

## *The Conspiritualist*

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The chaotic twenty-first century can already be thought of as a series of epistemic crises that undermine “consensus reality” (Berger and Luckmann) and lead to jeremiads about “the death of truth” (Kakutani). The latest such crisis is brought to you by *The Conspiritualist*. *The Conspiritualist* is an entrepreneur of “stigmatized knowledge” (Barkun). Their product represents a conundrum to the “demarcationist” logic of misinformation studies (Marres). Through channeling esoteric strains thought that lurk in the background of Western societies (Hanegraaff), *The Conspiritualist* blurs some of the basic epistemic categories that define us as Modern (Latour).



Fig 1. Screenshot from *The Conspiritualist*.

In its original coinage, by Charlotte Ward and David Voas, the portmanteau term “conspiritoriality” refers to a phenomenon in which “the female-dominated New Age (with its positive focus on self) and the male-dominated realm of conspiracy theory (with its negative focus on global politics)” blur into one another (103). Ward and Voas imagine conspiritoriality as a “digitally native” type of phenomenon, embodied for them by the figure of David Icke. Icke believes that powerful business leaders and heads of state conspire to control the world’s population as members of a secret society with roots in a heretical sect of Judaism (Icke). For obvious reasons this has gained him a pariah status in the mainstream media, while at the same time making him a cause célèbre for other “free thinkers” (“David Icke Interview #1”). As evidence of the current reach of Icke’s ideas: in the spring of 2020, a YouTube video in which he connected COVID-19 symptoms to 5G radiation was viewed *thirty million times* before the platform removed it (Kelion).

Ward and Voas’s concept of conspiritoriality can be critiqued from a number of perspectives. Apart from the obvious gender essentialism, there is also the matter of “presentism.” As opposed to its being new to digital culture, scholars of esotericism point out that conspiritoriality can, for example, be traced back to nineteenth-century ancient wisdom narratives that trained initiates in the literacy of secret signs (Asprem and Dyrendal). While some aspects of that same tradition have also been associated with some of the darkest periods in twentieth-century history (Kurlander), these same scholars argue that modernity and esotericism have always been intertwined (Hanegraaff), and often through the medium of new communications technologies (Sconce). We may thus think of *The Conspiritorialist* as the embodiment of the dynamics of technological retribalization, as first envisioned by McLuhan in the early 1960s.

The objective of *The Conspiritualist* video project is to foreground these ambiguous dynamics through the social scientific method of the ideal type—defined as a “synthesis of a great many diffuse, discrete . . . concrete individual phenomena, which are arranged according to those one-sidedly emphasized viewpoints into a unified analytical construct” (Weber 90). *The Conspiritualist* can thus be understood as conceptual persona for exploring what Tony Sampson refers to as “contemporary zones of indistinction,” in which user experiences blurs into “nonconscious mechanical habit” (190). *The Conspiritualist* can be understood as an entrepreneur of the self for the social media “influencer economy” whose product is “clarity,” from the perceived manipulations of the corporate-controlled “mainstream media.” *The Conspiritualist* aims to cut through the din of noise and the blur of imagery that lulls social media users into a semiconsciousness state of sleepwalking. As a self-help guru, *The Conspiritualist* thus offers, as their product, the promise to awaken their followers from Sampson’s induced state of “neosomnambulism” (Sampson). Their promise is not new. The explicit metaphor of “awakening” from mechanically induced habit is foundational to media theory (McLuhan), cultural theory (Benjamin), and New Age mysticism alike (Ouspensky). Yet, inasmuch as it seems to present the ultimate of insights, esoteric clarity can also represent a real epistemic danger (Deleuze and Guattari 228). Moreover, unaware of their own “spiritual privilege,” *The Conspiritualist* tends to reduce societal-level critiques to matters of personal reform (Goldman).

Conspiritoriality thrived during the pandemic as various social media entrepreneurs perceived pandemic mitigation measures as a tyrannical imposition on the sacred sovereignty of the body—both personal and societal (Birchall). This faith in personal sovereignty aligns with the neoliberal entrepreneurial self (Becker), tasked with nurturing their consciousness in a

competitive spiritual marketplace (Goldman). Of all the social media platforms, it has arguably been on YouTube, with its slogan “Broadcast Yourself,” where this entrepreneurial marketplace



Fig 2. Screenshot from *The Conspiritualist*.

is most developed, and most epistemologically dangerous. Trafficking in stigmatized knowledge, on YouTube, the figure of *The Conspiritualist* blurs distinctions that we normally use to make conventionally sense of politics, with anti-establishment ideas from different points on the political spectrum often blurring into one another (Finlayson). These are “lateral thinkers” (de Weck), whose brand is built on ventriloquizing the concerns of endlessly variegated assortments of niche subcultural audiences, who, for all their differences, share a politics that is anti-mainstream and anti-elite. In its blur of imagery, *The Conspiritualist* tries to bring all this cacophony into harmony—clarity from out of chaos.

There are a number of YouTube figures who might embody the paradoxes of this conceptual persona—including the elderly Icke. This current project explores *The Conspiritualist*

through the figure of Russell Brand, a flamboyant UK-based stand-up comedian and former Hollywood actor, who has successfully reinvented himself as left-libertarian political YouTube commentator and alternative health guru with a huge following in the UK—his YouTube channel had over 6 million subscribers at the time of writing. Over the course of the pandemic, Brand reinvented himself once again, by producing a consistent stream of videos using conspiracy theory buzzwords—like “Bill Gates,” “World Economic Forum,” and “The Great Reset” (Chilton). In these conspiracy theories, critiques of neoliberal capitalism are “blended together with truly dangerous anti-vaccination fantasies” (Klein).<sup>1</sup>

While YouTube has recently implemented more censorious content moderation policies to combat the spread of misinformation (de Keulenaar et al), Brand presents himself as a *commentator on* as opposed to *an advocate for* conspiracy theory. While his videos’ titles, descriptions, and thumbnails consistently promise to expose shocking secrets about the elite cabals ruling the world, Brand’s approach is only ever to ask questions and raise doubts, a rhetorical style that has been deemed “the new conspiracism,” or “conspiracy without the theory” (Rosenblum and Muirhead). This indirect approach of encouraging audiences to “do their own research” is a characteristic of how conspiracy theories spread through the medium of participatory culture (Birchall and Knight).

The project focuses on the platform vernacular of YouTube thumbnails, which tend to reproduce the sensationalistic aesthetics that are favored by platform’s engagement metrics (Marres). In promoting himself as a conspiracy entrepreneur (Birchall), Brand’s thumbnails typically intermingle personal branding with the latest conspiratorial keyword. As an artwork, *The Conspiritualist* compresses these thumbnails into image overlays composed of multiple

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<sup>1</sup> For an example of one of these conspiracy videos, see “The Great Reset: A Warning.”

partially transparent layers. The artwork is thus composed of a unique series of images taken from Brand's YouTube channel, corresponding to the post-COVID-19 period. On the left side, separated by a white border, is a ghostly image cohering out of the chaos of Brand: the self-styled YouTube messiah.



Fig 3. Screenshot from *The Conspiritualist*.

These images have not been edited. They were simply pulled from Brand's YouTube channel and arrayed chronologically without any deletion or manipulation apart from reducing each image's opacity to a series of frames each with a "multiple exposure" effect, resulting in a pulsating blur when presented sequentially.

The original soundtrack is composed and performed by the author. In combining sound and image in this way, the intention is to allude to the endlessly deferred feeling that draws people towards conspiracy theories—the idea, as the saying goes, that "the truth is out there" (Harambam). Following the principle of methodological empathy (Griffin), the ultimate point

here is this: if we want to address these kinds of big societal problems, the first step is to perceive what makes them aesthetically alluring.

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