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How to Cite: Kostopoulou, I 2020 Bureaucracy and Desire: Franz Kafka's Accident Report. *Open Library of Humanities*, 6(1): 5, pp. 1–28. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.480>

Published: 06 March 2020

Peer Review:

This article has been peer reviewed through the double-blind process of *Open Library of Humanities*, which is a journal published by the Open Library of Humanities.

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LITERATURE, LAW AND PSYCHOANALYSIS

Bureaucracy and Desire: Franz Kafka's Accident Report

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In as much as accidents are a malfunction, an interruption and even a source of horror, they also offer inexhaustible discursive potential. As an inevitable negative consequence of technological and industrial progress, accidents remind us of the contingent occurrence of disorder: they become an immaterial threat and yet they also fascinate, and create possibilities for narration.¹ In the attempt to grasp, register and regulate them, accidents become cases for insurance and are transformed into data in statistical analysis. The question of guilt and liability is, thereby, replaced in the insurance system by the category of risk.² As such, the bureaucratic and legal aspects of accidents became relevant aesthetic and narrative considerations for several modernist authors, including Franz Kafka and Robert Musil.³

Franz Kafka, in his dual occupation as literary author and professional writer, a so-called *conciptist* (responsible for writing legal documents

¹ This fascination gains new potential with the modern mediums of film and photography. Accidents in modern literature have become a specific motif and narrative strategy of modernity. However, ancient and pre-modern examples of working accidents and nautical catastrophes in literature go beyond the scope of this essay.

² François Ewald's discursive analytical approach of the development of *L'Etat-Providence* at the beginning of the 19th century can be a point reference for risk, social insurance and the "double life of the individuals" (Ewald, 450: 1993) in Franz Kafka's literary and professional work. For the reception of Ewald in the Kafka Studies, see: Wolf, B 2007 *Die Nacht des Bürokraten*. Franz Kafkas statistische Schreibweise. DVjs 80, pp. 97–127.

³ In the very first chapter of Musil's *The Man Without Qualities* an automobile accident occurs: 'In it stood the truck driver, [...] clumsily waving his arms as he tried to explain the accident. [...] After a while the gentleman said: "The brakes on these heavy trucks take too long to come to a full stop." This datum gave the lady some relief [...]. After the victim is carried away, the description of the accident's aftermath continues: 'People dispersed almost as if justified in feeling that they had just witnessed something entirely lawful and orderly. [...] "According to American statistics," the gentleman said, "one hundred ninety thousand people are killed every year by cars and four hundred fifty thousand are injured."' In: Musil, R 2017 *The Man Without Qualities*, pp. 4–5. Musil also documents various statistical data in his Diaries, see: Musil, R 1976 *Tagebücher*. Adolf Frisé (ed.). Reinbeck: Rowohlt. pp. 532–539.

or signing documents written by his superiors) towards the end of the Habsburg Monarchy, seems to be the ideal candidate to observe all these developments in insurance and accident prevention. In the following first section of this essay, an example from Kafka's *Travel Diaries* gives an idea of his own *poetics of accident* in the making (Wagner: 2007): Kafka's 1911 report of a car accident provides us with key insights in the interrelation between the factual and the fictional world. In the second section, the function of reports and files in his 1926 institution-novel *The Castle* shows the possibilities of literary writing and narration in a milieu, where *life* and *institution* intervene in each other (Campe: 2005).⁴ Finally, and against this background, I explore how the fundamental psychoanalytic term of *desire* is shaped in a pursuit for institutional and official recognition, so that a specific kind of *official* desire – in German *Amtsbegehren* – emerges (Wolf: 2018).⁵

⁴ Campe uses this term also to characterize institutions in Robert Walser's oeuvre.

⁵ To go after the difference between pleasure and desire is beyond the scope of this paper. Here, they are captured in the moment of their interweaving.

1. The Accident Report

In the summer of 1908, a few years after the beginning of his career, Franz Kafka was already an indispensable Chief Legal Secretary (or, “Oberkonzipist”) in the department of accident prevention at the “Workmen’s Accident Insurance Bureau” (AUVA).⁶ His duties included the calculation of the hazard classes for insured companies and the writing of articles or talks in the name of the Bureau.⁷ In addition, he played a vital role in the modernization of the department’s bureaucratic procedures.⁸

During his visit to Paris with Max Brod in 1911, he witnessed a car accident, which he documented shortly after in his *Diaries*.⁹ On the one hand, his interest – or rather passion – for insurance, and his enthusiasm for technological innovations such as the airplane and – in this case – the automobile, become evident.¹⁰ On the other hand, his humorous sensitivity for the human factor and his awareness of administrative genres such as the written report constitute a “proto-literary text” – a prototype for the literary texts he is yet to write (Wagner, 2007: 420).

Monday, September 11. Automobiles are easier to steer on asphalt pavement, but also harder to bring to a stop. Especially when the gentleman at the wheel, taking advantage of the wide streets, the beautiful day, his light

⁶ AUVA are the initials for “Arbeiter-Unfall-Versicherungs-Gesellschaft für das Königreich Böhmen”.

⁷ For a detailed account of his political and persuasive work towards a new bureaucracy and insights in the vehement protests of the Bohemia industrialists, see: Koch, H-G and Wagenbach, K 2002 *Kafkas Fabriken*. Marbach: Deutsche Schillergesellschaft. pp. 17–26.

⁸ It turns out that Kafka confronts bureaucracy here as a reformer rather than a mere critic. The modernized authority he envisions should—in addition to files and reports—also take into account the emotions, sense of justice and wishes of all parties, in accordance with a modern, bio-political state, and replace the old feudal, despotic administrative order.

⁹ In this English edition, the *Accident Report* appears together with other stories from Kafka’s trips in 1911 with the title *The Tricycle and the Automobile*.

¹⁰ See Koch, H-G and Wagenbach, K 2002 *Kafkas Fabriken*. Marbach: Deutsche Schillergesellschaft. pp. 8–14, with a facsimile of Kafka’s article “*Aeroplane in Brescia*.” published in Bohemia (28 September 1910), pp. 10–13. In this article Kafka reports about the road traffic in Italy in a way that reveals not only his acquaintance with statistics and accident language but also clearly shows how terms like order, chance and possibility influence his thinking from early on: “We don’t get out of the way and still don’t get run over. [...] Order and accidents seem equally impossible.”, p. 10, (my translation).

automobile and his skill as a driver to make a little business trip, at the same time weaves his car in and out at crossings in the manner of pedestrians on the sidewalk. **This is why** such an automobile, [...] runs into a tricycle, has only stepped on its toe, as it were; [...] the tricycle remains where it is with a bent front wheel. [Emphasis added] (Kafka, 1949: 282)

If the beginning of the accident report is the description of reality, of the accident as such, whilst knowing what caused the accident, then the following sentence marks the beginning of a “second-order-observation” (Wagner, 2007: 424). Reality is exposed through writing a legal meaning. From this moment on, Kafka’s text becomes the report of the report. “It is first a question of explaining how the accident happened.” (Kafka, 1949: 283) Even though this is a clear decision for an official text type, Kafka also chooses to present the scene as a mixture of street court and theatrical stage, which call to mind the lay juries and the court room in his 1925 novel *The Trial* (Kafka, 2009: 32–39). Here, the motorist wins the favour of the spectators, supposedly thanks to his theatricality while explaining the event from his – privileged – point of view. It is also thanks to his alleged generosity, after he decides not to put all the blame on the baker’s boy, that the question of guilt is off the table: “both are to blame, therefore none, such things just happen, etc.” (Kafka, 1949: 285).

Nevertheless, although the issue seems momentarily to be resolved in terms of private law, the question of guilt returns with the arrival of a policeman. This arrival of the institutionalized order also illustrates how the whole situation could be observed as an example of the development of car insurance – in this case a very early administration of car accident management. The accidental event advances to an insurance case and the spectators become consultants and valuable witnesses, for they were “already conferring together over the costs of the repairs” (Wagner, 2007: 426). Their amateur evaluations “would have had to be called for, if they hadn’t remembered that they could call a policeman” (Kafka, 285).

This transformation of the accident into a legal and bureaucratic ritual attracts onlookers, only this time, the crowd finds pleasure in the police man’s report:

No one had displayed any impatience, but interest is at once revived. Many new onlookers appear who will **enjoy** at no expense **the extreme pleasure of seeing statements taken**. [Emphasis added] (Kafka, 286)

The form that the French policeman has to struggle with is old and dirty, but it has not yet been used, which shows how the administrative procedure of dealing with car accidents is not a fully established practice – at least not in France in 1911. The fact that “he begins taking statements without any lengthy preliminary investigation”, as well as his weariness, are accepted as a routine element of the procedure. Kafka stresses the pursuit of pleasure anew, commenting this time that the expectation of an “objective conclusion” is “unconscious” as well as “unreasonable” (Kafka, 286). And as if Kafka suspected the escalation of the policeman’s misfortune, he goes on with *his* report in his notorious comical manner:

The taking of the statements occasionally flags. Something has gone wrong with the policeman’s notes, and for a while, in his effort to set it right, he hears and sees nothing further. He had, that is, begun to write on the sheet of paper at a point where for some reason or other he should not have begun. (ibid.)

The dysfunctional, blind paperwork does not seem to surprise Kafka. Indeed, reporting an accident appears to be a rather vain endeavour. The impossibility of accidental event management, and thus the impossible narration of the accident, are linked with writing in itself *as* an accident. This failure, together with the remaining fascination for accidents and their repetitive, statistical persistence to occur, equally shape the poetics of accident. At the same time, the failed statement-taking might not have satisfied the crowd seeking pleasure, but has managed to calm it down – in a very particular sort of calm:

The calm the whole affair acquires in this way [failure of the report] is not to be compared with that earlier calm which it had achieved solely with the parties involved. (ibid.)

Likewise, Kafka's report leaves questions unaddressed. It remains a mystery why the clumsy administrative ritual succeeds in calming the crowd down and what kind of calm ensues – for it seems to occur only after the actual desire is left unsatisfied. Furthermore, compared with the initial calm that the crowd felt before the entrance of the institution representative in the scene, this new, different kind of calm implies that the failed and yet soothing institutional act can – partly – prove satisfying.

The fact that the crowd feels addressed and even entitled to a satisfactory conclusion after it has experienced the initial, primitive sense of calm evokes the demanding child that Sigmund Freud describes in his 1920 text *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. The child that Freud refers to is willing to go through the repetition of even unpleasant experiences in order to reach a certain point of “mastery of the strong impression”:

Each fresh repetition seems to strengthen the mastery they [children] are in search of. Nor can children have their pleasurable experiences repeated often enough and they are inexorable in their insistence that the repetition shall be an identical one. (Freud, 1966: 35)

Freud sketches here a specific aspect of repetition-compulsion as observed in childhood, and which later disappears in this form for the adult:

But children will never tire of asking an adult to repeat a game that he has shown them or played with them, till he is too exhausted to go on. (ibid.)

Even though this does not answer what the people's actual desire is, it shows that their reactions – after they are confronted with the traffic accident *and* the paperwork accident – might be considered infantile. Bearing in mind that desire is far more than just *what one wants*, in an attempt to make desire conceivable, Kafka's later literary figuration of *official desire* in his novel *The Castle* can be read as an exposition of desire towards a Lacanian understanding of the term – in its specific interrelation

with Bureaucracy.¹¹ It remains to be seen how the Lacanian concepts “the desire of the Other” and “the wish the desire would tone down” (Lacan, 2006: 698) work in relation to the (bureaucratic) setting of Kafka’s institution-novel.

With regard to the factual world, the new order of the accident report can be identified as the modern administrative method based on average calculation. The accident form that the policeman fails to fill out properly appears to be quite similar to the tableaux of the accident cards Kafka used at his office. With these forms, information and the sequence of events were first documented. After a satisfactory number of cases, the Insurance Bureau (AUVA) was able to claim the occupational hazard as calculable and classified each company accordingly. In addition to the inaccuracy of the statistics, the institution had to rely on dubious reports by work inspectors and, thus, operate with limited knowledge. Evidence of the actual working circumstances in the various factories and stone quarries became whatever information reached the Bureau from accident victims, who came pleading, or by the factory owners, who filed an appeal because they felt the contributions they had to pay were too high. In Kafka’s role as a bureaucrat, he aimed to persuade of the benefits of accident prevention and insurance in the work place and at the same time modernize the Habsburgian Insurance system towards what he envisioned as the *living institution*. Unfortunately, his reforming visions were not compatible with the mentality of the industrialists, who preferred an accident prevention model based on the rather moral maxim: “Thoughts and eyes concentrated on work – that is the best protection against any accident” (Koch, 2002: 21). In the wake of Taylorism, where every move of a worker’s body is regimented, the fate of each individual who has suffered a life-changing injury becomes only briefly relevant for statistical risk calculation. The listed individual cases are utilized in order to estimate the possibility of work accidents regarding the entire mass of the workforce and so to estimate what the financial loss for an industry would be. In order to grasp the dynamics between

¹¹ For more about desire in Lacan (and also in relation to Hegel and Freud), see: Quadflieg, 2007: pp. 69–78.

individual life and life in the shadow/as the result of big numbers, and furthermore, in order to be able to follow the narrative paths that these dynamics enable, it is crucial – on the one hand – to take Kafka's narration outside of his official writings into account. Not only moments in his *Diaries* – like the Accident Report – but also private letters show his distinct sense of advocacy in cases of social injustice. For example, through Max Brod, we have Kafka's remark on the patience and modesty of workers who come to AUVA in need of legal representation.¹² On the other hand, the documentation and narration of the uncanny persistence of accidents – which seems to plague certain professional groups – also generates the stereotype of the tired, hunched clerk who has to cope with the towering piles of paper and continue with never ending calculations as part of the necessary accident risk assessment. As Kafka writes to his friend Oskar Pollak in the summer of 1909:

Within my district administration [...] people fall, as if they were drunk, from scaffolds, in machines, beams fall over, all embankments become loose, all ladders slip [...] and one gets a headache from these young girls in the porcelain factories, who throw themselves incessantly with towers of dishes on the stairs. (Kafka, 1999: 108, my translation)

While this passage can be understood as an expression of care or contempt, or both, it is nevertheless remarkable that the type of clerk who has to deal with cases of insurance also occurs again and again over the course of Kafka's literary texts, regardless of their form or genre – expanding from the early short stories all the way up to the institution-novels of the author's late style. On the level of literary figures we can observe a variety of characters which includes, in addition to clerks, pub girls, messengers, servants, assistants and errand boys.¹³ Advocacy seekers

¹² "Wie bescheiden diese Leute sind. Sie kommen uns zu bitten. Statt die Anstalt zu stürmen und alles kurz und klein zu schlagen, kommen sie bitten." Quotation after: Wagenbach, K 1992 *Franz Kafka mit Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten*. Hamburg: Rowohlt, p. 68.

¹³ Walter Benjamin underlines the prominent status of assistants and helpers in Kafka's texts as "unfinished creatures, beings in the nebula stage". In: Benjamin, 1991: pp. 409–438: 423 (my translation).

and advocacy-promising subjects alike, narrate and are narrated, are positioned or displaced, and this is always in relation to the Law and usually *before* the Law, which becomes the omnipresent Other.¹⁴ A certain kind of writing is at stake, one that registers these figures in their unfinished formation and observes their movement. At the same time, this writing also becomes possible itself thanks to them, leading, thus, to literary ways of reporting, story-telling and the institutionalized narration of life.¹⁵ However, we may ask whether following these administrative ways and procedures in the literary text allows us an access to *The Castle* as narrative and, at the same time, in what way moments of childish behavior towards the ungraspable, unknown, but repeatedly asked for will re-occur in the literary.

2. Reports and Files of the Institution – The Accessibility of the Law

Kafka's *Accident Report* (1911) is a documentation of a comic and yet uncanny duplication. The wish to have some sort of control over the event of the traffic accident by having trust in its technical-rational explanation and finally the expectation that it will be rationalized through legal order (represented by the policeman) remain unfulfilled due to the deferral caused by the failed police report. The policeman has to start over and this paperwork accident echoes the actual traffic accident. Kafka's report about the accident of the accident is then itself a decision for repetition in

¹⁴ The parable *Before the Law* [*Vor dem Gesetz*] as part of the novel *The Trial* shows par excellence the position of the desiring subject facing and addressing the void behind the doors of the Law.

If one tries to string together German terms that signify speech in the legal context of hearing, representation and advocacy by switching the prefix in front of the word -sprecher [-speker, -speaker], one comes from *Vor-sprecher* or *Für-sprecher* (=advocate) soon enough to *Ver-sprecher*, which nowadays means 'slip', a *lapsus linguae* that can be associated with the *Freudian slip*, a notion Freud develops in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901). According to Grimm's Dictionary, historically, the meaning of "*Versprecher*" oscillates between "the person who promises, guarantees, the advocatus or the defamer" and links thus (the) promise and/of advocacy with deception. <http://www.woerterbuchnetz.de/DWB?lemma=versprecher>, accessed 6th February 2020.

It remains to see in what way this slip also implies the *porosity* of advocacy in Kafka's literary texts also regarding the importance of such slips in Freudian and Lacanian Psychoanalysis.

¹⁵ A figure like this is *Poseidon* (written in 1920/published in 1936) who works bent over his neverending calculations, while the 1917 short story *A Report to an Academy* relies on the function of the report as a mode of narration.

writing. The duplication of the traffic anomaly in the failure of the administrative method is also inherent in the German term *Verfahren* which means *method* as well as going-off-track.¹⁶ *The Castle* is the novel of meth-odos (odos = way/street), bureaucratic ways and procedures as well as detours and aberrations. A veritable *suspension* is at stake, which stamps the narrative ways of Kafka's late style and leads to the mushrooming of narration (Kleinwort, 2013). The poetics of accident stay here in touch with the factual world's experience of troubled correspondence – private or official – and, moreover, they operate with the notion of writing as accident and failure. Following the trail of files, reports and clerks appears to be the main character K.'s conscious choice of struggle. It remains his method and activism even though he is constantly anticipated as someone who lost his way, goes too far and doesn't know his place – both in a metaphorical moral manner *and* in a literal way.

Right from the beginning of his arrival at the village, the land surveyor K. is confronted with suspicion. His presence is not desired, or rather, not justified. After a first and very brief investigation by phone, clerk Schwarzer concludes about his case: 'There's no record of any land surveyor; this is a common, lying vagabond and probably worse' (Kafka, 2009a: 8). The fact that K. has to fight against the confusion between a land surveyor and a vagabond [*Landvermesser* vs. *Landstreicher*] marks one of the many attempts not only to enter the Institution of the Castle but furthermore to be recognized in his occupation and his professional function as the appointed land surveyor. And from this moment on, where he decides to fight for his professional recognition – which becomes inevitably a legal statement *and* a narration of his own life – he automatically recognizes the power of the castle. Kafka repeats here the concept that he developed in his prior novel *The Trial*, only this time the authority "Castle", that has to be addressed, is a somehow more general and nebulous signifier. In *The Trial* the protagonist Josef K. wants to defend himself in front of an institution, the so-called "Court", by "presenting a brief account of his life" (Kafka, 2009b: 81) while at the same time being unable to access any documents concerning his case.

¹⁶ A third meaning of *Verfahren* is "trial" or "legal procedure".

During K.'s struggle for recognition and his placement in the Castle's service system, he remains also a stranger among the peasants of the village, a misplaced datum in the village's census. As the landlady during the "First Conversation" explains – an explanation articulated as if she was "inflicting" a "punishment" on K. (46):

You're not from the castle, you're not from the village, you're nothing. Unfortunately, however, you are a stranger, a superfluous person getting in everyone's way, a man who is always causing trouble [...] (46)

Later on, after K. doubts the – what seems to him – dubious administrative role of the telephone, he believes that he can gain access to the institution through the so-called records, which in turn have to rely on written reports based on oral interviews during hearings.¹⁷ As the landlady claims in the "Second Conversation" (101) referring to K.:

What's more, let me say that those records are the only real official connection he can have with Klamm. That's clear enough too, it's beyond all doubt. But if he [the land surveyor] doesn't believe me and goes on and on hoping, don't ask me why, that he will be able to see Klamm, then in view of the way his mind works nothing can help him but that one and only real official connection with Klamm, namely these records. (101)

For a while, the impression that the power of written word rationally regulates all the procedures and operations is predominant. The hope, however, that a bureaucratic act, which is performed in writing, is reliable and can be taken seriously into account, soon vanishes. What for a while appears as a comforting mediation, an access possibility, is merely a shift from oral speech to written record, a procedure which appears to be legitimate but is equally without content or effectiveness. Namely,

¹⁷ According to the narrator, K. hears a 'humming', which resembles 'the murmur of countless childish voices' (21).

senior officials like Klamm do not read any of the transcripts. And these transcripts are made only to document events on paper for the so-called village registry.

'Very well, Mr Secretary,' said K., 'will Klamm read these records?' 'No,' said Momus, 'why would he? Klamm can't read all the records, in fact he never reads any of them. (102)

These cause serious concerns about the effectiveness of the reports system, if one cannot rely on these records for evidence or for establishing one's position in relation to the authority of the castle. Instead, a particular failure of efficiency lies exactly in the records' symbolic function as rituals and representations of the institution's power. The communication through the records is en- or rather *insured* and legitimized, but the message or the information that it should carry and pass on is ignored by design.

Likewise, even when it comes to a somehow more modern communication medium, the telephone, K.'s aspirations must be disappointed anew, as the technical malfunction and disruption within the telephone network between the castle and the village is, again, the actual information:

That rushing, singing sound is the only real, trustworthy information that the telephone conveys to us down here, and everything else is just an illusion.¹⁸ (66).

This disturbing conclusion of the telephone's rather uncanny function within the institution can be read against the background of Kafka's own experiences with telephone services as well as in the context of his (card) postal strategies that oscillate between private and semi-official communication.¹⁹ In the diary entry

¹⁸ The initial letter by Klamm, which appointed K. as a land surveyor waiting to be utilized, also proves to be a misunderstanding, while the Czech word *klam* means 'illusion'.

¹⁹ For more about the usage of post cards in Kafka's correspondence with Felice Bauer in relation to writing and (de)humanizing processes, see: Kittler, F 1986 *Grammophon, Film, Typewriter*. Berlin: Brinkmann & Bose, pp. 328–331. Kittler also briefly mentions Jacques Derrida's *The Post Card* (1987) as a hint to the latter's narration of the vanishing "private" mail, which for Kittler means the vanishing

from 28th February 1912, Kafka documents his “energetic” and admittedly comic outburst of rage against a telephone girl’s unwillingness to connect him with a possible journal publisher. In keeping with a culture of secretaries and servants, the telephone operators here are those who have the power to “control the connections as they please” (Kafka, 1988: 188) and Kafka interprets the transmitted whispers he hears as a conspiracy against him. The whispers, murmurs and hissing of modern telecommunications continue haunting Kafka even toward the end of his life in 1924. In the letter of March 1922, he uses the metaphor of *ghostliness* to express his concern about the vanishing content of letters, a content that fails to reach its destination. Even new technological inventions such as the telephone are also taken over by ghosts, so that the individual is no longer the master of their own invention:

These are evidently inventions devised at the moment of crashing. The opposing side is so much calmer and stronger; after the postal system, the ghosts invented the telegraph, the telephone, the wireless. They will not starve, but we will perish. (Kafka, 1990: 223)

The demand to extend the project of discourse analysis to the role of emerging administrative technologies by examining these historical-technical developments proves to be a sound methodology for approaching both Kafka’s and the bureaucracy’s use of media.

In contrast to a Foucauldian conceptualization of the archive, Kafka shows a remarkable sensitivity to and consciousness of the potential of the media. His writing realizes this ghostly quality but at the same time he creates a peculiar mystification that is consistently related to the marginal, the parasitical and thus with waste, which, in its turn, embodies the materiality of paperwork. It is a materiality that makes itself noticeable when we see the cupboards cluttered with decrees and an

of handwriting and the voice as opposed to the typescript. Derrida goes on to the consequences of the disappearance of what he calls “the letter” for psychoanalytic procedures and “the forms of transference”. See: Derrida, J 1987 *The Post Card. From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, Chicago/London: Chicago University Press, pp. 104–105.

“exorbitantly large amount of files” (Kafka, 2009: 65) or when we hear about the noise that the towered, accumulated files in Sordini’s office make when they fall on the floor. In addition to the noise of the telephone comes the noise of falling files and the rule by *acta*; the power of the files remains undiminished despite the invention of new technologies. Paperwork marks the beginning and the end of all medial procedures.²⁰ However, the superposing materiality of files does not thereby guarantee access to content. The bigger the malfunction of the administrative technologies and the more chaotic the file proliferation, the power of the institution appears to be all the more undeniable. The question of the law *is*, thus, a matter of access and accessibility and not of legal content, justice or imperatives.²¹ In addition, K.’s struggle for lawful recognition makes clear on the one hand that law relies on the persistent, repetitive effort to make legitimacy evident (Wolf, 102: 2007) and on the other hand that ‘becoming guilty’ is a typical outcome for Kafka’s characters who try to use the law in their favour (Adorno, 286: 1970–1986).

The emptiness of the institution does not make it less powerful or less threatening but rather establishes what Hannah Arendt identified as ‘the rule by Nobody’: “The *rule by Nobody* is not no-*rule*, and where all are equally powerless we have a tyranny without a tyrant” (Arendt, 38: 1970). In *The Castle* we never see the land owner and owner of the castle, Count Westwest, and he is in fact even rarely mentioned by name. People speak in his name using invocations of the count’s *authorities* or *service* while in one of the inns there is “a banner in the count’s colours” (Kafka, 2009: 32). In Kafka’s oeuvre one often comes across sovereigns that are caricatured, absent or only visible at moments of their decline.²² The ‘count’s authority’ is actually replaced by ‘the count’s services’ and this replacement is also backed by the spatial organization of the buildings. The power of the castle is based on its inaccessibility

²⁰ As Cornelia Vismann points out, there are *acta*-files and *acta*-records. Files as recording-machines are always bound to the material, paper files. It is thereby a medial effect of files as records to produce an abundance of paper files (Vismann, 2000: 8).

²¹ This also evokes Kafka’s short story *The Silence of the Sirens* (written in 1917/published in 1931), in which silence maximizes the Sirens’ power.

²² An example is the emperor in the story *The Great Wall of China* (1917).

both administratively and physically. Neither does the architecture of the castle complex offer the alliance of a certain power constellation. Even though the castle's rule relies on its alleged complete knowledge about everybody and everything and K. indeed feels observed, a panoptic view on life from the castle hill is not possible, for "the observer's eyes could find nothing to fasten on, and slipped away [...]" (Kafka, 2009: 88).

It is clear that up to this point, the topological constellation of the castle and village is yet another justifying measure of a particularly flexible bureaucratic apparatus. The later scene of the Files Distribution [*Aktenverteilung*],²³ which takes place at the back of the village's 'Castle Inn', shows once again the emptiness of the administrative procedure. As is familiar from the reports system, when it comes to the management of the files, it is the acts of circulation and distribution that are of great importance, while the files' actual content and purpose are determined by the very lack of meaning. Furthermore, it becomes evident that castle and village are inseparable, just as castle officials often cannot be distinguished from village peasants, or it cannot be estimated who is higher in the hierarchy and thus closer to the castle.²⁴ Looking back to the reports that K. had to go through, it now makes sense as to why they required both the narration of his life and an official bureaucratic act at the same time. The fact that the secretary Momus tries to interview K. in the inn does not marginalize the procedure or make it obsolete – as K. thinks. Similar to Kafka's *Accident Report*, reports in *The Castle* are supposed to manage the connection between individual, oral statements and institutional registration.

The topological peculiarity, which makes it impossible to mark where the village ends and where the castle starts and vice versa, offers the ghostly but nevertheless material ground for the execution of the administrative procedures and mediations,

²³ In the English translation; see Chapter 24, pp. 239–246.

²⁴ As K.'s encounter with the Village Mayor showed early on in the novel, marriage, relationship and kinship often turn out to have a greater meaning in relation to the castle's authority. In this case, it was the Mayor's wife Mizzi who actually "is in charge of everything" (78) even though she looks "grey and insignificant" and follows her husband's orders (65).

so that power and law in the castle and in the village make an opposition between authority and life unthinkable and any resistance by K. vain.

In search of his very own personal file, K. can – from his parasitical, standby position in the corridor – only hypothesize what really is going on behind the doors. He is absorbed in his observation, and this, not entirely without enjoyment: “K. saw all this with interest as well as curiosity. He felt almost happy [...]” (240). K. has in the meanwhile forgotten or, rather, repressed the crucial question by the landlady earlier:

Mr Land Surveyor,’ wailed the landlady, ‘you really are exhausting me with such questions. **Is it necessary, is it even desirable**, for Klamm to read the records and have a word-by-word account of the petty details of your life? [Emphasis added] (102)

This key formulation that the landlady uses recalls that the question of accessing the law is also a question of *ananke* (=need) and urgent desire. Both are linked with what the castle knows about each individual. And everybody who needs to feel addressed by the institution seems to ‘suffer’ from the Derridean notion of *mal d’archive*:

We are en mal d’archive: in need of archives. Listening to the French idiom, and in it the attribute “en mal de,” to be *en mal d’archive* can mean something else than to suffer from a sickness, from a trouble or from what the noun “mal” might name. It is to burn with a passion. It is never to rest, interminably, from searching for the archive right where it slips away. It is to run after the archive, even if there’s too much of it, right where something in it anarchives itself. It is to have a compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire for the archive, an irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a home sickness, a nostalgia for the return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement. [...] (Derrida, 1995: 57)²⁵

²⁵ For more on the link between Freud’s thoughts on the archival structure of the Unconscious and younger archive theories see the introduction in: Weitin, T and Wolf, B (eds.) 2012 *Gewalt der Archive: Studien zur Kulturgeschichte der Wissensspeicherung*, Paderborn: Konstanz Univ. Press, p. 10.

This trouble – but at the same time passion – that Derrida diagnoses in association with the institution of the archive has an even more uncanny status in Kafka's *The Castle*. In the lack of rational management the official machinery is (de)regulated and controlled by its very own passions and idiosyncratic outbursts. At the same time, where the void of the law is complemented by internal institutional fever, desire is not far off. As K. observes:

Attempts to placate the impatient gentleman often made him even more impatient, **he wouldn't listen** to the servant's **empty words** any longer, he didn't want consolation, **he wanted files**. [Emphasis added] (241)

And accordingly, the endeavour to fulfill one's own desire does not guarantee immunity before the law: what to K. seems like a joyful, harmless observation turns out to be a serious offence. At any unexpected moment the category of guilt can return. The very recognition much hoped for within the castle, the attempt to trace down his lost personal file and thus the institutionalized narration of his life is in fact evidence for his incrimination, for guilt is the only certainty.²⁶ The question of guilt seems to be returning. However, and in contrast to *The Trial*, which ends with Josef K.'s execution, guilt in *The Castle* keeps its axiomatic emptiness, in other words, it remains without legal consequences and it does not lead to an execution or enforcement. This empty threat, the unfulfilled promise, is backed by the fact that the law is ultimately a mockery in the text, and which is dismantling itself. Under these terms, the law undermines itself and guilt becomes an outdated category in a system of chance and contingency. This is a development which in the factual world and according to the history of the welfare state stems from accident management. For once it became clear that accidents are – as a side effect of industrial production – a phenomenon, a reoccurring certainty, the category of guilt could no longer be used in order to calculate the damages and manage the claims. Guilt was replaced by the category of risk and the notion of omnipresent lurking danger (Ewald, 1993: 10

²⁶ The statement that guilt is the only certainty applies of course also in Kafka's *In the Penal Colony* (written in 1914/published in 1919) or *The Trial* (1925).

and Wagner, 2007b: 42–43). For K. this means that he has to be alert to any letters, invocations or subpoenas that can come at any moment.

3. Official Desire – Is it even desirable?

So far, the considerations on the *Accident Report* and *The Castle* have concentrated on the dynamics between Franz Kafka's official and literary writing. This demand of a way of reading with a constant awareness of translation in term of writing styles and transference processes switching back and forth between the official and the literary is thereby not a mere indication of (auto)biographical traces in the texts but of a discursive terrain of equivocation.²⁷ The numerous discourses that rotate and are being processed in the literary emphasise that Kafka is not only a bureaucratic switcher in a bilingual Insurance Bureau (AUVA) of a multilingual, multiethnic and disintegrating monarchy, but also someone who puts together and dismantles all discourses, someone who stratifies the different voices.²⁸

The different *voices* here are the demands by the insured and the uninsurable, the demands of workers from different ethnic groups of the empire and from different hazard categories. As they direct their claims to the bureaucratic apparatus, the emptiness (behind the Law, of power) encountered in Kafka's literary texts is opposed to them. Fiction with the discourses that enfold in it is, therefore, the constellation which provides the means of representation for the factual – beyond a mere interpretation of reality. Psychoanalysis proves to be adequate in making this

²⁷ For more on the notion of translation and transference (not merely as technical procedures of translation from one language to the other or deliverance) depicted against the background of Lacanian psychoanalysis, see: Tholen, G-C, Schmitz, G and Riepe, M, 2001.

²⁸ The dimension of Kafka's official and literary work as a cultural insurance in the multi-ethnic Habsburg Monarchy as well as of his role as a comparing force (comparing nations, ethnic groups, cultures, protection structures and insurance needs) becomes evident in regard to his text *The Great Wall of China*. The aspect of architectural construction but also construction in a discursive, broader sense, vital for approaching Kafka's text, is represented more aptly in the original title *Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer* which literally translates as "At/During the construction of ...". For more about Kafka's function as a *cultural* insurer, see: Wagner, B 2007 on the antagonism between *Biopolitik* and *Ethnopolitik* a professional problem and the literary dedication of Franz Kafka. Wagner makes here the case for a bio-political particularity of the multi-ethnic Habsburg, an approach which aims to go beyond the Foucauldian and Ewaldian analysis of the state/welfare state.

particular reciprocity conceivable. *Because of* or rather *next to* the particularity of psychoanalysis itself, literature gains the possibility of representation as construction and not as interpretation [*Deutung*].²⁹ The importance of this separation for the psychoanalytical technique is articulated by Freud in *Constructions in the Analysis*, where he states that “construction” rather than “interpretation” is the more adequate term and goes on to emphasize on the necessity of the construction’s incompleteness (Freud XVI, 1950: 50).³⁰ In the tradition of Freudian incompleteness one thinks of Jacques Lacan leaving the interpretation of dreams behind and making a stronger case for the importance of the slips of the tongue. Is there a connection thinkable to the slip [*Versprecher*] as an unfulfilled promise in Kafka’s fiction? Looking back to the importance of the ‘exchangeable’ terms *Fürsprecher/Versprecher* in relation to the question of promised advocacy in Kafka’s texts,³¹ it becomes clear, that in the case of K., subjects of (temporary) advocacy from the village and/or the castle replace each other in terms of contiguity and tangency [*Berührung*].³² Advice, promise of

²⁹ The importance of literature in its specific interrelation with psychoanalysis is often discussed by Lacan, as, for example in *Lituraterre* (1971). There, he uses as starting point the slip from *letter* to *litter* – found in Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* (1939) – to point out (i.a.) that “The question is of knowing [...] if literature be the using up of leftovers [accommodation des restes]”(12.5.1971; Jack W. Stone’s translation.) Further on, Lacan refers to one of his earlier *Écrits* “Seminar on Poe’s *The Purloined Letter*” (1956/English edition of 2006) in order to stress the need to understand “what the letter carries to arrive always at its destination” (ibid.). The statement, that the letter always arrives at his destination and its definition as “letter *ensouffrance*” (Lacan, 2006: 30) could prove to be fruitful for drawing another relation to Klamm’s letter and the deferring, exhausting hiring period imposed on the land surveyor K.

³⁰ Freud S and Freud A, 1950: 43–56, here 47. A construction is for Freud the laborious allocation of one piece/recollection to the other from the patient’s forgotten past. About this crucial point in Freud’s work, see: Coelen, Marcus. “Deutung”. *Elemente der Psychoanalyse. Eine Einführung nach Freud und Lacan*. Psychoanalytische Bibliothek Berlin, 19 Nov. 2019. Lecture.

³¹ The 1922 short story *Fürsprecher* provides a similar setting to K.’s persistence for recognition that has inevitably deferred to a neverending search of advocacy: “[...] (a) statement of facts of the judgment [...] is based on surveys here and there, at relatives and strangers, at friends and enemies, in the family and in public, in the city and the village, in short everywhere. Here it is urgently necessary to have advocates, advocates in masses, the one tight next to the other, a living Wall, because advocates are by nature difficult to move, but the prosecutors [...] slip through the smallest gaps, slit through the advocates’ legs. So beware! That’s why I am here, I collect advocates but I have not found one yet, only the old ladies come and go [...]” (Kafka, 2012: 384–385, my translation).

³² When we look closer to the Conversation with the landlady and Secretary Momus, it is clear that

alliance and descriptions of the castle's bureaucratic ways do not lead to a goal or meaning but refer to each other. They only "lead to the direction of..." (Kafka, 2009: 100) and/or they take place in deferral. Or, rather, with Deleuze/Guattari: "[...]it is the contiguity of desire that ensures that everything happens in the office next door." (Deleuze/Guattari, 1976: 70).

The incompleteness of K.'s endeavours is thus a structural moment, which, beyond the question of narrative ways, points to the function of desire as a structure. Specifically, when a subject directs its official desire to the institution, it wants to gain access by bypassing the flexible barriers that separate it from the Other.³³ Besides, the place beyond the barriers, where one imagines the authority, power, or the law to be, turns out to be a farce because it is in fact nothing else but desire.³⁴

In as much as the use of the slip of the tongue in psychoanalytic discourse is a chance of alliance, it also does not guarantee the correctness of an analysis or recovery in the form of achievement of happiness. Accordingly, as Secretary Bürgel states when he describes the life of clerks already (trapped) inside the institution: "How suicidal happiness can be!" (Kafka, 2009: 235). The question once directed to K. "Is it even desirable?" keeps getting asked and Kafka's text answers by pointing to the vanity of interpretation and by operating with the omnipresence of metonymy. In this bureaucratic case, Lacan's point, that metonymy is the vehicle of desire,

everything is not a straight answer but an indication often also grammatically expressed in the subjunctive mood of *würde* (=would) and in conditionals. When it comes to *Berührung*, this is indeed the word Secretary Momus uses when he states that Mr. Land Surveyor naturally does not understand how things are done around here for he – as a newbie and want-to-be – has not come to touch with the institution yet (Kafka, 2009: 69–79).

³³ The (im)possible ways that a witty subject, "a strange little grain of matter [...] can slip through such a perfect sieve", can by-pass the obstacles of the institution, narrates Secretary Bürgel in Chapter 23. In K.'s case, by-passing can also be trespassing if one thinks again of the accusation of him being a vagabond and not a land surveyor.

³⁴ The castle's barriers that K. hears rumors about can be identified in this setting as the barrier separating S from s, or with Lacan's later trinity model, the openings, doors and barriers have a recognizable symbolic and referential function. They stand for the promised access to the institution, where offices of the castle refer to other offices and secretaries have an indefinite number of superiors. What lies behind these accesses would then be the Imaginary. For more on the intertwined legal and psychoanalytical aspects of referentiality, see: Vismann, 2000: 33.

allows the assumption that the official desire as the desire of the subject cannot escape the official desire as the desire of the Other (Lacan, 2006: 715). If the Castle asks K. the question “What do you want?”, K. answers with “the Castle/Klamm/the landlady/etc. says that to me but what does it/he/she mean?”³⁵ His combinatory fury of interpretation [*Deutungswahn*]³⁶ shows when he tries to find meaning in the landlady's silence and is intensified by the allegedly perfect postal system that addresses him but does not clarify the recognition and vocation issue. A call which you are obliged to take, an *Anrufung*, takes place in the lack of an actual *Berufung*, an actual notice of appointment which is forever pending (Wolf, 2018: 212).³⁷

K.'s stubborn, childish struggle, and thus his desire, is displaced because it is ultimately an illusion. As necessitated by the metonymic castle-village architecture in *The Castle* – similarly to the metonymic attic court rooms in *The Trial* – he cannot really say what he wants because he is always somewhere other than he where he thinks he is. He is already there where he wants to be and at the same time he never comes to where he wants to be.³⁸ In relation to the question of the Law, the desiring subject will no longer be there when the Law might at last be determined or translated into execution; standing *before the law* gains thereby a temporality due to the law's transcendental quality. Standing before the law indicates a waiting period before a law has even existed. In the case of K., this waiting period *is* his hiring period.³⁹

The situation described in the following quote from a fragment (Kafka, 1993: 56) is apt when compared to the communicative farce in *The Castle*. Furthermore, the

³⁵ This question of the child that asks for meaning formulates Lacan in *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*: “He is saying this to me but what does he mean?” (Lacan, 1977: 214).

³⁶ Wolf sees a *Deutungsfuror* in K.'s reaction when a letter from Klamm reaches him, so that he also tries to interpret the messenger's appearance. See: Wolf, 2018: 212. In Freud's early text on *Neuropsychoses of Defence* one can also find the term *Deutungswahn*; see: Freud and Freud 1950: 402.

³⁷ Wolf takes into account these terms following Althusser. For a specific reading of *Anrufung* with Lacan, see: Schütt, 2015: 15–59.

³⁸ For more about the function of metonymy and architecture, see: Vogl, J and Kleinwort, M 2013 »Schloss«-Topographien: Lektüren zu Kafkas Romanfragment. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag.

³⁹ Here one thinks of course of Kafka's text *Before the Law*. Derrida relies on this text to make a case for what he calls “performative” in relation to the law and to violence. Differently as Vismann he “hesitates” to use in this context the word “symbolic”, for he wants to avoid the Lacanian connotation of the term (Derrida, 1992: 36–37).

relation to questions of power, rule and emptiness can also be found. At a rare moment where subjects are asked what they want and thus their desire is addressed, they choose the communicative-bureaucratic over absolute power:

They were given the choice of being kings or the kings' messengers. In a childish manner, they all wanted to be messengers. Therefore there are only messengers; they rush through the world, and as there are no kings, they shout their now meaningless messages to one another. They would gladly put an end to their wretched existence, but they dare not because of their official oath of service. (Kafka, 1993: 56, my translation)

Both the oath of loyal service and the official communication network, where organization takes place *for the sake of* organization, constitute the new form of power in the absence of monarchs. The official invocation ties the employees to a constant attendance no matter how tautological and thus meaningless their duty might be and at the same time this type of communication complicates the institutional ways and thus stimulates the desire further by causing an increased appetite for *significance*.⁴⁰ The official desire is at this point indeed the desire of the Other. Even when the subjects (think they) articulate their desire, their endeavour is regulated by the phantasm of the Other that is no longer there.

The desire to access the castle is answered by the chain of empty explanations about the organization and every attempt to bypass an obstacle, a barrier that protects the subject from the Other, increases K.'s fatigue and leads him closer to his fading away. He eventually slips into apathy and disappears entirely. K.'s increasing tiredness and the weariness of Olga's narration are essential to the suspension in Kafka's writing. It is exactly this rampant and mushrooming narration that takes place in accordance with the metonymic deferral of meaning in the novel's plot.

In the time between an accident report and a novel written almost ten years later (in 1922, published 1926), Kafka manages to depict bureaucracy not as a metaphor

⁴⁰ For more about Lacan's translation of the Freudian "Deutung" and its translation into English as "interpretation", see the Translator's Endnotes in: Lacan, 2006: 76.

or a motif but as a profound metonymy, in this way providing points of contact between the literary and the psychoanalytical discourse. The official desire is claimed both by the subjects who (mis)direct their desire to the bureaucratic institution and by bureaucracy itself. At the same time official desire is the attempted resistance or opposition to the metonymic expansion of Bureaucracy (Kafka B, 2012: 77). Even if desire as a restless human activity reaches a limit at some point, the role of psychoanalysis in its opposition to bureaucracy is the resistance to interpretation – opposing a usage of metonymy in equivocation, associations, puns and slips. If – as Lacan describes it in his prognosis – “Not perverts but bureaucrats will set things off [...] on order and completed with the ruler [...] with a hunched, broken [...] will, following an obligation that has lost any meaning” (Lacan, 1996: 280, my translation from German), then one can read his statement on the intervention of psychoanalysis as a response to it: “The psychoanalytic intervention should not be in any way theoretical, suggestive, viz. imperative. It has to be equivocal. The analytic interpretation is not there to be comprehended but to make waves [*produire des vagues*]” (Lacan, 1976: 35, my translation from German).⁴¹

Conclusion

The ungraspable nature of a traffic accident and the uneasiness that goes with it generate a repetitive scheme of attempts to reconstruct, explain and rationalize the course of events. The production of causalities and the establishment of guilt, with the help of bureaucratic legal procedures that promise a new order of managing the uncanny and the unsettling, also introduce a new kind of perception: it is the perception of the involuntary repetition of events next to the voluntary repetition and stubborn pursuit of satisfaction in paperwork. The partiality of this satisfaction is a risk inherent with structural moments of deferral and contiguity but also failure

⁴¹ “En aucun cas une intervention psychanalytique ne doit être théorique, suggestive, c'est-à-dire impérative ; elle doit être équivoque./L'interprétation analytique n'est pas faite pour être comprise ; elle est faite pour produire des vagues.” German translation by Marcus Coelen: “Die psychoanalytische Intervention sollte in keiner Weise theoretisch, suggestiv, das heißt zwingend sein. Sie muss zweideutig sein./Die analytische Deutung ist nicht dazu da, verstanden zu werden, sondern um Wellen zu schlagen.”

while pursuing what is thought to be desirable. In Kafka's novel *The Castle*, a specific *official desire* is at stake, which manifests itself at first as a struggle for recognition only to defer in a never-ending effort to access the authority of the castle, to find a rightful position in the hierarchy by getting hired. Against the background of the eventual state of exhaustion in the literary text, the particular calm and partial satisfaction the witnesses felt at the sight of the accident report in its making proves to be yet another effect of the administrative system. This very young administration of accident documentation and prevention relies on a mightier mechanism which operates based on reports and files.

By reading *The Castle* we gain insight into this mechanism which proves to be inaccessible, even when we are provided with knowledge on Kafka's factual world of *The Office Writings* (2004) and his correspondence. Accordingly, for K., exhaustion does not only mean physical weariness but also translates into his stubbornness to exhaust all possible ways to access the castle and strategically seize every opportunity of advocacy. His first, childish gaze on the castle upon his arrival escalates to an exhaustive and exhausting interpretative fury in his repeated attempts to grasp the communicative ways of the institution. The literary text is, thus, a constant reminder of paperwork's poetic potential. And at the same time, fiction provides insights in constructions beyond the literary text, creating a reality of organization through communication. The emptiness of this communication and the pending messages and notifications prove to be crucial features of the bureaucratic authority. The political aspect of this emptiness, rule in the absence of a sovereign, shows a world stuck in the uncompleted transition from a somehow feudal into a particular bio-political order. The question of guilt and the presence of the Law as also seen in Kafka's novel *The Trial* operate accordingly to this order. In a setting, where the subject stands *before the law*, directs its desire to bureaucracy and attempts to bypass at any cost the barriers separating it from the institution, Law can be identified as the Other. The structural moment of metonymy ensures that the subject will repeatedly persist with its pursuit – K. does not give up his official desire until the very end – and that this desire will prove to be unfulfillable. Based on the importance

of construction and structure as opposed to interpretation, I have suggested that the recognition but also usage of metonymy in psychoanalysis can be seen as an opposition to bureaucracy's own metonymic expansion. In order to achieve that, apart from the key feature of childishness, Kafka's literary and official work alike indicate the importance of advocacy, legal representation and equivocation. Assuming that "the need for *Fürsprecher*" can be replaced by "the need for *Versprecher*" and vice versa, the porosity of advocacy in Kafka's fictional world manifests an affinity to the usage of puns and slips of the tongue as they are known in the psychoanalytic discourse. In accordance to the resistance of psychoanalysis to interpretation, Kafka's texts prove to exhaustively exercise bureaucracy's very own instability and failure of signification, and thus offer a possibility to escape its power, dismantle its law and caricaturize its clerks.

Acknowledgements

I'd like to thank Manuela Kamp for her legal advice as well as Burkhardt Wolf and the Psychoanalytic Library of Berlin regulars for their contributions to the literary and psychoanalytic perspectives in this essay.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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How to cite this article: Kostopoulou, I 2020 Bureaucracy and Desire: Franz Kafka's Accident Report. *Open Library of Humanities*, 6(1): 5, pp.1–28. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.480>

Published: 06 March 2020

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