

DARK POWERS, May 12-14, 2006, University of Konstanz, Germany

Abstracts:

Prof. Stefan Andriopoulos, Dept. of German, Columbia University, New York

Occult Conspiracies: Spirits and Secret Societies in Schiller's Ghost Seer and Grosse's The Genius.

While seemingly engaged in an enlightened critique of superstition and credulity, Friedrich Schiller's novel "Der Geisterseher" („The Ghost Seer“) does not discard supernatural figures but displaces them onto the description of an omnipresent and simultaneously intangible conspiracy, personified in the mysterious figure of the Armenian. A similar pattern can be observed in Karl August Grosse's "Der Genius" („The Genius“, also translated as "Horrid Mysteries").

Prof. James DerDerian, Watson Institute of International Relations, Providence/RI

'The Desert of the Real and the Secret of the Simulacrum'

This March I spent a week in the Mojave Desert, embedded with the 25th Marines at 29 Palms as they went through their final training before heading to Iraq. While conducting a video ethnography of military cultural awareness, we discovered a dark side to the Global War on Terror. The war had come home.

Dr. Thorsten Hahn, Forschungszentrum Medientheorie, Universität Köln

The Secrets of Manchuria. Narrations on Mind Control

My paper will deal with the genealogy and the present form of the discourse on the possibility of mind control. This discourse becomes a popular form of communication in the 1950s, a decade in which the fear of so-called Eastern brainwash-techniques is so widespread that even Mickey Mouse can become a victim of mind control, programmed to kill by a Fu Manchu type of enemy (1955). The name for this kind of killer was provided by Richard Condon's bestselling novel "The Manchurian Candidate" (1959). The success of this narrative seems uninterrupted; a new and modernized filmic version based upon Condon's novel hit the movie theatres in 2004. The main difference this recent adaption introduces is the fact that "Manchurian" now has become a brand and the Asian secrets have been replaced by patented (or soon to be patented) Western technology. In my paper, I examine the discursive and narrative function of the exotic Eastern sphere, both in Condon's novel and in conspiracy theories centered around mind-controlled assassins. Is the general narrative changed once Manchuria becomes "Manchurian Global"? Does mind control somehow require the heirs of Fu Manchu to ensure its plausibility or are these just mere exotic decor?

Dr. Ralf Klausnitzer, Dept. German, Humboldt-Universität, Berlin

**Secret Ways of Human Machinations.
Sense of Relations and Sign Economics in Conspiracy Theories of the 18th Century**

Conspiracy theories can be described as the paradoxical result of a profound transformation in social observations and the conclusions these furnish. Providing models for the interpretation of collective processes, conspiracy theories reduce the complexity of social conditions by attributing such processes to the agency of individuals and the coordinated "machinations" of networks and their invisible plans. In their textual structure, however, these theories posit an arbitrarily tight network mesh and a virtually infinite number of combinations in possible conspiratorial connections. They also require a minute study of network activity. If *nothing is what it seems*, each detail of the social world might be seen as a clue whose capture requires a limitlessly fine-grained filtering and whose interpretation hinges on an equally intransigent defiance of the obvious. As a result of this type of observation, the Eighteenth Century witnesses a collective paranoia which Immanuel Kant in its Anthropology called a "special folly of reason". Its consequences affected political theory, historiography, literature, and science. In my talk I would like to elucidate the internal logic of conspiracy theories in the late Eighteenth Century and discuss the foundations of their textual strategies. After some general remarks I will draw on the example of the so-called Jesuit and ex-Jesuit "conjunction", a conspiracy theory that was spread in various versions since the Seventeenth Century. I will reconstruct the history of an obsession with the "Jesuits" which combined increasingly precise observations with an excess of combinatorial fantasy. I will:

- give some examples of observations and conclusions attributing invisibility, omnipresence, and unlimited power to the Societas Jesu which although officially outlawed was nevertheless suspected to be secretly still active;
- analyse the narrative and rhetorical structure of the scenarios which were spread by activists of the Enlightenment and by their conservative opponents;
- outline the cultural function of these collective imaginations which influenced the development of other secret societies, literary forms, and cultural theories.

Prof. Peter Knight, Dept. of English and American Studies, Manchester, UK

'Outrageous Conspiracy Theories': Popular and Official Responses to 9/11 and the War on Terror

As with the Kennedy assassination, conspiracy theories have begun to question the official version of events in the case of the terrorist attacks of September 11th 2001. In books, magazine articles, public meetings, DVDs and on the web, rumours are circulating that the American government knew of the attacks in advance, or that the official report is a cover-up. What are we to make of these seemingly implausible stories, angrily dismissed as "outrageous conspiracy theories" by Pres. George Bush? Will 9/11 end up producing the same kind of conspiracy culture that surrounds the Kennedy assassination? How do these conspiracy fears relate to popular and official fears about terrorism? How do they connect with the long history of American demonology, and is there any difference between American and European interest in conspiratorial interpretations? Has Islam replaced Communism as the new scapegoat of choice, or do these new conspiracy theories function in a different way to traditional demonology? This paper will argue that as much as post-9/11 conspiracy theories seem like last ditch paranoid fantasies of a conservative faith in rugged individualism, they also—perhaps accidentally—end up replicating in their own narrative strategies precisely the kind of decentered portrait of global power they fear.

Prof. Michèle Lowrie, Dept. of Classics, New York University

Evidence and Narrative in Merimée's „La conjuration de Catilina“

Prosper Merimée, the author of „Carmen“, had a taste for dramatic stories of intrigue, passion, and violent revenge. When he turned his attention to the writing of history, it is not surprising that the Catilinarian conspiracy caught his fancy. His project replays many of the epistemological impasses of the conspiracy about which he writes: he must put together fragments of evidence from ancient 'witnesses' to discover the real story, not just what Catiline and his cohorts did -- the conspiracy proper -- but its larger historical meaning. He blends historiographical method with novelistic insight to produce a masterful narrative that fills out the inevitable gaps left by the evidence.

Prof. Timothy D. Melley, Dept. of English, Miami University of Ohio, Oxford/OH

Brainwashed!: Conspiracy Theory and Ideology in the Postwar United States

Why has conspiracy theory become an increasingly popular mode of political thinking in postwar America? Using the idea of brainwashing as an example, I argue that conspiracy theory often functions as a crude form of ideological critique in a culture that is generally hostile to such forms of sociological analysis. Developed in Central Intelligence Agency research during the Korean War, and popularized by CIA operative Edward Hunter, the American discourse on brainwashing is a useful model of conspiracy theory for several reasons. First, it illustrates the degree to which conspiracy theory now depicts vast state and corporate powers rather than just small, secret plots or rebellions.

Second, the notion of brainwashing clearly links this rethinking of conspiracy theory to the burgeoning national security state with its covert and anti-democratic parallel government. Finally, the resonance brainwashing had for both U.S. government policy and popular culture stems from its anxiety about diminished human agency and social control. This anxiety animates much postwar American conspiratorial thinking—in both popular and literary forms. Its main cultural function, I argue, is to provide an explanation of the way social institutions and messages might govern individual human behavior.

Dr. Michael Hagemeister, Dept. of Cultural Analysis, Europa-Universität Viadrina, Frankfurt/Oder

The "Protocols of the Elders of Zion" between History and Fiction

The "Protocols of the Elders of Zion" is a fictitious "document" that pretends to describe the secret plan of a Jewish world conspiracy to achieve world domination. As it has long been known, the "Protocols" is a compilation of fictional texts (Joly's "Dialogue in Hell", Goedsche's novel "Biarritz"). Recent research (Tazbir, Eco, Dudakov, De Michelis, Skuratovskii) has shown that there are also numerous borrowings from French and Russian 19th century (popular) fiction (Dumas père, Sue, Dostoevskii et al.): pulp-fiction is made into a "document".

Not only the "Protocols" are pure fiction, but also the numerous versions of their origins, as propagated by their adherents, are fictitious (First Zionist Congress, dating back to the times of Solomon, B'nai B'rith loges, Alliance Israelite Universelle, Illuminati, Merovingians, Theodor Herzl, Ascher Ginzberg, Adam Weishaupt etc.).

But also in the critical research literature (Cohn, Taguieff, Dudakov, Ben Itto, Bronner etc.) one often finds a combination of facts and fiction (products of imagination). There are numerous assertions that have been handed down from one author to another since the early 1920s but have never been checked. This applies e.g. to the first appearance of the "Protocols", the role of the Okhrana in concocting them, the conspiracy to fight the influence of Papius and Philippe, the attitude of the Tsar and the church hierarchy, the importance of the "Protocols" for antisemitic propaganda and violence in pre-revolutionary Russia, the personality of the "Protocols" most prominent publisher and commentator, Sergei Nilus ("Orthodox monk", "priest", "professor" etc.) and so on.

The aim of the paper is to show how the (critical) version of the origins of the "Protocols" supported by most authors until today has been created in the early 1920s (based mostly on the account by Alexandre du Chayla), approved during the Berne trial in the 1930s and made "classic" by Henri Rollin and especially by Norman Cohn. This version will then be checked against the background of recent research (including my own). It will be demonstrated that in dealing with the "Protocols" (and also in fighting them) the border between facts and fiction has often been neglected.

Prof. Victoria Emma Pagán, Dept. of Classics, University of Florida, Gainesville/FL

Toward a Definition of Conspiracy Theory in Ancient Rome

Despite my intentional efforts to eschew the term "conspiracy theory" in *Conspiracy Narratives in Roman History*, one recent critic remarked that "It was hard not to misremember Pagán's title as 'Conspiracy Theories in Ancient Rome' (Haynes, *AJP* 126.4.631). The aims of this conference seem to demand an exploration of at least the possibility of conspiracy theory in ancient Roman history writing. In the absence of such a term in Latin or Greek, this paper attempts to excavate a conspiracy theory by looking at three aspects of conspiracy that raise fundamental contradictions for the Roman historians: silence, punishment, and evidence. Silence is a necessary ingredient for a successful conspiracy; yet silence hinders the transfer of knowledge that can bring a conspiracy to light. To punish conspirators, who have been apprehended before committing a crime, is to risk punishing innocent men. Evidence for a conspiracy often takes the form of written word that is rarely definitive. By exploring these regions of epistemological uncertainty, it may be possible to approximate a conspiracy theory for Roman historiography.

Prof. Dr. Jakob Tanner, Dept. of History, University of Zurich

The Complot of the "Invisible Hand". Anonymous Market Mechanisms and Dark Powers

An apparent coincidence has it that in 1776, the year in which Adam Smith in his *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* called market mechanisms „the invisible hand“, the secret order of the Illuminati was founded in Ingolstadt. The Illuminati soon became notorious as the prototype of a masonic conspiracy. Many conspiracy theories in the wake of the French Revolution are based on the assumption that there must be a secret link between opaque market mechanisms and the conspiratorial workings of hidden elites. At the end of the Nineteenth Century these conspiracy theories' antisemitic slant grew stronger, expressed in the catchphrase of the „golden international“. Bizarre constructions such as the „Jewish-Marxist world conspiracy“ or the „masonic-communist conspiracy“ found a broad audience and eventually (and not only in Germany) gained political credibility. The talk will examine both the tautologies and the factual base of these fictions. It will try to elucidate the persistent „uncanniness“ of anonymous processes of market globalization, upon which these theories hinge.

Dr. Henry Taylor, Dept. of Film Studies, University of Zurich:

The New Cabinet of Dr. Caligari. Neo-Expressionist Cinema and the Conspiracy of Reality

While conspiracies in film are almost as old as the medium itself, and Fritz Lang's master-criminal features of the 1920s and 30s established the paranoid thriller, it wasn't until the wave of American and European conspiracy films of the 1970s that the "genre" was broadly recognized as such. Often grounded in historical reality, its most typical formula has lowly investigative protagonists uncover a vast plot leading "all the way to the top" of big business, or, more frequently, government (as in *All the President's Men*, Alan J. Pakula's 1976 dramatization of the Watergate reporting by Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward).

After the left-leaning, post-'68 political thriller lost its momentum with the rise of Reaganomics and neo-conservatism in the 1980s, the 1970s were later nostalgically regarded by critics as a "golden age of paranoia." Yet, particularly since the mid-90s, paranoid cinema has flourished in a revival of film noir and science fiction, and indeed flooded the screens as conspiracy theories and cultural paranoia became the object of serious academic study. Meanwhile the conspiratorial outlook of some of the most innovative – and predominantly independent – films (e.g. *Cube*, *Pi*, *Fight Club*, *Memento*, *The Machinist*) has shifted: from "who can you trust?" to the more properly postmodern question whether *reality as such* may be trusted at all. Hence the frame has been displaced from conspiracies *in* reality to reality as conspiracy (or from conspiracy to paranoia). Harking back to the famous unreliability of the German expressionist classic *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), contemporary neo-expressionist cinema delights in presenting us with claustrophobic and ominously threatening environments, which may, however, turn out to be the figments of a prison-like mind. Concentrating on this paradigm shift of conspiracy in film with its particular reflexivity, the presentation will also address some of the phenomenon's cultural and political implications.

Prof. Steven Zipperstein, Dept. of Jewish History and Culture, Stanford – response

Prof. Anson Rabinbach, Dept. of History, Princeton

„*The Brown Book of the Reichstag Fire and Hitler Terror*“: Staging Antifascism

During the night of February 27, 1933 the main assembly hall (Plenarsaal) of the Reichstag in Berlin was set ablaze and largely destroyed by fire. Police and firemen called to the scene found a disaffected Dutch council communist, Marinus van der Lubbe, who confessed at the scene to being the arsonist. Nazi leaders, including Goebbels and Göring who arrived while the building was still ablaze, blamed the communists. Some 8- 10,000 opponents of the regime, including 5,000 communists, were arrested in the days and weeks that followed. In addition to van der Lubbe, four persons were charged with conspiracy to commit arson - the chief of the Communist delegation in the Reichstag, Ernst Torgler and three Bulgarian communists, Georgi Dimitrov, Vassili Tanev, and Blagoi Popov who were arrested several days later, on March 9th.

At the end of August, a group of communist exiles and writers who had fled to Paris in the wake of the fire published a book laying bare the elements of a counter-conspiracy entitled „*The Brown Book of the Reichstag Fire and Hitler Terror*“. It was more than a book, it was a staged event and the center of an international campaign that convinced much of the world that the Nazis conspired to burn the Reichstag as the pretext to establish a dictatorship. The campaign around the *Brown Book* and the trial of Georgi Dimitrov and the other defendants in Reichstag Fire trial held in Leipzig from September to December 1933 was so skillfully managed that it persuaded a broad public and reputable historians until the 1960s that the Nazis had set the Reichstag on fire. The *Brown Book*, this lecture argues, created the prism through which most of the world saw Nazism for more than a generation. The story it told was a compelling tale of ruthless and diabolical Nazis, bent on eliminating all their political rivals and using the fire as a pretext to assume dictatorial power on the eve of the elections by conspiracy to blame the fire on the communists. The central character is the hapless "tool" Marinus van der Lubbe, described as "a small, half blind love-slave" whose name appeared on a list of lovers of the notorious S.A. leader, Ernst Röhm. The *Brown Book* filled two urgent political and emotional needs, by offering explanation with an image of the Nazis that in all respects ignored their popularity and electoral successes in favor of one in which conspiracy, blackmail, brutality, pathology, and sexual deviance took pride of place. At the core of Communist antifascism was a conspiracy narrative, or one might more accurately say, a counter-conspiracy narrative.

Dr. Ruth Groh, History of Ideas, Heidelberg/**Prof. Dr. em. Dieter Groh**, History, Heidelberg,

Keynote:

The Temptation of Conspiracy Theories – or: Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?