“What matters is the system!” The Beatles, the “Passover Plot,” and Conspiratorial Narrativity

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> [John Lennon] was a countercultural revolutionary, and the government takes that kind of shit really seriously historically. He was dangerous to the government. If he had said, “Bomb the White House tomorrow,” there would have been ten thousand people who would have done it. These pacifist revolutionaries are historically killed by the government, and anybody who thinks that Mark Chapman was just some crazy guy who killed my dad for his personal interests is insane, I think, or very naïve, or hasn’t thought about it clearly. It was in the best interests of the United States to have my dad killed, definitely. And, you know, that worked against them, to be honest, because once he died his powers grew. So, I mean, fuck them. They didn’t get what they wanted.
> Sean Lennon, quoted in *The New Yorker*, April 20, 1998

In music and *Weltanschauung*, the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree. Not only has Sean Lennon followed his father John in seeking pop music fame, but the son of the founder of history’s most successful rock group seems to have inherited his father’s penchant for viewing history conspiratorially. According to Albert Goldman, John Lennon revealed this facet of his personality during the televised appeal hearings for James Earl Ray in the early 1970s. Asked by a family friend “What’s the real story behind the murder of Martin Luther King?” Lennon exploded, “Who the hell cares . . .? What matters is the *system*!” To Lennon, Goldman continues, James Earl Ray was “a guy who was framed. The Ray hearings fascinated Lennon. . . . ‘Look at him,’ Lennon would yell. ‘It’s obvious! He doesn’t have to ask for a glass of water or take a leak. He’s drugged!’”(1)

How do we account for otherwise high-functioning, even clever people holding these sorts of

opinions? Is conspiracy theorizing–as memorably portrayed in Jerry, Mel Gibson's character in the 1997 film *Conspiracy Theory*–a mental illness, falling somewhere in terms of severity between obsessive-compulsive disorder and full-blown paranoid schizophrenia? Or is it just the result of the irrationality and gullibility of an under-educated, tabloid-gobbling populace both here in America and abroad, tens of millions of whom believe that Elvis Presley faked his death in 1977, or that the U.S. government continues to cover up evidence of the 1948 crash of an alien spacecraft outside of Roswell, New Mexico? It's tempting to cite the idea that British secret service agents engineered Princess Diana's fatal car crash (http://www.londonnet.co.uk/ln/talk/news/diana_conspiracy_theories.html), or that in 1977 the United States government invented AIDS in a biochemical weapons laboratory (http://www.boydgraves.com/flowchart), as nothing more than proof that there's a sucker born every minute. But in our ridicule of the odd mix of credulousness with wacky skepticism we should not overlook how conspiracy theorizing–which has flourished, via the Internet, into a veritable cottage industry–reveals with glittering clarity the essential structure and purpose of originary narrative. Conspiracy theories are the myths of our age, in which the random and chaotic events of life are retrospectively ordered into a story with an explanatory purpose.

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What is a myth? In *Originary Thinking,* Eric Gans writes that "myth is etiological: it explains the origin of a custom or technique through divine activities and desires."(2) René Girard also sees myth as essentially explanatory: "Myths are the retrospective transfigurations of sacrificial crises, the reinterpretation of these crises in light of the cultural order that has arisen from them."(3) Combining these two definitions enables us to see how conspiracy theories bloom particularly in the aftermath of an event sudden and violent enough to instigate a cultural crisis. The more severe the crisis–that is, the more public or beloved the figure involved or the higher the death toll–the more dire the need for an explanation. But despite their functional similarities, there is an important difference between a myth and a conspiracy theory. From their origins in collective crises, myths retain traces of the all-against-one event they commemorate.(4) Conspiracy theories invert this all-against-one structure. Where myths implicitly expiate a community's guilt by heaping first blame and then praise upon the central figure for bringing about and resolving the cultural crisis, conspiracy theories blame everyone *but* the victim, even to the point of rejecting the possibility of actions independently conceived and carried out. Myths deny collective responsibility; conspiracy theories deny individual responsibility. Thus both Sean and John Lennon, like legions of Kennedy assassination theorists, dismiss as "naïve" or "insane" any lone gunman hypothesis. Instead, James Earl Ray and Mark Chapman are pawns or patsies for a covert network of coordinated agents, who together form what Sean Lennon calls "the government" and John Lennon calls "the *system*." In the words of Lennon *fils*, it is obviously in the "best interests" of the system to eliminate its dissidents ("My dad was a countercultural revolutionary. . . . If he had said, 'Bomb the White House tomorrow,' there

would have been ten thousand people who would have done it."). And since discovery of the system's operations would necessarily vitiate its power, the system employs elaborate measures to hide its involvement–a conspiracy theory is scarcely conceivable without a cover-up.

My aim in this essay is neither to debunk nor corroborate Sean Lennon or any of the scores of others who have propounded conspiracy theories about the murder of John Lennon. Instead, I want to examine how the Beatles helped to give reflex conspiracy theorizing a surprisingly ubiquitous presence in contemporary culture. Its similarities with mythic thinking show that conspiracy theorizing is as old as humanity itself. But as with so many other aspects of our age, the conspiratorial worldview reached a new plateau in the 1960s, when the pace of cultural transformation seemed suddenly to accelerate. The effect of the Beatles on the music of that era is well known. Less widely understood is how the semi-legendary status the Beatles acquired in the public imagination during their seven years together both revealed and contributed to the social disruptions of those tumultuous times.

The starting point for the Beatles' careers as both creators and objects of conspiracy theories was the "bigger than Jesus" controversy of the summer of 1966. This episode in pop culture history was more than just the flash point for long-smoldering anxieties about the relevance of religion to postwar Anglo-American society. The uproar that erupted over John Lennon's statement that the Beatles were "more popular than Jesus" demonstrated for this pop-star *cum* social commentator that outbursts of hysterical celebrity worship–like the Beatlemania that greeted the group around the world from 1964-66–originated in the same psychic and cultural forces that in the past had produced periods of mass religious fervor. This Lennon learned by comparing his first-hand experiences of Beatlemania with the picture of first-century Palestine he found in Hugh Schonfield's 1965 book *The Passover Plot*, which Lennon read shortly before uttering his infamous remarks. Schonfield also taught Lennon, however, to view history conspiratorially–that is, to look for the ways in which the powerful weave the chaotic profusion of events, conflicting interests, and contradictory testimonies into an apparently seamless eschatological narrative. To manifest and capitalize on their quasi-religious importance in the lives of their fans, Lennon realized, the Beatles needed merely to provide a plenitude of tantalizing, apparently disjointed details; their adherents, like the early church fathers, could be counted on eagerly to weave from those data a personally and culturally meaningful narrative. Two aspects of the Beatles' later career–the iconographic and musical experimentalism of *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* and the "Paul is Dead" myth–show the two main varieties of conspiratorial thinking. In its positive mode, conspiratorial thinking reflects a particular kind of intellectual ingenuity–the ability to assemble an interesting, even pleasing mosaic from the randomness of events as they happen. But because conspiratorial thinking assumes that some overarching purpose is always at work–the "system" has its aims–intellectual ingenuity gives way, eventually, to paranoia. This is the inevitable drift of conspiratorial narrativity. No matter how playfully begun, conspiratorial thinking invariably raises the avenging

specter of the sacred.

This story begins in early March of 1966, when John Lennon, comfortably ensconced in a mock-Tudor mansion in suburban London's "Stockbroker Belt," gave an interview to his old friend Maureen Cleave, pop music reporter for the London *Evening Standard*. Cleave's article, titled "How does a Beatle live? John Lennon lives like this," ran on March 4; her theme was Lennon's transformation–now that he had reached the ripe old age of twenty-five–from teeny-bopper idol to public intellectual:

Experience has sown few seeds of doubt in him; not that his mind is closed, but it's closed round whatever he believes at the time. "Christianity will go," he said. "It will vanish and shrink. I needn't argue about that. I'm right and I will be proved right. We're more popular than Jesus now; I don't know which will go first–rock 'n' roll or Christianity. Jesus was all right but his disciples were thick and ordinary. It's them twisting it that ruins it for me." He is reading extensively about religion.(5)

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The statement went unnoticed in Britain; as Mark Lewisohn has observed, "People were used to [Lennon's] caustic remarks, and besides, it was a valid comment." (6) On July 29, however, just two weeks before the scheduled start of the Beatles' annual U.S. summer tour, the American teen magazine *Datebook* reprinted extracts from Cleave's article, using the quotation's most volatile phrase–"I don't know which will go first–rock 'n' roll or Christianity"–as its page one banner. Within three days, Lennon's remarks were front-page news throughout the United States.

Popular versions of Beatles' history portray the "bigger than Jesus" flap as the scandal from which the group's fortunes never entirely recovered and the real reason why the Beatles never gave a public concert after August 29, 1966. For reasons I'll return to, the episode was a turning point for the group; but the public outcry was not nearly as widespread as one might assume from frequently replayed newsreel footage of young people tossing publicity photos and album sleeves onto bonfires. In the United States, expressions of outrage were more frequent in the South. In Nashville, for example, the Ku Klux Klan organized an anti-Beatle demonstration that drew 8,000 to a locale across the street from where the Beatles played two sold-out concerts to a total of more than 24,000 paying customers. Outside of the Bible belt, though, reactions ran the gamut from amusement to pedantry. The *Washington Post* wryly noted that in the two years since their last appearance in the capital city, the Beatles had acquired a couple of "reluctant theologians." Radio station KRLA in Los Angeles, a sponsor of the Beatles' August 28th appearance at Dodger Stadium, used the controversy to give its listeners a lesson in constitutional history: "If you remember . . . , a group of British subjects came to America to avoid public censure of their religious beliefs.

After many hardships, they won . . . religious freedom," a freedom which "Americans . . . still enjoy. Therefore, we here at KRLA do not believe it is our right to question the religious beliefs of the Beatles or any other talent."(7)

There can be little doubt that at any other time Lennon's remarks would have aroused indignation, especially in those parts of the United States where public avowals of Christian fideism had not yet acquired the patina of low-class enthusiasm they wore in the more sophisticated cities of the north and West. John's comments were, nevertheless, particularly ill-timed, for in the summer of 1966 the United States was a jittery nation. The previous summer had seen race riots in several major cities, including Washington D.C., Detroit, and Los Angeles, and in the three weeks immediately prior to the start of the Beatles' tour, the country found itself having to absorb two shocking instances of mass murder. On July 14 eight student nurses were found strangled in a hospital-owned apartment house on the south side of Chicago. A petty criminal and mental patient named Richard Speck, identified by a survivor who remembered that he had the phrase "Born to Raise Hell" tattooed on his left upper arm, was eventually caught and charged with the crime. On August 1, a heavily armed former U.S. Marine, Charles Lee Whitman, killed 13 in a 45-minute shooting spree from the top of the bell tower at the University of Texas at Austin.

Though the media drew no direct connections between religion and the summer's outburst of violence, it was a short step for Americans to go from their own growing awareness of being in the midst of a spiritual decline to the horrors of Speck and Whitman. In April, 1966, the cover of *Time* magazine asked, "Is God Dead?" and the events of the summer, along with Lennon's statement, seemed to answer the question in the affirmative. Moreover, that the "bigger than Jesus" statement issued from the lips of a man who had experienced first hand the fastest and most intense onrush of fame the world had ever seen lent Lennon's statement a certain credibility. Despite his northern English solecisms ("It's them twisting it. . ."), this young pop singer had put his finger on an emerging cultural trend: in the future, it seemed, cycles of hysterical celebrity worship would increasingly satisfy the transcendental longings that traditionally were the pretext and province of religion. The faithful were offended, in other words, not so much by the blasphemous drift of Lennon's comments as by their accuracy in describing the contemporary state of religious faith not only in America, but around the world. And though Lennon later said that at the time he was "terrified" by the anti-Beatles rhetoric in the U.S., at press conferences in nearly all of the 14 cities the Beatles played that summer he stubbornly maintained that his observations were accurate. In Chicago, a nervous, but clearly exasperated John told assembled reporters that

Originally I pointed out that fact in reference to England, that we meant more to kids than Jesus did, or religion, at that time. I wasn't knocking it or putting it down, I was just saying it as a fact. And it's true more for England than here. I'm not saying that we're better or

greater, or comparing us with Jesus Christ as a person or God as a thing or whatever it is. You know, I just said what I said, and it was wrong. Or it was taken wrong. And now it's all this.(8)

That "popularity" suggested itself to Lennon as the basis of his comparison shows how the Beatles and Beatlemania had by 1966 already altered the Anglo-American cultural landscape. The unprecedented financial success of the Beatles and the other entertainers that followed in their wake appeared to suggest that celebrity had, once and for all, established itself as the indisputable sign of cultural significance, and that henceforward, society would anchor its conceptions of worth more firmly than ever in the quantifiable realm of the market. But Lennon was prompted to make his offending comparison by more than just his having caught the spirit of his age. The immediate impetus for the comments, as Maureen Cleave reminded her readers, was Lennon's "extensive" reading about religion, which, it turns out, was probably not all that extensive, since it seems to have consisted of one book: Hugh Schonfield's 1965 bestseller *The Passover Plot*.

4

Schonfield's controversial bestseller argues that the fictional premise "used. . . by George Moore in *The Brook Kerith* and by D.H. Lawrence in *The Man who Died*"(9)–that Jesus survived the crucifixion–really happened. To the task of proving this thesis, Schonfield brought a prodigious command of scripture, new insights (largely gleaned from the recently published Dead Sea Scrolls) into the Jewish sectarianism of first-century Palestine, and forty years' experience studying and teaching (at Oxford University) early Christian history. He also brought a conspiratorial worldview that prompted him to weave from all the ancient sources available to him a story that explained on entirely rational grounds all of the events mentioned in the Gospels. The miracles and mysteries that serve to establish Christ's divinity in the church's official narrative are to Schonfield telltale signs of a plot–masterminded by Jesus himself–the purpose of which was to prove that this son of a Galilean carpenter was the Messiah whose coming had been predicted by certain Jewish sects since about a century and a half before his birth. Steeped from his youth in the religious ferment of his day, Schonfield's Jesus gradually becomes convinced that it was incumbent upon him to manifest his Messiahship by ensuring that his demise conformed to the prophesied pattern. To this end, writes Schonfield, Jesus minutely planned and orchestrated the events of Passion Week so they would culminate in his crucifixion on Friday afternoon. For the Passover Plot, timing is everything; delaying the Messiah's predicted ordeal until just before the Sabbath, writes Schonfield, would enable Jesus to survive crucifixion by faking his death. The custom of removing the bodies of the crucified from their crosses before the Sabbath meant that Jesus' time on the cross would be minimized, allowing him to receive quickly the medical attention he would need. And by appearing to die on his own Jesus would be spared having his legs broken, the usual means

by which the Romans hastened the deaths of crucifixion victims. Every conspiracy theory needs a leap of faith; Schonfield's is the precise means he thinks Jesus used to fake his death. Jesus' words "I am thirsty," writes Schonfield, were a signal to Joseph of Arimathea, who dispatched a servant with a vinegar-soaked sponge on the end of a twig of hyssop. But, says Schonfield, there was more than just vinegar in this sponge. Had this liquid consisted of the "the normal wine vinegar diluted with water," he writes, "the effect would have been stimulating. In this case it was exactly the opposite. Jesus lapsed quickly into complete unconsciousness. His body sagged. His head lolled on his breast, and to all intents and purposes he was a dead man" (191-2). As John Lennon might have said had he witnessed the scene as Schonfield drew it, "He's drugged!"

Having created the illusion of premature death, Schonfield's Jesus is taken down from the cross and immediately laid in the tomb. Sometime on Saturday night, however, Jesus' confederates return to the tomb to carry out, in Schonfield's words, "the entirely legitimate purpose of reviving him" (196). The Roman soldier's lance thrust, however, had made Jesus' chances of recovery "slender"; after regaining "consciousness temporarily," Schonfield writes, Jesus "finally succumbed" (196). It being "much too risky, and perhaps too late, to take the body back to the tomb, replace the bandages left there, roll the stone across the entrance, and try to create the impression that everything was as it had been on Friday evening," Jesus' co-conspirators "quickly and reverently" interred the remains elsewhere, "leaving the puzzle of the empty tomb" (196-7).

This enticing puzzle, continues Schonfield, may accurately be seen as the real basis of Christianity, since from it the early church, by tying together a quilt of conflicting eyewitness accounts, bits of unrelated historic data, and even snatches from works of fiction like Lucius Apuleius' *The Golden Ass*, wove its authoritative and authorizing narrative of Jesus' death and resurrection. If phase one of the Passover Plot was engineered by Jesus himself, phase two consists in the early church's "official" narrative of Christ's death and resurrection. Phase two ties together and tidies up the loose ends and unaccountable details left behind by Jesus' own, partially successful, conspiracy, producing, by about the third century, a myth capable in Schonfield's opinion of instituting a great world religion. But as that myth was reverently scrutinized, accumulating through the years a weighty interpretive tradition, its loose ends continued to turn up and demand explanation. As Christianity spread after about 300 C.E. to an increasingly educated and intellectually sophisticated populace, the need for a stable originary narrative–capable of withstanding the skepticism of friend and foe alike–became more urgent. Schonfield argues that the early church stabilized the myth of Jesus' life and worked first by obliterating any lingering traces of the Passover Plot, and finally by mining the Old Testament for every possible prophetic detail until the two parts of the Bible, taken together, constituted a seamless cosmological narrative. To Schonfield, though, in the end this is just a story, carefully and tendentiously abstracted from a chaos of events related only by their having occurred in roughly the same region at about the same time. Those events are capable of being woven into a different

narrative, and this is precisely what Schonfield did.

This is what struck Lennon more than anything else in Schonfield's book. The insights John took from *The Passover Plot* were more cognitive and historiographic than theological: at no time did Lennon state that he believed Schonfield's hypothesis in all its particulars. Rather, as the *Evening Standard* interview suggests, reading the book seems to have impelled Lennon to consider his own fame and the phenomenon of Beatlemania in their broader cultural and historic contexts, and to conclude that the psychic, political, and cultural forces that went into the making of Christianity had been revived by Beatlemania. The world of Jesus' birth was characterized, in Schonfield's words, by "an extraordinary fervour and religiosity in which almost every event, political, social, and economic, was seized upon, scrutinized, and analyzed, to discover how and in what way it represented a Sign of the Times and threw light on the approach of the End of The Days. The whole condition of the Jewish people was psychologically abnormal. . . . People were on edge, neurotic. There were hot disputes, rivalries and recriminations" (30). That Beatlemania rose to the level of neuroticism was made apparent by the spectacle of the Beatles being greeted by hundreds of screaming fans at airports around the world. George Harrison has said that in the 1960s, "the world used [the Beatles] as an excuse to go mad, and then blamed us for their madness." Other experiences no doubt also contributed to Lennon's sense that the Beatles had aroused another era of psychological abnormality. Ringo Starr has recalled that during their tours, the Beatles frequently found themselves presented with the sick and afflicted:

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> Crippled people were constantly being brought backstage to be touched by "a Beatle," and it was very strange. It happened in Britain as well, not only overseas. There were some really bad cases, God help them. There were some poor little children who would be brought in in baskets. And also some really sad Thalidomide kids with little broken bodies and no arms, no legs, and little feet.(10)

A few weeks before the flap over John's "bigger than Jesus" statement broke in the U.S., the Beatles experienced the scariest event in their touring history. After performing for sell-out–and extremely well-behaved–crowds in Japan, the Beatles went to the Philippines, where they found themselves, after receiving their usual enthusiastic airport greeting, *personae non gratae* for refusing an invitation to dine with Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos at the presidential palace. Though they played two sold-out concerts in Manila, the Beatles were virtually imprisoned on an island compound (which they were told was their hotel) in Manila Bay, and members of the group's entourage were punched and kicked by a gauntlet of police officers on the way to their plane at the end of their stay. Only after paying a "transport tax" equal to the total of their concert receipts were the Beatles allowed to leave the country. To Lennon, fresh from reading Schonfield's minute-by-minute account of Holy

Week, these events no doubt bore a chilling resemblance to Jersualem's violent swing from adulation to excoriation of Jesus between Palm Sunday and Good Friday. Perhaps this is why Lennon refused to recant his statements during the U.S. tour, since each day presented further proof that his original intuition–that Beatlemania and Schonfield's version of Christianity were parallel phenomena–was on target.

There was more to this parallel, however, than just Jesus' and the Beatles' shared identity as foci of adoration and scorn. By 1966 the Beatles' longevity–unprecedented for pop stars at the time–had made them and their music objects of the kind of scrutiny and study previously reserved for venerated religious figures and sacred texts. After reading Schonfield, Lennon realized that the Beatlemaniac's insatiable thirst for every scrap of information about her idols was functionally identical to the religious acolyte's hunger for a more comprehensive understanding of the characteristics of the godhead. Both are satisfied only by obsessively poring over every available tidbit, which is tirelessly studied for hidden messages and archetypal significances. Schonfield also showed Lennon that such an understanding was always predicated on a story–that is, a purposeful narrative stitched together from life's jumble of contingencies. These two realizations, combined with the "bigger than Jesus" controversy and its aftermath, pointed out a new direction for the Beatles, one in which they could broaden their cultural significance by exploiting and amplifying–rather than obscuring or repudiating–their quasi-religious status. The first step they took toward manifesting this new identity was to withdraw from the public–after their performance at Candlestick Park in San Francisco on August 29, 1966, the Beatles played no more public concerts. Though the immediate reasons for this decision were exhaustion and disgust with the madness of touring, not appearing in public had another accidental but welcome effect. In violation of accepted showbiz wisdom, which held that artists who didn't tour were quickly forgotten, withdrawing from the public eye only heightened the aura of sacredness that had grown up around the Beatles. Disappearing for several months added mystery and anticipation to the group's bag of entertainment tricks. "What will they do next?" wondered their millions of fans, patiently, even faithfully, awaiting the release of the next record.

Deciding not to play in public also reflected the degree to which–after only three years in the limelight–the Beatles felt entitled by their success to reject the entertainment-industry formulas on which they had built their success in order to forge for themselves new identities as full-fledged poets. After the summer of 1966, no longer would the Beatles wear matching stage suits; no longer would John Lennon struggle myopically through public appearances because his teeny-bopper fan base presumably wouldn't tolerate seeing their idol wearing eyeglasses. When the Beatles emerged from their self-imposed hiatus nearly a year after their last concert with a new album, *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, they were a different group: all four sported new hairstyles, drooping moustaches, and wore vaguely psychedelic parodies of the quasi-military uniforms customarily used by members of northern English community brass bands. Most important, John Lennon proudly wears his National Health-issued round spectacles as a sign of the bookishness that he had,

presumably, concealed to protect his image. These iconographic alterations were meant to signal that the Beatles had transformed themselves from history's most successful purveyors of rock and pop for teenagers into artists–that is, weavers of complex, subtle, and deep narratives about humankind's enduring questions.

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But despite these signals and the hoopla that greeted the new album, the music on *Sgt. Pepper* wasn't any deeper, more evocative, or more experimental than what the group had been doing for the previous year and a half. The music seemed more meaningful and capable of sustaining a more sophisticated interpretive inquiry, though, because of the care that had been taken with the album's ancillary features–particularly the sleeve design, which appears carefully composed to communicate a manifestly grand message. But even this aspect of the record is deceptive. Though now frequently identified as pop music's first "concept" album and a "manifesto of the 1960s," *Sgt. Pepper*, by its creators' admission, was a musical hodgepodge, tied together only by the title song and a brief repeat of that song in the penultimate track. "All my contributions to the album," said John Lennon, "have absolutely nothing to do with this idea of Sgt. Pepper and his band; but it works, because we *said* it worked, and that's how the album appeared. But it was not put together as it sounds, except for Sgt. Pepper introducing Billy Shears, and the so-called reprise. Every other song could have been on any other album."(11) Lacking real thematic and conceptual unity, *Sgt. Pepper* nevertheless "works" because its very randomness evokes High Modern obscurantism. As was the case for the conspiratorial view of history Lennon learned from Schonfield, what matters is the system: the appearance of merely accidental or chance relations between elements is, in this way of thinking, the surest indicator of the presence of a hidden story, waiting to be brought to light by the sort of thoroughgoing exegesis practiced on a manifestly important cultural artifacts, like Schonfield's Dead Sea Scrolls.

The impression of high modern seriousness was immediately apparent in the album's famous cover http://www.hillsboro.k12.nd.us/schools/students/sarah/sgt_pepper.htm. The sleeve art for previous albums had largely consisted of head shots of the Beatles as figures against a patterned or solid ground–four moptops staring at the camera.(12)The cover of *Sgt. Pepper* presents a hermeneutic puzzle: the customary configuration of Beatles as the image's focus gives way to a mosaic of faces in which the Beatles, though foregrounded, appear as members of some sort of community. But what unites this community? Who is the man in dark glasses (French film star Jean-Paul Belmondo)? What is his relation to Sonny Liston, Karl Marx, Oscar Wilde, Marlene Dietrich, and Shirley Temple? What story does the quilt of faces tell, and what role in that story is played by the other objects in the picture, such as the small television set on the right? Turn the sleeve over, and you encounter the second quasi-religious dimension of *Sgt. Pepper*: for the first time on a pop album, all the words to the songs are transcribed. The lyrics thus acquire the stable, fixed status of sacred text, which can now be pored over and studied with the kind of Talmudic intensity that the

Beatles knew their fans possessed.

When *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* was issued as a compact disc in 1987, it came with a key that matched the faces on the cover with their names, spoiling the fun of a new generation of Beatle fans who otherwise could have experienced the thrill of recognizing in the sea of faces such notables as Aleister Crowley and Fred Astaire. The LP didn't have such a key, because the album's original buyers were meant to derive additional aesthetic enjoyment from having figured out for themselves who these people were and why they made it to the cover–and why others didn't. A key cheats the viewer of one of the chief pleasures of a visual text like this–the satisfaction gained from having solved the puzzle. This is the benign starting point for conspiratorial narrative: a jumble of discrete images, unified only by their proximity. Though presented as a whole, the iconographic density of the *Sgt Pepper* cover invites sequential perusal of its details. At the end of this process the aesthetic pleasure afforded by the image as a whole is increased by the labor expended in identifying its parts.

As an interpretive tradition accumulates around the object, however, the meaning of a complex, manifestly serious image like this one inevitably grows more sinister. Words and pictures tied together only by their spatial propinquity begin to be related by cause and effect; they acquire the systematic interrelationship that in his *Poetics* Aristotle identified as the indispensable characteristic of a plot. The more public the object–that is, the greater the number of people who study it–the more elaborate the plot, since each brings a new interpreter who builds on prior elucidations of the "hidden messages" which, taken together, constitute a narrative. Lennon's reading of *The Passover Plot* showed him that culturally rich narratives were strung together from assortments of details. It followed, therefore, that the artist's task is merely to provide the details; the consumers of the art object can be counted on to weave the narrative.

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And this is precisely what Beatle fans did, eventually elaborating a Byzantine conspiracy theory *cum* hero's resurrection myth: the "Paul is Dead" rumor, which reached its crescendo in November 1969. Shortly after the release of *Abbey Road*, a Detroit disc jockey announced on the air that he had received a mysterious phone call reporting that McCartney's death was being surreptitiously communicated by the new album's cover photo, a famous and often-imitated shot of the four Beatles crossing a street. This innocent looking image, said the caller, was actually a funeral procession, with Paul's status as corpse covertly indicated by several details: he's barefoot (an allusion to the practice of interring people without shoes), he holds an unlit cigarette in his right hand (a symbol of a life "snuffed out"), and a license plate on a car in the background reads "28IF"–meaning McCartney would have been "28 if" he were still alive.(13)Spread by other disc jockeys and through the huge network of Beatle fans, the rumors were taken seriously enough to prompt

McCartney to appear on the cover of *Life* magazine before the end of the year, announcing that he felt "fine." Throughout that autumn and after, though, the story persisted and became more labyrinthine, as fans pored over their Beatle records, playing them word by and word and backwards and forwards in the search for more clues. In its most evolved form, the story was that after Paul McCartney died in a November 1966 auto accident, he was replaced by a look-alike. In memory of their lost comrade, however, the surviving Beatles supposedly laced their songs and album covers with intimations of the manner and circumstances of Paul's death. Displaying astonishing ingenuity, Beatlemaniacs over the years have identified hundreds of "clues," both visual and auditory, throughout the band's *oeuvre*. The most famous of these are the instances of "backward masking" on the *White Album*. The repeated phrase "number nine" in "Revolution 9," for example, supposedly says "Turn me on, dead man" when played in reverse on a turntable.(14) But it was to the busy pop-art of *Sgt. Pepper*, supposedly the first album completed after Paul's death, that Beatle fanatics turned for the lion's share of clues. On the back cover, for instance, George Harrison stands with his right index finger inexplicably outstretched. Closer examination shows that it points to a line from the song "She's Leaving Home": "Wednesday morning at five o'clock as the day begins." Moving to the column immediately to the left, the corresponding line, from "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds," is "Somebody calls you, you answer quite slowly." The column to the right reads "life goes on within you and without you," and the next column yields "And you're on your own you're in the street." Adherents of the "Paul is Dead" theory assembled these juxtaposed lines into an account of an accident in the early morning, a mortally injured Paul lying alone in the street unable to speak, and the Beatles going on without their fallen friend.

Also on the back cover, the three Beatles other than Paul face forward; Paul stands with his back to the camera, supposedly to indicate his non-presence. On the inside of the sleeve is a large photograph of the four smiling Beatles in their brightly colored Sgt. Pepper band uniforms. On Paul's left sleeve, where on a military uniform one might find a rank insignia, is a patch that reads "O.P.D." "Paul is Dead" theoreticians argue that this patch is an abbreviation for "Officially Pronounced Dead," the British equivalent of the American phrase "dead on arrival." And in the song "A Day in the Life," the theoreticians contend, John Lennon tells of the auto accident that took his bandmate's life:

> He blew his mind out in a car
> He didn't notice that the lights had changed.
> A crowd of people stood and stared.
> They'd seen his face before.
> Nobody was really sure if he was from the House of Lords.

This combination of sortilege and close reading–typical of "Paul is dead" evidentiary

reasoning–illustrates my point with particular clarity. Conspiracy theorizing is a mode of Gnosticism that can be counted on to arise spontaneously in the presence of any spatially or chronologically linked sequence of events lacking a self-evident originator and purpose. As it did on the originary scene, the mind abhors the cognitive vacuum of effects without causes; and where those causes are not glaringly apparent (and sometimes even where they are), a story will be concocted to account for them. To John Lennon (who ought to know) Hugh Schonfield was the unacknowledged master theorist of Beatlemania, for this shy and retiring Oxford don quite unintentionally, but accurately, pointed to the mythopoetic potentialities lurking in contemporary celebrity worship. Sadly, Lennon little suspected, as he sprinkled his songs and album covers with tantalizing details, that he would someday be the subject of his own son's hazy conspiracy theory, which emerges as the nightmarish incarnation of the myths woven in this media-saturated age around our celebrities. The deluge of information that both creates and is created by the mechanisms of contemporary celebrity falls sequentially into the ubiquitous scene of public representation. The jumble of evanescent images, publicity, rumor, anecdote, and conflicting eyewitness testimony that surrounds celebrities cries out to be arranged into a story that makes sense, a narrative. The more information that accumulates, the more conspiratorial or paranoid the narrative, as all the details need to be accounted for. But this is nothing new. René Girard has taught us that all myths are, to a degree, conspiratorial: by making the surrogate victim both the cause and the solution of the sacrificial crisis, myths mingle naïve faith with paranoid suspicion. I couldn't ask for a better illustration of the essential similarity between contemporary conspiracy theorizing and ancient myth than the last few sentences of the quotation from Sean Lennon with which I began this essay. Both conspiracy theory and myth say that "the system," in the final analysis, both does and doesn't achieve its nefarious ends: "It was in the best interests of the United States to have my dad killed, definitely. And, you know, that worked against them, to be honest, because *once he died his powers grew*. So, I mean, fuck them. They didn't get what they wanted."

Notes

1. Goldman, Albert. *The Lives of John Lennon*. New York: Morrow, 1988, p. 14. (back)

2. Gans, Eric. *Originary Thinking*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993, p. 95.(back)

3. Girard, René. *Violence and the Sacred*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977, p. 64. (back)

4. For an example of how the myth of Oedipus both covers up and reveals his innocence of the oracular charges laid against Thebes' unpunished murdered, see Girard's *Violence and the Sacred*, chapter 3. (back)

5. Reprinted in *The Lennon Companion*, ed. Elizabeth Thomson and David Gutman (New York: Schirmer, 1996), pp. 71-75. (back)

6. Lewisohn, Mark. *The Beatles Day by Day*. London: Macmillan, 1988, p. 212. (back)

7. *Los Angeles Times*, August 27, 1966. (back)

8. *The Beatles Anthology*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2000, p. 226. (back)

9. Schonfield, Hugh. *The Passover Plot*. Dorset: Element, 1996, p. 187. Further references to this book will be made parenthetically in the text. *(back)*

10. *The Beatles Anthology*, p. 142. (back)

11. *Ibid*., p. 241. (back)

12. See the covers for *With the Beatles*, *A Hard Day's Night*, and *Beatles for Sale*. (back)

13. Actually, McCartney "would have been" 27 when the album came out: he was born June 18, 1942, and *Abbey Road* was released in the U.S. on October 1, 1969. This fact did not stop "Paul is Dead" conspiracy theorists, however. They explained that in certain (unnamed) "Eskimo societies," years of a life are numbered from birth, so that a child begins at age 1. And how is McCartney related to Eskimos? On the cover of *Magical Mystery Tour*, one of the Beatles wears a walrus mask, and in the song "Glass Onion," John Lennon sings, "Here's another clue for you all: the walrus was Paul." Since walruses inhabit the Arctic along with Eskimos, we are meant to number McCartney's years in the "Eskimo" manner. For a listing of some of other "clues," seehttp://www.beatlesagain.com/bpidnew.html . (back)

14. To hear, go to http://www.geocities.com/SunsetStrip/Cabaret/8444/9rebmun.wav .(back)