

**Making fiction out of fact: attention and belief in the  
discourse of conspiracy**

MASON, Jessica <<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3892-5941>>

Available from Sheffield Hallam University Research Archive (SHURA) at:

<https://shura.shu.ac.uk/24739/>

---

This document is the Accepted Version [AM]

**Citation:**

MASON, Jessica (2019). Making fiction out of fact: attention and belief in the  
discourse of conspiracy. *Narrative Inquiry*, 29 (2), 293-312. [Article]

---

**Copyright and re-use policy**

See <http://shura.shu.ac.uk/information.html>

Requests for further information should be directed to

Jessica Mason, Department of Humanities, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities,  
Sheffield Hallam University, Owen Building, City Campus, Howard Street, Sheffield, South  
Yorkshire, S1 1WB, UK, [J.Mason@shu.ac.uk](mailto:J.Mason@shu.ac.uk)

## **Making Fiction out of Fact**

Attention and Belief in the Discourse of Conspiracy

Jessica Mason, Sheffield Hallam University

This article explores fictionality within the context of the discourse of conspiracy. In particular it examines the phenomenon of ‘false flag’ narratives: alternative versions of an event constructed by individuals who have become convinced that a news story has in fact been staged for malfeasant purposes. The chapter uses figure-ground analysis, which facilitates examination of how attention is distributed within a text. Specifically, it enables an examination of the prominence and salience that is afforded to particular elements within a text, and how this can be used to construct a fiction out of facts. The article problematises the notion of using a pragmatic assessment of authorial intention to establish the fictive or nonfictive status of a text. Finally, it proposes that more work needs to be undertaken in considering instances where authors either do not know or are conflicted about what they believe.

**Keywords:** conspiracy, false flag, figure-ground, burying, attention, belief, cognitive stylistics, Sandy Hook, Charlottesville

## Introduction

This article problematises the distinction between fictive, nonfictive discourse and wilful deception within narratives, with a particular focus on attention and belief. It adopts a cognitive stylistic approach to examine the language of conspiracy. The study takes as its example a conspiracy narrative that is categorically not credible relating to the deaths of twenty-six children and their teachers in a mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in 2012, and the death of Heather Heyer in Charlottesville in 2017, who was struck and killed when a car was deliberately driven into a crowd protesting against a nationalist rally. It presents an analysis of a narrative (played out over the course of two videos) where the author assembles a compilation of factual and fictive elements relating to these two tragedies into a conspiracy theory. The author argues that both the Sandy Hook shootings and the vehicular attack at Charlottesville were staged ‘false flag’ events, and that three grieving relatives and one victim are in fact the same two paid ‘crisis actors’. ‘False flag’ accounts offer a version of events in which “one group commits an attack and blames it on a rival group or a fictitious group of its invention” (Kearns, Conlon, & Young, 2014, p. 46). In this context, the term is applied in the belief that the two respective perpetrators of these acts are not the guilty parties but instead scapegoats, fictional constructs or paid agents, used to shield a clandestine group who either orchestrated or staged both events. Sandy Hook and Charlottesville are thus ‘false flags’ because they misdirect the public as the enemy draws closer. In spite of overwhelming evidence that the events at Sandy Hook and Charlottesville really took place, the author argues their own false flag narrative to be truth, with the official account rendered, in their view, the ‘real fiction’. Through this analysis, conspiracy narratives will be shown to blur of the boundary between fiction and non-fiction through the attribution of salience and attention. In doing so the article problematises the idea that authors always

know themselves whether their discourse, and the narratives they construct from it, is real or imaginary. It will consider the phenomenon of convincing (or trying to convince) oneself that fact is fiction or vice versa, or of holding conflicting or false beliefs. Drawing on cognitive stylistic approaches, the article uses figure-ground analysis (Emmott & Alexander, 2014; Stockwell, 2009) to offer a close examination of patterns of authorial attention to different elements within the narratives, as well as their claims about which are the important and meaningful aspects of a story.

### **Fictionality and belief**

Exploration of fictionality has predominantly taken place within the field of narratology. Historically the designation of ‘fiction’ or ‘non-fiction’ was attributed to particular genres of narrative: fairytales are fiction and memoir is non-fiction, for example, and these genres had characteristic ‘signposts’ that signalled their fictionality or not (Cohn, 1990, 1999; Hamburger, 1993). More recently there has been a shift towards thinking about fictionality as a rhetorical resource (Phelan, 2016; Nielsen, Phelan, & Walsh, 2015). This latter approach prefers the terms ‘fictive’ and ‘nonfictive discourse’, arguing that any text may contain stretches of one or other type of discourse, may shift between the two, or may use fictionalising strategies within a global non-fiction (Hatavara & Mildorf, 2017; Iversen & Nielsen, 2016; Phelan, 2016). This approach enables a move away from designating a whole narrative as categorically fictive or nonfictive, shifting instead to looking at which of these two types of discourse a story contains, and in what proportions. In the current context this is a particularly useful division, as conspiracy theories are, by their very nature, alternative versions of ‘official’ narratives, the originals of which most would agree are nonfictive. As

such, all conspiracy narratives are likely to contain elements of both fictive and nonfictive discourse.

However, the concept of fictive and nonfictive discourse frames the conscious selection of one type or the other as being driven by what the author desires to communicate. In other words, at its heart it is centrally concerned with matters of authorial intention and belief. This article contests the claim that, ‘fictive discourse is clearly distinct from lying, since lies are designed to be taken as referring to actual states of affairs’ (Nielsen et al., 2015, p. 63). Drawing on a close stylistic examination of the two video transcripts analysed below, as well as the most recent findings within the field of cognitive psychology, I will posit that such distinctions are inherently problematic. In particular, I argue that authors do not always know, or may be conflicted about, what they believe.

Fictionality has also been extensively investigated by cognitive psychology. Findings show that, ‘there is no distinct psychological category for fiction’ (Gerrig, 1993, p. 197). In other words, whilst our perception or expectations may differ depending on our belief that a text comprises either truth or fiction, there is no distinct way in which we process one versus the other. This body of research draws mainly on false memory studies. Here, participants are introduced to fictional events either as though they were fact or with the suggestion that they might be. Over time many participants report coming to ‘remember’ these imaginary stories as real memories. In Loftus and Pickerill’s (1995) study a fourteen year old boy was asked to write down his recollections of four events from his childhood, three factual and one fictional, presented to him by the researchers (that he had been lost in a shopping mall). The boy, Chris, was then asked to write about the four ‘memories’ every day for five days. As time passed he ‘remembered’ richer and more specific details about all of the events, even the one that was fictional. After a few weeks he was asked to rate the four memories for how clear they were, with one being the lowest and eleven the highest: Chris rated the false

shopping mall memory as the second most clear, giving it an eight. Most remarkably, ‘Chris was soon told that one of the memories was false. Could he guess? He selected one of the true memories. When told the memory of being lost was the false one, he had trouble believing it’ (Loftus & Pickerill, 1995, p. 721). The researchers then replicated the same procedure with twenty-four participants: six experienced the same false memory belief phenomenon as Chris, with a seventh initially reporting to recall the event but later changing her mind. Loftus and Pickerill (1995) concluded, “nearly two decades of research on memory distortion leaves no doubt that memory can be altered via suggestion. People can be led to remember their past in different ways, and they can even be led to remember entire events that never actually happened to them” (p. 725). From the point of view of fictionality studies, it is clear that Loftus and Pickerill’s findings problematise a stable attribution of authorial belief in the fictive or nonfictive status of their narrative. Similar studies have also found a wealth of support for false belief phenomena, from Porter, Yuille and Lehman (1999) who found people could be directed to remember being attacked by an animal, to Heaps and Nash (2001) who report individuals recalling nearly drowning. At the field’s most extreme, in a non-experimental setting, Perry and Szalavitz (2006) report on false recollections of being subjected to ritual satanic abuse: a number of people were almost imprisoned based on the inaccurate testimony of others who had been convinced in therapy sessions that they had repressed memories that never really existed. This body of work clearly shows that both fictive and nonfictive information can be stored and recalled using the same cognitive processes, exemplified by our inability to sometimes distinguish between them. As such, using authorial belief as the metric for determining fictionality is highly tenuous.

## **Conspiracy Theories and False Flags**

The most commonly accepted definition of a conspiracy theory is “a proposed plot by powerful people or organisations working together in secret to accomplish some (usually sinister) goal” (Wood, Douglas, & Sutton, 2012, p 767; see also Coady, 2006; Douglas & Sutton, 2008; Goertzel, 1994). Thus, conspiracies are best designated as narratives as they inevitably comprise plots, and therefore a version of an event (or sequence of events) with “at least one temporal juncture” (Labov, 1972). Unlike the news stories from which conspiracy narratives are typically derived, however, the conspiracist rejects the nonfictive status of the official accounts, believing that these publicly accepted versions are the result of a duped, or complicit, individual or media.

Research on the language of conspiracy is surprisingly sparse, however what does exist is highly relevant for an investigation of the role of fictionality. Researchers such as Bjerg and Presskorn-Thygesen (2017), Coady (2003, 2007) and Pigden (1995, 2007) all comment on the ontological power of designating a particular narrative as ‘conspiracy’. Specifically, they all argue that labelling something a conspiracy is not a neutral categorisation, because it encodes a value judgement that the narrative is fictive. Bjerg and Presskorn-Thygesen (2017), for example, claim, “‘conspiracy theory’ is no trivial word [...] any use of the concept of conspiracy theory always already implies a demarcation between legitimate, rational knowledge and illegitimate, irrational non-sense” (p. 138). Nielsen et al. (2015) suggest that, “the ascription of fictionality to acts of communication designed to be nonfictional can impede effective communication” (p. 66): this precisely captures the weight ascribed to the term ‘conspiracy theory’. Here, the impediment created by employing the

term conspiracy is generally treated as calculated and deliberate: a particular narrative is characterised as a conspiracy *in order to* impede effective communication of its contents. Where this becomes particularly problematic, and interesting, is in instances like the present case, where it is clear that it is entirely appropriate to designate the author's claims as a conspiracy theory, but any act of doing so is likely to fuel further belief from the author that their account *is* nonfictive, as the very act of labelling the narrative as conspiracy is taken as evidence of attempted cover up (Douglas, Sutton, & Cichocka, 2017; Lewandowsky, Oberauer, & Gignac, 2015).

The reasons for this unfortunate paradox lie in the typical status of conspiracism, not as a belief in one specific theory, but as an ideological perspective. Wood et. al (2012) findings are of significance here: belief in one conspiracy theory predicts belief in another, even when those beliefs are directly contradictory. For instance an individual who believes that Princess Diana was murdered is statistically more likely to also believe that she is still alive than someone who believes neither claim (Wood et al. 2012). The authors explain that conspiracist thinking is best understood as an ideology rather than a series of individual beliefs about specific events. In other words, conspiracism is better thought of as a world view - a way of thinking – that results in a willingness to believe a wide variety of non-official theories, even if some sit in contradiction with one another. This is because belief stems from a broad conviction that those in power cannot be trusted, and thus any claims about the status of an account as fictive or nonfictive from media or government is likely to be met with refutation.

In addition to this, there is a substantial body of research from the field of psychology exploring conspiracy theorists that is highly salient in the current context. Douglas, Sutton and Cichocka (2017) offer a comprehensive overview of this work, which explores reasons, motivations and predispositions that cause people to gravitate towards conspiracy versions of



a narrative rather than a non-conspiracy explanation. They divide the best current research into three broad categorisations. Of particular relevance to the current study is the first: epistemic motivations for conspiracy belief. Douglas et al. (2017, p. 538) explain that conspiracism typically stems from a desire for unambiguous understanding and certainty of knowledge. They explain that feeling as though we have a secure causal explanation for an event can serve many purposes, including, “slaking curiosity when information is unavailable, reducing uncertainty and bewilderment when information is conflicting, finding meaning when events seem random and defending beliefs from disconfirmation” (Douglas et al., 2017, p. 538). Key findings in this area centre in the main on propensities to perceive meaningful patterns and deliberate action where none exists. Characteristic behaviours of individuals who routinely believe in conspiracist accounts of events include: habitually seeking out patterns in the world (Brotherton & French, 2014); seeking meaning for things that occur, which can extend to belief in the paranormal (Bruder et al., 2013); higher feelings of distress in the face of uncertainty (van Prooijen & Jostmann, 2013), and being likely to believe that actions are intentional and conscious (Douglas et al., 2017). Swami, Voracek, Stieger, Tran and Furnham also found correlations between conspiracy belief and reduced levels of analytical thinking (Swami et al., 2014). Environmentally it has also been found that events that are either highly significant or large-scale attract conspiracy belief (Leman & Cinnirella, 2013).

Douglas et al. (2017) additionally identify that, “causal explanations [also] serve the need for people to feel safe and secure in their environment” (p. 539). Research suggests that people are more likely to be drawn to conspiracy narratives when they feel that they lack security and, or, control, especially when this prompts emotions such as anxiety (Grzesiak-Feldman, 2013) or a sense of being powerless (Abalakina-Paap, Stephan, Craig, & Gregory, 1999).

This article focuses on a particularly pernicious type of conspiracy theory: the false flag. The term ‘false flag’ appears to have derived from a deceptive practice in naval combat, where a ship would fly the flag of another innocent party in order to get close to their enemy, only to then attack them (Kearns et al., 2014). In the context of conspiracism, false flags typically involve designating a tragedy with multiple deaths, often but not always an act of terror (domestic or international), as either actually committed by a clandestine group bent on world domination, or staged by that same group. Perhaps the most prolific event attracting ‘false flag’ claims in the current moment, for example, is the attack on the Twin Towers in New York on 11<sup>th</sup> September 2001, with groups ranging from the US government, to rogue contingents within the CIA, to a race of alien lizard people accused of being the ‘real’ perpetrators by conspiracists.

### **The Videos: Data and Methods**

This article takes as its data two videos from the same author, which were posted onto their *YouTube* channel in rapid succession as the second and third parts of a three part sequence (the first has been removed). The latter video follows directly on from the second, and over the course of the two the author puts forward a version of the events at Sandy Hook and Charlottesville where two of the bereaved mothers at each respective tragedy – Donna Soto at Sandy Hook and Susan Bro at Charlottesville – are both fabricated characters played by the same ‘crisis actor’; a paid stooge working for the secret group that orchestrated the false flag. Similarly, one of Donna Soto’s surviving daughters, Carlee Soto, and Heather Heyer, Susan’s daughter who was murdered at Charlottesville, are also accused of being the same individual, and also of being a crisis actor. All three surviving family members appeared in an array of

media coverage, as did images of Heather. Both of the Sotos and Susan Bro were interviewed by the same journalist, Anderson Cooper, who is himself accused by many Sandy Hook false flag advocates of being somehow involved in its planning and cover up. Across the course of the two videos the author draws on various pieces of ‘evidence’ (outlined in detail below) from their own internet research and analysis of available media footage to support their alternative narrative.

The videos are drawn from a sample of fifteen ‘false flag’ advocating videos all taken from *YouTube*, all of which focus on the mass shooting at Sandy Hook the Elementary School in the USA in 2012. The study has been through comprehensive ethical approvals as, whilst the videos are open access, their content is highly sensitive. My institution was in agreement that no consent needed to be sought from the video creators as posting to a site such as *YouTube* comes with a reasonable expectation that the content may be subject to critique. Some research in the field of online data analysis (e.g., Pace & Livingston, 2005) argues that active consent should be obtained if the content is sensitive in nature. However, the view was taken that it is in the greater public interest to interrogate these kinds of materials, which tend to be distressing because they accuse grieving parents and family members of fabricating their suffering, sometimes going so far (as in this case) as claiming their lost loved one is a fiction. In other words, the manner in which these data are ‘sensitive’ cannot reasonably be understood to be in the spirit of what researchers like Pace and Livingston (2005) intended to prohibit. The ethical determination of my institution requires that I do not name the channel, the titles, or provide links to the videos. This is a step that may be disputed by some voices in the online research ethics community (see e.g., Spilioti & Tagg, 2017). Others, including my own institution, take the view that anonymising the data is the most ethical course of action. Here the point is moot as I am obliged to follow my university’s requirements, but it is nonetheless worth acknowledging that there are contesting

positions. It is uncontroversial to say that current research ethics have not kept pace with the significant advances in technology and this study, therefore, has simply followed the best guidance available in the current moment.

The two videos have been selected from the wider dataset for close analysis here for several reasons. Both are related and relatively short, meaning both can be examined in detail. The first (hereafter Video One) is three minutes and 21 seconds, with a derived transcript of 466 words: the second (hereafter Video Two) is two minutes and sixteen seconds, with a derived transcript of 313 words. The author's channel is small – at the time of writing it has only just over 100 subscribers – however the videos have in excess of 5,500 and 3,500 views respectively. The first has 106 likes and only nine dislikes. The second has 88 likes and only two dislikes. Whilst the wider study is not the focus of this article it is relevant to note that the claims made in the video are in keeping with those throughout the dataset, and assertions that 'crisis actors' are a staple part of false flag operations is a central belief of the conspiracist community (exemplified recently, for instance in VICE, 2018).

### **Context: Sandy Hook and Charlottesville**

On 14 December 2012 a twenty year old man entered Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut in the United States of America with a firearm, having killed his mother, Nancy Lanza (52), earlier that morning. The shooter killed twenty-six people before ending his own life.

Six of his victims were adults working at the school: Dawn Hochsprung (47) the head teacher, Mary Sherlach (56) the school's psychologist, Victoria Soto (27) and Lauren

Rousseau (30) who were both teachers, Anne Marie Murphy (52) a special education teacher, and, Rachel D'Avino (29) a behavioural therapist supporting children with autism.

The rest of the victims were children. They were: Emilie Parker (6), Ana Marquez-Greene (6), Dylan Hockley (6), Grace McDonnell (7), Noah Pozner (6), Olivia Engel (6), Catherine Hubbard (6), Charlotte Bacon (6), Daniel Barden (7), Jesse Lewis (6), Jessica Rekos (6), Jack Pinto (6), Josephine Gay (7), Chase Kowalski (7), James Mattioli (6), Madeleine Hsu (6), Caroline Previdi (6), Avielle Richman (6), Benjamin Wheeler (6) and Allison Wyatt (6).

The two videos analysed here focus on the mother and sister of one of the teachers killed at Sandy Hook, Victoria Soto. The author presents as firmly believing that the two women, Donna and Carlee Soto, are not Victoria's relatives but 'crisis actors' working for whichever clandestine group has presumably staged Sandy Hook. The key evidence offered in support of this, and the focus of both videos, is the claim that a victim and her mother at another 'false flag' event five years later are the very same women now 'acting' in different roles. This other event occurred in Charlottesville, Virginia, USA on 13 August 2017. Heather Heyer was one of many people who was in attendance protesting a 'Unite the Right' rally that was taking place in the town. A member of the original demonstration drove a car at speed into the crowd of protesters. Many were injured, and Heather Heyer (32), was killed. This too is designated as a false flag by the videos' author, with Heather herself and her mother, Susan Bro, cast in the roles of 'crisis actors', the same actors playing Donna and Carlee Soto, complicit in its staging.

### **Figure-ground analysis**

Nielsen et al. (2015) posit that ‘no formal technique or other textual feature is in itself a necessary and sufficient ground for identifying fictive discourse’ (p. 66). This I would not dispute particularly because, as the analysis below will demonstrate, conspiracy narratives are constructed using an interwoven combination of fictive and nonfictive discourse, often with a single phrase or sentence blending elements of the two. As such it would be antithetical to designate particular stylistic features to either category. Figure-ground configuration, however, is not a textual feature. Rather it is a natural cognitive phenomenon, close examination of which enables exploration of the ways in which a text positions a reader or listener’s attention. This, I argue, is a useful consideration in any assessment of fictionality.

Examining figure-ground profiling offers an account of how texts position readers to focus their attention. Derived from Gestalt psychology, the concept of figure-ground draws on our knowledge of visual attention, especially the fact that humans cannot pay attention to everything in their visual field at once (Scott Terry, 2009; Stockwell, 2009). Instead, at any given moment we consciously and unconsciously select what to pay attention to and, as a by-product, the other things in our visual field fade into the ground. Although initially presented as a binary (see e.g., Stockwell, 2002), later work encourages conceptualising figure-ground as a clinal relationship. Stockwell (2009) explains, “it is a cline of prominence, ranging through degrees of foregrounding into vague, undifferentiated but rich background” (p. 31). Giovanelli and Mason offer an example of looking at a crowd:

Imagine looking at a huge crowd of people and then focusing on different individuals within the group. Here the crowd is initially our main figure and the rest of the scene – the floor on which they’re standing, the sky, and any buildings or objects around – forms the ground. As you move to focus on an individual, however, the rest of the crowd joins part of the ground and the individual, in turn, becomes the figure.

Things that form the figure of our attention, especially if for a prolonged period or repeatedly, are more likely to be remembered, and more likely to be attributed salience. Conversely, things that quickly fade into the ground of our attention or simply remain there, are more likely to ‘decay’ and be forgotten or ignored (Stockwell, 2002). The stylistic make up of any text will thus profile certain elements that are positioned to be figured in the reader’s attention. Stockwell (2009, p. 31) collated the key research on visual attention and adapted it into a list of “good attentional attractors” to guide stylistic examination of texts through the lens of figure-ground. Those attractors include:

*newness*: (currency: the present moment of reading is more attractive than the previous moment)

*topicality*: (subject position confers attraction over object position)

*empathetic recognisability*: (human speaker > human hearer > animal > object > abstraction)

*definiteness*: (definite (‘the man’) > specific indefinite (‘a certain man’) > nonspecific indefinite (‘any man’))

*activeness*: (verbs denoting action, violence, passion, wilfulness, motivation or strength)

*brightness*: (lightness or vivid colours being denoted over dimness or drabness)

*fullness*: (richness, density, intensity or nutrition being denoted)

*largeness*: (large objects being denoted, or a very long elaborated noun phrase used to denote)

*aesthetic distance from the norm:* (beautiful or ugly referents, dangerous referents, alien objects denoted, dissonance)

(adapted from Stockwell, 2009, p. 31)

Stockwell's model of attentional attractors operationalises the phenomenon of figure-ground as a cognitive poetic framework able to be applied to texts. He uses it to track patterns of foregrounded and backgrounded elements within written texts. Here the application will be more multimodal in nature, as the data includes both linguistic and visual inputs. Given its genesis in Gestalt psychology, this is entirely in keeping with the cognitive foundations of the framework, and is also aligned with existing cognitive poetic research which examines multimodality (see e.g., Gibbons, 2012).

Psychological research shows that foregrounded - 'figured' - elements of a text are subject to greater depth of processing (Sanford, 2002; Sanford & Sturt, 2002; Sanford & Emmott, 2014), can be attributed "narrative world salience" (Emmott & Alexander, 2014), and prompt "selective focus" on those aspects at the expense of others (Emmott & Alexander, 2014, Barton & Sanford, 1993). In contrast, Emmott and Alexander (2014) explore the concept of 'burying', where items are left in the ground of a reader's attention. This is a stylistic technique common in crime and detective fiction where authors are highly motivated to include elements in a text but then endeavour to ensure that certain features are neither noticed nor attributed salience (as this would result in readers working out 'whodunnit'). Emmott and Alexander (2014) offer a comprehensive list of strategies used to 'bury' information within a text. Of particular relevance to the present study are:

1. Mentioning the item as little as possible;
2. Under-specification (being imprecise or vague so that the item does not attract attention);



### 3. Placing the item next to another that is made more prominent

(adapted from Emmott & Alexander, 2014, p. 332).

Approaching fictionality through the lens of figure-ground rather than attempting to categorise sections of discourse within a narrative as fictive or nonfictive offers a different way of discerning how a text comes to be perceived as factual or imagined, because it focuses on which elements are afforded prominence and thus positioned as most important. Such an analysis focuses simply on the stylistic patterns of figure-ground configuration and burying present in a given text, and cannot thus make claims about whether authors actively intended to manipulate a reader's attention in the manner outlined. Emmott and Alexander (2014) do present burying as a deliberate technique, though this is due to their particular focus on detective fiction, where it is reasonable to assert that such strategies are largely deliberate. In this context, however, it is more appropriate to frame these patterns as a reflection of authorial belief, which may be entirely tacit, about the aspects of their narratives that are worthy of attention. As such this kind of investigation enables systematic examination of the elements of a text attributed salience or conversely discarded as irrelevant. It is worth noting too, that texts are always constructed in interaction with a reader (Rosenblatt, 1938, 1978) who can choose to resist attentional attractors or focus on buried features, just as one could look at Giovanelli and Mason's (2018) crowd and ignore a man waving in the centre and look instead at a tree behind him.

**'Keep that in mind for later'**

Throughout both videos the author repeatedly employs pre-modifying adjectives to figure the apparent similarities between the two pairs of women as being aesthetically different from the norm. That is, the similarities are not framed as pure coincidence or without significance: in the opening line of the first video the audience is told the series is about the “*uncanny parallels* between Sandy Hook and Charlottesville”. The concept of similarity between the two events is repeatedly instantiated as a figure throughout through near constant repetition of lexis from this semantic field: the noun ‘resemblance’ is used five times in the first video and once in the second; the adjective ‘similar’ appears twice in the first and six times in the second; the noun ‘parallels’ is additionally used twice in the earlier video. This repetition is bolstered by the use of pre- and post-modification to make these apparent similarities aesthetically distant from the norm, that is, alien, almost frightening, and certainly not attributable to coincidence. The resemblances are termed ‘uncanny’ on five occasions within the 774 words that comprises both videos. Other adjective phrases used include ‘remarkable’, ‘incredible’, ‘one in a trillion’ (used twice), and the noun phrases ‘twins’ and ‘Virtual Twinsies’ (invoked as a scientific categorisation) also appear. The concept of ‘odds’ is also invoked three times in the first video and indirectly referred to twice in the second. Perhaps most strikingly, the first video concludes, ‘What are the odds of all of these *incredible* parallels coming together by random, chance? Well, one word, the odds there are: non-existent’, with the word ‘Nonexistant’ (sic) then appearing in bold white type on an otherwise completely black screen. Here the author uses multimodal figuring to also employ newness and brightness, as well as backgrounding any other potential attentional attractors that could potentially distract from their intended emphasis, both visually and aurally. The interrogative phrasing and the less specific cataphoric reference ‘one word’ further draws focus making the anticipated phrase relatively definite by comparison. Perhaps paradoxically, therefore, the

author repeatedly invokes a semantic field typically associated with fiction – the alien and supernatural – to assert the absolute reality of their claims.

There is also extensive use of the attentional attractors newness and fullness over the course of the two videos, through an incrementally building list of different aspects of the two scenarios and two pairs of women that are apparently similar, escalating gradually from individual features with lower degrees of certainty to an, from the author's perspective, irrefutable catalogue of evidence. The author discusses the similarity of the following elements:

1. Physical, specifically facial, resemblances between both Donna and Susan, and Carlee and Heather respectively. These claims are escalated significantly in the second video;
2. 'Distance resemblance': the fact that both Donna and Susan allegedly lived approximately twenty miles south of the sites of the two respective tragedies;
3. Audio similarity: Donna and Susan's voices are allegedly identical, demonstrated through the overlaying of two apparent audiographs of unknown origin;
4. Both women are interviewed by Anderson Cooper;
5. Gazeboes: the author identifies a gazebo at Donna's alleged place of residence and notes no gazebo appears to be present at Susan's. They then show footage of Anderson Cooper interviewing Susan in what appears to be a gazebo, concluding 'somebody's got something mixed up'. This aspect of the author's claim is too confused to unravel within the scope of this article because the salience attributed is so under-specified ('somebody', 'something') that the line of argument is indecipherable.

The analysis will now examine the first two sets of claims in close detail.

## Physical Resemblance

It is unsurprising, given the author's central claim that the two pairs of women are in fact one and the same, that physical resemblance forms a cornerstone of their narrative. In the first video this predominantly takes the form of repeated reference to facial similarities, with a particular focus on the two mothers: Donna and Susan. Even here there is use of attentional attractors in the form of empathetic recognisability – focusing on humans - and definiteness - in honing in specifically on their faces. A more comprehensive assessment of these apparent resemblances, however, is buried through under-specification. At no point does the author offer any definitive point of comparison ('their noses have the same curvature' or 'their eyes are the same colour', for example). Instead the resemblance is exclusively described through the forceful but ultimately extremely vague modification listed above ('uncanny', 'remarkable', incredible'). The burying strategy of swiftly shifting to other prominent features, encouraging these to become the new figures of attention, is also repeatedly employed. In the first video this involves rapid topic change (newness) onto 'distance resemblance' (discussed below) and in the second onto 'audio similarities'. In this way the author stacks up what superficially appears to be a wealth of evidence in support of his false flag theory, but in actuality presents a sequence of vague, unsupported and easily refutable claims. The fact that these 'uncanny similarities' are based on images of the women taken five years apart is also subject to burying via the technique of mentioning the feature as little as possible. This highly important detail is mentioned only once and very briefly in the first video in the phrase: "so we have this lady [Donna Soto] and this lady [Susan Bro] each bearing an uncanny resemblance to the other, albeit five years later." The positioning of the time gap within a subordinate clause additionally avoids giving the information topicality, further circumventing drawing attention to it. Thus in their collective claims about the

physical similarities, the author assembles a series of facts - the two women do look somewhat alike – but then proceeds to construct this into a stretch of fictive discourse within the narrative: that the two women are therefore the same person.

In the second video, this escalates to the use of facial recognition software, and reference to an academic study, a summary of which is shown briefly on the screen, which is then cited in support of the author's conclusions:

If they look similar to you you're not alone. According to the website *Twins Or Not* they are declared 'Virtual Twinsies'. What's the likelihood of finding a doppelganger out there in the real world, just a random? According to this University of Adelaide researcher, in excess of one-in-a-trillion. So if you think that the facial similarities are remarkable you're not alone, but it doesn't stop there.

Here the author uses newness, definiteness, and fullness, through the engagement of the semantic field of scientific rigour: 'likelihood', 'doppelganger', 'random', 'researcher'. The video switches rapidly through new images and ideas (newness), all of which are highly specific (definiteness) but are, on closer inspection, also highly atomised and not particularly relevant to one another. First, the actual 'evidence' of the facial similarities between the two specific women under discussion is presented, which is a screenshot of an Entertainment app *Twins Or Not* (see Figure 1 below) into which the author has uploaded images of Donna and Susan respectively. The video and narration then quickly switches to a new and definite attractor in the form of a web page with the abstract for an academic study regarding the rarity of 'doppelgangers' from a definite location '*the* University of Adelaide' with the definite and large quantifier 'in excess of one-in-a-trillion', and attributes salience to the 'Virtual Twinsies' rating on this basis. Again this presents the degree of similarity, especially

through the use of the noun phrase ‘doppelgangers’ as highly aesthetically different from the norm. The attractors collectively convey a sense of fullness in the form of a dense and complete case of ‘scientific’ evidence. The crucial buried element is displayed on the author’s own screenshot, which shows that the app in fact lists the two women’s similarity rating as 64%.

“@@ Insert Figure 1 here”

Thus a fictive discourse – that the two women are scientifically proven to be the same person, so low are the chances of this not being the case – is incorporated into the narrative through a misattribution of prominence and importance to supportive nonfictive elements coupled with omissions and burying of dissenting ones.

### **‘Distance Resemblance’**

The author also makes a number of appeals in Video One to the significance of ‘distance resemblance’. This takes the form of attributing relevance to the fact that Donna and Susan both lived approximately twenty miles south of the sites at which their daughters were (according to the author, allegedly) killed. This is established using addresses for the two women that the author has located online, and the claim is accompanied by a visual side-by-side comparison of the two routes between the respective houses and murder scenes from *Google Maps* (which I have not included because, whilst it is not possible to establish whether these are indeed the two women’s homes, it remains inappropriate to reproduce such private information in this context). The maps do, however, show similar distances and

routes; a relatively straight path from A to B. Thus here again the author uses nonfictive information to construct a fictional narrative. Why this ‘distance similarity’ bears any relevance to anything is not just under-specified, it is omitted entirely:

This is her [Donna Soto’s] address in Connecticut and how far is it from the scene of the crime? Twenty miles. Keep that in mind. This is the mother of Heather Heyer in Charlottesville. This is her address in Virginia. How far is it from the scene of that crime? My goodness, twenty miles. What are the odds? And look at the facial resemblance, it's uncanny. Distance resemblance. Facial resemblance. My goodness!

Then later in Video One this claim is repeated:

uncannily similar in facial features living similar distances, each lady, from the scene of the crime: twenty miles and twenty miles.

Here the author uses definiteness and under-specification in concert with one another to simultaneously figure this similarity and bury the fact that it has no meaningful connection to their line of argument. There is rich definiteness and detail in the narration of the spatial locations and distances being referred to: the specific quantifier ‘twenty’ miles is repeated four times, along with three precise geographical sites: Connecticut, Virginia and Charlottesville. Interesting too is the inclusion of the metacognitive imperative ‘keep that in mind’, repeated twice in Video One, which overtly instructs the listener to figure these elements of the discourse as though they carry importance. At the same time, there is no attempt to offer an interpretation of these nonfictive elements that would link them to the author’s claims that they prove his fictive false flag narrative.

## Conclusion

Reflecting on the patterns of attentional prominence and attributed salience explored throughout this analysis, a clear picture emerges of a narrator who is uncritical of both the connections they draw between the events of Sandy Hook and Charlottesville and the appropriate amount of interpretive weight to afford them. The potential reasons for this are manifold, and each has different implications for any assessment of authorial belief. There is research that finds a significant correlation between conspiracy theory belief and reduced levels of analytical thinking (Swami et al., 2014) and this does offer one account of the numerous gaps in logic observable throughout the two videos. This account does appear to fit with some of the incontrovertible misapplications of evidence deployed in support of some of the author's conclusions, in particular the assertion that the odds of Susan Bro and Donna Soto being doppelgangers is 'one-in-a-trillion' when offering proof of this via of an app categorised as 'Entertainment' with the author's own screenshot listing the similarity of the two images of the women as 64%. In terms of fictionality studies, this raises important questions about an author's ability to distinguish fact from fiction, a skill the field typically assumes authors possess, and in fact acts as a pre-condition for such pragmatic approaches to separating fictive and nonfictive discourses according to reasonable inferences about authorial intention.

An equally sound alternative account is that both videos are acts of 'wilful deception', perhaps for the author's own amusement. The enactor of the author narrating the videos certainly presents as believing that their narrative contains solely nonfictive discourse, but in the age of the internet where readers have only the text to assess, with all biographical information about the author shielded in a cloak of anonymity intent is often impossible to



identify. This fundamentally problematises Nielsen et al.'s (2015) claim that “fictive discourse is clearly distinct from lying, since lies are designed to be taken as referring to actual states of affairs” (p. 63). Coupled with the possibility raised above that a person could very well believe their own constructed fiction *to be* an ‘actual state of affairs’, this study suggests that the parsing of fictive discourse and lying needs revisiting.

A final, in this author's view most plausible, explanation can be drawn from the wealth of research from cognitive psychology that highlights that conspiracy belief is closely associated with a low tolerance for uncertainty or ambiguity, which can provoke feelings of anxiety (Grzesiak-Feldman, 2013; van Prooijen & Jostmann, 2013). This account gives rise to a category of authorial intention neglected by fictionality studies: ‘would like to believe’ or perhaps ‘determined to believe’. For it does seem that both transcripts can be characterised as being narrated from the point of view of someone absolutely determined to believe that the four women are two crisis actors and, inferentially, that both events were staged. One interpretation of this that could be offered is that the author has constructed for themselves a fiction to alleviate psychological discomfort by trying to convince themselves of its veracity. This is achieved by assembling a version of the events of Sandy Hook and Charlottesville by zooming attentional prominence onto a small collection of real pieces of information and backgrounding or outright ignoring all other elements that would challenge its nonfictive status. To some it may be easier to live in a world where the murder of twenty six small children and their teachers is staged rather than one where it really happens. This again problematises using even pragmatic assessments of authorial intention as the means by which to determine whether a discourse is intended to be fictive or nonfictive: what if the author truly does not know what they believe? What if the author really wants to believe what they say is true but knows deep down that it isn't, or vice versa?

Ultimately, the narrative presented over the course of these two videos is clearly not accurate according to any logical assessment of its content, and in that sense it should properly be designated as containing a wealth of fictive discourse, built on a foundation of factual, but arbitrarily related, information. Whether this is known to the author – what their ‘intent’ was – is impossible to ascertain, though they do certainly present themselves as strongly believing in its status as fact. Regardless of intent, it is important to note that the narrative is assembled from many nonfictive elements: the author has made fiction out of fact (Iverson & Nielsen, 2016). Thus, this study has demonstrated that in any investigation of fictionality, it is vital to look not only at what a narrative contains, but at the prominence and salience afforded to its various components. Cognitive stylistics, specifically figure-ground analysis, provides the ability to perform just such an examination.

## References

- Abalakina-Paap, M., Stephan, W. G., Craig, T., & Gregory, L. (1999), Beliefs in conspiracies, *Political Psychology* 20: 637–647.
- Barton, S. B., & Sanford, A. J. (1993). A case study of anomaly detection: Shallow semantic processing and cohesion establishment. *Memory & cognition*, 21(4), 477-487.
- Bjerg, O. & Presskorn-Thygesen, T. (2017), Conspiracy theory: Truth claim or language game?. *Theory, Culture and Society*, 34(1), 137–59.
- Brotherton, R., & French, C. C. (2014). Belief in conspiracy theories and susceptibility to the conjunction fallacy. *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, 28, 238–248.

- Bruder, M., Haffke, P., Neave, N., Nouripanah, N., & Imhoff, R. (2013), 'Measuring individual differences in generic beliefs in conspiracy theories across cultures: Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire', *Frontiers in Psychology* 4: 1-15.
- Coady, D. (2003). Conspiracy theories and official stories. *International Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 17(2), 197–209.
- Coady, D. (2006). *Conspiracy theories: The philosophical debate*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Coady, D. (2007). Are conspiracy theories irrational?. *Episteme*, 4(2), 193–204.
- Cohn, D. (1990). Signposts of fictionality. *Poetics Today*, 11(4), 755–804.
- Cohn, D. (1999). *The distinction of fiction*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.
- Douglas, K. M., Sutton, R. M. & Cichocka, A. (2017). The psychology of conspiracy theories. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 26(6), 538–42.
- Emmott, C. & Alexander, M. (2014). Foregrounding, burying and plot construction. In P. Stockwell & S. Whiteley (Eds.) *The Cambridge Handbook of Stylistics* (pp.329–343). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gerrig, R.J. (1993) *Experiencing Narrative Worlds: On the Psychological Activities of Reading*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press
- Gibbons, A. (2012). *Multimodality, cognition and experimental literature*. London/New York: Routledge.
- Giovanelli, M. & Mason, J. (2018). *The language of literature: An introduction to stylistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Goertzel, T. (1994). Belief in conspiracy theories. *Political Psychology*, 15, 731–742.
- Grzesiak-Feldman, M. (2013). The effect of high-anxiety situations on conspiracy thinking. *Current Psychology*, 32, 100–118.
- Hamburger, K. (1993). *The logic of literature* (2nd ed.; M. J. Rose, Trans.). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

- Hatavara, M. & Mildorf, J. (2017). Hybrid fictionality and vicarious narrative experience. *Narrative*, 25(1), 65–82.
- Heaps, C. & Nash, M. (2001). Comparing recollective experiences in true and false autobiographical memories. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory and Cognition*, 27, 920–930.
- Iversen, S. & Nielsen, H. S. (2016). The politics of fictionality in documentary form: *The act of killing* and *The ambassador*. *European Journal of English Studies*, 20(3), 249–262.
- Kearns, E. M., Conlon, B. & Young, J. K. (2014). Lying about terrorism. *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 37(5), 422–439.
- Labov, W. (1972). *Language in the inner city: Studies in the black english vernacular*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Leman, P. J., & Cinnirella, M. (2013). Beliefs in conspiracy theories and the need for cognitive closure. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 4, 1–10.
- Lewandowsky, S., Oberauer, K., & Gignac, G. E. (2013). NASA faked the moon landing—Therefore, (climate) science is a hoax: An anatomy of the motivated rejection of science. *Psychological Science*, 24, 622–633.
- Loftus, E. & Pickerell, J. (1995). The formation of false memories. *Psychiatric Annals*, 25, 720–725.
- Nielsen, H. S., Phelan, J. & Walsh, R. (2015). Ten theses about fictionality. *Narrative*, 23(1), 61–73.
- Pace, L. A. & Livingston, M. M. (2005). Protecting human subjects in internet research. *Electronic Journal of Business Ethics and Organization Studies*, 10(1), 35–41.
- Perry, B. & Szalavitz, M. (2006) *The Boy Who Was Raised as a Dog: And Other Stories from a Child Psychiatrist's Notebook*. USA: Basic Books.

- Pigden, C. (1995). Popper revisited, or what is wrong with conspiracy theories?. *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 25(1), 3–34.
- Pigden, C. (2007). Conspiracy theories and the conventional wisdom. *Episteme*, 4(2), 219–232.
- Phelan, J. (2016). Local fictionality within global non-fiction: Roz Chast’s *Why can’t we talk about something more pleasant?* *Enthymema*, 16, 19–31.
- Porter, S., Yuille, J.C. & Lehman, D.R. (1999). The nature of real, implanted, and fabricated memories for emotional childhood events: implications for the recovered memory debate. *Law and Human Behavior*, 23(5), 517–537.
- Rosenblatt, L. (1938). *Literature as exploration*. New York: D. Appleton-Century.
- Rosenblatt, L. (1978). *The reader, the text, the poem: The transactional theory of the literary work*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Sanford, A. (2002). Context, attention, and depth of processing during interpretation. *Mind and Language*, 17(1-2), 188–206.
- Sanford, A. & Emmott, C. (2014). *Mind, brain and narrative*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sanford, A. & Sturt, P. (2002). Depth of processing in language comprehension: Not noticing the evidence. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 6(9), 382–386.
- Scott Terry, W. (2009). *Learning and memory: basic principles, processes and procedures*. (4th ed.). Boston: Pearson Education Inc.
- Spilioti, T. & Tagg, C. (2017). The ethics of online research methods in applied linguistics. *Applied Linguistics Review*, 8(2-3), 163–168.
- Stockwell, P. (2009). *Texture: A cognitive aesthetics of reading*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Swami, V., Voracek, M., Stieger, S., Tran, U. S., & Furnham, A. (2014). Analytic thinking reduces belief in conspiracy theories. *Cognition*, 133, 572–585.

Wood, M. J., Douglas, K. M. & Sutton, R. S. (2012). Dead and alive: Belief in contradictory conspiracy theories. *Social Psychology and Personality Science*, 3(6), 767–773.

van Prooijen, J. W., & Jostmann, N. B. (2013). Belief in conspiracy theories: The influence of uncertainty and perceived morality. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 43, 109–115.

VICE. (2018). The rise of the crisis actor conspiracy movement [video file]. Retrieved from [https://video.vice.com/en\\_us/video/vice-hysteria-the-rise-of-the-crisis-actor-conspiracy-movement/5a830d13f1cdb335993dd871](https://video.vice.com/en_us/video/vice-hysteria-the-rise-of-the-crisis-actor-conspiracy-movement/5a830d13f1cdb335993dd871)

FIGURE ONE: ‘Author’s screenshot from *Twins Or Not* in support of his claim the two women shown are the same “crisis actor”

