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Conspiracy Theories – Conspiracy Narratives

I still consider myself a narratologist. To be sure, I have not been to the Narrative Conference in a decade (because I feel too old by now to fly across the Atlantic for a few days and always had other obligations when the meetings took place in Europe), I am no longer an active member of the Center for Narrative Research at the University of Wuppertal where this journal is edited (because I moved on to a different position), and I no longer engage with colleagues in heated discussions about the question if all narratives have a narrator (because we no longer share an office at the Freiburg Institute for Advanced Studies). But the interest in the forms and functions of all kinds of narrative across the media – and especially the interplay of form and cultural context – remains central to my research, my teaching, and (much to the dismay of students who I regularly ask to do sentence-by-sentence analyses of the representation of consciousness in excerpts from fictional texts) to the exams I administer.

Unsurprisingly, therefore, when it comes to conspiracy theories – my major topic of research for the past ten years and the one area where I can claim real expertise – I have also always been very much interested in their narrative dimensions. In fact, what initially got me interested in the phenomenon was the chapter “Uncovering the Plot: Conspiracy Theory as Narrative” in Mark Fenster’s seminal book on the topic. “At the heart of conspiracy theory,” he writes, there is “a gripping, dramatic story”: “the conspiracy narrative is compelling in its rapid, global movement, its focus on the actions of both the perpetrators of the evil conspiracy and the defenders of the moral order, and in its attempt to explain a wide range of seemingly disparate past and present events and structures within a relatively coherent framework” (Fenster 2008, 119). Over the years, I have drawn on and critically engaged with Fenster’s account of what he calls the “classical conspiracy narrative” (2008, 122) several times, for example, in my book on the history of American conspiracy theories (Butter 2014) and, more recently, in an article on how the dramatization of conspiracy scenarios in fiction films and TV shows has changed over the past decades (Butter 2020a). While we disagree on some details, we share the conviction that conspiracy theories are indeed narratives and should be analyzed as such.

Why, then, am I so concerned about the recent tendency of much of the German public to replace the term ‘conspiracy theory’ with ‘conspiracy narrative’ and why have I spoken out against it on numerous occasions? Because the desire to speak of ‘conspiracy narratives’ or *Verschwörungserzählungen* is driven by a fundamental misunderstanding of what theories and narratives are and do.

Since this is a narratological journal I will focus on the latter, but I want to quickly address the former first.

For four years, I was the vice chair of an international research project on conspiracy theories that brought together more than 160 scholars from 40 countries. Each language represented in the network has an equivalent to ‘conspiracy theory,’ but the appropriateness of the term is only questioned in Germany (and to a lesser degree in Austria and Switzerland). This is because for some Germans, especially in leftwing activist circles, which are the driving force behind the project to do away with the term ‘conspiracy theory,’ the term ‘theory’ always has echoes of the poststructuralist and postmodernist theories introduced to German academia since the 1960s (cf. Felsch 2018). Since they consider these specific theories – for good reasons – liberating, they associate everything labeled ‘theory’ with progressive ideas and thus the very opposite of what is commonly associated with conspiracy theories. Accordingly, they argue that we should not dignify absurd ideas like the claim that the Gates Foundation wants to reduce the world population through Covid vaccines by labeling them as ‘theories.’

Never mind that this is a wrong understanding of what theories are, that is, simply systematic attempts to make sense of the world, as analytical philosophy tells us (Hepfer 2021, 30). Never mind that most people who believe in conspiracy theories, including those whose native language is German, reject the label as stigmatizing and often claim that the term was invented by the CIA to stifle dissent (cf. Butter 2020b). Never mind all that. Let’s focus on why – given everything that we know about narrative – it is problematic to speak of ‘conspiracy narratives’ instead, as those who deny that conspiracy theories have the status of theories have been doing for the past year.

To begin with, narratives are in some regards not that different from theories. I have neither the space here nor the competence to engage in a sustained discussion of their complex relationship (cf. Stueber 2015). Let it suffice to say that both are cognitive instruments (cf. Mink 1987), ways of understanding and indeed mastering the world. What Fredric Jameson wrote about history forty years ago goes for all human experience and, indeed, reality as such: it is “not a narrative, master or otherwise, but [...] it is inaccessible to us [...]. [O]ur approach to it and to the Real *itself* necessarily passes through its prior [...] narrativization” (Jameson 1981, 35; italics in the original). As “an instrument of the mind in the construction of reality,” then, narratives transform the chaos that is unmediated reality into more or less well-ordered accounts of what happened and why it happened (Bruner 1991, 6). In this sense, both the claim that we are living through a dangerous pandemic and the conspiracist claim that the virus either does not exist or is rather harmless and that we are being deceived by dark powers who are pursuing sinister goals are narratives.

One could go on from there and fruitfully compare these conspiracist and non-conspiracist narratives. For example, one could point out, as I have done elsewhere (Butter 2014, 22), that conspiracy narratives are particularly strong narratives, because they leave no room for coincidence and contingency. As Jerome Bruner (1991, 19) stresses, all narratives display a tendency “for converting

post hoc into propter hoc” and for representing “things happening at the same time [as] connected.” But with conspiracy narratives, this penchant becomes the rule, since they are, built on the assumption that nothing happens by accident, that nothing is as it seems, and that everything is connected (Barkun 2013, 3–4). One could add that conspiracy narratives therefore overemphasize human agency and intentional action, claiming, for example, that the pandemic was deliberately manufactured or that there is no pandemic and that we are being systematically deceived, whereas the ‘official’ narratives about the pandemic stress coincidence and factors beyond direct human control.

Alas, this is not what those who favor the term ‘conspiracy narratives’ do. They do not acknowledge that the official (and – make no mistake – certainly true) take on the pandemic is a narrative, too. To them, narratives are merely stories, fictions that are made up by those who do not know better or have bad intentions and that do not adequately capture what is really happening but misrepresent it. They are not – to return to Jameson’s psychoanalytically informed phrasing above for a moment – ways to make the Real accessible but obscure our access to it. Hence, the proponents of the term ‘conspiracy narrative’ are not interested in discussing the differences between various conspiracist and non-conspiracist world-making narratives but seek to disqualify belief in conspiracies. According to their logic, those who believe in secret plots have narratives, those who don’t have the facts; ‘they’ have myths (another term sometimes proposed in lieu of ‘theory’), ‘we’ have the truth.

Don’t get me wrong. Conspiracy theories are almost always wrong and often dangerous, but such an approach is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, it makes the gulf between conspiracy theorists and others even wider than it already is. As I said above, the term ‘conspiracy theory’ is also usually considered as stigmatizing by those thus labeled, but the designation acknowledges at least that those who believe in conspiracy theories and those who don’t have one thing in common: both want to understand the world and form theories about it. Recognizing this commonality makes reaching out to and, yes, converting conspiracy theorists at least a little easier.

Secondly, and more importantly for scholars of narrative, this current use of the term ‘narrative’ in the German public shows how big the gulf between narratologists and ‘normal’ people still is, and how general discourse – not only in Germany but everywhere – still is blissfully unaware of relevant narratological insights. This is unfortunate because narrative is a key feature of human life and those who specialize in it have a lot to contribute to public discussions of all kinds of topics. This new column, designed to provide a narratological perspective on current debates, is certainly a step in the right direction. But we – the narratologists – should not only comment on the world but reach out to it as well, take our research into the public sphere, and stress how narratives make the world.

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