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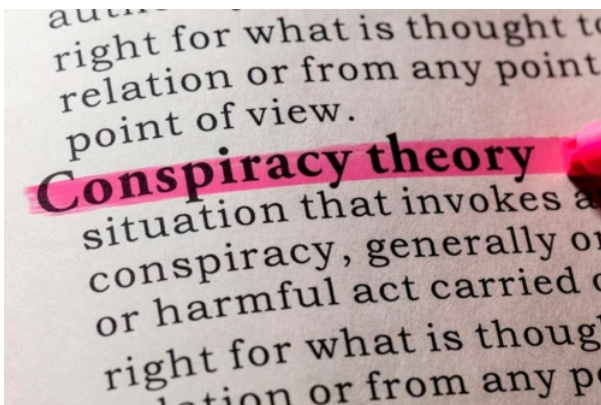
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# Transatlantic Circulations of Conspiracy Fiction: From Europe to the United States

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Chloé Chaudet, lecturer in comparative literature at Centre de Recherches sur les Littératures et la Sociopoétique (CELIS) at Clermont Auvergne University, was a visiting researcher at the ScienceCampus in June 2021. In this piece, she outlines her ongoing research on works of literature and other forms of cultural production that feature conspiracy discourses. In particular, she explores what she calls mega-conspiracies which have a transterritorial dimension to them. Exploring the form from its origins in nineteenth-century literature to its current transmedia manifestations, she traces the transnational and in particular transatlantic dimensions of such narratives. She argues that even though conspiracy theories are familiar to all and are indeed closer to fiction than reality, literary and cultural studies still lacks a suitable framework to explore their cultural representations together with their social significance. Her aim is to develop a transmedial narratology of conspiracy discourses produced in the Atlantic region. The study of *Joseph Balsamo* by the French writer Alexandre Dumas (1846) and *Atlas Shrugged* by the US-American Ayn Rand (1957) offer an indication of how this can be put into practice.



Who has never heard of “conspiracy theories”? What is less known, is the fact that a large set of fictions has been produced in parallel with them since their emergence at the beginning of the nineteenth century. This literary production has largely been overlooked, even though it manifests the logics, configuration and depth of the

imagination of conspiracies.

For about two centuries, a vast body of narrative fiction has taken on major importance in cultural productions in European languages: let's call it "conspiracy fiction". Such narratives, centered on an imaginary conspiracy, claim to reveal a secret plot concocted by a group of persons, often looking to target a public figure, an institution, or even an entire society. What marks the conspiracy fictions that have been a regular feature of literary production since the beginning of the nineteenth century is that they deal with a specific topic: a conspiracy with an interterritorial scope, one that can also be called a "mega-conspiracy".[1]

This type of fiction has never been studied in a systematic and transversal way, although it is part of our modernity and post-modernity. Discourses of conspiracy are recognized as an underlying component of our contemporary period by various scholarly disciplines.[2] Conspiracy fiction and conspiracy discourses are closely related. On the one hand, the whimsical dimension of several "conspiracy theories", which are closer to fiction than to other theories, is notorious. On the other hand, many authors were inspired by contemporary discourses of conspiracy and produced very successful works - from Friedrich Schiller and Honoré de Balzac to Umberto Eco, Joseph Conrad, Ernesto Sábato or Thomas Pynchon.

My current project aims to initiate a comparative study of mega-conspiracy fiction in several European languages, starting from its emergence in Europe in the nineteenth century. My research focuses on novels, but will also include a few films and television series. I intend to consider the various aspects of social imagination when it is mediated by fiction across the Atlantic area - in Europe and North America, but also in South America as well as in Africa. It aims at identifying the main elements of the fictional dimensions of the conspiracy discourses, thus contributing to the understanding of contemporary imaginations of conspiracy as a phenomenon that has become international through its circulations across the Atlantic ocean.

## **1. General outline**

My project starts from an initial observation: the scientific tools that would help us to better understand the specifics of conspiracy discourses are missing so far. Because of conspiracy discourses' fragmentary relation to reality, these intellectual constructions are closer to fiction, that is: imaginary products which correspond only partially to socio-historical reality.[3]

Of course, different works in social sciences have analyzed the discourses of conspiracy, but the relationship of these discourses to fiction as well as their transformations by fiction have not been systematically studied by scholars. Therefore, my project could contribute to a better collective understanding of the imagination of conspiracies as mediated by works of fiction.

## **2. Geographical and linguistic scope of the corpus**

Because of my philological background, the fiction addressed in my project is mainly narrative and textual. Since their emergence in the nineteenth century, discourses of mega-conspiracy have appeared both in narratives that

may be considered canonical literary works as well as in popular literature. In respect of their relation to conspiracy discourses, both forms share common characteristics.

From the twentieth century onwards, this convergence has extended to non-textual narrative forms, in particular films and television series, and to non-narrative media, too: in particular, pamphlets. What my study of the relations between fiction and conspiracy discourses aims to do is to bring literary studies into dialogue with the human and social sciences while considering fiction in a transmedia perspective.

My project focuses on the Atlantic area, which is an interesting intermediate scale for the study of globalization[4] as well as constituting a vast area where mega-conspiracy fiction in European languages has developed and diversified. Originally produced in Europe—in particular in the French *roman-feuilleton* (serialized literature)[5]—mega-conspiracy fiction has spread and diversified throughout the twentieth century in the North Atlantic space, in particular in the United States. It also exerted growing influence on writers and artists in the South Atlantic area.

In developing the corpus of my study, I have already listed about 80 international works in French, English, German, Spanish, Portuguese and Italian, half of which include the mega-conspiracy within the main plot, including—to give just a few examples:

- the novels *Joseph Balsamo* by Alexandre Dumas (1846); *L'Envers de l'histoire contemporaine* by Honoré de Balzac (1848); *The Secret Agent* by Joseph Conrad (1907); *Atlas Shrugged* by Ayn Rand (1957); *Angels and Demons* by Dan Brown, of course (2000); *Il Pendolo di Foucault* by Umberto Eco (2008); *Mathématiques congolaises* by In Koli Jean Bofane (2008); *La Forma de las ruinas* by Juan Gabriel Vásquez (2015);
- the series *The X-Files* by Chris Carter (1993-2018); *Mr. Robot* by Sam Esmail (2015);
- the films *Jud Süß* by Veit Harlan (1940); *Body of Lies* by Ridley Scott (2008); *Bacurau* by Kleber Mendonça Filho (2019).

### **3. Towards a Transmedia Narratological Study? Literature as starting point**

To outline the narratological part of my project—which is limited neither to literature nor to traditional narrative objects, as I will briefly show later—I will start with two successful novels featuring plots that are emblematic of their publishing contexts: *Joseph Balsamo* by the French writer Alexandre Dumas (1846) and *Atlas Shrugged* by the US-American Ayn Rand (1957).

#### **3.1 A basic axiological structure**

Just like the discourse of conspiracy, mega-conspiracy fiction tends to introduce more or less schematic boundaries within plural societies.[6] Conspiracy fiction is structured by an ethical demarcation between the targets of the plot and the plotters, affiliated with a secret entity. This does not mean that the conspirators are systematically located on the “right side”, nor does it preclude a blurring of the opposition, particularly when it

comes to maintaining narrative tension.

Devoted to the last years of the reign of Louis XV (1770-1774), Dumas' *Joseph Balsamo* is a serial novel—a *roman-feuilleton*—focusing on the French Revolution and its impact on the monarchy. Presented at the beginning of the novel, the plot in question is transnational in all respects. Carried by a cosmopolitan secret society that holds together a Freemasonry presented in an almost realistic manner alongside a fantasized representation of the “Illuminati”, this conspiracy has an objective clearly formulated by its leader (who has multiple names), Joseph Balsamo: “*moi et mes amis conspirons contre les monarchies de ce monde*”[7] (“my friends and I are conspiring against the monarchies of this world”). Such a theme is typical of the counter-revolutionary imagination that developed at the turn of the nineteenth century. Yet the secret society portrayed by Dumas follows benevolent aims: happiness for all, as Balsamo emphasizes.[8] By comparison, the motives that guide the representatives of the French monarchy depicted in the novel appear miserable. I will come back to this in a moment.

A similar axiological structure can be found in Ayn Rand's works, whose famous novel *Atlas Shrugged* (1957) is typical of the Cold War imagination. In this anti-socialist work, the main characters are entrepreneurs embodying the US-American logic of the self-made man. Dagny Taggart, head of a powerful railway company, her youthful love, Richard d'Anconia, a copper mining magnate, and her lover Hank Rearden, owner of the largest steel company in the United States, meet a mysterious figure: John Galt, instigator of a plot targeting the representatives of a more solidarity-based economy, including the People's Republic of Guatemala.[9] Galt's plan is to refuse to work, even sabotaging his own business, so that he can withdraw to a secret valley in the south of the United States. These brilliant self-made businesspeople do not want their work to benefit “the looters”. [10] The axiology is crystal-clear. It is part of the *roman à thèse* of a writer who hated socialism.

### 3.2 A dynamics of disclosure

I now come to a second main characteristic, essentially narrative, of the two pieces of conspiracy fiction discussed here, namely: the dynamics of disclosure that runs through them.

The most complete unveiling appears in Rand's novel. The indicial path[11] that characterizes it first confronts the reader with the conspirators' maneuvers before their identity is revealed. Just like the reader, the main characters Dagny Taggart and Hank Rearden are initially outside the plot. This is revealed, for example, when Francisco d'Anconia, who has already joined the conspiracy of the managers, visits Hank Rearden:

Rearden [...] caught a brief instant when Francisco, not moving, looked at him with the hint of an amused smile that was like a wink between conspirators at a secret they both understood, but would not acknowledge. It was only an instant, almost too brief to grasp, because it seemed to him that Francisco rose at once at his entrance, with a movement of courteous deference.[12]

The reader will discover the reason for this conspiratorial smile at the same time as the main characters.

But the disclosure can be more limited, as is the case in *Joseph Balsamo*. The reader does not see the progressive unveiling of the plot: everything is known from the beginning. What is at stake are the maneuvers of Balsamo and

his henchmen to weaken the monarchy. For example, the magician reveals to Marie-Antoinette that she will end up being guillotined.[13] Generally, the unveiling of Balsamo's maneuvers discloses at the same time the smallness of the characters associated with the monarchy. In his preface, Claude Schopp rightly points out that in *Joseph Balsamo*, "[l]e phallus supplante le sceptre"[14] ("the phallus supplants the sceptre")—which is particularly relevant to the king's character. The unveiling of the plotters' maneuvers goes hand in hand with the unveiling of their moral and ethical superiority. The parallels between Rand and Dumas in this respect become clear.

## 4. Conclusion

In the transatlantic corpus that I have briefly reviewed, as well as in other works that I study, the presence of a foundational axiological structure as well as the narrative dynamics of disclosure can be considered as two transnational and transsecular constants of the fiction of the mega-conspiracy.

These two constants are not only the prerogative of literary and traditional narrative works. The analysis is open to other cultural productions. A recent example is the French film *Hold-up* (2020) directed by the journalist Pierre Barnérias, whose aim is to demonstrate that the Corona-pandemic is associated with a series of national and international conspiracies. This film, presented and organized like a documentary film, clearly belongs to the imagination of conspiracy. To prove it, fact-checking is a first solution. A second and complementary solution is precisely to show that this pseudo-documentary film shares common features with works of conspiracy fiction. This suggests a transdisciplinary path to a more complete understanding of the imagination produced by discourses of conspiracy.

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## Notes

[1] See in particular Véronique Campion-Vincent, *La Société parano. Théories du complot, menaces et incertitudes*, Paris, Payot & Rivages, 2005; Pierre-André Taguieff, *L'Imaginaire du complot mondial. Aspects d'un mythe moderne*, Paris, Mille et une nuits, 2006; Emmanuel Kreis, *Les Puissances de l'ombre. Juifs, jésuites, francs-maçons, réactionnaires... la théorie du complot dans les textes* [2009], Paris, CNRS Éditions, 2012.

[2] See in particular Aurélie Ledoux, "Doute conspirationniste et regard critique", *Esprit*, novembre 2015, p. 8-17; Fredric Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetics Cinema and Space in the World System*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1992; George Marcus (ed.), *Paranoia Within Reason: A Casebook on Conspiracies Explanation*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1999.

[3] See in particular Françoise Lavocat, *Fait et fiction*, Paris, Seuil, 2016.

[4] See Jean-Marc Moura, "Entre études postcoloniales et travaux sur la mondialisation : les 'Oceanic studies'", in Françoise Aubès, Silvia Contarini, Jean-Marc Moura *et al.* (eds), *Interprétations postcoloniales et mondialisation*,

Berne, Peter Lang, 2014, p. 21-30.

[5] See Jean-Noël Tardy, *L'Âge des ombres. Complots, conspirations et sociétés secrètes au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 2015.

[6] See George Marcus (ed.), *op. cit.*; Pierre-André Taguieff, *op. cit.*

[7] Alexandre Dumas, *Joseph Balsamo* [1846-1849], ed. Claude Schopp, Paris, Robert Laffont, coll. "Bouquins", 1990, p. 900.

[8] "Que t'en reviendra-t-il, à toi, du renversement de cette monarchie?" asks Althotas to Balsamo, and he replies : "À moi, rien ; mais à tous, le bonheur", *id.*, p. 533.

[9] See Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged* [1957], New York, Signet, 1996, p. 992.

[10] "[W]e will see [...] the day of our victory and of our return [...] [w]hen the code of the looters has collapsed", *ibid.*, p. 686.

[11] See in particular Carlo Ginzburg, *Threads and Traces: True, False, Fictive*, transl. by Anne C. Tedeschi and John Tedeschi, Oakland, University of California Press, 2012; Luc Boltanski, *Énigmes et complots. Une enquête à propos d'enquêtes*, Paris, Gallimard, 2012.

[12] Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged*, *op. cit.*, 416.

[13] Alexandre Dumas, *Joseph Balsamo*, *op. cit.*, p. 171-175.

[14] Claude Schopp, 'Préface', *op. cit.*, p. 21.

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