
Negationist rhetoric and post-truth figures. Transversal research in social media in the COVID-19 era*

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Abstract: The research hypothesis of this paper postulates the existence of dominant isotopies and images-symbols cross-cutting all conspiracy theories, independent from ideological or contextual specificity. Hence, to detect an ideal core of the semantic universe of conspiracy where the various conspiracist fringe converges, we assumed that the common denominator could be traced in the figurative reasoning, which entails sharing the same images to explain current events. The best field to validate our hypothesis is the visual representation of the COVID-19 pandemic circulating on social media. The corpus on which the analysis has been conducted covers the time of February 15, 2020, until December 15, 2021, and counts on thousands of online publications. Within the corpus were selected posts on COVID-19 and on the daily practices of the lockdown of March 2020 spread by the leading Italian newspapers, and through the social profiles of institutional figures and influencers, reported by WHO as crucial points of information dissemination, in parallel with the *dis-information* propagated on Facebook, Instagram, Telegram and Twitter by the Italian conspiracy factions.

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1. Research outline

This paper reconstructs and presents the first results of our research still in progress, dedicated to the visual representations of the COVID-19 pandemic circulating on social media. The corpus on which the analysis has been conducted covers the time of February 15, 2020, until December 15, 2021, and counts on thousands of online publications. Within the corpus were selected the communications on COVID-19 and on the daily practices of the lockdown of March 2020 spread by the leading Italian newspapers, and through the social profiles of institutional figures and influencers, reported by WHO as crucial points of information dissemination, in parallel with the *dis-information* propagated on Facebook, Instagram, Telegram and Twitter by the Italian conspiracy factions. In addition, we collected and selected the texts with the Semiotic Sciences of Text and Languages student community of the Department of Communication and Social Research of Sapienza University of Rome (A.Y. 2019-2020, 2020-2021). Posts shared on social networks were chosen for representativeness based on users' liking and then collated with official communications (e.g., newspapers, institutions) to operate a fact-checking.

Case studies were identified for relevance, occurrence over time and diffusion. Since the content on social networks and the Web is stored and catalogued, we selected the pages and accounts of interest on the world's major social media, the tools that disseminate knowledge and implement contemporary. The relevance criterion, in this case, is numerical, so the most followed accounts, videos with the most views, content that generated the most comments and shares, in the No-vax, No-mask, and conspiracy theories scenarios related to COVID and 5G, modern flat Earth societies, and the QAnon movement.

Contrary to what one would expect, conspiracists' spaces for disseminating and exchanging information on social media are easy to find and generally have few, if any, privacy restrictions. Aside from personal accounts, groups and topicalized pages contain keywords such as no-vax, no-mask, QAnon, and vaccines, which clarify the enunciators' position. Moreover, it must be specified that the activity of these accounts is not censored or sanctioned, except in rare cases.

For reasons of brevity, it is not possible to list every page, account, group, or channel examined during the research, but we can mention the most relevant for our analysis¹. Among the Facebook groups, *COLCAXCHEMIVAX Movimento Disobbedienti* 🤪 (in English is a sort of "I prefer to go to hell than get vaccinated - Movement of Disobedience"), run by Thomas Ghidotti, organizer of no vax

¹ Last access January 21, 2022.

protests and father of Nicola, a thirteen-year-old boy who at the age of one year fell ill with encephalopathy, according to his parents as a result of a vaccine. Continuing with the No-vax movement on Facebook, we mention *Archivio danni da vaccino* (Vaccine Damage Archive), a private group with 34,038 members, the page active since 2012 *Vaccini Basta* (Stop Vaccines) followed by 32,874 people, where they defend the freedom of choice and advocate the theses that vaccines instead of protecting “from infectious diseases, have created much more serious HATROGEN DEGENERATIVE diseases”, or the account of the “philosopher” Diego Fusaro, with 316,424 followers, and present on almost all social media. Fusaro also offers a subscription from 4.99 euros per month to access a reserved discussion group, provides training courses and does not disdain invitations to private symposia. Moving to Twitter, the no-vax people find a voice in a well-known Italian psychologist, also a media personality, Alessandro Meluzzi (about 87 thousand followers) and in Minerva, an anonymous account whose name is inspired by the goddess of knowledge of ancient Rome, with about 10 thousand followers and a past in the Italian high political circles. The conspiracy theories continue with the modern flat Earth societies through the Facebook page *Sostenitori Italiani della Terra Piatta* (Italian Supporters of the Flat Earth, 17,538 likes), passing to the sovereigntists of the page *L'antieuropeista* (The Anti-Europeist, 18,949 likes), to reach the group Stop5G ITALIA with 25,992 members.

We conclude the shortlist with the Telegram channels of the two leading exponents of the QAnon network in Italy: Akim Aaron Volpato Channel (not active since July 2021, probably migrated under a new name) and Qlobal Change Italia (about 20 thousand subscribers). We want to point out that the FBI reports the QAnon movement in the USA as a potential terrorist threat, and also in Italy is becoming a social stigma that has affected people destabilized by the pandemic. Furthermore, QAnon's speeches are characterized by attributing all world events to Deep State plans (from a dam collapse to the blockage of the Suez Canal, from Trump to vaccines).

Whatever the conspiracy theory of choice and the linguistic register used (highbrow in the case of Fusaro, Meluzzi and the Flat Earth Saviors, on the verge of the vulgar with Ghidotti), the common point is to deconstruct the narrative of the dominant powers, using testimonies and certainties to show the truth to as many people as possible. They refer to a unified channel and governmental construction of the pandemic and its practices to cover political and economic interests towards capital and its abuses. So, the Opponent is the government, while the conspiracists make themselves Subject Operators of implementing the mission entrusted to them by the Addresser-Freedom of Thought, whose Object of Value is truth. The Opponent and the Anti-subjects (ministers, doctors,

pharmaceutical companies, media, pro-vax, etc.) fabricate the obstacles to the truth to keep as many people as possible in the dark.

To give an example of the transversality of some elements of the conspiracy theories, in the Facebook group Stop 5G Italia connections have been made between red, orange, and yellow zones (colorations where there are regulations based on the greater or lesser number of COVID-19 infected) and 5G implementation status. In 2020, several articles and posts on social media were spread about the correlation between 5G repeater installation and the spread of COVID-19, pointing out that in Wuhan, just before the diffusion of the infections, the deployment of antennas in the area had just been completed. Therefore, the correlation of 5G and COVID-19 is fake news based on a casual temporal consecutiveness of two controversial events recorded in the same space.

The semantic categories detected in conspiracy discourse of all kinds are:

1. freedom vs imprisonment, in the sense of exercising the right of free thought and choice;
2. obedience vs disobedience, the latter exalted as a direct consequence of freedom of choice and as a civil form of resistance;
3. truth vs lies, where the first is meant as absolute and held by conspiracists, while the State and the media disseminate the second.

It is not essential if it is about vaccines or 5G antennas, thus, the figures of the conspiracy discursive configuration, the system of beliefs and values at the base of the daily narrative are constant.

Our research aims to map the so-called selective negationism, or, better, the manipulation of events based on a distorted perception of risk and the desire to preserve the status quo. We have crossed the various types of media discourse, considering the verbal component, visual and the marks of the enunciative contract responding to the rhetorical characteristics of post-truth. Anna Maria Lorusso points out that the post-truth regime generates “cancerous gemmations of already existing and established narratives” that modify events to confirm starting beliefs, exaggerating the reality of facts to impress the audience (LORUSSO, 2018, p. 60, tr. ours). From the texts of a syncretic nature shared on social media, we derived a subcorpus of images, from which we extracted a pattern of invariant traits, both in terms of production and reception. Another focus of attention is related to the use and circulation of emotions and passions, of which we obtained a list of the most recurring, such as angst, indignation, fear, and anger.

The research confirmed the initial hypothesis regarding dominant isotopies and images-symbols cross-cutting all conspiracy theories, independent from ideological or contextual specificity. Hence, we can confirm an ideal core in the

semantic universe of conspiracy where pockets of unique thought converge, a holistic vision of global events based on figurative reasoning that we will explain in detail in the following pages.

2. General Theoretical Framework

Post-truth discourses are characterized by specific narrative modes, figurative reasoning, techniques of enunciative mimesis, elements aimed at arousing surprise and indignation, which take advantage of widespread emotional atmospheres, collective feelings of fear and uncertainty, the lack of references in ideologies. Among these discourses is made a transmedial connection, which assumes the role of an instrument of veridiction, an element that also characterizes the new rhetoric of pseudo-sciences increasingly followed because of the rampant superstition.

Our research focuses on another type of fragility generated by dysphoric passions, which involves distancing oneself from canonical science and approaching pseudo-sciences. Especially during the pandemic and the consequent infodemic, the permanent Observatory Censis-Ital Communications has calculated that 4.5 million Italians are informed only through social media. Therefore, a substantial portion of the population, which is informed mainly through social media, is increasingly dazed by the lack of specific or unambiguous answers, by the same excess of information, by the contradictory nature, actual or apparent, of the statements of experts or self-proclaimed experts, by the inexperience related to the fallibility of scientific theories (MARRONE; MIGLIORE, 2021). Consequently, they feel betrayed by the State and the so-called dominant powers and take refuge in “bubbles” that offer “facts”, evidence, and straightforward answers since they formulate their truths, providing what these people want and expect. Somewhat fragile in terms of their ability to critically process the complexity of information and to sustain a situation of cognitive uncertainty, they want to be able to focus on “culprits”, “scapegoats” on which to pour out their anger.

Here come the conspiracy theories – from the modern Flat Earth societies to 5G, all the way to the theory of the COVID-19 created in a laboratory to eliminate the weakest segments of the population – and their continuous work of catechizing new proselytes on whom they carry out an actual conversion through social and Web sites.

Even though the object of value of the various conspiracy theories may be different at first glance, what has emerged from the research is the absolute homogeneity of thought and the congruence between the various theories, which reveal, therefore, a single semantic halo in which the various conspiracies find their positioning based on the topicalization of their discourses. The

communicative strategies used by these “opinion leaders”, halfway between prophets and pseudo-scientists, are similar to those used for scams but even more refined. In order to fully understand a text interwoven with the implicit and the unspoken, that is, not manifested on the surface, we also investigated the intermedial imagery and semantic frames, since very often, the events commented on or targeted are explained with references to film or literary narratives, which seem to be considered more reliable or “truer” than the events of the “real” world.

After having studied the discursive production of these enunciators in-depth, we moved on to the study of their reception to understand in even greater detail the enunciative mechanisms triggered by these forms of expression, identified as unequivocally mendacious. Subsequently, we selected the most relevant comments – the most liked ones – in social media discussions related to pseudo-science through a semiotic and qualitative methodology. In these cases, the boundary between production and reception blurs in mimetic practices (sharing, transformation, imitation), situating itself within a meta-discursive framework, a source of counter-information using standard tactics.

To perform the analysis, we set up a grid to keep track of the evolution of the discourses and gradually outline their context. Once the texts were collected, we identified the external causalities that determined the publication of the content, which can be traced back to ideologies, alternative information strategies or counter-information, to which we added the internal causalities, i.e., related to the peculiar semiotic system of representation and encodings of the specific text.

Conspiracy narratives seem to be divided into two macro-groups, which we can trace back to the Lotmanian subdivision of grammaticalized and textualized cultures. For example, in the case of modern flat Earth societies, a metalanguage is employed, and hierarchical relationships are identifiable among members of conspiracy groups assigned based on expertise, or, better yet, the degree of truth held, as they are in QAnon. In contrast, in the case of the generic no-vax and no-mask positions, codifications are characteristic of common sense, and there is a tendency to hypersimplify medical rhetoric. In the texts of the textualized culture, the use of complacent language predominates, sacrificing the complexity of events for the benefit of a closer reading (BALDINI, 1989). The invariant trait lies in the continuous pursuit of a simplifying clarity that hides an excellent information vacuum, reflected in the use of images whose represented objects completely lose their denotative function in favor of the connotative and phatic ones. With this in mind, we classified visual texts according to the narrations they refer to and their connotations.

Regarding identifying invariant traits, we have reconstructed the articulation of the morphology of the values underlying the discourses, tracing

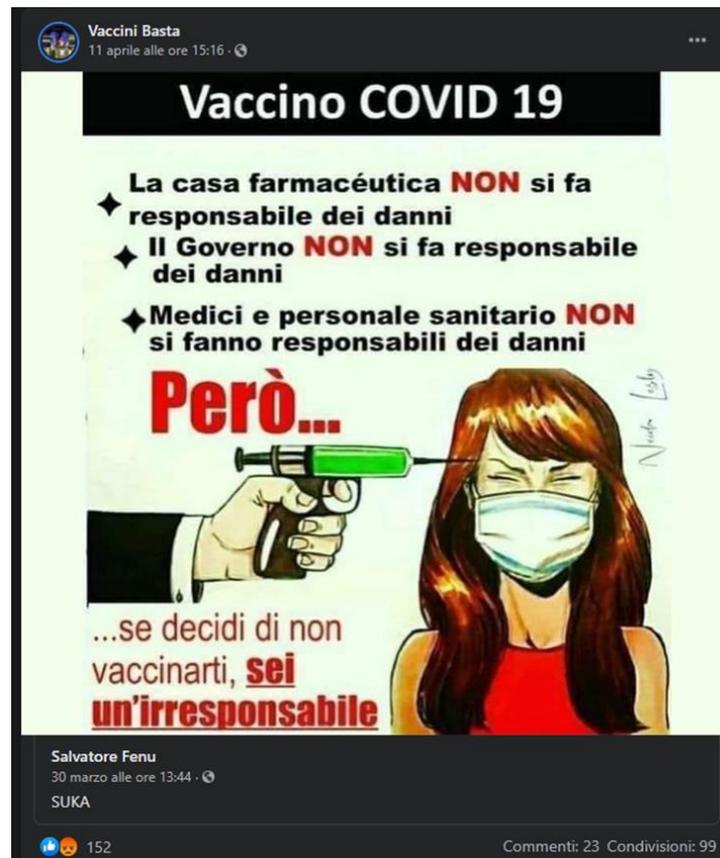
their progressive transformation from abstract to concrete. As far as the level of manifestation is concerned, the aim is to investigate the techniques and tactics of conspiratorial argumentation to compile a list of recurrent forms of expression and the genres (e.g., science fiction) recognized as significant. By identifying the units and rules of the forms of expressions that manifest content and expression substances, we compiled an identikit of the languages and practices of the “conspiracy” form of life, deepening their way of being, of approaching issues of public importance, and the modalities of intersemiotic translation enacted to reinforce arguments in support of their ideologies, i.e. how news stories are represented in other semiotic systems in order to resemantize them, desemantize them, manipulating their original meaning to reorganize knowledge. Texts generally simulate spoken language, especially in semantic recursiveness, by trivializing complex concepts and misusing specific categories of meaning.

To classify the enunciative style of the conspiracists, we identified the marks of enunciation and its mechanisms. The need to generate the enemy, even if invisible or imaginary, leads to contrast a “we”, the group who thinks like the enunciator, with a “they”, the opponents, the enemies who want to conceal the truth to pursue illicit interests (LOTMAN, 1989, p. 166). The structure of relations in the deictic “we” is exclusive because it refers to the fight between honest, enlightened citizens and evil rulers. Going into the merits of the communicative strategies, we found it helpful to outline the phases of the argumentation, which turned out to be of the theme-restriction-illustration type because it never proposed a solution to the problem but only a mere scientific and political trivialization aimed at altering information and spreading stereotypes (FABBRI, 1973).

This kind of discourse is organized according to the theme-restriction-illustration scheme and marked with “sign effects of superficial verisimilitude”, such as using technical-scientific terminology to generate beliefs that cannot be demonstrated with documentable research (FABBRI, 1973, our translation). Let us take, for example, the symbolic image in Fig. 1 titled “COVID-19 Vaccine” in the center, followed by the topic restricted to the main seme “responsibility” through an argumentation organized in a bullet-list. Here is a verbal text where the negations in the sentences are highlighted in capital letters and red the negations to focus attention on the unwillingness of institutional roles involved in the vaccine campaign, then the lack of commitment to protecting the citizens and, most importantly, compensating them in case of problems. The presence of negations is an invariant feature of social media conspiracy content as they express the enunciators’ rejection of practices and rules promoted by the government. At this point, we can draw the first conclusions about the discharge of responsibility that is illustrated and simplified by the “but” associated with the syringe with the “alien” vaccine (fluorescent green color) pointed at the temple

of a frightened woman and gagged by a mask. The citizen is imposed on a doing by the strong powers that, at the same time, declaring not to answer for any damage, implicitly affirm the harmfulness of the vaccine, administered for political and economic interests. The moral of the message is delivered to the irony of the phrase “if you decide not to vaccinate, you are irresponsible”, with the main sense of the argument in bold and underlined characters. Instead of languishing in the rhetoric of persecution, conspiracists do not provide alternative solutions.

Fig. 1. “If you decide not to vaccinate, you are irresponsible”.



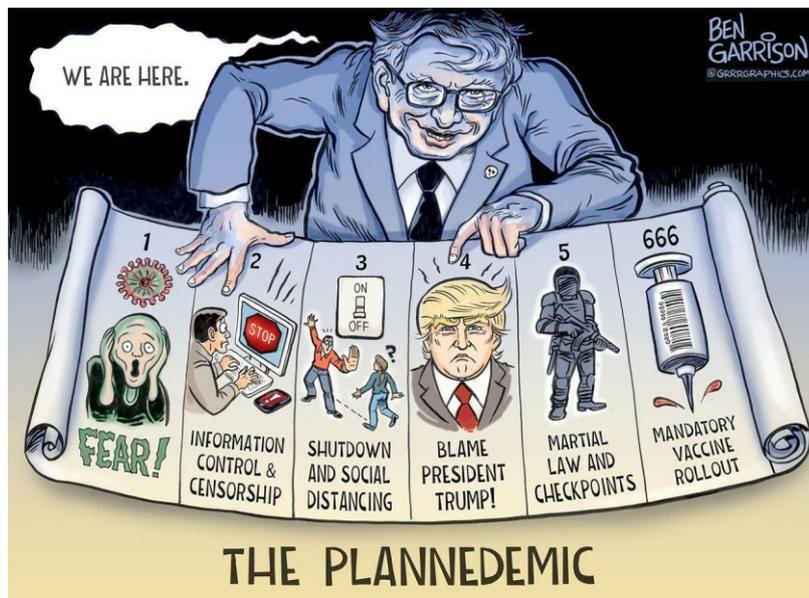
Source: Vaccini Basta. Available at <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=4554906037870980&set=a.299979463363680>

The process of assigning responsibility to the citizen is also simulated in the topological arrangement of elements in the syncretic text, which also organizes the enunciators' inferences on deductive reasoning. Following the reading order, the dominant powers are placed on the left, while the citizen forced to vaccinate herself on the right, positions that trace the passage of responsibility from one to the other by an act of force subsumed by the syringe-

gun clutched by a white-collar's hand, since the jacket and the shirt cuffs are recognizable.

Another example of the theme-restriction-illustration argumentation is the widespread cartoon “The plannedemic”, where an evil Bill Gates shows the six points of the Deep State’s plan of world domination, which although not directly mentioned, remains in the background, embodied by one of its prominent representatives, placed in the center, in the foreground, who draws the attention of the enunciatees, confiding to them “we have arrived here”. The cartoon was disseminated at the end of the term of office of Donald Trump, one of the most controversial moments of his career, anticipated chronologically by the COVID-19 virus, followed by the control of world information and censorship on social networks to prevent the spread of fake news from generating further panic.

Fig. 2. “The Plannedemic”.



Source: Akim Aaron Volpato Channel.

From the point of view of the enunciator, the media control implemented the principle of divide and rule amplified by social distancing and the shutdown of commercial activities. Which, effectively, was followed by stricter laws to observe anti-contagious practices and mandatory vaccines, the culmination of the Deep State’s plan marked with the number of the beast, 666. The cartoon depicts a possible future in which the succession of events is predictable and logical, given the arrangement according to the topological category of horizontality. What elevates the cartoon to a fulfilled prophecy is the correspondence to the events that occurred after publication. The conspiracy

theory is no longer just a suspicion but a credible and lucid truth, which bases its verisimilitude on the inevitable consequences of a state of emergency like the COVID-19 pandemic, such as martial law or drastic measures to control citizens (see curfew in Italy). Similarly, the mandatory vaccine is the only possible evolution to contain the pandemic. Therefore, there is no prediction ability, but only the exposition of the pre-determined consequences of the global emergency.

A variant of the scheme theme-restriction-illustration occurs in problematizing an aspect of the pandemic by asking the enunciatee a series of tendentious questions in which is already contained an answer that confirms the conspiracy hypothesis: “why vaccines do not work? Maybe because they are an experimental gene therapy made by mad scientists?”. We are looking at a rhetorical question whose purpose is to deal with an aspect of COVID-19 vaccines, which power of protection is not unbeatable. This kind of question reinforces the imagery related to the mad scientist, a thematic role that designates an expert dedicated to experimentation on human beings-guinea pigs.

In the conspiracy discourse, the reasoning starts from the contingency of facts that cannot be denied, but neither can they be definitively demonstrated as hypothetical and possible. Roland Barthes, following Plato, traces this type of rhetoric back to *doxa*, public opinion, as opposed to an argument based on evidence and testimony, i.e., *entechnai* (BARTHES, 1970). The aesthetics of conspiracy verisimilitude is convincing for its articulation through a concise visual language based on figurative models that articulate the semantic universes of references with symbolic, iconic, and graphic elements. The coherence of the semantic structure is consistent at the discursive level thanks to the widespread use of rhetorical figures such as redundancies, anaphoras, metaphors, synecdoche, metonyms, aimed at generating controlled effects of meaning, such as the referential illusion and verisimilitude with scientific research thanks to the use of metalanguage.

3. Visual rhetorics: a typology

Our research question recalls the considerations on rumors of the semiotician Paolo Fabbri who, in earlier times and concerning less impactful topics, already outlined the current infodemic: “What relation is there indeed between rumors-viruses that spread in presence, epidemically, and the media that are informed and deformed by them? Moreover, if the rumors are ‘mediated’ by the mass media, are not these media ‘rumored’ by the voices?” (FABBRI, 1998). Rumors and voices mentioned by Fabbri are a direct consequence of the post-truth pandemic regime, in which the uncertainty of science is “silenced” by the certainties of conspiracists, based on groundless data, but supported by

interpretative criteria congruent to their beliefs. Umberto Eco, in turn, in *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, identifies three types of reasoning: 1) the paradigm of similarity, where the “truth” is demonstrated by analogy and contiguity; 2) the Hermetic semiosis that involves “overestimating the importance of coincidences which are explainable in other ways” (ECO, 1992, p. 50); 3) association by contiguity, demonstration of causality between events for *pars pro-toto*, the argumentation of the action based on the agent. From this perspective, we can see that the line between events, occurrences, and paranoia is thin and blurred.

Conspiracists transform every occurrence into a parable, in the sense that they modify causes and effects in order to support their argumentations, independently developing a holistic dimension that generates figurative reasoning whose aim is to affirm the ideology (FABBRI, MARRONE, 2001, p. 144). In our corpus, the degree of figurative intensity varies from medium (figurative) to high (iconic), depending on if the main topic is current events or news created on purpose from the existing. The predilection for figurative reasoning confirms that the demonstration of the hypothesis does not proceed by the scientific method, that is, deduction or induction, but is based on analogy and the limit extension of the signified (catachresis).

The diffusion of specific texts establishes actual codes whose signs become the proofs of extraordinary events, which exceed the limits imposed by the “modus” of common sense. A theory is grounded not on the apparent link between two events but on the absolute irrefutability of the premises: vaccines are indeed harmful, therefore, are indisputably the cause of any “dysfunction” of the body that emerged after their administration. The human body is perceived as a set of elements in a fragile balance, which can be upset by a foreign entity forcibly incorporated into it as if it were a kind of profanation. Chance or other incidences are not contemplated in this type of discourse. The textualization of reality can be forced through the languages that serve to create signifieds and establish coincidences, realizing a personal truth within limits imposed by the things of the world.

The basis of scientific or pseudo-scientific discourse is the transmission of knowledge, which circulates in situations of never neutral communication, based on the persuasion to think in a certain way or to believe true a particular interpretation (LOZANO, 2012, p. 83). In this regard, Roland Barthes states that classical rhetoric revolves around the *topoi* accepted by common sense, where the dominant modalizations are the *causing to know* and the *causing to do*, to which can be added the *causing to want*, characteristic of persuasion (BARTHES, 1970). Jorge Lozano also includes the *causing to believe* considering the contemporary meaning shifts from convincing to trusting, proceeding by degrees of certainty (LOZANO, 2012). The act of persuading from the truth, or rather

from verisimilitude, no longer makes sense in contemporaneity, but the game is played on *wanting to believe* and being able to believe. As Algirdas Julien Greimas reminds us, believing, or causing to believe, is the crucial instance of scientific discourse (GREIMAS, 1983). Knowing and believing are contiguous because of their elastic structure that, once reached the maximum tension, makes them assume the opposite polarization, subsumed in popular beliefs contrasting scientific knowledge. As conspiracy theories prove, if the truth is constructed through argumentation and rhetoric, the circulation of knowledge is based on believing true, where the enunciator of the information becomes the bearer of the episteme, not of the opinion, of the *doxa*, while the enunciatee acknowledges it as a reliable and neutral source. We can apply the Greimasian actantial model to the conspiracist circulation of information and infer that Persuasive Addressers convince Addressees/Subjects to believe what they state to be true and receive a positive sanction from the latter by adhering to their interpretive regime (LOZANO, 2012, p. 86).

The difference between scientific discourse and conspiracy theories lies in the semantic category /exclusion/ vs /certainty/ because the scientific community can exclude interpretations that are less responsive to the truth, but by virtue of intellectual honesty cannot establish the best one without evidence, although conspiracy theorists affirm their theses forcefully, reaching fanaticism (LOZANO, 2012, p. 86). For example, institutions and media describe the COVID-19 pandemic using the sense of uncertainty due to the impossibility of foretelling the virus variants' outcomes and establishing its end. The circulation of information takes roots in a fiduciary contract stipulated between the enunciatee and the enunciator's reliability. The adherence to this contract depends on how it is proposed, the construction of the demonstration of the central hypothesis, the choice of certain words and visual texts that act as simplification and support.

As already specified, we will focus primarily on the images inserted in the argumentation procedures of the enunciators-conspiracists activated to convince the enunciatees by using the most likely reasons to appeal to the sensitive pathemic dimensions (LOZANO, 2012, p. 88). The images reinforce the enunciatee's argumentation and trust, increasing the truthfulness of the statement. The believing of the enunciatee is a cognitive act modalized by knowing with certainty, to be understood as both an *alethic* (modes of true and false, possibilities) and *epistemic* category. Images authenticate information by undermining any "degrees of uncertainty" related to those who convey the information since they are perceived as a transparent representation of reality. They use elements of figurative reasoning to establish associations and contiguities, activating a critical *believing* (BERTRAND, 2002).

Even if it is a cartoon or an image taken out of context, the visual text reinforces the message by facilitating a naive reading of what is posted on social media. The presence of visual or audiovisual text, or just emoji, highlights the post from the social media stream, being part of the tactics implemented to attract the attention of potential enunciatees. Simplified social network communication involves strategies and tactics of knowledge sharing or information spreading, which can be understood as aspectualized declinations of knowing and believing. Images increase the persuasive capacity because they evoke contextual, cultural, rhetorical-argumentative, dictionary implications, and ambiguous, contradictory formulations (PEZZINI, 2008). We noted four types of images that are recurrent and cross-cutting conspiracy theories:

1. Image-articles
2. Image-symbols (figures, cartoons, emoji, thematic roles)
3. Visual tropes
4. Image-frames

The first type is the image-article, i.e., the screenshot of the title of an article, often including the accompanying visual text, but without directly sharing the link to check it out. One could undoubtedly object that this could be a choice not to increase the traffic of the media that serve the Deep State or dominant powers, but we must consider the structure of online articles, which in order to get clicks often exaggerate in the title an aspect of the news that is irrelevant in the whole text. Headlines are emotional and sensationalistic, attracting attention and informing the enunciatee of a deliberately chosen dominant thematic isotopy. Screenshots of recurring articles include “unexplained or sudden deaths of young people” that, without giving further information, are attributed to vaccines in the verbal text accompanying the image, fabricating, in the very meaning of the word, evidence in favor of the underlying thesis of the harmfulness of the vaccine campaign. The same method is used with quotes from writers and philosophers (Nietzsche, Popper), which are taken out of context and adapted to the topic of the enunciators. The same applies to sacred texts, presented as accurate prophecy as in the case of Apocalypse 13:16-17, cited, among others, by Alessandro Meluzzi: “And he shall make all, both little and great, rich and poor, freemen and bondmen, to have a character in their right hand, or on their foreheads. And that no man might buy or sell, but he that hath the character, or the name of the beast, or the number of his name”.

In Italian, the term “character” is translated as “mark”, therefore interpreted as the sign left by the vaccine. In the current interpretation of this verse, the

word “character” refers to tattoos or marks imposed on people guilty of major crimes, but the conspiracists see them as the signs of being vaccinated.

The image-article can often include images-symbols that magnify the effects of the pathemic sense of the “news clipping”, driving the reactions of the enunciatee.

Consider the conspiracy rhetoric on vaccines administered to children: already in April 2021 on Italian social networks circulated fake news about children who died after the first dose of Pfizer. In Italy, the vaccine had not been administered to children at that time, so we can infer the impossibility of fact-checking on Facebook. As shown in Fig. 3, the recurring image in posts or articles of this kind was the detail of a baby’s hand clasping an adult’s finger, probably the parent.

Fig. 3. “Two years old baby dies after Pfizer vaccine”.



Source: Vaccini Basta. Available at <https://www.facebook.com/vaccinibasta/photos/a.234750079937011/3978716568873658/>

Since there is no direct link with the “news”, among other things concerning a two-year-old girl, the use of the black and white photograph is explained by the evocation of cultural and rhetorical-argumentative implications such as trust and unconditional love towards those who should protect, but instead betray exposing the defenseless infant to the dangers of a sick and unscrupulous science. Here the pathemic contagion is vital because such an image tends to silence any logical receptor, activating the passions of anger and indignation towards an abomination. The enunciatees, blinded by rage, do not have the time to think that there are no extremes to consider trustworthy that news, but they focus purely on the title and the black and white image, which is the bearer of a dysphoric *semisymbolism* that actualizes the semantic categories of good vs evil and life vs death.

Babies are part of the recurring figures of our typology, together with symbolic images such as the cage – that of “false” beliefs and governmental impositions – masks-muzzles and syringes-weapons, the most common.

The syringe becomes a gun pointed at the head, or an arrow piercing the body, thus connoting the imposition of a harmful vaccine. Behind such depiction, the empirical authors-enunciators presuppose the interpretive cooperation of model readers who share their worldview by organizing their argument on predicting the interpretative process of the enunciatees.

Another type of image-symbols is cartoons and emojis, endowed with a solid argumentative-polemic power as they clarify the interpretive program of the enunciator with irony and satire, having an effect of greater closeness with the public because of the *hypersimplification* of the topics of discourse (LORUSSO; VIOLI, 2004). *Emojization* assumes the functions of softening the impact of dysphoric events and clarifying the content meaning as if it were a text directed to children. Among the recurring emoji is the excrement emoji, used to express disgust and outrage at the health care system and the government. The emoji are part of the process of cartooning the reality, that is, a graphic translation of the practices linked to COVID-19 and the virus itself, to configure them following the dominant aesthetic on social networks where roundness, simplicity, lightness, and iconicity prevail.

Fig. 4. "Looking for freedom quoting Dante"



Source: Available at Diego Fusaro's Instagram account.

Hypersimplification reinforces the veridictory authority of the enunciator, who assumes the additional competence of making the most challenging issues understood, unlike the scientific community, which cannot break free from metalanguage. From here, the conspiracists derive one of the recurring thematic roles: the mad scientist, blinded by his research and willing to sacrifice human life to demonstrate his beliefs. The scientist, usually portrayed in technological laboratories holding the weaponized syringe, is accompanied by the evil and corrupt politician, emblem of the system's malfunctions, whose photographs are chosen with care, favoring funny or evil facial expressions.

One of the communication tactics preferred by conspiracists is to invalidate the offices of the State by ridiculing them using memes. A striking example is the photo of the Italian Minister of Health Roberto Speranza spread on various social accounts, where he is pictured with joined hands and a pleading look at the sky. Such an image is used as a clear proof of the oversimplification of the Italian government, which does not entrust its decisions to "certain data" but to beliefs or superstitions, as confirmed by the verbal text superimposed on the minister "Please make it rain" (Fig. 5).

Fig. 5. "Minister Speranza Meme".



Source: Thomas Ghidotti. Available at:

<https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=3936349563119773&set=a.448014925286605>

Opposed to the thematic roles of the evil politician and the mad scientist is the wise citizen, bearer of truth, a fearless hero whose job is to bring the citizen-slaves back to reality. The subjugation to the dictates of the State leads to constant visual rhetoric, where we find comparisons of pro-vax, *spherical earthist* or pro-5G depicted as sheep, monkeys, zombies, a barely veiled reference to poor judgment. Sheep, mammals, and monsters are variously represented, from emoji to cartoons, from frames of movies to documentary photographs (in the case of the first two). Another rhetorical figure transposed into the visual is the similitude, where the superimposition of Donald Trump – considered a savior by the QAnon conspiracy fringe – and a lion stands out for plastic and figurative rhymes, thus for colors, facial expression, and character qualities.

Fig. 6. "Trump resembling a Lion".



Source: Qlobal Italia and Aakim Aron Volpato Channel. Private archive.

As Lotman asserts, the effect of meaning of visual tropes is determined by the estrangement caused by the inclusion of an unexpected seme in discourse, a forced reference to a signification detached from the context or from the canonical way of conceiving things (LOTMAN, 1980).

The fracture created by the visual text ensures that the sense conveyed is more or less marked according to its degree of rhetoric, that is, the degree of distance from the semantic halo of the fact itself (SEDDA, 2021, p. 25). The higher the degree of resemblance of representation of reality, i.e., iconism, the visual text is destined to go unnoticed and therefore ineffective. Rhetoric has a greater degree of intensity in incompatibility, but it is also true that in the case of the conspiracy content, we must keep in mind the correlation between the verbal text and the visual text that generates new semantic values (SEDDA, 2021, p. 26). Then the juxtaposition of a fact and a visual text that does not act as a direct referral is more effective because it causes a shock that increases the pathemic intensity of the social media content. The association suggested by juxtaposition corresponds to stylistic procedures such as synecdoche, metaphors, and metonymies that impress the enunciatee.

Tropes signify according to relations established by the enunciators who base their persuasive discourse on an irregular and somewhat creative translation of reality to acquire credit with the enunciatees (FABBRI; LATOUR, 1977).

The predominance of image-symbols and visual tropes demonstrate how rare the documentary representation of the events is in the social media content of conspiracists, who, despite this lack, naturalize the symbolic component of

their argumentation in order to expand the range of the veridictory effect of meaning.

For Barthes, photography is a documentary proof, mimesis of the event represented, and can trigger a reality effect (BARTHES, 1968). However, in the images disseminated by conspiracists, “the incessant need to authenticate the real” becomes a constant need to unmask the real. The images are interpretive utterances that depict something recognizable, which is interpreted and defined by the people who publish the post and propose themselves as a clarifying voice through the verbal text. Then we can say that the verbal text modifies the visual and shapes it as the primary system for triggering and driving the emotional reaction of the enunciatee.

The use of images and videos increases the persuasiveness of the events presented and this, as pointed out by Eco, involves semiotic problems, especially with the supposed authenticity of visual testimonial evidence. In the words of Eco, the spread of the image culture enhanced by social media has contributed to changing further “the knowledge attitude of spectators towards reality” (ECO, 2017) (tr. ours). The image immediately signifies and conveys the fact, strengthening the relationship with reality and showing what is being narrated increases the statement’s credibility by documenting the “fact”.

The image is not a guarantee of truthfulness: think of using the technique of *deepfake* to make reliable theories, documents, or testimonies to authenticate forms of parrhesia. There is no need to build the proof with a photo retouching app; it is enough to associate the “correct” image with the news, as in the described case of the newborn, or choose the facial expression, the most suitable emotion to reinforce the context, no matter that the photo was taken in places and times different from those described. If one wants to blame politicians of an opposing faction, it is enough to find a photo that portrays them with a glare or an ambiguous attitude. Eco himself suggests that “putting a photo of a fact and placing the photo of a person next to it can suggest the idea that the person is the author of the fact”. In this regard, Eco tries to identify the “semiotic root” of possible lies and finds them in the double meaning attributed to images, on the one hand, trace because of its relationship with the existing, on the other hand, referral, and similarity, without direct relationship with a particular object, but with its class.

So, if an equally false image supports fake or manipulated news, the enunciatees can either consider it a sign referring to something they do not know or compare it with what they know about the event told and draw conclusions. In the case of reading something new, the words will direct the interpretation of the image according to the intentions of the enunciators, whose goal is to make as many people as possible adhere to their beliefs. Whether it is an article headline, a Facebook status, a tweet, or an Instagram caption, the verbal text

implements the specific reference despite its more generic nature than the image as an individual sign. As Eco points out, it is not that we should not believe images but learn to read them critically. Indeed, as Pietro Montani (2020) states, reasoning in terms of *intermediality* can represent a strategy of active intervention aimed at fact and theory checking, that is, a way of comparing the discourses of the various media with the same topicalization and reorganizing the relative regimes of truth to propose new forms of documentality and witnessing.

The conspiracy arises when one cannot identify a *deus ex machina*, as the philosopher Karl Popper would say, when the reference to God disappears and one begins to ask who is in his place, imputing responsibility to an oligarchy of the powerful (POPPER, 1972). History shows this, with Hitler versus the Elder Savivors of Zion and the Deep State from QAnon, united by the position of dominance obtained by holding a secret, as Simmel would say. The problem is that letting people know about the secret implies a further conspiracy that can have as a counterpart the establishment of a regime (Nazism and Fascism) or episodes of civil guerrilla war (United States Capitol Attack on January 6, 2021). The crux of the matter is always about how the argumentation is constructed, where the aesthetic and/or emotional dimension of fictional narrative can be considered more persuasive than the alethic dimension of the fact if the enunciatees do not possess the equipment to discern between fiction and reality (ECO, 2017).

Ultimately, the indeterminacy of the scientific community's statements because of lack of evidence is resolved by conspiracy discourses, in which many stereotypes proposed by simple association can be transformed into moments of tension, changing behavioral orbit (LOTMAN, 1992, p. 143). In the discourses of the QAnon movement, for example, events are interpreted by analogy using the good vs evil binary system, where the pandemic becomes an opportunity to destabilize the immobility of the Deep State.

The conspiracy argumentation anchors itself parasitic to other types of discourse: scientific, journalistic, statistical, literary and filmic. Now we have arrived at the last invariant trait of conspiratorial figurative reasoning, the image-frame that goes from charts and infographics to highlight the relevance and completeness of the information conveyed to intertextual references to figures already known in other fields.

In this way, the actions, reactions, and passions of the enunciatees are channeled into frames of experience, through which their behavior is prearranged, predicted, scripted, as well as the meanings attributed to the events and circumstances of everyday life.

According to Umberto Eco, frames are structures of previous experience that allow the setting of a typical situation from conceptual schemes based on

given uses and meanings (ECO, 1979). The frame, therefore, is a conceptual structure that involves all human cognitive activities: “that is what framing is about. Framing is about getting language that fits your worldview. It is not just language. The ideas are primary, and the language carries those ideas, evokes those ideas” (LAKOFF, 2004).

Reality is clarified through continuous intertextual references to certain movies, such as the *Matrix* saga (1999-2021), whose recurring figures are used as image-symbols in the discourse of conspiracists to interpret events from the experience of the enunciator and enunciatee of that narrative. The impact of the *Matrix* on conspiracy culture is due to the primary narrative program of the movie, that is, the discovery of the true world, the ultimate goal of pages, groups, accounts, and channels scattered across social media. Experiencing a completely new situation for humankind has widened the fascination for the existence of unrevealed secrets, of completely submerged worlds, to be accessed through enlightened characters such as the glocalized prophets of the QAnon movement. Italy counts Akim Aaron Volpato, active on Telegram, the social network of choice for encrypted and confidential communications, entered in the second half of 2021 in the blacklist of law enforcement to contain the spread of false information. Volpato often uses parallels with the *Matrix* to explain the events of the present, starting with a line from the first movie of the saga pronounced by Morpheus (portrayed by Laurence Fishburne), who addresses Neo (Keanu Reeves) offering him a visit to the “real world”: «You take the blue pill—the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill—you stay in Wonderland, and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes. Remember: all I’m offering is the truth».

We want to focus on the figures of the discursive configuration of truth present in this sentence, namely red pill, blue pill, rabbit hole and Wonderland, intertextual quotations from Lewis Carroll’s novel *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), where pills and rabbit hole act as helpers and intermediaries to discover a new world. The QAnon movement aims to help humanity to understand reality and uses the White Rabbit as an emblem of the conjunction with the truth, to which is also added the letter Q, which besides designating its prominent prophet, refers to the Q clearance, the supposed maximum level of authorization to access highly secret contents of the American government. The Q also relates to the number seventeen, given the letter’s placement in the American alphabet and the movement’s birth year, 2017. Moreover, the Q figurativizes the truth because of its eidetic properties that resemble the shape of a magnifying glass, a recurring tool in police imagery, and widely used in the logos of the various glocalized factions of the movement, such as that of *Qlobal Change Italia*, in which the White Rabbit also appears.

Fig. 7. “Qlobal-Change Italia logo and header”.



Source: Qlobal Change Italia website. Available at <https://qlobal-change-italy.blogspot.com/>

On a final note

It is difficult to say that the research has revealed radically new aspects compared to what has already been demonstrated about the communicative regime of post-truth in which we are living. However, it seemed of great interest to us to enter the specific merits of the rhetoric and figures used, an aspect often neglected or taken for granted, while our study seems to reveal precisely the great importance that the figurative dimension assumes in the more general construction of the efficacy of these discursive forms.

The model readers of conspiracy texts are all citizens, and this emerges from the fact that their communication spaces on social media have minimal, if any privacy, connoting the ambition to expand the reach of echo chambers. The power of rumors spread by conspiracists lies in the concatenation of enunciations, not in the matter itself. In each Facebook and Instagram post shared, each re-tweet and each forwarding on Telegram is added a bit of information or an opinion to make a circumstance an irrefutable proof that confirms the veracity of the conspiracy theory. Rumors, therefore, start from the existing and reach the peak of their effectiveness after a series of manipulations. At this point, we can say that the conspiracy theories are united by a stable and invariable core, from which emerges a narrative structure made specifically to englobe subsequent narrations, which restrict the actual happening until it becomes irrefutable evidence. The existing is dissected and parceled in order to find that piece that supports the conspiracy thesis. In the background remains the fear of the destruction of the status quo that triggers the instinct to preserve, to defend themselves, a common denominator of all the “ism” of contemporary life, such as racism, sovereignism, and conspiracism. The similarities between these “isms” are reflected in the political leaders followed by conspiracists or the opinion leaders from which the enunciation chains start.

The manipulation of the audience’s passions, the feeling of emotions “controlled” by words, is determined by the enunciators who enact states of feelings, linking them to things and people to induce the desired emotional participation (TERRACCIANO, 2019). It is not only a matter of aesthetic

contagion, i.e., the transmission of a sensibility but also of the authoritativeness of the enunciators, proportional to the degree of intensity of the passions: the more one suffers, the more one feels empathy for the destiny of the country and its citizens.

In addition to political interests, there are also those of marketing: considering that the main hubs of conspiracy information devote most of their time to managing social networks, it is quite “natural” that they need to profit from the content disseminated just like celebrities and influencers. Diego Fusaro or *Morris Sarì's* platform *numero6.org* propose degrees of accessibility to truth developed on the free/premium continuum. The access to a “truer truth” must be conquered with a payment, so we can say that a sort of proxemics applied to the markets is implemented, where proximity to knowledge is acquired.

Social media and figurative reasoning become a trojan horse to enter the lifeworld of proselytes and establish lasting relationships, based not only on fiduciary contracts but also economic ones, where the request for support from their peers is justified in the name of freedom of information because they do not accept contributions from parties and media.

In this way, the degree of veridicity is felt even more fervently, and conspiracists choose to free the longed-for truth on bail. ●

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📄 Retórica negacionista e figuras da pós-verdade. Uma pesquisa transversal nas mídias sociais na era da Covid-19

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Resumo: A hipótese de investigação deste artigo postula a existência de isotopias dominantes e imagens-símbolos que cruzam todas as teorias de conspiração, independentemente de sua especificidade ideológica ou contextual. Assim, para detectar um núcleo duro ideal do universo semântico dos discursos conspiratórios, no qual convergem as várias vertentes das teorias de conspiração, assumimos que o seu denominador comum poderia ser encontrado no raciocínio figurativo, o que implica partilhar as mesmas imagens para explicar os acontecimentos actuais. O melhor campo para validar a nossa hipótese é constituído pela representação visual da pandemia de Covid-19 que circula nas redes sociais. O corpus a partir do qual a análise foi realizada cobre o período de 15 de Fevereiro de 2020 a 15 de Dezembro de 2021, e conta com milhares de publicações *online*. Dentro do corpus foram seleccionados os posts sobre a pandemia de Covid-19 e aqueles sobre o *lockdown* de Março de 2020, feitos pelos principais jornais italianos, figuras institucionais e influenciadores digitais, relatados pela OMS como pontos cruciais de disseminação de desinformação, ao lado das facções conspiratórias italianas que costumam divulgar *fake news* no *Facebook*, *Instagram*, *Telegram* e *Twitter*.

Palavras-chave: negacionismo; teorias da conspiração; raciocínio figurativo; infodemia; semiótica.

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