

Conspiracism and the Shadows of Transparency

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Abstract: Following the approach of cultural studies, which views conspiracism as reflecting larger cultural and social anxieties and concerns, the paper argues that one of these anxieties is connected with the modern ideology of transparency. While at first sight a widely shared positive value, transparency can be shown to hide various tensions and paradoxes on closer inspection. This paper interprets conspiracy theories as imaginative attempts at capturing these tensions, at highlighting the inconspicuous opacity of the late modern transparent world and its institutions. Conspiracists are themselves entangled in the modern ideology of transparency, but at the same time, they knock against its boundaries, making explicit the unspoken premises of the entire system in all their paradoxicality. They draw attention to numerous inconsistencies and dark cracks in our late modern social and ideological system, symbolising them through various disturbing narratives that should not be taken literally but that are interesting precisely in that they offer an opportunity to reflect on the limitations of transparency.

Keywords: conspiracism; conspiracy theory; transparency; opacity; occult cosmology

Abstrakt: Článek vychází z přístupu kulturních studií, která konspiracismus chápou jako odraz širších sociokulturních obav a úzkostí, a tvrdí, že jedna z těchto obav souvisí se současnou koncepcí transparentnosti. Ta se dnes na první pohled může jevit jako veskrze pozitivní hodnota, při bližším pohledu však zjistíme, že v sobě skrývá nejrůznější napětí a paradoxy. Konspirační teorie můžeme chápat jako imaginativní pokusy o zachycení těchto napětí, o postžení nenápadné neprůhlednosti pozdně moderního transparentního světa a jeho institucí. Ač jsou konspiračisté do moderní ideologie transparentnosti sami zapleteni, narážejí zároveň na její hranice, čímž pomáhají zviditelňovat nevyčlenené předpoklady celého systému v celé jejich paradoxnosti. Ukazují tak na četné nesrovnalosti a temné trhliny v našem pozdně moderním společenském a ideologickém systému a symbolizují je prostřednictvím různých znepokojivých vyprávění. Tato vyprávění není na místě brát doslova – jsou však zajímavá právě tím, že nám nabízejí příležitost zamyslet se nad mezemi transparentnosti.

Klíčová slova: konspiracismus; konspirační teorie; transparentnost; jasnost; okultní kosmologie

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Since the day of Popper and Hofstadter, the study of conspiracy theories has for a long time been dominated by the “pathologising paradigm” that sees them as a minority phenomenon threatening the liberal-democratic consensus, an outburst of irrationality and an expression of a “crippled epistemology”, an “unscientific way of understanding social relations, which had emerged as a reaction and in opposition to the Enlightenment”.¹ Cultural studies have played a crucial part in offering an alternative, more positive approach that views late modern conspiracism as a mainstream phenomenon linked to popular culture rather than a marginal aberration and analyses it as reflecting larger cultural and social anxieties and concerns. Thus, for instance, Dean² interprets conspiracy theories as reflecting a general mistrust of experts and politicians in an age of virtuality, while Melley³ understands them as an expression of “agency panic” arising out from the confrontation between the liberal individualist model of personhood and the postmodern decentred subjectivity of our times. For Fenster, they represent “a utopian desire to reflect upon and confront the contradictions and conflicts of the contemporary democratic state and capitalism”.⁴ A particularly rich account has been given by Knight,⁵ who not only identifies a wide range of functions of contemporary conspiracy theories but points out their connection with the “routine paranoia” of our late modern age of epistemic uncertainty.

My paper will follow this tradition but will focus on a topic that has so far been less prominent in interpretations of conspiracism. I will read conspiracy theories as a specific reaction to the modern ideology of *transparency*. While at first sight a widely shared positive value, upon closer inspection, transparency can be shown to hide various tensions and paradoxes and to cast numerous shadows. Conspiracy theories may be read as imaginative attempts at capturing these paradoxes, at highlighting the inconspicuous opacity of the late modern transparent world and its institutions.

My interpretation will not be entirely original. Conspiracism has already been analysed as a reaction to transparency by various scholars.⁶ I will use their insights

¹ MICHAEL BUTTER and PETER KNIGHT, “The History of Conspiracy Theory Research: A Review and Commentary”, in JOSEPH E. USCINSKI (ed.), *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2019, p. 34–40.

² JODI DEAN, *Aliens in America: Conspiracy Cultures from Outerspace to Cyberspace*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1998, *passim*.

³ TIMOTHY MELLEY, *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press 2000, p. 47–78.

⁴ MARK FENSTER, *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture*, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press 2008, p. 128.

⁵ PETER KNIGHT, *Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to the X-Files*, London, New York: Routledge 2000, *passim*.

⁶ JODI DEAN, *Publicity's Secret: How Technoculture Capitalizes On Democracy*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press 2002, *passim*; HARRY G. WEST and TODD SANDERS, “Power Revealed and Concealed in the New World Order”, in HARRY G. WEST and TODD SANDERS (eds.), *Transparency and Conspiracy: Ethnographies of Suspicion in the New World Order*, Durham and London: Duke University Press 2003, p. 1–57; CLARE BIRCHALL, “Radical Transparency?”, *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 14 (1, 2014): p. 77–88; MATTHEW CAREY, *Mistrust: An Ethnographic Theory*, Chicago: HAU Books 2017, p. 85–106; MATTHEW FLUCK, “Theory, ‘Truthers’, and Transparency: Reflecting on Knowledge in the Twenty-First Century”, *Review of International Studies*

and employ them as building blocks for a fuller synthetic picture that also draws on Critical Transparency Studies⁷ and anthropological study of “occult cosmologies”.⁸ I will first provide a brief sketch of the modern ideology of transparency and then point out some of its shadowy aspects. In the second part of the paper, I will ask how conspiracism relates to transparency. I will argue that while to some extent it shares its principles, it takes them more literally, and thereby it paradoxically arrives at their very opposite and functions as an “occult cosmology” that depicts power as exceeding the system’s rules and operating secretly in the background. Conspiracism draws attention to numerous inconsistencies and dark cracks in our late modern social and ideological system, symbolising them through various disturbing narratives that should not be taken literally but that are interesting precisely in offering an opportunity to reflect on the limitations of transparency.

Transparency and Modernity

Transparency is “perhaps the ultimate consensual value of our time”.⁹ It is something that we regard as a self-evident good, similar to, say, personal freedom, democracy, or free speech. It functions as one of the “magic concepts”, i.e. concepts “imbued with a magic aura which promises to solve major dilemmas encountered by society”.¹⁰ We all hope that informational access for all citizens ensures better governance, accountability, procedural fairness and rationalisation. It is mainly in the post-ideological era after the end of the Cold War that transparency achieved prominence – perhaps best symbolised by the foundation of Transparency International in 1993, as well as the *Code of Good Practices on Fiscal Transparency* introduced by the International Monetary Fund in 1998. With the development of the Internet, transparency has reached yet another stage, as we can now access data more easily than ever before.

The roots of transparency, however, lie much deeper in the past, in the age of Enlightenment. One of its primary sources is modern science. The invention of the telescope and the microscope allowed scientists to peer beyond and beneath appear-

42 (1, 2016): p. 48–73; ADRIAN J. IVAKHIV, “Occult Geographies, or the Promises of Spectres: Scientific Knowledge, Political Trust, and Religious Vision at the Margins of the Modern”, in PAUL STENNER and MICHEL WEBER (eds.), *Orpheus’ Glimpse: Selected Papers on Process Psychology*, Louvain-la-Neuve: Éditions Chromatika 2018, p. 115–144.

⁷ EMMANUEL ALLOA and DIETER THOMÄ, “Transparency: Thinking Through an Opaque Concept”, in EMMANUEL ALLOA and DIETER THOMÄ (eds.), *Transparency, Society and Subjectivity Critical Perspectives*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan 2018, p. 1–14; CLARE BIRCHALL, *Radical Secrecy: The Ends of Transparency in Datafied America*, Minneapolis – London: University of Minnesota Press 2021, passim.

⁸ JEAN COMAROFF and JOHN COMAROFF, “Occult Economies and the Violence of Abstraction: Notes from the South African Postcolony”, *American Ethnologist* 26 (2, 1999): p. 279–303; WEST and SANDERS, “Power Revealed and Concealed in the New World Order”, passim.

⁹ ALLOA and THOMÄ, “Transparency: Thinking Through an Opaque Concept”, p. 2.

¹⁰ EMMANUEL ALLOA, “Transparency: A Magic Concept of Modernity”, in ALLOA and THOMÄ (eds.), *Transparency, Society and Subjectivity Critical Perspectives*, p. 28–29.

ances, helping to “render the mysteries of nature ‘transparent’”.¹¹ Autopsy and experimentation now had more weight than tradition. On a more fundamental level, the entire project of modern science presupposes an essential transparency of the world in the sense of its availability to scientific inquiry. As Weber explains in “Science as a Vocation” (1917), this does not imply that we would actually fully understand the conditions of our lives: “it means that principally there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation. This means that the world is disenchanted”.¹² Science keeps on gradually shedding its light on the world, step by step eliminating the zones of darkness.

Equally significant was the spread of the transparency ethos in politics. Whereas at the beginning of the 17th century, “secrets of the state” (*arcana imperii*) were still seen as crucial,¹³ in the second part of the 18th century, highly praised political values shifted to include openness and publicity. One of their famous defenders was Rousseau, condemning the hypocritical world of masks and false appearances and longing for a world in which all men are transparent to one another.¹⁴ As Foucault notes, Rousseau’s utopian dream inspired the French revolutionaries:

It was the dream of a transparent society, visible and legible in each of its parts, the dream of there no longer existing any zones of darkness, zones established by the privileges of royal power or the prerogatives of some corporation, zones of disorder. It was the dream that each individual, whatever position he occupied, might be able to see the whole of society, that men’s hearts should communicate, their vision be unobstructed by obstacles.¹⁵

Rousseau’s vision may have been radical, but it was in line with the general spirit of the times. According to Foucault, the latter half of the eighteenth century was haunted by a “fear of darkened spaces ... which prevents the full visibility of things, men and truths”, of the “unlit chambers where arbitrary political acts, monarchical caprice, religious superstitions, tyrannical and priestly plots, epidemics and the illusions of ignorance were fomented”.¹⁶ These fears (powerfully captured by the Gothic novels) led not just to the onset of new political ideas but also to new forms of architecture emphasising openness, hygiene, functionality, and free circulation of air¹⁷ – a development that, in the 20th century, culminated into modern glass buildings and open-space offices.

¹¹ JEAN COMAROFF and JOHN COMAROFF, “Transparent Fictions, or, The Conspiracies of a Liberal Imagination: An Afterword”, in WEST and SANDERS (eds.), *Transparency and Conspiracy*, p. 292.

¹² MAX WEBER, “Science as a Vocation”, in HANS H. GERTH and C. WRIGHT MILLS (trans., eds.), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, New York: Oxford University Press 1946, p. 139.

¹³ DANIEL JÜTTE, *The Age of Secrecy: Jews, Christians, and the Economy of Secrets, 1400–1800*, trans. Jeremiah Riemer, New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press 2015, passim.

¹⁴ JEAN STAROBINSKI, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Transparency and Obstruction*, trans. by Arthur Goldhammer, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1988, passim.

¹⁵ MICHEL FOUCAULT, “The Eye of Power”, in COLIN GORDON (trans., ed.), *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, New York: Pantheon 1980, p. 152.

¹⁶ FOUCAULT, “The Eye of Power”, p. 153.

¹⁷ FOUCAULT, “The Eye of Power”, p. 148–149.

On the level of state governance, this led to an emphasis on the public accountability of all political decisions. Kant, in his treatise “Toward Perpetual Peace” (1795), formulates a “transcendental formula of public right”, according to which “all actions relating to the rights of others are wrong if their maxim is incompatible with publicity”,¹⁸ i.e. if they are not planned to withstand the scrutiny of the ideal rational public. Bentham reached a similar conclusion from a utilitarian perspective. In his “Essay on Political Tactics” (1791), he argues that there is no better way to prevent those in power from becoming corrupt than “the superintendence of the public”: “Let it be impossible that any thing should be done which is unknown to the nation – prove to it that you neither intend to deceive nor to surprise – you take away all the weapons of discontent”.¹⁹

Perhaps most importantly, the ideal of transparency led to a new form of subjectivity and social control. Its roots lay in Protestantism with its penchant for self-inspection. By the end of the 17th century, the technology of glass production allowed the Dutch and British Protestants to have houses with large windows without curtains “so that one could see inside of the house of one’s neighbor and ensure that no one inside was engaging in sin”.²⁰ The new ethos of transparency thus implied not just being able to see others but being seen by them as well. Bentham provided a typical image of this in his “Panopticon” (1791), a prison house in which all the prisoners were fully and constantly exposed to the gaze of the guards while the guards themselves were, in turn, watched by the head inspector. As Foucault explains, this was revolutionary not just in that the soft power of the gaze now replaced the formerly violent forms of submission but, even more importantly, the gaze was meant to be internalised to the point that each individual becomes his own overseer, “thus exercising this surveillance over, and against, himself”.²¹

This meant an entirely new conception of power. In the old system, the source of power was the king, who exercised it alone and totally over the others. In the new bourgeois regime, it is really the system as such that is the source of power. “It’s a machine in which everyone is caught, those who exercise power just as much as those over whom it is exercised”.²² As Han points out, this is again something that has been brought to perfection by the technoculture of our times, when the “digital panopticon” of social media allows its inhabitants to “actively collaborate in its construction and maintenance by putting themselves on display and baring themselves”.²³ The

¹⁸ IMMANUEL KANT, “Toward Perpetual Peace”, in MARY GREGOR (trans., ed.), *Practical Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1996, p. 347.

¹⁹ JEREMY BENTHAM, “Essay on Political Tactics”, in JOHN BOWRING (ed.), *The Works of Jeremy Bentham*, vol. II. Edinburgh: William Tait 1843, p. 310–311.

²⁰ BRIAN FARMER, *American Conservatism: History, Theory and Practice*, Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press 2005, p. 105; cf. LEWIS MUMFORD, *Technics and Civilization*, New York: Harcourt, Brace 1934, p. 128.

²¹ FOUCAULT, “The Eye of Power”, p. 155.

²² FOUCAULT, “The Eye of Power”, p. 156.

²³ BYUNG-CHUL HAN, *The Transparency Society*, trans. by Erik Butler, Stanford: Stanford University Press 2015, p. 46.

result is a society where “communication and commerce, freedom and control, collapse into one” and each of us is “the master and entrepreneur of oneself”.²⁴

Transparency and its Invisible Distortions

Transparency is seen as something entirely positive and enlightening today, but this does not mean that it does not cast any shadows. What are these? The most common critique points out the invisibly distorting nature of transparency. Transparency pretends to be neutral, “a mode of disclosure and regulation that transcends personal or ideological interpretation”,²⁵ presenting the world in an unmediated way. We give you all the facts and data, and it is up to you to interpret them and decide. In fact, however, this is largely an illusion. Data are never presented “raw”, in a neutral manner. Somebody always has to choose what to reveal, thus already presenting the data from a perspective. “Data are always already social, subject to narrative and interpretation”.²⁶ Every form of disclosure conceals something that might appear from a different interpretive perspective.

Politicians and officials are usually apt at “strategically disclosing ‘information’ through coordinated public relations campaigns that produce pre-packaged, tightly controlled ‘news’”.²⁷ In effect, “politics has become a domain of financially mediated and professionalised practices centered on advertising, public relations, and the means of mass communication”.²⁸ Even disclosures of complete data sets are not of much help here, as they usually lead to such an overload of data that it is in no one’s power to go through them all. “In this way, extreme transparency begins to have the same effect as secrecy”.²⁹

However, the problem with transparency lies not just in its possible corruption by public relations and entertainment culture. Even if we did manage not to succumb to this pitfall, a distortion of a more fundamental kind would still remain – one that is implied in the hegemonic epistemology of modernity. For its analysis, we may follow Fluck³⁰ and turn to Adorno and Horkheimer, who, in their *Dialectic of the Enlightenment* (1944), see the fundamental problem of modernity in its tendency to reduce everything to quantifiable homogeneous units – data or commodities. “Bourgeois society is ruled by equivalence. It makes dissimilar things comparable by reducing them to abstract quantities. For the Enlightenment, anything which cannot be resolved into numbers ... is illusion”.³¹ This is true not just of modern science but also of

²⁴ HAN, *The Transparency Society*, p. 47–48.

²⁵ BIRCHALL, “Radical Transparency?”, p. 82.

²⁶ BIRCHALL, “Radical Transparency?”, p. 82.

²⁷ MARK FENSTER, “The Opacity of Transparency”, *Iowa Law Review* 91 (2006): p. 926.

²⁸ DEAN, *Publicity’s Secret*, p. 3–4.

²⁹ BIRCHALL, *Radical Secrecy*, p. 180.

³⁰ FLUCK, “Theory, ‘Truthers’, and Transparency”, *passim*.

³¹ THEODOR ADORNO and MAX HORKHEIMER, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Stanford: Stanford University Press 2002, p. 4.

modern society, which has replaced the old inequality of birth with the new equality of the market, reducing unique individuals to “things, statistical elements, successes or failures”.³²

As a result, the world becomes transparent, available to the objective inquiring gaze of science. At the same time, however, this leads to a reification of both the world and human beings, leaving out all that is unique, incommensurable and mysterious. As Han puts it, “transparency flattens out the human being itself, making it a functional element within a system.”³³ An example can be found in “the glass partitions of modern offices, the huge rooms in which countless employees sitting together can be easily supervised both by the public and by their managers, no longer countenance private conversations and idylls”.³⁴ In this way, something essentially human is bracketed off, leaving us with depersonalised institutional mechanisms.

On the level of institutions, this approach produces modern bureaucracy, a rational system of administration based on transparent rules and equality before the law. As Weber stresses,³⁵ bureaucracy has the advantage of providing us with “legal guarantees against arbitrariness”, since it demands “a formal and rational ‘objectivity’ of administration, as opposed to the personally free discretion flowing from the ‘grace’ of the old patrimonial domination”. However, this is once again achieved at the price of reification, ignoring the unique details of the case under consideration and reducing it to a mechanical procedure. As David Graeber puts it: “Bureaucratic knowledge is all about schematisation. In practice, bureaucratic procedure invariably means ignoring all the subtleties of real social existence and reducing everything to preconceived mechanical or statistical formulae.”³⁶ It is not surprising, therefore, that the transparent bureaucratic procedures frequently result in an opaque maze of senseless regulations so impressively portrayed by Kafka’s novels.

This creates feelings of alienation when modern “institutions and structures are experienced as something alien and unresponsive”.³⁷ Modern individuals react by wishing to know more: “they turn to epistemic ideals or projects promising access to data or the facts in the hope that in doing so they will come to understand or influence the structures with which they are faced”.³⁸ By doing this, however, they only replicate the fundamental problem, for the data and facts they seek are still reified. They are “the very bricks from which the impenetrable ‘façade’ of modern institutions is constructed”.³⁹ Thus, all they achieve is a “false clarity”,⁴⁰ which seemingly reveals everything but does so in a schematic and reductionist manner. Han fittingly com-

³² ADORNO and HORKHEIMER, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 21.

³³ HAN, *The Transparency Society*, p. 3.

³⁴ ADORNO and HORKHEIMER, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 183.

³⁵ MAX WEBER, “Bureaucracy”, in GERTH and MILLS, *From Max Weber*, p. 220.

³⁶ DAVID GRAEBER, “Dead Zones of the Imagination: On Violence, Bureaucracy, and Interpretive Labor”, *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 2 (2, 2012): p. 119.

³⁷ FLUCK, “Theory, ‘Truthers’, and Transparency”, p. 66.

³⁸ FLUCK, “Theory, ‘Truthers’, and Transparency”, p. 67.

³⁹ FLUCK, “Theory, ‘Truthers’, and Transparency”, p. 67.

⁴⁰ ADORNO and HORKHEIMER, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. xvii.

pares this to pornography which “subjects everything to compulsory exhibition”,⁴¹ depriving things of their singularity and hermeneutic depth and turning them into commodities. In this sense, even the transparent institutions of late modernity are “pornographic”: they reveal all kinds of details to the public gaze, but they do this either through commodifying PR campaigns or through objectivised data sets that reproduce the alienating maze-like quality of modern bureaucracy.

In our late modern times, all of this has taken a particular turn. On the one hand, we are more radical in our transparency efforts than ever before, and at first sight, it may seem that our emphasis on open e-governance and public participation has brought democracy to a new height. At the same time, however, many authors point out that these worthy claims are actually “part and parcel of a nexus of associated ideas that together make up the new, globalised market rationality”, being “closely linked to a neoliberal ethos of governance that promotes individualism, entrepreneurship, voluntary forms of regulation and formalized types of accountability”.⁴² As such, transparency functions as the ideology of neoliberalism, “facilitating global fiscal transactions by increasing the legibility of local regulations”⁴³ and shaping our subjectivity accordingly. Transparency indeed reveals a great deal these days, but it hides its own ideological premises, which effectively undermine its potential. While promising public empowerment, in fact, “it enlivens defences for the very mechanisms that embody power in late capitalism: the digital bureaucracies, intuitive interfaces, automated algorithms, minimalist looks and carefully designed ‘background’ technologies that colonise the fringes of our awareness, rendering consumption frictionless, circulation seamless, and production unobtrusive”.⁴⁴

Transparency Driven by Secrecy

Nevertheless, transparency does not just hide its ideological background. It actually employs secrecy in quite an explicit manner, requiring it as its condition of possibility. How exactly this works has been forcefully explained by Jodi Dean in *Publicity's Secret*.

Dean conceptualises transparency in a dynamic manner: not as a state of translucence in which everything can be seen but as a process of *publicity* which strives to make secret things public. Publicity implies that we want all secrets to be revealed but that this has not yet fully happened. “Secrets appear as lures, enticing us as ever-present objects of desire”.⁴⁵ This means, paradoxically, that publicity is based on

⁴¹ HAN, *The Transparency Society*, p. 11.

⁴² CHRISTINA GARSTEN and MONICA LINDH DE MONTOYA, “Introduction: Examining the Politics of Transparency”, in CHRISTINA GARSTEN and MONICA LINDH DE MONTOYA (eds.), *Transparency in a New Global Order: Unveiling Organizational Visions*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2008, p. 2–3.

⁴³ BIRCHALL, *Radical Secrecy*, p. 76.

⁴⁴ JORGE I. VALDOVINOS, Transparency as Ideology, Ideology as Transparency: Towards a Critique of the Meta-aesthetics of Neoliberal Hegemony, *Open Cultural Studies* 2 (1, 2018): p. 656.

⁴⁵ DEAN, *Publicity's Secret*, p. 1.

the secret. The secret is what provokes us to search further, gather more information, take into account yet another expert opinion, and click one more time. However, the entire secret “can never fully or finally be revealed”, for it is “a matter of form, not content”.⁴⁶ Even when technically speaking, all the information is available “out there” online. There is always more of it than any of us can comprehend. Full transparency is just a mythical ideal we aim for but can never reach. What we actually have is the secret-based system of publicity, of never-ending revelation. The secret thus appears as “an exception to the rule that everything should be out in the open”, which “imbues the secret with mystery and importance”.⁴⁷ Those who know more than others have more power. But not even they know everything. There is always something that resists knowledge, enticing us to keep searching.

For Dean, publicity plays an essential ideological part: it helps to establish the notion of the *public*, allowing us to feel like a unified democratic body of self-governing citizens despite considerable differences in culture, race, opportunity, status, education etc. A unified public is ultimately just a fantasy, but one that seems very plausible precisely due to publicity, the practices of which make the public appear as a “subject from whom secrets are kept and in whom a right to know is embedded”.⁴⁸

Dean illustrates this using Bentham’s publicity discussion in his “Essay on Political Tactics”. One objection Bentham needs to face is that the public is incompetent to judge political matters “in consequence of the ignorance and passions of the majority of those who compose it”.⁴⁹ He resolves this by distinguishing between the elite “public-supposed-to-know” (as Dean calls it), whose members judge for themselves based on information, and the common “public-supposed-to-believe”, which cannot really judge but trusts the knowing class and adopts their opinions. What unifies the two classes is publicity, which assures the public-supposed-to-believe that all the information is there for them, too, but that they need not know it all and may simply trust those who do. What this means, however, is that there is always something the public-supposed-to-know knows while the public-supposed-to-believe does not. In other words, the authority and mysterious power of the knowing elites are based on a *secret* – “that key to representational power that had been reserved to the king” that now is “linking together knowledge and belief”.⁵⁰ Again, the secret need not consist just of something wholly hidden from public sight but also something that, in theory, is accessible “out there” to everyone (such as scientific studies or various sets of government data) but that most of us would find too complicated or difficult to find and understand. In cases such as these, “knowledge” means knowing where to look and how to interpret what we find.

⁴⁶ DEAN, *Publicity’s Secret*, p. 42.

⁴⁷ DEAN, *Publicity’s Secret*, p. 10.

⁴⁸ DEAN, *Publicity’s Secret*, p. 18.

⁴⁹ BENTHAM, “Essay on Political Tactics”, p. 312.

⁵⁰ DEAN, *Publicity’s Secret*, p. 22.

This means, paradoxically, that publicity is a “system of distrust”:⁵¹ the public is suspicious of those who know, enjoying the revelations of their doings. We eagerly read the news concerning government plans, political deals, corruption accusations or expert opinions. Indeed, even the truly secret operations of the state, such as those tied to intelligence agencies, require some measure of revelation to gain public approval. That is “why military agencies routinely permit the use of their equipment in Hollywood films and why the CIA has a large public relations division”,⁵² which is concerned not just with carefully releasing bits of information but also with spreading disinformation and “strategic fictions”.⁵³ Publicity is based on revealing elite secrets, but it implies that there is always something more to reveal. “The suspicion that something has been withheld, that the information needed for judging properly is hidden and needs to be exposed, sustains this system”.⁵⁴ Frustrating as this may seem, it has the added value of making publicity thrilling. As Bentham points out, one of the advantages of publicity is “the amusement which results from it”.⁵⁵ Publicity is thus fundamentally about the media and the entertaining new revelations they keep on bringing every day.

The implications of this become fully obvious in our era of technoculture, with the Internet greatly facilitating access to information. While originally, this was supposed to make the public more informed and educated, in fact, it has led to a loss of trust and a collapse of the distinction between the public-supposed-to-know and the public-supposed-to-believe. “The endless exposure of ever more secrets hails... each as an expert entitled to know even as it undermines any sense that anyone knows anything at all. Precisely because each is an expert, no one believes in the expert opinion of anyone else. Everybody has to find out for him or herself”.⁵⁶ The resulting frantic search for information still manages to sustain the fantasy of the public, though one that is very much fragmented and thus incapable of coordinated political action. Moreover, “the practices of searching, clicking, and linking in technoculture turn us all into conspiracy theorists, ... as it were, suspicious subjects who trust no one”.⁵⁷ What makes conspiracists, in the narrow sense of the term, different from the rest of us is that they take this side of our subjectivity more at its word.

Conspiracism as Yet Another Type False Clarity?

How, then, does conspiracism relate to the ethos of transparency? At first sight, it would appear to embrace its principles, striving to bring the dark conspiracies to

⁵¹ BENTHAM, “Essay on Political Tactics”, p. 314.

⁵² TIMOTHY MELLE, *The Covert Sphere: Secrecy, Fiction, and the National Security State*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press 2012, p. 9.

⁵³ MELLE, *The Covert Sphere*, p. 29.

⁵⁴ DEAN, *Publicity's Secret*, p. 22.

⁵⁵ BENTHAM, “Essay on Political Tactics”, p. 312.

⁵⁶ DEAN, *Publicity's Secret*, p. 40.

⁵⁷ DEAN, *Publicity's Secret*, p. 48.

light. As Carey puts it, “conspiracy theories, like the social sciences, aim to make the world pellucid by revealing the secret structures of existence”.⁵⁸ According to Fluck, conspiracism “reflects the reality of an information society in which faith in clarity has been elevated to the status of a political ideal and defining feature of individual identity”.⁵⁹ In doing this, conspiracism even appears to follow the scientific principle of the fundamental knowability of the world by means of rational analysis. As Hofstadter, in his classic analysis, pointed out already, conspiracism is “intensely rationalistic” in that “it believes that it is up against an enemy who is as infallibly rational as he is totally evil, and it seeks to match his imputed total competence with its own, leaving nothing unexplained and comprehending all of reality in one overreaching, consistent theory.”⁶⁰

The difference between conspiracism and mainstream scientific or political thought thus seems to lie in the fact that the former is distrustful of the political and scientific institutions of the modern world in a more essential manner. As Fluck puts it:

... because conspiracy theorists do not believe the sources of clarity to lie in prevailing institutions, their attitude reflects the reality that many of the current structures of governance are experienced by large numbers of people as unresponsive or as a threat, and that this cannot be rectified simply by means of access to the information institutions themselves provide. In other words, it reflects the truth that technical knowledge is generally used to promote goals other than popular empowerment, that institutions of global governance are experienced as malicious or indifferent actors.⁶¹

Conspiracism understands that transparency cannot be achieved by making the institutions reveal their data, as each data set has to be selected and presented by someone. And if this “someone” is the institutions themselves, they will make sure that their true secrets remain unrevealed.

In this regard, Fluck admits, conspiracism does indeed see through the illusion of modern transparency. Nevertheless, while perhaps correctly diagnosing the alienating and unreliable character of modern institutions, conspiracism makes the mistake of replacing the standard ideal of transparency with yet another type of “false clarity”. Adorno and Horkheimer give modern anti-Semitic conspiracy theories as an example. In their view, their purpose is “to conceal domination in production” by blaming it on the Jew: “He is indeed the scapegoat, not only for individual manoeuvres and machinations but in the wider sense that the economic injustice of the whole class is attributed to him.”⁶² Thus, as Fluck comments, the complex and hard-to-grasp form

⁵⁸ CAREY, *Mistrust*, p. 102.

⁵⁹ FLUCK, “Theory, ‘Truthers’, and Transparency”, p. 71.

⁶⁰ RICHARD HOFSTADTER, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 1964, p. 36–37.

⁶¹ FLUCK, “Theory, ‘Truthers’, and Transparency”, p. 71.

⁶² ADORNO and HORKHEIMER, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 142.

of “exploitation involved in the capitalist system” is, in a simplifying manner, falsely replaced “by readymade categories and stereotypes, a process which reflects the reification involved in enlightened thinking in general”.⁶³ In this regard, conspiracism presents no real alternative to the falsely transparent world of modern capitalism. While criticising the hegemonic epistemology of transparency, it does not seriously question some of its main principles.

Conspiracism and the Limits of Transparency

However, while we may agree that conspiracism embraces the transparency ethos to some extent, the actual situation seems more complex. Fluck is talking about classic modern conspiracism, which amounted to “a paradoxically secure form of paranoia that bolstered one’s sense of identity”,⁶⁴ usually by engendering a sense of peril and putting the blame on a scapegoat, on “them” standing against “us”. In this case, the diagnosis of “false transparency” is perhaps appropriate.

As Knight and others have shown, however, in recent decades, these straightforward scapegoating narratives have been overshadowed by a new “postmodern” type of conspiracy discourse characterised by “a far more insecure version of conspiracy-infused anxiety”, which stirs up “a permanent uncertainty about fundamental issues of causality, agency, responsibility and identity”.⁶⁵ This recent type of conspiracism still attempts to understand the incredibly complex and unintelligible order of the late modern world by identifying a far simpler system of personified agents behind it, but what it achieves is the opposite: “an infinite hermeneutic of suspicion”.⁶⁶ The secret rulers of the world inevitably turn out to be more complex than they seemed at first. Every revealed secret usually points to yet another unrevealed one. A typical conspiracy website does not provide a single clear account of how things “really are” but offers a dazzling multitude of suggestions and possibilities that stimulate questions instead of providing unambiguous answers. The result is not a feeling of clarity but rather that of catching a glimpse of another secret level of reality whose exact mechanisms are yet to be discovered.

A good analysis of this side of late modern conspiracism has been given by Fenster, who reads it as a manifestation of “a popular desire to reconstruct the master narrative” (2008, p. 95) in the postmodern era that is no longer capable of believing in such narratives. In effect, the conspiracist desire is perpetually frustrated. Whenever a possible conspiracy is discovered, it faces a number of problems and obstacles that require further search. “Conspiracy theory demands continual interpretation. There

⁶³ FLUCK, “Theory, ‘Truthers’, and Transparency”, p. 71.

⁶⁴ KNIGHT, *Conspiracy Culture*, p. 4.

⁶⁵ KNIGHT, *Conspiracy Culture*, p. 4; cf. JARON HARAMBAM, *Contemporary Conspiracy Culture: Truth and Knowledge in an Era of Epistemic Instability*, London and New York: Routledge 2020, p. 59–66.

⁶⁶ KNIGHT, *Conspiracy Culture*, p. 28.

is always something more to know about an alleged conspiracy”.⁶⁷ In the end, the search turns out to be endless. “The conspiracy is an enormous structure always on the horizon of interpretation, always the cause of everything, always the point toward which interpretation moves but which it never fully reaches”.⁶⁸

Dean goes even further and stresses that conspiracism is fundamentally not about the desire for totalising grand narratives but about doubts and scepticism: “conspiracy thinking is so uncertain that one is rarely fully convinced; instead, one becomes involved in a reiterative back-and-forth that mobilises doubt and reassurance into a never-ending, never-reconciled account of possibility.”⁶⁹ In effect, “conspiracy theory rejects the myth of a transparent public sphere, a sphere where others can be trusted, ... although it continues to rely on revelation”.⁷⁰ This does not mean that postmodern conspiracism goes against the rational values of the Enlightenment. Instead, it takes the Enlightenment system of publicity at its word, thereby revealing its unspoken premises – namely, the fact that it is based on distrust and on revealing secrets. “We might say that by reiterating the compulsions of publicity, conspiracy’s attempts to uncover the secret assemble information regarding the contexts, terms, and conditions of surveillance, discovery, and visibility in a culture in which democracy is embedded in a system of distrust”.⁷¹

Conspiracism “challenges the presumption that what we see on the screens, what is made visible in traditional networks and by traditional authorities, is not itself invested in specific lines of authorisation and subjection”.⁷² It draws attention to the fact that the transparency game of rational citizens democratically debating public matters on the basis of trustworthy information is really just an appealing fantasy, that there are other, opaque factors at play, that power always “exceeds the conditions that authorise its use”.⁷³ We all know that politicians occasionally abuse their power, that shady backstage deals tend to be more important than public proclamations, that public contracts are sometimes concluded to benefit private companies, that opaque multinational corporations and financial groups nowadays have more power than state governments, that the covert state sector has constantly been growing since WWII. To most of us, however, these are only irregular excesses that do not disprove the notion of democratic politics based on transparent public debate. On the other hand, conspiracists have lost precisely this fundamental faith in the system. In this sense, they have indeed “taken the red pill” and “seen through the matrix”, as they frequently claim.

This is not to say we should take conspiracy theories at face value. They are usually not correct in the particular contents of their revelations but just in pointing out the

⁶⁷ FENSTER, *Conspiracy Theories*, p. 94.

⁶⁸ FENSTER, *Conspiracy Theories*, p. 94, p. 103–104.

⁶⁹ DEAN, *Publicity’s Secret*, p. 93.

⁷⁰ JODI DEAN, “Theorizing Conspiracy Theory”, *Theory & Event* 4 (3, 2000), available online at <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/32599>.

⁷¹ DEAN, *Publicity’s Secret*, p. 53.

⁷² DEAN, *Publicity’s Secret*, p. 53.

⁷³ DEAN, *Publicity’s Secret*, p. 50.

limits of the official system. The concrete narratives through which they try to grasp what is going on behind the scenes should rather be understood in the manner of dream images that, in a condensed manner, symbolise tensions and paradoxes too complex to be expressed directly. The dream-like symbolic nature of these images explains their inconsistent plurality. Are Covid vaccines, for instance, risky for their side effects? Do they modify our DNA? Has the pandemic been artificially induced by Bill Gates to double the profits of the vaccination companies he has invested in? Do the vaccinated emit a dangerous spike protein? Or do the vaccines contain microchips through which large businesses will be able to control us via a 5G network? Far from providing a satisfactory account of what is really going on, these theories rather function as experimental fantasy images that obsessively circle around specific issues, testifying to their essential opacity and elusiveness. Their chief effect is the breakdown of the dominant narratives that define the symbolic order. “Rather than mapping totality, conspiracy’s questions and insinuations disrupt the presumption that there is a coherent, knowable reality that could be mapped”.⁷⁴

In other words, while seemingly desiring transparency, in actuality, present-day conspiracism helps to highlight the opacity of the postmodern world. In conspiracy narratives, the globalised order of late capitalism appears governed by shadowy international forces whose precise workings are impossible to comprehend fully. “Conspiracy theory represents the desire for, and the possibility of, a knowable political order; yet, in its disturbing revelations and uncertain resolution it also implicitly recognises the difficulty of achieving transparent, equitable power relations in a capitalist democracy”.⁷⁵ What conspiracism “reveals”, therefore, is a fundamental mysteriousness implicit in late modern institutions. Behind the seemingly transparent surface of the social order, it postulates a secret “true reality” that turns out to be ultimately unfathomable. Conspiracism does not offer final answers and quiet repose. It always promises more than it can deliver. It always points beyond itself. It implies a kind of transcendence.

Conspiracism as an Occult Cosmology

It is fitting in this regard that West and Sanders treat conspiracism as one type of “occult cosmologies”, i.e. cosmologies that “suggest that there is more to what happens in the world than meets the eye – that reality is anything but ‘transparent’, ... that power sometimes hides itself from view, ... that it conspires to fulfill its objectives.”⁷⁶ Conspiracism would thus be akin to such phenomena as witchcraft, magic or divination.

The parallels between conspiracism and witchcraft are particularly striking. In both cases, we are dealing with narratives of malevolent agents acting in secrecy while appearing friendly and benevolent on the surface. Therefore, it is not surprising

⁷⁴ DEAN, *Publicity’s Secret*, p. 51.

⁷⁵ FENSTER, *Conspiracy Theories*, p. 150.

⁷⁶ WEST and SANDERS, “Power Revealed and Concealed in the New World Order”, p. 6.

that these two types of occult discourses are frequently combined in Africa. A detailed analysis of popular narratives concerning HIV in Zimbabwe, for example, has shown that witchcraft and conspiracy explanations function as two complementary types of occult causes. Witchcraft “is invoked in order to explain hardship inflicted on an individual or a small group of related people”, while “conspiracy theories are more commonly invoked to explain collective woes, explaining why larger social, regional, ethnic, racial, or other groups encounter misfortune”.⁷⁷ It seems, therefore, that witchcraft and conspiracism are closely related phenomena, the difference between them lying chiefly in the type of images they choose and the scale of issues they address.

At first sight, witchcraft or magic might seem to have little to do with modernity and its ideology of transparency. Yet, as many anthropologists have shown, these occult phenomena flourish outside the Western world under the very conditions of late modernity and may often be shown as its curious reflections.⁷⁸ West and Sanders argue “that modernity is experienced by many people as a fragmented, contradictory, and disquieting process that produces untenable situations and unfulfilled desires and that power is, in the modern world, perceived by many to be something that lies beyond their grasp. Modernity, paradoxically, generates the very opacities of power that it claims to obviate.”⁷⁹

Occult cosmologies may thus be seen as imaginative attempts at capturing this strange opacity that modern transparency casts as its shadow. In Africa, their revival in the 1990s was closely tied with the advent of a globalised neoliberal economy which has brought unfettered new desires and possibilities of money-making and consumption but which, at the same time, has not provided sufficient economic means to attain these ends.⁸⁰ The result is a world in which a handful of people can mysteriously enjoy suspicious wealth and power at the expense of the majority. Popular narratives of witches killing their victims and turning them into zombies who work for them at night, depriving the living of work opportunities, thus serve as “an apt image of the inflating occult economies of postcolonial Africa, of their ever more brutal forms of extraction”.⁸¹ Stories of this kind indeed bring to light the exploitative nature of global capitalism, though what they reveal is precisely the enigmatic ruthlessness of its power.

⁷⁷ ALEXANDER RÖDLACH, *Witches, Westerners, and HIV: AIDS & Cultures of Blame in Africa*, Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press 2006, p. 168.

⁷⁸ COMAROFF and COMAROFF, “Occult Economies and the Violence of Abstraction”, passim; PETER GESCHIERE, *The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa*, trans. by PETER GESCHIERE and JANET ROITMAN, Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press 1997, passim; HENRIETTA L. MOORE and TODD SANDERS (eds.), *Magical Interpretations, Material Realities: Modernity, Witchcraft and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa*, London: Routledge 2001, passim; JANE PARISH, “From Liverpool to Freetown: West African Witchcraft, Conspiracy and the Occult”, *Culture and Religion* 6 (3, 2005): p. 353–368.

⁷⁹ WEST and SANDERS, “Power Revealed and Concealed in the New World Order”, p. 16.

⁸⁰ COMAROFF and COMAROFF, “Occult Economies and the Violence of Abstraction”, passim.

⁸¹ COMAROFF and COMAROFF, “Occult Economies and the Violence of Abstraction”, p. 290.

Significantly, it is not just the merciless economic behaviour of international corporations that brings about the occult response. The same type of reaction frequently occurs in connection with humanitarian and development aid, which also offers salvific promises and involves large wealth transfers. Well-intentioned as such activities are, they “nonetheless include opaque bureaucratic practices and competition over knowledge, scarce resources, and institutional territory” and can thus “produce similar phenomena as has been described regarding contemporary witchcraft”.⁸² Thus, e.g., the humanitarian aid in Haiti in the 1990s frequently triggered competition between the aided victims, leading to witchcraft accusations both among the victims and against the NGO personnel. These were caused not just by the scarcity of resources but also by the fact that the humanitarian agencies typically reduce the unique subjectivity of the victims to “trauma portfolios” that circulate “as commodities in the humanitarian market”, serving as “a fund-raising tool to evoke compassion in distant charitable donors”,⁸³ thus repeating what Adorno and Horkheimer have identified as the fundamental problem of transparent modernity.

This means that the opaque shadow is cast not just by the morally suspect transparency preached by the neoliberal defenders of free trade but also by the well-meant idealistic type of transparency professed by liberal activists. In other words, the shadow is not just a problem of one possible form modernity may take (that produced by global capitalism) but seems inherent in the basic modern principles of rationality, equality, openness, human rights and inclusivity. In the end, these produce a reified and non-transparent system of bureaucracy, and they are often directly connected to the global market, serving as its charitable face compensating for its ruthlessness.

Viewed from this perspective, Western postmodern conspiracism appears as yet another way of articulating the opaque paradoxes generated by transparent modernity. In this case, the paradoxes are usually tied to the economic order in a less direct manner, one that concerns cultural identity more than material deprivation. They are connected with what Bauman calls “liquid modernity”, a de-localised world ruled by the volatile global capital which calls for permanent mobility and flexibility, a world in which “society is no longer protected by the state” but “is now exposed to the rapacity of forces it does not control”.⁸⁴ It is these powerful but, at the same time, anonymous and largely invisible forces that present-day Western conspiracy narratives try to name and reveal. George Soros, one of the frequent conspiracy villains, is their perfect mythical representative: while famous for propagating the transparent democratic values of “open society”, he is one of the best-known representatives of global capital, notorious for his 1992 speculative attack on the British pound that led to its drastic devaluation, thus encapsulating the paradoxes inherent in late modernity.

⁸² ERICA C. JAMES, “Witchcraft, Bureaucraft, and the Social Life of (US)AID in Haiti”, *Cultural Anthropology* 27 (1, 2012): p. 51–52.

⁸³ JAMES, “Witchcraft, Bureaucraft, and the Social Life of (US)AID in Haiti”, p. 52.

⁸⁴ ZYGMUNT BAUMAN, *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty*, Cambridge and Malden: Polity 2007, p. 25.

Soros is a good illustration of both the similarities and differences between conspiracism and witchcraft accusations.⁸⁵ Both locate the source of evil in a concrete person that deliberately uses occult powers to inflict harm on others. However, while witchcraft accuses a member of the local community that one knows in person, conspiracy imagery tries to capture the occult side of the global powers of late modernity, blaming distant personalities of global influence and renown, who are furthermore usually seen as representing larger secret groups of global elites. The second chief difference lies in the type of imagery: where witchcraft accusations draw from traditional premodern sources, envisaging the witches as using herbs and spells, conspiracism draws from modern science, telling stories of biological warfare laboratories and microchip surveillance systems. Indeed, most of the more elaborate conspiracy theories actually include a social sciences-inspired critique of the late modern finance industry and multinational corporations.⁸⁶

What conspiracism, witchcraft, magic or divination share is not just a concern with the operation of mysterious unseen powers but also a peculiar epistemic stance. As various anthropologists have shown,⁸⁷ witchcraft or magic are rarely firmly believed in. A typical attitude is rather a mixture of belief and scepticism. This ambivalence is not just a sign of epistemic weakness or deficiency. It is an attitude that is actually quite adequate in relation to powers that are shadowy and non-transparent in principle. As Kyriakides claims: “Mystical forces and evil spirits do not take form through devout belief (or the lack of it), but through the confusion that surrounds the possibility and condition of their existence and purpose. It is the ambiguity of both belief and disbelief that brings spirits and witches into being.”⁸⁸

A similar epistemic ambiguity pertains to conspiracism. As Knight has shown, postmodern conspiracy culture “oscillates between the hoax and the accurate revelation, between the serious and the ironic, between the factual and the fictional, and between the literal and the metaphorical. In many instances consumers of conspiracy don’t really believe what they buy, but neither do they really disbelieve it either.”⁸⁹ We may speculate that, just as in the case of magic and witchcraft, this epistemic stance reveals something essential about the nature of the mysterious powers that conspiracists address. It shows conspiracism as indirectly doubting the modern project of rational transparency, drawing attention to its shadows.

⁸⁵ Cf. RÖDLACH, *Witches, Westerners, and HIV*, p. 159–169.

⁸⁶ HARAMBAM, *Contemporary Conspiracy Culture*, p. 67–70, 72–75.

⁸⁷ E.g. JEANNE FAVRET-SAADA, “Death at Your Heels”, *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 2 (1, 2012): p. 45–53; DAVID GRAEBER, *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value: The False Coin of our own Dreams*, New York: Palgrave 2001, p. 240–245; RICHARD DENIS GERARD IRVINE and THEODOROS KYRIAKIDES, “Just Out of Reach: An Ethnographic Theory of Magic and Rationalisation”, *Implicit Religion* 21 (2, 2019): p. 202–222.

⁸⁸ THEODOROS KYRIAKIDES, “Jeanne Favret-Saada’s Minimal Ontology: Belief and Disbelief of Mystical Forces, Perilous Conditions, and the Opacity of Being”, *Religion and Society* 7 (1, 2016): p. 75.

⁸⁹ KNIGHT, *Conspiracy Culture*, p. 47–48.

Conspiracism and the Opacity of the Subject

Conspiracism is opposed to transparency in yet another way in that many of its narratives express anxiety concerning the autonomy and intimate opacity of the subject. Nowadays, this is best visible in various Covid-19 anti-vax narratives, which frequently picture the vaccine as invading the subject's privacy and implanting some electronic tracking or controlling device within it.

By highlighting these anxieties, conspiracism draws attention to yet another fundamental paradox of transparency, namely the fact that it concerns not only institutions but ourselves as well. In the modern world, we are not just subjects searching for information but also the objects of this search. We are being recorded by surveillance cameras; we are listed in various databases; Google and Facebook know our interests and shopping habits. We have been reduced to information, feeling alienated and threatened. "Surveillance cameras, like the bureaucratic systems of rationality and efficiency they are meant to serve, aim for transparency but breed secrecy and paranoia".⁹⁰

Conspiracists are not the only ones drawing attention to this problem. Personal data protection is a general issue today. We want the world to be transparent, but we do not want anyone to spy on us. The mainstream approach tries to reconcile these demands by insisting that institutions should be transparent, whereas individuals should have their privacy protected. We are aware, of course, that this is frequently not the case, that institutions are more powerful than individuals, and as a result, the surveillance cameras are often pointed downward on us rather than upward on them. However, we see this just as a defect to be corrected by political action. In other words, we accept the general rules of the game, hoping to deal with its shortcomings through piecemeal reforms. Yet, it is questionable whether the private sphere can be shielded from the public gaze that easily. After all, we have seen that the internalisation of the public gaze has been a critical component of the transparency ethos from the very beginning. And the "digital panopticon" of computer technologies and social media certainly does not make the task of shielding any simpler.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the conspiracists again take a more radical course, rejecting the rules of the game and seeing our system's inconsistencies as insurmountable. They chose extremely vivid images to express the danger that full transparency will deprive us of the mysterious core of our unique subjectivity. In the baroque version of David Icke, for instance, Covid vaccines contain nanotechnological receiver-transmitters designed to connect us through a 5G smart grid to the artificial intelligence that is meant to replace "the human mind as we know it", disconnect us from our "greater consciousness" and turn us into robots.⁹¹

⁹⁰ IVAKHIV, "Occult Geographies, or the Promises of Spectres", p. 125.

⁹¹ DAVID ICKE, "What's Going On? This Is Going On" [online], June 2021, accessed 24 July 2021, available online at <http://davidicke.com/2021/06/18/whats-going-on-this-is-going-on-david-icke-dot-connector-videocast>.

The paradox is intensified by the fact that while fearing excessive surveillance, at the same time, we actually *want* to be watched. As Jodi Dean claims, modern subjectivity is characterised not just by the desire to know more and reveal secrets but also by the drive to be known ourselves. We all want to be “celebrities”. In part, this is our reaction to the fact that while we are well aware that we are known and information-alised, “one is never sure how one is being known, one is never certain of one’s place in the symbolic order”.⁹² In response, we are driven to make ourselves visible over and over again in a controlled manner, thus desperately trying to take charge of our identity in the symbolic order. Social media give us ample opportunities for self-presentation, revealing our feelings, voicing our opinions, and documenting our meals and travels. The result of this theatre of self-presentations, however, is that they are turned into banalities (into pornography, as Han would say). One ends up as media “content”, and thus “one realises that one may well be unique but trivial. As content, one doesn’t have a secret that marks the mysterious kernel of one’s being”.⁹³ In effect, we worry that “those precious dimensions of ourselves that we hold most dear will be stained and tarnished by circulating as so much Net drivel. Yet, at the same time, we worry that our secrets won’t be revealed, that who we are isn’t significant enough to merit a byte of attention”.⁹⁴

For this reason, the conspiracists are desperate to defend this “mysterious kernel of one’s being” – despite the fact that they are “celebrities” like everyone else. The paradox is well-expressed by a Czech meme poking fun at anti-vaxxers that circulated on Facebook in Spring 2021:

You let your smartphone scan your fingerprint and do your facial recognition. In your running app, you enter your weight, height, and age, and the app knows how fast you walk and run. You buy bus and flight tickets through your smartphone. You share all your locations. You take pictures of all the meals you eat. Your smartwatch knows your pulse and your blood pressure. From your credit card, one can find the brand of your toothpaste and toilet paper. And now you are scared to death because you do not want a microchip from Bill Gates?⁹⁵

Ostensibly, the meme reveals the irrationality of vaccination fears, but it unwittingly captures their internal logic well. The fear is precisely a reaction to all the other self-revealing things we do and through which we gradually get entangled in a system of transparency that is scary in effect. While every one of those things is harmless and voluntary, all together, they create something frightening. Narratives of micro-chipped vaccines help to articulate this kind of anxiety. They serve as symbols capable

⁹² DEAN, *Publicity’s Secret*, p. 123.

⁹³ DEAN, *Publicity’s Secret*, p. 129.

⁹⁴ DEAN, *Publicity’s Secret*, p. 1.

⁹⁵ JAKUB HORÁK, “Iluze o soukromí, jdou po nás, jdou” [online], E15.cz, 18 June 2021, accessed May 2022, available online at <https://www.e15.cz/nazory/jakub-horak-iluze-o-soukromi-jdou-po-nas-jdou-1381451>.

of condensing in one image disparate meanings and feelings that, in real life, are hard to reconcile.

Conclusion

I have tried to show that while transparency functions as a consensual magic concept that is generally seen as entirely positive, it does cast various shadows that undermine its promises. While seemingly revealing things in a neutral manner, in fact, it always distorts what it reveals, whether by turning politics into PR campaigns or, on a more fundamental level, by reifying the world, reducing human beings to data and functional elements in a system, and paving the way for the opaque forces of the global market. Moreover, transparency is actually grounded in secrets, for it is not a static state of translucence but a dynamic process of making secret things public. It is driven by a desire for revelation that can never be satisfied and that creates a system of distrust, though it manages to do so in a manner that turns the never-ending disclosures into media entertainment. Last but not least, because of transparency, we are not just subjects searching for information but also the objects of this search, having ourselves been reduced to information and feeling alienated and threatened as a result.

Conspiracism may be seen as an imaginative attempt at articulating these paradoxes, drawing attention to the disquieting occult forces operating behind the facade of our transparent world. While most of us are somehow able to downplay the inconsistencies of late modernity, clinging to the fantasy of society based on a transparent public debate of rational citizens, conspiracists are no longer able to play this game. The gaps in the social order are too big for them to be convincingly plastered over by hegemonic narratives. Conspiracists are entangled in the modern ideology of transparency and still play by its rules, striving to bring secrets to light. At the same time, however, they knock against the boundaries of the whole system, making explicit its unspoken premises in all their paradoxicality. While desiring transparency, they actually help to bring out the fundamental mysteriousness implicit in late modern institutions. Their allegations function as disturbing dream images that incoherently circle around various problematic issues, disrupting the official narratives and revealing the dark cracks in the system, though without ever reaching any satisfactory conclusions.⁹⁶

My argument has some interesting implications for dealing with conspiracism. It is sometimes suggested that making our institutions more transparent will lessen the need for conspiracy theories.⁹⁷ I am sceptical about this. What conspiracists long to

⁹⁶ Cf. HRISTOV, *Impossible Knowledge*, p. 21–24.

⁹⁷ JAN-WILLEM VAN PROOIJEN, “Empowerment as a Tool to Reduce Belief in Conspiracy Theories”, in USCINSKI (ed.), *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them*, p. 432–442; JOSEPH E. USCINSKI, “Conspiracy Theories for Journalists: Covering Dubious Ideas in Real Time”, in USCINSKI (ed.), *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them*, p. 443–451.

expose is not really the actual working of our institutions but rather the principal limits of the entire system. They reveal the shadows that our transparent institutions cast. It is not likely, therefore, that more transparency would help. Instead, we might perhaps take the extravagant images of conspiracy theories as an opportunity to reflect on the limitations of transparency. What does it hide behind its constant revelations? What undesirable effects does it have? How does it impoverish our social experience? What tensions does it create? Seriously facing these questions will perhaps not decrease the attraction of conspiracy theories straight away, but in the long run, it may contribute to social stability more than idealistic attempts to defend the values of the liberal-democratic consensus.

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Czech Conspiracy Websites as Agents of Illiberalism: Case study of Parliamentary Elections 2021

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Abstract: In the past several years, conspiracy websites emerged as relevant actors in Czech uncivil society. The article uses the lens of the concept of illiberalism to explain their ideological position, relation to the liberal democratic system and understanding of politics. The analysis of their reporting about the Czech Parliamentary elections 2021 allowed the article to uncover their allies and enemies and describe the role they want to play in Czech politics.

Keywords: conspiracy websites; Czech politics; parliamentary elections 2021; illiberalism; ideology

Abstrakt: V minulých letech se konspirační weby etablovaly jako relevantní aktér české ne-občanské společnosti. Článek za pomoci konceptu iliberalismu osvětluje jejich ideové pozice, vztah k liberální demokracii a chápání politiky. Prostřednictvím analýzy jejich publikační činnosti před parlamentními volbami 2021 článek definuje jejich spojence a protivníky a popisuje jako roli by tyto aktéři chtěli hrát v české politice.

Klíčová slova: konspirační weby; česká politika; parlamentní volby 2021; iliberalismus, ideologie

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Introduction¹

In the past decade, global politics has undergone significant changes manifested by democratic backsliding, a fragmentation of the international order, and a reversal of economic globalisation. These trends were associated with the emergence of new political actors questioning the existing status quo and arguing for significant revision of the current institutional setting as well as the ideological principles guiding their functions. Political scientists trying to make sense of these developments came up with several theoretical frameworks describing the nature of newly emerging political forces.² This article would like to position itself within the framework of illiberalism which proved to be particularly useful for encapsulating the article's main topic – the ideological positions of conspiracy websites. The concept of illiberalism proved useful, especially due to its ability to pinpoint positive values that newly emerging political actors aim to achieve, allowing for their more nuanced and less normatively biased analysis.

Concurrently, the space in which political debate is held has also changed due to the transformation of the information space. The public debate has become significantly democratised due to the widespread online connection, the emergence of social media, and the decline of traditional gatekeepers such as the mainstream media.³ This development meant not only a change in the distribution and processing of information but also influenced how political forces get organised in society. The possibility of creating an online community with similar values and seeking to achieve the same goals also opened the doors for social forces criticising the existing liberal democratic system. In the Czech context, the notable actors of such an “uncivil society” are conspiracy websites which have become one of the crucial topics of the domestic public debate in the past several years concerning disinformation.⁴

The article aims to interconnect the topics mentioned above and try to understand the ideological positions of Czech conspiracy websites in the framework of the concept of illiberalism. Such an approach helps to cover the blind spots of both areas since, in the Czech context, the term illiberalism was used primarily for political

¹ The data were gathered within the framework of the research project „Czech Elections in the Era of Disinformation“ (see JONÁŠ SYROVÁTKA, and KRISTÝNA ŠEFCÍKOVÁ, „České volby v éře dezinformací: Parlamentní volby 2021“ [online], *Prague Security Studies Institute*, December 2021, accessed March 2022, available online at https://www.pssi.cz/download//docs/9417_parliamentary-elections-2021-analysis.pdf). Since several analysed websites were blocked, the access to original articles might be limited.

² GREGOR FITZL, JUERGEN MACKERT and BRYAN TURNER (eds), *Populism and the Crisis of Democracy*, London: Routledge 2018. 194 p.

³ POMERANTSEV, PETER, *This Is Not Propaganda: Adventures in the War Against Reality*, New York: PublicAffairs 2019, 288 p.

⁴ JAKUB JETMAR, „Jakub Eberle: „Spousta lidí nálepkuje jako dezinformace cokoliv, co se jim nelíbí“ [online], *Mediář*, June 2021, accessed December 2022, available online at <https://www.mediar.cz/spousta-lidi-nalepkuje-jako-dezinformace-cokoliv-co-se-jim-nelibi/>.

parties⁵, and conspiracy websites were perceived mostly in the context of the Russian influence operations.⁶ The article will expand upon existing knowledge by providing a different context for interpreting the ideological position of conspiracy websites and putting these political actors into the broader context of developments in the region. The article uses the Czech Parliamentary elections 2021 as the context for conducting this analysis since conspiracy websites became involved in the debate about the election, and it was possible to evaluate their ideological position based on their approach to the political parties.

The article will proceed to present its findings as follows. Firstly, it will describe the evolution of the concept of illiberalism, which served as an underlying theoretical framework for the analysis, and highlight its intersection with the dissemination of conspiracy theories. Secondly, the article elaborates on the definition of conspiracy websites in the context of the Czech information space, which allows for defining the units of analysis. The third section deals with the research method and explains the underlying rationale for selecting particular websites and texts included in the researched dataset. Finally, the article will elaborate on findings about the understanding of Parliamentary elections 2021 by conspiracy websites. The sections focused on the overall framing of the event, the role of the conspiracy websites in relation to the electoral process and the depiction of positive and hostile political forces. These steps will help underline the usefulness of the concept of illiberalism in understanding the ideological standing of Czech conspiracy websites.

Illiberalism, populism and conspiracy theories

The end of the Cold War accelerated the so-called “third wave of democratisation”, which meant the dismantling of authoritarian regimes all over the world and the introduction of the norms of liberal democracy.⁷ However, this process varied significantly among various countries, and therefore political scientists started to contemplate how to label states in transition which were neither fully democratic nor authoritarian. The text most relevant for the purposes of this article is Zakaria’s paper from 1997, in which he suggested that such states which held elections but lacked an institutional system of checks and balances or disregarded human rights should be called “illiberal democracies”. While the term itself did not really catch at the time, his central premise – the separation of democratic processes from the endorsement

⁵ For example VLASTIMIL HAVLÍK and VÍT HLOUŠEK, „Differential Illiberalism: Classifying Illiberal Trends in Central European Party Politics“, In ASTRID LORENZ and LISA H. ANDERS (eds.), *Illiberal Trends and Anti-EU Politics in East Central Europe*, Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, p. 111–136.

⁶ For example „Čeští elfové“ [online], *Cesti-elfove.cz*, 2022, accessed December 2022, available online at <https://cesti-elfove.cz/>.

⁷ SAMUEL P. HUNTINGTON, “Democracy’s third wave.” *Journal of Democracy* 2 (2, 1991): p. 12–34.

of liberal values – served as fertile ground for the debate about political movements that started to emerge around a decade and a half later.⁸

Interestingly, the term was not rediscovered by academics, but Prime Minister Viktor Orbán used it in a speech in 2015 when he labelled the regime he would like to establish in Hungary as an illiberal democracy. Some researchers utilised this trend to describe the changes in countries' governmental practices and institutional settings, namely in Central and Eastern Europe.⁹ For others, this term was not as interesting as a tool for describing the political regime but for defining the ideology that emerged globally as an alternative against the dominating liberalism. Szelényi and Csillag defined illiberalism as a “post-communist neo-conservative ideology” which “emphasises the value of patriotism, religion and traditional family values.” While they derived their conclusion primarily from the Hungarian case, they also noted that this thinking strongly resembles the opinions of socially conservative neoconservatives in the USA.¹⁰ Therefore, it is unsurprising that this concept also proliferated in the US when it was developed, particularly by Marlene LaRuelle. She further contextualised it by placing the emergence of illiberalism into a specific moment of crisis of liberal democracy in the second decade of the 21st century. In LaRuelle's opinion, this fluid ideology develops as an alternative to the dominating liberalism in countries which experienced failure when applying its recipes for the development of society. The alternative approach championed by proponents of illiberalism advocates for the majoritarian principles in politics, a respect for traditional hierarchies, and a nation-centric and sovereign state. An important feature of this ideology – which is different from traditional conservatism – is its radicality since it advocates for a shift from the current liberal political order and a return to the past.¹¹

LaRuelle's active mapping of existing research initiatives operating with the term illiberalism also allows us to see trending research themes in this field.¹² Some researchers focusing on Central Europe also took into account the impact of changing political situation on the information space.¹³ However, a link with another trending research topic was missing – the emergence of conspiracy theories in the online information space. This is quite surprising, given that illiberal politicians often use conspiracy theories in their communication. Orbán endorsing the conspiracy theories

⁸ FAREED ZAKARIA, “The Rise of Illiberal Democracy”, *Foreign Affairs* 76 (6, 1997): p. 22–43.

⁹ YASCHA MOUNK, *The People vs. Democracy*, Cambridge, USA: Harvard University Press 2018, 393 p.

¹⁰ IVAN SZELÉNYI, and TOMÁS CSILLAG, “Drifting from Liberal Democracy: Neo-Conservative Ideology of Managed Illiberal Democratic Capitalism in Post-communist Europe”, *Intersections* 1 (1, 2015): 18–48.

¹¹ MARLENE LARUELLE, „Illiberalism: a conceptual introduction”, *East European Politics* 38 (2, 2022): p. 303–327.

¹² MARLENE LARUELLE (ed.), *Conversations on Illiberalism: Interviews with 50 Scholars*, Washington, D. C.: The George Washington University 2022, 289 p.

¹³ VÁCLAV ŠTĚTKA, JAROMÍR MAZÁK and LENKA VOCHOCOVÁ, “Nobody Tells us what to Write about: The Disinformation Media Ecosystem and its Consumers in the Czech Republic”, *Javnost – The Public* 28 (1, 2021): p. 90–109.

about the influence of Jewish billionaire George Soros is a case in point.¹⁴ However, it is possible to step aside and take advantage of another term that emerged to describe new political forces – populism. While currently, this term is discarded by most scientists as overly vague, in the past was used to describe mostly the same political actors as illiberalism does.¹⁵ Moreover, since scholars studying populism also focused on conspiracy theories, using their findings to draw hypotheses about the relation between this phenomenon and illiberalism is beneficial.¹⁶

In fact, the trope of populist rhetoric – a conflict between good people and the corrupted elite – is similar to the assumptions of conspiracy theories about hidden conspirators running various evil schemes. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that so-called populist politicians and their supporters often tend to promote conspiracy theories to achieve various objectives.¹⁷ Since illiberalism also operates with the notion of majoritarian support and presents itself as a radical alternative against the current elite – which is not understood not only as political but also cultural and intellectual – it is reasonable to assume that the tendency for endorsing conspiracy theories will be similar. The article supports this concept by providing a case study of Czech conspiracy websites, which can combine both themes in their content when talking about political developments.

Conspiracy websites, uncivil society and Czech politics

In the past several years, Czech expert – and partly also public – debate dedicated significant attention to disinformation. Research in this area generated a list of websites spreading falsehoods, anti-system narratives, and pro-Russian messages. This segment of the Czech information space – consisting of roughly 50 websites and associated profiles and groups on social media – turned into an interconnected ecosystem whose readers, content, and adherence to journalistic standards are significantly distinct from the consumers of mainstream media.¹⁸ In research, these platforms were labelled differently depending on the broader topic – over the years, the same

¹⁴ PETER PLENTA, “Conspiracy theories as a political instrument: utilisation of anti-Soros narratives in Central Europe”, *Contemporary Politics* 26 (5, 2020): p. 512–530.

¹⁵ LARUELLE, “Illiberalism: a conceptual introduction”, p. 303–327.

¹⁶ BRUNO C. SILVA, FEDERICO VEGETTI and LEVENTE LITTVAY, “The Elite Is up to Something: Exploring the Relation between Populism and Belief in Conspiracy Theories”, *Swiss Political Science Review* 23 (4, 2017): p. 423–43.

¹⁷ EIRIKUR BERGMANN, *The Politics of Misinformation*, Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan 2018, 152 p.

¹⁸ JONÁŠ SYROVÁTKA, JULIE VINKLOVÁ, LINDSAY WOJTULA and ALENA ZIKMUNDOVÁ, “Dezinformace jako byznys”, [online], *Prague Security Studies Institute*, March 2020, accessed March 2022, available online at https://www.pssi.cz/download//docs/8207_751-dezinformace-jako-byznys.pdf.

platforms were called anti-system¹⁹, pro-Russian²⁰, disinformation²¹, or conspiracy websites²². While all these terms reflect certain features of their natures, none can fully grasp their positioning towards Czech politics. For the purpose of the article, the author decided to use the term “conspiracy websites” to label the analysed platforms since this term seemed like the most logical choice given the nature of the journal’s focus and not as problematic and controversial as other alternatives.²³

Conspiracy websites, however, should be perceived in a more nuanced way than only as actors of information space – “alternative media” – producing content contrarian to the mainstream media. This perception is one-dimensional and ignores the fact that most authors publishing on these platforms are highly politically engaged and have the ambition not only to comment on ongoing events but actively shape them through their actions. However, they do not intend to do so primarily by entering into the political competition – with the notable exception of editor-in-chief of *Nová Republika* Ivan David, who ran on the ballot of the far-right Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD) party in the European elections of 2019 and eventually was elected into the European Parliament²⁴ – but by actively promoting particular ideas in the information space.

A notable example is the so-called lithium affair that occurred in 2017 during the campaign before the Parliamentary elections. The website *Aeronet* published the article claiming that the Social Democratic Party (ČSSD) was plotting with an Australian mining company to steal the Czech lithium stock. The article framed this situation as a repetition of the corrupt privatisation of the 1990s and the precious metal as the ultimate solution for all the troubles of the Czech economy.²⁵ The opponents of ČSSD then picked up the story – mainly the populist movement ANO – and used it

¹⁹ ROBERT MALECKÝ, “Mapa českých webových médií. Hlavní proud, bulvár, investigace, dezinformátoři a ti druzí” [online], *Hlídací Pes*, November 2018, accessed December 2022, available online at <https://hlidacipes.org/mapa-ceskych-webovych-medii-hlavni-proud-bulvar-investigace-dezinformatori-a-ti-druzi/>.

²⁰ PATRIK URBAN, “Dezinformacím se v Česku daří. Proruské internetové zpravodajství ovládá pár hráčů, dohromady se vyrovnají největším serverům v zemi” [online], *Hospodářské noviny*, February 2019, accessed December 2022, available online at <https://domaci.hn.cz/c1-66477660-dezinformacim-se-v-cesku-dari-proruske-internetove-zpravodajstvi-ovlada-par-hracu-dohromady-se-vyrovnavaji-nejvetsim-serverum-v-zemi>.

²¹ “Výroční zpráva o stavu české dezinformační scény pro rok 2021” [online], *Bezpečnostní centrum Evropské hodnoty*, June 2022, accessed December 2022, available online at <https://europeanvalues.cz/cs/annual-report-on-the-state-of-the-czech-disinformation-scene-for-2021/>.

²² „Atlas konspirací“ [online], *Altaskonspiraci.cz*, 2022, accessed March 2022, available online at https://ataskonspiraci.cz/Hlavn%C3%AD_strana.

²³ Terminological debate in detail in JONÁŠ SYROVÁTKA, “Dezinformační Babylon II. – jak (ne)nazývat šířitele dezinformací?” [online], *Aktuálně*, July 2019, accessed December 2022, available online at <https://blog.aktualne.cz/blogy/jonas-syrovatka.php?itemid=34417>.

²⁴ “Autoři: MUDr. Ivan David, CSc.” [online], *Nová Republika*, 2022, accessed December 2022, available online at <https://www.novarepublika.online/author/david>.

²⁵ MARTIN EHL, „Střed Evropy Martina Ehla: Aféra lithium – z proruských serverů až do sněmovny“ [online], *Hospodářské noviny*, November 2017, accessed March 2022, available online at <https://archiv.hn.cz/c1-65955890-stred-evropy-martina-ehla-afera-lithium-se-zrodila-na-konspiracnim-proruskem-serveru-pres-babise-se-dostala-do-snemovny-a-zrejme-ovlivnila-volby>.

to boost their election campaign and attract potential voters of the Social Democrats.²⁶ Aeronet continued to be actively involved in politics and expressed support primarily for the SPD. However, something happened in 2019, and the websites started to be very critical towards the SPD chairman Tomio Okamura.²⁷ The situation escalated further before the European elections in 2019 when Aeronet launched a negative campaign against several candidates on the SPD ballot. On the other hand, the website expressed support for Hynek Blaško – who was also running for SPD – which probably helped him get enough preferential votes to enter the European Parliament despite being on the bottom of the candidate list.²⁸ The approach of other conspiracy websites towards political events was definitely less expressive than in the case of Aeronet, but they also provided voting recommendations and regularly commented on current events.²⁹

These examples illustrate that the authors publishing on conspiracy websites perceived themselves as public intellectuals challenging the existing status quo and advocating for specific political agendas. To better understand the multifaceted nature of conspiracy websites, it is useful to revisit the concept of uncivil society, which was introduced in the early 2000s. This concept aimed to address the fact that freedom to organise in a democratic society also opens this possibility for forces hostile to the liberal political system, such as neo-Nazi movements.³⁰ Czech conspiracy websites were also considered in this conceptual framework since Guasti mentioned the website Protiproud in his account of movements protesting against migration from Muslim countries in 2015.³¹ The similarity with the underlining assumption of illiberalism – mainly a challenge to the existing political system and its ideological framework is obvious. However, as far as the author is aware, in the context of Central and Eastern Europe, the research on illiberalism was mostly limited to political parties and did not investigate its proponents in a broader social and intellectual milieu yet.³² The

²⁶ KATEŘINA ŠAFAŘÍKOVÁ, „Poslední váhající voliče vechnalo do náruče ano lithium“ [online], *Respekt*, October 2017, accessed March 2022, available online at <https://www.respekt.cz/politika/posledni-vahajici-volice-vechnalo-do-naruce-ano-lithium>.

²⁷ JONÁŠ SYROVÁTKA, „Aeronet, SPD a konec jednoho přátelství“ [online], *Aktuálně.cz*, March 2019, accessed March 2022, available online at <https://blog.aktualne.cz/blogy/jonas-syrovatka.php?itemid=33684>.

²⁸ JONÁŠ SYROVÁTKA, FILIP LUKÁŠ and NIKOS ŠTĚPÁNEK, „České volby v éře dezinformací: Evropské volby 2019“ [online], *Prague Security Studies Institute*, June 2001, accessed March 2022, available online at https://www.pssi.cz/download//docs/8412_705-evropske-volby-2019-analyza.pdf.

²⁹ Compare JONÁŠ SYROVÁTKA and JAROSLAV HROCH, „České volby v éře dezinformací: Prezidentské volby 2018“ [online], *Prague Security Studies Institute*, February 2018, accessed December 2022, available online at <https://www.pssi.cz/publications/32-czech-presidential-election-2018>.

³⁰ SIMONE CHAMBERS and JEFFREY KOPSTEIN, “Bad Civil Society”, *Political Theory* 29 (6, 2001): p. 837–865.

³¹ PETRA GUASTI, “Same Same, but Different: Domestic Conditions of Illiberal Backlash Against Universal Rights in the Czech Republic and Slovakia”, in ASTRID LORENZ and LISA H. ANDERS (eds.), *Illiberal Trends and Anti-EU Politics in East Central Europe*, Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan 2021, p. 179–206.

³² For overview of the field see LARUELLE, “Conversations on Illiberalism”, 289 p.

article aims to bridge this gap and argues that Czech conspiracy websites are one of the actors of an uncivil society guided by this ideological framework.

Research approach

While analysing the manifestations of illiberalism on conspiracy websites, the article used the dataset collected within the framework of the Parliamentary Elections 2021 in the Era of Disinformation project conducted by the think-tank Prague Security Studies Institute. The project aimed to map the content of articles published by Czech conspiracy websites related to political developments four weeks before the Parliamentary elections held on October 7th 2021. The dataset consisted of articles mentioning political parties participating in the elections published on selected conspiracy websites whose wider reach allowed them to shape the discussion in certain segments of the Czech information space.³³ The article utilises the part of the dataset – excluding the Russian propagandistic outlet Sputnik CZ due to its different nature – and focuses on eight websites run by Czech citizens – AC24, Aeronet, CZ24 News, Česko aktuálně, Nová Republika, New World Order Opposition (NWO), Právý prostor, and Protiproud. These websites are also notorious for their ambition to comment on or even shape the Czech public debate, and therefore it was natural to expect that they would try to play an active role before the Parliamentary elections.

In total, the analysed websites published 343 articles mentioning political parties participating in the elections. Upon reading them closely, one could identify the conspiracy websites' position towards specific parties and better understand their overall interpretation of politics. The analysis was informed by the conceptual framework of illiberalism as described above. Therefore, the main themes represented in the observed texts were the interpretation of the nature of the elections and the position of this event in relation to politics in general and the portrayal of negatively and positively perceived political forces, such as Czech political parties or other actors influencing the elections. Focusing on this area allows constructing the ideological map of the analysed conspiracy websites' attitudes. Importantly the article does not attempt to present the position of each of the websites individually but understands them as a coherent opinion group. At first glance, this approach might be problematic since it means that it groups quasi-media mimicking regular news outlets (like AC24 or CZ24 News) and opinionated websites with one dominating author (such as Aeronet) or multiple authors (for example Právý prostor) together.³⁴ This diversity, however, does not mean that conspiracy websites promote radically different opinions, as will be demonstrated in the next chapter.

³³ SYROVÁTKA and ŠEFČÍKOVÁ, „České volby v éře dezinformací“, https://www.pssi.cz/download//docs/9417_parliamentary-elections-2021-analysis.pdf.

³⁴ For more nuanced view on identity of conspiracy websites see SYROVÁTKA et al., “Dezinformace jako byznys”, https://www.pssi.cz/download//docs/8207_751-dezinformace-jako-byznys.pdf.

Moreover, it is possible to identify a certain sense of community in some of the articles on all conspiracy websites. For instance, Lubomír Man, in an article published on the website NWOO, claimed that the Czech media space is divided into two worlds that formed along the lines of the supporters of the opposing candidates in the Presidential elections 2018. However, in his mind, the world of Jiří Drahoš supporters controls the majority of the mainstream media, which means that the voices of supporters of Miloš Zeman remain underrepresented. Man claimed that alternative media – despite their limited financial and human resources – have to play the role of spokesmen of the silent majority and contribute to “awakening” society.³⁵ Recurring comments as such justify treating the selected group of conspiracy websites as the unit of analysis.

The selection of the period before the Parliamentary elections 2021 was rather pragmatic since this event was central to Czech political life, which means conspiracy websites focused on this specific topic. They also got the opportunity to clearly manifest their viewpoints while commenting on individual political parties participating in the elections. This fact was even more important since the political dynamic before the election suggested that it would be possible to observe a struggle over the leading position in the far-right part of the political spectrum as the dominant SPD was challenged by the newly established parties Tricolour and Volný blok.³⁶ As the next section shall explain, this competition was far less fierce than initially anticipated. However, its interpretation by conspiracy websites demonstrated that they were careful to get involved only with individual political actors and try to act as mediators and bridges between political actors. Such positioning reaffirms the notion that conspiracy websites are not solely information sources but seek to shape political development actively, and therefore it is logical to perceive them through the lens of uncivil society.

Parliamentary elections 2021 through the lens of conspiracy websites

The Czech parliamentary elections of 2021 can be perceived along several main conflicting lines. On one level, they represented a contest between the populist party ANO, led by billionaire and former Prime Minister Andrej Babiš, and his opponents gathered into two coalitions – the right-wing SPOLU (composed of the Civic Democrats (ODS), Christian Democrats, and TOP 09) and the centrist coalition of the Pirate Party and the Mayors and Independents. The conflict between these two camps

³⁵ LUBOMÍR MAN, “Jsme před volbami. A kdo jediný to do nás hustí?” [online], *Parlamentní listy*, September 2021, accessed March 2022, available online at <https://www.parlamentnilisty.cz/arena/nazory-a-petice/Lubomir-Man-Jsme-pred-volbami-A-kdo-jediny-to-do-nas-husti-678381>.

³⁶ MICHAELA RAMBOUSKOVÁ, “Volný blok jde do voleb s Dělnickou stranou. Okamura kandiduje sám” [online], *Seznam Zprávy*, June 2021, accessed December 2022, available online at <https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/volny-blok-jde-do-voleb-s-delnickou-stranou-okamura-kandiduje-sam-167843>.

was fierce. Babiš was depicted in the campaigns of both coalitions as the ultimate threat to Czech democracy, which might even endanger its affiliation with Western institutions such as the European Union (EU).³⁷ On the contrary, the party ANO launched a smear campaign against the Pirate Party, claiming that its representatives wanted to open the Czech Republic to migration from Muslim countries.³⁸ In the end, the coalition SPOLU won the elections by a very close margin and formed the government with the Pirate Party and the Mayors and Independents.³⁹

As mentioned in the previous chapter, another conflict defining the 2021 Parliamentary elections concerned the representation of anti-system voters. In the previous electoral cycle, this group was represented by the Communist Party and the SPD. However, before the elections, several parties competing for the same voters emerged – Tricolour, formed by former members of the ODS and presenting itself as the defender of conservative values; Příklad led by a former policeman who became famous due to his investigation of high-profile corruption cases; and Volný blok formed around the anti-vaccination movement.⁴⁰ For a while, it seemed that it would be possible to see a significant reshaping of the parties representing the anti-system sentiments in the Czech Parliament. In the end, skilful political campaigner and SPD chairman Okamura managed to maintain the SPD's position as the strongest anti-system party by gaining almost 10% of all votes. Other political subjects did significantly worse since none exceeded the 5% threshold for entering the Parliament. Therefore around 650 000 voters favouring anti-system parties did not get representation in the Parliament, which may have further exacerbated their frustrations with the democratic system.⁴¹ Both anti-system parties and conspiracy websites can significantly benefit from this situation.

Elections as a component of a global ideological struggle

Conspiracy websites suggested yet another way of interpreting the elections. For them, the key development did not occur in the Czech Republic – instead, local elections were merely a minor component of the ongoing global ideological struggle. This Manichean fight took place between two forces – the evil globalists and the good patriots. The globalist forces aimed to undermine the independence of national states

³⁷ “SPOLU odstartujeme velkou změnou” [online] ODS, September 2021, accessed December 2022, available online at <https://m.facebook.com/ods.cz/photos/a.398294272699/10159671934712700/>.

³⁸ DOMINIKA JEŘÁBKOVÁ, “Piráti nabízejí migrantům své chaty a chalupy, osočil Bartoše Babiš” [online], *Novinky*, October 2021, accessed December 2022, available online at <https://www.novinky.cz/clanek/domaci-pirati-nabizeji-migrantum-sve-chaty-a-chalupy-osocil-bartose-babis-40373747>.

³⁹ “Fiala představil rozložení budoucí vlády. Spolu bude mít deset postů, koalice STAN s Piráty sedm” [online] *iRozhlas*, November 2021, accessed December 2022, available at https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/vlada-petra-fialy-spolu-pirstan-koalice-rozdeleni-ministerstev_2111022231_kro.

⁴⁰ RAMBOUSKOVÁ, “Volný blok jde do voleb s Dělnickou stranou...”, <https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/volny-blok-jde-do-voleb-s-delnickou-stranou-okamura-kandiduje-sam-167843>.

⁴¹ “Konečné výsledky voleb” [online], *Seznam Zprávy*, June 2021, accessed December 2022, available online at <https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/p/vysledky-voleb/2021/parlamentni-volby/>.

and transfer all decision-making to the international level, to unelected bureaucratic structures – for instance, into the hands of the EU. Another goal was imposing their neo-Marxist cultural and ideological values on nations in Central and Eastern Europe, as they had already successfully done in the West. Against them stood patriotic forces championing national sovereignty, maintaining traditional values, building a strong and populous nation, and preventing migration from countries with different cultural values – meaning primarily Muslim ones. These points apparently resonate with the illiberal ideology's perception of a political struggle.⁴² This overarching framework defined the perception of individual political parties participating in the elections. Conspiracy websites formulated their approach to them based on assessing which side of the struggle between globalists and patriots they took. However, as demonstrated further, the websites were not entirely bound by this worldview and could also use their endorsement pragmatically based on how the political situation developed.

Conspiracy websites did not perceive themselves as impartial observers but openly declared that they were supporters of the patriotic forces. This acknowledged bias informed their understanding of the legitimacy of information sources which was associated with their ability to represent the interest of a particular social group. The most transparent definition of this position was demonstrated by the already mentioned Lubomír Man, who defined the conspiracy sources as the representatives of Miloš Zeman's voters.⁴³ This view also formed the perception of other actors in the information space, who – according to the conspiracy websites – could not stay neutral within the ongoing ideological struggle. The criticism directed at mainstream media – particularly the Czech Television – was motivated not only by their alleged subordination to globalists but also by their dishonesty since they did not admit this ideological position. Conspiracy websites claimed to uncover this trick and called the Czech Television out as one of the interest groups trying to gain more power in the political arena.⁴⁴ As mentioned previously, conspiracy websites felt overwhelmed due to a lack of resources and the domination of mainstream media in the information space. In their view, they were in the defensive position and under the attack of various arms of globalist forces.

However, this position of dissidents seemed to motivate them to persist, although it was sometimes possible to detect their frustration with the political developments.

⁴² VLASTIMIL PODRACKÝ, “Černá totalita začíná lži” [online], *Parlamentní listy*, September 2021, accessed March 2022, available online at <https://www.parlamentnilisty.cz/arena/nazory-a-petice/Vlastimil-Podracky-Cerna-totalita-zacina-lzi-678341> (The article was published at Právý prostor).

⁴³ MAN, “Jsme před volbami...”, <https://www.parlamentnilisty.cz/arena/nazory-a-petice/Lubomir-Man-Jsme-pred-volbami-A-kdo-jediny-to-do-nas-husti-678381>.

⁴⁴ MICHAL SEMÍN, “Předvolební demokratická agonie: Naprogramování moderátorů. Vzhůru do technologického gulagu? Skutečná a zástupná témata voleb. ČT je další stranou usilující o moc. Kdo je tady loutkovodíčem? Budoucnost...” [online], *Protiproud.info*, October 2021, accessed March 2022, available online at <https://protiproud.info/politika/6062-predvolebni-demokraticka-agonie-naprogramovani-moderatori-vzhuru-do-technologickeho-gulagu-skutecna-a-zastupna-temata-voleb-ct-je-dalsi-stranou-usilujici-o-moc-kdo-je-tady-loutkovodcem-budoucnost.htm>.

This feeling was widespread after the announcement of the election results since the coalition government of SPOLU, the Pirate Party, and the Mayors and Independents was the worst possible outcome for conspiracy websites. Since these parties were perceived as globalist puppets, the websites predicted that the new government would pursue their agenda and try to introduce all these terrible things we can see in Western Europe into the Czech Republic.⁴⁵ In order to overcome their frustration from the election results, conspiracy websites claimed that this event was only one – and not very significant – part of the long-term struggle between globalists and patriots. One battle might be lost, but the war was far from over, and the websites could look into the future with a certain optimism. They pointed out that a new government consisting of five parties would be fragile and have to deal with various economic challenges.

On the other hand, patriotic forces would have time to consolidate and – with the help of conspiracy websites – reach out to disappointed citizens and offer them an alternative to the current government.⁴⁶ Interestingly, conspiracy websites still operated within the framework of democratic institutions and did not call for a revolution but planned to wait for the next elections. This attitude shows that their anti-system nature was quite moderate, probably because they believed that they had the majority of the population on their side and their main task was to help them awaken. This self-confidence led to bold predictions according to which, after a catastrophic rule of the current government, patriotic forces would triumph, and the “Prague coffee house (nickname for a liberal segment of Czech politics and elite) will finally die out. For good”.⁴⁷

Fifth column at home and plotting enemies abroad

Conspiracy websites expressed strong negative sentiments about both coalitions. For the most part, they did not distinguish between individual parties and perceived them as a united front under the control of globalists. This approach was quite different from the nuanced analysis of patriotic forces, which will be described in the next section. The most negatively perceived political force was the Pirate Party which was depicted as a shameless representative of a neo-Marxist ideology and the key tool of the globalist conspiracy against Czech interests. This represents a shift in the perception since, in the previous Parliamentary elections in 2017, this position was

⁴⁵ “Sociolog Hampl: Teď přijdou hrůzy. Babiš měl zakročít!”, [online], *CZ24 News*, September 2021, accessed December 2022, available online at <https://cz24.news/sociolog-hampl-ted-prijdou-hruzy-babis-mel-zakrocit/>.

⁴⁶ PĚTR HÁJEK, “1 000 000 ztracených: Výsledky voleb věrně zobrazují naši patafyzickou realitu. Babiš ji už nebude moci skrývat. Kavárna bude vládnout většinu. Kdo za to může? A co prezident? Vlastenci do podzemí? Zvrat na obzoru” [online], *Protiproud.info*, October 2021, accessed March 2022, available online at <https://protiproud.info/politika/6068-1-000-000-ztracenych-vysledky-voleb-verne-zobrazuji-nasi-patafyzickou-realitu-babis-ji-uz-nebude-moci-skrivat-kavarna-bude-vladnout-vetsine-kdo-za-to-muze-a-co-prezident-vlastenci-do-podzemi-zvrat-na-obzoru.htm>.

⁴⁷ “Čtyři roky trápení za poznání, že jsou to tluchubové” [online], *NWOO*, September 2021, accessed December 2022, available online at <http://www.nwoo.org/2021/10/15/ctyri-roky-trapeni-za-poznani-ze-jsou-to-tluchubove/>.

occupied by the liberal TOP 09.⁴⁸ However, the decline of this party and the increasing popularity of the Pirates – who, at one point, hoped they would be able to win the elections – changed the perspective of conspiracy websites. This development is interesting since it shows that these platforms can adapt their underlying story about the conflict between globalists and patriots to fit current political realities. Another distinct stream of criticism was aimed at the ODS, which was – especially due to the chairmanship of Petr Fiala – perceived as a party that had betrayed its conservative principles and submitted to globalist forces.⁴⁹ However, as was already mentioned, these individual narratives were not crucial and conspiracy websites perceived all parties of both coalitions with the same contempt.

This negative sentiment was also caused by the fact that these political parties were not independent actors but instead served as the puppets of their globalist masters. In the context of the political competition, they did not represent the interests of a certain segment of the Czech population but the fifth column, thus betraying the nation. Conspiracy websites had quite a clear idea about the goals of globalist forces, such as limiting the sovereignty of the Czech state, promoting neo-Marxist ideology, and supporting migration from Muslim countries. However, the nature of globalists was not specified much. The general consensus was that they were a power operating outside the Czech Republic and, despite its global nature, vaguely associated with the West. In their further specification, individual websites and authors diverged and offered various interpretations with varying degrees of specificity and complexity. This elusive portrayal of the enemy seems beneficial since it allows creating coalitions of different actors and adjusting the story to changing political developments.

In the most specific narrative, globalist forces were associated with the EU, which was acting as their main instrument in the destruction of European states' sovereignty. The European Commission – specifically Commissioner Věra Jourová – was criticised for comments about the dynamic of the elections, which were perceived as interference in domestic political processes. The Commissioner's statement was set in a broader context of alleged efforts to undermine the sovereignty of the Czech Republic.⁵⁰ Conspiracy websites did not feel the need to elaborate on their criticism of the EU and explain why it is a malicious actor in detail. All of them accepted this situation as a fact, and anyone who supported this institution or was not fully committed to the idea of Czexit was automatically considered a globalist agent. This perception

⁴⁸ For comparison see JONÁŠ SYROVÁTKA, “České volby v éře dezinformací: Parlamentní volby 2017” [online], *Prague Security Studies Institute*, October 2017, accessed March 2022, available online at https://www.pssi.cz/download//docs/8399_500-parlamentni-volby-2017-analyza.pdf.

⁴⁹ JAN BARTOŇ, “Jak jsou karty k volbám rozdány?” [online], *Neviditelný Pes*, October 2021, accessed December 2022, available online at https://neviditelnypes.lidovky.cz/politika/politika-jak-jsou-karty-k-volbam-rozdany.A211006_125116_p_politika_wag (The article was published at *Pravý prostor*).

⁵⁰ “Tohle je nátlak Bruselu na české volby, paní Jourová?! Petr Žantovský se zhrzil nad slovy eurokomisařky” [online], *Parlamentní listy*, September 2021, accessed December 2022, available at <https://www.parlamentnilisty.cz/arena/monitor/Tohle-je-natlak-Bruselu-na-ceske-volby-pani-Jourova-Petr-Zantovsky-se-zhrozil-nad-slovy-eurokomisarcky-678089> (The article was published at CZ24 News).

proved to be fertile ground for the development of conspiracy theories – for instance, Jindřich Kulhavý, in his article in *Pravý Prostor*, claimed that the EU was in charge of a planned depopulation within the framework of the Great Reset.⁵¹

Other depictions of globalist forces were even vaguer and more adjusted to the worldview of the individual author. According to Petr Hájek, editor-in-chief of the *Protiproud* website, the EU was only a tool in the hands of other hidden nefarious actors. Aside from an anti-German slant warning against the establishment of the Fourth Reich,⁵² he warned against a mysterious “THEM” trying to get control over Czech politics. These malicious outside forces – also called “holders of keys” – were Jewish bankers and multinational corporations (including the powerful pharmaceutical industry) controlling the Brussels bureaucracy, which was trying to limit the sovereignty of European states.⁵³ Other authors associated globalist forces with a pre-existing conspiracy theory about the New World Order (NWO), a plot of elites trying to destroy national states and establish an authoritarian global government. Radek Pokorný, in his article on *Protiproud*, suggested that the SPOLU coalition was one of the components of the NWO conspiracy since it was associated with billionaire George Soros who was part of the plotting globalist elite.⁵⁴ An author nicknamed *Myšpule* published an article on the website *CZ24 News* describing in great detail the depopulation of the planet due to malnutrition that was supposed to be part of the NWO conspiracy. This text also appealed to supporters of Andrej Babiš, who was presumed to be part of the globalist circles planning this genocide.⁵⁵ And finally, Jaroslav Tichý at the website *NWOO* criticised political parties advocating pro-Western

⁵¹ JINDŘICH KULHAVÝ, “Proč nevolit neomarxistické liberály?” [online], *inadhled.cz*, September 2021, accessed March 2022, available at <https://www.inadhled.cz/uvaha-dne/proc-nevolit-neomarxisticke-liberaly/>.

⁵² PETR HÁJEK, “Odstartováno: Volební podvod v Německu. Opět Hitler, tentokrát s ‘lidskou tváří’? Co naši svazáci nevědí. Vpřed do chudoby! Řízená Vzpouora davů? Máme zkušenost: odpor, odboj, oběti. Nic nekončí, jedeme dál!” [online], *Protiproud.info*, September 2021, accessed March 2022, available online at <https://protiproud.info/politika/6044-odstartovano-volebni-podvod-v-nemecku-opet-hitler-tentokrat-s-lidskou-tvari-co-nasi-svazaci-nevedi-vpred-do-chudoby-rizena-vzpouora-davu-mame-zkusenost-odpor-odboj-obeti-nic-nekonci-jedeme-dal.htm>.

⁵³ PETR HÁJEK, “Volební fraška na dohled: Vítěz je znám. Všichni jsou totiž stejní. Hra na demokracii již nebude dlouho trvat. Proměna mlčící většiny. Zmizela během covidu jako chřipka? Blíží se největší šance. Nebojme se prohrát!” [online], *Protiproud.info*, September 2021, accessed March 2022, available online at <https://protiproud.info/politika/6020-volebni-fraska-na-dohled-vitez-je-znam-vsichni-jsou-totiz-stejni-hra-na-demokracii-jiz-nejbude-dlouho-trvat-promena-mlcici-vetsiny-zmizela-behem-covidu-jako-chripka-blizi-se-nejvetsi-sance-nebojme-se-prohrat.htm>.

⁵⁴ RADEK POKORNÝ, “Zrada v přímém přenosu: Předseda lidovců odvolal pod nátlakem stanovisko proti homonátům. Volba obou koalic demobloku je pro křesťany nepřijatelná. Pomůžou zvrácené tendence koalic ve volbách vlasteneckým stranám?” [online], *Protiproud.info*, September 2021, accessed March 2022, available online at <https://protiproud.info/politika/6035-zrada-v-primem-prenosu-predseda-lidovcu-odvolal-pod-natlakem- stanovisko-proti-homonatkum-volba-obou-koalic-demobloku-je-pro-krestany-neprijatelna-pomuzou-zvracene-tendence-koalic-ve-volbach-vlasteneckym-stranam.htm>.

⁵⁵ “HUNGER GAMES JE TADY – GLOBÁLNÍ POTRAVINOVÝ KARTEL ODHALEN! MASIVNÍ VYHLADOVĚNÍ POPULACE A SNIŽOVÁNÍ POČTU OBYVATEL JAKO DALŠÍ KROK GLOBALISTŮ” [online], *CZ24News.cz*, September 2021, accessed March 2022, available at <https://web.archive.org/web/20211009070613/https://cz24.news/hunger-games-je-tady-globalni>

foreign policy and argued that cooperation between Slavic nations could help to stop the realisation of the NWO plans in Central Europe.⁵⁶

While the definition of globalists differed, all conspiracy websites agreed that they were attacking state sovereignty, traditional values, and the ethnic homogeneity of society. The intersection with illiberalism is apparent since political actors associated with this ideology understand the goals of their opponents in a similar manner. Moreover, proponents of illiberalism claim that they are fighting not only domestic political forces but a broader coalition of intellectual elite and media inspired by foreign models. The only difference – reflective of the conspiratorial thinking of the studied websites lies in the semantics. While illiberalism represents a negative attitude towards liberal values, conspiracy websites claim that they are against globalists promoting neo-Marxism. However, a closer look shows that despite the difference in vocabulary, the understanding of the political struggle is the same.

Realistic evaluation of the patriotic camp and pragmatic alliances

Since conspiracy websites perceived the parties of both coalitions as puppets of foreign interest, they did not pay much attention to ideological differences among them, nor were they focused on a nuanced analysis of their actions. Their attitudes towards the patriotic parties – SPD, Tricolour and Volný blok – were completely opposite since they were perceived as independent political actors with their own agenda. They also were keen on supporting their political campaigns, for instance, by providing the space for publishing op-eds and statements of candidates of these parties. A special case was Nová Republic which is, through its editor-in-chief Ivan David, closely related to SPD and, therefore, before the election, turned into one of the instruments of the campaign of this party. Even though, on a general level, conspiracy websites saw them positively since they were part of the same ideological camp, this did not mean automatic and full endorsement.

On the contrary, conspiracy websites were closely – and quite objectively – evaluating the situation in the patriotic camp, and they were not afraid to criticise things perceived negatively. The overarching theme was criticising the inability of patriotic forces to form a coalition, which caused a split of the votes and – as conspiracy websites foresaw – meant that a significant portion of non-systemic voters remained unrepresented. They were also very open in criticism of individual parties. Conspiracy websites, for instance, questioned the genuine commitment of SPD chairman Tomio Okamura to the goals of patriotic forces and contemplated whether he was not using its rhetoric to attract voters.⁵⁷ The campaign of Volný blok was criticised

-potravinovy-kartel-odhalen-masivni-vyhladoveni-populace-a-snizovani-poctu-obyvatele-jako-dalsi-krok-globalistu-video-cz-68-min.

⁵⁶ JAROSLAV TICHÝ, “A proč na Západ? To neumíme být sami sebou?” [online], *pokec24.cz*, September 2021, accessed March 2022, available at <https://www.pokec24.cz/nezarazene/a-proc-na-zapad-to-neumime-byt-sami-sebou/>.

⁵⁷ PETR HÁJEK, “Poprava Hany Lipovské v přímém přenosu: Mravných a statečných se zbábělci musejí zbavit” [online] *Rýmařovský magazín*, September 2021, accessed 2022, available online at

for an overly narrow focus on the topic of vaccination and an aggressive tone likely to antagonise voters.⁵⁸ Despite these critical remarks showing that conspiracy websites tried to approach the political situation with an analytical detachment, they usually recommended voting for parties of the patriotic camp to their readers. However, it is noteworthy that this decision was not based on passionate commitment but led by the voice of reason.

The realistic assessment of the situation in the patriotic camp led conspiracy websites not only to limit their expectations concerning election results but also motivated them to look for new allies. They found one in the populist party ANO. It is important to stress that this assessment was far from inevitable since its leader Andrej Babiš is a billionaire, which might make him one of the obvious members of the globalist conspiracy. Precisely for this reason, an author writing under the pseudonym Slovanka labelled his party a “chameleon”, an instrument of the globalist conspiracy mimicking the rhetoric of patriotic forces to manipulate voters. She argued that Babiš might use tough words at home, but on the level of the EU, he usually supported globalist agenda.⁵⁹ However, conspiracy websites changed their views of ANO after the Pandora Papers revelations. Around the week before the elections, investigative journalists reported that Babiš belonged to a group of wealthy people who used offshore companies to avoid taxation. This scandal significantly undermined the final stage of Babiš’s electoral campaign, but in the mind of conspiracy websites, this revelation had to be part of a nefarious plan of hidden forces. The question remained: who was to benefit? While the specific stories published on conspiracy websites differed, their underlying assumption was that Babiš had gotten out of the globalist forces’ control and now represented a threat and therefore had to be eliminated. This situation made him a logical partner for the patriotic camp. Billionaire George Soros featured prominently in these stories as the main antagonist.⁶⁰ Given this development, conspiracy websites recommended that their readers consider voting for ANO. In this context, the website Aeronet underlined a difference between voting with one’s heart for patriotic parties and voting with the head for Babiš, who represented the strongest opponents of the globalists. The article argued that only “conceptual” voters who “took the pill” and could see the true nature of the fight between globalists and patriots

<https://rymag.cz/2021/09/poprava-hany-lipovske-v-primem-prenosu-mravnych-a-statecnych-se-zbabelci-museji-zbavit/> (The article was published at Protiproud).

⁵⁸ JINDŘICH KULHAVÝ, “Odvolání Hany Lipovské je neúspěch Volného bloku” [online], *iNadhled.cz*, September 2021, accessed December 2022, available online at <https://www.inadhled.cz/zajimavosti/odvolani-hany-lipovske-je-neuspech-volneho-bloku/> (The article was published at Pravý prostor).

⁵⁹ “Chameleoni v politice mají jediný cíl – vysát protestní hlasy” [online], *Necenzurovanapravdy.cz*, September 2021, accessed March 2022, available online at <https://necenzurovanapravda.cz/2021/09/chameleoni-v-politice-maji-jediny-cil-vysat-protestni-hlasy/> (The article was published at Pravý prostor).

⁶⁰ KRISTÍNA ŠEFČÍKOVÁ, “Pandora Papers: novinářská praxe a integrita ve střetu s alternativními médii” [online], *Prague Security Studies Institute*, January 2022, accessed March 2022, available online at https://www.pssi.cz/download//docs/9485_pssi-perspectives-15.pdf.

could understand why it was important to support Babiš at that moment.⁶¹ Moreover, the alliance with Babiš was not perceived as limited to the 2021 elections but as one that should be cultivated further since the coalition of ANO and patriotic parties was supposed to replace the current government after its expected failure. In this context, it would be especially interesting to observe how conspiracy websites will interpret the Czech Presidential election in 2023, in which Babiš will also be running.

Since conspiracy websites felt part of a patriotic camp, they were more invested in the performance of its representatives – parties promoting traditional values and defending the country against foreign influences. Once again, these are qualities that illiberal political actors tend to attribute to themselves. This personal investment in the struggle made the websites more critical towards the performance of these parties, and they demonstrated their independent nature by suggesting alternative alliances for the patriotic camp – particularly with the populist party ANO. When this step is considered within the framework of illiberalism, it is not surprising since Babiš and conspiracy websites – both in their own ways – subscribe to this ideology.⁶²

Conclusions

The short period of one month before the 2021 Parliamentary elections revealed the ideological position of Czech conspiracy websites to a great extent. This article demonstrated that they connected domestic political events with the broader framework of an ideological struggle between globalists and patriots. While using different vocabulary, illiberal ideology suggests a similar interpretation of political events and therefore proves useful for analysing conspiracy websites. Significantly, the imagined conflict is not only political but has cultural and ideological dimensions as well. The community's power and identity are at stake as patriots defend their countries against the disruptive ideology of neo-Marxism pursued by globalists. This framing clearly allows for a militant interpretation of political life and might easily provoke radicalisation and leads to violence.

Czech conspiracy websites do not seem to be radicalised yet. Instead, they respected existing political institutions and felt the need to get actively involved in shaping politics. It seems they believe that it is possible to generate the energy for the change of the liberal democratic system through its own mechanisms since most of the population agrees subconsciously with their arguments. The role of conspiracy websites lies in trying to awaken society which will lead to a systemic transformation. How-

⁶¹ “Operace Pandora Papers byla spuštěna 5 dní před volbami v ČR s cílem dosadit k moci Pirátskou stranu za každou cenu, v pozadí operace stojí George Soros a jeho Open Society Foundations, která sponzoruje všechny subjekty podílející se na operaci!” [online], *Aeronet.news*, October 2021, accessed March 2022, available online at <https://aeronet.news/operace-pandora-papers-byla-spuštena-5-dni-pred-volbami-v-cr-s-cilem-dosadit-k-moci-piratskou-stranu-za-kazdou-cenu-v-pozadi-operace-stoji-george-soros-a-jeho-open-society-foundations/>.

⁶² VLASTIMIL HAVLÍK, “Technocratic Populism and Political Illiberalism in Central Europe”, *Problems of Post-Communism* 66 (6, 2019): p. 369–384.

ever, while facing defeats such as the one in the 2021 Parliamentary elections, conspiracy websites prepared for a long-term struggle, which they entered in a disadvantageous position since their opponents had almost unlimited means at their disposal.

In order to persist in this struggle, conspiracy websites defined their goal in the long term and took advantage of the vagueness of their ideology, which allowed them to react flexibly to ongoing political events. The level of flexibility was such that they could redefine who their enemies and allies were. A case in point is Andrej Babiš, who turned from a member of the plotting globalist elite into a powerful ally of the patriotic camp. It will be interesting to observe where conspiracy websites will look next for potential candidates for integration into the patriotic camp. The framework of illiberalism can be useful in answering this question since it demonstrates that the intersection of values might be found in surprising places – for example, with more conservative members of the ODS or the Christian Democrats. However, this remains to be seen.

Their flexibility will allow conspiracy websites to adapt to changes in the Czech political debate and interpret them within their vague framework of a struggle between patriots and globalists. Given their long-term perspective, it is unlikely they will depart from the scene soon. On the contrary, social and economic problems on the horizon can bring them new readers and reinforce their position in Czech uncivil society. Therefore, even established political parties appealing to anti-system voters would have to consider them in their calculations. This might easily help them enter into the mainstream public debate. Such a development might be expected, especially if illiberal ideology becomes more established and pronounced in the Czech political mainstream.

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Structural Analysis of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion

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Abstract: This paper explores one of the most influential conspiracy theories of all time, as described in the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, by employing the method of structural analysis. The “master myth” of the *Protocols* represents a basic structure of the conspiracy narrative, whose motifs were subsequently modified throughout the 20th and 21st centuries according to current events and moods. However, to understand the pamphlet as a whole, it is also important to shed a little light on its specific historical context and the religious, political, and social fervour of the time, which eventually gave rise to this text. The text is one we can still consider a blueprint of contemporary conspiracy narratives about the global cabal that occupies a prominent place within the modern conspiracy culture.

Keywords: conspiracy theory; conspiracism; Jews; antisemitism; structuralism; myth

Abstrakt: Tento text představuje návrh na strukturální analýzu jedné z doposud nejvlivnějších konspiračních teorií, kterou nám předkládají nechvalně proslulé *Protokoly sionských mudrců*. „Základní rámcový mýtus“ *Protokolů* představuje základní očištěnou strukturu konspiračního narativu, jehož konkrétní motivy byly v průběhu 20. a později 21. století modifikovány na základně aktuálního dění. Pro hlubší pochopení pamfletu je důležité přiblížit i konkrétní historický kontext, především náboženské, politické a společenské naladění tehdejší doby, který dal nakonec vzniknout textu *Protokolů*, jež dodnes můžeme považovat za stále vitální předlohu současných konspiračních teorií o globálním spiknutí, které zaujímají významné místo v rámci soudobé konspirační kultury.

Klíčová slova: konspirační teorie; konspirační smys; Židé; antisemitismus; strukturalismus; mýtus

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1.1 The (in)famous case of the Protocols

The Protocols of the Elders of Zion tells of a worldwide Jewish conspiracy with a secret infrastructure whose imaginary tendrils reach the world's farthest corners. The vast network of secret agents, spies, and allies helps conspirators control the political elites of many countries or international organizations, including religious movements and denominations. The ultimate goal of this Jewish conspiracy is to destroy and transform all currently existing governmental and social structures and dominate all goyim.¹ This will be the result of a centuries-old secret plan that is getting close to its finish line.²

The infamous pamphlet, which emerged in the early 20th century in the crisis-ridden Russian Empire, soon spread to almost every corner of the world. Shortly after its publication, it was translated into several languages, which allowed the text and its ideas to spread beyond Russia to Europe and the United States and find readers even as far as Japan. The idea of a global Jewish conspiracy also significantly influenced the formation of German Nazism.³

After World War II, the *Protocols* were doomed (though not entirely) in most Western countries. The same cannot be said of the Soviet Union or the Middle East. There, it still plays an essential role in deploying anti-Jewish and anti-Israeli rhetorics

¹ The word *goy* comes from Hebrew גוי (plural גוים *goyim*), which means “nation”. In nowadays Judaism, it refers to all non-Jews in the sense of belonging to a different religious tradition, and the word often has derogatory connotations of inferiority. HELENA PAVLINCOVÁ and BŘETISLAV HORYNA (eds.), *Judaismus, křesťanství, islám*, Olomouc: Nakladatelství Olomouc 2003, p. 167.; However, in the Old Testament, the word *goy* or *goyim* is used in different contexts and with flexibility, referring to non-Israelites and Israelites alike. According to Roshay Rozen Zvi and Adi Ophir, the “Jew/goy binary opposition” as a category of distinction is a later development that occurred during the first two centuries CE in rabbinic literature. ISHAY ROSEN-ZVI, „What if We Got Rid of the Goy? Rereading Ancient Jewish Distinctions“, *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Period* 47 (2, 2016): p. 149–150, 181.

² *Protokoly ze shromáždění sionských mudrců*, František Komrška (trans.), Praha: Alois Koníček 1927, p. 16.; NORMAN COHN, *Warrant for Genocide: The Myth of the Jewish World Conspiracy and the Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, London: Serif 2005, p. 27.

³ RICHARD LANDES and STEVEN T. KATZ, “Introduction – The Protocols at the Dawn of the 21st Century”, in RICHARD LANDES and STEVEN T. KATZ (eds.), *The Paranoid Apocalypse: A Hundred-Year Retrospective on The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, New York and London: New York University Press 2012, p. 1.; DAVID G. GOODMAN, “The Protocols of the Elders of Zion in Japan”, in ESTHER WEBMAN (ed.), *The Global Impact of The Protocols of the Elders of Zion: A Century-Old Myth*, London, New York: Routledge 2011, p. 161–174. It is well known that Hitler was intrigued by the *Protocols*, but the pamphlet had circulated among leaders of DAP (the precursor of NSDAP) before he became a party member. However, there was also a high degree of doubt regarding the authenticity of the *Protocols* among Nazi leaders. WOLFRAM MEYER ZÜ UPTRUP, “Why the Jews? The impact of The Protocols of the Elders of Zion on Nazi ideology and policy”, in ESTHER WEBMAN (ed.), *The Global Impact of The Protocols of the Elders of Zion: A Century-Old Myth*, London and New York: Routledge 2011, p. 69; GIRARD PASCAL, “Conspiracy Theories in Europe During the Twentieth Century”, in MICHAEL BUTTER and PETER KNIGHT (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*, London, New York: Routledge 2022, p. 571.; JOVAN BYFORD, *Conspiracy Theories A Critical Introduction*, London: Palgrave Macmillan 2011, p. 55.

within official political discourse and outside of it.⁴ Despite the undeniable influence of the *Protocols* on one of the most tragic moments in the history of the Jewish nation, its conspiratorial narrative is still very much alive in European and American countries, not to mention the attention they receive in some far-right movements or neo-Nazi groups.⁵ Although the *Protocols* have been officially disqualified from political or public discussion, many are still convinced that a massive international Jewish plot controls the mainstream media, the economy, and international affairs.⁶ With the new wave of interest in conspiracy theories after 2000, the fascination with long-debunked *Protocols* has been revived, as they still maintain a mysterious charm for some conspiracists.⁷

Because of the unfortunate role this pamphlet played in Nazi German propaganda, it has been the subject of study for many scholars from the second half of the twentieth century to the present. Previous studies approached the *Protocols* from various angles: the political-religious and social context of post-revolutionary Europe that preceded the creation and publication of the pamphlet in Tsarist Russia; its popularization in countries outside Russia and European countries; or its relationship to Christian apocalypticism and messianism.⁸ However, a great deal of research still

⁴ LANDES and KATZ, “Introduction...”, p. 1. The issue of the influence of the *Protocols* on the political environment and conspiracism in some Middle Eastern countries is addressed, for example, in the contribution of Esther Webman, an Israeli scholar of Egyptian origin (1947–2020), or Israeli scholar Orly R. Rahimiyan. ESTHER WEBMAN, “Adoption of the Protocols in the Arab discourse on the Arab–Israeli conflict, Zionism, and the Jews”, in ESTHER WEBMAN (ed.), *The Global Impact of The Protocols of the Elders of Zion: A Century-Old Myth*, London and New York: Routledge 2011, passim; ORLY R. RAHIMIYAN, “*The Protocols of the Elders of Zion in Iranian political and cultural discourse*”, ESTHER WEBMAN (ed.), *The Global Impact of The Protocols of the Elders of Zion: A Century-Old Myth*, London and New York: Routledge 2011, passim. Russian historian and ethnologist Victor Shnirelman (*1949) comments on the notion of a Jewish conspiracy within the political-religious discourse of contemporary Russia in VICTOR SHNIRELMAN, “The Russian Orthodoxy and a Conspiracy Theory: A Contemporary Discourse”, *Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte* 32 (1, 2019): p. 87–101.

⁵ In the United States, “*The Protocols* is second only to the Bible itself as a source of inspiration and enlightenment for the radical right.” JEFFREY KAPLAN, “America’s apocalyptic literature of the radical right”, *International Sociology* 33 (4, 2018): p. 506.

⁶ MARTIN PENGELLY, “Trump condemned by Anti-Defamation League chief for antisemitic tropes” [online], *The Guardian*, December 2021, accessed December 2021, available online at <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/dec/18/donald-trump-antisemitic-tropes-anti-defamation-league>; “Corbyn found to have written foreword for book claiming Jews control banks” [online], *The Times of Israel*, May 2019, accessed December 2021, available online at <https://www.timesofisrael.com/corbyn-found-to-have-written-foreword-for-book-claiming-jews-control-banks/>.

⁷ LANDES and KATZ, “Introduction...”, p. 2–3.

⁸ Some works on this topic: COHN, *Warrant for Genocide*, passim; ESTHER WEBMAN, “Introduction – hate and absurdity: the impact of The Protocols of the Elders of Zion”, in ESTHER WEBMAN (ed.), *The Global Impact of The Protocols of the Elders of Zion: A Century-Old Myth*, London, New York: Routledge 2011, p. 1–24; ROBERT SINGERMAN, “The American Career of the ‘Protocols of the Elders of Zion’”, *American Jewish History* 71 (1, 1981): p. 48–78. NEIL BALDWIN, *Henry Ford and the Jews: The mass production of hate*, New York: PublicAffair 2001, passim; RICHARD LANDES and STEVEN T. KART (eds.), *The Paranoid Apocalypse: A Hundred-Year Retrospective on the Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, New York, London: New York University Press 2012, passim.

needs to be done. As the study of conspiracy theories reached non-western regions only recently, we also learned about the influence of the *Protocols* in unexpected or not-so-apparent contexts and scenarios. While scholars have found obvious historical connections between the *Protocols* and some anti-Jewish myths and stereotypes, no one, to my knowledge, has yet sorted its chaotic content into a coherent pattern that would subsequently be subjected to a systematic analysis as a form of religious or political myth or narrative. In this paper, I attempt to propose such an analysis. Initially, this analysis constitutes the second part of my master thesis originally published in Czech – “Konspirační narativ Protokolů sionských mudrců v kontextu židovsko-křesťanských vztahů”, in which I place the narrative of the *Protocols* in its appropriate historical context in comparison with preceding and similar anti-Jewish and conspiracy narratives. This analysis draws on the first Czech translation of the original Russian text attached to Sergei Nilus’s *Great in Small*, produced and published by František Komrška in Prague in 1927 (first published in 1926). There are two reasons for the choice of the Czech translation. First, I do not work primarily with the Russian original because I do not consider my knowledge of the Russian language sufficient for such analysis without the risk of possible errors. Secondly, since the original thesis was written in Czech and the passages cited would still need to be translated, I decided to work with an authentic conspiratorial piece of work in the Czech language in its original form rather than bring my own translation that would have to be based upon not the original Russian text, but one of the English versions.¹⁰

I believe that the text of the *Protocols*, or rather, the narrative it presents, shares its fundamental structure with other modern conspiracy theories, whether they are concerned with the Jewish conspiracy or not. Due to the specific nature of conspiracy narratives, which at first glance contain many contrasting motifs and often contradictory claims, I have chosen the method of structural analysis presented by French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–2009).¹¹ I am certainly not striving to deliver a universal analysis. Instead, this paper is a proposal for interpreting conspiracy theories related to the Christian religious environment and reflecting the dynamics of Jewish-Christian relations. In formulating or extracting the “master myth”¹² from

⁹ KATEŘINA HLAVÁČOVÁ, *Konspirační narativ Protokolů sionských mudrců v kontextu židovsko-křesťanských vztahů*, MA thesis, Prague: Charles University, Faculty of Arts 2022, p. 34–52.

¹⁰ For the purpose of this text, I paralleled my translations of passages from the Czech version with the English translation published in Boston in 1920 by Small, Maynard & Company for comparison. However, I did not find any significant differences in the content and meaning of both translations that would alter the result of the analysis.

¹¹ I draw mainly on the text of Claude Lévi-Strauss (section „The Structural Study of Myth“): CLAUDE LÉVI-STRAUSS, *Structural anthropology*, Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf (trans.), New York: Basic Books 1963, p. 206–231.; and studies by RADEK CHLUP: “Strukturální antropologie včera a dnes: Sto let Clauda Lévi-Strausse I”, *Religio* 17 (1, 2009): p. 3–35; “Strukturální antropologie včera a dnes: Sto let Clauda Lévi-Strausse II”, *Religio* 17 (2, 2009): p. 156–84; PATRICK J. GRAY: “Structural Analysis of Folktales: Techniques and Methodology”, *Asian Folklore Studies* 37 (1, 1978): p. 77–95.

¹² I am using an analytical tool by Gérard Bouchard, according to whom the *master myths* “take the form of fundamental symbolic arrangements that act as matrices, structure the culture of a society, and govern the formation of other myths.” A master myth is a kind of myth that has a close rela-

which I will subsequently isolate the dominant oppositions,¹³ I will draw primarily on the text of all twenty-four “protocols”. Due to the limited scope of this paper, I will refrain from any extensive comparative analysis of the predecessors or successors of the *Protocols* and use previous comparative studies and my own research. I also agree with those scholars who see the pamphlet as a) a condensed “summary” of previous anti-Jewish myths (e.g., a specific compendium of other versions), emphasizing elements that were relevant to European and Russian society at that time and b) believe that they simultaneously become one of the most basic or even the fundamental model for many subsequent conspiracy theories and pamphlets, which, in many cases, eventually abandoned the original anti-Jewish ethos, transforming their motifs to suit their own needs.

The text of the *Protocols* itself is not very extensive compared to some previous significant conspiratorial opuses. For example, one of the most successful predecessors of the *Protocols*, *Mémoire pour servir à l'histoire du jakobinisme* (published 1797 in France) by a Jesuit priest Abbé Barruel (1741–1820), consists of nearly a thousand pages in English translation. All twenty-four “protocols” are around hundred-plus pages in either Czech or English. A Russian manuscript introduced by Sergei Aleksandrovich Nilus (1862–1929), Russian writer and self-proclaimed mystic, published in Berlin in 1922, runs to one hundred and twenty-five pages.¹⁴ Altogether, the *Protocols* comprise one alleged speech by an unknown rabbi. The rabbi describes partial victories in the plan for world domination, further actions and operations, and a few

tionship to a society’s deepest paradigms, values, and fears. These almost “eternal” myths, which change very slowly, are, however, continually transformed, updated, and re-translated according to how the context changes and the society or culture that live them develops. Bouchard calls these myths *derivative* or *secondary*. The original version of the *Protocols*, as well as every other adapted and updated version, can be regarded as a derivative myth with its unique features and motifs. GÉRARD BOUCHARD, *Social Myths and Collective Imaginaries*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press 2017, p. 112–115.

¹³ CHLUP, „Strukturální antropologie včera a dnes: Sto let Clauda Lévi-Strausse I“, p. 18.

¹⁴ Nilus introduced all twenty-four protocols in one piece as a final chapter to the second edition of his book *The Great in the Small: The Antichrist as an Imminent Political Possibility* (first published in 1903). SERGEJ NILUS *Velikoe v malom i antikhrisť, kak blizkaia politicheskaia vozmožnost: Zapiski pravoslavnago*, Tsarskoe Selo: Tip. Tsarskoselskago Komiteta Krasnago Kresta [Russian romanized] 1905, 417 p. This edition of the *Protocols* is considered to be among the most influential, and the earliest translations are based on it. His book contains apocalyptic teachings inspired by the 18th-century mystic Serapfim of Sarov (1754 or 1759–1833). In the last expanded edition, published in 1917 with a new subtitle, “*It Is Near, Even at the Doors*”: *Concerning That Which People Do Not Wish to Believe and Which Is So Near*. SERGEJ NILUS, *Bliz est', pri dverekh. O tom, chemu ne zhelaiut verit' i chto tak blizko*, Sergijev Posad, Tip. Sv.-Tr. Sergijevoj Lavri [Russian romanized] 1917, 288 p. Nilus warns against the coming of the Antichrist into this world and the apocalypse initiated by the Jews, as revealed in the *Protocols*. Not only did Nilus bring the *Protocols* to a broader audience, but he set them into an apocalyptic framework that is still vital within the current Russian orthodox conspiratorial milieu. STEPHEN E. BRONNER, *A Rumor about the Jews: Conspiracy, Anti-Semitism, and the Protocols of Zion*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, p. 62–63; BYFORD, *Conspiracy Theories*, p. 50.; MICHAEL HAGEMEISTER, „The Antichrist as an Imminent Political Possibility“, in RICHARD LANDES and STEVEN T. KATZ (ed.), *The Paranoid Apocalypse: A Hundred-Year Retrospective on The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, New York, London: New York University Press 2012, p. 80–82.

potential obstacles to the plan. While every individual “protocol” has an overarching topic stated in its heading, the topics are repeated many times throughout the text without any apparent logical continuity. This is also the result of the process of the pamphlet’s composition. While the vision of conspiracy created by Barruel and other conspiratorial texts of the 18th and 19th centuries served as the primary ideological source, other texts (unwillingly) inspired the basic textual structure and composition.

Shortly after their publication, the *Protocols* were, for a while, popular or rather curiously discussed in the United Kingdom after mainstream press and some conservative parties took them as a serious document. The idea of the Jewish conspiracy was already established in England and also fitted into the situation of general distress after World War I and the Bolshevik Revolution, as was the case in other European countries, where the *Protocols* gained their initial fame in the context of anti-Bolshevism and served as a proof of the Judeo-Bolshevik (outside Germany as Judeo-German-Bolshevik) conspiracy.¹⁵ It is also worth mentioning that the English translation under the title *The Jewish Peril* (London 1921) coincides with the work of a famous conspiracist Nesta Webster and the publication of her book *World Revolution: The Plot against Civilisation*, which helped root the content of the *Protocols* within a broader conspiratorial context.¹⁶ The British newspaper *The Times* was among those who initially published speculative articles about the Judeo-Bolshevik conspiracy and the *Protocols* in 1921. However, as early as in August of the same year, the newspaper published three more articles proving that the idea of the global Jewish plot was not only unsubstantiated but also that “the document is in the main a clumsy plagiarism”, a synthesis of a political satire *Dialogue aux enfers entre Machiavel et Montesquieu* (“Dialogue between Machiavelli and Montesquieu in Hell”) by the French publicist Maurice Joly (1829–1878), published in 1864, and a chapter taken from a novel *Biarritz* (1868) by an antisemitic author Hermann Goedsche (1815–1878).¹⁷ The chapter titled “Auf dem Judenkirchhof in Prag” (“In the Jewish cemetery in Prague”) describes a secret meeting of the representatives of the twelve tribes of Israel (the “sons of the Golden Calf” as the text refers to them) led by the Devil, who are discussing the final plans to take over the world. By the end of the 19th century, the chapter, taken from its original context of mere fiction, circulated as an independent document – an authentic record of the secret meeting of Jewish elders – and had become known as “Rabbi’s Speech”. Later, it also gave conspiracists another proof of the pamphlet’s authenticity.¹⁸ The *Protocols* draw their vision of conspiracy ideology from much older

¹⁵ GIRARD, “Conspiracy Theories”, p. 571; COHN, *Warrant*, p. 164–166, 171.

¹⁶ BYFORD, *Conspiracy Theories*, p. 54.

¹⁷ Goedsche published most of his works under pseudonyms. The novel *Biarritz* was published under the name sir John Retcliffe. BRONNER, *A Rumor*, p. 67.; *The Truth About “the Protocols”: A Literary Forgery, From The Times of August 16, 17, and 18, 1921*, London: Printing House Square 1921, p. 3.

¹⁸ The chapter was published in Czech under the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia (1939–1945) by Orbis in 1942 (and again in 1943) under the title *The Mystery of the Jewish Cemetery in Prague* (in Czech, *Tajemství židovského hřbitova v Praze*), also under the name sir John Retcliffe. “John Retcliffe: ‘Tajemství židovského hřbitova v Praze,’” *Holocaust.cz*, August 7, 2011, available online at

conspiratorial ideas while the textual structure is taken from the documents above, thus making the *Protocols* not only a defamatory enterprise but also an obvious forgery.¹⁹ Although the document was proven to be a fabrication, many believed and still believe it is authentic and such claims are only a part of a Jewish plot to maintain secrecy. A conclusion that also Adolf Hitler himself came to:

“How much the whole existence of this people is based on a permanent falsehood is proved in a unique way by ‘The Protocols of the Elders of Zion’, which are so violently repudiated by the Jews [...] that these are forgeries. This alone is evidence in favour of their authenticity. What many Jews unconsciously wish to do is here clearly set forth [...] they [the *Protocols*] disclose, with an almost terrifying precision, the mentality and methods of action characteristic of the Jewish people and these writings expound in all their various directions the final aims towards which the Jews are striving. The study of real happenings, however, is the best way of judging the authenticity of those documents.”²⁰

Another critical component and characterization of different versions of the *Protocols* (or other conspiracy-exposing documents and pamphlets in general) are attached commentaries that set the text in its intended cultural context. This is very important for the text to be accepted locally, in its original or adapted and updated version (e.g., when Henry Ford’s newspaper *Dearborn Independent* “Americanized” the *Protocols* in *The International Jew* series),²¹ while at the same time, such an appendix may provide an impression of legitimacy given by the author’s authority. For example, in the Czech translation, a short foreword tells us about the historical background of the acquisition of the *Protocols* that is subsequently concluded by a famous quotation from Henry Ford’s book *The International Jew: The World Problem* – “It is too terribly real for fiction, too well-sustained for speculation, too deep in its knowledge of the secret springs of life for forgery.”²²

1.2 The (Master) Myth of the Protocols

The *Protocols* begin with an unflattering description of the nature and character of the man. The goyim are characterized as stupid and undisciplined animals that lose the world and freedom because of their ignorance and failure to live according to

<https://www.holocaust.cz/zdroje/dokumenty/antisemitismus/antisemitska-propaganda-v-protektoratu-cechy-a-morava/clanky-z-doboveho-tisku/john-retcliffe-tajemstvi-zidovskeho-hrbitova-v-praze/>; COHN, *Warrant*, p. 28, 38–42; BRONNER, *A Rumor*, p. 67–9.

¹⁹ BYFORD, *Conspiracy Theories*, p. 50–5.

²⁰ ADOLF HITLER, *Mein Kampf*, James Vincent Murphy (trans.), London, New York, Melbourne: Hurst & Blackett Ltd 1939, p. 240.

²¹ JEFFREY, “America’s apocalyptic...”, p. 7.

²² KOMRSKA, “Preface”, in *Protokoly; The Protocols and World Revolution: Including a Translation and Analysis of the “Protocols of the Meetings of the Zionist Men of Wisdom”*, Boston: Small, Maynard & Company 1920, p. 39.

self-imposed laws and norms. They succumb to bodily urges and vanity. They are too lazy to think, and what they did understand, they have forgotten because, unlike the Jews, the goyim cannot effectively pass on the knowledge they have acquired from previous generations. Non-Jews do not understand the true nature of the world, and they also lack the knowledge of a deep, mystical character of the universe possessed only by Jews,²³ who legitimize their desire for world domination not only by their intellectual superiority but especially by the divine election of Israel that granted them the gifts of reason and perseverance. Indeed, they have been working on their plan to take over the world and destroy Christianity for two thousand years, and now they are “only a few steps from their goal.”²⁴

Since, according to the *Protocols*, there is no point in having a deep discussion with the goyim, the conspirators instead employ force and systematic manipulation. They have many tools at their disposal to lead the masses of goyim and their governments to their desired goal – to weaken them, destroy them, and disintegrate whole nations so they can eventually take over the power in all countries, ultimately taking control of the entire world. One of these tools is modern ideologies, especially the “poison” of liberalism: “the states became infected with a mortal disease, namely, the decomposition of the blood.”²⁵ The agents of the Jews spread false slogans among the nations (“Liberty – Equality – Fraternity”)²⁶ that disintegrate states, destroy peace and, above all, weaken respect for the law. By deceit, they turn brother against brother and add to mutual misunderstanding among people.²⁷ They control the press²⁸ and educational institutions, which help them spread false scientific theories and made-up ideologies and make the legal system tangled and hard to understand.²⁹ Due to the influence of Jews, the world has become so complicated that one can no longer comprehend it.

²³ “For it was by the word ‘progress’ that we have successfully turned the brains of the stupid GOYS. There are no brains among the GOYS to realize that this word is but a cover for digression from the truth, unless it is applied to material inventions, since there is but one truth and there is no room for progress. Progress, being a false conception, serves to conceal the truth so that nobody may know it except ourselves, God’s elect, who are its guardians.” *The Protocols*, p. 45.; Compare with *Protokoly*, p. 55.

²⁴ *Protokoly*, p. 16, 25, 59.

²⁵ *Protokoly*, p. 41; *The Protocols*, p. 35.

²⁶ *Protokoly*, p. 12; *The Protocols*, p. 15.

²⁷ “We have turned states into arenas in which storms and riots take place.” *Protokoly*, p. 17. Compare with *The Protocols*, p. 18.

²⁸ “We shall deal with the press in the following way [...] we shall saddle it and take it firmly by the bridle, and we shall do the same with other printed matter [...] no message will reach the people before it goes through our censorship [...] we have controlled the minds of the goyim that they look at world events through the colored glasses of the spectacles which we have placed before their eyes.” *Protokoly*, p. 47–48; Compare with *The Protocols*, p. 40.

²⁹ “the successes of Darwinism, Marxism, and Nietzscheism, engineered by us. The demoralizing effects of these doctrines upon the minds of the goyim should be already obvious to us. [...] The laws of scientific theories which we have induced them and to which we are still instilling blind confidence through our press. For this purpose, by means of our press, we increase their blind faith in these laws. The goyish intelligentsia will be proud of its education and verifying it logically, they will put into practice all scientific information compiled by our agents for the purpose of education in the direction which we require.” *Protokoly*, p. 14; Compare with *The Protocols*, p. 17.

By subverting states and orchestrating economic crises, they drive people into debt traps and cultivate poverty and hunger, leading desperate people to revolt against their current rulers. This rebellion will eventually eliminate the last remnants of the aristocracy that will be replaced with puppets from the ranks of conspirators – either Jews or corrupted goyim. One of the repeated themes of the *Protocols* is the fragmentation and disunity of nations – continual discord over political matters among countries, supported by partisan strife secretly designed by Jews. The weakness and fragmentation of humanity (the goyim) are the key premises for being manipulated by their enemies.³⁰

Other conspirator tools include modern inventions such as the right to vote, the idea of class equality, and individualism. The author (or authors) presents conspirators who see the freedom and equality of all people as an impossible idea, inevitably leading to anarchy and wars. This is because people (non-Jews) do not know how to enjoy freedom truly, and they can only distort it. The idea of freedom could only work if people followed “the principles of faith in God and human brotherhood.”³¹ However, because people had perverted God’s law and order, they fell into the hands of conspirators who took advantage of their weakness and led them to worship mammon in the form of money (the “cult of gold”) and subjected them to indulgences (alcoholism, infidelity, gambling).³² The only forces that pose a threat to the Jewish conspiracy are the Pope and the Russian Autocracy, which also claim divine legitimacy. Therefore, they have to destroy the reputation of the Christian priesthood and undermine their authority so that people will eventually turn away from Christianity and God.³³

In order to carry out their plan, they have created an undetectable network of agents and centres involving Masonic lodges, which are governed by strict rules from a location that “will always remain unknown to the people.”³⁴ The same rigour will also govern the world that will find itself under Jewish rule. The omnipresence of agents, working as extended tendrils of the conspirators, allows the conspiracy leaders to remain in the shadows while they stir up local political strife and revolutions and kill those who stand in their way. At the top of the hierarchy sits one Jewish king from the House of David – “a despot sovereign of Zionist blood, whom we are preparing for the world.”³⁵ When the world is completely torn apart, tired of hatred, wars, and anguish, people will cry out for one universal king that would lead them out of their misery and reunite divided humanity.³⁶ Despite the vicious nature of their plan, the conspirators claim that „from temporary evil [...] will emerge the good of

³⁰ “can they (the masses) defend themselves against external enemies? This is unthinkable, for a plan fragmented into many parts loses its coherent overview and thus becomes incomprehensible and unworkable.” *Protokoly*, p. 9, 61; Compare with *The Protocols*, p. 14.

³¹ *Protokoly*, p. 22–3.

³² *Protokoly*, p. 23.

³³ *Protokoly*, p. 72; *The Protocols*, p. 48.

³⁴ *The Protocols*, p. 22.

³⁵ *The Protocols*, p. 21.

³⁶ *Protokoly*, p. 44.

an unshakable government [...] The end justifies the means.”³⁷ In the end, there will be peace on earth, and people will enjoy freedom and abundance if they observe the laws established by the Jews.³⁸

It is evident that the document contains some quite specific motifs referring to the topics and fears of contemporary society. However, beyond that, we can already see some fundamental and persisting fears and questions, thematized in present-day conspiracy theories, regarding the nature of what is observable and hidden or even transcendental realities and their relation to the nature of man and society and their external and internal enemies.

1.3 The Fundamental Structure of the Conspiracy Myth of the Protocols as a System of Binary Oppositions

Now, I will subject the conspiracy narrative of the *Protocols* to a structural analysis using the methodological aid provided by Patrick J. Gray’s article with my own slight modification.³⁹ One of the techniques, which Gray formulates based on Lévi-Strauss’s concept, consists of identifying the essential elements of myth or “gross constituent units”⁴⁰ (or “mythemes” as Lévi-Strauss calls them) and then arranging these elements in binary oppositions on the level of one selected myth. In this case, that would be the text of the *Protocols*, which I understand as one of many variants of the anti-Jewish conspiracy myth. Optimally, this analysis method should ultimately show us that the isolated segments of the myth are variations of the same theme.⁴¹

(I.) The first step was extracting the syntagmatic sequences from their diachronic arrangement and classifying them. This classification consisted of comparing the individual sequences, which are no longer treated as temporal episodes but as separate elements of the myth, uncovering their common features. The individual elements of the myth distinguished according to the similarities we have found finally allow us to see the ahistorical, paradigmatic, structural level. The moment we break the story’s temporal or “narrative” line by rearranging the selected sequences, this completely new configuration, which is no longer conditioned by the order of the story, will show us their mutual, hitherto unrecognized relationships. From the perspective of structural analysis, the significance of the myth lies not in its plot or its individual sequences but in its deep, non-temporal structure that consists of the relations be-

³⁷ *The Protocols*, p. 13.

³⁸ “[W]e are benefactors, returning to the earth true good and personal freedom [...] subject to compliance with all of our laws [...] true freedom consists in personal safety, in the honest and exact compliance with the laws of cohabitation [...] our government will be the executor of the order in which the true happiness of mankind consists.” *Protokoly*, p. 90–91; The motif of law-keeping as a prerequisite for well-being is emphasized several times in the *Protocols*. It makes an impression of the critique of the Pharisees and scribes in the New Testament.

³⁹ LÉVI-STRAUSS, *Structural*, p. 206–231; GRAY, “Structural Analysis...”, p. 85–91.

⁴⁰ Which correspond to broader sets of episodes in the myth. LÉVI-STRAUSS, *Structural*, p. 211.

⁴¹ GRAY, “Structural Analysis...”, p. 79–80.

tween the identified groups of elements characterized by the opposition.⁴² Identifying shared features is not a straightforward or entirely “objective” process, but, to some extent, it is always a matter of subjective evaluation.⁴³

At the paradigmatic level, we can then look for what we might call the “meaning” or the “signification” of the myth. Or rather, it shows us the common feature of the individual identified elements that represents some recurring theme. Following Lévi-Strauss’s conception, the *Protocols* are a kind of a “supermyth” in the sense that a series of “episodes”, which recur many times in the text, describe intangible and recurring types of situations, which in some cases are formulated in almost identical words or sentences, rather than diachronic parts of a story.⁴⁴ Since it is impossible to list all the identified groups of sequences within the scope of this paper, I will illustrate the procedure with a concrete example. After carefully reading the text, one can notice that there are repeated “episodes” or, more precisely, situations in which the *Protocols* describe the alleged reality and ways in which Jews malevolently participate in the processes of the world economy. In this case, the identified syntagmatic sequences (mythemes) will be as follows: *Jews are rich, Jews control the economy, Jews cause the bankruptcy of nation-states*, etc. The common feature of this group may be *wealth* or *the power of money*. This group of sequences is then opposed by another group whose common feature is *poverty*. By repeating the same procedure, we find common features of other sorted groups, which are simultaneously in opposition to each other. For example: *adherence to the order of society given by God – non-adherence to the order of society given by God, centralization – decentralization, civilization – barbarism, strength, and potency – lack of strength and potency, technology, and ideology – primitive way of life*, etc. It was sometimes difficult to categorize some sequences, as they exhibited a common feature shared by two or more groups. In such cases, I intuitively assigned these sequences to the groups to which they were most similar in character. Again, this is a reminder that subjectivity plays a role in identifying common features and subsequent oppositions, and, at the same time, it may indicate that we have not yet reached the deepest level of the myth – the “essential” oppositions.⁴⁵ The result of the first step gives us several groups of mythemes (collectively denoted by the abbreviation *g*), characterized by a common feature of each mytheme in each group. We have simultaneously arranged these groups into oppositions. Table 1 finds these groups in the middle and right columns.

⁴² This relationship is based on a hypothesis “that the human mind works with pairs of opposites.” GRAY, “Structural Analysis...”, p. 80, 85; LÉVI-STRAUSS, *Structural*, p. 224–226; CHLUP, “Strukturální antropologie včera a dnes: Sto let Clauda Lévi-Strausse I”, p. 8, 18.

⁴³ The intuitive process of identifying oppositions should, at least partially, be guided by the general assumption about the presence of some fundamental oppositions, pointed out by Lévi-Strauss or other scholars. These are, for example, the oppositions good–evil, nature–culture, raw–cooked, etc. While sometimes it is possible to identify two direct opposites, at other times, elements of the myth may be in opposition according to their greater or lesser similarity. For example, the opposition between *the ideal order of God* and *the imperfect order of man*. GRAY, “Structural Analysis...”, p. 80, 85.

⁴⁴ CHLUP, “Strukturální antropologie včera a dnes: Sto let Clauda Lévi-Strausse I”, p. 15.

⁴⁵ GRAY, “Structural Analysis...”, p. 86.

Because of the large amount of material, I have chosen a gradual reduction of “meanings”, and so, at this stage, we have not yet learned much from the identified pairs. Organizing the sequences into groups characterized by “essential” oppositions in the first step of the analysis would certainly be possible, but not without the risk of missing some of the nuances of the elements’ meanings. For this reason, I have decided first to identify the more obvious common features and then repeat the process with the common features of the groups themselves, which I will henceforth refer to simply as “meanings”.

(II.) In the second step, we proceed the same as in step one, but in this phase, we are no longer working with syntagmatic sequences or mythemes (e.g., *Jews control banks*), but with the common features = meanings of the individual groups (*g*). In sum, while in the first step, we have analyzed the diachronic level of the myth, in the next step, we proceed in the same way, but only on the synchronic level. Thus, we get new groups consisting of the common meanings (collectively denoted by the abbreviation *G*) of the first groups of mythemes (*g*), which are again sorted according to their common features. Finally, we have, again, organized these new groups into the resulting fundamental oppositions. To illustrate with an example, if we have found the common features (now meanings) of *wealth*, *activity*, *omnipresence*, and perhaps *power* as a result of the analysis in the first step, the common feature of these relations may simply be *power*, which we find in an oppositional relation to another group of meanings whose common feature is *lack of power*. These new groups of meanings finally lead us to the resulting, deepest oppositions of the myth, through which we can then try to find its “significance”. Based on the procedure above, the following table emerges.

Now, all the identified oppositions need to be analyzed once more to get closer to their shared underlying significance. Not surprisingly, the first opposition of the conspiracy narrative of the *Protocols* appears to be (*G1*) *good* – (*G2*) *evil*. Quite frequently, conspiracy narratives give the impression that, above the level of a particular story, they speak about the battle between the forces of good and evil. Conspiracy theories that are part of the Christian discourse are often seen as reflections of the struggle of God against the Devil.⁴⁶

From the reader’s perspective, the conspirators are evil because their actions negate collectively accepted ethical norms and morality. At the same time, however, the conspirators and their plan oppose a system of values, relationships, and social arrangements facing disintegration or are perceived by society as under threat. Moreover, this current “world order” can even be regarded by its advocates as an *ius naturale* and thus untouchable. However, the conspirators admit to doing evil even on the level of the text itself when they say that evil must first be done for good to follow. Murders and deception have to take place in order to establish a perfect society under one Jewish king.

⁴⁶ CHIP BERLET, “Apocalypticism”, in PETER KNIGHT (ed.), *Conspiracy Theories in American History: An Encyclopedia*, Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO 2003, p. 86; BYFORD, *Conspiracy Theories*, p. 71; LANDES, KATZ, “Introduction...”, p. 17; HAGEMEISTER, “The Antichrist...”, p. 82.

Final oppositions	Oppositions in groups (g2)	
<i>G1 good – G2 evil</i>	peace / prosperity / freedom	murders, terror, and violence / misery / manipulation
<i>G3 ideal order of God (overstated organization) – G4 imperfect order of man (understated organization)</i>	adherence to the order of society given by God / compliance with laws / asceticism and religious life / strong order / hierarchy / centralization / unity and strong society	non-adherence to the order of society given by God / non-compliance with laws / secularism / weak and dysfunctional order / equality / decentralization / disunited society
<i>G5 knowledge – G6 ignorance</i>	awareness of mysteries / information / genius and wisdom / deceit and manipulation / complexity	absence of (awareness of) mysteries / lack of information / stupidity / disorientation / simplicity
<i>G7 culture – G8 nature</i>	civilization / absence of urges and emotions / fragile man living in civilization / technologies and ideologies	barbarism / succumbing to urges and emotions / predation / primitive way of life
<i>G9 non-autonomy effecting freedom – G10 autonomy effecting unfreedom</i>	despotism and non-autonomy / freedom under divine mandate	autonomy and arbitrariness / unfreedom under the dominion of sin
<i>G11 power – G12 lack of power</i>	strength and potency / wealth / activity / will / supremacy / omnipresence (globality)	lack of strength and potency / poverty / passivity / lack or weak will / subordination / limited field of action (locality)
<i>G13 life – G14 death</i>	immortality in community / continuity	breakdown of the traditional family / discontinuity

The perfectly designed plan and the conspirators' organization mirror the *ideal order of God (G3)*, which is in opposition to the inherently dysfunctional and unstable order of the goyim – the *imperfect order of man (G4)*. The conspirators are setting up a mirror to a society incapable of functioning according to its own laws and rules, even according to the law established by God. The order of the conspirators, its very existence, brings about the decline of a lazy and passive society (it hastens what is inevitable), which, in the end, “voluntarily” falls into their hands. On the earthly level, then, we find an opposition that could be, in a way, perceived as a sub-opposition of the *ideal – imperfect order*, defined by the contrast of the organizational abilities of the conspirators, which, according to the *Protocols*, are also conditioned by God's will. While Jews can lead a worldwide network of secret agents and still maintain one coherent plan, the disunited goyim face organizational problems at the level of local governments. Whether the conspiratorial plan focuses on a particular government, coalition, or the entire world, political power is irrelevant to them and probably already interwoven with the secret networks of conspirators and distorted by corruption. The only real danger lies in the anointed institutions. Here specifically in the

papacy and the “Russian autocracy”.⁴⁷ Not only do the conspirators distribute their power and resources efficiently, but they also have a tight hierarchy with one strong leader. They are united in opinion and willing to do anything to achieve a shared goal. In this respect, the *organization* and network of relationships or hierarchy of the conspirators appear to be *overstated*, while the society of non-Jews and their leaders are unable to ensure the regular and solid functioning of their government and institutions. Their organization is, therefore, *understated*.⁴⁸ Within these oppositions, our world always appears to be in some non-ideal, distorted form, and in this state, it faces a perfectly ordered world of the conspirators. In contrast to this, however, we must consider the paradox, which is also mentioned in the *Protocols*, namely the actual reality of Jewish dispersion (the “gift of dispersion” as the text calls it) and the absence of a Jewish state at the time of the publication of the pamphlet.⁴⁹

Topics related to knowledge are crucial to any conspiracy narrative. Therefore, it is not surprising that in the *Protocols*, the opposition of *knowledge (G5) – ignorance (G6)* forms one of the main lines running through all twenty-four sections. In the world of conspiracy theories, effective work with information becomes a supreme virtue on which humankind’s fate depends. Knowledge is necessary to recognize the true nature of things, navigate the complex world run by conspirators, or even find truths of mystical proportions. At the same time, it becomes a weapon against the forces of conspiracy that uses people’s ignorance to manipulate them.

Just as the perfectly organized structure of the Jewish conspiracy and the imperfect, subverted goyish society stand in opposition to each other, so does the secret plan to establish one strictly defined world order stand in opposition to the organic nature of society, characterized by phases of development and collapse with humankind subjected to its natural tendencies and desires. In the *Protocols*, non-Jews are described as the fierce “beasts we call men”, “cattle [...] manifesting their barbarism”, and as beings who mutilate freedom in anarchy.⁵⁰ But we also see the ambivalent character of the conspirators, most notably their cruelty alternating with strategic calculation. In addition to sophisticated manipulation and deception, the Jews want to use force – to exercise the natural right of those who are stronger: “our motto is power and hypocrisy [...] (the goyim, A/N) did not notice that there is no equality in nature; that there can be no liberty, since nature herself has established inequality of mind, character, and ability, as well as subjection to her laws.”⁵¹

⁴⁷ “The main thing for the invulnerability of government is the consolidation of the aureole of power, and this is only achieved by the greatness and strength of a government which would show signs of untouchability from mystical causes – the divine election. Such a government, until lately, has been the Russian autocracy – alone in the whole world, our dangerous enemy, if we do not mention the papacy.” *Protokoly*, p. 59. Compare with *The Protocols*, p. 47–48.

⁴⁸ Understanding QAnon’s Connection to American Politics, Religion, and Media Consumption“ [online], *Public Religion Research Institute*, May 2021, accessed November 2021, available online at <https://www.prrri.org/research/qanon-conspiracy-american-politics-report/>.

⁴⁹ *Protokoly*, p. 46.

⁵⁰ *Protokoly*, p. 6, 10.

⁵¹ *Protokoly*, p. 11.

Moreover, the Christian symbolism of the serpent appears in the *Protocols*, and in one passage, it also identifies the Jews as the Devil's minions: "we are only a few steps away from our goal. We are only a short distance away, and the whole path we have travelled is ready to close the circle of the symbolic serpent which represents our nation. This closing circle will enclose all the European states in a tight bolt."⁵² Later in the 20th century, depicting conspirators (mostly the Jews) as chthonic beings became increasingly popular on propaganda posters. Most often, they are compared to snakes, octopuses, or spiders.⁵³

The opposition *nature* (G7) – *culture* (G8) is evident in a number of modern conspiracy theories that express suspicions about the hidden harmful effects of specific technological innovations, experiments (e.g., chemtrails, GMOs), the malpractice of modern medicine, and especially the pharmaceutical industry,⁵⁴ or the decline of the traditional and "natural" nuclear family. Glancing back on those conspirators who act as agents of dark forces, in the imagination of conspiracists, such figures are symbolically or even literally stripped of human features and emotions: "in laying our plans we must turn our attention not so much to the good and moral as to the necessary and useful."⁵⁵ In addition to the chthonic monsters, usually representing conspiracy as a whole, this type of plotter is portrayed as an army of anonymous secret agents, later embodied by, for example, men in black.

In a world ruled by conspirators, everyone will have a determined or even designed place at the expense of their personal freedom and *autonomy* (G9). The question of lack of freedom and *non-autonomy* (G10) may extend not only to the physical but also to the psychological and spiritual levels. In medieval times, there were ideas about the union of witches, Jews, or lepers with the Devil, and the motif of unfreedom was associated with demonic possession or giving up the soul to the Devil. Concurrently, we often encounter the motif of "brainwashing" in the sense of unconscious unfreedom implemented by the manipulation of conspirators. This raises the question – can we still trust what we see and think or how we "want" to live?⁵⁶ As in the case of G1 and G2, the religious context has to be considered. From the point of view of Christian doctrine, we find a difference in meaning between the oppositions of *autonomy* –

⁵² *Protokoly*, p. 16. In this case, however, the "symbolism of the serpent", could refer more to the rapture from the initial "natural" state in the garden that man lost as a result of his sin. However, there are also interpretations according to which the Devil, who disguised himself as a serpent to seduce Eve, is to blame (fully or partially) for the expulsion from Eden, and since the Jews are the Devil's helpers, this transfers his guilt to them as well. BRONNER, p. 30.

⁵³ Also, many editions of the *Protocols* in various languages depict a snake or an octopus gripping the world on their covers. BRONNER, *A Rumor*, p. 58.

⁵⁴ See: JAMES NIGEL, "Contraails", in PETER KNIGHT (ed.), *Conspiracy Theories in American History: An Encyclopedia*, Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO 2003, p. 197–199; MARGIT STANGE, „Health Scares“, in PETER KNIGHT (ed.), *Conspiracy Theories in American History: An Encyclopedia*, Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO 2003, p. 306–311; Even the *Protocols* makes a remark about the "vaccination of diseases." *Protokoly*, p. 44. See also in *The Protocols*, p. 35.

⁵⁵ *Protokoly*, p. 8; In some contemporary conspiracy theories, conspiracists are described as cold-blooded alien lizards or heartless robots driven only by their mission.

⁵⁶ FRAN MASON, "Mind Control", in PETER KNIGHT (ed.), *Conspiracy Theories in American History: An Encyclopedia*, Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO 2003, p. 480–89.

non-autonomy and *freedom – unfreedom*. The concept of Christian freedom is different from physical, political, or legal freedom. This notion of freedom is not explicitly mentioned in the *Protocols* themselves, but traces of it can be seen in the criticism of non-Jews. They have turned away from God, and that has distorted their character, meaning they cannot draw on the benefits of true freedom, which is mediated only by faith in God and the life-giving and liberating sacrifice of Jesus Christ. At the same time, they fall into the clutches of the conspirators, who, in this case, are in real life perceived as damned by God because they rejected true freedom (and therefore life) and seek to attain it by the shallow observance of the commandments. In this sense, they represent wrong modern and secular values that, according to the *Protocols*, they are trying to install among the goyim. In contrast, contemporary conspiracy theories often rethink this opposition. For if the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries was still characterized by a struggle between dying monarchism and rising liberalism, concurrently, the notion of individual civil liberty, liberalism, and democracy would prevail over the desire to restore sanctified monarchical absolutism.

The position and achievements of the conspirators imply that they possess almost unlimited power, conditioned by God's will, giving them a unique supreme nature and, at the same time, secured by a worldwide network of agents, solid organization, and immense wealth. Thus, the common theme of previous mythemes could be the relationship between *power* and its *lack – lack of power*. However, in the context of this analysis, I will dare to go one step further. In searching for the underlying meaning of all the identified mythemes, I find a common theme of life and death.⁵⁷ The pairs *G1* and *G2* clearly imply life under the rule of good and death under the rule of evil. *G3* and *G4* express the danger of death due to the insufficient organization and weak order of the gentile society, which is responsible for the domination of conspirators who bring death to their opponents and life to those who submit. At the same time, we can ask whether the gentile society can sustain life in its disintegrated state. The pairs *G5* and *G6* express death due to the lack of knowledge and the ability to see through the conspirators' traps. In this case, culture (*G7*) causes life in contrast to nature (*G8*), emphasizing its primitive, aggressive, and predatory side. The chthonic character of the conspirators then may enhance the theme of death. However, the situation is different in the case of some modern conspiracy theories (chemtrails, GMOs, anti-vax). The myth is transformed, and the relationship is reversed. The culture causes death because it represses the life-giving nature. The pair *G9* and *G10* represents a paradox, where despotism and non-autonomy cause life, preventing anarchy and arbitrariness, which cause death. Reflecting the Christian ethos in the text, there is the ultimate gift of eternal life under God's mandate. Life and freedom are thus conditioned by the renunciation of personal autonomy, which will always lead to death (living in sin). The *Protocols* also briefly mentions a topic that is still very relevant to those contemporary conspiracy theories that express concern about the controlled breakdown of the traditional family. In this sense, autonomy,

⁵⁷ GRAY, "Structural Analysis...", p. 88.

freedom, and individualism threaten the stability of the traditional family as a means for reproduction and, thus, for the maintenance of life. In the last pair (*G11*, *G12*), life is linked to power and strength (physical, spiritual, organizational), while death is associated with its lack. The fundamental opposition between life and death could thus be better represented by the following table, which, however, only describes one (in this case, the “monarchical” and “conservative”) of several possible transformations of the myth:

<i>G13</i> life – <i>G14</i> death	good / ideal order of God (overstated organization) / knowledge / culture / non-autonomy effecting freedom / power / immortality in community / continuity	evil / imperfect order of man (understated organization) / ignorance / nature / autonomy effecting unfreedom / lack of power / breakdown of the traditional family / discontinuity
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1.4 Conclusion

Through the method of structural analysis, we were able to explore or reconsider one of the basic premises of the study of anti-Jewish conspiracy narratives and especially the *Protocols*, which are considered a concentrate of anti-Jewish conspiracy ideas with universal applicability. The analysis has shown us that, on the one hand, the narrative of the *Protocols* is undoubtedly a product of its time and reflects the contradiction between the individual and self-given freedom of human life and the Christian doctrine of freedom given by the grace of God, which stood as two opposing paradigms at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. In the context of Western Christianity, however, this conclusion simultaneously becomes a hypothesis for further investigation that requires a deep dive into the theological concept of Christian freedom and its modern transformation in order to get closer to the way it might have been perceived not only by the authors but also the readers and supporters of the *Protocols* and other conspiracy narratives from the early 20th century to the present.

While some contemporary transformations and updates of the anti-Jewish conspiracy myth of the *Protocols* have again taken place within the Christian world (Russian Orthodoxy, for example), we can trace its continuing success outside the explicitly religious environment. The dynamics and ambiguity of the various oppositions have shown us the moulding nature of this conspiracy theory, while they all relate to themes and anxieties that society in modern times still has to confront at the most fundamental level of its existence. The enormous influence that the *Protocols* have achieved goes beyond unmediated experience with the text. The narrative became a kind of Esperanto for conspiracy theorists. Whether or not they know of it, they embrace the patterns that long predate modern conspiracy theories of the secret global cabal.

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Cosmic Prison Break: From Gnostic Movies to Conspiracist Cosmology

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Abstract: The article thematically and structurally analyses a group of films usually designated as “gnostic films”. These films share a common ideology as they postulate the existence of two worlds – one illusory and the other true. The hero must escape the false world and reach the true one. As the majority of gnostic films appeared at the turn of the millennium, the article also suggests what contributed to the emergence of these films. As the cosmology of the films bears a close similarity to the cosmology of conspiracy theories, the emergence of the films is shown to be a part of the sociocultural development of the conspiracist mindset entering the mainstream. In the 1990s, conspiracism was out of the closet and gained popularity, but it was not yet perceived as an imminent societal threat and therefore was not a taboo for Hollywood filmmakers. The 1990s were also the decade of a unipolar world order where the absence of an inimical Other engendered anxiety about the system itself, which is reflected in the analysed films.

Keywords: conspiracy theory; mythology; gnosticism; gnostic myth; gnostic film; cinema; demiurges

Abstrakt: Článek tematicky a strukturálně analyzuje skupinu filmů, které se obvykle označují jako „gnostické filmy“. Tyto filmy mají společnou ideologii, neboť postulují existenci dvou světů – jednoho iluzorního a druhého pravého. Hrdina musí uniknout z falešného světa a dosáhnout toho pravého. Vzhledem k tomu, že většina gnostických filmů se objevila na přelomu tisíciletí, nabízí článek také odpověď na otázku, co přispělo ke vzniku těchto filmů. Vzhledem k tomu, že kosmologie těchto filmů je velmi podobná kosmologii konspiračních teorií, ukazuje se, že vznik těchto filmů je součástí sociokulturního vývoje, kdy se konspirační myšlení dostává do kulturního mainstreamu. V devadesátých letech 20. století konspirace opouštějí okrajovou pozici a získávají na popularitě, ale ještě nejsou vnímány jako bezprostřední společenská hrozba, a proto nebyly pro hollywoodské filmaře tabu. Devadesátá léta byla také dekadou unipolárního uspořádání světa, kdy absence nepřátelského Jiného vyvolávala úzkost ze systému samotného, což se odráží v analyzovaných filmech.

Klíčová slova: konspirační teorie; mytologie; gnóze, gnostický mýtus; gnostický film; kinematografie; demiurg

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Introduction

The year was 1998. I was a first-year student at Charles University's Religious Studies Department, reading voraciously – outside of the standard curriculum – the texts of ancient Gnostic traditions. The texts of the Nag Hammadi corpus – especially *The Apocryphon of John*, *Tripartite Tractate* and *Gospel of Truth* – perfectly suited my youthful contrarian intellectual tastes. I was fascinated by a cosmology where the God of the Bible is cast as a villain and where the world is seen not as a positive reality to be happily inhabited but as a prison to escape.

A worldview of this sort was attractive to me not only because I was strongly critical of “the System” (i.e. the world of the grown-ups I was entering). It was also quite understandable for me because of the experience of living under the communist regime in my childhood. My father was a dissident and a political prisoner¹ (he was the one who introduced me to Gnosticism), and my earliest experience with school and the state was a feeling of alienation and suspicion: The world did not seem to be a good place, even if the cheerful parades, the TV, and the newspapers were trying to tell us otherwise. It was an oppressive system, and it looked like only a few people were bright enough to understand its true nature and even fewer were brave enough to stand up and resist it.

As I was absorbed by the study of Gnosticism ten years after the Velvet Revolution, a very strange thing was happening at the same time: A surprising number of new Hollywood movies seemed to be filled with Gnostic ideas and motifs – the avalanche started with *The Truman Show* (1998), *Dark City* (1998), and *Pleasantville* (1998) and was followed the next year by *The Matrix* (1999), *The Thirteenth Floor* (1999), and *eXistenZ* (1999). The movies technically had no connection: their styles, directors and producers had nothing in common, only their cosmologies were surprisingly similar.

All of these movies directly or indirectly questioned the nature of everyday reality, and most of them told stories about an “awakening” from an illusory world and an escape into higher reality. My reaction to this coincidence was almost paranoid: Is it just my fascination with the topic that means I tend to see it everywhere? Or are the people in Hollywood also reading up on Gnosticism? Is the whole world turning Gnostic? The answer to the last question soon turned out to be negative: In the following years, several more films of this type appeared, but eventually, the wave would be over.

I didn't know what to do with the topic at that time, so I let it be. Many years passed, and I spent my time researching historical religious traditions unconnected to Gnosticism, but in recent years, I was brought back to the issue. My research into the theory of myth² led me to the contemporary phenomenon of conspiracy theories and the cultural background of conspiracist imagination, where the same movies I had noticed twenty years ago suddenly reappeared again:

¹ “Jan Kozák” [online], *Memory of Nations*, accessed July 2022, available online at <https://www.memoryofnations.eu/en/kozak-jan-1951>.

² JAN A. KOZÁK, *Monomytus: Synetické Pojednání o Teorii Mýtu*, Praha: Malvern, 2021.

Conspiracy theorists are thus not so much trying to discover the underlying forces of nature but aim to uncover the hidden forces that control society. Herein lies personal salvation. This is often illustrated in the milieu by reference to films like *The Truman Show* (dir. Peter Weir, 1999), *ExistenZ* (dir. David Cronenberg, 1999), or, most often, *The Matrix* (dir. Wachowski and Wachowski, 1999) where the protagonist hacker, Neo, discovers that everyday reality is in fact a virtual reality constructed by artificially intelligent robots (...).³

At this point, my old questions about “gnostic movies” returned to me, accompanied by several new questions: what is the connection between the gnostic-like imagination of Hollywood filmmakers and postmodern conspiracy culture? Could this connection explain the sudden appearance of a wave of these movies? The present article is an attempt to deal with these questions. I want to explore the relationship between Gnostic (or gnostic, see below) cosmology in Hollywood and conspiracy culture with the aim of shedding more light on both. The phenomenon of conspiracy theories has become particularly prominent in the last decades, and it is important to investigate its sources and interplay with popular culture.

With this, I conclude the introduction, which is consciously written in a personal and subjective style as I believe in “scholarship with a human face” where the subjectivity is not hidden behind a façade of impersonal presentation, but where motivations and personal attitude are admitted and openly stated at the outset of the text.

Gnostic Movies at the Turn of the Millenium

The conspicuous emergence of films with similar gnostic-like cosmology was not a mirage of mine. As other scholars have noted, the label “Gnostic” (or “gnostic”) has been attributed to them, and the last 20 years have seen an ongoing discussion on the topic.

The pool of the included films circles around the same titles with a slight variation: Eric G. Wilson (2006) devoted a whole monograph on Gnosticism in contemporary cinema⁴ and mentioned *Vanilla Sky* (2001), *The Thirteenth Floor* (1999), *eXistenZ* (1999), *Dark City* (1998), and *Pleasantville* (1998), while Fryderyk Kwiatkowski, who wrote a series of articles on the topic, named *The Truman Show*, *Dark City*, *The Thirteenth Floor*, *The Others* (2001), *Waking Life* (2001), *Vanilla Sky* (2001), and *The Matrix trilogy* (1999–2003).⁵

³ STEF AUPERS and JARON HARAMBAM, “Rational Enchantments: Conspiracy Theory between Secular Scepticism and Spiritual Salvation”, in Asbjørn Dyrendal, David G. Robertson, and Egil Asprem (eds.), *Handbook of Conspiracy Theory and Contemporary Religion*, Leiden: Brill 2018, p. 61.

⁴ ERIC G. WILSON, *Secret Cinema: Gnostic Vision in Film*, New York: Continuum 2006, p. 5.

⁵ FRYDERYK KWIATKOWSKI, “How To Attain Liberation From a False World? The Gnostic Myth of Sophia in *Dark City* (1998)”, *Journal of Religion and Film* 21 (1, 2017): p. 1.

Even scholars who do not use the label “Gnostic/gnostic” (typically film theorists not interested in the religious or mythological angle) still perceive a clear similarity of some sort among these films and tend to group them together – e.g. G. Christopher Williams, who lists *The Truman Show*, *Pleasantville*, *Dark City*, *The Thirteenth Floor* and *eXistenZ*,⁶ or Simone Knox, who discusses *The Thirteen Floor*, *Dark City*, *eXistenZ*, *Pleasantville*, *The Truman Show* and *The Matrix*, seeing a preoccupation with the relationship between representation and reality as the common feature of these films.⁷

Before addressing the label of “Gnostic/gnostic” in cinema, the selection criteria, and an overview of the selected films, let us illustrate what kind of narratives we are investigating by looking closer at the prototypical representative of the group – *The Truman Show* (1998, dir. Peter Weir):

The film tells the story of Truman Burbank (played by Jim Carrey), an ordinary clerk who lives with his wife, Meryl, in the town of Seahaven. Seahaven “is a suburban paradise with an almost surreal, 1950s everything-is-right-with-the-world quality. But its postcard exterior masks something strangely amiss.”⁸ Everybody around Truman is overly cheerful, and his wife has a strange habit of endorsing and recommending various products (like a brand of cocoa or a kitchen appliance) while looking past Truman into the corner of the room. Things start to unravel when one day, Truman witnesses a large lamp-like fixture falling from the sky and crashing on the street in front of his house. When he comes to investigate, he finds the label “Sirius (9 Canis Major)” on the lamp.

This first “crack”, the fallen “star”, is soon followed by stranger happenings and the situation culminates in Truman’s discovery of the fact that everybody around him (including his wife and his best friend) is an actor and his whole world is just a giant movie set – literally: Seahaven is covered by an enormous dome where an artificial sun, moon and stars revolve as it was imagined in medieval times. Miniaturised cameras are everywhere, including parks, beaches, mirrors, and buttons on clothing. It is not a suburban paradise but a prison covered by thousands of all-seeing eyes. Truman’s authenticity (conditioned by the fact that he never learns about the true nature of his situation) is the fundamental value here. Billions of people pay the showrunners to watch Truman’s everyday life precisely because he is ignorant of the fact that he is being observed.

The showrunner and director, Christof, the author of the whole spectacle, resides inside the artificial moon and directs all things around Truman, including the weather conditions (sunshine and rain, lightning and thunder), reminding us of God in the popular imagination. Nevertheless, Christof is only a God of the show, not of the real world outside the dome. Even if he controls everything on the set, he does not control Truman – the True Man. Christof can only strive to manipulate Truman so that he remains in his

⁶ CHRISTOPHER G. WILLIAMS, “Mastering the Real: Trinity as the ‘Real’ Hero of The Matrix”, *Film Criticism* 27 (3, 2003).

⁷ SIMONE KNOX, “Reading ‘The Truman Show’ Inside Out”, *Film Criticism* 35 (1, 2010): p. 1.

⁸ RANDALL VERARDE, “Suspicion, the Seed of Awakening: The Truman Show as Gnostic Fairy Tale”, *The San Francisco Jung Institute Library Journal* 19 (1, 2000): p. 38.

original ignorance and never “wakes up”, but he does not control his will and actions (in contrast to the actors, who follow the director’s instructions).

Against the will of the showrunner, Truman discovers the true nature of his world and decides to escape it. He overcomes his fear of the deep sea and sails away from his hometown on a boat. To his surprise, the boat eventually hits the outer wall of the studio with sky and clouds painted on it (fig. 1). He finds the escape hatch with the word “EXIT” written on it and leaves his prison, never to return (fig. 2).



Fig. 1: Truman hits the wall of his prison; *The Truman Show* 1998.



Fig. 2: Truman bows to the audience and leaves the Truman Show through the exit door; *The Truman Show* 1998.

The film is multi-layered and cannot be easily reduced to one line of thought. It clearly reacts to the boom of reality shows, which became globally popular during the 1990s, it also reflects on the spread of surveillance cameras in public spaces, and expresses millennial anxieties concerning the impact of mass media.⁹ The world Truman inhabits exudes a specific “Stepford Wives” atmosphere, suggesting a certain resonance between the 1950s (“We won World War II and now live a perfect cheerful life”) and the 1990s (“We won the Cold War and now live a perfect cheerful life”), in both cases suggesting that under the bright cover, there is some fundamental falseness or deception. These influences and ideas (and many more) enter the frame but do not make up the story’s core.¹⁰

The story itself is a story of a man living in ignorance inside a gigantic prison designed and ruled by a God-like person. The protagonist’s journey is primarily a journey of discovering the true nature of his world, followed by a successful prison-break attempt. He wakes up, finds a way to see through the illusion and leaves the domain where he was kept without his consent. These features led me and other scholars to connect *The Truman Show* with the Gnostic myth.¹¹ Let us make clear what is meant by the term.

What is meant by “Gnostic/gnostic”?

The problem of the label has been discussed extensively – best summarised by Kwiatkowski in a paper wholly devoted to the issue of the concept of “Gnosticism” in Fiction Studies.¹² There is a risk in using the label “Gnostic” in too vague a sense, which is well illustrated by Kwiatkowski’s quotation of Ioan P. Culianu:

Once I believed that Gnosticism was a well-defined phenomenon belonging to the religious history of Late Antiquity (...). I was to learn soon, however, that I was a naïf indeed. Not only Gnosis was gnostic, but the catholic authors were gnostic, the neoplatonic too. Reformation was gnostic, Communism was gnostic, Nazism was gnostic, liberalism,

⁹ KNOX, “Reading The Truman Show Inside Out”, p. 1.

¹⁰ The difference between various then-relevant themes and the gnostic nature of the story is best illustrated by contrasting *The Truman Show* to *edTV* (1999) a film from the same time period which has overall the same theme: the protagonist of the film is the center of a reality show. While *edTV* reflects on the same „current affairs“ of the era, namely the tabloid exploitative nature of reality shows, the central structure of the story is completely different. It lacks the philosophical and mythological dimension and while it also ends with the protagonist escaping the reality show, the result is not imbued with the meaning of salvation as in the *Truman Show*.

¹¹ “Like Truman, the first Gnostics decided that the time had come to get some answers. Like Truman, the answers they sought could not be found within the chaos of their world, a universe that seemed constructed to deceive them at every turn. What they sought was reality beyond the door in the sky, at the top of the celestial dome, beyond whatever cunning simulation this world might be.” APRIL DECORNICK, *The Gnostic New Age: How a Countercultural Spirituality Revolutionized Religion from Antiquity to Today*, New York: Columbia University Press 2016, p. 53.

¹² FRYDERYK KWIATKOWSKI, “About the Concept of “Gnosticism” in Fiction Studies”, *CLCWeb* 18 (3, 2016), p. 1–8.

existentialism and psychoanalysis were gnostic too, modern biology was gnostic, Blake, Yeats, Kafka, Rilke, Proust, Joyce, Musil, Hesse and Thomas Mann were gnostic. From very authoritative interpreters of Gnosis, I learned further that science is gnostic and superstition is gnostic; power, counter-power and lack of power are gnostic; left is gnostic and right is gnostic; Hegel is gnostic and Marx is gnostic; Freud is gnostic and Jung is gnostic; all things and their opposite are equally gnostic.¹³

To prevent problems of this kind,¹⁴ I will define what I mean by the term “Gnostic” and/or “gnostic” for the purpose of this article. As already could be noticed, I intend to distinguish Gnostic with the capital “G” and gnostic without it. By Gnostic, I understand a phenomenon linked directly to (or clearly genetically derived from) the historical Gnosticism, a diverse religious movement flourishing in the 2nd and 3rd century AD in the area of the Middle East and the Roman Empire, even spreading into the Far East in the form of Manichaeism. Roelof van der Broek succinctly summarises the Gnostic cosmology:¹⁵

(1) A distinction is made between the highest, unknown God and the imperfect or plainly evil creator-god, who is often identified with the God of the Bible; (2) this is often connected with an extensive description of the divine world (Pleroma), from which the essential core of human beings derives, and of disastrous “fall” of a divine being (Sophia, “Wisdom”), in this upper world; (3) as a result, humankind has become entrapped in the earthly condition of oblivion and death, from which it is saved by the revelation of gnosis by one or more heavenly messengers; (4) salvation is often actualised and celebrated in rituals that are performed within the gnostic community.¹⁶

While it is important to be aware of the basic features of the mythology pertaining to historical Gnosticism, it will not be that useful for our purposes as most of the

¹³ IOAN P. CULIANU, “The Gnostic Revenge: Gnosticism and Romantic Literature”, in *Religionstheorie Und Politische Theologie*, München: Wilhelm Fink 1984, p. 290–91.

¹⁴ An example of a too vague definition can be nicely illustrated by Lanzillotta, who ends up including some films that seem randomly chosen based on too few relevant features; LAUTARO ROIG LANZILLOTTA, “Albert Camus, Metaphysical Revolt, Gnosticism and Modern Cinema”, *Gnosis: Journal of Gnostic Studies* 5 (1, 2020): p. 45–70.

¹⁵ It is important to highlight here that since the publication of seminal works of MICHAEL A. WILLIAMS, *Rethinking “Gnosticism”: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1996, and KAREN KING, *What is Gnosticism?*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 2005, many specialists contest the existence of Gnosticism as a historical phenomenon. For more in-depth overview of the current usage of the term I refer the reader to GRANT ADAMSON, “Gnosticism Disputed: Major Debates in the Field”, in April D. DeConick (ed.), *Religion: Secret Religion*, Farmington Hills: Macmillan Reference US (2016): p. 39–54, and DYLAN M. BURNS, “Gnosticism, gnostics, and gnosis”, in GARRY W. TROMPF, GUNNER B. MIKKELSEN, and JAY JOHNSTON (ed.), *The Gnostic World*, Boca Raton, FL: Routledge 2018, p. 9–25. I use the Van den Broek characterization here just as a heuristic tool for establishing working prototype for comparisons, nothing more.

¹⁶ ROELOF VAN DEN BROEK, *Gnostic Religion in Antiquity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2013, p. 10.

“gnostic films” are not direct descendants of Gnosticism. Some indirect influence cannot be ruled out – one of the science fiction writers who had (posthumously) an enormous effect on Hollywood was Philip K. Dick.¹⁷ Dick admired Gnosticism, read the source texts and academic literature on the topic, and even quoted Nag Hammadi texts in his novel *Valis*.¹⁸ However, he was rather unique in this respect, and this kind of direct inspiration was not present when it comes to the writers of the core group of the “gnostic films” (even the Wachowskis, the authors of *The Matrix*, do not mention Gnosticism explicitly and instead point to Christianity, Platonism, and postmodern philosophy).¹⁹

The writers and directors are also usually very eager to boast their direct inspirations and influences in their work: In the *Matrix*, the names of the characters illustrate this clearly: Thomas Anderson (“Son of Man”), Morpheus, Trinity, and Zion point to the Bible and Greek mythology. On the other hand, we find no Sophia, Yaldabaoth, or Pleroma (i.e. Gnostic names and notions) there, not even a hint that the authors may have used Gnosticism as a direct source of inspiration.

For the purposes of the present analysis, I, therefore, offer another label, gnostic, with lowercase “g”. Here the focus is not on the links to historical Gnosticism, but it is rather a typological tool devised for comparisons between cosmologies. Features like number (2) (“extensive descriptions of the Pleroma”) from van der Broek’s summary above are of no use in this case because while lengthy descriptions of the divine world and the enumeration of the Aions (the perfect entities contained within the Pleroma) are staple elements of Gnostic tractates, they are never present in contemporary gnostic films. For obvious reasons: gnostic films are entertaining stories about a singular protagonist or a small group of protagonists, while Gnostic tractates are religious texts dealing with cosmogony, eschatology, soteriology, ritual etc. Another feature central to Gnosticism but absent in the films is the importance of the stark opposition of material and spiritual realms. The body and the bodily reality are a prison, while only our spirit (*pneuma*) can be lifted out of it and liberated. This element also cannot be found in the films, at least partially for purely practical reasons: invisible spiritual realms and realities cannot be portrayed as relatable for a mainstream viewer.

Moreover, to portray the spiritual dimension through verbal exposition goes against the movie-making maxim “show, don’t tell”. We must go beyond features dictated by the genre, style, and sensibilities of a historical era and grasp the core

¹⁷ The number of film and TV adaptations of Philip K. Dick’s novels and short stories is striking, beating all the classics of SF (Isaac Asimov, Robert A. Heinlein, Arthur C. Clarke). The problem of illusion and reality is a staple theme in PKD’s work.

¹⁸ MICHAEL KALER, “Neo-Gnosticism at the Movies”, *Journal of Religion and Film* 22 (3, 2018): p. 6.

¹⁹ “In an online chat with viewers of the DVD, the Wachowskis acknowledged that the Buddhist references in the film are purposeful. However, when asked ‘Have you ever been told that the *Matrix* has Gnostic overtones?’, they gave a tantalizingly ambiguous reply: ‘Do you consider that to be a good thing?’” FRANCES FLANNERY-DAILEY and RACHEL L. WAGNER, “Wake up! Gnosticism and Buddhism in the *Matrix*”, *Journal of Religion & Film* 5 (2, 2016): p. 24.

elements that characterise the common cosmology. I propose these fundamental features:

- 1) There are **two worlds**, one is true (and hierarchically higher, primary), and one is false (and hierarchically lower, secondary).
- 2) Ordinary people (including the protagonist of the narrative) live in the **secondary world** and are initially **ignorant** of it.
- 3) Ordinary life is based on a fundamental **illusion or deception**.
- 4) The false world functions like a **prison**.
- 5) There is a Demiurge, or more generally **Powers, Archons**, who created and control the false world, and keep people in **ignorance**.
- 6) People are **exploited** by the Powers.
- 7) The Powers are either **malevolent, deficient, immoral, illegitimate, or ignorant**.
- 8) The moment of **waking up** from the illusion of the false world is a crucial turning point.
- 9) It is possible to **cross over** from the false world into the true one and escape the prison.
- 10) There is a **small group** of those who know the Truth, who have woken up – the **Liberators, Gnostics**.
- 11) These are somehow connected to the real world outside or even **come directly from it**. They are the **bearers of the knowledge** of the real state of things and want to make this knowledge known to all people.
- 12) There are **agents of the Archons** who oppose the Liberators (and the protagonist).

In this abstract form, the characterisation contains some overlapping features with Platonism or even Buddhism, the main characterising differences being 1) the active role of the Demiurge/Archons and 2) their negative valuation – it is their fault and their doing that people live in the prison of the false world. The figure of the Demiurge can also be found in Platonism (and Neoplatonism), but it is in Gnosticism where the Demiurge is cast in a mostly negative light,²⁰ thus solving the problem of the origin of evil in the world (*theodicea*). While Buddhism also contains the motif of awakening (*bodhi*) from illusion (*māyā*), in Gnosticism this illusion is viewed as having been created malevolently, and people are kept in it, not because of their own inherent ignorance (Buddhist *avidyā*), but because it is the Demiurge's evil plan.

²⁰ It should be noted that the word “Demiurge” is not very common in the Nag Hammadi scriptures. It mostly lacks negative connotations; see EINAR THOMASSEN, “The Platonic and the Gnostic ‘Demiurge,’” in SØREN GIVERSEN et al. (ed.), *Apocryphon Severini: Presented to Søren Giversen*, Aarhus: Aarhus University Press 1993, p. 226–44. It seems that the main reason the term “Demiurge” is associated with the evil and monstrous ruler of the material realm comes from the texts of the Church Fathers, Neo-Platonists, and modern scholars who used this term to refer primarily to Sethian images of the world creator.

Gnosticism thus offers a much more dualistic and dramatic setting, where the state of the ordinary world is a product of Demiurge's evil intention (or his tragic deficiency).

The Selected Films

As already mentioned, the candidates for the category are offered by many commenters – not only by the scholars cited above but also by compilers of IMDB film lists²¹ and various bloggers.²² Some commenters suggest up to 80 films in this category but admit that they also include items with just “a slight glint of Gnosticism”.²³

In the following analysis, I will include only films that contain at least half of the 12 features listed above.²⁴ There is only one feature which I consider essential and indispensable, namely the fact that the protagonist has to begin their story in the false world and in ignorance and has to learn the truth during the storyline. Narratives where the protagonist starts in the real world and travels into the false world will be excluded from this analysis as they lack the crucial moment of *metanoia*, the transformative experience based on liberating knowledge.²⁵

For this reason, I exclude some films that are usually seen as belonging to the group. Among those are:

- 1) *Pleasantville* (1998). The film contains several motifs similar to the rest of the group, e.g. the structure of the two worlds (monochrome Pleasantville vs our reality); Pleasantville has a limited size, and its citizens are unaware that anything exists outside of their town, as all roads circle back with no escape. However, the pair of protagonists enter the virtual world from the outside and thus don't undergo the crucial experience of “waking up”.²⁶

²¹ RAPIDCEREB, “Gnostic movies” [online], *IMDB.com*, 20.1.2021, accessed June 2022, available online at <https://www.imdb.com/list/ls050422304/>.

²² MIGUEL ROMERO, “Take the Red Popcorn: Gnosticism in Cinema” [online], *Mysterious Universe*, 27.10.2014, accessed June 2022, available online at <https://mysteriousuniverse.org/2014/10/take-the-red-popcorn-gnosticism-in-cinema/>; JEREMYCROW, „Top 10 Gnostic Themed Movies“ [online], *Steemit*, 8.2.2017, accessed June 2022, available online at <https://steemit.com/philosophy/@jeremycrow/top-10-gnostic-themed-movies>.

²³ RAPIDCEREB, “Gnostic movies”, <https://www.imdb.com/list/ls050422304/>.

²⁴ I created the pool of candidate films by using all the suggestions mentioned in the academic and internet sources referred to in this article and additionally, I used the portal BestSimilar (<https://bestsimilar.com/>) that offers a selection of similar films to any chosen title based on a number of styles and plot distinctive features.

²⁵ One of the films included in the selection (*The Village*, 2004) contains an ambivalent version of the “waking up” moment – the heroine, who is blind, never finds out the true nature of things. Only we, the viewers, undergo the transformatory experience.

²⁶ Pleasantville is admittedly a film on the border of the category. I decided to adhere to the formal criterion of the protagonists beginning the story in the „upper world“. However, there are other valid perspectives: “The protagonists know from the outset about the illusory nature of the fictional town. However, due to exposure to new experiences and events in their lives while inside Pleasantville they acquire new knowledge and undergo an inner transformation – similarly as other denizens. So, one could argue that in a sense they ‘wake up’ but in a slightly different way than, say, Neo, who is ignorant of his entrapped condition.” (FRYDERYK KWIATKOWSKI, personal

2) *eXistenZ* (1999). While the film operates with the concept of virtual worlds (even more than one layer of them) and contains a series of twists where the protagonists learn that what they thought was reality is, in fact, a virtual reality, its cosmological and narrative structure is different from the rest of the group. There is no journey towards freedom from illusion, and the film ends in an atmosphere of complete uncertainty about what is real and what is fake.

I will now offer an overview of the films with the highest number of “gnostic points” in chronological order. These are the films selected for the analysis (Table 1).²⁷

There are also other significant films from the same period that explore the idea of dreams or virtual reality – and thus attest to the strange fascination with this topic characterising the turn of the millennium – but they lack most of the other features constitutive of the gnostic type. Illustrative examples are *Johnny Mnemonic* (1995), *The Cell* (2000), and *Vanilla Sky* (2001).

On the other hand, some films that do not include virtual reality of any sort and are not usually counted in the “gnostic” group scored surprisingly high (even if not high enough) based on the twelve presented features. Especially *Dogville* (2003) is worth mentioning,²⁸ but also *Gattaca* (1997), *The Game* (1997), and *Cube* (1997).²⁹

There is one special genre (with two specific forms) of films that usually score well regarding the 12 gnostic features. These films have been omitted from the present

communication.) DeCornick also offers strong arguments: “This Gnostic undercurrent frames David and Jennifer as emissaries from the ‘real’ world who come into Pleasantville with a subversive message that awakens the characters in the show and turns them from black-and-white to color. Their awakening is depicted along traditional lines, as eating from the tree of knowledge. Yet this act is not depicted as sinful. It is glorious. It is a Gnostic awakening that conveys the characters from death to life, from black-and-white to color.” APRIL DECORNICK, *The Gnostic New Age: How a Countercultural Spirituality Revolutionized Religion from Antiquity to Today*, New York: Columbia University Press 2016, p. 296.

²⁷ Two films in the group come from different decades than the rest: *They Live* (1988) is ten years older, and *Free Guy* (2021) is twenty years younger than the majority. It would be surprising not to find films with gnostic cosmology outside the 1990s window, but what is significant is their scarcity in other decades.

²⁸ *Dogville* tells the story of Grace (Nicole Kidman), a woman who ends up being stuck in a place called Dogville which seems perfectly fine at first sight, but after some time, the people of Dogville turn out to be creepily inhuman. Grace is abused and exploited by each of them. Ultimately, the inhabitants are ready to sacrifice Grace to her mysterious Boss. It turns out that her Boss is actually her father and that her travel into Dogville was not so much an escape from him as a mission to assess whether the people of Dogville are worthy of living. When the Boss asks her about the outcome, she votes for complete annihilation. Her father then unleashes his agents on the village in an Armageddon-like attack, killing everybody. While the film is usually interpreted through a political or social lens, it can also be read as a story of the innocent Soul entering the demonic sphere of Matter where she has to undergo enormous pain and suffering that will bring her to the understanding that she doesn’t belong there and the realm itself is so corrupt it has to be destroyed. By sheer coincidence, Nicole Kidman played another character, also called Grace, in *The Others* (2001), a film that is even more prominently gnostic.

²⁹ Other remarkable candidates are *Jacob’s Ladder* (1990) – see also FRYDERYK KWIATKOWSKI, “Climbing a ladder to heaven: Gnostic vision of the world in Jacob’s Ladder (1990)”, *Journal of Religion & Film* 19 (2, 2015); *Mr. Nobody* (2009) and *Us* (2019).

	They Live (1988)	Truman Show (1998)	Dark City (1998)	The Matrix (1999)	The Thirteenth Floor (1999)	Virtual Nightmare (2000)	The Others (2001)	The Village (2004)	The Island (2005)	The City of Ember (2008)	Free Guy (2021)
1	?	yes	?	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
2	?	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
3	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
4	yes	yes	yes	yes	?	?	yes	?	yes	yes	?
5	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	spec.	yes	yes	yes	yes
6	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	no	?	yes	yes	yes
7	yes	yes	yes	yes	?	yes	yes	no	yes	yes / no	yes
8	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes (?)	yes	yes	yes
9	no	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	yes	yes	yes
10	yes	yes (?)	yes	yes	no	no	no	no	no	no	yes
11	yes	yes	no (?)	yes	yes	no	yes	no	no	no	yes
12	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	no	no	yes	yes / no	no
score	9+	11+	10+	12	8+	7+	7+	6+	10	8+	10+

analysis as their similarity is based primarily on genre clichés and constraints,³⁰ but they deserve a separate study. These are:

- 1) Classical dystopian fiction with H. G. Wells' *The Time Machine* (1895), Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) and Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) – and their manifold film and TV adaptations – being the best known. In the typical case, the hero of these stories also starts in ignorance and has to work through the veil of state propaganda and brainwashing to reach the moment of (at least internal) liberation. In some cases (e.g. in Ira Levin's *This Perfect Day*, 1970), there is even opposition between the Two Worlds – one based on propaganda and one “normal”, where the hero can escape to, join with others of similar mind and return to get rid of the totalitarian system. Examples of films belonging to the category are *Alphaville* (1965), *Logan's Run* (1976), *Brazil* (1985), *Running Man* (1987), and *Equilibrium* (2002), but they are too numerous to be listed here *in toto*.
- 2) Young adult dystopian fiction. The young adult genre has a strong dystopian streak as the young heroes usually struggle against a totalitarian system. As the subgenre is lighter and more optimistic in its outcomes (contrasted to Orwell's or Huxley's novels), the hero and his companions usually defeat the villainous regime and liberate everybody. Typical examples are Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* (2008, adapted to film 2012), Veronica Roth's *Divergent* (2011, adapted to film 2014), and James Dashner's *The Maze Runner* (2009, adapter to film 2014).³¹

Regarding the problem of selection, we necessarily encounter the issue of fuzzy borders, and an element of subjectivity and interpretation becomes noticeable, especially in the case of films located near the border, i.e. those with around half the “gnostic points”.³² I have clearly shown my selection criteria and reasoning so that my argument can be followed, and any further discussion on the inclusion or exclusion of particular titles is welcome.

The Gnostic Motifs in the Films

Due to the space limitation, it is impossible to give summaries of all ten films here in similar detail as I did with *The Truman Show* above. Fortunately, detailed plot synop-

³⁰ I.e. the genre itself offers a limited range of cosmologies and narrative pathways. Dystopian futures usually imply that the hero will struggle and fight against the regime. It implies the hero is being brainwashed or indoctrinated into believing in the system and that he or she will sooner or later question the propaganda; it implies the scenes of the hero running away or hiding from the regime police, the hero finding kindred spirit(s) ready to join in the resistance etc.

³¹ A number of other young adult dystopian films score high in “gnostic points”, e.g. *The Host* (2013), *The Giver* (2014), *Equals* (2015).

³² Among those close to the group in the number of points but not included are *Zardoz* (1974), *Tron* (1985), *Total Recall* (1990), *Aeon Flux* (2005).



Fig. 3: Nada looks through the sunglasses and sees the real message behind the billboard advertisements; *They Live* 1988.

ses can be easily found online. I will therefore offer just a couple of sentences for each film to provide a basic orientation for those who have not seen them:³³

They Live (1988; dir. John Carpenter) tells the story of Nada, a drifter who one day finds special sunglasses that reveal the true messages in all the media: to stay asleep, consume, reproduce, and conform (fig. 3). In this way he uncovers the true nature of manipulated reality. Thanks to the sunglasses, he also discovers that some people are aliens and that these aliens keep humans in the brainwashed state of capitalist consumerism. The aliens broadcast a signal that keeps people from seeing them and their manipulation. Nada and his companions decide to destroy the source and succeed in the end.³⁴

The Truman Show (1998; dir. by Peter Weir) tells of Truman Burbank, the unknowing star of a reality show named after him, designed and ruled over by an autocratic director. Truman eventually discovers this and escapes into the real world.

Dark City (1998; dir. by Alex Proyas) tells of the awakening of John Murdoch, who lives in a city of perpetual night where alien beings alter human memories in the search for the secret of the human soul. Enlightened by the physician Daniel Schreiber, who works for and betrays the aliens, Murdoch defeats the aliens and gains the ability to reshape reality – his first creation is the sun.

The Matrix (1999; dir. by the Wachowskis) tells the story of Thomas Anderson, a.k.a. Neo, who is awoken from his quotidian reality to discover that all that we take

³³ I follow the example given in Kaler's article and even quote his succinct summaries of *The Matrix*, *The Truman Show*, *Dark City* and *The Thirteenth Floor*, KALER, "Neo-Gnosticism at the Movies", p. 7–8.

³⁴ *They Live* precedes the wave of gnostic films by ten years, yet it contains most features. The system of the Two Worlds is very peculiar here – it is unclear which one is the "real" one. The ordinary reality is physically real, but the monochrome reality is the "true message". What is obvious is the aspect of social critique present explicitly in the movie. It is basically a prototypical conspiracy theory turned into a film narrative.

to be real is actually a computer-generated, virtual reality illusion, the Matrix; humanity is trapped in a false world so that computer intelligence can feed on our vital energies. As it happens, Neo is the foretold Chosen One, and after he is liberated by a freedom fighter called Morpheus and his crew, Neo gains the ability to reshape the Matrix and alter reality.

The Thirteenth Floor (1999; dir. by Josef Rusnak) tells of the creation of a virtual reality world, and we subsequently discover that our own reality is such a world created by the inhabitants of a yet higher real world. At the end of the film, the protagonist is liberated from the lower, unreal world, and his consciousness ascends to live in the real world.

Virtual Nightmare (2000; dir. by Michael Pattinson) tells the story of Dale Hunter, an advertisement executive, working on promoting a product called Arora. Then he realises that nobody knows what it actually is. Eventually, he starts seeing glitches in reality and finds out that the colourful everyday life is just a virtual reality projected into human minds covering a weird blank background reality. He and his friend Wendy destroy the computer generating it, but they discover that humans became so accustomed to it that they remain in the simulation even without the computer.

The Others (2001; dir. by Alejandro Amenábar) tells the story of Grace, who lives with her two children in a large house that seems to be haunted. The house is shrouded in a constant fog, and Grace somehow cannot leave the premises. Eventually, she finds out that the strange sounds are not ghosts but real people visiting the manor, while she and her children are the ghosts. It is she who created her own private reality to escape the reality of having murdered her children and subsequently committing suicide.³⁵

The Village (2004; dir. by M. Night Shyamalan) tells the story of Ivy, the blind daughter of a village Elder in a 19th-century setting. Beyond the Village are the Woods, which no villager is allowed to enter. Monsters live there. Eventually, we, as the spectators, find out that it is the Elders who play the Monsters so that the people stay in the Village. The Elders founded the Village as a refuge from the present 21st-century world, which is corrupt and evil in their eyes. Ivy alone is allowed to travel across the Woods into the outside world to bring medicine for her wounded betrothed because, as a blind woman, she never sees the outside.

The Island (2005; dir. by Michael Bay) tells the story of Lincoln, who lives in an underground futuristic habitat with strict rules. The world above ground is a post-apocalyptic wasteland, but there is a paradisiacal Island where those selected by a lottery can reach. Lincoln eventually discovers that it is all a lie, the outside world is fine, and he and his colleagues are clones of rich people, with their bodies used as sources for organ transplants. Lincoln escapes to the outside world and, in the end, helps others to escape too.

³⁵ See also the convincing argumentation in favour of the presence of gnostic cosmology in FRYDERYK KWIATKOWSKI, "The Others (2001) by Alejandro Amenábar in the Light of Valentinian Thought," *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* (6, 2019): 21–10.

The City of Ember (2008; dir. by Gil Kenan; based on a book by Jeanne DuPrau from 2003) tells the story of Doon and Lina, who live in an underground city while the world above is being destroyed by nuclear war. The city slowly crumbles while the Mayor and most people do not want to do anything about it. The protagonists find out that the Builders of the city wanted them to leave after 200 years, which have already passed, and they find their escape route and reach the surface where they – for the first time in their lives – witness a sunrise.

Free Guy (2021; dir. by Shawn Levy) tells the story of Guy, who one day gets his hand on a special pair of glasses used by people around him. The glasses let him join in a game. Eventually, he finds out that his whole world is just an action game called Free City and that he himself is just a programmed character. However, the world of Free City is based on a better original game called Free Life that the author of the action game stole from its designers. In a struggle against the author of Free City, Guy is able to escape it and find the hidden Free Life and bring the other inhabitants of Free City with him.³⁶

As can be seen from the summaries, some elements recur more frequently. One such element is the structure of two worlds. It is worth noticing that the commonality here is not the presence of the motif of virtual reality generated by a computer but a purely structural difference between a “primary” and “secondary” reality:

		Primary World	Secondary World
1	<i>They Live</i>	Our normal world	The invisible signal hiding aliens
2	<i>Truman Show</i>	Our normal world	Inside the Show set
3	<i>Dark City</i>	Cosmos outside	Inside the Dark City
4	<i>The Matrix</i>	Postapocalyptic reality in the future	Virtual reality (simulating the past)
5	<i>The Thirteenth Floor</i>	Our (?) normal world in the future	Virtual reality (simulating the past)
6	<i>Virtual Nightmare</i>	Bleak cardboard reality in the future	Virtual reality (simulating the past)
7	<i>The Others</i>	Our normal world	The ghost reality surrounded by fog
8	<i>The Village</i>	Our normal world	Inside the community (simulating the past, surrounded by wood and wall)
9	<i>The Island</i>	Our normal world in the near future	Inside the habitat
10	<i>The City of Ember</i>	Postapocalyptic reality in the future	Inside the underground city
11	<i>Free Guy</i>	Original VR, “Free Life”	Parasitic VR, “Free City”

³⁶ Free Guy thus contains three dimensions: two virtual and one standard reality. One of the virtual realities (Free City) has the features of the Hysterema (it is an ethically corrupt place filled with violence), while the other (Free Life) of the Pleroma (blissful place). The original creation is the pleromatic Free Life, and the hysterematic Free City is just its corrupted copy. In this sense, it is close to Gnostic cosmology. However, there is also the third reality – the human reality, which created both virtual realities. The film is also peculiar due to its date, twenty years younger than most of the other members of the group.

The secondary reality can be a virtual reality, a film set, a walled habitat, or a dream-like or ghost-like dimension. What all of the various solutions have in common is that they produce something hierarchically lower than the base reality – either a simulation of it or a minuscule subsection of it shaped into a small universe of sorts, a microcosm. In this sense, we get a series of picturesque variations on the Gnostic motif of the secondary creation by the Demiurge.

In contrast to historical Gnostic myths, contemporary gnostic films do not value the primary reality as blissful, good and complete. Quite the contrary: the primary reality is pronouncedly dystopian in several cases. This peculiarity is not something to be glossed over – I believe it hints at a unique (post)modern version of the gnostic cosmology. While the traditional Gnostic cosmology sees the secondary world as a Hysterema (“Lack”, “Need”) and the primary as Pleroma (“Fullness”), the inverted postmodern gnostic imagination sees the secondary world as “Fake Fullness” and the primary world as “Real Lack”.

The “Real Lack” form has two sub-types: 1) a postapocalyptic world, and 2) our normal world (see the table above). What is implied by the existence of the two versions is that they are, in a sense, equivalent. In both cases, we are confronted with the “Desert of the Real” – in the first subtype, the idea is presented in a literal and visual way, and in the second subtype, it is usually expressed in a more subtle, toned-down way. The outside world of *The Village* is real but also filled with injustice and violence. The outside world of *Truman Show* is not a reality show anymore, but it is full of danger and uncertainty. Truman’s exit does not imply a happy ending. Truman escapes, filled with euphoria, and finds his beloved woman who inspired his escape, but the question is: what happens the second day, the third day when the euphoria subsides, and he sobers up? Once he is confronted with the banal conflicts of everyday life and the purposelessness of existence?

There are other variations that contrast with historical Gnosticism. Kaler, for example, notices the fact that “[w]hile the starting situations in these movies are quite comparable to ancient [G]nostic texts, their resolutions are strikingly different,” and adds that in Gnostic texts, “we never find, for instance, the enlightened figure rising up against the worldly power and successfully resisting martyrdom (...) the movies that we are discussing tend to show their protagonists as being more directly, autonomously effective in their battle against the Demiurgic forces in the lower realm.”³⁷

This difference can be explained by the fact that we encounter a hybrid of gnostic myth and the Campbellian hero’s quest in the films. The hero’s quest in its more exalted form contains the motif of apotheosis,³⁸ which we find in, e.g. *The Matrix* or *Dark City*.³⁹

³⁷ KALER, “Neo-Gnosticism at the Movies”, p. 9–10.

³⁸ JOSEPH CAMPBELL, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Novato: New World Library 2008, p. 138.

³⁹ The relationship of the Campbellian hero’s myth (CHM) to gnostic myth (GM) would deserve a separate study. The apparent structural difference is that in the CHM, the hero begins his story in the “normal world”, enters the “sacred world”, and then must return. There is a full circle. While in GM, the hero moves in one way – from the “false world” into the “true world”.

One important factor which plays a role in this change is modern individualism. Our fascination with the hero's myth is based on reading it on a personal psychological level as an emancipatory story of self-development and self-empowerment. Therefore, these films are initiatory narrative structures where we projectively undergo a psychological transformation by identifying with the hero who is subjected to the process.

When the secondary reality is not a virtual reality but a subsection of our material world, it necessarily gives rise to the **habitat motif**. Apart from the three films,⁴⁰ all the rest describe the secondary world as having definite borders that can (or cannot) be breached. This corresponds to the Gnostic *Horos*, the Border between the Pleroma and the Hysterema:

		Border
1	<i>They Live</i>	n/a
2	<i>Truman Show</i>	The wall of the giant studio
3	<i>Dark City</i>	The walls of the City
4	<i>The Matrix</i>	n/a
5	<i>The Thirteenth Floor</i>	The outer limit of the simulation
6	<i>Virtual Nightmare</i>	n/a
7	<i>The Others</i>	The fog around the mansion grounds
8	<i>The Village</i>	The Woods and the Wall
9	<i>The Island</i>	The walls of the underground habitat
10	<i>The City of Ember</i>	The walls of the cave
11	<i>Free Guy</i>	The border of the Free City

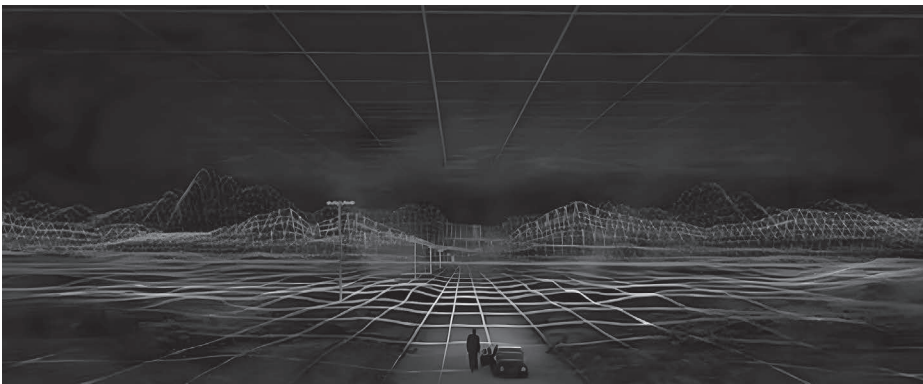


Fig. 4: the hero driving towards the limit of the simulation; *The Thirteenth Floor* 1999.

⁴⁰ *The Matrix* (1999), *Virtual Nightmare* (2000), and *They Live* (1988).

The motif of exploitation of people by the Archons takes on many forms in the films: in *The Matrix*, people are used as batteries for the machines; in *The Island*, people are used as sources for body parts; in *Dark City*, humans are experimental subjects of the aliens etc.

The function of the Archons or Demiurge is performed by various entities in the films, in many cases – characteristically – not wholly human, either aliens or machines:

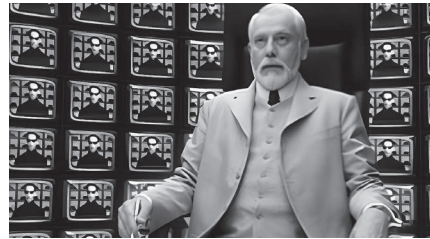
		The Archons/Demiurge
1	<i>They Live</i>	Aliens
2	<i>Truman Show</i>	The Director
3	<i>Dark City</i>	Aliens
4	<i>The Matrix</i>	Machines / The Architect / The Source
5	<i>The Thirteenth Floor</i>	People of the upper world
6	<i>Virtual Nightmare</i>	People themselves
7	<i>The Others</i>	Heroine herself
8	<i>The Village</i>	The Elders
9	<i>The Island</i>	The rich people / The Director
10	<i>The City of Ember</i>	The Builders / The Mayor
11	<i>Free Guy</i>	The architect of the „Free City“

A remarkable transformation of the prototype can be found in *Virtual Nightmare*, where the people created the virtual reality themselves and then became entrapped in it, so they are the unknowing “Archons”. A similar twist is the point of *The Others*, but limited to one person, the protagonist. In the case of *The Village*, the Archons (“the Elders”) are benign – their motivation is to spare themselves and their people the horrors of the outside world, but they use deceit as a means to that end, which casts a shadow on their “benignancy”. Their position is not far from Christof, the showrunner in *The Truman Show*, who also “wants the best” for his actor but effectively imprisons him in his show.

In the case of *The City of Ember*, the function is split: there are the Builders, a long-dead group of founders of the City, figures similar to mythological personages such as Noah, Yima/Jamshid, Manu, or Utnapishtim, who build a device to save the remnants of humanity. Then there is the Mayor, the corrupt heir of the tradition who fulfils the role of the antagonist because he does not want to change the untenable status quo.

There are also prominent motifs found repeatedly in these films, which were not included in our list of 12 features. One such motif could be called the **false promise of the system**. In *The Island*, the people in the habitat are promised the wondrous Island with a blue sky and sea. In *Dark City*, there is a half-forgotten memory of a place called Shell Beach, which many people remember, but nobody knows how to get there. In *The Truman Show*, Truman dreams of travelling to Fiji, but the actors thwart

 The representations of the Demiurge / Archons

The Director Christof (*The Truman Show*)Dr Merrick (*The Island*)Mr Book and the Strangers (*Dark City*)The Architect (*Matrix Reloaded* 2003)

his attempts several times. In *The City of Ember*, the Builders are expected to come and make things right, and in *Virtual Nightmare*, a product called Arora is constantly advertised and eagerly expected, but nobody actually knows what it is.

Another prominent motif reappearing in the selection is **memory manipulation**, amnesia and anamnesis. The world of *Dark City* is wholly based on the issue of remembering: people do not know they have never seen the sunlight because it is implanted in their memories. The hero starts as an amnesiac and receives the transformative knowledge as a memory implant at a crucial moment. In *Virtual Nightmare*, if people start discussions on forbidden topics, they suddenly forget what they were talking about. In this way, the system keeps them in oblivion. In *The Others*, the whole plot is again based on the fact that the protagonist repressed the memory of the “cosmogonic” infanticidal and suicidal crime.

Films, as a visual medium, can explore certain symbolic potentials in greater detail than any prosaic text, and that becomes quite noticeable in the case of another prominent motif – the **boat and birth symbolism**, which are intimately connected. Quite regularly in the selected group of films, the moment of the hero’s awakening (no. 8) or crossing over to the other side (no. 9) is expressed in the form of a boat or boat-like travel and proximity to water.

There are obviously not only structural similarities of plots and cosmologies in the analysed films but also a spontaneous resonance in the visual language and expression. Especially in the case of the “core of the core”, i.e. the films that scored 10 and higher, it seems almost as if they were – in completely different styles and idioms – re-

The representations of the boat/birth symbolism

The final boat ride in *The Truman Show*The final boat ride in *The City of Ember*The final boat ride in *Dark City*Waking up in *The Matrix*

volving around the same neuralgic points. What could explain this resonance? What kind of cultural atmosphere were they responding to?

Why at the Turn of the Millennium?

As these films were independent of each other and most of them were created around the same time, it is obvious they are not remakes of one another and did not directly causally influence each other.⁴¹ They come from different producers and directors and are of very diverse tones, genres and styles. Many original film scripts circulate each year in Hollywood, but only a fraction of them is picked up and survive the Darwinian selection process to be made into a feature film. While it is difficult to know the

⁴¹ Most of them are from the same period, but in the case of *Free Guy* (2021), with its two decades distance from the rest of the group, the inspiration by, e.g. *The Truman Show* or *The Matrix* should not be ruled out. We should expect rather a cultural osmosis than direct inspiration – the ideas popularized by the two famous films from around 2000 have since become public “property”. It is also possible that we will see more films of the gnostic type in the coming decade as the “nostalgia pendulum” (which has an approximate 30 years period) will move from the current 80s nostalgia to the 90s nostalgia, and with it might come remakes and reimaginings of the popcultural products of that era. PATRICK METZGER, “The Nostalgia Pendulum: A Rolling 30-year Cycle of Pop Culture Trends” [online], *The Patterning*, 13.2.2017, accessed June 2022, available online at <https://thepatterning.com/2017/02/13/the-nostalgia-pendulum-a-rolling-30-year-cycle-of-pop-culture-trends/>.

details of the intricate selection process, it is evident that Hollywood cinematography reacts to the overall cultural and historical realities in its own unique way.

In the following, I will suggest one possible reason for the sudden appearance of gnostic movies at the turn of the millennium, but it is important to stress here that the emergence of cultural products of this kind is never a uni-causal issue. Among the usually mentioned factors that open the space for these films are:^{42,43}

- 1) technical advances that permit increasingly realistic depictions of Otherworlds;
- 2) the spread of the Internet into a world-spanning phenomenon;
- 3) first commercial releases of consumer virtual reality headsets;
- 4) 1990s technophobia, particularly the fear of digital media;
- 5) the mainstreaming of science fiction;
- 6) the mainstreaming of psychedelia;
- 7) the mainstreaming of alternative spirituality (“New Age”).

I aim to add to these factors a new one that has not been discussed before and goes beyond the issue of technological advances or vague observations about mainstreaming niche cultural milieus. The question is not only why the films appeared around 2000 but also why they did not persist even if the technical advances and the mainstreaming of the above-mentioned alternative milieus are now even more pronounced than in the 1990s. The virtual world of *Metaverse* seems to be around the corner. The advancements of AI research have been stunning in the last few years, and people are spending enormous amounts of time “hooked” on various social networks that did not even exist in the 1990s – yet there has been no flood of films ringing the gnostic alarm bell and warning us that we live in a fake world of simulacra. Why is that?

Most of the movies were released around the year 2000. With the usual length of movie production being around two years, we can date the production of most of them safely to the second half of the 1990s. This decade is a peculiar period in the history of the West, wedged in between two major moments that changed the world – the end of the Cold War (1991) on the one hand and 9/11 and the beginning of the War on Terror (2001) on the other. The end of the Cold War meant the end of a bipolar world and a brief emergence of a purely unipolar world led by the victorious United States. The optimistic spirit of the 1990s is best expressed by Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992).⁴⁴ In the eyes of many Western liberals, history had ended: we arrived at the final form of human organisation, namely liberal democratic consumerist capitalism. We have achieved perfection. We need only double

⁴² I take many of my points from KALER, ‘Neo-Gnosticism at the Movies’, p. 8–9.

⁴³ A peculiar zeitgeist of the 1990s is mapped and explored (focusing on the crossbreeding of technology, neo-gnosticism and esotericism) in ERIC DAVIS, *TechGnosis: Myth, Magic, and Mysticism in the Age of Information*, Berkeley: North Atlantic Books 2015. The book was originally written in 1998, precisely at the apex of the era.

⁴⁴ FRANCIS FUKUYAMA, *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York: Free Press, 1992, passim.

down on our efforts and straighten up minor imperfections, and we will soon get to the Happy Ending.

The positive ideologues proclaimed the world to be at the “End of History”, but of course, under the projected image of perfection, many problems were brewing. Consumerist capitalism received an enormous boost as the only known alternative to it – Communism – failed and was discredited. An ideological vacuum was left behind after the collapse of the Eastern Bloc. Doubts about the nature of the new historical situation were first noticeable only at the fringes of society – already at the beginning of the 1990s. The phrase “New World Order”, popularised by George H. W. Bush during the Gulf War in 1991, became influential in the conspiracist milieu and slowly gained mainstream currency during the 1990s.⁴⁵ The Gulf War (1990–1991), the Somali Intervention (1992–1995), and the Kosovo War (1998–1999) showed that the gleeful „End of History“ had to be sustained by neocolonial violence. The unsolved contradictions of American neocolonialism finally brought an end to the “End of History” in the form of the 9/11 terrorist attacks of 2001.

The attacks of 9/11 were a human tragedy, but they resolved the geopolitical and cultural disorientation caused by the fact that during the 1990s, there was no symbolic Other against which the Western world could fight. The first Enemy in the new era came to be Islamist terrorism, an invisible network of suicidal rebels motivated by destructive “alien” ideology. In the following decade, this kind of dispersed Other was supplemented and finally superseded by much more concrete Other(s) in the form of the authoritarian states of Russia and China.

In this way, it was possible to escape the disorientation and anxiety of the “End of History” by finding new enemies and new binary oppositions. It is no surprise then that the same period (2008-present) is in Hollywood dominated by blockbusters of the superhero genre where the straightforward duality of the hero versus the villain is again in the foreground while questioning the system itself is out of mind and out of sight.⁴⁶

However, during the 1990s, this escape route (through finding a Villain outside) was not yet available. It was the New World Order itself (welcomed and praised by the globalist establishment), which generated diffused anxiety about its very nature:

⁴⁵ MICHAEL BARKUN, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, Berkeley: University of California Press 2013, p. 40.

⁴⁶ The reason why big-budget films of the 2010s and the current decade are much less subversive, much less varied and original and much more repetitive (remakes, sequels, reboots etc.) is connected to a gradual intensification of trends that value high probability fiscal return rather than experiments: “Hollywood’s déjà vu problem illustrates how many other industries and organizations struggle to resist the temptation of overexploiting successful but fleeting opportunities while under-exploring and not coming up with new ideas and concepts. This is one of the key dilemmas of innovation.” (<https://readysteadycut.com/2022/09/20/why-are-there-so-many-movie-sequels/>) In the 1990s ca 90% of films were original; in 2019, it is only about 50%, the rest being sequels or remakes (<https://digg.com/2020/original-vs-sequel-remake-highest-grossing-movies-percent-age-visualized>).

After the revival of Cold War demonology during the Reagan years, the “New World Order” of the 1990s introduced an insecure paranoia in which there is no longer a single recognisable enemy or, indeed, a clear sense of national identity.⁴⁷

This rising anxiety is well documented in the sphere of conspiracy theories. After all, it is no surprise that it is precisely at the turn of the millennium that seminal academic works on conspiracy theories appear: Peter Knight’s *Conspiracy Culture* (2000),⁴⁸ Jane Parish and Martin Parker’s *The Age of Anxiety* (2001),⁴⁹ Jodi Dean’s *Publicity’s Secret* (2002)⁵⁰ and Michael Barkun’s *A Culture of Conspiracy* (2003).⁵¹ These works could emerge at that point in time precisely because the 1990s saw a massive surge in conspiracism in the USA.

Conspiracism was becoming mainstream at that point, but it was not as ubiquitous as it is today nor seen as an existential threat to society as a whole. Moreover, these scholars, especially Knight and Dean and the scholars in the Parish and Parker collection, read conspiracism in a new, self-reflective way. They understand it as a form of social critique with merit, an approach that has not yet become dominant in academia. It even seems that this “sympathetic” academic approach peaked at the same time as the gnostic movies culminated – exactly at the turn of the millennium.

Conspiracism was „out of the closet“ in the 1990s but not yet a public enemy. It was, therefore, legitimate to produce films like *Conspiracy Theory* (1997; dir. by Richard Donner), *Wag the Dog* (1997; dir. by Barry Levinson), *Men in Black* (1997; dir. by Barry Sonnenfeld) or the television series *The X-Files* (1993-2002; created by Chris Carter). These works freely explored and popularised many conspiracy theories without having to explicitly distance themselves from them – something unthinkable in 2022.

I argue, therefore, that the sudden wave of gnostic films is a phenomenon which can be understood well in the context of the historical development at the time of their creation. These films expressed a peculiar *Zeitgeist* when there was no clear Enemy, and it seemed like humans were standing at the “End of History”. Liberal democratic consumerist capitalism had no alternative, and humanity seemed united under the “New World Order”. While gleeful and optimistic, this historical period produced its own form of anxiety. Gnostic films usually show a happy and optimistic life, which turns out to be an illusion hiding the fact that humans are exploited. Under the apparently harmonious and upbeat veneer, we find dark plots, postapocalyptic realities, and evil puppeteers running the show. The element of social critique (combined with

⁴⁷ PETER KNIGHT, *Conspiracy Culture: From the Kennedy Assassination to the X-Files*, New York and London: Routledge 2000, p. 175.

⁴⁸ PETER KNIGHT, *Conspiracy Culture*, passim.

⁴⁹ JANE PARISH and MARTIN PARKER (eds.), *The Age of Anxiety: Conspiracy Theory and the Human Sciences*, Oxford: Blackwell 2001, passim.

⁵⁰ JODI DEAN, *Publicity’s Secret: How Technoculture Capitalizes on Democracy*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press 2002, passim.

⁵¹ BARKUN, *A Culture of Conspiracy*, passim.

existential themes) is strikingly prominent in gnostic films and is unparalleled in the decades that preceded or followed.⁵²

Gnostic Cosmology and Conspiracy

While some of the analysed films present a vision that closely corresponds to existing conspiracy theories (e.g. *They Live* with its evil aliens ruling the world), most are not conspiracist at first sight. They do not contain conspiracy as an explicit motif (unlike *The X-Files* or films like *Conspiracy Theory*) but share a *cosmology* with the (more developed) conspiracy theories. The 12 features that characterise gnostic films are also applicable as characteristics of conspiracy theories of the type described by Barkun as “superconspiracies”.⁵³

A typical example of a widely successful superconspiracy is David Icke’s “Reptoid hypothesis”, which states that there are hidden shapeshifting reptilian aliens among us who created humans in their present form and feed on negative emotions.⁵⁴ He identified the Moon (and later Saturn) as the source of holographic experiences, broadcast by the reptilians that humanity interprets as reality.

Let us apply the 12 gnostic features to a typical superconspiracy theory:

		Conspiracy theory
1	Two worlds	Behind the everyday world, there is a hidden secret world. The machinations prepared in the secret world explain the contingent happenings in the everyday world.
2	Live in secondary	Ordinary humans know only about the everyday world and think there is nothing behind it.
3	Illusion	Life is based on a fundamental illusion and lie. Things are not what they seem to be. We are being duped by those who have real power.
4	Prison	Ordinary humans live as “sheeple” in a herd.
5	Demiurge	There are powerful entities (conspirators) who created the current world order, are behind important events, and drive history in their desired direction.
6	Exploitation	Humans are exploited by the conspirators.
7	Illegitimacy of Archons	The conspirators (The Illuminati, The Freemasons, The Jewry, The Aliens, etc.) are illegitimate rulers who are either self-imposed and work in secret or are outright evil.

⁵² That does not mean they cannot be found, but they are rarely represented in big-budget feature films. The “traditional” place for this kind of imagination is instead the form of science fiction anthology television series – e.g. *The Outer Limits* (1963–1965; 1995–2001) or *Black Mirror* (2011–2019). Similar ideas can also be found in the *Westworld* TV series (2016), which is based on a film from 1973. The Netflix series *Inside Job* (2021) parodies conspiracy theories in a way that affirms their absurdity and meaninglessness.

⁵³ BARKUN, *A Culture of Conspiracy*, p. 56.

⁵⁴ TYSON LEWIS and RICHARD KAHN, “The Reptoid Hypothesis: Utopian and Dystopian Representational Motifs in David Icke’s Alien Conspiracy Theory”, *Utopian Studies* 16 (1, 2005): p. 51.

8	Waking up	The moment of uncovering the conspiracy. The moment when the blindfold falls from the eyes. The moment of swallowing the “red pill”.
9	Crossing over	<i>n/a (There is no world outside the superconspiracy, so it is not possible to physically escape it; instead, we find eschatological motifs, a collective end of the current era)</i>
10	Liberators	The Researchers uncovered the conspiracy and published books or online posts about it.
11	Outside influence	<i>(Not very common; in the esoteric-flavoured conspiracies, we find the motif of benign extraterrestrials, e.g. from Pleiades)</i>
12	Agents	The world is full of those who either consciously or unconsciously collaborate with the conspirators – e.g. the mainstream media, the politicians etc. They strive to keep people in ignorance and suppress any dissent.

As can be seen from the table, the overlap of the cosmology is high, with 10 out of 12 points. The main difference is the issue of the outside world. While in ancient Gnostic myths and in gnostic films we usually find a clear border between the real and the illusory world, this kind of division does not apply to the conspiracist cosmology. Even if the prototypical superconspiracies have the structure of two worlds – 1) the everyday world and 2) the behind-the-scenes world of the conspirators, they do not produce two neatly divided realms as in fiction or myth. Therefore there is no “outside” to which the awakened people could escape.

The Otherworld of conspiracism is not a Pleroma-like blissful realm or firmer reality free from manipulation – it is the manipulation itself. Therefore, it is a horrifying Real that shapes our everyday reality but fundamentally eludes us. The conspiracists are fascinated by the secrets of the Real, by the meetings of the dark cabal that runs the world, but these can never be wholly uncovered – only hinted at.

While early 20th-century conspiracism produced documents like *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, with a clearly explained agenda, the 1990s and 21st-century conspiracism is of a different type, best expressed by the enigmatic drops of Q, the source of the QAnon conspiracy theory. These two types are referred to by different names, and Peter Knight distinguishes them as “secure paranoia” and “insecure paranoia”,⁵⁵ whereas Jaron Harambam as “modern conspiracies” and “postmodern conspiracies”.⁵⁶ As Kathryn S. Olmsted points out, “[n]o longer were conspiracy theorists chiefly concerned that alien forces were plotting to capture the federal government; instead, they proposed that the federal government itself was the conspirator.”⁵⁷ This twist is quite often expressed in the gnostic film by the hero’s awakening to the understanding that the whole system they live in is the problem, not just some of its parts.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ PETER KNIGHT, *Conspiracy Culture*, p. 4, 175.

⁵⁶ JARON HARAMBAM, *Contemporary Conspiracy Culture: Truth and Knowledge in an Era of Epistemic Instability*, New York and London: Routledge 2020, p. 62.

⁵⁷ KATHRYN S. OLMSTED, *Real Enemies: Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War I to 9/11*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2009, p. 4.

⁵⁸ Most literally is this executed in the *Virtual Nightmare*, where the protagonists discover that not only people themselves created the illusory reality, but they are remaining in it even when the special technology that broadcasted the illusion into human brains is destroyed by the protagonists.

So, while conspiracy theories also make use of the two-world system, it is in the films that we find them as a salient and integral feature. The films tend to produce clearly delineated worlds between which the characters can travel. Travel itself is a crucial narrative instrument in the stories. These and other specificities can be easily explained by the needs of the medium (and genre). Elements like the protagonist, the antagonist, the travel between worlds, the hero's journey, narrative twists and other structural features are essential for building a compelling story but are not obligatory for conspiracist cosmology in its abstract form. Some of the recurrent motifs that characterised many of the gnostic films (e.g. the habitat motif, the borders of the world motif, the watery birth symbolism etc.) will therefore remain limited to the narrative film medium. They are instruments that help the creators materialise the cosmology, to "show it" instead of "telling it".

However, there are also motifs which prominently appeared in the films, although they were not "expected" by the 12 features definition, and can also be found in the conspiracy imagination. One such motif is that of memory manipulation and amnesia, which can be found already before the 1990s in conspiracies regarding UFO abductions and the interaction with the so called "men in black."⁵⁹ But most significantly, we find it in the recent conspiracy theory which claims that small details from the past have been changed, altered, and edited to create a parallel universe.⁶⁰

To sum up, it is important to distinguish between cosmology and motifs. Cosmology is defined by its structure, which can be filled with very diverse content. *The Village* and *Dark City* overlap in their structure (see the table on p. 78) but not much in specific content. The same goes for gnostic films and superconspiracies in general – they share their cosmology. To make matters more complicated, some motifs seem to be concomitant with certain structures – they are easy solutions which allow concise symbolic expression to structural demands. So for example the structural element of "the author(s) of the illusion that captures ordinary humans" tends to attract the solution in the form of either a singular entity (The Director, The Architect, Satan) or a group of powerful entities (The Elders, The Strangers, The Reptilians).

Conclusion

There is an intricate interplay between conspiracist subculture and popculture produced in Hollywood. One of the characteristics of conspiracism is the so called "fact-fiction-reversal", i.e. the belief that ordinary reality as it is presented to us is fake, while fictional works like *The Matrix* tell us important truths: "Conspiracy literature is replete with instances in which manifestly fictional products, such as films and novels, are asserted to be accurate, factual representations of reality."⁶¹

⁵⁹ BARKUN, *A Culture of Conspiracy*, p. 83.

⁶⁰ AARON FRENCH, "The Mandela Effect and New Memory", *Correspondences* 6 (2, 2019): passim.

⁶¹ BARKUN, *A Culture of Conspiracy*, p. 210.

The study of the interplay of conspiracism and works of fiction has its decades long tradition, exemplified by the works of Peter Knight,⁶² Luc Boltanski,⁶³ Lewis and Kahn⁶⁴ and many others. However, gnostic films have not been explored as an important piece of the cultural puzzle in relation to conspiracy theories even if some of the more famous of these films (*The Matrix*, *Truman Show*) are habitually mentioned by most contemporary scholars of conspiracy theories. My aim was therefore to fill in this gap. The goal was not only to introduce the group of gnostic films (and define it in transparent manner), but also to relate it to conspiracism, both typologically and historically.

The common feature is the gnostic (or manichean) nature of both the films and conspiracism in its most developed form, the so-called superconspiracies. Therefore, the list of 12 features turned out to be useful not only as a tool for a polythetic definition of gnostic films, but also as a tool for a comparison with the cosmology of the conspiracy theories.

The group of films selected using the 12 feature tool exhibited also other recurrent commonalities in the form of motifs (i.e. habitat motif etc.). Most of these motifs were limited to the films and were not shared with prototypical superconspiracies as these motifs were emergent entities of the narrative film medium.

One of the most crucial questions discussed was the issue of the sudden emergence of the wave of gnostic films and its later disappearance. I offered a solution based on the specific *Zeitgeist* of the 1990s as a period of unipolar globalised world without direct cultural Enemy where the anxiety turned against the system itself. At the same time 1990s were the time when conspiracy theories were starting to be popular but were not yet a societal taboo. The wave of gnostic films is thus a brief moment in history when gnostic cosmology found expression in overt popcultural medium. Before 1990s gnostic cosmology was hidden in societal fringes like cultic milieu, science fiction fandom or early conspiracism. American filmmakers functioned like cultural amplifiers: they brought the mainstreaming process of gnostic cosmology to completion. After *The Matrix*, *The X-Files* and *The Truman Show*, the majority of Westerners had the template of gnostic cosmology always present in their mind. The notion of “escaping the Matrix” or “taking the Red Pill” is a staple of the majority of conspiracist websites and blogs up until present time.

What happened in the decades that follow the 1990s is the steady growth of conspiracism into a major societal force. As conspiracism rose in prominence and started to be perceived as a serious threat to the establishment and cultural mainstream, its acceptability in Hollywood decreased. That explains the gradual phasing out of explicitly conspiratorial films and TV like *The X-Files* or *Wag the Dog*. Nevertheless, it does not explain the disappearance of gnostic films, some of which don't contain any

⁶² KNIGHT, *Conspiracy Culture*, passim.

⁶³ LUC BOLTANSKI, *Mysteries and Conspiracies: Detective Stories, Spy Novels and the Making of Modern Societies*, Cambridge: Polity Press 2014, passim.

⁶⁴ LEWIS and KAHN, “The Reptoid Hypothesis”, passim.

explicit conspiracy. Here we must go beyond mere outward theme of the film and focus on its implicit cosmology.

The gnostic films, even if they don't contain overt theme of conspiracy, they still – thanks to their cosmology – express the message “don't trust the system”. Why was this message viable for Hollywood filmmakers in the 1990s and is not viable today? Because sending such message would make these creators the allies of the anti-system, “alternative” segment of the population. The core of the issue is the changed position of the intellectual and cultural front – while in 1990s intellectuals and creative people were generally more inclined to be critics of the system, today they defend the system against the looming threat of the conspiracists and other anti-system actors. The wave of gnostic films therefore illustrates this cultural transformation. Today we don't find gnostic films in large numbers precisely because the gnostic torch is now being held in the hands of the numerous anti-system crowds.

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“Do I Believe?”: Three Aspects of “Belief” in Conspiracy Theories

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Abstract: The following text aims to offer and illustrate a new concept for grasping the phenomenon of conspiracy theories. Based on field research in the form of semi-structured interviews and previous research, it provides a triadic schema for navigating the conspiracy landscape and understanding the transformations and functions that conspiracy theories provide to their adherents. After introducing the topic, the first part of the text briefly summarises previous research relevant to the article and describes the theoretical position on which it is based. Subsequently, it uses H. S. Versnel’s schema to introduce the three levels of meaning of conspiracy narratives: substantivist, functionalist, and cosmological. It then concludes by reflecting on the possible applications of this framework and its relevance for future research.

Keywords: conspiracy theories; levels of meaning; function; cosmology; belief

Abstrakt: Následující text si klade za úkol nabídnout a ilustrovat novou koncepci pro uchopení fenoménu konspiračních teorií. Na základě vlastního výzkumu v podobě polostrukturovaných rozhovorů a předchozího bádání poskytuje trojiční schéma pro orientaci v konspiračním prostředí a pochopení proměn a funkcí, které konspirační teorie poskytují svým širitelům. V první části text po uvedení do tématu krátce shrne stav přechodného bádání relevantního pro potřeby článku a popíše teoretickou pozici, ze které vychází. Následně na základě schématu H. S. Versnela představí tři úrovně významu konspiračních narativů, které nacházíme v životě jednotlivců, a to substantivistickou, funkcionalistickou a kosmologickou. Na závěr se pak zamyslí nad možným použitím této koncepce a jejím významu pro budoucí bádání.

Klíčová slova: konspirační teorie; úroveň významu; funkce; kosmologie; víra

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Introduction

In recent decades, our society has been preoccupied with the reoccurring theme of conspiracy theories. Especially now, the pandemic of Covid 19 has, at least in Czechia, increased the number of people somehow invested in or reacting to this phenomenon.¹ With all this, it is no surprise that the phenomenon has lately become a centre of attention, both in the public debate and academia.

Regardless of this fact, though, the public debate still primarily operates on relatively simple and often misleading premises. The general assumption is that people who believe in conspiracy theories make cognitive mistakes; they are wrong, misled or simply ignorant² and can be somehow corrected by debunking specialists. The question often is, “Why do people believe in such nonsense?”

Our article aims to challenge this public opinion and show that cognitive errors might not be the only source of conspiracy theories. This is not a new approach in academia. Using our study as well as past research, we want to explore the various ways that the phenomenon of conspiracy theories operates and changes among different people that accept them. Along with other scholars focused on conspiracy theories³, we believe the mainstream approach has many limits. Mainly, it does not explain why so many people are affected by conspiracy theories since, according to their disputants, the truth is accessible to anyone. It also does not explain the motivations that bring people to conspiratorial thinking. In the case of the previous question, the focus should not be on why people believe in conspiracy narratives but instead on what it means to believe.⁴ Our contribution is a simple tool that should help better to understand the complexity of belief in conspiracy theories.

First, we will place our standpoint in the context of previous studies to explain and clarify our approach. Then we will introduce the research that led us to write this article. Finally, with the help of data obtained through this research and past findings, we will present our thesis, concluding our article with a reflection on what this study could signify in the present-day context.

¹ “COVID-19 and Conspiracy Spreaders” [online], STEM, 2021, available online at <https://en.stem.cz/covid-19-and-conspiracy-spreaders/>.

² For example, this belief is well described in HELEN YOUNG and, GEOFF M. BOUCHER, “Authoritarian Politics and Conspiracy Fictions: The Case of QAnon”, *Humanities* 11 (3, 2021): p. 4–6.

³ We work in the footsteps of Peter Knight, Stef Aupers, Michael Butter, David Robertson, Asbjørn Dyrendal, Anna Ichino, and Juha Räikkä. The work of Jason Harambam should also be mentioned here. JARON HARAMBAM, *Contemporary Conspiracy Culture: Truth and Knowledge in an Era of Epistemic Instability*, Routledge: New York 2020, passim.

⁴ There are other researchers who deal with motivations and impacts on everyday life. One recent example: J. CARLSON and E. RAMO “I’m Not a Conspiracy Theorist, But...”, *Social Forces*, 101 (4, 2022): p. 1658–1681.

Theoretical Background

Before presenting our discoveries and arguments, we should address our position and background in the (now ever-growing) scholarly inquiry into conspiracy theories. To describe the phenomenon of conspiracy theories throughout history, we drew on the work of Michael Butter and Peter Knight: "The history of conspiracy theory research".⁵

Since the highly influential and fundamental contribution of Richard Hofstadter was published, the centre of attention in academic and public debate has been on the pathological character of conspiracy narratives. His essay from 1964 named "Paranoid Style in American Politics"⁶ shaped the academic approach to the phenomenon, which Karl Popper labelled as "conspiracy theories of society"⁷. He achieved that by framing their followers as a minority and the theories themselves as unscientific worldviews born out of paranoia⁸ threatening the liberal-democratic consensus.⁹ The pathologising paradigm dominated the academic debate (still limited in its extent at the time) until the 1990s,¹⁰ when scholars in cultural studies started to challenge Hofstadter's approach.¹¹

Many crucial studies aspiring to shift this dominant position have emerged since. Authors such as Jodi Dean¹², Timothy Melley¹³, Mark Fenster¹⁴, and Peter Knight¹⁵ tried to explain conspiracy theories as a changing phenomenon born out of contemporary society's anxieties, uncertainties, flaws and discrepancies. Fundamentally, they all observed that conspiracy theories moved into the centre of Western (main-

⁵ MICHAEL BUTTER and PETER KNIGHT, "The History of Conspiracy Theory Research", in JOSEPH E. USCINSKI (ed.), *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2019, p. 36.

⁶ RICHARD HOFSTADTER, *Paranoid Style in American Politics: an Essay: From the Paranoid Style in American Politics*, Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2016, passim.

⁷ KARL POPPER, *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge*, Routledge 2014, p. 165.

⁸ It must also be said that his description of what he called the "paranoid style" brought focus on the general style of conspiracy thinking and paved the way for others to focus not only on the style of thought but also on the narrative and aesthetic aspects.

⁹ RICHARD HOFSTADTER, *The paranoid style in American politics : and other essays* [online] in New York : Vintage Books, 1967, passim.

¹⁰ It is also important to mention the forefathers of the non-pathologizing approach Loewenthal and Guterman who already in 1949 regarded conspiracy thinking as "means-making cultural practice that was worth analyzing and studying." KATHARINA THALMANN, "John Birch Blues': The Problematicization of Conspiracy Theory in the Early Cold-War Era", *Copas 15* (1, 2014): p. 7.

¹¹ BUTTER and KNIGHT, "The History of Conspiracy Theory Research", p. 36.

¹² JODI DEAN, *Aliens in America: Conspiracy Cultures from Outerspace to Cyberspace*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1998, passim.

¹³ TIMOTHY MELLEY, *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press 2000, passim.

¹⁴ MARK FENSTER, *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture*, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press 2008, passim.

¹⁵ PETER KNIGHT, *Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to the X-Files*, London and New York: Routledge 2000, passim.

ly American) culture. Peter Knight provides us with an illustration of how this new approach operates in his book *Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to the X-Files*. He shows how influential the phenomenon is when linking it to (among other things) the fight for racial equality, feminism, and pop culture. Even more noteworthy is the connection of conspiracy thinking with cultural conditions, as the author states that conspiracy theories articulate “increasing doubt and uncertainty” about agency and even identity in the context of postmodernity. He describes a shift from “secure paranoia” (making a clear distinction between “us” and “them”) to “insecure paranoia” (disbelief in the system within its borders) and goes as far as to claim that a conspiracy narrative is not born of faith but default scepticism.¹⁶ Stef Aupers works on similar premises when discussing presupposed internal threats of modern institutions dominant in the uncertain postmodern society. He contrasts them to the earlier threat of the “exotic other”, which helped to affirm collective identities. Aupers connects conspiracy thinking with postmodernity, its destruction of the authority of science and state, and its inability to find “the truth” in our world. Conspiracy theories are born to provide us with what postmodern society and culture lack.¹⁷

Cultural studies came up with a much-needed new understanding of the phenomenon. We follow in the footsteps of cultural scholars when we grasp conspiracy theories as alternative narratives that work as a “skewed critique” of the mainstream system and are born out of its discrepancies and problems.

Our Position and the Question of “Belief”

Certain scholars of cultural studies and other fields have already shown the problematic aspects of the term “belief” in conspiracy theories while pointing out that other things are in play.

Knight, already in the early 2000s, claimed that belief in the case of conspiracy theories is more complicated than just accepting factual information. Scepticism is crucial in this context, and whether conspiracists see the theories as accurate is often unclear. Knight even claims that: “in many instances consumers of conspiracy don’t really believe what they buy, but neither do they really disbelieve it either.”¹⁸ and that “often people believe (...) only with a provisional commitment, believing [only] as if (...).”¹⁹ “Self-proclaimed acceptance of a conspiracy theory may be a way to express emotions or feelings – such as distrust, fear, prejudice or frustration.”²⁰

¹⁶ PETER KNIGHT, “ILOVEYOU: Viruses, Paranoia, and the Environment of Risk”, *The Sociological Review* 48 (2, 2000), p. 17–30.

¹⁷ STEF AUPERS, “‘Trust No One’: Modernization, Paranoia and Conspiracy Culture”, *European Journal of Communication* 27 (1, 2012), p. 30.

¹⁸ KNIGHT, *Conspiracy Culture*, p. 47.

¹⁹ KNIGHT, *Conspiracy Culture*, p. 47.

²⁰ KNIGHT, *Conspiracy Culture*, p. 155–159.

Aupers follows and helps himself with the famous motto of agent Mulder from the TV series X-Files: "I want to believe", which, according to him, shows the discrepancy between belief and non-belief, the secular and the religious, rationality and enchantment that lies at the heart of contemporary conspiracy culture. Aupers' arguments bring him to the connection between religion and conspiracy theories. He claims that the phenomenon of conspiracy theories is close to religion and especially alternative spirituality as both look for meaning and satisfy the "want to believe" in the modern world. However, they are not quite the same thing; conspiracy theories are both spiritual and irrational as well as rational and sceptic. They transcend the modern distinction between rationality and irrationality, belief and non-belief.²¹

David Robertson and Asbjørn Dyrendal, as our fellow scholars of religion, also see a connection between alternative spirituality and conspiracy theories. Among other things, this helps them grasp different aspects of belief also visible in religion and spirituality. They claim that when speaking of belief, people most likely think of propositional belief expressed by proclamations and statements. Belief is often situational because it is more likely to be a set of different reactions, opinions, actions, or commitments emerging in different contexts. As Robertson and Dyrendal point out, this is something we see in both the case of alternative spirituality and conspiracy theories. That is one of the reasons why they situate both phenomena in the same socio-cultural milieu.²²

A similar tendency appears in the philosophical perspective of Anna Ichino and Juha Räikkä. Their recent article claims that the general attitude towards conspiracy theories is dominated by what they call "doxastic assumption", meaning an assumption that conspiracists hold the information they spread as the truth.²³ However, Ichino and Räikkä argue that this is not always the case and that there exist what they call "non-doxastic conspiracy theories."²⁴ In this case, hope or adherence to a social group may be important factors. A conspiracist merely hopes his theory is true because, if so, it would fit within their worldview.²⁵ Alternatively, the conspiracist only shares and spreads²⁶ the theories because they articulate opinions accepted in their social group or movement without having a "doxastic commitment".²⁷ Even if the theory

²¹ AUPERS, "Trust No One...", p. 22–34.

²² DAVID G. ROBERTSON and ASBJØRN DYRENDAL, „Conspiracy Theories and Religion: Superstition, Seekership, and Salvation“, in JOSEPH E. USCINSKI (ed.), *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019, p. 411–421.

²³ ANNA ICHINO and JUHA RÄIKKÄ, "Non-Doxastic Conspiracy Theories", *Argumenta* 13 (2, 2021): p. 247.

²⁴ ICHINO and RÄIKKÄ, "Non-Doxastic Conspiracy Theories", p. 248.

²⁵ We could even say that they hope the theory is true because it fits their general attitude towards life, their cosmology.

²⁶ Recent research by a Czech organization called STEM shows a typology of people who spread conspiracy theories and supports the claim that acceptance of facts is not the only factor and shows that people can disseminate the theories for different social and personal reasons. "COVID-19 and Conspiracy Spreaders" [online], *STEM.cz*, 2021, accessed June 2022, available online at <https://en.stem.cz/covid-19-and-conspiracy-spreaders/>

²⁷ ICHINO and RÄIKKÄ, "Non-Doxastic Conspiracy Theories", p. 248.

fails, it is not crucial to them. Ichino and Rääkkä even claim that the person who supports a conspiracy in this way does not actually believe in the theory; they might simply lack a clear view of what their attitude towards the theory is. According to them, this should also be considered when developing communication strategies.²⁸

Furthermore, the social psychologist Sylvain Delouvé points out that spreading a theory does not necessarily mean believing in it. He situates conspiracy theories close to rumours²⁹ when he claims both operate on social logic instead of Cartesian logic. Social logic works in social thinking, “so-called natural thinking about a social phenomenon and, at the same time, thinking that occurs through social factors.”³⁰ People who accept either of the phenomena do so because of social factors that influence them. They think that their knowledge could be true, and that is enough. This is also why Delouvé holds it impossible to “convince an adherent of a conspiracy theory or rumour of the false nature of that conspiracy theory or rumour because representatives of the two sides are not thinking on the same level.”³¹

Like Delouvé, literary scholars Helen Young and Geoff M. Boucher also believe it problematic to debunk conspiracy theories through rational or scientific means (fact-checking, for example) because they operate on different levels.³² In the example of QAnon, they show how certain conspiracy narratives are more stories than theories. According to Young and Boucher, these stories are “fusions of cognitive, normative and affective elements into an imaginative presentation of possible experiences”, and because of that, they are very similar to fictional narratives. It is, of course, rather difficult to debunk compelling stories of speculative character (expressing political and other speculations based on the fore-mentioned elements) because people do not “believe” in them in the same sense as they accept facts.³³

This statement is the core of our argument, and following in the footsteps of the fore-mentioned scholars, we will try to present our understanding of it, offering a simple tool to navigate through different spheres of “belief”³⁴ that come into play in the case of conspiracy theories. It must be said that certain cultural scholars have come to conclusions similar to those we will try to demonstrate in the following text.³⁵

²⁸ ICHINO and RÄÄKKÄ, “Non-Doxastic Conspiracy Theories”, p. 247–263.

²⁹ Interestingly enough Radek Chlup similarly notices a different narrative logic behind conspiracy theories when he sees them as a type of mythical narrative combining features of what he calls social, fictional and political myths.

³⁰ SYLVAIN DELOUVÉE, “Repeating is Not Believing: The Transmission of Conspiracy Theories”, *Diogenes* 62 (3–4, 2015): p. 4.

³¹ DELOUVÉE, “Repeating is Not Believing...”, p. 6.

³² We can also see that in a recent article by Jaron Harambam where the author claims that debunking and fact-checking only works on certain conspiracy theories while others are not affected by it or are able to adapt. JARON HARAMBAM, “Against modernist illusions: why we need more democratic and constructivist alternatives to debunking conspiracy theories”, *Journal for Cultural Research* 25 (1, 2021): p. 112.

³³ YOUNG and BOUCHER, “Authoritarian Politics and Conspiracy Fictions...” p. 1–18.

³⁴ As in different types of reasons for why people are interested, affiliated or invested in conspiracy narratives or why they spread them.

³⁵ Especially Peter Knight, Anna Ichino, Juha Rääkkä, David Robertson and Asbjørn Dyrendal. For references see BUTTER and KNIGHT, “The History of Conspiracy Theory Research”, p. 33–46,

However, we believe that they were able to show only various partial aspects of this issue and that we can unify them from a new perspective. Through that, we try to shed light on why and how people accept conspiracy theories and what it means to believe in them in different contexts. After all, as scholars of religion, we often must pose questions concerning personal beliefs when dealing with religious and socio-cultural phenomena.

Three Levels of Meaning

To provide orientation in the complexities of belief in conspiracy theories (in some respects comparable to religion), we have chosen a classification scheme based on a text by the Dutch professor of classical history, Hendrik Simon Versnel, *Inconsistencies in Greek and Roman Religion II*.³⁶

Versnel refers in his study to an Indian anthropologist Rajendra Pradhan³⁷ who studied the Dutch obsession with talking incessantly about the weather. When Pradhan asked why this occurs, the Dutch gave him two types of answers:

1. We talk about the weather because it is terrible and unpredictable.
2. The weather is an excellent neutral topic of conversation with other people.

In addition to these "native" explanations, Pradhan recognises another one that is not explicitly stated but is based on an analysis of the collective Dutch mentality:

3. The Dutch talk about the weather because its chaotic nature contradicts the Dutch idea of a world in which everything is ordered and under control.

Versnel applies these three levels to myths and rituals. Analogously, he creates a triadic scheme consisting of three levels: substantive, functionalist and cosmological. In doing so, he says that all of them are represented to a certain extent in all religious phenomena. The substantive level is the layer of specific convictions accepted as true (n. 1). The functionalist level denotes the function that the concept performs for the community or an individual (n. 2). The cosmological level includes the way in which the concept fits into the overall understanding of the world and views of it (n. 3).

In interviews with our respondents, we noticed that these three levels also apply to their thoughts and ideas. For example, a conspiracist may genuinely believe that there are microchips in vaccines (substantive, n. 1). At the same time, they may share the theory to get a like on Facebook and not lose touch with their group of friends

ICHINO and RÄIKKÄ, "Non-Doxatic Conspiracy Theories", p. 247–263, ROBERTSON and DYRENDAL, "Religion: Superstition, Seekership, and Salvation", p. 411–421.

³⁶ HENDRIK SIMON VERSNEL, *Inconsistencies in Greek and Roman Religion II: Transition and Reversal in Myth and Ritual*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994, p. 6–13.

³⁷ RAJENDRA PRADHAN, "Mooi weer, meneer": Why do the Dutch speak so often about the weather? *Etnofoor* 1 (2, 1989), p. 3–14.

(functionalist, n. 2). However, the same motif may also be a symbolic expression of the warped and precarious sociopolitical order of late modernity (cosmological, n. 3).

Looking at these occurrences closely, we realised that the different levels of Verneel's typology could also interact with and complement each other. However, to present their complex relationship, it is first vital to describe them separately and more in-depth.

Data and Methods

At the end of 2021, our team conducted seven semi-structured interviews to take a random sample of the milieu of conspiracy theories. Since we attempt to demonstrate our perspective on their responses, we should introduce them first.

Our respondents have been anonymised. They are from different social strata, do not know each other and were chosen because they participate to some degree in the phenomenon of conspiracy theories.³⁸ The respondents were selected from internet forums focusing on conspiracy theories. This was based on recommendations within the personal networks of the original research team. Each team member chose one respondent and interviewed them with open-ended questions permitting discussion of the more nuanced and complex aspects of the conspiracism phenomenon. The interviews were done following the methodological and ethical conventions of conducting semi-structured interviews.³⁹

- 1) David is a 21-year-old university student born and based in Prague. He is from a well-off family. He often spends time online in various thematically focused groups. On the one hand, he mocks conspiracy theories; on the other, he takes on some of the narratives.
- 2) Filip is a middle-aged man living in Prague. He is a well-known figure in the Czech conspiracy scene and runs his own conspiracy website.
- 3) Marie is a middle-class 50-year-old woman who lives in a family house with her adult son and husband. At the time of the interview, she worked in HR and now works as a teacher's assistant. The Covid pandemic introduced her to conspiracy narratives. She is invested in them but sees them as only a possibility.
- 4) Lukáš is a 60-year-old man living with his family in a house in central Bohemia. He is a construction manager. He has a distinct worldview, including alternative

³⁸ We are aware that there is only one woman among the respondents. This was not intentional due to the interviewers not knowing whom their colleagues were interviewing in advance. Given the small number of respondents, it certainly does not say anything gender-wise about conspiracy theories.

³⁹ STEINAR KVALE, *InterViews: An introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing*, Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications 1996, p. 19–36, 124–136, 144–157; KATHLEEN MUSANTE DEWALT and BILLIE DEWALT, *Participant Observation: A Guide for Fieldworkers*, 2nd ed., Lanham: AltaMira Press 2011, p. 137–156.

narratives to historical events but does not share it with anyone and does not look for any community with similar interests.

- 5) Tomáš is a middle-aged man living in a small village in southern Bohemia. He is an engineer, studied Sanskrit, and is generally interested in things out of the ordinary. He is in a long-term relationship and does not have children. His interest in conspiracy theories is born from his doubt of almost anything.
- 6) Jakub is a successful middle-aged engineer and works with people from all around Europe. He could be described as a liberal. Conspiracy theories are a source of amusement for him, yet he does not believe in all mainstream information sources. Because of this, he is open to alternative versions of different events.
- 7) Petr is a 31-year-old man from Prague. He works in HR and is in a long-term relationship. His father was very interested in conspiracy theories, leading to Petr's complicated relationship with the phenomenon.

Our subsequent work with the transcribed interviews was based on the structure of the five main approaches to the analysis of meaning provided by Steinar Kvale in his book *InterViews: an introduction to qualitative research interviewing*.⁴⁰ First, each team member (1) *condensed* their interview into a short essay. The process of (2) *categorisation* was divided into two parts. An effort was made to find keywords, and those were later summarised collectively in a team discussion. While the respondents differed from each other significantly, we were able to detect some words that emerged frequently in all interviews. We provide a list in a footnote.⁴¹ In the discussion, we also focused on finding reoccurring themes that each member identified in their interview.⁴² The list is again provided in a footnote.⁴³ We also employed (3) *narrativisation* principles to the interviews to grasp the complexities of respondent's interaction with conspiracy theories and how it changes throughout their lives. Our work was constantly regulated in mutual discussions on possible (4) *interpretations* of what the interviews and the employment of chosen approaches reveal. During these discussions, we saw that the reoccurring themes revealed different layers of how conspiracy theories operate in people's lives. With Kvale's (5) *ad hoc method* approach, we have discovered that we can grasp these layers more precisely with Versnel's threefold typology.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ KVALE, *InterViews*, p. 187–209.

⁴¹ *Distrust (nedůvěra), disbelief (nevěra), belief (věra), certainty (jistota), uncertainty (nejjistota), control (kontrola), truth (pravda), lie (lež), disapproval (nesouhlas), explanation (vysvětlení), covid (covid), vaccination (vakcinace), theory (teorie)*. Because the interviews were conducted in Czech, these are translations debated over by our team, so that they correspond best with their Czech equivalents.

⁴² Cf. descriptions of data reduction in DEWALT and DEWALT, *Participant Observation*, p. 181–193.

⁴³ *Using conspiracy theories as source of amusement, using conspiracy theories for self-(re)presentation, using conspiracy theories to express disagreement, doubting conspiracy theories, trust in conspiracy theories, doubting the mainstream media, alternative world view, meaning and sense making, world order, disagreement with the situation in the world, disagreement with covid restrictions, different aspects of belief*.

⁴⁴ It is clear then, that we have chosen the *grounded theory* approach. KATHY CHARMAZ, "Grounded Theory", *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Social Science Research Methods*, Thousand Oaks and London:

The Substantive Level

In the public debate, this category is the most frequently mentioned level of meaning when thinking about conspiracy theories. Based on that, we also expected this level to be the most frequent, but we were surprised to find out it is not the case, at least in our sample of respondents. In general, this level focuses on the substance or content of the specific narrative. In our case, it would refer to conspiracists believing in the literal content of the conspiracy theory. Surprisingly, examples of these straightforward literal proclamations of belief seem to be very rare. In our study, we were only able to identify a few. One example would be Filip's statement that "Adolf Hitler was a British agent with the purpose of destroying the Soviet Union – until he proved incapable of carrying out his task." This is a very elaborate conception that he sees as true.

A slightly more complex situation is presented by Lukáš, whose belief contains grand narratives like "The Epic of Gilgamesh speaks in the language of the people of the time describing that Gilgamesh was an alien, and his quest for immortality was a quest to get on an alien spaceship."

However, this shows his general rejection of the mainstream interpretation of (historical) events. Within the substantive level, this was the case for most of our respondents. For instance, Jakub believes 9/11 did not happen as the mainstream media tells us, but he does not fully believe in a specific conspiracy narrative. Instead, he is open to new information from various sources, which he sees as trustworthy and would lead him to understand the situation better. While Jakub's and Lukáš's cases seem similar to Filip's in the form of straightforward belief, there is a difference in that Jakub's and Lukáš's beliefs are actually a kind of disbelief in the interpretation of certain (historical) events.

Another example is Tomáš, whose beliefs are more acceptable for the mainstream since he sees a difference between what he is certain of and what he believes is true. He claims that based on his personal experience, he is certain that "(1) telepathic communication is possible, (2) it is possible to predict the future", and "(3) there are lights and objects in the sky which are not caused by known human activity." In contrast, then, he states that he believes there are creatures of unknown origin in the universe, even though his personal experience cannot support this claim. Tomáš states that he must test whether things are true or not by his personal experience, and yet, there are some things that he believes in without it. We will attempt to explain why this is the case while introducing a different level of meaning later.

Even though we could identify a few examples above, it is apparent that the situation is more complicated, and to keep identifying only the substantive level seems unsatisfactory when describing these phenomena. After all, this study points out that perceiving conspiracy theories only within the substantive dimension is insufficient and can lead to misinterpreting the concept of belief in conspiracy theory. Therefore,

our intention in this article is to give more space to the other two levels – functionalist and cosmological – and especially to the reciprocal relationship between all three.

The Functionalist Level

When describing their notion of “non-doxastic conspiracy theories”, Ichino and Rääkkä claim that a person does not have to be persuaded that some theory is completely true. Instead, they can spread it because they merely hope it is true or because through its acceptance, they seek adherence to a specific social group.

In the context of Czechia, the organisation STEM has also shown that there are different types of “seeders” of conspiracy theories based on different types of socio-psychological functions that enable them to approach their surroundings. Therefore, the functionalist dimension is crucial in their relation to conspiracy theories.⁴⁵

The functionalist level appears in several alternative forms; our research allowed us to identify at least a few. What connects these forms is that conspiracy theories are used as means to different ends in every case.

Filip uses conspiracy theories for self-representation. He is a well-known owner of a conspiracist website who describes himself as an investigative journalist and activist. Apart from presenting himself to the world, the conspiracy environment is his way of finding “many friends.” However, self-presentation is not the only function conspiracies have for Filip. With his strong online influence, he tries to “set a balance between mainstream and alternative” news. Filip’s case shows that conspiracies do not have just one function per person but can have as many functions as people have needs. Some needs are more significant than others and, therefore, more articulated.

Jakub and David use conspiracy theories as a source of amusement. Jakub was joking throughout his whole interview about theories he saw as bizarre, like the Tartaria

⁴⁵ Examples:

Know-it-all – *“The main motivation of the Know-it-all is to show that he has insight, that he is smarter than his surroundings. He wants to get recognition by understanding things better than others. He wants to be the one that others look to as the informed person.”*

Lonely senior – *“For this type, spreading misinformation is a substitute for maintaining or strengthening weak social contacts and ties. He mostly forwards emails and debates, is not so demanding of content, does not seek out other sources. The social dimension is primary for him, i.e. the possibility to be in contact partly for fun and to fill his free time. He wants to feel useful (to give advice to others) or interesting (to entertain others)”*

Human of the world – *“A person of higher or senior age, quite successful and secured. Sharing information is for them, primarily, an “extension” of the influence to which they are accustomed, an assertion of status and authority. They have often had respected jobs, are essentially opinion makers in their social environment, and trust themselves. A strong motive for sharing information is nostalgia that “their” world is being lost, and respect for the world in which they are influential.”*

NIKOLA HOŘEJŠ, JITKA UHROVÁ, MICHAELA TRTÍKOVÁ VOJTKOVÁ, et al., „Veřejná zpráva v výzkumu: Šířitelé dezinformací“ [online], STEM, 2021, accessed June 2022, available online at <https://www.stem.cz/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Verejna-zprava-z-vyzkumu-web-STEM.pdf>.

theory⁴⁶. His jokes were a tool to lighten up the conversation. On the other hand, David was way more chaotic since his relationship with conspiracy theories was ambivalent. Even though he reads conspiracy theories for fun and is fascinated by them, he also detests them. Everything he said was filled with hate and covered up with many layers of irony. His jokes imitated conspiracy theories and presented them as “idiotic” or “cognitive dissonance”. Through this, his approach to conspiracy theories is also a kind of specific self-presentation.

In contrast, Marie and Petr use conspiracy theories to present their disagreement with state and government policies – a typical example of the “skewed critique of the system” mentioned above. Marie was not a fan of conspiracy theories until the Covid-19 pandemic. After that, she started feeling attacked and adopted some conspiracy narratives because they were able to express her emotions. A similar case is that of Petr. He was always suspicious of the state, but like in Marie’s case, the Covid-19 crisis escalated these beliefs. He felt attacked by the state, began to speak out against government regulations, and made his disapproval clear to those around him. From the beginning of the pandemic, he did not trust any information the government issued and was convinced that the whole situation was just an exaggeration of the flu season. Here, the conspiracy theories functioned as a medium for his disagreement with the mainstream interpretation of events.

The Cosmological Level

Aupers argues that the modern conspiracy culture is based on “ontological uncertainty” born out of the process of modernisation. Modernity alienated people from their world through institutional subsystems such as bureaucracy, economy, and technology, making it seem like they had no power or influence over the system. According to Aupers, conspiracy theories are “cultural responses.” They are “strategies to rationalise anxieties by developing explicable accounts for seemingly inexplicable forces.” This, of course, comes hand in hand with the struggle to give the world meaning, which is something that, according to Aupers (supporting his claims with Max Weber’s famous “disenchantment of the world”⁴⁷), modernity lost.

Filip’s cosmological approach to conspiracy theories would be an example of thinking that seeks to project tangible and meaningful structures to make sense of today’s opaque postmodern society. He says: “I have been led to the certainty of a global criminal conspiracy by many years of research into the origins of suffering (wars, disease, poverty, crime...) on planet Earth and in Czechia, by the experience of the utter disinterest of the ‘gangster-elites’ (powerful, influential and rich) to re-

⁴⁶ At the heart of this belief is that elaborate temporary exhibition sites built for events (e.g. the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco) were actually the ancient capitals of a supposedly fictional Tartarian empire.

⁴⁷ Max WEBER, “Wissenschaft als Beruf” (1919), in Max WEBER und DIRK KAESLER (ed.), *Schriften 1894–1922*, Kröner: Stuttgart 2002, p. 510.

duce suffering, and with evidence of how these 'gangster-elites' systematically create suffering and how they systematically parasitise on the majority population."⁴⁸ All of his statements are linked to the so-called NWO conspiracy theory, which in itself is explicitly a kind of cosmology structuring the world. A secretly emerging totalitarian world government behind every event, controlling every aspect of our lives, showing seemingly unrelated events as part of one larger scheme.

Conspiracy theories as "cultural responses" and rationalising strategies for the system we live in occur on what Versnel calls the cosmological level of meaning. Here, people are not satisfied with the world and society explained by mainstream social media. They are motivated to accept certain conspiracy narratives because they support their opinions and connect with their general worldview, which is not in agreement with the opinions and worldviews accepted in the mainstream. For example, Tomáš is naturally very careful at accepting facts as true, so he tends not to trust mainstream information. He also considers himself to be an "old-world communist"; therefore, he tends to look for a group of capitalists that controls the world.

While questioning our respondents, it was the lack of an acceptable interpretation of the world around them, which mainstream media did not offer, and the need for a meaningful ordering of the world that led some of them to seek alternative sources of "true" information about the world. Several interviewees wondered why the mainstream media do not portray reality. This led them to the conclusion that it may be due to an intention to distract from the facts or to the purposeful presentation of a biased and untrue reality. Therefore, two questions came to their minds. The first was whose intent it was to deceive us, and the second was the purpose of this complex deception. Some struggled to find sufficient explanations, which often led to speculation about a leading group, such as a superior race or aliens, who seek to dominate the world. An example of this is Lukáš, who presents a complex system of world domination, on top of which are powerful extraterrestrials. While producing a narrative going back to the beginnings of civilisation, his model also has a synchronic dimension represented in the form of a diagram (fig. 1). The complex narrative involving ancient cultures, extraterrestrials and alleged contemporary super-conspiracies has a close resemblance to the cosmology associated with the well-known conspiracist David Icke.

Although such conclusions are already beyond the lines of plausibility for most people, they are driven by logical reflections and the human need for explicable world order. When the mainstream explanation of (historical) events does not resonate with people, such as some of our respondents, they may feel the need to substitute their collapsing world order with a new one to structure their reality in a way comprehensible for them. Some interviewees themselves mentioned their need to find some universal truth to fall back on, which the mainstream media did not offer them.

⁴⁸ „K jistotě o globálním zločineckém spiknutí mne přivedly dlouholeté poznatky z pátrání o vzniku utrpení (války, nemoci, chudoba, zločin...) na planetě Zemi a v ČR, zkušenosti s naprostým nezájmem gaunerelit (mocní, vlivní a bohatí) utrpení snižovat a s důkazy o tom, jak tyto gaunerelity utrpení systematicky tvoří a jak systematicky parazitují na majoritní populaci.“

Intermingling and Transition

As shown in previous chapters, conspiracism does not contain only a substantive dimension, where one follows a theory simply because one trusts its content indefinitely. Conspiracism is much more complex, and applying Versnel's theory can bring mainstream society⁴⁹ closer to it. However, it is not as simple as identifying a particular theory functioning only on one of the levels. Each level of meaning is accompanied by another of the three since they constantly influence each other. For example, one is not just a functionalist conspiracist. Just as Versnel says that all three dimensions are to some extent represented in all religious ideas, they also appear in some proportion in conspiracy theories.

For instance, one of our respondents, Filip, has all three clearly observable levels in his belief. He believes in specific theories because of their content at the substantive level, presenting a list of historical events to which he gives a non-mainstream conspiracist interpretation (E.g., The Srebrenica massacre did not happen, or The Velvet Revolution was a fraud organised in the West to colonise Czechoslovakia etc.). All these substantive thoughts are arranged together in a structure showing his cosmological approach. Filip's statements are intertwined, putting together the explicit cosmology of a previously mentioned New World Order, a secretly emerging totalitarian world government controlling and, in that way, connecting random events. It is a model example of thinking that seeks to project almost magical forces that control the world behind the scenes of the chaos of today's opaque postmodern society. Finally, the functionalist level is as crucial for Filip as the previous ones since he is a well-known online media person who has set himself the goal of balancing out the mainstream.

With David, however, this is not the case. He has a powerful functionalist dimension and seems to have a minimal cosmological or substantive approach. Nevertheless, when we look at his responses, we see that both are present, just not as explicitly as in Filip's case. The cosmological level of conspiracy theories connects with David's leftist worldview. His inclination to conspiracy theories grows from a hostile position towards the contemporary (capitalist Western) world. Even though he mocks conspiracy theories most of the time and has a primarily functionalist approach to them, he is also fascinated by them and even takes over some of their narratives. His idea (which he presented not as conspiracy but as fact) that corporations knowingly and deliberately destroy the planet with a grander scheme is quite a strong substantive conspiracy thought in itself.

Due to Tomáš's beforementioned sceptical nature, from which his cosmology is constructed, it is generally difficult for him to believe in anything at all. That is why

⁴⁹ Mainstream society may be seen as a relatively static, stable conglomeration of individuals, groups and institutions that throws up more dynamic, deviant groups on its margins. ELIZABETH PUTTICK, "Personal Development: the Spiritualisation and Secularisation of the Human Potential Movement", in STEVEN SUTCLIFFE and MARION BOWMAN (eds.), *Beyond New Age: Exploring Alternative Spirituality*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2000, p. 202.

he is interested in conspiracy theories in the first place, while at the same time, it prevents him from believing in most of them. In some cases, however, he approaches them and believes in them on a substantive level for which he often needs empirical experience (although in other cases, when he has none, he further subjects his theories to critical scrutiny with the principle of "embrace widely, hold lightly"). An example of this would be his belief that UFOs,⁵⁰ which are not human-made technologies, exist. His worldviews, however, operate within the functionalist level as well. He states that conspiracy theories act as a badge of honour and a shield for him when he states: "People have then no interest in pulling you into worldly things, and conversely there may be those with whom you get along, or who will push you further." This serves him to identify people with similar beliefs and to differentiate himself from the mainstream population openly.

Our research also found another aspect of this intermingling relationship between the three levels. That is, one can see a transition between different approaches in space and time.

A suitable example is Petr. Petr's father was an ardent conspiracy theorist who dealt with conspiracies concerning alien extraterrestrials. From an early age, Petr was subjected to a strong substantive treatment of conspiracies, which he resisted during his life. Despite his rejection of them on a substantive level, he still uses them to express disagreement with the government. This suspicion towards the state peaked during the Covid-19 pandemic. He felt attacked by the state's restrictions and returned to the conspiracist vortex of non-mainstream interpretation of events. This shows him transitioning from his early-life contempt of substantive belief in conspiracy theories to using conspiracy theories as means to achieve a specific end (functionalist level), only to return to conspiracy theories on a substantive level but this time genuinely accepting them.

In conclusion, it is essential to emphasise that these three dimensions are not always in a harmonious relationship but sometimes exist in tension, as is apparent in David's case. He primarily mocks conspiracy theories; showing where his ridicule of conspiracies ends and believing in the narrative takes over is challenging. Hence his functionalist dimension (mocking conspiracies) is in direct conflict with his substantive approach (belief in the content of conspiracies).⁵¹

As shown in this chapter, the three presented levels of meaning do not stand alone but are constantly overlapping, intertwining, transitioning, and influencing each other.

⁵⁰ This term is not necessarily connected to aliens, since in general it means "Unidentified Flying Object".

⁵¹ The cosmological level concerning his leftist worldviews is in this case less visible and does not participate in the conflict between the two others.

Conclusion

Our article has explored the applicability of the three-fold typology proposed by H.S. Versnel on the phenomenon of conspiracy theories. The typology consists of three dimensions of understanding human belief in religious contexts: substantive, functionalist, and cosmological. We have attempted to show that what we call belief in conspiracy theories is rather complex and cannot be reduced to a mere acceptance of certain ideas as true (substantive level). Hopefully, we were able to demonstrate that this is only one aspect of belief and that people participate in conspiracy narratives because they are motivated by other than just literalist reasoning. Conspiracy theories can also provide a particular social or psychological function or support (functionalist level) and articulate their overall worldview without straightforward belief in the conceptions presented in the specific conspiracy theory (cosmological level). These three forms of understanding can go hand in hand but can also create tension. The functionalist and cosmological forms introduce us to a different approach when dealing with conspiracy theories than usual. That enables us to observe this phenomenon without judging its adherents for factual inconsistencies, similar to what we do in religious studies.

Our first question was whether we find representations of all three types. We applied them to the results of our qualitative study composed of in-depth interviews with representatives of the conspiracist subculture. The semi-structured interview format was crucial as it allowed for a discussion about the motivations and reasons underlying the respondents' beliefs. In this way, we could go beyond the mere content of the belief and verify the presence of functionalist and cosmological forms of belief.

Our study discovered that it is a helpful tool for understanding the formation of conspiracist beliefs. As our sample of respondents was very limited, we could not go beyond this basic observation and offer general conclusions about the Czech population – a task for a future study. However, there are still several points illustrated by our study deserving to be mentioned in the conclusion:

- 1) Thanks to the in-depth interview, we observed functionalist and cosmological levels of belief. We could ask follow-up questions about the motivations and reasons for a particular belief and see the belief content in the context of the individual worldview.
- 2) Previous researchers (Aupers, Delouvée) suggested concepts similar to the functionalist (“social logic” of Delouvée) and cosmological (“ontological uncertainty” of Aupers) forms of belief. In this way, we helped to add more cases that illustrate these forms of belief; we concluded that Versnel’s typology allows for a systematic approach to the issue of belief where three different types can stand side by side.
- 3) Our limited sample does not allow for far-reaching conclusions about the average distribution of the three forms of belief in the population; however, we find it noteworthy that none of our seven respondents exhibited solely the substantive form of belief. The other two layers of belief were always co-present to a certain

extent and, in most cases, were even more pronounced and essential. A future study could try to falsify our hypothesis by finding respondents who show the substantive layer only. If none are found, it would genuinely affect our understanding of the phenomenon of conspiracy theories: fact-checking and factual refutations of concrete beliefs would be deemed ineffectual (a perspective now getting more and more support from recent studies).⁵²

- 4) Our research also showed that each individual manifests a particular combination of all three studied layers of belief, so any reduction to just one of those types would be misleading.

As our study has a limited scope, it can be seen as an experimental exploration of an area which would profit from larger follow-up research projects. Future studies should focus on a more comprehensive mapping of our preliminary findings by using larger (and more representative) sets of respondents. Using quantitative methods, though, these studies will face the methodological issue of "measuring" the presence of the functionalist and cosmological layers of belief without the option of in-depth dialogue with the respondent.

Even if a future study confirms our findings, we will still face the difficult task of using our knowledge about the existence of three different layers of belief in our public communication – both with the mainstream media and policymakers and with the representatives of the conspiracist subculture.

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⁵² JOSEPH E. USCINSKI, "The Epistemology of Fact Checking (Is Still Naïve): Rejoinder to Amazeen", *Critical review* 27 (2, 2015): p. 243–252; DAVID YARROW, "From Fact-checking to Value-checking: Normative Reasoning in the New Public Sphere", *The Political quarterly* 92 (4, 2021), p. 621–628; JEFFREY W. JARMAN, "Influence of Political Affiliation and Criticism on the Effectiveness of Political Fact-Checking", *Communication research reports* 33(1, 2016): p. 9–15.

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