In his 1963 essay on “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” historian Richard Hofstadter speaks of the “paranoid style” as an “old and recurrent” mode of American public expression, marked by “heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy.” Those who mine this deep rhetorical tradition, he suggests, differ from clinical paranoids since they see the “hostile and conspiratorial world” not as directed against them, but against “a nation, a culture, a way of life.” “It is the use of paranoid modes of expression by more or less normal people,” Hofstadter argues, “that makes the phenomenon significant.”

The aim of this iteration of “Psychoanalysis and the Arts” is to examine how ‘our’ paranoid style—the paranoid style of late 20th- and early 21st-century America—might differ fundamentally from what which Hofstadter wrote about in the early 1960s. How has recent conspiracy culture been shaped by the postwar rise of a national security state, the long-term effects of 60s politics, the growth of so-called fusion paranoia, and the increasing power and ubiquity of surveillance technology? What role have such traumatic events as the Kennedy assassination, the Oklahoma City bombing, or the 9/11 attacks played in shaping that culture? To what extent is our ambient paranoia a response to the strikingly unlocalizable nature of modern socio-political power, ‘embodied’ as it is in faceless corporations, functionally replaceable leaders, and complex distributed systems (like the global economy or the Internet)? These are some of the principal questions this seminar will address.

In the first several weeks of the semester, we will examine a series of important attempts to theorize paranoia in both its clinical and cultural forms (by Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Richard Hofstadter, and David Shapiro). This will be followed by analysis of four accounts of the supposed facelessness of modern social power (by Michel Foucault, Fredric Jameson, Kevin Kelly and Slavoj Žižek). In the remaining weeks, we will engage in the close analysis of specific cultural artifacts, including a novel—Thomas Pynchon’s The Crying of Lot 49—and several films chosen from the following titles: Conspiracy Theory, JFK, the Matrix cycle, the Terminator cycle, Twelve Monkeys, Fahrenheit 9/11, Loose Change.

Pending approval, this course will be offered under the Multimedia Across the College program. In lieu of a final paper, students will produce a multimedia essay on a specific manifestation of the contemporary paranoid style for posting in the community space of the We the Paranoid website (now under construction).