"Where We Go One, We Go All": QAnon and the Mediology of Witnessing

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When critics admonish their opponents for circulating mere conspiracy theories, they are disparaging them for subscribing to facile accounts of socio-historical phenomena that are more sophisticated and aleatory than such heavy-handed narratives apprehend. Unfortunately, this kind of disavowal has the side-effect of precluding conspiracy theories from more serious philosophical consideration.

Arguably the most notorious information age conspiracy theory of the moment is QAnon, a byzantine, messianic truther echo-system that has recently irrupted into mainstream public consciousness. QAnon derives its name from "Q," a lurid, anonymous, putatively omniscient insider who has been dropping missives on message boards about Donald Trump's clandestine war with a satanic, sex-trafficking, election-fixing cabal that lurks beneath the liberal establishment.

In order to engage with QAnon as a cultural phenomenon, my article probes the rhetorical coordinates of the popular concept of conspiracy theory through optics provided by Kenneth Burke and Jodi Dean. Drawing on the recent media scholarship of Carrie Rentschler, Kate Starbird, and John Durham Peters, I then examine QAnon culture as a misguided activist modality of witnessing (what Alain Badiou might call a "pseudo-Event") precipitated, in no small part, by rhetorical and algorithmic architecture that subtends an ever-increasing proportion of human subjectivity.

I conclude with some reflections on the viability of what media theorist Jonathan Sterne terms an "intervention."

The Perils of Theory Policing

When commentators flag discourse as promulgating conspiracy theories, they are, in effect, characterizing it as an intellectually bankrupt, prejudicial attempt to philosophize about socio-historical phenomena that are infinitely more complex and aleatory than such rigid paradigms give them credit for. This epithet has the unfortunate side effect of circumscribing such accounts as unworthy of more serious philosophical consideration about the media environment we inhabit and the array of positions that we might assume within it.[1]

Perhaps the most notorious information age conspiracy theory of the moment is QAnon, a byzantine, messianic truther echo-system that has recently irrupted into mainstream public consciousness. QAnon derives its name from "Q," a lurid, putatively omniscient avatar purporting that Donald Trump is furtively at war with a satanic, sex-trafficking, election-fixing cabal lurking beneath the liberal establishment. In order to engage with QAnon as a cultural phenomenon, I will first probe the rhetorical coordinates of the popular concept of conspiracy theories through optics provided by Kenneth Burke and Jodi Dean. My article puts these understandings of conspiracy theories into conversation with John Durham Peters' pioneering account of witnessing as a rhetorical phenomenon bound up with the complex mediation of testimony, authority, and perspective. Drawing on recent media scholarship by Carrie Rentschler and Jonathan Sterne, I then examine QAnon discourse as a misguided activist modality of witnessing precipitated, in no small part, by the rhetorical and algorithmic architecture of our contemporary social media atmosphere.

Echolocating Conspiracy

In "The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories," Karen Douglas, Robbie M. Sutton, and Aleksandra Cichocka aver that there are three more or less Maslowian motives that tend to orient people towards conspiracy theories. The first motive is "epistemic," which is bound up with "understanding one's environment" and achieving a measure of certainty in an uncertain world. The second is "existential," the need to "be safe and in control of one's environment." The final category is "social," the drive to maintain "a positive image of the self and the social group."[2] This social drive is the primordial impetus to seek out community support, friendship, and solidarity. Not

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[1] See Kenneth Burke, "The Virtues and Limitations of Debunking," *The Southern Review* 3, no. 4 (1938): 640–56.

[2] Karen M. Douglas, Robbie M. Sutton, and Aleksandra Cichocka, "The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 26, no. 6 (2017), 539.

incidentally, this quasi-instinctual drive to seek and maintain validation tends to encounter dissonance and contortions in caustic social media ecosystems.

Interestingly, the authors do not go to great lengths to define conspiracy theories, which they merely characterize as "explanations for important events that involve secret plots by powerful and malevolent groups."[3] This passing definition calls for a closer examination of the very question of definition, as it pertains to conspiracy theories, since the examples they proffer are quite heterogeneous at the level of content and social sanction. The first example is the belief that "global warming is a hoax." In this instance, the scientific consensus on global warming has been attacked and undermined, in large part, by bad-faith agents, such as the petroleum lobby and its deep-pocketed allies. There is, nonetheless, a wealth of scholarly and journalistic evidence that the more verifiable conspiracy has been the mass-polluting petroleum industry's covert plot to stigmatize the environmental movement as indulging in mere conspiracy theories.[4]

In the case of their second example, the popular assertion that Lee Harvey Oswald did not act alone in his assassination of President John F. Kennedy, the coordinates of witnessing, accusation, and legitimacy are quite disparate from the corporate propaganda orchestrated to undermine the scientific consensus on anthropogenic climate change. Mainstream filmmakers like Oliver Stone and countless esteemed scholars from across the political spectrum have poked holes in the credibility of the Warren Commission's officially-sanctioned account of John F. Kennedy's assassination. To this day, there is little agreement among experts or the general public on a working hypothesis that could ultimately explain who hatched the plot, how many conspirators were involved, and why they did so. There is not even a measure of agreement about who qualifies as an expert on this scandal. Yet most Americans are able to dwell with the constitutive uncertainty about the truth of this matter without committing to the assertion that one or another cabal is necessarily culpable.

In spite of the rhetorical disparities between these two examples, there are some integral common threads. Both of these "theories" are primarily narratives that involve alleged nefarious plots to perform misdeeds and deceive the general public about matters central to the citizenry's understanding of its political environment. Each of these narratives also endeavours to resolve and metabolize an intractable

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[3] Ibid.

[4] See Benjamin Franta and Geoffrey Supran, "The Fossil Fuel Industry's Invisible Colonization of Academia," *The Guardian*, March 13, 2017.

nexus of ambiguity about opaque and labyrinthine matters of immense political import.

Historian Geoffrey Cubitt avers that most conspiracy theories are narrative efforts to cognize broad-sweeping historical events according to a reductive logic of intentionalism, dualism, and occultism. Intentionalism speaks to the fact that conspiracies are perceived to be a function of sinister intentions brought to fruition; they are effective far-reaching plots to engage in diabolical activities, and there are ostensibly no coincidences when it comes to decoding their intricacies. "Viewed from this angle," Cubitt observes, "conspiracy theories are about [clear] causes."[5] While intentionalism entails reducing the complexity of cause and effect, dualism radically simplifies ethical complexity. A dualistic approach to political matters conjures a Manichean conspiratorial universe that is sliced into the evil agents who perpetrate conspiracies, their innocent victims, and those who are placed in the position of bearing witness. The third category, occultism, refers to the belief that conspiracies necessarily operate under a cloak of secrecy and are obscured from plain-view. "Any conspiracy theory," writes Cubitt, "involves a claim to provide access to a reality which is, by its nature, hidden."[6] From a psychological viewpoint, the strategies that Cubitt adumbrates serve the simultaneously existential and epistemic purpose of reducing the complexity, resolving the ambiguity, and smoothing over the contradictions of a world to which we necessarily have extraordinarily limited forensic access. If conspiracy theories radically simplify the world of cause and effect to create the illusion of ethical clarity, this leads to vital questions about the rhetorical and mediatic catalysts that trigger these schemas in the first place.

We Have Never Been Meta

The epistemic ambiguity that inheres to the attribution of conspiracies is fascinating to rhetoricians because it is the purview of rhetoric "to study and clarify the *resources* of ambiguity."[7] The manner in which our internally-inconsistent symbolic universe produces ruptures and contradictions behooves rhetorically-minded theorists to observe "the strategic spots at which ambiguities necessarily arise"[8] in order to influence a course of events and their interpretation. Nebulous circumstances necessarily precipitate uncertainty, which, in turn, opens onto

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[5] G. T. Cubitt. "Conspiracy Myths and Conspiracy Theories." *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford* 20, no. 1 (1983), 14.

[6] Ibid., 16.

[7] Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1945), ix.

[8] Ibid.

multiple possible tributaries of persuasion about how we should interpret and respond to them. For Burke, we never arrive at a distantiated plateau of critical distance from our symbolic milieu and its intractable ambiguities. We are, rather, a symbol-using animal that is always put in the slippery position of having to not only "interpret the character of events . . . [but] also interpret our interpretations."[9] This simulacral quandary places denizens of modernity in the unfortunate predicament of having to scrutinize and integrate irremediable scandals and ruptures in our symbolic ether into our primordial relationship with the world.

On the thorny issue of the symbol-using animal's pulsion to theorize about conspiracies hiding beneath the surface of vertiginously complex networks of influence, Burke observes that what one observer of social cohesion describes as innocuous cooperation is another's nefarious conspiracy:

> Sovereignty itself is conspiracy. And the pattern is carried into every political or social body, however small. Each office, each fraternal order, each college faculty has its tiny conspiratorial clique. Conspiracy is as natural as breathing. And since the struggles for advantage nearly always have a rhetorical strain, we believe that the systematic contemplation of them forces itself upon the student of rhetoric.[10]

Riffing on the etymology of "conspire," which literally means "breathing together," Burke's line of thinking is replete with import when it comes to interpreting the communicative atmosphere that permeates our twenty-first century media environment. The attribution of conspiracy is, after all, one of many possible orientations one may adopt when construing disturbing activities that take place within noisy, complex social systems. Oftentimes, one observer's imputation of a malign plot appears to another witness as co-inspired cooperation or even mere happenstance.

I propose that, rather than endeavouring to zero in on a correct definition of conspiracy theory, perhaps a more fruitful line of inquiry would entail attending to the entangled rhetorical, ecological, and medial atmospheres that generate conspiracy-imputing attitudes towards the ambiguous, withdrawn, inscrutably complex networks that vehiculate our lives. In other words, a media-archaeological approach to conspiracy theory may be less a matter of psychology than one of what media scholar John Durham Peters calls "infrastructuralism," the understanding of media as dispersed, often ambient, "infrastructures that regulate traffic between

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[9] Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose* (University of California P, 1935), 6.
[10] Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (University of California P, 1950), 166.

nature and culture." In a particularly timely passage that seems to speak to the infrastructural vicissitudes of our present circumstances, Durham Peters writes, "[Media] play logistical roles in providing order and containing chaos. This view of media is not just a metaphor, but a reflection of current conditions. The question of media arises against a background of biological crisis and communication overload."[11]

From Psychology to Infrastructuralism

One implication of Durham Peters' infrastructural framework is that media environments necessarily serve as primary conduits for ecologies and economies that wildly exceed our cognition and agency. As rogue amplifiers of the epistemic, existential, and social turmoil that may impel us towards conspiracy theories under conditions of "biological crisis and communication overload," our digital media bubbles are adroit at engendering paranoia about incursions on our sense of agency and relevance. On the infrastructural impetus of contemporary conspiracy theories, Jodi Dean writes,

> As the global networks of the information age become increasingly entangled, many of us are overwhelmed and undermined by an all-pervasive uncertainty. Far from passively consuming the virtually entertaining spectacles of vertically integrated media, we come to suspect that something is going on behind the screens. What we see is not what we get. The truth may not be out there, but something, or someone, is. Accompanying our increasing suspicions, moreover, are seemingly bottomless vats of information, endless paths of evidence.[12]

Dean's appreciation of the abyssal, amorphous quality of the Internet leads her to advocate for a shift in the theoretical emphasis. Instead of castigating the personality defects of outlandish conspiracy theorists, she argues for understanding the proliferation of conspiracy theories as an unsettling feature, rather than a bug, of the same discourse networks onto which we project our residual Enlightenment fantasies of progress, meaningful dialogue, and education.

Through Dean's theoretical prism, the Internet figures as less of a quaint Habermasian public sphere than its seductive and cacophonous simulacrum. This heady telecommunicative brew, afforded by a "strange merging of democracy and

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[11] John Durham Peters, "Infrastructuralism," in *Traffic: Media as Infrastructures and Cultural Practices.* Eds. Marion Näser-Lather & Christoph Neubert. (Leiden: Brill/Rodopi, 2015), 31.

[12] Jodi Dean, "Theorizing Conspiracy Theory," *Theory & Event* 4, no. 3 (2000).

capitalism," is conducted through increasingly dense and pervasive digital networks. Referring to this infrastructural matrix as "communicative capitalism," she contends that many of the key attributes of traditional notions of democracy "take material form in networked communication technologies." For example, writes Dean, "Ideals of access, inclusion, discussion, and participation come to be realized in and through expansions, intensifications, and interconnections of global telecommunications."[13] The coupling of such incommensurable bedfellows puts egalitarian ideals on a direct collision course with the profit mandates and propaganda of corporate oligopolies.

Insofar as it makes sense to understand the Internet as infrastructure for opportunistically "merging" traditional ideals of democratic participation in the public sphere with the voracious accumulative drives of digital capitalism, social media figure as a powerful ideological locus of these disparate streams. Functioning as strange attractors of longstanding democratic ideals and volatile markets, social media platforms still, paradoxically, often manage to resonate in a fashion that sustains the Fukuyamist fantasy of the harmonious participation of the 99% within the circuits of a privatized global village owned tout court by the 1%.

From a standpoint that both Silicon Valley visionaries and right-wing corporatists would likely unite in labelling as paranoid, Dean underscores the infrastructural perniciousness of communicative capitalism as it inheres to the circulation of democratic values through social media: "When linked to new media, democracy tags a politics lite that anyone can get behind . . . and that is especially attractive to purveyors of mobile phones, notebook computers, software, and social media platforms."[14] As such, democracy has been reduced to a "marketing slogan" for Facebook, Twitter, and AT&T. Since the 1990's, "participatory media has offered quick, easy, universal democracy: anyone with a mobile phone or access to the internet can make her voice heard."[15] Dean's nuanced vision of communicative capitalism conjures a world in which the social media networks that online activists traverse are programmed to remediate their political aspirations into a more alluring armchair pantomime of the slow-moving, ponderous work of "real-world" activism they are supposed to vehiculate.

The ultimate contradiction of this digital environment is that "it incites voice, engagement, and participation only to capture them in the affective networks of mass personalized media."[16] This all-too-common misrecognition of one seductive

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[13] Jodi Dean, "Communicative Capitalism: This is What Democracy Looks Like," *RCL Journal of Communication and Languages* 51 (2019), 33.

[14] Ibid., 33.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid., 34.

brand of social media utterance as another more impactful mode of engagement leads many to succumb to a perspectival delusion about the efficacy of their tweets and shares. "Shared ideas and concerns," she writes, "are conceived less in terms of a self-conscious collective than they are as viruses, mobs, trends, moments, and swarms. Channeled through cellular networks and fiber optic cables, onto screens and into sites for access, storage, retrieval, and counting, communication today is captured in the capitalist circuits it produces and amplifies."[17] Thus, Dean claims that any approach to activism that fetishizes the positive role of social media is at risk of merely feeding back into and propping up the mesmeric platforms that afford and conduct it. Of course, from the standpoint of the attention-monetizing platforms, all spectacles and communications that keep eyes glued to flickering screens are to be encouraged. This is why she insists that the movement, not the medium, is the message.

Cloning Legitimacy

Much has been made of the fact that the Greek term *theoria* originally signified "witnessing a spectacle." The Athenian philosopher, writes Andrea Wilson Nightingale, "gazes with the 'eye of the soul' upon divine and eternal verities. In its most extreme form, which is articulated by Aristotle, *theoria* is hailed as a contemplative activity that is completely 'useless' . . . in the world of human affairs."[18] Seemingly excavating this philological sense of the term, contemporary conspiracy theories are bound up with the act of witnessing within the spectacle-producing ecosystem of communicative capitalism. But the architecture of the thoroughfares that conspiracy theorists inhabit induces a particularly maladaptive admixture of certainty and skepticism towards the mediated acts of witnessing that social media platforms, image boards, and video-hosting sites seems to encourage.

Levelling her gaze on the 9/11 truth movement as a departure from previous modalities of conspiracy thinking, Dean characterizes this conspiracy theorizing community as "symptomatic of a larger sociocultural development that involves a new constellation of questioning, doubt, credibility, and certainty"[19] pertaining to our capacity to both recognize expertise and dwell with irresolvable ambiguity. The circulation of social media narratives affords "[a] volatile mix of certainty and skepticism" in place of an authoritative "official story" about who colluded in the

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[17] Ibid.

[18] Andrea Wilson Nightingale, "On Wandering and Wondering: 'Theôria' in Greek Philosophy and Culture," *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* 9, no. 2 (2001): 23.

[19] Jodi Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism and Left Politics* (Durham, N.C.: Duke UP, 2009), 148.

terrorist plot and what actually transpired behind the scenes presented in the 24/7 cable news cycle.[20]

What fascinates Dean about this new twist—engendered by the increasing traction of deracinated social media discourse within the densifying circuits of communicative capitalism—is the extent to which 9/11 truther discourse manifests itself as an uncanny doppelganger of officially-sanctioned university scholarship and journalism. Drawing on what Jacques Lacan has termed "the university discourse," the proliferation of knowledge produced and disseminated by the likes of academics and journalists, Dean points to 9/11 truthers' approach to witnessing the hypermediated scandal of 9/11. Like a great deal of university discourse, the 9/11 truth movement mobilizes an avalanche of real and imagined facts: "Purporting to let the facts speak for themselves, the 9/11 truth movement is structured in accordance with the university discourse. Yet it lacks it authorizing support."[21] There is no officially-sanctioned textbook or authoritative expert witness when it comes to the conspiratorial "truth" of the "inside job." The movement assumes the role usually (at least in theory) occupied by academia and the press in providing the raw feed about occult networks bent on political corruption and unthinkable malevolence.

Dean suggests that this lack of pervasive institutional support renders academia's wayward, paranoid double into a more precarious "clone of university discourse, a psychotic clone."[22] Here, she employs the term "psychosis" in a non-pathologizing Lacanian sense. It refers, here, to the social texture that emerges from a lack of overriding authority to consolidate the symbolic field in which all denizens of modernity participate. In other words, from a Lacanian standpoint, we denizens of media modernity are all variably psychotic insofar as psychosis inheres to our socio-symbolic fabric. Since the Bush administration proved incapable of providing a coherent narrative about the Manichean battle of democracy against terror, the 9/11 truth movement rejects official accounts and "builds a discourse around the hole that is left. A response that is psychotic in its formal structure."[23] Such psychotic discourse is inherently unstable and must, like a discursive virus, latch onto other discourses: "To hold its speculations together," writes Dean, "this psychotic discourse models itself on other, more conventional discourses such as university discourse."[24]

Combining a psychotically "intense certainty" about the presence of a particular conspiracy (or cluster of conspiracies) with "overwhelming skepticism"

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[20] Ibid., 151.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid.

based on analyses of the facts, the 9/11 truth movement "renders all that comes into contact with it suspect, uncertain, [and] permeated with possible meaning."[25] For Dean, this particular "psychotic cloning" of university discourse is exemplary of a perverse tendency of a media milieu defined by communicative capitalism. The impetus to engage in activist media scholarship is all-too-readily driven off the rails of meaningful political participation and warped through the *psycho-tropic*[26] gravity fields of a social media environment that systemically "increase[s] the likely proliferation of such psychotic clones."[27] "What sort of politics is possible," Dean asks, "when there is knowledge without belief, when certainty and skepticism exist in tandem, each supporting but immune to each other? And what does any answer to this question entail for aspirations to collective approaches to equity and justice?"[28]

Witnessing and its Malcontents

In keeping with Dean's account, QAnon discourse fluctuates between the declarative "psychotic" register of certainty and the interrogative scholarly register of ceaseless skepticism. "Q Drops," Q's communications to followers through imageboards like 4Chan and then 8Chan, tend to vacillate between assertions made from a seemingly omniscient perspective and questions soliciting "researchers" to question the official story. The first Q Drop, on October 28, 2017, reads, "Hillary Clinton will be arrested between 7:45 AM - 8:30 AM EST on Monday - the morning on Oct 30, 2017."[29] However, as Clinton's supposed moment of truth approached, Q's subsequent drops began to create wiggle room for belief in her current or imminent demise to persist in spite of evidence to the contrary:

> POTUS is 100% insulated - any discussion suggesting he's even a target is false. POTUS will not be addressing nation on any of these issues as people begin to be indicted and must remain neutral for pure optical reasons . . . .

> What SC decision opened the door for a sitting President to activate - what must be showed? [sic]

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[25] Ibid., 152

[26] I employ this term in its etymological sense of "to turn the mind," which I want to bring into resonance with the narcotic (i.e., psychotropic) potentials of the Internet, the socio-symbolic understandings of psychosis theorized by Dean and Burke, and the pivotal role of tropes, or literary devices, in patching together psychotic fantasies.

[27] Ibid., 151

[28] Ibid., 152.

[29] Anonymous, "Calm Before the Storm," /pol/, *4Chan*, October 28, 2017.

> Why is POTUS surrounded by generals ^^ [sic]
>
> Again, there are a lot more good people than bad so have faith.
>
> This was a hostile takeover from an evil corrupt network of players (not just Democrats).
>
> Don't fool yourself into thinking Obama, Soros, Roth's [sic], Clinton's [sic] etc [sic] have more power present day than POTUS.[30]

A proper analysis of the individual conspiratorial threads that hold together Q's symbolic tapestry would require a book-length treatment. Nevertheless, we can draw attention to the fact that they are numerous. QAnon seems to function as a sort of mega conspiracy theory, a seething cauldron that gathers evil-doers such as the Rothschilds, Clintons, Obamas, and George Soros into an echo-system of COVID-19 hoax, 9/11 truther, Kennedy assassination, and anti-vaccination conspiracies (among others). The dystopian "evil corrupt network" is vast, and the QAnon discourse network is a bottomless reservoir seemingly designed to contain it. But there is also a countervailing utopian investment in Trump, who figures as a messianic world-rectifying figure in this onto-theology, which culminates in an Armageddon-like "Storm" of reckoning for the conspirators. The maelstrom will be followed by a "Great Awakening" of Enlightenment that will engulf the scene to reroute the course of American history.

Q's interrogative statements do more than galvanize skepticism about conventional narratives. They also buttress the declarative utterances by creating the impression that Q, the consummate insider and subject-supposed-to-know, grasps why precisely things are not as they seem; and this includes compensating for the increasingly clear reality that Hillary Clinton had not, in fact, been arrested or otherwise directly impacted by Q's allegations of criminal malfeasance. Behind the scenes, "Patriots are in charge," claims Q. "Sit back and enjoy the show."

Widespread faith in President Trump's manifest destiny to snuff out the Clinton cabal's malfeasance (ranging from election-tampering to child-trafficking to election-stealing) was vigorously sustained by a community of "online soldiers" all the way until election day, when Biden assumed the office of President without impediment and Donald Trump retreated more-or-less ignominiously into the background. Rather than ushering in a revolutionary conflagration, Q finally began to run out of steam. The phantom insider's credibility butted up against its own contradictions and shattered into a million pieces for even many of the most devoutly faithful to see. But the scope and scale of QAnon should awaken media

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[30] Ibid.

theorists and concerned observers to the fascistic theological longing that will continue to crackle within the circuits of communicative capitalism. Any contemporary update of cultural literacy education worth its salt will have to download this affair and think through the extent to which our communicative environment lends itself to weaponized mimetic contagion.

Diabolos Ex Machina

Internet disinformation researcher Kate Starbird admonishes readers that, "contrary to popular framings, belief in conspiracy theory 'alternative narratives' does not imply mental illness, but is instead indicative of a[n] '[impaired] epistemology' due in part to a limited number of information sources."[31] Her research suggests that this diminution of our access to information

> may be exacerbated by the false perception of having a seemingly diverse information diet that is instead drawn from a limited number of sources. This understanding of the dynamics of alternative media, where the same content appears on different sites in different forms, combined with what we know about how believing in one conspiracy theory makes a person more likely to believe [in others], suggests that alternative media domains may be acting as a breeding ground for the transmission of conspiratorial ideas. In this way, a 'critically thinking' citizen seeking more information to confirm their views about the danger of vaccines may find themselves exposed to and eventually infected by other conspiracy theories with geopolitical themes, with one conspiracy theory acting as a gateway to others.[32]

Starbird's conclusions suggest that an updated approach to infrastructural literacy will have to take into account the mirages that emerge out of deceptively narrow research pathways. The rabbit holes that she conjures can be understood as socially pathological because they are simultaneously infinitely connected and oppressively confining (especially when they are not perceived as such by the researcher).

Computer scientist and former Google design ethicist Tristan Harris lends weight to Starbird's analyses and contends that QAnon is, in many ways, a next-level Golem-like emanation out of Facebook's infrastructural affordances. After researching Facebook's recommendation tendencies, Harris insists that once a user

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[31] Kate Starbird, "Examining the Alternative Media Ecosystem Through the Production of Alternative Narratives of Mass Shooting Events on Twitter," *Proceedings of Proceedings of the Eleventh International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media* (Montreal, 2017), 238.
[32] Ibid.

shows interest in a conspiracy theory, "Facebook groups cross-recommend other conspiracy theories" because "the algorithms that optimize for engagement can't distinguish between healthy, conscious, wise thoughtful engagement and essentially radicalizing, alienating, and isolating people from their families."[33] The pre-eminent concern of Facebook's machine-learning recommendation infrastructure is maximizing eyeball-time on the screen. Whether these ocular wetware channels are taking in family photos or conspiracy theories about a Clinton sex ring is immaterial. "To Facebook's algorithm," claims Harris, "it's the same thing, as long as it increases the amount of engagement."[34]

Functioning much more like an acephalic Cambridge Analytica disinformation campaign than a neutral archive, the QAnon juggernaut has emerged out of a certain culture of bearing witness within a persuasive environment that has taken on an undead life of its own. Users who enter the algorithmic wind tunnel with a passing interest in anti-vaccination discourse or chemtrails may pop out on the other side as an evangelizing member of the QAnon research corps, or the like, bent on spreading the news about the Clinton sex-trafficking ring or the fabrication of the COVID-19 "plandemic" by shadowy agencies.

It may be too late to put the headless genie back in the bottle. Although Facebook and Twitter have recently pledged to increase their vigilance towards QAnon and other conspiracy communities, Starbird suspects that such palliative measures are likely too little, too late. These platforms, she claims, "helped QAnon grow, providing tools to build their networks, aided by recommendations and system-gaming tactics. The infrastructure of QAnon is now massive and redundant. Those networks (follower relationships, FB groups) are baked in[to] the 'organization' of QAnon."[35] QAnon will not simply evaporate and, even if it did, new mega-conspiracy theories will nonetheless emerge to take its place, as will an increasingly unpredictable array of algorithmic cultural accidents. What's more, there is no good reason to believe that Google and Twitter censors (be they human or algorithmic) will be astute at distinguishing "psychotic" conspiracy theories from justifiable accusations against powerful corporations and individuals (which will never cease to brandish the weaponized epithet of "conspiracy theory" against their critics).

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[33] Tristan Harris, interview with Travis View, "Your Undivided Attention," podcast audio, July 8, 2020, https://www.humanetech.com/podcast/21-the-world-according-to-q.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Kate Starbird, Twitter post, August 11 2020, 7:38 a.m., https://twitter.com/katestarbird/status/1293195168741339141?lang=en.

Reorienting Toward a Mediology of Witnessing and Reactivism

So much about the proliferation of conspiracy theories hinges on the manifold mediation of witnessing. John Durham Peters observes that the noun "witness" is inherently "intricate" in that it involves all three nodes of the rudimentary rhetorical triangle: "(1) the agent who bears witness, (2) the utterance or text itself, (3) the audience who witnesses." Encompassing everything from the religious "inward conviction" about the truth to the journalistic "privileged (raw, authentic) proximity to the facts," a witness, he writes, "can be an actor, an act, a text, or an experience."[36] The infinitive "to witness" is similarly polysemic:

> To witness can be a sensory experience – the witnessing of an event with one's own eyes and ears. We are all, constantly, witnesses in this sense simply by virtue of finding ourselves in places and times where things happen . . . . But witness is also the discursive act of stating one's experience for the benefit of an audience that was not present . . . . Witnesses serve as the surrogate sense-organs of the absent . . . . A witness is the paradigm case of a *medium*: the means by which experience is provided to others who lack the original.[37]

Commenting on Durham Peters' pithy account of the mediatic dimensions of this much-overlooked rhetorical term, Carrie Rentschler concludes that "witnessing is a form of participation, through mass mediation, in others' suffering." This leads her to speculate that "the meaning of witnessing may shift from that of the particular (first-person) experience of the survivor toward the more generalized experience of the media spectator."[38]

Alternative narrative discourses like QAnon bring to light the multifaceted mediality of witnessing in the digital age. Within a suasive social media echo-system constituted by platforms aggressively jockeying for our attention, media navigators are ceaselessly prompted by the ubiquitous witnessing function of social media to bear witness and react to the injustices that have been observed on their behalf and presented to them as exigencies. Like Dean, Rentschler views this nexus as one crackling with political consequences and crises of legitimacy. Such acts of witnessing, she writes, constitute "important political moments that hail us as citizens, and not just media consumers."[39] She therefore argues "that the commemorative function of witnessing is also a political act, but one not recognized

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[36] John Durham Peters, "Witnessing," *Media, Culture & Society* 23, no. 6 (2001), 709.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Carrie A. Rentschler, "Witnessing: US Citizenship and the Vicarious Experience of Suffering," *Media, Culture & Society* 26, no. 2 (2004), 298.

[39] Ibid., 299.

as political" because of its many valences. "[M]edia scholars have some responsibility to study the explicitly political uses of paying witness to suffering."[40] But this is a prohibitive task:

> People who pay witness through the news are positioned as passive consumers. Stories of past atrocity, for instance, may enable their hearers to empathize with distant victims, but they often do not tell their listeners how to turn empathy into usable knowledge in the present . . . . The news may call us to help our fellow human beings in the present, but if people do not perceive themselves as accountable for others' suffering, they will not be mobilized to act.[41]

In accordance with Rentschler's account, QAnon and Pizzagate adherents are activated by a media environment that interpellates witnesses into a form of activism that we might term *reactivism*, the misguided quasi-activist reaction to deceptive representations of atrocities. This reactivism is, through Rentschler's lens, a direct consequence of the rhetoricity of witnessing within a media milieu that intensely responsibilizes us but does "not give us a clear picture of how to be responsible for what we see."[42]

Much of QAnon activity entails the participation in online communities that interpret both Q's drops and other devotees' contributions (on social media, in videos, etc.) to this line of inquiry. In her essay in the bestselling QAnon community anthology *An Invitation to the Great Awakening*, Liberty Lioness valorizes her network of "citizen journalists, researchers who dig into the historical record and educate us, plus the decoders who help us read between the lines combined with the ability to make memes gives us a unique form of power." She describes her community as "people with vision and passion who have grown tired of deception and criminality, and who work together to communicate the truth" of these scandals. Lioness concludes, rather jarringly, that the activist Qmmunity has "invented, in effect, a new form of media."[43]

"Where We Go One, We Go All" is a call for solidarity. If accounts such as Liberty Lioness' are to be taken seriously, such fidelity to the perceived truth of QAnon reverberates as an exemplar of what Alain Badiou characterizes as a "simulacrum" of a revolutionary Event. As Badiou observes, pseudo-revolutionary

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[40] Ibid., 300.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Liberty Lioness, "The Power of Memes," in *An Invitation to the Great Awakening*, eds. Captain Roy D & Dustin Nemos (Dallas: Relentlessly Creative Books, 2019), 105.

ruptures can mimic some of the trappings of solidary revolutions even while militating against their most integral egalitarian potentials. Unlike the socialist revolutions of 1792 or 1917, writes Badiou, the Nazi "National Socialist" simulation of an emancipatory Event was "faithful only to the alleged national substance of a people" and "addressed only to those that it itself deem[ed] 'German'."[44] Importantly for Badiou, the Nazi valorization of a German communitarian substance was antithetical to the kinds of emancipatory struggles that it aped because "this substance is not an 'everyone' but, rather, some 'few' who dominate 'everyone'."[45]

QAnon is not an intrinsically fascist movement per se. But insofar as it functions as a pseudo-Event organized around making America great again, the Q phenomenon certainly harbours a weak fascistic power, whose potentials a more competent authoritarian leader would have better exploited to their advantage. As algorithmic modernity unfolds, Lioness' "new form of media" can be counted on to continue mobilizing reactivist fulmination against hallucinated subterranean campaigns of deception and criminality for some time to come.

Psycho-Tropes of Certainty

The economy of witnessing circulated by and through Lioness' discourse network manifests itself in an array of reactions. On December 4, 2016, Pizzagate follower Tim Welch was ready to put an end to the Clinton atrocities. After become fixated on the widely-circulated narrative that the Clintons were operating a child sex ring out of Washington, DC, pizza restaurant Comet Ping Pong's basement,[46] Welch brought an AR-15 rifle to the restaurant in order to investigate for himself and, presumably, rescue the children. Although he fired several shots in the restaurant (without injuring anyone), he quickly discovered that Comet Ping Pong had no basement, and there were no abused children to be found. He then turned himself in to the police. "Four years later," writes Michael Miller, "thousands of people would follow Welch's fevered path to Washington, drawn from across the country by an ever more toxic stew of disinformation and extremism, including Pizzagate's

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[44] Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (London: Verso, 2001), 73.

[45] Ibid., 74.

[46] In keeping with Bessner and A'Lee Frost's analysis, I want to draw attention to this pervasive narrative about the profligate mistreatment of unprotected innocents by corrupt elites. This potent *psycho-trope* radiates out of the obscene decadence of contemporary American liberal democracy. The Comet Ping Pong fantasy about the sadistic abuse of vulnerable "bare life" resonates as a warped transfiguration of Dean's analysis of a decadent political-economic system whose elected representatives impudently serve and recreate with the 1% at the *demos'* expense.

successor: QAnon. This time, instead of a pizzeria, they would target the U.S. Capitol."[47]

Commenting on the large, heterogenous cohort of Q faithful who participated in the Capitol Hill onslaught, Daniel Bessner and Amber A'Lee Frost scrutinize the cultural fabric of the constellation of aspiring activists that seems to have coagulated around Q:

> [Q] adherents don't share economic interest, culture, or even a political program. Rather, many people joined Q because of their alienation and disconnection from a system they view as illegitimate. To provide their ever-more precarious lives with meaning and an explanation for American decline, Q adherents congealed under a series of bizarre Internet conspiracy theories that unite a right-wing, anti-elitist, but nevertheless authoritarian sensibility that is organized around narratives that link pedophilic cabals, racism, antisemitism, fears of "cultural Marxism," Satanism and, of course, absolute faith in the singular, salvific, and millenarian figure of President Donald J. Trump.[48]

Bessner and A'Lee Frost view QAnon as a somewhat hapless misrecognition of a spectacularized cascade of atrocities that seem to radiate out of America's twenty-first century autoimmune spasms: the so-called War on Terror, the 2007/8 financial meltdown, the ever-widening gulf between the wealthy and the poor, and the pervasive "feeling of impotence in a political system that was supposed to be a democracy." To add insult to injury, the pandemic has acted as an accelerant on these ongoing exigencies: "[a]ll of these anxieties, of course, have been recently compounded and exacerbated by a pandemic, lockdown, and an economic recession that predictably witnessed an explosion in QAnon proselytes."[49]

Characterizing QAnon as part-cult, part-misguided reactivist movement, they conclude that "QAnon-ers embrace conspiracy theories because unlike the Republican or Democrat narratives, the stories they tell provide meaning in dislocated lives. In essence, QAnon tells people who believe in America that a cabal has stolen their country from them, and that faith in a charismatic leader is the only way to redeem it (and, ultimately, redeem themselves)."[50] The religious turn to the

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[47] Michael E. Miller. "Pizzagate's Violent Legacy," *Washington Post*, Feb 16, 2021, http://thewashingtonpost.newspaperdirect.com/epaper/viewer.aspx.

[48] Daniel Bessner and Amber A'Lee Frost, "How the QAnon Cult Stormed the Capital," *Jacobin*, Jan 19, 2021, https://www.jacobinmag.com/2021/01/q-anon-cult-capitol-hill-riot-trump.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Ibid.

auratic figure Donald Trump, the sovereign figure divinely anointed with the task of filling the hole in the symbolic order, betokens the movement's umbilical cord to the rent in the universe Dean echolocates in her analysis of the 9/11 truth movement. Indeed, if Max Weber were alive today, he would likely single out QAnon as the spiritual corollary to communicative capitalism. As such, the QAnon pseudo-Event, which is bound up with the intractable impediments to witnessing and progressive social change in algorithmic modernity, will not evaporate as a result of any Habermasian campaign to expunge disinformation and misinformation. If anything is to be gleaned from the free-floating weaponization of data that Starbird and Harris describe, it is that all information is potential *malignformation* when conducted through machine-learning labyrinths engineered to sustain and monetize our rapt attention.[51]

From Witnessing to Intervention

In "What is an Intervention?" Jonathan Sterne articulates the simultaneously theoretical and practical contours of scholarly-activist interventions. A great deal of his analysis dwells on the questions of how to move meaningfully from witnessing potentially hypermediated injustices to responding to them in a world without certain analyses or outcomes. He proposes, appropriately provisionally, that an intervention

> is simultaneously a political and intellectual act. It can be individual or collective. It is undertaken with intent, with consciousness of context and possible outcomes, and from a specific institutional and cultural position. It is itself theorized though it may not appear to be. Interventions have expiration dates, and while they can move from place to place, they are never universally applicable. They are conjunctural. Interventions do not come with guarantees.[52]

Sterne's ethical appreciation of the fraught complexity of the socio-symbolic order entails a tenuous balancing act between the understanding that the world is full of injustices that call for our meaningful engagement, on the one hand, and the absolutely critical recognition that both our assessments and our interventions may fall short or even backfire, on the other.

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[51] See Lisa Gitelman and Virginia Jackson, introduction to *"Raw Data" is an Oxymoron*, ed. Lisa Gitelman (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), 1–14. As Gitelman and Jackson observe, there is no neutral, "uncooked" data. All data are rhetorically motivated by the networks they traverse and the machine-learning processes that conduct them.

[52] Jonathan Sterne, "What is an Intervention?" *TOPIA: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies* 37, March 1, 2018, 6.

His evaluation of the fragile stakes of interceding in the world leads Sterne to assert that a great deal about the outcome of an intervention hinges on one's attitude towards enmity. "[W]hen academics take political stands," he writes,

> they can easily degenerate into nothing more than performances for other academics . . . . Denunciation is predicated upon assumptions of shared knowledge and agreement where they may not exist, overriding the messiness and complexity of lived conjunctures. We are supposed to analyze, describe and reimagine those conjunctures . . . . [Thus,] we should be very wary of a politics that begins by sorting into "us" and "them." This is not a call for empathetic dialogue with racists, but rather a demand that our politics must not, in the first instance, be about naming friends and enemies.[53]

By refusing to take the polarizing Manichean bait of descending into denouncements, "hot takes," or troll wars, academics and concerned researchers of every stripe create the opening for potential new plateaus of critique, understanding, and coalition-building. In other words, insofar as it makes sense to broach the idea of something like *the opposite* of a maladroitly certain and skeptical conspiracy theory, I might go out on a limb and say it is something like Sterne's notion of an intervention "without guarantee."

The unavoidable downside of Sterne's heuristic strategy, which is nonetheless a necessary one, is that it does little to ameliorate the epistemic and existential uncertainty that nudges many would-be interveners in the direction of conspiracy theories in the first place. The refusal to simulate certainty may even exacerbate our sensitivity to the vibrating tectonic plates shifting beneath our feet. Many well-intentioned individuals gravitate towards conspiracy theories out of an ethical impulse to make our corrupt, confusing world a more just, intelligible, meaningful place. Since our media environment is never a neutral atmosphere, aspiring researchers must be equipped with sufficient infrastructural literacy to salvage their ethical impulses before they are conducted through conspiratorial wormholes that propel them into spasmodic simulations of political intervention.

A Different Kind of Clearing

Just as QAnon can be understood as the uncanny double of an egalitarian activist project, so too can the "Great Awakening" be appreciated as the hapless doppelganger of the drive for Enlightenment. *Aufklärung*, the original German term for Enlightenment, is, after all, cognate with the idea of clearing and clarification.

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[53] Ibid., 9.

For Kant and his ilk, Enlightenment was an arc of history meant to elucidate matters of concern through the employment of better, more rational pedagogical instruments. If there is sufficient merit to exhuming the project to extricate humanity from its "self-incurred immaturity,"[54] we will have to update and reformat our cultural techniques to account for previous blind spots and the exigencies of the world in which we now find ourselves.

Above and beyond emphasizing the deployment of reason over passive dependency on moribund authorities, promulgators of infrastructural literacy will need to supplement and recalibrate the somewhat dated Kantian formula. One necessary component will have to be an updated public program of scientific literacy, with special emphasis on educating the general public about the prodigiously positive role of uncertainty in scientific endeavours. Far from turning on irrefutable truth claims about objective reality (as, for example, some anti-vaccination propaganda would have it), scientific projects are propelled by the ceaseless drive to refute working hypotheses and, indeed, everything that we think we know about the world.[55] Scientific methods are far from infallible or immune to conspiratorial corruption, but they deploy an infinitely more nuanced, reflexive, and powerful approach to solving problems pertaining to climate change and global pandemics than anything the Qniverse has to offer.

Still, writes Badiou, "[B]rutal obscurantist preachings present themselves as the simulacra of science, with obviously damaging results. But in each case, these violent damages are unintelligible if we do not understand them in relation to the truth-processes whose simulacra they manipulate."[56] Part of the appeal of Q is the pretense to mastery of an unmasterable field and the presentation of magical panaceas to profound problems. Scientific literacy can help inoculate the psyche against the temptations of false certainty. In good science, as in all good theory, writes Simon Critchley, "There is no God's eye view . . . . Errors are inextricably bound up with pursuit of human knowledge, which requires not just mathematical calculation but insight, interpretation and a personal act of judgment for which we are *responsible*." This sense of sacred responsibility radiates out the fact that science,

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[54] Immanuel Kant, "An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment? (1784)," trans. James Schmidt, in *What Is Enlightenment?: Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions*, ed. Schmidt James, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 47.

[55] See Kostas Kampourakis and Kevin McCain, *Uncertainty: How it Makes Science Advance* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2020).

[56] Badiou, *Ethics*, 77.

like Sterne's intervention, calls for and cultivates a mature "toleration of uncertainty"[57] in spite of our deep-seated drive to extinguish it.

The next pillar is rhetorical literacy. As Burke insists, countless rhetorical pulsions undulate just the below the surface of any lifeworld organized around processing irresolvable ambiguities and uncertainties. Thus, any contemporary approach to rhetorical literacy must be subtended by an awareness that the ability to distinguish provisionally robust authorities from deceptive agencies is often fraught with peril. When it comes to one's algorithmically-contoured informatic diet and the political stakes of witnessing, media navigators will have to be equipped with constantly-ramifying strategies for assessing the evidence we are presented, the authority of those who witness on our behalf, our feelings about the spectacles we witness, and our own agency within the rabbit holes that we find ourselves plunging through.

The third pillar is algorithmic literacy. This intervention must bring into relief the ever-evolving propensities of the persuasive technologies that hold us in their thrall and launch us towards oversimplified, affectively-contorted conclusions about the beguiling world we inhabit. These unfortunate reductions of complexity, animated by a strange admixture of ratiocinative sedation and phantasmagoric frenzy, can and will culminate in conspiratorial echo-systems. Because these mediatic nexuses both mimic and viciously militate against the possibility of broader community, activism, and a better world, they will have to be received by political imaginations equipped to recognize and contend with their "baked-in" tendencies. We will also need to engineer new digital agoras that stave off some of the more malign, weaponizable aspects of our digital dwelling space. After all, if Q can reinvent the Internet, so can we.

The final pillar is what Burke might call prejudicial literacy. And this educational mode may well be a synecdoche for the entire intervention. Prejudicial literacy would underscore the perniciousness of humanity's historical and ongoing predilection for prejudices based on arbitrary criteria like race, class, and gender. For Burke, such reified mischaracterizations of human character tend to draw from the same epistemic reservoir as conspiracy theories: both of these narrative strategies fetishistically fix the world so as to clarify otherwise inscrutable complexity and ambiguity.

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[57] Simon Critchley, "The Dangers of Certainty: A Lesson From Auschwitz," The Stone, Opinionator Blogs, *New York Times*, February 2, 2014, https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/02/02/the-dangers-of-certainty/?ref=opinion.

Like Dean, Burke zeroes in on opaque economic, technological, and ecological circumstances as prime movers of psychotic certainty. He employs the phrase "occupational psychosis"[58] to refer to a fossilized experience of one's surroundings that, for any number of reasons, proves inadequate to the vicissitudes of the world it encounters. A psychotic orientational lifeworld is a "way of seeing," remarks Burke, that "is also a way of not seeing—a focus on object A involves a neglect of object B."[59] He notes that post-World War II America is afflicted by such "marked instability"[60] that specific regimes of orientational training readily flip over into a kind of "trained incapacity" when applied to a different environment or the coordinates of their existing environment metamorphose. When this happens, people's "past training [causes] them to misjudge their present situation. Their training has become an incapacity."[61]

Burke proffers a number of thanatopolitical allegories to conjure the lifeworld of the disoriented occupational psychosis. One of the most disturbing and evocative is the trope of the rat placed in an electrified maze by a cruel experimental psychologist. When the vivisectionist electrocutes the rat for navigating the maze in one fashion or another, "the conditions of the experiment . . . do not enable the rat to perceive the experimenter's part in the enterprise at all."[62] Just as the abused rat responds in a "pathological," seemingly irrational manner to the electrical shocks that suddenly seem to erupt spontaneously out of their otherwise enemy-free mazes, Burke avers, people often foolishly misrecognize the provenance of their confusion and suffering at the hands of a callous, volatile world.

One such maladaptation in bound up with worldviews predicated on racism. Because of the ease with which the racist gaze can single out racialized minorities, intensely prejudicial imaginations will unreflexively fall back on "scapegoating" them for opaque societal ills. Describing this worldview as the product of a crude psycho-social algorithm that draws on an impoverished data set, Burke underscores the extent to which racism is often the by-product of a pervasive trained incapacity to process the overriding socio-economic and ecological processes that actually exert power over our lives. While refusing to exculpate racist behaviour, he claims that punishment is usually inadequate (and maybe even counterproductive) to the task of disabusing disoriented people of trained incapacities that tilt into racist

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[58] Burke mobilizes a now obsolete sense of the term "psychosis" to mean something like a lifeworld or pronounced experience of the world. Interestingly, his deployment of the concept (which he attributes to John Dewey) resonates with Dean's Lacanian sense of the term.

[59] Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change* (Berkeley: University of California P, 1935), 49.

[60] Ibid., 32.

[61] Ibid., 10.

[62] Ibid., 15.

scapegoating: "If people persist longer than [abused lab animals] in faulty orientation despite punishment," he writes, "it is because the greater complexity of their problems, the vast network of mutually sustained values and judgements, makes it more difficult for them to perceive the nature of the re-orientation required, and to select their means accordingly."[63] As Stuart Hall urgently framed the matter in the early 1980's, "[W]e hardly begin to know how to conduct a popular antiracist struggle or how to bend the twig of racist common sense which currently dominates popular thinking. It is a lesson we had better learn pretty rapidly."[64]

In what should be understood as a critique of naïve faith in the unambiguous arc of Enlightenment, Burke claims our symbolic environment frequently functions less as the instrument of self-emancipatory reason than a vehicle of technological rationality gone off the rails, a kind of second-order instinct that has lost sight of its proper telos along the way and orients the symbol-using animal towards all kinds of incapacitation and confusion. He asserts that bewildered symbol-using animals often default to this moribund second-order instinct out of habit and myopia: "the very authority of their earlier ways interferes with the adoption of new ones. And this difficulty is increased by the fact that, even when a practice is socially dangerous, it may be individually advantageous, as with the individuals who reap profits from a jingoism resulting in great misery to the group."[65]

To make matters worse, in the digital twenty-first century, there is arguably a third-order instinctual habitat that cues Burke's "occupational" second-order instinct to fall back on racism. Media scholar Luke Munn writes that racism and misogyny "might be facilitated . . . by hate-inducing architectures"[66] found in social media, streaming video sites, and search engine recommendation systems. For example, he singles out YouTube video recommendations, which have been shown to "often move from mainstream content to more incendiary media, or politically from more centrist views to right and even far-right ideologies."[67] While Munn is concerned about this algorithmic habitat's insidious generation of "angry and radicalized individual[s]" who plunge down conspiratorial rabbit holes and never come back, he finds it "equally troubling [that] a broader, more unseen population of users [is] gradually being exposed to more hateful material."[68] What he finds so

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[63] Ibid., 15.

[64] Stuart Hall, "The Whites of their Eyes: Racist Ideologies and the Media" [1981], in *The Media Reader*, eds. Manuel Alvarado & John O. Thompson (London, UK: British Film Institute, 1990), 9.

[65] Burke, *Permanence*, 15.

[66] Luke Munn, "Angry by Design: Toxic Communication and Technical Architectures." *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 7, no. 53 (2020), 2.

[67] Ibid., 6.

[68] Ibid., 7.

jarring about this architecture "is its automatic and step-wise quality. Users do not consciously have to select the next video, nor jump suddenly into extreme material. Instead, there is a slow progression, allowing [them] to acclimate to these views before smoothly progressing onto the next step into their journey."[69] If his assessment holds water, the slippery slope from relatively indifferent witnesses to a volatilized captive audience may be better lubricated than conventional wisdom dictates.

This particular technologization of witnessing results in the incremental amplification of incendiary racist content, which may, he worries, exert an insidious effect on the views of countless impressionable young people. Characterizing such exposures as less of a "zombie bite" than a slow-moving mold spore, Munn speculates that "this force is not an instant contagion, but something far more drawn out and subtle, a quiet influence that alters individuals as they inhabit online spaces over the months and years."[70] He therefore insists that we, as a civilization, examine and reprogram the categorical imperatives that our media architecture obeys. If we do not intervene on its human-engineered engagement-maximizing strategies, we will have no opportunity to stave off its automated cascade of effects.

Q, the Symptom[71]

QAnon is one of many psycho-social recrudescences of machine-learning processes that analyze and orchestrate billions of demographic data points with a view to sustaining and monetizing user engagement. It is undoubtedly an unfair contest. At the human user scale of pattern recognition, we are constantly put in the paralytic position of adjudicating the cognitive and ethical valences of algorithmic infrastructure designed to mesmerize us while extracting our data like blood from a captive child's vein.

The arc of QAnon is a compelling case study in our digital atmosphere's manifold contours, powers, and propensities. As a cultural phenomenon, QAnon is an uncanny doppelganger of activist media scholarship in that it represents a perverse remediation of the activist impulse to spring from hypermediated witnessing bubbles and make efficacious interventions on a world in peril. The irruption of Q's quasi-Evental reactivist community calls for concerned observers to concoct strategies for rewiring moribund cultural circuits in the hope that

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[69] Ibid., 6–7.

[70] Ibid., 7.

[71] Dean would likely go a step further and refer to Q as not so much a *symptom* of our media atmosphere as its "sinthome," Lacan's neologism for a symptomatic formation that is so densely woven with enjoyment that it cannot be untangled through interpretation.

malignant refractions of Enlightenment impulses can ultimately be conducted through more prismatically egalitarian, less psycho-tropic lenses.

At least for the time being, it is people who invent and codify the broad commands that even the most protean algorithms follow to the letter. And this is cause for hope. The fact that corporations cynically obfuscate these commands is a far from insuperable problem. But this epistemic asymmetry–with corporate algorithms processing nearly limitless data points about users, who cognize relatively few–does call for a concerned citizenry to update its understanding of and demands from our media environment. After all, it would be naïve to assume that any semblance of the Enlightenment project would be possible until we pause to elucidate our own rhetorical, ecological, medial, and political training in relation to our technological habitat.

Or maybe the arc of Enlightenment is an excessively rigid paradigm, a kind of philosophical psychosis whose time has come and gone. If so, this historical juncture compels us, more than ever, to conjure more versatile imaginaries around the possibility of a better world. In his recent writings on the COVID-19 pandemic, Slavoj Žižek proposes that the pressure cooker effect of the pandemic has engendered "a vast epidemic of ideological viruses which were lying dormant in our societies: fake news, paranoiac conspiracy theories, explosions of racism." He cites an array of Trump's psychotic immunizing remedies, like banning Muslims and building a wall around America, which betoken seemingly hard-wired trained incapacities at the highest level of government. These hateful misperceptions of the causes of and remedies for the current crises lead Žižek to wonder about an alterior philosophical-homeopathic approach. Perhaps what we should seek out is "another and much more beneficent ideological virus" which "will spread and hopefully infect us: the virus of thinking of an alternate society, a society beyond nation-state, a society that actualizes itself in the forms of global solidarity and cooperation."[72] At first blush, it registers as a perverse sentiment. But perhaps only a virus of the hive mind, an overdue recoding of our frazzled social software, harbours the potential to extricate us from our current infrastructural morass.

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[72] Slavoj Žižek, *Pandemic! COVID-19 Shakes the World* (New York: OR Books, 2020), 39.

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