



## The essence of functionalism

In Bernardo Bertolucci's award-winning 1987 film *The Last Emperor* there is a scene in the garden of the Communist detention camp where the former Chinese emperor, Aisin Gioro Puyi (Àixīnjuéluó Pǔyí; played by John Lone), is being rehabilitated through labour. The detention camp governor (played by Yīng Ruòchéng), who has almost succeeded in remoulding Puyi into a model citizen, accuses him of confessing to crimes he could not possibly have even known about, let alone been complicit in. An argument ensues. The governor rebukes Puyi for still wanting to be special – previously, the best of all men; now, the worst. Puyi says that he doesn't want to be instrumentalized. The argument climaxes in these lines:

Puyi: // <sub>1</sub> You / saved me be- / cause I am \*/ useful / to you. //

Governor: // <sub>2</sub> <sup>^</sup> Is / that / so \*/ terrible, / <sup>^</sup> // <sub>2</sub> <sup>^</sup> to be \*/ useful? //

The next scene shows Puyi's release. This is followed by scenes showing his life as a simple gardener – being useful to society.

Evolution retains what is useful, and rejects what is not.

The same assumption can be applied to the study of social institutions — such as language, and the various resources it places at our disposal: if these exist in a certain form today, then they have been useful, and therefore they have been saved.

Tools are shaped by their use.