|  |
| --- |
| **Some Notes on Art and Bureaucracy: Points for Discussion of Key Areas in Parallel Sessions at the Fourteenth Artists’ Regional Meeting**  **by Pil and Galia Kollectiv**  Since the 1960s, we have come to see the bureaucrat as the natural enemy of creative freedom. Synonymous with mediocrity, a petty clinging to power, anti-heroism, tedium and impotency, bureaucracy is often portrayed as a disease of modernity, which reduces the unique character of every single life to statistical probability and efficiency. Within the European art world, a common complaint is directed against public funding bodies, like Arts Council England in Britain, which, following vague and arbitrary managerial targets, support and promote compromised works of art that lack conviction or authenticity. Bureaucracy is seen as a side effect of highly complicated modern systems and never as an ideologically motivated politics in its own right. In this respect, bureaucracy is thought of as the engine of all modern political systems, liberal democratic or totalitarian, capitalist or communist, centralist or in a near anarchic state of breaking down of the nation state: all modern societies share the sacrifice of the individual to the arbitrariness of the management of large, complex systems.  It is easy to dismiss this suspicion of bureaucracy as the right wing American anti-Federalist fantasy cynically endorsed by Hollywood as a revisionist myth of resistance. The individual’s plight for justice, for the recognition of the complete incomparability of one’s love for a family member, under a suffocating bureaucracy is one of the major themes of cinema, from Michael Powel’*s A Matter of Life and Death*, where love is presented as an extenuating circumstance to a divine verdict of death in a heavenly court, to Clint Eastwood’s Changeling, where an imposter is rejected by a mother as replacement for her child in the face of a persistent police, media and mental health edifice. But in film and television an equally familiar treatment of bureaucracy is the attribution of agency to the system itself. The television show The Wire, for example, presents a situation where no individual can alter the course of this leviathan of drug crime, law enforcement and political corruption, and the ones who dare to oppose the oppressive injustice of the system are victims of an ironic realization that subversion plays a constructive role in the self-regulation of the bureaucratic monster. Both versions, either rightist or liberal, similarly address bureaucracy as the opposite force to the directness of a lived experience and the truthfulness and decisiveness of real political action.  In their study of the managerial discourse of the 1990s, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello identify several strands within what they define as the standard critique of capitalism, ranging from the oppression of autonomy and creativity to the production of inequality and poverty.[1] At one end we find what they call ‘social critique’, while at the other we have ‘artistic critique’. These critiques are in many ways opposed, the one endorsing a more traditional, communal way of life and rejecting the modern rise of individualism, the other promoting self-actualisation but negating its suppression under rationalized, modern conditions of production. In spite of this, they have historically formed temporary ‘anti-bourgeois’ allegiances, but moreover, they have fed into capitalism itself, which, having no inherent ideology with which to justify its consequences, colonises and assimilates critique, thereby disarming it. It is the fate of artistic critique in light of this development that is especially relevant to our discussion.  The artistic critique that demanded autonomy and liberation from traditional societies, paternalism, bureaucracy and Taylorism has been heeded in ways that cannot merely be dismissed as illusory. While the call for self-realisation may be falsely answered within capitalism by consumer culture – although even this is not incontestable – the advent of more flexible work arrangements and the deregulation of markets have truly increased the amount of freedom available to the post-1968 generation. Boltanski and Chiapello assert that capitalism only recuperates the kind of freedom that ultimately serves its ends, so for example workers are given more autonomy in decision-making processes, but these are narrowly framed by procedural constraints to do with the monitoring of overall productivity. Similarly, women have successfully fought for the right to work, without securing duties for men, gaining more freedom, but not necessarily more equality. From this perspective, the struggle against the rationalized society that produces both corrupt bureaucracies and systemic injustices is a double-edged sword: in vanquishing these arbitrary structures, we may enhance our freedom, but not destabilize the greater goals of capitalism that produced them. Thus, when artists or films continue to represent the bureaucrat as the enemy, they ignore the fact that the kind of creativity they are calling for is currently deployed far more oppressively in its production of precariousness in the labour market.  But perhaps the dichotomy between bureaucracy and personal freedom has always been a chimera, a myth that has diverted our political energies from the pursuit of a just and equal form of management of the social to a disproportionate passion for personal freedom. Bureaucracy itself already contains a place for individualism and creativity, as Herbert Marcuse explains in “Some Social Implications of Modern Technology”:  Max Weber has already stressed the connection between mass-democracy and bureaucracy: "In contrast to the democratic self-administration of small homogeneous units," the bureaucracy is "the universal concomitant of modern mass democracy." The bureaucracy becomes the concomitant of the modern masses by virtue of the fact that standardization proceeds along the lines of specialization. The latter by itself, provided that it is not arrested at the point where it interferes with the domain of vested control, is quite compatible with the democratization of functions. Fixated specialization, however, tends to atomize the masses and to insulate the subordinate from the executive functions. We have mentioned that specialized vocational training implies fitting a man to a particular job or a particular line of jobs, thus directing his "personality," spontaneity and experience to the special situations he may meet in filling the job. In this manner, the various professions and occupations, notwithstanding their convergence upon one general pattern, tend to become atomic units which require coordination and management from above. The technical democratization of functions is counteracted by their atomization, and the bureaucracy appears as the agency which guarantees their rational course and order”.[2]  In Marcuse’s account, it is precisely the breakdown of social structures and the atomized placement of the individual within these loose structures that require strong bureaucracy as a mediating power between the higher levels of management and the individual. Marcuse contradicts the view that bureaucracy is simply the decaying and obsolete support for the 20th century project of the welfare state that the forces of the market quietly and efficiently continue to dismantle. Those very forces that demand greater autonomy for the individual and less centralisation in fact require a greater amount of bureaucratic control.  This deconstruction of the binary of personal freedom and creativity vs. bureaucracy is further complicated in Hannah Arendt’s analysis of the birth of bureaucracy as a political system from British Imperialism and pan-Germanic and pan-Slavic tendencies in Europe and leading up to the ultimate triumph of bureaucracy under the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century. This specific historical context gave, according to Arendt, a special character to bureaucracy as a method of governance. First, Bureaucrats embody power without transparency and accountability, and since they “are not supposed to have general ideas about political matters” represent a form of power divorced from ethical deliberation or a negotiation of different positions.[3] Motivated by the expansionist aspirations of the empire rather than by a vision of just and stable rule, the space between the individual who holds power and the state vanishes: “no matter what individual qualities or defects a man may have, once he has entered the maelstrom of an unending process of expansion, he will, as it were, cease to be what he was and obey the laws of the process, identify himself with anonymous forces that he is supposed to serve in order to keep the whole process in motion”.[4] Identifying himself with the very drive of history, whether successful or not, the bureaucrat conceals his actions behind the vague and supposedly natural movement of historical forces. Thus, the bureaucrat occupies an invisible place at the very heart of history and, at the same time, outside of historical memory.  The second characterisation of imperial bureaucracy in Arendt’s analysis derives from the relationship between bureaucratic management and the law. “Legally, government by bureaucracy is government by decree, and this means that power, which in constitutional government only enforces the law, becomes the direct source of all legislation.”[5] The bureaucratic decree cannot be identified with any one particular legislator or be open to scrutiny from authority outside the administration. Furthermore, writes Ardent, “The administrator considers the law to be powerless because it is by definition separated from its application. The decree, on the other hand, does not exist at all except if and when it is applied”.[6] Rejecting the slowness of deliberation before a law has been agreed upon and its interpretation under the legal system, the bureaucrat unifies law and action. The space between the universal aspirations of the law, to apply to all who fall under its jurisdiction without prejudice and the particular uniqueness of each case is annulled by the specific operation of the decree which, in a tautological move, draws its power and legitimacy not from a law preceding it but from its very moment of application.  Arendt’s account of bureaucracy demolishes the liberal assumption that freedom, creativity, mobility and innovation are contradictory forces to the bureaucratic administration of life. In its invisible operation, its elasticity and its cancellation of the spaces between legislator and arbitrator, ruler and ruled, action and history, bureaucracy is closer to the demands of the avant garde. The avant garde, under the sign of which contemporary art still operates, wished to respond to the demands of life directly and without hesitation, to define an autonomy within the immanent function of its own logic, to collapse discourse and action. Similarly, bureaucracy is inherently anti-representational, both in the sense of visible political representatives accountable before a governed body and the partial representation of the law in its application. Both require an external and inexhaustible justification (infinite imperial expansion for the bureaucrat, the utopian realization of aesthetic principles in the everyday for the avantgardist) to define this immanent autonomy.  It is in the pursuit of this (il)logic that Neue Slowenische Kunst, the Slovenian art collective better known for its musical arm, Laibach, structured their activities within the framework of a complex hierarchy depicted as a mystifying ‘organigram’, or organizational diagram. This flow chart of departments and subdivisions, including fine art group Irwin, theatre troupe Scipion Nasice, design office Novi Kollektivism and the Department of Pure and Applied Philosophy at once parodied and competed with the official state apparatus of the late Communist Yugoslav system. As Alexei Monroe explains:  NSK was consciously designed as an ambiguous and highly flexible container of the literal and psychic investments and projections of its audience and members. It deliberately includes gray areas and bodies without precisely defined functions, enabling a multiplicity of interpretations while decreasing the chances that any of them will decisively penetrate it. The organigram is a “fantasy structure”. Even the maximum membership of NSK could never hope to staff all the departments shown on the organigram, let alone carry out wider political tasks.[7]  Proposing a “more stringent ethos than that of the state itself”, the NSK strategy of replicating and amplifying ideological state apparatuses does not call for a dismantling of bureaucracy, but identifies and appropriates the creativity inherent in such power structures.[8] Despite its semi-fictional nature, it is impossible to dismiss the organigram as purely ironic. In both connecting and transcending any specific list of NSK outputs, it functioned as the foremost achievement of this loose association of groups at its height, culminating in the NSK ‘state in time’ project, which actually issued passports to ‘citizens’. That the organigram deployed a powerful visual aesthetic, much like the merchandise marketed by the NSK state, differentiates the group from comparable artistic enterprises that might try to ridicule the way bureaucracies end up generating cultural products wanted by nobody, such as Komar and Melamid’s [Most and Least Wanted Painting](http://awp.diaart.org/km/painting.html) project. Where the latter demonstrate that painting by committee can only result in undesirable monstrosities (a combination of tacky realism, nature scenes, historical figures and animals can only end up disastrously), NSK harness the sublime beauty and power of bureaucracy itself. In dispensing with the reactionary question of what might replace bureaucracy – impossible to answer without reverting to nostalgic ideas of small-scale pre-modern structures – they reposition artistic critique, no longer cooptable from its position of antagonism to power, but always already compromised within the dialectic of freedom.  [1] Boltanski, Luc, and Chiapello, Eve, The New Spirit of Capitalism, London: Verso, 2007, p. 37.  [2] Marcuse, Herbert, “Some Social Implications of Modern Technology”, Studies in Philosophy and Social Science, 1941, at: http://users.ipfw.edu/tankel/PDF/Marcuse.pdf. [accessed 22.06.09].  [3] Arendt, Hannah, The Origins of Totalitarianism, San Diego: Harvest, 1968, p. 214.  [4] Ibid., p. 215.  [5] Ibid., p. 243.  [6] Ibid., p.244.  [7] Monroe, Alexei, Interrogation Machine: Laibach and NSK, Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2005, pp. 111-2  [8] Ibid., p. 112. |