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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 przeżyłeś*, 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 neomessianic 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 egalitarianization 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 émigré 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 Magdalanka, 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.