

DARK POWERS. Conspiracies in History and Fiction

International Conference
University of Konstanz, Germany
V 1001

May 12-14, 2006

"If we are on the outside, we assume a conspiracy is the perfect working of a scheme. Silent nameless men with unadorned hearts. A conspiracy is everything that ordinary life is not. It's the inside game, cold, sure, undistracted, forever closed off to us. We are the flawed ones, the innocents, trying to make some rough sense of the daily jostle. Conspirators have a logic and a daring beyond our reach. All conspiracies are the same taut story of men who find coherence in some criminal act." (Don DeLillo: *Libra*)

Conspiracies have haunted our political and historical imagination since Antiquity. In them we find a secret dimension of politics with unpredictable alliances, invisible networks, hidden agents, and dark subversive powers. Conspiracies – both real and mere phantasms - open up questions on what constitutes the mechanisms for the preservation or usurpation of power. How do conspiracies "work"? What defines their logic, their coherent forms, and how do they preserve their secrecy? What are the conditions for their success? Operating in the dark, conspiracies also pose a substantial problem to historiography. This raises the question of how secret political operations can be reconstructed, if it is impossible to adopt the "insider" position and if the "outsider" position is defined by the very lack of information and documents. What can one ultimately call a "successful conspiracy" if this success necessarily implies a breach of secrecy? The mere possibility of conspiracies thereby also opens up a world of interpretation and exploration, one commonly known as 'conspiracy theory'.

Instead of dismissing conspiracy theory as a merely paranoid form of ideological extremism or "style" (Hofstadter), this conference will analyse their historical and epistemological structure. What types of knowledge do conspiracy theories involve and how do they (re)organize knowledge? What are their social and political functions? Why and under which circumstances have conspiracy theories been successful? The conference will focus not only on questions of conspiratorial structures in history, but also on the conspiratorial imaginary in literature, film and popular culture. We will address questions about the fundamentally 'fictional' elements in historiography, as well as the historical impact of fictional elements in conspiracy theory and literature. In particular, we will ask to what extent any narrative about the secret side of politics and culture - whether historical or literary - inevitably employs elements of conspiracy theory.

Organized by:

Prof. Dr. Eva Horn, University of Basell, Switzerland

Prof. Anson Rabinbach, Princeton, USA

Prof. Dr. Albrecht Koschorke, University of Konstanz, Germany

Program:

Room V 1001, Universität Konstanz

Friday, May 12, 2006

- 2:00 pm Welcome and introduction
Eva Horn (Basel):
Conspiracy and Conspiracy Theories: History, Narrative,
Fiction
- 2:30 pm Michèle Lowrie (New York):
Evidence and Narrative in Merimée's „La conjuration de
Catilina“
- 3:30 pm Victoria E. Pagán (Gainesville/FL):
Toward a Definition of Conspiracy Theory in Ancient Rome
- 4:30 pm Coffee break
- 5:00 pm Jakob Tanner (Zürich):
The Complot of the „Invisible Hand“. Anonymous Market
Mechanisms and Dark Powers
- 6:15 pm Keynote
Ruth Groh/Dieter Groh (Heidelberg):
The Temptation of Conspiracy Theory – or: Why Do Bad
Things Happen To Good People?
- 8:30 pm Dinner

Saturday, May 13, 2006

- 10:00 am Ralf Klausnitzer (Berlin):
Secret Ways of Human Machinations. Sense of Relations and Sign Economics in Conspiracy Theories of the Eighteenth Century
- 11:00 am Stefan Andriopoulos (New York):
Occult Conspiracies. Spirits and Secret Societies in Schiller's „The Ghost Seer“ and Grosse's „The Genius“
- 12:00 Lunch break
- 1:30 pm Henry Taylor (Zürich):
The New Cabinet of Dr. Caligari. Neo-Expressionist Cinema and the Conspiracy of Reality
- 2:30 pm Anson Rabinbach (Princeton):
The Brown Book of the Reichstag Fire and Hitler Terror: Staging Antifascism
- 3:30 pm Coffee break
- 4:00 pm Podium: „The Protocols of the Elders of Zion“
Michael Hagemester (Frankfurt a. d. Oder):
„The Protocols of the Elders of Zion“ Between History and Fiction
Response: Steven Zipperstein (Stanford)

Sunday May 14, 2006

- 10:00 am Timothy Melley (Oxford/OH):
Brainwashed! Conspiracy Theory and Ideology in the Postwar United States
- 11:00 am Torsten Hahn (Köln):
The Secrets of Manchuria. Narrations of Mind Control
- 12:00 Brunch break
- 1:00 pm Peter Knight (Manchester):
Outrageous Conspiracy Theories. Popular and Official Responses to 9/11 and the War on Terror
- 2:00 pm James DerDerian (Providence/RI):
The Desert of the Real and the Secret of the Simulacrum
- 3:00 pm End and goodbye coffee