

Looking like an Administration: Towards an Aesthetics of Bureaucracy

JONATHAN FOSTER, ALEXANDRA IRIMIA, BURKHARDT WOLF

In recent decades, research has begun to explore the aesthetic and cultural dimensions of public administration. Before this, however, these dimensions had hardly been discussed. From the historical establishment of modern bureaucracies to their reflection by organisational theory in the twentieth century, administrations were perceived in other registers. When, in the mid-eighteenth century, the physiocrat Vincent de Gournay coined the term »bureaucracy«, his intention was to characterise what he viewed as a new form of rule: that of the legion of clerks employed by Louis XV in the course of his administrative reform.¹ Gournay's new term was essentially a pun: »To the classic three regimes, democracy, aristocracy, and monarchy—that is, rule by the many, the few, and the one—Gournay had added rule by a piece of office furniture.«² French administrative power had passed from the colourful and prestigious Versailles to small and gloomy parlours and from the stage of courtly events to anonymous and subaltern administrative officials—and yet, at the same time, the process of »bureaucratisation« had also sparked a creative impulse and generated an image of administrative power with meme-like intensity.

A century after de Gournay, the German statesman and political scientist Robert von Mohl, himself also a liberal, described bureaucracy as an »inexpedient formality«, a »waste of ink« and ultimately as »completely superfluous« or »formally pointless paperwork«, which

must ultimately lead to the »certain death of every ingenious thought«. For him, bureaucratic »paper controls« threatened to divest public life of its colourful diversity.³ Even in Max Weber's classic theorisation of bureaucracy, which places the administrative *officium* at the heart of modern rationalization, bureaucratic institutions function in a realm shaped by impersonal mechanisms that are not subjected to aesthetic or cultural variation. As Weber puts it, a dispassionate »staff of subaltern officials and scribes of all sorts« enacts and embodies the »dominance of a spirit of formalistic impersonality: ›Sine ira et studio‹, without hatred or passion, and hence without affection or enthusiasm.«⁵ Bureaucracy has, in other words, long been regarded as a dehumanizing mode of organisation and a »dead zone of the imagination.«⁶

What has been attributed to administrative institutions since the 18th century is, in essence, mediocrity and tediousness, futility and superfluousness, dryness and stupidity, as well as a lack of character verging on inhumanity. For this reason, the very concept of »administrative aesthetics« (Eugenie Samier)⁷ or of an »aesthetics of administration« (Benjamin Buchloch)⁸—the subject that we have set out to explore in this special issue—presents itself as a bit of an impossibility, an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms. And yet, states have kept the most diverse artists and writers busy. From early modern portraitists and commissioned painters to

photographers and filmmakers, from Honoré de Balzac to Franz Kafka and David Foster Wallace, bureaucracy has not only been dealt with under the auspices of alienation and criticism of power, but also with intense interest and a certain contrarian fascination. It is precisely because of its supposed dullness and stupidity that bureaucracy has posed a specifically aesthetic challenge, with writers and artists exploring quandaries such as »how to make administrative systems interesting to a reader, how to embody abstract public values, and how to make an absence of individualism seem heroic.«⁹ Alongside artistic explorations of the good in public service, literary and artistic renditions have highlighted how administrative routine can turn into the grotesque and the ridiculous.¹⁰ Questions have also been raised as to whether the actual operational secrets of the modern state are not hidden behind the appearance of the superfluous in administrative statecraft. Historians, portraitists and narrators of administration have likewise been sensitive to the acute risk of the programmatic discipline, obedience and »inhumanity« of bureaucrats developing into a veritable »iron cage« of bureaucracy, to borrow Weber's famous metaphor for the potentially undemocratic ambitions of the modern administrative state.¹¹

As soon as administrative statecraft is depicted in literature or visual arts, its cultural dimension becomes apparent. Since the later twentieth century, attempts have been made to capture this dimension in cultural studies as well. Werner Jann, for example, distinguished three dimensions of an »administrative culture« in 1983: firstly, the attitudes and opinions of society towards public administration; secondly, the patterns of orientation, the professional ethos and the forms of social interaction within the administration itself; and thirdly, the way in which the administration positions itself within its state, social and economic environment.¹² Other cultural studies approaches have pointed to the organisationally fundamental function of the forms and media of bureaucratic writing. Not only do file notes, minutes and forms serve and shape very different aspects of administrative work, but they also make a huge difference as to whether an administration primarily creates its files by hand or by means of typewriters or even computers.¹³ The introduction of electronic data processing into administration, in

particular, has led to a changed working environment with fewer centralised control options, with a dominance of informal contacts, loose couplings and network formations and therefore, greater uncertainty with regard to jobs and tasks. It is precisely these conditions that Niklas Luhmann identified as the reason why the concept of »organisational culture« has become important in administrative science, but also in neoliberal reform agendas such as »New Public Management«.¹⁴ In this new paradigm, culture is understood as that which is not explicitly regulated but which nonetheless shapes institutional praxes. In terms of systems theory, administrations or bureaucracies may be defined as formally structured decision-making agencies. However, in addition to this formal structure (which concerns internal hierarchies, record keeping or clearly regulated tasks of staff), an informal organisational culture inevitably emerges, which includes habits, manners and a certain self-image, all of which are important for the actions and decisions of the administration, but which themselves have never been determined by explicit decisions.

In the context of a corporate metaphor, the following distinction has therefore been made to illustrate this: the formal structure of an organisation represents its skeleton, while the informal structure or »culture« represents its nervous system and its skin.¹⁵ The »nervous system« refers to the organisation's internal »culture«: the informal but consequential practices and habits of administrative operations. These include, for example, certain language rules and manners within an administration and peculiarities of speech and appearance, which are, of course, of interest to art and literature. But they also include certain qualities of flexibility and creativity demanded by management programmes, which are intended to optimise staff interaction and performance and make the organisation more adaptive: inspiration techniques (such as »brainstorming«) or communication strategies (such as »storytelling«) that derive from aesthetic procedures (the surrealist automatic writing, the unfolding of narrative arcs) have recently become a part of institutional praxes.¹⁶ Last but not least, the »nervous system« of an organisation naturally also includes the appealing and ergonomically correct design of the internal bureaucratic environment, namely the »office space«. Since the 1960s

at least, there has been a conviction in the field of work organisation that the design of office spaces has a lasting influence on the performance of employees. Concepts such as the »action office« (by Robert Probst) or »office landscapes« (by the Quickborn team) derived from empirical studies of office productivity were introduced in a bid to improve office-workers' mental agility and creative workflow.¹⁷ The ›skin‹ of an organisation, on the other hand, concerns its informal or cultural ›outside‹, the façade or rhetoric that it uses to present itself. By means of this façade (e.g. self-professed ›efficiency‹ and ›customer-friendliness‹), today's organisations try to justify themselves to politicians and secure the favour of citizens or whoever their clients might be.

Questions concerning administrative culture and aesthetics, then, have increasingly come to the fore in the study of administrative systems. Against this backdrop, this issue of »Administory« presents different encounters between administration, art, design, architecture, film and literature, spanning various historical and geographical contexts, with a particular focus on questions to do with administrative aesthetics. Whilst there is a longstanding interest in administrative aesthetics in the field of public administration studies, this concept has not been closely delineated or theorised as such.¹⁸ For the purposes of this special issue, we take administrative aesthetics to mean, briefly put, the stylistic repertoire shaping culturally determined representations and material features of state administration. In other words, paraphrasing two seminal studies of statecraft—James C. Scott's »Seeing like a State« (1998)¹⁹ and Davina Cooper's »Feeling like a State« (2019)²⁰—administrative aesthetics concerns »Looking like a State«.

Despite the concerted effort to move away from the paradigm of grey bureaucracy with the rise of ›New Public Management‹ in the late twentieth century, the very colourlessness and rigidity of public service institutions continue to play a significant role in legitimating institutional authority, as the outward and aesthetic manifestation of bureaucratic rationality and impartiality. Numerous scholars have observed the significance of aesthetics in the production of the authority of public institutions. Studying the design of bureaucratic spaces, Marc Raeff observes that the authority of street-level bureaucracies is produced through the creation of a »bureaucratic ambience«

maintained by practices such as »prescribing the number of inkwells and the proper way of taking care of them«.²¹ Similarly, examining the graphic properties of textual administrative artefacts, Lisa Gitelman observes that the quality of »looking official,« achieved through a »baroque complexity of security features,« is integral to the authority of the official document.²²

Besides playing a crucial part in the production of state authority, administrative aesthetics also constitutes a source of work-life satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) for members of bureaucratic organisations. Whilst paperwork has a reputation as the dreariest of chores, Mirco Göpfert observes that state functionaries frequently »strive for aesthetic satisfaction« in writing and filing reports.²³ In other words, contradicting the Weberian conception of the bureaucrat's technical competence as tending towards impersonality and dispassion, certain administrative textual genres and bureaucratic activities, in fact, leave room for personal expression, creativity and enjoyment. H. George Fredrickson's query, »Can bureaucracy be beautiful?«, which points to the aesthetic appeal of bureaucratic »precision, harmony, routine, and ritual,« such as its »balance of form in architecture«, is thus more than justified.²⁴ It also goes against established theories of aesthetics. To cite one of the most canonical examples, G.W.F. Hegel's systematic philosophy of art presented in his »Lectures on Aesthetics« postulates a strong contrast between beauty and normativity: »what we enjoy in the beauty of art is precisely the freedom of its productive and plastic energy. In its origination, as in the contemplation, of its creations we appear to escape wholly from the fetters of rule and regularity.«²⁵ This staged dualism between untethered creative energy and the rigidity of formal rules, which follows the classical dialectic tension between the Dionysian and the Apollonian, is clearly thrown into question by what Tess Lea describes as »bureaucracy as a source of pleasure, even jouissance«—in a word, »administrative frisson.«²⁶

The richness and variety of office aesthetics is set centre stage in »Bureaucraties« (2008), Jan Banning's pioneering photographic study of administrators in their offices. By highlighting the striking visual differences that exist between administrative cultures, Banning's photography demonstrates the fruitfulness and importance of taking a comparative approach

to the study of administrative aesthetics.²⁷ The same attention to cultural variation is needed in the study of »bureaucratic poetics«, whether the object of stylistic analysis is an administrative artefact or a literary text influenced by bureaucratic textuality.²⁸ As C. H. Sisson aptly puts it, »[i]t is not, to say the least, obvious that British officials are writing in the language of Shakespeare until one observes that French officials are, by contrast, using the language of Racine.«²⁹ Rather than speaking of a general »aesthetics of administration«—which would clearly lack scientific rigor, given that administrative cultures differ markedly both geographically and historically—the articles in this issue place great emphasis on the particularity and singularity of their individual case studies. Of course, it is equally clear that certain components of state bureaucracy are all but universal, with the obvious example being the centrality of the desk as the organising principle of the office. Indeed, as Pieter Vermeulen puts it in a recent curatorial report on a bureaucracy-themed art exhibition,³⁰ bureaucratic systems come with »an unmistakable visual vocabulary.«³¹

Taking a dynamic and versatile outlook on bureaucracy, mindful of historical and cultural differences, our contributors approach bureaucratic settings and procedures as aesthetic phenomena, characterised by culture-specific styles and rhetorics, investigating what kind of aesthetics they yield. The contributions to the present special issue explore various aspects of the aesthetics of bureaucratic textual genres, office spaces and administrative paraphernalia. **Erk Volkmar Heyen** focuses on the evolution and use of certain recurring visual motifs in the European iconography of public administration, in a contribution that follows up on his 2013 book »Verwaltete Welten – Mensch, Gemeinwesen und Amt in der europäischen Malerei«. Heyen shows that from the 16th century to the present day, the portrayal of the administration, its personnel and its ambience, would often deploy pictorial means to reflect, evaluate and even criticise the decor and dynamics of administration. The article included here is the latest addition to this broader argument, supported by a close analysis of two lithographs from the late twentieth century.

The relationship between administration and the visual arts continues to be explored in new media: since

the iconic 1980s British satire »Yes Minister«, visual depictions of bureaucracies are no longer confined to painting, photography, feature film, or observational documentaries, but have also become the subject of popular TV series (it suffices to name here »The Office« and »Mad Men«). Writing about the latter, the article contributed by **Kira Kaufmann** offers a diachronic perspective on how administrations have been made »interesting« and visually appealing since the 1960s, how they have been discovered and shaped as cultural phenomena - and how today, in historical retrospect, we can discover the aesthetics of bureaucratic culturalisation which have only intensified since.

Under the conditions of computer-supported administration, the old bureaucracies and their old tools (such as paper, pens, erasers, staples) are radically historicised, becoming peculiarly obsolete objects that now appear in a nostalgic light. The article co-authored by **Isabella Brandalise, Judy Park Lee** and **Lucas Vaqueiro** uses the metaphor of a cabinet of curiosities to frame this materially-anchored nostalgia in a way that opens it not only for critical reflection, but also for artistic interventions co-curated by civil servants. The creative argument set forth here is informed by observational fieldwork conducted in public sector facilities (most prominently, in the Brazilian National School of Public Administration) in 2021 and 2022. Interestingly, it engages with the social media dissemination of images of »bureaucratic artifacts« as »sociomaterial infrastructures« and »porous sites of transformation«. Two other contributions perform case studies of this form of administrative image politics. **Jonathan Voges** offers a detailed analysis of the 1927 design contest gathering proposals for the headquarters of the League of Nations, looking at various criteria used to create and evaluate strategies for translating institutional mission and values into architectural form. Voges' article hints at broader aesthetic and political questions concerning the complicated process of creating a building of utmost symbolic value that doubles as an efficient large-scale administrative machine. **Sanchita Khurana's** contribution is likewise concerned with the interplay between political power and the design of constructed public space, this time from an urbanistic perspective. Khurana's take on recent street art commissioning by the municipal administration in Delhi exposes a web

of bureaucratic circuitry whose malfunctions have a visible impact on the urban tissue of the city, which is ironic given that the street art initiatives examined in the article are part of a concerted effort to culturally revamp bureaucratic architectural spaces.

Simon Rothöhler addresses the extent to which overflowing archives of office records can be digitised and virtualised in new, multimedia-embedded administrations, as well as the material, technological, and conceptual challenges entailed by this process. The author takes Iron Mountain Inc., an American company of information management born under the nuclear threat of the Cold War, as an exemplary case study for the development of corporate document storage facilities. A closer look at the aesthetics of institutional ›infomercials‹ created by these private bureaucracies reveals the fine threshold they have to navigate between the visibility of public relations work and the invisibility required by the safeguarding of documents in remote, inaccessible vaults. Although paperwork proliferates at an accelerated pace in contemporary bureaucracies, the management of overflowing archives is a centuries-old problem. Early modern literature was already engaging with the tools and working techniques of the administration striving to find models for the efficient storage and retrieval of its own material and textual production, as shown by **Jonathan Patterson**. His contribution examines not only inventorial practices in offices and libraries from seventeenth-century France but also the inventory itself as an eloquent device for the management of discursive and material clutter.

Several articles in this special issue focus on authors who worked in the civil service – ›writer-officials,‹ to borrow Ceri Sullivan's terminology.³² Two contributions examine literary works produced by ›writer-officials‹ in British contexts. **Nishant Gokhale** explores the pedagogical, propagandistic and exploratory dimensions of representations of colonial administration in novels by John Briggs and William Browne Hockley, nineteenth-century writers who served in military and civilian capacities in the East India Company. Although their works have failed to display great literary merit or to secure the much sought-after fame, they remain valuable as examples of fiction acting as a shadow companion to official writing, a less

sanctioned double and an alternative environment able to afford bureaucrats the freedom to express thoughts that could not otherwise be articulated within the rigid hierarchies of their professional lives. **Jonathan Foster** delves into the literary culture of ›Red Tape: A Civil Service Magazine‹, one of many civil service periodicals to appear in the early twentieth century, arguing that literary sketches published in such periodicals served an important collegial function in and by interrogating issues to do with the working conditions of clerical civil servants. Foster's article opens multiple leads for further research into the strategies of self-representation and self-expression used by generations of British bureaucrats to negotiate their professional identity through the creation of a body of literature which remains overlooked and understudied.

Expanding on the relationship of literary writing and administration but moving to the German-speaking world, **Rafael Jakob** and **Burkhardt Wolf** engage with the work of the German poet and reform thinker, the aspiring civil servant and pioneering magazine founder Heinrich von Kleist. His novella³³ ›Michael Kohlhaas‹ (1810) foresees, describes, and demands the transformation of the old Prussian state machinery (which concentrated the power in the hands of the king and his ›cabinet‹) into a modern administrative state which can first and foremost be described as a ›bureaucracy‹. Although set in the 16th century, the protagonist's struggle is animated by the spirit of the nineteenth-century Prussian reforms, which have led to a more rational, decentralised mode of government. Against the backdrop of another far-reaching administrative reform, the *Kanzleireform* incurred by the chancellery within the Austrian administration, **Peter Becker** unveils the entanglements of Heimito von Doderer's 1951 novel ›Die erleuchteten Fenster‹ [The Lighted Windows] with the regulation of official living conditions through ›Dienstpragmatik‹ (the Habsburgian service regulations). In contrast to the approach adopted by Jakob and Wolf, this article emphasises the position of the subject in a modern, highly developed organisational environment. The fictional text under analysis here becomes thus instrumental in tracing the ways in which the minute details of bureaucratic work, along with the internalization of an organisation's code of conduct and the appropriation of its encoding of

reality, can shape the personality of the administrative office worker.

Investigating the entanglement between Victorian bureaucracy and Gothic aesthetics, the article signed by **Jayson Althofer** explores how the stylistic regime of the ›documentary Gothic‹ comes to the fore in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels's critique of bureaucracy. Similarly, **Michaela Telfer**'s article discusses Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin's (another ›writer-official‹) use of fantastic figures originating in Slavic legends and folklore (such as the vampire or Baba Yaga) in depicting state bureaucracy in the novel ›The Golovlevs‹ (1880). Together, Althofer and Telfer's contributions uncover an unlikely confluence of Gothic or folkloric imagery and bureaucracy, highlighting a fundamental but often overlooked kinship between Western bureaucracy and fictional narratives with mythical or archetypal undertones.³⁴ Franz Kafka himself, creator of a modern bureaucratic mythology, described the office as a ›fantastic‹ space.³⁵

Literary theory and criticism also prove useful in discussing more modern representations of paperwork and institutional writing. The articles of **Kerstin Stüssel** and **Stephanie Marx** share, in this respect, a common thread: they show that modern literature deals closely with the transcription and documentation practices of administration, or the algorithms of its text production, precisely in order to reflect on its own conditions of creation and its own poetic possibilities. Their case studies and their approaches are, however, different. Starting from a reading of Hans Joachim Schädlich's 1971 short story ›Papier und Bleistift‹, Stüssel revisits the concept of *Mitschrift* [roughly, *transcript(ion)*], articulated and theorised in her book on literary transcripts of bureaucracy between early modern times and the present.³⁶ By way of a cautious historicization, Stüssel notes that her initial linguistic-rhetorical approach to administrative transcripts (and, consequently, to their literary processing and mimesis) requires a complementary rethinking of bureaugraphy, mindful of the rapidly-evolving technologies that shape transcription practices today. Marx compares the protagonists of two novels by Joseph Roth, ›Flight without End‹ (1927) and ›The Silent Prophet‹ (1929), to demonstrate that their ambiguous identities are shaped by their particular handling of state documents and

interactions with state administration. A third article in this vein, by **Sophie Liepold**, concerns the administered afterlife of literary production and its preservation in literary archives, guided by principles that differ significantly from other state archives. Liepold's contribution expands upon the historicised differences between literary and administrative archives, by applying theoretical insights inspired by Wilhelm Dilthey to contemporary works: Friederike Mayröcker's ›Archiv‹ [Archive] (2005) and Elfriede Jelinek's play ›Ein Sturz‹ [A Fall] (2010) are put to test.

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Highlighting the *story* in ›Administory‹, our contributors explore questions to do with administrative aesthetics as well as cultural representations of administration. Although the articles differ in topic, scope, and disciplinary perspective – which we trust makes for an all the more engaging and refreshing read – several thematic red threads emerge at a closer inspection. We have chosen to follow these threads in arranging the contributions into four balanced sections, with four studies in each. The first section, ›Administrative reform and its tropes‹, explores the recurrent demand for administrative optimization, as well as some of its ensuing results, through their literary and rhetorical avatars in different bureaucratic cultures and historical periods. The second group of articles, ›Documentation, transcription, archival‹, gathers analyses of fictionalised practices in the handling of administrative paperwork flows. The third section, ›Official materials and embodiments‹, is dedicated to literary, artistic, and material exchanges taking place between officialdom and the world outside the office. The closing batch of articles, ›Visual and spatial configurations‹, looks into how administration is spatially distributed and rendered visible through architecture, lithography, infomercials, and film.

The articles collected here contribute to a variety of ongoing debates about culture and administrative statecraft that converge on the topic of administrative aesthetics and culture. Recent years have, in fact, seen the beginnings of a more focused scholarly conversation about administration and the arts, as epitomised by a series of timely collaborative ventures and events. In 2020, an online workshop on ›Bureaucratic Poetics‹ was hosted by scholars at Stockholm University and Trinity

College, Dublin. In 2021, a new German-language series of edited volumes was launched, »AdminiStudies«, intended to explore the forms, media technologies and aesthetics of administration. In 2022, a series of talks on »Human Dignity and Bureaucracy« was hosted by Las Casas Institute at Oxford University, featuring talks dealing with representations of public administration in literature. Taken together, this concentration of interest in administration and the arts heralds the emergence of cultural bureaucracy studies as an interdisciplinary area of study in its own right, akin to Law and Literature. Contributing to the formation of such a field, the present special issue brings together researchers from the humanities working on administration and scholars of administration interested in literature and the arts, presenting their work under the rubric of »Administrative Cultures and their Aesthetics.«

In 2023, we held our own contributors' workshop at the Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities [Kulturwissenschaftliches Institut] (KWI) in Essen, which proved an excellent opportunity not only to discuss and sharpen the arguments put forth in the articles but also to share different disciplinary perspectives on bureaucracy and culture as a field of study. We extend our warmest thanks to KWI for making this workshop possible. The editors would also like to thank the authors for their excellent collaboration, as well as the peer reviewers who have helped to shape this issue. Special thanks go to Deputy Editor Stefan Nellen for his invaluable input throughout this project and to Simon Friedli for his prompt and savvy handling of the production process.

- 1 Cf. Friedrich Melchior Freiherr von Grimm : *Correspondance littéraire, philosophique et critique, adressée à un souverain d'Allemagne, depuis 1753 jusqu' en 1769*, Vol. 4, Paris 1829, pp. 11, 326.
- 2 Ben Kafka: *The Demon of Writing. Powers and Failures of Paperwork*, New York 2012, p. 77.
- 3 Robert von Mohl: Über Bürokratie, in: Klaus von Beyne (Hg.): *Politische Schriften*, Wiesbaden 1966, pp. 276-310, here at pp. 281f., 294, 300.
- 4 Max Weber: *Economy and Society. An Outline of Interpretative Sociology*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, Vol. 2, Los Angeles 1978, p. 957.
- 5 Weber: *Economy and Society*, Vol. 1, p. 225.
- 6 David Graeber: Dead zones of the imagination. On violence, bureaucracy, and interpretive labor: The Malinowski Memorial Lecture, 2006, in: *Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 2/2 (2012), pp. 105-128.
- 7 Eugenie Samier: The Aesthetics of Leadership and Administration, in: B. J. Irby, G. Brown, R. Lara-Alecio, and S. Jackson (eds.): *Handbook of Educational Theories*, Charlotte 2013, pp. 945-952.
- 8 Benjamin Buchloch: Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions, in: *October* 55 (1990), pp. 105-143.
- 9 Ceri Sullivan: *Literature in the Public Service: Sublime Bureaucracy*, Hampshire 2013, p. 19.
- 10 See the references in Michel Foucault: *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1974–1975*, ed. Valerio Marchetti and Antonella Salomoni, trans. Graham Burchell, New York 2003, p. 12.
- 11 As the technical director of a paint factory in postwar Italy, Primo Levi wrote about »the frightening anesthetic power of company papers, their capacity to hobble, douse, and dull every leap of intuition and every spark of talent. [...] it is not rare that the paper, a company secretion, is reabsorbed to an excessive degree, and puts to sleep, paralyses, or actually kills the organism from which it has been exuded«. Primo Levi: *The Periodic Table*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal, New York 1984, p. 155.
- 12 Cf. Werner Jann: *Staatliche Programme und »Verwaltungskultur«. Bekämpfung des Drogenmißbrauchs und der Jugendarbeitslosigkeit in Schweden, Großbritannien und der Bundesrepublik Deutschland im Vergleich*, Opladen 1983, p. 28f.
- 13 See the still fundamental study by Cornelia Vismann: *Files. Law and Media Technology*, transl. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young, Stanford 2008; also Lisa Gitelman: *Paper Knowledge: Toward a Media History of Documents*, Durham 2014; and most recently the AdminiStudies series, ed. Peter Plener, Niels Werber, Burkhardt Wolf, Berlin 2021ff., which revisits the media and cultural history of forms, protocols, apparatuses and files in several volumes.
- 14 Cf. Niklas Luhmann: *Organisation und Entscheidung*, Opladen 2000, p. 240.
- 15 See Stefan Kühl: *Organisationskulturen beeinflussen*, Wiesbaden 2018, p. 13, 22f.
- 16 See David M. Boje: The Storytelling Organization. A Study of Story Performance in an Office- Supply Firm, in: *Administrative Science Quarterly* 36/1 (1991), pp. 106-126 and, as an overview under the conditions of advancing digitalisation, David M. Boje: »Storytelling Organization« is Being Transformed into Discourse of »Digital Organization«, in: *M@n@gement* 22/2 (2019), pp. 336-356.
- 17 For more on the material and spatial developments of the office, see Nikil Saval: *Cubed: A Secret History of the Workplace*, New York 2014.
- 18 In 2007, Eugenie Samier heralded »an emerging field in administrative studies, aesthetic analysis«, in the editorial introduction to a special issue of the journal »Halduskultuur« on the topic of »Aesthetics of Government«. See Eugenie Samier: Editor's Introduction. »Art-Full« Government: On the Aesthetics of Politics and Public Administration, in: *Halduskultuur* 8 (2007), pp. 4-13.
- 19 James C. Scott: *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, New Haven 1998.
- 20 Davina Cooper: *Feeling Like a State: Desire, Denial, and the Recasting of Authority*, Durham 2019.
- 21 Marc Raeff: *The Well-Ordered Police-State: Social and Institutional Change through Law in the Germanies and Russia, 1600–1800*, New Haven 1983, p. 161.
- 22 Lisa Gitelman: *Paper Knowledge: Toward a Media History of Documents*, Durham 2014, p. ix.
- 23 Mirco Göpfert: Bureaucratic Aesthetics: Report Writing in the Nigérien Gendarmerie, *American Ethnologist* 40 (2013), pp. 324-334, here at p. 331.
- 24 H. George Frederickson: Can Bureaucracy Be Beautiful?, in: *Public Administration Review* 60/1 (2000), pp. 47–53, here at p. 50.
- 25 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel: *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, London 1993, p. 7.
- 26 Tess Lea: *Desiring Bureaucracy*, in: *Annual Review of Anthropology* 50/1 (2021), pp. 59–74, here at p. 68.
- 27 Adopting the opposite approach in his 2001 exhibition and photobook »Office / Kontor / オフィス«, the Swedish photographer Lars Tunbjörk plays with the uncanny monotony shared by officescapes in New York, Stockholm, and Tokyo. Dominique De Beir has altered a number of plays with the form of corporate payrolls and personnel reports for her conceptual art book titled »Poësie administrative« (2021).
- 28 Cf. Jonathan Foster and Elliott Mills: Bureaucratic Poetics: Brian O'Nolan and the Irish Civil Service, in: *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O'Brien Studies* 6/1 (2022), pp. 1–15.
- 29 C. H. Sisson: *The Spirit of British Administration and some European Comparisons*, London 1959, p. 119.
- 30 Exhibition: *The Seduction of the Bureaucrat*, curated by Pieter Vermeulen at De Garage, Mechelen, Belgium, 15.03 - 14.06.2023.
- 31 Pieter Vermeulen : *La séduction du bureaucrate. Rapport de terrain d'un curateur*, trad. Yasmine Mohammadi, in: *Facettes* 9 (2023), p. 14.
- 32 Ceri Sullivan: *Literature in the Public Service: Sublime Bureaucracy*, Hampshire 2013, p. 86.
- 33 Especially for non-German-speaking readers, it is perhaps interesting to mention that in German Novelle names the literary genre, as well as amendments brought to current law (Gesetzesnovelle). See also Jessica M. Maaßen: "What Is New?": Reading Kleist's Michael Kohlhaas (1810) as a Reflection on the Procedural Nature of Justice, in: *Law & Literature* 34/2 (2021), pp. 239–55.
- 34 Anthropologist Michael Herzfeld famously conceptualizes bureaucracies as »secular theodicies«. See Michael Herzfeld: *The Social Production of Indifference: Exploring the Symbolic Roots of Western Bureaucracy*, Chicago 1992, p. 7.
- 35 Franz Kafka: *Letters to Milena (Letter of July 31, 1920)*, trans. Philip Boehm, London 1999, p. 126.
- 36 Kerstin Stüssel: *In Vertretung. Literarische Mitschriften von Bürokratie zwischen früher Neuzeit und Gegenwart*, Tübingen 2004.

Abstract

This preface sets the stage for a scholarly exploration of administrative aesthetics—a concept often dismissed as an oxymoron, yet one that reveals surprising depth and complexity. From the bureaucratic desk to the architectural grandeur of state institutions, from the rigid formalism of official documents to the creative undercurrents within administrative cultures, this issue probes the cultural and aesthetic dimensions of governance. Simultaneously, the introduction situates the issue within an extensive theoretical landscape concerned with bureaucracy and its representations, arguing for an understanding of administrative cultures that explicitly involves their stylistic repertoires, visual vocabularies, and material practices. Thus, bureaucratic aesthetics are shown to be not just incidental but integral to the way power, authority, and governmental efficiency are perceived and performed.

Synthesizing perspectives from cultural and media studies, literature, arts, and organizational theory, the preface contextualizes multiple aesthetic and cultural dimensions long embedded in administrative systems. In so doing, it introduces and draws meaningful connections between 16 contributions that range from analyses of architectural design and image studies to literary explorations of bureaucratic experiences, unpacking the intricate ways in which administrative cultures generate meaning, shape identities, and negotiate power. Finally, the preface offers detailed insights into the structuring logic of the issue, and demonstrates that it marks a significant, interdisciplinary intervention in contemporary scholarly conversations about bureaucracy.

About the Authors

Jonathan Foster recently defended his dissertation »Writing the State: Administrative Fiction in Long-Nineteenth-Century Britain« at Stockholm University. His research focuses on representations of state bureaucracy in anglophone fiction. He has co-edited a special issue of »The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O'Brien Studies« on the author Flann O'Brien's role in the Irish Civil Service. He has also published articles dealing with literature and state administration in »Dickens Quarterly« and »Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik«.

Alexandra Irimia is a Humboldt Fellow working on a research project about contemporary bureaucratic fiction at the University of Bonn. Before joining the Institute for German Studies, Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies (IGLK), she held postdoctoral fellowships at the Eric Auerbach Institute in Cologne and the Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities (KWI) in Essen. Her monograph *Figures of Radical Absence emerged from doctoral work conducted in Romania and Canada and has received the ICLA First Book Subvention Prize from the International Comparative Literature Association. The newsletter Bureaucritics is her latest co-editorial project, created together with Jonathan Foster. Shorter pieces of her writing live online and offline in edited volumes, in journals including Critical Inquiry, The Comparatist, Discourse, Ekphrasis, and on the KWI Blog.*

Burkhardt Wolf is Professor of Modern German Literature, Literary Theory and Media Theory at the University of Vienna and main applicant of the WEAVE research group »Bureaugraphies. Administration After the Age of Bureaucracy«. Recent books include: »Handbuch Literatur und Ökonomie« (co-edited with Joseph Vogl), Berlin 2019; »Teilweise Musil. Chapter commentaries on the ›Man without Qualities‹. Second volume: Aktenzeichen MoE – Bürokratie« (co-edited with Peter Plener), Berlin 2020; »Das Formular« (co-edited with Peter Plener and Niels Werber), Berlin 2021; »Das Protokoll« (co-edited with Peter Plener and Niels Werber), Berlin 2023; »Moral Seascapes. On the Ethics and Aesthetics of Maritime Emergency« (co-edited with Jonathan Stafford and Henning Trüper), Leuven 2024; »Akten« (co-edited with Peter Plener), Berlin 2025.