

Poetics of insinuation

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“It is the very error of the moon. She
comes more nearer earth than she was
wont. And makes men mad.”

William Shakespeare,
Othello

The poetics of delight in the beauty of human achievements and fruits of those achievements have situated and kept researchers on the light side of the road for centuries¹. Not encouraging anyone to resign from the charms of that situation, we should nonetheless always bear in mind the existence of its rarely taken and explored opposite, hidden in the shadows of the dark side.

Half-truths

Let me illustrate the allusive mechanism of insinuation with the famous example of the Wehrmacht grandfather. The politician in question was born in Gdańsk, and his father's family was from Kashubia. This creates some inducement to insinuate that the politician is not Polish. And if not – what nationality is he? Perhaps German, which seems to be confirmed by the fact that his grandfather served in the German army – regardless of the fact that he was conscripted. The Wehrmacht uniform, combined with Polish prejudices, is enough to perceive the politician's friendly relationships with Angela Merkel and his relative popularity in Germany as a confirmation of his German origin. Thus, despite being a lifelong Polish patriot, he became a “German”, i.e. – an alien, stranger, foreigner. Many people, especially those prone to suggestions, are going to believe it solely on the basis of insinuations. And this is precisely what insidious insinulators count on.

¹ “Knowledge is a source of pleasure, and moreover it is beautiful to discover why and how a given text can produce so many good interpretations” – said Umberto Eco.

Insinuation is a threat. Its social toxicity stems from the poison of a lie – communicated and maliciously spread in order to mislead. But how is it a lie? The politician’s grandfather was in Wehrmacht, and so his grandson’s dubious nationality is a fact.

Insinuation poisons individual thinking. It operates on its appearances, which lead confused minds astray, to madness. An insinuator always hopes for false reasoning and negative emotions. They force us to suppose (“you are intelligent people” – argues Winnicki, a communist politician played by Janusz Gajos in the series *Alternatywy 4*) that there has to be something to it, as Germans want to (gradually) Germanize and enslave us. How? Craftily. Ideally with the help of collaborators and traitors.

Etymology

Before we take a closer look at morphological properties of such messages, we should consider the etymology of “insinuation”. It comes from the Latin verb *insinuo*, *insinuare*, which means “to covertly and subtly introduce into the mind or heart”, from Latin *insinuatus*, “to thrust in, push in, make a way; creep in, intrude, bring in by windings and curvings, wind one’s way into,” from *in-* “in” (from Proto-Indo-European root *en “in”) and *sinuare* “to wind, bend, curve,” from *sinus* “a curve, winding”. In some languages, e.g. in English, there is another Latin word with that meaning: *innuendo*. Latin has one more synonym: *imputo*, *imputare* – literally “to reckon, charge, enter into the account”, i.e. “to attribute, credit to; to impute”.

Similarly to fake news, insinuation has been a tool of the (mis)information war since antiquity. From the perspective of its communication aspects, the meaning of another one of its Latin synonyms is significant: *insimulatio*, which comes from the verb *insimulo*, *insimulare* – “to accuse, blame, charge”.

Rhetoric of acumen

The gullible easily fall for insinuation – after all, *mundus vult decipi*. The ease with which naïve human minds absorb and acquire desired information is a perfect territory for manipulators – both individuals and groups. Rhetoric is of key importance here. Insinulators manipulate information, twist facts, do a snow job, confuse reason; they suggest, convince and inspire suspicion. Using suggestion, they put forward harmful insinuations in bad faith.

We deal with insinuation on a daily basis. It transforms what is doubtful into doubtless, unobvious into obvious, and open into clearly defined. Using a certain set of rhetorical devices, an insinuator operates with an intrigue of vagueness, setting sophisticated traps of the unambiguous final conclusion. It thus deprives individuals of their own reflection; yes, they are supposed to identify the hidden, implied meaning, but without their own interpretation. In insinuation, the safe route of reasoning eliminates the risk of doubts, it misleads by offering a deceptive certainty of alleged truth. By demanding specific conclusions, it changes doubts and twists and turns of complex interpretation into the certainty of the suggested overinterpretation.

Today, communication has no limits. Treated as an incomprehensively extensive repertoire of processes and social practices, it can take various forms. However, due to its nature, each time it opens itself to civilizational, cultural, and – last but not least – ethical problems. Ethics in the communication process – regardless whether in the artistic sphere or not – remains in a close relationship with their poetics, with a given message, its interpretation and poetics of reception.

In a 1990 lecture on Richard Rorty's paper given in Clare Hall in Cambridge, Umberto Eco consistently defended both the value of a work of art as an inexhaustible source of ambiguous interpretations, as well as the fact that possible interpretations intended and designed by the author do not mean that overinterpretations are as justified².

No smoke without fire

Can insinuation be treated as a message with overinterpretation assumed in advance? I would seem that this is indeed the case. Insinuation as a device not only does not require reliable, independent interpretation – it actually avoids and eliminates it. Insinuation demands simple reasoning: taking suggestions for granted, and not bothering about a critical analysis when confronted with facts. A detailed analysis would ultimately unmask the hidden perfidy of its distortions.

Discourse and dialogue based on partnership which aim to establish the facts are useless or even undesirable for insinulators. They aim for suggested overinterpretation of what they imply, rather than for an independent interpretation. It seems logical – it is common knowledge that there is no smoke without fire. In order to see through hidden mechanisms of the rhetoric of insinuation and understand them, it is enough to refer to this saying, known in many languages (e.g. in German *Es gibt Keinem Rauch ohne Feuer*). Every insinuator knows that there is no smoke without fire – it is the quintessence of the false logic to which they refer and appeal.

Apparent coherence

What is this insidiously concocted coherence which guarantees insinuation's success? It is a good question, since a lie combined with truth should immediately undermine the dubious coherence of such messages. As a construct equipped with suggesting meaning, insinuation is internally coherent, as it is neither truth nor false. The two-value matrix of thinking seems natural only to the point when we are able to differentiate and clearly separate truth from false – as two opposite, mutually exclusive values of communicating. So how do we know what is what? Using reading based on reason and acquired skills of our upbringing, education, and the sum of personal experiences. Thanks to them, the axiomatics of binary opposition of truth and false, rooted in culture, regulates our reasoning and resulting constataions, equipping us with a coherent vision of broadly understood reality.

² Umberto Eco, "Replika" [Replica], in: Umberto Eco, Richard Rorty, Jonathan Culler, Christine Brooks-Rose, *Interpretacja i nadinterpretacja* [Interpretation and overinterpretation], edited by Stefan Collini, translated into Polish by Tomasz Bieroń (Kraków: Znak, 1996), 136ff.

The sanctioned logics of the commonly accepted order of thinking provides a sense of certainty in the processes of the human mind, such as: judging, defining, comparing, classifying, concluding, deducing, inducing, conjunction, differentiating, identifying, generalizing, excluding, etc. Each of these processes organizes our cognition around the classical, Aristotelian model of analyzing and judging what is true. Referring to the learned model of reasoning, encoded in our working memory, we constantly decide what is true, and what is false. We oscillate between those two poles, accepting what we decide is true, and rejecting what we decide is false. It all seems absolutely right and certain as a result of reasoning – as long as we realize that in communication, apart from truth and false, we also deal with a third category: that which is neither true, nor false³. This category does not suspend cognition dilemmas related to the two-value logics, but it takes into consideration messages based on the duality dilemma, which deliberately play a game between acceptance and rejection on the narrow and steep edge of *verisimilitude*.

Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see
She has deceived her father, and may thee.

(Brabantio in *Othello* by Shakespeare)

Each message containing insinuation causes anxiety; insinuation feels best in the area of uncertainty. You do not know this or that, but you will soon find out – from me. I am going to make sure you know. This is the truth. Think, but not too much, and you shall discover what I have discovered. The reading of a message provided by an insinuator by the assumed addressee should not be skeptical; it is based on the feeling of exclusion from being in the know, which suddenly transforms into learning a mystery via insinuation.

Let us use another example. By scaring society with “the total opposition”, presented by the propaganda as “aliens, foreigners”, the ruling party tried to convince Poles that if Civic Platform were to win general elections, they would immediately ban meat consumption, and force citizens to eat worms instead. The absurdity of this concept is striking, but it does not matter, as the total opposition should be fought with total absurdity. Declared carnivores will believe it (if they really want to).

Just think

It is possible to measure and scale susceptibility to insinuation: it is directly proportional to the level of frustration experienced by individuals and communities. The more frustration, the more susceptible to insinuation people become. Look around and you will feel the same. America is dying, it is no longer America, because foreign politicians, traitors, are in power, and they destroy its identity. We are true, simple Americans, who need to do something about it, even resorting to violence. Our candidate, Donald Trump, did not lose the elections, because the results were in fact falsified. We need to defend the Capitol and chase away traitors.

³ The original concept of the three-value logics was developed by the Lviv philosopher, Jan Łukasiewicz, over a hundred years ago. See Jan Łukasiewicz, “O logice trójwartościowej” [On three-value logics], *Ruch Filozoficzny* (9) 1920.

Insinuation is a product of imagination deriving matrixes and ways of generating the message from creative writing. The visible similarity between the two results from operating with a fictional imitation of the real world, fabrication styled as facts, and half-truths pretending to be real. Insinuation is subversive by default. The hidden conclusion at which it aims remains in suspension. The contents of a message and hidden meaning appeals to bad emotions. Language is used to blur produced meaning in order to enforce the intended meaning.

Rumor has it... In every form, insinuation relies on echo in the form of false reasoning. A rumor, hearsay, conspiracy theory, poison pen, slander, lampoon, libel, fabricated evidence, philippic, speech for the prosecution, political campaign, fake news... they all aim at a certain reception, conviction that even if something is not completely true, there is something to it. Insinuation is fueled by the transmission of probability. An insinuator does not say anything directly to the person they try to manipulate, and they do not bother to separate the truth from lies, since the truth – as is commonly known – does not exist. “None will convince us that white is white and black is black”. We know better. Insinuation simultaneously feeds on truth and false, which makes it highly problematic to read, as in the designed communication process it entwines and ties together truth and false in order to blur any significant differences. Trying to capture its meaning and reject what it suggests, the addressee is therefore forced to see those differences, treating the suggested probability as a form of fiction rather than a fact.

Imagination at work

In insinuation, vagueness – present in all sorts of messages – has the function of a deceitful bait. Using it aims to cast a net of understatements, counting on the addressee’s ignorance and forcing them to resort to suppositions. The relationship between an insinuator and the addressee of insinuation reaches its peak at the moment when the latter’s imagination – excited with the message – is fully captured. There are certain conditions which successful insinuation needs to meet. First of all, the addressee – who is given the role of an ignorant individual – is not supposed to learn everything from the insinuator. Incomplete information they receive requires them to fill in the missing pieces to create a full (suggested) picture. The assumed addressee is a special semantic construct, equipped first and foremost with acumen. However, vagueness as the motor of insinuation is not limited to logos; insinuation lets in on a secret. It concerns all kinds of messages: verbal, iconic, audial, audiovisual, etc., and it is generally based on the addressee figuring out – between the lines – what the secret is about via their own acumen.

The communicator’s role

In insinuation poetics, the key role is played by the schemer’s veiled strategy, just like Iago gradually entangles Othello in a scheme by throwing him into the pit of jealousy. This is to conceal the impressive function, put what is possible on display, make oneself invisible as the communicator of insinuation, put up appearances of giving voice to the cognitive function – to what seems to be real and obvious to everyone on condition they think for a moment. Intentional disinformation results from information based on points of vagueness, suggested to the recipient.

Insinuation is poisoned information, dangerous both for the attacked mind, and to the social environment where it circulates. A serum in the guise of personal mistrust and skepticism which launches the resistance of awareness is needed in order to protect oneself from it and not to succumb to its poison. Without it, individuals and communities become defenseless.

The cognitive processes involved in insinuation differ. In the recipient, insinuation stimulates a process of quasi-individual reasoning that something implicitly discussed is some truth previously unknown to them. This “something” is never fully articulated *expressis verbis* by the schemer. By taking the role of someone well informed, the insinuator only suggests, implies, redirects their victim’s attention, whereas in fact they create an alibi for themselves: “I never said that.” Insinuation communicates in a double way due to beating around the bush. The message expressed *expressis verbis* is simultaneously a part and cover of insinuation. It contains a concealed message, but the only way to protect oneself from it is the ability to crack the code it used. Successful insinuation requires balance between what is revealed, i.e. expressed directly, and what is concealed, i.e. suggested. Depriving the addressee of their liberty, locking their feelings and thoughts in the limits of insinuation is well camouflaged and achieved via manipulation. Insinuation makes the addressee an “insider”, someone “well informed”, who was “not in the know” before; once they are pulled in the manipulative discourse, they are “in the know”.

Insinuating means implying something without saying or communicating it directly. However, insinuation is not the same as subversive communication in general, although it has a lot in common with reading between the lines. Using subtext in communication is not reprehensible *a priori* – in fact, it is fully justified and acceptable. Moreover, in some circumstances it may even be the only possible option, e.g. due to censorship. What makes the fundamental difference between the two? It is elusive, takes place on the verge of poetics and ethics, each time engaging both those aspects of communication. Subtext is considered a certain characteristic of poetics or a message’s construction, whereas insinuation is degenerated due to bad intentions and a perfidious role given to it and arranged by the insinuator. The key difference between persuasion and manipulation in communication becomes intersubjectively tangible only when we recognize it via the tools of poetics of reception – highlighting the roles of the virtual communicator and the virtual addressee. In persuasive messages which aim to convince, the recipient is treated on equal terms, they are partners with the communicator, whereas in manipulative communication – such as insinuation – the addressee is a victim to be beguiled and manipulated. They are easy to confuse due to the used matrixes and rhetorical devices, and the difference, the true meaning is discovered only once the whole message is analyzed. All insinuation is in bad faith, one way or another. In the name of “truth” an insinuator falsifies and destroys it. However, it is not easy to identify it. From the functional perspective, in a regular message such as “brush your teeth”, “just do it”, “early bird catches...” etc. the designed and expressed information realizes the impressive function directly by default. Its meaning lies in what is said *expressis verbis*. On the other hand, in insinuation subtext is skillfully hidden, concealed, and it creates a semantic specter of the primary text – this specter is supposed to be the main message, suggesting (i.e. insinuating) the implied meaning. It is not a complete lie; insinuation always eagerly refers to “facts”, but whatever is true to facts has already been manipulated and reduced to the form of half-truth in order to legitimize suppositions.

It would seem that modern societies are more susceptible to manipulation. The previous century's invasion of destructive authoritarian and totalitarian regimes did not give humanity a lasting lesson. Busy with everyday issues, absorbed by their daily problems, people easily forget where they came from, what their predecessors went through, and what truly matters. This susceptibility seems to be supranational, and mass media – the Fourth Estate – play a major role in that. The problem, already prominent in democratic western countries, is even greater in Putin's Russia, which has been indoctrinating its citizens for generations, resulting in a conviction that genuine culture and faith need protecting from the West. In Poland, too, we often fall prey to collective illusions. *Homo informaticus* seems and believes to be well-informed about the surrounding world, whereas in reality their mind and worldview is often fed with a game of appearances. Hence what is believed to be information proves to be its disorienting substitute – fastfood infopulp.

Insinuation as a social fact

Other-directedness of individuals and communities is a major issue of today's world. It generates and determines susceptibility to insinuation. Reason is not enough – we need to think critically and be skeptical in order to navigate between truth and lies. What modern people consider to be their knowledge is not only industrially produced information, selective, simplified, and oftentimes completely useless. What is worse, this information is perfidiously manipulated to a large extent and in various ways by insinulators with a vested interest. Insinuation proves to be an introduction to creating an alternative reality, which replaces what actually exists. The insinuator is the only person who feels good in it, and everybody else – manipulated individuals and communities – suffers; this means that insinuation as a social fact is a significant threat. Insinulators' success relies on individual susceptibility, and so they have learned how to take advantage of it. For this reason, it is necessary to study its twisted mechanisms and ways in which it works, unmask and fight it, in order to reduce social susceptibility to it. It manifests itself in taking everything for granted, especially when information comes from the media. There are numerous examples – historical and from everyday life – that this uncritical trust of individuals and communities is a costly weakness. None should allow to be lied to, misled, and cognitively captivated – which is what insinuation does. Everyone who feeds their intellect with ideas which they take for granted, and which are in fact fruits of insinuation, will pay a high price for their unlimited naivety, gullibility, and mental laziness. In communication circulation, good money is personally verified: listen and look carefully, and consider it cautiously. There is no other form of securing oneself from someone else's perfidy and deception than our foresight, caution, and common sense, which should adequately react to attempts at manipulation. A crook, concealed prompter in the role of an insinuator always counts on their potential victim's naivety, whom they want to hoodwink and overpower in order to use them

translated by Paulina Zagórska

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KEYWORDS

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ABSTRACT:

The paper analyzes communication mechanisms of insinuation, using classical tools of poetics and rhetoric adapted to contemporary needs.

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hidden persuaders

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