

# Chapter 6

## A Compartmentalised Culture: Snow's *The Affaire*

### 6.1 Introduction

Charles Percy Snow's novel *The Affair* (1960) is the eighth volume in his novel sequence ("roman fleuve") *Strangers and Brothers*. The book concurs with the principle of unity of time, place and action in the sense that most of the action takes place at a Cambridge college, within a limited time frame (the period 1953–1954), and revolves around a delicate case of fraud. Lewis Eliot, a former college fellow and legal expert is invited to investigate the case and acts as first-person narrator. As a science novel, bridging the gap between literature and science, *The Affair* and other novels may be regarded (somewhat paradoxically perhaps) as a counterpart to Snow's famous 1959 lecture *The Two Cultures* lamenting the gulf that exists between scientists and "literary intellectuals", de facto bridged by these novels. He earned a Ph.D. in physics (spectroscopy) in Cambridge and became a Fellow of Christ's College in 1930 before taking up his *Strangers and Brothers* sequence.

The story can be summarised as follows. In 1951, a case of scientific fraud is detected in a prestigious Cambridge college. A former Fellow named Donald Howard published a paper in a scientific journal which was criticised by American colleagues who were unable to replicate his experimental results. A diffraction photograph, which was presented as decisive experimental evidence (both in Howard's paper and in his Fellowship thesis) proved to be forged. On closer inspection, "dilated pin-marks" could be seen (p. 108). Some experts from within the college had investigated the allegations and concluded that the picture indeed represented a clear case of "unadulterated fraud". But when called upon to explain himself, Howard (after initially vehemently denying the accusation) claimed that the fraud must have been committed by his supervisor, a highly venerated professor named Palairet, who had just died (on January 5, 1952).

Initially, Howard's line of defence seemed highly unlikely. Palairet's scientific work was sound and safely established ("textbook stuff"). His experimental results were beyond dispute and had been repeated, time and again, in laboratories across

the world. Why should such an esteemed scholar revert to fabricating his data? In addition, if the story had any credibility at all, it basically implied that Howard himself had been an extremely careless and irresponsible scientist who simply accepted data provided to him by his supervisor without questioning or critically assessing their quality. So, even if the fraud had been committed by Palairet, which seemed highly unlikely, Howard had de facto disqualified himself, both as a researcher and as a College Fellow. Thus, the Howard affaire was regarded as settled and the perpetrator was dismissed. The self-cleansing mechanisms of science had been successfully put to work and the College had managed to keep the scandal silent. No one in the outside world had been informed.

At the start of the novel, however, Laura Howard, the perpetrator's wife, insists that her husband is innocent, that his reputation has been damaged and that the case should be reopened. Initially, the College community is very reluctant to do so, also because of a broadly felt antipathy or even contempt towards Howard, not only because of his sloppy research attitudes, but also because of his communist fellow-traveller convictions. But Laura Howard (described as a "dark", "awkward" woman with a "long nose") suggests that prejudice may be at stake, given that her husband is Jewish. This also explains the title of the novel: a reference to the Dreyfus affair.<sup>1</sup> Initially, the grievances of the Howard couple are attributed to "paranoia and persecution mania", but at a certain point it is nonetheless decided to ask Palairet's executors to turn over the late Professor's notebooks so that they may once again be scrutinised by two College scientists, Nightingale and Skeffington. The notebooks arrive in batches and when finally the last instalment of Professor Palairet's scientific papers (a thick exercise book referred to as Notebook V) arrives (on December 11, 1953), it is studied first by Nightingale and subsequently by Skeffington. Towards the end of the notebook (on page number hundred and twenty-one, to be exact), the latter discovers a blank space in the middle of a page "with a rim of sticky paper, as though something had been removed". Two thirds of the page is empty, except for traces of gummy paper marking out the sides of a rectangle, where a photograph must have been. Indeed, at the bottom of the rectangle, even a scrap of the print is still noticeable. Underneath the empty space there are some lines in Edwardian script, in Palairet's handwriting, saying: "Have always predicted this. Follow up". Clearly, a diffraction photograph must once have occupied the empty space, but the photograph is now missing (p. 68). Skeffington realises that this is where Howard's paper starts off. Was it a case of self-deceit on the part of the elderly scholar? That seems difficult to determine, since the crucial piece of evidence has disappeared, which is problematic enough in itself.

With the smallest possible majority, the College fellows now decide to reopen the case. Everyone despises Howard, but most College fellows nonetheless believe that justice should be done. The Court of Seniors is requested to reconsider its

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<sup>1</sup> Snow also makes a comparison with the case of Emil Rupp (1898–1979) who retracted five publications in which he claimed to confirm Einstein's theories on wave-particle duality. Rupp attached a psychiatric report to his retraction claiming that these publications were written under the influence of "dreamlike states" caused by psychasthenia.

previous verdict. Two professional legal experts are brought in to argue in favour and against a reversal of the earlier decision, and two factions line up, so that a drama of college politics unleashes. Quickly, dissensus among the college fellows increases, tensions build up, suspicion proliferates and the political force field splits in two.

The reconsideration procedure is formally opened on April 22, 1954, with a leather-bound Victorian ledger, holding a collection of Palairet's notebooks, exhibited on the table. The case is a delicate one from the very outset. A piece of deliberate scientific fraud is in itself already considered a rare and highly unlikely event. All Fellows agree that the photograph in Howard's thesis had been deliberately faked, but the question is: by whom, Howard or Palairet? Before Palairet's notebooks reached Skeffington, they went through the hands of Nightingale, a Palairet supporter. Was it credible that Nightingale had seen the photograph and pulled it out? If the photograph now missing from the notebook had been present, and if that photograph had been a fraud, then that fraud (a case of self-deception, perhaps) must have been committed by Palairet. But again: why would a distinguished scientist, a member of the Royal Society, at the age of seventy-two suddenly revert to faking his results, thereby jeopardize his life's work? There seemed to be no motive, nothing much to gain from such an act, for Howard's mediocre work hardly added anything to Palairet's reputation. On the other hand, "the psychology of scientific fraud is often a mystery" (p. 230).

Howard himself is unable to explain how the tainted photograph had gotten into the experimental data. Palairet must have provided it, but Howard cannot remember how or when. There were many photographs, he tells the jury, and he was just trying to finish his thesis in time. He never saw the original negative and only used the evidence as it was provided. Without it, his thesis would not have been approved. On a previous occasion he had even declared that he was not interested in discoveries at all, that he just wanted to publish some papers and "play the game". On the other hand, everything fitted into place once the premise was accepted that Palairet had done it. But this would mean that the photograph now missing from Palairet's notebook had been consciously removed, in order to preserve Palairet's reputation and justify Howard's dismissal. Someone who was pro-Palairet and anti-Howard apparently desired to have that photograph out of the way. In other words, a fraud, a *suppressio veri* (286), had occurred twice, involving the same picture; and this shifted the focus of suspicion to Nightingale. The latter however claims that, when he looked into the notebook, the picture had still been there and that nothing seemed wrong with it at all. How then could the photograph have disappeared when the notebook was next opened? Was it Skeffington himself perhaps? Interestingly, as the narrative unfolds, everyone who is confronted with this toxic photograph, this toxic piece of evidence (Palairet – Howard – Nightingale – Skeffington) becomes tainted or infected by it, finding his integrity questioned, his reputation damaged.

Eventually, after much intrigue and bargaining, the "curves of justice" lead to the reinstatement of Howard. With the smallest possible minority it is concluded that the testimony is not sufficient to support the order which had been given for the "deprivation" of Howard. But this is not the end of the dispute, for the next issue on

the list concerns the amount of financial retribution to which the generally despised Howard is entitled.

## 6.2 First Comments

*The Affaire* initially seems a novel about Kantian morality, focussing on the conflict or tension between inclination and obligation (with the latter eventually overruling the former). Although the College community as such reveres Palairet and is vehemently and unanimously inclined to despise Howard, the collective super-ego or sense of justice nonetheless forces the fellows (or some of them) to reconsider their opinion. Notably, they are sensitive to the accusation of “prejudice” (a metonym or displacement term for antisemitism). “Prejudice” is the *signifier* which puts the procedural machinery into motion: a “second-order” accusation. Whereas the first-order accusation concerns the fraudulent act as such, the second-order accusation concerns the effort to cover it up (using Howards as a scapegoat).

If we look at the context (Cambridge, United Kingdom, 1953), a real scientific event immediately comes to mind, namely the discovery of the bio-molecular structure of DNA by James Watson and Francis Crick in 1953. Their discovery likewise involves an infamous, tainted photograph, namely photograph 51, belonging to Rosalind Franklin (although probably taken by Raymond Gosling, her collaborator), and shared with Watson (without Franklin’s knowledge or consent) by Franklin’s colleague Maurice Wilkins, as a vital piece of evidence in favour of the double helix-hypothesis, adopted by Watson and Crick but contested by Franklin (Zwart 2015d). This event (i.e. Wilkins showing photograph 51 to Watson)<sup>2</sup> is generally regarded as a decisive event (perhaps even *the* decisive event) in the DNA discovery, so that over the years a vehement discussion has evolved concerning the question whether the Wilkins-Watson scene should be considered a case of scientific misconduct (at the expense of Franklin, a female Jewish colleague with whom both Watson and Wilkins had a rather tense relationship (Watson 1968/1996; Wilkins 2003)). In *The Affaire*, no mention of nor any reference to this real dispute is made. Nonetheless, some intriguing parallels between both cases (the literary and the historical one) can be discerned (I will come back to this in due course).

From a Lacanian perspective one could argue that the (absent, missing) item, the decisive piece of evidence, the object which forces the various agents into action, the toxic entity which is infecting and contaminating everyone who touches it (Palairet, Howard, Nightingale, Skeffington, etc.) is the intractable object *a* of the novel, which I will now analyse in terms of Lacan’s theorem of the four discourses.

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<sup>2</sup> One day in January 1953, Raymond [Gosling] met me in the corridor and handed me an excellent B pattern that Rosalind and he had taken... A few days later Jim [Watson] was visiting us, and I stopped him in the main passage of our lab to show him the photograph. I said that it was very frustrating that Rosalind was continuing to base her work on non-helical ideas even though she had this new pattern that was even more convincingly helical than ever... (Wilkins 2003, p. 197/198).

### 6.3 The Discourse of the Master

The backdrop of the novel is a discursive mode which Lacan refers to as the discourse of the Master. The Master is an absent but prestigious voice from the past, emeritus Professor Palairet, acting as a deceased father-figure whose integrity is beyond question ( $\$$  in the lower-left position) and whose presence is still acutely felt, so that he puts his adepts (the recipients of his legacy) to work ( $S_2$  in the upper-right position):

$S_1$	$S_2$
$\$$	$a$

Besides his formal, published legacy, there is a *Nachlass*, an informal legacy, which becomes a source of embarrassment to the sons: a situation which in philosophy is not unknown, think of Nietzsche's *Nachlass* for instance. In contemporary author studies research, it is comparable to Heidegger's *Schwarze Hefte*. Palairet's *Nachlass* is tainted, infected, and the problematic photograph is the condensation of this problem. In other words, the core item of this legacy is something which is highly questionable, something which his disciples experience as impossible to deal with, and which is strictly speaking absent, but which *precisely because of this absence* is decidedly present: the allusive object  $a$ . Did Nightingale try to contain the threat (the potential damage to the reputation of  $S_1$ , so that  $\$$  would be revealed) by removing the photograph, thereby putting himself at risk? If this is the case, Nightingale (a respected fellow) becomes a fraudulent scientist himself ( $S_2 \rightarrow \$$ ), as if fraud is an infectious affliction, which can only be atoned by counter-fraud. Should that be the case, Nightingale (the only one who actually saw the original picture), apparently failed to see that he was *being seen*, that the absence of the picture would not go unnoticed (a position which Lacan (1966, p. 15) refers to as the position of the Ostrich, the person who hides something without being aware that he will be *seen as hiding*). Or are all other academics simply upset by a missing photograph which, according to Nightingale (again: the only person who actually saw it), was not only unproblematic but even irrelevant, "uninteresting". Paradoxically, the disruptive power of the object  $a$  resides precisely in its absence. Moreover, the (missing) evidence begins to circulate, infecting and injuring everyone who touches this intangible absent something, which damages the reputation of an eminent scientist (Palairet, accused of fabrication), disrupts the career of an early stage researcher (Howard, accused of sloppiness), undermines the credibility of Nightingale (accused of manipulating the file) and even affects the respectability of the Court of Seniors (accused of prejudice), etc.

There are, as we have seen, two instances of fraud (first-order fraud and second-order fraud). The first-order fraud can be summarised as follows. Initially ( $M_1$ ), the legacy of a reputed academic is to be treated with respect. But when the evidence produced by Palairet (the father-figure) is really used (by Howard), all kinds of tensions and contradictions emerge ( $M_2$ ). If the evidence produced by Palairet is used

in an uncritical manner, this results in accusations of fraud. But if the evidence is treated with scientific scepticism, in other words: if Palairet is regarded not as an unquestionable authority ( $S_1$ ), but simply as a researcher ( $S_2$ ), a *Fehlleistung* is discovered, a most unfortunate fatal mistake, possibly due to self-deception (but this interpretation is actually a rationalisation, for it is not to be excluded that it really was a case of fraud). The whole constellation results in an unintended and discomfoting by-product: the faked photograph ( $a$  in the lower-right position), exposed by U.S. competitors. Psychoanalytically speaking, the object  $a$  is the primordial agent of the story, forcing everybody into action: the picture with the diluted pin-marks, taken by Palairet, and therefore initially regarded as an unquestionable piece of evidence, but now posthumously undermining his prestige. Apparently, Palairet's photograph deceived him into believing himself to be on the path towards truth. The object  $a$  reveals Palairet's susceptibility to self-deception ( $\$$ ): Palairet's *fallibility*, disavowed until now and pushed back into the lower-left position. How to reconcile all these ambiguities into a convincing, comprehensive view ( $M_3$ )?

A similar dynamics (reflecting the structure of the Master's discourse) unfolds with respect to the second-order misconduct. The trustworthiness of the notebook, the legacy, bearing the name-of-the-father (Palairet's signature and handwriting:  $S_1$ ) seems initially beyond dispute ( $M_1$ ). Yet, there is a disconcerting gap, a missing link: the decisive item is emphatically absent. Only an empty space (its negative as it were) is visible. One possible explanation is that Nightingale, the first recipient of the notebook ( $S_2$  in the upper-right position), seeing that his attempt to verify Palairet's credibility was *negated* by the facts ( $M_2$ ), decided (as an act of fidelity by a devoted adept) to falsify the data by removing the toxic item (which threatens to compromise the legacy of the Master, upon which the reputation of the institution builds), thereby inevitably becoming tainted or infected himself. Palairet's handwriting (underneath the missing picture) seems to confirm his *Fehlleistung* (his self-deceit), but by removing the decisive piece of evidence, doubts concerning the reliability of the legacy of the Master ( $\$$ ) are temporarily silenced (contained in the lower-left position). But this instance of misconduct fails to restore the integrity of the *Nachlass* ( $\rightarrow$  |  $M_3$ ). Therefore, the by-product of Nightingale's (respectful or disrespectful?) actions is a spectral, haunting item ( $a$ ) which begins to circulate, disrupting the political balance within the College, due to the eruption of conflicting views concerning the content of the missing picture. In other words, due to the object  $a$ , latent political ruptures in what purports to be a homogeneous community come to the fore, so that a special procedure is set in motion in order to contain the political turmoil (on the *power* level), the credibility crisis (on the *knowledge* level). But on the level of the *Self*, this offers an opportunity for everyone involved to constitute oneself as a responsible moral subject by adopting a particular normative interpretation of the situation (by taking sides). But in terms of discursive dynamics, precisely this formal procedure (adopted as a means to find out the truth) effects a quarter-turn to the left, so that the discourse of the Master gives way to university discourse.

## 6.4 University Discourse

In university discourse,  $S_2$  (the professional expert) assumes the role of agent (upper-left position):

$S_2$	$a$
$S_1$	$\$$

Challenged by the unsolvable enigma (the crisis of the Master's discourse), Nightingale and Skeffington take the floor, not as adepts, but as (allegedly objective and independent) experts, able and willing to assess the situation, even if this entails a critical assessment of the legacy of Palairet (reading his work as if he were a mere researcher, rather than an infallible father-figure). The unquestionable authority of the Father ( $S_1$ ) is disavowed (pushed into the lower-left position) and Nightingale and Skeffington (representing  $S_2$ ) assume the role of independent agents who have sufficiently emancipated themselves from the (now discredited) power structure entailed in the Master's discourse. They address the intractable object ( $a$ ) in an impassive manner by giving their expert opinion. In order for the university discourse to function (in order for  $S_2$  to function as agent), the voice (the sway, the prestige) of the Master must be suspended ( $S_1$  in the lower-left position). Judgement on the basis of authority must be replaced by expert opinion, by a careful, technical and evidence-based examination of the case. But as soon as these principles and imperatives ( $M_1$ ) are brought into practice, the logic of university discourse becomes frustrated (*negated*) by the fact that both scientists, confronted with the same data, reach opposite (and mutually exclusive) conclusions ( $M_2$ ). The examination gives rise to a contradiction which seems impossible to reconcile. If the position of one of the experts is adopted, this necessarily implies that the other is a fraud (guilty of prejudice, of falsifying the data, etc.). Either Nightingale or Skeffington is guilty of second-order fraud. If Skeffington is right, Nightingale must have deliberately removed the photograph, but the reverse is also true. We are faced with a Moebius ring: both positions may be taken, and several fellows move from one side to the other, but no one is able to comprehend the situation as a whole. There is always a missing link, another side. Although both experts seem absolutely convinced of their case, the split proves unsurmountable, and both fellows find their reputation damaged in the course of the procedure. They are contaminated by the encounter with the infectious target of their examinations ( $a$  in the upper-right position). And the status of this object  $a$  (the photograph) remains highly ambiguous, for it is both regarded as decisive evidence (by some) and as uninteresting (by others), both as fabricated (by Skeffington) and as unproblematic (by Nightingale). The confrontation with this object  $a$  produces a case of fraud ( $\$$  in the lower-right position), but it seems impossible to determine with certainty who committed the misconduct. The result is a deadlock which is damaging for both, because rather than as impartial experts ( $S_2$ ), able to keep their distance, and in control of the situation, they are exposed as "divided subjects" ( $\$$ ) willing to revert to misconduct if that is what is

required for their version of the truth to prevail ( $\$$  in the lower-right position). In other words, in their struggle against fraud, they (or one of them at least) are forced to *become* fraudulent themselves.

## 6.5 Hysteric's Discourse

The Master's discourse is not only challenged by university discourse (by expert opinion), however, but first and foremost by the discourse of the hysteric. This type of discourse is voiced by Laura Howard ( $\$$  in the role of agent), not in the sense that she is a hysteric in the psychopathological (Freudian) sense of the term, but in the sense that she is the one who challenges and stands up against the authorities directly ( $S_1$  now in the role of recipient of the disconcerting message). She consciously violates the ethos of the College, which (among other things) entails that the (good) name-of-the-father should be venerated at all times. By raising a voice of protest, and also by introducing a sensitive signifier into the discursive mixture ("prejudice", a metonym for "antisemitism"), she forces the College to act. In response to her accusation, the procedural mechanism is set in motion, perhaps as an immunisation strategy, a mechanism of defence to safeguard the College's prestige. But instead of warding off the disruptive accusations entailed in the hysteric's discourse, the contamination proves more infectious than expected, resulting in chronic malaise:

$\$$	$S_1$
$a$	$S_2$

Laura Howard acts as agent, raising a voice of protest ( $\$$  in the upper-left position), challenging the authorities and accusing them of "prejudice". Although she is generally regarded as an "awful" woman, and repetitively referred to as the "other" woman, at a certain point her complaints (coming from outside the system) can no longer be ignored. Thus, the establishment, the recipient of the accusation ( $S_1$  in the upper-right position) is challenged and accused of prejudice and fraud. The initial verdict is negated: the establishment rather than Howard (its victim) is fraudulent. But her fervent campaign against injustice (allegedly on behalf of her husband) actually seems a façade driven by something else. She is not interested in science or scientific misconduct at all. Her object of desire ( $a$ ) is to expose (and to subsequently cleanse the world from) antisemitism. Finally, in the course of the procedure, two legal experts become involved (one of them the narrator) who actually learn something from this case, so that their expertise is strengthened ( $S_2$  as by-product of the collision).

## 6.6 The Discourse of the Analyst: *The Affaire* and *The Purloined Letter*

But the reason for reading a novel is that it is neither an instance of a Master's discourse (the legacy of a father-figure), nor of university discourse (a report written by experts), nor of a hysteric's discourse (*J'accuse!*), but rather a stage where these types of discourse are probed and questioned by mutually confronting them with one another. This is why the narrator, the author's voice, is a legal expert, for this position allows him to do what the discourse of the analyst basically consists of: asking questions. In view of the epistemological, political and normative crisis, all other voices (the voice of authority ( $S_1$ ), of expert knowledge ( $S_2$ ), of societal protest ( $\$$ )) become suspended (*ἐποχή*), so that a discursive space is opened-up and a different type of discourse evolves. The novel becomes a Freudian couch, a psychoanalytical clinic, a moral laboratory as it were. The focus shifts from the perspective of the subject (inevitably limited and one-sided) towards the disruptive role of the object (*a*) as agent. It is the itinerary of this missing object which defines the structure of the novel. The photograph is the cause of Palairet's self-deceit, of Howard's sloppiness and of Nightingale's (or Skeffington's) fabrication. They are all contaminated by what is supposed to be evidence. As if the father-figure bestows a toxic infection on later generation via a seminal picture. Because of accusations of fabrication by American competitors ( $S_2$ ), the papers containing the picture (*a*) is retracted, but this is not the end of the affair, for the original picture is still there, in Palairet's notebook, waiting to be discovered. Therefore, when Laura Howard ( $\$$ ) makes her accusation (of prejudice), Nightingale tries to take the picture out of circulation once and for all, but precisely because of its sudden absence it draws everyone's attention more than ever. As a spectral, *missing* item, it threatens to disrupt the symbolic order *as such*. Its absence seems to confirm the suspicions against Palairet, but by denying that he has removed the photograph, Nightingale de facto accuses Skeffington of having committed second-order fraud, etc. In other words, it is as if the toxic picture carries an invisible label: *Noli me tangere*, do not touch!

Snow's story about the missing photograph is reminiscent in many ways of the famous detective story *The purloined letter*, written by Edgar Allan Poe and meticulously analysed by Jacques Lacan (1966). This story concerns an embarrassing piece of evidence, which may severely damage a person of high status: namely a confidential piece of writing, an embarrassing letter – *lettre embarrassante* (Lacan 1966, p. 13) – to a Queen. The letter has been purloined by a Minister, who wants to use this sensitive piece of information to increase his power over the Queen. But actually, the purloined letter enters into a complicated circuit. As soon as it begins to circulate, it runs the risk of falling into the wrong hands, or the right hands, depending on one's perspective, so that it seems to empower its new owner, while at the same time it is impossible for the recipient to actually *use* the information. For by using the missing letter, the perpetrator would inevitably draw attention to his misdemeanour, so that the impact of his disclosure would be thwarted, and he would become the accused rather than the accuser. It is a story about seeing and failing to see, and about having valuable information at one's disposal without being able to use it.

Such paralysing paradoxes can also be discerned in Snow's story. Several persons may or may not have purloined the picture. If Palairet did it, it proves that he wanted to correct the self-deceit to which he had temporarily fallen victim, putting his disciple Howard on a vicious track (who should have handled the evidence with more suspicion). But it is also still possible that Howard did the tinkering, in order for his paper to be publishable, although he now claims to be ignorant as to the origin of the damaging picture. Nightingale may have taken it out. In that case, he knows something which others cannot know for certain. But he cannot use this knowledge, because as soon as he would produce the evidence, he would damage either Palairet or himself or both. Skeffington may own the picture, but in that case he cannot use it either. Should either of them decide to produce the picture (to prove that Palairet is either innocent or guilty) they would expose themselves as perpetrators. Therefore, even *if* one of the two experts owns the picture (thereby *knowing* the truth, but *keeping* it from others) this knowledge cannot be made available to others. The owner necessarily feigns ignorance, so that the trump card (wherever it is located) can never be played, face up on the table. As soon as it is put into circulation, the recipient becomes contaminated. Whereas the individual who removed the photograph, thereby taking it out of circulation (Palairet, Howard, Nightingale, Skeffington?) probably *expected* that this would stop the object *a* from causing any more damage (while granting him some power over the potentially disruptive situation), the very opposite is true. By being absent, the purloined picture proves more damaging than if it had been present. But now it has become impossible to put it into circulation once again. In other words, all actors grossly underestimate what Lacan refers to as the supremacy of the signifier (the evidence), whose very absence determines the interactions between the actors involved. It is the *absent entity* which determines the acts, interactions, blind spots and even future destinies of the subjects involved (1966, p. 30; cf. Assoun 2003, p. 40). In other words, instead of owning the photograph (the signifier), the perpetrator rather *is owned* by it. As the drama unfolds, the activities, options and choices of all the persons involved are increasingly determined by an absent X, so that its absence proves much more damaging and effective than its (now impossible) presence. In terms of game theory: by trying to prevent damage to Palairet (by trying to keep the latter's *Fehlleistung* a containable secret), the sum total of the collective damage becomes significantly increased. But once the process is set in motion, it functions almost automatically, and the big puzzle, for the Court of Seniors, is not "who did it?", but rather: "how to bring this detrimental process to a stop?"

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