After the Final Full-Stop: Conspiracy Theories vs. Aesthetic Response in Miloš Urban's *Poslední tečka za rukopisy* (*The Final Full-Stop after the Manuscripts*)

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On 16 September 1817, Czech linguist Vacláv Hanka discovered a medieval manuscript in the crypt of St. John the Baptist in the church of Dvůr Králové, Bohemia. The manuscript contained six poems about important events that took place throughout Czech history and a collection of folk songs; all of the texts were written in Old Czech. Hanka dated the manuscript back to the thirteenth century and used them as demonstrable proof of a long-lasting Czech literary tradition. He translated the texts into modern Czech, which in turn served as the basis for a German translation. This translation was published in 1819 and was well-received throughout Western Europe. The manuscript was integral to the shaping of the Czech nation; for example, it inspired historian František Palacký to write his history of Bohemia, and parts of it were set to music by world-famous composer Antonín Dvořák.

The manuscript's authenticity was a topic that was heatedly debated from the outset; this was perhaps because Hanka's discovery was not the only one from that time. In 1816, Josef Linda—a close friend of Hanka—found another manuscript in Prague, and an anonymous scholar sent yet another manuscript, purportedly from the eighth century, to the National Museum in Prague in 1817. A plethora of scholars from diverse disciplines, such as linguistics, literary studies, history, chemistry, forensics, paleography, etc. tried to prove or disprove the au-

thenticity of the manuscripts; many prominent figures from Czech history had their say in the so-called "fight over the manuscripts" (*spor o rukopisy*). Nowadays, the various manuscripts 'found' by Hanka and Linda are considered to be fake, by and large, as a recent 900-page study argues;[1] only the Czech Manuscript Society (*Česká společnost rukopisná*) still insists on the benefit of remaining doubt, as a fairly recent book entitled *RKZ dodnes nepoznané* (*Manuscripts, to this Day Unrecognized*, 2017) demonstrates.[2]

Miloš Urban's debut novel *Poslední tečka za rukopisy* (*The Final Full-Stop After the Manuscripts*, 1998) is based on this 200-year-long "fight over the manuscripts." In the novel, the manuscripts are real and, therefore, an extra layer of conspiracy is added to the commonly accepted historical 'truth.' Hanka and Linda made the manuscripts seem forged not in order to harm the nascent Czech nation, but for another, even more sinister purpose: to abolish patriarchy. Moreover, the two scholars seem to have hidden identities. The novel's protagonist Josef and his girlfriend Marie slowly uncover what actually happened by means of painstaking archival research, and then Josef uses their findings to further his academic career.

Most critics view Urban's novel as a typical example of postmodern, meta-reflexive playfulness.[3] Not only are the protagonists in literary mystery novels written by Umberto Eco and Dan Brown professional scholars familiar with reading and interpretation, but the narrator often self-reflexively addresses the novel's readers. Moreover, the text offers meta-reflections on the process of reading, on the relationship between reader and text, and it also implicitly alludes to Wolfgang Iser's theory of aesthetic response.[4] In my opinion, these reflections and the focus on reading are not just examples of postmodernism, but these features are closely interlinked with the novel's plot-shaping conspiracy theory. Urban's novel points out how reading and misreading reality can be used to create conspiracy theories and, at the same time, uses artistic devices to illustrate these processes; oftentimes, the text deliberately leads its readers astray.

1 Cf. Dobiáš et al. 2014.

2 Cf. Nesměrák et al. 2017.

3 Aleš Haman (1999: 11) sees the text as a post-modern literary game, Vladimír Stanzel (1999: 4–5) understands it as a game that Urban plays with the reader, and Jiří Peňás (2002: 89) points out that the text is, in many ways, playing with the various set-pieces of the detective novel.

4 Iser's "Wirkungsästhetik" is often conflated with reader-response criticism, but Iser himself suggested translating the German term as "aesthetic response," cf. Iser 1980: x.

Thus, the hunt to uncover the 'truth' becomes a reader-oriented phenomenon throughout the text's multiple layers of truth and equally multiple layers of conspiracies.

In this chapter, I will attempt to show what might happen after the final full-stop of a "conspiracy narrative."[5] I argue that Iser's theory of aesthetic response applies not only to literary texts but can also be instructive in the context of conspiracy theories. I use Urban's novel as an example because it not only shows how readers shape a literary text to their liking, and how conspiracy theories are based on (mis-)reading reality, but it also intertwines these two strands. In the first section, I will focus on theories of conspiracy theories which I will then, in the subsequent section, examine alongside Iser's theory of aesthetic response. Both literary texts and conspiracy theories rely on reader agency; the only apparent difference is that in the case of conspiracy theories, it is not a text that is being (mis-)read, but all of reality. In the third section, I will summarize the plot and analyze Linda's and Hanka's feminist conspiracy in a close reading informed by the theory of aesthetic response. In the fourth section, I will reflect upon the connections between fact and fiction and draw further examples from Urban's novel.

Conspiracy Theory Theories

Before attempting to apply literary theory to conspiracy theories it is first necessary to reflect on their mutual relationship. Are conspiracy theories literary texts, even just to a certain extent? Following philosopher David Coady's definition of conspiracy theories, there are indeed certain links between them and fictional texts:

> A conspiracy theory is a proposed explanation of an historical event in which conspiracy (i.e., agents acting secretly in concert) has a significant causal role. Furthermore, the conspiracy postulated by the proposed explanation must be a conspiracy to bring about the historical event which it purports to explain. Finally, the proposed explanation must conflict with an 'official' explanation of the same historical event.[6]

5 Mark Fenster proposed the term "conspiracy narrative" to cover both fictional texts and real-world conspiracies, see Fenster 2008: 133–35.

6 Coady 2006: 117.

In other words, there are at least two different narratives involved in conspiracy theories: An 'official' one and a conspiratorial one. Both 'explain' historical events, and in so doing contradict each other. Given that the official explanation is *also* a narrative, similar techniques as those used in the conspiracy-informed theory have to be used. This realization is reminiscent of Hayden White, who has pointed out the influences of narrative patterns on historiography;[7] one should certainly not confuse an 'official' narrative with 'truth' or 'historical reality.' Following this understanding, the difference between conspiracy theories and official explanations becomes blurry: neither of them ought to be considered exclusively in terms of facts. However, there are differences to be found between official and conspiracy narratives. According to Brian L. Keeley, one key trait of conspiracy theories is that the conspirators have bad intentions.[8] In a similar vein, Michael Butter boils conspiracy theories down to "a group of evil agents, the conspirators, has assumed or is currently trying to assume control over an institution, a region, a nation, or the world."[9] Mark Fenster speaks about the "perpetrators of the evil conspiracy"[10] and Brotherton and French call the conspirators "a preternaturally sinister and powerful group of people."[11] The association of conspiracies with evil agents is not an unsurprising one: Following poststructuralist theory, Jack Z. Bratich detects a power divide between official discourses and conspiracy theories: "The scapegoating of conspiracy theories provides the conditions for social integration and political rationality. Conspiracy panics help to define the normal modes of dissent."[12] Similarly, Joseph E. Uscinski interprets conspiracy theories as an "accusatory perception."[13]

But conspiracy theories are not merely counterpoints to, and at the same time cornerstones for, 'official' truth and power; they are also a narrative game. In a way, the conspiracy theories' focus on evil makes for compelling stories; 'official' explanations, on the contrary, often follow the ideal of scientific objectivity—although they also have to be considered an expression of a specific ideological background. One constituent of a conspiracy theory's narrative—or more specifically semiotic—game is misunderstandings, as Michael Butter points out:

7 Cf. White 1973.

8 Cf. Keeley 2006: 51–52.

9 Butter 2014: 1.

10 Fenster 2008: 119.

11 Brotherton and French 2014: 238.

12 Bratich 2008: 11.

13 Uscinski 2018: 235.

Conspiracy theories are an expression … of a semiotic [crisis of representation] ... As the conspirators constantly disavow the intentions that conspiracy theorists ascribe to them, they are producing signs which … are supposed to mislead their unsuspecting victims.[14]

It has to be noted that Butter argues from the perspective of believers of conspiracy theories, i.e., the "unsuspecting victims." But Brotherton and French underline the fact that a conspiracy theory's success should not be attributed to the conspirators who are producing misleading signs; instead, it is the believers' lack of reasoning skills which makes conspiracy theories believable. Brotherton and French outline the psychological background for the belief in conspiracy theories in the following manner:

Under conditions of uncertainty, people's statistical intuitions are often at odds with objective laws of probability. In particular, people often misperceive the co-occurrence of the ostensibly unrelated events as being more likely than the occurrence of either component alone. The current findings suggest that … conspiracy theories, similar with other anomalous beliefs, are associated with reasoning biases and heuristics.[15]

Bias, misperception, and misinterpretation are rife and a conspiracy theory is a misreading of reality that people fall for because of their cognitive biases. Similar ideas have been voiced by both Brian L. Keeley, who argues that conspiracy theories operate on "errant data" in official explanations and link unrelated events,[16] and by Mark Fenster, who states that a "conspiracy narrative is compelling … in its attempt to explain a wide range of seemingly disparate past and present events and structures with a relatively coherent framework."[17] Again, I wish to point out that the official narrative is by no means to be confused with 'truth' or 'reality.' In fact, both the conspiracy theory and its conflicting official explanation are narratives that have a varying degree of realism and adherence to facts.

In sum, a conspiracy theory is a narrative and, at the same time, it is a sign-reading game. Thus, the connection between literature and conspiracy theories is twofold: On the one hand, a conspiracy theory is a narrative that resorts to strategies and artistic devices from fictional texts. On the other hand, conspiracy theories exemplify reading processes. They rely on the power of the (mis-)reader to

14 Butter 2014: 17–18.

15 Brotherton/French 2014: 246.

16 Keeley 2006: 51–52.

17 Fenster 2008: 119.

connect dots which are not necessarily connected. It is precisely this focus on the reader and her/his perception which has led me to subscribe to Wolfgang Iser's theory of aesthetic response which presents itself as a proper tool to analyze conspiracy theories. In the following sections, I will elaborate on this thought in greater detail.

An Aesthetic Response to Conspiracy Theories?

According to Wolfgang Iser, the readers are responsible for the consistency of a literary text. This is especially true of longer texts where it is crucial that the readers be able to 'connect the dots':

> Large-scale texts such as novels or epics cannot be continually 'present' to the reader with an identical degree of intensity … The reader is likened to a traveler in a stagecoach, who has to make the often difficult journey through the novel, gazing out from his moving viewpoint. Naturally, he combines all that he sees within his memory and establishes a pattern of consistency, the nature and reliability of which will depend partly on the degree of attention he has paid during each phase of the journey.[18]

The meanings that are produced from combining individual signs can, in turn, become signs which can be connected further. Textual elements may help the readers to associate individual signs of the text and, thus, bring forward the "gestalt" of the text, i.e., a consistent interpretation as opposed to a connection of random elements that create arbitrary meanings.[19] One of those textual elements that shapes text-reader interaction is the so-called "blank" (*Leerstelle*). In this case, the text 'does' nothing at all and leaves everything—i.e., its inner consistency—up to the reader:

> The blank … designates a vacancy in the overall system of the text, the filling of which brings about an interaction of textual patterns. In other words, the need for completion is replaced here by the need for combination … They [the blanks—G.H.] indicate that the different segments of the text *are* to be connected, even though the text itself does not say so. They are the unseen joints of the text, and as they mark off schemata and textual perspectives from one another, they simultaneously trigger acts of ideation on the reader's

18 Iser 1980: 16.

19 Cf. ibid.: 120.

part. Consequently, when the schemata and perspectives have been linked together, the blanks 'disappear.'[20]

In a way, a text is a superposition of multiple possibilities and interpretations that collapse only when the readers have subconsciously decided how they want to fill in the blanks. As Iser notes, the blanks "marshal selected norms … into a fragmented, counterfactual, contrastive or telescoped sequence, nullifying any expectation of *good continuation.*"[21] The reader then "cannot help but try and supply the missing links that will bring the schemata together in an integrated gestalt."[22] When conspiracy theories operate on "errant data" and focus on "blanks" in official narratives, it is not out of something like spite; this operation is simply a byproduct of the reading process. A conspiracy narrative is born when especially an official story cannot deliver what fulfills the readers' aforementioned "expectation of *good continuation*."

Iser also comments on the relationship between fact and fiction, between text and reality, which "are to be linked … in terms not of opposition but of communication, … fiction is a means of telling us something about reality."[23] However, the text can never make the connection to 'real' reality; instead, the reader can only

> … assemble the meaning toward which the perspectives of the text have guided him. But since this meaning is neither *a given external reality* nor a copy of an intended reader's own world, it is something that has to be ideated by the mind of the reader. A reality that has no existence of its own can only come into being by way of ideation, and so the structure of the text sets off a sequence of mental images which lead to the text translating itself into the reader's consciousness.[24]

A few pages later, Iser once again stresses that "no literary text relates to contingent reality as such, but to models or concepts of reality, in which contingencies and complexities are reduced to a meaningful structure."[25] A literary text cannot relate to 'reality,' but "must bring with it all the components necessary for the construction of the situation, since this has no existence outside the literary

20 Ibid.: 183, emphasis in original.

21 Ibid.: 186, emphasis in original.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.: 53.

24 Ibid.: 38, emphasis mine.

25 Ibid.: 70.

work."[26] In this regard it is not possible to distinguish between literary texts and conspiracy theories: both are to be read as self-contained *simulations* of reality, but both stress their connection to a contingent reality to a certain extent. For conspiracy theories this relation is a necessity, but it is also heavily implied in some literary genres such as historical novels, autobiographies or documentary fiction. It seems a bit unfair to blame conspiracy theories for something that also applies to literary texts, especially given that the label 'conspiracy theory' is often used as a discursive weapon. This realization opens up another parallel between conspiracy theories and literary texts: According to Iser, literary texts have a specific intention. Rather than trying to reproduce reality, literary texts strive to put meanings to the forefront that have been neutralized or negated in reality[27] in order to "answer … the questions arising out of the system."[28] To a certain extent, literary texts provide narratives that oppose the 'official' stories, just as conspiracy theories do. Conversely, conspiracy theories may fulfill the same socio-critical functions as literature. In the following section I will try to further unravel these interferences.

A Feminist Conspiracy

Literary scholar Josef Urban, an assistant professor of Czech philology at Charles University in Prague, and his girlfriend Marie Horáková, a postdoctoral researcher, set out to find the truth about the manuscripts from Zelená Hora and Dvůr Králové. The main impetus comes from Marie, while Josef, who also serves as a first-person narrator and poses as the book's author, acts as her sidekick, her "Watson." During archival work, Marie and Josef each uncover two letters from the correspondence of Vacláv Hanka, which provide further clues to the mystery of the manuscripts; however, Josef keeps one of them from both Marie and from the reader. More and more facts about the 'real' truth behind the manuscripts become uncovered; finally, Josef can solve the literary puzzle because of information provided in the last letter, a letter he alone knows about. He then goes on and (mis)uses Marie's and his joint work to serve as his 'habilitation.'[29]

26 Ibid.: 69.

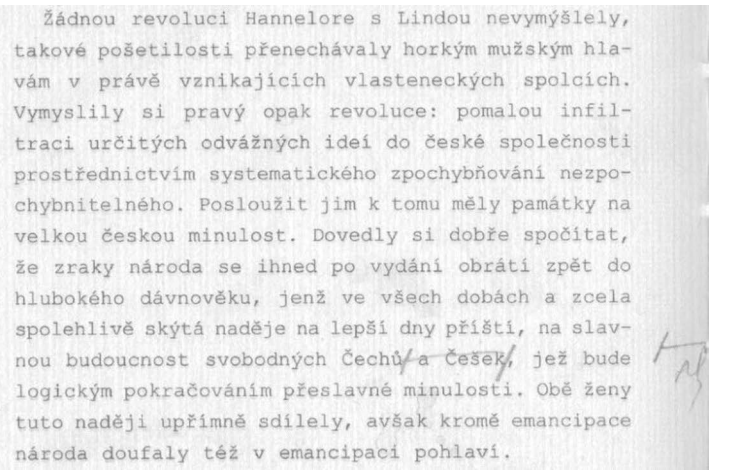
27 Ibid.: 72.

28 Ibid.: 73.

29 A habilitation is a second thesis which is needed to get tenure in the Czech academic system.

In Urban's novel, the manuscripts are real. Vacláv Hanka and Josef Linda, who were in fact both women, created the fabrication; they created errors and little details that do not add up and which would then lead attentive readers to doubt the manuscripts' authenticity. The goal of Linda, Hanka, and their fellow feminist conspirers—among them also Božena Němcová, the 'godmother' of Czech literature—was to sow the seed of doubt into Czech society so that Czech people would distrust everything and, ultimately, put an end to the patriarchy. In this context, Josef's habilitation is a twofold "final full-stop": Not only is the text intended to end all discussions about the manuscripts, given that it presents the 'full' truth, but it also implicitly shows that the conspirers' feminist dream has utterly failed: Josef harvests all of the academic glory, in spite of Marie being the driving force behind their shared research. Marie may be emancipated all right, but the old patriarchal hegemony is still going strong nevertheless. The last chapter of Urban's novel, consisting of the typescript of the introduction to Josef's habilitation, even *visually* shows us how women are removed from academic discourse. In the sentence "the future of free male and female Czechs,"[30] the part about female Czechs is crossed out in a handwritten comment (cf. Image 1). Hanka's and Linda's conspiracy has failed, the patriarchy is still in full effect and their carefully planted seed of doubt has been eradicated.

Image 1: The typescript of Josef's habilitation shows how women are removed from the story.[31]



Žádnou revoluci Hannelore s Lindou nevymýšlely, takové pošetilosti přenechávaly horkým mužským hlavám v právě vznikajících vlasteneckých spolcích. Vymyslily si pravý opak revoluce: pomalou infiltraci určitých odvážných idejí do české společnosti prostřednictvím systematického zpochybňování nezpochybnitelného. Posloužit jim k tomu měly památky na velkou českou minulost. Dovedly si dobře spočítat, že zraky národa se ihned po vydání obrátí zpět do hlubokého dávnověku, jenž ve všech dobách a zcela spolehlivě skýtá naděje na lepší dny příští, na slavnou budoucnost svobodných Čechů a Češek, jež bude logickým pokračováním přeslavné minulosti. Obě ženy tuto naději upřímně sdílely, avšak kromě emancipace národa doufaly též v emancipaci pohlaví.

30 "budoucnost svobodných Čechů a Češek" – Urban 2005: 225 (all translations G.H.).

31 Urban 2005: 225.

The novel's pivotal point is Josef's realization that V. Hanka and J. Linda are actually women, namely Hanka V. (Vierteilová) and Linda J. (Jannowitzová). The forgers being female is a compelling twist which relies on a misreading of reality: Hanka's and Linda's surnames are misread as female first names. In this context, it is no accident that gender equality is a recurring theme throughout the novel. Susceptibility to conspiracy theories, for example, is linked to gender: Marie states that: "I am a woman, who is able to create a complicated history out of naked facts … you are a man, a philologist with a clear mind … You like sharp contours, bright light and unambiguous concepts."[32] According to Marie, only the cold, rational man can uncover the truth, whereas women might transform any fact into a "complicated history." This idea of the 'cold, rational man' is subverted by the fact that Marie is the one who deciphers most of the clues under consideration, and that Josef is the one to actually solve the puzzle not by using his "clear mind" but more by using deception and outright treachery. Ironically, Marie's quote also applies to Hanka and Linda: In their feminist quest, they plant signs which are intentionally ambiguous and lead the readers astray. What is a fact in the novel—the manuscripts' authenticity—becomes "complicated" fiction, a fabricated fabrication.

In a way, Urban's novel also operates in a similar fashion, creating false leads and misdirecting the reader. The text occasionally presents fabricated historical 'facts' which are not crucial to the story, but which challenge the reader's historical knowledge. One such example concerns the burial place of Czech poet Karel Havlíček Borovský. In the novel he is buried in Slavín, the Czech 'pantheon' on Vyšehrad hill in Prague, but in reality he found his final resting place in Prague's largest cemetery, Olšany.[33] Another example of the novel engaging the reader is when Urban smuggles his literary inspiration, novelist Peter Ackroyd,[34] into a list of Marie's favorite English-language authors:

Swift, Fielding, Richardson, Sterne, Defoe, Austenová, Shelleyová, Radcliffová, Reevová, Eliotová, Gaskellová, Brontëovy, Dickens, Thackeray, Hardy, Scott, Carroll, Conrad, Wilde, Maugham, Bennett, Galsworthy, Lawrence, Joyce, Woolfová, Huxley, Lewis, Lehmannová, Compton-Burnettová, Forster, Westová, Wells, Waugh, Orwell, Rhysová,

32 "[jsem] ženská, co je i z holého faktu schopná udělat složitou historii ... Ty jsi mužský, filolog s jasnou myslí. … Máš rád ostré kontury, jasné světlo a jednoznačné pojmy." – Urban 2005: 70–71.

33 Cf. Slomek 1998.

34 Peter Ackroyd's novel *Chatterton* (1987) specifically served as an influence for Urban's novel; cf. Nagy 1999: 19 and Ficová 2000: 13.

Murdochová, Sparková, Lessingová, Beckett, Durrell, Greene, Wilson, Golding, Hartley, Fowles, Johnson, Trevor, Wain, Braine, Amis, Amis, Burgess, Gray, Carterová, Bainbridgeová, Tremainová, Weldonová, Wintersonová, Byattová, Drabbleová, Brooknerová, Gallowayová, Barkerová, Rushdie, Barnes, Boyd, McEwan, *Ackroyd*, Miller, Swift ... .[35]

Here, the reader needs to have extensive knowledge of English literature and a liking for close reading, otherwise this hint, which is hidden at the very bottom of the list, can be overlooked easily. Furthermore, Josef claims that "I never heard about most of them in my whole life,"[36] so even this riddle on the meta-level can only be solved by Marie. A final example of reader activation may be found in the acknowledgments section of Josef's habilitation, which concludes the novel:

I have the honor to add my thanks to a person, who stood right at the source of my interest for the described facts who during the course of the research activities kindly offered encouragement, always was willing to selflessly help and give good advice. This person, without whom my scientific work barely would have seen the light of day, is lecturer Dr. Jaroslav Sláma.[37]

Josef claims that he could not have written his thesis without one very dear and special person. Of course the reader suspects that finally Marie will be recognized for her contribution. This hope is fueled by the use of "osoba" for "person" which has a specific consequence: All verbs and participles have to be put in the female form ("stála," "byla nakloněna," "ochotna," etc.). Thus, Marie is evoked in the reader's mind. This expectation is crushed in the final sentence, when Josef enthusiastically thanks his nemesis, the department head Jaroslav Sláma. The use of feminine forms, however, ensures that at least some ambiguity is preserved: Perhaps Josef indeed wanted to thank Marie, but then he was too weak to fight academic tradition; maybe he did feel remorse for having ousted Marie and planted some hints in his habilitation which point to the 'real' author. In a similar vein, the previously mentioned use of gender mainstreaming in Josef's habilita-

35 Urban 2005: 145–46, emphasis mine.

36 "O většině z nich jsem v životě neslyšel." – Urban 2005: 146.

37 "Dovoluji si připojit děčné poděkování osobě, jež stála u zrodu mého zájmu o popisované skutečnosti a v průběhu výzkumných a badatelských prací mi byla laskavě nakloněna svou přízní, vždy ochotna obětavě pomoci a dobře poradit. Tímto člověkem, bez něhož by má vědecká práce sotva spatřila světlo světa, je Doc. Dr. Jaroslav Sláma." – Urban 2005: 229.

tion is removed by his advisor (cf. Image 1). Josef fights for gender equality, but only when it comes at no cost. As soon as he is opposed—mostly by more powerful men than himself—he tucks his tail between his legs.

That we are dealing with a feminist conspiracy as part of Urban's conspiracy narrative does not come as a surprise, given that conspiracy narratives, as Michael Butter puts it,

> … articulate … conflicts between classes and religious denominations, concerns about proper political representation and the undue influence of certain groups, or anxieties about race and gender relations and 'proper' sexual behavior as fears of subversion and infiltration.[38]

In Urban's novel, the Czech feminists of the nineteenth century could not openly advocate feminism but resorted to "subversion and infiltration." The "crisis of representation" mentioned previously applies in a twofold manner here: Czech nationalists agitated hard to establish a Czech nation; gender relations were not their primary concern. So, first there is the crisis of representation of the Czechs in the German-dominated Habsburg empire, and on top of that the crisis of representation of women. Realizing this, Linda and Hanka piggybacked on the nationalist cause to be able to realize their emancipatory goals in the long run. Worth mentioning here is that most conspiracies and conspiracy theories follow a specific pattern; they strive to take over the world which one could argue is a 'masculine' idea. The feminist conspiracy presented in Urban's novel just wants to position ideas in the official Czech discourse—and thus, not conquer, but rather subvert it; patriarchy should not be followed by matriarchy, but rather by an equal rights society. Hanka's and Linda's conspiracy is fueled by good intentions and does not have negative consequences for anyone, which sets it apart from the majority of other (literary) conspiracies.

Fact and Fiction

Urban's novel is not only about a feminist conspiracy, it is also about fact and fiction, which becomes evident when the question of genre is addressed. The novel itself claims to be an example of the "nolitfak" genre—an abbreviation of "New factual literature" (*nová literatura faktu*). This genre pretends to be as factual as possible and claims not to use any literary devices: "Everything is clear

38 Butter 2014: 283.

and authentic—nolitfak does not need any imaginary narrator or protagonist. Here, their roles are played by the author."[39] Furthermore, there is also no protagonist in the novel. Josef Urban poses as author, narrator, and protagonist; Miloš Urban at first even used a pseudonym so that the novel itself would have been written by one Josef Urban. Of course, he could have named the protagonist Miloš as well but then he would have lost a plethora of allusions: from the biblical Joseph and Mary to the forger Josef Linda and Božena Němcová's husband Josef Němec. Looking at these allusions it becomes immediately clear that "nolitfak" is in no way close to authenticity. Nonetheless, the text underlines that its author is not even an author, given that all he does is present facts and nothing more. The specific (invented) genre of "nolitfak" is a caricature of "litfak," which at times dealt with the manuscripts, see, for example, Miroslav Ivanov's book *Tajemství rukopisů královédvorského a zelenohorského* (*The Secrets of the Manuscripts from Dvůr Králové and Zelená Hora*, 1969).[40] The genre implies a specific perspective of reception, or at least the "author" hopes that this reader position is invoked: "Who works with facts, has readers' trust guaranteed."[41] This is a very easy and lazy position: "You have to understand that I do not want to leave anything to the reader's imagination. My life and my physiognomy are both naked facts."[42] The readers literally do not have to do anything, and they are specifically told to deactivate their imagination. This is a good thing, because then "the reader can concentrate … on the trustworthy narrator's fluent delivery, a narrator of flesh and bones, who he or she actually can touch."[43] The "author" downplays his own influence on the text, while at the same time he tries to trick the readers into thinking that they do not have any control over the narrative. But the narrator's claim that the text is solely fact-based soon crumbles, as his jealous personality comes to the fore: "When you are interested in what some novelist or poet did and worked on for a living, … why are you all of a sudden acting as if you are not interested in *my* life?"[44] Even a solely factual "nolitfak" cannot

39 "Vše je však ryzí a autentické—nolitfak žádného imaginárního vypravěče ani hrdinu nepotřebuje. Jejich roli zde zastává jen a jen autor." – Urban 2005: 82.

40 Cf. Machala 2008: 302; for the book, see Ivanov 1969.

41 "Kdo pracuje s fakty, má důvěru čtenářů zaručenou." – Urban 2005: 35.

42 "Pochopte, že nechci, aby cokoli bylo ponecháno čtenářově fantazii. Můj život a má fyziognomie, to jsou přece holá fakta." – Urban 2005: 31.

43 "Čtenář … může se soustředit na plynulý přednes věrohodného vypravěče z masa a kostí, vypravěče, na kterého si může sáhnout." – Urban 2005: 24.

44 "Když vás zajímá, co dělal a čím žil kdekterý romanopisec a básník, … proč se najednou tváříte, že vám nic není po *mém* životě?" – Urban 2005: 32, italics original.

force readers to accept everything, and when the narrator's life is boring, the audience does not have to like it.

The novel's specific—and cliché-laden—comments on the relationship between reader and text hyperbolically contradict Iser's positions and, thus, seem to implicitly support them. At the same time, the text directly alludes to Iser's idea of the "blank." "Slender, not yet 30, … and, as you already know, with a prominent … nose... What? I haven't told you about any nose? Why should I have? You imagined her being nose-less?"[45] Although the narrator never mentioned any nose, the readers implicitly assume that Marie does have one and, in a similar fashion, they fill in all of the other blanks the text was not able, or did not care, to address. Of course the fact that Marie indeed does have a nose is in no way relevant to the plot; what happens here is a meta-reflection on the impossibility of covering *all* of reality in a literary text. In this regard, the text traces a development: In the beginning, the narrator claims that it is possible to write a text which is completely factual without any fictional elements; for these texts he proposes the genre of "nolitfak." However, soon Josef has to admit that "I was brought into the magical labyrinth of her narration, to the maze with two exits: truth and lie."[46] Here, the text is suddenly navigating the fringe between truth and lie. Finally, Marie comes to the realization that "we can finally stuff ourselves with your gray Wahrheit, … Dichtung und Dichtung is her credo, Dichtung und Dichtung."[47] This is of course a variation on Goethe's autobiography entitled *Aus meinem Leben: Dichtung und Wahrheit* (*From My Life: Poetry and Truth,* 1811–1833). When "Dichtung und Wahrheit" becomes "Dichtung und Dichtung," literature is marked as something entirely fictional; there might be connections to 'real' facts, but they are simply of no importance whatsoever. In what seems to be taken from post-structural theory, the signifier does not refer to any external object, but rather points to the world of signs.

What led to the uncovering of the truth about the manuscripts is actually an arbitrary decision. "I could have chosen a different box … The world would

45 "Štíhlá, ještě ne třicetiletá, … a, jak už víte, s prominentním … nosem... Co prosím? Že jsem o žádném nose zatím nemluvil? A proč bych měl? To jste si ji představovali beznosou?" – Urban 2005: 40.

46 "Já jsem byl volky nevolky nanovo natažen do kouzelného labyrintu jejího vyprávění, do bludiště se dvěma východy: pravdou a lží." – Urban 2005: 61.

47 "Máme se s tou svou šedivou Wahrheit konečně vycpat, … Dichtung und Dichtung, zní její krédo, Dichtung und Dichtung." – Urban 2005: 149.

have kept turning, and you would have read a different factual text."[48] So there is no universal truth, everything is just a story which could have turned out otherwise. Of course, from the reader's perspective this decision is everything but arbitrary. Josef has to find the clue, otherwise there is no conspiracy narrative or rather: there is no conspiracy narrative which is to be uncovered. In a similar vein, small clues are able to turn everything on its head: "In the air hangs a new puzzle, a brain-teaser, whose decipherment, if it happens sometimes, provides further knowledge, which root-and-branch overthrows our old certainties and turns many a belief upside down."[49] Urban's novel puts this fragility of both the narrative and truth at the very forefront and thereby comments on the relationship of fact and fiction in very much the same way as Iser does: fact and fiction are communicating inasmuch as fiction can be seen as a commentary on real-world facts.[50]

Conclusion

Poslední tečka za rukopisy shows how conspiracy narratives work as a performative phenomenon of reception; what is interesting is that Hanka's and Linda's conspiracy does not follow common traits of conspiracy theories, but rather tries to anchor poststructuralist deconstruction in Czech society. Correspondingly, the novel itself is often considered to be a typical example of postmodern playfulness and irony; but as the application of aesthetic response has shown, there is more to the text. In many ways, the novel illustrates how conspiracy theories operate and at the same time demonstrates that if literary texts overstress their connection to facts, they fail miserably. As Iser put it, literary texts might operate with fragments from reality, and they might comment on reality, but they are not to be confused with 'real' truth and reality. The key difference between literary texts and conspiracy narratives, then, becomes the derogatory function of the latter. Urban, however, opposes this common interpretation of conspiracy theories as something sinister and negative by means of imagining a positive example. Hanka and Linda try to make the world a better place. Unfortunately, they ulti-

48 "Mohl jsem si vybrat jinou krabici ... Svět by se točil dál a vy byste četli jinou literaturu faktu." – Urban 2005: 91.

49 "Ve vzduchu visí nový rebus, hádanka, jejíž rozluštění, podaří-li se kdy, přinese poznatky, jež nám od základu převrátí staré jistoty a postaví na hlavu nejedno přesvědčení." – Urban 2005: 20.

50 Cf. Iser 1980: 53.

mately fail. The continuation of the patriarchy is embodied by Josef, who is dependent on Marie in every aspect, but nonetheless manages to betray her in the end. Though if we accept Josef's habilitation—specifically the acknowledgements—as a further puzzle piece in this ongoing literary mystery, then the circle of semiosis has not ended and doubt might still run rife.

The way in which Urban plays with his readers is quite telling, as it mimics the way conspiracy theories are born and propagated further: false traces on the author's part are complemented by misreadings on the reader's part. In this context, Iser's theory of aesthetic response has proven helpful because it identified elements of the text which rely on reader participation. Especially significant are the parts where the narrator denies the readers' control over the text, because in most of these cases he later has to admit that he was wrong.

What happens after the final full-stop of a text has been written? As Urban's novel points out, the final full-stop is only the beginning of a complex semiotic process of shifting meanings and reading between the lines. In a way the promised final full-stop, which would end the "fight over the manuscripts" once and for all, is misleading; most of the semiotic processes start to happen only *after* the final full-stop of a text has been written, after a conspiracy theory sees the light of day.

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Abstract

Miloš Urban's debut novel *Poslední tečka za rukopisy* (*The Final Full-Stop after the Manuscripts*, 1998) retells the story of a central Czech nation-building myth: the manuscripts of Dvůr Králové and Zelená Hora. These two purported medieval manuscripts were used in the nineteenth century to demonstrate Czech literature's long history and were later discovered to be fake. In Urban's version, a feminist conspiracy is added to this already complicated story. The protagonist and his girlfriend, two philologists at Charles University in Prague, uncover that the manuscripts are real and that Božena Němcová, one of the most prolific Czech writers of the nineteenth century, simply tried to make them look fake to-

gether with two other female conspirators. In this chapter, I study the fictional conspiracy as described by Urban. In so doing, I point out parallels between literary texts and conspiracy theories and show the advantages of applying Wolfgang Iser's theory of aesthetic response to conspiracy theories.