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The Sleep of Neoliberal Reason: Denialism, Conspiracies and Storytelling on Crises through *Ventajas de viajar en tren*

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Abstract: Do fictional figurations and their formal characteristics determine our relationship with the world? In a historical moment in which several crises overlap (economic, environmental, health), what cultural imaginaries circulate and with what consequences? One of the effects of this multilevel crisis, resulting from unrestrained neoliberalism, has been the rise of conspiracy theories of all kinds. The narrative of these conspiracies converges in many ways with the discursive structure of storytelling and fiction. Such narratives seem to serve as a model to interpret the present, overflowing the realm of representation. This article will explore commonalities between narrativity and conspiracy theories. In doing so, it will analyze *Ventajas de viajar en tren*, a novel by Antonio Orejudo and subsequent film adaptation Aritz Moreno. The story consists of a formal exploration of creating writing from a plot that addresses issues, such as conspiracy and mental health. I propose to invert this scheme to analyze how conspiracy theory operates as an act of discursive creation and what effects it has on our experience of the present and our relationship with the present and future in social, political and cultural terms.

Keywords: denialism; conspiracy; narrative; neoliberalism



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El sueño de la razón produce monstruos
[The sleep of reason produces monsters]

Francisco de Goya

The obstacles society faces in confronting the climate and environmental crisis are closely related to the sphere of discursive production. The main impediment to regulating and reforming the prevailing modes of production and consumption is anchored, first and foremost, in the hegemony of the capitalist system and its inherent mechanisms of operation. The orgy of 'creative destruction' that is sweeping away "social relations . . . ways of life and thought, reproductive activities, attachments to the land and habits of the heart" (Harvey 2007, p. 3) is imposed by the system's—otherwise impossible—the need for infinite accumulation and growth (Moore 2015, p. 11; Arrizabalo 2016, p. 28). Nevertheless, the myth of unlimited growth is ideologically sustained. The discursive mechanisms that such ideology activates in order to persuade society of capitalist sustainability are diverse, often combined, and have been studied by scholars from political theory, cultural studies and ecocritical studies, among others. Prádanos (2018) speaks of a capitalist imaginary that assimilates the idea of progress with that of growth, from which a completely incoherent ideological paradigm is organized: "To maintain itself, this imaginary social signification requires that no absolute limits to growth be recognized, no matter how counterintuitive that may be in the context of a finite and ecologically depleted biosphere" (Prádanos 2018, p. 11). The evident inconsistency of a productive model based on unlimited growth in an environment of finite resources is disguised by techno-optimist discourses and dissuasive rhetoric against radical logic. The concept of 'capitalist realism', coined by Mark Fisher, explains how even the critical enunciation of these conflicts through cultural objects (fiction, documentary, music, etc.) within the capitalist market, rather than mobilizing resistance,

often reinforces the assumptions that it supposedly denounces. Fisher gives the example of the Disney-Pixar film *Wall-e*, which depicts a planet totally ruined by the consumer industry and the waste it generates. However, the environmentalist critique is thwarted by the inclusion of a spaceship that is capable—without specifying how—of sustaining an idle and infantilized human species waiting for technology (the robots that are the protagonists of the plot) to solve the problem. Under its apparent critical will, the film mobilizes techno-optimistic idealism and stimulates the phenomenon of ‘interpassivity’ (the consumption of cultural products that convey an anti-capitalist discourse as a substitute for any possible truly disruptive action) (Fisher 2009, pp. 12, 18). Capitalism, Fisher tells, “seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable” (Fisher 2009, p. 8) and, therefore, the certainty of its unsustainability does not promote its dismantling, but rather generalizes a sort of acceptance of the consummated end, in the manner of the anticipation of mourning. This is what Marina Garcés has called ‘the posthumous condition’ of contemporary culture (Garcés 2017, p. 16).

Late capitalism and the overlapping of diverse crises give rise to a landscape of generalized tribulation. As Verónica Gago has explained, the prevailing neoliberalism imposes the reason of calculation, accumulation and competition, not only as an economic imperative but also as a system of governmentality and biopolitical disciplining. This is what she calls neoliberal reason. However, the collective experience of multileveled crisis causes the supposed logic of neoliberal reason to uncover its grotesque appearance, and it begins to arouse suspicions. The current crisis brings together economic depression, the crisis of political representation, the environmental emergency and the COVID-19 pandemic. In Spain, precariousness has intensified enormously in recent years, in a context of greater vulnerability than ever before, and the lack of alternatives and the loss of control over material conditions is coupled with a media storm and a revitalization of populist reactionary discourses. After the 2008 economic crisis, social movements of all kinds arose in the country, as in other regions, to challenge neoliberal foundations and resist the supposed social determinism it imposes (Garcés 2017; Moreno-Caballud 2017; Labrador 2014; Castro Picón 2022). However, not all reactions to the growing skepticism seem to be equally emancipatory. What remains of social movements coexist with another position of a drastically different nature, which is the radical refusal to accept empirical material conditions and verifiable explanations of the situation. This attitude is known as denialism. Paradoxically, studies in psychology have shown that environmental denialism often comes together with the endorsement of the neoliberal understanding of the free market as a de-regulated economy, as well as the belief in conspiracy theories (Lewandowsky 2018, p. 153)¹. At the same time, this position allows those who embrace it to evade themselves from the climate emergency (among others) as a future horizon while perpetuating the cultural logic of the dominant system. To this end, conspiracy narratives seem to be a functional discursive framework from which to contest the discomfort of facts. Clearly, denialism is nothing but a way of reacting to the high level of instability produced by late capitalism, which undermines the hegemony of neoliberal reason. In this sense, I propose to reformulate Goya’s famous *capricho* that opens this article in order to answer the following question: if the sleep of reason produces monsters, what are the monsters of the neoliberal reason when it sleeps? Depicted by denialism and conspiracy, one of the forms this monster takes is the cancelation of all rationality in favor of a paranoid mentality that constructs a fantasy to escape from facts and empirical knowledge. Studies show “that the common thread in liberal and conservative rejection of science is the presence of conspiracist ideation”, the reason why “there are strong reasons to think that perceptions of conspiracy are a principal driver of both rejection of science and distrust in scientists” (Pasek 2018, p. 210). Taken together, the broad set of denialist and conspiracist positions entails the radical rejection of a large part of the fundamental problems facing society. Its existence evidences a lack of collective consensus beyond political disagreement, but with respect to the mere perception of common reality. As Marietta and Barker warn, this issue fundamentally determines our

future outcomes, since “without agreement on where we are, deciding collectively where we ought to go is practically impossible” (Pasek 2018, p. 216).

In this article I will discuss some denialist and conspiracist positions that have recently emerged in Spain, and how they are a problematic force that can affect the political imaginary within crises and somehow determine their future outcome, particularly with regard to environmental and health crises. Mark Fenster clearly pointed out how “the particular conventions of the conspiracy narrative are articulated within the norms and standards of popular storytelling” as it “attempts to unify seemingly disparate, globally significant elements and events within a singular plot, doing so through the traditional logic of conventional popular narratives” (Fenster 2008, p. 108). Therefore, understanding the phenomenon from the perspective of Cultural Studies allows an approach that illuminates structural and essential aspects of its functioning, opening other ways to tackle the serious problem that it entails. For that purpose, my article will explain the internal structures of denialism and conspiracy discourse in relation to narrative, as a performative speech capable of overflowing the plane of representation and impacting people’s collective subjectivity and perception of the world.

Verisimilitude is overrated’, this is the central statement that organizes the plot of the film *Ventajas de viajar en tren* (Moreno 2019a), based on the novel of the same name by Antonio Orejudo. Although the novel was first published in 2000, he recovers this work for its adaptation almost 20 years later, in a context of widespread instability and marked by the increasingly intense economic deregulation and the rise of forms of leadership that promote conspiracies for political gain. I will analyze the novel and the film jointly in order to illuminate some overlaps between narrative and conspiracy, as it is a story that uses classic conspiracy theory tropes to conduct a metafictional exploration. Orejudo’s and Moreno’s exploration of the limits of verisimilitude in fiction, and the functions and potencies of storytelling to account for reality will serve as a description of the conspiracist accounting of reality in the context of the current and overlapped crises.

1. Everything Is a Lie: Scientific Denialism and Current Conspiracies in Spain

In Spain, as well as in other countries, the latest great wave of denialism—openly anti-scientific, furthermore—stems from the world health crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. This situation triggers a profound break of the conventional definition of reality (Fernández-Savater 2020), which generates a social shock and generalizes a sense of anguish and unease. In addition, society is experiencing a massive circulation of misinformation, rumors, or openly false news whose expansion has a ‘contagious’ character, what Zarocostas (2020) has called ‘infodemia’. In this context, a conspiracy emerges to offer meaning in the face of chaos and contradictory information (Elorduy 2020; Pierre 2020). If the disorganized and tentative nature of the early information on the virus mobilizes among many people the suspicion of the official version (i.e., communications from the World Health Organization, the scientific international community, Governments, etc.) the same distrust immediately encourages a series of conspiracy theories around the virus: that it was an artificially created biological weapon, that it was designed to force vaccination and remotely control the population through 5G technology, that it did not exist, etc. These suspicions lead to increased skepticism against the use of masks and, above all, a visceral rejection of the vaccine. Moreover, denialism and conspiracies about the health aspect of the crisis converge with other theories that precede the outbreak and that are not specifically anti-scientific but broadly political. One clear example of this is the conspiracy around ‘QAnon’. Gathered around the messages of ‘Q’, a popular user of the social network 4Chan, its supporters claim that the former American president Donald Trump was fighting a crusade against a secret organization of the world elite (‘deep state’) that tries to undermine democracy and freedom in multiple ways (Goldberg 2018). The arrival of the pandemic was interpreted by these as a diversionary maneuver and a strategy to undermine Trump’s public image. This current is internationally linked to the denialism of the pandemic and reaches Spain reinforcing the rejection of many people to health measures (Verifica RTVE 2020). The whole

matrix of discourses around the pandemic aligns perfectly with the narrative principle whereby, in conspiracy theory, “nothing that happens occurs by accident. Everything is the result of secret plotting in accordance with some sinister design” (Bale 2007, p. 53). The fueling of a set of spurious behind-the-scenes reasons thus eclipses the causality delineated by science, which points to a connection between the environmental disturbances caused by the modes of agri-food (macro)production in the context of global capitalism and this pandemic (de Sousa Santos 2021, pp. 220–34).

The atmosphere produced by the uncertainty during the health crisis and the increasingly widespread circulation of conspiracy theories feeds skepticism about subsequent events. In January 2021, the Filomena squall hits the Iberian Peninsula, causing the most intense snowstorm since 1971. Poor foresight and political mismanagement resulted in a generalized collapse in settlements and roads that lasted for days, as well as innumerable material losses (León 2021). The huge storm followed by a dramatic drop in temperatures led to the question of its relationship to climate change. Many consulted scientists agreed that the storm is part of a series of extreme weather episodes that are increasingly common and directly related to global warming (Martín Vidé 2021; Valladares et al. 2021). However, other theories also emerged. One, in particular, caught the attention of social networks and the media: some people on different social media platforms denied the veracity of the snow that covered most of the national territory. They asserted that the snow on the streets was artificial since it did not melt when approaching the flame of a lighter (J.A.G. 2021). In September of the same year, a volcano erupted in Cumbre Vieja, on the island of La Palma, and even then, some voices claimed that the eruption had been provoked, among other theories, to distract society from the vaccination process against COVID-19 (Mestres 2021). Although tremendously minority, and largely oversized by their coverage in the media and social networks, the existence of these theories attests to the plasticity and fertility of this way of thinking and constructing narratives in the current state of multilevel crisis.

The political success of the conspiratorial discursive matrix to address the current situation of crises has direct consequences on the experience of the present and the cultural imagination of the future. This is what the psychologist and cognitive scientist Stephan Lewandowsky points to in his essay “In Whose Hands the Future?” As he explains, his personal experience of harassment when trying to describe the modus operandi of radical denialism adds to a “growing body of literature which suggests that the aggressive efforts by climate deniers have adversely affected the communication and direction of climate research” (Lewandowsky 2018, p. 168). In recent years, moreover, the instrumentalization of these discourses by a portion of the political rulers in connivance with capitalist elites, always reluctant to carry on a real ecological transition has become evident. The political dominion achieved by feeding this type of conspiracy leads to a questioning of the future of democracy (Lewandowsky 2018, p. 172). However, it is also increasingly evident that the dissemination and implantation of such discourses are hardly prevented with outraged accusations of irrationality. Myths and stories are powerful and have served the human species to narrate themselves, their circumstances and their experiences for much longer than modern science. Therefore, it is from the culturalist perspective, in dialogue with scientific reason and its methods, that this issue must be addressed.

2. The Narratological Turn: From Neoliberal Reason to Conspiracy Theory by Way of Denialism

The term ‘denialism’ appears in different debates on various issues, as it refers to a particular way of responding to facts and official narratives. According to Hoofnagle and Hoofnagle (2007):

Denialism is the employment of rhetorical tactics to give the appearance of argument or legitimate debate, when in actuality there is none. These false arguments are used when one has few or no facts to support one’s viewpoint against a scientific consensus or against overwhelming evidence to the contrary. They are effective in

distracting from actual useful debate using emotionally appealing, but ultimately empty and illogical assertions. (Hoofnagle and Hoofnagle 2007, p. 1)

Effects and rhetoric constitute the discursivity that organizes this attitude², in a way not so different from the ideology that sustains capitalism—in fact, such ideology could be easily thought of as a form of denialism: it denies the limits of the earth's resources and the limits of human labor. Besides, in both cases, the process that is triggered is directly linked to the production of a certain discourse—through which a certain representation of the world is conceived—while at the same time mobilizing a series of specific effects or passions. However, there are fundamental differences between the mechanisms that organize both tendencies. Dominant ideology within late capitalism usually works by covering up its contradictions, taking them out of focus, either by promoting a utopian discourse centered on a certain idea of freedom (Harvey 2007, pp. 26, 45) or by dissuading that a better alternative is impossible (Jameson 2005, p. xxi; Fisher 2009, p. 2). Denialism and conspiracy, conversely, combine to operate, first, a cancellation of the official account of facts, and then to create an alternative account that works on the basis of eminently narrative logic. They trigger a logic of representation of the world that is essentially narratological, which will be discussed in this article. Mark Fenster is perhaps the one who has most clearly explained the correspondence between facts and fiction in a conspiracy:

The conspiracy narrative circulates in contemporary culture as both historical and fictional narrative. Numerous novels, films, and television series include real people, places, and events in their conspiracy thrillers, while the explicitly “historical” work of conspiracy theorists often evokes unproven, often quite fanciful, accounts to explain historical events. (Fenster 2008, p. 106)

Deepening this scheme, we can affirm that denialism is the mechanism that triggers the suspension of the official narrative—whether the latter has been made official through deterrence (ideologically or by means of discipline) or through empirical demonstrations as in the case of the scientific method. Denialism has been explained through the term ‘conspiracism’, “which is conspiracy without the theory, or in other words, bare assertions without providing explanations” (Sturm and Albrecht 2020, p. 4). The gap produced by the cancellation of the hegemonic narrative is very often filled by conspiracy theories or alternative theories that, in the best of cases, are usually supported by explanations and data that are not contrasted and, more importantly, cannot be contrasted. This is what Rudy Reichstadt (2015) explains as the transition from “denial to conspiracist re-writing of the facts” (Reichstadt 2015, p. 49). Reichstadt (2015), focusing on Holocaust denialism, recognizes a continuity between denialists and conspiracists, as well as between the various and numerous forms of conspiracy. First, he recognizes the same “very selective application of skeptical doubt”, which, on the one hand, serves to cast suspicion on anything that endorses the official theories and, on the other hand, allows one to cling to any clue that reinforces the alternative theory, however, inconsistent it may be (Reichstadt 2015, pp. 71–72). He also describes the way conspiracies converge with each other using the concept of ‘conspirosphere’. In describing the network of combined conspiracies, he also highlights the rhetorical structure as its main common attribute:

The protagonists of this conspirosphere come from political orientations that are sometimes far removed from one another and which do not all belong to the same linguistic or cultural zones. All nevertheless have as a common denominator the constant application of a rhetoric, which, directly or indirectly, improperly attributes the origin of an historical event or a public incident to an unacknowledgeable plot whose presumed instigators—or those thought to profit from it—are alleged to be conspiring in their own interests to conceal the truth. (Reichstadt 2015, p. 51)

From this perspective, denialism and conspiracy represent and reproduce a discursive matrix, which is to say, a certain rhetorical structure that can be replicated in many

discourses giving the whole a specific and common nature (Beacco 2005, pp. 376–77). Pete Mandik (2007) systematizes the conspiratorial structure as follows:

Conspiracy theories postulate

1. explanations of
2. historical events in terms of
3. intentional states of multiple agents (the conspirators) who, among other things
4. intended the historical events in question to occur and
5. keep their intentions and actions secret.

For Mandik (2007), the key point of conspiracies is that they are “inherently or *prima facie* unjustified,” which is why they are always marked by the immanence of secrecy. If this aspect were to disappear, the conspiracy theory would automatically cease to be a conspiracy theory. In other words, to be so, the conspiracy theory does not allow itself to be contrasted (Mandik 2007, p. 214). This aspect, which seems a formal triviality in the categorization, has essential implications among the collective of conspiracists and denialists. Psychology indicates that, to a large extent, the mental and subjective process that operates in the seduction of some conspiracies is very similar to that of certain religious cults (Pierre 2020). On the one hand, the sense of belonging to an exclusive group of people in possession of exceptional truth, in the face of a deluded mass, feeds the impression of being part of a chosen people (Sturm and Albrecht 2020, p. 7; Imhoff and Lamberty 2017). On the other hand, the type of community organizing around the conspiracy is not only similar to a religious one, but in some cases, the two tend to overlap, as in the case of certain evangelical groups that deny the COVID-19 (Sturm and Albrecht 2020, pp. 6–7). In other cases, conspiracy and spirituality converge in the same movement, what Charlotte Ward and David Voas call ‘conspiritualism’ (Ward and Voas 2011, p. 104). The convergence between conspiracies and religious movements lies in the secret immanence of conspiracy, which has much in common with the mechanism of belief in divinity, that is, the mobilization of a shared faith that generates a community around its irresolvable mystery. Faith in mystery is sustained through very diverse social, material and symbolic institutions, but, at its core, there is always a narration that accounts for the events to which the brotherhood in faith is linked.

In the prologue to the annotated edition of the book of Genesis, published in 2021 by Blackie Books, the editors, Pau Ferrandis Ferrer and Ramon Solé Solé (Ferrer and Solé 2021), present the text as “el relato más extraordinario jamás contado” [the most extraordinary story ever told]. They highlight its “potencia y una eficacia jamás igualadas” [force and efficacy never equaled] and point out that the text:

... pese a poseer bien claramente la principal característica de mitos y leyendas, que es la de ser inverosímiles, han sido tomadas como verdades incuestionables por miles de millones de personas, incluidas algunas de las mentes más brillantes y lúcidas que han existido nunca. (Ferrer and Solé 2021, pp. 17–18)

[... despite clearly possessing the main characteristic of myths and legends, which is that of being implausible, they have been taken as unquestionable truths by billions of people, including some of the most brilliant and lucid minds that have ever existed.]

This is precisely the power of storytelling and fiction. Its artifice consists in producing stories that, although false, generate a state that activates the suspension of disbelief and, under certain conditions, that can even be passed off as true without the need for any proof. Likewise, once the skeptical doubt of the denialist dismisses the official account of the facts, the conspiracy theory comes into play, taking on the task of filling the void and emulating the structure of fiction to do so. Another particularity of the discursive matrix of conspiracy, matching once again with religion, is that it is made to transcend the space of symbolic representation, it “presents itself as ‘objective history’ and brings a ‘realistic’ coherence to disparate events through an integrative logic of conspiracy” (Fenster 2008, p. 110). Despite its seemingly secular logic, Pipes (1997) points out that, like many cults

“[c]onspiracy theories have a way of growing on a person, to the point that they become a way of seeing life itself” (Pipes 1997, p. 22). Conspiracy theory provides something to believe in during times of great uncertainty and offers a compensatory feeling for the lack of control (Douglas et al. 2017, p. 539). It also serves to translate an increasingly sophisticated and complex world, marked by individual powerlessness and collective unease (to which the imminence of the climate crisis contributes), into an easily decodable moral grammar (Bale 2007, p. 51). Based on a Manichean structure, conspiracists attribute to conspirators, the same attributes as those of villains in classical narrative or cinema.

They are not simply people with differing values or run-of-the-mill political opponents, but inhuman, superhuman and/or anti-human beings who regularly commit abominable acts and are implacably attempting to subvert and destroy everything that is decent and worth preserving in the existing world. (Bale 2007, p. 51)

To a certain extent, read from the outside and against the grain, the conspiracist is of a Quixotic nature: Alonso Quijano inhabits an unfair and corrupt world in crisis, increasingly complex and unmanageable; a world in sum, that seems insurmountable (the kind of situation that gave rise to the Baroque, after all). In front of that, he finds in literature a harmonious and consistent world, where good and evil are perfectly differentiated. Therefore, in an escapist turn, he believes that this world is real, or rather, he makes the political decision to live as if it were.

3. *Ventajas de viajar en tren* or How to Get Rid of Verisimilitude and Coherence

Released in 2019, the film *Ventajas de viajar en tren*, by Aritz Moreno, is a film adaptation of the namesake novel by Antonio Orejudo, published in 2000. The adaptation covers about half of the novel (Moreno 2019b, 0:00–0:39), with very subtle variations of the chosen sections and great respect for the dialogues (although sometimes shortened)³. It narrates the encounter on a train between a man with multiple personalities and a literary editor⁴. The story is built from a series of intertwined plots, that the man tells the editor or she reads herself from his lost notebook, in the style of an intricately Chinese box. These different stories are intertwined through continuous metaleptic jumps (Genette), or transgressions among different diegetic levels. In addition, some of the main characters transmute from one to another through a constant supplantation of personalities with which the protagonist plays to confuse the editor. In different stories bewilderedly combined, Martín Urales de Úbeda, the psychiatric patient whom Helga Pato meets on the train, impersonates, respectively, the psychiatrist Ángel Sanagustín, his brother-in-law), or his sister, Amelia Urales de Úbeda. In addition to these misleading mechanisms, there are the different versions of his life that he reconstructs at different times: as an army officer in Kosovo during the war or as a garbage collector persecuted by the secret political police, for example. In the film, this transmutation effect is further accentuated by the switching of actors playing Martín’s different personalities as the story jumps from one diegetic level to another and, at times, makes the journey back to the conversation on the train. The change of actors and actresses is added to differential treatment in the color palette that marks each of the diegetic jumps. Besides, the narrative disorientation produced by the metamorphoses of both characters and plot recounts is strengthened by the use of antique camera lenses that produce deformations in their paths through the scene.

The director and the production company have stated that looking for a story that would fit Aritz Moreno’s style, they came across *Ventajas de viajar en tren*, which fascinated them with the way it mixes plots and tones (between black humor and thriller). Based on these statements, their decision seems to have been made for formal rather than thematic reasons. Moreover, twenty years later, the film has resulted extremely topical. The novel was written in the international context of the Yugoslav Wars, which it echoes. Tackling this historical situation through a conspiracist subplot, the novel and film address the links between structural violence, its deregulation in contexts of the war crisis, the rawness of capitalism and the impunity of power and elites. At the beginning of the plot, Ángel

tells Helga the story of the paranoid Martín as the sister of the later, Amelia Urales de Úbeda, supposedly told to him in a letter⁵. After becoming an army officer, Martín is assigned to the war in Yugoslavia. There he meets a doctor who runs an orphanage. She becomes involved in a conspiracy implicating members of the international elite who abuse and murder children and then trade their bodies. When he also becomes involved in the intrigue, Martín ends up expelled from the army and chased by the clandestine organization. This conspiratorial story made up by Orejudo is surprisingly similar to the one known as ‘Pizza Gate’, that widely circulates in the conspirosphere⁶ since it became popular in 2016. The theory, which is considered a predecessor of QAnon, denounces the existence of a secret society of wealthy and powerful liberals that performs satanic rituals in which children are abused and murdered (Robb 2017). It is precisely because of the rise of this type of theory that gives new meaning to the revival of Orejudo’s text and its adaptation to film almost 20 years after its publication⁷.

The metaleptic games participate in the metaliterary will that motivates the narrative. In the interviews conducted to promote both the novel and, later, the film, Orejudo acknowledged that his aim was to represent certain literary phenomena, such as the act of reading, the role of the author and the principle of verisimilitude. He explains that the novel is stated as a metaphor for reading or consuming fiction. In other words, what happens between a reader and an author through the mediation of the book (Orejudo 2012, 0:11–25). In the first scene (in both the novel and the film), Helga Pato returns to her home by train after hospitalizing her husband in a psychiatric hospital. Then, Martín Urales de Úbeda sits across from her and asks her the question “¿Le apetece que le cuente mi vida?” [Would you like me to tell you about my life?] (Orejudo 2000, p. 11). According to Orejudo, this is the main question asked by any book (Orejudo 2012, 0:25–1:00). The peculiarity of fiction is that the lives narrator tells are full of lies that the reader, despite knowing that they are lies, is allowed, to a certain extent, to pretend they are true (Orejudo 2012, 1:10–28). That notion of “to a certain extent” is what Orejudo seeks to carry out to the extreme through the character of Helga Pato. She plays the symbol of a reader—in quixotic terms—whose problem “era que confundía a los narradores con los autores y a éstos algunas veces con los personajes” (Orejudo 2000, p. 65) [was that she used to confuse the narrators with the authors and sometimes the authors with the characters.] In the mentioned interview, Orejudo points out that Helga Pato behaves like an inexperienced reader who believes that Ángel Sanagustín is telling true stories. In contrast, Martín Urales de Úbeda/Ángel Sanagustín/Amelia Urales de Úbeda plays the role of the writer, who is constantly changing personality, identity, or disguise and who constantly lies, seeking to captivate the audience (Orejudo 2012, 2:13–3:15). Both the novel and the film explicitly allude to some of these mechanisms in a conversation between the characters. At the end of the plot, Helga Pato tries to convince Martín to publish her fake testimonies of supposed psychiatric patients, and Martín replies:

Yo el lunes que viene hace siete años y dos meses que dejé de leer. Antes sí que leía, leía un huevo, pero ahora, desde que leo con ojos de psiquiatra, no me creo una palabra . . . Además, la verosimilitud me aburre. ¿Para qué tanto esfuerzo en parecer real si todo el mundo sabe que no es más que un libro? (Orejudo 2000, p. 145)

[Next Monday, it will be seven years and two months since I stopped reading. I used to read, I used to read a lot, but now, since I read with the eyes of a psychiatrist, I don’t believe a single word... Besides, verisimilitude bores me. What’s the point of trying so hard to look real if everyone knows it’s just a book?]

I reproduce in this and other moments the dialogue from the original text (Orejudo 2000), slightly edited and trimmed in the film version (Moreno 2019a). However, it is important to note that the film modifies the discourse to include cinematic fiction: “¿Por qué tanto esfuerzo de libros y películas en parecer reales si todo el mundo sabe que no lo son?” (Moreno 2019a, 1:36:10–18) [Why so much effort of books and movies to seem real if everyone knows they

are not?]. In the film, the issue is also reinforced by one of the few relevant addenda to the original text, where Helga Pato justifies herself: “hay una cosa que se llama suspensión de la incredulidad” [there is something called suspension of disbelief] and Martín answer: “la verosimilitud está sobrevalorada” [verisimilitude is overrated] (Moreno 2019a, 1:36:18–28). An instant after uttering it, both characters blow up in a fire in a surprising and dramatic twist that, both in the novel and in the film, underscores the horizon of unimagined possibilities that fiction allows. Moreover, the statement would later be used as a slogan in the promotion of the film, which shows that the radical suspension of this narrative principle is central to the project.

By pushing narrative resources to their limits, the story deconstructs the internal mechanics of fiction while underlining its potential to arbitrate what Ranciere called ‘the distribution of the sensible’, or the regime of what is possible to experience and transmit, according to a logic different from that of rationality. As in *Don Quixote*, the trope of madness sustains to a large extent the symbolic universe of the literary phenomenon. From the first conversation between the characters, Martín, pretending to be Ángel, his psychiatrist brother-in-law, unfolds this parallelism between madness and literary creation as a reconstruction of facts by its own logic.

Los pacientes con esquizofrenia hebefrénica, por ejemplo, presentan una tendencia . . . muy marcada a narrar la propia vida. Estos enfermos tienen una particularidad, y lo hacen cada vez de modo diferente, de manera que su personalidad no consiste en otra cosa que una sucesión de relatos superpuestos como las capas de una cebolla. Cuando nos queremos dar cuenta, no tenemos personalidad propiamente dicha que estudiar, sino una colección de cuentos, una narrativa tras otra, debajo de las cuales no hay persona. (Orejudo 2000, p. 16)

[Patients with hebephrenic schizophrenia, for example, present a very marked tendency to narrate their own life. These patients have a particularity, and they do it each time in a different way, so that their personality does not consist of anything other than a succession of stories superimposed like the layers of an onion. At the very end, we do not have a personality, properly speaking, to study, but a collection of stories, one narrative after another, under which there is no person.]

Along with schizophrenia Martín includes paranoia as another behavior that is productive in terms of narrative creation:

Al contrario que el esquizofrénico, el paciente paranoico está siempre atento a los estímulos externos, estableciendo entre ellos vínculos erróneos. Las narrativas de los paranoicos son extremadamente efectivas y convincentes, y pueden llegar a ser peligrosísimas. Como se puede imaginar, yo trato a gente muy rara, a pacientes que interpretan el mundo de una manera patológica, a sujetos que establecen nexos inexistentes o que extraen conclusiones delirantes. (Orejudo 2000, p. 19 my emphasis⁸)

[Unlike the schizophrenic, the paranoid patient is always attentive to external stimuli, establishing erroneous links between them. The narratives of the paranoid are extremely effective and convincing and can become extremely dangerous. As you can imagine, I treat very strange people, patients who interpret the world in a pathological way, subjects who establish non-existent links or who draw delusional conclusions.]

It is important to point out that both pathologies do not work contrastively but converge as part of the symbolic depiction of the fictional phenomenon. However, the presentation of the paranoid subjectivity triggers the first unfolded version of Martín Urales de Úbeda’s life, and in doing so indirectly establishes the link between literary creation and conspiracy theory. The writer and the conspiracist have in common the extreme attention to external phenomena, which they strive to connect in an equivocal but suggestive way. This first Urales de Úbeda is a garbage collector obsessed with the idea that the waste

collection service harbors a secret state system of mass espionage. According to his theory, the trucks do not shred the garbage but sort and analyze it to monitor the population. His paranoia was so dangerous (according to Martín, pretending to be Ángel) because “su poder de sugestión era hipnótico” [his power of suggestion was hypnotic] and he was able to convince people to throw themselves into trucks to confirm his theory: “Yo, que me tengo por un hombre equilibrado y emocionalmente estable . . . estuve a punto de sucumbir, estuve a un paso de ver el mundo con sus ojos, de convertirme en un paranoico por inducción” (Orejudo 2000, p. 20) [I, who consider myself a balanced and emotionally stable man . . . I was about to succumb, I was one step away from seeing the world through his eyes, from becoming paranoid by induction.]. The ability to convince is not given by the referentiality of the discourse with respect to reality but is of a purely suggestive nature. Martín tries to persuade Ángel by mobilizing emotions that unbalance the concomitance between subject, storytelling and reality through suggestion and seduction. Moreover, the methods of manipulation he uses coincide with the typical elements of conspiracy theory persuasion in general. First, Martín places himself in a position of superiority, as someone who has access to information that the other is unaware of: “No tienes ni puta idea de lo que se cuece en el mundo” (Moreno 2019a, 43:33–38) [You have no fucking idea what’s going on in the world.] Then, based on an incongruous analysis of his garbage, he tries to make Ángel feel like an exceptional subject, which is why he has been chosen:

Te he traído porque eres el elegido. Eres íntegro, porque usas desde hace años maquinillas de afeitar desechables por más que se lancen al mercado otras de triple o cuádruple afeitado; eres idealista, porque no consumes alimentos transgénicos; eres tenaz y perseverante, como indican las cáscaras de pipas de calabaza; pero, sobre todo, sobre todo Ángel, eres valiente, porque bebes mucho café. (Moreno 2019a, 43:58–44:37)

[I have brought you here because you are the chosen one. You have integrity, because you have been using disposable razors for years, even though other triple or quadruple blade are being launched on the market; you are idealistic, because you do not eat transgenic food; you are tenacious and persevering, as indicated by the pumpkin seed shells; but, above all, above all Ángel, you are brave, because you drink a lot of coffee].

This exceptionality entails the ability and the duty to go through the smokescreen and awaken to the truth (Imhoff and Lamberty 2017, p. 725; Elorduy 2020). Martín, in this case, spies on Ángel’s garbage and selects him with the purpose of opening his eyes (“para abrirte los ojos”, Moreno 2019a, 43:27–44:50).

In the background, the author’s intention in this fragment is to symbolically represent the power of seduction that narrative can accomplish. Like Martín with Ángel, the author ‘lures’⁹ the reader on his journey through the plot, stimulating various aspects of his subjectivity: “los silencios que he guardado, las contradicciones en las que he incurrido para intrigarlo, las pistas que le he ido dejando por el camino, y los besos con lengua que le he metido” (Orejudo 2000, p. 51) [the silences I have kept, the contradictions in which I have incurred in order to intrigue you, the clues I have left you along the way, and the French kisses I have given to you]. In fact, by alluding to contradiction, information gaps and the irreverent concatenation of clues, Orejudo deproblematizes and naturalizes them as legitimate discursive elements within fiction.

However, by resorting to conspiratorial discourse to represent literary creation, Orejudo also exposes and deconstructs the internal mechanism of the former. Literature and conspiracy are subject to a regime of discursive production that have in common the suspension of disbelief towards alternative versions of reality, the realization of a plastic verisimilitude not based on reason and the power of suggestion that is sometimes capable of overflowing its domain in the plane of experience. In this way, it is revealed that the discursive matrix of conspiracy produces a kind of counter-knowledge (Sturm and Albrecht 2020, p. 101) that cannot and should not be approached from empirical evidence or rationalization of facts.

The paradox, which Fenster illuminates very clearly, is that, with regard to conspiracy, the resolution of the ‘plot’, the unraveling of the mystery that conceals the theory, remains, by its own internal logic, always unresolved.

[C]onspiracy must be recognized as a cultural practice that attempts to map, in narrative form, the trajectories and effects of power; yet, it not only does so in a simplistic, limited way, but also continually threatens to unravel and leave unsettled the resolution to the question of power that it attempts to address. In attempting to uncover the plot, the conspiracy narrative reveals a longing for closure and resolution that its formal resources cannot satisfy. (Fenster 2008, p. 108)

In *Ventajas de viajar en tren*, the incongruities and inconsistencies evident in the character’s account, which constantly push verisimilitude to the limit, become explicit when the false Ángel reproduces the story to Helga on the train: “Es cierto que todo esto podía ser un cuento, pero es que si nos ponemos así no hacemos nada en la vida” [It is certain that it could all be a fairy tale, but if we behave that way we don’t do anything] (32:39–43) “I spent several days looking for the Amelia Urales de Úbeda’s non-existent house, but it did exist indeed” (Moreno 2019a, 32:51–55). At another moment, when Amelia reveals herself as Martin, that triggers a consequent reformulation of his story. To open a new diegetic level, the new narrator demands:

—“Olvida todo lo que ha dicho mi hermana, pon la mente en blanco y escucha con atención. Yo he sido cinco años basurero . . .

—Pero, ¿no has dicho que todo lo que ha dicho tu hermana era mentira?

—No. He dicho que te olvides de todo lo que ha dicho mi hermana, que pongas la mente en blanco y me escuches con atención. ¿Me vas a escuchar con atención?” (Moreno 2019a, 45:40–46:03)

[—Forget everything my sister has said, empty your mind and listen to me carefully. I was a garbage man for five years

—But didn’t you say that everything your sister said was a lie?

—No. I said forget everything my sister said, empty your mind and listen to me carefully. Will you listen to me carefully?]

In these fragments, the audience attests to how, repeatedly, inconsistency becomes a constituent part of the inner configuration of the story. The outrageous continuities and discontinuities shaping the structure of the story are resolved through the reenactment of a reader-writer contract that requires the renunciation of the reader/spectator of any critical perspective of what is narrated.

In his analysis of conspiracy as narrative, Fenster points out that “conventional ‘classical’ narratives problematize the structures of the conspiracy narrative in their tendency to careen toward incoherence and in the difficulties they face in resolving the excesses of their narrative elements” (Fenster 2008, p. 109). *Ventajas de viajar en tren*, evades these same conventions or, rather, manipulate them to its extreme. In this way, it exploits the plasticity of narrative resources and makes it evident that “verisimilitude is overrated”, that is, it does not play a fundamental role in the operability of the fictional story. In doing so, it reveals precisely why the conspiracy narrative can afford to dispense coherence, at the expense of that *excess of narrative* that Fenster recognizes. *Ventajas de viajar en tren* works just like conspiracies, and just like conspiracies, it shapes a literary device that works, despite its incongruities, or precisely because of them.

4. Conclusions

The profuse circulation of conspiracies that conceive hidden causes behind today’s major political and environmental claims seems to be the consequence of a feeling that combines a profound distrust in the failed neoliberal project and a generalized feeling of impotence. In this situation, conspiracy appears as a self-conclusive belief system, which neither can nor needs to be contrasted. Power, within the discursive matrix of

conspiracy theories, takes on a theological nature. Its impenetrable and inescapable nature prevents direct confrontation with it. Marina Garcés characterized radical enlightenment as a critical impulse inclined to submit everything to examination, even modern rationality itself. Reason is conceived by radical criticism as a product of a historically determined epistemology that is always susceptible to producing perversions and monsters in its own image (Garcés 2017, p. 37). From this perspective, we can speak of the current success of conspiracy theories as the dreams produced by neoliberal reason. As Fenster demonstrated, the discursive matrix that organizes the conspiracy genre has a narratological structure. The neoliberal reason, without being discarded, is thus clothed in a self-enclosed narrative, in the manner of fictional storytelling, which allows its followers to navigate the emergency, give it meaning, and also, to disengage themselves from any agency to contain the crisis. This narrative, as I have shown, has much in common with myths, just as it can be understood as a Quixotic delirious response to a world in decline. Conspiracy theories offer narratives that mix ideas and data in an arbitrary but highly suggestive way. These discourses, among other things, serve to make sense of the environmental emergency that today and in an increasingly evident way compromises the survival of all that is human and more than human. Particularly fruitful in the field of the COVID-19 pandemic, they seem to be plastic enough to capture any other notion or matter, belonging to the scientific realm in order to twist it and call it into question. This antagonism with science is a clear symptom of the rejection of positivism which, in turn, demands a different articulation for which narratology is a useful tool. That is why, in order to understand the social functionality of conspiracy, it is useful and urgent to apprehend its narrative structuring. If Fenster noted that the conspiracy narrative seeks to articulate the most unconnected events in a single plot, then the task of understanding how storytelling works becomes relevant. In particular, the plot and structure of the film *Ventajas de viajar en tren*, and the novel it is based on that I have analyzed here, are outstanding examples to work with. On the one hand, the alignment of inaccessible forms of capitalist power and domination and the conspiratorial drive is the central issue of the story. On the other hand, by premeditatedly overturning some of the rudiments that usually articulate the principle of verisimilitude, the story controverts the need for logical continuity in sustaining a functional narrative. Therefore, the metafictional project that the plot displays, when read against the grain, serves us to understand the representational dynamics that conspiracies set in motion. *Ventajas de viajar en tren* explores the paranoid nature of fiction through the topic of conspiracy thought, as an extreme case of the attempt to find unity of meaning among unconnected elements. For that reason, it is also an exploration of the conspiracy narrative itself, its foundations and the reasons for its effectiveness, despite its incongruity.

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Notes

- ¹ It is important to point out that Lewandowsky talks about the former as a “quantitatively less pronounced factor” (Lewandowsky 2018, p. 153).
- ² It is important to note the involvement of major corporations and think tanks, with large interests vested in environmental immobility, in the promotion of these trends of thought (Dunlap and McCright 2015).
- ³ In this text, I will quote alternatively the novel and the film as it is more convenient. When there is a relevant dissonance between the two cases, I will note it.
- ⁴ In the novel, Helga Pato is, instead, a literary agent.
- ⁵ Later we discover that Amelia is also Martín in disguise. As we can see, all the characters are, in one way or another, an unfolding of Martín, as a representation of the figure of the author.

- ⁶ In addition, other subplots address issues, such as gender violence or the sexist myths of porn that link to the fourth feminist wave. Not to mention how the memory of the Yugoslav Wars resonates today, a few years after the film's release, to the current war in Ukraine.
- ⁷ There is also a recent version in radio series ('sound fiction') produced by Radio Televisión Española and scripted by Alfonso Latorre, which was premiered in December 2022.
- ⁸ The italicized section does not appear in the film version.
- ⁹ In the novel, Martín says to Ángel "Traído no es la palabra: atraído sería más apropiado" (Orejudo 2000, p. 51) [Brought is not the proper word, lured is more appropriate], which emphasizes the persuasive power of the narrative.

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