The Reels of Truth – Material Faces of Conspiracy Theories

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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.

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[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-

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[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

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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-

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[6] However, according to Jussi Parikka, author of the preface to Ernst's book Ernsta *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/artykul/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

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[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

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[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/bltabloid-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"),

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

[15] See M. Kirschenbuam, *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 agencies[18] – 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

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[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 paranoiac 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

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[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

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[24] T. Cook, *A Messeage 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

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[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.

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

translated by Timothy Williams