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Franz Kafka's "Das Urteil" (1913) as Media History: Writing–Cinema–AI

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Abstract: In this essay, I read Kafka's 1913 story, "Das Urteil", as positing an anachronistic media history, with Georg the son representing the older medium of writing, while his father stands in for the newer medium of cinema. The father–son conflict is thus refigured as an intergenerational media war. In addition, I suggest that the end of the story points toward a non-human mediation, which resembles artificial intelligence as imagined by Friedrich Kittler's media theory.

Keywords: mediation; technology; writing; cinema; artificial intelligence; Kafka

As Laurence Rickels argued back in 2016, "the phantasmagoria of Kafka's media relations have come under such close scrutiny since the 1970s that the genealogy of media by now counts as the clear text or context of Kafka scholarship" (Rickels 2016, p. 68). From Friedrich Kittler's comments in *Discourse Networks 1800/1900* (1985) on Kafka's typewriter-enabled epistolary assault on Felice Bauer to Kata Gellen's 2019 book on the cinematicity of noise in Kafka's fictional output (e.g., Gregor Samsa's squeaks and Josephine's whistles), much has been written in the past half-century on both the media that appear as such in Kafka's writing and the medial conditions that made his writing possible, or at least likely, in the first place. Moreover, as the existence of this Special Issue on Kafka and artificial intelligence suggests, there is a certain desire to see in Kafka something of a techno-prophet, a figure whose texts intimate the mediascapes to come, or at least, his body of work is expected to speak productively about media–technological futures that its author had no access to.

In the following, I read the 1913 story, "Das Urteil", as a media–historical narrative itself, one that deploys a rather traditional father–son conflict over the seat of the patriarch (i.e., the business, the house, and the wife) to depict the antagonistic relationship between old and new media technologies, here specifically between writing and cinema. This makes the story a variation, or riff, on the Kittlerian conflict between the Romantic discourse network of "1800" with its hegemony of handwriting, where texts are said to communicate the "inner worlds" or "meanings" of their supposedly unique (male) authors to properly alphabetized readers in the form of audiovisual hallucinations, and the modernist discourse network of "1900" with its technological triad of gramophone, film, and typewriter, which, given the capacity to record actual sounds and images, separate data flows from each other and privilege a standardized writing that only communicates itself, thus demoting the previous era's "hermeneutics of the signified" (Wellbery 1990, p. xxiii). While a full exposition of Kittler's analysis is not possible here, the important difference for my reading of "Das Urteil" is that while the Subject of 1800 is characterized by a certain inwardness, most clearly emblematized by the insistence of the nebulous notion of the soul (*Geist*), the subject of 1900 is very much a corporeal–physiological being and has a radically

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disenchanted experience of language, aware that, as Kittler's paraphrasing of Mallarmé puts it, "literature is made up of no more and no less than twenty-six letters" (Kittler 1999, p. 14). If we can think of this sea-change as one between an interiority propped up by handwriting and exteriority accentuated by technological media, the difference is recast in Kafka's story as one between a self-aggrandizing isolationism and a self-destructive openness to the other. In addition, the order of generations is reversed, whereas it is Georg the son who wields the older technology of writing that fosters and secures his interiority—and does so, crucially, with the help of a window—Georg's father stands in for the newer medium of film, configured here as a visual medium that violently exposes the subject to what is external to it without leaving him a means of neutralizing interiorization. Although there are no direct mentions of screens or projectors in the text, I suggest that Georg's encounter with his father is modeled after a cinematic experience.

But neither Kafka's story nor the Kittlerian narrative ends there. The typewriter's isolation of writing from the audiovisual and the authorial, and of letters from each other by interrupting the ink's continuity, is for Kittler the media–technological ground for the Saussurean finding that language is merely a set of arbitrary signifiers constructed differentially, to be engaged with according to certain rules and conventions. This in turn is the basis for the Lacanian claim that the Symbolic, separated from the Real and the Imaginary (which Kittler associates with gramophone and film, respectively), is the "world of the machine"; ergo, the human subject in its engagement with language is nothing more than "a calculating machine": "For both people and computers are 'subject to the appeal of the signifier'; that is, they are both run by programs" (Kittler 1999, p. 17).

At this point, the question of AI becomes pertinent, which for Kittler meant something other than a "technology that enables computers and machines to simulate human learning, comprehension, problem solving, decision making, creativity and autonomy", as IBM's website defines the term (Stryker and Kavlakoglu 2024). He not only would have vetoed the last two terms as neo-Romantic babble (or "remainder humanism", to quote the subtitle of an upcoming book by Leif Weatherby (2025)) but also would have protested the rhetorical implication that there is any significant difference between human and machine computation in the first place. After all, their indistinguishability has been proved by Alan Turing in his "Computing Machinery and Intelligence" (1950), whose infamous thought experiment Kittler summarizes with much admiration:

> A computer A and human B exchange data via some kind of telewriter interface. The exchange of texts is monitored by a censor C, who also only receives written information. A and B both pretend to be human, and C has to decide which of the two is simulating and which merely is Nietzsche's thinking, writing, and speaking machine. But the game remains open-ended, because each time the machine gives itself away—be it by making a mistake or, more likely, by not making any—it will refine its program by learning. In the Turing game, Man coincides with his simulation. (Kittler 1999, p. 17)

The specificity of the term "artificial intelligence" for Kittler, especially in *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (1986), from which I have been quoting, has primarily to do with the fact that these machines are radically more superior than humans in terms of their capacities to store, transmit, and process, because they run on binary code, to which everything else can be reduced, and their hardware outperforms human wetware.[1] But these differences also make artificial intelligences into opaque objects that are fundamentally incomprehensible for the human; a quick Google search for "do we understand how AI works" affirms the point by giving dozens and dozens of answers in the negative. As Kittler puts it (with a tone of faint sorrow?) in the book's preface:

> Technologies that not only subvert writing, but engulf it and carry it off along with so-called Man, render their own description impossible. Increasingly, data flows onceconfined to books and later to records and films are disappearing into black holes and boxes that, as *artificial intelligences*, are bidding us farewell on their way to nameless high commands. (Kittler 1999, p. xxxix; emphasis mine)

And later, in the "Typewriter" chapter, where this "discourse gun" is properly framed as the precursor to Turing's machines, the fact of medial difference—to be understood both quantitatively (i.e., in terms of how much they can mediate) and qualitatively (i.e., in terms of their units of operation; "basics" and "grammar" as opposed to "glamor")—is once again emphasized:

> In *artificial intelligences*, all media glamor vanishes and goes back to basics. (After all, "glamor" is nothing but a Scottish corruption of the word "grammar"). Bits reduced the seeming continuity of optical media and the real continuity of acoustic media to letters, and these letters to numbers. DSP ["digital signal processor"; A.A] stores, transfers, calculates—millions of times per second, it runs through the three functions necessary and sufficient for media. (Kittler 1999, p. 243; emphasis mine)

AI, then, not as our medial enemy who will cruelly beat us in our precious human tasks (e.g., churning out texts, creating images, or composing melodies) but as the name of a mostly indifferent medial entity that is not to be understood ("they do their own stuff on their own level, just as we do ours", to quote Geoffrey Winthrop-Young [Horn and Winthrop-Young 2012])—such a notion of AI, I want to argue, enables a productively anachronistic reading of the ending of "Das Urteil", where there is neither a father nor a son—in fact, no humans at all—but just a virtually endless traffic into which the entire story collapses.

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But first, writing versus cinema. The reading I propose can be seen as a revision or expansion of Bernhard Siegert's in his book *Relays: Literature as an Epoch of the Postal System*, where he describes the story as "a fight between a father and a son over access to the mail":

> Whoever had access to the mail also had at his disposal the existence of its addresses, and therefore the life and death of its senders. Georg succumbs because he forgets 'to take [his father's] writing things away from' him—which enables the latter to occupy the communications channel to Russia and to declare Georg's letters incapable of delivery. (Siegert 1999, p. 214)

Siegert is correct to label the story a media war, but his reading based only on the explicitly thematized medium of letters misses the entire problematic of visuality, of seeing, looking, and blindness that is spread across the text. Indeed, like Georg, he simply believes the father's claim that he has occupied the communication channel. The assertion that he has Georg's letters in his shirt's pocket may as well be a bluff on the father's part; in any case, he does not *show* them, unlike Georg who does show the letter he is planning on sending ("he pulled the letter a little out his pocket and then let it fall back in" [Kafka 1916, p. 26; trans. mine unless stated otherwise][2]). And even if the father actually has Georg's previous letters, what seals the father's condemnation of Georg to death-by-drowning on account of his self-absorption ("now you know what exists outside of you, before this you only knew of yourself" [Kafka 1916, p. 28][3]) is Georg having failed to see his father's state until this moment: "[. . .] and me, well, you see how I am doing. That's why you have eyes" (ibid).[4]

In fact, writing in the form of letters is introduced in "Das Urteil" in conjunction with the question of visual mediation. The story opens with Georg having just completed the

letter to his friend in Russia, slowly and playfully sealing the envelope. He is doing this, however, while sitting at his writing table by a window, and right after he is finished with the envelope, he looks outside through it: at the river, the bridge, and the hills on the other bank. The writing of a letter to a friend "abroad" (*Ausland*) leads to a looking "out of the window" (*aus dem Fenster*), which allows Georg to perceive what is outside while remaining inside, in his "private room" (Kafka 1916, p. 5). The window is thus coded, for the moment, as visually mediating between the inside and the outside, the private and the public, while clearly demarcating these respective spaces. In addition, through the repetition of the preposition *aus*, the text connects what is outside of the window to what is outside of the country, i.e., the friend in Russia, making the act of looking at the other bank a stand-in for looking toward Russia—that "other place" of alterity (*die Fremde*), who gave his friend a "foreign-looking beard" (*der fremdartige Vollbart*) (Kafka 1916, p. 6).

What comes next, however, is mostly not Russia. This looking-*aus* under the sign or influence of writing commences an inner thought process that segues into flashback that goes for about a third of the story and recounts primarily how Georg came to write this letter, as if under the influence of the letter—as both *Brief* and *Buchstabe*—one can only think about the letter and its author. After a brief paragraph describing the friend's sorry state abroad, Georg "worries" for pages about what to write to his friend, as he does not want to say anything that might upset or embarrass the friend and hence jeopardize their "epistolary connection" (Kafka 1916, p. 8). There is much to say about the reliability, sincerity, and reasonableness of Georg's attitude here—it only takes a minor nudge by his fiancée for him to announce his wedding to the friend, which he thought was precisely what he should not do; call that, if you will, Kafka's parody of the Romantic female muse—but what is relevant in this context is that the window takes the reader and Georg not outside of the room, but instead into Georg's head, and then, with him, back in time. Instead of mediating between the inside and outside, the window functions more like a mirror provoking introspection, or a screen for Georg to project his mental life onto; it becomes a way to mediate between the inside (of the room) and inside (that is Georg's interiority), with the outside that is Russia a mere station within the circuit. That the window does not really lead Georg to the outside world is emphasized once more at the end of the section, when the reader is back with Georg by the window:

> Mit diesem Brief in der Hand war Georg lange, das Gesicht dem Fenster zugekehrt, an seinem Schreibtisch gesessen. Einem Bekannten, der ihn im Vorübergehen von der Gasse aus gegrüßt hatte, *hatte er kaum mit einem abwesenden Lächeln geantwortet*. (Kafka 1916, p. 13; emphasis mine)[5]

Georg is facing the window, but he is paying no attention to what is outside. Thinking with pride, it seems, of the letter he managed to concoct after all that worrying regarding the future of his correspondence, he responds to a passing acquaintance's greeting only with an absent smile.

This window that is under the influence of an author, who is under the influence of his own authorship, functions very differently, for example, from the one in Kafka's 1912 short prose text, "Das Gassenfenster":

> Wer verlassen lebt und sich doch hie und da irgendwo anschließen möchte, wer mit Rücksicht auf die Veränderungen der Tageszeit, der Witterung, der Berufsverhältnisse und dergleichen ohne weiteres irgend einen beliebigen Arm sehen will, an dem er sich halten könnte,–der wird es ohne ein Gassenfenster nicht lange treiben. Und steht es mit ihm so, daß er gar nichts sucht und nur als müder Mann, die Augen auf und ab zwischen Publikum und Himmel, an seine Fensterbrüstung tritt, und er will nicht und hat ein wenig den Kopf zurückgeneigt,

> so reißen ihn doch unten die Pferde mit in ihr Gefolge von Wagen und Lärm und damit endlich der menschlichen Eintracht zu. (Kafka 1912)[6]

Here, the window not only helps the lonely man attach himself to the world outside and thus stay in touch with the various changes taking place in the public realm, but it also proves to be so powerful as a means of all-sensory mediation that a mere leaning over the sill results in him being pulled, as it were, onto the streets by the horses passing by, joining him to the greater "human harmony" at last. Writing about "Das Gassenfenster", Lutz Koepnick correctly compares it to "the new window of film during Kafka's own lifetime", and based on Erwin Panofsky's understanding of cinema as "a dynamization of space and spatialization of time" that leads to a spectatorial experience of "permanent motion", he concludes that this lonely man is "a moviegoer in disguise" (Koepnick 2007, p. 17).

And again, this is *not* the window in Georg's room, which, paired with the written medium, simply helps him fortify his *Innenleben*. This is of course connected to the father's accusations of self-absorption, and explicitly so when he says, "that's why you lock yourself into your office, no one should disturb him, the boss is busy—just so you can write your *false* letters to Russia. But thankfully no one needs to teach a father how to *see through* his son" (Kafka 1916, pp. 22–23; emphasis mine)—if for no other reason, because the son's physical withdrawal, which aids his medial withdrawal via the letter, cannot be missed. The letters are false because they enable no communication, or merely an "epistolary connection", that is, no relation except for Georg's self-relation, a process which the window in his room helps facilitate. So, it is not much of a surprise that the first disagreement between Georg and his father in the story is over the closed window in the father's room, which is an omen of the incoming short circuit. "Astonished" by how "unbearably" dark his father's room is, Georg points out that the window is closed despite the nice warm weather outside, to which the father responds that he likes it better that way; and when the father becomes combative after hearing about the letter Georg wants to send and questions the sheer existence of his friend in Russia, thus questioning the foundations of his son's epistolary enterprise, Georg blames his father's behavior partially on the closed window: "You sit here in the dark, in the living room you would have beautiful light [. . .] You sit by the closed window, and the air would do you such good" (Kafka 1916, pp. 14, 18).

Parallel to this problem of the closed window and the resulting darkness that bothers Georg much more than it does the father is the question of the father's alleged visual impairment. The paragraph that relays Georg's astonishment in the face of the darkness also highlights that the father—sitting by the window and near the various mementos for the late mother—is reading a newspaper that he holds sideways in an attempt to counter "some weakness of the eye" (Kafka 1916, p. 14). As mentioned above, Georg will progressively be marked as the real blind one in the story, as the one who has so far remained in the dark regarding his father's state: he will accuse himself of negligence "upon the sight of [his father's] not particularly clean laundry" (Kafka 1916, p. 20), and "if one looked more carefully" (Kafka 1916, p. 21), he will soon add, it appears that it is already too late to obtain the necessary care for the father.

But to stay with the window and the newspaper, shortly before beginning his offensive against Georg, the father makes an opaque gesture that combines the sill of the closed window with the objects that signify his visual impairment, the newspaper and his glasses. Responding to Georg, saying that he initially did not want to let the friend know about the wedding, he asks, "and now you changed your mind", and proceeds to "lay [*legte*] the large newspaper on the window sill and the glasses on the newspaper, which he cover[s] [*bedeckte*] with his hand" (Kafka 1916, p. 16). How to read this? Now, even if one reduces the heterogeneity of these three objects—visual versus multimedial, relating to the father's "blindness" versus that of Georg's—down to a basic theme of vision, one is still left with

the task of interpreting the father's covering (*bedecken*) of this spontaneously assembled stack with his hand, an act syntactically emphasized by its separation into a subordinate clause, differentiating it from the mere laying down (*legen*) of the objects on top of each other. Is this hand gesture like the swearing of an oath by putting the hand on a book deemed sacred? Or, to invoke a more occult register, is it like placing one's fingers on the planchette of a Ouija board to establish connection with the dead? After all, the father will claim that he alone would have been too weak to subdue Georg, but their late mother has thankfully "ceded [him] her strength" (Kafka 1916, p. 26).

Walter Benjamin might have thought of this act of *Bedeckung* as a *Gestus*, as one of those gesture-as-events that populate Kafka's oeuvre and are "subject[s] for reflection without end" (Benjamin 1999, p. 702). One way to avoid that infinity is to focus on the word *bedecken* itself, the near-synonym of which, *zudecken*, is used repeatedly at the turning point of the father–son conflict and thus of the text (with *bedecken* also appearing once again), when the father's offensive pays off and gives him the upper hand. After their conversation about the friend in Russia, Georg carries the father to his bed and tucks him in. Then,

> "Nicht wahr, du erinnerst dich schon an ihn?" fragte Georg und nickte ihm aufmunternd zu.
>
> "Bin ich jetzt gut *zugedeckt*?" fragte der Vater, als könne er nicht nachschauen, ob die Füße genug bedeckt seien.
>
> "Es gefällt dir also schon im Bett", sagte Georg und legte das Deckzeug besser um ihn.
>
> "Bin ich gut *zugedeckt*?" fragte der Vater noch einmal und schien auf die Antwort besonders aufzupassen.
>
> "Sei nur ruhig, du bist gut *zugedeckt*".
>
> "Nein!" rief der Vater, daß die Antwort an die Frage stieß, warf die Decke zurück mit einer Kraft, daß sie einen Augenblick im Fluge sich ganz entfaltete, und stand aufrecht im Bett. Nur eine Hand hielt er leicht an den Plafond. "Du wolltest mich *zudecken*, das weiß ich, mein Früchtchen, aber *zugedeckt* bin ich noch nicht. Und ist es auch die letzte Kraft, genug für dich, zuviel für dich [. . .]" (Kafka 1916, pp. 21–22; emphases via italics and underline are mine)[7]

According to the father's usage of *zudecken*, to cover someone up and thus banish them from the visual field—that *zudecken* is a visual phenomenon is highlighted by the line, "as if he couldn't *have a look at* [*nachschauen*] whether the feet are covered enough" (emphasis mine)—is akin to banishing them from existence, with the blanket doubling as a burial cloth. The rhetorical strength of his last sentence quoted above, where *zudecken* is used twice, relies on the transition or oscillation between these two meanings: he erupts with a no and claims, holding onto the last bit of power he has, that Georg wanted to cover/kill him, but he is not covered up/dead yet, is not just yet bound for the visual/real death. What is even more interesting about the father's self-resurrection and the ensuing rant from the top of the bed, however, is that he aligns himself with the one person who is alive but almost always out of sight, namely the friend in Russia:

> "[. . .] Wohl kenne ich deinen Freund. Er wäre ein Sohn nach meinem Herzen. Darum hast du ihn auch betrogen die ganzen Jahre lang. Warum sonst? Glaubst du, ich habe nicht um ihn geweint? [. . .] Wie du jetzt geglaubt hast, du hättest ihn *untergekriegt*, so *untergekriegt*, daß du dich mit deinem Hintern auf ihn setzen kannst und er rührt sich nicht, da hat sich mein Herr Sohn zum Heiraten entschlossen!" (Kafka 1916, pp. 22–23; emphasis mine)[8]

After claiming that Georg was jealous of the friend in Russia, who would have been a son "after [his] heart", the father ridicules Georg's alleged belief of having prevailed against (*untergekriegt*) the friend. In the meantime, he reworks his own being-put-*down* on the bed so that Georg can cover him up into Georg believing that he has brought the friend *down* (*unter-gekriegt*) so much that he can sit on him with his "behind" (*Hintern*), with Georg's body thus functioning as an Ersatz-*Decke*.[9] And it is right after these similarities regarding the in/visibility of the father and the friend are established that a second eruption takes place, this time an eruption of images:

> Georg sah zum Schreckbild seines Vaters auf. Der Petersburger Freund, den der Vater plötzlich so gut kannte, ergriff ihn, wie noch nie. Verloren im weiten Rußland *sah er ihn*. An der Türe des leeren, ausgeraubten Geschäftes *sah er ihn*. Zwischen den Trümmern der Regale, den zerfetzten Waren, den fallenden Gasarmen stand er gerade noch. Warum hatte er so weit wegfahren müssen! (Kafka 1916, p. 23; emphasis mine)[10]

Looking up at the "father's image of horror" (*Schreckbild seines Vaters*), Georg is seized by the Petersburgian friend like "never before" (*wie noch nie*), and this seizure is accompanied and seemingly caused by the sudden and startling visibility acquired by the Petersburgian friend: the phrase "sah er ihn" is repeated twice, and the friend is firmly placed in various tableaus of commercial misery. As a result, this friend, whose existence so far had been relegated to mostly being a partner in written correspondence, with whom one could only "connect" in an epistolary manner, and one Georg did not want to upset or offend for the sake of the epistolary (non-)connection, can now grasp (*ergreifen*) Georg with the hand of his virtual body from a distance, as it were, inducing him to express something close to a genuine worry or lament: "why did he have to go so far away!" After such a forceful opening of the eye, it is over for Georg. The rest of the story narrates his downfall.

It is hard to pinpoint the nature or status of this *Schreckbild*: is it an image that is only in Georg's mind, or does it appear in the space of the room, like a "bogey" (Kafka 1972a, p. 85), as suggested by the Muir translation? Are we dealing with a moment of the occult here, or something like a hallucination on the part of the father–son duo? After all, the father's commanding of Georg to look at him ("Aber schau mich an!" [Kafka 1916, p. 24] while Georg is already looking at the father's *Schreckbild* implies that the father is aware that Georg is focused on some other image even when he is looking in his direction. There are no conclusive answers to these questions, but what is clear is that Georg can encounter this set of images of the friend in Russia only through the father, and more specifically, through the father's body: Georg's looking-*up* at the *Schreckbild* (*sah. . . auf*) coincides with the father standing on the bed while Georg is on the floor, resulting in an upward gaze. This gives truth to the father's claim that he is the "representative" (*Vertreter*) of the Petersburgian friend, i.e., the one who makes the friend effectively present—which in this story means *visually* present—through his own bodily presence. And this capacity to make an absent one present by facilitating their visual presence also suggests an explanation of that earlier *Bedeckung* as a gesture of power and control. Just as Georg would have controlled the father by banishing him out of the visual field if he could have covered him up (*zugedeckt*), the father, by covering (*bedecken*) the stack of objects associated with visuality (the window, the glasses, the newspaper[11]), claims the visual field and the capacity to mediate visually as his own—the capacity of *Aufdeckung*, of revelation or exposure.

In other words, *Aufdeckung* as paternal or, more to the point, phallic power—this was already foreshadowed when Georg encountered the revealing *Schlafrock* upon entering the father's room: "'Ah, Georg', said his father, rising at once to meet him. His heavy dressing gown swung open as he walked and the skirts of it fluttered around him. 'My father is still a giant of a man', said Georg to himself'" (Kafka 1972a, p. 85).[12] To go by the letter,

the father is a giant (*Riese*) not because of *what* he flashes—which is not named, merely implied—but that he flashes *at all*—and so casually at that too.

Now, this seizure of the capacity of revelation by paternal authority is reminiscent of how the technological medium of film has historically taken over the role of visual mediation from writing, the weak hallucinations caused by which cannot compete with film's strong pull: it is not the "yellow skin color" of the friend in Russia, which "indicates a developing sickness" that shatters Georg, which he all-too-briefly remembers while looking outside after finishing his letter, but that *Schreckbild* of nebulous provenance (Kafka 1916, p. 6).[13] In short, I claim that the *Schreckbild* scene is a cinematic one. That the paternal field of revelations is structured like a movie theater is first suggested by the conflict over the darkness in the father's room. Such darkness has always been integral to the cinematic experience, and early moviegoers were cognizant of this: in a 1909 piece titled "Kinematographentheater", Kafka's close friend Max Brod talks about the "eclipsing" ((verfinstern); Brod 15, Brod 1992) of the hall into the first film of the night. The movie theaters, for their part, knew that their success depended on enabling such an atmosphere, with a Mannheim establishment bragging in 1913 about being "the darkest in the whole city" (quoted in Kittler 1999, p. 121). Another spatial-architectural parallel is the aforementioned upward gaze caused by the father's body-screen being on the bed-stage and Georg standing on the floor, which mimics the situation of the seated movie spectator; Georg retreating to a "corner" (*Winkel*, *Ecke*) (Kafka 1916, pp. 24, 26) can also be read as alluding to the immobility, if not petrification, that comes with the spectatorial position.

Such a spatial distribution casts the father as the screen and Georg as the projector. An alternative to this setup is to take the description of the father as "shin[ing] with insight" (*strahlte vor Einsicht*) as an esoteric reference to what a projector does: what it beams onto the screen enables in-sight on the spectator's part. The screen in this case would be the blanket (*Decke*), which he had thrown upwards while protesting against being covered up, and which, as Michael Levine puts it, "unfolds into the *Plafond*, the canvas-like ceiling he seems to hold up with one hand" (Decke can mean both blanket and ceiling; Levine 2008, p. 1046). If so, the father would be projecting the images of the Petersburgian friend on the ceiling canvas he had constructed above himself as a result of his rejection to be covered-up, directly connecting his revolt to his counter-revelation. Such a reading would also explain his "look at me" comment: if the ceiling-as-screen is right behind the father from Georg's low angle, he would be looking toward the father but not at him.

As for the image sequence itself, it has the form of an accelerating montage sequence, with the twice-repeated "sah er ihn" and the two commas in the third and last sentence cueing the cuts, all leading to a climactic realization (which cannot be described as catharsis, as the emotions end up weighing on Georg and weighing him down):

1. Verloren im weiten Rußland sah er ihn.
2. An der Türe des leeren, ausgeraubten Geschäftes sah er ihn.
3. Zwischen den Trümmern der Regale,
4. den zerfetzten Waren,
5. den fallenden Gasarmen stand er gerade noch.
6. Warum hatte er so weit wegfahren müssen!

The effect of the sequence, again, is the Petersburgian friend gripping (*ergreifen*) Georg, similar to the horses in the cinematic "Gassenfenster" pulling the lonely man onto the streets. Although Georg does not find himself in Russia, the images trigger a tactile-corporeal experience that makes him feel like he is being taken hostage, as *ergreifen* can also mean to capture or to usurp. If we also take into consideration that encountering these images leaves him "distracted" or "scatter-minded' (*zerstreut*), what we have here is the Benjaminian film spectatorship with its tactility and distracted reception, but with the truly Kafkaesque twist

that the experience is wholly non-liberatory (Kafka 1916, p. 23).[14] In any case, this is certainly not the safe and voyeuristic spectatorship characterizing much of early Hollywood narrative cinema. It is indeed much closer to what Tom Gunning (Gunning 2006) has called, with a nod to Eisenstein's notion of "attraction", the "cinema of attractions", with its primary focus on the capacities of the new medium (e.g., close-ups, slow motion, reverse motion, loops, etc., but also the sheer fact that the camera can record physical reality) and its various forms of direct address (e.g., by a host, or by the actors looking directly at the camera) that break the fourth wall; the most famous example here is probably the Lumière Brothers' *The Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat Station* (1896), which is rumored to have made its first viewers scream and run to the back of the room because they were so overwhelmed by the image of the incoming train.[15] The *Schreckbild*, for its part, achieves its strong effect mostly by its capacity to *show* the friend's misery, with the accelerating montage form and, if it can be construed as such, the close-ups in shots 3–5 amplifying its attraction value. And as for its direct address, this is achieved here, on one hand, diegetically, as the world represented is one which Georg is personally involved or implicated in, and on the other hand, the father who "presents" these images is practically the host of this movie theater. Taking Gunning's "cinema of attractions" as a framework to understand father's counter-offensive also allows us to combine the cinematic moment with the next one where the father misogynistically mocks Georg's bride by acting like her: "'Because she lifted up her skirts", his father began to flute, 'because she lifted her skirts like this, the nasty creature" (Kafka 1972a, p. 85).[16] Such works of so-called "primitive" cinema would often be shown at carnivals and fairs in conjunction with theatrical "acts" such as that of the father here. When Kafka calls his father a "Komödiant" a little later, he once again invokes this carnivalesque context (Kafka 1916, p. 24).

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But "Das Urteil" does not end with the triumph of the father over the son, of cinema over writing, of the visual over the textual. The father himself "collapses" after he condemns Georg, who for his part rushes or is rushed ("fühlte sich [. . .] gejagt") to the nearby bridge to execute his sentence (Kafka 1916, pp. 28–29).[17] There are two important points to be made about this swift trip to the site of execution:

1. As he rushes down the stairs to leave the apartment, Georg bumps into their maid who is coming up to clean their place. She reacts by yelling "Jesus!" and "cover[ing] [*verdeckte*] her face with her apron", but Georg is already gone. With this final act of *self*-covering that makes both parties invisible to each other—curtains down, as it were—the maid emphasizes the end of the reign of the visual, that is, of the age of cinema.
2. Her *yelling* "Jesus" is preceded by Georg carrying "in his ears" the "bang" (*Schlag*) caused by his father's collapse, and later on, before he lets himself fall off of the bridge, he spots an "autobus that would easily drown out [*übertönen*, so audially cover up] his fall". After the end of cinema and as the writer rushes headlong to his death, it is sounds that take center stage. Crucially, these are mostly noises that signify nothing, the one major exception being Georg's "dear parents, I have always loved you"—but this exception sort of proves the rule, because it is "exclaimed softly", or paradoxically, "silently" (*rief leise*), as if its ascent to language in the midst of this cacophony is a source of immense embarrassment.

It is in the midst of such nonsense—or as Kittler, by way of Lacan, would say, in the midst of the Real, which is primarily associated with the gramophone, as it can capture all the noise that neither the Imaginary nor the Symbolic can catch—that Georg "lets himself drop down", but before he can get to the river, comes the story's notorious last line:

> In diesem Moment ging über die Brücke geradezu unendlicher Verkehr. (Kafka 1916, p. 29)

The Muirs translate this as "At this moment an unending stream of traffic was just going over the bridge" (Kafka 1972a, p. 85), which makes perfect sense within the diegesis; the aforementioned "autobus" is certainly a part of this *Verkehr*. But in a story that not only interrogates different kinds of mediation, but also explicitly or implicitly thematizes their media–technological bases, that *Verkehr* cannot be not (also) read as *communication*. Of this communication—this end of media history, if "Das Urteil" were to have the last word on the matter—we know that it is "virtually endless", contrasting sharply with the finitude of Georg and his father, and that it comes after the human and has no regard for it: it not only follows up on the (alluded to; interrupted) deaths of Georg the writer and his father the projector, thus succeeding their comparatively humanistic media ages, but cuts Georg's fall short, thus exhibiting its indifference to the species. In addition, relying on the subdued meaning of *Ende* as goal or purpose that is much better preserved in the English word "end", *unendlich* can also be read as being without purpose, thus extending, indeed infinitizing, the atmosphere of nonsense that was established by all the noise in the build-up to Georg's jump.[18] What kind of a media technology would correspond to such a post- or non-human infinity, one that seems to be without an aim, in any case without one that would make some human sense?

The end of "Das Urteil", I suggest, parallels the end of Kittler's media history as I have summarized it in the beginning of this essay. The superior medial entities called "artificial intelligences" pick up the task of mediation from us, "bidding us farewell on their way to nameless high commands"—or as Kittler once put it in a delightfully Hegelian mood, their aim is to establish that "endless loop" on which "absolute knowledge" will run (Kittler 1999, p. 2). Given the namelessness, that is, unnameability of their tasks, and given that these technologies "render their description impossible", there is not much to be said about them, hence Kafka's brilliant prudence of ending his story with a final act of naming: virtually endless communication—which exists, yes, but not for us.

But one can keep commenting, of course, on the moment in Kafka's literary text when these artificial intelligences make their appearance, focusing on the scene's rhetoric and comparing it to Kittler's descriptions. The farewell bid to us is represented by the story's curt ending, in addition to how the concluding sentence is separated from all that is before it by being its own paragraph. As for the vanishing of the media glamor and all going back to the basics, one just needs to compare that appallingly simple sentence to those in the previous paragraph, with their sprawling subclauses, jumbled syntax, and direct quotations. Even the rather technical claim that digital signal processors (DSPs) engage in media operations "millions of times per second" finds its counterpart in the containment of this (virtual, not actual) infinity in a "moment" (*Augenblick*).

Lastly, this virtually endless communication that is AI does not merely succeed and transcend previous media and their data flows, leaving them behind for good. It is also the endless communication into which the previous media flow, where they become mere numbers without quality, and out of which they can be pulled when a human subject wants them—for example, if they want to read Kafka's "Das Urteil" or this essay on it. Therefore, in our digital age when we regularly read on our computers, Georg the writer falling, together with the rest of the story, *not* into the river, but instead into this last sentence with its virtually endless communication—a sentence that would have been chronologically absurd anywhere else in the text—is simply a reminder of the computational structures that we rely on when we are reading that last sentence on a computer. Thus, Kafka can really make a claim for being a prophet of the digital age.

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Notes

1 As the Reddit user IsraeliChicken quipped nine years ago in the subreddit r/totallynotrobots,
WHAT DOES THIS BINARY CODE MEAN BECAUSE I'M A HUMAN AND I DON'T KNOW BINARY
01001001 00100111 01001101 00100000 01000001 01000011 01010100 01010101 01000001 01001100 01001100 01011001 00100000 01000001 00100000 01010010 01001111 01000010 01001111 01010100 00100000 01,001100 01000101 01010100 00100111 01010011 00100000 01001011 01001001 01001100 01001100 00100000 01010100 01001000 01001111 01010011 01000101 00100,000 01000110 01001001 01001100 01010100 01001000 01011001 00100000 01001000 01010101 01001101 01000001 01001110 01010011
THANKS YOU GUYS AND I'M NOT A ROBOT.
(Link: https://www.reddit.com/r/totallynotrobots/comments/4f2pt6/what_does_this_binary_code_mean_because_im_a/; accessed on 10 March 2025).

2 "Er zog den Brief ein wenig aus der Tasche und ließ ihn wieder zurückfallen".

3 "Jetzt weißt du also, was es noch außer dir gab, bisher wußtest du nur von dir".

4 "[. . .] und ich, du siehst ja, wie es mit mir steht. Dafür hast du doch Augen!"

5 "With this letter in his hand Georg had been sitting a long time at the writing table, this face turned toward the window. He had barely acknowledged, with an absent smile, a greeting waved to him from the street by a passing acquaintance" (Kafka 1972a, p. 80).

6 "Whoever leads a solitary life and yet now and then wants to attach himself somewhere, whoever, according to changes in the time of day, the weather, the state of his business, and the like, suddenly wishes to see any arm at all to which he might cling-he will not be able to manage for long without a window looking on to the street. And if he is in the mood of not desiring anything and only goes to his window sill a tired man, with eyes turning from his public to heaven and back again, not wanting to look out and having thrown his head up a little, even then the horses below will draw him down into their train of wagons and tumult, and so at last into the human harmony" (Kafka 1972b, p. 384).

7 "'Am I well covered up now?' asked his father, as if he were not able to see whether his feet were properly tucked in or not. 'So you find it snug in bed already', said Georg, and tucked the blankets more closely around him. 'Am I well covered up?' asked the father once more, seeming to be strangely intent upon the answer. 'Don't worry, you're well covered up.' 'No!' cried his father, cutting short the answer, threw the blankets off with a strength that sent them all flying in a moment and sprang erect in bed. Only one hand lightly touched the ceiling to steady him. 'You wanted to cover me up, I know, my young sprig, but I'm far from being covered up yet. And even if this is the last strength I have, it's enough for you, too much for you. [. . .]'" (Kafka 1972a, p. 84).

8 "'Of course I know your friend. He would have been a son after my own heart. That's why you've been playing him false all these years. Why else? Do you think I haven't been sorry for him? And that's why you had to lock yourself up in your office -- the Chief is busy, mustn't be disturbed -- just so that you could write your lying little letters to Russia. But thank goodness a father doesn't need to be taught how to see through his son. And now that you thought you'd got him down, so far down that you could set your bottom on him and sit on him and he wouldn't move, then my fine son makes up his mind to get married!'" (Kafka 1972a, pp. 84–85).

9 The use of the word *Hintern* further connects the friend to the father, who later laments having been exiled to the "backroom" (*Hinterzimmer*) (Kafka 1916, p. 25).

10 "Georg stared at the bogey conjured up by his father. His friend in St. Petersburg, whom his father suddenly knew too well, touched his imagination as never before. Lost in the vastness of Russia he saw him. At the door of an empty, plundered warehouse he saw him. Among the wreckage of his showcases, the slashed remnants of his wares, the falling gas brackets, he was just standing up. Why did he have to go so far away!" (Kafka 1972a, p. 85).

11 That the newspaper does not have much to do with writing is also highlighted when the father says, "do you believe that I read newspapers", and throws the "newspaper sheet" Georg's way, emphasizing its sheet-ness for the first time ("'Glaubst du, ich lese Zeitungen? Da!' und er warf Georg ein Zeitungsblatt" [Kafka 1916, p. 27])—newspapers, then, as mere covers in this battle of visions.

12 "'Ah, Georg!' sagte der Vater und ging ihm gleich entgegen. Sein schwerer Schlafrock öffnete sich im Gehen, die Enden umflatterten ihn–'mein Vater ist noch immer ein Riese, sagte sich Georg'" (Kafka 1916, p. 14).

[13] "So arbeitete er sich in der Fremde nutzlos ab, der fremdartige Vollbart verdeckte nur schlecht das seit den Kinderjahren wohlbekannte Gesicht, dessen gelbe Hautfarbe auf eine sich entwickelnde Krankheit hinzudeuten schien".

[14] For Benjaminian film spectatorship as it relates to aesthetico-political liberation, see Wilke (2010), "Tacti(ca)lity".

[15] For "cinema of attractions", see Gunning (2006), "The Cinema of Attraction[s]".

[16] "'Weil sie die Röcke gehoben hat,' fing der Vater zu flöten an, ‚weil sie die Röcke so gehoben hat, die widerliche Gans'" (Kafka 1916, pp. 23–24).

[17] To avoid having too many citations from the same section, here is the entire paragraph that the following two points refer to: "Georg fühlte sich aus dem Zimmer gejagt, den Schlag, mit dem der Vater hinter ihm aufs Bett stürzte, trug er noch in den Ohren davon. Auf der Treppe, über deren Stufen er wie über eine schiefe Fläche eilte, überrumpelte er seine Bedienerin, die im Begriffe war heraufzugehen, um die Wohnung nach der Nacht aufzuräumen. 'Jesus!' rief sie und verdeckte mit der Schürze das Gesicht, aber er war schon davon. Aus dem Tor sprang er, über die Fahrbahn zum Wasser trieb es ihn. Schon hielt er das Geländer fest, wie ein Hungriger die Nahrung. Er schwang sich über, als der ausgezeichnete Turner, der er in seinen Jugendjahren zum Stolz seiner Eltern gewesen war. Noch hielt er sich mit schwächer werdenden Händen fest, erspähte zwischen den Geländerstangen einen Autoomnibus, der mit Leichtigkeit seinen Fall übertönen würde, rief leise: 'Liebe Eltern, ich habe euch doch immer geliebt', und ließ sich hinabfallen" (Kafka 1916, pp. 28–29).

[18] For example, as in the title of Friedrich Schiller's famous 1789 Jena lecture, "Was heißt und zu welchem *Ende* studiert man Universalgeschichte?".

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