
Pandemic Denial and the Great Reset Conspiracy Theory: The Power of Semiotic Inter-Codability

Marcel Danesi

University of Toronto

ORCID 0000-0002-1826-013X

DOI | 10.14195/2184-9781_6_7

ABSTRACT

A rarely-discussed aspect of the covid-19 pandemic was how discourses based on the Great Reset Conspiracy Theory emerged to portray the pandemic as being manufactured by a global elite of liberal scientists, politicians, and intellectuals, who used the pandemic to attempt to furtively dismantle capitalism and reform the world order in accordance with radical liberal policies and views. These discourses became part of a major disinformation ecosystem gaining power via their

rhizomatic structure, which can be framed as a semiotic strategy based on “inter-codability” based on the coordination of interacting codes (rhetorical, visual, symbolic, narrative). This essay applies the inter-codability concept to a deconstruction of the Great Reset Conspiracy Theory, given that it could not have become so powerful without a semiotic network interlinked codes behind it.

KEYWORDS

covid-19, inter-codability, Great Reset Conspiracy Theory, meta-code, infodemic, QAnon, denial discourses

Introduction

In his bestselling 2004 novel, *State of Fear*, Michael Crichton painted a highly misleading and distorted portrait of the science of climate change, implying that a cadre of scientists, left-leaning politicians, and elitist liberal intellectuals had manufactured the global warming crisis in order to create a worldwide panic for self-serving reasons—namely, to promote a self-serving science agenda to get access to funding money and to control people’s minds by creating a “state of fear.”¹ The plot revolves around a group of eco-terrorists who are set on committing mass murder in order

¹ Crichton 2004.

to expose the dangers of global warming to the human species. Despite being a work of fiction, Crichton included graphs, footnotes, appendices, and even a bibliography, so as to impart an aura of scientific verisimilitude to the narrative. Although climate change denial started before the novel, there is little doubt that Crichton helped propel the politics of denialism broadly, spilling over into other areas, including the adoption and spread of conspiracy theories related to the covid-19 pandemic years later, which bear the same false narrative imprint to them of Crichton's novel.

The novel exemplifies how denial discourses work semiotically—it twists the meanings of scientific notions, using terms such as “hoax” and “cabal” to create an aura of sinister groups operating behind the scenes. It also reverses the meanings of the words and symbols that climate scientists and environmentalists use to convey their warning messages, suggesting that the science behind global warming is fallacious. Crichton also suggested that global warming hysteria became a media preoccupation because the reins of mass communications were in the hands of the members of the cabal. The gist of the book's intent is summarized perceptively by Rick Piltz as follows:²

Every aspect of the novel seems designed to make up a sustained, scurrilous misrepresentation of the climate science community and the environmental movement. His environmentalists are either eco-terrorists planning to cause a murderous disaster to further their sinister, authoritarian political aims, or they are ignorant fools and hypocrites. The leading climate scientists don't know what they're talking about, misrepresent their data, and trade their intellectual integrity for continued funding by bureaucrats with whom they are in collusion to mislead the world into believing that anthropogenic global warming and its impacts are real.

The novel came forth at a time when the social media universe had become a reality—a universe that quickly absorbed the conspiratorial mindset that it enfolded. By the time of the covid-19 pandemic, this took concrete form in the discourses based on the Great Reset Conspiracy Theory, which saw the pandemic as being manufactured by the same global elite

² Piltz 2015.

that was described by Crichton—a group of liberal scientists, politicians, intellectuals, and mainstream media pundits who were using the pandemic to surreptitiously dismantle capitalism and to enforce radical changes to the world order in accordance with radical liberal policies and views. The term “Great Reset” was adopted by the conspiracists from the name given to an initiative launched by the World Economic Forum in June of 2020, calling for fairer outcomes to people across the world by rethinking global investment and government expenditure in light of the catastrophic economic effects of the pandemic. The Forum was portrayed by many alt-right pundits on their social media platforms as a smokescreen hiding the real objective of the elites to take over the world, by destroying capitalism and enacting a “one world government” under the cover the covid-19 crisis, using the pandemic as an opportunity to ensconce policies such as forced vaccinations, identity cards, and the renunciation of privacy.

The conspiracy theory quickly became part of a major disinformation ecosystem, gaining power discursively via its rhizomatic structure, as Deleuze and Guattari called the power of interconnected meaning networks, which impel us to glean from them whatever we want to see in them.³ In a similar fashion, the present author used the term “inter-codability” to refine the rhizome notion by concretizing how such a network is constituted, with interacting codes (rhetorical, visual, symbolic, narrative).⁴ The purpose of this essay is to apply the inter-codability concept to a decodification of the Great Reset Conspiracy Theory, given that it could not have become so powerful without such a network of interlinked codes behind it. In a relevant study, Christensen and Au, conducted a qualitative analysis of social media content related to the hashtag #StopTheGreatReset, finding that Great Reset conspiracy narratives not only relied on traditional conspiratorial tropes, but also reflected a spreading anti-institutional discourse based in an ever-spreading antidemocratic politics.⁵

The Great Reset Conspiracy Theory encompassed terms similar to those used by Crichton, which had rhetorical force, including “takeover,” “world order,” “elitist cabal,” “deep state,” and many others. These were signifiers in the verbal code within the network. These were reinforced semiotically

³ Deleuze and Guattari 1987.

⁴ Danesi 2023.

⁵ Christensen and Au 2023: 2348–2366.

by visual-iconic codes, which included images of totalitarian social control (such as pictures of dictators of the past), and by the narrative structure of the conspiracy itself, all of which constituted other codes within the network. At the core of these codes was a meta-code—namely, the plot of world takeover. This was the overarching code from which all the others derived, forming an intricate meaning network that allowed conspiracists to make their messages coherent. It was the activation of this inter-codal system that imbued the conspiracy theory with such emotional force, providing a conceptual filter for (mis)interpreting measures such as lockdowns, mask-wearing, and vaccines, which could be mapped to the purported cabal's overall strategy of stripping away freedoms, increasing mass surveillance practices, and forcing vaccines on people, as a means of mind control.

Inter-codability

Cabalistic discourses are cognitively destructive because they deeply alter people's understanding of facts and reality, to the point where the believers will see nothing but what they are told to see by the congeners of the discourses. For any conspiracy theory to gain a foothold broadly in groupthink, it must have roots in deeply-embedded conceptual mechanisms that are carried forth to the present via language and other semiotic codes, lying in wait (unconsciously) for someone or something to revive or activate them. This is arguably what happened with the Great Reset conspiratorial discourse—it reignited the age-old cabal code that there is a small group of people working behind the social scenes who maintain power by controlling people's minds through persuasive techniques. This activation does not take place in cognitive isolation, but rather via the tendency of semiotic codes to coalesce into larger codes, or meta-codes, a concept that extends the notion of rhizomatic discourse structure in a specific way. So, for instance, the purported conspiracy that climate scientists are collaborating with radical liberal entrepreneurs and politicians, as portrayed by Crichton, and the Great Reset conspiratorial theme in pandemic denialism, converge around the same cabal-based meta-code. Even the players are essentially the same ones.

Never before has the semiotic approach to the deconstruction of false discourses been as critical as it is today, given the omnipresence of

conspiratorial groups and persistent false discourses throughout cyberspace. The interrelation between pandemics, social upheavals, cultural changes, and even innovations in the arts, writing, and other creative activities has been a part of human experience since the dawn of history. This does not mean that creativity and change are not sparked in other ways and inspired by other severe predicaments, from war to natural disasters or simply by an inherent impulse for innovation. Whatever the source or spark, the end result is the creation of semiotic artifacts that allow for reflection on what is going on, but which leave their traces into the cultural substratum permanently. The classic case-in-point is the invention of prose fiction, as exemplified in the *Decameron*, written by Giovanni Boccaccio in the 1300s, as a way to cope with the ravages of the bubonic plague through the telling of stories about everyday life, an invention that changed the world permanently, with the subsequent rise and spread of fiction as a major form of literature.⁶ At the same time, the negative side of creativity also emerged, with conspiracy theories aplenty, which blamed the Jews, witches, lack of religiosity, and other culprits emerging at the same time. These formed the conceptual substratum for subsequent conspiracy theories to emerge, many based on the meta-code of a Jewish cabal operating secretly to maintain hidden power over the world.

The term *code* is used in reference to the set of shared meanings and interpretations among users of a sign system (language, art, gesture, music, etc.). Without a code or set of codes, signs in themselves would have no meaning. To cite Roman Jakobson, a code allows users to consistently connect required or desired meanings to the signifiers used to deliver them (words, images, symbols, and so on).⁷ In an inter-codability system of analysis, the meanings are inherent in the individual codes constituting the overall network and the signifiers are the sign forms that constitute the codes. These are all derived from, or connected to, a core meta-code without which the individual codes would break down and fall from the network. The met-code keeps the network stable and impervious to change across time, revealing the process of time-binding, as Alfred Korzybski called it, which he described as “the capacity of an individual or a generation to begin where the former left off,” which, for the present purposes,

⁶ Boccaccio 1353.

⁷ Jakobson 1966: 34–45.

can also be seen to be the unconscious mechanism that activates conspiratorial meta-codes.⁸

As Anna Aragno has insightfully pointed out, the mind itself may be construed as an amalgam of coded information, “based on progressive stages in the development of symbolization, a cerebral faculty unique to our species, distinguishing us from all other animals, without which we could neither speak nor conceive of “mind at all.”⁹ In a similar vein, Georgij Somov sees the inter-linkages of codes in the expression of a specific thematic discourse, as the core element of how we make and extract meaning holistically:¹⁰

Codes can be viewed as mechanisms that enable relations of signs and their components, i.e., semiosis is actualized. The combinations of these relations produce new relations as new codes are building over other codes. Structures appear in the mechanisms of codes...Hence, codes can be described as transformations of structures from some material systems into others. which reflects the way typical semiotic formations emerge in mind based on the interrelations of various codes.

In the Deleuze-Guattari model, the assemblage of nodes in a network involves connections between any of its constituent elements (signifiers), regardless of ordering, structure, or entry point. In inter-codability theory, on the other hand, there is an entry point—the prior existence of a meta-code, such as the cabal one, which has been imprinted in the various codes that make up the particular network—rhetorical, iconographic, narrative, and symbolic, which carry forth the same themes and concepts that the meta-code established historically. Without this, the network would crumble under its own weight so to speak. Deleuze and Guattari break down structures into floating signifiers, to use Claude Lévi-Strauss’s apt term, or forms “representing an undetermined quantity of signification, in itself void of meaning and thus apt to receive any meaning.”¹¹ Contrariwise, inter-codability suggests that the network itself is so organized that only a bounded range of meanings can emerge from it, through its signifiers.

⁸ Korzybski 1933.

⁹ Aragno 2019, 21.

¹⁰ Somov 2016: 557–599.

¹¹ Lévi-Strauss 1950: 64.

Nonetheless, there is a point of similarity between these two models as can be seen in the fact that a rhizome node may be broken at a given spot, but will start up again on one of its old lines, which is somewhat analogous to the idea of regeneration or reactivation of a network on the basis of a meta-code.

The Infodemic Crisis

At the start of the Internet-social-media era, at the turn of the twenty-first century, the SARS epidemic came forth in 2003 to turn the digital system into a tool for conspiracists. It allowed for an “infodemic” to crystallize alongside the epidemic itself—a term coined in that year by David Rothkopf in reference to the rapid and far-reaching spread of both accurate and inaccurate information about the epidemic through cyberspace.¹² The term was a metaphor depicting how disinformation can spread like a virus from person to person and affect people destructively like a physical disease. As Rothkopf remarked, the infodemic transformed the actual epidemic from a regional health crisis into a “debacle” that had economic and social repercussions. He defined it as a “complex phenomenon caused by the interaction of mainstream media, specialist media and internet sites, and ‘informal’ media, which is to say wireless phones, text messaging, pagers, faxes, and e-mail, all transmitting some combination of fact, rumor, interpretation, and propaganda.”¹³ In the misinformation ecosystem that had emerged, conspiratorial ideas such as those expressed in fiction by Crichton a year later, began to spread. The most prominent one was that the virus was spread on purpose by an antagonistic foreign government. The stage was set for the Great Reset Theory almost two decades later.

From the start of the global spread of the coronavirus around the latter part of 2019, the online conspiratorial culture started perpetrating misinformation, mirroring the pattern of spread and mutation of the coronavirus itself. Tanya Lewis summarizes the situation perceptively as follows:¹⁴

¹² Rothkopf 2003: B.01.

¹³ Rothkopf 2003: B.01.

¹⁴ Lewis 2020.

This infodemic is just as harmful as covid-19 itself, leading people to downplay the severity of the disease and ignore public health advice in favor of unproved treatments or “cures.” A recent survey by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and Gallup found that four in five Americans say the online spread of misinformation is the biggest problem facing the media. Even with widely available evidence to the contrary, beliefs are hard to change.

The main type of misinformation that surfaced was a set of conspiracy theories that all revolved around the same meta-code utilized by Crichton in his novel against climate change science—namely that a sinister and powerful group was working behind the scenes, consisting of the usual suspects (liberal politicians, scientists, academics, and so on). The meta-code was expressed vicariously through a whole set of inner conspiratorial codes within the network such as blaming the pandemic on 5G technology, portraying it as a biowarfare plot, describing it as a big pharma ploy, and others—all of which can be seen to derive from the same meta-code of the cabal. The Great Reset Conspiracy Theory was the most deleterious of all the inner codes. The culprit behind the pandemic, in opposition to the scientific consensus among doctors and medical researchers that the virus had a natural source, was the same one that Crichton had so cleverly (mis)identified. In this case, the cabal was portrayed as aiming to “reset” the world according to its own ideology. Because conspiracy theories resist falsification, reinforced by factors such as circular reasoning and confirmation bias, one of the negative legacies of the covid-19 pandemic has been to embed conspiratorial discourse into the unconscious as an instrument of understanding, engendering a widespread distrust of authority and the spread of political cynicism. Once limited to fringe groups or individuals, this type of discourse has become commonplace in social media.

In a sense, the ecosystem that perpetrated and perpetuated the conspiracy theory might reflect how mythological thinking continues to influence our perception of unexplained events even in an age of science and secularism. As Roland Barthes cogently argued in his book *Mythologies*, such deeply-embedded thinking is an unconscious factor, not only in the creation of contemporary narratives in the field of entertainment, but also in how we see the mythological past as a frame for understanding the

present.¹⁵ It is one small step to extend Barthes' argument to deconstruct the rise of false beliefs based on false narratives and conspiratorial discourses in terms of such thinking. The major function of myth, Barthes claimed, was to "naturalize" a mode of thought or belief. The false myths that are imprinted in conspiratorial theories provide justification of biases, prejudices, and fears, because they literally "makes sense" on their own, being so deeply ensconced in the unconscious part of the mind.

In his 1722 novel, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, designed as an eyewitness account of the devastation caused by the bubonic plague in the city of London, Daniel Defoe, like Crichton after him, included statistical tables of casualty figures, oral witness testimonials, mortality documents, mayoral proclamations about the plague, and excerpts from the medical literature of the era to make his work even more realistic, drawing attention to the dangers of crowded living conditions and how plagues spread under such conditions, contrary to Crichton's objective.¹⁶ The style of Defoe's account achieves the same kind of verisimilitude of an actual diaristic journal, providing first-hand-type comments on the neighborhoods in which the chaotic events took place. The book sparked intense debates about public health procedures, raising awareness of the need to solve the problems that plagues bring with them, physical, social, and emotional. Quite striking is Defoe's description of the fringe theories as to the origins and spread of the disease that were being bandied about in London, putting obstacles in the way of the physicians to enact effective therapeutic measures. These were conspiracy theories that fed into the mass panic that common people experienced, as they tried to come to grips with the disease. Defoe's book also alluded, significantly, to the spread of a narrative that assigned blame to the origins of the plague to another nation, France, claiming that the plague reached England via the French port at Marseilles. Defoe had identified the same meta-code that Crichton used centuries later and that resurfaced during covid-19, albeit in a different form—namely that someone or something was the culprit for a calamity.

Never before in human history have false narratives become so widespread as they have because of the social media ecosystem. It is the massiveness

¹⁵ Barthes 1957.

¹⁶ Defoe 1722.

of the diffusion itself that actually adds to the perceived plausibility of the misinformation, given that, as any widely accepted belief, it is difficult emotionally to go against the grain. Moreover, the communicative situation itself provides a strange form of pleasure, as people on social media not only accepted the “truth” of a conspiracy theory at face value, but added to it subjectively by commenting on the theory through personal posts, thus allowing it to develop and mutate throughout cyberspace—like a physical virus. The resulting intertextual system (one version based on another and on another and so on) made the false ideas even more believable in themselves—a mindset that can be encapsulated colloquially as follows: “If so many believe it, then it must be true, especially since I myself can add something to the substance of the information.” It is at such points that a conspiracy theory becomes impervious to falsification, as believers tend to interpret any contrary evidence as actually confirming it, thus actually reinforcing it (confirmation bias), since the contrary evidence is seen a ploy if the cabalists. This whole misinformation discourse system is bolstered by social-media algorithms—when someone clicks on a conspiracy-oriented post, the algorithm offers up similar posts, sites, and platforms, which contain more false information, perpetuating the cycle of falsity that is becoming larger and larger.

Meta-code-based conspiracy theories spread primarily via hashtags, chat groups, and simple Google searches. In this virtual environment, believers develop their own language, sometimes called a “plandemic,” which imparts a sense of belonging and feeling united against a perceived common enemy. The term “plandemic” is traced to a 2020 conspiracy theory video, *Plandemic: The Hidden Agenda Behind Covid-19 and Plandemic: Indoctrination*, which promoted misinformation about the covid-19 pandemic as something “planned” behind the scenes—hence the result of a “plandemic.” The video went viral and became so embedded in the minds of many, given the persuasiveness of its pseudo-scientific arguments, that the general concept that there is a worldwide conspiracy seeking to control humanity through fear and to make money continues on seemingly without constraints.

The question of why anyone would believe such preposterous claims remains somewhat obscure, since fear and anxiety have been managed in an infinitude of ways in the past, outside of the adoption of conspiracism. In this area, the ideas of political scientist Michael Barkun seem relevant.

Barkun sees the appeal of conspiracism as motivated by three main reasons.¹⁷ First, conspiracy theories emerge to explain what institutional-scientific analysis cannot, which allow people to make sense out of something that is otherwise confusing. Second, they have a simple appeal, dividing the world between the forces of light and the forces of darkness. And third, they are presented as special, secret knowledge unknown or unappreciated by others, a style that clearly imitates the fictional one used by Crichton. The latter reason gives believers a sense of powerful knowledge that allows them to feel that they have uncovered a mystery. As Barkun puts it: “For conspiracy theorists, the masses are a brainwashed herd, while the conspiracy theorists in the know can congratulate themselves on penetrating the plotters’ deceptions.”¹⁸

The sense that by connecting the dots (clues) present in specific conspiratorial discourses, social media users unravel the mystery has been described as part of apophenic reasoning, a term introduced by psychiatrist Klaus Conrad in 1958 in reference to the “unmotivated seeing of connections” that are accompanied by “a specific feeling of abnormal meaningfulness.”¹⁹ Conrad applied the term to describe the early stages of delusional thought emanating from over-interpretations of sensory information and perceptions. The same notion has come forth to describe the propensity of unreasonably seeking patterns in random information, as can be seen in conspiracy theories, whereby coincidences are woven together into an apparent secret plot. The notion of apophenia provides direct psychological evidence that semiotic networks, constructed for deceptive purposes, produce belief in the meta-code they enfold, making us prone to manipulation by those who harness this very tendency to create unified patterns of meaning, from which there is no cognitive escape other than to reject the whole semiotic network system entirely. Each code in a network in isolation would not produce a false belief by itself; it is via its apophenic connectivity to other codes in a network that makes it resonate with believability.

¹⁷ Barkun 2003.

¹⁸ Barkun 2003: 3.

¹⁹ Conrad 1958.

The Great Reset Conspiracy Theory

The cabal meta-code used in denial discourses takes on various rhetorical-symbolic-figurative forms. In their most common form, the discourses warn that global elites manufactured the covid-19 pandemic to advance their world order aspirations. To reiterate, the denialism emerged as a semiotic distortion of the “Great Reset” initiative of the World Economic Forum, which introduced the term at its 2020 international conference to represent the need to reduce global inequality and advance environmental initiatives in the wake of the devastation of climate change and the coronavirus. The denialists saw this as “proof” that global elites were using the coronavirus and climate change science as a means to reorganize global societies and economies in order to control world order. In an October 2020 open letter addressed to President Trump that became a cornerstone for the conspiracy, the radical right-wing Catholic Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò wrote the following:²⁰

A global plan called the Great Reset is underway. Its architect is a global élite that wants to subdue all of humanity, imposing coercive measures with which to drastically limit individual freedoms and those of entire populations. In several nations this plan has already been approved and financed; in others it is still in an early stage. Behind the world leaders who are the accomplices and executors of this infernal project, there are unscrupulous characters who finance the World Economic Forum and Event 201, promoting their agenda.

The letter gave impetus to conspiracy groups to perpetrate the false claim that the coronavirus was a pretense devised to enforce lockdown measures, to destroy businesses and weaken the economy, so as to strip away freedoms, increase mass surveillance practices in totalitarian-regime fashion, and force vaccines on people. Great Reset conspiracists cast Trump as the only leader able to combat and defeat the cabal behind it. Spurred on by Viganò’s letter, pandemic denialists resisted public health measures, perceiving them as part of the Great Reset plot, delaying the resolution of

²⁰ Viganò 2022.

the pandemic via the usual public health measures of the past, including prophylaxis (mask wearing, disinfection, hand washing) and vaccination.

In their 2021 book, *I Know Who Caused Covid-19: Pandemics and Xenophobia*, Zhou Xun and Sander Gilman insightfully remarked that “in times of stress such as during pandemics, ancient prejudices and primeval fear, always beneath the surface, can be brought to life to haunt us”.²¹ In medieval Europe the scapegoats for the bubonic plague were the Jews, as mentioned, who were attacked by mobs as a result; in seventeenth-century London it was the French; in the early twentieth century, as cholera spread across Europe, the scapegoats were the lower classes, who were seen as unhygienic.

As a meta-code, the Great Reset Conspiracy Theory overlapped with another similarly-derived meta-code, called the Great Replacement Theory—in effect, the two constitute one overarching meta-code. The latter claims, essentially, that Western and majority White countries are under threat from immigration and declining birth rates. This theory gained momentum with the 2011 publication of French writer Renaud Camus’ book, *Le gran remplacement*, in which he expressed disdain over the influx of immigrants into France whom, he claimed, with the support of radical leftists (the French deep state), were destroying the country’s cultural and ethnic identity and replacing it systematically with their own identities and cultures, leading to the disappearance of traditional European culture.²² This interlinkage of two false meta-codes reveals the operation of apophenic thinking perfectly, since it involved connecting two embedded false myths thematically no matter how false or random they were. They were installed in the time-binding process. The simplicity and use of slogans by Camus constitute rhizomatic nodes in the conspiratorial discourse, including “white genocide” and the term “great replacement” itself, which gave the conspiracy theory a concrete lexical form, allowing it to spread discursively through cyberspace. Camus claimed explicitly that with the complicity of replacist elites, the ethnic White European populations at large were being demographically and culturally replaced by non-white peoples through policies such as mass immigration, the brain-washing advice of zero birthrates, and others. While similar coded themes have characterized various far-right theories

²¹ Xun and Gilman 2021.

²² Camus 2011.

in the past, including Nazism and Fascism, the term popularized by Camus became a rallying cry along with the Great Reset Conspiracy Theory during the pandemic, pinpointing the virus as yet another tool of white genocide, as Camus called it.

The two meta-codes are almost impossible to eradicate, because, as Sauter has remarked, social media and the Internet are an “apophenic machine,” whereby “one thing leads to another, always another link leading you deeper into nothing and no place, floating through self-dividing and transmogrifying sites until you are awash in the sheer evidence that the internet exists.”²³ This machine is a conspiracy-making one, impelling believers to think that they came up with the “conspiracy insight” themselves, after connecting the semiotic dots (rhetorical, symbolic, imagistic) apophenically. As a result, any contrary evidence is perceived to actually confirm their belief, since it is assumed that the cabal is behind the “false evidence.” This whole false belief syndrome is bolstered by social-media algorithms—when someone clicks on a conspiracy-oriented post, the algorithm offers up similar posts, sites, and platforms, which contain more false information, perpetuating the cycle of falsity that becomes larger and larger.

Counteracting a conspiracy theory such as the Great Reset one through facts and logic is rarely successful because of the sheer massiveness of its spread through cyberspace. Conspiratorial memes claiming that the World Economic Council is controlled by an elitist cabal which is using the Great Reset to set up a one world government have spread to all kinds discourses across cyberspace, making the conspiracy evermore difficult to eradicate, especially since it links the historical Jewish cabal code to the one pertaining to climate scientists. In medieval Europe, as mentioned, the scapegoats for the bubonic plague were Jewish citizens, who were attacked by mobs, even though many of them were physicians who actually helped poor people through their suffering and, in some cases, even become cured. In the early twentieth century, as cholera spread across Europe, the scapegoats were the lower classes, who were seen as unhygienic. Riots followed, as even the police and medical practitioners were assaulted and even killed. Medical practitioners have always attempted to dissuade people from adopting such self-destructive views, using medical notions, but usually to no avail, until

²³ Sauter 2017.

the pandemic starts to subside, thanks to their efforts. Significantly, it was writers who came forth to make compelling arguments for dispelling the conspiratorial ideas. As mentioned, Boccaccio even devised a whole new genre, fiction, to be able to get people to understand the seriousness of the plague in medical, not superstitious, terms. As Girard has aptly remarked in reference to the Shakespearean tragedy, *Romeo and Juliet*, powerful writing is often “a mimetic reenactment of a scapegoat process,” based on a kind of sinister need for temporary catharsis from panic, which Shakespeare actually ridicules:²⁴

In his tragedies, Shakespeare reproduces the cathartic mechanism of all tragedy; but he underlines it so forcefully that he lays it bare, so to speak, forcing us to ask questions that run counter to the cathartic effect, questions that would tear the entire dramatic structure asunder if they were seriously asked. In his comedies, Shakespeare openly derides the sacrificial pattern. In the Pyramus and Thisbe episode of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the play that comes immediately after *Romeo and Juliet*, he parodies the cathartic system of this first play. He comes closer to a full revelation of the sacrificial values hidden behind the plague and other mythical or tragic metaphors than our contemporaries, including those like Artaud, whose frontal attacks against sacrificial values ultimately regress into the crudest forms of sacrifice. Contrary to what we believe, we may not be in a position to criticize Shakespeare. He may be the one who criticizes us. Rather than trying to judge him from above, from a necessarily superior “modern” viewpoint, we should try to recover some major intuitions of his that obviously escape us. We must have lost them somehow and somewhere, unless, of course, they have yet to be grasped.

The Great Reset Conspiracy Theory brings out the power of conspiratorial thinking to shape perception and belief, warping minds to accept falsity—a warping process that could not occur in semiotic isolation. A phrase such as “great reset” would not, on its own, bring about conspiratorial thinking. It does so, because it is embedded in the time-binding process of meta-code transmission. To cite Korzybski:²⁵

²⁴ Girard 1974: 833–850.

²⁵ Korzybski 1921.

Humans can be literally poisoned by false ideas and false teachings. Many people have a just horror at the thought of putting poison into tea or coffee, but seem unable to realize that, when they teach false ideas and false doctrines, they are poisoning the time-binding capacity of their fellow men and women. One has to stop and think! There is nothing mystical about the fact that ideas and words are energies which powerfully affect the physico-chemical base of our time-binding activities...[that have] operated to suppress their real human nature and to prevent it from expressing itself naturally and freely.

Such mental mechanisms are hard to counteract, since they are so deeply-ensconced in language and other semiotic codes, and today being amplified by right-wing voices as a plot to erode freedoms and capitalism. The Anti-Defamation League has tracked the antisemitic tropes within the Great Reset conspiracy showing how the individual words and symbols cohere into a unified narrative that is almost impossible to disassemble. Online conspiratorial memes, for instance, intimated that the World Economic Council was “controlled” by Jews who were using the Great Reset to set up this so-called one world government. It is relevant to note that the word *cabal* is derived from *Kabbalah*, the Jewish mystical interpretation of scripture. In European culture, it became associated with occult doctrines and secretive cliques, starting in the medieval period, and assuming, by the seventeenth century, its current meaning—that is, during the era of the bubonic plague. QAnon followers have used the expression, “The Cabal,” to refer to what they perceive as a secret worldwide elite organization. On their official “Q News” Telegram channel, they frequently linked the Cabal to the Great Reset, claiming that vaccines were not designed to save lives and to bring the pandemic toward its eventual end, but rather, as bioweapons concocted by the Cabal and corrupt democratic government officials and drug companies, whose goal is to mutate the genetic structure of the species. Uploaded on the channel were videos titled “Murder By ‘Vaccine” and “Doctors and Nurses Giving the Coronavirus Vaccine Will Be Tried as War Criminals.” The link between violence against health practitioners and these messages cannot be discarded, As Timberg and Dwoskin have remarked:²⁶

²⁶ Timberg and Dwoskin 2021.

QAnon, with its false claims about shadowy political forces and rampant pedophilia among Democratic leaders, is older than the pandemic, tracing its roots to anonymous postings in 2017. But the arrival of the pandemic last year supercharged QAnon's growth, as did former president Donald Trump's baseless allegations of widespread voter fraud.

The cabal meta-code is a truly powerful one, as witnessed by its incorporation into popular works of fiction, including Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* (2003) and all the James Bond set of novels and movies. Pseudo-scientific works also peddle cabalism as behind historical events, from the Illuminati myth, a purported secret sixteenth century Bavarian cabal, alleged to be an all-powerful secret society who controls the world to this day, to deep state structures, which operate behind the scenes to create "illusions" such as global warming.

In his enduring 1947 masterpiece, *La peste* (translated in English in 1948 as *The Plague*),²⁷ French writer Albert Camus puts the spotlight on the Algerian city of Oran as the setting for his own existential reflections on the effects of a plague on the human psyche, with the *peste* assuming both literal and metaphorical meaning. At the literal level, the source material used by Camus for his novel was the cholera epidemic that killed a huge swath of Oran's population in 1849, although the actual setting of the novel is the 1940s. Oran was struck by the disease several times before Camus's novel, and was actually decimated by the bubonic plague in 1556. Metaphorically, Camus brought together two disparate events, the cholera epidemic and the rise of European fascism, reflecting the fragility of modern democracies in times of collective frenzy. Considered by some critics as an allegory of Nazi occupation during World War II, Camus used references to mass burials resulting from the disease as an allusion to the extermination camps of the war. The novel sets its narrative scope on the effects of pandemics on people as an imaginary "communal body." As Rene Girard has aptly observed, from antiquity onwards, the theme of plagues and pestilences and their effects on everyone and on semiotic codes has captivated everyone from time immemorial:²⁸

²⁷ Camus 1948.

²⁸ Girard 1974/1948: 833.

The plague is found everywhere in literature. It belongs to the epic with Homer, to tragedy with *Oedipus Rex*, to history with Thucydides, to the philosophical poem with Lucretius. The plague as background to the short stories of Boccaccio's *Decameron*; there fables about the plague, notably La Fontaine's "Les Animaux malades de la peste"; there are novels, such as Manzoni's *I Promessi Sposi* and Camus' *La Peste*. The theme spans the whole range of literary and even nonliterary genres, from pure fantasy to the most positive and scientific accounts. It is older than literature—much older, really, since its presence in myth and ritual in the entire world.

With the spread of covid-19, starting in early 2020, interest in ancient myths, novels, and other past real or fictional literary accounts of pandemics spiked considerably. Booklists compiled by reference services at libraries throughout the world featured novels about pandemics and plagues, listed alongside non-fiction volumes dealing with the history of plagues or with layperson treatments of viruses and their etiology. As Girard so aptly observes, mysterious illnesses, epidemics, and pandemics have always caught the interest of storytellers. In early literary-mythic portrayals, plagues were described as divine punishments, offering moral commentary on the characters in a story or on the society in which they lived. Even after scientists became knowledgeable, through the development of germ theory, about the causes of pandemics and the nature of contagions by the early twentieth century, writers continued to portray plagues in metaphorical ways, not as apocalyptic warnings or punishments from supernatural entities, but as a human-created apocalypse based in environmentally-destructive activities and corrupt social and political orders.

Concluding Remarks

As Mark Hay has insightfully observed, as the coronavirus started to recede, because of vaccinations, the denialist discourses did not.²⁹ They were redirected—a common trait of all forms of dangerous denialism. So, “rather than accept that the pandemic didn’t precipitate the dystopia

²⁹ Hay 2022.

they predicted, several prominent conspiracy theorist channels argue that covid was actually just the first major attempt at—or phase in—the Great Reset.” As Deleuze and Guattari maintained, it is almost impossible to dismantle a rhizomatic discourse system, given that, as inter-codability would add, the underlying meta-code that sustains it is rooted in the time-binding historical paradigm brought forward in time via language, stories, symbols, and other nodes in the network.

Denial discourses are hardly matters of differences of opinion, as Crichton suggested cleverly in his novel. They affect people’s minds indelibly, motivating distrust and promoting false beliefs that there are nefarious actors behind the scenes that are running the world—actors who appear normal and authoritative. The discourses have spread falsehoods about such dire events as the Holocaust, global warming, and pandemics in order to reshape politics and people through their own form of fear-mongering. The semiotic view espoused here is that a false belief such as the one encoded by the Great Reset Conspiracy Theory could only have arisen from the reactivation of an age-old cabalistic meta-code, which, once accepted as true, filters how reality is construed, putting up cognitive-emotive barriers to counter-arguments. As Crichton falsely argued throughout his novel, scientific arguments and research findings related to global warming are nothing more than attempts by the cabalists to take control of things, or at the very least, to keep them as they are for self-benefit. Significantly, critiques of the novel have not been effective, as it continues to be popular among conspiracists to this day, and even more broadly. The antidote to denial conspiracism is, clearly, not to attack believers directly. As history has repeatedly shown, this has never been successful; it just exacerbates the division between people. The best approach is to resort to counter-narratives, as did Boccaccio and Defoe, among others, exposing how denial discourses twist the meanings of signs.

If the hidden meanings of nefarious discourses are not tackled head on, then the real danger is that historical amnesia will emerge, leading to an inability to recognize the recycling of hate-based codes. Without this ability to “see” through them, not only will they continue to proliferate, but will arguably become even more dangerous. This may explain why QAnon-type conspiracy groups gain so much traction—they spread misinformation broadly by making it seem relevant in the moment. In this constantly-mutable ecosystem, any new denial discourse that emerges, based on the

cabalistic meta-code, will be perceived as “new information,” suggesting something sinister behind the scenes—hence the perpetuation of the false myth over and over. That is the real danger we face today.

References

- Aragno, A. (2019). “Semiotic Realms: Codes, Language, Mind: A Psychoanalytic Perspective,” *Biosystems* 182: 21.
- Barthes, R. (1957). *Mythologies*. Paris: Seuil.
- Barkun, M. (2003). *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Boccaccio, G. (1353). *Il decamerone*. Firenze: Filippo e Bernardo Giunti.
- Camus, A. (1947). *La peste*. Paris: Gallimard. / (1948). *The Plague*. New York: Modern Library.
- Camus, R. (2011). *Le gran remplacement*. Paris: Reinharc.
- Christensen, M., & Ashli, Au. (2023). “The Great Reset and the Cultural Boundaries of Conspiracy Theory,” *International Journal of Communication* 17: 2348-2366.
- Conrad, K. (1958). *Die beginnende Schizophrenie. Versuch einer Gestaltanalyse des Wahns*. Stuttgart: Georg Thieme Verlag.
- Crichton, M. (2004). *State of Fear*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Danesi, M. (2023). *Semiotics with a Conscience: Decoding Dangerous Discourses*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Defoe, D. (1722). *A Journal of the Plague Year*. London: E. Nutt.
- Deleuze G, & Felix Guattari. (1987). *A Thousand Plateaus*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Girard, R. (1974). “The Plague in Literature and Myth,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 15: 833-850.
- Hay, M. (2022). “Covid Truthers Have Found a New ‘Pandemic’ to Freak Out About, *The Daily Beast*, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/conspiracy-theorists-are-already-freaking-out-about-the-next-pandemic-as-part-of-the-so-called-great-reset>
- Jakobson, R. (1966). “Linguistics and Poetics,” in Thomas A. Sebeok (ed.), *Style in Language*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press: 34-45.
- Korzybski, A. (1921). *Manhood of Humanity: The Science and Art of Human Engineering*. New York: Dutton.
- Korzybski, A. (1933). *Science and Sanity*. Brooklyn: Institute of General Semantics.
- Lévi-Strauss, C. (1950). *Introduction to Marcel Mauss*. London: Routledge: 64.
- Rothkopf, D. J. (2003). “When the Buzz Bites Back,” *The Washington Post*, May 11: B.01.
- Lewis, T. (2020). “Nine Covid-19 Myths That Just Won’t Go Away,” *Scientific American*, August 18, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/nine-covid-19-myths-that-just-wont-go-away/>
- Piltz, R. (2015). “Michael Crichton, Author of State of Fear, Leaves global Warming Disinformation Legacy,” *Government Accountability Project*. <https://whistleblower.org/politicization-of-climate-science/global-warming-denial-machine/michael-crichton-author-of-state-of-fear-leaves-global-warming-disinformation-legacy/>

- Sauter, M. R. (2017). "The Apophenic Machine: The Conspiratorial Mode and the Internet's Data Hoard Were Made for Each Other," *Real Life*, <https://reallifemag.com/the-apophenic-machine/>
- Somov, G. Y. (2016). "Interrelations of Codes in Human Semiotic Systems," *Semiotica* 213: 557-599.
- Timberg C., & Elizabeth Dwoskin. (2021). "With Trump Gone, QAnon Groups Focus Fury on Attacking Coronavirus Vaccines," *Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/03/11/with-trump-gone-qanon-groups-focus-fury-attacking-covid-vaccines/>
- Viganò, C. M. (2022). "Open Letter to President Donald Trump," *Apisteia*, <https://aristeia.news/archbishop-carlo-maria-vigano-open-letter-to-president-donald-trump/>
- Xun Z., & Sander Gilman. (2021). *I Know Who Caused Covid-19: Pandemics and Xenophobia*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

