

## EDITORS' NOTE

The secrecy industry, worth billions of dollars every year, has boomed since September 11, 2001. According to *the Washington Post* investigation "Top Secret America," in 2010 there were 1,271 government organizations and 1,931 private companies that worked on programs related to counterterrorism, homeland security, and intelligence in about 10,000 locations across the United States (US).<sup>1</sup> The covert sector of the US produces 50,000 intelligence reports and 500,000 new "top secrets" per year (Melley, this issue).<sup>2</sup> Every day, the National Security Agency (NSA) intercepts and stores 1.7 billion e-mails, phone calls, and other types of communications.<sup>3</sup> Scandals on government secrecy, from WikiLeaks to the Snowden affair, revealed paradoxes of democracy, defined by the principles of transparency and accountability, as well as by secrecy and mass surveillance of populations.

This issue joins current scholarship to reflect on secrecy in both its global and historical contexts.<sup>4</sup> The articles explore secrecy regimes in Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, Central and Eastern Europe, and the contemporary US. They analyze the material and symbolic circulation and articulation of secrecy in policy, geopolitics, art, music, popular culture, and everyday life. This issue also includes "Conversations on Government Secrecy and Surveillance" with six leading scholars of secret regimes – Andreas Glaeser, Kristie Macrakis, Timothy Melley, Vladimir Tismăneanu, Katherine Verdery, and Amir Weiner.

In reviewing recent work on secrecy in anthropology, Katherine Verdery notes that, "unlike much of writing in sociology or political science, it

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1 Dana Priest and William M. Arkin, "A Hidden World, Growing beyond Control," part of the "Top Secret America" *Washington Post* investigation (2010), available at <<http://projects.washingtonpost.com/top-secret-america/articles/a-hidden-world-growing-beyond-control/print/>> (accessed July 12, 2015). We thank Timothy Melley for providing us with valuable source materials.

2 Ibid.

3 The NSA is able to sort only a 'fraction' of these into 70 different databases. Ibid.

4 See Andreas Glaeser, *Political Epistemics: The Secret Police, the Opposition, and the End of East German Socialism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011). Gilbert Herdt, *Secrecy & Cultural Reality: Utopian Ideologies of the New Guinea Men's House* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003); Karma Lochrie, *Covert Operations: the Medieval Uses of Secrecy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999). Kristie Macrakis, *Prisoners, Lovers, and Spies: The Story of Invisible Ink from Herodotus to al-Qaeda*; Joseph Masco, *The Theater of Operations: National Security Affect from the Cold War to the War on Terror* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014); Timothy Melley, *The Covert Sphere: Secrecy, Fiction, and the National Security State* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012). Michael Taussig, *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); Cristina Vatulescu, *Police Aesthetics: Literature, Film, and the Secret Police in Soviet Times* (Stanford: Stanford, 2010). Katherine Verdery, *Secrets and Truths: Ethnography in the Archive of Romania's Secret Police* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2014).

does not presume the individual as the bearer of secrets, privilege the realm of the 'private' as a space of secrecy, or assume transparency as the norm."<sup>5</sup> Instead, secrecy can be a positive source of meaning and identity, the opposite of the common view of secrecy as ethically problematic.<sup>6</sup> Secrecy not only represses but also creates: networks, insiders and outsiders, and hierarchies.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, secrecy not only conceals but also reveals, in a dialectical movement that Michael Taussig argues defines secrecy.<sup>8</sup> Secrecy plays an important role in shifting the definitions and boundaries of the private, the public, and the political, as in the overreach of secret surveillance technologies toward private spaces, letters, and even bodies.

Methodologically, this issue pays particular attention to the question of media and secrecy, tracking secrecy's visual, aural, architectural, and textual dimensions. Our authors consider secrets hidden within musical scores and building blueprints, as well as in the juxtaposition between a caricature and adjacent text. This careful attention to different media is also linked to the multidisciplinary perspective of the issue, which brings together scholars of anthropology, history, literary and film studies, musicology, political science, and sociology to contribute to a multifaceted account of the famously elusive concept of 'secrecy'.<sup>9</sup>

The relationship between secrecy and spectacle is at the heart of this issue. In "Public Secrecy and the Democratic Security State," Melley explores the ways in which the enormous covert sector of the US security state is represented in what he calls the covert sphere: "a new cultural imaginary shaped by both institutional secrecy and public fascination with the secret work of the state." As Melley explains, the covert sphere "includes novels, films, television serials, and electronic games – for fiction is one of the few permissible discourses in which the secret work of the state may be disclosed to the citizens." In the covert sphere, the "public can 'discuss' or, more exactly, fantasize the clandestine dimensions of the state." Melley traces the theoretical genealogy of his concept, showing how the Habermasian public sphere is deformed into the covert sphere, while at the same time revealing the Cold War roots of the National Security State.

On the other side of the iron curtain, in the USSR, a spectacle of secrecy complete with show trials and histrionic secret police practices had already

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5 Verdery, *Secrets and Truths*, 90.

6 See also Herdt, *Secrecy & Cultural Reality*. On the negative associations of secrecy, see Sissela Bok, *Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 8. Georg Simmel, "The Sociology of Secrecy and of Secret Societies," *American Journal of Sociology* 11, no. 4 (January 1906): 441–98.

7 Verdery, *Secrets and Truths*, 90–93. Glaeser, *Political Epistemics*.

8 Michael Taussig, "Transgression," in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998), 355.

9 On the conceptual challenge of defining secrecy and attempts thereof, see Verdery, *Secrets and Truths*, 79; Bok, *Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation*, 5-6. Lochrie, *Covert Operations*, 1.

been in full swing before the Cold War. Cristina Vatulescu describes the Soviet and Eastern European brand of secrecy epitomized by the era's secret police as "a spectacle of secrecy" whose style varied with the times, from histrionic in the 1930s to hyper-realist in the 1970s.<sup>10</sup> In this issue, historian J. Arch Getty traces "The Origins of Soviet Document Secrecy," through research in the archives of the former Soviet Communist Party in Moscow. He finds that by the mid-1920s, Soviet party usage had several levels of documentary secrecy, from 'secret' all the way up to the 'special folders' which were "for Politburo eyes-only." According to the Stalinist system, J. Arch Getty argues, "as much as possible should be hidden from as many people as possible, including foreign powers, their own officials, and the general public." Based on his long-term archival research, Getty reveals that some of these 'special folders' suggest re-evaluation of some important events like the 1932 Ukraine famine. He also concludes that, "despite the seriousness with which the party leadership took secrecy ... the system did not work."

In her contribution to the issue, "Translating Secrecy: The Iron Curtain Viewed from the East, West, and from Right Under," Cristina Vatulescu explores the iconic meeting point between the Eastern and Western spectacles of secrecy – the iron curtain. Originally a theatrical term, the iron curtain became the political metaphor we recognize when Winston Churchill used it in a famous 1946 speech that marked the beginning of the Cold War. An archeology of the iron curtain shows the foundational interpenetration of secrecy with theatricality. Theatricality defined the iron curtain from the start, so that once the curtain was hung, the world was staged as a *theatrum mundi*. This article investigates how the views on this *theatrum mundi* differed depending on one's position in it, whether that was in England, the US, the Soviet Union, or Eastern Europe. Vatulescu pays particular attention to the role played by rhetoric and translation in securing those viewing positions in the West, East, and right under the folds of the iron curtain.

Michael Beckerman, in his piece "Camp Secrets," explores the hidden secrets in Gideon Klein's music in the Nazi Terezin concentration camp in Northern Czechoslovakia. Nazis turned this concentration camp for many middle-class Jews and the Jewish cultural elite into a propaganda site of good life of its prisoners, another spectacle of secrecy, which was revealed by Klein's music secrets. Beckerman analyses techniques of hiding secrets in music in the 'middle', the most indistinguishable part to the audience. Before going to Auschwitz, Klein finalized his String Trio filling his work with "quotes and allusions, references, expressive markings, and coded language depicting – behind a somewhat bland and charming façade – a landscape of death." How are we to perform and understand these secrets now?, asks Beckerman.

Anselma Gallinat, in "Power and Vulnerability: Secrecy, Social Relationships, and the East German *Stasi*," explores the dialectics emerging in

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<sup>10</sup> See Vatulescu, *Police Aesthetics*, 2–5, 49–54.

spectacles of secrecy and its subversion. Surveillance in communist East Germany was as a 'public secret' in Michael Taussig's sense: secrets were generally known but impossible to articulate in their specificities.<sup>11</sup> Gallinat shows the arbitrariness of state secrecy: some people engaged in seemingly 'risky' oppositional activities without any consequences, while others became the targets of *Stasi* operations for seemingly no reason at all. By using intimidation and isolating them from their social networks, the *Stasi* recruited people to work for them. Paradoxically, revealing the secret recruitment attempts and the mechanisms of this spectacle did not result in threats or danger; it made the secret police vulnerable.

Secrecy is interconnected with material culture of archives, ritual and aesthetic artifacts. Anna Krakus, in "Revealing the Past: The Formerly Secret Police Files in Poland and Andrzej Wajda's Counter-Archive," explores how archives (their exterior and interiors) tell competing stories about the past. As Krakus shows, the Polish state archive (the National Institute of Remembrance) both reveals and hides secrets of the communist regimes, which have non-transparent afterlives: they are hard to access, navigate or understand. There are secrets about secrets: how many trucks of archives have left former socialist states to Russia? Were they burned? Or ended up in private archives? Krakus describes the case of Andrzej Wajda's archive, created as a counter-archive or even alibi to the former secret police archive about him. In Andrzej Wajda's counter-archive, the extreme openness in fact becomes muddling; secrets may be hidden in plain sight, impossible to locate in the masses of information.

In "Conversations on Government Secrecy and Surveillance," Katherine Verdery speaks about her own secret file of nearly 3,000 pages, compiled since the start of her research in 1973 by the Securitate, Romania's secret police. Verdery argues that the secret police were "generally interested in uncovering their version of the truth of the people they were following." They were actually interested in people for security reasons: whether people could actually create damage to Romania or a negative image of socialism. The personal secret file also projected a certain vision of an anthropologist as a "spy," which Verdery explores in her memoir in progress, *My Life as a "Spy."*

The section on "Conversations on Government Secrecy and Surveillance" presents a discussion of research on secret regimes and compares secret regimes and surveillance in democratic and totalitarian societies. Amir Weiner emphasizes that, unlike in the totalitarian Soviet Union and its socialist satellites, the US has functional and independent media, legal systems, and legislatures; citizens can also publicly debate the issues of secrecy. In Vladimir Tismăneanu's opinion on liberal societies, secrecy is for protection of the democracy, not for its subversion. Tismăneanu emphasizes the importance of civil society, democratic institutions, transparency, and accountabil-

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11 Taussig, *Defacement*.

ity in democratic societies. Secrecy, for Tismăneanu, is inevitable in this age of threats against democracy. Kristie Macrakis speaks about the US government's "corruption by secrecy" and its abuse of power, which the Snowden case uncovered. She draws important parallels between the government and market surveillance, and reminds us that not only the government, but also Google and other online services, watch us. Finally, Melley draws our attention to how the culture of secrecy has interpenetrated popular culture: we are fascinated by secrecy mostly at the level of fantasy. We watch TV spy series at home and support fictional missions of saving our homeland. Melley argues that the public has been encouraged through policy and popular culture to disavow its knowledge and responsibility for what the US government does overseas.

What is the relationship between secrecy, power, and spectacle? In one of the most famous approaches to this question, Michel Foucault argued that for power, "secrecy is not in the nature of an abuse: it is indispensable to its operation."<sup>12</sup> More recently, Michael Taussig unequivocally seconded Elias Canetti's pronouncement that "secrecy is at the heart of power," adding that, "it is not only secrecy that lies at the core of power, but public secrecy."<sup>13</sup> The articles in this issue give us a variety of angles into the question raised by our title. *Cachet*, a word that exists at the nexus of these terms, gives some preliminary clues. The Oxford English Dictionary informs us that the most recent meaning of cachet, in use already by 1882, is "high status, the quality of being respected or admired."<sup>14</sup> But if one digs through the layers of accumulated meanings and gets to the very first recorded use of the word in English, dating back to 1639, one finds that cachet stood and still stands for "a seal." In its original connection to writing, as in the phrase "letter of cachet" (*lettre de cachet*), cachet showcases the relationship between secrecy and power – often of a repressive kind – since it originally refers to "a letter under the private seal of the French king, containing an order, often of exile or imprisonment." A cachet seals a document and thus makes it secret, while at the same time conferring a special authority onto it. The etymology of cachet further emphasizes its relationship to secrecy. In the root of the word "cachet" we find the French verb *cache*, to hide, and the noun *cache*, which can refer either to the things hidden or to the hiding place, the container of the secret. This leaves the possibility, which Hannah Arendt sees as defining of totalitarian regimes, that a cache can be hollow of contents, of an actual secret, that it can just be an intriguing cover holding no secret whatsoever.<sup>15</sup> To have cachet, you actually don't have to have a secret, just a good secretive

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12 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley, 3 vols. (Pantheon Books, 1978), vol. I: 86.

13 Taussig, *Defacement*, 7, 57.

14 "Cachet," in *The Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford University Press, 2008).

15 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Meridian Books, 1958), 351–73.

cover. Making us aware of the relationship between contents and their covers, cache can refer to both, but most often refers to the cover. And, in any case, the contents are defined as secret, as having cachet, by their cover. So peeling the meanings of cachet, one finds less the hidden content behind the prestige and power, as much as the seal, the covering, the cover itself – secrecy. While secrets might need to remain hidden to protect their existence, secrecy itself does not – in fact, scholars contributing to this volume argue that some of the most powerful brands of secrecy developed in the twentieth century, such as the secrecy that defined the Soviet experience, or the secrecy that defines the current national security state, and have not been hidden at all, but have rather been elaborated into visible, if sometimes illegible, spectacles.



Credit: Lauren Puchowski, *Study for the Theater (Curtain)*. Courtesy of the artist.

Instead of an ending, we invite you to pause on this image of Lauren Puchowski's *Study for the Theater (Curtain)*. Its no longer white sheet strikes us an irresistibly fit invitation for each of us to project our own thoughts and images and sounds of secrecy. The title parenthetically names what our eyes may have registered as a bed sheet past its prime to be a theater curtain. Hesitating between the pretension of the title and the mysterious if shabby fragility of the image, the viewer starts seeing that there may be more of a connection between private secrets and theatricality that one suspected at first blush. The bed sheet can become a theater curtain. It can become a projection screen. It is not clear that the sheet hides anything here, either a secret, a show, or a showy secret. But even when there is nothing behind the curtain of secrecy, it still casts a shadow. It is with this image of the curtain, and the awareness of its shadows, that we would like to open our volume.

**Neringa Klumbytė and Cristina Vatulescu, Editors**