Mari-Liis Madisson and Andreas Ventsel, **Strategic Conspiracy Narratives: A Semiotic Approach**, Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2021, 134 pp., $128.00 (hardcover).

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Conspiracy theories matter because they focus attention on power. Who is really doing what? This creates a community bond for those who believe they know, against those who are conspiring against a society, nation, or even the human race and planet. This becomes a template by which to judge any new event against a stock of memories of past events that evidence the villains' continual misdeeds. It brings moral affirmation and sense of purpose, victimhood yet possible heroism against those hidden or callous villains. A narrative is formed, linking past, present, and future. Conspiracy theories are grounded in a strategic narrative because it is a narrative with a political goal in history-to-come. How do Madisson and Ventsel illuminate this, and what can we learn from this?
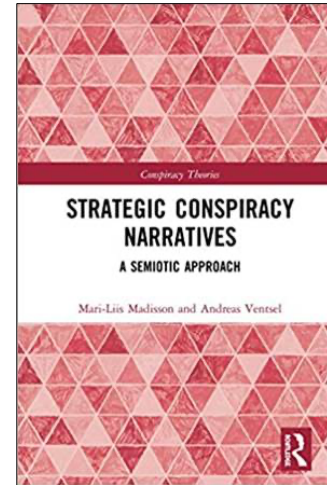
Strategic Conspiracy Narratives: A Semiotic Approach is the study of what conspiracy narratives are projected in Eastern Europe about George Soros. Since the focus is on texts, the authors choose semiotics to study how conspiracy narratives are presented and interact across a range of media platforms. Authors Mari-Liis Madisson and Andreas Ventsel apply two approaches. First, they apply strategic narrative theory to consider how actors seek to guide audiences' actions in international relations. I developed strategic narrative theory with my colleagues to explain the ways in which those projecting a narrative could generate among a group or community a feeling of moving through time in a certain political direction, with all the hope or dread this entails. The circulation and contestation of narrative can be enacted across multiple media. The authors focus precisely on how conspiracy theorists can narrate good or evil and safety or danger in ways that act as affective triggers that compel audiences to feel this narrative is genuinely unfolding. They analyze how this is done through transmedia networks that project the repetition of certain events and memories alongside the novel, unexpected, or shocking. They argue this juxtaposition can both draw users-cum-audiences in while making them feel engaged with the excitement of settling the meaning of new events.

The second approach they use is Umberto Eco's concepts of the Model Author and Model Reader. The Model Author includes all those projecting or publicizing the narrative in a community. It is not reducible to a single actor or source because narratives in politics are continually circulated by many actors. This author grouping thinks it knows what memories its target community tends to possess. It recognizes the need to emphasize some memories and fill in any gaps, such that their preferred sequence of events can be interpreted as history itself. The Model Reader can be inferred from the narrative being projected: what tropes and rhetoric are used repeatedly, and what "experts" can be drawn on to boost credibility, indicate what target audiences must be open to. Since the narrative's creator(s) and audience(s) can be identified through interpretive textual analysis, Madisson and Ventsel argue that this negates two methodological

challenges in strategic narrative research: finding an original narrative source and deducing their intention, and doing audience reception research work to elicit the intention of all those who encounter the narrative through media or routine political conversation. Generating data about such a large set of people's intentions might require a huge number of interviews, ethnography, and other expensive and time-consuming methods. They suggest instead that the intention of those projecting the narrative can be inferred directly from the political goals and resolutions present in their narrative. Equally, what the audience is familiar with or excited by can be identified in the narrative text, since the conspiracy group would not sustain that narrative if it was being mocked and rejected by its audience. This is an important claim about how valid strategic narrative research can be done through textual analysis alone.

For conspiracy authors to achieve buy-in from audiences, conflict is the important concept. The research question driving the book is, "How are conspiracy theories used in order to deprecate/demonise dominant institutionalised knowledges?" (p. 5). The answer is the staging of political life as conflict. The authors call this the discrete logic. Any citizen will be exposed to multiple narratives and multiple issues in contemporary politics and media. These are nondiscrete logics—each has its own history and salience. Conspiracy narratives simplify a very complex set of social problems into that discrete logic, a binary clash of victims and perpetrators. For their own reasons, a diverse set of groups can accept the unified aim of defeating that enemy. The notion of solving problems through cooperation between all groups with opposing interests in the conflict is entirely dismissed because of the zero-sum moral collision. It should be noted that conflict is not the root concept in all politics; the reader can consider or seek to find that concept for the issue that is their focus.

Temporality is key. This is why digital media become important. A political event occurs, mainstream parties may be slow to respond, yet already conspiracy theorists will know their networks of influence and affect, they will know how to sustain the "information fog" (p. 20) that prevents the acceptance of a single interpretation, and they will identify the echo chamber of truly committed users who support them. That community can be provided with further stories, interviews, archive footage, and below-the-line chats, so this event is connected to past events, unsolved events, and new events. Nondiscrete issues can be connected to the core, discrete logic of conflict. Digital media allow rapid posting of evidence by those conspiracy theorists or by users who joined the community. They await the next big event that can serve as an iteration to expand the community again. The digital and the social can work together, then, such that narratives opposing Soros's role in public affairs can be used to cement a wider defense of tradition, Christianity, heterosexuality, and nation. Each day's media communications can cement the conflict that comes to define political life.

The second half of the book contains analysis demonstrating how groups in different countries use conflict with Soros as a marker of that fundamental conflict. This analysis is valuable because it shows how actors in different political cultures connect local problems to Soros and therefore to fundamental, global conflict. We see how Soros is characterized in different media platforms, and how the community characterizes itself as victims and outsiders. We learn how some in that community use branding to try to lure in a wider audience, for news of the mysterious, the hidden, and the revelatory has a certain coolness and emotional appeal not present in mainstream news. How to do this in Estonia is very different than in Hungary, which has a very different political context. This attention to differences and similarities across

countries helps the reader to see how a shared goal is present, indicating an intention driving the strategic narrative even if this is not reducible to one actor's intention and narration. This model would be useful for studying other kinds of narrative than conspiratorial narratives. Whether the focus is narratives on climate, identity politics, energy, or any other issue, Madisson and Ventsel offer a clear methodology for studying how common understandings and connections between issues can be created across cultures.

Particularly valuable, here, is the argument that there are myriad memories, actors, and interpretations and we must untangle which of these become important to conspiracy theorists, under what conditions, in the pursuit of what goals. This work is necessary to prevent a spiral of interactions in which any new event becomes embedded in a binary narrative in which cooperation becomes understood as impossible and immoral. This book opens the question of how conspiracy narratives could be unraveled, and through what mix of media practices.

There are no illusions that conspiracy theories or narratives are new. Instead, this book illustrates the changing dynamics by which they circulate and can be engaged with through digital media. The authors conclude the book with an outline of the different methods to be used with such a rich but massive set of data. While this book has not analyzed how users engage with conspiracy narratives, Madisson and Ventsel at least acknowledge that this is possible. In fact, this is urgent; they have provided a reliable framework for the study of the projection of narrative but not the site of reception. We cannot know how conspiracy narratives are rejected, negotiated, or enjoyed until this site is explored, nor the power of these narratives evidenced. It cannot be inferred from the text. The book points the reader in two directions then: to this untested landscape of the reception of conspiracy narrative and to a much wider analysis of how conspiracy narratives and their opponents function across other issue areas and political questions. Given the growing presence of these groups and their ability even to win seats of authority in government, this is a vital task.