Culture as an Instrument
Introduction to Issue 2/2020

What is an instrument? According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, it can be understood, for instance, as “a means or implement by which something is achieved, performed, or furthered” or “a tool or device used for a particular purpose – especially: a tool or device designed to do careful and exact work”. What is highlighted in both definitions is its object-like and teleological nature: it is something made, defined and packaged in a certain way for a certain use to achieve certain ends. If something is “instrumental”, its value and significance is determined by its usefulness.

In our call for papers, we suggested that there is a growing trend of understanding culture as an instrument, resulting from requirements related to the reformulation of welfare policies and the emergence of new economically significant fields. Actually, if we look at international and national cultural policy debates since the formation of the field after the 1950s, we can see that instrumentalisation has always been a current topic. Its roots are in national public funding of the arts and heritage and seeing culture as a “public good”, which benefits whole societies. It has meant that policy-makers and actors of the field have thought about how the core values and goals of society can be promoted through the arts. No matter how pure or virtuous these goals and values are, they still represent an instrumentalisation of the arts and creativity. An important step in this was the more or less systematic gap bridging between high and low brows through the democratisation of culture: the arts, artists and heritage have been “subjugated” to such objectives as social and educational equality, and accessibility and intelligibility, for instance.

One good question, of course, is whether there ever has been a time or context, where cultural expressions, when allowed or even encouraged to become public, have not been instrumentalised in one way or another? Stone and Copper Age rock paintings and carvings served certain purposes for the belief system and maintained cosmological and social orders. Statues, architecture and decorations have underpinned power positions and structures since classical antiquity – with the exception of some more puritan eras – until modernity. The ownership of certain kinds of artworks has been a sign of a good and educated mind since the Renaissance and served as a distinction mechanism between people and classes. The nationalist movements of the 18th and 19th century shamelessly used the arts for their purposes when creating an imagery of culturally coherent nations, and artists were also involved in creating cultural canons for states in many ways. Even the art world itself has perpetuated instrumentalism. The recuperation of even the most radical avant-garde art for the purpose of using it in art museums and institutions, and the use of taste for sociocultural distinction by middle-class art consumers can well be defined as an instru-
mental use of the arts. Moreover, even many avantgardists themselves wanted to change the world through their arts. Is that not instrumentalism? Usually, it is not thought to be, because the impacts that political or societal artists want to achieve have been considered to have “intrinsic value”. Nevertheless, the boundaries of impacts and values are not definite, because their meanings evolve and are formed in the processes where the arts are interpreted, used and consumed.

In this theme issue, we concentrate on instrumental value and the use of culture in cultural or multisectoral policies. Hence, the focus is on more or less systematic administrative practices where the arts and culture are used for promoting some governmental or administrative objectives defined in advance. Particularly interesting in this respect are engagements with the acts and practices of governance that ought to embrace aesthetic, symbolic and cultural components constitutive of visual or aesthetic management and encompass a variety of cultural practices “as technologies of governance”.

Instrumentalism in cultural policy is topical in the Nordic and Baltic countries at the moment because of (1) the creative industries/economy “boom” and (2) the welfare through culture discourse and practices. 1) National, regional and local policy-makers have increasingly started to speak about the productive side of the arts and culture in terms of the economic development of their administrative sphere. The word “industry” has been linked to all cultural activities whose economic productiveness can somehow be measured. The use of “industry” automatically moves the central focus away from anything that is economically “non-productive”. 2) The convergence of social and cultural policy has produced new tasks for artists and new socially explicit objectives for their cultural expressions. Art is an instrument used, for instance, in care homes for elderly people, in supporting good hobbies for children and in the integration of immigrants in the Nordic countries. The Covid-19 lockdown has already produced a set of cultural practices, including art projects, which expose experiences of self-isolation and social distancing as new existential conditions of vulnerability and precariousness of human life.

What has supported the policy change behind the urge to use culture and the arts is, first of all, the orientation of making governance and administration more strategic. There is a growing tendency to intertwine the policy goals of different sectors with each other for local, regional and national development. This means funding culture in order to advance broader economic, social and political objectives. These objectives might be inclusive – such as the integration of different social and cultural groups into the societal mainstream – but they can also be exclusive, as exemplified by the populist instrumentalisation of traditionalism, nativism and neo-pagan mythology. Secondly, the “projectisation of governance” has increased this will to use artists and cultural actors in practices for policy implementation, mostly in the field of social policy. Projects have been the core “technology” in the development of public administration and services since the 1990s. Because projects include a need for reformation, they try to innovatively link new actors to the services or fields they attempt to improve. The principle of participation embedded in projects is also one that calls artists into action because of their skills in empowering, inspiring and activating communities. Thirdly, urban regeneration goals and especially the strong orientation of cultural planning attached to them have increased the policy utilisation of the arts, artists and culture. Artists and cultural organisations have gained visible positions in the development of urban areas through culture and arts-based community participation.

In the Nordic countries, the art world has traditionally been against instrumentalisation – and it still is to a great extent. This resistance manifests itself, in particular, through the ongoing discussions on “non-representational performances”, which reflect the postmoder-
nist disdain for artists’ submission to pre-existing discourses and meanings. Many artists and cultural workers have, however, become part of practices that one might argue to be “instrumental”. First of all, the intense competition for grants, assignments and orders forces a significant percentage of artists to establish enterprises and sell their work, time and skills through them. Secondly, the precarious labour markets of the arts and culture steer artists to take positions, if available, in design and marketing companies, advertising and projects that promote the creative industries locally or regionally. These two previous orientations are linked to the economic instrumentalisation of the arts. However, they are not necessarily motivated by necessity or economic factors only, as many artists state that they want to work in the business world, because it enables them to actualise their creativity and individual needs for fulfilling work. Thirdly, low income and labour market challenges, as well as the will to serve communities drive artists to apply for jobs in urban, local and regional development projects, which embody public policy instrumentalisation. Fourthly, the possibility to work among children, young people, women, elderly people and excluded groups such as immigrants appeals to artists’ “social conscience”. Fifthly, many artists think that participation in these policy-driven or entrepreneurial processes give them a chance to make social or cultural impact – to change the world. Instrumentalisation is not, however, a straightforward process. Some studies also indicate that artists can “play” with these contexts of instrumentalisation, generate new frames and use them for their own purposes to promote their arts or careers or the ends they want to link to their arts.

The relations of instrumentalisation are always reciprocal: policy- and decision-makers who politically use artworks are, at the same time, dependent on them, since their political narratives become embedded in what Jacques Ranciere dubbed “the distribution of the sensible”, in other words, the aesthetic standards that shape the hegemonic understanding of what is sayable and what is not, what ought to be visible and what should remain in the shadows. This approach seems to be very much in line with Roland Bleiker’s theory which argues that in the political sphere, the space for instrumentalised appropriation of cultural images is defined by a constitutive semiotic gap between aesthetic and mimetic representations. In other words, it is the space between signs and images, on the one hand, and the signified reality, on the other, that constitutes the most fertile ground for the generation of meanings, interpretations and the ensuing performative actions.

How can culture – which is one of “those concepts” known for their complexity – be instrumentalised? First of all, it is the multidimensionality of the concept itself that challenges instrumentalisation. As is well known, culture can refer to a whole way of life of a certain group or its material or immaterial patterns, or it can signify “merely” the arts – within which there are several subdivisions like high and low – or the conventions and use of language, just to mention a few of its possible frameworks of usage. It is also likely that the ambiguous character of the term makes its use contradictory in any context, because every signification can be subject to debate. “The identification of an exact definition that is acceptable to all users is unlikely to occur, as each directs attention to specific aspects of ‘culture’, and identifies different processes, actors and institutional arrays as being of analytical concern”, as Clive Gray has formulated it. Hence, every use of culture as an instrument requires as precise as possible identifications of what is meant by “culture” in its context to make the activity successful in achieving the expected ends. However, this rarely takes place due to the difficulty of this conceptual work, and actors play with more open identifications. On the other hand, this is a “disturbing” solution for many, because it leaves the door open to different interpretations and implementations and, hence, will most probably hinder the successful achievement of the goals set for the instrumentalisation in question. On
the other hand, it is preferable solution for many, as it gives the involved actors a chance to add their own meanings and perspectives to the project of instrumentalisation. Too tight a definition of culture would in any context of use make “violence” to the nature of culture as a process-like, never-fixed signifier.

What results from this ambiguousness is that when actors try to instrumentalise culture, they have to live with its vagueness if they do not want to kill its liveliness and innovativeness. This is probably not the most pleasant conclusion for policy-makers or business developers, but it will hopefully promote the idea of including artists and cultural workers in attempts to instrumentalise culture. Instrumentalisation will most probably not decrease in the near future due to the new governance trends, but if it was discussed generally and case-specifically, and planned and realised broadly together with all kinds of relevant actors, it would probably not be as hazardous to the spirit of culture as it sometimes is in current attempts.

The articles of the theme issue
In their article, Åsne Dahl Haugsevje, Mari Torvik Heian, Heidi Stavrum and Gunn Kristin Leikvoll engage in an important discussion on instrumentalisation versus artists’ autonomy as an antidote against cultural producers’ submission to the logics of the market or policy making. Based on this debate, they look more specifically at cultural policies at a subnational level in Norway and discuss how municipalities manage and administer creative projects and make them part of the urban cultural milieu.

Ådne Meling makes an interesting attempt to apply the concept of neo-tribalism to study the creative industries in the Nordic countries from a critical perspective. The author speaks about “tribal illusion” as part of the pragmatic if not utilitarian policy of cultural managers and administrators interested in increasing the market capitalisation of cultural products. The article raises a set of important issues concerning the relations between public authorities and art communities, which extend into a discussion of the presence of pre-modern elements in cultural management in the Nordic countries.

Olli Jakonen’s article touches upon the issues of governance of the cultural industries in Finland, which includes administrative, legal, financial and other instruments. The author explains how the reform of the Arts Promotion Centre Finland (Taike) was designed to protect the cultural sphere from direct interference by politicians and increase the efficiency of the art industry. In this context, the article discusses the role of professional expertise in this field as a means to achieve objectivity and neutrality in assessing the operation of the creative arts in Finland.

Additional referee articles
Besides the articles that explicitly reflect on the theme of instrumentalism, Ole Marius Hylland writes in this issue about negative cultural policy, which in many cases comes interestingly close to an instrumental use of cultural policy tools. As Hylland writes, many of the cases he has chosen to illustrate the negative side of cultural policy also “illustrate how various forms of arts and culture have been subjected to such policies.” It is up to the readers to consider how far this holds true for all kinds of cultural policies, whether labelled as negative, neutral or positive. In his article, Hylland suggests that negativity correlates directly with how “repressive, obstructive, and coercive” the relationship between power holders and producers of culture is.
The obstructiveness of adopted policies is examined by Johan Sundeen and Roger Blomgren in their historical study of articles that were published in the journal Bibliotek i Samhälle (bis) in Sweden. The authors “problematize the influence of activist ideas in perspective of ideals of democracy of speech and legitimacy of the public sector.” It is easy to detect how the authors’ discussion about the neutrality of public officials resonates both with considerations of instrumentality and with negativity in cultural policies. Essentially, the nature of public action is an essential question not only for these two articles, but for all the articles in this issue.

Finally, it is time to introduce the journal’s new editor to the readers. The basic principle of the Nordisk kulturpolitisk tidsskrift is to circulate the editorship between all the Nordic countries. After the first four years (2017–2020) of Finnish editing, Sakarias Sokka (editor-in-chief) and Anna Kanerva (editorial secretary) hand over the position to an acknowledged Danish colleague, Louise Ejgod Hansen from the University of Aarhus. She will start at the beginning of the year 2021. We wish her all the best with the stimulating and interesting task. As for you, our readers, as always, we wish a nice read!

Andrey Makarychev and Miikka Pyykkönen
Guest editors

Sakarias Sokka
Editor-in-chief

References


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