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Secrecy, Transparency, and Non-Knowledge

Timon Beyes and Claus Pias*

WikiLeaks, the Snowden affair, and secret service hacks have brought the notion of the secret, long sidelined by a morally charged discourse on digital transparency, to the forefront of the world's attention. Correspondingly, in this chapter we conceptualize digital cultures not—or at least not primarily—in terms of the nature and potential of transparency (or of related concepts such as participation and the public sphere). Instead, we suggest thinking about them in terms of the secret, in terms of fundamental intransparency and non-knowledge, and in terms of the arcane. How would digital cultures be understood if we set aside modern concepts and instead examine them through the strangeness of premodern concepts like the arcane?

40 If it is true that transparency represents one of today's most prominent concepts, then digitalization can be said to designate the media-technological condition of its ubiquity. As Manfred Schneider has pointed out, during the last 20 years or so a "messianic potential" has consolidated in the ideal and ideology of transparency (Schneider 2013, 13). This corresponds approximately to the span of time in which forms of digital world-making have prevailed, forms whose technological basis has come to characterize the systems and processes of communication, perception, and the bestowal of meaning (*Sinngebung*) (Striphas 2015). This development has made it clear that we have to speak of digital cultures in the plural, if only because the heterogeneity of this socio-technical arrangement seems to correspond to various forms of world-making that have arisen in tandem with the digital media environment that now pervades our lifeworld.¹

In opposition to the messianism of transparent and secret-free spheres of, say, politics and business, which derives its energy from the Internet's fiber-optic cables and the omnipresence of intelligent artifacts that can, in part, communicate with one another without the intervention of human subjects, there stands the nightmare of a "transparency society," in which the exposed lives of individuals become "big data" in the hands of Internet companies and government intelligence agencies that, while remaining intransparent themselves, collect and evaluate the traces left behind by digital users (Han 2015; Pasquale 2015). Activists, in turn, have been experimenting with media-technically enabled tactics of intransparency and secrecy in order to make it possible for user-based representations of identity to escape into anonymity or into subject positions that are fluctuating and temporary (the group known as "Anonymous" has thus far been the most captivating example of this; see Coleman 2015). The whole affair with Edward Snowden and the

1 Parts of this chapter are taken in revised form from the forthcoming "The Media Arcane." A prior version of the text was first published in German in *Zeitschrift für Kulturwissenschaften* 2014 (2): 111–117.

US National Security Agency (NSA), moreover, has certainly confirmed Schneider's laconic dictum: "In the here and now, there is no transparency" (Schneider 2013, 14).

At the same time, Snowden's betrayal of secrets has brought the very concept of the secret, so long sidelined by the morally charged discourse in favor of digital transparency, to the forefront of our attention. Our contribution to this debate is devoted to conceptualizing digital cultures not—or at least not primarily—in terms of the problematic nature and potential of transparency (or of related concepts such as participation and the public sphere) but rather to thinking about them in terms of the secret, in terms of fundamental intransparency, and in terms of the arcane.¹ Our first step will thus be to (re)call to mind the general social form—at least beyond its commonly understood ethical dubiousness—of the secret and its functionality; this will allow us to shed a more sobering light on secrecy and its betrayal. We would then like to venture an experimental-historical approach in greater detail, which will enable us to reexamine, with reference to premodern types of secrets, the present state of digital cultures on the basis of their temporal structures. There are thus two sides to our suggested approach: On the one hand, it is concerned with the question of how digital cultures can be conceptualized in terms of the secret; on the other hand, however, it is also concerned with whether our present concepts of the secret are even appropriate for or conducive to this type of thinking.

For reflecting on the social form of the secret, Georg Simmel's meandering essay on "the secret and secret society" marks an invaluable point of departure. Independent of their contents or the value attributed to them, Simmel considered "the attractions

1 Based on a similar argument, Howard Caygill recently suggested turning to the notions of secrecy and the arcane for rethinking the relationship between state and civil society: "Any radical politics founded in the emergent global civil society empowered by but also dependent on digital technology has to confront the problem of the *arcana* of state and civil society ..." (2015, 38; original emphasis).

42 of secrecy” to be a necessary aspect for differentiating social relations; secrecy’s attractions are enabled by differentiation as much as they intensify them (1999, 409). The secret, “or the concealment of realities through negative or positive means, is one of mankind’s greatest achievements. Unlike the childish condition in which every idea is given immediate expression and every activity is put on display for everyone, the secret leads to an immense enhancement of life, and this is because so many of life’s contents cannot even emerge in circumstances of complete publicity” (Simmel 1999, 406). To write the history of secrecy is thus one way of tracing the development of society: a sequence of revealed things that have become secret and of secret things that have been revealed. This yields a sort of zero-sum game of incoming and outgoing contents that are worthy of confidentiality, of secrecy and revelation, covertness and betrayal, with the secret functioning as the mysterious operator of social evolution.

In light of today’s digital cultures, however, it is reasonable to call into question Simmel’s concluding speculation that the “activities of the general public will become ever more open as those of individuals become more secretive” (1999, 411). Is the self-exposure of digital users on the Internet not indicative of the porous nature of the distinction between the public and the private, and does the discovery of secret masses of data by WikiLeaks and Snowden—their publication aside—not prove the existence of an enormous apparatus of secrecy? That said, Simmel’s basic idea still seems rather fruitful to us, namely that the secret deserves to be taken seriously as a fundamental category of cultural analysis. What is needed is a historical investigation of various forms of secrecy in order to gain insight into its present-day varieties (Assmann and Assmann 1997–1999). From a historical perspective, moreover, it will be shown that the secret ought to be thought about somewhat differently: The question is not what is being kept secret but what *is able* to be betrayed and what—in light of this ability or inability to be an object of

betrayal—constitutes the significance and the logic of the secret in various cultures and at various times (Horn 2013).

In this sense, we would like to propose a thought experiment, and it is to think about digital cultures beyond any concept of modernity according to which digital cultures are themselves modernity's final product, and have possibly even brought an end to the very modernity in question (Lyotard 1984). Many of today's passionate debates, it seems, have illustrated this issue by means of a latent anachronism that finds expression through the use of established concepts such as transparency, the public sphere, and participation (Baxmann et al. 2016). To intensify and take this anachronism further: How would digital cultures be understood if we set aside modern concepts (and ever-derivative postmodern concepts) and instead examined them through the strangeness of premodern concepts? For at that time the secret possessed an altogether different and, at least for our purposes, potentially fruitful historical semantics.

Up until the seventeenth century, cosmology drew a line around an essentially secretive realm, a line that demarcated a fundamental unknown in the form of natural secrets. It was modern science that first raised an objection to such secrets, namely with the goal of gaining knowledge about nature with natural means and of removing all authority from the "cosmic-religious stop sign" (Luhmann and Fuchs 1989, 104). Using the language of systems theory, we might say that time yielded the possibility of de-paradoxing natural secrets. In a comparable manner, however, "high" matters of state were regarded, on the basis of their nature, as secretive. Here the resolutions, decisions, and deeds enacted by the lords of wisdom were thought to possess a secret and essentially unfathomable intelligence, without which the stability of the state could not be preserved. The resolutions, decisions, and deeds themselves were clear for all to see, but the reasons behind them *could* not be betrayed and thus could also not be discussed. In cosmological terms, they were as incommunicable as all the great matters of nature and therefore

44 they represented not only wisdom, the arbitrary nature of which “has to be protected from triviality and thus kept secret” (Luhmann and Fuchs 1989, 116), but also a structurally *unbetrayable* secret.

In this context, the treatment of the secret then was probably more differentiated than it is today (or in Simmel’s sketch of things), and this is because premodernity was familiar with various types of secrets—such as the *arcana cordis*, the *arcana dei*, the *arcana mundi*, or the *arcana imperii*—each of which obeyed different concepts, methods, and rationalities. As far as our argument is concerned, however, the primary distinction to keep in mind is that between the *mysterium* (something non-knowable and thus non-betrayable) and the *secretum* (something concealed that can be made intelligible and thus be betrayed). The *arcana imperii* thus incorporate both aspects: the *mysterium* of the ruler’s wisdom and caprice as the center of an unbetrayable reasoning and, at the same time, a bustling multiplicity of minor or major *secreta* that are the object of betrayal and of efforts to keep them secret from all sorts of “intelligence” (literally, that is, from essentially possible forms of insight).

In contrast to this, the debates held today among politicians and in the newspapers concerning data protection and privacy rights operate with a different—and from our perspective rather reductive—variety of secrets, namely with those that can be betrayed. As soon as the shift is made into this modern category, a secret can either be betrayed or not betrayed, revealed or kept confidential. Without this hegemony of a particular type of secret, the idea of transparency associated with the so-called bourgeois public sphere could never have been formulated. It is the type of secret that can and must be revealed, and it simultaneously creates a situation in which it is unclear whether the state should fear its citizens or vice versa. With this newfound suspicion of sovereignty, along with an active interest in de-masking *arcana*, the type of secret that is unbetrayable seems either to have been lost or relocated to another realm.

As Reinhart Koselleck has shown, the unbetrayable secret has been sublimated into a new temporal order (2004). To some extent, modernity has transferred the unbetrayable secret of sovereignty onto time itself. It is the future that has henceforth become a secret that cannot be betrayed. Moreover, modernity has firmly associated the question of the future with the notion of participation and the public sphere. Both are embedded in a context of secrecy and transparency that are oriented toward the future. Otherwise participation—according to our modern understanding of it—would be meaningless, because it takes place between what *is* and what *ought to be*: between how the world *is* and how it (otherwise) *could be*. In this sense, as is well known, the eighteenth century invented a new form of historicity and thus a new form of history itself. And it came to treat the present as the decisive place between the “space of experience” and the “horizon of expectation” (Koselleck 2004, 255–275), as the venue of an essentially *open* future.

As regards digital cultures, the thesis that we would like to advance is that a new temporal order has been established—a “chronotope” that is distinct from the temporal order that established itself between 1780 and 1830 and has since defined our thinking. We believe that the beginnings of this change can be traced back to the rise of modern cybernetics after 1945. As Norbert Wiener suspected as early as 1948, the advent of digital computers—along with concepts such as feedback, self-regulating systems, and prediction—initiated a fundamental rearrangement of temporal structures (1961, 60–94). With the digitalization of further aspects of our lifeworld and with the countless number of apparatuses that can communicate with one another independently and can—the largest and smallest alike—control one another mutually and provide feedback to one another, these particularly cybernetic temporal relations have more or less become absolute. Arguably, they engender an order of time in which modern historicity collapses. One could perhaps call this an “absolutism of the present” (to adapt a

46 phrase by Robert Musil), or, in Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's terms, it could be referred to as a "broad present" (2014). The cybernetic chronotope of digital cultures thus raises, yet again, as a topic of discussion the question of historical temporalities.

This diagnosis is not new. A quarter of a century ago, for instance, Vilém Flusser offered a similar interpretation (1991). If, according to Flusser, a bond exists between cybernetic machines that interconnect by means of feedback, that behave adaptively, that process interferences independently, and that allow, by means of what today is called big data, the data traces of subjects to be conflated with the prediction of forms of subjectivation—then the relation between what is and what ought to be collapses and thus, with it, the modern concept of the future. Like other thinkers before and after him, Flusser referred to this condition as "post-history." For logical reasons, according to his diagnosis, there can no longer be any conventionally understood arguments, critiques, or politics within this new temporal order. And thus participation, as Flusser quite radically infers, is "nonsense."² In contrast to this bleak outlook, we would like to propose an experimental-historical approach, and this is to think about today's digital cultures precisely *not* in terms of modern concepts but rather—at least tentatively—in terms of premodern concepts. For if the modern temporal order has in fact become problematic or has even collapsed entirely, the challenge would then consist of no longer conceptualizing digital cultures with the categories of transparency, participation, and the public sphere but rather in terms of a fundamental intransparency—in terms, that is, of the arcane.

If the origin of this new temporal order can be ascribed to the cybernetic concepts of feedback, self-regulating systems,

2 In what follows, Flusser then elaborates that figures such as functionaries, depressed people, terrorists, technocrats, and environmental activists are social types that are specific to a present in which participation has become logically impossible.

prediction, and digital computers, then we can state at the same time that digital and networked media are the agents of this chronotope. The everyday examples are countless: Entire industries have since arisen that are concerned with predicting such things as what type of music we like to listen to, which television series we like to watch, who we should really be friends with, or how we can best avoid traffic on our way to work. With greater and greater masses of data, it is becoming increasingly probable to predict even the seemingly unpredictable twists and turns of the subject—something like anticipating the evasive, zig-zag maneuvers of an enemy airplane. It is no longer possible to escape from ourselves; rather, we are incessantly confronted with ourselves and with our own surprising predictability. Being deprived of the future in such ways—this blending of the “space of experience” and the “horizon of expectation” into a media-technical feedback loop between the past and the future—can perhaps better be understood with premodern concepts of time.

Consequently, the thesis can also be advanced that the “like” culture of so-called social media has less to do with modern participation than it does with premodern rituals. “Likes” seem to resemble instead the *états*, *cortes*, or parliaments that were common from the late Middle Ages until the eighteenth century. Such forms of “participation,” to which modernity had put an end, were rituals of *consensus* and not negotiations of *dissent*. It was just such rituals, in fact, that modernity disavowed as the opposite of the political. They operated according to a sort of logic that has nothing to do with a participatory public sphere based on arguments and transparency. They were necessary and performative forms of participation within a non-future-oriented temporal order because they lacked the concept of decision-making itself (Krischer 2010).

These examples, to which many more could be added, raise the question of how much one can and must know about the “apparatuses” (in Flusser’s terms) that create the particular temporality of digital cultures, the question of which secrets they

48 might possess that perhaps ought to be made transparent, and the paradoxical question of which secrets they are hiding that are unbetrayable or should perhaps remain protected. To this extent, our attempt at interpretation will either stand or fall depending on the issue of the “understanding” of digital media. And this “media-understanding,” as Friedrich Kittler surmised some 30 years ago, is perhaps a melancholy enterprise. His famous pronouncement that media “determine our situation” was made at a moment in which, in light of the emergence of digital cultures, the limitations or the impossibility of our ability to understand them were already beginning to loom. Or in Kittler’s own words: “The general digitization ... erases the differences among individual media. ... [A] total media link on a digital base will erase the very concept of medium. Instead of wiring people and technologies, absolute knowledge will run as an endless loop” (Kittler 1999, 1–2).

Since then, the plea for new types of representation, and even for a new poetics of rendering intelligible network-based governance and control (Galloway 2011), can thus be understood as an effort to oppose the intransparency, unrepresentability, and incommensurability of algorithms with a different “understanding” of digital media and to respond to the absolutism of the present with new images and forms of thinking that go beyond the mere betrayal of *secreta* (à la Snowden) and do greater justice to the *mysterium* of a media-technically conditioned *arcanum*. Especially at stake here is the related issue of action, and the basis for action if this is to take place in a chronotope that, to re-quote Flusser, is no longer determined by transparency, capable of deliberative reasoning, or open to the future. The discourse about transparency, which is always making or reflecting an ethical claim, has reached the limits of a secret that is challenging us to conceptualize an ethics without transparency and a future without the modern understanding of participation and the public sphere (Latour 2003; Foerster 2003).

A look at climatology is especially striking in this context, for hardly any other domain of knowledge is epistemologically so dependent on the historical state of hardware and software, on the observable leaps in quality enabled by sheer computing power but also on a history of software in whose millions of lines of poorly documented or undocumented code have sedimented archaeological layers of scientific thinking that, for good reason, cannot be touched or rewritten but merely expanded and globally standardized and certified. That which is processed in the supercomputers of such a global research alliance can simply no longer be made transparent—not even to the scientists involved. It follows that the habitual routines of critique are at a loss to address the kind of alternative worlds (and not merely prognoses) that result, and what might guide our behavior and self-perception under these conditions. The common reflex of citing the “constructedness” of knowledge achieves little in this regard, for it does not absolve anyone from acting in the face of scenarios that are conscious of their own constructivism. And the falsifiability of classical scientific ethics (not merely for reasons of capacity but for systematic reasons as well) is not practicable in this case because it is impossible to experiment with the climate as an object of science.

Accordingly, some climate scientists have begun to call for a new cosmology in order to justify our future activity on a global level. Should this demand be extended to all possible fields in which the degree of networking, computer power, and software development has achieved a measure of complexity at which understanding and comprehension are impossible—to such fields that, nevertheless, create a feedback loop between the present and the future? If, as in this example, the political becomes entwined around a center of non-knowledge and non-understanding, a modern transparency concept of knowledge reaches its limits, as does the idea of participation by means of voicing one’s opinion about “the matter at hand” (Schelsky 1965). And even this can be expressed, with recourse to thinking about the secret, in

50 premodern terms: The legitimation strategy of the computer-simulated climate cosmology corresponds to the premodern political register of sovereignty. Climate research, as it were, has become a new *science royale*. In the place once occupied by the wisdom (or caprice) of the ruler—a place protected by a metaphysical limit to knowledge—there is now the sovereignty of data processing. The sovereignty of data processing has drawn a new line to demarcate that which is constitutively evasive on account of being secretive according to its “nature.” Only it is no longer nature and no longer cosmology, but rather technology. Previously, and with respect to sovereign rule, this was referred to as the arcane.

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