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# From Alerting the World to Stabilizing Its Own Community: The Shifting Cultural Work of the *Loose Change* Films

Michael Butter and Lisa Retterath

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**Abstract:** Drawing on theoretical concepts developed by Mark Fenster in his analysis of contemporary conspiracy theories, this essay engages the online film *Loose Change*, which constitutes the most prominent conspiracy theory formed in the wake of the attacks of 11 September 2001. The different versions of the documentary, released between April 2005 and November 2007, perform markedly different kinds of cultural work. While the earlier versions try to construct a community of conspiracy theorists by alerting the world to alleged holes in the official account of what happened that day, the final cut attempts to stabilize the online community that the earlier versions managed to bring about. By way of conclusion we therefore propose that a focus on the kinds of communities that conspiracy theories have helped form and stabilize throughout American history might prove a fruitful area of investigation.

**Keywords:** twenty-first century American culture, 9/11, conspiracy theory, *Loose Change*, online communities, capitalism, paranoia

**Résumé :** Le présent essai s'appuie sur les concepts théoriques élaborés par Mark Fenster dans son analyse des théories contemporaines de conspiration et engage le film en ligne *Loose Change*, qui constitue la théorie de conspiration la plus importante formée dans la foulée des attaques du 11 septembre 2001. Nous faisons valoir que les versions différentes du documentaire, mises en circulation entre avril 2005 et novembre 2007, ont présenté des types sensiblement différents de travail culturel. Bien que les versions précédentes tentent de construire une communauté de théoriciens de la conspiration en alertant le monde aux trous présumés du compte rendu officiel de ce qui est arrivé ce jour-là, le montage final tente de stabiliser la communauté en ligne à ce que les versions précédentes ont

réussi à faire naître. En conclusion, nous proposons que l'accent mis sur les types de communautés que les théories en matière de conspiration ont aidé à former et à stabiliser durant toute l'histoire de l'Amérique puisse se révéler un domaine utile d'enquête.

**Mots clés :** culture américaine du vingt et unième siècle, 9/11, théorie de la conspiration, *Loose Change*, communautés en ligne, capitalisme, paranoïa

Ours, it seems, is the age of conspiracy theory. While such theories have played a crucial role both in the buildup to the American Revolution and the Civil War, as historians Bernhard Bailyn and David Brion Davis demonstrated several decades ago, the advent of postmodernity appears to have taken conspiratorial thinking to a new level. Events like the assassination of John F. Kennedy or, more recently, the attacks of 11 September 2001, with which we are concerned here, have given rise to a plethora of conspiracy theories that circulate globally in novels and fiction films and as allegedly factual accounts of what “really” happened. For some critics, such as Samuel Coale, such “factual” conspiracy theories are a paranoid reaction to the so-called postmodern condition—a desperate effort to structure and render meaningful a world that appears otherwise entirely fragmented and contingent (4). Other scholars, however, have suggested that a conspiratorial mindset constitutes an effective response to the cultural, political, and economic conditions of globalization. Fredric Jameson, for example, regards conspiracy theories as a form of the cognitive mapping he champions and thus calls them “the beginning of wisdom” (3). The middle ground in this debate is occupied by a scholar like Mark Fenster, who, on the one hand, stresses that conspiracy theories are usually “simplistic and wrong,” but who, on the other hand, also emphasizes that, driven “by a utopian desire to understand . . . the contradictions and conflicts of contemporary capitalism,” they constitute “one of the few socially symbolic attempts in contemporary culture to confront and represent totality” (116).

Sharing Fenster’s position, we engage a supposedly real conspiracy theory in this essay—the extremely successful online documentary *Loose Change*, which challenges the official narrative of the events of 11 September 2001 and suggests that forces other than al-Qaida were at work that day. After briefly addressing the general characteristics of conspiracy narratives and the *Loose Change* phenomenon in two shorter sections, we discuss the earlier versions of *Loose Change* and then the final cut, which, we argue, performs a markedly

different cultural function. While the earlier versions seek “to interpellate [the] audience as conspiracy theorists” (Fenster 17), the final cut attempts to stabilize the conspiracy community the other versions have helped to form. By way of conclusion, we then suggest that a focus on the kinds of communities that conspiracy theories have helped to form throughout the modern age might prove a fruitful area of investigation—one that would allow scholars to finally overcome the still predominant notion that conspiracy theorizing has always been a pathological practice engaged in only by isolated and paranoid individuals from the fringes of society.<sup>1</sup>

### The Characteristics of the Conspiracy Narrative

Treating conspiracy theories as attempts to interpret and narrativize reality, Mark Fenster has provided the most elaborate account so far of what one might call the poetics of postmodern conspiracy theory. According to Fenster, the typical conspiracy narrative, no matter if fictional or allegedly factual, must be understood as an attempt “to unify seemingly disparate, globally significant elements and events within a singular plot” (108). Hence, the narrative is characterized not only by its global scale—forging and naturalizing obscure connections between disparate people and events—but also by the breathtaking speed with which it moves from event to event and adds “fact” after “fact.” Fenster employs the term *velocity* to refer to “the geographic, geopolitical, and cognitive aspects of the conspiracy narrative’s speed” that passes on the experience of those who have “detected” the conspiracy to the recipients of their account of the discovery (122).

Conspiracy narratives, he argues, tend to accelerate even more at particular key moments—he calls them “narrative pivots” (111)—in the unveiling of the conspiracy at which, by establishing connections between what had been isolated and hence puzzling occurrences, the investigators as well as those reading or watching the story of their investigation make a decisive step forward in putting the puzzle together. In fictional conspiracy narratives, at some point, enough evidence is accumulated to foil the conspiracy and to restore order; in “putatively real conspiracy narratives” this achievement marks the moment to go public (122). In both cases, though, the conspiracy narrative tends to resist any definite closure. In fiction, the conspirators are often not entirely defeated and frequently shown to be on the rise again at the end of the novel or film. For “real” conspiracies, obviously, closure can be achieved

only once the villains exposed by the narrative are removed from power.

The resistance to closure is a consequence of the conspiracy theory's demand for "continual interpretation": "[W]ithin a system that respects no limits in its assumption about the secret treachery of true political power," there is always new evidence available, "always something more to know" (77; Fenster's emphasis). In other words, when every object, act, or occurrence is regarded as meaningful, the narrative must incorporate each new detail. The overall direction and design of the narrative, however, remain completely unchanged by the new information, as "the information of that evidence is already formed. Interpretation may be endless, but it is contained within the explication of the conspiracy" (78). Therefore, because the conspiracy narrative aims to present a watertight argument by integrating each new piece of information, it also displays a strong tendency to "excess and incoherence"—a fact that is grist to the mill of its critics (107).

### The Loose Change Films

In this article we draw on Fenster's observations in order to analyze what may be the most prominent conspiracy theory formed in the wake of 11 September 2001: the online film *Loose Change*, a feature-length documentary that tries to cast doubt on the official account of the events and implies that at least parts of the administration played a major role in orchestrating the attacks. Combining news footage with amateur videos and animated sequences with interviews, *Loose Change*, released in April 2005, quickly turned into the "first Internet blockbuster," as *Vanity Fair* put it (Sales). Several million people worldwide have watched the film online on YouTube.com or downloaded the file either from Google Video or the website specifically set up for this purpose. The fact that, in 2006, the film was parodied on the *South Park* episode "Mystery of the Urinal Deuce" indicates how swiftly *Loose Change* came to synecdochically represent the mistrust of a considerable group of people concerning the official account of the events of 9/11.

Almost immediately following its release, the film received considerable attention from both domestic and international media, and experts were called on to discuss (and refute) its claims that a cruise missile and not a plane hit the Pentagon, or that the twin towers could not have been brought down by the hijacked planes

alone and only collapsed because explosives had been installed inside the buildings. Moreover, the controversy about the film also took place online on the forum and the blog belonging to the film's own website where a group of followers and a group of critics emerged immediately. A little later, the blog *Screw Loose Change* was set up to dispel not only the movie's arguments but all conspiracy theories surrounding 9/11.

Reacting to continued criticism as well as support, the conspiracy theorists behind *Loose Change*, twenty-three-year-old director and editor Dylan Avery, twenty-four-year-old producer Korey Rowe, and twenty-seven-year-old producer and designer Jason Bermas, released the revised and technically improved *Loose Change: 2nd Edition* in December 2005 and *Loose Change: 2nd Edition Recut* in June 2006. Replacing claims from previous editions that had been found insupportable even by those who generally believed the film's argument, the filmmakers thus turned *Loose Change* into what Pat Reagan has aptly called a "living documentary" (1). While the addition or substitution of evidence, unsurprisingly, did not affect *Loose Change's* main argument, the filmmakers thus nevertheless fashioned themselves as the very opposite of narrow-minded conspiracy theorists: they projected themselves as open to criticism and eager to collaborate with their audience, which they invited to help spinning the conspiracy theory.

In November 2007, then, Avery and his team released the substantially altered *Loose Change Final Cut*. What we will focus on in this article are the differences between this final cut and the earlier versions. We contend that while the differences among the earlier versions are negligible, the final cut, as a result of a completely new narrative structure, rhetoric, and publication policy, performs a markedly different kind of cultural work. The earlier versions, we argue in the next section, deploy a variety of strategies to alert viewers to "the truth" about 9/11; the final cut, which we examine in the final section, makes use of a different set of strategies to consolidate the community of skeptics that the earlier versions have helped to form. While the earlier versions thus try to construct a community of conspiracy theorists, the last one, then, attempts to stabilize this community. Moreover, with the release of the "final cut" *Loose Change* ceases to be a living documentary, as this version's account of what happened on 9/11 claims to be the definite one.

### Alerting the World

As Fenster, who dedicates a few pages to the film in the revised edition of his book, remarks, “*Loose Change* deploys all the interpretive and narrative practices [my] book identifies” (17). As a consequence, watching the earlier versions of *Loose Change* for the first time is an experience apt to overwhelm the viewer. The film moves back and forth in time at breath-taking speed, forges connections between forgotten as well as heavily mediated events, and bombards the spectator with information. Some sections of the film condense long periods of real time to a few seconds of film, while others stretch out a relatively short period of real time over a filmic segment of several minutes, creating a very specific rhythm. Whenever the narrative approaches one of its many pivots—the Pentagon was not hit by a passenger plane, the WTC was brought down by explosives installed inside the buildings, Flight 93 landed safely in Cleveland—it invariably accelerates so that, without a moment to reflect on what is presented, the viewer is forced to forge and accept allegedly compelling links between, for instance, aircraft wingspans, mathematical equations, and the destructive power of cruise missiles.

Since it represents the most powerful narrative pivot in the film, we will focus on the Pentagon sequence here in order to describe the rhetorical and narrative strategies the earlier versions employ as well as the cultural work they perform. In order to avoid the confusion that might arise from discussing various versions simultaneously, we take *Loose Change: 2nd Edition Recut* to represent the earlier versions in this section. At twenty minutes, the Pentagon sequence is one of the longest sections in the movie, but it is barely long enough to contain all the alleged “evidence” accumulated to refute the official version of events. The sequence can be divided into eight sub-sequences, each of them dedicated to a particular piece of “evidence” and performing the circular interpretation that Fenster has identified as characteristic of the conspiracy discourse: each interpretive step only affirms what has been known all along, as the conclusion that a conspiratorial force was at work has been predetermined at the outset.

Compiling, among other things, a broad range of video footage, eyewitness reports, and computer simulations, the sequence as a whole suggests that “facts” such as the rather small impact hole in the outer wall of the Pentagon, the small scratches on the

lawn, and the negligible amount of debris on the Pentagon's property severely undermine the claim that a jet was steered into the complex. Moreover, the government's refusal to release confiscated videotapes from locations in close proximity to the Pentagon, the film claims, corroborates the notion that the US government is hiding the "truth" about the events. In fact, distrust in the US government is (re)created by the very first shot of the sequence: a rather insignificant quote by former secretary of defense Donald Rumsfeld is rendered suspicious by the way it is presented. Reproduced in white script on black ground, Rumsfeld's remark occupies the screen for several seconds and is left uncommented on by Dylan Avery, whose voice-over narration provides the audience with interpretive clues throughout the film. In this case, however, it is Avery's pointed silence that immediately suggests to the viewer that something must be wrong with this statement—and thus sets the tone for what is to come.

Although the disparate events in the sequence are hardly ever logically connected with one another, the smart deployment of editing devices suggests bridges and logical connections that are not really there. By juxtaposing, for instance, the crash sites of various airplanes, alleged inconsistencies in the official account are stressed. That each aircraft naturally leaves a distinct crash site and that comparing different aircrafts and their crash sites is thus of no real value is, it seems, purposely disregarded. In analogous fashion, images of buildings hit by cruise missiles are put next to images of the damaged Pentagon in order to imply that it is much more likely that a US-controlled rocket hit the building than a jet hijacked by terrorists.<sup>2</sup>

To make sure that its audience cannot harbour second thoughts about, let alone challenge, these and many similarly dubious conclusions, the Pentagon sequence moves at incredible speed. Accentuated by hip hop beats, the film floods its viewers with information in the form of newspaper articles, computer simulations, as well as still and moving images from the crash site at the Pentagon. This orgy of facts and figures climaxes in the fifth segment, which addresses the reputed inconsistencies between the damage done to the Pentagon and the kind of destruction that, according to the filmmakers, a Boeing 757, crashing frontally into a building, should wage. Here, for a few minutes, the film does without music, leaving Avery's voice-over to occupy the audio track. Then, just as the computer-simulated crash of the aircraft into the Pentagon takes place,



the intradiegetic sound of the engines blends into yet another extradiegetic hip hop beat whose persistence until the end of the segment makes it appear as if what follows is a coherent argument. From this moment onwards, the movie accelerates yet another time, one detail follows the previous one even more rapidly than before, and Avery deploys his pseudoscientific vocabulary in such staccato fashion that the viewers have less opportunity than ever to escape or question his conclusions.

However, in order to contain the danger of completely overwhelming the audience with the dazzling amount of information, and to suggest that the viewers are still on top of the argument, bird's-eye shots provided by Google Earth are now repeatedly inserted into the narrative. These aerial shots give the viewer the impression of being both literally and figuratively provided with an overview of the information offered and thus put in control of it. Such control, of course, remains an illusion on the part of the viewer. Rather, it is once again the filmmakers who are in charge. Not only do they decide what pieces of information are passed on to the audience; by controlling the editing and its rhythm they also decide in which order their evidence is received, how much time the viewers are given to digest each bit—and when they are “allowed” a few seconds to let it all sink in.

Through such devices, the Pentagon sequence is certainly the most persuasive section in the film. And yet, there are inconsistencies that even the most artful editing technique cannot disguise. Thus, for example, some parts of the sequence suggest that a military plane hit the Pentagon and present alleged evidence for this theory, while others imply that it was a cruise missile. These and other apparent contradictions, though, are contained on a higher level: neither the sequence as such nor the documentary as a whole tries to provide a definite answer to what happened; they are content to cast doubt on the official account.

Significantly, in leaving open what exactly hit the Pentagon, the sequence performs on the micro-level what the documentary conducts on the macro-level: it undermines the accepted version of 9/11 accounts, raises doubts, and fuels suspicion without offering a definite counter-narrative, let alone naming those it holds responsible. The film “merely” suggests that 9/11 was not orchestrated by Osama bin Laden and that members of al-Qaida were not—or at

least not alone—involved in carrying out the attacks. Paradoxically, it is exactly this vagueness that furnishes the filmmakers' claim of a conspiracy surrounding the events of 9/11 with credibility and makes *Loose Change* such a prototypical conspiracy narrative. The conspiracy in and by itself is so elusive that even those who have uncovered it—Dylan Avery and his crew—cannot really pin down the conspirators. They can only name the forces behind the conspiracy in the most general and populist terms: the US government and capitalism.

More than anything else, this absence of a positive account of who did what on 11 September 2001 has enabled the filmmakers to assume a stance of apparent openness and alleged neutrality vis-à-vis their audience—and turned the earlier versions of *Loose Change* into a living documentary. Highlighting the fact that the conspiracy theory is not yet complete and that the filmmakers are thus dependent upon their audience's input, the whole film, then, does implicitly what Dylan Avery's final address to the viewer does explicitly. Against the backdrop of an American flag—the symbolic equivalent to the shot of the Statue of Liberty with which the film opens—Avery's voice-over reaches its greatest intensity, as he delivers what Fenster has called "the narrator's final call to arms" (278):

America has been hijacked. Not by Al Qaeda. Not by Osama bin Laden. But by a group of tyrants, ready and willing to do whatever it takes to keep their stranglehold on this country. So what are we going to do about it? Anything. Share this information with friends, family, total strangers. Hold screenings, conferences, whatever you have to do to get the word out. It's up to you. Ask questions! Demand answers!

Avery's appeal exudes a strange mixture of openness and explicit directions. On the one hand, his call leaves it to the audience how they will spread the message and how they will contribute to the advancement of "truth"; on the other, all possible action revolves around *Loose Change* itself, as it is the message of the film that the viewers are to pass on. The film, in other words, seeks to turn its viewers into conspiracy theorists and projects itself as the founding text of a conspiracy community that will at some point in the future be able to offer a definitive account of what happened on 11 September 2001.

### Affirming the Community: The Final Cut

Released fifteen months later, *Loose Change Final Cut*, by contrast, suggests from the outset that Avery's urgent demand to unite and act, in which the earlier versions culminate, has been answered by "the people," implying that a powerful community has indeed been founded around the movie. This new perspective is already introduced by the animated company logo that precedes the actual film. Obviously modelled upon the army line-ups and battle scenes in Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* movies, the camera pans around and then tracks back from a digitally created human figure that wears a shirt saying "Investigate 911" and raises its right fist into the sky. As the camera moves away from this figure in an ever-quicker fashion and thus widens the viewer's perspective, this figure is revealed to be only one among literally many thousands of exactly identical ones that finally dissolve into the company name "Louder Than Words." Unaffected by the digital rain that is pouring down on them, they all, the sequence suggests, have joined ranks and are determined to "ask questions and demand answers."

This suggestion is then made explicit by the first scene of the film itself. Whereas the earlier versions began with what the film implied was the pre-history of 9/11, going back as far as the 1960s, the final cut opens with a moment of 9/11 remembrance, the fifth anniversary of the attacks. While the camera pans along a line of real people clad in "Investigate 911" T-shirts, Dylan Avery's narrative voice declares, "On September 11, 2006, thousands from all over the world gathered in New York City, New York. They wore black shirts reading 'Investigate 911' and held banners that read 'Ask questions. Demand answers.'" The demonstrators, as a close-up of the street sign highlights, walked down Liberty Street. While, in reality, this was probably merely motivated by the fact that this is where the World Trade Center site is located, the location gains a larger symbolic significance in the film, as this allows *Loose Change* to cast the movement it claims to have inaugurated as a major step towards restoring one of the basic American values: liberty.

As a consequence, the scene not only takes up the ending but also returns to and re-interprets the beginning of the earlier versions, which opened with an aerial shot of the Statue of Liberty against the background of a Manhattan skyline, of which the World Trade Center was still a part. If the function of this opening was to stress "what was destroyed on that day" (Fenster 270), the different be-

ginning, we wish to suggest, already hints at the changed agenda of the final cut. Instead of looking only backwards to what was lost in September 2001—innocent lives as well as liberty—the film now also looks forward to restoring the damage done. This new perspective is also signified visually: the close-up of the street name highlights that it is a one-way street, implying that the community's activism will inevitably lead them towards success. Accordingly, the final cut is no longer exclusively concerned with turning a broad audience into a conspiracy community by exploring the past. It also attempts to stabilize the community that such earlier explorations have apparently managed to bring about.

What is impossible to pin down, however, is how big the community that the films have constructed actually is. Obviously not all of those who would consider themselves members of the community, be it because they have given money or participated in discussions on the film's online forum, could attend the demonstration. At the same time, it is equally unclear how many of those shown in the film were actually present at the gathering because of *Loose Change* and how many were there for other reasons and are claimed by the film for its own community. After all, the "Investigate 911" T-shirts are sold not only on *Loose Change's* but on dozens of other websites as well; they are worn by many members of the 911 Truth Movement who doubt the film's theory as much as the official account of what happened on 11 September 2001. Moreover, the camera never offers a vantage point from which to judge how many people actually gathered on the fifth anniversary of the attacks. The narrator speaks of "thousands," but the actual footage suggests that the numbers were more likely in the low hundreds—an estimation backed up by the fact that the media, which had reported widely on 9/11 conspiracy theories during the build-up to the anniversary, do not mention a gathering of doubters in articles dedicated to this day of commemoration.

The film, then, has definitely constructed a community, albeit one whose size remains unknown to the critic and, as a result of the precarious status of all online communities, also to the filmmakers themselves. However, it is highly likely that allegiance to the community peaked around the time the demonstration took place. Contributors to the online forum were most active at that time, the website was redesigned in a more professional fashion, new features that we discuss below were added, *Loose Change: 2nd Edition Recut* was downloaded a few million times, and, generally,

“interest in 9/11 conspiracies and the truth movement appeared to peak” during these months (Fenster 356n123). It is therefore reasonable to assume that at this historical moment the filmmakers around Avery believed that the existing versions of *Loose Change* had performed their function of alerting those who could be alerted. As a result, we believe, they radically altered the final cut and assigned to it primarily the task of holding together “their” community. There is a community that can be joined, the final cut is to suggest to the yet-uninformed viewer. And those who have already been initiated are confirmed in their convictions and in their group allegiance.

Such speculations about the intentions of the filmmakers are ultimately as moot as they are futile. What can be stated with certainty, however, is that the final cut, intentionally or not, performs a markedly different cultural function, one that is produced by and simultaneously produces a vastly changed rhetoric and narrative structure. The final cut no longer tells a “gripping, dramatic story” (Fenster 119) that moves at breathtaking speed and desperately seeks to convince its viewers that the official story is a web of lies. Instead, it presupposes that the biggest part of its audience believes this already. Consequently, while the film, of course, continues to cast doubt on the official narrative of events, the urgency that characterizes the earlier versions has disappeared almost completely. The editing is less rapid, only rarely does the narrative jump back and forth in time, and non-diegetic music is used much more sparingly to suggest links between apparently unconnected events. The narrative simply assumes that such connections exist, although it occasionally calls on experts from within the conspiracy community to confirm its version of the events.

If the earlier versions drew the spectator into a race from narrative pivot to pivot (from the Pentagon to the WTC and then to Flight 93), adding revelation to revelation, the final cut severely undermines any “reading for the [conspiratorial] plot,” to borrow Peter Brooks’ expression (4), by breaking with the narrative structure of the earlier versions and drawing attention to its new structure by self-consciously employing captions and title cards. Opening with the “Prologue” discussed above, the argument is now divided into three acts, two of which are further subdivided into up to four chapters. Of these acts, only “Act 2” explores the actual attacks, moving from “Pentagon” via “WTC” and “Flight 93” to the newly added “WTC 7,” whose collapse the filmmakers present as the

ultimate proof that the destruction of all WTC buildings was an inside job for which the plane attacks served as a cover. "Act 1" introduces the "Hijackers," offering evidence for why they could not have done the job, and then, in the chapter "Wargames," claims that even if the hijackers had attempted the attacks, they could have been stopped easily by US forces, implying once again that "the government" let it happen or even caused it to happen. "Act 3" contains only the chapter "Aftermath," which once more debunks the findings of the 9/11 commission and strengthens the conspiracy community by underlining the justification of its claims.

However, it is not only the overall structure of the film that has been considerably altered, but individual sequences as well. The new Pentagon sequence, for example, no longer offers argument after argument for doubting that a jet hit the Pentagon, but assumes a more distanced, almost neutral stance. Over footage from news reports from the crash site, Avery says (in a fashion that might remind the literarily knowledgeable viewer of the "some say" sentences in the penultimate chapter of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*),

Opinions differ at this point. People that believe a 757 hit the Pentagon and people that don't. Those who believe a 757 did hit are fuelled by the damage path, wreckage outside the building, and eyewitness testimony. Those that think a 757 did not hit are fuelled by the damage to the building and lack of large structural debris outside. Particularly the lack of damage from the wings and vertical stabilizers and the fact that those objects as well as the engines were never fully recovered.

What is remarkable at first is that the film devotes as much time to those arguments that confirm the official version as to those that challenge it. This approach initially threatens to undermine the conspiracy theory the film promotes. After eyewitnesses have been given time to state once again that they clearly saw a passenger plane either passing them at low altitude or actually hitting the Pentagon, the counter-evidence looks extremely unconvincing, although Avery brings up some more "facts" that are supposed to strengthen the film's argument. The final cut is a world away from the urgency, speed, and one-sidedness with which earlier versions sought to overwhelm and convince the viewer. The reason is, first of all, that the final cut speaks primarily to those who already are conspiracy theorists and not to the unconvinced, thereby acknow-

ledging that there will always remain those who cannot be converted. But there is another reason: after the film has presented evidence for both positions, Avery suddenly introduces a new argument: "What hit the building," he declares, "may be important. However, our focus should be on why it was hit in the first place." Other than claiming that "important budget information was in the damaged area," though, the film itself does not provide an answer in this sequence, and the most obvious non-conspiratorial explanation (the building was hit because it is a symbol of American power, just as the WTC was a symbol of the power of capitalism) is not mentioned at all.

The answer eventually arrives in the "Epilogue" with which the film closes. Here Afghanistan, the Iraq war, the Patriot Act, and the largest deficit in history are projected as the results of 9/11. "Ask yourself," Avery finally commands, "would we be here today without 9/11?" Thus, in a schoolbook example of what Umberto Eco has called a "*post hoc, ergo ante hoc*" argument (51), the consequences of the attacks—the infringement of civil liberties, a strengthened executive branch, and a disastrous war—are turned into its cause—and into the penultimate proof that the Bush administration caused 9/11 or at least let it happen. The most pressing reason, though, to doubt the official narrative of 9/11 is, according to the final cut, that assuming the government's complicity makes for the most coherent narrative. Thus, the conspiracy narrative itself, though never spelt out as compellingly in the final version as in the earlier ones, becomes the ultimate piece of evidence; it carries the real explanatory power.

The differences to the earlier versions, then, could hardly be more pronounced. The final cut appropriates structural devices (acts and chapters) from classical epic and drama, because its storyline is already known to the audience—just as the plots of ancient plays and epics were well known to the audience beforehand. But if these literary forms usually presented a story that focused not so much on "what" as on "how," the final cut relates a story that revolves not around the question of "how" but of "why." In this story, 9/11 figures as a tragedy, as an event of the past whose tremendous repercussions in the present need to be tackled now that it has been understood and integrated into a narrative framework. The focus is therefore no longer on learning about the past, but on containing its impact on both the present and the future. The message passed on to the community is that the group should

now take appropriate actions in that direction. It should no longer demand answers but policy changes.

The shift of focus from “how” to “why” also means that *Loose Change* ceases to be a “living documentary,” a step already heralded by the notion of a “final” cut. Accordingly, the film must be understood as an attempt to achieve closure with regard to 9/11. It is no longer interesting, the movie argues, to investigate this event, because the small details that might emerge would not affect the larger picture. This does not mean, however, that there is no more investigative work to be done for the conspiracy community. Launching their new blog in March 2008, the filmmakers announced yet another shift of focus: “Almost three years after the release of the original *Loose Change*, we have decided to expand on commentary regarding a host of issues, not just 9/11 truth” (*Loose Change* 911). Since then, the blog has regularly reported on all kinds of alleged conspiracies ranging from the CIA aiding Nazi war criminals to right-wing attempts to manipulate the recent presidential elections. This broadening of the picture confirms Fenster’s observation that “[n]o conspiracy theory exists in isolation from others” and that they tend to merge and combine over time (158). While the *Loose Change* movies’ take on 9/11 appears to be “final” now indeed, the perspective of the *Loose Change* community on the attacks will further evolve when “knowledge” gathered on new conspiracies might be connected to 9/11.

The common enemy, which all conspiracy theories still in the making thus are bound to target more or less explicitly, it appears, is capitalism. “We are under CORPORATE CONTROL,” the filmmakers write in their first entry on the new blog, and in fact, throughout all versions of *Loose Change*, “capitalism” alongside the “government” already figures as the driving force behind the conspiracy. 9/11 was conducted or allowed to happen, the films suggest time and again, because some people made a lot of money out of it (through put options, insurance money, or Iraqi oil), and because it enabled the Bush government to restrict civil liberties and invade Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>3</sup>

The filmmakers’ relationship with capitalism, however, is more complex. *Loose Change* began as a “no budget” production (Fenster 269) whose first version could be printed on DVD only after online viewers had donated money. By the time the final cut was released, though, the film, as a result of its success, had proven a veritable



money-making machine. By then, an online store had already been set up for visitors to purchase not only DVDs but also other items such as rubber stamps, bumper stickers, and T-shirts demanding "Investigate 911." And, most significantly, the final cut, unlike the previous versions, is not available for free but available only on DVD.

The most obvious explanation for this changed distribution policy is that the final cut was far more expensive than the previous versions, since it includes a variety of specifically manufactured special effect sequences and interviews conducted for the purpose of including them in the film. While this was almost certainly a factor, we also suggest that the restricted access to the final cut can also be understood as connected to this version's cultural function as a piece of intra-community communication. By costing money, the final cut excludes all those unwilling to make—in the literal sense—a serious investment to the cause. At the same time, however, *Loose Change's* transformation into a money-making device indicates that the filmmakers have themselves, at least to a certain degree, fallen prey to capitalism. This, in turn, might then be read as the ultimate proof of the validity of their argument. The conspiracy is "all-encompassing," "always already (almost) everywhere" (Fenster 134), and finally swallows even those set out to fight it.

### Conclusion

For Mark Fenster, "[t]he idea of a 'conspiracy community' appears paradoxical" (14). He acknowledges, though, that such communities come into existence at "particular conjunctures" and then, albeit "often in contentious and stumbling ways," can bring about social and political action (15). Overall, however, Fenster regards "conspiracy" and "community" as diametrically opposed terms because, "[s]ceptical of each other, fearful of infiltration and surveillance by government groups, the conspiracy community is under continual threat of splitting or falling apart" and therefore never persists over a longer period of time (162).

At first sight, the fate of the *Loose Change* community seems to prove him right, as the final cut's attempt to stabilize this conspiracy community appears to have failed. The same could be said of the filmmakers' strategy of widening the focus of their blog to address and combine virtually all conspiracy theories in circulation. The vibrant discussions concerning the argument of the earlier ver-

sions of *Loose Change* are a thing of the past. Judging from the numbers of comments on individual articles that visitors to the website have left, interest in what one might call the *Loose Change* project has considerably declined over the past three years. Thus, when we drafted this article in the fall of 2008, we were convinced that the community would soon completely collapse. By now, however, we think that the situation is more complex.

As of May 2009, the community is still active. In fact, for the past few months, the blog has been rather lively again. Fuelled by the economic crisis, whose “conspiratorial causes” are frequently explored, new entries are now regularly commented on by fifteen or more visitors within a day or two. Consequently, the transition to exploring and combining all existing conspiracy theories seems to have been successful after all. While no doubt the *Loose Change* community is now much smaller than when interest in 9/11 conspiracy theories peaked, it is much more persistent than one might have expected. Accordingly, the concepts of “conspiracy” and “community” might be less antagonistic than Fenster argues. Even if, as he holds, “[t]he conspiracy researcher is by definition a loner who exists in continual fear of contamination by the conspiratorial other” (162)—in the case of *Loose Change*, Dylan Avery, who claims to have stumbled over the conspiracy while shooting a fiction film—the findings of this investigator can apparently form the basis of a community, albeit an unstable, provisional, and ever-shifting one, that helps him spread the word and finds collective purpose in supporting his argument.

It would be a fascinating endeavour to compare the *Loose Change* community to other conspiracy communities throughout history to bring to the fore the particularities of an online conspiracy community at the beginning of the twenty first century. At the moment, however, this is impossible, as virtually no research that such a comparative analysis could build on exists. The many hundred essays and books about real-life as well as fictional conspiracy theories listed by the MLA Bibliography concentrate almost exclusively on the post-Second World War era and centre on the individual. This combination is of course no coincidence. As the authors of these studies habitually stress, conspiracy theories seem to have steadily proliferated over the past decades. Moreover, post-modern conspiracy theories, no matter if fictional or factual, invite such a focus on the individual, as this brief list put together by Mark Fenster shows:

Robert Ludlum's characters work alone, as did Joseph Turner, Robert Redford's character in *Three Days of the Condor* (1975); JFK assassination conspiracy researchers are known for their vituperative condemnation of one another's work; and investigative journalist Danny Casolaro . . . died the archetypal conspiracy researcher's death—alone in a West Virginia hotel room, under suspicious circumstances, while tracking down sources. (162–63)

Many contemporary conspiracy theorists, it appears, are loners for a variety of reasons: they quickly learn that they cannot trust anybody, as the protagonists in Ludlum or the Redford movie do; they are envious of each other, as the JFK researchers are; or they are suffering from paranoia, as Danny Casolaro seems to have done toward the end of his life (Fenster 187).

What such a focus on the individual and its isolation and (potential) paranoia neglects, however, is that, as Robert Levine has put it, historically, “[c]onspiracy theories were expressed not only by ‘paranoiacs’ on the fringe but also by America’s most influential religious and political leaders” (5). Levine even suggests that conspiracy theories frequently functioned as “attempts to re-create community by calling attention to threats against it” (6). Published two decades ago, his study therefore explores, but by no means treats exhaustively, the social and cultural work performed by nativist, anti-Catholic, anti-Masonic, and other nineteenth-century conspiracy theories. His take, though, opens up two areas of research that should prove fruitful to literary and cultural studies scholars. Focusing on the community-building powers of conspiracy theories throughout the ages, future research could explore conspiracy theories prior to postmodernity and reconsider those conspiracy theories of the postmodern age that have so far been analyzed only under the headings of the isolation and/or paranoia of the individual. Treading either path, scholars would thus answer to the “real need to historicize conspiracy thought” (White 2).

### Notes

1. In October 2009, long after this essay had been submitted and accepted for publication, the filmmakers released yet another version of their movie entitled *Loose Change: An American Coup*. While we could not incorporate this film into our article, we stress that its release and rhetoric confirm the overall argument that we make here. Like *Final Cut, An American Coup* attempts to stabilize and affirm the conspiracy community that earlier versions have constructed. Moreover, pro-

- duced with a \$3.5 million budget and sold from a freshly designed American and a newly set up European online store, this version constitutes a further step in the commercialization of the *Loose Change* conspiracy theory.
2. Suggesting logical connections by juxtaposition is a technique the filmmakers employ throughout the film. The timeline *Loose Change* opens with, for example, introduces the viewer to the supposedly conspiratorial activities of the US government over a span of the last four decades. Although Dylan Avery as the voice-over narrator never explains the implications of these events, let alone connects them explicitly to 9/11, the film—by assigning them such a prominent position and arranging them as a countdown towards the attacks—leaves the viewers little choice but to establish such a connection. Later the same strategy is at work, such as in the juxtaposition of United Airlines Flight 93, which crashed near Shanksville, Pennsylvania, and Delta Airlines Flight 1989, which landed safely in Cleveland, Ohio, that same day. The artful arrangement, in one single frame, of computer simulations of both flights links these flights, even though there is no proof of an actual connection, and thus paves the way for the film's argument that Flight 93 did not crash but that it too landed safely in Cleveland.
  3. While Fenster regards *Loose Change's* refusal to blame a particular individual for the attacks as a departure from "the traditional populist style of story-telling" (277), we suggest that the film's blaming of "government" and "capitalism" constitutes rather the epitome of the populist drive that informs almost all contemporary conspiracy theories, as it constructs a dichotomy between an (allegedly) concrete group—the people—and elusive, secretive forces—government and/or capitalism—that can never be pinned down.

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