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On the Side of Non-Knowledge: Mistrust. Heinrich von Kleist's *The Duel* on Big Data Curation

Jeannie Moser

This paper historicizes the ambivalent discourse on data and communication transparency that is epidemic in digital cultures by confronting it with a reading of Kleist's novella, *The Duel* (1811). In the medium of literature, conditions of possibility for the production of relevant and reliable knowledge on the basis of data are subject to analysis and critique. Basic operations of data processing have proven to be fallible and corrupted by media, which, instead of reducing complexity, deepen it. In contradistinction to the trust that reduces this complexity, *The Duel* performs an epistemology of mistrust, which insists on the polyvalence, dubiousness, agility, and ephemerality of the data from which truth is supposed to appear.

Intro: Dystopic Transparency

Literature contributes to, shares, intensifies, radicalizes, and, sometimes, exaggerates current discourses and ideas. Regarding the latter, in Dave Eggers' dystopic novel *The Circle,* computer systems collect, exchange, and provide such unbelievable quantities of information that all gaps in non-knowledge seem to be eliminated irrevocably. The novel relates a hip and fancy Silicon Valley culture fully saturated with digital technologies, which augur the disclosure, communication, and monitoring of simply everything, by everyone. It is a culture that absolutely refuses to admit the opaque, the withheld, the ambivalent, the incomprehensible, or the overlooked. Because each of those impermanent and negotiable non-knowledge derivatives indicates an utter insufficiency, the primary rule in this culture is: *all that happens must be known*. *Secrets are lies*, *sharing is caring*, and *privacy is theft* are the corresponding slogans of the gigantic Circle Corporation, which has centralized all services provided by Google, Facebook, Twitter, Apple, etc. into a media concept called TruYou.

In *The Circle*, political governance, the governance of the self, and the governance of data all intermingle to form a highly sensitive alliance. Power structures are refaced in a radical way— ostensibly as the ideal of transparency reverts into a tyranny of the visible. Both private individuals and public figures start to wear cameras, which transmit a 24/7 feed that can be followed and commented on by the whole net community. Surveillance gets democratized. Political and computer programs intersect in a software program called Demoxie that is supposed to facilitate

the most pure and direct democracy, a "democracy with *your* voice, and *your* moxie" (Eggers 2013, 396).

Big Data, Agency, and the Specter of Non-Knowledge

The Circle is an intensification of the present, as dystopias are in general. It strongly resembles open source tools like LiquidFeedback, which powers Internet platforms for proposition development and decision-making by "heeding the voice of constituencies on a permanent basis, feeding it back directly to political processes at hand" (Hendriks 2014). But, most notably, it amplifies a discourse that claims ignorance is irrevocably something in need of correction (Proctor 2008, 2), and that everything one needs for such correction is freely available on the Internet. The masses of data that abound in a fluidized archive promise omniscience (Stalder 2015) and link omniscience to omnipotence: everyone will have the ability to become an autonomous and sovereign expert who detects the truth.

What this discourse ignores, however, is that accessibility, transparency, and truth are not actually identical. An accumulation of information alone does not produce truth. The direction is missing, the singular and binding meaning, namely, that which is reliant on distinctions (Han 2013, 17; Proctor 2008, 3). This is what Raymond Geuss, in his commentary on Jacques de Saint Victor's *The Anti-Political*, correspondingly uses to counter demands for a direct Web 2.0 participatory democracy run by, for instance, pirate parties all over the world. In the 2015 book, the discussion concerns Western democracies of mistrust, which are marked by the querulousness of their politics. Its point of departure is the observation that individuals and movements who understand themselves as anti-political and who demand that the corrupt, opaque authorities and experts all abdicate are being increasingly affirmed, driven by an idea that lends itself to paranoia: that authorities and experts "actively work to

organize doubt or uncertainty or misinformation to help maintain ignorance" (Proctor 2008, 8).

Criticism and even skepticism of Geuss and de Saint Victor are directed at answers offered by the anti-political, which rest on a digitalization of politics. They are also directed at the phantasm of total transparency, which, purportedly, enables independent formation of opinions, judgment, and agency—conceptualized as being beyond the established, mistrusted critical faculties, brain trusts, representative instances, and institutions of power that control the flow of information (de Saint Victor and Geuss 2015). In fact, power is concentrated in the ordering of data. Early modern political theory had already noticed that the essence of power lies in the government of channels through which information passes (Vogl 2010). Agency condenses in filters that direct the data flow by supposing and separating the relevant and the irrelevant, dividing knowledge and non-knowledge from each other.

But, according to Geuss, the problem is not with the structure of (political) institutions, although they organize data, rather it is that political systems are always embedded in economic orders—the blind spot of the anti-political. And from there it isn't far to the much-praised transparency. Google's algorithms dictate the boundaries of knowledge: "What one can know is the content of an *average* Google search," Geuss writes, "a nearly unending flood of irrelevant facts, lies, speculative fantasies, half- and quarter-truths, misleading insinuations, and completely uncontrolled expressions of opinions" (2015, 105f.; Stalder 2015).

Still, even more fundamental and severe is the procedure itself, which grinds out the status of both knowledge and non-knowledge. That status remains a matter requiring continuous negotiation. The borders between their areas of efficacy and legitimacy must be redrawn incessantly. And, for the most part, knowledge and non-knowledge are contaminated, calling for spaces of transition (Bies and Gamper 2012). Seen in this light,

the dream of total knowledge and the specter of ignorance are equally bound to digital technologies. But that is something not actually specific to digital culture's new electronic media:

> the ubiquity of the Internet, the increasing monopolization of the flow of data by companies like Google and Microsoft and the nearly incomprehensible bulk of information (of completely unclear epistemic value) depict at best the intensification of an already problematic epistemic crisis situation. (Geuss 2015, 107)

Epistemic Crisis

Knowledge, as digital technologies are providing it, discursively figures as a cache of electronically preserved and accessible data. But it is still confronted with the dilemma produced by the steady urgency of ordering, evaluating, and structuring these confusing masses of data. A persistent difficulty is segregating the meaningful from the meaningless, and thereby establishing the difference between knowledge and non-knowledge—that is what has precipitated the epistemic crisis. So even if digital cultures consider themselves as having escaped from the realm of non-knowledge, access to data doesn't suffice. Effective agency depends on the mutability of individual data points. It depends on the ability to recognize the relevant connections—in other words, on complex and extremely critical processing procedures worth a closer look.

The diagnosis of an intensifying epistemic crisis attending big data means, from a historical perspective, that the crisis is of *longue durée*; the threshold had appeared by 1800 at the latest. Since then, the question of the conditions of possibility and the boundaries of knowledge has been pressing, and boils down to the paradoxical conclusion: "knowledge of one's ignorance is a precondition for enlightenment" (Proctor 2008, 5). The question arises because knowledge is no longer merely collected. The problem of the production, storage, and transmission of data

produced by the state, by people, by science, by nature, and by economics arises. How can it be curated? What is relevant to the contemporary situation? From around 1800, knowledge branches out into forms of organization and administration intended to make data operable. Gaps between the multiplicity of things, contingent masses of data and ordering principals, between the state and the individual that produce spaces of non-knowledge, are asking to be closed (Schäffner 1999).

Coevally, by no means at all, is it extraordinary to dream the dream of transparency, to state that appearances are deceiving or to press charges against (aristocratic) camouflage and dis-simulation. The terms that are seeing inflationary usage and con-cern are: to debunk, disclose, publicize and expose (Starobinski 1988, 12; Schneider 2013).

Heinrich von Kleist's *The Duel*

It was during this historic state of epistemic crisis that Heinrich von Kleist wrote novellas, plays, newspaper articles, and numerous private letters by hand. Notwithstanding his analogous reference system, it is Kleist to whom current media theory owes insights into procedures of data curation, the challenging and awkward practices and techniques that are essential to the conversion of vast reams of data into relevant knowledge, and in turn, to the restriction of non-knowledge. Uniquely, all of his writings reflect and examine the very same epistemic system transformations that have been gaining momentum since 1800—linking them to a fundamental media critique.

Describing transmission, perception, administration, and management of information almost obsessively, his writings process—even in the mode of presentation itself—the ways in which knowledge is subject to media. In his writings, an issue is made of the fact that media increase complexity rather than reduce it. In whatever form, communication is attended by random noise. Kleist's texts perform failures, misinterpretations,

overhasty and lazy conclusions. They highlight the disability and oppression that escort enlightenment's optimistic claims to universality. In turn, the equality and honesty of sources and information providers hang in the balance. Determining truth is always a risky operation full of vulnerabilities. And the invisibleness of power technologies remains.

The novella *The Duel* appeared in print in 1811. The author, corresponding to a world of analogous media, dislocates us, thrusting us into a world not even acquainted with the printing press. He displaces us into a world organized by neither republic nor democratic principles.

The Duel begins with the depiction of a murder that occurs at the end of the 14th century. The Duke of Breysach, who has just effected the legitimation of a son born out of wedlock as the heir to the throne, is shot by an arrow. His half-brother, Jacob Rotbart, with whom he had lived in a state of feud, is under suspicion for being the owner of the arrow and having been absent at the time of the offense. But Rotbart claims, in front of the court, that he spent the night with Littegarde von Auerstein, who, according to the narrator, *one must know* had "until the utterance of this scandalous slur, enjoyed the purest and most blameless of reputations" (293).[1] As evidence, he presents a ring that he received as a parting gift from Littegarde, and, in turn, raises charges against her. Littegarde's father, Winfried von Breda, receives the scandalous notification concerning his daughter and, upon reading the court's "terrible communication," he is immediately seized by apoplexy (294f.). Littegarde is subsequently cast out of the house of Breda by her brothers, which leads to dissent concerning the inheritance after the death of the patriarch.

Only Friedrich von Trota, the chamberlain of the murdered Duke of Breysach, is convinced of Littegarde's innocence. Assured of

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1   References to *The Duel* translated by David Luke and Nigel Reeves (1978) are only indicated with page numbers. Paraphrases refer to *Der Zweikampf* (1994).

the falsity of Rotbart's testimony, the chamberlain challenges Rotbart to a holy duel. During this ordeal, which subjected the defendant to a game of strict rules, a struggle with his own body (Foucault 2002, 712), Friedrich is, curiously, badly injured. The injury is seen as the end of the fight, so trumpets sound a threefold flourish and Rotbart sets "his foot on the fallen knight's breast" (306). Friedrich and Littegarde are sentenced to death due to sinful invocation of divine judgment. But then the story, due to a "strange and remarkable fact," takes an "unexpected turn of events" (313f.), which, considering Kleist, is not actually all that unexpected.

The Truth Mediated by Evidence and Ordeal

The story makes an effort to illuminate multiple cases that are tightly interlocked. Criminal guilt, deception, virtue, and honor come into play. But the story is much more about the reconstruction, or simply the construction, of that which is not known. It concerns an agitation in the gray area between knowledge and ignorance, which simultaneously grasps the store of secured knowledge and, on the other hand, reaches out towards that which cannot or cannot yet be known—in other words, towards procedures and practices of investigation. And those are linked to epistemic media.

Both earthly and divine courts are convened, and throughout the story, things are inspected, and papers are shipped—inquiries, letters, and fragments of documents and files. These are read, or, more exactly, often over-read, and then evidence is presented, witnesses are called and investigated, private conversations are conducted as interrogations, statements are collected, and, finally, everything is interpreted. It can therefore be said of *The Duel* that it takes the conditions of possibility for the production of relevant and reliable knowledge on the basis of data as the focal point of its reflections. Exploiting the register of transparency, it forces the question about that which actually is to reveal or to pervade—and furthermore it asks whether the

disclosed, if it were there, would even be recognized or would, in contrast, be overlooked several times (cf. Claus Pias' and Timon Beyes' contribution to this volume).

Lacking a thrilling plot or an ingenious investigator figure, and instead coming up with abrupt shifts in perspective, curious and implausible changes of characters, of lines of action, as well as of topics, the novella mainly addresses data curation operations themselves. The medium of literature turns into a program of observation of non-knowledge and its administration. At the core of the novella is the question of how, or whether it is even possible that something can be taken from a confusing collection of contingencies and be identified as significant—touching on the very difference between the availability and the classifiability of data. The boundaries to which it leads are the boundaries of certainty—namely, beyond the inquisitorial means of truth deter-mination (Bergengruen 2011, 135).

On the one hand, the story takes us into a medievally tinted version of a debate about reasoning on the basis of evidence as it was established in the eighteenth century. It sets forensic practice as a philological-hermeneutical method of reading written and spoken signs, things and facts into motion, all of which, however, are staged as liminal phenomena and are equipped with an index of illegibility. On the other hand, divine judgment is supposed to decide the dispute through supernatural signs. It is God who shall safeguard communication against bias, disaccord, and dubiety (Hahn 2008, 286). Hence, the text, we can say with Roland Reuß, depicts the duel less in the context of the question of justice than in the context of the contentious core of truth.

The sacred verdict of arms in the holy duel—which, strictly speaking, is a binary-structured game that determines victory or defeat (Foucault 2002, 713)—is supposed to determine truth in a legal dispute and should, infallibly, bring that truth to light (303). The truth is therefore not entirely independent of the question of

what the fighting subjects hold to be true. But the gap between the desired manifestation of truth and the subject-bound claims of truthfulness in Kleist's texts is depicted as irresolvable (Reuß 1994, 8f.).

If God's word is supposed to adjudicate on Rotbart's statement, or as it says in the story, to decide "the truth of the testimony against [Littegarde] to which he has sworn," (303) it is actually completely unambiguous and transparent. But neither the spectators of the duel nor the readers of *The Duel* are capable of knowing that in the moment. Which is why and where the story takes its surprising turn: an "apparently insignificant" scratch (314) that Rotbart sustains develops into a lethal wound, whereas the defeated Trota returns to flourishing health and demands that the battle continue. The text, therefore, produces differing opinions about the proper method of reading God's message, if not about its fundamental legibility: "What mortal man," Trota asks, "could presume to interpret the mysterious verdict God has delivered in this duel?" (307). The text unites the evidence and the institution of the duel by turning it, in equal measure, into an uncertain matter of interpretation, an erratic question of analysis and negotiation. Their maximal epistemic resilience is subject to rigorous testing.

Trust as the Radiant Hero of the Story

Contemporary evidence, as well as the anachronistic trial by ordeal (it had already disappeared from European juridical life in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries), proves unreliable. It is, instead, demonstrated to be in need of interpretation and therefore subject to erroneous human imputations. Both are, therefore, associated with a non-juridical option. The story introduces another entity, which seems to unlock a direct and immediate path to the truth: Kleist makes trust into the radiant hero of his story, personified in the figure of Friedrich von Trota, the glowing advocate of Littegarde's innocence. This corresponds to the discursive condensation through which trust reveals itself

as imperial, and which, like the threshold of the epistemic crisis, is datable to 1800: the trusting and trustworthy person as a subject of agency enters into the limelight.[2] Mistrust, in turn, is discredited and arrives only as a specter.

When Littegarde's brothers, who are busy speculating about their inheritance, cast her out, she turns to Trota for help. When she tells him what happened, he interrupts her:

> Say no more … There is a voice that speaks for you in my heart, and it carries a far livelier conviction than any assurances, indeed than all the evidence and proofs which the combination of events and circumstances may well enable you to bring in your favor before the court at Basle. (299)

To demonstrate her irreproachability, Trota tenders himself to Littegarde as an attorney of trust, who, through a combination of thought and unwavering feeling, of knowledge and faith, expects certainty. The case becomes an anti-juridical matter of the heart, which demands a pledge to the law of the heart. As trust shows as a gap in communication, which demands a leap in the dark that may have fatal consequences, and, at the same time, has to be made out of communication (Hahn 2008, 229), the voice of the heart competes against the language of the ambivalent pieces of evidence and of text. Feelings and morality are placed in opposition to reflection, appearances, criminalistic logic, and against "arbitrary human laws" (308), such as those that determine that a fight is at its end at the statement of a judge and cannot begin again. With Anne Fleig following Niklas Luhmann, trust is placed at the center of the story as an unconditional trust. It becomes a risky advanced payment, performed as a practice. Trust gambles itself, and the stakes are high—divine judgment risks a battle of life and death (Fleig 2013, 98).

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2   For the wide-ranging research literature cf. exemplarily Fleig 2013; Frevert 2003 and 2013; Hardin 2004 and 2006; Hartmann 2011; Luhmann 2009; and Reemtsma 2008.

Trust encounters difficult-to-judge information by abridging the
gap and translating non-knowledge (once it acquired a professed
form) directly into action even where there is no transparency
(Han 2013, 78f.). Its discursive antagonist, mistrust, on the other
hand, is an opposite posture towards an abundance of data of
entirely uncertain epistemic value. Precisely by keeping the gap
between knowledge and non-knowledge open and broadening it
by strong imaginations, it becomes productive and might agitate
critically. Quite remarkably, though *The Duel* is a text in which
trust makes a fulminant appearance, it also performs this options
and possibilities augmenting specter posture in parallel.

The Mistrust of the Emperor

Unlike trust, mistrust does not at first glance appear to figure
in *The Duel*. The character from which it proceeds receives little
space to reveal or define himself. It is the emperor. He enters
the action in his function as the bearer of power without being
at all fleshed out in either a psychological or a narrative sense.
Nevertheless (or therefore) insights into the function and the
operational mode of mistrust can be adduced. There is one pas-
sage where mistrust appears explicitly, and it is not just *any* pas-
sage, but an extremely sensitive moment: precisely where both
the process of converting the unknowable and the narrative take
an unexpected turn. Trota and Littegarde are condemned to an
ignominious death by fire, and the sentence:

> would have been carried out at once, … if it had not been the
> Emperor's secret intention that Count Jakob Rotbart, against
> whom he could not suppress a certain feeling of mistrust,
> should be present at the execution. But the strange and
> remarkable fact was that Count Jakob still lay sick of the small
> and apparently insignificant wound which Herr Friedrich had
> inflicted on him … and all of the skill of the doctors … could
> not avail to close it. Indeed, a corrosive discharge of a kind
> quite unknown to the medical science of those days, began

to spread through the whole structure of his hand, eating it
away like a cancer right down to the bone; in consequence,
…, it had become necessary to amputate the entire diseased
hand, and later, … his entire arm. But this too, … merely had
the effect of, as could easily have been foreseen nowadays,
increasing the malady instead of relieving it; his whole body
gradually began to rot and fester, until the doctors declared
that he was past saving and would even die within a week.
(313f.)

The emperor's mistrust, which appears to be only one of many
kinds of mistrust, does not receive closer attention. Initially, it
seems only to motivate the sovereign, the supreme embodiment
of authority, who unites all powers of agency (though he is
nevertheless dependent on the information and expertise of
the court and of judges) to wish that Rotbart be present at the
execution. Mistrust thereby makes space for a knowledge and a
knowing subject that wishes to see with its *own eyes* in order to
evaluate the data produced by Rotbart's body: maybe excitations
and signs of affect, which, in the eighteenth century, within the
system of evidentiary proceedings, gain importance as data
worth being registered and protocolled (Weitin 2005 and 2009).

However, it is not the emperor's eyes that examine the wounds,
the marks and body signs, but the eyes of doctors. Conditioned
by an epistemology of suspicion (Vogl 1991), they look at a hand,
which by degenerating is dedicated to mediate something that
is detracted, invisible, and unknown. They look at the very part
of the body, which, in turn, no longer functions as a medium:
by writing, for example, or performing symbolic gestures, like
swearing an oath. The medical view intersects with the imperial
bird's eye view, but the authority of the interpretation of signs
and of expertise is displaced onto the field of science (Foucault
1973)—even if the knowledge produced there is shown to be rel-
ative and weak. It is depicted as being in danger because of the
time: nowadays, whenever "nowadays" might be, something com-
pletely different could be foreseen easily, and then it will become

outdated, turning into something of a kind quite unknown again. Aside from that, and in addition to the hegemony of medical expertise, the emperor, with his will to knowledge, is overtaken, outmaneuvered, and made obsolete in an entirely different manner—namely, it is the text itself that does not afford him an active role.

Disclosures

The emperor's mistrust, which is so minimally explicated at a contentual level, has a powerful effect on the progression of the story. Suddenly, the narration proceeds incredibly quickly—*one must know*, the narrator reveals, that Rotbart had an affair with the chambermaid Rosalie. Having since been spurned, Rosalie pretends to be Littegarde and spends the night of the crime with Rotbart and gives him the ring, which she had stolen from Littegarde. Nine months later, as the story goes, "the consequences of her immoral life became visible" (317). Rosalie names Rotbart as the father of the child and proves it with a ring that he (after all, he thought she was Littegarde) had sent to her in return for her gift to him. Supported by this "obvious piece of evidence," a petition for paternal support is submitted to the court. The court sends the testimony of Rosalie as well as the ring to the imperial tribunal in hopes of clearing up "the terrible mystery, which had become the chief topic of conversation" (317).

Rotbart, after reading the letter and being given the ring, now confesses immediately to responsibility for the Duke of Breysach's death and to having engaged the archer: "I am the murderer of my brother." With this declaration, he sinks back onto the litter and whispers his "black soul into the air." It is the body of the fratricide, instead of the innocent, that is consumed in red flames on the pyre. The moral legitimation of the duke's illegitimate son as his successor follows its juridical legitimation (Schneider 2003). Littegarde is returned to her paternal inheritance by an imperial decree and only three weeks later she celebrates her marriage to Trota.

The story finally gets—and this, actually, is surprising in a Kleist story—its happy ending: Rotbart's confession resolves the criminal case, while the sum and the concluding interpretation of the data produce a comprehensive picture of his offense and of Littegarde's innocence. The internal voice of her confidant, Trota, seems to have spoken the truth and been the key to the solution. It is, however, the emperor's mistrust that made this happy ending possible, and which ensured that the process of finding the truth could be brought so effortlessly to a conclusion. The unexpected turn of events is indebted to a mistrust that lets the story stagnate at a crucial point, which interrupts the chain of events and provides for a deferment. In other words, without the emperor's mistrust the case would have seen an entirely different conclusion—an entirely different truth: Trota and Littegarde would have long since been executed.

Amendment

It is mistrust, which, through its insistence on semantic open-ness, initiates the amendment of every decision made as a consequence of interpretation, such that data lose their pre-vious evidentiary power and consolidated knowledge begins to degenerate. Conversely, facts that initially seemed insignificant become meaningful details and new pieces of evidence, which serve to expand the body of evidence: because it begins to fester, Rotbart's apparently insignificant wound becomes a meaningful trace that leads to the black soul of the terrible. At the same time, it is only the delay in the execution of the sentence that can con-firm Rotbart's belief that he himself was deceived.

Eyewitness accounts from tower guards and a lady's maid, about which the text has said little or nothing up until this point, can now be brought into play. Newly introduced data receive consideration: the first ring, initially and falsely used as an alibi for Rotbart, and as evidence of Littegarde's moral failing, now testifies to the moral failing of her thieving chambermaid and is chained to a second ring, which testifies to both the paternity of a

child conceived out of wedlock and the deceptive bait and switch carried out by the maid. A suit for paternal support can be tied to the remarkable legal proceedings, and because they are united in this manner, can collaborate on the decipherment of the terrible mystery. All at once, the relevant connections providing agency are easy to recognize (Geuss 2015, 106).

Mistrust functions here to set the narration in motion and to efficiently direct it to its "good" ending—not, then, the emperor himself. And Trota's discursively incommunicable faith does just as little to effect the turn in events. Even if it seems as though he always knew, his feeling must first turn into an overwhelming evidentiary burden and be certified by a confession. That these clear data have any effect at all can be ascribed only to the decelerating delays of mistrust.

Polyvalence, Uncertainty, and Dubiousness of Data

This mistrust, which interrupts in order to effect the rapid acceleration in the deciphering of enigmatic events at the level of narration and brings them to their end in no more than *two* paragraphs, replaces an uneconomic and notoriously unprofitable narrative mode—a mistrusting narrative mode, which attaches a provision to all information. The emperor's mistrust is tied to a mistrust that the text produces relentlessly. Up until this penultimate paragraph, in which the text finally discloses that which had been held in reserve through an interruption in the narrated action—the very thing that *one must know* in order to resolve the case—the text systematically multiplies the possible interpretations and connections until they are endless; it obscures and veils itself like the clever chambermaid. The text dictates the borders of knowledge—and presents itself as a netting of clear and indistinct explanations, of "plain speech and insinuation" (294).

What it doesn't narrate is that which one might *want to know*: why the court doesn't once take into account the fact that Rotbart

could have hired someone to carry out the deed intended to secure the throne for him, and why his motive is never considered. Or even why the widow of the Duke, whose very first inquiries demonstrate that the murder weapon, namely the arrow, came from Rotbart's armory, an inquiry that also reveals that Rotbart was not in his castle at the time of the murder, then expresses her displeasure that the "ambiguous disclosures" of these researched charges (which she reads "twice through attentively") should have been publically raised given that it was such an "uncertain and delicate matter," and fears "any ill-considered action" (290). All of this despite the fact that the Duke had said on his deathbed, with broken words which she "then scarcely understood," that he suspected his brother of the crime (320)—a statement the widow doesn't remember until it assembles with the body of evidence, Rotbart's confession and death grinding out the truth.

Also inexplicable is why Littegarde refers to Trota. And why she, in turn, appears to him to be worthy of his trust. In being called to defend her honor, what sustains this faith in her innocence and makes him so decisively swear to prove that innocence, not in court but in a public event—the life and death ordeal of divine combat? All that, and much, much more remains shady.

Any possible contextual meaning, on the other hand, is constantly compromised. In the text, the polyvalence, uncertainty, and dubiousness of data, of signs, events, witnesses, statements, and facts—through which the truth is supposed to appear—is directly thematized. The chamberlain engages in two verbal duels that *directly* precede the emperor's mistrust, first with his mother and then with Littegarde (Schuller 2000, 200), and says he can ignore divine judgment, forcing a climax of confusion and enigma as well as of epistemic crisis. Friedrich calls the temporal boundaries of divine combat into question, most especially its endpoint, at which God has delivered his judgment, and simultaneously assesses its conclusion as a construable statement (Reuß 1994, 19).

For the mother, the meaning of this divine statement does not remain dark, as she appeals to the authority of the law, according to which "a duel which has been declared by the judges to be concluded cannot be resumed." For Friedrich, however, the duel was brought to an end because of a "trifling accident" (307f.). "Arbitrary human laws" do not concern him. And in a certain sense rightly so: only because none of the spectators had doubted, as it is said, his death, the emperor, who is responsible for nothing more than compliance with the rules (Foucault 2002, 713), brought the fight to an end. As can be seen through the healing of the chamberlain's wounds, which weren't fatal after all, this decision was arbitrary and coincidental. For this reason alone, divine judgment becomes complex and multivalent.

What One Can Know

The text thereby fundamentally problematizes the difficulty, even the impossibility, of determining the limits and defining the truth about an event. Exactly that which *one must know* and therefore also that which one *can* know, is known in *The Duel* by exactly one agent: the invisible and omnipotent narrator. He—and not the emperor—figures as an ideal eyewitness, who advocates the truth of the occurrences and verifies them (Vogl 1991), but, at the same time, organizes, filters, and distributes data. He by himself is the authoritarian principle who organizes the forms of data deemed relevant, and of those to be removed, discarded, or declared trivial.

He is the sovereign and the data processor who assesses and rates. Similar to a search algorithm like PageRank, which arranges what one will possibly know by assigning data to positions on the hit list, his guiding criteria are unsearchable and inscrutable—they remain (despite being an aesthetic and not a Google company) secret (Bergermann 2013, 100f.). But in contradistinction to the digital gatekeepers of the unending space of the Internet, he makes explicit the act of selection, of focusing on one thing, which is therefore invariably a choice to ignore another

(Proctor 2008, 7), the act of ranking, of indexing and indication. By twice revealing that which *one must know*, at least in these two short moments, he identifies and draws attention as well as suspicion to himself and his manipulative procedures.

The narrator exposes himself as the one who monopolizes the flow of information as a manipulation tactic. And he arranges the possible clues so wastefully and wildly that the emperor, as it is said, goes crazy as a result.[3] His politics is one of concealing transparency, which Geuss describes in reference to digital cultures as often just as effective as the suppression and withholding of facts for procuring absolute secrecy. It is a politics that introduces so much that is irrelevant and misleading into the churning stream of information that both the contentual relation and the foundations through which determinations of knowledge and non-knowledge are made can no longer be recognized (Geuss 2015, 106f.). Hence, finally, he is the one who communicates without anybody ever being on a par with him.

Taking Side with Non-Knowledge

Kleist's *The Duel* makes the nameless emperor's mistrust become the mistrust felt by the nameless reader, who must wait until that which *one must know* reaches him coincidentally. The novella does not do this, however, without transposing a clear and direct speech, through which the truth can appear, into the conditional. The final act of the emperor in the narration is namely this:

> he gave orders that in the statutes governing the sacred ordeal by combat, at all points where they assume that such a trial immediately brings guilt to light, the words "if it be God's will" were to be inserted. (320)

3   The English translation describes his condition much more lightly: "somewhat shaken in his belief" (302).

The text closes with a correction that means as much as carrying the institution of divine combat itself *ad absurdum* (Reuß 1994, 7). The medium of assumed immediate enlightenment loses its vigor. Even God's dictum becomes devaluated, being now only decisive conditionally and under certain circumstances. Even God as the singular agent, who is lord over all of the data, who knows the present in all of its details, who can therefore meticulously describe and know the past and future of all worldly events—just as the probability theoretician Laplace conceptualized the conditional intelligence later known as the Demon in 1814 (Laplace 1932, 1f.), and as the protagonist Mae Holland, on entering the campus of *The Circle* for the first time thinks, "MY GOD … It's heaven" (Eggers 2013, 1)—this agent appears in Kleist as incalculable and unreliable. Every data point, every event, every little piece of information is thereby provided with a degree of im/possibility and placed in a gray area between knowledge and non-knowledge (Schäffner 1999, 123)—where it remains.

The last act of this mistrustful, nameless emperor, therefore, dispenses entirely with the idea of making data transparent, citing the systematic impossibleness and narrowness of transparency itself. And this act runs contrary to the efforts that were current in 1800, and also runs contrary to the digitalized phantasm of the knowledge society of today. In contradistinction to those anti-political apologists of the Internet whose mistrust is directed toward institutions and critical faculties with their expertise—because they are so sure they are able to take the sovereign's, the emperor's place, and to have at their disposal the capacities and the media needed to know everything, but who also, in the same breath, attempt to delegate the curation of big data to equally obscure agents, economic interests, or the law of the algorithms, which become more and more complex by reprogramming themselves—the text of Kleist makes an issue of the operation per se. It foments mistrust as an epistemological principle, which, at facing an abundance of data, offensively takes sides with non-knowledge. It rejects the idea of pervasion, of omniscience and

omnipotence, and it would rather not know than acknowledge the status quo.

Therefore, it mobilizes contradictory imaginaries against one-and-only options, as well as against assumed perspicuities, which in respect to the algorithms governing digital cultures are the average, the standard, and the habitual. In contradistinction to an "obvious" relevance generated by PageRank, based on the citation index, for example, which counts on popularity, repetition, and frequency to guide decisions (Bergermann 2013, 101; Stalder 2015), mistrust asks persistently if everything is really as it seems—or if everything is different after all? It animates us into observing, questioning, thinking, and imagining again. The emperor's mistrust gathers the uncertainty of the scattered data from their latency.

In distinction to trust, it neither substitutes the ignorance, nor effaces the ambivalence of the data, their complexity, agility, and ephemerality—rather it insists on them and keeps them virulent. Even if the text provides an abundance of data, the emperor's mistrust reminds us that the gaps of non-knowledge are not to be eliminated: the significance, as well as the truth, only show up as random and temporary configurations. Both ignorance and knowledge are made and unmade incessantly. The text simultaneously demonstrates that communication, decision-making, political judgment, and agency need not be tied to claims of absolute truth. Maybe it's exactly the opposite: mistrust could then be a commendable posture of unsettled critique in the face of an epoch of alleged truth, of confessions, and of revelation—of total transparency directed both inwardly and outwardly.

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