Narrating Conspiracy Theories: A Paradoxical Ethics of Otherness, Propaganda and Mistrust

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Abstract – Reflecting conspiracy theories in contemporary fiction actualises conspiratorial thinking as a specific sociocultural phenomenon and narrative. Four symptomatic novels – George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, Ahmed Khaled Towfik's *Utopia*, and Stephen King's *The Institute* – have been analysed from a conspiratorial perspective to illuminate the most efficient ways of shaping the human perception of reality. For this purpose, the following conspiracy elements have been delineated to be the basis of the novels' poetics: otherness, propaganda and mistrust. They affect the authors' strategies of storytelling in the books written in the era of the end of truth. Following an interdisciplinary approach that primarily includes the method of narrative construction and semiotic analysis, the article focuses on the conspiracy elements for plotting the selected novels and explicates the conspiracy narratives for manifesting the paradoxical ethics of truth as fiction. Conceptualising this idea in the sociocultural context confers to such a kind of literature a new ethical dimension.

Keywords – Untruthfulness; Troubled Society; Conspiracy Discourse; Fictionality; Escapism.

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1. Introduction

Conspiracy theories, which arise in periods of crisis in history, have recently evolved into a very relevant and mass sociocultural phenomenon. A conspiracy theory is primarily a product of the media which relays the discourse demanded by the audience. A conspiracy theory can be considered a conception that declares certain socially significant events, certain historical phenomena or even the course of history as a result of a conspiracy of sinister and powerful groups (a state within a state, a global government) (Harambam and Aupers 1004; Goertzel 732) that guide this process for good motives, selfishness, ambition or other group or clan interests. Researchers claim that conspiracy theories "appear to provide broad, internally consistent explanations that allow people to preserve beliefs in the face of uncertainty and contradiction" (Douglas et al. 7), and "propose alternative versions [...] of how certain phenomena or events probably happened" (Deutschmann 19). In an era dominated by untruthfulness, misinformation, and fakeness, conspiracy theories are coming to play an increasingly influential role in society.

The reasons for the emergence and popularisation of conspiratorial thinking can be regarded through the following conceptions, among others: a psychoanalytic conception (Pipes; Hofstadter) considers conspiracy theories as a sublimation of social neuroses (people transfer their fears and complexes to an imaginary external enemy); a sociological conception (Knight; Bertuzzi) views the phenomenon of conspiracy in connection with changes in public life and consciousness (conspiracy theories appear to be a new way of thinking that depends on specific events in the world); a philosophical conception (Uscinski) puts forward interest in the categorical elements of the structure of conspiracy; and a culture conception (Imhoff) accepts conspiratorial thinking as a new way of understanding and creating history, playing with ideas, images and myths.

As a corpus of ideas, conspiracy theories have become a productive source of inspiration in culture. Conspiracy narratives, remaining a central category in politics, journalism, advertising, and entertainment, are increasingly being the subject of reflection by contemporary writers. Conspiracy theories are attractive to mass consciousness; they penetrate literary fiction since an author creates "pictures with words that are designed to bring your conspiracy to life", but "no conspiracy is ever as simple as it may seem" (Oldham 1–2). As a phenomenon of modern thinking, conspiracy theories give rise to a special form of storytelling with conspiracy elements to help writers express their aesthetic ideas.

Following Bonetto and Arciszewski (916), we interpret conspiracy theories as narratives that tell mostly fictional stories. Some researchers also believe that "the terms of conspiracy and of narrative overlap: in both cases one speaks about plots and plotting" (Boym 97). Conspiracy theories have become a legitimate model for explaining to the audience something

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incomprehensible and hostile. For the consumer of the printed word, they are a kind of way to find answers to mysterious questions, to assert oneself in one's thoughts (filter bubbles), or even a kind of escapism. Apart from the above, there is a rational grain of conspiracy theories since conspiracy is based on the archetypal opposition of *friend or foe* and arises when official explanations do not inspire confidence or have internal contradictions. Conspiracy theories attract attention also because capturing people's minds can be a tool for manipulation. That is why the classical conspiracy narrative is composed of certain structural and formal characteristics that individual conspiracy theories, contained in both fiction and putatively non-fiction texts, articulate in similar ways (Fenster 111). The *fiction* is understood here in the broad, non-specialised sense of the term as a partially referential imaginary narrative.

Among the corpora of texts related to conspiracy theories, there are media products, research on the phenomenon of conspiracy and conspiracy fiction. The latter include those works that contain the elements of conspiracism: a secret organisation that influences people's minds and creates its own history, as well as allusions to conspiratorial ideas. Conspiracy theories, pseudo-factual statements, are generally distinguished from fiction in the aesthetic sense of the term by the enunciative/pragmatic framework that defines them.

Moving beyond discussions of their truthfulness, we have focused on how the conspiracy idea is realised in the novel space of contemporary authors at the level of plots and especially elements of the literary world (plot, characters, time, space, and motifs). There have been selected four symptomatic novels that have not yet been analysed from a conspiratorial perspective: George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), Ahmed Khaled Towfik's *Utopia* (2008) and Stephen King's *The Institute* (2019). Since "conspiracy fiction evolved in relation to genres of popular fiction with distinct narrative features, the allure of conspiracy as a literary formula lay also in its mobility" (Carver 415). The mentioned novels may not be considered conventional conspiracy fiction, but they are interesting precisely because of the presence of the conspiracy elements, which compose the poetics of the novels.

Among the central elements, the following ones have been singled out and thoroughly analysed: otherness, propaganda and mistrust. The strategies of reflection on conspiracy discourse can be traced through those elements created by the writers of the era of the end of truth. In the case of conspiracy narratives, the dividing line between fact and fiction is particularly elusive (Christov 13), which makes the ethics of conspiracy theories quite paradoxical. Otherness, propaganda, and mistrust are crucial in conspiracy theories because they comprise the heart of conspiracy discourse.

It is crucial to identify the ideological, thematic, symbolic and aesthetic characteristics of a work of fiction, consider its unique qualities, and determine the author's intended message for a broad readership. Close attention to these texts is necessary to comprehend the classical heritage of the past and preserve its enduring significance, and to understand the new literary situation and the essence of works created by modern authors. Text analysis encompasses not only the dissection of a narrative into its parts and components but also the high-level generalisation and interpretation of information within the text. It is complex due to its ontologically dual nature, combining the material and spiritual, the real and fictional, the rational and emotional, the individual and general, the objective and subjective, and the social and personal. A literary text is a coherent whole that requires active participation from both the author and the reader to be understood. The author's intentions presented in the narrative to some extent influence the reader's reaction and ability to evaluate the text.

The article is targeted to delineate how the conspiracy elements are exploited for plotting the selected novels and how the conspiracy narratives manifest to be a pivotal means of explicating their paradoxical ethics and conceptualising truth as fiction.

To appreciate the aim, we propose a new methodological approach that acknowledges conspiracy theories as a means of constructing a special fictional reality and strategy of storytelling.

It involves an interdisciplinary approach that includes the method of narrative construction (Raab et al. 3), semiotic analysis (Madisson and Ventsel ch. 2) as well as stylistic, historical and cultural approaches to defining the modes of narrating and effectiveness of conspiracy narratives as the elements of making a complete story. They include plot, characters, conflict, background and atmosphere working together to share the writer's message. The aim is not to pursue a universal typology of narrative texts but to provide a clear and concise analysis of the subject matter. Narratological tools are used in the article to describe how the novels and their fictional societies are constructed. We employ them to deconstruct narrative texts stems from the necessity for "a fundamental epistemological structure that helps us to make sense of the confusing diversity and multiplicity of events and to produce explanatory patterns for them" (Fludernik 2). The novels include plot, characters, conflict, background and atmosphere, which work together to share the writer's intended message. The books are narrated through the internal focalisation of the main characters. We employ a methodological approach that enables us to scrutinise the authors' internal arguments. In the explicit examples of the storytellers' actions and understandings, our analysis reveals an implicit logic of the characters.

The structure of conspiracy research is manifested both at the formal level (explicit conspiracy elements) and at the expressive-verbal level (implicit conspiracy elements). Such a strategy for the selected novels has so far not been covered in academic research. This article hence explores not only the literary world of the novels but also the expressions and actions of the characters, forms and methods of implementing the conspiracy idea in the novel space of contemporary fiction in English to explicate its ethical bases.

2. Conspiracy Narratives in the Paradoxical Ethics of Truth as Fiction

The narrative structure of the selected novels represents the relationship of such thematic and storytelling congruences as an author – character, character – reader and reader – work of fiction. This occurs at the level of interaction between the author's and the reader's consciousnesses. The approaches to implementing different narrative strategies in the novels are subject to the creative task of depicting revising genre and narrative forms of objectifying the author's position in considering reality. Both Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* have a traditional linear narrative structure while Towfik's *Utopia* and King's *The Institute* have a non-linear one driven by postmodernist imperatives. The core of each story is revealed by expressing conspiracy narratives as a story is "the content of the narrative expression" (Chatman 23).

Conspiracy discourse, taken from mass culture, is readily used by contemporary writers to express their artistic and aesthetic ideas and study the surrounding reality. Since conspiratorial thinking, whether based on facts or fiction, produces vicious circles of analogy and paranoiac overdetermination, conspiracy theories can cause violence, not merely its effect (Boym 97). From this perspective, events unfold in the selected novels, and the analysed conspiracy elements – otherness, propaganda and mistrust – appear in the books to be the pivotal components of narrating conspiracy theories.

2.1 Otherness and the Politics of Othering: Power over Everything

Any author creating a literary text seeks to make readers feel the same emotions as a writer so that a piece remains in the memory of addressees. It should be emphasised that two characteristics play a decisive role in attracting readers to a work of fiction: the interpretation of the text and the use of literary devices. Studying the novels through the prism of their genre allows us to regard the opposition of *friend or foe* as a genre-forming component. One of the elements of this opposition is xenophobia which has always been inherent in humans. It takes various

forms: the desire to separate one's space from the others' space, the cultivation of hatred for a particular group of people, and the definition of an element of state ideology.

The novels appear to be a vivid illustration to demonstrate how the opposition of political discourse *friend or foe* is manifested in troubled societies. In fact, all the reasons are fear of the way of thinking of the others, and possible actions that could reshape the world order: "We stand against the small tide of those who want to make everyone unhappy with conflicting theory and thought" (Bradbury 59). The author employs hidden comparisons and hyperbole to exaggerate the situation and present a bleak outlook for the future. The message is implied through the comparison of *theory and thought*, suggesting that emotions should not be completely replaced by rationality as it can lead to a loss of identity. After all, as long as the others keeps calm, it is not about their elimination, but about attempts of burning "all evil and all illusion out of him; we bring him over to our side" (Orwell 298). The text describes the transformation of a person into a submissive and obedient being who follows rules without considering the consequences, solely at the request of the government. The author employs alliteration and assonance for rhythmic effect.

The literature under analysis remains popular and relevant to the present day since "[a] hundred years of exploitation, repression, state violence, war, genocide, disease, famine, ecocide, depression, dept, and the steady depletion of humanity through the buying and selling everyday life provided more than enough fertile ground for this fictive underside imagination" (Moylan xi). In the novels, we observe a clear distinction of *friend or foe*: "They aren't like us! They're from Utopia!" (Towfik 39). The use of simple exclamatory sentences emphasises the character's emotional state, which may prevent him from considering the situation from a different perspective. Even more, all those who are not followers of the party's course are not considered humans: "The proles are not human beings" (Orwell 58). Such an expression adds characteristics to the hero since the readers receive a message and "[i]t has to do with how protagonists interpret things" (Bruner 51). For the ruling elite, they are animals that are used for ignoble purposes: "[…] the Party taught that the proles were natural inferiors who must be kept in subjection, like animals, by the application of a few simple rules" (Orwell 81). According to Beauchamp, some have viewed the link between sadism and political power: "Orwell seems to suggest that the aggressive and destructive manifestations of power politics […] are the large-scale displacements of individual desires to hurt others – drives that, rather than exceptional, are commonplace and found all around us" (Beauchamp 79). To analyse the texts, the concept of enthymeme is used, as it "provides the researcher with a tool to transform the implicit parts of the arguments into explicit and analyzable data. Because stories often have multiple arguments, this form of analysis facilitates disentangling the various arguments in a story" (Feldman et al. 152). The animal nature of the others is exaggerated: "Years of subjugation have made them closer to animals. Day by day they lose part of their humanity until they end up truly horrible creatures" (Towfik 27–28). Campbell concludes that "Utopia [is] less as the tale of two psychologically realistic characters and more as the tale of the class" (541). A metaphorical comparison of people with vegetables denotes those who, like Clarisse McClellan, do not feel the unity of thought with the masses: "He [a psychiatrist] says I'm a regular onion! I keep him busy peeling away the layers" (Bradbury 20). The others can be considered different like psychic kids abbreviated as TP (telepathy) and TK (telekinesis) (King 72), or "average TKs and TPs pinks" (83), or "a test subject" (165). That separation is justified by historical tradition: "Throughout recorded time, and probably since the end of the Neolithic Age, there have been three kinds of people in the world, the High, the Middle, and the Low" (Orwell 214). The novels follow the main narrative – "divide-and-rule". The thoughts, desires and aspirations of the others are not taken into account, they are used to achieve one goal – to gain power over everyone: "We are not interested in the good of others; we are interested solely in power. Not wealth or luxury or long life or happiness: only power, pure power […]"

(309). The author employs parallel constructions to create new content in the previous message through the consecutive use of negation and affirmation. Human life is worth nothing compared to experiencing an intoxicating feeling of power: "[…] power is power over human beings. Over the body – but, above all, over the mind" (310). Therefore, anyone defined as the other is just dust whose further existence can be expressed by a phrase from the burial service in the Book of Common Prayer: *Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.*

According to Boltanski, specific conspiracy theories of a social novel are based on a dual understanding of characters and their relationships: each character is portrayed as an individual with a unique personality, psychology, past, and future, etc., and as a typical member of a social group with less clearly defined interests (Boltanski 10–13). Towfik's Gaber, for instance, notices the insidiousness of the ruling elite: "I don't trust any oath you people take since you deal with us as if we were subhuman. And you lie to us with the ease of someone lying to sheep" (Towfik 106). King's Mr. Jamieson is trying to save children at the cost of his own life: "While you, Mr. Jamieson, undoubtedly believe you'll go to heaven […] And who knows, you might be right. What God could turn away a man who rides to the rescue of defenseless youngsters?" (King 538). Otherness can be seen in the positive behaviour or way of thinking of a separate social group: "We are all bits and pieces of history and literature and international law, Byron, Tom Paine, Machiavelli, or Christ, it's here" (Bradbury 145); "The proles had stayed human. They had not become hardened inside" (Orwell 191).

The main purpose of propaganda is to create *an enemy* that should provoke anger and hate: "As usual, the face of Emmanuel Goldstein, the Enemy of the People, had flashed on to the screen. There were hisses here and there among the audience" (Orwell 11), or if foes are dead, they may provoke disgust: "[…] he was probably dead, and wouldn't provide a source of amusement" (Towfik 17).

If the world order changes, the laws of humanity are levelled: "Today there were fear, hatred, and pain, but no dignity of emotion, no deep or complex sorrows" (Orwell 32). King depicts in detail the interrogation of the boy: "Mrs. Sigsby nodded to Tony, who twisted Avery's arm behind his back and hoisted his wrist almost to his shoulder blade. The pain was incredible. Avery screamed" (King 317). The burning of a woman is explained by the fact that someone may hate her: "We burned a woman" (Bradbury 47), "She's nothing to me; she shouldn't have had books. […] I hate her" (48). Alliteration is important in a narrative, as it intensifies emotions through the repetition of the same sound. Thus, at the phonetic level, the method *from object to object* is transformed into a method *from sound to sound.* The goal is to create a certain disorder and fluidity in the text, giving the impression that it is spontaneously structured in the moment. The scenes of human death are getting more and more attractive for people from such societies: "He has fallen to his knees after the bullets have ripped him apart […]. The scene was fearsome, especially since it wasn't on the television screen. Everything was real and terrible and cruel and, and […]. And seductive" (Towfik 8). The interaction 'text – reader' is manifested in the narrative with the help of reflection of a different semiotic system. The representation of spectacles in the narrative allows for the indication of direct communication. Realising the authorities are capable of all kinds of executions and humiliations in order to achieve their goal makes the readers think about the value of the life of the others in a world of 'orderly' lawlessness.

2.2 Propaganda in the Air: Toe the Party Line

The main purpose of propaganda is to force people NOT to THINK but to rely on the will of the totalitarian state apparatus: "Don't you see that the whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of thought? In the end we shall make thoughtcrime literally impossible, because there will be no words in which to express it" (Orwell 57). Syme asks Winston using a rhetorical question presented as a statement of fact rather than a request for an answer. In the absence

of the right to choose, citizens must deal with what the government proposes to them: "If you don't want a man unhappy politically, don't give him two sides to a question to worry him; give him one" (Bradbury 58). This way propaganda is thought of as a subcategory of persuasive communication (Jowett and O'Donnell 6).

The psychological purpose of propaganda is to influence the system of ideological, social and political attitudes of people, which can be changed by forming new attitudes: "If one is to rule, and to continue ruling, one must be able to dislocate the sense of reality" (Orwell 246). The use of a first conditional sentence with a modal verb *must* and pronoun *one* is often considered an absolute rule, a truth that cannot be ignored. Propaganda needs a well-thought-out plan for its presentation, and the ruling party can implement it as they are "those who have the best knowledge of what is happening are also those who are furthest from seeing the world as it is" (246). Totalitarian states create their ruling clans, protecting themselves from manifestations of any equality in society: "If human equality is to be for ever averted – if the High, as we have called them, are to keep their places permanently – then the prevailing mental condition must be controlled insanity" (244). The events in society should resemble a kind of whirlpool, which does not give the slightest opportunity to think about what is happening: "Whirl man's mind around about so fast under the pumping hands of publishers, exploiters, broadcasters, that the centrifuge flings off all unnecessary, time-wasting thought!" (Bradbury 52). In the frantic speed of events, the average person may not note how the propaganda machine works, and the ruling elites occupy the best positions: "Family court brings prominent people in Utopia together, because this community has carved out its own separate laws and courts" (Towfik 16). The authorities try to protect themselves from the others, preferably with the help of the military: "Utopia, the isolated colony that the rich created on the North Coast to protect themselves from the sea of angry poverty outside, and that now fences in everything they might want [...] a company mostly staffed by former Marines" (14). The presence of an unattributed narrator suggests the existence of a universal consciousness that determines the world order. This uncertainty can create a general mental field where certain sentences seem to 'hang in the air' without belonging to anyone in particular.

The psychic kids can be used to eliminate influential people: "Once they're discovered, we investigate them, background them, surveil them, video them. Eventually they're turned over to the children of the various Institutes, who eliminate them, one way or another" (King 543). This is the paradoxical ethics of propaganda: on the one hand, the liquidation of harmful people from power is a noble mission, and on the other hand, the exploitation of children is contrary to the moral norms of any society.

Propaganda is a tool to spread ideology, and one of the ways propaganda influences people's minds is to choose *a leader* of the nation whose appearance should inspire confidence: "It [a poster] depicted simply an enormous face, more than a metre wide: the face of a man of about forty-five, with a heavy black moustache and ruggedly handsome features" (Orwell 1) and "I voted last election, same as everyone, and I laid it on the line for President Noble. I think he's one of the nicest-looking men who ever became president" (Bradbury 93). Towfik's and King's ruling elite is not one person, but a clan that is able to keep people in subjection, because the price is set for everything: "No one does anything without a price. The price may be money. It may be a job. It may be a body. It may be a feeling of superiority. [...] There's always a price" (Towfik 112). Sarcasm is heard in allegations of 'permission' for activities of any kind: "This was not illegal (nothing was illegal, since there were no longer any laws), but if detected it was reasonably certain that it would be punished by death, or at least by twenty-five years in a forced-labour camp" (Orwell 6). The author uses repetition to create a pun that highlights the futility of resisting an authority without laws. The events presented are introduced through the main character's perception: "Orwell's narrative positions the reader alongside, indeed almost within, the mind of the main character, Winston Smith. This narrative

positioning – which enhances the experience of terror – is of particular significance in thinking about the ways in which power is represented in the text" (Rooney 70).

Some indulgences only emphasise the lack of freedom: "Sometimes I even go to the Fun Parks and ride in the jet cars when they race on the edge of town at midnight and the police don't care as long as they're insured" (Bradbury 28). The children experience shocking permissiveness to smoke tobacco and drink alcohol is not banned but promoted: "There's a sign that says PLEASE DRINK RESPONSIBLY" (92), or "Smoke just like Daddy? Are you kiddin me? Got to be an antique. But they got some weird shit in the canteen. Including *real* cigarettes […]" (King 67). The technique of inversion plays a special role in the text, taking two steps forward and one step back. Inversion is used to record the diversity of the stream of consciousness, highlighting the impossibility of clearly structuring it. This reinforces the idea that the novel's narrative is an unfiltered, direct transmission of the characters' stream of consciousness. It gives the impression that the text is being written down in real-time as the characters' thoughts occur. The author focuses readers' attention on the method chosen to keep teenagers in subjection, using such graphical stylistic means as italics and capitals. Those close to the government enjoy special privileges: "No one wants disputes to leave Utopia. Excitement. Crime. Assault. Breaking the rules. Provocation. Violating taboos. Disorderly conduct. Misdemeanor. Destruction. Tension. Adrenaline. Change. Disobedience. Dissolution. Shock. Privilege. Astonishment" (Towfik 17). The author uses sentence fragmentation to enhance emotional and logical-emotional content, increasing the semantic expressiveness of the sentence. But concessions do not exempt from punishment for those actions that are defined by the state as 'world evil': "'Do you ever read any of the books you bum?' He laughed. 'That's against the law!'" (Bradbury 5).

By turning a blind eye to 'petty pranks', the state apparatus is just getting strong because everyone has compromising information that regardless of their own desires or hopes will force people to act in favour of the ruling elite at the right time: "Well, then, what if a fireman accidentally, really not, intending anything, takes a book home with him? […] We don't get over anxious or mad. We let the fireman keep the book twenty-four hours" (Bradbury 59). Permitted/prohibited pleasures include prostitution: "Tacitly the Party was even inclined to encourage prostitution, as an outlet for instincts which could not be altogether suppressed" (Orwell 73). This permission is explained by the unwillingness to break certain 'traditions': "As far as I knew, no law had been passed allowing prostitution, but it was now really out in the open. It had become stronger than the law, stronger than tradition" (Towfik 37). Everything is allowed what does not affect the lifestyle of 'the elite': "It's Utopia's all-purpose motto: Do what you want, as long as you don't infringe on the property of the rest of Utopia's residents" (25). Each author of the novel describes the life, emotions and thoughts of ordinary people to create a believable story: "[e]mbedded in the lives of the ordinary, the marginalized, and the muted, personal narrative responds to the disintegration of master narratives as people make sense of experience, claim identities, and 'get a life' by telling and writing their stories" (Langellier 700).

Slogans, as a powerful means of propaganda, cause mass insanity. They are printed and hung wherever the eye can see, and affect the consciousness of recipients, leaving no trace of the conscious absorbing of reality: "From where Winston stood it was just possible to read, picked out on its white face in elegant lettering, the three slogans of the Party: WAR IS PEACE FREEDOM IS SLAVERY IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH" (Orwell 4). Orwell's novel employs specific narrative strategies to cultivate the reader's apprehension and unease regarding the nature of power and its exercise in this dystopian world (Rooney 70). It is paradoxical that the author includes the ontological tendency of human thinking to refute the obvious facts, which is a consequence of the reaction of human consciousness to be based on the collision of conflicting thoughts, ideas and concepts: "Who controls the past, […] controls the future:

who controls the present controls the past" (Orwell 37). The author employs anaphora to highlight the central idea of the message, adds drama and expressiveness, creates a rhythm, and emphasises the text's structure. The slogan may look like a call to action: "Monday burn Millay, Wednesday Whitman, Friday Faulkner, burn 'em to ashes, then burn the ashes. That's our official slogan" (Bradbury 6). The slogan employs alliteration with the names of famous authors – *Monday Millay, Wednesday Whitman, Friday Faulkner* – to create a rhythmic and memorable text message. This technique is effective for propaganda purposes. Besides listing the names of the authors for residents of a totalitarian state, where reading is prohibited and considered one of the main offences, appears like sarcasm. Bright motivational posters and words in capitals are one of the major illustrations of propaganda methods, as they immediately 'catch an eye': "JUST ANOTHER DAY IN PARADISE" (King 63); "I CHOOSE TO BE HAPPY!" (66). The author uses parallel constructions to rhythm the text, and capital letters play the role of a big draw and influence the emotional sphere of the readers: "THE QUICKER YOU SEE EM, THE QUICKER YOU'RE BACK HOME!" (75). The examples above contain enthymeme, which is noted for ease of identification. All implicit statements are capitalised.

Among the individual means of propaganda there are symbols or insignia: "and then when she seemed hypnotized by the salamander on his arm and the phoenix-disc on his chest, he spoke again" (Bradbury 4); "He pulled out his igniter, felt the salamander etched on its silver disc, gave it a flick […]" (10). Symbols may not always have a complete overlap between the plane of expression (signifier) and the plane of content (signified), resulting in a semantic gap. Symbols often contain understated or hidden meanings. The greatest influence is caused by symbols that are everywhere you can see: "On coins, on stamps, on the covers of books, on banners, on posters, and on the wrappings of a cigarette packet – everywhere. […] Asleep or awake, working or eating, indoors or out of doors, in the bath or in bed – no escape" (Orwell 28).

One of the most powerful means of propaganda is broadcasting as propaganda aimed at the masses must adopt forms that appeal to them. Forms that appeal to the masses and accommodate individuals while minimizing them, making them feel both significant and small, by being relatable and identifiable. The language used should be relatable, identifiable, and empathetic, while also being vague and general (Ellul 6–9). For instance, the screening of propaganda films: "It was nearly eleven hundred, and in the Records Department […] they were dragging the chairs out of the cubicles and grouping them in the centre of the hall opposite the big telescreen, in preparation for the Two Minutes Hate" (Orwell 9). Propaganda has primarily been associated with unethical communication practices by totalitarian regimes (Jowett and O'Donnell 51). This order leads to creating primitive thinking the main goal of which is to find entertainment. In the novels, we have distinguished the different ways of having fun according to the tastes of citizens, cf.: "Heavy physical work, the care of home and children, petty quarrels with neighbours, films, football, beer, and above all, gambling, filled up the horizon of their minds" (Orwell 81); "And if it was not the three walls […] then it was the open car and Mildred driving a hundred miles an hour across town" (Bradbury 42); "You sleep, you take drugs, you eat until food makes you sick, you vomit until you can recover the enjoyment of eating, you have sex (it's weird that you notice how boredom makes your sexual behaviour aggressive and sadistic)" (Towfik 13). Only a few people can understand the fallacy of the chosen path but disbelief in their own strength leaves them no choice: "this life we think we're living isn't real. It's just a shadow play, and I for one will be glad when the lights go out on it" (King 31). The text attempts to transform the peculiarity but it is clear that forceful reporting is no longer necessary. Propaganda has taken root and replaced people's consciousness.

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Disinformation is a subset of propaganda. Storytelling becomes synonymous with disinformation, a tool of deception to influence the masses and manipulate them (Lelevé 24). Placing conspiratorial thinking into fictional discourse exacerbates the problem of disinformation. Its distribution is directly related to the mass media, which creates a simulated reality that is often used by writers because it is a space that we can only see due to various technologies but cannot touch or engage in dialogue with. It always causes mistrust as we do not really know who is responsible for broadcasting. Mass media are becoming the most important tool for spreading disinformation and hatred. It is also widely used to spread conspiracy theories which have a negative impact on efforts to uphold human rights and democratic values. The most powerful machine for creating a new world order is the media which become a source of disinformation:

> And the Records Department, after all, was itself only a single branch of the Ministry of Truth, whose primary job was not to reconstruct the past but to supply the citizens of Oceania with newspapers, films, textbooks, telescreen programmes, plays, novels – with every conceivable kind of information, instruction, or entertainment, from a statue to a slogan, from a lyric poem to a biological treatise, and from a child's spelling-book to a Newspeak dictionary. (Orwell 46)

Disinformation may reach an incredible level. Is it possible to believe that no one has been killed in a country at war? But misguided consumers of news accept such a deception without doubt: "I've never known any dead man killed in a war. Killed jumping off buildings, yes, like Gloria's husband last week, but from wars?" (Bradbury 91). Sentence fragmentation, mentioned in direct speech, indicates the speaker's thoughts and attempts to recall certain episodes of the character's life. Disinformation appears even in the names of ministries which are comprehended as antipodes: "The Ministry of Truth, which concerned itself with news, entertainment, education, and the fine arts. The Ministry of Peace, which concerned itself with war. The Ministry of Love, which maintained law and order. And the Ministry of Plenty, which was responsible for economic affairs. Their names, in Newspeak: Minitrue, Minipax, Miniluv, and Miniplenty" (Orwell 4). The passage presents a series of contrasts that convey the true atmosphere of the existing system. Orwell uses 'ministries' consistently, without attempting to conceal the actual course of events. Instead, the author employs sarcasm, as evidenced by the abbreviated names of the 'ministries', each of which begins with '*mini*'. Gossip, that can be defined as "an unverified proposition for belief that bears topical relevance for persons actively involved in its dissemination" (Rosnow and Kimmel 122–123), is one of the means of transmitting disinformation: "Rumors were self-generated disinformation" (King 292).

The proven tools, such as printed materials, are also used to spread disinformation: "It's published by people from Utopia and other places – people who were once of us, but who were then allowed by the rulers to live there; they are filled with gratitude, a sense of obligation and awe that is almost like worship" (Towfik 80). The information provided in such publications is usually combined with an entertaining message that distracts the readers: "So they write articles that don't mean anything, words that no one reads except the rulers. In fact, even the rulers don't read them, because they are confident of their content. These articles are a kind of intellectual tail-wagging" (Towfik 81). In the final sentence, the author compares the delivery of information to *intellectual tail-wagging*, suggesting that it is blatant propaganda. This comparison is easily understood by both the intended audience and the authorities. This is a kind of pulp fiction: "Here were produced rubbishy newspapers containing almost nothing except sport, crime and astrology, sensational five-cent novelettes, films oozing with sex, and sentimental songs which were composed entirely by mechanical means on a special kind of kaleidoscope known as a versificator" (Orwell 47). Entertainments that distract people are primitive: "So bring on your clubs and parties, your acrobats and magicians, your dare-devils, jet cars, motor-cycle helicopters, your sex and heroin, more of everything to do with automatic

reflex" (Bradbury 58), but effective: "The truth is that we have our own special television that only shows us what we want to watch. It's a cable and home-movie arrangement. There's a high demand for movies about sex, violence and crime" (Towfik 27).

Disinformation becomes the only truth that leads to the loss of the ability to think, which is perceived by totalitarian societies as a challenge to the system: "It was curious that he seemed not merely to have lost the power of expressing himself, but even to have forgotten what it was that he had originally intended to say" (Orwell 7); "The televisor is 'real.' It is immediate, it has dimension. It tells you what to think and blasts it in. It must be, right. It seems so right" (Bradbury 80). Sometimes it is just observation and third-person limited omniscient narration "frequently limits the revelation of thoughts to those of one character, presenting the other characters only externally" (Rooney 75): "The more ignorance grew, the less the cerebral cortex dominated behaviour, making the crimes committed by the lower classes bestial, in the literal meaning of the word" (Towfik 83). The paradoxical ethics of the crime is the criminals' awareness of the falsity of their actions but seeking irrational justification: "Eventually, the murderer stands looking at the camera lenses of the insatiable press with doltish, wandering eyes, and he's content to repeat: 'The devil made me do it'" (83).

Conspiracy theories are a consequence of people's belief in the ruling elites: "They're faking. You threw them off at the river. They can't admit it. […] So they're sniffing for a scapegoat to end things with a bang" (Bradbury 141); "They didn't show the man's face in focus. Did you notice? Even your best friends couldn't tell if it was you. They scrambled it just enough to let the imagination take over" (143). To emphasise the ignorance of thoughtless information consumers, the author uses exaggeration and allusions: "I fell from the peaks of Olympus to crawl through the mud, and I learned that reality is uglier than you can imagine" (Towfik 37). One of the obvious signs of a conspiracy by the ruling elite to hide the truth and misinform people is their disappearance: "People simply disappeared, always during the night. Your name was removed from the registers, every record of everything you had ever done was wiped out, your one-time existence was denied and then forgotten. […] VAPORIZED was the usual word" (Orwell 19); "She didn't want to know how a thing was done, but why. […] The poor girl's better off dead" (Bradbury 57–58), or impunity for elimination: "But we'd be meeting Egyptians or Israelis, and we'd be able to reason with them; unlike the Marines, who shot first and asked questions later" (Towfik 116), or accusations of insanity: "Any man's insane who thinks he can fool the Government and us" (Bradbury 31), or murders: "The police would find out in short order that his parents were dead, murdered, and he was the most likely suspect" (King 271).

The largest disinformation, in fact, a global conspiracy, is the rewriting of history: "The Party said that Oceania had never been in alliance with Eurasia. He, Winston Smith, knew that Oceania had been in alliance with Eurasia as short a time as four years ago" (Orwell 37). The author uses personification to emphasise that the only structure in the world that is always right is the Party. The ruling elites use real well-known names to add 'truth': "Established, 1790, to burn English-influenced books in the Colonies. First Fireman: Benjamin Franklin" (Bradbury 32). There are only a few who is interested in real history. These are those who have doubts or have not been broken completely by the powerful machine of disinformation: "'Is it true that long ago firemen put fires *out* instead of going to start them?' 'No. *Houses* have always been fireproof, take my word for it'" (6). When flirting with history, it is important to remember that without the past, there is no future, and lies cannot replace truth: "The past was erased, the erasure was forgotten, the lie became truth" (Orwell 85). If powerful people associate themselves with gods who are allowed to influence history for the 'good of the world', they may organise so-called institutes where the psychic kinds are used to eliminate those who may influence the course of history: "Institutes were set up, one by one, in isolated locations. Techniques were refined. They have been in place for over seventy years, and by

our count, they have saved the world from nuclear holocaust over five hundred times" (King 539–540). The readers follow the characters who share a common ground to make guesses about reality based on simple details, such as the precise location or time of day as well as larger facts about the power of the ruling elites. Propaganda is widespread, and dissent is punishable under existing laws and orders, as the most important law is embodied in the slogan 'toe the party line.'

2.3 Two Sides of Inferno: Trust vs Mistrust

Our research presents the implicit argument made by the storytellers. We focus on the understandings that the authors express through their stories, rather than whether the argument is right or wrong. Fisher (1987) argues that human communication is infused with unverifiable ideas, which he calls mythos "ideas that cannot be verified or proved in any absolute way" (Fisher 19). The purpose of storytelling is to persuade, and the focus of this text is on the meanings conveyed through these stories.

Belief in conspiracy theories is not necessarily a manifestation of paranoiac consciousness. People who suspect conspiracy theories everywhere are often emotionally unstable. Their hatred easily turns into adoration and vice versa: "Thus, at one moment Winston's hatred was not turned against Goldstein at all, but, on the contrary, against Big Brother, the Party, and the Thought Police; and at such moments his heart went out to the lonely, derided heretic on the screen, sole guardian of truth and sanity in a world of lies" (Orwell 14). Taken to its logical extreme, Winston's entire narrative could be viewed as the result of an individual's delusional nightmare or mental illness, rather than objective reality (Currie 69).

In a world of mistrust of one's own strength and trust in conspiracy theories, devices and methods for tracking are becoming extremely popular: *telescreens* – "The instrument (the telescreen, it was called) could be dimmed, but there was no way of shutting it off completely" (Orwell 2); "[…] while the camera remained stationary, watching the creature dwindle in the distance – a splendid fadeout!" (Bradbury 128); *microphones* – "There's half a dozen places in Front Half where their damn microphones don't reach, dead zones, and I know all of them" (King 111); *chips* and *motion sensors* – "I'm just going to chip your earlobe. […] No big deal, and all our guests get em" (King 104); "This one was topped with barbed wire, and there were light-posts along it at roughly thirty-foot intervals. Motion-activated […]" (King 262); *robots* – "nose so sensitive the Mechanical Hound can remember and identify ten thousand odour-indexes on ten thousand men without re-setting!" (Bradbury 127); a *security apparatus* – "There are six security systems observing each other and the mission of each of them is to protect the rulers" (Towfik 75).

Conspiracy theories are getting more popular due to distrust of all because everyone may betray: "His earlier thought returned to him: probably she was not actually a member of the Thought Police, but then it was precisely the amateur spy who was the greatest danger of all" (Orwell 68); "Can't trust people, that's the dirty part" (Bradbury 83); "If Maureen was really the saint you think she is, she'd get us out of here" (King 87–88). Children who reflect adult behaviour also slander their family members: "It was almost normal for people over thirty to be frightened of their own children" (Orwell 26), despite the threat of extermination of parents: "Within two years those children would be denouncing her to the Thought Police. Mrs Parsons would be vaporized" (67). This is one of the reasons why children are unwanted: "'No one in his right mind, the Good Lord knows; would have children!' said Mrs. Phelps, not quite sure why she was angry with this man" (Bradbury 92). Another reason not to give birth to children is the lack of possibility and desire to provide for offspring. It is a manifestation of the paradoxical ethics of distorted thinking in a totalitarian state: "The bastard was demanding food, air, warmth and affection. There was nothing I could do for him" (Towfik 33). The woman called her new-born *a bastard* and later she killed it. Death, as a rule, erases all the

unpleasant memories of dead people: "There's Beatty dead, and he was my friend once, and there's Millie gone, I thought she was my wife, but now I don't know" (Bradbury 124–125).

Conspiracy theories lead to belief in the existence of the enemy and at the same time raising doubts about its existence: "Perhaps the rumours of vast underground conspiracies were true after all – perhaps the Brotherhood really existed! […] Some days he believed in it, some days not" (Orwell 17). The doubts in the narrative have more to do with recurring features of language and structure. The repetition of the words *perhaps* and *some days*, along with the consistent affirmation and momentary denial of the same thought, express the idea. Ignorance and prohibition of the search for truth serve a single purpose: "the unconditional subordination of the minority to the majority and support of this model of the state structure" (Bohovyk and Bezrukov 86). Mistrust in society breeds cruel behaviour of its representatives: "Some Eurasian prisoners, guilty of war crimes, were to be hanged in the Park that evening, Winston remembered. This […]–was a popular spectacle" (Orwell 25). In such a world, there is no empathy for those who are inferior or do not resist: "In some way, the poor deserve the circumstances they find themselves in" (Towfik 122). The stronger destroys the weaker: "My uncle says his grandfather remembered when children didn't kill each other" (Bradbury 27). Towfik's main character rapes Safiya without the slightest remorse. And this is despite the fact that she was the sister of the boy who saved him from death. Instead, the guy is proud of his deed: "Raping a woman who is sick with tuberculosis! This event would go down in history" (Towfik 104). The main character is portrayed as an anti-hero, and any minor changes that may have made him appear as a 'good guy' to the readers are eliminated. Despite this, the hero's image remains intriguing to the readers, and his behaviour prompts reflection on the existence of individuals who cannot be fundamentally changed by society's influence: "[a]n actor who overturns all our previous conceptions of his role is usually less enjoyable than one who builds on the interpretations we have become accustomed to. But if he adds no special touches of his own to the part we will experience his performance as flat and uninteresting" (Cawelti 10). On the other hand, for those who have empathy, even an understanding of the demonic nature of people, does not become a motive for murder: "But this young guy isn't Napoleon. Hell, no! He's merely a lecherous animal from Utopia who commands not an iota of awe. […] I am incapable of killing them" (Towfik 94). The author uses allusion to emphasise that despite their different status, people remain equal in the face of death.

People's belief that change is possible in such societies is in question: "His heart quailed before the enormous pyramidal shape. It [Ministry of Truth] was too strong, it could not be stormed" (Orwell 29); "I'm one of the innocents who could have spoken up and out when no one would listen to the 'guilty,' but I did not speak and thus became guilty myself" (Bradbury 78); "And I hardly think a very old man and a fireman turned sour could *do* much this late in the game" (81). Life turns into existence when only a dream remains:

> A person could endure life without shelter. Without food. Without drink (perhaps for several days). Without clothes. Without a roof over his head. Without a sweetheart. Without dignity. Without a family (except Safiya). Without a refrigerator. Without a phone. Without a television. Without a tie. Without friends. Without shoes. Without trousers. Without phlogistine. Without a condom. Without headache medicine. Without a laser pointer. But he couldn't endure life without dreams. (Towfik 44)

The author uses sentence fragmentation to depict the impasse. The use of graphical stylistic mean graphon is reminiscent of the wailing of a person who is aware of the darkness of their existence: "Your life was one looooo(what are you waiting for?)oooooo(nothing)ooong, grim present" (Towfik 45). The repetition of the vowel *'o'* in the word *long* is perceived as a symbol of the animal howl that fills the human interior, rather than a human emotion. The narratives of each of the analysed utopias maintain the reader's attention until the end due to unexpected

events and subjective perception. Franzosi noted the importance of maintaining objectivity in subjective evaluations as "[t]he events in the story must disrupt an initial state of equilibrium that sets in motion an inversion of situation, a change of fortunes—from good to bad, from bad to good, or no such reversal of polarity, just an 'after' different from the 'before,' but neither necessarily better or worse" (Franzosi 521). The consequences of fictional or real conspiracy theories can be mistrust, paranoia, fear, hatred, self-isolation of an individual or group, making wrong decisions and hostility.

3. Conclusion

Examining a work of fiction in its broad historical and cultural context is a complex process that ensures the formation of the skills to penetrate the content and narrative structure and reveal an author's message to readers. The mode of narrating conspiracy theories is in great demand in contemporary literature. It provides the authors with extra opportunities, including the acquisition of subjectivity (the plot is organised by the category of the suspicious, polarisation of characters and space, action (extraordinary event, desire to solve a mystery, reveal a secret), and also a new way of playing with the worlds (constructing the ideal closed worlds and finding the ultimate reality).

Using the only elements of the conspiracy worldview (otherness, propaganda, and mistrust), each writer expresses an individual reflection on the issues raised by them. Orwell in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* covers censorship, totalitarianism, loneliness and ignorance, Bradbury in *Fahrenheit 451* reveals the pressing issues of marginalisation, totalitarian society, and obscurantism, Towfik in *Utopia* focuses on policies of segregation of the poor and the rich, King in *The Institute* highlights the problem of the insecurity of kids who serve the dark purposes of powerful men.

Studying a literary reflection of the poetics and themes of contemporary conspiracy fiction allows for the conclusion that the construction of conspiracy space is implicit and explicit using formal and expressive-verbal levels. This way the writers emphasise the paradoxical ethics of truth as fiction in contemporary society. In fictional discourse, conspiracy theories included in the plot of a work of fiction multiply and reveal the most pressing problems of society. Reimagining the idea of truth as fiction confers to this way of understanding reality a new ethical dimension.

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