

Conspiracy Fictions in Contemporary America

King's College London

Dr Clare Birchall

LATE EDITION

The  Onion

Take a Moment to Remember Where You Are

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KENNEDY SLAIN BY CIA, MAFIA, CASTRO, LBJ, TEAMSTERS, FREEMASONS

President Shot 129 Times from 43 Different Angles

DALLAS, Tex. —President Kennedy was assassinated Friday by operatives of the CIA, the Giancana crime syndicate, Fidel Castro, Vice President Johnson, the Freemasons and the Teamsters as he rode through downtown Dallas in a motorcade.

According to eyewitnesses, Kennedy's limousine had just entered Dealey Plaza when the president was struck 129 times in the head, chest, abdomen, arms, legs, hands, feet, back and face by gunfire. The shooting began at 12:30 p.m. and lasted until 12:43 p.m. CST.

In all, 43 suspects have been taken into the custody of the

Parkland Hospital, where doctors with ties to Johnson's inner circle performed a staged autopsy. They pronounced him dead at 2:18 p.m. CST.

The body was then chemically treated by J. Edgar Hoover and put in a decoy casket for transport to Roswell, New Mexico. There, space aliens using medical technology beyond the knowledge of man sealed Kennedy's 129 wounds. Kennedy's corpse was then reanimated and rushed to Germany for an emergency meeting with the frozen brain of Adolf Hitler.

After the meeting, Kennedy was announced alive for the



Module Description

The fear of conspiracy functions as a recurring motif in many American cultural forms including novels, film, television, certain genres of music like hip-hop and rap, graphic novels, and websites. After considering early articulations of conspiracism, this module will focus on 20th and 21st Century mediations of conspiracy fears and theories. The module will consider conspiracism through key events that have unsettled epistemological certainty and fuelled hermeneutic activity, including the assassination of JFK, the AIDS epidemic, and 9/11.

Throughout, students will be asked to utilise concepts from cultural, critical and literary theory, as well as from the sociology of knowledge and epistemology, to trouble distinctions between fact and fiction, interpretation and 'overinterpretation', justified and unjustified paranoia, official knowledge and popular knowledge, critical theory and conspiracy theory. They will also be encouraged to understand the power struggles that animate competing claims to knowledge and 'legitimacy'.

General/Background Reading (for context and for getting a sense of the field)

- Knight, P (2003) *Conspiracy theories in American history: an encyclopedia*, ABC Clío.
- Fenster, M. (2008) *Conspiracy theories: secrecy and power in American culture*, University of Minnesota Press.
- Melley, T. (2000) *Empire of conspiracy: the culture of paranoia in postwar America*, New York: Cornell University Press.
- Bratich, Z. (2008) *Conspiracy panics: political rationality and popular culture*, New York: SUNY.
- Butter, M. (2014) *Plots, Designs, and Schemes: American Conspiracy Theories from the Puritans to the Present*, Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter.
- Coale, S. (2005) *Paradigms of paranoia: the culture of conspiracy in contemporary American fiction*, University of Alabama Press.
- Birchall, C. (2006) *Knowledge goes pop: from conspiracy theory to gossip*, Oxford: Berg.

- Davies, D.B. (1971) *Fear of Conspiracy: Images of Un-American Subversion from the Revolution to the Present*, NY: Cornell Uni Press.
- Olmsted, K. S. (2009) *Real enemies: Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War I to 9/11*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Knight, P. (ed.) (2002) *Conspiracy nation: the politics of paranoia in postwar America*, New York: NYU Press.
- Brotherton, R. (2015) *Suspicious minds: why we believe conspiracy theories*, London: Bloomsbury.
- Byford, J. (2015) *Conspiracy theories: a critical introduction*, London: Palgrave.
- Donovan, B. W. (2011) *Conspiracy films: a tour of dark places in the American conscious*, McFarland.
- Jameson, F. (1992) *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana Uni Press.
- Hantke, S. (1994) *Conspiracy and Paranoia in Contemporary American Fiction*, Frankfurt: Peter Lang.
- Dentith, M. (2014) *The Philosophy of Conspiracy Theories*, London: Palgrave.

Weekly Schedule

<p>1</p>	<p>Definitions and Historical Precedents: Locating Conspiracism in American Thought</p> <p>In this first session we will survey historical documents to detect conspiracist attitudes in early writings about America. We will think about what the differences and similarities are between conspiracism then and now. It will also be necessary to come up with some provisional definitions of conspiracy, conspiracy theory, and conspiracy fictions that can guide us through the rest of the module.</p> <p>Core Reading</p> <p>Goldberg, R. A. 'Conspiracy Theories in America: A Historical Overview,' and Knight, P. 'Making Sense of Conspiracy Theories', in Knight, P. (ed.) (2003) <i>Conspiracy Theories in American History: An Encyclopaedia</i>, ABC-Clio.</p> <p>Jedidiah Morse, 'A Sermon, Exhibiting the Present Dangers,' 1799, reprinted in P. Knight (ed.) <i>Conspiracy Theories in American History: An Encyclopaedia</i>, ABC Clio, 2003.</p> <p>Further Reading</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Butter, M. (2014) 'Chapter 1: Mapping American Conspiracism', <i>Plots, Designs, and Schemes: American Conspiracy Theories from the Puritans to the Present</i>, Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2014: 32-67. • Olmsted, K. (2009) <i>Real enemies: conspiracy theories and American democracy, World War I to 9/11</i>. Oxford: Oxford University Press. • Davis, D. B. (1971) <i>The fear of conspiracy: images of un-American subversion from Revolution to the present</i>. New York: Cornell University Press. • Curry, R. (1972) <i>Conspiracy: The Fear of Subversion in American History</i>, New York: Holt.
<p>2</p>	<p>The Paranoid Style</p> <p>Continuing from last week, we will address a strain of political rhetoric identified by Richard Hofstadter as the "paranoid style". As well as reading this seminal essay, you will need to have seen the film <i>The Manchurian Candidate</i> (the original with Frank Sinatra rather than more recent re-make). We will think about how the Cold War heightened a certain paranoid style in</p>

	<p>political thought and how this influenced film narratives of the period. We will also want to look at some of the rhetoric used by Donald Trump in his recent presidential campaign to consider the use of the paranoid style today.</p> <p>Core Reading/Viewing Excerpt from: Hofstadter, R. (2008) "The Paranoid Style in American Politics", in <i>The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays</i>. New York: Vintage.</p> <p>Excerpt from Butter, M. (2014) <i>Plots, Designs, and Schemes: American Conspiracy Theories from the Puritans to the Present</i>, Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter.</p> <p>Film: <i>The Manchurian Candidate</i>, Dir. John Frankenheimer. Case Study: Trump's Rhetoric</p> <p>Further Reading</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oliver, J. and Wood, T. (2014) 'Conspiracy Theory and the Paranoid Style(s) of Mass Opinion', <i>American Journal of Political Science</i>, Vol. 58, No. 4, October: 952–966. • Butter, M. (2014) 'Chapter 5: Masters of Deceit: Conspiracy Theory in the Great Red Scare of the 1950s', <i>Plots, Designs, and Schemes: American Conspiracy Theories from the Puritans to the Present</i>, Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter. 223-282. • Olmsted, K. (2009) 'Masters of Deceit: Red Spies and Red Hunters in the McCarthy Era', <i>Real enemies: conspiracy theories and American democracy, World War I to 9/11</i>. Oxford: Oxford University Press. • Fenster, M. (2001) ch. 1, <i>Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture</i>, University of Minnesota Press. • Knight, P. (2001), Introduction, <i>Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to the X-Files</i>, London and New York: Routledge. • Pipes, D. (1997), ch. 1-3, <i>Conspiracy: How the Paranoid Style Flourishes and Where It Comes From</i>, New York: Free Press. • Robins, R.S. and Post, D. (1998), <i>Political Paranoia: The Psychopolitics of Hatred</i>, New Haven: Yale University Press. • Frye Jacobson, M. & G. Gonzalez (2006) <i>What have the built you to do? The Manchurian Candidate and Cold War America</i>, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
3	<p>"Everything is Connected": Reading History through Conspiracy</p> <p>In this seminar we will address the attractions of reading historical events through the lens of conspiracy. Why is it an appealing mode of narration and reading? What happens to other aspects of a story or account when conspiracism guides? What is our relationship to primary sources when we are convinced of certain connections prior to reading? The Kennedy Assassination will provide the key case study for this week as it is often positioned as a seminal event in the destabilisation of epistemological certainty.</p> <p>Core Reading/Viewing DeLillo, D. (1998) <i>Libra</i>, Viking Press.</p> <p>Film: JFK, Dir. Oliver Stone).</p>

	<p>Further Reading</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Olmsted, K. (2009) 'Chapter 4: The Dealey Plaza irregulars: The JFK Assassination and the Collapse of Trust in the 1960s', In <i>Real Enemies: Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War 1 to 9/11</i>, Oxford: Oxford University Press. • Knight P. (2000) 'Chapter 2: Plotting the Kennedy Assassination' <i>Conspiracy culture: from the Kennedy assassination to The X-files</i>, London: Routledge. • Knight, P. (2007) <i>The Kennedy Assassination</i>. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. • Melly, T. (2000) 'Chapter 4: Secret Agents', in <i>Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America</i>. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press. • Michael, M. C (1994) 'The Political Paradox within Don DeLillo's <i>Libra</i>', <i>Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction</i> 35(3):146-156. • Thomas, G. (1997) 'History, Biography, and Narrative in Don DeLillo's <i>Libra</i>', <i>Twentieth Century Literature</i>, 43. • Willman, S. (1998) "Traversing the Fantasies of the JFK Assassination: Conspiracy and Contingency in Don DeLillo's <i>Libra</i>", <i>Contemporary Literature</i> 39. • Hankte, S.(2004) <i>Conspiracy and Paranoia in Contemporary American Fiction</i>, Peter Lang. • You also might want to consider newly released files relating to the assassination: see https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/live/2017/oct/26/jfk-files-released-assassination-documents-conspiracy-theories
4	<p>Interpretation and Overinterpretation</p> <p>Umberto Eco was a semiotician and novelist fascinated with the limits of interpretation and what he saw as the dangers of overinterpretation. Having established what is at stake in this representation of the interpretive endeavour, we shall look at the conspiracy theories that surround 9/11.</p> <p>Core Reading</p> <p>Eco, U. (1992), 'Interpretation and History', 'Overinterpreting Texts', in S. Collini (ed.), <i>Interpretation and Overinterpretation</i>, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.</p> <p>Case Study: 9/11 Conspiracy Theories</p> <p>Further Reading</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collini, S. (ed.) (1992), <i>Interpretation and Overinterpretation</i>, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. • Bondanella, P. (1997), 'Interpretation, Overinterpretation, Paranoid Interpretation', in R. Capozzi (ed.), <i>Reading Eco: An Anthology</i>, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press. • Eco, U. (1988), <i>Foucault's Pendulum</i>, trans. W. Weaver, London: Picador. • Eco, U. (1990), <i>The Limits of Interpretation</i>, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press. • Birchall, C. (2004) 'Economic Interpretation', in <i>Illuminating Eco: on the Boundaries of Interpretation</i>, Oxford: Ashgate. • Bratich, J. (2008) 'Chapter 5: Going Global: 9/11, Popular Investigations, and the Sphere of Legitimate Discourse', <i>Conspiracy</i>

	<p><i>Panics</i>, New York: SUNY.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Olmstead, K. (2009) 'Cabal of Soccer Moms; 9/11 and the Culture of Deceit', <i>Real Enemies</i>, Oxford: Oxford University Press. • Barkun, M. (2003) 'Chapter 10: September 11: The Aftermath', <i>A Culture of Conspiracy</i>, Berkeley and LA: University of California Press. • Coale, S. (2005) <i>Paradigms of paranoia: the culture of conspiracy in contemporary American fiction</i>, University of Alabama Press. • Eco, U. (1979) <i>The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of texts</i>, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
5	<p>Postmodern Paranoia and Cognitive Mapping</p> <p>Cognitive mapping is the term the Marxist scholar Fredric Jameson uses to describe the complex task of understanding and orienting oneself in the landscape of postmodern late capitalism. Controversially he calls conspiracy theory "the poor man's cognitive mapping". In this seminar we will think about what kind of cognitive maps conspiracy theory and fictions provide. Alongside a consideration of this key term, we will look at Thomas Pynchon's novella <i>The Crying of Lot 49</i>, considering it as an attempt to display the pitfalls of cognitive mapping.</p> <p>Core Reading</p> <p>Pynchon, T. (1969) <i>Crying of Lot 49</i></p> <p>Further Reading</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Simons, J. (2000) <i>Postmodern Paranoia? Pynchon and Jameson</i>, Edinburgh University Press. • Coale, S. (2005) 'Chapter 6: Thomas Pynchon: The Functions of Conspiracy and the Performance of Paranoia,' <i>Paradigms of Paranoia: The Culture of Conspiracy in Contemporary American Fiction</i>, University of Alabama Press. • Jameson, F. (1988) 'Cognitive Mapping' in C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (eds) <i>Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture</i>. University of Illinois Press. • Jameson, F. (1995) 'Totality as Conspiracy' in <i>The Geopolitical Aesthetic</i>, Bloomington: Indiana University Press. • Mason, F. (2002) 'A Poor Person's Cognitive Mapping', in Peter Knight (ed.) <i>Conspiracy Nation</i>, New York: NYU Press: 40-56. • K, J. (2010) 'Mapping Conspiracy', <i>Cartographies of the Absolute</i>, https://cartographiesoftheabsolute.wordpress.com/2010/05/08/mapping-conspiracy/ • Tally, R. (1996) 'Jameson's Project of Cognitive Mapping,' In: R. G. Paulston, ed. <i>Social Cartography: Mapping Ways of Seeing Social and Educational Change</i>. New York: Garland, pp.339-416. • Tally, R. (2014) <i>Fredric Jameson: The Project of Dialectical Criticism</i>. London: Pluto Press. • Paglen, T. (2010) <i>Blank Spots on the Map</i>. London and New York: New American Library.
6	READING WEEK
7	<p>Popular Knowledge vs Official Knowledge</p> <p>This week, we will consider conspiracy theories as a form of popular knowledge often placed in opposition to more official or legitimate ways of knowing. How is such an opposition created and maintained? Is it a helpful</p>

	<p>binary or one that falls down under scrutiny? Please watch the first episode of the first series of <i>The X-Files</i> and a few others before this seminar and consider the ways in which different knowledges are pitched against each other.</p> <p>Core Reading/Viewing Fiske, J. (1993), Chapter 9, <i>Power Plays, Power Works</i>, London and New York: Verso.</p> <p>Birchall, C. (2006) Selection from: "Introduction", <i>Knowledge Goes Pop: From Conspiracy Theory to Gossip</i>. Oxford: Berg.</p> <p>TV: <i>The X-Files</i>, Series 1, Dir. Chris Carter</p> <p>Further Reading</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kellner, D. (1999), 'The X-Files and the Aesthetics and Politics of Postmodern Pop', <i>Journal of Aesthetics</i>, 57(2): 161–75. • Jane, E. & C Fleming, <i>Modern Conspiracy: The Importance of Being Paranoid</i>, London: Bloomsbury. • Turner, P. A. (1994) <i>I Heard it Through the Grapevine: Rumor in African-American Culture</i>. Berkeley: University of California Press. • Popper, K. (1945) <i>The Open Society and its Enemies</i>. • Barkun, M. (2003) 'Chapter 2: Millennialism, Conspiracy, and Stigmatized Knowledge', <i>A Culture of Conspiracy</i>. Berkeley, University of California Press: 15-38. • Lyotard, J-F, (1984) <i>The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge</i>, Manchester: Manchester University Press. • Doyle-McCarthy, E. (1996) <i>Knowledge as Culture: The New Sociology of Knowledge</i>, London and New York: Routledge. • Lavery, D. (1996) <i>Deny all knowledge: Reading the X-Files</i>, Syracuse University Press. • Ross, A. 'New Age Technoculture' in Grossberg et al (eds) <i>Cultural Studies</i>, London and New York: Routledge. • Showalter, E. (1998) <i>Hystories</i>, London: Picador.
8	<p>Alien Conspiracy</p> <p>What social and cultural anxieties do conspiracy theories and fictions that centre on the figure of the alien express? In this seminar, we will look at a range of possibilities including fears over loss of agency, control over the body, and concerns over immigration, sexuality, and otherness.</p> <p>Core Reading / Viewing Dean, J. (1998) 'Introduction', <i>Aliens in America: Conspiracy Cultures from Outerspace to Cyberspace</i>, Cornell University Press.</p> <p>Barkun, M. (2003) 'Chapter 5: UFO Conspiracy Theories', <i>A Culture of Conspiracy</i>. Berkeley, University of California Press: 79-97.</p> <p>Alien Autopsy Footage: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pukbzCC3cfQ</p> <p>Case Study: Alien Abduction conspiracy theories; Roswell & Area 51</p> <p>Further Reading</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brown, B. (2002) 'My Body is Not My Own: Alien Abduction and the Struggle for Self Control', in Knight, P. ed., <i>Conspiracy Nation</i>, New

	<p>York University Press.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dean, J. <i>Aliens in America: Conspiracy Cultures from Outerspace to Cyberspace</i>, Cornell University Press. • Melley, T. (2002) "Agency Panic and the Culture of Conspiracy," in Knight, P. ed., <i>Conspiracy Nation</i>. New York: NYU Press. • Strieber, W. (2008) <i>Communion: a True Story</i>, New York: Harper. • Guylas, A. (2016) 'Chapter 3', <i>Conspiracy Theories: the roots, themes and propogation of paranoid political and cultural narratives</i>, Jefferson, NC.:McFarland. • Bratich, J. (2008) 'Chapter 4: Left Behind', <i>Conspiracy Panics</i>, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press. • Matthews, M. (2007) <i>Hostile Aliens, Hollywood and Today's News</i> New York: Algora. • See Prof. John E. Mack's books on alien abduction.
9	<p>Reading Race through/as Conspiracy This week we will be asking what role conspiracy theories play in the narration and understanding of racial politics of the United States by looking at the moments they arise in the African-American community.</p> <p>Core Reading/Listening Knight, P. (2000) 'Chapter 4: Fear of a Black Planet: Black Paranoia and the Aesthetics of Conspiracy', <i>Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to the X-Files</i>. London and New York: Routledge: 143-167.</p> <p><i>Get Out</i>, 2017, Jordan Peele</p> <p>Case Study: Tuskagee Syphilis Experiment</p> <p>Further Reading</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quinn, E. (2002) "All Eyez on Me": The Paranoid Style of Tupac Shakur" in P. Knight (ed.) <i>Conspiracy Nation</i>, New York: NYU Press. • Reed, Ishmael (1972), <i>Mumbo Jumbo</i>. • Turner, P. A. (1994) <i>I Heard it Through the Grapevine: Rumor in African-American Culture</i>. Berkeley: University of California Press. • Kelman, A. 'Even Paranoids Have Enemies: Rumors of Levee Sabotage in New Orleans's Lower 9th Ward,' <i>Journal of Urban History</i>, 35 (5), 2009, pp.627-639. • Hartman, C & Squires, G (2006) <i>There is no such thing as a natural disaster: Race, class and hurricane Katrina</i>. London and New York: Routledge. • Olmsted, K. (2009) 'Chapter 6', in <i>Real Enemies: Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War 1 to 9/11</i>, Oxford: Oxford University Press. • Simmon, W. & S. Parsons (2005) "Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories Among African Americans: A Comparison of Elites and Masses," <i>Social Sciences Quarterly</i>, 83 (3): 582-598. • Millard, D. (2016) 'Why Hip-Hop Loves Conspiracy Theories', <i>Vice</i>, January 27. Available at: http://www.vice.com/en_uk/read/why-hip-hop-loves-conspiracy-theories-bob-flat-earth • Bratich, J. (2008) 'Chapter 4', <i>Conspiracy Panics: Political Rationality and Popular Culture</i>, SUNY Press. • Goldberg, R.A. (2001) 'Chapter 5', <i>Enemies Within: The Culture of Conspiracy in Modern America</i>, Yale University Press.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Turner, P. and Fine, G.A. (2004) <i>Whispers on the Color Line</i>. University of California Press. • Fiske, J. (1996) "Blackstream Knowledge: Genocide," <i>Media Matters</i>, University of Minnesota Press.
10	<p>Patriarchal Conspiracy</p> <p>Staying with identity, we will consider cultural dystopias that represent and imagine patriarchy as a literal rather than figural conspiracy against women alongside popular feminism that uses some of the same tropes and language. How does the figuration of conspiracy operate in recent feminist movements such as #MeToo? Equally, the logic of conspiracism is used by misogynist groups like self-identified "incels" (involuntary celibates)?</p> <p>Core Reading/Watching</p> <p>Margaret Atwood, <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i>, Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1985.</p> <p><i>The Redstocking Manifesto</i>, 1969 http://www.redstockings.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=76&Itemid=59</p> <p>Further Reading</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peter Knight, Chapter 3, <i>Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to the X-Files</i>. London and New York: Routledge, 2001: 117-142. • Timothy Melley, Chapter 3: Stalked by Love, <i>Empire of Conspiracy</i>, New York: Cornell, 2000. • Susan Faludi, <i>Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women</i>, New York: Crosn, 1991. • Betty Friedan, <i>The Feminine Mystique</i>, London: Penguin, 1963. • Jia Tolentino, "Rage of the Incels", <i>The New Yorker</i>, May 15, 2018. https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/the-rage-of-the-incels
11	<p>Close Reading Workshop on The Stepford Wives and Module Summary</p> <p>In this final session, we will be looking at both versions of <i>The Stepford Wives</i>. This will enable us to think not only about the difference in the figuration of conspiracy between second and third wave feminism (extending last week's discussion), but also a reminder on how to conduct close reading of a visual text. You will be asked to draw on all the different ideas we have looked at in the module to make sense of these two films</p> <p>Set Viewing</p> <p>Watch:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The Stepford Wives</i> (1975) dir. Bryan Forbes • <i>The Stepford Wives</i> (2004) dir. Frank Oz