4.5
CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND VISUAL CULTURE

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Introduction
The bulk of the material studied in connection with the transmission of conspiracy theories is comprised of written sources. Texts can be investigated with regards to their formal aspects such as narrative structures, rhetorical figures and strategies to produce coherence (Butter 2014: 7). Yet, images are powerful tools – perhaps even more than text – for the diffusion of ideas and mirror the desire to represent the un-representable in the visual culture of conspiracy theory. By turning the imagined conspiracy into an image instead of a text-based theory, the invisible is turned into visible ‘evidence’, for instance, in picturing ‘pyramids’ and ‘networks’. The image thus assumes a completely new quality: Seeing is believing and provides immediate knowledge. Thus, images of conspiracy locate themselves at the border between the seen and unseen; they portray dense and condensed narratives of causal connections in a play between graphic image, reality and imagination.

In this chapter, we argue that visuality in conspiracy culture is an under-researched phenomenon that promises fruitful investigations, an argument also relevant for other research areas (Meyer 2015: 333–60). Until now, there have been few, if any, systematic attempts to approach the relationship between conspiracy theories and their visual representation, despite their intimate relationship (Knight 2007, 2016; Krause et al. 2011; Großhans 2014; Eklund, Alteveer 2018). Conspiracy theories not only recur in verbal images, but they also are expressed through a host of materialised graphic images, pursuing visual strategies with multiple narrative aims. Drawing upon van Prooijen (2018: 5–6), we can distinguish five features that can be translated into a specific iconographic programme producing (conspiracist) meaning and thus creating potent tools of transmission. In the examples discussed below, we will demonstrate how the visual culture of conspiracy theories recognises patterns, detects agency, maps coalitions, crafts enemy images and visualises secrecy in various interrelations of mediality (intermediality), essentially between verbal and visual media. For art historian William Mitchell, this relation is constitutive: ‘all media are mixed media’ (Mitchell 1994: 95). Following Irina Rajewsky, we can distinguish three intermedial practices, all of which need to be addressed in the study of conspiracy theory: Meaning is either created by ‘medial transposition’ (e.g. text into picture) or through ‘media combination’ of at least two medial forms of articulation (e.g. text and picture in one product), or constituted by ‘intermedial references’ (Rajewsky 2005: 51–3). In the latter
case, a picture refers to another conventionally distinct medium, thematising, evoking or imitating elements or structures of, for example, a concrete prior text, speech or another graphic image. Visuality, we argue, is an essential aspect of intermediality, and hence part of cultural production. In the conspiracist world of facts and fiction, visual metaphors, as much as materialised graphic images, contribute to an effective style of narration, communication, mediatisation, recognisability and memorability of messages. Our aim is thus to unpack the repertoire and narrativity of visual tropes that constitute the colour palette of the conspiracist imagination and its development over time. Finally, we will discuss a number of iconic visual representations of conspiracy in history, politics and art, focusing on (historical) case studies bridging five centuries: The antisemitic ‘ritual murder’ narrative, ‘Jewish Bolshevism’, The Protocols of the Elders of Zion and the purported conspiracy of secret societies. In a final section, we investigate the (syn-)aesthetic of conspiracy theories in modern art.

**A seminal precursor of the conspiracist style**

As Leone has argued, it is Rembrandt and his *The Conspiracy of the Batavians under Claudius Civilis* (1661–1662), shown in Figure 4.5.1, who ‘offers one of the first modern instances of visual conspiracy theory’ (Leone 2016: 11). Whereas there certainly are instances of visual representations of ‘conspiracy’ before the seventeenth century, it is worthwhile to consider the emergence of tropes of conspiracy in art in connection with the paradigmatic development of conspiracy theories during the early modern period. Zwierlein (2013) has made a similar case with regards to political theory. The narrative of conspiracy turned into one mode of analysing the current state of affairs based on projections of a ‘pool of possible pasts’ and futures (Zwierlein

![Figure 4.5.1](https://example.com/image.png) Rembrandt, The Conspiracy of the Batavians under Claudius Civilis (1661–1662). Donated in 1798 to The Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Sweden, by Mrs Anna Johanna Peill, born Grill, widow of Mr Henrik Wilhelm Peill in memory of her late husband.
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2013: 78), further fuelled by the emergence of political writing and political news dissemination through books and pamphlets, many of them illustrated. Renaissance art developed the idea that there is a hidden story to be (de-)constructed by the viewer, and Rembrandt excelled in a particular socratic and ironic style through which he guided his viewers to explore their own answers (Müller 2015: 1–19). His massive painting brings together many elements of later visual representations of conspiracy, such as a ‘treacherous conniving, held in secret, cemented by unknown, barbaric rituals’ (Leone 2016: 12). Without going too deeply into the image and its highly compelling context, Rembrandt visualises covert assembly at a secret, concealed location, involving plotting against the current state of affairs. These plotters are gathered in a circle to illustrate their bond, taking an oath ‘intoxicated by conspiracy’ (following Leone 2016: 12) and raising their cups to the plot. With their swords (as tokens of fidelity – as opposed to the dagger, which symbolises treason) they are pointing at the central figure, the master plotter (who has just delivered an inflammatory speech in which the enemy has been scapegoated). The visual aura of esoteric secrecy is evoked and enhanced by a conscious oscillation between opacity and transparency, darkness and light, blurriness and sharpness (e.g. some of the figures are distinct, while others disappear into the shadows, are dressed in a cloak or are even painted from behind) and what Leone (2016: 11) has called the ‘chromatic promise of blood’ – ruddy tones of colour that saturate the image. These, together with other elements of Rembrandt’s painting, seem to characterise the conspiracist mindset, not least the quest for pattern recognition, coalitions and secrecy, and the search for intentional agency where there is none.

Conspiracy theories and visual narrativity

Conspiracy theories interpret the world by telling a story. There are many concrete manifestations of this story, with structural similarities: In the most basic versions, a societal ill, styled as an existential crisis, is monocausally ascribed to the evil plan and secret machinations of a designated outgroup, scapegoated and blamed for the real or pretended problem. A ‘group’, a ‘plan’ and ‘secrecy’ are constitutive features of conspiracist narratives. In addition, there is the act of disclosure, which assigns the role of the narrator to the conspiracy theorist or, in modern terminology, the ‘whistleblower’. What distinguishes him is his need for communication, to reach out in the face of the overabundance of available media. Already, Simmel noted the psychology of revelation in his ground-breaking essay on the sociology of secrecy and of secret societies (1906: 465): ‘Secrecy involves a tension which, at the moment of revelation, finds its release. This constitutes the climax in the development of the secret.’ This ‘joy of confession’ or publication may contain ‘a sense of power’ (Simmel 1906: 466), which explains the communicative impact of the conspiracy theorist as a revelator and public educator. It falls short to call – in Hofstadter’s (1964: 7786) pejorative formula – the representatives of such theories ‘paranoid’ in the context of a ‘political pathology’, because their approach is linked to a ‘specific kind of irrationality associated with a stubborn, highly rational, and highly operational logic’ (Groh 1987: 4), not least with regards to strategic communication and dissemination of information. The conspiracy theorist aims to influence and convince his readers, his audience. To that aim, facts are amalgamated with fictions into a most convincing and compelling story. This mode of narrative operation from the side of the conspiracy theorist can be compared to what Anton has called a ‘grey zone’ between fact and fiction (Anton 2011: 14) or Barkun the ‘fact-fiction reversal’ (Barkun 2003: 29).

When exploring conspiracy narratives and the role of visual culture, trans-medial narratology research offers a methodological advantage: A narratological approach to other than epic texts also includes non-verbal representations. Basically, all media operate as intermediaries of semiotic
signs, enabling communication (Rippe, Etter 2013: 192). Moreover, as material facilitators of information, their materiality matters. Marie-Laure Ryan, therefore, criticises the perception of media as ‘hollow conduits for the transmission of messages’ (Ryan 2004: 1–2): ‘you cannot tell the same type of story on the stage and in writing, during conversation and in a thousand-page novel, in a two-hour movie and in a TV serial that runs for many years’ (Ryan 2004: 356). The approach of a trans-medial theory of narrativity is helpful as it distinguishes media-specific discourse modes (modes of transmission) from the culturally acquired cognitive frame narrative, which is media-independent (Ryan 1992: 371; Wolf 2002: 357). With reference to the visual arts, narratologist Werner Wolf argues that the ‘real question is not whether the visual arts can be narrative or not but to what extent they can be narrative’ (Wolf 2003: 192). Thus, narrativity is not perceived as an absolute and stable category, but Wolf’s approach opens up to explore dynamic expressions of ‘narrative potential’ in various media (Wolf 2002: 428–30, 2003: 192). Similarly, Ryan differentiates between ‘[h]aving narrativity’ and ‘being a narrative’ (Ryan 2004: 9). Insofar, both concepts perceive narrativity in visual media.

Visual metaphors

The conspiracy theorist exercises himself, both orally and in writing, as a sovereign narrator by establishing connections to his reader or his audience. This happens with reference to traditional verbal images, which, beyond textual culture, can also be realised graphically. Some visual tropes belong to the basic repertoire of conspiratorial thinking. They can act as introductions to a larger narrative, which the viewer in a concrete historical context is familiar with. The use of animal metaphors is popular, linked to the long legacy of symbolical anthropomorphism, such as in fables or codified in the many emblem books of the early modern period. As a rule, an animal represented strictly coded qualities and the emblems were used as inter-medial messages since they united a motto with an image and an explanatory text. One of the major purposes of identifying conspirators with threatening or negatively coded animals is their dehumanisation, creating distance and eliminating empathy with the ‘other’. But, the use of animal metaphors is more complex, since there also is an inbuilt reference to imaginations of their essential qualities, which potentially correspond with the basic structure of the conspiracist narrative.

Some animal metaphors are more prolific than others to represent the invisible conspirators. One of the most prominent is the octopus, known in Egyptian culture and Greek mythology. With its many slimy and flexible (sometimes sexualised) tentacles directed by one all-seeing head, it can simultaneously and dynamically reach out in different directions, attach to, grab and devour its prey. And it will not die, as it is able to rebuild its tentacles. The metaphor is thus able to evoke multiple connotations of danger: Of intelligence, concealment and secrecy, of multidirectional, far-reaching and, yet, coordinated action, and of deadly embrace. It is depicted as a sea-monster threatening sailors such as in Pierre Denys de Montfort’s *Colossal Octopus* (1801), at the time a popular book illustration, or in Victor Hugo’s poem, ‘Toilers of the Sea’, published in 1866 and often referred to since. But, the octopus has also been used as a motif on the cover of editions of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* or in cartoons about large corporations, with the malevolent creature controlling the nation-states (Knight 2016: 111; Hagemeister 2019, forthcoming).

A more apocalyptic connotation, corresponding with the eschatological scenario of many conspiracy theories, is evoked through the visual metaphor of the snake. In the Judaeo-Christian tradition it represents sin, ambiguity and falsehood, but also intelligence. The split tongue of the snake corresponds to the basic assumption of conspiracist thinking, according to which a distinction should be made between a misleading appearance and the (evil) hidden reality. The concept
of the snake again can be found in various editions of *The Protocols*, for instance in the popular French edition, commissioned by Jesuit priest Ernest Jouin: *Le Péril judéo-maçonnique: les ‘Protocols’ des Sages de Sion* (1927; Caumanns 2019, forthcoming). Apart from in antisemitic imagery, the snake was also used in Stalinist iconography for depicting ‘enemies of the people’. For instance, during the Great Purge show trials of the 1930s, the exiled Leon Trotsky appeared as the double-tongued snake, conspiring with Nazi Germany, as it is visually expressed on Sergej D. Igumnov’s infamous propaganda poster *We Will Eradicate the Spies and Saboteurs, the Trotskyist-Bukharinist Agents of Fascism!* (Moscow/Leningrad 1937). Virtually a collage of visual metaphors is presented in Gerald Burton Winrod’s book *The Hidden Hand, the Protocols and the Coming Superman* (1932), represented in Figure 4.5.2.

![Figure 4.5.2](https://archive.org/details/GeraldB.WinrodTheHiddenHandProtocolsComingSuperman1934)
Winrod (1900–1957), an antisemitic writer and preacher, propagated Nazi propaganda material in the U.S.A. in the 1930s. Although the picture lacks artistic credentials, it is worth scrutiny, as it presents a veritable catalogue of the metaphorical repertoire of conspiracist iconography: Central is the motif of the wire-puller or puppet master, as the mastermind, holding the strings; he exercises control over money (‘gold’) as well as over other phenomena of chaos (‘filth’, ‘atheism’, ‘poverty’, ‘immorality’, ‘modernism’, ‘communism’ and ‘depression’). His hands reach through the (half-open) curtain while the rest of the body is concealed behind the scenery (in secrecy); the symbolic snake is on the curtain, while the globe in the foreground signifies the trope of ‘Jewish world domination’. Winrod’s commentary reminds the reader of the ‘symbolic snake’ from The Protocols and the trope of the ‘Hidden Jewish Hand’, ‘which has produced the present Chaos by controlling the finances of the world’ (Winrod 1933: 33). Next to animal metaphors, ‘the puppetmaster’ and his ‘puppets’, the half-open curtain and the ‘hidden hand’ have been, as illustrated in the section on modern art below, most popular in representing the idea of global conspiracies.

Another popular visual signifier of conspiracy is the dagger. A book entitled Le Tombeau de Jacques Molai (De Gassicourt 1797; first published in 1795 with the subtitle ‘the secret of the conspirators’) establishes the argument that the French Revolution was orchestrated by dark forces, above all the infamous Knights Templar, who sought revenge for the execution of their last Grand Master, Jacques de Molay, by the French king and the Pope in 1314. Le Tombeau has an emblematic frontispiece worth dwelling on. At the centre of the scenery lies a naked beheaded male body, stretched out in a scandalous pose. To the right of the beheaded body we see the figure of a blindfolded perpetrator of the crime dramatically displayed against the background of a rising or setting sun. He holds a dagger in his left hand and the head of his victim, by his hair, in the right. On the ground of the cave are a broken sceptre, a crown and mitre. A figure outside the cave, armed with a sword, overlooks/directs the scenery. Without suggesting immediate genealogy, a similar imagery was displayed 115 years later in a more dramatised version on the 1912 election poster of the Belgian Anti-Masonic League (Önnerfors 2017: 117). Under the title ‘The work of freemasonry: Revolution, Anarchy’, we see, against a dramatic red and black sky, a blond woman pictured from behind, dressed in blood-red, with wild Medusa-like hair, carrying a torch in her left hand and a dagger in her right. In her wake, she has set a village on fire, turned over a cross and the (figurative) Tables of the Law, and broken a pillar, which probably held the crown and sceptre now scattered on the ground, together with a broken sword and a standard. Having trampled underfoot religion, law and political order (just as in the frontispiece of Le Tombeau), her next target is the calm village on the horizon. The woman in red does not act on her own. To the left of her we see a sinister character, dressed in a hood and Masonic apron, holding the Jewish Star of David in his left hand and pointing out the imminent target to her. As in Le Tombeau, the evil assassin is directed by someone else, who is the mastermind behind the plot. But, in contrast to the monochrome frontispiece from 1797, the 1912 election poster is saturated with the ‘chromatic promise of blood’ (Leone 2016: 11) and potentially the colour of all-consuming and apocalyptic fire and flames. Within a century, the conspiracy theories of the post-revolutionary era had been blended with virulent antisemitism, not least through the publication of the infamous Protocols. Ever since, the idea of the ‘Jewish-Masonic plot’ has turned into a visual representation of its own. Comparing the two images diachronically, it appears as if certain visual tropes are reused and recombined in new contexts and that the development of conspiracy tropes only generates new expressions as varieties of larger and general frames. This indicates that there is a distinctive mode of visual representation of conspiracy and a recognisable intermediality that has its own traditions and meanings.
Examples of mixed mediality

One striking element of the visual culture of conspiracy is the intricate relationship between image and text. Following the emblematic tradition, highly charged visual representations are frequently paired with textual references, not only as titles, commentaries or framings (as in newspapers or ads), but as parts of the picture itself. Each form of mediality has specific qualities attractive to creators as much as to communicators (multipliers) of conspiracy theories. While the spoken or written word relies in these cases on (quasi-/pseudo-) rational-argumentative logic, visual communication follows an associative logic and communicates immediately to its spectators. Text and image are not competing forms of expression, but refer to each other, and, in combination, reinforce meaning. This holds true for cartoons, charts and posters, not least in political campaigning, as seen in the Belgian election advert from 1912. Twenty-five years later, the conspiratorial narrative of ‘Jewish Bolshevism’ was popularised by Nazi institutions and organisations through a series of large-scale propaganda exhibitions. One of these, Der Ewige Jude (‘The Eternal Jew’), opened in 1937 and was accompanied by a widely disseminated poster. The origins of the trope originate in the Russian October Revolution of 1917, when one of the central themes of Russian antisemitism (that of secret manipulation) morphed into the notion that the revolution itself was masterminded by ‘the Jews’. This trope soon made its way to the West. In the Weimar Republic, ‘Völkisch’ and especially Nazi propagandists made ‘Jewish Bolshevism’ their political battle cry and the poster for The Eternal Jew exhibition featured many of its visual tropes. The central figure is a stereotype of the poor Eastern European Jew, dressed in black, scruffy, his closed eyes, escaping the direct view of the beholder. In his right hand he carries the gold coins of the traitor and in his left the whip of despotic rule. Tucked under his arm, the figure holds a three-dimensional model of the European part of the Soviet Union, marked with hammer and sickle. At that time, everyone in Nazi Germany was familiar with the message: ‘The Eternal Jew’ is the true ruler of Soviet Bolshevism. For Hanno Loewy, this picture incorporates many of the antisemitic motifs turned into the ‘basic equipment of the collective fantasy’ in the Third Reich (Loewy 2009: 542). Indeed, in the eyes of experts in Nazi media, the poster genre, for its suggestive emotional impact, was of utmost importance in their communication strategy: ‘The Jew is always represented as a type. […] The posters do not burden the viewer with the scientific problem of the influence of Judaism […] The pictorial contents are charged with subjective assertion.’ (Medebach 1941: 36–7 [our italics]).

Graphically, the possibilities of the poster as pictorial genre are exploited here. The author, Hans Schlüter (sometimes the name is given as Stalüter), and the exhibition organisers relied on striking colours – red and yellow – and prominent pseudo-Hebrew typography (as in anti-Jewish medieval iconography) suggesting both alienation and orientalist exoticisation. The motif became the symbol of the campaign. We can find a ‘medial transposition’ type of intermediality here, as the motif also was communicated through other visual media, including postcards and book covers. Placed in central locations, it furthermore dominated the public space: At main train stations like Munich and Vienna, and – of monumental size and illuminated at night – on the roof of the Deutsches Museum in Munich (Caumanns et al. 2012: 73). The Eternal Jew signature poster, along with the textual and visual material of the exhibition – one of the largest in German history –, transmitted the conspiracy theory of ‘Jewish Bolshevism’ to an audience of millions. Text and image reinforced one another, visually preparing this audience for a war against the Soviet Union and the extinction of the racial other, the Jewish ‘sub-human being’.

A second mixed-media example with an equally close text-image relationship is the chart. The example in question once more refers to the conspiracy theory of ‘Jewish Bolshevism’. Figure 4.5.3 shows a chart of 1941 from the Nazi Party (N.S.D.A.P.) wall newspaper Parole der
Woche (‘Slogan of the Week’), published as indoor posters for showcases, e.g. in offices, railway stations and restaurants.

The graphic, entitled Das jüdische Komplott (‘The Jewish Conspiracy’), takes up about two-thirds of the 84 × 120 cm surface area, with explanatory text on the remaining third (Caumanns et al. 2012: 76). In the centre is a brutally stereotyped visual representation of (the head of) ‘the Jew’, with caricatured features. To the left and right, names are inserted into Stars of David, ‘Baruch’ and ‘Mosessohn’. These are the alleged ‘Jewish puppetmasters’ of the plot: Baruch the alleged close friend of ‘Jewish descendant and high-degree freemason’ Roosevelt and leading circles of U.S.-society; Mosessohn with direct links to Stalin and the Russian nomenclature. The henchmen of the Jewish puppetmasters, the poster claims, are Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin – interrelated by Jewish interbreeding and corrupting affinities (and, as it happens, also Nazi Germany’s main enemies of war). This major visual narrative of interconnectedness is constructed by yellow arrows, lines and text boxes against a black background, suggesting causality through a collective racial genealogy of culprits. Thus, the image presents a vast network of East-West-European or global relations under Jewish control that, in the context of the year 1941 and an evolving anti-Hitler coalition, developed certain plausibility and credibility for the German viewer.

The power of the chart in conveying conspiracy narratives lies in its pseudo-informative impact. As a multimodal technique of displaying ‘evidence’, it is able to combine two medial forms of articulation (Rajewsky 2005: 52): Verbal (e.g. names) and visual elements, thereby organising complex causal relations and identifying alleged coherences. This corresponds to the basic conspiratorial assumption that ‘everything is connected’ (Barkun 2003: 1–14). However,

Figure 4.5.3 „Das Jüdische Komplott“ (‘The Jewish Conspiracy’) (1941) [fragment], colour lithography. Source: “Parole der Woche”, edition A, no. 50, Reichspropagandaleitung der N.S.D.A.P. (ed), München: Eher Verlag. Reprinted with permission from the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.
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at the same time, the suggestive pictorial effect is relevant: Given the Stars of David and the stereotyped face at the centre of the visual axis, the viewer recognises at once that the Jewish mastermind in the ‘conspiracy’ is to be found on all sides. In a sense, the chart is a deconstruction and technical description of the octopus metaphor, a blueprint of its functionality.

Performativity: Conspiracy as spectacle

Closely related to the mixed medially of text and image is the performance of conspiracist narratives. By staging and re-enacting these narratives in front of a specific audience and involving a multitude of participants, it was possible to display and (rhetorically) demonstrate an example, immediately appealing to affects and emotions. Performativity transgresses textuality (and hence literacy) and visuality through its enactment of the ‘Un-outspoken’ (Gadamer 1986: 504) in time and space. This dynamic quality has the ability to develop explanatory power in multiple contexts, ranging from premodern times with widespread illiteracy to our contemporary state of hyper-mediality (Madisson 2016), where borders between text, image and performance once again are fluid. One example of the performativity of conspiracism discussed below is modelled on the powerful trope of ‘Jewish ritual murder’ and ‘blood libel’, the allegation of a Jewish conspiracy around Passover to abduct (Christian) children in order to mock the Passion of Christ, to ritually murder the children and consume their blood (Erb 1993: 9). This trope offers access to different transmissions in diverse historical contexts and was productive from at least the twelfth to twentieth centuries (and constant repercussions during the twenty-first) both on local or regional levels, but also as a general attribution to ‘The Jew’ worldwide. There are many representations of the trope of Jewish world dominance, but what concerns us here is the staging of ‘conspiracy’, ‘ritual murder’-trials, enacted as a visual happening on the local level, targeted towards a local audience. Outside the theatre ‘court room’, the narrative was popularised by establishing a regional cult of martyrs who had suffered from alleged Jewish malevolence, such as Simon of Trent (1472–1475), who was celebrated as a beatified ‘saint’ in the Catholic Church until 1965. Simon was allegedly kidnapped and ritually killed by Jews (based on testimonies obtained under torture). His memory was glorified through iconic images of his violent martyrdom, highlighting the innocence of the Christian child and the monstrous barbarity of the Mosaic ‘other’. The case of Anderl Oxner of Rinn (c. 1459–1462) was modelled after the Simon of Trent story, his murder and memory immortalised in theatrical performances up to the 1950s.

However, the Order of Jesuits developed to perfection theatrical performance as a tool of strategic communication, not least during the Counter-Reformation of the seventeenth century. The didactic (and rhetorical) function of Jesuit theatre during this period cannot be overestimated. The order decided to stage the ‘ritual murder’ stories of both Simon and Anderl, turning them into spectacle. The first performance of the Anderl-drama took place in 1621 in the Austrian city of Hall, the first high-profile retelling of the legend (Tilg 2004: 624). It is only possible to reconstruct that performance to a very limited extent, based on an abstract (‘Periodiche’) preserved from the 1621 staging. We know today that the story was simply invented by its author, the physician Hippolyt Guarinonius. Participation was the goal of religious theatre since the days of the medieval mystery plays; to this aim, new and impressive stage props were used. According to Szarota, the spectators went to these performances for stimulation (Szarota 1975: 140). This was achieved by the basic performative situation, in which actors demonstrated something through their actions (like a performed example in rhetoric), and the audience could identify with or reject specific characters. Not only saints and martyrs appeared, but also secular characters, such as the mother whose child was treacherously murdered (by Jews), as well as the

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murderers themselves. However shocking and cruel the story, the audience could expect a conciliatory ending: While Simon and Anderl, for example, were accepted into the circle of martyr saints, the ‘Crudelitas’ (personified ‘cruelty’ as a substitute for the Jews that had escaped) was banished from the stage and sent to hell, while angels snatched the perpetrators’ cup and thus saved the martyr’s blood.

Here, the spectators were made eyewitnesses to the ‘blood libel’ conspiracy, to the act of disclosing, as well as to the punishment of the crime, and had the opportunity to express sympathy or disapproval. The Jesuit ‘ritual murder’ drama was about listening, seeing and participating to become emotionally engaged, as well as about demonstrating something. The actors served through their actions as deterrents or as role models for what was right or wrong and thus – through the performance of conspiracist dualism – established solid ethical norms.

**Monophasic representation**

If the ritual murder plays expressed dynamic performativity as the primary mode of transmission, the opposite can be said of static images, as they are displayed in ‘monophasic representations’, i.e. visual narratives along one particular string of narrative. The enemy images of conspiracy theories are not stable but fluctuate between a particular story and a general frame narrative known to contemporary audiences. In terms of composition, it is not enough to bring stereotypically drawn figures into a pictorial context: It is their context of action that resonates with the idea of conspiracy. In the case of graphic novels, in serial or multiphase pictures, the narrative quality is comparatively easy to identify, since they already through their form embody temporal progression of a story and thus the essential criterion of narrativity – time. Yet another example of the ‘ritual murder’ narrative in this context is represented by a thirty-part plate in the pilgrimage church of Judenstein (the purported geographical place of ritual murder turned into a place of religious devotion). The plate tells the story of Anderl of Rinn as a story of life, conspiracy, torture, murder and miracles in all their stations, similar to the Stations of the Cross. Underlining its didactic character, until the 1960s, the plate hung right next to the pulpit (Schroubek 1986: 3853). Monophasic pictures are more ambitious in terms of visual narrativity since they depict Jewish ‘ritual murder’ as one storyline. It is a moment that promises to open up the reflection of past and future. Wolf (2003: 190) has pointed out that this device, frequently a turning point in the story, or the ending, is a significant variety of potentially narrative visual works. This emerges also in another piece of art, represented in Figure 4.5.4, depicting the Anderl-motif, an eighteenth-century sculpture group from the workshop of Austrian wood-carver Franz Xaver Nißl (1731–1804).

The sculpture group is composed of five figures, four of whom would have been recognised at the time as Jews by their ‘Oriental’ clothing (which also evokes the Ottoman archenemy of the Habsburg empire) and by their facial features, and who surround a brightly dressed child. Originally, the group had been mounted on a large stone, the alleged martyr stone (‘Judenstein’) itself.

The context of action corresponds to the written and oral narrative and therefore is immediately accessible to the viewer: With the figures holding a knife to the throat of the half-sinking boy, strangling the child and collecting the blood, the act of desecration and of ritual murder is anticipated. The action freezes the moral depravity of the antagonists at a gruesome moment. Here, according to Wolf, we are dealing with a form of narrativity in which chronology, causality and teleology can be deduced. It is a representation of one phase where the temporal dimension is provided through ‘frozen action’ as a device within the composition. The viewer is able to ‘evoke a story related to this action through external, inter-medial reference’ to the
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ritual murder narrative as ‘cultural script’ (Wolf 2003: 193). Whereas the sculpture group of life-sized coloured figures, previously placed on top of the ‘Judenstein’, is inside and thus confined within the church – as a physical destiny for pilgrimages – other modes of transmission allowed regional, trans-regional, national and potentially global outreach through photographs and postcards. When these turned into a popular genre of media at the end of the nineteenth century, the ritual murder narrative was transformed into a modern means of dissemination for the purpose of memories, marketing and geographical branding.

Conspiracy theories in modern art

The conspiracy narrative of ‘ritual murder’ migrated, as we have seen, over the centuries through various modes of transmission, from oral accounts to trials and finally beatification and reverence of local saints. Almost immediately, and in parallel with technical development of the printing press, the plot was depicted, performed, displayed and disseminated in different media. Already in the propaganda posters of Nazi antisemitism, modern graphic elements such as collage, arrows and text boxes were integrated into the visual narrative. In the twentieth century, conspiracy theories were communicated in the language of advertising or pseudo-scientific information campaigns. But, beyond intentional propaganda, a large number of post-1945 artists have attempted to engage with dimensions of socio-economic realities deliberately hidden from public record. Others have ‘dived headlong into the fever dreams of the disaffected, creating fantastical works that nevertheless uncover uncomfortable truths in

Figure 4.5.4 Wooden sculpture group in the pilgrim church of Judenstein, Rinn, Austria, Franz Xaver Nißl, c. 1766 (coloured in the original). Photo: Heinrich Hoffmann, 1928. Source: German Historical Museum, Berlin. © Raumbildverlag Otto Schönstein / DHM.
an age of information overload and weakened trust in institutions’ as a recent exhibition at The Metropolitan Museum of Art (Met Breuer) in New York aimed to demonstrate (Every-thing is Connected: Art and Conspiracy, 2018). Both approaches aim to visualise what cannot be seen at first sight, to make the unseen seen, but with different purposes. The former is an artistic response to the increasing opacity of national and international politics (particularly in a U.S. context) and thus constitutes a clear political statement – a demand for transparency and an end to endemic lies as the primary mode of political communication. The latter is an expression of how art engages with conspiracy culture as a way to destabilise established knowledge-regimes, to illustrate the inbuilt irony of conspiracist imagination and meaning-making or the barely discernible differences between ‘truth’ and ‘post-truth’, ‘news’ and ‘fake-news’ of the modern and late modern ages (see Chapter 4.10).

How do these positions translate to art? First and foremost, both are replete with synaesthetics (merging different aesthetic expressions and sensations), since conspiracies, imagined or true, (etymologically) presuppose the ‘breathing together’ of their wicked puppetmasters, it is no surprise that the artistic response is to picture or craft toxic togetherness, outrageous overlaps and acid amalgamations. The ultimate representation of connections is the network. It combines our need for pattern recognition and to detect agency and it connects dots in order to visualise or imagine coalitions, hostile to us and operating in secrecy. In our age of global interconnectivity, the horizontal network has replaced the vertical pyramid as the primary depiction of conspiracy. Mark Lombardi’s artwork explores such self-replicating network structures with independent cells and offshoots – not unlike self-growing metastases – spreading in the body politic: Unregulated transnational flows of black capital creating a mesh of interests and inter-relations between legal and illegal enterprises across the globe. The revelation of political action beyond electoral control or insight appears to be a recurring feature of U.S. politics. But, modern artists also employ established motifs such as the puppetmaster, as illustrated by Emory Douglas’s untitled artwork (1974) in which U.S. president Gerald Ford is depicted as a marionette controlled by a host of corporations.

The motifs of the octopus, or the mythological kraken, are reprised to depict the toxic entanglements of conspiracy. Peter Saul’s Government of California (1969) is an ambiguous psychedelic example of tentacle-pornographic aesthetics in which Martin Luther King, Jr. is depicted as a black octopus with a halo, but yet completely and inseparably interwined with the evil forces of economy, politics and drugs. Such zoomorphism has another sci-fi sub-category, alienisation. The Martian Portraits (1978) by Jim Shaw elaborate David Icke’s conspiracy theories of a ruling class of shape-shifting alien lizards beneath human skin and belongs to the second category of artistic representations of conspiracy with no obvious political edge. Yet another strategy of bringing different aesthetics of conspiracy together is the collage, which, through its particular technology of assemblage establishes immediate interconnections between apparently unrelated images and events. Lutz Bacher’s The Lee Harvey Oswald Interview (1976) is an elaborate imitation of the cognitive habitus of the conspiracy-theory believer, uniting several strategies of combining information and perspectives. Jim Shaw’s cave The Miracle of Compound Interest (2006) offers a three-dimensional descent into a 1950s gas station covered by interwoven red spiderwebs. When entering the gas station, the visitor is immediately drawn into the conspiracy of three garden gnomes framed by two large crystalline formations and convening ritually around a fireplace and fluorescent material placed on a cushion. Approaching them resembles an initiation into an incomprehensible and primordial cult. Such epistemological fuzziness or blurring characterises the artwork of Gerhard Richter and Andy Warhol, who both had profound knowledge of advertising and political art. Locating both artists and their production within a shared ontology of the Cold War, John J. Curley (2013) points out that they also shared similar
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techniques to illustrate and uncover paranoid tensions of their time, such as blurred photography, cut-outs and collages. In the age of the Kennedy assassination, the Cuban Missile Crisis and the moon landing, pattern production and detection were at an all-time high in everything from grainy photographs, amateur movies and Jason Pollock’s action painting (van Prooijen 2018: 44). As with The Lee Harvey Oswald Interview, it is possible to make the case here for the emergence of obsessive amateur reinterpretation of visual evidence (or what Aupers calls ‘pop-semiotics’, see Chapter 4.7 and 4.10). Due to the ready availability of media images, the conspiracy is now visible, ‘hiding in plain sight’, available to everyone (who also are provided with the ‘right tools’ of analysis, the conspiracist-revelatory gaze). The visual culture of conspiracy is no longer just an act of fictional imagination; it now entails actively deconstructing the true image in search of ‘facts’. Whereas Rembrandt used his own irony to express ironic references to what is hidden in plain sight (The Conspiracy of the Batavians displays, for instance, a sword that nobody holds’, Leone 2016: 15), the photography or moving image is now systematically searched for inconsistencies that can be used as evidence for the alleged conspiracy. The public readiness to accept grainy images as proof of ultimate evil developed considerable traction when a global audience was made to believe the existence of supposed Weapons of Mass Destruction on Iraqi soil (around 2002). In a reversed psychology, the narrative logic of conspiracist pattern detection could develop political persuasiveness but proved later to be fiction.

Conclusion

In the age of hyper-media meaning-making (Madisson 2016), it is challenging to delineate any limits to the visual expression of conspiracy theories. The amalgamation of aesthetic expression, temporality and spatiality through electronic media offers the potential for iconic representations of conspiracy, whether they are following traditional styles and expressions or are more performative in nature. Digital media provide even more tools to construct conspiracy theories through the abundance of raw material, easily assembled into a professional-looking form (see Chapter 4.7). A primary focus is on visual evidence, since it is instant and available. Nevertheless, we also witness a return to the use of visual shorthand, furthered by the need for quick communication and dissemination on social media through memes, pic-badges or GIFs. For instance, a search for ‘Illuminati’ and ‘Conspiracy’ GIFs on Facebook messenger, or the popular meme ‘Illuminati confirmed’ (as shorthand for evidence of a huge conspiracy), generates countless results displaying the all-seeing eye, a triangle shaped by two hands or the number ‘666’. Similarly, the badge ‘QAnon’ has within a year (2017–2018) established itself as a visual code of ‘deep-state’ conspiracy theories in the U.S.A., while coded imagery suggests that Europe is exposed to a conspiracy of inner and external enemies (Önnerfors 2019: 13–20).

As we have tried to illustrate through the above examples, the visual culture of conspiracy theory is an essential device for its transmission. Over the centuries, the visualisation of the unseen and the uncovering of the hidden real has occasioned the development of different tropes, employed in different situations and transmitted by different media. Particularly productive in this regard has been the complex of motifs attached to the racial ‘other’, amalgamated with powerful enemy images – as the diachronic variations of the themes ‘Jewish ritual murder’ and ‘Jewish plot’ forcefully demonstrate in different cultural contexts. Other tropes emerged parallel to these, such as that of secret societies in general or of Freemasonry in particular and were eventually merged into a similar visual message. Taken together, it has been possible to delineate a palette of visual narrativity in which particular symbols (such as the octopus, the puppetmaster or the dagger) are charged with meanings of conspiracy. What we also attempted to
demonstrate is that – ranging from Rembrandt’s *The Conspiracy of the Batavians* to Nazi propaganda charts – the visual culture of conspiracy is able to adapt to changing preconditions of mediality and of their inherent traits.

In this regard, antisemitic imagination over the last five centuries serves as a case in point. Whereas its tropes and their content remain, in principle, stable over time (and recur to an established canon of metaphors), their medialisation was adapted dynamically to shifting communicative aims and technologies (from woodcuts to charts), modes of expression, and audiences and their ability to decode the message. Thus, the Manichaean dualism of the ‘ritual murder’ narrative morphed slowly from representing a Christian enemy image to the vocabulary of the modern political conspiracy theory, aiming to uncover the vast interconnections of assumed causality in the complex state of affairs in global politics. A recent example of this is presented in the 8Chan manifesto of the April 2019 San Diego synagogue assassin, who – conceiving himself as the avenger of Simon of Trent – merged traditional religious anti-Judaism with the conspiracist world view of white supremacist racism. Moreover, when the image of conspiracy moved into the ‘age of mechanical reproduction’ (in Walter Benjamin’s term), it also allowed for new forms of lay reinterpretations (or ‘pop-semiotics’) and particular styles of D.I.Y. pattern detection, reflecting the grassroots obsessive search for causal connections. In contemporary art, the revelation of conspiracy aims to reveal the hidden dimensions of political reality, whereas the art of conspiracy theory engages with the surreal imagining of malevolent manipulation behind the scenes. Finally, the hyper-mediality of the digital age appears to – once more – dissolve the borders between text, image, sound and performativity, and prepares the ground for visual as much as virtual dissemination.

References
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