

# On Cats In Bags: Asymmetric Information, The Cohort, and The Discourse of the Magician

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*“You will feel like a fool for having written all that without having this special information on which to judge.... But that feeling will only last for a week or two, because after a week or so of having four star generals bring you in special brief cases, special pouches, books that are available only to you and your boss and a few other people... and certainly not to members of the public, you will forget that you were once a fool and remember only that everyone else is a fool who does not have this information.”*

- Daniel Ellsberg, former special assistant to the U.S. Assistant Secretary of Defense, testifying at the Joint Senate Hearings held on May 17, 1973 by the Committees on the Judiciary and Government Operations, recounting a conversation in December, 1968 with then newly-appointed Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger.

## 1. Introduction

Art is like magic and magic is like psychoanalysis and psychoanalysis is like art. Which brings us back to magic, since all such analogies are a form of sleight of hand; a this-for-that substitution which solicits the receiver’s complicity. What the solicitor is prone to do with that complicity depends on the nature of the relationship. And relationships depend on the participants’ treatment of the relationship’s secrets. Such secrets create the unique boundaries which define the privatized, privileged space of the relationship. To an even greater extent, relationships are confirmed or corrupted by one

participant's treatment of secrets *not* shared with the other participant(s). These orientations to and mechanisms of knowledge which define the relationships 'through which language exercises both formative and transformative power in human affairs',<sup>1</sup> determine what effect one participant may have on another. More surprisingly, these determinations, in turn, determine the likelihood of deception and how participants are likely to *employ* such deception. This essay aims at a clearer understanding of relationship types and their intrinsic dynamics.

## 2. Welcome to the Cohort

Public and private are terms defined by their opposition; each by not being the other. Language finds the use of such oppositions conceptually manageable. Thought, being deferential, usually agrees. But, when examining human relationships and the knowledge specific to these relationships, it quickly becomes apparent that we require an intervening category. The term *confidential*, overlaps both the public and the private, obeying rules specific to each at different times and in different contexts. Confidentiality is the implicit or explicit prohibition of revealing information exclusive to a group of individuals within the public (a subset) formed on bonds and allegiances. I call these groups *cohorts*: corporations, bus passengers, families, teams and their supporters, schools of thought, pop star fan clubs, targeted marketing demographics, transvestites. Cohort allegiances usually form along intentional allegiances (Man United scarves at a football match). But sometimes the commonalities are unintentional (cancer patients). In the common parlance, information exclusive to a cohort is called a *secret*. And secrets are shared *only* within cohorts. If an individual shares a secret, a cohort is created. If a secret reaches the public it is no longer a secret. The *effect perimeter* of any secret is described by the most distant location or situation of the person or persons who can be effected by the communication or enactment of the specific knowledge in question. The

effect perimeter always includes the members of the cohort, but often extends beyond the cohort's membership.

Henry Kissinger's exceptional access to secrets made him a member of a variety of very small cohorts. In some cases, according to Daniel Ellsberg's testimony, a cohort was so exclusive as to include only Kissinger, 'the President, and the Army General Staff'.<sup>2</sup> But the effect perimeter of many of Kissinger's secrets extended to include most of the citizens of the world.

### **3. Secrets and the Effect Perimeter**

Regardless of the size of the cohort and its effect perimeter, the ramifications of exposing the cohort's secrets often include expulsion from the cohort. (The Mafia typically 'whacks' rats – an expulsion of an extreme variety.) In some cases the exposition can cause the destruction of the cohort itself. (Divulgence of the radio payola schemes of the 1950s led to the disappearance of so-called radio "hit-men." They reappeared later, but as a new cohort, with new secrets.)

#### **In psychoanalysis**

In the psychoanalytic relationship, the cohort is two people big. The process of analysis explicitly asks the analysand to make public to the cohort what is explicitly private, though in a limited sense and with clearly stated rules governing the handling of the information. The secrets are meant to stay within the confines of the two-person cohort. The American Psychoanalytic Association's Principles and Standards of Ethics for Psychoanalysts states:

Confidentiality of the patient's communications is a basic patient's right and an essential condition for effective psychoanalytic treatment and research. A psychoanalyst must take all measures necessary to not reveal present or former patient confidences without permission, nor discuss the

particularities observed or inferred about patients outside consultative, educational or scientific contexts.<sup>3</sup>

The effect perimeter of a secret belonging to an analyst-patient cohort is assumed to extend no farther than the two members of the cohort. However, in certain, recognized circumstances, the effect perimeter may be extended to include specific or unspecific members of the public. Thus the safeguarding of the public good is invoked and valued over and above the cohort's confidentiality:

In the event that a credible threat of imminent bodily harm to a third party by a patient becomes evident, the psychoanalyst should take reasonable appropriate steps to protect the third-party from bodily harm, and may breach patient confidentiality if necessary only to the extent necessary to prevent imminent harm from occurring. The same applies to a credible threat of suicide.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to membership in the analyst-patient cohort, the analyst also represents a different cohort – the cohort of the psychoanalytic profession. Ideally, the effect perimeter of the analyst encompasses the analysand, but not the other way around. The analyst is meant to maintain a critical distance from the patient; an objectivity which excludes the analyst from the analysand's effect perimeter. At first glance, the dynamics of the analyst-analysand relationship displays features similar to the dynamics of both the artist-audience and the magician-audience relationships. But closer examination reveals that one of these is a red herring.

### **In art**

Pierre Bourdieu has written:

As for awareness of the logic of the game as such, and of the *illusio* on which it is based, I had been inclined to think that it

was excluded by membership of the field, which presupposes (and induces) belief in everything which depends on the existence of the field, i.e. literature, the writer, etc., because such lucidity would make the literary or artistic undertaking itself a cynical mystification, a conscious trickery.<sup>5</sup>

But, as it turns out, the cohorts of artistic and literary producers are not always required to keep their secrets. In fact, these sorts of disclosures form a commonly employed apparatus in the production of literary and artistic works. The great leaps forward of literary and art history have often been presaged by treasons which, while initially controversial, were eventually subsumed by the cohort (or *field*, to use the Bourdieuean term) and subsequently held up as exemplary moments in the field's history of inventive progress. Artistic production, it seems, is immune to such treason. In literature, for example, Stéphane Mallarmé simultaneously ratified the taboo of exposing poetry's secrets, transgressed it, confessed to his transgression, reveled in his transgression and marveled at poetry's ability to interpolate the transgression:

We know, captives of an absolute formula that, indeed, there is only that which is. Forthwith to dismiss the cheat, however, on a pretext, would indict our inconsequence, denying the pleasure we want to take: for that *beyond* is its agent, and the engine I might say were I not loath to perform, in public, the impious dismantling of the fiction and consequently of the literary mechanism, display the principal part or nothing. But I venerate how, by a trick, we project to a height forfended – and with thunder! – the conscious lack in us of what shines up there.<sup>6</sup>

In a less revolutionary mode, Wallace Stevens' work makes constant allusions to the tricks of the trade and the mechanism of the craft. Ostensibly, Stevens' poems are about poetry as arbiter of the human consciousness. His *Collected Poems* encompasses a fully-realized philosophy of the translation and transference of experience to sensation and back to

experience in the form of the poem. In his magnum opus, 'Notes Toward A Supreme Fiction', a sort of metaphysical how-to, he writes of the poet:

It is the gibberish of the vulgate that he seeks.  
He tries by a peculiar speech to speak  
The peculiar potency of the general,  
To compound the imagination's Latin with  
The lingua franca et jocundissima.<sup>7</sup>

Ten pages later, in the poem's last numbered section (before a brief epilogue), he delivers the goods:

That's it: the more than rational distortion,  
The fiction that results from feeling. Yes, that.

And, in the next lines, he takes a poke at the academy for concealing the truth:

They will get it straight one day at the Sorbonne.  
We shall return at twilight from the lecture  
Pleased that the irrational is rational...<sup>8</sup>

By imagining his own future pleasure at the Sorbonne's eventual disclosure, Stevens prescribes the reader's reaction to the poem. We, too should be 'pleased that the irrational is rational'. We have been let in on the secret.

In the visual arts, Belgian conceptualist, Marcel Broodthaers, a former poet, has adopted the post-structuralists' cynicism about signification and expressed it in the form of objects. In so doing, he has, in effect, re-appropriated the critical exposition of the visual object's 'dirty little secret' and, turning the tables on signification, converted the critique into that which is critiqued. This is a sly sort of treason. But its exposition is very thorough, cutting directly to the contradictions of representation. To a

question regarding his *Painting and Object*, 1970, Broodthaers addressed the topic of treason directly:

I prefer to believe that it acts like a pedagogical object. The secret of art must, whenever possible, be unveiled – the dead general smokes an extinguished cigar.<sup>9</sup>

Even in the act of confessing his treason, Broodthaers makes a case for the necessity of the act. He sees the unveiling of the secret as a sort of pedagogy; an act of *a priori* value.

Although it is a supremely clunky phrase, ‘hyper-protected, cooperative system’ is a useful, literary theory description of the province of artistic interchange. It is ‘hyper-protected’ in that the work reaches the receiver with certain implicit or explicit assurances. (The implicit: publication, gallery representation, radio play; the explicit: book jacket blurbs, critical accolades, word-of-mouth). The receiver is ‘cooperative’, in part, because of the assurances which have been offered and due to an assumed willingness to come freely to the exchange. This hyper-protected and protecting community, extending from the artist – via publishers, galleries, performance venues, critics, journalists, and the like – to the audience, constitutes a cohort. Art’s effect perimeter, as we learned with the publication of *The Satanic Verses*, can be much bigger than its cohort.

### **In magic**

Magic assumes similar complicities, but with different motivations. The audience’s cooperation depends, not so much on the assurances they have received (magic is a less reviewed medium than painting, literature or film), but on their own ‘insistence on not knowing the hidden mechanism’.<sup>10</sup> This insistence is the pre-requisite of credibility. If the audience acts counter to this insistence and, by some means, secures knowledge of the hidden

mechanism, the illusion disintegrates, there is nothing left. Magician, Walter 'Zaney' Blaney puts it plainly (if ungrammatically): 'The magician has one Achilles' heel...their secret! Give that away and there is no magic. Everyone knows that'.<sup>11</sup>

In magic, as much as in any field, the secret's importance is expressly understood and protected – sometimes vehemently – by the members of the cohort. In the U.S., in November of 1997, the Fox Television Network aired the first of a three-part, national series entitled, 'Breaking the Magician's Code: Magic's Biggest Secrets Revealed.' The programs featured a magician – reputed to be one of the top ten magicians in the world, but identified only as "The Masked Magician" – explaining and demonstrating how various well-known magic tricks are performed. As one might expect, this treason was not well received in a field based on the secrecy of their secrets:

The crux of the matter is this: Magicians have taken both an overt and covert oath to NOT give out the secrets of magic in such a way that they are simply tossed to the wind and the masses, whose only real interest is purely to know the HOW of what many of us have taken thousands of hours to perfect. It could be argued that I as a magic dealer do the same thing, but it would be a fatuous argument. In order to have the same effect or even an effect that closely resembles what Fox has done, I would have to walk up to every person on the street and offer to tell them how various items of magic work! In fact you must come to me specifically to buy magic. Even then I don't simply tell anyone off the street how items are done on the basis of casual seeming request!<sup>12</sup>

#### **4. The Discourse of the Analyst**

Jacques Lacan's schemata of the four discourses attempts to identify the mechanism 'through which language exercises both formative and transformative power in human affairs'.<sup>13</sup> Lacan's model consists of four positions:

<u>the agent</u>	<u>the other</u>
truth	production

Briefly, the factors which occupy the positions on the left side are those which are active in the speaker, while the factors in the positions on the right side are those which the discourse assumes of the receiver of the message.

Furthermore, the top position on each side represents the dominant or overt factor while the bottom position represents the covert or latent factor. (For a more comprehensive description of the model, see Bracher, p. 109.)<sup>14</sup>

The four factors which occupy the positions are:

S<sub>1</sub> = the master signifier (that which enables the understanding or making of meaning)

S<sub>2</sub> = knowledge (la savoir or *how it is done*)

\$ = the divided subject

a = the lack or the cause of desire

The four discourses, then, are represented by four unique arrangements of the factors in the positions. The unique arrangements of the four discourses are created by shifting the positions of the factors one quarter turn in a clockwise direction:

Discourse of the master

<u>S<sub>1</sub></u>	→	<u>S<sub>2</sub></u>
\$		a

Discourse of the hysteric

<u>\$</u>	→	<u>S<sub>1</sub></u>
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$a$              $S_2$

Discourse of the analyst

$$\frac{a}{S_2} \longrightarrow \frac{\$}{S_1}$$

Discourse of the university

$$\frac{S_2}{S_1} \longrightarrow \frac{a}{\$}$$

Nestor A. Braunstein applies Lacan's discourse of the analyst in the form of 'non-propositional' statements;<sup>15</sup> disjunctive statements which push the analysand to investigate meaning and to respond. If the analyst says 'God gives bread to those who are toothless' (as Braunstein has suggested),<sup>16</sup> the analyst isn't counting on reactions to the concept of God or to the efficacy of eating bread without teeth or even to the proverbial connotations. It is the disjunctive nature of the statement which pushes the analysand to make meaning. These solicitations assume the form of the shadow of the voice of the other, in that they ask questions aimed at discovering or contextualizing meaning, in a manner which does not connote, yet provokes. They are, in effect, statements which have no manifest utility.

Similarly, art can be thought of as the elements within an object which are denuded of utility. Because most things which are considered art also maintain a utility function (as commodity, at the very least) the identification of the 'art' in an object must be located in elements within the object which generate the *pang* of acknowledgement in the recipient. But, like Braunstein's non-propositional statements, these elements don't offer specific and prescriptive content. Instead, they instigate processes of meaning-making.

For the analyst's non-propositional statements to enact a process within the analysand, the statements must be 'read' by the analysand as solicitations. The solicitation is contingent on the analysand's presumption of the analyst's intent. This constitutes the analysand's recognition of an internal solicitation, which is the intent of the (subjectified) other and is actuated in the analyst's mechanisms, reflecting an intent which ultimately belongs to (or emanates from) the analysand. Art also depends on a *fictive presumption of intent*. (This concept is named carefully to avoid confusing its application with notions of concrete authorial intention or even definitive attribution.) This *fictive presumption of intent* does not refer to a specific intent, but an intent to intend. It does not matter if the intent, as perceived by the audience, resembles any actual intent on the part of the artist. The viewer who wishes to submit certain elements within an object to the processes of artistic consideration, must have in mind a notion (true or false) of those elements as intended for such consideration. So, a pile of bricks on the sidewalk is not art, unless there is something (such as gallery representation) to indicate it was placed or arranged there with an artistic intention.

The language used to describe the discourse of the analyst, works just as well when the analysis-specific words are replaced with art-specific words (the statement is Lacan's, the parenthetical words in bold are my substitutes): '*It can be said that the psychoanalytic/artistic action is developed in and through verbal communication, that is, in a dialectical grasp of meaning. It presupposes, therefore, a subject/viewer who manifests himself as such to the intention of another*'.<sup>17</sup>

If we insert art-specific terms into Lacan's model of the discourse of the analyst, we expose certain features of art's social behavior:

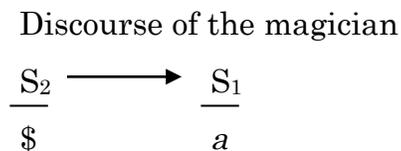


...propositions about any aspect of the analysand. Rather, it offers statements designed to expose to the analysand his or her unconscious desire and the object *a*, the piece of the Real around which unconscious signifying chains (associations) are constellated. Such exposure will pressure the analysand him- or herself to articulate and provide meaning for this element that was heretofore left out of his or her system of meaning.<sup>18</sup>

Again, the definition stands up if we replace ‘analyst’ and ‘analysand’ with ‘artist’ and ‘audience.’

### 5. The Discourse of the Magician

Magicians view other magic technically, *sans pang*. They either know how a trick is done or view it analytically, with an eye toward deciphering the mechanism. The secret of any one trick is simply a variation of the big Secret. Once the cat is out of the bag, there is no cat, there is no bag. This suggests that the magician-audience relationship might not find apt description in the model of the discourse of the analyst. The mismatch occurs in the positioning of the ‘mechanism’ factor. In magic, the mechanism is the agent and the mechanism acts upon the master signifiers (those which create meaning for the audience) to produce the sense of wonder that is magic’s aim. The subject occupies the truth position, because the truth is wholly at the discretion of the subject – this is the ‘insistence on not knowing’ mentioned earlier. This arrangement of factors suggests a discourse not accounted for in Lacan: the discourse of the magician:



The troubling aspect of this model is that the mechanism occupies the position of the agent and imposes its knowledge on the master signifier thereby *manufacturing* a signification which has no genesis in either subjective or objective constellations of meaning. (The used car salesman: ‘It was driven to church on Sundays by an old lady from Pasadena.’) The issue here is that there is nothing to check the illusion-creating capacity of the knowledge. This, of course, produces a lack which may resemble the Lacanian lack, but which is also a different lack, created by a new imposition of manufactured signification.

## 6. Asymmetric Information

The discourse of the magician acts as a fitting description of other relationships as well. Its dynamics are mirrored in a relationship, known in economics as *asymmetric information*. Let’s look briefly at how this relationship plays out, using the classic example: *The Market for Lemons* by Nobel Laureate, economist, George A. Akerlof. The used car market is employed to describe the potential for dishonesty in exchanges where there is an unequal distribution of knowledge. Akerlof describes how a buyer of a new car assigns a probability to the event that his car is a “lemon” (as opposed to a “good” car). Sometime later, this owner wishes to sell the same car:

After owning a specific car...for a length of time, the car owner can form a good idea of the quality of the machine; i.e., the owner assigns a new probability to the event that his car is a lemon. This estimate is more accurate than the original estimate. An asymmetry in available information has developed: for the sellers now have more knowledge about the quality of a car than the buyers.<sup>19</sup>

As a result, ‘most cars traded will be the “lemons,” and good cars may not be traded at all’.<sup>20</sup> Asymmetric information depends on cohort distinctions.

Members of a cohort share symmetric information: the secret. The minute

one participant withholds information from another, any existing cohort bonds are broken and new allegiances are formed. According to Akerlof, such inter-cohort, asymmetric systems actually encourage the supply of lemons, rather than good cars. Akerlof says, ‘there is incentive for sellers to market poor quality merchandise, since the returns for good quality accrue mainly to the entire group whose statistic is affected rather than to the individual seller’.<sup>21</sup> In other words, inferior products get lumped in with better products, giving the whole market cohort (including the sellers of crap) a reputable sheen.

The long-term potential for abuse in relationships marked by asymmetric information has more severe implications, especially in more complex systems. According to Akerlof, the end-product of such a system can be the annihilation of the system itself.

...in a more continuous case with different grades of goods, even worse pathologies can exist. For it is quite possible to have the bad driving out the not-so-bad driving out the medium driving out the not-so-good driving out the good in such a sequence of events that no market exists at all.<sup>22</sup>

## **7. Endemic Dishonesty**

Looking at the artist-audience relationship through the filter of the discourse of the analyst unlocks certain significant features. The mechanism (or technique) of artistic production does not impose meaning on the audience. As a result, the mechanism can be exposed without harming the pang, the artist, the audience or the cohort as a whole. And, because the secret information of the field – represented by the mechanism – is symmetrically distributed, there is little opportunity or incentive for dishonesty.

However, In systems described by the discourse of the magician – where the mechanism is known by one participant and not the other – there exists not only a potential, but an endemic tendency toward misrepresentation.

‘Fooling’ is the whole point of magic. In this sense it is a game, it is competitive. In magic the stakes are low, i.e., the existence or absence of wonder. But in relationships with bigger stakes which exhibit the same asymmetric information distribution (confidence scams, are an obvious example), the inherent misrepresentation turns sinister. As Akerlof points out, ‘It is this possibility that represents the major costs of dishonesty – for dishonest dealings tend to drive honest dealings out of the market’.<sup>23</sup>

Asymmetric information is not incidental to dishonesty, but causal.

## Notes

1. Mark Bracher, 'On the Psychological and Social Functions of Language: Lacan's Theory of the Four Discourses', in *Lacanian Theory of Discourse*, ed. Mark Bracher, et. al. (New York and London: New York University Press, 1994) p. 107.
2. Daniel Ellsberg, former special assistant to the Assistant Secretary of Defense, testifying at the Joint Senate Hearings held on May 17, 1973, by the Committees on the Judiciary and Government Operations. ('*One White House staffer told me... "I wonder if Henry realizes there were certain things known only to him, the President, and the Army General Staff..."*')
3. Source: <http://www.apsa.org/ethics901.htm> 11 November 2002.
4. Source: <http://www.apsa.org/ethics901.htm> 11 November 2002.
5. Pierre Bourdieu, 'The Field of Cultural Production', in *The Field Of Cultural Production* trans. Randal Johnson (Columbia University Press, 1993, original publication: 1983) p. 72.
6. Stephen Mallarmé, 'La Musique et les lettres', in *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard (Pléiade), 1945) p. 647. This passage is also quoted by Bourdieu, p. 72.
7. Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (Vintage Books, 1982, original publication: 1954) p. 397.
8. Stevens, *Collected Poems*, p. 406.
9. Marcel Broodthaers, 'Ten Thousand Francs Reward', in *Broodthaers: Writings, Interviews, Photographs* (MIT Press, 1988) pp. 39-40.
10. 'Escamoteo', in *Escape* (ed. J. L. Marzo), Sala Amarica, Vitoria, agosto de 1998, pp. 149-213. Source: <http://www.soymenos.com/textos/Sleight-of-hand.html> 26 October 2002.
11. Walter "Zaney" Blaney, 'A letter on EXPOSURE from a Professional Magician'. Source: <http://www.magiciansalliance.com/letter.html> 11 November 2002.
12. Brad Burt, owner Brad Burt's Magic Shop. Source: <http://www.magicshop.com/mask.htm> 11 November 2002.
13. Bracher, 'Psychological and Social Functions' p. 107.
14. Bracher, 'Psychological and Social Functions' p. 109.
15. Nestor A. Braunstein 'Con-jugating and Playing-with the Fantasy: The Utterances of the Analyst' in *Lacanian Theory of Discourse*, ed. Mark Bracher, et. al. (New York and London: New York University Press, 1994) pp. 151-159.
16. Braunstein 'Con-jugating' p. 157.
17. Jacques Lacan, 'Aggressivity in Psychoanalysis' in *Écrits: A selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan, (Tavistock/Routledge, 1977) p. 10.
18. Mark Bracher, 'Introduction', in *Lacanian Theory of Discourse*, ed. Mark Bracher, et. al. (New York and London: New York University Press, 1994) pp. 8-9.
19. George A. Akerlof, 'The Market for "Lemons": Quality Uncertainty and the Market Mechanism', *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, Volume 84, Issue 3 (August, 1970), p. 489.
20. Akerlof, 'The Market for "Lemons"' p. 489.
21. Akerlof, 'The Market for "Lemons"' p. 488.
22. Akerlof, 'The Market for "Lemons"' p. 490.
23. Akerlof, 'The Market for "Lemons"' p. 495.