Module Title: Cultures of Secrecy

Module code: 7YYA0010
Department: English
Programme: MA American Studies

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Credit Level: 7
Credit Value: 20
Teaching period of module: Semester 1
Assessment pattern: 1 x 4000-word essay
Essay deadline: TBC

- Electronic copy to be submitted online through Keats.
In the contemporary U.S. and other liberal democracies there is a polarisation between ideals of transparency – borne out in legislation, freedom of information, surveillance and confessionary culture – and what we might call a secret sphere, an institutionalised commitment to covert security operations that exist beyond the public sphere. This module will consider the relationship between concealment and revelation in both cultural and political realms. We will apply sociological, literary and philosophical theories about the secret (and related concepts such as privacy, transparency, the public sphere), to case studies and cultural texts.

In terms of concealment, we may consider the image of the intelligence services in visual and literary culture, the U.S. classification system and practices of redaction, the secret rituals of sororities and fraternities at U.S. colleges, the occluding tendencies of neoliberalism (privatisation and outsourcing), and the social function of secret societies (from the KKK to the Freemasons). With regard to different forms of revelation, we will analyse the modern confessional mode as evident in talk shows, reality TV and blogs; the phenomenon of WikiLeaks and other acts of virtual transparency; and the prevalence of conspiracy theories on the Internet. By looking at a number of narrative fictions (literature, television, film, graphic novels) alongside historico-political cases, we will explore Tim Melley’s proposition that such fictions afford the public an essential opportunity to engage with and fantasise about the covert state. This module will address what is politically, ethically, socially and ontologically at stake in cultures of secrecy at the personal, national, and international level.
Reading
You will need a copy of Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*; and a copy of *The Circle* by Dave Eggers. Please allow enough time to read these novels.

Useful Books


I have also collated a number of online readings on secrecy and transparency at the following web address:

http://liquidbooks.pbworks.com/w/page/39188133/Transparency%20and%20Secrecy

As many of the weekly set readings as possible will be available in PDF form on Keats. Please download and print for your use. We will often refer to readings in seminars so please have them handy in digital form or hard copy.

Screenings
You are required to watch two films for this course: both of them are in the Maugham Library.
COURSE STRUCTURE

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Preparation
Each week will specify a number of set readings that will be available in digital form on Keats. These readings are compulsory. Whilst reading, you should make notes about how each text fits into 1) that week's theme; and 2) the wider questions we are asking. You should come to the seminar having things to say about the texts you have read.

You will be assigned a week to present on a secondary reading. You may choose any of the readings from the Further Reading to introduce and summarise. You should make links between the further reading and set reading and draw on real-world or cultural examples to illustrate your reading.

Several weeks require you to attend a screening. See the week by week course outline and make a note in your diary.

Some weeks require you to research a particular cultural phenomenon before the seminar. See the week by week course outline for details.

Assessment
You will need to choose a topic you wish to write on and propose an essay title. You can only proceed with an essay title/question once it has been agreed by me.

You are welcome to discuss ideas about your essays with me during my office hours or by appointment. I cannot, however, look at or edit first drafts of essays – this has to be your own work that emerges out of seminar discussions, independent thought and research, and a tutorial with me if requested.
**Material on Keats**

Keats is the name of an electronic facility on one of the university's servers. You will all have an account of the on the university’s computing system. All PowerPoint slides used in seminars, a copy of this course booklet, electronic copies of readings and useful links will be posted on Keats. You should login to Keats regularly to check if there is anything new there for you. You can use the discussion forum to tell your fellow students about relevant events or to simply continue the discussion. I will use the Keats 'News' facility to contact you during the course, so you must check your university mail regularly.
Week 1: Course Introduction

In this first seminar, we will try to define the secret and secrecy and explore why they are important concepts for understanding American culture and global relations.

Key Texts


Week 2: The Social & Psychological Functions of Secrecy

Secrets have been seen to be key to understanding how small communities and whole societies function, how relationships are formed, and how children develop a sense of identity. This week, we shall examine some of these functionalist readings of secrecy while thinking about sororities and fraternities and other secret societies. Take a look at the book, *Pledged* by Alexandra Robbins, for a journalistic description of life in a sorority if you're interested.

Key Texts


Further Reading

Psychoanalysis


Anthropology / Sociology


**Child Development**


**Organisation Studies**


### Week 3: State Secrecy

This week, we will think about the implications of secrecy neither in terms of personal psychological development nor group dynamics, but with respect to the state. Simmel’s study of secrecy (our reading for last week) and his concern with the distribution of information, is relevant again to our discussion, but here we are much more interested in state forms of power. We will try to think through the tension in liberal democracies between freedom of information and national security. How are state secrets managed and how does this position the citizen? What is the proper role of secrecy within government today? In preparation, look at the list of secrets on [https://bkofsecrets.wordpress.com/2009/01/17/68/](https://bkofsecrets.wordpress.com/2009/01/17/68/) and follow some of the links, making notes.

**Before this seminar, you should go to the Maugham Library and watch the following film:**

*Secrecy* – A Film by Peter Galison and Robb Moss; Library shelf mark: PN1995.9.D6 SEC

**Key Texts**


**Further Reading**


Week 4: The Covert Sphere & Mediated Spies

This week we will consider Tim Melley’s thesis that fictions afford the public an essential opportunity to engage with and fantasise about the covert state. He argues that ‘in an era of covert action, such fantasies are crucial vehicles of public half-knowledge’ (2012: 14). A central part of this fantasy is the image of the spy. The spy has become central to the way in which citizens imagine the relationship between secrecy and the state, and its trade in intelligence and information. In this session we will examine why the spy is an enduring figure even after the end of the Cold War.

Before this seminar, please watch Spy Kids (Rodriguez, 2001): in library or sometimes available online.

Key Texts

**Further Reading**


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**Week 5: Codebreaking: The Crying of Lot 49**

Codebreaking holds a special place in the spy fictions we discussed last week. In this seminar, we will be applying the metaphor of codebreaking to the practice of interpretation – interpretation of both words and the world. What happens when we approach cultural or literary texts like codes to be cracked? What limits are there to hermeneutic practice? Does paranoia interfere with or enhance the ability to read postmodern landscapes? We will be thinking about these questions through Thomas Pynchon's novella, *The Crying of Lot 49*.

**Key Texts**

  [http://www.ottosell.de/pynchon/magiceye.htm](http://www.ottosell.de/pynchon/magiceye.htm)

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**Further Reading**


Cooper, P. *Signs and Symptoms: Thomas Pynchon and the Contemporary World*. Berkeley: University of California Press.


[You will find many more books and articles on Pynchon with a simple search.]
**Week 6 READING WEEK – NO seminar this week**

**Week 7: Aesthetics of the Secret**

In this seminar we will be looking at a number of artists that engage with the theme of secrecy in different ways. You will each be encouraged to present the work of a different artist, guided by questions such as: How does one represent that which, by definition, must not be represented? How does this artwork raise questions about the role and limits of secrecy in contemporary society? What can art tell us about the secret that other forms of communication cannot?

**Key Texts**


**Further Reading/Listening**

Week 8: The Politics of Privacy and Transparency: The Circle

For this seminar, you should read The Circle by Dave Eggers. Through this novel, we will discuss the concepts of privacy and transparency and Eggers’ critique of them.

Key Texts


Further Reading


Privacy and Digital Culture


(See Week 9’s reading list for sources on transparency.)

Week 9: Transparency, Whistleblowing & WikiLeaks

This week we will stay with transparency, but less from a personal perspective and more in terms of the state. We will consider both state sponsored transparency and more radical approaches to transparency such as WikiLeaks and Edward Snowden’s whistleblowing. We will consider whistleblowing as another technique for revealing secrets: an act of last resort when internal reports of institutional wrongdoing have been ignored. The act of releasing institutional secrets to the press in order to institute change has been praised by some
quarters as bravery and lambasted by others as betrayal. Before the seminar, you must familiarise yourself with the different leaks WikiLeaks has been involved in, and Snowden’s revelations concerning NSA’s Prism. We will think about some of the implications of these as well as the punitive response to whistleblowing by the Obama Administration – one which professes to be on the side of openness.

**Key Texts**

  http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/cifamerica/2010/dec/06/western-democracies-must-live-with-leaks
  http://www.guardian.co.uk/profile/glenn-greenwald

**Further Reading**

**WikiLeaks and Whistleblowing**

(The story behind WikiLeaks can be gleaned from more journalistic accounts such as D. Leigh & L. Harding, WikiLeaks: Inside Julian Assange’s War on Secrecy or M.L.Sifrey, WikiLeaks and the Age of Transparency. There are also some good documentaries to be found online.)

Greenberg, A. (2013) *This machine kills secrets : Julian Assange, the cypherpunks, and their fight to empower whistleblowers*, Plume.


http://networkcultures.org/wpmu/geert/2010/08/30/ten-theses-on-wikileaks/


There are plenty of good online readings about WikiLeaks at:  
http://liquidbooks.pbworks.com/w/page/39188133/Transparency%20and%20Secrecy

**Transparency**
Week 10: Popular Revelation: Conspiracy Theory, Gossip, Scandal

Staying with the ‘other’ side of the secret – that of disclosure rather than concealment – we will be looking at various popular forms, such as gossip, conspiracy theory, and scandal that people invoke in order to reveal information and stories. Why do these forms of disclosure have such bad reputations? Does transparency really circumvent the problems these more popular forms are seen to encounter? Will a more transparent government really lead to a reduction of conspiracy theories, gossip and scandal? What social functions might the latter serve?
Key Texts


Further Reading

Gossip


R. F. Goodman and A. Ben-Ze’ev (Eds.), *Good Gossip* (pp. 139-153). Kansas: University of Kansas Press.

Conspiracy Theories


Scandal


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<th>Week 11: Secrecy Now: Us, the U.S., and the World</th>
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This will be our final session and the one where we try to bring together all of the different strands of the course. To do so, we will look inwards and outwards. In other words, we will both take a self-reflexive approach to secrecy to ask how academic work and cultural analysis itself resembles the revelation of textual secrets; and also, think about the role of secrets and secrecy in an increasingly globalised world which relies on standards of transparency. What is at stake, academically, personally, nationally and globally, when we invest in secrets?
Key Texts
