The New Clarity: Awakening in the Post-Truth Era

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Abstract: In the wake of Trump and Brexit, the late 2010s gave rise to an ambient sense of a post-truth crisis. It signals the social media fuelled breakdown of liberal democracy and its 'fourth estate' into fragmented and mutually antagonising epistemic media bubbles. Yet at the same time, the new online political movements driving this crisis became enthralled with the radical sense of *waking up* from a false reality to absolute Truth, ranging from new (con)spiritual fascinations with mystical clarity to far-right ideas about a Great Awakening and red-pilling. This article tries to make sense of this strange resurgence of 'awakening' and the experience of radical epistemic clarity from within post-truth culture. We argue that what we refer to as the New Clarity represents the bleeding edge of our current post-truth predicament, which at once intensifies 'postmodern' sentiments of cynicism, irony and play *and* breaks with them in the form of new political-epistemic radicalisms. To draw out this paradoxical relationship between post-truth and the New Clarity, we survey three historical dimensions of postmodernism as theorised by Lyotard and others at the closing of the 20th century, namely: cynicism and the crisis of critique, new spiritualities and authoritarian conspiracism, and the spiralling dialectic between neoliberalism and populism. Breaking down these dimensions to understand the New Clarity, we take the QAnon conspiracy movement as embodying its paradoxical logic. Doing so we offer a critical heuristic for charting the rise of new conspiratorial and spiritual Awakenings today.

Keywords: conspiracy theory, QAnon, post-truth, postmodernism, conspirituality, critique, neoliberalism

INTRODUCTION

Since the populist revolt climaxed in 2016, western societies are said to have entered a 'post-truth' world in which '[n]othing is true and everything is possible'.[1] In this view, the Brexit referendum and the election of Donald Trump as US president proved that liberal democracies had scrapped their regard for reason or facts. Yet what disappears from these narratives is that the populist movements propelling this 'post-truth' predicament have established a renewed orientation to Truth. This manifests in the oft-heard call to 'wake up' from a false or manipulated reality and to reestablish a

2. Although in progressive circles 'wokeness' also alludes to awakening as a critical act, it is not so much obsessed with clarity as with institutional critique. Although worth mentioning in the context, we decided to leave this out of our analysis of the new clarity for that reason.

3. Gabriele Cosentino, *Social Media and the Post-Truth World Order: The Global Dynamics of Disinformation*, Palgrave MacMillan, 2020.

4. Clare Birchall and Peter Knight, *Conspiracy Theories in the Time of COVID-19: Conspiracy Theories about the Coronavirus Pandemic in the Online Environment*, Routledge, 2023. (Hereafter *Conspiracy Theories in the Time of COVID-19*.)

5. David A. Neiwert, *Red Pill, Blue Pill: How to Counteract the Conspiracy Theories That Are Killing Us*, Prometheus Books, 2020.

6. Geoff Shullenberger, 'Redpilling and the Regime', *The New Atlantis*, blog, 2021. https://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/redpilling-and-the-regime

7. Lana and Lilly Wachowski, *The Matrix*, Warner Bros, 1999.

8. Abby Ohlheiser, 'Reddit Bans r/Greatawakening, the Main Subreddit for QAnon Conspiracy Theorists',

sense of clarity in the convoluted mediascapes of platform capitalism. The notion of 'awakening' to reality holds out the false promise of seeing into the nature of that reality with an unquestionable and immediate clarity. The desire for clarity is particularly present on the right-wing reactionary and conspiratorial side of the political spectrum.[2] These range from learning the truth about the authoritarian deep state (e.g. QAnon),[3] to seeing the 'globalist' agenda of liberal elites and their plans for a Great Reset (e.g. anti-COVID-19 vaccination movements),[4] to waking up to the reality of male oppression by feminism (e.g. the manosphere),[5] or Cultural Marxism (e.g. the Dark Enlightenment movement of neo-reactionaries like Curtis Yarvin).[6] Incels and neo-reactionaries, for instance, popularised the blue and red pill trope from *The Matrix* to dramatise the choice between staying blissfully ignorant and painfully waking up to the 'desert of the real'.[7]

The trope of a 'Great Awakening' has been prominent in the QAnon conspiracy movement since its inception on 4chan's Politically Incorrect board in October 2017. On Reddit, the r/greatawakening board became a popular place for Q-related discussions, amassing 70,000 subscribers before being banned in September 2018.[8] One year later, a book written by twelve insiders called *QAnon: An Invitation to the Great Awakening* topped the Amazon best-seller's list.[9] Snowballing from the deep vernacular web to more mainstream platforms, the super-conspiracy theory of QAnon ultimately reached the halls of US Congress. Here, its absurd claims were channelled by elected officials such as Majorie Taylor Greene, or indeed by those storming the US Capitol after the 'Stop the Steal' rally on 6 January 2021. In QAnon, the Great Awakening refers to a collective waking up to the 'real' historical struggle being waged behind the scenes of the Trump presidency, as intimated by the illustrious government insider turned whistleblower named Q. This struggle for the soul of the country is between Trump and the deep state, which acts on behalf of the Democrats, who in turn are the puppets of a global elite of child-trafficking pedophiles. Beyond totalising these manifold connections, what makes this awakening Great is that it is supposed to trigger an apocalyptic uprising decimating the global cabal.

Ideas of waking up from a false reality have long been staples of conspiracy culture as well as of popular culture, seen in series like *The X-Files* and films like *They Live*.[10] In *They Live*, for instance, the protagonist finds a pair of sunglasses that give him the power to look behind the images of advertising to see their 'real' message of mindless consumerism. 'Obey!', a soda ad now reads. The film contrasts the phrase 'they live', which refers to the alien space creatures pulling the strings, with 'we sleep', alluding to the earthlings locked in their simulacrum of a world. Similar tropes abound in online conspiracy culture, where the NPC ('non-playable character') meme has recently come to stigmatise those not-yet awake, casting them as the social media sleepwalkers ('normies') entrapped within algorithmically curated narratives.[11] These examples from popular culture enact a cliché

version of ideology critique as waking up the masses from the 'false consciousness' keeping them in their place.

Tapping into this cultural reservoir, the rhetoric of Awakening as espoused by Q-adepts and similar reactionary movements assumes privileged epistemic access to the dark truths of society, providing an Archimedian point for social criticism and political action. At its most powerful, the notion of awakening offers no less than a radical epistemic, political, and possibly spiritual transformation. Awakening promises a profound disintermediation, a relationship to the world and being that is *immediate* and eminently *real*, as if to cast off the veil of political mediations that engross us in everyday life. While such a desire may be understandable, it is counter-intuitive that the longing for 'waking up' from an everyday or ideological slumber to a position of radical clarity should gain renewed traction today in light of popular diagnoses of our era as postmodern, post-ideological or post-truth.[12] This raises the question our article seeks to answer, namely: How must we explain the renewed obsession with awakening, truth, and clarity in a culture that has supposedly entered its 'post-truth' phase? Is the obsession a simple compensatory reflex, offering some relief from the pressures and epistemic uncertainties of neoliberal capitalism? Or is the relation between post-truth sentiments and the desire for Awakening and Truth a more immanent and therefore more troubling one?

Current strains in the burgeoning field of conspiracy studies fail to adequately conceptualise the connection of new forms of epistemic radicalism to this 'post-' condition. Understating the effects of our 'post-' condition on new forms of Awakening, conspiracy theorists and spiritual seekers are often represented as simply formulating alternative truth claims. Some conspiracism researchers, then, aim to take them seriously and give them a voice as credible epistemic actors competing with scientists and journalists on a level playing field.[13] This approach frames conspiracy theorists as sincere searchers for a truth that is unambiguously 'out there'. These accounts sidestep the question of the 'postmodernisation' of conspiracy culture through forms of irony and play. In contrast, other scholars have extensively noted the confluence of postmodern play with popular conspiracy culture.[14] This offers a useful lens for understanding popular engagement with conspiracy theories in the 1990s, when conspiracy theories became fun and subject to play, rather than being the dark domain of right-wing paranoiacs. These cultural objects played into postmodern sensibilities of ironic consumption and cultural bricolage, embodying millennials' detached, post-historical worldview. While helpful in understanding a previous phase of conspiracy culture, these works are no longer fully adequate for understanding conspiracism in its present form, losing sight of its new emphasis on Clarity and Truth.[15]

We argue that current iterations of conspiratorial awakening warrant a different analysis. Our claim is that today's conspiracy culture, with its fascination with awakening and clarity, has *passed through* and *come out the other*

Washington Post, 26 October 2021.

9. Kaitlyn Tiffany, 'How a Conspiracy Theory about Democrats Drinking Children's Blood Topped Amazon's Best-sellers list', *Vox*, 2019.

10. John Carpenter, *They Live*, Alive Films, 1988.

11. Non-playable character is a term used in video games to mark the scripted characters in games that 'actual' players encounter along their journey. On the conceptual persona of the social media sleepwalker, see Tony Sampson, *A Sleepwalker's Guide to Social Media*, Polity Press, 2020.

12. Michael Freeden, 'Confronting the Chimera of a "Post-ideological" Age', *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 8:2, 2005, pp247-62.

13. Steve Fuller, *Post-Truth: Knowledge as a Power Game*, Anthem Press, 2018. (Hereafter *Post-Truth*.) Jaron Harambam, *Contemporary Conspiracy Culture: Truth and Knowledge in an Era of Epistemic Instability*, Routledge, 2021.

14. See Jodi Dean, *Aliens in America: Conspiracy Cultures from Outerspace to Cyberspace*, Cornell University Press, 1998; Mark Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture*, University of Minnesota Press, 2008; Peter Knight,

*Conspiracy Culture:
From the Kennedy
Assassination to The
X-Files*, Routledge,
2000 (Hereafter
Conspiracy Culture.);
and Clare Birchall,
*Knowledge Goes Pop:
From Conspiracy
Theory to Gossip*,
Berg, 2006.

15. As Rani Baker
rightly notes,
however, 1990s
conspiracy culture
was never fun to
begin with. Rani
Baker, 'So When,
Exactly, Did
Conspiracy Culture
Stop Being Fun?',
Medium, 20 October
2022.

16. Jean-François
Lyotard, *The
Postmodern Condition*,
Manchester
University Press,
1984. (Hereafter *The
Postmodern Condition*.)

17. Peter Sloterdijk,
*Critique of Cynical
Reason*, University
of Minnesota Press,
1987. (Hereafter
*Critique of Cynical
Reason*.); and Slavoj
Žižek, *For They
Know Not What They
Do: Enjoyment as a
Political Factor*, Verso,
1991. (Hereafter *For
They Know Not What
They Do*.)

18. Robin Celikates,
*Critique as Social
Practice: Critical
Theory and Social
Self-Understanding*,
Rowman and
Littlefield, 2018.

19. Bruno Latour,
'Why Has Critique
Run out of Steam?
From Matters of
Fact to Matters of
Concern', *Critical
Inquiry*, 30:2, 2004.

20. As Timothy
Melley notes, the
workings of power
take the form of
a 'public secret'

side of the postmodern. Current calls for a Great Awakening neither belong to the same incredulous and playful postmodern condition of yesteryear, nor represent an unlikely return of a modern or even pre-modern credulity toward absolute truth. Instead, the resurgence of various Great Awakenings offers at once a break and a radicalisation of the postmodern, signalling a new paradoxical mood we refer to as the New Clarity.

In order to trace the complex genealogy of this new cultural formation, we situate the New Clarity along three different but partly overlapping historical axes. Throughout the following sections, the QAnon conspiracy movement will focalise these historical developments in the present. As a super-conspiracy myth born on the internet that combines calls for a Great Awakening with a postmodern play of signifiers, QAnon exemplifies the strange convergence of postmodern attitudes and epistemic radicalism in post-truth culture today. The first section discusses how the rhetoric of Awakening both disrupts and exploits the 'postmodern' logic of ironic play and cynical reason against the backdrop of the twentieth century 'crisis of critique'. QAnon, we show, mixes the online play of crowdsourced scavenger hunts and 'alternate reality games' (ARGs) with dead earnest appeals to a 'Great Awakening' in a way that speaks to the paradoxical composition of the New Clarity. The second section situates these Awakenings in the wider spiritual and cultic milieus of the 1960s. It traces a longer spiral of secularisation and sacralisation that is present in the postmodern era and that surfaces in contemporary conspiracism as a contradictory epistemology of seekership. Finally, the third section investigates how, on a political-economic level, 'waking up' marks an epistemological and organisational response to the slow erosion of democratic institutions in the wake of the neoliberal counterrevolution and its populist backlash. Cultic conspiracist movements tessellate with neoliberal sociality, but simultaneously call for a clarity that breaks with neoliberal market deference. Together, these sections present three variations on a theme rather than a linear narrative. By spiralling through these three dimensions the New Clarity and its tense relation to the post-truth present, we aim to draw out its paradoxical logic.

CRISIS OF CRITIQUE: FROM POSTMODERN CYNICISM TO QANON'S GREAT AWAKENINGS

This section historicises the current post-truth milieu as an intensification of a pre-existing 'postmodern condition'. The postmodern condition refers to a cultural attitude of skepticism towards capital-t Truth and utopian visions of Justice, paradigmatically phrased by Lyotard as an incredulity toward modern meta-narratives.[16] The postmodern subject has supposedly 'seen through' it all and has become cynical.[17] As the twentieth century progressed, such cynicism has formed the backdrop for a crisis of critique that works in two directions. On the one hand, the critic can no longer ascertain a secure vantage point for their truth-claims, while, on the other, the general public

has already been enlightened to the false masks of power. Today's move from cynicism to fanaticism, we will argue, only heightens this crisis. This section poses a question that is crucial to tracing the paradoxical constellations of the New Clarity: How do new forms of epistemic radicalism – as expressed in the rhetoric of awakening and the desire for clarity – take root in a milieu of generalised cynicism? Using QAnon and its notion of a Great Awakening as a site to explore this paradoxical dynamic, it is through QAnon's affinity with alternate reality games (ARGs) that we will unearth the New Clarity as emerging *from within* and *against* postmodern cynicism.

Recent appeals to great awakenings are reminiscent of the traditional task of critical theory to awaken the proletariat from its ideological slumber. As twentieth century social critics realised, however, this 'vulgar' notion of ideology critique assumes that the critics are themselves untainted by capital's ruses and thus turns on an unlikely appeal to truth.[18] In the postmodern condition, this point on the inaccessibility of truth is no longer reserved for philosophers but extends to the general public, further deepening the crisis of critique. It forms the backdrop of Bruno Latour's influential essay *Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?*[19] In it, Latour recalls a colloquial conversation with his neighbour in the French countryside who mocks his naivety in trusting the official story of 9/11. The attack on the World Trade Centre, he is told, was staged by the Bush administration to preemptively justify their wars in the Middle East. Latour offers the anecdote to argue that current modes of academic critique assume a social distribution of knowledge that no longer exists, one in which the masses are duped and it is the critic's role to enlighten them. Instead, the twentieth century projects of emancipatory critique now meet an already pervasive distrust by 'ordinary' citizens.[20] As with Latour's interlocutor, these forms of distrust have often taken the form of wildly implausible and potentially dangerous conspiracy theories.[21]

Yet postmodern cynicism does not only come from below – it comes from above as well. In his diagnosis of 'cynical reason', Peter Sloterdijk analyses it as a strategy adopted by the powerful to cope with the more authentically 'kynical' critique of authority from below, by taking the latter into account beforehand (*Critique of Cynical Reason*). The cynical powers that be, Sloterdijk noted, are aware of the discrepancies that pertain between their public-facing mask and their inner-directed, private face, but insist on them anyway. The only clarity cynicism has on offer, as Žižek adds, is precisely that there is no final 'waking up' from ideological fictions, granting the cynic a perverse pleasure (*jouissance*) in knowing this to be so. Yet at the same time, for Žižek, cynicism is also the function of a system that has moved beyond any epistemic or normative justification, its role reduced to 'a means of manipulation, purely external and instrumental ... secured not by its truth-value but by simple extra-ideological violence and promise of gain'.[22] Power comes to operate through the performative violence of tautology: 'law is law' and 'efficiency is efficient' (*For They Know Not What They Do*, p34).[23] By balancing the seemingly

further fuelling the feeling of mistrust by the general public. Timothy Melley, *The Covert Sphere: Secrecy, Fiction, and the National Security State*, Cornell University Press, 2012, p33.

21. Clare Birchall and Peter Knight, 'Has Conspiracy Theory Run out of Steam?' in *Theory Conspiracy*, Frida Beckman and Jeffrey R. Di Leo (eds), Routledge, 2024.

22. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Verso, 2008, p27.

23. Adorno already observed that people have come to entertain a cynical form of 'beliefless belief'. These remarks echo what Habermas would later refer to as the 'glassy background ideology' of a period driven by the self-evidence of technical progress. Jürgen Habermas, *Toward a Rational Society: Student Protest, Science, and Politics*, Beacon Press, 1971, p111. On Adorno's analysis of cynicism see Vladimir Safatle, 'The Fascist Laugh: Propaganda and Cynical Rationality in Adorno', in *Théorie Critique de La Propagande*, Pierre-François Noppen and Gérard Raulet (eds), Bibliothèque Allemande. Éditions de la Maison des Sciences de L'homme, 2021, pp123-34.

24. In her research on the populist rhetoric shared by Putin and Trump, Masha Gessen shows how their

propagation of self-evident falsities works *performatively* to display their power to *defy* the truth. Masha Gessen, 'The Putin Paradigm', *The New York Review of Books*, 13 December 2018. On Lyotard's critique of technoscience, see Massimiliano Simons, 'Jean-François Lyotard and Postmodern Technoscience', *SSRN Scholarly Paper*, 2022.

25. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Cambridge University Press, 1989, p46. (Hereafter *Contingency*.) The drying up of truly utopian energies, or the lack of 'western culture's confidence in itself' is what Habermas called 'the New Obscurity'. Jürgen Habermas, 'The New Obscurity: The Crisis of the Welfare State and the Exhaustion of Utopian Energies', *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 11:2, 1986, pp1-18.

26. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, Manchester University Press, 1988.

27. In this context we use the adjective 'cynical' in a non-pejorative sense, denoting a second order awareness of the conventionality of truth as 'just' games we play. The title of a collection of interviews with Lyotard plays on the ambiguity of this phrase: *Just Gaming* simultaneously signals the triviality (as in

contradictory claims that everything is ideology *and* that ideology no longer really matters, these authors suggest that cynicism acts as the official ideology of the post-cold war era.

These cultural critiques are closely aligned with Lyotard's famous diagnosis of the postmodern condition as the delegitimation of metanarratives. For what remains in the absence of these narratives, Lyotard claims, is precisely 'the cynicism of [the] criterion of performance' (*The Postmodern Condition*, p66). This criterion, he argues, acts as the '[d]e facto legitimation' of the most effective political moves of the most effective players, adorned with the sheen of technical supremacy (*The Postmodern Condition*, p7). Who has power will produce truth, who has truth will produce power.[24] With ideology critique rendered moot under these conditions, Lyotard calls for navigating social complexity by telling 'small narratives' that do not claim to have the last word. It resonates with Rorty's liberal plea for postmodern irony as the virtuous alternative to cynical complicity, redefining freedom as 'the recognition of contingency'.[25] No longer beholden to meta-narratives of Progress or Political Truth, post-metaphysical liberalism re-invents its central value of tolerance as irony. Grand narratives become 'vocabularies' that are subject to changes over the course of history and that can never conclusively legitimate themselves (*Contingency*, p73). This 'ironic', aporetic version of liberalism calls for a public sphere in which different standpoints are democratically negotiated on a pragmatic basis.[26] Irony thus offers a hopeful alternative to cynicism, even if they are two expressions of the same postmodern mood.

For Lyotard, the postmodern proliferation of vocabularies is reconceptualised in terms of competing 'language games'. Scientific and other discourses are games in the sense that they are practices bound by nothing more (nor less) than their own immanent rules. Truth, in this view, is also a game: It sets the epistemic constraints of any situation, in a way that enacts its own conditions of verification. This cynical[27] and agonistic understanding of truth in terms of games, as Steve Fuller claims, also essentially characterises our current post-truth condition. The latter, he argues, 'is all about going *meta*. You try to win not simply by playing by the rules but also by controlling what the rules are' (*Post-Truth*, p3).[28] What is at stake here is no longer the reconciliation of diverging perspectives on shared issues (playing the same game differently, as in the ideal of a liberal consensus), but the forking of 'alternate realities' (playing a different game), in what Lyotard called the move of 'paralogy' (*The Postmodern Condition*).

In its own distorted way, QAnon mimics this gamified worldview.[29] It operates on the 'cynical' insight into truth as so many discursive and strategic *games*. Yet what were still playfully agonistic language games in Lyotard[30] have now been weaponised to facilitate reactionary worldbuilding. Here, Wittgenstein's language games meet the game-theoretical models of Von Neumann and Nash.[31] Several commentators have noted the similarities between QAnon and so-called alternate reality games (ARGs)[32] as well as 'live

action role-playing' (LARPing).[33] Others believe QAnon to be an elaborate 'Psyop' by ex-military Trumpists and/or foreign governments.[34] The cynicism that fuels these gamified worldviews can be glanced from one of Q's cryptic messages posted on where they state: 'This is not a game; learn to play the game'.[35] The phrase 'This is not a game' is a well-known principle in the ARG-genre known by its acronym TINAG.[36] It is deployed to signal to the players it *is* a game (allowing them to navigate the game within its real-world setting), but without disrupting the players' immersive experience, which depends on behaving 'as if' it is not. In contrast, the second part encourages players to acknowledge that it *is* a game, in order to learn how to play (and win) it. The QAnon player thus needs to *cynically* navigate these two conflicting imperatives. To play the game and to win requires both a reflexive awareness of its status as a game (observed from without) and a blind commitment to its unfolding as if it wasn't (observed from within).

It is precisely this dual imperative to know it is a game while at the same time insisting that it is not (Žižek's 'doing it anyway') that makes this message so cynical. Any Awakening that QAnon holds out to its followers is thus complemented by a second-order awareness of its status as a game, understood as a contingent rule-based system maintained by an implicit social contract between the players. For QAnon's Great Awakening to be made performative, this kind of cynicism which views the world in terms of games must first be universalised. Constantly oscillating between the view from within and without, much like Latour's neighbour, such Awakenings both insist that nothing is true and everything is possible *and* that one can still wake up to the ultimate reality underlying the mirage of manipulative mediatisations. The New Clarity is thus more than pure cynicism. It expresses a chiasmus: In order to believe, one must be cynical; but to be cynical, one has to believe.

As Fredric Jameson notes in his Introduction to *The Postmodern Condition*, the proliferation of micro-narratives and *local* truth-games on the level playing fields of late capitalism is both the effect of and a current driver of a *global* crisis of narrativity (*The Postmodern Condition*, pxi). In the same way, the new clarities that conspiracist games like QAnon bring forth benefit from today's global crisis of narrativity. It is precisely the incredulity towards metanarratives that allows these awakenings to flourish. One way to understand the resurgence of Awakening is to see these instances of clarity as the localised effects of 'epistemic bubbles' forged by online platforms and the local language games their participants engage in. What for Lyotard remained an abstract discursivity of 'language games' can thus be reinterpreted in media-ecological terms as echo chambers and filter bubbles. The clarities secreted by these insular-yet-leaky digital spaces each appear absolute from within, yet completely irrational and absurd from without.[37]

If critique has indeed run out of steam today, it is because of this generalised cynicism that simultaneously claims an absolute insight into truth

conventionality) of games, and holds up the seemingly impossible possibility of *justice* in playing. Jean-François Lyotard and Jean-Loup Thébaud, *Just Gaming*, University of Minnesota Press, 1985.

28. Curiously, Fuller neither acknowledges the relevance of Lyotard's work here, nor does he adequately problematise the game-theoretical assumptions of this discursive framing of post-truth.

29. On this broad notion of gamification and its relation to neoliberalism, see Patrick Jagoda, *Experimental Games: Critique, Play, and Design in the Age of Gamification*, University of Chicago Press, 2020, and Max Haiven, A.T. Kingsmith, and Aris Komporozos-Athanasiou, 'Board Games as Social Media: Towards an Enchanted Inquiry of Digital Capitalism', Max Haiven blog, 18 February 2023. https://maxhaiven. com/enchanted-inquiry/ (Hereafter *Board Games as Social Media*.)

30. Stefan Sonderling, 'To Speak Is To Fight: War As Structure of Thought in Lyotard's Postmodern Condition', *Communicare: Journal for Communication Studies in Africa*, 32:2, 2022, pp1-19.

31. For a critical history of game theory and its

persistent influence across society, see Philip Mirowski, *Machine Dreams: Economics Becomes a Cyborg Science*, Cambridge University Press, 2002.

32. Hugh Davies, 'The Gamification of Conspiracy: QAnon as Alternate Reality Game', *Acta Ludologica*, 5:1, 2022, pp60-79.

33. Daniël de Zeeuw and Alex Gekker, 'A God-Tier LARP? QAnon as Conspiracy Fictioning', *Social Media + Society*, 9:1, 2023.

34. Claire Goforth, 'Here's Why Prominent Conservatives Now Are Calling QAnon a "Psyop"', *The Daily Dot*, 28 January 2021.

35. Q Drop 885, 8 March 2018. https://qalerts.app/?n=885

36. On the history of ARGs, see Dave Szulborski, *This Is Not a Game: A Guide to Alternate Reality Gaming*, New-Fiction Publishing, 2005.

37. On the dangers and seductions of clarity as engendered by these epistemic bubbles, see C. Thi Nguyen, 'The Seductions of Clarity', *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement*, 89, 2021, pp227-55.

38. The phrase is from Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*, Basic Books, 2017.

39. Theodor Adorno and Max

and distances itself from its own truth-claims. In equally agonistic, game-theoretical terms, this form of 'bad faith' grants the conspiracist immunity from the critic, since they can flee into either pole depending on the critic's line of attack. When the critic defends facts, the conspiracist will point to their insufficient epistemic warrant; but when the critic indicates the social constitution of facts, the conspiracist resorts to the unique insight in the conspirators' true machinations. Crucially then, there is no arguing with those who claim to have awoken. At best, there is the tedious labour of *making* the other see through means other than dialogue, through an appeal to secret knowledge or mystical insight, or to encourage them to 'do their own research'. Awakening bars the reflexive integration of a plurality of viewpoints idealised by Rorty, favouring a clarity so luminescent as to become blinding. In the absence of dialogue, there is only the contagious movement of either waking up 'alone together'[38] or being reduced to an NPC. This is how cynicism may engender dangerous new forms of clarity. The next section locates a similar danger in the new (con)spiritualities that have co-emerged (and increasingly merged) with QAnon's reactionary Awakenings.

STRANGERS TO DISENCHANTMENT: FROM NEW RELIGIONS TO 'CONSPIRITUALITY'

As the previous section shows, it is counterintuitive that new Great Awakenings should arise in an age defined by Lyotard (*The Postmodern Condition*) as increasingly skeptical and cynical toward overarching narratives and their claims to universal truth. The postwar rise of spirituality and new religions equally seems to fly in the face of postmodern incredulity. This raises the question: How does this condition of generalised incredulity and cynicism nevertheless give rise to spiritual Awakenings? Approaching this question from another angle, this section will trace this tension in the confluence of conspiracy culture and New Age spiritualism known as 'conspirituality'.

Taken at face value, it appears as if the postmodern condition had finally completed modernity's process of 'disenchantment', popularised by Weber as the exorcism of ultimate values by technical progress, and thought to have been brought to its bloody conclusion in the industrialised slaughter of Auschwitz.[39] Left defeated by the events, postmodern thinkers had no reason to believe in anything but the quasi-autonomous 'performativity' of the system as science and technology slowly but steadily colonised the social in a new era of computers (*The Postmodern Condition*). 'Still', Lyotard remarked, 'the postmodern condition is as much a stranger to disenchantment as it is to the blind positivity' of technical performativity (*The Postmodern Condition*, pxxiv). More than value-free technocracy, postmodern performance operates through a multitude of 'language-games', each with their own localised values and principles.

As a thesis of secularisation, too, 'disenchantment' fails to capture the

postmodern mood, as scholars of religion have identified the reemergence of religiosity after the Second World War. Christopher Partridge designates this development the 're-enchantment of the West', understood as the strange doublet of secularisation and sacralisation.[40] While churches were being emptied, Western societies saw the rise of so-called 'occulture', an umbrella term for popular yet 'deviant' modes of thought and practice associated with spirituality and New Age – ranging from astral projections, healing crystals and *feng shui* to UFOs, Kabbalah and Druidry (*Re-Enchantment of the West*, p70). Occulture marshals familiar postmodern elements, such as epistemological individualism, eclecticism ('supermarket spirituality'), the goal of happiness, and the mystical belief in the divination of the self. As hyper-individualist pastiche, the world of occulture is one of 'spiritual bricoleurs' (*Re-Enchantment of the West*, p85). It is religion for the incredulous.

The sacralisation of the self puts individual mystical experiences centre stage. Such appeals to spiritual 'intuition' form clues to the oneness of self and God or self and world, awakening the individual to an inexpressible truth about reality. These visions belong to what the scholar of religion Colin Campbell has called 'the cultic milieu', a cultural reservoir of deviant knowledges of which mysticism forms the paradigmatic example.[41] The cultic milieu, Campbell explains, offers a helpful concept to interpret the rise of the new religions in postmodernity, since it is unified by 'a common ideology of seekership' that highlights the spiritual quest of the individual (*The Cult*, p15). Mystical insight, as a type of unmediated knowledge, may seem far removed from the postmodern play of infinite mediations, yet many spiritual seekers view what Lyotard called 'postmodern science' (*The Postmodern Condition*) as proof of the inner-worldly reality of their Gnostic intuitions.[42] Cybernetics, fractals, and quantum mechanics offered a window onto the weird.[43] Post-normal and paranormal science could shake hands.[44]

Scholars have also traced the current popularity of conspiracism, occultism, and mysticism back to 1950s Californian counterculture,[45] later coalescing under the name of New Age. According to the New Age, humanity was facing spiritual awakening in the 'Age of Aquarius'. As Fred Turner has extensively documented, New Age spiritualism found its way into the techno-utopianism of early computer and internet pioneers.[46] The 'New Communalists', settling in hippie communes in the Bay Area hills, dreamt of outsourcing social organisation to information machines and directing their attention to exploring the depths of consciousness. This was the model that would shape the techno-utopian visions of Silicon Valley, or what Barbrook and Cameron in their influential essay dubbed the Californian ideology: 'a mix of cybernetics, free market economics, and counter-culture libertarianism'.[47] For these 'techGnostics', information would free the market *and* the soul.[48]

Yet for Erik Davis, the mystical optimism of cyberculture was also flanked by a darker moment of the counterculture (*High Weirdness*). By the 1970s, the optimism of the 1960s had given way to a gloomier decade of stagflation,

Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Verso, 2010; Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Polity Press, 2007.

40. Christopher Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West: Volume 1, Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture, and Occulture*, T&T Clark International, 2004. (Hereafter *Re-Enchantment of the West*.)

41. Colin Campbell, 'The Cult, the Cultic Milieu and Secularization', in Jeffrey Kaplan and Heléne Lööw (eds) *The Cultic Milieu: Oppositional Subcultures in an Age of Globalization*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2002, pp12-25. (Hereafter *The Cult*.)

42. Wouter Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought*, Brill, 1996, p62. (Hereafter *New Age Religion*.)

43. Erik Davis, *High Weirdness: Drugs, Esoterica, and Visionary Experience in the Seventies*, MIT Press, 2019, pp69-72. (Hereafter *High Weirdness*.)

44. The post-normal sciences found their way to the New Age through works by David Bohm and Karl Pribram on the holographic paradigm, and by Ilya Prigogine and Erich Jantsch on the self-organising universe, as well as the literary genre of 'parallelism', which

notes an affinity with Eastern religion and new physics, exemplified by Fritjof Capra's *Tao of Physics* (*New Age Religion*, pp62-76).

45. Wouter Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed*, Bloomsbury, 2013, p43. (Hereafter *Western Esotericism*.)

46. Fred Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism*, University of Chicago Press, 2006; Fred Turner, 'Machine Politics: The Rise of the Internet and a New Age of Authoritarianism', *Harper's Magazine*, 2019, no page.

47. Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron, 'The Californian Ideology', *Mute*, September 1995.

48. Erik Davis, *TechGnosis: Myth, Magic and Mysticism in the Age of Information*, Serpent's Tail, 2004.

49. David G. Robertson, *UFOs, Conspiracy Theories and the New Age: Millennial Conspiracism*, Bloomsbury Academic, 2016.

50. Richard Hofstadter, 'The Paranoid Style in American Politics', *Harper's Magazine*, November 1964.

51. See also Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary*

oil shocks and deepening foreign wars. An uglier face of re-enchantment started to show itself. The 1970s formed the pinnacle of what Davis terms 'high weirdness', a culture of consciousness centred on the 'paradoxical coming-together' of the sacred and the profane (*High Weirdness*, p14). Seeking ecstatic experiences, 'seventies psychonauts' experimented with a mix of occult knowledge, synthetic psychedelics, and new information technologies. As the 1970s progressed under the threat of atomic war and Communist espionage, those busying themselves with spiritual transformation increasingly became preoccupied with 'brainwashing'. For many, the discovery of Project MKUltra proved their worst fears about secret military experiments with mind control.

From the 1980s onwards, the children of the counterculture increasingly resorted to conspiratorial explanations for the failure of their New Age utopian ideals to materialise, conjuring up images of omnipotent counter-forces to their spiritual aspirations.[49] Conspiracy theories amply supplied for the demand, whether based around the Illuminati, UFOs, or, in the case of David Icke, reptilians from outer space. If conspiracy culture in the 1950s was still predominantly the domain of right-wing fanatics and their 'paranoid style of politics',[50] 'by the end of the 1960s', as Peter Knight writes, 'it became the identifying style and posture of significant numbers of those in tune with the New Left and the counterculture' (*Conspiracy Culture*, p18).[51] A postwar brew of cultures, the counterculture, occulture and conspiracy culture all got stirred into a politically ambiguous cocktail.

The confluence of New Age occulture and conspiracism most clearly manifests in today's rise of 'conspirituality'.[52] The term refers to a fusion of the conservative and male-dominated conspiracy scene and the more liberal and female-led holistic milieu. The main throughline of conspirituality since the 1960s, Ward and Voas show, has been to supplement political cynicism with spiritual optimism (*The Emergence of Conspirituality*, p108). It explains how the counterculture could give rise to both Silicon Valley's dreams of techno-spiritual liberation *and* the paranoid visions that swarm its platforms. It also sheds light on the seemingly contradictory sensibilities of cynicism and truth-telling that mark the New Clarity. Their shared history in postwar 'occulture' indicates a 'common origin of elements that have only later (and only partially) been separated from each other'.[53]

More recently, the mystical turn in QAnon represents such an instance of 'conspirituality'. Under the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic, alt-health anti-vaxx movements joined forces with alt-right conspiracists, leading to the exponential rise of QAnon in 2020. Here too, the gendered division of labour clearly comes to the fore. As one journalist quips, QAnon partnered up with 'QAmom'.[54] On the Instagram-channels of holistic wellness and lifestyle influencers, green juice recipes and nursery decorating tips now became flanked by QAnon-inspired distress calls about global pedophile rings. The hashtag #SaveTheChildren became a clever way of dodging social media platforms' cautious attempts at content moderation, luring women

into anti-Semitic fictions by appealing to their maternal sensibilities. A softer, pastel-coloured aesthetic served to render the 4chan-borne paranoid scripture of QAnon more acceptable, thus creating 'new recruitment and radicalisation pipelines into female dominated ecosystems'.[55] In the case of QAnon, women played a pivotal role in popularising the conspiracy theory beyond the confines of the masculinist media ecosystem, notably through wellness accounts on Instagram. Women scanning their timelines for content on yoga, essential oils, natural childbirth or holistic diets now encountered warnings of a 'plandemic', driving them into the arms of the QAnon super-conspiracy theory.[56]

The wellness community's quest for clarity of body, mind and soul in turn lends credence to QAnon's longing for a Great Awakening. On the Instagram-page of the Dutch supermodel-turned-conspiracist Doutzen Kroes, for instance, one finds posts that remind her followers that they are not 'separate from oneness' and calls for 'transforming states of consciousness from one dimension to another' while offering the rebirth of a caterpillar into a butterfly as a metaphor for a spiritual awakening.[57] Such an awakening is truly Great, since it refers not only to its radical social or psychic implications, but also to its global character. While anchored in individual experience, in conspirituality all minds are cosmically connected, as part of Gaia or some other holistic system. Mystical intuition offers unmediated insight into this divine unity, lifting the distinctions between God and the self, spirit and matter, eternity and time (*Western Esotericism*, p87). Appeals to divine unity act as a fantastic substitute for the absence of solidarity and community in the post-war West. Consequently, political action is displaced from the universal to the universe, as the simultaneous experience of each individual mind acts as a kaleidoscopic node in a cosmic network of radiating influence. It is why this politics may aptly be called 'the cosmic right'.[58]

Similar to QAnon, conspirituality's 'coalitions of distrust' unite two contradictory epistemologies: 'doing your own research' and tapping into mystical self-knowledge. The former leads through endless chains of conspiracy narrativisation, whereas the latter offers an unmediated flash of insight. While the contradiction may be striking, this paradoxical epistemology belongs to a longer tradition of the cultic milieu and its seekership ideology. Truth is not handed down through dogmas, institutions or orthodoxy but requires a quest from the individual. The seeker must prepare themselves to gain access to the 'esoteric commodity' that is spiritual insight, which retroactively vindicates the endless pursuit (*The Cult*, p15). It is why conspiracists must do their *own* research rather than being presented with an exhaustive explanation or master narrative. Only then can individuals open themselves up to the ecstatic experience of truth.

The postmodern world has thus never been disenchanted. The rise of the new religions and the anticipation of the New Age was as much part of the postmodern condition as the incredulity toward meta-narratives.

America, University of California Press, 2003, p18.

52. Charlotte Ward and David Voas, 'The Emergence of Conspirituality', *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 26:1, 2021, pp103-121. (Hereafter *The Emergence of Conspirituality*.)

53. Egil Asprem and Asbjørn Dyrendal, 'Conspirituality Reconsidered: How Surprising and How New is the Confluence of Spirituality and Conspiracy Theory?', *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 30:3, 2015, p376.

54. EJ Dickson, 'The Birth of QAmom', *Rolling Stone*, 2020.

55. Marc-André Argentino, 'Pastel QAnon', *Global Network on Extremism & Technology*, 2021.

56. Mia Bloom and Sophia Moskalenko, *Pastels and Pedophiles: Inside the Mind of QAnon*, Redwood Press, 2021.

57. Doutzen Kroes, Instagram post, 2020. https://www.instagram.com/p/CC8yN4yhu1P/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link; Doutzen, Kroes, Instagram stories under the tab 'Awakening', 2022. https://www.instagram.com/stories/highlights/17876614078961062/

58. Keir Milburn, 'The Cosmic Right Is on the Rise in the UK. The Left Must Fight It With Reason', Novara

Media, 2020.

59. Even though
QAnon's 'Great
Awakening' echoes
earlier Christian
spiritual awakenings
and is strongly
indebted to the
American evangelical
tradition, the latest
Awakening now
partakes in the
syncretic logic of
the cultic milieu.
It places Bible
interpreters in
a coalition with
Q-shamans and far
right trolls exploiting
the gamified logics
of social media,
yielding a far
more ambiguous
politics. See for a
history of Great
Awakenings: Frank
Lambert, *Inventing
the 'Great Awakening'*,
Princeton University
Press 1999.

60. Bayleigh Bond
and RyanNeville-
Shepard, 'The Rise
of Presidential
Eschatology:
Conspiracy
Theories, Religion
and the January
6th Insurrection',
*American Behavioral
Scientist*, OnlineFirst,
2022, pp1-16.

61. Herman Paul
and Adriaan
van Veldhuizen,
*Post-Everything: An
Intellectual History
of Post-Concepts*,
Manchester
University Press,
2021.

62. Michel Foucault,
*The Birth of
Biopolitics: Lectures at
the Collège de France,
1978-1979*, Palgrave
Macmillan, 2008,
p31.

63. Friedrich Hayek,
*Law, Legislation and
Liberty*, Routledge,
2013. (Hereafter
*Law, Legislation and
Liberty*.)

This incredulity, however, is still reflected in the eclecticism and hyper-individualism of spiritual movements, allowing seekers to pick and choose as if on a supermarket aisle. Moreover, contemporary spirituality is often oriented towards this-worldly happiness rather than other-worldly salvation, giving rise to the 'presidential eschatology' of QAnon[59] or the cosmic health regimens of influencers.[60] The mystical experiences of 'conspirituality' thus challenge the incredulity of the postmodern, but are interpreted through its seekership epistemologies of bricolage and heighten its cynical mood. It shows that the calls for a Great Awakening present a strange re-configuration of the postmodern rather than a simple break with it. The New Clarity works through postmodern incredulity, simultaneously interrupting and intensifying its cynicism by prioritising a newfound credulity toward unmediated truth.

WAKING UP IN THE VOID: FROM NEOLIBERALS TO NEOCULTS

In the previous sections, we analysed the New Clarity as harbouring a set of cultural and spiritual dispositions that mark a simultaneous break and radicalisation of postmodern cynicism, a terminal symptom of the age of the 'post-concepts'.[61] However, deciphering the enigmatic rise of 'awakening' narratives and new forms of clarity requires more than attending to cultural and spiritual factors. It demands turning our eyes to the political-economic transformations of the last four decades since the neoliberal counterrevolution. The postmodern talk of 'vocabularies', 'metaphors' and 'narratives' tends to hide the material counterpart to liberal irony, which is central to the post-Fordist and neoliberal management of the economy. Here, we are faced once again with the enigmatic return of clairvoyant truths in a political-economic order of epistemic and legislative humility, flexible labour and populist delegitimations of truth.

For neoliberals, ironic distance forms the essence of free market society. Neoliberalism, as Foucault wrote, sees the market as 'a site of veridiction', an arbiter of truth to which legislators must flexibly adjust.[62] Friedrich Hayek, as weary of Cartesian rationalism as Richard Rorty, calls for a cautious stance from regulators in the face of market omniscience.[63] No market party or government agency has access to all the pieces of information scattered across the market order.[64] Since these snippets can only be efficiently synthesised by the price mechanism, governments have to keep to modest 'piecemeal tinkering' (*Law, Legislation and Liberty*, p113). Market engineers need to carefully programme and protect the market, unleashing the full power of 'the catallaxy' in producing social truths and goods.[65] In light of this, neoliberals view collective decision-making as a threat to the market, requiring international institutions to curb democratic pretensions.[66] After the neoliberal turn, societies thus became split between a law-oriented rule of experts on the one hand and a market-based 'consumer democracy' on the other.[67] Both experts and consumers, however, must exercise epistemic

humility: Only the market truly knows.

In the void left by neoliberalism's 'undoing of the demos' rose the figure of the precarious worker and the entrepreneur.[68] With organised labour's fist shattered, labour markets were flexibilised in order to heighten the complexity of the catallaxy. Industries got outsourced and firms were downsized, giving way to a 'lean' play of decentralised market forces governed by 'transaction costs' rather than central planners. Workers, finally, were re-imagined as 'entrepreneurs of the self', left to fend for themselves as labour unions lost their collective bargaining power.[69] The play of market forces led to a 'gamified' existence for the worker. Post-Fordist sociality thus became one of temporary projects instead of overarching institutions, mobilising fleeting networks of precarious labourers that could adjust quickly to changing price signals.[70] The social had become truly 'liquid'.[71]

At the same time, voter turnout, party membership and union activism steadily declined. With democratic subjects increasingly disillusioned, neoliberal ideologues encouraged them to instead 'vote with their feet'. Yet as the gap between politics and the populace widened, politicians now became tasked with 'ruling the void'.[72] Absent old party and union structures, politicians clamped onto new techniques of popular mediation – media training, impact analysis and opinion polling – to construct 'the people'.[73] Politics, too, increasingly became a sub-domain of market research.[74] Without competing ideologies and constituencies, this anti-politics of 'second modernity' gave rise to a crisis of 'the political'.[75] The neoliberal counterrevolution emptied-out politics of its 'ontic' content, and what remained was its 'ontological' core of the we/they-distinction – the crux of 'populist reason'.[76] After decades of neoliberal delegitimation of popular democracy, 'the people' were back with a vengeance.

The populist opposition between the people and the elite, Us and Them, insiders and outsiders, slides right onto the Manichean division between good and evil pushed by conspiracists (*Conspiracy Theories in the Time of COVID-19*, pp10-14). Far-right leaders such as Jair Bolsonaro, Viktor Orbán and Nigel Farage have all weaponised conspiracy theories for their political power plays, invoking the image of 'cultural marxists' funded by Jewish billionaire George Soros as the cause for their nations' loss of sovereignty. Donald Trump, however, remains the ultimate example of populist conspiracism, climbing the presidential stage on the premise of the 'Birther' conspiracy theory and descending it amidst the 'Stop the Steal' rallies. As part of a broader process of delegitimation of traditional epistemic authorities – including legacy media, universities, medical practitioners and state agencies – these populists strategically exploit conspiracy theories and disinformation to further public mistrust. These attacks on truth-producing institutions often combine populist enmity with neoliberal projects of marketisation and austerity, as became clear for instance in Donald Trump's slashing of the Department of Energy's budget.[77] As populism and neoliberalism provoke each other in a process

64. Friedrich Hayek, 'The Use of Knowledge in Society', *The American Economic Review*, 35:4, 1945, pp519-530.

65. Hayek preferred 'catallaxy' over 'the economy', since the latter term, with its roots in 'oikos' or 'household', suggested that the market order might be ran like a household (*Law, Legislation, and Liberty,* p268).

66. Quinn Slobodian, *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism*, Harvard University Press, 2018.

67. Niklas Olsen, *The Sovereign Consumer: A New Intellectual History of Neoliberalism*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

68. Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*, MIT Press, 2015.

69. Ulrich Bröckling, *The Entrepreneurial Self: Fabricating a New Type of Subject*, Sage, 2016.

70. Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Verso, 2007.

71. Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, Polity Press, 2012.

72. Peter Mair, *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing Out of Western Democracy*, Verso, 2013.

73. Péter Csigó, *The Neopopular Bubble: Speculating on 'the People' in Late Modern

Democracy, Central European University Press, 2016.

74. Theodor Adorno, 'Sociology and Empirical Research', in Theodor Adorno, Hans Albert, Ralf Dahrendorf, Jürgen Habermas, Harald Pilot and Karl Popper (eds) *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, Heinemann, 1976, pp68-86.

75. Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political*, Routledge, 2005.

76. Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, Verso, 2005.

77. Aeron Davis, 'The Economics of Public Knowledge', *PERC Paper Series*, 2015, www.perc.org.uk. Michael Bailey and Des Freedman, *The Assault on Universities: A Manifesto for Resistance*, Pluto Press, 2011; John Watkins and James Seidelman, 'The Last Gasp of Neoliberalism', *Journal of Economic Issues*, 53:2, 2019, pp363-369.

78. Daniel Dennet, 'I Begrudge Every Hour I Have to Spend Worrying about Politics', interview by Carole Cadwalladr, *The Guardian*, 12 February 2017.

79. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich 1979; Michael Lewis, 'Has Anyone Seen the President?', *Bloomberg*, 2018.

80. Dale Beran, *It Came from Something*

of mutual agitation, they alternatively take stabs at what is left of collective knowledge production and the public sphere.

All this came to a head in 2016, when 'post-truth' was chosen as Oxford Dictionaries' 'Word of the Year'. For some, it was postmodern irony and relativism followed to its final conclusion.[78] For others it represented the old fascist techniques of confusion documented in Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1979) and updated for the digital era by Steve Bannon's calls for 'flooding the zone with shit'.[79] Dale Beran, for instance, has shown how the alt-right trolls who claimed to have 'memed' Trump into the White House weaponised irony to further their reactionary ends.[80] These trolls combine playful action, ironic 'unbelief' and memetic bricolage with extremist identitarian beliefs – a paradoxical combination similar to the ones we are analysing in terms of the New Clarity. Angela Nagle, in turn, claims that alt-right trolls had appropriated the transgressive tactics of the counter-cultural left, from the Merry Pranksters to the Dutch provos.[81] Muirhead and Rosenblum analyse these attacks on truth-criteria as 'conspiracy without the theory'.[82] Contrary to classical conspiracy theories, they argue, this 'new conspiracism' does not offer alternative explanations of historical events but merely seeks to undermine any truth claim or appeal to epistemic authority.

While these readings certainly identify an existing tendency, our interpretation of what is 'new' about current forms of conspiracism is a different one. Coming back to our focal object, QAnon, we can see why these accounts come up short. In the span of two years, QAnon evolved from a collective role-playing game on 4chan /pol/ to a full-blown global conspiracy cult.[83] On the one hand, participants display a playful and ironic attitude to one's own and others' beliefs, constructing a postmodern pastiche of cascading interpretations through memes and hastily compiled YouTube documentaries. Yet on the other hand, these conspiracists claim absolute epistemic clarity about a secret global cabal against whom Trump heroically struggles. Such mystical truth-claims cannot be correctly interpreted by appealing to ironic transgressions or an undermining of truth. 'Post-truth' therefore only partially captures part of this time of 'truthers', 'alternative facts' and 'The Great Awakening'. It sits uneasily with the clarion call for a New Clarity.

The oft-heard designation of QAnon as a 'cult' is worth lingering on. The term helps to locate its contradictory epistemologies of seekership and mysticism in 'the cultic milieu', as we noted above, but they also indicate a specific mode of sociality. In contrast to churches and sects, cults are 'loosely organised, ephemeral, and espouse ... a deviant system of belief and practice' (*The Cult*, p12). They are therefore eminently suitable organisations for the distributed, networked, and market-mediated sociability of the neoliberal age. While it is conducive to cultic formations, however, neoliberal sociability is hardly a good conductor for democratic politics, leaving public institutions vulnerable to antagonism and conspiracist delusions. As Wendy Brown has shown, the cultic and anti-institutionalist atmosphere has led, on the one

hand, to intensified anti-state sentiments of 'authoritarian liberalism' and 'authoritarian moralism' and, on the other hand, to a crippled mode of the political reduced to technocratic systems management.[84] This grim spiral of right-wing radicalism and neoliberal technocracy distorts political action, leading to a 'return of the repressed' in the form of a cultic radicalism that may end up undermining the neoliberal project (*In the Ruins of Neoliberalism*, p16).

The conspiracist crowds that stormed the German Reichstag and the US Capitol in 2020 are the most violent social expressions of the New Clarity, the dual anti-institutionalist mobs of cultic collectivities and hyper-individualist spiritual politics. The rise of the *Querdenker* ('diagonal thinkers') and the siege of the US Capitol did not so much announce the return of the old fascist masses, marching in lockstep and uniform, but rather represent a new microfascist network of loosely connected groupuscules.[85] In both cases, they brought together a motley crew of small entrepreneurs, holistic healers, alternative influencers, and fanatic commandos, united only by a deeply felt intuition of being wronged by the powers that be. These cultic formations are reminiscent of Deleuze and Guattari's original description of 'microfascism': 'we are trapped in a thousand little monomanias, self-evident truths, and clarities that gush from every black hole and no longer form a system, but are only rumble and buzz, blinding lights giving any and everybody the mission of self-appointed judge, dispenser of justice, policeman, neighbourhood SS man'.[86] This passage reads as an apt description of the new cultic swarms, gnostic subcultures and spiritual influencers that currently roam the internet and (increasingly) the streets, each contained in their own echo chambers but overflowing and interlocking with other microfascist ensembles, from QAnon-adepts and anti-vaxxers to flat-earthers and anti-5Gers. Liquid modernity is carbonated with a thousand bubbles.

It is striking that Deleuze and Guattari noted 'Clarity' as one of the four dangers of (micro)fascism alongside Fear, Power and Disgust (*A Thousand Plateaus*, p227). These dangers, they explain, were first formulated by Carlos Castaneda, one of the leading figures of the New Age spirituality movement in the 1970s. Castaneda was an anthropological con-man turned neo-shaman for whom these four dangers were encountered by the spiritual seeker on the path to enlightenment.[87] Rather than an obstacle to true enlightenment, however, Deleuze and Guattari regard Clarity as a crucial weapon of what they call the 'war machine', a particular organisation of desire enlisted by both Fascist dictators *and* neoliberal capitalism. What distinguished the fascist state from the totalitarian Soviet state, Deleuze and Guattari (*A Thousand Plateaus*, p230) argue, is that only the fascist state harnessed the dark desires of the people: their heart was in it. Similarly, the New Economy, Deleuze and Guattari held, no longer repressed desire but exploited it for its creative and productive potential. Clarity, we might say, belongs to the risky desires that circulate in the cultic sociality of neoliberalism.

Awful: How a Toxic Troll Army Accidentally Memed Donald Trump into Office, All Points Books, 2019.

81. Angela Nagle, *Kill All Normies: The Online Culture Wars from Tumblr and 4Chan to the Alt-Right and Trump*, Zero Books, 2017.

82. Russel Muirhead and Nancy Rosenblum, *A Lot of People are Saying: The New Conspiracism and the Assault on Democracy*, Princeton University Press, 2019, p19.

83. Mike Rothschild, *The Storm Is upon Us: How QAnon Became a Movement, Cult, and Conspiracy Theory of Everything*, Melville House, 2021.

84. Wendy Brown, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West*, Columbia University Press, 2019, p59. (Hereafter *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism*.)

85. Jack Bratich, *On Microfascism: Gender, War, and Death*, Common Notions, 2022. For their account of 'diagonalism' as a new form of social protest movement, see William Callison and Quinn Slobodian, 'Coronapolitics from the Rechtstag to the Capitol', Boston Review. https://bostonreview.net/articles/quinn-slobodian-toxic-politics-coronakspeticism/

86. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and*

Schizophrenia, University of Minnesota Press, 1987, p228. (Hereafter *A Thousand Plateaus*.)

87. C.E. Hardman, '"He May Be Lying But What He Says Is True": The Sacred Tradition of Don Juan As Reported by Carlos Castaneda, Anthropologist, Trickster, Guru, Allegorist', in James Lewis (ed.), *The Invention of Sacred Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp38-55.

88. Reijer Hendrikse, 'The Rise of Neo-Illiberalism', Krisis, 41:1, 2021, pp65-93; William Davies and Nicholas Gane, 'Post-Neoliberalism?', special issue of *Theory, Culture & Society*, 38:6, 2021.

Clarity is thus as much a productive desire as it is a destructive one. To account for these destructive tendencies, this section demonstrated how new cultic formations such as QAnon and *Querdenker* dovetail with neoliberalism's fleeting sociality. Their hyper-individualist epistemologies of irony and self-knowledge, moreover, reflect the humility demanded from a society integrated by localised price signals, as Hayek and other neoliberal economists petitioned for. Yet equally, the mystical clarity touted by the cults aims to break with this humility, to 'take back control' as the Brexit-slogan goes. So far, the radical-right has mostly ended up supporting the neoliberal project,[88] but there is, from the perspective of the system, always the risk that the desire for Clarity can no longer be recuperated.

CONCLUSION

Our starting assumption for this article was that the so-called post-truth era inherits and accelerates the cynical and postmodern attitudes that were seen as dominant cultural trends from the 1980s onward. Yet, intuitively, this assumption seems unable to explain the recent upsurge of claims to unequivocal truth and visions of mystical clarity, manifesting in the myriad calls for a Great Awakening in conspiracy movements like QAnon. At first sight, these new cultic forms of awakening contradict the postmodern mood of playful, ironic and sometimes nihilistic engagement with truth. They also contradict the pervasive sense of inhabiting a 'post-truth' condition, in which 'nothing is true and everything is possible'. This raised the question that we sought to answer, namely: How must we account for the emergence of conspiratorial and spiritual awakenings from within a culture characterised by cynical distrust and postmodern incredulity?

Our answer to this question is that this co-incidence of Awakening with the 'post-' era is not as contradictory as it may seem, once we understand the self-transcending and paradoxical tendencies of the postmodern. We traced these tendencies along three different historical axes: cynicism and the crisis of critique, New Age spirituality, and the spiralling dialectic between neoliberalism and populism. Faced with the opacity and complexity of today's digital mediascapes, we showed how super-conspiracy myths like QAnon offer their followers an illusional world of clarity, allowing privileged access to an extant trace of Truth. The promise of 'awakening' from the mire of ideological, institutional and technological manipulations provides these movements with a competitive edge on the global market of ideas, offering an affective hook in an otherwise chaotic and opaque world.

The various manifestations of QAnon testify to the emergence of a New Clarity, a spiral of cynical attitudes that breed mystical visions, and which in turn stimulate further disillusionment with the 'official' world. As with the cultic back-and-forth between spiritual quests and ecstatic experiences, the conspiracist endlessly cycles through DIY-research and flashes of epistemic

clarity. Once the incredulous citizen has awoken to the truth of vaccine microchips, they might then dive into alternative medicine, only to arrive at a spiritual self-help book on Amazon. The New Clarity is thus neither a return to classical modernity and its 'naive' critique of ideology nor still simply postmodern. Rather, it names a new cultural mood that relates to postmodernism in a similar way as postmodernism related to modernism, offering at once a *break with* and *a radicalisation of* its predecessor. To recall, Lyotard did not proclaim postmodernism to be an era beyond modernity, but defined it as a figure of the modern: 'Postmodernism ... is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant' (*The Postmodern Condition*, p79). This state is the creative principle of modernism, realising itself in its very subversion.

In the same way, the New Clarity must be considered the nascent state of postmodernism, in which mystical certitudes and cultic formations rise atop waves of cynicism, incredulity, and irony. The Internet has very much played the role of midwife in delivering the New Clarity from the postmodern womb, as the sheer quantity of conspiratorial affect circulating within global networks comes to make a qualitative difference. As the dominant infrastructure of the New Clarity, social media not only lend credibility, visibility and synergy to otherwise disparate fringe movements, but also renders them politically potent, as they swarm from the dark comment sections of the web to the halls of the US Senate. The New Clarity must thus be understood as a cultural formation emerging at the level of the social system that cannot be reduced to individual beliefs as empirical units. Its contradictions are not co-existent within individual belief systems or even on a group level, but manifest collectively on the level of culture, in the interactive assemblage between different actors and discourses – from the original LARPers of QAnon to the radical believers such as the QAnon shaman who stormed the US Capitol in 2021, or from cynical 'conspiracy entrepreneurs'[89] to sincere holistic influencers on social media.

This leaves the question of how these new clarities 'that gush from every black hole and no longer form a system' (*A Thousand Plateaus*, p228) can be curbed. In this respect, we believe that the postmodern conviction that grand appeals to Truth or Justice are threats to democratic pluralism is still valid. Yet that does not mean that Rortyan pleas for ironic pluralism will suffice. A quasi-democratic relativism of simply relaying existing opinions in a postmodern montage only fuels the flames. Besides perhaps a brief period in the 1990s and early 2000s, conspiracism is no longer harmless fun. The postmodern *play* of signifiers has become a *war* of signifiers, visible in the memes and (dis)info wars that now accompany the new geopolitical wars in the age of American hegemonic decline. Liberal commentators and policy makers have engaged in a 'war of restoration'[90] against post-truth, going all in on fact-checking, debunking, and digital literacy. Others have suggested that critique, rather than an agent of disenchantment, should itself

89. Clare Birchall, 'The Paranoid Style for Sale: Conspiracy Entrepreneurs, Marketplace Bots and Surveillance Capitalism', *Symploke*, 29:1, 2021, pp97-121.

90. Jack Bratich, 'Civil Society Must Be Defended: Misinformation, Moral Panics, and Wars of Restoration', *Communication, Culture and Critique*, 13:3, 2020, pp311-32.

be re-enchanted (*Board Games as Social Media*), or be reoriented towards the enlarged empiricism offered by 'matters of concern', as Latour advocated. Almost twenty years after his influential essay, the anecdote about Latour's conspiratorial neighbour has proven to be prophetic, but therefore also banal: We all know someone who adheres to this or that conspiracy theory. Awakening and the desire for clarity is the form the crisis of critique takes today, and as always it forms along class lines.[91] Yet however we respond and develop new counter-strategies to these new microfascist formations requires understanding their paradoxical relationship to postmodern and post-truth affects, rather than simply dismissing them as external threats to an otherwise stable (neo)liberal order.

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91. Note that Latour stages the encounter with his conspiratorial 'other' in the countryside, which especially in France has become a marginalised place where, in contrast to the city, only the uneducated and elderly still dwell.