

7-25-2014

What They Don't Want You to Know About Planet X: Surviving 2012 and the Aesthetics of Conspiracy Rhetoric

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Citation/Publisher Attribution

Reyes, Ian and Jason K. Smith. "What They Don't Want You to Know About Planet X: *Surviving 2012* and the Aesthetics of Conspiracy Rhetoric." *Communication Quarterly*, vol. 62, no. 4, 2014, pp. 399-415.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01463373.2014.922483>.

Available: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01463373.2014.922483>

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“What They Don’t Want You to Know About Planet X: *Surviving 2012* and the Aesthetics of Conspiracy Rhetoric”

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Abstract

Predictions of catastrophe at the end of the year 2012 are popular enough to be exploited by Hollywood and debunked by NASA. Drawing from a YouTube video series predicting a 2012 cataclysm caused by “Planet X,” we ask whether the discourse in question is a conspiracy theory and demonstrate how it exemplifies the challenges of analyzing rhetoric in the “paranoid style.” Examining these videos in terms of evidence, credibility, and inter-textuality, this article articulates an aesthetic of conspiracism, going beyond identifying the components of paranoid style to answer what makes a good conspiracy theory as such.

Keywords: 2012, Planet X, conspiracy theory, conspiracism, rhetoric, aesthetics, YouTube.

By now, it is well known that the Mayan calendar is purported to predict the end of the world in December of 2012. What fewer know is that this prediction is true, but there is a conspiracy to keep people from believing it. At least this is what some argue online. In this article, we examine one such discourse, explaining how it is situated in, what will be described as, a larger culture of *conspiracism* by examining its rhetoric in terms of its distinct approaches to evidence, credibility, and inter-textuality. Illuminating the moving parts of this discourse, we show first that it meets the measure for a conspiracy theory. Building from that critique, we evaluate this conspiracy theory on its own terms, arguing that it is best understood as an entelechial aesthetic endeavor unlike more dialectical modes of public discourse such as science or politics.

The central text for this study is the *Surviving 2012 and Planet X* (2007) series on YouTube. The first of this five-part series alone received more than 3 million views, making it the most watched YouTube video on the Planet X hypothesis. Each installment of the series features its creator and uploader, Marshall Masters, arguing that a planet unknown or unacknowledged by mainstream science will soon cross into Earth's orbit, bringing about cataclysmic disasters. The video is a public awareness campaign doubling as an infomercial for books and other Planet X related media sold through Masters' publishing company, Your Own World.

According to YouTube's statistics, most traffic to *Surviving 2012* comes from YouTube and Google searches for "Planet X."ⁱ Hundreds of thousands of additional hits come from "referrals," links from other videos in the series and from non-YouTube sites dedicated to 2012 theories.ⁱⁱ Users' comments on the videos expand on the topic to include alternate, equally catastrophic 2012 possibilities, including divine retribution and alien invasion.

Motivated by the fact that conspiracy theories have moved from the political fringe to the center of mainstream entertainment, our work seeks to articulate an aesthetics, rather than a politics, of the phenomenon, one that can better explain how an otherwise reviled modality like “conspiracy theory” can triumph as it has. Our approach to this topic represents the evolution of conspiracy studies away from identifying symptoms of social and political malaise, and towards a concern for the popularity of conspiracy theories as entertainment.ⁱⁱⁱ Conspiracy theory is a genre unto itself and, in the following, we argue that *Surviving 2012* is an exemplary case through which existing theories of conspiracy theory can be applied and synthesized, thereby advancing a more immanent understanding of this popular form.

Hofstadter’s (2008) agenda-setting research posited that conspiracy theory is a “paranoid” style of rhetoric.

The central image is that of a vast and sinister conspiracy, a gigantic and yet subtle machinery of influence set in motion to undermine and destroy a way of life. [...] The distinguishing thing about the paranoid style is not that its exponents see conspiracies or plots here and there in history, but that they regard a ‘vast’ or ‘gigantic’ conspiracy as *the motive force* in historical events. (p. 29)

Like Hofstadter, our approach brackets questions of psychology, or whether conspiracists are themselves paranoid, asking instead whether and how *Surviving 2012* meets the *stylistic* criteria for a conspiracy theory in the style of paranoia. However, as Adamo (2010) found, conspiracy theories are highly recalcitrant when it comes to academic study: “the researcher of particular facets of this phenomenon [conspiracy theory] becomes mired in a labyrinth of rhetoric that defies examination” (p. 5). Further, although conspiracy studies have yielded a number of strategies for mapping the labyrinth, the greater issue is that few discourses announce themselves

as “conspiracy theory.” Therefore, the first aim is to see how the text in question compares to existing criteria for conspiracy theory.

To accomplish this, we ask where evidence of conspiracy can be found, what makes someone a conspiracy theorist, and how this rhetoric may be evaluated vis-à-vis other texts in the conspiracy canon. First, we will chart the perimeter of the “labyrinth,” explaining the original texts, terms, and concepts informing *Surviving 2012*'s claims. Following that, we examine the argument itself, reading it through the lens of conspiracy studies to reveal the patterns recognizable when mapping the interior of the maze. By expanding from the central text to consider also YouTube users' comments as well as material from debunkers on other sites, we argue that the key to understanding and evaluating this discourse is to recognize that, although *Surviving 2012 and Planet X* makes leaps unwarranted by the evidence itself, from another, “paranoid” vantage, these leaps are enthymemes consistent with conspiracist tropes. Ultimately, we propose that conspiracy theories are entelechial formations striving to realize a distinctly conspiracist aesthetic, and therefore cannot be understood or judged only by the standards of other, more dialectical discursive traditions.

Situating *Surviving 2012 and Planet X*

The *Surviving 2012 and Planet X* series consists of “Part 1: The Threat,” “Part 2: Scientific Proof,” “Part 3: Historical Proof,” “Part 4: Surviving,” and “Part 5: Beyond 2012.” The first is the top-listed, most “relevant” video for YouTube searches on “Planet X.” Across the series, there were 320 comments from 113 users. The first installment of the series has more than 3 million views; the remainder of the videos average slightly above 1 million. The series is listed as a “vlog,” or video web-log, though the production is different from the kind of amateur

webcam-confessional associated with the term. By comparison, *Surviving 2012* has higher production values, somewhere between a narrated slideshow and a cable television documentary. Each 8-10 minute installment presents a montage of images and text illustrating a voice-over narration from Marshall Masters, the series' creator, explaining aspects of the predicted cataclysm, from the causes, to the cover-up, to the strategies for surviving after the fact.

Masters posts to YouTube with the name “yowbooks” and identifies his company and their products in his user profile as well as the videos. His goal is not just to argue that the world as we know it will soon end, it is also to sell a series of self-help guides preparing people the coming catastrophe and life beyond. That is, his product line is geared towards the idea that, though unavoidable, the disaster predicted in *Surviving 2012* is natural, not divine, and, therefore, can be prepared for and survived by those in the know. In this vision, 2012 will be doomsday only for the unprepared or unfortunate. This hypothesis is not unique to *Surviving 2012*. Rather, it is a bricolage of material poached from evolutionary biology, astrophysics, ancient mythology, and science fiction, woven together with tropes common among conspiracists.

The information presented in *Surviving 2012* is, essentially, the (pseudo)science behind the infamous Mayan prophecy. Such combinations of elements like mystical texts and astrophysical data are a hallmark of internet culture, especially user-generated content (Varnelis, 2008). Nonetheless, these discursive formations can also be found in earlier media. Jenkins (2009) argued that “the elaborate play between reality and fiction” is typical of cultural approaches to any new media form:

there seems to be a fascination with blurry categories at moments of media in transition—it is one of the ways we apply our evolving skills in a context where

the categories that organize our culture are in flux. Some groups can tap this fascination with blurred ontological categories as an end unto itself. (p. 123)

Seen as a continuation of this established logic for new media content, one can better appreciate what the *Surviving 2012* YouTube series does well: create a fascinatingly blurry discourse. This intentional blurring was noted, in a way, in Hofstadter's take on evidence, "What distinguishes the paranoid style is not...the absence of verifiable facts (though it is occasionally true that in his extravagant passion for facts the paranoid occasionally manufactures them), but rather the curious leap in imagination that is always made at some critical point in the recital of events" (p. 37). As we will argue, however, what Hofstadter would call a "curious leap," may be neither curious nor a leap for those well read in the master works of conspiracy theory. To better understand how the fascinating blurs and curious leaps of conspiracy theory operate, one must first understand how something like *Surviving 2012* is distinguishable from similar texts.

The subject of *Surviving 2012* makes it different from the *Lonelygirl15* series, for instance, wherein an aspiring actress surreptitiously showcased her talent by vlogging as a fictional character, because the claims of *Surviving 2012* are not about the author's identity; they are about the scientific accuracy and political prescience of the author's evidence and reasoning. *Surviving 2012* is also unlike scientific hoax videos, like the one showing a laptop lifted by bees, because Masters' claims do not hinge on *vérité* video, but on argument. Moreover, the stakes for the claims of *Surviving 2012* are greater than either of these. Public understanding of the strength of bees or the life of a teenage girl is, arguably, of less consequence than understanding the potential for a global cataclysm. For these reasons, one has to consider that a conspiracy theory and a hoax are not one and the same.

While all hoaxes are conspiracies and some conspiracies may be hoaxes, there is a rhetorical style of conspiracy *theories* making them different from hoaxes or outright lies. Knight (2001) characterized conspiracy theories as “oscillating between the hoax and the accurate revelation, between the serious and the ironic, between the factual and the fictional, and between the literal and the metaphorical” (p. 48). The question, then, when it comes to evaluating *Surviving 2012* as a conspiracy theory, is not whether it is a willing falsification or whether it is the product of a paranoid mind, but how it engages a broader culture of conspiracism through this kind of aesthetic.

It is impossible to interpret a conspiracy theory in isolation from other texts because conspiracy theorists rely on audiences’ familiarity with similar propositions. Because of this, Pipes (1999) argued that conspiracy researchers should think more in terms of *conspiracism*. The concept of conspiracism comes from observing that people rarely subscribe to a single conspiracy theory, rather they partake broadly of media wrought in a paranoid style. Pipes’ work traced the paranoid style across hundreds of years, making the case that it could be understood as a rhetorical or literary tradition in its own right. This suggests that there should be a type of conspiracist literacy informing the production and interpretation of conspiracist texts, which themselves should share a conspiracist aesthetic.

While there is a history of conspiracism centuries long, Masters’ textual horizon originates in the beginning of the 20th century. Although it is not stated overtly in the *Surviving 2012* series, Masters’ ideas about Planet X stem from theories of “ancient aliens.” Ancient alien theories became popular in the early and mid-20th century due to influential works of fiction, like H.P. Lovecraft’s *The Call of Cthulhu* (1928), as well as science, like I.S. Schlovsky and Carl Sagan’s *Intelligent Life in the Universe* (1966), and the theme continues to appear in books like

William Bramley's *Gods of Eden* (1989) and Erik Von Daniken's *Chariots of the Gods* (1999). The central hypothesis advanced by Masters, however, is derived primarily from the work of Zecharia Sitchin, an independent scholar publishing dozens of books, beginning with *The Twelfth Planet* (1976), who made a business of interpreting and prophesying from ancient Sumerian texts. Sitchin's work contends that humans are descendents of aliens from a planet he calls "Nibiru," not Planet X, which orbits near the Earth approximately every 3,600 years. This long orbit cycle is the heart of Masters' theory.^{iv}

Such infotainment is the latest in, what Hess (1995) identified as, a "countercultural knowledge tradition" beginning with the birth of modern science in the 16th century and later witnessing popular trends like hermeticists, occultists, hippies, and New Agers. Like many of these formerly fringe subjects, conspiracy theories are now part of a lucrative multimedia entertainment complex. There are numerous examples of this related specifically to 2012 conspiracies. The most well known may be Sony Pictures' *2012* (2009), which grossed more than \$700 million internationally, yet there are many more 2012 movies, both documentary and fiction, including *2012: Doomsday* (2008), *2012: Supernova* (2009), *2012: An Awakening* (2009), *December 21: 2012* (2009), *2012: Science or Superstition* (2009), *2012: We're Already In It* (2009), *2012: Time for Change* (2010), *2012: The War for Souls* (2010), and *2012: Seeking Closure* (2010). Television is also following the trend towards end-times entertainment. The History Channel, Science Channel, and Discovery Network, to name but a few, offer a range of programs blending science fiction and science facts concerning potentially catastrophic astronomical anomalies like asteroids, sun flares, and cosmic radiation featured in tandem with new readings of Nostradamus' predictions, paranormal investigations, and survival-themed reality shows, like *Doomsday Preppers* (2012).

This commodification of conspiracy theory is precisely where aesthetic matters come to the fore because the most important measure of a conspiracy theory's economic value is the allure of its spectacle, not the veracity of its argument (Birchall, 2002). With that in mind, one should view *Surviving 2012 and Planet X* as the product of a conspiracist cottage-industry with the potential to influence trends of major media corporations. But what is yet to be seen is how Masters' take on Planet X reveals a conspiracist aesthetic. So far, we have noted only that it partakes of discourses spanning science, pseudo-science, and science fiction. We will next examine how Masters took these raw materials of the 2012 craze and rendered it in conspiracist style.

Conspiracist Evidence of Conspiracy

It is worth recognizing, as is occasionally said amongst conspiracy buffs, that some conspiracies are *theories*, but other conspiracies are *facts*. *Surviving 2012* posits a conspiracy, but that alone does not make it a conspiracy theory. What makes it a conspiracy *theory* is that it finds proof of conspiracy via conspiracism, using a small amount of evidence to configure epistemic lacunae through which the conspiracy is imagined. The theoretical qualities come not because the conspiracy has yet to be proven, but because it is premised on the leap from identifying/constructing a mysterious absence to assuming that absence is actively produced by governments, scientists, media, or a different powerful Other.

The first segments of *Surviving 2012* circulate around the apparent increase in natural disasters and engineering failures.

Our infrastructure is much like our own weakened biosphere. Both are failing partly due to our own fault, but mostly because our planet is being increasingly

perturbed by something in space. It is a massive object called Planet X, and it is approaching the core of our system. It has caused ancient cataclysms, and by 2012 it will revisit some of those cataclysms upon us once again. Could this really be true? If you're willing to believe your lying eyes, there is scientific proof.

(Masters, Part 2)

The world is falling apart, and anyone should be able to see it. The causes, however, are not something common people can see. There are hidden forces at work beyond human causes like bad engineering or poor environmental management. Explanations like global warming, a dwindling tax base, or sensationalist journalism are, for Masters, insufficient to account for the frequency and size of the calamities one now finds regularly in the news.

This idea that there is something more, something hidden from plain view that may nonetheless be revealed, makes conspiracist rhetoric a close relative of occult rhetoric. As Gunn (2005) explained, occult rhetoric is that which uses language to both figure and reveal secret knowledge. By comparison, conspiracy rhetoric is the opposite of the occult. It is not the discourse of a secret society designed to keep the public outside; it is the public discourse of outsiders revealing insiders' secrets. Additionally, conspiracy rhetoric is much less poetic than occult rhetoric, or at least the poesy is found not in the language but in dramatic juxtapositions of evidence through which secrets are figured and revealed.

Juxtaposing two popular press articles published nearly a decade apart reveals the biggest secret in *Surviving 2012*. The first is a 1983 article from *US News and World Report*, stating that NASA had found a large object referred to within the article as "Planet X." According to Masters, this writer claimed that when Planet X approaches Earth "life as we know it will cease to exist." The second article is a 1992 NASA press release that did not mention Planet X, but did

identify a large body that was closer than the one mentioned in 1983. Masters' vision of 2012 is built from the possibility that these articles are related.

In 1983 the infrared astronomical satellite, IRAS, detected heat from an object about 50 billion miles away. Then, in 1992, NASA issued a press release in which they state that they found an object of 4-8 Earth masses on a highly tilted orbit about 7 billion miles from the sun. If this indeed is the very same object, the numbers say it all. This monster is headed our way. That is, assuming this object is in a long elliptical orbit around our own. (Part 2)

The argument takes as major premises that, first, these two articles are about the same thing despite there being no explicit connection and, second, this object orbits around the sun on an elliptical orbit that takes thousands of years to complete, which is why it had yet to be discovered by astronomers.

This reading of the evidence is underwritten by the assumption that any counter-evidence is part of a conspiratorial disinformation campaign. Masters explains that, aside from these articles, the mainstream media and NASA have avoided acknowledging Planet X. So, the question posed by *Surviving 2012* is why there are only these two media blips concerning what ought to be of major public concern. This kind of evidentiary work is what Hofstadter would call "careful preparation for the big leap from the undeniable to the unbelievable" (37-38). Within a conspiracist frame, observing the paucity of evidence for Planet X strengthens the case for it. The proverbial smoking gun is found in the lack of smoke, even lack of a gun.

Judging by users' comments, this did not go unnoticed by YouTube viewers. In one of the first comments on the series, user Illlsondowlll stated "You may think me ignorant for this because it goes against the purpose of the videos but I really am not going to take this too

seriously until I get public acknowledgment,” to which Dennis7420, another user, replied, “This is your Public acknowledgment! If they put this on the news - people would be stockpiling food & there would be chaos. Most people are asleep and caught up in entertainment or Britney Spears. Arise and let the Light shine on you!” (Part 5, comments). Likewise, HVACR26 queried, “Why are they lying about this thing? What are they afraid of, and why are they scared to give us the truth?!” (Part 2, comments). To which Masters replied:

Why is the government quiet? Look up cognitive dissonance and put yourself in their shoes. People are denying and deflecting this threat with angry statements and acts. If they go public now, they'll get swamped by it. That is why they're waiting for something I call the britches event. When the weight of poop in the britches reaches critical mass, it pulls the ears open and shuts the mouth. Who are the stupids here? (Part 2, comments)

For Masters as well as some users, the main reason most people do not believe in Planet X or other 2012 scenarios is that they are dupes of the mainstream media or that they simply cannot cope with knowing that we are living in end-times; only exceptional individuals are willing and able to grasp what this evidence really means and to act accordingly.

Because publicly affirming this knowledge would breed social unrest, those few who know Planet X is real and have power within orthodox institutions (the “Powers That Be,” or “PTB” in conspiracist lingo) are intentionally keeping the public in the dark about Planet X. So, the conspiracy surrounding Planet X is, specifically, that NASA, world governments, and global media agencies are intentionally keeping this information from the public in order to maintain order. The conspiracist leap is that, because these institutions deny or ignore Planet X, it must therefore exist.

This may seem to make *Surviving 2012* different from classic conspiracy theories like Watergate or the JFK assassination, which are teeming with incredible amounts of evidence. Yet in those cases, too, it is actually from *lack* of evidence that conspiracism takes root. Although there is solid proof of genuine conspiratorial actions in each case—Nixon really made the tapes, someone really planned to shoot Kennedy—the foothold of conspiracism comes from identifying or creating lacunae in the existing evidence, like the Zapruder footage used to implicate an unseen second shooter or the Nixon tapes where the missing 18 ½ minutes have been used as proof of deeds more nefarious than the public had imagined. Such indeterminacies are quintessential pieces of conspiracist evidence, and the work of conspiracism is first and foremost to identify and/or construct these gaps where others have yet to do so. For *Surviving 2012*, the definitive proof of a conspiracy surrounding Planet X is that there is so little proof to be found for it. The art of conspiracism is not solely the leaping critiqued by Hofstadter, it is also if not primarily establishing those observable points across which such leaps are made.

Reasoning Through Conspiracist Enthymemes

Astronomy is only the most basic component of Masters' Planet X theory, the material with which he identifies/constructs a constitutive gap for conspiracism to fill. Once this gap is created, Masters' fills-in the blank with conspiracist tropes borrowed from mysticism and survivalism. The segment labeled "Historical Proof" turns towards ancient religions and mythologies for textual references to global cataclysms. Such texts are, for Masters, historical proof that Planet X has visited destruction upon our planet in the past, and will do so in the future. In this way, *Surviving 2012* affirms ancient wisdom in a manner familiar to New Age

heterodoxa. The ways traditional texts from far-flung cultures seem to predict the coming disaster are, as the video explains, detailed in *The Kolbrin Bible*.

This so-called Bible, though described as “ancient,” happens to be copyrighted and published exclusively by Masters’ company, Your Own World. So, one evidentiary cornerstone presented by *Surviving 2012* is Masters’ own retreading of religious texts as historical documents, a tactic similar to the anthropological and entrepreneurial work of Sitchin. Yet working in such well-worn territory invites challenges from Planet X and 2012 aficionados. In the first comment on the series, user happieness122112 challenged Masters:

Umm so do you all actually read any Sitchin?? Nibiru being the Sumerian name for "Planet X" and Marduk in Babylonian, the planet our ancient creators, the Anunnaki.. yeah, that planet is on a 3600 yr orbit with another star, probably that brown dwarf mentioned in the 2nd film. and was last documented passing in 400 AD so it isnt coming back anytime soon.. 2012 is mayan prophecy and NOTHING to do with "planet x" or as I call it Nibiru.(Part 1, Comments)

Though the videos do not mention Sitchin, the similarities are obvious, and Masters’ deviations from the original theory may not be read as improvements, rather as poor reasoning.

Similarly, other users understood the videos in terms set by a different conspiracy theorist, David Icke, who contended that a shape-shifting, reptilian race of aliens disguised as humans have infiltrated our most trusted social institutions, including science, government, and media.^v User Nwois4life asked, “is this related to some kind of possible 'alien' timing of either a revealing of their 'making contact' with us, or possible 'invasion', a.k.a. reptilians?” (Part 3, comments) and peggykane1 offered,

Planet X is real and it is the force that will break up the frequency barrier that the reptilian race has us imprisoned within. It is not coming to wreck Earth, but to free us. Morgellons is where we are all heading if we don't have PX. We all have the fibers in us thanks to chemtrails and the reptilian overlords planned to keep us as food and slaves. Listen to reverse speaking and you will learn what is going on.

No one can lie in reverse. check evp reverse speaking. (Part 1, comments)

Such contributions were not challenges to *Surviving 2012* as much as re-contextualizations demonstrating how Masters' reasoning may be supported by the agenda of another conspiracy theorist.

But not all comments pulled the discussion further into conspiracy territory. Other users found the material resonant with contemporary takes on Christianity and Judeo-Christian texts. KnowledgeGod, for example, was sold on the videos' historical perspectives on the Old Testament: "the bible includes account of things that actually happened in history and not just fictional accounts of how the earth was made by God ha. such events that actually happened are the flood within the story of noah's ark. they sayin this was actually a tsunami caused by planet x" (Part 3, comments). Others found in the video proof of the Rapture, such as gucciisme, who commented "Now the God Almighty Jesus Christ is gonna punish every human being who thinks their greater than him. .hahaha, Bush and the members of those secret societies are gonna be in big trouble!!!" (Part 3, comments). Clearly, for some, it stands to reason that Planet X is a harbinger of end-times anticipated to be brought on by God's wrath or by extraterrestrials, and not just a natural perturbation of Earth's orbit. Nonetheless, while the tropes of mysticism serve to make sense of the long orbit claims, they do nothing to address the supposed conspiracy to

hide this from the public. On that front, Masters' subtly, without naming, evokes fear of the New World Order (NWO), finding proof that world governments are readying for disaster.

“New World Order” is the conspiracist name for the agents and agenda of the real power structure. NWO is “the code word for the master conspiracy’s plan to bring about a one-world government that will wipe out the sovereignty of free Americans” (Knight, 2002, p. 1). So common is this code word, that it need not be uttered at all. Therefore, when Masters declares that the launch of solar satellites, extension of the Hubble mission, and construction of the South Pole telescope are proof that the government is monitoring the approach of Planet X, not conducting mundane research, it makes sense that there is a conspiracy behind it all. He need only assert that members of the government and other elites will retreat into their subterranean survival complexes, because those literate in conspiracism understand that the government actively works against the common interests of the people.

While NWO has been a popular trope among conspiracists for some time, *Surviving 2012* taps into the related but more recent boom in doomsday survivalist, or “prepper,” culture, which is omnivorous in its consideration of cataclysmic scenarios but univocal on one point: the government cannot be trusted. Contributions from preppers were easy to recognize on the forums; they were the most pragmatic, less interested in the specific arguments and evidence of the videos, and more interested in how to plan based on what the videos describe. One such user, csuarez1974, asked, “SO, besides the USA is there any safe spots in South America, Europe or Asia?” (Part 5, comments). Another user, stonereflex, offered advice and plugged his own YouTube channel:

Africa may be the continent to be ripped apart, right through the center... There are maps out on the internet that predict or show what the earth will/may look like

after 2012. There are also “safe spots” like the videos states that are aligned on the grid of the earth that should be a lot safer than most places. You can check my channel for some good videos. (Part 5, comments)

Later in the thread, 5kings concurred, stating “I’m going 2 central Africa that way I’m might have a better way 2 survive” (Part 5, comments). CommanderUTube, however, offered a different interpretation: “Australia would be fried to a giant continental pizza (summer in the southern hemisphere)! I speculate best place to hide underground for 6 months will still be in Tibet or the Tibetan plateau, say around Aksai Chin.” (Part 5, comments).

These and the previous comments mentioned demonstrate harmonious conspiracist literacies showing some of the competing views on Planet X and 2012. But they also point to something more important as far as conspiracy studies are concerned. What may first appear as a miring labyrinth of rhetoric can become common sense if read against the inter-textual horizon for conspiracism.

This meshes with Zizek’s (2006) notion that “the ‘conspiracy-theory’ provides a guarantee that the field of the big Other is not an inconsistent bricolage” (p. 230). Ironically, however, upon close analysis, the best way to fight bricolage through conspiracism seems to be more bricolage, just a far more consistent one. Similar to Zizek, Jameson (2001) characterized conspiracy theories as “a degraded attempt...to think the impossible totality of the contemporary world system” (p. 80). Degraded though it may be compared to postmodern theory, it makes sense that, given everyday experiences of postmodernity, many people would be drawn toward discourses that not only model the indeterminacy typical of everyday life, but also offer tidy reductions of those indeterminacies into paranoid certainties. Yet it is clear that users also brought their own interpretations and evidence to bear upon *Surviving 2012*. Though their

contributions showed a range of readings and investments, their engagements show how one person's bricolage may be another person's enthymeme. Where one sees jarring juxtapositions of unrelated elements, another finds an efficient ellipsis needing no explicit justification or reasoning.

Conspiracism Requires Agonism

Gravois (2012) found argumentation and evidence alone are ultimately not enough for conspiracy theories to persuade non-believers, and, for this reason, claiming or cultivating experts is crucial to conspiracist movements. Indeed, a major part of Masters' internet presence is aimed at demonstrating his bona fides, casting himself as an expert on all topics related to Planet X, acting as the star of his own media productions, making guest appearances in other conspiracy-related media, and thereby creating a considerable presence on- and off-line within conspiracist networks. Aside from his self-published work on Planet X, his most consistently touted credential is his former job as a field producer of science features for CNN; he also occasionally describes himself as a former technical writer. But he does not list "conspiracy theorist" as a credential.

"Conspiracy theorist" is a term like "terrorist." Few people so described would self-identify in that way (Hustings and Orr, 2007). Through this reasoning, Jones (2012) argued for understanding conspiracies not in terms of their narrative style, such as positing nefarious plots hatched by powerful elites, but with regard to the way they are marginalized by more entrenched, credible, mainstream discourses. Jones contended that conspiracy theories cannot be identified solely through features of the text, they must also be defined in terms of their agonistic relationship to other discourses. Likewise, Goodnight and Poulakos stressed the ways conspiracy

theories strive to construct knowledge through an agonistic relation with competing discourses, finding that conspiracy theory as such must be considered the product of rhetorical friction among proponents and opponents, and not a property of any text in and of itself. A discourse is not fully actualized as a conspiracy theory unless and until it is (dis)credited as such, and the same goes for conspiracy theorists.

Among the comments on *Surviving 2012*, there were a few debunking efforts. Casandra649 wrote, for example, “People just seem to love to live in fear! We have been predicting our doom since day one. I don't think people will ever know the true ending of the human race” (Part 1, comments). Another, from dafotograf, was more explicit, “2012 is a business. All videos we can see about 2012sucks and don't prove anything (Part 2, comments). Though such comments were surprisingly few and far between, the scarcity of debunkers does not necessarily mean that no one else voiced dissent in this way; it is possible that Masters, who has administrative control over the user forum, deleted some.^{vi} Regardless, there is no shortage of public debunking originating from outside this channel.

For scientists and other establishment sources, the problem of conspiracy theories is their radical rejection of the fundamental premises of orthodox knowledge and the rhetoric that would explain it to the public (Bratich, 2008 ;Knight, 2001). As astronomer Phil Plait lamented about Planet X theorists, “You cannot debunk these people. They are completely impervious to scientific logic” (Frazier, 2004, n.p.). To be sure, the scientific community has roundly debunked Planet X. For example, Neil de Grasse Tyson was asked about Planet X during a webcast event, and responded: “Oh, yes, yes, there is no such thing as ‘Nimbiru’ or whatever they say, it’s just, it’s just fiction and they cite sources that cite NASA sources, they don’t cite NASA” (ForaTV, 2011). *Surviving 2012* is presumably one of those sources that cites NASA, to which other

people refer to instead of NASA itself. In this case, the distinction is crucial because it turns out that NASA has, in fact, put out press releases about Planet X since the ambiguous 1992 release cited in the videos.

David Morrison, Senior Scientist at NASA's Astrobiology Institute, created the "Nibiru and Doomsday 2012: Questions & Answers" web page, dedicated to handling public concerns about this subject. Unequivocally, Morrison stated that Nibiru/Planet X "is a figment of Sitchin's imagination" (n.d., n.p). Though Morrison targets the root of the rogue planet theory—Sitchin, not Masters—there are other sites targeting Masters directly, including *2012Hoax* and *YOWCrooks*, the latter of which is solely dedicated to discrediting Masters and his enterprise.^{vii} The thrust of attacks on his credibility is that he is not a hapless pseudo-scientist but a cunning scam artist opportunistically cashing-in on the 2012 trend.

For conspiracists, however, these debunkers are just propagandists for the conspirators whose debunking campaigns are proof that forces ranging from anonymous internet activists to NASA are at work against the best efforts of someone like Masters, who accused the *YOWCrooks* group of being "cyberterrorists" and a "PTB [powers that be] disinformation wolf pack," the goal of which is to "target innocent Americans for hate crimes" (2009, n.p.) Discussing elsewhere the problem of moderating online discussion forums, Masters said,

A lot of people don't realize how much of the [online] conversation about this topic is grossly manipulated. And we're not talking, folks will, you know, knock it off to cranks, ne'er do wells, et cetera. The folks that I see out there, twisting the conversations, that's how they pay their orthodontia and child support, okay? It's a job for them, and this is going on all of the time. (*Jungle Apocalypse*, 2012, podcast).

Masters, then, is not the scam artist who has made a job out of spreading misinformation; through a conspiracist prism, it stands to reason that intense, widespread, personal criticism is where the scam lies. Conspiracy theorists are constituted as such by their confrontations with opposition, real or imagined. Therefore, for conspiracists as well as debunkers, the contest often comes down to arguments concerning the credibility of sources.

Conspiracism leads not only to a mistrust of debunkers, it also leads to internal suspicions about in-group authorities. This is an inevitable cost of paranoid rhetoric. Goodnight and Poulakos found, “while some conspiracy rhetoric is directed toward out-groups, claiming the pervasiveness of ‘foreign’ influence, other charges are directed toward the in-groups, the very sources of support and respectability” (p. 310). In this light, it is notable that Masters’ videos denouncing orthodox scientists, media, and governments do not address potential conflicts among in-group authorities. It is not surprising, however, to find that there are Planet X and 2012 debunkers who are also conspiracy theorists.

Consider, for example, the very different conversation about Planet X and 2012 found on Alex Jones’ *Infowars* site, a conspiracist web portal also popular with preppers, featuring the article “2012 Fears Inspire Apathy.” The problem with doomsday predictions, the author argued, is that it makes people less inclined to resist the New World Order.

The supreme body of central bankers, deciding who gets special treatment by the eugenicists and who does not, is rolling out its game plan with an effort that dwarfs any embarked upon before by the New World Order in its long and sordid history. Its power rests and always has rested primarily on its ability to control the flow of information, relying on an uncritical mass, bobbing on a wire. We have the mainstream media to thank for this massive propaganda offensive. The

situation becomes even more dire when we consider some alternative media outlets, changing their trajectory of truth towards vague new age concepts, softening the people up to the point of complete spine failure and furthering the objectives of the New World Order in the process. (Maessen, 2012, n.d.)

At best, from this perspective, Masters is complicit with the goals of NWO. At worst, he is an active agent within the mainstream media's secret campaign to control the populace. We witness here how conspiracism may cause schisms among conspiracists. But considering that debunking is productive, indeed necessary, for conspiracy theories and theorists, this kind of infighting could also be seen as a self-sustaining activity. But this particular in-group critique also shows that, above and beyond the material borrowed to lay his premise, Masters is indeed staking a claim on relatively new conspiracist territory by including New Age beliefs and values.

With respect to his call to action, the ultimate message of Masters' series is unique and somewhat bizarre even within the field of conspiracism: "surviving Planet X and 2012 is less about what is in your bunker and more about what is in your heart" (Part 5, video). The final message is thus hardly apocalyptic. "Eventually, Planet X will leave us in peace once again, and the steadfast few who have survived through a philosophy of service to others shall arise from the ruins. They will embrace this new future with humility, compassion, tolerance, and, above all, love" (Part 5, video). Distinct from other conspiracy theories, Masters' is notable for its peace-and-love message amidst a sea of paranoia, striving to keep "us" together even after "they" have gone.

Conspiracism's Entelechial Tendencies

Within less than two years of being online, Masters disabled and deleted user comments.^{viii} There was no explanation of this on his YouTube channel, but on one of his other sites, Masters defined a “vetting protocol” for helping people judge the veracity of Planet X videos. One part of the protocol explains how to analyze YouTube comments:

The first YouTube viewer comments on a new video are usually very good on balance. This is because they're contributed by people who are actively looking for this kind of information. When viewing comments, always begin with the first comments on the video -- not the latest. Try to read these comments within the first few hundred plays of the video. As a video breaks into the 1,000+ viewings range, you'll usually begin to see an increasing number comments from vulgar cranks and sophomoric trash talk idiots. Eventually, they can dominate the discussion in most cases. (Masters, 2011, n.p.)

It is difficult to tell how much comment curation Masters did on YouTube. But at least one of his detractors has pointed out that he removed all of the Comet Elenin material from his channel after his predictions failed to come true.^{ix} Of course, as should be obvious by now, this type of critique is easily recuperated through the typical, agonistic reasoning whereby debunking is proof of the conspiracy.

This incredible resistance to debunking even in the face of incontrovertible truths led Clark (2002) to define conspiracy theory as that which has a “degenerating research program” (p.131). That is, unlike science or philosophy, conspiracy theorists do not revise dialectically their hypotheses if they fail in the face of empirical evidence or superior reasoning. Instead, they retain their hypotheses at all costs, erecting baroque discursive supports to maintain them. This

would be damning criticism if conspiracy theories were striving to rival conventional science, politics, or philosophy, but that is not the case.

Finding that conspiracism is both an alternative epistemology and a discursive practice unconcerned with truth, Soukup (2008) argued that conspiracy rhetoric is driven by textual desire, deriving pleasure from exploring and participating in the intricacies of conspiracist rhetoric. These intricacies are easiest to see when agonistic friction appears between conspiracists and debunkers, producing the fascinating blur, or oscillation, that theorists like Knight and Jenkins identified as part of the allure conspiracy theories. Soukup, too, used a metaphor of motion, “spinning,” to describe how a conspiracy theory attracts people, and argued that the digital environment of the web is perfect for maintaining that motion perpetually: “digital (hyper)text has no endpoint and no end to the playful signification, in a sense, digital media allow for the emergence of a ‘perfect’ conspiracy theory” (p. 23). In this way, he argues that conspiracy theories are “entelechial,” or striving to actualize their potential not as science, philosophy, politics, or whatever discursive mode they may borrow from, but as conspiracy theory proper. The perfection of a conspiracy theory does not come from achieving the status of scientific knowledge, historical facts, or religious dogma. Rather, as an adversary to these modes, the best conspiracy theory is one that most powerfully deploys conspiracism as an aesthetic end unto itself. Therefore, the entelechy of conspiracism lies not in dialectically refining its research program to match the methods of its critics, but in constantly revising its arguments in the interest of maintaining the spin, oscillation, or blur that is the hallmark of conspiracist aesthetics.

To achieve this, however, not just any bricolage of evidence swirling around a paranoid core will do. As we have shown, conspiracism is a historical form, and so there is a rhyme and a reason to it; there is a culture of conspiracism affecting its aesthetic limits and possibilities for

realizing entelechial potential. Certain tropes, like NWO, are the *sine qua non* of contemporary conspiracist style, while others features, like survivalism, may become *de rigueur* following a trend or event, like the Y2K scare did for preppers. Still, propelled by agonism, conspiracists cannot simply coast on the most readily available material; the work of conspiracism requires a constant uptake of materials from outside established conspiracist traditions. In the case above, it was Planet X pseudo-science and New Age mysticism that provided a unique, though not uncontroversial, dimension to otherwise familiar conspiracist tropes. In that way, we observe conspiracism as more than a rhetorical style. It is a culture with an aesthetic history, canon, and literacies that, while recognizable and influential, are nonetheless contested from within the culture as much or more than from without. So, while conspiracist discourses tend towards entelechy, that target is always moving due to the vicissitudes of the inter-textual field of references and the agonistic, paranoid ethic often cleaving conspiracists from one another.

Discussion

Whatever conspiracy there may be concerning 2012, whether the Powers That Be have deceived us for the last time or whether conspiracists have deceived us yet again, there can be no doubt that this style of rhetoric will continue to be popular, and that there will be new doomsday prophecies and conspiracies to fill the void that will be created in the uneventful passing of December, 2012. Looking at the aesthetics of conspiracy rhetoric, whether Masters has it wrong or whether he is an opportunist matters less than the way this text figures within a culture of conspiracism. Aesthetically, the best conspiracy theories are not measured by their truth claims or persuasiveness, such as whether the prediction of a 2012 disaster is accurate or whether many

people believe it, but by their ability to set and keep in motion a labyrinthine argument that is itself the mark and measure of conspiracy rhetoric.

Understanding the entelechial tendencies of conspiracism means researchers must consider that conspiracy theories are not merely failed science or bad philosophy. Instead, conspiracy theory should be understood first and foremost as a genre unto itself, and conspiracism as the practice of striving to perfect a discourse vis-à-vis the aesthetics articulated above. With that in mind, one key factor as yet unexplored, which the notion of conspiracist aesthetics begs for, is better understanding of how conspiracist “fiction” feeds back into conspiracist “non-fiction.” Moving forward, researchers should be concerned with how conspiracist fictions, like Sony’s *2012* movie, influence conspiracist non-fictions, like Planet X conspiracy theories.

It will also be necessary for conspiracy studies to pay more attention to sub-genres of conspiracism because, for one, it is clear that conspiracy theories often speak to different kinds of paranoid worldviews and, for another, the business of conspiracizing is not about which conspiracist is most often correct in their analysis, but about marketing a text to audiences familiar with the conspiracist form. Our analysis of *Surviving 2012* suggests that there are likely to be many identifiable sub-genres of conspiracism, and we have touched on at least two permutations affecting this one discourse—political (concerning NWO) and mystical (concerning ancient aliens). The fascinating blur of conspiracism found within an individual conspiracy theory should be expected to take place also in a proliferation of sub-genres and other micro-variations on old themes.

Lastly, though we have bracketed the issue here, as these sub-genres of conspiracism become better understood, it will be necessary to revisit questions of persuasiveness in light of

new findings. Looking only at the text itself, where user interactions were taken at face value, did not permit us to inquire as to the motivations for participating in conspiracism. While we follow Hofstadter in the distinction between a text representing a paranoid worldview and an individual's psychology, and our aesthetic approach to conspiracy rhetoric opens a space for thinking about conspiracy theories as a form of entertainment rather than a mode for politics, the larger question remains how and whether this blurry discursive modality affects individual beliefs or public discourses circulating outside distinctly conspiracist environs.

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Endnotes

ⁱ The first part of *Surviving 2012* is the third-listed site for “Planet X” on Google, preceded only by the Wikipedia entry on the topic and the home page of a different conspiracy theorist.

ⁱⁱ The top off-site referrers are yowusa.com and 2012warning.com (accessed March 27, 2011).

ⁱⁱⁱ See Aaronovitch (2010), Adamo (2010), Birchall (2002), Bratich (2008), Fenster (1999), and Knight (2001, 2002).

^{iv} In *The End of Days*, Sitchen predicts a later date in the year 2900. While Sitchen is not a proponent of the 2012 hypothesis, Masters’ has adopted Sitchen’s idea that the next near-orbit will be disastrous, but not, however, truly apocalyptic. Masters’ twists on Sitchen, especially the name “Planet X” and the 2012 date, resemble more closely Nancy Lieder’s *Zeta Talk*.

^v See David Icke. *The Biggest Secret: The Book that Will Change the World*. (David Icke Books, 1999).

^{vi} A re-uploader posted all 5 segments as one piece on YouTube. This copy, not controlled by Masters, features far more debunking in the user comments. Retrieved May 5, 2012, from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TaeyGsOi9ls>

^{vii} See <http://www.2012hoax.org/> and <http://yowcrooks.wordpress.com/>.

^{viii} Around this same time, however, Masters rejuvenated his own forum away from YouTube, the 2012 and Planet X Survivors Town Hall (planetxtownhall.com) a publicly-readable but highly moderated forum for 2012 believers.^{viii} There, the conspiracy model is inapplicable because the relevant (counter)public is defined by the worldview figured in Masters' arguments. Conspiracy is left outside the "Town Hall," which is populated only with believers and guarded from disinformation. Although the original comments are now gone from YouTube, most material is preserved on sites mirroring the original content, including plantosurvive2012.com and survival-in-2012.com.

^{ix} See <http://yowcrooks.wordpress.com/2011/12/04/doomsday-cancelled-at-least-for-now/>.