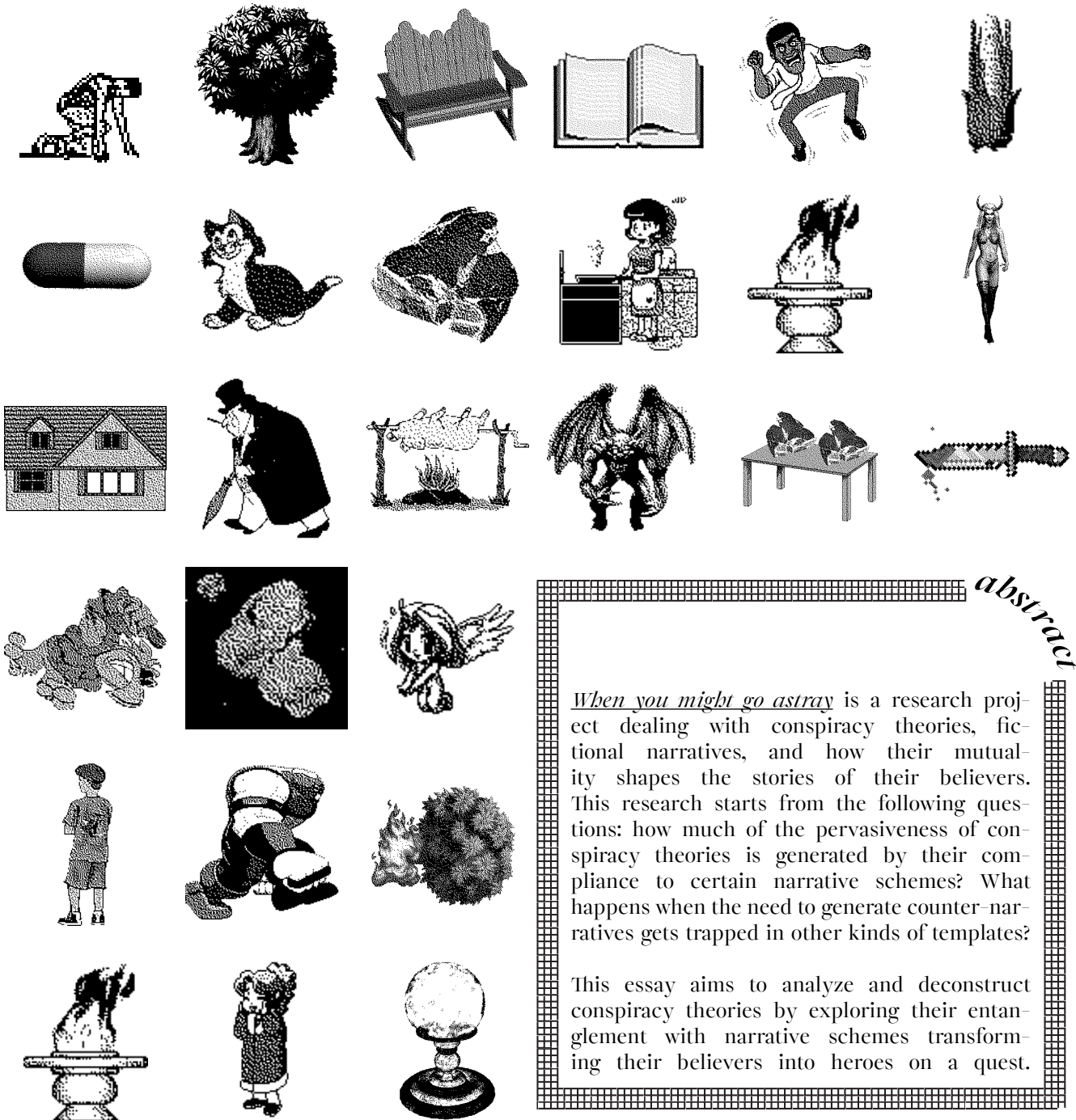


When you might go astray

● *A journey into conspiracy theorising and its haunting narratives* ●

by Anna Sandri














abstract

When you might go astray is a research project dealing with conspiracy theories, fictional narratives, and how their mutual-ity shapes the stories of their believers. This research starts from the following questions: how much of the pervasiveness of conspiracy theories is generated by their compliance to certain narrative schemes? What happens when the need to generate counter-narratives gets trapped in other kinds of templates?

This essay aims to analyze and deconstruct conspiracy theories by exploring their entanglement with narrative schemes transforming their believers into heroes on a quest.

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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 notori-

ous, 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 “WWGIW-GA”, 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 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 rele-

vant, 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.

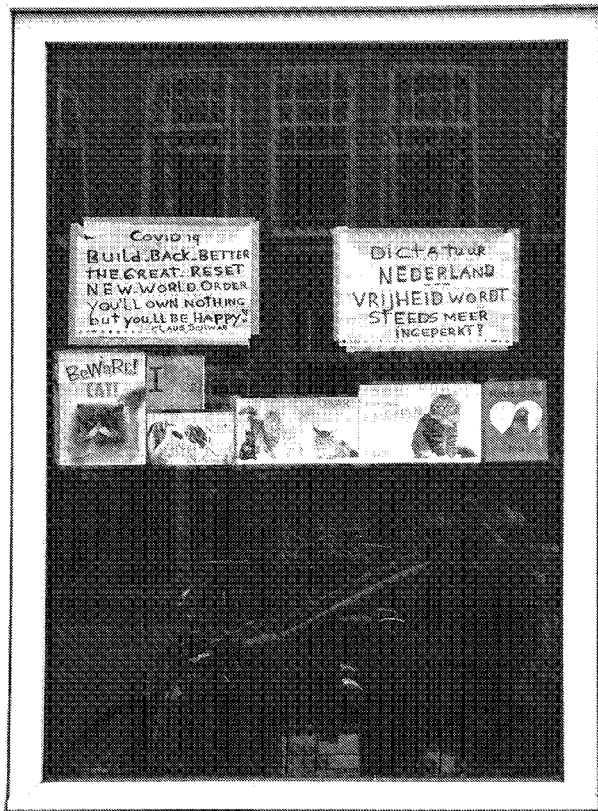


Fig. 1: Cats and sanitary dictatorship in Rotterdam West
 Since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, along with the rise of cases and preventive measures, the number of conspiracy-related messages, stickers, and posters appearing around the city grew rapidly.



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 tagline “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.



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 as a lot of conspiracy theories. The mono-myth is the result of a series of studies aiming to index fictional narratives' passages.

The Russian folklorist Vladimir Propp published his *Morphology of the Folktale* in 1928: the work consists of the analysis of 100 Russian folk tales from which he extrapolated thirty-one structural plot units. In 1949 the American scholar Joseph Campbell popularised the mono-myth studies through his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*¹. In his study, Campbell divided the hero's journey into three acts forming seventeen stages: from the first step where the hero is still dealing with their ordinary world, to their return after having achieved the goal of their quest. In 2007 the Hollywood author and executive Christopher Vogler pursued Campbell's studies with the intention of translating them for the purpose of screenwriting. He eventually reduced Campbell's stages to thirteen.

My intention in this thesis is to explain, narrate and deconstruct conspiracy theories by using the hero's journey. I will employ the mono-myth's structure to dive into the conspiratorial world and expose the mutuality between fictional plots and conspiracy theories.

This peregrination will evolve according to the three main acts of the mono-myth (Campbell, 1949): an initiation act, which we will call Departure, a central act, which we will call Initiation, and a final act, which we will call Return.



① Joseph Campbell borrowed the term *mono-myth* from James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*: a novel conceived by his author as a universal story where the last sentence – a fragment recirculates to the beginning sentence creating a ring-shaped plot.



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 *Nostalgia*, 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 becoming¹. 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 grove². Although difficult to recognise and therefore follow, a master can quickly emerge from nowhere when guidance is lacking³. When reality doesn't fit an individual desire, a parallel universe may open its gates: to leave the ordinary world is all that is needed⁴.



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).



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 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 nar-

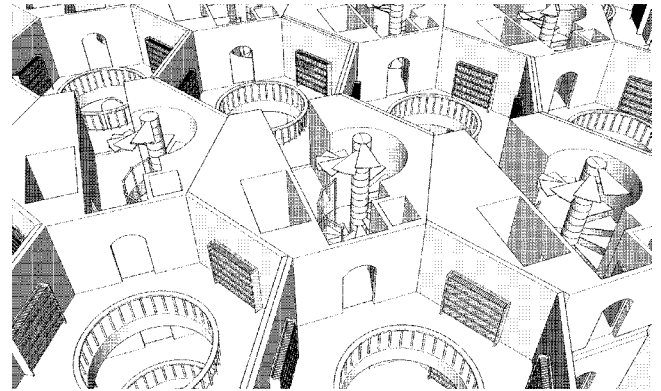


Fig. 2: A sketch plan inspired by the universe in *The Library of Babel* (Zawinski, 2017)



rator 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)



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.).



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

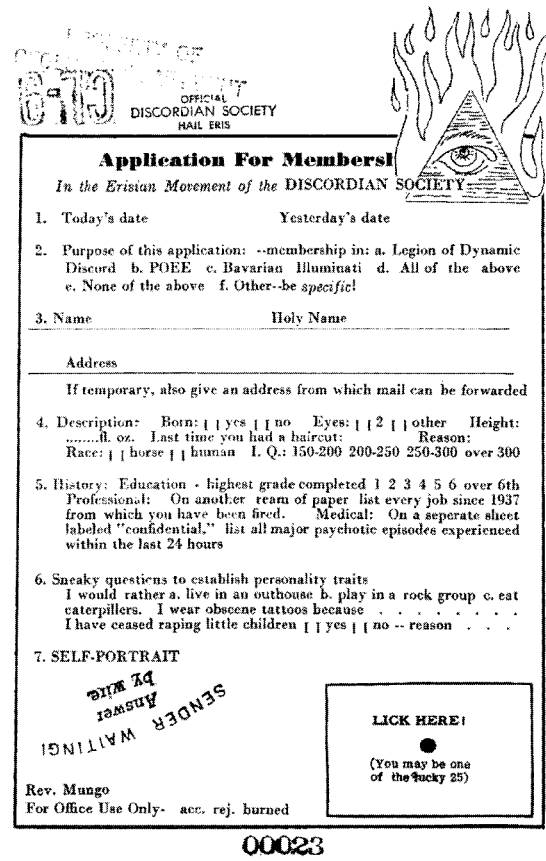


Fig. 3: A page from Principia Discordia, Or, How I found goddess and what I did to her when I found her



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 rath-

er 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 (Theodor, 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.

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 An-

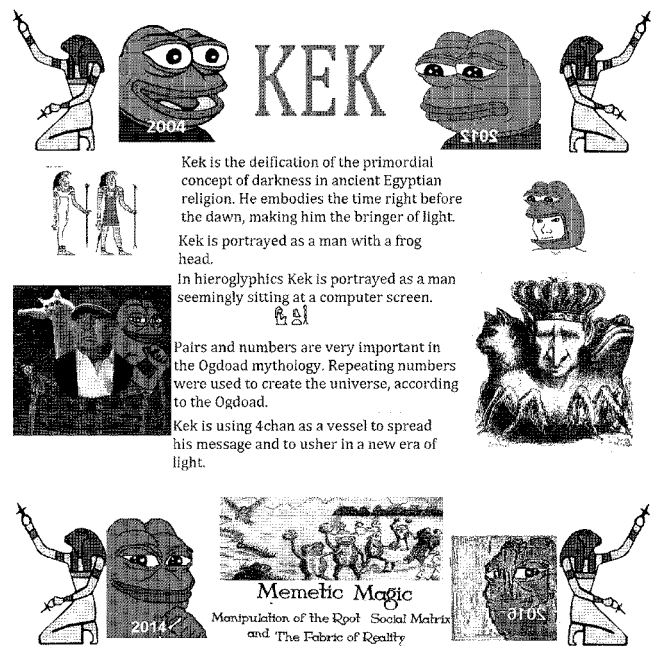













Fig. 4: An image from the subreddit r/pepe-thefrog explaining the relationship between cartoon character Pepe the Frog, the ancient Egyptian deity Kek and Meme Magic

ton 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.

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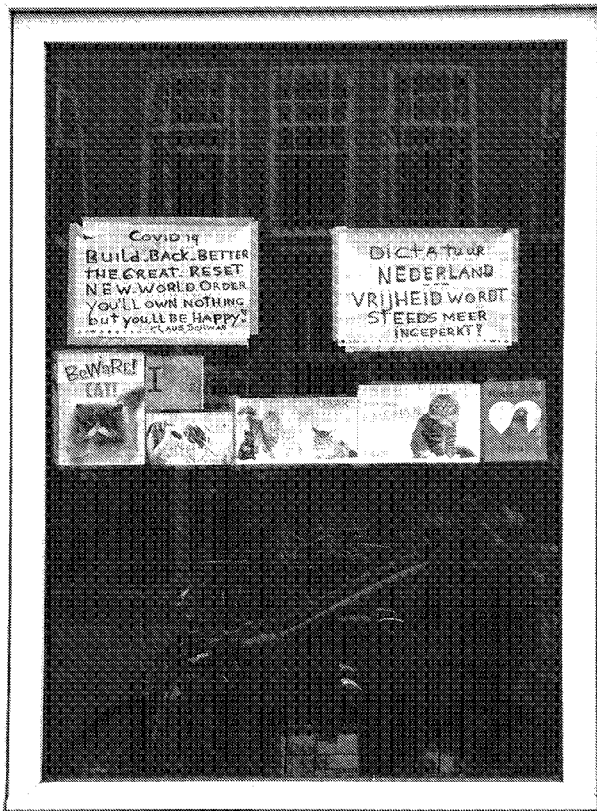


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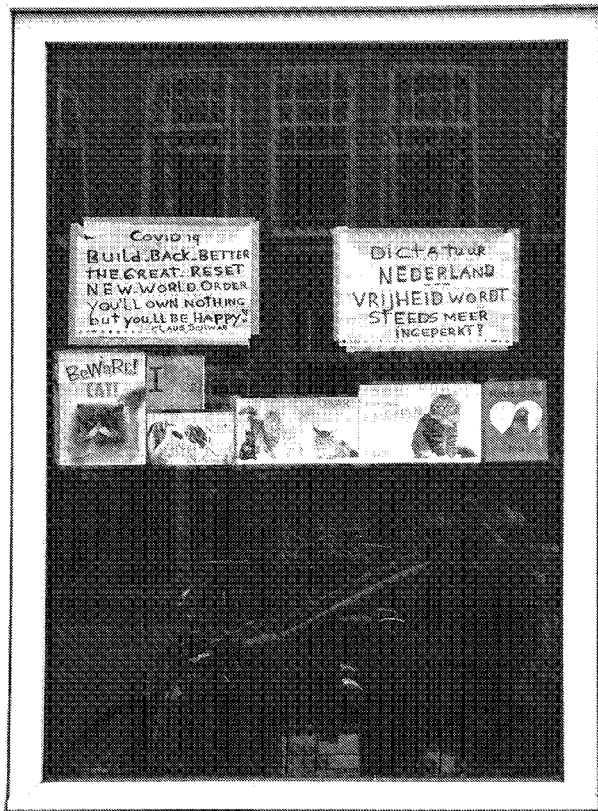


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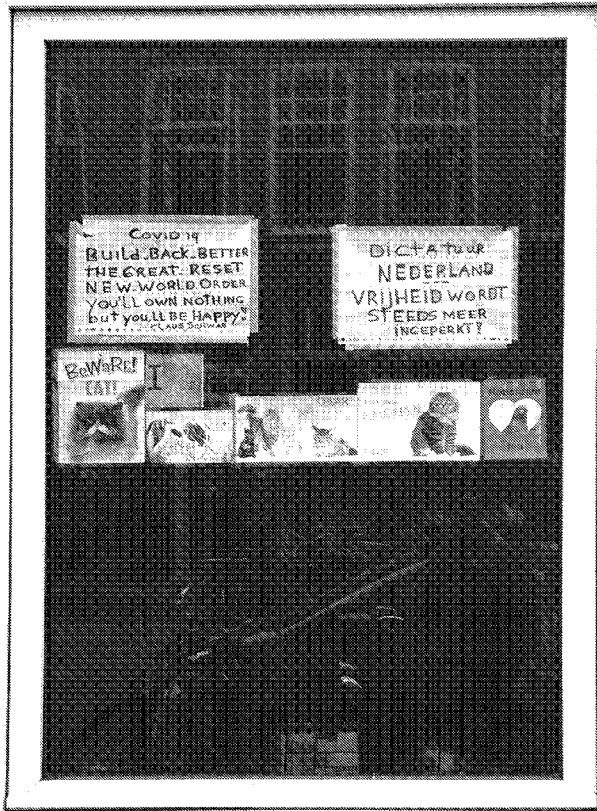


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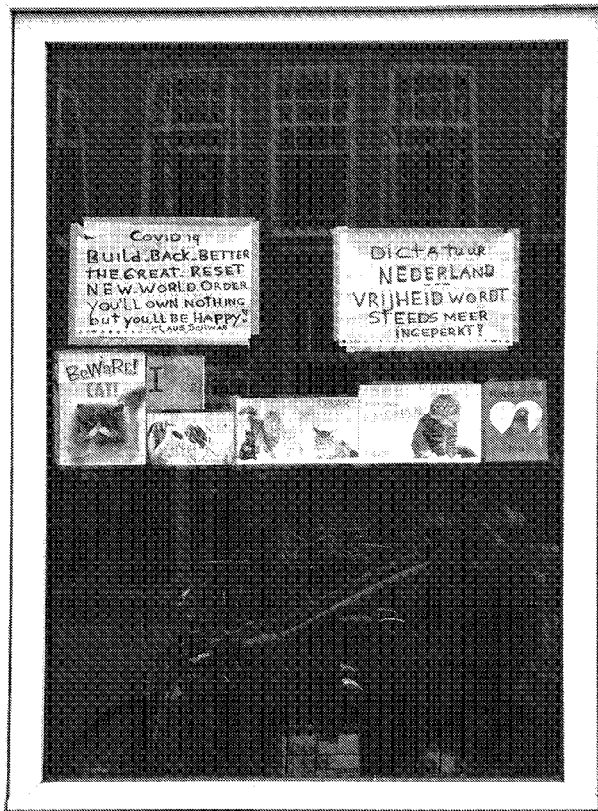


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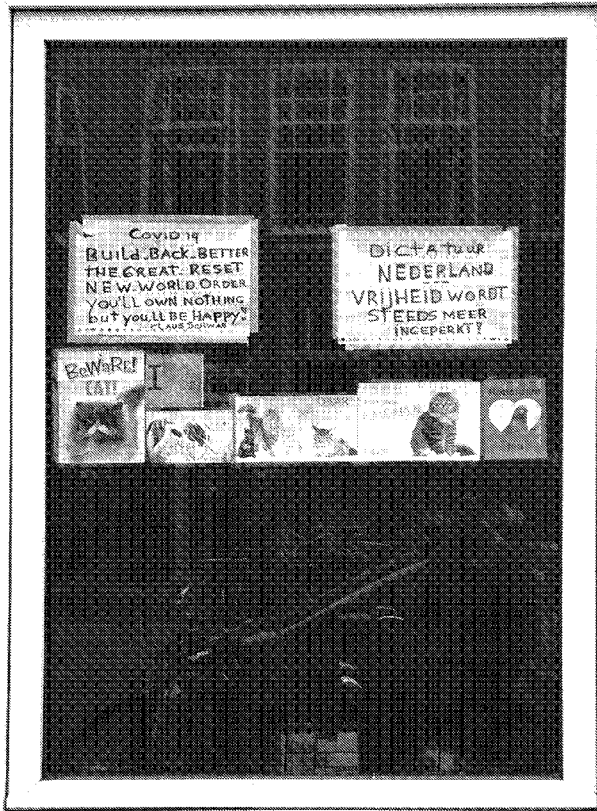


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After having walked less than a kilometre, feeling dazed and confused by my surroundings, I started to wonder if there was some chance I was going to unravel other secret plots by the time I would reach my final destination. All the clues, insights, 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 rele-

vant, 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.

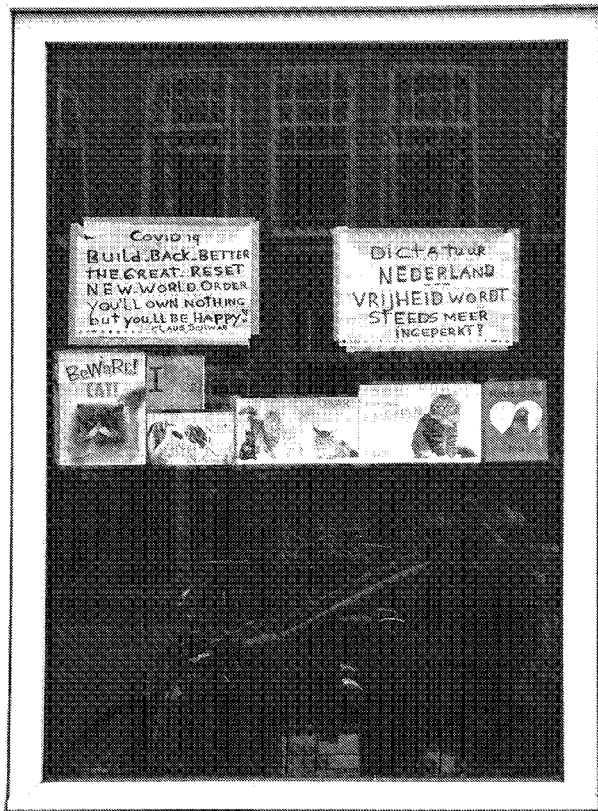


Fig. 1: Cats and sanitary dictatorship in Rotterdam West
 Since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, along with the rise of cases and preventive measures, the number of conspiracy-related messages, stickers, and posters appearing around the city grew rapidly.



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 tagline “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.



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 as a lot of conspiracy theories. The mono-myth is the result of a series of studies aiming to index fictional narratives' passages.

The Russian folklorist Vladimir Propp published his *Morphology of the Folktale* in 1928: the work consists of the analysis of 100 Russian folk tales from which he extrapolated thirty-one structural plot units. In 1949 the American scholar Joseph Campbell popularised the mono-myth studies through his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*¹. In his study, Campbell divided the hero's journey into three acts forming seventeen stages: from the first step where the hero is still dealing with their ordinary world, to their return after having achieved the goal of their quest. In 2007 the Hollywood author and executive Christopher Vogler pursued Campbell's studies with the intention of translating them for the purpose of screenwriting. He eventually reduced Campbell's stages to thirteen.

My intention in this thesis is to explain, narrate and deconstruct conspiracy theories by using the hero's journey. I will employ the mono-myth's structure to dive into the conspiratorial world and expose the mutuality between fictional plots and conspiracy theories.