Introduction

Contemporary conspiracy theories are generally formulated about modern institutions such as the state, science, industries, capitalism and the ‘power elite’ (Melley 2000; Knight 2000; Aupers 2012; Boltanski 2014). Mass media play a particular role in this: From established newspapers to film, documentaries or news – mass media invoke distrust since they are powerful, omnipresent and highly influential in what we think, see and experience. Eva Horn argues in this respect: ‘As media enable and inform our perception and our communication, as they surreptitiously intervene in almost every aspect of everyday life, they represent perfect tools of manipulation and thus ideal candidates for any kind of conspiratorial suspicion’ (Horn 2008: 128).

Mass media texts, from the perspective of conspiracy theorists, are ‘not what they seem’ (Barkun 2006): They are generally considered staged (arte)facts and tools of manipulation to mislead the public and conceal the underlying conspiracy. From the reading of newspapers, official documents to the meticulous analysis of visual details in the Zapruder-film, the broadcasted moon landing in 1969 or the televised attacks of 11 September 2001 – media texts are both the object of suspicion and speculation. Notwithstanding the media distrust, conspiracy theories are themselves deeply mediatised since their developers depend on media in the formulation and communication of their ideas. This chapter therefore deals with the question of how conspiracy theorists read and decode mass media texts. This topic is understudied in the academic literature on conspiracy culture. One of the reasons may be that, generally, conspiracy theories are studied as texts in and of themselves. To study the ‘worldviews’ and ‘beliefs’ of conspiracy theorists, scholars often turn to text as a source – they analyse conspiracy narratives in fiction, literature and detective novels (see Chapters 4.2, 4.3 and 4.4), art and propaganda (see Chapter 4.5), or in film and television series (see Chapter 4.6). And, yet, this methodological focus on published texts blinkers the fact that conspiracy theories in everyday life are neither stable narratives nor full-fledged worldviews/beliefs. In fact, we might even question the label ‘theory’. Rather, conspiracy ‘theorists’ are involved in interpretive practices – their ‘theories’ are unstable, open-ended and (often) non-conclusive interpretations about possible conspiracies (e.g. Dean 1998; Knight 2000; Fenster 2008). Conspiracy theorists are hence assembling information, collecting data, revising texts and are relentlessly involved in interpretive practices to make sense of events: ‘Conspiracy theory’s interpretive desire produces more than meaning. Conspiracy theorists’
interpretive desire moves – back in time, around and through events, collecting details, surrounding the conspiracy and leaching it to a long and signifying chain’ (Fenster 2008: 110).

Understanding conspiracy theory as an interpretive practice rather than a fully-fledged text, narrative or belief, this chapter focuses on how conspiracy theorists interpret mass media images. Theoretically, this question will be situated in the academic literature on audience reception (e.g. Hall 1980; Morley 1980; Fiske 1998) and participatory media culture (e.g. Jenkins 2006), to demonstrate the relevance of this field for the study of conspiracy theory. From the perspective of media studies and communication sciences, it will be demonstrated that conspiracy theorists are, essentially, (inter)active audiences involved in the decoding of mass media texts to, simultaneously, produce their theories. Empirically, I will use an illustrative case study of YouTubers decoding Illuminati signs and symbols in media texts and public performances of celebrities.

Encoding/decoding mass media

How do audiences relate to mass media and, particularly, media content? We can make an analytical distinction between different intellectual traditions that were dominant in different historical phases. Halfway through the twentieth century, the majority of theories about mass communication and media effects were by and large informed by the ‘mass culture approach’ (Abercrombie, Longhurst 1998; e.g. Storey 2003). Audiences, in this approach, were unambiguously at the receiving end of information and communication. Most famously, Horkheimer and Adorno (2002 [1944]) wrote in this respect about the omnipotence of an emergent ‘culture industry’ – the complex of radio, film and advertising in modern society: Coming from a Marxist position and confronted with propaganda machinery in the Second World War, they warned against the ideological hegemony of media messages, its standardising workings on culture and alienating effect on individuals. The culture industry, they argued pessimistically, feeds on and consolidates the passivity of the audience: It can ‘do as it chooses with the needs of consumers – producing, controlling, disciplining them’ (Horkheimer, Adorno 2002: 115) since it infuses culture with ‘sameness’ and, ultimately, reduces ‘the individual to a standardized commodity’ (Horkheimer, Adorno 2002: 94).

Nowadays, such deterministic assumptions about the workings of media are generally problematised from a theoretical and empirical stance. During the 1970s and 1980s, fundamental critique was formulated on this mass media theory at the Centre of Contemporary Cultural Studies or the so-called Birmingham School. Various scholars (Hall 1980; Morley 1980; Radway 1987) argued that mass produced texts are not necessarily understood by the audience in conformity with the hegemonic ideology installed in them. Texts are fundamentally polysemic and the audience is not passive, but active, in its interpretive practices. In and through their readings of mass media texts, the consumers of novels, films or television create new cultural meanings. This approach represented a paradigm shift in studying the relation between media and audience (Abercrombie, Longhurst 1998). As scholar John Fiske formulated succinctly:

Popular culture is made by the people, not produced by the culture industry. All the culture industries can do is produce a repertoire of texts or cultural resources for the various formations of the people to use or reject in the ongoing process of producing their popular culture.

(1998: 24)

A theoretical model that was and still is highly influential was developed by Stuart Hall (1980). With his famous ‘encoding/decoding model’, Hall makes the argument that mass media texts
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with ‘encoded’ and (allegedly) hegemonic ideologies have different meanings for different people in different social-cultural contexts. Informed by the semiotics of Roland Barthes and others, he argues that ‘already coded signs intersect with the deep semantic codes of a culture and take on additional, more active ideological dimensions’ (1980: 168). In his work, he distinguishes three ideal-types of readings of texts by the audience: The ‘preferred reading’ that is passively reproducing the ‘dominant-hegemonic position’; the negotiated reading in which consumers adapt the preferred meanings to their personal lives and identities and, finally, the oppositional reading. In the oppositional interpretation of a text, readers are actively resisting the encoded hegemonic ideology and, hence, reading becomes a political act: ‘He/she detotalizes the message in the preferred code in order to retotalize the message within some alternative framework of reference’ (Hall 1980: 172–3).

The key assumption in audience research as proposed by Stuart Hall is then that there is no inherent (ideological) meaning in a media text since consumers read, decode, reconstruct and, ultimately, produce meaning in different ways. Readings of people are polysemic and, particularly, oppositional readings ‘exceed the norms of ideological control’ (Fiske 2006: 114). This brings us to a first hypothesis related to conspiracy theories. As counter-narratives self-consciously formulated in opposition to the official interpretation of (mediatised) events, we can argue that conspiracy theories are grounded in an oppositional reading of mass media texts. In fact, conspiracy theories can be understood as oppositional readings par excellence. In their critical readings of newspapers, broadcasted news, film, policy dossiers, video clips or mediatised events in politics, sports, entertainment, conspiracy theorists actively resist (alleged) ideological control and, in the words of Hall, ‘retotalize the message within some alternative framework of reference’ (Hall 1980: 172–3). The adage ‘nothing is what it seems’ (Barkun 2006) inspires an oppositional interpretation of the media text wherein it is assumed that ideology, power and manipulation are key. This ‘deep’ style of reading ideology shows similarities with what Paul Ricoeur called ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ (e.g. Knight 2000: 73–5; Harambam 2017). Not unlike Marx, Freud and Nietzsche, conspiracy theorists detect deep structures underneath the surface of what is said, written or visualised in the text and, in a typical modernist way, reduce every empirical detail to the underlying theory. ‘Signs and symbols’, Harambam argues, ‘are not fully understood by their manifest content, but are skeptically addressed for what they hide, repress or conceal’ (2017: 248). Transparency can hence be decoded as a sign of concealment while every arbitrary number, letter, word, object or gesture, can have ultimate meaning. Reading the official report of the Warren committee about the cause of death of John F. Kennedy in 1963; watching the 26-second Zapruder film and meticulously analysing its 486 frames; observing the broadcasted moon landing in 1969 or screening the televised attacks of 11 September 2001 – the deep and intense readings of mass media texts bring conspiracy theorists to different (and substantially competing) interpretations about what really happened. Even seemingly non-political and aesthetically pleasing clips of pop stars like Rihanna, Madonna or Miley Cyrus, we will see, can be read as signifying a conspiracy to create a new world order. The practice of decoding mass media texts can, perhaps, be understood as key to making a contested conspiracy theory plausible and the invisible conspiracy visible to others. To prove, justify and legitimate their oppositional reading of mainstream media texts, conspiracy theorists actively search for textual/audiovisual evidence, signs and symbols.

The interpretive practices of conspiracy theorists can basically be understood as a form of pop-semiotics: Not unlike academic semioticians inspired by the works of Ferdinand de Saussure, Roland Barthes or Charles Sander Pierce, conspiracy theorists are self-consciously making distinctions between signs and what they really signify; between denotations and unconventional, deep ideological connotations to uncover the underlying conspiracy structuring the text. A rose
shown in a video clip is never a rose; a dollar bill never a dollar bill; gestures, aesthetics or performances are never studied in isolation since they are ultimately embedded in a web of intertextual references to other events in history, narratives or forbidden texts. Ultimately, such deep symbolic readings of conspiracy theorists show an affinity with religious (sub)cultures where ‘invisible power is made visible’ through the use of pictures, aesthetics or other visual mediations (Morgan 2013; Meyer 2015). There is, however, a crucial difference: Conspiracy theorists are not trying to represent God, spirits or metaphysical elements in the natural world but, instead, opaque forces in the cultural world (Aupers, Harambam 2019).

Understanding conspiracy ‘theories’ as oppositional readings embedded in a practice of decoding of mass media texts, then, is crucial. And, yet, there’s another important element in the encoding/decoding model of Stuart Hall and David Morley that is pivotal in explaining the type of (conspirational) reading of mass media texts. Interpretations of texts, they argue convincingly, are neither individual nor arbitrary since such readings are always embedded in a social context and related to the social-economic or cultural position of the audience – the (class) interest, education, cultural capital, gender, ethnicity or worldview of the group involved. Such sociological variables, after all, do not only structure what people consume but also how they evaluate and interpret the text, message or code of a cultural product (e.g. Bourdieu 1984). In the study of conspiracy theories, we can therefore hypothesise that the type of conspiracist reading people have of mass media texts is related to the particular audience – their socio-economic position, ideology or worldview. Quantitative research on conspiracy theories confirms in this respect that conspiracy theories flourish along the whole political spectrum (Oliver, Wood 2014), but that distinct political positions inform the type of conspiracy theory one believes in (van Prooijen, Krouwel 2015). Rightist-conservative citizens, for instance, affiliate more with conspiracy theories about climate change being a hoax and progressive-leftist citizens more with conspiracy theories about capitalism, multi-nationals or bankers. The same may be true if we apply other demographic variables such as age, gender, race, etc.

The encoding/decoding model gave rise to various empirical case-studies, varying from the way people from different classes are watching programmes, such as Nationwide in the U.K. (Morley 1980), soap series like Dallas (Ang 1982), or how women read novels (Radway 1987) and magazines (Hermès 1995). If we consider conspiracy theorists as an active audience, studies are called for that research how they read/decode mass media texts and if these readings can be understood from social context, ideology and worldview.

‘Produsers’/‘prosumers’ on the Internet

The model of encoding/decoding, then, provides a valuable theory to empirically study the way conspiracy theorists read established media texts, decode encoded ideologies and formulate conspiracy theories that can be explained by social-economic position, ideology and worldview. Since the 1990s, audience studies were focused not only on the reading of texts, but, more fundamentally, it was considered that text, literature, film, television, video and music are used as cultural resources for young people to construct their personal and social identity (Fiske 2006, Willis 1990). Initially, this debate was launched in relation to the active appropriation of mass media material by, for instance, fans (Jenkins 1992; Hills 2002). This highly devoted audience actively produces narratives about pop stars, celebrities and idols by re-assembling material from songs, video-clips, television shows and news fragments. They are ‘textual poachers’ (Jenkins 1992) or ‘textual performers’ (Hills 2002: 41) since they ‘produce and circulate among themselves texts which are often crafted with production values as high as any in the official culture’ (Fiske 1992: 39).
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Conspiracy culture, from this perspective, can be considered as the dark flip-side of fan-culture. Like fans, conspiracy theorists are not just reading mass media, they are also actively exploiting it as a cultural resource to build their worldview and construct their identity. Conspiracy theories are typically *bricoleurs*: They tap into various media sources, texts, images, fragments of news, scientific facts, literary fiction and audio-visual material (see Chapter 4.5). Instead of passive consumers, they are a highly productive audience since they use this material to build a coherent narrative and ground the plausibility of their conspiracy theory. A good example is David Icke who is most famous – or notorious – for his ‘reptilian thesis’: The idea that ‘reptilian human-alien hybrids are in covert control of the planet’ (Robertson 2013: 28), but also known for his assemblage and ‘synthesis’ of different sources (cf. Barkun 2006; Ward, Voas 2011) to claim epistemic authority (Harambam, Aupers 2015). Icke reads scientific reports, findings and theories about chemistry, quantum physics or evolution theory; he draws on science fiction texts like *The Matrix* (2000) and integrates these with conspirational readings of the Bible, esotericism, spiritual New Age literature and advertising. In fact, he is not just a consumer/reader of mass media texts, but uses media as a cultural resource to construct his own conspiracy narrative. Although David Icke is, of course, in no way representative for conspiracy theorists in general, his highly productive and eclectic stance vis-à-vis media texts exemplifies a broader trend in conspiracy culture where the distinction between encoding/decoding and production/consumption is eroding. This is not new but becomes more prevalent with the rise of the Internet in the 1990s and contemporary social media: The non-hierarchical structure and ‘participatory culture’ (Jenkins 1992) of this medium provides a platform for ‘amateurs’ to compete with ‘professionals’ in the production of knowledge. Academically trained scientists, professional journalists and politicians can now publicly be criticised with alternative knowledge claims. Andrew Keen (2008) writes in this respect (in a pejorative sense) about how the Internet cultivates a ‘cult of the amateur’ where the distinction between established (scientific) knowledge and alternative truth claims erodes. He argues:

Can a social worker in Des Moines really be considered credible in arguing with a trained physicist over string theory? Can we trust a religious fundamentalist to know more about the origins of mankind than a PhD in evolutionary biology? Unfortunately, the Web 2.0 revolution helps to foster such absurdities. (2008: 44)

Pessimistic accounts such as these are, however, complemented with overly optimistic accounts about the end of the monopoly of mass media, the democratisation of knowledge and the rise of ‘citizen journalism’ (Bowman, Willis 2003) since lay-people are now actively and publicly ‘collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information’ (Bowman, Willis 2003: 9; see also Önerfors 2020).

Notwithstanding the overly moral underpinnings of this debate, it is pivotal for the empirical study of conspiracy theories to understand that, unlike with mass media, conspiracy theorists are not only ‘decoding’ established texts on the Internet (in the sense of Stuart Hall). Since the structure of the medium is principally democratic, they are essentially part of a global chain of communication where citizens are simultaneously ‘decoding’ and ‘encoding’, consuming and producing. There’s yet another paradigm shift here from an *active audience* to an *interactive audience* that reads, negotiates and decodes texts, actively discusses worldviews on fora, uploads user generated content via blogs, vlogs or YouTube clips, and shares self-produced information with others on the Internet. This erosion of the typical modern distinction between encoding and decoding, production and consumption on and through the Internet is captured by concepts
like the ‘prosumer’ (Ritzer, Jurgenson 2010) or ‘produser’ (Bruns 2008). The ‘prosumer’, it is agreed, adds to the value of the product – not only through interpretation – but by co-producing content and actively distributing and disseminating the information. If we apply this to contemporary conspiracy theorists on the Internet, we see that they are often decoding mass media messages and, based on that, encoding and producing their own texts. These vary from personal articles on websites, texts on Facebook, tweets on Twitter to audio-visual material on YouTube. Given the fact that these texts are, in turn, decoded by other ‘prosumers’, conspiracy theories on the Internet may potentially develop into global ‘digital memes’ (Shifman 2014): They are popular texts constantly ‘circulated, imitated, and or/or transformed via the Internet by many users’ (Shifman 2014: 41).

Audio-visual readings on YouTube

The theories and concepts outlined above, then, are helpful to understand the way audiences (including critical audiences like conspiracy theorists) relate to texts on the Internet. They are no longer only decoding mass media by having particular interpretations (as Stuart Hall argued), but are often actively encoding, producing and ‘publishing’ their own texts based on mass media material. Of particular interest here is the video-sharing platform YouTube, founded in 2005, that exemplifies the participatory culture of the Internet (Burgess, Green 2018). Indeed, on YouTube, ‘amateurs’ can produce and broadcast their own videos on countless topics – varying from personal vlogs made on a smartphone to full-fledged documentaries.

Conspiracy theories are flowering on YouTube. They are broadcasted on channels like ‘Conspiracy theories & Disclosures’, ‘Celebrity Conspiracy theories’ and ‘Government conspiracies’, and vary from vlogs posted about media events like the ‘Grammy Awards’, the ‘Super Bowl’, ‘State of the Union’ to new, disastrous events like high-school shootings or terrorist acts. Such videos can be understood as audio-visual readings. A few formal elements are important here. In general, these videos are multi-media assemblages of textual, visual and audio fragments that are selected, edited and combined in a particular way by their producers to build a coherent and convincing narrative about a conspiracy. The reading, therefore, is already embedded in the personal arrangement of the mass media material: Selected fragments of interviews, public performances, visual cues, combined sometimes with inserted graphics, stats, animations, have the function to prove the conspiracy theory. The visual image is pivotal here: Guided by the modernist motto ‘seeing is believing’, audio visual readings rely on visual ‘evidence’ or, rather, ‘virtual eyewitnessing’ (McKenzie-McHarg 2019: 142). This reliance on visual information instead of text; visual rhetoric instead of argumentation, is not exclusive for YouTube videos of course, since it has a long tradition in propaganda and art (see Chapter 4.5), but is increasingly an important, yet undertheorised, element of modern conspiracy theories (McKenzie-McHarg 2019). In addition to the selection of visual fragments, the actual interpretation/reading/decoding or explanation of what is really going on is performed generally by a voice-over of the author. She is taking the lead in the interpretation and showing that ‘what we think we see’ is actually ‘not what it seems’. Do you think the broadcasted moon landing is real? Just look at the absence of stars and the direction of the shadows demonstrating the position of the cameras in the Hollywood studio! Do you really think the Twin Towers were attacked by Al Qaida instead of being an inside job? Just look at the (underlined) small explosions in the tower, just before it crumbles down! Do you think you are seeing an innocent video clip of a famous artist? Just learn to read the hidden signs and symbols in the media text to change your mind!

Selected visual evidence and voice-over operate in tandem and, in coalition, reinforce one another in the oppositional reading of mass media events. This constitutes the audio-visual
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reading on YouTube that differs from other media forms. Unlike elitist texts in books, literature or fiction, or professionally produced films, series or documentaries – YouTube provides the option for ‘amateur’ conspiracy theorists to visualise the invisible. Over 30 years ago, Sherry Turkle argued in psychoanalytical terms that ‘the computer, like a Rorschach inkblot test is a powerful projective medium’ (1984: 14). She considered the personal computer a ‘mirror of the mind’ (1984: 15) inviting people to project their individual concerns, personal ideas and private fantasies on the screen. In analogy, social media like YouTube provide open-ended platforms to express and share the social imagery about the power elite and the social systems they represent. The empirical question is, then, how are mass media messages reconstructed in the oppositional reading of a conspiracy theory? What style of decoding is used to make the invisible conspiracy visible? And, can we explain the different readings by looking at the social-economic position or ideology of the users? To explore these questions, an illustrative case study of YouTube videos will be discussed in the next section. It loosely covers a diverse cluster of conspiracy theories united by the well-known claim that a secret society of Illuminati is dominating the entertainment industry.

Reading Illuminati in the culture industry

The ultimate question addressed in contemporary conspiracy theories is: What is the real reality behind the reality that is staged? And, more specific: Who, then, is really in control? (Boltanski 2014). The culture industry, in this respect, is a usual suspect: Halfway through the twentieth century, Horkheimer and Adorno (2002 [1994]) sketched a grim image of its omnipotence and radical influence on the minds, thoughts and experience of individuals in modern societies. Given the contemporary global, oligarchical and highly complex nature of major companies like Universal, Bertelsmann, Sony, Warner, Disney, Viacom, Corporation – the ‘Magnificent seven’ (Hesmondhalgh 2013: 195) – the culture industries have only become more powerful. Not surprisingly, they are hence a prime source for the conspiracist imagination. Since these companies are de facto producing the mass media messages that people see, watch, hear in everyday life, these messages are the object of oppositional readings and active forms of decoding: ‘Nothing is what it seems’.

One of the most popular genres of conspiracy theories about the culture industry on YouTube is that organisations and companies operating in this field are not mainly interested in amusement for the people – let alone money-making. The goals of companies in the industry are political, since they are in fact ruled by the ‘Illuminati’ – a mysterious cultural and economic elite that allegedly strives for a new world order by using celebrities, implementing subliminal messages in songs, films, television shows and games and, in doing so, ‘brainwash’ the ignorant audience to complete their evil masterplan: The constitution of a new world order. Obviously, conspiracy theories about Illuminati have a long history in Western society. Secret societies varying from the Templars, Rosicrucians, Freemasonry to the ‘Bilderberg group’, have been a staple in conspiracy theory, at least, since the end of the 18th century (cf. Önnerfors 2017: 3, 114–5, 120). The ‘Order of the Illuminati’, founded in 1776 by Adam Weishaupt in Bavaria, was originally an organisation based on principles of the Enlightenment, with the goal to resist political corruption and reform society. Once banned ten years later, conspiracy theories about its persisting influence on historical events (i.e. the French Revolution) and world politics flowered in Europe and the U.S.A. (Önnerfors 2017). Such theories about ‘Illuminati’ have been a stable feature in the cultural margin ever since, but resurfaced over the past few years in various publications in the conspiracy milieu (Barkun 2006) and popular culture, varying from Umberto Eco’s Foucault’s Pendulum (1988), Dan Brown’s Angels
and Demons (2000, movie 2009), the film Lara Croft: Tomb Raider (2001) and recent video games such as Deus Ex or The Secret World. Countless theories flourish about Illuminati governing the complex global world of politics, the finance or science; in many prominent audio-visual readings on YouTube nowadays they even control the entertainment industry. Titles like ‘The music industry exposed’, ‘Illuminati rebellion’, ‘Illuminati symbolism in video games’, ‘Illuminati control the world’, ‘Illuminati Idols: Who Really Controls the Pop stars?’ or ‘How the Illuminati runs Hollywood’ illustrate that the culture industry is, ultimately, read as an exponent of the Illuminati.

A particular role in these conspiracy theories is played by celebrities who are in many ways representing the culture industry and – through their mediatised performances – allegedly indoctrinate the general public. As a ‘power elite’ (Mills 1956), they are literally the public faces of the culture industry and are incarnating its power. Hence, they are the pinnacle of conspiracist speculations on YouTube. The picture painted of celebrities in the context of Illuminati theories is extremely ambivalent: On the one hand, celebrities are considered ‘puppets’, ‘programmed robots’ or ‘sex slaves’ of the industry and the elite of the Illuminati. The standard narrative here is a Faustian one: Particularly female stars like Rihanna, Miley Cyrus, Britney Spears or Katy Perry sold their souls to the Illuminati to obtain fame and the stories point to a corrupted biography: ‘good American girls’, like Miley Cyrus, Ariana Grande or Britney Spears, raised and trained in the ‘Disney factory’, have ‘gone bad’ once they became famous. Rihanna, from this perspective, has been dubbed ‘princess of the Illuminati’ – a term that she playfully used in one of her clips, thereby fuelling the rumours about her alliance with the ‘Illuminati’. On the other hand, celebrities are attributed with almost supernatural power. In their position carved out by their masters, they are capable of reaching a worldwide audience and, as programmed role-models, influencing the beliefs, identities and lifestyles of youngsters. Countless examples are used to prove the relations celebrities have with the Illuminati. ‘Discovered’ signs and symbols in clips (the all-seeing eye, pyramids, etc.), but also interviews, ‘live’ performances and song texts, allegedly demonstrate the alliance with the Illuminati. Indeed, in many theories, worldwide media performances, such as the Grammy Awards, the Super Bowl or the Oscars, are considered as ‘ritual performances’ in honour of the Illuminati.

In short, conspiracy theories about the Illuminati running the culture industry exemplify oppositional readings as described by Stuart Hall. The ‘preferred reading’ of the culture industry is self-consciously replaced by an alternative, critical or resistant reading. In fact, not unlike neo-Marxist academics, conspiracy theorists explicitly deconstruct the preferred reading of media texts as providing ‘innocent’ entertainment as a hegemonic ideology to install ‘happy consciousness’ in public consciousness to conceal the evil conspiracy of the Illuminati. In their paranoid readings, the culture industry is not about entertainment but worldwide domination; celebrities are not talented artists but slaves of the Illuminati; media is not a tool of representation but of manipulation.

Decoding Illuminati symbolism

How, then, do conspiracy theorists on YouTube decode media texts produced by the entertainment industry? It is pivotal for the argument here that their claims about Illuminati are not just ‘theories’ but ‘readings’ since they are grounded in the practice of decoding mass media texts. A typical example is ‘Does the Illuminati control the music industry?’ (2014) – a professional-looking documentary in which the phenomenon is discussed in a quasi-journalistic style and open (yet highly suggestive) questions are formulated about the role of the Illuminati in the music industry. The video is an example of an audio-visual reading: Visual images are selected
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from mass media while written text and voice-overs reinforce one another to strengthen and communicate the oppositional reading.

The clip opens with a collection of visual fragments of celebrities making signs of a triangle with their fingers (allegedly signifying the Illuminati symbol of a pyramid), covering one eye with one hand (the ‘all seeing eye’) or showing other alleged ‘Illuminati symbols’. The voice-over comments:

The clues are everywhere. Symbolism can be found in almost all major music videos, concerts, merchandise and records. But what does it mean? Is all of this … just a mere coincidence? Or is it in fact a secret message from our favorite popstars? Are Kanye, Lady Gaga, Drake, Jay-Z, all trying to tell us something – something that we shouldn’t know about the darker side of the music industry?

(Uncovered 2014: 00–27 seconds)

Then an image is shown of a meeting of European royalties, politicians and C.E.O.s and, after this, a picture of serious (business) men in suits before a large media screen. This is, in turn, followed by a close-up of the unfinished pyramid with the all-seeing eye pictured on top. A connection is then audio-visually established between what we see (signs and symbols) and the reading (the power of the Illuminati):

Is it possible that Kanye West is referring to an elite organization thought to be manipulating the world’s most powerful corporations? Or was Kanye perhaps referencing the secret and all-powering fraternity known as the Illuminati? And if so, what interest would this organization have in the music business?

(Uncovered 2014: 42–57 seconds)

Particularly, more personal vlogs are dedicated to the decoding of signs and symbols to educate the general public. Self-proclaimed ‘Illuminati watchers’ analyse every detail of clips, films, texts or lyrics of songs in their videos. On the one hand, there are countless readings on YouTube of lyrics of songs of Rihanna and Jay-Z (Umbrella, 2008), Katy Perry (Dark Horse, 2013) or Taylor Swift (Look what you made me do, 2017), in which seemingly romantic sentences, words and meanings are decoded as metaphorical references to the Illuminati. Practices of decoding, however, are by no means restricted to words/texts and are more often focused on visual elements in media texts or public performances. In their audio-visual readings, conspiracy theorists commonly show celebrities like Jay-Z, Beyoncé or countless others making the ‘ritual’ gesture of the all-seeing eye; they explain the body movements of Rihanna that are similar to the iconic image of ‘Baphomet’ – the satanic, horned figure that allegedly was the God of the Templars; they decode the patterns of the dress of Lady Gaga conveying hidden references to the Jewish mystic current of Kaballah; they deconstruct the use of pyramids, triangles and occult symbols in performances; they refer to symbols of snakes, reptiles or reveal the shape-shifting behaviour of Beyoncé in an interview fragment; they detect the returning colours black and white in clips signifying the floors of Masonic lodges and speculate extensively about hidden Illuminati messages in films. Most notable are Walt Disney films like the Little Mermaid showing hidden phallus symbols in seaweed, the Lion King’s face hiding a nude woman and the ghost in Aladdin allegedly murmuring ‘Young teenagers, take of your clothes’.

Indeed, given the assumption that ‘the clues are everywhere’, potentially everything can be/is decoded. Illuminati symbols can be detected in stage performances, choreography, gestures, body movements, close-up of eyes, pupils, clothing, props and so on. By analysing these signs,
particularly in relation to one another, conspiracy theorists try to unveil the omnipresent ideology of the Illuminati and visualise what remains hidden to the general public. In addition to disentangling signs and signified, the authors often aim to strengthen their interpretation through intertextual references. The analysis of a text, in other words, is often embedded in a broader context of (pseudo)scientific references (i.e. theories about the ‘unconsciousness’, communication theories about ‘subliminal messages’, quotes of philosophers like Plato or Nietzsche), (pseudo)historical events or even (science) fiction. A good example of this intertextual form of meaning-making is the analysis of a performance of Katy Perry at the Grammy Awards in 2014 that was by many bloggers and vloggers understood as a ritual performance in order to honour the Illuminati. The performance of her new song Dark Horse, that had just been released, was analysed in detail and often embedded in a rich context of intertextual references: The ‘Dark horse’ with red, glowing eyes in the background, for instance, was considered a reference to the Apocalypse (one of the four horses described in the biblical chapter ‘Revelation’), while the glowing red cross on Perry’s dress was in many cases considered similar to the red cross of the Templars – ultimately indicating that she was, in fact, ritually re-enacting the murder of Jacques de Molay in 1314 who allegedly was the last grand master of the Templars. (As noted on Lara Atwood’s (2014) blog: ‘at the 2014 grammys, that event was symbolically relived to the cheers of a modern crowd’. The Templars, in turn, are then rhetorically connected to Freemasonry, the order of the Sith in the Hollywood movie Star Wars (white knights with red crosses) and, ultimately, the Illuminati in the contemporary music industry.

In short, by placing the Illuminati symbols spotted in contemporary media texts in a broader context of scientific, historical and fictional references, conspiracy theorists add to the meaning and urgency of their claim. After all, they communicate: The striving for a new world order is not new – it has always been the staple of secret societies and has been the driving force in history.

Audiences and conspiracy theories

A final issue to deal with from the perspective of audience perception studies is: Who, then, is the audience? In the work of Hall, Morley and others, this question is not so much answered in psychological – or biographical – but rather sociological terms: If we want to understand the different readings of a media text, we have to relate it to the social-economic position, ideology or worldview of the audience.

If we apply this perspective to the producers of the videos on YouTube, we can, of course, first conclude that such readings about Illuminati in the entertainment industry share a habitus of distrust. It is a mainstay in the literature on conspiracy theories that conspiracy theorists score high on distrust vis-à-vis the government, modern institutions and elitist groups (Oliver, Wood 2014). From this perspective, the culture industry is a usual suspect. Celebrities – representing the opaque system of the culture industry – are logically connected to this since they represent the culture industry and are, literally, the faces and incarnations of its power. Notwithstanding previous academic assumptions about celebrities being a ‘powerless elite’ with limited institutional power (Alberoni 2007), recent studies argued that they are the new status group par excellence. Like the traditional elite, Kurzman et al. (2007) state, celebrities enjoy interactional, normative, affectual and even legal privileges. According to Driessens (2013), ‘celebrity capital’ is a form of ‘meta capital’: Being a mediated celebrity opens up access to social capital, economic capital and even political capital. There is, however, another important difference with the traditional cultural elite: Unlike stable, traditional status groups where status is inherited (Weber 2013 [1922]), celebrity thrives on the market and is ‘status on speed’ (Kurzman et al.
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2007) – it exemplifies extremely rapid social mobility. In general, then, this perspective on celebrities being a new, global ‘power elite’ may explain the appeal of conspiracy theories about celebrities. They provide a subversive, yet clear, account about why some pop stars are suddenly very successful and explain to people the extraordinary status and influence of celebrities in contemporary society.

In general, the habitus of distrust vis-à-vis the opaque culture industry and elitist status of celebrities may, then, explain oppositional readings of the culture industry on YouTube. But, if we look at the ‘authors’ of the videos and the underlying ideology, we can detect differences as well. Within this resistant reading of the culture industry there are different audiences, with different biographies, motivations and ideologies. Although the reference to the ‘Illuminati’ is a lingua franca in conspiracy narratives about the culture industry, the term proves to be an umbrella category (Barkun 2006: 52) – a common trope that refers to different groups with slightly different aims. Who the Illuminati ‘really are’ and what they ‘really want’ varies from text to text – seemingly in accordance with different, often radically contradicting, worldviews of the authors of YouTube clips. Typically, four variations on the theme can be distinguished:

- **Christian reading.** In this popular Christian scenario, generally brimming with biblical references, it is argued that Illuminati governing the culture industry are actually satanists. They are involved in a ‘Luciferian scheme’ to seduce (young) consumers to engage with occultism, esotericism, New Age and to use (hidden) symbols and sexualised messages to distract them from the Christian faith.

- **Antisemitic reading.** There is a widespread claim that the Illuminati are actually Jews (often connected to banker family Rothschild), controlling the companies for economic reasons and, ultimately, seeking world domination. This scenario converges with a long-standing tradition of antisemitic conspiracy theories (Pipes 1997) and, particularly, about Jews seeking world domination – a theory that flowered since the famous (fake) document The Protocols of the Elders of Zion, in which Jews conspired to take over the world, was fabricated in 1903, translated in different languages and circulated widely thereafter (see Chapter 3.8).

- **Neo-Marxist reading.** This leftist scenario is closely related to Horkheimer and Adorno’s critical theory about the omnipresent ‘culture industry’ commodifying culture and indoctrinating a passive audience into ‘false consciousness’, ‘sameness’ and ‘pseudo-individualism’. It exemplifies the fact that contemporary conspiracy theories often incorporate theories and assumptions from the social sciences and, as such, can be understood as a form of ‘pop sociology’ (Harambam, Aupers 2015).

- **Science fiction reading.** This scenario delves into various themes of science fiction, arguing that the Illuminati have a ‘transhumanist’ agenda, are aliens or (most notable) ‘shape-shifting lizards’ that have come to the Earth already thousands of years ago and have infiltrated humanity. Clips of celebrities like Rihanna or Beyoncé allegedly ‘confirm’ they have reptilian eyes, scales underneath their skin or are able to shape-shift. This scenario is rooted in works like that of Erich von Däniken and is particularly developed and popularised by David Icke – probably the most influential conspiracy theorist in the field today (cf. Barkun 2006).

These scenarios illustrate not only that there are different types of conspiracy theories about the culture industry being run by the Illuminati, but, more importantly, that different audiences adopt/create variations that are converging with their identities and ideologies. Christians have distinctly different readings of mass media texts than antisemitic groups, leftist neo-Marxist
activists or sci-fi fans. Indeed: *mass media texts may be considered polysemic projection screens* that are, like Rorschach tests, open for various interpretations. However, the interpretations are neither individual nor arbitrary: They are embedded in and shaped by the worldviews of those who formulate them. The four ideal-typical groups formulated here are derived from the YouTube clips – several biographical references and explicit ideological statements made by the author – but the typology is more tentative than empirically grounded. A more systematic study of who the producers and audiences are and how their ideology relates to their interpretation/reading/decoding is called for.

**Conclusion**

Conspiracy theories are often studied as stable media texts or narratives in literature, fiction, film or series. The goal of this chapter was to focus on how conspiracy theorists relate to mass media texts in everyday life. Given their ambivalent relation to media, the question was how they actively read, decode, use media texts in the formulation and communication of conspiracy theories. In the context of this concern, I discussed different theoretical perspectives in audience research and Internet studies and applied these to a specific case on conspiracy theories about Illuminati in the entertainment industry on YouTube. Conspiracy theorists on YouTube, it is suggested in this chapter, exemplify oppositional readings of mass media texts and performances and the paranoid style of decoding is characterised by a ‘deep’ reading of signs and symbols in seemingly trivial aesthetic details that, together, allegedly unveil the underlying ideology of the culture industry.

This reading/decoding/prosumption of media texts should be further studied if we want to better understand contemporary conspiracy culture. Conspiracy theorists are critical audiences and their different readings can be understood as a form of pop-semiotics: The academic discipline in cultural studies of analysing the deeper meanings embedded in texts, evidently, trickled down to the ‘amateur’ who is not just a passive audience. (S)he produces new, subversive texts and videos on the Internet that are shared and, in turn, interpreted and decoded by other users. Studying this phenomenon of pop-semiotics, particularly on the Internet, has its own epistemological and methodological complexities: On the one hand, conspiracy theorists are competing with the humanities in the interpretation of literature, films, series and video games. Trained scholars do not have the authority on the question: What do these texts really mean? One of the common academic reflexes of being involved in such an ‘interpretive contest’ (Melley 2000) is ‘boundary work’ (Harambam, Aupers 2015) – the making of a clear-cut distinction between good/rational (academic) and bad/irrational (amateuristic) interpretations of media texts to, ultimately, defend the superiority of science as a professional practice (Gieryn 1983). Rather, however, I suggest that we should face the complexity of ‘double hermeneutics’ (Giddens 1984) in analysing the interpretive practices of conspiracy theorists: As academics, we are now in the position to not only analyse, read and decode published texts, but to read the readers and decode the decodings of these readers on the Internet. Herein lies, I think, one of the challenges for future research of conspiracy culture.

**References**


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