

SLEIGHT OF HAND

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Around about 1843, Robert Houdin, one of the most famous conjurers of his time, met the Count of Escalopier, a wealthy noble and enthusiastic patron of everything that had to do with mechanics. In those days, Houdin was elaborating a project that he had reflected upon for a long time, which consisted of the fabrication of what he called the "Theatre of Fantastic Sessions", which later would come to be known as the "Fantastic Theatre". After the count had come to learn about the magician's project, he offered him the necessary funds to carry it out. Yet the illusionist showed a certain reticence to accept the offer, as he did not know how he would be able to pay back the loan, expressing doubts and offering constant excuses before the count's eagerness to go ahead with the project. As the count could find no way for Houdin to accept the loan, he decided to present him a domestic problem that had been worrying him for a good while, in the hope that the illustrious magician could find a solution and, in the meantime, establish a point of mutual trust. The count explained the problem to him in the following terms:

"For more than a year now someone has been taking large sums of money from my secretaire. As I have no idea whom to suspect, I have interrogated one by one all of my servants; I have taken all of the precautions and security measures you can imagine: guards, change of locks, traps on the doors, and so on. But nothing has been able to stop the continuation of the theft. This very morning, I have just learnt of the disappearance of two one thousand franc notes. Just think, added the count, of the horribly difficult situation my family has been put in; whoever the thief is, if we might judge by his energetic audacity, he could, if we catch him in the act, assassinate whoever is in his way to save himself. So then, couldn't you find a way to discover or capture this audacious crook?"

-"Monsieur", answered Houdin, "you know perfectly well that my magical power does not go beyond my fingertips, so that in the case at hand, the truth is that I don't see how I can be of any help to you."

–"What is it that you cannot do?", replied the count. "Don't you have a powerful ally in mechanics?"

–"Mechanics?... Listen," said Houdini, "you've just given me an idea. Quite so, I recall that once when I was in school, with the help of a rather primitive machine, I discovered a little pilferer who impudently took from me my student's stipend. With this as a starting point I could perhaps combine a few pieces. Let me think about it; tomorrow you will have my answer".

The fantastic world of sleight of hand and conjuring, of illusion and trickery; a universe of hidden strings and loud exclamations of more or less expected surprise. It is not by chance that we are going to speak of something that awakens a certain aesthetic melancholy, with those gentlemen in their tuxedos, those nightmarishly kitschy stage presentations, flimsily dressed ladies aiding the magician in depressing little theatres able to incarnate the play of hallucinating gazes, where the ideas of seduction, katharsis, power and spectacle speak of our very own mechanisms as communicating beings.

It might aid us to speak of power and its weapon, the spectacle, of the machinations that make the questions that seem so natural to us be nothing more than exercises in suggestion, set out by somebody who already has the answers. And, of course, we are also going to speak of heresies, for among conjurers there is no greater heresy than to speak of the tricks outside of the professional trade.

The magician Houdin, as we have said, decides to help the count in his attempt to discover the thief that steals from this desk. (We might note that Houdin does not know that the story of the secretaire is in fact a bait to draw the magician, by way of solidarity, into collaboration with the count: a deft trick on the count's part). Houdin, evidently, finds the way to track down the crook. An indelible ink which, after a few strings are pulled, stains the skin, stigmatizing whoever is marked by it: "The easiest thing in the world", the French magician exclaims. "The catch consists in arranging a number of short sharpened points, in such a way as to form the word 'thief'. These points are hidden inside a cushion, doused with silver nitrate. When the thief touches the cushion, which he cannot avoid doing, the needles mark an indelible scar that stays for life. A fleur de lis

engraved with a hot iron by a torturer would not be more effective." Finally, faced with the count's uncertainty to apply such a measure, Houdin alters the mechanism in part to provoke only a temporary mark. The crook, who turned out to be Bernard, the count's chamber servant, admitted that he had stolen some 15,000 Francs once discovered. Houdin accepted this quantity as the count's gratification which helped him to initiate his surprising feats as an illusionist.

From the start, we find ourselves with a double position of the conjurer's identity: on the one hand, he is a skilled mechanic able to construct the most amazing things, while on the other he enthusiastically chooses to design a plan by which he is able to control the behaviour of a determined person. Thus the magician represents the will to create an illusion, while at the same time creating a strategy to repress another illusion. On the one hand, he invents numerous phantasmagoria which amaze the public, pulling out rabbits, turning rope into sticks, vomiting eggs, while on the other hand he spends his time chasing someone who, thanks to the use of trickery, traps and secrecy, steals money from the secretaire of a count. One practice is legitimated to delegitimize the same practice. What is the difference, then, between the strategy of the magician and that of the thief? That one publicizes it and the other does not. And their goals, to be sure, their goals. The slippery Houdin seems to have them clear. Yet this we will see, we will see.

Conjuring is the art of sleight of hand. It is defined this way by a good number of the treaties that have been written on the theme. According to them, sleight of hand means carrying out concrete actions with results that are not determined by the previous knowledge of the mechanisms used in their elaboration. This creates what is called illusion; that is, an unreal effect derived from the impossibility to apply a logical judgement to what one is seeing because we do not know how it is being done. Thus, we discover that magic is an exercise in technology and faith, based on the suppression of the necessity to know the details, to know the small print in the contract, for in it is based the essential foundation of the state of consciousness in the field of representation, of the social projection through images and their theatricalization.

We might anticipate some of the strategies that the magician uses when carrying forward this fantastic world of tricks and appearances.

In illusionism, the principal essence of every number is the opacity of the trick, the secrecy of the mechanism. The magician awaits the possibility to persuade the public of a determined action through its result, not of the means by which they are achieved. In the same presence of the effect the trick is assumed, so that it is left in the realm of the evident and the obvious. What is hidden is made evident, but not visible. The conjurer achieves certain results, some effects that are completely unbelievable, yet it is through their staging, "normalized" in the spectacle, that the spectator comes to observe the act with certain belief. In reality, it is the expectation generated by the effect that is going to come, which attains a "plausible" value, something evident, certain of the result. In short, it is the fact that we already know that something strange and unpredictable is going to occur that allows the act to be successful. In illusionism there does not exist the perception of confusion, nor of contradiction. Given that we already know what is happening and that we know beforehand what surprises await us, persuasion is produced in a total degree of consensus, thanks precisely to it being found in the realm of representation, limited within the frame of the stage.

The mechanisms, the machinery, are hidden to our eyes; it is the principal insurance that the magician possesses, through which he acquires a persuasive value. If he makes the trick known, the magic disappears entirely: the mechanisms are hidden to offer an objective and highly technical discourse accessible to whoever is prepared within the field. Our participation occurs in function of an invitation to legitimize the actions that are produced before us, in the same way that the illusionists invites someone to come up onto the stage from the audience to participate in an act, so that it seems that everything that occurs is subject to a common law, applicable to everyone. The invited subject justifies and ensures the veracity, the lack of tricks of the magician, as well as the supposed objectivity of the public.

In this sense, it is interesting to observe how the magicians themselves write respectfully of what they call the forced choice, that is, to make the spectator believe that he is acting and choosing freely when in reality we are dealing with a simple strategic game of the theatrical manipulator for the sake of forcing a decision that fits with their own designs. We find written in a conjurers manual:

"In order to make the public understand that the games being carried out are not prepared beforehand, the artist allows that many times one might chose between two objects to determine which one of them has to be used to complete the trick. In these cases there is the need to force choice".

The magician explains how to turn a spectator invited up on stage into a complice in a determined act, choosing what the magician desires without it being evident, making him believe that he has chosen freely. In reality, this is done through a rapid and deft sleight of hand, difficult to detect. And this not only affects the complice but the observing public as well, which has to be persuaded that the act is being done with total transparency. This is the reason why someone from the audience goes up on stage! After explaining various tricks to help "guide" the free choice of the public, concretely in a trick with a ring between two scarfs, we are told how to persuade the public if there is a danger of being discovered: "The spectator is afraid to insist in his disagreement so as not to displease those present, and when the artist asks if the scarf that is left is the one he has chosen to carry out the number, the answer teased out of him, in a more or lessed forced fashion, tends to be yes. In this way the artist can continue the number without worry".

The strategy consists in introducing the public into the world of the scenography through a concrete spectator who is asked to take part in an act. This is not done simply to make him or her a participant in the illusion, on an individual level, but to convert him or her into the prism through which the audience arrives to the phantasmagoria. What is made public, seen under lights, generates the legitimation of the lie. The spectator who is appealed to "is afraid to insist in the denial so as to not cause displeasure among those present"; in other words, how many people up on stage would dare to expose the magician if the secrets of the trick had been picked up? This spectator confirms the supposed reality of the stage scene, granting it the guaranty of "believability". In programmes of trials and court scenes emitted on television, for example, an absorption of the spectator occurs in the course of the trial, to the point that through the mass media the spectator comes to influence the true development of the deliberations and the sentences. The mechanisms, in this case, are made available to the visual client, but with the concealed

effect of attaining certain influences of public opinion during the processes: "Not only are the accused and the members of the court modified in the alteration of the staging, changing their behaviour on the set, but the spectator as well, who in becoming 'public opinion' (more than just a citizen who desires informational transparency) feels 'as if' he makes up part of the process".

The strategy does not stop here, however. In fact, the fusion of the spectator with the scenography is also meant to ensure that he or she becomes an "effect" within the operetta, as if just another mechanism, a recondite resort waiting to be activated. The creation of this effect is projected to gain the public's predisposition to see everything, including the spectator on the stage, as virtual. Both the trick and the effect are virtual phenomena. The reality of the scene is thus suspended in an paradoxically continuous interregnum, perfectly applicable for those seeking consensuated, acritical states of consciousness.

Before the television screen, we watch O.J. Simpson's vehicle being chased by the police in real time. It almost seems it is happening in slow motion. Yet incorporated into the image as well are the "in situ" spectators, along the freeway, watching the vehicle go by. A hyper-Baroque visual drama that introduces the spectator into the very scene, conferring it believability, and as a consequence legitimacy. Yet legitimacy of what? Of the spectacle itself. Why is it that there is an audience in TV shows like contests, debates, and others? Without the public, they would be less real.

It is not at all strange to observe how in the Baroque, for example, a period where the concept of illusionism begins to define itself from a modern perspective (that is with a mechanistic life economy), the idea of introducing the spectator into the visual machinery becomes the quintessential communicative strategy. A strategy that is shared both by the interests of the artists –in their search to find other readings and views which distanced themselves from the central and moral image of perspective of Renaissance humanism– as well as by the social and political elites of the moment, and more concretely by the Catholic Church after the Council of Trent, held from 1545 to 1563.

Baroque techniques (and we are not referring to the Baroque in the sense of exaggeration or hyperbole, but because we are speaking of something created intrinsically in that moment, and assumed since then in

many political discourses) are in our day the most successful rhetorical mechanics in programs designed by public institutions when representing reality and establishing fields of political production. The entrance of the spectator onto the magician's stage, or the interest, for example, of the Baroque Roman papacy –through Berini– to symbiotize the spectator into institutional stagings, have in our day their correlations in daily phenomena that are ever-present among us: the canned laughter and applause on TV shows, for example; or, to cite another popular case, surveys or opinion polls. In a great number of contests, comedies, and variety shows, perfectly placed previously recorded laughter, applause and shouting is heard, constituting a kind of behavioural plot that substitutes our natural expression as spectators with codes that are difficult to elude and which in the meantime form part of the very structure of the emission. A few years ago CBS reported that a comedy without canned laughter is practically ignored by the public. According to the TV network, the public is so used to these interpretive dictates that, in a test carried out with two groups of 50 people, very few in the group that saw the series without pre-recorded laughter found the show entertaining. On the other hand, the group that saw the comedy the way it is normally emitted, found that it was funny and witty.

Hidden mechanisms, known only to the specialists that formalize an illusion which all of us are governed by. This is the norm we have set up so as to understand each other. Illusion, the effect of sleight of hand, is legitimized as an ambit where consensus can be found; it is good both for the magician and the audience. However, the control of the mechanism is only available to the already initiated, and it is essential that the trick not be known beforehand nor afterwards, for in this way the success of the phantasmagoria, its capacity to create expectation, is assured. Creating them, however, the magician carries out a graceful pirouette, because to the degree that the effect and the ambience created is predictable –even though we never know how it is done– the magic, something completely unbelievable, becomes believable, susceptible to be real, able to acquire certainty, normalcy, evidence. In short: if we are able to predict the appearance of a ghost again and again without knowing what its appearance is due to, then either we ourselves are magicians, or we are simply imbeciles.

"What ever it is, if, in our day, comments often refer to swindlers or impostors, launderings or varied traffic, seldom or never mentioning the unexplainable or the incredible, in other words, the simple truth has escaped unnoticed. It was true, and nobody had realised it. Why? Because it was true. Of pure veracity, not mixed with any falsities that could have become truths."

Is it possible then that we are illusionists who do not know the rules our acts are performed by? In the ambit of representation this is where power unfolds its great rhetorical exercise, for it is the only place where it is possible to make us participants without fear of wanting to know why. Public institutions, through the mass media and other techniques of social representation, seek above all to convert us into a substantial part of their programs of political implementation, for the dominance of the spectator is based on the absence of questions, in the absence of previous knowledge of the strategy employed. We are magicians, because the social and economic elites want us to feel like we are, so that it is impossible for us to distance ourselves from the same illusions that are continually shown to us. The absence of questions, nevertheless, tends to introduce more questions. The spectacle is more of a sibylline than a simple recreation of reality. Its true magnetic nucleus lies within the spectator, answering the questions that turn up, the whole game becomes legitimate. Without the entire game, the spectacle is impossible. The spectacle is not simply a circumstantial technique, but in fact "a whole world", as Debord said. An autonomous, self-referential world which at the same time is obliged to stay within its own confines. "At last we have made a world that fits you; now don't turn it down", could be its favourite slogan.

The conjurer, like the social programmer, seeks above all to close the ambit of the discipline within its own walls, in order to escape from the confusion of reality, the principal mortal enemy of institutional illusion. It has been observed that the complaints of crazy people are always interpreted as symptoms of their craziness, which has lead to an extraordinary deafness before the messages of those who are considered to be abnormal or different. This point is rather illuminating in regards to the perception that power has had and sustained with respect to criticism or actions taken against the rules imposed from above. Criticism has been

and is still seen as something belonging to whoever criticizes, not susceptible to affect other unrelated areas. Critical language, that other language that brings to light and questions the existing mechanisms meant to impose value judgements and generic realities, is acceptable to the degree that it represents or describes a different planet, a cosmos, a universe of signs that thanks to its own existential autonomy is read as endogamic, and thus useless when wishing to cross borders to challenge power. It is justly the specialization of each discourse, the disciplinary concept of each universe, which serves as the legitimating basis for power in dictating that it cannot be affected by other discourses. The same occurs in psychiatry: the mentally ill person, when he or she complains, does so because of his or her illness. Thus the capacity of dialogue between doctors and patients is blocked in the name of the reason of one of the parts, not of both. Criticism made against the established mechanisms of control, social relation and consensus, is labelled as a symptom of its own critical and destructive capacity, and not as a legitimating discourse in itself, able to offer new readings even though they come from different sites from those set out in the menu of the possible.

The discourse of contemporary power is based on the premise that each ambit should strictly affect what concerns it. Each discipline is created to settle its litigies in the area previously assigned to it; if it goes over its own boundaries, one then speaks of dysfunction, unproductivity, overlapping of tasks, and so on. During the last great stockmarket crisis at the end of the last decade, all of the analytical commentaries about how to correct the errors that caused the problem dealt with technical areas or security mechanisms. What had happened –or so all of the financial specialists and technicians seemed to agree– was that certain aspects were not protected from their neighbours enough, so that something going wrong would quickly provoke the famous international domino effect. Oddly enough, as a measure to prevent catastrophes all of the studies focussed on the attainment of mechanisms that could limit an interconnected reality, seeing it as something confused, adisciplinary. It is not inconvenient to recall that the military origins of Internet at the end of the 60's derived from the same premise: how to achieve a situation where communications would not be cut in the case of atomic collapse; how to

avoid the demolition of the system by protecting each area from its neighbouring area.

Truth has been constructed as an inaccessible space, subject to a reserved right to be served. Given that there are no truths, and that truth is an unattainable value, the attainment of certain levels of certainty supposes its protection and immediate isolation. The curtains are closed; out of the desire to give the entire complex maximum security, mechanisms are created which at the same time are made irremediably secret and invisible. It seems impossible to think in global terms, since the system is set up so that different sections of the discourse and social practice might be protected from overloads, tensions, and unexpected visits.

In reality, the map of our political sociability is based upon a pattern that is very similar to that of a terrorist or guerilla group. Each individual that participates in the schemings of these groups is obliged to not know the identity of his or her companions, so that if someone falls into the hands of the enemy nothing of the apparatus can be revealed, nor can any clues be given to it. Our systems of social, economic, and political communication are based on the same structure: the better the systems protect one another, the lesser the danger for the general system overall.

But at the same time, in a automatic folding Berninian exercise, the system survives because it is intimately connected. The trend of the information and the technology is its ubiquity, its capacity to make a connection and interaction. Fulfilment of desires, “the immediacy of implementation” as the military and economists say, assured thanks to the mobility that provides the technical resources, the mechanisms. The facts are connected and in such “being everywhere”, it is legitimised and they acquire an added value. The interaction, and its velocity, are scattered as if these were true laws of transparency, and thus the perfect vaccine to battle secrecy. Therefore, the modern methods of communication, through means of the new technological information, have created new political space in its relation with secrecy and lying. All of sudden, it seems that there is no space for that which is hidden, for secrecy, or for suspicion. The transparency, the immediacy of information are transforming our concept of what is public. Private and public seem to have united in a superior state which takes first place in general access, the availability of

instant knowledge. Today, TV programs flood us with the unique purpose to show us in the raw the lives of people, some defined as public (professional showmen) and other are described as private (life stories, domestic videos, reality shows). On the other hand, the maximum value of the public information is to be at the scene of events as soon as possible, at the murders, in war. If a determined political event occurs (political party conference, a secret political meeting, a rumour) successful information is defined by obtaining privileged information of the aforementioned, from informants, recorded conversations, etc. Transparency becomes a superior value which simulates the drawing of a heavy curtain to uncover that which is secret. Transparency is supposed to be the system's fundamental element, based on the publicity of the mechanisms that assure at the same time a control of the main purpose. So, for example, the verdict of the jury that judged Mikel Otegui (supposedly ETA terrorist who was absolved of killing some cops) was revoked by a Superior Court because it assessed "a valid defect of having abstained from concisely explaining the motives for his conviction" in the time of emitting the verdict. The problem the court detected was defined as a mere question of clarity, transparency.

What is curious about appearance is that the reality is other but without becoming any different from itself.

The protection of some areas in respect to other ones (this is, justification of maintaining secrecy as a form of political survival in a system united, apparently, with the law of transparency) also promotes larger amounts of movement when it comes time to avoid the supposed laws of conduct, such as location, surveillance, and control of offenders, are much more complicated to execute. It is not a coincidence, then, to see how a phenomena like Internet makes determined centres of decision nervous, to deal with an open structured system where the automatic regulations do not influence upon the character of the message that is being emitted. But this nervousness does not stem from the other existing voices, perhaps different from one's own regulations, but by the access of those that derived the assumed secrets from public access, as in the case with Internet

Whoever has infiltrated without a previous appointment and leaves to tell what he has seen in the restricted world of such mechanisms, very

often receives the label of heretic. The curtain is retired, revealing the object that has been held in secret. Even though in the end it does not have so much to do with revealing the secret, but with the reason why it was a secret in the first place.

To the degree that the conjurer appeals to his own field and the concrete knowledge of his professionalism, justifying itself in the practiced trick, only able to be carried out from the precise technique that only he knows, the hidden mechanisms begin to be legitimized in their obscurity and privacy. We know the trick, so that only with difficulty can we carry out a criticism of illusion, of the effect, beyond the simple fact of saying that it is simple, or that it has been seen before.

It is worth observing how the worst criticism a magician could receive is one based on the idea that the trick has been seen before. That is, if we observe the trick, then the act is no good. This leads us to think that the whole show of the magician is based on the audience's insistence on not knowing the hidden mechanism, for when it is seen, the result is not valid, it is not believable. A suggestive paradox, when believability is the condition of what could be credible or certain. The objective or goal of illusionism is the trick, because it is based on and legitimized in the necessity of secrecy for the mechanisms used to attain it. The spectacle, then, promises the attainment of an illusory reality that maintains the vision valid even though infringed, wiping out the possibility to know why it is produced and that it is necessary. As we are dealing with an illusion, the necessity to wonder about this necessity disappears. (Power knows perfectly well that it is impossible to create an idea of consensus where the majority is made to participate, and thus legitimate their own actions and decisions, without adopting social forms of communication that offer a justifiable veneer of union and common identity. Here then lights of the spectacle enter into play).

Public institutions, as a body of mechanisms programmed under Kant's premise to "act in a way so that what they do is what everyone would do" –the premise of "common good"– seem to have found a functional response to the question of legitimacy: given that it is impossible to designate a fundamental truth applicable to a great number of stratas, they opt to offer a reality where everything might be possible, that is a superimposed reality that could be controlled, varied at will, and

submitted to the designs of a reduced group of programmers, to whom we have ceded this task precisely. This new reality needs two basic fundamentals to install itself in society, in real life: the first is to dote itself with a supposed vital experience it can be legitimated by, that is, arouse its necessity, create a desire for it; the second is to construct it in such a way so that it might respond to believable, credible stimuli. These two norms, which are key to socially justify the mechanisms of control, make up the reality of the spectacle. In this virtual reality, in this world of representation, the causes and effects do not respond to any kind of real premise, but solely to the conditions dictated by pure illusion. It is precisely because we do not see the cogs, strings, and pulleys that generate spectacle, that illusion might be sustained.

Very frequently a phenomenon occurs that in reality constitutes the very essence of what we are commenting upon. Before the virtual spectacle, advertisements, television, technology applied to communication or politics, we might say, by way of critical commentary: "Well, we know what's up. It is obvious and evident that we are dealing with a false, unreal world." This assumption about what is considered obvious is precisely the desired effect of the spectacle, and for institutions of social conjury. Illusion seems evident without knowing what the mechanisms that produce them are. We take as real, certain, and obvious, something that does not show its own configuration, something that exists thanks to its total lack of transparency: just like the magician. We have here the fundamental contradiction we find ourselves in: we want magic because we do not see the trick. The non-vision of the trick is its nucleus and base, but it is also the very basis of the social desire of spectacle. The nexus of union between both of them is the same idea of the evident. The disconfiguration of this evidence is the last thing that a magician would want to see.

But there is something else. The illusionist acts under a fundamental premise: he is conscious that the mechanisms can be perceived from a moral view. This occurs because the public is fully conscious of the necessity to keep them hidden, so that the trick might be a success. If they are shown they enter into the terrain of the perceptible, of what can be shared, of what is moral, criticable, so that the secrecy of the mechanism

might adopt a new dimension: the justification of the error, because error is nothing but the visibility of the trick.

A trick is bad only when it is seen.

The propaganda of what is not seen

The magician is fundamentally a propagandist. A propagandist in the modern sense of the term, coined for the first time by the Catholic Church in 1633 when it founded the Congregatio de Propaganda Fide: propagate, plant cuttings for their multiplication. That is, to obtain the establishment of a determined idea in certain places, which in this way is legitimated for later generalization.

Thus the conjurer is a propagandist inasmuch as he conjures a certain perception among the audience, and especially in a few members, who serve as transmitters for the rest of the audience. When the invited person goes up on stage, he too becomes the spectacle. This helps the magician entertain himself; but above all it makes him into a medium; a functional board against which the potential critical charge of the spectator might be directed.

When we watch a hypnosis act on television, the attention is projected essentially towards the people subject to the test and not onto the character of the strategy used. The person is thus converted into a theatrical character. However, to determine the goodness or effectivity of the narcotic session, this character must be real, innocent, and not make up part of the "show", in the same way that the judgment of a witness is measured by his or her impartiality. This trustworthiness or believability as an innocent subject, is the prism through which we construct the value of quality, certainty and truth of the act in question. The paradox consists in the fact that his or her function on the stage is like that of any actor: to interpret a role, even though the role is to not have a role. For this reason he or she is there, wearing street clothes, with that everyday face.

Hypnotists and illusionists play with the psychological consumption of the person invited onto stage from the audience. Given his innocence and his willingness to submit himself as an objective channel for the gaze, the magician uses him as bait to be devoured, to the degree that he is set

before the public as the person who is ultimately responsible for the legitimacy of the magician. "True life" TV programs, or the omnipresent reality shows, project subjects who acquire this dimension because they are cited to objectivize a situation, while at the same time being incarnations of it. Their absorption is the mechanism the propagandist or illusionist protects himself with.

We might see, for example, the "suffering" derived from the observation of the character submitted to the test. The subject, unaware of the tricks and hidden resorts, makes us "suffer" because his public descent is our appetite's goal. More than one director of thriller films, when referring to the theme of suspense, has noted that the secret consists in telling the spectator where the bomb is, but not letting the characters in the story know: "if things were not like this, we would create a one second fright instead of 90 minutes of anxious expectation and bated breath".

In the audience, at home –now no longer considered separate spaces from the stage– we observe the spectacle of the hidden through the disappearance of the real.



We find ourselves for a moment on the Ramblas of Barcelona. A familiar image at the end of the day is a group of people gathered around an improvised table, made out of a cardboard box: we are speaking of the famous street swindlers. Over the box, a man quickly and deftly moves three little cubes. In one of the cubes there is a little ball, a chickpea, or whatever might be at hand. The game involves guessing where the chick pea is, following the rapid movements of the manipulator. Around the table, a few people bet, quite often winning. The leader of the game urges the betters to keep on playing; the bills pass ostentiously from hand to hand. However, none of the players is real. All of them form part of the group of swindlers. If an unaware pedestrian stops to observe the show, what he will see are players, in principle as innocent as he, who are quite simply making money with great ease. If finally he decides to play, it is quite probable that he will win –that they let him win– the first time or even the first few times. Yet inevitably he will lose money in the following

games. For this reason, an innocent player is never allowed to go on for too long, nor are innocent players ever allowed to watch other innocent players playing, for after losing money one is especially sensitized to the need to uncover the trick or secret, something which could scare off other potential players.

What is the decision of the pedestrian to play or not due to, if it is not that he has seen another "safe" person he can rely on? One of the most fundamental aspects of the scam, if not the key, is the construction of innocence, the ability to make innocence as believable as possible. In this sense too, swindlers are propagandists, establishing a believable chain of promotion –something plausible– in order to reach an ulterior state (or person) they can benefit from. With certain variations in 'ethical' hierarchy, this could also be perfectly well applied to the world of lotteries, and casino betting.

We could keep tugging on this discursive string (the magic pun is intended). When a passer-by chooses to participate in the game he does so in function of the perceived benefits of the situation: make money with minimal commitment. He decides to play because the situation (created with deception, as we have seen) indicates that there are real possibilities of winning. That is, to the degree that the lie is not revealed, the capture of innocent players is possible. Though this might be obvious, it signifies the most intrinsic feature of the conjurer's game, and of the spectacle's illusion: the lie is the most efficient procedure in propaganda and publicity, because when it succeeds it remains unnoticed.



We might define propaganda as the deliberate and systematic attempt to tame perceptions and direct behaviour in order to obtain a response in consonance with the intentional will of the emitter. We could add to this that the essence of all of the many possible methods employed is centered around the deliberately planned use of symbols, especially through suggestion and similar psychological techniques. Equally important is the fact that propaganda always moves within a determined sociocultural structure, without which its psychological and cultural aspects cannot be understood.

In propaganda, secrets and camouflage are the two axes upon which the operativity of the emitted messages are legitimized. Secrets become the necessary force that guarantee the success of the operation. Camouflage makes good the following dictum: it is good for infiltrations.

The knowledge of a secret turns into a power, and this power is jealously kept secret. In this way, the secret signifies a certain status of power and control; if we are dealing with magic, a type of direct and real knowledge that cannot be revealed to the public for the sake of establishing the success of the act; if we are speaking of politics, a policy appropriated in relation to the interests of a public institution; if we are dealing with the military, the need to maintain one's goals hidden to the enemy; or of the maintenance of a communicative believability, if we are moving in the field of media spectacles. In reality, the goal is to ensure that others do not come to know what you know; from this it can be inferred that more than hiding certain information, it is important that others know that you have something that they do not know. Machiavelli spoke of government as the knowledge and employ of the "arcana imperii" and the outwards public projection of this possession; but only of the possession, not of the content.

Politics and science have changed since Machiavelli. Before they were calm; they did not need to be entertained. In the heart of both of them rested the legitimacy of the common good, of the social mass for whose interest public institutions must acquire full autonomy. This autonomy is the fundamental value alleged in their external projection to justify its necessary security.

The deliberations of a council of ministers are subject to the oath of those present to not reveal a single word of what has been said; yet governments make a great effort in dauntlessly informing us of the derived results, in propagating them. During the Great Depression in North America in the 20's, for the first time large firms and special departments in big companies are created, destined to last *ad infinitum* for all of the Twentieth Century: public relations. They tried to convince the working masses about the goodness of brutal labour policies during a time of extreme tension. In politics, both legislative and administrative secrecy has always been bent at trying to make procedures secret; the results, that is, the laws, dictates, regulations, and so on, are of public interest. What is

important about the secret is not so much what it has that is hidden but its rhetorical force, its capacity of persuasion.

For their part, "men of science, incarnate promoters, try to make all of their discoveries 'clear', announcing them. Yet is is enough to think of all the great contemporary careers destined to discovery, to realize that any laboratory uses all of the its techiques 'to keep secret' and 'codify' so that the competing laboratory does not know what it is doing. As a result, for scientists the maximum secrecy of their operations and the maximum promotion of their results are obvious necessities".

Some of the great businesses of our planet are the world of (secret) patents and the names of (exclusive) pharmaceutical products.



The driving force of societies or groups that work in secret is the oath of loyalty to their fellow members, which at the same time is an oath to keep secrets. The oath radically alters social relations: it creates the most intense relation of faithfulness that can be imagined, which is at the same time the most radical and threatening relation with others. From the first moment that someone swears to share a secret he or she converts into someone able to betray it.

Treason only exists to the degree that someone "inside" might reveal the internal mechanisms. This is because treason is the betrayal of a secret and corruption is habitually secret, ceasing to exist when it is publically shown. The benefit of the secret of whoever possesses it consists in part in their being among the few that have access to the secret and among the few that might betray it.



Carl Hertz, a famous North American illusionist, wrote in his memoirs the following about the duty of the woman who accompanied him on stage: "An oath was pledged and a contract was signed, which converted Miss Emilie D'Alton into my assistant. A little later, in order to assure my secrets, if more assurance was possible, Miss D'Alton became Mrs. Hertz."



Daniel Ellsberg, an important ex-official of the State Department of the United States, made in 1973, before a hearing of the American Senate, one of the most revealing lectures about the idea and possible existence of secrecy in a democracy, in reference to the effect that the confidential information had in the hands of those who shared its access. Ellsberg, as if a magician one day decided to reveal his tricks, was immediately accused of heretic. Below are some passages:

"The Pentagon Papers... revealed to me, above all, a conspiratorial style in executive decisionmaking, a style that I was part of in the 12 years that I have worked with it. Why have our executive officials been led to act as if they are members of a conspiracy?

Perhaps I could cut through it best by just relating to you some advice I gave to a man who entered Government 4 years ago, and I might as well name him – Henry Kissinger – someone I had known academically or professionally for 10 years. It seemed to me it was appropriate to pass on some thoughts to him in advance and perhaps inoculate him against the transformation that I feared was going to come over this person. It was appropriate to do it to this person because I felt he was going to be initiated into the most esoteric and sinister parts of this system. He was not only going to have a top secret but perhaps a score or two score, for all I know, of the clearances higher than top of which I had held an even dozen when I worked as special assistant to the Assistant Secretary of Defense. ...

In December of 1968 in the Hotel Pierre... I said to him... 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. Moreover,

in signing agreements to have this information, you will come to understand that the only way of keeping secrets this well is to lie. A contract to observe these clearances, and these are essentially contractual agreements in the executive branch, conditions of employment, is a contract to lie; When I say lie, on the first hand, if you are asked if you have this clearance, you are not allowed to say, no comment. Your duty is to lie and say you do not have it. If you are asked about the contents, you are to lie and say you know nothing about the contents. If you are asked whether you have a particular piece of information, you must lie and say you do not. The effect of that is that you will have to lie and will succeed in lying and you will fool your former academic colleagues. You will discover, in collaboration with thousands of other executive officials all telling the same cover story, that it is easy to fool people. And that is what the President learns. In fact if I have learned one thing in 5 months in court, it is to respect the wisdom of allowing 12 ordinary citizens to be the judges of truth or honesty on the witness stand. I believe they are shrewd and extremely effective weighers of lying on that stand.... But you will find if any of you go into the executive branch, you will discover that given the benefit of the doubt that accrues to the President or anyone who works for him, it is easy to fool people. There really are secrets and they are very well kept. The notion that everything comes out in the New York Times is untrue. It is a cover story meant to keep people from prying too closely. You will learn as Kissinger would, as I told him, you will learn there are secrets that are very well kept, that people can, in effect be easily fooled if you work for the President....

The security system is an education in contempt for law, because you cannot be held accountable to law, at least we used to think we could not.... You are then beyond the law if you do the President's wishes, and the President is thought to be beyond the law. Moreover, you cannot be accountable to Justice or even the public if the secrets of your advice and your actions are bound to be well kept. You are safe from accountability. Contempt follows for the public that is so easily fooled, and that contempt is the death in that individual for the democratic spirit. Indeed, we cannot, our democracy cannot be served or guarded by people whose core belief is contempt for the democratic process and for the citizens who elect them

and to whom they supposedly are responsible. This was the image in my mind on the effects of secrets on a high level official; not the low level because mere top secrets don't have this effect, they are so low, so close to what you read in the New York Times... So you live in a different world of information. You come to think of yourself as a resident of a different world with different powers and responsibilities. As I say, I thought of that access like the potion that Circe gave Ulysses' men that turned men into swine, and made fools of them.

The secrets are kept not only by this conspiratorial type of honor among thieves, but by the entire apparatus of conspiracy and that is the last point I want to touch on here. I am saying, I have to reiterate, the secrets are better kept than you know. I have never met in 12 years a newspaperman... who could imagine how often and how easily he was lied to by my bosses. In the field of foreign affairs we have come to expect this from the President; it is his job and we don't need to know. The President shares that belief: That the public does not need to know and cannot be trusted with the information -- the two requirements of sharing information with him, in the regulations ... they have... an apparatus to keep these secrets even from their own secretaries... or their own deputies or wives, people who work closely with them.

If you had worked all your life with top secret material in the Pentagon for Assistant Secretaries, unless you were one of the elect, you would not be aware that there are entire rooms in the Pentagon with safe doors outside, with a guardian, with a computer list up to date hourly and daily as to who is admitted in that room, and unless you know the codeword and are on that list, you cannot enter that room or know of its existence. It will have a very nondescript door in the hall that will not suggest what is inside. You can go in that room and discover yourself in something like the reading room of the New York Public Library, not a closet, not a safe, but a room with charts, with library shelves of material, no word of which you were previously aware existed. You did not know how it was gotten. You did not know the President had this kind of information at all. Of course, the effect of that is very euphoric at first. You go around and take things off the shelves and begin reading and imagine

you are about to learn all the answers, that Godlike knowledge is now available to you. Now, you can be introduced into one of those rooms and still have no idea that there exist still other rooms with other sources of information, other access lists just as large and just as secret. I would say it is not until you have four or five such clearances, that the next level is revealed to you. Then you become aware that there is no limit to this; that these clearances can be generated very quickly in a day or two; and such types of information can be segregated – I am not saying only from the public or Congress, but even from other people who have two or three other clearances – very effectively.

Once you have a dozen, from then on, you live in the knowledge there must be others you don't have. Could there be clearances the President doesn't know about? Of course, certainly, without any doubt... Could it, however, be withheld from him? The answer is 'Yes,' and even by close associates. Top Secret, you have heard in testimony, top secret is accessible to 400,000 to 500,000 people... Comint clearance is far more secret, far more sensitive. Members of Congress or their staffs... can't be trusted, but... 120,000 sergeants, warrant officers, generals and Cabinet secretaries can. The next clearance above that cuts way down to about 14,000 to 20,000. What I am saying is that the world of secrets is lived in by a very large number of people, though a very small part of our electorate and only one branch of our Government. Henry Kissinger lives in a much smaller world, a world that for some pieces of information might be inhabited only by a couple of people... 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...' But I am saying, as many as 100,000 or 400,000, nevertheless keep secrets very well because of this apparatus of conspiracy, special channels, special couriers for each clearance. The couriers for one clearance do not know the existence of the other ones. Special briefings, special access lists, special libraries, each separate, the apparatus of an espionage ring; a Government that consists of cells but with the President at the top. Certainly when I say there are clearances that the President may not know of, I say that only to make a point. The more important point is, the President does know virtually all this... "



"Among us we must speak frankly, but we will never speak of this publically . . . and I am referring to the destruction of the Jews". (Heinrich Himmler, in Posen, October, 1943).

"There are certain things that should not been done in the name of the state, but if they do occur, it is better to shut them up". General Sáenz de Santamaría, former director of the Guardia Civil, Radio Nacional de España, 1995.

Authorized opinions that bring us to succulent pickings, which in his day understood Henry the 8th of England himself. This king ordered the construction of a hall called the "Sub-Rosa Room" (sub-rosa, in Roman times, meant a secret or confidential oath). In it a reduced number of people loyal to the monarch could freely express their opinions, with the need to resort to the decorum typical in the world of the court, yet under the promise that they would never reveal the content of the conversations held therein. The questioning of the mechanisms is possible only if it does not transgress the fundamental norm of illusion, that is, its incommunicability. If the mechanisms are criticized it should occur within the particular ambit that has previously been designated for this purpose. In our time, the decisions made in boardrooms, in the advisory committees of museums, in government cabinet rooms, among others, are legitimized because in the name of the supposed public good –an illusion of illusions, the essential dogma in the "Fantastic Theatre" of sleight of hand– the mechanisms are left to technicians and the appropriate people responsible for them. Their very secrecy is based on the fact that criticism should correspond to the established parameters of acceptable criticism, that is, that which is expressed without the knowledge of what has really been decided, which is why it might easily be tagged with comments like: "Well, you don't know what you are talking about. Let those who do understand do their work". Criticism is only acceptable when it occurs from within the institutional office, for it is their that one really knows what one is talking about.

It is perhaps in technology where the phenomena shows us the most perfect political form. Technology imposes respect, a distance, due to its competence and complexity, and at the same time fascinates and seduces its suprisingly rapid and positive world. So, this respect corresponds to the technicians and managers that manage this complexity, while the fascination is transferred to the spectator, now incorporated in the scene as “user”, who legitimises all of the mess, due to his enjoyment “ like a monkey”, placed by a responsible individual on a cable access channel of Spanish television. Public goods exist to satisfy citizens and technology offers a perfect paradise, because it never ends. There is always more.



The magician only accepts self-criticism. And if we follow his own scale of values, he is certainly right. Perhaps it is here where the seduction arises when we find out about someone who is keeping a secret. That within that world he or she is vulnerable. For this reason, to enter into it is what the magician wants of us. With interest. And with enthusiasm. The enthusiasm which shows who holds a secret when it comes time to build its own appearance is the philosopher’s stone of the spectator. “The spectacle has made secrecy triumph and it should always remain in the hands of secrecy specialists”.

Therefore, the institutions that direct the common good and elaborate consensus show the effects of their acts but not the mechanisms that they move by. To this one might reply that we do know the mechanisms of social action of institutions, given that they are written, measurable and objective; there are laws, documents, norms, and so on, that are not so easy to ignore, without forgetting the fact that we are the ones that write them, fulfill them and improve them, backing up their pertinency and legitimacy. However, we have proferred ourselves a social culture where the strategy of projection of power seeks its legitimation not so much in transparence, which is more and more difficult to avoid, but in individualized specialization. "If I only know about what pertains to me, I will have little responsibility for what everyone else does". The system remains intact and isolated. If each of us is implicated in the law of the concrete, in the universe of the catalogue of human signs, it will be easier

to establish control on the basis of this individual and supposedly respectful participation in one's own identity.



Derrida, not too long ago, has remembered that the outstanding part of lying (mechanism that protects secrecy) is never its content, but the intention to lie. Lying is not something that opposes truth, but rather finds itself in its purpose: in the vector that separates what someone says from what they think during their discursive actions with others. What is decisive, therefore, is the harm that it causes to the other, without it, lying would not exist. This harm –we sum up– is based on hiding the main reason of the discussion from who is speaking. Without this reason, the other one, the one that listens in this case, is lacking elements of judgement in order to establish an interpretation freely. The success of lying is when the final result is in tune with the opening discussion; it is not necessary to know the underlying purposes of the transmitter –and perhaps the receiver– to establish credibility.

It would seem clear that freedom of choice (in Greek *hairesis*, the source of the word *heresy*) assumes the full appreciation of all existing alternatives. Yet a common characteristic to all types of propaganda is that it tries to deliberately limit our choice, whether eluding arguments (the pithy declaration of a sole point of view in exclusion of all others) or making an emotional and non-objective criticism of the other and its opinions, by way of caricatures, stereotypes and others, as for example in ventriloquism.

The conjurer tries to control the audience's reactions by way of certain techniques that augment believability, giving the spectator the sense that he or she is free to choose between different possibilities, in a completely natural manner, following common sense. In this way, the magician situates his action in the realm of the "logical", of consensus, so that illusion is backed up by *versosimilitude*. This in turn leads to an odd sort of feedback; the spectators are manipulated so that the degree of illusion becomes something familiar and thus plausible; so that magic, at the cost of being something somewhat less extraordinary, might be more easily assimilated .

Hitchcock said that the key for suspense to work was its credibility. The more simple and everyday it is, the more authentic the danger.



To survey, to conduct market tests or opinion polls, suggests two things: the act of choosing (and evaluating), and the fact of playing (and eventually of betting). Both processes are related to a sort of magic. The person surveyed is introduced into the terrain of the general show, and exciting context that is both real and objective because he or she participates by adding will, like the audience member invited up on stage by the magician to verify the authenticity and believability of the act. To fill in certain questionnaires signifies participating in a sort of secret and unknown adventure, something eminently selective. What is more, this collective game adds a great component of individual identity against the majority, which is finally the alibi which is given to justify the result.

It occurs to me how fantastic it is that more and more opinion polls reflect a greater percentage of people who answer "Do not know/Do not respond".

The problem is that they too are represented.



The propagandist, like the magician on the stage, does not enter into genuine dialogue, as the answers are determined beforehand. Thus it is necessary to construct a series of questions whose most plausible answers are those that have been previously designated. To do this, the propagandist constructs a mediatized universe whose basic function is to project into the theatre the sensation of the importance of certain necessities and desires. Desires which are inherently subject to the replies that the magician has a priori set up.

Noone can create non-existent emotions; the propagandist, or the publicist, simply evokes those attitudes of the total spectrum that exist in the theatre and which fit into his designs, attitudes that could be innate but in general are socially acquired. the magician will want to arouse the

desire of something, with the goal of suggesting later that he is the only one who has the means to satisfy the desire.

The magician is the beloved fairy godmother of capitalism.



The possession of the secret, its use, obliges whoever has it to construct personal and social relations that exist in function of and in constant relation to the fact of concealment.

The world of propaganda is built to deny the evidence of the secret message that is transmitted. The techniques that the illusionist projects into the audience are not only meant to ensure the success of the trick but to distract the public from any attempt to guess the secret or to criticise. The magician carries out his manipulations in order that they not be seen. The best magician is the most agile, the one who best understands the rules of camouflage. To accomplish this, he uses a distracting ambience, one that amuses, situating the gaze of the spectator in a receptive state where the result is seen, but not even the smallest detail of the procedures are perceived.

The word "secret" in reality comes from an interpretation of the verb *secerno*, which means to separate, to put apart from. So, it is not strange that the conjurer does small theatrical deeds around the trick itself or delays the trick with jokes or parallel exercises. All told it ends up being a spectacle, with no other goal than that of distracting the public's attention from the essential, which is the secret itself. Separating reality (always remembering that it is *his* reality) from visual based on the declaration of secrecy, of its existence, not on its content.

A magician is always in movement, accompanied by background music. He is never still and lets no one else be still either. He needs our dull gaze. There is something of a myopic effect in his repertoire.

The ubiquitous Harry Houdini, perhaps the greatest illusionist of all time, who appropriated the name of his antecessor Robert, once wrote: "I have always been impressed by the ease with which pianists can read and play the most difficult pieces while looking at the music. I observed that, with practice, it would be possible to create a certainty of perception and an ease of pulsation, allowing the artist to deal with various things

simultaneously, while his hands were busy in the most complicated of tasks. This faculty is what I wished to acquire and apply with skill and dexterity. To be able to use this advantage and translate it to the public became primordial for me, for in this way I was able to ensure that the public was watching the movement of my hands".

The maximum condensation of movement is achieved when someone is invited up on stage. It is a long-awaited moment, something electric. We all crane our necks like when we were in Grade 8 Math class and the teacher called someone 'up to the board'. The moment of maximum suggestion.

This person is not there to ensure that everything is alright, but to give witness to the fact that the trick cannot be seen!



Lacking criteria of truth, the participants are no longer in condition to defend themselves. The events transmitted by the spectacle sit over the effect of unreality and hyperreality that is offered. The imaginary, the re-real, seems to no longer have a surplus value in the world of representation, becoming a reality in itself. Its debate, then, cannot be established via clear referents. Not in vain, one of the main arguments at home in front of the television concerns the reality or virtuality of what one is watching: if this or that is real or a set up; if it is a documentary or a fictitious representation; if it is performed in play-back or if the sound is live. Thus the arguments concern the content of the spectacle of the medium, what effectively allows the message in question to be pushed into the background, and even more that the message is perceived or the news piece received in function of its believability as a phenomenon of the spectacle.

General Schwarzkopf turned us all into fabulous magicians with our magic wand remote controls, flipping channels enthusiastically, making red electronic deserts appear on the screen, laser visions of nothingness, optical hallucinations that of course had nothing to do with death. In the end, the exercise involved making things disappear, and not making them seem like they had died.



A fundamental law of conjury and the spectacle in general is the anonymity of the receiver: the individuals that make up part of the audience remain personally unknown to the person communicating the act. Knowledge would take them too close to the trick with the resultant danger of its being found out. The spectacle requires a numerous public, which excludes all face to face interaction.

The street swindlers get "especially" angry when some player stays too close to the box after having played.



The spectacle exists so that we might see ourselves in it and be able to establish a direct relation between our representativity and the goodness of the medium as a carrier of this connecting function. The spectacle, however, offers the social paradise of representativity when, as a mechanism of suggestion, it is only able to project representability. The spectacle cannot be representative, for to do so would be to show its methods, its little clogged wheels. Something we will never allow.



It is not so much that some day we might have fifteen minutes of fame, but that we all have to enjoy and participate in the game of putting oneself under the lights before the public. The spectacle is founded to a great degree on psychophagy: the suggestion of a compulsive necessity to devour, to phagocytize another's psyche, even though it might only be an appearance.

It is perhaps for this reason that the spectacle is afraid of silence. From the start, it always believes that silence is conscious and voluntary, that it is an *emitted*, broadcasted silence, which is why it is worth repressing it, given that it denies the previously agreed upon communication in name of the community; it mocks it, laughing at the established system of dialogue. Yet silence could also be simply silence; a genre of discourse that moves in its own orbit and whose radio wave is not

found among the frequencies commonly in use, as if it were dreaming. There is silence because we cannot hear a thing. This silence is without a doubt much more heretic than the first. It is an *omitted* silence, as quite simply it ignores the system of representation, which is supposedly collective.

There are two things, according to magicians, that are especially odious in a theatre: that no one can hear them, and that there are hecklers in the audience. That is, that there are audience members who do not follow the protocol set out by the illusionist, people who simply are not interested in going along with the show. This presence is especially bothersome, as it cracks the very existence of the system, the essence of the spectacle.

One thing is to be against it, but another to simply not go: why should I be interested in the tricks if in the first place the show does not interest me?



Towards the end of his life the ever-agile Harry Houdini wrote in one of his diaries: "Don't lose confidence in an effect just because it has been done many times before. Simply make sure that your effects 'are the good ones'. And don't let yourself get tired of any of your numbers. Always keep up the enthusiasm! There is nothing more contagious than exuberant enthusiasm. Through it you will always have the audience in your hand."

The signed document between Houdini and his insurance company informs us that he did not contemplate any tape of "fate" in his profession. All danger was avoided through careful planning, but the feeling of danger was heavily projected upon the audience. This was his true insurance.



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