



Revista de Estudios Históricos de la Masonería
Latinoamericana y Caribeña

ISSN: 1659-4223

Universidad de Costa Rica

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Revista de Estudios Históricos de la Masonería Latinoamericana
y Caribeña, vol. 15, no. 1, 2023, January-June, pp. 1-25

Universidad de Costa Rica

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15517/rehmlac+.v15i1.52742>

Available in: <https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=369576335001>

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The Representations of Secret Societies in Mass Communication. A Quick Overview

Las representaciones de las sociedades secretas en la comunicación de masas. Una sipnosis

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Recepción: 20 de octubre de 2022/Aceptación: 09 de noviembre de 2022

doi: <https://doi.org/10.15517/rehmlac+.v15i1.52742>

Keywords

Secret Societies; Freemasonry; Literature; Cinema; Television; Conspiracy Theories; Mass Communication

Palabras clave

Sociedades secretas; masonería; literatura; cine; televisión; conspiraciones; medios de comunicación

Abstract

The image of secret societies, as either some sort of mystical troupe, with grandiose ceremonies and rituals regarded by outsiders as an oddity or as power-thirsty malevolent organizations, has been represented and amplified by mass communication since the 18th century. Here are just a few examples.

Resumen

La imagen de las sociedades secretas, ya sea como una asociación de místicos con ceremonias grandilocuentes que provocan extrañeza entre los espectadores ajenos, o como organizaciones malévolas y sedientas de poder, ha sido representada y amplificada en la comunicación de masas desde el siglo XVIII. He aquí algunos ejemplos.

“We’ve got lots of theories, we just don’t have the evidence.”

Rudolph Giuliani¹

“Mais il faut un minimum de culture si on veut faire du complotisme !”

Patrick_Mulder427, Les Complotistes²

Intro

On 11 June 2022 the American Canadian digital media and broadcasting company VICE posted a video on their YouTube channel as part of their series *In the Business of Crime*, which, according to their own description, “looks at different parts of the criminal economy, separating fact from myth.” The video reports on the large number of arrests made by the Italian authorities in late 2021, as part of the operation targeting the ‘Ndrangheta, the infamous Calabrian mafia whose origins date back to the 18th century, which is considered one of the most powerful and dangerous organised crime groups in the world. Italian investigators also managed to seize large quantities of cocaine originating from South America, meant to be sold and distributed across Italy and Europe by the ‘Ndrangheta’s large network of dealers. But there was one baffling detail about the packaging of some of those cocaine shipments. It is not unusual for drug cartels to mark their packets with their own distinctive image or logo, either as a form of identifying the “merchandise” as their own or as a visual aid to tell apart which packets belong to which “costumer”. Police forces around the world recurrently seize illegal drugs in packets marked with luxury brands or even football clubs’ logos. But, in this case, they were marked with images of all-seeing eyes, compasses, and the Greek letters alpha and omega, all of which are known to be recurrent in masonic symbolism.

As the prosecutors dug deeper, they found out about the links between some ‘Ndrangheta members and masonic lodges in southern Italy. The mobsters would join said lodges to meet and socialise with public servants and law enforcement agents in order to corrupt them and lure them into their ranks, with the added bonus that this could be conducted within the secrecy of the lodge. In 2017, it came to the Italian authorities’ attention that 193 southern Italy freemasons were also high-ranking members of the Sicilian mafia. A couple of years earlier, the police discovered that Giovanni Zumbo, an accountant who worked for the Italian government managing properties seized to mafia members, was the insider tipping off Antonio Pelle –one the ‘Ndrangheta’s most notorious and violent bosses, who had been on the run since 2011³— about the actions of the law enforcement agencies who were after him. The accountant got this information at the masonic lodge he attended from one of his fellow masons, Giancarlo Pittelli, a well-known lawyer and politician. Pitelli was expelled from the Gran Oriente d’Italia by Stefano Bisi, the present grand master, and is currently a defendant in the “mega trial”. According to

1 Stephen Colbert, “Trump’s relentless, illegal scheme to overturn the election”, *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, June 21, 2022, <https://youtu.be/dw50MIFeB1U>

2 Fabrice Erre, Jorge Bernstein, *Les Complotistes* (Paris: Dupuis, 2020), 89.

3 Julia Jones and Artemis Moshtaghian, “Wanted Italian mafia boss found hiding in cupboard in his own home.” *CNN*, October 6, 2016, <https://edition.cnn.com/2016/10/06/europe/italian-mafia-boss-hid-in-cupboard/index.html>

Antonio Nicaso, author of *Global Mafia* and one of the leading experts on the ‘Ndrangheta, there are quite a few structural similarities between the mafia and freemasonry: a clear respect for their particular set of rules and hierarchy, the use of initiation rites to mark the rise within the organisation’s ranks, and, most of all, the idea of absolute secrecy⁴.

But these alleged links between freemasonry and the Italian mafia are really not that new. In separate trials, held in 2014 and 2019, Giuliano di Bernardo, former grand master of the Grande Oriente d’Italia, stated that he had brought up his concerns about mobsters joining and exploiting Italian freemasonry – especially in Calabria— to the Duke of Kent, the grand master of the United Grand Lodge of England, since the early 1990s; to which His Royal Highness suggested that maybe di Bernardo should “leave the Grande Oriente d’Italia and create a new order.” Di Bernardo went on to create the Gran Loggia Regolare d’Italia in 1993. Through a spokesman, the Duke said that he:

would never comment on vague sensationalist claims based on alleged conversations from over 30 years ago, suddenly made in a court case which until now was unheard of”. The United Grand Lodge of England’s official statement on the matter wasn’t very flattering: “It sounds as though some Italians might, certainly at that time, have significantly lost their way⁵.

In 2015 Deutsche Welle, the German state-owned broadcasting service, reported on the death of Licio Gelli, the “masonic puppet master”, who was an ardent supporter of Mussolini and who always kept close ties with neo-fascist organisations and individuals. Gelli was best known for leading the infamous Propaganda 2 (P2) masonic lodge at the time of the Banco Ambrosiano scandal, which involved high-ranking political figures as well as the Vatican Bank and the Sicilian mafia, that led to the downfall of the Italian government and to the mysterious death of Roberto Calvi, “God’s Banker”, in 1982. According to DW, “the P2 has counted Italy’s political, financial, and military elite among its members, including, allegedly, former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi.”⁶

VICE’s video has three very distinct moments. At first, they seem to imply that the Italian freemasons have always worked very closely with the mafia, creating a network of mobsters, law enforcement agents, politicians and the business elite, where they all perfectly fit together due to the organisation’s secretive nature and “long history of suspected corruption”, thus creating a bridge between organised crime and the Italian state. Then, they switch their attention to Giancarlo Pittelli and put forward the idea that maybe he and other freemasons who have colluded with organised crime, acted by themselves and are just “opportunistically picking up whatever crumb they can.” By the end of the video, they say that not all lodges are corrupt and that maybe it was the ‘Ndrangheta who “invented a deviated lodge”, that the masonic symbols on packets of cocaine should not be “overstated” and that it could all be just a marketing strategy. “Things

4 “The Freemasons and the Mafia,” *VICE*, June 11, 2022, <https://youtu.be/3SPaDhw4PIQ>

5 UK to come under scrutiny in Italy’s largest mafia trial in decades,” *The Guardian*, April 27, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/apr/27/uk-to-come-under-scrutiny-in-italys-largest-mafia-trial-in-decades>

6 “Italy’s Masonic ‘Puppet Master’ dead at 96,” *Deutsche Welle*, December 17, 2015, <https://www.dw.com/en/italys-masonic-puppet-master-dead-at-96/a-18923482>

aren't always a code to be cracked, however tempting it may be to think so", the presenter, Zing Tsjeng, says to wrap up the video. "But if nothing else, there is one link between masons and mafia: their own fraternal codes are the reason they've lasted so long".

Was VICE's video just another blatant case of what is nowadays known as "click bait"? It could definitely be categorised as a lesser offender in that area because, in the end, they delivered information accordingly to the video's title and description, albeit superficially. The company has always strived to be controversial, but if anything, they end up falling on the sensationalist side of the spectrum. Their *War on Drugs* series always concludes by congratulating drugs for winning the war on drugs, their latest video on their *Empires of Dirt* series, about the "dark" financial secrets of the late Queen Elizabeth II –also presented by their UK editor, Zing Tsjeng—turns out to be a recount of the British Monarchy's ties with slave trade... in the 17th century⁷.

But if the final lines of the presenter are anything to go by, it is definitely guilty of that long tradition in mass communication to equate any obscure, clandestine or even criminal organisation to secret, private or fraternal societies in general and to freemasonry in particular, sometimes even using the words "freemasonry" and "masonry" to refer to someone's inner circle or to a close-knit group of disreputable people. In August 2019, British magazine *Prospect* published an article titled "Boris Johnson and the freemasons protecting him", written by Andrew Adonis, a member of the House of Lords affiliated with the Labour Party, who served as transport secretary under Gordon Brown. To the Rt Hon Lord Adonis, "freemasonry" is a term that loosely translates into a wide-ranging group of "untrustworthy" people and institutions, from Dominic Cummings, Max Hastings and Johnson's Eton classmates to the BBC, *The Telegraph* and *The Times*, who have supported the former Prime Minister's political career over the years and not to actual freemasons or masonic lodges⁸. Nearly a century and a half earlier and many miles away, in April 1863, a group of Mexican Catholic priests in favour of the 1857 Constitution and against the Second French Intervention, penned an article for the liberal newspaper *El Monitor Republicano* criticising a sector of the Mexican clergy who was in favour of the French invasion and its plan to ditch the republic and establish a monarchy, calling them "Napoleon III's freemasonry"⁹. As in Lord Adonis's case, this did not refer to any actual freemasons or masonic lodges.

But mass communication's fascination with freemasonry and secret societies has gone beyond YouTube videos and magazine or newspaper articles criticising political antagonists. The film industry, printed and electronic books, television, radio, blogs, podcasts, magazines, newspapers; every mass media has contributed to the increasingly fictitious representation of secret and fraternal societies that has slowly permeated public opinion over the past three centuries, to the detriment of a more factual interpretation of the role of said societies in the historical processes at global, regional and local levels. Most of the time, the mention of a secret

7 "The Dark Secret Behind the Royal Family's Wealth. Empires of Dirt," *VICE*, October 7, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZmcnSs58uVk>

8 Andrew Adonis, "Boris Johnson and the freemasons protecting him," *Prospect*, August 4, 2019, <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/politics/boris-johnson-and-the-freemasons-protecting-him>

9 *El Monitor Republicano* (Mexico), "Los clérigos constitucionales reformistas de México," April 4, 1863, <https://hndm.iib.unam.mx/consulta/publicacion/visualizar/558075be7d1e63c9f1a360?anio=1863&mes=04&dia=04&tipo=publicacion>

society's name or any reference to the concept of conspiracy, either in the title, the description of or the in the work itself, is more a selling strategy than a genuine interest in the subject. In the next few pages, I will try to briefly and by all means not comprehensively explore two of the three distinctive –and quite often overlapping– trends in which secret societies have been portrayed in mass communication: satirical, ominous, and pseudo-factual. Due to the understandable page limitations inherent to these kinds of academic mass media, only the satirical and ominous tendencies will be analysed.

I will focus on mass communication rather than on mass media because I intend to concentrate on the message rather than on the medium through which it is put forward to the public. Therefore, I will not delve into the realm of social media firstly because of the aforementioned methodological limit, and secondly because I believe it is so vast, rich, and ever changing, that it needs an analysis centred exclusively on it. Although personally I think of YouTube as a form of mass communication and as a sort of bridge between mass media and social media, due to its nature it also deserves an exclusive study. Hence, I will limit the references to it to the example at the opening of this paper.

Farcical

The most recurrent trope in the satirical representation of secret societies have been the rituals, ceremonies and regalia associated with them. Probably the earliest example of a mock masonic initiation can be found in William Rufus Chetwood's 1731 play *The Generous Free-mason: or the Constant Lady. A tragi-comi-farcical ballad opera in three acts*. The play consists of two unrelated and alternating stories that drastically differ in tone. The first story, rather sombre and dramatic, sees Sebastian and Maria, two young lovers who cannot fulfil their desire to get married because Maria's father opposes their relationship. They intend to flee to Spain, where Sebastian's uncle serves as British consul. While at sea, their ship is captured by the fleet under the command of Mirza, the King of Tunis's best admiral. Sebastian and Maria are held captive, but they learn that Mirza is in fact a Briton and a mason, just like Sebastian. Mirza sets the lovers free and they all go back to Britain.

Chetwood was a mason himself and the whole play is dedicated to the grand master and to all of his brethren, but still he chose to use what is probably the most important ritual in freemasonry as the means to move forward the plot of the "comi-farcical" segment of the play, which is funny and light, full of sexual innuendos and double-entendres. Caelia, a young upper-class woman, is set to marry Nicodemus Noodle, a squire of rather dubious social skills and mental capacities. But Caelia is actually in love with Cleremont, her lover. Sir Jasper Moody, Caelia's father, is adamant on celebrating the wedding as soon as possible and gives his daughter and ultimatum: either she marries Noodle, or he will see that she dies a virgin. Lettice, Caelia's maid, comes up with a plan to delay the wedding as long as possible. Lettice tells Noodle that Caelia has vowed to only marry a man who is a freemason, but that she can help him get initiated because her brother is the master of a lodge, which is obviously not true.

When the day of the supposed initiation comes, Davy, a friend of Cleremont, impersonates the grand master and performs a ceremony which involves shaving Noodle's head and painting it black with a potion contained in a basin "made out of half the Queen of Egypt's great pearl, when she treated Marc Anthony in the Highlands of Scotland, which was given to our Honourable Society by Alexander the Great when he turned protestant after conquering North Wales." Davy and his assistant, whose "masonic" name was Pantagruel, then proceed to rid Noodle of his earthly belongings—several rings and 100 pounds— and to dress him in the Queen of Sheba's coat, made with the webs of the birds of paradise and hair from the king of Brobdingnagian's beard, collected by Gulliver. In fact, the "coat" was just an old and dirty sack. Cleremont, disguised as a physician, frees Noodle from the sack and upon examining him determines that the masons have made him pregnant. Noodle fears that Caelia will not marry him now that he is carrying some else's child, so he is tricked into marrying Jenny, Lettice's sister. In the end, they bring a parson who marries Noodle to Jenny, Caelia to Cleremont and Lettice to Davy.

In both of Chetwood's stories the use of masonic elements is intended to be a plot point, but eventually becomes incidental. As a matter of fact, in the story of Sebastian and Maria the twist that reveals that Mirza is in fact British and a freemason is far more interesting than the mock initiation in the story of Caelia and Cleremont, but definitely the whole play could have gone without bringing up freemasonry at all. Just like in the next couple of examples, the mention of a secret society in the title had probably the same the intention of, as it colloquially known in the film and theatre industries, putting "bums on seats"¹⁰.

In 1901, actor and playwright Leo Dietrichstein (also spelled Ditrichstein) published an English adaptation of *Die Logenbrüder*, a farcical comedy in three acts with freemasonry at its centre, originally penned by Carl Laufs and Curt Kraatz in 1897. *Are you a Mason?* premiered at Wallack's Theatre, in New York City, on April 1, 1901, with Dietrichstein himself playing one of the main characters (George Fisher) and featuring a 20-year-old Cecil B. DeMille as part of the supporting cast (Ernest Morrison). It was subsequently adapted twice for the silver screen: once in 1915 as a silent film (of which apparently no known copy exists), starring John Barrymore – Hollywood's A-listers Drew Barrymore's grandfather—and Jean Acker–Rudolph Valentino's first wife—, and again in 1934 with a British cast and crew.

Frank Perry is a successful New Yorker married to Eva Bloodgood, a woman obsessed with him becoming a freemason, just like her father. Eva goes to visit her parents who live in Rockford, and during her absence Frank goes out every single night until the wee hours of the morning. Lottie, the Irish, Catholic, anti-masonic and ultra-conservative housekeeper, informs Eva upon her return about Frank's escapades. To stay out of trouble and following his best friend's (George Fisher) advice, Frank tells Eva that he had finally joined the freemasons and that the lodge meetings ran until very late at night. Eva breaks the news to Frank that her father (a worshipful master) her mother and her two sisters are arriving later that day to visit them. As

10 Chetwood's play is available on quite a few online bookshops at an outrageous price for a bunch of poorly bound low-quality photocopies. A transcript is available online: William Rufus Cheetwood, *The generous Free-mason: or, the constant lady. With the humours of Squire Noodle, and his man Doodle. A tragi-comi-farcical ballad opera*, at Eighteenth Century Collections Online, University of Michigan, accessed October 1, 2022, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/ecco/004793688.0001.000?rgn=main;view=fulltext>

soon as the Bloodgoods arrive, Eva excitedly tells her father that Frank has become a freemason, not knowing that he has been playing a similar trick on her mother—also obsessed with being married to a freemason—for the past 20 years and that he never joined freemasonry, let alone got the worshipful master’s degree. Frank and Mr Bloodgood, not aware that neither of them is a freemason, start mimicking each other’s nervous movements and gestures thinking that the other is performing a masonic salute.

John Halton, an acquaintance of Frank, stops by to visit him and, upon being told that both Frank and Mr Bloodgood are freemasons, immediately insists on being initiated as soon as possible and won’t take no for an answer. Mr Bloodgood sends him on a series of ridiculous quests all over New York City, supposedly as some sort of pre-initiation tests, to buy some time. Frank confesses to Mr Bloodgood that he did not join freemasonry, to which Mr Bloodgood reacts with shock and disappointment, although he is relieved to keep his own secret safe and to have some leverage with his son-in-law.

To further complicate things, Ernest Morrison, who wants to marry Eva’s younger sister, Lulu, shows up at Frank and Eva’s house. Morrison is a real freemason and invites the whole family to a charity event hosted by the local lodge the next evening. Knowing that the truth will eventually come out, Frank and George come up with a ludicrously elaborated plan to blackmail Mr Bloodgood to keep him from telling Eva that Frank is not a freemason, involving Angeline, a long-lost lover of Mr Bloodgood, who apparently committed suicide years ago, and George dressing up in women’s clothes to impersonate an illegitimate daughter Mr Bloodgood allegedly had with her. George plays the part, and the three Bloodgood sisters immediately bond with her and want her to move in with them. Separately, Frank and Mr Bloodgood confess to Ernest Morrison that neither of them is a freemason, and Morrison agrees to help them out. Things spiral out of control when Mrs Halton shows up and turns out to be Angeline, who is not only alive and well but never had twins from Mr Bloodgood, when George shows up later dressed in men’s clothes and everyone notices how much he resembles the new Bloodgood girl, all he can think of is saying that he is her twin brother. Morrison intervenes, claiming that all of these apparent misunderstandings have been nothing but a series of pre-initiation tests for Mr Halton, and falsely informs the family that the event at the lodge has been cancelled, thus avoiding Frank and Mr Bloodgood from being exposed as charlatans. Everyone gets to keep their secrets safe¹¹.

Again, freemasonry is reduced to an attempt to produce a plot point, but since it is not further developed it becomes eclipsed by the real plot point of the play, the ever-present “ghost” of Angeline, which eventually provides the climax of the play and the twist at the end of the third act. I could not find a physical or digital copy of *Die Logenbrüder* but, based on the list of dramatis personae and on abstracts and reviews of the play in its German versions (*Die Logenbrüder*, *De Schummelbröder*, *So lang es Männer gibt* and *Die blaue Maus*), the story is basically the same as in Dietrichstein’s adaptation¹².

11 A digitized high-quality, downloadable PDF version of the play is available online: Leo Dietrichstein, *Are you a mason? A far-cical comedy in three acts* (New York: Samuel French publisher, copyright by Emmanuel Lederer and Carl Herrmann, 1901), at *Hathi Trust* Digital Library, accessed October 1, 2022, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=loc.ark:/13960/t1pg2bp6v&view=1up&seq=30&skin=2021>

12 Poster of *Die Logenbrüder*: Schwank in 3 Akten, at Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, accessed October 1, 2022, https://digital.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/werkansicht?PPN=PPN750717831&PHYSID=PHYS_0001&DMDID=DMDLOG_0001

In May 2022 Netflix premiered *The Pentaverse*, a six-episode mini-series that would mark the return of actor and comedian Mike Myers to the screen after a quite long absence. Myers not only wrote and produced the series, he also played 8 different characters in it. The premise of the series is quite interesting: based on a fictional secret society briefly mentioned in the 1993 film *So I married an axe murderer* (starring Mike Myers), The Pentaverse is an über-technological and benevolent brotherhood presided by five leaders and with members all over the world, whose goal is to influence events for the sake of humanity's greater good and its betterment. Ken Scarborough, played by Myers, is an aging Canadian journalist who has lost relevance and is on the verge of getting fired from the local TV station he works at unless he comes up with an important story. In a final effort to keep his job he joins forces with Anthony Lansdowne, an American conspiracy theorist who has been trying to expose The Pentaverse for years, and with Reilly Clayton, his trusty camerawoman. Meanwhile, one of the five Pentaverse leaders dies and is set to be replaced by Hobart Clark, a nuclear scientist who has been working on a solution for climate change. But the new member also dies under mysterious circumstances, the day after he and MENTOR, the Pentaverse's supercomputer that needs a human soul to function, come up with a permanent fix to global warming. A billionaire casino owner, Skip Cho, who also happens to be an expert in weather patterns, is put forward to take Clark's place as the fifth leader. Scarborough manages to infiltrate the Liechtenstein Guard, The Pentaverse's security corps, which is also hit by a series of mysterious deaths and is ultimately replaced by a different group of security guards called the Red Robes. In the end, it turns out that one of The Pentaverse leaders, Bruce Baldwin, an Australian media mogul (also played by Mike Myers), conspired with newly elected member Skip Cho to steal MENTOR's technology and sell it in auction to the highest bidder. Scarborough rallies the remaining Liechtenstein guards and storms the place where the auction is taking place. It is worth noting that this final sequence, from the auction and the battle between the Liechtenstein Guard and the Red Robes to the epilogue, where all filmed at Freemason's Hall in London.

Baldwin and Cho are defeated with the help of Anthony Lansdowne and Reilly Clayton, who turns out to be a member of the British branch of The Pentaverse sent on a mission to help Ken Scarborough save MENTOR and the society. The three remaining leaders decide to follow their emergency protocol and commit suicide; Scarborough's consciousness fuses with MENTOR and becomes KENTOR. Fast forward a few years and The Pentaverse has morphed into The Septaverse, a new secret society equally benevolent but more open and inclusive.

The show disappointed both audiences and critics alike, mainly because of its over-the-top and outdated kind of humour—filled with references to bodily functions and private body parts—in which every line and every situation tries too hard to be funny. Myers's performances of the eight characters he plays is utterly predictable, formulaic and extremely dependent on stereotypes and clichés, just like his depiction of a secret society: there are initiation ceremonies, secret salutes and hand gestures, insignia and special garments. The Pentaverse's leaders are clad in

"De Schummelbröder (Die Logenbrüder)", *Theatertexte*, accessed October 1, 2022, https://www.theatertexte.de/nav/2/2/3/werk?-verlag_id=vertriebsstelle&wid=869

"So lang es Männer gibt (Die Logenbrüder)", *Vertriebsstelle*, accessed October 1, 2022, <https://www.vvb.de/werke/showWerk?wid=2271>

"Die blaue Maus (Logenbrüder)", *Theatergruppe Lendorf*, accessed October 1, 2022, <https://www.theatergruppe-lendorf.de/die-blaue-maus.html>

long crimson robes and wear masks, reminiscent of those worn by The Simpsons' Stonecutters, equally decorated with gilded motifs but in Netflix's case resembling the decorations found on Catholic chasubles; the members of lesser rank are all dressed in mustard yellow monks' habits. The leaders' robes and all the accessories and props, including one of the character's mobility scooter, are adorned with a symbol consisting of a letter V, the number five in Roman numerals, overlayed on an engraving of a radiant eye in the shape of an equilateral triangle, which yields and image pretty similar to the masonic compass and square with an all-seeing-eye, symbols that have become shorthand for secret societies in general. Given the fact that the miniseries intends to be more a critique of mass media's ubiquity, corporate greed, and the lack of diversity amongst the decision-making elites (the five leaders are old white men) than a mockery or an exposition of secret societies, The Pentaverse, instead of actively becoming another character in the story, merely provides a backdrop to Myers's extraordinary vocal abilities and to a series of comical situations not always related to the secret society mentioned in the title.

Although not centred on the subject, both *The Simpsons* and *The Flintstones* make a better job at satirising secret societies. The former depicts a men-only secret society –The Stonecutters—who wear crimson robes, have their lodge adorned with masonic-like symbols and whose activities mainly consist in getting together on Wednesdays to drink beer, play games and sing songs that evoke their alleged accomplishments:

Who controls the British crown? Who keeps the metric system down? We do, we do!
 Who keeps Atlantis off the maps? Who keeps the Martians under wraps? We do, we do!
 Who holds back the electric car? Who makes Steve Guttenberg a star? We do, we do!
 Who robs cavefish of their sight? Who rigs every Oscar night? We do, we do! ¹³

Membership benefits included free drinks, better parking spots, an exclusive number (912) to report emergencies and more comfortable chairs at the workplace. The society eventually dissolved and re-formed when Homer Simpson became the new leader and tried to steer The Stonecutters into more humanitarian and philanthropical activities, as the rest of the members (including Jack Nicholson, Mr T and George H.W. Bush) decided to stick to their more fun-oriented traditions and create a new secret society, The Ancient Mystic Society of No-Homers. While the Stonecutters' name clearly references the freemasons, its offshoot reminds of the Ancient Mystical Order Rosae Crucis.

The Flintstones' references to secret and fraternal societies are of a wider scope than the previous examples, draw elements from different sources and lean more towards a farcical representation of charitable and philanthropic societies than to secret ones. The first appearance of a fraternal society in the show came about as early as episode two of the first season, originally aired in the United States in October 1960. At first it was known as The Loyal Order of Dinosaurs, but by season two it was renamed as The Loyal Order of Water Buffaloes, clearly inspired on two short-lived American fraternal societies from the early 20th century, The Loyal Order of Buffaloes and The Benevolent Order of Buffaloes, and on a British philanthropic society, the

13 “We Do (The Stonecutters’ Song)”, *The Simpsons*, episode “Homer the Great” (season 6), accessed October 1, 2022, <https://youtu.be/QoSLiHKrzRU>

Royal Antediluvian Order of Buffaloes, created in 1822 and still active today¹⁴. The aesthetics of the Water Buffaloes, especially their main symbol, is quite similar to that of Shriners International, known until 2010 as the Ancient Arabic Order of the Nobles of the Mystic Shrine. There is even a mention of a rivalry with another fraternal organisation, The Exulted Lodge of Elegant Elks – named after another real organisation, the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks¹⁵. Just like in the Stonecutters’ case, the Water Buffaloes’ activities include drinking beer, playing games and pranks, and attending shows on the lodge’s premises by comedians, singers and dancing girls. It is in this aspect and in the fact that no persons of colour are present at the Water Buffaloes lodge, or in any episode of *The Flintstones*’ six seasons for that matter, that certain parallels can be drawn to another real-life organisation, the Loyal Order of Moose: a fraternal society that in some parts of the United States had its own liquor licenses that excluded their lodges from the restrictions of the hours during which alcohol could not be served, and that up until the 1970s only accepted Caucasians in its ranks¹⁶.

But of course, not all satires are aimed at funnily representing initiation ceremonies or colourful regalia and robes. Some were intended to denigrate and ridicule not only the society or organisation but, most importantly, its members. Freemasonry, being the most public and best-known of these exclusive societies, has been on the receiving end of slanders and slurs practically since its foundation in its modern form. Different from masonic exposures, which started circulating as early as 1724 and were aimed at revealing what happened at lodges behind closed doors, masonic satirical caricatures were widely printed during the 18th and 19th centuries and had the intention of demeaning the organisation with special emphasis on its members. On May 8, 1742, *The Westminster Journal* published an illustration by George Bickham, portraying a mock masonic procession staged by the Scald Miserable Masons on April 27¹⁷. In it, a group of grotesque figures march holding banners with masonic symbols, a portrait depicting a “master mason” and two pillars marked “Boaz” and “Jachin”. Some of the attendees are depicted very elegantly dressed and riding in the back of coaches, but with monkeys’ and donkeys’ heads, others dressed as common people are trancelike banging on pans and kettles. Notably, an elegant coach leads the crowd, one of its occupants is throwing coins out the window while some of the people marching collect them. Above the image, the title reads that it is dedicated to the society of “scald miserable corrupted Free-Masons” and the caption says that the etching is “A Key, or, Explanation of the Solemn and Stately Procession of the Scald-Miserable-Masons, as it was martiall’d on Tuesday the 27th past, by their Scale Pursuivant, Black Mantle. Set forth by Order of the Grand-Master Poney”¹⁸. This mock procession was not an isolated event. There are later examples of engravings depicting similar events¹⁹ and, according to 19th century masonic scholar W.J. Chetwode Crawley, this led to London freemasons cancelling for good their annual

14 *Royal Antediluvian Order of Buffaloes*, accessed October 1, 2022, <https://www.raobgle.org.uk/#About-Us>

15 “Fred Strikes Out,” *The Flintstones* (fandom page), accessed October 1, 2022, https://flintstones.fandom.com/wiki/Fred_Strikes_Out

16 *The New York Times*, “Law”, June 18, 1973, 6, accessed October 1, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/1972/06/18/archives/support-for-the-right-to-exclude-clubs.html>

17 The Scald Miserable Masons were a group of people, apparently highly organised, that intended to mock and ridicule freemasonry and its rituals with special emphasis on their annual processions. For a succinct yet biased account on their history, see: John G. Keplinger, “Scald Miserable Masons,” *Templar History*, April 30, 2022, <https://templarhistory.com/scald-miserable-masons/>

18 “The Free-Masons Downfall” (satirical print), *New Weekly Miscellany*, No. 24, May 8, 1742, The British Museum, London, accessed October 1, 2022, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_J-1-168

19 “The grand procession of the scald miserable masons,” London, 1744, Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University, accessed October 1, 2022, <https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/10700446>

processions after 1746²⁰.

Another farcical reference to the economic power, elevated social status and shady monetary practices of the freemasons was published on the front page of the June 23, 1888, issue of *Illustrated Bits*. In the engraving Albert Edward, the Prince of Wales, in full masonic regalia, points to a table on top of which sit several bags of money. A man with a baffled expression, identified as Mr Lawson (Edward Levy-Lawson), holding a copy of *The Daily Telegraph* in his hand (Mr Lawson was the owner of the newspaper), stands next to him. Albert Edward says, “There Mr Lawson, that’s what we Masons do for our daughters”. The caption reads that at the centenary of the foundation of the Royal Masonic Institution for Girls, the Prince of Wales presided a dinner at the Royal Albert Hall in which £50,000 were raised, and he challenged “anybody to dispute that so large a sum had ever been collected at a charity dinner”²¹. According to *The Freemason’s Chronicle* of April 7, 1888, they needed to raise at least £32,000 to get the institution through the year, but were confident that once the attendance of the Grand Master—Albert Edward, the Prince of Wales—was confirmed, the donations would double or treble²².

Some periodicals hid behind a satirical façade some more caustic attacks against freemasons. *The Boston Evening Post* published on January 8, 1751, a poem called “In Defence of Masonry”. It was the complete opposite: in it, a supposed freemason admits not only his brothers’ penchant for playing loud and awful music on kettles, pots and other makeshift instruments –as pictured in the etching on the *Westminster Journal* discussed earlier– but also to perform acts of sodomy, with both men and women, at lodge meetings:

[...] The WEAPONS that belong to our Show,
Are SWORD and TRUNNEL, that you know,
We carry ‘em with us to defend us Against the Croud that do attend us.
As to the SWORD, it shone so bright,
It almost took away B--ck’s Sight;
He was hardly able for to look,
Much less to read out of our BOOK.
I’m sure our TRUNNELS look’d as clean
As if they ne’re up Arse had been;
For when we use ‘em, we take care
To wash ‘em well, and give ‘em Air,
Then lock ‘em up in our own Chamber,
Ready to TRUNNEL the next Member.
[...]
N. B. We don’t use TRUNNELS with a Sister,

20 W. J. Chetwode Crawley, “Mock Masonry in the Eighteenth Century”, *Ars Quatuor Coronatorum* XVIII (1905): 130-146, at *Internet Archive*, accessed October 1, 2022, https://archive.org/details/Ars_Quatuor_Coronatorum_Vol_Xviii_1905/page/n211/mode/2up

21 *Illustrated Bits*, “Princely Patronage” (satirical print), June 23, 1888, The British Museum, London, accessed October 1, 2022, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1902-1011-10427

22 *Freemason’s Chronicle*, “The Centenary Festival of the Girls’ School”, April 7, 1888, at *Museum of Freemasonry*, accessed October 1, 2022, https://www.masonicperiodicals.org/periodicals/fcn/issues/fcn_07041888/page/2/

When we make them, we give a Clyster²³

An engraving was commissioned to illustrate the poem. In it, a man is bent over with his trousers down and a happy expression on his face. Behind him, another man, smiling and wearing a masonic apron, is about to hammer a trunnel in his rectum. A donkey that is witnessing the scene, says “Trunil [sic.] him well brother”. The poem was dedicated to “Mr Clio”, which was a reference to Joseph Green, a satirist and author of several pamphlets poking fun at individuals and institutions in the Boston area. Since the late 1730s, Green had penned a number of poems mocking freemasonry and its rituals²⁴. Even though sometimes Green had hinted at homoerotic and sadomasochistic behaviour in masonic lodges and had used the clyster analogy before to infer anal intimacy amongst the freemasons²⁵, he vehemently denied having written the poem. Green’s style was more subdued and intellectual, not as crude and direct as in *Defence*. In one of Green’s most widely printed poems about freemasonry, first published in 1750, with editions as late as 1917, *Entertainment for a Winter’s Evening*, the clever use of words in capital letters or in italics as a wink to the reader, helps to convey a message that sometimes is not apparent upon the first reading²⁶. Then, who wrote *In Defence of Masonry*? Apparently, it was written by John Hammock, a wine merchant who had been the subject of one of Green’s satirical poems. Hammock wanted to get even with Green, and by publishing *Defence of Masonry* exaggerating Green’s style and taking it to lewd limits, Hammock wanted to draw the ire of local freemasons to his adversary. In the end it was, seemingly, another case of using freemasonry as a means to get notoriety, one in which “Boston’s freemasons just happened to be caught in the crossfire between two men feuding for their own reasons”²⁷.

Gloomy

The bulk of the representations of secret societies in mass communication falls under the ominous category. The vast majority of such societies portrayed in print, television, and film, are bringers of chaos, bent on world domination and working behind the scenes to alter or influence events in order to achieve their goals. They are also portrayed as prone to use violence to silence their opponents and anyone who might interfere with their masterplan, a characteristic that makes them doubly ominous: they are willing to act not only on a collective level, making the world a worse place for everyone, but they can also target specific individuals that they deem expendable.

But probably the two most notorious effects of mass communication in our perception of these organisations, real or fictional, is the inseparable intertwining of conspiracies and secret societies and the blurring of the lines separating them from cults and other extremist groups and cabals. Thus,

23 Thomas A. Foster, “Antimasonic satire, sodomy and Eighteenth-Century masculinity in the ‘Boston Evening-Post’”, *The William and Mary Quarterly* 60, no. 1 (January 2003): 184, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3491500>

24 One of his best-known satirical poems about freemasonry was the one depicting Saint John’s Lodge third annual procession during the festivities in honour of St John the Baptist: Joseph Green’s Anti-Masonic Broadside, 1739, at *Scottish Rite Masonic Museum & Library Blog*, accessed October 1, 2022, https://nationalheritagemuseum.typepad.com/library_and_archives/broad-sides/

25 Foster, “Antimasonic”, 178.

26 Joseph Green, *Entertainment for a Winter’s Evening: being a full and true account of a very strange and wonderful sight seen in Boston on the twenty-seventh of December at noon-day* (New York: Reprinted, W. Abbatt, 1917 [1750]), at *Internet Archive*, accessed October 1, 2022, <https://archive.org/details/winterseveing00greerich/page/n1/mode/2up?ref=ol&view=theater>

27 J. L. Bell, “Joseph Green, John Hammock, and the Freemasons”, *Boston 1775* (blog), April 15, 2014, <https://boston1775.blogspot.com/2014/04/joseph-green-john-hamock-and-freemasons.html>

it is not uncommon for audiences to consider that films like Sion Sono's *Suicide Club*, David Fincher's *Fight Club* and Roman Polanski's *Rosemary's Baby*, or that books like *The Bourne Identity* series and Agatha Christie's *The Seven Dials Mystery* portray secret societies when in fact they are depicting something closer to cults, criminal syndicates and undercover government agencies, respectively. In some cases, specifically in the realm of the comic books, the introduction of secret societies into the larger universe of superheroes and supervillains is entirely superfluous (pun intended) and it is clearly aimed at creating ever-expanding plots and twists. If supervillains and superheroes are always characterised as egocentric and antisocial individuals that already keep their identities and whereabouts secret, then grouping them together under the hierarchical structure of a secret society is entirely counterintuitive. If on top of that writers not only seek inspiration but clearly steal the names (like Marvel's *Illuminati*) or the historicity of real societies and organisations (like DC's *Order of St Dumas*, which is a carbon copy of the Knights Templar) then the intention of introducing such organisations in their product catalogue as means to increase their bottom line becomes clear.

Probably the two franchises that have more successfully adapted the concept of ominous secret societies into their stories, without entirely ripping off the history or structure of another one, are *James Bond* and *The X Files*. In the former, the criminal organisation SPECTRE borrows elements from different criminal syndicates and terrorist groups without strictly being neither. Ian Fleming conceived it as an apolitical and transnational organisation with a very clear leadership and hierarchical structure, whose only goal is world domination not by means of actually ruling over humankind but by influencing and controlling national governments to their own advantage, in much the same way conspiracy theorists conceive a secret world government run by the freemasons, the illuminati, the Bilderberg Group or even the Reptilians.

Some of the most iconic Bond villains—like Dr No, Goldfinger, and its leader and founder Ernst Stavro Blofeld—belonged to SPECTRE, but due to copyright and legal issues between author Ian Fleming and screenwriter Kevin McClory the society's last official appearance on film was in 1965's *Thunderball*. Even though it was featured in the “unofficial” Kevin McClory's *Never Say Never Again*—starring Sean Connery and released on the same year as the “official” *Octopussy*, penned by Fleming starring Roger Moore—it wasn't until 2015 that the film *Spectre* revived Blofeld's secret organisation, when all the legal issues between Fleming's and McClory's estates were resolved²⁸. This revival was short-lived, because in 2021's *No Time to Die* the main villain, Lyutsifer Safin, a former member of SPECTRE, manages to destroy the organisation and kill both Ernst Stavro Blofeld and James Bond.

In the TV series and two feature-length films of *The X Files*, the story's main antagonist is a secret society referred to as The Syndicate, The Consortium, The Elders or The Group. It embodies two of the most recurrent tropes when it comes to represent secret societies in works of fiction: the collusion between rich, powerful individuals and corporations, and high-ranking members of the government. In its origins, The Syndicate was a secret group of operatives attached to the Department of State, tasked with developing an alien-human hybrid based on the genetic material from the extra-terrestrials recovered at the Roswell UFO crash site in 1947 and with relocating former Nazi scientists to the US to that end.

28 Mike Reyes, “The Battle For SPECTRE. The Rights War That Complicated James Bond For Decades”, *Cinemablend*, April 12, 2019, <https://www.cinemablend.com/news/2470183/the-battle-for-spectre---the-rights-war-that-complicated-james-bond-for-decades>

Eventually, The Syndicate, under the leadership of German tycoon and former Nazi Conrad Strughold, distanced itself from the US government as they came in contact with the alien race to which the Roswell UFO belonged, and forged an alliance with them in order to help them colonise the Earth and to further develop the human-alien hybrids that would both spearhead the invasion and provide the slave force once the alien colonisation was completed. The Syndicate operated behind the façade of Roush, a biotechnology corporation, and had its own armed wing that conducted black operations, sabotages, killings and intimidations in order to protect the conspiracy. Its structure is quite similar to James Bond's SPECTRE, with one leader at the top and its other important members identified only with numbers (1, 2, 3, and so on in the case of SPECTRE; First Elder, Second Elder, Third Elder, etcetera in The Syndicate). In a rather interesting twist, there was a conspiracy within the conspiracy: a group of aliens rebelled against the plan to colonise and enslave the Earth, attacking a series of Syndicate's facilities where human-alien hybrids were being developed. The Syndicate was, therefore, forced to rush their plan to initiate the invasion and, just as they were about to hand the first successful hybrid to the alien invaders, the extra-terrestrial rebels attacked and killed all of The Syndicate's high-ranking members present to make the delivery along with the hybrid being, thus destroying the society and saving the planet.

Although both in *James Bond* and *The X Files* there are a series of references to existing organisations and conspiracy theories—The Syndicate is clearly based on the Majestic 12 conspiracy theory that has been around since the 1980s and James Bond is a member of MI6, the UK's foreign intelligence service—, probably the most enduring and visually appealing depiction of a secret society can be found in Stanley Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut*. In the film, Dr Bill Harford (played by Tom Cruise), a wealthy New York physician, becomes obsessed with his wife's revelation that she had contemplated being unfaithful to him. At a party thrown by his wealthy friend Victor Ziegler, he stumbles upon Nick Nightingale, an old classmate who dropped out of university and moved to Seattle to become a pianist, who invites him to come and see him play at a jazz club. At the party, Ziegler's companion—Mandy, a young sex worker—accidentally overdoses and Harford is summoned by his friend to reanimate her. Some nights later Harford, who is still obsessing over his wife's revelation and her drunken flirting with a guest at Ziegler's party, goes to the jazz club where Nightingale plays. He tells Harford about some rather strange parties he is hired to play at, in which he must remain blindfolded all the time but, nevertheless, has managed to peek through the blindfold at unclad young women attending said parties, engaged in all kinds of sexual practices with the guests. Harford asks Nightingale to give him the location and password of the next party, to which the pianist reluctantly complies not before warning him that he must be very discreet, and attend disguised with a cloak and a mask.

Harford, trying to exert some sort of anticipated revenge on his wife for her imaginary infidelity, shows up at the party, and it is at this point in the film that the most referenced and recognisable sequence takes place. Although the Simpsons' Stonecutters predate *Eyes Wide Shut* by four years and were the first to introduce the crimson robe look for their secret society, it was Kubrick's production design that stuck in audiences' minds. The man serving as grand master, clad with a crimson hooded cape and wearing a golden mask, slowly swinging a censer with one hand while holding a long staff on the other, is surrounded by other figures wearing black

robes and masks, kneeling down in a circle around him. The rest of the attendees, also wearing black robes and masks, stand in the shadows, in absolute silence. At some point, the figures kneeling down around the grand master stand up and drop their robes, to reveal that they were all unclad young women. As the ceremony comes to a close, the young women mingle with the guests. As Harford strolls around the mansion where the party is taking place, he witnesses all sorts of unrestricted sexual activity going on. He is approached by a young woman, who tells him that he is in grave danger and that he must leave immediately. As he is trying to leave, he is intercepted by security guards, who escort him to the area where the opening ceremony took place. There, the grand master is seated on a throne-like gilded chair. The crowd of masked men and women stand around him, forming a circle. Harford is confronted by the grand master, who tells him to remove his mask so that everyone can see him. Harford complies, and just as he is going to hear his sentence for crashing the secret party, the young woman who warned him tells the master and the crowd that she is willing to take his place.

The next day, Harford notices that he is being followed by a mysterious man. He reads the news about the death of a young model due to an overdose and realises that it was Mandy, the girl he saved at Ziegler's house and who in turn saved him at the secret society's party. He rushes to Nightingale's hotel, just to learn that he had left very early in the morning, bruised and roughed up, accompanied by two unknown men. He then drives to the mansion where the party took place, only to be handed an envelope with a note inside, urging him to immediately stop his inquiries and that he should take this as his second warning. Later on, he is summoned by Ziegler, who tells him that he was at the party and saw what happened; he urges him again to give up trying to find out more about this society. Harford confronts Ziegler with the fact that Mandy turned up dead and that Nightingale disappeared severely beaten and under mysterious circumstances. Ziegler tries to convince him that it is all just for show, that Nightingale is back in Seattle only slightly manhandled and that Mandy used drugs regularly, that he had seen it for himself. Still, he implies that the society is powerful and dangerous, and that they could act on their threats. As Harford returns home, he finds the cloak and mask he wore at the party neatly set on top of his pillow, right next to his wife, who is sleeping soundly. He breaks down and cries.

The idea of a secret society ominously going after those who betray it or try to expose it, is not exclusive to the instances listed above. As a matter of fact, it has its roots in literature. The earliest example can be found in *The Woman in White*, published by English novelist Wilkie Collins in 1859, in which the main antagonist, Count Baldassare Fosco, an Italian middle-aged and overweight man with a shady past, moves to England and helps his English accomplice, Sir Percival Glyde, to steal his wife (and Fosco's niece) Laura's inheritance by exchanging identities with her illegitimate half-sister—Anne, a terminally ill and mentally disabled young woman who always wears white clothes. Their plan is to wait for Anne's death and to bury her as if she was Laura and then committing Laura to an asylum under the name of Anne. But Count Fosco is a wanted man: an Italian secret society simply known as "The Brotherhood", whose object is the same as "other political societies of the same sort—the destruction of tyranny and the assertion of the rights of the people", is after him. The description of The Brotherhood's structure and functioning made by Collins is quite interesting: there is a president and a secretary in Italy and other presidents and secretaries abroad, only they know the members, but the members

do not know each other. They all bear a mark that identifies them as members of the society: a small bright-red circular tattoo on the inner side of the arm, close to the armpit, “so small that it could have been completely covered by a shilling coin.” Members can go on their businesses and private lives until their services are required. They do not need to swear an oath upon being admitted to The Brotherhood, but they are warned that if they betray the organisation by serving other interests, they will die by its laws. Death can come in the form of a complete stranger, sent from the other side of the world, or by the hand of a friend whom the traitor was not aware was a member of the society. “A man who has been false to The Brotherhood is discovered sooner or later by the chiefs. A man discovered by the chiefs is dead. *No human laws can protect him*”²⁹.

Glyde and Fosco’s plan fails; Glyde dies as he is trying to burn the evidence, Laura’s real identity is restored. Fosco flees to Paris, where he lives under the guise of a French artisan. But the unrelenting Brotherhood catches up with him. He died of a single stroke of a blade to the heart, the marking on the inner side of his arm was replaced with a letter T, for *traditore*, carved in his flesh. His body was thrown to the river Seine and he would have been buried in a mass grave had it not been for an anonymous letter sent to his wife. The Countess arranged for him to be buried at Père Lachaise cemetery. She made sure that fresh wreaths were always laid at his tomb. Later on, she wrote a biography of her husband. About the circumstances of his death, she just wrote that “his life was one long assertion of the rights of the aristocracy and the sacred principles of Order, and he died a martyr to his cause”³⁰.

The ominous secret societies’ floodgate burst open with Dan Brown’s Robert Langdon series: *Angels and Demons*, *The DaVinci Code*, *The Lost Symbol*, *Inferno* and *Origin*. In each and every one of those books –three of them have been adapted to the big screen, directed by Ron Howard and starring Tom Hanks, one was turned into an unsuccessful streaming series— a different conspiracy takes the centre stage to kill, deceive, kidnap and plot in its attempts to either upend the world’s most powerful religious institution (*Angels and Demons*), stop a secret that could revolutionise humankind’s belief system from being revealed (*The DaVinci Code*, *The Lost Symbol*, *Origin*), or to stop the world’s overpopulation problem (*Inferno*). Three of them prominently feature a secret society (the Illuminati, the freemasons and the Priory of Sion) as being directly or indirectly involved in said conspiracies. Analysing in depth the whole corpus of Brown’s work escapes the limits of these pages, therefore I will, instead, direct the attention to a couple of examples of the literary production about conspiracies fuelled by secret societies that has gravitated around the aforementioned books, especially *The DaVinci Code*.

Brown’s books have invigorated four tendencies amongst writers who have sought to emulate his success: firstly, they have steered the thriller genre away from the straight-forward crime and suspense tropes to an amalgamation of the adventure, historical and romantic sub-genres, leaning heavily on the inclusion of conspiracies as the main plot devices and secret societies, whether entirely fictional or with a real reference, as the main antagonists. Secondly, Brown’s novels have popularised a writing style in which two plots are narrated simultaneously (but cannot be characterised as parallel

29 Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White* (e-book published by The Project Gutenberg, 2008), “The story continued by Walter Hartright”, chapter V, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/583/583-h/583-h.htm>

30 Collins, *Woman*, chapter VI.

because they are linear), setting the conflict and vertiginously rising the action until the climax is reached, usually with a twist. Thirdly, the extensive use of what Alfred Hitchcock used to call a *MacGuffin*: a device, usually an object, that keeps the plot in motion because of its enormous value to both heroes and villains, who try to either get hold of it or hide it from the other camp. Lastly, the inclusion of a main character very well versed in a special academic field yet not very apt for physical action (who usually gets help in that area from a member of the opposite sex that involuntarily got dragged into the story, and with whom the protagonist invariably develops a romantic interest), that gets in trouble with an extremely zealous law enforcement agent because at first glance he/she is the main suspect, but who finally ends up collaborating with him/her. A prime example of this tendency is the novel *El Medallón de Santiago*, written by Ignacio Arruego and published in 2014. In it, Beatriz, a historian from Spain, is writing an article about Hitler's controversial decision not to attack and completely obliterate the French, Belgian and British forces cornered in Dunkirk. Her mentor, French professor Lacompte, dies under strange circumstances but not before sending her a letter asking her to point her research in a new direction and warning her that, whoever was after him, could be out to get her too. Simultaneously, we are told the story of a strange medallion found next to the alleged tomb of the apostle St James (Santiago in Spanish) by a construction worker in the 9th century. This subplot follows the medallion through its various owners, from El Cid and Genghis Kahn to Leonardo DaVinci, Marco Polo, Napoleon and a French freemason and collector, based in Dunkirk, who bought it in Vienna at an antique shop where it had caught the eye of another potential costumer: an obscure art student, viciously antisemitic, interested in occultism, and a passionate advocate for Pan-Germanism. Beatriz recruits her ex-boyfriend Mario, who speaks German, to help her follow the leads Lacompte left her in order to pursue her investigation in Germany and France. But they are closely followed by a tall, athletic, short-haired blond blue-eyed man, who is the member of a secret society led by Friedrich Kurt, a former member of the Waffen SS who firmly believes the medallion has magic qualities that confer unlimited power on its owner. Whilst Beatriz and Mario were being chased by Kurt's blond hitman in France, a French detective got involved in the case and started following them as well. Beatriz and Mario concluded that Hitler held back his attack on Dunkirk for fear of destroying the medallion (which he was also desperately seeking since he first saw it in that antiques shop in Vienna), but then they are kidnapped by the blue-eyed henchman and taken to Kurt's lair. In the final showdown a gun fight breaks out, Mario, Kurt and the hitman die. Beatriz heads back to Spain, whilst the French commissaire heads to the United States, with the medallion in his pocket. A freemason himself, turns out that he secretly worked for a group of American masonic lodges, led by rich and powerful individuals, that also wanted to get hold of the Apostle's medallion.

Another novel that in appearance follows this blueprint but eventually veers into the realms of adventure and romance, is bestseller *The Last Cato*, by Matilde Asensi. Sister Ottavia Salina, a nun and palaeographer, is commissioned by the Vatican to decipher the bizarre scarifications on the body of an Ethiopian man who died in a plane crash in Greece, consisting of seven letters and seven crosses. The dead man also had three seemingly worthless small pieces of wood on him, which turned out to be relics from the Holy Cross. A secret society established in the fourth century, called the Staurofilakes, devoted to safeguarding the holiest relic in Christendom, seems to be behind the heists which have occurred all around the world. But the Staurofilakes lure sister Ottavia and her two companions—Kaspar, a stone-cold muscular Swiss Guard captain appointed by the Pope to aid

her in her quest and Farag, a nerdy and shy Egyptian archaeologist—into pursuing the initiation process every Staurofilax had to go through to become a member, following the clues left by Dante—a Staurofilax himself—in his *Divine Comedy*. Their journey will take them to seven churches in seven cities of the ancient world and to pass as many dangerous tests, after each they will also get a distinctive scarification. In an unsurprising twist, the dreadful Staurofilakes turn out to be a sort of mystic commune hidden somewhere in Ethiopia who, concerned about the fate of the relic they swore to protect, steal all the bits and pieces that both the Catholic and the Orthodox churches have scattered all around the world in order to rejoin them with the cross that they have been guarding for the last 1700 years. In the end the would-be villain, captain Kaspar Glauser, who was sent along by the catholic hierarchs with the specific instructions of recovering the missing pieces of the Holy Cross and eliminating the secret society, ultimately joins the Staurofilakes and eventually becomes their leader under the name Cato CCLVIII. Ottavia and Farag return to Rome but refuse to give out any information about the secret location of the Holy Cross or the whereabouts of the Staurofilakes. They get married and move to Egypt but are kept under constant surveillance by the Vatican. Apparently, there is a sequel to this book. Honestly, I do not think I will read it.

In both *El Medallón de Santiago* and *The Last Cato*, the characters are extremely flat and impossibly cliché. The action is constantly interrupted by the long expositions both authors include in order to attest their knowledge of certain topics and to justify—or show off—the extensive research they conducted to give their work some sort of academic credibility aura; in *The Last Cato* there are even footnotes scattered along the text for good measure. But probably one of the worst offenders in this category is *La Revelación de Qumrán*, self-published in digital format by Spanish author David de Pedro in 2012. I included it here because it condenses all the tropes inherent to this genre and perpetuates the image of secret societies as dangerous, violent and bent on world domination: a calm and borderline boring accountant gets caught in the crossfire of the feud between freemasonry and the Catholic Church—specifically the Opus Dei— involving hitmen, the ultra-rich widow of the grand master of the lodges of Spain and France, the Knights Templar... all mixed with characters lacking real arcs, enormous amounts of exposition and bucketloads of apparent erudition. A book I will not include for exactly the opposite reasons is Umberto Eco's masterpiece *Foucault's Pendulum*. At the risk of sounding like a broken record, Eco's seminal work deserves a deeper analysis that definitely cannot be provided in an article of this nature, that it's only intended to be a quick descriptive overview of the representation of secret societies in mass communication.

Outro

“Il faut bien constater que la science officielle tout entière professe, sur les doctrines des sociétés secrètes, des opinions aussi remarquables par l'ignorance que par l'animosité qu'elles décèlent.”

Paul Sédir, *Histoire et doctrines des Rose-Croix*.³¹

On November 19, 2020, Danish feature film *Retfærdighedens ryttere* (*Riders of Justice*), starring Mads Mikkelsen, opened to cinemas. At first glance, it is another revenge movie in

31 Paul Sédir, *Histoire et doctrines des Rose-Croix* (Rouen: Imprimerie Maugard, 1932), XIV.

the style of *Death Wish*, *Taken* or *Memento*. But just like the latter, it concerns a deeper analysis of the human psyche and the mechanisms we, as individuals and as a society, use to deal with and explain situations and events seemingly unconnected and random. Whilst *Memento* is a brilliant exercise on the importance of memory, the construction, control and interpretation of sources to sustain said memory, and how those cognitive processes can be used to manipulate the interpretation of the past in order to alter the perception of the present, *Riders of Justice* is a clever take on correlation, causation, data interpretation and on how even the best structured and strictly scientific analysis can be tampered with in order to make it conform with our hypotheses. Markus (Mads Mikkelsen) is a cold, emotionless and temperamental member of the special forces in the Danish army deployed abroad. Upon learning the tragic death of his wife in a bizarre train accident, he heads back to Denmark. Markus's wife wouldn't normally take that train, but the night before their daughter Mathilde's (Andrea Gadeberg) bicycle was stolen and, as she tried to drive her to school, her car wouldn't start, so they were forced to take the train. A few days later, he is contacted by Otto (Nikolaj Kaas), a scientist who has been unsuccessfully trying to pitch an algorithm that can predict consumer behaviour to several companies. Otto was in the same train as Markus's wife but was unharmed because he ceded his seat to her: had he remained seated he would have died instead of her. A visual clue of things to come was brilliantly added by the director (Anders Thomas Jensen) to the train wreck scene, in the form of a graffiti of an all-seeing eye right next to the seat originally occupied by Otto.

Otto is convinced that the tragic event was not an accident. On board the train, he spotted "The Eagle", an infamous member of a white-supremacist motorcycle gang, heading to court to testify against his former leader in a murder case. He also spotted a suspicious bearded man alighting the train in a hurry one stop before the part of the route where the accident took place, and he thought it was highly suspicious that the bearded man had thrown away a sandwich from an expensive cafeteria after just one bite. By feeding all the data he could gather to his algorithm, from security camera footage to financial and medical records, Otto concludes that the train crash was a carefully planned attack to kill "The Eagle" to stop him from testifying against the bikers (their leader walks out a free man as a consequence). Facial-recognition software concluded that the mysterious bearded man was an Egyptian dentist. Otto thinks this is absolutely impossible, and that the software must be misinterpreting the data. By lowering the software's threshold, it identified the man as the brother of the biker's leader, who also happened to be a train engineer.

Markus firmly believes this theory and goes after the gang looking for revenge, using all his military skills to hunt them down and to neutralise them. Just as he has attacked and killed all of the biker's senior members, Otto confesses that he tweaked the data until it conformed with his initial hypothesis. The fact that somewhere an anonymous girl wanted a blue bicycle and not the red one that was readily available led the shop keeper to call his accomplices, who stole Mathilde's blue bike. That led to his wife trying to drive Mathilde to school, but the car broke down. That led them to take the train, boarding the same carriage in which coincidentally "The Eagle", Otto and the bearded man were riding. Otto's chivalry led him to cede his seat to Markus's wife, which caused her death. And all of those events led Markus to massacre a group of shady individuals who were guilty of a number of crimes, but who had nothing to do with

his wife's demise. The scene cuts to Cairo, where the original bearded man is telling his wife and son over dinner about his business trip to Denmark. They all laugh when he recounts that Danish sandwiches are so awful that he couldn't take more than one bite and had to throw it in the bin. In the final scene we see the girl who, unknowingly and involuntarily set the series of tragic events in motion, merrily riding her new blue bike in circles.

Deeply embedded in our human minds, and especially after the historical process known as the Enlightenment, is the need to quantify, classify, organise, and interpret the world around us in order to make sense of it. We strive to find causes and effects; we go to great lengths to establish all kinds of correlations to entirely rule out that any linkage between phenomena is the result of chance and nothing else. But how far is too far? Has our collective compulsivity driven us to a state of chronic apophenia, in which even the most unconnected events are perceived to be correlated? Or have we pushed ourselves into a vicious circle of infinite phronesis, in which we gain knowledge through our "being here" but that "being here" is always necessary and never contingent? If so, then every entity is supposed to act according to its nature. Doing otherwise, would be an impossible contradiction. An objectivist would argue that this is only applicable to entities and facts that do not proceed from human choice or action, entities whose actions are "metaphysically given" and, therefore, are beyond the reach of human involvement, which is necessarily (pun intended) an act of conscious free will.

If the representation of secret societies produced by mass communication in the past three centuries is anything to go by, then it is in their nature not only to celebrate bombastic ceremonies and rituals, but also to plot, conspire, kill and deceive in order to achieve their goals, whether these are gaining economic or political power, serving humankind on a silver platter to an alien race, abolishing monarchies and religions or organising the kinkiest parties in New York. This would turn secret societies into supra-human entities with a mind of their own blindly fulfilling a set of teleological goals, in the same way many globophobes, anti-capitalists or climate activists also conceive corporations. Where does human free will fit into this? If a human, willingly and knowingly joins any of these pernicious societies (or corporations), are they going according or against their nature? Are their actions within the bigger scheme necessary or contingent? Are we Blofeld or the little girl riding a blue bike?

On the other hand, also ingrained in our collective mind through a long series of historical and social constructs, is the belief that there is more to reality than meets the eye, and that knowledge, true knowledge that is beyond the measurable and quantifiable, should be reserved only for those who deserve it by proving their worth. Therefore, truth must be hidden under layers upon layers of clues and symbols that only that selected few can decipher, that only the initiated can read. As French mystic and esotericist Paul Sédir complained in the epigraph at the beginning of this section, exotericists and esotericists mistrust and distrust each other on the basis of their irreconcilably different interpretations of reality. But said interpretations open a third way that attempts to deconstruct reality and the historical and social sources it is based on –in its most basic and simple definition of understanding and questioning the relationship between text and meaning– with the intention to prove the inadequacies and contradictions of other theories and interpretations, especially the so-called "official" ones.

Again: how far is too far? Has our perennial distrust of institutions and their “official” versions of reality driven us to over-question and over-interpret the communication processes and sequences? Some conspiracy theorists believe that their interpretative endeavours make them part of the postmodernist movement and its rejection of metanarratives³². Contemporary philosophy has taken a more “neutral” approach to the question of how conspiracy theories come about and whether they can be analysed from a rational and logical perspective without dismissing them a priori as irrational or illogical. Drifting away from Karl Popper’s idea that conspiracy theories are an erroneous explanation of socio-historical phenomena, contemporary philosophers like David Coady see them as interpretations that run counter the “official” explanation of an event³³ and some others, like Charles Pigden, go as far as to consider that “the belief-forming strategy of not believing conspiracy theories would be a political disaster and the epistemic equivalent of self-mutilation”³⁴. In the case of mass communication and its portrayal of conspiracies and of the secret societies inherent to them, probably a more pragmatic perspective can be added to the equation: these subjects appeal to both our dual modern/postmodern Weltanschauung and especially to our post-truth Zeitgeist; therefore, they have been –and most probably will continue to be, exploited for commercial purposes in the increasingly competitive and ruthless market for subscribers and views which, in some cases, are the main source of revenue for mass communication outlets. Even serious news agencies, like Reuters or Ouest-France, have included reports about conspiracies/secret societies trending topics with the intention to fact-check them but also to increase traffic to their servers: the Canadian multimedia corporation recently posted a piece debunking the alleged links of newly elected Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni with freemasonry³⁵, whilst the French newspaper scrutinised the peculiar t-shirt Emmanuel Macron wore last year on a video he posted on official social media, which some believe is the evidence of his membership to either the Bohemian Club or to a “masonic Satanist” cult³⁶. Or, we can argue, following Lacan, that mass communication as an array of sensory-perceptual phenomena has shaped and affected our Imaginary and has driven us to misrecognise the Symbolic as Real, plunging us into an obsessional-neurotic and paranoid-psychotic state in which meaningless contingent events in the material world are conceived as meaningful and significant signs placed there to be deciphered and interpreted. Or, maybe, we could take VICE’s UK editor in chief advice and sit back and try not to assume that everything is a code waiting to be cracked.

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- 32 A rather colorful approach to this idea can be found in this blog entry on Tim Boucher’s website (a self-proclaimed “Hyperrealist AI artist and writer, specializing in questionable alternative realities”): Tim Boucher, “Conspiracy Theory Is Actually Just Postmodernism In Disguise”, July 4, 2021, *Tim Boucher* (blog), <https://www.timboucher.ca/?s=postmodernism>
- 33 David Coady, *Conspiracy Theories: The Philosophical Debate* (New York: Routledge, 2006).
- 34 Charles Pigden, “Conspiracy Theories and the Conventional Wisdom”, *Episteme* 4, no. 2 (2007): 219-232.
- 35 “Fact Check-Digitally altered image of Italy’s Giorgia Meloni wearing a Freemason pendant,” *Reuters*, September 30, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/article/factcheck-meloni-freemason/fact-check-digitally-altered-image-of-italys-giorgia-meloni-wearing-a-freemason-pendant-idUSL1N31129G>.
- 36 “Emmanuel Macron et son t-shirt au hibou: qu’est-ce qui se cache derrière cette mystérieuse marque?,” *Ouest France*, August 3, 2021, <https://www.ouest-france.fr/politique/emmanuel-macron/emmanuel-macron-et-son-t-shirt-au-hibou-qu-est-ce-qui-se-cache-derriere-cette-mysterieuse-marque-5147392a-f45e-11eb-be44-3c3b5e3aae9e>
For a contrasting report on the same issue, please see: Britta Zeltmann, “MASONIC MYSTERY. Macron sparks wild conspiracy theories he is ‘masonic satanist’ after mystery logo spotted on T-shirt during TikTok chat”, *The Sun*, August 4, 2021, <https://www.the-sun.com/news/3412874/macron-conspiracy-tshirt-logo-tiktok/>

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