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Mythocracies and Conspiracies

This translated edition of *Mythocratie* brought only minor edits to the text of the 2010 French edition. No attempt has been made to update the examples drawn from political or media life of the time, nor to complete the bibliography with the numerous references published over the past fifteen years on related issues. The theoretical effort made a decade and a half ago is obviously dated, but it hopefully still speaks to our current situation. It would often have been easy to substitute Trump's name for Berlusconi's, to refer to TikTok instead of telereality, to deride Boris Johnson's histrionics instead of Nicolas Sarkozy's, the myths of Brexit instead of those of French Sovereignty.

Here is not the place to draw a balance sheet of the pathetic failure of François Hollande's presidency, which totally discredited the little amount of trust and hope still vested in the 'left'. In direct opposition to the daring bifurcation (negotiated with a self-assumed gaucheness) advocated in the closing chapter of the book, the Hollande–Macron sequence managed to associate a total submission to the Given with a perfectly arrogant form of authoritarianism. Worldwide over the past decade, the (re-)elections of Putin, Erdoğan, Modi, Duterte, Bolsonaro, Bukele, Trump, Netanyahu, Orbán, Wilders, Meloni, and the like seem to demonstrate that the far right has been much more adept than anyone else at navigating the seas of mythocracy.

One relatively recent development, however, deserves to be revisited in this afterword under the light shed by the analyses presented in the preceding chapters: the current surge in debates about the threats of conspiracy theories. Just as *Mythocratie* attempted in 2010 to mobilise some technical tools and hermeneutic gestures borrowed from literary studies to reassess the potentials of storytelling and the power of scripting, similarly, it may be politically relevant to revisit conspiracism in a literary perspective – a perspective which has been systematically neglected among all the social sciences supposed to account for this present danger. So rather than attempting to update the framing of mythocracy sketched in the previous chapters, this afterword will be entirely devoted to pursuing the same investigation in an attempt to understand why and how conspiracist stories shape our worlds.

Beliefs? A brief analytics of conspirational mythocracy

The *prima (im)materia* of the diagram through which this book attempted to model mythocracy was made of 'flows of desires and beliefs' (Chapter 2). The debates around conspiracy thinking provide a good opportunity to question more in depth the puzzling nature of the three terms linked in this formula. First, how are we to understand a *flow*? The Latin etymology of 'conspiracy' answers this question in a very suggestive manner: a flow of desires and beliefs is something we 'breathe in and out' (*-spirare*) 'together with' other people (*con-*). To conspire, first and foremost, is to share the same air, the same atmosphere, the same myths. What better definition of a public – that of a musical group, a periodical, an influencer, or a TV channel – than the fact that its members breathe together, in and out, the same jingles, the same news, the same ideas, the same suggestions, the same images, the same stories, more or less at the same time?

More specifically than this minimal definition of conspiracy, the common uses of the term refer to the idea of *plotting* some (evil) deed together. Here again, however, mythocrats are on familiar ground. A great deal of Chapter 4 was devoted to clarifying the role and the importance of plots, defined as assertive ways to concatenate actions in tight relation with imputations of causality. A quasi-synonym to conspiracy is *complot*, referring to a covert coordination of malevolent actions purposefully geared towards the harming of its target.

Valentina Desideri and Stefano Harney have revisited with joyful brilliance the necessity to conceive of ‘conspiracies without a plot’ in order to make room for the possibility of ‘breathing-together’ (in solidarity) without being caught in the traps of ‘plotting-against’ an enemy (who has already partially won the fight by the moment we become obsessed with them).¹ For the sake of clarity, we may follow their cue by hardening an analytic distinction between the mere breathing-together of conspiracy and the more offensive plotting-against of *complot* – even if this abstract distinction cuts across concrete realities that mix the two. What distresses political commentators in the current conjuncture is a certain tendency to interpret all our states of affairs as affairs of State: whatever happens in the world that doesn’t agree with my interests or my whim gets loudly denounced as the result of a *complot*.²

From here on, we can follow the path trodden by familiar friends of ours, the Italian mythocratic collective Wu Ming (discussed at length in the ‘Literary Interlude’ between Chapters 5 and 6). In a sum which delineates the most convincing reflection of conspiracism to date, Wu Ming 1 articulates a distinction between two rather different imputations of *complot*. The ‘*phantasmagorias of complot*’ are unresearched allegations based on poorly documented imaginary machinations supposed to establish a universal control over all aspects of social life; ‘*hypotheses of complot*’, by contrast, formulate a hypothesis about a limited set of malevolent coordinated actions, a hypothesis that either results from a serious work of investigation or can lead to a properly documented fact-finding inquiry.³

In light of this distinction, it becomes clear that simply using the accusation of conspiracism to discredit a certain assertion is misguided at best, oppressive at worst. We all know that there *are* countless cases of conspiracies, where breathing-together leads to acting-together, and where acting-together involves some forms of plotting-against. Economic life and political life are made up of just that: people who are not content to breathe the same air, but who undertake to turn their common breath into organizations, more or less formalised, capable of taking advantage of opportunities, thanks to the strength of (partly covert) coordinated actions.

The idea that Bill Gates is inoculating people with subcutaneous microchips disguised as vaccines in order to inform Microsoft of our every move, or that the world is being ruled by a clique of cannibalistic paedophiles is undoubtedly phantasmagorical. But how are we to describe the campaigns set up to get Western consumers to buy electric cars? National

¹ Valentina Desideri and Stefano Harney, ‘A Conspiracy without a Plot’, in Jean-Paul Martinon, ed., *The Curatorial: A Philosophy of Curating*, London: Bloomsbury, 2013.

² The following books on the topic are particularly interesting: Anonymous, *Conspiracist Manifesto*, Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2013; Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003; Luc Boltanski, *Énigmes et complots. Une enquête à propos d’enquêtes*, Paris: Gallimard, 2012; Gérald Bronner (ed.), *Les Lumières à l’ère numérique*, Paris: Présidence de la République, 2022; ‘Conspiracy Thinking’, special issue of *Social Research* 89, no. 3 (2022); Russell Muirhead and Nancy L. Rosenblum, *A Lot of People Are Saying: The New Conspiracism and the Assault on Democracy*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019; Katharina Thalmann, *The Stigmatization of Conspiracy Theory since the 1950s: ‘A Plot to Make Us Look Foolish’*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2019.

³ Wu Ming 1, *La Q di qomplotto: QAnon e dintorni. Come le fantasie di complotto difendono il sistema*, Rome: Edizioni Alegre, 2021, p. 141.

governments and the European Union put in place legal machinery to ban the sale of new combustion engines by 2035 and subsidise the purchase of electric vehicles. Car companies multiply their advertising machines to convince us that we're saving the planet by buying a green SUV. Meanwhile, Aurore Stephant and the SystExt association meticulously investigate the current practices of metal extraction and make convincing calculations to show that the simple substitution of (heavy) electric vehicles for current thermal vehicles, without rethinking our transportation policy, will lead to mining disasters scarcely less damaging than climate disruption.⁴ Are far-right parties conspiracist when they denounce such a green deal as a scam? Shouldn't we see the collusion between business interests and government policies as the symptom of conspiracies (they breathe together in the same growth-oriented direction at all costs), machinations (they put forward selected quantitative figures, while leaving other important factors in the dark), or even complots (the decisions of CEOs and ministers are taken by players who consult and lobby each other regularly, coordinate their actions, and often swap roles)?

As Wu Ming 1 suggests, hypotheses of complot generally contain precious 'kernels of truth' out of which further investigation may draw important information. But the relations between truth and conspirational mythocracy are more complicated than that. Whether phantasmagorical or empirically documented after a fact-finding investigation, conspiracists are storytellers. They do not simply reveal facts: they construct narratives that often have the power of myths. Assessing the truth-value of these myths is made particularly difficult and conflictual because it takes place on a battleground between two very different definitions of 'truth'.

The authoritative debunkers that Wu Ming 1 portrays as 'ratio-supremacist' operate with a *punctual* definition of truth, which focuses its attention on facts: an assertion is true or not depending upon the asserter's capacity to document the factuality of what is asserted. What irrefutable evidence can one show about an actual meeting (or a transfer of funds) taking place between Volkswagen's CEO and Ursula von der Leyen in the days preceding the promulgation of EU's directives on electric cars? This punctual definition of truth is the one that holds weight in the judicial system, in order to check the veracity of punctual allegations. Of course, it is essential to defend and enforce it, not only in courts but more broadly in journalism, scientific inquiry, and administrative reporting.

There is another conception and practice of truth, however, that is orthogonal to the previous one, but no less important and respectable. This second, *integrative* definition considers something as true insofar as it provides a big picture on the background of which punctual facts can be 'figured out' and assessed. Whereas the first conception was a matter of reference and of proving, this second one is a matter of relevance and of making sense. I can't prove that Ursula von der Leyen was bribed by anyone, and I don't think she was, but that's not the point. The sum of partial information I have absorbed over the years suffices to convince me that conservative politicians and business leaders are systematically in cahoots to scratch each other's back at the expense of the more general good. A hypothesis is not only true when it is corroborated by well-established facts, but also when it fits within a meaningful pattern (*Gestalt*), a certain 'figure' emerging out of a 'background'.

Let us remember the phrase used by economists to explain potentially surprising data: 'we have a story for that'. As we saw, this is the power of myth: it provides us with a narrative concatenation of events that organises them within an integrative explanatory frame. This concatenation goes beyond the particular facts considered in this singular instance. It works as a model that can apply to a whole range of other comparable situations. When this explanatory process of 'figuring-out' rises in generality, it ends up resembling what used to be called, a few

⁴ Association SystExt: systext.org.

decades ago, an *ideology* – a system of ideas and representations that is internally coherent enough to offer an integrated perception of the different aspects of our lives, articulated to a system of values capable of orienting our actions.

Even if ratio-supremacist debunkers are perfectly justified to question and denounce phantasmagorias of complot that are deprived of factual evidence (or that go directly against factual evidence), they may be misguided in disqualifying as ‘pure myths’ hypotheses based on the need to make sense of reality through the ‘figuring-out’ relevance of a big picture. What is at stake in these orthogonal definitions of truth is a double experience of belief. It is very different to believe in the sensory evidence that happens to be within sight at the present moment (a cat is sitting on a chair in front of my desk) than to believe in the explanatory power of a causal scheme (capitalism is responsible for global warming). While believing in what one perceives with one’s eyes becomes more and more problematic – as it is mediated by screens increasingly permeated by generative AI expert in producing fake news (more on this later) – the traditionally reflexive experience of belief takes place when one asks oneself if this or that assertion actually fits with one’s overall understanding of the world (that is, with one’s ideology), not with one’s current sensory data.

As we saw in the diagrams of Chapter 2, flows of beliefs are constantly reconfiguring themselves and each other, according to generally minor (but exceptionally dramatic) clashes with contradictory evidence: narratives provide an open playground where such readjusting can take place under safe conditions. Far from being exceptional, or exceptionally dangerous, conspiracy thinking appears as mythocracy-as-usual – no more (but also no less) dangerous than your average ideological struggle. It may be because ratio-supremacist debunkers, often operating in the positivist fields of political theory or cognitive sciences, have forgotten the category of ideology that they are so prompt to denounce the speck of conspiracy in their adversaries’ eye, rather than the plank of ideology in their own.

But what our analysis of storytelling has suggested with more insistence is that beliefs held are a very different thing than beliefs *stated*. The difference between the two rests in our intuitive awareness of the power to script. While flows of beliefs are very hard to access, what floods our public sphere and social media are flows of blabber about beliefs. There seem to be many more people believing in an invasion of flat-earthers than people who actually believe that the earth is flat: it has become a cliché to repeat that a third of (young) Americans are mystified to the point of seeing the earth as a pancake, whereas a 2018 YouGov poll got only a few percentage points (between 2 per cent and 4 per cent) of them saying so – a few more percentage points prudently stating their cautious ‘doubts’ about the whole thing.⁵ The crucial question, however, is that such a poll does not implant a captor inside people’s brain, but triggers them to make an *utterance*. And it is not hard to imagine what might prompt a surprising response: to sound clever, to piss off the system, to give a stupid answer to a stupid question, to test how far the joke can go ... What Boris Groys has persuasively flagged as ‘the obligation to self-design’ seems much more decisive than adherence to factual reality when assessing statements of beliefs or conspiracist build-ups: the democratisation of our access to social media leads to a situation where we all feel called upon constantly to design (and redesign) our public persona – that is, where the *duty of scripting our self* takes precedence over all other tasks.⁶

While paedophiles and complots *do* actually exist in factual reality, and while numerous carriers of phantasmagorical conspiracist rumours *are* the victims of cynical manipulations orchestrated ‘up there’ by the Republican Party or the Putin government, a good number of conspiracy-theorists may be much more intuitively savvy in communication pragmatics and

⁵ Craig A. Foster and Glenn Branch, ‘Do People Really Think Earth Might Be Flat?’, *Scientific American* blog, 21 August 2018, scientificamerican.com; and Signe Dean, ‘No, One-Third of Millennials Don’t Actually Think Earth Is Flat’, *Science Alert*, 4 April 2018, sciencealert.com.

⁶ Boris Groys, *Going Public*, London: Sternberg, 2010.

self-scripting strategies than your average cognitive scientist. Spreading a world-view that portrays decision-makers of the ‘deep state’ as sucking the blood of innocent children may need to be assessed according to its oppositional virtue, rather than its truth content. It may express the refusal of a government that spends billions of dollars to establish democracy in Iraq and Afghanistan (with the success we know), while telling me there’s not enough water left to irrigate my golf course. Which big picture can I turn to in order to explain such budget priorities? Which myth will better express my rejection of such systemic aberrations? Whose myth am I attacking by retweeting a climato-sceptic post? Who will ‘like’ me if I do? These are the questions to raise in a mythocratic approach to conspiracism. To give us the tools to answer them, we need to sketch an all-too-brief energetic view of conspirational mythocracy.

Desires? A hurried energetics of conspirational mythocracy

What flows of desires fuel statements deemed conspiracist in the current state of our mythocracies? The following pages summarily identify eleven dynamic principles to be taken into consideration in order to do two things at the same time: on the one hand, combat the toxic effects of a far-right conspiracism that undermines the very possibility of holding empowering democratic debates, and on the other hand, shed light on some of the debunkers’ blind spots that lead them to fuel the fire they pretend to extinguish, or to disqualify potentially emancipating movements.

1. *Motricity precedes sensoriality*. What taps on a keyboard, reacts to an image, swipes on a screen, or relays a story is the human body, driven by vital needs (food, shelter, the ability to pay bills). What the body perceives in its surroundings, what it sees, hears, absorbs, remembers, is a function of what it needs to notice in order to put itself in a position to satisfy these vital needs (as well, of course, as a host of other derived desires). Strictly speaking, then, one’s perceptions and one’s ‘emotions’ are ‘motivated’ by the ‘movements’ one’s body makes to satisfy these needs.

In his lectures on *Imagination and Invention*, French philosopher Gilbert Simondon suggested that the shape of the mother’s breast, and the shape of the lips that enables it to be sucked, constitute an ‘a priori image’, prior to any perception of an external object – an image in which ‘motricity precedes sensoriality’.⁷ If we didn’t come into the world with an internal aspiration to suck on something round that could fill our mouths, we wouldn’t live beyond a few hours. This obviously has psychoanalytic implications: all we aspire to, through all our subsequent desires, including when we listen to a story or relay a conspiracist myth, is try to find the original satisfaction of suckling. The more general implication is that our world-views are drastically filtered by the practical perspective of our daily behaviours.

Our habits have taught us that our life-forms depend on certain movements. To persist in our existence, these movements seem indispensable, rightly or wrongly. If my livelihood depends on keeping a job located thirty miles from home, and there’s no public transportation to get me there, my car and the fuel to run it seem as obviously essential to my wellbeing as air and water. Any speech advocating a significant hike in the price of gasoline sounds like a vital threat to me, no matter how justified it might be from an environmentalist perspective. As Upton Sinclair wrote in 1934, ‘it’s hard to make someone understand something when his salary depends on his not understanding it’.⁸ The same goes for water-saving policies that would imply the closure of the golf club around which my social life revolves.

⁷ Gilbert Simondon, *Imagination and Invention*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2022.

⁸ Upton Sinclair, ‘I, Candidate for Governor and How I Got Licked’, *Oakland Tribune*, 11 December 1934, p. 19.

This primacy of motricity over sensoriality structures a large part of our relationship with ‘the truth’. Our expectations precondition our attentions. We can therefore subscribe to a conspiracy delusion, despite its implausibility, as long as it is closely aligned with our vital needs. At a time when so many daily habits of middle-class Western consumers would need to change if people are not to render large proportions of the planet uninhabitable, conspiracist myths conveniently disqualify inconvenient truths that one’s ‘salary depends on not understanding’.

2. *Perception is controlled hallucination.* As Andy Clark showed in *Surfing Uncertainty*, our orientation in our daily environment is based on processes of ‘projective predictions’:

Naturally intelligent systems do not passively await sensory stimulation. Instead, they are constantly active, trying to predict (and actively elicit) the streams of sensory stimulation before they arrive. Before an ‘input’ arrives on the scene, these pro-active cognitive systems are already busy predicting its most probable shape and implications.⁹

My eyes are not content with being merely open, to passively receive luminous fluxes that they would a priori treat in an egalitarian manner, only gradually to allow the shape of this or that object to be composed. My perceptual system operates from a stock of expansive forms (*Gestalts*) already constructed according to what my bodily movements need me to identify. This is the case of the innate rounding of the baby’s mouth ready to suckle but, most often, these are figures constructed through our perceptions and our previous practices.

Scanning the visual space, my eyes constantly project these figures onto it, based on an anticipated holistic correspondence that they attempt to recognise (rather than discover). We only (sometimes) correct these anticipated predictions at a later stage, when the sensory data prove to be (too) incompatible with them. Andy Clark summarises this principle with a striking formula: ‘Perception is controlled hallucination.’¹⁰ This implies, among other things, that hallucination precedes perception. The expectations projected by our myths generally pre-empt the careful observation of what lies before our eyes. We do not have an originally pure, inductive, objective perception that dark, malicious manipulations would then pervert and divert from the truth. We begin by hallucinating our lived world, and we never really stop doing so. We live in hallucinations and myths until they become too damagingly incompatible with the responses we get from our environment. I can believe that the earth is flat or that Democrats suck the blood of babies because it doesn’t make much difference to my daily actions. No conspiracy, however, will convince its supporters that by cutting off one finger a day, they will become virtuoso pianists in a week.

In plain language: we are all born suckers. Certain political myths operate as pacifiers: their primary effect is to shut our mouth around an illusory and ephemeral satisfaction, as they are incapable of nourishing our real needs in the longer term. Other myths and ideologies, however, pre-configure our attentions to identify opportunities or threats that would take years or generations to be inductively constructed through costly trials and errors.

3. *Sociality trumps factuality.* We don’t suck and hallucinate on our own. Seeing this reality or believing this myth rather than those other ones does not so much depend upon their more or less probable character as on who sees or believes them among the people we know (and tend or need to trust). Twentieth-century psychologists have multiplied experiments showing to what extent I will come to see very different things in the same image depending

⁹ Andy Clark, *Surfing Uncertainty: Prediction, Action and the Embodied Mind*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016, p. 52.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

on what my peers seem convinced of finding there. What applies to the size of parallel lines on a sheet of paper also applies, a fortiori, to much more abstract objects of thought, such as freedom, merit, or justice.

Myths and conspiracy thinking draw a large part of their power from the fact that sociality trumps factuality. We need to believe, and we always believe *with others*. Believing with others sometimes proves more important than adjusting our beliefs to the specific evidence of the facts. Even though I know that water shortages may worsen, the convivial weekends I spend with my golf buddies push me to endorse their climate-denialist convictions.

Informal sociality has been neglected by the mainstream ‘left’ over the past decades. During much of the twentieth century, the French Communist Party managed to weave a strong community life maintained between the different electoral cycles, a life made up of routines (meetings, campaigning), events (demonstrations, festivals), leisure (summer camps), and solidarity (strike funds, legal support, help for comrades in difficulty). Apart from a few marginal circles that have continued and sometimes intensified such communities of life and solidarity – *Zones À Défendre* (political occupation of land to prevent ecological destructions), squats, activist associations, artistic collectives – it is mostly religious communities that have invested this sphere of believing-together by chatting-, playing- and doing-together. In France, the current successes of the far-right National Rally may owe more to its (anti-Muslim) sociality of red wine and pork sausage than to the xenophobic arguments of its program.

4. *Complexity trumps unanimity*. Our needs for sociality and proximity are all the more vivid as they are threatened by the development of our productive systems. These have become mind-bogglingly complex over the past two centuries, with the intensification of the division of labour and the extension of supply chains. More and more humans must coordinate increasingly differentiated and distant activities to collaborate in the production of goods that are ever more ‘complicated’ to understand and unfold – the etymology of ‘complexity’ [*com-plicare*] pointing to a process of layer upon layer ‘folding us with’ each other. The smartphone is often waved as an emblem of this complication, with its seventy types of materials mobilised (including thirty different metallic elements) from four continents. As these superimposed layers of complexity multiply, our social organisations differentiate themselves into a growing number of tangled causalities and intersecting perspectives, of which it becomes increasingly difficult to construct a shareable understanding. Smartphone users generally only have eyes to cry when an investigative report gives them a glimpse of the production conditions that prevail in Congolese mines or in Chinese workshops. Depending on the perspective from which it is approached, the same object shines like a high-tech miracle, a neocolonial shame, a prosthetic brain, a vector of brutalization, a catalyst for profit, or a medium of emancipation. It is tangentially impossible to agree on its ‘real’ status: complexity trumps unanimity.

5. *Intelligibility trumps complexity*. As we have seen in the previous chapters of this book, reference to complexity has nonetheless become a cover for a falsely progressive discourse. Everything is so tangled that it becomes unimaginable to do anything concrete to redress the injustices structuring the world. Too complicated ... Conspiracy thinking rides on the feeling of impotence self-inflicted on the left by complexity thinkers. The appeal of ‘populist’ rhetoric rests on the simple – mythical, mystifying – solutions it offers to complicated problems: stop immigration; lock up offenders; cut bureaucratic jobs; lower taxes; privatise public media; increase tuition fees; ban the construction of mosques; dollarise the economy. Although they are not unanimously endorsed, such solutions are attractive insofar as their causal effectiveness can be readily hallucinated: we can easily breathe their stories in and out together.

Denouncing ‘populism’ for its overly their simplistic solutions, however, is no more effective than fact-checking Donald Trump’s nonsense. Any human understanding of causal

links consists of a simplification of the entanglement of infinite causal chains from which any event results. Anti-capitalism can be equally described as an ideology and as a conspiracist myth: it invites activists to breathe together in a common fight against the machinations of capitalists elevated to the rank of root causes of contemporary problems. This is partly true – insofar as any truth can only be a *partial* truth, *the* (all-encompassing) *truth* not belonging to the human realm. Conspiracism is clearly dangerous when it identifies the conspirators with an essentialised social group to be repressed (typically: Jews, Muslims, foreigners), and when it establishes its monocausal principle of partial intelligibility as the sole and exclusive source of explanation. But ideological myths make (partially) intelligible a tangle of causalities whose hypercomplexity always risks inhibiting any intervention. In doing so, they operate as a catalyst for political mobilisations: we act because we believe (in part wrongly) to have identified the decisive cause of a situation.

6. *Antagonism consolidates communities.* Another factor in adhering to certain opinions, closely linked to the previous one, is that we believe all the more strongly with our fellow human beings as we band together to *believe against* those we identify as adversaries. Conspiracy hypotheses help unite communities by attributing the frustration of certain needs to malevolent intentions. It is well known that antagonism consolidates communities. The uncanny recurrence of the accusation of cannibalistic paedophilia is likely explained by the fact that gratuitous horrendous violence imposed on children can only unite against it all people who consider themselves ‘normal’ and with good intentions. Here, too, however, the power of myth must be carefully dissected from the dangers of mystification, in order not to throw out the baby of necessary opposition and pugnacity with the conspiratorial bathwater.

There are very real conspiracies whose effects can be terribly destructive. Let us think of the meeting in Berlin of European powers (including Russia, the Ottoman Empire, and the US) between November 1884 and February 1885 to share the colonial exploitation of the African continent. Or the creation in Washington, DC, in 1989 of the Global Climate Coalition by an alliance of oil, mining, energy, forestry, and manufacturing industries, in tune with George H. W. Bush’s White House, to protect these companies against limits on greenhouse gas emissions. Even if these conspiracies took the official form of conferences and well-established organisations, led by public figures (although keeping a good part of their transactions secret), it is difficult not to consider them, in retrospect, as anticipating quite precisely the current phantasmagoria of the deep state: a few (rich, white, male) decision-makers gather around a table to divide the exploitation of the world, for their buddies’ benefit and at the cost of immeasurable suffering, unspeakable violence, and unprecedented destruction. Stories denouncing such collusions of interests are not conspiratorial per se. Neither is identifying adversaries and mobilising communities of action around the need to combat them. It is the daily routine of political mythocracy.

7. *Omni-mediatisation fosters multi-perspectivism.* The factors mentioned in the previous sections have conditioned political life for centuries. One of the main novelties of the current period is the unprecedented technical possibility, made affordable to a majority of the world’s population, of becoming the source of media flows capable of spreading almost instantly across the planet. The miniaturisation and multiplication of audiovisual broadcasting/reception devices (smartphones, screen cameras) tends to multiply the contradictory perspectives, documenting our complex realities in their various aspects. As illustrated by street videos showing racist police violence, this multiplication puts into circulation representations (images, sounds, speeches, stories) that manifest very diverse – and potentially antagonistic – points of view and hypotheses about our tangled causalities. As demonstrated by high school student Darnella Frazier recording and broadcasting the murder of George Floyd on 25 May 2020 in

the streets of Minneapolis, or by two young women posting on Twitter a video recording of Nahel Merzouk's murder in the streets of Nanterre on 27 June 2023, the type of 'sousveillance' has now become widespread, while it was exceptional in March 1991 when George Holliday filmed the beating of Rodney King, before transmitting it to a local Los Angeles TV channel.¹¹ Dominant myths about police behaviour – duly authorized and scripted from 'up there' – can be much more easily debunked by sousveillance practices.

This technical capacity to diversify points of view considerably alters the dynamics of mythocracy: while mass media throughout the twentieth century mostly relayed the perspectives (sometimes conflicting among themselves) of the privileged classes, nowadays cameras, smartphones, and social networks allow underrepresented points of view to gain visibility. Omni-mediatisation fosters multi-perspectivism.

8. *Affective attractivism trumps multi-perspectivism.* Multi-perspectivism, however, encounters an adversary within the very heart of the technology that favours it. The decentralised internet of the 1990s was based almost exclusively on *pull* gestures: I look for the information by getting out there to pull it from where it is (first by trial and error, later with the help of search engines). This allowed everyone to communicate with each other in peer-to-peer mode, without anyone knowing if you were an expert or a dog. In recentralising communications on a few hegemonic platforms, the internet of the 2010s based its expansion on *push* dynamics: I receive notifications, incentives, recommendations, and suggestions that bring content to my screen without me having to seek them. By accelerating the massification of followers and by basing their economic model on the commodification of attention, platforms tend to favour certain (more profitable) content: those that will exert the most irresistible attraction, and those that will capture our attentions more predictably.¹²

According to the magnetic analogy mobilised in Chapter 2, within the magnetic fields generated by the circulation of messages on platforms, content is structurally privileged by the currently dominant captological dynamics insofar as they 1) mobilise affects most intensely, 2) fit into previously marked positions, 3) polarise the most divisive oppositions, 4) deviate the most from the median positions perceived as expected, 5) manage to encapsulate the state of a field through a striking synthesis, and 6) bring out a singularity that shakes the field without making it explode.

All these (often mutually contradictory) traits clearly point towards an exacerbation of conspiratorial phantasmagories. Even if the overall tendency seems to add fuel to the fire of already burning conflicts, these chaotic dynamics can play to or against any type of myth. Centripetal and centrifugal forces are in constant tension, to the rhythm of an unstable swing between acceptance by homophily and singularisation by deviation.¹³ What remains fairly clear, however, is that such a magnetic field seems perfectly suited to welcome what the previous chapters have analysed as 'myths' – while it seems perfectly unsuitable to what general wisdom considers as rational, reflective, and sustained 'argumentations'.

Beyond the unpredictability of platform mythocracy, *attentional extractivism* – which bases the profits of platforms on the quantity of attention that they manage to harvest in order to resell them to advertisers – results in an *affective attractivism* – which tends to group perceptions around a restricted number of lines of cleavages, both pre-facilitated and unstable.

¹¹ See Steve Mann, Jason Nolan, and Barry Wellman, 'Sousveillance: Inventing and Using Wearable Computing Devices for Data Collection in Surveillance Environments', *Surveillance and Society* 1, no. 3 (2003).

¹² These issues have been developed in Yves Citton, *An Ecology of Attention*, Cambridge: Polity, 2016; and *Mediarchy*, Cambridge: Polity, 2019.

¹³ Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Discriminating Data: Correlation, Neighborhoods and the New Politics of Recognition*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2021.

This affective attractivism can be praised for its capacity to mobilise a massive number of agents around tags like #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo, placing on the political agenda, with unprecedented speed and vigour, issues that the authorities systematically tended to repress in the past. At the same time, it can just as easily be criticised for the emotional ruts in which it generates and imprisons our indignations.¹⁴

Just when omni-mediatisation allows us to dream of a pluralistic media universe, where multiple perceptions of the world can coexist by correcting and complementing each other, the affective attractivism inherent to platform capitalism obliterates the development of multi-perspectivism. It exacerbates the polarisation of attention and affects around binary clashes, driven by the need for recognition rather than by attention to complexity. It reduces the multiplicity of points of view by trapping them in conflictual polarisations that favour the recognisable at the expense of the alien.

9. *Vertigos of viral playfulness trump calculations of interests.* If there is one aspect that most rationalist debunkers-from-above recurrently miss in conspirational mythocracy, it is its sarcastic, gaming, gambling, playful, and even joyful dimension. In this respect only, the designation of a ‘post-truth’ era is perhaps more accurate than it seems – as long as we understand it from the point of view of the role-playing game in which all players know full well that they are maintaining a fiction. Most actors understand that the point of the game is not so much the victory of truth as the rivalry between myths. The naivety of many debunkers lies in not seeing that, within this mythocratic playfield, truths and fictions are supposed to intertwine, support, and weave into each other, rather than repel each other.

Such a mythocratic playfield must be recontextualised in the framework sketched by the (in)famous statement attributed to Karl Rove, advisor to President George W. Bush, collected by Ron Suskind in the *New York Times Magazine* of 17 October 2004:

The aide said that guys like me were ‘in what we call the reality-based community’, which he defined as people who ‘believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality’ ... ‘That’s not the way the world really works anymore,’ he continued. ‘We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you’re studying that reality – judiciously, as you will – we’ll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that’s how things will sort out. We’re history’s actors ... and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.’¹⁵

Like it or not, over the past decades at least, the ‘right’ has operated from a much more insightful (if reckless) understanding of mythocracy than has the ‘left’. Berlusconi, Bush, Orbán, Trump, Bolsonaro, Milei have managed to play rebels and gamble with history, while all of us have been ‘left’ to just study what they did.¹⁶ At the heart of this worryingly *wirklich* delirium (true insofar as effective) parades the figure of the *actor*, in the double but converging sense of the one who acts and the one who plays a role. Rove only takes note of the obvious: actor and agent become one on a political scene. As protagonists of a running myth (which could sound as a running joke, if the stakes were not so high), these sinister characters ‘perform’ better than their ‘left’ counterparts. While comparisons between the political scene and a theatrical stage have haunted many periods of past history, the rise of platform capitalism in the

¹⁴ Laurent de Sutter, *Indignation totale. Ce que notre addiction aux scandales dit de nous*, Paris: L’Observatoire, 2019.

¹⁵ Ron Suskind, ‘Faith, Certainty and the Presidency of George W. Bush’, *New York Times Magazine*, 17 October 2004.

¹⁶ Pablo Stefanoni, *La rébellion est-elle passé à droite?*, Paris: La Découverte, 2021; Aris Komporozos-Athanasiou, *Speculative Communities: Living with Uncertainty in a Financialized World*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022.

2010s – simultaneous with the rise of video games in the cultural practices of intensely connected populations – marked the entry of political life into a much more *playful* universe, of which we are just beginning to glimpse some rules. The affective attractivism of social media irresistibly tickle the gaming instincts of the *Homo ludens* lying dormant in most of us.

The conspiratorial gamification hosted by the various platforms strikingly stimulates the four dimensions of play highlighted by Roger Caillois in his classic 1958 work *Man, Play and Games*.¹⁷ Online, too, (1) we frequently play roles under borrowed identities (*mimicry*); (2) we expose ourselves to the chance of more or less fortunate serendipity (*alea*); (3) we are often led to compete for consideration and influence, under a constant barrage of critical appraisals, vengeful denunciations, and hostile rivalry (*agôn*); finally and more importantly still, (4) when a post or a tweet goes viral, when likes or retweets soar in an exponential curve, the buzzing hype generates a psychic experience of bungee-jumping vertigo (*ilinx*). The most implausible conspiracy theories as well as the most sinister forms of online harassment are driven by this vertiginously playful (and narcissistic) thrill, whose force of attraction is largely overlooked by debunkers obsessed with the sole compass of truth-value. From this point of view, the most enlightening model for understanding the conspiratorial battleground of platform mythocracies should be found in Natasha Dow Schüll's brilliant and disquieting analysis of Las Vegas's slot machines.¹⁸

'We are the actors of history': from White House aides to young influencers, political antagonisms (*agôn*) are restructured and decided through mythocratic simulations (*mimicry*), to the point where the vertigo of viral playfulness (*ilinx*) takes precedence over calculations of interests and strategic rationalities, with unpredictable consequences (*alea*). How many film stars, rap idols, or political figures did we see carried away by the competitive spirit of the attraction game, making scandalous statements or taking perfectly indefensible positions – against their best interests and basic rationality – like moths to a flame, fascinated by the parallel rise of outrageousness and retweet count? Some of them apologise retrospectively at their expense, while others choose to always rush forward, overcoming vertigo by an ever steeper escalation, accumulating excess upon excess in the hope of reaching that highest level of the game where all will be forgiven – which apparently works for certain figures like Trump, who seem inoxidably armoured against any return to reality.

This joyful dizziness fuels the myth of the winner: it is inherently cheerful and it smiles at the cheerful. This myth is genuinely lived by the business manager who sees his goods snapped up by distributors, or his shares rising on the stock market, as well as by the influencer who sees clicks, likes, and followers increase exponentially. Before being translated into hard cash or elected power, this myth is measured and experienced in speed of propagation, in positive feedback, and in a feeling of traction inherent to the dynamics of attractivism. It is the form of enjoyment and power specific to platform mythocracy: its vertigo (*ilinx*) is that of the surfer at the top of the wave, carried by the joint breathing of a conspiratorial communion.

10. *Generative neural networks undermine indexicality.* Such self-inflicted dizziness, resulting in self-destructive swerves of our obligation to self-design, is all the more threatening now that we are entering a media world bound to be permeated with deep fakes. Fact-finding and fact-checking will be made all the more difficult (skilled, costly) as generative pretrained transformers (GPTs) will soon allow anyone to flood the media sphere with perfectly realist contrafactual simulations. If the relentless (and environmentally unsustainable) development of generative AI follows its current course, it will put within the reach of any teenager the

¹⁷ Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001 [1958].

¹⁸ Natasha Dow Schüll, *Addiction by Design: Machine Gambling in Las Vegas*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014.

‘psychological operations’ arsenal heretofore confined to heavily financed secret services.¹⁹ This will further undermine whatever indexicality was left in the images and sounds flowing through our screens, as the distance between ‘I’ve seen/heard it’ and ‘Therefore it happened’ is bound to expand, growing less and less easily manageable. Even as we are still struggling to understand the stakes of the Web 2.0 revolution whereby ‘everyone-becomes-media’, we are already confronted with its next step, wherein ‘everyone-becomes-PsyOperator’ – a democratisation which is in no way incompatible with the strong presence of the more traditional agents of PsyOp (CIA, Kremlin, Chinese Communist Party, etc.), with armies of trolls on their payroll. The various analyses presented in this book will hopefully help brace ourselves for this further erosion of our capacity to establish a water-tight, stable, and obvious separation between reality and myth.

11. *Iconomorphosis supersumes reality*. Under the neologism of ‘iconomorphosis’, French philosopher Frédéric Bisson has recently developed a powerful theorisation of the ways in which the signs circulating through our various forms of audiovisual media overdetermine, reorient, reconfigure, and restructure our material realities. In phase 1 of iconomorphosis, ‘the mediatic icon substitutes itself to the index upon which it is superimpressed, so that the possible object signified by the image substitutes itself to the real object it denotes’. In phase 2, through ‘the materialisation of the icon, the possible crosses the threshold that separates the real and its representation; it materialises in our lives, through gestures, behaviors, affects’.²⁰

An emblematic example of such an iconomorphic materialisation is the dramatic case of James Holmes, who shot twelve people in a movie theater of Aurora, Colorado, during a preview of Christopher Nolan’s *The Dark Knight Rises*, on 20 July 2012 – claiming ‘I am the Joker’, while wearing the make-up and costume of the fictional character. The ‘sophism of Edenic ontology’ (held by most debunkers) assumes that reality would virginally precede its representations. To the contrary, Bisson extends Baudrillard’s intuition about (what I would call) *the iconomorphic supersumption* of our reality by the dynamics of simulation: in the same way that Antonio Negri extended Marx’s intuition about the ‘real subsumption’ leading all forms and moments of our life to be infiltrated (from below, *sub*-sumption) by the financial logic of capital, similarly Bisson suggests that all spheres of our material life become permeated (from above, *super*-sumption) by iconomorphosis.

The story goes like this: our (spontaneous) hallucinations result from the dissemination of (socio-economic) ‘semiotic inseminations’. In other words, as suggested by radical theorists from the 1970s, our reality itself functions as a conspiracy, insofar as we breathe together (in and out) the icons artfully designed by a huge economic sector of ‘semiurgy’. To say that iconomorphosis supersumes reality is to account for the fact that fictional films generate actual killers, in the same manner that our myths about terrorism and conspiracies contribute to the scripting of actual terrorist violence and conspiracy thinking.

This is mythocracy to the power of four, since not only our stories (as concatenations of actions), not only our words (as references to states of things), not only our perceptions (as index of a certain reality), but *reality itself* appears as being deeply mythified (and therefore dangerously mystifying). This supersumption explains why, on both sides of what Naomi Klein described as a ‘Mirror World’ – populated by ‘individuals not guided by legible principles or beliefs, but acting as members of groups playing yin to the other’s yang’ – ‘we are having disagreements about who is in reality and who is in a simulation’.²¹ Such dizzying

¹⁹ See Konrad Becker, *Dictionary of Operations: Deep Politics and Cultural Intelligence*, New York: Autonomedia, 2013.

²⁰ Frédéric Bisson, *Logique du Joker*, Paris: MF, 2023, p. 230.

²¹ Naomi Klein, *Doppelgänger: A Trip into the Mirror World*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2022, pp. 15 and 106.

disagreements should be heard as the contemporary translation of Sun Ra's (anti-)foundational questions: 'If you're not a reality, whose myth are you? If you're not a myth, whose reality are you?'

Literature and/as multi-perspectivism

Ending this book with an afterword on the current debates about conspiracism establishes the latter both as an illustration and as an application of the theses of *Mythocracy*. To sum it up in a formula: *(anti-)conspiracy thinking is a myth about a myth*. In the 'Mirror World' constructed along the whirlwind dynamics of platform capitalism, the conspiracism of QAnon followers and the anti-conspiracism of academic debunkers symmetrically respond to and mutually feed each other. They share a similar gesture of denouncing a myth from a point of view assumed to be exterior and superior to mythification/mystification. From the conspiracist perspective, those of us who continue to gobble our daily blue pills fall victim of the myth of the Matrix: the deep state controls every part of our life for its leaders' profit, while we continue naively to believe in institutions plotted to take advantage of us. From the debunkers' perspective, those of us who denounce reality as a scam fall prey to the myths of conspiracy thinking: evil manipulators and/or ignorant agitators spread unfounded fake news that erodes the impermeable separation a free and rational society should maintain between lies and truth.

By doing so, both sides produce or maintain a common myth: the myth of an intellectual superiority enjoyed by some humans above others, indissociable from the myth implying that those who do not think like ourselves can't think on their own. I will call it *the myth of uni-perspectivism*. The main lesson repeated in this book is that there is no such position above or outside the realm of the myth. (The same could be said about ideologies.) We can only choose our (better: more egalitarian, more solidary, more sustainable) myths to fight against other (worse: more exclusory, more oppressive, more ecocidal) myths. This overall lesson comes with at least five corollaries, which I will briefly address to conclude this afterword.

First, within the situation described by the eleven principles outlined above, our main practical task should be to further develop the tools, methods, teachings, practices, and supporting institutions admirably framed by Matthew Fuller and Eyal Weizman under the heading of *Investigative Aesthetics*.²² Any serious 'politics of truth' needs to invest in the means necessary to conduct investigations, whether in the natural or social sciences, in political and environmental activism, in social justice, in international relations, in technology, or in the arts. We will always need reductive stories and partly mystifying myths in order to streamline the unbearable complexity of being. But these stories and these myths will be all the more helpful, and all the less dangerous, if they are fed (and permanently corrected) by a tireless fieldwork of fact-finding investigations.

Second, these investigations will need to associate the highest efforts of objectivation and distant analysis with the humble and *narrative* recognition of their situatedness. It is no coincidence that the two most insightful books recently published on conspiracy thinking should come from writers who place their own story at the core of their investigation. Naomi Klein's *Doppelgänger* starts from, and constantly goes back to, what attracted her to the other side of the Mirror World: the frequent mistakes made between her and feminist writer Naomi Wolf, who had become a public ally of Steve Bannon's conspiracy-mongering. Wu Ming 1's *La Q di qomplotto* is more emblematic still: as a member of the far-left Italian collective Luther Blissett, he had participated in the writing of a novel that became an international best-seller in

²² Matthew Fuller and Eyal Weizman, *Investigative Aesthetics: Conflicts and Commons in the Politics of Truth*, London: Verso, 2021.

the early 2000s under the title *Q*; his investigation documents his surprise to see, fifteen years later, his fictional character (named *Q*) become the mythical protagonist (*QAnon*) of a planetary-wide far-right phantasmagoria of complot, which had metaleptically transgressed the boundary between fictional and actual worlds to play a decisive role in real-life elections.²³

Both of these books provide a remarkably lucid, rational, enlightening analysis of conspiracism, no less knowledgeable, trustworthy, and rigorous than the best academic publications. Yet they investigate, and live, the worlds of conspiracism from-the-inside: as an entanglement of myths within which they too are dizzyingly trapped. Explicitly or implicitly, the voice which analyses the situation, and possibly sketches a solution, acknowledges to be also a part of the problem. Nowhere do they deny the fact that they navigate the troubled waters of mythocracy with mythical sails and a mythical compass. Far from diminishing the explanatory power of their investigation, this narrative and enunciative situatedness inhabits (and haunts) it with a more discriminating tone and a livelier intensity.

Third corollary: the point of view from-the-inside of the conspiratory turmoil adopted by these two books can be more generally indexed upon the *specific virtues of literature and literary studies*. In an age and in an academic division of labour wherein studying literary texts seems about as relevant, to face today's urgencies, as specialising in theology or Egyptology, the previous chapters of this book have attempted to reclaim a practical and political usefulness of approaching narratives as narratives, mobilising some of the analytical tools generated by literary theories during the second half of the twentieth century. On the specific issue addressed in this afterword, literary studies seem well ahead of cognitivism when it comes to shedding light on the conspiracist imaginary. Their quasi-absolute exclusion from the current debates on this issue perpetuates a pseudo-rational naivety, which their remobilisation would help to dispel. This would involve a triple backstepping from the ratio-supremacist common sense: *hermeneutical* (all knowledge results from an interpretative construction), *fictional* (factuality and causality are to be understood within, rather than in opposition to, narrativity and fictionality), and *enunciative* (whenever we express ourselves in public, our voices never directly reflect our identities and beliefs, but constantly play with complex and subtle games of distancing and reframing).

More importantly still, literary attention and literary sensibility teach us a certain prudence, a sense of nuance and discrimination inherently linked to being an expression lived-from-the-inside. In the Western culture of the past four centuries, what we now identify as 'literature' emerged as a collective adventure fuelled by countless individual attempts to rewrite our constitutive myths, during countless cross-disciplinary investigations based on experience elevated to the status of experimentation, made all the more valuable because it was unbounded by the disciplinary walls now associated with the laboratory. For this collective adventure, Sun Ra found the best possible name in calling his ensemble the Myth-Science Arkhestra.

The fourth corollary qualifies the dominant literary tradition – focused on the identification and fetishisation of the author – by staging the contemporary literary experience-experimentation as a radical questioning of authorship and authority. As we have seen in the previous pages, what the brave knights of debunking describe as a 'post-truth' era should rather be labelled '*post-authority*'. We have not fallen from the Paradise of Truth (heroically conquered by the predominance of critical thinking) to the Hell of Myth (abandoned to the most gullible). Rather, we are entering an era when the prevalence of comfortable lies and the omnipresence of half-truths may be more realistically recognised under the corroding assaults of a form of hyper-criticism. The rampant discrediting of all positions of authority experienced during the Covid episode can be credibly assessed as the result of seeing too many authoritative

²³ See edizionalegre.it for an English summary of the as-yet untranslated book.

and authoritarian voices (people and institutions) caught with their pants down while passing myth for truth.

We will always need to distribute trust (another word for authority) in order to stabilise and validate reliable conducts of factual accuracy. What may (hopefully) be coming to an end is the myth of the uni-perspectivist truth, arrogantly monopolised by those who got hold of positions of authority. What follows it is not so much the empire of lies as the more difficult task of having to reposition oneself in a new regime of plural truths, and of systematically problematic access to facts. This calls for the learning of a new investigative prudence, rather than for lamentations in apocalyptic tones.

Under this light, it is a blessing for literary studies to have been debunked from the hegemonic status enjoyed by literary theory in the 1970s. Now that they find themselves uncomfortably cornered in a marginal zone of useless non-expertise, devoid of any pretence to authority, they are best positioned to address our most pressing issues from an unassuming, radically transversal, and properly ‘curious’ vantage point. Their relegation to a dusty *cabinet de curiosités* encourages them to fully endorse the truly revolutionary mission of curiosity: seeking the disturbing and inconvenient kernels of truth that lie beyond the boundaries of preestablished authorised knowledge.²⁴

Fifth corollary, and final remark for this book: the most precious aspect of the literary *curiosité* may be its inherent propensity to foster *multi-perspectivism*. Long before Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin redefined the novelistic genre as a polyphonic dialogue between heterogeneous and contradictory points of view, epistolary novels had accustomed their readers to appreciate one set of events from the multiple perspectives of various value systems. Long before Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro taught us the cognitive, ethical, political, and environmental merits of the ‘perspectivist’ world-views developed by Amazonian populations, literary fictions had experimented with discovering eighteenth-century France through the gaze of a Peruvian princess, or with seeing modern life from the point of view of a human cockroach.²⁵

Sun Ra viewing the racist US from his Saturnian Astro-Black perspective proves as deeply literary as Voltaire’s Micromegas visiting Earth from Sirius. It leads him to radically decenter his characterisation of truth:

‘Truth’ can also be bad, as when a man says ‘I’ll kill you’ and he does. The moment of truth in a bullfight is the time of the bull’s death ... Those who live by reality are slaves to truth. It’s a kind of narcotic, a dope. When the police finds out the truth about you, they say they get the ‘dope’ on you.²⁶

The value and the effects of ‘truth’ can be quite different, whether you approach them from the perspective of a white university professor, a police officer, or an impoverished Black youth: it can simultaneously be a worthy goal for some, and a mortal danger for others.

The epistemological stakes and the political demands of multi-perspectivism within the conspirational context of digital omni-mediatisation have already been clearly articulated by Vilém Flusser in his 1983 *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*. They can be succinctly

²⁴ Enrico Campo and Yves Citton, eds, *The Politics of Curiosity: Alternatives to the Attention Economy*, London: Routledge, 2024.

²⁵ Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982; Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017; Françoise de Graffigny, *Letters from a Peruvian Woman*, New York: MLA Editions, 1993 [1749]; Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis* [1915] in *The Complete Stories*, New York: Schocken Books, 1971.

²⁶ Quoted in John F. Szwed, *Space Is the Place: The Lives and Times of Sun Ra*, New York: Da Capo Press, 1998, p. 317.

summarised in six points: 1) any photograph taken by a camera is (objectively) ‘true’; 2) the photographer’s intervention rests on the (subjective) perspective adopted to frame a given situation; 3) different perspectives can reveal contradictory aspects of this situation (all equally ‘true’); 4) it is impossible to consider a given situation from all of its possible points of view; 5) each photograph changes reality by putting in circulation a certain view on it; 6) a democratic society ought to find institutional mechanisms to allow for contradictory perspectives to complement, rather than suppress, each other.²⁷

After having been rather uncomfortable throughout this book about the current definitions of the ‘left’ and the ‘right’ in today’s politics, this afterword could suggest a reconfigured contrast, which would drastically redistribute the traditional assignments. It would identify the left with the (admittedly difficult) acceptance and taking into account of the multi-perspectivism afforded by our new communication regimes, while the right would be identifiable by their authoritarian imposition of a uni-perspectivist construction of reality.

Multi-perspectivism is no less ‘mythical’ than uni-perspectivism. It is just another way to tell a possible story for democratic regimes. It is a dream, it is a hope for ‘what we never came to be that we should be’, it is a script for altering our common destiny according to the powers of letters, words, narratives, research, and study – a literary conspiracy, for which Sun Ra provided an inspiring blueprint:

Now, just like everybody else, when I first came on this planet, I didn’t know anything, completely ignorant. As I look back on my childhood, I am amazed at how ignorant I was. But it’s a good thing I was, because then I did not accept anything as being the truth. And that made me research, you see. And researching, I found out all these things.

...

Two women stayed after a meeting and they asked me: ‘What must we do?’ I said: It is written *Take words, my people, and return to me!* You got to put these words together properly. Like if you put some chemicals together, they become deadly. That’s the way it is for words. You can put certain words together and they become deadly for you, and deadly for our nation, and deadly for everybody. Words produced the atomic bomb: symbols, words, that’s the way they got it first. First, they put on these symbols, letters and words, and then they were able to produce it ... Now whatever you’re living here – our supposed ‘living’ – there’s a blueprint, and it’s equational, and these equations are about to kill you. Unless you get some more equations. Now sometimes I’ve been talking about ‘altered destiny’, that’s the substitution of a destiny for the one you got. Because the one you got is spelled D.O.O.M. And it’s knocking at your door. Therefore, it’s impossible you get out, because there’s such a thing as karma.

So then, what must you do? You must appeal to God’s Impossible Department. Because the possible can never save you, and the truth cannot save you, because the truth is what you do every day. It’s what you have done in the past, what you think every day, and it’s what you read in the newspapers. Everything out there that’s happening is the truth. And everything that happens in history is the truth. But that’s not any good.

...

They say that history repeats itself, but history is only his-story. You haven’t heard my story yet ... My story is close to mystery. My story is better than history. Mystery is better than history. What’s *your* story?²⁸

²⁷ Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, Göttingen: European Photography, 1984; Emmanuel Alloa, *Partages de la perspective*, Paris: Fayard, 2020.

²⁸ Sun Ra, ‘The Possibility of Altered Destiny’, conference, 10 November 1979; last paragraph from Szwed, *Space Is the Place*, p. 317.