

Spoilers, Triggers, and the Hermeneutics of Ignorance

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Abstract

A hermeneutics of ignorance may, at first, appear to be a contradiction in terms. Yet, ignorance and stupidity remain a pressing issue in the realm of today’s public discourse. The form this takes concerns, not the actual intelligence of people *per se*, but rather the use of the denomination of “stupidity” as an active framing of debate, or the use of perceived ignorance to strategically organise individuals, publics, and audiences. This offers a challenge to hermeneutic practice; or, at least, a pause for reconsidering some of the assumed figures that govern the hermeneutic endeavour, namely dialogue and intelligibility. In this paper, I want to sketch out some provisional areas of consideration for such a challenge and its potential response. Focusing on one aspect of the contemporary media milieu – the work of the spoiler and the trigger – I want to suggest how the digital ecology through which much of public discourse takes place requires adjustments to hermeneutic approaches, and the implications of these to what a hermeneutics of ignorance might look like.

Keywords

Ignorance, spoilers, mediation, dialogue, on-line information

Towards a Hermeneutics of Ignorance

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A hermeneutics of ignorance may, at first, appear to be a contradiction in terms. After all, if hermeneutics is the study of interpretation, this already presupposes a level of engagement with the world that ignorance rejects. The latter involves ignoring rather than engaging knowledge, sense or awareness; rooted in the Latin *ignotus* (unknown, strange, or unfamiliar) which appears as the opposite of the efforts to understand inherent to hermeneutics, and the significance of *Bildung* within Gadamer's own work. At the same time, as part of the "universality of the hermeneutic viewpoint" that Gadamer cites as a core principle of interpretation, the importance of the effective history of knowledge renders the idea of "ignorance" as a cleanly-defined object rather more complicated. Instead, there is an awareness that "people read [...] sources differently" over time because they are "moved by different questions, prejudices and interests" (Gadamer, 2004, p. xxix).

Yet, ignorance and "stupidity" remain a pressing issue in the realm of today's public discourse. Furthermore, the prominence of stupidity as a figure of discourse – ever-present in discussions of politics, climate-change, public health, and cultural practices, not to mention the all-too-common intellectual decrying of the superficiality of those discussions in themselves – suggests that it has taken on a specific value, and a specific urgency. For some, this is a key problem with progressing any form of socio-political dialogue; arguments by the likes of Shawn Rosenberg ("the incompetent citizen") or H el ene Landemore ("the dumb many") are supplemented by work such as Hartman, Hester, and Gray's research (2022) that suggests the attribution of stupidity to political opponents has a more significantly polarising effect than the perception an opponent is morally evil. As such, this form of ignorance and stupidity – which is not the actual intelligence of people *per se*, but rather the use of the denomination of "stupidity" as an active framing of debate, or the use of perceived ignorance to strategically organise individuals, publics and audiences – offers a challenge to hermeneutic practice; or, at least, a pause for reconsidering some of the assumed figures that govern the hermeneutic endeavour, namely dialogue and intelligibility. In this paper, I want to sketch out some provisional areas of consideration for such a challenge and its potential response. Focusing on one aspect of the contemporary media milieu – the work of the spoiler and the trigger – I want to suggest how the digital ecology through which much of public discourse takes place requires adjustments to hermeneutic approaches, and the implications of these to what a hermeneutics of ignorance might look like.

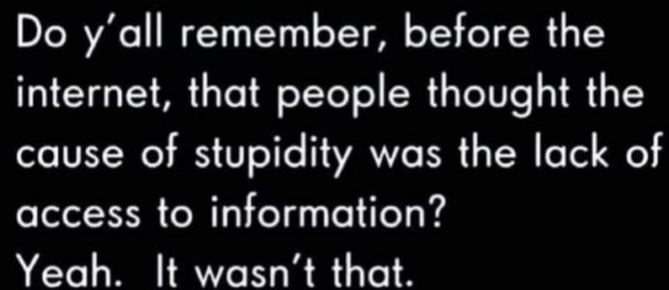
Fields like agnotology studies have pointed to a necessary ignorance inherent to all forms of knowledge, and philosophical approaches to epistemic injustice have highlighted the faults of "prejudicial flaws in shared resources for social interpretation" (Fricker, 2007, p. 147). My interest, though, is in the stupid as a figure or rhetorical commonplace, a particular argumentative device, a trope that is part explanation, part insult, which is embedded within the inherent plurality of interpretations that constitutes the current field of public discourse. In his book, *Stupidity in Politics*, Nobutaka Otake comments on how the dimensions of this plurality of our everyday affairs places the clich e as a key site of public discourse: amid the plural forces that communicative interaction must negotiate, "clich es – words of others – constitute the quintessential phenomenon of stupidity. Our thought is not a result of solitary activity, but the outcome of plural forces circulating within and beyond individual thought" (Otake, 2021, p. 5). I would take this a step further: not only are clich es seen as stupid, "the stupid" themselves (however they are represented) are now a clich e of public discourse. This is not to dismiss or devalue the work of the clich e, but

rather view it as a relational assemblage governed by particular interpretative practices (see Grimwood 2021a).

The idea that there is a group of people who are stupid fits almost perfectly with endlessly revived calls for a healthy dose of critical thinking, attention to detail, or understanding of the scientific method. As a trope, the stupid reflect well-known monstrosities that recur throughout discourses of the intelligentsia regardless of methods and approach: the inattention caused by media saturation, the lack of depth caused by social media's endless clickbait, the destruction of rational debate and the reduction of nuance to angry polemics caused by a combination of all of the above. But these responses are problematic for a number of reasons. It is precisely this twitch-response, the instinct to repeat the well-worn mantras of intellectualist positions, that obscure or reject some of the key interpretative principles that philosophical hermeneutics alerts us to. Yet, the *urgency* of ignorance as a problem can conceal such framing: indeed, such responses make implicit (and explicit) use of spoilers and triggers in their formation of the need for intellectual engagement in the public domain to provide answers we have inevitably heard before. The work of the spoiler and the trigger are therefore often-ignored, sometimes banal, but even so a crucial site of interpretative practice.

Accessing the Ignorant

But before discussing spoilers in these terms, some more groundwork on the hermeneutics of ignorance is necessary. My starting point, in keeping with the contexts in which the figure of the ignorant and the stupid have most emerged with most alarm, is an internet meme.



Do y'all remember, before the internet, that people thought the cause of stupidity was the lack of access to information?
Yeah. It wasn't that.

Of course, access to information *alone* would never be a cure for stupidity: information is, after all, not the same thing as understanding. But the meme is obviously not arguing this, and it would be less amusing and less shareable if it was. Instead, it is making a familiar claim, perhaps even obvious an obvious one: the array of information promised to be “at our fingertips” in the digital age has turned out to produce counter-intellectual discourse, with people running amok through conspiracy theories, unbalanced evidence, and filter bubbles, resulting in the ominous threat of “post-truth.” As such, the meme is effectively suggesting that the access to information is being *misused* by stupid people (whether this is their fault, or the fault of the internet); while at the same time deploying a form of nostalgia that creates a particular sense of community (“y'all”) who are linked by virtue of their hope for the emancipation from ignorance, and a memory of the time before the widespread use of the internet.

I use this meme because both the implicit and explicit claims at work should raise concerns for a hermeneutics of ignorance. Before exploring such a hermeneutic response, it is worth unpacking these concerns briefly.

The idea that the internet provides a vast and overwhelming amount of information resonates with a range of academic writers, across varied critical traditions. We find, for example, that that an “overwhelming flood of information” (Haack, 2019, p. 265) has led to “the drowning of meaningful experiences in a sea of random noise” (Terranova, 2004, p. 14), bombarding our faculties and leaving us unable to distinguish meaning from non-meaning. James Bridle referred to this as a “New Dark Age” where “the value we have placed upon knowledge is destroyed by the abundance of that profitable commodity” (Bridle, 2018, p. 11). The effect of this is to place a burden of responsibility on what the meme refers to as the “access to information.” Not only does this frame the idea that public debate is overwhelmed with the noise of information (too much access, not enough critical thinking), but also the solutions on offer to redress the conflicts raging over who is stupid and who is not. This typically takes the form of yearning for the “gatekeepers” of truth – however we interpret that term – to return and organise, or at least focus, the easily-led (see Grimwood, 2021a, pp. 165-171).

It is worth noting the recurrent metaphor of water in the descriptions of the internet, from the threats of drowning issued by Haack and Terranova to the “flows of information” and “fluidising” of culture discussed in, for example, the work of Boris Groys (2016), not only serves a rhetorical function in the framing of ignorance, but also links to a longer history of the role of metaphor within the work of philosophy, and in particular metaphor of water as a figure of unreason. Rhetorically, the invocation of watery depths implies a uniformity to digital circulation, as if users are as unable to tell the difference between one ocean wave and another as they are between Wikipedia and the Death Clock, or between The New York Times and a Flash game of Tetris. It does not take too long to reflect on how inappropriate it would be to suggest these are all equally indiscernible. Yet, the everyday user-experience of information on the internet is routinely framed as such.

The sense of “being overwhelmed” by the apparently infinite information of the internet resonates with an effective history of the image of water in relation to reason, a point made by Foucault in *Madness and Civilisation* and his as-yet untranslated 1963 essay *L'eau et la Folie* lecture, and Michèle Le Doeuff in her book *The Philosophical Imaginary*. For Foucault, reason has been recognised in the Western Imaginary as being firmly part of the *terra firma*, repelling the water of unreason. Le Doeuff, meanwhile, focuses on Immanuel Kant’s imagery of a “land of truth” surrounded by a broad and stormy ocean in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, which she suggests is a development of Francis Bacon’s *In Temporis Partis Maximus*. For both (and the tradition they write from), the image of the island “produces and structures a fantasy” that is both the solidity of the metaphysical system being proposed, and the urgency and justification of its need against indeterminate unreason (Le Doeuff, 1989, p. 12). Yet, the need for an image to articulate this justification means that, to paraphrase Le Doeuff, the work of such a figure operates “in places it should not belong” (1989, p. 2), i.e., as a justification for the *removal* of the figural from proper thought. In the context of the meme, the figure serves the purpose of removing the content of information from information itself, invoking affective responses of bewilderment.

In this particular framing of ignorance, then, the role of the figure is not simply to invoke a broad swathe of unintelligible information that the stupid cannot hope to understand if they access it. It also shapes the notion of what constitutes access itself. As I have argued elsewhere (Grimwood 2021b), the discourse of post-truth (or, at least, how to avoid it) is dominated by the figure of knowledge as an object of possession or property. Information is “there,” to be taken, a sense which can be found not only in memes but also in contemporary accounts of the analytic philosophy of ignorance. What follows from the figuring of access as a form of property is a particular organisation of knowledge as something which is either held or not held; *owned* or *lost*. This seems, adds extra weight to the invocation of nostalgia which the meme starts with. Indeed, it is notable to what extent those writing with concern on the rise of stupidity in society utilise recollections of the past in much the way Kant utilised his island: both for those charged with spreading post-truth, playing with nostalgia to link past injustices with conspiratorial theories (Foroughi et al., 2021; Gabriel, 2019), but also for those arguing for the return to truths and methods that provide certainty and reductive simplicity (Grimwood, 2022; Vogelmann, 2018). Do y’all remember when truth was uncomplicated by suggestions it might not be as universal as it claimed?

I am reminded of Gianni Vattimo’s observation that while “the mass media tend to create homogeneity and uniformity in the collective culture,” alongside this, the opposite effect takes place: for, “as the system of information transmission becomes denser, ‘interpretative agencies’ also tend to multiply and, by a paradoxical logic of autodetermination, these agencies present themselves ever more explicitly as *interpretative*” (2003, pp.16-17, emphasis original). However, whereas Vattimo saw this as contributing to an inevitable “decline of the West” – by which he meant the metaphysics of certainty, universalising reason and a unitary progress to history (2003, p. 22) – the responses to the concerns with ignorance and post-truth across digital media more typically see a vehement *return* of “the West,” and a *downplaying* of the role of interpretation that allows certain clichés of who and what the ignorant are to become accepted unproblematically. The persuasiveness of such a return of the West, in relation to the problem of ignorance at work in the meme at least, thus seems to be intrinsically linked to the well-established metaphor of water as philosophical unreason, and the more recent prominence of nostalgic longing within digital culture (see Fisher, 2014).

Dialogue (with Spoilers Ahead)

What I’ve suggested so far in this paper is that the “access” referred to in our opening meme does not simply concern a threshold or entrance, but instead how communal understanding is formed, associated, and disassociated. To this end, a hermeneutics of ignorance would need to engage in three elements of this: first, the reflexive dialogical structure of understanding and its effect on the persuasiveness of the commonplaces of stupidity and ignorance at work in current public discourse; second, the figural resonances that constitute part of the traditions in play when such commonplaces are invoked; and third, the underlying assumptions regarding the promise of access to knowledge given by digital media, which relates directly to the work of the spoiler and the trigger.

The Gadamerian hermeneutic tradition has long argued for the role of effective-historical consciousness in enabling interpretation to take place. As such, a hermeneutics of ignorance would

suggest a route beyond the cynical deployment of *faux-naif* appeals to scientific method – that is, the idea that those who are stupid are simply unable to access information correctly, and as such are excluded from public discourse – as well as from the use of interpretation as some kind of relativistic enabler of post-truth. But as Lorenzo Simpson has argued in *Hermeneutics as Critique*, when the Gadamerian tradition “shifts its focus [...] to coming to terms with other competing cultures, traditions, and epistemic regimes, the question of its ability to provide an understanding that is simultaneously noninvidious and genuinely critical arises” (2021, p. 55).

Simpson himself offers a cohesive set of methods for doing this, arguing for the synergies between hermeneutics and both critical theory and scientific method. His book is of particular significance because, in doing so, he foregrounds the importance of interpretation as a form of *mediation*. Mediation is a “facilitating condition” of agency, and as such whenever classifications are drawn – in our case, between the ignorant and the intelligent – “we should always be concerned to inquire after the conditions under which particular modalities of classification become the salient term of discourse” (Simpson, 2021, p. 103). Such mediation becomes particularly important when we consider the sites and platforms of public debates where ignorance is invoked and, at times, weaponised. Consider how the focus of trigger-warnings is often specific words or images; following Simpson, the question would quite rightly be not what images offend, but instead how and why the trigger is connected to the mainframe of our conceptual imaginary; or, how it plugs into the “closed circuits of history” of which Gadamer once spoke.

Where I find myself less convinced by Simpson’s account is the way in which he figures mediation in terms of a humanistic dialogue. Indeed, the humanistic underpinning is something he is keen for hermeneutics to return to. For Gadamer, humanism referred to a specific sense of German Classicism: the cultivation of the senses and the intellect towards enlightened existence. While Simpson does not press this relationship to the German model of humanism, it becomes apparent in his focus on the role of dialogue as an opening-out and elevating of interpretative discussion. He does this by introducing two stages of dialogical operation: one which constructs a common language, and one which makes use of it. This means that, “[a]ssuming that interlocutors begin with a sufficient descriptive overlap to assure themselves they are indeed addressing the same topic, it is certainly possible that they may disagree about further properties of the thing they are talking about” (2021, p. 47). In this way, we find in Simpson’s work a certain narrative progression whereby dialogue serves to resolve – albeit incompletely, and with open-ness to disagreement – the loss caused by ignorance of certain positions or perspectives.

With this move, despite the many other methodological differences, Simpson reflects a number of those writing on the problem of ignorance and the rise of post-truth who promote dialogue as a way forward (see, for e.g., MacIntyre, 2021). Can we ask the same question of salience to this underpinning notion of humanistic dialogue, though? This would not be to condemn interpretation to the determinations of tradition – that is, remove the phronetic dynamics of dialogue that led Gadamer to employ it so centrally to his hermeneutics – but rather to consider some of the more banal and ordinary aspects of digital communication which disrupt the coherence of the reason/unreason binary. In other words, it requires thinking through the medial work of mediation, beyond simply facilitating dialogue between agents, and towards aspects which may render uncomfortable the humanistic assumptions at the heart of a dialogical response, as well as carrying and enabling the urgency and speed of the threat of widespread ignorance to public debate.

In this case, it seems to me that asking about the salient modalities of a discourse is effectively to think about access: who is engaged to speak and how. As I have already suggested, thinking about this access requires dialogical mediation, as well as the mediation of the metaphors and figures that shape the “who” and the “how” by associating and de-associating sense-making processes. But it is the third element, the role of information and its overwhelming presence, which precisely disrupt the assumptions of those figural commitments regarding “the ignorant.” In his book *Spoiler Alert*, Aaron Jaffe describes the connectivity of the digital age as a hardwired “compulsory regime of stupidity” (2019, p. 5). But unlike those who see this regime as a succumbing to some kind of Debordian fantasy of ceaseless empty spectacle – the overwhelming water of aesthetically seductive unreason, for example – Jaffe understands that the stupidity of this regime is not simply a reversal of what progressive modernity once imagined itself to be, as our meme might have suggested. Instead, he suggests that the view of an insurmountable volume of information frustrating any attempts to distinguish the sense from nonsense becomes *itself* an idealist fantasy, and furthermore a fantasy which is rendered difficult to sustain by the figures of the spoiler and the trigger.

These present a more complex relationship *between* sense and narrative: in particular, the framing narrative that digital information is an indiscernible flow of noise, what Habermas once bemoaned as disrupting the “intellectual focus” of modernity. The spoiler and the trigger (the latter is, Jaffe argues, the reverse-wiring of the former), far from a retelling of a narrative or issuing a causal sequence of significant events, are “a switch, a flop, a knee jerk, an impedance mechanism made operational for a connected world charged with specific knowledge sequencing problems”; less a *precis* and more the signal of a “new technical sensitivity to activated sensibilities” (Jaffe, 2019, pp. 3, 13). The marking of spoilers is, on the one hand, a deliberate signing up to ignorance of something that we could easily find out; and on the other hand, an assumption that all there is to know is there to be found; that the spoiler actually spoils, and the trigger actually triggers. In this way, the spoiler and the trigger are both sources of information, but rather than constituting forms of knowledge, they instead curate our sense of what there is to be known, foregrounding an interplay between tacit and deliberate ignorance.

Spoilers at Work

In Jaffe’s words, a regime where information is always-already available, the spoiler alert “encloses a world” that is “supersaturated with tacit, nondisclosure agreements...we simultaneously didn’t agree to and acutely experience as betrayals of virtuous stupidities” (p. 4). Rather than embody the threat that the excesses of the information age pose to the intellectual, spoilers, and triggers bring to the fore the various complicities at work in how such excesses are organised and engaged with. How would this affect a hermeneutics of ignorance? Some examples may help.

As I noted earlier, the call for renewed dialogue in Simpson’s work resonates with many similar recommendations on what to do when public disagreement is rooted, at least in part, in ignorance. Consider behavioural expert André Spicer’s advice on the topic:

constantly dismissing the other side as stupid can be dangerous. It's unlikely to foster dialogue, and will instead drive political factions ever further apart. Politics will become a grudge match between factions who consider their opponents idiots and therefore refuse to listen to them. Whenever this sort of vicious partisanship kicks in, voters become more likely to follow their own politics when making a decision – no matter what the evidence says. (Spicer, 2016)

Spicer's rejection of the dualism between the informed, considerate, and good, and the stupid, aggressive, and bad is a valuable ethos to follow. The sentiments cannot escape irony, though. After all, even if one agrees that politics is about finding agreement and compromise within the public sphere, many instances of the cultural battles begin from the very effort to talk more, to educate, to make visible tensions within the understanding and recognition of those occupying shared social and political spaces. The idea that voters may "follow their own politics" seems an odd warning to make (how else does one participate in politics?). It is clarified by the suggestion of the cod-psychology factions and tribalism; simply following your "in-group" line is a sign of barbarity unbecoming a modern democracy. However, barbarity is also indicative of stupidity: the very same labelling that the passage began by warning us against.

Spicer's view could thus be seen as a kind of individualistic re-enactment of what Jacques Ranciere (2009) critiques in structural social criticism (the same social criticism that, arguably, Simpson's hermeneutic response attempts to lead us to). On the one hand, Ranciere argues, such social criticism links emancipation to intellectual discovery; on the other hand, it is resigned to the perpetuity of a system which blocks it. Certain groups (class, race, age, the "left behind" and so on) are said to be excluded from knowledge because they don't know the true reasons that they can't access that knowledge; but their ignorance is a product of the systems of knowledge that don't let them in. They would *know*, if *only* they knew! The entire process is wrapped in a spoiler alert, carefully concealing the circular logic at work.

While perhaps not as complex as Jaffe's account of spoilers, there is a similar interplay here between how expectations are tacitly accepted and usurped. As Ranciere noted, such an interplay is often overlooked simply because it is unnecessary to examine them: after all, the various theories of stupidity such as "Dunning Krueger," nudging, groupthink, and so on all make perfect sense in particular moments and as part of particular connections (despite the inherent problems with the ways in which all of those touchstones for condemning the ignorant have been produced; see Grimwood 2021b); just as the suggestion of engaging in dialogue, rather than throwing around insults of stupidity, *seems* an utterly reasonable approach. But this rationality involves a particular foregrounding of certain elements of dialogue at the expense of others. It is, as Gadamerian hermeneutics has long held, necessary for access to understanding to be mediated; but the form of that mediation can be inattentive to the tacit spoilers with which it might engage.

Consider another example. One of the most important books on ignorance, at least in analytic philosophy, has been Miranda Fricker's work on epistemic injustice. Fricker is less interested in ignorance *per se* and more the exclusion of certain groups being deemed to be "knowers," arguing that this exclusion is both epistemological and hermeneutic in nature. As such, the work is an important step towards re-imagining the focus of traditional studies on knowledge. However, it also demonstrates, inadvertently, the problem with appeals to dialogue. For Fricker, addressing

epistemic injustice requires awareness of different levels of interpretation, or “intellectual gears,” with which we respond to claims to knowledge. A level of “spontaneous, unreflective” response can often bear several unfair prejudices by a listener against a speaker. However, Fricker suggests that if one suspects prejudice to their “credibility judgement” – through a sense of cognitive dissonance, emotional response and so on – then they should shift their intellectual gear into “active critical reflection in order to identify how far the suspected prejudice has influenced her judgement” (2007, p. 91).

It is interesting, though, that all the examples that Fricker uses involve dealing with a first-hand dialogue between a speaker and a listener; but each dialogue is a reported narrative, a retelling (for the purpose of explicating her argument), with her recurrent example being Tom Robinson from *To Kill a Mockingbird*. These stand as ideal cases, carefully constructed narrative devices to expose the clear ignorance of one group or the exclusion of another. This serves to keep the analysis contained within a certain mode of knowing: canonical literature, well-established within school curricula, and the lists of greatest Hollywood films alike. This is not to say that it can’t be a useful example, of course. But the wider historical circuits of the example, and its effect on its persuasive power, is not explored. The example is thus wrapped in a tacit spoiler, and by complying with such spoilers the layers of mediation involved in the example are under-explored. Such mediation might involve the deeper historical and social contexts of racial injustice that Fricker ignores; it might equally involve the institutional banalities providing its credibility as a set reading for the General Certificate in Secondary Education in English Literature. Fricker utilises the example because we know it; but in jumping to the end, overriding the means by which some aspects are mediated and others are ignored, renders her interpretation a literal spoiling of the hermeneutic dialogue. It is not spoiling the end, so much as literally spoiling the materiality of the text. As a result, Fricker leaves us with a solution that focuses on the self-reflection of the individual, presented through a diverse web of social, pedagogical, and referential relationships.

All of these examples are, in this sense, reflections of Theodore George’s suggestion that, “in many quarters, whether in the academy, the media, or even the arts, the concern to tarry on the political, to attempt to make things visible in a new way, is increasingly squelched in the name of frames of debate that already have accepted trappings and established channels of dissemination” (George, 2020, p. 142). Or, perhaps, simply Vattimo’s return to “the West.” However, they are also examples of complicities arising from general apprehensions about the threat of ignorance. Hence, Jaffe suggests that the spoiler and the trigger constitute “a literary-historical interface between epistemological confidence and ontological confusion which may have been baked into media modernity all along” (2019, p. 67). The task of a hermeneutics is to engage with the conditions of such confusion, not to reduce or obscure them, but rather to understand how it is enacted and performed in the mediating structures that are supposed to resolve them. It is not enough, in other words, to consider the dialogical aspect of hermeneutics as mediative without also considering the phronetic contexts of application. But in digital media, such application involves constant associations of meaning that are not simply linguistic, but also affective, promissory, and often tacit, all of which can be easily obscured from more traditional foci of interpretation. In many senses, these associations are a more localised and everyday process of what Vattimo termed “interpretative agencies.” Interpreting these sites of association would lead us, not to a Le Bon-esque diagnosis of ignorance as a contagious pathogen in need of a cure, or a nostalgia for the certainties of the pre-postmodern “knowledge,” but rather to a hermeneutics of ignorance,

embedded within the curation of knowledge and stupidity. This may bring us back to the work of agnotology: a hermeneutics of ignorance is not concerned with demarcating itself from its opposite (that is; intelligence, understanding, applied “truth”), but to acknowledge the complicities at work in any engagement with ignorance. This is not, though, simply to admit or describe the necessary ignorance in our hermeneutic disposition. Instead, it carries an obligation to understand the curation of what is foregrounded and what is left in the background in the mediation of understanding, and the access it provides – in all its linguistic and material forms.

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