

Betrayal.

This is a strong word. So are most of its synonyms, like treachery or deception. But there is a near synonym which is less strong, namely divul-gation. To divulge means, of course, to betray a secret. But the word is used to mean something like publication. The purpose of this essay is to consider the connotation of treachery hidden within the concept of public-ation. In this age of media culture it might not be wise to repress this hidden meaning.

An apparently harmless example may illustrate this purpose. A scientist publishes an article in a magazine destined to the general educated public. That man is a traitor. He is betraying the scientific discourse by trans-coding it into the code of common speech, and by thus changing its message. Through such a reformulation the message loses its original clear and distinct structure, and it has become open to non-scientific interpretations. It has been divulged, made vulgar. In fact, that man has betrayed himself: he has become unfaithful and untrue to his responsibility for the rules of disciplin-ed reason. This harmless example shows what is meant by "trahison des clerics", betrayal by the intellectuals. Media culture as a whole may be seen as the result of this kind of treason.

It may be seen as a network which divulges secrets. There are knots within that net which suck in secrets, (for instance TV stations). They suck the sec-crets in, either by sending out spies, (reporters), or by seducing people who hold secrets to divulge them, (people who permit themselves to be interviewed or quoted). Those knots then transcode the secrets into a sort of slang: they "process the information". That slang, (which is even more vulgar than is com-mon speech and which is even easier to learn), permits everybody who connects to the net to participate in the secrets. Which of course are no longer sec-rets. The question to ask is this: "how did this situation come about?", and only then may one ask whether to divulge secrets, to betray, is a good or a bad thing.

This is a hen-and-egg question. Is the present cultural situation as vulgar as it is because the media feed it, or do we feed on media because we have become so vulgar? (The progressive feed-back between vulgarity and the media: "the more there are media the more we become vulgar, and the more vulgar we become the more we become media addicts," sets in only later.) Here is the hen answer: we have become as vulgar as we are because the declining bourgeoisie has merged with the emerging proletariat to form a plebeian grey zone in which the media flourish. And here is the egg answer: scientific and technic-al progress have resulted in communication gadgets which permit the media to work, and the result of the media is a plebeian "silent majority", a vulgar culture. Is there a common root to the hen and the egg, one that would per-mit to spot the original betrayal?

There is such a common root: the invention of the printing press. That invention divulged the secret of alphabetic writing. Prior to it there was an elite of "litterati", (mostly monks and priests), who manipulated the secret alphabetic code to rule the illiterate masses with, (to impose rules on them which they were unable to decipher, and which they had to follow blindly). Printing has cheapened all the texts, they became progressively ever more profane, and ever wider groups of the population gained access to them. The masses became capable of deciphering the rules, and somewhat later of writing them themselves, (or at least of believing that they did so). The secret of the elite, (the alphabet), having been disclosed, there was no longer any place where the elite could hide, and it withered. This progressive disclosure of the secret is called "enlightenment", and the withering of the elite is called "social progress". Media culture is the triumph of enlightenment and social progress.

"Elite" means an elected group, but not elected through democratic elections. It means a group chosen to participate in a secret. The obvious examples are the Jews who were chosen by God's unfathomable council, and the Church is the heir to this election. The opposite of the elite are the laymen. The progressive laicization of society is a measure of enlightenment and of social progress. This process of disclosure of secrets, of profanation and vulgarisation achieves a culminating point in Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia. This is the high point of the radio and of film. The present situation may be seen as a rather less murderous stabilisation of general profanation and vulgarisation. It is rather less murderous, because there are almost no secrets left to be betrayed, and those that are left are not really worth to be disclosed: they have themselves become vulgar, ("open secrets"). The age of television is thus less murderous than was the age of the radio, but it shows even better what is at stake in media culture: not only moral and intellectual, but even more so aesthetic vulgarisation. By watching TV we can concretely see not only that stupid murder is Kitsch, but even more impressively that Kitsch must in the end lead to stupid murder. Which leads to the second question: Is it a good thing to divulge secrets, and are the spying reporters and interviewed people committed to a good cause? Is betrayal a commendable method?

It is, if you are all for enlightenment and for social progress, without asking yourself where this has led to in the past, and where it must lead to in the future: to kitschy stupid murder. But you cannot avoid asking yourself that question. Our generation is blessed with a lesson: the motives of the betrayers of secrets in Russia were noble ones, (they were all for enlightenment and social progress). This was a lesson which was hard to swallow, and we should not forget it. But if you do not avoid the question of where enlightenment and social progress lead to, you are cornered in an uncomfortable position. You are being forced into defending an elitist culture, one that could rule the plebeian masses by hermetically encoded rules which those masses would have to follow blindly, because they are not capable to decipher them.

Let us assume, for arguments's sake, that an elitiste position is called for. Let us assume that the press that "did its duty" during Watergate and Iran-gate, and that is about to do the same thing in Russia, ("glasnost"), is committed to the propagation of vulgarity, and thus will lead to kitschy stupid murder. And that those who try to establish secret codes to which the masses do not have easy access, (and of which the computer codes are the best examples), are doing the right thing. In that case we will have to face two problems: (1) Can such an elitiste culture establish itself in opposition the the prevailing mass culture, (like the elitiste monastic culture established itself in opposition to the mass culture of the circus during what we use to call the "Dark ages")? And (2) If those "Dark ages" were to be re-established, what would be the secret the exlite would have to keep from being disclosed to the masses? The first problem is a technical one, and it is therefore relatively easy, (technical problems are formulated in a way that always admits a solution). The second problem is of a quite different order.

(1) We may observe, even now, how monastic communities come into being. An early example are the kibbutzim, other examples are the "alternative" communities all over Europe, the groups which form around computers in the Western world, and the communities which gather in the artificial oases in the North American deserts. It is not difficult to imagine that a world-wide network of elitiste groups linked by material and immaterial cables might crystallize in the not far distant future, and that such a network might elaborate rules which would govern society at large without being discovered by the masses. Such a thing has become technically feasible even now, and no doubt those techniques, (and the codes which they would serve), will become progressively ever more performant.

(2) However, if we compare such a future situation to the one that prevailed during the Dark ages, one difference strikes us. Then, the monasteries were surrounded by barbarians, (pagans), and they were committed to the preservation of civilized culture. This commitment had a meaning, because the monks had faith in individual and collective salvation. The future monasteries would be surrounded by plebeians, (consumers), and their commitment would be a negative one: against Kitsch and progressive stultification. It would not be a religious, but an aesthetic commitment. The secret the new monasteries would have to keep might well be the knowledge that there is no meaning, that life is absurd, and that the sole purpose of culture is to hide that knowledge. Now this implies, (if it were true), that the monks were an elite quite different from the one that is emerging at present. Their commitment was to lead society on to salvation, and paradoxically the result was modern civilisation. The elite that is emerging at present could lead society nowhere, and it is precisely this lack of purpose, (this "ludic commitment"), which would constitute its secret. In this curious sense the new Dark ages we might be approaching would be even darker than were the early Middle ages.

I believe that such is the true reason why it is so uncomfortable to defend an elitiste culture at present. Not because it is "undemocratic",

but because it is disillusioned, and therefore hopeless. The disgust many of us feel when exposed to mass culture may justify our wish to escape from it, but if we consider the technically feasible alternative, we despair of its justification. And instead of committing ourselves to a future elitist culture, we tend to opt for retreat into isolation.

Consider the inner contradiction which pervades this paper. If you read it, you will find that it is an argument against any publication. But of course it is meant to be published. It is a conscious betrayal of a secret. Let me try to justify that treason. Erasmus wrote a paper in praise of folly. This is a paper in praise of media culture, (which is a pernicious form of folly) Hopefully, this paper is treacherous in the same sense as are Erasmus' writings.