

# What makes conspiracy theories appealing for teenagers?

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- Semiotics + media and communication studies
- CA15101 - Comparative Analysis of Conspiracy Theories (COMPACT)
- **Research interests:** cultural semiotics, media semiotics, strategic narratives, conspiracy theories, radicalization of online communities



# Introduction

- Conspiracy theories (CTs) are spread by people of all ages
- Teenagers – who often happen to be heavy users of social media– are particularly responsive to CTs

## **The structure of my talk:**

1. How are CTs studied by cultural semiotics + brief explanation of the main meaning-making tendencies of CTs
2. Popular plots: Illuminati and NWO
3. Coolness of CTs
4. The positive self-description of conspiracy theorists
5. CTs and (affective) social media communication

# CTs and cultural semiotics (Madisson 2016)

- **CTs as paranoid style** e.g. an inadequate or irrational, sometimes even pathological practice of interpretation (see Hofstadter 1967, Pipes 1999; Showalter 1997)
- **CT as a framework which enables constructive and democratically transparent communication** and to articulate one's doubts about dominant institutions and regimes of truth (see Birchall 2006; Bratich 2004; Dean 2002)
- Cultural semiotics is **not interested in reality in its entire diversity** but rather in sign-based models of this reality; and in most of the cases those models tend to be simplifying (M. Lotman 2001:216-217)
- Cultural semiotics understands **CT as a specific model of meaning-making or interpretational frame that treats various (unpleasant) events or phenomena as “the result of a group of people acting in secret to nefarious end”** (Birchall 2006: 34)

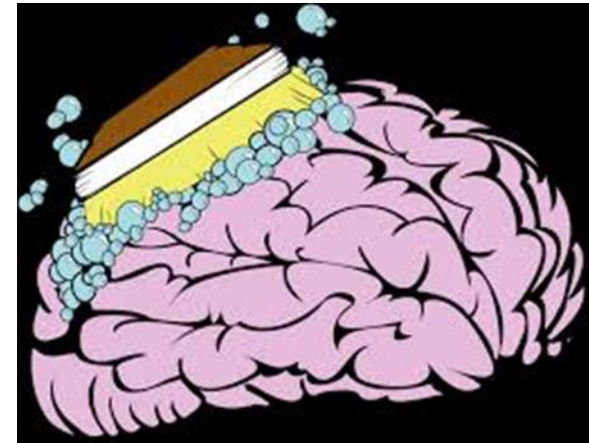
# Semiotic logic of CTs: WHY?

- CTs answer the question: *Why do bad things happen to good people?*
- Their logic does **not** perceive events (be it natural disaster, social conflict, disease etc) **as a coincidence of tragic contingencies**, but rather as being motivated by one and the same originary cause – the **evil** acts of conspirators
- CTs are based on **binary logic**, dividing it into Good and Evil agents
- The more terrible the consequences of an event, the more brutal and inhuman are those who caused it (Madisson 2016b: 33)



# Semiotic logic of CTs: HOW?

- **How a particular event happened?** Under specific physical, social, historical, etc. conditions...
- CTs interpret social events in light of **over deterministic models of causation**; it is believed that **by way of a conspiracy, everything is connected with everything**
- Conspirators are often depicted as **extremely organized group**, divided into intricate sub-systems
- Conspirators are perceived as extremely dangerous because interpreters presume that they have the **capacity to apply natural causality for serving their evil intentions** (Madisson 2016a, 2016b)

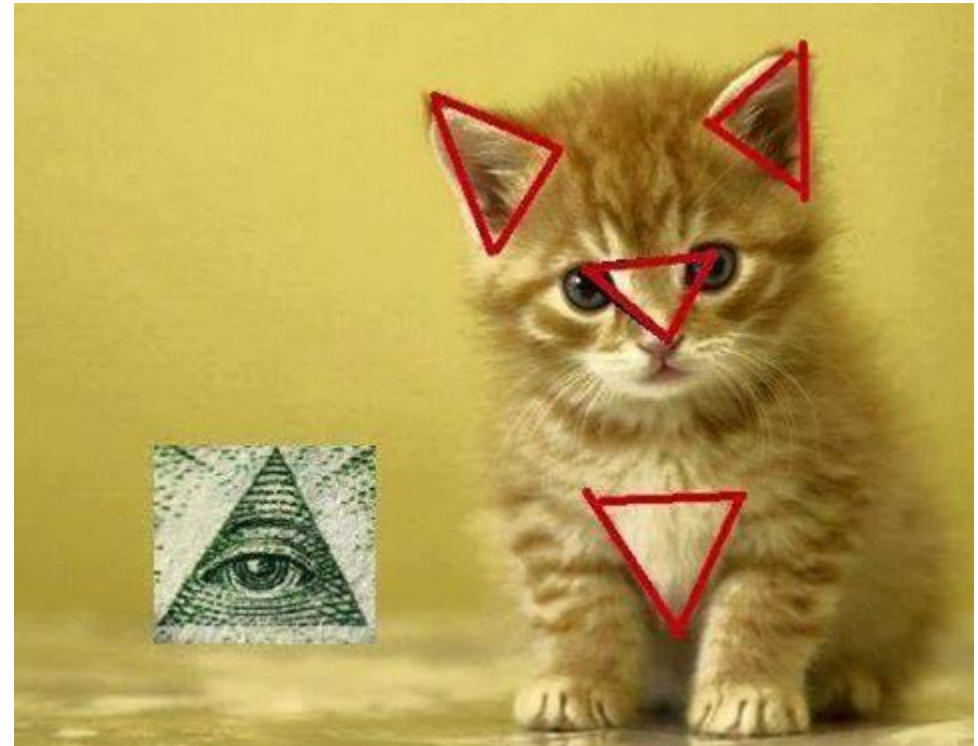


# Hermetic semiosis

- **Hermetic semiosis** is directed by a powerful mechanism of analogy which is almost unstoppable once started
- The interpreter starts to look for **secret motives, or “missing links”** behind all kinds of events and phenomena
- **The criterion of similarity is established quite loosely** (Eco 1990: 163–166)
- E.g.: Suspicious gestures, vocabulary, physical appearance
- Search for “suspicious numbers” (666, 13, 5 etc.) or symbols (e.g. pentagram, triangle)
- The connections are seen more valuable if they are not obvious

# Thinking assignment

- What are the **3 main things** (themes, events, characters etc) that come to your minds when you think about Illuminati and NWO?
- You may discuss it in pairs
- 4 minutes



# Popular plots: Illuminati and NWO

- **Goal** – to create the **total control over the movements and even the thoughts of people** (Ballinger 2011)
- Extremely **syncretic nature**

## Pyramid structure of evil

- **I level, the evil circle**- some very powerful, almost supernatural dark force (quite narrow circle of Illuminati)
- **II layer, the henchmen of the secret cabal**, is absorbed into the most influential structures of global political and economic elite. E.g. international organizations, institutions related with (mass)media, education and healthcare, entertainment industry etc
- **III layer** -the lowest and widest- **the mass of ignorant “ordinary citizens”**- unwittingly under the influence of the corrupted system and thus alienated from independent thinking and moral principles (Madisson 2016a)



# Popular plots: Illuminati and NWO

- Illuminati plots have been popularized by American film and music industry (Byford, 2011)
- So-called **Illuminati gossip**, very widespread on tabloids and SNSs

## Main symbols:

(Devil's) all-seeing eye, "the all-knowing eye"/one-eye

- triangles/pyramids
- sometimes goat head
- Illuminati symbols are **repeatedly present in music videos, posters and celebrity logos**
- Jay Z, Beyoncé, Lady Gaga, Rihanna, Kim Kardashian, Kanye West etc.
- Intepreters often see be a secret collaboration between them





# Bill's example about serious worrying about the deeds of conspirators

- “[T]hese artists are **literally required to sell their souls to the devil in exchange for promoting their ideals and agenda through music crafted (both vocals and instrumentals) to spiritually influence the minds of people in the world.**”
- **“The imagery of the “one eye” symbolism are evidence of what the artists represent and are willing to represent publically as a means of conveying their support of the Illuminati and their agenda.”**
- **“In many numerous music videos, if you pay close attention, you will see the promotion of “one eye”, the pyramid or diamond, finger gestures like extending your index and pinky and folding in the rest of your fingers (a traditional and common rock music gesture) or even pictures of baphomet... The half man, half goat icon image that represents Satan.”**

(Bill 11.10 2018)

# This connection with pop culture makes CTs cool

- Pop references encourage **search for hidden motives and UGC about it**
- Stæhr's (2014) anthropological study concluded: teenagers that followed conspiracy-references in pop culture had **ambiguous/ controversial attitudes about it**
- It was considered **cool, related with their "special knowledge"** that defined their insider status
- The signs e.g. handsigns – such as the triangular shape – quickly became part of the adolescents' already existing repertoire (Stæhr 2014: 108)
- Teens began to identify symbols of Illuminati everywhere
- **Collective playful articulation of social fantasy scenarios about conspirators** taking over all kinds of aspects of our everyday life and society (Stæhr 2014: 114)

# The positive and narcissistic self-description of conspiracy theorists

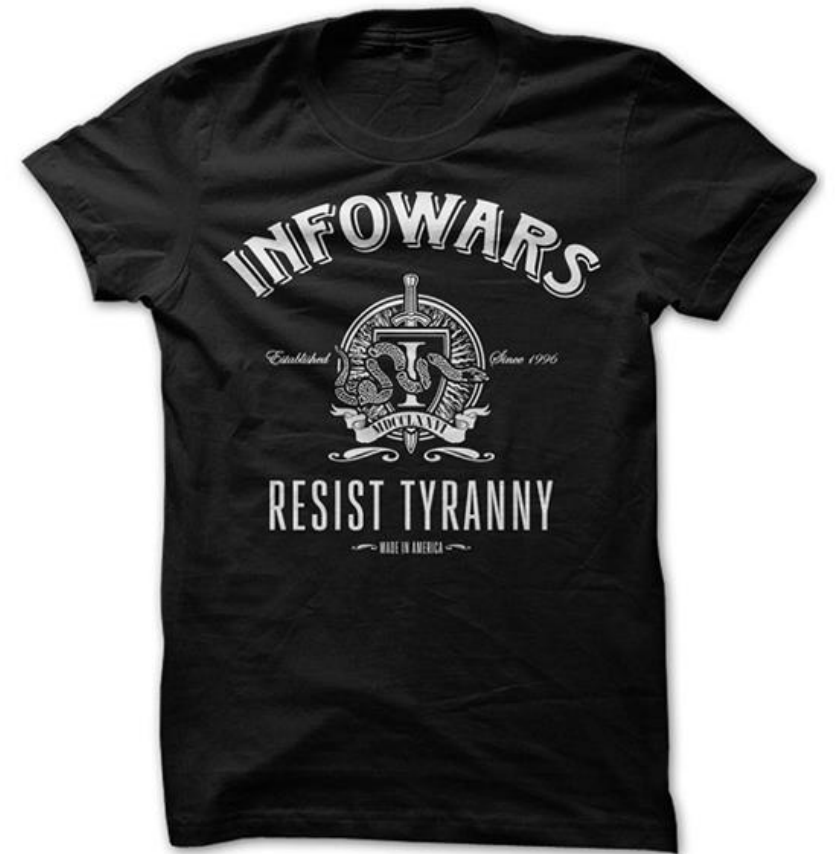


# The positive and narcissistic self-description of conspiracy theorists

- Cultural psychologists have concluded that **belief in CTs is correlated with narcissism, disagreeableness and insecure attachment** (van Prooijen, Douglas 2018: 3)
- CTs are **provoking the norms of so-called dominant understandings** (*e.g. education is useful, professional journalism is trustworthy etc*)
- CTs translate abstract feelings of fear, anger and **moral superiority** into a **tangible and explicit language** that is transferable also to the others
- Conspiracy theorists feel **active and useful** because their conspiracy-investigations may **disclose the conspiracy and to guide the others to “open their eyes”** (Madisson 2016: 195)
- When teens consume CT-related with pop culture it is quite likely that they enjoy a certain **rewarding feeling they are somehow in contact with hidden knowledge**
- They can take a **heroic role of a detective/ investigative journalist** and start digging for valuable material

# CTs as a means of impression management

- While sharing CTs on SNSs teens present themselves as conspiracy-explorers who have “social nerve” and deal with something forbidden, secret and even dangerous
- They share a **common repertoire of specific codes and signifiers** (e.g. acronyms, formerly mentioned numbers, etc)
- In some cases, the value of communication increases when it is incomprehensible to outsider groups
- **The immediate rewards – like receiving attention and admiration, and achieving a sense of belonging – have high value in the teen’s mind** (Gabriel 2014: 105)



# CTs and (affective) social media communication

- Contemporary attention economy facilitates **affective communication which is based on sharing immediate reactions and (pre-)emotions** (Harsin 2015, Papacharissi 2016 Papailias 2016, Prøitz 2017)
- It cultivates **the culture of instantaneity** and the **pressure to react/participate urgently** (Papacharissi 2016)
- CTs work as **excellent tools for attention-grabbing** as that they create the atmosphere of secrecy (Fenster 2008)
- People are more willing to share content which is perceived as **novel, intriguing, and somewhat mysterious or obscure** (Karlova, Fisher 2013)
- The architecture of social media suits well with naming the connections without actually logically explicating them



# Epidemic of conspiracy theories on social media?

- There is **no evidence that people are more prone to believing in CTs now** than they were prior to the triumph of social media (van Prooijen, Douglas 2018: 3)
- The internet plays a crucial role in **fostering distinct and polarized online communities among conspiracy believers**
- In hermetic online groups conspiracy beliefs become stronger more homogeneous over time (Douglas 2018)



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Your questions and comments are very welcome  
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