

4.6

CONSPIRACY THEORIES IN FILMS AND TELEVISION SHOWS

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Introduction

‘At the heart of conspiracy theory,’ Mark Fenster observes, is ‘a gripping, dramatic story’ of the desperate efforts of a lone investigator or a small group of heroes to expose and foil the devious schemes of powerful enemies (2008: 119). Plots, that is, complots and intrigues, therefore make for exciting plots, that is, storylines in works of art. Hence conspiracy scenarios have been an important element in fiction of all kinds for many centuries, ranging at least from the intrigues of Shakespeare’s villains via the cabals of secret societies in Schiller and his contemporaries to the plots of governments and powerful organisations in the novels of Robert Ludlum and Tom Clancy. After all, fictional representations of conspiracy hold at least two advantages over their – allegedly – factual counterparts. First, outside of fiction, conspiracy theorists can only ever postulate the existence of a conspiracy by offering what they consider conclusive evidence. Inside of fiction, by contrast, conspiracies can be real beyond any doubt, as readers and audiences witness the evildoings of the conspirators directly. Their suspicions are confirmed and become established facts within the diegetic world. Second, the function of allegedly factual conspiracist discourse is to expose the conspirators and move the audience to take action against them. Fictional texts, by contrast, often do not only dramatised the exposure of the conspiracy but also its defeat. The optimism that, despite its generally bleak outlook on the world, informs conspiracy theorising (Butter 2018: 110–11) comes to the fore here more explicitly than in conspiracist texts outside fiction.

This chapter discusses the representation of conspiracies and conspiracy theory in film and television. It focuses almost exclusively on American narratives because of the global dominance that the products of American culture still enjoy and the influence they exert on other national cinemas and television cultures. The first section discusses American fiction films from the 1950s to the present; focusing on the period from the 1990s onward, the second section addresses television shows. Throughout, I place the changing depictions of plots and intrigues in two different contexts: On the one hand, the stigmatisation that conspiracy theories underwent in the second half of the twentieth century, which did not make them unpopular but rendered them problematic; and, on the other hand, the shifting conventions and aesthetics of Hollywood film-making and serial television.

Most studies of American conspiracy theories claim that such suspicions have become more and more widespread and normal over the course of the twentieth century. As Peter Knight

puts it, ‘conspiracy theories have become far more prominent, no longer the favoured rhetoric of backwater scaremongers, but the lingua franca of ordinary Americans’ (2000: 2). In the wake of the Kennedy assassination, revelations about the Vietnam War and the Watergate affair, this argument goes, widespread distrust of the government and its agencies such as the C.I.A. became reasonable and spread through the culture at large. As a result, conspiracy theories are ‘no longer “on the fringe”’, but have moved into the mainstream (Dean 1998: 10). However, as I have argued elsewhere, there is ample evidence that conspiracy theories were part of the mainstream from the colonial period until after the end of the Second World War. As orthodox knowledge, they were believed by ordinary people, articulated by the nation’s most revered leaders such as George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, and thus significantly shaped culture and society (Butter 2014).

Recently, Katharina Thalmann (2019) has built on this argument and demonstrated that conspiracy theories have not become ever more influential since the 1960s but, on the contrary, have undergone a process of stigmatisation. They remain popular but, at least in their explicit form, have been largely excluded from mainstream discourse. As heterodox knowledge, they are derided and problematised by the media, but also constantly reported upon, which has created the impression that they have become more influential. But, what scholars and the mainstream media have mostly been concerned with in recent decades are no longer the potentially harmful effects of conspiracies, but rather the dangers of conspiracy theory. Even the 2016 election did not mark the return of conspiracy theories as legitimate knowledge. The alarmism with which the conspiracist allegations of Donald Trump were discussed in the media shows that they are still considered problematic and are not at all generally accepted (Thalmann 2019: 192; see also Chapter 5.10 of this volume).

The conspiracy (theory) film

At first sight, it is surprising that larger political conspiracies only begin to feature prominently in American films in the early 1950s (Arnold 2008: 11). One could have expected that the conventions of classical Hollywood narratives would have made such scenarios a standard formula of films much earlier. As David Bordwell *et al.* (1985) have shown in their seminal study, Hollywood films in the first half of the twentieth century were extremely plot driven and invested into tightly-knit character-centred causality. Much like conspiracy theory, which operates on the assumption that ‘nothing happens by accident’ (Barkun 2013: 3), Hollywood films tried to exclude coincidence, confining it at most ‘to the initial situation’ of a film (Bordwell *et al.* 1985: 13). Moreover, the plot of classical Hollywood films is propelled forward by the combination of the goal that the protagonist wants to reach and the obstacles he faces along the way (Bordwell *et al.* 1985: 16). Accordingly, the foiling of a conspiracy that presents ever more obstacles to the protagonist would make for a classical plot par excellence.¹

However, the rules that Hollywood imposed on itself prevented filmmakers until the end of the 1940s from picking up on suspicions of conspiracy circulating in American culture. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, films were considered pure entertainment and not protected by the First Amendment, which guarantees freedom of speech. Censorship from outside was thus a threat looming large over the industry, and, in order to avoid it, film studios adopted the Production Code in 1934. It specified in much detail what could and could not be shown on screen, and, while it did not explicitly forbid the treatment of politics, filmmakers avoided controversial issues from that realm almost completely. Moreover, the Code explicitly stated that ‘[t]he history, institutions, prominent people and citizenry of other nations shall be represented fairly’ (qtd. in Maltby 2003: 596). Since American conspiracy theories until 1960

tended to focus on foreign plots (see Chapter 5.10 of this volume), this guideline made it virtually impossible to represent conspiracies orchestrated from outside the country.

Accordingly, Hollywood only began to depict a political conspiracy when the vast majority of Americans agreed that such a plot was really underway, so that the filmmakers could claim that they were representing the matter 'fairly'. This was the case from the late 1940s onward when 'a broad anti-Communist consensus' had emerged and 'most liberals as well as conservatives, ... intellectuals as well as plain folks' were convinced that there was a Soviet plot to undermine all American institutions and destroy the country's way of life (Fried 1990: 34). Also fuelled by an investigation into communist subversion in Hollywood by the notorious House Committee on Un-American Activities (H.U.A.C.), the film industry, eager to demonstrate that it was not secretly controlled by communists, began to address the issue (May 1989). These efforts were greatly helped by a 1952 Supreme Court ruling that finally granted movies protection under the First Amendment. Within a few years, Hollywood produced a large number of films that cast the alleged communist conspiracy in the bleakest possible terms.

Films such as *Conspirator* (1949), *The Red Menace* (1949), *Walk East on Beacon* (1952) or *Big Jim McClain* (1952) either focus on ordinary Americans who realise that family members or close friends are secretly aligned with the communists, or on heroic government agents that fight communist intrigues invariably presented as parts of a larger plot. *Suddenly* (1954) combines these two plotlines to a certain degree. The film revolves around a small group of communist conspirators – their leader is played by Frank Sinatra – who want to assassinate the president from a family home, to which they have gained access under false pretence. When the town's sheriff and a secret service agent visit the house and detect their true intentions, the communists kill the agent and take the sheriff and the family members hostage, but they eventually manage to free themselves and kill the conspirators.

Suddenly is a typical example of the 'conspiracy film tradition' that began in the early 1950s. As Thalmann defines the genre, conspiracy films are 'narratives which dramatize a relatively small-scale, clearly delineated conspiracy and focus both on the machinations of and the fight against said conspiracy' (2017: 215). In these films, it is established early on that there is indeed a conspiracy. Thus, the story does not focus on the efforts of an investigator to find out what is going on and then to convince a sceptical public of his claims, but instead concentrates on the efforts to foil the plot. Reflecting the status of conspiracy theory as orthodox knowledge during the 1950s and, more specifically, the general belief in a communist plot, the genre peaked later in the decade. It comprises films such as Alfred Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* (1959) and science-fiction films such as *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), which dramatises the foreign plot against the U.S.A. metaphorically as an alien invasion, or *Them!* (1954), in which gigantic ants, another metaphor for communists, attempt to take-over the country.

The conspiracy film tradition continues throughout the following decades and into the present. Prominent examples include *Seven Days in May* (1964), in which the military tries to take-over the government because it objects to the president's goal to reach a disarmament treaty with the Soviet Union, *Executive Action* (1973), in which big businessmen and secret agencies plot the assassination of John F. Kennedy, *Three Days of the Condor* (1975), in which one part of the C.I.A. plots against some of its own agents to keep their plans for regime change in several countries a secret, *All the President's Men* (1976) about the Watergate scandal and *The Pelican Brief* (1993) about the plot of an oil company to drill in a protected area in the Louisiana marshlands; in the twenty-first century the tradition continues with films like *The International* (2009) or *Salt* (2010). Despite many parallels – for example, it is established beyond doubt that a conspiracy exists and this conspiracy is, with the exception of *Executive Action*, foiled in the end – these films also differ from their 1950s precursors in some respects. For once, the conspirators

are no longer Soviet infiltrators or other foreign foes, but members of the administration, the military, the C.I.A. or powerful companies (Ryan, Kellner 1988: 95). Conspiracy films thus mirror the general shift in American conspiracy theorising that occurs during the 1960s: From plots directed against the state to plots by the state and its various institutions (Butter 2014: 59–60). They also reflect the increasing prominence of ‘superconspiracies’ that comprise different actors, groups and organisations (Barkun 2013: 6). The plots of the films revolve around grow bigger and become more and more convoluted over time. Most importantly, the films also reflect the growing scepticism towards conspiracy theory by focusing more on the investigative process of the protagonist, his attempt – he is invariably male (see Chapter 3.3) – to find out what is going on and then convince others of the existence of the conspiracy.

This focus on the cognitive efforts of the protagonist is taken to extremes in conspiracy *theory* films, which emerge in the 1960s in reaction to the stigmatisation of conspiracy theories in the culture at large. Just as conspiracy theory narratives in literature, conspiracy theory films

give extended attention to the complex, conspiracy-centred ‘paranoia’ of their protagonists. What matters in these narratives, what shapes and sustains the plot, is not the machinations of a genuine conspiracy per se. Rather, the narratives focus on the fear of their protagonist(s) that a conspiracy, often of immense proportions, might exist.

(Wisnicki 2008: 2–3)

While this definition makes the films appear rather bleak, Thalmann also highlights that they also work to contain the depressing effects of the threat of paranoia that looms so large by ‘constantly shifting from a serious mode of storytelling to an ironic, satiric, and playful mode’ (2017: 216). In other words, in conspiracy theory films, the threat of conspiracy is simultaneously a serious *and* a facetious matter.

This filmic tradition begins with John Frankenheimer’s *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962), which is based on Richard Condon’s novel of the same title. Like the conspiracy films of the 1950s, *The Manchurian Candidate* is concerned with the fear of communist subversion. Unlike the earlier films, however, it both confirms and problematises this fear, thus effectively functioning as ‘comment on and expression of common American ideas and ideologies at the height of the Cold War’ (Jacobson, González 2006: 49). It is an ‘expression’ of 1950s ideas because the communist plot is absolutely real and only foiled at the very end; but it is also a ‘comment’ on such ideas because the film does not resolve right away whether or not the plot is real or if protagonist Major Marco is simply delusional. The brainwashing that Marco and his patrol of abducted soldiers underwent in Manchuria is only revealed gradually over the first half of the film. Moreover, since the narrative employs the device of character-centred flashbacks to disclose the communist plot, it remains also unclear for most of the film if the memories of Marco and another soldier are real or not. Thus, unlike the novel, where the reality of the plot is established from the outset, the film evokes the possibility that ‘ungrounded paranoid suspicions’ are at work (Dallmann 2007: 90).

Significantly, *The Manchurian Candidate* also breaks with some conventions of classical Hollywood cinema. Not only does it use flashbacks extensively, it also moves away from the goals-and-obstacles logic, featuring characters whose motivations remain unclear (and not because they are part of the conspiracy and keep their real agenda secret) and scenes that are only loosely connected to the overarching story. The most prominent example of this is the famous train scene during which Rosie, introduced in this scene, behaves so weirdly and says so many strange things to Marco that she left a large part of the audience puzzled, and film critic Roger Ebert suspecting that she was a conspirator talking in code (Jacobson, González 2006: 151). Thus, the

beginning of the shift from conspiracy to conspiracy theory films is as much fuelled by the emerging discourse of stigmatisation as by the loosening of the conventions of classical Hollywood cinema.

It is therefore not surprising that the conspiracy theory film thrives during the late 1960s and 1970s, since this is both the time during which the stigmatisation of conspiracy theory, as Thalmann describes it, truly gains momentum and the period of New Hollywood. Each of the ‘paranoia thrillers’ of these years (Pratt 2001: 124) – for example, *Greetings* (1968), which features one character who is obsessed with the Kennedy assassination and clearly delusional, *The Parallax View* (1974), which revolves around a reporter’s investigation into a secretive organisation, or *Winter Kills* (1979), a satirical engagement with Kennedy assassination theories – could be used to exemplify the poetics of New Hollywood:

Disjunctive or associative editing ...; a privileging of mood and character over tightly plotted action; ... episodic, ambiguous, unresolved and/or temporally complex, non-linear narratives, sometimes combined with a flaunting (and hence questioning) of narrative agency itself; ... devices, which collectively heightened the self-consciousness and reflexivity of these films.

(Langford 2010: 134)

The Parallax View employs these tropes to ‘refuse its viewers the safe haven of omniscient knowledge’ (Knight 2007: 153): It is never revealed who the conspirators are and what their goal is. In similar fashion, *Winter Kills* ‘uses conspiracy as a causal explanation behind the president’s death, but mocks and taunts both the protagonist’s and the audience’s conspiracy inklings’ (Thalmann 2017: 252). The films thus problematise and simultaneously endorse conspiracy theorising.

The conspiracy theory film tradition ends in the late 1970s for two reasons. First, the process of stigmatisation that triggered the emergence of the genre in the first place has been completed by then, and films no longer need to perform the cultural work of negotiating this problematisation (Thalmann 2017: 255). As conspiracy theories are frowned upon in mainstream factual discourses, fiction – as a “‘nonserious discourse”’ where knowledge is ‘invented, not found’ (Melley 2012: 16) – becomes a space to playfully indulge in a way of making sense of the world that is disqualified as ‘serious’ discourse but remains nevertheless appealing. Consequently, more traditional films, received by audiences on a ‘non-committed basis’ (Knight 2000: 45) become more popular again. This shift back is, second, also motivated by the waning of New Hollywood at the end of the 1970s. Film narratives in general became more traditional, straightforward and goal-oriented again, and therefore neither producers nor audiences were much interested anymore in the playful, ironic and self-reflexive aesthetics of the conspiracy theory film. The career of Alan Pakula exemplifies this development, as he first made a prototypical conspiracy theory film with *The Parallax View* and then *All the President’s Men* and *The Pelican Brief*, two typical conspiracy films. Another case in point is Jonathan Demme’s remake of *The Manchurian Candidate* (2004), which sheds the self-reflexivity and irony of the original (Butter 2015).

However, post-New Hollywood films do not simply return to the straightforward conspiracy narratives of the studio era. Responding to the, by now, culturally dominant scepticism about conspiracy theorising as an adequate way of making sense of the world, the films often do not establish early on, but only later in the film, that a plot exists beyond doubt. Accordingly, these films focus much more on the process of investigating and providing evidence for the conspiracy than the films of the 1950s and 1960s did, which concentrated on the foiling of a plot that was early in the narrative established beyond any doubt. In fact, since the 1990s, the

conspiracy film has undergone a development that could be described as a merging of the two traditions described here, resulting in what Mark Fenster has called the ‘classical conspiracy narrative’ (2008: 122). Fenster captures an interesting development, but the label he assigns it is misleading because ‘classical’ implies considerable longevity and stability, whereas the films thus categorised are a relatively recent phenomenon. Moreover, in the context of Hollywood film, the label evokes associations with the Hollywood of the studio era, which ended around 1960 and thus long before classical conspiracy narrative in cinema emerged.

Classical conspiracy narratives such as *JFK* (1991) or *Conspiracy Theory* (1997) are structured around ‘narrative pivots’, turning points in the narrative that occur when ‘the protagonist gleans the single piece of information that enables him to realize the real nature of the forces that oppose him’ (Fenster 2008: 135). More precisely, there are usually two major pivots in a classical conspiracy film: ‘At the first one, the protagonist realizes that something is going on and starts to investigate; at the second one, s/he finally understands what is going on, as all the pieces of the puzzle fall into place’ (Butter 2014: 25). Thus, although some classical conspiracy narratives, for example, *The Bourne Identity* (2002) or *The International* (2009), include many action scenes, their plots are not propelled forward by action but by the cognitive labour of the protagonist who tries to find out what is really going on. In addition, classical conspiracy narratives are characterised by a high degree of ‘speed’ – the narrative is fast-paced and ‘a multiplicity of events [is depicted] in brief scenes’ (Fenster 2008: 133) – and ‘velocity’, which refers to ‘the geographic, geopolitical, and cognitive aspects of the conspiracy narrative’s movement’, which is ‘both global and increasingly rapid as the narrative progresses’ (Fenster 2008: 134). Finally, the films typically stage a ‘restoration of agency’. The detection that something sinister is going on throws the usually male protagonist into a crisis, often one of masculinity, because nobody believes him and he begins to doubt himself. At the end, however, the protagonist overcomes this crisis because he manages to prove the existence of the conspiracy and often even ‘arise[s] triumphant through [its] ultimate defeat’ or at least its public exposure (Fenster 2008: 124).

The most prominent and definitely the most influential classical conspiracy narrative – used, in fact, by Fenster to define the genre – is Oliver Stone’s *JFK*. Based on the story of New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison, the film suggests that Kennedy was killed by the military-industrial complex because he wanted to withdraw American troops from Vietnam. Indeed, Stone’s version of events is, at first sight, extremely convincing because the film’s rapid editing is designed to overwhelm the audience. In fact, for viewers it is virtually impossible to distinguish fact from fiction, as Stone ‘blended original footage with archival footage ... and faux archival footage. Audiences were thus confronted with a stew of traditionally staged material, actual historical evidence, and fake historical evidence, all mixed together in a compelling story’ (Arnold 2008: 138). Replacing logical with formal coherence, the film seeks to interpolate its viewers as conspiracy theorists.

This is nowhere as apparent as in the final courtroom scene. Talking to an assistant who is very sceptical that they will get a conviction for the one alleged conspirator they have managed to put on trial, Garrison implicitly breaks the fourth wall:

This war has two fronts – in the court of law, we hope, against the odds, to nail Clay Shaw on a conspiracy charge. In the court of public opinion, it could take another 25 or 30 years for the truth to come out, but at least we’re going to strike the first blow.

(Stone 1991)

Here, Garrison casts the film – released 28 years after the assassination – as another and maybe the decisive blow in the struggle for public opinion. Consequently, his revelations in court are

not so much directed at the jurors, who dismiss them quickly, but at the audience for which they are made to appear far more convincing through clever use of editing and *mise-en-scène*. That Garrison is played by Kevin Costner, back then Hollywood's most authoritative voice of moral authority because of *Dances with Wolves*, makes his disclosures all the more powerful.

Since *JFK* so clearly aimed at leaving behind the safe space of fiction where conspiracist ideas can be indulged in with impunity, it is hardly surprising that the film was met with 'voluminous and vituperative criticism' for promoting a conspiracy theory (Fenster 2008: 118). Nevertheless, the film has been extremely influential, leading to a marked increase of those who believe that Lee Harvey Oswald was not a lone gunman (Carlson 2001). Furthermore, the film became a model for non-fictional online documentaries like *Loose Change* (2005–2009) and *Zeitgeist* (2007–2011) that came to dominate YouTube in the mid-2000s largely in response to 9/11. Like *JFK*, the various versions of *Loose Change* and the different versions of the *Zeitgeist* trilogy join very disparate material in rapidly edited sequences to visually overwhelm the audience and convince them of their conspiracist claims (Butter, Retterath 2010).

An interesting – and much less controversial – variation of the classical conspiracy narrative are the film versions of Dan Brown's mega sellers *The Da Vinci Code* (2006) and *Angels & Demons* (2009). Just as the novels, the films display all the characteristics of the classical conspiracy narrative. They focus on the cognitive labours of protagonist Robert Langdon, who restores his agency over the course of each narrative; they are characterised by a high degree of speed and velocity; and they are structured around narrative pivots. At the first pivot, which usually occurs about a third into each film, Langdon, who is very sceptical of conspiracy theories, accepts that there is a sinister plot going on. However, at the second narrative pivot, which occurs towards the end, Langdon does not finally understand what the plot is all about but comes to realise that there is no large-scale conspiracy. In *The Da Vinci Code*, everything has been planned by only one villain, Leigh Teabing, who has tricked two members of Opus Dei into supporting him. In similar fashion, in *Angels & Demons*, Langdon eventually finds out that there is no large Illuminati plot against the Vatican but that the dead Pope's chamberlain is orchestrating events with the help of an unwitting assassin to become the next Pope. In other words, the films are classical conspiracy narratives without conspiracies. As such, they reflect the status of conspiracy theory in the twenty-first century as an appealing but disqualified form of knowledge that can only be safely indulged in within the realm of fiction, where it makes for exciting narratives. Thus, it is no surprise that conspiracy scenarios have also become very popular in television shows in recent decades.

Conspiracy (theory) in television shows

Since television became a mass medium in the U.S.A. during the Red Scare, it is hardly surprising that several series of the 1950s, for example, *Foreign Intrigue* (1951–1955), *I Led 3 Lives* (1953–1956) or *The Man Called X* (1956–1957), put the fight against communist subversion centrestage. The most successful of these shows was *I Led 3 Lives*, which was based on the memoir of the same title by former F.B.I. informant Herbert Philbrick. Since television shows until the 1980s were strictly episodic, each week's instalment revolved around the fight against a different group of communists trying to infiltrate yet another American institution or organisation. Over the years, the show thus painted 'an ever-expanding social canvas that ma[de] communism seem all the more pervasive and insidious' (Doherty 2003: 143), while also suggesting that as long as decisive action was taken, the threat could be contained within the 30 minutes of a single episode. In line with the general status of conspiracy theory at the time, the show did not aim for a playful 'as if'-reception, but presented the fight against communist

subversion as an entirely serious matter. Accordingly, the show employed a variety of techniques to suggest that it was ‘a documentary, rather than fictional, text’ (Thalman 2017: 111).

The spy shows that thrived on American television a decade later shared the basic narrative structure with *I Led 3 Lives* but were very different in tone. Clearly inspired by the tremendous success of the first James Bond movies, *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* (1964–1968), the most successful of nearly a dozen similar shows of the 1960s no longer focuses on an undercover informer as *I Led 3 Lives* had done but focuses instead on the agents combatting the conspiracy. Much like the 1950s shows, though, *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* revolves throughout around the conflict with one powerful enemy, with each weekly instalment offering a self-contained chapter in that fight. This enemy is now no longer one that also exists in real life like the communists, but a fictional organization, T.H.R.U.S.H., whose members and command structure remain vague but whose goal was clearly world domination. In fact, within the fictional world, T.H.R.U.S.H. is considered so dangerous that the U.S.A. and the Soviet Union join forces to fight it. Thus, the show clearly distances itself from reality and, reflecting the stigmatisation of conspiracy theories that was gaining momentum during the 1960s, invited a more playful reception from its audience than its 1950s predecessors. This is even more true for *Get Smart* (1965–1970), a show co-created by Mel Brooks that parodied shows like *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* by taking the familiar ingredients of the genre finally over the top, thereby painting a ‘portrait of reality ... in which secrets and fear and paranoia were harmless’ (Arnold 2008: 78).

During the 1970s and 1980s, then, there were hardly any conspiracy-driven shows on American television and none with any larger cultural impact. The formula of the spy show had become too worn-out even for a medium that thrived on the formulaic. At the same time, the conventions of television did not allow for the highly self-reflexive and formally innovative treatment of the topic as in New Hollywood’s cycle of conspiracy theory films. The conspiracy topic reappeared with a vengeance, however, in the early 1990s with *The X-Files* (1993–2002), the most famous and influential conspiracy-related show ever made. The plot revolves around two F.B.I. agents, Fox Mulder and Dana Scully, who not only solve mysterious and often supernatural cases on a daily basis but also slowly unveil a gigantic conspiracy that involves aliens and evil global elites. Often seen as indicative of the conspiracy culture of the 1990s (Knight 2000; Fenster 2008), the show ‘brought the screen portrayal of conspiracy theory to a new level’ (Arnold 2008: 145).

The narrative of *The X-Files* strikes a balance in two important ways. First, much like the 1970s films to which the show is ‘overtly indebted’ (Graham 1996: 59), *The X-Files* allows for both serious and ironic readings. In the terminology introduced in the previous section, then, *The X-Files* is both a classical conspiracy narrative and a conspiracy theory show. It can be read as entirely vindicating Mulder, who believes in a large-scale cover-up from the very beginning, and proving wrong Scully, who is very sceptical of Mulder and his suspicions for a long time. In fact, as the voice of reason who questions her partner’s outlandish conspiracy theories, Scully embodies the scepticism towards conspiracism as a form of heterodox knowledge deeply ingrained in American culture at the time. That she eventually comes to believe Mulder can be read as a vindication of his suspicions within the diegetic world but not beyond. Unlike the anti-communist shows of the 1950s, ‘*The X-Files* operates in the key of “as if”’ (Knight 2000: 48). However, the show constantly undermines even this certainty with regard to the fictional world. As Knight puts it, ‘*The X-Files* often deliberately and wittily exploits a self-ironizing aesthetic’ that casts serious doubt on the findings of its two protagonists (2000: 50). Not only are there often ‘different kinds of explanation’ but no ‘ultimate solution’ for the strange and potentially sinister events the agents deal with each week (Knight 2000: 48); in addition, ‘[t]he sheer complexity of the conspiracy [and] the inclusion of so many competing references from popular

culture ... combine to stretch the limits of rationality' (Arnold 2008: 149). As a result, the show can also be read as a parody of the desire to give in to conspiracy theories.

Second, the show features both self-contained episodes, whose plotlines are resolved each week, and an overarching narrative of a global cabal that spans the whole show. In earlier shows like *I Led 3 Lives* or *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.*, the larger intrigues by communists or nefarious organisations constitute the background to each week's episode, but the protagonists hardly ever gain new information about their enemies and never come closer to defeating them. On *The X-Files*, the 'monster of the week' plot sometimes has nothing to do with the conspiracy, but just as often Mulder and Scully learn – or think they have learned – something new about the larger case they are pursuing: The mysterious connections between aliens, government agencies and global elites (Knight 2000: 217). As a consequence, the show featured a much larger recurring cast, as the villains, too, appeared repeatedly, and many of the episodes could no longer be fully appreciated when watched in random order or by somebody who tuned in only occasionally. The conspiracy plot of the show required a new viewing habit from a devoted audience.

In the larger history of television shows, *The X-Files* occupies an important place in the shift from series to serials that occurs during the 1990s and early 2000s and that had led to the emergence of what critics refer to as 'complex TV' (Mittell 2015). As Sarah Kozloff explains, 'Series refers to those shows whose characters and settings are recycled but the story concludes in each individual episode. By contrast, in a serial the story and discourse do not come to a conclusion during an episode' (1992: 92). Obviously, *The X-Files* are still considerably more episodic than many of the most celebrated shows in the 2010s whose tightly-knit narratives often focus on season-long arcs alone and hardly resolve anything at the end of an individual episode. Instead, the show employs its larger conspiracy narrative to balance the episodic and the larger arc. But conspiracy plots appear to be particularly suited for such a balancing. After all, one of the basic assumptions that drive conspiracy theorising is that 'everything is connected' (Barkun 2013: 3). Thus, the possibility that the monster of the week might be connected to the larger story always looms as a possibility for the knowing audience, and this suspicion is sometimes confirmed and sometimes not.

Arguably, shows with overarching conspiracy plots that balance the episodic and the serial are particularly well suited for 'what might be termed the "infinite model" of storytelling' on which much of American television still operates: 'programs generally keep running as long as they are generating decent ratings' (Mittell 2015: 33, 34). Strictly episodic shows like the spy series of the 1960s are best at satisfying this economic need, while shows that lean too heavily toward the serial pole of the series-serial continuum often progress too fast and get too convoluted too quickly or suffer in quality when one major plotline has been concluded and another one has to be thought up. The first two seasons of the German show *Dark* (2018–), whose time travel plot marries mystery and conspiracy in a manner reminiscent of *The X-Files*, are an example of the first problem. Unsurprisingly, the producers have already announced that the show, which explicitly uses the tagline 'Everything is connected', will end after season three. *House of Cards* (2013–2018) exemplifies the second problem. After the Underwoods' conspiracy to make Frank president succeeded at the end of season two, the producers did not know where to go with the plot, but the show's success demanded its continuation. By contrast, shows like *The X-Files* or a few years later *Lost* (2004–2010), which also revolves around a large and sinister conspiracy and develops a mythology much like that of *The X-Files*, reconcile the industry's needs and the desire of contemporary audiences for overarching plotlines, as they slowly but steadily add to the image of the conspiracy. Since conspiracy theory not only assumes that everything is connected but also operates under the assumption that '[t]here is *always* something more to know' (Fenster 2008: 94; original emphasis), the protagonists uncover more and more

layers of the plot over the course of several seasons. This, in turn, makes the conspiracy more and more complicated and difficult to grasp.

Accordingly, what Mark Fenster describes as a problem with regard to *The X-Files* – a ‘narrative tension between mystery and resolution [as] no single episode can resolve’ the larger conspiracy plot (2008: 145–6) – is actually an asset of these shows and, in fact, their organising principle. However, Fenster has a point as these shows run the danger that their conspiracy arcs become so convoluted over time that parts of the audience become disaffected with it, as arguably happened to *The X-Files* in the later seasons (Mittell 2015: 19). Moreover, the complication of the conspiracy over several seasons can also turn into a liability when the shows eventually end, be it because they are no longer successful or because producers and cast want to move on to new projects. *Lost* is notorious for unsuccessfully resolving its conspiracy/mystery plot, whereas *The X-Files* did not even attempt this. In the final episode of season nine, teasingly entitled ‘The Truth’, which concluded the show’s original run in 2002, Mulder and Scully appear to finally have found out everything there is to know about the conspiracy. However, they do not manage to defeat it, and the show ends with their vow to continue the fight. Unsurprisingly, the story then continued with a 2008 feature film – *The X-Files: I Want to Believe* – and two more seasons of the show (2016–2018), which capitalised on a different characteristic of conspiracy narratives – the sudden turnaround.

Another important assumption that all conspiracy theories share is that ‘nothing is as it seems’ (Barkun 2013: 3). The villains operate in secret, keeping their goals and actions hidden, and only the heroic investigator who has realised that something is going on can uncover their deeds and motives. During the investigative process, friends can turn out to be foes, and what, after much cognitive labour, seems to be the ultimate goal of the plotters can be revealed to be just another smokescreen to hide an even more horrible truth. Such realisations are a stock ingredient of conspiracy films and shows, but especially highly serialised shows employ them to take a plotline in a new direction or to reboot a show that appears to have reached a dead end. Thus, in seasons ten and 11 of *The X-Files*, which continue the story after a hiatus of almost a decade, Mulder has become convinced that everything he and Scully found out at the end of season nine is a sham and that not aliens but humans are the driving force behind the conspiracy he has been tracking for so long. This insight is clearly motivated by what the narrative necessitates of the story: The protagonists cannot simply fight the conspiracy but also need to keep investigating it. In even more extreme fashion, *Alias* (2001–2006), a far more serialised show than the original seasons of *The X-Files*, has repeatedly used shocking revelations to move the narrative into ever new directions. At the end of season four, for example, the protagonist, C.I.A. agent Sydney Bristow, learns that her fiancé, with whom she has been fighting several global crime organisations throughout the show, is not named Michael and does not work for the C.I.A., thus setting the scene for the fifth and final season. In *24* (2001–2010), which thrives just as much on the threat of conspiracy, similar turnarounds occur at least once in each season to move the plot into a new direction. Halfway through season three, for example, it transpires that the biological threat Jack Bauer and his colleagues have been fighting so far has only been staged by the real conspirators to get hold of the virus in question and use it against the American people.

In the twenty-first century, conspiracy theories have figured more prominently than ever in television shows. Currently, there are dozens of shows – *Stranger Things* (2016–), *Designated Survivor* (2016–) or *Bodyguard* (2018), to name just a few recent ones – that revolve to a large degree around conspiracies. What is markedly absent from these shows, however, is the post-modern self-reflexivity and often ironic negotiation of the promises and pitfalls of conspiracy theory that characterises both the films of the 1970s and a show like *The X-Files*. But there are of course exceptions. The first season of *Homeland* (2011–), for example, is as much a conspiracy

theory narrative as it is a classical conspiracy narrative, because it is for a long time kept open whether Brody is really an Islamist sleeper or if Carrie, the C.I.A. agent investigating him, is paranoid. At the end, however, she is proven right, and subsequent seasons shed all self-reflexivity with regard to conspiracy theory. In similar fashion, the first season of *Berlin Station* (2016–2019) can be read as a dramatisation of why large-scale conspiracy theories fail to adequately grasp reality. In the show, the C.I.A. does not nearly work as smoothly as conspiracy theorists usually assume. As it turns out in the end, there is no large-scale Islamist plot, but the main suspect has been made to look like a terrorist by a branch of the C.I.A., who had planned to trap a mole inside the agency. However, another part of the agency has found this fiction so convincing that they have abducted and tortured the innocent man. As in the case of *Homeland*, though, in the following two seasons the plots are real, thus attuning the show to the dominant mode of representing conspiracies on television in the present.

Conclusion

The ongoing popularity of conspiracy films and the sheer omnipresence of television shows that revolve completely or to a large degree around conspiracies have as much to do with the way in which conspiracy scenarios lend themselves to dramatisation in general and extended serialised narration in particular, as it has with American and, more generally, Western culture's fascination with conspiracy theory. Since all the shows mentioned here and virtually all conspiracy films of the past decade embrace the “nonserious” discourse of fiction (Melley 2012: 16), they should not be considered an indicator for an ever-continuing mainstreaming of conspiracism. Rather, they testify to and fuel in turn the long-standing appeal of conspiracy theories for those who believe in them and those who do not. For those who believe in them, the representation of plots and intrigues in film and television surely confirms the suspicions they harbour in real life. For those who do not believe in conspiracy theories, these representations are a way to indulge in a way of thinking that remains attractive but that they have learned not to apply to real life.

Note

- 1 My argument in this section has been significantly shaped by the chapter on conspiracy (theory) films in Katharina Thalmann's doctoral dissertation (2017). Unfortunately, the chapter is not included in the version published later (Thalmann 2019).

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