

Marcin Sarnek, Ph.D. *Kings don't die in traffic accidents*

In fifty years that have passed since the events in Dallas the JFK assassination has evolved into a grand postmodern narrative. The shooting itself has become the most devotedly described time in human experience.[1] This incessant process of describing extends, of course, well beyond academia, yet also within it – which is in its own right, to a degree, a reaction to the explosion of extra-academic interest JFK assassination triggered – the amount of research into the events on Dealey Plaza and into the surrounding contexts created an archive in which “text to time ratio” is incomparable to research pertaining to any other historical moment. Yes, one might suggest the dynamics of the assassination is what caused this (after all, bullets travel fast), yet it is more correct to state that the snowballing effect is – no matter how perverse it sounds – a product of imagination. Or, rather, the growth of the archive draws its potency from how an event of such importance resonates in the imaginations of the public and of academicians.

Thus, if one of the functions of scholarly study is to provide material for further edition that would render creation of meaningful theories pertaining to the past possible, the developing of the grand JFK assassination narrative testifies to either a collapse of this function of historiography or to a massive change in the logic of historiographical research. This in itself is not, of course, an original claim, for, as it has been observed by numerous authors, the scope of the archive makes such edition hardly possible. The JFK assassination narrative has become a model of an unlikely map whose size by far surpasses the territory it claims to symbolically represent.

Of course, the abundance of detail and the inability to penetrate the archive invite editions (and the theories that spring from them), which serve varied political and ideological agendas and employ a spectrum of political, sociological, psychological, and narrative devices to promote themselves. The narrative strategies of persuasion have induced a respectful body of research, which helped situate the JFK assassination narrative in the very center of the postmodern historiography; the event has become a textbook example of how, supposedly, history is rewritten with every text and by every reader.

The persuasive powers of successful conspiracy theories rely heavily on the narrative spectacle the dramatic historical event implies: due to its nature the assassination itself is, after all, an effect of an action performed by actants (also known as actors), of a crisis, of a conflict, of perpetrators' rationales, and of their real or imagined agency. Yet theories pertaining to the assassination do not evolve solely as the aftermath of this action, they often require from their proponents and followers action on their own right and promise a desired by-product once these actions are completed: an enriched sense of agency.

Lee Harvey Oswald's fictional biography presented in *Libra* by Don DeLillo establishes that what lies behind Oswald's unaware participation in the grand conspiracy is a crisis of agency. The drama of DeLillo's Oswald unfolds due to a conflict resolvable – like

countless conflicts of American fiction – only through violence: the conflict between Oswald’s positioning of himself as a potent author of his own narrative and his real role of an actor in somebody else’s story. More precisely even, the drama results from Oswald’s somewhat dull yet persistent demand of agency, a drive towards accomplishing of his authorship through action. While whether his action results from his own will or whether it is a product of somebody else’s authorship remains still a vital narrative mystery of the novel, it is *through* action nonetheless that he finally tries to overcome his own crisis of agency. The Oswald narrative in the novel, and in effect the totality of the *Libra* narrative, emerges, then, from the negotiations between the novel’s sub-plots, whose individual authors struggle to control their own stories, in result forcing the narrative elements of the emergent plot – which seemingly writes itself – to come to life, and, as DeLillo famously writes, conclude in death.

Similar crises of agency have always motivated interest in conspiracy theorizing, at least partially and on several levels. One of these levels is manifest in conspiracy theories’ tendency to transform meaningless accidents or random acts of violence into meaningful narratives in which the public seeks imagined drama. This is only possible if a lot of energy is invested into identifying the agents behind the plot. When this is being done the sense of agency of the select few righteous truth seekers is obviously enhanced through their actions: the act of identifying, the uncovering, the writing of the true account. After all it seems only fair that compromising the lie and discovering the truth is perceived as a legitimate action successfully challenging one’s perceived lack of agency in the social context in which truth remains buried under lies. Such naïve beliefs in legitimacy of thus constructed conspiracy theories are upheld by a persuasive narrative mechanism: a call to action to challenge collectively the suggested monopoly of discourse in the name of reclaiming individual agencies. Nothing sells better as a successful political rhetoric than positioning of the eager audience as voiceless victims deprived of agency by a regime dictating its own narrative.

What kind of action is, then, called for by a successful conspiracy theory? While the political platforms promoted by conspiracy theorizing do not shy away from proper calls to arms, marching, burning of effigies, and violence, conspiracy theories themselves, being narrative in form, require something more subtle: turning of the page, clicking on a hyperlink, blurring – for many – the distinction between political action and a hobby.

The new media environment has complicated, however, a number of aspects of this relation between agency and conspiracy theory. In fact, much of what happens in new media, motivated by strategies to monetize content, relies on the potency of the content itself to stimulate action. This influences the quality of the content to the degree where most of the content resembles conspiracy theorizing, for the economic success of the online platform relies on the content’s potential to draw attention. For this to happen the media content has to fulfill functions similar to narrative stimuli present in fiction and in good conspiracy theories. While numerous other approaches to describe this effect are possible, I’d like to argue for the presence of mechanisms of *emergent narrative* in conspiracy theories and in similar mechanics of new media coverage: both mastered designing receivers’ actions in response to narrative stimuli: instilling curiosity, disbelief, fear, and, above all, anger.

I plan to borrow the concept of emergent narrative from a possibly unlikely source. The final decades of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st brought a rapid rise of a cultural form which builds its economic success and its cultural impact on stimulating the immersive illusion of agency in its consumers. Yet, while classic video and computer games construct the immersive experience through (more or less) subtly masterminded narrative paths (even if such paths are imagined to be “open”), the more contemporary approaches focus more directly on the player’s agency, promising participation in true *interactive narratives*, rather than inviting to narratives that offer merely *some* interaction. In recent years, then, successful implementations of emergent narrative have become video game industry’s *Holy Grail* – at least in those sections of the business which are still interested in transforming the medium into one capable of proper, and possibly paradigm-shifting, storytelling. As a notion emergent narrative is relatively simple to explain: it is a design that produces an illusion of creating/ authoring a personal narrative by active agents in the game-world through their actions, which are stimulated by the interactive game mechanics rather than by the game’s “plot”. Yet, as a creative practice, emergent narrative has proven to be frustratingly difficult to achieve in a medium where, for example, the pacing of storytelling is not easily controlled, and where players can always decide to try to do what’s not expected of them.

I find such juxtaposition of the logic of the conspiracy theory, the conspiracy itself, new media marketing and video games inspiring because we can find in it an intriguing paradox of sorts. While conspiracy theories (and JFK assassination in particular) are often credited with stimulating more energetic research into the postmodern condition of contemporary historiography rooted in *poststructuralist* literary theory, a medium (video games), which in many ways presents itself as a practical exercise in *structuralist* writing, seems to offer similar mechanisms of simulated agency. In other words, while thick poststructuralist theory explains the mechanics of postmodern historiography by mostly complicating it further, at least some foundational elements of these mechanics may be explained by using quite simple, if not simplistic, narrative devices.

By juxtaposing JFK assassination and video games I don’t intend to trivialize or unnecessarily further dramatize either. In fact, merely suggesting that the assassination anniversary should inevitably transform into a celebration of a birthdate of postmodern history seems more perverse than any of the very commonsensical comments I might offer. Half a century, however, is enough time for a number of processes to reach completion, be it – for example – due to the biological progression of generations of eyewitnesses, historians and extra-academic commentators, or due to the demands of new media environment, in which the grand narrative of the assassination develops today. I will simply try to show how the ubiquity of novel forms of entertainment / participation in culture may possibly help understand how what happened five decades ago still motivates groups and individuals to continually develop original narratives centered around an event which seemingly gains new significance every time it’s spoken or written about.

[1] That I refer to human experience here seems vital, since if we are to be more accurate and extend this statement to cover all time it would be probably false. The several seconds of the JFK assassination might have triggered thousands of pages of research material, as did the nanoseconds following of the Big Bang in the field of theoretical physics.

Dr hab. prof. IH PAN Tomasz Wiślicz, *Niedohistorie, czyli dlaczego pewne opowieści o przeszłości nie stają się historiami*

W wyniku postmodernistycznej krytyki historia jako dyscyplina naukowa utraciła swoje fundamentalne przekonanie o możliwości obiektywnego badania przeszłości i stwierdzenia „jak to naprawdę było”. Jeżeli historia jest literackim artefaktem lub ideologiczną praktyką dyskursywną, to w jaki sposób można oceniać jej jakość wedle dotychczasowych kryteriów, a zwłaszcza kryterium „prawdy historycznej”? Czy profesjonalna historiografia powinna być w jakikolwiek sposób uprzywilejowana w stosunku do innych opowieści o przeszłości, tworzonych innymi, lub nawet zbliżonymi metodami? Być może odpowiedzi na pytanie o fundamentalne podstawy tożsamości naukowej historii należy szukać na jej najdalszych obrzeżach, czyli na jej zetknięciu z opowieściami o przeszłości, które historią z pewnością nie są. Dlatego też w swoim referacie spróbuję przedstawić podstawowe zasady odrębności różnych gatunków twórczości parahistorycznej, takich jak uchronia, „historie alternatywne”, negacjonizm czy fomenkizm. Pytaniem badawczym stanie się zagadnienie, czy refleksja nad „warunkami brzegowymi” historiografii wystarczy dla określenia pozytywnego programu tożsamości dyscyplinarnej historii.

Dr Jakub Morawiec, *Co się stało z Olafem Tryggvasonem po bitwie w Oresundzie czyli (krypto)historia pewnej pogłoski*

W 1000 roku doszło do bitwy na wodach Oresundu, jednej z cieśnin bałtyckich, w której król Norwegii Olaf Tryggvason zmierzył się z siłami króla Danii Swena Widłobrdęgo i jego sojuszników. Flota norweska uległa rozbiciu a sam król poległ w bitwie tonąc w wodach Bałtyku.

Ostatnie starcie króla Norwegii szybko obrosło legendą, którą utrwalił między innymi autorzy islandzkich sag. Legenda mocno zniekształciła samo zdarzenie i okoliczności bitwy. Jej istotną częścią są pogłoski, jakoby król Olaf przeżył bitwę znajdując schronienie bądź w kraju Słowian (Vindland) bądź w Ziemi Świętej, gdzie miał resztę życia spędzić jako mnich.

Referat posłuży próbie wyjaśnienia dlaczego i kiedy plotki o pobitewnych losach bitwy mogły się zrodzić i dlaczego autorzy sag bardzo chętnie do nich nawiązali.