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ȘCOALA DOCTORALĂ DE ȘTIINȚE UMANISTE**

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**The Conspiracy Narrative:**  
**Projecting the Enemy in *The Manchurian*  
*Candidate, Libra, and The Plot against America***

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Conspiracy theories are an indelible component of today's society, defining its culture and adapting constantly to new societal needs. They are ubiquitous, whether they revolve around serious matters or trifles, whether they spring from practical jokes or urban myths, or, on the contrary, they parallel essential political crises. They manage to permeate all the layers of current culture, always adapting to modern fears and concerns, addressing both domestic and international affairs.

My thesis aims to discuss this complex subject, following the epistemological transformation of conspiracy theories, from legitimate to illegitimate forms of knowledge starting with the 1960s, when they began to be ridiculed and rejected, being labeled as counterculture at best, according to Butter (2014: 17, 44–48). Richard Hofstadter claims they belong to the margins and connects them to the right-wing politics and the “paranoid style” characteristic of McCarthyism (1964: 36–39). In a rapidly changing reality, ever more challenging, conspiracy theories broke free from politics and permeated all the layers of society, from science to fiction, generating “cultural paranoia”, as Peter Knight explains (2000: 43). The digital age we live in, has granted them a safe place in the mainstream, as they are nowadays circulated around the globe almost instantly. Even though this does not necessarily mean that they are more influential, their endurance and plausibility lies in the fact that at the core of every conspiracy theory there is a real grievance, present in society. The paradigm shift in the 1960s shows that the populace has grown more and more skeptical as trust in the authorities plummeted. Questioning the official account has become almost synonymous with civil duty.

Conspiracy theories are so successful because they claim to hold the real truth behind what is apparent, behind what we are being told, and they are able to provide enough arguments to convince, especially considering that one individual cannot possess all the knowledge these theories operate with, from all the respective fields. However, they are successfully circulated in the mainstream, because they include and combine aspects which may have been neglected or overlooked, they connect separated events and provide us with an apparently all-encompassing explanation.

This is why, many scholars agree, conspiracy theories are narratives. They offer an alternative version to the official account, given by the authorities, in an age when questioning authority is almost a must. It is an age when being skeptical has become perfectly legitimate, when being “paranoid” has become the norm, as Knight argues (2000: 2). Supporting the idea that conspiracy theories are regaining some of the lost legitimacy, Claire Birchall contends that they are knowledge generating discourses, they represent “an alternative paradigm of knowing” (2006: 34), competing with and completing the official versions. All of these versions are meant to be taken into consideration, as all of them contain parts of

the truth; therefore, they all are equally valid. The fact that there are so many alternative narratives nowadays means that the master narrative is no longer possible, which is why we have alternative narratives both to official versions and to non-official ones. In their infinite adaptability and endless interpretation, these narratives twist and turn the official accounts and describe them as conspiracy theories.

My thesis discusses conspiracy theories and the way in which they function, their transformation in time and their endless adaptability, with a focus on how all of these elements are combined and made to fit into fiction. Accordingly, the thesis contains two main parts: the first part, containing two chapters, is concerned with the theoretical background, while the second part, containing the following three chapters, aims to reveal how conspiracy narratives work in fiction, concentrating on the construction, projection and transformation of the enemy's image. This being a matter of perspective, my thesis focuses on who tells the story. The topic bears more relevance than we might expect, because the enemy in the official account may be presented as the victim in the alternative narratives, while central power is, or covers up, the actual villain. This is the pattern that all conspiracy theory narratives go by: as alternative narratives, they set the blame on the federal government, who has become the nation's enemy, turning against its citizens in a moment of crisis.

At this point, the difference between the obvious enemy (Communists or Muslim terrorists) and the obvious hero (who represents the central power) becomes more and more blurred, as these two separate entities begin to be confused with one another, they begin to merge into each other and change places. This is true for the narratives which generated them, as well. As official narratives are a source for conspiracy theory narratives, they move back and forth in this endless game, feeding upon each other, until we can no longer comprehend which is which. The reporting of historic events, the official narratives which, in appearance, reflect on these events and the alternative/conspiracy theory narratives, all mingle, creating fiction. Fiction, in turn, works according to the same pattern, being fed from these narratives and generating new ones. All these narratives overlap, creating a loop, which is an infinite reservoir for alternative, official or fictional, narratives, all in good standing and likely to be considered equally legitimate.

In the first chapter, *Conspiracy theories – a general overview*, I offer a functional definition of the paranoid style and I discuss how it has changed in time, spreading its tentacles and permeating other types of narrative apart from the political discourse, thus becoming a cultural phenomenon. I follow the evolution of conspiracy theories as forms of knowledge with a legitimate status, especially before the

1960s, when they paralleled important political decisions and outcomes, to an illegitimate status, from the 1960s onwards, when they became associated with the paranoid style in American political discourse. This evolution is explained in connection with a strong tradition of conspiracy theorizing in the American political thought, properly carved by the Republican jeremiad, which influenced these narratives on their journey to the 21st century. The paradigm shift in the 1950s is another important aspect I discuss, as, in the context of McCarthy's Communist infiltration accusations, the enemy of the republic started to be placed within, inside the federal government, not outside, trying to break in and assume power.

In Chapter II, *Conspiracy theories as narratives. The enemy within and without*, I discuss conspiracy theories as narratives and show that they work, very similarly, both in fictional and in non-fictional texts: their chameleonic fluidity allows them to cross genres, so that they can be found both in political discourse, sermons, (newspaper) articles, documentaries, but also pamphlets, novels, movies and TV series, songs, and even ads. The focus here is on the key elements of a classical conspiracy theory narrative, how they interact and alter the pattern in the postmodern period, more precisely, from the 1950s onwards.

The theoretical part highlights the *modi operandi* of conspiracy theories. Even though, in their infinite adaptability and (over)interpretation, conspiracy theories seem to display a great variability, in fact, they abide by the same mechanics. Sophisticated as they might seem, like the 9/11 conspiracy theory, for instance, they are to be integrated within the same canon. They are centered on an enemy, who, from the 1950s onwards, is placed within the American society, holding key positions in the state.

Traditionally, the existence of a villain who aims to destroy the republic and take control would cause the population to unite against this enemy. Logic dictates that, in a moment of crisis, citizens will side with the central power. This is the argument that official narratives employ: the enemy is singled out in some way, and it becomes the projection of all evil: the enemy is ungodly and viciously deceiving (Communists), un-American by origin, un-Christian (Muslims) and must be cast away from society at all costs, unless they will completely destroy America, and potentially, the entire world.

I insist on the importance of the fact that, starting with the 1960s, the enemy is within, therefore the central power is perceived as the enemy in conspiracy theory narratives. This is the pattern of all conspiracy theories from this point on: the enemy in the official account may be presented as the victim in the alternative narratives, while central power is, or covers up, the real villain. Alternative narratives set the blame on the federal government, who has become the nation's enemy, turning against its citizens in a moment of crisis. The difference between the obvious enemy (Communists or Muslim terrorists) and

the obvious hero (represented by the central power) becomes more and more blurred, as these two separate entities begin to be confused with one another, they begin to merge into each other and change places.

This is true for the narratives which generated them, as well. As official narratives are a source for conspiracy theory narratives, they move back and forth in this endless game, feeding upon each other, until we can no longer comprehend which is which. The reporting of historic events, the official narratives which, in appearance, reflect on these events and the alternative/conspiracy theory narratives, all mingle, creating fiction. Fiction, in turn, works according to the same pattern, being fed from these narratives and generating new ones. All narratives overlap, creating a loop, which is an infinite reservoir for alternative, official or fictional, narratives, all in good standing and likely to be considered equally legitimate.

The way that official accounts are twisted around, combined with alternative ones, de- and re-contracted is very relevant as it can teach us more about conspiracy theories and their functionality. Fiction serves as an instrument for us to have even a better grasp of these theories. This is covered in the final three chapters of my thesis, each dealing with a different novel, which unfolds a different conspiracy theory narrative.

The second part of my thesis, composed of chapters III, IV, and V, serves the main purpose of my thesis, which is to show how conspiracy theories are reflected in fiction. For this, I am going to consider three major conspiracy theories (the Red Scare, the JFK assassination conspiracy theory, and the 9/11 conspiracy theory), and illustrate how the conspiracy narrative is restructured in three representative fictional texts (*The Manchurian Candidate*, 1959, by Richard Condon; *Libra*, 1988, by Don DeLillo, and *The Plot against America*, 2004, by Philip Roth), focusing on the way the image of the enemy within or the enemy without is projected. I start from the hypothesis that all these conspiracy narratives develop around the enemy-hero dichotomy and feed on its ambivalence. This demonstration is going to be achieved by applying Fenster's classical conspiracy theory narrative formula on the three novels.

Chapter III, *The Communist Trojan horse. The Manchurian Candidate, the illustration of a conspiracy theory*, analyses Condon's novel as a conspiracy theory narrative, according to Fenster's theory scheme. It describes the worst American nightmare: not only is the enemy within, holding key positions in the state (Senator Iselin and his wife), but this terribly vicious enemy is able to control and "operate" with sleeper agents who can perform any kind of duty, being completely brainwashed

(Raymond). This chapter focuses on the Communist conspiracy theory in America, starting from Senator McCarthy's policy and an analysis of how his paranoid style functioned, as well as how this type of manipulating narrative became influential. Concepts such as propaganda, strong manipulation and brainwashing, or infiltration, secret agents or momism are also touched, as they have been strongly connected with Communism. At the same time, with the conspiracy theories' immense ability to adapt, brainwashing has gradually been associated with capitalism, through the media and advertising, which have been proved to alter the individuals' free will and to manipulate them. All these aspects are explored in *The Manchurian Candidate*: the reader is delighted to surf through this conspiracy narrative, set in motion by Chinese and Soviet Communist agents, with the help of Eleanor Iselin, Raymond's American handler – the enemy within. There is an entire web of agents, sleeper agents, such as Raymond, who work for the conspiracy while being brainwashed, but also dupes, such as Senator Iselin, McCarthy's equivalent in the novel, who are blissfully unaware of their role in the conspiracy. This dynamic narrative framework, displaying Fenster's key elements, is what makes Condon's novel a classical conspiracy theory narrative. The enemy without is clearly delineated: the Chinese and Soviet agents are the obvious villains. The enemy within, exposed quite soon in the development of the plot, is represented primarily by Eleanor Iselin. She is the embodiment of the Communist agent infiltrated in the government, being the perfect image that both Senator McCarthy, who imagined the high treason of his country, and Edgar Hoover had projected in his book: vicious, deceiving, deviant, hungry for power, willing to betray not only her country, but also her own son, in order to achieve personal goals, all the while working for the conspiracy. At the same time, her husband fits another typology identified by Hoover: he takes part in the conspiracy unknowingly, he is a puppet, whose projected image, carefully constructed by his wife, is that of a man of great integrity and the nation's hero. To add to this complicated hero-villain equation, Raymond, another hero promoted by his mother, who receives the Medal of Honor for bravery in mission, proves to be yet an enemy from within, who performs the tasks assigned by the conspirators, still unknowingly, having been brainwashed in Manchuria. He is contrasted by Ben Marco, also brainwashed, who manages to resist the conspiracy. Recurrent nightmares concentrating on what had happened in Manchuria seem to consume him: he is on the verge of losing his mind and his job, he is perceived almost as paranoid, living in a fantasy, especially by Raymond. However, he reverts his position of a victim, turning into the real hero: he manages to resist the brainwashing process, he figures out what the nightmares mean, the truth is revealed to him through cognitive effort but also as a result of a series of coincidences. These narrative pivots help him to understand mechanisms that set the conspiracy in motion, and, ultimately, defeat it.

Chapter IV, *JFK Conspiracy theory narratives. Libra, the alternative narrative of an assassination*, analyzes the novel *Libra*, which is another conspiracy theory narrative. DeLillo employs Garrison's conspiracy theory, according to which the JFK assassination was an inside job, most likely orchestrated by the CIA. The author uses a series of speculations, according to which several CIA agents, amongst whom Guy Banister and David Ferrie (agents in real life, but also characters in the novel) murdered President Kenney as a consequence of the Bay of Pigs fiasco, which brought major setbacks both to their careers, and to their businesses in Cuba – an aspect very cleverly illustrated in the novel.

As stated, this chapter deals with the JFK conspiracy theory narrative, and the faulty investigation which only encouraged such theories to bloom. Initially, the Warren Report, putting forth the conclusions that the FBI had delivered to the authorities, was well received. Soon after this, the situation changed, due to the evidence which kept pouring in, evidence that had been neglected or overlooked by both investigations, a fact which caused the general public to become highly skeptical of the official account. Trust in the authorities began to plummet, while other nefarious governmental actions began to surface, such as the Vietnam War, for instance. K. Olmsted argues that the murder of President Kennedy cannot fully be understood outside the very complex Cold War context, outside the Castro plots and the tense relationship with the Soviet Union (Olmsted: 113, 133, 134). Indeed, this context generated even more conspiracy theories both by the left and by the right. Perhaps the most prolific of these theories is Garrison's conspiracy theory, which provides an all-encompassing explanation, thus satisfying both the left and the right, but also a fragment of the population who disliked President Johnson. This theory placed the enemy within, suggesting that the government was lying to its citizens in order to cover something up, making it almost irrelevant whether Oswald Lee was the murderer or not. It is this theory, strongly connected to the Bay of Pigs incident, that DeLillo employs when writing *Libra*, a novel built on a conspiracy theory narrative. He uses places and names that are to be found in Garrison's theory as well, and forges his narrative on the speculation that CIA agents – such as David Ferrie and Guy Banister, real life agents, but also characters in the novel – may have held a grudge against President Kenney, on account of the Bay of Pigs fiasco, and wanted revenge. For Peter Knight, the JFK assassination is the primal scene for American postmodernism, a view which DeLillo shares, describing it as the last moment of solid ground, of manageable reality (2014: 114 – 116). After this moment, the interpretation goes, we have been thrown into a world where the chain of causality has been broken, and the obscure forces of hazard and coincidence have replaced the human agent. The narrative in *Libra* is designed on this exact view on reality: though the CIA agents carefully plan the assassination, Lee Oswald is sucked into the conspiracy as if by coincidence, he misses the shot, though he doesn't mean to do so, and realizes he was

framed, as he looks through his rifle and sees Kennedy being shot by Raymno, a Bay of Pigs veteran, whom he knows nothing of. The nucleus that binds the narrative together is still the hero-enemy correspondence, which, as shown above, works in reverse and becomes more and more complicated. The conspirators themselves, the CIA agents designing the assassination, leave two sets of trails so that they would deflect the attention from themselves. On the one hand, there is the enemy without, the Castro regime, the Communists, and, on the other, there is the enemy within, the federal government who betrayed the nation, and is trying to cover up shady things. In this sense, the saint-like image of a hero that the official narrative projected on JFK has been turned upside down. The President himself, his family and the government become the enemy for plenty of reasons, the most sonorous being that they betrayed the country and made peace with Cuba, with the Communist enemy. Making things deliberately fuzzier, Oswald – who seems to be the obvious enemy, the true assassin – is presented as a scapegoat: he is the victim of the system, his country and his family fail him. He is portrayed as someone who was bound to be a failure all his life, and this predisposition is completed when he eventually misses the shot that would make him an agent of history.

The 9/11 conspiracy theories are covered in the last chapter, *The 9/11 Terrorist attacks in the logic of conspiracy narratives. A case study: Philip Roth's The Plot against America*. This chapter focuses on Roth's novel, aiming to show how conspiracy theories work in fiction, but also beyond it, shedding light on current events. The novel walks us through the experience of young Philip and his family, a Jewish family who has lived in a democratic and long praised America for generations. But, after President Lindbergh wins the elections, this country turns into a totalitarian state, oppressing its citizens, generating an American version of the pogroms. By a twist of faith, it would seem, the initial world order is restored, and, as the resolution is reached, FDR becomes president once again.

The 9/11 terrorist attacks generated perhaps the most complex response worldwide, both in the media coverage and in the conspiracy theories they generated. These attacks are acknowledged as a historical event of great magnitude, for the United States, and for the entire world, as they introduced a new type of enemy: the Muslim terrorist. The official account was quite simple at first, but soon it grew more and more complicated, as the Bush administration forced a connection between al-Qaeda and Saddam Hussein, thus justifying the war in Iraq and the international war on terror. Once again, the evidence did not support the official account, and neither did intelligence in the U.S. or the U.K. The population grew more and more frustrated with the administration, the 9/11 Commission Report became a source for researchers and generated lots of alternative narratives. The population lost faith in the authorities and the official account was now understood as a conspiracy narrative. Conspiracy theorizing

had twisted things around, and, once again, the enemy was within: the main villain was President Bush himself, while the Muslims were seen as victims, especially after the state police enforced by The Patriot Act. It is an example of the state turning against its own citizens, using methods of oppression, abolishing civil rights and liberties, etc.

My thesis employs Roth's *The Plot against America*, written in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the initiation of Bush's campaign against terror, as a case study for this conspiracy theory narrative, describing a totalitarian-like state which is oppressing its citizens, denying them their very identity as Americans. Young Philip's life as a Jewish offspring in an anti-Semitic America, ruled by Nazi President Lindbergh, bears both authenticity and verisimilitude: Lindbergh's policies have thrown the country into chaos, with families losing their sense of belonging and identity, their civil rights, being discriminated against and relocated, leading to American pogroms. One can easily parallel this narrative development with America after the Patriot Act, with enhanced control and surveillance, with American citizens being jailed, while others were deported. Roth touches subjects which are very sensitive and of great topicality for contemporary America, such as: identity, inclusion and exclusion, discrimination, racism, civil liberties, citizenship, warning on the very feeble American democracy. These concepts, together with uncanny parallels between Lindbergh's and Bush's official narratives, with the protagonists fighting the conspiracy – which moves rapidly towards the unexpected resolution, make *The Plot against America* both a conspiracy theory narrative in the classical sense and a veiled critique of the Bush administration.

This novel is the perfect illustration of my premise, which is that fiction can be used as a tool meant to teach us how conspiracy narratives work. Many critics (M. Scanlan, D. Shiffman, J. Siegel,) see *The Plot against America* as much more than a simple alternative narrative of the Anti-Semitic conspiracy theory narrative. The novel is perceived as an instrument meant to connect different events, it is seen like a bridge between the 1940s uchronia, described by Roth, and post 9/11 America, a parable and a veiled critique of the Bush administration.

As well as in the other conspiracy theory novels, the enemy projected by the official narrative, the Jewish community, is meant to be an outsider, and it tends to be isolated by the Lindbergh administration. Even though they are American citizens and have been living in America for generations, they are described as non-Christians who are jeopardizing American values, and national security, by urging that the country should go to war, on account of what was happening to Jews in Europe. They are discriminated against, oppressed, their liberties and civil rights are denied, humiliated by the police, they

are relocated, American pogroms take place. Furthermore, Lindbergh's friendship with Hitler is meant to keep the country and its citizens safe, away from Europe's war. By playing the peace card, the Nazi President enjoys the public support, he is applauded and idolized: he is the hero, while the Jewish people are the enemy. The alternative narrative works in reverse: Hitler and his American counterpart, President Lindbergh, represent the enemy who turned against their own people, while the Jews are seen as victims of this criminal regime. At the same time, they are also perceived as heroes in the novel, as Philip and his family, together with other Jews – Walter Winchell, Mayor LaGuardia – oppose, resist and, eventually, foil the conspiracy, even though this is the result of a series of coincidences.

By analyzing the narrative structure of Roth's novel, readers and critics alike cannot but see – eyes squinting – the narrative of the Bush administration reveal itself. By understanding conspiracy theory narratives, by seizing their functional mechanisms, readers can learn how to grasp them elsewhere, be aware of their ability to camouflage, and not fall victims of such narratives. From this perspective, *The Plot against America*, just like the other novels selected in the corpus of my thesis, serves as an instrument which demonstrates the fact that fiction can easily be used to teach readers how to de/re-construct conspiracy theory narratives, how to decode them and make sense of current events and politics.

Embracing many forms, conspiracy theories have been a part of the American culture. At times legitimate forms of knowledge, at other times ridiculed as illegitimate forms of knowledge, as expressions of counterculture, they have adapted, camouflaged, reinvented themselves and managed to become a constant feature in the evolution of American society. The age of digitalization and globalization only helped to enhance this phenomenon, and make conspiracy theories spread, worldwide, like never before; this is a subject matter which may be developed in a different research. They are ubiquitous nowadays, and productive in all possible fields, from the media to TV shows or documentaries, from science to science-fiction. At this point, we need to see them as narratives, not only in the field of politics, and acknowledge the fact that they provide us with alternative versions of events. The great variety of such accounts only goes to show us that we ought to see them as alternative/complementary/fictional variants of given events, therefore we need to be able to understand their mechanics, and see through these minutely constructed narratives. They need to be thoroughly decoded, read and interpreted, so that we may not fall victims to their spell. As shown, fiction may be an instrument which can help us to do exactly that: by the literary analysis of conspiracy theories in fiction, we can grasp the ability to identify and deconstruct conspiracy theories elsewhere, hence shedding light on current events.

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