

Conspiracy Culture

Florian Cramer, Münster lecture 6-2021

I have been invited to talk about conspiracies and the larger culture surrounding them. Since we are here at an art school, I will do my best to make my talk specific to you, as artists and as people interested in the arts, using as many references to contemporary art as possible.

It seems as culture and society around the globe are currently witnessing an explosion of conspiracy narratives. Typically, this is being linked to the rise of reactionary political populism: of among others Trumpism in America, Duterte in the Philippines, Putinism in Russia, and of the milieu of AfD and Corona deniers in Germany. Their typical populist campaigns and conspiracy concern:

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- immigration and globalization; such as in the conspiracy narrative of “The Great Replacement” or “Bevölkerungsaustausch”;
- the Corona pandemic and environmental politics; such as in the conspiracy narrative of the “Great Reset”.

(Explanation of memes: first is a fake EU billboard, second shows George Soros, who’s a main target of right-wing and antisemitic conspiracy narratives)

[slide popper]

In such a situation, it is tempting to simply side with a rationalist ideology that discredits any talk of conspiracies as epistemologically invalid and socially and politically dangerous. Actually, the term “conspiracy theory” itself was coined in 1945 by a scientific rationalist and political liberal, the philosopher Karl Popper, with exactly the intention to discredit conspiracy discourse as such. His book “The Open Society and Its Enemies” blames idealist philosophy since Plato for a development that ended with both fascist and Stalinist totalitarianism. Popper’s book does not differentiate conspiracy theory from conspiracy mythology, but equates and disacknowledges both on the grounds of a rationalist political philosophy.

[slide Mont Pelerin https://smhttp-ssl-53905.nexcesscdn.net/catalogue_images/auction//large/10126-2_1.jpg]

(Although one could argue that the political movement of neoliberalism in which Popper participated as a member of the Mont Pelerin Society operated itself in conspirative ways, namely through being organized in such a society.¹)

In my talk, I would like to argue in favor of a more cautious and maybe ambiguous position that avoids the framing of conspiracy culture as purely an issue of either belief or disbelief. Instead, I want to shed more light on the gray areas in between (a) conspiracy mythologies, (b) conspiracy theories based on at least partial evidence, and (c) proven conspiracies.

1 Mirowski/Plehwe, The Road to Mont Pelerin

QAnon

[slide diagram x3]

The following diagram comes out of the conspiracy culture of QAnon diagram. It was made by Dylan Louis Monroe, an art-school educated graphic designer who describes his work as follows:

“In 2017, Dylan began the ‘Deep State Mapping Project’ in response to the changing political climate in America. [...] faced with unrelenting Orwellian censorship, Dylan’s work has been banned and deplatformed by Facebook, Instagram, Shopify, Mailchimp, Square, and Patreon. As a ground operative for Ashtar Command, and the Galactic Federation, Dylan is also known by the call sign A-145: ‘The Mapmaker.’ In 2019 he channeled, through automatic writing, the Orit-B Codex, an accelerant to the Great Awakening, and an epilogue to the disclosure operation known as “Q”.²

In other words, this map and his artist comes out of the subculture known as QAnon. QAnon originated, as you may know, on the website 4chan, an open forum which has been the main breeding ground of Internet meme culture since the early 2000s, of the Anonymous movement [wearing the Guy Fawkes masks], major parts of the extreme right “Alt-Right” movement and finally of QAnon.

[slide pizzagate]

QAnon was preceded by an “Alt-Right” meme, or fake news story called “Pizzagate” during Donald Trump’s election campaign in 2016, according to which Hillary Clinton’s campaign team and top-ranking Democratic politicians were part of a satanist conspiracy that sexually abused children in the basement of a particular pizza parlor in Washington, DC. This story was spread by major Alt-Right and pro-Trump social media influencers, including the conspiracy website and YouTube channel “Infowars” run by the extreme-right influencer Alex Jones. (According to Wikipedia, “the InfoWars website receives approximately 10 million monthly visits, making its reach greater than some mainstream news websites such as The Economist and Newsweek”, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/InfoWars> ; in Germany, KenFM could best be compared to Infowars.)

[slide alex jones]

There are at least two links to contemporary art here: First, Alex Jones used as his legal defense in 2017 that he is a “performance artist” and “playing a character”.³ (In 2001 and 2006, he also appeared as an actor in two movies directed by Richard Linklater, “Waking Life” and “A Scanner Darkly”).

[slides Abramovic]

Secondly, one of the pieces of evidence for the supposed child-abusing satanist conspiracy were pictures of Marina Abramovic’s “spirit cooking” with John Podesta, chairman of Hillary

2 <https://www.dylanlouismonroe.com/biography.html>

3 <https://www.businessinsider.nl/lawyer-alex-jones-infowars-playing-character-acting-2017-4/?international=true&r=US>

Clinton's presidential campaign:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3EsJLNGVJ7E>

"Pizzagate" ended with a man entering the Washington D.C. pizza parlor with a shotgun to free the supposed sex slave children from the basement - only to find out that the building of the pizzeria didn't even have a basement.

[slide] This debunked the conspiracy fantasy only temporarily. One year later, in October 2017, an anonymous poster on 4chan, identifying as Q, relaunched the mythology by claiming to be a secret agent working for the U.S. government, and having insight into classified information on satanic pedophile liberal elites in the "Deep State", and into Donald Trump secretly fighting them behind the scenes of his presidency, with an imminent end battle of a "Storm" and a "Great Awakening".

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Next to Pizzagate, this story was riffing, copy-pasting or sampling three other narratives:

First, the widespread American evangelical belief in a "rapture" and endgame fight of Jesus Christ against Evil before Judgment Day. The term "Great Awakening" had already been used in U.S. evangelical protestantism of the early 18th century, and had its immediate parallel in what is called "Erweckungsbewegungen" in Germany at the same time, particularly in Southwestern German Pietism. (It's therefore not coincidental that many "Querdenker" and German QAnon followers come from this region and milieu.)

[slide LB, Q]

Secondly, it was almost certainly plagiarizing the novel "Q" by the Italian leftist-countercultural activist, artist and writer collective "Luther Blissett". The novel appeared in 1999 and plays in the German reformation and peasant wars, and tells the story of anonymous messages by an alleged government agent called "Q" who calls upon the revolutionary peasants to go into an end battle against the aristocracy - only that in the course of the novel, these letters turn out to be disinformation that lure the revolutionaries into a trap and tragic defeat. [Disclaimer: Luther Blissett operated as a collective-pseudonymous movement similar to Neoism, which grew out of the 1970s Mail Art movement and underground performance art, and which collectively used the identity Monty Cantsin. I've been personally involved in both Neoism and the Luther Blissett project. The "Anonymous" movement of the early 2000s used a similar strategy, but probably without being aware of its precursors.]

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Thirdly, the QAnon mythology brought back the old antisemitic myth of a secret world elite that drinks the blood of children that has existed since the Middle Ages.

[slide: woodcut from 1475, the caricature is from the Nazi paper "Der Stürmer" from 1934]

The storming of the Capitol in January 2021 ended up becoming QAnon's "storm". It was prefigured by the attempted storming of the Reichstag in 2020 where German QAnon followers

were prominently involved, and a Q flag had been waved. Just as the Pizzagate temporarily collapsed after the actual storming of the pizzeria, it remains unclear how the QAnon subculture will continue after the failure of storming the Capitol and reinstating Trump. But since QAnon's social media channels had several million followers in the U.S. alone, and since 15 Republican congress candidates for the 2020 elections had QAnon affiliations or sympathies, one can safely assume that this culture will not go away, but adapt and perhaps even become something bigger, just like in the morphing of Pizzagate into QAnon in 2017.

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Just a few months ago, there had been speculation whether a Berlin-based contemporary artist would become the new leader of QAnon. One of the fastest growing subnetworks and social media channels of the QAnon culture, with more than 1 million followers, was called "Sabmyk". Investigative journalism revealed that the person behind Sabmyk was the Polish-German performance and conceptual artist Sebastian Bieniek, a former master student of Katherina Sievering, who names Abramovic and John Armleder as his major influences and has been featured in a recent issue of the art periodical "Kunstforum" [vol. 268]). [slide]

[slide] In 2011, Bieniek wrote a self-published book "REALFAKE" in which he describes fake, according to the book's blurb, as a "sense-making 'bridge between people' [...], which gains uncheckable authority through exaggeration and repetition in space and time. All success, fame and power are based on the repeated glorification of miraculous deeds of the identity founder by those who profit from the resulting group formation".⁴

[slide] In the meantime, Bieniek denies that he has been a serious actor in QAnon's culture, also denies allegations of having spread antisemitic messages in his channels, and claims - similar to Alex Jones - had been a conceptual art performance.

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Aside from performance artists, literary writers have reflected on or even created conspiracy culture narratives in their novels: Thomas Pynchon in the "Crying of Lot 49" (where a secret postal system operates as a world subcultural conspiracy whose reality remains doubtful), Robert Anton Wilson and Robert Shea in the "Illuminatus!" trilogy (which became a major inspiration for hacker culture, including the German Chaos Computer Club, and the hacker Werner Koch who worked for the Soviet KGB in the 1980s, committed suicide and whose life story was adapted in the movie "23") and Umberto Eco in "Foucault's Pendulum" (which can actually be read as a comprehensive historical encyclopedia of European conspiracy theories and esoteric movements, including Rosicrucians, Freemasons and Illuminati).

Conspiracies at large

[slide Beuys]

- 4 "Und eine Fake genannte, sinnstiftende 'Brücke zwischen den Menschen' ist der Ursprung solcher Gruppen, der durch Überhöhung und Wiederholung in Raum und Zeit unüberprüfbare Autorität erlangt. Aller Erfolg, Ruhm und Macht beruhen auf der wiederholten Glorifizierung wundersamer Taten des Identitätsstifters durch jene, die an der daraus resultierenden Gruppenbildung profitieren."

There are, in other words, blurry lines between conspiracies, fake and disinformation as conceptual and performance art, or as literary fiction on the one hand - and actual political conspiracy cultures. And the question remains to which degree art tendencies can cater to conspiracy cultures. For example, there were subculture of fascism as aesthetic transgression in 1980s and 1990s post-punk and Industrial music culture that formed a, in some cases: direct, pretext for the contemporary “Alt-Right”. (For lack of time, I cannot go into details here.) And you may have read the speculations of whether Joseph Beuys might have been, because of his strong affiliation with Rudolf Steiner’s anthroposophy, be a member of the Querdenker/lateral thinker movement of anti-vaccers and Corona deniers today. (Which itself could be called a conspiracy narrative or speculation, unless we channel the dead Beuys via spiritist seances.)

Conversely, this begs the question about the degree to which any esoteric belief system can be called a conspiracy narrative; what the difference is between an esoteric belief system and a canonical religion; to which degrees religion (or the belief in gods or spirits) qualifies as a conspiracy - in the literal sense of a coming together of like-minded spirits - and its scriptures as conspiracy mythologies. (If you are in the camp of radical atheists such as Richard Dawkins, Steven Pinker and Christopher Hitchens, the answer would probably be a yes.)

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But the same question applies to art: Jean Baudrillard was the first theoretician to call art a conspiracy. His book was written after 9/11 and questioned the complicity of art with politics, economy and media spectacles. Baudrillard’s points are further substantiated in the more recent economic critique of the contemporary art system by Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello from 2017, and before that in Ben Lewis’ documentary film “The Great Contemporary Art Bubble” by Ben Lewis. Shot shortly before and during the financial crisis of 2008, “The Great Contemporary Art Bubble” is a piece of investigative journalism into the most expensive part of the contemporary art market - particularly the gallery sales of Damien Hirst’s work - and how they have been rigged by a small group of collectors, gallerists, auction houses and Hirst himself in literal insider trades and what one could call a market-rigging conspiracy.

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Another example of an art-related conspiracy is American Abstract Expressionist painting that scholarly research has revealed to have received substantial sponsorship by the CIA in the 1950s as part of Cold War soft politics, with Jackson Pollock and critic Clement Greenberg even having been members of the CIA front organization “American Committee for Cultural Freedom”.

This proves that conspiracy theories are, as opposed to what Popper claimed when he claimed the term, false or to be dismissed on the mere grounds of being conspiracy theories. (Another example is the global surveillance of the Internet through the NSA and its befriended agencies, which was a common conspiracy theory in hacker and media activist circles until Edward Snowden proved it as a fact.)

When talking about “conspiracy culture” at large, we are talking about intersections of (a) politics, finance, and other power structures, (b) the arts, visual culture, literature and storytelling and (c) belief systems, speculation and esotericism.

Borrowing from and merging Carl Schmitt and aestheticism (and my former teacher Gert Mattenklott's "aesthetic anthropology"), conspiracy culture could thus be called the product of an aesthetic political theology. [And we are close to fascism, as defined by Walter Benjamin as tending "towards an aestheticization of politics".]

The ground assumption of conspiracy culture is the existence of esoteric power structures in a hidden narrative that contradicts the official narrative of exoteric power structures.

However, the boundaries between the esoteric and the exoteric, and between fact and speculation, can be blurry. To return to the example of NSA's global Internet surveillance, it only existed as speculation prior to Snowden, with a mix of probability, mythology and (still sparse) evidence, and solidified into a fact-based narrative through the leaked evidence. The same is true for CIA's financial support of American abstract expressionism, for which there was weak evidence since the 1970s, and which was solidified through the scholarship of Frances Stonor Saunders in her 1999 book *The Cultural Cold War*. [slide]

Conversely, some factual conspiracies have been revealed which were, in my opinion, wilder than even the wildest conspiracy fantasy: In Germany for example, through the opening of the Stasi files after 1990 which among others revealed that the shooter of the 1967 student protestor Benno Ohnesorg had been a Stasi agent and secret member of the East German communist party (or that the West-Berlin pimp Otto Schwanz, who had been a member of the Christian Democratic Party and involved in a real estate corruption scandal involving local politicians in the 1980s, also worked for the Stasi and the East German foreign trade coordinator Alexander Schalck-Golodkowski).

[slide diagram]

Going back to the initial diagram, we learn from it that QAnon has grown, - or perhaps even was designed - to become a meta-conspiracy narrative that potentially contains all other conspiracy narratives, including all those that are included in novels such as *Illuminatus*, *Foucault's Pendulum* and Luther Blissett's *Q*. Possibly, it is the feature of all conspiracy mythologies that they strive to become universal, or in other words: world explanation models.

[slide Lyotard]

Such conspiracy narratives then could be characterized as both postmodern and anti-postmodern: postmodern, because they are networked, have rhizomatic structures and are the collective products of a multitude, with no identifiable origins and no traditional authorship, and constantly shifting meanings and floating signifiers; anti-postmodern because they are "grand narratives" and thus exactly that which, according to Lyotard's original philosophy of postmodernity, the "postmodern condition" has left behind. Perhaps one could state that conspiracy narratives fill the void left behind by the abandonment of grand narratives (such as Christianity and communism), but themselves in postmodern ways.

QAnon now seems to be undergoing a process of emancipating itself from Trumpism and its original narrative, becoming a more generic conspiracy mythology of child-raping satanic world-ruling elites. Other such narratives exist: next to those of "The Great Replacement" and "The

Great Reset” that of “Cultural Marxism”, but also on the left, “neoliberalism”. I don’t have the time (and sometimes not even enough expertise) to dissect all these narratives and their respective varying degrees of mythology and fact. But with the Wu-Ming Collective (which succeeded the Luther Blissett collective of the novel “Q”), I share the opinion that kernels of truth can even be found in most absurd conspiracy narratives. For QAnon, my colleague Felix Stalder (media researcher and teacher at the art school ZHdK Zurich) rightfully pointed out that the narrative of liberal elites drinking the blood of children, while nonsensical on a factual level, has a kernel of truth on a figurative level, if one considers that the extreme social divide and high cost of college education in the USA destroys future opportunities for children - and that a former executive of Walmart, Hillary Clinton was part of a vampirical system that accumulates wealth on the cost of future generations.

Art

While this all may explain the relation between esoteric and exoteric politics, or more generally the political theology of conspiracy culture - what about the aesthetic dimension? Why does conspiracy culture even where it is not literally affiliated to art systems or creative industries, have such a close affinity to arts, visual culture and literary storytelling?

The arts seem to be attractive for conspiracy culture because mythologies needs a narratives, and a mythopoeisis needs a poesis in the literal sense of making. As we see in the initial diagram, there is a high degree of connectivity in conspiracy narratives, and a high degree of creativity through both seeing and drawing connections. Any narrative, any visual, any cultural product can potentially become part of conspiracy culture and conspiracy narratives:

[slide V for Vendetta]

whether it’s images of a Marina Abramovic performance or a 1990s countercultural Italian novel, or products of popular visual cultures such as the comic book V for Vendetta that inspired the Anonymous movement,

[slide 300]

or the movie comic book adaption “300” that inspired the logo and iconography of the extreme-right “Identitarian” movement in its fight against the supposed “Great Replacement” of the white European population through non-European immigrants.

[4chan]

It is telling enough that the so-called image board 4chan became an experimental development laboratory of contemporary conspiracy mythologies. 4chan is perhaps the most essential medium of contemporary popular visual culture. Originally, it was the Western equivalent of a Japanese website for exchanging manga and anime images, and then became the place where visual Internet memes were invented. Anonymous, the memetic Alt-Right movement and QAnon all grew out of its meme culture.

This is still a recent development, for which art, art history and visual culture studies lack literacy. Today, nearly 20 years after 4chan went online, there are still no art-historical or visual

culture studies books on Internet memes.

History

However, the phenomenon of anonymous conspiracy mythologies spreading in networks is historically not new. I will be brief in my summary in order not to exceed my time:

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- A significant forerunners was the 17th century “Fama Fraternitatis”, literally a “rumor” or “conspiracy narrative” (to translate the Latin word “fama”) that launched the mythology of Rosicrucianism and the secret Rosicrucian brotherhood bringing spiritual enlightenment to the world. The text had originated in the milieu of Southwestern evangelical theologists and alchemists, and can on many levels be studied as a historical precursor to the so-called “Q drops” that established QAnon. (It also plays a prominent role in Eco’s “Foucault’s Pendulum”).

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- Georg Büchner’s 1837 drama “Woyzeck” documents that paranoia of conspiracies and secret societies already existed in this time, among working-class people. In the drama, Woyzeck thinks that he hears Freemasons speaking to him from underground tunnels beneath his feet. ^ (“Siehst Du den lichten Streif da über das Gras hin, wo die Schwämme so nachwachsen? Da rollt abends der Kopf. Es hob ihn einmal einer auf, er meint’, es wär ein Igel: drei Tag und drei Nächte, er lag auf den Hobelspänen. - Leise: Andres, das waren die Freimaurer! Ich hab’s, die Freimaurer!” (Georg Büchner, Woyzeck, 1837)
- Conspiracy mythologies have been constructed by artists as part of blurring art and life, as it had both been advocated in romanticist aesthetics, and performative art movements since the 1960s including happening, fluxus and performance art.

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Examples include Richard Hambleton’s project “Image Mass Murder” from 1976 to 1978 in which he created chalk outlines of fictitious murder victims in 15 cities of the USA and Canada;

The Berlin-based project “Story Dealer AG” by Hans Geißlinger & Ernst Handl in late 1980s Berlin which created complex staged situations in public space; Geißlinger had been heavily influenced by (and published writing on) the philosophy of radical constructivism. Today, it operates as agency that offers its staged situations as staff workshops to businesses.

[slide Watzlawick]

Paul Watzlawick’s 1977 book *How Real Is Real*, a key work of radical constructivism which describes reality as a subjective construction and its creative manipulation, became a manual for interventionist and reality-manipulating artists.

[slide Burroughs]

The literary writer William S. Burroughs, a major protagonist of the American Beat generation and influence on underground and countercultural artists until today, wrote a literal conspiracy

poetics inspired by the Watergate scandal. His 1970 book “Electronic Revolution” is manual for creating fake news and conspiracy mythologies as forms of subversive art and activism, in which he for example propose to create tape recorder montages of a politician with sex tapes in order to spread false rumors about the politician: “So his teen age daughter crawls all over him while Texas rangers and decent church going women rise from tape recorder 3 screaming ‘WHAT ARE YOU DOING IN FRONT OF DECENT PEOPLE.’”. This suggestion was taken up in a comic strip drawn by the experimental musician Chris Lunch and published in the German music magazine “Sounds” (whose editor-in-chief was Diedrich Diederichsen) in 1981:

[slide Chris Lunch, Nu-Punks]

(Burroughs’ book contains a hilarious yet somewhat dubious anecdote how he supposedly ran a coffee bar out of business that had served him poisoned cheese cake, by standing in front of it with a tape recorder and camera for two months driving its owners and guests paranoid, and ultimately forcing it to go out of business.)

[slide Stang]

In the larger orbit of 1980s Mail Art and counter-culture, the founder of the parodistic “Church of the SubGenius”, Ivan Stang, published the book “High Weirdness by Mail” in 1988, which is an analog networking compendium of fringe movements and activists, published in the times before the World Wide Web existed. The book is a mail directory of fringe and conspiracy cultural movements, including the fringe religions and the extreme right, that fully anticipates and predates the Internet conspiracy culture of today (sometimes even with the same actors). The book thus proves that conspiracy culture is *not* a product of the Internet, its social media platforms and their algorithms. These platforms have only helped these discourse to grow from lunatic fringe to mainstream, by latching on network multiplier effects and weaponizing the Internet’s participatory structures.

Even in the 1990s, the Internet didn’t play a major role yet when the discourses of Burroughs & Co were taken up in British and Italian subcultures, in the larger orbit of what today is known as “culture jamming” and which often also referred to the Situationist concept of “detournement” and of countering mass media spectacles.

[slide Tes Men]

Examples include the German film “Decoder” (in which Burroughs has a cameo), and the Italian magazine and book published “Decoder” named after this film, the Luther Blissett Project of the later 1990s followed by the mass media pranks of artist groups like Übermorgen and The Yes Men.

Much of this work was literally about spreading disinformation and fake news, for example with Yes Men publishing a fake edition of the New York Times on the day Barack Obama took office. A major question would be whether artists from that generation would still use those means of expression today, or whether they have become tainted through right-extremist fake news campaigns (such as Pizzagate). (This also concerns our curriculum in Rotterdam where we have course modules on culture jamming and hacking as artistic strategies.)

Conclusion

In this retrospect, the contemporary Alt-Right, QAnon and lateral thinker movements simply continue a long history of conspiracy cultures and poetics. My proposal was to characterize conspiracy culture as an aesthetic political theology - for which the 17th century Rosicrucian “Fama Fraternitatis” would already meet all criteria.⁵ I proposed to focus its political theology on a dialectics of “esoteric” and “exoteric” politics and religion.

The model I would like to propose for describing the aesthetic dimension of conspiracy culture would be that of the sublime [/des Erhabenen], according to its textbook definitions by Pseudo-Longinus, Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant, namely as that what is overwhelming, overpowering, and infinite or shapeless.)

To use Kant’s concept of the sublime, conspiracy culture involves both a dynamic sublime and a mathematical sublime: i.e. a sublime of dynamic forces - such as literally in “the storm” of QAnon - and a sublime of static size or dimension - such as in the myriad of names and connections on the diagram that I showed in the beginning, which (on closer inspection) could not only be used for QAnon’s particular conspiracy culture, but just as well as for Woyzeck’s paranoia of freemasons or hacker cultural conspiracy mythologies of Illuminati world power, up to antisemitic conspiracy mythologies.

Interestingly, to return to my earlier discussion of postmodernism, Lyotard applies the sublime to his definition of postmodernity. Lyotard characterizes sublime experience as “the transport that leads all thought (critical thought included) to its limits”. This, I think, is exactly what is happening in conspiracy culture.

Being caught in these sublime nets and powers is both the romanticism of and the trouble with conspiracy cultures, because they seem to leave no way out except with violent force. The answer, however, cannot be to fundamentally discredit as critical rationalist would do, sublime experience and aesthetic political theology, because this would be no less violent in shutting out subjectivity, imagination and alternative epistemology.

5 With due credits to Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann in whose seminar I studied and presented the Rosicrucian ‘Fama’ as political theology in the 1990s.