

Secrets and Lies: Misunderstanding Narrative

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Abstract

“Secrecy is one of the greatest accomplishments of humanity,” Georg Simmel argues, because it secures “the possibility of a second world alongside of the obvious world.” The same could be said of fiction, which duplicates the world and thereby unleashes the power of duplicity. Secrets and lies—a catchphrase in the English language—go together in the art of fiction. Not only is fiction false by definition, but it depends on secrets for suspense; something must be hidden in order for the story to unfold. In this talk I investigate the role of secrets in the English novel, comparing Fielding’s eighteenth-century narrative *Tom Jones* to Joseph Conrad’s modernist spy novel, *Under Western Eyes*. I’m particularly interested in the paradox that secrets, which seem to isolate their keepers, also demand to be exchanged, producing alliances of “secret sharers.” This paradox is encapsulated in the English verb “secrete,” which can mean either to conceal or to exude. *Secrets secrete*.

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