

Andreas Bernard

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The Total Archive: On the Function of Non-Knowledge in Digital Cultures

Andreas Bernard

This article tries to combine two tendencies in digital cultures. On the one hand, search engines and social media seem to erase former gaps of knowledge that in the history of literature and film, from Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* to the Hollywood romantic comedy, were crucial to the tragic or comical plots. On the other hand, this abundance of knowledge, all these electronic encyclopedias and social connections in our pockets, is organized by a set of algorithms and computational performances that are unknown and even mysterious to their users. The article discusses this simultaneous growth of knowledge and non-knowledge in digital cultures. The total archive of our presence produces new illegibilities.

Although the movie is only 15 years old, its story seems to belong to some strange and distant past. *Serendipity*, starring John Cusack and Kate Beckinsale, was one of the most successful box office hits of 2001. In the film, a man and a woman get to know one another by chance while Christmas shopping; after a few intimate hours spent together in Manhattan, the two of them, each in a steady relationship of their own, part ways without even bothering to learn the other's first name. "Do you think," the man asks in parting, "good old fate is just gonna deliver my information right to your doorstep?" The woman then convinces him to write down his full name and telephone number on a five-dollar bill, which she immediately gives away to a street vendor. If they are truly meant for one another, she implies, then the bill containing his information will somehow make it back into her hands. To be fair, she then writes her own name and telephone number inside a book, which, in the same spirit of anonymity and unpredictability, she sells to a used bookstore on the following day. Years go by, and the circulating tokens of love do ultimately bring the destined couple back together, though their reunion occurs shortly before the man's scheduled wedding.

Today, a plot such as *Serendipity's* would inevitably fall apart not long after the first scene. It is no longer conceivable that two young people would share a nice time together and then part ways without saying "connect with me on Facebook" or having gathered enough information to google each other. Some time ago, the actor Tom Hanks remarked in an interview that the cell phone had ruined many of the traditions of romantic comedy because everyone can call anyone at any time or pictures can be taken that would let the truth out of the bag. In that particular genre, to which Hanks made several of his own successful contributions during the 1990s (*Sleepless in Seattle* or *You've Got Mail*), the storylines are typically driven by knowledge gaps: a man and a woman fall in love with one another, but they do so without

knowing the other's true identity, or they are separated after a brief encounter. After a series of complications and misunderstandings, they finally come together in a happy ending.

The current media reality has largely eliminated this dramaturgical principle. Stories of this sort are simply no longer thinkable given that smartphones can be consulted at any time. In 1999, it was still more or less possible to transplant Ernst Lubitsch's classic 1940 film *The Shop Around the Corner*, in which two employees who dislike one another unwittingly begin a romantic exchange of letters, into the age of email correspondence. In *You've Got Mail*, Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan can simultaneously fight with each other as business competitors and begin a love affair on the Internet because anonymous chatrooms, misleading AOL addresses, and the lack of search engines still made it possible to conceal one's identity. During the last 15 years, however, throughout which the availability and classification of data have probably brought about greater changes than took place during the 500 years between Gutenberg and Google, it would have been rather silly to revive a plot of this sort: social networks and dating apps have since constrained their users with strict controls over the genuineness and consistency of online profiles. The traditional driving forces behind such movies have thus become ineffective, and in this light it is perhaps no surprise that each of the most successful recent comedies—the *Hangover* trilogy from 2009 to 2013—requires its main characters to have a total blackout after the rowdy night before. Because the Web 2.0 fills in all of the gaps in the characters' knowledge of their everyday activity, drugs and alcohol are all that remains to bring about the amnesia that is so essential to any comedy of errors.

2

To some extent, the following reflections have been inspired by Hanks' remarks. As politicians and economists have repeatedly

22 told us, we are now living in a “knowledge economy.” The creation, dissemination, and application of knowledge have long supplanted the production of material goods as the most significant economic factor. Non-knowledge has thus come to be understood more than ever as an unavoidable deficit. The crisis of the “romantic comedy” is only an obvious indication that, wherever possible, a sort of historical countercurrent has also been developing: this countercurrent is characterized by the increasing suspicion among cultural theorists and social scientists that a certain degree of non-knowledge might, in fact, be necessary for the organization and implementation of particular events and processes. In light of our digitally organized culture, I would like to pose the following question: What is the function of non-knowledge as we come closer and closer to producing a total archive of the present?

Since the beginning of this century, steps to fulfill digital technology’s ongoing promise of “networking” have been made with remarkable intensity—first, by the establishment of search engines, since 2005, in the form of social media, and most recently by the so-called Internet of Things. Data, people, services, and objects are now constantly connected to one another; according to some of the trendiest terminology, they are said to “communicate,” to reveal their location, to “share,” and to “be shared.” My first interest is thus concerned with the relationship of this ubiquitous networking, which is, of course, also a form of ubiquitous identification, to the history and status of human imagination. On the one hand, this involves an examination of such cultural products as literature and film; on the other hand, however, it also involves an analysis of forms of subjective fantasies, desires, and reminiscences. The latter are not simply arbitrary and timeless emotions; rather, they each have their own pertinent *history*. They react, for instance, to the ways in which technical media happen to transform ideas into realities.

Tracking down the most relevant and effective characters in the canon of tragedies and comedies makes it immediately clear that the non-knowledge between the actors has a sort of elementary significance. Gaps in communication and interrupted connections—either preordained or brought about by intrigue—are what provide dramas with irreparable guilt or the joy of playfully resolved misunderstandings.

From Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* to Shakespeare's tragic and comic heroes and on through the personae of classical and late-bourgeois drama, the non-knowledge of the characters is constitutive for what takes place in the works. Paul Valéry's dictum that "man can only act because he is capable of not knowing" is above all an expression of a poetological truth, and it is telling that the most influential *theoretical* treatments of the laws of poetry situate this dynamic at the center of their expositions. "The most powerful elements of emotional interest in tragedy," as Aristotle remarked in his *Poetics*, are "the reversal of circumstances (*peripeteia*) and the recognition scenes" (1450a32). According to Aristotle, these turning points in the story—these "changes from ignorance to knowledge"—constitute the "foundation" and "soul" of the characters being represented (1452a).

If it is indeed true that the "romantic comedy" is threatening to sink forever into the networking maelstrom of digital media, then this development certainly has much to do with the narrative stasis caused by exhaustively profiled identities and relationships. On the one hand, it seems as though today's most popular love stories, such as Pascal Mercier's best-selling *Night Train to Lisbon*, are only able to maintain their ostensible realism at the cost of ignoring technological developments (the protagonist's entire journey could just as well have been replaced by a little Internet research). On the other hand, this stagnation has resulted in the success of backwards-oriented narrative worlds in which the current constellations of knowledge do not pertain. The somewhat disconcerting boom of the fantasy genre in literature,

- 24 film, and on television has been going strong for several years—think of the Tolkien renaissance, the spectacular success of the Harry Potter stories, and the universally acclaimed medievalistic television series *Game of Thrones*. I believe it is possible to associate this boom with today's media reality and its narrative and imaginative consequences.

3

As regards non-knowledge, what interests me in a broader sense is an epistemological perspective that could perhaps be called a technological history of imagination—a type of history that is concerned with imagination's architectonic, infrastructural, communications-technical, and transportation-technical conditions at a given time. Such interrelations play not only a significant role in our present day; they were also of great concern, for instance, to the authors writing during the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. The latter was an epoch in which many of today's fundamental questions about digital culture were first raised (as Jeannie Moser argues in her contribution to this volume): Should we be enthusiastic or skeptical about encyclopedic projects? What is the relationship between the sovereign subject and overwhelming masses of data? What are the acceptable manners of representing knowledge about human beings?

In a remarkable entry in his "Scrapbooks," written in the 1770s and given the simple title "Novels," Georg Christoph Lichtenberg recorded his reflections about this very issue of the relationship between knowledge, non-knowledge, and the literary imagination. It is worthwhile quoting this passage at some length:

Our way of life has become so simple now, and all our customs so free of mystery ... that a man who wants to write a German novel hardly knows how to bring people together or tie together the knots of a story. Because German mothers today almost always breastfeed their own children,

the possibility of exchanging children has disappeared, and thus a source of literary invention has been obstructed that can hardly be compensated for with any money. ... In England, moreover, chimneys function not merely as channels for smoke but mainly as ventilation shafts in bedrooms, and thus they provide immediate and undetectable access to any given place in a house. ... In Germany, however, a lover would hardly cut a pleasant appearance if he opted to climb down a chimney. ... Finally, a genuine obstacle to intrigue is the otherwise fine and praiseworthy institution of post directors in Germany ... and the fact that, instead of English stagecoaches and machines—in which a pregnant princess would feel neither shame nor fear to travel—we have rather introduced the open-air garbage carts that are so dear to us. The opportunities for mischief provided by these comfortable English coaches do not need to be expressed with words. First of all, if a girl and her lover run away from London in the evening, they could be in France before the father wakes up. ... In Germany, however, even if the father realized that his daughter was missing three days after the fact, it would be enough to know that they traveled with the post in order to catch up with them by horse at the third station. (Lichtenberg 1968, 373-377, translated by the author)

Lichtenberg's concern in this passage is, as he wrote, the "source of literary invention," which can be "obstructed" or expedited by infrastructural realities. The practice of breastfeeding one's own children, which was established in Germany and France during the last quarter of the eighteenth century, the varying sizes of chimneys from one country to another, and the speed of stagecoaches each exert a degree of influence over the narrative possibilities in different national literatures—and, as far as genealogical origins or the escape routes of lovers are concerned, it is always non-knowledge that constitutes the dynamic of a given plot.

26 A few years later, in 1812, Friedrich Schlegel posed a rather similar question in his lectures on the *History of Literature, Ancient and Modern*. In comparison with some of his treasured books such as *Don Quixote*, Schlegel believed that contemporary German fiction was lacking in vitality, and this he attributed to an “all-too-strong and perfected bourgeois order” that had since been established. Inhibited by the “transparency” or “clarity” of present social relations, as Schlegel called them, German novelists were forced to seek “some sort of opening or access into a domain in which fantasy or the imagination can move freely.” “The romantic element in many of these second-rate romances,” he went on, “seems to coincide very closely with a state of morals disposed to set at defiance magisterial authority.” And then he added the following prognosis:

Whenever the economy of municipal arrangements shall be perfected in general police so as to prevent all contraband trading, and so vigilantly detective as to sketch not only the physiognomy but also the biography of every traveler on his passport, romance will become obsolete, from the want of necessary materials. (Schlegel 1859, 259)¹

4

As mentioned at the beginning, the productive force of non-knowledge has recently begun to attract a considerable amount of attention in cultural studies and the social sciences. In light of the prominent theoretical impulses of the last few decades, the present interest in non-knowledge seems quite logical; it is a category that has long played an eminent role, at least implicitly. For the fact of the matter is that—in the wake of Canguilhem, Foucault, Kittler, Rheinberger, and rediscovered authors such as Ludwik Fleck—disciplines such as the history of science and

1 These passages by Lichtenberg and Schlegel were brought to my attention by Bernd Seiler’s fascinating study, *Die leidigen Tatsachen*, published in 1983.

historical epistemology have been characterized by a process of desamentization: what has taken the place of reconstructing the scientific truth contents that are overhauled and supplanted from one author and epoch to the next is, as we all know, a shift of attention toward the *distribution* of knowledge at a given time, toward the political or social mechanisms of its verification, toward the medial and experimental preconditions of cognition (*Erkenntnis*), and even toward the “poetology” of knowledge, which—to quote Joseph Vogl’s programmatic text—“immediately connects the production of statements and objects of knowledge with the question of staging and representability” (1999, 7).

On the one hand, these theoretical premises necessitate that something else must play an equal role, namely the inverse of whatever happens to be regarded as true and conducive to knowledge at a particular time and for particular “styles of thinking.” Any exposure of an “order of discourse” must also take into account the negative of this order; that is, it has to account for what has fallen through cracks or has been discarded as obsolete, faulty, dangerous, or insufficiently validated knowledge. (To this extent, non-knowledge has always been a component of every discourse-analytical approach to historiography.) On the other hand, the most productive research approaches attempt to convert this epistemological object itself into something positive, productive, and operational. At issue here is not “ignorance”—that is, I am not concerned with that which, being in clear opposition to the known, would thus be false and correctable. The issue is rather a fundamental gap or *lacuna*, a category that—beyond the mere negative—casts doubt on the validity of the oppositions between true and false, representable and unrepresentable, and thereby generates specific epistemological effects. “How societies manage their non-knowledge,” in the words of Albrecht Koschorke, “is certainly one of the most difficult questions of cultural theory” (1999, 445).

It is possible to illustrate this thesis with three short examples: first, of course, with the category of the “secret,” which

28 Georg Simmel long ago praised as the “greatest achievement of mankind” and thus firmly secures the “foundation of the social” in the mode of non-knowledge, both within small groups as well as between nations. The manner in which institutions function—and not only secret societies and intelligence services—is based on intransparency. Among both the proponents and critics of digital culture, however, the secret has a bad reputation. The chief guideline or category is now “transparency,” and this is just as apparent in Mark Zuckerberg’s pleas for the necessity of global communication as it is in the dissident concept of the “leak,” that is, in the unreserved puncturing and exposure of intransparent structures, as demanded by Julian Assange or the European Pirate Parties. These seemingly incongruous ideologies coincide in their absolute trust in the enlightening effects of knowledge and cognition. For both positions, the social significance of the secret is negligible. Regarding where things might lead, however, if the digital world’s transparency becomes reality, David Eggers recently offered speculations in his dystopian novel *The Circle*. In his story, the complete openness and transparency of relations dissolve into a totalitarian system, and social terror ensues.

Second, it can be said that even the normative foundations of society are stabilized by non-knowledge. This can be demonstrated by the concept of the “dark or hidden figure of crime,” about which the sociologist Heinrich Popitz wrote a magnificent study almost 50 years ago. In order for a state to maintain the “validity of its norms,” according to Popitz, it is necessary for it *not* to reveal each of their violations and thus *not* to punish each of their violators. This would be possible from neither an administrative point of view, because the “sanctioning organization” would be overstrained, nor from a moral point of view, because the mass of delinquents would dull society’s general readiness to be sanctioned, causing the social norms to lose their “protective function” (Popitz 1968, 16 and 18). From this argument, Popitz derived the idea that a “dark figure” is necessary for a social system to function. It is this hidden figure that, as he wrote,

provides “relief from the rigidity and overtaxing nature of the norm by limiting information about behavior.” The category of the “dark figure,” he concluded, “opens up a sphere in which the system of norms and sanctions does not need to be strictly heeded and yet does not obviously forfeit its claim of validity. ... It enables ... a blurry relation to exist in social life.” (Popitz 1968, 12)

Popitz introduced the category of strategic non-knowledge as an antidote to the threat of a “transparent society” (1968, 9). Regarding both Schlegel’s remarks and a novel such as *The Circle*, it is telling that Popitz immediately associated the possibility of escaping from the horrific vision of total profiling with the possibility of literary narration. “There will always be,” he wrote, “new opportunities to evade the interests of information. Even Orwell could write about his utopia of perfect behavioral information in the form of a novel: the story that he tells can only get underway because the perfection—despite all of the installed surveillance equipment—is not achieved. It is still possible in his story for certain things to be done ‘in secret.’” (Popitz 1968, 9)

A third and final example involves a certain *caesura* in our historical knowledge about human beings, a sort of turning point whose questions and consequences warrant further discussion as we find ourselves today on the threshold of digital culture. The turning point in question was the advent of numerical statistics around the year 1800. As Wolfgang Schäffner has noted, it marked a transition from knowledge to “data knowledge” that “formulated epistemological questions no longer on the basis of human capacities such as reason, understanding, or memory but rather on the basis of a specific materiality, ... such as that which appears in the problem of transmitting and storing masses of data” (1999, 124). Long into the nineteenth century, an epistemological ambition persisted that hoped to make the knowledge of a nation seem complete and transparent—in the form of tableaux, for instance. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, however, the excess of data, which, as Schäffner notes, “exceeded the domain of the productive

30 subject" (1999, 123), required a different method—a displacement of descriptive statistics in favor of numerical statistics, which transformed non-knowledge "into an operable space." Instead of a "complete dissemination of all data" there now appeared the "operationalization of the absent" by means of "samples," "large-scale calculations," or "averages" (Schäffner 1999, 123). Thus, to summarize these three brief case studies, non-knowledge became a precondition of the social, a precondition of the narrative, and a precondition of knowledge itself.

5

The organization of knowledge in our present day—based as it is on "Internet protocols," "algorithms," or "Big Data" (and these terms remain puzzling however often they might be cited)—poses these very same questions with a new level of intensity. Where, in our digital culture, can the lines be drawn between knowledge and non-knowledge, between transparency and intransparency, and between predictability and incommensurability? Ubiquitous networking has generated a new and entirely unprecedented excess of available knowledge. Interruption, unfamiliarity, and distance—three of the constitutive conditions of narration—have more or less been eliminated by digital currents of rationalization and data collection. This rationalization also concerns certain fundamental features of our collective imagination—including, for instance, the cultural and social conceptions of love and how to find someone to share it with.

As sociologist Eva Illouz has recently demonstrated with a wealth of evidence, online dating, at least in Western societies, has become the predominate way for single or promiscuous people to find a romantic partner. The agencies behind all of this advertise that they are able to *predict* the likelihood of successful amorous relationships: those who leave enough information about themselves and their wishes in the profiles and multiple-choice questionnaires—or so the promise goes—have the strongest

chance of meeting the right person. “Love is not a coincidence” reads the seemingly ubiquitous slogan of elitepartner.de. Of course, this assertion vehemently contradicts the “romantic code”—to use Luhmannian terms—that has organized the meeting of couples and the synthesis of love and marriage over the past 250 years.

The fact that this code is based on contingency and non-knowledge was made clear by Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel in a section of his *Aesthetics* entitled, appropriately enough, “Love’s Contingency.” Unlike the “objective content of existence, with one’s family, political aims, nation, and professional obligations,” the romantic feeling is entirely left to the person in love, and the question of “why it is just this man or this individual woman alone is grounded in the person’s own private character, in the contingency of caprice” (Hegel 1973, 567). Conversely, Hegel says, the suffering experienced in pursuit of love, the false selection of a love interest, or a lack of reciprocation cannot be considered an “injustice in itself” and a “universal interest.” This is because, he notes, “there is nothing inherently necessary in his taking a fancy for this girl alone” (Hegel 1973, 568). The idea of romantic love depends on the unpredictability and irrationality of the encounter, on the fact that, in the eternal stream of passers-by and fleeting faces, a particular figure could suddenly appear, like the “flash of lightning” in Baudelaire’s famous poem, and give new meaning to one’s life. In the world of online dating, this fateful moment is replaced by accurate calculations of data, by the mathematically supported work of “matching.” At the large dating agencies, potential “hits” and “pairings” are generated less by the individual profile searches made by clients than they are by computer programs, which, on the basis of a person’s data and browsing history, are presumably better than the person in question at boiling down his or her own tastes and preferences.

With the rise of online dating, it seems as though the history of romantic relationships has entered into a new epoch. As is well known, the era of marriages being determined on social,

32 religious, and economic grounds lasted until the end of the eighteenth century. The prevailing notion of romance since then—namely the idea that even family-sanctioned partnerships should be based solely on the passionate feelings of two people—seems to be gradually eroding with the collective trust that we are placing in online dating. Search engines and algorithms have become new external authorities for making decisions about the suitability of potential romantic partners. Today it is no longer parents and families that determine which couples should be together; instead, it is the programmers and psychologists employed by dating agencies. In the twenty-first century, the arranged marriage is experiencing an unexpected comeback. No longer occasioned by finances, status, or faith, today's arranged marriages are made only if the data situation is favorable.

6

Digital technology provides us with abundant and omnipresent data that seem to be eliminating all non-knowledge. Every social gathering and every walk in the park now takes place in a fully equipped library, and the emblem of our time seems to be a table at which everyone is turning to a phone or tablet in order to answer or solve, by pushing a few buttons on a screen, whatever questions or problems might have arisen. In conversations, one occasionally still hears the term “walking encyclopedia” applied to people who, when asked, seem to know something about the most esoteric areas of knowledge. Yet this term has now become applicable to every person with a smartphone at his or her disposal; in fact, it doesn't even make sense anymore as a compliment. Moreover, the computer-controlled collection and classification of large amounts of data not only has access to the past and the present; it also, as we hear so often on the news, is used as a method for making allegedly precise predictions about such things as future criminal activity or consumer behavior in particular regions of the country.

Algorithms and Big Data are today's instruments of knowledge—and yet the ambivalence of digitally construed organizations of knowledge lies in the fact that, while their *effects*—their arrangements and distributions—are visible to all of us, the specific manner in which they function remains opaque. The ontology of algorithms—of that set of instructions which determines the series of Google hits, the composition of a Facebook timeline, or the matches of a dating agency—is a secret known perhaps to just a few corporate programmers. Or perhaps it is not even known to them, given that complex and proliferating computer codes are not exactly represented in a specific way and that some of them can only be viewed by the initiated at a single location, much like the well-guarded secret of Coca-Cola's original recipe.

It would thus seem to be high time for the so-called digital humanities, which have emerged at our universities over the past few years, to start reflecting on a *poetology of digital knowledge*. A perspective of this sort has not received sufficient attention from those involved in this area of study. The avant-garde's often blind optimism about knowledge, and the general historical forgetfulness of projects being undertaken in the humanities and social sciences—which rely precisely on “data mining” and computer-generated quantitative processes—are truly quite striking. In practically all of the articles that have been published in the past years on the use of Big Data, the aim of the methodology is claimed to be the recognition of “patterns.” From numerous examples, I quote Lev Manovich—certainly one of the more original thinkers in this regard—who in one of his essays concludes that the “computer-assisted examination of massive cultural data sets typically reveals new patterns in this data which even [the] best manual ‘close reading’ would miss” (2011, 9). In terms of the history of theory, it seems as though epistemology has regressed by 50 years, back to when Derrida was writing his notorious article about Lévi-Strauss and reproaching structuralism for deploying a sort of metaphysics of the concept

34 of structure which simply shifted that reference, which was presumably at the heart of the entire structuralist enterprise, onto a transcendental signified. Perhaps something similar might apply, for example, to the curves, diagrams, and schemata that are generated when Google's Ngram Viewer is used to chart the frequency of certain words or phrases in tens of thousands of digitalized novels.

As regards the issue of non-knowledge, however, I am more interested in a different aspect of the digital humanities, namely in the breach or discontinuity that exists between the visualizable effects of computer-assisted organizations of knowledge and their codes—the 30-year-old mathematical origins of a programming language that end users have never had to learn, at least not since the first Macintosh computers and their intuitive interface made coding skills unnecessary. The basic question is this: How can algorithms be represented? Thinking about search engines some ten years ago, Peter Haber diagnosed the permanent neglect of any genealogy of knowledge. It is a question that has been addressed more recently by the media philosopher Alexander Galloway: drawing a maybe precarious and assailable distinction, he divides digitally processed knowledge into raw numerical “data” and into “information” that can be represented in writing, images, or videos (it remains doubtful, of course, whether something like “raw data” actually exists). I believe that this distinction is productive, however, because Galloway is able to use it to isolate the rift that exists between mathematically calculated and visualized knowledge. With reference to Gilles Deleuze's famous little essay, he notes: “Adequate visualizations of control society have *not happened*” (Galloway 2011, 91, emphasis original).

It is possible to analyze, for instance, the representation of Edward Snowden's betrayal of secrets, as has been attempted in newspaper reports and in the impressive film *Citizenfour*, precisely in terms of the representivity or non-representivity of digitally mediated masses of data. Glenn Greenwald and Laura

Poitras' encounter with Snowden in a hotel room in Hong Kong is riveting; having watched the film, you would be able to say something about the relationship between victimhood and whistleblowing or about the life-changing boldness of Snowden's act, but you would be at pains to identify any details about the bold nature of the *content* that Snowden had brought to light. The film offers no specific image of this excess of abstract and encoded data. In *Citizenfour*, Poitras repeatedly depicts the decoded greetings from the beginnings of Snowden's email correspondence, but then as soon as we expect to see something decisive, she cuts away from the scene. And so today, when it is so often said that the collective outrage in the wake of these revelations has been somewhat restrained, the main reason for this restraint is presumably related to the problem of representation.

To revisit Galloway's thoughts for a final time, the algorithm is an authority, but its calculus, its governmental principles—its "algorithmic governmentality," as Antoinette Rouvroy recently called it—remain in the dark. For most members of the Internet society, from its indifferent consumers to its political activists, the world of the digital represents a space of transparency, participation, and freedom—the most modern manifestation of modernity's achievements. But those examining the relationship between knowledge and non-knowledge that this space produces more closely could also come to the conclusion that the 250-year-old elements of the bourgeois public sphere no longer have much to do with the way in which digital culture functions. Such is the remarkable thesis of the article by Claus Pias and Timon Beyes published in this volume on "Transparency and Secrecy."

If a characteristic of modern organizations of knowledge and society is that they have replaced both the secretive, arbitrary rule of the absolute sovereign and providential notions of the future with concepts of openness, contingency, and participation, then the premodern world and our digital culture do in fact have a number of things in common. Algorithms create providence: on Amazon and Netflix, they tell us which books or television series

36 might appeal to us after we have made a single purchase; they suggest friends to us on social networks; they select potential marriage partners while the self-empowerment of the romantic and subjective selection of partners, which had been determining the course of love since the last third of the eighteenth century, slowly fades into oblivion.

An analysis of non-knowledge, however, is not at all intended to leave an aftertaste of irrationality. Rather, it should make a contribution to the analysis of power structures in the digital age. As Galloway has written: "The point of unrepresentability is the point of power. And the point of power today is not the image. The point of power today resides in networks, computers, information, and data" (2011, 92).

As authorities over knowledge, the most powerful actors in this sphere are entirely aware of the ancient and grand tradition to which they belong. So much is clear, for instance, in the sovereign playfulness with which they have named themselves. After all, the second *o* in the acronym *Yahoo*, the first mainstream web portal in the history of the Internet, stands for the word *oracle*.

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