THE RHETORIC OF CONSPIRACY  
*An Honors Course* 

Fall Semester 2011  MWF 2:00-2:50  CU 130  

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OBJECTIVE OF THE COURSE:  
This course examines the tropes and rhetorical patterns inherent in conspiracy thinking, as it migrates back and forth from psych ward, to the news report, to the college classroom, to the silver screen, and everywhere in between.  

The course will be multimedia in format and interdisciplinary in its approach. We will examine conspiratorial thinking in all its manifestations, using textual, historical, sociological, psychological, and philosophical modes of analysis. We will explore the inherent appeal and logic of conspiratorial thinking as well as its ultimate weaknesses.  

Early in the semester, each student will “adopt” a conspiracy on which they will become an expert to the rest of the class. Smaller papers throughout the course will center on several of the modes of analysis and will become part of a larger portfolio project due at semester’s end. The semester will culminate with an in-class presentation which will integrate the various approaches in a single analytical overview of the conspiracy in question, and students will include a theoretical retrospective on what they have learned.  

Overarching questions of the course include:  

- *Why are conspiracies so appealing?*  
- *Are conspiracies a particular feature of the postmodern world?*  
- *What is the particular rhetoric that conspiracy theories employ?*  
- *Does conspiracy thinking creep into other intellectual arenas and undermine genuine inquiry there?*  
- *How ought we to think about conspiracies?*  

This is an honors course. Students will be responsible for learning the methods of primary research across several disciplines and presenting their findings to the rest of the class in creative, effective, and analytical ways.
REQUIRED TEXTS:
Daniel Pipes. *Conspiracy: How the Paranoid Style Flourishes and Where It Comes From.*
Umberto Eco. *On the Limits of Interpretation.*
Umberto Eco. *Foucault’s Pendulum.*
George Orwell. *1984.*
William Shakespeare. *Julius Caesar.*

POLICIES:
1. ATTENDANCE: Every class period is important, so you need to attend every class. I will take attendance every day. I will also give occasional reading quizzes. Your attendance/quizzes grade and will account for 10% of your final grade. Quizzes missed because of tardiness may not be made up. Note that a total of SIX (6) ABSENCES will automatically result in FAILURE of the course.

2. RESEARCH PAPERS & PORTFOLIO: You will write four primary papers this semester, including one integrative summary analysis near the end of the semester. The last day of class, you will turn in a portfolio of all your writing and various supplementary multimedia materials documenting and studying the phenomenon of your conspiracy. This is a Gordon Rule class; consequently, we will spend significant time in class discussing effective writing. On your final papers, errors in spelling, punctuation, and grammar will hurt your grade. But I will of course also be looking for complexity of thought, subtlety of insight, and elegance of expression in your writing as well. Your papers should conform to the MLA style sheet. (Besides the help in our textbook, online guides can be found at http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/research/r_mla.html or http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Oracle/4184/.)

You are required to turn in a topic and invention sheet approximately two weeks before each paper is due and then a rough draft one week before the final version is due. These need to be either photocopies or extra printed copies of your work. Once you’ve chosen your topic, you may not change that topic unless you obtain your instructor’s approval.

Note, too, that you will turn in an electronic version of your final papers (on or before the due date). I prefer that you simply email them to me (tmartin@fau.edu). The electronic version will not replace your typed or printed version: you will turn in both a hard copy and an electronic copy.

After I return your graded term papers to you, you will revise them and attach them (along with the marked copy) to your next paper. Revision will be important because we will track your progress as a writer this semester.

3. TIMELINESS: Assignments are due on or before the date specified. Any assignments that are late will be deducted one-half letter grade per calendar day of lateness. Failure to turn in an assignment will result in a zero for that assignment.
4. **PLAGIARISM**: You are expected to do your own work. When you put your name on your paper, you certify to me that you are turning in your own work. Any plagiarism will result in failure on the assignment and may result in failure of the entire course. (University regulations pertaining to plagiarism may be found in the catalog under the heading “Academic Irregularities.”)

5. **ELECTRONICA**: In class, turn off and put away all cell phones, smart phones, ipads, and laptops.

   Francis Bacon said: “Reading maketh a full man, conference a ready man, and writing an exact man.” How well you develop yourself in these three areas will determine your grade for this class.

**GRADE BREAKDOWN:**

- ATTENDANCE/QUIZZES: 10%
- PARTICIPATION/DISCUSSION: 10%
- PORTFOLIO: 5%
- FINAL EXAM: 15%
- RESEARCH PAPERS (4 @ 5 pages): 60%

**GRADE SCALE:**

Florida Atlantic University follows a plus/minus (+/-) grading system. Numeric values for this course are as follows:

- 93-100 A; 92-90 A-
  - 89-87 B+; 86-83 B; 82-80 B-
  - 79-77 C+; 76-73 C; 72-70 C-
  - 69-60 D; 59-0 F

**THEMES AND TOPICS:**

- “Black Helicopters”: Introduction to the World of Conspiracy Thinking
- “The Truth is Out There”: The Appeal of Conspiracy Thinking
- “There is No Coincidence”: The Logic of Conspiracy Thinking
- “Everything is Connected”: The Sociology of Conspiracy Thinking
- “You’re Not Paranoid If They’re Really Out to Get You”: The Psychology of Conspiracy Thinking
- “‘They’ Don’t Want You to Know”: Conspiracy Thinking, Science, and Methods of Verification
- Conspiracy Theories in Movies
❖ Conspiracy Theories in Television
❖ Conspiracy Theories in Music
❖ Conspiracy Theories in Politics
❖ Conspiracy Theories in Fiction
❖ Conspiracy Theories in the Academy

A SAMPLE OF POPULAR NOVELS AND MOVIES WE WILL DISCUSS:

❖ The DaVinci Code
❖ V for Vendetta
❖ The Golden Compass
❖ A Beautiful Mind
❖ Conspiracy Theory (movie)
❖ South Park Conspiracy
❖ 23
❖ New World Order

A SAMPLE OF POPULAR CONSPIRACY THEORIES WE WILL COVER:

❖ Holocaust Deniers
❖ 911 “Truthers”
❖ Paul McCartney is Dead
❖ The Trilateral Commission
❖ The Rosicrucians
❖ David Icke and the Reptilian Overlords
❖ UFOs and Aliens Hidden at Roswell
❖ Princess Diana Murdered by Royals
❖ Jewish World Domination, The Protocols of the Elders of Zion
❖ Apollo Moon Landing a Hoax
❖ Priory of Sion
❖ Skull & Bones
❖ Knights of Malta
SCHEDULE:

THE RHETORIC OF CONSPIRACY – ASSIGNMENT & READING SCHEDULE

M 1/10  Introduction.
W 1/12  Julius Caesar, Act I.
F 1/14  Julius Caesar, Act II.

M 1/17  MLK Day. No class.
W 1/19  Julius Caesar, Act III.
F 1/21  Julius Caesar, Act IV.

M 1/24  Julius Caesar Act V. Conspiracy in the News assignment.
W 1/26  Conspiracy Overview writing assignment.
F 1/28  Foucault’s Pendulum 1-45.

M 1/31  Foucault’s Pendulum to 71.
W 2/2   Foucault’s Pendulum to 106.
F 2/4   Foucault’s Pendulum to 141. Pipes Chapter 1.

M 2/7   Foucault’s Pendulum to 176. Other reading TBA.
F 2/11  Foucault’s Pendulum to 245. Pipes Chapter 2

M 2/14  Foucault’s Pendulum to 280. Other reading TBA.
W 2/16  Foucault’s Pendulum to 309.
F 2/18  1984 to 35. Pipes Chapter 3. PAPER #1 DUE.

M 2/21  1984 to 70. Other reading TBA.
F 2/25  1984 to 140. Pipes Chapter 4.

M 2/28  1984 to 175. Other reading TBA.
F 3/4   1984 to 245. Pipes Chapter 5

M 3/7   Spring Break.
W 3/9   
F 3/11  

F 3/18  Other reading TBA. Pipes Chapter 6.

M 3/21  Instruction in writing.
W 3/23  Instruction in writing.
F 3/25  Instruction in writing. Pipes Chapter 7. PAPER #2 DUE.

M 3/28  Foucault’s Pendulum to 345. Other reading TBA.
W 3/30  Foucault’s Pendulum to 380. Conspiracies in the Academy assignment.
F 4/1  Foucault’s Pendulum to 415. Pipes Chapter 8.

M 4/4  Foucault’s Pendulum to 450. Other reading TBA.
W 4/6  Foucault’s Pendulum to 485.
F 4/8  Foucault’s Pendulum to 520. Limits of Interp Intro & Chapter 1

M 4/11  Foucault’s Pendulum to 555. Other reading TBA.
W 4/13  Foucault’s Pendulum to 590.
F 4/15  Foucault’s Pendulum to end. Limits of Interp Chapt 2-3. PAPER #3 DUE.

M 4/18  Pipes Chapter 9. Other reading TBA.
W 4/20  Limits of Interp 9-10.
F 4/22  Presentations

M 4/25  Presentations
W 4/27  Presentations. PORTFOLIOS AND RETROSPECTIVE PAPERS DUE BY END OF THE WEEK.

Final Exam