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Utopia

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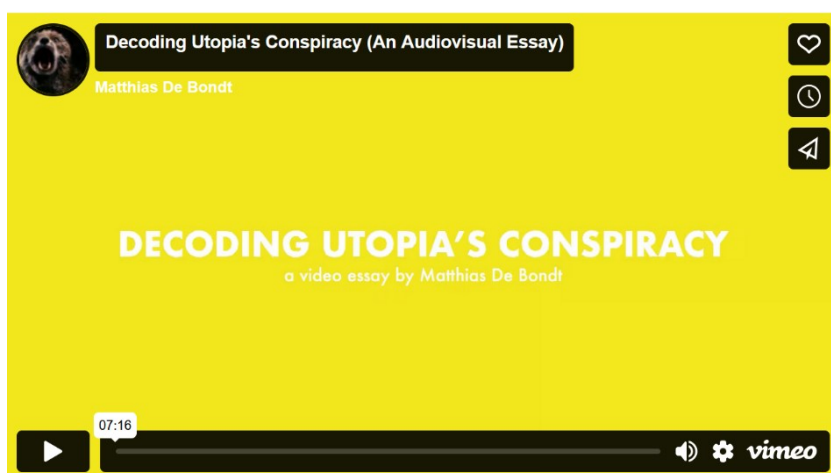
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de Bondt

Mathias de Bondt

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<https://vimeo.com/1024436423>

This audiovisual essay examines a conspiratorial reading of the cult television series *Utopia* (Channel 4, 2013-2014). During the COVID-19 pandemic, I rewatched *Utopia* while conducting ethnographic research on conspiracy-oriented Reddit communities, where I observed intense engagement with this series. Users interpreted its plot – featuring a bioweapon engineered to sterilise the global population – as an uncanny parallel to real-world conspiracy theories about COVID-19, viewing *Utopia* as a more truthful account of these events than official narratives.

To examine how Redditors interpret *Utopia* as a source of 'truth', I adopted an analytical lens characterised by suspicion, aiming to decode the series' purportedly hidden meanings and covert symbols. This interpretive

approach aligns closely with Paul Ricoeur's concept of a 'hermeneutics of suspicion', a mode of critical reading that assumes texts conceal ideological messages and suppressed meanings, requiring an investigative process to unveil them.

¹ Such a forensic-like mode of engagement encourages viewers to delve deeply, 'digging beneath the surface' to reveal complex narrative structures and their underlying construction.² This approach not only informed my analysis but also facilitated an empathetic connection with the detective-like pleasures that these Redditors seemed to report when deciphering concealed elements within *Utopia*.³ Immersing myself in this reading style, I found a similar pleasure in uncovering the latent conspiratorial meanings woven into the series, mirroring the interpretive practices of these Redditors.

This essay adopts a desktop documentary format inspired by Lého Galibert-Lainé's *Forensickness*, allowing for an immersive exploration of these interpretive practices and their emotional resonance. It argues that engagement with conspiracy theories transcends mere radical belief, and instead reflects an ironic response to contemporary uncertainties.⁴ By situating such paranoid readings within a broader tradition of critical interpretation, this essay argues that these conspiratorial interpretations on Reddit serve as both an epistemic and affective response to the ambiguities of postmodern life, reflecting a complex interplay between skepticism and enjoyment.

Author

Matthias De Bondt a PhD candidate and teaching assistant in the Media Culture & Policy Lab at KU Leuven (Belgium). Taking a media-sociological approach to the study of conspiracy culture, his research focuses on the mediatization of contemporary conspiracy practices.

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Notes

¹ Ricoeur 1970.

² Mittell 2009.

³ Felski 2011.

⁴ On the relationship between conspiracy theories and 'play', see Fenster 2008 or de Wildt & Aupers 2023.