

Cryptohistories

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Edited by

Alicja Bembien, Rafał Borysławski,
Justyna Jajszczok and Jakub Gajda

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INTRODUCTION

Contemporary political and social discourses increasingly appear to be departing from the modes of reasoning dominant since the Enlightenment and begin to resemble the paradigms recognizable from the past; either those that are emotionally laden and ideologically conservative, or – which is equally common – those that search for the causality of events beyond their officially acknowledged or sanctioned motivations. The conviction that a hidden agency does exist, or rather a need for such a conviction has existed since the dawn of humanity. Cultural anthropology sees in this type of thinking the origins of religions and later it manifested itself in a pervasive belief that the true logic of events is beyond human understanding and must, therefore, most likely be a result of covert forces. Moreover, covertness and secrecy have been understood to be the marks of the true knowledge, since only that which is secretive, unclear and hermetic is truly precious and may grant access to the truth. Speaking from a semiological perspective, Umberto Eco comments on the human fascination with secrecy: “secret knowledge is deep knowledge (because only what is lying under the surface can remain unknown for long). Thus truth becomes identified with what is not said or what is said obscurely and must be understood beyond or beneath the surface of a text. The gods speak (today we would say: the Being is speaking) through hieroglyphic and enigmatic messages.”¹ If we assume the Being to mean the order of events, Eco’s remark describes the way of perceiving reality, which, in its essence, is accessible only to the initiated.

The symbolic beginning of the 21st century, that is the 9/11 attacks, is a strong proof of the presence of a propensity to think in terms of conspiracy theories in the contemporary technology-driven world. The abundance of beliefs in plots, conspiracies, secretive deals and connivances and the popularity of such beliefs seem to be a characteristic sign of the present times. Occam’s razor has ceased to operate, or is, at least temporarily, rendered blunt by the political manipulations with the truth, by the revelations declared by the likes of Julian Assange or Edward Snowden and by the disturbing awareness that thanks to contemporary

¹ Umberto Eco, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 30.

technological advances each and everyone of us may be under permanent surveillance by institutions whose existence we never even suspected. Thus an enquiry into the roles and socio-political consequences of secrecy, clandestiness and conspiracy theories in history and in the narratives of both history and pseudo-history may be particularly relevant at present.

Crypthistories is a volume of essays which provides a meeting ground for scholars on the one hand probing into the meanings of the broadly understood themes of secrecy and conspiracy and, on the other hand, debating what Tomasz Wiślicz describes in his essay as “the boundary conditions” for history and the importance of narrative mechanisms for the construction of historical narratives. A crypthistorical perspective concerns therefore such historical texts which focus on tracing, uncovering and describing secrets, plots and speculations as well as on explaining their origins and their narrative strategies.

The texts which open the volume focus on the theoretical aspects of what can be described as a crypthistorical discourse or a discourse of secrecy in history. In the first essay, “Almost-histories, or Why Some Tales of the Past Do Not Become Histories,” Tomasz Wiślicz poses questions that are fundamental for the historian and considers the criteria of historicity of a narrative and the ethical aspects of historiography after the post-modern turn in writing about history. Wiślicz resorts to examples of narratives which did not become history, the said “almost-histories,” but also to the examples of unscientific pseudo-histories, whose potential for history understood as an ethical science is devastating. The second text opening the volume investigates the narrative rhetoric of one of the types of pseudo-histories mentioned by Wiślicz, that is an account based upon a conspiracy theory. In his essay, “Kings Don’t Die in Traffic Accidents,” Marcin Sarnek discusses an apparent paradox connecting conspiracy theories with the narratives of contemporary video games. On the one hand it lies in the necessity for the sense of causation, on the other in the awareness that that very sense is only illusory, both in conspiracy theories and in games. Two other texts which continue the theoretically-inclined initial part of the volume, Alicja Bembien’s “The Lie that Tells a Truth, the Truth that Lies” and Michał Kisiel’s “Event as Danger, Event as Hope. Alain Badiou’s Complicated Marriage with History” take the considerations of Wiślicz and Sarnek further and study the questions related to the paradoxes of truth and falsehood in history as well as the conceptual implications of a decision to narrate an event into an event of history.

Thus the first part of the volume outlines the historiographic, meta-narrative and rhetorical framework of history and cryptohistory. The essays which constitute its second part are a set of particular case studies of mechanisms and phenomena which were theoretically outlined in the volume's first four chapters. Justyna Jajszcok looks at parasitology as a cryptohistorical discourse, Nina Augustynowicz studies the codes and mores of Victorian floriography, Anna Malinowska debates cases of cross-dressing and sartorial camouflage, Aleksandra Musiał discusses the Vietnam War by focusing on the soldiers missing in action, Krzysztof Popek considers the case of a manipulated myth lying at the core of Bulgarian contemporary historical identity and J. Eric Starnes reviews the search for a racial utopia in the American South. Finally, Anna Olkiewicz-Mantilla presents the fiction of Beryl Bainbridge as a form of cryptohistorical literature seeing in it some of the points which were earlier outlined by Wiślicz and Sarnek in their social and historiographic contexts.

* * *

In *Foucault's Pendulum*, Umberto Eco's subversive novel devoted to conspiracy theories, Eco novelizes deliberations on and then a search for an all-encompassing secret Plan which is to be the fundament of all known events in human history. Casaubon, one of the three editors possessed by the idea of first finding and later devising the Plan, speaks of events that slip out of their control and of the effects of the fascination with secrecy and conspiracies: "We invented a nonexistent Plan, and They not only believed it was real but convinced themselves that They had been part of it for ages, or rather, They identified the fragments of their muddled mythology as moments of our Plan, moments joined in a logical, irrefutable web of analogy, semblance, suspicion."² As editors of the present volume we may only hope that the "web of analogy, semblance and suspicion" has been analytically researched by the volume's authors and that the cryptohistorical studies it offers may constitute a starting point for further investigations into the issues debated here both by the researchers of history and historiography as well as the researchers of narratives.

Rafał Borysławski, Alicja Bembien, Justyna Jajszcok, Jakub Gajda

² Umberto Eco, *Foucault's Pendulum*, trans. William Weaver (Orlando: Harcourt Books, 2007), p. 612.

PART ONE.

THEORIZING CRYPTOHISTORY

CHAPTER ONE

ALMOST-HISTORIES, OR WHY SOME TALES OF THE PAST DO NOT BECOME HISTORIES

TOMASZ WIŚLICZ

Historians of historiography are eager to stress that history is one of the oldest, if not the oldest, scientific disciplines. Its traditions go back two and one half millennia, and the first “methodical” historian – depending on one’s preference – is considered to be Herodotus or Thucydides. And no matter how each course on the history of historiography praises the way in which each of these two fathers of historiography gained and conveyed their knowledge of the past, scientific history has a much shorter life. Not until the first half of the 19th century did a breakthrough occur that is described as a “professionalization” of history. This does not mean that between Thucydides and Leopold von Ranke (regarded as the creator of modern historiography) there were no professional historians. Indeed, history was recorded by hundreds of authors, and new methods of research arose, some of which are still applied today. But only as a result of the professionalization of history were the basic practical requirements of scientific historiography and the methods of educating historiographers clearly defined. In this way a clear distinction was formed between history as a science and other tales about the past which have ceased to be objective knowledge and have been categorised as literature. In fact, the introduction of the methodologically supported principle of “historical truth” not only helped shape a better documented knowledge of the past, but also established a conviction among readers that everything a historian writes is, in very principle, true. Consequently, the “objective” past and historical rightness became the motor and, at the same time, an explanation for modern nationalisms, an ideological foundation for a nation-state and an argument in political disputes.

The conviction of historians that there is a basic difference between “genuine” professional historiography and an amateur historiography that does not merit trust was considerably eroded in the final decades of the

20th century as a result of a set of phenomena described as postmodernism. One of its sources was an interest in language and narrative, and at the same time a conviction that no knowledge can transcend the language with which we describe the world. The favourite subject of postmodernist criticism in this regard was historiography, which was better suited to prove this thesis than any other discipline. Referring to the views of such authors as Roland Barthes, Hayden White or Paul Ricoeur, postmodernism regarded a historian's work as more of a literary effort than a scientific one. From this angle, history is unable to fulfil the pledge of telling "how things really happened" because a historian has no access to facts from the past and works only with fragmentary linguistic texts describing these facts. These possess no structure until the historian makes sense of them and forms them into a narrative which we call history. In this light, history as a science is not a search for the historical truth, but a method by which the historian creates a convincing tale in compliance with the standards accepted in his environment. Thus, postmodernism eroded the opposition between history and literature, between fact and fiction, and has adopted, as its standard thesis, Hayden White's theory whereby historical writing is a literary artefact. Just like a literary author, the historian presents facts in the form of a story governed by the laws of rhetoric, but the difference is that a literary author simply invents his contents while the historian discovers them in so-called "source" texts. At the same time, the form in which the historian renders his tale is meant to appear as the closest possible reflection of reality. To achieve this aim, the historian applies both classical literary devices and supporting evidence such as historiographical references, tables or figures which possess a particularly persuasive force for humanists.

Postmodernist criticism made a strong impression on historians in the final quarter of the 20th century, dividing the community and at the same time boosting the theoretical sensitivity of researchers, who now had to be more careful in defining the epistemological basis of their research and had to approach the results of their research with greater scepticism, for as a result of postmodernist criticism history as a scientific discipline lost its fundamental power of objectively investigating the past and establishing "what really happened." If history is a literary artefact or an ideological discursive practice, how can one assess its quality according to the criteria applied until now, especially the criterion of "historical truth"? Moreover, should professional historiography, which previously served as the guardian of this truth, now assume some kind of privileged position *vis-à-vis* other tales of the past created by other, even similar, methods?

Historians have returned to literature, perceiving it not only as a possible historical source, but also as a source of inspiration for interpretation. At the same time they have realised that they employ literary forms just like writers. As early as 1979, the distinguished English historian Lawrence Stone propagated the revival of historical narrative, shamefully forgotten by post-war science-like historiography¹ – yet in 1902 the second person to win the Nobel Prize in literature was the historian of ancient Rome Theodor Mommsen. The “literary sensitisation” of historians also meant that they now undertook experiments in narrative whose purpose was to break with the pseudo-objective style of writing history which imitated 19th century realistic fiction, and to apply more modern literary forms of literary practice.²

A real challenge to the supremacy of professional historiography has come from the information revolution, which has created a free market of historical tales written mainly outside the academic community and making skilful use of the poetry of 19th century historical writings. In any case there is an entire spectrum of non-academic and, at the same time, non-literary tales of the past, some of which pretend to be “genuine historiography” and some which simply utilize elements of historical discourse or historical methodology in order to create tales that are obvious fantasies. Despite their huge differences, all these anomalous forms of relating the past are joined by the fact that they possess far greater media attraction than academic historiography. Thus, history not only has to compete with various amateurish conspiracy theories or pseudo-archaeologies for people’s minds, but has also lost its exclusive right to characteristic expert discourse (described by Barthes as “psychotic”), which is used more and more often to create fictitious worlds.

Still, this phenomenon is unusually interesting for the theory of academic history. Perhaps the answer to the question about the foundations of the disciplinary identity of history lies there – in its furthest reaches; in other words at its point of contact with tales of the past that are certainly not history. In this way it may be possible to determine the “borderline conditions” of historiography which will help determine a positive programme for a modern understanding of the conditions of academic history.

¹ Lawrence Stone, “The Revival of Narrative: Reflections on a New Old History,” *Past and Present*, Vol. 85 (Nov. 1979), pp. 3-24.

² Characteristic of this trend is the collection of studies *Experiments in Rethinking History*, eds. Alun Munslow and Robert Rosenstone (London, New York: Routledge, 2004).

Nevertheless, the oldest counter-factual history comes from the pen of a historian. Titus Livius himself, in book nine of the *History of Rome*, wondered what would have happened if Alexander the Great had directed his expansion towards the west – towards Rome – instead of towards the east. Since then many historians have been racking their brains over “what would have happened if,” though they usually harbour such thoughts on the margin of their work and seldom regard them as strictly scientific, but rather as the so-called popularisation.³ Needless to say, counter-factual history does sometimes develop into a fruitful means of research – for example, it was successfully applied by Robert Fogel, the American cliometric luminary, in his work which undermined the importance of the railways in the economic development of the United States in the 19th century.⁴ But, basically, the creation of alternative historical visions became a literary activity, for every historical tale may be called an “alternative” history because it either introduces fictitious characters to history or attributes historical figures with fictitious deeds.

What might intrigue the historian more than a historical tale is the creation of entire alternate histories via *ad hoc* virtual societies. Such histories, often called uchronias (analogical to utopias) are frequently a result of the reprocessing of literary works (e.g. J. R. R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*), and sometimes lead to literary projects (e.g. the Steampunk trend). However, books here appear to be the tip of the iceberg; they merely retain a certain reference to the complicated and increasing amount of information gathered on numerous Internet platforms such as the Alternate History Discussion Board.⁵ Here, extensive chronicles of events are produced, with numerous maps and geographical presentations, descriptions of customs etc., relating to worlds whose connection with today and with history ranges from complete fiction to quite a plausible alternative which diverges from academic history at a certain so-called point of divergence (the point in which a crucial counter-factual event is introduced, such as Napoleon winning the battle of Waterloo). Especially interesting here is the use of narrative forms of scientific historiography. Authors go into a lot of trouble to master the impersonal, professional style of official historiography. There is no question of any experiments in

³ E.g. Richard J. Evans, *Altered Pasts. Counterfactuals in History* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2013). In Poland recently, for example: *Niezrealizowane drogi historii*, ed. M. Woźniak (Lublin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 2012).

⁴ Robert Fogel, *Railroads and American Economic Growth: Essays in Econometric History* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1964).

⁵ *AlternateHistory.com*, www.alternatehistory.com (29 March 2014).

narration or even a shadow of doubt about the hypothetical “veracity” of the “facts” given. Also characteristic are the preferences of authors towards political history, especially military history, as well as genealogy and historical geography. These three areas of historiography still form the basis of “public history” and of school curricula. But there are also works on imagined social history or the history of customs. Economic history perhaps enjoys the least interest, while theoretically advanced trends and ones considered modern by historians, such as historical anthropology or gender history, do not figure at all. The world of *uchronia* avails itself of the achievements of traditional historiography according to a pattern developed in the 19th century, but this is a historiography devoid of its core, i.e. sources, though there are attempts to create artificial “sources,” usually in accordance with 19th century preferences for normative texts.

Uchronia is of course in principle fantasy and does not claim to be the historical reality. But what is striking is its form, imitating historiography in its most conservative version. Although these stories in no way compete with scientific historiography, they, nevertheless, convince public what history should really deal with and how it should be written. At the same time, the choice of this bombastic form of historical narrative not only reflects the tastes of its authors, but also serves practical purposes: it is easy to emulate and carries a stylistic “truth effect,”⁶ thanks to which the fable can be made cohesive and the recognition from readers is assured.

The concept of “alternate history” possesses yet another meaning which, nevertheless, fits within the scope of academic history: I mean stories that remain in opposition to the dominant “grand narratives” of world historiography. These meta-narratives, describing large-scale historical world processes, have been harshly criticised since the 1960’s as products of a profoundly ideological vision of the world from the angle of Western culture and as seen by a white heterosexual male from an upper social class. As a result of the social and political changes in the second half of the 20th century, academic historiography has begun to satisfy the

⁶ The “truth effect” is a phenomenon that accompanies public acceptance of traditional historiography which, thanks to the application of suitable means of persuasion, appears to be the most faithful reflection of the historical truth. Of course, an author backs up his theses with various evidence to be found mainly in footnotes. The problem is that only someone with a historical education can check this evidence. Other readers have to accept only the possibility of checking the author. In practice, this means that any narrative that bears the hallmarks of a professional historical treatise is regarded by its readers as a “presentation of the historical truth.” In other words, a historical work is believed to tell the “truth” not because it describes a historical reality, but because it employs a historical form.

need to describe the histories of emancipating groups. This trend was intended to, on the one hand, update and demystify the historical process for the sake of historical truth, and on the other, help build group identities: of women, African Americans, gays etc. But it quickly turned out that “alternate” histories have the same lack of equilibrium as traditional histories (after all, they also satisfy the needs of both their recipients and authors), in addition to which it is difficult to correlate them with each other. In such a situation, the criterion of historical truth had to undergo a certain adjustment, especially, since postmodernist criticism was at the same time attacking the epistemological foundation of history in general. Historians accepted the fact that many versions of history resulting from differences in interpretation may exist and that they have a practical role in building a democratic society that nurtures the identities (including historical ones) of its members.⁷ It is due to this democratic criterion that within the frame of academic historiography various alternate identity-related histories exist in the United States (e.g. of American Indians or sexual minorities), whilst the identity-related historiography of the South, relating to racist theories, is developing beyond the confines of the universities.

Aside from its identity-type nature, this last trend is also a typical example of the revisionist manner of writing about the past. The concept of historical revisionism is still a subject of debate. It is difficult not to agree with James McPherson who said that a constant aim to alter the established state of knowledge is the lifeblood of historical scholarship.⁸ Alternate identity histories may therefore also be considered revisionist because they have undermined the prevailing interpretations. Yet those who denied the extermination of the Jews during World War II described themselves as revisionists in the 1970’s, and since then revisionism has been generally defined as a conscious falsification or distortion of the past for political or ideological purposes.⁹ Such a definition is still not very practical because it refers to some absolute, tried-and-tested historical truth, which seems debatable in view of the various permitted ways of interpreting the past and of undermining the epistemological basis of

⁷ Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (London, New York: Norton, 1994).

⁸ James McPherson, “Revisionist Historians,” *Perspectives on History*, Vol. 41, No. 6 (2003), www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/september-2003/revisionist-historians (29 March 2014).

⁹ The prehistory of this concept is discussed by Pierre Vidal-Naquet, “Theses on Revisionism,” in: Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Assassins of Memory. Essays on the Denial of the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

historiography in general. Neither does today's political or ideological context of historiography set a framework for revisionism.

Revisionism is more easily distinguishable by its social manifestations than by its theoretical assumptions. Unlike other politically motivated trends of historiography, revisionism is applied not so much to create one's own identity as to undermine or humiliate one's political opponents. For this reason too, revisionists are accused of breaking the laws of political correctness; but they are also fond of presenting themselves as "politically incorrect" and make themselves out to be the victims of defending the "historical truth" against distortion of official teachings. Revisionism's *raison d'être* is to oppose academic history, which it accuses of having the very same qualities it has itself: bias, self-interest, and a tendency to simplify things and ignore inconvenient information.¹⁰

Revisionist views of history are frequently centred on conspiracy theories. The conspiracy may appear as the chief explanation for past events, but it may apply to the very relationship between official teachings and the revisionist view. A good example of this is the paleoastronautical hypothesis of Erich von Däniken: he believed there is evidence that the Earth had been visited by aliens in the distant past, but the refusal of official science to recognise this was the result of a kind of conspiracy by scholars against him. Although von Däniken was very cautious about identifying conspiracies, his theories have become a historical basis for the entire set of claims whereby there is a worldwide conspiracy to keep the existence of intelligent extraterrestrial beings a secret from the world's population. Involved in this conspiracy are the governments of world powers, secret societies patterned on Masonry, and even continuers of the traditions of the Third Reich who have settled in Antarctica with permission from the CIA. Of course, if there is such a broad conspiracy, its aims must be hostile, therefore the aliens (in a different version: reptilians from inside our planet according to the so-called Hollow Earth theory) must be preparing a conquest, supported by corrupt human elites. This theory, stuck together out of various conspiratorial views by David Icke, is rather extreme when it comes to complication and the accumulation of improbabilities. Nevertheless, active historical conspiracy theories include ones that are more earthly but uglier, based on traditional anti-Semitic, anti-Masonic or anti-Catholic trends, as well as on more probable views

¹⁰ An interesting attempt to distinguish between politically and scientifically "correct" and "incorrect" historical revisionism in post-Soviet Europe has been made by the authors of the volume *Past in the Making: Recent History Revisions and Historical Revisionism in Central Europe After 1989*, ed. Michal Kopeček (Budapest, New York: CEU Press, 2008).

that lie on the very edges of historiography as in the case of analyses of the assassination of John F. Kennedy.

A lot of research has been devoted to the reasons for the growing popularity of conspiracy theories and the way in which they are depicted in popular culture.¹¹ From a historical point of view, the way in which coincidence is pushed aside is particularly significant: in conspiracy theories, nothing occurs without a reason and without a purpose; every event is the fulfilment of some plan. If at first sight one sees no sense in events and there is no evidence of a conspiracy, it means that we are dealing with a particularly perfidious and well camouflaged conspiracy. This is a kind of return to premodern historiography, which also did not recognise the possibility of chance, but found the sense of events in God's providence rather than in the plans of secret alliances. In any case, *histoire événementielle* has always had a problem with the randomness of history, at least because when constructing its narrative. It has based itself on cause-effect relationships between facts set in chronological order, therefore the search for associations between these facts, not always evident, has become the professional skill of the historian who, in addition – according to classical principles of the critique of sources – should always ask him- or herself: *cui bono*?

A look at history through the prism of conspiracy theory gives one a feeling of understanding the real sense of a chaotic collection of facts supplied by the media, but also allows one to easily reject historical interpretations which normally are not as ideally simple as conspiracy theories and, in addition, are often mutually contradictory for reasons which only specialists can understand. The consumer of a conspiracy theory is also under the impression that he has received a profound understanding of the reality and has learned the absolute historical truth. But how to identify the truth if historians themselves have trouble with establishing it? Through its revisionist nature, of course. As one website propagating conspiracy theories has neatly put it: “The truth is the truth, and is not necessarily politically correct or socially acceptable. As a matter

¹¹ Among the more important works for the historian one can mention: *Changing Conceptions of Conspiracy*, eds. Carl F. Graumann and Serge Moscovici (New York: Springer, 1987); Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2003); Mark Fenster: *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture*, 2nd extended edition (London, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008). For the political aspects of the conspiracy theory, see: Jérôme Jamin, *L'imaginaire du complot. Discours d'extrême droite en France et aux Etats-Unis* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009).

of fact, the truth is by no means politically correct or socially acceptable.”¹²

The fact that a conspiracy theory is in opposition to established knowledge gives its believers a feeling of elitism: no matter how popular a given theory is, its supporters will stress their exclusivity towards those who do not share this understanding of the world and still let themselves be deceived by official media or science. Believers of conspiracy theories have even invented a neologism: “sheeple” (from “sheep” and “people”) to describe the people who do not share their views.

An exceptional case of revisionism is the denial of the historical facts such as the extermination of Jews during World War II.¹³ Publications which propagate Holocaust denial are sometimes crass, openly neo-Nazi pamphlets, but there is also a denial pseudo-scientific institute with the word “historical” in its title (Institute for Historical Review), and one denier is David Irving, who for a certain time was regarded a historical writer (he had a share in creating a conspiracy theory around the plane crash at Gibraltar in which Polish Prime Minister in exile Władysław Sikorski died in 1943).

Nothing would seem further from history, and yet many denying publications make a great effort to imitate traditional historiography. But unlike *uchronia*, which takes its topics and ways of constructing narratives from historiography, the publications of deniers mainly apply its means of persuasion. The mimicry consists in giving publications a neutral title that suggests professionalism (such as *Concentration Camp Majdanek. A Historical and Technical Study*), supporting statements with an impressive array of references to sources and literature, and the use of tables, figures, technical diagrams and documentary photographs. This creates the impression of trying to exploit the external “truth effect” of traditional historiography because the contents leave no doubt about the authors’ intentions. One can only wonder whether they are trying to bolster up their

¹² *Truthism.com*, www.truthism.com (29 March 2014).

¹³ Apart from the cited work by P. Vidal-Naquet, see also: Deborah E. Lipstadt, *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory* (New York: Free Press, 1993); Michael Shermer, Alex Grobman: *Denying History: Who Says the Holocaust Never Happened and Why Do They Say It?*, 2nd extended edition (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2009); Berel Lang, “Six Questions On (or About) Holocaust Denial,” *History and Theory*, Vol. 49, Iss. 2 (May 2010), pp. 157-168. For David Irving and his role in Holocaust denial see: Richard J. Evans, *Lying About Hitler. History, Holocaust, and the David Irving Trial* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).

own anti-Semitism in this way, or whether they are counting on new supporters.

At the opposite pole lies probably the most intellectually advanced theory of historical revisionism: the so-called New Chronology of the Russian mathematician and Academy of Sciences member, Anatoly Fomenko. He has conducted a statistical analysis of historical events inspired by structural methods and has backed it with research into the history of astronomical observations in order to conclude that the chronology currently accepted in history has been artificially expanded. Thus the Middle Ages should not exist in historiography because, basically, history keeps repeating the same events under various names and locations.¹⁴ One might regard Fomenko's work as an intellectual game by a distinguished mathematician were it not for the consequences of its revisionist character that are typical of this trend. Despite criticism from the world of science, New Chronology has gained enormous popularity in Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union and has found a niche in the overall nostalgia for the Empire, thus becoming a political problem. Also, an element of conspiracy is present in New Chronology in the shape of the question: who extended the chronology of world history, when and for what purpose?

So what can a historian learn about his discipline when reading tales of the past that are not histories? Firstly, it is not enough – as in the case of uchronia – to produce a chronological narrative of events if there are/were no facts to which it refers, even if we were to agree with critiques of the epistemological possibilities of history whereby the historian has no direct access to past facts. Secondly, it is not enough to construct a cohesive and convincing interpretation and believe in its truth, as in conspiracy theories, because there may be many legitimate interpretations of the past and the historical reality is too complicated and too chaotic to be given a uniform explanation. Thirdly, it is not even enough to refer to advanced methodologies and produce ever increasing analyses of sources, if the purpose of all this effort is to justify lies – as in the case of Holocaust

¹⁴ Some of Fomenko's chronological works have been translated into English: Anatoly T. Fomenko, *Empirico-Statistical Analysis of Narrative Material and its Applications to Historical Dating*, trans. O. Efimov (Boston, Dordrecht, London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1994), Vol. 1-2; Anatoly T. Fomenko, *History. Fiction or Science? Chronology*, trans. Michael Jagger (Paris, London, New York: Delamere Resources, 2003), Vol. 1-3. The most important critiques of Fomenko's concept remain in Russian, e.g. *Istoriya i antiistoriya. Kritika "novoy khronologii" akademika A.T. Fomenko* (Moscow: Yaziki slavianskoy kulturi, 2000-2001), Vols. 1-2.

denial. And at the same time, if the historian has no possibility of verifying his history by direct reference to the reality he is describing, and therefore has no access to the historical truth in an essential sense, then where should one find the principle that distinguishes his tales of the past from tales that are not histories? In response to similar doubts, Paul Ricoeur cited a “historiographical operation” which, after Michel de Certeau, he used to describe the procedure of a historian’s work. In his opinion, a historiographical operation consists of three stages: a documentary stage, explanatory stage and literary stage. These stages do not occur one after another, but rather permeate each other. Nevertheless, the historian must proceed through each stage according to the rules of his art, as accurately as possible and in harmony with his conscience: the gathering of materials, their interpretation and, in the end, the actual writing constitute history. Its veracity depends on the researcher’s honesty at every stage of work, and if its end result cannot be compared with the subject of the description because it represents or stands in for the subject at the very most, then the key role in creating history is played simply by the historian’s ethics.¹⁵

(Translated from Polish by George Szenderowicz)

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¹⁵ Paul Ricoeur: “L’Écriture de l’histoire et la représentation du passé,” *Annales Histoire Sciences Sociales*, Vol. 55, No. 4 (Jul.-Aug. 2000), pp. 731-747.

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CHAPTER TWO

KINGS DON'T DIE IN TRAFFIC ACCIDENTS

MARCIN SARNEK

In this chapter I will attempt to look in conspiracy theories for the characteristics of implicit and Emergent narrative and procedural rhetoric, which have been recognized in video games. I will not, however, attempt to analyse these characteristics in detail; rather, I hope that the mere juxtaposition of properties of conspiracy theories and video games will create a rhetorical effect in its own right.

I find a juxtaposition of the logic of conspiracy theory and of video games inspiring, because we can find in it an intriguing paradox. Both conspiracy theories and video games build their success on generating pleasure in their recipients through narrative and procedural mechanisms of imagined agency. Conspiracy theories promise to challenge the crisis of agency characteristic for groups and individuals who might feel certain narratives to have been excluded from the official accounts of historical events. Video games, in turn, offer an illusion of agency to players who, while interacting with the game world, receive enough stimuli to develop an impression that they control what happens in the game. Thus, while conspiracy theories are often credited with stimulating more energetic research into the postmodern condition of contemporary historiography, rooted in post-structural literary theory, a medium of video games, which in many ways presents itself as a practical exercise in *structuralist* writing, offers similar mechanisms of simulated agency.

The post-structural features of successful conspiracy theories are numerous: the decentralization of meaning, complex intertextuality, or maximalism of many successful conspiracy theories would be just three of such characteristics. These are, of course, linked to the postmodern rendition of history and historiography. In essence, as it was put by Hayden White, “all postmodern history is historiography, which is the critique of texts produced by past historians, since the past is only

accessible via texts.”¹ This contributes to the confusion of distinctions between history, fiction, and criticism, which is characteristic of postmodernism, of postmodern critique of meta-fictional historiography, and of conspiracy theory. Conspiracy theory advances, then, a new organization of knowledge of past events, which is postmodern in its nature and is often defined as a paranoid exercise in historiography. In fact, conspiracy theory is guerrilla historiography: although it is conducted outside the academia, without authorization from trained historians, it performs the three basic movements of historiography: the critique of existing accounts, the introduction of new evidence, and the writing of a new account.

Thinking of video games as exercises in structural writing (and reading) seems equally justified: the pleasure of video game experience is founded on the player’s selection of syntactic developments which happen within the game’s storyline (if the game has one), or – to put it most crudely – it is founded on following a series of choices designed into the game by its creators. This observation applies not only to the critical potential of structural analysis of video games (which has proven to be a productive approach to video game studies, as documented, for example, by Diane Carr²), but also has a more practical dimension, as a number of textbooks on video game design point to semi-structuralist writings of Joseph Campbell as source of inspiration for video game writing.³ In other words, it is possible that, while thick poststructuralist theory explains the mechanics of postmodern historiography by mostly complicating it further, at least some foundational elements of these mechanics may be explained by using quite simple narrative devices, borrowed from the world of interactive entertainment.

By juxtaposing conspiracy theories and video games I do not intend to trivialize or unnecessarily further dramatize history, historiography, or interactive entertainment. I will simply try to show how the pervasive character of novel forms of entertainment and of participation in culture may possibly help us understand how what happened five decades ago still

¹ Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1987), p. 207.

² Diane Carr, “Textual Analysis, Digital Games, Zombies,” *Breaking New Ground: Innovation in Games, Play, Practice and Theory. Proceedings of DiGRA 2009*, www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/09287.24171.pdf (31 March 2014).

³ See e.g. *Game Writing: Narrative Skills for Video games*, ed. Chris Bateman (Stamford, CT: Cengage, 2006); *Professional Techniques for Video Game Writing*, ed. Wendy Despain (Nattick, MA: A K Peters/CRC Press, 2008).

motivates groups and individuals to continually develop original narratives centred around the JFK assassination. Of course, some of the conclusions drawn from this chapter might be applicable not only to this particular event. The ambition of this writing is, then, to simplify the discourse of conspiracy theories: not to challenge the existing rationalizations of conspiratorial thinking, but to offer some possible ground for productive debates.

The political potential of conspiracy theories is documented by numerous historical examples, some of them anecdotal, some showing how successful conspiracy theories influence local and international political processes.⁴ The rhetoric behind successful conspiracy theories has also been discussed extensively; these discussions point to an array of rhetorical devices conspiracy theories employ, such as: antithesis, paradox, oxymoron, aporia, irony, and – perhaps most significantly – syllogism and enthymeme.⁵ The rhetorical studies of conspiracy theories usually follow similarly classic studies of the rhetoric, rooted in philosophical rhetoric built around Aristotelian thought and later theories of persuasion.⁶

⁴ Examples of conspiracy theories that influenced global history are abundant; the most dramatic of all of such examples is the history of the Holocaust, complete with the history of Anti-Semitism, the history of how the accounts of the mass killings going on in Europe were dismissed as paranoid in America prior to 1944, and with the history of post-war revisionism.

⁵ Enthymemes are syllogisms depleted of a major premise. Enthymemes advance the claim that a certain proposition is true in light of another's truth value. Unlike syllogisms, in which both propositions and conclusions are given explicitly, in enthymeme one of the propositions in a syllogism is omitted. For example, in the enthymeme "We cannot trust this man, as he is a politician," the major premise of a proper syllogism ("Politicians are not trustworthy") is omitted.

The use of enthymeme in conspiracy theories offers a solid illustration of what makes a rhetorically successful enthymeme: it is not just a *truncated syllogism*, but its use is always persuasive and practical. It is by omission itself that an argument and the persuasive effect are built – by imposing a reconstruction of the omitted premise.

For a comprehensive theory of the enthymeme see: Jeffrey Walker, "The Body of Persuasion: A Theory of the Enthymeme," *College English*, Vol. 56, No. 1 (Jan. 1994), pp. 46-65 and Thomas B. Farrell, "Aristotle's Enthymeme as Tacit Reference," in: *Rereading Aristotle's Rhetoric*, ed. Alan G. Gross and Arthur E. Walzer (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), pp. 93-106.

⁶ See e.g. Mark Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Marc Redfield, *The Rhetoric of Terror: Reflections on 9/11 and the War on Terror* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2009).

It might be naïve to believe that any kind of meaning can be successfully instilled in the audience through the use of effective rhetoric, but it definitely seems logical to expect rhetorical success from conspiratorial narratives which reinforce the pre-existing ideologies or create meanings the public expects; these meanings do not develop in a vacuum, they require contextualization for the narrative and rhetorical process of completing the enthymeme to reach fruition. This claim verges on being a platitude: the popularity of particular conspiracy theories is intrinsically linked to the context – historical, social, or cultural – in which they circulate. Such is also the case of JFK assassination theories. For example, the financial crisis of the early 21st century provided enough contextual space for the explosion in popularity of conspiracy theories that link the assassination to the Executive Order 11110, issued by Kennedy in June 1963. The general premise of such theories is that the EO11110 was an effort by Kennedy to transfer power from the Federal Reserve to the Department of the Treasury, by replacing Federal Reserve Notes with Silver Certificates. Such beliefs have been circulating in the conspiracy universe since 1989, when the book *Crossfire* by Jim Marrs was published,⁷ yet they did not receive much currency until they were revisited in the aftermath of the 2007 crash in the real estate and derivatives markets. In 1991 Oliver Stone, who based much of his film *JFK* on Marrs' book, did not think it useful to address any of such accusations. Today no online discussion on the JFK assassination is complete without someone's finger pointing at the Fed as the entity behind the assassination.

All of the above offers a rationale behind studying of *narrative qualities* or, more precisely, of the mechanics of persuasive narrative of conspiracy theories. Such mechanics can be described from numerous perspectives, including a purely rhetorical one, and also the perspective of the literary theory of meaning. It is my belief, however, that the growing complexity and abstractness of literary and narrative theories supplement the processes of detachment of academia from its own rhetorical responsibilities. This is, obviously, a self-consciously ironic remark; the irony fades away, perhaps, when we think about the actual impact such complex academic theory has on daily media debates surrounding global or local conspiracy theorizing, on how audible the voices from within the academia in those debates are, and – although this claim is by far not universal and may be limited to local politics – what the social assessment of the academia's involvement in these debates is. Hence, my pessimistic

⁷ Jim Marrs, *Crossfire: The Plot that Killed Kennedy* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1989). The speculations about EO11110 are on p. 275.

views pertaining to the possible answers to these questions drive me to suggest a vulgar exercise in simplification – to take a look at narrative mechanics of conspiracy theories from the perspective of video games. To make such a seemingly trivial gesture is merely another example of rhetoric argumentation: if one is pessimistic about the possible outcomes of the academia's involvement in the conspiracy theory universe, it might be the time to try to think about even most outlandish proposals to make this involvement less esoteric.

We Must Use the Right Narrative!

To clarify certain potentially controversial aspects of what has been said so far: I do not suggest conspiracy theories are like video games or that video games are like conspiracy theories. Neither do I have anything against the complexity of academic discourse as such. I merely suggest one of the possible simplified models of looking at conspiracy theories, which in itself has some rhetorical ambitions. An interesting paradox pertaining to the contemporary status of historiography suggests a need of such simplifications: today, the postmodern qualities of historiography appear to have been accepted even by political entities routinely protesting postmodernity as a concept. This is visible in frequent requests for implementing effective *historical policies*, whose anticipated products are defined as countering of superimposed historical narratives with a properly framed local narrative. These could be summarized as calls for “the right narrative” that would serve a similar purpose as any other conspiratorial reasoning: challenging the order of authority by setting up an alternative narrative which addresses the needs of the audience who perceive themselves as excluded from the polity.

The political potential of video games has already begun to draw attention of game designers, scholars, and politicians – although we hopefully still have some time to prepare ourselves for the full-scale effects of this trend. When I speak about the political potential of video games I do not only have in mind the possible use of video game narrative as an engine for ideologies, on the level of the superficial visual and narrative representation of thematic content of video games. I would like to focus more on the games' capability of inciting political action through the use of what Bogost calls *procedural rhetoric*,⁸ and what may also result from a much simpler concept of *emergent narrative*. When we

⁸ Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Video games* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010).

combine the two concepts we may come to a model in which interaction designed into a game through the use of procedural rhetoric produces an Emergent narrative which itself leads to action, giving the player a satisfying *sense of agency*, even though the resulting action is in fact externally authored and only simulated player's agency. Such an argument would follow, partially, Bogost's line of reasoning, whose books on *Persuasive Games*,⁹ *Newsgames*¹⁰ and on practical real-life applications of games in politics¹¹ began a serious academic discussion of rhetoric qualities of video games. I merely want to show how the persuasive character of the mechanics of video games mirrors to some extent the persuasive qualities of conspiracy narratives.

Birth of postmodern history?

In fifty years that have passed since the events in Dallas the JFK assassination has evolved into a grand postmodern narrative. The shooting itself has become the most devotedly described time in human experience. This incessant process of describing extends, of course, well beyond academia, yet also within it the amount of research into the events on Dealey Plaza and into the surrounding contexts, created an archive in which "text to time ratio" is incomparable to research pertaining to any other historical moment. Yes, one might suggest the dynamics of the assassination is what caused this (after all, bullets travel fast), yet it is more correct to state that this snowball effect is – no matter how perverse it sounds – a product of imagination. Or, rather, the growth of the archive draws its potency from how an event of such importance has resonated in the imaginations of the public and of academicians.

I use the word imagination not to speculate whether or not conspiracy theories, or indeed all historiography pertaining to the JFK assassination, are *figments of imagination*, but in a much more positive sense, similar to the use of the word in natural sciences, in which the plenitude of source material is creatively edited into a theory or discovery, which requires imagination, for example imagination required to properly design an experiment. Still, although claims have been made about the narrative or storytelling qualities of research in natural sciences, it is historiography

⁹ Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Video Games* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010).

¹⁰ Ian Bogost, Simon Ferrari and Bobby Schweizer, *Newsgames: Journalism at Play* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010).

¹¹ Ian Bogost, *How to Do Things with Video Games* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).