

Democracy, Secrecy and Dissidence in Contemporary Literature in English

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("Democracy, Secrecy and Dissidence in Contemporary Literature in English")

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This two-day international conference welcomes proposals on the interrelation between democracy, secrecy and the politics of transparency, in contemporary literature written in English. Our theoretical premise emerges from the dialectics between secrecy and disclosure as "a defining feature of the contemporary *Zeitgeist*" (Boothroyd 2011: 42; see also Horn 2011; Broeders 2016). As Jeremy Gilbert claims, "we live in an age of endless disclosure" (2007: 22), labeled as "the transparency society" in the influential book of the same title by Byung-Chul Han (2015). The theoretical work produced during the last two decades in the realms of sociology, political theory and cultural studies on the issue of secrecy coincides on the relevance of the tension between secrecy and transparency in contemporary capitalist societies, as information and data work as "an extension of commodification to subjective life itself" (Boothroyd 43).

In this context, secrecy often emerges as defying hegemonic modes of thought: "we can refashion secrecy as that which resists 'enclosing' hegemonic discourses rather than as a strategy that 'naturally' lends itself to, and aligns with, hegemony" (Birchall, 2011: 72). In the ideological alignment of the idea of total transparency with hegemonic discourses and totalitarian practices, the echo of Derrida's claims in *A Taste for the Secret* may be identified: "the demand that everything be paraded in the public square and that there be no internal forum is a glaring sign of the totalitarianization of democracy [...] if a right to the secret is not maintained, we are in a totalitarian space" (2001: 59). For these authors, the main social function to be attributed to the secret is that of exercising a resistance to total transparency, and is therefore expressed as a form of dissent or "controversary dissidence" (Wills 28). It is also on these grounds that an ethical dimension of secrecy can begin to be articulated, as ethics comes to be thought as the realm where the individual is confronted by an irreducible otherness, which may be identified with the secret.

In their search for times and places in which secrets are productive rather than repressive, authors like Birchall looks at the realm of aesthetics, and Horn suggests that literature may be the best field in which to analyze and explore the implications and workings of political secrecy. We aim at exploring the specific ways in which literature can be regarded as the exemplary realm where dissidence, resistance and secrecy are to be found. Such connection seems to work, we may tentatively argue, at two levels: 1) as the realm where dissidence and resistance may be expressed, where the ideas of freedom of expression and censorship come to play most explicitly, and where, as Derrida argues in *Given Time*, an individual may refuse to take responsibility for whatever he/she may have written; 2) as the realm where the impossibility of full disclosure in any aspect of human life is most visible, as the literary work is precisely one that never exhausts its interpretive potential in a given context, so that the singularity of the text (Attridge) is made evident in each and every reading. This involves the possibility to focus on secrets as "structuring devices", and on specific forms in which literary texts exert their right to secrecy, so that the thematic expression of secrets finds a suitable expression in narrative structure itself.

Hence, this CFP aims at attracting scholars who may want to explore the concept of secrecy and its connections to ideas of resistance, dissidence, democracy and transparency in contemporary literature, from two different but interrelated points of view: 1) Secrecy as a cultural, social and political dimension, and 2) The secret as a formal dimension of the literary text.

References

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- Gilbert, Jeremy. "Public Secrets: 'Being-with in an Era of Perpetual Disclosure". *Cultural Studies* Vol. 21, No. 1 (2007): 22-41.
- Han, Byung-Chul. *The Transparency Society*. Stanford UP, 2015.
- Horn, Eva. "Logics of Political Secrecy", *Theory, Culture and Society*, 28.7-8 (2011): 103-122.
- Wills, David. "Passionate Secrets and Democratic Dissidence". *Diacritics* 38.1/2 (2008): 17-22, 24-29.

We welcome proposals dealing with any of these topics and related ones as articulated in contemporary literatures in English. Please submit your **400-500 word abstracts** by **June 30th, 2022** to desedi@uco.es. Abstracts should include a short biographical note.

Selected papers will be considered for publication.

Confirmed keynote speakers

Prof. Clare Birchall (King's College London)
Prof. Sascha Pöhlmann (University of Innsbruck)

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