

Files, Forms, Fictions

Literary Lives of Bureaucracy from Ledgers to Algorithms

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Files, Forms, Fictions

**Literary Lives of Bureaucracy
from Ledgers to Algorithms**

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Concept

Organized within the framework of the research project *Bureaucratic Fiction: Narratives, Images, and Affects of Administration in Contemporary World Literature and Film* (2024 – 2026, University of Bonn), this international symposium brings together scholars exploring the intersection of bureaucracy and literature across various cultural and historical contexts. The main goal is to open a space for the circulation and exchange of ideas on the literary uses of bureaucratic forms and themes, as well as to sketch synchronic and diachronic comparisons. Fostering a productive dialogue between researchers at various stages of their careers, with expertise in a variety of national literatures, specific themes, or individual authors, the event doubles as an opportunity to develop or consolidate frameworks for understanding literature's complex relationship with bureaucratic power, documentation practices, and institutional acts, forms or tools of writing.

At the heart of our exploration lies, therefore, the complex interplay between bureaucratic machinery and aesthetic imagination.

We invite participants to illustrate their own approaches to how bureaucratic structures, languages, and logics have shaped fictional tropes (visual, textual, affective) while also considering how literature and the arts critique, reimagine, or reproduce administrative systems.

Of particular interest is the study of evolving bureaucratic structures and processes—with their intricate webs of political authority, computational technologies, symbolic markers, embodied experiences, and affective dimensions—which leave unmistakable imprints on contemporary aesthetic forms. We are currently witnessing a moment in which AI, platform capitalism, and data-driven systems reshape both bureaucratic structures and their cultural representations. As the early 21st century continues to accelerate the transition from paper-based recordkeeping to digital governance, we deem it important to look back at the fictional instantiations of 19th- and 20th-century models of administration for a better grasp of emergent forms of bureaucratic imagery and imagination.

(Panel 1)

Bureaucratic Affects, Institutional Madness

Dullness – Bureaucracy’s double-edged sword

Abstract

David Foster-Wallace explains the fact that internal conflicts and scandals in administrative institutions such as the American tax revenue service IRS do rarely become public or widely known with the most effective protective mechanism of the bureaucratic apparatus: its lack of stimulation potential: “abstruse dullness is actually a much more effective shield than is secrecy. For the great disadvantage of secrecy is that it is interesting.” (David Foster-Wallace: *The Pale King*, p. 85) On the other hand, when administrative institutions and processes are under pressure, it is difficult for them to mobilize actors and narratives for the same reason. The bureaucratic order is always the hostile other: In today’s right-wing populist narratives, the bureaucratic gets identified with the left (especially targeting the welfare state).

In contrast, the self-understanding of left-wing politics looks back on a long history of struggle against the institution and the oppressive technocratic state. My talk aims to offer a twofold perspective on the problem of dullness in these contexts: Firstly, as a question of these stories that accompany the concept of bureaucracy; secondly, as a question of aesthetic form. Wallace’s fragmentary novel originates with this particular question or paradox: How does one form dullness into something that’s both boring and interesting at the same time? Selected case studies will be used to illustrate how literary projects negotiate the problem of the lack of stimulation and entertainment potential of everyday administrative life at the level of form and what picture they paint of bureaucratic rule.

Livia Kleinwächter

Livia Kleinwächter is currently engaged as postdoc in the WEAVE-project *Bureaugraphies. Administration After the Age of Bureaucracy* (Vienna/Basel/Friedrichshafen/Cologne). In the Cologne sub-project “Narrative Micro-Praxeology: Sociological and Literary Office Novels 1970/2000” she examines the co-evolution of office novels and organizational theory in the 20th century. She studied literature, theater and media studies at the Universities of Bayreuth and Bochum. In 2022, she completed her PhD thesis in Cologne with a book on *Poetiken des Notierens (Poetics of note-taking)*, which was published in 2023.

Totalitarianism as a Total Institution in Goffman, Bettelheim, and Blanchot

Abstract

This paper explores the intersection of psychiatric and governmental power in totalitarian systems, drawing on Erving Goffman's concept of "total institutions" and Bruno Bettelheim's analysis of concentration camp psychology. Goffman defines total institutions as those—ranging from hospitals to camps—that erase the boundary between public and private life, extending control into the deepest layers of the self. He argues that such institutions induce structural transformations of subjectivity, compelling individuals to identify with overpowering aggressors. The paper argues that the patterns of subject formation identified by Goffman are comparable to those that Bruno Bettelheim described in the 1940s for concentration camp inmates, and that he diagnosed as induced psychoses. Taken together, Goffman's and Bettelheim's analyses amount to the thesis that ideal totalitarian subjects, as total institutions

aim to shape them, would be psychotics.

This framework serves as the lens through which I examine Maurice Blanchot's novel *The Most High*, which offers a fictional account of totalitarian subjectivity. Its protagonist, Henri Sorge, identifies as a loyal functionary of a totalitarian regime while exhibiting signs of paranoid psychosis. His own paranoid anxieties and the involuntary identification they trigger put Sorge in an ambivalent position as both agent of the state and potential dissident. Moreover, Blanchot's narrative blurs the boundaries between the supposed reality of the totalitarian state and Sorge's delusions. When the apartment building Sorge lives in gradually transforms into a hospital, then a prison, the reader therefore cannot decide whether this reveals the operating principle of the totalitarian state to which Sorge adequately responds, or whether it is Sorge's psychosis that by itself reveals the common logic of totalitarianism and total institutions.

Sandra Janßen

Sandra Janßen is an Associate Fellow at the International Research Center for Cultural Studies (IFK) in Vienna and heads the DFG Research Network "Epistemic History of the Inaccessible Self. Individual and Collective Subject Figures in Psychology, Sociology, Ethnology, and Cultural Studies 1850-1980" at the University of Erfurt. She previously researched and taught at the Free University of Berlin, among others, and held visiting professorships and professorships at the University of Chicago, the University of Vienna and the University of Bonn. She received her doctorate in 2006 in a joint process from the FU Berlin and the University of Paris 8. She was a member of the DFG network "The Nocturnal Self. Dream Knowledge and Dream Art in the Century of Psychology, 1850-1950" and is co-editor of Einar Schleef's diaries (Suhkamp 2006-2009). Her research focuses on the connection between the history of knowledge and literature, in particular the history of psychology and German and French literature of the 19th and 20th centuries. She is currently completing a habilitation thesis on the 'totalitarian subject', which combines psychology, political theory and literature of the 1930s and 1940s.

Her publications include her PhD thesis *Phantasmen. Imagination in Psychology and Literature 1840-1930* (Flaubert, Čechov, Musil), published in 2013 by Wallstein, the anthologies *Wissens-Ordnungen. Zu einer historischen Epistemologie der Literatur* (De Gruyter 2014, ed. with Nicola Gess) and *Selbstsein als Sich-Wissen? Zur Bedeutung der Wissensgeschichte für die Historisierbarkeit des Subjekts* (Mohr Siebeck 2021, ed. with Thomas Alkemeyer) as well as the issue *Psychopathologie der Zeit* of the *Zeitschrift für Kulturwissenschaften* (1/2021, ed. with Maximilian Bergengruen).

“The Effort to Drive the Other Person Crazy”

Abstract

This talk takes its title from a 1959 paper by the American psychiatrist Harold Searles, who was investigating the origins of certain borderline and psychotic conditions among his patients at Chestnut Lodge, a famous psychiatric hospital on the outskirts of Washington, D.C. (its director was the German psychiatrist Frieda Fromm-Reichmann). Some patients, Searles argued, become ‘crazy’ because significant people in their lives have set out to make them that way. My talk will expand on his argument to consider how our encounters with bureaucracy can push us to the edge of sanity. Is there a specifically ‘bureaucratic’ madness?

What are its mechanisms? Quite a lot of bureaucratic fiction raises this question either directly or indirectly. I will take as my source Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22*, which appeared two years after Searles’s paper, and belongs to the same literary and cultural atmosphere.

Ben Kafka

Ben Kafka is an associate professor of clinical psychoanalysis in the Department of Psychiatry at Columbia. He joined the clinical faculty of the Columbia Psychoanalytic Center in 2024, after nearly twenty years as a professor at NYU, where he taught the history and theory of communication. He is also a former Senior Fellow at IKKM Weimar. Originally trained as a historian, he’s the author of *The Demon of Writing: Powers and Failures of Paperwork* (Zone Books, 2012) and is now at work on a book about how people drive each other crazy. He sees patients in private practice in Greenwich Village.

(Panel 2)

Bureaucratic Literacy: Public Service in the Public Eye

Familiarising and Defamiliarising State Bureaucracy in Victorian and Modernist British Fiction

Abstract

In this paper I examine the role that fictional representations of British state bureaucracy played in familiarising Victorian readers with the emergent administrative state, before considering how the conditions for writing about the state changed once “bureaucracy” became a household word. In the mid-nineteenth century, increasing bureaucratisation prompted a literary endeavour of conceptualising state bureaucracy and promoting bureaucratic literacy. In short, popular Victorian narratives about state bureaucracy à la Charles Dickens’s *Little Dorrit* (1857) had the character of bureaucratic handbooks or guidebooks that indicated how to proceed in interactions with professional bureaucrats. This was followed,

in the early twentieth century, by a second wave of narratives about state bureaucracy, by modernist writers such as Joseph Conrad and Virginia Woolf, written for a readership immersed in, and culturally conditioned by, a fully-fledged bureaucratic state culture. Such readers did not require bureaucratic guidebooks. On the contrary, as Conrad and Woolf’s treatment of state bureaucracy indicates, bureaucratisation was so pervasive that civilians’ thought and perception had come to be governed by institutional structures and protocols. These later authors instead sought to “defamiliarise” (Shklovsky) state bureaucracy—that is, to destabilise habituated modes of perception and thus enable readers to see the administrative state afresh.

Jonathan Foster

Jonathan Foster recently completed his doctoral studies at Stockholm University. He specializes in Victorian and modernist literature. His dissertation *Writing the State: Administrative Fiction in Long-Nineteenth-Century Britain* explores representations of state bureaucracy in the work of Harriet Martineau, Charles Dickens, Joseph Conrad and H. G. Wells. He has published articles on literature and bureaucracy in *Dickens Quarterly* and *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik*. He has also co-edited bureaucracy-themed special issues of *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O’Brien Studies* and *Administory: Journal for the History of Public Administration*. He is also the co-editor of two forthcoming edited volumes: *Dickens and Decadence* (Edinburgh UP) and *Irish Writers in the Civil Service* (Liverpool UP). Co-writes the Substack newsletter *Bureaucritics* with Alexandra Irímia.

Conspicuous Contradiction: Bureaucracy in the Social Imaginary

Abstract

In his 1960 essay ‘Culture and Administration’, Theodor Adorno states that art and culture are ascribed a ‘sacrosanct irrationality’ in bourgeois society. The total ‘uselessness’ of the cultural sphere, Adorno argues, serves as ‘a fitting correlation of the faith in the pure usefulness of the useful’ – including administration itself, whose utility is confirmed by its heavy ‘scent of philistinism’. Aside from the implicit paradox – that culture’s apparent uselessness is precisely what makes it useful – Adorno is keen to point out throughout his essay that the segregation of an autonomous ‘cultural sphere’ is in itself an expression of the extent to which administrative categories and demarcations govern the contemporary social imaginary. The autonomy of the useless from the useful ultimately therefore illustrates their interconnection.

This nest of contradictions is complemented by the extent to which administration itself is habitually attributed its own brand of ‘sacrosanct

irrationality’. *Catch-22*s, Kafkaesque paradoxes, and the many ‘Zenonisms’ that riddle nineteenth-century portrayals of bureaucracy are the chief expression of administration’s role in art and culture, but a sense of conspicuous metaphysical crisis runs throughout its analyses more generally. The long tradition of commentators on modern bureaucracy – from Vincent de Gournay to Graeber – operates from the premise that ‘rule-by-the-desk’ is manifestly paradoxical.

Just as culture’s own ‘uselessness’ ultimately demonstrates its utility in bourgeois society, what underlies this habitual association of bureaucracy with paradox? By focussing on the nineteenth-century literary traditions that did so much to inscribe this attribution in modern culture (as well as reappraising some comparable claims I have made in my own previous work), I will explore the role that bureaucracy’s conspicuous contradiction plays in the modern social imaginary.

Daniel Jenkin-Smith

Daniel Jenkin-Smith is a lecturer at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David, UK. His research focusses in portrayals of office life in English and French literature of the long 19th century. His most recent publication was *The Rise of Office Literature: Bureaucratization and Aesthetics in Britain and France, 1810-1900* published by Bloomsbury. His articles have appeared in publications that include *Victorian Review*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, and *The European Journal of English Studies*.

¹ Theodor Adorno, ‘Culture and Administration’ (1960) tr. Wes Blomster, in *The Culture Industry – Selected essays on mass culture*, ed. J. M. Bernstein (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 93-113 (p. 97).

² Ibid., p. 99.

(Panel 3)

Latin American Office Literature

Latin American Office Literature in Retrospect

“Small-scale sovereignty. Personal forms of domination in everyday life and their representation in the Hispano-American novel of the 20th and 21st century” (University of Kassel, 2022-2025)

As the third-party funded research project about “small-scale sovereignty” in Latin American prose literature comes to an end, Karolin Schäfer and Fernanda Melchor Audirac will be presenting insights into their research processes as well as the final results thereof, including an extensive corpus of Latin American (both hispano- and lusophone) office literature negotiating power and hegemony in the bureaucratic world.

Project website: <https://www.uni-kassel.de/forschung/kleine-souveraenitaet/projekt>

Karolin Schäfer & Fernanda Melchor Audirac

Karolin Schäfer studied English and American, German, and Hispanic studies at the University of Kassel, Germany. She currently holds a position as research assistant in the third-party funded project “Small-scale sovereignty. Personal forms of domination in everyday life and their representation in the Hispano-American novel of the 20th and 21st century” (lead researcher: Prof. Dr. Jan-Henrik Witthaus, University of Kassel, 2022-2025). Her PhD project investigates the marginalized role of women within the patriarchal structures found in the literary office. Further research interests of hers are office literature in general (with a specific focus on Germany, Latin America, and the USA), literature about migration, and Spanish cyberpunk.

Fernanda Melchor Audirac studies English and American and Hispanic studies at the University of Kassel, Germany. Since November of 2022, she has been working as student assistant in the third-party funded project “Small-scale sovereignty. Personal forms of domination in everyday life and their representation in the Hispano-American novel of the 20th and 21st century” (lead researcher: Prof. Dr. Jan-Henrik Witthaus, University of Kassel, 2022-2025). Her research interests include sociocultural perspectives on 20th and 21st century Mexican literature as well as cultural memory studies and the particular genre of *narcoliteratura*.

“The Second Sex” feat. the Bureau: Female Workers in Latin American Office Literature

Abstract

When the genre of Latin American office literature emerged in the 1920s/30s, women were barely visible in these stories almost exclusively told by male writers. If they did make an appearance, however, the female characters were caught in between new and old concepts of womanhood, between their precarious – and quite frequently sexually objectified – existence in the office and a foreseeable future as housewife and mother. Up until more recent literary texts depicting office life, such as *El oficinista* by Guillermo Saccomanno and *El trabajo* by Aníbal Jarkowski (Argentina 2010 & 2007), we find the archetype of the marginalized female office worker, oftentimes presented through the male gaze and stylized as an object of sexual desire. However, there

are other novels and short stories, such as *La Directora* by Gonzalo Guillermo Rodríguez Balmori (Mexico 2013), *Workaholic* by Natalia Gauna (Argentina 2015), and *La secretaria* by Carlos R. Serra (Uruguay 2016), that portray alternative, empowered types of female office workers: the madwoman and the puppet mistress, who regardless of her non-hegemonic position holds power and seems to control not only her own but sometimes even her superior's fate. The objective of the contribution proposed here will be to identify archetypes of female workers in 20th- and 21st-century Latin American office literature. The works to be taken into consideration span from the early 1920s to the early 2020s, covering Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, and Uruguay.

Karolin Schäfer

Karolin Schäfer studied English and American, German, and Hispanic studies at the University of Kassel, Germany. She currently holds a position as research assistant in the third-party funded project “Small-scale sovereignty. Personal forms of domination in everyday life and their representation in the Hispano-American novel of the 20th- and 21st-century” (lead researcher: Prof. Dr. Jan-Henrik Witthaus, University of Kassel, 2022-2025). Her PhD project investigates the marginalized role of women within the patriarchal structures found in the literary office. Further research interests of hers are office literature in general (with a specific focus on Germany, Latin America, and the USA), literature about migration, and Spanish cyberpunk.

(Panel 4)

Governmediality: Literary-Technological Infrastructures

KafKaDare – The File on Everything

Abstract

The desire of creating and controlling a “file on everything” (R. Maddow, about the illegal exploits of DOGE) is by no means a product of our emerging age of governmediality (Chr. Engemann). The unleashed hypertextual potential of modern literature, described by Michel Foucault as a “library in flames”, has, by a number of writers, been closely connected with the description and/or the application of bureaucratic techniques and procedures, and with the desire to remove, by use of fiction, the department walls and folders that separate files in an orderly administration. My lecture features two of those writers, Franz Kafka and Ismail Kadare, whose life spans (1883-1924) cover the full distance from the emerging social state (the peak of governmentality) to our present day. I will first (I. KADARE) retrace Kadare’s use

of bureaucratic techniques and procedures as actors in his narrated worlds (*The File on H.*; *The Palace of Dreams*); I will then (II. KAKFA) focus on Kafka’s WWI story *Building the Great Wall of China* to present Kafka’s multi-layered fictional hypertexts as an intensive extension of his management of accident insurance files and cases, as a “1000th generation computer beside which the current technology of our computers and micro-computerfied archives and translating machines remain a bricolage of a prehistoric child’s toys” (J. Derrida, on J. Joyce); eventually (III. KAFKADARE) I will turn to Kadare’s *réécriture* of Kafka’s poetic WWI file, his 1964 story *The Great Wall*, and it will highlight the potential of literature to summon a war machine (Deleuze/Guattari) right out of the center of the administrative state.

Benno Wagner

Benno Wagner is an Extraordinary (apl.) Professor of Literary Theory and Modern German Literature at the University of Siegen (Germany). He studied Communications and Literature at the Ruhr University of Bochum, Ethnology in Brisbane (Qld.), and received his PhD in 1992 from the University of Siegen. Habilitation with a thesis on risk and accident in the work of Franz Kafka (1998, University of Siegen), Associate Professor from 1999-2004, Extraordinary Professor since 2005. In 2011/12, Associate Professor at Tamkang University, Taipei, 2012/13 Chair of German at Chinese Culture University (Taipei). 2013-2016 Associate Professor at the Beijing Institute of Technology. 2016-2022 Professor at the School of International Studies and Core Advisor in the Global Engagement Program of Zhejiang University. Since 2023 Wagner has served as a member of the Advisory Board of the Austrian School of Government, Vienna.

In-Between; a bit of Shannon: Disciplinary Files, Control Punching, Amtsinstructionen, Heart Stitches & the World Law of Bureaucracy

Abstract

»Literature is an administrative technology that experimentally creates, organises and disorganises the world. This is the small, even cunning freedom of literary systems, of literary mappings, that they, equipped with administrative technologies, create worlds, organise them, make them coherent and at the same time point out the breaking points.« (J. Vogl) – if we drive this thesis back into the heart of darkness, into literature, with official instructions, office regulations, schematisms, business divisions, processes and decision-making requirements as well as cultural and media techniques of administration, we can make astonishing findings and mutually read and extract information: suddenly Kafka and Musil – academic clerks as ›impaling stakeholders‹ – are writing plain text on their office desks and machines, quoting administrative writings, personnel and manuals, providing concrete insights into files; Stoker recognisably reproduces his own administrative textbook and has the vampires and bloody heads of the 19th century put on media-technically advanced feet by the New Employee and her skills; in this way, Melville's (another clerk) cetological disassembly line becomes the Fordist assembly line of a process architecture of the administrative Taylorists; the Weber brothers' talk of administrative »machines«

and »apparatuses« merges with the means of automation support into the »Black box bureaucracy« (Luhmann) of the new algorithmic frenzy, where every homunculus is projected into an AI in an undaunted anthropomorphising manner, while Latour and Luhmann are still arranging their card indexes. Leibniz's State-Taffles and 0|1-models will invade literature in the course of a few centuries and help to pull up Weber's steel-hard cases as well as enabling them to be heaped into sandcastles.

∇ – A ... The Rest is Silence: Silicon / Silentium.

In other words, the shape of public services and their organisation changes with the processing media and techniques (also: second order techniques) that are introduced, while the basic business processes, including decisions, remain comparable. At the latest with the introduction of punch card systems and tabulating machines, at the same time as the emergence of new private-sector work, accounting and profit models, and soon thereafter considerably differently layered and stratified social systems, public administrations and their central offices come under massive pressure, which only typewriters, mainframe computers, personal computers, electronic files and artificial intelligence are expected to compensate for. Some literatures – indicated above as examples – are able to make this observable.

Peter Plener

Peter Plener is Deputy Head of the Austrian School of Government (Civil Service Section of the Austrian Federal Chancellery) and has been appointed to work on media and cultural techniques in administration.

(Panel 5)

Vanishing Media Ecologies: Critical Junctures in Austrian Paperscapes

A Vanishing Kind in the Eyes of the Media: Francis Joseph as the Last Paper King

Abstract

When reflecting on the paperwork of early modern monarchs, one inevitably recalls the “paper king” Philip II, who in the Escorial during the second half of the sixteenth century inaugurated a new form of monarchical governance. By the time of Emperor Francis Joseph, all rulers spent some part of their day at their desks, immersed in files. Yet Francis Joseph occupied a distinctive position: he was the last monarch to define his competences in strikingly broad terms, thereby inheriting the difficulties that stemmed from the ruler’s entanglement in complex administrative tasks. He may thus be understood as the last “paper king” — one who sought, through comprehensive responsibility for state affairs, to project a tradition of monarchical self-government into the modern world.

Literary works and, above all, the press exploited the intimate association between ruler and desk to convey a modern, technical mode of power to their audiences. But how exactly was Emperor Francis Joseph represented and staged? Did his role as the last paper king — even if not actively promoted by the court — generate specific visual and textual representations of monarchical rule? And was the particular character of his reign embodied in portrayals of his desk, or of his relationship to it?

Peter Becker

Peter Becker is Professor of Austrian History at the University of Vienna, where he also serves as Director of the Institute for Austrian Historical Research. His work explores the cultural history of bureaucracy and state governance, with a focus on the Habsburg Monarchy and modern Europe more broadly. He is particularly interested in the material practices of administration—information flows, communication, and decision-making—as well as the intersections of criminology, law, and institutional authority.

The File and the Fluid: Fiction, Bureaucracy, and the Wild Waters of Memory in the Destruction of Socialist Libraries in 1934 Austria

Abstract

This lecture is part of the artistic project *Brandungen*, which addresses the destruction of socialist libraries in Austria in 1934 by austrofascist and corporate state forces. In this historical context, books from workers' libraries were thrown into the Traunsee to be destroyed, a practice linked to a local custom of sinking "excess" materials in the water. However, the water proved to be resistant: the books were not only deformed by the water but also washed back to the shore, where they had to be sunk again. This recurring cycle of destruction and rebirth reflects the paradoxical interplay of memory and forgetting. The *Brandungen* project, created by Ana de Almeida, Jakub Vrba, and Christian Wimplinger, was exhibited in Ebensee in October 2024 as part of the European Capital of Culture, combining images, texts, sounds, and resin sculptures to process and bring this history into the exhibition space.

The lecture centers on the connection between the sinking of books and bureaucracy. While the books sank into the water, they remained present in the records of bureaucratic institutions – at least as "cleansed" entries. The file, as a processing and storage medium of the central authorities (in this case, the Ministry of Education), not only documented the destruction of books but also constructed the narrative of this destruction. Files thus became a form of "fictional" representation, as they did not always reflect the full reality, but were often distorted through bureaucratic logics – such as fear of retribution – that

led to omissions or alterations.

"What is the moist underside of the dry, terrestrial medium of the file?" This question addresses the tension between the physically fixed, dry form of the file and the fluid, often invisible currents that run through both the file itself and the reality it documents. A media-theoretical perspective on water, as explored by Melody Jue in *Wild Blue Media*, opens a new approach to this issue. Water is understood not only as an element of destruction but also as an active carrier of information and memory, capable of preserving, transforming, and transmitting the stories of the books. Water thus becomes a "wild" medium that embodies the fluidity of memory and history, resisting the formal structures of bureaucracy. In both the project and the lecture, water is examined as a symbolic and medial element that facilitates the transition from destruction to rebirth, making visible the gaps and fluid dimensions of bureaucratic processes.

The materialization of the lecture into a resin book, functioning as a physical form of memory, further explores the file process itself: How do files capture the currents of the world? How do they construct a reality that is both documentary and narrative? After the exhibition, the project will continue as new resin books are created by the artists, reinforcing the ongoing process of memory and transformation. The artistic project and the lecture probe how administration and art shape the processes of destruction and renewal of knowledge and memory, and the role of files as "fictional" constructions in this process.

Christian Wimplinger

A literary and cultural scholar with a focus on philosophical writing working at the University of Vienna and at the Austrian School of Government, Christian Wimplinger researches book culture and writing practices of the New Left in Germany, particularly focusing on the collaboration between Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge. He is a former IFK Junior Fellow (2017-2019) and an associated member of the research platform *Mobile Cultures and Societies*. He is also part of an artistic and writing collective together with Ana de Almeida and Jakub Vrba. The group explores individual and collective memory and processes of remembrance from a sociopolitical perspective, working with water, text, sound, and mixed media, as well as with archives and installation essays.

(Panel 6)

Mixed-Media Bureaucracy: Text/Image Hybridities

Bodies on/as Paper:

State Bureaucracies and the Violence of Administrative Authorship in Comics of Refugee and Displacement Experience

Abstract

This paper examines how comics narrating 20th-century refugee and/or displacement experiences visualize and comment on bureaucratic regimes of identification, exclusion, and survival. Focusing on pages and panels from Keiji Nakazawa's *Barefoot Gen* (1973–1987), Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1980–1991), Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* (2006), Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2000–2003), Thomas Henseler and Susanne Buddenberg's *Tunnel 57*, as well as multiple works by Joe Sacco, the paper traces how popular graphic narratives make tangible the violence of administrative authorship through both content and form – documenting moments when bodies and identities are rendered on and as paper: as permits, passports, visas, forms, and files.

These comics depict the life-and-death stakes of bureaucratic documentation, from transit papers and exit visas to registration cards and asylum applications. Visually, they incorporate

state artifacts – passport stamps, interrogation transcripts, ID photos – into the architecture of graphic narrative, creating a tension between the aesthetic grammar of (independent) comics and the file-based logics of state surveillance and control. Ranging from quasi-fictional allegory to autobiographical accounts and documentary comics journalism, these works foreground the made-ness of paper identities, reflecting on how documents not only record but also construct and constrain the lives they purport to represent.

Across fascist, socialist, colonial, and postcolonial regimes, these comics do more than narrate displacement – they embody it formally. In so doing, they make graspable the paper-bound architectures of 20th-century power, while offering counter-archives that reassert the embodied subject against the flattening violence of the administrative record.

Tanja Kapp

Dr. Tanja Kapp is Lecturer and Postdoctoral Researcher in the English Department of the University of Tübingen, Germany. Previously, she was a Research Fellow and Doctoral Candidate at the Graduate Research Group *New Travel – New Media* at the University of Freiburg, Germany, where she received her PhD in English Literature. Her current work explores the intersections of textual ephemerality, kinship, and affect in 18th- and 19th-century British and transatlantic literature, including multispecies and more-than-human kinships. She also teaches and writes on autobiography, multimodality, and how spaces, borders and mobilities are represented in media, and has a longstanding interest in how marginal forms register and contest state structures of knowledge and power.

Blank Forms, Defaced Records and Redacted Documents: Aesthetics of Bureaucracy in Contemporary Visual Arts

Abstract

The presentation analyses the representation of bureaucracy in contemporary visual arts and aims to give an overview of artistic approaches that mimic, parody or subvert the aesthetic of bureaucracy in order to criticise bureaucratic systems and procedures. On the one hand, I will focus on forms of recontextualising (e.g. office material culture turned into ready-mades, ‘defacement’ or erasure of bureaucratic forms, documents, and symbols). Paying particular attention to the medial gap between text and image, I will on the other hand examine techniques of intermedial transposition in text-based artworks that deploy the textual means of bureaucracy, the disjuncture between language and object, and the materiality of language in order to create moments of visual storytelling. I will discuss contemporary installations from Jenny

Holzer, Sung Tieu, Amalia Pica, Prerna, or Daniel Knorr that address the power of ‘paperwork’ to shape reality. Tieu’s, Pica’s and Prerna’s artworks concern themselves with questions of bureaucratic identity construction, the administrative struggles associated with migration and naturalisation, and the bureaucratic production of difference. Knorr’s and Holzer’s works engage with techniques of state control and administrative intransparency. Holzer, for instance, turns declassified US government materials regarding the so-called war on terror into images by transforming redacted documents – textual blanks – into paintings. The artist thereby draws attention to the administrative machinations and abuses of a specific historic event; however, at the same time she creates an abstract visual testimony to the ‘bureaucracy of secrecy’.

Alexandra Müller

Alexandra Müller has studied comparative literature; she is an associate professor in the Department of German Studies (faculty of Comparative Literature and Culture) at the Justus-Liebig-University Giessen, Germany. Her dissertation (*Trauma und Intermedialität in zeitgenössischen Erzähltexten*) explores how literary texts employ the interplay between text and image in order to represent traumatic experiences and memories. Her research interests include inter arts studies and intermediality, trauma studies, literature and work, contemporary literature, and the interplay between analog and digital media. She has recently submitted her ‘habilitation’ on the representation of office culture in different media (*Poetik des Büros: Zur Repräsentation von Bürotätigkeit und bürokratischer Arbeitswelt in Literatur, Kunst und neuen Medien*). She also serves as secretary for the German Association of Comparative Literature (DGAVL).

Recent articles:

- “‘He would do nothing in the office’: Representation of Work and Alienation in Cinematic Adaptations of Herman Melville’s *Bartleby*”;
- “Ludifizierung von Arbeit. Die Darstellung des Büros im Videospiel”;
- “Zwischen Biologie und Bürokratie: Unheimliche Bürolandschaften in Georg Kleins *Mikro* und Jeff VanderMeers *Authority*”.

(Panel 7)

Mixed-Media Bureaucracy: Office Work on Screen

‘Welcome to a Day in the Average Office’: The Portrayal of Bureaucracy on British Television Screens

Abstract

“Put the key of despair into the lock of apathy. Turn the knob of mediocrity slowly and open the gates of despondency – welcome to a day in the average office.”

The Office (2003)

The Office (UK and US versions) have become globally synonymous with the perceived drudgery, routine and mindlessness of bureaucracy but at the turn of the twentieth century Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant’s mockumentary was only the latest addition to a long-standing tradition in British popular culture of disgruntled office workers penning novels, sitcoms and films about their experiences. This paper briefly charts the literary heritage of the office genre in Britain before discussing three televisual contributions that pre-dated

The Office and which powerfully captured the pathos of life trapped in the bureaucratic machine: *The Fall and Rise of Reginald Perrin* (1976-1996), *Colin’s Sandwich* (1988-1990) and *Men Behaving Badly* (1992-1999). In exploring these popular televisual texts – two of which were adapted from novels – this paper considers the impact that longstanding cultural icons continue to exert on twenty-first century attitudes to office work, particularly in light of the ‘return to the office’ that has followed the Covid-19 pandemic.

Nicola Bishop

Nicola Bishop is a popular culture researcher and Academic Enhancement Lead at De Montfort University, UK. Her first book, *Lower-Middle-Class Nation: The White-Collar Worker in British Popular Culture* was published by Bloomsbury in 2021 and offered an interdisciplinary cultural history of the lower-middle-class worker in British life since 1850. Her other publications have discussed the clerk in fiction, white-collar workers on screen and popular crime fiction. Nicola is currently working on a second book about office life in the twenty-first century.

Media Nostalgia in the Office

Abstract

The presentation explores the phenomenon of media nostalgia in office environments, focusing on how the contemporary perception of office technologies reflects a nostalgic mode. The television series *Mad Men*, for example, exemplifies this phenomenon, demonstrating how 1960s office advertising taps into sentimental memories through media, thereby aligning with business interests by fostering desire and resistance to technological change. Historically, nostalgia has been regarded as a pathological longing for the past. However, with the advent of technological obsolescence, it has evolved into a collective phenomenon associated with media formats such as film, tape, and video.

In the absence of a commercial context, bureaucratic offices are also susceptible to nostalgia, a phenomenon that is frequently depicted with overt humor or sentimentality in literature and photography. Two novels will be examined in order to illustrate the transition from analog to digital bureaucracy. They reflect on the failure and obsolescence of office media, portraying a melancholic mourning for lost technologies and the existential boredom of bureaucratic life, ultimately framing “media melancholy in the office” rather than nostalgia.

Burkhardt Wolf

Burkhardt Wolf studied German Studies, Philosophy, and Sociology at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München and Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. After working as a translator, he earned his PhD at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin in 2001. His academic record includes positions as a research associate and assistant professor at Bauhaus-Universität Weimar and Humboldt-Universität Berlin, as well as postdoctoral fellowships at the University of Paderborn and Berlin. Between 2012 and 2018, he held guest and visiting professorships in Berlin, Munich, at the University of California Santa Barbara, and Indiana University Bloomington. In 2019, he took over the Vienna professorship for modern German literature with a special focus on literary and media theory. His research focuses on discourse history of violence, economics, governmentality, the poetics of affect, maritime culture, and media aesthetics. He is the initiator and main applicant of the WEAVE project *Bureaugraphies. Administrations after the Age of Bureaucracies*.

(Panel 8)

Généalogie et mythologie: médiations symboliques de l'administration

Genealogy and mythology: symbolic mediations of administration

Entre mémoire et administration : les documents d'archives dans le récit de filiation contemporain

Abstract

Dans le récit de filiation – une forme littéraire qui ne cesse de se développer en France depuis les années 1980 –, les archives administratives ne sont pas de simples sources factuelles. Vestiges d'une mémoire familiale qui fait défaut, supports pour une recherche généalogique, outils narratifs pour redonner voix aux sans-noms de l'histoire, elles permettent aux auteurs d'imaginer et de reconstituer les trajectoires de vie de leurs prédécesseurs silencieux.

Mon intervention se propose d'interroger les différents modes d'apparaître du document officiel et de la pratique archivistique dans des écritures contemporaines singulières, portées par des auteurs d'abord reconnus en tant que chercheurs dans le domaine des sciences humaines et sociales, qui commencent, au

sommet de leur carrière, à investir la forme littéraire du récit pour repenser leurs objets d'études à l'aune de leur propre mémoire familiale. J'avancerai ainsi selon une logique d'archipel, en analysant trois œuvres issues de disciplines distinctes : le récit d'une sociologue (*Une histoire de France* de Nathalie Heinich, 2018), celui d'une historienne (*À l'ombre de l'histoire des autres* de Camille Lefebvre, 2022) et d'une spécialiste de littérature (*Géographie des ténèbres* de Marta Caraion, 2024).

Ces textes, entre enquête, mémoire et littérature, construisent une forme de savoir sensible, où les documents d'archives ne disent pas seulement le passé, mais engagent une réflexion sur l'identité, la transmission et les enjeux contemporains du récit.

Laura Marin

Laura Marin enseigne à l'Université de Bucarest, dans le domaine des études culturelles visuelles. Ses publications portent sur la question du neutre chez Maurice Blanchot, Roland Barthes, Emmanuel Levinas et Jacques Derrida, ainsi que sur les usages de la figure dans la pensée et la création contemporaines. Elle a traduit en roumain *Devant l'image* et *Devant le temps*, de Georges Didi-Huberman. À présent, elle s'intéresse à l'étude des arts de l'archive en relation avec l'épistémologie de l'héritage et de la transmission. Dernier ouvrage paru: « Filiation endeuillée : figures, styles, politiques de l'héritage dans la culture roumaine », *România Orientale*, vol. 36, Rome, Sapienza Università Editrice, 2023 (co-dirigé avec Adrian Tudurachi).

Between Memory and Administration: Archival Documents in Contemporary Filiation Narratives

Abstract

In filiation narratives (*récits de filiation*) – a literary form that has been steadily developing in France since the 1980s – administrative archives are not merely factual sources. As relics of an incomplete family memory, tools for genealogical research, and narrative devices for giving voice to the nameless figures of history, they enable authors to imagine and reconstruct the life trajectories of their silent predecessors.

My presentation aims to examine the different ways in which official documents and archival practices appear in unique contemporary writings by authors who are primarily recognized as researchers in the humanities and social sciences and who, at the height of their careers, are beginning to use the literary form

of narrative to rethink their subjects of study in light of their own family memories. I will follow an archipelago-like logic, analyzing three works from different disciplines: the narrative of a sociologist (*Une histoire de France* by Nathalie Heinich, 2018), that of a historian (*À l'ombre de l'histoire des autres* by Camille Lefebvre, 2022) and that of a literature specialist (*Géographie des ténèbres* by Marta Caraion, 2024).

Combining investigation, memoir, and literature, these texts construct a form of sensitive knowledge in which archival documents not only tell the story of the past, but also engage in a reflection on identity, transmission, and the contemporary stakes of the narrative form.

Laura Marin

Laura Marin teaches visual cultural studies at the University of Bucharest. Her publications focus on the question of neutrality in the works of Maurice Blanchot, Roland Barthes, Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida, as well as on the uses of figures in contemporary thought and creative practice. She has translated Georges Didi-Huberman's *Devant l'image* and *Devant le temps* into Romanian. Currently, she is interested in the artistic use of archives, in relation to the epistemology of heritage and transmission. Latest publication: 'Filiation endeuillée: figures, styles, politiques de l'héritage dans la culture roumaine' (Mourning filiation: figures, styles and politics of inheritance in Romanian culture), *România Orientale*, vol. 36, Rome, Sapienza Università Editrice, 2023 (co-edited with Adrian Tudurachi).

De Kālī à Kafka : mythologies du passage bureaucratique dans l'œuvre de Shumona Sinha

Abstract

Le passage d'un pays à l'autre, d'une identité à l'autre prend, dans les romans de Shumona Sinha, la forme à la fois d'une corvée bureaucratique et d'un rite d'initiation. Cette dernière, malgré les aspects habituellement stériles du processus administratif, est à plusieurs reprises associée à des figures mystérieuses – damnantes ou rédemptrices – issues d'un imaginaire aux inflexions religieuses diverses.

Dans le roman *Assommons les pauvres !*, les bureaux du centre de demande d'asile, où la protagoniste est interprète, deviennent sous son regard un espace infernal, et les migrants, des êtres presque sous-humains. Seule Lucia, la Béatrice d'une Dante féminine, illumine ce topos tortueux de la bureaucratie par la révélation de l'Autre et la promesse d'une sexualité réinventée.

Dans *Apatride*, une autre figure – cette fois-ci ambivalente, à la fois positive et négative –, Christophe Richard, incarne le type du fonctionnaire : angélique, prometteur d'un au-delà en situation régulière, il demeure en même temps inquiétant avec sa serviette noire et son caractère inaccessible.

Notre analyse se penchera sur ce phénomène de *mythologisation* du processus bureaucratique entamé par Shumona Sinha, allant de la déesse Kālī à saint Christophe, en passant par le démon Raktabīja ou les enfers et les paradis dantesques. Une attention particulière sera également portée au renouement avec une « mythologie littéraire » aux échos kafkaïens, à travers l'anonyme Monsieur K.

Andreea Apostu

Andreea Apostu est chercheuse à l'Institut d'Histoire des Religions de l'Académie Roumaine. Ses travaux portent sur le langage et l'imaginaire religieux dans la littérature, sur les relations entre texte et image dans les manuscrits médiévaux, ainsi que sur la réception du Moyen Âge dans l'art et la littérature des XIX^e et XX^e siècles. Sa thèse, intitulée *Réminiscences médiévales dans l'œuvre de Maurice Denis* (Classiques Garnier, 2021), analyse les emprunts médiévaux qui structurent les compositions picturales et les décors d'églises de l'artiste français. Elle a récemment contribué au volume collectif *Postcolonialisme, femmes et migration dans l'œuvre de Shumona Sinha* (AVM Verlag, 2025), avec une étude consacrée à l'imaginaire religieux qui infuse les romans de l'écrivaine. À ces travaux s'ajoutent plusieurs articles sur l'enluminure médiévale, dont le plus récent, intitulé « L'écu : prouesse, lâcheté et parodie de l'absence. Autour du manuscrit Bodley 264 », a été publié dans la revue *Le Moyen Âge* (2023/2). Un article à paraître chez Brepols, consacré aux représentations de Cerbère et de Pluton dans des manuscrits du XV^e siècle, constitue le fruit d'un séjour de recherche d'un mois à l'Université de Caen Normandie, effectué dans le cadre du projet ERC AGRELITA.

From Kālī to Kafka: Mythologies of Bureaucratic Passage in the Work of Shumona Sinha

Abstract

In Shumona Sinha's novels, the passage from one country to another, from one identity to another, takes the form of both a bureaucratic chore and a rite of passage. The latter, despite the usually sterile aspects of the administrative process, is repeatedly associated with mysterious figures – damning or redeeming – drawn from an imagination with various religious overtones.

In the novel *Assommons les pauvres! (Down with the Poor!)*, the offices of the asylum application center, where the protagonist works as an interpreter, become, in her eyes, an infernal place, and the migrants, almost subhuman beings. Only Lucia, the Beatrice of a female Dante, illuminates this tortuous *topos* of bureaucracy by revealing the Other

and promising a reinvented sexuality. In *Apatride (Stateless)*, another figure – this time ambivalent, at once positive and negative – by the name of Christophe Richard embodies the archetype of the civil servant: angelic, promising a future in a regular situation, he remains at the same time disturbing with his black briefcase and his unapproachable nature.

Our analysis will focus on this phenomenon of *mythologizing* the bureaucratic process undertaken by Shumona Sinha, ranging from the goddess Kālī to Saint Christopher, via the demon Raktabīja and Dante's hells and paradises. Particular attention will also be paid to the revival of a "literary mythology" with Kafkaesque echoes, through the anonymous Mr. K.

Andreea Apostu

Andreea Apostu is a researcher at the Institute for the History of Religions of the Romanian Academy. Her research focuses on religious language and imagery in literary texts, the interplay between textual and visual representations in medieval manuscripts, and the reception of the Middle Ages in 19th- and 20th-century art and literature. Published in 2021 by Classiques Garnier, her doctoral thesis, *Réminiscences médiévales dans l'œuvre de Maurice Denis*, investigates the medieval elements underpinning the paintings and church decorations of the French artist. She recently contributed a study on religious imagery in Shumona Sinha's novels to the volume *Postcolonialisme, femmes et migration dans l'œuvre de Shumona Sinha* (AVM Verlag, 2025) and has published several articles on medieval illuminated manuscripts, including "L'écu: prouesse, lâcheté et parodie de l'absence. Autour du manuscrit Bodley 264" (*Le Moyen Âge*, 2023/2). An article on medieval representations of Cerberus and Pluto in 15th-century illuminated manuscripts is forthcoming in a collective volume published by Brepols, resulting from her one-month stay as a visiting researcher at the University of Caen Normandie within the ERC project AGRELITA.

Le troisième corps du roi : une histoire politique de l'administration dans l'Europe de la première modernité

Abstract

Cette communication propose l'exposé programmatique d'un projet plus global consacré à la « République européenne des bureaux », entendue comme un espace transnational de circulation des pratiques administratives et des savoirs d'État aux XVI^e et XVII^e siècles. Elle s'attache à comprendre, de manière comparative, les conditions de visibilité du pouvoir : pourquoi et comment les gouvernements rendent-ils perceptibles leurs opérations, à quels coûts et pour quels bénéfices, notamment en situation de crise politique.

L'argument s'organise autour de trois axes : 1) les cadres normatifs de la négociation et du gouvernement (conseils, secrétaireries, juridictions) ; 2) la matérialité des écritures et des objets politiques (liasses, portefeuilles, registres, sceaux, tableaux) ; 3) la dimension performative des textes et des images dans l'espace public. L'enquête progresse par comparaison entre

la France, les anciens Pays-Bas (Bruxelles), l'Angleterre et la Confédération suisse, en suivant à la fois des profils d'administrateurs (secrétaires d'État, magistrats, envoyés) et des scènes de décision (conseil, arbitrage, négociation).

L'hypothèse centrale est qu'émerge, à l'échelle continentale, une société administrative relativement cohérente – avant-garde de la société politique – dont l'unité repose sur ses modes de représentation, l'usage d'expertises spécialisées et la manipulation d'objets politiques fortement matérialisés. Cette « société administrative » constitue un « troisième corps du roi », distinct de son corps mortel et de son corps mystique, réceptacle fragile de la Majesté. L'objectif est de montrer comment, par écritures et images, ces acteurs configurent les imaginaires des institutions collectives, et de dégager – grâce à la comparaison – les invariants et écarts qui structurent l'Europe des bureaux.

Jérémie Ferrer-Bartomeu

Historien de la première modernité européenne, Jérémie Ferrer-Bartomeu consacre ses travaux à l'histoire politique et culturelle de l'administration lors des conflits confessionnels. Il analyse les circulations des savoirs administratifs et diplomatiques ainsi que les matérialités qui façonnent l'exercice du pouvoir. Son approche, résolument interdisciplinaire, conjugue l'anthropologie historique de l'écrit, les études visuelles et la sociologie pragmatique pour saisir la performativité des textes et des images au sein de ce qu'il nomme la « république européenne des bureaux ». Ancien membre de la *Casa de Velázquez* (Madrid) et docteur de l'*École nationale des chartes*, il a été chargé de recherches du F.R.S.-FNRS, rattaché à l'Université de Liège et à l'Université catholique de Louvain. Il est actuellement maître de conférences invité à la Faculté de philosophie, arts et lettres de l'UCLouvain, chercheur associé du Centre Jean-Mabillon de l'*École nationale des chartes* et du *Centre d'études supérieures de la Renaissance* de Tours. Sa monographie, *L'État à la lettre. Écrit politique et société administrative en France durant les guerres de Religion* (Champ Vallon, 2022), a été distinguée par le prix Tilsit-Institut de France pour l'Administration (2024).

The Third Body of the King: A Political History of Administration in Early Modern Europe

Abstract

This paper presents the programmatic outline of a broader project devoted to the “European Republic of Offices,” conceived as a transnational space in which administrative practices and state knowledge circulated during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It aims to investigate, in comparative perspective, the conditions of visibility of power: why and how governments sought to make their operations perceptible, at what cost and for what benefit – especially in times of political crisis.

The argument is developed along three main lines: 1) the normative frameworks of negotiation and government (councils, secretariats, jurisdictions); 2) the materiality of political writings and objects (files, portfolios, registers, seals, paintings); 3) the performative dimension of texts and images within the public sphere. The enquiry moves across France, the Habsburg Netherlands (Brussels), England, and the Swiss

Confederation, focusing both on administrative actors (secretaries of state, magistrates, envoys) and on decision-making arenas (council, arbitration, negotiation).

The central hypothesis is that a relatively coherent administrative society emerged on a continental scale – an avant-garde of the political community – whose cohesion rested on its modes of representation, its use of specialised expertise, and its handling of highly materialised political artefacts. This “administrative society” embodied a “third body of the King,” distinct from the mortal and mystical bodies, and functioned as the fragile receptacle of Majesty. The project seeks to demonstrate how, through texts and images, these actors shaped the imaginaries of collective institutions, and to highlight – through comparison – the continuities and divergences that structured the Europe of offices.

Jérémie Ferrer-Bartomeu

A historian of early modern Europe, Jérémie Ferrer-Bartomeu specialises in the political and cultural history of administration during the Confessional Wars. He analyses the circulation of administrative and diplomatic knowledge as well as the materialities that shape the exercise of power. His resolutely interdisciplinary approach combines historical anthropology of writing, visual studies and pragmatic sociology to capture the performativity of texts and images within what he calls the “European republic of offices.” A former member of the *Casa de Velázquez* (Madrid) and a doctor of the *École nationale des chartes*, he has been a research fellow at the F.R.S.-FNRS, attached to the University of Liège and the Catholic University of Louvain. He is currently a visiting lecturer at the Faculty of Philosophy, Arts and Letters at UCLouvain, and an associate researcher at the Centre Jean-Mabillon at the *École nationale des chartes* and the *Centre d’études supérieures de la Renaissance* in Tours. His monograph, *L’État à la lettre. Écrit politique et société administrative en France durant les guerres de Religion* (Champ Vallon, 2022), was awarded the Tilsit-Institut de France Prize for Administration (2024).



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