

Interview with Wu Ming I: QAnon, Collective Creativity, and the (Ab)uses of Enchantment

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Abstract

In this interview with Wu Ming I, a member of the mysterious but well-known and widely-translated novel-writing Wu Ming Collective, we discuss his new book, *La Q di Qomplotto (The Q in Qonspiracy: How Conspiracy Fantasies Defend the System)*. In the interview, Wu Ming I unravels the power of narrative and games in driving conspiracy fantasies and fuelling new forms of activism that have risen to confront a system that gives rise to them.

Keywords

alternate reality games, capitalism, conspiracy theories, counter-games, critical theory, mythological narratives, QAnon

Introduction

If the Italian novel-writing collective Wu Ming, and its predecessor Luther Blissett Project (LBP), had not existed, it would have been necessary for the radical left to invent them. The two distinct but connected projects of cultural activism have proven, since the 1990s, a vivification and living laboratory for the forms of radical play theorized by the

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more radical thinkers of the late 20th century. As Nicholas Thoburn (2011) argues, the LBP and Wu Ming represent a high-water mark in rigorous experimentation in collective creativity and the problematization of Western literary and political traditions rooted in bourgeois notions of the individual author. The texts that emerged from these projects were and continue to be deeply entangled with the imagination of the radical left – even if they are appreciated by a more general public and often discussed by critics of all political and cultural convictions – not only in Italy, where the projects originated, but around the world.

Luther Blissett emerged in 1994 as a kind of open-source *nom-de-guerre* for dozens if not hundreds of cultural activists, mostly in Europe but also in North and Latin America (Baird and Wu Ming, 2006). The shared persona, in whose name scores of tactical media interventions were staged and several manifestos were published, took its alias from an ill-fated Jamaican football player recruited to A.C. Milan in 1984, perhaps by mistake. His single disappointing season with the team, as well as his withdrawn demeanour and his seeming refusal to work, inspired a new generation of authors, actors, artists and cultural troublemakers who were interested in the refusal of work. This was a generation that had emerged alongside and in the aftermath of Italy's *Autonomia* movement (famous in the Anglophone world via the work of associated theorists including Antonio Negri, Paolo Virno, Maurizio Lazzarato, and Franco 'Bifo' Berardi) and the draconian state crackdown on this and other radical movements, known as the Years of Lead.

The LBP was to become a key player in 1990s debates about the possibility of culture jamming, hoaxing, pranks, tactical media and neo-situationism in a decade defined by the fall of the Soviet power block and the triumphalism of globalizing, hypermediated capitalism. While it involved a global cast of provocateurs, the core of the LBP gravitated around the notoriously 'red' and intellectual Italian city of Bologna. As the following interview describes, this core was pivotal to a notorious series of interventions in the late 1990s that took aim at the reactionary 'Satanic panic' around the fabled ritualized sexual abuse of children – a conspiracy theory peddled by the right-wing press and religious zealots in Italy and around the world, largely to legitimate the harassment, stigmatization and criminalization of queer and countercultural tendencies. In response, activists operating under the LBP orchestrated a massive real-world theatrical production that hyperbolized their enemy's Manichean worldview, complete with staged public battles between a satanic cult and righteous Catholic crusaders that made front-page news. As one of the insurgent dramaturges makes clear in the following interview, the magic of the stunt was not only in its creative daring but in the 'reveal': the moment the actors call a press conference to explain to the rapt audience how they pulled off the trick. This was only one of several successful public hoaxes staged by the LBP, which had a profound if difficult to measure impact on political and literary culture in Italy and beyond.

In 1999 the originators of the LBP initiated a process of collective 'Seppuku' (the Japanese ritual suicide of the samurai) that culminated in the publication of what was to become a globally-successful novel, *Q*, and the transmutation of several key LBP protagonists into a new, smaller collective that named itself Wu Ming, a Chinese word meaning 'anonymous' or 'without name'. Wu Ming often refers to itself less as a pseudonymous project and more like a rock band, where multiple voices come together under a common name, their novels appearing like concept albums. *Q*, which was widely translated, became

a key reference point for the emergent alter-globalization movement, even though it was historical fiction. Set during the Protestant Reformation and gory German Peasant War, it is the story of the narrator, a radical anabaptist heretic, who moves from community to community, organizing common people to revolt against the earthly power of the church and the princes and to install a form of anarcho-communist life in common. Our revolutionary protagonist is pursued across central Europe by a ruthless Vatican agent, codenamed Q, whose letters to his patron, the future pope, appear as a foil to the narrator's accounts.

As Wu Ming 1 (one of the original protagonists of both LBP and the later Wu Ming collective) makes clear in this interview, *Q* was an attempt to grapple with the prospects of politics in an age when the digital technologies that powered a neoliberal globalization were paradoxically enabling new forms of activism. As with the advent of the printing press that was so pivotal to the Reformation, movements of the late 1990s and early 2000s seized upon a new technology to express new forms of rebellion and articulate new subjectivities in struggle. The rallying cry of *Q*'s doomed radical anabaptists, *Omnia Sunt Communa* (everything for everyone), seemed to resonate across the ages as, nearly five centuries later, multitudinous protesters, coming together from multiple different tendencies, organizations, and backgrounds, assembled to confront the forces of corporate power at summits in Seattle in November of 1999, in Quebec City in April of 2001 and, with tragic results, in Genoa in July of that year. There, Italian federal police, the Carabinieri, murdered a young working-class protester.

Fast forward some two decades later. Wu Ming has published more than a dozen collectively-authored books in Italian, with many translated into other languages. These include *54*, published in 2002, about post-war Italy; the award-winning and bestselling 2007 *Manituana*, which follows the story of the Mohawk people caught between sides in the American Revolution; *Altai* (2009), a spin-off of *Q* set in the Ottoman Empire; 2014's *The Army of Sleepwalkers*, which explores the social and political chaos following the French Revolution; and, most recently, the 2018 *Proletkult*, which revisits the Soviet Revolution through the story of one of its most famous science fiction novelists, Alexander Bogdanov, who is visited by aliens from the planet he himself invented.

In the summer of 2017, as *Proletkult* was nearing publication, someone codenamed Q, claiming to be an insider within the beleaguered Trump administration, started leaking mysterious, riddle-like posts to the /pol ('politically incorrect') channel of the notorious platform 4-chan, a digital lair made infamous for its role in facilitating the rise of the hacker movement Anonymous and, later, for fostering the #GamerGate swarming, where feminist video game critics were targeted for vicious harassment. With what appeared to be unmistakable echoes of the novel *Q* and the LBP's Satanic Panic hoax, Q confided in their growing cadre of followers that they was leaking cryptic clues about Trump's secret war against a dark cabal of Satan-worshipping murderers and paedophiles. In his cryptic posts, the new Q recycled and remixed a wide variety of conspiracy theories, from the anti-Semitic blood libels to Kennedy assassination rumours to the more recent Pizzagate narratives, which held that blue-chip American celebrities, members of the Democratic Party elite and billionaires like Bill Gates and George Soros were secretly abducting children for dark purposes. The new Q's regular stream of riddles soon attracted hundreds of thousands of followers, thanks in no small part to the mushroom-like growth of enthusiastic online communities and newly minted YouTube celebrities who worked together on a kind of gonzo

collective hermeneutic interpretation of each ‘Qdrop’, each cryptic ‘breadcrumb’ offered by this enigmatic pied piper of the digital age.

On 8 August 2018, two months after QAnon had made frontpage news when an armed follower had blockaded the highway crossing the Hoover Dam to demand the fictitious children be freed, *Buzzfeed* and *Artnet News* released widely-circulated articles speculating that the conspiracy fantasy might have a direct connection with the novel *Q* and the past activities of the LBP. This generated a rumour that the fantasy was cooked up by former members of the LBP or even Wu Ming themselves (Broderick, 2018; Davis, 2018; Merelli, 2018). The group refuted that rumour and tried to understand and explain what really happened. As Wu Ming 1 notes in this interview, it is highly probable that the initiator of the QAnon phenomenon *did* read and was inspired by *Q*, as well as many other critical and radical texts that have, over the past decades, explored the playful, creative and mythoreal aspects of conspiracy. That said, it is also highly probable that this originator was soon displaced by more dedicated and resourceful far-right operatives keen to use *Q* as a kind of participatory game to recruit and mobilize zealous followers, all the while making profits thanks to monetization of QAnon-related products.

The climax of that all too real story came on 6 January 2021 in Washington DC, a few months before the interview, whose transcript appears below, was recorded. At that event, thousands of far-right protesters, including many QAnon followers, stormed the US Capitol building following a ‘stop the steal’ rally called by Trump to protest his loss to Democrat Joe Biden in the elections of November of the previous year, an election he claimed was rigged. The entire saga, as well as a highly original and engaged dissection of the QAnon phenomena and a theorization of the role of conspiracism in capitalism, is the subject of the 2021 book *La Q di Qomplotto: QAnon e Dintorni (The Q in Qonspiracy: QAnon and Its Contexts)* by Wu Ming 1.

The following interview was recorded in May 2021 by Max Haiven, A.T. Kingsmith, and Aris Komporozos-Athanasίου. The edited audio appeared as part of the Conspiracy Games and Countergames podcast (<http://conspiracy.games>). It has been edited here for brevity and clarity and to update some of the relevant information in light of current events.

Q Who?

Haiven et al.: How did Wu Ming become associated with QAnon and what drew you to dive into this subject? Perhaps we can begin with the participatory game-like features of the Luther Blissett Project (LBP) and how that led into our current state of affairs.

Wu Ming 1: In late spring of 2018 the Wu Ming collective received an email message from an old friend, Florian Cramer (now a professor at the Wilhelm De Kooning Academy in Rotterdam), informing us that, apparently, someone had taken the Wu Ming playbook and turned it into a conspiracy theory for the alt right. Shortly afterwards, other people wrote to us, too, because the story of QAnon sounded eerily familiar to them: it’s basically the outline of the plot of the novel *Q*, which I co-authored with three other people under the signature of Luther Blissett (we later became Wu Ming), which was published in Italy, in March 1999. It was an international bestseller and translated into many languages, though its American publication in 2004 didn’t do so well and received mixed reviews.

That novel takes place between 1517 and 1555: the former is the year in which Martin Luther presented his Ninety-Five Theses in Wittenberg and started the Reformation; the latter is the year of the Peace Treaty of Augsburg, which put an end to 30 years of religious wars in Europe. The novel is about a kind of long-distance duel, an indirect confrontation between two characters: on the one hand, a subversive heretic who operates under many names, and, on the other, a Catholic *agent-provocateur* who infiltrates the radical movements of the time, spreading disinformation among the radicals, heretics, anabaptists, peasants and servants. This agent sends dispatches to his superiors in the Vatican signed with the biblical name Qoèlet, shorthand ‘Q’.

Our fictional Q poses as someone who’s very close to power and has access to valuable information, which he’s secretly sharing with the radicals. He starts a correspondence with Thomas Müntzer, a radical preacher who was the spiritual and political leader of the peasant uprising that broke out in some regions of Germany in 1524. By sending Müntzer letters with false information, he convinces the peasant rebels to gather near the Thuringian town of Frankenhausen to fight the ultimate battle to liberate the land from the princes, bishops and corrupt authorities. Instead, the radical peasants fall into a deadly trap; there is carnage and the uprising is crushed and defeated. Of course, other uprisings will follow, and our main character, the heretic, will take part in them. And the agent codenamed Q will be there as well, trying to sabotage the rebellions on the orders of his superior, Cardinal Carafa.

Now this is basically *exactly* the premise of QAnon’s narrative: An anonymous figure, sending dispatches signed ‘Q’, posing as a guy who has access to very valuable confidential information from the very top level of state power. But, in fact, he spreads disinformation. As in our collectively written novel, he tricks his targets into taking the field for an ultimate battle: 6 January 2021 on Capitol Hill.

It was so uncanny for us, so eerie to see this incredible phenomenon. It’s kind of like someone started a role-playing game based on our novel back in Autumn of 2017. We in Wu Ming believe that the first person who penned the ‘Q drops’ on 4chan in October – November 2017 took inspiration from some elements of our novel. Here I’m talking about the very beginning of the Q phenomenon, before it was hijacked by Ron Watkins and appropriated by far-right hustlers and entrepreneurs, before it grew out of proportion. This initiator’s purpose may have been simply to play a prank, which was far from unusual on 4chan, where so-called ‘shitposting’ was always encouraged. Unfortunately, we may never know for sure who this guy was.

Bewitching Media Environments

There’s also another connection between our activities as the LBP and QAnon that is even more intriguing. The LBP was about playing media pranks and organizing very complex hoaxes. In 1996–7 we used prank-playing in order to do a big counter-investigation and start a solidarity campaign on the subject of satanic ritual abuse (SRA). The context was that three innocent people belonging to a cultural association interested in heavy metal and occultism, called the *Bambini di Satana* (Children of Satan), were framed and imprisoned for a year and a half, facing horrible accusations before they were acquitted at trial. The media turned them into monsters. In response, the LBP started this campaign to show that SRA was nothing more than an urban legend and that

the accusations were based upon a conspiracy fantasy. We in the LBP did a lot of investigative work on SRA and other, related hate legends and reactionary conspiracy fantasies. Our research contributed to the acquittal.

There's a common misconception about Luther Blissett's media hoaxes which frames us as fabricating 'fake news'. That's fairly trivial and oversimplifying. It was much more than that. The LBP was, in a sense, about creating a big alternative reality game. It was about creating very complex, participatory stories and dealt with the cultural obsessions of the time and shaping the news in those days. We created very complex, even cumbersome life-sized practical jokes to create a kind of chain reaction of falsehoods. We called these *ambient*, or informational environments, in order to inhabit them and live in them for long periods. Fake news happens in a flash. Its life cycle is very, very, *very* quick. In contrast, the LBP was about being *slow*. We kept inhabiting those media hoaxes for a long time – exploring, turning them into media environments and exploiting their repercussions within the wider media system. At the conclusion of these 'chain reactions' of practical jokes came the punch line: disclosure and explanation, 'the big reveal'.

For example, we as the LBP concocted and staged evidence of a satanic cult, and we also invented their enemies: a group of right-wing, Christian vigilantes called 'The Committee for the Safeguarding of Morals' (Co.Sa.Mo.). We fabricated evidence of their confrontations, wrote press releases from these vigilantes claiming to have interrupted satanic rituals at night in the woods and to have prevented the ritual violence . . . stuff like that. The media took it for real for over a year – it even reached primetime, mainstream media newscasts. But this didn't happen in a flash of 'fake news' – it was a chain reaction of hoaxes. In the end, we claimed responsibility for all of it and, in doing so, we explained all the bugs in the corporate information system that we had exploited in order to pass those falsehoods on.

All this was part of the LBP's solidarity campaign, to demonstrate that the 'satanic panic' was all based on paranoia, on cultural obsessions with evil and hate legends, on ancient conspiracy fantasies resurfacing, and on a culture of scapegoating marginal subjectivities in society. This fantasy was all part of a hate campaign against all kinds of lifestyles and subcultures that weren't accepted by the mainstream. The '90s were in some ways a much simpler decade because there was a much clearer separation between the mainstream and subcultures. Today it's much more complicated.

The Uses of Hoaxes

Our hoaxes of this kind had several purposes. The first was a counter-information purpose, to change the way public opinion addressed a given issue or problem. We as the LBP aimed to raise doubts and questions about the way the media was talking about an issue, for example about SRA.

Second, there was also a pedagogical purpose and educational purpose. The key for us was, in the end, reverse-engineering of our hoaxes publicly, exposing our tactics, explaining how we played on cultural dogma and the distortions of the information system in order to pull off the prank. In fact, *the explanation of the prank was more important than the prank itself*.

The third purpose was *mythopoetic*: Each action raised the reputation of Luther Blissett as a folk hero. The LBP saw hundreds of people in Italy, Europe and elsewhere using the same open pseudonym, the same collective nickname, in order to build, piece by piece, the reputation of an imaginary character called Luther Blissett. He was a kind of social bandit, a Robin Hood of the information age. So you had all kinds of actions and writings and artwork, signed by hundreds of people. Every action, every hoax, every exposure, increased Luther Blissett's reputation, making the adoption of the collective identity even more interesting, more appealing, and more charged with affectivity. Using the name made you feel part of an open community. You shared a certain style, a certain imagery, *you were part of the myth*. That's what we meant by mythopoeisis: creating shared narratives that stimulated collective imagination, cooperation, and collaboration.

And last but not least, there was a *playful* purpose. It was about having fun, playing a game, because Luther Blissett's reputation was composed of countless pieces that we've scattered in various media. This reputation was constantly evolving thanks to new stories that flowed into one another. It was a game of consistently creating and telling such stories. We worked on those stories collectively, and we kind of rehearsed them. This included improvisation, role playing, research, etc. Luther Blissett was a character that we played all together in the infosphere, but also with our own bodies, doing embodied performances, street actions, psychogeographical drifts, that kind of stuff. In short, the LBP had several characteristics of live role-playing games, labs and alternate and augmented reality games, many of the attitudes that we witness today, in contemporary subcultures.

Conspiracy Hypothesis versus Conspiracy Fantasy

Haiven et al.: In *The Q and Qonspiracy: How Conspiracy Fantasies Defend the System*, right in the title you announce that you're going to move us away from the familiar terminology of the 'conspiracy theory' and towards the notion of 'conspiracy fantasy'. Already you've described the importance of storytelling and enchantment, but unpack this distinction for us. Why 'conspiracy fantasy'?

Wu Ming 1: In my book, which is about 600 pages long and took me almost three years to write, I do a sort of inventory of concepts in order to understand which are suitable to describe what we've been witnessing in these past few years. I think that 'conspiracy theory' is an inadequate concept for many reasons.

First of all, the English term is something of a false friend when it translates into other languages. In English, the term 'theory' has a slight (or even not-so-slight) negative and derogatory connotation, but this is absent from the use of the term in other languages and cultures. When you literally translate the phrase it becomes unusable or equivocal in Italian, German, or French, where the word 'theory' has no negative connotation at all. In fact, a 'theory' is something very important in these cultural traditions, permeated as they are by philosophical idealism: a theory is much more substantial than an opinion or a conjecture, it's a structured thought, a very carefully pondered and complex position. To have a 'conspiracy theory' is to have a serious theory about conspiracies.

Here's the other problem: to be fair, there's nothing wrong about having a theory about conspiracies, because conspiracies really take place all the time in politics, in the

intelligence service, in other state agencies, in organized crime, in the corporate world, even in the academic milieu. In order to have a conspiracy, you simply need two people to agree in secret to cause damage to someone or something else. That's a conspiracy, it's very simple. In Italian, the term *teoria del complotto*, the literal translation of conspiracy theory, is not automatically negative, derogatory, or dismissive, probably because we have had so many political conspiracies in the history of Italy, even in living memory and today. So there's nothing wrong in having a theory, which is more than an opinion or conjecture, about a conspiracy taking place.

The problem with *conspiracism* is that it imagines all kinds of universal all-encompassing, ultra-consistent, ultra-coherent conspiracies that are somehow perfectly planned, involving millions of accomplices, then flawlessly put into practice, somehow covering all aspects of reality. Of course, these kinds of perfect conspiracies never take place, they can't exist. But there are, nonetheless, all the time, small conspiracies, even small conspiracies that become quite large, but not *universal* conspiracies.

We need a couple of new concepts to separate real conspiracies from fantasized conspiracies. For example, if, in 1971 in Washington DC, someone had come up with a theory about a conspiracy involving Richard Nixon and his top aides spying on their political competitors and political enemies, this guy would have been dismissed as a conspiracy theorist. But the conspiracy was actually taking place, as we learned in the Watergate scandal. There are plenty of examples. There was also a conspiracy, for instance, in 2001–3, in order to convince the world that Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq had weapons of mass destruction.

In order to identify critical discourse on plausible conspiracies I introduce the term *ipotesi di complotto*, or conspiracy hypotheses. I do so in order to distinguish this theorizing from the wild discourse of universal conspiracies, which I call *fantasia di complotto*, or conspiracy fantasies. QAnon, for example, is not a theory, it is a fantasy. With that terminology in place I then, in my book, try to classify the key characteristics that make it possible to distinguish between the real conspiracies to which conspiracy hypotheses refer and conspiracy fantasies.

First, real conspiracies have a precise focus and an easily summarized purpose. Second, they involve a limited number of actors. It may be a big number, but it's a number, a definite group of people; they don't involve everyone and their brother. Third, such conspiracies are usually implemented in an imperfect way, because reality isn't perfect. There is always going to be a mistake or an error. In fact, you get to know about them because someone makes a mistake, or one of them is a snitch. Fourth, real conspiracies end once they are discovered and reported, and this typically happens after a fairly short period, although the consequences of the conspiracy may persist for a long time. But they usually don't have a long duration, at most a few years. By the way, it is never a conspiracist, that is a person obsessed with conspiracy fantasies (or who exploits conspiracy fantasies, like Alex Jones), who discovers and shuts down real conspiracies. Real conspiracies are usually discovered by journalists or researchers or even by the authorities. Fifth, real conspiracies cannot be separated from the era or context in which they take place: They belong to a historical moment and then become history along with that moment. These are characteristics of real conspiracies, and if, for example, you apply them to Watergate, it fits perfectly.

Conspiracy fantasies are exactly the opposite: they turn every characteristic of real conspiracies upside down. First, fantasy conspiracies have a blurred and dispersed focus because they have the broadest purpose imaginable: to dominate, conquer or destroy the whole world. Every fantasized conspiracy is a universal conspiracy where the whole planet is at stake. Second, they involve a potentially unlimited number of actors. The cast of evildoers grows and grows with every account. And anyone who denies the existence of the conspiracy can be framed as a member of the conspiracy. According to any reasonable logic, the more people who are aware of a conspiracy, the more unstable and at risk of failure that conspiracy will be. Only in the warped, distorted, upside-down conspiracy fantasist's mindset is a conspiracy somehow *more* solid and *more* successful when more people are part of it. Third, in the mind of the fantasist, conspiracies are always perfect. They're put into practice in a perfect, impeccable way. Everything is carried out according to plan, down to the smallest detail. Everything runs smoothly. Whatever happens is part of the plan. If something seems to go wrong, it's because the conspirators wanted it to *appear* to go wrong. Everything is perfect, which is, of course, impossible. Fourth, these kinds of fantasized conspiracies continue endlessly, they go on and on indefinitely, even if they're continually exposed and denounced and attacked in countless books, articles, documentaries, websites and Facebook pages. For example, the fantasized Judeo-Masonic conspiracy has allegedly been going on for centuries, and the Templar conspiracy has been going on for 2000 years. These conspiracies never become the past, they never become history, they're always described as ongoing, as part of the present. They are ahistorical, they transcend every age, every phase of history, every historical context. When you hear about Watergate, for example, a specific era comes to mind: the 1970s. When you hear Jewish conspiracy, it invokes an eternal conspiracy that's been going on for ages and has no end in sight. So the five main characteristics of fantasy conspiracies are exactly the opposite of the characteristics of real conspiracies.

The Kernel of Truth, the Diversionary Narrative and System Homeostasis

Haiven et al.: How do conspiracy fantasies 'defend the system', as the subtitle of your book claims?

Wu Ming 1: In order to answer this question I need to summarize a few other concepts that I define and develop in my book, which are the kernel of truth, diversionary narrative, and system homeostasis.

In the book I devote several chapters to explaining that every conspiracy fantasy, even the wildest, craziest ones, always starts from a kernel of truth. At the bottom, there's always a truth that's expressed in a confused way, based on real discontent about the workings of capitalism or 'the system'. For example, I dedicate several chapters to the pandemic emergency in Italy and in Europe. Mine is a radical critique of the way the emergency was managed and sold. I dissect its dynamics and show how this way of managing the pandemic emergency was destined to fuel conspiracy fantasies, which are always a translation of a real discontent about a real problem. The reality of the

discontent must be recognized when it comes to dealing with conspiracism. We must start from the kernel of truth that lies at its heart.

Of course it's absurd to say that Bill Gates wants to vaccinate us all in order to control us with an injected nanochip. But at the bottom of this conspiracy fantasy there is a truth that is being expressed in a distorted way, or at least there's a discontent about real problems that is being hijacked and distorted. Unfortunately, a potential energy for real change is channelled towards false narratives based on scapegoating and so on. I mean, do we really think that the neoliberal models of philanthropism, health care management, and agri-business promoted by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation are actually good? Their model centres on the market, on the dominance of a few multinational corporations, on patents and intellectual property regimes. The ultrarich won't be the ones who save us. So there is a real preoccupation, a real anxiety, a real discontent with this situation, but it's thought and expressed in a very confusing and confused way. But there's always a kernel of truth in conspiracy fantasies, a social foundation, and we shouldn't dismiss it. We should, rather, try to intercept that discontent in order to prevent it from being hijacked, distorted, channelled, and funnelled away.

This brings us to the concept of *narrazione diversiva* (diversionary narrative), which I define as the tendency to focus obsessively on fictitious or minor aspects of a social or political problem, or on false or unimportant causes, attributing massive responsibility and importance to them. By focusing on bogus explanations, fictitious possibilities, and false causes, a diversionary narrative develops a line of criticism of the real workings and contradictions of capitalism, but proposes false solutions, which are often centred on scapegoating. Conspiracy fantasies are the most frequent and effective diversionary narratives, but they're not the only ones. For example, the 1990s discourse on 'zero tolerance' (regarding crime, urban disorderly conduct, etc.) was a diversionary narrative, but it wasn't a conspiracy fantasy. When Rudi Giuliani was the mayor of New York City, his 'broken windows' policy with its zero tolerance obsession with petty crime was a diversionary narrative that actively prevented people from understanding that the real cause of citizens' discontent was in the neoliberal policies that were being implemented, including the eroding of welfare and budget cuts to public spending on social programs. It was a diversionary narrative, but it wasn't a conspiracy fantasy. I would say that conspiracy fantasies are a subset of diversionary narratives.

The purpose of diversionary narratives is to foster an *omeostasi del sistema* (system homeostasis). This is the set of processes, procedures, and dynamics by which capitalism stabilizes itself in order to survive. *Homeo* is the Greek word for 'similar', and *stasis* means 'to stay', so homeostasis simply means to stay similar. It's the tendency of capitalism to preserve its basic characteristics and its underlying logic, in spite of external and internal conflict, turbulence, and contradictions. Every social system tends to stay similar to itself, but capitalism is the first social system to have imposed itself as a totality on a global scale. Capitalism is everywhere on the planet, so its homeostasis operates everywhere, at the same time, at all times. Every option that threatens the basic characteristics of this system is discarded immediately by the ruling ideology. And sometimes such an option cannot even be imagined.

In order to be more concrete, a historical example: Fascism in all its historical incarnations is the organized movement of diversionary narratives. Fascism is a device that endlessly manufactures false interpretations of real problems and false solutions to those

problems all the time. Fascism is a kind of mythological machine that produces diversionary narratives describing fictitious enemies, like migrants or Jews. It always points the finger at the scapegoats and so intercepts discontent, especially low and middle class discontent, anger, or rebellion. It channels those energies into false conflicts, even into the myth of false revolutions, because fascism always describes itself as a revolution. Here in Italy we have '*la Rivoluzione fascista*', a concept that was hammered into the minds of the Italian population in the 1930s. By these means, those energies that might potentially provide energy for change and for progress are squandered and dissipated. That's an example of how diversionary narratives work in order to defend the system. Conspiracy fantasies work this way too.

Against Rational Supremacism

Haiven et al.: In your book you argue that the urge to debunk conspiracy fantasies, to burst the bubble so to speak, doesn't really work in the way that many liberal thinkers imagine. Why?

Wu Ming 1: Very rarely do debunkers acknowledge the kernels of truth that lie in the core of conspiracy fantasies; they simply see conspiracy fantasies as falsehoods and imagine that demonstrating or proving that those narratives are false will be enough to defeat them. I call this kind of attitude 'ratiosuprematism' – the belief in the supremacy of rationality at all times, no matter the issue and context. If you're rational enough, you will always win. Of course it doesn't work like that. It never works like that.

In the book, I talk about the 'balloon piercing syndrome', the tendency to pierce balloons, like a pin-wielding party-spoiler at a children's birthday party, laughing out loud. That's the would-be debunker. He (and I say 'he' because most self-styled debunkers are men) thinks he's fighting the sacred battle for the truth with a sword in his hand, but it's a pin. It's a Don Quixote thing – the debunker sees barbarians, the enemies of reason, but in fact he is piercing balloons, making himself a very loathsome figure, spoiling the party and achieving nothing. He ends up being framed as a pillar of the system, and sometimes it's true, he is actually a defender of the neoliberal consensus. That's not the way to tackle conspiracy fantasy.

At its root, an anti-capitalist way of tackling conspiracy fantasy must start from the kernel of truth, from the matters of fact, but in ways that that give real answers to real needs. We have to satisfy those needs in alternative ways. We have to intercept that discontent before it's hijacked by conspiracy fantasies, as the QAnon fantasy did so well. Of course fact checking is necessary to demonstrate, in a rational way, that a conspiracy fantasy is a fantasy. But that's not enough, and its effectiveness depends on how it's done. Doing it simply for the sake of doing it is useless because ratiosuprematism is a dead end, it's a toxic narrative.

The Second Level Wow and the Dynamic Sublime and Critical Enchantment

If this urge to debunk is not going to work, what will? Here, I think we share with you a real interest in the question of enchantment, counter-fantasy, and counter gaming. We're fascinated by the collective fun that people have *through* conspiracism and conspiracy

fantasies, even if that joy operates alongside incredible anxiety and can give expression to profound hatred.

This is where the interviewee responds: Yes, we need narratives that are flexible enough to keep critical reasoning but that also re-enchant the world. In my book, I draw many examples from the world of stage magic, for example from some acts by the American illusionists Penn and Teller, who have a unique act in which they first do a trick and then explain how they did it. But the description adds more to the enchantment instead of spoiling the effect because we see how much work went into creating the illusion. I call it the second level 'wow'. The first level 'wow' is when you see the trick. The second 'wow' comes after the explanation.

At the end of the day it's what we did with our Luther Blissett Project hoaxes. The most magical moment was when we claimed responsibility and explained how we did it, when we showed the reverse-engineering. It was a form of *critical* enchantment, where people said: 'Wow, they did all that and they fooled the media!'

Let me add a few words here about the kinds of fun that people who believe in conspiracy fantasies are having. These fantasies don't just answer the anger and frustration people feel with the world as it is (exploitation, discrimination, disenfranchisement, poverty, etc); they also answer the need for wonder, for magic, for enchantment. They offer new angles from which to look at the world and the means to *feel* differently about reality. It doesn't matter that the world looks horrible from those particular angles. For instance, from the perspective of the QAnon fantasy the world is in the grip of a global elite of satanist paedophiles, murderous child rapists, and blood-sucking freaks. But that doesn't matter, because wonder is not only about beauty, it's also about the uncanny, and it's also about the sublime.

I think that this concept of the 'dynamical sublime', introduced by Immanuel Kant, is very useful, and I use it in the book. According to Kant, it names a pleasure that has an indirect origin, an indirect cause, because it arises from the feeling of (to paraphrase) a momentary arrest of vital energies, followed by a more intense exaltation. For example, Kant talked about the pleasure of looking at a very violent storm but knowing that you're safe. You look at the bolts of lightning, you hear the thunder, you see the pouring rain and the wind destroying the woods, you see a ship rocking from side to side on violent waves. You are horrified, but you're also exalted because you're in a position in which you aren't invested: you can't be hit by the storm, but you can contemplate its immense power.

Now if you replace the omnipotence of nature with the omnipotence of power, you have QAnon's narrative. Think of it: the world may be controlled by powerful villains, but I know it, because I took the 'red pill'. I see a reality that was previously hidden from me. I see, at last, the totality of the picture. It's a horrible picture, but because I'm aware of it I now have some sort of power. I took the pill. I know the truth. At first I felt dismayed because the world is controlled by these horrible forces: you have millions of children kept as slaves in the underground military bases, who are raped, whose blood is sucked in order to have adrenochrome, etc. At first I feel horrified, but now that I know that reality I feel like a new, special person. That is the dynamical sublime.

Conspiracy fantasies, especially the latest generation of conspiracy fantasies like QAnon, function as games because of this. You have a community of 'red-pilled' people experiencing the dynamical sublime, believing that 'the world is horrible, but at least I

know it'. Knowing is empowering in itself, and it gives a paradoxical joy, a paradoxical pleasure. From the bottom of the rabbit hole they see the light: a red-pilled community, a new community, at the end of the tunnel. This is why debunking alone doesn't work: it doesn't address these kinds of feelings in any way. Not only do the would-be debunkers not recognize the kernels of truth in conspiracy fantasies, they completely miss the way that believing in a conspiracy fantasy like QAnon is a form of enchantment.

And so we need to play on the grounds of enchantment with our critical reasoning and tactics in the most collective way possible. We need social movements addressing these kinds of problems. We don't need technicians and task forces of experts, working on *critical enchantment*. It's not a game that can be played by tiny minorities, we need social movements. We need social conflict. We need struggles. We need an anti-capitalist agenda in order to properly do this.

The Field of Struggle and the Role of the Artist

Haiven et al.: How might social movements combine critical analysis and the kind of critical enchantment you are speaking about? And what role can and should artists and authors play relative to these movements?

Wu Ming 1: It's beyond my capacity to envision the kinds of political movements that might synthesize critical approaches with enchantment. We can't predict the way social movements will form and the emergence of new subjectivities. It's always a surprise. What we *can* do is provide a toolbox and sharpen our concepts so the most useful, effective, and suitable ones are ready when social movements rise and need them. We can provide theory, imagery, metaphors, and even plot devices. I don't think that we can predetermine or predict what kind of subjectivity will make use of these tools.

We made some mistakes in the past. We in Wu Ming worked on the campaign to counter the G8 summit in Genoa that met in July of 2001. It was a big event, with people coming from all over the world to protest and fight against neoliberal globalization. We all felt that this would be a turning point. It indeed was, but in a completely different way than we expected because it was the stage for savage police repression; a young protester, Carlo Giuliani, was shot dead by the Italian federal police, the Carabinieri. There was carnage in the streets. It was the beginning of the big defeat of the anti-globalization movement, though that name completely missed the point: it wasn't about nationalist anti-globalization but a global rejection of neoliberal corporate power.

But we made mistakes. We former protagonists of the LBP became a sort of a specialized task force working on the imaginary of the movement, contributing culturally, artistically, and aesthetically to the mobilizations for the big demonstrations in Genoa. We were acting kind of as mythmakers for the movement. But in our enthusiasm we uncritically aroused people's expectations. These were the very same mistakes that the heretics in our novel *Q* made: we encouraged people to a 21st-century 'Frankenhausen', the ultimate 'field day' battle against the forces of evil . . . and of course with that kind of imagination and those kinds of references, you set yourself up for defeat.

Based on this, we came to understand that there cannot be a specialized office or specialized task force of communication guerrillas and information warfare experts. You cannot play with the collective subjectivity of movements as though they were puppets.

What we did was in good faith, but it was an instrumental exploitation of the radical energies and currents, of the flux of the imagination. Afterwards, we talked about it a lot in our collective and decided that we would never make that kind of mistake again. So, now, we prioritize telling the right stories, providing the best concepts, the best interpretation of phenomena. We are dedicated to developing the toolbox for those who will come next, and possibly make use of it.

Social Struggles Today

Haiven et al.: We've spoken about the shape of struggles in the decades around the turn of millennium. What do you make of social struggles today?

Wu Ming 1: In the years immediately before the pandemic struck we had big mass movements everywhere: Black Lives Matter in the US, Fridays For Future or Extinction Rebellion in Europe, popular uprisings from Hong Kong to Chile, the democratic confederalist revolution in Northern Syria. There was a wave of global insurgency and demonstrations that were very creative and working with mythopoesis in intriguing ways. Even the frustrating debate on so-called 'cancel culture' is a way of acknowledging that the recent wave of social movements is dealing with issues of mythology, issues of connective memory, issues of historical contradictions, and the way these historical contradictions have repercussions on our present. Today, there is a high level of consciousness, which previous movements probably had in more confusing ways. For example, in the movements I participated in around the turn of the millennium we didn't deal as much with historical issues, or contestation related to cultural needs, to the segmentation of mythologies, and toxic narratives in our collective associated life. That's promising and very interesting.

The pandemic emergency kind of froze those energies for a while but I am seeing them being rekindled right now. And many movements didn't freeze up at all during the pandemic, for example Black Lives Matter kept taking to the streets, even during lockdown. In some places, like Italy, the pandemic emergency was seemingly deadly for social movements. In other places it wasn't like that. The structure is very complex. It's very diversified. What I'm seeing is that the kind of stuff the LBP used to elaborate, research, work on, and experiment with is exactly the same stuff that today's movements are trying to understand and tackle.

Conspiracy and the Novelistic Imagination

Haiven et al.: What is the role of aesthetics and poetics in these struggles? And do you see games and gamification as an important part of these struggles?

Wu Ming 1: When we talk about gamification, we mean something different than simply playing games: gamification is a corporate process that turns every aspect of collective life, every context, every moment of communication, into a competition with the ratings, records, and stuff like that, with 'likes', little stars, little hearts, etc. That gamification is that kind of stuff you experience on Facebook, as a content generator on YouTube, as an addict of gaming or betting. Gamification is a strategy of capitalism. When we talk about

these kinds of games, we're not talking about the same games that we're talking about when we use the term 'gamification'.

I think that poetics and aesthetics are useful concepts for understanding the strategies and tactics of resistance. The LBP had its specific poetics, because we had our way of doing things in an elegant manner and a poetical sense of what we were trying to achieve. It wasn't all activism, it was art as well. It was even literature because we created stories with proper characters who share complex interactions, and we wanted those stories to be aesthetically and artistically satisfying. That's completely different from the intention and aims that capitalist gamification has online.

I think it's not by chance that we are talking a lot about books. *Q* was a novel. I often mention Umberto Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum* because it provides us with an incredible anticipation of QAnon. The fact that QAnon may have started as a prank . . . that's the plot of *Foucault's Pendulum*, where a big conspiracy fantasy starts as a parody of conspiracy fantasies which people believe is real, and there are terrible consequences. It's not by chance that we are talking a lot about novels, for example, *The Illuminatus!* trilogy, *The Crying of Lot 49* by Thomas Pynchon . . . a lot of novels were mentioned inside and were imported into the discourse of QAnon. For example the mythical substance adrenochrome, which satanists allegedly harvest from abducted children, comes straight from the imagination of Hunter S. Thompson in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*.

In a way, when we speak about conspiracy, we're always speaking about literature, even when it's unrecognizable. Conspiracies belong to the same world as literature. They are distortions and paradoxical interpretations of reality. This helps us explain how they can achieve the dynamically sublime so powerfully and easily. They are so effective because they use tropes that come from literature, mythmaking and poetry. I think that my work is also a celebration of the ever unexpected. I'm always returning to the constantly resurfacing power of literature, of books. Many books, overtly or indirectly, have exerted a tremendous influence on the currents of imagination that flowed into QAnon. At the same time, these books provide us with tools for understanding QAnon. In *La Q di Qomplotto* I review many of these: *The Malleus Maleficarum* (The Hammer of Witches), *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, *The Morning of the Magicians*, *Michelle Remembers*, *The Crying of Lot 49*, *The Illuminatus!* trilogy, *Foucault's Pendulum* and our own *Q*. Some of these are disguised novels, written for evil purposes. For example *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* is a disguised novel, as Eco and other scholars demonstrated so effectively: all the tropes are taken from 19th-century novels, from Alexandre Dumas, for example.

I think novels remain important and retain their power even in the age of the internet, of social media and of gamification of online life because we humans think in narrative frames. Each of our thoughts feeds into a story that our minds keep unravelling. The textual type that comes most naturally to us is a narrative text. For example, a complaint filed to a company, or a police report, these are all texts that tell a story. But the strongest and most effective narrative techniques, the ones that engage our minds in the most effective ways, are those that we have experimented with for centuries: novels. Nowadays, you have TV series that are often scripted in brilliant and complex ways, and some are real masterpieces. But as far as telling stories is concerned, you cannot top the novel. There are almost no narrative techniques that TV series employ that don't originally come from the novel. In the LBP, we used the novel's techniques in order to fabricate

those complex hoaxes that we inhabited for long periods of time. We wrote novels but the difference was that we didn't publish them as books, we staged them. They came to life in the real world. We also use those techniques of the novel for doing investigative reporting and counter-investigation.

In *La Q di Qomplotto*, I celebrate the power of literature in all its ramifications, consequences, and repercussions. Of course it's frightening to think that QAnon has connections to a novel that we wrote back in the late '90s. But in a way, it's also intriguing because it testifies to the fact that novels retain their power and magic.

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