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Introduction

"The saint whose water can light lamps, the clairvoyant whose lapse in recall is the breath of God, the true paranoid for whom all is organized in spheres joyful or threatening about the central pulse of himself, the dreamer whose puns probe ancient fetid shafts and tunnels of truth all act in the same special relevance to the word, or whatever it is the word is there, buffering, to protect us from. The act of metaphor then was a thrust at truth and a lie, depending where you were: inside, safe, or outside, lost."

-- Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (1965)

This morning, while I was walking to the studio, I started thinking of something. It was a short walk. At the beginning of my journey, I turned my head and stared at Rotterdam's Bilderberg hotel. The hotel rose to fame by giving its name to the Bilderberg group: a convention of European and North American heads of state and financiers who came together for the first time in 1954. The agenda of the group was to nourish a sense of community and fraternity between North America and Europe to hopefully prevent the outbreak of another world conflict. Yet there was another, more notorious, reading of the group's activity in the public sphere: a Stanley Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut* fashioned meeting, planning the expansion of its members' sinister shadow on the world.

While the aura of secrecy surrounding the group's activity certainly lacks transparency to many of us, there is no evidence that the Bilderberg elite is the steering force behind the corruption of the American Republican Party, whose policies, affected by infiltrations and corruption, as some suggest, would put in motion the creation of a world communist order.

On the other side of the street, a series of stickers on the trash bins recite "WWG1WGA", an acronym standing for the formula "Where we go one we go all". The sentence is both a quote from the 1996 Jeff Bridges movie *White Squall* and a

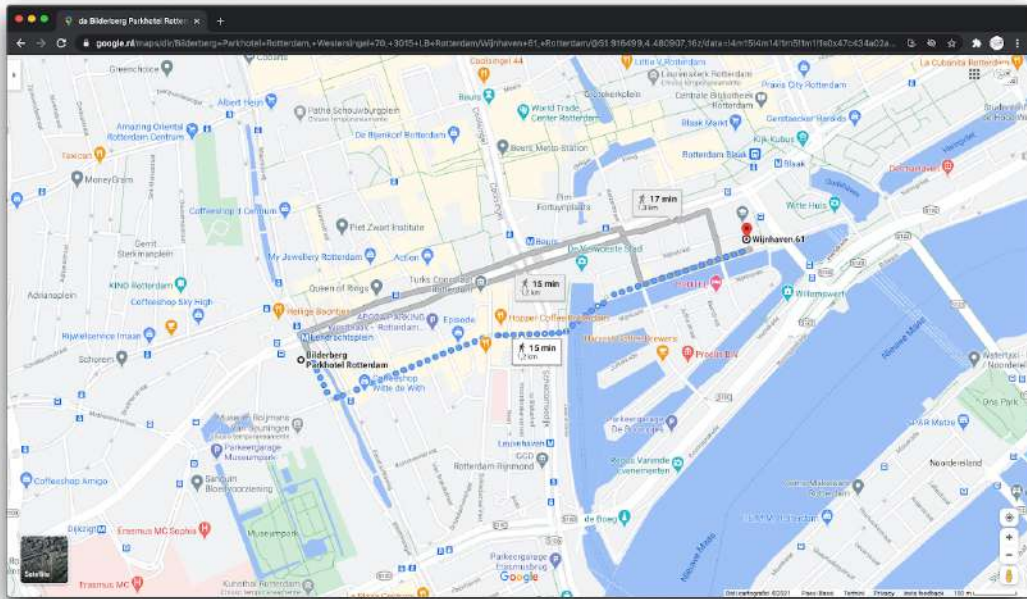


Fig. 1: A stroll around the city

motto adopted by the believers of the conspiracy theory QAnon, somehow misattributed to President Kennedy.

I then proceeded to a street that, before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, was among the most crowded places in the city. I was walking past bars' and restaurants' closed doors when I spotted a group of three men having a heated discussion. They were sharing their insights on China's supposed plan to destroy the western economy by the spreading of a virus. According to them, the latter was created in a laboratory and probably derives its lethal power from pangolin faeces. Not all the opinions were shared by the whole group: some perplexities remained on deciding whether the disease had to be considered harmful or not. As specified by one of them, Covid-19 was actually a cover for a much more dangerous plan to implant trackable microchips in our bodies. He asserted Bill Gates might be involved.

After having walked less than a kilometre, feeling dazed and confused by my surroundings, I started to wonder if there was some chance I was going to unravel other secret plots by the time I would reach my final destination. All the clues, insights, and quests were driving me to the point where extreme concentration was turning into distraction: If every wall, letter or piece of eavesdropped conversation was relevant, how could I stay faithful to my path? I took a step back: after all the only thing I had planned for that morning was to reach an address. Yet I couldn't help but wonder if the other characters I met along my way remained close to a similar austere path or if, to some extent, they already started one of a different kind.

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Conspiracy theories have always been present in the political sphere. Although the popularisation of the internet first, and the sense of detachment from reality due to the Covid-19 pandemic lately, seemed to have increased their proliferation, the belief that --in accordance with Don DeLillo's famous words "this is the age of conspiracy"-- can only be the

reflection of a popular myth (DeLillo, 1978). As psychologist and science writer Rob Brotherton suggests, despite some historical events appearing to have caused a rise in the number of conspiracies circulating in the public sphere, they tend to remain equally present throughout history (Brotherton, 2015).

Sometimes conspiratorial narratives have been instilled in the population by the ruling class, other times their origin remains obscure. Back in 64 AD, when the infamous blaze also known as the great fire of Rome raged and swept across the city, people turned their eyes to the unpopular emperor Nero. He retorted with his own conspiracy theory: in his version of the facts, the perpetrators of the fire were the adepts of an ostracised religious minority that was rapidly growing in popularity across the empire: the Christians.

In other cases, these theories derive directly from pieces of fiction: born and raised for art or entertainment and eventually trespassing into our reality. It's no coincidence that The X-Files TV show tag-line "The Truth Is Out There" became a motto for the ones who do not believe in coincidences at all.

Most of the time, their affiliates and believers seem to share much more than a collection of inventive rumours. They partake in a journey of salvation consisting of steps and actions to take: a renewed vision of a world where everything that happens makes sense. It must be part of the plan. On January 6, 2021, a group of Donald Trump's most fervent supporters, white supremacists, and QAnon disciples stormed the United States Capitol in a violent attack. Most of them believed to be there to liberate the country from a reptilian pedophile cabal.

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In narratology studies, the common structure of a story involving a protagonist who embarks on an adventure, overcomes challenges and finally comes back transformed, is referred to as the hero's journey, or the mono-myth. Its structure suits several novels, myths, and religions, as well



Fig. 2: *Cats and sanitary dictatorship in Rotterdam West*

Since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, along with the rise of cases and preventive measures, the number of conspiracy-related messages, stickers, and posters appearing around the city grew rapidly.

1 The Departure Act

"A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder:[...]"

-- **Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949)**

In Andrei Tarkovsky's 1983 movie *Nostalghia*, the madman Domenico climbs up Marco Aurelio's statue on the roman Capitoline Hill. Before setting himself on fire he delivers a passionate speech. He calls out: "There are no great masters left. That's the real evil of our time. The heart's path is covered in shadow. [...] We must fill the eyes and ears of all of us with things that are the beginning of a great dream.[...]"

Similar to Domenico's sentiment, our path as humanity seems to be covered in shadow: an unavoidable ecological crisis, the economical collapse of a system appearing to be impossible to subvert, and ultimately a pandemic brought us on the verge of a chaos that is constantly becoming [1]. Yet this is where the journey starts: when disarray dominates the surroundings there is space for a resolution to appear; when every path seems interrupted a new one sprouts out of the grove [2]. Although difficult to recognise and therefore follow, a master can quickly emerge from nowhere when guidance is lacking [3]. When reality doesn't fit an individual desire, a parallel universe may open its gates: to leave the ordinary world is all that is needed [4].



[1] In mono-myth terms, this phase represents the starting of the journey and coincides with the hero experiencing an awareness of the troubles of their world. It is referred to *in Ordinary World* by Campbell (1949).

[2] The hero is willing to confront the problem. This moment corresponds to the *Call to adventure* phase in Campbell's hero's journey (Campbell, 1949).

[3] Sometimes the hero is reluctant to change at first: their opinion can shift if a mentor or a supernatural aid is encountered. In Campbell's mono-myth these phases are named *Refusal of the call* and *Supernatural Aid* (Campbell, 1949).

[4] This passage represents the entering of the hero in a new dimension and the end of the Departure Act: it is referred to as *Crossing the First Threshold* (Campbell, 1949).

1.1 The universe (which others call the library)

“The library will endure; it is the universe. As for us, everything has not been written; we are not turning into phantoms. We walk the corridors, searching the shelves and rearranging them, looking for lines of meaning amid leagues of cacophony and incoherence, reading the history of the past and our future, collecting our thoughts and collecting the thoughts of others, and every so often glimpsing mirrors, in which we may recognize creatures of the information.”

-- Jorge Luis Borges, *The Library of Babel* (1949)

Jorge Luis Borges was an Argentinian writer and poet. In his life, Borges was also a librarian, most precisely the director of the National Public Library of Buenos Aires. In 1941 he wrote a short story, *La Biblioteca de Babel* (in English *The library of Babel*) where the universe appears like a never-ending library made of hexagonal chambers connected to each other in an infinite chain. Each hexagon holds a collection of volumes whose content appears to be completely meaningless. After centuries of explorations carried on by the librarians, a general law of the library was established: the books contain every possible ordering of the 25 characters (22 letters, the period, the comma, and space). Thus the library must contain every book ever written and every possible permutation of it: all useful information, every literary work ever produced, every biography and prediction of the future alongside their translations in every language. Despite -- and because of -- the quantity of information, the majority of books are useless to the readers: in the library's infinite flow of data everything exists, yet meaning seems unequivocally out of reach.

In another Borges' short story, *The Garden of the Forking Paths*, the author proposes the concept of a novel that can be read in multiple ways, according to the decisions of the reader. As for *The Library of Babel*, the story was published in 1941, prior to the popularisation of computers: without knowing its future implications, Borges was creating a prototype of the hypertext novel (Montfort, 2003) [1]. Yet it was not the only time he

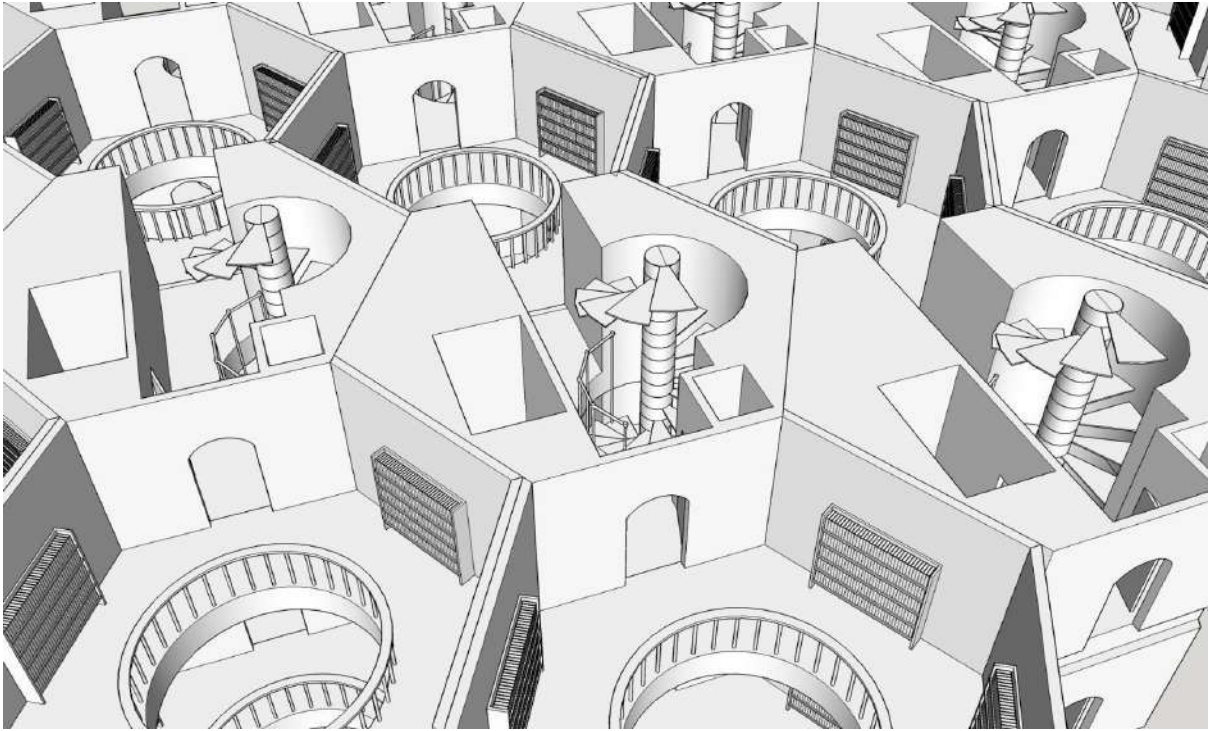


Fig. 3: A sketch plan inspired by the universe in *The Library of Babel* (Zawinski, 2017)

envisioned a shift in the media sphere. If *The garden of the Forking Path* foresighted the hyperlinked structure of the web *The Library of Babel* seems to expose another important matter in our relationship with the modern web: the discomfort resulting in dealing with an infinite hoard of generated information.

Similarly to the human enthusiasm derived from the possibility of consulting an almost infinite range of sources, the narrator of *The library of Babel* describes the atmosphere following the general law's discovery as one of extravagant joy: "All men felt themselves to be the masters of an intact and secret treasure. There was no personal or world problem whose eloquent solution did not exist in some hexagon. The universe was justified, the universe suddenly usurped the unlimited dimensions of hope." (Borges, Yates and Irby, 1962). Though bliss is rapidly replaced by disillusionment. As soon as the librarians try to look for the relevant information they bump into another unavoidable truth: in an almost infinite collection of volumes, the possibility to find the solution of a specific quest can be computed as zero.

In this uncertain landscape, our narrator describes the proliferation of various sects, spreading additional chaos across the bookshelves. One of them suggested to cease all searches and employ the librarians to reshuffle the book's letters and symbols in order to construct themselves the meaning they are looking for. The sect's effort doesn't appear to be so different from some methods adopted by conspiracy theorists online: the indecipherability of the environment they inhabit pushes them into generating contrived and often delusional solutions.

As communication and media studies scholar Molly Sauter suggests "When we impose patterns or relationships on otherwise unrelated things, we call it apophenia. When we create these connections online, we call it the internet" (Sauter, 2017). Apophenia is a word that describes the tendency to perceive meaningful connections between unrelated things. We could also add that apophenia is the result of the human eagerness for meaning to exist within the complex structures we inhabit: physically and

digitally. If humans are pattern-seekers and metaphor makers, so are the infrastructures we create to adhere to this need.

The Library of Babel's inaccessible knowledge stimulated the proliferation of many sects and cult-like behaviours like the one listed above. Yet another hope -or superstition- endures in Borges' story: that of the Man of the book, a librarian who found, in an undefinable moment of the past or the future, the book that contains the ultimate index of the library. Our librarian, who by now came to the end of his years, recalls the days when he was looking for him; and even though he never managed to find neither the man nor the object of his quest, he still hopes for an explanation to exist:

"I pray to the unknown gods that a man -- just one, even though it were thousands of years ago! -- may have examined and read it. If honor and wisdom and happiness are not for me, let them be for others. Let heaven exist, though my place be in hell. Let me be outraged and annihilated, but for one instant, in one being, let Your enormous Library be justified."

(Borges, 1941)

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[1] While Borges' philosophical approach to this narrative style and contribution to media theory is critical (Montfort, 2003) other examples of hyperlinked texts already existed in different spheres of fiction. The first example of hyperlinked literature was written by two women: *Consider the Consequences!* by Doris Webster and Mary Alden Hopkins was published in New York in 1930 and consists of the first example of Choose Your Own Adventure book (DeMarco, 2017). In the text, the reader is asked to proceed in the story as one of the three selected characters -one woman and two men- and follow the different pathways the plot can take accordingly to their decision. A decade later, Borges adopted a similar storyline concept for his story *An Examination of the Work of Herbert Quain* (1941). Furthermore, the book represents an interesting work in terms of social and gender studies because of its examination of social roles and their possibilities in American society during the thirties (Paredes, n.d.).

1.2 The golden apple of discord

In the April 1969 edition of the American magazine Playboy, something weird appeared on the readers' letters page. Together with several messages concerned about relationships and masturbation's side effects, the following message appeared: "I recently heard an old man of right-wing views - a friend of my grandparents - assert that the current wave of assassinations in America is the work of a secret society called the Illuminati. He said that the Illuminati have existed throughout history, own the international banking cartels, have all been 32-degree Masons and were known to Ian Fleming, who portrayed them as SPECTRE in his James Bond books - for which the Illuminati did away with mister Fleming" (Higgs, 2013). The editors of the page were Robert Anton Wilson and Bob Shea: two characters who will become pivotal later on in this story. Now, the important questions may be: why did this kind of message appear in a Playboy forum? Where did all of this non-sense come from?

In 1965 Greg Hill and Kerry Wendell Thorney wrote, assembled, and freely distributed [1], using a copy-machine of a friend of theirs [2], the religious text *Principia Discordia, Or, How I found goddess and what I did to her when I found her* under the fictional name of Macalypse the Younger. The zine was the result of a confrontation on the themes of chaos and order. They started from the assumption that the concept of order was an illusion that human minds tend to project on reality. Thus, religions represented for them a translation of this sentiment: all of them were intrinsically foolish in claiming the existence of an organising principle in the universe. According to the two men, the one and only entity operating in the world would rather be chaos. So they decided to turn it into a goddess. As a matter of fact, a goddess of chaos already existed in the Greek Olympus: her name was Eris and Hill and Thorney adopted her as the core belief of their new fictional religion. Her symbol was going to be the Apple of Discord. In their foolish effort, the two authors translated the religious concept of dogmas as well: they called them Catmas. But they also specified that all of them could be discarded on behalf of non-sense.

In the late sixties, from the firsts photocopied zines, the text was starting to circulate: authors' friends and other followers united under the newly born community of Discordianism activism also called Operation Mindfuck. Their role was to spread the Erisian teaching by discarding clarity and common sense. By the early seventies, hundreds of people across the country were talking about the text [3].

In those same years, similar frenzy principles inspired a practice known as Chaos Magic or "results-based magic". Developed in England in the seventies, the technique proposes to make use of prayers, formulas, and rituals common in popular religions in order to cause interventions in reality. The result to be attained by this method consisted in what the psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung would call synchronicity, such as a "meaningful coincidence of two or more events where something other than the probability of chance is involved" (Jung and Pauli, 1965). According to occultist Peter J. Carroll, Chaos Magic essentially consists of a set of techniques for "deliberately engineering synchronicities" (Carroll, 1987) [4]. One of these techniques includes the creation of Sigils: physical or metaphorical objects that are meant to gather the magicians' desire towards the attainment of a certain result. They usually consist of glyphs or pictures.

On the 11th of September 2016, a spell involving a similar kind of ritual was cast during a presidential campaign talk in New York City. The method, evolved for 21st-century practitioners into the so-called Meme Magic, made it possible for Hillary Clinton to collapse under the spells of a hoard of anonymous 4chan users and Donald Trump supporters. They were invoking the power of another divinity, this time borrowed by Egyptian mythology: Kek, another god of chaos, virtually embodied by the cartoon character Pepe the Frog (Burton, 2016). The meme populating the famous image board turned into a powerful Sigil: it was a hypersigil (Theødor, 2016). The chaos power evoked by the symbol was coming from different places of mythical belief, yet none of that mattered at that moment. The myth was proving to be able to pierce reality.

PROPERTY OF
 6-710
 OFFICIAL
 DISCORDIAN SOCIETY
 HAIL ERIS



Application For Members!

In the Erisian Movement of the DISCORDIAN SOCIETY

1. Today's date _____ Yesterday's date _____
2. Purpose of this application: --membership in: a. Legion of Dynamic Discord b. POEE c. Bavarian Illuminati d. All of the above e. None of the above f. Other--*be specific!*

3. Name _____ Holy Name _____

Address _____

If temporary, also give an address from which mail can be forwarded

4. Description: Born: yes no Eyes: 2 other Height: _____fl. oz. Last time you had a haircut: _____ Reason: _____ Race: horse human I. Q.: 150-200 200-250 250-300 over 300

5. History: Education - highest grade completed 1 2 3 4 5 6 over 6th Professional: On another ream of paper list every job since 1937 from which you have been fired. Medical: On a separate sheet labeled "confidential," list all major psychotic episodes experienced within the last 24 hours

6. Sneaky questions to establish personality traits
 I would rather a. live in an outhouse b. play in a rock group c. eat caterpillars. I wear obscene tattoos because
 I have ceased raping little children yes no -- reason

7. SELF-PORTRAIT

SENDER WAITING
 Answer
 by wire

LICK HERE!
 ●
 (You may be one of the lucky 25)

Rev. Mungo
 For Office Use Only- acc. rej. burned

00023

Fig. 4: A page from Principia Discordia, Or, How I found goddess and what I did to her when I found her

Let's come back to another meaningful coincidence. The message selected for the April 1969 number of *Playboy* by our forum section's editors Robert Anton Wilson and Robert Shea was coming from the newly born Discordian community mentioned above. It appears that some of them were *Playboy*'s readers or at least people who might have liked the idea of addressing this kind of message to a men-only erotic magazine. Almost certainly the editors themselves were part of the cult.

Some years later, in 1975, Robert Shea and Robert Anton Wilson published what would become one of the most celebrated satirical science fiction books ever published: *The Illuminatus! Trilogy*. The series of books uses the typical chaotic layout of Discordian-style literature to extravagantly report a series of secret plots and government conspiracies, cleverly unraveled by the story's many characters and their hallucinations.

Despite its obvious satirical intent and unreliable sources --and because of its mixing with true and existing historical characters-- many believed the book's plots to be well-grounded. Moreover, if not the storyline itself, the hallucinated style of narration played a role in giving a set of rules and characteristics to what will later become the conspiratorial style we are familiar with. The view of reality present in Shea and Wilson's narration, regardless of its unprovable components, turns out to be plausible in a bigger scheme. It resonates with people's fears and suspicions. It is giving them names they already encountered in history books' -- like in the episode where the authors expose the secret murdering of president George Washington by the founder of the Illuminati society.

The latter, which in the book takes the shape of a secret cabal controlling the world's destiny, was in fact an existing secret society that, unlike its fictional companion, only operated for a limited amount of years in 18th century's Bavaria. While their true intention was to spread the values of the Enlightenment and oppose superstition, today the Illuminati are mostly known for their fictional counterpart's plans to establish a new world order by pulling strings in the shadows.

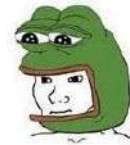
Illuminati and secret society's narratives still massively populate the conspiratorial landscape and despite the effort that has been made in debunking the pranks, it seems they became a habitual pattern.



Kek is the deification of the primordial concept of darkness in ancient Egyptian religion. He embodies the time right before the dawn, making him the bringer of light.



Kek is portrayed as a man with a frog head.



In hieroglyphics Kek is portrayed as a man seemingly sitting at a computer screen.



Pairs and numbers are very important in the Ogdoad mythology. Repeating numbers were used to create the universe, according to the Ogdoad.



Kek is using 4chan as a vessel to spread his message and to usher in a new era of light.



Memetic Magic

Manipulation of the Root Social Matrix and The Fabric of Reality

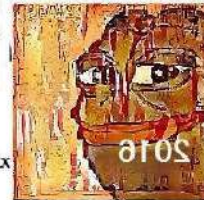


Fig. 5: An image from the subreddit *r/pepethefrog* explaining the relationship between cartoon character Pepe the Frog, the ancient Egyptian deity Kek and Meme Magic

2 The Initiation Act

"[...] fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won:[...]"

--Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949)

The journey enters a new dimension, unraveling another descending road. It leads to a space where the true conflict manifests itself: it will be a place for definitive transformation [1]. The intention to seek the truth will push the traveler to territories inhabited by repellent creatures [2]. Ultimately, the challenge will be won, giving the seeker the possibility to discard their old self and move beyond[3].

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[1] In mono-myth terms, this phase represents the series of tests that the hero must undergo to begin the transformation. It is referred to as *The road of trials* by Campbell (Campbell, 1949).

[2] The hero must recognise and confront whatever holds the ultimate power. This moment represents the central point of the journey. It corresponds to the *Test, Allies, Enemies* and *Approach Innermost Cave* phases in Vogler's interpretation of the hero's journey (Vogler, 2007).

[3] During this phase, the hero will obtain the achievement of the goal of their quest. In Campbell's mono-myth this phase coincides with the ones named *Apotheosis* and *The Ultimate boon* (Campbell, 1949). Instead, Vogler uses the word *Reward* (Vogler, 2007).

2.1 Reptilians, pedophiles, and Democrats

"How do you feel about this terrible thing?"

"Terrible," said Oedipa.

"Wonderful!"

-- Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (1965)

Stanley Kubrick died on the 7th of March 1999, four months after the release of his last movie *Eyes Wide Shut*. His unexpected death generated a series of rumors. According to them, the rituals depicted in the movie, shot in a Rothschild's family property in England, were in fact a reference to the affluent family's own habits. The unraveling of this upsetting truth represents for some the cause of Kubrick's premature death.

Actually, the conspiracy fantasy was partially inspired by an event hosted by Baroness Marie-Hélène de Rothschild and her husband Guy: the 1972's Surrealist Ball, an extravagant costume party attended by magnates and celebrities held at the sumptuous Chateau de Ferrières in France. During the event, lots of pictures were taken, depicting plates covered in furs, costumes designed by Salvador Dalí, stuffed animals, and Audrey Hepburn in a birdcage hat. Unfortunately, the similarity between the movie's party and the surrealist ball's lavish scenography doesn't necessarily represent evidence of Rothschild's involvement in satanic rites and other sorts of nefarious activities (Margaritoff, 2020).

Powerful elites and vicious habits are usually paired in conspiracy theories. In their plots, a pattern exists: one that wants the story's overpowering villains to lose their humanity. To become enemies they need to be treated as a species of another kind.

In 1935, during the heyday of fascism in Europe, the American writer Sinclair Lewis wrote the book *It Can't Happen Here*. The work was a political fiction piece that speculated about the imposition of a totalitarian dictatorship in the United States of America. Decades later, the screenwriter Kenneth Johnson worked on a miniseries based on Lewis' book. The original script was rejected by the national broadcasting



Fig. 6: Sober centerpiece from Rothschild's 1972 Surrealist Ball
The resemblances in the scenarios appearing in the Surrealist Ball's pictures and in the Eyes Wide Shut movie inspired several masonry-related conspiracy theories.

company, claiming the story was unfitting for the American public. A year later, despite the initial discontent of Lewis, a new script was presented, this time figuring man-eating extraterrestrials instead of American fascists: the successful science fiction TV show *V* was broadcasted for the first time in May 1983.

The letter *V* stands for Visitors, namely the aliens "visiting" earth in the TV series. The plot develops in the following way: the Visitors appear on board of their motherships, showing their intention to share with humanity their extremely advanced technology. All they want in exchange is the possibility to extract some chemicals from the earth. Yet, as soon as this collaboration starts, the situation goes off the rail: the Visitors begin to gain considerable influence with human authorities, to the point that they completely overcome them. Freedom restrictions are put in place while the Visitors start a harsh persecution of scientists. In the meantime, a fierce resistance arises: its members find out that, beneath their human-like façade, the aliens are actually carnivorous reptilians planning to harvest the human race as food.

For those who are accustomed to the conspiracy theory QAnon [1], this story might sound pretty familiar. An elite of shapeshifters controlling the people (a role played in QAnon's mythology by the American democrats, George Soros, and the Rothschilds) and imposing their technology to better control us (Mark Zuckerberg and Bill Gates) while pursuing unnoticed their terrible interests (human trafficking). The conspiracy theory, like the TV show, was a great triumph: the dehumanisation of the villains worked amazingly as a business strategy for Johnson's TV show as well as to make the QAnon tale spread rapidly.

The QAnon conspiracy originated in 2017 on the image-board website 4chan, where a user named "Q Clearance Patriot"[2] started to drop some alleged government secrets, claiming to be a high-level federal administrator. Q's messages, also known as "crumbs", reveal nonsense clues that seem to be open to endless interpretations. These lasts are elaborated by Q followers, named "bakers". Some of them believing Q to be an actual spy, some others just participating in the interactive quest for the sake of trolling.



Fig. 7: A frame from the TV show *V* figuring one of the Visitors revealing his reptilian appearance



Fig. 8: *"Omnia sunt communia, figli di cane!"*

A graffiti in Florence carrying a quote from Luther Blissett's Q. The first part of the sentence is a Latin expression meaning "all things in common" attributed to medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas. The latter, as one of the most influential philosophers and theologians in Christian philosophy, discussed in one of his treatises the concept of private property. While advocating for its legitimization for commercial purposes, he supported the option of discarding it in case of necessity (from Latin "In extrema necessitate Omnia sunt communia"). The sentence was re-purposed as a battle cry during the German Peasants' War described in Q.

An alleged spy who signs their messages as Q is one of the main characters of a novel --also called Q-- written in 1999 by four members of the Italian collective of artists and activists Luther Blissett, active today under the name of Wu Ming. The historical novel is set in Europe, during the years of the Protestant Reformation. In this turbulent context, a spy of the Roman Catholic Church is infiltrating groups of radical reformers who are hostile to both clergy and feudal authority. From there, this emissary reports to the Catholic establishment the stories of a maverick of a hundred names. His letters are signed Q like Qoèlet (from Hebrew קהלת): the bible's book of Ecclesiastes.

The Luther Blissett collective started its activity in the nineties in the Italian city of Bologna. Since then, its name has been used to claim several pranks and media hoaxes as well as to run campaigns for victims of censorship and repression. One of these victims was Marco Dimitri, the leader of the neopagan association "Bambini di Satana" (in English Satan's Children). Following the wave of satanic hysteria generated by cases like the McMartin preschool trial, Dimitri was arrested on the charges of tomb violation, desecration of a corpse, and sexual assault. The press insisted on depicting him as a monster, drawing a comparison between Dimitri's unproved crimes and Mafia's atrocities. Ultimately, as in the trial mentioned above, all the accusations ended up being contrived. Not only were Satan's Children the victims of a conspiracy theory but also of the lack of fact-checking carried out by local and national media (Blissett, 2000) [3]. In this blind environment, Luther Blissett pursued a counter-investigation that exposed the failures of the press: in 2001 the result of the inquiry was translated into the book *Lasciate che i bimbi*. Twenty years later, with its belief in a child-murdering elite, QAnon resurrected the long-lasting myth of Satanic Ritual Abuse.

When QAnon came out of its 4chan niche, readers and fans of Luther Blissett's novel contacted the collective, exposing the similarities with their work and the new movement that was getting out of cyberspace, incorporating other sex trafficking fantasies like the 2016 Pizzagate. The



Fig. 9: A meme figuring the President of the Italian Republic Sergio Mattarella discussing Adrenochrome's production with the current prime minister and former President of the European Central Bank Mario Draghi While Mario Draghi and the heads of the European bank are probably not child-murdering reptilians it is possible to come to the conclusion that the conspiracy theories originated from the dissatisfaction resulting from their economic policies. These might have figuratively "murdered" the future of younger generations.

collective dug into the issue and entered the debate around the origins of the conspiracy theory. The media as well followed the trail: is QAnon a leftist hoax? (Broderick, 2018). Nobody knows for sure. Yet the two stories can easily be placed in relation to each other.

When the *Q* novel came out it was immediately regarded as an allegory of the broken promises of the sixties and seventies' countercultural movements. With its rebellious peasants and Catholic establishment spies, *Q* is the story of a rebellion that resulted in a stalemate: the nobles triumphed, the peasants lost and Martin Luther's fringe generated another unquestionable doctrine, depriving Protestantism of its radical side. Likewise, neoliberalism prevailed at the end of the 20th century, seemingly leaving the younger generations with no other options.

Wu Ming 1, a pseudonym used by one of *Q*'s authors, says that conspiracy theories give wrong answers to legitimate questions (Wu Ming 1, 2018). In *Eyes Wide Shut*'s conspiracy story the imaginative effort is spent to dehumanise the Rothschild's. The storyline, instead of questioning the logic of the system that generated their power, only fuels dangerous anti-semitism. As philosopher and media theorist Boris Groys suggests: "Instead of analyzing the class interests behind the dominant corporate discourses, one assumes, for example, that these discourses serve a sect of pedophiles that uses children's blood as raw material for producing drugs" (Groys, 2021). QAnon and similar conspiracy fantasies leave everything behind to fit into the rhetoric of the moral crusade and generate something that appears like a fight between good and evil. They also generate a paradox: conspiracy theories only end up reinforcing the establishment they pretend to fight (Wu Ming 1, 2018).

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[1] QAnon is the American alt-right conspiracy theory asserting the world's rulers are affiliates of a pedophile cabal made by members of the democratic party like Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, and influential characters including Bill Gates, Tom Hanks, and George Soros. The cabal members are also known for being reptilians devoted to human trafficking. They are also believed to use components derived from children's flesh to obtain a powerful drug they all consume called Adrenochrome. This last has been introduced to them by performing artist Marina Abramovich (Friedberg, 2020). In this apocalyptic scenario, which managed to incorporate many other theories over the years, Donald Trump is a messianic figure sent to save humanity. Aware of the elite's plans he is trying to fight back, supposedly helped by Aryan-like aliens who really care about humans' destiny (Herold, 2018).

[2]The username of the special agent refers to Q clearance as the name of the authorisation required to access restricted data belonging to the United States Department of Energy.

[3] Theories like the one concerning Marco Dimitri became so widespread that they turned into an undisputed popular myth. Growing up in the Italian countryside in the early 2000s I remember, in those years, to have been invested in the popular activity of entering shacks and ruined houses in order to find clues that would ultimately prove the existence of satanist headquarters in the village.

2.2 Belief and reward: the flat earth guru Mark Sargent and how he found bliss in the dome

“There is no top or bottom, no absolute positioning in space. There are only positions that are relative to the others. There is an incessant change in the relative positions throughout the universe and the observer is always at the centre”

— **Giordano Bruno, De la causa, principio et Uno (1584)**

When it comes to looking at conspiracy theories the tendency is to map them in order to determine, overall, their different levels of reasonability with factual truth. While I am writing this, many real conspiracies are probably occurring undisturbed. Consequently, one would think it may be fair to analyze what at the moment exists only as a conjecture: a relevant twist may still lie in those muddy waters.

Some of these theories, even though still lacking proof, actually have some solid foundations. On July 2020 a group of Britney Spears supporters gathered in front of a Los Angeles courthouse carrying the message #freeBritney. The pop singer, known for her precocious fame and very public breakdown in 2007, is since then under her father's conservatorship. Now she is 39 years old, yet unable to manage her finances, career, and personal life: a situation that moved fans to express serious concerns and ultimately made some of them buy into a conspiracy theory that claims she is enslaved in her own house. Despite the involvement of some of the #freeBritney activists in debatable activities [1], the worry about a conservatorship institution that enables relatives of precocious celebrities to keep exploiting them is legitimate. It makes this story stand in the realm of reasonable speculation (Jacobs, 2021).

On the opposite side, some theories presume to fight truths we may consider indisputable, standing at the gate of science denialism. It is the case of the flat earth conspiracy theory. The belief in a flat planet was resurrected in the 19th century by the English inventor Samuel Rowbotham. Because of a miscalculation in the curvature of the earth,



Fig. 10: *On reasonable speculation: governmental manipulation in the weather forecast*

On the 4th of April 2021, my father called me reporting what he believes to be a conspiracy currently carried on by the Italian government and media. While sharing the new Covid-19 restrictions put in place for the Easter holidays the news' weather forecast was frightening the Italians with the prediction of a cold and rainy weekend. On the contrary, the weather ended up being warm and sunny over the whole peninsula. According to my dad, the wrong prediction was in fact a governmental tactic to prevent people from organizing the traditional Easter's outdoor gatherings.

in 1849 he published a pamphlet in which he proposed a model of the earth as an enclosed plane ('Modern Flat Earth Beliefs', 2021). Needless to say, Rowbotham's theory has been immediately discredited by the scientific community, causing hilarity.

More than a century later, flat-earth believers are still convinced that the earth is not an ellipsoid and some of them are willing to prove it.

Shot in 2017, Daniel J. Clark's documentary *Behind the Curve* follows the stories of people involved in the American flat-earth community. It includes extracts of an experiment conducted by flat-earthers Jeran Campanella and Bob Knodel. In an interview, Mr. Campanella shows his commitment to the scientific method as "the best way to get to the truth" (*Behind the Curve*, 2018). That is the reason why, after raising the amount of 20 thousand dollars, they decided to invest in a professional gyroscope. If the earth was a globe rotating on itself in a 24 hours span, the gyroscope would measure a 15 degrees deviation every hour. Which is exactly what happened. The experiment failed, yet Knodel still believes that it might have been a mistake.

Despite their intentions to investigate by adopting a scientific mindset, they end up discarding it when conflicting with their belief. The latter is a phenomenon also known as confirmation bias, "the tendency to process information by looking for, or interpreting, information that is consistent with one's existing beliefs", which ultimately results in ignoring conflicting data (Casad, n.d.). The human bias explains why centuries after the flat earth model has been discarded, some people still feel the need to prove it right.[2].

Another character appearing in Clark's documentary is Mark Sargent, an apparently ordinary guy who, out of general curiosity, started to look into the theory. He watched a series of YouTube videos, carrying all sorts of clues on flat earth: from flight paths in the southern hemisphere to depositions of actors being hired by NASA. He eventually ends up believing it. In 2015 he started to release a series of videos on his own channel called "Flat Earth Clues", where he discusses the possibility of our lives being trapped in a Truman-show-like bubble. Initially, Sargent was sharing his "clues" thinking that scientists or experts on the topic would discredit his



Fig. 11: *Mark Sargent discussing a flat earth mock-up*

material and eventually get in touch with him. It never happened. Instead, other curious individuals like him reviewed the clues as well, ultimately thinking that the whole theory was holding water.

In a matter of months, his videos became widely popular, pushing Sargent to a level of internet fame that he would have never imagined. The documentary follows the protagonists to the flat-earthers' events, where the attendants' feedback seems to focus more on describing its friendly environment, rather than the community's scientific findings. In Mark Sargent's case, flat earth has been able to change his position from digital pinball champion living with his mother to a leading figure in a movement where he is in fact a celebrity. He became a protagonist, in as much as the other believers, many of them reporting to have suffered from feeling isolated in their past.

Flat earthers are not a unique case when it comes to beliefs that originated from a place of trauma. In New York Times' podcast *Rabbit Hole*, the speakers lead through the story of Caleb Cain, a young man who experienced being trapped in a YouTube echo chamber of alt-right and extremist content. He reports his experience of dealing with loneliness, together with the constant feeling of never fitting in. Living at his grandparents' house without a satisfying social life or occupation, his depression drove him to look for self-help content on Youtube, where he fell into a rabbit hole that would ultimately radicalise him. (The New York Times, 2020).

There are plenty of stories like Caleb's: some of them ending in redemption, many of them resulting in further radicalisation or even xenophobic acts like in the case of the Christchurch terrorist attacks (Lewis, 2020). While the flat earth community stays in an area of belief that, unlike alt-right extremism, can still be considered innocuous, it raises the question of how society is pushing to its fringe people who are unable to comply with its demanding standards -- or who simply got stuck in an understanding process. In these regards, physicist Lamar Glover spoke to his colleagues at an astronomy event. He points out: "The worst-case scenario is you just completely push these individuals to the fringe of society. [...] And then society has just lost them." (Behind the curve, 2018). In

this way, groups that are left behind function as emotional shells, impossible to be fully seen through by anybody else. At the end of the documentary, Sargent is asked what would happen to him in case he found the ultimate proof that discards his belief. He hesitates, leaving us with the thought that perhaps he would never abandon the flat earth belief, even if aware of the lie.

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[1] Although a real concern exists #freeBritney activists took the situation to extremes: the campaign quickly escalated into an interpretation game where fans are invested in finding secret messages on the pop star's Instagram pictures. In an attempt to stop the activity, Spear's social media manager had to officially declare that the singer is not leaving help requests on her Instagram page (Hautman, 2021).

[2] This sort of reaction, coming from facing uncomfortable truths, also reminds us of the case of climate change which, despite being studied and experienced for decades, is often treated like a theory that can still be debated.

3.1 The great awakening: spiritual beings in the cosmic right

On the morning of January 6th, 2021 Jacob Chansley wore his distinctive horned helmet and carried an American flag all the way to Capitol Hill, Washington D.C. Together with him, an angry mob of Trump supporters and fervent QAnon disciples stormed the United States Capitol in an attempt to overturn the former president's defeat in the 2020 election. Chansley, who would later become known as Jake Angeli or the Q Shaman, is now in federal custody, facing a quarter-century charge in prison (Choiniere, 2021). His participation in the Capitol riots represented the pick of a relatively long career as a QAnon activist, as well as a shamanic practitioner.

This cross-pollination between the world of conspiracy theories and the New Age movement does not represent an isolated case. In fact, the Q Shaman perfectly embodies a fringe that gained popularity in recent years, often named Conspirituality (Love, 2020). The term, a portmanteau of conspiracy theories and spiritual beliefs, was coined in 2011 to describe a phenomenon consisting of the merging of the traditional world of conspiracy theories, with its narrative involving corrupted global politics, and the New Age realm, characterized by a positive attitude towards the self (Ward and Voas, 2011). The concept of Conspirituality reinforces the vision of the conspiracy theorist as a seeker who is not only embracing a new quest for truth but is also following a spiritual path of personal salvation.



Fig. 12: An image portraying former US President Donald Trump shaking his hands with the commander of the Galactic Federation Ashtar Sheran Several Conspiratorality/New Age/Ufo beliefs count on the intervention of the Pleiadians, also known as Nordic aliens, whose commander in chief is Ashtar Sheran. The latter is a recurring figure appearing in contactees' visions and channelings ('Pleiadians', 2021).

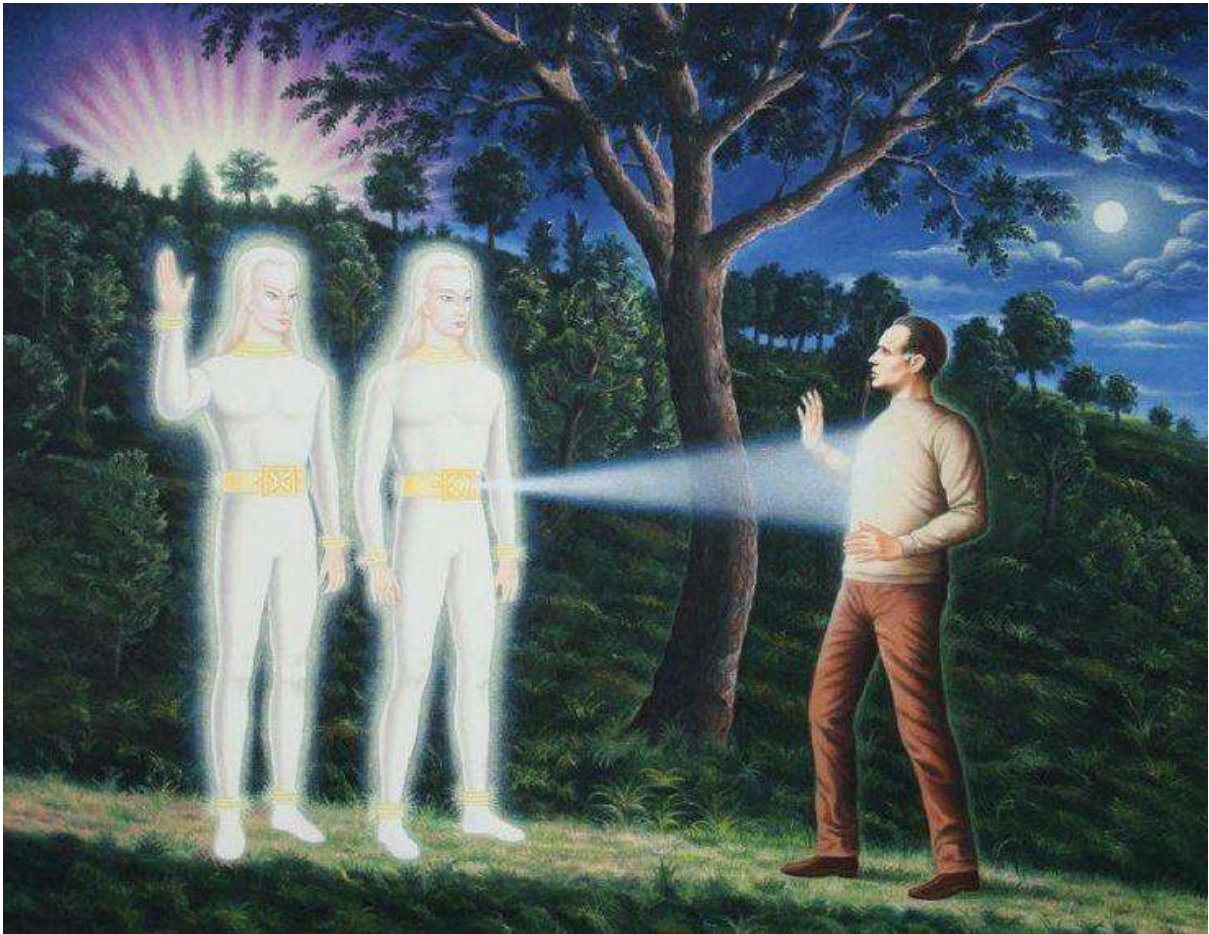


Fig. 13: *An illustration depicting a human encountering spiritually advanced beings*

3.1.1 Spiritual beings

The first time I bumped into this world I was visiting the Instagram profile of an old friend of mine who I will refer to as Laura. After being a very popular person in our small town's high school, Laura was a fashion student in Milan, turned celebrities' personal stylist and influencer, attending the cities hottest parties, meeting the fanciest people. Sometime later her followers were surprised by a shift in her social media image: in the profile description, she was now presenting herself as a star-seed and angelic channeler (Channeler, n.d.). Together with the development of a spiritual practice involving communication with extracorporeal beings, she eventually collaborated in the making of the official translation of the QAnon map in Italian. Despite the apparently radical change, Laura's profile aesthetic was still the one of a glossy and wealthy Instagram influencer, yet now discussing the conduct of extraterrestrial entities in relation to dark human trafficking conspiracies. Laura's social behaviour [1] was pursuing a dangerous operation: using unquestionable spiritual powers to give credit to unproven conspiratorial belief. In addition to that, she was making a living out of it, selling her intuitions as 30 minutes sessions worth 50 euros each.

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, a lot of people are trying to cope with the isolation by adopting a healthier lifestyle, often by following wellness influencers and their advice. During the first outbreak of Covid-19, I was looking for online yoga classes when an Instagram advertisement suggested me to follow Gaia, a streaming platform for yoga and meditation. When visiting its website, I had an overview of the content offered by Gaia. As expected, a huge section was dedicated to yoga classes. Another one included documentaries presenting several topics, from alternative forms of physical and mental healing to Bilderberg's group control plans: all of them revealing shocking stories with no sources other than the passionate narration of their speakers (Gaia - Conscious Media, Streaming Yoga Videos & More, 2021).

Gaia's business strategy, as well as my friend Laura's vocational change, are an established trend by now: many influencers in the fashion or wellness world are including content moving towards conspiratorial beliefs, giving them a new face while making a significant profit (Tiffany, 2020).

Conspirituality's influencers not only link the concept of wellness with other spiritual beliefs: they build a link between entrepreneurial wealth and spiritual accomplishment.

A connection that manages to legitimise economical inequality and its reproduction [2]. Money and beauty become a translation of their own enlightenment (Novara Media, 2020). In this way, a spiritual and consciousness-focused world that has often been considered as aligned with the political left, changes in order to generate value for today's web enterprises. Speaking in entrepreneurial fashion, Conspirituality is a theory that managed to find a place in the sun, making use of whatever thing would increase its success, including QAnon and other controversial content.

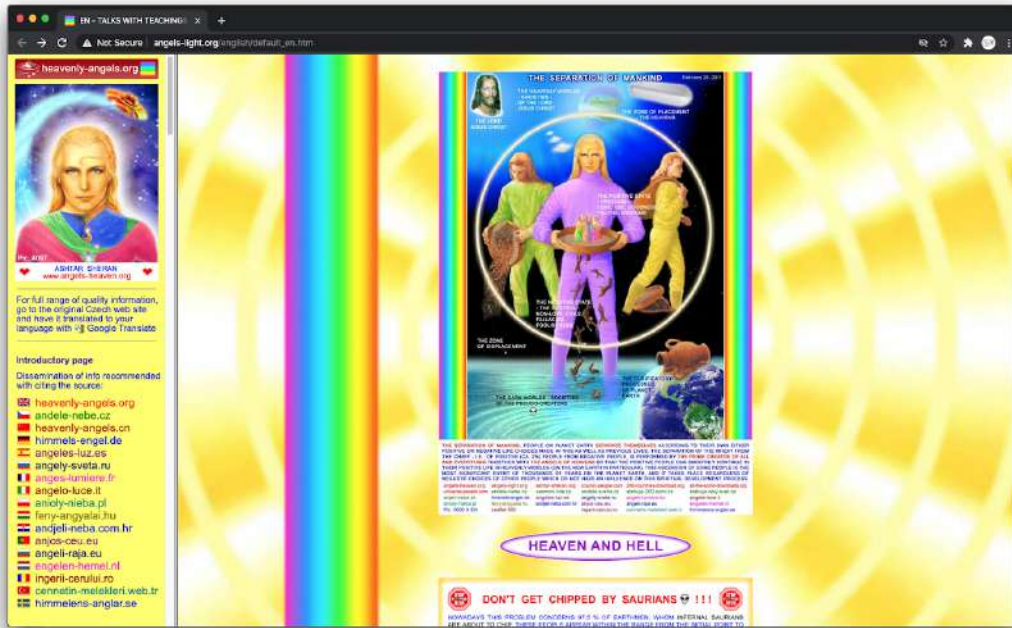


Fig. 14,15: Screenshots from the website angels-light.org
The website offers an overview of several New Age/Conspirativity beliefs, from the spiritual path necessary to reach enlightenment to information about the "chipping" of the world population carried on by saurians -and the ways to escape it with the help of the spiritually advanced beings.

3.1.2 Resurrection

The biggest transmuter of spiritual energy in Conspirituality is considered to be the sun. The latter is also the protagonist of an extraordinary event envisioned by the holders of this belief: the apocalyptic circumstance known as Great Solar Flash or, alternatively, the Great Awakening. The occurrence would change the frequency of the world, substituting the current dark era with an age made of wisdom, technological progress, and abundance (Doughty, 2020). In classic New Age belief, the event coincides with the coming of the Age of Aquarius such as the new astrological era carrying love, joy, and harmony. The concept is combined with what in traditional QAnon fashion is known as the fall of the world's elite and its satanic rulers (the already mentioned pedophilia ring) and the triumph of light forces (guided by Donald Trump and others extraterrestrial beings). Needless to say, 2020 didn't end with Trump exposing the satanic cabal leadership while inaugurating a new age of prosperity: the great awakening became just one of the many QAnon prophecies that failed to manifest, leaving its followers in distress (Wong 2021).

Regardless of the tangible aspects the great awakening was supposed to bring, Conspirituality also promotes another reading: the envisioned ascension may only happen inside the self. It can manifest itself through the acceptance of the individual path of spiritual enlightenment.

It appears that, despite all the effort pushed towards establishing an apocalyptic mythology, Conspirituality doesn't really care about waiting for a new age: the individual's journey can perfectly inhabit our current times. In this world, rebirth only happens for the enlightened individual self: there is no need anymore for heaven on earth.

Conclusion

“... we read novels because they give us the comfortable sensation of living in worlds where the notion of truth is indisputable, while the actual world seems to be a more treacherous place.”

— **Umberto Eco, *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* (1994)**

I found myself in the precise spot where, after all the encounters made, I started to experience an upsetting dizziness. The relaxing walk to the studio, which used to be my original objective, turned out to be compromised as it was now replaced by another burning need. No matter how, I *had* to understand what happened along the way. I decided to take a diversion: I was willing to retrace all my steps, starting from the point where I felt that someone has crossed reality's threshold, all the way to the first step out of my front door. Was the truth really out there? All things considered, how could I possibly believe in all those delusions?

I was sure that something beyond the clues themselves needed to be taken into account. I might as well just got lost in details, forgetting to look at the bigger picture. I was convinced that the solution would not be found either in the secrets hidden between the walls of the Bilderberg building or in the snippets of conversation I managed to eavesdrop. Something different was proving to be missing.

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The great confusion surrounding the venturer is what makes them want to leave for another space. The mechanisms at work in this physical environment, just like the algorithms regulating the online landscape, appear to be inscrutable and unmoving for the ordinary person. Therefore the initial quest for meaning is sometimes transformed into an attempt to restore a sense of personal agency within the given narrative. If even reality seems to be discarding clarity and common sense it comes to

no surprise how easy it can be to take this confusion to an even more extreme level. The already present chaos is left to replicate and reproduce, creating multiple versions of reality where no effort to differentiate between them can possibly be successful.

Nonetheless, we come to the point when every metaphor, assumption, and abstraction radically surpasses its premises: it is the moment where the kernel of truth hidden inside every fantasy begins to tarnish.

Conspiracy theorizing fails to address a struggle that is most of the time caused by immaterial forces: it allows the ungraspable rival to grow inside real bodies, the ones of politicians, bankers, or minority group members. And so it becomes surprisingly easy to find an enemy.

In the same way these fantasies permit their believers to make a new set of villains embody their struggle, they are also able to create meanings that do not necessarily belong to the collective imagination anymore. These fantasies become instruments for repurposing an individual's life and creating new forms of personal rewards within their own capabilities. Besides their focus on collective goals, what conspiracy theories manage to achieve is most of the time a personal reward only.

Though this is not a reward system that excludes backlashes: after finding their renewed purpose, the believer's sensation is one of being pushed towards the edge, in what appears like an enclosed space. This closed system, which is built to protect, makes it hard to see what is happening outside.

Approaching the end, the venturer might be asked to reconsider the meaning of being cut out of the system. Can this feeling be turned into value? Perhaps isolation, as the allowable default act, is what makes some individuals cope with their everyday struggles, often by daring to change their role in the world from followers to creators of their own universe.

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In Umberto Eco's novel *Foucault's Pendulum* a group of redactors and intellectuals is asked by their editors to review some material concerning

conspiracy theories. The objective of the publishing house is to release a series of books about these odd speculations, as the topic was proving to be really profitable. The intellectuals, who regard themselves as rational thinkers that would never buy into similar theories, decide to create their own conspiratorial plot as a parodic response to the job they have been assigned. A story, or game, that would incorporate and connect all sorts of delusional assumptions.

Yet something else happens to the protagonists while moving along with the process. The game becomes a catalyst of its author's desire to recapture their lost purposes and all of them end up believing in their own fictional theory. Their contrived conspiratorial plot, born to parody conspiracy theories and their believers, is not preserving its original function. Instead, it is answering their own needs, doubts, and vulnerabilities. In *Foucault's Pendulum*, the conspiracy theory is nothing but a plot device: the story stops being about its events, becoming an excuse to dive into the characters' transformation.

Conspiracy theories are so appealing for the common venturer because they represent what Eco would call open works: a narration flexible to endless interpretations that can create space for the journey of the individual to superimpose its plot.

The strategy of using the parody as a shield against the traps of conspiracy thinking-- as well as other tactics resulting in discrediting their believers -- might just be pointing at a dead end. The individual's journey -- and the adventurous narrative fuelling it -- needs to be taken into account together with its protagonist's needs, sense of purpose, and personal history of suspicion.

Conspiracy fantasies end up serving a purpose that goes beyond the one they initially propose to solve. They feed into the latent sentiment of disappointment and the need to oppose the status quo without really addressing the underlying causes of their believers' disillusionment. The result is a narrative that constantly repeats itself without critically interpreting its surroundings, lacking the intention to differentiate between the core of its quest and the images haunting the hero's

narrative. As easy as it can be to get lost in a rabbit hole of clues and meaningful coincidences, a mechanism of a similar kind can push the so-called rational thinkers into spending their effort in debunking the details, losing as well the objective of their quest.

This journey exposes the need to create different ways to look at conspiracy fantasies, by focusing on the importance of the transformation of the disillusioned individual into a hero on a quest, and take distance from these haunting narratives. Without it, we might as well keep going astray.

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Fig 14, 15. Sandri, A. (2021). *Screenshots from the website angels-light.org.*