Rowan Wilken - Some reflections on archives, bureaucracy, digital technology and plumbing

There will be no theses, antitheses, syntheses, here. Rather, this text is constructed from and held together as a series of 'non-totalizable fragments' (Bensmaïa 1987: xxviii). For Roland Barthes, a master fragmentist, fragmentary writing is 'a method of abrupt, separated, broken openings' (Barthes 1995: 94), a collection of interrelated but not necessarily connected lexias. Moreover, as Nietzsche (another master fragmentist) has revealed, fragmentary writing shifts registers, accommodating the poetical, the polemical, the philosophical, the autobiographical, the inventorial...

These fragments - or, given the theme of 'waste', these 'scraps' are six in number: bureaucratese, human remains, retrieval and loss, leaks, insurgent action, and economic rationalism. They are intended as provocations, 'pressure points' or 'sites' (Frow and Morris 1993: xv) around which to reflect on the convergence of library archives (and in particular a key State repository), bureaucracy and digital technology. Barthes's fragmentary method seems fitting here, for these three - like the fragment itself - are 'non-totalizable', they add together but do not necessarily add up.

Fragment/Scrap # 1: bureaucratese

'Bureaucratese' as a form of linguistic waste? Former Australian Labor party speechwriter Don Watson (1999: 1) thinks so: 'language in this country is in disrepair, clogged up'. Interestingly, this is also a common charge levelled against the language of certain strands of contemporary cultural theory, particularly poststructuralist theory. On the surface, there are certain similarities between the two: a shared interest in neologisms and wordplay, and what many consider impenetrable language. But, this unlikely and perhaps disconcerting comparison is drawn in order to delineate clearly between them, since poststructuralist theory is also a powerful tool for critiquing bureaucratic language and culture.

To begin with, consider the charge of 'impenetrability' levelled against the language of poststructuralist theory, an accusation that deserves qualification. When approaching the poststructuralist theoretical writings of Barthes and other members of the French nouvelle critique, Philip Thody remarks that 'it is the duty of the reader to try to understand the author, not of the author to bring herself or himself down to the reader's level' (Thody 1987: 28-29). This is not a statement of arrogance. Rather, it is in recognition that poststructuralist theory takes language as its subject - a subject understood to be difficult. The theorist proceeds in the
knowledge that in traversing this difficult terrain the fact of this difficulty is inescapable and pervades and shapes the act of traversal itself.

But the poststructuralist agenda is also as much about politics as it is about language. Its interest in language is an interest in the process of language, such that it critiques the way in which words and sentence structure can distort meaning to fit ideological or political agendas.[1]

'Bureaucratese' generates just such distortions. It manipulates language to fit ideological or political agendas; it is also obfuscatory and evasive in order to achieve certain goals. Take, for instance, the following examples. According to this manipulated and evasive language the word 'restructure', a word by now all too plainly associated with job loss, is perfidiously re-dubbed 'forward planning'. This latter phrase deliberately carries a positive inflection (similar to the niggling insistence on 'challenges' over 'problems') whilst the intent - job cuts - remains unchanged. Bear in mind that 'job cuts' are themselves generally referred to as 'position spills' in order to avoid all mention of the human individuals affected. The factors motivating the perceived underlying need for change are dubbed 'change drivers' - a term that props up the bureaucratic desire for change because it conveys a certain sense of inevitability, of the individual being 'chauffeured' to a position of redundancy, of change being 'driven' by factors beyond control and therefore beyond scrutiny and beyond question.

Or, to cite a second example, there are 'market driven' (another suspicious term) mechanisms for measuring employee 'performance' - mechanisms decidedly Pavlovian in that they are either punitive (pecuniary) or remunerative - which are adjudicated according to 'key performance indicators (KPIs)' or a 'goals matrix'. (But, as Heidegger (1971) has observed, we do not control language, language controls us. Language is slippery; it invariably leaks and gives something up of itself in spite of all attempts to subdue it. It is in this sense that the phrase 'goals matrix' itself betrays that, for employees, achieving performance recognition is a realistically labyrinthine and difficult path to negotiate.][2]

Bureaucratic wordplay of this kind (although little about it suggests 'play') merely serves to illustrate, yet again, [that] every culture institutes itself through the unilateral imposition of some 'politics' of language. Mastery begins, as we know, through the power of naming, of imposing and legitimating appellations (Derrida 1998: 39).

The bureaucrat appropriates and 'masters' language in the same way as the colonial 'master':

Because the master [or bureaucrat] does not possess exclusively, and naturally, what he calls language, ' because language is not his natural possession, he can, thanks to that very fact, pretend ' to appropriate it in order to impose it as 'his own'. That is his belief; he wishes to make others share it through the use of force or cunning; he wants to make others believe it, as they do a miracle, through rhetoric' (Derrida 1998: 23)

This is precisely why bureaucratese is so troubling, for 'inside languages there is a terror' (Derrida 1998: 23), a 'terror' that can be alternately 'soft, discreet, or glaring' (23). Bureaucratese is chameleonic: it is all of these, sometimes at once.

More notable is that bureaucratic language services an 'unshakeable belief' in 'certitude', in the inherent rightness and 'naturalness' of all that is said and done (Lucy 2001: 8). Such a belief in certitude is manifest, Lucy suggests, in 'the "truth" that competition is so natural and right that any state-sponsored institution ' must be "artificial" and therefore has to be privatized' (8). Or, to cite a library-specific example, the economic 'wisdom' that services such as conserving archival collections (ie. countering inevitable 'archiviolithic' forces) are deemed a luxury because they are non revenue raising - 'wisdom' all the more worrisome when it is
sanctioned by UNESCO (see Foster, Russel, Lyall, Marshall 1995).

This will to certitude has been adjudged to be 'undemocratic' (Lucy 2001: 1-12). Which is to say (among other things) that it is 'anti-philosophical', as the following passage from Bertrand Russell may elucidate:

> Philosophy, though unable to tell us with certainty what is the true answer to the doubts which it raises, is able to suggest many possibilities which enlarge our thoughts and free them from the tyranny of custom. Thus, while diminishing our feeling of certainty as to what things are, it greatly increases our knowledge as to what they may be (Russell 1980: 91).

Accordingly, and far from constituting some kind of conceptual weakness, then, 'to doubt' is a productive verb, to doubt is generative, it is freeing and liberating - in a word, it is democratic. Equally, and no less importantly, it is also quarrelsome in that it acts as a foil to certitude, it is certitude's 'other'. It is in this way, as Lucy puts it,

> [that] cultural criticism is also a form of cultural politics, even when it's seen as being 'philosophical', 'speculative', rhetorically 'obtuse', 'playful' or 'literary' and seemingly 'apolitical' (Lucy 2001: 146).

And it is from this perspective that Lucy writes eloquently and at length on how a commitment to textuality and deconstruction is, among other things, a commitment to 'a critique of certitude' (146 & passim; cf. Lucy 1995).

A further way by which one might critique certitude is to 'steal language' as one might 'steal a loaf of bread' (Barthes 1995: 167) - this is the point at which the 'human resource' is forced by necessity to become the 'resourceful human'. Linguistic theft (or reclamation) can serve, to revive Michel de Certeau's (1984) distinction, as an effective 'tactic' to combat bureaucratic 'strategy'. And if language (and its theft) is ammunition, writing (in both its narrow sense and its specific but nevertheless wider sense of écriture[3]) can serve as a weapon with which to deploy this ammunition. To write, in this context, is a political act. Especially when instigated 'indeed, actively fomented' by an insurgent actor. In Hélène Cixous's hopeful words, 'writing is precisely the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures' (Cixous 1976: 879).

**Fragment/Scrap # 2: cataloguing human remains**

Any archive is the archive of something else, of someone else - a storehouse of human remains and cultural and personal residue. The following invent- ory, extracted from one Victorian State archival listing, illustrates this:

- Adam Lindsay Gordon ivory horse's head whip
- armour belonging to Ned Kelly
- Aurora antarctic expedition: Roberts's snow compass
- badges worn by concentration camp inmates
- black military coat of N. S. W. volunteer
- bone, carved brooch
- boot hooks which belonged to Robert Hoddle
- bronze metal plaque of Cook and the Endeavour
- brooch made from Miss Drysdale's hair
- Bryant and May directors' attendance books
• candle of Sir Henry Bolte
• cast of Barry Humphries's hands
• certificate of competency as a telegraph operator
• clay pipe from Crimean War
• commemorative shovel 1899 - spade used to mark the Geelong to Melbourne railway (has been confused with Melbourne to Collingwood railway spade)
• compass belonging to Robert Saunders Webb, early customs officer in Melbourne
• death mask of Marcus Clarke
• early Victorian parasol: brown brocade, whalebone ribs, folding handle
• Edmund Burke plaster bust
• 1879 British saw back bayonet and scabbard
• flag flown at Kimberley during Boer War
• fragments from unidentified plaster busts
• gent's cream satin embroidered waistcoat, early Victorian
• gold covered belt with two gold straps
• hair from camels of Burke and Wills expedition
• Henry Lawson's walking stick
• historical boots, leather
• honour roll: Public Library and National Museum
• latex model of bear
• Marcus Clarke, circular bas-relief
• Moët et Chandon champagne magnum 1906 (empty) - found in Miss Ramsay's office
• piece of timber from HMVS Nelson
• pistol found by Howitt in Burke's hand, belonged to Wills
• plaster bas-relief of Sir Redmond Barry
• plaster bust: head fragments
• plaster cast: Henry Lawson's right hand
• Port Arthur: padlock from the condemned cell
• postcard album (belonging to Augustus A. Fritsch)
• railway conductor's bag
• red clay pot, supposedly made by an Aboriginal
• sextant used in surveying the boundary of Victoria / N. S. W.
• sticks of chewing tobacco
• tea caddy used in Scotts's expedition
• two leather convict caps
• Union Jack flag from Shackleton's Antarctic expedition
• visiting card
• white bodice, trimmed with white fringes, c.1860
• William Shakespeare's house, model

It seems apt that these items are generally housed in what is termed a 'compactus': in library terms, a storage mechanism; but in a slightly different context (and according to a slightly different spelling), a device for condensing or compacting waste.

Fragment/Scrap # 3: retrieval and loss

In his short meditation on archives, Archive Fever: a Freudian Impression (1996), Jacques Derrida, the
French philosopher of writing, proposes that there is a dual logic at work within the notion of the archive, with one 'logic' counterbalancing the other. On the one hand there is what he terms 'archive desire' or passion (in the old, suffering sense of the word): a 'compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire for the archive, an irrepresible desire to return to the origin', to return to the moment of 'impression' (Derrida 1996: 91). And, on the other hand, there is 'archival violence' (the death drive), or what he later comes to term 'archive fever' (le mal d'archive) (81 & 90ff). The death drive, Derrida suggests, is 'archiviolithic' (10), exerting an 'annihilating force' (12) against the archive. Combined, the two exist in tension: 'the archive always works, and a priori against itself' (12) - recollection and forgetting, anamnesis and amnesia.

Such a notion poses tantalising and manifold possibilities. The idea that the archive is simultaneously constructive and destructive is illuminating for a society such as ours, which is obsessed with origins and moments of historical significance.

Yet, perhaps even more potent are the impacts of new technology on archives as Derrida envisions them, two of which are outlined below.

The first concerns Derrida's pronouncement that 'archivable meaning is also and in advance codetermined by the structure that archives' (18). So-called 'new' technologies within archives - CD-ROMs, electronic databases, html files and Web sites, e-mail, microcomputers and other electronic storage retrieval systems - are all implicated in this structure. Utilisation of these technologies within the archival process, it is argued, serves to 'transform archives from top to bottom and in the most initial inside of its production, in its very events' (16). That is to say, the archive 'produces as much as it records the event' (17), similarly to the way in which news media produce rather than report news events.

Strongly connected to the above point is the second impact of new technology on the archive. This concerns the emerging and popular perception within the library industry that new archival technology, especially electronic databases and other digital storage systems, hold twofold promise. For the archivist, it is hoped that this technology, applied in the 'digitising' of existing collection items, will serve as a kind of 'plumbing' that will 'unblock' an archival alimentary system constipated by a glut of physical (and ever-expanding) archival material so space-intensive it is measured in linear kilometres. For the researcher, this technology is intended to serve as some kind of aide-mémoire which will enable them to fruitfully grasp archivable history in its entirety, to 'objectivise it with no remainder' (68). For Derrida, however, the very antithesis of this promise also holds true. This is partly due to the way in which 'the archivist produces more archive, and that is why the archive is never closed. It opens out of the future' (68). But it is also because new archival technology disperses as well as synthesises knowledge (it blocks and unblocks). The impact of this technology is such that the contents of our archives 'move away from us at great speed, in a continually accelerated fashion. They burrow into the past at a distance more and more comparable to that which separates us from archaeological digs' (18).

Any recourse to digital technology in an archive management context must recognise and engage with the double logic of 'archive fever', of that which simultaneously produces and destroys, synthesises and disperses, recollects and forgets, retrieves and loses. Or, to put the matter somewhat differently, adding the reflections of Fragment/Scrap # 1, what is required here is 'the necessary juxtaposition of suspicion and recollection' (Ricoeur 1986: 307; 1970: 32-36).

---

**Fragment/Scrap # 4: leaks**

A note or two on the information 'leak'. Operationally, bureaucratic responses to 'leaks' are generally pursued
On the one hand, the response by management is to impose an *omertà*, a conspiracy of silence. That is to say, censorship 'by lack of opportunity or intimidation through control of the channels of communication' (Theall 1995: 263). Strategies of this sort are the inverse of the archival interest in digital technology. Where library bureaucrats seem enamoured of digital technology as a form of plumbing for *unblocking* the archival alimentary system (see Kenney 1993, and Howell 2001), bureaucratic culture of the sort described here is interested in administrative plumbing that wilfully *blocks* - a disciplinary equivalent to bureaucratese. The *omertà* can be an effective technique for a time. But, as Norbert Weiner has observed, information leaks in transit (see Weiner 1965: 82; cf. Tofts 1999). Moreover, the informational system, like all forms of plumbing, is designed for movement. It is a question of biology: if phloem become clogged in a plant (and 'plant' can be read as informational, institutional or industrial as much as biological), material finds another conduit.

On the other hand - and this is usually a strategy that follows post-leak - a second response is to implement the corporate version of Nixon's 'madman theory' (Chomsky 1998). According to this theory, the enforcing body (in this case, management) presents itself as irrational and vindictive in order to frighten and compel submission (Chomsky 1998).

**Fragment/Scrap # 5: insurgent action**

Along with a faith in certitude, there is a certain political and bureaucratic culture that is suspicious of free speech, that recognises the slipperiness and danger of language; that understands that to write is a political act. There is nothing particularly unusual about this; all regimes (and I use this word advisedly) realise this. But it is nevertheless remarkable in that it is particularly strong in present Victorian State politics, as evidenced in the *Code of Conduct for the Victorian public sector* (1995), specifically clauses 17-19. The Code acknowledges the 'right to make public comment and enter into public debate on political and social issues' (6), but at the same time prohibits 'public comment on the administration of any State department' (6). It is a comprehensive prohibition given that, in an all-encompassing definition, 'public comment' is taken to mean:

speaking engagements, comments on radio and television and expressing views in letters to the newspapers or in books, journals or notices where it might be expected that the publication or circulation of the comment will spread to the community at large (6).

'Leaking' of information (7) is also prohibited.

In a word, the aim is to 'gag'. Strangely, though, 'gag' is a particularly apt word, because what seems to pass unnoticed is that it is an amphibology, one of those words which Barthes (1995: 72) delights in because it retains a double meaning (at least) with one (or more) meaning(s) winking at the other(s). So, 'gag' can mean a thing or circumstance restricting free speech, but also, and simultaneously, a joke as part of an act (albeit an 'unfunny joke', as Gregory Ulmer [1989: 76] would have it).[4] More revealing still, it is also 'an actor's interpellation in a dramatic dialogue'. In a governmental (bureaucratic) context, to interpellate is to interrupt and demand explanation of. Thus, the 'actor' who sees the joke that isn't funny in bureaucratic culture, the actor who 'interpellates', who interrupts and demands answers of bureaucrats becomes a vital and dynamic actor (actor is from the Latin for 'doer'), a politicised figure - an *insurgent actor*.

**Fragment/Scrap # 6: economic rationalism**
The notion of 'economic rationalism':

1. The last line of defence behind which all bureaucrats and politicians take refuge is the 'bottom line'. Economic rationalist strategies treat the 'bottom line' as inscrutable, a sine qua non of all budget-related decision-making. To defer to the 'bottom line' is thus to embrace certitude; it is to appeal to a notion of the 'elemental'; a desire for that which is closed to debate, context free, 'outside the text'. Deference to the 'bottom line' to the exclusion of all other factors and arguments is to be greeted with the utmost suspicion and resistance.

2. The bureaucratic reluctance to admit to the fullness of the ambiguity of language is lamentable. Lamentable, but not surprising. For to submit to the 'risk that textuality entails' (Lucy 2001: 11) - that words do not always mean what we intend them to mean - would be to engage with an 'ethics of indecision' (146), which, in turn, would entail questioning the very foundations of a concept like 'economic rationalism'. Take the word 'economic', for example. Spivak reads economy not as a purely fiscal term but as 'a metaphor of energy - where two opposed forces playing against each other constitute the so-called identity of a phenomenon' (1997: xlii). In this sense, 'economy is not a reconciliation of opposites, but rather a maintaining of disjunction' (xlii). Similarly, the 'rationalism' of 'economic rationalism' is dramatically reconfigured if one conceives of it as Bachelard does. In his work in the field of philosophy of science, Bachelard maintains a subtle but insistent encompassing of the irrational within the rational (see McAllester Jones 1991).

3. That archival administration is held so firmly in the thrall of economic rationalist strategies can (at least in part) be explained etymologically. The word 'economy' comes from the Greek root oikonomia, defined as 'household management', as in the scholastic pursuit of 'home economics'. However, this rather benign meaning takes a more profound turn when 'house' is read as 'archive' and 'management' is read as the maintenance of 'law':

The meaning of 'archive', its only meaning, comes to it from the Greek arkheion: initially a house, a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior magistrates, the archons, those who commanded. The citizens who thus held and signified political power were considered to possess the right to make or to represent the law. On account of their publicly recognized authority, it is their home, in that place which is their house (private house, family house, employee's house), that official documents are filed (Derrida 1996: 2).

Thus, the first figure of an archive ' is at once institutive and conservative. Revolutionary and traditional. An eco-nomic archive in this double sense: it keeps, it puts in reserve, it saves, but in an unnatural fashion, that is to say in making the law (nomos) or in making people respect the law (Derrida 1996: 7).

In the present context, it is the 'law' of the economic rationalist agenda that is to be respected. And it is in the present context, as in so many others, that 'deconstruction' and 'deconstructing certitude' (Lucy 2001:11) are (and will continue to be) immensely important.

Sources


Bensmaïa, Réda, The Barthes Effect: the Essay as Reflective Text, trans. Pat Fedkiew (Minneapolis:
University of Minnesota, 1987).


- *Beyond Semiotics: Text, Culture and Technology* (London: Continuum, 2001).


Footnotes

[1] Similar concerns are pursued by Hegel in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1977: 308ff) where he discusses, as Ricoeur (1986: 160) puts it, 'the language of flattery and the language of the court, the distortions of language for political use'.


[4] In Ulmer's engagement with the amphibological character of 'gag' he considers its double meaning of 'joke' and 'choke' (1989: 75).

[5] James Joyce (1992: 540) captures the political, the economic and the irrational (the joke that isn't funny) in a single portmanteau word: 'politicoecomedy' (politics + economy + comedy).