CONCLUSION

ANOMIE, ALIENATION AND THE FUTURE OF
HYPER-REAL RELIGIONS

FANTASY, CONSPIRACY AND THE ROMANTIC LEGACY: MAX WEBER AND THE SPIRIT OF CONTEMPORARY POPULAR CULTURE

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Introduction

> God damn it, an entire generation pumping gas, waiting tables; slaves with white collars. Advertising has us chasing cars and clothes, working jobs we hate so we can buy shit we don't need. We're the middle children of history, man. No purpose or place. We have no Great War. No Great Depression. Our Great War's a spiritual war...our Great Depression is our lives. We've all been raised on television to believe that one day we'd all be millionaires, and movie gods, and rock stars. But we don't. And we're slowly learning that fact. And we're very, very pissed off (*Fight Club*, Fincher 1999).

These are the words of Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt), the hero in the movie *Fight Club*. These words summarise his discontents with modern society: the alienation experienced by people in factories and offices, the never-ending consumption of superfluous goods, and the unrealisable desire, nourished by advertising and media, for fame, status and success. The movie thus discusses typical modern problems of meaning: the characters in this story have lost any sense of the meaning and purpose of life. They do not know why they live and who they are. Driven by his dissatisfaction with modern life, Tyler Burden started *Fight Club*, a weekly gathering of men who beat each other up, so as to feel something that is 'real': something beyond the rationalised and routinised modern order.

Fight Club's critical message resonates in many other cultural products of our times, among which are a number of well-known films that were released in the very same year, 1999—*American Beauty* (Sam Mendes), *The Matrix* (Andy and Larry Wachowski) and *Magnolia* (Paul Thomas Anderson)—all films that explicitly discuss problems of meaning related to modern, (sub)urban life. These films thus deal with a notion that has been central to the sociological tradition from its very beginnings: that modernisation brings with it cultural problems of meaning. Modern individuals, it is often held, experience their lives less and less as solidly rooted in 'natural' or 'firmly grounded' social worlds and meaning is therefore no longer 'self-evident' or a 'given'. This is what Jean Baudrillard writes about

when he describes and laments the insidiously spreading simulations that increasingly mask and replace 'real' and 'authentic' reality (Baudrillard 2000); this is the experience of inhabiting worlds in which 'depth' has given way to 'surface' (Jameson 1991); this is an emergent culture in which science's authority to legislate truth has evaporated (Bauman 1987; Beck 1992; Giddens 1991; Inglehart 1997; Rorty 2009) and in which Christianity has lost much of its former credibility (Brown 2001; Heelas and Woodhead 2005; Norris and Inglehart 2004). Tradition and science have lost much of their authority and capacity to provide late-modern selves with convincing explanations of what the world's processes 'really' mean and what the meaning of life actually is. As a consequence, Berger, Berger and Kellner (1973: 82) commented as early as forty years ago, "[m]odern man has suffered from a deepening condition of 'homelessness' . . . a metaphysical loss of 'home' " (see also Gehlen 1980; Zijderveld 1970).

These problems of meaning, discussed and lamented in today's social sciences, were already at the heart of Max Weber's classical analysis of modernity, according to which modern science with its uncompromising anti-metaphysical ethos and relentless quest for truth inevitably erodes belief in a transcendent 'other world' that gives meaning to 'this world'. These developments, Weber famously claimed, constitute a progressive "disenchantment of the world," a process in which traditional religious systems of meaning become less plausible and lose much of their former capacity to provide modern selves with the aforesaid convincing explanations. Science itself, by its very nature, can adequately describe the world as it is but remains silent about its inherent goal or meaning. Simultaneously, Weber underscored, processes of rationalisation and bureaucratisation result in stifling 'iron cages' that are imposed on individual lives, thus threatening personal freedom, creativity and meaning. Weber's tragic "disenchantment of the world" therefore increasingly leads to a world deprived of meaning—a world in which "the world's processes . . . simply 'are' and 'happen' but no longer signify anything" (Weber 1978: 506). Moreover, this process evokes some existential uncertainties with respect to selfhood.

Two other classical sociologists, Emile Durkheim and Karl Marx, discussed these problems of meaning more specifically under the headings of 'anomie' and 'alienation', respectively, and sociologists have ever since considered these two problems as "the twin maladies of modernity" (Zijderveld 2000: 198–201). While the concepts of anomie and alienation have often been used interchangeably, they do in fact refer to quite

different phenomena. On the one hand, anomie, exemplified by Durkheim's analysis of the social decomposition and cultural disintegration of modern societies (Durkheim 1997, 2006), refers to "the absence of a meaningful, institutional *nomos*" (Zijderveld 2000: 198; italics in original). On the other hand, alienation, exemplified by Marx's analysis of the reduction of workers to commodities and cogs in the machinery of capitalism (Marx 1988), refers to "the presence of an overbearing institutional system" (Zijderveld 2000: 198). To put it simply, one may say that "anomie is caused by too little institutional control (and) alienation is caused by too much institutional control" (Zijderveld 2000: 198–199). Yet under modern conditions, the two are likely to occur simultaneously, because of modernity's tendency to erode the meaningful *nomos* of the past (anomie) and replace it with overbearing and therefore alienating institutional systems.

In this chapter, we argue that such analyses of modern life are no longer confined to the works of sociologists. Ever since the romantic counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s, these analyses have been adopted by the cultural industry and expanded to commercially successful, widespread cultural narratives about life in contemporary Western societies. We argue that these narratives are especially present in today's popular culture, in particular in the genres of fantasy and conspiracy theories. We conclude with a discussion on the theoretical implications of this observation, in particular for Max Weber's classical analysis of the discontents of modern culture. Moreover, we explore the possibility that fantasy culture and conspiracy culture may serve as repertoires by means of which hyperreal spiritualities are constructed that offer solace for modern problems of meaning.

Cultural Discontents and the Romantic Counterculture

Cultural resistance against the modern rationalised order is as old as modernity itself, yet a prominent manifestation of this resistance was the eighteenth and nineteenth century artistic and intellectual movement of Romanticism. The Romanticists of that time turned against industrialisation, against the smoking and noisy factories that destroyed the beauty of the natural landscape (William Blake's "dark satanic mills"), against the mass production that threatened handcraft and humanity, and against science that was believed to threaten the human faculties of feeling, intuition and personal experience.

The counterculture of the 1960s and the 1970s was in many respects akin to Romanticism, since it shared its critical stance against the disruptive aspects of modernisation, as well as its nostalgic longing for an idealised past and its utopian dreams of a better future (Campbell 2007; Doorman 2004). There were, however, many differences as well. The counterculture, in the first place, was not the product of a relatively small elite of artists, intellectuals and philosophers, as was the case with Romanticism, but a cultural movement that had broad public support among educated middle-class young people. The counterculture was, in other words, a mass manifestation of Romanticism, as Daniel Bell rightly observed (1996). Secondly, the counterculture of the 1960s and the 1970s contained, much more evidently than eighteenth and nineteenth century Romanticism, an explicit, theoretical-sociological articulated criticism with respect to modern society. This criticism, which echoed Weber's, Marx' and Durkheim's classical analyses of modern cultural discontents, was loudly propagated by the social sciences of that time, in particular by the neo-Marxist Frankfurt School (Horkheimer, Adorno, Fromm, Marcuse and Benjamin).

Theodor Roszak's *The Making of a Counterculture* (1995), as much a countercultural pamphlet as a social scientific analysis, is one of the most influential examples of this "double hermeneutics" (Giddens 1984). Roszak argued that the old Enlightenment dream of progress, rationality and freedom was degenerated into a society that he characterised as 'technocratic'; a society that is defined by scientific-technological ideals such as efficiency, productivity, control and progress, which are reached by technological and scientific means and systematically deployed by the powerful agents of this system: the science-trained experts (see Roszak 1995). As Roszak argued, the technocratic society is supported and legitimated by a tremendous trust in science and technology and the efforts to implement the knowledge and products of both in all domains of society—even the most personal, subjective and intimate domains. The consequence of this, according to Roszak, was the disruption of 'real' community, 'natural' social bonds and 'spontaneous' solidarity.

Roszak gave voice to a deeply-felt dissatisfaction with modernity that was shared by those who identified with the counterculture. Participants of the counterculture believed that something had been lost in the mechanistic and instrumental worldview of rationalism. From this stance, they expressed the anomic complaint that technocratic society undermines man's union with nature, real forms of sociality and authentic identities. There was, all in all, a widely shared conviction that modern, rationalised

society no longer provided a genuine 'home' for the individual—a cultural analysis that in turn inspired a collective search for the authentic, a search for a "salvaging of enchantment from the very dross of daily life" (Roszak 1995: 130). As against the centrality of reason and technocratic mentality, the counterculture called for imagination, feeling and fantasy as the royal road to the real.

The search for 're-enchantment' and a genuine 'home' led those who identified with the counterculture to a varied palette of practices, rites and beliefs. Many observers have paid attention to the countercultural penchant for Eastern religions, magic, shamanism, theosophy and the occult (Campbell 2007; Roszak 1995), all forms of religiosity with which the counterculture aimed to find spiritual meaning and break with the prime vehicle of modern enlightenment; secularism. Besides these spiritual strategies, more secular ones were embraced, among which were the romanticisation of nature and attention to the inner life of passions and emotions (e.g. Bell 1996; Taylor 1989). Furthermore, there was a nostalgic longing for pre-industrial communities and a search for tribalised communities, in order to overcome the mechanical and associational relationships that were ascribed to modern social life. Guided by the famous adage of LSD guru Timothy Leary, "turn on, tune in, drop out," such alternative, tribal communities were sometimes actually built. Examples are Arcosanti in the United States (founded in 1970) and Findhorn in Scotland (founded in 1972), but one can also think of Woodstock (1969) and other temporary social gatherings clustered around alternative music, ideologies and lifestyles. The call for genuine communities also boosted an interest in 'imagined communities' in the most literal sense of the word. Romantic fiction, fairy tales and fantasy novels thematising better civilisations in imaginary pre-modern pasts, were collectively embraced by countercultural hippies. The immense popularity of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* is illustrative of this. *The Lord of the Rings* is mainly based on Scandinavian mythology and its world, Middle-earth—inhabited by hobbits, elves and wizards—was immediately embraced by the counterculture when the book was published as a paperback in 1965. It was, as Hinckle (quoted in Ellwood 1994: 201) states, "absolutely the favorite book of every hippie" since they "[felt] immediately familiar, upon first reading, with an apparently imaginary place and/or time" (Curry 2004: 118). A genuine home, beyond the anomie created by the 'technocratic society', was thus sought in real life and in the imaginary realm of fantasy fiction.

Not only the lack of guidance, morality and community was criticised, but also the oppressive and dehumanising efficacies of 'the system'—one

of the most characteristic concepts of the counterculture. This notion of 'the system' expressed the deeply felt alienation of many youngsters in these days, the experience that technocracy functions as an imperialistic system that reduces individual people to insignificant cogs in a soulless machine. In such discourses, the contours of conspiracy culture emerged in that the hippies ascribed agency and intentionality to this "imperialistic system," this "gigantic technological mechanism" (Roszak 1995: 54). The countercultural revolt was, so to say, quite 'paranoid'. Roszak's *The Making of a Counter Culture* is again illustrative of this, since it breathes a jargon full of conspiracy-like terms. To quote some passages of this book: the technocratic society is seen as "the regime of experts" (Roszak 1995: 7)—those trained people "on the official payroll of the state and/or corporate structure" (Roszak 1995: 11)—who are involved in a "social engineering" project (Roszak 1995: 6) that has an almost totalitarian hold on individuals. In such a society, all products of human action become "the subjects of purely technical scrutiny and of purely technical manipulation" (Roszak 1995: 6). The technocratic society uses techniques of "coercion" (Roszak 1995: 9) and domination, which work on the level of social organisation as well as on the "subliminal" level, since the regime "prefers to charm conformity from us by exploiting our deep-seated commitment" (Roszak 1995: 9) to technocratic ideals and the ideal technocratic society.

Roszak's portrayal of 'the system' as a brutal, dehumanising agent did not stand alone. There is a strong hostility to modern society in many of the works of sociology, philosophy and art of his time that in turn strongly influenced the ethics of the counterculture. The neo-Marxists of the Frankfurt School, for instance, formulated well-known critiques, of which the work of Marcuse is worth mentioning here in particular. His *One-dimensional Man* (2002) breathes a similar spirit as Roszak's *The Making of a Counter Culture*, especially in those passages in which Marcuse calls for "the great refusal" of those societal forces that act upon the individual to create "false needs," in order to integrate individuals into the capitalist system (Marcuse 2002; cf. Campbell 2007: 288ff). A similar critical tone is heard in Vance Packard's *The Hidden Persuaders* (1991), in which he discusses the manipulative forces of the media, depicted by Packard as working upon the inner drives and desires of individuals in order to create the demand for the products of industry (Packard 1991). Existentialists such as Jean-Paul Sartre railed against the alienation that stems from the *Verdinglichung* (*chosification*) of human beings by technology and science: the efforts to make human beings objects of research, policy, labor, etc., which, according to Sartre, is a threat to human freedom. And, as a

final example, poets (such as Alan Watts and Allen Ginsberg) and musicians alike composed litanies of complaints about the estrangements of modern life.

In all these cases, modern society and its overly rationalised institutions were depicted as powerful, alienating agencies, held to repress people and to integrate them in the broader project of modernity. Moreover, the countercultural discourse highlighted concepts like 'false consciousness', 'brainwashing' and 'subliminal seduction', concepts that indicate a paranoid conspiracy culture imagining the social system as a powerful and malicious agent that threatens the free individual.

The 1960s counterculture has had a lasting impact on Western culture (Aupers, Houtman and Roeland 2010; Houtman 2008; Houtman, Aupers and Hüzeir 2010), even though the revolutionary vigor and the fierceness of the countercultural criticism have subsided in the course of time. As Marwick (1998: 13–15) points out, the counterculture was not so much an "attempt at political revolution that eventually failed" and that is meanwhile "over and done with," but rather an acceleration in an ongoing process of cultural transformation. The criticism of the counterculture has transformed many societal domains, such as religion (Aupers and Houtman 2010; Campbell 2007), the social sciences (Gouldner 1970; Lemert 2004; Seidman 2008), and politics (Inglehart 1977; Weakliem 1991). Several studies point out that, ironically, even modern domains that in the 1960s and 1970s were criticised as being exponents of the 'technocratic system', such as corporate life, have appropriated the countercultural discourse (Houtman 2008). Thomas Frank (1998: 32), for instance, argues that since the 1960s, companies and advertisers have created a consumer culture that "promises to deliver the consumer from the dreary nightmare of square consumerism." Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter (2004: 98) even claim that "the critique of mass society has been one of the most powerful forces driving consumerism for the past forty years."

As we will explain in more detail below, a similar conclusion can be drawn with respect to the cultural industry, which has adopted the cultural discontents that were loudly articulated by the counterculture half a century ago. At that time, the counterculture was extremely suspicious of the cultural industry, which was seen as the ultimate source of alienation and false consciousness. As Horkheimer and Adorno (2002: 115) argue, "the culture industry . . . can do as it chooses with the needs of consumers—producing, controlling, disciplining them." The same cultural industry, however, has made the cultural discontents that were vented by the counterculture into a commercially successful source of entertainment

and amusement. Nowadays, media products articulate a cultural dissatisfaction with media, technology and the state—often accompanied by romantic strategies to cope with or escape these feelings of estrangement. We discuss these developments with respect to two cultural genres which have become prominent in today's cultural industry: fantasy culture and conspiracy culture.

Anomie and Fantasy Culture

Whereas fantasy culture was already embraced by participants of the counterculture, it has entered the mainstream since the 1990s through a whole gamut of cultural products (e.g. Partridge 2005a, 2005b). The fantasy genre manifests itself nowadays in countless novels, movies, games, music styles, and festivals. Its underlying worldview has influenced the tastes and lifestyles of many individuals and groups (De Kloet and Kuipers 2007; Partridge 2005a, 2005b; Schofield Clark 2003). The screen versions of *The Lord of the Rings* and the *Harry Potter* series are among the most visited films of all time. Millions of people watched the television series *Charmed* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Science fiction films and series featuring all sorts of fantastic elements, among which is George Lucas' well-known *Star Wars*, may count on millions of devoted fans all over the world. Colin Campbell (2007: 329) even argues that "fantasy literature has now become a dominant force in modern fiction . . . but also in film, television, and computer games, such that a virtual tidal wave of stories embodying myths or set in mythic worlds has swept through the modern culture of the West. One can conclude from this that we now live in a mythopoeic culture, one in which stories about supernatural beings and events are continually being created . . . and eagerly consumed."

One of the most characteristic elements of fantasy culture is its creation of a mirror image of the modern, rationalised world. Despite the immense variety, a common feature of many products of fantasy culture is, after all, that it offers another world that reflects an imaginary past which, unlike modern society, boasts a coherent social structure, harmonious communities and a clear-cut morality—phenomena that, according to the sociological tradition, would erode under the influence of processes of modernisation. In addition, fantasy culture offers an enchanted, magical world populated by other-than-human beings and all sorts of mythical creatures (wizards, witches, demons, elves, angels, spirits, gods) which, if their historical equivalents had ever constituted the pantheons of older religions, have vanished from planet Earth in the course of modernisation.

The core example is undoubtedly Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. Not only has it attracted a vast population of fans since its appropriation by the participants of the counterculture; it can easily be understood as the archetype and blueprint of the entire genre. In this work, Tolkien created a detailed, medieval-like 'secondary world' called Middle-earth, populated by hobbits, orcs, elves and wizards. This world is worked out in great detail and by a lively imagination. Tolkien elaborated extensively on the landscapes and geographical characteristics of this world, the aesthetic qualities of the products made by the populations inhabiting this world (clothing, architecture, things, etc.), the languages spoken by those populations, their typical customs and behaviors, and so on and so forth. The main story line of the book deals with a young hobbit named Frodo who, together with a couple of friends (the "Fellowship of the Ring," which includes hobbits, men, elves and the white wizard Gandalf), goes on a long and hard journey from the safe, warm community of the Shire to the dangerous barren lands where the dark lord Sauron reigns, in order to destroy an extremely powerful magical ring in the fire of the mount Doom. During this journey, Frodo is confronted with powers that are far beyond his own capacities, yet a strong drive to succeed and the help and bravery of Gandalf and the great warriors of his fellowship help him fulfill his mission.

Striking about Tolkien's world is the combination of realism and the display of moral values and worldviews that break with the modern anomic world. Clear-cut moral dichotomies embodied by a juxtaposition of good characters (e.g. Frodo, Gandalf) versus bad characters (e.g. Sauron); good places (the Shire) versus bad places (Mordor) and good virtues versus bad morals, are contextualised in a pre-modern world brimming with meaning, mystery and enchantment. The display of such values, allegedly eroded in the modern anomic world, is arguably part of the attraction of Tolkien's world. His own hermeneutic key to reading his work confirms this. In an essay entitled *On Fairy Stories* (1939), he admitted that his own work is driven by a "desire to escape" from "self-made misery"—a misery he relates to the modernisation he saw reflected in worlds produced by industrialisation: the factories and the products developed in factories. More generally, he argued that good fantasy functions like religion since it offers existential answers, hope and consolation in times of suffering. Describing *The Lord of the Rings* as an "implicit diagnosis of modernity" that compensates experiences of "homesickness," Patrick Curry (2004: 15) furthermore argues that it bestows on the reader "empowering nostalgia." Visiting Middle-earth, from these perspectives, is like visiting a genuine 'home'.

A similar point can be made about another popular, yet fundamentally different exponent of fantasy culture: Rowling's best selling *Harry Potter* series. In this series Rowling created an antiquated, gloomy-Dickensian world full of magic, in which features the young wizard Harry Potter, a student at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. He and his friends are confronted with a couple of scary and threatening developments and happenings, which all have to do with the attempts by the evil wizard Lord Voldemort to gain supremacy over the wizarding and the non-wizarding world. Together with his best friends Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger and with the help of the masters of the Hogwarts School, Harry Potter foils Voldemort's efforts to become the most powerful wizard in the world. In a final battle between Voldemort and Harry Potter, Harry, a skillful wizard by that time, defeats Voldemort. *The Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter* differ, of course, in many respects: *The Lord of the Rings* is located in an imagined pre-modern or medieval society whereas the setting of the *Harry Potter* novels resembles traditional England of the nineteenth century. Both examples, however, testify to a nostalgia for times where community, morality and identity were still quite stable and firmly inscribed in the social structures, and meaning was a 'given'.

If we look at the impressive sales successes of fantasy books such as Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, we see that the once exclusive and underground fantasy literature has become mainstream. Moreover, fantasy fiction spills over to other media, such as film and television series. And although such media still assume a quite passive audience consuming fantasy worlds, fantasy culture becomes aligned with interactive media assuming a more 'participatory audience' as well (Jenkins 2006). Fantasy board games, card games and role-playing games such as *Dungeons and Dragons* and *Magic: The Gathering*, for instance, have a loyal host of players and provide the opportunity to interactively engage oneself with the fantasy world through role-playing. Furthermore, there are people identifying themselves with elves, wizards, witches, druids, trolls and hobbits in our contemporary world, meeting each other in real life, at fantasy fairs, fantasy festivals, pagan ritual meetings, Internet communities and fantasy hot spots such as the film locations of *The Lord of the Rings* in New Zealand. By playing Live Action Role-playing Games, these fantasy fans can act out their fantasy roles in real life settings with other people, thereby turning the fantasy of meaningful other worlds into 'real' happenings. An extremely popular example of such interactive immersions in fantasy environments is the booming genre of online computer games. No less than ninety five per cent of a particular

popular genre in this field—the so-called "Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game" (MMORPG)—is based on the Tolkienesque fantasy genre (Woodcock 2008). Examples are *Everquest*, *Dark Age of Camelot*, *Ultima Online* and, currently the most popular one, *World of Warcraft*. What distinguishes these and other online games from the older console games is that they offer shared worlds (the game worlds are 'inhabited' by many players at the same time), they are persistent (the three-dimensional environment is online twenty four hours a day and continues to exist even when players are not interacting with it) and they generate a unique culture, social structure, economy and ecology that changes over time. These environments are therefore no longer simple games but emergent 'virtual worlds' (Bartle 2004). Characteristic of these worlds is the enchanting experiences that are offered. The cover of *World of Warcraft*, for instance, attracts the consumer to enter the exciting world of the game by saying that "[a] world awaits…Descend into the World of Warcraft and join thousands of mighty heroes in an online world of myth, magic and limitless adventure…An infinity of experiences await."

Of course, the question remains how audiences participate in these fantasy worlds, and which meanings they attach to them. The small but growing body of studies on online gamers, however, indicates that for them, gaming is a serious practice that transcends the mere 'just for fun'. As Norberg and Lundblad (2001: 3) argue, "[gamers look for] a parallel mode of existence, an illusion of meaning, that becomes increasingly real, an enchantment within or beside a disenchanted world" (see also Aupers, 2011a, 2011b; Harambam, Aupers and Houtman 2011). In addition, these online fantasy worlds provide a sense of 'home' and feeling of belonging because they provide the opportunity to build small tribal communities. In *World of Warcraft*, players form vital groups, tribes and guilds with friends and strangers, online and offline, virtual and real (e.g. Williams et al. 2006). Online fantasy games feel, as one of the respondents in Aupers' research on gaming summarises, "like a second home." No wonder, from this perspective, that the average playing time of such games is twenty-three hours a week (Yee 2006) and that one fifth of the players of *Everquest* "treat the game world as their life world" (Castronova 2005: 59).

Middle-earth, Norrath, Derreth, Kalimdor, Lordaeron, Khaz Modan, Azeroth, Albion, Hilbernia and Midgard—these are all imaginary places constructed in fantasy culture, that seem to derive their attractiveness from the way in which they contrast with the modern rationalised world. As such, the contemporary cultural industry has incorporated the countercultural uneasiness about modern society and capitalises on the

experiences of anomie and 'homelessness' (Berger, Berger and Kellner 1974), that—according to the sociological tradition—characterise the modern consciousness.

Alienation and Conspiracy Culture

Conspiracy culture is another dominant genre in contemporary popular culture. While paranoid thinking has long been characterised as irrational, pathological or weird, the counterculture turned this habitus into a constructive way of looking at the 'system'—a higher form of rationality even, since "no matter how paranoid you are, you can never be paranoid enough." Be that as it may, nowadays conspiracy culture has entered the mainstream of popular culture. Many of its products—books, films and television series—describe hidden complots and secret conspiracies that make the modern world a somewhat precarious and opaque place, in which individual agency is besieged. Paranoid fears about 'the system', once considered something for deluded crackpots and stoned hippies, are now institutionalised in the narratives of contemporary bestsellers and blockbusters. Popular books and television series like *24*, *Profiler* and *The X-Files* freely play with the paranoid assumption that social reality as we experience it is an illusion, a hall of mirrors and smokescreens constructed to conceal the secret powers that *de facto* determine history (Kellner 2002). While this cultural analysis may be frightening, conspiracy culture offers hope and solace at the same time through the formulation of alternative narratives and explanations: the 'real truth', as *The X-Files* typically propose, is 'out there'.

In short, the paranoid logic has evolved in the last decades from a deviant, exotic phenomenon to a commercialised and institutionalised mainstream narrative that spreads through popular culture (Arnold 2008; Birchall 2002; Goldberg 2001). As Timothy Melley (2000, 2002) argues, the appeal of conspiracy culture is related to the feelings of alienation that people may experience in today's complex society, in particular the feeling that is associated with the institutional pressure on individual lives. It is this pressure that results in—in the words of Melley—'agency panic' and a discourse of paranoid suspicions about modern society, its institutions and the social control they exert on the individual.

If we look at such a discourse in popular culture, we can distinguish many varieties. Technology, to begin with, plays an important role and is often portrayed as an alienating, overpowering force used to control the

bodies, minds and spirits of individuals. A particularly good example of this is the famous Wachowksi brothers' trilogy *The Matrix* (1999–2003) that features technology getting out of control and transforming into a powerful, malicious agent. *The Matrix* tells the story of the computer hacker Neo, who finds out that the world he is living in is not what it seems. The ordinary world he is familiar with turns out to be a simulated reality, a virtual realm and a dream world made by intelligent machines. Somewhere in the course of history, these man-made machines overpowered their creators and locked them up in big, grimy fields. Their only function was to provide the intelligent machines the energy to stay alive. Humans were, in other words, reduced to batteries. To keep them under control and undermine resistance, the machines plugged humans into a computer system that projected the illusion of a real world in the minds of people.

The Matrix exemplifies conspiracy culture. It is first and foremost a movie about a powerful hidden agent, a social system that acts upon the individual to the extent that he or she is completely deprived of agency. The suspect in this particular trilogy is technology. Technology not only imprisons people, but even 'infiltrate' the minds of people, so that they are unaware of the fact that they are captured or brainwashed by the system. The following quote, where Morpheus explains the Matrix to Neo illustrates this.

> Morpheus: Do you want to know what the Matrix is? The Matrix is everywhere, it's all around us, here even in this room. You can see it out your window or on your television. You feel it when you go to work, or go to church or pay your taxes. It is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth.
>
> Neo: What truth?
>
> Morpheus: That you are a slave, Neo. Like everyone else, you were born into bondage, kept inside a prison that you cannot smell, taste or touch. A prison for mind.

In its imaginary future scenario of technological development, *The Matrix* obviously builds on an anxiety that has been central to the modern consciousness, and to the countercultural consciousness in particular—the anxiety about technology and technological progress. It takes this anxiety a step further by representing the ultimate realisation of technological domination: a world in which human beings have literally become replaceable cogs in a soulless machine, a world in which people are successfully alienated from their true essence: freedom.

The Matrix can not only be simply read as "technoparanoia" (Jameson 1991), since it may as well be understood as a broad metaphor for other powerful modern institutions that exert social control. As in *The Matrix*, technology has frequently been featured as a symbol mirroring a wider suspicion of technological progress and the use of high-tech by the State, malicious governments and corporate businesses. In Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) for instance, the supercomputer named HAL (often assumed to be referring to IBM, since alphabetically, each character of this name is neighboring the characters of IBM's name) has been designed as a powerful and intelligent machine that at a given moment no longer serves the human crew of the spacecraft, but becomes a powerful agent controlling and eventually turning against the members of the crew (cf. Arnold 2008). In Spielberg's *Minority Report* (2002), to give another example, it is the inventive security technology that, once it turns against human beings, is hard to beat. Peter Weir's *The Truman Show* (1998), finally, tells the dramatic story of a man who suddenly finds out that he has lived in a giant studio since the day that he was born—that his life, including his work, wife and children, is a set-up, staged and broadcasted as a 'real life soap' for millions of viewers worldwide. As in *The Matrix,* it is the media and technology that fully controls the life of the individual.

Such paranoid discourses about media and technology often touch upon a wide complex of institutional forces that allegedly conspire against individual freedom. But many conspiracy theories about media, science, technology, bureaucracy and other modern institutions point their arrows, in the end, to the power of the State. This is, for instance, the case in *The X-Files*, an incredibly popular American television series that aired from 1993 to 2002. The series follows two FBI agents, Fox Mulder (David Duchovny) and Dana Scully (Gillian Anderson), who are investigating a bunch of mysterious 'unsolved' cases. They came to investigate these files after Fox Mulder began to question the mysterious disappearance, years earlier, of his younger sister. Digging into this case, the two agents slowly get lost in a widening, never closing network of conspiring parties. Every link leads to another link and every clue to another clue and, as conspiracy logic demands, in the end 'everything is connected'. Mulder's sister was abducted by aliens; these invaders had made a treaty with a syndicate, a group of powerful 'men in black', which turns out to be part and parcel of the United States government, which has its own hidden agenda: to prevent the human race from total alien domination. In order to achieve this, the syndicate uses any means at hand. It thus functions

as an unscrupulous group able to murder and sacrifice human beings, to infiltrate and mould governments and other institutions, and to use all available means to keep mankind in ignorance of its vulnerable fate.

Central to the narrative of *The X-Files* is a firm distrust in the State and governmental institutions, which are portrayed as powerful agencies with bad intentions and secret agendas. This is a staple feature in conspiracy movies. In Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974), for instance, the government is involved in a dirty business around water resources. In Tony Scott's *Enemy of the State* (1998), a lawyer becomes the target of a group of NSA (National Security Agency) agents, after he unwittingly comes into possession of a disc containing crucial evidence in a political murder case. Peter Hyams' *Capricorn One* (1977) tells the story of a huge conspiracy, set up by a small elite within NASA, to stage a landing on Mars that in fact never took place but was broadcast on the screens of the NASA control room (in order to mislead the NASA personnel) and on television (in order to mislead the bigger audience). Examples like these indicate that there is a relentless feedback between real political events, non-fictional conspiracy theories and conspiracy in fiction. The Watergate scandal, the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the moon landing hoax, and the alleged role of the United States government in the 9/11 attacks—all are events and theories that have in turn inspired movies such as *All the President's Men* (1976, directed by Alan J. Pakula) which features the Watergate scandal, and *Executive Action* (1973, directed by David Miller), *JFK* (1991, directed by Oliver Stone) and *Interview with the Assassin* (2002, directed by Neil Burger), all of which feature the assassination of John F. Kennedy. Even in the seemingly conventional *Rambo* movies "the idea that the government…had schemed to suppress and victimise brave members of the American military" is at the heart of the narrative (Arnold 2008: 199). In addition to the state, industries and companies may also serve as suspects, as in Mike Nichols' *Silkwood* (1983), in which a woman got on the wrong side of the nuclear power company and eventually died in a strange car accident, after she had publicly denounced the miserable safety procedures in a nuclear power company. In some cases, a complex of agencies are involved in huge conspiracies, as for example in *Syriana* (2005). This movie, directed by Stephen Gahan, shows a hornet's nest of a worldwide operating oil industry, governments and the CIA, which are all connected and completely corrupt.

These examples suggest that conspiracy thinking about state, media and technology, once countercultural and deviant, now reigns in popular

culture. Conspiracy thinking bestows meanings upon things, social struc-
tures, organisations and agents, that may not contain or warrant these
meanings. It constructs causality were randomness prevails; intention
where coincidences thrive; meaning where meaninglessness comes to
the surface. Moreover, it makes metaphysical claims about mysterious,
unseen powers that are operative beyond the surface of everyday life. As
such, conspiracy culture offers, as Melley (2000: 8) argues, comfort for
feelings of alienation:

> [t]he idea of conspiracy offers an odd sort of comfort in an uncertain age: it
> makes sense of the inexplicable, accounting for complex events in a clear, if
> frightening way. To put it another way, by offering a highly adaptable vision
> of causality, conspiracy theory acts as a 'master narrative', a grand scheme
> capable of explaining numerous complex events.

Whether or not the embracing of conspiracy theories by the cultural
industry and the wider public indeed contains more than just an expres-
sion of modern feelings of discontent—namely a way to cope with these
feelings—remains an open question that cannot be answered on the basis
of our analysis. Perhaps conspiracy culture may not only depict the indi-
vidual as besieged by external agencies, but also offer notions of human
redemption and empowerment, whether by offering 'true' insight into how
things 'really' are, or by keeping up the hope for true freedom and agency
by featuring heroes and redeemers who dismantle the corrupt elements in
the government (as in *Enemy of the State*) or bring people to freedom (as
in *The Matrix*). Narratives about conspiracies may, in other words, para-
doxically feed faith in human agency. *The Matrix* is again an outstanding
example. Neo, the protagonist of the story, can choose between taking a
blue pill and a red pill and chooses the latter in order to escape virtual
alienation and learn to know the 'truth'. The reason he gives is: "[b]ecause
I don't like the idea that I am not in control of my life." Conspiracy culture
thus not only expresses the precarious condition of modern life, but also,
for those who feel alienated, it keeps alive the modern humanist dream
of personal agency.

Conclusion: Max Weber and the Spirit of Contemporary Popular Culture

The relation between modernity and the cultural discontents of anomie
and alienation is a central element in the works of Weber, Durkheim,
Marx and their successors. In addition, cultural discontents have often
inspired an upsurge of romantic stories about a better, meaningful world:

in eighteenth and nineteenth century Romanticism, in the counterculture of the 1960s and the 1970s, and in the many products that the cultural industry has released in the last decades.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Max Weber was well aware of the upsurge of such stories, as well as the many initiatives in his own intellectual circles in the German city of Heidelberg to find meaning in—according to Weber—a "disenchanted" and essentially meaningless world. Many a philosopher, psychologist, and artist took refuge in utopian experiments, alternative experiential religions, and esoteric movements like the new theosophy of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (who founded the Theosophical Society in 1875), Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophy, spiritism, pantheistic perspectives on nature derived from Romanticism, and the philosophy of life of Henri Bergson. During the 1913 and 1914, Weber himself paid visits to Monte Verita in Ascona in the Alps, where his contemporaries indulged in spirituality and free sexuality (Radkau 2009).

While acutely aware of these attempts by many of his fellow-intellectuals to re-enchant a progressively disenchanted world, Weber himself emphasised the need to 'heroically' face the essential meaninglessness of a disenchanted world without taking refuge in 'surrogate' experiential religions. "The ubiquitous chase for 'experience' stems from . . . weakness: for it is this weakness not to be able to countenance the stern seriousness of our fateful times" (Weber 1948: 149). And more bluntly: "this is plain humbug or self-deception" and one should "bear the fate of the times like a man" (Weber 1948: 154–155). Although Weber's rationalist aversion to what he saw in his own days and in his own intellectual circles may perhaps be understandable, it is quite unfortunate that he neither embarked on a more systematic study of these attempts at re-enchanting the modern world, nor developed a more sociological perspective on the significance of cultural discontents for the development of romantic cultural initiatives. This is especially so, because the Romantic resistance against the modern society, a relatively marginal and elitist phenomenon until the sixties, has become a mass phenomenon in the post-sixties era and, as we have shown, part of the cultural mainstream of today's popular culture.

The fact that Weber did not study and theorise such developments is remarkable, because his cultural sociology constitutes a most promising point of departure for such an analysis. In fact, Weber understood cultural change as the outcome of problems of meaning that inevitably emerge when belief systems become implausible. Cultural discontents do not simply lead to the abandonment of traditions, cultural ideals and systems of belief, Weber's cultural sociology maintains, but rather stimulate processes

of cultural reconstruction ('cultural rationalisation') so as to make them less vulnerable to loss of plausibility. Campbell (2007) has recently applied this Weberian notion to processes of cultural change in the West from the 1960s onwards, ranging from the shift from Christian religion to New Age spirituality, the emergence of a new ecological consciousness and the rise of quantum physics. What underlies these various cultural changes, he points out, is a marked shift away from the religious and scientific renditions of the Western dualistic worldview, towards an Eastern monistic or holistic one. This "Easternisation of the West" Campbell (2007: 41) maintains, entails "a fundamental revolution in Western civilisation, one that can be compared in significance to the Renaissance, the Reformation, or the Enlightenment."

The remarkable thing about Campbell's wide-ranging theory of cultural change is that it logically results from a systematic application of some of Max Weber's own most fundamental theoretical notions: the assumption of a universal human need to give meaning to an essentially meaningless world, the conception of culture as "the endowment of a finite segment of the meaningless infinity of events in the world with meaning and significance from the standpoint of human beings" (Schroeder cited in Campbell 2007: 11), and the notion that problems of meaning spark processes of cultural rationalisation that lead to a reconstruction and eventual replacement of worldviews that have lost their plausibility. According to Campbell, the problems of meaning that sparked these processes of cultural reconstruction were precisely those that were voiced by the counterculture in the heydays of the 1960s and 1970s, that is, the same problems of anomie and alienation that are massively culturally articulated in contemporary popular culture, as we have seen.

Now that doctrinal and theistic Christianity has fallen victim to the disenchantment of the world, and is therefore increasingly understood as implausible, unconvincing and unsatisfactory, and while science by its very nature can only further the disenchantment of the world and hence only increase problems of meaning, the cultural hunt for new cultural articulations of meaning is clearly on. This is a hunt for articulations of meaning that no longer necessitate 'belief' or 'doctrinal conformity', yet nonetheless endow reality with meaning, and may thus offer relief and comfort from modernity's maladies. Although in this chapter we have not studied whether and if so, how, audiences of fantasy and conspiracy culture use these cultural articulations to reflect on, appease, and even

cope with anomie and alienation as the principal maladies of modernity (see Aupers, this volume), we suggest that their immense contemporary popularity may stem precisely from their role in offering consolation from these modern experiences.

It is quite clear that fictional narratives, informed by fantasy and conspiracy culture, are much more 'disenchantment-proof' than doctrinal and theistic Christianity, which after all requires 'belief' (in the sense of 'placement beyond doubt and scrutiny') and hence conformity to religious doctrines and authorities. Precisely because of their explicitly fictional status, the popular fictions of fantasy culture and conspiracy culture do not demand belief and conformity to doctrine. Fantasy culture and conspiracy culture are in this respect similar to contemporary spiritualities of life ('New Age'), that also go beyond the need to 'believe' or 'have faith', in the latter case by emphasising personal experience rather than conformity to doctrines and propositional truths. Unlike traditional theistic types of religion, these spiritualities of life construct personal experiences as spiritual lessons about the self and the sacred that may further guide one on one's 'personal path'. Although this of course precludes the solid and taken-for-granted answers to problems of meaning that characterise traditional types of Christian religion, it is quite doubtful whether this means that these spiritualities—and, by implication, fantasy culture and conspiracy culture, too—can play no role at all in providing solace from modernity's cultural maladies. Fantasy culture and conspiracy culture may well provide the repertoires people draw from in practicing 'hyper-real spirituality': a spirituality based on fictional worlds which, despite their fictional nature, may inspire a spiritual search for meaning against the background of cultural discontents.

A promising avenue for further research, then, is the systematic uncovering of the role of fantasy culture and conspiracy culture in dealing with modern problems of meaning, alienation and anomie in particular. The guiding hypothesis in such research, the foregoing suggests, should be that popular culture neither feeds an unfathomable nihilism and meaninglessness of the type that Weber holds to be the logical outcome of the disenchantment of the world, nor the deep-rooted and unassailable existential certainty that traditional Christian religiosity aimed to provide. In an increasingly disenchanted world, it is likely instead that meaning will assume dramatically new shapes and that popular culture will play a vital role in its articulation, so as to enable its appropriation by its audiences.

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