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More Neoliberal Art History

By Todd Cronan (Emory University) and Charles Palermo (College of William & Mary)

This discussion addresses two parts of Pamela M. Lee’s forthcoming study of Think Tank Aesthetics: Mid-Century Modernism, The Cold War and the Rise of Visual Culture: the 2011 October essay “Aesthetic Strategist: Albert Wohlstetter, the Cold War, and a Theory of Mid-Century Modernism,” and a recent talk, “1973: or, the Arché of Neoliberalism.” Two core issues are at stake throughout Lee’s study, the crisis of the humanities and its connections with neoliberal policy. In “Aesthetic Strategist” Lee focuses on the surprising relationship between military strategist and systems theorist Wohlstetter and art historian Meyer Schapiro, who shared a defining commitment to semiotics; in “1973” Lee looks at the Ulm designer Gui Bonsiepe, the management systems expert Stafford Beer, and the Austrian economist Friedrich Hayek to consider the way their work occupies and evacuates history.

Wohlstetter is best known for his 1959 RAND Corporation discussion of “The Delicate Balance of Terror.” As Lee shows, Wohlstetter’s argument in this and related works turned on the problem of intentionality. Wohlstetter’s basic aim was to dispel what he called “the nearly universal optimism about the stability of deterrence” (215). As it was conventionally understood, deterrence was a matter of assured mutual destruction. Wohlstetter was unconvinced. Projecting innumerable “uncertainties” into the equation, above all the increased probability of “accidents” with the rise of multiplied weaponry, Wohlstetter sought to come to terms with uncertainty and accident rather than wish them away. Appealing in part to Schapiro’s semiotics, but more significantly to Claude Shannon’s information theory, Wohlstetter sought to reduce the “noise to signal” ratio in reading enemy dispatches. If ambiguity haunted every message, what strategies were available to reduce them? Seeking in vain for “unambiguous evidence of enemy intentions,” he warned of “miscalculations” when construing “enemy intent and the meaning of ambiguous signals” (226, 231). If intentional analysis was difficult with works of art, then
“Not even the most advanced reconnaissance equipment can disclose an intention from 40,000 feet” (231). For Wohlstetter, and for the most obvious reasons, intention was something one aimed to disclose.” (We might pause at this point to note how Lee is asking readers to transfer Wohlstetter’s extreme vision of message extraction to an understanding of how the humanities deals with intent.) In order to “reduce the chance of accident” Wohlstetter sought a kind of absolute intentionality, a set of “fail-safe’ procedures” to extract a meaning from the ambiguous message. As his procedures developed, Wohlstetter began to see that potentially nothing was outside the constraints of systems analysis. In the most revealing moment of Lee’s discussion, she cites Wohlstetter’s 1979 “Notes on Signals Hidden in Noise”: “No signal, in the sense in which it is used in…information theory is ever completely ambiguous…. [N]o bit of noise is unambiguously noise; it is always possible to hypothesize that some apparently random series of events contains a piece of information, deliberately, or actually concealed.” So what began as intensified sense of ambiguity and uncertainty ends as fail-safe and the totalization of meaning. As Lee concludes her discussion of “Aesthetic Strategist,” Wohlstetter marshalled Schapiro’s “polysemic” semiotics to “agendas that were far more universalizing, or perhaps colonizing: to read, and thus control, an expanding empire of signs.”

Neoliberalism, then, is the mastery of signs. Thus, for Lee, neoliberalism hinges on matters like the “convergence between semiotics and politics,” on the “demands of operational analysis,” the “military-aesthetic complex,” on systems and algorithms, even more generally on notions of domination, administration, and control by and through signs. And while it makes perfect sense to see a defense strategist committed to reducing the presence of “polysemic” signs, for Lee, the opposite holds as well. Polysemousness is the critical tool for undermining neoliberalism, a kind of permanent, and potentially disruptive, noise in the system.
In “1973: or, The Arché of Neoliberalism,” Lee takes up a seemingly related dimension of Cold War thought and its connection to events in the past and to contemporary artistic production. She considers an enigmatic recent installation, *Multinode Metagame*, at the Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie, which is based on the décor and technology of an even more curious project, the Opsroom of CyberSyn, which was a project of Salvador Allende, the ill-fated socialist leader of Chile in the early ’seventies who was deposed and murdered by Augusto Pinochet in a coup September 11, 1973. CyberSyn was to use the latest thinking in management systems to coordinate, in the Opsroom, daily reports from Chile’s factories and plants of all kinds. This aggregate of nearly real-time economic information would inform a team of planners seated in the Opsroom in high-tech swivel chairs and surrounded by screens onto which representations of this data could be projected. There, information could be fashioned into a centralized response to changing conditions.
The Opsroom was never fully operational. And Allende’s planned economy never had a chance. But it brought together a management systems expert, Stafford Beer, and a design specialist, Gui Bonsiepe, whose perspectives on the intersection of design and systems Lee takes to capture a crucial nodal point in history. Lee draws on a third voice, Austrian economist Friedrich Hayek, to exemplify mid-century thinking around systems. Hayek played a leading role in the Mont Pelerin Society, and he also knew Beer (however fleetingly) and visited Pinochet’s Chile twice. Hayek, like Wohlstetter, represents a crucial interdisciplinary perspective. Hayek places economics in a network of disciplines with the stated aim of securing maximal individual liberty in a society that permits everyone the freedom to pursue his or her own interests to his or her own advantage. While all of these figures profess a concern with liberty and equity in society, they are all concerned, more centrally, about the concentration of control. What they forget—or suppress—is history. According to Lee, the Mont Pelerin Society aimed to suppress certain historical accounts and to fill their place in our understanding of the world with an interdisciplinary program that excluded history—an aim fulfilled in our neoliberal society, insofar as it
lies past what Francis Fukuyama called the end of history. It is there, in the return to CyberSyn’s Opsroom, that Lee sees a return to a moment before the official account could regard Allende’s failure as a fait accompli, a return to the floor of the desert where bodies continue to emerge, a return to the primordial matrix, the arché, of neoliberalism. But what kind of history is this?

It’s a vision of neoliberalism’s historical moment that avoids—is designed to avoid—the role that class conflict and exploitation plays in this history. Lee notes how the designers at Ulm “read deeply in Frankfurt School Marxism” and how Bonsiepe’s Marxism converged with (loosely) neoliberal system-thinking in the Opsroom. Unless Bonsiepe was a terrible reader of the Frankfurt School, it is clearly an extension of the (highly contested) model of Marxism that Adorno and Horkheimer developed with *Dialectic of Enlightenment*—one that, like Bonsiepe’s, and like Lee’s, expunges exploitation from the record in the name of mechanisms like administration, domination and violence. That is why one (maybe Bonsiepe) could perhaps understand Lee’s disregard or minimizing the ideological opposition between Allende’s communism and Pinochet’s fascism, both of which were (on this account) epiphenomenal expressions of the primacy of administrative systems. And if systems are what matter to neoliberalism, then something like anti-system, “polysemic” difference would be its “enemy,” not redistribution.

When the enemy is the state, anti-statism is the alternative. Thus the “recursive” part of Lee’s Foucauldian “recursive ontology” (her alternative to neoliberalism) is an ongoing and collapsible collectivity without a state. As Daniel Zamora and Michael C. Behrent have recently shown, in *Foucault and Neoliberalism*, there is wide common ground between Left and Right anti-statists. In Mitchell Dean’s words, Foucault looked into the “liberal and neoliberal political repertoire to find ways of renovating social-democratic or socialist politics and escaping its perceived fatal statism.” But this “recursive ontology” is a system, too—just a system without a center, without an author.
In Lee’s work, systems have a way of generating “meaning” independent of agents. This commitment to autonomous systems should be familiar to readers of Lee’s earlier work, *Chronophobia: On Time in the Art of the 1960’s* (2004). Recall that Lee asked readers to “feel” Riley’s paintings, to “experience” them, rather than view them as abstractions. Readers were asked to “Stand a little longer, look a little harder” at *Current* of 1964 and consider “what happens” while you look (155). Looking a little longer and harder the surface flickers “like a stroboscope; or wave, like a lenticular screen; look longer still and surprising colors-psychedelic phantoms-emerge from between the lines. Spangles of gold, pink, and green burst and flash, lining the eyelids and rattling the skull. The eye is ennervated while the body feels something else:
nausea, perhaps, or even a blinding headache” (155). Woozy, rattled, enervated, nauseous, blind. One might be tempted to show how this account is a highly literal instance of Bois’ notion of the “surefire.” But Bois tends to see surefire works as intended, even if they fundamentally displace the relevance of any intent. When Lee asks “what happens to you” before a Riley, she’s not asking what the artist meant to happen to you. It’s “Not…a matter of intention…on the artist’s part—far from it” (235). Bois’ critical ophthalmology becomes Lee’s ophthalmology without an operator. Operatorless ophthalmology does not (yet) make an appearance in *Think-Tank Aesthetics*: the agency of line in Riley is replaced by the agency of systems and inevitable noise they make when the body gets processed in its cogs.

So what kind of history is this? How does Lee describe the moment of historical contingency in 1973 when CyberSyn threatened to function as a tool of a planned economy, as the vehicle for an economy outside or beyond the market? Why is it difficult for us, in our historical moment to grasp that contingent moment and imagine in it something else? Why is it difficult to imagine an alternative form of social organization, one that we *could* will for ourselves and others?

The point of Francis Fukuyama’s “end of history” thesis is, of course, not that history as memorable events ended, but that history (understood as the narrative of evolving and competing forms of economic and political organization, as ideological disagreements) ended. People would still do things—seek advantages, prosecute wars, seek justice for past wrongs—but they would do them *within* a capitalist market economy:

And yet, good news has come. The most remarkable development of the last quarter of the twentieth century has been the revelation of enormous weaknesses at the core of the world’s seemingly strong dictatorships, whether they be of the military-authoritarian Right, or the communist-totalitarian Left. From Latin America to Eastern Europe, from the Soviet Union to the Middle East and Asia, strong governments have been failing over the last two decades. And while they have not given way in all cases to stable liberal democracies, liberal democracy remains the only coherent political aspiration that spans
different regions and cultures around the globe. In addition, liberal principles in economics—the “free market”—have spread, and have succeeded in producing unprecedented levels of material prosperity, both in industrially developed countries and in countries that had been, at the close of World War II, part of the impoverished Third World. A liberal revolution in economic thinking has sometimes preceded, sometimes followed, the move toward political freedom around the globe.11

The tone of self-evidence—the kind that saturates Lee’s stories of mostly forgotten anti-heroes—is standard for the genre. Whatever the quarter-century of failures has thrown at it, act as though it’s some hard knocks on the way to success.12 The author’s present doubts are about the durability of the neoliberal free-market order’s best, most democratic form, not the possibility that competing social or economic organizations might reenter the ring and prove themselves superior to neoliberalism. That is neoliberal ideology. Lee tells us that neoliberalism’s architects busied themselves with writing certain kinds of histories out of the record. This has everything to do with underplaying ideological differences and alternatives. So, for instance, when Friedrich Hayek wrote The Road to Serfdom, history (in Fukuyama’s sense) was anything but over. Still, there seemed to Hayek to be remarkably little, even then, to disagree about in the struggle between liberals (in Hayek’s sense) and “planners” (socialists—National, Soviet, and otherwise):

The dispute between the modern planners and their opponents is, therefore, nota dispute on whether we ought to choose intelligently between the various possible organizations of society; it is not a dispute on whether we ought to employ foresight and systematic thinking in planning our common affairs. It is a dispute about what is the best way of so doing. The question is whether for this purpose it is better that the holder of coercive power should confine himself in general to creating conditions under which the knowledge and initiative of individuals are given the best scope so that they can plan most successfully; or whether a rational utilization of our resources requires central direction and organization of all our activities according to some consciously constructed “blueprint.”13

Hayek allowed room for the state—to ensure that everyone had equal access to trades, to regulate methods of production (for safety, etc.), to administer “an extensive system of social services,” etc. (37).
As long as the state’s intervention did not coerce, did not interfere with competition, and did not apply unequally to different parties (as long, that is, as the rule of law was enforced on everyone), Hayek did not object.

The idea of rule of law is central to *The Road to Serfdom.*

The distinction we have drawn before between the creation of a permanent framework of laws within which the productive activity is guided by individual decisions and the direction of economic activity by a central authority is thus really a particular case of the more general distinction between the Rule of Law and arbitrary government. Under the first the government confines itself to fixing rules determining the conditions under which the available resources may be used, leaving to the individuals the decision for what ends they are to be used. Under the second the government directs the use of the means of production to particular ends. The first type of rules can be made in advance, in the shape of formal rules which do not aim at the wants and needs of particular people. They are intended to be merely instrumental in the pursuit of people’s various individual ends. (73)

As long as laws regulating economic activity avoided directing resources to “particular ends,” they were agreeable to Hayek’s theory.

So even for Hayek, stuck in the thick of history, there wasn’t *that much* to disagree about. The crux of the disagreement, according to him, would be something like CyberSyn. Indeed, a quote from Lee suggests that Beer’s view of management was deeply that of one of Hayek’s “planners”: “When we come to management, whether of the firm or of the country or of international affairs, the same problem of adaptation exists.”14 And yet, Hayek and Beer traveled in the same circles, due to their shared interest in systems theory. In fact, though, their views didn’t diverge so sharply:

Every manager, whether he runs the family business or a small department in a firm, whether he runs the firm itself or a major department of Government, whether he runs the country or an aspect of international affairs, faces an identical problem. He faces, that is, the need to maintain a viable system far more complicated than he personally can understand. And the beginning of wisdom for management at any level is the realisation that viable systems are, in large measure, self-regulating and even self-organising.15
Does that mean, then, that even in Allende’s CyberSyn, neoliberalism’s devotion to self-organizing markets was fundamental? Is the coordination of information—the communications systems that were really a form of domination and for which design, selonGui Bonsiepe, was merely camouflage—the historical soil in which today’s full-blown neoliberalism germinated?

If you accept accounts like Hayek’s and Beer’s of the coordination and functioning of markets, then possibly the answer is yes. But what about Pinochet? No light-touch regulator there. So what are we to make of Hayek’s visits to Pinochet’s Chile? Or, more to the point, what does Hayek’s theorizing have to do with anything, really? Richard Raico, writing on the Cato Institute’s letterhead, warns Hayek that visits openly condoning Pinochet’s regime might pose a danger to his reputation and to public perception of the libertarian/neoliberal program. This assumes, I suppose, that we accept at face value Hayek’s insistence—repeated throughout The Road to Serfdom, in the Mont Pelerin Society’s “Statement of Aims,” and beyond—that the moral foundation of his social thinking was an aversion to the kind of coercion that Pinochet was known to favor.

If we concede that all the moral handwringing—indeed, the whole theoretical foundation of neoliberalism in individual liberty and rule of law—is a transparent excuse for exploitation, then systems theory stops looking central to anything much at all. On many levels, this seems the right thing to do. Richard Nixon’s CIA was there on September 11, 1973, as it was on so many occasions, supporting the thuggish strongman whose extinction Fukuyama celebrated in 1992 as the crowning achievement of those very same Cold Warriors. And the Cato Institute’s commitment to a principled libertarianism hardly sets it above an odious piece of transparently illogical special pleading when it is trying to save a special carve-out in the rule of law for its kind of people. We recommend Daniel J. Mitchell’s “Debunking Fiscal Myths: There Is No Loophole for ‘Carried Interest.’”16 (It’s a mixture of arguments for incentivizing certain economic behaviors—anathema to Hayek—and cooked descriptions of real-world activities: “A capital gain doesn’t magically become labor income just because an investor decides to share a portion of the gain with a fund manager.” Sharing is supposed to replace paying fees, so that the fund manager’s pay can look like some kind of act of largesse.)
One has to agree with Bonsiepe, then. The aesthetics of CyberSyn and the whole style-apparatus of the Hochschule für Gestaltung have been the sugar that helped the medicine—exploitation—go down. And while this could certainly be attractive to an art historian—it makes it seem like we’re in the thick of ideological struggles—studying the sugar won’t tell you anything relevant about how the medicine—neoliberalism—works. If *The Road to Serfdom* or mid-century design Kitsch sold you neoliberalism by promising you a glowing utopia, equal treatment under the rule of law, and freedom from coercion, rereading Hayek or Bonsiepe more critically won’t help you understand why your hedge-fund manager pays half your tax rate, or why your loved ones disappeared into the desert.

A final point: we might hesitate to describe the CyberSyn’s décor as modernist. The chairs suggest Saarinen, but is the Opsroom animated by a modernist sensibility? To the extent that the heart of the project is to produce a maximally flexible situation that projects for the participating subject a kind of immersion in an array of information, to be reconfigured for and by the experiencing subject, it is paradigmatic of a post-minimalist sensibility. Why does this matter?

To return to Bonsiepe’s insight: aesthetics does not hover above the world of politics, and his design aesthetic “was necessarily imbricated in a network bent on systems of either emancipation or control” (“1973”). Now, since it was the project of a socialist government, Hayek would say it supported a system of control; we socialists would see it as a tool of emancipation. Bonsiepe may have worried that, despite Allende’s plans for it, it might have had domination in its DNA. It was a matter that worried Beer and Chilean workers, as well. Insofar as it is a question of the real ability of the CyberSyn room to capture and represent the Chilean economy, domination seems to have been well beyond its potential grasp (“Democratic Socialism, Cybernetic Socialism,” 719). Insofar as the question is an empirical one, Pinochet put the answer out of reach in 1973.

The more interesting question, then, would be about Enrique Rivera and Catalina Ossa’s *Multinode Metagame* (2002) and the *Opsroom* reconstruction at ZKM (2005), which featured Bonsiepe’s photograph of the Opsroom portion of CyberSyn, a computer game by Felix S. Huber, and a DVD showing Patricio Guzmán’s *La batalla de Chile* (three parts, 1975, 1976, and 1979). The photograph is
enlarged and mounted horizontally to provide seating. What these projects share, beside their orientation toward CyberSyn (or the faded Ektachrome avant-garde romance of it) and the tragedy of Allende’s regime, is their commitment to an open-ended, participatory user interface, so to speak. That is, both of them emphatically reject the self-contained modernist work, which is a set of fixed internal relations indifferent to the presence of a beholder, in favor of a paradigmatically anti-modernist open-ended situation of which user participation is constitutive. What does this refusal of modernist art in favor of anti- or postmodernist experience have to do with neoliberalism? Everything.

At the end of “1973: or, the Arché of Neoliberalism,” Lee describes an isomorphism that relates the astronomy that makes the Chilean desert so valuable to science, on one hand, to history, on the other, and specifically to the history of the Pinochet regime. A woman, Violeta Berríos, who lost a loved one to Pinochet’s thugs tells Guzmán in 2010 that she wishes the telescopes could turn their gaze downward and, rather than collecting light emitted by stars millions of years ago, expose the remains of those who were deposited there in modern human history. This is part of the history Multinode Metagame offers the user in Germany, courtesy of the Chilean archive. Like a telescope, it, too, offers a remote glimpse into events of long ago. The information in the archive is available for the user—who sits in a recreation of the CyberSyn Opsroom’s chairs—to consult and arrange. One can join Berríos, sympathetically, in mourning the dead and deploring the brutal regime of the dictator.

But brutality is not unique to neoliberalism. And sympathy for its victims makes an ideological struggle into what Brecht called empathy, a central means to dissimulate the source of the violence. This is the failure of projects like Multinode Metagame as politics. They are not about challenging neoliberalism, they are about feeling-management, arousal and dispersal. Lee’s conclusion on this point is telling. Like her analysis of Bridget Riley, it shows you how you are affected by design, not how neoliberalism functions. “Individual memory and collective history mirror one another as traumatic isomers” (“1973”). It’s easy to see the individual memory; the collective history appears here not as the economic and political structures that produce exploitation and repression, but as something like a starry sky—a
thousand points of light, traumatized and individual. This is how things look under the end-of-history lens—without an analysis of exploitation, it’s individuals looking for justice for individual injuries or sharing a portion of the gain: within a neoliberal market economy.

That individual experience is what is at stake in an analysis like Lee’s and in projects like the *Multinode Metagame* and the *Opsroom* installation means that they are always different, always changing, always occasioning new “meanings.” This is the polysemic, and the polysemic is not the opposition, but the alibi of neoliberalism. It provides cover for exploitation, the glitter of a thousand stars to transfix the thousands of victims while their pockets are being picked. Much easier is to transfix the eyes of the elite on the intersection of art and government, on the glamour of old systems, because they know that if they look there long enough, they might begin to believe they are the critics and not packaging for the perpetrators.

**NOTES**

The authors wish to thank Walter Benn Michaels for making helpful suggestions on a draft of this essay. Whatever faults remain are ours alone.

1. We say “more” here because an earlier article, “Neoliberal Art History,” *Radical Philosophy* 180 (July/Aug 2013): 50-53 on David Joselit’s *After Art*, outlines a related instance of neoliberal critique as deluded expression. The article was reprinted in *nonsite*, [https://nonsite.org/review/neoliberal-art-history](https://nonsite.org/review/neoliberal-art-history).


2. In Lee’s words, “the currently embattled state of the humanities in higher education owes something to this earlier history in no small measure” (17).


5. Cronan discussed the turn from exploitation to domination, from state monopoly to state capitalism under the Frankfurt School in “Class Into Race: Brecht and the Problem of State Capitalism,” *Critical Inquiry* 44 (Autumn 2017): 54-79. ↑


10. We will not dwell here on the essential problem considered in numerous *nonsite* articles and related matter on the distinction between intended and actual effects, and the consequences, ultimately political ones, of ignoring that difference. See, for instance, Cronan, “Actual versus Intended Effects,” in *Against Affective Formalism*, 34-38. ↑


16. *Cato at Liberty* (November 10, 2015),


