

Is the QAnon Conspiracy the Work of Artist-Activist Pranksters? The Evidence for (And Against) a Dangerous Hypothesis

The history of "Luther Blissett," the Italian media jamming movement, is suddenly relevant to the US political discussion.

Ben Davis, August 8, 2018



A man holds a large "Q" sign while waiting in line on August 2, 2018 at the Mohegan Sun Arena at Casey Plaza in Wilkes Barre, Pennsylvania to see President Donald J. Trump at his rally. Photo by Rick Loomis/Getty Images.

Is the whole QAnon "movement" just a leftist art prank that got out of hand?

That's the latest twist in the narrative around this sordid and freakish right-wing conspiracy, born in the swamps of 4Chan and lately stumbling wild-eyed into the crowds of President Trump's recent Tampa rally.

To review, for those fortunate enough to have missed the ascendance of "Q" to T-shirt status: On Halloween 2017, someone calling themselves "Q Clearance Patriot" posted

to 4chan's /pol message board. The now-infamous so-called "Bread Crumbs" post asked a series of rhetorical questions, insinuating, more or less, that Donald Trump had been hand-selected by the military to clean out a secret pedophile ring that had taken over the highest levels of government.

From there, the notion metastasized on Reddit and YouTube into a master narrative tying in everything from Kim Jong Un (who is secretly no longer in charge of North Korea) to JFK Jr. (who faked his own death). Before being kicked off TV, Roseanne Barr amplified the fringe idea to her considerable Twitter following.

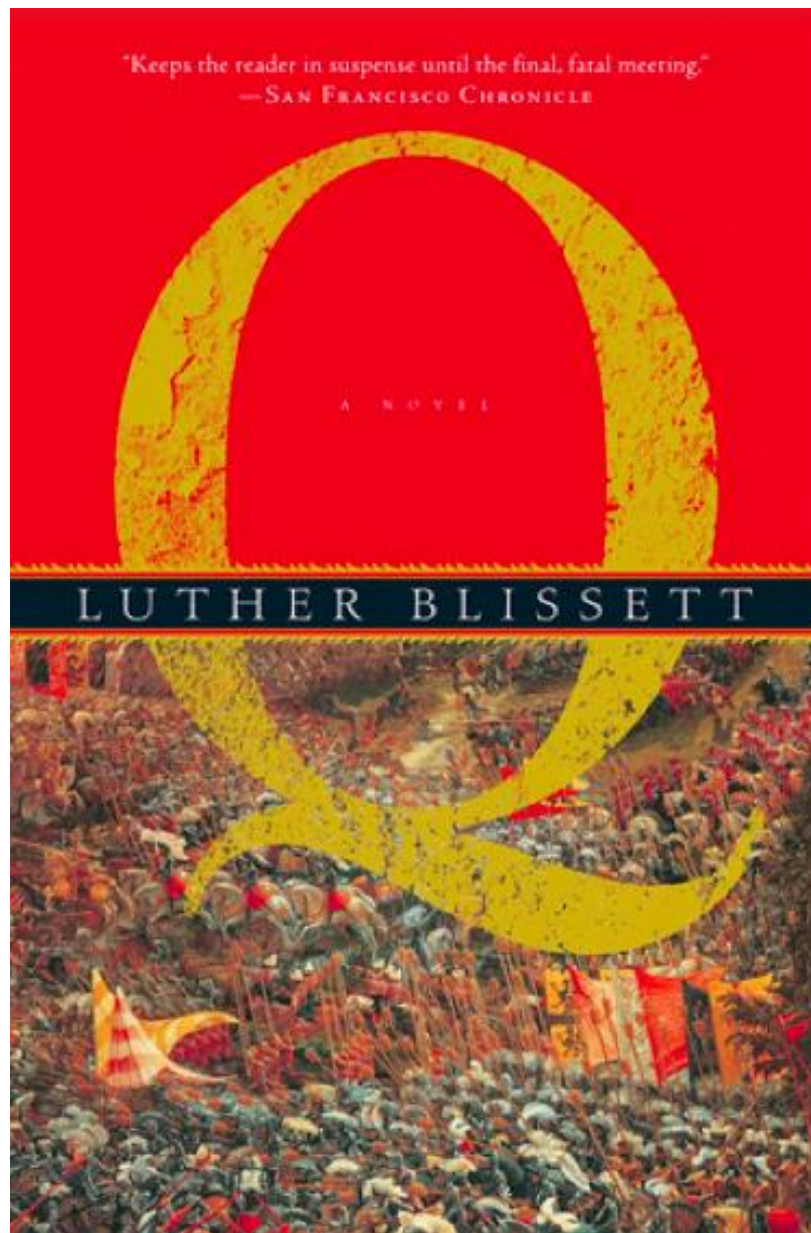
It is well-nigh impossible to pin down a single version of the QAnon "theory," but despite—or perhaps because of—that lack of specificity it has mushroomed in influence. Partisans of the Q conspiracy have lately migrated to IRL mischief. In June, a man armed with an AR-15 rifle used an armored vehicle to blockade the road over the Hoover Dam, seemingly under the conspiracy's influence.

And then on Monday, BuzzFeed served up a juicy new hypothesis about the origin of "QAnon" in a post entitled "It's Looking Extremely Likely That QAnon Is a Leftist Prank on Trump Supporters."

The title probably overstates the case. In its fundamentals, the idea is that the QAnon conspiracy seems suspiciously similar to the plot of Q, a best-selling novel by a team of anarchist media activists collectively known as "Luther Blissett," first published in Italian in 1999. The suggestion, evidently, originates with Twitter posts by the "Wu Ming Foundation," the name of a present-day literary collective formed by former Luther Blissett members:



The insinuation essentially would be that the “QAnon” posts were somehow started originally by left-wing cultural activists inspired by Luther Blissett’s work, looking to hack right-wing online culture, planting information so over-the-top that it would eventually discredit them. (In fact, right-wing activists alarmed that the QAnon obsession is primed to hurt Republicans in the midterms seem to be part of the effort to unmask it as a hoax.)



The cover of Luther Blissett's *Q*.

What follows is some background on Luther Blissett, and why someone might be convinced that they are behind a hoax like QAnon. Strangely, the evidence below is

much richer than what BuzzFeed's post offers—though I still think it is less likely than their headline suggests.

The Novel Angle

Exhibit A is the plot of the novel *Q* itself.

While set during the violent ferment of the Protestant Reformation in Europe, the book's political tale is widely read as being informed by the anti-establishment political activism of the 1990s. The authors were inspired to look at peasant rebellions in early capitalist Europe by the Zapatista uprising, and were themselves prominent participants in anti-globalization protests in Genoa.



A public intervention by Luther Blissett, putting signs around monuments in Italy to encourage participation in the 2001 Genoa anti-globalization protests. Image courtesy Wu Ming Foundation.

The antagonist of the novel, who goes by the name “Q,” is a scheming agent within the Papal bureaucracy attempting to turn back the tide of revolution. Secret-laden missives from Q stud the book, uncovering how he is orchestrating events and controlling his seeming enemies on the Continent—much as Trump is thought to be masterminding world events behind the scenes today.

“Coincidences are hard to ignore,” members of the Wu Ming Foundation told Buzzfeed of the ‘Q’ posts on 4chan. “Dispatches signed ‘Q’ allegedly coming from some dark meanders of top state power, exactly like in our book.”

They speculate that the “QAnon” conspiracy “may have started as some sort of, er, ‘fan fiction’ inspired by our novel, and then quickly became something else.”

The History, Real and Invented

Yet strangely, the link to the novel is actually not even the most suggestive connection.

Like Anonymous later, “Luther Blissett” was an identity adopted collectively by partisans of a certain strand of media activism coming out of Italy in the 1990s. Inheriting the spirit of Situationism and Italian mail art, they were early innovators of what art theory dubs “Tactical Media” or “Culture Jamming”—which is to say that before becoming authors, various members of the Luther Blissett Project engineered complex, multilayered media hoaxes.

In 1995, for instance, they went to great lengths to get the story of “Harry Kipper,” supposedly a British conceptual artist, onto an Italian prime-time missing persons show, claiming that he had vanished while hiking across Europe to spell the word “ART” on the map. (The show, *Chi l-ha visto?*, evidently got wise, and called off the segment.)



Image disseminated of the slain artist "Darko Maver." Image courtesy Rhizome.org.

Most famously, however, members of the Luther Blissett Project staged a years-long hoax about a fictional artist named "Darko Maver." In a scheme of head-spinning, wheels-within-wheels complexity, they fomented a media myth about a mysterious artist who was executing a multipart art performance leaving hyper-realist sculptures of dead bodies in various public spaces.

In 1999, they released the news that Maver had died while in prison for his edgy artwork. "The official version states that this is a suicide: the suspect [sic] that Maver was summarily executed is doomed to stay," read a press release.

One year later, another twist: A new press release came out, this one titled "The Great Art Swindle" and co-signed by "Luther Blissett" and the collective 0100101110101101.org (aka Eva and Franco Mattes, who have gone on to a distinguished career; their most recent work, *Riccardo Uncut*, was sponsored by the Whitney earlier this year). It revealed that the whole thing had been a hoax: the Maver character was a fabrication; the images of his hyper-realistic "sculptures," on the other hand, were pictures of actual murders and atrocities found online.

“The diffusion of the name and works of Darko Maver is an active riot against any dominant form of art,” the release declared. “Where the borders between reality and false, if they exist at all, are so thin that often the roles exchange and reality copies imitation, Darko Maver is an essay of pure mythopoesis.”

The Key Connection

In an essay on the history of the Luther Blissett Project, Northeastern University’s Marco Deseriis theorizes their method as a form of “media homeopathy”: “The idea was to inject into the media bloodstream stories whose patent falsity would eventually induce the media immune system into a reaction of its own.”

Which brings us to the most suggestive connection to the present. The QAnon conspiracy, from the beginning, has fixated on the lurid idea of hidden child molestation rings, drawing on and expanding the (thoroughly debunked) notion of a secret child-prostitution cabal based out of a DC pizza restaurant.

As it so happens, this touches on the exact point of the Luther Blissett Project activists’ most consequential culture-jamming activism. The ’90s saw Italy face its own version of “Satanic Panic” around child sex abuse. Feeling that people were being baselessly targeted, Luther Blissett activists responded in an unconventional way—with a multiyear campaign of interconnected, multi-city media pranks.

The exact chronology and details in Deseriis’s description are a bit convoluted—and, frankly, I’m always unsure if accounts of such media activism don’t overestimate their importance—but in essence Luther Blissett would manufacture evidence of Satanic rites and other sensational news, getting them into the media, then turning around and revealing them to have been fabricated in an effort to show up the nature of the moral panic.

“Luther Blissett, by means of some carefully planned stunts, managed to instil [sic] in the public opinion reasonable doubts about the solidity of the case against those guys,” members reflected later.

The Final Verdict

Luther Blissett officially disbanded in 1999, its many partisans moving on to new projects in art, marketing, activism, and beyond, including the publication of the enigmatic historical novel Q itself. Is it possible, then, that the famed “Q Clearance

Patriot” was, somehow, the creation of latter-day media activists, inspired by the collective’s example and looking to infiltrate the paranoid world of 4chan so as to discredit it?



An image of “Luther Blissett.” It is said to be a photo composite. Image courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

It’s possible, but then again... “Q,” after all, is not so unique as a secret identity; it is shared between the Italian anarchists’ “Q” (which stands for “Qoèlet,” that is, “Preacher”) and James Bond’s gadget guy. The idea of a secret government infiltrator doling out secret “bread crumb” communiques is really just a replay of Watergate-ish Deep Throat fantasies.

The very object of Luther Blissett’s Satanic ’90s pranks in the first place shows that the reactionary mind does not require the assist of left-wing satirists to come up with evil pedophiles as the all-purpose image of godless evil.

As a project, “Luther Blissett” was engineered as a kind of “Robin Hood of the Internet,” a folk hero or myth that could be used to undermine the authority of powerful media narratives. If somehow its lingering legacy injects a hint of disquiet into the twisted certainties of the QAnon crowd, it is doing what it was meant to do.

On the other hand, I am inclined to think that the lesson of the whole affair runs the other way.

So-called “Tactical Media” strategies pioneered by the likes of 0100101110101101.org and the Yes Men are still romanticized as the go-to role model for activist-artists intervening in the political conversation. Yet the truth is such strategies have been basically absorbed by the mainstream media itself these days.

Critique by way of satire, misinformation, and misdirection predominate everywhere from the *Daily Show*’s many attenuated clones to Sacha Baron Cohen’s *Who Is America?*, through Jimmy Kimmel’s lame twerking hoax of a few years ago (justified as criticism of media gullibility), to the shitposting black ops of the Pepe the Frog brigade (see “Operation Lollipop”) and the scattershot scheming of Russian propaganda operations, which aim not just to promote any one message, but to undermine public faith in unbiased discourse in general.



A man wear a shirt with the words “Q Anon” as he attends a rally for president Donald Trump at the Make America Great Again Rally being held in the Florida State Fair Grounds Expo Hall on July 31, 2018 in Tampa, Florida. Photo by Joe Raedle/Getty Images.

These '90s and early 2000s art projects now look, to me, like the product of a more innocent time. Then, the internet's fragmentation seemed like a genuine check on the powerful; then, one could believe that fomenting and then exposing a hoax would have a naturally radical, "homeopathic" effect—rather than simply helping to nurture strains of the paranoid virus that become more and more difficult to treat, like a course of antibiotics not taken through to the end.

Hey, anything's possible—but even were it to be true that this whole mess was a well-intentioned leftist intervention, it would be an intervention that disastrously backfired. And until I'm told differently, I will treat the echoes between Luther Blissett and QAnon not as evidence of some grand anti-conspiracy conspiracy, but as a sign that we have ascended one more level of difficulty in the video game, and need new theories about media activism for novel and trying times.