

The Paranoia of Popular Culture: Lacanian Psychoanalysis and Music Videos

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The coyote is the most aware creature there is [...] because he is completely paranoid. Charles Manson, circa 1969 (as cited in Hansen 413)

While not directly related to this essay, the coyote, in the above quotation, represents a powerful figure, indeed one that is not just literary, which can be used to demonstrate what it means to know in a “post-truth” culture. In fact, the relationship the coyote has to knowledge may offer us, upfront, an almost complete map of the relationship between paranoia and knowledge. With specific regard to what follows, as I hope to show, the epistemological logic of the conspiracy theory discourse comes as close as one can get to the paranoid nature of knowledge itself. This final point, what is the nature of knowledge, is relative to one’s own biases, philosophies, or personal stakes. Yet is not this very questioning the source of all epistemic claims?

In agreement here is Jacques Lacan, who is arguably the most famous psychoanalyst in history. Lacan perfected the Freudian practice of treatment over the long course of his seminars, referred to in French as the *Séminaire*, which he delivered from the years 1953 to 1980, right before his death. Perhaps, however, it was his first seminal scholarly work, a doctoral dissertation on the case of Aimée in 1932, that laid the foundation for what has come to be known in literary, academic, and even popular culture circles as Lacanian theory.

In its properly conceptual treatment, paranoia is considered by psychoanalysis and Lacan himself to be a diagnosis, a category or label, that the analyst assigns to a patient to conceptualize and treat them. Its formal symptomology usually includes an enduring suspicion or deep skepticism about the subject’s social role in relation to the larger sociological structure, their culture or society (McWilliams 215). This

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mindset can lead to beliefs, in the subject, that others are out to deceive, trick, or even harm them. As a consequence, being typically the case, paranoid patients report that their sense of belonging, indeed even their very identity, becomes unstable and up for grabs since they are unable to engage in a reciprocal relation with another human being.¹

As a case in point, with regard to the specific case of Aimée, Lacan (“The Case”) describes the subset of paranoia, paranoid psychoses, in the following symptomatic terms when writing that “[Aimée] fits the usual criteria perfectly: egocentricity, logical development from false premises and gradual use of defense mechanisms to consolidate it” (219). Thus, it is easy to see how the case of Aimée represents a prototype for Lacan—soldering the connection between popular discourse and paranoia—one that featured predominately in informing the construction of his larger theoretical oeuvre over the next fifty years.

Indeed, it would become intrinsic to Lacan’s approach to psychoanalysis that the subject is intimately linked with paranoia, not unlike the way Lacan develops it in his doctoral dissertation about Aimée. That is, in even stronger philosophical terms, paranoia is a necessary condition for any form of knowledge that the subject may possess, thereby making it central to understanding how subjects or identities are produced. Glen Gabbard, Bonnie Litowitz, and Paul Williams relate this by saying that “from Freud’s text [“Some Neurotic Mechanisms in Jealousy, Paranoia and Homosexuality”], Lacan took the central idea that a paranoid knowledge (*la connaissance paranoïaque*) exists at the core of each subjectivity” (225).

The forthcoming analysis will show that far from representing a sort of pathology on the part of the actors, the conspiracy theorists or the music artists, the way that they co-construct a discourse that can be labeled as paranoid actually exposes the very nature of knowledge itself. Put differently, they may be closer to the “source” of an ontology of epistemology. Psychoanalysis, given its penchant for speaking in clinical metaphors, may talk about this using something like the following: the stubborn encasement of the signifier within the subject becomes

¹ Nancy McWilliams signifies the importance of an analyst considering the historical, economic, and political etiology of the symptom. The example she uses is National Socialism and the rise of Nazi ideology. She writes that, “the crushing humiliation of Germany in World War I and the subsequent punitive measures that created runaway inflation, starvation, and panic, with little responsiveness from the international community, laid the groundwork for the appeal of a paranoid leader and the organized paranoia that is Nazism” (McWilliams 224). Indeed, McWilliams relates, right before this, that the psychological origins of Nazism mimic the childhood events reported by paranoid analysts.

emptied of meaning and gets pushed out, resulting in a knowledge that is not exactly epistemological, in that it is not shared, but is truer to the desire of the subject.

Why music videos as opposed to other more recently created popular discursive artifacts such as internet memes, TikTok clips, or celebrity Twitter posts? Indeed, the genre of music videos is by all accounts, given the fast changing nature of technology, an older form of media; nevertheless, foregrounding a postmodern discourse that has found its way today into social media (Rubey 873). What I take to be especially relevant about music videos that does not necessary apply to the aforementioned social media phenomena is their seeming interrelatedness or, to use more literary language, intertextuality that appears when one reads several music videos side-by-side. Not only does this highlight the strange similarities—and symbols—that many music videos seem to exhibit, it also raises the somewhat suspicious question: Why is this the case?

One of these symbols that shows up in the popular music videos being analyzed in this essay is the pyramid with the all-seeing eye, along with its mutations and permutations from one video to the next. This symbol quilts and binds many of the chains of signifiers that give form to the discourse that is produced—a kind of textuality that is more free-floating than, perhaps, traditional academic texts insofar as it is born in the precise liminal space between these two interlocutors. The interplay of how the discourse is created is necessary, then, to explain why this conspiratorial textuality is paragon of popular discourse in general thereby revealing the nature of knowledge for Lacan: plainly, how knowledge is fundamentally paranoid in nature.

A Technical Treatment of Paranoia in Lacanian Theory

It may be helpful, at this point, to follow the lead of Jon Mills and provide a brief etymology of the very term paranoia. He describes this etymology: ““paranoia” is derived from the Greek, *para*—outside of or beside—as in ‘*beside oneself*’—and mind (*nous, νόος*), thus beyond intelligible thought (*noēsis*), hence madness” (31, emphasis in original). The literal meaning of standing outside or beside oneself nicely conveys the essence of the term. Putting this into Lacanian language might produce something like the following: how there necessarily must exist an alterity, between subject and other, such that the other stands outside or beside oneself, and that this alterity is utterly unintelligible to the big Other, gibberish, whereby the knowledge that the paranoid subject produces is socially and relationally barred.

The big Other (*L'Autre*), as it is sometimes referred to in the secondary literature on Lacan, or just the Other with a capital O, is the relationship the subject has to social, material, and cultural environments and institutions to which the subject must relate. The fact that the subject is typically barred from its Other was formalized by Lacan using a symbolic shorthand that he called a *matheme*. A *matheme* is used to transmit, in this context, psychoanalytic concepts. The specific *matheme* that corresponds to the preceding etymology of the term paranoia is Lacan's *matheme* of the fundamental fantasy, which is $\$ \diamond a$. In a general sense, this can be read by saying that the barred subject, the *analysand*, the one who seeks knowledge, etc. (\$) sits at the left side of the \diamond , separating, as it were, this subject from the *objet petit a* (*a*). Or, as Lacan says, "the stamp is read 'desire of,' to be read identically in the retrograde direction, introducing an identity which is founded upon an absolute nonreciprocity" ("Kant" 62).

This "absolute nonreciprocity" is precisely that which bars or restricts the subject from knowledge of the Other. But, as Lacan claimed in the previous quote, the subject, nonetheless, desires this inaccessible scrap of the real of its being, the *objet petit a* (Ruti 17), which is not an epistemological and therefore paranoid knowledge but a certain embodied, enacted, or practiced type of knowledge. When the subject becomes frustrated at its inability to access this part of its being, illustrated to us at the onset in the case of Aimée, it lashes out in uncharacteristic aggression.

Indeed, it is perhaps this notion of aggression that best captures and illustrates, in an intersubjective way, how paranoia results from a misrecognition of what actually is the case. Mills, in even stronger terms, states that "by closely examining a few of Lacan's key works, it becomes increasingly clear that aggressivity suffuses the very fabric of human knowledge, a paranoid residue of the dialectic of desire" (33). Holding Mills to his final phrase here, the paranoid residue of the dialectic of desire, this formulation begs the question of exactly "why" this is the case for Lacanian theory. It is not enough to accept, uncritically, the principle for the fundamental fantasy given earlier whereby the lacking subject remains necessarily caught in the dialectic of desire, since one must give an account of how this kind of paranoid subject comes into being in the first place—i.e., how subjectivity, on account of this view, is produced.

Lacan famously argued, on certain developmental grounds, that aggressivity arises during the mirror stage at the early part of the subject's lifespan (Dor 96). During the mirror stage, the infant comes to recognize itself in the mirror as discrete

from its environment, which can be construed in many different senses. Empirically, this is the case insofar as the infant can see itself in a literal mirror and tell the difference, understanding that its reflection is not identical to its being. Yet, in more abstract and symbolic terms, the mirror stage represents a specific kind of subjectivation or production of identity, one that gives rise to unique ways the subject organizes its libido, its relationship to its own desire, and its understanding and relationality toward its Other.

The initiation can be understood in two ways: both through the ideal ego and the ego ideal. For Lacan, the ideal ego begins with the mirror stage, and by extension the Imaginary register, and is the subject's projection onto futurity of its unconscious wish-fulfillments, to use Freud's words, or, in slightly more obverse Lacanian terms, its aspiring to be the phallus for the (m)Other—i.e., how can I plug the lack in the Other's being? As Bracha Ettinger points out, the (m)Other is a Lacanian neologism that helps get at the undifferentiated relationship between self and world that we all have had during development, or the foundation of what Freud called primary narcissism (95). When this agitation of the subject becomes frustrated, finally realizing it can never fill this hole, it results in aggressivity. It follows, then, that knowledge in this sense perpetually defers itself, never to be punctuated—and, I would go so far as to claim that the ideal ego of the subject, that one that seeks the knowledge the Other has to offer, follows suit here.

On the other hand, the ego ideal is the reverse side of the ideal ego, therein making it purely Symbolic in nature, which is to say that the ego ideal, for the purposes of the present analysis, inflects and internalizes a non-paranoiac “knowledge,” one that does not fall under the transferential entanglements of the Imaginary (the domain of images and, consequently, music videos), but that enacts the logics of the properly paranoiac structure of knowledge in mimetic and inverted terms. This is not the aggressivity of the ideal ego, with its flaccid going to and fro between its own desire and the desire pushed upon it by its Other, but a signification that may actually ‘get behind’ this aggressivity in the first place, one that, in terms of knowledge, exposes the ego ideal in its fantastic and paranoid elements.

Bringing this theory down to the ground, the mistake that Aimée made was not the fact that she attacked and stabbed a famous Parisian actress, even though this is most certainly to be denounced, but that she mistook celebrity, incarnated in this actress, for her own ideal ego—projecting her own desires, wishes, and fantasies onto this object, her *objet petit a*, therein making it a troubling and menacing source of excitement and knowledge. Unable to contain herself anymore, Aimée's own

personal paranoia transformed in such a maniacal and consuming fashion that she was compelled to try and extinguish this source of meaning. She tried to consume the other, in reverse terms, by attempting to destroy it.

In an analogous manner, according to Mills, knowledge as such “is saturated with paranoia because it threatens to invade the subject, and it is precisely this knowledge that must be defended against as the desire not to know” (43). The ideal ego does not want to know that it is not the Other or that it is lacking in some way. It follows that the desire not to know is equivalent, then, to the kind of aggressivity that knowledge produces. The two, on account of Lacan, actually go hand-in-hand and can only be consummated or extinguished through the ego ideal, in symbolic and signifying terms which are less meaningful than what the ideal ego has to offer.

Lacanian Knowledge and Conspiracy Theory

Given the foregoing Lacanian treatment of the paranoid nature of knowledge, it seems that a certain homology may exist in terms of how the two function and deploy themselves, between the way that conspiracy theorists take up knowledge and Lacan’s own work. This is not to suggest that certain conspiracy theories are right or wrong, having some correspondence to reality or saying something deeper than their surface and discursive structure. It is, however, to suggest that the adjective “conspiracy” operates by a similar psychoanalytic logic and deploys similar discursive effects as does the barred subject in the clinic and, more generally, in the way knowledge institutes and restricts the subject from its Other.

First, it may be helpful to get a definition going of what I mean when I use the term conspiracy theory. On this point, David Ray Carter has the following to offer:

The term “conspiracy theory” is commonly used to refer to a belief that differs from or runs counter to the accepted line of thinking on a particular topic. It is almost exclusively used derogatorily, implying a view that is unfounded, illogical, or paranoid [...] conspiracy theories are an approach to historical analysis that discard the accepted versions in favor of alternate ones by interpreting the historical record differently or, as is often the case, using a different set of records all together. (5)

There are several things that stand out in this definition. The first, as should be clear by now, is to reject the connotation that there is something derogatory or, least of all, illogical about the term conspiracy. For, as we have seen, knowledge is by its very nature “conspiratorial” or, more technically, paranoid in the way that the

subject is forced into handling it. Therefore, it cannot be said that one should view conspiracy theories in a pejorative sense since they display, perhaps most overtly, how knowledge comes to circulate itself in its epistemological and sociological sense.

In addition, Carter seems right to proclaim that the storehouse of knowledge, the archive, for conspiracy theorists contains alternate or non-hegemonic meanings that challenge the accepted status of the most popular socially circulated knowledges—the beliefs about the state of affairs of the world held by most people. However, according to Lacanian theory, conspiracy theories indicate an even stronger sense by which knowledge operates; that is to say, that the archive is lost from the start (Roudinesco 51). There is no place by which to house more truthful or correct meanings, an alternative theory, because the lack of an archive is what makes the nature of knowledge *ipso facto* paranoid, the experience that the subject cannot ever seem to find the archive.

In another attempt, Michael Barkun casts conspiracy through the lens of theodicy. This way of explaining conspiracy provides a mythological and etiological account as to the nature of evil in the world. The conspiratorial discourse, then, arises from a paradigm that takes alterity, the difference between self and other, as necessarily menacing. Barkun writes:

The essence of conspiracy beliefs lies in attempts to delineate and explain evil. At their broadest, conspiracy theories “view history as controlled by massive, demonic forces.” The locus of this evil lies outside the true community, in some “Other, defined as foreign or barbarian, though often [...] disguised as innocent and upright.” The result is a worldview characterized by a sharp division between the realms of good and evil. (3)

The Other, in the sense of being controlled by the most evil demonic forces imaginable, is most definitely not the same Other understood by Lacanian theory. For if that were the case, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to explain why the creation of alterity is ultimately threatening or subversive to the Other. In other words, the foregoing explanation of conspiracy homogenizes even as it purports to make a radical distinction between good and evil. In fact, this latter point, the dualistic nature of its logic, is precisely why any kind of difference would become obliterated, nihilistically leveled, at the feet of the power of this kind of Other.

What Barkun does get right, if we were to recast this in Lacan’s terms, is that conspiracy theory does contain an element of “disguise”—one that can make knowledge slippery and unstable for the subject insofar as the subject can never be

certain of its place in regard to this Other that produces its knowledge. Such is the paranoiac nature of knowledge: What is the final signifier that would give my past meanings a terminal sense for me? There is ultimately no answer. Consequently, this leaves the subject's knowledge claims, their empirical validity and their very intelligibility, even in a reciprocal solipsistic sense, unstable, contestable, and potentially harmful, through the mechanism of aggressivity developed during the mirror stage and illustrated clinically in the case of Aimée.

An Analysis of the Repetition of a Symbol in Music Videos

Making the jump from the connection that Lacan's doctoral dissertation has to celebrity and popular Parisian culture, the way his case study demonstrates that aggressivity can result from the paranoid nature of knowledge, it is not too far afield from applying a similar practice of analysis to contemporary popular culture and some of the most highly circulated signifiers found in this discourse. Accordingly, in what is to follow, as a matter of precision, I focus on the medium of popular music videos.

Carol Vernallis provides us with a beautifully written manual on the nuances of music videos. From cinematography to costumes, she eruditely shows how the minor details of the medium figure into the often complex messaging the video imparts. As she suggests, this happens even on the levels of rhythm, note, and timbre. Her discussion of the way imagery figures into the narrative or nonnarrative structure of the music video, while very savvy, seems confined to the parameters of one specific video. Perhaps what is unique about this essay is the fixation on a specific symbol—a trope that can be read consistently from one video to another and, indeed, even from one music artist to another. I will set this analysis against the backdrop of conspiracy theories found on the internet, via places like YouTube or popular conspiracy websites, which I argue can be read as producing a precisely paranoid discourse of knowledge.

The specific symbol, as I alluded to earlier, will be the pyramid with the all-seeing eye, along with its repetitions and mutations within different videos. I have chosen this one particular symbol on several grounds: that is, it seems to have a certain popularity status, of its own right, within the already highly shared discourse surrounding music videos. This gives it a certain privileged place insofar as it cuts across and traverses many varied and disparate media and epistemologies. In other words, this symbol can be found not just within the music video community but

also in many other places: some of which have been talked about by the conspiracy theorists, including street art, corporate advertising, political literature, and religious iconography.

With regard to the present study, the object of inquiry is, however, specifically music videos. Even within this more tightly defined domain, the symbol seems to have a rather robust resiliency, appearing in videos for music artists like Rihanna, Lady Gaga, Kanye West, and many others. What this resiliency amounts to is a certain repetition, what can be described in broad symbolic and theoretical terms as the Other's repetition compulsion. This is important because it explains, psychoanalytically, the symbol's function as providing consistency to the Other specifically without the need to arbitrate any kind of truth claim, which is impossible given Lacan's theory of knowledge.

Briefly, the repetition compulsion is usually ascribed, in the psychoanalytic tradition, to the subject, analysand, or discrete entity that is under analysis. However, given the preceding development of the mirror stage and how this results in the ideal ego, a specific form of projection by the subject onto reality, it makes sense to talk about the repetition compulsion, in this case, as belonging to the big Other, from which arises the more superficial production of the symbol as a socio-cultural symptom. The comparatively robust repetition of a symbol, across discursive domains, makes a psychoanalysis of such a symbol possible: Why does the Other choose to address itself in this way?

This is an inversion of the standard Lacanian adage given by Mari Ruti in that "the symptom is a coded message addressed to the Other" (61). In our formulation, however, it would be that the symptom of the Other, the symbol as indicative of the repetition compulsion of the broader socio-cultural, planetary, and mediatic stratum of planet Earth, betrays the Other's coded message to the subject. In this sense, then, the symbol, while still symptomatic insofar as it remains to be deciphered, nonetheless carries with it a certain "truth" as to the nature of the meaning, intention, and even suffering of the Other—if one is allowed to ascribe these personological terms to such an abstract concept.

To analyze now, concretely, the pyramid with the all-seeing eye, I will use three music videos as ciphers that will help unlock and burrow into what the conspiracy theorists have to say: "Pyramids" by Frank Ocean featuring John Mayer (2012), "Dark Horse" by Katy Perry featuring Juicy J (2014), and "Grass Ain't Greener" by Chris Brown (2016). An astute consumer of this media genre will notice, right away, the typical symbol one thinks about when invoking the phrase "the pyramid

with the all-seeing eye” is not straightforwardly represented in any of these music videos. This, of course, begs the question as to what the typical or commonsensical symbol would be: Is it the one found on the side of the paper currency of the United States? How it appears in Masonic literature, publicly or privately circulated, its architectural and emblematic correlates? Or, is it the iterations located in Egyptian iconography, the symbol’s widely accepted origin story and historiography, perhaps its most well-known material manifestation being the Great Pyramid at Giza?

All of these questions are misleading, I would suggest, because they aim to hypostatize the symbol, rendering it static, immutable, and non-interpretable, when, at least on account of Lacanian theory, such is precisely not the nature of meaning, knowledge, and even the superficial sharing of signs and symbols. In fact, it is rather the symbol’s popular mutability and easy ability to be appropriated, across cartographies of media, in these different music videos, that makes it so interesting to analyze, not the fact that it may get at some esoteric or conspiratorial meaning or knowledge. Such a project goes beyond the analysis of identity politics, positionality, and even iconography described by Dan Rubey insofar as the present endeavor is predicated on the virtual undoing of these systems of reference. This is not to say that pointing out how viewers from various ethnic, gender, or age categories interpreted Madonna’s music video for “Papa Don’t Preach” differently is not relevant; rather, the paranoid nature of knowledge, coupled with the conspiratorial nature of some of the music videos that follow, takes us beyond an analysis of iconography and identity, the superficiality of the visual image, and into a realm that is devoid of content—that, in other words, lays a claim to some unified theory that the music video as a medium is being coordinated in some way.

In this ethos, tracking the way the symbol appears and changes in these popular mediums is supportive of a Lacanian understanding of epistemology, the sedimentation resulting from the sharing of signs and symbols. Compounding this is the utter degree of the sociological effects popular media has, the fact that it is, by definition, that which is shared among the most interlocutors imaginable. Strictly speaking, the two are mutually constitutive of each other, the symbol’s mutability being an effect of the underlying paranoia contained within its appropriation by the subject itself.

As a case in point, in the music video by Chris Brown for the song “Grass Ain’t Greener,” the somewhat loose narrative has Chris and his clique driving to some party in the desert in the middle of the night. After a few exchanges of dialogue

between Chris and his friends poking fun at each other for being too scared to attend, they all finally make their way toward the neon lights and arrows that are pointing the way toward the party. Following the red and blue neon arrows leads them to a large, levitating pyramid with a purple, neon diagram on the top of one of its sides. This scene cuts away, immediately, to Chris wearing his clothing line, black pyramid, and a corresponding image of a black pyramid on his shirt. The music then finally starts.

There are several commentaries on this song and video that can be found around the internet, on discussion boards, various websites, and YouTube. One of the most interesting comes from a YouTube channel that uses the screen name A Call For An Uprising; the reactionary positionality this name has in relation to its Other is already telling. The user says during his video commentary that “[Chris and his friends] are headed right towards the pyramid. They’re heading right towards it. Look out in the distance. It’s the pyramid out there that’s where the party is taking place. What a coincidence, right?” (A Call For An Uprising). There is, here, in even the early part of this user’s discussion of the music video, a certain fixation on the symbol of the pyramid as betraying the hidden meaning of the Other.

This is interesting since it prefaces or colors virtually all of the subsequent analysis given by this particular conspiracy advocate. Both the fact that the pyramid shows up at the beginning of the video, prior to the music, and that the YouTube user, following his announcement of the pyramid onto the scene, says the following, indicates what he thinks this could mean: “I guess they just thought it would be cool to put the pyramid in there. It has nothing to do with the secret societies and the Illuminati or anything like that. Chris Brown just wrote it in because he loves pyramids” (A Call For An Uprising).

The power of this symbol, in this example, to bring forth a certain paranoid rhetoric is indicative of the cartography of conspiracy as such. That is, the symbol of the pyramid with the all-seeing eye structures the way in which signifiers are allowed to be strung together within the conspiracy discourse, functioning as a policing agent of semiology, language, and rhetoric. Of course, the symbol itself has no inherent meaning, if Lacan is right about anything, since its use in enunciation must be taken into account. Nevertheless, the fact that there is some Other, as per what A Call For An Uprising says, “secret society and the illuminati,” that must repetitively display this symbol, thereby structuring its social dialectic, is the most heightened form of knowledge—one that pushes the knowledge of the

Other to the brink of collapse because the subject sees it as totalizing, covert, and all-consuming.

Indicative of this is the sarcastic tone and use of disavowal by the user in the latter string of dialogue: “it has nothing to do with the secret societies and the Illuminati or anything like that. Chris Brown just wrote it in because he loves pyramids” (A Call For An Uprising). Returning to the earlier discussion of the mirror stage, what this demonstrates is the aggressivity of the ideal ego in relation to its Other, the sublimation of a subject that wants to be taken seriously. I do not, however, want to suggest that I am making any kind of judgment about the actual content of these claims, since I actually think that they point to the very nature of knowledge: i.e., this is not pathologizing or diagnosing the subject behind the username. To demonstrate this, as a matter of fact, one could even take this YouTube channel and cast it as a sort of double agent of the Other, one that is working to distribute and disseminate propaganda precisely for the agenda of those in control, according to A Call For An Uprising. In this place, it would become absolutely untenable to properly ‘know’ anything at all.

“Dark Horse” by Katy Perry is another music video that features the pyramid and the all-seeing eye rather prominently. A permutation of it is shown, perhaps most clearly, at the climax of the video and song, near the very end—this is not to mention that the entire location of the video is set in a remixed version of ancient Egypt inaugurated by a stone pyramid in the opening scene. At the climax of the song, Katy Perry is ascending a large, levitating, and technologically enhanced pyramid structure with purple neon lights, which highlight how the viewer’s attention should be directed toward the capstone. At the top of the pyramid, in this final scene, Katy Perry, or Katy-Patra as she is known in the video (presumably a tongue-in-cheek play on the name Cleopatra), walks to the top of the pyramid with a set of wings, that she somehow non-narratively attained, outstretched with a cloud portal of lightening flashing all around her.

A well-known conspiracy website on the internet known as Vigilant Citizen shares an analysis of “Dark Horse” saying that, in this final climatic scene, “when Katy-Patra steps on top of the unfinished pyramid, she becomes imbued with crazy magical powers. She even grows wings” (para. 35). These “crazy magical powers” are certainly part of the paranoia that is intrinsic to the conspiracy theory discourse, such that the writer of this article supposes their existence as an actual possibility, albeit occult, secret, and hidden from most of the public.

Yet, in a more totalizing sense, the analysis given by Vigilant Citizen blankets the Other with monolithic signifiers, thereby obfuscating political, historical, or even symbolic nuances that would antecedently be required to bring something like this about. The conspiracy theorist writes that “seeing this pyramid, Katy-Patra gets very excited because that’s what she, and the elite, truly wants: Unlimited occult power over the world. The illuminated pyramid essentially represents the Illuminati’s high-tech control over the world” (Vigilant Citizen para. 34). As indicated earlier, terms like the “Illuminati” are homogenizing in nature, which is often a characteristic of conspiracy rhetoric in general. As Carter writes, “The Illuminati is often used as a placeholder, invoked when the real identities of those behind a conspiracy are unknown” (133). What they attempt to signify, an esoteric manipulation and takeover of planet earth, demonstrating the paranoid Other of knowledge as such, can only be accessed or decrypted through a symbol that stands in the place of the signifier. In the examples I have been using, this symbol is the pyramid with the all-seeing eye.

This relationship between the symbol and the chain of signifiers that give the Other of knowledge any meaning whatsoever is necessarily made through a paranoid connection, even if the degree of this paranoia is normal and aids in everyday functioning and sociality. To bring this home a bit more, Lacan (2006) refers to the rationalist philosopher René Descartes in the following quote to demonstrate the form of madness that is intrinsic to this conspiratorial logic, between the symbol and the meaning it allows the subject to access:

Assuredly, one can say that the madman believes he is different [*autre*] than he is. Descartes said as much in his sentence about those who believe “that they are arrayed in gold and purple robes,” where he conformed to the most anecdotal of all stories about madmen [...] [this] was the key to understanding paranoia. (139)

The form of madness that Lacan quotes Descartes on is also found, I suggest, in the following excerpt taken from Vigilant Citizen. The actual conspiracy theorist says, referring back to the “Dark Horse” video now, “standing on top of the Illuminati pyramid, Katy-Patra turns into a super-powerful tyrant. That’s probably not a good thing. More importantly, she becomes a personification of the goddess Isis” (Vigilant Citizen para. 36).

The form of sovereignty that both of these quotations point to must necessarily, if Lacan is right, contain that kernel of madness that is part-and-parcel to the production and circulation of knowledges, a madness that is, by its very nature, a

paranoid madness. This sovereignty, in both cases it would seem, is found strictly from within the Other. That is to say, the subject, Descartes, Vigilant Citizen, and so on decipher the coming of such a sovereignty, emanating out of the totalizing and encircling powers that the pyramid with the all-seeing eye stands for—i.e., using their words: “a super-powerful tyrant” (Vigilant Citizen para. 36) that is “arrayed in gold and purple robes” (Lacan *Écrits*, 136).

To cap off the analysis of how the pyramid symbol within the conspiracy theory discourse helps to demonstrate the essentially paranoid nature of knowledge, the final video is aptly just named “Pyramids” and is performed by the music artists Frank Ocean and John Mayer. As one might expect, the pyramid is featured extensively in this music video, showing up either as a part of the landscape or in its more stylized version, again, constructed out of neon lights.² This time, however, instead of being a machinic superstructure upon which the sovereign of the Other sits, this scene depicts a neon-blue pyramid with a neon-red Kabbalah tree of life at its center. Frank Ocean and John Mayer stand and play guitar at the pyramid’s base.

This certainly establishes a different dynamic to the scene when contrasted to the “Dark Horse” video, since there is no apotheosis of a sovereign, no overt ascension to the top of the pyramid. It is also different in kind from the “Grass Ain’t Greener” video in that the pyramid does not signal a party or an invitation to join a secret club. Rather, in Frank Ocean’s take, the pyramid connotes a certain spiritual path, made overtly manifest by the reference to the Kabbalah tree of life.

Illuminati Watcher, a popular website that frequently details the connection between the music industry and conspiracy, writes, specifically in reference to this video:

The Sephirot (a.k.a. Sefirot) is better known as the Tree of Life. It shows us eleven circles (but only ten attributes), with each one representing one of God’s emanations [...] it is best expressed through the concept that we are all part of one ocean of consciousness. (Weishaupt 3)

Here, even the conspiracy theorists agree as to the nature of the pyramid and how it may contain, quite literally in Ocean’s video, an esoteric or occult spiritualism.

² Unfortunately, it is somewhat beyond the scope of the present analysis to explore the repetition of the neon motif and how this might relate to the pyramid structure within the selected music videos or elsewhere. Suffice it to say, the connection is interesting, particularly if it is positioned next to the claim by some conspiracy theorists that insinuates an ecumenical motivation to the nature of the Other.

Yet again, for the purposes of this article, I want to highlight the way that the pyramid is jostled and appropriated by these different music videos. In other words, it never takes on a stable consistency whereby one may then definitely ascertain its “hidden” meaning.

Bringing these differences back to the beginning of the discussion of the Other’s repetition compulsion at the onset of this section, what this amounts to is the Other trying to signify an encoded form of trauma, ultimately its symptomology, to the subject. However, attempting to interpret this symptom, concretized in the pyramid with the all-seeing eye, necessarily belies a paranoia such that the subject is helpless to do anything about it. This results in a discourse that is as close to “knowledge” as one can actually get.

The “Truth” to the Conspiracy: Discussion and Conclusion

Understanding the nature of conspiracy is now more important than ever. As alluded to at the inauguration of this essay, the “post-truth” world we now inhabit contains plenty of examples of conspiracy gone mainstream: the politically and internet-driven QAnon movement (LaFrance), the sensationalized *Plandemic* documentary (Frenkel, Decker, and Alba), and tweets by the President of the United States that Black Lives Matter protestors are a funded terrorist organization (Perez and Hoffman). What are we to believe? Who are we to believe? And, first and foremost, what is the nature of belief itself? A revived treatment of how a kernel of paranoia exists within all knowledge and beliefs goes to show precisely how these ideas gain traction: through the false projection that there is some hidden hand controlling the social order.

The pyramid with the all-seeing eye epitomizes this, symbolically. As we have seen in the foregoing analysis, the way that the symbol functions in the video and the way that it is taken up by the conspiracy theorists is a dialectical move such that the symbol comes to represent a self-reinforcing and paranoid sedimentation of the knowledge itself, underpinning its popularity and shared epistemology. It is not the case, then, that one is able to say anything definite about the validity of this kind of knowledge, least of all via a correspondence theory of truth, as though the symbol has some signified to which it referred. Nevertheless, the large territory that this discourse occupies on the internet and in the material lives of the actors involved, music artists and conspiracy theorists alike, says something about its own

truth power, its ability to replicate and reproduce in spite of any authoritarian sanction or institutional proclamation.

The upshot this has for popular culture is the revelation that the ‘surface’ nature of epistemologies makes them especially amenable to an analysis using Lacanian theory that is aligned with similar values as to the way signs and knowledges are shared communally. Put simply, the only way one can judge the truth claim of a bit of knowledge is precisely through the socio-symbolic effects that it has, the degree to which it is shared among its interlocutors. In this way, the distinction between what is real and what is not, as if there were a signified, gets lost in the textuality of popular culture. In a strict theoretical sense, then, popular media enjoys a privileged domain of research and knowledge insofar as this domain is predicated on the Lacanian conspiratorial and paranoid understanding of knowledge.

What this says about the genre of music videos specifically is very close to Lisa St. Clair Harvey’s point when the researcher writes that a way to broaden understanding of popular culture “is to expand critical theory’s rejection of media’s surface *meanings* to include a rejection of surfaces *uses*” (40, emphasis in original). Such an intervention, by the music video, sets sail old and dated notions of structure that are the remnants of either modernism or, at the very least, a generation of artists, practitioners, or researchers that have relied on the firm and binding distinction between, in the previous example, meaning and use to buttress their intuitional positions and identity. Pushed further, as Harvey noted, this is even to challenge critical theory to self-reflect on its own *modus operandi* and the protocols and technologies that it secretly may take as axiomatic.

Yet, in contradistinction to Harvey, a Lacanian interpretation of music videos, specifically as it pertains to knowledge and discourse as such, does not constitute “just a ritual” that goes toward the smooth functioning of sociality: “the overall maintenance of the social order, as do all good ritual devices” (Harvey 60). Upon the forgoing analysis in this article, the secret messages that are supposedly hidden within the music videos work toward an apocalypse of the social order, in its etymological sense, insofar as this ‘apocalypse’ requires the fantasy of teleological progression—e.g., the culmination of the conspiratorial logic and its subsequent collapse into normative knowledge practices.

The abandonment of sense, in the most general understanding of the term, as well as taking seriously the surface ontology of popular media studies—the fluidity of the meaning/use distinction—does not amount to a genre or media, like music videos, that is substantively vacuous therein imparting no real knowledge. As Sue

Lorch says, music videos “are the metaphysical poetry of the twentieth century [...] conveying truths inexpressible discursively” (143). I would share a similar pollyannaish sentiment about music videos, in line with Lorch, albeit tinged with a healthy dose of Lacanian irreverence as if to say that music videos are the epistemological poetry of the twentieth century. They do not only convey inexpressible discursive truths but they also, in a stronger sense, lay bare the paranoid heart of discourse itself—popular, colloquial, or otherwise.

In no way, however, is this a cynical or nihilistic take on the phenomenon since, as I have argued, such a thesis brings epistemological production (e.g., music videos) as flush as possible to Lacan’s own ideas on the matter. Now in agreement here, Lorch writes:

By showing not that it is possible to erase the line between truth and fiction, but that *that line does not really exist* [emphasis added], music videos recognize the power of the creative intelligence and suggest to us that we are the art which we ourselves have made. (154)

Indeed, the blurring of the difference between the artwork and the artist, alluded to earlier, could be the very thing that Lacan was trying to transmit; his medium happened to be language and Rihanna’s happens to be music videos. In both cases, it would seem, “the paranoia of popular culture” intercedes precisely at the disjunct of not being able to comprehend this unique and very strange form of creation.

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