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The Shadow-Cast by Paranoia

Alexandra Midal

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Alexandra Midal

Professor Head-Genève/HES-SO

The Shadow Cast by Paranoia: The Exhibition in Question.

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“You don't build it for yourself. You know what the people want and you build it for them.”
Walt Disney, inscription on the “Club 33 Disney” plate celebrating the thirty-fifth anniversary
of the Disney Club.

“The lie is often more plausible, more tempting to reason than reality because the liar has the
great advantage of knowing in advance what the public wants to hear or expects to hear.”

Hannah Arendt¹

“And if you say ‘the earth is round,’ do you really mean what you say? No. What you say is
true, without being what you think.”

Gilbert Keith Chesterton²

The recent resurgence of flat earth theories and their growing acceptance may be analysed as an attempt to soften the blow caused by the end of the certainties defended by the great narratives that have long structured the Western world. This “last shore” which, in the words of Francis Fukuyama, territorialises a phenomenon of deconstruction inviting us to reappropriate history and its perceptions in different ways, has failed and splintered into a series of versions that coexist, self-justify and gain legitimacy in the name of the equivalence to alternative discourses. This is true for the flat earth theory, initiated in the 19th century and built around the Flat Earth Society, an Anglo-American organisation with millions of followers, founded in 1956 by Samuel Shenton. Today, the figures speak for themselves: 10%

¹ Hannah ARENDT. *From Lies to Violence. Essays in Contemporary Politics* [1972]. Paris: Presses Pocket, 1989, p. 12.

² Gilbert Keith CHESTERTON. *The Man Called Thursday* [1908]. Bordeaux: L'Arbre vengeur, 2020, p. 25.

of the French population³—one young person in six⁴—and around twelve million Americans believe that the earth is flat.⁵ Most of these so-called *flat earthers* believe that the planet is stationary. They also believe that the Earth, whose horizon the human eye always perceives as flat and straight with no curvature, is flat rather than spherical, as imagined by the majority of people who are in serious need of enlightenment. As for the twinkling stars of the Milky Way, they are deceptive two-dimensional representations. In the 19th century, Samuel Birley Rowbotham described the flat earth model in a pamphlet entitled *Zetetic Astronomy*, published in 1849. Flat earthers conceive of and represent the planet as a disc with ice walls, which they call “parallax.” For some, like Mark Sargent, founder of the *Flat Earth Clues Series* on YouTube, the disc is covered by a dome.

This essay examines the nature of the political links between forms and flat earthers, based on *Keep it Flat* by designers Emma Pflieger and Antoine Fœglé. Far from trivial, this use of shapes and forms is a recurrent feature of conspiracy theory. It reveals a strategy of the primacy of vision over all other perceptions and references to knowledge from books. It opposes the human faculty of eyesight and science, which is perverted and manipulated for guilty reasons.

The disc and dome are symbols of flat earther beliefs and recognition, but are by no means exclusive to this movement. The engineer Richard Buckminster Fuller, to whom we also owe the portrayal of the earth's sphere literally flattened out in order to erase distortions, placed his 2-mile diameter *Dome Over Manhattan* above the centre of New York in a 1959 photomontage. This giant dome was intended to regulate pollution and clean the city's air. Fuller thus established a link of equivalence between aesthetics and politics.

However, the dome has crossed the ages and emerged in different areas. A random selection: in his novel *Isolation* (1992), Greg Egan exploits the subatomic principles of quantum mechanics. Former policeman Nick Stavrianos discovers that aliens have covered the Earth with a dome: the question is why. Another dome, this time made of glass, covers the city of

³ “It's a chilling figure: only 21% of French people do not believe in any conspiracy theory according to an Ifop survey conducted online on 19 and 20 December 2017 among 1,252 people representative of the French population, on behalf of the Jean-Jaurès Foundation.” Lise LOUME, “Apollo, Sida, climat : près de huit français sur dix croient à au moins une théorie du complot,” *Sciences et Avenir*, 8 January 2018, (page consulted on 4 January 2023) <https://www.sciencesetavenir.fr/fondamental/fake-news-pres-de-8-francais-sur-10-croient-a-au-moins-une-theorie-du-complot_119658>

⁴ According to an Ifop survey conducted in January 2023. *Le Canard enchaîné*, 25 January 2023, n° 5333, p. 5.

⁵ Juliette HEUZEBROC. “One in ten French people think the Earth is flat,” *National Geographic*, n.d., (page accessed 25 February 2023) <<https://www.nationalgeographic.fr/sciences/un-francais-sur-10-pense-que-la-terre-est-plate>>

Springfield in *The Simpsons* (David Silverman's 2007 feature film). It contains the pollution caused by the "spider-pig" adopted by Homer Simpson, and is akin to a McGuffin, a narrative pretext invented by Alfred Hitchcock to move his plots forward. For flat earthers, however, the dome reference is something of a totalitarian scenario: it confines inhabitants, forcing them to live a truncated existence like that of the lead character in *The Truman Show* (a film by Peter Weir) or the guinea-pig ex-terrestrials that roam the galaxy in *Dark City* (a film by Alex Proyas), both of which were released in 1998.

For flat earthers, the use of simple geometric shapes—a disc, flat stars and a sphere cut in half—marks the importance of moving from aesthetics to belief and vice versa. These forms serve as icons, rallying signs and shields against the lies of governments and the official media. The dome over a territory shows that forms can be used to mean almost anything. To analyse them is to engage in a political perspective of their existence, in other words thinking the form in its ideological dimension, capable of developing its own structures and elaborating an autonomous discourse. This condition structures the approach of Pflieger and Føæglé, who have been working for several years on the appropriation of apparently insignificant forms by creationists: for example, the Trojan dinosaurs,⁶ Dinny and Mr. Rex, created in the 1960s in Cabazon by Claude K. Bell to promote his restaurant near the freeway between Los Angeles and Palm Springs; since 1996, they have been part of a tourist attraction.

However, territorialisation strategies do not really serve up a possible alternative or political or revolutionary potential in the face of an invisible enemy. In fact, they are colonised by the technological tools of communication, particularly by social networks, the mainspring of late capitalism and conspiracy.

Without being subversive in anyway, they re-enact the banal opposition between good and evil, the anti-state and anti-media cabals,⁷ etc. Likewise, flat earthers unite against the idea of

⁶ See Alexandra MIDAL. "Design is Fiction", *MAAT*, 30 January 2021, (page accessed 25 February 2023) <<https://ext.maat.pt/longforms/design-fiction>>

⁷ These strategies of territorialisation embodied by capitalism are the focus of animated films such as the very successful *Tamala 2010* (2002) by t.o.L. or, in another register, Andrew Stanton's *Wall-E* (2008), where all the protagonists and all ideologies merge: "Time after time, the villain in Hollywood films will turn out to be the 'evil corporation.' Far from undermining capitalist realism, this gestural anti-capitalism actually reinforces it. Take Disney/Pixar's *Wall-E* (2008). The film shows an earth so despoiled that human beings are no longer capable of inhabiting it. We're left in no doubt that consumer capitalism and corporations - or rather one mega-corporation, Buy n Large - is responsible for this depredation; and when we see eventually see the human beings in offworld exile, they are infantile and obese, interacting via screen interfaces, carried around in large motorized chairs, and supping indeterminate slop from cups." Mark FISCHER. *Capitalist Realism*. Geneva: Entremonde, 2018, p. 19.

a common enemy; the feeling of belonging to an ideology overcomes the specificities and divergences of each individual, and this lowest common denominator identity unites the community.

An exhibition that does not go round in circles

Without lapsing into the condescension or mockery that often emerges when listening to these theories, Pflieger and Føglé have built a project that, through a taxonomical approach to the visible forms adopted by flat earthers, delivers critical distance with respect to a huge movement that now counts millions of individuals. *Keep it Flat* revisits the cinematic technology of the phantom ride, which refers to footage filmed from trains with a camera placed on the locomotive during the Victorian era. In the exhibition, a miniature G-scale train records its surroundings as it travels through a landscape of information. The result is projected onto a large screen.

As well as being part and parcel of the first industrial revolution and renewing the perception of time, the steam engine also attracted interested from a number of designers in the 20th century, from the locomotives designed by Raymond Loewy to Roger Tallon's Corail trains. Others have used it in their scenography, including designer Alessandro Mendini with *The Syndrome of Influence* for the Milan Triennial (2013). And who has not seen the photographs of a smiling Walt Disney in his travelling model train? This form of locomotion belongs to the history of modernity, industrialisation and design as a scenographic mechanism.

In 1905, it served as an image-based teaching tool when George Consider Hale, inventor of *Tours and Scenes of the World*, invited passers-by to experience an educational journey in a classroom set up to replicate a carriage with a screen. Projected images provided spectators with cinematic scenes filmed from the front of a train. The illusion produced by the installation was made all the more realistic by a system placed underneath the carriage that reproduced the bumps and rumblings of a moving train. This immersive project was based on the famous metaphor of the cinema being a “non-moving journey,” where spectators have the sensation of passing through real landscapes. Rather redundantly, we see Hale travelling in real trains to promote his screenings.

On the other side of the Atlantic, this new means of locomotion in the 19th century was perceived as a troublemaker, and doctors accused its bumpy ride of rendering both male and female travellers hysterical. The train and its mechanism were the start of a traumatic time in history, accompanied by an attractive series of images. One of the first was *The Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat Station* by the Lumière brothers. It was first shown in Lyon in January

1896 and is said to have caused a violent wave of panic among the audience, although this was apparently a figment of someone's imagination. Then came Edwin Stanton Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* (1903). The train was also central to the plot of Buster Keaton's *The General* (1926) as well as being the main protagonist of Michael Garrison's television series *Mysteries of the West* (1965-1969), with the two heroes, James West and Artemus Gordon, aboard. Their private train was luxuriously equipped with cosy rooms, a kitchen, a laboratory, an armoury and a pigeon loft pulled by the "Wanderer" locomotive. This means of locomotion, as James D. Dilts reminds us in "The Train and the Camera,"⁸ was also a technological laboratory for communication. It was used by Samuel Morse, inventor of *invisible communication*, who "demonstrated his telegraph on the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad right of way between Washington and Baltimore. Telegraph poles became a prominent figure of early railroad photographs as the rail and telegraph network together spanned the continent"⁹ becoming an instrument and symbol of contemporary communication—the social networks, used extensively by flat earthers, are today's modern version.

Machine of travel and vision, subject of cinema films or mobile technology, the train was above all a catalyst. From the "Railway Spine" to the "Railway Shock"¹⁰ in the 19th century, it revealed the traumas of "Mobile Modernity"¹¹ and even a "trauma laboratory," as remarkably demonstrated by Mireille Berton¹² in her analysis of the clash between train, cinema and a number of pathologies.¹³ This association helps to understand what led Pflieger and Fœglé to resort to railway and cinematographic mechanisms: good-natured language embodying the idea of contamination in order to deconstruct chronological linearity and rethink history and time through the format of the circularity of eternal return.

⁸ James D. DILTS. "The Train and the Camera," *Railroad History*, Autumn 2000, n° 183, pp. 96-101.

⁹ *Ibid.* Page accessed on Jstor on 4 February 2023 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/43504798>>

¹⁰ See Simone GIGLIOTTI. "Sensory Witnessing and Railway Shock: Disorders of Vision and Experience," *The Train Journey. Transit, Captivity, and Witnessing in the Holocaust*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2010, pp. 128-168.

¹¹ Todd PRESNER. *Mobile Modernity. Germans, Jews, Trains*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007, p. 29.

¹² Mireille BERTON. "Train, cinema and modernity: between hysteria and hypnosis," *Décadrages*, 2005, n° 6, p. 8-21. Online version consulted on 26 February 2023 <<https://doi.org/10.4000/decadrages.476>>

¹³ It is also the train of death associated with the Holocaust; Claude Lanzmann revealed the chilling management system operated by the Nazis to transport victims to the extermination camps at their own expense—with the exception of the free transport provided for Jewish children under the age of four by the French railways.

Of course, the train in the exhibition is a reference to the astute Rowbotham:¹⁴ in 1830, his family helped establish the Manchester-Liverpool line to transport cotton from Liverpool to his factories. It is also a metaphor for the flat earthers' disc, the true representation of the Earth that can be circled. Finally, it reproduces the distribution of information via networks in a synaptic process, since it is less a question of observing each carriage or making free associations by anadiplosis, and more of allowing meaning to emerge from the interstices left between them.

In her text, Berton also proposes a connection between hypnosis, trains and the cinema: "This hypnotic state can also occasionally affect train travellers as well as cinema-goers if they choose to lower their customary threshold of vigilance in order to navigate between wakefulness and sleep, and abandon themselves to imaginary captivation. Caught in a constant swinging motion, like that of the pendulum used by hypnotists, today's subject can easily move from hysteria to hypnosis, from shock to boredom, from apathy to versatility, from reactivity to suggestibility."¹⁵ The drowsiness caused by the rolling of the train may induce a state of receptiveness to suggestion, and thus to mental manipulation. This state is also important for Hugo Münsterberg, who believes that the content of images carries with it the seed of possible "psychical infection"¹⁶ among easily impressionable subjects.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Elizabeth Blount, founder of the Universal Zetetic Society after Rowbotham's death, set out to legitimise flat earth. She used photographs to disseminate tangible evidence to support her belief. Like many conspiracy theorists, flat earthers use images, without doubting them, to denounce the manipulations that we apparently suffer. Remember the analyses of the pictures of the Pentagon and the Twin Towers following the 9/11 terrorist attacks. In another context, Münsterberg points out the dangers that hypnotic images can provoke in fragile and easily intimidated subjects. The train thus proves to be at once a symbol, a form and a manifesto. It does not aim to change the world—the idea of efficiency promoted by salutary culture as opposed to politics has long been illusory—but, without lecturing or separating good from evil, it highlights the constant overabundance of information that blinds and blurs reason, offering no escape. Optimists notwithstanding, this little train is not on its way to paradise.

¹⁴ The aforementioned author of *Zetetic Astronomy* described the Earth as a flat surface with the North Pole at its centre. The title of his work was restyled by Elizabeth Blount, wife of explorer Walter Blount, who ensured the continuity of flat earth theories at the end of the 19th century by publishing the magazine *The Earth Not a Globe*.

¹⁵ Mireille BERTON, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

¹⁶ Hugo MÜNSTERBERG, ed. by Allan LANGDALE. *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study and Other Writings*. London: Routledge, 2001, p. 154.

Seeing the world differently

Design duo Dunne & Raby deliver another slant with their masterful installation *An Archive of Impossible Objects* (2019), which they describe as a "platform for exploring different systems of reality that stretch our imaginations in ways that not only help us imagine how things could be otherwise, but also, how the way we think about reality might change."¹⁷ On a table sits a series of nine white models, positioned quite close together, representing cubic Earth: the Toroidal Planet, the Möbius Volume, the Hyperboloid (inspired by Greg Egan's *Dichronauts*), Flat Earth, the Pseudosphere (from the inverted world), the Spheroid (from the *Mesklin* literary series), the Ultima Thule, the Multiverse and the Earth. Dunne & Raby's choice is assumed *de facto*: the visitor is confronted with a multiplicity of representations of the Earth from literature, science, etc., and becomes aware of the diversity of its conceptions. The Earth as a globe is the yardstick for these elegant sculptures.

Plurality of worlds is a science fiction trope that allows for the exploration of alternative scenarios to offer a critical and possibly productive distance from the individual condition. This distance can be found in novels of anticipation. Let us return to Greg Egan's *Isolation*, where Stavrianos revisits the principle of a space governed by the laws of quantum physics, popularised by Austrian scientific theorist Erwin Schrödinger with the help of a burlesque paradox. He explains the existence of superimposed possibilities by means of a cat enclosed in a box and obeying the principles of quantum laws. Subjected to a state of quantum indecision, the poor animal, at once dead and alive, escapes this state of simultaneity as soon as a form of consciousness looks inside the box and sees that it is either alive or dead. In the course of his investigation, Stavrianos eventually discovers that the Earth is beneath a dome to prevent Earthlings from making other galaxies and planets disappear, like observers operating the phenomenon of reducing wave packets every time they look up at the sky. This conception endorses the simultaneous co-emergence of fiction. It is omnipresent, from *Twelve Cautionary Tales for Christmas* (1971) by Piero Frassinelli and the radical architectural group Superstudio, to *Eye in the Sky* (1959), a novel by Philip K. Dick. The latter describes individuals thrown into universes or "realities" that turn out to be journeys into the delusional projections of ordinary people. What is the value of these mental productions? Dick wagered on the coexistence of parallel universes, arguing that the existence of an objective world is fiction. In 1977, he said to a sceptical audience: "If you think this world is

¹⁷ DUNNE & RABY. "An Archive of Impossible Objects," Mariana PESTANA (ed.). *Fiction Practice*. Eindhoven: Onomatopée, 2019, p. 40.

bad, you should see some others [...]. [If] a lot of people claim to remember past lives, I claim to remember a different—very different—present life.”¹⁸

Let us return to the coexistence of the universes described in *Eye in the Sky* and, rather than seeing these statements as the rantings of a psychotropic drug addict, we note the fact that fiction reveals how all perception of worlds, and their representation, is a matter of ideology, morality and politics. By favouring levels of interpretation according to several cultural registers, artistic practices and contemporary and historical sources, *Keep it Flat* explores the perception of the world and its layers, and specifically asks what is reality and what is the value of its representations. In this respect, Dunne & Raby's wish to archive systems of reality that allow for the development of mindsets serving to modify reality is not so far removed from the conception of parallel worlds described by Dick. Yet I find this suggestion, however attractive, fraught with risk in the current mood of conspiracy theories. While this mechanism opens a door on the conflicts between the conceptions of reality by de-hierarchising them, the risk is that all the alternatives are validated at the same level, thus leading us, unwittingly, towards a principle of equivalence of worlds.

Perception in power

Newtonian gravitational force plays a decisive role in the shape of the Earth and challenging it is the keystone of the flat earthers' deconstruction project. However, the Earth is not a perfect sphere: the irregular distribution of masses is the result of thousands of years of evolution. The photographs of the Earth taken by astronauts do not quite match. It looks a little bumpy. Are the visuals produced by NASA propaganda? Not really, because the said deformations are not visible to the naked eye. For its part, the Flat Earth Society makes reference to the first photos of the Earth taken by the Explorer 6 satellite in August 1959 and during the Apollo missions from 1961 to 1972; they are considered to be spurious creations by Stanley Kubrick or by the special effects specialist Douglas Trumbull on behalf of NASA to hide the flat earth truth from the rest of the world.

The point of encounter between expography and flat earthers revolves around the primacy of perception, which is the decisive axis of the research carried out by Pflieger and Fœglé. The first flat earthers, such as Elizabeth Blount, joined forces with photographers to impose their belief. The argument was based on trusting our senses and, above all, grounded in the experience of vision as opposed to disembodied knowledge. In short, reason would come to

¹⁸ Lecture given on 24 September 1977 at the second international science fiction festival in Metz. See also Philip K. DICK. *Si ce monde vous déplaît...* Paris: Éditions de l'éclat, 1998.

grief against the duo of conspiracy and paranoia, described as “hermeneutics of ultra-suspicion” by Daniel Pick.¹⁹ Faced with the disorder of the world and notions that contradict individual observation, “*Instead, it can be tempting to assume a hidden, malevolent human agency must be pulling the strings, persecuting us personally, giving us the hope that if only we can expose and destroy that source, that plot, we will be free. Conspiracy theory, in short, can resonate for all kinds of people, not just a crazy few; its effect cumulatively, in recent times, is to weight much public inquiry heavily towards a shrill and adversary tone, and to assume, a priori, the prevalence of nefarious schemes*”²⁰ The line of the horizon, which is most significant given that it serves as a synecdoche of the flat earth ethos, is reassuring, being obvious and visible to the naked eye.

Let us return one last time to the train which assumes a twin role in the exhibition: associating the obvious pleasure of play and, behind the appealing but protective screen of childhood, exposing the flat earth project. Through this form, designers question and re-evaluate representations of our planet, underlining the extent of the ideological dimension of the way the Earth is represented. In his documentary series *Can't Get Out of My Head* (2021), BBC journalist Adam Curtis—a major reference for Pflieger and Føglé—discusses the association between form, exhibition format and propaganda. He discusses the project set up at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) for the exhibition *The Family of Man* (1955). Curator Edward Steichen was aiming for a visual representation of the diversity of individuals and contexts to show “*the gamut of life from birth to death*”²¹—the ultimate example of modernist mass communication propaganda according to Benjamin H. D. Buchloh.²² Nine million visitors were immersed in a torrent of images that had to be linked together. The five hundred and three photographs selected for *The Family of Man* were a curatorial choice for a quantitative demonstration serving a discourse whose aim was to show a utopian conception of society and individuals.

Again according to Curtis, this process is at work in the styles of scenography by Herbert Bayer, who designed the pavilion of the Deutscher Werkbund at the *Exposition des Arts Appliqués* in Paris in 1930, the *Die Kamera* exhibitions in Berlin in 1933 (for the head of Nazi propaganda Joseph Goebbels) and *Road to Victory. A Procession of Photographs of the*

¹⁹ Daniel PICK. *Brainwashed. A New History of Thought Control*. London, Wellcome Collection, 2020, p. 262.

²⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 262-263.

²¹ New York Museum press release, 31 January 1954, p. 1. Accessed online 26 February 2023 <https://www.moma.org/documents/moma_press-release_325966.pdf>

²² Benjamin H. D. BUCHLOH. “From Faktura to Factography,” *October*, Autumn 1984, vol. 30, p. 82-119.

Nation at War in 1942 in New York at the MoMA. His projects refer to an engagement of the body in the full space of the work, which he explained in “Fundamentals of exhibition design,” an illustrated article that includes a diagram of three eyes on top of each other, or the famous “Field of Vision,” representing a panoptic man in a suit, whose head is replaced by an outsized eye.²³ According to Fred Turner,²⁴ exhibitions of images only preserve a democratic dimension if they leave spaces between the works, thus protecting the viewer's free will. Clearly, underlying these political subtleties of picture-hanging, there is a considerable risk of the individual becoming lost in the profusion of images. The case of Bayer—who directed the Bauhaus typography workshop from 1925 to 1928 before working for the Nazis until 1936 and then moving to the United States in 1938—shows the links that prevail between scenography, which is rarely considered, politics and propaganda. The democratic condition of the subject, deconstructed by information technology and capitalism, is perceptible behind these choices.

These convolutions were necessary to explain the nature of what is at stake with the prodigious spatial device of *Keep it Flat* implemented by Pflieger and Føglé. My hypothesis consisted in raising the possibility of conceiving the visitor's physicality in the exhibition as a form of immediate knowledge and looking at how this idea is also a springboard for conspiracy attraction strategies. If the visitor's body in the exhibition hall is studied in the field of art, it also deserves to be examined in the field of design in the light of politics. Here, the visitor is not a passive spectator totally immersed in the flow of information. Their body overlooks, but does not dominate, the travelling model, assuming a non-illusionist representational dimension. It is possible to think that they are free to take a step to one side and thus withdraw from the hypnotic dimension that results from the association between the moving train and the projections. This shift rehabilitates the importance of distancing in an exhibition environment of the all-immersive and the metaverse. To conclude, rather than imagining that the subject might hope for a return on investment with such distancing—or, as György Kepes explained in his time, “act of integration”²⁵ or “invaluable educational medium”²⁶—*Keep it Flat* promises nothing. The exhibition manifesto signals the end of the

²³ Herbert BAYER. “Fundamentals of Exhibition Design,” *PM*, December 1939-January 1940, pp. 23-24.

²⁴ Fred TURNER. *The Democratic Surround. Multimedia and American Liberalism from World War II to the Psychedelic Sixties*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013, p. 82.

²⁵ György KEPES. *Language of Vision*. Chicago: Paul Theobald, 1944, p. 13. See also Julie JONES. “An advertising art?”, *Photographic Studies*, December 2006, n° 19, pp. 46-67, (pages accessed 26 February 2023) <<http://etudesphotographiques.revues.org/1262>>

²⁶ György KEPES, *op. cit.* p. 13.

illusions. The one that concerns us today is an act of despair, in the sense that it reinvests the quasi-hypnotic jingle of eternal return produced by the train and heard by the spectator, thus echoing the informational irradiations of conspiracists. It deconstructs the promised paradise discovered by Truman Burbank, the character played by Jim Carrey, at the end of *The Truman Show*, a benchmark film for flat earthers.