style, the conspiracy mentality, or the authoritarian personality, and there is even some mention of a neurobiological predisposition in the brain.¹⁷ A crucial link has often been asserted between susceptibility to belief in conspiracy theories and the desire to maintain a feeling of control over reality. "The attractiveness of conspiracy theories," Professor Krystyna Skarzyńska observes, "derives from the fact that they fulfil certain important human needs – above all, they provide a feeling of having control over our own lives, and perhaps over the reality that surrounds us."¹⁸ Only such a feeling of control allows us (from the

¹⁶ F. Czech, *Spiskowe narracje i metanarracje*, Kraków 2015, pp. 31–40.

¹⁷ R. Robinson, J. Post, *Political Paranoia: The Psychopolitics of Hatred*, New Haven 1997, p. 76; R. Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," *Harpers* 11/1964, p. 86; K. Skarzyńska, "Bin Laden żyje, chociaż jest martwy," *Więź* 3/2015, pp. 199–201.

¹⁸ K. Skarzyńska, "Bin Laden żyje..." op. cit., pp. 194, 197.

perspective of our subjective consciousness) to maintain a feeling of causative subjectivity. Sławomir Mrożek captured the essence of this paradoxical relationship in a perverse but unusually apt remark, writing: “Why do I wish to believe in a Conspiracy? In order to finally know, what it’s all about, where all this is heading, mister. To know that someone is in control of it all, somehow. Even if they are against me, they are in control. That would mean that it’s possible to control it, that it can all be controlled after all. I am being controlled, goddammit, but if everything is under control, and the best evidence shows that it is, since they are controlling me, then I can counter-control.”¹⁹

By linking psychological considerations that usually relate to the individual personality with an analysis of the broader formation process of contemporary subjectivity, in its super-individual aspect as well, it seems we can put forward a theoretical model of the formation of a connection between conspiracist thinking and the emancipatory postulate, distinguishing four stages in this relationship. The first is the constitution of a defined social group, which either ascribes to itself the role of a historical subject or aspires to that status. The second stage consists of the discovery of limits to agency, seen in the perspective of history in its entirety or in confrontation with an important historical event, in relation to which the results of actions undertaken deviate significantly from intentions and goals. The third stage involves the discovery of History understood as a set of objective laws, existing independently

¹⁹ S. Mrożek, “Spisek,” *Gazeta Wyborcza* 143/1997, p. 11.

of human efforts: Providence, Progress, the progression of the Spirit of History or the laws of dialectical materialism. Formulated thus, however, the theory looks overly subtle and abstract – as a result, it leads, in the popular interpretation, to quietism and passivity. The fourth stage in the shaping of the conspiracist narrative thus involves an attempt at regaining a subjective sense of subjective agency through the identification of the causative force active in history with some particular group or individual.

This subjective sense of agency is naturally burdened with a fundamental ambivalence. It has the power to mobilize us to take action, but because it is based on a false image of the world, it cannot be fully effective, and as a result the mobilizing act of the subject's emancipation must be constantly renewed.

From Utopia to Revolution

The Cartesian and Kantian postulate of rationalism was fundamentally universal in character. Those philosophers believed that Reason, in whose name they were acting, belonged to the nature of humanity and as such was the birthright of all people. However, belief in the rational potential dormant in humanity was necessarily accompanied by a pessimistic diagnosis regarding the achievements of civilization thus far. The human being, ably using his reason, could know and master nature, or discover and bring into being just principles for the organization of society, but for some reason had so far failed to do so. The question arose: Why?

Answers to that question varied, but initially focused on bringing into relief certain objective difficulties. Kant demonstrated that the human condition joined within itself a rational element and an animal one, and as a result the human being was guided completely neither by instinct nor by reason.²⁰ “Nothing straight can be constructed from such warped wood as that which man is made of”²¹ – this statement applies as much to speculative knowledge as it does to social existence. Descartes saw the reason for the failures of knowledge in the lack of an appropriate method of understanding and in the objective difficulty with questions about the principles on which nature functions. The matter was further complicated by the tendency to be ruled by emotions that disturb rational reasoning and lead reason astray, a tendency immanent in human nature. Francis Bacon developed the theory of the *idola*, or illusions that cause errors in reasoning. He saw the source of failure in human nature – *idola tribus*, as well as in deficiencies of language and social communication – *idola fori*.²²

Parallel to the solutions outlined above, in their background as it were, the scholar of the history of philosophy can observe an opposite tendency that involves the formation of an interpretation of the history of civilization which, in place of the objective difficulties facing Reason, looked to the purposeful action of particular inter-

²⁰ I. Kant, “Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View”, [in:] *Idem., On History*, trans. L.W. Beck, R.E. Anchor, E.L.Fackenheim. Indianapolis 1963, pp.15-16.

²¹ I. Kant, *Political Writings*, trans. H. S. Reiss, Cambridge 1991, p. 46.

²² F. Bacon, *Novum organum*, trans. J. Wikariak, Warszawa 1995, p. 68.

est groups. Thomas More, criticizing the irrationality and injustice of the organization of society in his time, wrote in *Utopia*: “as I hope for mercy, I can have no other notion of all the other governments that I see or know, than that they are a conspiracy of the rich, who, on pretence of managing the public, only pursue their private ends, and devise all the ways and arts they can find out; first, that they may, without danger, preserve all that they have so ill-acquired, and then, that they may engage the poor to toil and labour for them at as low rates as possible, and oppress them as much as they please; and if they can but prevail to get these contrivances established by the show of public authority, which is considered as the representative of the whole people, then they are accounted laws [...]”²³ Without taking an exaggerated view of the extent to which that diagnosis was accurate and to what extent a rhetorical device, we should note that More’s method of interpretation later showed itself to be extremely influential. Voltaire, seeking to explain how it was possible that Christianity – a religion of provincial shepherds, who could not equal the genius of Greek philosophy – attained power in Rome and medieval Europe, speculated on a conspiracy of charlatans who, pretending to work miracles, deceived influential aristocrats in order to profit together from the feudal system, naturally at the people’s expense.²⁴ This view was quite popular among the French philosophes of the eighteenth century. Rousseau,

²³ T. More, *Utopia*, trans. G. Burnet, Seattle 2015, p. 81.

²⁴ Voltaire, *A, B, C or Alphabet* [in:] idem, *The Works of Voltaire, A Contemporary Version*, trans. W.F. Fleming, New York 1901; Idem, *Letters Concerning the English Nation*, Oxford 1994

who considered himself the victim of numerous conspiracies, formulated his famous theory of the origin of private property by depicting the devious behaviour of the first private owner, who first surrounded a plot of earth with a fence and then managed to persuade his fellow citizens that he was specially entitled to it. The essence of that manipulation consisted in the fact that these fellow citizens, who included agricultural workers and tenants, went on to defend the rights of the putative landholder, unconscious of acting against their own interests.²⁵

The theories cited here do not, of course, represent whole conspiracy narratives of the type we can encounter in the literature that has arisen increasingly since the French Revolution, but the basic premise of conspiracist thought had already been formulated therein: the idea that beneath the surface of visible political and social disputes a certain group of people is taking deliberate action to pursue its own interests in a concealed way that goes against the interests of the general citizenry. The discovery of a particular enemy made possible the transition from theoretical reflection to political practice – from a belief in rational and moral rightness to the legitimization on that basis of the right to political power, and as a result heralded the approaching eruption of the French Revolution. Paradoxically, this process took place with no small contribution from the conspiracist strain, because the secret societies in fact played an important role in the popular dissemina-

²⁵ J.J. Rousseau, "Rozprawa o nierówności," [in:] idem, *Trzy rozprawy z filozofii społecznej. Rozprawa o nierówności*, trans. H. Elzenberg, Warszawa 1956, pp. 186–187, 204–207.

tion of the nation's new reconfiguration and changed attitude (though not in the course of the revolution itself).²⁶ The course of the revolution, as well as its concomitant discourse, appear to confirm the correctness of the proposed four-stage model for the connection between the emancipation process and conspiracist thought. The people's aspiration to political subjecthood was accompanied by a continual sense of the danger of losing their agency. The political struggle was focused on the question of who was qualified to represent the people's will, and the category of conspiracy was its basic weapon.²⁷ The sense of danger integrated the revolutionaries, and a series of particular revolutionary acts resulted directly from the belief in the existence of the alleged conspiracies. For example, the Great Fear, the slaughter of feudal aristocrats in late July and early August 1789, was caused by a belief that the aristocracy was plotting to plan a famine that would lead to the mass death of recalcitrant peasants.²⁸

Newly stirred subjecthood was nonetheless attended by the discovery of limited agency. Against expectations, not all of the revolution's goals were achieved, and the post-revolutionary order did not fulfil the expectations of any faction.²⁹ The solution to that state of affairs was found in great historiosophical narratives that empha-

²⁶ R. Koselleck, *Krytyka i kryzys*, trans. J. Duraj, M. Moskalewicz, Warszawa 2015, pp. 279–283.

²⁷ F. Furet, *Prawdziwy koniec Rewolucji Francuskiej*, trans. B. Janicka, Kraków 1994, p. 67.

²⁸ G. Lefebvre, *The French Revolution: From Its Origins to 1793*, London, New York 2001, pp. 116–117.

²⁹ See J. de Maistre, "Considerations sur la France," trans. J. Trybusiewicz, [in:] J. Trybusiewicz, *De Maistre*, Warszawa 1968, p. 126.

sized the role of History, in charge of the course of events, modifying the results of human efforts.

The broad masses, however, sought a more concrete reason for these failures, a concrete enemy. A conspiracy of aristocrats, a conspiracy by Robespierre to steal the revolution, or – from the other side of the barricades – the impressive structure of triple conspiracy worked out by Abbé Augustin Barruel: the philosophers, the Freemasons, and the Illuminati³⁰ – all of these mobilized the populace to a great degree by indicating an adversary. Adam Weishaupt, the leader of the Bavarian Illuminati, was even suspected of being an agent of the Jesuits.³¹

Conspiracy theories, functioning as vulgarized versions of the “sacrificial goat” concept, have enabled many people to reclaim their belief in the possibility of emancipatory struggle and the causative configuration of the world. Nevertheless, this populist interpretation of emancipatory postulates, even if it has been a constant companion to modern subjecthood, has frequently been revealed to be a dangerous tool, leading to horrific consequences. It is worth remembering the remark, ascribed to social democrat August Babel, that “anti-Semitism is the socialism of the stupid.”

translated by Timothy Williams

³⁰ D. Pipes, *Conspiracy...*, op. cit., pp. 69-78, S. Duda, *Historia spisków...*, op. cit., pp. 189–191.

³¹ J.H. Billington, *Fire in the Minds of Men. Origins of the Revolutionary Faith*, New York 1980, p. 118.

Metaphysical Despair. Messianism and Conspiracy Theories in Polish Media Space

Piotr Urbanowicz

What links contemporary conspiracy theories with messianism? We can certainly observe the return of the Romantic style as defined by Maria Janion,¹ and the domination of political discourse by figures of rhetoric universally associated with the Romantic tradition. Jarosław Kaczyński consistently plays on a cultural amalgam of messianism, quoting Juliusz Słowacki and Józef Piłsudski alternately. Paweł Kukiz echoes the views of such neo-messianic thinkers as Stanisław Szczepkowski, who speaks of national industry and refers to the idea of an independent Polish strain of “unofficial prophets, these unfit revolutionaries [...] gifted with intuitive clairvoy-

¹ See M. Janion, “Zmierzch paradygmatu,” [in:] Janion, *Czy będziesz wiedział, co przeżyteś*, Warszawa 1996, pp. 5–23.

ance.”² “Let us recall,” Andrzej Walicki wrote, “that the ‘national messiah’ anticipated and invoked by Mickiewicz was supposed to overcome, as his first order of business, ‘factionalism,’ and to ‘concentrate’ in himself all the powers of Poles.”³

Messianism is undoubtedly becoming a tool of political strategy. Rather than analyze contemporary performances of power, I would like to demonstrate the historical and material parallels between messianism and conspiracy theories. This may also serve to answer the question as to why neomesianic political strategies have exerted such a strong influence on Polish minds in the present period.

I wish, however, to avoid the structuralist approach to the study of Romanticism proposed by Maria Janion. Messianism presents itself to me not as a closed, historical intellectual current, but as a mediatized attempt at a negotiation of national identity and reconciliation of political interests, in which it quite obviously resembles conspiracy theories. Through the approach I am suggesting, the same elements can be perceived to condition both of these forms of thought.

Andrzej Walicki provided an excellent description of the phenomenon when he stated that “Polish messianism was in essence a ‘millenarization’ of the modern idea of progress.”⁴ Moreover, in Andrzej Wawrzynowicz’s view, Polish

² S. Szczepanowski, *Idea Polska*, Warszawa 1987, p. 237. Quoted in: K. Ratajska, *Neomesjanistyczni spadkobiercy Mickiewicza*, Łódź 1998, p. 62.

³ A. Walicki, *Filozofia a mesjanizm. Studia z dziejów filozofii i myśli społeczno-religijnej romantyzmu polskiego*, Warszawa 1970 p. 292 [emphasis mine].

⁴ Walicki, *Filozofia a mesjanizm*, p. 290.

messianism fulfilled three interconnected social functions: compensatory, mobilizing, and emancipatory.⁵

The basis of conspiracy theories, I claim, is found in their compensatory dimension. They are connected to traumas; working through those traumas becomes the basic function of these theories. Unlike the symbolic apparatus of the state, which the Smolensk disaster revealed to be found inadequate as a framework of representation, conspiracy theories allow us to get involved in the work of interpreting events and to merge narratives that originate from many different sources: social, philosophical, and religious. Unlike the stiff rituals of the state, they have the potential to encompass individual experience within their framework. Conspiracy theories thus offer an opportunity for affective participation. They also connect with extra-institutional areas of knowledge, because they open themselves up to the space of new media. For that reason, they also constitute a certain cultural countermodel opposing the symbolic schemata established by state institutions for weathering grave events.

Messianism was an intellectual current that sought to explain the consequences of seminal events in nineteenth-century cultural history – a new model of the state, revolutions and uprisings, the creation of a mass society, the triumph of the free market, the development of industry, scientific discoveries and technological inventions – by means of religious and philosophical language. At the same time, as Lech Zdybel has shown, conspiracy theories

⁵ See A. Wawrzynowicz (ed.), *Spór o mesjanizm. Rozwój idei*, Warszawa 2015, pp. XV-XX.

possess the same tendency but move in the reverse direction – “they represent a religious-metaphysical dualism which has been peculiarly transformed into a historical, social, and political vision of the world.”⁶

The significance of messianism thus transcends its status as a convenient rhetorical figure for use in analyses by journalists affiliated with a broad left coalition for diagnosing irrational, dark forces and anachronistic interpolations in public life. The return of the Romantic style after the Smolensk air disaster became the chief context in which the concept of messianism has been used. But its presence is a result not only of a strategy on the part of the right-wing establishment to raise the Romantic canon to a model of nationhood. In this problematic presence of messianism there also appear the same factors that were decisive for its emergence and dissemination in the nineteenth century, which are the very same as those conditioning its appearance in contemporary public discourse in Poland. Here, I have in mind primarily the fragmentation and egalitarization of knowledge relating to the crisis in institutional credibility, and new technologies which allow the dissemination of information with a hitherto unimaginable speed and scope, but also the ways of conceptualizing reality that result from those technologies.

Messianism and Technological Progress

There is no denying that the activity among Polish emigré circles in Paris occurred during the period of France’s

⁶ L. Zdybel, *Idea spisku i teorie spiskowe w świetle analiz krytycznych i badań historycznych*, Lublin 2002, p. 113.

industrialization and urbanization. The scholarly institutions formed in the early nineteenth century pursued a wide range of modernizing tasks, whose range encompassed art and literature as well. Scientific discoveries and inventions such as electricity, the steam engine, the locomotive and many lesser and related examples charged the imagination of poets and represented a supremely relevant cultural context for their works.

As Marek Dybizbański⁷ has persuasively argued in his book on the connections between Romanticism and technology, the latter became the fundamental experience for, and a crucial pillar of, messianistic historiosophies. We cannot here discuss exhaustively the connections between mechanistic and Romantic thought. In terms of dealing with the problem addressed in this article, we must limit ourselves to the thesis to be drawn from Dybizbański's analyses – namely, that technological change defined the need to formulate a messianic program. Though such change was clearly not the only factor in its development, I follow Dybizbański in designating that particular factor as crucial to the material and cultural paradigm of messianism.

Dybizbański points us toward traces of this necessity for working through progress, citing the words of Mickiewicz himself, who sought to acknowledge scientific discoveries as activities of the spirit:

⁷ See M. Dybizbański, *Romantyczna futurologia*, Kraków 2005.

*Discoveries – it is time we acknowledge – are not in the slightest natural products of a civilization, and do not in any way depend on institutions founded for progress and the development of skills: they are born outside the realm of reasoned calculations, they are high above all of science, at the height of the spirit.*⁸

The Romantics underscored the role of the spirit in the history of inventions. Mickiewicz's articles published in *Trybuna Ludów* in 1849 are significant in this context. In them, the messianic program meets with social postulates. In articles such as "Socialism" and "Workers' Settlements", a rational evaluation of industrial activity is linked with the role of the proletarian masses in a messianistic historiosophy. Their liberation from their chains was still expected, in Mickiewicz's view at that time, to be brought by Napoleon, who would create a new European order through collaboration with the people – with the French proletariat and the oppressed Slavic nations. In my opinion, this was an attempt to measure the horizon of developing industry as well as a philosophical gesture toward mastery of its far-reaching consequences of civilizational change. "A need arose to demonstrate 'that despised industry too is one of the ways of the spirit,'"⁹ Dybizbański concludes.

Juliusz Słowacki goes a step further than Mickiewicz, proclaiming that physical and chemical forces belong to

⁸ A. Mickiewicz, *Dzieła wszystkie*, vol. 11, Warszawa 1933, pp. 162–163. Quoted in: M. Dybizbański, *Romantyczna futurologia*, op. cit., p. 286.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 265.

the spirit. In his system, the first science dealing with the spirit was theology, while next in line were “chemistry and physics joined... seeking spiritual labours in the composition of visible bodies.”¹⁰ Słowacki wrote the chemical elements that had been discovered and the activity of electricity into the structure of the spirit. Despite his initial antipathy for the industrial revolution, splendidly conveyed in his early poem “Paryż” (Paris), Słowacki attributes historical significance to physical and chemical forces. Similarly to what happens in Mickiewicz’s case, he performs a peculiar “spiritualization of matter”– he pronounces the transformations of modernization to be the gleanings of spiritual developments.

The Post-Smolensk Crisis of Representation

Why are the events that followed the Smolensk air disaster so important to understanding contemporary conspiracy theories? Citing the work of Dariusz Kosiński,¹¹ we can state that the post-Smolensk performance revealed the weakness of the methods of symbolic representation that had hitherto existed in the national repertoire. It brought about a reinforcement of the conviction that reality has a dualistic structure, spiritual and material. As Dariusz Kosiński writes: “‘the return of the spirit’ to ‘its reign’ signifies [...] the establishment of an order on metaphysical foundations.”¹² In the activities of participants in post-Smolensk protests, we can perceive an unambiguous

¹⁰ J. Słowacki, *Dzieła wszystkie*, vol. 14, ed. J. Kleiner, Wrocław 1954, p. 423. Quoted in: M. Dybizbański, *Romantyczna futurologia*, op. cit., p. 311.

¹¹ See D. Kosiński, *Teatra Polskie. Rok Katastrofy*, Warszawa 2013.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 184 [Emphasis mine].

distance toward the rituals proposed by the authorities and a drive, elicited by that distrust, to put forward counter-theories. In fact, it was not only the government's procedural approach that was being questioned, but above all, the credibility of traditional media (television and print) that was being rejected. "In this way, Mickiewicz's image of the 'nation as lava,' preserving a hard shell of official, ordered ceremony on the outside while inside authentic discussions rage and the most uncomfortable questions are posed, returned,"¹³ Dariusz Kosiński sums up.

Thus even if conspiracy theories about current social and political problems are not directly linked with post-Smolensk events, the distrust in "regime" media that was sown at that time, of which the 2015 electoral campaign represented the culmination, was the reason for the return of the metaphysical understanding of truth. In this sense, discussion of conspiracy theories concentrates in itself two complementary tendencies: Romanticism and the use of contemporary media. The turn away from traditional forms of representation, perceived in institutional rituals and media narratives about the air disaster, brought both a messianic model of conceptualizing the nation and a metaphysical understanding of media.

The popularity of conspiracy theories thus results from at least two interconnected causes. Firstly, together with the return of the Romantic style, a transcendental division between "deep reality"¹⁴ and media reality has become

¹³ Ibidem, p. 188.

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 191.

widely disseminated. Secondly, this division is being stabilized by the metaphysics of new media. Describing this phenomenon from a performative perspective, we can explain it as the illusion that there exists an actual, original point of reference for the hyper-real representations that we see on the screens of televisions, computers, tablets, and telephones. That ontological trap reinforces the conviction among adherents of conspiracy theories of the existence of a truth hidden behind a given film or photograph, whereas the referentiality of these images, as indicated by Jean Baudrillard in his theory of simulacra, does not refer to anything real.

Orrin N.C. Wang¹⁵ describes conspiracy theories using the concept of metonymy. Moreover, he directs our attention to a peculiar paradox. According to this British scholar, a conspiracy theory involves the premise that everything fits together in a coherent whole, which contradicts the other fundamental premise of the theory, the impossibility of getting to the heart of the matter and exposing the conspirators' activities. The hidden totality can only be grasped by means of a fragment.

In the context of the problems addressed in this article, it is worth considering the transcendental dimension of this metonymic system of perceiving reality. It is not a coincidence that in Wang's text we encounter the term "virtuality," which is – in the imagination of those who believe in conspiracy theories – a basic component of conspiracy.

¹⁵ See O.N.C. Wang, *Romanticism and Conspiracy. Introduction, Romantic Circles*, 1997, <http://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/conspiracy/wang/owint2.html> (20.01.2016).

The location of truth in virtual space, for Wang, is an indication of our postmodern condition. Wang does not develop this hypothesis. It nonetheless presents me with an opportunity to advance my own theses concerning this virtual kind of transcendence.

Dariusz Kosiński writes about an experience of this type – with regard the Smolensk disaster – which eludes the process of mastery and description in a known language. He thereby raises the very important aspect of how such an event exists exclusively at the level of performative cultural practices. Because of its elusiveness, the event figures only in discourse. The stratification of the languages of its description results in a deepening retreat from the initial source of the event. A similar process takes place with regard to conspiracy theories. In the absence of real disasters, through constant contact with performances, the ontological difference between an event and its representation becomes effaced. For that reason, as in the case of the Smolensk disaster or the conspiracy in conspiracy theory, as Orrin Wang wrote, we are dealing with a metonymic chain. We thus barely touch the surface of events, the hyper-real level, whose initial source, as Dariusz Kosiński would have it, remains beyond the possibility of comprehension. It develops invisibly, resonating in the space of media communication, by means of a mechanism that, while providing the illusion of approximating truth, is actually pushing us away from it. We allow for the elusive meaning's “artificial resurrection in systems of signs [...]”¹⁶

¹⁶ J. Baudrillard, *The Precession of Simulacra*, trans. P. Foss, P. Patton and P. Beitchman, New York 1983, p. 3.

“Watch the Movie for Yourself”

Showing, but in a different way than Dariusz Kosiński, the impossibility of grasping a catastrophic event, Jean Baudrillard, in his theory of simulacra, radically denies the existence of an event that would be the referent of a representation. The media, in enumerating a series of symptoms, attempt to convince us that they are caused by a disease. In relation to different conspiracy theories, the disease is defined differently. The refugee crisis may be due to a conspiracy by Putin, poverty to a deliberate operation by Western corporations, and Poland being “in ruins” because of collusion between Communists and descendants of the confederation formed at Targowica protesting against the constitution of May 3rd 1791. Adherents of conspiracy theories, failing to heed the challenge issued by Baudrillard that “We must learn to read symptoms as symptoms,”¹⁷ consistently read media presentations as symptoms of a real disease.

New media throw us a challenge which, to quote Michael Heim, author of the already classic book *The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality*, we can encapsulate in the question: “How far can we enter cyberspace and still remain human?”¹⁸ In his book, Heim describes the epistemological change in conceptual discourse that has occurred under the influence of the Boolean logic that dominates the internet. This logic, used in contemporary web browsers, has changed the traditional link between the signifier and signified, reversing the direction of conditioning.

¹⁷ J. Baudrillard, *The Gulf War did not take place*, trans. P. Patton, Bloomington 1995, p. 41.

¹⁸ M. Heim, *The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality*, Oxford – New York 1993, p. XI.

Statements made have value only as models of abstract relations among symbols. In Boolean logic, concepts can – but do not have to – contain references to the content they represent – as mathematical symbols, they are separate from their meaning. It is not important whether they refer to their content. Boolean logic can thus employ terms that are empty. This fundamental reversal is what Heim calls *the priority of system*. As a result, in Heim's words, "we can be perfectly logical yet float completely adrift from reality."¹⁹

The priority of the system is, as Baudrillard would have it, "the precession of simulacra." That thinker holds that the reality we encounter is devoid of any relation to reality, and calls it hyper-reality. It functions as a "programmatic, metastable... machine [...]."²⁰ Virtuality's construction is auto-referential. The link-centred nature of the web joins individual accounts and films together on social networks. Without any extra effort, it leads us from a lecture on Wałęsa's alleged secret collaboration with the Polish Communist secret police through another one on the Round Table talks at Magdalenka, to *Nocna Zmiana* (a documentary on the 1992 Olszewski government), a report on the secret police, and another on the alleged attack at Smolensk. The typical comment, "Watch the film for yourself," that we find on every site devoted to historico-political controversies, with the intention of decisively persuading non-believers of the conspiracy theory's validity, confirms our thesis of auto-referentiality. We

¹⁹ Ibidem, p. 18.

²⁰ J. Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. S.F. Glaser, Ann Arbor 1994, p. 2.

therefore think that we know of the existence of a certain level of mediation, but we do not believe that it is of decisive importance. Next, we announce that we are crossing beyond the level of the medium for the purpose of getting to the truth, remaining in the sphere of referentiality and the exchange of signs in this space of simulacra.

Both of these kinds of logic – that of virtual space and that of conspiracy theory – develop from the same premises. Clare Birchall correctly observes that the central ideas in conspiracy theories – firstly, that things are not what they seem, and secondly, that everything is interconnected – also form the components of the paradigm of thought on experience in the era of information flows.²¹ Here it is possible to draw another analogy with Romantic metaphysics and the organicist conception of the world. Though adherents of conspiracy theories believe themselves to be studying a specific, singular and individual matter, what they are doing falls within a certain generic, general schema. It is not, therefore, an investigation into truth and falsehood, because these categories are suspended in the world of simulacra. Those who consume conspiracy theories, replacing metaphysical poetry with an equally metaphysical contemporary genre on the boundary between literature and performance, perform a provocative kind of storytelling in which “the nation tells, and is told, the story of itself.”²² Conspiracy theories provoke because, as Matthew Dentith suggests, they relate to “political alien-

²¹ See C. Birchall, *Knowledge Goes Pop. From Conspiracy Theory to Gossip*, Oxford – New York 2006, p. 34.

²² *Ibidem*, pp. 43–44.

ation.” This American scholar’s position complements Birchall’s: “Individuals who feel they are alienated from social and political discourse (and thus feel themselves to be on the fringe) are liable [...] to see themselves as the playthings of uncontrollable powers.”²³

Based on these concepts of conspiracy theories, it is perfectly clear that such theories represent a tool of resistance to economic and cultural marginalization. This dependent relationship has a historical analogue in the situation of the Romantics. Mickiewicz’s course on Slavic literature can be seen, as Michał Kuziak writes,²⁴ as an attempt to include marginalized nations in European political discourse. This post-colonial accent of the emigré professor’s lectures at the Collège de France overlaps in part with the messianic view of the Slavs’ role in the renewal of the European order.

At the same time, the return of the Romantic-symbolic style not only activates the revolutionary disposition which is somehow inscribed in Polish culture, but also reinforces the metaphysical schema of the search for truth in the simulacric reality of new media. This peculiar metaphysical strain, which, in view of its virtual character, we should rather define as “post-metaphysics,” plays a dual role. Firstly, it represents an attempt to process experiences connected with the transformation of the political system and the resulting economic problems. Secondly, it is a peculiar displacement of the semantic void that has

²³ M. Dentith, *The Philosophy of Conspiracy Theories*, New York 2014, p. 13.

²⁴ See M. Kuziak, *Inny Mickiewicz*, Gdańsk 2013, pp. 119–146.

been established on the other side of the screen. Conspiracy theories, in their search for direct causes for complex historical processes in a reality of symptoms rather than diseases, straightforwardly continue to treat images as reflections of a deeper reality. Faced with the crisis of forms in the stories the nation tells about itself, and the crisis of representation that has revealed its simulacric face(s), consumers of conspiracy theories oppose that crisis with their belief that although an image may falsify and denaturalize reality, such a theory is the profound, concealed reward for persistent seekers of truth. In that sense, conspiracy theories are a form of vehement reaction to the void, what Baudrillard writing about iconoclasts called the “metaphysical despair” elicited by the sense that “the image didn’t conceal anything at all, and that these images were in essence not images, such as an original model would have made them, but perfect simulacra, forever radiant with their own fascination [...]”²⁵

translated by Timothy Williams

²⁵ J. Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 5.

The Reels of Truth – Material Faces of Conspiracy Theories

Marta Haldas

Conspiracy theories are often closely linked to various kinds of technological artefacts. These include mediums that transmit data (tapes, hard disks, USB drives), as well as recording devices (wires, dictaphones, cameras). While the history of the recording and reading of data falls within the realm of popular culture and art, its true heritage traces back – as the “godfather” of media materialism, Friedrich Kittler, has emphasized – to military, espionage and surveillance technologies. The problem of conspiracy theories shows with particular acuity how interwoven these two threads are. The culture of popular media and the “grown-up world” of politics, the military and various other organizations have become embroiled in a network of multifarious connections, at the intersection of which alternative knowledge of the world and its history emerges. It would seem worthwhile to focus our attention on the place occupied in this network by material artefacts.

The material “infrastructure” of conspiracy theories is not only integral to their functioning, it also forms the

basis for their coming into being. It would be impossible to imagine what we call “conspiracy theories” existing without material media, even in those cases where such narratives are themselves transmitted by gossip rather than through official media channels (in the era of social media, this distinction seems to be losing its usefulness). It is the existence of a shared culture, together with its shared technological media, that enables conspiracy theories to take flight, to become something more than simply local intrigues or paranoid scenarios dreamt up by mentally disturbed individuals, to the point where they become a broad-ranging social phenomenon. As Franciszek Czech observes, the twentieth century saw the emergence of the concept of conspiracy theories as we understand it today. Czech suggests that the reason for the development of this state of affairs was primarily the sociopolitical ferment of the postwar era, in which various kinds of critical analysis of the preceding years’ tempestuous politics and ideology were undertaken.¹ It is an inescapable fact, however, that the period in question also represents the beginning of a vast expansion of the media. Technical discoveries during made during the Second World War, such as those relating to early information technologies, found applications in peacetime, and the development of other technologies which had been suspended during the war, such as television, intensified after the Allied victory. It was precisely in this context that contemporary conspiracy theories and similar paranoid narratives took shape.

¹ See F. Czech, *Spiskowe narracje i metanarracje*, Kraków 2015.

Theoretical formulations of the phenomenon of conspiracy theories exist in many disciplines, as we can observe in studying Czech's anthology of texts entitled *Struktura teorii spiskowych* (The Structure of Conspiracy Theories).² Despite the wide field of research indicated by the title, the topic of its material aspect is almost entirely neglected in the book. Whether from a psychological or cultural studies perspective, the texts focus on the human being. I do not mean to suggest that this approach is erroneous or lacking in innovation. The analysis of conspiracy theories made by Czech in *Spiskowe narracje i metanarracje*,³ strongly influenced by British cultural studies, is undoubtedly a valuable and contemporary look at the topic of conspiracy theories. In it, they are not treated as curiosities invented by unbalanced individuals, but as an important element of resistance to the dominant discourses of power.

This essay is not intended to polemicize with, but rather to complement those analyses. In fact, I agree that conspiracy theories and their adherents can perform the function of destabilizing the existing discursive order by introducing an alternative reading of various kinds of events. Whether their influence is positive or negative depends on particular cases and our point of view. Nevertheless, conspiracy theories cannot be ignored, nor can they be reduced to the fever dreams of a handful of lunatics. It is my opinion, however, that in this case the discursive aspect presents only one side of the coin. On the other side we find a zone of history outside human beings and out-

² See F. Czech (red.), *Struktura teorii spiskowych. Antologia*, Kraków 2014.

³ See F. Czech, *Spiskowe narracje...*, op. cit.

side discourse, relating to what the German media scholar Wolfgang Ernst calls the microtemporality of technological media.⁴ What influence does this level exert on the emergence and development of conspiracy theories?

The Secret Life of Devices

... [S]he thought of the time she'd opened a transistor radio to replace a battery and seen her first printed circuit. The ordered swirl of houses and streets, from this high angle, sprang at her now with the same unexpected, astonishing clarity as the circuit card had. Though she knew even less about radios than about Southern Californians, there were to both outward patterns a hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning, of an intent to communicate. There'd seemed no limit to what the printed circuit could have told her (if she had tried to find out) [...].⁵

In the passage cited above from Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, its chief protagonist, Oedipa Maas, experiences a singular kind of paranoiac epiphany. She observes the remarkable similarity between the traces of a conspiracy hidden in urban space and the strands found inside an electronic device, a radio. The language of conspiracy theory, which at least creates a narrative of cause and effect, however irrational, becomes here a reflection of the radically non-narrative language of circuits and electric impulses. The latter, though constructed according to

⁴ See W. Ernst, *Digital Memory and the Archive*, Minneapolis, London 2013.

⁵ T. Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*, New York 1966, p. 14.

the principles of rational science and the laws of physics, seems to elude our understanding even more than the secret machinations of powerful persons and institutions.

That language is precisely the main topic of scholarly interest for Wolfgang Ernst, who is often described as representing what is known as the German school of media.⁶ The German school is commonly associated with (and its various branches are united by) a specific approach to media, focused on their material, extradiscursive and non-human aspects. This perspective is to a large extent inspired by the thought of Friedrich Kittler, or, as Mirosław Filiciak has called him, “McLuhan in reverse,”⁷ and whose theories have even been defined as “media studies without people.”⁸

The practice of concentrating on the materiality of technological media and leaving out human (f)actors has led to accusations of techno-determinism. It is, nonetheless, possible to consider this question from the other side, treating this approach not as antagonistic to more culturally conditioned analyses, but as a complementary perspective to them. As Ernst himself writes: “In order to thoroughly analyze technological settings, it is vital to suspend the discourses that envelop them and mold their meanings for a heuristic moment; this does not necessarily result in a categorical op-

⁶ However, according to Jussi Parikka, author of the preface to Ernst's book *Ernst's Digital Memory and the Archive*, it is difficult to speak of a coherent scholarly formation in this case. See J. Parikka, *Archival Media Theory. An Introduction to Wolfgang Ernst's Media Archaeology*, [in:] W. Ernst, *Digital Memory...*, op. cit., pp. 19–22.

⁷ M. Filiciak, “Friedrich Kittler. Syreny zamilkły,” *Dwutygodnik*, 10.2013, <http://www.dwutygodnik.com/artyku/4812-friedrich-kittler-syreny-zamilkly.html> (28.02.2016)

⁸ See J.D. Peters, *Introduction: Friedrich Kittler's Light Shows*, [in:] F. Kittler, *Optical Media: Berlin Lectures 1999*, Cambridge 2010, p. 5.

position but rather in a complementary strategic alliance between cultural studies and German media theory.”⁹ This fusion of both theories would appear to be an intriguing point of departure for an analysis of conspiracy theories.

For Ernst, the most important category, both in the study of media and epistemologically, is the archive. It is thanks to various types of archives – from those co-created by the media to those affiliated with particular institutions – that we can look at past events and thus shape our knowledge on the subject of the world and history. Through them, it also becomes possible to create a variety of conspiracy theories based on the analysis of archival “clues” and their interpretation in an alternative light from that of dominant media discourses. All of the elements of archival armature – recording machines, data storage and transmission devices, systems for the organization of information – have an inordinate influence on our cultural memory, leaving their imprint on our ways of thinking and perceiving.

This problem becomes even more interesting when Ernst turns his attention to related nonhuman factors. The “internal life” of technological media expresses itself in myriad ways. One of them is what we would call a recording error, a disturbance. Electronic appliances record not only the content intentionally selected by human operators, but also random elements. These include some that elude our perception capabilities.¹⁰ Curiously, it is just such sundry noises, distortions of image, or unreadable information

⁹ W. Ernst, *Digital Memory...*, op. cit., pp. 25–26.

¹⁰ See *ibid.*, pp. 59–65.

that often form the point of departure for diverse conspiracy theories – from the outline of the devil’s face seen in films recording the attacks on the World Trade Center, allegedly proving the devastation to have been a “controlled demolition” organized by the American government,¹¹ to various types of hidden, coded information found in sound recordings. Obsessively listening to Beatles records (including played backwards) in order to find proof that Paul McCartney is dead, or searching for discrepancies in the photographs from the Apollo 11 mission that show the moon landing to have been faked are practices that reveal not only a penchant for conspiracy theories about historical events, but also a certain epistemological barrier that stands between the human being and his technologically mediated products. It often takes the form of a belief in paranormal phenomena as well – spirits, phantoms, or extraterrestrial beings – as described by Jeffrey Sconce in his book *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television*.¹²

From Ernst’s reflections there emerges a vision of a history that cannot be reduced to the world of human culture or described in terms of a narrative of cause and effect. The history of what lies beyond discourse and hermeneutics. It might therefore appear that there is nothing more distant from that vision than the method of interpreting the past typical for conspiracy theories, which Czech refers to as conspiracy narratives.¹³ At the same time, paradoxically, the operations

¹¹ See D. Emery, *Satan’s Face in World Trade Center Smoke on 9/11*, Urban Legends About.com, 9.11.2014, <http://urbanlegends.about.com/library/bltblloid-arch10.htm> (28.02.2016).

¹² See J. Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television*, Durham 2000.

¹³ See F. Czech, *Spiskowe narracje...*, op. cit.

performed by conspiracy theory adherents are, to some degree, reminiscent of the investigative method Ernst proposes. Just as those who believe in conspiracies seek hidden explanations behind the dominant discourses of power, so medial materialists look outside of the cultural interfaces of media: “The microphysical close reading of sound, where the materiality of the recording medium itself becomes poetical, dissolves any semantically meaningful archival unit into discrete blocks of signals. Instead of applying musicological hermeneutics, the media archaeologist suppresses the passion to hallucinate ‘life’ when he listens to recorded voices.”¹⁴ This method, which may be called “forensic,” with reference to Matthew Kirschenbaum’s *Mechanisms: New Media and Forensics Imagination*,¹⁵ brings materialistically inclined media scholars and adherents of conspiracy theories closer together. The after-effects of these investigations vary greatly, however. Those who believe in conspiracies constantly have a sense of “illusion” in life, searching for narratives even where they are absent. This state of affairs is brought on by some cognitive wrong turns. As Timothy Melley, quoted by Czech, describes the problem, analyzing the phenomenon of conspiracy theories in terms proposed by Frederic Jameson, conspiracy theory attempts “...to map networks of power too vast to be adequately represented. In this account, conspiracy theory’s oversimplifications stem partly from the sublime objects it attempts to make visible. Instead of being merely a comforting form of misrepresentation, conspiracy theory is a reductive (or “degraded”),

¹⁴ W. Ernst, *Digital Memory...*, op. cit., p. 60.

¹⁵ See M. Kirschenbaum, *Mechanisms: New Media and Forensics Imagination*, Cambridge, London 2008.

but still useful, form of political representation.”¹⁶ Though Jameson’s point refers primarily to the impossibility of explaining phenomena typical for late capitalism and co-created by “conspiracy culture,”¹⁷ possessing primarily a sociopolitical dimension – social institutions’ lack of transparency, anonymous systems of experts, murky connections among business, politics, and media, and occasional reports on the activities of secret agencies¹⁸ – I believe it is also important to consider the material “infrastructure” of such processes. In this sense, “networks of power too vast to be adequately represented” can be seen not as merely networks of human interests, but also, to refer to Latour’s actor-network theory,¹⁹ various kinds of extrahuman factors.

Paranoia in the Age of Cloud Computing

*To be paranoid is to think like a machine.*²⁰

Wendy Hui Kyong Chun

Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, in her book *Control and Freedom. Power and Paranoia in the Age of Fiber Optics*, observes that “[t]he end of the Cold War has not dispelled paranoia but rather spread it everywhere: invisibility and uncertainty—of the enemy, of technology—has invalidated deterrence and moved paranoia from the pathological to

¹⁶ T. Melley, *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America*, Ithaca 2000, p. 9.

¹⁷ The concept of “conspiracy culture” refers to Peter Knight’s theory. See P. Knight, *Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to the X Files*, New York 2000.

¹⁸ F. Czech, *Spiskowe narracje...*, op. cit., p. 91.

¹⁹ See B. Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Oxford 2005.

²⁰ W.H.K. Chun, *Control and Freedom. Power and Paranoia in the Age of Fiber Optics*, Cambridge, London 2006, p. viii.

the logical.”²¹ Chun emphasizes the existence of a significant link between the emergence of digital media – together with discourses, surrounding them on both sides, of Utopian freedom and dystopian control – and paranoid thought. At the same time, Chun’s thought exceeds the boundaries of the discursive level. She devotes attention to both software and hardware, noting that such paranoia relates to the loss of control over our media technologies. Heeding the words of Jussi Parikka, we might understand this situation as a “political economy of contemporary increasingly closed [...] and black-boxed media technologies in which one cannot open devices without breaking them completely.”²² And, as Timothy Melley observes, it is precisely the lack of control over our own actions that leads to the creation of conspiracy scenarios.²³

These issues can be illustrated with an example from the widely commented-upon battle that took place in February 2016 between Apple and the FBI, in the context of which conspiracy theories took only a few days to appear. The flashpoint in this case was the question of access to data saved on an iPhone smartphone belonging to Syed Rizwan Farook, one of the culprits in the terrorist attack in San Bernardino. The complicated security protocol used by Apple made it impossible for FBI agents to access the information contained in the phone. The Federal Bureau of Investigation thus issued a demand that the California-based corporation provide access via a special

²¹ W.H.K. Chun, *Control and Freedom...*, op. cit., p. 1.

²² J. Parikka, *Archival Media Theory...*, op. cit., p. 14.

²³ See T. Melley, *Empire of Conspiracy...*, op. cit.

“backdoor” program through which it would be possible to recover the blocked data. Though at the time of this writing the case is ongoing, for the moment (28.02.2016) Apple has refused to allow access to this “connector,” and company head Tim Cook has issued a statement in which he justifies the decision to protect user data.²⁴ The conspiracy theories that have taken shape regarding the case refer, for instance, to the deliberate blocking of data by the FBI, which could thereby force Apple to loosen its safeguards and thus enable surveillance of citizens.²⁵ Although the famous Silicon Valley corporation presented itself in this case as protecting the privacy and freedom of its users, Apple, too, has been accused of surveillance of private data and deliberate collaboration with the NSA.²⁶ These intricacies perfectly mirror the indistinct status of materiality in the world of contemporary media. A layer of programming here appears as a magical code located in the hands of a select few, by means of which it becomes possible to trace the clues preserved in an inert artefact. Although in the example described above, the refusal of access is justified by the desire to protect users, the situation also indicates how control over our devices lies not in our hands, but in those of large organizations and corporations. Though the complete reverse of this situation could lead to total anarchy, we can state with some

²⁴ T. Cook, *A Message to our customers*, Apple, 16.02.2016, <http://www.apple.com/customer-letter/> (18.05.2016).

²⁵ K. Kopańko, “FBI vs Apple – to już nie komedia, to tragifarsa,” *Spider'sWeb*, 20.02.2016, <http://www.spidersweb.pl/2016/02/fbi-vs-apple-tragifarsa.html> (28.02.2016).

²⁶ C. Lee, “Timing of SSL bug fuels conspiracy theories about Apple and NSA,” *iDownloadBlog*,” 24.02.2014, <http://www.idownloadblog.com/2014/02/24/ssl-bug-fuels-nsa-theories/%20> (28.02.2016).

certainty that the lack of transparency in institutions of various kinds is also reflected in the lack of transparency of our devices.

The impossibility of interference “from below” in devices produced by Apple relates not only to security, but also to various types of consumer practices – from inserting an undedicated cable to installing programs purchased outside the App Store platform. This “closed system” strategy was recently portrayed in a memorable scene from the biopic of the famous founder of the California-based corporation, *Steve Jobs* (*Steve Jobs*, 2015, dir. Danny Boyle). The scene depicts a quarrel between Jobs and Steve Wozniak about how the products of their recently founded company should look. Whereas Wozniak is presented as a proponent of open systems enabling free user interference (thereby further maintaining the ethos of the cyberculture that was linked to amateur “tinkering” and DIY culture), Jobs represents the approach that would permanently become the default in the contemporary culture of applied electronics. The marketing potential of “closed systems” would be based not only on the intuitive quality of their use, but also the possibility of selling the greatest number of dedicated peripheral devices and programs. Continual replacement of obsolete models of devices by their newer versions would also become an element of this strategy, one that results not only from the logic of the market and advertisement, but also from the impossibility of independently repairing or improving old discarded

appliances. It is therefore no surprise that advocates of conspiracy theories, aside from the disputable question of data security, accuse Apple of what they call planned obsolescence of its products. According to one such theory, the company uses updates of its programs to deliberately slow down old models of mobile devices when new versions of them appear on the market, thereby encouraging users to buy the next model.²⁷

Together with the development of digital technologies, the number of conspiracy theories has been growing at a breakneck pace. I think the reason for this lies not only in the increased ease with which information circulates, but also in the specific situation wherein today's media find themselves. As James Allen-Robertson writes, "once media moved into the realm of the computational, the [material] substrate disappeared, encased in the opaque box and indiscernible from the other magical components that generated the interface in front of us. The increasing implementation of cloud computing and storage in consumer grade services further obscures the hardware by moving all but the interface off site. However, the material realities of the digital remain and affect us every day."²⁸ The concealment of the material "infrastructure" of our devices by increasingly thick layers of interface still further deepens

²⁷ E. Zolfagharifard, "Does Apple deliberately slow its old models before a new release?", *The Daily Mail*, 29.06.2014, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-2709502/Does-Apple-deliberately-slow-old-models-new-release-Searches-iPhone-slow-spike-ahead-launches.html> (28.02.2016).

²⁸ J. Allen-Robertson, "The materiality of digital media: The hard disk drive, phonograph, magnetic tape and optical media in technical close-up," *New Media & Society* 2015, p. 2.

Marta Habdas, *The Reels of Truth*

the cognitive barrier that results from the very specificity of a technical, nonhuman language. Alternative knowledge, created collaboratively through conspiracy theories, even when the fears relating to it are exaggerated, allows us to pull away that curtain – at least in part.

translated by Timothy Williams

No-one Is Innocent Conspiracy Theories in Zombie-centric Literary Narratives

Ksenia Olkusz

*So why, exactly, do we love zombies so much?
According to experts – and, yes, there are zombie ex-
perts – it's because for all their limitations,
the brain-rotted, animated corpses are
so darned versatile – helping reflect
whatever our greatest fears happen to be at the time.¹*

Contrary to widely-held views, popular literature constitutes an important component of culture and a source of extremely incisive observations on the reality from which it emerges. As a particular form of art, popular literature is simultaneously a resonator of widespread moods and a sphere in which they become reified – sometimes in an allegorical fashion, sometimes rather

¹ D. Gross, *Why we love those rotting, hungry, putrid zombies*, cnn.com, 2.10.2009, <http://edition.cnn.com/2009/SHOWBIZ/10/02/zombie.love/index.html?iref=24hours> (19.02.2016).

allusively, and sometimes expressed straightforwardly – reflecting a variety of social, economic, political, quotidian and other discourses. The perception of this process is relevant in that it relates to the problem of the plausibility of observations made by those authors who choose to work within the conventions of fantasy. Their perceptions and artistic achievements become entangled in the particular kind of binary relation formed from the supposed antagonism, referenced in scholarly discourse and enduring in our collective consciousness, between fiction and reality. As Krzysztof M. Maj insists, “the main problem lies [...] in the fact that since the time when most important theories of fiction and fantasy genres were developed at the same time [...], the realm of fantasy has also witnessed the postmodernist turn, and as a result, it would really be necessary now to [...] talk about post-fantasy rather than fantasy as a strictly defined genre. [...] In what we would thus call post-fantasy narratives, the world ceases to be simply a stage on which characters appear and disappear, marking successive stages in the development of the plot by their presence – and becomes instead a particular kind of virtual reality, an epistemological construct possessing high cognitive potential.”² Proof of the justice of this claim can be found in elements that explicitly relate to authentic reality and penetrate the world of fiction as components contributing to the creation of the plot. One example of this predilection consists of works that develop apocalyptic scenarios, representing an artistic conse-

² K.M. Maj, *Allotopie. Topografia światów fikcyjnych*, Kraków 2015, pp. 21–22.

quence of the global crises proliferating in many areas of our social, political, and economic life.

The figures of living corpses or pandemics that we find in zombie-centric narratives³ can thus fulfil the function of accessories in works whose content diverges from the strictly genre horror. Their decorative function, indeed, argues in favour of abandoning the label of horror or survival horror when discussing this type of plot and recognizing such works as legitimate participants in social discourses. The optics used by authors working in the zombie-centric convention focuses primarily on conspiratorial activity by national governments or corporations. A similar narrow focus is typical in the context of social and economic crisis or the related implicit collapse of societal trust in financial and public institutions and much-heralded forthcoming twilight of capitalism; furthermore, “[c]onspiracy theory demands continual interpretation in which there is *always* something more to know about an alleged conspiracy, the evidence of which is subjected to an investigative machine that demands the perpetual motion of signification. Further, the very attempt to shut interpretation down is itself a suspicious act that requires interpretation”;⁴ following a conspiracist

³ I apply this term to all cultural texts in which living corpses constitute an element in the construction of the represented world, defining the status of characters in the reality presented there and determining the state of that reality as newly collapsing or previously destabilized due to the spread of a plague of undead aiming to infect or devour all living members of society. It is not relevant what convention the text works within, because the conception by which the worlds are designed are based on pandemic factors that result from global infection with disease causing loss of consciousness and its reduction to the primary need to transmit and duplicate the virus through contact with blood and bodily secretions.

⁴ M. Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories. Secrecy and Power in American Culture*, Minneapolis 2008, p. 94.

vision of the world is therefore one of the most frequently used methods for developing a zombie-centric plot.

An atmosphere of general suspicion toward government and business significantly influences the formation of narrative models for plots about living corpses and rules for designing their represented worlds. There is a visible tendency in such plots toward monochrome and explicitly antagonistically inclined methods of presenting relations between citizens and the state or corporations. In that model, the individual is always shown to be a victim of the machinations of state or corporate rulers, and the twilight of the human race the result of diabolical and short-sighted attempts to experiment with illicit substances or pathogens. Such a black-and-white vision of the world falling apart as the fault of conspiring authorities is sometimes amplified by devices that heighten the negative features of the representatives of state or corporate power, depicted as driven by unimaginable hubris, obsessive ambition or psychic ability, and their juxtaposition with the attributes of the protagonists, who are honest, empathetic, and devoted to their families, prizing honour, sincerity, and openness. This typical theatricalization of the antagonists' behaviours serves to underscore the wrongheadedness of their decisions, and aims to intensify and finally solidify the reader's belief that the individuals in charge generally have only their own interests and personal satisfaction at heart, becoming a decidedly accusatory sign of the authors' perception and resulting artistic presentation, of those in power.

Conspiracism, we should underscore, is not a distinguishing feature of zombie-centric plots, although, significantly, the number of narratives in which the axis of the plot revolves around the results of a conspiracy at the state echelons is notably high. An important component of conspiracist thought is the belief that official statements by the authorities diverge from their actual (hidden) manoeuvres, which have nothing to do with working on behalf of building and maintaining social order. This belief is concretized in many narratives about living corpses as a constitutive element in the destruction of civilization. Government branches engaged in illegal activities prepare viruses for which there are no vaccines; they conduct various (usually unsuccessful) tests, freely and nonchalantly with regard to questions of safety, tests which often spiral out of control (as in Luke Aherne's *Euphoria Z or Transformation*, or Alex Laybourne's *Diaries of the Damned*), while sometimes their adversaries seize upon the results of their work, who are replicating the pathogen in their own complexes (Gary M. Chesla's *The Last Days*) in such a way that it becomes impossible to stop the epidemic.

Laybourne's novel *Diaries of the Damned* is unquestionably inspired by conspiracy theories about government involvement in actions harmful to citizens; the novel is a Decameron-like depiction of a vision of a government responsible for wiping out the population. Evacuated from areas engulfed by the plague, the passengers of an airplane take turns telling of their experiences during

the first days of the rise of the zombie disease, attempting to find the reason for the emergence of the epidemic. Successive stages in the stories of individual characters lead to the revelation of a government conspiracy aimed at expanding military power in the future through simulations of a terrorist attack with biological weapons. At the instructions of those in power, scientists prepare a mutated flu virus intended to be purely local in scope and to demonstrate that external forces are interfering with the peace and well-being of the Norwich community. Such actions are justified by the need to prevent possible acts of aggression by other powers, since, as one of the people involved in the production of the pathogen states, “We are always at war. There is always a threat, but you can never make a move. You don’t want to be the aggressor.”⁵ This policy of evading responsibility fails even to stop the transformation of a local epidemic into a global pandemic, because the government decides to undertake further conspiratorial action, this time aiming to achieve supremacy over other nations. Politicians, working together with governments of various Eastern European countries and Asia, declare the evacuation of survivors to those territories, while concurring that in view of these refugees’ probable infection, they should be killed immediately upon disembarking. Such actions are not only intended to hush up the fact that state actors are implicated in the outbreak of the epidemic, but above all, become the basis for forming political relationships with those nations that were not previously eager

⁵ A. Laybourne, *Diaries of the Damned*, Kindle Edition, p. 192.

to become allies. As one of the conspirators justifies this decision, “Everybody is clambering over themselves to help, to prove it wasn’t them. We even have a few planes being taken into North Korea. The world is uniting. It’s remarkable.”⁶ These optimistic revelations are discredited, however, by one of the passengers, a tabloid journalist who directly states that mass murder will operate as the pretext for obtaining political hegemony due to the fact that each of the governments involved in the killings will become complicit in the conspiracy. “That’s blackmail,” another character declares, “It’s a fucking dictatorship [...]. Ruling by fear [...].”⁷ In the passages quoted, there is a distinct echo of conspiracy theories which claim that citizens should have limited trust in their government, a claim linked to the belief that those governments are capable of doing anything for the sake of achieving military advantage or economic control.

In many other zombie-centric narratives (such as Mira Grant’s *Newsflesh* and *Parasitology* trilogies, Lisa Morton’s *Washington Deceased*, Stephen Knight’s *Zombie Apocalypse* novels, Manel Loureiro’s *Apocalypse Z*, James Dean’s *This Dying World*, Devan Sagliani’s *The Rising Dead*, Marie Lanza’s *Fractured. Outbreak ZOM-813*) we can discern emphatic philippics against politicians and the military, who are accused of dishonesty, incompetence, or a lack of professionalism. Furthermore, in the apocalyptic orientation of such visions, geared toward revolutionary change taking place in the system, we can hear echoes of theo-

⁶ Ibid., p. 206.

⁷ Ibid.

ries announcing the decline of capitalism and predicting transformations relating not only to economic but also sociopolitical systems.⁸

In that context, the actions of the authorities are usually shown to end in the failure of their attempts to find optimal solutions, in the process revealing a fundamental, unprecedented lack of competence in crisis management in situations of utmost danger, or even utter abandonment of their responsibilities toward citizens – as occurs in the series⁹ *#Retreat* by Jole McKinney, Craig Dilouie and Stephen Knight, in which military officers, not wanting to endanger the integrity of their ranks, decide not only to give up on fighting those infected, but more importantly, to refrain from doing anything to help the civilian population. This helplessness or passivity at a critical juncture for civilization allegorically represents the authorities'

⁸ A similar formulation has been proposed by Immanuel Wallerstein, though obviously in his theory the end of capitalism is not linked with drastic revolutionary change; nevertheless, for him too, the phenomenon will represent the consequence of such events as the crisis of the state, the growth of anti-state tendencies, etc. As Marcin Dachter states in presenting Wallerstein's thought, "a choice between future systems awaits humanity. In the time of the final crisis of the contemporary world system, which may last another 25–50 years, every human action counts. In Wallerstein's view, we face a choice between the spirit of Davos and the spirit of Porto Alegre. Davos represents the old system, its hierarchical, antiegalitarian structure and the defense of the old interests of the elite of the capitalist world-system in the course of creating a new system. The new system that emerges as a result of the transformation, need not be any better than the current one. If the spirit of Davos is victorious, the new system may be even worse than the current one. The spirit of Porto Alegre, on the other hand, is an appeal to the egalitarian and democratic demands formulated during the alterglobalist summits that have taken place in the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre [...]". M. Dachter, "Przyszłość systemu-świata. Wizja konfliktowa," [in:] M. Baranowski (ed.), *Demokracja i rola obywatela. O napięciu pomiędzy państwem, społeczeństwem i procesami globalizacyjnymi*, Poznań 2014, p. 67.

⁹ I refer to these novels as a series, since the term "cycle" does not suit them very well. The action in these books takes place in a universe created by these authors, but individual parts are written by other authors and their plots do not always intersect.

lack of skill and neglect of their duties, while the apocalyptic scenarios unmask the dilettantism of political strategies and reveal the characteristic dysfunctionality of the system when faced with crisis.

Contemporary literary narratives about zombies also represent a peculiar kind of critical voice toward government transparency, and the authors of such plots enter directly into the discourse on the level of professionalism, competency, and engagement of politicians via references to real events, including real scandals.¹⁰ Through their inclusion in the matrix of representation, they raise doubts as to the reliability and motivation of those in power, branding murky and secretive activities as potentially destabilizing. In these narratives, we can perceive reflexes of conspiracist thinking which do in fact apply to secret operations. A refusal to accept political processes is strongly expressed by Lisa Morton in her novel *Washington Deceased*, in which the US vice president, Delaney, initiates conspiratorial activity with the goal of collaborating with the zombies, as he plans for the advent of a new world and a new order to be ruled by those who belong to his political faction.

In zombie-centric plots, responsibility for the future of humankind no less often lies in the hands of corporations whose operations or resources are capable of meeting the demands of the emergency, a situation, however, that presents them with the opportunity to break free of any

¹⁰ In *Washington Deceased* Morton refers, for example, to the Secret Service scandal. An important component of many novels about zombies consists of references to the war in Iraq.

kind of supervision. This view is illustrated by, for example, the scene from Morton's novel, mentioned above, in which the authorities, in possession of a vaccine, blackmail the surviving national leaders, proposing joint rule in exchange for providing the medicine for the immunization of their populations.

The corporation, in zombie-centric narratives, either plays the role of the main antagonist, even more dangerous than the virus itself, or is responsible for the development and spread of the virus. In both cases, its primary goal is to seize power over the mechanisms of social control. In Mira Grant's *Newsflesh* trilogy, the corporation assists the government in its operations, while also manipulating the puppet president, and despite having a vaccine against zombism, does not publicize that information, using the regulation of the drug in order to maintain public order. Worse, the corporation selects the citizens who display the most interesting cases of carrying the virus (so-called reservoirs) in order to conduct some ethically questionable tests and experiments relating to cloning. In Grant's trilogy, the etiology of zombism distinctly echoes conspiracy theories, as it attributes bioethically controversial experiments in secret laboratories to pharmaceutical corporations – not without reason, if one considers the widespread practices of testing new drugs among citizens of developing countries.

In the *Paracitology* trilogy by the same author, a pharmaceutical concern is shown to be directly responsible for

the outbreak of the epidemic; for purely mercantile reasons, it ignores signals from its scientific team working on a mutation of tapeworms that gives it unheard-of resistance to all diseases, and in the name of profit, allows the mass zombification of the population, whose consciousness is taken control of by the parasites. In such cases, pharmaceutical companies, concerns, and corporations become clear allegories for the discourse of the neoliberal economy – in the end, as shown in the chapter “The Pharmaceutical Nexus” in Adriana Petryna and Arthur Kleinman’s book *Global Pharmaceuticals: Ethics, Markets, Practices*, “[s]candals in the pharmaceutical industry—be they related to questionable marketing practices or the withholding of information about dangerous drug side effects—are often traced back to the same cause: a conflict of interest. It is now required among researchers and even medical ethicists to declare any financial conflicts of interest at the end of their lectures or journal articles.”¹¹

The other force involved in a conspiracy against the community are the media moguls, whose activities from the outset serve purposes of disinformation by hushing up the first moments of the epidemic and frustrating any attempts to take remedial measures before it reaches the level of a global pandemic. Under the pretext of not wanting to stir panic, the government exerts pressure on journalists to keep them from telling the real news about the plague, ensuring they disseminate only concocted explanations of incidents relating to the appearance of the

¹¹ A. Petryna, A. Lakoff, A. Kleinman (eds.), *Global Pharmaceuticals: Ethics, Markets, Practices*, Durham 2006, p. 11.

zombism virus. Authors of zombie-centric narratives unambiguously show the media's involvement in processes of falsifying data, driven by a belief in the possibility of manipulating the news, and more concretely, operating according to a peculiar twist on the theory of agenda setting, which says that "[a] great deal of evidence has been amassed suggesting that the news media greatly impact the public's political opinions and behaviors. Perhaps the most broadly accepted and studied impact of the news is its ability to set the audience's issue agenda. In this scenario, news outlets report issues, and the public subsequently views those issues as important. This represents a very powerful effect, and a multitude of studies have lent credence to this paradigm, called 'agenda-setting.'"¹² Given that such a pattern exists, the content of news media can easily be manipulated so as to hide issues that are uncomfortable for certain groups, instead promulgating such media narratives as allow control over the population to be maintained. The manipulation of public opinion and knowledge functions in zombie-centric narratives in the context of a plan to stifle the effect that information about the incipient pandemic could generate. Thus both the government authorities and television or radio stations conspire for the purpose of reducing the potential risk of an explosion of panic and its related implications. Media outlets present all incidents related to efforts by the police and armed forces to fight the living dead as

¹² J.E. Uscinski, *The People's News. Media, Politics, and the Demands of Capitalism*, New York 2014, p. 44. It should additionally be noted that this theory has applications with regard to other types of media as well, as its inventor, Maxwell McCombs, underscored as early as 2005. See: M. McCombs, "A Look at Agenda-setting: Past, Present and Future," *Journalism Studies* 6/2005, pp. 543–557.

pacification of riots, control of protesters, and information about quarantine or the rising number of infected people is confined to reports of the disease's etiology as a form of flu or possibly tuberculosis, in the process minimizing the symptoms and their effects (this happens, for example, in Lanza's *Fractured. Outbreak ZOM-8*¹³ and Jason McPherson's *Dead Ascent*). This type of disinformation campaign not only fails to protect citizens, but even exposes them to contact with the unidentified virus and its dangerous carriers, whom the idea of disarming is practically unimaginable to anyone who has encountered an attack by the flesh-eaters. The intended protection or control over society is transformed into an even greater danger when the level of informational disorganization in traditional media is high. In many zombie narratives, such disorganization is also aggravated by the simultaneous loss of internet resources – websites publishing any kind of information about the inexplicable events, illnesses, unexplained deaths and so on are gradually shut down, and characters who moments ago had complete access to them announce with amazement that none of the sites exists any longer (Lanza's *Fractured. Outbreak ZOM-813*, Dean's *This Dying World*).¹³ This notable disappearance of all forms and possibilities of communication is meant to show the deliberate nature of activities whose purpose is to cut the citizenry off from all sources of information, and thereby deny the existence of the pan-

¹³ In Rick Restuccia's novelistic cycle *The Zombie Theories (Chaos Theory and Conspiracy Theory)*, his most blatantly conspiracist works, it is revealed that government websites comprise the only functioning internet source, but specific skills, not available to ordinary citizens, are required to access them.

demic. Needless to say, the method is ineffective, since the pandemic continues pitilessly spreading regardless of attempts to hush it up.

The authors of zombie-centric narratives distinctly negate or undermine the objectivity and independence of media content, and thus enter into the discourse on the significance of published information and its degree of accuracy. Fears of the manipulation of information thus result in the creation of represented worlds in which the reliability of the media is markedly questioned by the revelation of their direct dependence on state authorities who are attempting to shield their own negligence or simply mistakes. Our belief in the media's independence is contradicted by the work of many researchers who have demonstrated a peculiar kind of balance between the needs of the audience and the fulfilment of their expectations by the creators of broadcasting services. Joseph E. Uscinski, for example, writes that "correlations between the media's agenda and the public's agenda do not necessarily indicate that the media have set the audience's agenda. A correlation between [these– K.O.] two numerical variables implies only that their values rise and fall in relation to one another; correlation does not imply that one value causes the other."¹⁴ It is obviously easier for authors of zombie-centric narratives to show a clear opposition between honest citizens and a dishonest government running a disinformation campaign than to present a more complex pursuit of motives relating to the flow of

¹⁴ J.E. Uscinski, *The People's News...*, pp. 44-45.

information. This monochrome aspect of the represented world aims primarily at heightening the mood of paranoia and menace, creating a believable and plot-motivated atmosphere of chaos and decline of the established order. Using the motif of dishonest media thus serves a particular dramatization of events, constituting a useful tool for creating an apocalyptic climate in which the quick unravelling of state and social structures that we see is linked with (among other things) the lack of proper data or readily available procedural protocols.¹⁵

In the context of the themes presented in this essay of conspiracies in zombie-centric narratives, there is yet another issue worthy of our attention, namely the differences in how responsibility for the outbreak of the pandemic is outlined in various works. In books by European authors, the epidemic's genesis is usually irrelevant, or possibly indicated to lie in unspecified eastern-bloc countries (see, for example, Magdalena Owczarek's *Po moim trupie* [Over My Dead Body], or Loureiro's *Apocalypse Z*), whereas in works by American authors the dissemination of the virus is the fault of state actors (or possibly corporate ones; or, as in the universe portrayed in Knight's *Apocalypse!*, both together), whose hidden manoeuvres have led to the twilight of the human species. Such considerable

¹⁵ Interestingly, this problem drew particular attention from Max Brooks, in his discussion of the rather injudicious comparisons of the ebola epidemic to a zombism pandemic. In commenting on the misguidedness of the analogy, the author declared: "The final reason my fictional pandemic managed to nearly wipe us out was that the global village failed to form a neighborhood watch. The nations [depicted in] World War Z all acted out of self-interest, allowing themselves to be divided and conquered"; M. Brooks, "Is Ebola the real 'World War Z?' (Spoiler alert: It's not)," Reuters, 16.10.2014, <http://blogs.reuters.com/great-debate/2014/10/16/is-ebola-the-real-world-war-z-spoiler-alert-its-not/> (18.12.2015).

amplification of conspiratorial activity is related, firstly, to the societal crisis of trust in government, and secondly, to the predilection, congenital in American culture above all, for conspiracist interpretations of history. The multitude of works depicting an apocalypse that results from the negligence of the government and its inability to bear the consequences of its own actions reveals the critical interpretation of reality that inspired such stories.

translated by Timothy Williams

Slavic Conspiracy Theories as Non-scientific Historical Narratives

Konrad Kośnik, Justyna Filipiuk

Contemporary popular perception of distant times deviates substantially from what was actually specific to them.¹ Historical narratives on the subject of the past life of one's own community (for example, of Poles) are often built on the basis of national myths or an idealized, great power image of military and political history.² Gaps in historical sources and a lack of familiarity within the greater society with the current consensus among academic scholars result in amateur efforts to replace the lacunae in our historical knowledge with the creation of stories about the nation's or our ethnic group's history that depart from the "official" schol-

¹ J. Hańderek, *Walka ciemności i światła – popkultura i jej imaginarium średniowiecza*, [in:] M. Karas (ed.), *Historia filozofii. Meandry kultury. Teksty i studia ofiarowane Jackowi Widomskiemu z okazji 65. urodzin*, Kraków 2014, pp. 121–137; I. Kowalczyk, I. Kiec (eds.), *Historia w wersji popularnej*, Gdańsk 2015.

² M. Morys-Twarowski, *Polskie imperium. Wszystkie kraje podbite przez Rzeczpospolitą*, Kraków 2016; A. Zieliński, *Sarmaci, katolicy, zwycięzcy. Kłamstwa, przemilczenia i półprawdy w historii Polski*, Warszawa 2015.

arly record. The “non-scientific” nature of these historical narratives relates to the lack of a consensus as to their correctness (meaning: accuracy) inside academic circles.³

Historical narratives of this type concerning the ways of the Slavs are based on a belief in the destructive effect of Christianity on Slavic cultures.⁴ The religious connotations of the problem mean that adherents of Slavic “rodnovery,” defined in scholarly literature as belonging to the movement(s) broadly known as neopaganism, are heavily engaged in the discussion.⁵ The legitimization of their reconstruction of local pre-Christian belief systems (leaving aside individual inner spiritual needs) is based on myths that describe the glories of the proto-Slavic era and present the decadence of (Judeo-) Christian culture.⁶ The juxtaposition of the former might of the Slavic peoples with their current state gives rise, in receptive minds, to suspicions of interference by harmful external forces that led Slavic cultures to their downfall through a deliberate conspiracy.

This article presents the results of research into Slavic conspiracy theories that exist mainly in the space of the internet. Polish-language texts, with their specific local focus on the legacy of Western Slavdom (Lechia), rather than Rus, have been the object of study, as well as claims

³ K. Kośnik, “Religia jako system poznawczy. Eksplanacyjna rola religii Słowian,” *Humaniora. Czasopismo internetowe* 3(7)/2014, pp. 67–82.

⁴ M. Agnosiewicz, *Zapomniane dzieje Polski*, Miłkowice 2014, pp. 23–29; R. Merski, *Moje słowiańskie przebudzenie*, Wrocław 2013, pp. 10–15.

⁵ M. Strutyński, *Neopogaństwo*, Kraków 2014.

⁶ A. Sołtysiak, *Jak neopoganie manipulują przeszłością?*, [in:] J. Olko (ed.), *Dawne kultury w ideologiach XIX i XX wieku*, Warszawa 2007, pp. 49–63.

made for a dominant role played by Poland among Slavic countries. The evidence analysed consists of direct sources, texts published on the internet directly by their authors (referred to ironically by their opponents under the term “Turbo-Slavs”), but also indirect sources, whose composition includes published books, scientific or popular-scientific,⁷ and others that belong to the genre of historical fiction;⁸ these works are promoted on websites via subjective commentaries.

The Psychological Study of Historical Narratives

Exploring the secrets of historical narratives is an area of inquiry within the psychology of cultural history, derived from the dualistic psychology of Wilhelm Wundt.⁹ The perspective it brings to studies of how human beings function takes into account the context of the religion, mythology, or ethnic group to which an individual belongs, using knowledge provided by history and the study of culture. It studies human mental processes as they manifest in cultural products (material and spiritual), among which we might include historical narratives, and supplements the data gathered by the main body of psychology with contextual factors, placing the universal character of psychological laws in doubt.

⁷ P. Makuch, *Od Ariów do Sarmatów. Nieznane 2500 lat historii Polaków*, Kraków 2013; A. Szrejter, *Pod pogańskim sztandarem. Dzieje tysiąca wojen Słowian połabskich od VII do XII wieku*, Warszawa 2014.

⁸ M. Marchwiński, *Wierni Bogom. Zaginione dziedzictwo*, Szczecin 2015.

⁹ A. Pankalla, *Kultura psychologów. Wprowadzenie do psychologii (historyczno-kulturowej)*, Katowice 2014; R. Stachowski, *Historia współczesnej myśli psychologicznej. Od Wundta do czasów najnowszych*, Warszawa 2010, pp. 43–46.

The study of non-scientific historical narratives, representing a phenomenon on the borderline between psychology and history, forces the scholar to draw from the legacies of both disciplines with all of their possibilities and limitations.¹⁰ Paying attention to the construction of “stories” by particular individuals about the history of their ethnic group (in the form of journalism or literary works) through the prism of their form and content, unlike academic knowledge, enables conclusions to be drawn about the specific psychology of those individuals. “Sometimes the subjectivity of their authors is externalized in them with particular force, sometimes, on the other hand, they provide valuable information about their own psychological functioning.”¹¹ The bias of a “chronicler” whose narrative is seen by scholarly historians as a deformation of historical knowledge reveals either the conditions at work in his personality or his ideological entanglements, resulting in the formation of an image of history that, while clashing with the actual findings of scholars, testifies to the needs, desires or fears of its creator.¹²

Conspiracy theories constitute a particular category of historical narrative. They represent a conscious attempt to understand complex problems, a search for a rational basis behind suffering, wars, or a menacing sense of powerlessness and simultaneous absence of (historical)

¹⁰ M. Dymkowski, *Wokół problemu tożsamości psychologa historycznego*, [in:] B. Zimoń-Dubowik, M. Gamian-Wilk (ed.), *Oblicza tożsamości: perspektywa interdyscyplinarna*, Wrocław 2008, pp. 111–121.

¹¹ M. Dymkowski, *Wprowadzenie do psychologii historycznej*, Gdańsk 2003, p. 96.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 128–146.

facts.¹³ A low level of trust in the motives of others and a tendency to attribute negative intentions to them (what is called the *sinister attribution error*¹⁴), as well as a deep attachment to one's own theses, cause a strong emotional engagement in such professed theories. People who believe in conspiracy theories have a tendency to look for meaning and find causal links in the world around them even when the facts and meaning they find can (from an objectivist perspective) be considered arbitrary.

Anti-Slavic Conspiracy

In view of the fragmentary treatment given this subject by individual authors, it is difficult to speak of one coherent Slavic conspiracy theory. All of these conspiracy narratives have their source, however, in attempts to look for the ancient Slavic world that vanished in the shadows of history, a focus of interest as early as the Romantic era.¹⁵ Another shared feature among them is the attribution of conspiratorial activity to representatives of Western (Judeo-Christian) culture.

According to these non-scientific historical narratives, Slavs are an ancient people and have inhabited Central-Eastern Europe for many thousands of years. This view, which exists as part of autochthonic theories of the

¹³ V. Swami, R. Coles, *The Truth is Out There*, "The Psychologist" 23(7)/2010, pp. 560–563.

¹⁴ R.M. Kramer, "The sinister attribution error: Paranoid cognition and collective distrust in organizations," *Motivation and Emotion* 18(2)/1994, pp. 199–230.

¹⁵ A. Gajda, *XIX-wieczne korzenie polskiej myśli rodzimowierczej: słowianofilstwo, gminowładztwo, pogaństwo*, [in:] B. Szlachta (ed.), *Myśl i polityka. Księga pamiątkowa dedykowana profesorowi Jackowi Marii Majchrowskiemu. Tom 1*, Kraków 2011, pp. 205–224; M. Michalski, *Dawni Słowianie w tradycji polskiej I połowy XIX wieku. W poszukiwaniu tożsamości wspólnotowej*, Poznań 2013.

ethnogenesis of the Slavs, was widely disseminated in the historiography of the PRL period.¹⁶ Contemporary scholars are rather inclined toward allochthonic theories of Slavic ethnogenesis, postulating that the Slavs arrived in the fifth or sixth century C.E. from their original eastern abodes,¹⁷ though these are tempered by an awareness, typical with scientific knowledge, that new facts may yet alter that view and that existing research methods require further honing.¹⁸ Non-scientific narratives, on the other hand, tend to be deemed final and conclusive; their inconsistency with scientific findings is therefore thought to be the result of actions by hostile interests or errors on the part of researchers resulting from their reliance on faulty sources.

Selective use of scientific knowledge for the purpose of validating one's own claims can be observed in the references to the latest findings on population genetics (haplogroup R1a Y-DNA¹⁹). Studies have shown that the population of Central Europe has changed only slightly in genetic terms since neolithic times and is related to the population of Persia (Iran). The builders of non-scientific

¹⁶ W. Hensel, *Etnogeneza Słowian*, [in:] L. Leciejewicz (ed.), *Mały słownik kultury dawnych Słowian*, Warszawa 1988, pp. 433–444; J. Wyrozumski, *Historia Polski do roku 1505*, Warszawa 1984, pp. 63–68.

¹⁷ P.M. Barford, *The Early Slavs. Culture and Society in Early Medieval Eastern Europe*, Ithaca–New York 2001; A. Sołtysiak, "The plague pandemic and Slavic expansion in the 6th–8th centuries," *Archaeologia Polona* 44/2006, pp. 339–364.

¹⁸ K. Borowiec, "Kanon wiedzy na temat tzw. etnogenezy Słowian. Czas przełomu," *Kwartalnik Językoznawczy* 1/2012, pp. 1–36.

¹⁹ C. Białczyński, *Genetyczne odkrycia 2010/2015 – Nowa Genealogia Słowian i innych ludów Białego Łądu (Europy)*, Białczyński, 20.09.2015, <https://bialczyński.wordpress.com/slowianie-tradycje-kultura-dzieje/genetyka-skad-pochodza-slowianie-r1a/genetyczne-odkrycia-2010-%E2%80%93-nowa-genealogia-slowian-i-innych-ludow-bialego-ladu-europy/> (17.02.2016); *Haplogroup R1a (Y-DNA)*, Eupedia, http://www.eupedia.com/europe/Haplogroup_R1a_Y-DNA.shtml (17.02.2016).

conceptions of Slavic history have asserted a priori that the Central European genotype is closely linked to the Slavic ethnicity,²⁰ a claim subject to doubt in academic circles.

The Slavs' antiquity and, at the same time, exceptionality are thought to be demonstrated by their descent from the Aryan race.²¹ In more extreme versions, the Aryan origin of the Slavs is linked with their inheritance of an extraterrestrial civilization from which the Aryans are said to be descended, while the emergence of the Slavs as a separate entity resulted from the defeat of the Aryans in a war with the Atlantic Empire.²² Less "radical" narratives reject the cosmic aspects and indicate the greatness of the Slavs by revealing the (deliberate) onomastic errors in the names assigned to individual Eurasian peoples. A fundamental misunderstanding is thought to have occurred due to the nomenclature used during the Roman Empire, which referred to all tribes east of the Rhine as Germans. In contemporary non-scientific narratives, a strong belief in the Slavic origin of (at least) the majority of the Germanic tribes, such as the Goths and the Vandals, holds.²³ Other

²⁰ Marucha, "Jesteśmy jedną z najstarszych cywilizacji na świecie!", *Dziennik gajowego Maruchy*, 28.08.2015, <https://marucha.wordpress.com/2015/08/28/jestesmy-jedna-z-najstarszych-cywilizacji-na-swiecie/#more-53066> (17.02.2016).

²¹ "Ario-Słowianie starożytni duchowi wojownicy białej drogi (światta)," *Indiachinook*, 11.02.2015, <https://indiachinook.wordpress.com/2015/02/11/ario-slowianie-starozytni-duchowi-wojownicy-bialej-drogi-swiatla/> (17.02.2016); L. Czupkiewicz, *Pochodzenie i rasa Słowian*, Wrocław 1996; Miron, "Kolebka Ariów (Airyanem Vaejo)," *Wiara Przyrodzona*, 22.01.2016, <https://wiaraprzyrodzona.wordpress.com/2016/01/22/kolebka-ariow-airyanem-vaejo/> (17.02.2016).

²² J. Bieszk, *Słowiańscy królowie Lechii. Polska starożytna*, Warszawa 2015.

²³ I. Cwirko, "Jak ze Słowian zrobiono Germanów," *Kryształowy Wszechświat*, 30.04.2015, <http://krysztalowywszechswiat.blogspot.com/2015/04/jak-ze-sowian-zrobiono-germanow.html> (17.02.2016).

peoples who have been wrongly denied their membership in the Slavic fraternity are the Sarmatians, the Scythians, and even the Tatars.²⁴

The power of the ancient Lechian Empire (as the putative Slavic state is called) is thought to have manifested in its territorial reach. The Empire would have included all of Central Eastern Europe (including the Balkans) and stretched to the Urals, while its western border is thought to have lain at the Rhine or possibly even the Loire.²⁵ This imperial narrative portrays the Lechians as the rulers of nearly the entire ancient world, before whom the inhabitants of neighbouring countries, including the Roman Empire, trembled; not only did that empire fail to take control of the Amber Road,²⁶ it also fell due to the onslaught of Slavic warriors.²⁷ The Lechians are also thought to have colonized areas in North Africa.²⁸ The cultural legacy left elsewhere by the Slavs, with their highly advanced level of civilization, is inconsiderable, according to these conspiracy theories, because of the deliberate destruction of

²⁴ C. Białczyński, "Czy Scytowie byli Słowianami i czy Słowianie są Scytami? Tak!", *Białczyński*, 21.01.2012, <https://bialczynski.wordpress.com/tag/genealogia-slowian/> (17.02.2016); Miron, "Tatarzy," *Wiara Przyrodzona*, 17.03.2015, <https://wiaraprzyrodzona.wordpress.com/2015/03/17/tatarzy/> (17.02.2016); "Who are we Slavs and what is our Origin," *Slavorum*, 6.09.2014, <http://www.slavorum.org/who-are-we-slavs-and-what-is-our-origin/> (17.02.2016).

²⁵ *Mapy*, *Wiara Przyrodzona*, <https://wiaraprzyrodzona.wordpress.com/mapy/> (17.02.2016).

²⁶ M. Agnosiewicz, "Starożytności polskie," *Racjonalista*, 11.11.2015, <http://www.racjonalista.pl/kk.php/s,9933> (17.02.2016).

²⁷ I. Cwirko, "Starożytna historia Polaków. W drodze do Imperium," *Kryształowy Wszechświat*, 21.08.2015, <http://krysztalowywszechswiat.blogspot.com/2015/08/starozytna-historia-polakow-w-drodze-do.html> (17.02.2016).

²⁸ Miron, "Kolonizacja Afryki Północnej przez ówczesnych władców Imperium Lechickiego," *Wiara Przyrodzona*, 2.04.2015, <https://wiaraprzyrodzona.wordpress.com/2015/04/02/kolonizacja-afryki-polnocnej-przez-owczesnych-wladcow-imperium-lechickiego/> (17.02.2016).

evidence and sources, and each minor datum confirming the imperial sweep of the Slavs is therefore treated as a world-historic discovery. One example of a remnant of the Lechian Empire is supposed to be the Serpent's Wall in present-day Ukraine, interpreted as a giant network of defensive fortifications.²⁹

Amateur linguistic and source analyses have been treated as proof of the ancient imperial might of the Slavs. The Lechian state was supposedly known to the Hebrews, judging from the appearance in the Old Testament of the word "Lechia" (six times, in Judges and II Samuel) in the context of geographical names. Linguistic interpretations present theories no less interesting. Comparison of ancient Greek records with Polish language is used to argue the allegedly Slavic origin of the Trojans.³⁰ Whereas the identification of various terms, such as "Polska" ("Lechistan"), "Polak" or "szlachcic" (nobleman), as descendants of the root "Lechia" constitutes a relatively uncontroversial group of claims, the creators of conspiracist narration go considerably further in their line of argumentation. According to them, the names Yahwe (Lah-we) and Allah (Al-Lah) refer to representatives of the Slavic empire, whom adherents of the great monotheistic religions worshipped as gods.³¹

²⁹ M. Kozak, "Wielki Mur... Słowiański – gigantyczna sieć umocnień obronnych, wokół której panuje zмова milczenia. 'Do budowy zużyto kilka milionów metrów sześciennych drewna i usypano kilkaset milionów metrów sześciennych ziemi,'" *Niezłomni*, 1.09.2014, <http://niezłomni.com/?p=18916> (17.02.2016).

³⁰ Miron, "Słowiańskie napisy sprzed 2500 lat," *Wiara Przyrodzona*, 18.03.2015, <https://wiaraprzyrodzona.wordpress.com/2015/03/18/slowianskie-napisy-sprzed-2500-lat/> (17.02.2016).

³¹ "Lachy," *IndianChinook*, 26.01.2015, <https://indianchinook.wordpress.com/2015/01/26/579/> (17.02.2016).

The dominant role of Slavdom led, according to such narratives, to the conspiracy raised against it. The Lechians were too powerful, which provoked hostility toward them from all other peoples. A crucial role is played in Slavic conspiracy theories (as in many others) by the Jews, who are alleged to have sought revenge for the destruction by Slavs of the Judaic Khazar state in the tenth century C.E. Plans made by contemporary Jews, alleged to be descended from the Khazars rather than the ancient Hebrews,³² is thought to involve taking the Slavs' lands away from them and building a second Israel on the territory of contemporary Ukraine.³³ This anti-Slavic conspiracy is alleged to have begun no later than the ninth or tenth century, when the Judeo-Christians (in most of these narratives, any distinction between Jews and Christians is considered superfluous) took advantage of the Lechian Empire's increasing weakness to smash it apart and establish the power of the Pope following a bloody crusade.³⁴ The Slavic civilization was then replaced by the "Western Jewish anti-civilization."³⁵ Today's Germans were also involved in the conspiratorial activities directed against the Slavs, for

³² B. Machalica, "Prof. Shlomo Sand obnaża kłamstwo założycielskie Izraela: Żydzi nie są Semitami, czyli narodem wybranym, a 'antysemityzm' to technika globalnej manipulacji," *Tajne Archiwum Watykańskie*, <https://tajnearchiwumwatykanskie.wordpress.com/2015/01/31/prof-shlomo-sand-obnaza-klamstwo-zalozycielskie-izraela-zydzi-nie-sa-semitami/> (17.02.2016).

³³ Paziem, "Tajny plan Izraela – drugi Izrael na Ukrainie," *Wierni Polsce Suwerennej*, 21.12.2014, <https://wiernipolsce1.wordpress.com/2014/12/21/tajny-plan-izraela-drugi-izrael-na-ukrainie/> (17.02.2016).

³⁴ Miron, "Jak Europa krwawo nawracała Słowian i Bałtów," *Wiara Przyrodzona*, 31.07.2015, <https://wiaraprzyrodzona.wordpress.com/2015/07/31/jak-europa-krwawo-nawracala-slowian-i-baltow/> (17.02.2016).

³⁵ Opolczykpl, "Cywilizacja Słowiańska a żydo-anty-cywilizacja zachodu," *Blog polski*, 11.03.2014, <https://opolczykpl.wordpress.com/2014/03/11/cywilizacja-slowianska-a-zydo-anty-cywilizacja-zachodu/> (17.02.2016).

the purpose of obliterating the Slavic past from their territory and creating legitimacy for their very young emerging state.³⁶

The enfeeblement of the Slavs' might by conspiracies is said to have taken place through the implementation of the principle of "Divide and conquer," in accordance to which notion internal conflicts are stirred up among Slavic nations, in order that they might fail to unite against their common (real) enemies.³⁷ Moreover, conspiracist narratives postulate a modification of historical memory that made the social order in Slavic nations, deprived of their roots, succumb easily to external Western influences.³⁸ That belief is based on the low level of awareness of Slavic societies, observed, for example, in contemporary Poland, and manifested in the scant knowledge of the culture of the ancient Slavs or even attempts to deny the existence of certain elements of that culture.³⁹

The description above by no means exhausts the content of Slavic conspiracy-themed historical narratives. Only the most important and most representative elements

³⁶ Phoenix, "Niemcy? Jacy Niemcy? – Niemcy NIE są starsze od USA!", *Wspaniała Rzeczpospolita*, 7.01.2015, <http://wspanialarzeczpospolita.pl/2015/01/07/niemcy-jacy-niemcy-niemcy-nie-sa-starsze-od-usa/> (17.02.2016).

³⁷ "Zasada 'Dziel i rządź' – taktyka, która obecnie okupanci stosują aby nami rządźić. Jak można odeprzec ta taktykę 'dziel i rządź'? Co się jej przeciwstawia i ją pokonuje?", *Indianchinois*, 14.04.2014, <https://indianchinois.wordpress.com/2014/04/14/zasada-dziel-i-rzadz-taktyka-ktora-obecnie-okupanci-stosuja-aby-nami-rzadzic-jak-mozna-odeprzec-ta-taktyke-dziel-i-rzadz-co-sie-jej-przeciwstawia-i/> (17.02.2016).

³⁸ Miron, "Dlaczego ukrywa się nasze dzieje Polski?", *Wiara Przyrodzona*, 15.02.2016, <https://wiaraprzyrodzona.wordpress.com/2016/02/15/dlaczego-ukrywa-sie-nasze-dzieje-polski/> (17.02.2016).

³⁹ M. Janion, *Niesamowita Słowiańszczyzna. Fantazmaty literatury*, Kraków 2007, pp. 12–20.

of the stories woven by self-taught historians about the history of the Slavs and the foes conspiring against them have been presented. Nevertheless, the examples shown reveal the mentality among those who create such narratives and enable us to perform a psychological analysis of them.

Historical Narratives and the Sense of Slavic Identity

From a psychological point of view, Slavic conspiracy narratives belong to the category of what are called “grand narratives”, a designation that can be applied to “basically any general, meaning-creating interpretation of reality and each system of knowledge – visual, scientific, artistic, ideological, bearing the status of a paradigm and constituting a key to understanding reality.”⁴⁰ At the same time, grand narratives are closely linked with personal stories relating to the perception of a particular individual.⁴¹ A sense of identity, understood in terms of content, representing a subjective, phenomenological equivalent of objective identity,⁴² in its layered structure creates a space for the construction of the cultural references that shape the structure of the private self.⁴³

⁴⁰ M. Straś-Romanowska, *Psychologia wobec małych i wielkich narracji*, [in:] M. Straś-Romanowska, B. Bartosz, M. Żurko (ed.), *Psychologia małych i wielkich narracji*, Warszawa 2010, p. 25.

⁴¹ E. Dryll, *Wielkie i małe narracje w życiu człowieka*, [in:] M. Straś-Romanowska, B. Bartosz, M. Żurko (ed.), *Badania narracyjne w psychologii*, Warszawa 2010, pp. 163–182.

⁴² M. Straś-Romanowska, *Tożsamość w czasach dekonstrukcji*, [in:] B. Zimoń-Dubowik, M. Gamian-Wilk (ed.), *Oblicza tożsamości: perspektywa interdyscyplinarna*, Wrocław 2008, pp. 19–30.

⁴³ J. Kociuba, *Idea Ja i koncepcja tożsamości. Zmiana znaczenia idei Ja i koncepcji tożsamości w nauce i kulturze*, Lublin 2014, pp. 171–204.

A strongly defined sense of ethnic or national identity (a Slavic self) results in considerable importance being ascribed to the role of knowledge about the history of one's community. The "blanks" that are a part of the natural course of development of scientific knowledge and contrasting or contradictory theories and hypotheses elicit an inner need for closure with regard to historical knowledge and the creation of a coherent narrative for the purpose of obtaining a sense of being in possession of a full range of data on one's own ethnic past. From a subjectivist perspective, Slavic conspiracy theories (regardless of their historical accuracy) reveal in their meaning the identity structures of their creators, propagators and exponents, or (to generalize somewhat) a substantial portion of the population of those who are Slavic at heart.

The attribution of political failures to external actors while simultaneously believing in the former greatness of Slavdom creates a sense of belonging to a "mighty" ethnic group. The powerful idealization of one's own community brings with it a sense of approval for oneself as a participant in it. "Since time immemorial, among our Forefathers, a hard, warlike, heroic national character was formed. We are like that today because through the centuries generations of heroes together created a heroic and hard, unyielding, stubborn, always edging forward, immortal national character."⁴⁴ The dormant potential in Slavs often figures prominently in statements looking

⁴⁴ R. Merski, *Etyka słowiańska*, Wrocław 2013, p. 30.

forward toward expansionist activity aimed at recovering lands that have somehow been lost.

The perception of conspiracies aimed at Slavdom places individuals who identify with that ethnic identity in the role of victims of a hostile conspiracy, resulting in a sense that their territory is in danger (a danger symbolized by the fall of Arkona). Remedial measures against this intervention would theoretically include solicitude for the ethnic purity of the region (a popular internet meme says: “Muslims? Remember what happened when we let in the Christians?”) and close collaboration among all Slavic nations or even efforts to create a Pan-Slavic brotherhood. Being a Slav (where the creators of such narratives are concerned) would thus be linked with participation in a strong ethnicity-based collective association whose representatives are thought to be marked by numerous virtues, such as their love of peace and nature (reminiscent of the elvish peoples of fantasy literature.⁴⁵) These virtues, too, in the context of certitude as to the accuracy of these created historical narratives, would be accompanied by infallibility and a monopoly on truth.

The creation of such associations is made possible for proponents of Slavic conspiracy theories by the internet activism of charismatic and authoritarian personalities.⁴⁶ Studies conducted in 2010 showed that conspiracy

⁴⁵ Slaviceter, “Słowiańszczyzna – królestwo Elfów,” *Słowianie i Słowianowierstwo*, 11.04.2015, <https://slowianowierstwo.wordpress.com/2015/04/11/slowianszczyzna-krolestwo-elfow/#more-1490> (17.02.2016).

⁴⁶ J.W. McHoskey, “Machiavellianism and Personality Dysfunction,” *Personality and Individual Differences* 31/2001, pp. 791–798.

theories are more convincing for individuals with low self-esteem. Such narratives constitute reactions to feelings of self-doubt and impotence, a fact testified to by heightened activity in the sector of the brain responsible for social interactions, fear or aggression. Continuous processing of information of a conspiracist nature enables an increased subjective sense of their truth and the creation of a coherent narrative.⁴⁷ The decisive factor in remaining within a milieu where conspiracy theories are propounded, on the other hand, is the fact of being there, since deeming one conspiracy theory valid raises the probability of finding another one valid, even when the two contradict each other.⁴⁸ Despite their mutual exclusivity, particular Slavic narratives can thus be contained in the single (subjectively) coherent cognitive system of a particular person.

Understanding the conspiracy theories that function within contemporary Slavic cultures from the point of view of the psychological factors that lie at their foundation offers an incentive to understand the mentality of the present-day inhabitants of Central Eastern Europe and the social phenomena currently at play in the Slavic realm. Popular (non-scientific) historical narratives that exist in the media shape social consciousness, and as a result, also affect such aspects of public life as political preferences or attitudes toward other nationalities. A tendency to be susceptible to the “charms” of conspiracy theories or to create them, rooted in a sense of alienation

⁴⁷ V. Swami, R. Coles, *The Truth...*, op. cit.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

and helplessness or in an authoritarian mentality,⁴⁹ may, depending on the current socio-political situation, affect some sector of the population.

Although the reach of Slavic conspiracy narratives is limited, their influence should not be underestimated. They require further study from researchers, just as do other (sub)cultural manifestations of the contemporary revival of interest in the Slavic past. The “Slavophilic” trend constitutes a potential source for the formation of a new identity among Poles (and not only them), and a scientific awareness of its sources, of real continuity between the past and the future, is thus more crucial now than ever.

translated by Timothy Williams

⁴⁹ K. Korzeniowski, “O dwóch psychologicznych przesłankach myślenia spiskowego. Alienacja czy autorytaryzm,” *Psychologia Społeczna* 3(11)/2009, pp. 144–154.

Al-Qaeda or ETA? An Alternative Take on the Terrorist Attacks in Madrid

Maja Biernacka

The series of explosions that took place in Madrid on March 11, 2004 furnished food for the Spanish mind, giving rise to different theories, chief among which were those concerning the culprits responsible for that brutal crime. Following its investigation, the public prosecutor's office declared Islamic jihadists to be the guilty party. At least two counter-narratives have arisen, however; in addition to the official version, there is an unofficial one that throws suspicion on the Basque terrorist organization, ETA. Such a version of events was seen as the most probable by the public prosecutor's office at the outset of its inquiry. Denials by the Spanish government some years later have been interpreted as evidence of a lack of transparency in official proceedings and a form of political manipulation.

Conspiracy Theory or Uncomfortable Truth?

Conspiracy theories do not constitute theories in the scientific sense. They do not represent a coherent system of

axioms, statements, or definitions that define, systematize, and explicate a chosen aspect of reality. Such a theory is, instead, a set of imaginings constructed around a statement or hypothesis about events viewed as a conspiracy being carried out by powerful forces. Conspiracy theories are fundamentally designed with a focus on important political events that awaken the interest of the mass media and have the potential to resonate within social discourse. As scholars of the subject have noted,¹ conspiracy theories are no longer marginal in nature, and their construction is now an element of public life.

Unlike the scientific application of the word “theory,” the term “conspiracy theory” is one used a priori to discredit. It questions facts, making claims, hypotheses and speculations on the sequence of events and their causes, and providing evidence to support to its arguments. Labelling these as false or even absurd can add legitimacy to the interpretation generally considered to be correct. In dealing with contestations of facts, declaring a particular version of the facts to be a conspiracy theory aims to highlight the difference between what is accepted as true and what is considered to be false. The term “conspiracism” is applied in a similar way.² It designates alternative visions of the truth as manifestations of an overactive imagination or of personality disorders, as lies or infantilism on the part of their adherents. They are often

¹ J. Boyford, *Conspiracy Theories. A Critical Introduction*, Basingstoke – New York 2011, p. 3.

² M. Gray, *Conspiracy Theories in the Arab World. Sources and Politics*, London – New York 2010, p. 168 and passim; A. Graf, S. Fathi, L. Paul (ed.), *Orientalism and Conspiracy. Politics and Conspiracy Theory in the Islamic World*, London – New York 2011; M. Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy. Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, Berkeley – Los Angeles – London 2013, p. 99.

treated as signs of the demagoguery of their purveyors, or as an epidemic or plague taking over people's defenceless minds.³

It is hard to believe, nonetheless, that belief in a single version of events could remain intact among all the citizenry in a democratic society, in whose structure the existence of divergent beliefs is inscribed. Given the current level of development of the media and the varied political interests they represent, mutual contradictions in the information they convey is an integral property of them. For the opposition and its supporters, the designation of an alternative version of events as a "conspiracy theory" may also lead to the conjecture that the official version is merely a cover-up for a politically uncomfortable truth. Furthermore, in a climate where citizens' trust in their government is generally at a low level, the antitheses of official narratives may have greater verisimilitude.

11-M in Madrid. Details of the Terrorist Attacks

The abbreviation 11-M4 has come into widespread use in Spain to refer to the series of terrorist attacks that took place on March 11. Polish and other foreign mass media refer to them as the "attacks in the Madrid metro"; the bombings took place on four trains within the city's Cercanías commuter train system.⁵ Ten explosions occurred almost simul-

³ See P. Knight, *Conspiracy Culture. From Kennedy to The X Files*, Abingdon – New York 2000.

⁴ It is also sometimes written 11M.

⁵ *Cercanías*, the train network in whose cars the attacks took place, consists of commuter trains, bound to the city center and connecting it with surrounding areas. This train system enables Spaniards to travel quickly to work. It is more or less the equivalent of the Polish Szybka Kolej Miejska (SKM—Fast Urban Train) that runs in Warsaw and the Tri-city metropolitan area of Gdynia, Sopot and Gdańsk.

taneously, over a period of a few minutes, in various areas, indicating the existence of an entire network of perpetrators who prepared carefully and coordinated efficiently. The explosions occurred during the morning rush hour, between 7:36 and 7:40 AM, when trains were typically full of people heading to work. The number of casualties from the attacks was significant – those killed numbered between 191 and 193, depending on the source, while around two thousand people were injured. This cruel onslaught horrified Spanish society, but it also became the subject of speculation, particularly with regard to the identity of the culprits.

Nearly a year after the attacks, the Islamist organization Al Qaeda took responsibility for them and that version of events was accepted by the public prosecutor's office in its resolution concluding the criminal investigation.

An Alternative Vision. Data on ETA Terrorist Activity

Besides Al Qaeda, the ETA was also suspected of orchestrating the attacks, but other suspicions also arose. In tabloids and in daily conversations among supporters of the right-wing Partido Popular there was talk of possible involvement by the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE), the opposition at that time, which had supposedly schemed and plotted in favour of the attacks in the final days before the elections for political advantage. Members of both parties accused each other in the course of the media commotion. Some even hinted that the attacks might be linked to French and Moroccan secret service interests. Those rumours were

rather marginal discourses, however, and the main narrative divided into two lines, one blaming Al Qaeda, the other blaming ETA. The version that claimed ETA had perpetrated the attacks attained great popularity. This view was propounded by, among others, the internet daily *Libertad Digital*, but it also appeared in *El Mundo*, one of the most widely-read newspapers in Spain, center-right in its political orientation.⁶ That version gained added plausibility from the fact that ETA was known for having been involved in committing acts of terrorism on Spanish soil over many years.

There is evidence pointing to attempts made by ETA members to commit a similar type of attack shortly prior to 11-M. On December 24, 2003, two members of ETA⁷ were held by the Spanish police under suspicion of attempting to carry out an attack. Not only was the intended strike supposed to occur at the Chamartín train station in northern Madrid, but similar tactics were also employed, including the use of explosive materials concealed in backpacks. Two months later, February 28, 2004, two other members of the organization were arrested as they headed toward Madrid in a delivery van carrying over 500 kilos of explosive materials, referred to later on in news articles, including in the pages of *El País*, as the *caravana de la muerte*, or

⁶ Several years later, the new editor-in-chief, Casimiro García-Abadillo, wrote a short feuilleton on the subject of 11-M, discrediting the attempt to attribute the attacks to ETA and declaring that “we all make mistakes.” See C. García-Abadillo, *Diez años después, un balance desapasionado del 11-M*, *El Mundo*, 9.03.2014, <http://www.elmundo.es/opinion/2014/03/08/531b74b122601da1438b456d.html> (23.01.2016).

⁷ These were Irkutz Badillo Borde and Gorka Vidal Álvaro, also known as Irkus Badillo and Gorka Vidal (in Spain, including in the Basque Country, most people have two surnames. In daily life, many use only one. The use of the second is less frequent, hence the variation in their media documentation.)

“caravan of death”.⁸ Those who were arrested confirmed not only their affiliation with ETA, but also that they were acting on the organization’s orders. Like another member of the organization, the well-known Basque-Algerian recidivist Henri Parot, they denied any connection with the March 11 attacks or with Islamists throughout the criminal proceedings. The news made the front pages of the newspapers,⁹ together with the names and photographs of the accused. In addition to those earlier efforts, there were other attempts by ETA after the massacre, both in 2004 and 2005, to place explosive materials in various places in Madrid. Those, however, did not result in casualties.

Arguments for the Involvement of ETA

Firstly, on the day preceding the attacks, flyers were distributed on the streets of San Sebastian calling for a boycott of Spanish trains. In light of the events of March 11, this could be interpreted as a warning, directed at ETA supporters, to avoid ending up among the casualties. Secondly, there were no suicide bombers in 11-M, so that it lacked a typical feature of attacks organized by Islamists. The terroristic practices of ETA involve the detonation of charges without resorting to suicidal tactics. Thirdly, suspicions have been raised that the explosive materials were of the same type as those commonly used by ETA. This information was even released by the Spanish authorities through the mass media shortly after the tragedy, as a result of the police investigation. It led to

⁸ The same name was applied in the early 1970s to a famous Chilean army death squad under the rule of Pinochet.

⁹ See e.g. J.A. Rodríguez, J. Yoldi, *Tres conocidos etarras rechazan cualquier vínculo con los atentados del 11-M*, El País, 24.04.2007, http://elpais.com/diario/2007/04/24/espana/1177365608_850215.html (23.01.2016).

a wave of inquiries as to whether not only the type, but the brand of materials was also the same as that used by ETA.

The type of material used was said to be Titadyn 30AG, referred to by the Spanish media as titadine, a brand of dynamite manufactured in southern France, conventionally used by the terrorist organization in the past. That information was then corrected by a statement that in fact Goma-2 ECO,¹⁰ a kind of explosive material made in Spain, had been used; it had occasionally been used by ETA, before the organization began to resort to the more powerful Titadyn 30AG, which was easier to obtain in France. As these facts were disputed, an increasing number of details were revealed. Finally, the government in its statements to the press denied that the explosive materials employed in the attacks were the same as those used by ETA.

No detailed report on the subject of the explosive materials used was made available for public consumption. That led to intensified suspicions that the truth was being somehow covered up by the Spanish government. According to statements by the government, the case has officially been closed. The final statement on behalf of the government was issued by Minister of the Interior Jorge Fernández Díaz exactly a decade after the tragic events at the request of journalists. He announced that, first of all, it was not the ETA but *ihadis* who carried out the attacks, and secondly, that the matter was closed. This information was broadcast via television, radio and newspapers of diverse polit-

¹⁰ Also known as Riodín.

ical orientations, including their online versions.¹¹ Doubts as to who was to blame for the attacks have nonetheless remained a vital presence in the social imagination.

The Attacks of March 11, 2004 and the Election Results

The coexistence of an unofficial version of the course of events alongside the official one has obviously been inconvenient for the Spanish government, regardless of what the factual truth might be: the version accepted by the public prosecutor's office, blaming Al Qaeda, which in fact took responsibility for the attacks, or the version that claimed the attacks were carried out by ETA. During the period immediately preceding the tragedy, the Partido Popular (PP) had been in power, led by José María Aznar. The attacks not only coincided with the end of his term, but occurred just three days before the elections and influenced their outcome. The day before the elections, protests were held as a direct result of the attacks. The government even considered the possibility of postponing the elections in view of the possible influence of societal unrest on the results of the upcoming elections. Furthermore, on the eve of the elections, thousands of people gathered in front of the Partido Popular headquarters to protest enigmatic information issued by the Ministry of the Interior regarding the attacks, thereby elevating the chances of the opposition party, Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE). In the final reckoning, PSOE won the elections of March 14, 2004,

¹¹ See e.g., *Fernández Díaz sobre el 11M: es evidente que fue un atentado ejecutado por el terrorismo yihadista*, ABC, <http://www.abc.es/videos-espana/20140310/fernandez-diaz-sobre-evidente-3323845705001.html> (23.01.2016).

and its leader, candidate José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, took power. Large segments of society remained disturbed by the horrific events of March 11 and, moreover, the level of trust in the authorities, already low, fell further among the people regardless of their political orientation.

The alternative interpretation of those events continues to be maintained and treated by its exponents as revealing the hidden meaning of the affair. To this day it is treated as a proof of the thesis, repeatedly asserted by these exponents, that “the government is lying.” They voice objections to both parties, the PP and the PSOE, given that the attacks took place just before the change of cabinet, and the investigation continued for several years. In recent years, particular attention was paid to proceedings begun in early March 2012 in connection with a report on the *Libertad Digital* website that the police, or the judge in charge of the case, Juan del Olmo, had ordered for the remains of one of the cars in which a detonation took place to be suppressed, as a result of which it had not been tested or examined. After about three months the case was dropped, a decision officially justified by a lack of evidence. That not only has given further encouragement to those who maintain the unofficial version, but also, more generally, had constituted an argument, widely advanced in Spain, that there is a lack of transparency in the government’s operations, particularly where the organs of justice are concerned.

The memory of the tragedy lives on. There is a strong sense of injury on the part of those who survived the attacks and

the families of the dead and wounded. There is a civic platform called Peones Negros,¹² whose goal is to propagate the view that the government has been lying about 11-M. Its banners have frequently appeared at demonstrations organized with the participation of NGOs who act on behalf of the victims. Among these NGOs is an association called Asociación Víctimas del Terrorismo,¹³ referred to by the acronym AVT, the Asociación de Ayuda a las Víctimas del 11-M¹⁴ and the Asociación 11M. Afectados del Terrorismo.¹⁵ The last two named were founded in 2004 for the purpose of helping the victims of 11-M and their loved ones. The last one was refused financing from public funds, which was seen as an additional argument in favour of the thesis that the government is concealing the truth.

translated by Timothy Williams

¹² The Black Messengers (*peones* in other contexts can also mean “workers” or “pawns”). See Plataforma Ciudadana Peones Negros, <http://www.peones-negros.com/>, Plataforma Ciudadana Peones Negros Libres, <http://peonesnegroslibres.com/> (23.01.2016).

¹³ Association of Terrorism Victims. See <http://avt.org/> (23.01.2016). In *Spanish mass media*, the name Asociación de Víctimas del Terrorismo is sometimes used, but the first version is the organization’s proper name. It was formed in Madrid in 1981, first as Hermandad de Familiares de Víctimas del Terrorismo (Brotherhood of Relatives of Terrorism Victims). Its purpose, as declared in its charter, is to support and offer assistance to those who have suffered as a result of acts of terrorism in Spain and their families, and also to raise awareness of their situations and problems in society. The association receives subsidies from several ministries including the Ministry of Employment and Social Security, the Ministry of Defense, and the Ministry of the Interior, and also receives financial support from local administrators, enterprises, and private individuals through a foundation called Fundación Víctimas del Terrorismo (Terrorism Victims Foundation). See <http://www.fundacionvt.org/> (23.01.2016).

¹⁴ Association for Aid to Victims of 11M.

¹⁵ 11M Association for Victims of Terrorism. The word *afectados* can refer to both victims and those affected or hurt by the attacks through family or other connections. In the context of the association’s name and the scope of its activities, it is best translated as “victims,” though this unfortunately renders the name similar to that of the AVT. See www.asociacion11m.org/ (23.01.2016).

Nothing Is True, Everything Happened for Real

Małgorzata Balcerzak

Let us start with some dates.

In 1966, the radio station Radio Praga announced that a manuscript by the Czech polymath Jáchym Cimerman had been discovered, the existence of which had previously been unknown. Cimerman was a unique figure – a genius (he created the prototype of the electric laundry machine), visionary (the inventor of yogurt), artist and philosopher (a proponent of “externism”). Incredibly, this product of the impressive imagination of Zdeňek Svěrák, Ladislav Smoljak and Jiří Šebánek was a contender in the plebiscite for the title of the Greatest Czech, and in the late 1990s was considered the ideal future candidate for president.¹

Also in 1966, Dr. Miroslav Ivanov, one of the best-known Czech nonfiction writers, undertook a penetrating anal-

¹ *Čtenáři navrhovali, koho nasadit proti Klausovi*, idnes.cz, http://zpravy.idnes.cz/ctenari-navrhovali-koho-nasadit-proti-klausovi-f5t-/domaci.aspx?c=A070801_142212_domaci_klu (9.10.2013). The significance of the Cimerman phenomenon cannot be overlooked in the context of the idea of hoaxes as a kind of “national genre” for the Czechs (a famous thesis advanced by Vladimír Just, invoked by such writers as Mariusz Szczygiel).

ysis of what was called the RKZ manuscript controversy, a particularly sore point in the history of Czech literature. His research culminated in the publication of two books: *Tajemství RKZ* (The Mystery of RKZ, 1969) and *Záhada Rukopisu královédvorského* (The Enigma of the Manuscript of Dvůr Králové, 1970). Ivanov's work was indebted to two linguists. One, Josef Linda, a graduate of Charles University in Prague, had made an astonishing discovery 150 years earlier – inside the spine of a book that was being used to prop up the leg of a table, he is said to have found some ancient parchments (the first experts to examine them identified their origins to date from the tenth century). Next, in 1817, the archivist of the Prague National Museum, Václav Hanka, found a manuscript inside the Church of John the Baptist in Dvůr Králové, consisting of fourteen songs resembling medieval texts, written in Cyrillic and Glagolitic² (they were estimated to date from the thirteenth century). Twenty years later, this event was commented upon with a certain bombast by Lucjan Siemieński: “then, verily, the Czech need not look down with eyes of shame, for he may lift them with joyful pride: the *Dvůr Králové manuscript* equals the fruits of halcyon days of yore.”³ The glory of this “treasure trove” did not last long, however. An anonymous article published in the late 1850s in the magazine *Tagesbote aus Böhmen*, entitled “Literärische Lügen und paleographische Vahrheiten,” strongly questioned the

² D. Świerszczyńska, “Vacla Hanka i staroczeskie rękopisy (przypomnienie słynnej mistyfikacji literackiej),” *Slavia Occidentalis* 46–47/1991, pp. 247–260.

³ *Królowodworski Rękopis. Zbiór staroczeskich bohaterzkich lirycznych spiewów znalezionych i wydanych przez Wacława Hankę, Bibliotekarza Krol(ewskiego) i narod(owego) Muzeum, a z czeskiego na polskie przez Lucyana Siemieńskiego przełożonych*, Kraków 1826, p. XI. Quoted in: Świerszczyńska, “Vacla Hanka,” p. 247.

authenticity of the found documents, initiating a long dispute over the value of the Zelená Hora Manuscript and the of *Dvůr Králové Manuscript*, later acknowledged to be one of the greatest hoaxes in Czech history.

In 1996, Petr Zelenka, director of the film *Mňága – Happy End*, which belongs to a related genre, placed the following cheeky inscription at the beginning of the credits: “Nothing in this film is true, everything happened for real.” Illusion, error, mistake– “a basic part of our cognitive ability”⁴ (as we read in Járý Cimrman’s lexicon) – joined with a fraudulent design, brings about a destabilization of noetic balance, though one element that distinguishes the functioning of a hoax can be the question of the particular context in which it is used and its meaning in terms of a conspiracy theory of history.

Postmodern novelistic strategies violate epistemological paradigms in a meaningful way, especially when the focus of the game involves the lexicon of fundamental concepts – history, facts, reality, rationalism, reference. Such play is also engaged in by the Czech writer Josef Urban, author of a novel whose title not coincidentally corresponds to the object of the historical and literary quarrel discussed above – *Poslední tečka za Rukopisy*⁵ (The Final Mark on the Manuscripts, 1998). The “driving force” of the author’s concept, placed at the dividing line between two cultures, the world of seriousness and the world of fun, lies not in the possibility of heightening tension be-

⁴ Cimrmanův zpravodaj, <http://www.cimrman.at/list.php?l=9&str=O> (10.10.2013).

⁵ J. Urban, *Poslední tečka za Rukopisy. Nová literatura faktu*, Praha 1998.

tween them, but rather violation of the antinomy itself and the functions arbitrarily assigned to both spheres. Here we can talk of a parody of the literature of fact or, holding with the formula suggested by the narrator, of a “new literature of fact” (*notlitfak* for short), a particular way of engaging in “new journalism,”⁶ an ironic commentary on authentic literature, an intertextual carnival, a paradocumentary game, the Czech national imaginary in miniature, a “double hoax” (Joanna Czaplińska),⁷ a polemic with scientific axioms (Lubomír Machala)⁸ or a new emancipatory novel, whose liberationist element would inhere not in the projection of a conspiracy theory, but in the intention of revealing the skeleton of such a theory. Such a novel would thus be situated close to the concept described by Leszek Kołakowski of a “philosophy of the clown,” and thus would to a certain extent be “a vehicle of change and an appeal to rethink the foundations of our culture anew.”⁹ The driving mechanism of its functioning turns out to be fiction, but fiction that has undergone multifaceted redefinition.

The documents and information cited by the narrator of the novel, Josef Urban, an employee at the Institute of Czech Literature, working together with Maria Hořakova (his partner in both professional and private life), exist

⁶ L. Doležel, “Fikční a historický narativ: setkání s postmoderní výzvou,” *Česká literatura* 4(50)/2002, pp. 341–367.

⁷ J. Czaplińska, *Gra z tekstem, gra z mitem. Podwójna mistyfikacja Miłocha Urbana* (‘Posledni tečka za Rukopisy’), [in:] I. Kowalska-Paszcz (ed.), *Intertekstualność w literaturach i kulturach słowiańskich*, Szczecin 2006, pp. 216–223.

⁸ L. Machala, *Literární bludiště. Bilance polistopadové prózy*, Praha 2001, p. 183.

⁹ A. Szahaj, *Ponowoczesność – czas karnawału. Postmodernizm – filozofia błazna*, [in:] *Postmodernizm a filozofia. Wybór tekstów*, ed. S. Czerniak, A. Szahaj, Warszawa 1996, p. 389.

at the limit of tension between truth and falsehood, and furthermore are bound up within their own rhetorical framework (the language of scholarship, the language of literature), allowing those orders to become mixed. The polyphonic reading of a hoax directs our attention to the important qualitative change in how its tasks are examined. As Lenka Krausová¹⁰ has shown, the idea of a hoax has travelled a long trajectory: from the concept of lying to humour and a new aesthetic quality.¹¹ That dimension is linked in some measure to the legacy of the avant-garde (Dadaism, which “defended the right not to take seriously everything around us, and rehabilitated the principle of playing with scientific discourse”¹²). Similarly, a reading of Urban’s novel in terms of Raymond Federman’s theory of surfiction may be understood as distantly referencing the Surrealist “method,” shifting the centre of weight to the irrational, hitherto placed in a position subordinate to the logic of reality.¹³ In this sense, a hoax can be understood to conceal the intention to, if not break up, then at least clearly violate binding cultural paradigms.

In *Poslední tečce za Rukopisy* a kind of fusion can be found that joins together all four of the forms perceived by Krausová in the semiotics of mystification: firstly, along the axis of referentiality between “reality” and “fiction”;

¹⁰ This cultural studies scholar invokes the theory of Eugen Brikus. See: L. Krausová, “Mystifikace – typ sémantické kretivity,” [in:] *Euro litteraria* & *Euro lingua*. Series Bohemistica, Liberec 2007, p. 9.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹³ R. Federman, *Surfiction – Four Propositions in Form of an Introduction*, [in:] *Idem* (ed.), *Surfiction. Fiction Now... and Tomorrow*, Chicago 1975, pp 5-18.

secondly, in the mutual interrelationship between two texts (“quotation vs. fictional quotation, allusion vs. quasi-allusion”¹⁴); thirdly, in the compositional or stylistic framework (“the method of disappointed expectations, the false lead, camouflage”¹⁵); and fourthly and finally, at the communicative level (for example in the activation of the function a pseudonym or an authorial persona).¹⁶ This last perspective opens a wide field of play, because it represents one of the first indications of the sleight of hand central to the novelist’s design. Behind the pseudonym of Josef Urban stands a Czech prose writer whose first name is Miloš, born in the 1960s, a graduate of the English and Scandinavian Studies programs in Prague. The change in his personal information is not random – the pseudonymous persona is a member of the Czech Manuscript Society, called upon to verify the authenticity of manuscripts. The narrator himself serves up a respectable scholarly exposition to the reader in the form of a commentary on the fate of the documents, whose status over the course of history has shifted from recognition of their priceless historical value (and at the same time, their compensatory function in the context of the idea of national rebirth and the formation of linguistic knowledge) to their exposure as forgeries instrumental to a purely ideological (conspiratorial) purpose in building the Czech national mythology of the nineteenth century.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

The story, which would have best suited an easygoing, adventuresome form, is thus clad by Urban in a specialized scholarly language that treats the object of its analysis as a detective story with a riddle to be solved (in the spirit of the convention developed by Ivanov). Its solution can be guaranteed by the logic of facts – the greatest ally of the man of science. And that logic becomes the object of the artistic provocation being carried out by Urban. Curiously, there was some suspicion among literary critics that the name Josef Urban masked the writer Vladimír Macura – a literary scholar known for his revisionist position, and furthermore, a writer-scoffer who often conceals himself behind invented personae. Not only were his novels a point of encounter between national mythology and fraudulent narratives, but that combination also assumed the form of journalistic publications such as a collection of reviews for the fictional book *Sametová Anna* (Velvet Anna), relating to the events of 1989.¹⁷ And though Macura was not responsible for the provocation *Poslední tečka za Rukopisy*, his typical method of deconstructing the idea of national renewal as a thought construct with the post-script *hra* (play) dovetails with the attempt to reformulate the literary-historical context undertaken by Miloš Urban, representative of the next generation of writers, since his debut in the late 1990s.

Taking into consideration the referential context of the problem under discussion, the novel constitutes a space

¹⁷ P. Janoušek, *Macura albo drapanie czułymi pazurkami*, [in:] *Mistyfikacja w kulturach, literaturach i językach krajów słowiańskich*, eds. K. Ćwiek-Rogalska, I. Doliński, Warszawa 2013, pp. 4–14.

of confrontation between fiction, on the one hand, and historical figures and the sphere of national mythology, on the other. It is the dividing line between history and literature – an area frequently overlooked, its obscurity maintained in order to preserve the sovereignty of science and art. In the novel, this integrity is unceremoniously violated by the activation of a network of textual allusions. The formula invoked from Zelenka’s film is an example of a standard ploy of the postmodern novel – balancing on the border between what designates the sphere of convention (the adoption of the framework of illusion proposed by it) and what conspicuously disrupts it (signals of anti-mimesis triggering a disillusion effect). Brian McHale has noted the “scent of scandal” connected with using this deceptive strategy: “And what exactly is the source of this scandal? Ultimately, its source is *ontological*: boundaries between worlds have been violated.”¹⁸

The author is thus taking a dispute in hand which cannot remain untouched by controversy, since it was settled in one of the spheres that monopolizes the truth (science), but which, with the passage of time, has ceased to be the reservoir of certainties. And although in the space of less than two centuries various theories have arisen alternately juggling the epithets “authentic” and “false,” turning the dispute into grist for the mill of political entertainment as well, this converted product of the historical “dialectic” has its scent of scandal not only in the sense proposed by McHale, but also at the literal level. Because it is included

¹⁸ B. McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, London 1987, p. 85.

in the “drama of concealment and disclosure”¹⁹ – a typical feature of sensation in the purely sociological context. In this instance, the phenomenon of scandal would involve the transference of the centre of gravity from the object of the scandal to what John B. Thompson describes as “a series of subsequent actions which are aimed at concealing the [scandal—M.B.]”²⁰ (thereby vindicating one side) or exposing it (vindicating the other). Going further in this direction, we can say that in the dispute over the manuscripts, the question of their actual existence or nonexistence fades away and its place is assumed by the mediation of rhetoric or, to use the language of a classic of the theory of hyperreality, the “precession of simulacra,”²¹ the dynamic of images unstuck from the source of their emission.

The reader meets the protagonist in the course of his process of research, receiving a series of pieces of information that fit with the stereotype of a member of the scientific sphere, unconditionally devoted to the empirical principle. The author of the treatise confronts the reader with relevant “facts” concerning the dispute over the manuscripts’ authenticity – there are descriptions of the discovery, partial biographies of Hanka and Linda, information about the roles of authoritative figures from the era of national revival (the Dobrovski government, the participation of Puchmajer and Jungmann, and then – Palacki and Šafářík), results of expert chemical and paleographic analyses, and some reminiscence about the publication of

¹⁹ J.B. Thomson, *Political Scandal: Power and Visibility in the Media Age*, Cambridge 2000, p. 18.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

²¹ J. Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. S.F. Glaser, Ann Arbor 1994.

trenchant feuilletons that cast doubt on the discovery by the two archivists. Nor does he forget to invoke the political context of that polemic (the role of Masaryk and those affiliated with *Athenaeum* magazine in undermining the documents' authenticity) or the fate of Professor Josef. L. Pič, the archaeologist who investigated the case and whom he calls "the first and last victim of the dispute" ("he gave his life for the truth"). There is also a mention of the twentieth-century continuations of the dispute (the formation of the Czech Manuscript Society in the 1930s, the Marxist analysis of the problem in Ivanov's edition, which defended the assertion of the manuscripts' falseness). Using the terminology of political campaign theory analysts, we might thus say that the reader receives a "staging of pseudo-events,"²² which itself is also a pseudo-event, with the character of a simulacrum, enhanced by references to the stylistics of the literature of fact, a genre particularly propitious to a conspiracy theory of history.

In showing a kind of literary-historical skeleton hidden under the cloak of "factography," Urban reveals his method (how do conspiracy theories develop?), the mechanisms underlying the cover of description, and thus the tools serving to popularize the phenomenon; he shows its process of formation – focusing public opinion's on whatever is "scandalous" (and therefore attractive), the maintenance of an atmosphere of sensation as a result of the accumulation and exposition of various explanations that cancel each other out (from various scientific disciplines).

²² W. Schulz, *Politische Kommunikation Theoretische Ansätze und Ergebnisse empirischer Forschung*, Wiesbaden 1997.

In this context, the dynamic of the controversy takes the place of its object, and thus atop one layer of mystification (which in the literary-historical process was reduced to its basic factors) another is laid. To this is added the design of yet another “game” – an intrigue, whose explanation the reader finds in the introduction to the treatise – the mystification of the theory of the manuscripts being fake, and thus of the whole dispute, for which its potential “victims,” Hanka and Linda, having managed to outwit history, are to be held responsible. An analysis of their correspondence, however, reveals that “Hanka and Linda did not exist” (they are the products of the collective imagination), yet in fact “a Hanka and a Linda existed. Their names were Hannelore Vierteilová and Linda Janowitzová.”²³

The axis of intrigue is thus a hidden mystery regarding the revolutionary, emancipatory role of Czech literature in a particular period of its national development (the nineteenth century), whose fundamental direction was set by women using male pseudonyms to conceal their identities. Not only have they stifled the “truth” about the manuscripts, directing public opinion toward the forgery issue, and therefore, according to the logic of conspiracy, effectively putting whole ranks of “truth seekers” onto a false scent; the women have also exposed those seekers’ scholarly analyses to ridicule (in the form of Josef Urban’s discoveries), with men representing 99% of those participating in the battle raging in the press and academic

²³ J. Urban, *Poslední tečka...*, op. cit, p. 5.

circles. The novelistic hoax thus reaches the point where not only is a dispute over a key concept relating to the idea of revival demythologized, but also a legend about those who led the revival, including in particular Božena Němcová, a precursor of Czech feminism and a “Communist firebrand” (according to such critics as Fučík, Nejedlý, Zápotocký). The form in which the two myths are confronted consists of passages from letters printed on the pages of the novel – the “icons” of the national revival are referred to either in commentaries or are the addressees or sources of messages analyzed, which constitute the basic archival material beside which the titular final mark is to be placed.

The collision between the two realities dismantles the myth of the fomenters of national awakening, which is also harnessed to other spheres of meta-hoax set up by Miloš Urban. He directs attention once again toward the method by which an idea (with unheard-of power to generate cultural activity) is developed, and thus reveals the “stitches” in the national story that had been carefully kept from view over the course of the history of Czech literature. In this context, it becomes possible to discuss the “artificial” aspect of the revival (in the sense proposed by Macura): “the creation of Czech culture as ‘another existence,’” where “cultural products were in fact installed in empty space,”²⁴ and the project itself constituted the product of an idea that had been painstakingly worked out (as opposed to appearing *a priori*),

²⁴ V. Macura, “Ideálnost, hra a mystifikace,” [in:] idem, *Znamení zrodu: České národní obrození jako kulturní typ*, Jinočany 1995, p. 105.

it was “a free decision by the people taking part in it, a project undertaken ‘during their overtime,’”²⁵ which testifies to its illusory character as well. This theory simultaneously outlines the complex context implied in activating an idea – Barbara Jaroszewicz-Kleidienst and Zofia Trajło-Lipowska note that Czech culture organized and even (particularly in the early nineteenth century) replaced the national sphere.²⁶ Against that background, its connection to ideology becomes even more boldly accented, a connection that would represent its severance from reality, and in the context of Miloš Urban’s provocation itself – the placement in quotation marks, beside the concept of reality, a whole lexicon of epistemological definitions that construct an entire cultural universe. This referential game that he proposes not only creates an imaginative picture of one of the founding concepts that shaped how we see the development of national literature, but also remains a form of imaginative “play” or mental simulation, far from any intent to monopolize truth – any judgment on which of the various worlds is the real one. Urban effectively textualizes both, so that their opposition to each other has an illusive character, allowing us to uncover the gesture of a mystifier who could, in the style of Odo Marquard, declare: “There was a time when [...] what was real and what was fictional

²⁵ Z. Tarajło-Lipowska, “‘Prawdziwy’ charakter czeskiego odrodzenia narodowego,” [w:] H. Mieczkowski i T.Z. Orłoś (ed.), *Odrodzenie narodowe w Czechach i na Słowacji. Księga ku czci prof. Zdzisława Niedzieli*, Kraków 1999, p. 93.

²⁶ B. Jaroszewicz-Kleidienst, “W cudzych oczach. Z problematyki świadomości narodowej we współczesnych literaturach zachodnio- i południowosłowiańskich,” *Slavica* 30/1983, p. 27.
Z. Tarajło-Lipowska, “Nieodparta pokusa syntezy literatury czeskiej czy ‘neodepřený pokus o syntézu české literatury’?”, *Porównania* 7/2010, p. 84.

stood in real opposition to each other; [...] today, reality and fiction occur only in the form of an amalgam, never in a pure form anymore [...].”²⁷

There is yet another way of understanding information (fundamental to the literature of fact), one that illuminates it as “destructive of meaning and signification”.²⁸ To deal with that problem, it produces the appearance of communication – “it exhausts itself in the act of staging communication.”²⁹ The edge of novelistic irony is also targeted at (aside from the academic milieu) a certain significant, exceptionally popular field of literature, especially successful after 1989 during the novelist boom, and at the growing expectations tied to the search for writing marked by authenticity. Seen thusly, the literature of fact becomes a mediatized product, particularly vulnerable to manipulation that aims to claim for it the title of a mirror held up to reality. We can therefore recognize this Czech writer’s provocation as a manifestation of awareness of reality’s simulacric form, a result, to borrow again from Marquard, of the “economy of the fictional,” or the “growing susceptibility to illusion,” particularly demystified in Urban’s version, given the enduring power of national myth.³⁰

translated by Timothy Williams

²⁷ O. Marquard, *Aesthetica i anaesthetica. Rozważania filozoficzne*, trans. K. Krzemieniowa, Warszawa 2007, p. 155.

²⁸ J. Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, op. cit., p. 79.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

³⁰ O. Marquard, *Apologia, przypadkowości*, trans. K. Krzemieniowa, Warszawa 1994, p. 83.

The Invisible Root. On Contemporary “Conspiracy Culture”

Wojciech Hamerski

Chris Carter, the writer and director of the TV series *The X Files*, pulls no punches in the first episode of the new season – long-starved fans get to see a dramatic UFO crash straight away, with off-screen commentary by Agent Fox Mulder. His monologue ends with a series of questions that, as usual, receive no answer: “But we must ask ourselves are they really a hoax? Are we truly alone? Or are we being lied to?”¹ For aficionados of the series, it only gets better, i.e., the same thing as before only more so – in the reactivated FBI agent’s fevered reasoning, everything is connected with everything else; the conspiracy theories most persistently mulled over in pop culture fit into a readable pattern – from Roswell and Aztec encounters with aliens to the CIA’s deliberate distribution of crack-cocaine in American inner cities or manufacturing the AIDS virus, to deliberate efforts made by pharmaceutical concerns to harm communities.

¹ *The X Files*, written by Chris Carter, 2016.

This cocktail of conspiracies would be hard to swallow without some familiarity with the pastiche conventions of the series. As Peter Knight, author of the book *Conspiracy Culture. From Kennedy to the X Files*, has argued, American identity from its very beginnings “was shaped by the continual fear of sinister enemies,” though only since the 1960s (and what we may call the symbolic moment of the Kennedy assassination) have conspiracy theories become “the lingua franca of many ordinary Americans [...]”² Knight describes the process of demonumentalization of conspiracist explanations, which were once associated with dangerous political paranoia and are now a routine practice among both creators and consumers of culture, and not just popular culture. A peculiarly “world-weary paranoia” in the contemporary world contains “its own built-in diagnosis” and *The X Files* “deliberately and wittily exploits a self-ironizing aesthetic” in order to lay bare its own links to conspiracy culture.³ In the series, we always more or less know what is going to happen – Mulder will maintain his resistance to common sense persuasion, while Scully, no matter how many times she encounters proof of the existence of extraterrestrial life or a government conspiracy, will remain sceptical. The erotic-ironic tension of the situation, in which Scully’s “masculine” rationality is frequently tested by Mulder’s “feminine” imagination, offers a powerful illustration of the contemporary romance between conspiracy theories and critical analyses of them made by representatives of various disciplines in the social sciences.

² P. Knight, *Conspiracy Culture. From Kennedy to the X Files*, London 2000, p. 2.

³ P. Knight, *Conspiracy Culture*, pp. 2, 50.

The characters in the series represent the dynamic paralysis that has taken hold of the current cultural scene, described by Franciszek Czech – author and editor of two books on conspiracy theories, to be discussed herein – as a “profound conflict of two different kinds of (nar)rationality, which clash, but also mutually define each other.”⁴ Mulder and Scully are like the “two rocks” in the song by Polish songwriter Jacek Kaczmarski, used as an epigraph to Czech’s *Spiskowe narracje i metanarracje* (Conspiracist Narratives and Metanarratives): the “rock of madness and the rock of reason” are two seemingly separate explanatory systems which nevertheless “are joined deep down by an invisible root.” Not conspiracist narratives themselves or critical metanarratives, but their mutual contact and placement within the broader framework of postmodern culture seem to me to constitute the crucial theme of both the Kraków sociologist’s original treatise and his pioneering anthology of translations in *Struktura teorii spiskowych*, including the introduction from the book, cited above by Peter Knight, the leading authority on contemporary “conspiracy culture.”

Czech’s anthology presents an interdisciplinary panorama of academic theories that have developed on the subject of conspiracy theories since the mid-20th century, while the first part of Czech’s own book presents an exhaustive commentary on the materials in the anthology (he reconstructs the history of the theories he calls “conspiracist metanarratives”), replete with interpretative sallies and polemical jousts, outlining the methodological horizon

⁴ F. Czech, *Spiskowe narracje i metanarracje*, Kraków 2015, p. 16.

for the second part, in which Czech presents the results of his own research. The sociologist forges his own definition and typology of conspiracist narratives, as well as presenting a survey of the most popular contemporary Polish conspiracy theories. Among them, he singles one out for particular attention in the final chapter, devoted to an “anatomy of attack narratives,” constituting a sociological examination of the Polish conspiracy tale to end all conspiracy tales, interwoven with unofficial (until recently at least) explanations for the causes of the Smoleńsk crash.

For the purposes of the anthology, Czech, together with students participating in his “Conspiracy Culture” translation seminar at Jagiellonian University, selected and translated a representative group of scholarly texts containing a variety of approaches to the theoretical conceptualization of the problem. That gives the collection undeniable value, considering that until now the accomplishments of Western “conspiratology” were unknown to the Polish-language reader, except for *Political Paranoia: The Psychopolitics of Hatred* by Robert S. Robins and Jerrold M. Post, or *Conspiracy: How the Paranoid Style Flourishes and Where It Comes From* by the American historian Daniel Pipes. Both books are for the general public and work within the classical paradigm in which conspiracy theories are the warped creations of paranoid minds, explanations based on false principles, and dangerous to boot. Czech maintains a certain distance from both volumes. They have a certain “educational mission”⁵ to execute, relying on a predictable

⁵ Czech, *Spiskowe narracje i metanarracje*, p. 63.

set of examples (with conspiracist anti-Semitism foremost among them) aimed at defining and discrediting conspiracist thought as such. Czech notes that the interventionist and alarmist character of these books, rousing readers to keep vigilant and warning them against the lurking evil caused by conspiracist thinking, has the effect of steering them into the same kind of paranoid thought pattern they claim to be fighting against. Both works represent popularized (and, one is tempted to say, pauperized) forms of the position represented by the classics of conspiracy metanarrative, Karl Popper and Richard Hofstadter.

Popper, author of *The Open Society and its Enemies*, never crystallized his arguments into a stand-alone text, which explains the absence of his surname in the table of contents of Czech's anthology, but his analysis nonetheless remains an important reference point for many of the texts included therein. Popper, who brought the concept of the "conspiracy theory of society" into use in the mid-twentieth century, lay the cornerstone of modern studies of the subject – he was the first to place conspiracy theory "within a broader conceptual system, defining both desirable [...], and undesirable attitudes."⁶ According to Popper, conspiracy theories belong to the undesirable category, because they constitute a threat to open society. His unambiguous critique of them suited the postwar mood. Popper reminded readers that belief in a conspiracy activates anti-conspiratorial ways of thinking, leading to exclusion and hostility – the belief in the plot by the El-

⁶ Czech, *Spiskowe narracje i metanarracje*, p. 40.

ders of Zion culminated in the counterplot that led to the Holocaust. Hofstadter wrote in a similar spirit in *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* about conspiracy theories as manifestations of “heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy [...]”⁷ For this historian, who bases his argument on American examples (for example, he describes bloody nineteenth-century anti-Catholic fantasies, fed by, among other things, the report by runaway nun Maria Monk on children raped and strangled by priests⁸), but encourages readers to extrapolate from them into other contexts, the paranoid style represents “a common ingredient of fascism [...]”⁹ To link conspiracism with the concept of paranoia – as Hofstadter does metaphorically, not clinically – moves beyond the horizon outlined by Popper, initiating the tradition of providing psychological explanations for why conspiracist narratives arise, a tradition continued by Robins and Post, Pipes, and also Serge Moscovici, author of an essay included in Czech’s anthology on “the conspiracy mentality” – it is fed by resentment and contempt mixed with a sense of inferiority and veiled envy, often manipulated by politicians against weaker groups, in particular minorities.¹⁰

The constellation of views outlined above acquired the status of the classic conspiracy metanarrative in the second

⁷ R. Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” *Harpers* 11/1964, p. 77.

⁸ “Her book, hotly attacked and as hotly defended, continued to be read and believed even after her mother, a Protestant living near Montreal, gave testimony that Maria had been somewhat addled ever since childhood when she had rammed a pencil into her head.” Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style...”, p. 80.

⁹ Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style...”, op cit. p. 81.

¹⁰ See Czech, *Struktura*, p. 67.

half of the twentieth century. The next generation of scholars carried out a multi-level revision of it, defined by Czech as “the cultural turn in conspiracy metanarrative,” whose decisive phase came at the turn of the twenty-first century. His anthology contains a broader sample of such revisionist formations. The structure of *Struktura teorii spiskowych* thus gives away Czech’s own methodological sympathies, which were more explicitly laid out in *Spiskowe narracje i metanarracje*, in both its historical commentary and in the passages where the author configures his theoretical apparatus. The polemic with classical analyses (which, according to Czech, constitute the matrix for common knowledge on the subject to this day) that emerges from the articles gathered in the anthology relate primarily to the following three problems: the definition of conspiracy theory, the reasons for such theories’ development, and their possible consequences.

Calling any explanation of events a conspiracy theory is a powerfully persuasive act, a kind of “rhetorical knockout” that cuts discussion short. Czech draws attention to the fact that the first serious scholar to name this rhetorical violence for what it is was Noam Chomsky, who has himself frequently been on the receiving end of such knockouts due to his anti-government views. Of the authors in the anthology, Charles Pigden engages in the most direct polemic with Popper. In “Popper Revisited, or What is Wrong with Conspiracy Theories?” Pigden argues that the philosopher, by manipulating the term and its definition, exaggerated the consequences of conspiracist thought.

Conspiracism, as presented by Popper, was shown to be a purely deterministic form of thought – the people who wielded it used conspiratorial activity to explain literally everything and “confers god-like powers on the conspirators [...]”¹¹ If this were truly the case, Pigden observes, Popper’s fears would be sensible, but the problem is that the philosopher takes conspiracy theories to extremes, and in effect “renders [their] denial uninteresting.”¹² Pigden’s polemic is tied to the discovery that conspiracy narratives constitute a varied aggregate of explanations that cannot be thrown together into one bag. From that epiphany, it requires only one step to reach the statement that both the range and the probability of conspiracy theories represent a continuum. “We seem to be confronted,” writes Brian L. Keeley, with a spectrum of cases, ranging from the believable to the highly implausible.”¹³ The dogmatic belief in the falsehood of conspiracy theories has been undermined – structurally, the category includes both certain narratives relating to the illegal activities of the Nixon administration, and those about kidnappings by lizard people.

Within the revisionist current, psychological explanations for how conspiracy theories take shape are confronted with social explanations. Czech adroitly describes the resulting change in outlook as a passage “from wildness to wilderness [...]”¹⁴ The conspiracist image of power emerges “not

¹¹ C. Pigden, “Popper Revisited, or What Is Wrong With Conspiracy Theories?”, *Philosophy of Social Sciences*, 25:1 (1995), p. 4; quoted in Czech, *Struktura*, p. 79.

¹² Pigden, “Popper Revisited,” p. 8; quoted in Czech, *Struktura*, p. 81.

¹³ B. L. Keeley, “Of Conspiracy Theory,” *The Journal of Philosophy*, 96:3 (1999), p. 126; quoted in Czech, *Struktura*, p. 112.

¹⁴ Czech, *Spiskowe narracje*, p. 87.

as the result of individuals' mental problems, but as a consequence of their unfavorable position in the social hierarchy"; it is linked to "the inability to precisely describe the complicated contemporary world [...]".¹⁵ Democracy promises transparency from the authorities and participation by citizens in the formation of the state, yet to the majority of the citizenry even electoral law itself, with its complex algorithms for counting votes, makes no sense, let alone the global mechanisms of capital flows, which occur utterly independent of elections. As Fredric Jameson writes, the treatment of conspiracist narratives as a "desperate attempt to represent the [late capitalist] system"¹⁶) leads to yet another revaluation – after the "cultural turn" it is possible to look differently at the question of conspiracy theories' potential effects. It turns out that instead of serving the majority's stigmatization of minorities, as in the anti-Semitic model, they can provide a tool for the minority, "a rhetorical weapon for the excluded, thereby undermining the truth of the oppressive majority [...]".¹⁷ This second function of conspiracy theories also becomes manifest in the defensive Afro-American narratives reported by Mark Fenster in the anthology, alleging that HIV was produced in government laboratories with the intention of perpetrating genocide against the black population of the US; a similarly demonic purpose was thought to have animated the Church's Fried Chicken restaurant chain, said to be a Ku Klux Klan front, serving food that caused infertility in black men.¹⁸

¹⁵ Czech, *Spiskowe narracje*, pp. 95-96, 90.

¹⁶ F. Jameson, "Cognitive Mapping," [in:] C. Nelson and L. Grossberg, L. (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Urbana 1988, p. 356; quoted in Czech, *Spiskowe narracje*, p. 89.

¹⁷ Czech, *Spiskowe narracje*, 97.

¹⁸ See Czech, *Struktura*, pp. 158-159.

Czech, emphasizing the most important landmarks on the road from the classical to the contemporary interpretation, places them in the broader context of changes in the social sciences – he points to the shift from the classical paradigm, based on nineteenth-century historiography, “toward the hazy perspective of cultural studies and the postmodernist and constructivist revisions.”¹⁹ In describing the dislodgement of global narratives about worldwide conspiracy based on the mechanism of the scapegoat (a function fulfilled by the Jesuits, the Illuminati, the Masons, the Jews, and others), by smaller narratives that offer handy ways of understanding the world to marginalized persons of varying views, Czech refers to the “Brueghelian turn” particular to his own discipline, which initiated the current of sociology of everyday life, but the phenomenon can also be analyzed in the context of the crisis of grand narratives, the rhetorical turn, the postmodernist erosion of referential concepts of truth, and so on.

One interesting result of the “cultural turn” is the discovery – which caused a certain sense of bewilderment – of the uncomfortable kinship between conspiracy theories, considered to be illegitimate, and ostensibly legitimate forms of cultural or critical theory. I refer to what Clare Birchall has called the “aporia of legitimacy”: “it becomes impossible to map conspiracy theory and academic discourse onto a clear illegitimate/legitimate divide.”²⁰ The strong ties between

¹⁹ Czech, *Struktura*, p. 13.

²⁰ C. Birchall, “Just Because You’re Paranoid, Doesn’t Mean They’re Not Out to Get You,” *Culture Machine*, vol. 6, 2004. <http://www.culturemachine.net/index.php/cm/article/view/12/11> (accessed 23.11.2016).

narratives of conspiracy and the critical paradigm in the social sciences, in whose disciplines narratives about those narratives take shape, is revealed, for example, in the contemporary fascination with the “demystification of more or less discrete forms of rule and cultural hegemony.”²¹ In this interpretation, the tendency toward academic delegitimization of conspiracy theories (as in Pipes’s *Conspiracy*, for example) is unmasked as “a refined form of social control.”²² The revisionist current thus does not rule out the basic rationality of narratives previously treated as paranoid. Conspiracy theory as a form of interpretation of reality may contain errors and miss its mark, but scientific theories can also err. The unfalsifiability of conspiracy narratives need not automatically signal their irrationality, as Lee Basham observes, “there is nothing *inherently* exaggerated or distorted in them.”²³ *De omnibus dubitandum est*, everything should be subject to doubt – Czech chose this as the second epigraph to his book, referring readers to the fundamental suspicion that lies at the sources of Cartesian rationality. At what moment does overweening academic suspiciousness towards conspiracist suspiciousness itself take on the shape of paranoid thought?

The passages in Czech’s book where he describes “the linkage between views defined as conspiracy theories and theses about what those views really represent”²⁴ have great analytical value for me. And even a superficial glance at

²¹ Czech, *Spiskowe narracje*, p. 258.

²² Czech, *Spiskowe narracje*, p. 259.

²³ L. Basham, “Global Conspiracy Theory,” in *Conspiracy Theories: The Philosophical Debate*, ed. David Coady, Burlington 2006, p. 103; quoted in Czech, *Struktura*, p. 126.

²⁴ Czech, *Spiskowe narracje*, p. 12.

the table of contents, suggesting a sharp division between conspiracy metanarratives (part I) and narratives (part 2), might give the impression of an argument securely in the tradition of classical methodology, leading to an acknowledgement of the “aporia of legitimacy” as common to all interpretations. Instead, however, this sociologist comes out as a proponent of a constructivist understanding of culture, postulating that academic metadescription is a product of historic circumstances which is ideologically far from neutral. Equipped with that kind of self-consciousness, the conspiracist metanarrative corresponds to Hayden White’s project for a historical metanarrative: “By drawing historiography nearer to its origins in literary sensibility, we should be able to identify the ideological, because it is the fictive, element in our own discourse.”²⁵ Of course, Czech’s own argument, despite his painstakingly cultivated scholarly distance, cannot break away from this paradigm; it, too, is “constructed in defined social conditions.”²⁶

In fact, the social conditions in which *Spiskowe narracje i metanarracje* was written were rather extraordinary, marked by a painful polarization of Polish opinion regarding the influential conspiracy narrative about the real reasons for the Smoleńsk crash: “It is rare that an explicit conspiracy theory has institutional support from the leading opposition party [now the party in power–W.H.] in a country.”²⁷ I cannot resist the impression that the

²⁵ H. White, “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact,” [in:] *Narrative Dynamics: Essays on Time, Plot, Closure, and Frames*, Brian Richardson (ed.), Columbus 2002, p. 201.

²⁶ Czech, *Spiskowe narracje*, p. 16.

²⁷ Czech, *Spiskowe narracje*, p. 197.

weight of that context subtly influenced the trajectory of Czech's argument. The sociologist resists the temptation to indulge in journalistic polemics, whether he is writing about the machinations of the lizard people or the Kennedy assassination, leading his argument toward a monotonous avoidance of controversy that may be disappointing for conspiracy theory buffs. This ostentatious neutrality, which I suppose to be guided by a sense of ethics, appears to be a form of solicitude for the potential hurt feelings of readers, but also represents an attempt at critical distance, the very possibility of which Czech earlier undermined. Out of what is this distance constructed? Primarily out of declared lack of knowledge: "I do not possess the competencies or wherewithal in each case [...] to make a final judgment on the accuracy of individual claims."²⁸ In truth, conspiracy theories rely on specialist knowledge (of ballistics, chemistry, aeronautics, etc.), the obtainment of which exceeds the opportunities available to a single person – it is typical that very few people have read the 200-page report by the Macierewicz Commission, while almost everyone has an articulate opinion on the subject. As a result, Czech does not wish either to propagate the theory of an attack (such as that propounded by Antoni Macierewicz), or to dismantle it as myth (as Wojciech Orliński aims to); however, he does not hesitate to call out both sides for rhetorical fouls (such as tendentious media reports).

This scholarly position has some justification in the definition of conspiracy theories that Czech distilled from the

²⁸ Czech, *Spiskowe narracje*, p. 126.

academic theories mentioned above. It goes as follows: they are “stories expressing the belief that contrary to influential opinions, official positions, and widely-held views, crucial information about public affairs remains hidden as a result of the activities of a group of individuals secretly colluding with one another for the purpose of achieving ends that run counter to the common interest.”²⁹ As understood in this concentrated formula, conspiracy theories always relate to public affairs (no private conspiracy theories have gone into wide circulation) and always undermine the *status quo*, so that they are by nature polemical. This definition also presents the structure of such narratives as the object of reflection, so that products of “conspiracy culture” are examined without venturing into psychological explanations for their formation. Czech is also not interested, *ex definitione*, in determining the truth or falsehood of the narratives under discussion, nor their socially harmful or beneficial effects.

The second part of the monograph, when compared to the first, which presents a disciplined argument of high cognitive and methodological value (particularly for non-specialists, of whom the present author is one), may at first seem disappointing— in it, the author, armed to the teeth with carefully weighed theories and his own original definition, presents “a map of contemporary Polish conspiracy theories.” The map has the virtue of not being a guide – it does project the situation, mutual relations and dimensions of particular theories in appropriate dimensions,

²⁹ Czech, *Spiskowe narracje*, p. 125.

and furthermore is furnished with a key, allowing readers to consult a typology classifying narratives from the most general to the most detailed; but it does not contain any clearly conceptualized proposals for interpretative excursions. Czech is aware that he is using “newsflashes that signal the existence of broader phenomena”³⁰ – the signaling mechanisms are not as well developed as they should be, however, which is why the book leaves an impression of being full of curiosities, but nonetheless intellectually too weakly developed in its presentation of the narratives and mini-narratives circulating on the net. Czech follows primarily internet narratives (on blogs and fora), allowing him to spontaneously formulate his thoughts, but whether the sample he presents is in any way representative remains unclear, since he does not share his methods of evidence-gathering or the mechanism by which he selected among the materials he gathered from the net. The most general, and simultaneously traditional, narratives about conspiracy by Jews or Masons, no less than those exposing a secret “world government,” are – as one might expect – “simply translations or compilations of English cultural texts.”³¹ Medium-range reports have a rather more idiosyncratic nature and deal with details of secret influence exerted by Russia, Germany, Jews, the Vatican, or the European Union on Polish life, “expressed by means of strong hyperbole,”³² but also more global issues that relate to the crimes of the vaccine industry, global warming, and chemtrails. All of the structural features of the medi-

³⁰ Czech, *Spiskowe narracje*, p. 125.

³¹ Czech, *Spiskowe narracje*, p. 133.

³² Czech, *Spiskowe narracje*, p. 137.

um-range conspiracy narrative are also present in the story of how laundry detergent powders sold in Poland are of worse quality than the equivalents sold in the West, which in fact was revealed to be true – this example confirms the need to detach from definitions of conspiracy theories the label that they are “always false.” Czech likewise has compiled many individual narratives concerning particular events, such as the deliberate falsification by referee Howard Webb of the results of the Poland-Austria football match during the 2008 European Championships, false elections in Poland, the murder of General Marek Papała, and, last but not least, the Smoleńsk air disaster.

According to Czech, general conspiracy narratives now play a smaller role than these more detailed ones – he even admits that many of his students do not know who the Masons were (and are). Czech also argues that there exist “latent narratives” which are activated by the influence of external circumstances (or carefully phrased questions in a survey) and sudden increases in the belief in clandestine activity due to tragedies such as the crash of the presidential plane, seemingly confirming “that we are lost in a wilderness in contemporary reality rather than simply overtaken by the wildness of insanity.”³³ In this part of the book, Czech also interprets a research survey he conducted in 2014 on the extent to which people internalize conspiracist narrative schemas. The conclusions drawn from answers given to seven questions are interesting – it turns out that the narratives of conspiratorial intrigue most

³³ Czech, *Spiskowe narracje*, p. 173.

commonly advanced in certain media in fact represent the explanations least accepted by those surveyed. Czech believes this to confirm the thesis that conspiracy works as a “metaphor for the contemporary sociopolitical system,”³⁴ a plot that occurs without the intervention of agents from hostile foreign powers. At the same time, he includes the survey answer option “Hard to say” in the realm of “conspiracy culture,” noting that it is not a statement of indifference, but in keeping with the nature of conspiracy theories, which are often not “great explanatory systems,” but hypotheses “expressing rather a state of uncertainty.”³⁵ In disenchanted modern and contemporary societies this “state of uncertainty” or “wilderness” becomes an almost commonplace experience. Uncertainty as to the weightiest issues is linked with the intuition, a recurring motif in the anthology, of a cryptoreligious subtext to many conspiracy narratives. For Popper, as Pigden writes, “the conspiracy theory is a secularized version of a religious belief”³⁶ – even if the philosopher exaggerates in his claim that conspiracies are attributed “god-like powers,” in the context of the history of ideas one can defend the thesis of the existence of a kind of “metaphysics of conspiracy.” Hofstadter likewise referred to the “apocalypticism of the paranoid style,” presenting a “conflict between absolute good and absolute evil,” amounting to a “secular and demonic version of adventism.”³⁷ (He thus highlights the significant overlap between conspiracist and millena-

³⁴ Czech, *Spiskowe narracje*, p. 182.

³⁵ Czech, *Spiskowe narracje*, p. 184.

³⁶ C. Pigden, “Popper Revisited,” pp. 7-8; Czech, *Struktura*, p. 81.

³⁷ Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style*, pp. 28, 31; Czech, *Struktura*, p. 45.

rian thought– the latter tendency, according to Andrzej Walicki’s definition, represents “religious revolutionism,’ the predecessor and prototype of secular revolutionism.”³⁸ The historiosophical complications of nineteenth-century conspiracism have been acutely and comprehensively studied by Lech Zdybel – in his monumental work on the theme of the “idea of conspiracy,” Zdybel showed the rise of conspiracism during the period of the French Revolution, superimposed on the process of European societies’ secularization. Conspiracy theories thus take the form of a kind of “modernist gnosis” which reveals a crucial kinship with theories of Providentialism.³⁹ As can be seen, the “cultural turn” did not definitively eradicate the postulates of the traditional conspiracist metanarrative– many classic works in the discipline remain in force (here Czech refers as well to Hofstadter, who set the template for signalling broader phenomena using “analysis by exemplification”), even if it sometimes requires reining in, especially when veering too far into the radical or the general.

My reading of *Struktura teorii spiskowych* (inevitably distorted, I admit, by my effort to find possible analogies with the history of literary scholarship) was accompanied by the conviction that the discovery of the rhetorical as a common denominator in all narratives was an important moment in the history of theory relating to conspiracy theories. For Czech, however, the perception of the

³⁸ A. Walicki, “Millenaryzm i mesjanizm religijny a romantyczny mesjanizm polski: zarys problematyki,” *Pamiętnik Literacki* 4/1971, pp. 30–31.

³⁹ See L. Zdybel, *Idea spisku i teorie spiskowe w świetle analiz krytycznych i badań historycznych*, Lublin 2002, pp. 429 and passim.

tropological dimension of language is found to be “only the beginning” of changes that lead toward “more serious charges”⁴⁰ of an epistemological nature: “This does not mean rhetorical moves [...], I am interested chiefly in the definition of conspiracist (anti-)knowledge itself.”⁴¹ Czech thus perceives a clear boundary between “conspiracist semantics” and “conspiracist rhetoric,”⁴² and suggests an important leap from utterance formation to “more serious” questions of epistemology. Such a radical cut, in the light of the constructivist paradigm of which Czech is an adherent, seems neither possible nor desired, however. The discovery of the rhetorical aspect of critical argument (in the spirit of White’s *Metahistory*) appears to be one of the most serious blows delivered to the classic metanarrative, which postulates its own discourse’s epistemological advantage, its transcendental legitimization.

In “The Epistemology of Metaphor,” an important text for the American deconstructionist school – which itself, after all, represents a “mode of thought that (like conspiracy theory and potentially cultural studies) highlights an aporia of legitimacy, knowledge and interpretation,”⁴³ Paul de Man states that “It does not take a good semiotician long to discover that he is in fact a rhetorician in disguise.”⁴⁴ If, as de Man claims, “rhetoric cannot be separated from its epistemological function,” the same thing can be said with regard to the possible formulation

⁴⁰ Czech, *Spiskowe narracje*, p. 77.

⁴¹ Czech, *Spiskowe narracje*, p. 199.

⁴² Czech, *Spiskowe narracje*, p. 124.

⁴³ C. Birchall, “Just Because You’re Paranoid,” op. cit.

⁴⁴ P. de Man, “The Epistemology of Metaphor,” *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 5, No. 1, (Autumn, 1978), p. 29.

of “more serious charges” and their relationship (or lack thereof) to “conspiracist rhetoric.” This accords with the famous definition by the pioneer in this type of thinking, Friedrich Nietzsche, who claimed that “truth is a mobile [or narrativized?—W. H.] army of metaphors [...]”⁴⁵ As it turns out, when we undertake to escape the question of conspiracist narratives’ truth in the direction of problems with such narratives’ structure, we do not get very far – truth, if indeed it is an army of metaphors, must not be understood too literally. The supposed indifferentism of the constructivist conspiracist metanarrative represented by Czech is thus no less a “refined form of social control” – avoiding pronouncements on the truth or falsehood of conspiracy theories amounts to simply and quite reasonably avoiding a naïve literalization of metaphor. There remains, however, the search for a different kind of truth (figural), co-created in cultural interpretation, not without the help of successive metaphors (such as that of the wilderness). There is, then, one thing we can say for certain concerning conspiracy narratives after the “cultural turn”: they are always true.

translated by Timothy Williams

⁴⁵ F. Nietzsche, *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense*, [in:] F. Nietzsche, *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann, New York 1954, p. 46.