Politics, Lies and Conspiracy Theories: A Cognitive Linguistic Perspective

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Politics, Lies and Conspiracy Theories: A Cognitive Linguistic Perspective, by Marcel Danesi. Routledge, 2023. ISBN: 9781032393124, 116 pages (paperback).

In one of his later treatises memorable for its critique of education and stupidity in the attentional economy, Bernard Stiegler grieves the "disarmament of thought" and the "exhaustion of critical power" that ensued from the whimsical legacy of poststructuralist theory (86). That legacy was not one of educational reform or curricular innovation, but of original hermeneutic performances that were unrepeatable. The conservative mode of "performative politics" currently trending in Washington, DC, amounting to personal puffery and vainglory, was weirdly anticipated by the stylized public demonstrations of radical theorists in academia—and just as institutionally ineffectual. The fixation of Derrida and others on the undecidable or aporetic forces and conditions inherent in reading and interpretation denied traction and substance to their cultural progressivism. Instead of refining methods of critique and evaluation for students, instead of developing new criteria for exegesis and other forms of concrete practice, theorists became mired in artfully ambiguous anti-foundationalism when enrollment in the humanities was already in steep decline. Stiegler is "profoundly discouraged" (79) by the inability of such theorists to address concrete sociocultural and educational problems associated with diminished ("proletarianized") outcomes in literacy, civic awareness, and consumer protection from predatory algorithms. Intervention in these sectors of public life is handicapped and confounded, not helped by describing the destabilizing figural and semiotic dynamics of rhetoricity. Stiegler perceives a lamentable irony in the way the aporetic outcomes of poststructuralist theory, which was supposed to deconstruct status quo institutions, are replicated in the impasses and stalemates afflicting the operations of status quo political governing. The philosophers and the politicians can no

longer make firm distinctions based on logic or principle, but they can sure quarrel and spin their wheels in a bog of indecision.

Marcel Danesi, an emeritus professor at U. Toronto, seeks to avoid the self-kneecapping of poststructuralist theory by arguing that the operations of metaphor are not meaningless but meaningful. Metaphor does not subvert meaning but integrates threads of meaning into a persuasive narrative totality—such as QAnon, which started out as gossip on social media until millions joined up in a cultish herd phenomenon. Danesi argues, "The objective of metaphor study within linguistics is to understand how the human brain extracts elements from disparate information, organizing them into meaningful wholes" (10). These wholes can consist of meaningful nonsense that excites and mobilizes ignorant believers. The ominous metaphor of the "deep state" on which Trump blames his criminal charges might be an absurd nonentity to those endowed with critical acumen, something to spoof on late night television; but its mythic archetype, demonically personified, has become what Danesi describes as a "conspiratorial narrative of persecution that Trump is always spreading to protect himself from political opposition and even legal actions—persecutions from the political left" (39). Spread at rallies and through social media, the metaphor of the deep state has grown so powerful and significant to MAGA fanatics that they use it to exculpate Trump from all 93 alleged crimes. Danesi would explain the transference of meaning that occurs between the deep state and its personification as metaphorical mapping. "Trump has repeated this metaphor so many times, in public and in tweets, that it has become a Korzybskian linguistically-altered map" (39).

The discipline of linguistics is beholden to its own theorists, such as Alfred Korzybski, and presupposes, as does deconstruction, its own version of the linguistic turn initiated by Wittgenstein and Heidegger. In this regard the recent linguistic study of metaphor is an area of research that has been affiliated since 1980 with the popular writings of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, whose central idea is that "metaphorical meaning pervades language and thought" (11). But unlike the playful literary pretensions of poststructuralist theory, the scientific *disciplinary ethos* of linguistics projects a heuristic pertinence and applicability. This

ethos has a sobering effect on Marcel Danesi's prose, which is lucid and undistracted by stylistic considerations.

As adumbrated above, Marcel Danesi marshals cognitive linguistics to interpret and understand the widespread susceptibility of the masses to political lies, conspiracy theories, and viral streams of disinformation. In particular, the author leverages conceptual metaphor theory as a "decodification tool" (102) to explain the psycholinguistic intricacies of deception by political discourse relying on relatable metaphors that take on a life and power of astonishing scope in social media. Those conspiratorial metaphors are the lifeblood of the gullible MAGA devotees, all 80 million of them, and are all too familiar: the deep state; decadence, or cultural decline from 1950s' family values; worldwide Jewish cabal; perversion; miscegenation or racial contamination; invasion and border integrity; victimhood; injustice, etc.

"I don't mind being Nelson Mandela, because I'm doing it for a reason," Trump mythologized himself in New Hampshire. In a *Salon* article by Chauncey Devega, Jennifer Mercieca, author of *Demagogue for President: The Rhetorical Genius of Donald Trump* is quoted as follows: "Trump suffers for his followers, so his followers owe him. They owe him their loyalty, votes, and money…" The martyr metaphor expands, exudes a religious aura when Trump tells his MAGA audience, "I'm being prosecuted for you." He becomes a martyred *savior* with religious overtones; merges his persona as a dictator with the patronizing and patriarchal role of the *father who knows best*; and cynically solicits millions of dollars to support his cause as a *patriotic duty* as he personifies the *nation itself*.

While Jennifer Mercieca presents admirable research, the titular "Genius" is a poorly chosen word for a sociopathic clown and follows the popular but *ad hominem* misfocus on Trump and not the gullible millions who support him. Danesi's succinct study is dryly schematic like a study guide for college students, but he acknowledges the imperative to understand why so many millions are duped by political mendacity. Each chapter sandwiches content between a Prologue and Epilogue. His seven chapter titles are sequenced as follows: (1) Lies and Conspiracy Theories; (2) Deconstructing Political Lies; (3) Da Vinci Code Effects; (4) Fake News and Pseudo-Events; (5) Mythic Lies; (6) Channels of Spread; (7) The

Cognitive Linguistic Perspective. MAGA fanatics are subjugated, he argues, by powerful and pervasive metaphors whose conspiratorial aura beguile, engage, and even flatter common sense, such as Dan Brown's clandestine intrigues in *The Da Vinci Code* published in 2003. Danesi argues that the "Da Vinci Code effects" (34) associated with this blandly written blockbuster provided the archetypal preconditions for the cabal metaphors of the QAnon "big tent conspiracy theory" (50). Enabled by the internet, millions of people became sofa-bound sleuths; encouraged by the talking heads of Fox News, they preoccupied themselves by chasing clues down rabbit holes and connecting them via gossip and calumny, demonstrating "an ingrained tendency to perceive meaningful connections between unrelated things." This cognitive compulsion to make specious connections, Danesi explains, is called *apophenia*, a diagnostic term formulated in 1958 by the psychiatrist Klaus Conrad (35).

Engulfed and spellbound by conspiratorial metaphors issuing from what Guy Debord called the *integrated spectacle,* the Mobius-like continuum of film, television, and social media, citizens offer little resistance, critically unprepared as they are by the schools where they were supposed to learn critical thinking. Danesi doesn't go there, criticize educators and their institutions. His sphere of professional competence is cognitive linguistics. Yet it seems inarguable that the educational system has failed voters by failing to inculcate the critical thinking, rhetorical acumen, and civic awareness that would decode and disarm powerful and pervasive cabals and their metaphors. The only reason this educational focus sounds infeasible if not wildly ambitious is because of drastically diminished expectations for student learning outcomes. Rhetorical analysis can be taught; I have taught it, along with critical thinking and exegesis, for many years to teachers, writers, and philosophers.

In any case, somehow MAGA diehards misperceive pleonastic bombast and narcissistic arrogance as business savvy and wisdom; for them, the choreographed television show "Apprentice" was real. The MAGA diehards (over 100 million of them) are not charmed, persuaded, or duped (gulled) by subtle reasoning and argument that supports its claims with evidence. Trump *does not argue*, an incapacity which is his secret motive for skipping debates, and not because he is above the fray. Trump does not argue because genuine argument is well-informed and

civilized. As Walter Sinnott-Armstrong explains, "reasons and arguments express respect, improve understanding, induce humility, undermine overconfidence, engender abstraction that reduces polarization, and enable cooperation and compromise." Trump does not argue; he confabulates; projects an attitude of defiance; boasts and insults; he agitates strong feelings of dissatisfaction and resentment.

This is why, beyond logic and rational debate, the subtle psychosocial and cognitive influence of metaphoric captivation, via imagery and spoken utterance, is the primary focus of Danesi and his colleagues. "The reason why metaphors are powerful tools of persuasion is that they structure thought by mapping processes, making it easy to focus on certain things and ignore others (96). In short, they enable discursive bubbles or siloes that protect shibboleths and exclude otherness. The flexibility of metaphoric suggestion invoked by themes like "moral perversion" or "liberal decadence" makes it possible to "map" or thematically cluster a variety of logically incommensurate issues (perversion, children, pizza, Hilary Clinton) without evidential proof.

Something else we need to grasp that is *not* decodified or clarified by Marcel Danesi is why millions of MAGA fanatics are *enjoying* their own submission to deception and demagoguery while 'Rome burns.' David French, a columnist for the *NY Times*, made the uncommon (and seemingly unappreciated) observation, based on his personal experience, that it is not the political content of rallies but their festive aura, rageful intensity, and sense of communal belonging that makes the carnival atmosphere of conservative nihilist politics (or nihilistic political gatherings) today sustainable and robust. Misery loves company, to be sure. And those who are most angrily bamboozled find fun in their troubled but growing multitude. In this context, Danesi cites an aphorism by George Orwell: "Let's all get together and have a good hate" (44).

Danesi's concise study, admirably systematic and accessible, is an urgently necessary project to expose the linguistic roots of today's sociopolitical coercion and dupery, and thereby bring self-awareness to regressive tendencies in society that raise the specter of barbarism and violent polarization on a global scale. The tragically ironic obstacle to such noble efforts is that reflection on linguistic practice is fiercely resisted by the average citizen, as it is by students. When students are given a literary

or philosophic passage for exegesis, they rarely focus on its linguistic properties, stylistic nuances, and rhetorical strategies, unless specifically prompted to do so. Paul De Man famously described this phenomenon as a "resistance to reading" and even a "resistance to theory." Danesi's project of metaphorical understanding--based solely on linguistic concepts and theory—while urgent, should not be mistaken as a how-to guide for protecting susceptible citizens from political dupery, *and* from their own ignorance and servility as uncritical "followers" of fascist leaders and their preferred cabals about stolen elections, perverted liberals, and so on.

It bears repeating that common citizens from both the left and right, like my college students, find it unnatural to reflect on the intricate operations of language and rhetorical figures such as metaphor to which they are vulnerable. To speak of metonymy or anastrophe, irony or mimesis in the undergraduate classroom seems an unwieldy abstraction. Indeed, very few citizens are blessed with insight into the linguistic nature of thought itself, of thinking. They dwell in language oblivious of their milieu like fish in their seas. Only flying fish are aware of the aqueous world in which they swim; the other fish do not know they are enveloped, immersed, submerged.

Ultimately Danesi's approach, while more methodologically concrete and narrowly defined than Derridean deconstruction or what Hans Blumenberg calls a metaphorology, seems academically formalistic, more descriptive than prescriptive. Cognitive linguistics provides us with a supple vocabulary for schematically characterizing populist dupery and digital captivation on a global scale. Does Danesi move us any closer, however, to an ontological understanding of the *gullibility* that remains the precondition for the populist insurgencies, uprisings, cabals, and personal and national embarrassments that continue to surge on screens and seem impossible to overlook or derisively dismiss. Is gullibility merely ignorance and passivity, or something more insipid and pathetic, like obedience—in short, servitude and compliance? Is it the stupefaction observed by Stiegler in *common sense*, which never gains a sure foothold in a technically enabled existence whose algorithms are beyond its comprehension? Years before Facebook programmed a generation to be followers and not leaders with its "follow" requests, Guy Debord

diagnosed the "mass psychology of submission" (27) when he wrote: "In this concrete experience of permanent submission lies the psychological origin of such general acceptance of *what is*; an acceptance which comes to find in it, *ipso facto*, a sufficient value (28). In other words, most people accept the status quo, the *given*, at face value, and hence have a *precritical* (or unenlightened) grasp of reality. As such, both Kant and Stiegler would deem them *immature*, stuck in a regressive pattern devoid of the power of critical judgment and selectivity that separately individuates each member of a group. Debord attributes such disindividuated immaturity to dependence on technology, so that, "At the technological level, *images chosen and constructed by someone else* have everywhere become *the individual's principal connection to the world he formerly observed for himself*" (27, emphasis added).

Some forward traction towards an understanding of widespread gullibility seems to be gained when Danesi adopts Baudrillard's concept of the *simulacrum*, wherein reality and fiction converge in a continuum of precritical experience which is not unlike Debord's *integrated spectacle.* Danesi argues that the brains of MAGA fanatics have been rewired by being steeped or immersed in a simulacrum of falsehoods and disinformation: "Conspiracy theories, big lies, fake news, disinformation campaigns, and pseudo-events produce a simulacrum of reality, distorting it in ways that affect the brain processes, likely rewiring the brain to accept falsehoods as a form of normalcy, indistinguishable from truth" (65). Since their experience is precritical, MAGA voters do not realize they inhabit this simulacrum of *real* and *unreal*, hence, as Danesi says, cannot distinguish falsehoods from truths.

If we accept Danesi's claims, it becomes apparent that MAGA gullibility would be an immersion and cognitive (re)wiring issue, not as much a behavioral flaw or weakness. It is not a question of foolishly or naively accepting fake facts over real ones, for in the simulacrum *they are the same*. Given his systematic pursuit of clarity, it proves worthwhile to read Danesi's exegesis of Baudrillard's four stages by which MAGA devotees becomes absorbed into the simulacrum of absolute credulity:

> First, there is the normal state of consciousness, inhering in a straightforward perception of reality and in a concrete awareness of the distinction between reality and fantasy.

This is followed by a mental state that involves a perversion of reality produced by constant exposure to simulations and fictional portrayals; this is the stage in which alternative facts and conspiracy theories start to create doubt about reality. It then leads to the third stage, when perception breaks down, incapable of filtering between what real and what is false or just imaginary. The final stage is when the simulacrum becomes habitual, as people become more and more skeptical in accepting anything as true or even meaningful. (66)

This paragraph goes a long way to describing the absolute credulity or gullibility of MAGA fanatics as a sort of psychosis insofar as reality can no longer be distinguished from fiction. Anyone who watches television news coverage of Trump rallies will observe the exit interviews in which MAGA people appear spellbound and give utterly stupid responses to reasonable questions about their beliefs and their grasp of contemporary events. These MAGA fanatics are precisely the audience that can most benefit from Marcel Danesi's study, but least likely to ever read it, or any book outside the MAGA simulacrum that doesn't confirm their conspiratorial worldview. They inhabit digital spheres of influence that are self-confirming and impermeable. By now this digital niching behavior is common knowledge, but its linguistic roots are much less commonly understood, and Danesi bring us closer to fathoming them.

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