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THE CONSPIRACY IN THE AGE OF THE NEOLIBERAL MACHINE OF COMMUNICATION

Abstract

Among the political phenomena that seem to attest to the crisis of neoliberal governance in the 21st century, conspiracism has assumed such prominence that there is increasing talk of a veritable golden age of conspiracy theories. While correctly noting the link between conspiracy theories and the hollowing out of the «political» triggered by globalization, political studies mostly stick to the assumption that conspiracy theories are a phenomenon of reaction to neoliberal societies. In my article, I seek to overturn this assumption by showing how conspiracism and the «new right» are, conversely, direct expressions of neoliberalism. To this end, I will trace a philosophical-political genealogy of conspiracism, framing it within the broader horizon marked by contemporary forms of the aesthetization and spectacularization of politics. Analyzing the nexus between politics, media and communication, I will try to show how the «neoliberal communication machine» structurally tends to promote what Furio Jesi called «right-wing culture».

Keywords: Aestheticization of Politics, Communication, Conspiracy Theory, Cybernetics, Neoliberalism

> This is the age of conspiracy, the age of connections, links, secret relationships.
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> (Don DeLillo, *Running Dog*)

> For man, being alive means the same thing as participating in a broad global system of communication.
>
> (Norbert Wiener, *Cybernetics, or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine*)

> That is the secret, and it's that there isn't one.
>
> (The Invisible Committee, *To Our Friends*)

1.

In an important 1988 essay, Fredric Jameson established a relationship between conspiracy theory and the accomplished erosion of political and cognitive orders by late capitalism. «Conspiracy,» Jameson wrote «is the poor person's cognitive mapping in the postmodern age; it is a degraded figure of the total logic of the capital, a desperate attempt to represent the latter's system, whose failure is marked by its slippage into sheer

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theme and content»[1]. Among the merits of Jameson's formulation is undoubtedly the relocation of the problem from the terrain of psychopathology to that of historical and material analysis. It is the indecipherable complexity of power relations and the opacity of the sources of economic value on which globalized capital hinges that constitutes the historical and political condition of the conspiracy theorists' «paranoid style»[2]. With its discovery of a hidden political agenda behind the confusing succession of political happenings on the surface of history, conspiracy theory attempts to «provide a compensatory sense of historical location»[3], or, in Jameson's terms, of «cognitive mapping».

Remarkably, Jameson's thesis implies a substantial revision of the Marxian prognosis of capitalist globalization and its social vehicle, the bourgeoisie. By the time the expansive and dissolving tendency of Capital takes over, and finds its fulfillment in the globalized world, human beings do not find themselves at all, as Marx and Engels argued, «to face with sober senses their real conditions of life, and their relations with their kind»[4]. Instead, they plunge into an enchantment all the deeper the higher the degree of disarticulation of the social nexus.

In this perspective, it is not surprising that globalization offers not only the setting but also the theme for many conspiracy theories. Indeed, Timothy Melley's statement that «the term "conspiracy" rarely signifies a small, secret plot anymore», but rather alludes to «a powerful and obscure identity so dispersed that it is the antithesis of traditional conspiracy»[5] does not seem entirely grounded. A cursory genealogy of conspiracism such as that traced by Wu Ming 1 is sufficient to show that the tendency to incorporate minor narratives into an overarching «conspiracy fantasy» has been a typical trait of conspiracism since the time of Augustin Barruel (1741-1820), who first syncretized and grafted the most diverse narrative to explain the French Revolution, the pivotal event in modern history, which to him appeared as the «scourge of Europe»[6].

Thus, the connection between conspiracy and globalization appears to be biunivocal. On the one hand, conspiracism is a political and semiological phenomenon that can only take place under the impetus of capitalist globalization, and which reaches its climax only in the midst of the neoliberal era, where the masks of sovereignty fall away and power unveils its Janus face: at once, paradoxically, impersonal and imperial[7]. On the other hand, the conspiratorial narrative machine that is thus set in motion is structurally aimed at generating global narratives, such as to involve a potentially unlimited number

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1   F. Jameson, *Cognitive Mapping*, in C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and Interpretation of Culture*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana 1988, p. 356.

2   R. Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (1964), in Id., *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge and London 1996, pp. 3-41.

3   P. Knight, *Conspiracy Culture. From Kennedy to The X-Files*, Routledge, New York 2000.

4   K. Marx, F. Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, translated by S. Moore, Verso, London 2016, p. 10.

5   T. Melley, *Agency Panic and the Culture of Conspiracy*, quoted in D.S. Grewal, *Conspiracy Theories in a Networked World*, in «Critical Review», 28, n. 1, 2016, pp. 24-43, p. 25.

6   Wu Ming, *La Q di Qomplotto. QAnon e dintorni*, Alegre, Roma 2021, pp. 84-85 (unless otherwise noted, all translations from Italian are my own).

7   R.H. Wade, *The Invisible Hand of American Empire*, in «Ethics and International Affairs», 17, n. 2, 2003, pp. 77-88, p. 87.

of actors, linked by actions that potentially unfold along the entire axis of historical time and the entire extent of geographic space, aimed at pursuing ends that transcend any «empirical politics».

2.

Yet there is a second remarkable aspect of Jameson's hypothesis on conspiracy, which sheds light on the specificity of conspiracy in the neoliberal era. It is a historical a priori that, stepping over the sphere of the philosophy of history, allows this phenomenon to be firmly anchored in neoliberal governmentality and its technological and communicative apparatus. For Jameson, in fact, «the omnipresence of the theme of paranoia [...] in a seemingly inexhaustible production of conspiracy plots of the most elaborated kind» can only be ensured through technologies that, by grafting communication onto the technical reproducibility theorized by Walter Benjamin, trigger processes of self-refentialization of communicative fields that, in Jameson's view, mostly involve the field of postmodern art as a «degraded figure of the great multinational space that remains to be cognitively mapped»[8].

It is not by chance that Jameson refers to Benjamin's essay on the *Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility*. Indeed, in the last passages of that essay Benjamin formulated his famous definition of fascism as the «aestheticizing of political life»[9]. According to Benjamin, the deployment of the technological apparatuses of reproduction would have the essentially revolutionary virtue of destroying the «aura» of the work of art, that is, the residue of sacredness that bourgeois society, victim of an enchantment that, in a fragment fifteen years earlier, Benjamin himself had called «capitalism as religion»[10], persists in conferring it. In such a situation, fascism would present itself as a paradoxical attempt to save the aura through the same technological apparatuses that had brought about its disappearance.

In this way, Benjamin recognized in Fascism or, as it came to be called by critical theory and its heirs, in «technicalized myth», not so much an ultimately vain and laughable attempt to react to technological progress and capitalist de-localization, but a political style inscribed in late capitalism itself, in its apparatuses and communication structures.

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8   F. Jameson, *Cognitive Mapping*, cit., p. 356.
9   W. Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility*, in Id., *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, translated by E. Jephcott, R. Livingstone *et al.*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge and London 2008, pp. 19-55, p. 41. On the concept of aura and the dialectic of distance and proximity that it implies see A. Pinotti, A. Somaini, *Introduzione*, in W. Benjamin, *Aura and choc. Saggi sulla teoria dei media*, ed. by A. Pinotti and A. Somaini, Einaudi, Torino 2012, pp. XVI-XXIII. On the nexus between the aesthetization of politics and market society, see D. Gentili, *La politicizzazione dell'arte. Individuo, massa, mercato*, in M. Montanelli, M. Palma (eds.), *Tecniche di esposizione. Walter Benjamin e la riproduzione dell'opera d'arte*, Quodlibet, Macerata 2017, pp. 139-151.
10   W. Benjamin, *Fragment 74: Capitalism as Religion*, in Id., *Religion as Critique: The Frankfurt's School Critique of Religion*, Routledge, New York 2005, pp. 259-262.

Such an approach allows a new light to be shed on 21st century conspiracism, understood as a fundamental expression of the «far-right accelerationism»[11]. From this perspective, the growing hegemony of right-wing culture in neoliberal societies could not be read as a reaction to neoliberal governmentality, but rather, as a direct expression of it[12]. The neoliberalism of the 21st century would thus indeed be, as has been aptly noted, «the golden age of conspiracy»[13]. But it would be so first and foremost insofar as the neoliberal art of government rests on communication structures that promote what Vilém Flusser has called «post-historical magic»[14].

In this essay, therefore, I will outline the hypothesis that conspiracism is something like a discard of what I would like to call the *neoliberal machine of communication*. I will argue that its operation closely traces the semiological mechanisms described by Furio Jesi in reference to fascist language and mass culture, to the extent that Jameson's «cultural logic of late capitalism» would find its precedent precisely in the «cultural logic of fascism». Following Jesi, I will argue that such logics find their point of intersection in a *tanato-logy*, that is, in *a mechanism of communication that institutes and performs the political and the community only in the form of an incessant trade with death*. But, before getting to the question of communication, I would like to dwell, following Jameson's example, on the «epochal» conditions of conspiracy.

3.

The best starting point for the proper understanding of conspiracy is, perhaps, the indirect question: *What is* not *a conspiracy?* Only in this way it seems possible to grasp the specific performance of conspiracy, detaching it, as a political phenomenon, from the background of its historical conditions of possibility. The answer that, drawing on a remarkable insight by Donatella di Cesare, I would suggest is that conspiracy is not, nor

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11   K. Aarons, *Genealogy of Far-Right Accelerationism*, in «Pólemos. Materiali di filosofia e critica sociale», 3, n. 1, 2022, pp. 261-294.
12   For the widespread thesis that conspiracism takes the form of a reaction to the social, political and cognitive neoliberal disruption, see L. Esposito, *The Alt-Right as a Revolt against Neoliberalism and Political Correctness: the Role of Collective Action Frames*, in «Perspectives on Global Development and Technology», 18, nn. 1-2, 2019, pp. 93-110; S. Moore, A. Roberts, *Post-Internet Far Right. Fascism in the Age of the Internet*, Dog Section Press, London 2021. It is worth noting that the conception in antagonistic terms of the relationship between neoliberalism and conspiracy is already implicit in Hayek (A. Moore, *Hayek, Conspiracy, and Democracy*, in «Critical Review», 28, n. 1, 2016, pp. 44-62). The opposite thesis, according to which the belief in conspiracy theories comes together with the endorsement of the neoliberal understanding of the free market, is conversely argued by S. Lewandowsky, *In Whose Hands the Future?*, in J.E. Uscinski (ed.), *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2019, pp. 149-177.
13   V. Pagán, *The Golden Age of Conspiracy Theory*, in Ead., *Conspiracy Theory in Latin Literature*, University of Texas Press New York 2012, pp. 119-124.
14   V. Flusser, *Das Politische im Zeitalter der technischen Bilder*, in «Falter. Wochenzeitschrift für Kultur und Politik», 26, 1990, pp. 134-140.

can it be, a conjuration[15].

More precisely, the hypothesis I propose sounds: *Conspiracy is what remains of the Conjuration in the era of the oath's end*. What then is a conjuration? A conjuration is essentially a pact, a relationship between men sealed by an oath. Both the Latin noun *ius* and the verb *iurare* resonate in the word *conjuration*. Such a reference to the sphere of law may, at first glance, be puzzling. Is not conjuration always directed *against* the established political or juridical order? There is no paradox here. There is no need to recall the words of Walter Benjamin, nor the most basic theorems of political realism, to realize that every state is born from a handful of conjurers and their «revolutionary violence». Is it not true that the conjurers of yesterday are always the governors of today?[16].

At the center of every conjuring there is always an oath. And at the center of every oath is a paradox. It is the paradox inherent in any performative use of language, that is, of that peculiar mode of enunciation that consists in *doing things with words*. But to do things with words, the speech act comes to situate itself in an area that lies beyond both words and things or actions. Neither word nor action, the performative is rather what is situated at their point of indifference.[17]

According to the great linguist Émile Benveniste, there are two conditions that make a speech act performative. First, a syntactic or formal condition. An enunciation, to be performative, must first of all be formed with the syntagms «I swear», «I declare» *et similia* followed by a declarative sentence. It is also essential – for reasons we shall see – that the subject instance in the main sentence be occupied by the first person, the one who says «I». Second, a contextual or material condition. A performative utterance, says Benveniste, is such only in the extra-linguistic conditions that make it so. I will summarize them in a single macro-condition: *the utterer must be endowed with authority*. Only the appointed judge can performatively issue a sentence of condemnation; only the sovereign can declare war. However, this authority is not in every case a constituted authority, based on a set of legal codes. Even the conspirator, who decrees political mobilization, can only do so if he has a sort of non-codified authority.

But where is the paradox of the performative? «This leads us,» Benveniste concludes,

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15   D. Di Cesare, *Il complotto al potere*, Einaudi, Torino 2021, p. 14. It should be pointed out that Di Cesare further complicates the conceptual framework by proposing, instead of the Conjuration/Conspiracy dichotomy articulated here, the tripartition «Congiura»/«Cospirazione»/«Complotto». In Di Cesare's meaning, «cospirazione» has no negative connotation and rather coincides with what, *infra*, I have called «Conjurer».

16   I allude to what W. Benjamin (*A Critique of Violence*, in Id., *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, translated by E. Jephcott, Schocken Books, New York 2005, pp. 277-300) calls «a dialectical rise and fall in the formation of violence that creates and preserves law». On the distinction between immediate and law-creating violence and the problematic proximity between pure violence and revolutionary violence, see M. Tomba, *Attraverso la piccola porta. Quattro studi su Walter Benjamin*, Mimesis, Milano 2017 and C. Menke, *Law and Violence. Christoph Menke in Dialogue*, translated by G. Jackson, Manchester University Press, Manchester 2018, pp. 33-37, which tends to emphasize the pure character of revolutionary violence.

17   I draw here from two essays by Emile Benveniste, namely *Subjectivity in Language* (1958) and *Analytical Philosophy and Language* (1963) (E. Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics*, translated by M.E. Meek, University of Miami Press, Miami 1974, respectively at pp. 223-230 and 231-238).

«to recognize in the performative a peculiar quality, that of being self-referential, of referring to a reality that it itself constitutes by the fact that it is actually uttered in conditions that make it an act. As a result of this it is both a linguistic manifestation, since it must be spoken, and a real fact, insofar as it is the performing of an act»[18].

What does it mean that language, in its performative use, refers to itself? And what does such self-referentiality imply? Let us examine the case of the oath. If the oath satisfies the linguistic and extra-linguistic conditions – syntax and authority – of performative language, then it *institutes the sphere of its own referentiality*. It is, that is, a point of absolute discontinuity in a continuum of communication that coincides with a political continuum. It is in this way that conjurers, give themselves a new lexicon, which allows them to inhabit time and space in a singular way, generating a new form of life. But such a lexicon – thus the communicative order that is, at once, a political order- can only hold itself up through constant reference to the speech act that gave it life and from which it deduces its authority. Every conjuration is, that is, hung on its own original oath.

But the institution of signification to which the oath gives rise is the condition and, at the same time, the result of a destitution. In order for a new language to come into being, it is necessary to cut ties with the old regimes of signification. Such a break is possible only in a paradoxical instant, where the pure speech act, detached from the old meanings, remains, as it were, suspended in the void of pure self-reference. Here we begin to glimpse the paradox. For what does it mean that the possibility of signification depends on something like a void of signification? Is there not something properly uncanny about a linguistic act that, like the En-Sof of the Kabbalists, subtracts itself from self in order to create self?

This is why Giorgio Agamben could call the oath – the *hórkos* – the sacrament of language. Not by chance, the homonymous essay concludes Agamben's decade-long meditation on *Language and Death*[19]. That in the oath language refers to itself and, in this way, institutes the possibility of signification, this attests, according to Agamben, that its essential performance is something like a *sacratio*, an original separation, which ultimately concerns political living. «The first promise» Agamben writes, «the first – and, so to speak, transcendental – *sacratio* is produced by means of this division, in which man, opposing his language to his actions, can put himself at stake in language, can promise himself to the *lógos*»[20]. In this sense, Western politics would be not only, insofar as it invests in the living, already always a biopolitics, but, likewise, it would be consigned to law, *ius*, precisely because it is founded on oath, *iurare*. Or, rather, if Western politics exists as biopolitics, it can only be so insofar as it is, at the same time, *a politics of conjuration*.

Let us now return to our original question: What about the void of signification? In the light of Agambenian oath theory, we can answer that it is, properly speaking, the *Ur-tei-*

18 É. Benveniste, *Analytical Philosophy and Language*, cit., p. 236.
19 G. Agamben, *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity*, translated by M. Hardt, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2006.
20 Id., *The Sacrament of Language. An Archaeology of the Oath*, translated by A. Kotsko, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2011, p. 69.

lung, the original separation of the living being from itself coincides with the isolation, in the living being, of a naked life, which, mute and perpetually exposed to death, is the obscene of all (bio)political staging. It is the Invisible, the Incommunicable, the Death that, secreted, lets the Visible, Communication and Life be. It is, in other words, the Void of Meaning that makes Meaning possible.

Now, let us return to Benveniste's authority. If what we have said so far is correct, then something like a (bio)political separation can only take place in the person who embodies Authority. In this way, Authority stands between the Void and Communication, between Death and Community. But who, properly, stands between? "I": the one who, saying "I" holds the scepter of authority: the Sovereign, the Herald, the Judge, the Conjurer. Such figures protect Community and Communication from deadly exposure to the Void, masking its irradiation.

But what happens when every mask falls? The epoch of Conspiracy opens, that is, of the Conjuration surviving the conditions that made it possible. If Conjuration works as an immunological "dispositive", which can establish Communication upon an Incommunicable only insofar as Authority protects it from such exposure, in Conspiracy there remains only the pure form of exposure to Nothingness. In this way, the Void spreads into every Communication and every Community, filling every sign and every enunciation. From this moment on, all Communication takes the form of a *communicatio mortis*: a fatal trade with Death.

4.

Who weaves the plots of the Political Order? Who or what is behind it? – Thus sounds the question of the conspiracist. It establishes a precise logical space, a precise topology. There is a Front and a Behind, a Surface and a Center, a Manifest and a Hidden. In such a framework is expressed, perhaps, a foreshadowing awareness of an epochal turning point: There is no longer something like an Authority to protect from the Void from which Power and Language, Community and Communication, originate. That origin is today, perhaps, a pure instance of discourse, an empty instance, or, rather, the Void itself. The Voice of Power – or, rather, its echo – can resound in the ears of the Spectator, of a public opinion reduced to the status of an audience, only from a perfectly empty stage. The Power is anonymous; the Button Room is deserted.

From one edge of the political spectrum to the other, it is theorized that, to the anonymity of Power, one can only respond with the anonymity of Counter-Power. In the 1990s, in a post-historical situation where all historical stakes seemed to be emptied or «remain secret, enigmatic, they are resolved in events which do not really take place», Jean Baudrillard reported (or, perhaps, invented) the case of the Stealthy Agency, whose aim was precisely «to set up against this simulation a radical de-simulation or, in other words, *to lift the veil on the fact of events not taking place*»[21]. In its footsteps, after the

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21   J. Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End*, translated by C. Turner, Polity Press, Cambridge 1994, p. 15.

2005 French banlieue uprising, the Invisible Committee arose, a radically acephalous, dislocated, anonymous collective. For only a nameless Counter-Power can subscribe to the program of an Apocalypse of the Non-Place[22].

It may be suggested that, in the age of the strike of events, political discourse cannot but articulate itself in the form of a topology of secrecy. Perhaps its best illustration is Guy Debord's parable of thought, which, unfolding from the European economic boom of the 1960s to the security policies of the Italian Strategy of Tension, has, so to speak, closed in on itself, until it formed an ellipse, whose two poles are the Spectacle and the Secret. Thus, in the mid-1980s, Debord placed as an appendix to his magnum opus of '67 – *La Société du Spectacle* – his *Commentaires*, in which he theorized that the accomplished triumph of the spectacle (the «integrated spectacular», that is, the globalization of spectacle) coincides with the genesis of societies whose fundamental law is secrecy («Secrecy dominates this world, and first and foremost as the secret of domination»)[23]. It is a new governance, based on the systematic employment of intelligence agencies that are so ambiguous as to be opaque even to themselves. Here is the paradox: The Spectacle, the society whose only law is the emptying of every social object, is unable to empty itself of its own Emptiness, which, hidden by its walls, becomes the Secret that haunts every spectacular performance. It is the Button Room, the place of Place-less Power.

However, for Debord, the Secret is by no means something substantial, a sort of Power in itself. Rather, those who, in the 1970s and 1980s, hold power are instead held by the Power. If intelligence agencies hold the strings of the spectacular world, they do so, however, without Script, without Strategy[24]. In this sense, it can be said that here the Button Room is neither full nor empty. It is, indeed, empty, but its door remains wide open so that puppeteers can enter and leave in a whirl without direction or purpose.

With 21st-century conspiracy, one slips from one end of the political spectrum to the other. QAnon, as well, is an anonymous entity that aims to unravel and destroy nameless Power. But such Power – and here the distinctions leap to the eye – is the full and absolutely strategic Power of the one «Puppet Master»[25].

Not by chance, among Q's best-known drops – the posts published on the social network *4chan* by the anonymous user who started the QAnon spiral – we find, precisely: *Trust the Plan*[26]. To the well-known Strategy of the Invisible Power is replied here with a Counter-Strategy, this time completely unknown, of an Anonymous Counter-Power. These Strategies, despite their apparent opposition, share one essential trait: too well known or too unknown, in each case they elude enunciation.

It is well known that QAnon-linked shooters have always acted isolated, streaming their exterminations on social media, and proclaiming themselves links in a martyrological chain dating back at least to Timothy McVeigh, the bomber of the Oklahoma City

22   The Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection*, semiotext(e), Los Angeles 2007.
23   G. Debord (1988), *Comments on the Society of Spectacle*, translated by M. Imrie, Verso, London 1990, p. 60.
24   Ivi, p. 83.
25   S. Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989), Verso, London 2008, p. 174.
26   Wu Ming 1, *La Q di Qomplotto. QAnon e dintorni*, cit., pp. 37-54.

bombing of '95, and, through him, to the Waco massacre. The Organization is just this invisible martyrological chain, whose intangible testimony passes through social media, and which links back to its Great Dead[27]. The same applies to the Strategy, which is nothing more than Testimony that grows to the Apocalypse of Power, whose sudden collapse is expected at the first ray of Light.

5.

Is it possible that such outcomes are inscribed from the very beginning in the structures of neoliberal communication? Is there not, perhaps, in the «topology of secrecy» a death drive that invests the very roots of our language?

In the theory of the mythological machine, which Furio Jesi elaborated in his essays of the 1970s, one can perhaps find the operative pattern of neoliberal communication in a nutshell.

As is well known, the question of myth is the political crux of the 20th century. From Sorel to Benjamin, from Hitler to Lenin, myth is the terrible cornerstone of the season of violent political mobilizations of the early twentieth century. All this casts a sinister shadow over the myth. But is not political violence – as legions of humanists, from Kerényi to Habermas via Thomas Mann, have taught us – the product of brutal manipulation of communication and public opinion? Does not the horror lie exclusively in the will of those who used the myth, «instrumentalizing» it, for Evil?[28]

Against such assumptions testifies the fact that those who made «instrumental» use of myth were able to do so only because they *believed* in their myths. In Sorel, for example, it is not the proletariat that is the real subject of the class struggle, but the myth of the «general strike»[29]. This myth is not a tool in the hands of the party or trade union leaders, but the very soul of mobilization. With the myth, in other words, language is really, as in John's Gospel, «in the beginning»: it is the driving principle of a world to come[30]. Here resonates, laden with all its implications, Benveniste's thesis that performative is the language that establishes the sphere of its own reference.

We find ourselves, then, at a crossroads. Is it man, the political animal, who manipulates myth, or myth that manipulates politics? Or, in Jesi's terms, is the myth the efficient engine of the mythological machine, or, conversely, is the machine empty and its effects the result of extra-linguistic political engineering, which, at the same time, constantly generates the illusion of an efficient engine «hidden within the walls of the machine»?[31].

27 K. Aarons, *Genealogy of Far-Right Accelerationism*, cit., pp. 278-283.
28 For a critique of the humanistic approach to myth, see F. Jesi, *Mito*, a cura di A. Cavalletti, Quodlibet, Macerata 2023, pp. 119-124.
29 G. Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, edited by J. Jennings, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1999.
30 F. Dal Bo, *Il linguaggio della violenza. Estremismo e ideologia nella filosofia contemporanea*, Clueb, Bologna 2020, pp. 107-136.
31 F. Jesi, *Conoscibilità della festa*, in Id., *Il tempo della festa*, a cura di A. Cavalletti, Nottetempo, Roma 2014, pp. 61-113, p. 82. On the theory of the mythological machine, see the introductory essay to the book by A. Cavalletti, *Festa, scrittura e distruzione* (ivi, pp. 7-26), and E. Manera, *Furio Jesi. Mito, violenza, memoria*, Carocci, Roma 2012, pp. 89-138.

Indeed, the specific performance of Jesi's theory is precisely to bypass such an ultimatum. The mythological machine is, in fact, a performative device, such, that is, as to situate itself at the intersection of language and reality, Communication and Community. Therefore one should not ask: What *is* the mythological machine?

But: What *does* the mythological machine *do*? «Its function» Jesi answers, «is to refer back to the emptiness of being»[32]. That is, the machine functions by constantly alluding to an immobile engine, an Incommunicable or Secret, which, situating itself at the heart of all Communication, solely could make it possible.

In a '79 interview with the newspaper *L'Espresso*, Jesi proposes what he calls «right-wing culture» as the model for such performance. «Right-wing culture» Jesi writes, «is the culture within which the past is a sort of homogenized mush that can be shaped and kept in shape in the most useful way. The culture in which a religion of death or even a religion of the exemplary dead prevails. The culture in which it is declared that there are values that cannot be questioned, indicated by words with a capital letter, first and foremost Tradition and Culture, but also Justice, Liberty, Revolution»[33].

Hidden in this seemingly trivial passage is the precise and paradoxical dialectic that governs the mythological machine. Not only does Jesi establish a relationship between the *religio mortis* and the mythological machine, but he points to the origin of this link in what I would call *a linguistic dialectic of allusion*. Such is the «language of wordless ideas», the linguistic principle of right-wing culture: just because it is emptied of all possibility of signification, the word is elevated to the rank of an incommunicable idea, and, as such, it can give rise to an incessant flow of communication. The word becomes a watchword, an empty slogan, pure performativity, and, therefore, can become at once object and subject of incessant repetition. Such an emptied word is, then, the magic word capable of evoking spirits. And it can do so because it is itself dead, reduced to a pure nothingness of signification. Thus the mythological machine describes a linguistic mechanism where a pneumatic void of signification, located in the core of linguistic circulation, attracts meanings to itself, relentlessly triggering what Cass Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule have called «informational cascades», i.e. collective cognitive processes aimed at identifying in a single perpetrator the social cause of nefarious events, according to a pattern that closely traces the sacrificial logic outlined by René Girard[34].

It is worth noting that this mechanism has more than one affinity with the dialectic of Baroque allegoresis described by Walter Benjamin in his *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*. In this way, the essential nexus linking the «mythological machine» to the religion of death comes into full light. It is none other than Death, in fact, who draws the features of *Melancholia*'s face in Dürer's famous engraving. At her feet lie objects removed from their worldly use, their use values. In her incessant *meditatio mortis*, *Melancholia* stares at them in search of their true meaning. Such meditation can indeed be infinite, for the

32   F. Jesi, *Lettura del* Bateau ivre *di Rimbaud*, in Id., *Il tempo della festa*, cit., pp. 30-58, p. 52.
33   Id., *Intervista a «L'Espresso»*, in Id., *Cultura di destra*, Nottetempo, Roma 2011, p. 285.
34   C. Sunstein, A. Vermeule, *Conspiracy Theories: Causes and Cures*, in «Journal of Political Philosophy», 17, n. 2, 2009, pp. 202-227.

object emptied of meaning is, by itself, infinitely signifying. But such infinity is but the measure of emptiness. It is the same infinity of the «abyss of meaning» into which the Baroque allegorist plummets, in the secret hope that he can, at least, – if the true meaning of things is revealed as the Inaccessible – crash upon the Void of Meaning, sacrifice himself to the Nothingness of Language. But such sacrifice, as the conclusion of Benjamin's book sounds, is always denied him. He does not die a bloody death on the rock-solid bottom of the Void, but plummets, mute, into the slow agony of a world dominated by the secret[35].

6.

As an eminently performative dispositive, the mythological machine establishes a sphere of signification through a linguistic strategy of self-reference. In this way, it unleashes a dialectic of allusion, which, by emptying signifiers – or, rather, as Jesi puts it, «filling them with emptiness»[36] – triggers repetitive streams of communication. Self-referentiality, emptying, incessant repetition – do not these essential performances of the mythological machine sum up, perhaps, the constant traits of a typical principle of neoliberal digital communication – the meme? Is it not by chance that the essay in which Jesi first formulated his theory of the mythological machine was dedicated not to right-wing culture or Nazism, but to pop culture?

Leaving these questions unanswered, I rather intend to insinuate a doubt, which coincides with the question from which we started: Is it possible that something like a death drive is inscribed in neoliberal communication structures?

The elements for an answer lie, perhaps, in the Vilém Flusser's 1991 essay on *The Status of Images*. Faced with the communication structure produced by television, not even a theorist beyond all suspicion of technological nihilism like Flusser can disclaim «the dreadfulness», «the horror» that this veritable «infernal machinery» arouses. «With such irradiation» Flusser writes, «a great many individuals, locked in their homes, through many frames of images stare fixedly at the same instant at the same image, and through that same image they all look into the same place inaccessible to them. There all gazes meet, but without being able to see each other»[37].

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35 W. Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, translated by J. Osborne, Verso, London 1998, pp. 231-235. The reference here is to what Benjamin calls «the bottomless pit of contemplation». We cannot discuss here the complex baroque dialectic articulated by Benjamin in the *Trauerspielbuch*. However, it should be mentioned that the most remarkable dialectical feature of the allegorical form consists, according to Benjamin, in the messianic reversal that ensures its redemption. For a general framework on the subject, see Lindner's entry *Allegorie* in M. Opitz, E. Wizisla (eds.), *Benjamins Begriffe*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M. 2000, vol. 1, pp. 50-94. For a comparison between Jesi and Benjamin see D. Gentili, *Ebbrezza e distruzione, rivolta e festa. Walter Benjamin e Furio Jesi*, in «Pólemos. Materiali di filosofia e critica sociale», 1, 2022, pp. 123-139. In the same issue, in relation to the problem of dialectics, see J. Martel and E.E. Pelilli, *Nota dei curatori*, ivi, pp. 9-13.

36 F. Jesi, *Simbolo e silenzio*, in Id., *Letteratura e mito*, Einaudi, Torino 1968, pp. 17-31, pp. 26-27.

37 V. Flusser, *Bilderstatus*, in C.M. Joachimides, N. Rosenthal (eds.), *Metropolis*, Internationale Kunstausstellung, Berlin- Stuttgart 1991, pp. 50-51.

Flusser's metaphor traces a typical mythical pattern found in the horror aroused in Foucault by Bentham's Panopticon project: the ideal of an invisible vision, *seeing without being seen*[38]. Through the moving image of the television screen, the viewer does not just stare at streams of communication. Rather, his gaze passes through the media images and, beyond them, encounters the gaze of the Incommunicable, who, mute, stares at him from the reverse side of the images. Again, access to the invisible dimension of Power, or Invisible Power, is paid for by the sacrifice of vision.

However, the uncanny of television communication can be reduced, according to Flusser, to a wiring problem. As long as there are dissymmetries in the networks that carry communication, there will be the dreadful. The exorcism of the dreadful coincides, then, for Flusser, with the total horizontalization of communication. So far, says Flusser, the wiring remains asymmetrical because the User is overloaded with medial and communicative inputs to which, however, he cannot reply. He is the purely passive pole of the machine. The active pole is the Broadcaster, the invisible center that radiates communication, which is everywhere and nowhere, and which constitutes the true object of the allegorical *meditatio mortis* of the television user.

In 1991, Flusser believed he was glimpsing the dawn of a new communication society, finally freed from the «dreadful». According to him, «a new generation of producers and consumers of images» will break the asymmetry of communication, resolving the secret and the «horror» in the plane of immanence of a perfectly networked communication. In what he calls «the telematic information society», «every receiver would be responsible because he or she would simultaneously also be a Broadcaster and therefore would in turn be an active participant in the production of images. At each node of the network, images would be processed, and therefore each recipient would have a different view from all others networked with him. All subjects would be connected in a constant dialogue with one another. And the reality content of these images, thanks to this dialogue, would be subjected to constant critique». In this way such a society would «overcome the horror of irresponsibility, massification, stupidity and estrangement»[39].

It is easy to find, in these lines, a utopia of communication soon betrayed by its capitalist reversal. Because Capital, as Adorno said, is the dialectical regime where the realization of the Idea coincides with its parody; where every dream is realized as a nightmare, every paradise as hell. However, I do not believe that Flusser's vision stems from an error of judgement. Rather, it is necessary to grasp its dialectical trait. On the one hand, if the realization of utopia coincides with its perversion, this by no means invalidates the utopian instance as such. On the other hand, the fact that Communication stretches out in a plane of immanence in no way guarantees the dislocation of the secret non-place from which the Incommunicable – the Broadcaster's Power – radiates death.

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38   On the typical mythic leitmotif of «seeing without being seen» see F. Jesi, *La festa e la macchina mitologica*, in Id., *Materiali Mitologici. Mito e antropologia nella cultura mitteleuropea*, Einaudi, Torino 1979, pp. 81.-120.
39   V. Flusser, *Bilderstatus*, cit., p. 52.

The diffusion of Power does not displace Power at all; it does not destroy the Room of Buttons. Instead, it is its most refined stratagem: only the Power disseminated is, in fact, truly everywhere and nowhere – that is, truly Secret[40]. It is therefore not by chance that the generation Flusser speaks of, having learned from situationism the basic arsenal of counter-spectacular communication, put it at the disposal of the capitalist restructuring of the 1980s. In Italy, debordians from the University of Genoa, who became executives of the national Broadcaster, first introduced programs made of «homogenized mush» into the programming schedules, mixing shreds of political banality, indifference and everyday dementiality in a post-ironic pastiche that opened the spectacle phase of Berlusconi-ism[41]. It is, once again, «the language of wordless ideas», at once the condition and product of an incessant trade with death, which relentlessly exposes neoliberal societies to spirals of bloody violence.

My impression is that Jesi has pushed his gaze far beyond Flusser's vision. Not only is the mythological machine, according to Jesi, under no circumstances reformable and must therefore be unambiguously destroyed. If truly revolutionary politics is expressed in such destruction, then such politics cannot even make use of mythological communicative strategies for its purposes. At the end of *Conoscibilità della festa*, he puts forward in these terms the revolutionary chance of a destruction of the machine:

> It is necessary to destroy not the machines themselves, which would reform like the heads of the hydra, but the situation that makes the machines real and productive. The possibility of this destruction is exclusively political; its risk, from the gnoseological point of view, is that the machines are really empty and that therefore, having finally demonstrated their vacuity, it itself imposes itself as a paradoxical negative machine producing nothingness out of nothingness[42].

The real miracle of neoliberalism is perhaps to realize, at the same time, both options outlined by Jesi. Having wiped out the truly political chance of a real destruction of the conditions that make the machine operational, neoliberalism seizes the only opportunity left: to destroy the machine in a purely ritualistic way. Thus dismembered and sacrificed, the mythological machine can not only reclaim new terrain and dissect the old, scattering itself everywhere «like the Hydra's heads», but also convert its production: no longer allegories, but pure simulacra. It is the incessant «production of nothing from nothing» of which Jesi speaks: a production of the secret from the secret, of death from death. From the ashes of the machine thus arises a miracle of governmental linguistic engineering

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40   There is a deep dialectical and, at the same time, messianic trait in Flusser's thought. On this aspect, in relation to the double negative and positive meaning of the concept of illusion in Flusser, see the analysis of F. Restuccia, *The Polysemy of Vilém Flusser's Concept of Illusion*, in «AN-ICON. Studies in Environmental Images», 1, n. 2, 2022, pp. 51-66. It is precisely this dialectical character, according to Restuccia, that allows Flusser to "avoid the rationalistic approach to debunking" that Wu Ming 1 calls «ratiosuprematism».

41   Wu Ming 1, *La Q di Qomplotto. QAnon e dintorni*, cit., pp. 124-132.

42   F. Jesi, *Conoscibilità della festa*, cit., p. 106. See G. Agamben, *Sull'impossibilità di dire Io*, in Id., *La potenza del pensiero*, Neri Pozza, Vicenza 2005, pp. 107-120, p. 119.

capable of perfecting, finally, to the highest degree, the trade between Communication and Secret, Language and Death: the neoliberal machine of communication.

In the face of the conspiracy and far-right accelerationism that feeds at this source, it is perhaps necessary to make a bold proposal. An authentically materialist politics must, perhaps, today, be able to situate itself at the height of neoliberal cybernetics as a technique for governing communication flows. Only in this way can it perhaps resist the medusa-like gaze of the Void that emanates from the heart of our devices, nailing us to them. Only such politics is, perhaps, capable – as a German folk song, reminiscent of the Song of Songs, puts it – of «fighting against death and superstitions».