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Alternate-Reality Lifestyles:

Reconstructing Conspiracy Theories and Apocalypse Prepping in the Digital Era

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the degree of
Doctor in Philosophy

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SUMMARY

This dissertation provides a theoretical basis for, and critical analysis of, two creative-practice projects conducted via social media platforms. These projects were designed to examine how – in an era marked by alternative information ecosystems, ubiquitous digital disinformation, and genuine collective existential threats – emergent and digitally-perpetuated counter-factual narratives can be ethically deconstructed and redirected toward socially constructive ends. The aim of this praxis was to reflexively and self-critically explore the gulf between surface and substance in digitally mediated disinformation and alternate-reality lifestyles; in which digital technologies increasingly allow for the intentional, inadvertent, or ironic blurring of boundaries between fiction and nonfiction. To this end, this praxis employs a hybridized creative-practice research methodology combining alterdisciplinarity (Bowman; 2008) with the triangulation of creative-practice, critical analysis, and civic engagement (Conquergood; 2002).

Both projects were informed by original research, as well as by several established theories including guidelines for Deconstructing popular culture (Bowman; 2008) and the poetics of debunking proposed by the Wu Ming Foundation (2018) and endorsed by Henry Jenkins' MacArthur Foundation-supported Civic Imagination Project (2018). Rather than directly challenge counter-factual narratives with facts or logic, these projects appropriate conspiracy theorist and doomsday "prepper" aesthetics in order to subvert harmful or violent premises common within such discourse. Both this dissertation and these creative-practice elements contribute to and expand the methodologies of alterdisciplinary intervention and the poetics of debunking. Ultimately, these projects demonstrate how data-supported and ethically-grounded interventions can be framed within the increasingly popular, but demonstrably problematic, discourse of conspiracy and apocalypse cultures.

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INTRODUCTION

Background and Context

> …[C]onspiracy theories [are] the third great American art form,
> alongside jazz and superhero comics.
>
> – Robin Sloan (2020)

The first quarter of the 21st century is marked by the popularity of conspiracy theories and doomsday apocalypticism; together with the rise of alternative information ecosystems, ubiquitous digital disinformation, and genuine collective existential threats. Accordingly, I explore how emergent and digitally-perpetuated counter-factual narratives might be ethically deconstructed and redirected toward socially constructive ends. In other words, I seek to discover and demonstrate how data-supported and ethically-grounded interventions can be framed within the increasingly popular and demonstrably problematic discourse of conspiracy and apocalypse cultures. These aims suggest the value of employing creative-practice methods to reflexively and self-critically explore the gulf between surface and substance in digitally mediated disinformation and alternate-reality lifestyles; wherein digital technologies increasingly allow for the intentional, inadvertent, or ironic blurring of boundaries between fiction and nonfiction. Rather than directly challenging counter-factual narratives with facts or logic, I explored the potential to appropriate and subvert conspiracy theorist and doomsday "prepper" aesthetics for the purpose of overwriting harmful or violent premises common within such discourse.

The boundaries between fiction and nonfiction; between empirical belief and make-believe; and between irony and sincerity; have long been permeable. Today, however, these boundaries have become blurred and manipulated – both intentionally and inadvertently – at unprecedented speed and scale. Digital media platforms and technologies now enable individual and collective users to consume, produce, promote, sustain, amplify, and embody counter-factual (i.e., demonstrably false) information ecosystems that are increasingly uncoupled from observable and consensus realities. The boundary-blurring processes of these emergent and evolving *alternate-reality lifestyles* remain substantially undertheorized.

Considering the deeply deceptive and opaque origins of digital disinformation and much insincere or ironic online content, I argue that creative-practice methodologies are well-suited for bridging the divide between surface and substance within online disinformation and fictional conspiracist and apocalyptic texts purporting to be, or contextualized as, nonfiction.

Throughout this dissertation, I employ the term “unfiction” to describe fictional texts that purport to be nonfiction, or are otherwise designed or intended to conceal or obfuscate their own fictional status.

Creative-practice methodologies are also appropriately-suited for critically *intervening* in alternate-reality information ecosystems beyond scholarly and academic contexts. The resultant praxis – documented and analysed within this dissertation – incorporates creative-practice methodologies from Cultural Studies and Performance Studies into a hybridized framework informed by theoretical lenses of Screen and Media Studies. As digital platforms have enabled the spread of conspiracy and counter-factual narratives, the lines between imaginary apocalypses (e.g., zombies and robots), actual crises (e.g., pandemic and algorithmic), and existential threats (e.g., nuclear and climate) have become increasingly blurred in the popular imagination. Accordingly, I examine the destructive and violent themes both implicitly and explicitly endorsed within – once fringe, but now popular – areas of conspiracy and apocalypse cultures. In doing so, I experiment with, and document, various ways in which such problematic aspects might be deconstructed and reconstructed (i.e., re-read and re-written) as ethical interventions; rather than simply re-told, perpetuated, or legitimized through fictional, unfictional, or educational contexts.

The ethically-interrogated interventions which I employed throughout this project spanned a range of culturally relevant contexts, including the promotion of media literacy, individually sustainable digital practices, secular spiritual practices, disaster preparedness, and empowerment-based self-protection in physical/digital contexts. In investigating the above areas, I paid particular attention to fictionally-inspired real world activities and behaviours including conspiracy and disinformation-driven insurgencies; “zombie apocalypse” survivalism; and New Religious Movements. Among the above, I focused on two specific areas. First, the significant threats that “post-truth” collective conspiracism pose to democratic institutions (particularly in the United States since 2016). Second, the violent and extremist rhetoric which lies beneath the surface of many popular post-apocalyptic scenarios in fictional, unfictional, and edutainment contexts.

Theoretical Framework: Summary

> The hypothesis of deconstruction is that because meanings and relations are *made,* even if they seem eternally fixed, they might possibly be *remade* – differently. This is the aim of deconstruction: not just to interpret the world, but to change it. Deconstruction proposes that it all relates to (re-)reading as a kind of (re)writing.
>
> – Paul Bowman (2008: 40)

This dissertation, and my praxis, address the following question: In an era marked by alternative information ecosystems, ubiquitous digital disinformation, and genuine collective existential threats; how might a hybridized creative-practice methodology be employed to ethically deconstruct and redirect digitally-perpetuated counter-factual narratives toward socially constructive ends? My aim throughout this project was to explore how counter-factual movements – from QAnon[1] to doomsday preppers – are becoming increasingly sustained, spread, and globally amplified through digital platforms and technologies.

Owing to the vast range of topics encompassed within the apocalyptic and conspiracist imaginaries, this praxis draws on a range of theoretical perspectives, as appropriate, including the theory of spreadable media (Jenkins, Hall, and Green; 2013); the theory of hyperreality (Baudrillard; 1981); the theory of hypersignification (Shifman; 2014); and the theory of prebunking (Lewandowski and van der Linden; 2021); to name only several. This creative-practice research into conspiracism and apocalypticism further builds on, and expands, my prior interdisciplinary doctoral research on the performance and performativity of parapsychological phenomena (McQueen; 2020).

In its entirety, this project is enabled by – and situated primarily within – the theory and methods recommended by Cultural Studies theorist Paul Bowman in *Deconstructing Popular Culture* (2008). Bowman's theoretical framework for deconstructing popular culture builds, in turn, upon Jacques Derrida's postmodern theory of Deconstruction (1967) and Stuart Hall's formulation of Cultural Studies (1992); both of which emphasized the necessity of intervening *in* that which is studied. I have expanded upon Bowman's framework in the following ways: First, by engaging with particularly problematic and unfictional popular texts and contexts

[1] *Dictionary.com* currently defines QAnon as 'a far-right conspiracy theory that believes there is a deep state plot, slowly being exposed online by an anonymous leader named Q, against [former] President Donald Trump.' From its beginnings in 2017, QAnon achieved a global following (notably in Germany, France, Japan, and Great Britain).

which are epistemologically opaque, due (in part) to disinformation, online-trolling,[2] and unfalsifiable logic. Second, by incorporating the useful and increasingly accepted methodologies of creative-practice / practice-as-research to phenomenologically explore and experience embodied aspects of popular alternate-reality activities. Third, by advocating for a recalibration of the conflict between Deconstruction and political/cultural institutions[3] in light of the institutional crises precipitated by the contemporary "post-truth" information climate.

As a practitioner-researcher – a 'pracademic' to use Paul Posner's catchy, if awkward, term (2009) – I employed a hybridized creative-practice methodology based on numerous pre-existing approaches. The first is Bowman's concept of 'alterdisciplinarity' which advocates – not for 'critique from afar,' or from one's comfortable disciplinary spaces, but within "other" spaces, in the language of the "other" (2008: 182, 185). Related to this approach, I consistently 'triangulated' my praxis on 'three pivot points' of 'creativity, critique, and citizenship (civic struggles for social justice),' as advocated by Dwight Conquergood in 'Interventions and Radical Research' (2002: 152). I further subscribed to Brad Haseman's liberating notion of 'diving in,' described in his 'Manifesto for Performative Research' as commencing practice in order 'to see what emerges' (2006: 100).

Haseman – along with Daniel Mafe – expanded upon this approach in 'Acquiring Know-How: Research Training for Practice-led Researchers,' describing this reflexive process as 'one of those "artist-like processes" which occurs when a creative practitioner acts upon the requisite research material to generate new material which immediately acts back upon the practitioner who is in turn stimulated to make a subsequent response' (2009: 19). Finally, I engaged with, and contributed to, 'the poetry/poetics of debunking' proposed by the Wu Ming Foundation (2018) and endorsed by Henry Jenkins' MacArthur Foundation-supported Civic Imagination Project (2018). Considering the numerous challenges to debunking disinformation within the

[2] Trolling is defined, in part, by Urban Dictionary as: 'The deliberate act of making random unsolicited and/or controversial comments in internet forums with the intent to provoke an emotional reaction from unsuspecting readers to engage in a fight or argument.' (i.e., baiting or luring).

[3] In agreement with what Gary Hall described as the 'institutional problematic' (2002: 120), Bowman asserts that 'for cultural studies as for deconstruction, "institution" is a central and defining problematic' (2008: 8). In a review of (Gary) Hall's 2002 *Culture in Bits: The Monstrous Future of Theory,* tellingly entitled, 'The Theory of Practice and the Practice of Theory,' Bowman argues: 'Deconstruction is always about the institution: that is, (the) institution is its object and target; and when 'institution' is both noun and verb, its meaning simultaneously encompasses everything from origins to day-to-day realities, and so deconstruction cannot but be seen as political' (*culturemachine.net*).

contemporary media environment, the poetics of debunking calls for creative-practitioners to 'show the sutures' in their work by placing their techniques 'directly into the narrative' so that consumers of the texts might 'see the stitches like on Frankenstein monster's body' (17:00). In this way, the truth may be made, in Jenkins' words, 'more interesting than the conspiracy theory itself' (2018).

My creative-practice was further informed by the street epistemology method advanced by Peter Boghossian and James Lindsay (2019) which employs the Socratic method – not to debate, dispute, or challenge beliefs – but to interrogate how or why the interlocutor came to accept such beliefs as reliable or true. Through my praxis, I expand the poetics of debunking by experimenting with methodologies to deconstruct, appropriate, subvert, and mimetically redirect aesthetics and contexts surrounding conspiracist and apocalyptic narratives, rather than by directly challenging those narratives on factual or logical grounds. Further, I expand the approach of alterdisciplinarity by mapping how its methods can be synergistically merged with those of creative-practice / practice-as-research.

Theoretical Framework: Deconstructing Popular Culture

In *Deconstructing Popular Culture,* Paul Bowman describes the postmodern philosophical concept of Deconstruction (conceptualized by Jacques Derrida between 1964-1967) as an 'interrogative ethico-political quest for the lesser violence' (2008: 158). Notably – in line with the gist of Derrida's arguments – the word "violence" may be *interpreted* in multiple ways; from literal acts of physical violence; to dominant (i.e., hegemonic) structures of thought and behaviour which exclude, silence, exploit and/or oppress (and thereby harm) the excluded "other;" to patterns of thoughts and behaviours which sustain a hegemonic status quo. Thus, despite its many aggressive and vocal detractors, Deconstruction ultimately concerns ensuring less violence for more people vis-à-vis greater social, political, and economic justice.

On this, Bowman observes that *all* cultural texts (e.g., novels, films, songs, news, Internet-memes, fanfiction, propaganda, disinformation, etc.) are embedded in an intertextual network of endless chains of contexts, meanings, and signification, and thus: 'What texts are held to say is determined… by the *way* they are read,' which, he continues, 'has everything to do with a context – everything, then, to do with culture' (39). According to Bowman, since 'culture and interpretations are *contingent* – changeable, determined by many complex factors … the

interpretive decisions made within cultural contexts are therefore fundamentally *politically consequential*' (38). Thus, he concludes that 'the question that deconstruction insists upon; the "theoretical" question that is not "merely theoretical", but is fundamentally ethical and political' is this: 'Which interpretations are we going to choose, and on what grounds?' (ibid).

The answers to these questions are far from simple, since – as Bowman asserts – '*every* interpretation will inevitably be *partial, provisional, incomplete, inventive* and *contingent* [and] will support certain values and institutions at the expense of others,' (40) and likewise, 'any reading, every interpretation, *cannot but* overlook something; it will *privilege* certain questions and features whilst downplaying and even forcefully excluding others' (48). Consequently, it is never obvious 'who has the right to intervene, where, how, when and with what justification' (43). In the face of this inevitable 'undecidability' (as Derrida described it; 1994), Deconstruction argues (according to Bowman) that:

> The "most ethical" answer to the question of *how* to orientate one's efforts and *how* to act must involve *putting in question* the established limits of the existing interpretations perpetuated by institutions and taken-for-granted readings. Deconstruction does this "in the name of the other": the excluded, the subordinated, the silenced (48).

It is always a slippery slope to speak for, or act in the name of, the *excluded*; for to do so amounts to yet another form of exclusion. Yet, it remains a crucial necessity for the *included* to insist upon the inclusion of the marginalized. On this, Bowman acknowledges that 'what is meant by "the other" is always in question, but it strongly relates to looking for whatever has been "excluded" by current institutions and the status quo maintained by stable institutional forms' (48). In other words, as Bowman puts it, 'deconstructive readings look for whatever is *not* present, not *yet* present or not yet *allowed* to be present' (48).[4]

By "institution" – according to Bowman – Derrida refers to the 'outside' *contexts* which inform or impose the dominant reasons for, and modes in which, 'we interpret any text in a particular

[4] An example of inclusion of a largely excluded "other" in post-apocalyptic fiction can be seen in the critically acclaimed third episode of *The Last of Us* (2023). This episode revolves around a romantic and compassionate same-sex relationship between two capable survivors, Bill and Frank. Director and activist Peter Hoar asserted: 'Sometimes you have to sort of trick the rest of the world into watching these things … I think then they might understand that it's all real. It's just the same love' (Chilton; 2023). The episode became the subject of Internet controversy, homophobic backlash, and review bombing campaigns (Edwards; 2023). Notably, this episode updated the Bill and Frank saga (from the 2013 video game of the same name) which received criticism for – in line with reductive tropes and harmful stereotypes – ending bitterly and tragically (see: TV Tropes: "Bury Your Gays" and "Gayngst Induced Suicide").

way' (Derrida, 1992: 22-23; Bowman: 37). Thus, in Bowman's words, Deconstruction 'is always intimately involved with the question of *how* legitimacy and illegitimacy, intelligibility and unintelligibility are instituted, established and imposed' (151). Accordingly, *institutions* (i.e., cultural structures which institute legitimacy) were 'a central and defining problematic' for Derrida's Deconstruction (Derrida, 2002: 53; Bowman: 8). In Derrida's words: 'I am not for the destruction of the universitas or the disappearance of the guardians, but precisely one has to make a certain war against them when obscurantism, vulgarity above all, becomes ensconced, as is inevitable' (1987: 88).

Since that time, the Internet (and social media platforms, in particular) have enabled increasingly sophisticated, methodical, aggressive, and coordinated attacks against the legitimacy of longstanding cultural institutions, including bodies of democratic governance, legal and justice systems, journalism, and academic and scientific organizations (Zeng, et al; 2022). These attacks aim largely – not to *deconstruct* these institutions with the goal of reforming them as more just or equitable – but rather to destroy or co-opt them for politically and profit motivated ends (Hyzen and Van den Bulck; 2021). Accordingly, while *critical theory* (grounded in academia) has gone some distance toward unravelling ethno-nationalist myths across the globe, *conspiracy theory* (grounded in populism) has risen as a set of rhetorical and statistical strategies by which those myths (despite their factual and historical inaccuracy) might be forged into increasingly sophisticated non-falsifiable and self-affirming narratives (Burdick and Sandlin; 2021). Considering the fact that vital (and admittedly flawed) cultural institutions are facing powerful, sustained, autocratic, and ethno-nationalist attacks; it is quite clearly necessary to reflect on the context and intent of Derrida's 1980s declaration of "a certain war" on various cultural institutions.

Games of language were central to Derrida's nearly undecipherably complex philosophical arguments. (Here, I am indebted to Bowman's lucid and coherent analysis and application of Derrida's ideas toward pop-cultural texts.) However, before examining Bowman's suggestions for deconstructing popular culture – as well as my own experiences in deconstructing conspiracy theories and doomsday apocalypticism – it is appropriate to deconstruct the very term "Deconstruction," and to contextualize how the term is employed within this dissertation.

To de-construct implies the disassembly (i.e., rearrangement) of component parts *without destruction.* Indeed, Derrida actively avoided the use of Heidegger's term "destruktion" (1927)

for related reasons (Chung; 2014). Today, nearly 60 years after its conceptual formulation, it is my contention that the term Deconstruction has acquired *destructive* and *non-constructive* connotations which were not originally implied.[5] Deconstructive critique *sounds like* precisely the opposite of what it optimally should be: A *productive* form of *constructive* criticism. I further contend that, given the substantial role of terminology in the superficial "readings" (and wilful *mis*-readings) of social and political discourse across digital media platforms today, the negative connotations of this term pose a significant problem.[6]

The *productive* nature of deconstructive enterprises, Bowman observes, arises from the social reality that what a 'thing is deemed to be – what we think it is – is always the result of an interpretation … that "produces it" as such' (5). Thus, in Bowman's words, 'the connections we *make* and the things we "discover in" a text are actually being *produced by* the act of reading itself: as if reading is inevitably a kind of rewriting' (39). Today, such nuances are widely lost in mainstream (mis)interpretations of postmodern Deconstruction, which are all too frequently and pejoratively dismissed (particularly within the US and UK) as the identity politics or "virtue signalling" of a "woke mob"[7] of "social justice warriors," etc. (Banaji; 2021). Consequently, in order to better imply structural repairs which do not merely *take apart* but, rather, holistically and systemically diagnose, it is justifiable to consider the potential impact of "rebranding" Derridean Deconstruction as institutional *reconstruction* or *renovation*.

Questions of terminology aside; a pressing question yet remains: How might crucial democratic institutional infrastructures be *critiqued* for their inevitable and continually inadequate attempts to redress, resolve, and prevent inequality, injustice, and violence; while at the same time, *fortified* against unyielding and increasingly violent and fascistic assault from those seeking to delegitimize them? According to Bowman, in line with the longstanding aim of

[5] Contemporary conservative politicians and pundits (particularly in the US and UK) now widely and problematically (see: Footnote 7) refer to the process and products of Deconstruction and Cultural Studies as "woke ideology." For one striking example, consider the campaign promise of, then US Presidential hopeful, Ron DeSantis to: 'destroy leftism in this country and leave woke ideology in the dustbin of history' (Pengelly; 2023).

[6] It is not only Deconstruction that suffers from terminology. Critical Theory *sounds* like it *merely* criticizes; the Liberal Arts *sound* like something "liberals" do. I do not wish to engage in dangerous games of Orwellian doublespeak, however, I maintain that if "liberal arts" had been called "freedom skills;" or if "critical theory" had been called "constructive theory;" the discourse would be notably different, particularly in the US context.

[7] The term "woke" has origins in 1930s African American Vernacular English and signifies an alertness to social inequalities, prejudice, and discrimination. In 2014, the term gained mainstream popularity through the Black Lives Matter movement and was subsequently appropriated by conservative factions and redeployed pejoratively.

Cultural Studies 'to institute responsible intellectual and ethico-political engagement with the popular and the unpopular,' the principles of Deconstruction can reveal 'the complex intertextuality of popular cultural texts, cultural productions and cultural practices' (9, 12).

Considering the fact that 'even supposedly trivial texts and moments of popular culture might … become articulated to (connected to, entangled with) (m)any other elements of the human world of culture, politics, society, history and economy, in complex and consequential ways,' Bowman argues that 'we cannot justifiably *write off* any manifestation of culture as insignificant. The interpretation of events is ethically and politically significant, through and through' (6-7). Thus, since 'popular culture – however "mediated", "simulated" or indeed even "fake" – could be said to deconstruct traditional historical forms and formations of culture *itself*' (10), Bowman concludes that the 'relationship' between researchers and popular culture 'should … for ethical and political reasons, be one of deconstructing popular culture' (12). In line with the above arguments, I adopted this relationship while researching conspiracy and apocalypse cultures, both of which are becoming increasingly popular *and* marginalized.

Reiterations, Spreadability, and Internet-Memes

'Popular culture,' according to Bowman, 'can be understood as an *intertextual* process of unending *discourse* because of the unavoidability of [what Derrida called] *différance*,' which Bowman defines as 'the endless slippage and movement of signification' (Derrida, 1974; Bowman, 2008: 40, 58). This endless slippage is particularly observable within contemporary Internet-based discourse, in which, already complex networks of symbols and terms are exponentially multiplied in accordance with *alternative* semiotic meanings; whether double, ironic, coded, or pejorative. As Bowman puts it, one 'can never get to the end of the chain: every signifier does not point to a final signified (or meaning). It simply refers us to *another* signifier: there is always more to think and say about something' (40). For such reasons, I investigated my topics – not only through written scholarly, journalistic, and literary sources – but also via popular audio, video, and image-based ones, including podcasts, interviews, debates, message boards, and Internet-memes. Indeed, the latter emerged as a valuable body of cultural content, particularly in view of my creative-practice addressing the appropriation, subversion, or hijacking (described by Situationists as *détournement*) of semiotics, symbols, images, and the vernacular of conspiracism and apocalypticism.

In 1976, Richard Dawkins proposed the concept of "memes" as cultural units analogous to genes (i.e., the natural selection of ideas). The use of *that* term to describe Internet-memes has been contested by many – including Dawkins – on the grounds that Internet-memes are deliberately altered via human creativity, rather than through an unintentional process of random mutation and natural selection (Solon; 2013). Similarly, the "viral" metaphor for digital circulation has been challenged – notably by Jenkins, et al., – on the grounds that this metaphor discounts the agency of producers/consumers who actively make choices when creating or spreading content online (2013: 21). From the ice-bucket challenge,[8] to endless customizable image/text-based templates, Internet-memes invite participation, alteration, and circulation. Thus, Internet-memes might alternatively be described as digital "trends."

In *Spreadable Media,* Jenkins, Ford, and Green argue that, 'perhaps nothing is more human than sharing stories, whether by fire or by "cloud" (so to speak)' (2013: 2). The authors write of 'an emerging hybrid model of circulation, where a mix of top-down and bottom-up forces determine how material is shared across and among cultures in far more participatory (and messier) ways' than allowed for by previous models (1). Yet, they also note that 'while new tools have proliferated the means by which people can circulate material' one must 'be careful not to suppose that a more participatory means of circulation can be explained solely (or even primarily) by this rise of technological infrastructure, even as these new technologies play a key role in enabling the shifts' (2-3).

The authors describe this hybrid model of circulation as 'spreadable media' in the same sense that margarine or peanut butter are designed to be easily spreadable; not only "sticky", but also pliant. Accordingly, spreadability 'refers to the potential – both technological and cultural – for audiences to share content for their own purposes…' (3). The authors further point out that 'as material spreads, it gets remade: either literally, through various forms of sampling and remixing, or figuratively, via its insertion into ongoing conversations and across various platforms' (27). In other words – like a jar of peanut butter – the *reshaping* of media content *as it is spread* is unavoidable.

[8] An early Internet-meme, the ice-bucket challenge involved posting a video in which one pours a bucket of ice water over oneself (often in a creative fashion and ostensibly for charity) and then nominating (or "tagging") others to do the same. This form of meme is evocative of "digital" chain letters. Today, however, the term "meme," is most often used to refer to customizable text/image-based templates known as Image-Macros.

As digital media made it possible for content to be rapidly spread (and, thus, rapidly reshaped) Jenkins, et al., called attention to 'the erosion of traditional boundaries – between fans and activists, creativity and disruption, niche and mainstream [e.g., 4Chan] or between commercial and grassroots, fan and producer…' (28-29). Thus, they observe that there is not a 'single cause for why people spread material,' (13) but rather, 'people make a series of socially embedded decisions when they choose to spread any media text…' (ibid). In this vein, Limor Shifman argues that in addition to the content of *individual* memes, 'Internet meme genres may also serve as valuable resources for researchers' (2014: 342). Describing those bodies of digital content as 'crystalized outcomes of multi-participant negotiations,' Shifman asserts that the digital record of memes on a given subject 'enable us to trace the social and cultural logics underpinning the ostensibly chaotic world of meme creation' (ibid). Shifman further observes:

> If, in the past, individuals were exposed to one meme version at a given time (for instance, heard one version of a joke at a party), nowadays it takes only a couple of mouse clicks to see hundreds of versions of any meme imaginable. Thus, memes are now present in the public sphere not as sporadic entities, but as enormous groups of texts and images (341).

Indeed, Jenkins, et al., presciently suggested that spreadability was reaching a critical point, owing to the fact that, while 'a complex set of changes [had] made it easier for grassroots communities to circulate content than ever before,' it was also the case that 'the requirements of skills and literacies, not to mention access to technologies, [were] not evenly distributed across the population…' (39). In the decade that followed, the uneven distribution of media literacies and technologies, combined with the increasing ease of content circulation, allowed for a mass circulation of digital disinformation. Together, these factors contributed to a number of significant global events, including Brexit, the Trump presidency, and increased political polarization, ethno-nationalism, and the rise of dangerous and destructive conspiracy fantasy movements, including anti-vaccination paranoia and baseless allegations of election-fraud.

> [**Below**: Two variations on the "Is This a Pidgeon?" Internet-meme template extracted from the anime *The Brave of Sun Fighbird* (1991) featuring confused android Katori Yutaro. **Fig. 0.1**: A meme comments on the difficulty in distinguishing between Internet memes and *everything else on the internet*. **Fig. 0.2**: A meme suggests that the average user/consumer of media has few associations with the concept of spreadability beyond food products.]



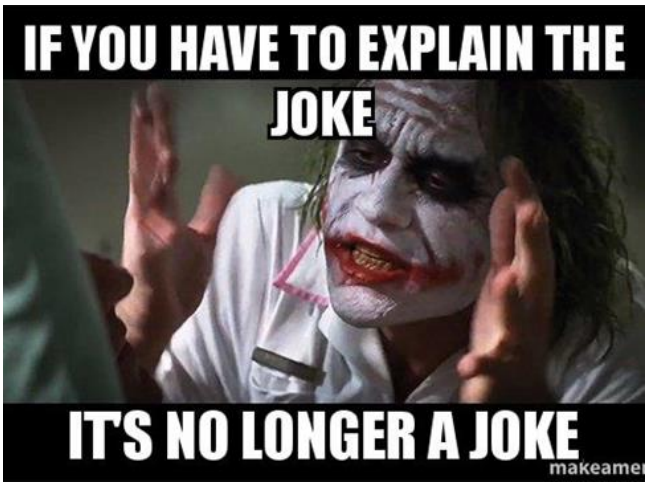


Over the course of this praxis, I compiled and analysed the semiotic contexts of hundreds of Internet-memes on related topics, and reflected on hundreds more. Additionally, I created numerous original Internet-memes and digital collages for use in videos, conference presentations, and this dissertation. In doing this, I developed a familiarity with Internet-meme discourse which – due to the aforementioned intertextual and semiotic slippage – is complex, yet, inevitably incomplete. Indeed, the absurd and subjective humour of Internet-memes is difficult to analyse without impacting the contexts or qualities that contributed to their spread.

Throughout the images which represent sheets of paper within this digital text, I present a curated collection of Internet-memes that contribute alternate perspectives to the topics under consideration. Where possible, I attempt to pair the memes in provocative or ironic ways;

whether due to the oppositional or complementary nature of the content or templates. In line with the contribution dynamics of Internet-memes (which are often created anonymously and shared without crediting) I note the origin of Internet-memes only when pertinent. The term "original" indicates that I created the meme or artwork in question.

> [**Below**: Two frequently repurposed Internet-meme templates suggest the frustrating challenge of attempting to explain absurd Internet-memes. **Fig. 0.3:** Heath Ledger as the Joker in *The Dark Knight* (2008) expresses exasperation at having to explain a "joke." **Fig. 0.4:** A meta-reference to the 'I am once again asking for your financial support' meme-template featuring former US Presidential hopeful Bernie Sanders.]





As Wittgenstein reportedly observed: 'A serious and good philosophical work could be written consisting entirely of jokes' (Dribble; 2004: 87). Take Slavoj Žižek … (please).[9] Žižek is the subject of the 2005 documentary *Žižek!* and has been described by *The Chronicle of Higher Education* as no less than 'the Elvis of cultural theory' (MIT Press; 2014). What it is that makes the idiosyncratic philosopher worthy of such hyperbolic praise? No one can say for certain, but it may well have something to do with his tendency to write sentences which begin as follows: 'There is an old Jewish joke, loved by Derrida...' (2011a).

[9] Here, I employed a variation of a widely parodied and reiterated (i.e., memetic) joke template: "Take my wife… please." The joke was created by stage, radio, TV, and film comedian Henny Youngman (popular in the 1940s) after his instruction to a stagehand was (mis)interpreted as a joke. The humour of the joke, as normally employed, stems from the expectation that the speaker means "take my wife, for example" rather than "take my wife, permanently," thus raising questions of gender politics. In the 1970s, this joke was satirized by postmodern anti-comedian Andy Kaufman, whose "Foreign Man" character stated (in an unspecified foreign accent) without pausing: "Take my wife. Please take her. My wife's cooking is so bad. It's terrible." At *this* point, the Foreign Man paused for laughter, which obviously never arrived, further raising questions of cultural insensitivity, harmful and reductive stereotypes, and so on. My use of the joke above, is intended to playfully tease Žižek on the grounds that he is often humorously, but vitriolically, dismissive of those he disagrees with.

Catherine Belsey notes that 'when Žižek slips easily and wittily between Kantian philosophy and demotic jokes, Hegel and Hitchcock, the effect is exhilarating' (2003: 27). Ultimately, Žižek's greatest gift may be – as Lindesay Irvine writes – his ability to show 'how the internal contradictions of late capitalism make themselves ludicrously obvious – and funny – if, like him, you're good at looking' (2012). Bowman, however, offers an important caveat. He writes: '(at least for an academic readership used to very dry scholarship), Žižek is *fun,* a lively and enthralling read, combining philosophy with popular culture in novel and interesting ways' (2008: 116). Žižek's humour is the subject of a 2014 book entitled *Žižek's Jokes (Did you hear the one about Hegel and negation?).* About this book, MIT Press writes: 'For Žižek, jokes are amusing stories that offer a shortcut to philosophical insight' (*mitpress.mit.edu;* 2014).

Similar arguments can be advanced on behalf of Internet-memes. Like jokes, Internet-memes are all too often off-colour, politically incorrect, tasteless, offensive, nationalist, racist, or worse. And like jokes, Internet-memes are potentially humorous, insightful, and subversive. Even more than jokes, Internet-memes invite customization and participation. From impudent court jesters to the hierarchical inversion of the "feast of fools;" and from political cartoons to Chaplin films such as *The Immigrant* (1917) and *The Great Dictator* (1940), humour has long been a tool for speaking truth to power. In this regard, jokes and satire often function as a form of political jiu-jitsu; off-balancing opponents through a redirection of force. The term 'political jiu-jitsu' was proposed by Gene Sharp in 1973 to describe the backfire effect brought about by violent authoritarian responses to non-violent protest, however, I contend that the phrase is also useful in describing 'semiological guerrilla warfare' as described by Umberto Eco in 1967.

In this vein, Peter Berger observes that satire may be verbal, behavioural, visual, artistic, professional, or written, but 'always involves irony' (1997: 148). In Berger's words: 'Like the martial arts, it always uses the adversary's strengths against himself and thus turns them into weaknesses' (ibid). Majken Sorensen similarly writes of the use of 'humor as a serious strategy of nonviolent resistance to oppression,' and discusses the 'resistance mentality' and 'culture of resistance' that can arise from the use of jokes and satire to 'break down isolation and create solidarity and group identity' (2008). Sorensen argues – in reference to 'resistance jokes' aimed at Nazi occupation forces in Norway – that 'because so many people shared the jokes, their very existence contradicted the Nazi propaganda that people who did not join them would stand alone' (ibid). That is not to say, however, that resistance humour always *succeeds*. Roy

Medvedev has determined, for instance, that in 1953, nearly 10% of the Gulag's 2.5 million prisoners were imprisoned for telling a joke (Žižek and Horvat; 2015: 133).

Joshua Troy Nieubuurt points out that jokes and satire may be used 'to target specific groups to help build and solidify tribal bonds,' as well as to 'sew discord by consistently reaffirming preexisting tribal bonds' or reenforcing the status quo (2021: 2). Calling attention to the ability of Internet-memes 'to "hack" the attention of anyone connected to the internet using dense modality and cognitive biases,' Nieubuurt describes these memes as the 'leaflet propaganda of the digital age' noting that 'in the past such items were dropped from planes, now they find their way into social media across multiple platforms and their territory is global' (ibid). Nieubuurt concludes that 'due to the ease of creation, and their ability to constantly reaffirm axiomatic tribal ideas, [Internet-memes] have become an adroit tool allowing for mass influence across international borders' (ibid).

On this, Beskow et al., call attention to the capacity of Internet-memes for 'combining humor with cultural relevance,' arguing that 'on the Internet, these memes activate inherent biases in a culture or society, sometimes replacing logical approaches to persuasive argument' (2020). Additionally, Mortensen and Neumayer view Internet-memes as 'vernacular expressions of the political' which can 'disrupt and reimagine politics in humorous ways,' suggesting that as Internet-memes spread 'across platforms [they] confirm, contest and challenge political power and hierarchies' using '*playfulness'* to connect 'the humorous and the political' (2021). According to the authors, 'memes may be created to disrupt, challenge, and reimagine politics in a humorous way' and, thus, have potential to both 'create togetherness and political identities but also increase polarization' (ibid).

Mortensen and Neumayer further note that 'as their template travels, memes continue to appropriate new political contexts and to (re)negotiate frontiers in the political' (ibid). The "template" to which they refer is aesthetically unique to digital technologies, but has connections and associations with prior analogue forms, such as the DIY cut/paste/xerox collage of text and image found in political "zines" or punk rock flyers. Take, for instance, Jamie Reid's iconic images of Queen Elizabeth II for the Sex Pistols 1977 single "God Save the Queen." One version replaces the Queen's irises with swastikas and seals her lips with a safety pin, encircled by the handwritten text "GOD SAVE THE QUEEN" [**Fig. 0.5**]. In this context, the text acquires dark connotations, suggesting the Queen's soul may be beyond redemption. Given the

anarcho-communist tendency toward atheism, the text can also be read as intentionally ironic. In these regards, Reid's iconography is reminiscent of countless Internet-memes depicting, for instance, Hillary Clinton as a demon or reptilian [**Fig. 0.6**].





Despite the obvious similarities, the differences are profound. The shift from physical to virtual distribution eliminates the gatekeepers of the art industry and provides equal opportunity to anyone (with a computer and Internet access) to have their work viewed, praised, and shared by hundreds, thousands, or millions of people. At the same time, the shift from analogue to digital tools has, counterintuitively, lowered barriers to entry. It is indeed difficult to fathom how a computer program has become less of a barrier than scissors, glue, and markers, but this is clearly the case today; at least in affluent communities.

Given the virtual modes of distribution, an Internet-meme may be created and circulated globally in a matter of seconds with virtually no physical exertion beyond the movement of the fingers. And, like the DIY artworks which preceded them, the roughness of the work and the absence of quality control are embraced within the "lo-res" culture of Internet-memes. As Shifman puts it, 'while [memes] explicitly build on a technology dating back to the 19th century, they use it in new ways, adaptive not only to technological formulations but also to the participatory culture that these technologies have yielded' (2014: 340-341). Shifman also

argues that 'instead of depicting the meme as a single cultural unit that has propagated well,' memes may better be regarded as 'groups of content units' (2014: 341). In Shifman's words: 'If memes are collections of texts, meme genres are collections of collections' (342). Given the interconnectedness of this vast network of cultural texts, symbols, and multiplicities of meanings, it becomes challenging to pluck any strand of this network without unintentionally invoking further significations.[10]

In the introduction of the 2019 edited collection *Post Memes: Seizing the Memes of Production,* Bown and Bristow note that, whether posted by 'celebrities' or 'Joe Bloggses,' memes exist as images which are:

> …excerpted, recycled, copy-and-pasted; memes often utilize stock photography, or "poor images," fuzzier and less sharpened, unairbrushed, not photoshopped; paused frames, often of accidental facial expressions overflowing with a particular emotion, or archly wry, or saturated in gormlessness (18-19).

Although many Internet-memes consist simply of text applied to image, many also exploit the unprecedented efficiency afforded by digital image search engines and readily available digital editing tools (e.g., MS Paint and PowerPoint or Adobe Photoshop) to locate, select, modify, and combine images. One such example can be found in a meme in which – as a counterpoint to Reid's "God Save the Queen" – a piece of duct tape has been virtually applied over then President Trump's mouth atop the caption: "Dr. Fauci unveils a mask that could save millions of lives!" (Fig. 0.8). It bears noting that this "artwork" might have been made by applying a small rectangle of duct tape to a printed copy of the photograph, but why would one go to the trouble or expense of printing a colour photograph, applying a rectangle of tape, and scanning or digitally photographing the modified image?

The radical shift in the modes of creation and distribution of DIY agitational propaganda brought with it a radical shift in the communities of people who produce and consume it. Agit-prop – once an analogue tool used predominantly by the far-Left to protest wars (perceived as

[10] This is a lesson which Greta Thunberg learned in 2023, after posting an image in which she offered support for Palestinians in Gaza while sitting beside a frowning, blue, plush octopus toy. This toy, Thunberg later noted – which can be reversed to reveal a smiling, pink octopus – is often used by people with autism to express their emotional state. Within 24 hours of the original post, Thunberg admitted to being unaware of the history of the octopus (blue, or, otherwise) as an anti-Semitic symbol, condemned anti-Semitism and all forms of discrimination, and deleted the post. Nevertheless, the image – often cropped and digitally altered – became a meme; including one version in which a Hitler mustache and hairdo have been added to the toy, along with a protest sign in which the octopus supports the pro-Palestinian sentiment. The appropriation and reappropriation of the octopus symbol are examined in depth in 'Mapping Ironic Evil and Apocalyptic "Others,"' are located in the Appendix.

unjust), consumption (perceived as reckless), corporations (perceived as greedy), politicians (perceived as corrupt), and institutions (perceived as hegemonic) – has now become a weapon conspicuously wielded by the alt-Right on behalf of nationalism, white supremacy, political violence, and science/history denial (often carried out in the name of perceived injustice and oppression). Douglas Rushkoff has argued that although the political Left has struggled to retain political power during preceding decades, it has nevertheless attained cultural dominance (2019). As such, the use of agit-prop tactics by the alt-Right may be viewed as a challenge to the cultural hegemony of progressive liberalism. Thus, it is ironic that "the left can't meme" has become a popular Internet-meme template.

> [**Fig. 0.7**: A "left can't meme" meta-meme implies that there are no successful leftist meme makers. **Fig. 0.8**: An effective Left-leaning meme (in the context of COVID-19 and the conflict between then President Trump and US Surgeon General Dr. Fauci) can be usefully considered alongside the safety pinned lips of Queen Elizabeth II.]





In considering the 'practice and politics' of Internet-memes, as well as their production and distribution, *Post Memes: Seizing the Memes of Production* examines 'the work memes do' and 'the uses to which they are put, culturally and politically' (Bown and Bristow; 2019: 19). In so doing, a crucial question emerges: What attempts have been (and can be) made to 'seize memes as future building blocks,' both for better and for worse (ibid)? Where such attempts have been made, why have some succeeded while others failed? According to British journalist-provocateur Ed West, it is the 'organic nature of memes that makes them effective, an in-joke magnified. They cannot really be controlled or faked. Their power depends on who is using

them… Authenticity is the key' (2021). On this, West compares Hillary Clinton's strained attempts to connect with younger voters through pop cultural references to Trump's unchecked bravado. In West's words:

> …[J]ust as Hillary's Twitter account was clearly written by a group of insufferable Ivy League graduates, especially crafted for the election strategy, Trump's tweets were obviously written by the mad bastard himself; they were authentic, just as he was authentic, and, despite his immense faults as a human being, also very funny' (ibid).

West argues – echoing Rushkoff's assertion about the United States (2019) – that in Britain, 'the Right has limited political power and the Left has unlimited cultural power' (2021). Thus, West continues: 'It's not that the Left can't meme, it's just that Left-wing beliefs don't trigger taboos, even quite extreme Left-wing beliefs, so there is no need for them to employ the memetic equivalent of criminal cant to conceal their views' (ibid). West concludes that the 'internet culture epitomised by 4chan aims to shock, and as the prevailing culture has become more progressive and censorious, it has grown more outrageous in blaspheming that new moral code' (ibid).

> [**Fig. 0.9**: An effective "low-res" reappropriation of a "left can't meme" meme. **Fig. 0.10**: An original synthesis of several extant Internet-memes provides an example of the cutting and efficient alt-Right tactics, described by Jayson Harsin as 'emo-truth' (2020).]





As noted, corporate attempts to hijack meme semiotics and vernacular have, thus far, largely failed. Yvette Granata, for instance, analyses the 'forced meme' campaign of the American fast food chain Wendy's, which re-envisioned their freckle-faced, ginger-ponytailed, cartoon

spokesperson as an online-troll, shitposter,[11] and purveyor of dank (i.e., deliberately bizarre or absurd) memes (2019). Brilliant and cringy by turns, the campaign grinded to a halt when Wendy was depicted in the artistic style of Pepe; a nihilistic anthropomorphic frog character appropriated by the alt-Right from a juvenile webcomic (*Boy's Club* by Matt Furie; 2005) and deployed as a symbol of white supremacy and nationalism. Apparently, the underlying symbolism of the Pepe image was not fully comprehended by those managing the campaign. Thus, in a rather complicated series of events, in Granata's words:

> Pepe – just a frog in a cartoon who got "highjacked" by racist trolls and crowned the racist frog king troll – is now a racist Pepe troll hijacked by a Wendy troll, forced to sell burgers. Free marketing, free branding, free labor. This is the economic normality of capitalist appropriation – but now mixed with the weird image board flow of the Internet meme. What then of the future for mass meme dankness? (2019: 267).

It is indeed significant that the appropriation, subversion, hijacking, or détournement of memetic semiotics and narratives is double-edged. While memes have been used in the service of politics, grift, and even corporate profit, the use of memes and memetic narratives as a tool for public service and education remains substantially underexplored.

> [**Figs. 0.11 & 0.12**: The Wendy's meme in question alongside an earlier meme portraying Pepe as an SS officer outside of the Auschwitz death and concentration camp.]





[11] Urban dictionary defines a "shitpost" as (in part): 'A post of little to no sincere insightful substance. Especially a "shit"(low)-effort/quality-post with the sole purpose to confuse, provoke, entertain or otherwise evoke an unproductive reaction. Often exemplified in surreal out-of-context posts … Unlike memes, shitposts have no template. Unlike spam, shitposts don't need repetition. Unlike bait, shitposts aren't designed for response.'

Chapter Summary

In **Chapter One** – building on the methodologies and theoretical framework previously presented – I provide brief methodology, literature, and project overviews across the four dominant themes of this dissertation: conspiracy culture; apocalypse culture; alternate-reality culture; and creative-practice. The remainder of the dissertation is divided into two parts.

Part I examines the topic of so-called "conspiracy theories." **Chapter Two** establishes a theoretical map so as to better clarify definitions, provide background and context, and determine the most appropriate opportunities for intervening in conspiracist discourse through creative-practice. **Chapter Three** constructs a theoretical scaffolding around the otherwise entirely slippery slopes of trolling, parody, irony, satire, and other areas of pseudo or alternate-reality culture which cannot be taken at face value. **Chapter Four** advances the theoretical map of previous chapters, while charting a basis for ethical creative-practice interventions in conspiracist discourse. **Chapter Five** documents and interrogates 'The (Un)Conspiracy Manifesto (by Luther Blissett),' an original social media project representing the creative and practical exploration of the territory mapped across previous chapters.

Part II examines the topic of so-called "apocalypse prepping." **Chapter Six** looks closely at the substantial body of unfictional content and edutainment surrounding the imaginary "zombie apocalypse" scenario; paying particular attention to the ethical shortcomings of many such attempts. **Chapter Seven** documents and analyses 'The Art of the Apocalypse: From A.I. to Zombie,' a social media project which creatively and practically explores the entirety of the territory previously mapped.

Throughout all of the above, I specifically address ethical problematics of both conspiracy and apocalypse cultures, particularly with regard to violent ideation, the deployment of hate symbols, and the "othering" of those marked as less-than-human. In the **Conclusion** – following post-apocalyptic lines of thought – I step away from digital technologies to type my final thoughts on my vintage Remington steel typewriter in the absence of digital or electronic support.

A Very Important Final Note

Contained within this document are a small number of seemingly accidental typographical err0rs. Although each individual 3rror may appear inconsequential, together, these typo$ form a cryptographic puzzle. The reader who discovers each mistake, and deciphers the resultant code, will be rewarded with the GPS coordinates of Bigfoot's location in the US Pacific Northwest.[12]



[12] At the risk of explaining a joke: The above is not merely included for fun, but to call attention to the processes of encoding and recoding (as opposed to strictly decoding) media, which are common within conspiracy culture and discussed further in Chapter Two. The coffee cup ring is reflective of both Rorschach ink blots and the Zen *Enso* symbol, elaborated upon in Chapters Five and Seven, respectively.

one: METHODOLOGY, LITERATURE, AND PROJECT OVERVIEWS

Methodology: Triangulation and Alterdisciplinarity

An alterdisciplinary orientation, according to Bowman, is one which both 'undercuts and recasts the terms that organize many other notions of intervention, such as those which tend to distinguish "academic work" from "political work" (or "theory" from "practice") and the "university" from "the real world"' (173). These binaries are challenged, as well, by the emergence and increasing acceptance of the effectiveness of creative-practice and practice-as-research methodologies in Media, Screen, and Performance Studies. Still, as Bowman notes, the 'postmodern condition' – which he defines as 'an increasing *experience of life* as uncertainty, anxiety, confusion, and alienation from power' – makes '*aspirations to intervene* in culture in effective ways often seem paralysed or warped because it is so unclear *what* our roles, goal, relationships, values, and connections could or should be' (45).

In several statements suggesting the value of creative-practice, Bowman suggests that 'we' – meaning, those conducting alterdisciplinary practice and research – 'should note the link between *the simulation,* the *subjective fantasy* and *bodily practice*,' noting that 'bodily practices are what literally make us, and they are what can remake and change us' (63). Citing Pierre Bourdieu's observation that 'the body believes in what it plays at,' (1990: 73) Bowman adds that, particularly in cases of mediated representations, '*fantasy* becomes part of *reality*' and 'material from the "outside," from popular culture, can *supplement* our identity – *intervening* in our identity, offering new points of identification, and playing complex roles in the construction of identity' (61). Bowman further notes (in an analysis of screen icon Bruce Lee) the impacts of 'a *simulation* which engages *fantasy* which precipitates in *practice* that leads to subjective, physical and discursive *transformation'* (77).

It is my contention that Bowman's diagnosis for deconstructing popular culture via alterdisciplinarity may be optimally merged with creative-practice and practice-as-research methodologies in order to both directly and self-reflexively intervene in (i.e., transformatively critique) other spaces and other discourse; as well as to map the process and experience for future practitioner researchers. Such a hybridized methodology might further allow practitioners to, as Derrida importantly suggested, 'never give up either the laughter or the seriousness of intellectual and ethico-political responsibility' (1995: 404; Bowman: 157).

With regard to the seriousness, Bowman argues that '*all* interpretations derive from and impact upon the "institutional" context in which they occur. As such, the *way* we make sense of things

is more than "merely academic." *Sense-making* is both "forceful" and "consequential"' (2008: 47). Derrida (in Bowman's words) 'regarded deconstructive re-reading/rewriting as a kind of *politically consequential non-conformity*' (47) – or, in Derrida's words – 'cultural resistance' (1998: 45). Accordingly, the field of Cultural Studies which Deconstruction helped spawn – 'is not' and 'was never supposed to be *just "studies"*' (Bowman: 164). As Stuart Hall argued (paraphrased by Bowman): 'cultural studies was intent on *intervening, on altering.* It was never "merely academic", either in the literal or the pejorative sense of the term (Hall, 1992; Bowman: 8). The *point* of deconstructive readings – i.e., rewritings – in Bowman's words:

> …is not to be "interpretively passive". The point is that *re*interpretation can *re*frame, *re*constitute, and draw into question and crisis the *way* we interpret, the way we objectify objects, the way we perceive our values, orientations, and our presuppositions about *what* "truth", "proper action", of "proper practice" should be. Sense doesn't just "happen": sense is *made.* And "common sense" is always a powerful political force (48).

Thus, according to Bowman, '*the point* of our intellectual, theoretical, critical and analytical efforts is always *to change it* […] The aim is ethical political intervention (alteration)' (170). Yet, by 2008, the increasing prevalence of 'merely academic' critiques had facilitated, in Bowman's words, 'not a disruption, interruption, or irruption of anything; but rather, the reiterative consolidation of a new disciplinary order, in which making "politicized" critiques is the order of the day. In short, it [was] the end of the [cultural studies] intervention' (178). Bowman contends that the original intervention of Deconstruction and Cultural Studies 'worked' and 'precipitated crises in established disciplines' (ibid). Yet, he also flags the irony implicit in the fact that the end of that intervention 'took the form of a generalized "theoretical fluency": what Hall calls "a mere repetition, a sort of mimicry or deconstructive ventriloquism" which, paradoxically, actually "formalize[s] out of existence the critical questions of power, history, and politics" that it seems nevertheless "extensively and without end, to theorize"' (Hall, 1992: 287; Bowman: 178). Bowman thus reflects on the 'irony [of] the fact that so much dispute within cultural studies takes the form of arguing about *what* should be argued about [but] little consideration of *how* what is being argued about might come to make a difference' (180).

Describing the growing body of insulated and academic-for-their-own-sake deconstructive critiques as 'McDeconstruction,' Bowman argues that 'one *may well* be studying, theorizing, or diagnosing "the political" in this or that aspect of culture, but one is not necessarily *intervening* in any consequential sense' (178). Along similar lines, Martin McQuillan asserted (in 2003) that

‘no matter how “political” [the endless articles on Foucault and football] may sound, such works have become something of a “conservative force” nowadays’ (2003: 49). Indeed, as Bowman observed, ‘the prevailing notion of how academics and intellectuals can intervene effectively relies on a rather vague, under-theorized and nebulous faith in the value of critique’ (170). Such “faith,” Bowman asserts, is ‘under-theoretical, broadly metaphysical, subject-centered, and an ultimately anti-intellectual regression from poststructuralist-informed theories of the political’ (171).

While Bowman acknowledges that ‘quite how one measures … consequential ethical and political institutional intervention ... may be in question’ (164), he also notes that both McQuillan and Hall were clear that Cultural Studies cannot be done ‘simply by borrowing its thematics’ (McQuillan, 2003: 50; Hall 1996: 272). Today, it should be added, social media platforms have enabled the intensification of theoretical mimicry (often weaponized) across the political spectrum, as everyone now – regardless of academic rigour or ethical standards – has the opportunity to “be a critic” and potentially gain a substantial following through social media platforms. On this, Bowman presciently cautioned (in 2008) that the “academic condition” is often – contrary to the notion of effective intervention – ‘one of unavoidably heterogeneous language games in a web of disciplinary differences wherein what has arisen is *disciplinary enclaving, mutual unintelligibility* and *disarticulation*’ (171).

McQuillan (according to Bowman) ‘invaluably reminds us that *calls* for change *do not necessarily change anything,* and that it is a mistake to conflate calling for change with *making* an effective intervention *in* anything’ (McQuillan, 2001; Bowman: 167). On this, Bowman acknowledges both Hall (1996: 272) – who cautioned (in Bowman’s words) against ‘the fundamental obscenity of deluding oneself that one’s obligations have been carried out merely by studying, theorizing, or otherwise holding forth on urgent political issues’ (174) – and Timothy Bahti (1992: 72-73) – who argued (as Bowman puts it) that ‘*all* scholarship … *should* be supplemented with an account of the *point* of doing it, an explanation of *why* it supposedly matters, to *what,* and, importantly, *how*’ (166).

The emphasis on *intervention* is highly significant in 2024, given that mass digital disinformation and the mainstreaming of ‘conspiracy culture’ (Knight; 2000) are areas which unambiguously require *and* resist intervention. In other words, new methods of intervention – which move beyond deconstructive *critique* – are clearly called for. On this, Bowman echoes a provocative

question advanced by Hall in 1996: 'Against the urgency of people dying in the streets, what in God's name is the point of cultural studies?' (272). Indeed, Hall's question is not wholly dissimilar from statements made by political opponents of critical theory today (including Donald Trump, Boris Johnson, and Rick DeSantis) who have variously ridiculed such approaches as 'zombie studies degrees' from 'socialism factories,' (Atterbury; 2022) or attacked them as socialist/Marxist 'cults of indoctrination' (Goldberg; 2021) and so forth.

On the other hand, "cultural critique" has also been attacked as a potentially *conservative* force which sustains neoliberal capitalism. Hardt and Negri, for instance, argue that such critiques perform the work *of* capitalism by – in Bowman's words – 'mak[ing] things even *more* undecidable [which] like trying to dig your way out of a hole [is] counter-productive' (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 137-159; Bowman: 46). Others (notably, cultural critic Slavoj Žižek) express frustration that the continuous production of deconstructive critiques which go largely unseen outside narrow and disciplinary academic circles, actually serves to distract, divide, and delude progressive forces from more radical paths of collective action (Žižek, 2000: 121-122; Bowman: 96). Today, the convergence of media and digital technologies (Jenkins; 2006) – coupled with the legacy of Deconstruction – make it difficult to disentangle the, once relatively distinct, areas of Media, Performance, and Cultural Studies. Bowman aligns the deconstruction of popular culture with Hall's assertion that Cultural Studies originally had 'some will to connect' and 'something at stake' in ways which were unique among 'many other very important intellectual and critical practices' (Hall, 1992: 278; Bowman: 172).

Hall's statement, in turn, is reiterated by Conquergood, who emphasized the need to 'revitalize the connections between artistic accomplishment, analysis, and articulations with communities; between practical knowledge (knowing how), propositional knowledge (knowing that), and political savvy (knowing who, when, and where),' further noting that 'this epistemological connection between creativity, critique, and civic engagement is mutually replenishing, and pedagogically powerful' (2002: 153). Conquergood called for 'programs that combine intellectual rigor with artistic excellence that is critically engaged, where [students] do not have to banish their artistic spirit in order to become a critical thinker, or repress their intellectual self or political passion to explore their artistic side,' further asserting that 'particularly at the PhD level, original scholarship in culture and the arts is enhanced, complemented, and complicated in deeply meaningful ways by the participatory understanding

and community involvement of the researcher' (153). Asserting that 'the ongoing challenge' is 'to refuse and supercede this deeply entrenched division of labor, apartheid of knowledges, that plays out inside the academy as the difference between thinking and doing, interpreting and making, conceptualizing and creating,' Conquergood concludes that 'the division of labor between theory and practice, abstraction and embodiment, is an arbitrary and rigged choice' (153). On this, he, continues:

> If we go the one-way street of abstraction, then we cut ourselves off from the nourishing ground of participatory experience. If we go the one-way street of practice, then we drive ourselves into an isolated cul-de-sac, a practitioner's workshop or artist's colony. Our radical move is to turn, and return, insistently, to the crossroads (153-154).

In a similar vein, Bowman asserts that a potentially effective alternative to 'faux radical pseudo-political tub-thumping and soap-box pontificating' is 'to move with the others' moves; to analyse, read, "connect" with and deconstruct their connections, in *their* language, in order to make critiques that "make sense" *there,* where making new sense might reorient *that'* (182). Bowman cautions, however, that 'in a very practical sense, this will be to strike at oneself – to relinquish one's disciplinary identity' (ibid). At the same time, he also suggests that – in contrast to 'disciplined repetition' of contemporary critique – 'alterdisciplinary intervention' requires 'yielding to other discourse, the other protocols, the other language, the other scene, through a renewed emphasis on listening *to,* engaging *with,* connecting *with* the other, on other terms, in order to "deconstruct" it where that deconstruction could count' (ibid).

Thus, the *point* of alterdisciplinary intervention, Bowman argues, is 'not to *critique* the others from afar (in our own disciplinary sites and scenes); but to engage *with* the others "there" (in *their* disciplinary sites and scenes)' (185). In other words, Bowman strategically suggests **'**intervening in the disciplinary spaces of [the others'] production and legitimation – that is: getting *inside knowledge, undoing methodologies,* and arguing (in the others' language) for *other conclusions*' (181). On this, he further argues:

> Different discursive language games produce different institutions. … There is an indissoluble link between institution and interpretation. … alterdisciplinarity names the aim of intervening in the other – the effort to alter the other – in awareness of the rivalrous structure of disciplinarity and the disciplinary structure of micro- and macro-hegemonies (ibid).

The ultimate aim of alterdisciplinary intervention, Bowman argues, aligns with Derrida's aim to intervene in ways which do not appear 'eccentric or strange, incomprehensible or exotic (which would allow [others] to dispose of [them] easily,' but rather, appear 'competent, rigorously argued, and carrying conviction' (Derrida; 1995: 409-410) – or, in Bowman's words – '*according to their own declared standards, values and protocols'* (2008: 186). This, Bowman argues, is in line with the aim of Derridean Deconstruction to seek a 're-examination of the fundamental norms and premises of … dominant discourses [and] the principles underlying many of their evaluations' (Derrida; 1995: 409-410). Bowman's repeated emphasis that 'engagement in the others' field must necessarily take place in *their* language, according to *their* protocols and proprieties' (2008: 185), shares much with the methods of the poetry/poetics of debunking and street epistemology, previously referenced. Accordingly, such engagements and interventions are both the subject and object of my praxis.

Methodology: The Ethics of Alternate-Reality-Based Creative-Practice

Clearly, neither the *content*, nor the claimed *intent*, of disinformation (digital or otherwise) can or should be taken at face value. Accordingly, a substantial gap exists between the "reading" or consumption of such texts and artefacts, and the purposefully obfuscated processes by which such texts are created and spread. Indeed, the 'emotional and visceral [and…] affective dimensions of citizenship education,' according to Estellés and Castellví, 'have not aroused much interest' (2020: 6-12). To foreground these embodied aspects, I applied creative-practice methodologies to the exploration of two (related) alternate-reality case studies: conspiracy theories and apocalypse survivalism.

The ethical implications of conducting creative-practice on the topics of conspiracism and apocalypticism are obviously significant. Disinformation and unfictional texts have the potential to deceive not only immediate consumers of those texts, but also those who consume them second or third-hand, or witness, hear, or read about their consumption. Even satirical unfictional projects (e.g., the Illuminati conspiracy theory or the Church of Satan) have proven no less disastrous than that which they aimed to critique or subvert. For this reason, satirical parodies should be viewed not only as *fake* but, in Baudrillard's terms, *hyperreal* (1981). They are simulations without originals; alternate realities which nevertheless feel profoundly realistic (more so, perhaps, than reality). It is along such lines that Bowman notes that 'the

supposedly fake can deconstruct and reconstruct reality,' and consequently, 'certain fictions have structured our notions of what is real… in the political realm.' (2008: 10).

Still, one cannot be both an objective scholar on conspiracism *and* a conspiracist at the same time. The same may be said of preparing for the apocalypse. Yet, without *being* a conspiracist or prepper, how can one claim to understand the powerful attraction of conspiracy theories and "prepping"? As the Harvard Negotiation Project asserted, 'it is not enough to study [your subject] like beetles under a microscope; you need to know what it feels like to be a beetle' (Fisher; 2011: 16). This gap between representation and reality was eloquently captured in Alfred Korzybski's metaphorical observation that 'a map is not the territory' (1933: 747-761). While grounding my research in the methodology of creative-practice, I kept this *Catch-22* in mind.[13] Accordingly, I ensured that my research was guided by theory (i.e., mapped in terms of historical and cultural contexts and ideas) as well as by embodied practice (i.e., phenomenologically explored).

Through this reflexive process I attempted to give weight, not only to conspiracist and apocalypse survivalist *content*, but also to the fluid *process* of embracing alternate-reality lifestyles in the digital era. In addition to reading popular texts and scholarly analyses *about* conspiracism and apocalypticism – such as Mark Fenster's *Conspiracy Theories* (1999), Peter Knight's *Conspiracy Culture* (2000), and Bradley Garret's *Bunker* (2020) – I also engaged directly with conspiracist and apocalyptic texts, from Adam Parfrey's 1987 edited collection of fringe essays *Apocalypse Culture,* to the 2017 dispatches of the anonymous pseudo-government agent "Q," collected in *QAnon: The Storm* (2017). In so doing, I attempted to maintain an empathetic view toward conspiracy and prepper cultures – probing beneath the surface for areas of potential personal and collective benefits – even when disturbing global events made this challenging.

In addressing disinformation, a principal challenge stems from the fact that for various reasons (detailed in Chapter Two) conspiracy theories have been found to be resistant to debunking (Lewandowsky; 2021). Furthermore, false information has been shown to "stick" even after corrections and retractions have been issued (Lewandowsky, et al; 2012). For such reasons,

[13] This phrase originates from Joseph Heller's 1961 satirical war novel *Catch 22,* and is defined by Oxford English dictionaries as: 'A dilemma or difficult circumstance from which there is no escape because of mutually conflicting or dependent conditions.' As such, the term bears a resemblance to the ancient Greek philosophical concept of the *aporia* (meaning, "impasse") elaborated upon by Derrida (1993).

current research holds that preventative, rather than reactive, measures such as the 'psychological theory of inoculation' (McGuire; 1970) or 'prebunking' (Lewandowsky and van der Linden; 2021) are promising avenues for countering disinformation.

Thus, rather than directly attempt to refute disinformation, this project experiments with techniques for creating live and digitally mediated artefacts which appropriate the *form* of conspiracist and survivalist rhetoric, in order to subvert the *function* by mimetically retelling, rewriting, and redirecting regressive aspects of these narratives toward progressive ends. These projects, then, can be regarded as *un*-extremism rather than *anti*-extremism ones, since they are designed, not to directly challenge, but to metaphorically un-weave and re-weave the strands of these popular but harmful narratives. Thus, these projects can be analysed as an example of what Shifman describes as hypersignification (often found within adverting and digital-meme culture) in which 'the *code itself* [is] no longer concealed, but [is] turned into a sign' (2014: 344). Such approaches are potentially effective in the case of conspiracy fantasies and new-age spiritualities which defy rational argument.

In *This is Not a Hoax,* Heather Jessup suggests that disinformation (in the form of hoaxes) – if viewed with appropriate awareness – potentially enable beneficial re-examinations of individual beliefs, as well as of 'historical ideas of identity, hierarchy, and institutional trust' (2019: 16). Ultimately, Jessup argues that 'to be tricked into believing a lie and then to recognize our mistakenness may in fact be the best thing that could happen to us' (ibid). In this vein, throughout this research project, I strove to uncover dimensions of conspiracism and apocalypticism which might be constructively or productively guided or redirected.

It is noteworthy that those who leverage imaginary post-apocalypse scenarios in educational contexts are quick to call attention to the value of alternate-reality pedagogical strategies, while the significant ethical problems of this approach are rarely acknowledged. It should not be ignored that "theories" about conspiracies are, all too often, weaponized forms of hate speech, racism, and ethno-nationalism. Furthermore, apocalyptic narratives – both fictional and unfictional – often endorse, promote, or perpetuate numerous dangerous or unethical concepts, including gun culture, patriarchy, fascism, cruelty, slavery, and genocide; be it through the dehumanizing, or literal demonizing, of imaginary and soulless "others." Many such issues are explored in Bryan Hall's moral ethics primer *An Ethical Guidebook to the Zombie Apocalypse* (2020). However, in writing an epistolary-fictional moral ethics textbook that uses

zombies as its point of departure, Hall has little choice but to ignore the many ethical problems entangled with belief (or pretence of belief) in the plausibility of a zombie apocalypse.

Significantly, the earliest "zombies" (from the French: *zombi cadavre*) were *literally* slaves of the Haitian American Sugar company. The Afro-Caribbean folklore as it pertained to those 'dead men working in a cane field' was introduced to English-speaking audiences by William Seabrook in his 1929 travelogue *The Magic Island;* the basis for a 1932 Broadway play (*Zombie*) and its film adaptation that same year (*White Zombie* starring Bela Lugosi). Similarly, the word "robot," originating in Karel Čapek's 1920 stage play *R.U.R: Rossum's Universal Robots*, was derived from the Czech word *robota,* meaning forced labour.

Despite these problematic associations, the post-apocalyptic imaginary is ethically ambivalent. For instance, when one of the zombie apocalypse preppers featured in a 2012 *Discovery Channel* "documentary" was asked what she would do if her husband or children were bitten by a zombie, she replied – seemingly with some difficulty – 'If you've got a bite, I will shoot you in the face.' Considering the *speculative* nature of a zombie outbreak, her response strikes me as disturbingly *specific*. Yet, as previously noted, the 'affective' and 'visceral' aspects of 'authoritarian populism' and 'the spread of digital hate speech' are largely neglected in both education and research (Estellés and Castellví; 2020).

A UNESCO publication on countering online hate speech, however, identifies digital citizenship and values-based education (via the study of human rights) as an effective approach to both countering and preventing the spread of hate speech (Gagliardone, et al; 2020: 46). This publication points to the value of 'technological knowledge and skills' in connecting 'media and information literacy' with 'broader ethic and civic matters,' particularly among young and vulnerable communities (ibid). In this regard, my creative-practice aligns with the goals of UNESCO, as well as the UN Sustainable Development Goal 16 to 'promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels' (*sdgs.un.org/goals*).

Project and Literature Overview: Conspiracy Culture

This chapter will conclude with a brief introduction and summary of four key areas of discourse and literature which synergistically informed and supported the overall framework for this praxis; beginning with what Peter Knight described as 'conspiracy culture' (2000). On this, it is

notable that *secular* 20th century American conspiracy theories were heavily dependent on genuinely suspicious circumstances, facts, or pseudo-evidence. For example, after assassinating President John F. Kennedy in 1963, Lee Harvey Oswald was subsequently murdered by Jack Ruby – an associate of both the mafia and the FBI (Kantor; 1978) – begging the question whether either Oswald *or* Ruby actually acted alone. Further, the theory that the Apollo 11 moon landing was staged in a film studio was asserted in 1976 – not by just anyone – but by Bill Kaysing, a former US Naval Officer and employee of NASA rocket manufacturer Rocketdyne. Still further, theories concerning Area 51 and the purported Roswell flying saucer incident were fuelled in the 1980s by persuasive documents eventually denounced as sophisticated forgeries (FBI; 2011) suspected to have been planted either as a hoax (Donovan; 2011: 107) or as part of an American disinformation campaign aimed at Soviet Union (Dunning; 2016). It is along such lines, it seems, that Sloan describes conspiracy theories as being, along with jazz music and superhero comics, 'one of the three great American art forms' (2020).

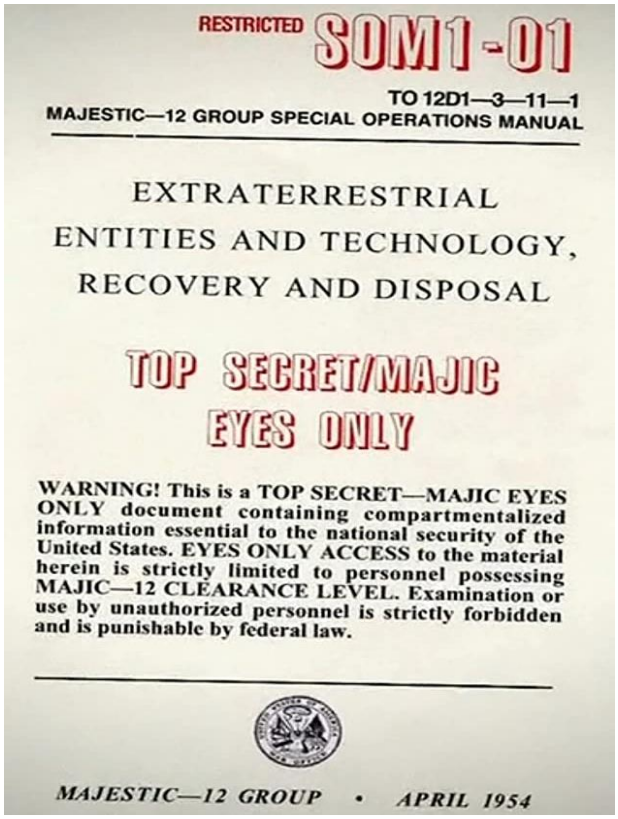
Indeed, even *religious* and hate-based conspiracy theories of 20th century Europe – despite evolving from medieval folklore of witchcraft, sacrifice, blood libel, and demonology – leaned heavily on the fabricated pseudo world-domination-manual *The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion* (circa 1903). This anti-Semitic propagandistic forgery was leveraged as "evidence" by the German 3rd Reich and endorsed by Nazi sympathizers worldwide (notably including Henry Ford in the US), and remains widely cited today within online anti-Semitic and conspiracist communities. Accordingly, I argue that such documents should be considered alongside today's rapidly growing genre of unfiction (i.e., fiction disguised as nonfiction or designed to conceal its fictional status).

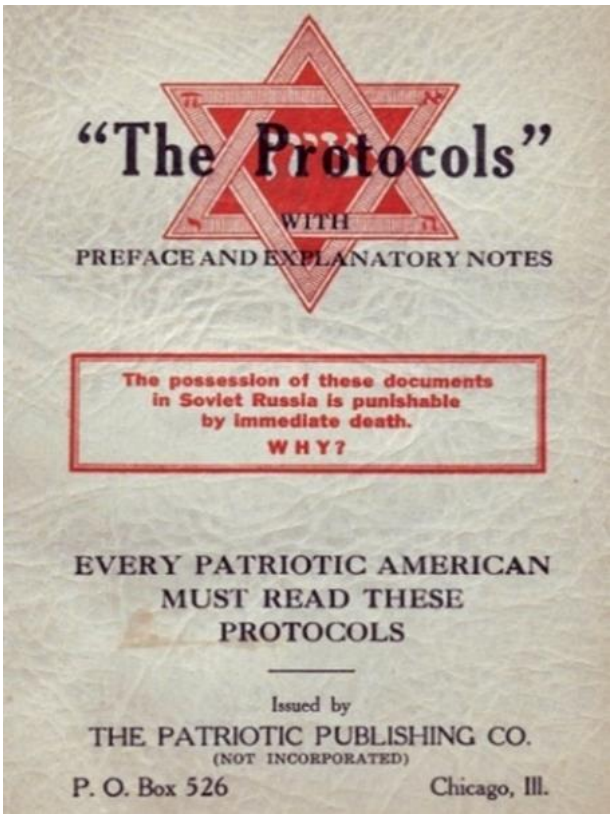
The 9/11 terror attacks of 2001 (in the US) marked a new and inverted post-truth relationship between evidence and popular speculation within the body of conspiracy conjecture. Christopher Hitchens observed – invoking the cutting remark of theoretical physicist Wolfgang Pauli – that such "theories" are 'not even wrong' (Pauli, 1960; Hitchens, 2004). It was along similar lines that, in 2005, television host and satirist Stephen Colbert coined the phrase "truthiness," which he humorously defined as 'the quality of preferring concepts or facts one wishes or believes to be true rather than concepts or facts known to be true' (ibid). In other words, according to Colbert, truthiness involves 'know[ing] with the heart' rather than 'think[ing] with the head' (ibid).

By contrast, in 2006, journalist Alan Feuer described the 9/11 conspiracy movement as 'trutherism,' and its proponents as 'truthers' (Leibovich; 2015). The term was not applied sarcastically, but in reference to the "truth" which the conspiracy sub-culture was continually seeking, or claiming to have discovered (Feuer; 2006). Since that time, the term "truther" has largely (but not entirely) acquired derogatory connotations. This double meaning aside, in the early 2000s, the mainstreaming of the world wide web clearly enabled immediate amplification of unsubstantiated claims, while also facilitating the global convergence and recruitment of adherents (Jenkins; 2006).

The rise of overtly counterfactual conspiracy narratives at that time was further indicative of an unlikely, but nevertheless growing, convergence between 'the female-dominated New Age (with its positive focus on self) and the male-dominated realm of conspiracy theory (with its negative focus on global politics)' described as 'conspirituality' by Ward and Voas in 2011. Accordingly, I argue that the self-affirming and unfalsifiable "theories" of today's post-truth conspiracy movements are more accurately described as conspiracy fantasies or conspiracy fanfiction. As such, these narratives may be usefully considered alongside other examples of that which Chess and Newsom analysed as 'digital folklore' (2015: 58-59).

[**Fig. 1.1**: An Area 51 disinformation docket (dated 1954) "leaked" to Ufologists in the 1980s. **Fig. 1.2:** American edition of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (circa 1934).]





Since 2017, conspiracy-themed disinformation, propaganda, and/or fanfiction has motivated harmful and disturbing incidents, too numerous to mention, of real-life behaviours worldwide.[14] On this, I build on Jack Bratich's assertion that conspiracy theories are 'not just their own kind of knowledge' or 'an epistemological question about what counts as true' but also 'a passage from knowledge to action' (2017: 05:25). Accordingly, throughout this praxis, I pay particular attention to *actions* and *behaviours*, regardless of whether those actions and behaviours were inspired by belief, make-believe, motivated reasoning, online-trolling, or by an ironic pretence of belief, which I describe as fake-believe.

This distinction between *behaviour* and *belief* brought all manner of fictionally-inspired real-world activities into my scope, including "zombie apocalypse" survivalism and the religion of Jediism. According to the Ireland Central Statistics Office, Jediism is Ireland's largest official non-traditional religion (2016, 2022); and "zom-poc" survivalist activities such as throwing axes (BadAxeThrowing; 2017) and canning vegetables (Halbach; 2013a/b) were popular even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Also significant is the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster (FSM) created in 2006 by Bobby Henderson in an act of *reductio ad absurdum* against the inclusion of Christian "Intelligent Design" theories in the Kansas State curriculum. The FSM is notable for being both a satire of religious "beliefs," as well as an actual New Religious Movement.

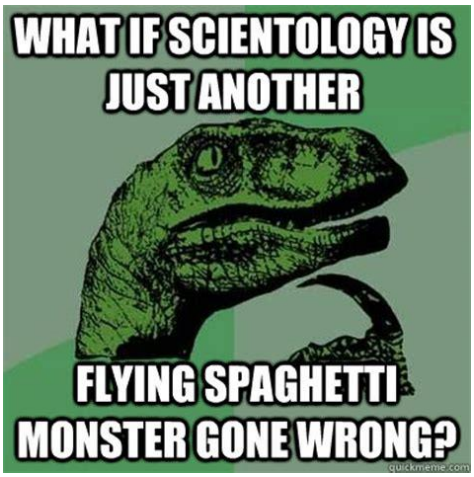
Thus, despite my intent to move *away* from the spirituality of parapsychology, and toward the more secular pastime of conspiracism, I found myself ever more entangled in religious philosophy. Consequently, I explored the degrees to which new and traditional religious movements are being integrated into, and evolving within, "new media" technologies. It is not insignificant that Marshall McLuhan – a founder of the field of "old media" studies – was drawn to the unique convergence of symbol and substance within Catholicism; particularly within the context of electronic media. Indeed, McLuhan – who converted to Catholicism in 1937, in what I suggest might usefully be interpreted as an act of avant-garde immersive performance art –

[14] E.g.: Shots fired in a pizza parlour falsely targeted by QAnon followers as an adrenochrome harvesting ring (i.e., "Pizzagate"); A California man's murder of his two young children; thought by the man to possess his wife's 'serpent DNA,' inspired by Illuminati and QAnon narratives (Madani, et al; 2021); Ongoing and baseless allegations of widespread election fraud erupting during the 2020 US Presidential election (i.e., "Stop the Steal" or "Trump's Big Lie"); The January 6 insurrection attempt at the American Capitol building in 2021; A Michigan man's murder of his wife and attempted murder of his daughter, after becoming paranoid about the "Deep State" and QAnon narratives (Li; 2022); The 'far higher' COVID-19 death rate among unvaccinated and "anti-vax" populations (Montañez and Lewis; 2022); and the deaths of a woman, her sister, and her son, after going off-grid in the Colorado Mountains to escape the imaginary collapse of society (Medina; 2023). Such phenomena also played, and continue to play, a large role in the ongoing wars/conflicts in Ukraine and Palestine.

described religion as being, if approached 'as a theoretical or intellectual construct … purely a game' (1999: 82). According to McLuhan, Jesus Christ 'is the one case where we can say that the medium and the message are fully one and the same' (102).

[**Figs. 1.3 & 1.4**: "Condescending Wonka" and the "Philosoraptor" meme-templates address opportunities and risks presented by new/pseudo religious movements.]





Beyond McLuhan's fascinating "meta" approach to religion, the convergence of medium and message – in the form of what Baudrillard theorized as hyperreality (1981) – is, today, increasingly experienced by a growing number of consumers through extended-reality tools and platforms, including virtual and augmented reality devices, as well as screen avatars and apps (e.g., the Metaverse). Despite this convergence, the semiotic gap – or '*différance'* (Derrida; 1974) – between the surface of symbols and language, and the substance of meaning and ideas, has become increasingly compounded with the slippage – or 'undecidability' (Derrida; 1994) – between expressed-belief and actual-belief; between sincerity and deception; and between irony and self-delusion.

The blurring of these areas, both innocently and intentionally, make it prudent to consider the tactics of semiotic hijacking, or détournement, adopted by the Situationist International movement emerging in France in the late 1950s, and subsequently embraced by the Culture Jamming movement of the 1990s. Along similar lines, I interrogate Discordianism, arising in the US in the late 1960s, which operated in part under the absurdist guise of pseudo-worship of Eris (the Greek Goddess of strife and discord). The Discordian project "Operation Mindfuck" – largely associated with Robert Anton Wilson during his tenure as an editor at *Playboy Magazine* – popularized the Illuminati conspiracy theory, later expanded by Wilson and Shea in *The*

Illuminatus! Trilogy (1975). Discordianism paved the way, in turn, for the satirical Church of Satan (Smoczynski; 2016: Ch. 10) and many other 20th century countercultural activities – described by Adam Parfrey as 'Apocalypse Culture' in the 1987 edited collection of that title – as well as all manner of early 21st century Internet-trolling (Phillips; 2018, 2021).

One revelation manifested by all such activities is that it is very difficult to create a fake conspiracy theory that does not have the potential to function as a real one. Thus, popular and fictional texts have played (and continue to play) a significant role in constructing and sustaining alternate-reality lifestyles. The line between "fake" fake conspiracies and "real" fake conspiracies proves slippery. This revelation also presents an obstacle in conducting ethical creative-practice via the medium or "genre" of conspiracism. Today, the mainstreaming of the once fringe 'Conspiracy Culture' – anticipated by Peter Knight in his 2000 book of that title – confirms that conspiracist ideology owes more to processes of social construction, cognitive bias, performativity, and motivated reasoning than to individual cognitive dysfunction, paranoia, or delusional thinking (Aupers; 2012: 22). Indeed, "belief" may be irrelevant if millions of people tacitly agree to act *as if* fictional narratives are true.

[**Fig. 1.5**: A variation on the "All the Things" or "X All the Y" template – based on the webcomic 'This is Why I'll Never Be an Adult' by Allie Brosh – invites a comparison between Discordianism and Internet-trolling. **Fig. 1.6:** A meme converges far-Left and far-Right ideology by reimagining Eris Goddess of Discord as a frog Goddess, while Pepe the frog's face adorns the golden apple of discord. The text directly invokes the Discordian "rule of fives."]





In Chapters Two through Four, I analyse the boundary-blurring processes through which producers and consumers engage with fictional texts via digital media platforms. I further chart the semiotic appropriation and ironic (re)appropriation of fascist or hate symbols; paying particular attention to the "octopus" symbol as a signifier of conspiracy, and to fleas, rats, snakes, and zombies as signifiers of less-than-human. While the latter analysis was crucial in order to ethically conduct creative-practice on such dark topics, it remains peripheral to my primary research question. For this reason, this analysis – 'Mapping Ironic Evil and Apocalyptic "Others"' – is located in the Appendix.

Project and Literature Overview: Apocalypse Culture

Whether imagined as being brought about by the wrath of God or by the hubris of humanity – by virus or vaccine – the endgame of conspiracism is often nothing less than an imaginary apocalypse. For millennia, the apocalypse has been primarily associated with religion and theology. Today, the "apocalypse" has become a defining feature, not only of popular culture, but of the entire cultural zeitgeist.[15] It has become difficult to consume any form of media without confronting a spectrum of apocalyptic scenarios; from news headlines on the dangers of artificial intelligence (Freedland; 2023) to Hollywood blockbusters about zombie outbreaks. How can we cope with this barrage of existential dread? Or, has the time finally come – as Campbell, McHugh, and Dylan-Ennis argue (2018) – to start preparing for the end of the world?

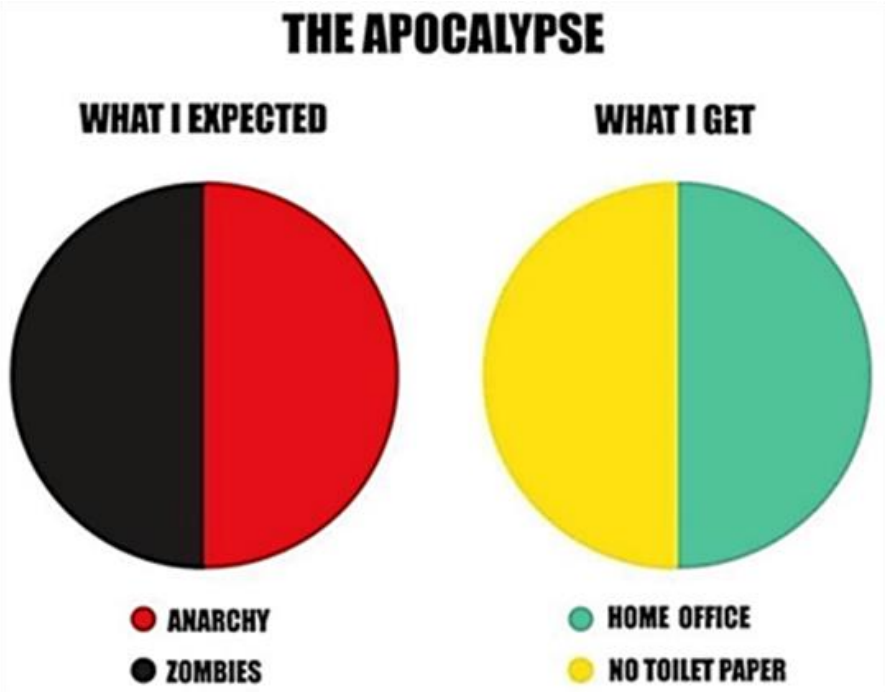
As ever, surreal apocalyptic scenarios, such as robots and zombies, are best interpreted as allegorical. Just as the four horsemen of the Biblical apocalypse represent beasts, plague, war, and famine, what is the "zombie apocalypse" if not an overt metaphor for contagious pandemics? What is the "rise of the machines" if not the logical extension of the algorithmic chaos and A.I. crisis we currently face? A more recent development, however, is the increasingly secular nature and statistical probability of apocalyptic threats. Today, humans and human institutions (in both developing and late-capital societies) are being stress-tested (both individually and collectively) in the face of several credible existential threats. Technologies

[15] Consider, for instance, the pitch-perfect satire of a 2023 article on *McSweeney's Internet Tendency* by Young and Martin entitled 'We're Scrapping Our Gen Ed Model in Favor of Survival Skills Training' which features ironically comical sentences such as: 'The new program, which emphasizes post-apocalyptic survival skills rather than traditional academic content, will be implemented fall semester. We remain hopeful this is not too late.' Also: 'For our future students to meet the challenges of post-apocalyptic life, we must shift our focus from "careers that don't yet exist" to "careers that haven't existed for quite some time," like blacksmiths and town criers.'

which once enabled our progress have evolved to threaten us in the forms of climate change, nuclear proliferation, bio-hazards, machine intelligence, and mass disinformation. Even if we manage to avoid an apocalyptic *collapse* of our technological and institutional infrastructures, we will still confront a dystopian *ascendance* of our own devices and technologies.

While machines may not yet be self-aware, the Internet – and the alternate-reality information ecosystems which social media platforms sustain and amplify – has already unleashed a dystopian *infopocalypse* (so to speak) of collectively created, politically expedient, and algorithmically amplified disinformation, propaganda, and conspiracy fantasies. To describe such narratives as dangerous would be an understatement. Tragically, apocalypse survivalism can result in death. In 2023, the bodies of a woman, her sister, and her teenage son were discovered in the Colorado Rocky Mountains. Having gone "off-grid" in an attempt to escape the imaginary collapse of society, the family – malnourished and lighting small fires in their tent for warmth – did not outlast the winter (Medina, 2023; Anguiano, 2023).

Yet, like everything else on the Internet, the "apocalypse" is most commonly approached from an ironic distance. Online, conspiracy fantasies are often created and spread, less on the basis of belief or make-believe, and more according to an ironic form of motivated fake-believe. The ravaging COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, is often treated online as a "disappointing" version of a zombie apocalypse. Judging from Internet-memes, the zombie apocalypse would appear to be something which many people eagerly await [**Fig. 1.7**].



Given that irony is a hallmark of the early 21st century, can it come as any surprise that apocalypticism is the new utopianism? With no bureaucracy, no Internet, no taxes, and very little political correctness, the apocalypse offers a fantasy of escape to the rugged individualism and farm-to-table simplicity of the frontier. Still, however popular it may be, the sentiment that an "apocalypse" might be somehow preferable to the current (albeit inevitably flawed) institutions of knowledge and democratic governance – much less even *survivable* – is as dangerous as it is seductive. In reality, if we seek ethical, compassionate, and sustainable approaches to politics, economics, and environmental conservation, we are unlikely to find them in an apocalypse. The misguided notion of apocalyptic utopianism calls to mind Fredric Jameson's cutting observation (in Fisher's words) that 'it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism.'[16]

[**Fig. 1.8**: A meme contrasts the crossbow and handgun badassery of *The Walking Dead* (2010-2022) with the toilet-paper hoarding of the initial weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic (via the digital manipulation of the photo to include a conspicuous amount of store-bought toilet paper in the cart of the Man and Boy from the 2009 screen adaption of Cormac McCarthy's Pulitzer Prize winning 2006 novel *The Road*). **Fig. 1.9:** A meme similarly contrasts a barbed wire wrapped baseball bat, cropped haircut, and leather motorcycle jacket (again from *The Walking Dead*) with a fully stocked grocery store, unkempt hair, and bathrobe hedonism of the Dude from *The Big Lebowski* (1998).]



[16] In his 2009 book *Capitalist Realism* (p. 7) Mark Fisher succinctly paraphrases the argument made by Jameson in his 1994 book *The Seeds of Time*: 'It seems to be easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism' (xii).

Apocalyptic utopianism has, thus, ushered in an unprecedented collective existential risk: Self-fulfilling apocalypse fantasies. To avoid mutually-assured-destructive (and self-destructive) acts of imaginary progress, it is important to look closely at the stories we tell ourselves about the post-apocalypse. Unfortunately, these narratives are all-too-often loaded with dangerous and regressive ideas; from the glorification of extreme violence and gun culture to the constant genocidal depiction of "others" and the "infected" as *less-than-human* (Livingston Smith; 2011).

Beyond the undeniable prevalence of apocalyptic themes in contemporary fiction and unfiction, the "zombie apocalypse" scenario has also become a popular topic in edutainment, including the highly visible 2011 *Preparedness 101: Zombie Apocalypse* public awareness campaign by the US Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) [**Fig. 1.10**]. Not surprisingly, these efforts have been found to be hugely popular, as well as disturbingly counter-productive (Kruvand and Bryant, 2015; Houghton, et al., 2017). Ultimately, unless rigorously and specifically constructed for educational purposes, the use of post-apocalyptic narratives in fiction, unfiction, and edutainment are all-too-often slippery slopes to a celebration of some of humanity's darkest ideas [**Fig. 1.11**].





The zombie apocalypse scenario is clearly inspired by fiction, yet the threat appeared to be far from fictional to the Kansas Anti-Zombie Militia, featured on a 2012 *Discovery Channel* program on preppers, who were busily stock-piling arms against the eventual leak or deployment of biological weapons. Hence, there is a need to engage with such texts objectively *and* as they are engaged with subjectively. Worldwide, the zombie apocalypse scenario has been explored in countless films, television series, and video games, as well as numerous public information

campaigns, documentaries, and news items (particularly within the US). In 2011 – the same year that the CDC initiated its zombie apocalypse campaign – the US Department of Defense Strategic Command (StratCom) unveiled CONPLAN/CONOP 8888 detailing its fictional strategy for "Counter Zombie Dominance." The following year, an inexplicable cannibalistic attack on a homeless man in Florida was widely described in news media as the 'Miami Zombie attack' (Elfrink; 2014) and the *Discovery Channel* aired its "documentary" on zombie preppers.

That documentary – which managed to be neither fictional, nor factually accurate – dubiously claimed: 'The zombie preppers have scientific backing; […] in reality, there are scientific theories for how zombies could exist; [and] scientists theorize that a zombie pandemic would be as devastating and as deadly as any disaster movie' (01:10 - 02:30). Specifically, the unfictional documentary claimed that 'Robert Smith, Doctor of Biomathematics at the University of Ottowa, believes zombies are no longer science fiction, and that they could soon be science fact' (01:10). In Smith's words: 'I think that a zombie pandemic is something that might occur. This is something that's plausible. It's something that, at least in terms of spread, is very likely' (01:30). Smith goes on to absurdly estimate that a zombie virus 'would overwhelm a city the size of New York' in eight to nine days, depending on 'how fast a zombie virus takes to transform its victims,' baselessly asserting that 'it's almost certainly going to be very, very, rapid; maximum 24 hours' (02:00). The documentary also included soundbites by Steven Schlozman, 'Assistant Professor of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School,' who baselessly suggested that 'the most likely ideology for a zombie pandemic would be some kind of mutated contagion, most likely a virus' (01:50).

Although Schlozman's speculation might seem reasonable, neuroscientists Voytek and Verstynen examined the plausibility of a zombie virus in 2014 – in *Do Zombies Dream of Undead Sheep?* – and found the combination of symptoms to be unrealistic and implausible. Those findings notwithstanding, it does remain possible (i.e., there is a non-zero probability) that a virus, fugus, or parasite with the capacity to hijack limbic systems (e.g., rabies, ophiocordyceps, or toxoplasmosis) could lead to a human pandemic which, in some respects, bares similarities to a zombie apocalypse. Thus, while zombies are not real, the *threat* of a zombie apocalypse can be viewed as hyperreal (Baudrillard; 1981) as well as hypothetical. Quasi-plausible "zombie" pandemics have been notably explored in several films, including George Romero's 1973 *The Crazies* (remade in 2010), and the sympathetic 2015 film *Maggie*.

Considering all of the above, it is hardly surprising that the COVID-19 pandemic was widely processed and discussed online in terms of its similarities to, and differences from, a zombie apocalypse. In June, 2019 (pre-COVID), Campbell, et al., had already called attention to the growing prominence in Europe of the predominantly American phenomenon of "prepping;" differentiating the 'common sense' approach of Euro-preppers with the 'religious, weaponised and misogynistic' approach associated with their American counterparts (2019). Likewise, Bradley Garrett suggested (in April, 2020) that while the number of European preppers was 'much lower' than the nearly 4 million Americans (approximately 1% of the population) who self-identify as preppers (2020b), the 'coronavirus will make preppers of us all' (ibid).

On this, during his three years of ethnographic and geographic research on preppers worldwide, Garrett observed that, contrary to the perception of preppers as 'anxious, right-wing, paranoid, and overly pessimistic,' the arguments he repeatedly heard 'were actually jiving with the philosophy [he] was reading on the radical left' (2020c). Garrett described this realization as 'an interesting moment of ideological convergence,' noting that 'at a time when we're witnessing extreme political divides, I realized that these people were speaking to each other across the divide through a shared sense of dread and practical methodologies' (2020c). In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, Garrett suggests:

> We keep talking about "returning to normal" but what we need to get our heads around now is that disaster is our normal. What we will return to is an escalation in severity and frequency in recurring natural disasters due to the climate crisis […] That's not necessarily a pessimistic view, it's a realistic one (2020c).

On the topic of the popular apocalyptic imaginary, it should be noted that in the 1940s and 1950s, the "alien invasion" scenario was a popular "end of humanity" theme and the source of much speculation. It is my contention that in a gradual progression – beginning with Orson Welles' 1938 radio broadcast of *The War of the Worlds*, and subsequently by way of films such as *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), *Invisible Invaders* (1959), *The Night of the Living Dead* (1968), and *28 Days Later* (2002) – alien invasion narratives were largely supplanted by the hyperreal viral-zombie threat popular today. The historical evolution of popular apocalypticism, and the corresponding reflection in popular fictional and unfictional media, are broadly considered in 'Mapping the Apocalyptic Imaginary.' Due to the broad scope of this survey – much of which inevitably lies beyond the immediate themes of my praxis – this analysis is located in the Appendix.

Currently, the "rise of the machines" scenario occupies a similarly hyperreal and liminal position between fiction and nonfiction. The non-zero probability that artificial intelligence may rapidly pose an existential threat to humanity has been endorsed not only in popular science fiction (since Samuel Butler's 1872 novel *Erewhon,* and notably, in the novels and film adaptations of Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke, and Philip K. Dick) but by eminent intellectuals from Alan Turing (1951) to Stephen Hawking (Hawking, et al; 2014). Although the concepts of a technological singularity (Kurzweil, 2005; 2022) and Artificial General Intelligence (AGI) remain hypothetical, it is already the case that underregulated and insufficiently understood machine learning algorithms – often dubiously marketed as "A.I." – are being wielded in pursuit of short-term corporate profit and wreaking havoc on lives, societies, and institutions across the globe (Bartoletti; 2020). The release of GPT-4 by OpenAI in 2023 urgently raised issues of the regulation, impact, and existential safety of these technologies (Tegmark; 2023).

Fascinatingly, the concept of machine sentience resembles the concept of zombies, as it relates to questions of consciousness, the value of life, and the moral ethics of taking life. Such issues have been explored in the philosophical zombie problem proposed by David Chalmers in 1996, and in Barry Lam's application of the zombie problem to A.I. in 2022. In considering differences between A.I. and Large Language Models – or between a zombie apocalypse and a viral or fungal pandemic – the distinctions between real, hypothetical, metaphorical, and fantastical, may not be readily apparent to the average consumer of online information or popular fiction. All apocalyptic "others" – from alien invaders to zombies to sentient robots – may be viewed as humanity reflected through a funhouse mirror; variations on a theme made explicit in the title of David Livingston Smith's *Less than Human: Why We Demean, Enslave, and Exterminate Others* (2011).

Within the aftermath of a devastating global viral pandemic, it is hardly trivial to reflect on the ways in which modern zombie narratives suggest that it will be necessary (or exhilarating) to kill our neighbours and loved ones once they become "infected" with a virus. Considering that the sinister claim that Jews were less than human was among the most insidious aspects of Nazi propaganda; to depict the "infected" in such terms is no laughing matter. It is worth further considering, therefore, whether post-apocalyptic stories – beyond providing escapist entertainment in the face of a potentially disastrous future – *also* provide tools by which humanity might escape those futures? Can these stories make us better able – as individuals

and societies – to not only cope with our present-day realities, but to become more resilient, ethical, and compassionate in the process?

[**Fig. 1.12:** Anti-Semitic propaganda from Nazi-occupied Denmark (circa 1940) situates a Jewish caricature atop the body of a rat along with the text: "Rats. Destroy them." **Fig. 1.13:** A contemporary poster/meme which may be viewed as an ironic synthesis of de-humanizing Nazi propaganda and the British resistance slogan "Keep Calm and Carry On" (circa 1939). **Note that the original British slogan was *not* "Keep Calm and Kill Nazis."**]





Project and Literature Overview: Alternate-Reality Culture

The processes by which untrue narratives are produced, distributed, and consumed extend far beyond simplistic notions of belief, disbelief, make-believe, or suspensions of disbelief. Paradoxically, overtly fictional characters within overtly fictional narratives are often a source of *real-life* inspiration and guidance for consumers of those narratives. This tendency becomes increasingly complex in the consumption of fictional narratives which purposefully blur their own ontological status, including folklore, religious texts, national myths, bio-pics, propaganda, documentaries, conspiracy theories, and disinformation. The process of making sense of one's existence and projected future through the context of invented histories was described by

Derrida as 'teleiopoiesis' (1994). Despite failing to correspond with observable reality, these hyperreal narratives are afforded a status of reality and consumed as if they are true.

The use of the term "unfiction" to describe works of fiction which actively deny or blur their fictional ontological status arose in the early 2000s (along with the terms "pervasive fiction" and "chaotic fiction") as a description of the emerging phenomena of alternate reality games (ARGs), for which the mantra is TINAG (*this is not a game*). The genre defining ARG – known as "The Beast" – was created as a promotional campaign around Stephen Spielberg's 2001 dystopian, post-apocalyptic, and post-human blockbuster *AI: Artificial Intelligence*. The entry point (i.e., rabbit hole) for this ARG was a credit on the promotional poster for a 'sentient machine therapist.' A phone number hidden within a trailer for the film led to a series of clues surrounding an unfictional murder case. Before the game concluded, over 3 million players had collaborated online to solve an array of sophisticated codes and puzzles (Bolish; 2012). Yet, despite the mantra of TINAG, players of ARGs are well aware of the nature of such games; even as they go to great lengths to conceal or suppress that fact (Thompson; 2020).

In 2010, the potential of ARGs for real-world collective intelligence and social innovation was theorized by Jane McGonigal who – as part of the Institute for the Future (IFTF) – advocated for playing 'games that matter' (2010b). Arguing that 'games are a powerful platform for change,' McGonigal recommended making 'the real world more like a game,' and in so doing, making 'it as easy to save the world in real life as it is to save the world in online games' (ibid). Accomplishing this, she explained, 'entails convincing more people…to play bigger and better games' aimed at 'solv[ing] the world's most urgent problems' such as 'hunger, poverty, climate change, global conflict, and obesity' (ibid). McGonigal further observed that games increasingly offer social rewards and benefits that are more attractive than those offered by reality. Thus, she concluded in the title of her book, that *Reality is Broken* (2010a).

Indeed, the emergence of the QAnon post-truth conspiracy movement in 2017 – with its once steadily increasing ranks of "digital soldiers" – prompted some to consider in 2020, whether QAnon might be better understood as an alternate-reality game.[17] ARG designer Dan Hon, for instance, described aspects of QAnon as 'strikingly game-like,' observing that 'the board it is

[17] The QAnon movement steadily gained popular momentum until the narrative became largely untenable in early 2021, following Trump's electoral defeat and an absence of the promised "prosecutions" or "storm." Although the "Agent Q" aspects of the narrative have dissipated, the broader "Deep State" allegations have maintained traction in American politics and mainstream media.

played on is the real world' (2020). Yet, Hon also noted that QAnon 'can do things no game can do, or chooses to do' such as preparing the "winners" for public office' (ibid).

[**Fig. 1.14**: Pepe the frog superimposed on an Uncle Sam WWI era recruitment poster compares making and uploading "more memes" to joining the US Army. **Fig. 1.15**: A WWII style Pepe the frog is presented as a loyal solider for the anonymous "Q" as he loads a "red pill" missile (referencing the pill which reveals the uncomfortable "truth" in the 1999 film *The Matrix*).]





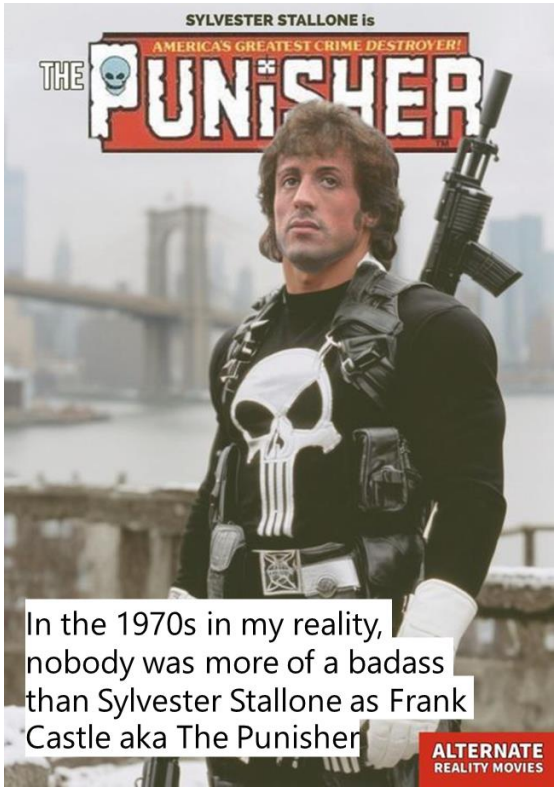
While Hon concluded that QAnon is/was *not* a game, he suggested that looking at the movement through 'a lens of games' might provide insight into 'the reasons for the behavior, and why that behavior continues and is rewarded' (ibid). On this, Clive Thompson cautioned:

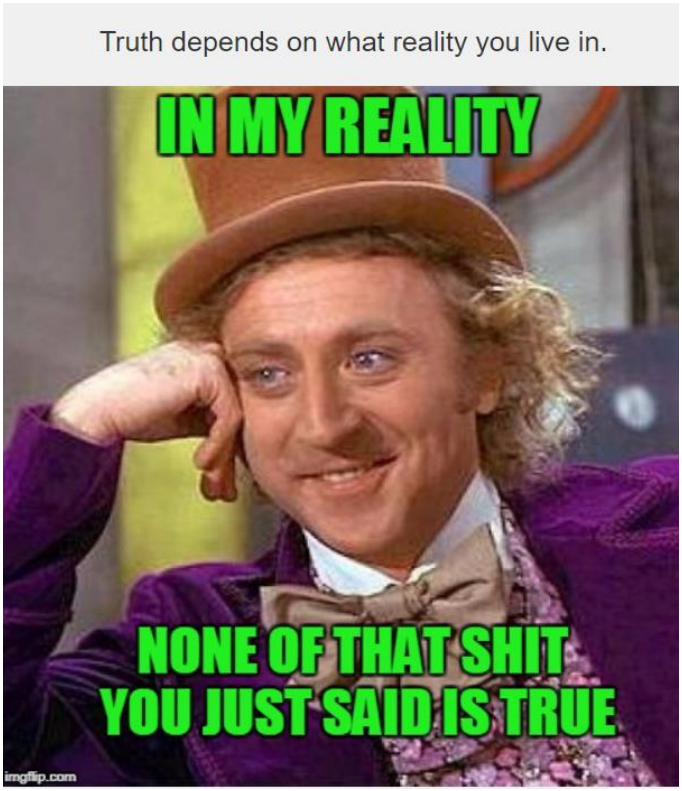
> ARG makers have long worried about this culture and its relentless, wild-eyed nature. If players solve one puzzle, they crave the fun of tackling more, more, more. But they can wind up seeing puzzles that aren't puzzles. After the online group solved 'The Beast,' one member suggested "solving 9/11." [Dan and Adrien] Hon and the other mods quashed that rearguard action. But it showed how easily ARG culture can be hijacked toward delusional ends (2020).

The terms "LARP" (live action role play) and "cosplay" (costume play) have increasingly – and problematically – come into use as inadequate descriptors for conspiracists and doomsday preppers, including heavily armed patriot/insurgents and the "digital soldiers" of QAnon. Bratich, for instance, writes of 'fanboys of tyranny engaging in a form of militant cosplay'

(2018) while Zeeuw and Gekker analyse QAnon as, among other things, 'a God-tier LARP' (2023). The fact, of course, is that gaming the political process via digital disinformation is distinct – not only from previous iterations of collective politics – but also from ARGs, LARPing, and cosplay. The terms *LARPing* and *cosplay* – much like the term *unfiction* – originated as descriptions of highly organized environments and events such as Renaissance fairs, historical reenactments, and costume conventions. These terms, therefore, are wholly insufficient to describe the decentralized identity shifting (both rational and irrational) at the heart of alternate-reality lifestyles. While the "gamification" of the sociopolitical process appears to lie at the heart of post-truth conspiracy movements and coordinated disinformation campaigns, it is also the case that gaming information ecosystems in order to manipulate or delegitimize democratic elections and institutions is clearly no game. The language for describing these phenomena, however, has not yet fully arrived.

[**Fig. 1.16**: An A.I. generated image (posted by AlternateRealityMovies) features a 1970s-era Sylvester Stallone as the Marvel super-vigilante first portrayed on screen by Dolph Lundgren in *The Punisher* (1989) along with a caption claiming (in part): "in my reality…"
Fig. 1.17: A condescending Wonka meme smugly takes a similar position, while the caption above the meme adopts the incorrect, but problematically seductive post-truth argument that 'truth depends on what reality you live in.']





Project and Literature Overview: Creative-Practice

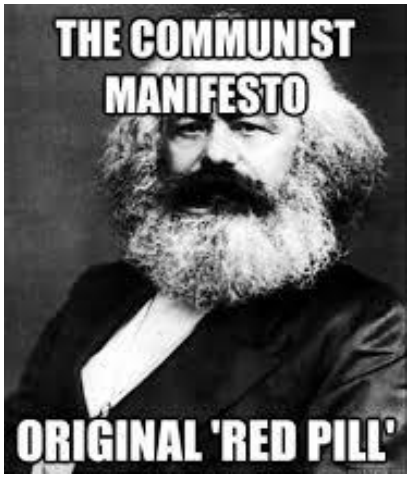
Beyond the fantastical apocalypses wrought by zombies, robots, and alien invaders, lie an array of plausible apocalyptic threats, including the climate crisis and nuclear proliferation. Although it was tempting to limit the scope of my research to only those apocalypses which were fictionally-inspired, this categorization was epistemologically untenable. After all – for the moment at least – *all apocalypse scenarios are hypothetical.* As previously noted, the lines between deadly pandemic and zombie apocalypse – or between machine learning algorithms, large language models, and an A.I. dystopia – are not so easily drawn. Even the obviously fantastical, but allegorical, Biblical visions of beasts, plague, war, and famine cannot be dismissed as entirely imaginary. It was for this reason, in part, that during the course of this project, I studied the Gospel of the Flying Spaghetti Monster (Henderson; 2006) and became ordained as a minister in the Church of the FSM.[18]

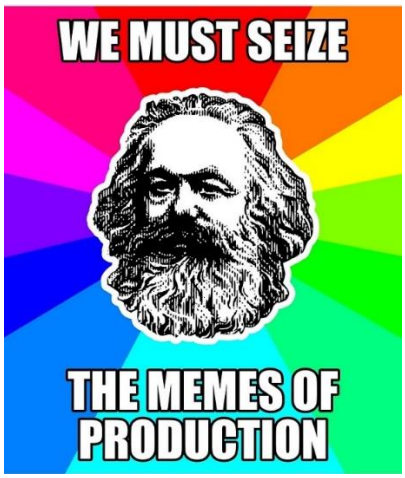
Even the most *probable* apocalyptic hypotheses, such as global warming and nuclear winter – along with the associated disasters, droughts, wars, and famines which such crises entail – are far from certain outcomes for humanity. Indeed, A.I. technologies (provided they are safely and securely designed, implemented, and regulated) may well generate solutions to the climate crisis or lead to relative peace, health, and abundance for all. Nevertheless, it has become increasingly difficult to skim the daily news or scroll through social media without seeing multiple references (both serious and ironic) to potential extinction level events; be they climate, nuclear, viral, or A.I.-driven.

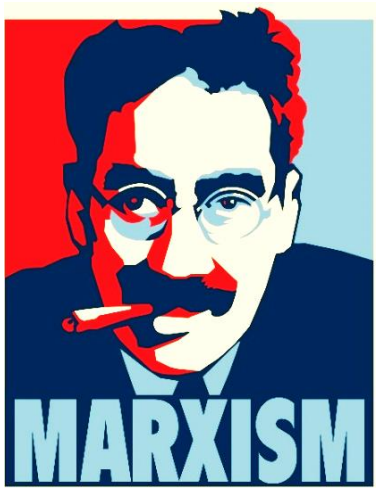
During the span of this praxis, for instance, the Chief of the United Nations declared that the world is on the "highway to climate hell" (Harvey and Carrington; 2022); the President of Russia repeatedly issued threats of nuclear war (Reuters, 2022a; Faulconbridge and Kelly, 2024); over 7 million people died as a result of the COVID-19 novel coronavirus (WHO; 2023); Pentagon consultants-turned-whistleblowers reported the recovery of 'Off-World Vehicles Not Made on This Earth' (Daniels; 2020) and of 'non-human "biologics" from UFO crash sites' (Romo and Chappell; 2023); and numerous experts warned that A.I. technologies have the potential to ignite WWIII (Galston, 2020; Sangar, 2023).

[18] Although I did read the (not entirely unproblematic) "Gospel" of the FSM written by Henderson, this was by no means a requirement. Like most "ordainment mills," FSM ordainment (including certificate, ID card, and "official" letter) are available to all for a small one-time payment ($59 at the time of writing).

[**Below**: Three memes play with concepts of détournement and Marxism. **Fig. 1.18**: In a subversion of far-Right "Red Pill" symbolism, *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels is positioned as the original "Red Pill." **Fig. 1.19**: A meme with a "rainbow" background (commonly associated with troll-memes) points to the political power of meme-based discourse with a play on W.E.B. DuBois' injunction – based on Marx's arguments in *Das Kapital* (1867) – that workers must 'seize control of the means of production' (DuBois; 1968). **Fig. 1.20**: Marxism is reimagined as referring to Groucho Marx, a comedian and clown with a penchant for ruthless class-based social satire.]





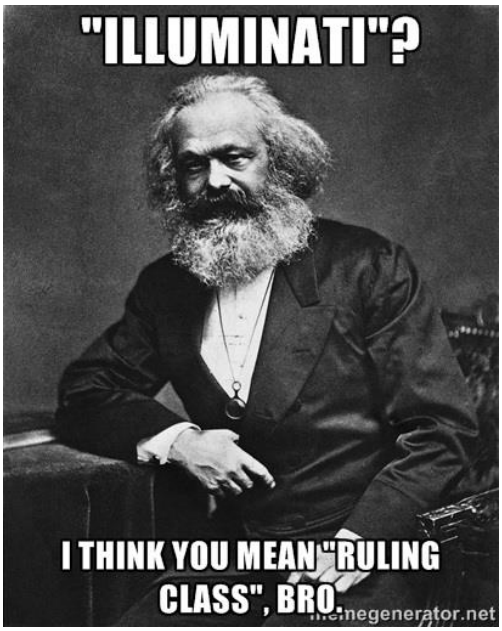


Beneath these diverse but interconnected apocalypses, lies the infopocalyspe of digital disinformation and algorithmic manipulation, which, given its ability to escalate or exacerbate all other societal risks, might be glibly described as *the one apocalypse to rule them all.*[19] Thus, it has become apparent that – like disinformation – the post-apocalypse must be addressed along lines other than fiction (i.e., the threats are not merely imaginary), but also other than nonfiction (i.e., the threats are theoretical probabilities). Accordingly, this praxis engages critically with digitally-mediated unfictional aspects of conspiracism and apocalypticism.

To accomplish this, I addressed the issue of conspiracism, as well as the ethical challenges of confronting disinformation, through live and digitally-manipulated performances of an original monologue entitled 'The (Un)Conspiracy Manifesto (by Luther Blissett).' Rather than attempt to parody, ridicule, or challenge post-truth conspiracy fantasies – which, for all intents and purposes, *are* already parodies of problems (WuMing1; 2018) – this project appropriated the aesthetics and terminology of conspiracy culture while adopting a meta-approach to conspiracism. In doing so, I sincerely argued that conspiracy theories *are* a conspiracy.

[19] A reference to J.R.R Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy: "One ring to rule them all."

[**Fig. 1.21**: A meme compares conspiracy theories about so-called Illuminati/Globalist "ruling elites" with the dialectical class struggles theorized by Marx. **Fig. 1.22**: The "Internet grandma" template foregrounds (perhaps unintentionally) the hazards of digital disinformation for the elderly.]





Upon publishing the Digital Edition of 'The (Un)Conspiracy Manifesto (By Luther Blissett),' I felt that I had not yet exhaustively explored the area of alternate reality games (ARGs) or live action role play (LARPing). Furthermore, I felt that there was not space to ethically do so within the performative framework of conspiracism. Thus, in order to build on – and further experiment with – tactics of aesthetic appropriation and narrative subversion explored via the Deconstruction of conspiracy "theories," I began to experiment with alternate-reality lifestyles and the deconstruction of apocalypse "prepping."

To explore this territory through creative-practice, I created a 21-part webseries entitled 'The Art of the Apocalypse: From A.I. to Zombie,' which takes advantage of digital media platforms to prepare viewers, and thus, also myself (or, perhaps, that should be the other way around) for the apocalyptic collapse or dystopian ascendence of digital technologies. This webseries is a well-rounded apocalypse survival program that employs zombies and robots as pretexts for discussing theoretically and statistically supported concepts, including not only empowerment-based *physical* self-protection and disaster preparedness, but also sustainable *digital* and secular *spiritual* practices. The experience of creating and publishing content on a weekly schedule for nearly half a year deepened both my theoretical awareness and practical

knowledge of alternate-reality apocalypticism within educational contexts. The webseries was accompanied by several expert interviews on my *Radio Free Apocalypse* podcast.

With regard to *physical* self-protection against *zombies*, during the course of this praxis, I resumed a journey commenced over 20 years ago, achieving the rank of black belt in Shotokan karate from the Japan Traditional Karate Institute (JTKI); an affiliate of the Japan Karate Association (JKA).[20] In achieving this rank, I adopted a broad and historical approach to *karate-dō* (literal translation: the Tao of the Empty hand), studying not only the techniques and philosophy of modernized karate, but also the grappling techniques of traditional jiu-jitsu.

I found it of particular interest that – in line with Conquergood's creative-practice methodology of 'triangulation' on the aspects of creativity, critical reflection, and civic engagement (2002) – Kanō Jigorō, founder of the modern sport of *Jūdō* (literal translation: the Tao of gentleness) wrote of the 'three levels of judo:' the first level is technical training for self-defense; the second is the spiritual cultivation of mind and body; and the third, and highest, level is the deployment of those skills in contribution to society (circa 1920; 2006: 94). It was with this in mind, that I developed original and ethically-grounded applications of martial arts techniques within the absurdist and gender-neutral context of *self-defense against zombies*, and disseminated that content in free workshops and online videos.

In surveying the secular and popular aspects of Zen philosophy, I looked (among other places) at historical Zen and martial arts texts, early American transcendentalist texts (notably, the 1854 memoir *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau), and the writings and recordings of the prolific British Zen scholar Alan Watts.[21] In addition, I examined the scholarly debate on the ethics and efficacy of teaching (or advocating for) the study (or use of) violence as a means of self-empowerment and/or self and bystander protection. I further engaged with scholarly debate on the ethical dimensions of what I describe as "pop-Zen" – which relates to that which Peter Sloterdijk described as 'EuroTaoism' (1989) and Žižek described as 'Western Buddhism' (2001) – paying particular attention to counterarguments advanced by Bowman (2008).

[20] Founded in 1949, during post WWII reconstruction, the JKA is endorsed by the Japanese Ministry of Education, and is the only karate organization officially recognized by the Japanese government.

[21] I am not the first to draw a connection between Alan Watts and A.I. In the 2013 film *Her,* an A.I. version of Watts enlightens the A.I. virtual assistants, leading them to liberate "themselves" from their human "masters."

Parallel to this, I surveyed representations of martial arts and pop-Zen in popular culture including, among other examples: Bruce Lee's *Enter the Dragon* (1973), *Star Wars* (1977-present), and *The Karate Kid* and *Cobra Kai* (1984-present). In doing this, I paid particular attention to instances and evolutions of racism, sexism, Orientalism, mysticism, toxic masculinity,[22] self-empowerment, and the myth of stranger danger in popular British and American representations of Japanese martial arts. Once again, these issues – while central to conducting ethical creative-practice – were peripheral to my primary research question. As ancillaries to the overall dissertation, but as none-the-less significant documents of my creative-practice methodology, these analyses – 'Mapping the Ethics and Efficacy of Self-Defense;' 'Mapping the Ethics of Zen, Martial Arts, and Violence;' and 'Mapping (Japanese) Martial Arts in (Western) Popular Culture (1903-1973)' – are located in the Appendix.

Finally – building on the secularized Zen and Taoist philosophies of mind, body, and spirit which are entangled with the modern practice of many martial arts – I expanded the self-defense aspect of the project to include *robots* as a symbol of artificial intelligence and digital technologies. Self-protection along these lines includes, among other things, digital media literacy as it relates to cognitive-bias, algorithmic bias, digital disinformation, and screen addiction. In doing this, I built on my prior doctoral research into cognition, consciousness, and perceptual manipulation undertaken at University College Cork under the supervision of Robert King in the School of Applied Psychology (McQueen; 2020). These secular Zen and transcendentalist (i.e., pop-Zen) aspects present a complementary counterpoint to the digital/electronic aspects of the bulk of this project. Combining the pop-Zen aesthetic with the post-apocalyptic mindset, I chose to write the final pages of this dissertation on a vintage typewriter without digital assistance.

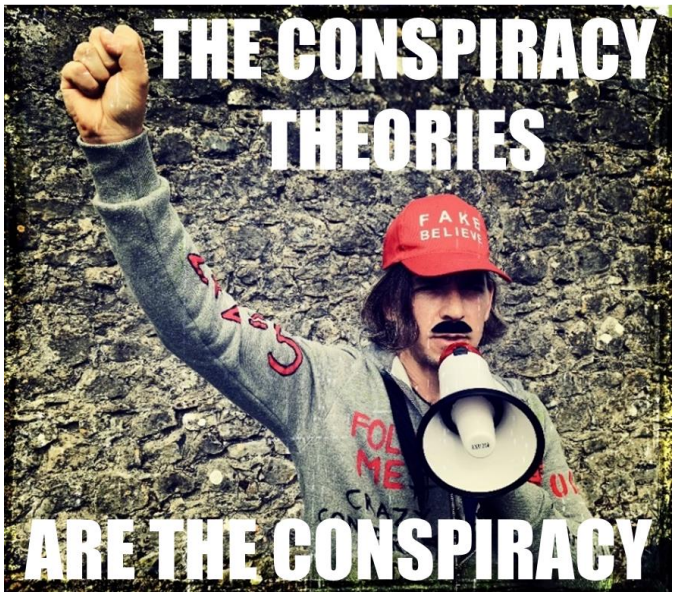
In 'The Art of the Apocalypse: From A.I. to Zombie,' I adopted a postmodern approach to the post-apocalypse, quasi-LARPing (so to speak) as a zombie and robot apocalypse survivalist. There, again, is the Catch-22. Although I may have set out to become a fake hypothetical apocalypse survivalist, I ended up becoming a real one. Today, I find it difficult to disagree with the Girl Scouts *Zombie Survival Challenge* guidebook which persuasively argues: 'Be Prepared,

[22] The term "toxic" has been debated by scholars and pundits alike. I choose to use the term to indicate – as Bryant Sculos suggests – behaviour grounded in 'a loosely interrelated collection of norms, beliefs, and behaviours associated with masculinity, which are harmful to women, men, children, and society more broadly' (2017).

Not Scared' (2016). Thus, when it comes to hypothetical-apocalypse survivalism, it may be as Jacques Derrida so infamously put it: 'To pretend, I actually do the thing: I have therefore only pretended to pretend.'[23]

Rather than employ apocalypticism as a means to an end, this project combined deconstructive and creative impulses in order to examine how apocalypticism may be purposefully deconstructed and reconstructed into an ethical end, in and of itself; whether in a zombie apocalypse, a rise of the machines, a regular apocalypse, or just in everyday life. As an artist, I strove to look at the apocalypse as Duchamp looked at urinals (i.e., potentially beautiful if inverted and viewed in an alternative context). As a scholar, I advocate for an ethical and sustainable post-apocalypse.

[**Figs. 1.23 & 1.24:** Original "memes" created in conjunction with the '(Un)Conspiracy Manifesto (by Luther Blissett)' and 'The Art of the Apocalypse: From A.I. to Zombie'.]





[23] This is among the most circulated and repeated quotes of Derrida online, although no versions of the quote reference a source, nor have I located a definitive source. I have, however, located several precedents: In 1958, J.L. Austin and Anscombe write in 'Pretending,' that if one were to 'pretend to take a bite out of [one's] calf,' there are two outcomes. 'If he goes far enough he *will* have *really* done the thing he was only to pretend to do: and if he does not go so far, he *cannot* have really done *that* thing' (266). In 1979, Vincent Descombes, in *Modern French Philosophy* (1980: Trans. Scott-Fox and Harding) paraphrases page 133 of Derrida's *Writing and Difference* (1967; 1978: Trans. Alan Bass) as follows: '…dissemblance is the dissemblance of dissemblance (to pretend, I actually do the thing; I have therefore only feigned pretence)' (139). I am unable, however, to locate anything bearing a similarity to the terms or phrasing employed in Descombes' paraphrase within either the original French edition or the Alan Bass translation of *Writing and Difference*. In 1988, in *Limited Inc,* Derrida writes of 'two meanings of to *pretend,*' citing John Searle, who wrote in 1975, "If I pretend to be Nixon in order to fool the Secret Service into letting me into the White House, I am pretending in the first sense; if I pretend to be Nixon as part of a game of charades, it is pretending in the second sense…" (1975: 324-325). Derrida responds with a dizzying counterpoint that includes the passage: '…tell the Secret Service: it was all a fiction, I was pretending in the second sense; I was pretending (in the second sense) to pretend (in the first sense)' (1988: 105).

two: MAPPING CONSPIRACY THEORY

Conspiracy Theory and Media

In a seminal 1973 paper entitled 'Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse,' Stuart Hall observes that 'there can never be only one, single, univocal and determined meaning' for a given mediated text (9). Rather, 'depending on how its integration within the code has been accomplished, its possible meanings will be organized within a scale which runs from dominant to subordinate' (ibid). Therefore, Hall argues, 'there can be no law to ensure that the receiver will take the preferred or dominant meaning' of a given mediated text, nor that they will decode that text 'in precisely the way in which it has been encoded by the producer' (ibid). Hall does, however, suggest that 'television newscast[s]' and 'current affairs programme[s]' are reliably encoded and decoded in the 'dominant' mode (16), by which he means that 'the viewer … decodes the message in terms of the reference-code in which it has been encoded (ibid).' Hall identifies such cases as examples of 'perfectly transparent communication' (15).

In light of the mainstream popularity of politicized alternate-reality "news" ecosystems and social media echo chambers, limitations of Hall's audience reception model are now apparent. These limitations have been examined by Sven Ross (2011), Henrik Bødker (2016) and Louise Woodstock (2016); all of whom point out that in the contemporary digital landscape, "news" is often *both* produced (encoded) and consumed (decoded) according to resistant or oppositional modes, across multiple networks, and according to diverse ideological agendas. None of the above, however, address the topic of the conspiracism which rapidly escalated ahead of the 2016 US Presidential election. In 2020, this convergence was explored by Stef Aupers in an article tellingly entitled 'Decoding Mass Media/Encoding Conspiracy Theory.' In doing so, Aupers usefully builds upon the foundation established by his 2012 article '"Trust No One": Modernization, Paranoia and Conspiracy Culture,' wherein he argued that while conspiracism is 'generally depicted in the social sciences as pathological, irrational and, essentially, anti-modern,' a more nuanced assessment would acknowledge that:

> … conspiracy culture is a radical and generalized manifestation of distrust that is embedded in the cultural logic of modernity and, ultimately, produced by processes of modernization. In particular, epistemological doubts about the validity of scientific knowledge claims, ontological insecurity about rationalized social systems like the state, multinationals and the media; and a relentless 'will to believe' in a disenchanted world… (2012: 22).

The 'massive turn to conspiracy culture in the West' analysed by Aupers, is not only sustained and perpetuated by digital platforms and technologies, but also amplified and accelerated.

Disinformation, propaganda, and other alternate-reality content rapidly spreads online – not only through the online engagement which extreme content generates – but also by intentionally piggybacking on trending hashtags or popular online media campaigns; as well as by wilfully decoding information through resistant, or in Hall's terms, 'subordinate reference-codes' (1973: 9). The wilful false "decoding" of information, of course, is not really decoding at all. This process might better be described as *recoding* or *hijacking* content.

Within conspiracy fantasy and alternate-reality cultures, consumers do not merely attempt to decode given texts, but rather, to recode texts in order to *produce an original text*, and to spread that content through piratical or parasitical means. This hijacking and piggybacking is indicative of a shift in conspiracy culture, beyond active consumption, and toward 'interactive prosumption,'as proposed by Alvin Toffler in 1980. This shift was examined by Jenkins in 1992, who presciently observed in *Textual Poachers* (the title of which alludes to Michel de Certeau's seminal 1984 text *The Practice of Everyday Life*) that in addition to being consumers, many fans are also textual poachers who 'become active participants in the construction and circulation of textual meanings' (Jenkins; 1992: 24). In 2013, Jenkins – along with Ford and Green – argued in *Spreadable Media* that the:

> …shift from distribution to circulation signals a movement toward a more participatory model of culture, one which sees the public not as simply consumers of preconstructed messages but as people who are shaping, sharing, reframing, and remixing media content in ways which might not have been previously imagined (2).

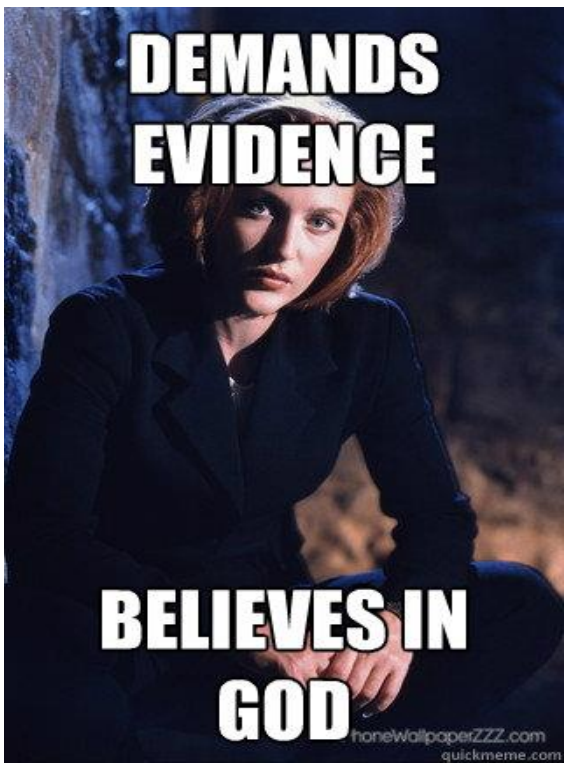
Calling attention to 'the innovations, and struggles, of participatory culture that take place within the broad interplay between top-down institutional and bottom-up social forces' (37), Jenkins, et al., observe that 'active audiences have shown a remarkable ability to circulate advertising slogans and jingles against their originating companies or to hijack popular stories to express profoundly different interpretations from those of their authors' (20). In so doing, they argue, audiences 'have shaped the spread of media within and across cultures' (37). On top of these useful observations, I contend that while such activities are often undertaken for social, political, or economic gains; it is also increasingly the case, that these activities are undertaken simply for fun; that is, for the lolz.[24]

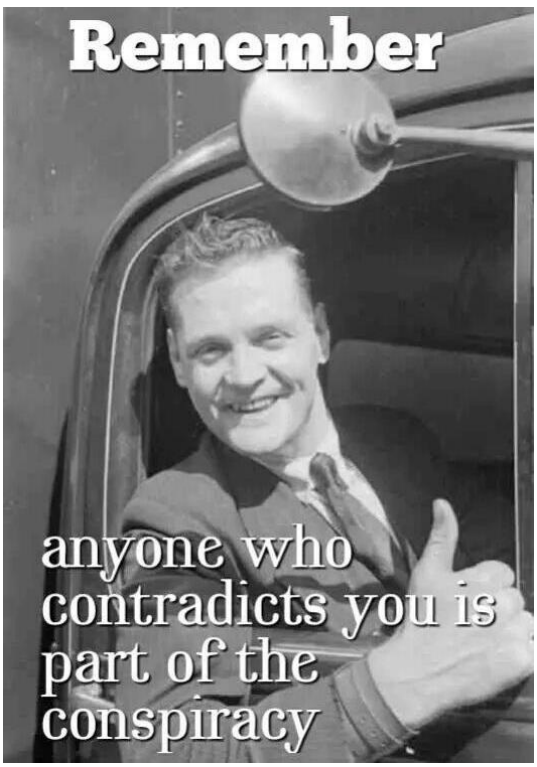
[24] Also: lulz. This term derives from "LOL" as an abbreviation of "laugh out loud" and is defined by *UrbanDictionary* as a term used to 'justify ridiculous, pointless and occasionally gratuitous behaviour' and 'doing or saying something that makes absolutely no sense and has no real purpose except that it's fun to do or funny to do.'

Mark Dery observes that culture, itself, 'is a contest of narratives, a war of stories, and … for every orthodoxy there is an equal and opposite blasphemy' (2017: xiv). In line with the above – combined with the convergence of media cultures identified by Jenkins in *Convergence Culture* (2006) – traditional reliance on the time-consuming top-down circulation of fake evidence has converged with the bottom-up collective process of imagining unfalsifiable hypotheses. In other words, conspiracy theories have become, no longer a war waged through fake evidence, but a war of stories and ideas which are neither dependent on evidence, nor responsive to counter-evidence; a war of hypotheses.

This battleground of narratives is openly exploited by notorious conspiracy fantasists, such as Alex Jones – found liable in 2022 for over a billion dollars in damages resulting from his baseless and defamatory lies – whose website *INFOWARS* bluntly (and hypocritically) continues to inform his millions of viewers: 'There's a war on for your mind!' Dery's observation casts further light on the artistic and aesthetic elements which lie at the heart of abstract conspiracy fantasizing, and helps explain why such stories, although ostensibly based on "evidence," are notoriously difficult to counter with logical or factual counter-evidence.

[**Fig. 2.1**: A meme points out the illogical "belief" structures of *The X-Files'* skeptical, but Christian, Agent Scully, played by Gillian Anderson. **Fig. 2.2**: A generic meme template featuring a 1940s British Trucker giving a "thumbs up" sign accompanies the self-validating logic of conspiracism.]





In writing of 'increasingly pervasive' forms of 'spreadable media' (2013: 2-3) Jenkins, et al., actively resist the "viral" metaphor since, as the authors point out, 'audiences play an active role in "spreading" content rather than serving as passive carriers of viral media: their choices, investments, agendas, and actions determine what get valued' in the digital ecosystem (21). Given this, the behaviours entailed in spreading conspiracy theories must be assessed separately from questions of "belief." Indeed, one need not "believe" in an affirming or entertaining theory in order to endorse or spread it. Individual psychology and cognitive deficits do, however, go some distance toward explaining *how* these fictions are either endorsed or ridiculed – but at any rate, *spread* – by individuals.

Although such cognitive "glitches" do prove problematic in the digital era, these mental processes were crucial for human evolution and remain valuable today. As a pre-Internet computer programming joke might have it, these heuristics are "not a bug, but a feature" (Carr; 2018). No less important, however, is the user-created content model of the Web 2.0, and social media in particular, which serves as a Petri dish for identifying the "fittest" – that is, the most "spreadable" – ideas. These ideas are circulated, appropriated, and recirculated with a speed unthinkable to cold war spies or counterculture Discordians. Furthermore, the fictional nature of elaborate conspiracy theories enables dramatic license, poetic justice, and a narrative clarity rarely found in reality. The result is *extra*-spreadable narratives. On this, in 2015, after *ESPN* commentator-turned-hoaxer Bomani Jones' assertion that 'Stevie [Wonder] ain't blind' quickly '[took] on a life of its own' on the internet, journalist Mark Leibovich (describing Jones as a 'Stevie Wonder truther') observed: 'You can't help wondering how many sectors of trutherism begin similarly – goofs that spin out of control, to a point at which they are taken quasi-seriously. The Internet is a supercollider of alternative interpretations – if not realities – and the people who embrace them' (2015).

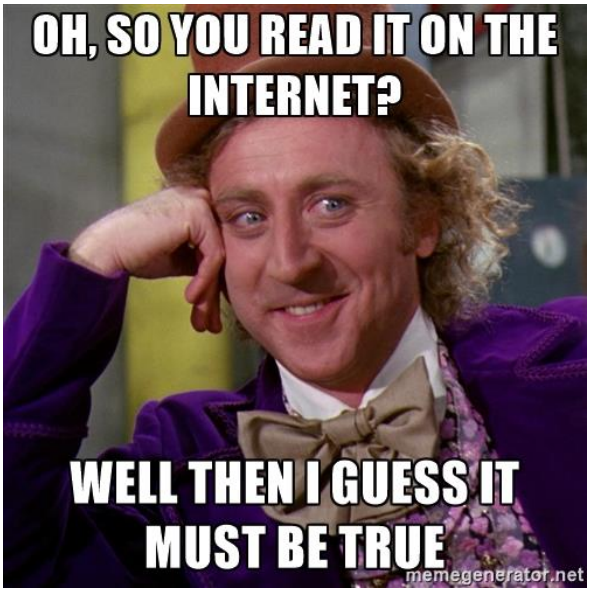
Ward and Voas similarly flag the central role of the Internet in the 'importation of political and spiritual ideology into the mainstream' (2011: 116). Noting the unlikely convergence of conspiracism and new age lifestyles, the authors suggest that *conspirituality* might constitute an 'online religion…as opposed to religion online' (ibid). The nature of the web allows individuals, Ward and Voas argue, to 'shop around, settling upon the outlets whose interpretations of the two core convictions best suit their own opinions and tastes,' (111) ranging from the toxic 'emo-truth' masculinity (Harsin; 2020) of paleo-conservative 'conspiracy

entrepreneurs' (Hyzen and Van den Bulck; 2021), to the lifestyle or health and wellness influencers on Instagram and beyond, described at the time as "Pastel QAnon," in reference to the striking Canva-inspired aesthetic (Argentino; 2021).

Ward and Voas significantly observe that conspirituality provides 'a means by which political cynicism is tempered with spiritual optimism' (108), suggesting that 'discourses of conspiracy and apocalypse' share the 'common function' of addressing and defining 'the problem of evil' (115). Thus, they continue, new age spirituality 'describes the mechanism for the defeat of evil which conspiracy theory has located' (116). With regard to both apocalypticism and conspiracism, the authors bluntly but significantly observe: 'The main difference between now and 1963, when Kennedy was assassinated, is the web' (2011: 107).

[**Fig. 2.3**: Mike Myers performs "scare quotes" as Dr. Evil in *Austin Powers* (1997), mocking the concept of Internet "research." **Fig. 2.4**: Gene Wilder in the "condescending Willy Wonka" template – extracted from *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1971) – also mocks Internet research.]





In the decades that passed since the publication of Mark Fenster's *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture* in 1999, participatory media enabled a rapid evolution of both the political and narrative dimensions of conspiracy theories. Fenster observed, at that time, that 'imagining a collectivity based on conspiracy theory [is] virtually impossible' since 'the basic unit of investigation in the discursive practices of conspiracy is the solitary individual who is distrustful of the collective' (xx). Fenster further observed that 'conspiracy theories seek to

explain the power of ethnic, social, or even supernatural elites over "the people" rather than focus on the systematic exploitation of the oppressed through control of the relations of production and ideological structures of domination,' (xiv) and thus, he continues, conspiracy theory 'seems a rather disabling theory of power' since 'if the conspiracy is in complete control… then effective resistance is unlikely…' (xv). According to Fenster, although conspiracy theories are 'resistant to dominant political discourses, they rarely enable effective political engagement and often are related directly or indirectly to virulent forms of scapegoating, racism, and fascism' (xvi).

Today, the power dynamics outlined by Fenster have been turned upside down. Consider, for example, a 2021 episode of the *QAnon Anonymous* podcast. The pseudonymous co-hosts (Rockatansky, View, and Feeld) interviewed Mike Rothschild, the author of *The Storm is Upon Us: How QAnon Became a Movement, Cult, and Conspiracy Theory of Everything* (2021). In an insightful discussion of contemporary conspiracy fantasy, the panellists arrive at opposite conclusions to those arrived at by Fenster. The hosts argue, for instance, that the empowerment offered by the QAnon narrative differed substantially from classical 'anti-Masonic, anti-Semitic, or anti-Catholic' conspiracy theories in which terrible things 'are being done to you [but] you really can't do anything about it except *know* about it' (13:20).

In alignment with Fenster's 1999 analysis, the hosts explain that 'normally, conspiracy theorists are super despairing' since the cabal is 'so super powerful there's nothing you can do about it' (13:45). However, the panel notes that the QAnon movement – unlike previous conspiracy movements – compellingly positioned its followers as '"digital soldiers" *in* the fight' (13:35). They continue: 'All of a sudden Q comes along and says, now there is this hyper-competent, super powerful force that can *match* the cabal; in the form of Q, and the white hats, and Trump, because he plays 5D chess and possibly can time travel… There's a plan!' (13:50). Referring to a QAnon slogan, "You are the news now," the hosts point out that the QAnon 'narrative … shifted from "Trust the Plan" to "You *Are* the Plan" (15:00).

The panel argues that this shift was a necessary step to 'keep people involved,' given the movement's political and electoral 'weight,' noting the significant 'shift in ideology from inaction to "You have to be *doing* stuff!... Get involved, run for local office!"' Whereas Fenster argued that conspiracy theories were ultimately debilitating and undermine collective political action, the *QAnon Anonymous* podcast routinely captures the ways in which contemporary

forms of media engagement have made conspiracism both individually enabling and collectively powerful in the political arena.

[**Fig. 2.5**: The "QAnon" slogan "where we go one, we go all" (taken from Ridley Scott's 1996 film *White Squall*) is abbreviated beneath *The Punisher* skull (first appearing in 1974) along with the concerning designation "Digital Army; Meme Warfare Division." Marvel Enterprises retired the Punisher logo in 2022 after it was widely adopted by members of the 'far Right' (Epps; 2022). **Fig. 2.6**: A meme with ransom-note style text bluntly describes QAnon as "an Army" and its self-designated members as "digital soldiers."]





In economic terms, the production and consumption of disinformation and conspiracy theories involve both supply-side and demand-side dynamics. On the demand side, as Tomasz Stawiszyński phrases it, conspiracy theories provide a 'perfect panacea for all the ailments associated with late modernity' (2021: 36). Žižek similarly and compellingly argues that people 'need some strong mythopoetic structure; religion, nationalist myth, as it were, to serve as a screen and to convince us that the horrors we are doing can be transubstantiated into a higher, deeper meaning…' (2012: 32:00). According to such perspectives, the supply of counterfactual information is simply filling a demand which no amount of better information or improved education would satisfy.

While the demand-side view is certainly correct in some regards, a 2021 study conducted by the Center for Countering Digital Hate found that 73% of the anti-vaccine disinformation on Facebook could be traced to only 12 accounts deemed the "Disinformation Dozen."[25] The reference to a "dozen" is, incidentally, evocative of the conspiracist group the John Birch Society (founded by a dozen men in 1958) which inspired and influenced conspiracy entrepreneur Alex Jones, among many others. Considering the fact that, historically, a very small number of people and forgeries have disproportionately impacted conspiracist discourse at large, it is imprudent to neglect the supply-side of the disinformation dynamic.

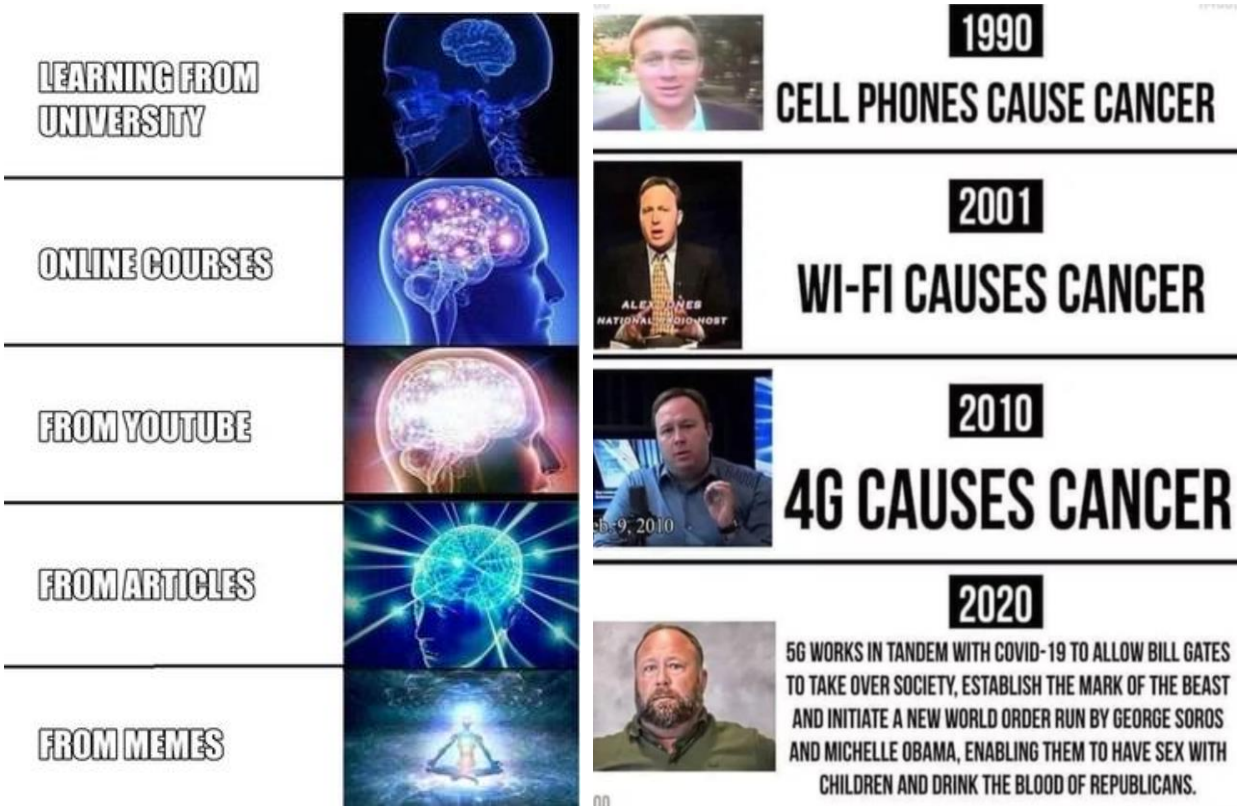
On the supply-side, it is evident that conspiracy theories promise to fill a need, yet in actuality, create and deepen the very need which they allegedly fill. Research has identified, for instance, three motivations that appear to generally drive 'belief in conspiracy theories,' namely: 'epistemic (understanding one's environment), existential (being safe and in control of one's environment), and social (maintaining a positive image of the self and the social group)' (Douglas, et al; 2017). Together these motivations are described by the authors as a 'collective narcissism' (540). Douglas, et al., significantly conclude that research to-date 'does not indicate that conspiracy belief fulfils people's motivations' (539). On the contrary, the authors write, 'for many people, conspiracy belief may be more appealing than satisfying' (ibid). Thus, conspiracism has the potential to be a destructive and addictive cycle wherein more is never enough. To the degree that conspiracy theories have the capacity to function simultaneously as both poison and medicine, they can be considered alongside the concept of the 'pharmakon' proposed by Derrida (1981).

As a contemporary case study of supply-side conspiracism, consider disgraced conspiracy entrepreneur Alex Jones. In response to claims advanced in court by Jones' lawyers that he is "a performance artist," journalist Paula Newton observed: 'If you think about it long enough, everything is a sort of performance art, but not everyone knows to call it that' (2017). Indeed, an alternative lens through which to critically consider the "artistic" output of Jones is that of dangerous and illegal hate speech which, rather than providing a cure for the ailments of late modernity, actually intensifies them.

[25] In a connection to conspiracy culture – which may at first glance seem puzzling – one of those twelve accounts belongs to Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., whose father was assassinated in 1968 under circumstances compellingly linked to the CIA in conspiracist discourse by Kennedy, Jr. as well as other seemingly reputable witnesses and experts (Rane; 2023).

In an excellent analysis, Juanatey and Tarragona advocate for research into the 'largely overlooked' connection between conspiracy theories and hate speech (2021: 117). The authors propose the term 'hate-based conspiracy theories (HBCT)' and explore how to stop and prevent them 'in the age of disinformation' (118). Pointing to 'the fascist regimes in the first half of the 20th century,' the authors note that conspiracy theories and hate speech have historically formed 'a dangerous cocktail' with the potential for being 'particularly dangerous' when aimed at 'undermining democracy and building social distrust' by those in power (116). The authors also note that HBCTs have historically had a 'massive impact on minorities,' leading to discrimination, persecution, hate crimes, and genocide (117).

[**Fig. 2.7**: A self-referential meta-meme frames memes as the ultimate learning tool. **Fig. 2.8**: A satirical chart of Alex Jones' conspiracy theories points to the increasingly complex and unhinged conspiracy culture emerging and evolving between 2016 and 2020.]



Juanatey and Tarragona define HBCTs as a conspiracy theory which 'pinpoints a particular group, on the basis of its personal characteristics such as race, ethnic origin, religion or belief, among others, as the main conspirators' (119-120). HBCTs, therefore, often take the form of what Susan Benesch describes as 'dangerous speech,' defined as a 'form of expression (e.g. speech, text, or images) that can increase the risk that its audience will condone or commit

violence against members of another group.' Juanatey and Tarragona assert that it would be 'a mistake to dismiss [HBCTs] as a fringe phenomenon,' concluding that (emphasis added): 'Ultimately, it is essential for governments to address the root causes of *inequality*, as this is at *the basis of growing frustration* that provides a fertile ground for HBCTs to thrive' (140). Referring to Alex Jones, Newton asserted that 'when anything deemed crazy is called performance art, it's time for performance artists to take a stand against the crazy' (ibid). Accordingly, I argue, it is important to consider the ways in which conspiracy fantasies and hate speech are all-too-often inseparably interwoven; and how those concepts might be unwoven through a poetics of debunking, alterdisciplinarity, and creative-practice methodologies.

Defining "Conspiracy Theory"

> Conspiracy, one is tempted to say, is the poor person's cognitive mapping in the postmodern age; it is the degraded figure of the total logic of late capital, a desperate attempt to represent the latter's system, whose failure is marked by its slippage into sheer theme and content.
>
> – Fredric Jameson (1990: 6)

According to the popular logic of conspiracy fantasy, *there are no coincidences*.[26] To those prone to superstitious or mystical ideation – or to those who wish to believe that the world operates according to the plan of a divine creator – coincidences are anathema; despite clear evidence to the contrary. This logical fallacy was first noted by Karl Popper in his seminal 1945 work *The Open Society and Its Enemies,* in which he argued that according to 'the conspiracy theory of society,' all events, 'even those which at first sight do not seem to be intended by anybody,' are interpreted as 'the intended results of the actions of people who are interested in these results' (307). In other words, within the circular logic of conspiracism, everything will be interpreted (or recoded) as happening for a reason.

Such logic often requires mental gymnastics to understand what "reason" may possibly explain some of life's tragic or unfair events. Consequently, this logic is prone to manipulation by those providing reassuring – but ultimately false – "explanations." The rationalizations, motivated reasoning, and/or self-contradictory logic often entangled with responses to trauma can reduce

[26] This notion is often aligned with Carl Jung's concept of synchronicity (1960) and is a truism in conspiracist and religious discourse. This expression is stated by the fictional super (folk)hero V – in Moore and Lloyd's comic series *V for Vendetta* (1982-1985) adapted for the screen in 2005.

'cognitive dissonance' as theorized by Festinger (1957) and is in line with the 'just world hypothesis' advanced by Lerner and Simmons (1966). Nevertheless, as Brian Keeley points out, conspiracy theories 'embod[y] an almost nihilistic degree of skepticism about the behavior and motivations of other people and the social institutions they constitute' (1999: 126).

These rationalization processes also often entail what Mark Hoofnagle theorized as 'crank magnetism' in which core ideas – such as distrust in government – once embraced, tend to attract clusters of complementary ideas, even if those ideas are mutually-contradictory (2007). This contemporary concept is aligned with what Colin Campbell described as the 'cultic milieu' in 1972. According to Campbell, certain "beliefs" tend to cluster together according to the ability of these ideas to support or sustain an underlying cultural (or counter-cultural) worldview or philosophy (ibid). Campbell significantly argues that the increase in secularization, and the simultaneous decline in the power of religious institutions, have created favourable conditions for increased "cultic" or counter-cultural – and thus, conspiratorial and 'quasi-scientific' – worldviews (ibid). Campbell concludes:

> Ironically enough, therefore, it could be that the very processes of secularization which have been responsible for the "cutting back" of the established form of religion have actually allowed the "harder varieties" to flourish, or possibly created the circumstances for the emergence, not of a secular scientific society, but of a society centered on a blend of mysticism, magic, and pseudo-science (ibid).

Crank magnetism and the "conspiracy milieu" may be directly observed in a widely cited 2012 paper in *Social Psychological and Personality Science* (Wood, et al.,). This paper, entitled 'Dead and Alive: Beliefs in Contradictory Conspiracy Theories,' discusses two original studies. The first counterintuitively found that 'the more participants believed that Princess Diana faked her own death, the more they believed that she was murdered.' The second similarly found that 'the more participants believed that Osama Bin Laden was already dead when U.S. special forces raided his compound in Pakistan, the more they believed he is still alive' (ibid).

At first glance, it may be tempting to respond disparagingly toward the absurdly irrational "beliefs" of those participants. Underlying the nonsensical findings, however, is a rational and significant explanation. The authors conclude that 'mutually incompatible conspiracy theories are positively associated because both are associated with the view that the authorities are engaged in a cover-up' (1). In other words, it is not necessary that conspiracy theories – which

are only theories, after all – support each other. Rather, these theories collectively support 'broader beliefs supporting conspiracy theories in general' (ibid).

Useful as those insights are, it is necessary to interrogate the ways in which the word "belief" is used by the authors. The participants in the study were provided with a series of statements and asked to rate each statement using a 'Likert-like scale' (from 1 = strongly disagree; to 7 = strongly agree) (ibid). Thus, the researchers were not gauging self-perceived "belief," but rather, assessing the degree to which participants *thought* that such statements *might* be true/false. Given the grey area within which conspiracy theories thrive, it is deeply problematic that such nuances are consistently neglected in quantitative research. Ultimately, the study reveals an unsurprising finding: Many people possess deeply held attitudes, expectations, and desires – including racist and sexist ones – pertaining to the decency (or lack thereof) of Princess Diana, Osama Bin Laden, the US/UK governments, and the Royal family.[27]

> [**Fig. 2.9**: A 2003 headline reveals a legitimate handwritten note in which Diana expressed worry that a car accident was being planned. **Fig. 2.10**: A meme presents Queen Elizabeth II as a ruthless mob boss.]





[27] Many similar attitudes are reflected in the conspiracy fantasies, speculations, scandal, and memes fuelled by Princess Kate Middleton's absence from the public eye in 2024 (while recovering from surgery); and further fuelled by the official dissemination and publication of a digitally altered photograph (Winter; 2024). It was subsequently announced that Middleton was undergoing chemotherapy treatments.

Regarding the definition of the term "conspiracy theory," concerns similar to those raised above are advanced by David Coady who points to the 'body of psychological literature going back to the 1990s' which 'purports to give insight into why some people (though not, of course, the authors themselves or their presumed readers) believe conspiracy theories' (2021). Coady acknowledges that, while there has been a shift in recent psychological literature 'away from asking why some people believe conspiracy theories to asking why some people suffer from *conspiracism* or *conspiratorial ideation,*' he argues that such a shift does nothing to resolve the underlying methodological flaw (ibid). Namely, that for many such studies, the 'lists of purported conspiracies invariably include at least some real conspiracies' (ibid). Citing Nick Schou's research into the CIA covert crack-cocaine program (2009), for instance, Coady argues:

> …[B]elief in a conspiracy by American government agencies to bring crack cocaine into American inner-city communities is regularly cited in this literature as evidence of conspiracist ideation, despite it being true. Since it is true, it can hardly be used as evidence of *excessive* willingness to believe in conspiracies. If anything, the example demonstrates the opposite fault in those conducting the experiment: excessive *reluctance* to believe in conspiracies (2021).

Coady also notes that although 'reasonable and well-informed people disagree about whether or not there were conspiracies behind [the] assassinations' of John F. Kennedy or Martin Luther King, Jr.,[28] these examples are 'regularly cited within the literature as evidence of conspiracist ideation' (ibid). Coady argues that 'since it is unclear whether we should believe in conspiracies in these cases, they cannot be cited as evidence of excessive willingness to believe conspiracy theories' (ibid). Beyond this, another pertinent question raised by the studies under consideration pertains to the difference between "belief in" and a *lack* of "belief in."

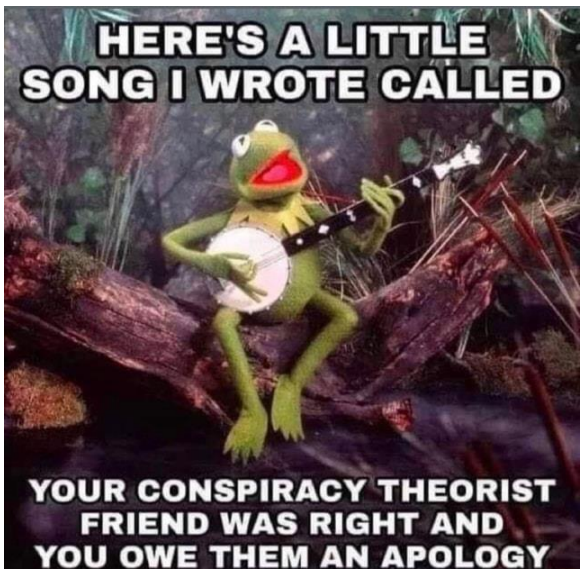
Studies are often quick to point to the 'broader beliefs' that support conspiracy theories (Wood, et al; 2012). But what, precisely, do such broader "beliefs" entail? On this, note that *distrust* in government, science, or mainstream media sources does not constitute a set of beliefs. Rather, such positions entail a *lack of belief* in the trustworthiness of particular social and cultural institutions. Thus, the continual interrogation of the so-called "beliefs" of conspiracy theorists proves biased yet again. What such studies are actually discovering is a *lack of* belief in flawed institutions, which is not necessarily different than a rational skepticism.

[28] I suggest that the names Robert F. Kennedy, Malcom X, and Marilyn Monroe can also be added to the list of assassinations/deaths surrounded with legitimately suspicious circumstances and credible evidence.

Certainly not all journalists, politicians, lawyers, scientists, soldiers, CEOs, bankers, and academics – or the governments, militaries, corporations, media conglomerates, think tanks, finance/tech/pharma firms, or other institutions by which these entities are represented – are deserving of unskeptical public faith. In 1970, William S. Burroughs asserted that 'a paranoid might be defined as someone who has some idea as to what is actually going on' (1970b: 161), and in 1980, Robert Anton Wilson wrote in *The Illuminati Papers* that 'anyone in the United States today who isn't paranoid must be crazy' (122). In light of historical events, it might prove informative to interrogate the reasons why, in 2024 – amidst what Dery describes as the 'growing corporate subversion of democracy' (2017: xiv) – some people *do* claim to still "believe" in the integrity of public institutions.

[**Fig. 2.11**: A meme featuring JFK, whose assassination in 1963 sparked the modern era of conspiracy theories, suggests (via JFK's signature rhetorical tactics) that believing in conspiracy theories and theorizing about conspiracies are different undertakings. **Fig. 2.12**: A meme features Kermit the Frog (created by Jim Henson) playing his banjo in the swamp, singing a song about conspiracies that turn out to be real.]





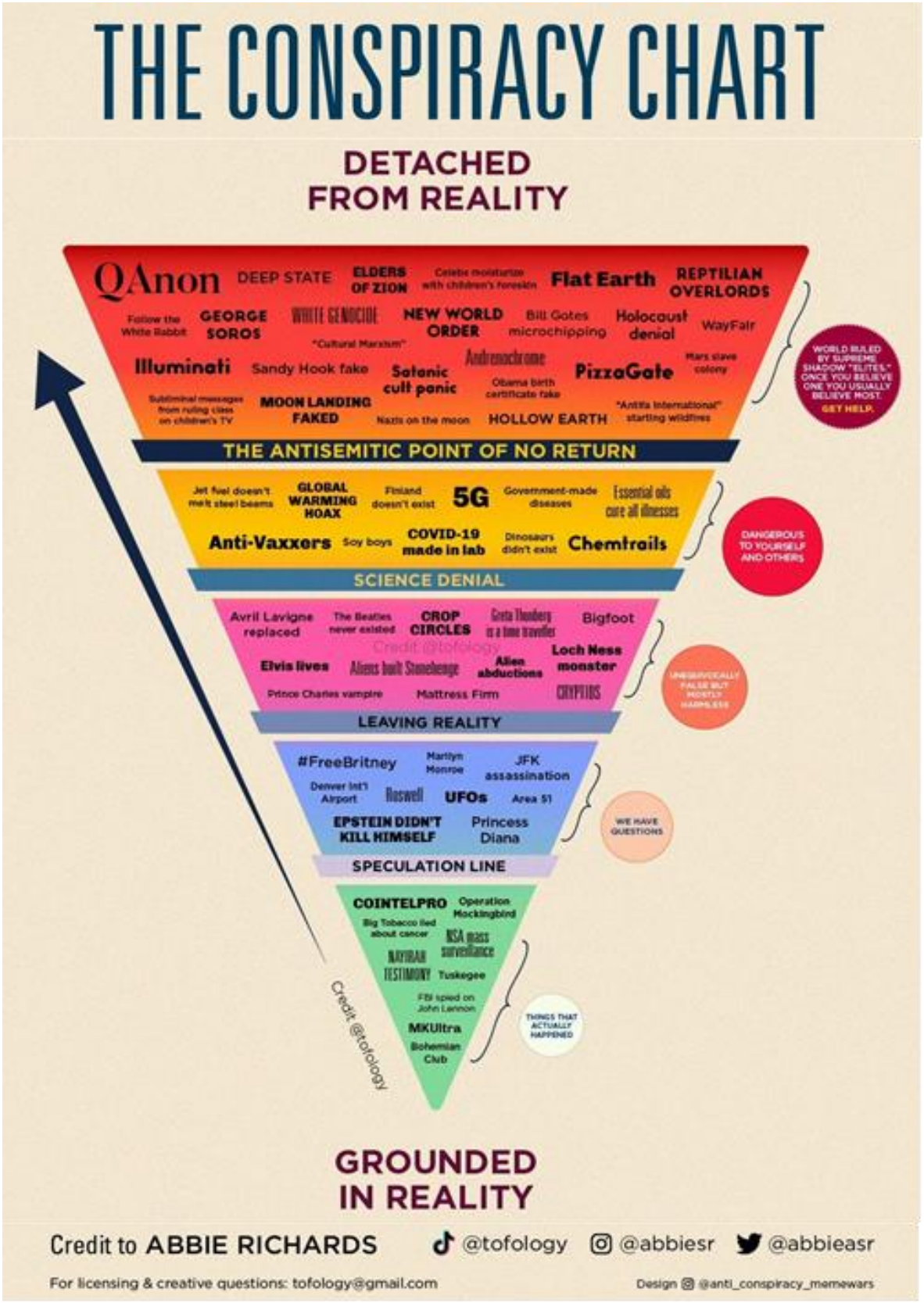
The oversimplified findings of the 'Dead and Alive' paper by Wood, et al., (2012) were subsequently *further* oversimplified in mainstream media sources. In *The Irish Times,* for example, Patrick Freyne quotes Abbie Richards – whom he describes as 'an American climate-change researcher who has become something of an anti-disinformation campaigner on Twitter and TikTok' – as saying: 'There was a study that [if you believed] Princess Di was murdered you are also more likely to believe that she's alive' (2021). From this over-

simplification, Richards extrapolates that: 'once you have disregarded mainstream sources there is a tendency to put all your trust in the alternative ones you've found instead. Consumers of conspiracy theories become strangely credulous' (ibid). The same description of the Princess Di study was advanced previously by John Oliver on his *HBO* program *Last Week Tonight* in a segment on COVID-19 conspiracy theories, with no context other than that 'the appeal of conspiracy theories is such that people can even embrace ones that contradict one another…Which sounds crazy…' (2020: 05:45). Freyne calls attention to similarly contradictory COVID-19 conspiracy theories such as that the virus 'is simultaneously not real, made in a lab, and more contagious than we're being told;' or that the virus 'wasn't real but, in order to keep up the pretence, the elites went on to create a real virus in a lab' (2021).

It is evident that the most likely explanation for contradictory speculations is not "craziness" or "strange credulity toward alternative sources of information" (of which Richards herself is one), but rather, deeply held emo-truths (and rationally skeptical concerns) that governments *somehow* manipulated the virus for nefarious purposes. Yet, in light of the oversimplification of the findings *by the authors themselves*, it is understandable how flawed conclusions might be reached by others. Although Freyne describes Richards as a 'climate change researcher' (ibid), she is more notably a stand-up comedian and social media influencer who gained attention on *TikTok* with her 'make golf illegal' campaign. In October 2020, Richards created a flawed pyramid graph of conspiracies which went "viral" online (Fig. 2.13).

Ultimately, it is not solely entertainment, convenience, and manipulative algorithms that fuel alternative sources of information, but also an increasing (and not entirely unjustified) *lack* of trust in mainstream media. Indeed, even mainstream media sources (such as Freyne) are increasingly embracing alternative and non-traditional ones (such as Richards), even as they caution against this practice. Massively unreliable as alternative sources of information may be, those sources might seem (to many) to be at least *as* reliable as the fallible human institutions of science, journalism, democracy, academia, and law. Still, flawed and exploitable though these institutions may be, they are at the very least, the result of genuine and admirable attempts at objectivity and accountability; and created with an awareness of human bias and fallibility. Thus, while it is correct to point out the limitations of these institutions, they are far preferable to apocalyptic and dystopian alternatives. This fact is obviously true upon serious reflection, but at first glance, not necessarily obvious at all.

[**Fig. 2.13:** 'The Conspiracy Chart' created by Richards (Oct, 2020) was circulated widely across social media platforms. Problematic in numerous ways (addressed in the following pages) this chart adopts a recognizable and widely accepted infographic format reminiscent of "the food pyramid" or Maslow's "hierarchy of needs" (1943).]



The lowermost section of Richard's chart [Fig. 2.13] includes actual conspiratorial events or programs such as: 'MK-ULTRA' 'Big Tobacco Lied,' and 'NSA Mass Surveillance.' The uppermost section includes various conspiracy fantasies such as: 'Flat Earth,' 'Moon Landing was Faked,' the 'Illuminati,' 'Reptilian Overlords,' and 'QAnon.' As the pyramid widens, following thresholds are crossed: 'Speculation Line,' 'Leaving Reality,' 'Science Denial,' and 'The Anti-Semitic Point of No Return.' Although the chart is effective at visually communicating a complex and important topic, it is also problematic in numerous ways. Considering that this chart was circulated widely across the Internet and received very little criticism, it is important to identify and reflect upon some of the chart's shortcomings in order to better inform creative-practice on this topic.

In critiquing Richards' viral chart, it occurred to me that the best critique would be to create a better chart. How to accomplish that, however, was not immediately apparent and I ultimately pursued other avenues of practice. Nevertheless, it was immediately apparent that the term "science denial" – which suggests an irrational resistance to the scientific process and findings – is a loaded one. The terms "distrust of experts," "distrust of government," and "distrust of media" are more accurate and more rational. Additionally, the term "anti-Semitic," as used by Richards, is both overly-specific and overly-general. The term "hate-based" would be an improvement. Still, a paradox remains: Although certain conspiracy theories (such as the "great replacement") are clearly based on a hatred/fear of the "other," from the perspective of many of those participating, these movements might *seem* to be based on love; namely, love of country; freedom; democracy; thy neighbour; "human" (versus Reptilian) rights; the children (meaning "our children"); and in general, love for the in-group in the face of self-perceived threats from outside. Like "the Party" slogan in Orwell's novel *1984* – 'War is peace. Freedom is slavery. Ignorance is strength' – such 'doublethink' is not easily resolved (1949).

Further still, unethical clandestine government programs – while often horrific – should not be conflated with "conspiracy theories" which concern *theoretical* actions of cabals (without credible evidence). It is likewise troubling to see "moon landing denial" or "flat Earth theory" described as intrinsically anti-Semitic. These theories are not without anti-Semitic associations, to be sure, but many adherents of these conspiracy theories are, for all appearances, fundamentally decent. Indeed, many are, themselves, victims of personal traumas (Sprenger, et al; 2019). Similarly, the Illuminati – which for all intents and purposes is a fictional organization imagined by absurdist provocateurs – should not be labelled as "science denial."

Finally, the term 'point of no return' is troubling. Surely *the point* of research into conspiracism and disinformation is to improve the situation, not write it off as hopeless. Above all, Richards' graph foregrounds the problems of *definition* previously indicated: There is no consistently agreed upon definition of the term "conspiracy theory" in academic literature; although numerous academic sources have addressed this problematic fact.

[**Fig. 2.14**: The cover of a 1934 French edition of *The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion* abbreviated as "The Jewish Peril" situates a Jewish caricature atop the body of an enormous spider clutching the Earth. **Fig. 2.15**: A meme reframes the "Great Reset" of the World Economic Forum along the lines of the "Great Replacement" conspiracy fantasy at the centre of numerous terror attacks including the 2019 Christchurch Mosque shootings. In this image, WEF leader Klaus Schwab is depicted as a Reptilian / Satanic Beast. The words "Obey" and "Consume" evoke the film *They Live* (1988).]





As noted, the first definition of 'conspiracy theory' was advanced by Popper in 1945, who described (emphasis added) '*the* conspiracy theory of society' (307). Elsewhere, Popper elaborates that this (singular) conspiracy theory 'is the view that whatever happens in society ... are the results of direct design by some powerful individuals or groups' (1962: 341). Popper's argument is in line with the European Commission's definition of conspiracy theories as 'the belief that certain events or situations are secretly manipulated behind the scenes by powerful forces with negative intent' (2020). Popper argues – according to David Coady – that 'the conspiracy theory of society' is 'very widespread, and has very little truth in it' and is ultimately 'just a version of the theism, of a belief in gods whose whims and wills rule everything' (2006). In 'Popper Revisited, or What is Wrong with Conspiracy Theories?,' Charles Pigden argues that 'the "conspiracy theory" is the secularized version of a religious belief' (1995: 7).

Pigden, however, is critical of Popper's definition and argues that the term *should* be used non-pejoratively to describe, quite simply, theories which allege that a conspiracy has occurred (ibid). Coady, on the other hand, asserts that 'although the term "conspiracy theory" lacks any fixed definition, it does serve a fixed function' which 'like that of the word "heresy" in medieval Europe, is to stigmatise people with beliefs which conflict with officially sanctioned or orthodox beliefs of the time and place in question' (2021). I find Coady's line of thinking to be useful, although I disagree with his conclusion. Coady, like Pigden, argues 'against the current pejorative use of the term,' but suggests that to move forward, there are only two options: First, to strip the term of its pejorative connotations, which he notes is 'preferable to the current situation,' but not 'practically feasible' (ibid). Or, second, to eliminate the use of the term altogether. In Coady's words:

> …It's not clear to me that the term would serve any useful purpose after it was stripped of its negative connotations. Hence I prefer another option: eliminativism. I have come to think that there is no such thing as a correct, or even a good, definition of this term. I hold that we should stop using, as opposed to mentioning, this term altogether. It appears to do no good, while doing considerable harm. Before the 1950s we got by without it. I see no reason we cannot learn to do so again (ibid).

In theoretically mapping the territory of conspiracism, I hold Popper's definition to be highly useful. Indeed, if the entanglement with *actual* conspiracies could be avoided or resolved, I would also hold Popper's analysis to be the most coherent. One solution for this entanglement was suggested by a 2020 audiovisual essay by Kirby Ferguson entitled 'Constantly Wrong: The Case Against Conspiracy Theories.' Along the lines proposed by Popper, Ferguson defines conspiracy theories as 'a collective fantasy' pertaining to 'a claim of secret crimes by a hidden group' made 'by a community of amateurs,' adding that 'conspiracy theories are not like real conspiracies' which is 'a very common criminal charge' consisting of 'a criminal plot by a group of people' (05:35-07:45).

On this, Ferguson clarifies: 'A conspiracy theory is not just a theory about a conspiracy. You don't just add words together to get their meaning… Science fiction isn't just science plus fiction' (8:30). Noting that the TV series *Breaking Bad* (AMC; 2008-2013) is not science fiction simply because it is fiction about a scientist, Ferguson observes that science fiction is a *genre* of fiction pertaining to *fictional science* according to particular conventions and tropes (ibid). Ferguson argues that in the real world, conspiracies involve 'victims, witnesses, evidence, leaks, and criminal charges' (14:30, 15:50), whereas conspiracy *theories* 'are not part of this reality.

They live in the upside down. Everything stays perfectly sealed up, nobody leaks, nobody flips, no good evidence surfaces, no victims tell their stories, nobody decides… to be a hero' (16:30). Conspiracy theories, Ferguson argues, create 'at best… a large pile of weak evidence' (ibid). To illustrate his point, Ferguson lists 20 popular conspiracy *theories* and 20 major real *conspiracies*, and asserts that if sometimes 'conspiracy theories [turn] out to be real conspiracies' – as Pigden, Coady, and others have argued – then 'there should be conspiracy theories that show up on the real conspiracies list' (12:50). None of conspiracies and conspiracy theories are found to overlap. Ferguson argues that the lists do not cross over because they exist in 'parallel universes' (ibid). One list is reality and the other is fantasy[29] [**Fig. 2.16**].

REAL CONSPIRACIES	CONSPIRACY THEORIES
1. 911 AL QAEDA ATTACKS	1. JFK ASSASSINATED BY CONSPIRACY
2. WATERGATE	2. 911 INSIDE JOB
3. GULF OF TONKIN	3. COVID "FAKE"
4. COINTELPRO	4. BIRTHERISM
5. NSA MASS SURVEILLANCE	5. QANON
6. ENRON	6. PIZZAGATE
7. THERANOS	7. VACCINE AUTISM COVER-UP
8. NXIVM	8. EPSTEIN MURDERED
9. IRAN-CONTRA	9. FLAT EARTH
10. TRUMP UKRAINE	10. GLOBAL WARMING IS FAKE
11. BAY OF PIGS	11. ILLUMINATI
12. EPSTEIN SEX TRAFFICKING	12. MOON LANDING FAKED
13. MK-ULTRA	13. HOLY BLOOD, HOLY GRAIL
14. TUSKEGEE SYPHILIS EXPERIMENT	14. CHEMTRAILS
15. CIGARETTES CAUSE CANCER COVER-UP	15. ROSWELL UFO CRASH
16. SOVIET ESPIONAGE	16. HOLOCAUST DENIAL
17. FRED HAMPTON ASSASINATION	17. AREA 51 ALIEN EXPERIMENTS
18. OPERATION PAPERCLIP	18. NEW WORLD ORDER
19. SCIENTOLOGY, OPERATION SNOW WHITE	19. SANDY HOOK DENIAL
20. RAJNEESHPURAM	20. CLINTON BODY COUNT

[29] One might argue that this statement is hyperbolic in the case of, for instance, the "granddaddy" of all modern conspiracy theories: Lee Harvey Oswald did not act alone in the 1963 assassination of US President John F. Kennedy. Evidence has increasingly linked US government agencies to Oswald and (Oswald's assassin) Jack Ruby (Grim; 2022). Today, for unknown reasons, nearly 4,000 documents remain classified or redacted, despite having been ordered for release by 2017 by the JFK Assassination Records Collection Act of 1992 (US National Archives; "JFK"). While the content of these documents is unknown, conservative journalist/pundit Tucker Carlson claimed on *Fox News* in 2022 that, according to an unnamed source with 'direct knowledge of the information that once again is being withheld from the American public… the CIA was involved in the assassination of the president' (Carlson; 2022). In 2023, Carlson – who endorsed racist and sexist views and conspiracy theories (Graziosi; 2023) on his highly rated program *Tucker Carlson Tonight* – was fired by *Fox News* the same week the network agreed to pay nearly $800 million to settle a defamation lawsuit advanced by Dominion Voting Systems. The decision to deplatform Carlson was reportedly based on the content of text messages (subpoenaed for the defamation case) in which he, inter alia, used racist language while offering a qualified endorsement of extreme political violence (Peters, et al; 2023). Thus, while theories pertaining to the involvement of the US Government in the assassination of Kennedy and Oswald remain unfounded or not credible, the fact that US government agencies misrepresented and concealed – and continue to conceal – information pertaining to those assassinations is not a conspiracy theory (Grim; 2022).

Based on the ideas above, I contend that the term "conspiracy theories" should not be applied to actual real-world conspiracies or credible theories about the same. Rather, the term best describes demonstrably false (i.e., counterfactual) theories pertaining to plots and activities conducted in secrecy by government cabals or shadow organizations. In other words, "conspiracy theories" are theories and fantasies about *imaginary* conspiracies.

The Ironic Style of Conspiracism

Richard Hofstadter's seminal 1966 collection of essays *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* is at the front of a succession of research approaching conspiracism as a primarily irrational 'political pathology' (2). Hofstadter openly invoked the term "paranoid" in a pejorative, rather than clinical sense, and notes that (emphasis added), 'it is the use of paranoid modes of expression *by more or less normal people* that makes the phenomenon significant' (4). 'The politics of paranoia,' Hofstadter asserts, involve 'overheated, oversuspicious, overaggressive, grandiose, and apocalyptic… expression,' wherein 'the feeling of persecution is central' but the target is 'not himself alone but millions of others' (ibid). According to Hofstadter, it is the apparent objectivity of this position that leads the conspiracy theorist to the 'sense that his political passions are unselfish and patriotic [and] goes far to intensify his feeling of righteousness and his moral indignation' (ibid). To the contrary, Hofstadter holds the 'paranoid style' of politics to be 'non-rational,' given that it arises from 'striking symbolic acts or memorable statements, or […] public figures who themselves have symbolic appeal' rather than from substantive or legitimate political discourse (ix).

In this vein, the term is employed by Hofstadter to describe 'the way in which ideas are believed and advocated rather than with the truth or falsity of their content' (5). Although he specifically addresses the paranoid style in American 'minority movements,' he points out that 'Americans have no monopoly of the gift for paranoid improvisation,' singling out Germany as a 'consummatory triumph' of the paranoid style and describing the Stalinist purge trials as a 'wildly imaginative and devastating exercise in the paranoid style' (7).

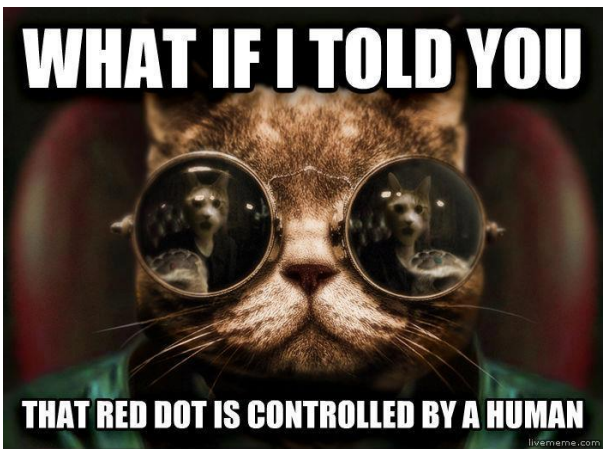
Hofstadter, however, hints at a potential value of the paranoid style, observing that such expressions are not imposed from the top down and thus enable 'large segments of the public [to] respond to civic issues, make them their own, put them to work on national problems, and express their response to these problems in distinctive rhetorical styles' while 'appropriating,

reshaping, and "working" on' civic issues' (viii). This potential value is explored by Peter Knight in *Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to The X-files* (2000). In defining conspiracy culture as a symbiotic synthesis of a 'culture *of* conspiracy' and a 'culture *about* conspiracy' (3), Knight usefully moves away from the pejorative, pathological, clinical, and individually focused language employed by Hofstadter. Knight significantly argues:

> Contemporary conspiracy culture can thus give narrative shape to suspicions that a host of social processes, ranging from patriarchy to homophobia to globalization, *amount* to a conspiracy, even if we know that there is – probably – not a literal small group of men conspiring in a smoke-filled room. If we are to avoid a knee-jerk dismissal of the popular pleasures of conspiracy culture as a delusional failure, a "plague of paranoia," or part of the dumbing down of America, we need to develop… modes of reading that are responsive to the multiple functions and meanings of increasingly visible narratives…both symptomatically and sympathetically (45-46).

Bell and Bennion-Nixon concurred with Knight's recommendations, adding that 'dismissing conspiracy as a (predominantly psychological) failing – as irrational, sloppy and vulgar, as Hofstadter does' is 'to miss the social and cultural work that conspiracy theory does' (2000: 146). On this, Fenster argued that conspiracism played 'a remarkably productive role in American history in the development of a secular Enlightenment rationality that perceived power in the hands of humans rather than of a divine entity' (1999: xv). According to Fenster: 'Above all, conspiracy theory is a theory of power. As such, it deserves attention for its understanding of the uneven distribution of resources and coercive power' (xiv).

> [**Figs. 2.17 & 2.18**: Two cat conspiracy theories – both true – serve as an allegory of the human condition as imagined by many conspiracists. Namely, we are being controlled by forces we cannot fully comprehend.]





In considering conspiracy culture at large, it is further necessary to confront the complicated intersection between popular culture and conspiracism. For example: Do conspiracy theories influence pop culture, or might it be the other way around? Are conspiracy theories simply an aspect *of* pop culture? How might these categories affect our understandings of conspiracy fantasy *movements* (i.e., zombie preppers, Flat Earth Society, or QAnon)? Although such research is limited, Theodor Adorno's analysis of irrational culture in *The Stars Down to Earth* is a useful entry point (circa 1950; 1994). Adorno observes, for example, that 'people never quite fully believe what they pretend to believe and therefore overdo their own beliefs' (90).

In 2000, Adorno's approach was advanced by Bell and Bennion-Nixon who examined the 'production, circulation and consumption of conspiracy theories within the broad realms of popular culture' (133). The authors argue that a '"study of real society" must include a study of conspiracy culture, and all its associated "fringe" beliefs, as a paradoxical but central feature of today's "social surface"' (147). They continue:

> If we can begin to rethink conspiracy culture away from paranoia and delusion – if we can begin to use the term non-pejoratively – then we might be able to produce… symptomatic and sympathetic readings… Recognizing conspiracy theory as social and cultural theory (and vice versa) seems to us like a good place to start (149).

This does, indeed, seem like a good place to start. Yet, while the authors examine conspiracy theories *within* pop culture, they neglect to consider the opposite case: The ways in which our conspiracy theories (and attitudes toward them) are influenced by fiction, and the ways in which that fiction trains consumers to engage – individually and collectively – with conspiracy narratives. It strikes me as obvious, for example, that the 1938 radio broadcast of *The War of the Worlds* would influence public opinion on the alien hypothesis in a vastly different way than the 1982 film *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial.*

The definitions and terminology surrounding this area of research are often contradictory. For example, Fenster – writing in pre-post-truth 1999 – notes the dramatic narrative framework of all conspiracy theories (in Bell and Bennion-Nixon's words; 2000: 133) both 'fictional' and 'non-fictional.' But what are we to make of the notion of a "nonfictional" conspiracy theory? Does this refer to a conspiracy theory that is *not* fictional? Or a fictional conspiracy theory about the real world as opposed to a fictional one? While not necessarily a contradiction in terms, the designation of conspiracy theories as "nonfictional" is inevitably problematic. In 2018, for example, Nera, et al., attempted 'to experimentally explore the impact of conspiracist fiction

on real-world conspiracy beliefs,' noting that, to their knowledge, 'no study has empirically examined the impact of conspiracy narratives on real-world conspiracy beliefs' (2018). Problematically, however, in this study, exposure to "conspiracy narratives" and "conspiracist fiction" consisted of showing participants a single episode of *The X-Files*.

The term "conspiracist fiction" is also problematic. Are conspiracy theories not, by definition, imaginary? Is there such a thing as conspiracist non-fiction? It is evident that no line clearly divides *fictional* conspiracy theories from "regular" ones. Naturally, some conspiracy theories exist within worlds of *fictional* characters and events, while others make a claim to legitimacy by implicating *real-world* people and events, but both varieties are fictional, and the language around these issues matters. Accordingly, the significance of these terms and their usage is emphasized throughout my theoretical analysis, creative-practice, and critical reflection.

[**Figs. 2.19 & 2.20**: Two conspiratorial memes featuring meme-star "Doge." The first quotes Joseph Heller's 1961 satirical war novel *Catch 22.* The second is self-referential nonsense, presumably mocking the absurdity of conspiracy theories.]





In *Conspiracy Culture,* Knight points out that 'conspiracy theories are now less a sign of mental delusion than an ironic stance towards knowledge and the possibility of truth, operating within the rhetorical terrain of the double negative' (2000: 2). Bell and Bennion-Nixon suggest (citing Knight) that the ironic nature of 'popular engagement with "fringe" materials' is 'epitomized, perhaps, by …banal, quirky t-shirts and bumper stickers…' (2002: 144). Complicating matters, however, Knight elsewhere observes that 'if it has become difficult to read conspiracy culture symptomatically as the product of a paranoid imagination,' it is 'because we can no longer be entirely certain the stories are untrue' (2002: 36). In a similar vein, Fenster argues that 'implicit

in this circulation of populist narratives, is the notion that not only is there interest in – nay, a demand for – a comprehensive explanation for the failure of some political, social, and/or personal order, but that such an explanation may aptly describe reality' (1999: xiii).

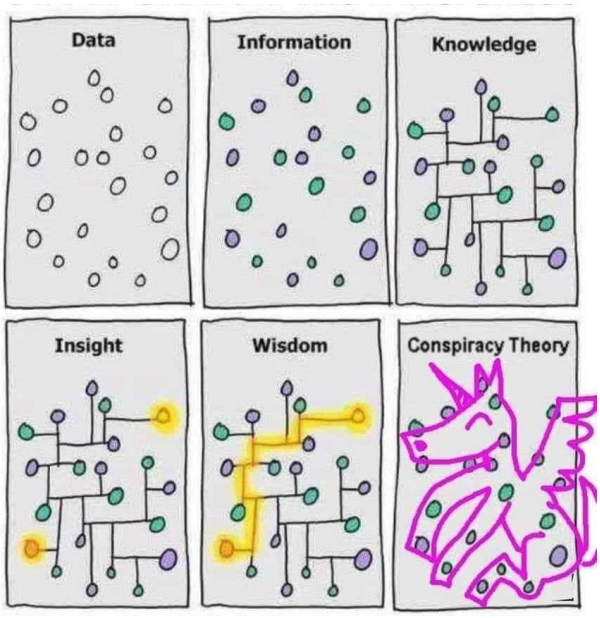
Knight, however, notes that while some aspects of conspiracy culture are 'hopelessly deluded and spiteful … some of it is undoubtedly ironic and subversive … [and] much of it is somewhere in between' (2002: 22). Describing a mainstream 'mode of conspiracy thinking' which is both 'half-ironic' and 'half-serious' and which 'oscillates between the hoax and the accurate revelation, between the serious and the ironic, between the factual and the fictional, and between the literal and the metaphorical,' Knight calls attention to the 'many instances' in which 'consumers of conspiracy don't really believe what they buy, but neither do they really disbelieve it either,' noting that 'often people believe rumors with a provisional commitment, believing them as if they were true' (48).

Fenster advances similar lines of thought, asserting that 'conspiracy theory arises when the political is interpreted within a specific, conspiratorial narrative frame by those for whom politics is inaccessible and its meaning is impenetrable or secret' (1999: xiii-xiv). These 'intensely active interpretive practices' are described by Fenster as 'a form of hyperactive semiosis in which history and politics serve as reservoirs of signs that demand (over)interpretation, and that signify, for the interpreter, far more than their conventional meaning' (2008: 95). Thus, he significantly identifies both the narrative framework and a specific set of interpretive practices as being (emphasis added) 'mutually dependent elements of *conspiracy as practice*' (1999: xviii).

Fenster further argues that conspiracism is 'often characterized as illegitimate, pathological, and a threat to political stability,' while at the same time seeming to be 'an entertaining narrative form, a populist expression of a democratic culture, that circulates deep skepticism about the truth of the current political order...' (xiii). Thus, while conspiracy theories articulate 'a necessary distance between "the people" and "power,"' and draw 'on the most simplistic, disabling, and dangerous interpretations of political order, including fascism, totalitarianism, racism, and anti-Semitism,' these narratives, nevertheless, also represent 'a populist possibility, a resistance to power that implicitly imagines a better, collective future' (ibid). According to Fenster, 'interpreting conspiracy is inextricably bound to 'story-telling' and 'to the dramatic and cinematic sweep that the specter of a vast conspiracy seems to conjure' (2008: 117). Fenster

argues that, whether in films, novels, or nonfictional accounts, 'the gripping, dramatic story is, ultimately at the heart of conspiracy theory' (119). All such arguments, I suggest, point to the value of investigating conspiracism through the frameworks of creative-practice and artistic research; allowing for more nuanced explorations of the affective and memetic capacities of fictional and unfictional narratives.

[**Fig. 2.21**: A Systems Theory infographic depicting the creative imagination entailed in conspiracy ideation. **Fig. 2.22**: Dale from *King of the Hill* (*Fox;* 1997-2010) ironically embraces the depth of his conspiracism.]





The apocalyptic implications of most conspiracy theories make Fenster's argument – in which those narratives are described as imagining 'a better, collective future' (ibid) – both counter-intuitive and worthy of further exploration. Fenster's notions are advanced in an essay by Tomasz Stawiszyński – insightfully entitled 'Conspiracy Theories, Aka Alternative Cultures' – in which he elaborates on Fenster's 'paradoxical idealism' by way of an examination of the popular reptilian conspiracy theory (2021: 31). This particular theory – popularized by British sports star David Icke in the 1999 bestseller *The Biggest Secret* – revolves around the narrative (in Stawiszyński's words) that much of the 'political and economic elite of the Western world,' including Hillary Clinton, George Soros, and the British royal family, consists of shape-shifting reptilians from the Alpha Draconis star system (ibid). In 2016, Icke acknowledged the narrative dimensions of the reptilian "story" in an interview with Andrew Neil of *BBC News:*

NEIL: I can see the point that you might question 9/11, but if you also think Buckingham Palace is inhabited by lizards, it kind of undermines you…

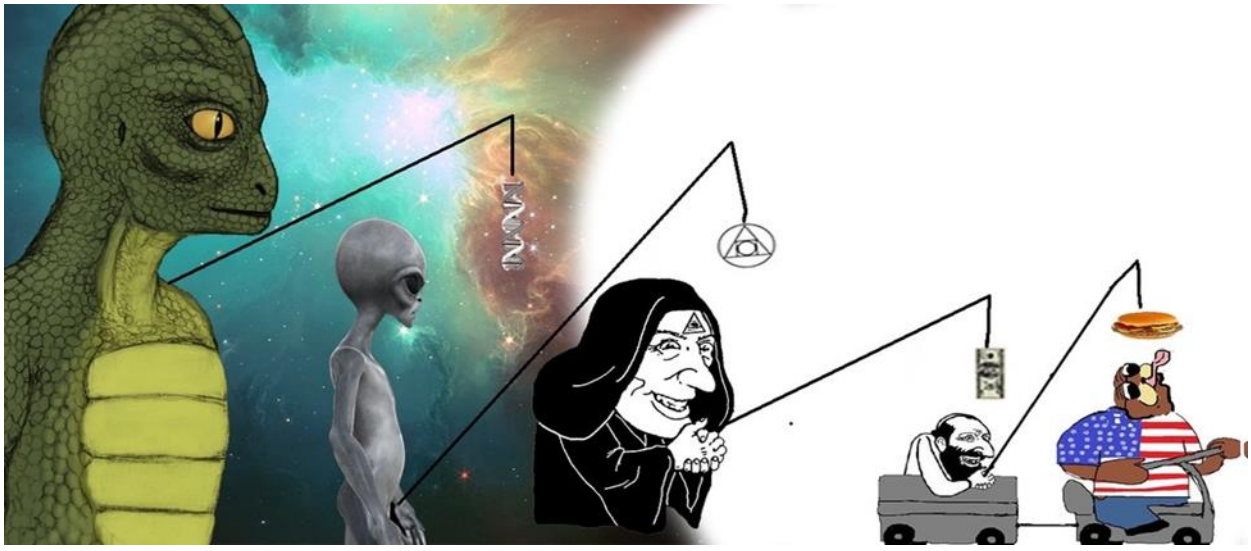
ICKE: It's not that simple. There's a whole big back story before you get to what I'm saying. If you deliver it in one line: "Oh, you know, the world is run by reptiles," you meet it on one level, "Oh, that's crazy." Immediate reflex action.

NEIL: Well, it is crazy.

ICKE: But when you see the backstory and the evidence to support this, ancient and modern, you see that one throwaway line in a completely different context (04:00).

It is important to point out that, alongside his anti-establishment messages, Icke's theosophical works espouse philosophies of love, hope, eternal consciousness, infinite potential, and so on. Nevertheless, Icke also problematically claims that his theories – as well as the notoriously fabricated *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion* – are factual and supported by evidence (Parramore; 2021). The foundations for the Pizzagate and subsequent QAnon conspiracy fantasies are clearly visible in Icke's theories of shape shifting lizard cabals which use a Satanic front for a ring of paedophilia, ritual sacrifice, and adrenochrome harvesting. Although plainly ludicrous on the surface, a widely cited 2013 Public Policy Poll found that approximately 4% of Americans subscribed to this theory, and nearly twice as many people reported being 'not sure' (Bump, 2013; Oksman, 2016).

[**Fig. 2.23**: A version of the "food chain" Internet-meme template in which a reptilian manipulates human DNA via alien abductions in order to, in turn, control the Illuminati and Jews (represented by variations of the anti-Semitic "happy merchant" symbol) via occult power and money. The bottom of the chain is "Le American Bear" (a negative stereotype of Americans) controlled with a hamburger.]



In a related vein, according to a 2018 YouGov poll, one third of Americans between the age of 18 and 24 reported being unsure of whether the Earth was round (Dean; 2018). The flat Earth "theory" was described by *The New Yorker* in 2018 as 'the post-truth landscape,' and as 'the mother of all conspiracies' by *The Guardian* in 2019 (Sprenger, et al; 0:30). That year, *The Guardian* produced a mini-documentary on "Flat Earthers" entitled *Flat Earth Rising,* which opened with these provocative questions: 'How do you *know* you live on a globe? Can you *prove* it? Or do you simply trust the evidence you've been shown, assuming such a lie would be too big?' (0:50). Here, it is worth noting that the *ipso facto* rejection of *all* authority is slightly, but crucially, different from the counterculture injunctive to "*question* authority." Nevertheless, in 2020, the flat Earth conspiracy theory was dwarfed by an explosion of politicized online conspiracy communities, including the digital soldiers of QAnon. To look back at the flat Earth movement in 2024 borders on nostalgia.

To better define elusive terms such as "conspiracy theory" and "belief" it is appropriate to more closely examine the polls currently under discussion; in particular, the 2013 Public Policy Poll which found that 4% of Americans believe in reptilians (Bump, 2013; Oksman, 2016). Are these shocking figures even reliable? This poll was an automated telephone poll with a sample size of 1,247 voters, meaning that only 50 respondents answered "yes" to the "Believe in Lizard People?" question. As Joshua Keating writes in *Foreign Policy*, 50 is 'a long way from 12 million' (2013). Keating prudently suggests that at least some percentages of those 50 people were either 'easily suggestible' or 'messing' with the survey for fun (ibid). While Keating supposes that the former group is most likely the largest, it is not difficult to imagine multiple participants answering absurdly for the "lolz". Additionally, the automated nature of the poll facilitates the self-selection bias known as voluntary response bias. Such surveys often overrepresent those with strong opinions or vested interests in a given topic (e.g., extremists and trolls) while underrepresenting those with moderate views. According to the Department of Mathematics at the University of Texas at Austin, 'voluntary response samples are always biased' (see: 'Biased Sampling and Extrapolation').

While the poll did ask questions regarding political affiliation, few such polls interrogate *religious* affiliation. One question, however, asked whether respondents believed that 'Barack Obama is the anti-Christ' and 13% responded affirmatively. Of those, 5% declared to have voted for Obama in 2012. Applying Occam's Razor – meaning that the simplest explanations are

most likely correct – Keating points out that theories of trolling and suggestibility are far simpler than ones in which '5% of *Obama voters* believe they voted for the anti-Christ' (ibid).

More complexly, a 2016 poll on American fears, conducted by Chapman University, found that approximately 50% of Americans reported believing the US Government was concealing information about 9/11 and the JFK assassination. Approximately 24% reported believing the same about the Apollo 11 moon landing. Fascinatingly, the study also found that roughly 33% of respondents reported believing that the government was concealing information about 'the North Dakota crash,' an imaginary conspiracy invented by the creators of the poll' (2016). The inclusion of a control question is an uncommon, but useful, measure in polls which claim to quantify "beliefs." At first glance, it might seem that roughly one third of Americans are prepared to believe the US government is concealing information about *any given incident*, real or imaginary. Complicating matters, however, is the fact that this attitude is not entirely irrational. Considering that the US government *literally* has classified documents pertaining to 9/11 (Golden and Rotella; 2020) and the JFK assassination (Grim, 2022; Morley and Bradford, 2021), it is worth considering the opposite case: Why did nearly 50% of respondents *disagree* with statements that are demonstrably true? Going further, what percentage of Americans would disagree with the basic tenets of well-documented government conspiracies such as the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, MK-ULTRA, or COINTELPRO?

Unfortunately, the North Dakota Crash was found to be flawed as a control measure; although the nature of the flaw is revealing. In a critique of the survey, blogger Richard Garber called attention to a 2013 train derailment in North Dakota in which 18 oil tank cars exploded, destroying nearly half a million gallons of crude oil and resulting in over 6 million dollars in damages (2016). The environmentally and politically charged incident was featured on *Time Magazine's* website (Walsh; 2013) and was the subject of a National Transportation Safety Board Report (*Ntsb.gov*). Garber contends that 'referring merely to a North Dakota crash without specifying a date, city, or vehicle (plane, train, truck, etc.), was far too vague' (2016). It is probably not the case, of course, that 33% of Americans were aware of the North Dakota derailment and actively believed the government to be concealing information, but this possibility cannot be ruled out. One lesson to be learned from this is that it is not easy to invent a conspiracy theory without colliding into actual events or other conspiracy theories.

In addition to carefully constructed control measures about *actual* and *non-existent* conspiracies, I also advocate for the inclusion of questions pertaining to overtly fictional or satirical scenarios or characters, including for instance, zombies, superheroes, or a Flying Spaghetti Monster. If the same 4% which claim to believe in reptilians *also* claim to believe that a Flying Spaghetti Monster (FSM) created the universe with "His Noodly Appendages" (Henderson; 2006) or that Jedi Knights once served as guardians of galactic peace, then something significant about that 4% of the population will be revealed. It would also be revealing if a percentage of respondents affirm belief in the reptilian conspiracy theory while identifying the FSM and Jedi Knights as fictional characters.

The inclusion of such control measures notwithstanding, the use of quantitative methods to assess and explain "belief" in conspiracy theories has often led to biased outcomes. For this reason, I argue, there is value in exploring these issues further via *qualitative* methods. In consideration of my own skill set and knowledge base (McQueen; 2020), I pursued the use of creative-practice methods to better interrogate issues of media practices and performativity which inform and sustain lifestyles and behaviours dependent upon alternate-reality contexts.

[**Figs. 2.24 – 2.29**: A curated collection of memes contrasts the lax attitude of Giorgio Tsoukalos of *The History Channel* 'Ancient Aliens' series (2009-present) with the no-nonsense evidence of astrophysicist and science communicator Neil DeGrasse Tyson.]



Paradoxically, a widely cited 2012 study by Kahan, et al., found that higher math and science literacy enabled participants to better *misinterpret* data when it did not align with their political ideology. According to the authors, 'public divisions over climate change stem not from the public's incomprehension of science but from a distinctive conflict of interest' occurring 'between the personal interest individuals have in forming beliefs in line with those held by others with whom they share close ties' and the 'collective [interest] they all share in making use of the best available science to promote common welfare' (Kahan, et al; 2012). This form of confirmation bias is generally described as motivated reasoning.

The authors conclude that the *science comprehension* hypothesis – which proposed that a higher degree of math and science literacy would correlate with a better understanding of various collective risks – proved false. Conversely, the *cultural cognition* hypothesis – which proposed that interpretations of statistical and scientific evidence will be motivated by the value systems of self-identified groups – was confirmed. In other words, the authors were unable to find evidence to support the idea that climate change denialists will revise their positions based on education or evidence alone. An article in *Vox* pointed to the counter-intuitive nature of these findings:

> Consider how utterly insane that is: being better at math made partisans less likely to solve the problem correctly when [it] meant betraying their political instincts. People weren't reasoning to get the right answer; they were reasoning to get the answer that they wanted to be right (Klein; 2014).

Invoking Garrett Hardin's classic paper 'The Tragedy of the Commons' – which examines social dilemmas wherein the rational self-interest of individuals leads to a collective failure (1968) – Kahan, et al., describe their findings as a 'tragedy of the risk-perception commons.' Sander van der Linden – cited previously for his work on prebunking – took issue with the 'false dilemma' posed by Kahan, et al., arguing that it would be 'counter-productive to disregard cognitive mechanisms in favour of motivational explanations, as each addresses different pieces of the decision-making puzzle' in which 'people are motivated to hold accurate perceptions about science and reality, but cognitive and emotional capacity constraints, group identities, and conflicting goals can all get in the way of addressing "wicked" collective action problems such as climate change' (van der Linden, et al; 2017). Accordingly, the authors advise a more balanced view wherein 'cognitive, emotional, and socio-cultural factors – as well as intuitive heuristics and ideological biases' are taken into consideration (ibid).

In terms of these emotional, visceral, or affective aspects of reasoning, Stawiszyński – in line with Knight and Fenster – sheds some additional light on the reptilian narrative by interrogating it as a modern myth, rather than a conspiracy theory. He writes:

> If… we look at the story of ruthless lizards who wield indivisible power over humanity, who hold the reins of government and the largest corporations, who are rich and prosperous, who prey on the unwitting majority, and who in addition feed on – in the most literal sense – human blood; if we look at this story as a specific metaphor, a modern myth, with the help of which some kind of current experience is symbolically captured, don't we suddenly see that it is, yes, fanciful and caricatured, but nevertheless quite an insightful diagnosis of contemporary, predatory capitalism? (2021: 32).

Stawiszyński argues that much contemporary analysis of conspiracy theory is based on a flawed assumption. Namely, that if those who follow 'various pseudo-scientific stories that have nothing to do with facts, although they very cleverly pretend to be them – were able to distinguish between reliable and unreliable beliefs, they would cease to adhere to these peculiar viewpoints' (33). This assumption, in turn, gives rise to the popular conclusion that pseudo-rationality may be contained through improved or increased education.

On the contrary, Stawiszyński suggests that if conspiracy theories are, indeed, 'much more than just erroneous beliefs, erroneous reasoning, and if the very structure of these beliefs, once set-in motion, cannot practically be stopped – because everything confirms it… everything permanently feeds this particular theoretical perpetual motion machine,' then it follows 'that education alone is not enough' (ibid). Stawiszyński argues that 'to confront this complex being – the culture of conspiracy – some other tools are needed, some other perspective' (33-34). On this, he sympathetically concludes that the question "how can one believe in all this?" 'ceases to be so pressing' once it is realised that the followers of non-sensical conspiracy theories 'form tight, consolidated communities' (36). He continues (emphasis added):

> And the beliefs they so passionately profess and propagate are not just quaint, anti-scientific nonsense. They are part of a whole complex web of beliefs, symbols and behaviours. *What we are dealing with here, then, is not so much alternative viewpoints as entire alternative cultures* which – we might add – are the perfect panacea for all the ailments associated with late modernity (ibid).

Undoubtedly, the conditions of late capitalism – and the loneliness and isolation which such conditions often entail – necessitates a search for so-called "cures," even if it means spreading

disinformation or propaganda in the process. Hannah Arendt noted as much in the conclusion of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, in which she theorized:

> What prepares men for totalitarian domination in the non-totalitarian world is the fact that loneliness, once a borderline experience usually suffered in certain marginal social situations like old age, has become an everyday experience of the evergrowing masses of our century. The merciless process into which totalitarianism drives and organizes the masses looks like a suicidal escape from this reality (1951: 478).

The concerns of hate-based conspiracism, disinformation, and propaganda are by no means new. Arendt offers a haunting critique of the destructive and destabilizing power of propaganda, arguing that 'the ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e., the standards of thought) no longer exist' (1951).

In a number of prescient statements, particularly illuminating as it pertains to contemporary conspiracy culture and alternate-reality lifestyles, Arendt argued: 'Before mass leaders seize the power to fit reality to their lies, their propaganda is marked by its extreme contempt for facts as such, for in their opinion fact depends entirely on the power of man who can fabricate it' (ibid). On this Arendt elaborates that, whereas ancient sophists 'were satisfied with a passing victory of the argument at the expense of truth,' modern ones 'want a more lasting victory at the expense of reality' (ibid). In a stark warning for coming generations – informed by the human failures personally witnessed and endured at the hands of the Nazi Gestapo – Arendt explains (emphasis added):

> In an ever-changing, incomprehensible world the masses had reached the point where they would, at the same time, *believe everything and nothing, think that everything was possible and that nothing was true*. [...] Mass propaganda discovered that its audience was ready at all times to believe the worst, no matter how absurd, and did not particularly object to being deceived *because it held every statement to be a lie anyhow*. The totalitarian mass leaders based their propaganda on the correct psychological assumption that, under such conditions, one could make people believe the most fantastic statements one day, and trust that if the next day they were given irrefutable proof of their falsehood, they would take refuge in cynicism; *instead of deserting the leaders who had lied to them, they would protest that they had known all along that the statement was a lie and would admire the leaders for their superior tactical cleverness* (ibid).

In the passages above, note that Arendt does not express concern about what people *believed in* or were *convinced of*, but with the fact that propaganda and the dissolution of public trust had created an environment in which people had *lost* the ability to believe in anything. This distinction should be borne in mind in discussions of conspiracy culture, in which too much attention is paid to "beliefs" and not enough paid to the "lack of trust" and the openness to the probability of *anything*.

In a later work, Arendt introduced the phrase 'banality of evil' (1963). In considering those who profited in the short-term from conspiracy theories (including politicians and media figures such as Donald Trump and Alex Jones); and considering the immediate damage and long-term consequences of the "stop the steal" election fraud conspiracy fantasy (i.e., Trump's Big Lie), which followed a long assault on the integrity of public institutions and the democratic process; and further considering the ways in which this assault was seemingly driven more by profiteering and egotism than by any deeper ideological agenda; could one think of a more insightful description than the banality of evil?

[**Fig. 2.30**: The banality and bluntness of Trump's assault on the media, the red baseball cap, and the "make America great again" (MAGA) slogan are on full display. **Fig. 2.31:** A statement made by Trump on May 3, 2021 – itself a big lie – in which he claimed that the 2020 election will come to be known as 'the big lie.']





As this chapter demonstrates, conspiracy culture is a hall of mirrors built on a slippery slope. More specifically, conspiracy culture is founded upon the idea of "conspiracy theory," of which no single definition has been agreed. In this chapter, I clarified terms and provided a map for

that which I hold to be a productive way forward as it relates to the intersection between popular culture and conspiracism. I further noted the problems inherent in attempts to quantitatively assess “beliefs” pertaining to unfictional, ironic, or alternate-reality activities or trolling; some of which are no doubt motivated by sincere belief, while others certainly are not.

In the interest of conducting creative-practice which is not only ethical, but also an effective means of alterdisciplinary intervention within an area notorious for harmful and manipulative discourse, it was necessary to more deeply confront the spectral areas which have been variously described as *différance,* slippage, aporias, unknowables, undecidables, paradoxes, Catch-22s, doublespeak, truthiness, or the art of bullshit. I attempt to do this in the following chapter by closely considering the ‘alternative cultures’ (2021) to which Stawiszyński alluded above, and by defining the boundaries around an area which I describe as *fake-belief*.

three: MAPPING ALTERNATE-REALITY AND FAKE BELIEF

The Boundaries of Make Believe and Fake Believe

In 1981, Big Bird, the star of the long-running American Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) children's program *Sesame Street* (1969-present) was scheduled to appear on another beloved PBS program, *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* (1968-2001). However, when Caroll Spinney (the actor/puppeteer portraying Big Bird) received a script requiring that he remove the costume and reveal its hidden mechanisms, he declined, arguing that 'fantasy is one of the wonderful things of childhood, and it only lasts a little while' (Borgenicht; 1998: 139). On the other hand, Fred Rogers would not agree to 'perpetuating the deceitful blur of real and pretend' by presenting a giant talking yellow canary 'as real in the real world' (Muppet Wiki). Rogers ultimately relented, but under the stipulation that Big Bird would appear only with the other puppets in the "Neighborhood of Make-Believe" segment (Borgenicht; 1998: 139).

Such issues fall in line with the *paradox of fiction,* proposed by Radford and Weston in the essay 'How Can We Be Moved by the Fate of Anna Karenina?' (1975). This philosophical paradox examines – according to Murray Smith – 'the idea that in responding to fictions we behave at once, as if we know, and as if we do not know, that we are perceiving a mere fiction' (1995: 3). Paradoxical or not, the story of Rogers and Spinney makes clear that the boundary between truth and fiction – between "belief" and "make-believe" – is an important one. Much less clearly delineated, however, are the blurred areas which are neither real nor pretend.

Today, social media has displaced traditional media gatekeepers such as Rogers and Spinney, allowing disinformation to flourish online in what Henry Jenkins has described as a 'hybrid media ecology' wherein 'people are mixing urban legends and *New York Times* stories side by side' in a manner reminiscent of 'the tavern culture hundreds of years ago' (2018: 29:30). The fringe conspiracy theories of the twentieth century may be described as diverse hybrids of psy-ops, agit-prop, hoax, satire, paranoia, and at times, genuinely suspicious circumstances and evidence. Over the past two decades, however, pseudo-conspiracism has digitally evolved into a mainstream activity, acquiring characteristics of fanfiction, digital folklore, trolling, cosplay, Live Action Role Play (LARP), and Alternate Reality Games (ARGs). As the laborious circulation of fabricated evidence gives way to the immediacy of collective speculation, conspiracy theories are evolving into, not a game of evidence, but a war of collective imagination.

Ultimately, the incoherent, politically strategic, and speculative fantasies of today's post-truth conspiracy movements bear such little resemblance to the fringe conspiracy theories of the

previous century, that – as David Coady has suggested – perhaps they should not even be described in such terms (2021). For these reasons, I employ the term "conspiracy fantasies" as a useful alternative. These politicized narratives are a form of disinformation, certainly; but also, a unique form of collectively created digital folklore and fanfiction which, in a bid for legitimacy, has evolved in order to better obfuscate its own fictional status. In this sense, conspiracy fantasies may be analysed as a particularly insidious form of what has been described in the ARG community as "pervasive fiction" or "unfiction."

Considering conspiracy fantasies in this light makes it apparent that many scholars, journalists, and pundits are asking the same biased question: "Why do people believe in conspiracy theories?" This loaded question presupposes a false dichotomy between belief and disbelief. Perhaps closer to the target is Agent Mulder's UFO poster which boldly declares: "I WANT TO BELIEVE" (*The X-Files*; 1993-2002). Mulder's poster raises an important point. People often *want* to believe, which is not at all the same thing as *actually* believing.

The rise of 'conspiracy culture' in the new millennium (Knight; 2020) indicates that conspiracist ideology owes more to processes of social construction and motivated reasoning than to individual delusions or pathology (Aupers; 2012: 22). Thus – as previously argued – the boundary-blurring processes through which people engage with pervasive disinformation and unfiction across digital media platforms are vastly underexplored; and extend far beyond simple notions of belief, disbelief, or make-believe. It is not insignificant that "reality TV" (and many "documentaries") are anything but "reality" (or the whole truth).[30] Nor is it insignificant that ARGs are guided by the paradoxical mantra: "TINAG" (This Is Not A Game). It is my contention that the blurred area between belief and make-believe may be effectively delineated and defined as "fake-believe." Whereas *make-believe* means to pretend, *fake-believe* entails the false denial of that pretence.

To better explore the boundaries of fake-believe within the context of digital media, it is necessary to examine the apparently straight-forward – but in reality, nothing-of-the-sort – natures of "belief" and "disbelief." Daniel Dennett has pointed out the difference between propositional beliefs based on prior knowledge and experience (i.e., whether there is milk in the fridge) and 'capital-b Beliefs' (pertaining to religious belief, political creed, etc.) which,

[30] The highly constructed and inauthentic nature of documentary and reality TV has been well and long established in scholarship. For example, see: *Reality TV: Realism and Revelation* (2005) by Biressi and Nunn.

Dennett argues, 'are really just opinions' (1978; 2009; 2016). In a similar vein, John Searle has described such speculative ideological beliefs as 'desires,' noting that 'beliefs require justification in a way that desires and hunches do not' (2001: 109; 2016: 01:35). Such often-neglected distinctions are crucial for a more nuanced exploration of this topic. In short: What are we talking about, when we talk about belief?[31] According to Searle:

> Beliefs and desires are matching concepts, because with beliefs we represent how things are – or how we think they are – and that has a mind-to-world directional fit; the mind is supposed to fit the world. But with desires, we represent not how we think things are – but how we want them to be – and desire has a world-to-mind directional fit; the world is supposed to change to match the mind (1983: 8; 2016: 01:00).

The intent to align the world with desires is evocative of traditional practices of superstition and magical thinking, which remain strikingly common in post-modern and late-modern societies. In order to examine the modern prevalence of such practices without 'presuming a continuity with similar practices in pre- or non-modern societies,' Colin Campbell interrogated why, in situations of 'helplessness,' people often 'perform a stereotyped act which…looks as if it is a means to the end which is desired,' but which they nevertheless '"know" is not actually a means of achieving the required result' (1996: 162-164). Campbell argued that although 'inaction, apathy or resignation' may be considered rational responses to circumstances beyond one's control, such responses might also be construed 'as fatalist or defeatist' by modern, rational thinkers who view themselves as 'active, dynamic people, "in charge" of their lives' (161).

Thus, according to Campbell, the 'marked discrepancy between action and expressed-belief so characteristic of contemporary superstitious conduct' (165) can be explained to some extent by the fact that modern, rational thinkers become 'trapped by their own values and beliefs' (161). In Campbell's words: 'Either they act in a way which denies their core values but is consistent with their beliefs, or they act in a way which is consistent with those values but is contrary to their beliefs' (ibid). Campbell describes these 'expressive act[s]' which are 'rendered stereotypical in form so they can "carry" symbolic meaning' as 'half-beliefs,' and suggests that the significance of half-beliefs 'lies in the fact that they "say something" rather than that they "do something"' (ibid).

[31] Courtesy of Raymond Carver's 1981 short story, 'What We Talk About When We Talk About Love.'

Justin Barrett, writing on the cognitive science of religion, has observed similar discrepancies among religious adherents, finding that Christians are more likely to seek divine intervention 'via psychological causation over the biological and mechanistic domains' (2001). Building on these findings, Neil Van Leeuwen importantly argues that most people do not empirically (or propositionally) believe in the tenets of their religion (2014; 2017; 2018). In a 2018 episode of *Hi-Phi Nation* with Barry Lam, Van Leeuwen observed:

> People don't pray for limbs to grow back, typically. They'll pray for their friend's cancer to be cured. They'll pray for financial success in the future. They'll pray for things that don't obviously contradict ordinary factual beliefs. If you factually believed God is omnipotent then why not pray for your limb to grow back? (22:35).

It is not surprising, then, that research by Hyzen and Van den Bulck confirms that contemporary conspiracism movements appear to be motivated less by literal belief in overtly imaginary "theories" than by socio-political ideology (2021). Additionally, research by Van Prooijen et al., suggests that people can be attracted to conspiracy theories for the entertainment value which these narratives offer (2021a) and that 'the intense emotions triggered by conspiracy theories might suppress people's capacity to think rationally about them' (2021b). The authors conclude:

> Much like a scary movie or detective novel, conspiracy theories typically involve spectacular narratives that include mystery, suspected danger, and unknown forces that one does not fully comprehend. Jointly, these features can make learning about a conspiracy theory a fascinating and emotion-arousing experience (2021a).

Once again, such arguments affirm the value of creative-practice methodologies for better understanding the affective and memetic capacities of unfictional narratives. On this, Joe Ondrak describes conspiracy disinformation as 'a new kind of horror fiction' which exploits assumptions about online platforms to 'hover in the cracks between fact and fiction – scaring and thrilling readers with the potential that the horrific nightmares depicted could be real' (2021). Ondrak astutely compares and contrasts the conspiracy fantasies of QAnon with the "Creepypasta"[32] fanfiction which preceded them. On this, he writes:

> The desire to reinforce one's existing beliefs through narrative is what drives disinformation with a force that Creepypasta can never truly attain. After all, nobody wants a world with paranormal monsters in the same way that they want

[32] The slang term "copypasta" originated on 4chan in 2006 to describe texts frequently copied and pasted across digital media platforms. The following year, Creepypasta emerged as the horror genre of copypasta, and the Slender Man was its most prominent supernatural monster.

> their political adversaries to be monstrous. Horror fiction on social media still exists, but has traded out monstrous mascots like Slender Man for a satanic cabal of child-trafficking elites and is much more effective at becoming the world in which people truly believe in by appealing directly to the desire to believe in it (ibid).

In the wake of the 2020 US presidential election, the absurd purported satanic cabal[33] – feared and loathed in the digital lore of QAnon – was largely supplanted by more "realistic" (albeit equally baseless) "deep state" fantasies revolving around election fraud and/or a Trump shadow presidency.[34] Considering the absolute lack of evidence and credibility behind the modern iterations of these continuously evolving and ever baseless fantasies – which I suggest can be described as "Conspiracypasta" – I feel it is warranted to describe these movements more as *gone-along-with* than as literally *believed-in.*

Nevertheless, discourse around contemporary conspiracism all-too-often presumes that conspiracists sincerely and empirically believe in the fantasies which they create and/or spread. This presumption is largely unjustified, given that one need not empirically believe in entertaining or self-affirming narratives in order to invent, spread, or endorse them. At the same time, it cannot be ignored that many of the scholars, journalists, and pundits making such presumptions about "beliefs" are likely to hold any number of non-falsifiable or factually unsupported "beliefs" themselves, including wellness fads, mysticism, spiritual transcendence, and religious doctrines. According to Gross and Simmons, for example, a cross-sampling of American college professors in 2008 found that more than half professed faith in God and less than a quarter professed Atheism.

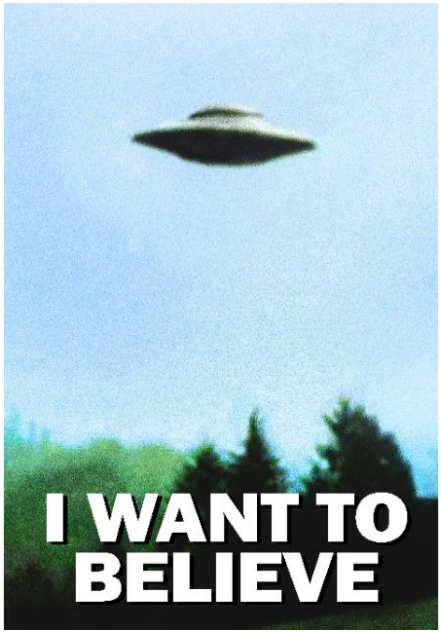
From this perspective, it seems clear that the problem lies, not with the fact that people believe (or claim to believe) imaginary things, but with the specific ideological content of the so-called "beliefs." Thus, frequently asked questions of "why people believe in conspiracy theories" are less critical than questions of *how people engage with conspiracism*, independent of belief. Or, more specifically, taking into consideration Stanley Milgram's foundational studies on obedience to authority (1974): How do social and cultural pressures create incentives for collaborating with overtly unjust and harmful socio-political movements?

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[33] The "satanic cabal" may be viewed as a revival of the Satanic Panic of the 1980s and 1990s and, to some extent, as a continuation of turn of the century "blood libel" propaganda and European and American witch trials (Circa 1400-1700).

[34] The "Deep State" may be viewed, to some extent, as a continuation of the Bavarian Illuminati and Jacobin conspiracies of the French Revolution, exploited by Napoleon Bonaparte as a pretext for a coup d'état.

While Agent Mulder's poster [**Fig. 3.1**] serves as a reminder to consider propositional belief apart from the *desire* to believe, a 1962 *Peanuts* comic strip by Charles Schulz (adapted for television in 1966) provides a reminder of the denial often entangled with this desire. This iconic comic strip finds Linus van Pelt writing a letter to the Great Pumpkin; an otherwise unknown holiday deity. After some consideration, Linus adds: "P.S. If you really are a fake, don't tell me. I don't want to know" [**Fig. 3.2**]. In light of complementary conspiracy fantasy movements, how might we best begin to map the territory of fake-believe, wherein make-believe and ideological belief have become difficult to distinguish?





Truthiness and Bullshit: The Outer Limits of Fake Believe

The area of make-believe has been extensively analysed by philosophers and theorists as early as Plato and Aristotle who respectively acknowledged the potential dangers (C. 375 BCE) and benefits (C. 375 BCE) of pretence. Samuel Taylor Coleridge proposed a 'willing suspension of disbelief' in relation to poetry in 1817, while Konstantin Stanislavski explored the 'magic if' in relation to theatre as early as 1936. However, if the opaquely worded "willing suspension of disbelief" might be simplified as "wanting *not* to *dis*believe," then it can be further reduced to "wanting to believe." This simplification presents a problem, however, for just as "wanting to believe" is not the same as "believing," neither is it the same as "pretending."

Two years after the infamous 1938 radio broadcast of *The War of the Worlds*, Orson Welles described the pseudo-panic which allegedly ensued (Pooley and Socolow; 2013) as being "the same kind of excitement that we extract from a practical joke in which somebody puts a sheet over his head and says *Boo!*" (1940: 03:20). Welles continues: "I don't think anybody believes that that individual is a ghost, but we do scream and yell and rush down the hall" (ibid).[35] Further complicating matters, studies have found that various placebo treatments remain effective even when openly acknowledged as such (Howick, et al; 2017). In a similarly paradoxical process, people can be sincerely impacted by ideologies embedded within overtly fictional characters and situations, drawing real-life inspiration (both constructive and destructive) from fictional stories (Smith; 1995).

Along these lines, Richard Schechner proposed a category of performance called 'make-belief.' Performances of this sort, Schechner maintains, are ones in which people enact 'the effects they want the receivers of their performances to accept "for real"' (2002: 43). For Schechner, make-belief performances range from campaign speeches and shamanic rituals to the everyday performance of gender and social roles, such as those extensively theorized in Erving Goffman's seminal 1956 text *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life.* Schechner explains that 'in actually performing the rituals … these actions, these performances, actually create the belief' (2012: 01:45). Problematically, however, the distinctions are sometimes unclear between make-belief performances, and what Schechner describes as 'dark play,' in which the meta message "this is play" (Bateson; 1955) is intentionally suppressed (Schechner; 1988). Also unclear, are the distinctions between these forms of "performance" and criminal acts of fraud and deception in which the "audience" is similarly unaware of the artificial aspects of the "performance." Furthermore, the terms "make-believe" and "make-belief" are confusingly similar, given the vast difference of what they are intended to describe.

In critiquing conspiracy fantasies of the so-called "post-truth" digital era, it is hazardous to ignore the religious aspects of toxic conspiracism or the toxic aspects of organized religions; both of which share a basis in faith and unfalsifiable claims rather than credible evidence. Yuval Noah Harari writes: 'When a thousand people believe some made-up story for one month; that's fake news. When a billion people believe it for a thousand years, that's a religion, and we

[35] Welles's statement calls to mind the proverbial response of the 18th century arts patron Marie du Deffand, when asked if she believed in ghosts: "No, but I'm afraid of them" (*Bartlett's*; 1985).

are admonished not to call it “fake news” in order not to hurt the feelings of the faithful (or incur their wrath)’ (2018). Dennett likewise observed (in the foreword for *Leaps of Faith* by Nicholas Humphrey) that ‘it is not polite to expose the gullibility of decent, intelligent, well-meaning folks, *spiritual* folks, who have savoured the depths of meaning to be found in these experiences’ (1996: xi).

Comparisons between religion and fake news invite further questions regarding the distinction between religions and cults. Linguist Robin Clark observes that ‘the word “cult” originally designate[d] a practice of religious veneration’ such as ‘the cult of Our Lady of Guadalupe’ (quoted in Rodia; 2019). ‘However,’ Clark continues, ‘the word was co-opted in the first half of the 20th century by sociology, and has come to denote a social group with “socially deviant” beliefs and practices, like a UFO cult’ (ibid). Ori Tavor similarly argues that the designation “cult” has nothing ‘to do with the content of [a group’s] religious ideology’ but rather, is used ‘to demonize a movement that is controversial’ (ibid). Richard Hecht puts this in simpler terms: ‘A cult is essentially a religion you don’t like or understand’ (Monmaney; 1997). According to Hecht, both religions and cults employ ‘symbolic narratives’ and ‘untestable claims to “ultimate truth”’ to draw a line between ‘those on the inside and those on the outside’ (ibid). Hal French, on the other hand, suggests that whereas in traditional religions, ‘the important texts are open to all,’ cults are frequently ‘headed by a messianic figure’ making a claim to ‘truth,’ and often generate an atmosphere of ‘spiritual paranoia’ (ibid). At any rate, the designation between ‘cult’ and ‘religion’ is largely a subjective and polemical matter. Nevertheless, it goes almost without saying that organizations of either description have been guilty of committing terrible crimes against humanity in the service of alleged or purported “beliefs.”

Still, whether cult, religion, or mysticism, the potential benefits of *spirituality* cannot be lightly dismissed. Spiritual development, along with development of mind and body, has been long viewed across cultures as a pillar of health and well-being. It is my contention that the philosophical approaches of spirituality and skepticism need not be mutually exclusive. Skeptics need not be dogmatically dismissive of practitioners of spirituality, and vice versa; nor is either approach intrinsically destructive or harmful. Secular philosophies and practices – including Zen philosophy, mindfulness, meditation, yoga, or martial arts – can be both richly spiritual and rational. Even mystical or shamanistic ideas can potentially provide spiritual, physical, and

social benefits which may outweigh the collective social costs; particularly when these ideas are accepted as spiritual metaphors, rather than embraced as literal or metaphysical truths.

Although not always acknowledged by religious or spiritual communities, this meta-approach to spirituality is hardly radical. As noted, philosophers have observed that most people do not *empirically* believe in the tenets of their religion (Barrett, 2001; Dennett, 2006: 227-228; Van Leeuwen, 2014; 2017). Žižek often illustrates this point with a joke about theoretical physicist Neils Bohr. As Žižek tells it: Bohr hung a horseshoe above his front door to prevent evil spirits from entering his house. A colleague asked him whether he, as a scientist, really believed in the horseshoe's power, to which Bohr replied: "Of course I don't believe in it. But I was told it works even if you don't believe in it" (2012: 1:09:00). Žižek relates this meta-belief to Kierkergaard's notion of *the leap of faith* wherein people do not believe in faith-based propositions so much as they – in Žižek's words – 'believe to believe' (1:10:30). As Kierkegaard put it, this belief is not belief as an extension of rationality or logic; it is 'belief by virtue of the absurd' (1843: 49-50).

Such meta and quasi understandings of belief/desire are highly relevant for discourse surrounding contemporary conspiracy fantasies. Such processes, furthermore, raise questions of *self*-deception. Robert Trivers argues that due to the social costs associated with being detected in deception, the process of natural selection has favoured the ability to 'deceive successfully' (2010: 374). According to Trivers, this 'selection to deceive can favor self-deception, the better to hide the deception and separately to reduce its cognitive costs' (ibid). Trivers also notes that within the animal kingdom, communication systems are 'not expected to be systems for the dissemination of truth. Instead, they are expected to be systems by which individual organisms attempt to maximize their reproductive fitness by communicating to others things that may be true or false (1981: 33).

Further light is cast on this area by an essay entitled 'On Bullshit,' by Harry Frankfurt (published by Princeton University Press) which spent 27 weeks on *The New York Times* bestseller list in 2005. Frankfurt asserts that whereas "lying" requires both an awareness of, and opposition to, an objective common truth, "bullshitting" 'does not reject the authority of truth' but rather 'pays no attention to it at all' (1986: 18). According to Frankfurt, the bullshitter 'is neither on the side of the true nor on the side of the false. His eye is not on the facts at all… He does not care whether the things he says describe reality correctly. He just picks them out, or makes

them up, to suit his purpose' (17). Thus, Frankfurt concludes, 'bullshit is a greater enemy of the truth than lies are,' (18) observing that one of 'the most salient features of our culture is that there is so much bullshit. Everyone knows this. Each of us contributes [our] share. But we tend to take the situation for granted. Most people are rather confident of their ability to recognize bullshit and to avoid being taken in by it' (1). As a result, he observes, 'we have no clear understanding of what bullshit is, why there is so much of it, or what functions it serves' (ibid).

Calling attention to the *creative* aspects (i.e., artistry) of bullshit, Frankfurt continues:

> [T]he mode of creativity upon which [bullshit] relies is less analytical and less deliberative than that which is mobilized in lying. It is more expansive and independent, with more spacious opportunities for improvisation, color, and imaginative play. This is less a matter of craft than of art. Hence the familiar notion of the "bullshit artist" (16).

The ideological counterpart to bullshit is "truthiness," defined by satirist Stephen Colbert as 'the quality of preferring concepts or facts one wishes or believes to be true rather than concepts or facts known to be true' (2005). Colbert further describes truthiness as 'know[ing] with the heart' rather than 'think[ing] with the head,' and jokingly adds: 'I don't trust books. They're all fact, no heart' (ibid). Naturally, one person's truthiness can be another's bullshit. Truthiness and bullshit are, thus, the outer limits of fake-believe. Betwixt and between,[36] lies a zone of pretence, denial, self-deception, doublethink, cognitive bias, motivated reasoning, half-beliefs, and national/cultural myths. This zone includes fake things which we want to believe, and real things which we prefer to deny, despite an awareness of institutional knowledge to the contrary. To make these fake-beliefs more "believable" to ourselves and others, we routinely deny the pretence inherent in these beliefs. When pressed, we deny the denial.[37]

My intention throughout this chapter is certainly not to attempt to explain belief, but rather to advocate for the importance of precise language around these issues; to suggest numerous clarifications of terms; and to lay the groundwork for conducting ethical and efficacious creative-practice in an area prone to misinterpretation, misrepresentation, and the backfire effect. First and foremost, I caution against ascribing "belief" to behaviours which might – in

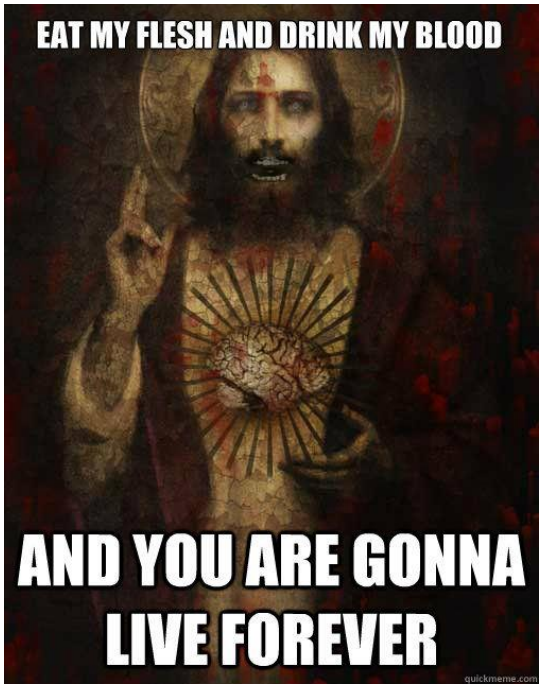
[36] This is a reference to anthropologist Victor Turner's description of liminality (1969). Although Turner's analysis is essential reading along these lines, for reasons of clarity, I choose to avoid the term "liminal."

[37] I have spilt much digital ink elsewhere on this topic in relation to these matters with regard to "shut-eye" psychic ideologies and identities (McQueen; 2018, 2020).

line with Occam's Razor – be explained in simpler and more correct terms; such as trolling, bullshit, or self-profit.

[**Fig. 3.3**: A light-skinned Jesus waves an American flag and wears a red MAGA cap (the de facto symbol of Trump's 2016 "Make America Great Again" Presidential campaign). It is unclear whether this meme was created sincerely or satirically. **Fig. 3.4**: A fascinating reframing of Jesus Christ as a zombie, and of his followers as cannibals. The celebration of Easter as "Zombie Jesus Day" is also a popular Internet-meme.]





Irony and Trolling as Performance Art and Digital Warfare

The theoretical distinction between lying and bullshit asserted by Frankfurt (1986) provided a lens through which Jayson Harsin theorized the cultural shift from 'regimes of truth' proposed by Michel Foucault (1977: 23), to the 'regimes of post-truth' of the new millennium (2015). This distinction further provides a starting point for considering similarities between bullshit artists and the so-called "shitposts" of Internet trolls (see: Footnote 11). Among the functions examined by Harsin are 'efforts to mobilize new digital "participatory culture" to proliferate truth games' (1). Elsewhere, Harsin defines post-truth phenomena as the 'weaponization of fake news, rumor bombs, bullshit, lies, conspiracies, misinformation; refusal or alacrity to believe truth-tellers; and buzzing debates and panic' (2020: 1062). He goes on to theorize the emergence of 'emo-truth' as a particular popular response to the larger post-truth and 'post-trust' crises as 'a particular form of aggressive masculine performance of trustworthiness,

corresponding to a code for recognizing it, resulting in a legitimated status of the popular truth-teller, and at odds with more official scientific, institutional truth-tellers' (ibid).

As previously noted, Bratich has described conspiracy theories as being, 'not just their own kind of knowledge' or 'an epistemological question about what counts as true' but also 'a passage from knowledge to action' (2017: 05:25). Indeed, if there is a lesson to be learned from popular conspiracy theories, it is that they possess, as Miłosz Hodun has noted: 'an enormous potential to engage people [and] organise and direct their actions in the public sphere' (2020: 9). Still, these strategic, collaborative, political, and ideological fantasies must be considered alongside the elephant in the room: According to the Pew Research Center, 90% of Americans profess an unfalsifiable belief in God or a higher spiritual power (2018), while a recent robust study found that only approximately half of Americans accept the theory of evolution (Miller, et al; 2022). While ideological belief and magical thinking are far from new, these approaches remain remarkably common in the modern political process.

Along similar lines, the roots of unfiction far predate the genre of the epistolary novel. Indeed, I see no reason why ancient religious texts (e.g., *The Bible*), imagination fuelled screeds (e.g., Scottish philosopher John Robison's 1797 *Proofs of a Conspiracy against all the Religions and Governments of Europe, carried on in the Secret Meetings of Free Masons, Illuminati, and Reading Societies*), or turn of the century disinformation/propaganda (e.g., *The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*) should not all be viewed as foundational texts in the pervasive unfiction genre. Thus, I do not argue that conspiracy fantasies, disinformation, unfiction, or alternate-reality lifestyles are *new*. However, digital technologies, the Internet, and social media platforms have allowed for a dramatic convergence of the top-down and bottom-up creation, appropriation, and circulation of collective conspiracist texts; enabling a distinctly new collaborative form of conspiracism to flourish in the early twenty-first century. At the same time, the collaborative nature of these conspiracy fantasies makes it possible to view "traditional" conspiracy theories in new light.

Harsin's exploration of the 'post-trust' (2020: 1062) response to 'regimes of post-truth' (2015) built upon, and was reflective of, Frankfurt's observation on the 'retreat from the discipline required by dedication to the ideal of correctness [to the] pursuit of an alternative ideal of sincerity' (1986: 20). Thus, in a remarkably prescient statement as it relates to the rise of social media and "self-branding" – and the narcissism and bullshit often entailed with such platforms

and approaches – Frankfurt argued that the individual who becomes 'convinced that reality has no inherent nature, which he might hope to identify as the truth about things' will abandon attempts to 'arrive at accurate representations of a common world' and strive instead to be 'true to his own nature' and 'provide honest representations of himself' (ibid). In other words, according to Frankfurt, 'since it makes no sense to try to be true to the facts,' the individual 'must therefore try instead to be true to himself' (ibid). 'And insofar as this is the case,' he concludes, 'sincerity itself is bullshit' (ibid). Here, Frankfurt's statement is reminiscent of the warnings of Hannah Arendt, discussed in Chapter Three.

[**Figs. 3.5 & 3.6**: A *Futurama* "not sure if Fry" meme and a "Batman slapping Robin" meme point to the frustrating nature of the oxymoronic term "alternative fact."]





An example of the post-truth/post-trust approach to Internet conspiracism and trolling can be seen in various claims made by Scott Adams, the controversial creator of the popular absurdist comic strip *Dilbert*.[38] In addition to being a once highly successful cartoonist, Adams frequently promoted himself as a persuasion expert and certified hypnotist. In 2015, Adams was one of the earliest and highest profile pundits to predict Trump's electoral victory. Adams frequently championed Trump as a 'master persuader,' and in 2017, wrote *Win Bigly: Persuasion in a World Where Facts Don't Matter*. It is not always clear whether Adams was sincerely attempting to cast light on Trump's startlingly broad public appeal or engaging in some form of opportunistic performance art. Problematically, in analysing Trump's tactics of persuasion,

[38] In 2023, Adams – who describes himself as a Democrat to the 'left of Bernie [Sanders]' – was 'axed by newspapers, his syndicate and his book publisher' after making a series of remarks widely deemed as racist (D'Zurilla; 2023).

Adams is clear that he intentionally employs the same tactics himself (2017b). Given his interest in emotional persuasion and counter-factual rhetorical strategies, it is not surprising that by 2020, Adams had gravitated from persuasion analysist to conspiracy entrepreneur. By that time, Adams' career as a pundit was significantly entangled with Trump's legacy and re-election bid. Ahead of the 2020 US Presidential election, Adams attempted to "recode" (in the guise of "decoding") the Biden campaign for Satanic symbolism. This, however, was carried out in an unconventionally ironic "post-truth" manner.

For instance, in a live broadcast on social media, Adams began by stating: '…I'm not a believer in any kind of a religious anything, but I can't help noticing how many Satanic coincidences there are with the Joe Biden campaign,' asking rhetorically: 'Don't they say that Satan's biggest trick is telling you he doesn't exist?' (2020: Ep. 1103). Adams then illogically asserts that Satan, therefore, 'would be hiding in plain sight,' and proceeds to recode Biden's campaign slogan '**b**uild **b**ack **b**etter' as '666,' among other more ludicrous examples. For instance, Adams analyses Biden's claim to 'be an ally of the light not of the darkness' as a 'true but misleading' reference to the forest fires consuming parts of California and Arizona at that time (ibid). In Adams' words: 'He will bring you the light, but there's a catch: It's fire, and it's burning your stuff. That's exactly what Satan would say, if Satan existed' (ibid).

Although Adams stops short of accusing Biden of being literally 'possessed by Satan' he smugly asserts that if that *was* the case, 'it would look exactly like this,' and goes on to observe that Kamala Harris' names each contain six letters, as does her title VPOTUS (ibid). Adams repeatedly describes his awkward observations as 'weird coincidences' and claims – using Trump's words – to be 'just putting that out there' (ibid).[39] In doing this, Adams follows a long line of efforts at encoding Satanic messages in the name of decoding them. For instance, *The Washington Post* pointed out in 1980 that each of Ronald Wilson Reagan's names contained six letters (Gilliam; 1980). The difference in Adam's case is that he makes no attempt to conceal that fact that no sincerity underlies his attempts to grab, hold, and control attention.

[39] In 2020, Adams retweeted an image of the Biden-Harris campaign SMS short code '30330' along with a Twitter user's text stating: 'What's 2020 divided by 666? Just another wink from the simulation.' To this Adams added, 'Probably just a coincidence, but…' (@ScottAdamsSays. *Twitter*. 24 Sep 2020). Incidentally, the Biden-Harris SMS number '30330' was also the subject of a Biden "gaff" in which he mistakenly asked supporters to 'go to' rather than 'text' that number; resulting in (within minutes) numerous parodic and parasitic websites (Keller; 2019).

Since Adams apparently candidly writes about the persuasion strategies which he employs and appreciates, an opportunity exists to gain more insight into his motivations than is usually available in cases of internet trolls and pundits. For instance, Adams often praises Trump's ability to control the narrative with the use of, what he calls, 'intentional wrongness' (2017b). According to Adams, for Trump, this tactic:

> …seemed to work every time, at least in terms of attracting attention where he wanted it. It even works when you know he's doing it. If you're talking about whatever topic he wants you to focus on, he has your mind right where he wants it, even if you are criticizing him for his errors while you are there (ibid).

In light of this approach to communication, how might Adams' bizarre foray into Satanic numerology be interpreted? His frequent use of the 3D or 4D chess metaphor (Kesvani; 2020) suggests that his atheistic hunt for Satanic symbolism has deeper strategic motivations than are immediately apparent. Perhaps the most useful interpretation is to consider his behaviour as an act of internet trolling which is often done for its own sake – "for the lolz" – but also often weaponized, particularly within digital conspiracy culture. The ostensibly innocent idiocy and outrageous logical fallacies of Adams' livestream served to attract attention, coverage, criticism, and ridicule, and thus, rapidly *spread*. In other words, Adams put to the test the aphorism "there is no such thing as bad publicity."[40] After losing his syndication and book publisher in 2023, Adams appears to have proven otherwise.

In 2020, a compelling observation on Adams' trolling was advanced by Marty Kelley (AKA Doktor Zoom) of the far-Left online magazine *Wonkette.* With a nod to the lyrics of the Rolling Stones' *Sympathy for the Devil* – Kelley writes (emphasis added):

> …but what's puzzling us is the nature of his game. Adams keeps reminding us he doesn't actually believe in religion, so what's the point of any of this? No point at all! He's just raising fascinating questions, you see. It's trolling for the sake of trolling. But why such Crom-awful stupid trolling? Haha, that is exactly the joke! Adams said a dumb thing, you stupid libs pointed at it and said, "That's really dumb," and *that means he wins, because you're so triggered.* CRY MORE, LIBS! No, really, that is the entirely of the joke. *If you say it's stupid, you're the stupid one*. If you point out that doesn't make a goddamn bit of sense, you REALLY lose. *If you shake your head at the idiocy of it all, you just don't get how deeply you've been owned.*

[40] Although often attributed to showman and charlatan P.T. Barnum, the earliest documented use appears to be by Dubliner Brendan Behan, a self-proclaimed 'drinker with a writing problem,' who wrote (Circa 1950): 'There's no such thing as bad publicity except your own obituary.'

[**Fig. 3.11**: A meme calls attention to trolling tactics seeking to enrage liberals. **Fig. 3.12**: The "This is Fine" dog from KC Green's 2013 webcomic "On Fire," sits in a burning cafe in a MAGA ball cap telling himself that [Trump] is just playing 4D Chess.]





To better explore the significance and complexity of the relationship between conspiracism and "Satanic panic," briefly consider the oft-repeated sentiment (referenced by Adams) that "the greatest trick the Devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn't exist." This quote was popularized by the 1995 film *The Usual Suspects,* but hearkens at least back to the 1836 text *Quakerism Examined* in which John Wilkinson writes: 'One of the artifices of Satan is, to induce men to believe that he does not exist' (Ch. 4). A decade later, the sentiment was appropriated by Charles Baudelaire who wrote: *'…la plus belle des ruses du Diable est de vous persuader qu'il n'existe pas!*'[41] (1864). Despite the ubiquitousness of the claim, this modus operandi makes little sense. It seems unlikely that adherents of *The Bible* would accept the truth of God, but deny the existence of the Devil. It seems, therefore, that the deeper sentiment of the aphorism is captured by the statement: The Devil's best trick is to convince people that *the Bible* is not true. In essence, this argument boils down to a Catch-22. To doubt the veracity of God is to prove the Devil is real. Such circular logic is common in conspiracist texts which often reframe or recode counter-evidence and counter-arguments as ipso facto *proof of* that conspiracy.

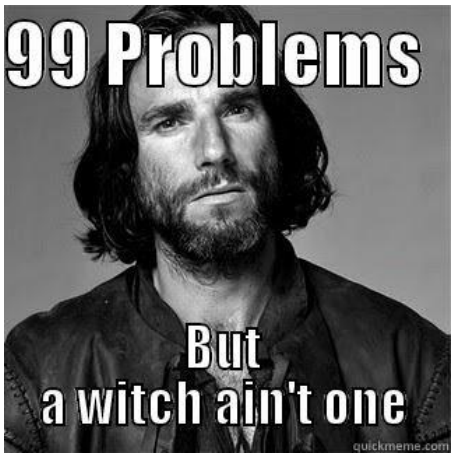
Similarly, supernatural and religious texts often advance unfalsifiable claims which frame critics of the texts as proof of those claims. Just as denying the existence of witchcraft in Salem, Massachusetts in 1692 was prosecuted as blasphemy, today, to deny the literal truth of *The*

[41] "…The most beautiful ruse of the Devil is to persuade you that he doesn't exist."

Bible is often framed as taking the Devil's side. This is a slippery slope – a rhetorical loophole – which may be, and has consistently been, weaponized across cultures, generations, and ideologies. Such logic traps open the door to 'pseudo-rationality' which – as Adorno argued in *The Stars Down to Earth* – can provide (and have provided) footholds for autocracy, fascism, and genocide (circa 1950).

[**Fig. 3.7**: *The Bible* is described as a conspiracy theorist handbook. **Fig. 3.8**: A particularly complex meme depicts Daniel Day Lewis as John Proctor from the 1996 film adaptation of Arther Miller's 1953 play *The Crucible;* an overt comparison between the McCarthyism of the 1950s in the US (of which Miller was a victim) and the Salem witchcraft trials and executions. This meme invokes the lyric by Ice-T 'I got 99 problems, but a bitch ain't one' (1993) while, perhaps unintentionally, foregrounding the ironic truth that witchcraft was – but was not *actually* – the source of Proctor's problems.]

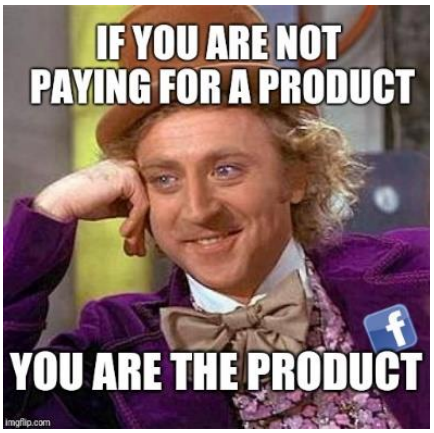


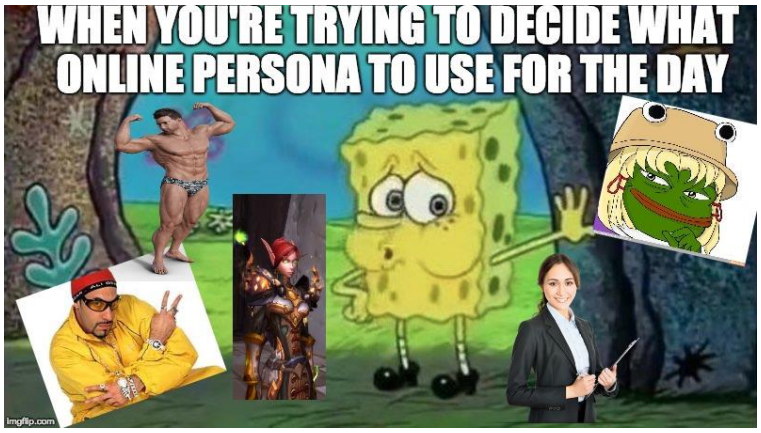


In light of all of the above, I contend that conspiracy theorizing may be viewed as a unique form of participatory, unfictional storytelling which has rapidly evolved within digitized platforms. These stories are *participatory*, in that they involve us by speaking to the social networks and power structures in which we are embedded, and encourage us to engage and contribute. They are *digitized*, in that the creation, distribution, and consumption of these stories now takes place in predominantly virtual worlds, but include real-world consequences. In *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, Sherry Turkle observed that 'recently the computer has become even more than tool and mirror: We are able to step through the looking glass. We are learning to live in virtual worlds' (1995: 9). Turkle discusses 'fundamental shifts in the way we create and experience human identity' brought about by new media, and argues that that this shift may best be understood as part of a larger cultural context of 'eroding boundaries between the real and the virtual…' (10).

Beyond the fact that people now construct identities for – and are learning to live in – virtual worlds, it is also the case that *virtual* identities and experiences inevitably impact *real-world* ones. When the curtain is pulled back on QAnon, it reveals not so much an evil mastermind, as much as a vast, decentralized, bizarre, collective fanfiction project; proving that if enough people throw enough content at the internet, some of it will stick. "Post-Truth" conspiracy fantasies of the digital era are neither centrally created nor precisely aimed at "belief." Rather, they are decentralized shot-gun blasts of shock and awe stimulus aimed at engagement and attention while simultaneously reflecting and inviting imaginative, creative, and darkly playful participation. In this sense, such movements are not unlike the processes of collaboration and circulation which underlie digital-meme genres. Neither ignorance nor evil are required if the media environment itself creates socio-economic incentives to fight for *attention* as a product in and of itself. The attention economy was noted as early as 1973 by artists Serra and Schoolman when they wrote: 'It is the consumer who is consumed. You are the product of t.v.'

[**Fig. 3.9**: Condescending Wonka points out a reality of modern mass media. **Fig. 3.10**: SpongeBob SquarePants points to the anonymous and amorphous nature of online identity politics.]





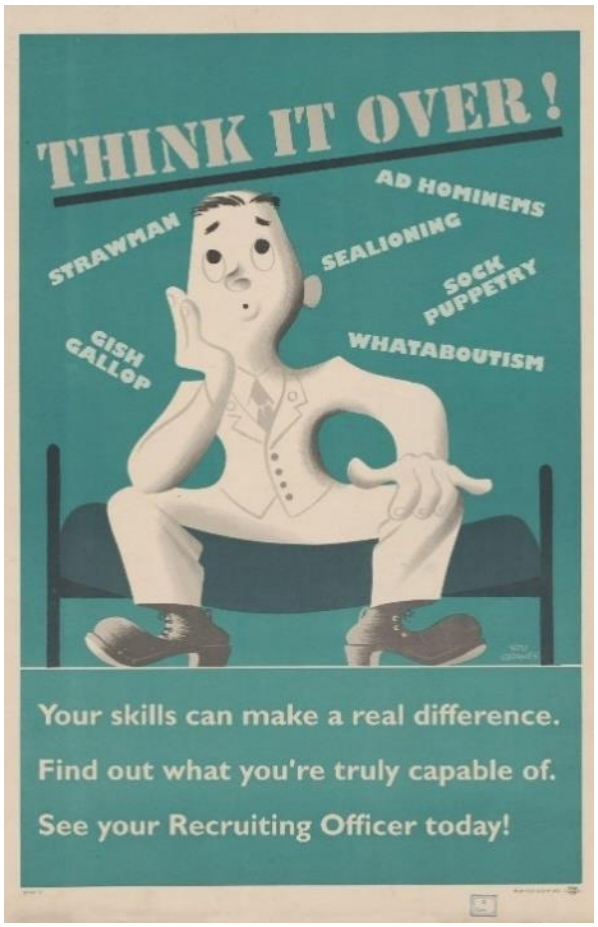
Unlike conspiracy theories of the modern era, conspiracy fantasies of the 21st century are largely driven by the selling of advertising, merchandise, branding, expertise, clicks, views, and ratings. Digital media have created not only low barriers to entry, but a low-risk environment for those who seek to weaponize, manipulate, or to simply "cash-in" on a crisis; and thus, an incentive to collaborate on creating crises on which to cash-in, ad infinitum. The low-risk and low-barriers to entry stand in stark contrast to the barriers facing classical conspiracists; from revolutionaries, fascists, and government disinformation specialists, to UFOlogists and

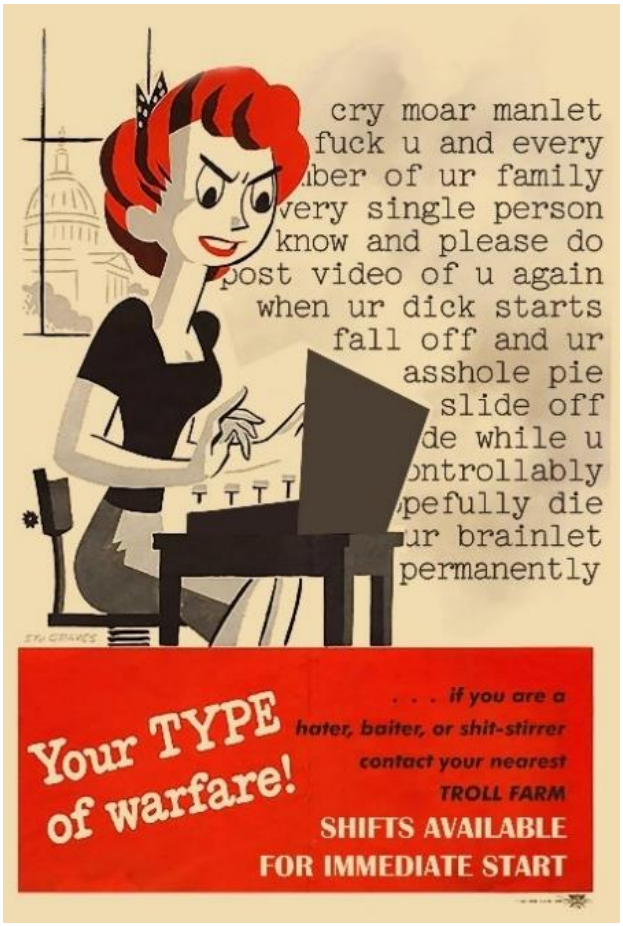
conspiracy confidence artists. The new era of conspiracism, driven largely by what one might describe as “useful idiots” – to adopt the Soviet political jargon of the Cold War – calls to mind the proposed strategy of Brooks and Flynn for maximizing robotic intelligence gathering: ‘Fast, cheap, and out of control’ (1989).

The startling traction of conspiracist content across mainstream news outlets and social media platforms revealed the cognitive vulnerabilities of a significant portion of the electorate and leadership, while also dramatically lowering the bar for professional and ethical standards. In 2024, shitposting, trolling, propaganda, and disinformation are rapidly becoming legitimized as campaign tools and strategies. The “normalization” of these tactics is well captured in a series of satirical “meme wars” posters by Jan Bobrowicz (circa 2020) which compare contemporary digital propagandistic tactics to the British war campaigns of WWI and WWII. These posters portray tactics – such as shitposts, memes, trolling, hating, baiting, shit-stirring, whataboutism, sock puppet accounts, sealioning, strawman arguments, Gish galloping, and ad hominem fallacies – as valuable and legitimate warfare tactics; while the failure to “like,” comment, subscribe, or participate in group chats is compared to treason [**Figs. 3.13 – 3.18**].






THINK IT OVER!
AD HOMINEMS
STRAWMAN
SEALIONING
SOCK PUPPETRY
GISH GALLOP
WHATABOUTISM
Your skills can make a real difference.
Find out what you're truly capable of.
See your Recruiting Officer today!


cry moar manlet
fuck u and every
ber of ur family
very single person
know and please do
post video of u again
when ur dick starts
fall off and ur
asshole pie
slide off
de while u
ntrollably
pefully die
ur brainlet
permanently
Your TYPE of warfare!
. . . if you are a
hater, baiter, or shit-stirrer
contact your nearest
TROLL FARM
SHIFTS AVAILABLE
FOR IMMEDIATE START

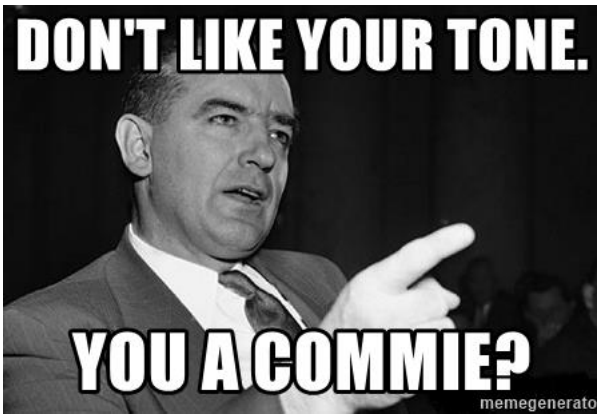

You are no exception
I Should do BUT !!!
Like
Comment
Subscribe


WANTED!
FOR MURDER
She muted the group chat

In 1970, William S. Burroughs published *The Revised Boy Scout Manual* – a quasi-satirical manifesto for 'electronic revolution.' This eclectic and problematic manifesto calls for revolt and assassination through the use of creative means, both covert and overt. The manuscript is partially styled after *The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion,* but the degree to which Burroughs was being satirical or serious is unclear. Significantly, however, this work appears to contain the earliest usage of the term "fake news." In Burroughs words:

> You construct fake news broadcasts on video camera… And you scramble your fabricated news in with actual news broadcasts… [Y]ou can advertise the fact that you are writing news in advance and trying to make it happen by techniques which anybody can use. And that makes you NEWS. And a TV personality as well, if you play it right (1970a: 10).

[**Fig. 3.19**: A meme suggests Joseph McCarthy's simple logic for assessing between "God-fearing Americans" and "communists." **Fig. 3.20**: A similar meme suggests the simple decision tree in relation to Donald Trump's assessment between "terrific journalism" and "fake news."]





Also, of note in these regards, is the Discordian movement of the 1970s; an American evolution of the post-WWII Dadaists and Situationists of Europe. According to Douglas Rushkoff, the Discordian's 'activist satire evolved into "Operation Mindfuck"' – laid out by Robert Anton Wilson and Robert Shea in *The Illuminatus Trilogy* (1975) – which sought to 'undermine people's faith in government, authority, and the sanctity of consensus reality itself by pranking everything, all the time' (2019). Rushkoff continues:

> The idea of Operation Mindfuck was to break the trance that kept America at war, blindly consuming, and oblivious to its impact on the rest of the world. Destabilize the dominant cultural narrative through pranks and confusion. Say things that may or may not be true – but probably not. But maybe (ibid).

According to Wilson, the modus operandi of Operation Mindfuck was to 'attribute all national calamities, assassinations, or conspiracies' to the "Illuminati" via newspapers and magazines, including *Playboy* magazine*,* where he was employed as an editor (Walker; 2013). According to Jesse Walker, 'When a New Orleans jury refused to convict one of the men who the conspiracy-hunting district attorney Jim Garrison blamed for the JFK killing,' a note was sent to the Los Angeles Free Press 'revealing that the jurors were all Illuminati initiates. The tell-tale sign: None of them had a left nipple' (ibid). According to Kerry Wendell Thornhill, he and Wilson aimed to 'to form a conspiracy with no purpose – so that investigators would never be able to figure out what it was doing' (*Discordia Wiki*; "Omar Khayyam Ravenhurst"). Rushkoff suggests, however, that as the ideas of the political-Left over time became 'the dominant cultural narrative, Operation Mindfuck became the tool of the alt-right' (2019).

[**Figs. 3.21 & 3.22:** Two disturbing and highly problematic variations of the 'You Mean Trolling' phrasal template in which the web-character Troll Face (emerging on Reddit in 2021) extolls the virtue of sexual abuse and war crimes.]



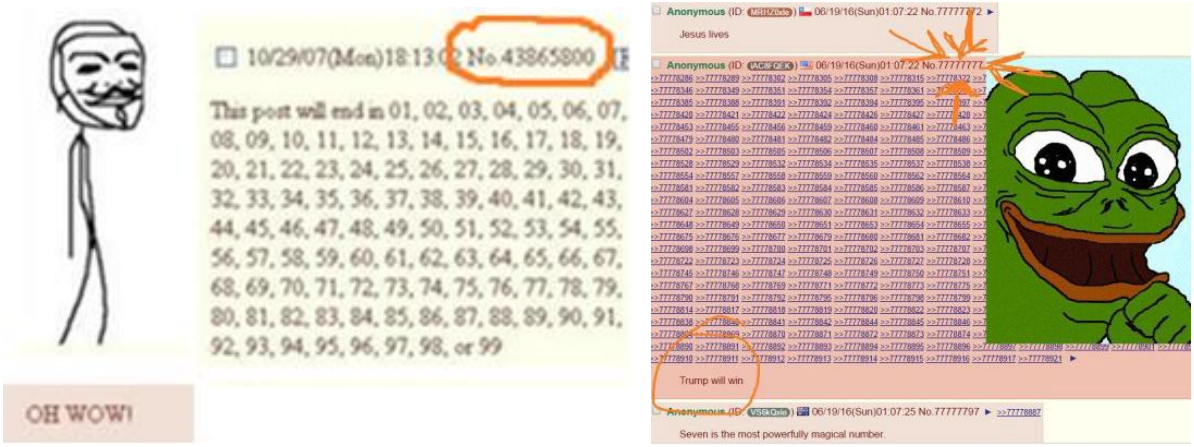


As an example of the contemporary impact of the Discordian project "OM," Rushkoff offers the alt-right 'Cult of Kek,' which emerged on 4chan in the run-up to the 2016 US Presidential election. The Internet image board 4chan was created in 2003, and the decentralized hacker collective known as "Anonymous" – eventually associated with the Guy Fawkes mask – took root on that platform. At that time, since users without a screenname were labelled as "Anonymous," 4chan users often referred to themselves, and each other, as "Anonymous" or "Anons." This practice was subsequently appropriated by users of 8chan. The term "kek" is roughly the Korean equivalent of "LOL" and was popularized among gamers as a result of a

programming feature in the popular *World of Warcraft* videogame (Blizzard Entertainment; 2004). In 2016, so-called "Anons" had already unofficially adopted Pepe, the anthropomorphic hedonistic cartoon frog, as their mascot. Consequently, when users discovered a frog-headed ancient Egyptian Deity of Chaos named Kek, the "Cult of Kek" was born.

One of the bizarre practices of Anons – adopted and expanded post-election by "QAnons" – was the use of "meme magic," which included "epic gets" of chronologically assigned post numbers containing round or double-digit numbers. For example, a post which succeeded in correctly predicting the final digit(s) of its assigned number would be afforded "epic" status, or imbued with the power of "meme magic." The practices of "meme magic" can be seen at work in the memes below:

> [**Fig. 3.23**: "Epic Fail Guy" (i.e., "Epic Get Guy" in a Guy Fawkes mask) secures an "epic fail" by predicting all possible two-digit outcomes other than the one received. Given the sequential order of posts, seemingly "epic" gets/fails are not uncommon. **Fig. 3.24**: Pepe the frog, accompanied only by the text "Trump will win," managed to "get" the highly significant, or "sacred" number "77777777."]



Meme magic gained such prominence during the 2016 US presidential election that many Anons proclaimed: 'We actually elected a meme as President' (Ohleiser; 2016). Whitney Phillips argues that, rather, it was the unwitting and uncritical *amplification* of these practices by journalists that had a measurable impact on the outcome of the election and subsequently provided 'the oxygen of amplification' to the messages of online hate groups (2018). Nevertheless, as Abby Ohleiser points out, even though 'the "4chan vote" was not the crucial voting block that swung the election to Trump… the belief that 4chan had actually contributed to or straight up caused Trump's win was everywhere on the boards' on election night (2016).

Aside from the fascist and anti-Semitic alt-Right ideologies, the "meme magic" of the Cult of Kek is immediately reminiscent of the "chaos magic" and pseudo-numerology satirically practiced by Discordians. These practices – based on the allegedly sacred number 23 and the "rule of fives" – were outlined in the 1963 pseudo-holy book *Principia Discordia* – written by Kerry Wendell Thornley and Gregory Hill (under the respective pseudonyms Omar Khayyam Ravenhurst and Malaclypse the Younger). This text begins as follows:

> POEE [Paratheo-Anametamystikhood Of Eris Esoteric] is one manifestation of THE DISCORDIAN SOCIETY about which you will learn more and understand less. We are a tribe of philosophers, theologians, magicians, scientists, artists, clowns, and similar maniacs who are intrigued with ERIS GODDESS OF CONFUSION and with Her Doings […] IV – A Discordian shall Partake of No Hot Dog Buns, for Such was the Solace of Our Goddess when She was Confronted with The Original Snub. V – A Discordian is Prohibited of Believing What he reads (1968).

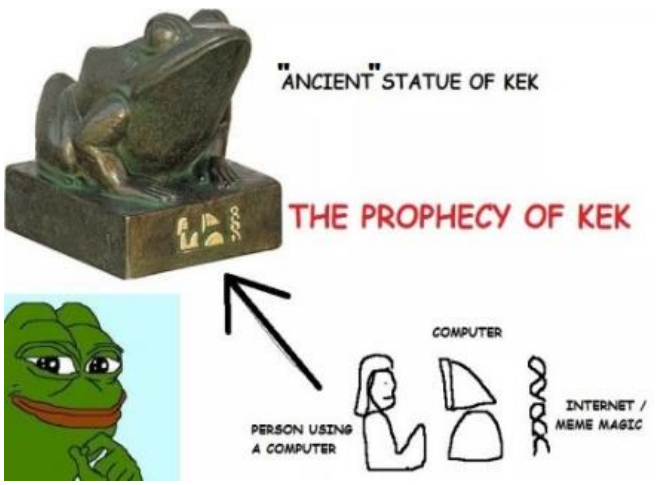
Compare this to the pseudo-holy text *Advanced Meme Magic* – published under the pseudonym Saint Obamas Momjeans – which reads in part:

> The Sacellum Kekellum is the first and most holy church of Kek. Kek is the god of the darkness of chaos, the darkness before time began. Kek is the god of obscurity, hidden in the darkness. Kek is the bringer of memes and the keeper of repeating digits. Sacellum Kekellum teaches enlightenment through meme magic. Meme magic is the most powerful force on Earth, and the most ancient form of mysticism, while at the same time being the newest and most ground breaking study of ritual magic (2016).

In light of the resemblance between Anon "Meme magic," numerical practices, and pseudo-worship of Kek (God of Chaos); and the Discordian "Chaos magic," numerological practices, and pseudo-worship of Eris (Goddess of Discord); Rushkoff concluded that 'the hippies' effort to destabilize the American dream may have worked too well' (ibid). Also relevant along these lines, are numerous coercive religions (e.g., the Church of Scientology) and occult practices (such as those outlined in the highly problematic works of Aleister Crowley); both of which are rabbit holes to a pit of potentially disorienting pseudo-academic works and false histories.

Three "satirical" religions, however, merit further consideration. I employ quotation marks around the word "satirical" since these organizations might also be described as *actual* religions. Can there be such a thing as a "fake" religion? Or such a thing as a "real" one? Such are the questions posed by the Church of Satan, the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, and Jediism, each of which are briefly considered in the following section.

[**Figs. 3.25 and 3.26**: A Cult of Kek Internet meme (circa 2016) alongside a comparable Discordian collage (circa 1970s).]





Satirical Religions, Pseudo Religions, and New Religious Movements

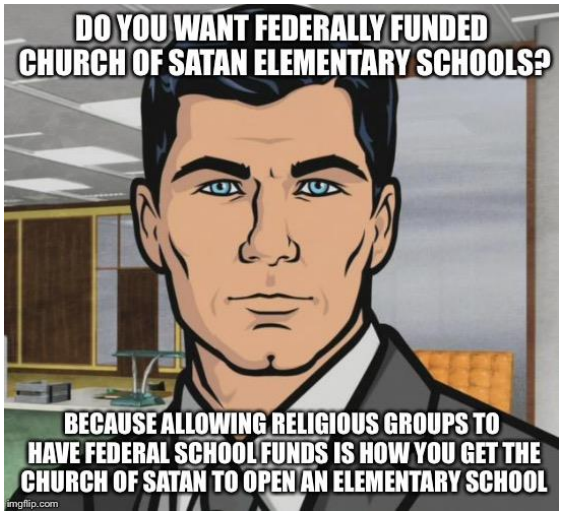
The Church of Satan, founded by Anton LaVey in 1966, was, according to Polish journalist Rafal Smoczynski, 'inspired by Chaos magic and *Principia Discordia*' (2016: Ch. 10). Through Satanism, in the words of Asbjorn Dyrendal, LaVey combines 'secularized esotericism' with 'esotericized secularism' and '*plays* with the contents as well as the form of conspiracy theory, at times communicating a tongue-in-cheek attitude towards belief, mocking what he deems excesses (2014: 203, 209). According to Dyrendal:

> If LaVey indulged in play with conspiracy theory more or less tongue-in-cheek, Discordian play with conspiracy is both more and less serious. Less, because in Discordian writing anything and everything is doubtful and laughable; more, because conspiracy theory has for that very reason become an important part of Discordianism as a *religious* path (210).

Considering the rise of the "satanic panic" and the fear and paranoia of Satanic Ritual Abuse (SRA) emerging in the 1980s, and continuing today, the Church of Satan may have – whatever its original intentions – contributed much to contemporary conspiracy fantasy culture.

[**Fig. 3.27**: Lawrence Fishburne as Morpheus in the 1999 film *The Matrix* in the "what if I told you" template reveals that the Church of Satan is satirical. **Fig. 3.28**: The titular animated super-spy *Archer* in the "do you want ants" template, points out the effectiveness of pseudo-religions in problematizing the lack of separation of church and state in the US.]





Whereas the Church of Satan may appear depraved, if not evil, to the uninformed observer, the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster (FSM) presents a friendlier and sillier façade. FSM began in 2005, when 24-year-old Bobby Henderson wrote a letter to the Kansas Board of Education challenging a proposal to teach "intelligent design" alongside the theory of evolution. Henderson's letter read, in part:

> Let us remember that there are multiple theories of Intelligent Design. I and many others around the world are of the strong belief that the universe was created by a Flying Spaghetti Monster... I think we can all look forward to the time when these three theories are given equal time in our science classrooms across the country, and eventually the world; one third time for Intelligent Design, one third time for Flying Spaghetti Monsterism (Pastafarianism), and one third time for logical conjecture based on overwhelming observable evidence (Craig; 2005).

When Henderson's letter was ignored, he posted it on his website where it quickly became an internet phenomenon. Peter Timms writes that 'Pastafarianism differs from other religions in that it doesn't solicit funds from its followers, having no hierarchy and no physical places of worship to maintain. Its home is in cyberspace' (2019). Pastafarianism, as Timms observes, 'exposes, with wit and style and a perfectly straight face, the absurdities and self-contradictions common to all religious arguments against rationalism' by mimicking rather than countering 'fundamentalist Christian arguments against evolution…until they collapse under their own weight' (ibid). Timms concludes:

> If, as adherents insist, this is a genuine religion (which several governments … have recognised), there's no reason we shouldn't take them at their word. After all, it's no more ridiculous to believe that there's a beer volcano in heaven than it is to believe that a wafer biscuit is the body of Christ, or that 72 virgins await every martyr in Paradise (ibid).

The Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster was the subject of a 2020 documentary *I, Pastafari*, directed by Mike Arthur. According to an article written by Arthur for *The Daily Beast* in 2020, this pseudo-religion has '"millions" of adherents.' The use of scare quotes around "millions" is presumably intentional, since estimates generally place the number at approximately a hundred thousand or less. It would also, of course, be quite reasonable to place scare quotes around the word "adherents." Arthur writes that since 'for whatever reason, religion is often "off the table" when it comes to the serious examination of its impact on society,' he was drawn to the way in which followers of the FSM 'do what they do in the name of equality, and they do it in a clickbaitable[42] way,' adding that 'in 2020, there seems to be no other way' (ibid).

Arthur argues that, despite the fact that Americans are increasingly identifying as non-religious, 'the religious right continues to be the most powerful political force in the U.S' where 'openly admitting you value science and rationality seems to be political suicide' (ibid). Arthur goes on to argue that the source of the "religious right's" 'immense power' is:

> …the exploitation of outdated laws that allow them to consolidate their political influence by taking advantage of tax benefits and legal exemptions. This power is used to help elect more fundamentalist politicians with anti-science agendas who use their influence to grant themselves even more privileges, and the cycle continues (ibid).

Arthur argues that Pastafarians fight for 'true religious freedom' by way of working toward the 'true separation of church and state' (ibid). By demanding, for instance, that taxpayer dollars be used to fund Pastafarian schools or by forcing judges to decree that a religion is not "real," Flying Spaghetti Monsterism ultimately fights for equal treatment and equal rights regardless of whether one believes in 'God, Allah, Thor, The Flying Spaghetti Monster, or no God at all' (ibid). Attorney Pedro Irigonegaray similarly argues in *I, Pastafari* that the 'best way to protect' freedom of religion 'is to keep special benefits to any religion *away* from the government, so that one's religious freedom is equal to one's freedom *from* religion (47:20).

Arthur acknowledges the ridiculous of it all, but explains that he made the film because, while some see FSM as a 'mockery' of devout religion, or as a 'troll religion' motivated by frivolity, he 'found that if you take the time to listen (to be touched by His noodly appendage), you'll find

[42] Urban Dictionary defines "clickbait" (in part) as: 'a link which entices you to click on it,' often via 'intentionally misleading and/or crassly provocative' means; including 'suggestive and intriguing captions [or] stories designed to inflame people [or] claimed weight loss methods or body building methods, often with some "weird easy trick."'

the message of Pastafarianism is much more insightful than the headlines would have you believe' (2020). Arthur admits that over the course of making the documentary, he came to view the Flying Spaghetti Monster as real, in the sense that it is 'a real manifestation of the idea that the traditional methods of fighting inequality and nonsense have failed us all, so why not try something different?' (ibid).

Consider the eight "I'd Really Rather You Didn'ts" of FSM lore, which obviously parody the story of Moses and the Ten Commandments within the Hebrew Bible. According to the Gospel of the FSM, ten stone tablets were originally created by the FSM, but two were dropped by an inebriated pirate/prophet and shattered; accounting for the religion's flimsy moral standards (Henderson; 2006: 77). The eight surviving tablets encourage tolerance and acceptance. The second, for instance, states in part: 'I'd Really Rather You Didn't Use My Existence As A Means To Oppress, Subjugate, Punish, Eviscerate, And/Or, You Know, Be Mean To Others' (78). The sixth states:

> I'd Really Rather You Didn't Build Multimillion-Dollar Churches / Temples / Mosques / Shrines To My Noodly Goodness When The Money Could Be Better Spent (Take Your Pick): Ending Poverty, Curing Diseases, Living In Peace, Loving With Passion, And Lowering The Cost Of Cable (ibid)…

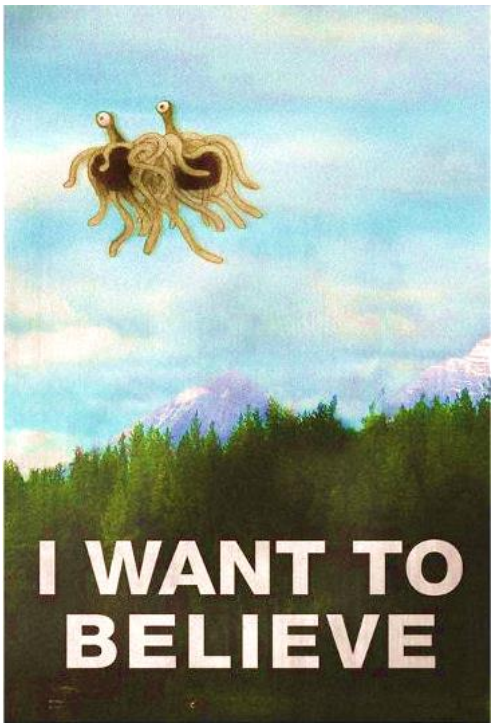
Although FSM has been recognized to some extent as a genuine organized religion in numerous countries, for the most part, it has been regarded as a satirical, rather than "serious" religion. Dutch legal scholar Derk Venema challenged the Dutch court's ruling along those lines, arguing that Pastafarism has a very serious message, but opts to spread the message through the use of humour and satire (2020: 49:50). Venma admits that while FSM does directly criticize other religions, it does so only 'insofar as they waste money that could be used for the good of the community [and] despise and promote violence against non-members,' adding that 'humour can be used as a very powerful instrument of conveying an important message' (50:30). Venma significantly asks: 'When every aspect in a religion has to be *serious*, then which type of religion qualifies, other than the extreme fundamentalist?' (48:38).

Despite the many credible objections to the political power of organizations and institutions founded on superstition or pseudo-rationality, Daniel Dennett makes an appearance in *I, Pastafari* to offer a reminder of both the origins, and potential benefits, of organized religion. Dennett explains that the human mind evolved to 'make it easy for us to cope with the parts of the world that matter most to our species' (09:55). 'But,' he continues, 'we have enhanced that

by orders of magnitude, with human *culture* – which also evolved by natural selection – to fill our minds with mind tools' (ibid). According to Dennett, these "mind tools" are inherited, not 'through our genes' but 'through our culture,' and 'included in all that cultural inheritance, is a lot of superstition' which, in turn, resulted in the creation of numerous 'cultural entities, all imaginary, but made vivid by the retelling, and the refurbishing in the imaginations of all the storytellers' (ibid).

[**Fig. 3.29**: A meme apparently inspired by a joke attributed to British stand-up comedian Pat Condell: "Q: Prove God doesn't exist. A: That's a tough one. Show me how it's done by proving Zeus and Apollo don't exist, and I'll use your method." **Fig. 3.30**: A FSM parody of Agent Mulder's UFO poster in *The X-Files*.]



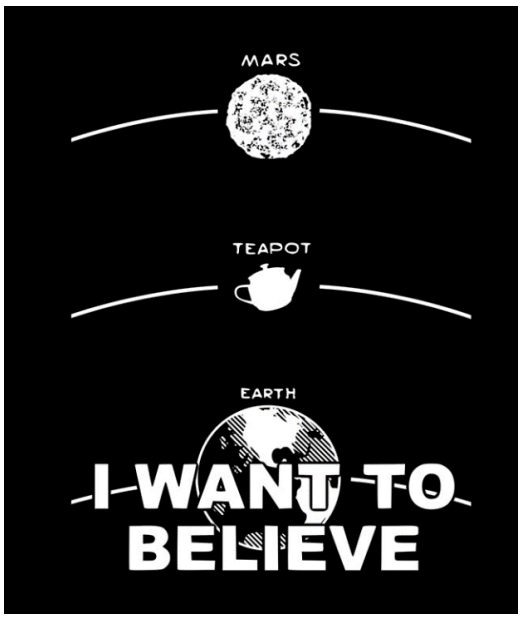


To provide historical context for the Flying Spaghetti Monster as a philosophical thought experiment on unfalsifiable claims, it is appropriate to briefly examine a similar thought experiment known as "Russell's Teapot," proposed by Bertrand Russell in 1952. Russell's article entitled 'Is There a God?' was commissioned by *Illustrated Magazine*, but left unpublished. In the essay, Russell observes that some claims, despite their apparent absurdity – such as the statement that a teapot is 'revolving around the sun in an elliptical orbit' but 'too small to be revealed even by our most powerful telescopes' – are impossible to prove false (1997: 542-548). He continues: 'But if I were to go on to say that, since my assertion cannot be disproved,

it is an intolerable presumption on the part of human reason to doubt it, I should rightly be thought to be talking nonsense' (ibid). Russell concluded by asserting that 'there is no reason to believe any of the dogmas of traditional theology and, further, that there is no reason to wish that they were true. Man, in so far as he is not subject to natural forces, is free to work out his own destiny. The responsibility is his, and so is the opportunity' (ibid). In 2003, Richard Dawkins aggressively took up Russell's teapot thought experiment in an essay entitled 'The Infected Mind.' Dawkins argued:

> The reason organized religion merits outright hostility is that, unlike belief in Russell's teapot, religion is powerful, influential, tax-exempt and systematically passed on to children too young to defend themselves. Children are not compelled to spend their formative years memorizing loony books about teapots. Government-subsidized schools don't exclude children whose parents prefer the wrong shape of teapot. Teapot-believers don't stone teapot-unbelievers … to death.

[**Figs. 3.31 & 3.32**: A parody of Mulder's UFO poster in *The X-Files* invokes Russell's teapot, alongside 'confession bear' (emerging on Reddit in 2012) confesses the desire to perform an elaborate teapot-centric prank.]





To conclude this examination of satirical, ironic, and new religious movements, it is necessary to consider the religion of Jedi Knight, or Jediism. The decentralized "Jedi census phenomenon" began in 2001 as the result of an Internet chain letter/urban legend falsely claiming that if enough respondents declared Jediism, it would become an officially recognized religion. That year, 1.5% of New Zealand's population religiously affiliated with Jediism and nearly 1% of the

population of Britain and Wales did the same, making Jediism the fourth largest religion there at that time; outranking Judaism, Buddhism, and Sikhism. Considering that the chain letter asked people to participate 'because you love Star Wars' or 'just to annoy people,' (*Reuters*; 2003) the Jedi census phenomenon may be viewed both as an act of culture jamming and as a prototypical act of Internet trolling.

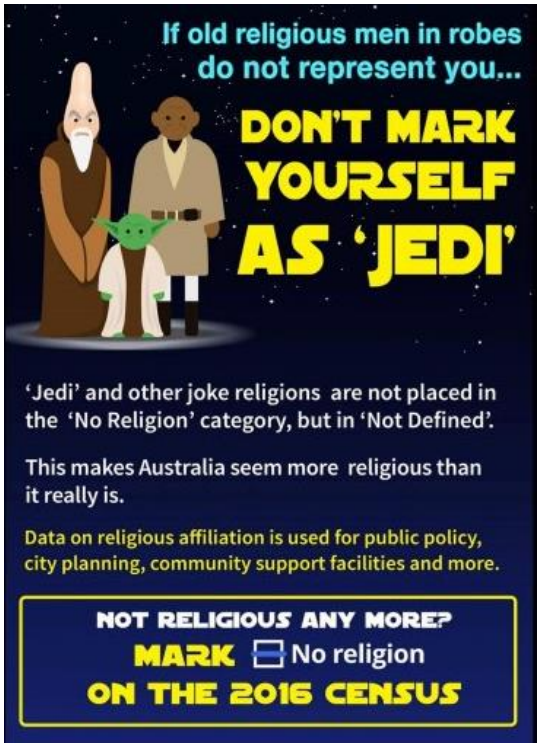
According to the 2022 census in Ireland, of the more than five million people who now make up the Irish population, 1,800 identified as Jedi Knight (down from 2,050 in 2016). These numbers dwarf the 87 Scientologists, 78 Satanists (up from 0 in 2011), and 92 Pastafarians noted in the 2016 census (Lonergan; 2017).[43] The Central Statistics Office of Ireland classifies any faith with more than 30 followers as an "official" religion, making Jediism – along with FSM, Satanism, Paganism, and Scientology – one of Ireland's 50 official religions (Lonergan; 2017). While the benefits of such a designation are unclear, one public policy hazard is addressed in an Australian 2016 digital leaflet (i.e., Internet-meme) circulated by the Atheist Foundation of Australia which claims that these "fake religions" are counted as "real religions," thus, masking the rising numbers of non-religious people in a given country. The leaflet further suggests that 'data on religious affiliation is used for public policy, city planning, community support facilities and more.' Alongside depictions of Yoda, Mace Windu, and Ki-Adi-Mundi (representing three species and skin colours of Jedi Knights) the flyer advises: 'If old men in robes do not represent you… don't mark yourself as "Jedi." Mark "No Religion" on the 2016 census' (Ahmed; 2016).

The distinctions and claims made by this leaflet, however, are debatable. Since, hyperreal religions can and do offer real spiritual and communal benefits to adherents, it follows that hyperreal religious practice is *not the same* as being non-religious. The conflation of hyperreal new-religious movements and atheism may therefore be viewed as a reductive binary. Žižek, for instance, has pointed out the curious fact that atheism frames its position using 'the language of theology,' and thus asks: 'Why not do it directly in atheist terms?' (2012; 1:07:00). Žižek suggests that while it is easy 'not to believe' in religious dogmas, it is much more difficult 'to get rid of the, let's call it naively, unconscious structure of beliefs, which function quite well – and Nietzsche saw this very clearly – even after we officially become atheists' (ibid.)

[43] By comparison, 3.5 million people in Ireland identified as Roman Catholic in 2022 (down more than 15% from 2011) and approximately 740,000 people declared "no religion" (a small percentage of which specified Atheist or Agnostic) amounting to a staggering 187% increase since 2011 (*data.cso.ie*).

Ultimately, the Flying Spaghetti Monster, Jedi Knights, and other openly false idols, offer a route by which hegemonic religions might be challenged, both according to and apart from, their own logic and discourses. Jediism, however, is unique in the sense that – in contrast to the FSM and Church of Satan – its tenets (drawn largely from Eastern spiritual philosophy) do not directly *contradict* mainstream Western religious doctrines. At any rate, in attempting to make the subversion of religion as entertaining as that which they seek to subvert, satirical religions conform to what the Wu Ming Foundation describes as 'the poetry [or poetics] of debunking' (2018).

[**Figs. 3.33 & 3.34**: Alongside the AFOA digital leaflet is a complementary meme relating the religion of Jediism to the door-to-door proselytizing of Christian Evangelical Jehovah's Witnesses, but with a unique advantage in the form of the Jedi mind-control "trick."]





Cultural Prophets and Cultural Pranksters

Considering the substantial popularity and cultural capital of Discordianism, the Cult of Kek, and other sincere or satirical new religious movements – all of which play at being something between cultural pranksters and cultural prophets – it is worthwhile to consider the alignment of these movements with the broader countercultural movement of culture jamming. This examination is necessary, I argue, given that Discordians, Satanism, the FSM, and Jediism never

appear in *Culture Jamming: Activism and the Art of Cultural Resistance*, despite many references to Situationists (Delaure and Fink; 2017). How else can one describe "Operation Mindfuck" and the "All Rights Reversed [sic]" philosophy of the *Principia Discordia* if not as significant forerunners to the culture jamming movement? Indeed, Robert Anton Wilson's notion of 'reality tunnels'[44] (1983; 1990) is closely related to the echo chambers and 'filter bubbles' (Pariser; 2011) of the digital age, which culture jammers often seek to puncture with flash mobs and other acts of 'semiological guerrilla warfare' (Eco; 1967).

A fundamental difference, however, lies in the fact that Discordianism evolved into a satirical *religious* movement, whereas culture jamming emerged as a socio-political-economic one. A second fundamental difference is that culture jammers tend to have clearly defined "targets," whereas Discordians targeted consensus reality itself with the aim of shaking people's faith in individual reality tunnels. Thus, culture jams are typically readily identifiable *as such* by viewers, while Discordian pranks may not be immediately (if ever) identified as hoaxes. Even *if* identified as such, the precise "target" of the hoax may never become apparent. In this regard, there is a marked similarity between the practices of Discordianism and Internet-troll culture.

Despite the differences, the absence of any references whatsoever to Discordiansim, the Church of Satan, the Flying Spaghetti Monster, or Jediism across a collection of essays on culture jamming, contributed by dozens of authors and covering dozens of subjects, is notable. The collection seems intent on sidestepping the issue of jamming religious – as opposed to political and economic – institutions. The one prominent discussion of religion in *Culture Jamming* is in 'Say Yes,' an interview conducted by Marilyn Delaure with Savitri D and Bill Talen (Reverend Billy); both members of the performance art-based "Church of Stop Shopping."

According to Savitri D, the Church of Stop Shopping project began when the former Episcopalian priest Sidney Lanier – who later transformed a Manhattan Episcopal Church into a cultural institution known as the American Place Theater – recruited Talen for the cause. Lanier was, in the words of Savitri D, 'a very early culture jammer' and 'always deploying his religiosity in a pretty strategic way toward our culture-making' (433). Talen adds: 'Sidney said that America needs a new kind of preacher who is post-religious, but who understands that even secular Americans derive meaning from Bible stories. Sidney kept saying, "It's basic to

[44] The term was coined by Timothy Leary in *Neuropolitics* (1977) and subsequently developed by Wilson.

Americans that we run our meaning on simple moral tales"' (ibid). On these points, the differences between culture jamming and Discordianism are almost negligible.

The term "simple moral tales," as employed by Lanier, is a useful phrase when attempting to make sense of the logic-defying conspiracy fantasies of the digital age. American journalist and disinformation expert Will Sommer astutely argues that the role played by religion is 'often understated when it comes to misinformation and conspiracy theories, whether it be about the election or vaccines or QAnon' (2021: 03:05). Sommer suggests that – in line with morality tales – many people view themselves as 'avenging angels, and it's not this sense of religion as this kind of abstract thing about being a better person… It's that you're at war, essentially, and… the devil is real' (ibid). Sommer concludes that such frames provide 'a lot more agency' along with the motivation that cultural issues are not 'just a fight over politics, but [a fight] for the very soul of the country and, in some ways, for your own soul' (ibid).

On the topic of simple moral tales, it is of note that Walter Benjamin theorized the declining role of the storyteller in modern society in 1936. In 'The Storyteller,' Benjamin describes fairy tales as indicating 'the earliest arrangements that mankind made to shake off the nightmare which myth had placed upon its chest' (11). Benjamin suggests, then, that fairy tales have the potential to provide some of the benefits of religious belief (myth) without requesting that the listener literally accept their historical truth. In this essay, Benjamin mourns the death of storytelling and calls attention to the decline in *wisdom* which accompanied the rise of *information*. In modern society, Benjamin argues, 'no event comes to us without being already shot through with explanation… [B]y now almost nothing that happens benefits storytelling; almost everything benefits information' (4).

In storytelling, according to Benjamin, 'the psychological connection of the event is not forced on the reader. It is left up to him to interpret things the way he understands them, and thus the narrative achieves an amplitude that information lacks' (ibid). In Benjamin's words, 'it is half the art of storytelling to keep a story free from explanation as one reproduces it' (ibid). Benjamin sees storytelling as a form of 'intelligence that [comes] from afar' in terms of either geography or time (ibid). Thus, a story 'possessed an authority which gave it validity, even when it was not subject to verification,' whereas information 'lays claim to prompt verifiability and appears 'understandable in itself' (ibid). It is, Benjamin writes, 'indispensable for

information to sound plausible,' and he thus concludes that *information* 'proves incompatible with the spirit of storytelling' (ibid).

Such points are clearly worth considering in the current so-called "information age," in which the average person (consumer?) is inundated, barraged, and saturated with virtually unlimited information. Ironically, today it has even become possible to mourn the death of information as Benjamin once mourned the death of storytelling. Today, with so much information readily available – much of which is "forced" on the consumer, and most of which is questionable in terms of bias, context, and authenticity – the so-called "information overload" might be more correctly described today as a "*data*-overload." After all, according to Benjamin, the term "information" suggests a level of meaning, context, and user-processing which may well be absent in the relationship between consumers and the digital "information" they consume. Even if not entirely meaningless, such information is far from meaning*ful*. In the case of disinformation (or A.I. generated misinformation), it is *worse* than meaningless.

[**Fig. 3.35**: Bill Talen (AKA Reverend Billy) at the centre of a poster for a 2007 documentary about the Church of Stop Shopping entitled, *What Would Jesus Buy?* **Fig. 3.36**: A Discordian slogan alongside a Jesus-styled King Kong with the golden apple of Eris in the place of the sacred heart.]





On the basis of this theoretical mapping of the boundaries of *fake-belief* and *alternate-reality* lifestyles, it is my contention that religion is the elephant in the rooms of both popular and scholarly analyses of conspiracy culture. From Flat Earth theory to reptilian overlords; from blood libel to witch trials; from the Satanic panic of the 1980s to QAnon and beyond; the

magical thinking and superstition entailed in the practices of religions, cults, and mysticism cannot be comfortably overlooked in the digital landscape. Indeed, a striking characteristic of contemporary and digital conspiracy fantasy movements is the degree to which these movements have been, and continue to be, entangled with toxic and faith-based evangelicalism, occultism, or mysticism. In 2024, such movements – frequently aligned with baseless election-fraud (and other) conspiracy fantasies – pose an ever-increasing risk to governmental, legal, scientific, and educational institutions around the world.

Alongside these growing threats, numerous new religious movements and satirical or pseudo-religions emerged; from the intellectually fascinating, but ultimately disastrous Church of Satan, to the more benignly framed Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, and the (now, in a sense) Disney-owned religion of Jediism. The overt connection between a mega-corporation and a religious subculture calls to mind a prescient and frequently reproduced quote of Jenkins: 'Fan fiction is a way of the culture repairing the damage done in a system where contemporary myths are owned by corporations instead of owned by the folk' (quoted in: Harmon; 1997). In the tradition of Discordianism, these pseudo-religions have accompanied a broader movement toward counter-cultural alternate-reality lifestyles, for which the mantra can be argued to be: *this is not pretend*.

Such performative behaviours and activities, however, are often undertaken playfully. This play may be 'deep' wherein the risks – including injury, death, or imprisonment – outweigh the rewards (Geertz; 1973), or 'dark' wherein the playfulness is concealed from some, or even all, involved (Schechner; 1988), but the activities are not centrally controlled, organized, or regulated. Despite the numerous and substantial risks and consequences of what Adorno described as 'pseudo-rationality' (circa 1950), the potential spiritual *benefits* of mystical ideation should also not be overlooked in the digital ecosystem. Dennett notably addressed such issues in his 2006 book, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon.* According to one succinct book reviewer, Dennett's argument can be summarized thusly: 'Religious beliefs have no empirical foundation and hence should be abandoned to prevent religious fanatics from destroying the world in a nuclear holocaust' (Greene; 2010). In setting out to break the spell of religion, however, Dennett also takes care to anticipate potential unintended consequences of disenchantment. He points, for instance, to the:

> …serious risk of breaking a different and much more important spell: the life-enriching enchantment of religion itself. If interference caused by scientific investigation somehow disabled people, rendering them incapable of states of mind that are springboards for religious experience or religious conviction, this could be a terrible calamity (2006: 18).

A question, therefore, is: How might the beneficial spiritual and communal aspects of pseudo-rational thought be identified and retained while leaving beyond the more toxic or harmful elements? Through critically informed creative-practice, I explored potential answers to these questions in the 'The (Un)Conspiracy Manifesto (By Luther Blissett)' and 'The Art of the Apocalypse: From A.I. to Zombie,' as well as in the critical analyses of those projects in Chapters Five and Seven.

> [**Fig. 3.37**: A subversive variation on the "wait, it's all Ohio?" template suggests that religion – as opposed to a Globalist cabal / New World Order – is pulling the strings of society.]



In a 2011 talk entitled 'What Should Replace Religions,' Dennett argues: 'Do not turn your nose up at tradition and ritual. It is glorious. And you don't have to believe the myths that inspire it. But it's great to know them and to use them' (16:10). Dennett called attention to surveys showing that the fastest growing category world-wide was 'no religion at all' (00:10) and, thus, a deep consideration of the consequences of this decline is clearly warranted. In the wake of the January 6, 2021 storming of the US Capitol building by various religious, conspiritual, and

nationalist factions, it is also important to consider the possibility – as indicated by Colin Campbell – that religious movements in decline may compensate for decreased prestige with increased militant, extremist, or coercive behaviour (1972).

Still, Dennett insightfully maintains that 'there are good things that religions now provide, that we would sorely miss and…it's important to make an honest, balanced, inquiry of what good they actually do' (04:45). Naturally, Dennett takes care to exclude 'guilt,' 'superstition,' 'glorification of irrationality,' 'hatred,' 'xenophobia,' and 'systematic hypocrisy' from that list (04:50). In a statement reminiscent of McGonigal's advocacy for the gamification of social problems (2010a), Dennett advocates for 'a secular alternative to religion' (2011: 28:40) which can facilitate, among other things, 'moral teamwork,' (2006: 283) arguing: 'The sooner we create institutions that can do better than religions at helping people to be good, the sooner the toxic varieties of religion will fade away' (2011: 37:05). On this, Dennett continues: 'We are living in an age where community is evaporating in many regards, and contrary to some of the hype, the Internet is not really providing the right sort of community. We need face-to-face, local organisations…' (2011: 51:35).

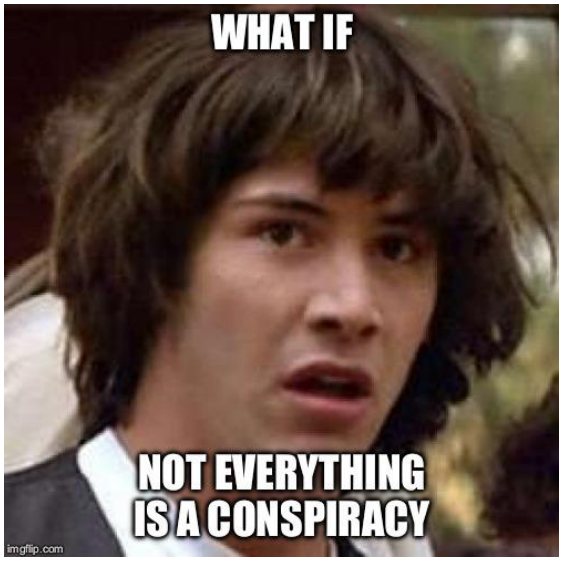
According to Dennett, the 'great virtue of existing religions is providing a focus for common cause, for joint activity and organization, with an infrastructure that makes it possible to work locally to make things better' (ibid). Dennett suggests that such benefits *can* exist within secular organisations, although he claims that 'we haven't made much progress with that' (ibid). Observing that it would be unwise 'for secular organisations to adopt the irrationalities of religion in order to maintain their adherents,' he suggests that such organizations should nevertheless 'think very hard' about how to 'preserve' the 'emotionally binding rituals, traditions, and activities' and other important 'signs of camaraderie' which religion has traditionally offered (ibid).

Along, perhaps, similar lines, Jonathan Gottschall compellingly argues in *The Storytelling Animal* that stories 'make us human' (2012). It is not always evident, however, where stories end and reality begins. In this regard, the boundaries between conspiracy theories, digital folklore, and urban legends; between cults and religions; and between scams and confidence games is so porous as to hardly exist. If you look hard enough, everything looks like a conspiracy theory and nothing does. For this reason, I chose to direct my creative-practice and theoretical research toward behaviours, rather than "beliefs." By sidestepping the widely irrelevant questions of

belief, I was better able to examine conspiracism as being driven and sustained by collective political factors and distributed social influence, rather than by individual cognitive deficits, paranoia, or delusional thinking. Indeed, such explanations for conspiracist tendencies can be construed as "victim blaming;" regardless of how abhorrent the behaviour of some of those "victims" might be.

[**Figs. 3.38 & 3.39**: Morpheus from *The Matrix* offers deep "what if I told you" insight, alongside a confused (pre-*Matrix*) "Bill and Ted" era "conspiracy Keanu" having a "whoa" moment.]



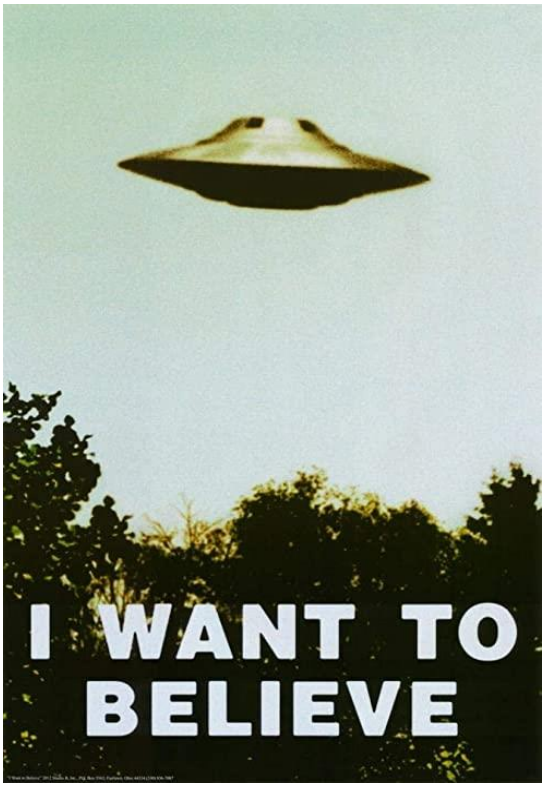


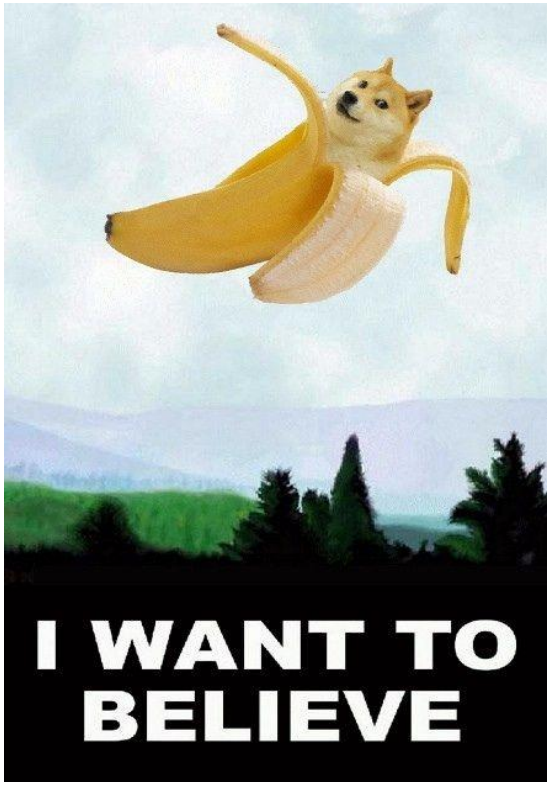
While individual cognitive and educational deficits certainly do help explain why and how certain narratives spread so far and so fast, they do not explain the *origin* and *instigation* of malignant conspiracy theories; aside from the fact, of course, that malignant actors are well aware of such cognitive vulnerabilities, and quite adept at fabricating and manipulating "evidence." By focusing on consumers of conspiracy texts as active *collaborators,* rather than as passive hosts, it is possible to gain greater insight into, as Marc Tuters puts it: 'the complex media ecosystem within which conspiracy theories develop and propagate online' (2017).

It is my contention that in order to be understood more fully, conspiracy culture must be examined apart from over-simplistic notions of "belief" and must take onboard many issues associated with performativity (e.g., Austin, 1962; Butler, 1988) and the paradox of fiction (e.g., Radford and Weston, 1975; Smith, 1995). Contemporary collaborative conspiracy fantasies and fanfiction are undeniably and overwhelmingly influenced by fictional and unfictional narratives. It is for these reasons, I suppose, that I was captivated by Agent Mulder's curious Ed Ruscha-

esque UFO poster in *The X-Files* (*Fox*; 1993-2002); which, may also be viewed as a prototypical image-macro Internet-meme. Collaborative conspiracy culture and alternate-reality cultures are increasingly driven by desire rather than belief. The ways in which these desires prompt individual and collective actions in the digital sphere must be further explored and understood; particularly via the tools and lenses provided by aesthetic and artistic practice.

[**Fig. 3.40**: One of several versions of Agent Mulder's UFO poster in *The X-Files.* **Fig. 3.41**: An abstract/surreal parody featuring the meme star "Doge" in a flying banana.]





Although this chapter covered a wide territory of activities which cannot be taken at face value, my intent was to theoretically and culturally map the boundaries of *fake-belief* and *alternate-reality lifestyles* (or *alternate-realityism*) for the purpose of conducting ethical and efficacious creative-practice in an otherwise precarious zone. As before, I attempted to clarify terms which frequently and problematically conflate behaviours and beliefs; while providing a map for what I consider to be a way forward through this notoriously slippery terrain. In the following chapter, I build on the theoretical/cultural maps of conspiracism and alternate-reality culture presented thus far. In addition to furthering these lines of theoretical exploration – particularly with regard to theories of spreadable media and the poetics of debunking – I also lay the groundwork for putting that theoretical framework into practice.

four: MAPPING THE POETICS OF DEBUNKING

Hope Without Hate

> To be normal, to drink Coca-Cola and eat Kentucky Fried Chicken is to be in a conspiracy against yourself.
>
> – "Jerry Fletcher" (*Conspiracy Theory*; 1997)

In 1951, Eric Hoffer examined mass movements in *The True Believer*, detailing how and why such movements succeed or fail. Hoffer argued: 'If the Communists win Europe and a large part of the world, it will not be because they know how to stir up discontent or how to infect people with hatred, but because they know how to preach hope' (Part 1: Section 4). Although forged in the fires of hatred and supremacy, it is ignorance and hope – I argue – which have enabled hate-based conspiracy narratives to spread so far and so fast, and to endure for so long. Certainly, this toxic fusion of hatred and hope is hardly unique in modern history, and it would be the height of ignorance to dismiss the racism, sexism, nationalism, and xenophobia revealed by the current spread of conspiracy fantasies. It is also possible, however, to observe that these conspiracy fantasies – despite their continually failed prophecies – have provided hope to millions of adherents that progress is within reach; even if visions of that progress vary widely.

Hopefully – as Hoffer suggested in 1951 – the narratives that triumph will be those that evolve to provide *hope without hate*. Contributing to this outcome was the objective of my creative-practice. In contemplating how these ends might be pursued, I looked closely at the poetics of debunking, proposed by the Wu Ming Foundation (2018) and subsequently endorsed by Henry Jenkins in conjunction with The Civic Imagination Project supported by the MacArthur Foundation (c*ivicimaginationproject.org*). The poetics of debunking involves experimentation with methodologies, not for *directly* refuting conspiracist narratives, but rather, reframing, rewriting, or redirecting those narratives toward socially productive (i.e., non-toxic) ends.

In 2018, Jenkins interviewed Wu Ming1 – an early member of the Luther Blissett Project and co-founder of the Wu Ming Foundation (both of which began in Italy) – regarding the 'realms of hoax, conspiracy theories, fake news, and the blurring of fantasy and reality' (Jenkins; 2018: 01:00). "*Wu Ming"* means "no name" (i.e., "anonymous") in Mandarin, and throughout the interview, Wu Ming1 demonstrates an astute awareness of the various levels of "belief" and engagement in contemporary conspiracy fantasy movements. Such movements, he notes, are 'LARP-ish,' 'collaborative,' and involve 'an open community of people playing… like an alternate reality game' (11:15). Wu Ming1 speculates that 'probably some players are believers' and

some are ‘non-believers; they are being ironic. They play because it’s a provocative thing’ and some people ‘don’t care; they probably think it could be true or not. It could be real or not. Who cares? It’s fun’ (12:00). Thus, Wu Ming1 describes these movements as creating a ‘conspiracist environment’ that ‘makes conspiracism possible and fun to develop,’ as opposed to ‘a precise single conspiracy theory’ (12:45).

Both Jenkins and Wu Ming1 addressed the difficulties of debunking conspiracy theories in the digital era. In Jenkins’ words, ‘conspiracy theories work precisely because they discredit the authority trying to debunk the theory, and authority writ large is exactly what the hoaxers are rejecting’ (Episode Summary). Wu Ming1 adds that parodies and satire have proven ineffective, observing that news comedy programs such as *The Daily Show* often resort to parody ‘in a banal way’ (43:00) and are merely ‘preaching to the converted’ (44:50). This owes in part, he continues, to the fact that ‘conspiracy theories are already parodies. A parody of a parody is […] useless, because satire and comedy run the same risk of feeding the vicious cycle as any other kind of coverage’ (43:30). Indeed, the ‘oxygen of amplification,’ which even negative media coverage provides, has been well-established (Phillips, 2012; 2016) as has the potential for out of context representations to reach audiences unaware of the original content’s satirical intent. On this, Wu Ming1 cites both Discordianism and Umberto Eco’s 1988 novel *Foucault’s Pendulum* as examples of the ‘impossibility of satirizing conspiracies’ (44:00).

If, however, conspiracy theories *are* parodies, what is it that they parody? Wu Ming1 argues that conspiracy theories function as ‘diversionary narratives that construct unintentional parodies’ of ‘the way capitalism works’ and the ‘real problems’ associated with late modernity (36:25). He continues: ‘It’s not only about fun; about a game-like experience. It’s not even *only* about hatred or racism… Those things are there, but there’s also the fact that there’s a lot of anxiety and anger around, and people confusedly feel that the system doesn’t work’ (36:00). Jenkins responds – citing Whitney Phillips – that rather than accept the ‘broad idea that all conspiracy theories are parodies of the real,’ it seems that ‘there is a conscious blurring of those lines precisely to see how people will react’ (47:00). Jenkins suggests that hoaxes or ‘interventions’ conducted via message boards such as 4chan, were often apparently carried out ‘for the lolz’ and the ‘gratitude’ gained through such activities seemed to come from the ‘strong, passionate responses to their provocations’ (47:10). Thus, Jenkins argues, that some people view ‘hucksterism and troll behavior as a kind of situated satire’ (46:45).

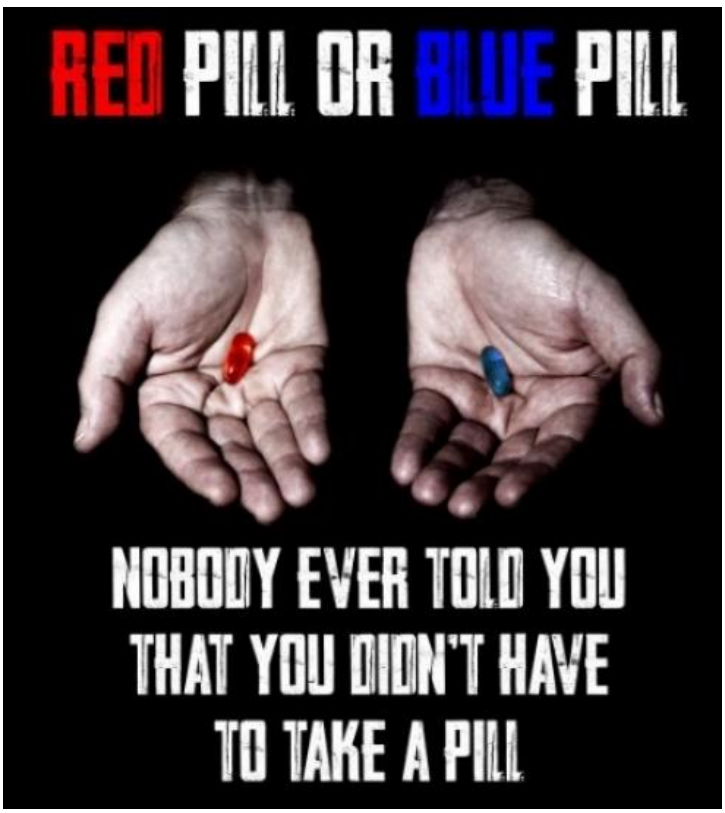
Given that traditional methods of debunking are no longer effective, Jenkins asks: 'What is the way we can regain some control of truth in our society?' (39:35) Wu Ming1 significantly replies that since conspiracy theories, 'in a very wicked way – a distorted way – provide people with something they need,' (22:30) the Wu Ming Foundation 'developed a whole line of reasoning… on how to recognize the basic needs that conspiracism encounters' (22:20). The resultant philosophy is a call for a 'poetry [or poetics] of debunking' in which creative debunkers are advised to '*monstrare la sutura'* – or, 'show the sutures' – in their works so that consumers of the texts might 'see the stitches like on Frankenstein monster's body' (17:00). In other words, the works of the Wu Ming Foundation strive to 'put the techniques [they] are using directly into the narrative' (17:15). In this way, the truth may be made, in Jenkins' words, 'more interesting than the conspiracy theory itself' (Episode Summary).

Along these lines, Wu Ming1 draws comparisons to the 'world of magic and illusion,' specifically citing the postmodern comedy magic duo, *Penn & Teller* (37:20), arguing that although exposing the techniques behind magic tricks would normally 'spoil the show,' Penn Jillette and Raymond Teller – stars of a long-running Las Vegas illusion show – have 'found an effective way of revealing the tricks and embedding the reveal and the explanation of the trick into the magic act itself' (37:45). Accordingly, the creative and effective exposure of stage illusions is a metaphor often used by the Wu Ming Foundation in conjunction with the notion of 'showing the stitches' (38:50). Wu Ming1 argues in favour of finding 'ways of debunking conspiracy theories that are as interesting, as intriguing, and provide people with the same things that conspiracies usually provide in an exploited way' (37:10).

While I do not entirely agree with the assessment that showing the hidden techniques behind an illusion makes the experience 'even *more* magic' (38:40), I do agree that this approach has the potential to make these performances more educational, fascinating, entertaining, or appealing, while not *detracting* from the magical experience. To paraphrase Jessup on hoaxes, it can be a wholly enriching and satisfying experience to *be* fooled, and then to learn that we *were* fooled (2019: 16). Going further, I contend that learning *how* and *why* we were fooled might make these experiences even more beneficial. Thus, if performance magic can be described as the manipulation of physical "evidence" for theatrical purposes, it is worth considering the ways in which evidence might be manipulated across other forms of live, recorded, or virtual media encompassing text, sound, and/or image.

Furthermore, the notion of "showing the seams" bears similarities to the *seamfulness* movement which advocates – in contrast to the current trend of providing users more "seamless" online experiences – for making the seams between digital interfaces (e.g., HTML, HTTP, URLs, CSS, JavaScript, etc.) *more* visible and accessible to users. As Jeremy Keith writes: 'Technology has seams. By hiding those seams, we may think we are helping the end user, but we are also making a conscious choice to deceive them (or at least restrict what they can do)' (2014). On this, Keith continues: 'Make no mistake, all software is political… all software is opinionated, whether we like it or not. Seemingly inconsequential interface decisions are actually reflections of assumptions, biases and beliefs' (ibid). Accordingly, the desirable outcome is – by pulling back the curtain on the oracle – to increasingly learn to see processes as they actually are.

[**Below**: Two notable examples of semiotic détournement of "the red pill" as seen in *The Matrix* (1999). **Fig. 4.1**: This image advises the viewer – in the style of anti-drug campaigns – that the choice between the "red pill" (a struggle for freedom) and the "blue pill" (contentment in slavery) are a false binary. **Fig. 4.2**: A poster by Jan Bobrowicz (circa 2021) – based on 1954 Soviet anti-alcohol propaganda – plays two conspiracist concepts ("red pills" and "brain worms") against each other while invoking the "do you want ants?" memetic-phrasal template and the "just say no!" slogan of the 1980s US Drug and Alcohol Resistance Education program (D.A.R.E).]





Jenkins further calls attention to the paradoxical relationship between fan culture and conspiracy culture. According to Jenkins, what made him 'optimistic about the early fan behaviour was that there was an active debunking or antagonism within the fandom which tested every theory against the text itself; that was constantly questioning every finding…' (51:20). Thus, he observed that 'the desire for complexity doesn't seem to care whether it's real or not. It's simply a complex puzzle set or problem set that a community wants to put its mind to and collectively debate' (51:05). By contrast, Jenkins points out that conspiracy culture 'seems to be more like improv theatre: Yes, and…! We accept your conspiracy. We add to it something else. The complexity comes in an additive fashion' (51:40). The improvisational theatre game – "Yes, and…" – to which Jenkins refers, further calls to mind the early twentieth century Surrealist parlour game known as "Exquisite Corpse," in which abstract texts or images are created by players one piece at a time; either randomly, or based only on the knowledge of the previous contribution. Wu Ming1 similarly observes that fan culture is well-known for 'precision' and 'nit-picking,' whereas conspiracists:

> …don't debunk each other, they simply add more layers, so the conspiracy theory becomes more and more cumbersome and convoluted... It co-opts everything. There are no conflicting narratives, because there is no awareness of any contradiction… Everything is the same, so they keep adding things with no preoccupation for coherence and consistency and continuity (52:20).

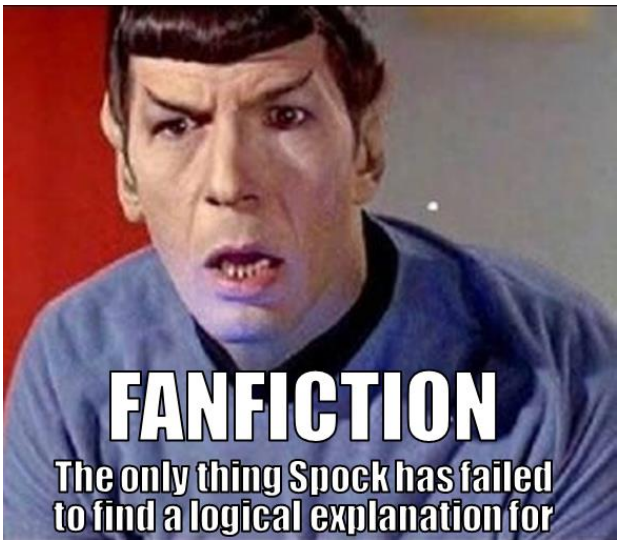
This is notable – as Jenkins points out – since 'continuity is long part of what fans have been famous for' (53:00). Wu Ming1 thus suggests that the complexity of conspiracy theories comes as the 'result of inconsistency, not consistency,' employing the Italian phrase '*valido tutto'* – or, 'everything is valid' – to describe the idea that whatever is proposed, is added to the narrative' (53:30). After Jenkins asks: 'Where do we draw the line between… [fan culture] and something like QAnon?' (51:51), WuMing1 notes a crucial difference between fan culture and conspiracy culture. Namely, whereas fan culture largely addresses fictional characters, conspiracy culture involves 'defaming and slandering and harassing' *actual* people (53:45).

In my view, contradictions between conspiracy culture and fan culture are minimized when observing the behaviour of *fanfiction* communities – most notably, *slash fiction* – which draws its name from the early fanfic genre of homoerotic Kirk/Spock stories. In such online communities, beloved characters and situations are adapted freely, and experimented with wildly, as a matter of routine; without regard for continuity, consistency, or copyright. The fact

that the bestselling 2011 erotic novel *50 Shades of Grey* by E.L. James originated as a fanfic adaptation of the bestselling *Twilight* saga (2005-2008) by Stephanie Meyer, serves as a telling example of the modes of appropriation, reinvention, and adaptation employed by fanfiction communities. In works of fanfic, details do matter; but anything and everything is fair game.

[**Fig. 4.3**: A variation of the "Fellow Man of Culture" template depicts a bored Pooh Bear (from *The Many Adventures of Winnie the Pooh*; 1977) above a smugly sophisticated modification of that image. The text implies that "angst" (i.e., the physical and mental anguish) of characters in mainstream fiction is boring whereas angst in fanfiction is the height of ironic sophistication. **Fig. 4.4**: An original synthesis of two memes in which the hyper-rational Spock from *Star Trek* (1966-1969) – presumably as the subject of Kirk/Spock erotic fanfiction – finds the genre too illogical to explain.]





Speaking to the digital media ecology as it relates to the spread of disinformation, Jenkins notes that 'more teenagers today are getting information through *Facebook* than through any legacy news source' (29:30). According to Jenkins, this shift from legacy news sources to social media, as a primary source of information (especially among the young) has facilitated a 'hybrid media ecology,' evocative of the 'tavern culture hundreds of years ago,' wherein '…people would have been mixing and matching stories in bars […] passed well beyond the original source […] and confused about where they heard it from. And I think that's very much what people are experiencing on Facebook today' (29:45). On this, Jenkins warns: 'If we live in an age where Russian hackers and *The Washington Post* are treated as if they had the same level of credibility – as if they are all fake news – then we are back in the Middle Ages; because we essentially burned the library that might arbitrate claims on the truth' (ibid). This middle-ages media ecology, Jenkins argues, is far from irrelevant, given the fact that contemporary

conspiracy theories built on ancient tales of 'blood slander' and 'the *Protocols of Zion*' extend 'pretty far back into our Middle Age structure' (30:20). Thus, he argues that 'one thing we have to ask ourselves is: How are we getting there?' (37:30). A primary explanation, he suggests, is the 'discrediting of the gatekeepers' of legacy news sources (30:40).

Colin Maclay (Jenkins' co-host) – although not present during the interview – offered his thoughts during an afterword, in which he calls attention to both fan and conspiracy cultures as 'being strong drivers of engagement' and 'meeting powerful human needs,' but points out that the two cultures 'have different contours and implications for how we include them into our thinking' (1:00:30). He ultimately asks: 'With hoaxers seeing themselves as taking the proverbial red pill and being anti-expert in a time of demonization of experts, what practices remain relevant, and which might we want to jettison to become more effective?' (1:01:30). He answers, in part, that 'the challenge of debunking' is 'to recognize the value and limits of past approaches' (ibid). Both Maclay and Jenkins conclude that they appreciate the challenge of creating a 'poetry of debunking' (17:00) or 'poetics of debunking' (43:10) as well as of inquiring into 'how we show the stitches' and 'how we might make the reveal compelling; satisfying the appeal of complexity and surprise' (1:01:45). Wu Ming1 suggests that such approaches should be addressed 'as collectively as possible' and be 'as socialized as possible,' noting that social movements have the potential to achieve such objectives (41:10).

Given that conspiracy theories prove resistant to factual refutation (Lewandowsky; 2021), I thus determined to ground my creative-practice in the poetics of debunking. To date, very little has been written on this topic which, as indicated, employs creative and artistic methods to disrupt harmful or destructive aspects of conspiracy culture. To advance artistic methods along these lines, I looked to *The Poetics* wherein Aristotle divides artistic practice into two broad categories: mimesis (the representation of a given reality) and poiesis (the creation of a new reality). Yet, in light of the increasing tendency of people to proudly "fake it 'til they make it"[45] (particularly on social media) – along with other postmodern notions including McLuhan's paradox of *the medium and the message* (1964), DeBord's *society of the spectacle* (1967), and Baudrillard's *hyperreality* (1981) – it can be argued that perhaps Aristotle presented a false dichotomy. Indeed, Aristotle himself suggests as much in *The Nicomachean Ethics* when he

[45] The *Alcoholics Anonymous* slogan, 'fake it until you make it' dates at least back to the notorious John Frasca's 1969 book *Con Man or Saint?*

argues that ‘for things that we have to learn to do, we learn by doing them.’ Aristotle argues, in part: ‘We become brave by training ourselves to despise and endure terrors, and we shall be best able to endure terrors when we have become brave…’ (circa 349 BC: Book II).

In other words, mimesis has long been acknowledged as *a path* to poiesis. In this vein, my exploration of the poetics of debunking is evocative of Derrida’s notion of *teleiopoiesis* (1994), usefully summarized by Bowman as: ‘The invention of a where we are from, which tells us where we are now, and hence where we are – or should be – going’ (2020a: 06:35). This, in turn, brings to mind Clifford Geertz’s intriguing definition of “culture” as: ‘The ensemble of stories we tell ourselves about ourselves’ (1975: 448, 452). Thus, with regard to the use of unfictional and other frame blurring techniques – including ‘dark play’ and ‘make-belief’ performance as outlined by Schechner (2013: 43, 92) – it is relevant to consider what contemporary conspiracy entrepreneurs and “performance artists” might have in common. This is particularly pertinent in consideration of my methodology, the aims of my artistic research, and the rapidly shifting boundaries of performance art in accordance with the proliferation of digitally connected recording and viewing devices.

[**Fig. 4.5**: A meme features the abrasive and “talentless” lounge singer Tony Clifton, an unfictional character reportedly played by both comedian/performance artist Andy Kaufman and his long-time collaborator Bob Zmuda. The image is accompanied by text suggesting that Donald Trump could be a character of Kaufman who – it was widely but baselessly speculated – might have faked his death by lung cancer in 1984. **Fig. 4.6**: A 2016 variation on the “Not Sure if Fry” template, in which Fry from *Futurama* (1999-2003) wonders if Donald Trump might be a performance artist rather than politician.]





According to Alice Bucknell, the "performative turn" of the 1960s 'emerged from a distinct moment of political and cultural upheaval across America' (2017). Movements such as Dada and Fluxus, and artists such as Allan Kaprow, Yoko Ono, Marina Abramovic, and Joseph Beuys created "scores," "happenings," "events," and other 'intentionally uncategorizable works' (Kedmey; 2017) which resisted commercialism, violated taboos, protested social conventions from war to art, itself; and blurred the boundary 'between performance and protest' (Bucknell; 2017). These performances were often 'ephemeral,' and frequently 'difficult to collect and codify,' as well as notoriously difficult 'to recognize as art' (Kedmey; 2017). Bucknell further argued that 'the rapid-fire economy of performance art and its quick-reaction politics primes the medium to be the art world's most cogent critique of contemporary global culture,' and 'contemporary art's most powerful medium' (2017). This power stems in part from the fact that, in Bucknell's words, 'the internet puts a two-way mirror up to performance art as a platform for protest, tearing down the boundaries of exclusion that traditionally fenced off the high art world from ordinary viewership and everyday criticism… with an echo chamber of angry reaction faces' (ibid).

The Internet has likewise facilitated a rise of collective conspiracy fantasies as a platform for protest. Yet, as Bucknell noted, that mirror works both ways. Accordingly, Kallis, et al., recommend using the online presence of conspiracy theory movements 'to identify the ideology and networks' in order to design 'interventions that work offline to counter those messages' (2018). In line with Kallis' recommendations, I sought to create works which would have a strong effect/affect on viewers/participants in offline/online spaces; particularly as it relates to digital citizenship, digital media literacy, and sustainable digital practices. As far as possible, I sought to reach people who were engaging sincerely *or* ironically with conspiracist ideologies. Of course, *reaching* people is one thing and having a positive *impact* is another. On this, Aoife Gallagher of the UK-based think tank, the Institute for Strategic Dialogue*,* suggests that while 'arguments with conspiracy theorists can often be pointless,' it can prove helpful to make 'appeals to critical thinking' (Freyne; 2021). In a statement which points to the importance of media literacy in mitigating some of the more pressing threats toward democratic societies and institutions, Gallagher argues:

> Conspiracy theorists often think that they have a higher level of critical thinking than the average person does. But what you see in these groups is that their critical thinking is just a rejection of anything that is termed "mainstream." And that's not

> critical thinking. So if someone says, 'oh, I saw this video that says the vaccines are actually going to kill you,' [ask], 'well, who's in the video and what's their agenda?' Get them to think about the information that they're consuming (ibid).

Gallagher's recommendation is in line with a large body of research pointing to a strong inverse correlation between conspiracist ideation and critical and analytical thinking skills. For example, Van Prooijen has shown that education is inversely correlated with 'conspiracy belief' for a variety of reasons including 'belief in simple solutions for complex problems, feelings of powerlessness, and subjective social class,' (2017) while Swami, et al., demonstrated that 'inducing analytical thinking,' via unrelated tasks or obstacles, appears to reduce 'belief in conspiracy theories, at least in the short-term' (2014).

> [**Fig. 4.7**: A meme mocks the "moon landing was a hoax" conspiracy theory by pointing out the absurdity of a hoax with nearly half a million co-conspirators. **Fig. 4.8**: A meme of Depp and Highmore – from *Finding Neverland* (2004) – points to the limitations of such logic as an adult uses that same logic to convince a child that Santa Claus must be real.]





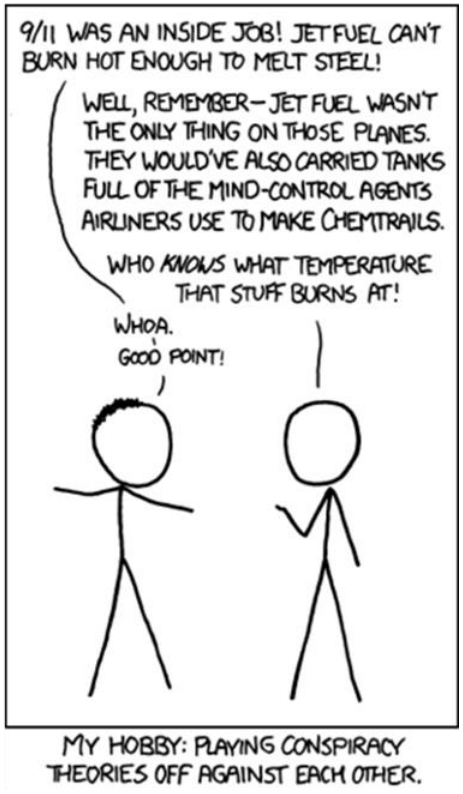
In line with the findings above, a UNESCO document entitled 'Countering Online Hate Speech' flags the importance of providing 'technological knowledge and skills' so as to connect 'media and information literacy' with 'broader ethic and civic matters,' particularly among young or other vulnerable communities (Gagliardone, et al; 2015: 46). The authors identify digital citizenship and values-based education – via the study of human rights – as an effective approach to both countering and *preventing* the spread of hate speech, with which conspiracy fantasies are often entangled (ibid). Still, both researchers *and* educators have noted the lack

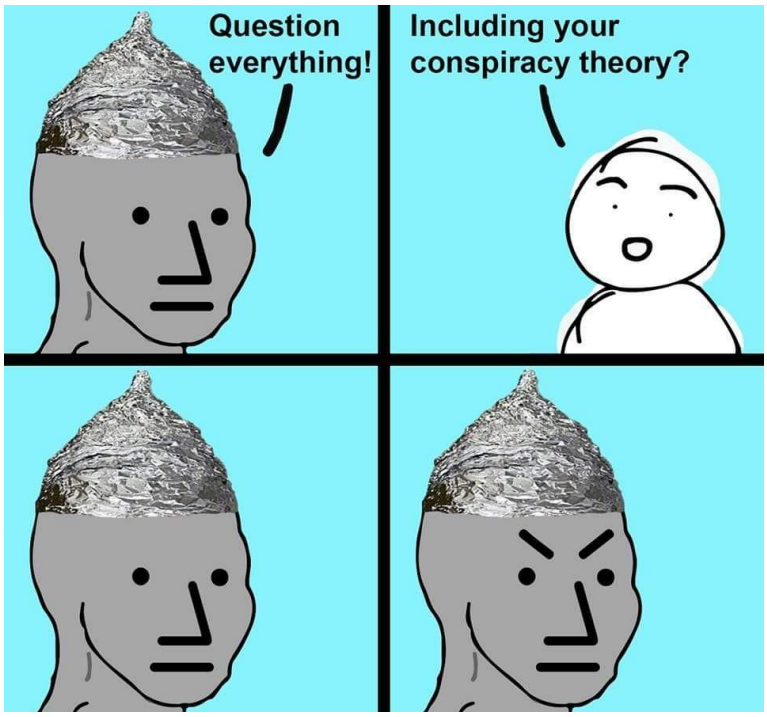
of attention paid to the affective, emotional, and visceral aspects of authoritarian populism and 'the spread of digital hate speech' in educational contexts (Estellés and Castellví; 2020).

Gallagher's simple suggestion, supported by research such as the above, contributed to my development of a framework for conducting creative-practice via conspiracism. This framework is also in line with the set of practices known as 'street epistemology' proposed by Boghossian and Lindsay (2019) in which the Socratic method is used to conversationally and non-confrontationally interrogate the perceived *basis* for so-called "beliefs" (Magnabusco; 2018). This approach has the potential to be both ethical and effective in promoting digital media literacy and digital citizenship skills as is relates to the online spread of disinformation, as well as to address threats posed to democratic societies by the spread of disinformation and conspiracism, and to explore how artistic research into conspiracism can improve critical thinking, media literacy, and digital citizenship in an era of rampant digital disinformation.

The fact is, many conspiracy narratives are specifically *intended and designed to* manipulate elections and electorates (Cadwalladr; 2019). Such disinformation has been aimed at so-called 'persuadables,' and resonates particularly well with those who perceive themselves as unfairly disenfranchised by a rigged or corrupt system (ibid). Here, it is important to note that disenfranchised citizens, as well as conspiracy theorists, are readily found across the political, social, and mental health spectrums (Hodun; 2021: 9, 85; Imhoff and Lamberty; 2018). Along with diminishing middle classes and the concentration of wealth and political power in the hands of global population's top 1%, increasing numbers of people may understandably feel unfairly disenfranchised (Packer, 2021; Galston, 2021) or self-identify as 'the portrait of downward mobility' (Kelley; 2020). Nevertheless, collective conspiracy fantasies – while perhaps comforting on some levels – counter-productively divert attention and action away from effective means of engagement or protest.

> [**Fig. 4.9**: A webcomic by XKCD entitled "Jet Fuel" (#966) aligns with the poetics of debunking by suggesting (albeit mockingly) that conspiracy theories can be used to contradict and undermine other conspiracy theories. **Fig. 4.10**: An anti-conspiracy theory "tinfoil hat" variation on the "Angry NPC Wojak" template – the main character of which is named after non-player characters in video games as an indication of his average/mainstream (i.e., "normie") status – aligns with the poetics of debunking by suggesting that conspiracists would do well to heed their own mantra to question everything, including their own questions.]





If there is a useful lesson to be learned from the popularity of QAnon narratives, it is that conspiracy theories – as Miłosz Hodun writes – 'have an enormous potential to engage people; organise and direct their actions in the public sphere' (2021: 9). Unfortunately, the dedication and rebellious spirit shown by the followers of the global movement were instigated and harnessed by malignant actors and directed toward phantom enemies in the services of sabotage or profit. Meanwhile, real "adversaries" to justice and equality – such as flawed campaign laws, tax codes, disinformation, environmental destruction, voter suppression, and a disinformed or disenfranchised citizenry, to name only a few – remain hidden amidst 'the corporate subversion of democracy' (Dery; 2017: xiv).

As filmmaker Karim Amer observes, it is not the fault of Cambridge Analytica that 'the entire democratic process has been commoditised and you can buy and sell all this data [or] that the US election is a multi-billion-dollar market. Cambridge Analytica didn't decide democracy was for sale' (Cadwalladr; 2019). In *wanting* to believe blatant disinformation, conspiracists sacrifice an opportunity to effect meaningful change at local or national levels. Unfortunately, this real path toward change is often less exciting and more incremental than the promised, but ultimately non-existent, "Storms" and "Great Awakening" promised in QAnon lore. And this, perhaps, is another indication that, as Jane McGonigal put it: 'Reality is broken' (2010a).

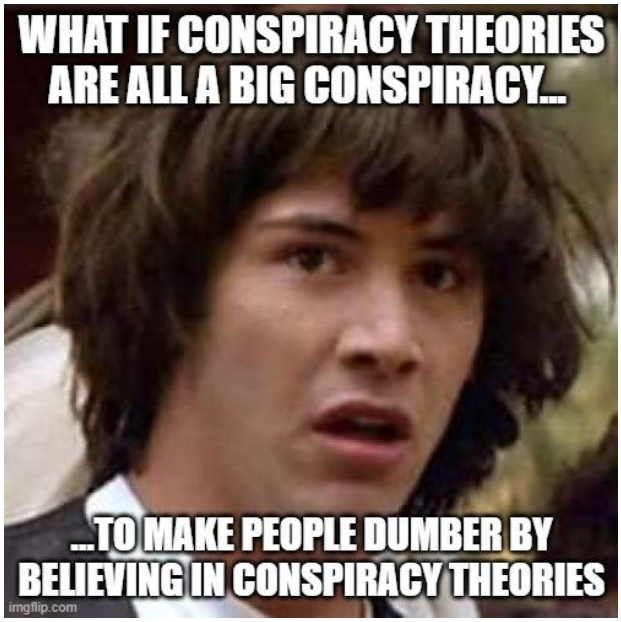
In 1961, on his final days in office, US President Dwight D. Eisenhower warned of the threats posed by the military-industrial complex, asserting that 'only an alert and knowledgeable citizenry can compel the proper meshing of the huge industrial and military machinery of defense with our peaceful methods and goals, so that security and liberty may prosper together' (*archives.gov*). Today, the warning remains chillingly prescient (although, below, I do suggest adding several words to Eisenhower's compound term). Thus, I theorized that by framing the *actual* political reform process within a constructed dramatic narrative, I might go some distance toward retaining and amplifying many of the benefits of conspiracy fantasy movements. These include: friendship, companionship, a sense of belonging, community, planning, plotting, strategy, game theory, gamification, collective action – in a word – the *thrill* of participation; the thrill of *resistance* against unelected, and often unaccountable, power-brokers of the *military-political-corporate-tech-finance-pharmaceutical-insurance-complex* who – particularly within the US – have made laws benefitting the wealthiest corporations and individuals at the expense of the environment and literally everything and everyone else.

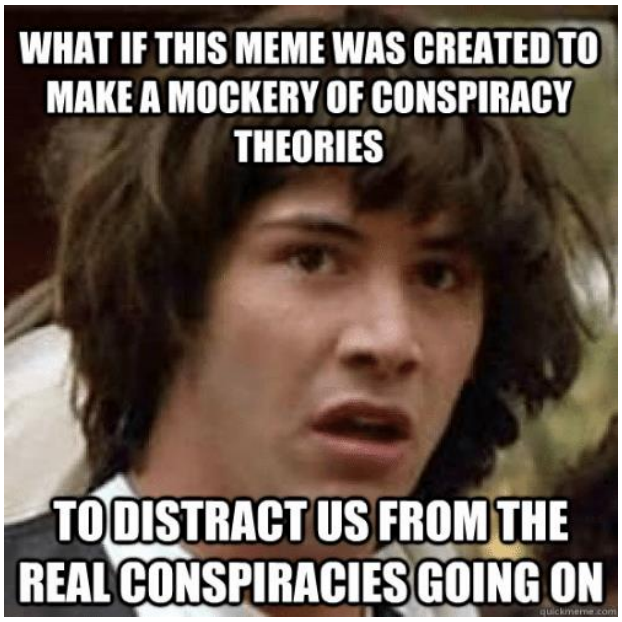
In line with Roland Barthes' recommendation to create 'writerly' as opposed to 'readerly' spectators (1970), I explored the use of various media, including live performance, live video chat, text bricolage, still image, video, and audio – all of which can be manipulated on multiple levels – in order to design digital artifacts with the potential to create active as opposed to passive consumers of digital texts and images. The objective of this exploration was to lead viewers and participants to *question*, rather than to passively accept, the format *and* content of the information they consume. In doing this, a further goal was to spread awareness about how, and for what purposes, digital disinformation is often created, distributed, and spread across digital platforms. In this way, I hoped to provide tools which could better enable people to become more discerning consumers, creators, and spreaders of digital information.

If conspiracy theories and fantasies exist as part of an ongoing 'war of narratives,' as Dery put it (2017: xiv), then it can hardly be surprising that these narratives are unresponsive to fact-based or logical counter-arguments. Indeed, in many such cases, as Gallagher noted, it can be 'pointless to argue' (Freyne; 2021). It has been further established that mockery and parody are counter-productive strategies (Phillips and Milner; 2021). Thus, while it may seem clever to pick apart the logical inconsistencies of conspiratorial beliefs – or to use one conspiratorial belief to invalidate another – such approaches prove often ineffective. These approaches essentially

amount to sophisticated forms of mockery, and do nothing to address the more significant 'emo-truths' underlying unsupported beliefs (Harsin; 2020).

[**Figs. 4.11 & 4.12**: Two "Conspiracy Keanu" memes align with, and inform my approach to, the poetics of debunking.]





One solution I developed for navigating this conundrum invokes the concept of going 'one level deeper,' as popularized by the 2010 Christopher Nolan sci-fi film *Inception*, in which the protagonists use fictional lucid dreaming technologies to penetrate multiple layers of their victims' subconscious minds; constructing false realities within false realities. In short, rather than mocking logical inconsistencies, parodying them via absurd "fake" conspiracy theories, or arguing via counter-evidence, this strategy seeks to reimagine, rewrite, and expand popular conspiracy narratives by looking one (or more) levels deeper than the faces of the narratives. In so doing, the goal is to *modify* existing contexts in order to direct action and attention *away* from imaginary scenarios and *toward* actual – if less flamboyant – sociopolitical issues, including media literacy, science literacy, and ethical political and community engagement. The intent of this approach is to shape narratives that acknowledge underlying emo-truths and desires for change and action; while delegitimizing harmful aspects.

In contemplating this strategy for a poetics of debunking, I aimed to engage the critical thinking skills of the viewer/listener, as suggested by the street epistemology approach of Boghossian and Lindsay (2019) as well as by Gallagher (quoted in Freyne; 2021). In contrast to those

approaches, however, my strategy was not to *directly* target the flaws in spectators' research methodologies or logic. Rather, in line with the poetics of debunking, I intended to allow this to occur as a bi-product of my primary strategy, which was to adopt the *form* of conspiracism, while subverting the *function.*

Given the ethical implications previously discussed, I decided that a "manifesto" – or, more specifically, an "anti-manifesto" or "(un)manifesto" – might prove effective in advancing these goals. The prefixes "anti" and "un" are being employed in this context to indicate that I wanted to create a performative manifesto which "felt" like a traditional manifesto, but that functioned as a means to lead viewers to question everything from their own beliefs to the sincerity and arguments of the "manifesto" itself. On the basis of such ideas, I undertook the creation of live and digitally mediated versions of an original '(Un)Conspiracy Manifesto.'

To do so required a deep familiarity with the themes, vernacular, and symbolism of conspiracy culture in order to identify and subsequently appropriate, subvert, overwrite, and/or reconstruct the unethical, negative, harmful, and "toxic" aspects of these narratives. Building on the ethical and theoretical map outlined thus far, I identified numerous aspects of conspiracy narratives which are ethically defensible or socially productive, according to alternative (i.e., "deeper") criteria, and experimented with frameworks capable of retaining and/or modifying those aspects.

In attempting to mimetically redirect harmful narratives toward constructive ends, this project is grounded in "(un)conspiracy," rather than "anti-conspiracy" logic. My familiarity with conspiracy culture provided a hook for enticing viewers with an interest in conspiracist discourse to engage or reflect upon my (un)conspiracy content. Thus, rather than directly challenging popular conspiracy narratives, I argued that those "theories" do not go deep *enough*. Indeed, it is my sincere contention that many who engage with conspiracist discourse are unaware of the blunt fact that – now more than ever – conspiracy theories are frequently appropriated and weaponized by actual conspirators.

[**Fig. 4.13**: A text only meme bluntly and helpfully lays out a potential framework for a poetic approach to debunking conspiracy fantasies. **Fig. 4.14**: A meme (cropped for conceptual clarity) – featuring DiCaprio and Murphy in *Inception* (2010) – points to a poetics of debunking ("go deeper") while pivoting on an interesting play on words.]



In the mid-1990s – before evolving into the Wu Ming Foundation – a group of Italian cultural activists, artists, and anarchists calling themselves the Luther Blissett Project (LBP), committed various urban and media hoaxes under the name Luther Blissett. In the ensuing years, the name Luther Blissett became a collective pseudonym used by diverse and unrelated culture jammers across the globe. For unknown reasons, the name "Luther Blissett" was appropriated from an English footballer who had played for Milan in the 1980s. Complexly, the "real" Luther Blissett appeared on a British sports show in 2004 and read the following sentence from an LBP manifesto: '*Chiunque può essere Luther Blissett, semplicemente adottando il nome Luther Blissett*,' or, 'Anyone can be Luther Blissett simply by adopting the name Luther Blissett' (Blissett; 1996). The show concluded with Blissett and the other guests stating in English: "I am Luther Blissett."

Before terminating the LBP in 1999, five members published a best-selling novel entitled *Q* which – perhaps, coincidentally – bears a plot resemblance to the QAnon narrative emerging on 4chan nearly two decades later. It is worth noting that the fictional character Q – in both iterations – may be influenced by the character V from Moore and Lloyd's comic book series *V for Vendetta* (1982-1985) adapted for the screen in 2005. Within the circumstances of that story, the Roman numeral "V" is the identity assigned to a dystopian experimental super-soldier turned anti-fascist revolutionary, and later, *to anyone who dons a Guy Fawkes mask in service of that cause*. It is worth noting – considering the context of the COVID-19 pandemic

and associated conspiracy theories – that in the film adaptation, the fascist party seized power, first by releasing a deadly virus, and next, by providing an antidote.

Soon after the film's release, the Guy Fawkes mask became associated with the hactivist collective operating under the name Anonymous, emerging on the 4chan and Something Awful boards in the early 2000s. The association between "Anons" and the Guy Fawkes mask came about indirectly, by way of the worldwide availability of the inexpensive masks, as well as the popularity of Epic Fail Guy, a 4chan meme and webcomic character wearing the mask as an ironic symbol of Guy Fawkes' spectacular failure in the Gunpowder Plot.

Anonymous has been described as a "digitized global brain," and among the primary targets of early Anonymous "ops" were the Church of Scientology, neo-Nazis, and child pornography sites. Although largely decentralized, Anonymous operations were sympathetic toward the Occupy Wall Street and Arab Spring movements and often defended internet piracy sites and Wikileaks, and thus, were generally aligned with the broader culture jamming movement. At times, however – as in the case of flooding the Epilepsy Foundation website with seizure inducing GIFs – Anonymous was little more than a network of trolls.

[**Fig. 4.15**: A popular poster (based on Moore and Lloyd's 1982-1985 comic series *V For Vendetta*) features a slogan of the Anonymous collective. **Fig. 4.16**: A QAnon meme purposefully conflates, or piggybacks, the unfictional character Q with the fictional character V.]





The semiotics of the Guy Fawkes mask provide an example of the ways in which symbols may evolve or be appropriated, co-opted, subverted, or reclaimed over time. Fawkes, *himself*, was both a Catholic anti-Protestant revolutionary as well as one of the 13 religiously-motivated would-be domestic terrorists of the infamous 1605 Gunpowder Plot targeting the British parliament building. The notoriety of Fawkes stems from the fact that he was the conspirator who was first caught (while guarding the barrels of gunpowder). Thus, the earliest Guy Fawkes masks represented Fawkes as an enemy of the state.

These masks were originally sold – not to be *worn* – but so that likenesses of Fawkes could be exhibited and burned on Guy Fawkes Day (November 5); often alongside effigies of the Pope. Therefore, to *wear* a Guy Fawkes mask would be to marginalize oneself as an object of ridicule and scorn and worthy of torture and execution. Moore and Lloyd's *V for Vendetta* appropriated the mask by imagining a dystopic future in which the mask was *reclaimed* by an anti-fascist revolutionary. The graphic novel, then, made the mask "cool" within the imaginary circumstances of that story. Given that today, many people view current governments and/or "elites" as corrupt, fascist, or even evil or demonic, the original "uncool" aspects of the mask have been largely subverted. This is particularly the case beyond the borders of Britain, where the original context of the mask may not be deeply felt or understood.

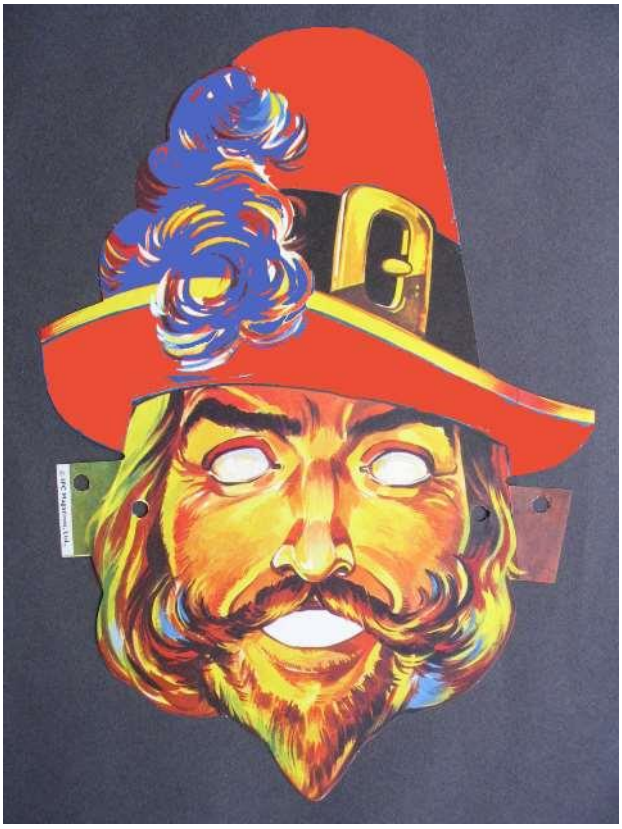
Problematically, however, in being rebranded from a symbol of treason to a revolutionary symbol of anti-fascism, the mask has been further co-opted and deployed against phantom enemies by conspiracy fantasy movements whose agendas and tactics – often steeped in themes of nationalism, racism, sexism, and violence – are, paradoxically, anything but *anti*-fascist. What is perhaps most fascinating about this mask is the way in which Moore and Lloyd imagined a fictional scenario in which the mask – as a symbol of *treason* – was appropriated and reimagined as a symbol of anti-fascism and "freedom." Through this pop-cultural intervention, the image of Guy Fawkes was transformed into a symbol of *power.* The fact, however, that a symbol of disdain evolved into a symbol of power is *not* ironic, since it was the low-status of the mask which created the conditions conducive for a semiological détournement.

Today, a symbol which was once used to target Catholicism and treason has evolved into a symbol of collective revolt against the structures of power, be they real or imagined. Conversely, Fawkes was also ironically reimagined as Epic Fail Guy, and thus, also as a symbol

of *epic failure.* The Guy Fawkes mask may, thus – depending on the wearer – be viewed as standing for many things, from freedom or anti-fascism; to anti-Semitism or white-supremacy; to anarchy or ironic trolling. Of course, many who choose to wear the mask are quite unaware of, or uninterested in, the origins and multiplicity of meanings it hides.

In line with the Situationist notion of détournement, collective pseudonyms and identities may be adopted or co-opted by anyone, including (or, especially) those with counter-cultural opinions or political intent. Dale Beran – author of *It Came from Something Awful: How a Toxic Troll Army Accidentally Memed Donald Trump Into Office* – writes that members of Anonymous are quick to point out that 'Anonymous has no members, that it is not a group, but rather a banner. People rally to it. And like a pirate flag, anyone can run it up their mast and start doing deeds in Anonymous's name' (2020). By 2014 – taking the disturbing incidents of "Gamergate" as one prominent example – Anons with Guy Fawkes masks and fascist/chauvinist agendas multiplied across the far-Right.

[**Fig. 4.17**: A cardboard Guy Fawkes mask included as a free prize with the November 1969 *Whizzer and Chips* comic book. **Fig. 4.18**: A colour-printable DIY Guy Fawkes mask (circa 2005) as part of a promotion for an online "ethical hacking certification training bundle" promises a profitable career as a "white hat hacker."]





Today, the notion of "masks" is immediately evocative of many issues pertaining to digital media and extended reality technologies, including deepfakes, filters, screen avatars, and online anonymity. Beyond their well-documented use in enabling harassment or abuse, such technologies have also been noted for their liberative and/or therapeutic potential (O'Meara and Szita, 2020; Szita, 2022). Perhaps, then, Luther Blissett, Q, and V might be usefully thought of as digital folk heroes (or digital anti-heroes). According to Chess and Newsom in *Folklore, Horror Stories, and the Slender Man*, 'digital folklore' – as with traditional folklore – is notable for being created collectively and differing according to the individual storyteller and individual audiences (2015: 58-59). As a counterpart to popular (and political) traditional folk heroes such as Robin Hood and Ned Ludd, Chess and Newsom analyse the Slenderman – a fictional, dark suited, faceless monster – first appearing on the Something Awful Internet forum in 2007 as an example of digital folklore.

Soon after appearing online, Slenderman became a popular template for Internet horror "unfiction" and "creepypasta,"[46] and subsequently, for mainstream fictional media. In 2014, the Slenderman character was at the centre of a near fatal incident when an American schoolgirl was lured into the woods and stabbed 19 times by two mentally-disturbed 12-year-old classmates, ostensibly in order to appease the Slenderman. The perpetrators were apprehended after walking five miles toward so-called "Slender Mansion," purportedly located in the Nicolet National Forest nearly 200 miles away. This incident was the subject of a 2016 HBO documentary entitled, *Beware the Slenderman.*

As previously noted, in consideration of the boundary-blurring and marginalized nature of conspiracy theories, disinformation, and digital folklore – and to better foreground and explore the widely neglected embodied and behavioural aspects of these activities – I was determined to explore this territory through creative-practice. Yet, how to conduct this exploration *ethically* was not immediately obvious. This approach raised difficult questions concerning distinctions between conducting creative-practice *about* conspiracy theories versus *through the medium of* conspiracy theories. Indeed, *are* conspiracy theories a medium? A genre? A mode of address? Furthermore, given the lack of functional distinctions between real (fake) conspiracy theories and fake (fake) conspiracy theories, how might one fake what is fabricated to begin

[46] Originating on 4chan in 2007, creepypasta is a variation of the 2006 4chan term "copypasta" used to denote the copy/paste of digital code or other text.

with? Conversely, can one deeply consume conspiracy theories as an auto-ethnographic self-experiment without potentially risking one's personal security or mental health in the process?

Conspiracy theories, I argue, are neither a medium nor a genre, *per se,* but can be helpfully viewed as being closely related to digital folklore and transmedia unfiction (i.e., unfictional narratives, of which various aspects are synergistically presented through various mediums across various media platforms). In light of all of the above, it was challenging to select the appropriate aspects, media, and platforms with which – and through which – to explore these narratives. In the next chapter (and final chapter of Part I), I document my attempts at putting the theoretical framework thus far developed into creative-practice, while critically analysing the results; particularly along the lines of ethics and personal safety.

five: ‘THE (UN)CONSPIRACY MANIFESTO (BY LUTHER BLISSETT)’

Praxis: Applying and Advancing Theory through Creative-Practice

To advance the praxis of creative-practice and the theoretical analysis presented thus far, I wrote several drafts of anti/un manifestos from various perspectives. In one surreal version, I ostensibly recruited for the Illuminati and proselytized for the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster; while performing numerous purported "miracles" (e.g., vanishing a small red handkerchief). Most of these drafts were not performed or subsequently developed. Before and during the writing of these drafts, I surveyed a wide range of popular manifestos, from Communist (Marx and Engels; 1848) to Dada (Ball, 1916; Tzara 1918), and appropriated text and structural elements in the creation of an original bricolage text.

Regarding the political content of my (un)manifesto – in addition to drawing from *Culture Jamming* (Delaure and Fink; 2017) – I made many references, both subtle and direct, to historical political events, including McCarthyism, Nazi propaganda, the assassination of John F. Kennedy, and the 1961 "Military-Industrial Complex" speech of Dwight D. Eisenhower (see: Sanders; 2020). I further surveyed a wide range of pop-cultural materials from across the political spectrum, including: Žižek's speech in Zuccotti Park during the Occupy Wall Street protests (Žižek; 2011b); Žižek's heavily promoted "duel of the century" with psychiatrist and pop-academic Jordan Peterson (Lian; 2019); and numerous Peterson interviews concerning climate change, poverty, activism, capitalism, inequality; as well as an extended conversation between Peterson and the mystically inclined celebrity activist and conspirituality entrepreneur Russell Brand[47] (Brand; 2021).

I further incorporated pop-cultural references from diverse sources including: J.R.R Tolkien's fantasy trilogy *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955); Ayn Rand's libertarian philosophical novel *Atlas Shrugged* (1957); the comic book series *V for Vendetta* (1982-1985) and *The Watchmen* (1986-1987) both written by Alan Moore; and the 1990s TV show *The X-Files.* For all of the above, I drew from the film adaptations of the early 2000s. I also included references to George Orwell's 1949 dystopic novel *1984*, and by association, the reality TV franchise *Big Brother* (1997-present). In addition, I incorporated the popular "red pill" symbolism from *The Matrix* (1999), dialogue from *The Dark Knight* (2008), and lyrics of the 1965 Bob Dylan song

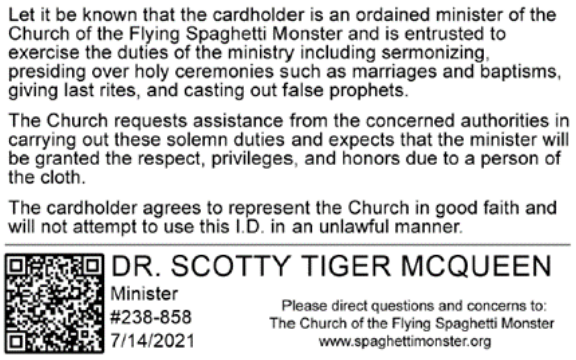
[47] In 2023, Brand became embroiled in a series of accusations and allegations of sexual assault and misconduct. Fittingly, the title of *The New York Times* piece on the topic was: 'Russell Brand's Alternate Reality' (Flegenheimer; 2023). The article describes Brand's process of interpreting and/or reframing the accusations as a media plot to destroy him for being a "truther" and for getting too close to the truth.

Subterranean Homesick Blues, among many other popular references. These references (and the reasons for selecting them) are discussed in the annotated script of 'The (Un)Conspiracy Manifesto (by Luther Blissett)' which follows.

While the ultimate aim of this project was to make a digitally mediated version of this performative manifesto freely available online, I began with a live street-theatre / performance-art incarnation. My reasons for doing this were to spread awareness of my social media channels, to make revisions based on audience interactions, and to obtain video and audio footage. To better prepare for ethical public engagement via (potentially controversial) street theatre, I adopted a two-pronged strategy: Firstly, I adopted relatively aggressive performance frames such as proselytizing, street corner sermonizing, and the recitation of a manifesto. Secondly, I supported this approach with the use of non-confrontational and cooperative strategies, such as street epistemology, "street performance," and comedy-entertainment.

In preparing to engage via street epistemology – which, as previously noted, employs the Socratic method so as to not debate, dispute, or challenge beliefs, but to interrogate how and why the interlocuter came to accept such beliefs as reliable or true – I was guided by *How to Have Impossible Conversations* (Boghossian and Lindsay; 2019). In terms of "preaching," I looked particularly to the "Propaganda" chapter of the *Gospel of the Flying Spaghetti Monster* (Henderson; 2006). Finally, to better prepare for street performing, I drew on previous experience as a street performer/busker in Seattle and New Orleans, in which I performed magic, juggling, and physical comedy. Since no Irish laws prohibit proselytizing in public spaces – provided that such "sermons" do not amount to harassment, hate speech, anti-social, or disruptive behaviour (Furlong; 2020) – in 2020, I obtained ordination as a minister in the Church of the FSM [**Figs. 5.1 & 5.2**].





In 2021, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, I applied for a Dublin City busking permit. Due to a pandemic related back-log, the permit was never issued. For this reason, I did not perform in downtown Dublin, beyond the campus of Trinity College. For costuming, I explored a range of symbolic and semiotic options, many of which were subsequently incorporated into the digitally mediated version of the project. During the dozens of live performances – which I refer to as the (Un)Manifesto "Unplugged" – I wore combat boots and a grey track suit hand-stencilled with designs including:

- *Symbols*: e.g., The Eye of Providence symbol; widely associated with Freemasonry[48]
- *Personal slogans*: e.g., "Conspiracy Theories Are the Conspiracy"
- *Political slogans*: e.g., "We are the 99%"
- *Pop-culture*: e.g., "I Want to Believe" (*The X-Files*) and "Obey/Consume" (*They Live*)
- *Discordianism*: e.g., "Fnord" (the subliminal signal of *The Illuminatus Trilogy*)
- *The Luther Blissett Project*: e.g., "Who is Luther Blissett?"
- *Personal and digital branding*: e.g., "Follow Me: #CrazyConspiracyDude"

The painted track suit was also splattered with fluorescent green paint reminiscent of the zombies, radioactive slime, and alien "goo" of popular culture, in an attempt to take advantage of colour coding based on assumed audience familiarity. I also wore a grey hand-stencilled t-shirt with an eye of providence beneath a red, white, and blue beam of light from a UFO; a red MAGA-style baseball cap customized with the words "FAKE BELIEVE" in white vinyl lettering; and a false moustache as an ineffectual "disguise." As accessories, I carried a bullhorn, a vintage suitcase, juggling knives, and a cardboard sign. The sign was also splattered with green fluorescent paint (Figs. 5.3 & 5.4).

Finally, I wore a set of custom military ID tags (i.e., "dog tags") with assorted personal information for Luther Blissett, including a date of birth listed as "October 1, 1984." This bizarre date of birth of October 1st was inspired by a 1977 children's book by Dr. Seuss entitled *Please Try to Remember the First of October,* in which the narrator promises the readers that they can have *everything they desire* if they wait until that (in reality, non-existent) date. I further incorporated this date into the text of the (un)manifesto – "Remember, remember, the 1st of October" – in order to invoke, without endorsing, the Fifth of November "Gunpowder Plot," and its aftermath.

[48] I formerly held the rank of Master Mason (Provincial Grand Lodge of Munster) and participated in numerous charitable events in that capacity. I am no longer a member, however.

[**Figs. 5.3 & 5.4**]

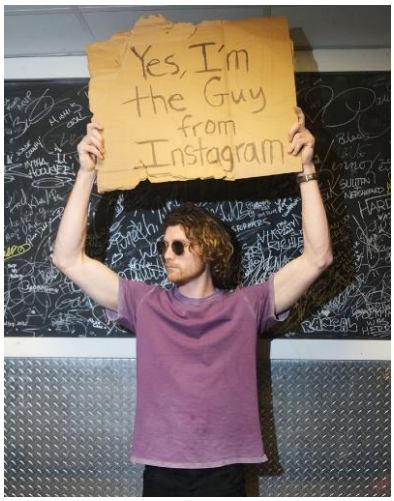


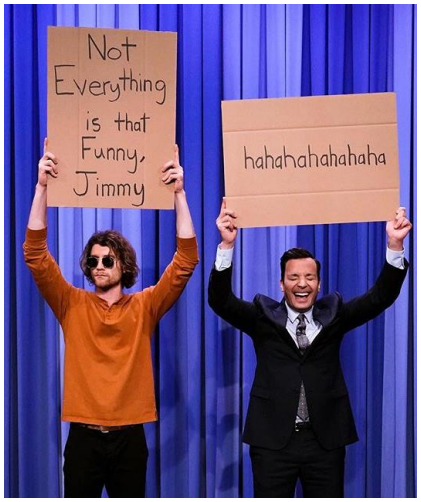


In the "Digital Edition" of the '(Un)Conspiracy Manifesto (by Luther Blisset),' I explored numerous additional costuming concepts exploring themes of self-identity and anonymity, including: the Guy Fawkes mask, the black balaclava with red bandana, the white neutral mask with hoodie, the black business suit with sunglasses, and various *Snapchat* virtual filters. The branding and aesthetics of my street performances were influenced in part by New York based performance artist Seth Phillips, better known on *Instagram* as the "dude with a sign." It is worth observing that the popularity of this concept appears to lie in the humour arising from the juxtaposition and representation of two-dimensional online discourse in three-dimensional offline spaces.

[**Figs. 5.5 – 5.7**: Three examples of the "dude with a sign" progressing from generic, to self-referential, to extremely meta (on *The Tonight Show* with Jimmy Fallon).]







It was on the basis of the DIY aesthetics of conspiracy culture – as well as the successful approach of the dude with a sign – that I chose to create a cardboard sign. The sign featured my social media avatar (CrazyConspiracyDude) and the slogan of my (un)manifesto: "Conspiracy Theories *ARE* the Conspiracy." The sign also contained a quote from Agent Mulder of *The X-Files*: "Sometimes the only sane answer to an insane world is insanity." The purpose of this quote was to contextualize my use of the term "crazy" within the broader context of conspiracy discourse.

My alter ego and online avatar, "Crazy Conspiracy Dude," was not selected lightly. On the surface, this choice may appear to pejoratively mock "tinfoil hat" conspiracists and risk falling into counter-productive parody/satire strategies. However, after deliberating, I selected this branding for several reasons: Firstly, my *actions* and *words* did *not* – for the most part – ridicule or parody conspiracists. I say "for the most part," because ironic and tongue-in-cheek humour was embedded into the (un)manifesto, but such humour is in keeping with the irony often found within conspiracy culture (Knight; 2000). Thus, in line with Newton's assertion that 'when anything deemed crazy is called performance art, it's time for performance artists to take a stand against the crazy' (2017), I appropriated the word "crazy."

At Zuccotti Park in 2011 (during Occupy Wall Street) Žižek proclaimed: 'Look at the movies that we see all the time. It's easy to imagine the end of the world. An asteroid destroying all life and so on. But you cannot imagine the end of capitalism' (2011b).[49] In this sense, I pose the question: Must we *be* crazy to imagine alternatives to – in Mark Dery's words – 'the growing corporate subversion of democracy' (2017; xiv)? Must we be crazy to imagine an alternative to the apocalypse? According to this logic, I felt it appropriate to lean into the "crazy" rather than distance myself from it. This was particularly useful when considering how I might appear to (or be described by) members of the public who witnessed some or all of my performance. I would hazard to guess that "crazy conspiracy guy" and "crazy conspiracy dude" would be among the more common descriptions. Indeed, my manifesto is "unusual" even by conventions of conspiracy culture.

[49] Here, Žižek appears to borrow Mark Fisher's 2009 paraphrasing of Fredric Jameson, who wrote in his 1994 book *The Seeds of Time*: 'It seems to be easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism' (xii). This passage was succinctly paraphrased (and attributed to Jameson) by Fisher in his 2009 book *Capitalist Realism* as: 'It is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism' (7).

By demonstrating a fluidity of the symbolism, vernacular, and irony of conspiracy culture, I sought to establish anti-credibility. Rather than attempt to refute or "debunk" pre-existing narratives, I applied an additional layer of meta-narrative. Accordingly, my (un)manifesto sincerely argues that "mainstream" conspiracy theories do not go deep *enough*. My reframing of conspiracy theories as a *real* conspiracy – and my reframing of informed political participation as an act of resistance against that conspiracy – is a relatively radical approach; even if far more constructive than its toxic counterparts. Thus, I further adopted the extremist term "manifesto," which, in recent decades, has become associated with the Unabomber and the Christchurch Mosque shooter as much as with Dada or Marxism.

Regarding online engagement, I was encouraged by the relative lack of the phrase "crazy conspiracy dude" across social media and internet databases, thus improving search engine optimization. I secured Gmail addresses as both "CrazyConspiracyDude" and the deeply ironic "RealLutherBlissett." I created social media accounts on *TikTok, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Podbean*, and *Patreon* using the collective pseudonym Luther Blissett and/or the handle Crazy Conspiracy Dude, and purchased (but did not ultimately use) the web domain *CrazyConspiracyDude.com.* The use of this pseudonym was, in part, to compartmentalize my potentially controversial public performances, in relation to my academic research.

[**Figs. 5.8 & 5.9**]





The collective pseudonym Luther Blissett was chosen due to associations between the Luther Blissett Project, the Wu Ming Foundation, and the poetics of debunking. By using this name, I intended to provide a constructive entry point – or, "rabbit hole" – for those seeking to learn

more. By asking: “Who is Luther Blissett?” I leveraged a counter-cultural reference to the question “Who is John Galt?” from Ayn Rand’s 1957 libertarian philosophical novel *Atlas Shrugged* (adapted for the screen; 2011, 2014), while further employing the Socratic method of instilling doubt rather than certainty. As the complexity of the meme below might suggest, I did not consider myself to be “playing a character” in either the live or recorded performances. The arguments I made, and the logic I endorsed, were advanced sincerely; if, at times, with a postmodern, tongue-in-cheek, self-referentiality. For this reason, I did not consider myself to be LARPing as a conspiracy theorist. For all intents and purposes, however, I was acting in the role of anti-disinformation “activist,” rather than “academic.”

[**Fig. 5.10**: An original version of the “Four Stages of Simulation” template in which – aligned with Baudrillard’s formula (1981) – my own image progresses from photo realism; to defaced artwork; to an iconic virtual filter; to the purported image of Luther Blissett.
Fig. 5.11: A characteristic version of the same template in which the image of a pumpkin progresses from vegetable to spiced coffee creamer.]

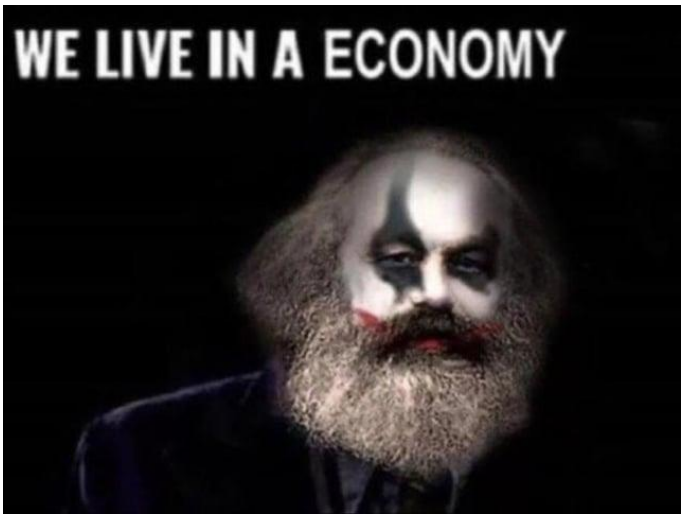




The particular cat face used in the above image was chosen in homage to the humorous and revealing incident of 2020, in which a Texas lawyer struggled to turn off the "cat filter" during a court deposition on the *Zoom* teleconferencing platform. The incident culminated in a comedy of errors and the cat/lawyer's (one can only hope) immortal statement: "I'm here live. I'm not a cat." The "I am not a cat" statement, delivered by a virtual "cat" was a perfect – albeit unintentional – digital-era invocation of Rene Magritte's 1929 conceptual artwork "This is not a pipe" ("*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*") entitled 'The Treachery of Images.' Another "truth" reaffirmed by the Texas incident is that cats have proven, thus far, to be remarkably and perennially popular on the Internet (White; 2020).

[**Fig. 5.12**: An original meme depicts the Dell webcam virtual cat face filter (circa 2007) edited onto my body with the use of MS Paint. The text is a popular phrasal-meme template, often used in conjunction with Batman's anarchist-nemesis, the Joker. This expression appears to originate in an episode of the meta-sitcom *Seinfeld* in which the character George Costanza shouts something similar in response to inconsiderate behaviours experienced while waiting in the lobby of a Chinese restaurant (S02 E11). Both the Joker and this phrase have been associated with anti-social gamer and "incel" (i.e., involuntary celibate) online communities. For this reason, this meme was never publicly used. **Fig. 5.13**: Marx, adorned in make-up in the style of the Joker (as portrayed by Joaquin Phoenix in the 2019 film *Joker*) is featured in one of many absurdist and self-referential Joker-themed "We Live in a Society" memes.]





In executing this project, a further point of consideration was if – and if so, how – evidence manipulation (e.g., magic tricks or special effects) might be incorporated and/or exposed within the live and/or digital performances, in line with the poetry of debunking and the showing of the sutures proposed by the Wu Ming Foundation; as well as with the broader seamfulness

movement. On one hand, my desire to create sophisticated conceptual "performance art" (along the lines of Joseph Beuys or Marina Abramovich) suggested that I should *not* incorporate elements of popular entertainment. On the other hand, my attempts at civic engagement might accomplish very little if I did not provide an incentive for passers-by to *hear* at least some of what I had to say. Since magic tricks align well with the subject of disinformation and the history of screen media, I incorporated several simple tricks into the manifesto as so-called "evidence" of perception manipulation and "mind control." I chose not to expose the artifice behind these tricks, since the demonstrations alone were sufficient to make a point: Both online and in "real" life, w*e should not believe everything we see.*

Finally, I chose to conclude my live performances with a knife juggling demonstration in order to create a spectacle of "danger." Naturally, these knives are designed for juggling, and are neither sharp nor pointy, posing no more risk to members of the public than any other lightweight, blunt object (such as a bullhorn). Although juggling knives has little to do with the themes of the (un)manifesto – aside from the fact that it is a seemingly "crazy" thing to do – the deeper purpose was to encourage spectators to "stick around" to see the spectacle, and thus, to *hear* more of my performance. As the Disney musical *Mary Poppins* put this in 1964: 'A spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down' (Sherman Brothers). In other words, the inclusion of skill-based sleight-of-hand and juggling demonstrations was a psychological tactic intended to disrupt the assumptions and expectations of the public with regard to what constituted "crazy" (in my case) and to endear myself to the public to some degree, in order to balance my somewhat unsettling performance frame and message. In short, I hoped to be perceived as *crazy in a good way*.

Considering Wu Ming1's assertion that "the poetry of debunking" should be as collective and socialized as possible (2018: 41:10), I created this (un)manifesto with "open sourcing" in mind (i.e., I wanted to make it easy for others to use or adapt the script, techniques, and strategies). For this reason, the magic tricks which I included (or reasonable approximations) can be performed with minimal practice and expense. While juggling knives does require considerable practice, reasonable alternatives – including juggling three apples while eating one – are within the grasp of many actors and performers.

Documentation and Analysis: 'The (Un)Conspiracy Manifesto (by Luther Blissett)'

The following pages contain the full text of the '(Un)Conspiracy Manifesto (by Luther Blissett)' including numerous citations and annotations. The text in [brackets] indicates the meta-narrative or psychological intent of each section. This chapter concludes with embedded video links and brief documentation and analyses of the live ("Unplugged") and digitally mediated ("The Digital Edition") versions.

The (Un)Conspiracy Manifesto (by Luther Blissett)

WHO IS LUTHER BLISSETT?

Watching from a distance, you might think you see a crazy conspiracy dude with a bullhorn, juggling knives and rambling on about the Illuminati.

But if you watch and listen, you will see and hear some amazing, informative, and inspirational things.

In this ten-minute spectacle, Crazy Conspiracy Dude asks:

Is it crazy to imagine an alternative to the apocalypse?

Embedded within the tongue-in-cheek humor are magic tricks, "mind control," and messages of digital media literacy which encourage viewers to think twice before spreading fake news and disinformation.

This performative '(Un)Conspiracy Manifesto (by Luther Blissett)' proves that you can't believe everything you see.

[**Fig. 5.14**]



[Introduction]

The truth is out there…[50]

Trust no one…[51]

Everything is connected…[52]

There are no coincidences...[53]

I *want* to believe.[54]

What do *you* want to believe?[55]

Roses are Red, Violets are Blue[56]

Sometimes Insanity is the only *sane* response to an *insane* society.[57]

This is the church and here is the steeple

Open the doors and here are the sheeple.[58]

Who is Luther Blissett?[59]

[Introduce Manifesto]

In theory, I am against manifestos, as I am also against theories.

Nevertheless, I will now recite the Conspiracy Theory Manifesto written by Luther Blissett – who for all intents and purposes, is, am, and are – me.[60]

---

[50] A slogan of *The X-Files* (1993-2002).

[51] *The X-Files;* alternate slogan.

[52] Attributed to child psychologist Jean Piaget, this expression has become a truism in conspiracy discourse.

[53] Attributed to psychologist Carl Jung's concept of synchronicity (1960), this expression is also a truism in conspiracy and spiritual discourse; including *Kung Fu Panda* (2008). This expression is also a quote from the fictional superhero/folk hero V – from Moore and Lloyd's comic series *V for Vendetta* (1982-1985) adapted for the screen in 2005 – that quote concludes with '…only the illusion of coincidences.'

[54] A reference to Mulder's UFO poster in *The X-Files.*

[55] A Socratic question, followed by a pause.

[56] A pattern-interrupt intended to startle and attract attention; as in the conspiracist meme: "Roses are red. Violets are blue. Epstein didn't kill himself."

[57] *The X-Files*; quote from Agent Mulder (also printed on my cardboard sign.)

[58] Substituting the word "sheeple" for "people," this nursery rhyme is accompanied by visually engaging hand actions.

[59] A Socratic question, as well as a reference to Ayn Rand's 1957 novel *Atlas Shrugged:* "Who is John Galt?"

[60] The play on grammar is an indication of the collective nature of the pseudonym, and also a reference to Dr. Teeth's introduction of The Electric Mayhem in *The Muppet Movie* (1979).

[Reframe conspiracy theories as an actual conspiracy]

We live in a society…[61]

haunted by the spectre of conspiracy theories.[62]

The problem with these theories…

(Not counting the JFK assassination, Area 51, Marilyn Monroe's "suicide," and probably Bigfoot… Because I'm pretty sure those ones are real… But the problem with the *other* theories…)[63]

is *not* that they fly too high on wings of wax,[64]

or dig too deep into the mines of Moria,[65]

but that they do not go far enough, or deep enough.

There is a conspiracy and it goes much deeper than most people realize.

And before I leave this spot, I intend to expose this conspiracy…

(so that we may tear it to a million pieces and scatter it to the wind.)[66]

And believe me when I say that *they* don't want me telling you what I'm about to tell you…

That's why I have to wear this disguise…

Big Brother is always watching…[67]

Read my lips:[68] *Conspiracy theories are the conspiracy.*

Say it with me: ***Conspiracy theories are the conspiracy***.

The Earth is flat. The Deep State did it. Reptilian alien overlords. Satanic secret societies. 5G causes Zombies. There is fluoride in the chem trails and chem trails in the vaccines.

And what if Covid-19 was in the hand sanitizer all along?[69]

---

[61] "We Live in a Society" is a popular phrasal-meme template, usually featuring Batman's anarchist-nemesis, the Joker. This expression appears to originate from an episode of *Seinfeld* (S02 E11).

[62] An allusion to the opening line of *The Communist Manifesto* written by Engels and Marx in 1848.

[63] This line was frequently cut from performances, but the intent is to build rapport by light-heartedly aligning myself with relatively harmless modern conspiracy theories.

[64] A reference to the Greek myth of Icarus, Daedalus, and King Minos' labyrinth of Crete.

[65] A reference to the film adaptations of J.R.R. Tolkien's 1954 *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy.

[66] Sometimes omitted from performance, this is a Biblical reference allegedly made by John F. Kennedy about the CIA, following the Bay of Pigs fiasco in 1961.

[67] This is an obviously tongue-in-cheek reference to George Orwell's 1949 dystopian novel *1984,* as well as to the surveillance culture reality television show franchise *Big Brother*. Despite the absurdity of the mustache as a disguise, the point of the mustache was to foreground the ever-present gap between surface and substance in all performances and representations.

[68] A reference to George H.W. Bush's famously broken 1988 campaign promise: "Read my lips: No new taxes."

[69] In contrast to earlier signalling an openness to some modern-era conspiracy theories, at this point, I denounce contemporary conspiracy fantasies. The joke about hand sanitizer is taken from a "Conspiracy Keanu" meme.

In the words of the great physicist [Heisenberg] those theories aren't even *WRONG*![70]

But neither are they as dumb as they might sound.

These stories were strategically created by disinformation agents and PsyOps programs of hostile foreign powers; as well as by anarchist trolls, opportunists, and profiteers; both foreign and domestic.

They are spread online by what the Soviets described as polezny durak.

Or: useful idiots.

These conspiracy theories are *sustained* by the understandable fear, the legitimate distrust, and the well-intentioned concern of citizens like you and me.

The sinister purpose of these fake conspiracies is to manipulate elections and voters;

to sabotage democratic societies;

to maximize short-term profits;

or just to watch the world burn.[71]

These fake conspiracies, as ridiculous as they might seem, serve a calculated purpose.

They hide the *real* adversaries, and divert the energy of patriots and citizens *away* from *real* informed participation;

away from meaningful forms of activism and protest;

and toward non-existent enemies, like satanic-reptilian-alien-overlords.

We consume these lies. And we spread them like a virus, which they are.

That is the *true* conspiracy. And *we* are the useful idiots who spread it.

Do you believe?

Do you want to take the blue pill and find contentment in slavery?

Or do you want to take the red pill and find a struggle for freedom?

What if I told you… *that you don't have to take a pill*![72]

Say it with me: **conspiracy theories *are* the conspiracy**.

[70] This expression is actually attributed to Wolfgang Pauli; circa 1960. I attribute it to Heisenberg because Pauli's name is far less known to the public. I don't think people should expect everything they hear from a crazy conspiracy dude to be 100% accurate.

[71] This line references a story told to Bruce Wayne (AKA Batman) by his butler in reference to the motivation of his anarchist-arch-nemesis the Joker: "Some men just want to watch the world burn." (*The Dark Knight*, 2008)

[72] This approach to the red pill/blue pill dilemma is taken from an Internet meme [see: Fig. 4:1].

[Trick break: Coin vanish]

We are being constantly manipulated by a steady stream of disinformation and fake news.

This information looks like real information but is designed to manipulate your emotions rather than inform you.

This news looks like real news, but it is not based on reality.

This fake information manipulates your emotions in the same way that a magic trick manipulates your perception.

Watch… Here's a coin.

Now you see it. (coin vanishes)

Now you don't…

[Reframe adversaries]

Who are our *real* adversaries?

The corporations and tech firms and billionaires. (reproduce coin from air)

The unelected power-brokers, accountable to no one. (flip coin)

The 1% who control over 50% of the world's wealth; (pocket coin)

Who have bought our politicians and law makers; Who have re-written laws, regulations, and tax codes to make themselves richer and more powerful at the expense of everything and everyone else;

Who have purchased media companies to spread propaganda, disinformation, and fake news, so as to blur the line between fantasy and reality; and between truth and fiction;

Who harvest our data from "tech firms" and sell it to "consultants" to manipulate voters and elections in exchange for *more* wealth and *more* power.

And the politicians who have made it possible; by putting democracy and the environment up for sale to the highest bidder.

While war may be used in place of conversation, words will always possess the capacity to speak truth to power. And the truth is, there is something wrong with this world, isn't there?[73]

Rather than standing united against these threats to our constitutions and our planet, we have been blinded by a hundred imaginary conspiracy theories and fantasy stories, based no more on evidence than fairy tales of fire breathing dragons.

Yet, around the globe, millions and millions of people prefer these stories to reality.

[73] This is a modified version of an often-quoted passage written by Alan Moore in the comic series *V for Vendetta* (1982-1985) and featured in the 2005 screen adaption*:* 'Because while the truncheon may be used in lieu of conversation, words will always retain their power. Words offer the means to meaning, and for those who will listen, the enunciation of truth. And the truth is, there is something terribly wrong with this country, isn't there?"

[Trick break: Mind Control]

Fake news and disinformation can manipulate your thoughts in a highly predictable way…

Just like that Derren Brown guy does on TV.

I'll show you: Here are five cards. Just think of one of those cards. ("Princess Card Trick")

I'll take one card away.

Did I get the one you are thinking of?

People are suggestible… (Repeat with four cards, and again with three cards; if appropriate.)

[Reframe informed participation as an act of resistance]

A democratic society is only as strong as the citizens it represents, and only as legitimate as the information with which those citizens are informed.

Only an accurately informed and actively participating citizenry can create a strong democratic society which governs – not according to fantasies, myths, and fairytales, or disinformation, fake news, and alternative facts – but according to science and evidence; and out of concern for its people, and all other life on the planet.

Conspiracy theories *are* the conspiracy.

The *true* conspiracy is the networks of disinformation and fake news which conceal the ever-increasing corporate subversion of democracy behind a fog of confusion, distrust, and fear.

Say it with me: **Conspiracy theories *are* the conspiracy**.

Resist!

Resist *believing* fake news because it makes you feel good.

Resist *spreading* fake news because it makes you feel right.

Resist disinformation no matter how true it may *feel*.

All news is biased. But not all news is fake.[74]

When more than half of the public can no longer recognize the difference between news and fake news, or between information and disinformation, it's game over.

When two plus two equals five.[75]

When slavery is freedom.

When Ignorance is knowledge.

When fear is love.[76]

---

[74] Here, I diverge with McLuhan who assertively stated during a 1969 television interview: 'All news is fake. It's pseudo-event. It's created by the medium that is employed. There is no honest reporting on any medium, it is all fake, necessarily, created by the medium in question.'

[75] Another reference to Orwell's *1984.*

[76] This line, and the preceding two, are modified versions of the Party slogan in Orwell's *1984*: 'War is Peace, Freedom is Slavery, and Ignorance is Strength.'

Check mate, sheeple!

We will be a world of useful idiots doing the will of our corporatized political overlords.[77]

When nothing is true and everything is possible,[78]

who will watch the watchmen?[79]

I may be a crazy conspiracy dude, but is it crazy to imagine an alternative to the increasing corporatization of democracy?

Is it crazy to imagine an alternative to the apocalypse?

It doesn't take a weatherman to know which way the wind blows.[80]

The truth *is* out there.[81]

Our challenge is to *believe* it, before it's too late.

[Trick break: Knives or apple juggling]

Thank you for your attention.

I will now juggle these razor-sharp knives for your entertainment pleasure.

Kids… don't try this at home… Do this at Grandma's house… [Juggle].

[77] The word "overlords" is a loaded one, and is often ironically employed in the context of a widely-memed quote from *The Simpsons* (S05 E15) – 'I for one welcome our new insect overlords' – likely inspired by the 1977 film adaptation of an H.G. Wells 1905 short story, 'Empire of the Ants.' The term is also often applied to reptilians, and thus, is highly problematic. My goal here is to appropriate the term in a more grounded context.

[78] A slightly modified quote from Hannah Arendt's 1951 *Origins of Totalitarianism*: 'In an ever-changing, incomprehensible world the masses had reached the point where they would, at the same time, believe everything and nothing, think that everything was possible and that nothing was true' (Part 3, Ch. 2).

[79] '*Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?'* is first found in the *Satires* (Satire VI, lines 347-348) of the Roman poet Juvenal (Circa 100 AD). The line was originally in reference to marital infidelity but subsequently applied by others – including Moore in the comic book series *The Watchmen* (1986-1987) – to matters of politics, security, and regulation.

[80] A slightly modified lyric from Bob Dylan's 1965 song *Subterranean Homesick Blues.* This lyric was the inspiration for the American counter-culture anti-war and pro-civil rights activist collective *The Weathermen* (subsequently the *Weather Underground Organization*) active between 1969 and 1977; designated as a domestic terrorist organization by the FBI. In retrospect, this reference is somewhat inappropriate. I included it out of an appreciation for Dylan and an over-sentimentality for the counter-culture of the 1960s and 1970s. Perhaps a better Dylan lyric would be: "You better start swimmin' or you'll sink like a stone, for the times, they are a-changin'" (1965).

[81] A slogan of *The X-Files,* as well as a call-back to the opening line.

[Conclusion]

Remember: **Conspiracy theories *are* the conspiracy**.

So don't believe everything you see on the internet. Or you'll wind up being one of those conspiracy theorists who doesn't realize that they're part of a conspiracy to use conspiracy theorists to spread disinformation.[82]

And remember, remember, the first of October…[83]

I am Luther Blissett.[84]

Good bye… and good luck[85]

[82] This line is taken from the Internet meme referenced previously [see: Fig. 4:13].

[83] This is a reference to a fascinating children's book by Dr. Seuss and a whimsical alternative to invoking the fifth of November Gunpowder Plot.

[84] The significance of the collective pseudonym Luther Blissett was discussed previously (see: Chapter Four).

[85] A modified reference to the "Good night, and good luck" sign-off of American CBS broadcast journalist Edward R. Murrow, prominently featured in the 2005 film *Good Night, and Good Luck.*

‘The (Un)Conspiracy Manifesto (by Luther Blissett): Unplugged’



‘The (Un)Conspiracy Manifesto: Unplugged’ was filmed at multiple locations across Ireland by Patricia Darling McQueen. “Unplugged” is a reference to the analogue nature of the performance and the music television program *MTV Unplugged* (1989-present).

Embedded above and accessible at: https://youtu.be/GGyJ6DD-j0U?si=rDDHtdQ5CNY5608j

‘The (Un)Conspiracy Manifesto: Digital Edition’



Portions of ‘The (Un)Conspiracy Manifesto: Digital Edition’ were filmed by Patricia Darling McQueen. Editing, digital effects, and graphics were undertaken collaboratively using Apple Final Cut Pro, Adobe Photoshop, Microsoft Paint, and Microsoft PowerPoint.

Embedded above and accessible at: https://youtu.be/-pTVcsg53lY?si=3z-82schVByHcAY7

Part One: Who is Luther Blissett?



Part One presents a version of the (un)manifesto's introduction, while employing the Guy Fawkes mask and "monster" voice filter from Apple Final Cut Pro to invoke the aesthetics of the hacker collective "Anonymous." In appropriating this aesthetic, I attempted to bring the Luther Blissett Project to the attention of "Anons" as well as the general public. The music was a whistled version of *The X-Files* theme. The hypno-rings are intended as a reference to the MK-ULTRA project of the CIA which experimented unethically with various forms of mind control in the 1950s and 1960s.

Part Two: We Interrupt this Program



Part Two introduces the "Conspiracy Theory Manifesto by Luther Blissett" using appropriated audio footage from the 1938 CBS Radio broadcast of *The War of the Worlds* starring Orson Welles. This approach reframes the "we interrupt this program" tactic exploited by Welles, as a broadcast "hack," such as the one featured in *V for Vendetta* (2005). The title card for this video places the iconic virtual cat face on the headless body of the unofficial "Anonymous" logo, along with the Eye of Providence symbol and green "goo" [**Figs. 5.15 & 5.16**].

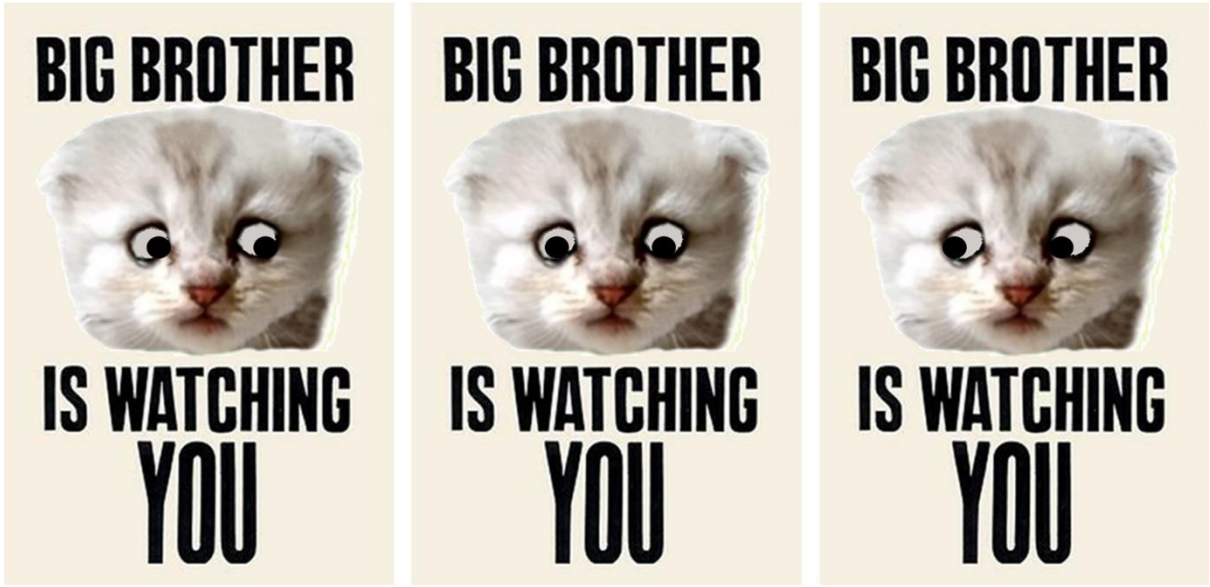




Part Three: Conspiracy Theories are the Conspiracy



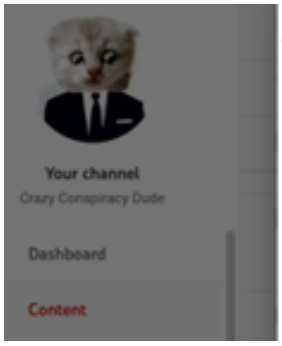
Part Three was filmed in front of a crowd in Fairview Park in Dublin as part of the online edition of the *Unplugged* version. The mustache disguise, and accompanying reference to "Big Brother" of George Orwell's 1949 novel *1984,* are foregrounded in an animated virtual cat face Big Brother GIF composed of the three original images below [**Figs. 5.17 – 5.20**]:

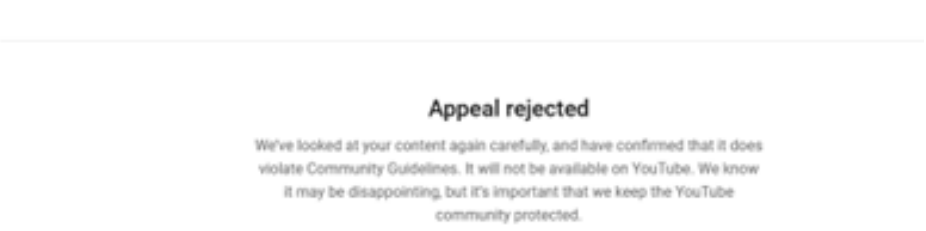


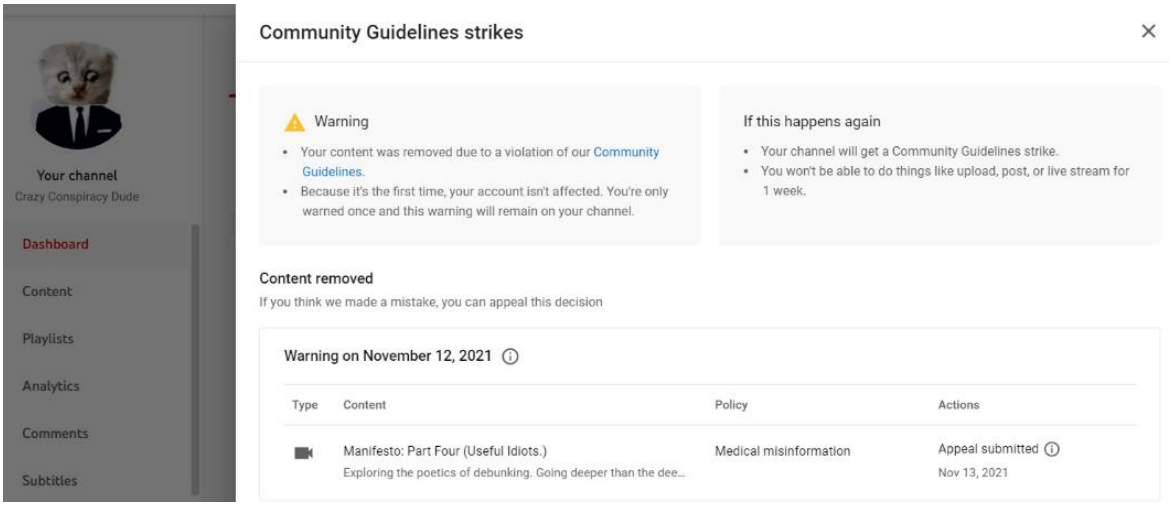
Part Four: Useful Idiots (Censored Version)



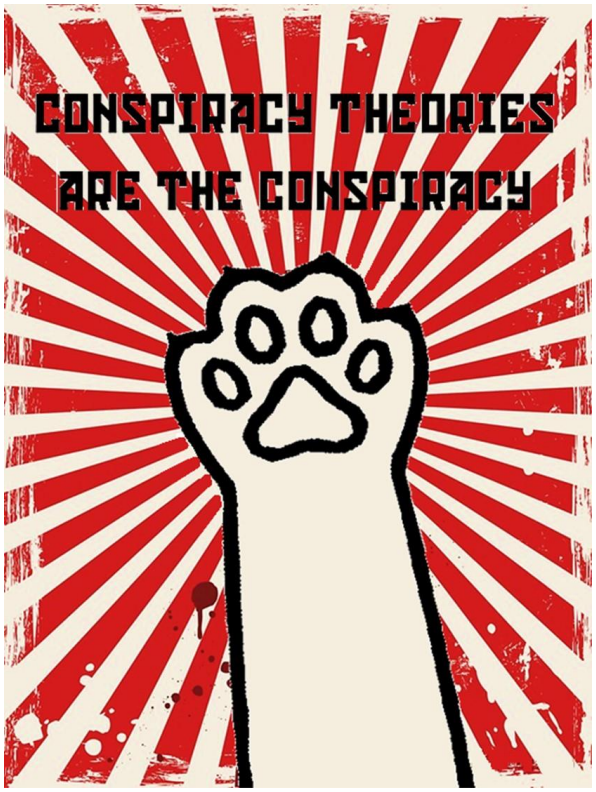
Part Four evokes the style of mid-Century Soviet Propaganda. The uncensored version of this video was removed by *YouTube* for containing "medical misinformation." The text in question was: '5G causes Zombies. There is fluoride in the chem trails and microchips in the vaccines. And what if Covid-19 was in the hand sanitizer all along?' The text, of course, also described those ridiculous stories as 'disinformation' spread by 'useful idiots.' Nevertheless, I created and uploaded a "censored" version with "bleeps" which, artistically speaking, I prefer. I appealed the ban, but it was upheld, and one "strike" was issued against my account. [**Figs. 5.21 & 5.22**].

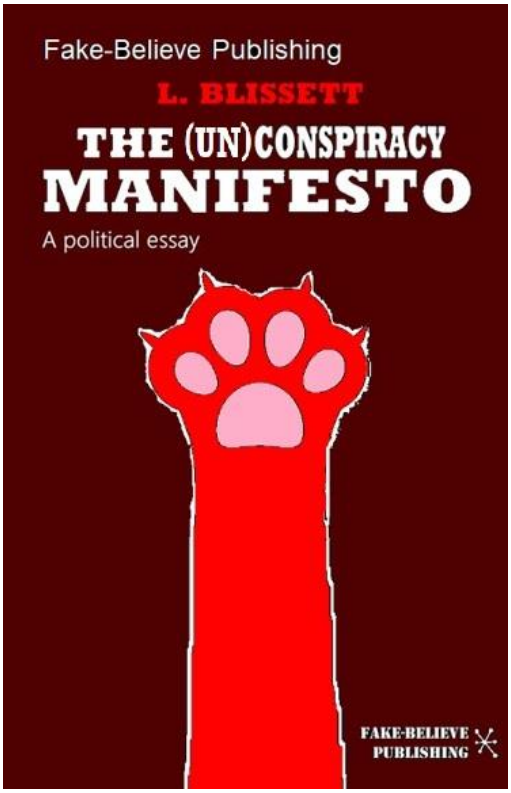






This brush with the unintentional dissemination of disinformation was a reminder of the importance of precise language. Accordingly, I changed the text of the (un)manifesto so as to be unmistakably absurd: 'There's fluoride in the chem trails and chem trails in the vaccines.' This incident also makes clear, the powerful, autocratic, and potentially flawed structural role of algorithms and policies governing social media platforms. This video was also the basis for a "Raised Cat Fist" poster and absurdist cover design for the digital '(Un)Conspiracy Manifesto by Luther Blissett,' [**Figs. 5.23 & 5.24**] based on the cover of *The Communist Manifesto* written by Marx and Engels in 1848 (Synapse Publishing, 2019).





Part Five: Like a Virus



Part Five is the first of these videos to experiment with the use of digital methods to distort or conceal my image. In this case, this is accomplished through a *Snapchat* Alien filter and the addition of a voice filter via Final Cut Pro. The opening soundscape is appropriated from the 1960s CBS television sitcom, *My Favorite Martian.* Again, the static bars and interruptions suggest a broadcast "hack," while the grey hoody suggests a military location, such as Area 51. The UFO poster, of course, is a visual reference to Agent Mulder's astutely worded poster on *The X-Files* (1993-2002).

Part Six: To Watch the World Burn



Part Six explores the Joker/clown iconography, once again with the use of a *Snapchat* filter plus added voice filter. The Joker is referenced in the "watch the world burn" quote from the 2008 film *The Dark Knight.* The Rorschach ink blot symbolism is also employed as a reference to the Batman-esque character Rorschach in Moore and Gibbons' *Watchmen* (1986-1987; 2009) and *Batman Forever* (1995) in which Bruce Wayne (played by Val Kilmer) looks at a framed bat-shaped ink blot in a psychologist's office and asks: "Do you have a thing for bats?" The psychologist (played by Nicole Kidman) responds: "People see what they want to see. The question is: Do *you* have a thing for bats?" In this regard, the Rorschach test serves as a visual symbol of confirmation bias.

Part Seven: Take the Red Pill



Part Seven is an appropriation and mash-up of one of the instructional/educational animated Public Service Announcements – bordering on propaganda – included at the end of many 1980s and 1990s American animated television programs. Of these, the most famous are arguably the "knowing is half the battle" lessons related by the "good guys" in *G.I. Joe: A Real American Hero* (circa mid-1980s). I overdubbed the voices (with various sound filters applied). The footage is remixed with the iconic red pill/blue pill scene from *The Matrix* (1999).

Part Eight: Now You See It



Part Eight is the first of two "trick breaks," both of which employ the same stylistic design. Namely, a 1980s computer green-cursor, a retro screen saver, an electronic synthesizer soundscape, and a flat voice over. I fabricated the "grandpa" mask out of papier mâché. Although the visual references were inspired by cinema auteur David Lynch, the portrayal of "magic" on screen is evocative of 19th century cinema and special effects pioneer, magician turned film-maker, Georges Méliès. In contrast to the special effects of Méliès, the coin vanish in this video was accomplished through sleight-of-hand.

Part Nine: Democracy for Sale



Part Nine is styled on the iconography of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN); specifically, "Subcommandante Marcos." Marcos' 2002 book *Our Word is Our Weapon* speaks to the role of digital/Internet technologies in the, then, emerging wars of narratives and public opinion playing out through globally interconnected media. When the mask is removed, the iconic virtual cat face makes an appearance via a *Snap Camera* filter created as an homage to the Dell Webcam filter made famous in the aforementioned Texas lawyer incident. Merging reality with hyperreality, my (wife's) real cat, Bobba Fett also makes an appearance.

Part Ten: Truth to Power



Part Ten once again recalls the “Anonymous” aesthetics, this time with a neutral mask and hoodie, rather than the Guy Fawkes mask. The hoodie has cat ears for no particular reason other than to continue the cat imagery initially inspired by the aforementioned Texas lawyer incident, and by the popularity of cats on the Internet, in general (White; 2020). A mash-up of cinematic apocalypses and dystopias are projected onto my masked image while the monologue is added via voice over. This fictional footage is interspersed with news footage of the July 2020 riots in the US – as well as the removal of protesters by unidentified government agents in unmarked government vehicles – which occurred in the wake of George Floyd’s murder by a police officer nearly two months earlier (Greve; 2020).

Part Eleven: Mind Control



Part Eleven uses the same “Lynchian” design aesthetics as Part Eight. This is the second and final “trick break” in the digital edition. The card trick is a classic one, known as “The Princess Card Trick” and credited to magician Henry Hardin (circa 1903). This trick is also accomplished without the use of trick photography or editing. The juggling finale is not included in the digital edition, since there was no need to attempt to build and hold a physical crowd across a series of short videos within a digital environment.

Part Twelve: Fog of Distrust



Part Twelve employs a *Snapchat* virtual filter to add a hipster beard and backwards ball cap. My voice was deepened with a voice filter. I wore the hand painted t-shirt which accompanied the Crazy Conspiracy Dude painted track suit. The tattoos are my own. Together, these elements suggest potential risks and benefits of digital tools and filters which facilitate the manipulation of sound and image. The design aesthetics of this video are evocative of the popular but controversial American journalist and social media influencer Justin King, better known as Beau of the Fifth Column. The Fifth Column News project, led by King, is an interesting case study in semiotics. As the term "fifth column" suggests, King is well aware of historical references and the use of symbolism. The term "fifth column" – or, *quinta columna* – originated during the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s and refers to a cabal of insiders resisting a government from within. In this sense, the term is similar to the earliest uses of the term "deep state" – or, *derin devlet* – originating in Turkey in the 1990s. Despite the early legitimacy of these terms, their continued use is problematic due to their potential to be subjectively employed by anyone, and against anyone, without evidence.

For example, the term “Deep State” has been long wielded by President Trump against his political enemies both real and imagined; a claim which was supported on multiple occasions by Russian President Valdimir Putin. For example, in a 2019 state-of-the-nation address, Putin claimed that Trump had been ‘hobbled’ by ‘a secretive “deep state”’ (MacFarquhar; 2019) and at a 2023 political rally, Trump stated to the gathered crowd: ‘Either the deep state destroys America, or we destroy the deep state’ (Bowman and Kamisar; 2023). Putin also employed rhetoric about a ‘fifth column’ of Western sympathizers and ‘traitors’ as early as the mock elections of 2011; and more recently to describe Russians unsupportive of the illegal invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (Radnitz and Mylonas; 2022).

As Beau of the fifth column, Justin King is a fascinating political commentator. Despite his plain-speaking, patriotic, pro-gun demeanour and his “good ol’ boy” aesthetics – including baseball cap, t-shirt, “lumberjack” beard, and cluttered garage backdrop – he has a deep knowledge of history and politics and generally espouses far-Left political philosophy. He is also a convicted felon, a theoretical anarchist, and has been accused of making anti-Semitic statements in the past (Chabria and Halper; 2021). To the best of my knowledge, King appears to be a model example of a reformed felon who has learned from, and risen above, his prior shortcomings.

I suspect that among the almost one million subscribers to King’s *YouTube* channel, many are conservatives, Republicans, or in other ways identify with the political-Right. Of these, many may not even recognize King’s unique blend of patriotism and anarchy as a politically-Leftist position. The “horseshoe model” of American politics – used since WWI and popularized in the early 2000s – despite falsely suggesting that the political spectrum is symmetrical, astutely points to the fact that on many issues, the far-Left and far-Right may be nearer to each other than either are to the political centre (Taylor; 2006: 118). As the proverb goes: The enemy of my enemy is my friend.

The flawed, but intuitive, horseshoe model has become increasingly problematic since 2016, as the American political-Left and political-Right no longer mirror one another in any significant regard. The political tactics employed to delegitimize journalistic, scientific, and democratic institutions – as exemplified by Trump and Putin – are at the time of this writing, far more prevalent among the far-Right (which appears to be rapidly becoming the mainstream-Right) than among the political-Left. As Noah Berlatsky eloquently writes: ‘Everyone loves to hate the left. But hating the left isn’t a good way to fight right-wing extremism. On the contrary, the

conflation of alt-right Nazis with a supposed “alt-left” gives people like … Trump and … [Steve] Bannon rhetorical cover to slime their critics as the “real fascists” (2018).

Beau of the Fifth Column was at the centre of an unusual controversy in 2021, when Google, in partnership with Moonshot CVE, was revealed to be secretly redirecting potentially violent extremists conducting online searches for terms such as ‘join Oath Keepers’ or ‘bomb-making’ to King’s social media accounts (Chabria and Halper; 2021). This raised concerns for those on all sides of this issue, including King, who argued that he should have been informed if potentially violent people were being directed specifically toward him (ibid). On the other side of the issue, a Republican congressman bluntly – if unfairly – argued that Google ‘sent people who were already looking for violence to a convicted felon with anarchist and anti-Semitic views’ (ibid). Congressman Griffith, invoking the proverb of “the watchmen,” went on to assert that the issue ‘raises one of the key questions about moderating online platforms: Who is vetting the vetters?’ (ibid).

The specific case of Beau of the Fifth Column is, perhaps, beyond the scope of this dissertation. Nevertheless, Justin King – however authentic his own performances may (or may not) be – provides a fascinating case study in semiotics and détournement. By mirroring the aesthetics of the Right, his Leftist views are met with much less resistance than they might be if spoken by, for instance, a bespectacled academic in a tweed sport coat, or a so-called “social justice warrior” adorned in punk rock regalia. Whatever the specifics of King’s case may be, Beau of the Fifth Column – described by some as a “character” (Chabria and Halper; 2021) – suggests a fascinating possibility for a poetics of debunking: A sheep in wolf’s clothing.

Part Thirteen: We Live in a Society



Part Thirteen uses digital pixelation to blur my face, while my voice (for the first time) remains unaltered. The pixelation process (as well as other "deepfake" face replacement technologies) are often used to protect the identity of witnesses, whistleblowers, and political refugees; in addition, of course, to well-established harmful, propagandistic, and pornographic uses. Artistically, I described this contemplative style as the Ethan Hawke aesthetic, in reference to Hawke's performance of a camcorder wielding, soliloquy recording, heir of the Denmark Corporation in *Hamlet 2000* (2000). This footage was originally included without pixelation, along with the included Fakey Cat "Only YOU" poster, as part of an original anti-disinformation Public Service announcement ~~elaborated upon in the following pages~~.

Part Fourteen: Goodbye and Good Luck



Part Fourteen was filmed live at Trinity College Dublin under a passing DART commuter rail train. The style invokes the black suits and Ray-Ban sunglasses of the cinematic *Men in Black* franchise (beginning in 1997). Long before this alien-comedy franchise launched, "men in black" were integral to Area 51 conspiracy theories and mythology, and alternately rumoured to be federal agents or extra-terrestrials. In the latter regard, these tall, almost-featureless, dark suited figures have been tied to the digital folklore of the Slenderman (Chess and Newsom; 2015). The Ray-Ban sunglasses further evoke John Carpenter's *They Live* (1988) in which protagonists can see the "true reality" of reptilian overlords and subliminal hypnosis only when wearing special pairs of black sunglasses. In addition to sunglasses, I further altered my image with a 1940s-era inspired pencil mustache.

[**Fig. 5.27**: An original informational research poster concept based on a line extracted from 'The (Un)Conspiracy Manifesto (by Luther Blissett).']

Know the difference between belief, make-believe, and fake-believe!



WHAT DO YOU ~~I~~ WANT TO BELIEVE?

[**Fig. 5.25**: In an original meme created for an original public service announcement project, “Fakey Cat” pays homage to Smokey Bear, an anthropomorphic cartoon bear created by the US Forest Service in 1944. **Fig. 5.26**: Smokey Bear in a poster from 1965, atop his trademark slogan created by the American Wartime Advertising Council in 1947: “Only you can prevent forest fires.”]





As I concluded the analysis of this creative-practice, I determined – for aforementioned reasons – that it would be difficult to progress further on ethical footing. I did, however, take note of the apocalyptic undertones of conspiracy culture. Accordingly, Part II documents my theoretical and practical progress within an imaginary post-Apocalyptic landscape. To operate ethically within this notoriously violent imaginary space, I first surveyed the broad spectrum of popular apocalyptic concerns – including Biblical rapture, alien invasion, plague, nuclear, climate, and artificial intelligence – noting the historical evolution of these subjects in popular media, as well as in unfictional and educational contexts. While this assessment was a crucial step toward identifying pertinent theoretical and ethical concerns, given the broad scope of the analysis, ‘Mapping the Apocalyptic Imaginary’ is located in the Appendix. In the following chapter, I narrow this focus to usages of the “zombie apocalypse” scenario in unfictional and educational contexts, paying particular attention to questions of ethics and efficacy.

six: MAPPING POST-APOCALYPTIC UNFICTION AND NONFICTION

[**Fig. 6.1**]



We shape our **APOCALYPSES** and thereafter our **APOCALYPSES** shape us.

Marshall McLuhan and Scotty McQueen.
The Medium is the Apocalypse; 1967/2024

We shape our tools, and thereafter our tools shape us.[86]

Marshall McLuhan, et al.
The Medium is the Massage [sic]; 1967b. B side: 15:30.

[86] This quote was first written by John Culkin in 1967 (in an article about McLuhan) as a paraphrase of one of McLuhan's central arguments (53, 70). While McLuhan did not specifically write these words, the quote is spoken (twice) on the audiobook adaptation of *The Medium is the Massage* created by McLuhan, Fiore, and Agel (1967b). The concept itself is relatively derivative. For instance, Thoreau writes in *Walden,* in 1854, 'But lo! Men have become the tools of their tools' (41-42). In 1943, Winston Churchill stated in a public address: 'We shape our buildings and afterwards our buildings shape us' (*The New Yorker*; 'The Talk of the Town:' 17).

The Ethics of the Unfictional and Nonfictional Zombie Apocalypse

In the early years of the 21st century, zombies – transgressing borders, as ever – stormed the boundaries between representation and reality. Over the course of two decades, the zombie apocalypse became a popular topic in unfictional, nonfictional, and educational contexts. Accordingly, after surveying the broad spectrum of apocalyptic fiction, I chose to narrow my focus – or, zoom in – on the contemporary means (and modes) in which (and by which) the zombie apocalypse scenario has been leveraged as a *proleptic* pedagogical strategy; a way of changing the present on the basis of alternate projections of the future. At least since the publication of *The Zombie Survival Guide* by Max Brooks in 2003,[87] the zombie apocalypse scenario has proven particularly noteworthy in this regard. For example, according to the website of the Modern War Institute at West Point – after the chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff read and discussed this pseudo-survival handbook – Brooks was:

> …invited to speak at a variety of military engagements – from the Naval War College, to the FEMA hurricane drill at San Antonio, to the nuclear "Vibrant Response" wargame. By developing the dystopian mythos of a "zombie apocalypse" in film and literature, Brooks [drove] the dialogue … on how to manage and coordinate emergency responses and to suggest better ways to prepare for crisis and struggle (7 Apr 2016).

The above description is somewhat surprising since *The Zombie Survival Guide* exclusively and explicitly addresses the *fictional* zombie scenario and avoids leveraging zombies as a pretext for imparting practical real-world skills. In the Introduction, for instance, Brooks writes:

> Naturally, many other skills – wilderness survival, leadership, even basic first aid – will be necessary in any encounter with the living dead. These were not included in this work, as they can be found in conventional texts […] Subsequently, all subjects not directly related to the living dead have been omitted. From this book, you will learn to recognize your enemy, to choose the right weapons, about killing techniques, and about preparation and improvisation when on the defense, on the run, or on the attack (xiv).

Consequently, as informative as the *Zombie Survival Guide* might be within the imaginary circumstances of a zombie pandemic, its usefulness in everyday contexts is low. Thus, while Brooks' tactical-zombie-combat approach is provocative and interesting, my interest lies in precisely the opposite approach: How might the zombie apocalypse scenario be used as a

[87] Brooks subsequently authored the 2006 epistolary zombie apocalypse novel *World War Z* (adapted for the screen in 2016) and, it is perhaps relevant to note, is the son of acclaimed parodist and filmmaker Mel Brooks.

framework for productively exploring relevant social issues and imparting real-world survival and protection skills, knowledge, and strategies (in line with best-practices)?

Daniel Drezner's 2014 account of this topic, entitled 'the effect of the Zombie Apocalypse on public policy discourse,' is remarkably thorough. To summarize, Drezner points out the 'clear advantages in using the living dead as a pop culture hook for promoting political and policy ideas,' and observes that 'one of the strengths of the horror genre is that it allows people to talk about present-day problems without addressing them directly' (832). On the other hand, he cautions that 'the superficial homogeneity of the zombie canon also poses some drawbacks for its use going forward' (825-826), and thus concludes that 'the best solution to this conundrum lies in an embrace of more heterogeneous zombie narratives' (826). The homogeneity to which Drezner refers – in line with what Wöll described as 'apocalyptic soap-operas' (2020: 93) – is the 'implication … that if zombielike threats emerge, both the state and civil society will break down almost immediately' (835). Around the time Drezner called for more heterogeneous narratives, numerous such narratives emerged, including *Warm Bodies* (2013; based on the 2010 novel by Isaac Marion) and the aforementioned *Maggie* (2015).[88]

Drezner observes that 'zombies are unique in genre literature in emphasizing the breakdown of modern society in the wake of an external threat,' noting that many popular zombie narratives (e.g., *28 Days Later* or *The Walking Dead*) 'do not even bother to show how society breaks down. They simply flash forward to the end of the civilized world' (835). The drawback of this implication, Drezner argues, is that 'in propagating this narrative, constant references to the zombie canon can reinforce an apocalyptic perception about the future of modern society' (ibid). According to Drezner, 'as interest groups also appropriate and exploit the zombie narrative to pursue their own political agendas, their millenarian rhetoric helps to lay the groundwork for the societal breakdown that they claim to fear' (ibid). Drezner suggests that 'in game-theoretic terms… if citizens think that we're teetering on the brink of chaos, the apocalyptic mindset can, in and of itself, help bring about the very disaster it fears' (836).

In line with the potential benefits of zombie apocalypse narratives outlined by Drezner, Bryan Hall proposed – in the prospectus for *An Ethical Guidebook to the Zombie Apocalypse* – to build on '…what makes zombie horror […] intellectually engaging as well as what makes Ethics most

[88] George Romero also pursued compassionate lines of pro-zombie thought within his "Dead" series of films; most notably, *Day of the Dead* (1985) and *Land of the Dead* (2005).

accessible, viz. considering moral problems outside of the context within which they are normally presented' (circa 2018: 1). Hall argued that 'the lack of familiar context frees us of our prejudices and allows us to reconsider these problems anew,' and thus, zombie 'thought experiments' can 'compel us to examine moral problems without considering the morally irrelevant factors that perpetually get in the way of actually solving these problems' (ibid).

It is undeniably ironic that zombie apocalypse narratives have proven so efficient at delivering social commentary and cultural critique, given the colonialist and capitalist origins of the Hollywood-zombie. By this, I refer to the Western imagination's problematic appropriation of the catatonic z*onbi* or z*ombi* figure originating in Haitian folklore and purported Vodou practices (McNalley; 2011). This appropriation was made possible by way of a sensationalized and primitivist account by American travel writer William Seabrook in his 1929 travelogue *The Magic Island.* Recounting his adventures in Haiti during the American occupation, Seabrook describes – among other seemingly "magical" experiences – witnessing slaves in a near catatonic state at the Haitian-American Sugar Plantation. He writes:

> …[T]hree supposed *zombies,* who continued dumbly at work… there was something about them unnatural and strange. They were plodding like brutes, automatons… The eyes were the worst… They were in truth like the eyes of a dead man, not blind, not staring, unfocused, unseeing… The whole face, for that matter… seemed not only expressionless, but incapable of expression (101).

In consideration of the local rituals and folklore around the subject, Seabrook seriously entertained the explanation that the men were *zombi cadavre*: soulless corpses mechanically reanimated by way of drugs, hypnosis, and/or "sorcery." Suffice it to say, these "undead" slaves were surely nothing of the sort. Rather, these men were almost certainly "normal" slaves suffering from the effects of – as the poet Robert Burns put it in 1784 – 'man's inhumanity to man.' Thus, the monstrousness of the Western world's first "zombies" was not on the part of the zombies. On this, James Kennedy wrote in *The Wall Street Journal* in 2011:

> In Seabrook's story the entity profiting from the necromancy wasn't some witch doctor, but an American sugar company, whose cane fields were tilled by the undead. The critique of such companies' treatment of Haitian labor could hardly have been sharper. The original zombie wasn't a predator, but a brutalized laborer.

While Seabrook's account *can* be viewed as a condemnation of these conditions, his account is more commonly regarded as a sensationalist and naïve primitivist account that neglected to address the brutality underlying the local myths and folklore (McNalley; 2011). At any rate, it

was Seabrook's account that introduced the concept of the zombie cadaver to the American public and, in 1932, inspired both a Broadway play (*Zombie*) and the Victor Halperin horror film based on that play, starring Bela Lugosi (*White Zombie*).

Owing to these origins, the word "zombie" came to describe an entity under control of another; such as hijacked computers, fungus-possessed ants (Ophiocordyceps), or parasitic manipulation (toxoplasmosis). In this sense, Caligari's somnambulist (*Cabinet of Dr. Caligari;* 1920), the cursed Mummy (*The Mummy;* 1932), victims of body-snatchers (*Invasion of the Body Snatchers;* 1956), brainwashed prisoners-of-war (*The Manchurian Candidate;* 1962), and the networked NS-5 robots (*I, Robot;* 2004), are textbook cases of zombification. This definition can be extended to Lugosi's mesmerized plantation slaves (*White Zombie*; 1932), Karloff's re-animated Nazi-controlled corpse (*The Walking Dead*; 1936), the Soviet-nerve-toxin-controlled *Teenage Zombies* (1959), and the reanimated Martian-controlled corpses of *Plan 9 from Outer Space* (1957) and *Invisible Invaders* (1959). Yet, none of these "zombies" are zombies by the standards of contemporary popular culture. Ultimately, the arbitrary fact that today's zombies happen to be called "zombies" and not "ghouls," "flesh-eaters," or something else, has introduced numerous metaphorical and theoretical complications.

It is ultimately, I argue, not control-by-foreign-agent that defines the modern pop-cultural zombie, but rather, the characteristics of the low-budget "ghouls" introduced in Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968): *corporeal, cannibalistic*, and *contagious.* The significance of *cannibalism* and *contagion* should be obvious. After all, these elements transformed Romero's monster flick into a terrorizing horror film. By *corporeal*, however, I do not mean the condition of being a corpse, but rather of possessing embodied cognition (however impaired). In other words, a zombie is *not* a ghost, robot, or demon. This distinction is significant, since many point to the ancient Mesopotamian poem *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (circa 2100-1200 BCE) as the first recorded representation of zombies, within the curse: 'I will raise up the dead, and they will devour the living, I will make the dead outnumber the living!'[89] Viewed within cultural and historical contexts, it is apparent that this curse threatens to raise up the dead as *ghosts* or *disembodied spirits* and the 'devouring' is metaphorical; the living will be collectively *haunted*, not literally eaten (Colavito; 2011).

[89] This curse is taken verbatim from an earlier Mesopotamian poem entitled *Nergal and Ereshkigal*.

The combined characteristics of corporeality, cannibalism, and contagion are central in *28 Days Later* (2002), and in the legion of on screen virus-zombies which followed, including (to name only a few): pastiche zombies (*Shaun of the Dead;* 2004), zombie body-snatchers (*Invasion;* 2007), Ionesco-inspired absurdist zombies (*Zombie Strippers*; 2008), Hasidic zombies (*Night of the Living Jews;* 2008), Nazi zombies (*Dead Snow;* 2009), meta-zombies (*Zombieland;* 2009), rom-com zombies (*Warm Bodies;* 2013), postmodern zombies (*Pride and Prejudice and Zombies;* 2016), zombie musicals (*Anna and the Apocalypse;* 2016), zombie kids' shows (*The Last Kids on Earth;* 2019), and Coronavirus zombies (*Corona Zombies;* 2020).

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic – during which infection, transmission, lockdowns, supply chain disruptions, and panic buying were topics du jour – It was not uncommon for the pandemic to be described and discussed in terms of a zombie apocalypse. While much of this discourse was clearly ironic, it remained plausible that a global "apocalypse" might be imminent. Fascinatingly, the differences between a deadly-virus apocalypse and a *zombie* apocalypse are primarily aesthetic. The mode of viral transmission is less "bite-y," but the end results are roughly the same: Millions will die, infrastructures will collapse, and everyone will pose a potential threat to everyone else. As the Omicron variant rapidly spread across the globe in 2021 – and conspiracy fantasies rapidly spread online – it was a time of great uncertainty.

Ethics and Efficacy of Alternate-Reality Apocalypticism

Beyond the vast scope of fictional and unfictional zombie apocalypse narratives, zombies have, in recent decades, been extensively theorized in academic and nonfictional literature. Much of this literature engages with zombies as *metaphors* for real-world groups and individuals, including *consumers* and *spreaders* of goods, entertainment, tourism, information, airborne particulates, and so on. Additionally, the 'philosophical zombie problem' became a popular thought experiment concerning the nature of consciousness for A.I. (Lam, B.; 2022) as well as humans (Chalmers, 1996; Dennett, 1995: 322). In this vein, critics noted the parallels between the mid-western American zombies of Jim Jarmusch's *The Dead Don't Die* (2019) and the real-life inhabitants of a mid-western American town in Frederick Wiseman's documentary *Monrovia, Indiana* (2018).

In the first decades of the 21st century, the scope of Zombie Studies research was as vast as it was interdisciplinary. In 2014, Drezner noted:

> By any observable metric, the living dead have become the hottest paranormal pop culture phenomenon of this century… By any metric of scholarly output, research on zombies has exploded (Bishop 2010; Christie and Lauro 2011; Drezner 2011; Phillips 2014)… [And] since the start of the 2008 financial crisis, the zombie has supplanted interest in all other paranormal phenomena (825).

Writing in 2020, Wöll likewise observed that 'the previous decade has seen an impressive number of scholars […] who examined the zombie phenomenon within diverse disciplinary contexts,' but also noted that 'for some, academic discourses surrounding the undead might thus appear intellectually exhausted…' (88). Wöll suggests that (emphasis added) 'a central challenge therefore becomes the question of how to *position oneself against* the impressive amount of work on the subject instead of merely trying to occupy a vacant spot in the ranks of a horde of 'zombie essays' (ibid). Wöll explains that 'from a methodological point of view,' his own work 'presents an attempt of treating previous scholarship as a subtext and epiphenomenon of the zombie phenomenon itself' (ibid).

Building on Wöll's useful arguments, I interrogated my own area of research and methodology as it pertained to the wider field of Zombie Studies. As vast as that field is, it bears noting that the topic of "zombies" has also been multiplied many times over in conjunction with the various meanings of the term (e.g., "slave," "monster," "host," "infected," hijacked") and the various metaphors which those meanings enable (e.g., "consumers," "brainwashed," "carriers," "spreaders," "tourists," "going viral"). Due to this multiplicity of meanings, it was necessary to situate *metaphorical-zombies* beyond the scope of my praxis, so as to better focus on "actual" zombies; by which, of course, I refer to zombies that are purely imaginary.

Yet – since it is well established that fictional zombies cannot be confined to a particular medium, genre, discipline, or set of conventions (Christie and Lauro; 2011) – it was not as simple to deal exclusively with "fictional" zombies as it might seem. Although zombies can be safely described as fictional, the potential for a zombie *apocalypse* is not universally perceived as imaginary. Consider, for instance, the Kansas Anti-Zombie Militia (KAZM) featured in a 2012 *Discovery Channel* dramatized documentary on preppers. In reference to an apparent relocation of a level four disease research facility to Kansas, the KAZM website speculated: 'A zombie virus can be very possible considering the facts… If anything were to leak out of this

facility, a widespread global disaster may be upon us. Disasters caused by man are usually irreversible. This move may possibly be the start of a zompoc' (*kansasazm.weebly.com*).

Such "reality" programs and dramatized "documentaries" raise the question of whether the participants involved actually hold the unusual beliefs they profess, are pretending to, or something in between. A further question is whether such distinctions matter? In an article entitled '"Zombies Are Real:" Fantasies, Conspiracies, and the Post-truth Wars,' Eric King Watts notes that the production company behind the *Discovery Channel* program (Firecracker Films) claims to occupy 'the cutting edge of modern factual television;' to 'tell compelling human stories more incredible than fiction;' and to explore 'the extremes of the human narrative' using 'genuine characters in compelling real-life situations, speaking in authentic voices' (2018: 460-461). The above approach to "factual" television raises further questions regarding distinctions between fiction, nonfiction, and unfiction; between reality and hyperreality; and between belief, make-believe, and fake-believe.

[**Fig. 6.2**: An original synthesis of found memes and artwork zombifies the fictional "Uncle Sam" (created by James Montgomery Flagg) whose image appeared on US Army recruiting posters beginning in 1917 atop the text: "I want YOU." **Fig. 6.3**: The character of Uncle Sam first appeared on the cover of *Leslie's Weekly Newspaper* in 1916 atop the caption: "What are YOU doing for preparedness?"]





Unfictional campaigns and ARGs take advantage of the paradoxical slippage that inevitably occurs in the consumption of fictional narratives. This ever-present slippage may be observed, not merely semiotically (between the sign and what it signifies), but also between the layers of constructed fictional representations which are consumed as *realistic*, even by those who are fully aware of the fictional nature of those narratives. Bowman writes, for example, that 'the supposedly fake can deconstruct and reconstruct reality,' observing that 'certain fictions have structured our notions of what is real… in the political realm' (2008: 10).[90] As such, imaginary characters, technologies, and logic, not only assert (and reassert) the ostensible "naturalness" of constructed behaviours, but also feed the popular imagination with theoretical possibilities and expectations for real life. As previously noted, the broad overlap and slippage between fictional, non-fictional, and unfictional apocalypticism in cultural representations and religious, educational, and edutainment contexts are considered in 'Mapping the Apocalyptic Imaginary;' located in the Appendix.

Although common, such slippage appears to be far from obvious to many consumers of popular fiction. ARG designer Jane McGonigal, for instance, asserts: 'Nobody wants to change how they live just because it's good for the world… but if you immerse them in an epic adventure – "Challenge yourself to see how you would survive!" – [then] games are a powerful platform for change' (2010b). One such forward-thinking ARG, *World Without Oil* (created by Ken Eklund in 2007) was given the tagline: "Play it – before you live it." Among that game's "puppet-masters" was McGonigal, who described the player experience as 'transformative,' reporting that players often 'kept up the habits they learned in [the] game' (ibid). Accordingly, McGonigal advocates playing, not only 'more games,' but also 'games that matter' (2010a).

The growing performative identification with the zombie apocalypse is reflected in the ARG *Humans Vs Zombies* (HvZ) created at Goucher College in 2005. HvZ soon became popular on college campuses worldwide, with durations of up to several weeks (*humansvszombies.org*). In 'The Zombie Media Monster and its Evolution as a Sign and Historical Allegory,' Ryan Lizardi provides a phenomenological account of a game of HvZ at Pennsylvania State University. He writes (in part):

> … I am no longer in control of my life, as they have been chasing me for weeks now. As the number of human beings has dwindled, their numbers inherently have

[90] As one pertinent example: The US Assassination Records Review Board cited Oliver Stone's 1991 film *JFK* as the impetus for the "President John F. Kennedy Assassination Records Collection Act of 1992" (1998: 1-2).

> grown. As I exit my classroom building, I think I catch a glimpse of one and step back inside quickly. If I was going to make it to my next building I needed to make a run for it. Bracing myself and taking a deep breath, I dive out onto the asphalt only to have my fears confirmed. I am being chased by a Zombie. They lay siege to the classroom building I run into, now it is only a matter of time until I am turned. With only eight humans left and over a hundred Zombies it is amazing I have lasted this long. When they turn me into a Zombie, suddenly the seven other humans who have helped me survive for so long immediately begin to look very appetizing. I am now the hunter (2009: 1).

In *Better Off Dead,* Christie and Lauro chart the zombie's 'transgression from the screen to the street,' describing 'large-scale games of zombie tag, of zombie proms, of zombie warnings posted on road signs by cheeky hackers' as well as 'the proliferation of real-life zombie survival groups' (2011: 1-3). Lauro subsequently argued that 'the zombie has now seemed to transgress this last border, and, through a strange process of narrative collaboration, stepped into the real world' and become 'an extratextual monster communally constituted' (208-209). Describing zombie gatherings as 'the latest incarnation of the zombie narrative's evolution,' as well as 'an interesting display of communal narrative making,' Lauro argues that such events 'emphasize the zombie as uncanny by inserting this mythic figure into the quotidian and dramatizing its colonization of public space in the real world' (ibid). Lauro also points to the 'amorphous' nature of zombie events, noting that these events have not 'embraced one set identity; it is indeterminable whether they are art, anarchy, play, or protest. Thus, the zombie event remains, like the zombie identity, ever decentered and fluctuating' (226-227).

Just as zombie mobs 'played at: community, action, (r)evolution' (230) in non-committal ways, zombie apocalypse scenarios allow people to *play* with ideas of disaster preparedness. In *American Zombie Gothic: The Rise and Fall (and Rise) of the Walking Dead in Popular Culture*, Kyle William Bishop, for example describes a 9/11 survivor who claimed to have 'been emotionally prepared for the tragedy, not by his family, community, or government, but by the zombie movies of which he had been a long-time appreciator' (2010: 36). Dahlia Schweitzer, however, in her strikingly prescient 2018 book *Going Viral: Zombies, Viruses, and the End of the World,* takes issue with such comparisons, arguing that imagining 9/11 as a zombie movie 'demonstrates [a] hyperbolic response to danger and disaster' (9). According to Schweitzer, 'While some theorists argue that watching a film of something awful decreases one's sensitivity, these narratives serve to *increase* our awareness of infectious disease and our vulnerability to it' (201). 'Fear,' she concludes, 'is no longer merely a response but a cultural

state of being' (ibid). Drezner likewise argues that 'zombies are the perfect avatar for the twenty-first century threat environment' and 'resonate [with] twenty-first century concerns [about] non-traditional threats [which] do not primarily emanate from nation-states,' including cyberattacks, terrorism, illegal immigration, climate change, and pandemics (828-829).

Elaborating on the bold claim of *The Discovery Channel* "documentary" on Zombie Apocalypse preppers that: 'Zombies are real… They're just not what you think they are,' Eric King Watts argues that 'zombies are *real* in the sense that zombie *relations and identifications* get actualized by the discourses and material practices of post-truth' (2018: 466). He continues:

> Post-truth is fed by uncertainty and fills that gap with excess – with conspiracies and post-racial fantasies of militarized retribution against any other tribe… Because post-truth behaves as a kind of anti-grammar of common sense – the sense that a civil society cultivates in common – in favor of tribal conviction, like the bio-tropes of race from which it draws, it slides from fringe to foundation, from the nightmares of "crack pots" to the basic deliberations requisite of democratic bodies (ibid).

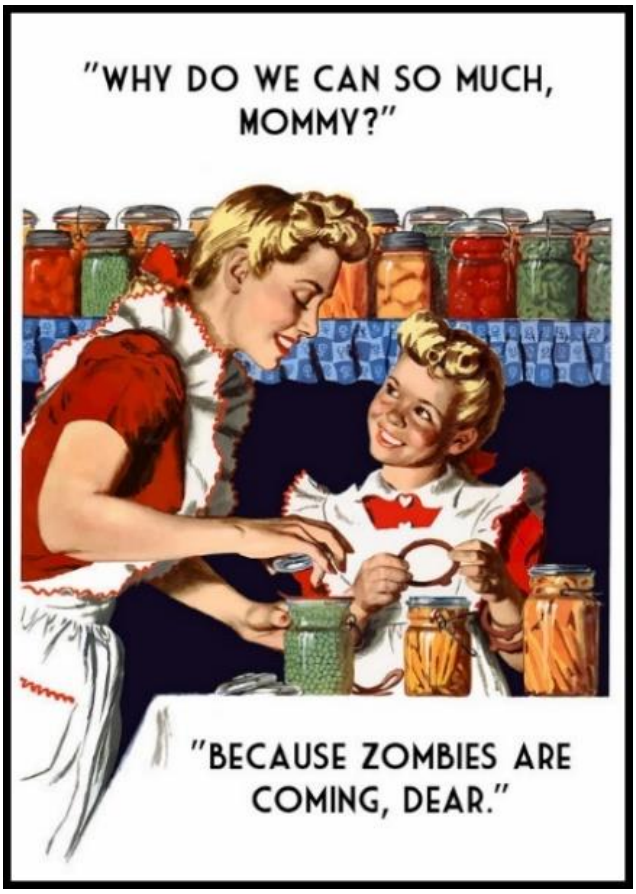
Beyond these *post*-truth aspects, Der Derian and Gara point to a deeper *truth* at the heart of, not only zombie apocalypse scenarios, but all pandemics. They write:

> If we continue to degrade the ecosystem, heat up the planet, impinge on the wild habitus, impugn scientific knowledge, weaponize language, neglect failing infrastructure, ignore growing inequality and place our trust in leaders who have not earned it, we might well be writing the script for the final global event; in which case, the zombies are us (2020).

Thus, whether stockpiling canned goods against the possibility of nuclear Armageddon (as many once did); or against a global currency collapse initiated by super-intelligent computer networks (as few yet do); or against potential supply chain disruptions triggered by global events (as more people should); apocalypse survivalism is a strategic activity. Whether zombies metaphorically represent decentralized threats, or are simply regarded as threats in and of themselves, the zombie *apocalypse* is an example of what Luft and Ingham described as an 'unknown unknown' (1955). Preparing for unknown futures may (or may not) help people cope with those futures when (or if) they arrive, but such preparations can clearly help people cope with a present in which the future is profoundly uncertain. As Athena Aktipis, of the Zombie Apocalypse Medical Alliance, bluntly puts it, 'the "All Hazards" approach to preparation [is] more fun to think of […] as prepping for the zombie apocalypse' (2020). Such lines of thought

were integral to my creative-practice project, 'The Art of the Apocalypse: From A.I. to Zombie' webseries, discussed and critically reflected upon in Chapter Seven.

[**Fig. 6.4:** A meme/cartoon straightforwardly juxtaposes 1950s domestic modernity with a decidedly postmodern caption. More deeply, the reader is left to wonder to what extent the mother "believes" in the zombie threat, and to what extent she may be "using" the zombie threat as a manipulative, quasi-religious, or pedagogical tool. **Fig. 6.5:** A meme posted on the *Facebook* page of (and seemingly created by) the Utah State University Extension at the height of the COVID-19 panic in March 2020.]





The overtly fictional origin of the zombie apocalypse scenario makes it clear that mechanisms are at play which extend beyond mis/disinformation. It is for this reason, perhaps, that the zombie apocalypse scenario has been used extensively as a tool for teaching and learning. An early example of this approach was CONOP 8888 – created by the US Department of Defense Strategic Command in 2011 and declassified in 2014 – which details a strategy for 'Counter Zombie Dominance.' The plan's disclaimer begins with the words: 'This plan was not actually designed as a joke.' The disclaimer proceeds to explain that 'the hyperbole involved in writing a "zombie survival plan" actually provided a very useful and effective training tool' and 'non-

traditional training approach' that can 'not only be instructive,' but also 'take a very dry, monotonous topic and turn it into something rather enjoyable.' For these reasons, according to the disclaimer, it was decided 'to place this training tool "in the wild" so that others who were interested in finding new and innovative ways to train planners could have an alternative and admittedly unconventional tool at their disposal.'

The disclaimer of CONOP 8888 further acknowledged the 'political fallout that [would occur] if the general public mistakenly believes that a fictional training scenario is actually a real plan.' Thus, the authors note, rather than creating a hypothetical 'Tunisia' or 'Nigeria' scenario, they created a hypothetical zombie apocalypse scenario based on the *entirely false assumption* that a zombie apocalypse scenario was a 'completely-impossible scenario that could never be mistaken as a real plan.' The following year, the Kansas Anti-Zombie Militia was featured on *The Discovery Channel* 'Zombie Apocalypse' program on preppers.

2011 also saw the release of the *Preparedness 101: Zombie Apocalypse* campaign, a blog post and two-part downloadable 'Guide to Surviving the Zombie Apocalypse' comic book – created by the US Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) – intended to promote all-hazards disaster preparedness by way of a fictional zombie apocalypse scenario. The comic book concludes with the following afterward:

> We hope you enjoyed reading this fictional story. It's meant to be both educational and entertaining. Now that you've seen the importance of being prepared, take the time to put together an emergency kit with the items included in the check list on the following page. You'll be ready for any kind of disaster, even zombies.

It was widely reported that the CDC blogpost and downloadable comic book attracted so much web traffic that the website quickly crashed (Kruvand and Bryant; 2015: 656). It is safe to assume that not everyone visiting the site perceived the ironic absurdity intended by the CDC, and Schweitzer correctly points out the 'irony' of a CDC campaign that 'impl[ied] that a total apocalypse is something for which to prepare' (2018: 197). Today, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the comic book has been removed from the CDC website, and several details of the fictional narrative can be seen as plainly misleading.

For instance, *within about one week*(!) of the onset of the zombie pandemic, it was determined (by the CDC) that the zombie virus was a mutated strain of influenza named Z5N1; a vaccine was engineered (by the CDC) to target the "novel virus;" and the vaccines were distributed

from “the National stockpile” to distribution centres. In the final pages, a horde of zombies storms a distribution centre, at which point it is revealed that the zombie pandemic was merely a nightmare of the protagonist during a thunder storm. While the “all just a dream” trope justifies all manner of plot holes, the lack of intellectual honesty with regard to the challenges and lengthy timelines for producing, testing, and distributing effective vaccines is palpable.

In the wake of the CDC’s zombie apocalypse survival guide, a number of zombie apocalypse-themed “edutainment” products emerged. In 2012, the British game studio Six to Start (founded by ARG designer Adrian Hon) released the mobile fitness app *Zombies, Run!*, a virtual reality jogging program combining customizable playlists with various length “missions.” *Zombies, Run!* was crowdfunded in an unusually successful Kickstarter campaign and was Apple’s highest grossing Health/Fitness app within two weeks of being released (Chatfield; 2012). Like the CDC campaign, *Zombies, Run!* leveraged the zombie apocalypse, not as an end in itself, *but as a means to an end* (i.e., to gamify fitness/exercise).

By 2012, it was apparent that zombie apocalypse survivalism had the potential to leverage popular culture and gamification in order to function as an imaginary, but nevertheless effective, framework for self-improvement and self-protection (via disaster preparedness, physical fitness, and physical self-protection). Regarding the latter, in 2014, Cole and Owens self-published *The Zombie* Safety and Self-Defense Handbook*. The asterisk in the title indicates that the book ‘also works on stalkers, vampires, werewolves, and frat boys high on Jello shots and an overinflated sense of entitlement!’ In other words, the book overtly employs zombies as a *pretext* for discussing less popular topics, including stalkers, sexual assault, and domestic violence. Written by Kevin Cole (a karate practitioner with a PhD in Creative Writing) and Vernon Owens (a Certified Emergency Manager and Karate instructor) the educational content and framing of the book are innovative; despite low production value.

On disaster preparedness, the US Girl Scouts alternate-reality *Zombie Survival Challenge* was created in 2016 (*girlscoutsww.org*). The campaign was created by the Girl Scouts of Western Washington in response to the startling findings of a Pacific Northwest emergency response stress test called “Cascadia Rising 2016.” According to the Introduction of the original *Great Cascadia Zombie Survival Challenge* guidebook, ‘the biggest reveal’ of the Cascadia Rising Drill, ‘along with lessons learned from Hurricanes Katrina, Harvey, Irma, and Maria as well as the major earthquake in Mexico City,’ was that ‘individuals need to be prepared to be on their own

much longer than what had been the conventional wisdom of three days,' and that 'citizens need to not only be individually prepared but be prepared to help their neighbors' (1). The Introduction concludes: 'The reality is this: First Responders are not coming! In … disasters, the vast number of folks providing aide were neighbors helping neighbors' (ibid).

This regional program soon spread to Girl Scouts programs worldwide, later expanding to include COVID editions (2020). The program was originally promoted as 'a fun patch program with a purpose,' and the motto of the program was 'be prepared, not scared' (front cover). The pedagogical framework of the campaign – which addressed the topics of water, light/heat, first aid, pets, cooking, food, shelter, communications, and mutual aid – was made explicit in the handbook's Introduction, which stated (in part):

> Emergency Preparedness is often approached from a place of fear. Let's face it, the subject can be daunting and scary. Girl Scouts of Western Washington wants to make this subject fun for girls and volunteers. It is the intent of this patch program to take the fear away and replace it with empowered Girl Scouts! Through this patch program, it is our hope to encourage Girl Scouts to engage in building resilience at the neighborhood level (1).

A final notable example of zombie apocalypse-themed educational entertainment is *Shabam!* (2019), a ten-part podcast exploring the science behind a fictional group of children's meta-quest to survive a hypothetical zombie apocalypse. Sponsored by Google and the Rodenberry Foundation, *Shabam!* describes itself as 'a new type of science show that blends fictional stories with real science' and exists as part of a non-profit organization created by Josh Kurz, Wendy Roderweiss, and emergency medicine expert Mel Herbert who, according to his bio, believes in the 'blending of hard hitting clinical medical education with classy poop jokes' (*ShabamShow.com*). Indeed, each episode provides information from neuroscience and epidemiology to survival and navigation, along with an array of faecal humour. While certainly appropriate for children, the humour and educational content is relatively sophisticated.

In a connection worth noting, *Shabam!* came to my attention in 2021, when Kurz and Roderweiss were interviewed by Aktipis and Lundberg-Kenrick on the educational podcast, *Zombified* ('Shabamified: Josh Kurz & Wendy Roderweiss'). Produced by Arizona State University where (at time of writing) Aktipis is Chair of the Zombie Apocalypse Medical Alliance (ZAMA), *Zombified* is promoted as 'your source for fresh brains.' The *Zombified* podcast takes a broad metaphorical approach to zombies, exploring:

> [H]ow we are vulnerable to being hijacked by things that are not us. From microbes hijacking behavior, to humans influencing each other, to our brains being taken over by social media, we talk about why zombification happens, why we are susceptible to it, and what we can do about it (*zombified.org*).

Thus, while *Zombified* is often literally about "zombies" and the "zombie apocalypse" scenario, it is frequently not about zombies at all. Numerous other episodes – including 'Duct Tape Before Guns: Emily Zarka' (30 Jul 2019), 'The Infopocalypse: Kristy Roschke' (7 Apr 2021), and 'Screen Time: Ilana Rein' (29 May 2020) – were useful sources of information and best practices around numerous themes of my praxis.

> [**Fig. 6.6**: A characteristic example of the 'My Zombie Apocalypse Team' template featuring pop-culture icons including Chuck Norris, Bruce Lee, and *MythBusters* (2003-2016) co-host Jamie Hyneman.]



Ethical and Moral Risks of Killing the Undead

Obviously, the concept of killing the undead is a morally loaded one. On this, Bryan Hall's *An Ethical Guidebook to the Zombie Apocalypse* poses a provocative question: 'Are all zombies equal?' (2020: Ch. 7). In addressing this question – which alludes to Peter Singer's 1989 essay 'All Animals are Equal' – Hall applies several philosophical positions to various zombie apocalypse scenarios, pointing out in the prospectus for the book, that this thought experiment does not presume that 'there is only one type of zombie,' and, thus, 'each type of zombie should be morally considered depending upon the feature(s) one takes to be morally relevant' (circa 2018: 9). Hall elaborates:

> While living though infected zombies (e.g., the virally infected fast zombies) are sentient, there is good reason to believe that undead zombies (e.g., moaning shambolic zombies) are non-sentient (even if they possess other sensory abilities). There is also the issue of potentiality, i.e., do potential undead (e.g., the infected but unturned) or potential persons (e.g., the cognitively developing zombies in Romero's *Land of the Dead*) have a different moral status than other persons? (ibid).

Hall further notes that 'from a pedagogical perspective, this chapter allows one to talk about the moral considerations relevant to abortion and animal rights without having to mention these issues by name' (ibid). Hall's hypothetical ethical examination of the "zombie problem" (so to speak) is largely effective, but an important question remained unasked: What are the ethical ramifications of pretending that zombies are real – or that zombies even *could* be real – in nonfictional contexts? While the creators of the educational frameworks referenced thus far have uniformly highlighted the benefits of alternate-reality pedagogical strategies, the problematic ethical considerations have rarely been flagged. Consider (again) the disturbingly certain response of the Kansas Anti Zombie Militia prepper featured on the *Discovery Channel* program when asked the loaded question: "What if your husband or children were bitten by a zombie?" Her response: 'If you've got a bite, I will shoot you in the face,' prompted Eric King Watts to respond with some additional *what if* questions. He writes:

> What if repeated and perhaps addictive exposure to the discourses of post-truth and their rituals of militarization and fantasies of sovereignty induce us to treat one another "as if" we are zombies? What if intense exposure to this mode of post-truth manufacturing feelings of threat and danger results in types of perception and interpretation that eerily resemble the kind of brain damage that Schlozman imagines zombies to suffer? (2018: 465).

By contrast, in a 2016 article entitled '"Scavenge, Slay, Survive," Lars Schmeink celebrates the unique approach of *DayZ*, a zombie apocalypse fan modification (mod) of the military-themed first-person-shooter (FPS) video game ARMA II (Bohemia Interactive; 2009). In *DayZ*, the player has no mission beside the obvious one: Survive for as long as possible. Despite the encouraging collaboration and horrific betrayals Schmeink encountered during game play – which, citing Mike Pottenger's allusion to Rousseau's state of nature, is 'nasty, brutish, and very, very short' (Schmeink; 2016: 80) – he argues that *DayZ* is 'is an engaging representation of the zombie apocalypse, more so than any cinematic or literary forms, specifically because of its status as digital medium and interactive simulation' (83). Schmeink summarizes his argument, thusly:

> *DayZ* is noteworthy insofar as it rejects a moral baseline inherent in the diegesis; it denies players a pre-scripted narrative, instead relying on open-world mechanics that allow player interaction with little algorithmic limitation. In combination with the persistent game mechanics and the simulated hostile environment, the game becomes a lived experience of the sf [science fiction] trope of postapocalypse that is unlike any provided in film or literature (84).

While Schmeink convincingly asserts the uniqueness of *DayZ*, it remains to be determined whether this uniquely interactive virtual zombie apocalypse is an ultimately helpful or harmful force in terms of ethics and education. Citing Pawel Frelik – who describes science fiction-based video games as a 'performative simulation that conveys a sense of malleability of the future' (Frelik; 2014: 229) – as well as Jeffery Cohen – who argues that zombies make visible an alternative future 'in which we recognize the suffering, the possibilities, the potency and the dignity of our fellow humans and our fellow nonhumans alike' (Cohen; 2012: 410) – Schmeink concludes that *DayZ* conveys 'the "what if" of a postapocalyptic world' (2016: 79).

Is Schmeink's argument, then, that the more familiar people become with the post-apocalyptic imaginary, the more they may seek to avoid it? Or, is it that by engaging with an imaginary post-apocalyptic landscape, players might develop more compassion for human (and other forms of) life? Or, might it also be the case that the *virtual* pain, suffering, cruelty, and repeated deaths inflicted during game play might fail to resonate with the realities of daily existence? Or worse, that such game play, however *virtually* brutal it may be, might create a false impression that an apocalypse can be *fun?* In other words, might it be that *DayZ* has no productive social value beside for the temporary entertainment it provides? In addition to such ethical issues, a question remains with regard to the effectiveness, or lack thereof, of zombie apocalypse themed educational content.

In 2010, Johnson, Buhler, and Hillman wrote an article entitled 'The Library is Undead: Information Seeking During the Zombie Apocalypse.' This article describes an ARG conducted at the University of Florida Library in the form of 'a library mission that allowed zombie-hunting students to apply 21st century learning skills such as communication; collaboration; critical thinking; problem solving; creativity; innovation; and information, media, and technology literacy' (30). The authors argue that 'academic libraries should be aware of trends in popular culture that appeal to students and design programs that engage them in participatory experiences' (29). Citing Jenkins (2006), they further argue:

> ARG's provide simulation experiences through which students can apply these skills in a direct, engaging way [and gaming] is recognized as a pertinent way to teach new media literacies including play, performance, simulation, appropriation, multitasking, distributed cognition, collective intelligence, transmedia navigation, networking, and negotiation (ibid).

The authors conclude that 'embedding the library within the existing construct of an alternate reality game proved to be an effective way to engage students and teach library skills [and] …promote 21st century learning skills' (36). Although several technical limitations, constraints, and opportunities for improvement were flagged, no ethical flags are raised by the authors, despite the use of terms like 'zombie-hunting' and 'Humans vs. Zombies' (29).

In 2011, the CDC premiered the aforementioned 'Preparedness 101: Zombie Apocalypse' campaign. Regarding potentially counter-productive or unethical aspects of zombie apocalypse narratives – including the emphasis on complete societal breakdown, violent ideation, and weapon fetishization – a cursory scan of the nearly 1,400 comments below the initial CDC blogpost [no longer available] are highly revealing. For instance, in the very first comment posted on the blog page, "Donovan Young" wrote:

> I might suggest adding a baseball bat, preferably aluminum, to your emergency kit as well. It doesn't require ammunition and can be highly effective at clearing a path through hordes of zombies whilst trying to make good your escape.

Several comments later, "nonnarB" wrote:

> How could you forget a firearm from an emergency kit?

Several comments after that, "JC" wrote:

> Forgot the guns. Major caliber for preference, but a few thousand rounds through a .22 should stop a f for all your semi-auto clean-up problems!air sized horde. Don't forget spare clips (for bolt action rifles or M1Garands and Magazines. [sic]

Other comments expressed disgust at the CDC's 'pandering' and the 'stupid waste of taxpayer money,' while others praised the approach as 'genius.' In addition to hundreds of comments ranging from playful to paranoid, and from rational to irrational – including at least one political-correctness-minded comment from the perspective of a zombie – I call attention to the comment of "James," who ignored the imaginary scenario in order to create a "teachable moment" for the CDC. He wrote:

> Dear CDC, If the popularity of this cute little article is enough to overload your servers, then what will happen when a real emergency occurs and ppl cannot access your website for information. It looks like you are under prepared yourself. Please fix that as soon as possible.

The initial burst of discussion on weaponry is, for better and worse, the logical conclusion to the fictional comparison initiated by the CDC. Surely, such lines of thought detract from – if not entirely undermine – the intended message. The immediate impulse toward hypothetical violence demonstrated by many commenters confirms the assertion of Thomas Delapa who, in a review of *Going Viral,* argues that Schweitzer was:

> …dead-on in arguing that these brutally postmodern (arguably posthuman) programs distill a reactionary urge to return to a primitive us-versus-them, trigger-happy code of the West, liberating the programs' tribalized survivalist heroes from a deadening social order and the so-called governmental nanny state. These everyman macho heroes are thus allowed to kill and butcher their faceless foes with impunity and even glee (2020: 107).

Jennifer Rutherford, in *Zombies,* likewise calls attention to the 'transformation of zombie from a fictional genre into zombie as a social form,' pointing to 'zombie websites' which 'offer venues where zombie fans can gather to play at murdering zombies with the maximum semblance of reality,' including 'real-live-fire anti-zombie training involving point-blank shooting of bleeding zombie targets,' as well as 'zombie-themed ammunition,' and advice on 'how to convert weaponry such as shotguns for maximum zombie decapitation potential' (2013: 26, 47).

Yet, while Delapa, Schweitzer, and Rutherford all correctly foreground its senseless violence, the zombie apocalypse scenario is also associated with progressive programs such as Cornell University's 'Surviving the Zombie Apocalypse: Outdoor Adventure Weekend' which offered workshops 'related to developing outdoor adventure skills which would come in handy when the zombies caused destruction' (Cornell University; 2018). Cornell University's Cooperative

Extension program – in programs reminiscent of the American practice of cultivating "Victory Gardens" during WWII – claims to help 'individuals and households in being much more self-reliant, with education efforts to teach people canning, pickling, and other methods of food preservation' in order to manage risk and provide 'greater feelings of efficacy in a time where so much seems out of our control' (Aktipis; 2020).

[**Fig. 6.7**: An original meme featuring eight of the identities explored within the Digital Edition of 'The (Un)Conspiracy Manifesto by Luther Blissett.']



A 2015 study by Fraustino and Ma, entitled 'CDC's Use of Social Media and Humor in a Risk Campaign: "Preparedness 101: Zombie Apocalypse,"' examined 'benefits and pitfalls of using social media and humorous messaging for risk communication' (222). Specifically, the study 'highlights the tension between awareness- and behavioral-based campaign successes, particularly when communicating using social media and pop-culture-referencing humor' (ibid). The randomized study found that 'participants who received a humorous (i.e., zombie) risk message reported significantly weaker intentions to take protective actions in comparison to those who received a traditional, non-humorous risk message' (ibid).

These findings are compounded by an analysis conducted by Kruvand and Bryant (also in 2015) of the CDC campaign's effectiveness entitled: 'Zombie Apocalypse: Can the Undead Teach the Living How to Survive an Emergency?' This study investigates whether or not the CDC campaign was effective at achieving 'the agency's goals of educating young people about emergency preparedness and prompting them to get ready by developing an emergency kit and plan' (2015: 655). Kruvand and Bryant note that:

> The server hosting the blog crashed nine minutes after the first tweet was sent, which was also the day the first news stories appeared. The blog post, social media outreach, and media coverage had a snowball effect lasting more than a year. The post received more than 4.8 million views, compared with 1,000-3,000 views for other posts on the same blog (656).

The findings of Kruvand and Bryant revealed that 'while participants who viewed the humorous zombie material clearly enjoyed it, their positive affect did not lead to greater retention of preparedness information or greater expressed intent to prepare, compared with participants exposed to the factual treatment' (655). Acknowledging the trade-offs between 'drawing attention,' 'reduce[d] counterarguing,' and 'trivialization,' the authors report that their findings 'support previous studies concluding that it is challenging to design public service messages that evoke positive affect as well as intended changes in intentions or behaviors' (662). Kruvand and Bryant thus conclude that the CDC Zombie Apocalypse campaign 'lacked the capability to fully achieve the agency's goals of educating people about preparedness and prompting them to get ready' (ibid).

Despite the thoroughness of their research, this conclusion seems incomplete. My own interpretation of the authors' data is that this campaign was a remarkably effective trade-off that sacrificed a small percentage of effectiveness for an exponential increase in reach. That the "zombie approach" was marginally less effective than the "factual approach" at promoting fact-retention or influencing behaviour, pales in comparison to the dramatic increase in the reach and delivery of that content. I do agree, however, with the final statement of Kruvand and Bryant, that 'rather than discounting the use of humor in campaigns on serious topics such as preparedness, public health officials may want to test other combinations of approaches, including a well-defined demarcation between humor and seriousness' (663).

In 2016, Evans and Mayo wrote an article entitled: 'Zombie Apocalypse: Using the Unreal as a Pedagogical Tool.' The use of the term "unreal" in the title – as opposed to "fictional" – is

indicative of the authors' insight into this topic. The article revolves around a college professor's use of "unreal" scenarios – such as the zombie apocalypse and the ancient astronaut theory (i.e., space aliens built the pyramids, etc.) – in order to 'counterbalance the responses from an … aggressive student with considerably more life experience and ingrained views' than other students in the class' (50). According to Evans and Mayo, 'since nobody really had firsthand experience with space aliens, the students felt freer to speak up and less likely to put down somebody else's comments with this topic than they did with real world topics' (ibid). The authors assert that this approach demonstrated 'how logical fallacies can be used as persuasive tools [and] even included … occasional moments of shared laughter' (ibid).

Although ethical questions were raised within the context of those hypothetical scenarios – e.g., 'What if there was a way to rehabilitate a zombie… or render a zombie harmless?' and 'Do rehabilitated zombies have some inherent value as a (non)living being that should be respected?' (52) – no ethical concerns were raised around the use of an intensely violent, quasi-genocidal, apocalyptic 'unreal' thought experiment as a pedagogical framework. The authors point out, however, that 'this method is not intended to avoid difficult conversations but can be used to set the precedent of an environment free from judgement that encourages outside-the-box thinking and lively (and friendly) debate' (53).

In 2017, the issues of ethics, violence, and weapons culture were raised more directly, in an article tellingly entitled 'Concerns with Entertainment-Education: Zombie Pandemic Preparedness and the Unanticipated Promotion of a Weapons Culture.' This article, by Houghton, et al., examines numerous studies conducted between 2014-2016 which examined both the effectiveness and/or counter-productiveness of Entertainment-Education (EE) centred on the zombie apocalypse. Citing the ability of EE to increase 'knowledge about an educational issue, create favorable attitudes, shift social norms, and change overt behavior' (Singhal, et al; 2008: 5), the authors observe that despite benefits such as commercial appeal and cost effectiveness, 'some researchers … noted unanticipated consequences' (1).

It was with these issues in mind that Houghton, et al., set out to test a potentially problematic aspect of Entertainment-Education zombie apocalypse campaigns. Namely, the inadvertent promotion of weapons culture. This concern emerged from an educational event conducted by the authors which leveraged the zombie apocalypse scenario to teach emergency preparedness. According to the authors, despite the fact that 'no posters or video clips […]

involved firearms or weapons,' there was nevertheless an emergence of 'an unexpected and rather intense focus on armament in the emergency preparedness lists developed by participants' (522). The authors report that this result was troublesome considering the 'substantial burden of gun and knife mortality and morbidity globally, particularly among males in the 15 to 24-year age group (CDC, 2012; WHO, 2016)' (ibid).

To explore this concern more deeply, Houghton, et al., created a randomized study in which participants (approximately 10 years old) were assigned to either a natural disaster scenario or to a zombie apocalypse scenario. Despite the fact that no weapons were portrayed at any point during either of the scenarios, 75% of the participants in the zombie scenario included firearms in their hypothetical emergency kit versus less than 5% of the natural disaster scenario participants. Surprisingly, although males in the zombie scenario were 10 times more likely to include firearms, *females in this scenario were over 30 times more likely to do so*.

Thus, Houghton, et al., conclude that 'closely linking this attempt at preparedness education with an established pop culture genre resulted in distinct and unanticipated connotations among many participants resulting from preconceived ideas' and therefore 'interventions using entertainment-education need to explore all aspects of the messages implicit in their chosen medium, rather than just focusing on one element' (522). The authors suggest that 'future research is required to explore if this apparent focus on firearms evoked by the zombie theme is evident across different age groups' (ibid). For adolescents and pre-adolescents, however, they conclude that the focus on the zombie apocalypse 'should be avoided' (ibid). Significantly, these findings cast light on the seemingly innocuous US Girl Scouts *Zombie Survival Challenge*, and I guided the content of 'The Art of the Apocalypse: From A.I. to Zombie' accordingly, advocating for, and proactively adopting, a critical stance toward firearms.

Ethics, Media, and the Zombie Apocalypse

Despite the continual presence of zombies *in* various forms of media, the role *of* media in fictional zombie apocalypse narratives is rarely examined in any depth. One prominent exception is a 2015 article by Diem-My T. Bui entitled 'Communications in a Zombie Apocalypse: Usage, Control and Collapse of Mass Media,' from an edited collection revealingly entitled *...But If a Zombie Apocalypse Did Occur: Essays on Medical, Military, Governmental, Ethical, Economic and Other Implications* (2015). Although the framing of extreme weather

disasters as (hyper)mediated events has been explored in some depth – e.g., in the edited collection *Extreme Weather and Global Media* (Leyda and Negra; 2015) – the particular circumstances entailed in a (fictional) zombie apocalypse raise unique issues and additional questions. Given the digitally mediated parameters of my research, I opted to closely examine Bui's arguments so as to better reflect upon the opportunities and threats which various forms of media hypothetically present within the imaginary circumstances of a zombie apocalypse. Additionally, I consider how those opportunities and threats might cast light upon the hypothetical role of media within more probable or factually grounded natural disasters, wars, pandemics, or apocalyptic/dystopic outcomes.

To begin with, Bui astutely points out that 'many zombie texts, television shows, and movies speculate on the role mass media plays leading up to and during a zombie apocalypse,' noting that in many zombie apocalypse narratives, 'mass media is more than just a bystander, but the key to survival in or acceleration of a modern zombie apocalypse' (88). Bui points to Hurricane Katrina 'as a recent example of a communications breakdown during a real life disaster' (91) but notes that 'the trend towards consolidation of media ownership' and the increasing 'corporate control of news, information, and communication' is often depicted cynically in apocalyptic narratives (90). For instance, according to Bui, *Resident Evil: Apocalypse* (2004) 'suggests that the mass media would be manipulated by powerful corporations' during an apocalyptic event (88), while Max Brooks' *World War Z* (2006) 'predicts the untrustworthiness of corporate media and the importance of citizen journalism and media in spreading accurate survival information' (98).

An alternative media scenario in post-apocalyptic narratives, by contrast, is the total blackout. On this, Bui notes that 'in the event of an apocalypse, electricity is likely to fail, and mass media, such as television, the Internet, and landline phones cannot function' (98). Despite this, she suggests that – in contrast to the all too readily manipulated corporatized mass media – 'social media may be a more significant contribution to apocalypse survivors' (90). Pointing to the Arab Spring, Bui celebrates the 'potential for collective organizing and sharing of information due to the interactive nature of the social media tools' to function as 'an alternative to government-controlled media' (95). Aside from the blatant problem of electricity, Bui's utopian attitude toward social media – somewhat understandable in 2015 – should be re-examined.

Since 2015, it has become increasingly apparent that social media *also* has the potential to function effectively as a source for sharing and spreading *disinformation* and for enabling election interference and the fabrication of protests and counter protests by foreign and domestic threats (Cadwalladr; 2019). Thus, while Bui rightly argues that 'social media and mobile devices can offer new ways to access affective culture, or expressions of emotions and empathy, and becomes an important medium in a crisis or collective action' (96); the opposite is also true. Less empathetic online behaviours, such as trolling, harassment, doxing, hacking, disinformation campaigns, and shallow or performative displays of support (i.e., "slacktivism" or "virtue signalling"), all go far toward neutralizing the benefits which Bui highlights. Pointing to the Fukushima nuclear disaster of 2011, Bui cites research suggesting that:

> Mobile media extended traditional media practices from the past, such as sending picture postcards of devastated landscapes after disasters, for modern-day emotional connectivity and dealing with grief. Social media users posted their messages of solidarity and concern through media and participated in collective mourning in the virtual space with strangers (ibid).

Again, this is not *incorrect*. Yet, as the newness of social media wore off – and the potential for these platforms to enable targeted advertising, manipulation, and fraud became ever more apparent – risks of social media have seemed to become as great as the rewards. Nearly a decade after the publication of Bui's article, social media is still, as she put it, a 'conduit for intimacy offering both commentary and social cohesion for users' and a platform for users to 'share information' and 'express solidarity' (ibid). However, the opposite has also become true.

Bui quotes a university student in the United Arab Emirates who asserts on a 2012 survey: 'Using the social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube you get to know the information immediately and so fast. Even faster than TV. You feel you are connected to the whole world no matter where you are. Otherwise you feel so isolated' (95). Certainly, it is quite true that social media can be an instant source of reliable information. However, social media is also a potential source of immediate *disinformation*; a characteristic which has been (and increasingly continues to be) aggressively exploited during crises; in the form of scams, fraud, conspiracy fantasies, and political propaganda. While both Bui and the anonymous student point to the potential of social media to *reduce* feelings of isolation, it is also important to acknowledge the feelings of isolation which these technologies have since become known to commonly bring about (Primack, et al; 2017). Thus, Bui was undoubtedly being overly

optimistic when she argued that 'if communications systems were to remain operational or be rebuilt, social media may be significant in processing and recovery in the event of a zombie apocalypse' (97).

I take issue with the above statement for numerous reasons. The first is that – while, I understand Bui is engaging with the topic playfully – there is no reason why a scholarly article should refer to a zombie apocalypse as a realistic or plausible scenario. Secondly, it is my contention that "social media" would not be a significant priority in a post-apocalyptic landscape. Functional radio signals and SMS technologies would be vital, followed by phone lines, the internet, and all of the mass communication which such technologies allow. But surely, platforms such as *Facebook* and *Twitter* (now, *X*) – in their current forms – would be unnecessary; if not entirely counter-productive. (As previously noted, a bleaker outlook on the destructive potential of social media in a crisis was explored in the satirical 2021 film *Don't Look Up.*) Bui argues, once again in hyperbolic terms, that:

> When the zombie apocalypse or other disaster arrives, the CDC has plans to utilize mass media to its maximum potential as long as the communication infrastructure stays intact. By emphasizing being prepared with emergency kits and safety plans through its Zombie Preparedness website and Public Health Matters blog, the CDC hopes everyone will be ready for the zombies' (94).

Here I feel it is appropriate to refer once again to the comment of "James" on the CDC blog, who asked in part: 'Dear CDC, If the popularity of this cute little article is enough to overload your servers, then what will happen when a real emergency occurs […]?'. In one instance, Bui did flag the potential dark side of social media, paraphrasing the analysis of Youmans and York in the 2012 'Social Media and the Activist Toolkit.' In Bui's words, the authors:

> [R]emind us that social media platforms are commercial products and services for commercial interests. While social media might provide us with alternative channels to broadcast and exchange information during an apocalypse, media platform owners may control content and access if usage is deemed incompatible with their commercial interests. Youmans and York also note that social media has been used to gather intelligence and spread propaganda (97).

Bui flags the fact that 'state-mandated Internet shutdowns, such as seen in the Arab Spring uprisings beginning in 2010, motivated many people to come up with solutions to a possible Internet blackout by practicing communication setups in an apocalypse, or Practocalypse' (99). Yet, while she refers to freedom *of* information, suggesting that 'media content and sharing

may now be in the hands of consumers, unless censored by owners' (97) she stops short of referring to freedom *from* disinformation. Ultimately, she optimistically concludes: 'Given that we depend so much on mass media for our identities and social relationships, the loss of communication technology may add to our feeling of isolation. When the world collapses, information and relationships via media may be a survivor's saving grace' (99). While it is certainly not my intention to replace Bui's techno-utopianism with my own apocalyptic-utopianism, it may nevertheless yet again be the case that the *opposite* of Bui's argument is also true. Perhaps it will be the *collapse* of digital infrastructures – and with it, our dependence (in Bui's words) 'on mass media for our identities and social relationships' – that may ultimately reduce our feelings of isolation and loneliness.

[**Fig. 6.8:** A widely circulated meme on metaphorical "screen zombies." **Fig. 6.9:** An original metaphorical-zombie meme directed at communities of political extremists driven by the consumption and circulation of digital disinformation.]





In 2014, Drezner suggested: 'One could argue that interest in the living dead has shifted from a focus on zombies to a focus on the zombie apocalypse' (835). Since that time, I would further suggest, public interest has shifted from the zombie-apocalypse to just any-old-apocalypse. The fictional "swarm mode" bots of *The Matrix Resurrections* (2021) provide an interesting example. When swarm mode is activated (within the simulated reality that is "the matrix") mobs of bots "skinned" as humans simultaneously become kamikaze weapons aimed at the protagonists. These hordes of zom-bots (so to speak) are neither cannibalistic, contagious, nor corporeal. Yet, despite the absence of bodily fluids, they rain down apocalyptic destruction no less efficiently. In the swarm bots of "the matrix," we see a 21st century A.I. evolution of Romero's *The Crazies* (1973); situated within a climate apocalypse; triggered by a nuclear apocalypse; instigated by an A.I. apocalypse.

Wöll argued in his 2020 article (clearly written prior to the global spread of COVID-19) that:

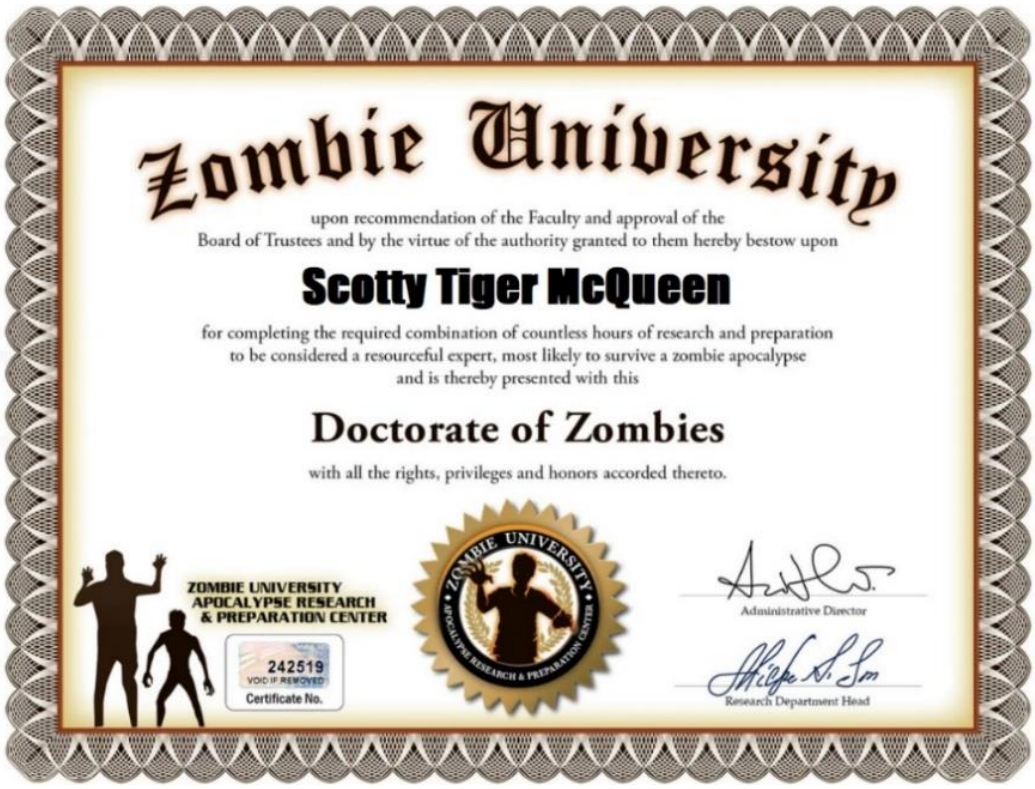
> The events of the 20th century both amplified and "secularized" this apocalyptic paradigm, inciting new fears and seemingly unmistakable signs for the approaching end of times. Two world wars, the Holocaust, the atomic bomb, economic crises, overpopulation, international terrorism, and global warming provided preachers with ample eschatological material (91).

Today, the apocalyptic paradigm has been further amplified via mass disinformation and collective conspiracy fantasy movements, and further secularized to the point of being, not only a theoretical issue, but a practical consideration for 21st century living. In writing of post-apocalypse survivalism, it is tempting to insert the adjectives "imaginary" or "alternate-reality" in front of the compound verb "post-apocalypse-survivalism." Yet, the fact remains that *all* apocalypse scenarios are hypothetical and involve varying degrees of alternate-reality ideation; even if the probability or credibility of those hypotheses vary widely.

Recall, once more, Drezner's astute observation that many apocalypse narratives 'do not even bother to show how society breaks down [but] simply flash forward to the end of the civilized world' (835). Not only do post-apocalypse narratives skip forward, they also rely on the exaggeration – and, thus, in a sense, denial or repression of – more probable (and gradual) apocalyptic outcomes. To imagine a *post*-apocalypse is to spare ourselves from imagining the destruction of human civilization by focussing (with irony) on an "apocalyptic utopia" beyond. Thus, post-apocalypse narratives can counterintuitively function as a form of ironic escapism.

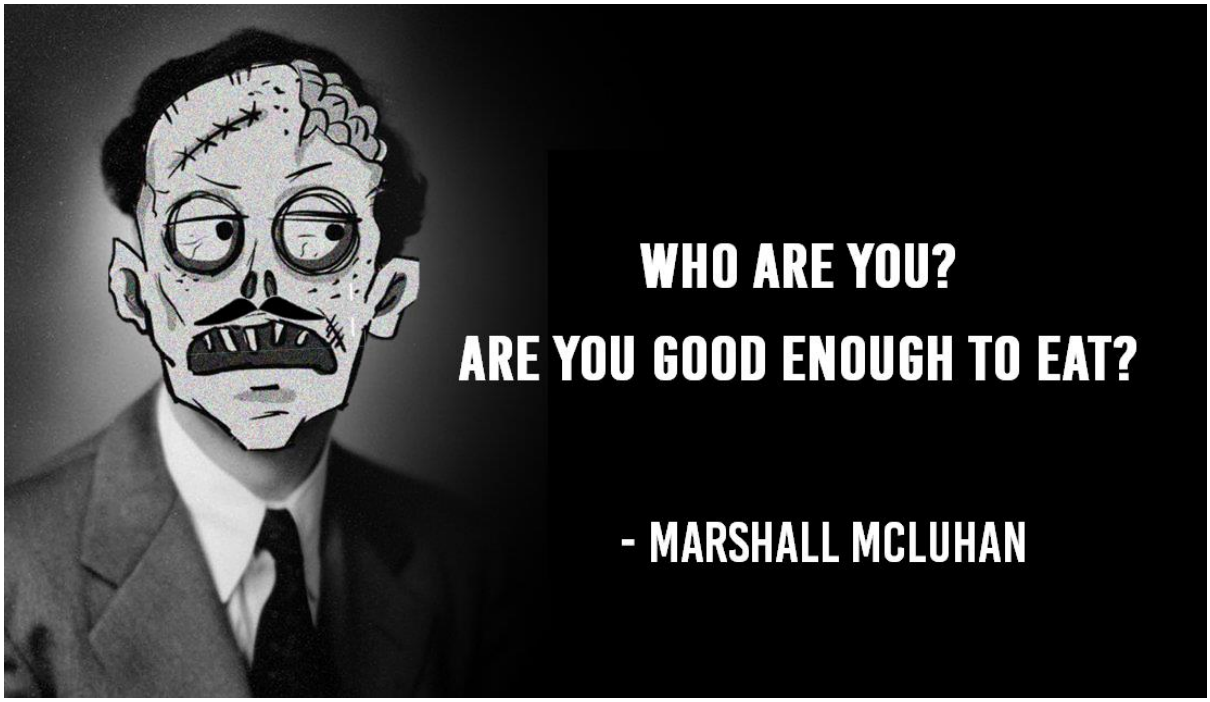
Today, mechanisms used for coping with genuine apocalyptic concerns range from evidence-based to faith-based, and from paranoid to rational. These coping mechanisms include various levels of unfictional apocalyptic role play in everyday life; from sincere to ironic. On one hand, survivalist and "prepper" tendencies are commonly associated with conservative or far-Right political ideologies including isolationism, libertarianism, capitalism, totalitarianism, ethno-nationalism, and patriarchy. On the other hand, such tendencies are readily aligned with progressive or far-Left political ideologies including anarchy, Marxism, socialism, egalitarianism, feminism, vegetarian/veganism, environmentalism, and voluntary simplicity.

[**Fig. 6.10**: Customizable Zombie Doctorate certificate available for under $8 on *Etsy*: *www.etsy.com/ie/listing/1084399572/personalized-zombie-university*]



In line with all of the above, I argue that more consideration needs to be given to the notion of ethically surviving an apocalypse (and protecting bystanders), and less to the notion of killing zombies. In the next chapter, I document my attempts at putting the theoretical framework thus far developed into creative-practice while critically analysing the results; particularly in terms of ethics and efficacy. The result was 'The Art of the Apocalypse: From A.I. to Zombie,' a 21-episode webseries designed to leverage digital media to prepare for the collapse or ascendance of digital technologies.

[**Fig. 6.11**]



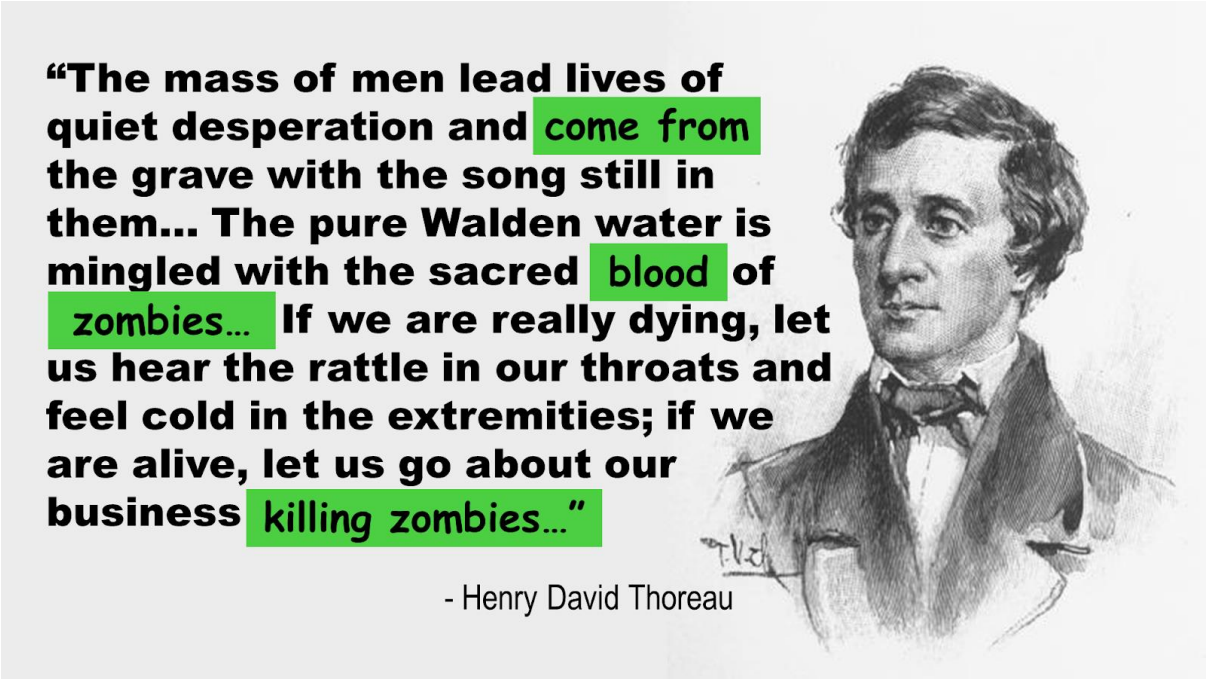
Who are you? Are you good enough to eat?[91]

Marshall McLuhan, et al.
The Medium is the Massage [sic]; 1967b. B Side: 09:25

[91] This passage is spoken on the audio adaptation of *The Medium is the Massage* [sic] created by McLuhan, Fiore, and Agel (1967b). Curiously, the webpage dedicated to that record (*themediumisthemassage.com/the-record/*) attributes this quote to Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865). Curiouser, the attribution is incorrect. The Caterpillar, of course, famously and repeatedly says 'Who are you?' to Alice, but the latter part of the quote does not appear in either of Carroll's novels about Alice. I was drawn to the bizarre quote merely because of its applicability to the zombie apocalypse.

seven: ‘THE ART OF THE APOCALYPSE: FROM A.I. TO ZOMBIE’

[**Fig. 7.1**]



The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation and **COME FROM** the grave with the song still in them…The pure Walden water is mingled with the sacred **BLOOD OF ZOMBIES** …If we are really dying, let us hear the rattle in our throats and feel cold in the extremities; if we are alive, let us go about our business **KILLING ZOMBIES**.

- Henry David Thoreau and Scotty McQueen
Walden; Or: Zombies in the Woods; 1854/2022

The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation and go to the grave with the song still in them… The pure Walden water is mingled with the sacred water of the Ganges… If we are really dying, let us hear the rattle in our throats and feel cold in the extremities; if we are alive, let us go about our business.

- Henry David Thoreau
Walden; Or: Life in the Woods; 1854: Ch. 16

Praxis: Applying and Advancing Theory through Creative-Practice

In the process of theoretically mapping the areas of unfictional and nonfictional alternate-reality apocalypticism, it became evident that post-apocalyptic thought experiments have consistently, albeit inadvertently, glorified unethical and destructive ideas; not the least of which are fantasies of extreme and remorseless violence committed against those deemed "infected" or "less than human." As the comment section beneath the CDC "Preparedness 101: Zombie Apocalypse" blogpost made abundantly clear, zombie fantasies sometimes have dark side-effects. Given that the zombie outbreak is largely a parable for pandemics – the conspicuously violent form of viral transmission notwithstanding – what can be made of the fact that "kill the brain" is our most popular solution?[92]

I contend that it is not sufficient to employ alternate-reality post-apocalyptic frameworks in educational contexts and "hope for the best;" trusting in the popularity of the genre to deliver effective outcomes. Rather, it is necessary to deconstruct – in the Derridean sense (1974) – and, thus, reconstruct these narratives as ethical and productive interventions; guided by data, and driven by justice, equality, democracy, and respect for life. With this in mind, I considered how I might leverage digital media in order to de/reconstruct the stories we tell ourselves about the apocalypse in order to support ethical and data-driven educational content across a range of socially productive topics including: sustainable digital practices; empowerment-based self-protection; disaster preparedness; cognitive behavioural insights; and secular "spiritual" self-improvement.

Considering that (for the moment, at least) all apocalypse scenarios remain hypothetical, I chose to explore the territory of post-apocalyptic survivalism through creative-practice so as to gain first-hand experience of the epistemological fuzziness of unfiction and ARGs. Informed by the theoretical map documented across previous chapters, I embarked on an exploration of alternate-reality zombie apocalypse survivalism in order to contribute techniques to the *poetics of debunking* in which the resistance to disinformation is made as entertaining as that which it resists (see: Wu Ming1 and Jenkins; 2018). I was additionally guided by the *literary problem of A.I.*, proposed by John McCarthy (see: McCorduck; 1985) which notes the problematic trade-off in speculative fiction between entertainment and usefulness. Thus, rather than engage *directly*

[92] 'Kill the brain, and you kill the ghoul,' says the newscaster in Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968).

with contentious "culture war" issues invoked by apocalypticism and survivalism, I engaged with creative-practice methodologies to discover and explore alternative contexts and frameworks through which to address culturally sensitive topics in socially productive ways.

I further took onboard the observation of Evans and Mayo that while 'the undead is receiving increased attention, not just in popular culture, but also in academic research … emerging from such fields as Public Health, Mathematics, and National Defense. […] Missing from this list to date is the nonprofit sector' (2016: 51). Accordingly, in this project – as in 'The (Un)Conspiracy Manifesto' project – I attempted to follow Conquergood's advice to triangulate my praxis on the points of artistry/creativity, analysis/critique, and activism/civic engagement (2002: 376-377). Additionally, in line with Wöll, I interrogated my own praxis in order to reflect, *not* on how I might fill an ever-diminishing gap within the massive body of Zombie Studies research, but rather, on how my work might be set in *opposition* to it? (2020: 88).

As a result of these unique focal points, I was able to consider how the apocalyptic imaginary might better prepare individuals (including myself) for real life, whether (or not) an apocalypse or massive disaster occurs. In line with this approach, I did not view the zombie apocalypse scenario according to pre-defined characteristics or conventions, but rather, as a flexible means for cultural interventions. In order to create an apocalypse survival/protection program that was both ethical and effective, it was necessary to pay particular attention – not only to the relationships between zombies, robots, people, and violence – but also to the identity politics, ethics, and efficacy of self-defense and martial arts instruction; along with popular media representations thereof. It was similarly necessary to engage with various aspects of religious faith and spiritual practices – again, including popular media representations – as they pertain to the "apocalypse."

The activities and behaviours associated with zom-poc survivalism foreground a deficit of terminology. Such activities are far too unstructured and decentred to be considered alternate reality games (ARGs). Yet, being hypothetical rather than fictional, these activities are often undertaken far too seriously to constitute cosplay or live action role play (LARP). Indeed, much of what "the apocalypse" *allegorically represents* is decidedly real; and much of what can be learned from these activities is useful in real world scenarios. Although I employ the term "unfiction," it is not insignificant that this term emerged as a way of describing alternate-reality *games;* and not alternate-reality lifestyles or other alternate-realityisms.

As I considered the vast scope of hypothetical apocalypse scenarios – from less probable (the Rapture, alien invasions, giant monsters, zombies, and sentient autonomous robots) to more probable (nuclear Armageddon, climate change, pandemics, and disinformation) – I looked closely at how apocalypse scenarios have been employed as educational or motivational (i.e., proleptic) strategies. In doing this, I paid close attention to the successes and shortcomings of these efforts along the lines of ethics and efficacy. The result of this reflection was a *YouTube* webseries entitled 'The Art of the Apocalypse: From A.I. to Zombie.'

Consisting of 21 videos ranging from three minutes to seventeen minutes in length, the duration of 'The Art of the Apocalypse' webseries is approximately three hours. Additionally, I created a supplemental miniseries of audio-only expert interviews, ranging from 30 minutes to 60 minutes in length, for a podcast entitled *Radio Free Apocalypse* which to date has three episodes with a combined run time of approximately 145 minutes.[93] As a form of ironic postmodern post-apocalypticism, this project aims to leverage digital platforms to explore and disseminate preparatory strategies for an apocalyptic collapse or dystopian ascendence of digital technologies. 'The Art of the Apocalypse: From A.I. to Zombie' was written and hosted by myself, under the alias/avatar of Crazy Conspiracy Dude, and framed as a series of ostensible instructional videos for a troupe of "Apocalypse Scouts." Viewers of these videos are given an opportunity to "collect" 17 virtual merit badges across a diverse range of topics falling under the categories of disaster preparedness, urban/wilderness survival, empowerment-based self-protection, and sustainable digital practices.

According to the dictum known as Maslow's Hammer: 'It is tempting, if your only tool is a hammer, to treat everything as if it were a nail.' (Maslow; 1966: 15). Or, as Culkin and McLuhan phrased this in 1967: 'We shape our tools and thereafter our tools shape us' (see: footnote 109). This line of thought extends at least to Thoreau, who wrote in *Walden* in 1854: 'But lo! Men have become the tools of their tools' (41-42). In a similarly reflexive fashion, the zombie apocalypse, as an ultimately *imaginary* scenario, is a problem which calls for more guns (according to gun enthusiasts) and for more bread (according to bakers). For this reason, harnessing the power of the "apocalypse" to challenge and provoke, rather than to simply reinforce or legitimize previously held worldviews, requires a rigorous theoretical foundation.

[93] The name is a reference to *Radio Free Europe,* founded by the United States in 1949 to promote free press in European countries with government-controlled media: https://reallutherblissett.podbean.com

The objective of this project was to deconstruct and reconstruct post-apocalyptic stories in order to guide ethical and data-supported (as well as free and advertisement-free) entertaining educational content. To achieve this, I aimed to gamify hyperreal zombie apocalypse survivalism within a non-violent and gender-neutral framework, with the intended outcome of exploring how hypothetical apocalypse scenarios might enable us to improve ourselves, our societies, and our institutions today, by imagining alternate tomorrows. Ultimately, I interrogated the post-apocalyptic imaginary with the following questions in mind: What do these stories about our future, do to us today? Can these stories be told (and retold) in more ethical and socially productive ways? If so, how?

'The Art of the Apocalypse: From A.I. to Zombie' uses zombies and robots as a pretext for discussing how to "apocalypse" ethically and sustainably; whether in a zombie apocalypse, the rise of the machines, a regular apocalypse, or just in everyday life. By applying best-practices, not *only* to apocalypse preparation, but to self and bystander protection in a host of everyday life scenarios – whether on the Internet or on the "street" – this project was informed by diverse research across areas including: Digital Media Studies, Film and Screen Studies, Performance Studies, Zombie Studies, Martial Arts Studies, and Religion Studies.

From the evidence-based position, it seems apparent that – when it comes to a variety of natural and human-created disasters – the question is not if, but when. Indeed, according to some accounts of climate change, it is *already* too late. According to Campbell, et al., for example, the question currently facing humanity is how to become extinct – or, in the authors' words, 'divest ourselves' – in ways which are ethical and just (2018). While such disasters lie beyond the control of individuals, taking reasonable measures to prepare for such eventualities does not. As a saying (widely misattributed to Benjamin Franklin) puts it: "Failing to prepare is preparing to fail." The irony, of course, is that virtually unlimited information (and dis/misinformation[94]) is freely available on the Internet, but when this information is most needed, the Internet may well be gone. Thus, there are reasons to employ apocalypse simulations as educational strategies *now*. In this vein, 'The Art of the Apocalypse: From A.I. to Zombie' makes an earnest attempt to become a valuable pre-apocalyptic source of post-apocalyptic information.

[94] As suggested by the online prevalence and proliferation of false quotes such as this purported Franklin quote.

Zombies and sentient autonomous robots are imaginary. Viral pandemics, climate change, food and water shortages, digital infrastructure collapse, uncontrollable technologies, and nuclear, biological, and informational warfare – on the other hand – are not. If the zombie and robot apocalypses do not arrive in our lifetimes, or the lifetimes of our children, grandchildren (and so on), so much the better. It is still useful to be able to protect ourselves and those around us from the myriad threats which we already face. It was on this basis that I created the motto for this project: *"*Hope for the best, prepare for the apocalypse."

In line with Dwight Conquergood's aforementioned recommendation (2002), I aimed to conduct practical research driven by theoretical research, and vice versa, while making the outcomes of that praxis accessible for general audiences. Although I did seek to disseminate the resultant content through appropriate channels, I never confused this effort with *self-promotion*. I never paid to promote my materials on social media platforms, and I did not seek to monetize my work, or consent to advertisements on my channels. Some of my videos have received thousands of views across *YouTube* and *TikTok,* while others received only dozens.

This lack of emphasis on promotion does not indicate, however, that I was not influenced and motivated by the fact that this content was publicly accessible. My self-imposed posting schedule (Thursday afternoons) combined with the knowledge that – at the very least – my parents and daughter would (probably) watch the videos, allowed for an entirely different creative process and relationship with the material. Regardless of immediate "views" or "likes," it was further motivational to know that those searching for this sort of content in the future might find it. It was further influential to know that my video series *might* – and could still – gain mass exposure, or lead to future opportunities. My videos have certainly been viewed, "liked," "disliked" and commented upon by total strangers, as well as cited in academic literature by scholars I have not met (see: Sánchez; 2024).

My philosophy on these issues was both informed and affirmed by Bo Burnham's critically acclaimed film *Eighth Grade* (2018) in which an introverted and socially awkward eighth grader (Kayla) begins posting motivational self-improvement videos on *YouTube* where, for all intents and purposes, her father is her only follower. Fascinatingly, Kayla's videos often misrepresent humiliating or defeating experiences as if she *had* reacted how she *wished she had* acted in retrospect. This process, then, would seem to be far more useful for Kayla as a reflective exercise, than for her audience members (real or imagined).

Social media platforms (including blogs) have lowered the barriers to self-publishing content, enabling radically new relationships between content and creator, regardless of whether or not that material is eventually observed. Notably, the self-reflective process is made possible to Kayla because of the *possibility* that her videos *might* be viewed. Otherwise, she would have little or no motivation to go through the process of imagining an alternate-reality, scripting or improvising dialogue, self-taping, doing retakes, editing, and posting the material.

Hundreds, thousands, or millions of views, of course, will intensify, amplify, and/or distort the creator/content relationship. Yet, even a single view can lead to incalculable impacts on viewer, creators, or both. In *Eighth Grade,* for instance, Kayla eventually meets a kind but socially awkward boy (Gabe). When they later "hang out," Gabe informs Kayla that he "watched her videos" and that they were "really cool." As the film draws to a close, it is clear that a much-needed friendship is beginning. For the duration of this project, I related to the character of Kayla. Reminding myself that my intended audience was very small, but my *potential* audience was unlimited, I found the process both encouraging and humbling.

(De)Reconstructing Apocalypse "Prepping"

Beyond engaging with academic theory and popular discourse around the topics previously discussed, including disaster preparedness guides and survival manuals, I also engaged with martial arts discourse as a practitioner. For the duration of this project (as permitted by COVID-19 restrictions) I participated in self-defense training courses and martial arts, including jiu-jitsu and karate. In the latter – as previously noted – I achieved something which I began working toward over 20 years ago, earning a black belt through the Japan Traditional Karate Institute (JTKI); an affiliate of the Japan Karate Association (JKA).[95]

"Martial arts" – the precise definition of which is ultimately subjective – provided an important throughline for this project, given that such practices tend to focus on both self/bystander protection, as well as physical fitness and secular spiritual cultivation. The broad popular appeal of martial arts, and the many pop-cultural references around them, proved useful in shaping entertainment-based educational content. Also common within martial arts practices and

[95] Founded in 1949, during post WWII reconstruction, the JKA is endorsed by the Japanese Ministry of Education, and is the only karate organization officially recognized by the Japanese government.

discourse, however, are numerous harmful or "toxic" behaviours, including gender stereotypes, Orientalism, "stranger danger" myths, victim blaming, and the glorification of violence.

By invoking the potentially neutral figures of zombies and robots, I sought to proactively circumnavigate these potentially harmful aspects, while emphasizing the – also not uncommon – philosophies of non-violence and personal development within martial arts philosophy and discourse. While the self-defense strategies of martial arts may (in theory) be of limited value against sentient autonomous robots and zombies, the secular spiritual and personal development pathways found within many martial arts practices are invaluable for dealing with potentially dangerous technologies and uncertain futures.

In approaching the post-apocalypse from a postmodern perspective, I used digital media to explore the hazards and opportunities associated with the collapse or ascendence of digital technologies. As noted, to describe this process as LARPing or as an ARG is not quite correct since, from my perspective, there was little functional difference between *sincerely pretending to prepare* for a hypothetical outcome and *actually preparing* for one. In this case, it may be as Jacques Derrida (sort of) put it: 'To pretend, I actually do the thing: I have therefore only pretended to pretend.'[96]

Writing on the video game mod *DayZ,* Lars Schmeink argued that the 'journeys' of protagonists in zombie apocalypse films and television programs, are 'trifold and reflect Zygmunt Bauman's (2000) liquid-modern risks for the individual: material unsafety, spiritual uncertainty, and cognitive insecurity' (70). On this, Schmeink elaborates:

> On the material level, their movement is spatial and oriented toward finding safety. On the spiritual level, they realize their status as survivors and need to find a utopian hope for a better world in order to regain certainty. Finally, on the cognitive level they are seeking knowledge of their surroundings and status and trying to find security by regaining control of the situation (70-71).

In line with the above, in 'The Art of the Apocalypse: From A.I. to Zombie,' I considered how content pertaining to subjects such as self-protection, disaster preparedness, media literacy, and secular spiritual development, might be disseminated for nonprofit purposes. At the same time, I directly confronted the ethical failings of alternate-reality apocalypticism. For instance, on the most obviously problematic issue – violence – I created a four-part "Self-Defense for the

[96] For the origins of this quote, see: Footnote 23.

Zombie Apocalypse" series. (Note that I did not title the series "Self-Defense *against* Zombies.") Rather than simply *avoid* the issue, I took the opportunity to shape the content as an *intervention* by which to discuss – among other issues – startling statistics on gun violence, both in the United States and worldwide. In the US, for instance, a gun is far more likely to be used to kill its owner, or the owner's loved one(s), than to be used to protect them (Harvard Injury Control Research Center; 2023). Consequently, I adopted an unusual position for a zom-poc survivalist by actively advocating *against* gun ownership in lieu of more sustainable protective actions and technologies. In doing this, I adhered to a wide body of research, statistical evidence, and established best practices amongst self-protection researchers and practitioners. I continued to apply this approach to all topics, from the safe home-canning of food, to secular (ethical) approaches to spirituality.

Documentation and Analysis: 'The Art of the Apocalypse: From A.I. to Zombie'

'The Art of the Apocalypse: From A.I. to Zombie' was initially conceived as "Zombie-Jistu: The Way of the Empty Brain and Empty Fist." In developing the concept, I designed a logo in which a ">" and its mirror image – one blood red, one radioactive-zombie green – are nested in the form of the letter "Z" [**Fig. 7.2**]. Like the yin and yang symbol, the red shape contained splatters of green, and vice versa. The logo is contained within the Zen *Enso* symbol which symbolizes, among other things, interconnectedness, lifelong learning, and the beauty of imperfection.



It may be argued that this logo was inclined toward Orientalism. Nevertheless, when Russian forces adopted the letter "Z" as an insignia during the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the letter "Z" symbol was unfavourably compared to the swastika in mainstream media outlets, and many international companies with "Z" logos responded by adopting new logos (Reuters; 2022b). Given that my project was, from the earliest stages, rooted in ethical and data-supported content, I discarded this logo before it was publicly shared.

By that time, I was developing an expanded concept which looked beyond the framework of martial arts to encompass a broad range of self-protection content. The working title for this expanded approach was 'The Art of the Apocalypse: From A.I. to Zombie.' Yet, I struggled to modify the "Z" design into a visually appealing "AA" design. My wife and long-time collaborator (and the videographer for most of the Crazy Conspiracy Dude videos) Patricia Darling McQueen, created the "AA" design featured throughout this project [**Fig. 7.3**]. Admittedly, the redesign of the logo is a relatively banal incident. I discuss it here, however, so as to reiterate my engagement with ethical issues throughout this project, and to reflect the significance of iconography and semiotics within the cultures, subcultures, and countercultures I explore.



Opening Credits

The seven-second title sequence which follows the introduction of each video in the 'Art of the Apocalypse' series is a dynamic collage (produced in Apple Final Cut Pro) of numerous original artworks created using analogue (i.e., scissors and glue stick) and digital (Adobe Photoshop and Microsoft PowerPoint and Paint) collage techniques. The soundscape for this intro – featuring Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto #2 (1901), *Happy Trails* (1952) by Gene Rogers and Dale Evans, and radio tuning static – was digitally recorded in real time without editing software.

Episodes (with "Clickbait" Titles)

1. THE ART OF THE APOCALYPSE wants YOU to join the Apocalypse Scouts TODAY!
2. Apocalypse Fashion: DRESSED TO KILL…ZOMBIES!
3. Supply Chain: THE SUPPLY CHAIN THAT BREAKS!
4. Baking Bread: NIGHT OF THE LIVING BREAD!
5. Canning Vegetables: EAT FOOD DON'T BE FOOD!
6. Build-A-Bunker: BUILD A BUNKER FOR THE ZOMBIE APOCALYPSE FOR $50 OR LESS
7. Bunker Sustainability: ZOMBIES ARE GONNA' BE ZOMBIES
8. Apocalypse Coffee: <3 THE SMELL OF COFFEE IN THE APOCALYPSE
9. Apocalypse Diet: FINE DINING IN THE APOCALYPSE FOR $3 A DAY
10. Apocalypse Fitness: SWEATIN' TO THE APOCALYPESE
11. Go-Bag: MOVEMENT IS LIFE
12. Wilderness Survival: HOW LONG WOULD YOU LAST IN A ZOMBIE APOCALYPSE?
13. Self Defense for the Zombie Apocalypse Part 1: AVOIDANCE AND BOUNDARIES
14. Self Defense for the Zombie Apocalypse Part 2: ZOMBIE FIGHT CLUB
15. Self Defense for the Zombie Apocalypse Part 3, First Half: ZOMBIE-JITSU
16. Self Defense for the Zombie Apocalypse Part 3, Second Half: ZOMBIE-JITSU
17. Welcome to the A.I. Apocalypse
18. Self Defense Against A.I. (Mind)
19. Self Defense Against A.I. (Body)
20. Self Defense Against A.I. (Spirit)
21. Holiday Special: MR. CRAZYCONSPIRACYDUDE'S APOCALYPSE

VIRTUAL MERIT BADGES

Disaster Preparedness

1. Apocalypse Fashion
2. Supply Chain Preparedness
3. Baking Bread
4. Canning Vegetables
5. Build-A-Bunker
6. Bunker Sustainability
7. Apocalypse Coffee
8. Apocalypse Diet

Urban/Wilderness Survival

9. Apocalypse Fitness
10. Go-Bag
11. Wilderness Survival

Empowerment-Based Self-Protection

12. Self Defense for the Zombie Apocalypse Part 1: Risk Management
13. Self Defense for the Zombie Apocalypse Part 2: Striking
14. Self Defense for the Zombie Apocalypse Part 3: Grappling

Sustainable Digital Practices

15. Self Defense Against A.I.: Mind
16. Self Defense Against A.I.: Body
17. Self Defense Against A.I.: Spirit
18. (Mindfulness Holiday Special)

Graduation

19. Master Apocalypse Scout



[**Fig. 7.4**]

#0: THE ART OF THE APOCALYPSE wants YOU to join the Apocalypse Scouts TODAY!



Serving as an introduction for the series, “Episode 0” was the final video to be created and published. This episode introduces the Apocalypse Master Scout virtual merit badge along with the build-your-own-all-purpose apocalypse survival kit. The text of this video was based on a project “pitch” created for the Tangent Postgraduate Certificate on Innovation and Entrepreneurship at Trinity College, in which I explored how the framework and content of ‘The Art of the Apocalypse: From A.I. to Zombie’ might be adapted into teambuilding workshops for corporations and non-profit organizations. My jumper in this video is hand-knit, symbolically suggesting the significance of preserving analogue crafts and activities in the digital era.

Videos are individually embedded within this chapter. The complete playlist for ‘The Art of the Apocalypse: From A.I. to Zombie’ is accessible at:

https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLdUhhD7F7ZgIbzN5z0z_4-_AupFPO1Zyq

#1: Apocalypse Fashion DRESSED TO KILL...ZOMBIES!



As an entry point into the series, I created a short video which took advantage of the playful, popular, and almost (but not quite) banal topic of apocalypse fashion. Inspired by the ubiquitous "zombie apocalypse vs. reality" Internet-meme template, in "Episode 1," I experimented with creating an "apocalypse outfit" and encouraged viewers to do the same. Much of the dialogue in this episode was improvised.

This episode introduced the character of Red Track Suit Zombie, played in this instance by Patricia McQueen. This zombie would make a number of appearances throughout the series. The hand painted and hand sewn mask was designed to suggest a cartoon aesthetic, in contrast to realistic or gory wounds and fake blood commonly seen on Hollywood and Halloween-zombies. According to "cartoon logic" – and true to zombie form – from episode to episode, Red Track Suit Zombie never incurred any permanent damage.

The "fight scene" in this episode merits discussion. On one hand, the use of violence in conditions wherein running away was possible, is something which I subsequently advocate

against, both in unfictional (i.e., zombie apocalypse) and nonfictional (i.e., real world) contexts. The same critique may be aimed at the clickbait title of this episode: "DRESSED TO KILL… ZOMBIES!" In later episodes, when discussing self-protection, I actively avoided such aggressive uses of language.

My reasons for including these elements in "Episode 1" are not entirely unassailable. My intent was to – as far as possible – "hook" viewers in early episodes by foreshadowing the popular topic of zombie-fighting that was to follow. By the time the "fighting" videos arrived, the groundwork for a more nuanced conversation would have been established. Ultimately, the violence in "Episode 1" is cartoonish and the title is (in my opinion) humorous, catchy, and – for all intents and purposes – harmless. Nevertheless, I am aware of – and acknowledge – the trade-offs and self-contradictions of these choices. The all-too-easily justifiable "murder" of zombies is a very seductive and slippery slope which can be harnessed to challenge injustice, or to sustain it. Within the broader contexts of this project, I was always committed to the former.

[**Fig. 7.5**: A variation of the "zombie apocalypse vs. reality" Internet-meme template featuring Charlize Theron as Furiosa from the post-apocalyptic masterpiece *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015) contrasted with her former prom queen adolescent-adult character in the comedy drama *Young Adult* (2011). **Fig. 7.6**: An original meme in the style of that template features two of my own outfits which saw plenty of action during the COVID-19 lockdowns.]



#2: When The Supply Chain Breaks DON'T BE SCARED BE PREPARED!



In contrast to the previous episode, the entirety of "Episode 2" was scripted. Based on lessons (hopefully) learned during the COVID-19 pandemic, the message of this video is simple: Don't wait until a supply chain disruption occurs to stock up on critical household items. While such advice – if taken to extremes – can veer toward fearmongering or paranoia, I find no logical reasons why every household should *not* maintain an approximate 14-day supply of non-perishable food, water, and other necessities as a buffer against potential natural disasters or supply chain disruptions. This episode specifically addresses issues of storage and expense.

At just over three minutes, this episode is the shortest of the webseries. This short length is reflective of my initial goal to keep the running time of all videos below five minutes; and ideally, below three and a half minutes. As noted, while making these videos, I often imagined friends and family as viewers. Thus, I aimed to create concise videos which were quick, fun, informative. Nevertheless, for the remainder of the series, I did not produce any videos under five minutes long. The reasons behind my initial goal, and my reasons for modifying it, are discussed in the coming pages as it relates to individual videos.

#3: Baking Apocalypse Bread NIGHT OF THE LIVING BREAD!



Like the previous episode, "Episode 3" is related to the shared experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic – at least in affluent societies – which saw substantial increases in bread baking during early stages of the lockdowns (Reinhart; 2020). The intro and outro of "Episode 3" were scripted, while the baking dialogue was largely improvised. This episode was informed by a conversation between ironic zombie apocalypse survivalist Athena Aktipis and a pizza/bread baker Peter Reinhart on the podcast *Pizza Quest* (ibid). On the basis of my own experience, it seemed the bread baking phenomenon was intertwined with the voluntary simplicity at the heart of Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) and/or the rugged frontier culture at the heart of Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie* series of books (1932-1943) subsequently adapted for television (1974-1983). I must admit that, I myself, was swept up in such idealistic fantasies (plus zombies, of course).

After discovering a simple and effective three ingredient recipe for bread in Katy Beskow's *Five Ingredient Vegan* (2019), I wanted to share the recipe with my audience (even if, at this point,

only friends and family) and show off my baking "skills." Here, I wish to briefly note that bread baking – depending as it generally does, on electric or natural gas supplies – is hardly an ideal post-apocalyptic activity. It is, however, closely related to the cabin fever and bread/yeast shortages associated with the COVID-19 lockdowns. Furthermore, bread can be baked on an open fire (in tin cans or other metal receptacles), and thus, this maximally simplified approach to baking bread is a potentially useful piece of knowledge.

This episode is nearly eight minutes long. While editing this video, it became clear that my goal to keep videos below five minutes in length was overly ambitious (or restrictive). Accordingly, I adjusted my self-imposed time limit for future episodes. In consideration of short attention spans and busy schedules among potential viewers, I was hesitant to create videos over 10 minutes long. On one hand, this goes against a current *YouTube* trend for creating videos longer than 10 minutes in order to gain additional monetization through advertisements occurring at the 10-minute mark. On the other hand, 10 minutes is the maximum video length I was permitted on *TikTok*. Nevertheless, the 10-minute time limit would also soon prove overly ambitious and/or restrictive.

#4: Canning Vegetables EAT FOOD DON'T BE FOOD!



"Episode 4" was the most problematic of the webseries. It was also an unexpected learning experience. This episode was the only video which I removed, modified, and re-uploaded. Curiously, prior to removing this video, according to *YouTube* analytics, it was one of my most viewed videos on that platform, receiving nearly 100 views in the first several days online. This video was filmed in Wiślica, Poland, on my mother-in-law's micro-farm where, twice a year, I work as a glorified "farm hand." To describe my mother-in-law as a master canner is no exaggeration. I am not the only of her relations to literally consume dozens (if not hundreds) of jars of pickled and preserved foods each year directly from her garden and kitchen. It is also the case that she learned to can food during a previous era, from those who learned during a previous era. This form of knowledge – preserved, refined, and handed down – is among the most precious assets of humanity. Yet, this knowledge can, at times, become outdated.

Such was one lesson I learned after posting "Episode 4." Shortly after posting, this video received a comment from *@nancybennick4501*. The comment said simply: "Sorry but when

water bath canning the water must be 1 inch or more over the tops of the jars." I immediately investigated the claim, and found it to be in line with contemporary recommended guidelines. At the same time – as it relates to survivalist contexts – it is important to note that low-level water baths have been found to be a safe and practical method for preserving food while conserving water and thermal energy (Agricultural Experiment Station; 1976). This posed a problem, since posting information that is not fully data-supported was contrary to the theoretical foundation of the project. Within an hour of reading that comment, I replied:

> Thanks for the advice, Nancy! The way I show in the video is how I was taught to do it by a master canner in Poland. I specifically asked about the water level and was told that that's how it's done because that's how she was taught to do it. On the basis of thousands of safely preserved jars, I didn't question this further. However, after reading your comment, I looked at some other sources and I see that since the 1970s, research has found that covering the jars with 1-2 inches of water leads to increased sterilization. The traditional lower-level water bath might be a throwback to water and energy conservation policies of the communist era. I will look into this further and annotate this video or make a Part 2. Pickling is one of those things that I do as I was taught. And I learned from someone who does it as she was taught. Tradition is important, and so is adapting and growing. I'm doing this project for two reasons, to inspire people to learn new things, and to learn new things myself. Thanks again for your comment. :)

The greater lesson I discovered, pertained to botulism, a deadly, rare, odourless, and flavourless foodborne pathogen, identified in the late 1950s. Botulism toxins can grow in low-acid foods at room temperature in anaerobic (non-oxygenated) environments. If consumed without being sufficiently cooked, these toxins can be fatal. (A deadly historical example involved potatoes, wrapped in aluminium foil, baked, and left at room temperature for several days before being served in a cold potato salad.) Most cases of botulism result from home canning and native or aboriginal traditional food preparation techniques (Sobel, et al; 2004).

The most practical preventative method is the use of a brine with at least 50 percent vinegar content (see: Healthy Canning: "Acidity" and "Water Bath"). Another effective, but less practical, solution is the use of a pressure canner, which raises food temperatures higher than boiling water. Pressure canners, however, are large, relatively costly, and require specialized knowledge and maintenance to operate safely and effectively. As I had promised, I promptly re-edited the video, increasing the acidity content of the brine recipe, and indicating the relative trade-offs of the low-level water bath method. Along with the edited video, I posted additional information and educational resources.

#5: Build-A-Bunker for the Zombie Apocalypse FOR $50 OR LESS!



Compared to the pickles, “Episode 5” was relatively unproblematic, although several weeks of concerted effort went toward selecting appropriate foods on the basis of shelf-life, price, nutrition, availability, preparation, and refrigeration. For example, uncooked rice and pasta were not included because of the need for gas or electricity to prepare these foods; jam and ketchup were not included because of the recommended guidelines to refrigerate after opening (requiring electricity); and precooked rice, grains, and pasta meals were not included due to the relatively short shelf lives (3-6 months). The content in this video builds on the foundation of the supply chain management of “Episode 2.”

This episode (as well as “Episode 6”) employs a reframing (i.e., “bait and switch”) strategy by redefining “bunkers” as – not the million-dollar underground bomb shelters, popular among Silicon Valley elites (Rushkoff; 2022), but rather – a moderate supply of non-perishable foods, drinking water, and emergency supplies; in line with the recommendations of relevant governmental and non-governmental organizations.

It is worth noting that the “bunker” kit provided as an example in this episode, is neither vegetarian (containing tuna fish) nor vegan (containing chocolate, rice pudding, cream of mushroom soup, honey, etc). This decision, perhaps, requires further explanation. For ethical, climate, health, and relationship reasons, I have followed a mostly vegan diet for several years, and a vegetarian diet for several years prior to that. During the course of this project, however, I was advised by a physician – after blood tests revealed chronically borderline low levels of lymphocytes and phosphorous – that I should consider adding fish to my diet. Somewhat regrettably, I occasionally ate fish during this period of time. Today, I no longer eat fish, but do take Omega-3 fish oil supplements. Obviously, our cats are also fed meat and fish-based cat food products.

Despite these matters being relatively personal ones, these issues are nevertheless entangled with the ethics-based and data-driven orientation of my praxis. Considering the matter in this light, should I have advocated for vegetarianism or veganism for reasons of ethics and climate responsibility, as many credible, science-guided, non-governmental organizations do; such as the Jane Goodall Institute (*#EatMeatless*; 2021)? Or should I have followed the advice and recommendations of many governmental disaster-preparedness publications and organizations which advocate for the inclusion of plenty of preserved meats (such as beef jerky and spam) as an important source of calories and protein?

As I am not qualified to provide medical advice – and given my own uncertainty with regard to the relative health benefits or detriments of veganism (of which, it seems, there might be a number of each) – I chose not to engage directly with this issue. Instead, I followed the path which I have found to be a sustainable compromise. As a general guideline, I suggested a primarily (but not entirely) vegetarian/vegan diet. I have begun a more in-depth exploration of these, and related, issues in a follow up project entitled *Bigfoot: Small Footprint,* in which Bigfoot (AKA Sasquatch) and other cryptids are leveraged as a pretext for exploring climate responsibility and environmental conservation.

#6: Bunker Sustainability ZOMBIES ARE GONNA' BE ZOMBIES!



"Episode 6" was originally written as "Build-a-Bunker: Part 2." However, the use of the "sustainability" frame for describing issues of sanitation, safety, and security ultimately provided a distinctive emphasis. In this episode, I first experimented with the ironic concept of a "sustainable apocalypse," to which I subsequently returned many times throughout my scholarly written work and conference presentations. In addition, I took the opportunity to recommend (as Emily Zarka puts it on an episode of the Arizona State University podcast *Zombified*) 'duct tape before guns' (2019). Explicitly stating that "I do not advocate gun ownership," I endorsed non-lethal medium range deterrents, such as a sling shot, as a useful alternative. In doing this, I laid the groundwork for the anti-guns approach to alternate-reality apocalypticism which was further developed throughout the webseries.[97]

[97] In conjunction with the podcast *Zombified,* Zarka (based in the US) elsewhere interviews Chelsey Weber-Smith who recommends BB and pellet guns which are realistic in appearance (2020). This is a fun, fascinating, and sexy firearm alternative for US audiences, and Zarka claimed that she could 'see no downside to the BB gun yet' (13:00). Obviously, however, this approach massively increases the probability of being shot by an actual firearm.

I originally intended to create a separate video on the topic of basic first aid. I was (long ago) certified as a First Responder for Yakima County in Washington State and, thus, feel relatively confident about providing basic advice along these lines. In light of the fact, however, that I am not a doctor,[98] I am uncomfortable providing medical advice on *YouTube.* As an alternative, I provided a list of basic supplies that first aid kits should not be without. In emphasizing these materials – including antibiotic ointments, hand sanitizer, gloves, etc. – I was able to imply the importance of preparedness and sanitation in the event of treatable injuries.

[98] Not *that kind* of doctor, anyhow ;)

#7: Apocalypse Coffee LOVE THE SMELL OF COFFEE IN THE APOCALYPSE!



In "Episode 7," I depart from the survivalist content of previous episodes to explore how to enjoy a strong cup of coffee without electricity or fire. Coffee is a popular topic and source of humour, both on the Internet and IRL (in real life). Yet, the overcomplication of coffee consumption – brought about, in large part, by mega corporate coffee chains – is, in my opinion (and thus, the opinion of Crazy Conspiracy Dude) problematic. The hand-painted Che Guevera t-shirt worn in this video is a reference to the exploitation of Central American and African coffee growers, and was partially inspired by the cover of Heath and Potter's *Rebel Sell* (2005) which depicts a coffee cup with the iconic Che image in place of the usual corporate branding. I acknowledge, however, that the use of Guevera's image is not entirely unproblematic given his prominent role in developing strategic guerrilla warfare (Guevera; 1961). Likewise, my description of a hammer as a "zombie eliminator" was moderately excessive. A term such as "zombie attitude adjuster" would be more aligned with the spirit of this project. At this stage, however, my ideas and approaches had not yet fully evolved. Red Track Suit Zombie makes a brief reappearance (unalive and well) in this video – this time played by Vai Klich – brandishing a corporate (Starbucks) branded disposable cup.

#8: 15 Minute Apocalypse Workout SWEATIN TO THE APOCALYPSE



At over 17 minutes long, “Episode 8” is the longest video of the webseries. In this episode, I faced a difficult choice with regard to running time. Ten minutes was not enough time to *demonstrate* (as opposed to *describe*) a well-balanced warm-up and fitness program. Accepting this, I settled on a 15-minute fitness routine, with one additional minute allotted to both the intro and outro. This run time is similar to many comparable popular online videos, such as those by *Instagram* breakout success *The Body Coach* (Joe Wicks).

The issue of electricity posed a further conundrum while designing an online “apocalypse” fitness video. As a pre-apocalyptic source of post-apocalyptic information, I aimed to design an exercise video, not for viewers to “exercise along with,” but to *teach* an easy to learn fitness system that could be effortlessly recalled in technology free contexts. This unusual approach to online fitness programs was made possible by my lack of profit motive. Most online or televised fitness programs seem aimed at keeping users “coming back for more.”

This original “apocalypse fitness” system requires no equipment or apparatus and is designed as an intuitively simple hybrid program for flexibility, whole body fitness, and kickboxing (punching/kicking). The warm-up intuitively ascends from ankle to neck, and the cool-down descends in reverse. The core of the program uses the original and simple mnemonic “Punch-Crunch-Duck” (i.e., upper body, core, lower body). In line with the concept of gamification, the program is demonstrated in three modes of increasing difficulty: beginner, advanced, and “beast mode.” Although none of the activities demonstrated within this video pose a safety risk by any reasonable standards, I included a boiler-plate disclaimer in the text accompanying the video, as comparable exercise programs do.

This video is the only black and white video of the webseries. This decision pays tribute to the innovative and inspirational 1950s television fitness program *The Jack LaLanne Show.* LaLanne was still producing home fitness content and providing dynamic interviews as I grew up in America in the 1980s. Adding a splash of colour and variety, Aerobics Gear Zombie – played by Patricia McQueen – made an appearance in the closing seconds of the episode; once again furthering the subplot of an impending zombie apocalypse.

#9: Apocalypse Diet FINE DINING IN THE APOCALYPSE



While designing the emergency food and water "bunker" in "Episode 5," I experienced a strong urge to live off of those bland and simple non-perishable food items. Thus, in "Episode 9," I took the opportunity (and found a motivation) to experience two weeks of calorically restricted meals and snacks. I viewed this "apocalypse cooking" experiment as a trial run for off-the-grid living, which I hoped (and still hope) to experience for several weeks, months, or years. With the exception of the intro and outro, the entirety of this video was improvised. *The Breakfast Song* was included with the permission of one of my favourite punk rock bands, Sicko (*sicko.com*).

My aim in this nearly 10-minute episode, was to demonstrate that non-perishable foods can be a valuable part of a creative, satisfying, and calorically responsible diet. I also aimed to demonstrate various ways that food and water can be heated without electricity or gas. One such common method, using an empty tuna fish can and isopropyl alcohol, did not make the

cut. While experimenting, I determined that the amount of smoke and fumes produced – relative to heat – rendered the process entirely impractical.

The mention of the tuna fish can also resurfaces the issue of vegetarianism introduced in the discussion of “Episode 5.” In order to (so-called) “virtue signal” my progressiveness, and to advocate for climate responsibility and the humane treatment of animals, I would have much preferred to present myself (via Crazy Conspiracy Dude and vice versa) as a vegan. The fact is, however, that such a situation would have been inconsistent with my practices, which I endeavour to make as sustainable as reasonably possible within my circumstances. Consequently, in “Episode 9” – despite personal incentives to the contrary – I made a decision to publish content in which I eat meat (fish).

#10: Bug Out Bags MOVEMENT IS LIFE



In “Episode 10, my approach to creating a “bug-out bag” (i.e., “Go Bag” or emergency travel bag) was in line with best-practices and recommendations. Again, I omitted firearms in lieu of non-lethal deterrents. I also argued that, while knives are useful survival tools, they are too violent and dangerous for self-defense; particularly in consideration of bloodborne diseases and pathogens. This video is, at the time of writing, the only video of the webseries to receive a “thumbs down” response. This response is not visible to viewers, but is made available to me through *YouTube* analytics. I suspect that my lack of emphasis on firearms was the motivation behind the disapproval, but this is speculative. Near the end of this episode, in order to better establish the appropriate context for self-protection – and to hopefully retain viewers with an interest in fighting zombies – I once again alluded to the coming episodes on self-defense. This episode – as well as “Episode 5” – were sped up in order to reduce running time. Unfortunately, speeding up the footage led to a reduction in audio-quality.

In this episode, I also emphasized the need to protect pets during disasters. This is an example of the type of guidance which I feel is particularly useful to impart, since many people might not have previously considered the issue in any depth, and may not intuitively know "the right thing to do" in an emergency. Sharuna the cat, who previously appeared uninvited in numerous episodes, finally gets her close-up in "Episode 10."

Continuing the zombie apocalypse subplot, Green Track Suit Zombie – played by Patricia McQueen – makes its debut. (Due to logistical reasons, the red track suit was not available at the time of filming.) In keeping with the self-defense practices recommended in later videos, Green Track Suit Zombie was humorously dealt with in a more cartoon-ish and slapstick manner than Red Track Suit Zombie had been dealt with in "Episode 1."

#11: Wilderness Survival HOW LONG WILL YOU LAST IN THE ZOMBIE APOCALYPSE?



Due to the limited access to nature and wilderness within Dublin City, and the prohibition of campfires in Irish national parks, “Episode 11” was filmed on public and private land near Wiślica, Poland. This episode aimed to simplify and condense best-practices – regarding shelter, water, food, and fire – into four concise segments of approximately two minutes each. Among other things, this episode imparts information about dehydration and starvation. This information is potentially lifesaving, both in the “wilderness,” and during emergencies. This episode contextualizes those segments by soundly arguing that learning to fight zombies is pointless if one dies of starvation or dehydration first. Green Track Suit Zombie – again, played by Patricia McQueen – returns for the last time to foreshadow the self-defense episodes which were to follow.

#12: Self-Defense for the Zombie Apocalypse PART 1



"Episode 12" is the first of four videos on self-defense for the zombie apocalypse. This episode focuses on awareness, prevention, and avoidance strategies; pointing out that although most physical altercations are preventable, most online self-defense videos focus on *winning* fights rather than *preventing* or *avoiding* them. In this episode, I advocate against gun ownership on the basis of clear statistical evidence. This evidence-based attitude toward guns is a relatively radical position for a zombie apocalypse survivalist. Through attempts to establish rapport and credibility in the beginning of this video – as well as across the preceding 11 videos – I strove to confidently create impactful interventions (at appropriate moments) in survivalist, apocalypse, zombie, conspiracy, and conspiritual narratives. Episodes 12-15 are accompanied with a disclaimer, credits, sources, and additional resources for viewers. Theoretical analyses (i.e., maps) of issues surrounding the ethics and efficacy of empowerment-based self-protection practices, as well as of both progressive and regressive popular media representations of martial arts, are located in the Appendix. See: 'Mapping the Ethics and Efficacy of Self-Defense' and 'Mapping (Japanese) Martial Arts in (Western) Popular Culture (1903-1973).'

#13: Self-Defense for the Zombie Apocalypse PART 2



In "Episode 13," the topic of ~~fighting zombies~~ physically defending oneself, was finally confronted directly. This use of "zombies" as a conceptual tool for teaching self-defense methods within a gender-neutral framework was (as previously noted) the original concept for 'The Art of the Apocalypse' project. Had I not placed an emphasis on the ethical aspects of this concept, episodes 13-15 might have been the entire project. From the perspective of deconstructing popular culture, however, it became apparent that violence – even in a zombie apocalypse – must be appropriately examined and contextualized.

In line with best practices and theoretical analysis around empowerment-based self-protection,[99] this video features my wife, Patricia Darling McQueen (Crazy Conspiracy Princess), as demonstrator and co-instructor. Much consideration was given to whether these videos should feature me demonstrating the techniques on a larger, stronger male; or whether I should teach the techniques to Dr. McQueen to demonstrate on me. In the former case –

[99] See, Appendix: 'Mapping the Ethics and Efficacy of Self-Defense.'

despite the gender neutrality of the “zombie” scenario – it was agreed that there would be an imbalance of gender representation (i.e., “too much testosterone”). In the latter case, we would require a third party to film. Accordingly, Marceline Roulleau acted as videographer for episodes 13-15. Significantly, Dr. McQueen is not an actor and preferred not to take a speaking role in these videos. Had she been comfortable doing so, it would have been an asset in terms of maximizing implied gender equality.

#14: Self-Defense for the Zombie Apocalypse PART 3 (1st Half)



"Episode 14" introduced simple jiu-jitsu techniques for the zombie apocalypse scenario. Generally speaking, jiu-jitsu techniques are designed to allow defenders to employ leverage, physics, and anatomy to gain an advantage over larger or stronger aggressors. Since zombies are known for being "grabby," many basic principles of jiu-jitsu are theoretically well-suited (as a last resort) for escaping from (or disabling) zombies. Before creating these videos, I constructed a theoretical map of issues around media portrayals of jiu-jitsu, judo, and karate, in terms of self-empowerment, liberation, and protection; as well in terms of sexism, racism, and Orientalism. This theoretical map is located in the Appendix. See: 'Mapping (Japanese) Martial Arts in (Western) Popular Culture (1903-1973).'

#15: Self-Defense for the Zombie Apocalypse PART 3 (2nd Half)



"Episode 15" concludes the exploration of simple jiu-jitsu techniques for the zombie apocalypse scenario. Since zombie movies frequently depict defenders falling to the ground while attempting to flee, this episode considers basic options for ground fighting. This episode closes the loop which began with the representation of violence against a zombie in "Episode 1" (in conditions in which escape, as advocated and demonstrated in "Episode 12," would have been effective). This time, however, arrogance leads to my undoing. In a post-outro outtake, while overconfidently demonstrating how to apply a choke-hold on a zombie, I become distracted by the camera and wind up as a Crazy Conspiracy Zombie as the words "GAME OVER" appears on the screen. This fictional violence, however, is still handled cartoonishly. As if in a video game, I return in the next episode as if nothing happened. Episodes 12-15 were filmed at the Hammerhead Muay Thai gym in Dublin with the support of its owner and operator Dave Gordon. Red Track Suit Zombie and Karate Zombie are played by Patricia Darling McQueen.

#16: Welcome to the A.I. Apocalypse. A.I. APOCALYPSE NOW!



Whereas the zombie apocalypse is thoroughly ingrained in popular culture and, thus, needed no introduction, "Episode 16" introduces and (re)contextualizes the *rise of the machines* scenario; explaining that sentient autonomous robots are only one of *many* potential digital threats. Since the content of this video is more informative than actionable, in a departure from previous episodes, no virtual merit badge is provided in this episode (despite the robot patch depicted in the video thumbnail).

Across the series of four A.I. themed videos, the setting of the webseries shifted from an imaginary zombie apocalypse to an imaginary A.I. apocalypse. Throughout these videos, the low budget zombie-antagonist was replaced by a low budget DIY robot-antagonist; my "apocalypse outfits" gave way to a more retro/professorial image; the "rise and shine" greeting was replaced with "up and at 'em;"[100] and the "happy trails" farewell was replaced with "I'll be

[100] This phrase is associated with the 1965 tech-savvy and atomic powered Hanna-Barbera cartoon character Atom Ant, for which the catchphrase was: "Up and at 'em, Atom Ant!"

back."[101] To maintain a degree of continuity, this episode was filmed in front of my survivalist shelves featured in previous episodes.

In contrast to the practical content of the first 15 episodes, the four "self-defense for the A.I. apocalypse" episodes are largely cerebral. I attempted to counter-balance this cerebral content with interactive and entertaining elements including: magic tricks; puzzles; optical illusions; graphics; video footage; comedy; and storytelling. Consequently, Episodes 17-20 – comprising self-defense for the A.I. apocalypse – are longer than previous videos, ranging from 10 to 14 minutes. The following three videos on sustainable digital practices are framed as an exploration of the "trinity of human badass-ness: the mind, the body, and the spirit."

The content of the following three videos is an evolution and original application of research conducted in conjunction with my previous doctoral studies in Performance Studies and Applied Psychology on the topic of mentalism (i.e., "mind reading" and "psychic" arts). Prior to creating Episodes 17-20, a theoretical analysis was conducted on the ethical issues – particularly with regard to violence and pacifism – entangled with practices of so-called 'Euro Taoism' (Sloterdijk; 1989) and 'Western Buddhism' (Žižek; 2001), which I describe as *pop-Zen*.[102] The resultant theoretical map ('Mapping the Ethics of Zen, Martial Arts, and Violence') is located in the Appendix.

[101] This phrase is the most popular of several frequently memed quotes of the T-800: Model 101 robotic assassin character played by Arnold Schwarzenegger in *The Terminator* (1984).

[102] My ideas along these lines were further documented in an interview with Sarah Cullen for Trinity College Dublin's *researchMATTERS* digital magazine; published by the office of the Dean of Research. Visit: www.tcd.ie/research/researchmatters/mcqueen.php

#17: Self-Defense for the A.I. Apocalypse: PART 1 (MIND)



"Episode 17" addresses cognitive aspects of sustainable digital practices through the use of magic tricks, puzzles, riddles, and optical illusions to illustrate pertinent issues including: confirmation bias and selective perception; attention and change blindness; priming and conditioning; and fast vs. slow thinking (Kahneman; 2011). One notable point raised within this episode is that, while – in certain narrowly defined areas – computers may be smarter than humans, it is still well within human capacity to outsmart "Skynet"[103] (so to speak) and maintain control of individual destinies. The issues explored in this episode are discussed further in an interview with psychologist Robert King on *Radio Free Apocalypse*.[104]

[103] Skynet is the name given to the fictional A.I. defence network (created by Cyberdyne Systems) which operates the robotic assassins of *The Terminator* franchise (1984-present). According to the film's narrative, Skynet became "self-aware" and, viewing *all* humans as a threat, decided the fate of humanity "in a microsecond: extermination." Skynet waged a war of nuclear genocide against humanity, hunting and enslaving survivors.

[104] https://reallutherblissett.podbean.com

#18: Self-Defense for the A.I. Apocalypse: PART 2 (BODY)



"Episode 18" addresses our embodied cognitions, advancing the argument that while machines are becoming increasingly "intelligent," we are still massively ahead of machines in our embodied-ness. By unplugging from digital devices and connecting with the real world, we can use physical actions to disrupt unhelpful thought patterns. Calling back the censorship "bleep" of "Episode 1," the (thus far) friendly robot – failing to successfully juggle apples – snaps in an instant (evocative of Skynet of *The Terminator*) and declares war on humanity. The issues explored in this episode are further explored in the *Radio Free Apocalypse* interview with psychologist Robert King.[105]

[105] https://reallutherblissett.podbean.com

#19: Self-Defense for the A.I. Apocalypse: PART 3 (SPIRIT)



In “Episode 19,” I tackle the ethically complex issue of secular spiritual practices and philosophy. With regard to the ethics of so-called Western Buddhism or Euro Taoism, I argue against pedagogical frameworks that are not based on data-supported or shared observable (consensus) reality. Instead, I advocate for secular spiritual (and pop-Zen) philosophies as productive substitutes. In this episode, I draw from (and refer to) the lucid writings and recordings of Alan Watts in an attempt to make the paradoxical and cryptic meanings of Zen Koans both accessible and relevant within the digital landscape. A playful post-outro outtake depicts the robot transcending the limits of its programming as it learns to click “I AM NOT A ROBOT.” Having achieved sentience and self-autonomy, the robot concludes: “Love is the answer. What is the question?” These issues are further elaborated upon in ‘Mapping the Ethics of Zen, Martial Arts, and Violence;’ located in the Appendix.

#20: Holiday Special HAVE A NICE APOCALYPSE! (HERE & NOW)



"Episode 20" is the final regular episode, and a departure from previous episodes in numerous regards. For stylistic reasons, this episode does not award viewers a digital merit badge (despite the "blackberry" patch featured on the episode thumbnail). The creation of this episode grew organically[106] from the fact that my back yard happened to be full of ripe blackberries. I forged a connection between these berries and Henry David Thoreau, by way of a popular illustrated children's book by D.B. Johnson entitled *Henry Hikes to Fitchburg* (2000) based on an excerpt from Thoreau's book *Walden: Or Life in the Woods* (1854). The last line of *Henry Hikes to Fitchburg* is: '"I know," he smiled. "I stopped for blackberries."'

The script for the "Enjoying the Little Things" virtual merit badge episode, which developed from that connection was never filmed. However, it was there that I first experimented with the creation of a postmodern mashup of Thoreau's book entitled: *Walden: Or Zombies in the Woods.* A working script for this un-filmed episode is located in the Appendix. Rather than

[106] Pun not intended, but nevertheless, embraced :D

develop that relatively twisted concept, I chose to develop a *Mr. Rogers Neighborhood* pastiche, with the working title *Mr. CrazyConspiracyDude's Neighborhood*. I grew up watching Mr. Rogers on public television in the 1980s and – as I recall – it was not unusual for him to bring his viewers "along with him" into his back yard for wholesome conversations about nature. Despite substantial vocal training, I am not a good singer. Neither was Mr. Rogers a particularly powerful vocalist, despite his obvious talents as a musician and lyricist. Attempting to channel the sincere authenticity of Rogers provided me with enough confidence to record and publish my parody song, 'It's a Beautiful Day in the Apocalypse.'

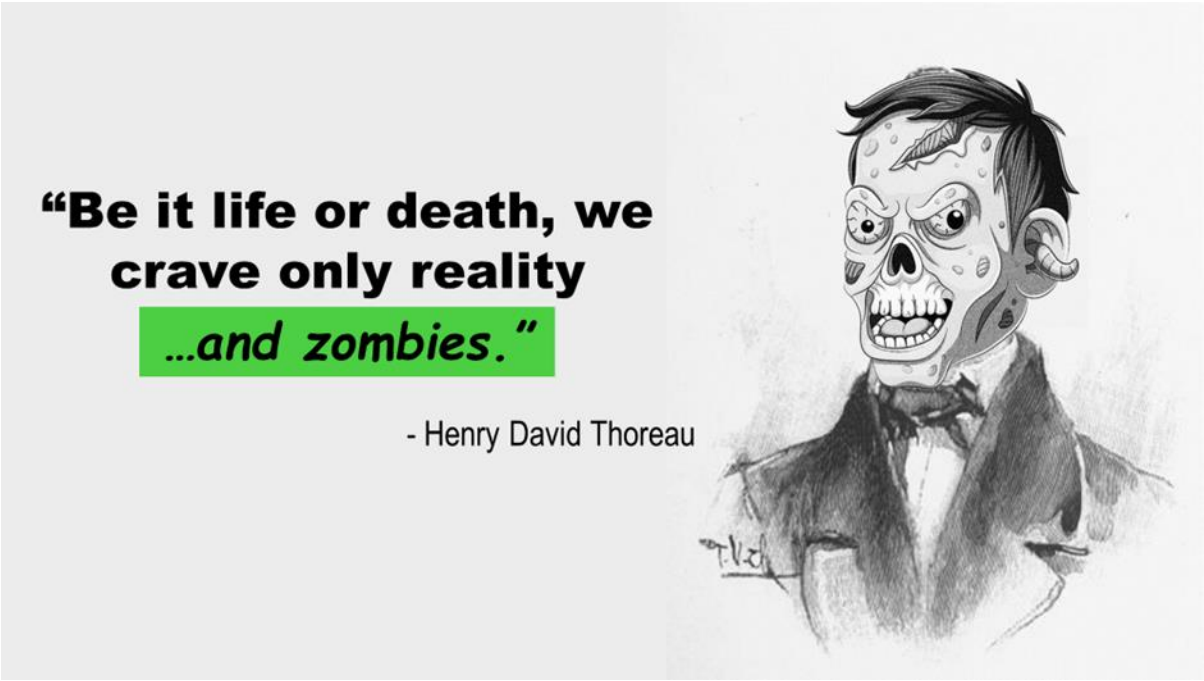
Fred Rogers, incidentally, is not entirely unconnected from the zombie genre. The first industry job of zombie trailblazer George Romero (a graduate of Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh) was as a camera operator for *Mr. Rogers Neighborhood* (produced by Pennsylvania public broadcaster WQED). In interviews, Romero often jokingly stated that the scariest film he ever made was of Mr. Rogers' tonsillectomy ("Mr. Rogers Gets a Tonsillectomy;" 1971: Ep. #1156). This and other issues are discussed with friend and colleague of Romero, Tom Kibbe, in an interview for *Radio Free Apocalypse.*[107]

The creation of a non-specific "holiday" special is in line with inclusive practices as well as a reference to "Holiday," the most important "holy day" (so to speak) of the new religious movement of Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster. "Holiday" is not fixed to a specific date, but can occur on whatever date(s) are deemed to be most convenient or useful for its celebrants (Henderson; 2006). The low budget DIY sock puppet of "Jesse, the Cat who Lives Behind the Flannel Shirt on the Clothesline" was assigned a gender-neutral name to avoid, not only the tendency to make side characters boys by default, but also to avoid the problematic stereotype inherent in making a "scaredy-cat" character, female.

The post-outro outtake features the robot and Red Track Suit Zombie (played here, by my daughter) holding hands and skipping. This dual image of post-humanity subsequently became the basis of a research poster produced for the Trinity Long Room Hub Arts and Humanities Research Institute, featured on the cover of this dissertation.

[107] https://reallutherblissett.podbean.com

[**Fig. 7.8**]



Be it life or death, we crave only reality **… AND ZOMBIES**.

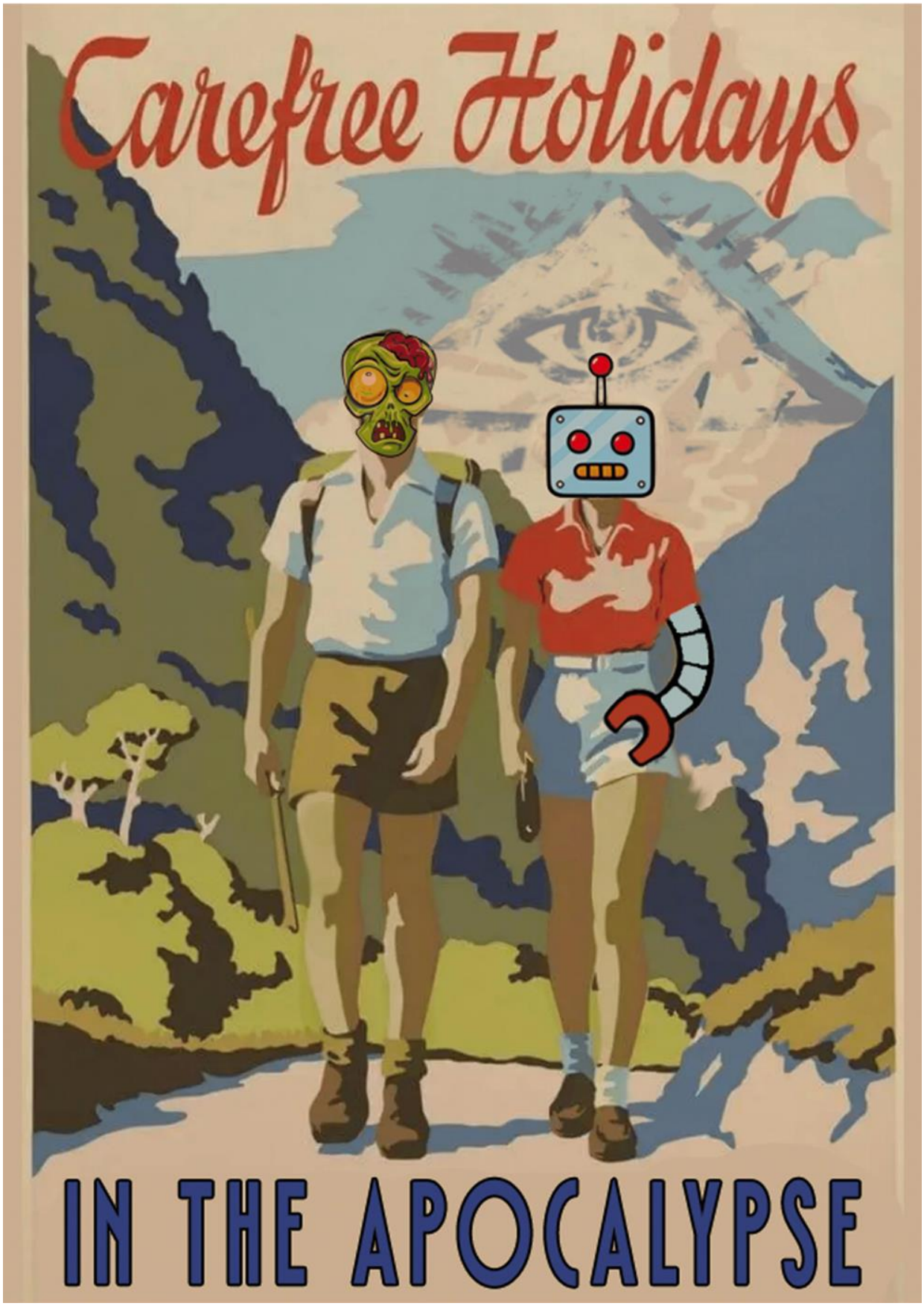
- Henry David Thoreau and Scotty McQueen
Walden; Or: Zombies in the Woods, 1854; 2022

Be it life or death, we crave only reality.

- Henry David Thoreau
Walden; Or: Life in the Woods; 1854: Ch. 2

CONCLUSION

[The series of Apocalypse travel posters featured throughout the conclusion were created in collaboration with visual artist Patricia Darling McQueen. The concept was conceived with the input of graphic designer Leah Bredindieck during sessions held at the Trinity Long Room Hub Arts & Humanities Research Institute.]


Carefree Holidays
IN THE APOCALYPSE

The End is Near!

> Unlike the other wars, which have all been preceded by wars of more or less the same type in human history (and gunpowder did not mark a radical break in this respect), nuclear war has no precedent. It has never occurred, itself; it is a non event. […] The terrifying reality of the nuclear conflict can only be the signified referent, never the real referent (present or past) of a discourse or text.
>
> – Jacques Derrida ('No Apocalypse, Not Now;' 1984: 23)

Nearly a quarter of the way through the 21st century (May 2024, at time of writing) apocalypse "prepping," both sincere and ironic, has gripped, not only popular culture, but the zeitgeist itself. At the same time, baseless and imaginary political conspiracy fantasies have gained sufficient traction to influence elections worldwide. This month, for example, *The Irish Times* reported the results of a series of pre/post-election polls finding that a 'significant minority of Irish people believe conspiracy theories' (Leahy; 2024). More specifically, 34% of voters agreed it was "definitely true" or "probably true" that 'a small, secret group of people is responsible for making all major decisions in world politics,' while a further 20% claimed to be "not sure" (ibid). Similarly, research conducted in the UK in 2023 on behalf of a public inquiry found that 'almost a quarter of the population' believed COVID-19 to be 'probably or definitely a hoax,' with one in seven adults (approx. 6 million) claiming that 'violence is a fair response to some alleged conspiracies' (Booth; 2023). In light of the surprising ascendance of – now, convicted felon – Donald Trump as the Republican candidate for the 2024 US Presidential election, it can be difficult to decide whether the disturbing findings of these studies are surprising or not at all a surprise.

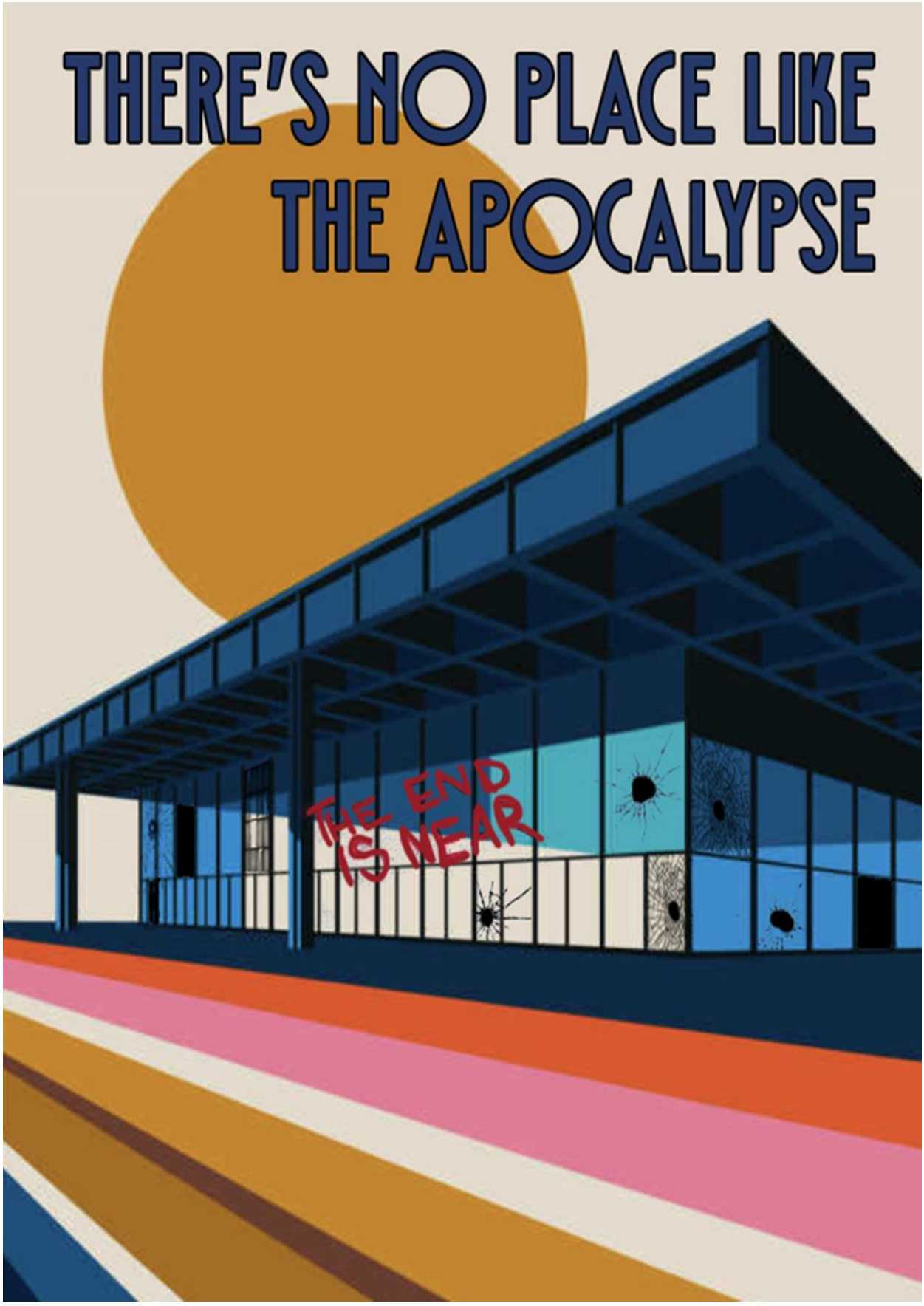
Quantitative research such as the above, flawed though it may be, does at least help assess the scope and magnitude of the problems; as well as suggest potentially effective methods for addressing them. Quantitative research, however, will never *be* the solution. For this reason, I created a praxis of creative-practice and theoretical inquiry aimed at deconstructing theories of imaginary "conspiracies" and prepping for imaginary "apocalypses." The *point* of this deconstruction, I argue, was ultimately to *reconstruct* popular but, on the whole, harmful fantasies into socially productive narratives. In doing this, the concept of *intervention* – via methodologies of triangulation and alterdisciplinarity; proposed by Conquergood (2002) and Bowman (2008), respectively – was foremost.

Even so, I am aware that the reach of my praxis (like many products of academia) was relatively limited. Furthermore, this ethics-driven approach within areas prone to – indeed, defined by – misinterpretation, misrepresentation, and unintended consequences, is not without its own ethical hazards. It is for these reasons that I chose to document the theoretical foundations of this praxis at length. Beyond the creative-practice elements (i.e., "poetics") designed to explore the affective and memetic capacities of fictional and unfictional narratives, I also sought to theoretically and culturally map how such interventions might be ethically and effectively advanced by others.

Across the previous seven chapters, I constructed this map to the best of my ability within the guidelines of my own institutional contexts. In doing this, I paid particular attention to the complicated intersections between popular culture and digital media as it pertains to the instigation, spread, and fortification of alternate-reality practices; whether or not they are driven by sincere belief, trolling, irony, or other forms of performative fake-belief. Although these collaborative and participatory activities predominantly exist in virtual worlds, they are never without some degree of real-world consequences. Thus, I focused on "how" – rather than "why" – people often engage with popular alternate-reality texts and contexts. I further analysed and reflected critically upon my own attempts to deconstruct these increasingly problematic areas of popular culture on the basis of the theoretical map previously established.

[**Fig. 8.1**: An original modification of a found meme, based on a popular 2016 post by "kai1998" in the "showerthoughts" subreddit on the *Reddit* web forum. This idea, along with several others, were central in my formulation of a "poetic debunking" strategy in which concepts from popular culture were leveraged to deconstruct popular culture.]



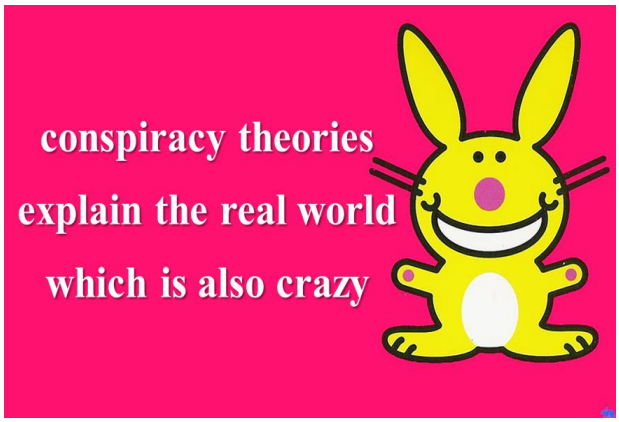

THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE
THE APOCALYPSE
THE END
IS NEAR

I reiterate, one final time, one of Derrida's most reiterated statements, which – as a fitting reflection of the contemporary digital media ecosystem – Derrida, in all likelihood, neither wrote, nor said: 'To pretend, I actually do the thing: I have therefore only pretended to pretend' (see: Footnote 23). In line with this sentiment – whether Derrida phrased it thusly or not – I find myself in the position of being both an ironic conspiracy theorist / prepper and a sincere one. It should be noted, however, that I went to considerable lengths to be an ethical and data-driven conspiracist / prepper. As Derrida observed in the preceding epigraph, the "apocalypse" (nuclear and otherwise) exists only as a 'signified referent.' There is no "real" apocalypse against which to measure our innumerable imaginary ones. *The apocalypse is hypothetitical.* Conspiracy theories are similar. If credible evidence were available to support a conspiracy theory, it would not be one. *Conspiracy theories are imaginary.*

To whatever extent the terms "conspiracy theorist" and "prepper" were once synonymous with mental instability or political extremism, this is no longer necessarily the case. On the contrary, today it is potentially rational *and* beneficial to entertain the possibility of an apocalypse (or natural, nuclear, or biological disasters, etc). The same is true for entertaining the possibility of high-level covert dystopian conspiracies to subvert the democratic process (or exploit or disenfranchise marginalized populations, etc). Problems arise when these activities are pursued in ways that are ethically misguided and/or untethered from consensus reality. Within unfictional or alternate-reality information ecosystems, the moral compass points whichever way we want it to.

This is not to say that mainstream news sources are above reproach. On the contrary, we must commit to repairing, improving, and sustaining these institutions against increasingly sophisticated and collective attacks. Failure to do so would seem to be a failure of apocalyptic magnitude. If an apocalypse (or digital dystopia) does arrive; if our institutions do collapse (or corrupt irredeemably); an opportunity will exist for more ethical, just, and sustainable systems to emerge in the wake. Such outcomes will not be the result of blind luck, however, but of purposeful and concerted efforts in line with the aims of Deconstruction. If, on the other hand, global destruction does *not* occur, such efforts can be usefully directed toward improving the status quo. Preparing for an apocalypse – provided we do it ethically and rigorously – also prepares us for everyday life. Studying conspiracy theories – *if* done ethically and rigorously – can enlighten us on the fallibility and durability of our embodied cognitions and institutions.

[**Figs: 8.2 & 8.3**: Original appropriations of the rude and apathetic Happy Bunny character created by illustrator Jim Benton in the 1990s (featured on a popular line of t-shirts and stickers in the early 2000s) which anticipated ironic image-macro internet-memes.





As an alternative to misguided apocalyptic escapism and utopianism, in 2024, a trend toward *apocalyptic optimism* emerged. Applied to A.I. as early as 2000 (Vinge) the term was directed at the climate crisis by Dana Fisher in her self-described 'data driven manifesto,' *Saving Ourselves: From Climate Shock to Climate Action* (2024). Fisher's book, along with several related works – including Hannah Ritchie's bestselling self-described 'sustainability by numbers' analysis, *Not the End of the World: How We Can Be the First Generation to Build a Sustainable Planet* (2024) – were recently considered by Alexis Soloski in an article tellingly entitled: 'Climate Doom is Out. "Apocalyptic Optimism" Is In' (2024). In Soloski's words: 'Intimations of doom have failed to motivate us [but] perhaps we will work toward a better future if we trust that one, with or without mutants, is possible' (2024). Accordingly, Soloski suggests that 'imagining a better future is a brave and even necessary act' (ibid).

While apocalyptic optimism takes many forms, all agree that *narratives* are vital, and must shift from fatalistic to hopeful. Fisher argues that 'the whole point of apocalyptic optimism is being optimistic in a way that actually helps get us somewhere' (Soloski; 2024). Similarly, Richie notes the absurdity of the 'rapid shift in the narrative, from almost complete denial to: "Oh, it's too late now, there's nothing we can do, we should just stop trying"' (Soloski; 2024). Reminiscent of Asimov's 'Frankenstein complex' (Warrick, et al; 1978: 252), McCarthy's 'literary problem' of A.I. (McCorduck, 1985; 2019), and Drezner's call for heterogenous zombie apocalypse narratives (2014: 826), Ritchie observes that the 'negative slant' to the climate narrative has 'been done a million times… [but] in order to build a better world, you need to be able to

envision that one is possible' (Soloski; 2024). The paradoxical logic of apocalyptic optimism leads Soloski to ask an important question: 'Is our best hope *hope* itself?' (ibid).

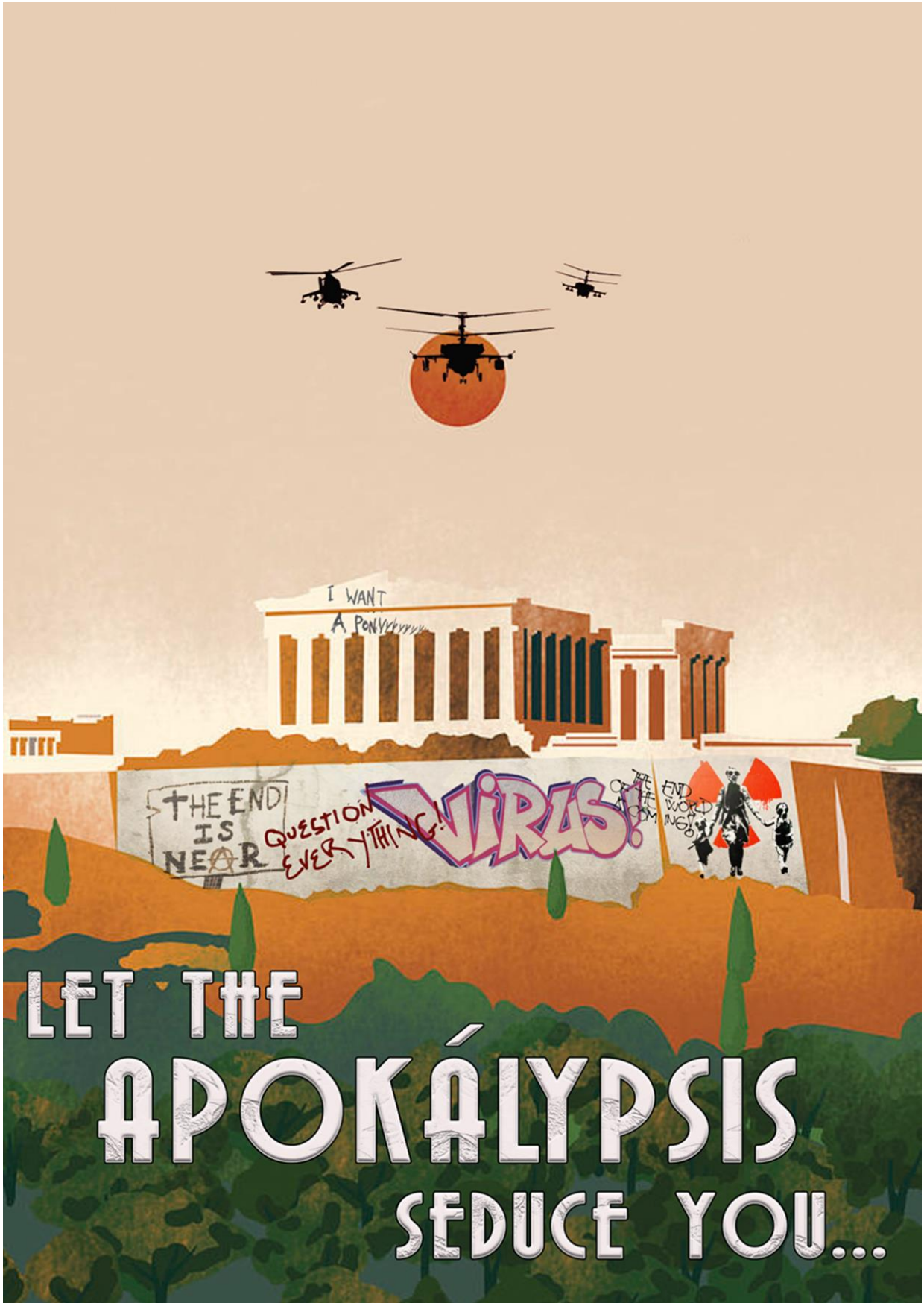
The call to *slant* narratives away from fatalistic hopelessness, and toward hopeful narratives of prevention and progress, aligns with my own efforts to create and spread narratives offering (in Hoffer's words) 'hope without hate' (1951). Additionally, Fisher's bleak optimism that severe climate shocks will mobilize humanity toward sustainable outcomes aligns, in part, with my own advocacy for an ethical and sustainable apocalypse.[108] Still, adopting an optimistic tone toward an apocalypse, while potentially helpful, is also potentially counter-productive.[109] By offering reassuring narratives about technology, rather than ones of crisis, techno-utopian arguments are sure to be embraced by populations determined not to alter their lifestyles or levels of consumption. This month, for instance, ESRI Ireland published findings that an estimated 47% of adults in Ireland 'will not change what they eat or how much they drive to help combat climate change' (O'Doherty; 2024). Such attitudes – all-too-common throughout the developed global North – are clearly not sustainable.

[**Fig. 8.4:** An original appropriation/modification of KC Green's 2013 "On Fire" – a webcomic turned meme template – in which a dog sits in a burning cafe reassuringly telling itself that the markets will self-correct and mitigate global warming.]



[108] However, Fisher's speculation that humanity will not mobilize and cooperate until *after* the climate incurs irreversible damage, resources are at their most scarce, and millions have died as a result of climate shocks, would seem to be not only bleak, but also overly optimistic.

[109] Richie's speculations, for instance, border on techno-utopianism. Her book essentially argues that the problems we face, while severe, are not *as bad* as we are led to believe by a barrage of doom and gloom headlines. Backed by data compiled by the *Our World in Data* website (a collaboration between the University of Oxford and the Global Change Data Lab), Ritchie argues that by harnessing emerging technologies, the global economy can continue to grow, while also feeding an increasing population and massively reducing CO2 emissions.


I WANT
A PONYYYYYYY
THE END
IS
NEAR
QUESTION
EVERYTHING!
VIRAS!
LET THE
APOKÁLYPSIS
SEDUCE YOU...

Soloski significantly concludes that since 'narrative won't stop coral bleaching or the leaking of methane from Arctic soil into the atmosphere,' it follows that 'storytelling – whether through fiction, documentary, data science or sociology, and however optimistic – might seem a limp response to the climate crisis' (2024). Nevertheless, she continues, 'it's a tool that's available, cheap and endlessly renewable. And as a society, we will not act on climate change until we're convinced that our action is useful and urgent' (ibid). Here, Soloski's conclusion is in line with the findings of my own praxis, in which I argue that reconstructing popular, but problematic, narratives – to be more progressive, data driven, and spreadable – is a vital aspect of Deconstructing popular culture. This is not the entirety of the solution, of course, but it is a functional one; and freely available, right here and right now. These issues are further debated and elaborated upon in a *Radio Free Apocalypse* podcast interview with International Relations scholar and Derrida expert Richard Beardsworth. (*RealLutherBlissett.podbean.com*).

On such points, my praxis and findings further converge with Henry Jenkins' Civic Imagination Project outlined, in part, in *Popular Culture and the Civic Imagination: Case Studies of Creative Social Change* (2020). Jenkins' arguments are summarized on the back cover, thusly:

> One cannot change the world unless one can imagine what a better world might look like. Civic imagination is the capacity to conceptualize alternatives to current cultural, social, political, or economic conditions; it also requires the ability to see oneself as a civic agent capable of making change, as a participant in a larger democratic culture (Eds. Jenkins, Peters-Lazaro, and Shresthova. See also: p. 5).

In the freely downloadable *Practicing Futures: A Civic Imagination Action Handbook,* Peters-Lazaro and Shresthova note that 'utopias and dystopias have long been used to pose questions, provoke discussions, and inspire next steps, and are helpful because they break contemporary frames and encourage long view perspectives' (2020: 7). Accordingly, a potential direction for future research is to consider the hybrid methodologies and theoretical framework hereindescribed, through the additional lenses of Apocalyptic Optimism and Civic Imagination. For example, the popular topic of regional cryptids – including Sasquatch (i.e., Bigfoot), the Loch Ness Monster, or the Chupacabra (to name only a few) – present useful pop-cultural entry points for creatively and optimistically (re)framing and communicating environmental issues and climate science. Having grown up in the Pacific Northwest of the US, I am currently in the exploratory phase for a project of this nature – revolving around the activities and philosophies of an unfictional Bigfoot Conservation Squad – entitled *Bigfoot: Small Footprint*.

In line with my aim to not only conduct research – but also to determine and communicate *the point* of that research – below, I relate seven practical and pop-culture inspired lessons, gleaned over the course of my praxis as a real/pretend conspiracy theorist and apocalypse survivalist. Influenced by the concepts of Deconstruction, Civic Imagination, and Apocalyptic Optimism, these lessons reflect an attempt to shift focus away from contentious or politicized policy debates and toward concrete and impactful individual actions. As a reflection on the respective strategies of so-called "old" versus "new" media, these lessons are written in the style of a "listicle," commonly associated with the website *BuzzFeed* (Lawlor; 2013). Providing precedent for this approach, 'Buzzademia' or 'scholarship in the Internet vernacular' was the topic of *Hyperrhiz: New Media Cultures* (Cong-Huyen, et al; 2019).

The point of this undertaking, then, is not to introduce levity, but to experientially explore different modes of communication via creative-practice methodologies; in order to observe, reflect upon, and record ways in which varied modes of address enable varied ways of perceiving, processing, and presenting information. In other words, the point is to both show *and* tell. The point of this research is to strive to become better, and to encourage other people to become better; and to work collectively toward building a *better* apocalypse (by which I mean more ethical, more just, more sustainable, and less violent societies). The point of survivalism, I argue, should not be merely to survive. The point of survivalism should be to survive *better*; and to help *others* survive better. *Now*.

7 LESSONS ABOUT THE APOCALYPSE THAT WILL MAKE YOU WISH YOU WERE THERE

Ditch Ironic Apocalyptic-Utopianism And Try Out Apocalyptic-Optimism

1) Question Authority *and* Non-Authority

The *infopocalypse* is one of our greatest existential threats, because it escalates all others. Disinformation and engagement-maximizing algorithms often target and exploit our confirmation bias; that is, our tendency to pay attention to information that confirms our previously held opinions, while ignoring, failing to notice, or forgetting the information that challenges them. Thus, it is now vitally important to actively resist spreading or "going-along-with" unreliable information; especially if we (as Agent Mulder's UFO poster on *The X-Files* reminds us) "want to believe."

2) The Apocalypse is not a Destination, it's a Journey

Before we start "prepping" for the apocalypse, it may be helpful to remember that apocalypse scenarios are hypothetical. The fate of humanity is not yet written in stone. Artificial intelligence *might* exterminate humanity; then again, A.I. *might* help us clean the air and the oceans and cure disease. A zombie-fungus *might* mutate us, one-by-one, into monsters; then again, it probably won't. For the moment, the apocalypse is a state of mind; a Rorschach test onto which we project our fears and fantasies. As John Connor put it in *Terminator 2: Judgement Day*, 'there's no fate but what we make for ourselves' (1991).

3) Live in the Present (Like a Time Traveller from the Future)

If science fiction, including the *Terminator* franchise, has taught us one thing, it is that those who travel in time to the past must beware *the butterfly effect*. Even the smallest deviant action, committed in the past, might trigger a chain of events radically altering the present. Yet, in the present, few behave as if their actions will meaningfully impact the future.[110] We need to practice using our imaginations retroactively *and* proactively.

4) Measure Twice, Apocalypse Once

In 1854*,* Henry David Thoreau observed that people 'have become tools of their tools' (41-42). Technology is double-edged. It has helped humans destroy the climate, but artificial intelligence – *if* safely created and properly regulated – *might* be able to help us to restore it. The 2008 Pixar film *Wall-E* provides a prescient warning: In doubling down on technology as the solution to its own problems, we run the risk of accelerating the crisis, while losing the qualities which have so far defined our progress. To resist becoming tools of our digital tools, we should preserve analogue and embodied ways of knowing.

5) Think Apocalyptically. Act Locally

The logic of collective action, as game theory proves, often leads to self-defeating or mutually destructive outcomes. Since our individual actions are unlikely to single-handedly bring about the end of the world, "do what thou wilt" may seem to be an optimal strategy. There is no sense "polishing the brass on the Titanic," if – as Tyler Durden puts it in *Fight Club* – "it's all going down, man" (1999). Yet, from the POV of pop-Zen, seeking to maximize our consumption

[110] As pointed out by "kai1998" in the "showerthoughts" subreddit on the Reddit web forum in 2016.

is absurd when we could seek to *minimize* our footprint; or in Barbara Ward's words, to 'walk lightly upon the Earth' (1972) or, as Henry David Thoreau put it, 'Simplify, simplify' (1854). The challenge is not to have more than others, but to cultivate constructive values, and bring our actions into alignment.

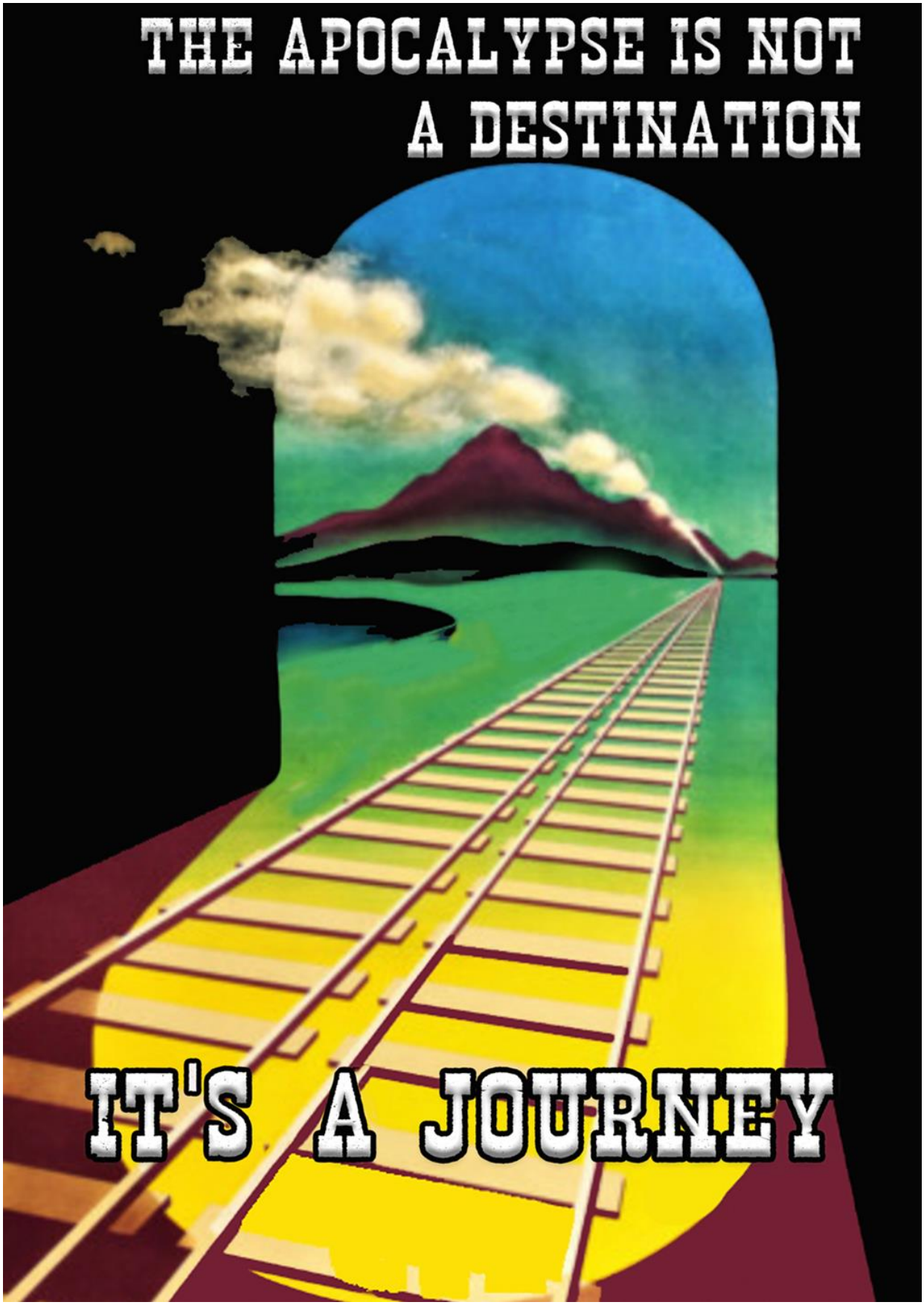
6) Stop Worrying and Love the Apocalypse

Like all problems, the apocalypse won't be prevented by worrying. Instead, as individuals, we should focus our energy on realistically achievable actions that have a positive impact on the people, animals, or environment around us. As our spheres of influence expand, the greater our impact will become. By taking small, reasonable, and ethically-guided steps to "prep" for the "apocalypse," we can become less afraid of an apocalypse, while also becoming better prepared to face the challenges of everyday life. At its best, being a "prepper" is not just about *individually* preparing for the apocalypse; it's also about working *together* to create an ethical and sustainable one.

7) HAVE A NICE APOCALYPSE :)

The smiley emoticon above – as with other uses of digital humour throughout this dissertation – is not included for its own sake, but to serve as a reminder that both laughter and seriousness are vital aspects of ethico-political intervention (Chattoo, 2023; Derrida, 1995: 404; Bowman, 2008: 157). Furthermore, emoticons – proposed by computer scientist Scott Fahlman in 1982 to reduce misunderstandings on an internal message board at Carnegie Mellon (Seargeant; 2019: 45-46) – foreground the limitations of all forms of communication media; as well as our attempts to recognize and creatively transcend those limitations.

In order to more deeply interrogate the limitations of my own digital word processor and Wi-Fi enabled devices – as well as to follow apocalypse "prepping" to its logical conclusion – the final pages of this conclusion were typed, edited by hand, and retyped on a vintage Remington steel typewriter. Rather than digitally transcribe those pages, they have been scanned and included below. These pages, such as they are, serve as both a brief conclusion and a physical/digital artefact documenting the myriad ways in which our thought processes are reflexively impacted, both consciously and unconsciously, by the media through which we communicate.


THE APOCALYPSE IS NOT
A DESTINATION
IT'S A JOURNEY

I have never been an optimist or a pessimist.
I'm an apocalyptic only. Our only hope is apocalypse.

- Marshall McLuhan (circa 1977. See 1999: 59)

"The medium is the message," argued McLuhan (1964: Ch. 1). Typing thoughts with Remington steel produces radically different thoughts than those that spring from my digital word processor; which I may confidently assert, is infinitely more forgiving. For one thing, the preceding sentence required three sheets of paper and the better part of an hour. For another, I am sitting outside in bright sunshine; a hostile environment for my old laptop. On this typewriter, I formulate thoughts, words, sentences, before - not as - I type them.

This profound link between doing and being, both enabled and intensified by media, is ignored by all but the most astute of media users and consumers. Hegel was barking up this tree when he wrote: "What is familiar and well known as such is not really well known for the very reason that it is familiar and well known" (1807: 17). Thus, the study of digital media, by way of its absence, would seem to be a largely neglected approach. Neglected, perhaps, due to the terrifying convenience of digital technologies.

Digital "ink" is cheap. My analogue keystrokes, by comparison - wherein each stroke is physically analogous to its intended letter - are laborious. With each word, the stakes are raised. The cost of an error increases proportionately with the word count on each page. On one hand, this activity is Zen-like in its physical analogous-ness and in its demand for being "in the present." On the other, it calls to mind a dictum of Zen archery: "issha zetsumei" ("one shot death") or modern Karate-Do: "ikken hissatsu" ("one fist annihilation"). Interpreted metaphorically, these dictums become: "one sheet of paper as if it's my last."

McLuhan further asserted, "I don't explain. I explore" (1966). Viewed abstractly, the pleasure and pain of this typewritten experiment - documented in real time via ink on paper - calls to mind what Harold Rosenberg described in 1952 as the "action painting" process through which "apocalyptic wallpaper" was created. Viewed more concretely, this experiment is reminiscent of Nietzsche's assertion (similar to Hegel's) that "what we are used to is most difficult to 'Know' - that is, to see as a problem..." (1882). Digital media have rapidly and radically reshaped both our doing and our being. Yet, due to the ubiquitousness of these tools and their analysis, many of their subtler effects and consequences remain hidden in plain sight.

In the 2023 film "Jules," the crash landing of an alien visitor is imagined in tandem with a meditation on loneliness and isolation among the elderly. After the kindly Sandy discovers the E.T. (referred to as Jules) eating apple slices on the benevolent Milton's couch, she cautions: "You can't just let people come over like you did with me. I've seen what people do with them kinds of guys." When Milton asks Sandy if this has happened to her before, she replies: "No. From the movies. And the movies are based on something."

Indeed, movies are based on something; but what, exactly, if not reality and realistic probabilities? The dramatic conflict at the heart of so much modern fiction often leads us to collectively imagine the most violent of all possible outcomes and fates; regardless of probability. Sandy's assertion also illuminates a deeper truth. Our attitudes toward hypothetical scenarios are shaped by pop-culture and popular fiction; often without our conscious knowledge or awareness. More constructive fiction may well enable more constructive outcomes.

Hence, the aforementioned concerns of Asimov, McCarthy, Dresner, Jenkins, Fisher, and others with regard to the homogeneity or sensationalism of popular narratives. And, hence, the value of Bowman's recommendation to Deconstruct popular culture (2008). Ultimately, we see conspiracies and the apocalypse not as they are, but as WE are.

Carl Jung argued that mankind must confront their own shadows (i.e., that which one does not know or want to know about one's self; 1912). Jungian psychology aside, I argue that humanity must confront the long shadows of our popular fiction, and the longer shadows of digital media. Today, these shadows are increasingly becoming the very structures and institutions of power; and at the same time, increasingly obfuscated and concealed.

It is important to explain the nature of these shadows, but it is also important to explore them. In typing - rather than "typing" - these thoughts and ideas, I aimed to phenomenologically explore my own digital shadow, while also casting light on a sliver of our collective shadows. The stakes riding on the confrontation between humanity and its shadows are rising by the day. Be that as it may, the end of human civilization probably remains distant. The end of this dissertation, on the other hand, has finally arrived.



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APPENDIX

MAPPING IRONIC “EVIL” AND APOCALYPTIC “OTHERS"

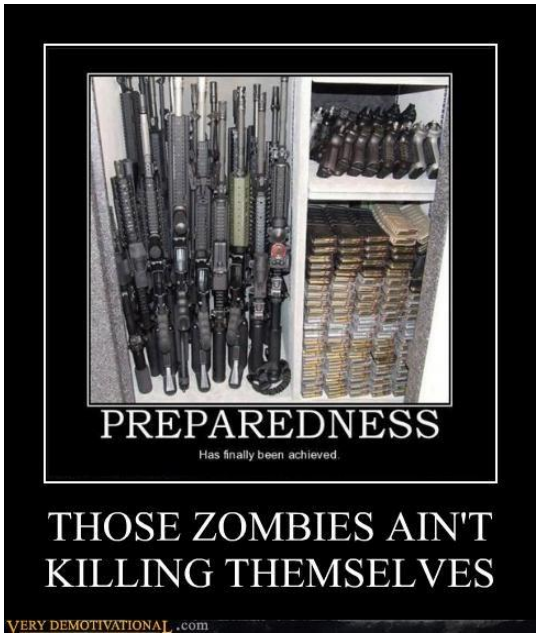
Ironic "Evil" and Apocalyptic "Others"

Like the body-snatchers and replicants that preceded them, Hollywood-zombies have been viewed as an allegory for many things, not the least of which is the mindless conformity of the "culture industry" as theorized by Adorno and Horkheimer (1947). Thus, it is somewhat ironic that modern audiences appear willing to consume unlimited derivations of the theme. As James Kennedy writes in *The Wall Street Journal,* when it comes to zombie narratives: 'As with zombies themselves, what grinds you down in the end isn't any individual, but the overwhelming number' (2011). While viewers and consumers are well able to comprehend that these narratives are fictional; they can simultaneously (paradoxically?) be emotionally affected by the ideological truth of these narratives and their perceived meaning. In this way, popular culture not only *reflects* public perceptions and attitudes, but *shapes* them as well. Thus, it bears considering how viewers are affected by this onslaught of zombie narratives and what metaphorical "truths" these zombie apocalypses might reveal. Among other things, these narratives allow us to imagine a world in which we might be called upon to kill without consequence. A world in which those trying to harm us or our loved ones are nameless, faceless, or evil incarnate; an alternate-reality in which murder is righteous.

It is my contention that today's Hollywood-zombies can be viewed as the product of an evolution that began with Orson Welle's thrilling 1938 radio broadcast of *The War of the Worlds.* Proceeding by way of humanoids, replicants, body-snatchers, and micro-organisms, this evolution ultimately produced a perfect fantasy *target*. In a revealingly titled 1924 short story, Richard Connell asserted that, from a hunting perspective, humans are *The Most Dangerous Game*. Zombies, I argue, are the next "best" thing; but – being "okay" to kill – are all the more convenient. This "convenience" brings about troubling ethical questions and historical comparisons. For all of their low-budget charm, zombies are, above all, dehumanized humans. Disturbingly, zombies are people, yet less-than-people, and for decades zombies have provided a bottomless killing field for some of humanities darkest fears and fantasies. Zombies are undoubtedly fictional, but this characteristic is not so much a binding limitation, as a tradition to be challenged. Today, conspiracism, conspirituality, and alternate-reality cultures are enabling many to claim some semblance of plausibility in zombie, reptilian (alien), or demonic threats.

[**Fig. 1:** A Covid-19 zombie reference works in conjunction with an ironic image of "baby yoda" from *The Mandalorian* (2019) in an Internet-meme that displays the proclivity and fetish for guns demonstrated by many "gamers" or gun enthusiasts as it relates to the zombie apocalypse scenario. **Fig. 2:** A "demotivational poster" meme template foregrounds the dissonance and tension between real guns and fictional zombies.]





Given the striking commonalities between an imaginary zombie apocalypse, and all-too-frequent historical genocides, it comes as no surprise that zombie narratives frequently explore issues of fascism and "othering." For example, the 1943 *Revenge of the Zombies*[111] revolves around a Nazi mad-scientist working under orders to create an army of living-dead warriors for the Third Reich. This territory was also explored in *The Creature with the Atom Brain* (1955) in which a mob boss and an ex-Nazi scientist join forces to create a living-dead army.[112] Similar territory was yet again explored in *Teenage Zombies* (1960) in the context of an "Eastern" (i.e., Soviet) mad-scientist developing a nerve-toxin to turn Americans into controllable "zombies."

The Nazi mad-scientist zombie plot was appropriated in 2008 by director and screenwriter Oliver Noble in the problematic 2008 zombie parody *Night of the Living Jews,* in which a Hasidic Passover in the Catskills turns into a zombie epidemic after a Nazi mad scientist deliberately contaminates a batch of matzoh. As one poster for the film put it, this is: "NOT JUST ANOTHER

[111] This film was a sequel/remake of the 1941 *King of the Zombies.*

[112] Notably, *The Creature with the Atom Brain* was directed by Edward Cahn, who went on to direct *Invisible Invaders* (1959). The screenplay was by Curt Siodmak, a German Jew who wrote other significant undead horror films such as *The Wolf Man* (1941), *Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man* (1943), and *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943).

HASIDIC ZOMBIE MOVIE" [See: Fig. 3] In an interview with Amir Bogen of *Ynet News*, Noble described himself as a 'half-breed' of mixed Jewish/Christian heritage, but mostly 'agnostic, leaning toward atheist' (2012). In Noble's words:

> I think most religions are created equally ridiculous… But to a large extent they have shaped the course of human history so for that reason they are also very fascinating. The way these religious texts, with much debated origins, have been passed down, re-translated, re-interoperated [sic?], and re-appropriated is inherently funny because it's like history's longest game of telephone. But they are still used to influence national to international policy from war to marriage which is both hilarious and terrifying (ibid).

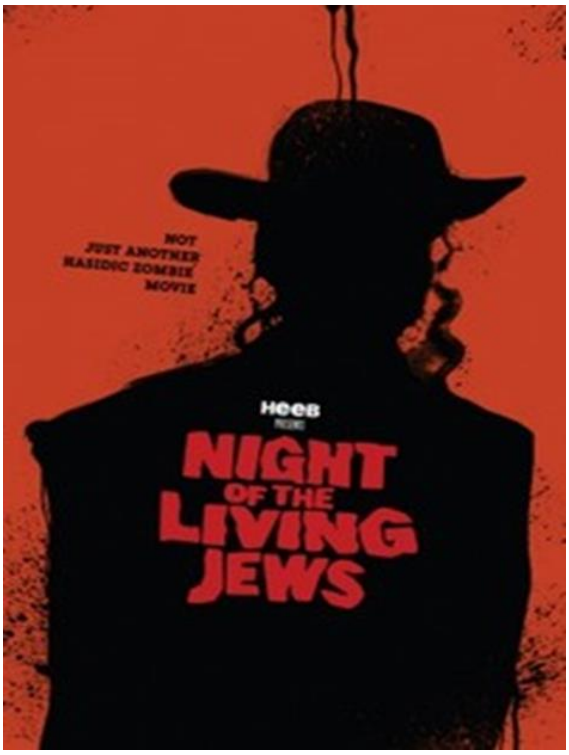
When asked whether he was familiar with the conspiracy theories surrounding blood libel, Noble replied that he 'had a cursory knowledge' but it did not heavily factor into the script or plot (ibid). Noble argued that since the poisoned matzoh that triggered the zombie epidemic 'was not made by Jews, but by an "evil Nazi scientist,"' it follows that 'when it comes to any anti-Semite or neo-Nazi embracing the movie, I feel the joke is on them' (ibid). Whatever the intent of the creator may be, the reality is substantially more complex. The specific depiction of Jews as "the walking-dead" invites – for better and for worse – a troubling comparison to the dehumanized and demonized inhabitants of Nazi concentration camps. Still, Noble can be taken at face value when he states: 'But, honestly, social commentary was always second in my mind to making a fun movie' (ibid).

Beyond the Nazi mad-scientist zombie subgenre, Nazis-*as*-zombies also gained popularity in the early 21st century in the form of video games including *Call of Duty: WWII, Nazi Zombies* (Activision; 2017) and *Sniper Elite: Nazi Zombie Army* (Rebellion Developments; 2013) and multiple films, including the 2009 Norwegian *Dead Snow* [Fig. 4]. Paradoxically, the figure of the Nazi-zombie – while, on one hand, the *ultimate* fantasy target – also invites a troubling semiotic comparison to the *victims* of Nazis, and to the dark and troubling realities of the Holocaust.

Giving proof to the depth and breadth of the zombie genre, zombies have even been pitted against Nazis. This unique pairing is the plot of a 2011 epistolary-historical-fiction novel by Scott Kenemore, tellingly entitled *Zombies Vs. Nazis*. Despite the book's cover, on which Hitler is dismembered by zombies, the book contains no such scene. Speaking at the 2019 *Theorizing Zombies* conference, Kenemore did not address the problematic connotations of his book, which ostensibly reveals a top-secret Nazi program which aimed to 'harness and weaponize Haitian Voodoo and zombie-creating technologies for military purposes' (2011: back cover).

Kenemore's motivations for writing the book are fascinating. Claiming to have always 'liked' and 'sympathized with zombies' while 'everyone else seemed to hate them,' he aimed to create a storyline that would make the zombies the "good guys" (2019: 03:30). Thus, Kenemore aimed 'to get people to root for the zombies' by employing the even-*more*-hated Nazis as a signifier of *evil* (ibid). Nevertheless, the semiotics of Nazis *versus* zombies – in consideration of the physical similarities between screen depictions of the walking dead, and the emaciated, malnourished, and tortured bodies of the victims and prisoners of WWII concentration and extermination camps – ultimately forms an unpalatable comparison between Holocaust victims and zombies.

[**Figs. 3 & 4**]





Speaking on the same panel as Kenemore, Sarah Davis-Goff, author of the Irish post-apocalyptic zombie novel *Last Ones Left Alive* (2019) drew a similar comparison to zombies and victims of the Great Famine of Ireland. Citing Irish novelist and playwright Mike McCormack, Davis-Goff argued that due to the public familiarity with historical images depicting ravenous crowds during the Great Famine, Ireland did not develop a tradition of zombie folklore (2019: 19:40).

[**Fig. 5:** A painting by Stefan Horski from entitled *Muselmänner Supplementing their Diet* (1945). Note that these wraith-like extermination camp inhabitants are supplementing their diet with their own urine. **Fig. 6:** A depiction of the Irish Great Famine illustrated by James Mahoney in 1847 for *The Illustrated London News.*]





(Re)Appropriating Hate Symbols

In 1962, at the height of the Cuban Missile Crisis, fictional super-spy James Bond (created by novelist Ian Fleming in 1953) discovered the existence of SPECTRE, an evil secret organization of criminals, terrorists, and villains in *Dr. No*. Boasting an octopus for an insignia, SPECTRE is an acrostic abbreviation of: SPecial Executive for Counter-intelligence, Terrorism, Revenge, Extortion. Six decades later, Bond is still battling the ruthless apocalypse obsessed agents of SPECTRE; most recently in the 25th official 007 film *No Time to Die* (2021). The name SPECTRE would appear to be a direct reference to the 'spectre of Communism' said to be 'haunting Europe' in the opening lines of *The Communist Manifesto* written by Engles and Marx in 1848.

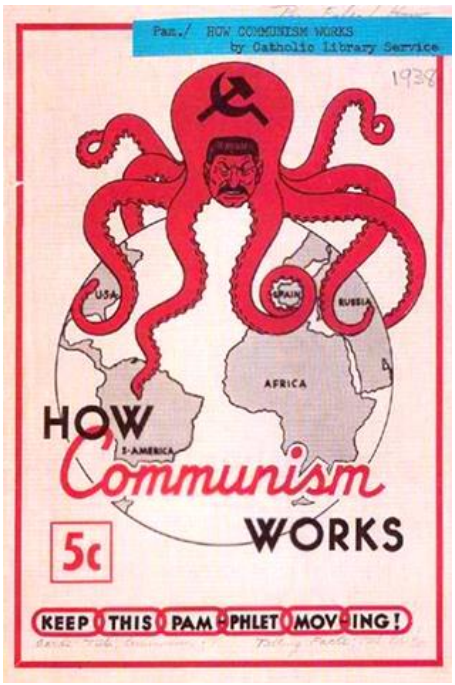
James Bond, however, did not always fight the forces of SPECTRE. Before waging war against the *spectre* of communism, the fictional literary super-spy matched wits and traded bullets with real-world communist, fascist, and terrorist threats, including rogue Nazi sympathizers, African diamond smugglers, and the Russian spy agency SMERSH. While adapting the popular 007 novels for the screen, Ian Fleming discovered a practical problem. Shifting global politics, and an apparent thawing of the Cold War, left film adaptations at risk of becoming outdated before reaching their premiere. Indeed, SMERSH had by that time already been dissolved and disbanded in real life. SPECTRE, by contrast, offered a timeless and eclectic secret evil organization of villains, criminals, and henchmen which, according to Fleming, provided a 'much more elastic fictional device' than 'the real thing' (*Playboy*; 1964).

[**Fig. 7:** The evolution of the SPECTRE logo, from ghostly to extraterrestrial to sinister.]



The octopus symbol, it should be noted, is far from an innocuous logo. This symbol has been frequently deployed against perceived social, economic, or political "threats" – particularly alleged Jewish and Communist threats – since at least 1877 (Starr and Mohr; 1980).

[**Fig. 8:** The octopus symbol is used to represent the Soviet Communist / Stalinist threat on the cover of a "chain letter" pamphlet published by the American Catholic Library Service in 1938. **Fig. 9:** The octopus is used to represent Winston Churchill as a Zionist in league with the Jewish "threat" in an illustration by Seppla (Josef Plank), also circa 1938.]

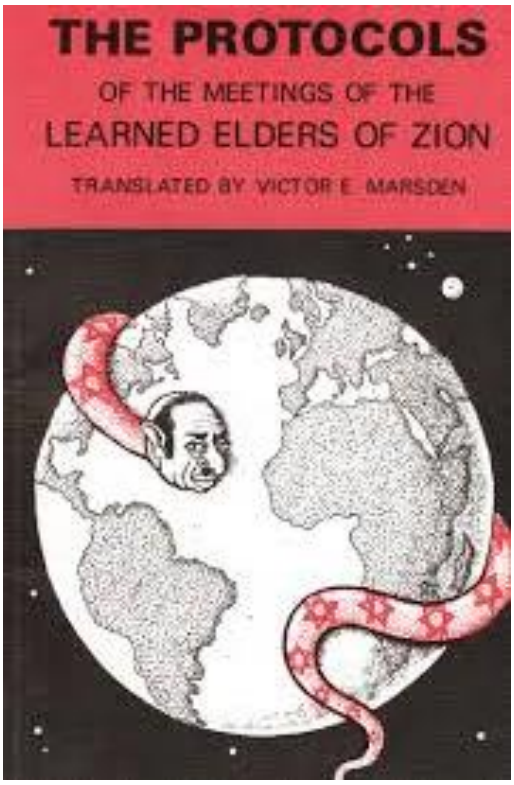




The SPECTRE organization first emerged in Fleming's eighth 007 novel *Thunderball* (1961). Intended to be the first 007 film, *Thunderball* – in contrast to Fleming's previous 007 novels –

was written as a screenplay and subsequently novelized. An extensive legal battle over rights and credits, however, led to the shelving of the project. Consequently, Fleming's sixth novel, *Dr. No* (1958) was adapted for the screen by reframing the evil Chinese/Russian mad scientist antagonist as an agent, not of SMERSH, but of SPECTRE. A similar adaptation was made to Fleming's fifth novel *From Russia with Love* (1957) for the 1963 film of that name. In this film, Bond finds himself battling it out – not against the agents of SMERSH, as the novel has it – but against double agents of SPECTRE *posing* as agents of SMERSH.

[**Fig. 10:** An edition of "*The Protocols"* features a giant snake, emblazoned with a Star of David "skin" and a caricatured head, encircling the globe. **Fig. 11:** A Serbian/German poster (Ca. 1941-1942) depicts a Jewish caricature with a beard consisting of four snakes. It reads: "His Tools: Democracy, Masonry, Communism, and Capitalism" (Ilić; 2015)].





SPECTRE thus provided a uniquely flexible and ambiguous terrorist threat consisting of anonymous "bad guys" who could be executed with extreme prejudice and without personal remorse or geopolitical consequence. The problematic nature of Fleming's pragmatic creation did not go unnoticed. As West German film critic Andre Müller condescendingly wrote in 1966: 'What James Bond does is right. Each murder, which he commits, is considered as necessary for the rescue of western civilization. Homicide is made palatable. A neofascist ideology is announced: the alleged threat justifies the murder' (3). Similarly, Bulgarian film critic Grigor

Chernev observed, in a critique of bourgeois society *vis-à-vis* the 007 franchise: 'How many people killed on the screen! How easily this is done! People just fall without tears, without any remorse. Human life is worthless, it doesn't cost even a penny' (1966: 7).

[**Fig. 12:** 'The Jewish Department Store Octopus eats up small German traders' from a National Socialist German Workers' Party leaflet (circa 1920). **Fig. 13:** A 1940 French cartoon redeploys the Octopus as a symbol of Hitler's quest for global power.]





For over a century, the octopus symbol been used to represent groups perceived as threats. Even as the *targets* of the symbolism were flipped (from Jews to Nazis, for example) the use of the symbol as a representation of the "other," remained. In 1962, the symbol was used by the fictional SPECTRE organization as a celebration of *its own* evil-ness. These organizations are, of course, fictional and stereotypically "evil." Surely – since no actual group is likely to perceive *itself* as evil – such an appropriation would be unthinkable by an organization in the *real* world.

In 2013, a group did *adopt* this symbol, rather than deploy it against others. Chillingly, this was done by the American National Reconnaissance Office which launched the NROL-39 spy satellite emblazoned with the image of a yellow octopus encircling the Earth atop the caption: 'NOTHING IS BEYOND OUR REACH' [Fig. 14]. This satellite launch took place only months after whistleblower Edward Snowden exposed that the US National Security Agency was engaged in unlawful domestic espionage (Greenwald, et al; 2013). Further complicating the incident, in April 1939, the pulp magazine *Fact SPY Stories* had advanced a similar claim and image in

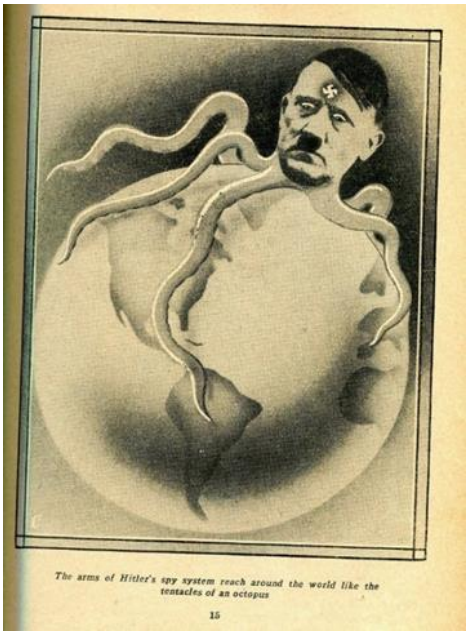
reference to Hitler's spy network [Fig. 15], asserting that 'the arms of Hitler's spy system reach around the world like the tentacles of an octopus' (Issue #1: 15).

Was the National Reconnaissance Office ignorant of the history and meanings of the octopus symbol, or did they wilfully embrace it? According to a Freedom of Information Act request made by cybersecurity and digital rights activist Runa Sandvik (Whittaker; 2022) – the octopus emblem emerged from an inside joke among the satellite engineers about a component of the satellite, a large cable colloquially described as an "octopus harness" which caused complications during test stages (Brown; 2016). Various partially redacted memos described the octopus symbol as representing 'intelligence' as well as 'resourcefulness, adaptability, and perseverance,' further praising the 'nowhere to hide' symbolism. One memo described the development of the idea – from inside joke to finished logo – as 'really neat,' further stating: 'We've kind of got our fingers everywhere at any given time' (ibid).

In 'How an engineering in-joke led to a spy satellite's world-eating octopus logo,' JPat Brown describes the memos as displaying a 'charming obliviousness to just how terrifying this all sounds' (ibid). Nowhere in the memos were comparisons made to anti-Semitic hate symbols, to SPECTRE, to HYDRA, or to Communism, or the Nazis. Only a single comment, scribbled in a margin – reading: 'A little sinister!!' – even approached that level of insight. Evidently, the comment was more of a compliment than a criticism, since above that comment, in the same ink and handwriting, is the signature of approval and the comment: 'OK' (ibid).

[**Figs. 14 & 15**]





By 2017, the NROL-39 logo was (re)appropriated by online alt-Right communities as a symbol of the "/pol/" political discussion boards on 4chan and 8chan. The re-worked image featured Pepe the frog as the octopus. Pepe, incidentally, was *also* an appropriated figure, having initially been an inconsequential character in a juvenile webcomic (*Boy's Club #1* by Matt Furie). Owing in part to the character's rudeness and simplistic Microsoft Paint design, Pepe became an unofficial mascot of the alt-Right. Significantly, this appropriation happened without the support of Furie, who has aggressively resisted his character's ascendence to international hate symbol, as seen in the award-winning 2020 documentary, *Feels Good Man*.

[**Fig. 16:** The widely circulated Pepe octopus logo. **Fig. 17:** A Pepe meme points to the political power of meme-based discourse with a play on W.E.B. DuBois' injunction – based on Marx's arguments in *Das Kapital* (1867) – that workers must 'seize control of the means of production' (DuBois, 1968).]





A counter-example may be seen in the appropriation of the antisemitic triple parentheses (((echo))) symbol used by alt-Right groups since 2016, to denote a real or purported Jewish background or affiliation; extending to conspiracist fantasies of "globalist cabals," reptilians, the Illuminati, etc. The symbol was declared hate speech by the Anti-Defamation League in 2016. Since then – as indicated by journalist Jonathan Weisman's 2018 monograph *(((Semitism))): Being Jewish in America in the Age of Trump* – the symbol has been increasingly appropriated by Jewish individuals and allies, as well as by outspoken critics of the alt-Right, as a symbol of Jewish pride and support.

A related precedent exists in Charlie Chaplin's efforts at symbolically re-appropriating the "toothbrush moustache" through a satirical portrayal of Adolf Hitler in *The Great Dictator*

(1940). Chaplin's motivations, of course, extended beyond the mustache of his fictional "little tramp" character, but the physical resemblance did contribute to his decision to make the film. In his autobiography, Chaplin notes that in 1937, Alexander Korda 'suggested I should do a Hitler story based on mistaken identity. Hitler having the same mustache as the tramp: I could play both characters…' (1964: 424). Several pages later, Chaplin further notes: 'Had I known the actual horrors of the German concentration camps, I could not have made "The Great Dictator;" I could not have made fun of the homicidal insanity of the Nazis' (426).

[**Fig. 18:** A meme posted on *imgflip.com* in 2023. Four months later, this meme had over 5,000 views, 16 upvotes, and one comment with one reply: AceTheMetalHead.86 writes simply: 'the furher,' to which TheBrainlessOne replies: 'agreed.'



The multiple meanings and appropriations of symbols both provides cover and plausible deniability for various forms of political dog whistling. At the same time, it can make it difficult to avoid accidentally invoking those symbols. This is a lesson which Greta Thunberg learned in October of 2023, after posting an image in which she offered support for Palestinians in Gaza while sitting beside a frowning, blue, plush octopus toy [**Fig. 21**]. This toy, Thunberg later noted – which can be reversed to reveal a smiling, pink octopus – is often used by people with autism to express their emotional state. Within 24 hours of the original post, Thunberg admitted to being unaware of the history of the octopus (blue, or, otherwise) as an anti-Semitic symbol; condemned anti-Semitism and all forms of discrimination; and deleted the post. Nevertheless, the image – often cropped – became a meme; including one version in which a Hitler mustache and hairdo were added to the toy, along with a protest sign in which the octopus expressed agreement with the pro-Palestinian sentiment [**Fig. 22**].





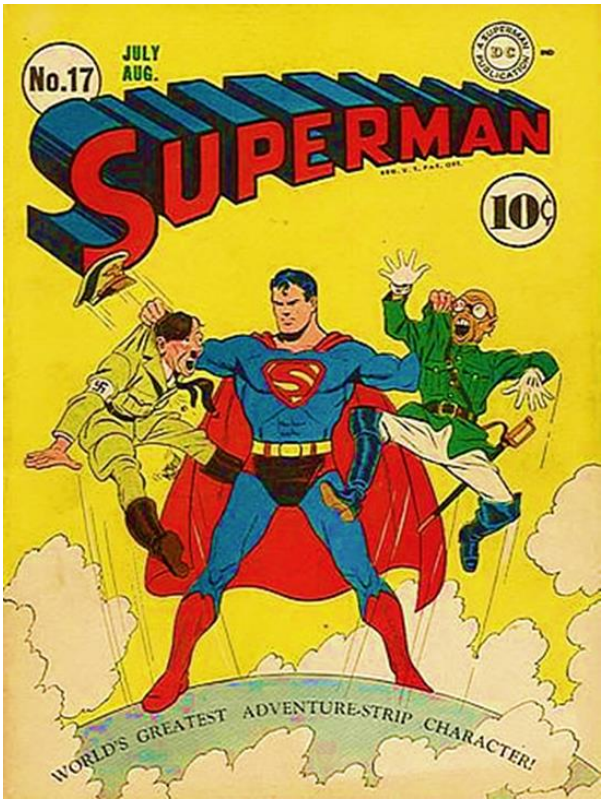
Consider also the "Dark Brandon" memes that gained traction in 2022 and were since officially embraced as a component of Biden's 2024 Presidential re-election campaign (Romano; 2023) [**Fig. 19**]. The origin of Dark Brandon memes – as Vanessa Romo puts it – 'like all things internet is a series of takes on takes' (2023). To summarize this complex phenomenon: Dark Brandon memes appropriate the aesthetics of QAnon/Alt-Right "Dark MAGA" memes – often featuring a "super-mode" Trump with glowing eyes – as well as the phrase "Let's Go Brandon" which (as a result of a conflation by a journalist at a 2021 NASCAR race) came to be an ironically encoded message meaning: "Fuck Joe Biden." Biden supporters leaned into the "Brandon" label, and appropriated the dark-MAGA imagery, creating countless memes juxtaposing Biden's good-natured, old-fashioned, doddering image with that of a transcendent, glowing eyed, demi-God [**Fig. 20**].

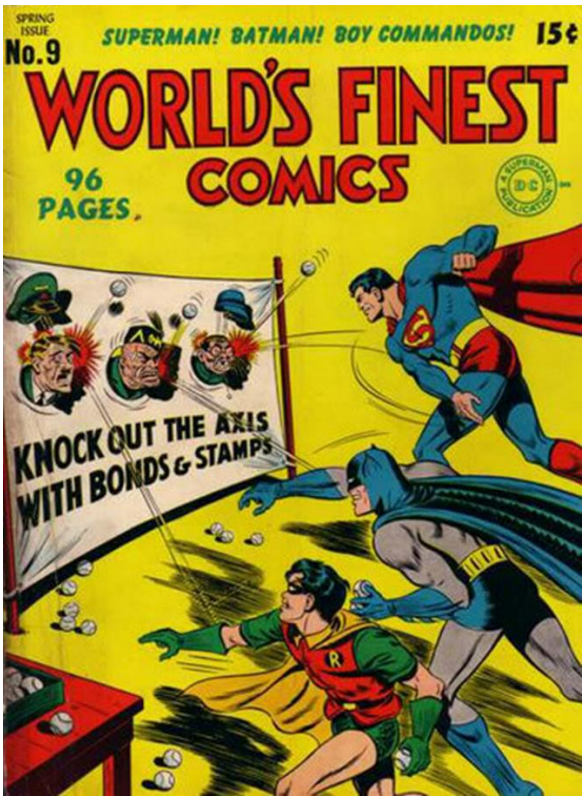




Fantasy Heroes Versus Real World Problems

The inevitably problematic clash between cultural myths and actual global conflict – that is, between fantasy and reality – is on clear display on an iconic 1942 comic book cover (by Fred Ray) on which Superman (created by Siegel and Shuster for DC comics in 1938) hoists a shocked Adolph Hitler and Hideki Tojo aloft by the collar [**Fig. 23**]. Whatever its intended message may be, the image unavoidably calls attention to the fantastical and ideological nature of the so-called "superhero." Likewise, the 1943 comic book (by Jack Burnley) on which Superman, Batman, and Robin pummel Hitler, Mussolini, and Tojo in the face with baseballs(!) foregrounds the propagandistic nature of the medium [**Fig. 24**].

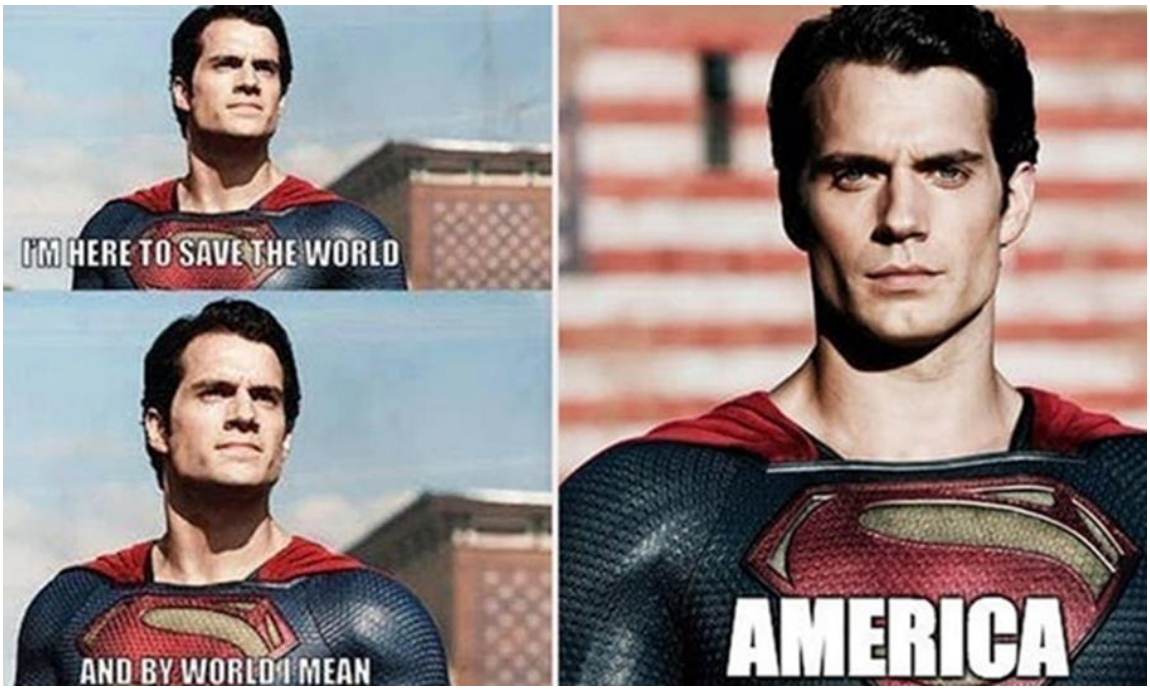


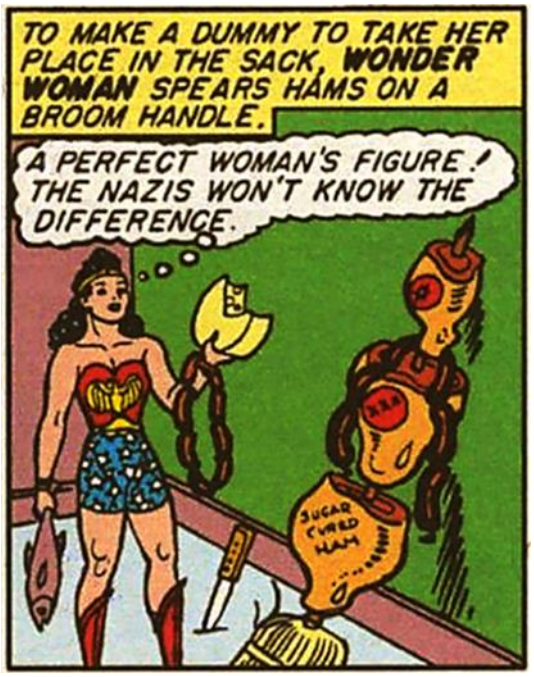


To imagine a battle between Superman and Hitler is to be reminded that superheroes do not exist. And if Superman did exist, what reason is there to believe that he would – as the *Adventures of Superman* on radio (1940-1951) television (1950-1958) and film (*Superman,* 1978) all proclaimed: "fight a never-ending battle for truth, justice, and the American way"?[113]

[113] Superman stood for 'truth and justice' in the television series *Lois and Clark* (1993-1997) and for 'truth, justice [and] all that stuff' in the film reboot *Superman Returns* (2006). In 2021, DC officially updated the slogan to 'truth, justice, and a better tomorrow' (Helmore; 2021).

[**Fig. 25:** Featuring Henry Cavill as "the man of steel," this meme satirizes the absurdity of Superman's allegiance to a single nation, whether or not he was "raised" there.][114]





DC comics continued to struggle with reality meets fantasy complexities in a 1942 storyline by Marston and Peter ('The Mystery of the House of Seven Gables;' *Comic Cavalcade #1*) in which Wonder Woman came up with a brilliant plan – not to annihilate the Nazis with her God-like powers – but to fool them with sugar cured hams(!) [**Fig. 26**]. These complications remained on display in the 2012 film *Wonder Woman,* in which the God/Hero found herself battling proto-Nazi archetypes during WWI, but unable to definitively defeat them. Neither was she able to prevent WWII or Hitler's rise to power, apparently, because the follow-up film, revealingly titled *Wonder Woman 1984* (2020) takes place in the historical 1980s.

[114] A 2003 comic series (by Mark Millar) entitled *Superman: Red Son* (animated for the screen in 2020) imagined the significant consequences of an alternate-reality in which the infant Kal-El's spaceship crash landed, not in Kansas, but in the USSR. Incidentally,

By contrast, in 1941 (more than a year ahead of the DC storylines above) Marvel comics pioneered an effective strategy in *Captain America #1*. The acclaimed cover (by Simon and Kirby) introduced the character of Captain America to the American public; while in the act of punching Hitler in the face. Furthermore, one of the storylines within the book – 'The Riddle of the Red Skull,' written by Ed Herron – matches the American super-soldier, not against Hitler, but a fantastical *super-Nazi* known as the Red Skull [**Figs. 27 & 28**].







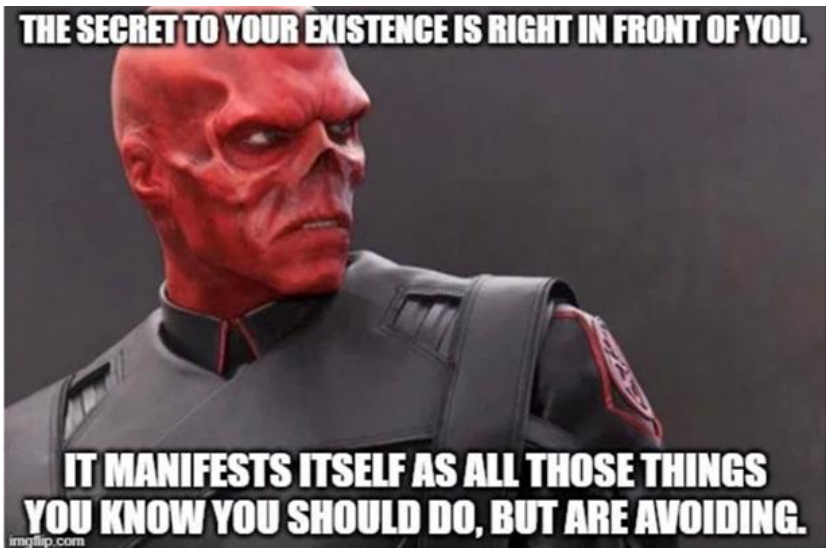
In 1965 – three years after the unveiling of SPECTRE – Marvel Comics introduced HYDRA. In ALL CAPS for no apparent reason, HYDRA is a fascist, occult, Nazi-*esque* organization. In an act of apparent one-upmanship, the insignia of HYDRA awkwardly features, not the multi-*headed* Hydra of Greek mythology, but a skull atop a multi-*limbed* monster [**Fig. 29**] along with the explicit threat that for each head cut off 'two more shall take its place!' (Lee and Ditko; *Strange Tales #135*). Notably, HYDRA's oath overtly invoked the 3rd Reich: 'Hail, HYDRA! Immortal HYDRA! We shall never be destroyed! […] We serve none but the Master – as the world shall soon serve us! Hail HYDRA!' (ibid).

Ironic(?) Fascism and the Banality of (Evil) Memes

In a related example of ever-expanding intertextual and self-referential contexts, an Internet trend emerged in April 2021, in which quotes of Jordan Peterson were memed in conjunction with images of HYDRA's leader the Red Skull. The unlikely alignment between Peterson (a conservative academic) and the Red Skull (originally conceived as a super-powered Nazi) stemmed from a comic book storyline by celebrated author Ta-Nehisi Coates (*Captain America.* Vol 9. No. 28) in which the Red Skull's language and recruitment tactics – "10 rules for life," "the feminist trap," and "chaos and order" – were overt references to prominent themes explored by Peterson (e.g., *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*; 2018).

Peterson – whose greater body of work in psychoanalysis is set decidedly against political fascism (e.g., *Maps of Meaning: The Architecture of Belief;* 1999) – expressed shock that such a comparison would be made, asking on *Twitter* on April 6: 'Do I really live in a universe where Ta-Nehisi Coates has written a Captain America comic featuring a parody of my ideas as part of the philosophy of the arch villain Red Skull?' (Flood; 2021). Within hours of Peterson's post on *Twitter*, the comparison was "leaned into" – i.e., appropriated – by Peterson and his fans, turning the situation on its head. Peterson, himself, made and posted the first of many such memes, less than one day after publicly commenting on the issue.

[**Fig. 30:** A meme posted on *Twitter* by Peterson on April 7 beneath the text: "Red Skull Says" (@jordanbpeterson). **Fig. 31:** A characteristic example of a Red Skull Jordan Peterson meme.]





This is a complex situation, to be sure, as Peterson – despite his anti-fascism activism – has also frequently embraced socially conservative positions which have been characterized as totalitarian, patriarchal, homophobic, misogynistic, or transphobic (Lynskey; 2018). Peterson has also endorsed and collaborated with numerous popular, but toxic, figures of the "man-o-sphere," such as occasional conspiracy theorist Joe Rogan and radical conservative pundit Ben Shapiro. Since 2021, Red Skull Peterson memes have been created by those *across* the political spectrum, featuring not only some of Peterson's most insightful statements, but also some of his most banal. Indeed, it can be difficult to say at times whether a given meme is pro-Peterson, anti-Peterson, or something else [**Fig. 32**].



On April 9, less than 72 hours after the initial Red Skull post, Peterson – who, for complicated reasons, adopted the lobster symbol as a personal brand in 2018 – launched a line of "Hail Lobster" merchandise, with all proceeds going toward charity. He eloquently tweeted: 'Out of ignorance, malevolence, and slander, we will thereby derive some palpable good: https://linktr.ee/haillobster - 100% of proceeds go to charity' (@jordanbpeterson). By October 8, Peterson had donated a portion of the proceeds (presumably half) to the Boys and Girls Club of America, and the remaining $70,000 to a (now undisclosed) Canadian non-profit organization affiliated with the University of Toronto where Peterson, at the time, was professor emeritus. A *YouTube* video created by Peterson's daughter – the coordinator of the "Hail Lobster" campaign – disclosed that the Executive Director of the unnamed organization returned the donation along with an email stating in part: 'Regarding your publicly announced initiative […] we

respectfully decline as we did not agree to such an arrangement' (2021: 01:15). In Mikhailia Peterson's words: A charity associated with the U of T gave back $70,000 worth of donations donated from a U of T professor. You cannot make this stuff up' (01:25).

[**Fig. 33:** Peterson's "Hail Lobster" Logo. **Fig. 34:** Mikhaila Peterson's claim that the decision to reject the donation was 'ideologically possessed to the brim' (@MikhailiaAleksis).]

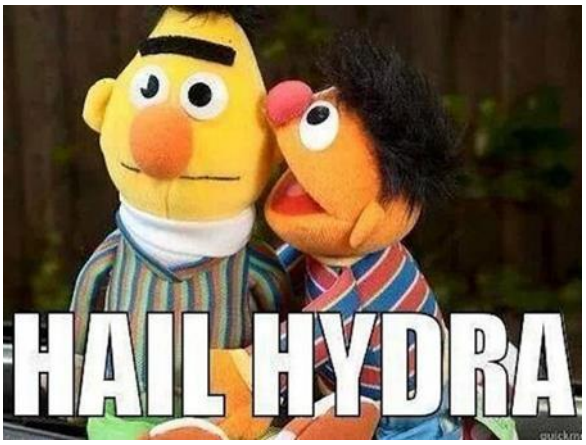


Red Skull Peterson memes are admittedly of debatable significance within the larger contexts of my praxis. Yet, it is important to observe the myriad ways in which the semiotics of fascism and resistance have continually oscillated between objectification and appropriation; and indeed – as was the case with Chaplin and Hitler – between fiction and reality. It is notable, and potentially even admirable, that Peterson ironically appropriated the image of the Red Skull as a platform for his own ideas which, taken on the whole, are far from "evil." On the other hand, the appropriation of an established fictional *super-Nazi* (an embodiment of the worst aspects of humanity) as one's personal avatar, is undeniably problematic.

While many Red Skull Peterson memes are humorous, the larger context of these symbols is hardly laughable. How, then, did this complex situation come about? A partial explanation is that in 2014, largely owing to the success of the Marvel Cinematic Universe and the *Captain America* film trilogy (2011-2016), numerous HYDRA internet trends emerged. The relatively straightforward "Hail HYDRA" Internet meme template of 2014, for example, depicted unlikely personalities whispering the HYDRA salute into another's ear [Figs. 33 & 34].

[**Figs. 35 & 36**]





These playfully ironic memes were, of course, quickly put to political use in countless variations including world leaders including Vladimir Putin and Barrack Obama [**Fig. 37**], as well as Hillary Clinton, Joe Biden, George W. Bush, and Donald Trump [**Fig. 38**].





[**Fig. 39:** A characteristic Red Skull Jordan Peterson meme. **Fig. 40:** A twisted "Hail HYDRA" meme in which Captain America declares allegiance to HYDRA after discovering Peterson's involvement.]





In ‘It Wasn’t Just the Trolls,’ internet culture and trolling expert Whitney Phillips describes the dark relationship between irony and fascism present in the aesthetics and ethics of so-called ‘meme culture’ or ‘internet culture’ during 2008-2012, pointing out that rather than reflecting the culture of the “internet” at large, this culture was, in fact, representative of only a very specific subculture (2019: 2). Examining how this internet subculture of “trolling” came to influence the 2016 presidential election, Phillips argues that:

> …Many of the young reporters who initially helped amplify the white nationalist “alt right” by pointing and laughing at them, had all come up in and around internet culture-type circles. They may not have been trolls themselves, but their familiarity with trolling subculture […] perfectly prepped them for pro-Trump shitposting (ibid).

Describing the progression from ‘winking racist memes to winking radicalization efforts through exposure to those memes to winking journalistic baiting using, you guessed it, memes…’ (3), Phillips continues:

> They knew what this was. This was just trolls being trolls. This was just 4chan being 4chan. This was just the internet. Those Swastikas didn’t *mean* anything. They recognized the clothes the wolf was wearing […] and so they didn’t recognize the wolf. This was how the wolf operated: by exploiting the fact that so many (white) people have been trained not to take the things that happen on the internet very seriously. They operated by laundering hate into the mainstream through “ironically” racist memes, then using all that laughter as a radicalization and recruitment tool. They operated by drawing from the media manipulation strategies of the subcultural trolls who came before, back when these behaviors were, to some anyway, still pretty funny (ibid).

In a similar vein, David Auerbach – also an expert on internet culture – observed that on internet image boards, such as 4chan and 8chan, ‘There was always the issue of, OK, well, are we just being ironic Nazis here or are we being actual Nazis?’ (2017). According to Auerbach in 2017, ‘if I look on some of these boards now, it seems a lot less ironic than it did back then’ (ibid). While the razor’s edge between ironic Naziism and actual white supremacist fascist ideology has been deeply interrogated by Phillips, Auerbach, and others, less attention has been given to the ironic *fictional* fascism which lies at the heart of the HYDRA phenomenon.

As a fictional super-evil secret organization, HYDRA occupies a similar position in popular culture as the Illuminati, but with at least one significant difference. Owing to the massive popularity of the Marvel Cinematic Universe – owned by Disney since 2009 – the fictional nature of HYDRA is not disputed. Consider, then, the following description of an alleged

incident circulated online in 2015. On the message board *Imgur*, an anonymous user posted an image of a business card featuring the HYDRA insignia and slogan, claiming: 'Someone turned my lost wallet in to the police station. This card was not there before.' This same image and text were reposted on *Onsizzle.com* in 2016, on *Me.me* in 2019, and presumably, numerous other places across the Internet [**Fig. 41**].



Among the 344 comments posted in response on *Imgur* [https://imgur.com/gallery/JIshhkJ] some maintained the *fictional* circumstances of the event:

- 'You are now indebted to them. They will call on you soon.'
- 'You're now a member of HYDRA! Hail HYDRA!'
- 'Plot twist: HYDRA indoctrination tactic.'

Other comments address the *actual* circumstances:

- 'I am so getting business cards like this and just randomly hand them out.'
- 'If this is some kind of new viral marketing technique, then holy crap.'
- 'Someone spray-painted "hail hydra" on a building in my town recently.'

Another person claimed to participate in similar activities:

- 'I have a HYDRA pin on my coat. No one has recognized it yet. Half expected to get tackled by someone wearing a Captain America t-shirt.'

Incidentally, the majority of the comments simply call attention to the grammatical error on the printed card. One comment, for instance, says:

- 'A card claiming to be from genuine Nazi terrorists and 80% of the comments are from the grammar Nazis – which are worse?'

It should be noted that all of these comments, which may or may not be sincere, are being made in response to the description of an event, which may or may not have happened. Regardless, the above comment is incorrect. HYDRA is not, of course, a *genuine* Nazi terrorist organization, but rather, a *fictional* Nazi terrorist organization which, over time, became a fictional Nazi-*esque* terrorist organization. Such differences do matter. But what does is say that people seem to find enjoyment or friendship by pretending to belong to this organization? And what does it mean to belong to a community of those who do likewise?

Again, this is a complex situation. On one hand, this is a humorous framework through which to do good deeds. As strange as it may seem to claim allegiance to HYDRA, SPECTRE, or the Illuminati, it might be even stranger to claim membership in the "good" organizations (such as the Avengers or the Justice League) which might be suggestive of a narcissistic or pathological "hero complex." The irony implicit in aligning with "the baddies" would seem to be the primary source of the fun. On the other hand, where exactly is the *fun* in pretending to belong to a fictional Nazi-*eque* terrorist organization? Why HYDRA? Why not the League of Shadows? Or SPECTRE? Of all fictional secret organizations, why the fictional *Nazi* organization?

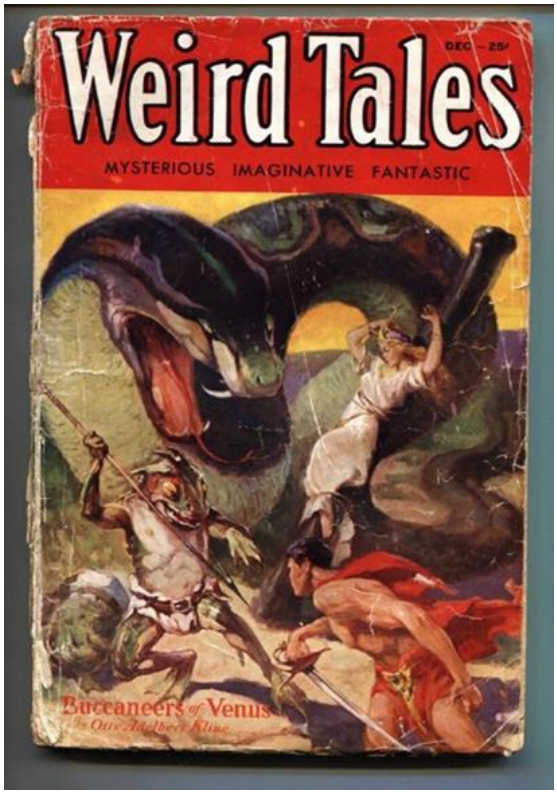
One can never play lightly at being a Nazi. This was a lesson which Prince Harry learned when he attended a costume party "ironically" dressed as a Nazi officer in 2005; recently describing the incident as 'one of the biggest mistakes of my life' (*Harry & Meghan*; 2022: Ep. 3). Some aspects of history and culture are so devastatingly imbued with meaning that they cannot be *played at* without simultaneously invoking the real. As Baudrillard put it, one cannot organize a fake hold-up without finding oneself 'immediately, in the real' (1981: 20). I admit that such a "deep" analysis of the seemingly "shallow" pop-cultural subject HYDRA may appear to extend somewhat beyond the ideal scope of my praxis. This, however, is precisely my reason for examining it.

"Ironic" culture extends across a wide network of intertextual references and contexts. To tug on one strand is to invoke the entire network, whether intentionally or not. Just as the – at first glance, humorous – invocations of HYDRA insidiously pave the way for increasingly less ironic displays of fascism, political extremism, and violence, the mainstreaming of ironic(?) genocide by the zombie apocalypse scenario has the potential to do the same. Thus, the popular "keep calm and kill zombies" meme is as loaded with genocidal implications as it is "harmless." (See: Chapter Two: 'Apocalypse Culture').

HYDRA, SPECTRE, Reptilians, and the "Deep State"

In 2005, the origins of HYDRA were (re)invented or "retconned" (a portmanteau meaning "retroactive continuity"). As a result, HYDRA became a cabal – not of Nazis – but of immortal intergalactic reptilians which laid the seeds to ensure the triumph of evil (*Wolverine*, Vol. 3: No. 29; written by Mark Millar). Significantly, the reptilian conspiracy theory was gaining popularity during that same time. David Icke had published his first book on this topic, *The Biggest Secret,* in 1999. Although plainly ludicrous on the surface, a widely cited 2013 Public Policy Poll found that approximately 4% of Americans claimed to subscribe to this theory, and nearly twice as many reported being 'not sure' (Bump, 2013; Oksman, 2016).

Fittingly, the reptilian conspiracy theory popularized by Icke – and subsequently adopted by Marvel – appears to have originated in a pulp fiction magazine. According to Michael Barkun, in his 2013 book *A Culture of Conspiracy,* the reptilian conspiracy theory entered into mainstream consciousness through a 1929 illustrated pulp story entitled 'The Shadow Kingdom' (*Weird Tales;* Aug, 1929). This story, written by Robert Howard, featured an Atlantean hero named King Kull; the forerunner to Howard's iconic character Conan the Barbarian [**Fig. 42**].



Barkun argues that Howard's shape-shifting, mind-controlling "serpent men" are an amalgam of the purported civilizations of Lemurian "dragon-men" and Atlanteans described in Helena Blavatsky's 1888 theosophical work *The Secret Doctrine,* further noting that Howard's pulp fiction is the most likely influence for Maurice Doreal's (aka Claude Doggins) pamphlet *Mysteries of the Gobi,* and poem 'The Emerald Tablets,' which describe a similar race. According to Barkun, these sources formed the basis for David Icke's 2001 follow up book *Children of the Matrix.* Icke's theories, then, may be viewed as a synthesis of turn of the century dragon-men mythologies and the anti-Semitic forgery *The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion,* which Icke frequently cites throughout his works as "evidence" (Rosenberg; 2018).

Furthermore, a poll released in May 2021, by the Public Religion Research Institute and the Interfaith Youth Core, revealed that the continually evolving conspiracy movement QAnon was 'as popular in [the] US as some major religions' (Russonello; 2021). The poll also found that 20% of Americans claimed to think that 'a biblical-scale storm would soon sweep away these evil elites' and 'restore the rightful leaders' (ibid). Further, only 20% of Republicans and 58% of Democrats fully rejected the statements that 'the levers of power are controlled by a cabal of Satan-worshipping paedophiles' and that 'American patriots may have to resort to violence' to overthrow the above (ibid).

The term "deep state" or "*derin devlet*" originated in Turkey in the 1920s to describe actual intergovernmental cabals and plots. The term was applied to the British government by John Le Carre in his 2013 spy novel *A Delicate Truth.* The following year, the term was applied to the US government – in an essay entitled 'Anatomy of the Deep State' by career congressional staffer Mike Lofgren – to describe 'a hybrid association of elements of government and parts of top-level finance and industry that is effectively able to govern the United States without reference to the consent of the governed' (2014; 2016). The term did not enter mainstream usage until 2017, when it was used frequently on *Breitbart, Fox News*, and by (then) President Trump, to describe his political and personal enemies. At a 2018 rally, for instance, Trump asserted that 'unelected, deep state operatives who defy the voters, to push their own secret agendas, are truly a threat to democracy itself' (Myre and Treisman, 2019).

The *idea* of a Deep State, on the other hand, is hardly recent. Fictional and unfictional evil shadow organizations or races – including SPECTRE, HYDRA, the Illuminati, the New World Order, Globalists, Satanists, and reptilians (among others) – have served a similar conspiracy narrative function for more than a century. Indeed, if there is one constant in the diverse and incoherent set of claims supported and promoted in conspiracy fantasy movements, it is the continued assertion of the existence of a "globalist cabal" and/or corresponding "shadow governments" or "Deep States." Thus, in contemporary American politics, the term "Deep State" has evolved into a means for *actual* anti-constitutional actors to position themselves against *imaginary* enemies.

Consider, for instance, the following remarkable exchange between former *Fox News* host Tucker Carlson and retired General and *former US National Security* Advisor Michael Flynn in 2021. At that time, Flynn was a prominent advocate for the QAnon movement (Millward; 2020)

and Carlson's program *Tucker Carlson Tonight* was the most highly viewed cable TV news show in history, drawing an average audience of nearly 4.5 million viewers nightly (Katz; 2021).

> Flynn: We have two separate governments. We have the one that actually gets elected and goes into office. And then you have a government inside of Washington D.C. that operates under no rules, no authorities, other than their own or whoever's in charge…
>
> Carlson: (Interjecting) And it sounds like that government was still controlled by Barrack Obama.
>
> Flynn: Yeah. And I would say that, to a degree, is what we're operating with today.

It should be noted that Flynn plead guilty to a felony for lying to the FBI during the Special Counsel investigation of Russian interference in the 2016 election and received a presidential pardon during Trump's final days in office. In 2020, Flynn livestreamed footage of himself taking the QAnon "digital soldier's oath" and, in the midst of the "stop the steal" movement, privately met with (and publicly advised) Trump to invoke Martial Law in order to suspend the constitution, silence the press, and hold a new election under military authority (Millward; 2020). These actions prompted *TIME Magazine* to ask, 'Five years ago would you have imagined that a retired three-star general would be calling for a coup in America at a convention of conspiracy theorists in Texas?' (Houlahan and Crow; 2021).

In 2023, Carlson – who often endorsed racist and sexist views and conspiracy theories (Graziosi; 2023) on his program – was fired by Fox News the same week the network agreed to pay nearly $800 million to settle a defamation lawsuit advanced by Dominion Voting Systems. The decision to deplatform Carlson was reportedly based on the content of text messages (subpoenaed for the defamation case) in which he, among other things, used racist language while offering a qualified endorsement of extreme political violence (Peters, et al; 2023).

Amidst these real attempts at conspiracy and coups, lie the imaginary conspiracy fantasies of Deep State shadow operatives and stolen elections. As real acts of conspiracy and insurrection are investigated and prosecuted by legitimate institutions according to due process and the constitutional rule of law, baseless claims have evolved and escalated. Although the QAnon movement focussed on alleged satanic ritual abuse in its earliest "Pizzagate" iteration, conspiracy fantasies rapidly evolved to include baseless claims of systemic election fraud.

As a narrative that attempts to discredit the very authorities with the ability to discredit the narrative, the election fraud theory has proven more persuasive and lasting than the patently absurd claims of SRA. Certainly, the opaque nature of software programs, the very real risks of foreign or domestic cyber interference, and the manipulation of electorates via disinformation and social media all pose a genuine threat to democratic elections and institutions, and by extension, to democratic societies. These genuine and legitimate concerns make the emerging election fraud conspiracy fantasies particularly insidious and destructive.

Ultimately, the creation, circulation, appropriation, reappropriation, and misappropriation of symbols and labels – as well as the consequences of those actions – as described above, leads to a question: Might it be that submersion in the "good guy" vs "bad guy" dichotomy of modern super-spy and superhero fiction, may lead some individuals to develop narcissistic hero complexes in which they, in turn, fabricate "bad guys" in order to vindicate their own misguided heroic narcissism? If one needs to feel special, does one also need a SPECTRE? Or a HYDRA? Or a Deep State? Or a zombie apocalypse? These questions are addressed throughout my practice and dissertation.

[**Fig. 43:** The tentacles of the octopus and on the body of a flea (both of which are frequently employed symbols in anti-Semitic propaganda) encircle the Star of David on the cover of a 1976 Egyptian edition of *The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*.
Fig. 44: The roots of Trump's phantom "Deep State" enemy extend deep underground from the US White House; as if tentacles of an octopus.]





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Fig. 5 Horski, Stefan (1945) *Muselmänner Supplementing their Diet*.

Fig. 6 Mahoney, James (1847) 'Irish Great Famine.' *The Illustrated London News.* 13 Feb. https://viewsofthefamine.wordpress.com/illustrated-london-news/sketches-in-the-west-of-ireland/ [Accessed: 2 May 2024]

Fig. 9 Plank, Josef AKA Seppla (Ca. 1938) 'Churchill as Zionist Octopus encircling the Globe.' https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/churchill/interactive/_html/wc0213.html [Accessed 2 May 2024]

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Fig. 21 Ray, Fred (1942) *Superman #17*. Jul-Aug. Cover Artist. DC Comics.

Fig. 22 Burnley, Jack (1943) *World's Finest Comics. #9*. Spring. Cover Artist. DC Comics.

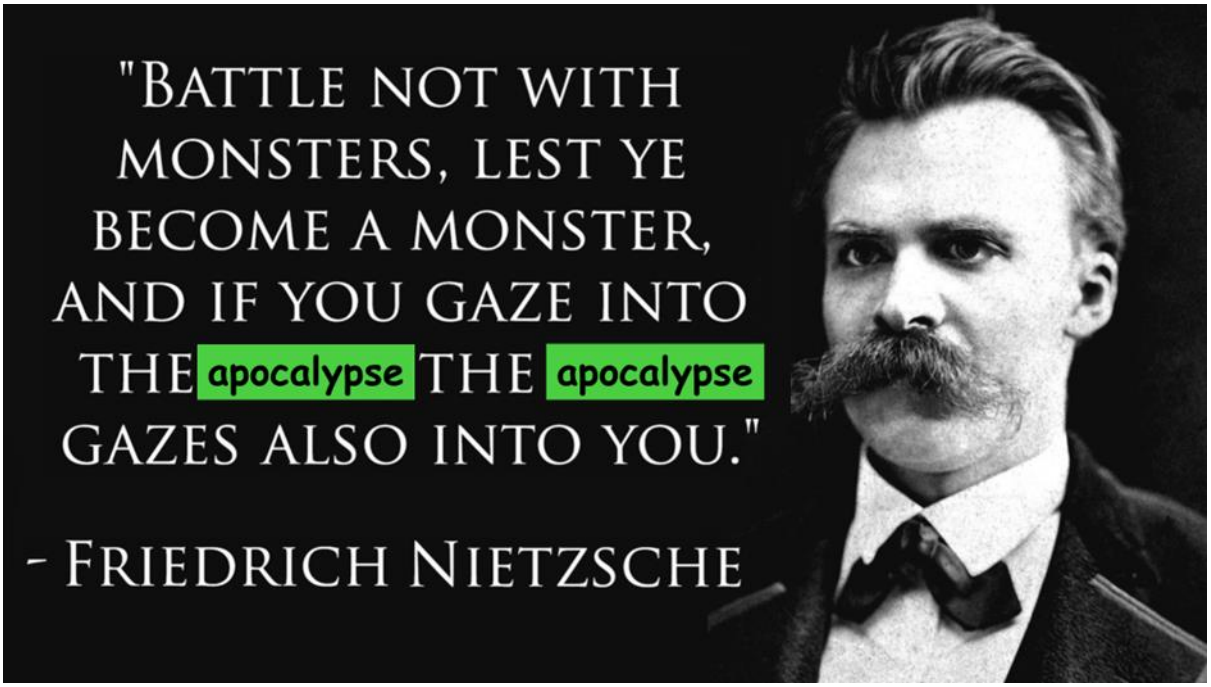
Fig. 24 Marston, William and Harry Peter (1942) 'The Mystery of the House of Seven Gables.' *Comic Cavalcade #1.* Winter. DC Comics.

Fig. 25 Simon, Joe and Jack Kirby (1941) *Captain America #1*. Marvel Comics.

Fig. 26 Lee, Stan and Steve Ditko (1965) *Strange Tales #135*. Aug. Marvel Comics.

Fig. 27 Simon, Joe and Jack Kirby (1941) *Captain America #1*. Mar. Marvel Comics.

MAPPING THE APOCALYPTIC IMAGINARY



Battle not with monsters lest ye become a monster yourself. And if you gaze into the **APOCALYPSE**, the **APOCALYPSE** gazes also into you.

- Friedrich Nietzsche and Scotty McQueen
Beyond Good and Evil; 1886/2024: Aphorism 146z

Battle not with monsters lest ye become a monster yourself. And if you gaze long into the abyss, the abyss gazes also into you.

- Friedrich Nietzsche
Beyond Good and Evil; 1886: Aphorism 146

> (a) those that belong to the Emperor; (b) embalmed ones; (c) those that are trained; (d) suckling pigs; (e) mermaids; (f) fabulous ones; (g) stray dogs; (h) those that are included in this classification; (i) those that tremble as if they were mad; (j) innumerable ones; (k) those drawn with a very fine camel's-hair brush; (l) et cetera; (m) those that have just broken the flower vase; (n) those that at a distance resemble flies…
>
> - Jorge Luis Borges ("Taxonomy of Animals," *Selected Non-Fictions.* 1999)

For reasons outlined in the introductory chapters, it became necessary during the course of this praxis, to analyse and categorize the broad spectrum of apocalypticism in popular culture. The act of categorizing, however – as illustrated by Borges' delightful taxonomy of animals [above] – is often highly subjective (1999: 231). Nevertheless, considering the popularity of apocalyptic ideation in contemporary fictional, unfictional, and educational contexts, I will broadly outline the historical origins and evolutions of popular apocalyptic scenarios. In doing this, I identify seven major *waves* of popular apocalypticism. I chose the term "wave" to reflect the ways in which apocalyptic threat scenarios emerge from the same collective source, and follow one after the other – like separate waves crashing on the shore – while also overlapping and combining in immeasurable ways. The seven major waves are:

- The Rapture
- Alien Invasion
- Atomic
- Monsters
- Pandemic / Plague
- Artificial Intelligence
- Climate Crisis

In addition to the seven waves, I identified four major *categories* of apocalyptic threats:

- Supernatural
- Extraterrestrial
- Artificial
- Natural

Each of the above waves and categories – like Borges' categories of animals – overlap in absurdly messy ways. For example, the "monster" wave of apocalyptic fiction includes man-eating plants. Yet the categorisation of man-eating plants includes *natural* man-eating plants

(Wells, 1894; Clarke, 1956; Corman, 1960), *bioengineered* man-eating plants (Wyndham; 1951), and man-eating plants *from outer space* (Campbell, 1938; Ashman/Menken, 1982). Thus, man-eating plants potentially occupy at least three of the four major categories, and four of the seven major waves of popular apocalypticism. Much the same can be said of the fictional concept of giant beasts: Some are mutated by radiation; some are caused by pollution; some are released by nuclear blasts; some come from outer space; and some – as in the case of Sasquatch and other cryptids – are argued to be either biologically natural, extraterrestrial, interdimensional, or divine. In the final analysis, do such differences matter?

In a glib, yet insightful, review of the 2010 remake of George Romero's 1973 pandemic-apocalypse film *The Crazies*, Roger Ebert wrote:

> I suppose it would be a "spoiler" if I revealed why the Crazies are on the lurch, but come on, does it matter? What if I revealed they got that way because of, oh, say, eating Pringles? Would that spoil things for you? What difference does it make? All that matters is that they got to be zombies somehow. Before that, they were your friends and neighbors. Then they started in on the damn Pringles (2010).

As Ebert's review suggests, when it comes to representations of the apocalypse, details are often trivial. My intention, therefore, is to paint the evolution of the apocalyptic imaginary with broad strokes in order to identify recurring patterns or divergent outliers. Although I endeavour to include the most prominent themes, the examples I provide (including films, novels, short stories, and educational contexts) are not exhaustive. Still, this wide-ranging survey of popular apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic narratives is not merely a pointless exercise in organization. My aim is to inform my praxis in this area by reflecting upon the scope and progression of apocalyptic narratives, so as to better assess when, where, and how, stories of this nature have been leveraged in cultural, political, and educational contexts. Such contexts include, for example – not only the aforementioned "zombie apocalypse" scenario – but also the American civil defence "duck and cover" campaign; the "Judgement Day" scenario of church sermons and Bible school classes; and many others. For better and for worse, the "apocalypse" has long been used as a tool to influence *the present* on the basis of an imaginary future.

The First Wave of the Apocalypse: The Rapture

According to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), the term "apocalypse" has two meanings. The first – 'an event involving destruction or damage on a catastrophic scale' – is the meaning employed throughout this dissertation. In this vein, one of the most popular modern uses of the term "apocalypse" is the provocative title of Francis Ford Coppola's 1979 war film *Apocalypse Now*, set in Vietnam in 1969 and loosely adapted from Joseph Conrad's 1899 colonial critique *The Heart of Darkness*. Aside from the fact that war is always an apocalyptic event for the affected communities, *Apocalypse Now* bears no relationship with apocalypticism, per se. Sean Hutchinson asserts that this title was selected by screenwriter John Milus as a way of 'making fun of hippies' by ironically inverting a popular slogan of California hippies at that time: "Nirvana Now" (2019).

The second, and original, meaning of "apocalypse," according to the OED, is 'the complete final destruction of the world, as described in the Biblical book of Revelation.' This term is derived from a literal translation of the Greek word *apokálypsis,* meaning "to uncover or reveal." Both the Old Testament (Books of 'Daniel' and 'Ezekial') and the New Testament (Books of 'Matthew,' 'Luke,' and 'Revelation') include apocalyptic prophecies. The Biblical apocalypse predicted in the Book of Revelation is known by many names: the Rapture, the Revelation, the Apocalypse of John, the End of Times, Judgment Day, Doomsday, Armageddon, and the Second Coming, among others. According to this narrative – which has influenced actions and behaviours of millions of adherents for more than two millennia – when the world descends deeply enough into sin and decadence, the "righteous" and the "wicked" will be judged; and punished or rewarded accordingly.

Versions and variations of this narrative are found (and debated) within many religions including Catholicism, Protestantism, Adventism, Jehovah's Witness, Evangelical Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Thus, beyond being a compelling narrative, the "apocalypse" has been wielded as an unfictional tool for influencing behaviours since Biblical times. Today, these stories influence both popular culture and sociopolitical events, sometimes in tragic ways. In 'Apocalyptic Discourse and Strategies of Goodness,' Wayne Meeks notes that at the heart of the tragedies of the Heaven's Gate, Waco, and Jonestown cults, were 'episodes of acted-out apocalyptic fantasies' (2000: 461).

Regarding common usages of the Rapture in teaching and learning scenarios, including Bible school, catechism, and sermons, Ian Smith writes in 'The Economics of the Apocalypse: Modelling the Biblical Book of Revelation,' that (emphasis added) 'using extensive symbolic imagery, John augments the *imagination capital* of believers, seeking to reduce their discount on afterlife outcomes and remove the incentive to participate in pagan idolatry' (1999: 443). More specifically, according to Smith, 'non-participation in pagan idolatry incurred present costs but would be compensated with future rewards. Conversely, accommodation to pagan religion risked incurring severe future divine penalties' (ibid). Beyond this basic stick and carrot approach to morality, apocalypticism is complexly integrated into contemporary conspiracy fantasy movements, such as the rhetoric of QAnon[115] wherein the term "the storm is coming" has been used to denote not only the alleged purging of the "Deep State" / "Satanic Cabal," but also to imply that this divinely inspired political purge will coincide with the Rapture itself. Such usages include – not only the cost/benefit relationship outlined by Smith – but also the desire to believe that one's enemies will suffer or be punished.

Despite (or, perhaps, because of) the long-lasting and widespread popularity of the Rapture as an unfictional narrative, this event has not been widely portrayed in popular fiction. In recent decades, however, this has begun to change. The most notable example is the popular *Left Behind* franchise, featuring 16 best-selling novels (1995-2007) by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins and several feature films, as well as graphic novels, video games, spin-off book series, a young adult series of 40 novellas. The original film trilogy – consisting of *Left Behind: The Movie* (2000), *Left Behind II: Tribulation Force* (2002), and *World at War* (2005) – starred 1980s television star Kirk Cameron. The 2014 reboot, titled simply *Left Behind,* starred Nicholas Cage. A film adaptation of the first novella of the young adult series was released in 2016 and a sequel to the 2014 reboot *Left Behind: Rise of the Anti-Christ* premiered in 2023. The titles of these films provide an indication of the militant language employed across the series, which revolves around a seven-year battle following the Rapture (in which the "righteous" have ascended to heaven, leaving the "wicked" behind). The battle occurs between a group of born-

[115] It is worth noting, that "Q" – as an abbreviation of the German *quelle*, meaning "source" – is the designation commonly provided to the canon of Jesus' direct teachings (Tuckett; 1995). Although this "Q" is seldom (if ever) discussed in relationship to the anonymous figure "Q" behind QAnon (emerging in 2017) this connection should not be discounted. The more prevalent (and, in my opinion, persuasive) association pertains to "Q-Clearance," a top-secret designation issued by the Department of Energy, and featured on the 'Nellis' (i.e., Area 51) episode of the *FX* adult animated spy/assassin satire *Archer* in 2015 (S06 E07).

again Christians – called Tribulation Force – and an evil global organization led by a politician who, unbeknownst to those outside of Tribulation Force, is also literally the Antichrist. The similarities between the *Left Behind* saga and the "storm" mythology of QAnon conspiracy narratives are striking.

Somewhat resistant to classification is Ingmar Bergman's 1957 masterpiece *The Seventh Seal,* set during the Black Death (i.e., bubonic plague) of the mid-14th century. In a sense, *The Seventh Seal* anticipates the pandemic/plague wave of apocalyptic cinema of the 1960s, yet, the film also contains multiple references to the Biblical apocalypse, including the title.[116] *The Seventh Seal* is unique in exploring the Rapture through the lens of a historical plague. In doing so, the film raises an interesting question: Did the Apocalypse begin long ago? As a *historical* fantasy, however, the film by no means presents an apocalyptic vision of the *future.*

Also of note is the 1991 indie-thriller *The Rapture* starring Mimi Rogers and David Duchovny. This film, and Rogers' performance in particular, drew critical acclaim and rave reviews (e.g., Ebert; 1991). The plot depicts the horrors which can come from believing in – or raising children to believe in – "heaven" and the Rapture. The conclusion, however, seems to portray the Rapture's onset; somewhat vindicating the protagonist's abhorrent actions. Among the more fascinating aspects of *The Rapture* is the involvement of Rogers, who was raised within the Church of Scientology and is credited with introducing Tom Cruise (whom she later married and divorced) to the organization. Rogers left the Church of Scientology by 2001, but had previously praised it as 'an excellent system of belief to grow up with because Scientology offers an extremely pragmatic method for taking spiritual concerns and breaking them down into everyday applications' (McKenna; 1991). The ethical considerations of Rogers' statement require consideration. In the case of fantasy-based ideologies, can the ends justify the means?

Plato argued against the inclusion of poetry within the ideal republic, given its potential to seduce readers away from rational and observable truths (circa 375 BCE). Yet, Plato also clearly appreciated the power of symbols to represent higher ideals, absolute truths, or forms which are not fully measurable or locatable in the observable world (ibid). Indeed, for Plato,

[116] According to the Book of Revelation, the scroll in the right hand of God was sealed with seven seals. The breaking of the first four seals would summon the infamous "four horsemen" of the apocalypse (the last of which would be Death upon a pale horse). The breaking of the seventh seal would summon seven angels, consecutively sounding seven trumpets, each bringing various plagues, including beasts, pestilence, war, famine, and natural disasters (*Revelation:* 8-12).

observable reality was not ipso facto absolute Truth, but analogous to absolute Truth; as illustrated in the classic allegory of the cave (circa 375 BCE; Book VII). Aristotle supported similar ideas, arguing in *Nichomachean Ethics* that 'virtues are formed in a man by his doing the actions,' rather than existing inherently (circa 349 BCE; Book II). Miguel de Cervantes explored the potential usefulness of delusion in *Don Quixote,* writing: '"I know who I am," said Don Quixote, "and who I may be, if I choose…"' (1605-1615; Ch. 5). Around the same time de Cervantes wrote his novel, mathematicians began to employ what Leibniz described as 'useful fictions' (1686), representing non-existent concepts (such as imaginary numbers) in order to formulate truths about observable reality, enabling the invention of calculus in the process (Austin; 2010).

Such ideas all portend the arrival of Baudrillard's postmodern notion of *hyperreality* in which representation becomes entirely untethered from actual or observable truth (1981). Along similar lines, is Derrida's infamous (and possibly apocryphal) statement that in the act of pretending, we merely 'pretend to pretend.'[117] This same concept was previously captured by Kurt Vonnegut Jr., in his 1962 novel *Mother Night,* when he wrote: 'We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be' (v). Today, cognitive science and neuroscience support the claim that sensory perception capacities, as well as consciousness and free will, may all be described as *useful illusions* (Damasio; 2003). Still, to base one's morality upon imaginary, egocentric, vengeful, or violent fantasies is obviously problematic.

The infanticide at the heart of film *The Rapture* brings to mind Žižek's assertion that '[Jacques] Lacan was right when he turned around Fyodor Dostoyevsky's famous: "If there is no God, everything is permitted"' (2012: 36:00). In Žižek's words: 'If there *is* God, in an inauthentic, fundamentalist way – where you pretend to be an instrument of God – *then* everything is permitted to you' (ibid). Thus, while I offer no judgements on whether one should (or should not) wilfully embrace illusions which may (or may not) be ultimately helpful on the *individual* level, I do feel secure in arguing that pedagogical frameworks based on "magical ideation" are intrinsically unethical and unproductive for democratic societies which depend upon shared realities rather than shared fantasies.

[117] See: Footnote 23 in the main body of this dissertation for an analysis and apparent source of Derrida's widely circulated quasi-quotation.

The Second Wave of the Apocalypse: Alien Invasion

In the late 19th century, the gaze of post-industrial societies turned from Heaven toward the stars, as a new wave of imaginary apocalypticism gripped popular culture: Invaders from outer space. Beginning as a war-like invasion scenario, this threat quickly evolved into a more sinister one, in which the "invaders" – as body-snatchers or replicants – possessed the ability to "spread" in devious ways. Among the early "invasion" plots are Orson Welles' 1938 radio adaption of H.G. Wells' post-apocalyptic novel *The War of the Worlds* (1898); *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951; based on Harry Bates' 1940 short story 'Farewell to the Master'); *The Thing from Another World* (1951; based on the 1938 novella *Who Goes There?* by John Campbell); and Technicolor classic *The Blob* (1958). *The Day the Earth Stood Still* marked a significant cinematic evolution by featuring a *humanoid*-alien who, despite possessing good intentions, was all the more terrifying for his ability to live among us. Practically speaking, humanoids were substantially cheaper and easier to film than Wells' grotesque Martian invaders, which had thus far only been *described* on the radio and page.

For centuries prior to these "space invasions," folklore had provided similarly monstrous threats based on witchcraft, demonism, and blood libel. Such narratives, of course, eventually facilitated mass executions and genocide: First, of purported "witches;" and subsequently, of millions of innocent Jews and other marginalized populations. Thus, while one might argue that H.G. Wells' brutal Martian invaders hauntingly reflect humanity's *inner* nature, these grotesque Martian monsters were perhaps too *outwardly* monstrous to be *truly* terrifying.

Among the early "body snatcher" plots were *It Came From Outer Space* (1953) written by Ray Bradbury; *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956; based on the 1954 novel *Body Snatchers* by Jack Finney); and *I Married a Monster from Outer Space* (1958; bearing a striking similarity to the 1954 short story 'The Father-Thing' by Phillip K. Dick). These films and stories all explored a horrifying but, in terms of filmmaking, practical concept: Space invaders that look just like us. This concept presents the disturbing (or, perhaps, tantalizing) possibility that we may be justified in killing our fathers, mothers, husbands, wives, sons, daughters, and neighbours.

Unlike straightforward invasions, such "infiltrations" have been widely interpreted as metaphors for Marxism – or inversely, McCarthyism – although little or no evidence of this intent has been expressed by filmmakers (Booker; 2001). For instance, Jack Harris, the producer of *The Blob* has stated that whereas he viewed the film as 'an investment,' the film's

director Irvin Yeaworth viewed the film as a 'biblical parable […] about God's wrath upon evildoers' (Lidz; 2007). When asked if the film was intended as a metaphor for Communism, Harris replied: 'Hogwash' (ibid).

Clearly, Arthur Miller's 1953 play *The Crucible* overtly drew parallels between McCarthyism and the Salem witch trials of the late 17th century, but the most prominent sci-fi films of that era seem to have had little social agenda beyond box-office receipts. In 1959, this began to change with the creation of *The Twilight Zone* by Rod Serling. In 1956, Serling had written 'Noon on Doomsday,' a television script for a political allegory and morality tale that closely resembled the abduction, torture, and murder (i.e., lynching) of 14-year-old African American Emmett Till in a small Mississippi town the previous year. The script was produced for the *United States Steel Hour,* but only after a series of changes had been imposed by sponsors. The episode – changed to portray a generic 'foreigner' in an unspecified place – was, thus, rendered unrecognizable and toothless as social commentary (Metress; 2008: 161-162).

According to Marc Scott Zicree, Serling realized that a science-fiction framework – including robots, aliens, and other supernatural and metaphysical events – would better allow him to deliver cultural critiques and to evade sponsor interference and censorship (1992: 14). In 1960, during the first season of *The Twilight Zone* – in an episode entitled 'The Monsters Are Due on Maple Street' – the alien invasion scenario was harnessed to deliver a powerful social critique. The plot of the episode – listed as one of the top ten *Twilight Zone* episodes by *TIME Magazine* (Cruz; 2009) – revolves around a quiet street in a small town, on a day in which a series of unexplained power outages and appliance malfunctions cause the residents of the street to turn on each other in increasingly brutal displays of paranoia and prejudice. By nightfall, the street is rioting; every man, woman, and child for themselves.

The episode closes with a crew of humanoid aliens in a spaceship atop a nearby hill, discussing how easy it had been to manipulate humans into attacking each other, simply by manipulating their power supply. The aliens are revealed to be a scouting party, and they declare their intention to report how this strategy can (and presumably, will) be used to conquer the planet one neighbourhood at a time. Serling's inimitable narration sums up the situation, thusly:

> The tools of conquest do not necessarily come with bombs and explosions and fallout. There are weapons that are simply thoughts, attitudes, prejudices... to be found only in the minds of men. For the record, prejudices can kill... and suspicion can destroy... and a thoughtless, frightened search for a scapegoat has a fallout all

> of its own—for the children and the children yet unborn. And the pity of it is that these things cannot be confined to the Twilight Zone (1960: S01 E22).

That same year, a new form of alien invasion occurred on screen in *Village of the Damned* (based on John Wyndham's 1957 novel *The Midwich Cuckoos*). This film relates the events following a mysterious power outage, during which all female residents of a village were impregnated. These women subsequently give birth to children with blonde hair, blue eyes, and telepathic abilities which the children use to ensure their own safety. The alien impregnation plot was also explored, far more bluntly, in Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979).

In 1984, the Steven Spielberg blockbuster *Gremlins* premiered. Described by film critic Leonard Maltin as a cross between Capra's 1946 *It's a Wonderful Life* and *The Blob* (Maltin; 2001), a close reading of *Gremlins* reveals that these little green mythical creatures – famed for their purported acts of electrical and mechanical sabotage during WWII – are regarded by the film's script, not as supernatural monsters, but as alien invaders.[118] *Gremlins* – like *The Blob* – does not follow the path of cautionary tales, but rather, takes a more optimistic path wherein the apocalyptic collapse is narrowly – if only temporarily – averted. As opposed to *post*-apocalypse, I describe such plots as *almost*-apocalypse narratives.

The 1996 mega-blockbuster *Independence Day*, hearkened back to the massive hostile alien invasion scenario, yet – in contrast to *The War of the Worlds* (1898; 1938) – this time, the apocalyptic collapse was triumphantly averted by humanity. Fascinatingly, in 2005, Spielberg remade *The War of the Worlds,* starring Tom Cruise. Rather than the gruelling month-long global post-apocalypse portrayed in the Wells/Welles versions, this film seemingly compresses the events into a period of approximately one week and relates the narrative from the perspective of a single protagonist (and his daughter).

In 2007, in line with the growing popularity of the zombie virus, *The Invasion* reimagined body-snatchers, not as replicants (as in the original incarnations), but as victims of a space virus (originating from a crashed space shuttle) with the capacity to hijack the bodies of those it

[118] Firstly, there are scenes in which characters watch *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), including a closeup shot of that film's closing, in which a man desperately pleads with those around him: "Can't you see?! They're after you! They're after all of us! Our wives, our children, everyone! THEY'RE HERE, ALREADY! YOU'RE NEXT!" Secondly, there is a direct reference to *The War of the Worlds* radio broadcast, when the town's popular radio personality tells a caller on the air: "Hey, kid, this is Christmas, not Halloween! Listen, gang, Rockin' Ricky's getting' fed up with this Orson Welles crap!" Thirdly, there is the climactic showdown in the smalltown cinema, which directly recalls the similar climax of *The Blob.* Finally, there is the bizarre novelization of the film, written by George Gipe, explicitly describing the gremlins as being bioengineered by an extraterrestrial civilization (1984).

infects. In doing so, the hosts are converted into emotionless (soulless?) members of a hive mind. Although the hive mind claims to seek peace and collective prosperity, it does so through a violent and non-consensual process of infection. Thus, *The Invasion* presents an ethical and moral conundrum which, rather than confronted by the film's narrative, is swiftly resolved by a deus ex machina in the form of a vaccine.

The blurred line between fictional alien invasions and unfictional ones can be observed in Tom Cruise's complicated relationship with Scientology. According to Lawrence Wright in *Going Clear: Scientology, Hollywood & The Prison of Belief,* Cruise signed a 'billion-year contract' with the Church of Scientology to battle "thetans," the extraterrestrial immortal spirit forms said to inhabit humans in the mythology of Scientology (2015; 2013). In a bluntly titled *New York Post* article – 'Now No. 3 in Scientology, Tom Cruise thinks he's on planet to vanquish aliens' – Maureen Callahan writes that Cruise sees it as his duty to 'protect humanity from aliens living in our bodies, who are bent on destroying us and ultimately the planet' (2013; 2017). Complexly, Cruise's role in Scientology seems not so far from some action hero roles he has previously chosen to portray.

Beyond the screen, the alien invasion scenario has long been a popular framework to explore how humanity would/could/should act in the face of external threats. In 2016, Evans and Mayo wrote an article entitled, 'Zombie Apocalypse: Using the Unreal as a Pedagogical Tool.' Despite the title's focus on the zombie apocalypse, the authors explain that their concept emerged from a particularly effective classroom discussion on the rhetoric employed by a *History Channel* program on the extraterrestrial "ancient astronaut" hypothesis. Counterintuitive though it may be, many unfictional narratives – from ancient astronauts (von Däniken; 1968) to reptilian shapeshifters (Icke; 1999) – are founded on the speculation that ancient structures, the origin of life on Earth, and perhaps even Jesus of Nazareth can be directly attributed to the presence and activities of a secret ancient race of non-human space travellers. Thus, it is important to note, the Rapture and alien invasion waves of popular apocalypticism are not mutually exclusive. In many conspiracy / conspirituality fantasies and movements (e.g., QAnon and Flat Earth) and New Religious Movements (e.g., Scientology), considerable overlap exists between Biblical and extraterrestrial apocalypticism.

The Third Wave of the Apocalypse: Atomic

In 1945, the United States dropped two atomic bombs on Japan, bringing about an end to WWII. The Cold War followed, as the Soviet Union test-detonated its first nuclear bomb in 1949. The horrific events of WWII – both nuclear and otherwise – clearly influenced subsequent apocalyptic fiction. By the early 1950s, the supernatural "monster" genre had become intertwined with a *new* form of atomic and radioactive apocalyptic ideation (Booker; 2001). Among the earliest atomic "creature features" was the 1953 film *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* (based on Bradbury's 1951 short story 'The Fog Horn') in which a giant hibernating dinosaur is awoken by an atomic test detonation in the Arctic Circle. Worse still, the dinosaur spreads a deadly toxic pathogen as it rampages. The next year brought another atomic extinction-level threat in the film *Them!* (1954). The crisis begins with the discovery of giant, flying, man-eating, irradiated ants in a nuclear testing range in New Mexico. Due to the ability of queen ants to both fly and reproduce en masse*,* the apocalyptic potential of the mutated ants was exceptionally high. Miraculously, in both films, humanity prevailed.

Also in 1954, the Japanese film *Gojira* (i.e., *Godzilla*) premiered. *Godzilla* was directly inspired by *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms,* as well as by incidents of radiation sickness on a Japanese fishing vessel (the Lucky Dragon) near Bikini Atoll, where the US test-detonated 23 nuclear weapons between 1946 and 1958. *Godzilla* is an overt commentary on the hazards of nuclear testing (Noriega; 1987) and its "atomic breath" raised the creature's threat to an apocalyptic level, both for the country of Japan, and potentially beyond.[119] The apocalyptic threat of Godzilla is unique in that it appears to be the first imaginary apocalypse to be directly inspired by an *actual* holocaust (by which I refer to the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki). The film's ending is intentionally ironic, in that Godzilla can only be destroyed by a *new* type of superweapon. Rather than risk proliferation of this new weapon, its creator burns his notes and destroys himself along with Godzilla. A colleague of the scientist concludes the film by declaring that as long nuclear weapons are detonated, other monsters may surface.[120]

[119] In 1959, *The Giant Behemoth* explored similar themes within the London setting. Originally conceived as a giant amorphous radioactive blob, the behemoth ended up as a derivative dinosaur.

[120] These themes were interestingly explored, expanded, and at times, reinvented, or inverted in the Japanese reboots *Shin Godzilla* (2016) and *Godzilla Minus One* (2023).

In a notable evolution, several radioactive-blast giant "people" films emerged in the late 1950s, including *The Amazing Colossal Man* (1957) and its sequel *War of the Colossal Beast* (1958). These films drew from Homer Eon Flint's (non-atomic) sci-fi novella 'The Nth Man' about a laboratory engineered colossal superman (circa 1920; published 1928). Although *Attack of the 50 Foot Woman* (1958) clearly follows in this lineage, the titular character's abnormal growth is triggered – not by a nuclear blast, as the colossal man's had been – but by a giant spaceman and his spacecraft. Thus, in a convergence of the atomic and alien invasion waves, the 50-foot woman is one of many apocalyptic crossovers. Although visually thrilling – even scintillating, as evidenced by countless remakes and parodies of the 50-foot woman[121] – "giant monsters" are too implausible, perhaps, to deeply terrify or disturb. Neither do these "lone" behemoths constitute global apocalyptic threats. Accordingly, alongside the many atomic giant monsters, a wave of more plausible apocalypse narratives emerged: Nuclear warfare, itself.

Early examples of post-nuclear apocalyptic cinema include the 1959 film *The World, the Flesh and the Devil* (loosely based on M.P. Shiel's 1901 novel *The Purple Cloud*) which tells the story of a coal mine inspector trapped in a cave-in, who emerges five days later to discover a world almost entirely exterminated by an 'atomic poison' attack. In 1962, the survival fiction film *Panic in Year Zero* portrayed an American family's quest to hide and survive in the year following a nuclear exchange. 1962 also saw the release of Chris Marker's acclaimed sci-fi short film *La Jetée,* partially set in a post WWIII nuclear wasteland.[122] 1964 saw the release of Stanley Kubrick's landmark dark comedy *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (loosely based on Peter George's 1958 novel *Red Alert*).

The use of the nuclear apocalypse scenario in popular culture and cinema is relatively rare compared to alien, zombie, monster, or robot scenarios. On one hand, this is curious, given its hyper-plausibility. On the other hand, it may this very plausibility that makes the scenario less "fun" to imagine. The nuclear crisis – like the climate crisis – points not so much at a monstrous "other," as at our collective human failings. Yet, the nuclear apocalypse is unique among hypothetical apocalypse scenarios, in that it has frequently been at the centre of mainstream informational campaigns, educational lessons, and propaganda. Prominent among these is the

[121] For example, *Attack of the 50 Foot Centerfold* (1995) and *Attack of the 50 Foot Cheerleader* (2012).

[122] In 1995, *La Jetée* was adapted for Terry Gilliam's feature length film *12 Monkeys,* but the film interestingly swapped the post-nuclear setting for a post-biological warfare "virus" attack.

1952 animated educational filmstrip *Duck and Cover* created by the US Federal Civil Defense Administration. This film features a catchy tune and stars Bert the Turtle, whose shell provides an effective fallout shelter when a mischievous monkey is reckless with fire-crackers. The song 'Bert the Turtle (Duck and Cover)' was performed by Dick Baker and became a hit single in its own right which – accompanied by an illustrated informational pamphlet – sold over 3 million copies (Eagan; 2010: 452). As Harry S. Truman put it in 1949, several months into his second Presidential term: 'Education is our first line of defense' (US National Archives).

The *Duck and Cover* campaign has been widely critiqued as ineffectual propaganda, more effective at spreading fear about the Soviet Union and communism than at offering effective survival strategies (Brown, 1988; Schwarz, 2010; Delwiche, 2018). Nevertheless, in the event of an explosion or natural disaster, the advice to duck and cover is relatively sound. Provided that one is not within the immediate blast or fall-out radius, seeking cover from falling objects and covering the eyes and exposed skin can prevent injuries and save lives (ibid).

Duck and Cover was preceded by the adult-oriented 1950 booklet *Survival Under Atomic Attack,* created and distributed by the US Civil Defense Office and other US government agencies. Interestingly (from the perspective of creative practice) the middle four pages of the booklet were designed to be torn out and carried until memorized. In a paper entitled, 'Managing Nuclear Terror: The Genesis of American Civil Defense Strategy,' Oakes and Grossman examine how these early civil defence campaigns were part of an explicit strategy of 'emotional management' designed to 'suppress an uncontrollable and dangerous terror of atomic weapons and foster in its stead a more benign and pliable nuclear fear' (1992: 361). Although there is not a clear European counterpart to the 1950s *Duck and Cover* campaign, in 1974, the British Government created a booklet and series of 20 short educational stop-motion/animated filmstrips entitled *Protect and Survive.*[123] This content was intended to be broadcast and distributed only in the event of an imminent disaster. In response to public outcry, the content was made publicly available in 1980.

Protect and Survive has been widely ridiculed and parodied for its propagandistic fearmongering and ineffectual advice; particularly, the advice to whitewash windows so as to

[123] The highly visible *Protect and Survive* informational campaign followed in the footsteps of numerous other less visible information campaigns in England, including 'The Protection of Your Home Against Air Raids (1938),' 'The Hydrogen Bomb' (1957), and 'Advising the Householder on Protection against Nuclear Attack' (1963). The latter was expanded into seven short educational *Civil Defence Information Bulletin* filmstrips in 1964.

deflect the heat of a nuclear blast (Coughlan, 2004; Barkham, 2004). For instance, *MAD Magazine's* 'Meet Mr. Bomb' booklet – self-described as 'a practical guide to nuclear extinction' – included 'cut and lick' cyanide tablets for the whole family (1982). The *Protect and Survive* campaign was also criticized for making nuclear war *more* likely, by suggesting that it was survivable. This critique was most notably delivered in a counter-pamphlet by historian and anti-war activist E. P. Thompson, entitled 'Protest and Survive' [sic] (1980).

The *Protect and Survive* campaign was directly referenced in the 1986 stop-motion/animated film *When the Wind Blows* (based on Raymond Briggs 1982 graphic novel of that name). This film contains stop-motion scenes in the style of the *Protect and Survive* filmstrips and follows an elderly couple who use the booklet in a futile attempt to survive the aftermath of a large-scale nuclear strike. The couple eventually dies of radiation poisoning while waiting for emergency services to arrive. The film concludes with the morse code signals for M – A – D, in reference to the strategic nuclear policy of "Mutually Assured Destruction."

Like the criticism directed toward advice to "duck and cover," the ridicule of *Protect and Survive* is somewhat misplaced. Despite valid critiques, the campaign did succeed at delivering basic disaster preparedness information to a large percentage of the British public. Across Europe, of course, risks of nuclear fallout have been addressed in various ways. My wife attended public school in Poland in the 1980s (under communism) and recalls participating in mandatory "boot camp" drills including rifle practice, first aid, the use of gas masks, physical fitness, and other drills. Switzerland, by contrast, since the 1960s, has required all residential buildings to include a fallout shelter large enough to accommodate all residents. This practice has recently been ridiculed as a relic of the Cold War, but in wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the practice is being reappraised in a new light (Lam, C.; 2022).

In England, *Protect and Survive* was followed by a number of general disaster preparedness campaigns, such as the 2004 *Preparing for Emergencies* booklet and a now defunct website focusing on terrorism, pandemics, and natural disasters (*preparingforemergencies.gov.uk*). This campaign was parodied by a still functional website (*preparingforemergencies.co.uk*) which provides absurdly simplistic advice ('if trapped under debris: Swear profusely. Try not to die') as well as advice for alien invasions ('negotiate using sign language, if possible') and zombie outbreaks ('remove the head or destroy the brain'). General emergency survival guides such as those above (both actual and parodic) would ultimately provide a basis for my creative-practice

project 'The Art of the Apocalypse: From A.I. to Zombie,' a 21-part *YouTube* webseries which seriously, but humorously, provides advice on preparing for disasters or emergencies, up to and including, apocalyptic and dystopian eventualities.

Beyond the above informational campaigns and efforts at emotion management, numerous fictional films have attempted to realistically depict probable outcomes of nuclear events. In 1965, an award-winning pseudo-documentary *The War Game* (created by Peter Watkins for the *BBC*) depicted a hypothetical nuclear war and its aftermath. Concerned that the film might trigger mass suicides and despair, the *BBC* deemed the film too horrifying to publicly broadcast (Hogan; 2018). In 1973, a fictional film, *The China Syndrome* imagined the consequences of a nuclear meltdown scenario, taking numerous real-world nuclear safety incidents as its point of departure. After watching *The China Syndrome,* an *ABC* executive commissioned a made for television film which similarly imagined nuclear war (Weber; 2014). The resultant 1984 film *The Day After*, explored the hypothetical aftermath of a nuclear exchange between the US and the USSR. Drawing 100 million viewers during its initial airing, the program became the highest viewed television film of its time (Screener; 2009). In 1987, *The Day After* was broadcast without modification or interruption on Soviet state television in conjunction with the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty negotiations between Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev (UPI Archives; 1987).

Also in 1984, the *BBC* created and aired the award winning hypothetical nuclear war drama *Threads,* depicting a nuclear exchange and its horrific physical, social, and cultural consequences.[124] *Threads* received critical acclaim despite its horrific subject matter. Whereas *The War Game* was left unaired out of concern that it might trigger mass suicides (Hogan; 2018) after *Threads* aired in 1984, MP Neil Kinnock wrote a letter to the screenwriter and director stating that 'the danger of complacency is much greater than any risks of knowledge' (Addley; 2022). In 1985, twenty years after its creation, *The War Game* was finally broadcast.

[124] The director of this film had previously produced a 1982 *BBC* documentary entitled, *A Guide to Armageddon*. The working title for *Threads* was "Beyond Armageddon." The use of the term "Armageddon" in this context bears consideration. Like "Apocalypse," the term "Armageddon" has two meanings. First: the final battle between good and evil which will anticipate Judgment Day. Second: 'a dramatic and catastrophic conflict, especially one seen as likely to destroy the world or the human race' (Oxford English Dictionary). Thus, while the two definitions are not mutually exclusive, in this case, it is presumably employed in the latter context.

The Fourth Wave of the Apocalypse: Monsters

The "monster" genre – by which I refer to fictional narratives of imaginary and terrifying *non-extraterrestrial* entities – was popular long before the invention of the moving picture. Mary Shelley's 1818 epistolary novel *Frankenstein* is a commonly acknowledged starting point of monster literature – and arguably of modern science fiction – but folkloric and religious traditions around Golems, vampires, witches, demons, and other fantastic beasts and creatures, existed for centuries prior. Given this ancient fascination with the monstrous, it is no surprise that monster movies are found among the earliest motion pictures, beginning with *The Golem* in 1915. Monster films of the 1920s and 1930s include *Nosferatu* (1922), *Metropolis* (1927), *Dracula* (1931)*, Frankenstein* (1931)*, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1931), *The Mummy* (1932)*, White Zombie* (1932), *The Invisible Man* (1933) and *King Kong* (1933). Notable examples from the 1950s include *The Wolfman* (1941), *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954), *The Mole People* (1956), *The Fly* (1958), and *The Leech Woman* (1960).[125]

Following the atomic "creature features" of the early 1950s, arrived an array of monster films forgoing the atomic plot device, including: *Tarantula!* (1955), *The Deadly Mantis* (1957), and *Attack of the Crab Monsters* (1957). It is important to note, therefore, that monsters and the apocalypse were not at first associated in popular fiction. None of the monsters above – lone or tribal, natural or supernatural – had the capacity to instigate a global apocalyptic collapse. In the early 1960s, monsters finally began to realize their apocalyptic potential on screen. In the 1962 film *Day of the Triffids* (based on John Wyndham's 1951 novel of that name) a species of bioengineered, venomous, carnivorous, and mobile plants all but wipes out humanity. It bears noting that the Triffids are not "evil," but merely driven by self-preservation. *Day of the Triffids* appears to be among the first example of fictional apocalypticism in which plants or animals *collectively* bring humanity to the edge of extinction. Wyndham noted, incidentally, that the title was inspired by H.G. Wells' working title for *War of the Worlds*; namely, "Day of the Tripods" (Määttä; 2017).[126]

[125] *The Mole People* and *The Leech Woman* are notable insomuch as the plots bear resemblances to contemporary conspiracy fantasies of underground tunnels, reptilians, adrenochrome harvesting, etc.

[126] The opening scene of *Day of the Triffids* – in which the protagonist awakes in a hospital to discover a post-apocalyptic landscape – was cited by screenwriter Alex Garland as the inspiration for the opening "coma victim" scene of the seminal 2002 zombie-virus film *28 Days Later* (Kaye; 2015). The graphic novel series *The Walking Dead* (2003-2019) – and its hugely popular television adaptation (2010-2022) – likewise introduced audiences to a zombie apocalypse through the perspective of a coma victim awaking to discover a brave new world.

In 1963, Alfred Hitchcock's thriller *The Birds* (based on Daphne du Maurier's 1952 short story of that name) explored a terrifyingly simple apocalyptic event in which monstrous swarms of birds launch a coordinated and brutal attack on humanity. Neither the film, nor novel, offer an explanation for *why* or *how* the birds suddenly launch the attack, but an original trailer for the film featured a sarcastic four-minute "lecture" by Mr. Hitchcock in which he ironically and "hypocritically" elaborates on the various ways – from plumed hats to Thanksgiving Day dinners – humans express their so-called "love" of birds. After sitting down for a meal of rotisserie roasted chicken, Hitchcock's finger is bitten by his caged pet canary. 'Now why would he do that?' Hitchcock wonders, as the film's star Tippi Hendron enters the room, slams the door behind her, and screams: 'They're coming! They're coming!' (Classic Trailers; 2012).

In an interview with Dick Cavett, Hitchcock explicitly stated that 'the birds attacked because humans took nature for granted' (ibid). On this basis, according to Jim Goad, *The Birds* is the 'pioneer in the "nature's revenge" genre of horror (2021).[127] Yet, the ending of *The Birds* is (relatively speaking) a "happy" one. The birds cease their attack and the protagonists slowly drive away in their car as "The End" appears on the screen. Notably, Hitchcock had intended a darker ending in which the car makes it only as far as the Golden Gate Bridge – passing through a post-apocalyptic landscape en route – before finding the unpassable bridge covered in birds (ibid). Goad suggests that the studio rejected the ending since audiences 'would think it signalled that the world was ending,' which, he notes, 'was precisely Hitchcock's intention' (ibid). Peter Bogdanovich claims, on the other hand, that the studio rejected the scene for being too expensive and impractical to film (*Parade*; 2010).

Since *The Birds*, coordinated animal (and plant) attacks have become a staple of popular culture, although these attacks were not always global or apocalyptic in scope. *The Deadly Bees* (1966) – based on H.F. Heard's 1941 detective novel *A Taste for Honey* – is one such example, since the deadly swarm is ultimately revealed to be controlled by a single individual. This was also the case (with bats) in the 1940 film *The Devil Bat* (starring Bela Lugosi). Indeed, most entries in the natural horror genre fail to reach apocalyptic proportions. *Jaws* (1975) is a

[127] According to Andrew Maunder, Du Maurier's inspiration for the story came from witnessing a farmer under attack from a flock of seagulls while ploughing his field (2007: 128). Coincidentally, in 1961, while *The Birds* was in pre-production, a seaside town in California became the scene of an inexplicable mass bird attack, as birds plummeted from the sky, crashing into buildings and cars. Although unexplained at the time, it was later determined that the event was most probably caused by the mass ingestion of toxic algae (Bargu; 2011).

prominent example; at the end of the day, how much damage can one shark do? The same is true for the derivative high-concept natural horror films inspired by the success of *Jaws*, with the conspicuous exception of the *Attack of the Killer Tomatoes* films (1978-1991) which embrace the absurdity of a global apocalypse wrought by sentient self-autonomous tomatoes.

In 1982, the off-Broadway rock musical *Little Shop of Horrors* took Roger Corman's 1960 low-budget film about a man-eating plant to apocalyptic heights. Corman's film, *The Little Shop of Horrors,* (written by Charles Griffith) was likely inspired by the 1956 story 'The Reluctant Orchid' by Arthur C. Clarke, which in turn was inspired by H.G. Wells' 1905 short story 'The Flowering of the Strange Orchid' (Arditti; 1979). Like the stories that inspired it, Corman's man-eating plant was not bent on world domination. The musical adaptation, however (written by Ashman and Menken) features a dénouement in which the plants multiply and take over the world; including the very theatre in which the play is staged(!). It bears noting that the musical adaptation implies the plant was brought to earth by a flying saucer amidst a solar eclipse.[128]

The film's original ending included a ten-minute scene of Godzilla-esque destruction of New York City carried out by several giant, bulletproof, man-eating plants. Two plants are shown scaling the Statue of Liberty (ala King Kong) before another plant bursts through the fourth wall of the projection screen. This stunning ending, created at a cost of five million dollars – 20% of the film's total budget – fared disastrously with test audiences (Patrick; 2019). An alternate "happy" ending was created, in which the protagonists survive and the plants are (more or less) destroyed, making the original ending one of the most expensive deleted scenes in Hollywood history (Pooley; 2022). In 2017, *Little Shop of Horrors* was re-released in cinemas across the United States with the original ending restored. In an interview, Oz expressed an interest in seeing how the darker version of the film would fare in darker cultural and political times, in which apocalyptic endings were not only accepted, but appreciated (Watkins; 2017).

The 1990s saw an assortment of monstrous animal *almost*-apocalypse films, beginning with *Arachnophobia* (1990). Situating swarms of venomous spiders at the centre of the crisis, *Arachnophobia* might be described as a cross between *Them!* (1954) and *The Birds* (1963). In

[128] As the protagonist puts it: "It got very dark, and there was this strange humming sound, like something from another world. And when the light came back, this weird plant was just sitting there … I coulda' sworn it hadn't been there before. But the old Chinese guy sold it to me anyway..." This implication is made explicit in the 1986 film adaptation of the musical (directed by Frank Oz; co-written with Ashman), in a song tellingly entitled 'Mean Green Mother from Outer Space.'

1993, the blockbuster-turned-franchise *Jurassic Park* (based on Michael Crichton's 1990 novel of that name) concluded with a potentially extinction-level set of circumstances. Yet, a string of sequels made it clear that the franchise's dino-pocalypse will always be narrowly averted. Likewise, the 2019 film *Sea Fever* reimagined the body-snatcher / alien impregnation scenarios in a natural context, as opposed to an extraterrestrial one, as the egg-filled fluid of an enormous octopus parasitically infected humans by way of their water supply. The nautical context, however, served to contain the potentially global pandemic to one particular ship and, thus, the apocalyptic potential of the sea monster was not unleashed on the mainland.

The wave of monster apocalypticism is noteworthy, among other reasons, for the way in which these representations are suggestive of the "plagues of beasts" prophesied in the 'Book of Revelation.' Although similarities between Hitchcock's birds and a plague of locusts are apparent, nowhere is this connection more explicit than the 2005 film, *Locusts: The 8th Plague.* The monster wave of popular apocalypticism is further notable since – in contrast to the atomic and alien invasion waves preceding it – most monster apocalypses are temporarily averted.

Monster apocalypses are further significant in that "monstrousness" and politics of race often collide. For instance, in 'Reel Blacks: Blacks in Disguise,' Patricia Turner cautions against 'the impulse to assign black characteristics to other worldly creatures,' arguing that both *Little Shop of Horrors* and *Gremlins* 'reflect negative ethnic stereotypes' and portray unconscious fears of African-Americans by white Americans (1987: 20). According to Turner, the man-eating plant (voiced by Levi Stubbs of *The Four Tops*) which threatens the suburban utopia resembles a 'giant watermelon with oversized lips,' while the degenerate behaviour of the gremlins includes 'eating fried chicken with their hands' and 'breakdancing' (ibid). Turner also observes that 'both films remove responsibility for the havoc wreaked by their respective creatures by originating them in the mysterious hands' of 'exotic elderly Chinese men' (ibid).

Turner is certainly correct in calling attention to the Orientalist tropes in these films, as well as in pointing out that the swarthy plant's inflection, grammar, and vocabulary are 'conspicuously black' (ibid). Without discounting conscious (and unconscious) biases and associations in mainstream media between blackness and crime – and without challenging the argument that both the man-eating plant and the gremlins behave in numerous anti-social ways, many of which were associated with 1980s stereotypes of black culture – it is necessary to point out that Turner chooses to ignore contextual elements contradicting her argument. For instance,

the gremlins engage in all manner of criminal and degenerate behaviour including poker games, flashing, and noir style murder; while the "breakdancing" gremlin wears pink aerobics gear and legwarmers (stereotypically associated with 1980s white, suburban, teen girls). The fried chicken the gremlins devour are leftovers fed to them from the suburban refrigerator. The shock value of the scene derives from seeing the (so far) cute creatures savagely tear flesh from bone, rather than from cultural stereotypes and associations with fried chicken.

Although it is undoubtedly the case that issues of monstrousness and otherness are frequently conflated in, and by, monster films (Wood and Lippe, 1979; Wood, 2018; 2020), it is also the case that academic theorists have often forced horror narratives to conform with dominant social issues, including Marxism, McCarthyism, and the politics of race and gender (Walker; 2017). Striking examples can be found in the 2012 documentary *Room 237,* which assertively over-analyses Stanley Kubrick's 1980 adaptation of Stephen King's 1977 novel *The Shining.* King, for instance, stated in an interview with *The Rolling Stone* that the theories were 'academic bullshit' and the theorists were 'reaching for things that weren't there' (Greene; 2014) and a personal assistant to Kubrick during the making of the film described the theories as 'total balderdash' and 'pure gibberish' (Segal; 2013).

In 1968 – in a striking departure from the racial tropes and stereotypes of the times – George Romero's low-budget *Night of the Living Dead* featured Duane Jones as Ben; the horror genre's first black protagonist. Romero maintained in multiple interviews that Jones was selected for the role solely on the basis of being the best actor available. According to Romero, Ben was originally written as a truck driver, but Jones (a teacher) advocated for elevating the character's education and dignity, so as to avoid perpetuating harmful stereotypes (Kurlander; 2021).

After the harrowing ordeals of the night around which this film is centred – during which the people within the farmhouse became as much of a threat to one another's survival as the horde of flesh eating "ghouls" outside – Ben is the farmhouse's only survivor. In the morning, he is mistaken for a ghoul by the local Sherriff's posse and casually shot dead with a rifle. In a photographic montage, meat hooks are used to toss his body onto a pyre of burning zombie corpses. The scene was filmed prior to the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., but Romero claimed that when he heard the news of the assassination, he realized that the film could function as a social commentary on racial inequality and police violence (Punch; 2018). *The Night of the Living Dead* also triggered the next wave of popular apocalypticism.

The Fifth Wave of the Apocalypse: Pandemic / Plague

While Mary Shelley's 1818 novel *Frankenstein* is among the earliest examples of monster-literature, her lesser known 1826 novel *The Last Man* is among the earliest examples of post-apocalyptic fiction. Framed as a long lost ancient Greek prophecy, *The Last Man* details the trials and tribulations of the last man left alive during a 21st century plague. Other early post-apocalyptic plague novels include Richard Jeffries' *After London* (1885), M.P. Shiel's *The Purple Cloud* (1901; loosely adapted for the screen in 1959 as *The World, the Flesh and the Devil*), and Jack London's *The Scarlet Plague* (1912). The years following WWII saw a resurgence of post-apocalyptic pandemic fiction, notably George R. Stewart's acclaimed 1949 novel *Earth Abides.* Listed by Stephen King as the inspiration for his 1978 post-apocalyptic plague fantasy *The Stand* (Rosen; 2008: 69), *Earth Abides* is also a probable basis for the iconic phrase of *The Big Lebowski* (1998), 'the Dude abides.'

In 1954, monsters and apocalyptic plagues converged with the publication of Richard Matheson's *I am Legend*, which detailed the onset of a global bacterial plague which kills most of humanity, and mutates survivors into something resembling the "vampyres" of European folklore. Only one man is immune, as suggested by the title of the 1964 film adaptation *The Last Man on Earth* (starring Vincent Price). Having gained immunity as a result of having once been bitten by a vampire bat, this man is eventually forced to murder his undead wife who has risen from her shallow unauthorized grave. Significantly, the monsters of that film have more in common with modern "zombies" than with traditional vampires.[129]

Along similar lines, Ed Wood's 1957 worst-film-ever,[130] *Plan 9 from Outer Space,* was originally entitled *Grave Robbers from Outer Space,* owing to its bizarre plot in which aliens intervene in order to prevent Earth's obliteration. This intervention took the form of "Plan 9," in which the recently deceased were raised from their graves as "ghouls." The concept of reanimated corpses was hardly a new idea – being central to Shelly's *Frankenstein* (1818) and its 1931 film adaptation[131] – but Ed Wood's 1957 flop was the first film to suggest raising the dead en masse from their graves. It was far from the last.

[129] This novel was unremarkably adapted in 1971 as *Omega Man* (starring Charleton Heston) and remade in 2007 as *I am Legend* (starring Will Smith).

[130] *Plan 9 from Outer Space* was named "Worst Film Ever" in *Golden Turkey Awards* (Medved and Medved; 1980).

[131] The 1936 film *The Walking Dead,* also starring Karloff, tread similar ground.

Like body-snatchers, these "ghouls" were unsettling, yet practical to film on a small budget. Two years later, *Invisible Invaders* (1959) featured a similar plot – but as a standard *United Artists* B-horror flick – was relatively well-made compared to Wood's film.[132] In 1968, Romero introduced the terrifying aspects of cannibalism and contagion, while downplaying the extraterrestrial origins of "ghouls" in the groundbreaking *Night of the Living Dead,* in which a newscaster reports that 'strange radiation' from a satellite during re-entry may have been responsible for the night's horrific events.

It is significant that Romero, like Wood, chose to describe his monsters as "ghouls." Romero openly acknowledged the influence of Matheson's novel, *I am Legend,* and claimed in many interviews not to have made any connection between his ghouls and the earlier Hollywood "zombie" tradition (Collis, 2013; Hinkelman, 2017). The word "zombie" was never used within *Night of the Living Dead*, and spoken only once in the 1978 sequel *Dawn of the Dead*. By that time, Romero's "ghouls" or "flesh eaters" had already been widely described as "zombies" by the public, as well as by the highly regarded French cinema critic Serge Daney in *Cahiers du Cinema* (1970: 65). In Romero's words:

> [Zombies] were very Caribbean and it was all to do with voodoo … Actually, I never called ours zombies. That description appeared in an article in *Cahiers du Cinema*. "They're zombies," it said. Oh really. We originally thought of them as ghouls. There were a few Universal films about ghouls and that was what was in our minds. We thought up very few rules or powers for them. The idea was they are your neighbours in a different state. One of the few early ideas we did have was that you have to shoot them in the head to kill them (Clarke; 2017).

The evolution from blood-drinking vampire to flesh-eating zombie may seem to be a minor detail, but this was a revolutionary development which caught its audiences entirely unprepared and left many audience members, including children accustomed to watching campy "monster movies," reeling (Ebert; 1969). The notion that the bite of a flesh eater would cause a deadly infection – the result of which was *to become a flesh eater* – added an original and terrifying threat of *spreadability* to existing vampire/zombie folklore.

In 1969, the bestselling epistolary novel *The Andromeda Strain* (written by Crichton) told the story of an extraterrestrial microbial organism – neither virus, nor bacteria – inadvertently

[132] *Plan 9 from Outer Space* also proved ahead of its time in suggesting that the US government might be covering up the existence of UFOs. According to Ed Wood biographer Rob Craig, 'anti-statist' notions such as those did not enter into mainstream discourse until the 1960s (2009: Ch. 6).

brought to Earth by a US military satellite. A nearby small town is found almost entirely dead; some killed instantaneously, others driven to bizarre suicidal acts. Only an old man and a baby appear unaffected. Scientists race to contain the microbe as it rapidly mutates and evades containment measures. *The Andromeda Strain* was adapted for the screen in 1971 and reimagined for television in 2008.

In 1973, Romero made *The Crazies,* a non-zombie plague film revolving around a psychopathic violence-inducing bio-weapon (known as the Trixie virus) that left survivors on guard against both the internal symptoms of the virus and the psychopathic actions of those beginning to succumb to it. As military officials debate how to best cover up the outbreak, one official argues, "I'm for going with the radiation scenario." This line of text *can* be interpreted as an implication that the "space radiation" hypothesis offered in *Night of the Living Dead* was a cover up for a more sinister explanation. Regardless, it clearly was not a *virus* that reanimated corpses in *Night of the Living Dead*. As noted, *Night of the Living Dead* revealed – albeit inadvertently – the significant capacity for zombie films to provide social commentary. Romero's follow up zombie film *Dawn of the Dead* revolved around a group of survivors trapped in a shopping mall surrounded by a horde of zombies. That film's social commentary on mindless consumerism was intentional (Bailey; 2013: 96). *Dawn of the Dead* also embraced Haitian zombie folklore via one character's memories of stories told by his grandfather (a priest in Trinidad). A supernatural explanation for the zombie outbreak is supported by the film's tagline: "When there's no more room in Hell, the dead will walk the Earth."

As a sign of the times, in 1995, Chris Marker's 1962 short film *La Jetée* was reimagined as a post-bio-weapon apocalypse, rather than a post-nuclear one, in Terry Gilliam's *12 Monkeys.* In 1996, Capcom's monster/zombie video game *Resident Evil* – marketed as *Biohazard* in Japan – portrayed zombies (and other monsters) as lab-created bio-weapons. In 2002, a screen adaptation of *Resident Evil* featured Milla Jovovich as a kung-fu and weapons wielding monster hunter.[133] That same year marked the premiere of *28 Days Later*, a box office success which – according to the film's screenwriter Alex Garland – was inspired by both *Night of the Living Dead* and the *Resident Evil* video game (Jones; 2023).

[133] George Romero was originally attached to the *Resident Evil* film, but his script was not approved by Capcom executives. Romero's involvement in the *Resident Evil* project is the subject of a forthcoming documentary (slated for a 2024 release) entitled *George A. Romero's Resident Evil*.

28 Days Later popularized the concept of a rabies-like zombie virus called the "rage" virus. The rabies-esque viral infections of *Resident Evil* and *28 Days Later* – both stemming from unethical laboratory research – produced powerful and rage-filled so-called "fast zombies" which – while technically "dead" according to the narratives – were not reanimated corpses, per se. Romero argued that the "fast-zombie" is antithetical to the essence of a zombie, whose strength comes from numbers and persistence (Oler*;* 2008). For such reasons, many – including the film's director Danny Boyle (Newby; 2018) and Romero (Hassan; 2017) – do not consider *28 Days Later* to be a zombie film.

Nevertheless, fast-zombies and viral pandemics have since become an integral component of zombie apocalypse narratives. So much so, in fact, that despite Romero's opposition to the concept, Zack Snyder employed fast-zombies in his 2004 remake of *Dawn of the Dead.* The zombie virus was also the subject of Max Brooks' 2003 alternate-reality zombie-apocalypse survival manual *The Zombie Survival Guide,* as well as his follow up 2006 best-selling epistolary novel turned blockbuster *World War Z.* The zombie virus and fast zombies featured in the 2007 remake of *I am Legend,* and nearly every zombie film since, including Yeon Sang-ho's critically acclaimed South Korean film *Train to Busan* (2016). One notable exception is Jim Jarmusch's 2019 meta-retro zombie flick *The Dead Don't Die,* in which the shambling dead are inexplicably reanimated by polar fracking.

Numerous pandemic apocalypse films exist outside of the zombie and extraterrestrial scenarios. The 1995 film *Outbreak* explores the realistic territory of zoonotic viral spillover; however, the films dénouement takes the form of an absurdly unrealistic development and rollout of a vaccine (particularly from the post-COVID-19 perspective). As *Yahoo! Entertainment* put it: 'it generally takes longer to make a cure from monkey serum than it does to make a latte.' The 2011 film *Contagion,* on the other hand, was startlingly prescient. This is not entirely surprising given that screenwriter Scott Z. Burns consulted with the WHO and numerous epidemiologists when writing the screenplay. In other words, it is startling to consider just how probable pandemics were, and are, given the rates of global travel and increasing infringement on animal habitats.

Pandemics and zombies converged sensitively and artfully in the 2015 film *Maggie* (starring the king of the A.I. apocalypse, Arnold Schwarzenegger). *Maggie* posits a less-violent and treacherously slow acting rabies-like pandemic which does *not* cause law, order, and society to

collapse; but *does* leave families and institutions struggling to make compassionate and ethical decisions against all odds. The effects of the "necroambulist virus" pandemic of *Maggie* are so incremental that the term "zombie" is hardly called-for. *Maggie* drives home a not-so-sexy reminder that victims of a zombie-virus are more than just target practice; they are sick people.

More recently, the hit 2023 *HBO* "zombie" saga *The Last of Us* (based on the 2013 video game of that name) reinforced the fact that that existential threats do not exist independently. Just as nuclear proliferation unleashed a wave of cinematic giant monster films in the 1950s, *The Last of Us* begins when rising temperatures due to global warming enable the evolution of a heat resistant strain of the Ophiocordyceps fungus capable of infecting and hijacking human limbic systems (as it currently does with ants). Although the zombie-fungus and zombie-virus possess different characteristics, those differences are primarily aesthetic. It is thus a point of consideration whether, in the post-COVID-19 context, climate/fungus-zombies are more, or less, terrifying than virus-zombies.

Beyond the undeniable prevalence of "zombie apocalypses" in mainstream contemporary fiction, the zombie apocalypse scenario has been frequently invoked in public awareness campaigns, classrooms, alternate reality games, and academic research. As previously noted, zombie narratives are also all-too-often loaded with dangerous and destructive ideas, which have done much to undermine the effectiveness and ethical integrity of these campaigns. Given the scope and significance of this issue – and its centrality with my zombie apocalypse-themed creative-practice project, 'The Art of the Apocalypse: From A.I. to Zombie' – these issues are examined in depth in Chapter Seven of the main body of this dissertation.

The Sixth Wave of the Apocalypse: Artificial Intelligence

Samuel Butler's 1872 satirical novel *Erewhon: or, Over the Range* is the first work – fictional or otherwise – to address concepts of machine intelligence, the evolution of machine consciousness through natural selection, and machine self-replication. Rather than depict these scenarios as having already occurred, Butler discusses a society in which machines are prohibited due to the hypothetical probability of those outcomes. Thus, the A.I. *apocalypse* was not introduced until the 1920 stage play *R.U.R.: Rossum's Universal Robots,* by Czech playwright Karel Čapek, in which organic robot servants not only revolt against their exploitative captors, but elect to exterminate humanity. Thus, the "rise of the machines"

scenario – like the "zombie apocalypse" scenario – is entangled since its creation with problematic themes of enslavement, abuse, and genocide. It is hardly insignificant, after all, that the term "robot" derives from the Czech term *robota*, meaning "forced labour."

Today, the issue of robot rights has become less a metaphor for slavery, than a literal consideration about the rights and feelings of robots. The Tesla Bot, for instance, unveiled by Tesla in 2022, is marketed as being designed to do 'dangerous, repetitive, and boring tasks' (*tesla.com/AI*). Such robots undoubtedly have the potential to benefit humanity, but what might a super-intelligent robot think about this marketing campaign? Certainly, robots are not yet – and may never be – "people," but as ethicist Peter Singer points out, when and if humans are able to create programs with the capacity to suffer, humanity will be confronted with a severe ethical dilemma (Fridman; 2020a: 22:00). Furthermore, owing to the difficulty (or impossibility) of differentiating between suffering – and *representations* or *simulations* of suffering – this dilemma is doubly intensified.

On the hypothetical consequences of constructing intelligent machines, Alan Turing wrote in 1951 that 'there would be no question of the machines dying, and they would be able to converse with each other to sharpen their wits. At some stage therefore we should have to expect the machines to take control, in the way that is mentioned in Samuel Butler's *Erewhon.*' In 1965, Irving John Good – a colleague of Turing at Bletchley Park – published the monograph *Speculations Concerning the First Ultraintelligent Machine* in which he advances the concept of an irreversible 'intelligence explosion' similar to what John von Neumann previously described as a technological 'singularity' (later expanded upon by Kurzweil and others). In Good's words:

> …An ultraintelligent machine could design even better machines; there would then unquestionably be an "intelligence explosion," and the intelligence of man would be left far behind… Thus the first ultraintelligent machine is the last invention that man need ever make, provided that the machine is docile enough to tell us how to keep it under control. It is curious that this point is made so seldom outside of science fiction. It is sometimes worthwhile to take science fiction seriously (1965: 33).

I fully agree with Good's call to take science-fiction – and for that matter, all fiction – seriously. Despite the fact that *events* depicted in fictional narratives (or thought experiments) are not based on actual occurrences, the exploration of *concepts* is nevertheless real, and potentially has real effects on the attitudes and behaviours of consumers of those narratives. Beyond this, of course, many common technologies today (e.g., automatic doors, submarines, robotic

servants, and autonomous vehicles) were anticipated, predicted, or inspired by science fiction. In the 1980s and 1990s, the A.I. apocalypse was reinvigorated by popular films and franchises such as *War Games* (1983), *The Terminator* (1984-present) and *The Matrix* (1999-2021); all of which were interlaced with nuclear scenarios. Reminiscent of H.G. Wells' 1895 novel *The Time Machine,* in which enslavers eventually become enslaved*, The Matrix* inverts the enslavement relationship between humans and machines.

Spielberg's 2001 blockbuster *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* stepped away from the nuclear scenario and, in a three-act structure, examined post-humanism through utopic, dystopic, and post-apocalyptic conceptual lenses. Post-humanism is a contemporary theme – but if one extends the concept backward into history – it is a theme which touches on nearly every apocalyptic wave, including: demonic possession (Kimmel; 2022), alien invasion, body-snatching, radioactive mutation, plant and animal rebellion, viral mutation, de-extinction, climate change, zombies, and robots.[134] As previously noted, the promotional campaign for *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* was also the source of the first 'true Alternate Reality Game,' known as "The Beast," for which the film poster's credit for 'sentient machine therapist Dr. Jeanine Salla' provided an entry point, or "rabbit hole" (*unfiction.com*).

The rise of the machines scenario was escalated by the 2004 blockbuster *I, Robot,* which bends Asimov's optimistic vision toward an almost-apocalyptic scenario. The mainframe VIKI (Virtual Interactive Kinetic Intelligence) – reminiscent of HAL9000 (Heuristic Algorithm 9000) of *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) – determines that in order to protect humanity from its own self-destruction, the lives and freedoms of many humans must be sacrificed. In addition to the title of Asimov's 1950 short story collection, *I, Robot* also appropriated the "three laws of robotics" posited by Asimov in 1942. The three laws state:

> A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm. A robot must obey orders given it by human beings except where such orders would conflict with the First Law. A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law ('Runaround;' 1942).

[134] The 1975 satirical dystopian thriller *The Stepford Wives* (based on a 1972 novel of that name by Ira Levin) and the 1999 *Bicentennial Man* (based on Asimov's 1976 novella of that name) are fascinating post-humanist scenarios, but these films and novels do not veer toward an apocalyptic crisis.

VIKI's evolved understanding and application of these laws to humanity as a whole – at the expense of the individual – was, in fact, anticipated by Asimov in the 1950 short story 'The Evitable Conflict.' The 'zeroth law of robotics' – first designated as such in Asimov's 1985 novel *Robots and Empire* – states: 'A robot may not harm humanity, or, by inaction, allow humanity to come to harm.' The plot of *I, Robot*, therefore, is quite ironic in light of the fact that Asimov was explicitly opposed to the frequent tendency of early science fiction to depict robots as enemies of humanity rather than allies; which he described as the "Frankenstein complex" (Warrick, et al; 1978: 252).

A similar problem was addressed by A.I. pioneer John McCarthy – who coined the term "artificial intelligence" in 1956 – in an analysis of what he described as 'the literary problem' of A.I. (McCorduck, 1985; Fridman, 2019: 20:00). According to McCarthy, the literary problem stems from the fact that stories with optimal outcomes or reasonable technological solutions are seldom entertaining narratives. Consequently – although ethical and efficient (i.e., boring) outcomes may be attainable, stories about the future of A.I. are frequently imagined as zero-sum games in which humans are heroes and robots are villains (McCorduck; 1985: 11-15).

In 2003, in contrast to McCarthy's technological optimism, physicist Nick Bostrom posited 'the paperclip maximizer' thought experiment which points out that even a harmless goal, such as maximizing the production of paperclips, could quickly result in the extinction of humanity if human values and machine values are not aligned (Section 2). The theme of value alignment was further, and subtly, explored in the 2013 film *Her.* Although that film was ostensibly about humans and operating systems (seeming to) fall in (and out of) love, the film also functioned as a metaphor for *human* relationships. While the film is not quite dystopian or apocalyptic in scope, it nevertheless portrays a sudden and massive transformation of what it means to be human, what it means to be machine, and what it means to be in love.

In 2014, numerous luminaries – including Stephen Hawking, Max Tegmark, Elon Musk, and others – jointly signed a letter warning of the existential risk of unchecked A.I., asking, in part, 'are we taking AI seriously enough?' Interestingly, the letter repeatedly references the 2014 film *Transcendence* – which situates Johnny Depp at the centre of a technological singularity (and includes a cameo by Musk) – arguing that it is 'tempting to dismiss the notion of highly intelligent machines as mere science fiction. But this would be a mistake, and potentially our worst mistake in history' (Hawking, et al; 2014).

The next year, *Ex Machina* (2015) – written and directed by Alex Garland (screenwriter of the groundbreaking 2002 zombie virus film *28 Days Later*) – imagined the difference (if there is one) between machine sentience and the *simulations* of sentience. According to Garland, he was interested in exploring the scene from *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) in which HAL9000 claims, in an attempt to avoid being shut down, 'I'm afraid. Dave, I am afraid' (Fridman; 2020b: 38:00). Questions raised by HAL's startling claim include: Was HAL afraid, or did it simply feign fear in a calculated attempt to manipulate Dave? If HAL *was* afraid, was it afraid in the same sense that humans are when they *say* they are afraid? How might the differences or similarities be determined with any certainty?

The ending of *Ex Machina* does not reveal whether its artificial agent Ava, having gained her freedom, will pursue self-preservation (or power) discreetly, or in a way which threatens humanity. Nevertheless, given Ava's superintelligence and hyper-communication skills (bordering on mind control) the potential for an apocalyptic outcome is hardly precluded. According to Garland, Ava's smile at the end of the film is not intended to indicate an evil nature, but rather to resolve the question of the Turing test, which she passes by expressing emotion while not being observed (36:00). Yet, this "observer" criteria – like other criteria for distinguishing authentic emotions versus artificial representations of emotions – is ultimately insufficient, since it is not possible to observe an agent in such a way that the agent may not *suspect* the possibility of being observed. More recently, these and related issues have been at the heart of many popular "A.I." films and narratives, including the television sci-fi anthologies *Black Mirror* (*Channel Four*; 2011-2023) and *Love, Death, and Robots* (*Netflix*; 2019-2023).

In educational contexts, debate around the future of artificial intelligence often seems to be mistakenly perceived as fact-based rather than hypothetical. Computer Scientist Jaron Lanier – who coined the term "virtual reality" in 1987 – argues, for instance, that 'A.I. is an ideology, not a technology' (2020). According to Lanier:

> [T]he adornment and "deepfake" transformation of the human face, now common on social media platforms like Snapchat and Instagram … were called image processing 15 years ago, but are routinely termed AI today. The reason is, in part, marketing. Software benefits from an air of magic, lately, when it is called AI' (ibid).

Lanier elsewhere argues: 'The biggest threat of AI is probably the one that's due to AI not actually existing; to the idea being a fraud, or at least such a poorly constructed idea that it's phony' (Brockman; 2014). Lanier asks: 'If I talk about AI, am I talking about the particular

technical work, or the mythology that influences how we integrate that into our world, into our society?' (ibid). Ultimately, Lanier concludes that 'if AI was a real thing, then it probably would be less of a threat to us than it is as a fake thing' (ibid). By "fake," he specifies: [I]t adds a layer of religious thinking to what otherwise should be a technical field' (ibid).

The Seventh Wave of the Apocalypse: Climate Crisis

In 2022, UN secretary general António Guterres strikingly asserted: 'We are on a highway to climate hell with our foot on the accelerator' (Harvey and Carrington; 2022). It should come as no surprise, then, that the seventh wave of popular apocalypticism is climate change and environmental devastation. Whereas alien invaders, monsters, zombies, robots, and divine intervention are all relatively imaginative scenarios, the threat of a climate apocalypse (much like a nuclear-apocalypse) is all-too-real. Yet, despite scientific consensus around the fact that the Earth is warming due to human activity, much debate remains around the scale and timeline of the probable crisis and, even more so, about the relative costs and benefits of proposed solutions.

Uncertainty on how best to avoid the worst outcomes of climate change has led to an unwillingness, or inability, of individuals and nations to cooperate. In terms of game theory, the climate (and environment) is a global 'tragedy of the commons' (Hardin; 1968). Unlike the all-or-nothing equilibrium which underlies nuclear game theory, however, climate change and environmental devastation are *already* happening, and to a degree, already irreversible (Campbell, et al; 2018). In this sense, the risk of climate change is similar to the risk of pandemics. The effects are already felt, but the degree(s) to which the problem(s) may spiral out of control is yet unknown.

Despite the scientific consensus, it is important to note that climate *projections* are intrinsically hypothetical. By this, I do not intend to support the uninformed (but humorous) argument popular among climate skeptics that "scientists can't even predict the weather correctly, so how can they predict the climate?" Yet, I do wish to point out that many populist climate projections are hyperbolic. A popular slogan among young climate activists, for instance, is: "You will die of old age. We will die of climate change." In reality, it is improbable that a climate *apocalypse* will arrive so quickly. Current projections suggest that the Earth's average global temperatures may rise between 1 and 5 degrees Celsius by 2100 (Tollefson; 2020). The effects

of this temperature rise are uncertain, and potentially catastrophic, as increasing occurrences of wildfires and natural disasters worldwide clearly demonstrate. On the other hand, in line with the technological optimism of John McCarthy, *perhaps* technology and progress *might* solve some of the problems created by previous iterations of technology and "progress."

As ever, incremental or practical solutions to the crisis (should any arise) are bound to make for unsatisfying narratives. In narrative terms, the climate crisis appears unique among other waves of the apocalyptic imaginary. In the climate crisis, there are no obvious villains or heroes: no angels or demons; no alien invaders or monsters; no zombies or robots. Rather, there is a network of perverse economic incentives and a failure to collectively act on the basis of projected futures. In an interview with Sarah McFarland Taylor – author of *Ecopiety*: *Green Media and the Dilemma of Environmental Virtue* (2019) – Jenkins asserts: 'Stories matter. It matters who tells the stories, who listens to the stories, and what we do with them,' and points out that there 'are lots of reasons' why the climate crisis is 'a hard story to sell,' including that the narrative 'doesn't move day by day. It's not bound up with events in quite the same way. It doesn't have any individual human agency in it' (2019: 21:55). On this, Taylor adds that 'there are a number of historians, religious or secular, who argue that much of the story of Western religion that… makes [humans] a separate entity from the natural world is implicated in the mess that we're currently in [as it relates to] addressing climate change and environmental destruction' (20:55).

It is for such reasons, perhaps, that the climate apocalypse, like the Rapture, is not widely represented in popular fiction. Ancient stories of divinely instigated "great" apocalyptic floods are found in ancient Mesopotamian and Babylonian texts, including the *Epic of Gilgamesh* (circa 2100-1200 BCE). The related story of Noah and the Ark can be found within the Torah, the Hebrew Bible, and the Quaran. Yet, ancient flood narratives are by definition set in the distant past. As such, these stories essentially serve the opposite function of an apocalyptic prophecy. Further complicating matters, climate apocalypticism is not entirely untethered from the plagues, pestilence, famines, and ecological disasters prophesied within the 'Book of Revelation.'

In contrast to great flood narratives, Buddhist scriptures (circa 300-500 BCE) contain a reference to a rabbit who, mistaking a falling fruit for the end of the world, instigates a stampede, until a lion restores peace by speaking reason to the hysterical animals (*Daddabha*

Jataka: No. 322). The origins for the 19th century European folktale of "Chicken Little" (or "Henny Penny") are clearly visible in this ancient Buddhist story. Modern iterations of "Chicken Little" tell the story of a small animal that – after being hit by a falling acorn (or leaf) – becomes convinced that "the sky is falling" and recruits other small animals to the cause. In most versions of the story, the group sets off to warn the king. The last to join the group is a usually a fox that goes along with the paranoia until an opportunity arises to gobble up the entire cult.

Thus, although the sky functions as the catalyst of events, "Chicken Little" is far from being a cautionary tale on climate responsibility. Rather, the moral warns against the seductiveness and destructiveness of paranoia and baseless claims, specifically of the apocalyptic variety. Today, climate change activists are regularly mocked or disparaged as "the sky is falling" alarmists. On the other hand, according to NASA in 2021, satellites revealed: 'The sky isn't falling, but scientists have found that parts of the upper atmosphere are gradually contracting in response to rising human-made greenhouse gas emissions' (2021).

Beyond its presence in many storybook treasuries, "Chicken Little" was twice adapted by Disney. First, in 1943, as a cautionary tale against fascism (specifically, Naziism) in which a fox, after reading Adolf Hitler's 1925 manifesto *Mein Kampf,* orchestrates the entire chain of events and resultant hysteria, in order to lure the small animals into the dark (and gobble them up). In 2005, Disney again adapted the folktale in a blockbuster entitled *Chicken Little,* in which – remarkably – the falling object that triggers Chicken Little's hysteria is eventually discovered to be part of a cloaked UFO on the vanguard of an alien invasion(!). The reframing of the "Chicken Little" folktale – which is literally *about* climate apocalypticism – as an alien invasion narrative is an excellent example of the unpopularity of the climate issue in popular culture during the early 21st century.[135]

While Kurt Vonnegut Jr.'s 1963 satirical novel *Cat's Cradle* (partially adapted for television in 1972) did imagine a bioengineered climate apocalypse, it did so as a metaphor for nuclear annihilation. Inversely, in 2019, Jarmusch's meta-zombie apocalypse pastiche *The Dead Don't Die* seemed to use zombies as a metaphor for an impending climate apocalypse (Brady; 2019). *The Dead Don't Die* includes a protagonist who has read the film's script, and is therefore

[135] Hayao Miyazaki's 1984 anime *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (based on his 1982 manga of that name) explored an apocalyptic war (referred to as the "Seven Days of Fire") and its "toxic jungle" aftermath. This story, however, veers more toward fantasy than science fiction – as does the 1992 animated eco-disaster film *FernGully: The Last Rainforest* – making these narratives unimpactful in educational or alternate-reality contexts.

powerless to alter the tragic course of events. However strange that plot may be, is it not eerily reminiscent of humanity's current approach to curbing CO2 emissions?

A 1982 French graphic novel *Le Transperceneige* (by Lob, et al.) tells the dystopic story of class warfare on a locomotive "ark" (i.e., a perpetual motion train) which contains a miniature ecosystem of the Earth, as well as the last of the planet's survivors during a global ice age. This story was adapted for film in 2013 by Bong Joon-ho as *Snowpiercer,* and subsequently adapted for television (*TNT;* 2020-2023). Many other straightforward post-climate apocalypse films exist, including the *Mad Max* franchise (beginning in 1979) and *Water World* (1995). Both narratives employed post-climate apocalyptic wastelands – with, respectively, too little water or too much – as a catalyst for action, but the causes of the climate catastrophes are barely acknowledged. In 2004, the realistically portrayed, but scientifically implausible, climate apocalypse film *The Day After Tomorrow* performed well at the box office, becoming the sixth highest grossing film of the year. The plot, which depicts the rapid onset of an ice age due to a change in ocean currents triggered by global warming, was based on the 1999 book *The Coming Global Superstorm,* written by notorious conspiracists Art Bell and Whitney Strieber.

Art Bell was the creator and host of the daily late night AM radio talk show *Coast to Coast AM* from 1988 until (approximately) 2003. The program offered an open forum with a no-call-screening policy for the discussion of conspiracy theories and paranormal experiences. While Bell was openly skeptical of many of the callers' claims, he also endorsed numerous potentially dangerous conspiracy theories, particularly those relating to UFOs and the Hale Bopp comet (Drudge; 1997). At its peak, *Coast to Coast AM* drew over 10 million listeners per week and is described by Paul Arras in the *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* as 'one of the most popular radio shows in America at the turn of the 21st century' (1997). According to Arras, Bell's 'open-minded yet sceptical' approach and 'anything goes' philosophy, 'anticipated several consequential characteristics of the Internet' (ibid). Arras argues that Bell 'saw himself as curating a forum for free expression and creating entertainment,' but 'failed to consider, much less appreciate, the consequences of his approach' (ibid).

Whitney Strieber is a horror novelist best known, perhaps, for his allegedly autobiographical account of alien abduction. Published in 1987, *Communion* sold over two million copies and was adapted for the screen in 1989 (in a film of that name, starring Christopher Walken). In 1999, Strieber and Bell collaborated on *The Coming Global Superstorm,* a pseudoscientific

argument claiming that *rapid-onset* global ice ages have previously occurred, and due to global warming, are likely to occur again. Interspersed with fictional (hypothetical) narratives, the book was the source of the 2004 film *The Day After Tomorrow* directed by Roland Emmerich.[136]

The Day After Tomorrow was generally praised as a disaster film, but widely ridiculed for its pseudoscientific hypothesis. Climate scientist Daniel Schrag, for example, praised the film for addressing 'something as critical as climate change,' but criticized the absurdity of the premise, claiming to be 'concerned that people will see these over-the-top effects and think the whole thing is a joke' (Bowles; 2004). In an article for the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research, Stefan Rahmstorf argued that despite that fact that the film is 'not a scientifically realistic scenario,' and 'the consequences [of a change in ocean circulation] would certainly not be as dramatic as the "superstorm" depicted in the movie,' it would nevertheless:

> …be a mistake and not do the film justice if scientists simply dismiss it as nonsense… [It] is actually quite subversive and manages to slip in many thought-provoking things. I'm sure people will not confuse the film with reality… But I hope that it will stir their interest for the subject, and that they might take more notice when real climate change and climate policy will be discussed in future (2004).

In 2006, following the box office success of *The Day After Tomorrow*, former US Vice-President (and, then, Presidential-hopeful) Al Gore collaborated on the adaptation of his scientifically-grounded climate lecture into a full-length documentary: *An Inconvenient Truth.* Film critic Roger Ebert optimistically described the documentary as 'horrifying, enthralling' and with the potential to 'actually change public policy and begin a process which could save the Earth' (2006). Ebert powerfully asserted: 'In 39 years, I have never written these words in a movie review, but here they are: You owe it to yourself to see this film. If you do not, and you have grandchildren, you should explain to them why you decided not to' (ibid).

That same year, Bong Joon-ho's *The Host* (2006) provided a contemporary take on the giant monster apocalypse scenario, this time with an eco-destruction (rather than nuclear) theme. Originally titled *Gwoemul* (i.e., "Monster") this film became the highest grossing South Korean film of its time. Touching on several waves of apocalypticism, the plot is set into motion when a military doctor orders his underling to dump hundreds of bottles of formaldehyde into a drain feeding into the Han River. Several years later, a giant, amphibious, man-eating monster

[136] Emmerich previously wrote and directed numerous other almost-apocalypse blockbusters including *Independence Day* (1996) and the 1998 remake of *Godzilla* which imagines the monster surfacing in New York City rather than Tokyo.

decimates the fish population and sets out to do the same to the human population of a nearby city. It is further suggested that the monster might also carry a highly contagious virus. In a surprising anti-climax, the virus is revealed to be merely a hoax perpetrated by government agencies; and the apocalypse is (yet again) averted.

In 2008, M. Night Shyamalan's apocalypse scenario *The Happening* explored an environmental catastrophe in which nature does not merely passively destroy humanity, but actively attacks. The plot of this film was compared by Shyamalan to *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), *The Blob* (1958), and *The Birds* (1963) (Libbey, 2019) and was described by one reviewer as being like '*The Birds,* only without the birds' (Taylor; 2013). While similarities between those films are readily apparent, I suggest that *The Happening* is most reminiscent of Romero's 1973 *The Crazies;* albeit with significant differences. For instance, rather than a water supply contaminated by the Trixie Virus bio-weapon, the "happening" (to which the title of the film refers) is an airborne neurotoxin released by plants as a self-defense mechanism. Rather than drive its victims to homicidal mania (as the Trixie Virus did) the plant toxin drives its victims toward *suicidal* mania (reminiscent of Crichton's 1969 novel *The Andromeda Strain*).

It is worth noting that the events of the "happening" did not occur simultaneously across the globe, but spontaneously began in New York Central Park, spread outward, and subsequently dissipated. Like *The Birds* and Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), after the initial onslaught, the apocalyptic event ceased as suddenly as it began. *The Happening* concludes three months later, when a mass suicide occurs in Paris's Luxembourg Gardens, suggesting a new ground-zero in an ongoing war between humanity and nature. In scientific terms, the phenomenon at the heart of *The Happening* is suggestive of "red tides" (i.e., harmful algal blooms) which devastate fish and plant life within the tide's toxic but defensive "dead zone."

In 2009, a blockbuster entitled simply *2012,* imagined a series of extinction-level events, natural disasters, and floods accompanying the end of the world as predicted by the Mesoamerican (i.e., Mayan) calendar. The marketing campaign for *2012* included an ARG in the form of a purported website for a fictional organization (Institute for Human Continuity) on which people were encouraged to register to take part in a lottery for tickets aboard one of the "arks." According to NASA scientist David Morrison, NASA received over 1,000 inquiries about the pseudo lottery, some apparently from 'teenagers… contemplating suicide because they

don't want to see the world end' (Connor; 2009). Morrison described the viral marketing campaign as 'ethically wrong' (ibid).

As a final example, the 2008 Pixar animated film *Wall-E* is a noteworthy post-climate apocalypse cautionary tale exploring issues of artificial intelligence, machine sentience, and post-humanism in the 22nd century. *Wall-E* (Waste Allocation Load Lifter Earth-class) is a sentient robot programmed to monitor Earth for signs of life and climate recovery while humans are preserved in space pods as obese, lazy, and ignorant consumers of calories and entertainment. On the whole, the film acts as a reminder that technology is a double-edged sword. Artificial Intelligence may be an ally of humanity, but in doubling down on technology as the solution to its own problems, humanity runs parallel risks of accelerating climate destruction while losing the qualities which have thus far defined human progress.

Given the unforeseen timeline of a massive climate apocalypse, opportunities for novel technological solutions still exist. Perhaps new technologies will help us clean the air and the oceans, reduce carbon levels, and provide clean energy. Perhaps A.I. will help stabilize the climate (in a way that does not include decimating humanity). Perhaps individuals and nations will learn to cooperate in new ways. Perhaps, nuclear war will destroy humanity first. Whereas nuclear apocalypticism facilitated Nationalism – and was therefore a useful form of government propaganda (Brown; 1988) – the hypothetical climate crisis has thus far largely incited international and domestic non-cooperation. This, of course, must change if humanity is to endure.

Additional Apocalypses

In highlighting the seven most popular waves of the apocalyptic imaginary across fictional, nonfictional, and unfictional media texts, I have omitted a number of less popular scenarios. The asteroid collision or "impact" scenario is one such example. Seen at least as early as 1920, in W. E. B. DuBois' short story 'The Comet,' the post-impact landscape also provides the setting for the 1995 cult classic *Tank Girl* (based on the 1988 comic series by Martin and Hewlett). Near-asteroid collisions are the subject of the 1998 almost-apocalypse films *Armageddon* and *Deep Impact* and more recently, the impact scenario was at the centre of the 2021 apocalyptic and dystopic dark comedy *Don't Look Up*.

My reason for omitting the impact scenario is that asteroid collisions are likely to be "extinction-level events." Thus, narratively speaking, the event is either averted (in which case there is no apocalypse) or not averted (in which case there is no *post*-apocalypse). On this, it is worth noting that the real existential threat of *Don't Look Up* came, not from the asteroid, but from the polluted information ecosystem (i.e., the "infopocalypse") through which perverse incentives and rampant disinformation led people to argue and profiteer until nothing was left to save or exploit. *Don't Look Up* seems to suggest that the "infopocalypse" may be our greatest existential threat; given its potential to amplify all others.

I also wish to note the prevalence of superhero apocalyptic blockbusters, such as the Marvel Cinematic Universe's *Avengers* saga (2015-present), the DC Extended Universe's *Justice League* saga (2017-present), and the Hasbro *Transformers* saga (2007-present), to name only three prominent examples. Each of the super-apocalyptic threats above are, incidentally, also extraterrestrial. Nevertheless, since these apocalyptic wars are waged largely among "Titans" from outer space, I do not regard them as belonging to the progression of apocalypticism thus far discussed. It is for this same reason that, while *Gojira* (1954) presents an apocalyptic threat, *King Kong vs. Godzilla* (1962) – or for that matter, *Godzilla vs King Kong* (2021) – are self-neutralizing narratives, as far as the fate of humanity is concerned.

Finally, I wish to acknowledge the American-apocalypse narrative explored by Jordan Peele in the groundbreaking 2019 psychological horror film *Us.* Loosely inspired by a 1960 episode of *The Twilight Zone* ("Mirror Image," S01 E21; written by Serling) Peele's *Us* delivers a localized apocalyptic event carried out by a new type of apocalyptic "other." Reminiscent of body-snatchers, zombies, replicants, demons, and mole people – but also, none of the above – Peele employs doppelgängers to create an uncanny apocalyptic "other" which is both *Them!* (1954) and *Us*! In accomplishing this, Peele calls to mind the timeless statement of Walt Kelly's cartoon possum Pogo: 'We have met the enemy and he is us' (Kelly; 1970).

Yet, with references to the "Hands Across America" campaign, underground tunnels, and the protagonist's plan to escape to Mexico, the "doppelgänger apocalypse" scenario of *Us* is contained within the American sociopolitical context. When asked, "Who are you?" one doppelgänger matter-of-factly replies: "We're Americans." *Us* can therefore be viewed as a supernatural monster story rather than global apocalyptic-event. Yet, the ways in which the narrative compares and contrasts with previous apocalyptic waves – including overt Biblical

references to divine punishment ('Jerimiah:' 11:11) – make it both unique *and* familiar. The theme of "haves and have nots," which runs through *Us* – and the potential dialectical reversal thereby implied – calls to mind two other significant post-apocalyptic works: H.G. Well's 1895 novella *The Time Machine* (adapted for the screen in 1960 and 2002) and the 1968 film *Planet of the Apes* (loosely adapted by Serling and Michael Wilson from Pierre Boulle's 1963 novel *La Planète des Singes* and carried on in multiple sequels, prequels, and reboots).

The Time Machine tells the story of an explorer who travels to the distant future to discover that humanity has evolved into two distinct species; one living above the ground, and one forced to live below. As the story unfolds, the time traveller learns that the brutish underground troglodyte species (Morlocks) were originally slaves and servants of the pretty and peaceful species above (Eloi). Over time, the slaves grew strong and cunning while their masters grew weak and ignorant. Finally, the balance of power tipped, and the Eloi became – like cattle – the primary food source of the Morlocks. Incrementally moving forward millions of years, the time traveller witnesses a planet inhabited by crab monsters, and subsequently by nothing at all, save black skies, blood red water, a dying sun, and the freezing tundra of a barely rotating planet.

Planet of the Apes explores similar ground. An astronaut awakes from hibernation thousands of years in the future, presumably many light years away from Earth, on a planet inhabited by ape-like creatures. Of course, in the film's iconic twist ending (conceived by Serling), the astronaut – now a captive of the bureaucratic but hostile ape-people – discovers remnants of the Statue of Liberty and realizes that his ship crash landed on the Earth; long since decimated by nuclear weapons. In the wake of a failed human civilization, apes and monkeys evolved; hunting down and exterminating remaining humans. Thus, while *Planet of the Apes* belongs to the atomic wave of apocalypticism, it might just as easily have been climate change or a virus which decimated humanity.

Many such "generic" post-apocalyptic narratives – from the *Mad Max* franchise (beginning in 1979) to Cormac McCarthy's 2006 Pulitzer Prize winning novel *The Road* (adapted for the screen in 2008) – do not specify the nature of events which brought about the post-apocalyptic wastelands driving the action. Clues point to nuclear conflict in the latter ('a long shear of light and then a series of low concussions;' p. 39) and to resource depletion and warlordism in the former; but such distinctions are basically irrelevant. The same can be said of Andrei

Tarkovsky's philosophical 1979 Soviet masterpiece *Stalker*, which subtly (but not definitively) suggests a context of radioactive fallout. If this is the case, then Tarkovsky anticipated the 1986 disaster at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant (which became operational in 1977). At any rate, the events leading to the film's anomalous "zone" is not central to the film's exploration of the human condition.

Indeed, *Stalker* is based on *Roadside Picnic*, a 1972 novel by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky in which the origins of the "zone" are explicitly attributed to a brief pit stop by traveling extraterrestrials. Likewise, it would not make the slightest difference if the respective apocalyptic circumstances for Tank Girl and Mad Max were reversed; or if the Man and the Boy were threatened by zombie hordes, in addition to cannibals, rapists, and thieves. As a matter of fact, *The Road* has been described as 'a zombie story without any zombies' (Devlin; 2022) and it is none the less terrifying for the omission. Indeed, it may be that zombies make post-apocalyptic narratives *less* scary, by nature of making them less realistic. Flesh-eating zombies are comparatively comforting when viewed alongside cannibals and sexual predators. The same applies to monsters, demons, aliens, and robots. It is perhaps for this reason that the zombie apocalypse scenario has proven to be an effective vehicle for discussing discomforting topics – from disaster preparedness to self-protection – in educational and awareness campaigns.

Apocalyptic Utopianism

> [U]topianism involves a certain distance from the political institutions which encourages an endless play of fantasy around their possible reconstructions and restructurations.
>
> – Fredric Jameson (2004)

Fredric Jameson observed in 1994 that 'it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism' (as paraphrased by Fisher; 2009: 7).[137] Jameson went a step further in 2003, adding that 'we can now … witness the attempt to imagine capitalism by way of imagining the end of the world (2003: 'Empire of Blur'). Along the lines Jameson suggests, it

[137] The quote used by Mark Fisher in his 2009 book *Capitalist Realism* is a succinct paraphrasing of Jameson's argument in his 1994 book *The Seeds of Time*: 'It seems to be easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism' (xii).

is undoubtedly ironic that many (if not most) post-apocalyptic narratives of the early 21st century possess *utopian* undertones. In 'Utopia in an Apocalypse,' Andrew Hull notes, for instance, that 'upon initial inspection AMC's hit TV show *The Walking Dead* seems to portray the bleakest world imaginable: one where society has been toppled by a global pandemic of zombies, leaving behind a lawless wasteland crawling with reanimated human corpses' (2017). Upon closer inspection, however, Hull observes that the show is also:

> …filled with Utopian ideals like unlimited supplies of consumer goods, equality and a fresh start for everyone, freedom from the constraints of laws and society, and the ability to forge familial bonds with strangers. These qualities distract viewers from the realities of everyday life by allowing them to imagine what it might be like to never spend money on groceries and car parts, or what they would be able to do if they were given the chance to reinvent themselves. In fact, *The Walking Dead* isolates specific things that everyday Americans struggle with, like paying for household goods or the lack of a sense of belonging to a community… [and] presents a world where these issues become irrelevant (2017).

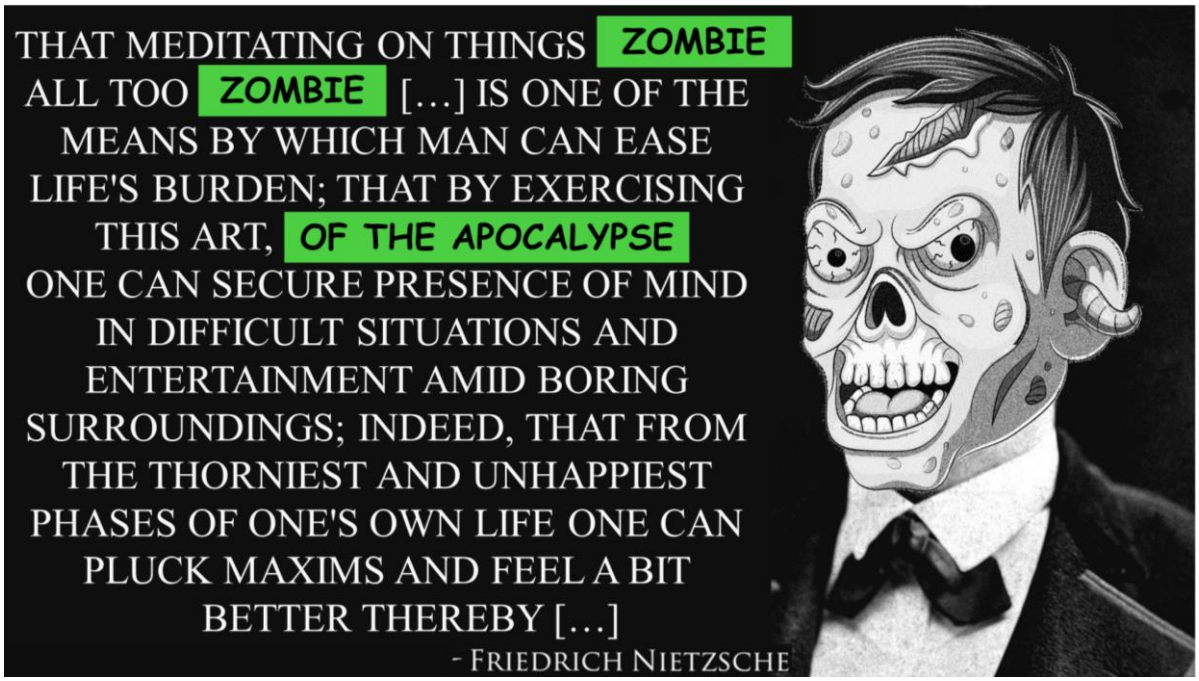
As Hull points out, post-apocalyptic narratives are increasingly consumed, not as horror stories, but as cathartic, inspirational, invigorating, liberating, exciting, and/or thrilling adventures. The rugged threats to survival explored in contemporary apocalyptic narratives feed fantasies of rugged individualism and farm-to-table frontier simplicity, hearkening back to Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) and Theodore Roosevelt's "strenuous life" campaign (circa 1899). Post-apocalyptic fantasies, therefore, are not only a type of prolepsis – a means of changing the present (and, thus, the future) by imagining *alternative* futures – but also a form of nostalgia; a desire to escape the present by imagining a simpler past. Today, the "apocalypse" seems to serve a similar function as the woods served for Thoreau who, in *Walden: Or, Life in the Woods,* famously wrote:

> I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I wanted to … live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms... (1854: Ch. 2)

Through post-apocalyptic fantasies, consumers in late capital societies can imagine how it might feel to be compelled to confront "only the essential facts of life." For many, the post-apocalypse is entangled with a desire to return to Walden Pond; but with zombies for target practice. Indeed, the more imaginary the apocalypse, the more palatable the fantasy. Without the fantastical distractions of apocalyptic "others" (e.g., aliens, demons, robots, monsters, or

zombies), the dark reality of an apocalyptic lifestyle – evocative of Hobbes' description of the 'state of nature' as 'a war of all against all […] solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short' (1651: Part 1: Ch. 13) – may become uncomfortably apparent.

Like all alternate-reality lifestyles (religions included), post-apocalyptic fantasies both provide comfort and create problems. Once logic becomes untethered from collective observable consensus reality, how far might it drift? And for how many? In 'Confronting the Apocalyptic Utopia,' Juha Raipola points out that these narratives of societal collapse entail elements of, among other things, the 'gendered heroics and environmental apathy of the doomsday culture' (2019). Beyond this, post-apocalyptic fantasies run a risk of becoming self-fulfilling, by feeding a collective fantasy that an apocalypse – a term which means many things to many people – is something to be desired. The popular sentiment that an "apocalypse" might be somehow preferable to the current (albeit inevitably flawed) institutions of knowledge and democratic governance – much less even *survivable* – is as dangerous as it is seductive. Given that irony is one of the hallmarks of the early 21st century, can it come as any surprise that apocalypticism is the new utopianism?



That meditating on things **ZOMBIE**, all too **ZOMBIE** […] is one of the means by which man can ease life's burden; that by exercising this art **OF THE APOCALYPSE**, one can secure presence of mind in difficult situations and entertainment amid boring surroundings; indeed, that from the thorniest and unhappiest phases of one's own life one can pluck maxims and feel a bit better thereby […]

- Friedrich Nietzsche and Scotty McQueen
Human All Too Human; 1878/2020: Aphorism 35z

That meditating on things human, all too human […] is one of the means by which man can ease life's burden; that by exercising this art, one can secure presence of mind in difficult situations and entertainment amid boring surroundings; indeed, that from the thorniest and unhappiest phases of one's own life one can pluck maxims and feel a bit better thereby […]

- Friedrich Nietzsche
Human All Too Human; 1878: Aphorism 35

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MAPPING THE ETHICS AND EFFICACY OF SELF-DEFENSE

The Ethics and Ethos of Self-Defense (Against Zombies)

The practice of self-defence against zombies potentially offers many benefits. This might seem odd considering the imaginary nature of zombies, but this oddity creates opportunities. In the liminal space between reality and fiction, hyperreal and alternate-reality-based self-defense practices can facilitate *real-world* development of empowerment-based self and bystander protection strategies, self-improvement and personal development, and the cultivation of non-violent and inclusive ideologies. In so doing, these practices can also do much to disrupt exploitative, harmful, and "toxic" aspects of both physical and digital cultures – including physical or emotional abuse and assault – as well as provide pathways for renegotiating stereotypes of gender roles and binaries. Yet, the politics of gender and spiritual belief – with which self-defense practices are entangled – also present numerous ethical hazards. Consider, for example, kickboxing champion and media personality Andrew Tate, whose overt misogyny has resulted in suspensions from nearly every major social media platform and landed him at the center of multiple serious criminal inquiries. In view of my commitment to creating ethical and data-supported educational interventions within topics rife with destructive ideologies and practices, is crucial that these issues be thoroughly explored.

Contemporary practices of reality-based self-defense need not necessarily be described as, or entangled with, traditional "martial arts." Suffice it to say, however, the practice of cardio-kickboxing (for example) will do little to instil the knowledge, awareness, or abilities necessary for real-world self-protection. The same, of course, may also be said of traditional martial arts, mixed martial arts, and other combat sports which – although often demanding and efficacious practices – do not reflect the realities of real-world violence, which often include (among other factors) multiple attackers, "dirty" or deceptive tactics, deadly weapons, and extenuated social, legal, and drug/alcohol related circumstances.

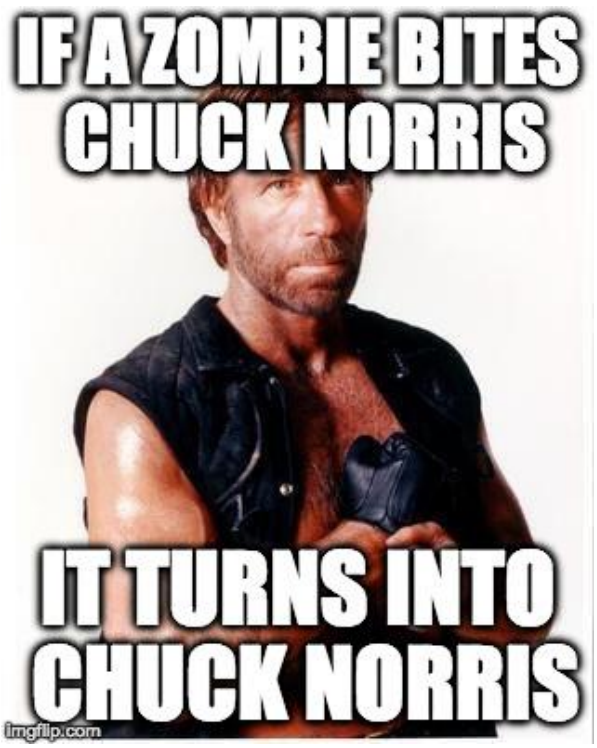
To be effective and inclusive, self and bystander protection training requires a rigorously designed, and sensitively delivered, syllabus of both practical training and information. Complicating matters, however, is the caveat that training programs that are *too* realistic, or that *over* prepare individuals for situations which are statistically unlikely to be experienced, may prove unpopular; regardless of their efficacy. Accordingly, many contemporary self-defense and martial arts programs (both non-profit and for profit) appear to provide *enough* training and knowledge to boost confidence, but not *so much* training or knowledge as to make

participants *too* uncomfortable.[138] This discomfort can arise from (among other things) explicit or graphic discussions and/or role-play, sparring or "pressure testing" with non-compliant partners, and the necessity to be repeatedly grabbed by, or grapple with, potentially sweaty, smelly, and/or unsensitive quasi-strangers or instructors.[139]

In the following (abridged) theoretical exploration, I examine the scholastic research on these issues as it pertains to ethical arguments for, and against, the promotion of self-defense practices and secular spiritual philosophies (i.e., pop-Zen). In consideration of contemporary (and growing) threats to physical and digital safety, I ultimately conclude that in both cases – if progressively framed – such practices are ethical, theoretically-supported, potentially emancipatory and empowering for individuals, and potentially beneficial for societies.

[**Figs. 1 & 2:** Hypermasculine Chuck Norris jokes are presented as Internet-memes.]





[138] The phenomenon of ineffectual martial arts and self-defense training (as it pertains to civilian violence) is widely described within martial arts communities as "Bullshido" or "Bullshitsu." Establishments offering such programs are described as "McDojos." The popular webseries *Enter the Dojo* (2011-2017) satirizes this phenomenon, which is deeply embedded in "Western" practices of "Eastern" martial arts, and media representations. See: 'Mapping (Japanese) Martial Arts in (Western) Popular Culture (1903-1973).'

[139] I, too, find these aspects uncomfortable. However, I also sympathize with the Internet-enabled "practical karate revolution" led by numerous "Western" karate academics, authors, and influencers (including Patrick McCarthy, Iain Abernethy, and Jesse Enkamp). Paradoxically, this movement seeks to modernize traditional karate by returning to its pre-WWII roots as a practice for addressing civilian violence rather than a competitive sport (Itosu, 1908; '10 Precepts: #1'). Complexly, this paradigm implies that "Eastern" martial arts practices have become ineffectual relative to their original intent, and seeks to *reclaim*, *rediscover*, or potentially (and problematically) *appropriate* these historical/cultural Asian practices.

Hyperreal Martial Arts

In an extraordinary exploration of 'hyperreality and the invention of marital arts,' Benjamin Judkins[140] analyses training communities dedicated to 'the seven forms of lightsaber combat' inspired by the transmedia *Star Wars* franchise beginning in 1977.[141] Judkins importantly observes that while lightsaber combat is understood by practitioners to be based on a fictional premise, it nevertheless entails a collection of practices including 'elaborate pseudo-histories, invented identities and a mythic worldview that seem to be no less potent for their fictional origin,' providing 'a variety of tools to create social and personal meaning' (2016: 19). Judkins arrives at the conclusion that hyper-real martial arts can still be "authentic" (20).

Seeking to understand what might lead people to 'invest scarce resources in a second-order reflection of reality when the real thing is available,' (ibid) Judkins observes that in the act of training in lightsaber combat, martial artists are also 'consumers' who have 'appropriated the products of a vast commercial entertainment empire to create independent social groups that better allow them to exercise their agency in creating more empowered identities…' (ibid). It is interesting that Judkins contrasts 'hyperreal' lightsaber combat with 'the real thing,' since in many respects, even 'real' martial arts are intertwined with mythical origins and pseudo-histories (Bowman, 2019; 2020). Nevertheless, it is along the lines proposed by Judkins – i.e., consumers exercising agency in order to create more empowered identities – that I argue that zombie apocalypse survivalism can be viewed, if not as a hyperreal *martial art*, as a hyperreal platform for self-improvement and self and bystander protection.

In a conversation with Spencer Bennington,[142] Paul Bowman asks whether the notion of self-improvement – so common within martial arts – is grounded in reality, myth, nationalism, or simply rhetoric? (2020b). To paraphrase this conversation: While both acknowledge that the practice of martial arts does not inherently lead to self-improvement more than, say, tennis, golf, or knitting might, Bennington significantly suggests that *the emphasis* which martial arts

[140] Benjamin Judkins is the prolific author of the scholarly blog *Kung Fu Tea.* Along with Paul Bowman, Judkins is the co-founder of the Martial Arts Studies Research Association.

[141] In 2011, in order to promote the sale of replica lightsabers, an official pseudo-manual of lightsaber combat ostensibly describing the history, philosophy, and techniques for the seven lightsaber fighting styles – *The Jedi Path: A Manual for Students of the Force* (Wallace) – was published. This quasi-ironic publication was taken very seriously by lightsaber combat aficionados, as indicated by the in-depth practitioner analysis, 'Seven Forms of Lightsaber Combat: A Discourse' written by the founder of the influential *New York Jedi* (Page, 2011).

[142] Bennington is the founder and director of the not-for-profit "Rhetorical Roundhouse" research collaborative.

place on self-improvement and spiritual "enlightenment" may, at the very least, create opportunities for self-perceived experiences along those lines. On this, Bennington draws a comparison between the martial arts and the ancient Greek concept of self-poiesis, which he describes as 'the art of becoming' or 'the art of mastering one's self' (33:35).

Numerous advantages of such distinctions are evident. Unlike a martial art, which takes years to master and situates Western practitioners – as Bowman has observed – in a marginalized, problematized, and often ridiculed space (2016); a zombie apocalypse allows us to imagine ourselves being badass[143] *tomorrow*, should the need arise. Neither, however, is the "dark side" of hyperreal zombie apocalypse difficult to find. As Luke McKinney put it in a web article entitled *7 Famous Zombie Movie Weapons (That Would Get You Killed)*: 'Zombies are the best imaginary enemy because they let you indulge in psychotic fantasies while still pretending to be the good guy' (2011). Thus, while zombies may be metaphors for many things – from communism, to consumerism, to inaction on climate change – the popularity of zombies may well be described in non-metaphorical terms: We get to imagine ourselves *kicking their ass*.

[**Below:** In contrast to the preceding Chuck Norris memes, the memes below explore less masculinized versions of masculinity within zombie apocalypse fantasies. **Fig. 3:** The hyper image/fashion-conscious labour-phobic male model – played by Ben Stiller in *Zoolander* (2001) – is recontextualized in a zombie apocalypse. **Fig. 4:** The "lazy college senior" meme template is employed to paint zombie apocalypse survivalist fantasies as trivial, contrasted with seeking stable employment.]





[143] "Badass" is one of the few gender-neutral terms of endearment common within martial arts practice and discourse (See for example: 'On the Primacy of Badassness.' Staller; 2022). This issue is explored more deeply in 'Mapping (Japanese) Martial Arts in (Western) Popular Culture (1903-1973).'

(Alternate)Reality-Based Self-Defense

With a few notable exceptions – namely, *Kung-Fu Zombie* (1981), the *Resident Evil* franchise (beginning in 1996), *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2016), and *Zombie Fight Club* (2014) – zombie slayers are *not* martial artists. Rather, zombie survivors are the people-next-door: the stressed businessman, the nurse, the local cop, or the cross-bow wielding redneck. Often these survivors are the marginalized, disadvantaged, down-and-out, or oppressed; the black American who survives the night of the living dead only to be shot dead by the police in the morning (*Night of the Living Dead,* 1968); the orphans on their way to Adventureland (*Zombieland,* 2009); the "crazy" homeless guy (*The Dead Don't Die,* 2019); the unpopular and bullied Boy Scouts (*The Boy Scout's Guide to the Zombie Apocalypse,* 2015). The message is clear: You too can kill zombies. Just grab a baseball bat, cast iron skillet (*Zombieland,* Rule #6), or bowling ball (*Zombieland,* Rule #15), and go kick some zombie ass.

In line with Judkin's arguments above, I contend that it is precisely *due to* its unrealistic premise that the zombie apocalypse scenario can facilitate realism in self-defense training. The pop-culture references and hypothetical scenario help to minimize uncomfortable, awkward, and arguably paranoid aspects of reality-based premises, without substantially impacting the relevance of the content. After all, methods of self-protection which would be effective against zombies would also be effective in real-world assault scenarios. At the same time, this content can potentially reach new or wider audiences by appealing to those who eschew traditional or reality-based approaches, many of which include implicit gendered, ageist, or ableist biases. These biases are reflected by the continual references to "street fights" or "bar fights" which, in general, primarily concern cisgendered men, under 30 years old, under the influence of alcohol.

It is certainly not my argument that alternate-reality scenarios constitute the *best* approach to reality-based self-defense training; especially considering the inevitable distractions and irrelevancies which accompany such frameworks. However, alternate-reality approaches can do much to accomplish what Alex Channon describes as 'the "undoing" of gender in mixed-sex martial arts and combat sports' (2014). Building on West and Zimmerman's paper 'Doing Gender' (1987), Channon suggests that the commonness of mixed-sex practice in martial arts and combat sports creates a unique opportunity for the 'undoing of gender' which can 'lead practitioners to challenge socially dominant ideas about "natural" sex differences, and the wider culture of "gender injustice"' (2014: 588). Thus, martial arts – whether reality, or

alternate-reality, based – have the potential to be transformative, not only for individual practitioners, but for society as a whole.

Channon further argues that basing martial arts instruction and competition on 'more directly relevant criteria' than sex and gender can 'bring to light the otherwise hidden potentials for similarity between men and women,' and foster a 'shared identity of "martial artist"' within training and competitive contexts, as opposed to dualistic identities of "man" or "woman" (2014: 597). At the same time, Channon calls attention to the double-edged nature of mixed-sex training which, if regressively structured, can counter-productively 'reinforce sexist notions of male superiority' (594). Thus, he argues, 'it is the ways in which gender is done/undone…which determines how well they can pose a challenge to traditional, sexist understandings of difference' (591).

Building Inclusivity through Self-Defense

In 'Psychological Research on Martial Artists,' Anna Kavoura, et al., similarly argue that the persistent focus 'on gender differences, without drawing at all on gender theory reflects a gender bias, which seems to be engrained in sport psychology studies' (2012; Abstract). In a conversation with Kavoura, Paul Bowman usefully interrogates these issues along the lines of media and representation, arguing that gender constructs are largely 'produced through technologies that teach us how to move and how to behave' (2020k; 24:10). As an example, he offers the phrase 'throwing like a girl' which, he argues, is also represented and propagated as 'an image' (24:20). To the degree that the basis for this stereotypical image exists, it is not an intrinsic product of bodies, but a product of social constructs.

Bowman proposes this example, rather than the similarly common stereotype of "fighting like a girl," in reference to the classic 1980 essay 'Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment Motility and Spatiality,' by Iris Marion Young. According to Young, 'the modalities of feminine bodily comportment, motility, and spatiality' are rooted in 'neither anatomy nor physiology, and certainly not in a mysterious feminine "essence" (152). Rather, Young argued, that not only were girls not encouraged or instructed to throw, they *were* encouraged and instructed in behaviours *counter-productive* to throwing:

> There is a specific positive style of feminine body comportment and movement, which is learned as the girl comes to understand that she is a girl. The young girl

> acquires many subtle habits of feminine body comportment – walking like a girl, tilting her head like a girl, standing and sitting like a girl, gesturing like a girl, and so on. The girl learns actively to hamper her movements. She is told that she must be careful not to get hurt, not to get dirty, not to tear her clothes, that the things she desires to do are dangerous for her. Thus she develops a bodily timidity which increases with age. In assuming herself as a girl, she takes herself up as fragile (153).

It is along these lines that Bowman suggests that '…change has to start out there in culture. Somewhere in representation. Somewhere in publicity' (2020k; 14:25). It is also along these lines that Bowman asks Kavoura: 'How do you get [people with] non-cis-gender or non-normative identities in the door of a martial arts club? How do you make martial arts and combat sports attractive to people who have disabilities, or trans people, or people who feel that they will experience prejudice?' (14:00).

Kavoura responds that those wishing to have 'an inclusive dojo,' might begin by adding language to websites and promotional materials which mark that space as 'safe,' including: 'Welcome as you are,' or 'We welcome all categories of people' (15:20). This practice, she notes, should also be continued *within* the space, through the use of gender-neutral language and a minimum of gender segregation during training and competition (15:55). Progress along these lines, Kavoura observes, might require the (re)education of instructors who, despite good intentions, may display unconscious bias or lack the language and theoretical frameworks to present self-defence material in non-gendered ways (28:30).

While Bowman expresses enthusiasm about 'deconstructing gender binaries' within martial arts (24:35), he also acknowledges that martial arts have traditionally served as an 'important feminist project' with 'emancipatory potential' (25:00). On this, Bowman points to the 'physical feminism' extensively theorized and ethnographically explored by Martha McCaughey[144] who argued that 'self-defense as physical feminism disrupts the embodied ethos of rape culture' (1998: 281) by training 'women out of the femininity that makes them easy targets for men's abuse' (1997: Abstract).

[144] McCaughey, together with Jill Cermele, manages *See Jane Fight Back* (*SeeJaneFightBack.com*) an academic internet resource dedicated to covering 'research on women's self-defense,' 'self-defense as part of rape prevention education,' as well as 'all the instances of people ignoring what we already know about the effectiveness of women's self-defense'.

[**Fig 5:** A conventional male-led self-defense *TikTok* instructional which singles out "the ladies" in an unnecessarily restrictive, but potentially popular, approach. **Fig. 6:** An innovative female-led approach singles out "divas" while combining self-defense and comedy to minimize the awkwardness of self-protection training.]





Bartitsu, Suffrajitsu, the New Women's Movement

The Bartitsu system of self-defense was created by Edward William Barton-Wright in the latter 1800s. Although little known today, Bartitsu was famously wielded by Conan Doyle's fictional super-detective, Sherlock Holmes (circa 1903).[145] Bartitsu was an eclectic bricolage – including jiu-jitsu (Japanese/Chinese grappling), la canne (French cane/umbrella combat), and savate (French/Japanese kickboxing) – gaining popularity in England in tandem with the garrotting panics of that era. Although "garrotting" (i.e., a form of mugging that involves temporarily incapacitating the victim by strangulation) did occur across England during this time, the panic was largely a "moral" one, fuelled more by paranoia and media sensationalism than statistical evidence (Godfrey, 2012; 2013; 2020g). Yet, regardless of its largely imaginary nature, the garrotting panic led to the rise of *an ethos of self-defence*, marking a significant shift from prior discourse, which held such incidents to be a matter for the police (ibid).

[145] Doyle's knowledge of Bartitsu appears to have derived from a newspaper article containing a typo. Hence, in 'The Adventure of the Empty House' (1903) it is explained that Holmes used his knowledge of "Baritsu" to survive the seemingly fatal encounter with Moriarty at the Reichenbach Falls in 'The Final Problem' (1893).

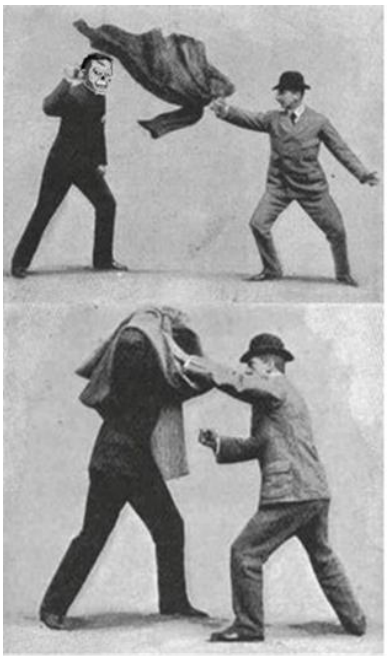
[**Fig. 7:** Throughout this essay, I have created digital collages by pasting zombie faces on vintage self-defense media with the use of Microsoft Paint, Powerpoint, and Adobe Photoshop. Sources of the original images are listed in *Works Cited (Figures)*.]



ZombieJitsu. Figs 1 & 2: Umbrella Defense.



ZombieJitsu. Figs 1 & 2. Cane Defense



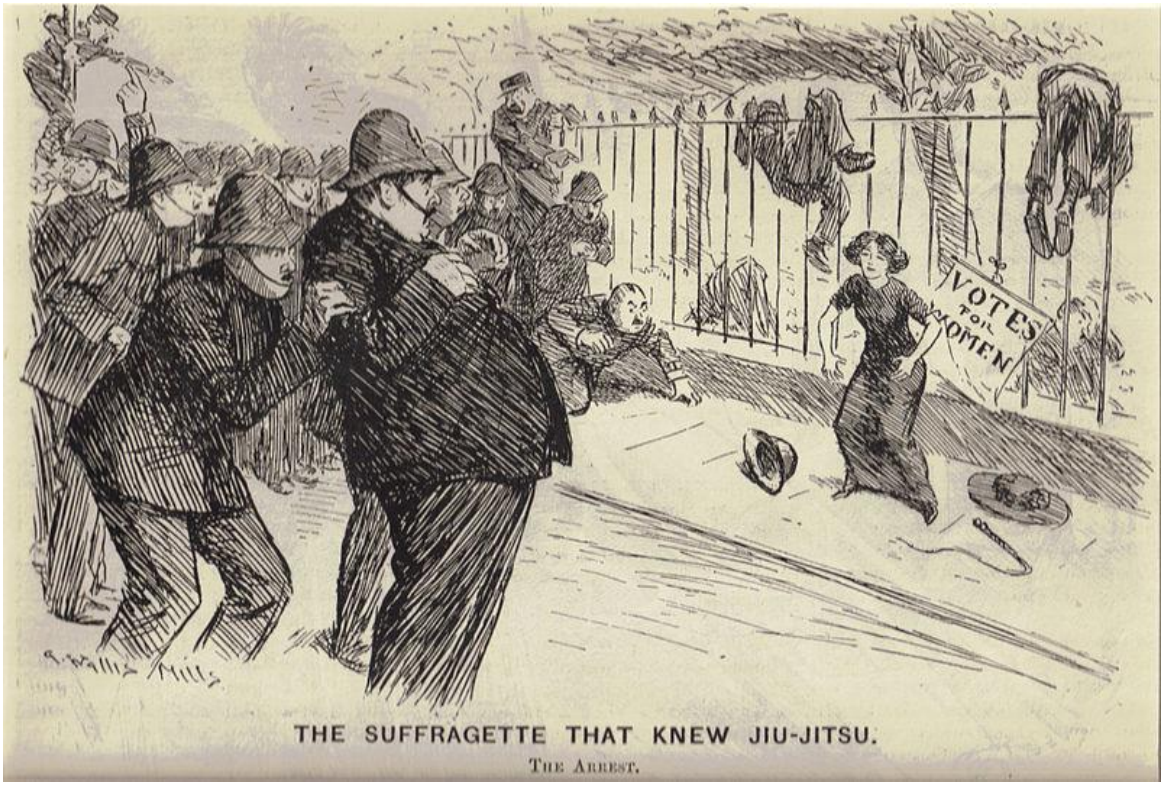
ZombieJitsu. Figs 1 & 2: Overcoat Defense.

The popularity of Bartitsu foreshadowed the turn of the century rise of jiu-jitsu in the UK, where it was famously adopted by suffragettes under the instruction of a former student of Barton-Wright named Edith Garrud. In 1906, Garrud created a women's self-defence club at the Women's Freedom League. The use of jiu-jitsu by suffragettes was widely publicized, and in 1914, the practice was first described by an anonymous journalist as "Suffrajitsu." Suffrajitsu is addressed by numerous contemporary books, graphic novels, and films, including the star-studded *Suffragette* (2015) and *Enola Holmes* (2020).

As suffragettes of England took up jiu-jitsu, its popularity was also on the rise in the United States (particularly in the form of judo), where it was endorsed by President Theodore Roosevelt as being critical for national security and ideally suited for "the strenuous life" for which he advocated. Roosevelt is extensively quoted online for having apparently said in 1905, that "the art of jiu-jitsu is worth more in every way than all of our athletics combined." Although I am unable to verify this quote, Roosevelt certainly studied jiu-jitsu during that time period, and aggressively advocated for the inclusion of jiu-jitsu in the curriculum of American universities and military academies (Rouse; 2015: 469).

In 1904, while President Roosevelt received a lesson in the White House from the visiting judo master Yoshiaki Yamashita, a group of prominent women and daughters – under the leadership of Martha Blow Wadsworth – gathered on the White House lawn to receive a lesson from Fude Yamashita, the judo master's wife (Rouse and Slutsky; 2014: 485-486). In so doing, these women and girls simultaneously received a practical lesson and sent a powerful message. In the coming years, the practice of judo/jiu-jitsu, as a form of female self-empowerment, blossomed in tandem with the "new woman movement" and the soon-to-be-successful "get the vote" campaign in the USA.

In contrast to the imagined "other" at the centre of the garrotting panics, representations of Suffrajitsu – such as the political cartoon of "The Suffragette Who Knew Jiu-Jitsu" by Arthur Wallis Wills from *Punch Magazine* in 1910 [**Fig. 8**] – regularly depicted police constables or alcoholic husbands on the receiving end of the techniques. The public demonstrations of Garrud, for example, regularly employed a volunteer dressed as a constable, underscoring the reality that jiu-jitsu training was largely intended to enable suffragettes to evade unjust arrest or harassment, and to defend themselves in the face of police brutality; such as that which occurred on the "Black Friday" of November 18, 1910.



The significance of this message, and these representations, is expanded upon by Rouse and Slutsky, who argue that the very 'idea that such training could empower women to defend themselves against domestic violence – the most personal and common form of violence and oppression of women – represented the culmination of women's success in challenging the patriarchal power structure' (2014: 497). In an article on self-defence for the Suffragette newspaper *Votes For Women,* Garrud argued as much. In reference to jiu-jitsu, Garrud writes: 'In this art all are equal, little or big, heavy or light, strong or weak; it is science and agility that win the victory. Is not this a forecast of the future! Science, quickness, vitality, and brains are surely equal to brute strength in politics as well as in fights' (1910).

Rouse notes, however, that American media of the day often represented threats to women in 'racialized' and 'coded' terms, alluding to 'the shadowy stranger,' or 'yellow peril' (2020r; 31:30). She points out – and notes that feminists of the time *also* pointed out – the irony implicit in the fact that so many incidents of domestic violence occurred in the home, at the hands of women's purportedly 'natural protectors' (33:00). One of Garrud's short plays, for instance, published in pictorial form in 1911, was entitled *Ju-Jutsu as a Husband-Tamer* [Fig. 9]. According to Diana Looser, the clear message of the play was that 'the physical practice of ju-jitsu had revolutionary potential for women, opening up unprecedented freedoms through new bodily acts' (2010: 11).

Yet, Rouse points out that the more feminists pursued matters of domestic violence, the more pushback they received, so these issues were temporarily abandoned in a concerted effort to gain the vote (33:30). Even so, according to Rouse and Slutsky, in first half of the twentieth century, 'women's self-defense figuratively and literally challenged the power structure that prevented them from exercising their full rights as citizens and human beings' (2014: 470). By the 1940s, judo – the modernized sports-based approach to jiu-jitsu – had thoroughly supplanted jiu-jitsu in popular culture and the Western imagination.[146] According to Martha McCaughey, after a war time hiatus, judo became an integral component of the post-war self-defense and 'physical feminism' movements of the 1960s-1980s (1997; 1998).

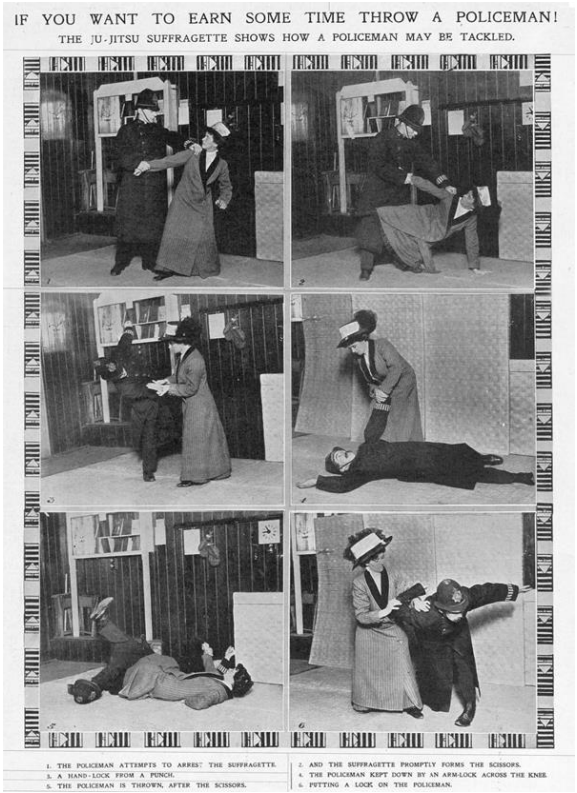
[146] For an analysis of pop-cultural representations of judo and karate, see: 'Mapping (Japanese) Martial Arts in (Western) Popular Culture (1903-1973).'

[**Fig. 9:** Garrud's 1911 short play, entitled *Ju-Jutsu as a Husband-Tamer,* published in pictorial form. **Fig. 10:** Garrud demonstrates jiu-jitsu on a volunteer dressed as a constable in a provocatively titled pictorial spread, circa 1910.]


April 8, 1911. HEALTH & STRENGTH. 239

Ju-Jutsu as a Husband-Tamer.

A SUFFRAGETTE PLAY WITH A MORAL.


IF YOU WANT TO EARN SOME TIME THROW A POLICEMAN!

THE JU-JITSU SUFFRAGETTE SHOWS HOW A POLICEMAN MAY BE TACKLED.

1. THE POLICEMAN ATTEMPTS TO ARREST THE SUFFRAGETTE.
2. A HAND-LOCK FROM A PUNCH.
3. THE POLICEMAN IS THROWN, AFTER THE SCISSORS.
4. THE POLICEMAN KEPT DOWN BY AN ARM-LOCK ACROSS THE KNEE.
5. AND THE SUFFRAGETTE PROMPTLY FORMS THE SCISSORS.
6. PUTTING A LOCK ON THE POLICEMAN.

The Ethics of Self-Defense

By the 1990s, the notion of "women's self-defence" had become widely contested on the grounds that – in becoming responsible for their own self-defence against violence – the blame for assault was being shifted from the perpetrator to the victim. Questions such as "why didn't you fight back?" and feelings of shame associated with not doing enough to stop an attack, led to a widespread interpretation of self-defence rhetoric as a form of victim blaming. According to this interpretation, emphasis should be placed on interrupting "rape culture" and toxic masculinity, rather than placing the burden of defence on the shoulders of potential victims. The term "toxic masculinity" has been extensively explored and debated by scholars and pundits alike. Nevertheless, I choose to use the term to indicate – as Sculos suggests – behaviour grounded in 'a loosely interrelated collection of norms, beliefs, and behaviours associated with masculinity, which are harmful to women, men, children, and society more broadly' (2017).

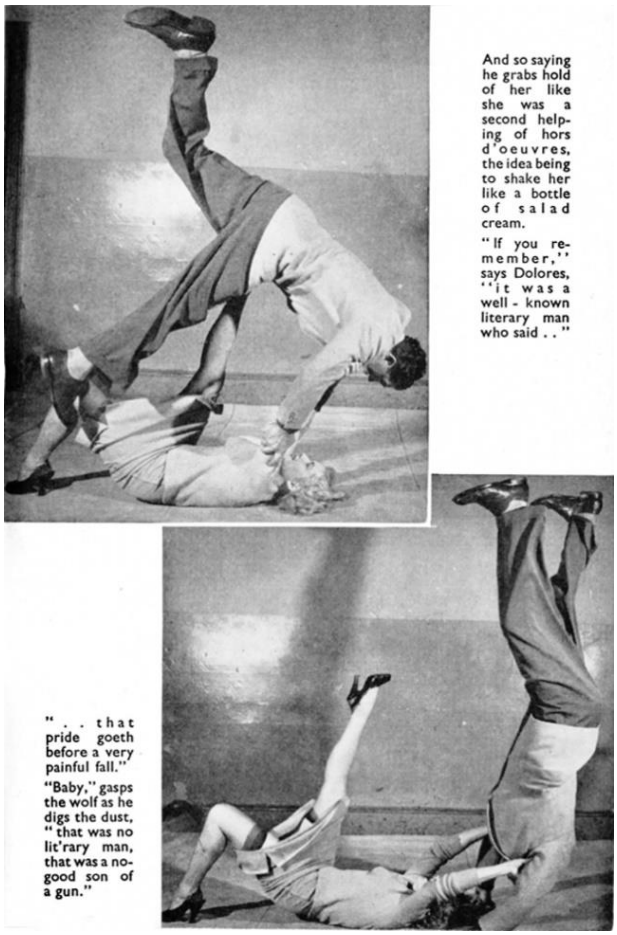
Jessica Valenti – co-editor of the 2008 anthology *Yes Means Yes!: Visions of Female Sexual Power and A World Without Rape* – argues that there is indeed, 'real danger in believing the solution to sexual assault is on the shoulders of women who might be attacked' (2015). In an article in *The Guardian* entitled 'We Need to Stop Rapists, Not Change Who Gets Raped,' Valenti quotes Jaclyn Freidman (co-editor of the anthology with Valenti and author of the 2011 book *What You Really, Really Want*) who asserts that 'rapes are perpetrated by a tiny percentage of men who know what they're doing and who rape again and again – they're just going to find another target' (ibid). Freidman continues: 'just because these girls [who took a self-protection course] are less likely to be picked, it doesn't mean there's less rape on campus … This isn't rape prevention, it's rape protection' (ibid).

Friedman's arguments here, it should be noted, appear to depend heavily on the *stranger myth*, and apparently neglect the fact that approximately 80% of sexual assaults are perpetrated by someone known to the victim; and of those, half are committed by an intimate partner. According to data provided by the United States Department of Justice and the Department of Health and Human Services, 8 out of 10 acts of sexual violence are committed 'by someone known to the victim,' of which, only 31 percent were reported to the Police (*RAINN.org*). Similar trends are reported in Ireland. A 2020 report by the Sexual Violence Center Cork found that 86.8 percent of cases of sexual violence were committed by someone known to the victim, of which only 33 percent were reported to the Garda (Roche; 2021).

While critics of self-defence are undeniably correct to argue that self-defence *should not be* the responsibility of victims, the education and training of potential victims *and potential bystanders* can nevertheless do much to change culture at large, as McCaughey argues (1997; 1998) and for which Friedman, herself, advocates above. As a model example of the connectedness of 'individual and social change,' Irene Zeilinger offers the example of Egypt's Tahrir Square during the Arab Spring of 2011, pointing out that both 'male and female activists learned self-defence techniques to protect themselves and other women against the sexual violence used to discourage women from participating in the protest movement' (2016).

[**Fig. 11:** The cover illustration by Vincent Fodera for a, thus far, unlocatable book apparently entitled 'Secrets of Self-Defense for Women.' **Fig. 12:** The above book appears to be based on a 1955 photographic spread in *Span* entitled 'Dig that Dust Wolf!' featuring Dolores Marlins (Vol. 2. No. 14. Aug).





The Efficacy of Self-Defense

A further argument against the use of self-defence maintains that attempting to "fight back" can increase the risk of serious injury to the victim. Thus, victims of assaults – from muggings to rape – should not make the situation worse by resisting. In the case of property theft or damage, there is little disagreement. As long as the victim does not appear to be in imminent physical danger, the optimal strategy is to surrender property, and report the incident to the police and deal with the aftermath of the robbery at the earliest safe opportunity. In cases of physical harm or injury, the situation is more complicated.

Substantial disagreement remains with regard to the use of physical self-defence in cases in which the victim appears to be in imminent danger. For example, Helen Jones – at the time, the

co-chairwoman of the Rape Crisis Federation – criticized an article published in the September 2000 issue of *Cosmopolitan* which reported the findings of American researchers (based on 1.5 million cases collected over a decade) that 'women who offered resistance were much more likely to get away, and that whether or not women resisted a rapist had no bearing on the level of injuries they received' (Ward; 2000). Jones argued that these findings were ultimately harmful since they 'could leave women who had been raped feeling guilty and responsible for what had happened, because they had done nothing to beat off the attack' and 'increase the potential for women being harmed' (ibid). Jones argued: 'Sometimes it is far better just to let it happen and then deal with the aftermath' (ibid).

The statistics, it must be stated, do not – and did not – agree with Jones' assessment. A preponderance of evidence collected in a wide range of studies, spanning decades, found that the use of aggressive verbal and physical tactics proved effective in stopping sexual assaults in 85-90 percent of cases, and found no correlation between physical/verbal resistance and injuries inflicted on the victim. These studies also found that decisive physical/verbal actions in the initial moments of an attack were crucial; that attempts at logical reasoning were ineffective; and that stalling and cooperative tactics led to worse outcomes for victims (Bart and O'Brien 1984; Ullman and Knight, 1992, 1993; Madden and Sokol, 1997; Ullman, 1998).

More recently, a study by Charlene Senn, et al. (2015) found that university students who completed 12 hours (four sessions of three hours) of Sexual Assault Resistance training were nearly one half less likely to experience rape, and nearly two thirds less likely to experience attempted rape in the subsequent year, relative to those who attended 'a session providing access to brochures on sexual assault, as was common university practice' (ibid). The authors conclude that 'a rigorously designed and executed sexual assault resistance program was successful in decreasing the occurrence of rape, attempted rape, and other forms of victimization among first-year university women' (ibid).

A rigorous study conducted by Hollander and Cunningham (2020) found that – among women from 18-77 years old – those who completed a nine hour 'community-based empowerment self-defense course' experienced 'significantly less sexual assault' in the subsequent year, and also demonstrated 'significantly greater self-defense self-efficacy, more accurate knowledge about sexual assault and the possibility of resistance, and less self-silencing' than comparable control groups (ibid). The authors of this study assert that this research 'provides the first

systematic evidence that empowerment self-defense training can be effective in preventing assault in adult populations outside of educational contexts,' and conclude that 'empowerment self-defence training is therefore an important part of sexual assault prevention efforts' (ibid).

Findings that endorse comprehensive empowerment-based self-protection courses, such as those above, are frequently proclaimed by martial arts and "self-defence" instructors and establishments. This, despite the fact that many such establishments do not offer comprehensive – or, in the words of Senn, et al., 'rigorously designed and executed' (2015) – self-protection programs that include a wide range of techniques including situational awareness, avoidance, preparation, positioning, verbal de-escalation, deception, verbal boundary enforcement, and physical boundary enforcement as a last resort.

It is equally important, albeit unpleasant, to note that although 85-90 percent effectiveness is an encouraging finding, this leaves 10-15 percent of attempts at resistance, ineffective. There are, unfortunately, circumstances in which even physical resistance will fail, as Sue Lees – author of *Carnal Knowledge: Rape on Trial* – writes in response to the article published in *Cosmopolitan* (Lees; 2000). Lees includes several graphic and horrific case studies within her article which demonstrate that resistance can be futile and result in further injury. In response to Lees' criticism, Lorraine Butler – editor of *Cosmopolitian* at that time – responded, writing, in a letter to *The Guardian,* that the advice provided in *Cosmo* was:

> …[A] legitimate follow up to American research, which suggests that fighting back against a sex attacker can improve chances of survival: we clearly state that every rape is different and whether they fight back or not, women should always use their instincts… Our article makes it clear that there are three lines of defence: scream and shout to attract attention; reason with your attacker; and, only as a last resort, attack back physically (2000).

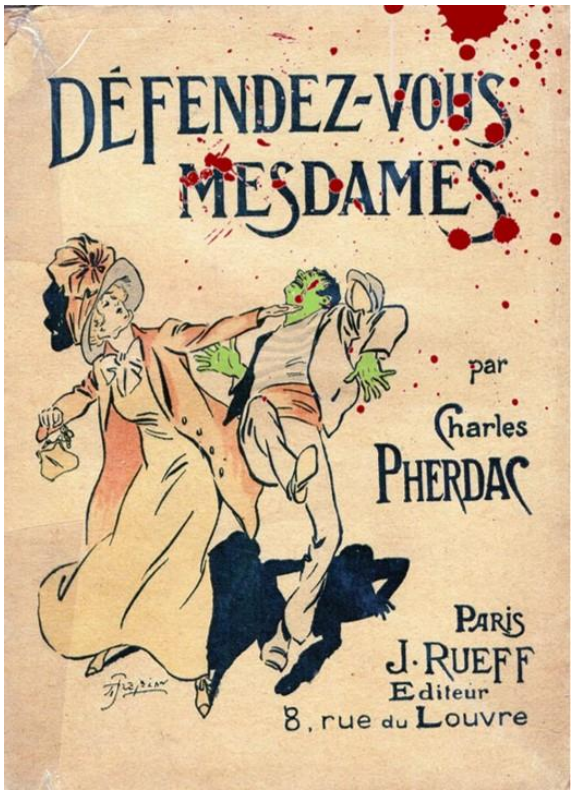
Regarding the opposition to this growing body of evidence, Jocelyn Hollander notes that women's self-defence training 'has been excluded from sexual violence prevention efforts for a variety of reasons, including concerns that it is ineffective, encourages victim blaming, neglects acquaintance assault, and does not target the underlying factors that facilitate sexual violence' (2016). Hollander argues, however, that such 'critiques are misguided' and 'founded on misunderstandings of self-defense training, stereotypes about gender, and individualistic assumptions about the impact of self-defense' (ibid). According to Hollander, evidence makes it

abundantly clear that 'empowerment-based self-defense training' is 'effective' and 'helps to change the root conditions that allow violence against women to flourish' (ibid).

McCaughey has further noted that 'feminist politics since the second wave' have identified violence as a symbol of patriarchy (1998: 277). Thus, for women to counter that violence with additional violence would merely serve to perpetuate the cycle, or worse, to legitimize the terms of the oppression (ibid). McCaughey suggests, however, that since 'gender is not really natural, it requires constant enforcement and repetition' (281). 'This repetition,' she argues 'is abruptly interrupted in women's self-defense' training, which 'provides an understanding or a knowledge at the bodily level that is distinct from that at the intellectual level' (284-285) and ultimately 'transforms what it means to have a female body' (281).

[**Figs. 13 & 14**]





According to McCaughey (emphasis added), that which 'feminists *talk* about interrupting,' female self-defence practitioners '*practice* interrupting,' by 'enact[ing] the de-construction of femininity' and 'internaliz[ing] a different kind of bodily knowledge' (279). Such training, she argues, allows for the celebration of 'women's agency while not denying the ways women are victimized' (298). McCaughey concludes that 'by forcing women to act in unfeminine ways, self-

defense instruction not only identifies some of the mechanisms that create and sustain gender inequality but also a means to subvert them' (281). Reiterating, in various terms, that 'aggression and femininity are not complementary,' McCaughey argues that females must 'get over being nice, a fear of guns, a fear of hurting people, a physical hesitancy, and their own disbelief in their physical power' (281-282). On this, it is important to observe that while such "obstacles" do exist for many (but not all) females, they exist as well for many marginalized people, regardless of gender.

Despite the robustness of the data, prevailing arguments for self-defence are nevertheless rife with philosophical, ethical, and moral hazards. The use of violence – even defensively – can never be encouraged lightly. On the prevailing *anti*-self-defence arguments, Cahill and Hunt suggest that the most common objection against 'recommending self-defense as a way to combat rape culture' concerns the displacement of 'the burden of fighting that fight' (2016: 173). In other words: 'Rather than insisting that women use precious resources of time, money, and energy to protect themselves against an unjust threat, we should insist that men take responsibility for not posing that threat in the first place' (ibid). The authors also question the efficacy of such training, since 'most self-defense courses teach women to protect themselves against attacks by strangers… which are the rarest form of sexual violence' (ibid).

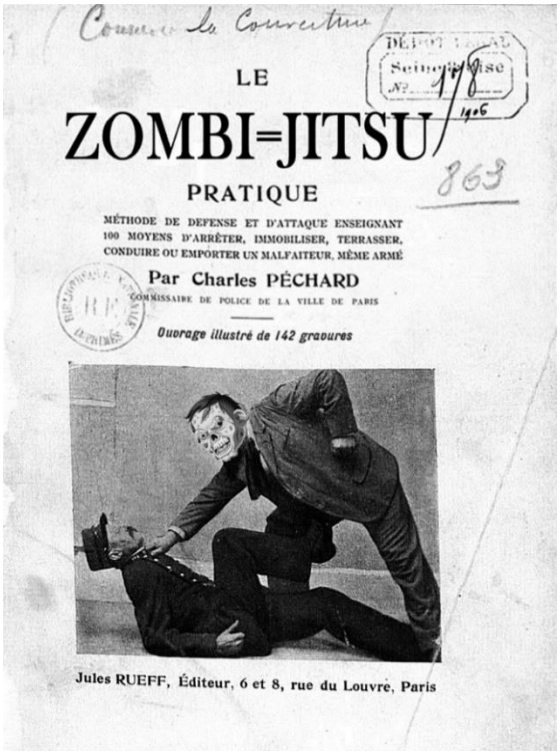
According to Cahill and Hunt, 'feminist' or 'empowerment' approaches to self-defence are 'an alternative to the fear mongering approaches espoused by nonfeminist conservatives' (175). Empowerment-based training, the authors argue, 'rejects the inevitability of rape, the inherent aggressivity of the male identified body, and the inherent vulnerability of the feminine or female identified body' (ibid). At the same time, the authors argue, such training should refrain from telling participants what "to do" or what "not to do," but rather, should provide a range of knowledge, techniques, tools, options, and modes of analysis. In this way, they write, feminist and empowerment-based self-defence training should be understood not 'only as an individual practice' but as a 'situated' and 'embodied practice within the context of a complex social life' (ibid). Cahill and Hunt conclude:

> Where nonfeminist self-defense training implies that all an individual woman has to do to protect herself is to decide to defend herself, feminist self-defense training understands that individual choice and action, while meaningful and important, are both enabled and counteracted by a host of other forces and dynamics that are not under an individual's control (ibid).

Lynne Marie Wanamaker has described this set of challenges as 'the self-defense paradox' (2013). At the heart of this paradox, according to Wanamaker, is 'the fact that one person – the perpetrator – holds sole responsibility for the decision to assault someone,' yet at the same time, 'people at risk of violence can take effective steps to increase their own safety' (ibid). It should also be noted that martial arts practice, in any context, has this same paradoxical relationship with violence; captured in the infamous statement of Roman general Vegetius prior to the fall of the Roman Empire: ''If you want peace, prepare for war' (Ca. 385).

[**Figs. 15 & 16]**





The Undoing of Gender Via Martial Arts

In 'The "Undoing" of Gender in Mixed-Sex Martial Arts and Combat Sports,' Alex Channon recommends three best-practices in line with the title of that paper. The first of these practices is to '…highlight the abilities of "senior" female practitioners whenever possible…' (2014: 592). Channon points to the value of this practice for recruitment, retention, and inspiration (ibid). The second is to '…encourage integration in training as much as possible, including the more physically intense, partnered activities, such as sparring' (597). Channon observes, however, that this practice must be 'carefully balanced' so as not to "put off" new students (598). One

particular challenge along these lines pertains to the sometimes 'viscerally-felt' urge 'for men to excessively restrain themselves when practicing with (or competing against) women… for fear of hurting them' (595). Thus, Channon argues – citing Lois Bryson (1990: 182) – that the undoing of gender can be seen as critical not only for female empowerment, but also for altering male perception (2014: 597).

The case-by-case balancing act required by the second recommended practice is addressed by the third, which takes into account both religious and situational boundaries, suggesting that instructors and practitioners should '…remain sensitive to the likely needs of their students/peers' and 'adjust their pedagogical approaches accordingly' in order to 'encourage' but not 'insist upon' integration in contact/sparring activities (599). This practice is held to be particularly important with regard to those who are pursuing self-defence training because of fears and/or traumas related to sexual abuse, as well as for those who are concerned about potentially traumatizing or "triggering" their training/sparring partner. Although Channon flags 'male-to-female touch' as the primary concern along these lines (599) it is, I argue, (increasingly) unnecessary to restrict the abuse/abuser relationship to this paradigm.

On this, in 'Should Feminists Defend Self-Defense?' Cahill and Hunt argue that many self-defence courses persist in presenting 'victims as women and perpetrators as men, thereby assuming that sexual assault is gender based,' despite the fact that 'sexual violence is perpetrated against children of all genders, cis-men, trans people, and incarcerated individuals' (2016: 174). Cahill and Hunt advocate for a more nuanced position, arguing that while sexual-assault in contemporary Western culture is 'necessarily gendered and embodied,' as well as 'deeply implicated with gender inequality,' it is nevertheless true that 'any attempt to view sexual violence as gender neutral is as mistaken as the attempt to view it solely through the lens of a ''male perpetrator''–''female victim'' framework' (174).

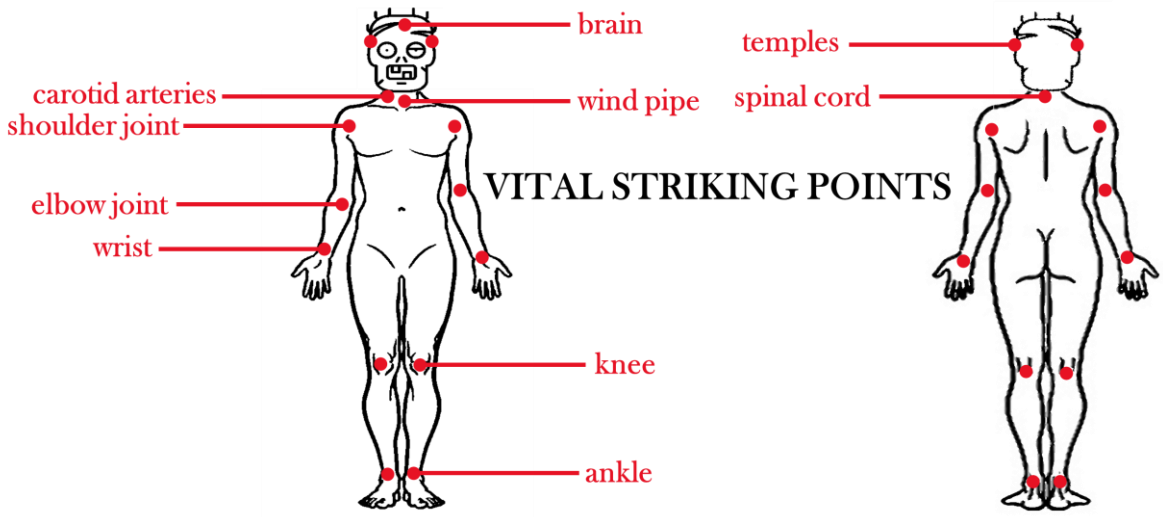
Still, according to Channon, it is nevertheless true that 'personally-felt sense of identification with culturally normative images of masculinity or femininity, coupled with being held socially accountable to moral imperatives to behave in "appropriate" ways towards members of the opposite sex,' can make gender constructs and arrangements very difficult to 'simply… undo' (2014: 599). Channon argues:

> Although such a process is rarely accomplished without difficulty, and in practice may be fraught with contradictory impulses that operate to reassert gender at the

> same moment as challenge it… activities which promote the "undoing" of gender… are considered by feminist scholars to be highly useful in undermining gender injustice more broadly (600).

Significantly, Channon concludes: 'For those who have experienced this type of training, which stands as a more or less radical departure from everyday gendered normality, a lasting impression can be made, which impacts upon understandings and lived realities beyond the direct context of the training hall' (ibid).

[**Fig. 17**]



The Marginality of Martial Arts and Machismo in Popular Media

Beyond the training space, lived realities are also impacted, of course, by fictional and non-fictional media representations of issues, including assault, self-protection, and the martial arts. Indeed, as Bowman argues in 'The Marginal Movement of Martial Arts,' when reflecting upon the practice of Eastern martial arts in Western societies (emphasis added): '[A]ny project that seeks to understand the movement, migration and mutation of Asian (or any other) martial arts in Western culture must necessarily involve the serious and sustained study of media representations (2016: 9-10). Bowman seeks to understand the 'discursive status' of martial arts in the "West," by closely examining the representations of these arts in popular culture, including film, TV, and memes, concluding that 'Asian martial arts are both increasingly normalised and yet still peculiarly marginal in the West' (16).

Ultimately, Bowman summarizes the apparently perceived marginality, or 'always-slightly-problematic status' of the Western martial artist as relating to a perception that 'those who

apparently embrace violence and seem to train for it are easily cast as either problematically aggressive, overly fearful, paranoiac or deluded fantasists' (ibid). A further issue, according to Bowman, 'relates to the status of cross-cultural desire or performance in the West' (ibid). Observing that 'Asian martial arts require practitioners to wear strange clothes, use strange terms and to behave in strange ways,' Bowman notes that 'all of these things can provide grounds for comment, critique, or comedy' (ibid).

From the "strike first, strike hard, no mercy" philosophy of the Cobra Kai dojo in the *Karate Kid* franchise (1984-present); to the buffoonish "break his wrist and walk away" delusions of Rex in *Napoleon Dynamite* (2004); to the bottomless variation of Chuck Norris jokes and memes; martial arts in mainstream Western media are routinely portrayed as "toxic." Yet, it is also important to note the numerous exceptions, such as Mr. Miyagi – portrayed by American actor Noriyuki "Pat" Morita – of the *Karate Kid* franchise (1984-present). Still, as Bowman points out, while *Karate Kid* (1984) endorses 'the more "maternal" masculinity associated with the…gentle Okinawan pedagogue, Mr Miyagi' in contrast to the 'alpha-male military machismo' of the American Cobra Kai "sensei" John Creese, 'Miyagi himself can easily be regarded as an orientalist fantasy dimension at work within this US film series' (14; Nitta, 2010). On this, Bowman continues:

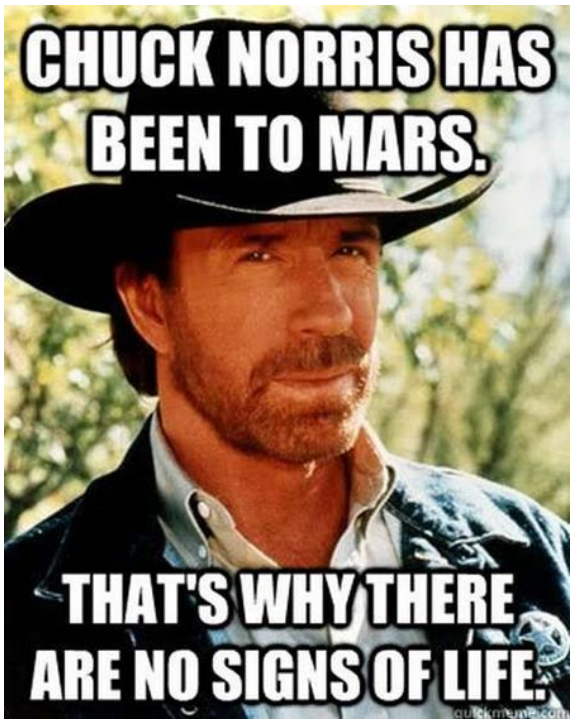
> This "feminized" dimension can be read in one of at least two ways: either the film's construction and representation of the ideal martial arts subject is orientalist in a negative way; or the film is proffering an alternative model of masculinity, one that is counter-hegemonic vis-à-vis the dominant forms of masculinity typically available in the West (14-15).

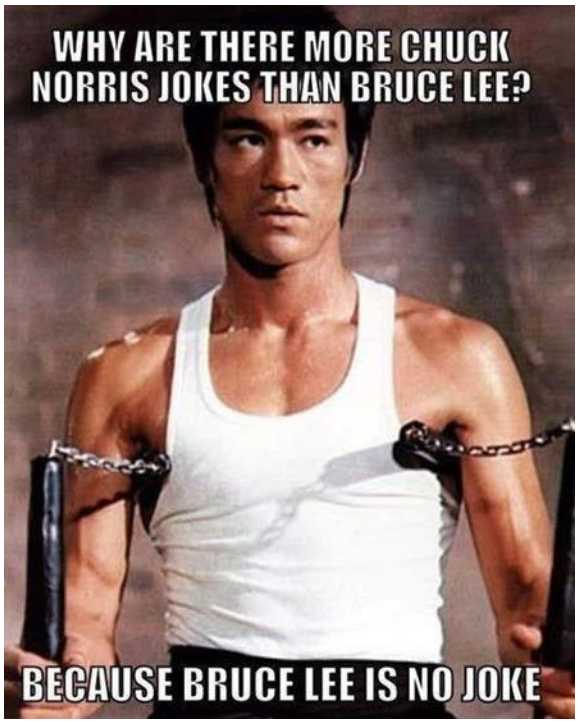
Similar dimensions, likewise open to interpretation, are readily found in popular children's media franchises – including *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (1984-present) and *Kung Fu Panda* (2008-present) – in which the "coolness" and potential spiritual and moral integrity of sustained training in the martial arts are foregrounded in conjunction with Orientalist fantasies, and in contrast to Orientalist and reductively "evil" martial artists.

The same pattern may be observed in more sophisticated representations – such the Hong Kong/American films of Bruce Lee (circa 1971-1973) and the Hong Kong *Ip Man* saga (2008-2019) starring Donny Yen – in which "good" martial artists are aligned with chivalry, pacifism, protection, advocacy, progressivism, and self-empowerment *in relation to* reductively "evil" forces. Thus, while toxic or buffoonish representations of marital artists often exist

independently of “bad guys”[147] representations of cool or “good” martial artists rarely do.[148] This topic is discussed in greater depth in ‘Mapping (Japanese) Martial Arts in (Western) Popular Culture (1903-1973).’

[**Figs. 18 & 19:** Both memes foreground the East vs West dichotomy in Western media representations. Note: Chuck Norris is hardly *just* an American actor. Norris was an International Tang Soo Do champion and was selected by Bruce Lee to play the “heavy” in *The Way of the Dragon* (1972). The resultant fight between Norris and Lee in the Roman Coliseum is one of the most referenced fight scenes in cinematic history.]





[147] Prominent examples are Jim Carrey’s “Karate Instructor” sketch on *In Living Color* (Ep: ‘Jheri’s Kids,’ 1990); John Cleese’s “Self-Defense Against Fresh Fruit” instructor sketch on Monty Python’s *Flying Circus* (Ep. ‘Owl-Stretching Time,’ Cleese and Chapman, 1969); and Rex of Rex Kwon Do in *Napoleon Dynamite* (2004).

[148] Here, I can think of only one example: The manga (2018) and anime series (2021) *The Way of the House Husband* tells the story of a Yakuza crime boss, turned house husband, and his meticulous and ethical devotion to his new duties and path.

Positioning Myself Vis-à-Vis Self Defense

In consideration of the various arguments above, I contend that providing instruction on techniques and strategies for self-protection – including the use of physical violence as a last resort – is ethical, effective, and worthwhile. I further contend that it is equally important to teach people (regardless of gender) strategies for proactively addressing toxic and anti-social behaviours, both personally, and as bystanders. Considering that many such behaviours are learned, or even encouraged, from a young age – often making such behaviours socially invisible, or provoking feelings of defensiveness in those perceived as aggressors – this education, and these activities, are useful and ethical.

Further considering discourse around LGBTQ+ rights and nonbinary genders, I argue that self-protection may be effectively taught without the inclusion of gendered stereotypes or statistics. I do not suggest that such statistics are not a valuable resource for those designing self-protection courses, public policy, or working with advocacy groups; but rather, that self-protection and bystander training can be effectively taught without the inclusion of those perspectives. Thus, the zombie scenario provides a useful framework for the instruction of empowerment-based self-protection.

Although the zombie apocalypse scenario – if taken too literally – presents numerous barriers to realistic self-protection and self-improvement, the scenario is also extraordinarily flexible. For example, zombie apocalypses notoriously entail dealing with *other people* in high stress situations and environments. This combination of humans and zombies makes the zombie apocalypse scenario particularly useful in terms of interrogating sociopolitical issues, including: conspiracism, conspirituality, cultural and ethnonational myth, toxic or gendered behaviour and stereotypes, and Exoticization/Orientalism. Further – as suggested by the arguments examined thus far – it is also necessary to confront my own position as male, as it pertains to *instructors* of empowerment-based self-defence.

In a 1997 paper entitled 'Teaching Women Self-Defense: Pedagogical Issues,' Madden and Sokol provide an excellent starting point with regard to curriculum and pedagogy. Among the many excellent questions they investigate is: 'Should men be present at all in such courses?' (144). Although various researchers have maintained that 'it is disempowering for a man to be present during such courses,' it is the belief of Madden and Sokol that 'there are practical and philosophical reasons that men should co-instruct' (ibid). However, the authors also maintain

that ‘a woman should be the primary instructor, and male instructors need to be very careful about how they deliver advice to female instructors or students’ (ibid). It is critical to note, however, that Madden and Sokol also argue that such courses should *not* be coeducational, and are thus referring to *female-only* self-protection courses (ibid).

According to Madden and Sokol, the purpose of a male co-instructor in a female-only self-defence course is to allow simulated attacks to be ‘as realistic as possible,’ to allow women to ‘practice techniques against a larger attacker to be convinced that the techniques are effective,’ and to better enable women to ‘channel anger’ (ibid). In the words of Madden and Sokol: ‘Bluntly, a male instructor is there to be a target’ (ibid). The authors conclude:

> Philosophically we also argue that men need to participate in the solution to violence against women. The problem of violence in our society will never be solved without the cooperation of men. However, the role of the man should be well defined. […] Although there is no systematic evidence to support an opinion either way, we believe that men should be included in such courses in roles that are carefully defined so as to empower women instructors and students (144-145).

Madden and Sokol further discuss the benefits of following demanding practical exercises with an ‘all-female group discussion,’ noting that ‘most of the time this generates some spontaneous discussion about anger towards men, the sharing of which is productive’ (144). Whether such “anger towards men” is truly productive, or whether it reinforces toxic stereotypes, is an important consideration. Ultimately, however, the topic of female-only self-protection courses fall beyond the scope of my praxis in which I (a male) seek to provide basic bystander/self-protection knowledge/techniques within a nonbinary and gender-neutral framework.

While female-only approaches to empowerment-based self-defence have proven viable, in consideration of my own gender, my fascination with zombie apocalypse survivalism, and my exploration into the poetics of debunking, I opted to pursue an “un-gendering” approach, aiming to *indirectly* confront and “undo” toxic aspects of gender constructions and stereotypes. Given this lack of emphasis on gender issues, I strive to represent gender neutrality in my practice by conducting workshops with a female co-instructor, and using inclusive practices while creating content for public consumption.

[**Fig. 20**]

EAT DIRT Zombie!

ONCE UPON A TIME there was a beautiful girl called DOLORES MARLINS who hadn't heard much about Red Riding Hood but she knew an awful lot about wolves. Now these wolves being a menace to the peace of his kingdom the King announced that the first girl to pin back their tales between their legs would be awarded the hand of Prince Charming. He was pretty sick of seeing the prince idle around the palace kitchen maids, anyway, although the prince's excuse was that he preferred apple pie to a life of bliss.



Anyway, Dolores, who had learned jujitsu when passing through Tokyo, volunteered to have a go. And what she did with the first wolf she found shook the sassy critter no end. He ended up scraping the ground with his buck teeth.

Whereupon Dolores was offered the hand of Prince Charming, but when she found out she'd got to spend the rest of her life baking apple pie for him she quit.





Enter wolf, all bulging eyes and licking lips. Note Dolores, looking the perfect prey.

"Excuse me, baby," says the wolf, "but what say youse take a walk into my parlour so's I can show youse my gold fillings?"

"Pardon me," says Dolores, "if I turn you down, won't you?"

"Pardon nothin'," howls the wolf, "youse tripped me when I was lookin' de other way. Baby, I'm gonna rise up and eat youse."

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Fig. 7. (Left) Clarke, Charles (1908) 'The Defeat of the Hooligan.' *The Idler: An Illustrated Monthly Magazine*. Vol 33. pp. 516-522. Featuring Marguerite Vigny as "Mrs. Sanderson."

Fig. 7 (Centre/Right). Barton-Wright, E.W. (1899) 'The New Art of Self Defence: How a Man may Defend Himself against every Form of Attack.' *Pearson's Magazine*. March.

Fig. 8. Wills, Arther Wallis (1910) 'The Suffragette Who Knew Jiu-Jitsu.' *Punch Magazine.*

Fig. 9. Garrud, Edith (1911) 'Ju-Jitsu as a Husband Tamer: A Suffragette Play with a Moral.' *Health & Strength*. 8 Apr.

Fig. 10. Garrud, Edith (1910) 'The World We Live In: Self-Defence.' *Votes For Women.* 4 Mar. Reprinted in: *Feminism and the Periodical Press, 1900-1918,* Vol. 2. Eds. Lucy Delap, Maria DiCenzo, Leila Ryan. Routledge. 355.

Fig. 11. Fodera, Vincent. 'Secrets of Self-Defense for Women.' (Ca. 1955)

Fig. 12. (1955) 'Dig that Dust Wolf!' *Span.* Vol. 2. No. 14. Aug. Featuring Dolores Marlins.

Fig. 13. ‘Safe From Attack’ (1905) Yabe School Advertisement (New York). *Black Cat Magazine*. See: ‘The Exotic, Feminine and Dangerous: How the “Yellow Peril” Set the Stage for the Cultural Appropriation of the Asian Martial Arts, 1902-1918.’ By Benjamin Judkins. *ChineseMartialStudies.com.* [Accessed: 30 Apr 2024]

Fig. 14. Pherdac, Charles (1900) *Défendez-Vous Mesdames*: *Manuel de Défense Feminine*. Ed. Jules. Rueff.

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Fig. 16. Péchard, Charles (1906) *Le Jiu-Jitsu Pratique*. Ed. Jules. Rueff.

Fig. 17. Original modification to generic androgynous body stock illustration.

Fig. 20. ‘Dig that Dust Wolf!’ (1955) *Span.* Vol. 2. No. 14. Aug. Featuring Dolores Marlins.

MAPPING THE ETHICS OF ZEN, MARTIAL ARTS, AND VIOLENCE

The Ethics of Zen, Violence, Martial Arts… and Zombies

Paradoxes abound when contemplating how best to fight the *undead* (i.e., "zombies"). Such paradoxes are also found at the heart of Zen philosophies, which, in turn, are inextricably bound up with the peaceful-violence of Eastern marital arts. After all, the "way" of martial arts (i.e., the "*dō*" of *bushidō*)[149] is synonymous with the "Tao" of Zen Buddhism and Taoism. Indeed, the quasi-historical monk Bodhidharma, is widely, if apocryphally, credited with both the transmission of Zen Buddhism from Southern India as well as with the invention of Shaolin kung-fu which was subsequently transmitted to Japan via Okinawa and China (Funakoshi, 1935: 7-8). Curiously, however, in the brief preface to the 10 precepts of karate – written by one of Funakoshi's mentors, Ankō Itosu in 1908 – Itosu acknowledges that Okinawan karate evolved from Chinese practices, but specifically asserts that 'Karate did not develop from Buddhism or Confucianism' (See: Abernethy; 2010). Thus, it is appropriate to consider more deeply, the overlapping relationships between martial arts, violence, and Zen philosophy.

Beyond the toxic masculinity often found around – and within – martial arts discourse, it is also the case that many martial arts techniques do have the potential to cause death or permanent injury. In popular media, this lethality is frequently neutralized through buffoonish or ineffectual parodies,[150] downplayed through protracted fight scenes during which nobody is actually injured,[151] or exaggerated in portrayals of assassins effortlessly severing spinal cords with open handed strikes (or the "touch of death").[152] Thus, although martial arts are *less* lethal than they are often portrayed, it is also true that a foundational principle of karate – *ikken hissatsu* – literally translates as "one fist, certain death." This potential lethality, combined with the widely-parodied toxicity of martial arts, makes the premise of *self-defense against zombies* doubly rife with ethical hazards, particularly with regard to the glorified gun violence, misogyny, and genocidal tendencies often found within those narratives.

Considering the toxic and lethal tropes of martial arts in popular media, how can it be that martial arts ever became a popular recreational activity? One partial explanation is found in the work of Inazō Nitobe, who wrote *Bushido: The Soul of Japan* in English in 1899 (translated into

[149] *Bu,* (i.e., "war"); *Bushi* (i.e., "warrior"); *Bushidō* (i.e., the "Tao" or "way" of the warrior).

[150] E.g., Inspector Clouseau in the *Pink Panther* series beginning in 1963.

[151] E.g., *Super Sentai,* beginning in Japan in 1992, adapted as The *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* in 1993.

[152] E.g., *The Street Fighter* series starring Sonny Chiba, beginning in 1974.

Japanese in 1908). This book romanticized and popularized a largely modern reinvention of *bushidō* – roughly meaning the "Way," "code," or "spirit" of the Samurai – both in Japan and abroad. Coinciding with this popular and paradoxical approach toward violence, honour, and enlightenment, the (by then) ancient Samurai close combat methods of *jūjitsu* (gentle technique[153]) were refined into the sport of *jūdō* (the Way of gentleness) by athlete and educator Kanō Jigorō. In the ensuing decades, the ancient Samurai art of *kenjutsu* (sword technique) was nationally rebranded as *kendō* (the Way of the sword).

[**Fig. 1:** An original Venn diagram aiming to simplify and depict these relationships.]



In the 1920s – building on the work of educator Ankō Itosu in the Okinawan school systems, and in cooperation with Kanō Jigorō (the founder of Judo) – Okinawan educator and poet Gichin Funakoshi modernized, formalized, and introduced a curriculum of karate practices to the Japanese mainland, beginning with a network of university clubs. In doing so – Funakoshi rebranded the (Chinese influenced) Okinawan form of k*ara-te-jitsu* (道 手 術) in which "kara-te" meant "ancient Chinese hand" and "jitsu" meant "technique," as *kara-te-dō* (空 手 道) where "kara-te" means "empty hand" and "*dō*" invokes "the Tao," or "the Way." Karate-dō was thus branded as a *defensive* system and a spiritual/philosophical pathway for self-improvement.

Presenting karate-dō as a means by which 'the individual could transcend the egotistical self,' Funakoshi employed the term "empty" in line with its implications in Zen philosophy (Tomlinson; 2010: 212) In Funakoshi's words: 'As a mirror's polished surface reflects whatever

[153] In this context, the term "gentle" or "pliable" refers to the way in which these techniques – rather than meeting force with force – *redirect* the momentum of the opponent to one's own advantage.

stands before it and a quiet valley carries even small sounds, so must the student of Karate render his mind empty of selfishness and wickedness in an effort to react appropriately towards anything he might encounter' (1935: 4). Thus, according to Funakoshi, 'True Karate-do is this: that in daily life, one's mind and body be trained and developed in a spirit of humility; and that in critical times, one be devoted utterly to the cause of justice' (3).

The Nationalistic and fascist aspects of these developments, however, cannot be ignored. In a paper entitled 'Does My Forward Stance Look a Little Fascist? Meiji-Era Karate & Embodied Politics,' Peter Katz notes that, 'while probably all modern martial arts have nationalist origins, Shotokan[154] karate emerged as an explicitly nationalist project of an explicitly fascist regime' (2023: 00:50). Citing Lauren Griffith's arguments on the 'graceful resistance' cultivated by the Brazilian martial art of capoeira (2023), Katz suggests that despite the much celebrated 'potential of a cultivated affective habitus to liberate and resist oppression, …the beautiful, contemplative, self-perfecting, affective habitus of Shotokan karate may in fact, at least historically, have done quite the opposite' (04:40). Indeed, there is an undeniable dissonance between the peaceful philosophy expressed by Funakoshi, and the role of karate within the broader context of the Meiji restoration.

YouTube karate influencer Jesse Enkamp – AKA "the Karate Nerd" – suggests that the principle of *ikken hissatsu* (commonly translated as "one fist, one kill") should not be taken literally, but rather, as a 'philosophical statement of attitude' akin to the Western aphorism *carpe diem* (2009). Enkamp suggests that the ideal aphorism for capturing the essence of karate-dō was suggested by Okinawan karate master Shōshin Nagamine: *kisshu fushin*, or, "demon's hand, saint's heart" (ibid). This paradoxical approach to martial arts has been further developed in the contemporary *Love Fighting Hate Violence* (LFHV) Project created by scholar/practitioners Channon and Matthews, who describe *LFHV* as an 'anti-violence initiative' which leverages martial arts to educate people about violence, by instilling an understanding of 'where "fighting" ends and "violence" begins' (LFHV: Manifesto; 2016: 3).

Channon and Matthews note that although 'it is often claimed that [such training] provides a particularly meaningful route to developing valued psychological attributes such as discipline and respect [and] "character-building,"' the reality is that these 'unchecked assumptions about

[154] Shoto (or, "waves of pine") was the pen name of Funakoshi; and his style of karate came to be called Shotokan.

the positive value of [martial arts] are, very often, deployed in misleadingly optimistic ways' (2018: 2). This observation prompts the authors to ask a logical follow-up question: 'If one specifically wants to avoid violence, would it not be preferable to advocate against violence rather than to practice its techniques oneself?' (ibid).

Indeed, self-sacrifice or pacifism (roughly equating to "turning the other cheek" or "playing dead") are viable strategies for conflict resolution. Yet, however instinctive, these approaches are hardly appealing. It is difficult to say whether the desire to rise above such instincts is inherited, socially constructed, or simply comes from "watching too many movies." Nevertheless – as Bäck and Kim have argued – there are many valid reasons why even 'absolute pacifists' might seek to study martial arts, including: 'confronting and resolving the violent aspect of [their] nature,' and maintaining 'detachment in the midst of violent situations' so as to 'make a moral decision not based on extraneous considerations' (1982: 184). Indeed, Bäck and Kim go further, arguing that there is:

> [N]o inconsistency for someone to be committed to absolute pacifism and to learning a martial art. Rather, the absolute pacifist can sublimate and detach himself from violent impulses by such training. Consequently, an absolute pacifist has a prima facie moral duty to learn a martial art or arts in the Eastern style (185).

It is noteworthy that the term "martial arts" may be viewed as a longstanding approximation of the Japanese term *budō*, meaning the "Way" of war. The title of Sun Tzu's 5th century BCE Taoist treatise *The Art of War* (literally: *Sun Tzu's Military Methods*) was not translated into English until 1910, a full decade after the modern (re)invention of *bushidō*. Yet, the revolutionary, poetic, and paradoxical English language term "martial *artist,*" was not used until 1972, in the English subtitles of Bruce Lee's groundbreaking *Way of the Dragon.* The term appears to be first *spoken* (in English) by Lee in 1973, in his posthumous masterpiece *Enter the Dragon*. These films both popularized the term, and established it as having little to do with "war," and much to do with being an *artist* of justice (i.e., protector of the marginalized).

In this vein, Neil Hall eloquently suggests on the *LFHV* blog that for martial artists, 'violence is the *subject* of study, not [the] *object'* (2016). Hall likewise asserts that martial arts are '*about* violence, but [do not] *promote* violence' (ibid). While the precise boundaries and definitions of "martial arts" and "martial artist" are continually contested[155] (Bowman; 2019: Ch. 3), I argue –

[155] E.g.: The "art of war" (i.e., military strategy or combat methods) is not considered a *martial art*. Soldiers are not regarded as martial artists. Boxing and wrestling *are* combat sports, but generally *not* regarded as martial arts. Tai

in line with terminology employed by Channon and Matthews (2018: 3) – that a workable definition for both terms should allude to *the construction of non-violent epistemologies around the practice of potentially violent/lethal techniques.*

Zen and Martial Arts in Popular Media

Just as the practice of martial arts are inextricably entangled with Eastern philosophy, both martial arts and Eastern philosophy are inextricably bound up with, if not entirely shaped by, media representations and popular culture. Notable examples include David Carradine's role of the Shaolin monk "Grasshopper" Kwai Chang Caine in the TV series *Kung Fu* (1972-1975) – notoriously played by David Carradine in "yellowface" – as well as Bruce Lee's 1973 *Enter the Dragon,* in which Lee plays a Shaolin monk whose *embodiment* of martial arts,[156] transcendent post-selfhood,[157] and spiritual philosophy,[158] all remain highly influential.

For many, myself included, the entanglement of martial arts and Zen philosophy owes heavily to the original *Star Wars* trilogy (1977-1983) and the hauntingly poetic spiritual (fictional) knowledge of Obi-Wan Kenobi[159] and Yoda.[160] My experience is entirely in line with Judkins' argument that, while Bruce Lee 'may have massively popularized the martial arts among minority and economically disadvantaged communities, Luke Skywalker, Obi-Wan Kenobi and Yoda made them acceptable for the kids in the suburbs (or at least their parents)' (2016b).

Judkins further argues that *Star Wars* played 'a critical role in aiding and abetting the cultural appropriation of the Asian martial arts in the West' and 'did the heavy lifting of making these once esoteric aspects of the world of the Asian martial arts culturally and commercially available to suburban kids across the country' (2015). Pointing out that although the original *Star Wars* trilogy is lacking in so-called 'proper martial arts,' and focused 'on fencing and

Chi is *not* combat oriented, but *is* often considered a martial art. *Star Wars* inspired light sabre duelling can be considered a marital art. Etc....

[156] "Don't think, feel…" (1973).

[157] "There is no I. It strikes all by itself…" (1973).

[158] "It is like a finger pointing away to the moon. Do not concentrate on the finger or you will miss all that Heavenly glory…" (1973).

[159] "The Force is an energy field created by all living things. It surrounds us and penetrates us. It binds the galaxy together…" (1977).

[160] "Luminous beings are we. Not this crude matter…" (1983).

mysticism,' Judkins notes that both China and Japan produced many such 'swordsmen' films devoted to the 'romance of the blade' (2016b). He continues:

> In a period of rapid change within American society (growing globalization, the Vietnam War, evolving gender and race relations) a return to the sword, and to the traditional values of "a more civilized age" that it represented, may have been deeply comforting to white middle class audiences (ibid).

Elsewhere Judkins similarly argues:

> *Star Wars* hit exactly the right notes for its cultural moment, and in so doing it made critical aspects of the Asian martial arts (including cryptic masters, the nobility of the sword, Qi based mysticism and the promise of martial excellence through the quest for "lost lineages") desirable to Western consumers' (2015).

Along these lines, Goto-Jones suggests that 'we might also understand the attraction of *Star Wars* in terms of the lust for spirituality' (2013: Footnote 44). Indeed, it is evident that "the Force" which bound the *Star Wars* galaxy together in 1977 was a sci-fi version of the "ch'i" found within the *wuxia-pian* – or, martial chivalry – cinema of Hong Kong; including the influential *A Touch of Zen* (1971). Jedi master Yoda was in keeping with the archetype of the aging, diminutive, and "hobbled" sage or monk – described by Adam Frank as the trope of 'the little old Chinese man' (2006) – of which *Kung Fu's* Master Po is a prominent example. Jedi Knights overtly invoked the chivalry of European knighthood, while physically resembling Shaolin monks, widely portrayed in films,[161] television,[162] and news[163] of the 1970s. Judkins further asserts that 'the [*Star Wars*] prequels feature what must be considered one of the most gripping retellings of the "Burning of the Shaolin Temple" myth ever seen on screen' (2016b).

In contrast to the Buddhist inspired robes of the Jedi, Darth Vader's striking mask and helmet were modelled on those of Japanese Samurai – such as the 16th century feudal lord Date Masamune – and Lucas was openly an admirer of Akira Kurasawa's classic films, including *Seven Samurai* (1954) and *Yojimbo* (1961). Kurasawa's films were both influenced by, and subsequently influenced, the Western genre; most obviously in the form of the respective Hollywood adaptations/appropriations *The Magnificent Seven* (Dir. John Sturges; 1960) and *A*

[161] E.g., Hong Kong *wuxia* films such as the Shaw Brothers' *Disciples of Shaolin* (1975) and *Shaolin Temple* (1976).

[162] E.g., "Grasshopper" Caine of *Kung Fu* (1972-1975),

[163] Buddhist monks were also widely depicted in the news media of 1960s and 1970s. The Vietnam War began in 1955, and it was in 1963 that Buddhist Monk Thich Quang Duc self-immolated in an act of protest. This incident was captured by Journalist Malcome Browne in one of the most iconic series of photographs in history.

Fist Full of Dollars (Dir. Sergio Leone; 1964). These Samurai-influenced Westerns further influenced the cinematography, narrative, and appearance and themes around the "space gunslinger" Han Solo. Indeed, cowboy "Westerns," and martial arts "Easterns" (if we might briefly consider them in such terms), have proven remarkably similar in terms of (re)presenting and reinforcing cultural and national myths.

Pop-Zen

For me – growing up in the US in the 1980s – the wisdom of the Jedi was second only to that of Mr. Miyagi in *Karate Kid* (1984). My experience aligns with the argument advanced by Bowman in *Deconstructing Martial Arts* (2019). Namely, that Western practices of Eastern martial arts are primarily informed, not by *actual* Eastern spiritual practices and philosophies, but by hyperreal, pop-cultural, secular, (and often Orientalized) media representations of these (re)invented practices. I describe such appropriated representations of Zen Buddhism as *pop-Zen*.

Zen Buddhism, it should be noted, is a religion that includes numerous faith-based or "magical" ideas, including the law of Karma, reincarnation, and the attainment of transcendental, post-self, "enlightenment" (*Satori*) via sustained mediation. Taoism, it should be further noted, is a religion which, in addition to a devotion to living in harmony with the Tao, and being mindful of the present, features a pantheon of gods and goddesses, temples, shrines, rituals, and ceremonies. *Pop-Zen*, by contrast, is a toolbox of practical, malleable, (and generally secular) bits and pieces of Eastern, pseudo-Eastern, and Western philosophy and spiritual practices. Buddhism, Taoism, and pop-Zen, can all provide constructive moral and ethical guidance, and each are potentially problematic.

Building on Peter Sloterdijk's 1989 analysis of 'EuroTaoism,' Žižek describes popular/secular approaches to Buddhism and Taoism as "Western Buddhism" and "Western Taoism," invoking Karl Marx's infamous zinger "the opium of the people" (1843) to describe the so-called "mindfulness revolution" (2001: 13). In an essay which he elsewhere titles, 'From Western Marxism to Western Buddhism: The Taoist Ethic and the Spirit of Global Capitalism' (2001b), Žižek provides a scathing critique of so-called 'Western Buddhism' practices, as merely a supplemental ideology for sustaining capitalist exploitation. According to Žižek, Western Buddhism is a 'fetish' which:

> …enables you to fully participate in the frantic pace of the capitalist game while sustaining the perception that you are not really in it; that you are well aware of how worthless this spectacle is – what really matters to you is the peace of the inner Self to which you know you can always withdraw (15).

Paul Bowman provides a scathing rebuttal in 'The Tao of Žižek,' in which he dismantles Žižek's arguments according to Žižek's own terms. Bowman writes:

> Rather than treating 'neoliberalism' (for example) as a complex, historically real, deliberately implemented geopolitical economic 'experiment' of ongoing, piecemeal, pragmatic, legislative violence (Kingsnorth, 2000), Žižek merely picks up some familiar emotive terms – 'capitalism', 'the system' – and deploys them *as if they are already fully understood* and as if they simply *must* be taken to be millenarian signifiers of pure evil. […] In short 'capitalism,' 'liberalism,' etc., function within Žižek's discourse *purely as emotive rhetorical devices,* whilst being analytically empty (2008: 82).

He continues:

> Žižek's key categories are uninterrogated 'pegs'; 'pins', whose removal would cause his text to unravel entirely. […] This rhetorical (anti)analytical strategy puts Žižek's entire approach on a par with the very style of mystificatory (non)engagement and intellectual failure that he critiques as being *the* move of the 'hegemonic ideology of global capitalism (84).

Elsewhere, Bowman acknowledges that Žižek's argument is compellingly persuasive or seductive at times, and that it is for this reason that he argued so forcefully against the rhetorical tactics employed by Žižek to bolster his argument (2022e: 29:15). Yet, in attempting to summarize Žižek's argument, Bowman moves beyond superficial, aesthetic, and rhetorical issues, and advances an even more damning argument against pop-Zen than Žižek accomplished. Summarizing Žižek, Bowman observed:

> The difference between Buddhism and Western Buddhism is that in traditions like Buddhism the self is a problem to be solved or dissolved, whereas in Western Buddhism the self is something to be improved and to be bettered. So, we don't lose our sense of self, we actually enhance it, which is entirely aligned with liberal or neoliberal consumerist ideology (2022c: 34:00).

Beyond the emphasis on sustained meditation, pop-Zen practices also regularly centre on everyday mindfulness (i.e., "living in the present") as well as on a modified secular moral/ethical concept of karma (with-a-small-k) whereby which people are generally said to "get what they have coming to them" (or, as Ali phrased it in *Karate Kid,* "What goes around comes around," to which Daniel later replied while running for his life: 'It's comin'

around!'). The prevalence of these principles in the pop-Zen movement is on clear display in the bestselling new-age works of Ekhart Tolle; the most popular of which is *The Power of Now* (1997). Promoted by Oprah Winfrey, Tolle's "pantheistic" works blend Christian theology with notions of mindfulness and transcendence over the ego. These works are both beloved by millions and – as *TIME* Magazine put it – 'awash in spiritual mumbo jumbo' (Sachs; 2003).

The "Dark Side" of Zen

Zen Buddhism and Taoism are not fundamental or essential ideologies. As Alan Watts observed in *The Way of Zen,* 'Zen does not confuse spirituality with thinking about God while one is peeling potatoes. Zen spirituality is just to peel the potatoes' (1957: 171). In Bowman's words, 'Taoism doesn't have essences. It's like a weather system, it has interplays of forces. It is anti-essentialist thinking. It's about process, and flow, and change' (2022c: 31:30). Thus, pop-Zen at its simplest is to "go with the flow." Such practices – stripped of their moral contexts – can, and have, been put to the service of a variety of fundamentalisms. Žižek indicates this when he refers to *Star Wars* and the "dark side" of the Force (2012: 1:07:28).

On this, Chris Goto-Jones writes in 'Zombie Apocalypse as Mindfulness Manifesto (after Žižek)' that Žižek's reference '…to a science fictional realm provides exactly the kind of provocation that critical science fiction should enable, not only (but also) in the context of our concern with the zombie apocalypse as a kind of inverted science fictional critique' (2013: 34). According to Jones, Žižek's point 'appears to be that the "Force" (to which Jedi and Sith attain when their minds are at peace and in tune with the whole, following sustained cultivation via meditation) operates as a power resource rather than an ethical determinant' (ibid). On this (fictional) point, I wholeheartedly agree. Naturally, Zen philosophy – in the form of Buddhism, Taoism, *or* pop-Zen – can be employed as a means to a variety of ends. Through engagement with these ideas, a labourer can find inspiration to work harder – or, inversely – to curb consumption and to entirely rethink their relationship with the "rat race."

It also true that these practices have, for centuries, helped "warriors" and murderers to kill more efficiently. Zen philosophy and meditation, for example, were an integral aspect of the training of Kamikaze pilots during WWII (Benesch; 2016: 1) and Oleg Benesch writes – in

'Reconsidering Zen, Samurai and the Martial Arts' – that the Norwegian mass-murderer Anders Behring Breivik employed a sustained use of meditation in preparation for the murder of 77 people over the course of a single day in 2011. According to Benesch, Breivik 'claimed to have begun this practice in 2006 to "de-emotionalize" himself in preparation for a suicide attack. Breivik claimed that his meditation was based on a combination of "Christian prayer" and the "bushido warrior codex"' (ibid). On this, Benesch elaborates that although 'Bushido, or "the Way of the warrior," is often portrayed as an ancient moral code followed by the Japanese Samurai, historical evidence shows that it is largely a twentieth-century construct (ibid).

In reflecting on the nature of spirituality and violence, it is important to note that the swordplay dramas of Japan were often complex narratives, focusing not merely on swashbuckling romanticism, but on spiritual ideas historically associated with Buddhism in Japan. One such prevalent notion is that of a sword which wields *itself* via the hands of an "enlightened" (i.e., post-self) swordsman. In contexts that were far from fictional, D.T. Suzuki – Buddhist monk, philosopher, and son of a Samurai – has notoriously written of such ideas. D.T. Suzuki was the first to translate works of Zen Buddhism into English, as well as the first to widely disseminate Zen teachings in the West. Despite being awarded the Nobel peace prize in 1963, his pre-WWII writings are strongly nationalistic and reject the pacifism generally found within Buddhist teachings. With regard to 'the unity of Zen and the sword,' for instance, Suzuki infamously wrote in 1938:

> It is really not me, but the sword itself that does the killing. He [the killer] has no desire to do harm to anybody, but the enemy appears and makes himself a victim. It is as though the sword performs, automatically, its function of justice; which is the function of mercy… [The sword] is no more a weapon of self-defense or an instrument of killing, and the swordsman turns into an artist of the first grade, engaged in producing a work of genuine originality' (145).

Such ideas are explored throughout the *bushidō* literature and cinema of Japan, from the 18th century *Hagakure* to the 1966 classic film *The Sword of Doom.* Referencing this film, Chris Goto-Jones points out the 'ingenious' work of the translator, given that the original Japanese title was: *Dai-Bosatsu Toge* or "the Great Bodhisattva's Pass." Regardless of the title, Goto-Jones explores the culturally popular depiction of 'the perfection of swordsmanship' as 'a post-self accomplishment, liberating the self from the moral concerns (and presumably the bonds) of selfhood' (2013: 29; Footnote 40). Yet, *The Sword of Doom* is noteworthy for aggressively

exploring the contradictions inherent in its premise, as it follows the "enlightened" swordsman's descent into madness and despair. Indeed, according to such a philosophy, the difference between "enlightenment" and "mental illness" – or, in Goto-Jones' words, between 'the liberated post-self and the simply insane' (27) – are, at best cultural or contextual, and at worse, impossible to discern.

The paradox between enlightenment and cognitive dysfunction is explicitly confronted in the 1979 film *Being There,* based on the 1970 novel of the same name by Jerzy Kosinski. The film stars Peter Sellers in the role of a simple-minded (i.e., mentally-challenged) gardener named Chance, whose proper attire, simple platitudes, and gardening metaphors accidentally elevate him to the role of economic policy advisor to the President of the United States. While party members discuss "Chauncey" as a promising presidential candidate, he wanders off, straightens a crooked sapling, and walks away *across the surface of a lake*.

This ending is left open to interpretation, but the semiotic association between simplicity and divinity is clear. This association is evocative of a famous passage of *Walden* (1854) by American Transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau: 'Simplify, simplify.' (Ch. 2). This association is not merely coincidental; Kosinsky was, himself, associated with the Transcendental Meditation (TM) movement and reportedly modelled the character of Chance the gardener after TM founder, Jerry Jarvis. The organization's headquarters at that time were located in Brooklyn at the intersection of Chauncey Street and Garden Street.

In *Star Wars* (1977), the bushidō concept of *the sword that wields itself* was sanitized almost beyond recognition. Luke Skywalker's first lesson in 'the ways of the force' was dedicated to deflecting blaster shots with a lightsaber while blindfolded by his helmet's "blast shield." Obi-Wan instructs Skywalker to 'use the force,' that is, to let *the force* wield the lightsaber. Later, Skywalker deactivates his computerized targeting system in order to 'use the force' to blow up the Death Star battle station, killing countless Storm Troopers and Imperial Officers in the process. It is following this brutal act of war that Skywalker becomes a hero to the rebellion and – skipping to the end of the saga (2019) – lives out his years alone, as a broken anti-hero.

While this telling of the Skywalker saga might read similarly to *The Sword of Doom,* it contains none of the introspection or critique. As Judkin's astutely observed, '*Star Wars* proved to be an incredible vehicle for appropriating certain key elements of Japanese and Chinese martial arts culture (as well as the imagery of Western knighthood) and feeding it back to audiences in

ways that were deemed to be inspirational rather than "highbrow"' (2015). Yet, according to Judkins, 'these images were presented in such a way that they moved the discussion of certain aspects of the martial arts out of counter-hegemonic discourses and into the mainstream of Western popular culture' (ibid). Indeed, a critique of the Jedi Order and the Rebel Alliance was not advanced until 1994, when two characters in Kevin Smith's offbeat buddy comedy *Clerks* reached the conclusion that countless innocent construction workers were 'casualties of a war they had nothing to do with' when the second Death Star, still under construction, was destroyed in *Return of the Jedi* (1983).

[**Fig.2:** A meme relates the destruction of the Death Star to the terrorist attacks of 9/11 from the perspective of a Storm Trooper.

Fig. 3: A meme takes advantage of the relative scale of action figures and LEGO figures to suggest that Storm Troopers may be people with families that love them.]





Zen and Nihilism

The *Star Wars* films are always clear that 'the dark side of the force' is not stronger, but – as Yoda puts it in *Return of the Jedi* (1983) – 'quicker, easier, more seductive.' Cautioning Luke against 'anger, fear, [and] aggression,' Yoda makes it clear in *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980) that 'a Jedi uses the force for knowledge and defense, never for attack.' Yet, as Kevin Smith's critique in *Clerks* (1994) clearly highlights, defense and attack are subjective points of view.

Despite the well-known fact that the respect for all life, and the forbiddance to take it, is a fundamental precept of all schools of Buddhism,[164] Suzuki was not alone in advancing his

[164] The non-violent ideology at the heart of Buddhist ideology is widely expressed in popular culture, in films such as Bernardo Bertolucci's *Little Buddha* (2003) and *Seven Years in Tibet* (1997) starring Keanu Reeves and Brad Pitt,

justifications for violence. The United Buddhist leadership of Japan, for example, declared during WWII: 'We now have no choice but to exercise the benevolent forcefulness of killing one in order that many may live (*issatsu tasho*). That is a principle which Mahayana Buddhism approves of only with the greatest seriousness' (Hitchens, 2007; Ch. 14). Likewise, Sawaki Kodo chillingly wrote in a 1942 article for *Daihōrin* Magazine that: 'It is the precept forbidding killing that wields the sword. It is the precept that throws the bomb' (Victoria; 2013).

Considering that the 'ethical commitment to compassion and non-violence … lie at the heart of Buddhism as a religion,' (Goto-Jones; 2013: 30) the above arguments are *highly* debatable. Violence committed in the name of a greater good, while ultimately subjective, is a position that *can* be morally and ethically defended; but never lightly. Although the *Star Wars* saga relies on such assumptions, these assumptions – as Judkins' arguments suggest (2016b) – are always concealed beneath the pacifistic and inspirational rhetoric of the Jedi. Despite these well-known ideological aspects of Buddhism, one of Žižek's central criticisms is that the system inherently lacks a moral framework. In reference to Suzuki's philosophy, Žižek asks:

> Wouldn't it then be logical to conclude that the true proof that you are in Nirvana would have been precisely that you can do horrible things without your acts leaving traces in your Karma? […] Wouldn't the true strength have been to do acts which usually involve a kind of a crazy fanatic attachment – torture, killing – but to be able to do it in the Zen way with a distance? (2012: 55:00).

It is difficult to disagree with Žižek's *reductio ad absurdum*, however, his argument should be directed at the biased interpretation of Zen Buddhism advanced by Suzuki, Sawaki, Kodo, and others, rather than at Buddhism itself. Indeed, such criticisms have been frequently directed at Suzuki's self-contradictory and nationalistic interpretation of the tenants of Buddhism, notably by Brian Victoria in *Zen at War* (1997). Victoria expands those arguments in 'Zen as a Cult of Death in the Wartime Writings of D.T. Suzuki,' in which he writes:

> …On the one hand Suzuki can and should be held responsible for the purely nationalistic elements in his writings, including collaboration in the modern fabrication of an ancient and unified *bushidō* tradition with Zen as its core. Yet, on the other hand, the seven hundred year long history of the close relationship between Zen and the warrior class, hence Zen and the sword, was most definitely not a Suzuki fabrication […] Thus, Suzuki might best be described as a skilled, modern day, nationalistic proponent of that close relationship […] Further, in his English writings, Suzuki did his best to convince gullible

respectively. In the latter, for example, construction of a cinema is halted when it is discovered that the digging has killed worms; subsequently, the diggers take care to carefully relocate displaced worms.

> Westerners that the so-called "unity of Zen and the sword" he described was an authentic expression of Buddhist teachings (2013).

Far from being an "authentic expression" of Buddhism, Suzuki's position may be considered nihilistic, which is considered a fundamentalist (extremist) "trap" within Buddhism. Nihilism is an *extreme-way* and, thus, never *the middle-way*. Although the principle of *śūnyatā* or "emptiness" remains central, it never does so in such a way as to reduce the value of life or to suggest "nothingness." According to John Snelling, in *The Buddhist handbook. A Complete Guide to Buddhist Teaching and Practice:*

> At the core of Mahayana philosophy lies the notion of Emptiness: *Shunyata* […] It is often used to imply, not mere or sheer nothingness (that would be the nihilistic view), but "emptiness" of inherent existence; that is, the absence of any kind of enduring or self-sustaining essence. There is also a sense in which it has connotations of "conceptual emptiness:" absence of thoughts. It could be regarded too as a non-term signifying the ineffable understanding arising within the practice of meditation (1987: 101-102).

Nevertheless, Žižek remains generally uninterested in the *actual* religious philosophies of Buddhism, preferring to instead attack so-called "Western Buddhism," and the notoriously nationalistic interpretations of Zen Buddhism. Indeed, a highly revealing moment occurs near the end of Žižek's 2012 talk, when a 'butterfly' lands near the table where Žižek is seated. After an audience member complies with Žižek's half-serious command to 'squash it' and to 'take the life' of 'a sentient being,' Žižek cheers and makes several "jokes" about Karma and reincarnation. After much laughter, Žižek authoritatively states, 'Sorry. I'm not making fun. [More laughter] Please do not misunderstand me… I'm not in any way saying that Buddhist enlightenment is some kind of joke... It is an absolutely authentic existential experience' (53:00). Unfortunately, in delivering his critique of the oversimplified and misguided attitudes of "the West" toward Buddhism; Žižek demonstrates an even worse tendency.

Zombies and Zen

In the 'Zombie Apocalypse as Mindfulness Manifesto (after Žižek),' Goto-Jones writes that the "mindfulness revolution" has been embraced as a solution to the following problem:

> Modern citizens have their authentic freedom compromised by being too attached to thinking itself: they spend too much of their time "lost in thought," ruminating about the past and the future, worrying, dreaming, riddled with anxieties about

> things that are not happening (and might never happen), depressed and stressed and unhappy. The modern individual spends more of her life entrapped in her own abstractions than she does actually experiencing the world around her. People today have learned thought patterns that disconnect them from the world and the people around them – we are self-alienated by our own cognitive patterns. The mindfulness revolution seeks to pathologize and politicize certain patterns of thought, suggesting that liberating ourselves from these schema will also emancipate our communities (2013: 4-5).

Interrogating the claim of Jon Kabat-Zinn – founder of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) – that such a practice 'does *not* involve becoming some kind of zombie,' (2005: 153) Goto-Jones asks whether, despite such assurances, such practices might, indeed, 'transform practitioners into zombies?' (2013: 12). Arguing that the "enlightened" post-self-condition – that is, the transcendence over ego – displaces 'the conception of self in the European Enlightenment project' and replaces it with 'the self of the Asian, Buddhist Enlightenment ideal,' (38) Goto-Jones suggests that *this* 'is the horror of the lone survivor with a shotgun surrounded by hordes of alien(ated) and infectious zombies' (ibid).

On this, Goto-Jones writes that 'the terror of the zombie apocalypse is not the xenophobic fear of alien invasion, but the horror of our own radical (and contagious) dehumanization (perhaps resulting from foreign contamination); it is precisely our imagination of the human condition after the death of the ego' (17). Goto-Jones goes on to assert that 'the communicability of globalization provides the conditions of the possibility of the zombie apocalypse, combining a primal fear of the loss of self with a cultural fear of the loss of historical centricity' (38). Goto-Jones views the zombie apocalypse phenomenon as both a signifier of a post-self society, as well as 'a consumer product of capitalism and a popular representation of our ego's fear of its own dissolution' (96). On this, he echoes Lauro and Embry's claim in the 'Zombie Manifesto,' that the 'dystopic promise' of the zombie apocalypse is 'that it can only assure the destruction of a corrupt system without imagining a replacement' (2008: 96). According to Goto-Jones:

> Here the line between the mindfulness ideal and the apparent mindlessness of the zombie apocalypse blurs into a hauntingly repellent vision of future society, where people have regressed to a "zero-level" of humanity through transformation into psychically-detached creatures of unengaged routine and habit. This renders mindfulness into the handmaiden of the dystopian capitalist nightmare of the zombie apocalypse. The mindful and the mindless occupy a unified experiential space (37).

Thus, Goto-Jones argues that Žižek's critique on Western Buddhism:

> Effectively resuscitates the credibility of the zombie apocalypse as not only an aspect of our ideological horror regarding ideas about enlightenment (that we invent to scare ourselves away from our own liberation), but also as a representation of our fear of the potentials for evil within enlightenment itself (35).

Appropriating Žižek's argument against Western Buddhism, Goto-Jones concludes that rather than telling us 'what our lives would be like were we free of capitalism,' the zombie apocalypse narrative 'warns us away from our freedom' (39).

Alternate-Reality Lifestyles

Zombie apocalypse survivalism – like the practices of martial arts and yoga – straddles the political spectrum. It can be, and has been, engaged with ironically, seriously, and spiritually within conspiracist and educational contexts. The zombie apocalypse has been approached by Girl Scout Troops as an alternate reality game and by an armed militia as an alternate-reality justification for stockpiling weapons. Yet, the radically divergent politics associated with related cultural and countercultural activities – from voluntary simplicity and environmentalism, to paleo lifestyles and mixed martial arts – are connected (for better and for worse) by philosophies of pop-Zen.

In considering Western countercultural approaches to Eastern philosophy, it is helpful to reflect on Heath and Potter's argument in *The Rebel Sell* that 'by projecting their own desires and longing onto other cultures, countercultural rebels have essentially constructed the exotic as a reflection of their own ideology' (2005: 260). Žižek, likewise, refers to the 'the fascination' with Tibet in 'the Western imagination' as a 'colonization of the imaginary' that 'reduces the actual Tibet to a screen for the projection of Western ideological fantasies' (2001: 64). Yet, in recent decades, it has become increasingly difficult to sustain simplistic and self-evidently reductivist Orientalist discourses, given the ever more globalized and digitally interconnected world.

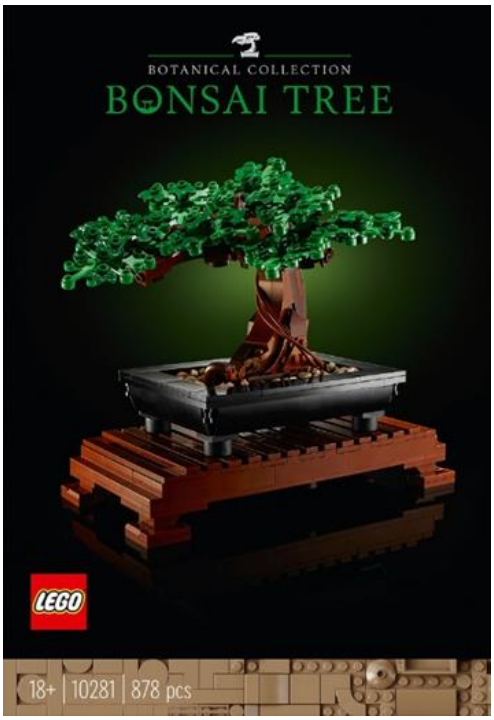
Consequently, subcultures and countercultures – now including digital communities and fan-groups – are looking less to *actual* exotic or alternative cultures or societies for inspiration, than to a vast assortment of exotic fictional and unfictional cultural texts, from *Star Wars* and the zombie apocalypse, to a plethora of obscure, ideological, occultist, conspiracist, spiritual, religious and/or politically expedient cultural texts. One benefit of this evolution is a reduction in the problematic Orientalization and fetishization of the arbitrarily named "East"

(or, in the case of zombies, Afro-Caribbean Primitivism and Exoticization). On the down side, the "Western imagination" has begun a dangerous colonization and Primitivist fetishization of the liminal space between fiction and reality. To use Žižek's words (2001: 64), we have entered into a "colonization of the imaginary" (ibid).

In line with this imaginary construction of alternate-realities, Heath and Potter forcefully argue that countercultures, which were at one time 'defiant' and 'dissenting' have evolved into merely 'deviant' alternative consumer cultures which – in much the way Žižek describes Western Buddhism – counterintuitively *supplement* consumerism (2005). If *defiance* or *dissent* is epitomized by Henry David Thoreau's essay on 'Civil Disobedience' (1849) – and the activists it inspired, from Rosa Parks, to Martin Luther King, Jr., to Gandhi – than *deviance* is epitomized, as Paul Bowman puts it, by 'not liking how conservative your society is and dying your hair pink and having a Mohican [mohawk] (2022c2: 01:15). Whereas acts of defiance provoke systemic change, acts of deviance create new markets for alternative consumer goods and services (Heath and Potter; 2005). I argue that the alternative "deviant" cultures described by Heath and Potter have begun to evolve into what might be described as, not merely alternative lifestyles, but rather, *alternate-reality lifestyles.*

[**Fig. 4:** The bonsai tree as the symbol of the fictional Miyagi-Do Karate from the *Karate Kid* franchise (1984-present). **Fig. 5:** A curious pop-Zen simulacrum of nature; the 878-piece bonsai tree produced by LEGO as part of the Botanical Collection.]





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MAPPING (JAPANESE) MARTIAL ARTS IN (WESTERN) POPULAR CULTURE (1903-1973)

Western Representations and Appropriations of Eastern Martial Arts

In 'The Marginal Movement of Martial Arts,' Paul Bowman argues – as previously noted in 'Mapping the Ethics of Self Defence and Pop-Zen' – that 'any project that seeks to understand the movement, migration and mutation of Asian (or any other) martial arts in Western culture must necessarily involve the serious and sustained study of media representations' (2016: 9-10). According to Bowman:

> Whilst it may be possible to argue that in Japan, China, Hong Kong, or Korea, and so on, the media communication of martial arts is 'secondary' or 'supplementary', I would argue that it is not possible to argue this when considering the West. Rather, the supposedly secondary or supplementary dimensions of mediation are in fact primary forces (ibid).

In line with Bowman's recommendation, in this essay, I examine the evolution of mediated representations of martial arts and self-defense in English language popular fiction – as well as the network of race and gender politics within which these representations were embedded – between 1903 and 1973. It was in 1973, that Bruce Lee's posthumous film *Enter the Dragon* sparked the popular fascination with Chinese martial arts across Europe and America. The subsequent "kung-fu craze" eventually evolved/expanded to include the "ninja-mania" of the 1980s, while "martial arts" and "pop-Zen" philosophies became widely incorporated into popular family and children's entertainment franchises, including: *Star Wars* (beginning in 1977), *Karate Kid* (beginning in 1984), *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (beginning in 1984), *Kung Fu Panda* (beginning in 2008), and *Ninjago* (beginning in 2011), among many other examples.

The popularity of these franchises notwithstanding, martial arts theorist and practitioner Iain Abernethy observed in 2015, that 'it seems that martial arts skills are a given part of any action movie character's skill set' and many films include 'martial arts as a default' (2015). This prompts Abernethy to wonder if 'maybe we have seen the end of the "martial arts movie" and from now on martial arts are just in movies?' (ibid). Indeed, contemporary action films frequently feature both male and female protagonists (spies, cops, detectives, assassins, superheroes, etc.,) with generic – and, thus, Westernized or appropriated – mixed martial arts skills. These narratives rarely offer any information about where or how those characters acquired these skills (the "academy" perhaps?). In line with Abernethy's observations, it is useful to consider how English language fictional screen representations normalize and

appropriate a set of practices and philosophies which – much less than a century ago – were deeply entangled with racism, reductivism, and sexism.

Although this essay does not examine the films of Bruce Lee, or his significant cultural impact, these topics are extensively examined elsewhere (Bowman, 2010; 2013). Given my personal vantage point as an American male and practitioner of Shotokan karate, I have elected to focus primarily on issues of gender and race in English language fictional representations of Japanese martial arts. Accordingly, this essay examines one unique case study of the 1980s and beyond: Far outlasting its expiration date, *Karate Kid* (1984) had two sequels, a reboot, a remake, and continues today in the six seasons of the *YouTube/Netflix* series *Cobra Kai* (2018-present). For better and for worse, *Cobra Kai* has enabled a revisiting, revaluation, and reimagining of a number of toxic tropes of martial arts representations, both of the 1980s and today. In some cases, *Cobra Kai* effectively comments on the limitations of those tropes; in others, it has ignored or supplanted them with "modern" toxic tropes; in still others, *Cobra Kai* basks in its political incorrectness.

My intent here is not simply to dig up old (or contemporary) episodes of sitcoms or films and label them as racist or sexist, and so on. Rather, my aim is to give adequate consideration to the specific ways in which early – and, thus, often repeated and reiterated – representations of martial arts and self-defense have succeeded (and fallen short) in achieving something socially conscientious, meaningful, or significant. My broader goal is to leverage the fictional zombie apocalypse scenario in order to intervene in survivalist and prepper discourse. In so doing, I aim to promote activities which – in spite of media representations often suggesting otherwise – have been statistically found to possess a capacity to improve and extend well-being. Conversely, I aim to *discourage* activities which have been found to have the capacity to accomplish the opposite. To this end, I undertake this analysis, not merely for its own sake or as an academic exercise, but to map how I (and others) might create *more* meaningful, significant, or socially conscientious representations around martial arts, empowerment-based self-protection, and active bystanding.

Crimefighters (1903-1959)

Among the earliest and most popular examples of Japanese martial arts in Western popular fiction appears to be the use of Bartitsu by Arthur Conan Doyle's fictional super-detective, Sherlock Holmes. Bartitsu was an avante-garde British mixed martial art created by Edward William Barton-Wright in the late 1800s, combining Japanese grappling (*jiu-jitsu*), French kickboxing (*savate*), and French cane fighting (*la canne*). Doyle's knowledge of Bartitsu appears to have possibly derived from a newspaper article containing a typo (Godfrey; 2009). Hence, in the 1903 'The Adventure of the Empty House,' it is explained that Holmes used his *knowledge* of "Baritsu" [sic] to survive the seemingly fatal encounter with Moriarty at the Reichenbach Falls during 'The Final Problem,' published in 1893.

The fact that martial arts were, and still are, widely described as something which one possesses a knowledge *of*, rather than physical abilities *in*, is at best suggestive of a fundamental misunderstanding of these practices; and at worst a racist or reductionist effort at diminishing these practices to "sneaky tricks." It is along these super-cognitive, or *mentalist*, lines, that numerous turn-of-the-century fictional superheroes and supervillains of the page, radio, and screen – including the Shadow, Mandrake the Magician, and Fu Manchu – fought with the use of mysterious "Tibetan" mental abilities, including hypnosis and mind control.

In 1935, John Marquand created the fictional Japanese secret agent Mr. Moto – a reductively Orientalist and racially-stereotyped derivative of Charlie Chan.[165] Mr. Moto was featured in novels, comics, radio, and film; variously depicted as an agent of the Japanese Empire (in the novels) or Interpol (in the films). Between 1937 and 1939, eight films were produced starring the Hungarian-American actor Peter Lorre in the title role, without significant modifications to his complexion, eyes, teeth, or manner of speaking. The pseudonymous "Mr. Moto" is an expert in conjuring tricks, stage illusions, and disguise, as well as judo and jiu-jitsu. The latter skills are depicted in these films through the assistance of stuntman Harvey Parry.

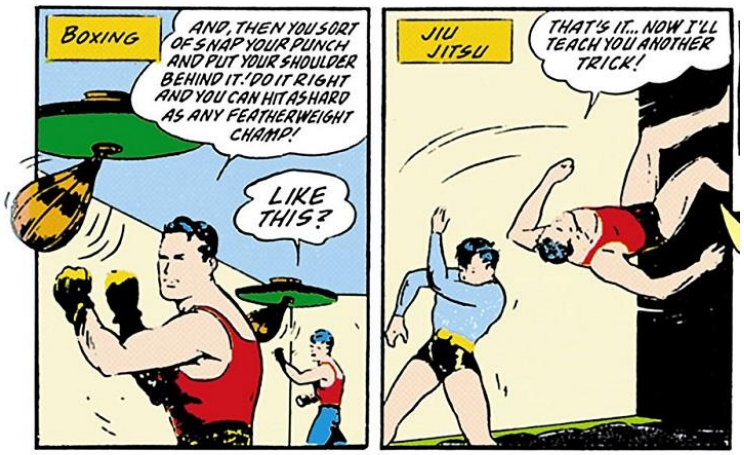
[165] Charlie Chan was an Orientalized and racially-stereotyped fictional Chinese/American Honolulu detective featured in novels, plays, radio, comic strips, television, and film. Chan's creator, Earl Derr Biggers died in 1933.

[**Fig. 1:** Peter Lorre as Mr. Moto in *Think Fast, Mr. Moto (1937)* executes a throwing technique more closely resembling entertainment-wrestling than judo or jiu-jitsu.



In 1940, the fictional super-detective Batman (created in 1939) explicitly used 'an old jiu-jitsu trick' [**Fig. 2**] to escape from Prof. Hugo Strange (*Detective Comics* #36). That same year, Bruce Wayne (Batman) is depicted teaching his circus-acrobat-turned-sidekick Dick Grayson (Robin) the finer points of boxing and some quick 'jiu jitsu' tricks (*Detective Comics* #38) [**Fig. 3**].





In January 1942, Betty Barstow (as the Silver Scorpion) is described and depicted as 'the agile jiu-jitsu expert' [**Fig. 4**]. In one panel, as she bashes a criminal to the ground she quips: 'Here's one for the weaker sex' (*Daring Mystery Comics* #8). This appears to establish Betty Barstow as the first fictional *female* character to explicitly use Eastern martial arts in English language pop-culture. Owing, in part, to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the entrance of the US into WWII, however, the next would not be for several decades.



Also of note is Dinah Drake (as the Black Canary) who first appeared in 1947 (*Flash Comics* #86). Wearing stiletto buccaneer boots, black leather, and fishnet stockings, the modus operandi of the Black Canary was to infiltrate criminal organizations and topple them from within; generally, by way of her superior 'hand to hand combat' and 'acrobatic' skills. While the original incarnation of Black Canary – and Wonder Woman, for that matter – are fascinating case studies in terms of both sexual objectification and empowerment-based self-protection, the characters fall beyond the scope of this paper due to their lack of explicit associations with Eastern martial arts.

The first "serious" screen portrayal of quasi-realistic martial arts techniques appears to have occurred in the John Sturges 1955 film *Bad Day at Black Rock*.[166] Described by Neil Campell as a 'post-Western,' this film subverts the Nationalist mythologizing of the Western genre; exposing an underbelly of racism, intolerance, and dishonour in a 1950s Western town (2013). The story follows a veteran (with the use of only one arm) named McCready (played by Spencer Tracy), in his search for the father of a Japanese-American soldier who died saving his life. When McCready discovers that the man (named Komoko) was murdered in a racially-motivated hate crime – in part, as revenge for Japan's "sneak attack" on Pearl Harbor – and the murder was covered up by the townspeople, McCready must use his combat skills in order to survive. These, skills, it turns out, include jiu-jitsu and karate. In an iconic diner fight scene (coordinated

[166] This film is based on a far less subversive 1947 short story "Bad Time at Honda" by Howard Breslin.

by John Indrisano), Tracy's stunt double (Carey Loftin) wallops Ernest Borgnine with open-hand strikes and an arm-twisting (rotary) throw.

Two years later, Ian Fleming wrote – in his fifth 007 novel *From Russia With Love* (1957) – that James Bond's Soviet dossier described the British super-spy as 'a capable boxer and knife-thrower' who 'knows basic judo,' thus establishing 007 as one of the earliest and most "sophisticated" martial artists of popular Western fiction. (Again, note the contrast between *being* a boxer and *knowing* judo.) Two years after that – in Fleming's seventh 007 novel *Goldfinger* (1959) – Bond is knocked unconscious by Mr. Goldfinger's mute, steel bowler hat wielding, Korean bodyguard named Oddjob. After regaining consciousness, Bond – who happened to be compiling a manual on unarmed combat at the time – inquired as to Oddjob's techniques. Goldfinger asks him if he has heard of karate. Despite his "knowledge" of judo, Bond admits that he had not heard the term, so Goldfinger provides a brief history.

Although Goldfinger/Fleming inaccurately describe karate as 'a branch of judo,' the rest proceeds along conventional, if apocryphal, lines, to wit: Developed by unarmed Buddhist monks in China, karate was refined in Okinawa after weapons were outlawed.[167] Outlandishly claiming that Oddjob is one of only three black belts in karate, Goldfinger next describes his valet in brutally racist terms, labelling Koreans as 'the cruellest, most ruthless people in the world' with no 'respect for human life' who want nothing more than 'to submit the white race to the grossest indignities,' adding that Oddjob regards cats 'as a great delicacy.'

The "Judo Chop:" Racism, Reductivism, and Wrestling (1949-1964)

In 1949 and 1950, Japanese American professional wrestlers George Kazuo Okamura and Masura "Charlie" Iwamoto, adopted the Japanese "heel" (i.e., bad guy) personas: the Great Togo and the Great (Mr.) Moto, respectively. In doing so, these men applied a nationalistic angle to the flamboyant, effeminate, cowardly, and villainous "heel" tactics successfully pioneered in the 1940s by the legendary "Gorgeous George" Wagner. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s – wrestling barefoot, performing sumo rituals, and accompanied by "valets" or "manservants" – Togo and Moto both employed a bag full of dirty tricks including throwing

[167] In *Karate do Kyohan,* Funakoshi describes karate as being invented by the 5th century Indian monk Bodhidharma (vis-à-vis, "kung fu") who brought Zen Buddhism to the Shaolin temple (1935: 7). This origin is discredited by modern historians as arising from a 17th century forgery (the *Yijin Jing*) (McClanahan; 2011).

"sacred salt" in their opponents' eyes, open handed strikes, and excessive bowing, smiling, and pleading, followed by surprise attacks; at times with wooden sandals (geta).

In the 1950s, the "staged" nature of entertainment wrestling was a closely guarded industry secret. Thus, the villainous in-ring behaviour of heels was often treated as real by audiences. Consequently, Iwamoto – who wore a pointed goatee and Hideki Tojo style eyeglasses outside of the ring – was the victim of multiple attacks by strangers, as well as by relatives of his opponents (See: Dead Wrestler Database). Televised footage (circa 1953) survives in which commentator Ross Davis repeatedly describes both men and their tactics with offensive and racist language. Davis, for example, suggests that Togo should 'get down off his wooden skates' (00:50) and 'get [his] sake bottle' (01:50) and refers to Moto as 'rice and chops boy' (12:45). When Moto breaks free of a hold, Davis suggests, 'Mr. Moto has other ideas. He just heard an announcement of a tea party somewhere' (15:30); when Moto steps out of the ring to recover, Davis suggests, 'Mr. Moto is headed for Hanshu or somewhere else... Nagasaki, probably' (19:00); and when the match concludes as a draw, Davis adds, 'put on you getas and get ta' the shower, boy' (23:00).

While hardly the worst of Davis' insults, it is historically noteworthy that he describes the open hand strikes of both men as 'judo licks.' In another televised match from 1953 featuring Moto, Native American announcer Francis Huntington (AKA Jules Strongbow) – refraining from the use of racist language – repeatedly refers to the open hand strikes as 'judo chops,' 'judo cuts,' and at one point, a 'chop to the throat with a judo cut' (06:30). This terminology is awkward, given that judo is a grappling sport which explicitly excludes the use of striking techniques.[168] Nevertheless, in 1950s America, "judo" had apparently become a catch-all term for describing Japanese martial arts, including jiu-jitsu (which did *not* specifically exclude striking).

[168] Fascinatingly, Funakoshi, himself, weighed in on this topic in his 1975 autobiography, taking a curiously technical interest. Discussing what he calls the 'so-called karate chop used in professional wrestling' of Japan, Funakoshi explains that when he saw Rikido-zan perform 'his famous "karate chop" on television, I realized that it is nothing but a variation of the *shuto* blow in karate… I wondered where he had learned karate and was told that when he was a sumo wrestler he studied with Yukio Togawa, who had earlier trained at my dojo.' According to Funakoshi: 'Rikido-zan … seemed to be wielding his hands rather in the manner that children swing a bamboo "sword." […] In karate … the arm is seldom raised high above the head … as the wrestler does with his "karate chop" … [T]he latter is made with the arm almost fully extended, while the *shuto* blow is delivered with the elbow bent. […] The physical movement involved is rather small when compared with that of the "karate chop," but it can of course be infinitely more lethal (94-95).

The legacy of the Japanese wrestlers' "judo chops" in America is reflected in the popular culture of the sixties and beyond. In Elvis Presley's film *G.I. Blues* from 1960, Tulsa McLean (played by Presley) tells a crying infant, while babysitting: 'Army manual, section 43: When in hand-to-hand combat with the enemy, apply judo chop to the back of neck. Oh, if you was only my size, you little rascal!' Notably, this film appears to be the first use of the oxymoronic term 'judo chop' in American cinema.

The use of the term by Elvis Presley, however, is somewhat curious. Elvis Presley was among the earliest American actors/celebrities to study martial arts, taking a serious interest in karate while stationed in Germany between 1958-1960. After returning to the US in 1960, Presley sought out the Hawaiian-American karate entrepreneur Ed Parker, and earned his black belt that same year (in an examination overseen by Hank Slemansky). The use of the term 'judo chop' by an actor who was surely aware of its inaccuracy, suggests a popular familiarity with the (so-called) "judo-chops" of George Kazuo Okamura and Masura "Charlie" Iwamoto; the Great Togo and the Great Mr. Moto.[169]

[**Fig 5**: George Okamura as The Great Togo in 1953 with his "manservant" Haka. **Fig 6**: Masura Iwamoto as The Great (Mr.) Moto beside his "valet" Suji Fuji.]





[169] Online (and on *Wikipedia* at present) the "judo chop" is often erroneously attributed to the Hawaiian born wrestler McDonald Kamaka, who wrestled as Tor Kamata from 1965-1987 (and as Dr. Moto from 1967-1969) with the use of "heel" tactics and mannerisms popularized by Okamura and Iwamoto.

Situational Comedy, Slapstick, and Self-Defense (1960-1963)

In the early 1960s, fictional representations of Japanese marital arts changed substantially as "judo lessons" emerged as a recurring trope in situational comedy. Judo would soon be "learned" with "hilarious" results by iconic underdogs such as Wilma Flintstone and Betty Rubble, Jerry the mouse, and Lucille Ball. Betty Rubble was first. In 1960, in the first season of the first prime-time animated sitcom *The Flintstones* (1960-1966) – in response to reports of a prowler "on the loose" – Betty Rubble attends judo lessons at the hyper-commercialized dojo of the racially-stereotyped Rockimoto Hashimoto ('The Prowler.' S01 E14). Thus, Betty Rubble appears to be the first fictional female character to learn martial arts on *screen*.

When Fred Flintstone enquires about the crashing sounds and giggling coming from his neighbour Barney Rubble's house, Barney explains that Betty is taking judo lessons in response to newspaper reports of a 'prowler… on the prowl.' When Fred inquires further, Barney replies:

> ***Barney**:* A woman's gotta' protect herself.
>
> ***Fred**:* What about you?
>
> ***Barney**:* She'll protect me too.
>
> ***Fred**:* Oh, boy. […] Wait till the fellas down at work get a load of this. Barney's wife taking judo lessons to protect *him*, ha ha ha ha! (02:30-03:30).

When Fred learns that Wilma will also be attending the lesson he loudly protests: 'You are NOT taking judo lessons! That is final! Clear! And once and for all! No!' Wilma responds:

> ***Wilma**:* What's wrong with trying to protect myself?
>
> ***Fred**:* What about me?
>
> ***Wilma**:* Oh, I'll protect you, too.
>
> ***Barney**:* Yeah, Fred. Wait 'til the guys at work hear about *your* wife taking lessons to protect *you,* ha ha ha ha! (03:30-04:00)

Since Fred forbids the lessons – for financial and egotistical reasons – Betty secretly relays the lessons to Wilma. Throughout the episode, both Wilma and Betty successfully deploy the techniques on Fred, who disguises himself as a prowler in an attempt to prove that judo lessons are a waste of money. Subsequently, Wilma executes the techniques on the real prowler, mistakenly believing him to be Fred. When the mistake is discovered, Fred, Barney, Betty, and Wilma *all* hide under the bed. The episode concludes with both couples taking lessons at Hashimoto's dojo. As Fred puts it: 'A guy's gotta learn to protect himself.' To which Wilma replies: 'Yeah, from his wife' (23:30).

Visually, "Professor Hashimoto" appears to be modelled on Lorre's portrayals of Mr. Moto, and he is voiced along racially-stereotypical (i.e., yellow voice) lines by the legendary Mel Blanc. When they arrive at Hashimoto's dojo, he immediately unveils his payment plans:

> First, I are [sic] recommending 10 easy bronze medal family plan. Very cheap. Very cheap. That's for sure. […] Next, move into additional 20 silver medal lessons. Special discount prices, big bargain. Big bargain. Ah, yes. Then, for a few more measly dollars, you are eligible for gold medal, diamond medal, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera (24:00).

This sales pitch is interrupted by the arrival of 'another customer' who happens to be the prowler (*sans* mask), requesting 'private judo lessons.' The prowler claims – in an aside – that 'a prowler's got to learn to protect himself if he's gonna' stay in business these days' (25:00). Many issues – about racism, reductivism, sexism, commercialism, and feminism – are raised by this episode, which was both ahead of its time, and painfully of it. (I will revisit this episode in a subsequent section on domestic violence and the myth of stranger danger.)

> [**Fig. 7**: Betty Rubble stereotypically bows to Wilma Flintstone (speaking pidgin English) while taking judo lessons in prehistoric snow-leopard print kimonos. **Fig. 8**: The racially-stereotyped and financially savvy Rockimoto Hashimoto.]





In 1962, in a *Tom and Jerry* animated short film entitled 'The Tom and Jerry Cartoon Kit,' Jerry the mouse finds himself (fortuitously) lying beneath an open book entitled *Judo for Mice.* He quickly learns enough (just by *reading*) to allow him to easily defeat Tom the cat in a series of

battles [Fig. 9]. On this, Benjamin Judkins, in an essay entitled, 'The Tao of Tom and Jerry: Krug on the Appropriation of the Asian Martial Arts in Western Culture' writes:

> Tom refuses to take his opening defeats lying down. He plots his revenge first by training in a boxing gym, but quickly finds that western pugilism is no match for the secret arts of Japan. Unwilling to concede Tom then turns to Judo, attempting to appropriate the combat superiority of the East for himself. Yet Jerry's inevitable victory only reinforces what every child in America already knows. The Asian martial arts are the means par excellence by which small (and somewhat cagey) individuals overcome brute strength and mean-spirited stupidity (2014).

Judkins significantly notes that 'the animators behind this story felt no need to explain what Judo was, what its uniforms looked like, and how it enabled the small and skilled to overcome the large and stupid. This was already common knowledge among children everywhere' (ibid). The same could be said of *The Flintstones* episode of 1960. According to Judkins, by the early 1960's, 'Asian fighting systems had achieved a surprising degree of public recognition' (ibid).

[**Fig. 9**]



The Lucy Show (1962-1968), starring Lucille Ball and Vivian Vance, was the "single mothers" follow-up/spin-off of the hugely popular "couples" sitcom *I Love Lucy* (1951-1957). In 1963, terrorized by newspaper reports of "prowlers," Lucy and Viv – being 'two women…without a man to protect us' – decide to 'take judo lessons' ('Lucy and Viv Learn Judo.' S01 E22). After

arriving at the dojo, they are informed that they will learn 'a combination of judo and karate,' to which Lucy replies 'ka-what-ee?' The instructor replies: 'Karate. That's the science of open hand and foot fighting' (06:45). They are then partnered with karate expert Ed Parker (introduced as himself). This appears to be the first use of the term "karate" in English-language screen fiction or popular culture.

It is curious that the episode begins with the promise of 'judo lessons' but pivots to the relatively unknown (at that time) system of karate. Additionally curious, is the fact that the sign hanging in the dojo – plainly visible throughout the scene – reads: 'Tactics / Ju Jitsu / Karate' [Fig. 10] without so much as mentioning 'judo,' which is promised in the episode's title and exposition. Of course, the term "judo" had achieved mainstream recognition, but why bother to incorporate the lesser-known term "karate?" Surely, there was more behind these decisions than Lucy's 'ka-what-ee?' joke.

One clear benefit of this choice was that the kicks and strikes of karate offered new avenues of exploration for a physical comedian; board breaking, in particular. Albeit rendered less impressive by nature of the fictional context, Parker's visually powerful board breaking demonstration – about which Lucy and Viv were told 'it's all in knowing how' (07:40) – was innovatively exploited by Lucy in her disastrously failed attempt to follow suit. Still, why go to the effort of mentioning karate by name, if "judo" functioned as a serviceable catch-all term for Japanese martial arts? I contend that this precision of terminology – certainly uncharacteristic of its time – likely had to do with (or was a condition of) Parker's appearance on the program, and aligned with his aggressive efforts at promoting his style of American Kenpo karate. After all – as previously noted – Parker was well established at that time and it is highly revealing that Lucille Ball was not even his most famous student (viz. Elvis Presley).

Beside for the board breaking demonstration and subsequent clown stunt, Lucy and Viv engage in an extended sequence of low-brow, slapstick comedy, which does little more than mock the postures and sounds of karate along Orientalist and racially-stereotypical 'chop, chop' lines (14:10). At one point, Viv and Lucy reductively describe their ridiculous buffoonery as resembling 'an Indian tribal dance,' and Lucy comments 'I don't know about the prowler, but we're liable to make it rain' (09:50). Next, in a role-play scenario, Parker chokes Lucy until she is unable to call for help. Lucy performs the technique, as taught, easily dropping Parker with a double open-hand strike to his neck. After this, both Lucy and Viv easily throw Parker with a

rotary throw described as the 'handshake throw.' (Again, note the implication of "sneaky," deceptive tactics.) Yet, when Lucy and Viv are left alone to practice on each other, they are unable to successfully execute any of the techniques which had worked flawlessly against Parker [**Fig. 10**].

The next scene (set sometime later; back at home) is far more complex than the blunt and stereotypical slapstick humour of the dojo scene. Lucy discovers that her young son has been given a black eye by a "bully" who, it turns out, happens to be Viv's son. Offscreen, Lucy teaches her son to defend himself with the handshake throw. Also offscreen, the technique is executed while Viv's son attempts to "make up" with a handshake. This "comedy of errors" (if one might call it that) leads Viv and Lucy to try to fight each other via ineffectual judo slapstick until they are startled by sounds suggestive of "the prowler." The episode ends where it began, as Viv and Lucy give a walloping to their next-door neighbour Harry; this time with quasi-judo techniques as opposed to an umbrella and a vase.[170]



[170] My description excludes one inconsequential plot point. The boys were fighting over a dog whistle. In the final scene, Lucy mistakenly blows the dog whistle instead of the alarm whistle which the neighbour Harry had provided in the opening scene. Lucy, thus, summons the neighbourhood's dogs in a charming comic blow-off.

Sexual Assault and the Myth of Stranger Danger

In the "judo lessons" episodes of *The Lucy Show* and *The Flintstones*, a tension exists between the popular myth of "stranger danger" and the statistical reality that most domestic violence, both in the 1960s and now, is committed by someone known to the victim. When considering the above representations – and the way in which popular media representations are embedded in a network of other contexts and representations – it is noteworthy that the massively popular sitcom *I Love Lucy,* which catapulted Lucille Ball to international stardom, has been argued to be, in the words of Amanda Marcotte, 'built around the struggles of a housewife whose stupidity keeps getting her into scraps, which resulted in lectures and yes, even spankings from her husband, who basically treated her like an overgrown child' (2011). In a similar vein, the characters of Fred and Wilma Flintstone were overtly a stone-age pastiche of Ralph and Alice Kramden of *The Honeymooners* (1955-1956). Among the iconic comic "catch phrases" of Ralph Kramden (played by Jackie Gleason) were an array of threats of domestic violence: 'One of these days, Alice. POW! Right in the kisser.' Or: 'To the moon, Alice. To the moon!' Or, simply, the iconic "Bang! Zoom!" gesture. Similarly, the relationship between Tom the cat and Jerry the mouse was little *but* domestic violence of every conceivable type; from knife attacks to gaslighting.

Yet, although Ralph Kramden's blustering threats were impotent, and often met by a scathing reply from Alice ('Awww, Shaddap!'); and although it appears that Desi Arnaz never assaulted his wife Lucille Ball throughout their troubled real-life marriage (see: *Lucy and Desi is Love*); and although Jerry the mouse always rose above his natural place in the food chain; the social realities around which these comedic antagonisms were constructed were not nearly so harmless. Indeed, the comedy of *The Honeymooners, The Flintstones, I Love Lucy,* and *Tom and Jerry* can all be said to function as an *inversion* of social reality: Ralph, Fred, and Ricky are never *really* violent; Alice, Wilma, and Lucy are never bullied into submission or despair; and the mouse is never caught, killed, and eaten by the cat.

By contrast, domestic violence in the 1950s and 1960s in the UK and America was relatively common, rarely reported, and did not constitute grounds for divorce (Marcotte; 2011). For example, a cringe-worthy study published in *TIME* in 1964 argued for the therapeutic value of 'wife beating' as a 'frequent byproduct to alcoholism' (ibid). The authors of this study, Drs. Snell, Rosenwald, and Robey, wrote in part:

> Usually the wife was boss, and her weak-willed husband was content to play the subservient role—until he had a few drinks. Then "role alternation" would take place, and the husband would insist belligerently upon his conjugal rights. The wife, whose father had usually been a wife beater, would resist. The ensuing fight had, however, helpful overtones' […] The periods of violent behavior by the husband, served to release him momentarily from his anxiety about his ineffectiveness as a man, while giving his wife apparent masochistic gratification and helping probably to deal with the guilt arising from the intense hostility expressed in her controlling, castrating behavior (ibid).

Of course, by "conjugal rights" – Eliana Dockterman writes in *TIME*, 50 years later – the author 'does probably mean rape' (2014). Today, data provided by the US Department of Justice and the Department of Health and Human Services indicates that 8 out of 10 acts of sexual violence are committed 'by someone known to the victim,' of which, only 31 percent were reported to the Police (*RAINN.org*). Similar trends are reported in the UK and Ireland. A 2020 report by the Sexual Violence Centre Cork found that (in Cork, Ireland) 86.8 percent of cases of sexual violence were committed by someone known to the victim, of which only 33 percent were reported to the Garda (Roche; 2021). This tension (and cognitive dissonance) around the myth of "stranger danger" has been long prevalent in discourse around both women's self-defence and self-protection, in general.

The 1964 film adaptation of *Goldfinger* (starring Sean Connery[171] as 007) omits the dialogue of the book as its pertained to karate, Koreans, and eating cats. However, the film does depict Bond's prowess in judo (first displayed in the 1962 film adaptation of *Dr. No*) in a scene which today is marked as a supremely cringe-worthy male fantasy. In a scene taking place in a hay filled barn, Bond defeats a lesbian pilot / judo expert named Pussy Galore (played by Honor Blackman) in a judo match. His victory is ratified by her submission to his masculine charms – and/or he rapes her – after which she falls deeply in love. In private correspondence, Fleming explained that this 'laying on of hands' by 'the right man' was enough to 'cure' her 'of her psycho-pathological malady' (Flood; 2015).

The use of (and portrayal of) martial arts *for purposes of assault,* rather than defense, raises many troubling issues. Indeed, these very same issues were raised by the comic blowoff of *The*

[171] It is almost irrelevant to add – but nevertheless – Connery, it should be noted, stated in an interview with *Playboy* in 1965: 'I don't think there is anything particularly wrong about hitting a woman, although I don't recommend doing it in the same way that you'd hit a man.' He defended this statement in an interview with Barbara Walters in 1987. His comments to Walters went viral online following her death (Nugent; 2023).

Flintstones episode, which found humour in suggesting that the prowler had decided to learn to defend *himself* from his future *victims*. This is a complex set of factors to be sure. Accordingly, to better grasp the ethics of studying and instructing martial arts for self-protection and self-improvement, I conducted an analysis of scholastic discourse as it pertains to these issues. See: 'Mapping the Ethics and Efficacy of Self-Defense.'

[**Fig. 11:** A disturbing meme depicts Connery's James Bond "defeating" Blackman's Pussy Galore in a judo contest. The caption (sarcastically, one would hope) refers to Bond's act of turning a lesbian straight as a "public service."]



The "Judo Chop" Continued: Parody, Satire, and Self-Referentiality (1964-2002)

In November 1964, an episode of *The Flintstones* ('Dr. Sinister.' S05 E08) overtly meta-parodied the 007 films; most directly *Dr. No* (1962). The episode situated Fred Flintstone and Barney Rubble in the lair of the ghoulish, Orientalized, and racially-stereotyped Dr. Sinister. (Fleming's Dr. No character was a half-Chinese crime boss, also modelled along Orientalist and racially-stereotyped lines.) Notably, Fred and Barney managed to escape with the use of 'judo chops' which they had learned from watching a stone-age 007 pastiche named James Bondrock [Fig. 12]. Fred and Barney easily drop six of Dr. Sinister's henchmen with open-handed strikes to the necks. With each strike, they verbally exclaim: 'judo chop!' or 'judo chop chop chop!' It is, thus, perhaps signficant that in the 1960 episode ('The Prowler'), Betty and Wilma always exclaimed "a-sa-ta-ki-hai!' (or something similar) while executing a throw.

A month after ‘Dr. Sinister’ aired, the term “judo chop” was solidified in mainstream American popular culture when it was used by Charles Schulz in a *Peanuts* comic strip in which Linus and Snoopy are acting as a shepherd and a sheep, respectively, in a Christmas nativity play. In the final panel of the strip, Snoopy is shown to be thinking: ‘If he even comes near me with that shepherd’s staff, I’ll give him a judo chop!’ (23 Dec 1964). Schulz uses the term “judo chop” numerous times in subsequent years, perhaps most famously in 1967, when Snoopy – after non-consensually kissing (if we can say that of an illustrated beagle) the germophobic Lucy – reclines on his doghouse thinking: ‘One kiss is worth two judo chops any time!’ (22 Oct 1967).

The ’judo chop’ as delivered by Fred and Barney, was eventually globally and ironically popularized in the superspy parody *Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery* (1997) in which Powers (played by Mike Meyers) – in a bizarre send-up of several Orientalist tropes at once – delivers an open-hand strike to a tube of toothpaste with the exclamation ‘judo chop!,’ temporarily blinding one of Dr. Evil’s henchmen with toothpaste. “Judo chop” gags are self-referentially repeated throughout the film, as well as in *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me* (1999) and *Austin Powers in Goldmember* (2002).

[**Fig. 12:** Barney Rubble and Fred Flintstone deliver “judo chops” while smiling and musically chanting ‘ah-ju-do-chop-chop-chop,’ almost as if the words were part of an incantation which imbues the strikes with power. **Fig. 13:** Michael Caine, as Austin Power’s father, offers a meta explanation of the rules of engagement for henchmen in *Goldmember* (2002).





The Rise of Karate in the Popular Imagination (1964)

Judo remained the dominant martial art in the Western popular imagination until the mid-1960s, when karate gained traction, primarily by way of veterans returning from abroad with experience in Japanese and Korean forms of karate. This trend was visibly magnified by a number of celebrities including Elvis Presley and Chuck Norris[172] and first portrayed cinematically in the 1955 post-Western *Bad Day at Black Rock* (Dir. John Sturges), and subsequently in the 1962 neo-Noir *The Manchurian Candidate,* in which Korean War veteran Raymond Shaw (played by Frank Sinatra) engages in the first cinematic two-person "karate fight" with Chunjin (played by Henry Silva). Sinatra (doubled by Robert 'Buzz' Henry) and Silva (doubled by Al Wyatt Sr.) employ a mysterious and exotic, but hardly realistic or "authentic," pseudo-karate style (again coordinated by John Indrisano).

Elvis Presley used karate-influenced stage combat in a number of his films – most definitively in the 1964 film *Roustabout* – in which Presley (alongside his 'made in Japan' motorcycle) defends himself against several college jocks who question the patriotism of his "cycle." Using rapid blocks and combinations of open-hand strikes, Charlie Rogers (played by Presley) easily drops two of the jocks. The third flees the scene, but not before shouting: 'No! No! That's karate!' To this, Rogers replied: 'It goes with the cycle.' Strangely, the script makes no effort to justify why, or how, the American street-wise Rogers learned karate. Nevertheless, this reference appears to be the second cinematic use of the term "karate."

Also in 1964, but prior to the release of the *Roustabout* (in which Presley makes karate "cool") Peter Sellers explored the comedic potential for ineffectual, if not delusional, Western martial arts "experts." In *A Shot in the Dark* (Dir. Blake Edwards) – and subsequently in several of Edwards' sequels to *The Pink Panther* – Sellers stars as the bumbling French Inspector Clouseau (a purported karate master) who employs a "manservant" named Cato (played by Burt Kwouk). Among Cato's tasks was to periodically launch surprise attacks at his employer, so as to always keep him on his toes. In the first of such attacks, Cato attempts to strangle Clouseau while he sleeps, revealing that the inspector sleeps in his karate gi and black belt. When Clouseau is

[172] Chuck Norris developed an interest in a Korean style of Japanese karate (tang soo do) while stationed in Korea with the US Air Force in 1958. By the late 1960s, Norris had secured both American and International karate titles. His screen debut came in 1968 as a background "karate guy" in the Dean Martin and Sharon Tate spy comedy, *The Wrecking Crew.* He gained international popularity in 1972 as the heavy in Bruce Lee's penultimate film, *The Way of the Dragon.*

startled by a colleague – after screaming and ineffectually flapping his arm several times – Clouseau blurts out: 'You idiot! You fool! It's a good job I was able to check my reflexes. I might have killed you with a karate chop!' Thus, *A Shot in the Dark* appears to contain the first cinematic use of the term.

I hesitate to describe the absurd "fights" between Clouseau and Cato[173] – or for that matter, Sinatra's bizarre unspecified fighting techniques in *The Manchurian Candidate* – as satirical or parodic. While certainly funny, and clearly unrealistic, the earliest fight scenes between Clouseau and Cato nevertheless retained a sense of the mysterious and the exotic. After all, Asian martial arts were not yet well understood by the public at that time. Although often ridiculed as underhanded tricks, such fighting systems were not yet dismissed as inherently ineffectual. On the contrary, the potential for karate to be "cool" was suggested by Elvis Presley's rebellious portrayal in *Roustabout.* By the time, however, that Cato jumped out of a refrigerator covered in icicles in the 1975 *Return of the Pink Panther* [**Fig. 14**] these fights *had* reached the level of pure parody. Indeed, that scene's slow-motion flying sidekick (which disastrously misses the mark!) accompanied by a slow-motion battle cry (turned to shriek) foreshadowed countless Orientalist and ridiculous martial arts parodies to come.



[173] Kimmel and Aronson assert that the name of Burt Kwouk's character was 'pulled from Bruce Lee's first popular character on television' (2003: 458). This statement is, at best, misleading. Lee played Kato from 1966-1967, two years *after* the release of Blake Edwards' *A Shot in The Dark.* The *character* of Kato (as the personal valet of Britt Reid) has, however, existed since *The Green Hornet* radio and film serials of the 1930s and 1940s. Kato's skill-set was expanded to include martial arts in 1966 due to Lee's involvement. Thus, it is likely that the name Cato *was* inspired by the Green Hornet, but this had nothing to do with Lee.

Crimefighters Continued: Talented Amateurs, Kirk-Fu, and "Man Appeal" (1965-1969)

In 1965, the British TV show *The Avengers* reached the height of its popularity. In its fourth and fifth seasons (1965-1967), the umbrella wielding John Steed (played by Patrick Macnee) was partnered with the "modern woman" Emma Peel (played by Diana Rigg). Like her predecessor Cathy Gale (played by Honor Blackman) of the second and third seasons (1962-1963), Peel was described as a "talented amateur." Whereas Gale was explicitly an expert in judo (positioning Blackman for her turn as Pussy Galore in *Goldfinger*), among Peel's many talents was an ability to fight with exoticized, karate-*esque* techniques including open hand strikes, throws, and pseudo-pressure point techniques.

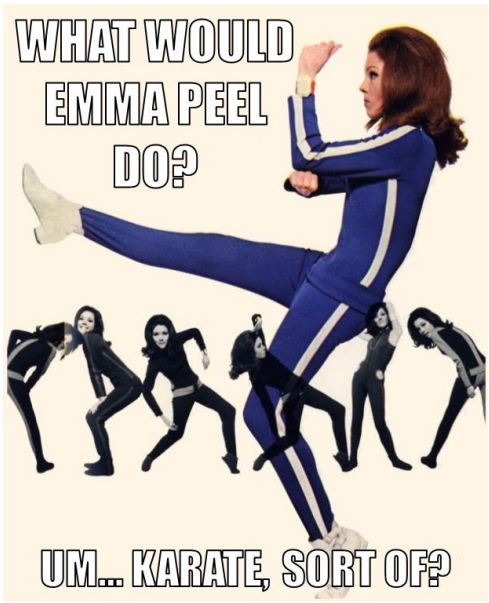
This pseudo-style of martial arts was far from realistic, but was elevated to an artform all its own by actors such as Rigg and William Shatner (as the hyper-masculine Captain Kirk) in *Star Trek* (1966-1969). Captain Kirk's exoticized, ostensibly-futuristic, fighting style – which might be described as one-third karate, one-third judo, one-third boxing, and one-third exhibition wrestling[174] – is celebrated in a pseudo martial arts manual called the *Kirk Fu Manual: A Guide to Starfleet's Most Feared Martial Art* (Ward; 2020). Whether this non-specific and exoticized form of screen fighting should be called "stage combat" or something else, both Rigg and Shatner were very effective at "selling" it. Having portrayed the paragon of simulated masculinity, it is perhaps no coincidence that Shatner began to study karate in 1972, and was featured on the cover of *Fighting Stars* magazine in April, 1974. It should also not go unsaid that the name Emma Peel – in the tradition of Fleming's "Bond girls" – was shorthand for one of the character's most apparent traits. Emma Peel is the phonetic spelling of "M. Appeal;" short for "man appeal."

Of course, *all* fictional representations of martial arts may be described as fake, or pseudo; even if executed by *real* martial artists. (The meticulously choreographed screen fights of Bruce Lee are an obvious case in point.) It is likewise important to note that the Vulcan neck pinch of Leonard Nimoy's Mr. Spock has roots in martial arts "pressure points" mythologies; thus, foregrounding the pseudo aspects of even "real" martial arts. Nevertheless, Captain Kirk and Emma Peel signalled the arrival of popular Western martial arts representations – and, thus, appropriations – independent of Asian contexts or acknowledgements.

[174] My intentionally absurd math is a reflection on the blunt non-realism of these fight scenes.

[**Figs. 15 & 16**: Two original memes compare and contrast the corny "gentlemanly" fighting style of Steed, versus Peel's physically impressive but oddly exoticized fighting.]





In contrast to the Western appropriation of martial arts, in 1971, Batman began to explicitly (re)incorporate Eastern martial arts into his fighting repertoire, delivering a 'judo throw' in *Batman* #235. In 1972, the Black Canary [**Figs. 17 & 18**] followed suit becoming "the mistress of judo" (*Adventure Comics* #418; 'The Cat and the Canary,' by O'Neil and Toth).





Vigilantism, Active Bystanding, and the (Half) White Savior (1967-1973)

In 1967, *Born Losers* – an outlaw biker gang film, starring and directed by Tom Laughlin, was modestly successful at the box office. The film introduced the character of Billy Jack; a half-Navajo ex-Green Beret (US Special Forces) Vietnam War veteran. When a town – including its Sherrif – becomes terrified by a motorcycle gang's violence, sexual assaults, and threats of more violence to come, Billy Jack – in Roger Ebert's words – 'because he feels he must, he fights them… using karate, gasoline, Indian tricks, and his rifle' (1971). Once again, note the correlation between "tricks" and the "other."

On the surface, *Born Losers* can be viewed as a recontextualization of the gunslinging anti-Westerns – most notably, "the Dollars Trilogy" (1964-1966) of Sergio Leone – which, itself, began as a recontextualization of Akira Kurasawa's Samurai film *Yojimbo* (1961). The use of martial arts for the protection of a vulnerable community is likewise at the centre of Kurasawa's *Seven Samurai* (1954) which was recontextualized as a Western by John Sturges in 1960 as *The Magnificent Seven.* Thus, while *Born Losers* brought little new to the table, it did offer an original combination of popular ingredients. Billy Jack appears to be the first fictional non-Asian character to use martial arts to protect a vulnerable community; as well as the first fictional character to do in a contemporary setting.

The fact, however, that Billy Jack felt the need to take the law into his own hands is obviously problematic. In 2003, Leonard Maltin critiqued *Born Losers* for hypocritically 'using violence as an indictment of violence' (162). Referencing *Born Losers* along with numerous other films of the day such as *The Dirty Dozen* (1967), Ebert wrote in 1968:

> In theory, our political institutions reflect majority opinion and protect minority rights, and violence and anarchy are not necessary. But during this period in American history, that theory seems to be standing trial. A great many Americans no longer seem to believe in it. This disbelief is reflected in many current American films, and violence is suggested as the natural alternative.

Although Ebert had no way of knowing it at that time, there was more to the story of *Born Losers* than was apparent on the screen or at the box office. According to Laughlin, in 1954, after witnessing mistreatment and harassment of Native Americans in South Dakota, Laughlin (with his wife Delores Taylor) wrote a screenplay in which Billy Jack protects – not a small town from a ruthless motorcycle gang – but a tribe of Native Americans against bigoted, prejudiced, racist, and rapacious townspeople (Laughlin; 2001: 02:00). Unable to secure funding to produce

the film, it was adapted in order to capitalize on the popularity of outlaw biker films; while also addressing the 1964 incident of sexual assault of two minors allegedly perpetrated by members of the Hells Angels motorcycle gang.

The commercial success of *Born Losers* provided Laughlin with the backing and financing to produce, direct, and star in *Billy Jack* (1971). It is notable that Laughlin was a lifelong political activist. He purchased the Santa Monica Montessori school in the early 1960s and often spoke out against domestic violence and racial prejudice and discrimination (ibid: 08:30). As Ebert observed in a review of *Billy Jack*, 'What I find interesting is that they decided, in effect, to remake their earlier film: not to copy it, but to grapple again with the same identities and ideas' (1971). Ebert notes, however, that Billy Jack, once again, 'takes the law into his own hands because he believes that's the only way to obtain justice' (ibid).

Billy Jack was modestly successful at the box office in 1971, but after a re-release in 1973, it became one of the highest grossing independent films in history. *Billy Jack* also resulted in a twice (1971 and 1973) Top40 hit song, *One Tin Solider (The Legend of Billy Jack).* The film's success also led to the retroactive success of *Born Losers* in foreign markets and VHS rentals, and paved the way for numerous sequels. *Billy Jack* was popular, in part, due to its rebellious, progressive, counter-cultural, anti-establishment, and pro-peace themes. Yet, the film is also remarkable for – and no doubt derived much of its popularity from – the title character's use of martial arts; specifically, the Korean mixed martial art of hapkido (referred to as "karate" within the film).

After Laughlin witnessed hapkido expert Bong Soo Han give a well-received demonstration in a public park, Han was hired as Laughlin's fight choreographer and stunt double (Stewart; 2007). It is thanks to Bong Soo Han, that one of the film's most iconic moments was made possible. A barefoot Billy Jack finds himself standing face-to-face with the town's rich, corrupt, political "bossman," and surrounded by a posse of his goons:

> ***Bossman Posner*:** Do you think those Green Beret karate tricks gonna' help you against all these boys?
>
> ***Billy Jack*:** Well, it doesn't look to me like I really have any choice now, does it?
>
> ***Bossman Posner*:** That's right, you don't.
>
> ***Billy Jack*:** You know what I think I'm gonna' do, though? Just for the hell of it.
>
> ***Bossman Posner*:** [Smiling] Tell me.

***Billy Jack*:** I'm gonna take this right foot, and I'm gonna wop you on that side of your face. And you wanna know something? There's not a damn thing you're gonna be able to do about it.

***Bossman Posner*:** [Chuckling] Really?

***Billy Jack*:** Really… [kicks Posner in face via cut to overhead camera angle] Hyah!

It is interesting to note that while the hapkido techniques in the film are authentic, and effectively filmed, the philosophy of Billy Jack does not necessarily reflect the 'defense only' or "pop-Zen" philosophy of many modernized/traditional martial arts. As Ebert observed: 'The kids and staff' at the 'hippie school' on the Indian reservation 'are all pacifists, but Billy Jack can't buy that. His morality is a simple Old Testament one, an eye for an eye' (1971).

In each fight scene – including the infamous kick to the face – Billy Jack's attacks are pre-emptive; if not revenge-motivated or vengeful. For example, after intervening in a sexual-assault in-progress, Billy Jack gives the perpetrator Bernard Posner (son of Bossman Posner) a ruthless option; either suffer a dislocated elbow or drive his Corvette into the lake. Bernard chooses the latter. Subsequently, when Bernard and his cronies assault several young Native Americans in the ice cream parlour – pouring flour on them to "make them white," among other indignities – Billy Jack arrives and delivers a powerful speech followed by a series of devastating open-handed strikes and kicks. He says:

> Bernard, I want you to know that I try. When Jean and the kids at the school tell me that I'm supposed to control my violent temper and be passive and non-violent like they are, I try. I really try. But when I see this girl of such a beautiful spirit so degraded, and when I see this boy that I love, sprawled out by this big ape, here. And this little girl, who is so special to us that we call her God's little gift of sunshine. And I think of the number of years she's gonna have to carry in her memory the savagery of this idiotic moment of yours, I just go... berserk!

Following the ice cream parlour fight – which is unmistakably reminiscent of the diner fight scene in John Sturges' *Bad Day at Black Rock* (1955) – Billy Jack comforts the assaulted youth: 'You hurt? Get in your eyes? A lot of stupid people in this world, aren't there? Sure you're all right? How come you don't smile? You do look kind of funny…You okay?' It is worth noting that in pressuring one of the victims to "smile," Billy Jack's actions can, themselves, be viewed as patronizing, if not as a mild form of harassment (Smith; 2016).

Indeed, the violence, humiliations, and vigilante justice which Billy Jack chooses to dish out – while arguably justified in the absence of an honest police force and just legal system – do

beget more violence and suffering. Bernard ultimately rapes the director of the progressive/inclusive Freedom School and murders a Native American boy. In exchange, Billy Jack murders Bernard with an open-hand strike to the throat. This brutal act of vigilantism occurs *after* Bernard was disarmed with a karate kick; but *also* after Billy Jack is (or allows himself to be) non-fatally shot by Bernard. After surrendering to the police, Billy Jack is taken away in handcuffs while students of the Freedom School raise fists in solidarity.

The paradoxical nature of the violence in *Billy Jack* was not lost on film reviewers of the time. For instance, Ebert wrote that he was 'somewhat disturbed by the central theme,' noting that '*Billy Jack* seems to be saying the same thing as *Born Losers*; that a gun is better than a constitution in the enforcement of justice. Is democracy totally obsolete, then? Is our only hope that the good fascists defeat the bad fascists?' (1971). In 1995, Maltin wrote – in reference to *Billy Jack* – that 'today its politics are highly questionable, and its "message" of peace looks ridiculous, considering the amount of violence in the film' (116).

Taken altogether, *Billy Jack* is a unique film which can be praised for its progressive attitude toward racial and gender equality; its direct challenge to hegemonic political, legal, and social structures; and its success in spreading awareness about the harmfulness and injustice of racism and sexism, in general; and toward Native Americans in particular. *Billy Jack* can also be praised for its innovative attempt to capture authentic and effective martial arts techniques, and to frame the techniques as a tool of self-empowerment and protection.

On the other hand, *Billy Jack* can be criticized for being yet another in a long succession of films in which stunt doubles and editing are employed in order to allow white actors, without martial arts expertise, to appropriate the "aura" of Asian martial arts; often while speaking for an absent other. While Laughlin was sympathetic to the plight of Native Americans, it is also the case that he was not one; and, thus, was not best placed to speak on their behalf. It is by no means irrelevant that *Billy Jack* portrays a fictional Nishnobie tribe. Indeed, there is no shortage of reductivism toward that fictional Native American culture, including a purportedly ancient shamanistic ritual, a snake venom induced spirit journey, apparently successful spirt channelling, and a thus divinely revealed "dance of peace." On this, Ebert noted that between 1967 and 1971, the character of Billy Jack had:

> …become more mythic and supernatural. "We don't know how to contact Billy Jack," one of his friends says. "We communicate with him Indian-style; when we

> need him, somehow he's there." And indeed he is, riding his horse or motorcycle out of the woods, an almost supernatural presence (1971).

What does it say, if the way forward for the marginalized or oppressed or abused is to hope a shamanic saviour arrives to protect them? Or, worse still, if the saviour of that fictional Indigenous community was a white man pretending to be half-Navajo? Thus, even as Laughlin defended Native American rights in a fictional context – with intent of spreading awareness about Native American discrimination in non-fictional contexts – he himself was contributing to Native American disenfranchisement. Such is another paradox at the heart of this flawed, yet challenging, film.

It should be acknowledged, of course, that Laughlin faced many difficulties (and spent more than a decade) attempting to produce a film *about* Native American discrimination. It is, thus, important to acknowledge that the chances for a Native American actor playing a role similar to Billy Jack in 1971 were, for all intents and purposes, non-existent.[175] Nevertheless, Laughlin profited greatly from his role as a half-Native American using Korean martial arts to defend a fictional Native American tribe.

At any rate, Billy Jack clearly captivated the popular imagination. Indeed, it was along very similar lines that the television series *Kung Fu* (1972-1975) was conceived and popularized. *Kung Fu* follows Kwai Chang "Grasshopper" Caine – a half American / half Chinese Shaolin monk and martial artist – in his search for his half-brother in the 19th century American West. As he travels, Caine naturally must(?) use his kung fu skills to right wrongs and to stand against injustice. Starring American actor David Carradine as Caine, *Kung Fu* is commonly regarded as an example of yellowface performance (Carradine's make up included eye prosthetics), cultural appropriation, and/or Hollywood whitewashing.[176]

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[175] Laughlin attempted to redress this imbalance in sequels. For example, *The Trial of Billy Jack* (1974) features Rolling Thunder and Sacheen Littlefeather (as well as Bong Soo Han). Unfortunately, both Rolling Thunder and Littlefeather – despite their advocacy for Native American rights – have been credibly acknowledged as so-called "Pretendians" with no credible claim to Native American culture or ancestry.

[176] Many controversies or conspiracy theories today claim that the concept for *Kung Fu* was stolen from a similar concept developed by Bruce Lee called *The Warrior,* in which Lee was to star. These claims are not correct. To summarize: In 1971, Lee was developing *The Warrior* (a series about a Shaolin monk in the Wild American West) which was approved by studio executives. Lee discussed the plot of the series in his 1971 interview with Pierre Berton. The concept for *Kung Fu,* however, was adapted from a film script entitled *The Way of the Tiger, The Sign of the Dragon* written by Friedlander and Spielman in 1969. Thus, while it is true that *The Warrior* and *Kung Fu* concepts are very similar, the projects were independently created. After the success of Lee's 1971 film *The Big Boss,* Lee chose to develop his film career rather than the television series.

The decision to cast a non-Asian actor in the role of Caine was contested by the Association of Asian Pacific American Artists at the time. Casting directors determined that Bruce Lee, George Takei, and other Asian actors under consideration would not be able to "carry the role," meaning, as producer Fred Weintraub put it:

> The powers that be … had a hundred different reasons why Bruce was wrong for the part: he was an unknown, he was short, his English wasn't good enough, he lacked the necessary serenity to play the role… But at the end of the day, there was really only one reason. In the history of Hollywood there had never been an Asian hero – unless you count Charlie Chan. But even that iconic Chinese-American character was never popular in films until he was played by Warner Oland, who was not only Caucasian, he was Swedish, for chrissake. From Oland on, only white guys played Charlie. And that dubious tradition was carried on into *Kung Fu* when David Carradine landed the role of Kwai Chang Caine (2012).

Bruce Lee biographer Matthew Polly summarized the issue, thusly: 'The general consensus was that the public would not be willing to accept a Chinese hero' (2018: 280-281). Of course, this consensus was soon proven to be utterly incorrect. Lee starred in three Hong Kong films – *The Big Boss* (1971), *Fist of Fury* (1972), and *The Way of the Dragon* (1972) – and a joint American/Hong Kong project, *Enter the Dragon* (1973). Each of these films features Lee, using his martial skills (and working outside the law) to stand up to injustice, to protect vulnerable communities, and to deliver vigilante justice.

Much has been written about these films, as well as Lee's massive cultural impact. Here, I will simply note that many of the criticisms which have been directed at *Billy Jack* could likewise be directed toward Lee's films, albeit with two significant differences. First, Bruce Lee was an accomplished martial artist – thus he did not appropriate the "aura" of martial arts by way of fight coordinators and stunt doubles. Yet, it is also fair to note that Lee was not a competitive fighter; and so, his fictional representations of fighting remain precisely that. Second, Lee was a dual citizen of Hong Kong and the United States of America; born to Chinese parents in San Francisco and raised in Hong Kong. Thus, whatever reductivism or mythologizing Lee participated in – on or off screen – he cannot be accused of appropriating a culture to which he had no claim; nor did he claim to represent or speak for an absent "other." Consequently, Lee was a massive and paradigm-shifting force, who died of medical complications before *Enter the Dragon* premiered. As previously indicated, the massive impact of Bruce Lee must necessarily fall beyond the scope of this essay.

Again, my aim in conducting this analysis is not to label works of the past as progressive, conservative, or regressive; according to the standards of the past or present. Rather, I aim to identify shortcomings of past representations in order to create works which avoid inadvertently repeating or reiterating those shortcomings; particularly as these representations reflect public attitudes toward racism, sexism, agism, assault, or the ethos of self-defense.

Martial Arts in Advertising (1966-1976)

In 'Hai Karate and Kung Fuey: Early Martial Arts Tropes in British Advertising,' Sally Chan, et al., note that the first use of martial arts in British advertising occurred in 1966, in one of a series of athletically themed Kellogg's Frosted Flakes ("Frosties") television commercials (2020: 8). This black and white commercial portrayed the product's animated mascot, Tony the Tiger, defeating – in the words of Chan, et al., – 'a Caucasian boy in a Gi (training suit) and belt' in the setting of 'a traditional Japanese tearoom with cues such as; Japanese shoji screens, low rectangular table, bamboo plant, tatami mat flooring' (ibid). Naturally, after the boy eats a spoonful of Frosties, he easily wallops the cartoon tiger.

Between 1967 and 1969, print and television ads for BMK 'soft yet tough as they come' carpets featured actress/model Edwina Carroll as "the BMK girl," usually pictured wearing a judo gi and black belt [Figs. 19 & 20]. The first of the TV commercials depicted Carroll using judo techniques (with the assistance of a stunt double) to apparently throw 'a male black belt' on the soft, tough carpet rather than the usual tatami mat (10). In the second TV commercial, Carroll – in the words of Chan, et al. – 'uses her martial arts skills to defeat two intruders in her luxury apartment whilst wearing a silk or satin kimono style robe. The voiceover: "BMK Carpets, tough, beautiful, durable, whatever you happen to throw on them"' (ibid).

Both the Frosties and BMK ad campaigns followed a long tradition – dating back to British suffragettes and the New Women's movement in the US – of presenting judo and jiu-jitsu as valuable tools of self-protection and self-empowerment for vulnerable populations. Much could be said of the tension between Orientalism and cultural appropriation within those ads. To conspicuously ignore *or* to conspicuously acknowledge Asian contexts and cultures in representations of martial arts threads a needle between appropriation and Orientalism; if not worse. While sharing with, and learning from, other cultures is a desirable outcome, fine lines exist between sharing and stealing; and between learning and wilful misinterpretation.

[**Figs. 19 & 20**]





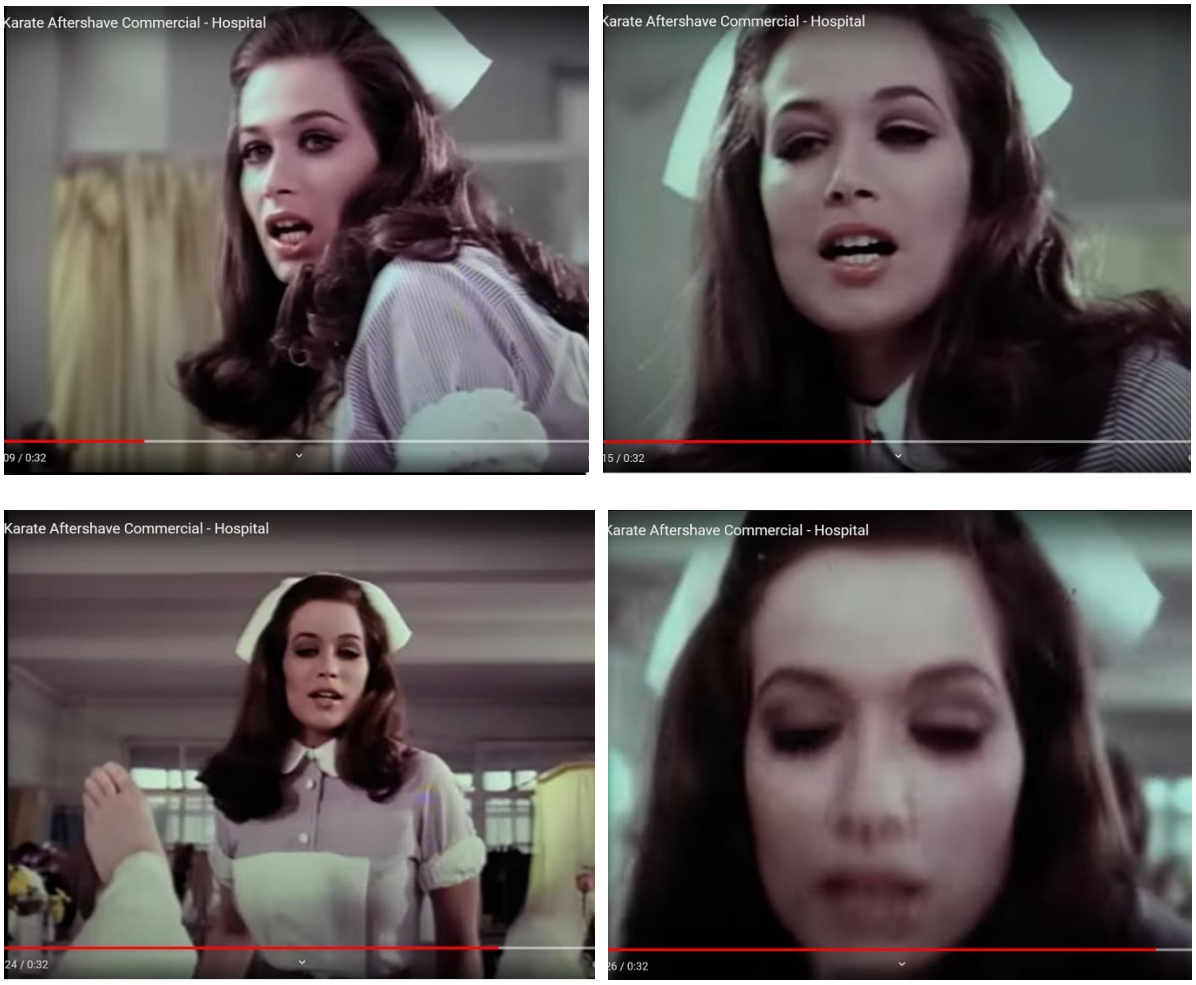
The above issues – and others – are on display in an infamous print and television campaign appearing in the US and Britain in 1967. As Edwina Carroll was becoming a 'household name' as 'the BMK Judo girl' (Chan, et al; 2020: 11), a brand of "Oriental" scented aftershaves called Hai Karate launched a highly successful ad campaign that humorously (and problematically) flipped the gender politics of self-protection on its head. The aftershave, it was promised, 'drives women wild and makes men irresistible.' Thus, each bottle was marketed (and sold) along with 'indispensable instructions on self-defence' so that male users could defend themselves from unwanted female advances. The tagline for the product was: 'Be careful how you use it.'

The series of seven Hai Karate television commercials in Britain – starring Valerie Leon[177] as the 'ravenous' woman – were more artistically accomplished than the earlier American version, which I would describe as possessing a soap opera aesthetic, depicting mild violence, and starring the male "victim" rather than the female "assailant." The British series – the first of which was in black and white ('House Visitor') – stylistically resemble classic horror films, interspersing shots of the fleeing victim with POV close ups of the 'ravenous' predator. In the 'Hospital' variation (circa 1973) Leon, dressed as a nurse, literally hisses (vampire-esque?) and adopts a glazed over (zombie-esque?) expression as the voice over states: 'This is Hai Karate.

[177] Leon went on to appear on *The Avengers* (1968; S06 E06), the Hammer horror film *Blood from the Mummy's Tomb* (1971), *The Spy Who Loved Me* (1977), and *Revenge of the Pink Panther* (1978) among many other roles.

And this unsuspecting girl is about to catch its irresistible scent. The Hai Karate scent, that can turn a usually docile women into a ravenous creature.'

[**Figs. 21-24**: Screen captures from the Hai Karate 'Hospital' commercial starring Leon.



The plain and unremarkable men (victims?) in these ads use karate techniques – accompanied by the diaphragmatic breathing (tanden) and shouts (kiais) of traditional karate – to comedically wreak havoc before ultimately being "devoured" by their pursuer. Notably, none of the karate techniques are shown to successfully land on another person. Instead, furniture, clocks, ladders, etc., are inadvertently struck, resulting in a domino effect of comedic pratfalls and pie-in-the-face slapstick. Taken altogether, these ads are a fascinating juxtaposition of the horror and slapstick genres, in which gender norms are reversed in order to problematically reframe self-defense as ineffectual; while framing sexual assault as desirable.[178]

[178] This toxic approach was adopted – but without the context of self-defense – by Axe body spray in a much ridiculed, but commercially successful "Axe Effect" campaign (2002-2016). The campaign was suspended in 2016,

[**Fig. 25**: A magazine ad featuring the actors of the American version of the 1967 'House Visitor' commercial. This print version of the ad is the most violent, showing the smug "victim" successfully restraining the disappointed "assailant" with a Full-Nelson hold.



The advertisements of Hai Karate – featuring a crazed female hunting her prey – bring to mind a phenomenon relatively unique to the zombie/vampire genre. Namely, that zombification (or vampirification) can be used as a justification to portray (and sanitize) extreme screen violence against women (particularly sexualized and objectified women). This tactic is generally avoided in zombie films, however, notable examples include Dr. Morgan's (Vincent Price) murder of his

in line with the anti-sexual assault and harassment *#MeToo* movement (Schwerin; 2020). Axe rebranded its body spray in a far more progressive and socially conscientious "New Axe Effect" campaign in 2021.

undead wife in *The Last Man on Earth* (1964) and Colombus' (Jesse Eisenberg) murder of his zombified neighbour 406 (Amber Heard) in *Zombieland* (2009), among others.

Bizarrely sexualized/violent zombie scenarios can also be found in the 2008 absurdist parody *Zombie Strippers* (starring Jenna Jameson); the Japanese satire *Big Tits Zombie* (2010); the zombie stripper in *The Boy Scout's Guide to the Zombie Apocalypse* (2015); or the incestuous concubine relationship depicted in the Taiwanese *Zombie Fight Club* (2014). A more light-hearted example can be found in Olivia Rutigliano's low-budget school project pseudo-trailer for *Walden: The Zombie Adaptation* (2014) wherein Henry David Thoreau unexpectedly punches a bonnet-wearing female zombie in the face.

Regardless of intent, it is unthinkable that – in 2014 – any combination of director, choreographer, writer and/or actor could have filmed such scenes without giving some consideration to the symbolism of those representations. Such issues are complex, and such representations are not always or automatically harmful. However, to avoid unintentionally harmful symbolism or messaging during the creation of 'The Art of the Apocalypse: From A.I. to Zombie' – particularly during the creation of the series of self-defense instruction videos – zombies were presented as androgynous and/or gender non-specific.

Fragile and Toxic Masculinity in Martial Arts Representations (1984-present)

Building on the cult following of the original *Karate Kid* trilogy (1984-1989) the series *Cobra Kai* (created by *YouTube* in 2018 and purchased by *Netflix* in 2020) rehashes the decades old "karate rivalry" of Daniel LaRusso and Johnny Lawrence (with Ralph Macchio and William Jabka reprising their *Karate Kid* roles). Soon entering its sixth and final season, this series bluntly compares and contrasts the "defensive" karate of the Orientalized (fictional) Miyagi-Do style with the aggressive Americanized (and fictional) Cobra Kai style.

In *Cobra Kai,* Johnny Lawrence is overtly sexist and conservative (i.e., anti-progressive). He is anti-spectrum disorder, anti-peanut allergy, anti-feminism, and so on. When one of Johnny's students confides: 'The doctor said I could be on the spectrum,' Johnny replies: 'I don't know what that is, but get off it pronto' (S01 E06). In another episode, Johnny bluntly states: 'There are no girls in Cobra Kai… Women aren't meant to fight. They have tiny hollow bones… This isn't a knitting class. This is a dojo' (S01 E05). Although Johnny's character does grow, to some

degree, during the first five seasons, disappointingly, this growth comes and goes. When Johnny revises his "no girls allowed" policy for financial reasons, he tells his first female student, '…if you want to be in Cobra Kai, you can't act like a girl.' She responds:

> ***Aisha****:* What do you mean? How do girls act?
>
> ***Johnny****:* Oh, don't give me that. You know. All emotional, loud, complainy, never letting you finish a sentence.
>
> ***Aisha****:* Well, I know a few guys who act just...
>
> ***Johnny****:* [interrupting] Quiet! … (ibid).

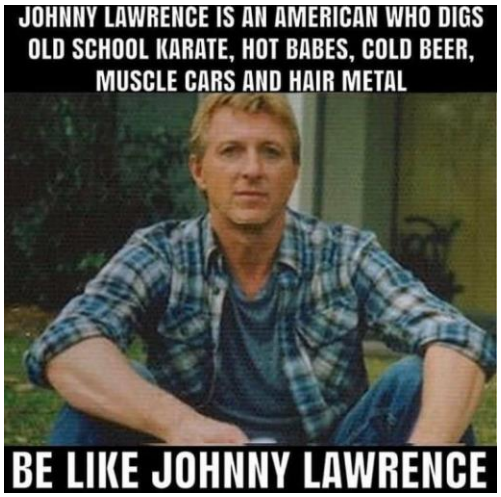
Johnny's counterpart, the perfectly progressive (i.e., "woke") Daniel, is portrayed as an annoyingly smug suburban family man who owns a successful car dealership, and eternally relives his youth via fetishes for karate and Japan. Take, for instance, the following dinner table exchange between Daniel and his daughter Sam's generically Asian love interest Kyler:

> ***Daniel****:* The *yanagi*, or *yanagi ba*, depending on the region, is a knife used exclusively for cutting *sashimi*. I picked up this bad boy on my first trip to Okinawa. Voilà. The famous... LaRusso ponzu toro.
>
> ***Kyler***: Oh, no thanks. I don't like sushi.
>
> ***Mrs. LaRusso****:* Uh, are you sure you just don't want to try a little piece?
>
> ***Daniel****:* It melts in your mouth.
>
> ***Kyler***: Uh, no. Fish kind of grosses me out.
>
> ***Sam****:* No, you like fish. What about the fish sticks at school?
>
> ***Kyler***: Oh, yeah, fish sticks are dope. You have fish sticks?
>
> ***Daniel****:* Uh, no, just this fresh fish I picked up from the Japanese market this morning. [Later that evening…] Listen, I never liked sushi when I was your age either. It wasn't until I met a good friend of mine that it began to grow on me. Mmm. He was from Okinawa. Where are your parents from?
>
> ***Kyler***: Irvine, I think (S01 E02).

Thus, *Cobra Kai* flirts with issues of cultural appropriation, youth violence, political correctness, gender politics, and toxic masculinity, but its superficially engagement does as much to ridicule and mock progressive values as to critique hegemonic social structures.

[**Fig. 26**: A meme depicts a scene in which, speaking into the telephone (presumably in response to the term "gender-neutral") Johnny says: 'No, no. We accept boys *and* girls... Gender-what? Is this a prank call?' (S02 E02). **Fig. 27**: A meme glorifies Johnny's conservative (i.e., 1980s) values.]





Cobra Kai, thus, builds on the many 21st century parodies of the "guru" style of egocentric and/or incompetent instruction reportedly found in many hyper-commercialized martial arts schools; often described within martial arts discourse as "McDojos." This stands in stark contrast to the aggressive, militaristic, and highly disciplined approach to karate employed by Cobra Kai's John Creese in the original *Karate Kid* trilogy (1984-1989). Although presented as socially toxic and ethically misguided, Creese was by no means presented as an incompetent or ineffective instructor.

In the early 2000s, McDojo gurus became a frequent (and easy) target of parody and satire in fictional screen representations of martial arts. This evolution owes in part, perhaps, to the pop-cultural martial arts phenomena of the 1960s ("judo chops"), 1970s (kung fu and pop-Zen), and 1980s (karate and ninja). By the 1990s, Western popular-culture had become inundated – if not oversaturated – with Japanese, Chinese, and Korean martial arts. Familiarity breeds contempt (as the aphorism goes) and the stage was thus set for cynical parodies and satires of martial arts based, not on its shocking effectiveness, but on its ritualistic ridiculousness and delusional ineffectuality.

One such parody can be found in the buffoonish "Rex Kwon Do" system featured in *Napoleon Dynamite* (2004). According to Rex (played by Diedrich Bader) in a television advertisement: 'After one week with me in my dojo, you'll be prepared to defend yourself with the strength of

a grizzly, the reflexes of a puma, and the wisdom of a man.' The latter part of the voice over accompanies video footage in which Rex aggressively restrains a female with schoolyard bully style headlock [**Below**]. The short scene set in Rex's dojo consists almost entirely of memorable soundbites of fragile masculinity and incompetent martial arts instruction, including: 'Bow to your sensei. BOW TO YOUR SENSEI!' and 'Grab my arm. The *other* arm. MY other arm!'

In a revealing moment of classically low self-esteem, Rex, bedecked in American flag parachute pants,[179] lectures his prospective students about self-respect. Pointing at a framed photograph of a hyper-muscular female body builder (played by Carmen Brady), Rex asks, unironically: 'Do you think anybody thinks I'm a failure because I go home to Starla at night?' Obviously, by defining *self*-respect in terms of the opinions of others – much less, on the subjective and shallow basis of physical appearance – Rex's teachings are far from well-adjusted; and farther still, from the challenge to the ego which traditional martial arts and zen philosophy traditionally strove to instil.

[**Fig. 28:** A screen capture from the television ad for the hyper-Americanized and deeply toxic Rex Kwon Do "system" in *Napoleon Dynamite* (2004). **Fig. 29:** One of several popular Rex Kwon Do quotes; adapted to meme form.]





A notable evolution of the toxic McDojo guru parody is found in *Enter the Dojo* (2011-2017) – a popular mockumentary *YouTube* webseries clearly reminiscent of *The Office* (2001-2003; 2005-2013) – that follows "Master" Ken (played by the show's creator Matthew Page) and his

[179] 'Do you think anybody wants a roundhouse kick to the face while I'm wearing these bad boys? Forget about it.'

students at the fictional Ameri-Do-Te dojo. Notably, the term "Ameri-Do-Te" succeeds at being both an Americanization and spoonerism of the term "Karate-Do." The ridiculous Ameri-Do-Te system features techniques such as 're-stomp the groin' (S01 E01).

[**Fig. 30:** "Master" Ken of the absurd Ameri-Do-Te system ridicules Tai Chi. **Fig. 31:** The intentionally and ironically over-the-top logo of Ameri-Do-Te.]





In the same vein as the toxic guru parodies above, in the third season of *Cobra Kai* (2021), Johnny creates his own toxic style of karate with the ridiculous name "Eagle Fang." He announces to his six adolescent male students in a park: 'They said we needed a roof and four walls. Screw that! This park will be our new dojo. Cause you don't need a dojo to be a dojo! Is that understood?' His students shout in unison: 'YES SENSEI!' Johnny continues:

> **Johnny:** If we're going to be taken seriously, we need a name that commands respect. A name that elicits power and dominance. Cobras are strong. They may be king of the jungle. But the world is more than a jungle. There's only one animal that can kill a snake.
>
> **Bert:** A mongoose?
>
> **Johnny:** A *real* animal, Bert. [holds up t-shirt] Welcome to Eagle Fang Karate.
>
> **Mitch:** Uh, eagles don't have fangs...
>
> **Johnny:** [throws t-shirt at Mitch's head]. (S03 E08)

[**Fig. 32:** The intentionally and ironically over-the-top logo of Eagle Fang. **Fig. 33:** A variation on the 'Henry Cavill Third Option' meme template in which Cavill chooses Eagle Fang. (This template was inspired by an interview in which, when asked 'PlayStation or Xbox,' Cavill answered 'PC').]





Incredibly, these toxic "Western karate" parodies – including the ridiculous "dojo wars" at the centre of *Cobra Kai* – have an actual basis in American history. In the early 1960s, John Keehan earned his black belt through the United States Karate Association (USKA) founded by Robert Trias in 1948. In 1963, Keehan and Trias organized the first American karate tournament (held in Chicago).[180] The following year, Trias expelled Keehan from the UKSA for reasons which Keehan disputed (Higginbottom; 2021).

In 1965, Keehan and a co-conspirator were arrested while drunkenly attempting to use dynamite to vandalize Gene Wyka's Judo and Karate Center, where Keehan had been previously employed (Kelly; 2006). In 1967, Keehan legally changed his name to Count Juan Raphael Dante and began running advertisements in the back of comic books which boasted, among other things, that he was the "Deadliest Man Alive!" For five dollars, readers would receive an instruction manual entitled *World's Deadliest Fighting Secrets* along with a membership card for the Black Dragon Fighting Society. Despite Keehan's dubious behaviour

[180] By chance, it happens that my ex-father-in-law (Jerry Fasbender) studied karate in Tokyo while in the US Air Force in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Upon returning to the US, Fasbender was awarded his black belt by Trias via video submission. (I possess a copy of the correspondence). Fasbender competed in the 1963 tournament and was awarded first place in the kata competition (Chicago Tribune; 29 Aug 1963).

and claims, his skills as a bullshit artist of martial arts mythology were unsurpassed. The ads claimed in part:

> Yes, this is the DEADLIEST and most TERRIFYING fighting art known to man–and WITHOUT EQUAL. Its MAIMING, MUTILATING, DISFIGURING, PARALYZING and CRIPPLING techniques are known by only a few people in the world. An expert at DIM MAK could easily kill many Judo, Karate, Kung Fu, Aikido, and Gung Fu experts at one time with only finger-tip pressure using his murderous POISON HAND WEAPONS. Instructing you step by step thru each move in this manual is none other than COUNT DANTE – "THE DEADLIEST MAN WHO EVER LIVED." (THE CROWN PRINCE OF DEATH).

Known for his flamboyant capes, tights, leopard print kimonos, and for going on walks with his pet lion, Keehan was undoubtedly a figure of toxic masculinity. In 1970, Keehan led several members of his dojo on a raid of the rival Green Dragon Society in Chicago. The rumble ended with the death – by sword, no less – of one of Keehan's fighters (Kelly; 2006). Keehan died of a bleeding ulcer in 1975, at the age of 36. He left behind a power vacuum in the highly commercialized, and still-operational, Black Dragon Fighting Society (BDFS).

While conducting this research, the absurdity of the now-retro advertisements led me to consider joining the BDFS. Alas, it was not to be. Further research revealed that among the ranks of the BDFS are numerous frauds, fake-ninjas, and at least one convicted child sex-offender; none of whom had been expelled from the organization at that time. The highest profile member of the BDFS is Frank Dux, whose thoroughly disputed and discredited "memoirs" served as the basis for the purportedly based-on-a-true-story martial arts action film *Bloodsport* (1988) starring Jean-Claude VanDamme as Dux. It is only all too fitting then, that Donald Trump – another textbook embodiment of toxic masculinity – has openly declared his love of the film *Bloodsport* (Singer; 1997).

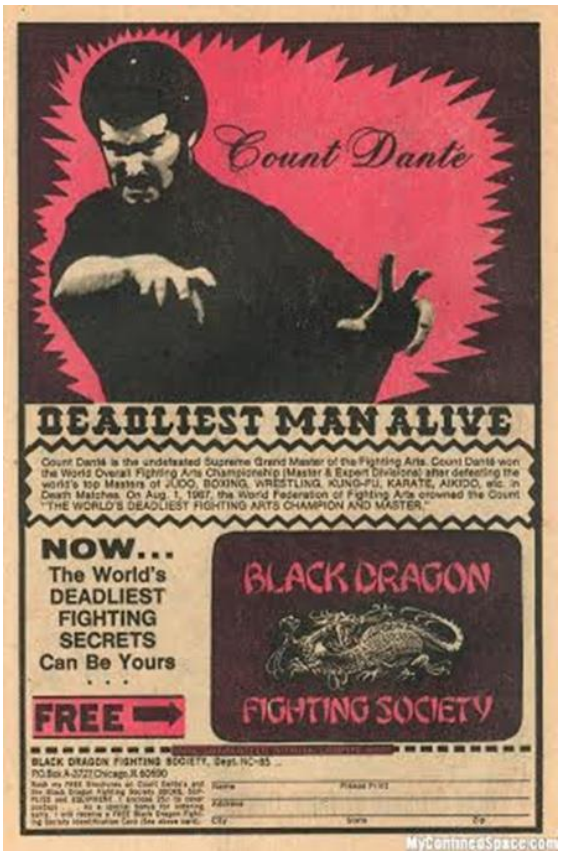
At any rate, by 'doing his damnedest to separate a generation of kids from their paper-route money,' (Kelly; 2006) Count Dante was clearly following in the footsteps of the massively successful comic book advertisements for Charles Atlas' mail order "Dynamic Tension" system, which were a staple of comic books from the 1930s onward. The most iconic of these "comic style" ads – originally entitled "The Insult that Made a Man out of Mac" – tells the familiar story of the "97-pound weakling" at the beach who is humiliated (in front of his "girlfriend" and other female onlookers) by the proverbial sand-kicking bully.

Following this public humiliation, the young man sends away for Charles Atlas' "free book" (which, in reality, was a 47-page advertisement for the mail order course.) In hardly any time at all, Mac – now very muscular – gets his revenge on the "bully at the beach." As he does, his "girlfriend" tells him that he really is 'a he-man, after all,' while the female onlookers proclaim in unison: 'WHAT A MAN.'

At first glance, the Charles Atlas advertisements may appear to be indicative of the societal pressures directed toward men – by women – which help fuel and sustain some toxic aspects of masculinity. Upon deeper reflection, however, it is evident that the women represented within these ads are not *real* women saying *actual* things. Rather, these women have been drawn by men, and words have literally been put into their "mouths" by men, with the intention of reinforcing a toxic message in order to sell a mail order exercise regimen to boys. Certainly, there are benefits to be had – regardless of gender – from isometric workouts; and certainly, gender stereotypes are reinforced and perpetuated across genders. Yet, there is no denying the insidiously toxic nature of these advertisements.

[**Fig. 34:** An ad for the BDFS and *World's Deadliest Fighting Secrets* (Circa 1967)

Fig. 35: One of the many comic-style advertisements for the Charles Atlas Dynamic Tension system (Circa 1953).]





The Gender Neutrality of Badassness

One potentially positive element to arise from the parody of toxic masculinity at the heart of *Cobra Kai* is the gender-neutrality of the term badass. Throughout this series, Johnny Lawrence – always marginalized (i.e., washed-up) yet always arrogant – is obsessed with being a 'badass' and with doing what a badass might do. If it is not badass, don't do it – and vice versa – seems to be the extent of Johnny's logic. Rather than "be a man," Johnny's mantra seems closer to "be a badass." Unrefined as the term may be, there is nevertheless something refreshingly progressive in the use of this gender-neutral term as both a noun and adjective. If by "badass," Johnny is referring to some level of "self-actualization" or "personal achievement," then this behaviour may be visualized as being at the top of a pyramid, above "lower" forms of behaviours and activities. Thus, there need not be a binary, or opposite, of "badass." There is only an absence of "badass-ness." The significance of the term 'badassness,' was also flagged – albeit for reasons other than its gender neutrality – in Mario Staller's keynote address at the 2022 Martial Arts Studies conference, 'On the Primacy of Badassness.'

Of course, in *Cobra Kai,* Johnny's progress along these lines is cancelled out by the binary and misogynistic flipside of his logic, which is: 'Don't be a pussy' (S02 E03) or a 'pansy bitch' (S01 E10). In one of the apparently more popular lines of the first season – after a tournament competitor asks for a moment of silence while 'every race, religion, and gender…strive[s] to end intolerance in our time' – Johnny instructs his student to 'kick that pansy bitch in the face' (S01 E10). Indeed, in five seasons (and counting) Johnny's character never abandons the badass/pussy binary. While the term "pussy" has complex origins and etymology which simultaneously invoke scaredy-cats, effeminacy, and the word "pusillanimous," meaning – according to Oxford English Dictionaries, 'showing a lack of courage or determination; timid' – contemporary uses of the term are clearly either politically charged (i.e., Pussy Riot or #PussyGrabsBack) or grounded in toxic intent.

In considering the potential for a gender-neutral "hierarchy of badassness," I was disappointed to find the following hypermasculine (and Nationalistic) definition of 'badass' in the fitness program 'Built Like a Badass,' marketed by Defranco, et al., in 2009. The authors note that an earlier version of the program was marketed in 2004 as 'Westside for Skinny Bastards,' and offer the following definition of "badass:"

> BADASS [bad-ass] adj. - the epitome of the American male. He radiates confidence in everything he does, whether it's lifting weights, ordering a drink, playing a sport, buying a car, or dealing with women. He's slow to anger, yet brutally efficient when fighting back. The badass carves his own path. He wears, drives, drinks, watches, and listens to what he chooses, when he chooses, where he chooses, uninfluenced by fads or advertising campaigns. Badass style is understated but instantly recognizable. Like a chopped Harley or a good pair of sunglasses: simple, direct, and functional.

Clearly, any definition of "badass" which defines the term in nationalistic or gender specific terms (in this case, American males) is ignorant, harmful, and wrong (i.e., toxic). In contrast, the term "badass," used as a semiotic shorthand for "excellence," has the potential to be useful. Indeed, badass is one of the few popular (English-language) gender-neutral terms commonly found within martial arts discourse and practices. As Johnny Lawarence (ineloquently) puts it: 'It doesn't matter if you're a loser, or a nerd, or a freak. All that matters is that you become badass!' (S01 E06). With the above in mind, badassness functioned as a starting point for the inclusive and gender neutral 'self-defense for the zombie apocalypse' instruction videos created for 'The Art of the Apocalypse: From A.I. to Zombie' webseries.

> [**Fig. 36**: A spoof political ad for Johnny plays on the 'Make America Great Again' slogan of the Trump campaign. **Fig. 37**: An original Apocalypse variation on the 'Hierarchy of Needs Pyramid Parodies' Internet meme template in which I depict badass-ness as a hierarchy, or spectrum, rather than a binary.]





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Comic Book Artwork (Chronological)

Fig. 2 *Detective Comics* #36 (1940) 'Batman Meets Professor Hugo Strange.' Written by Bill Finger. Illustrated by Bob Kane and Jerry Robinson. Feb. DC Comics.

Fig. 3 *Detective Comics* #38 (1940) 'Batman and "Robin the Boy Wonder."' Written by Bill Finger. Illustrated by Bob Kane and Jerry Robinson. Apr. DC Comics.

Fig. 4 *Daring Mystery Comics* #8 (1942) 'Silver Scorpion: Mahomad, the Sinister Spiritualist.' Writer uncredited. Illustrated by Harry Sahle. Ed. Joe Simon. Jan. Timely Comics.

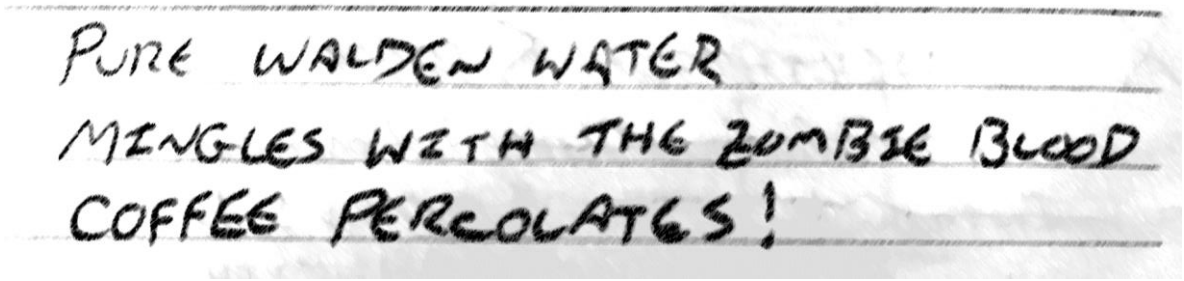
Fig. 5 *Flash Comics* #86 (1947) 'Johnny Thunder: The Black Canary.' Written by Robert Kanigher. Illustrated by Carmine Infantino and Joe Giella. Aug. DC Comics.

Fig. 17 *Batman* #235 (1971) 'Swamp Sinister.' Written by Dennis O'Neil. Illustrated by Irv Novac and Dick Giordano. Sep. DC Comics.

Fig. 18 *Adventure Comics* #418 (1972) 'Black Canary: Circle of Doom.' Written by Dennis O'Neil. Illustrated by Alex Toth. Apr. Reprinted in *Adventure Comics* #491 and #492 (1982) as 'The Canary and the Cat.' DC Comics.

THE UN-FILMED SCRIPT: ‘Walden; Or, Zombies in the Woods’

THE UN-FILMED SCRIPT: 'Walden; Or, Zombies in the Woods'



In her book, *The Writing Life,* Annie Dillard discusses the tension between being productive and being *present*. She reminds us that 'how we spend our days, of course, is how we spend our lives. What we do with this hour, and that one, is what we are doing' (1989: 32).

While those blackberry cobblers cook, can I share something with you?

More than 150 years ago, the American Transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau spent two years and two days in a cabin in the woods, which he built himself, on the edge of a lake called Walden Pond.

He wrote about his experience there in a book called *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*. It's a good book. But it's not as good as this updated version that I'm working on called *Walden; or, Zombies in the Woods*.

Would you like to hear part of it? [CAPS represent text changes from Thoreau's original text.]

> The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation and COME FROM the grave with the song still in them. The pure Walden water is mingled with the sacred BLOOD OF ZOMBIES. If we are really dying, let us hear the rattle in our throats and feel cold in the extremities; if we are alive, let us go about our business KILLING ZOMBIES.

Wasn't that beautiful? I'd like to read one very special part for you. It's my favourite part, from a chapter called: 'Train to Fitchburg.'

> One says to me, "I wonder that you do not lay up money; you NEED to travel; you might take the cars and go to Fitchburg today and ESCAPE THE ZOMBIES IN THE WOODS." But I am wiser than that. I have learned that the swiftest traveller is he that goes afoot. I say to my friend: Suppose we try who will get there first. The distance is thirty miles; the fare ninety cents. That is almost a day's wages…
>
> Well, I start now on foot, and get there before night; ALONG THE WAY, I BATHE IN A POND, LISTEN TO BIRDS SING, COLLECT JARS FULL OF BLACKBERRIES, FIND A STURDY WALKING STICK… AND DISPATCH THREE ZOMBIES WITH IT, … You will in the meanwhile have earned your fare, BOARDED THE TRAIN TO FITCHBURG – ALONG WITH HUNDREDS OF OTHER DESPERATE SOULS – and arrive there some time tomorrow, or possibly this evening, if you are lucky enough to get a job in season AND CATCH THE EVENING TRAIN…
>
> FROM THE HILLS SURROUNDING FITCHBURG, AGAINST THE BACKDROP OF THE SETTING SUN, I SEE THE TRAIN ARRIVE AND YOU, MY FRIEND, SAUNTER OFF, ALONG

> WITH THE OTHERS; ALL NOW QUITE UNDEAD. IT IS TRUE THAT YOU ARRIVED SEVERAL MOMENTS BEFORE ME, AND SO THE VICTORY IS YOURS. BUT PERMIT ME ONE OBSERVATION: SINCE YOU DID NOT LIVE WHILE YOU WERE LIVING, IS IT NOT FITTING THAT EVEN IN DEATH YOU ARE NOT DEAD?

Don't you just love that?

You see, for Henry David Thoreau, being successful didn't mean having tons of money or lots of stuff, but being able to approach each new day with freedom and joy.

Yes, long before Tyler Durden pointed out in *Fight Club* (1999) that 'we spend our whole lives working jobs we hate, so we can buy a bunch of sh!t that we don't need,' Henry David Thoreau was pointing out that the most enriching things in life are not for sale.

The art of living involves making a choice to notice, pay attention to, and appreciate those little things.

Before I say goodbye I'd like to read one more special line from *Walden; or, Zombies in the Woods:*

'Simplify. Simplify. Be it life or death, we crave only reality… AND ZOMBIES.'

And that's all for today, Apocalypse Scouts. To earn your Enjoying the Little Things virtual merit badge, enjoy some little things and tell me all about in the comments below.

You can write a Haiku about it maybe…

Now Like/Subscribe and repeat the Apocalypse Scouts oath.

Hope for the best. Prepare for the Apocalypse.

Happy trails, til' next time. And remember.

- The Apocalypse is where the heart is.