

Article

Code Word Cloud in Franz Kafka's "Beim Bau der Chinesischen Mauer" ["The Great Wall of China"]

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Abstract: Amidst the centenary reflections on Franz Kafka's legacy, this article explores his work's ongoing resonance with the digital age, particularly through the lens of generative AI and cloud computation. Anchored in a close reading of Kafka's "Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer", this study interrogates how the spatial and temporal codes embedded in the narrative parallel the architectures of contemporary diffusion systems at the heart of AI models. Engaging with critical theory, media archaeology, and AI discourse, this article argues that the rise of large language models not only commodifies language but also recasts Kafka's allegorical critiques of bureaucratic opacity and imperial command structures within a digital framework. The analysis leverages concepts like Kittler's code, Benjamin's figural cloud, and Hamacher's linguistic dissemblance to position Kafka's parables as proto-critical tools for examining AI's black-box nature. Ultimately, the piece contends that Kafka's text is less a metaphor for our technological present than a mirror reflecting the epistemological crises engendered by the collapse of semantic transparency in the era of algorithmic communication. This reframing invites a rethinking of how narrative, code, and digital architectures intersect, complicating our assumptions about clarity, control, and the digital regimes shaping contemporary culture.

Keywords: Franz Kafka; AI futures; computer-mediated communication; *Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer*; code; cloud; Walter Benjamin; computational cultures; cultural memory; meaning making



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1. Introduction

Throughout the centenary year of Franz Kafka's death, novel interpretations and approaches inspired by his texts' engagement with aspects of modernity have resonated both inside and outside academia at major international conferences, in new publications, and in artistic retrospectives. Headlines within the popular press read "'He is my bare minimum:' Franz Kafka becomes an unlikely HEARTTHROB on TikTok—where Gen Zers are swooning over the Czech novelist nearly 100 YEARS after his death" (Nardoizzi 2023) and "The Very Online Afterlife of Franz Kafka: One hundred years after his death, the Czech writer circulates as a pop idol of digital alienation" (Hess 2024). Viral videos circulate on social media, AI-generated voiceovers of Kafka's letter to Milena overlaid onto carousels of images that evoke and aestheticize a particular feeling of alienation, anxiety, and guilt present in his texts that feels especially digital (Angelica 2024).

Beyond the individual experience of a world mediated by screens, Kafka has long been an object of reference for engagement with the structures and systems of emerging socio-technological developments. From Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno's honing

of critical cultural theory against the whetstone of Kafka's texts to the influence of Kafka's protagonists traversing landscapes of bureaucracies and machines in fields like film studies, media archaeology, and beyond, we seem to encounter the incomprehensible rules and logic of Kafka's world in many aspects of contemporary existence. This relevance has continued in the digital age, even at surprising junctures, such as when, at the turn of the 21st century, the noted privacy and technology lawyer Daniel J. Solove published two significant essays that drew on Kafka's *The Trial* as "a fitting metaphor for the privacy problems caused by the aggregation of personal data in large computer databases" (Solove and Hartzog 2024, p. 1023; Solove 2001, 2004). One hundred years after Kafka's death, twenty-five years into the new millennium, and the development of the digital technologies that have driven this continued echo with Kafka has only intensified.

In 2008, the author-turned-entrepreneur Chris Anderson, in a *Wired* magazine article titled "The End of Theory", coined the term the "Age of the Petabyte" to refer to our contemporary moment, where the massive accumulation of data has upended cultural production, communication, and industries. A "petabyte" is a measure of memory or data storage capacity that is equal to 2^{50} bytes. A typical laptop or desktop computer might contain between 16 and 32 gigabytes of memory storage. A top-end server can contain as much as 6000 GB, or 5 TB, of memory. It would take 170 top-of-the line servers—or roughly 61,000 laptops—to add up to a single petabyte of information. Anderson argues that the effectiveness of large datasets leveraged by platforms like Google and Facebook points to an epistemic shift. In this "Age of the Petabyte", contextual and representational models, "old" forms of knowledge production via the scientific method, have been replaced by applied mathematics operating without semantic or causal understanding. The numbers, in a sense, speak for themselves.

The rise of generative AI platforms such as OpenAI's ChatGPT and Google's Bard exemplifies an acceleration in the replacement of representational cultural forms by products generated through big data, a hyper-logical endpoint of mimesis in the age of (digital) technical reproducibility. These large language models might *seem* to mark a new kind of cultural production, automating written language in a way that sidesteps semantic understanding. They are often described as operating within hermetic, closed-loop systems of prompts and outputs, resulting in exchanges that can mimic the appearance of meaning, but whose depth and capacity for meaning making are hotly contested, with one extreme claiming these are nothing but stochastic parrots and another evangelizing the imminent emergence of an Artificial Generalized Intelligence (AGI) (Borji 2023; Mitchell 2024).

While not dismissing the importance of pinpointing the technical capacity and operations that power these machine learning algorithmic systems, in this article, I argue that the problematics produced by AI "language machines" remain insufficiently explored. Certainly, the scale of the components involved, and their growing ubiquity, represent a significant obstacle to nuanced critique, a noteworthy mirror to Adorno's lament of Kafka's cultural popularity that reduces his work to "an information bureau of the human condition, be it eternal or modern, and which knowingly dispenses with the very scandal on which his work is built"¹ (Adorno 1982, p. 245). The comparison here is not merely superficial: just as Kafka's themes and tropes risk being diluted into popular culture commonplaces, so too do the outputs of language models become commodified instances of "conversation" between human and machine. But to assume that the consequences of AI language machines are solely derivative would be to overlook the deeper implications of these technologies as they reshape our engagement with text, narrative, and meaning itself.

In exploring these implications, this article is fashioned around a prototype model of thinking about Kafka's works that looks towards a digital regime. With the superscaling of big data in mind, the specific question to be posed here is what would it mean to think about

his short story about (and around) a huge edifice, “Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer” [“The Great Wall of China”], as an anticipatory allegory for the spatial and temporal dimensions of code? In Sections 2 and 5, I will consider the code of the Great Wall itself, extending recent scholarship on Kafka’s text that interprets it as a model which disrupts power’s arc towards completion, applying this framework to the infrastructure of modern computer (knowledge) networks. However, the core of my argument will focus on that which remains intangible and relational in AI “language machines”, specifically proposing instances of clouds in Kafka’s text as an organizational framework to analyze the digital “cloud” of networked devices and the linguistic “cloud” of training data that comprise AI systems.

Touching on Kafka’s recurring mistranslation, or his untranslatability, is almost a requirement of engaging with his texts. However, it is worth noting that the common English translation of “Beim Bau” as “The Great Wall of China” elides significant ambiguity in questions of the process over time for a massive construction process. What is the “Bau” of “Beim Bau”? Is it a structure or its ongoing construction, object, or process? And what is the “Beim”? Does it indicate a continuous, temporal “Bei” [“at (the time of)”]? Or is it a spatial “Bei” [“by the”], indicating a proximity to the construction of the wall so close that it becomes a witness? In the German, both aspects of this spatial temporal tension are encoded into the language, tying the title to the code that powers the story’s inner machine, the narrative program that deeply interrogates the projection of imperial power through space and time.

Furthermore, another immediate issue is that a spatial model might initially seem unsuitable for representing the dimensions of a text, whether the analog form of Kafka’s stories or the command-and-control language of digital code. While initially a text rooted in historical and cultural specificity, Kafka’s “Great Wall” offers a conceptual framework that resonates with the architectures of digital systems, where space and time become mutable, fragmented, and governed by their own internal logic—rules that emerge from within these systems rather than being imposed from outside.

The Great Wall of China is adopted by Kafka as an ultimate instance of human fabrication, the notion of the Great Wall itself simultaneously reduced and expanded to the foundation for the vertically scaled Tower of Babel. The shift from an edifice of stone to an overreaching territory, that of the clouds and the limitless sky, might seem tenuous as a way of considering the material infrastructure and immaterial regimes of digitality. Finally, in “Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer”, Kafka’s allusions to clouds, to fog, and to vapor are relatively brief.

But locating meaning in precisely such seemingly incidental details is thematically resonant within this specific story, in Kafka’s larger oeuvre, and in the theoretical contexts of critical theory and media archaeology that support the broader stakes of the interplay of partial construction, inscrutability, and digital “clouds” in the Age of AI at play.

Throughout this article, I rely on a multifaceted notion of the digital cloud. I will develop the practical dimension of the cloud in Section 3, considering it as a globally distributed infrastructure whose chief function is to store and make accessible digital information and meaning at scale. However, the digital cloud works in a persistently figurative sense as well, especially within the terminology and structural logic of generative AI. I will expand on its figurative evocation of the ephemeral and the opaque in Section 4, exploring the implications of the ways that meaning can dissolve and re-coalesce in new forms, much as Kafka’s “Gewitterwolken” [“storm clouds”] hover over the horizon of the imperial territory in “Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer” (Kafka 1948, p. 17).

I propose that both senses of the cloud—material containment and nebulous diffusion—are essential for grasping how modern AI systems handle text and narrative. Both stone/hardware and cloud/software operate according to codes, whether of conduct

or of execution, and with the potential for I/O moments of decision, both are capable of glitches. And the specter of becoming ruin hangs over all such overreaching human construction projects, material and virtual, as Kafka is eager to remind us in this story.

2. Fragmentation and the Formless-Taking-Form

“Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer” begins with an ending. Kafka’s narrative is a kind of parable, cast at scale, on the ultimate impossibility of the manifold undertakings of humankind—including those of spoken and written communication, as becomes clear as the tale unfolds:

The Great Wall of China has been completed at its most northerly point. From the south-east and the south-west it came up in two sections that were united here. This system of piecemeal construction was also followed within each of the two great armies of labour, the eastern army and the western army. [...] Now one might think at first that it would have been more advantageous in every way to build continuously, or at least continuously within each of the two main sections² (Kafka 2002, pp. 118–19)

With stunning narrative efficiency, Kafka erects a vast spatial and temporal frame, in which the actions of the story will be cast. Yet, the author of the text-within-the-text and its assumed reader, both somehow dual narrative witnesses of, and to, the story, are impossible to locate in time. In Kafka’s “beendet worden” [“has been completed”], the narrator is (and is describing) simultaneously where the wall was completed and that the wall, at its most northerly point, has (just) been terminated, as if the moment of completion were both proximate and at some indeterminate distance from the time of narration.

It is worth noting the genetic, as well as the spatial, development of the text, and its correlation with temporal dimensions. We know, from deconstructive narrative reconstruction, that this turns on Kafka’s replacement of “wurde beendet” [“completed at a past point in time”] in a later manuscript with the specific construction “ist beendet worden” [“has been completed”]. Additionally, Kafka added “Süd” [“south”], twice, to the sentence “Von Südosten und Südwesten wurde der Bau herangeführt und hier vereinigt” [“From the south-east and the south-west it came up in two sections that were united here”], which originally read as just “Osten” [“east”] and “Westen” [“west”].

Already in the erecting of a “Südosten und Südwesten” line, the space ramifies. Offshoots, lines of flight perhaps, move past the cardinal directions. The orientation of the entire spatial assemblage is uncertain at the moment that the first “Mauerteil” [“wall segment”] is completed, as “after the junction had been effected the work was not then continued, as one might have expected, where the thousand yards ended; instead the labour-gangs were sent off to continue their work on the wall in some quite different region”³ (Kafka 2002, p. 119). This model of space and its elusive orientation brings to mind the concept of “Landvermessung” (surveying) from *Das Schloss* [The Castle], where attempts to textually measure and ethnologically survey the space of “Das Schloss” begin to project other forms beyond the textually measurable, as if registering the lack of measure bound up with the verb “vermessen” (to measure/survey) through the adjective “vermessen” (hubristic, overreaching).

But simultaneously, the Imperial China of “Beim Bau” is cast as particularly beyond measure, a quasi-global territory. This is true as a geographic and historical actuality, making the scale of China’s historical processes and geographical transmissions difficult to manage. And it is also true in the contradictory, illegible historical construction of the story, where the narrator slips through time from the present tense of being a worker, constructing portions of the wall (Kafka 1948, p. 11), to the distant, removed past tense of an intellectual, no longer especially concerned with the overwhelming scale of the matter of China and

its Great Wall—even while participating in the construction. Instead, the narrator says, “Already to some extent while the wall was being built, *and almost exclusively ever since*, I have occupied myself with the comparative history of peoples”⁴ (Kafka 2002, p. 130; my italics).

However, this resistance of the narrative space erected in “Beim Bau” to any fixed point in time is not just an incidental characteristic of the literary text. It is part of the very code that powers the Kafka machine. Consider Friedrich Kittler’s “Code oder wie sich etwas anders schreiben lässt” [“Code (or, How You Can Write Something Differently)”] (Kittler 2015), which traces a path from the codex of Ancient Rome to the Pentagon’s long-time motto “Command, control, communications, intelligence,” identifying empire as the site of confluence for code’s various streams of meaning, saying, “In other words, the basis on which command, code, and communications technology coincided was the Empire”⁵ (Kittler 2008, p. 41). And indeed, in the third line of “Beim Bau”, the collapse of command, code, and communication into each other becomes comprehensible in the empire’s wall, but only through Kafka’s gesture of a coded program. “This system of piecemeal construction”⁶ (Kafka 2002, p. 118) transforms the seemingly vast spatial frame of China, and with it the closed-loop narrative of “Beim Bau”, into an impossible space, encoded with gaps in the structure. It is also an impossible temporal space, as the text itself again bends the reader’s placement in the past and present, the legible code now only semi-legible, the narrator asserting that “There was a great deal of confusion in people’s minds at that time—this book is only one example—perhaps just because so many were doing their utmost to combine their forces in a single aim”⁷ (Kafka 2002, p. 125).

As “Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer” progresses, chronotopical details co-mingle with an uneasy near universality already apparent in the span of “Südosten und Südwesten”. China is an Old World, with a peasantry threatened by nomadic vandals from the north, while the ruling class of the south, “the ladies of the emperors, overfed and sunk in their silken cushions”⁸, are unable to penetrate beyond the palatial walls of Peking (Kafka 2002, p. 134). However, just as the temporal span described above flows in a non-linear way, the spatial span is not a simple divide. The initial construction consists of transverse binaries, of northern–vandal/southern–civilization and east/west workers’ armies. The threat from the north is, in fact, never realized, especially not in the southeast, from where the narrator originates [“stammt”]; “lightning no longer flashes from the thunderclouds that have long since rolled away”⁹ (Kafka 2002, p. 128). The people know almost nothing of “these northerners; we have never set eyes on them, and if we remain in our villages we shall never set eyes on them, even if they should spur their wild horses and keep charging straight towards us; *the land is too vast and will never let them through to us, they will ride on until they vanish in the empty air*”¹⁰ (Kafka 2002, p. 129; my italics).

To start, the word “cloud” [“Wolke”] is here an element in the broader notion of the “thunderclouds” [“Gewitterwolken”] that have long disappeared over the horizon, which, even if they were visible, would not contain the danger of lightning. Rather, they encapsulate a kind of temporality where the anticipated disruption remains perpetually deferred. Furthermore, the nomadic northerners are not lost simply in the physical space of the sky/air—seemingly also without clouds—but in a boundless conceptual terrain that keeps them always at a distance, not even gathering into the diffuse danger of the “Gewitterwolken”. Both the indeterminate span of this space and the accompanying illegibility of “diesen Nordländern” [“these northerners”] are evocative, pointing towards an unfamiliarity with the people of the north as well as the multiple countries that spread beyond the “too vast” of the horizon’s vista. “Verrennen”—running awry or running out—is a corollary of “vermessen”, of excessive measurement.

For Walter Benjamin, Kafka's short texts depict a "Kodex von Gesten"¹¹ ["code of gestures"], one that operates not through definite symbolic meaning but through experimental and always-transforming groupings (Benjamin 2012, p. 9). These gestures are conditioned by "the cloudy spot in it"¹² (Benjamin 2007, p. 122), where reason fails to fully grasp their meaning¹³. However, as Theodor Adorno perceptively argues, "there is more than merely 'cloud' here, for the dialectic and the imagery of the cloud are certainly not to be 'explained away,' but they are to be rendered dialectical through and through" (Adorno 1999, p. 69). In this article, I will argue that the cloud itself in "Beim Bau" is fundamental to the dialectical process implied in Kafka's "Kodex von Gesten", one that reflects a long-standing historical and etymological co-incidence with the cloud in a digital sense.

Consider how the temporal and spatial unlocatability of "Beim Bau", of its textual and metatextual code, of its problematization of horizontal and vertical hierarchies, culminates in a literally cloudy gesture. The narrator asks,

Can there really be a village where the houses stand side by side, covering more fields than can be seen from the top of our hill, and can crowds of people be packed between these houses day and night? Rather than to imagine a city like that, it would be easier for us to believe that Peking and its emperor were a single entity, say a cloud, peacefully voyaging beneath the sun through the course of the ages¹⁴. (Kafka 2002, p. 136; my italics)

Peking, in its material totality, with the emperor as its focal point, is unimaginable, immeasurable from this vantage point. The narrator's region seems a utopian space, isolated, vast, where the wars and happenings of the empire rarely reach. When a refugee from a neighboring district flees to the southeast carrying a pamphlet for a rebellious faction, the communiqué from another place and time is ridiculed and ripped to shreds, as "the dialect of this neighbouring province differs in some essential respects from ours, and this difference occurs also in certain turns of the written speech, which for us have an archaic character"¹⁵ (Kafka 1960, p. 92).

Kafka's tracing of radically reduced spatial presence exists in tension with structures of vast scale and abstraction, as in the Great Wall itself. But, within the unfathomable expanse of the empire, despite a geography so vast that it exceeds the imagination of a fairy tale and a span broader than the skies/Heavens ["Himmel" (Kafka 2024, p. 271)], Peking, the supposed political and symbolic heart, becomes "nur ein Punkt, und das kaiserliche Schloß nur ein Pünktchen" (Kafka 2024, p. 271) ["only a dot, and the imperial palace less than a dot" (Kafka 2002, p. 131)]. Furthermore, the institutions of the empire, although having lost none of their "ewiger Wahrheit" ["eternal truth"], nevertheless remain diffuse, eternally unrecognized, shrouded in "diesem Dunst und Nebel" (Kafka 2024, p. 271) ["all the fog and vapor" (Kafka 2002, p. 131)]. The question of presence, here, is key, as the symbolic authority of the emperor is reduced to near invisibility within the physical and political sphere, divorced from any concrete execution of power.

But Kafka ends "Beim Bau" with this spatial presence exploded from within, the emperor hyperscaled into the ungraspable symbol of the cloud. The narrator's people have given up any material understanding of the power that rules over them, and consequently, the emperor's symbolic narrative is indeterminate. It runs through time, adopting new clothes, while simultaneously hiding, making illegible, the "running," the execution, of the emperor's program. The cost of giving up this material understanding is steep. When confronted by the "unwiderlegliche" ["irrefutable"] testimony of the refugee to the atrocities of the emperor, well, the narrator's people only shake their heads and laugh in an act of willful deletion. "So eager are our people to obliterate the present"¹⁶ (Kafka 1960, p. 92).

3. Deconstructing Machine Communication

When Walter Benjamin relates the story of the accommodating Shuvalkin, who reveals the artifice of Potemkin's imperial edicts only to find his name already signed by Shuvalkin himself, he describes it as "like a herald racing two hundred years ahead of Kafka's work. The enigma which beclouds it is Kafka's enigma"¹⁷ (Benjamin 2007, p. 112). That herald, in its "vorausstürmen" ["racing ahead"], does so in the form of a "Rätselfrage" ["enigma"] that "clouds" both Potemkin and Kafka. For Benjamin, the diffuse clouding happens inside the enigma "die sich in ihr wölkt", which is Kafka's (Benjamin 2012, p. 2). The standard translation, "The enigma which beclouds it is Kafka's enigma" (Benjamin 2007, p. 112), elides this formulation of the cloud-within as the figuration through/with which there is a storming forth that not only heralds Kafka, but thus also must storm forth ahead of him to us. And if it can be said that running through time is the crux of Franz Kafka's contribution to our understanding of the Age of AI, then his prognosis takes form in the elusive figure of the cloud that designates an intention toward language and meaning making. But how can the cloud be a figure? Or, if it is the figure, then it is one always in a state of self-dispersion and change, distinctly temporal and yet evanescent (as with the thunder clouds that have long since rolled away).

The notion of the code, both linguistic and digital, is a curious force to reckon with, a concept underneath which, as Friedrich Kittler says, even before the emergence of GenAI, we might disappear (Kittler 2015, p. 88). Kittler's perspective is a corrective to a popular understanding of computation in which code-as-the-basis-of-software is conflated, through a paradoxical historical inversion, with the legible instructions of a transparent machine. Instead, Kittler meets code on its own footing by articulating the aspects of computer language that the computer scientist Manfred Broy calls "almost intangible, generally invisible, complex, vast and difficult to comprehend" (Broy 2002, p. 11). Ultimately, Kittler argues that software programming languages cannot exist independent of the proprietary hardware and processors that interpret and run them, and that consequently, software and the act of writing itself have ceased to exist:

Writings and texts no longer exist in perceptible times and spaces, but rather in the transistor cells of computers. And since, in the last three decades, the heroic deeds of Silicon Valley have managed to reduce the dimensions of transistor cells to the submicron level (that is, to less than a micrometer), our present-day scene of writing can only be described by way of fractal geometry: as self-similarity of letters over some six decades that extend from corporate billboards the size of a house down to a bitmap the size of a transistor. At the alphabetic beginnings of history itself, a mere two and a half decades separated a camel and the Hebrew characters designating the animal. Now that all signs have been miniaturized to a molecular scale, the act of writing has vanished. (Kittler 2014, p. 219; my italics)

More recently, Christina Gratorp (2020), following on from Kittler, argues that storing digital information, though seemingly abstract, depends on tangible processes involving energy and matter, emphasizing that the "cloud" is simply a network of other people's computers. But, strangely, considering the provocative title of her "The materiality of the cloud: On the hard conditions of soft digitization", Gratorp does not consider that which remains intangible in the cloud, that which Kittler analyzes as the space between the transistor cells.

Kittler and Gratorp offer valuable perspectives on digital materiality. In addition, Kittler's concise genealogy above, in its movement from the Hebrew symbol for camel to the molecular scale of transistors, understands that grasping the function of language in computational systems requires crossing over conventional historical periodization. Kafka is a writer that enables this kind of historicization-at-scale. As Benjamin writes, "if Lukács

thinks in terms of ages, Kafka thinks in terms of cosmic epochs" (Benjamin 2007, p. 113). This distinction is crucial for understanding how Kafka works in the "Age of AI".

Part of Kafka's function in our computational present is tied to his status as a bureaucratic writer, as scholars like Stanley Corngold and Benno Wagner (Corngold and Wagner 2011) and Klaus Benesch (1997) have demonstrated, noting Kafka's dual existence between the creative desk and the administrative one. Benesch, in his essay "Writing Machines: Technology and the Failures of Representation in the Works of Franz Kafka", analyzes Kafka's worlds as writing-machines ["Schreibmaschinen"]. Ultimately, he takes a critically mixed view of the mechanistic external inputs from Kafka's bureaucratic professional life and the internal "codes" of his writing, viewing them as a literary metaphor that, in its illegibility, fails to represent the technological conditions of modernity, producing only "the horrors of machinery run amok" (Klaus Benesch 1997, p. 92). Is this what Kafka has to offer us in the Age of AI? Are his worlds-of-machines (and perhaps world-machines) merely that "information bureau for the human condition" lamented by Adorno? Are Kafka's writing-machines just 1:1, side-by-side, a literary anticipation of the eventual rise of AI writing-machines? No, now after Adorno, there is more than only "cloud" here.

Corngold and Wagner's analysis in *Franz Kafka: The Ghosts in the Machine* is insightful on this front, as they examine the "technical ghosts" and "architectural features" in Kafka's work—the "optical instruments for looking through" that bend and refract the light of criticism back upon the reader's society (Corngold and Wagner 2011, pp. ix–x). They identify how Kafka's texts display "with exceptional clarity the fundamental character of modern writing, its self-reflexiveness, its way of leaving textual trace markers of its own production" and possess "a striking ability to anticipate their own reception" (Corngold and Wagner 2011, p. 75). Their textual-machinic framework provides a model for examining how Kafka's literature participates in non-literary media by inscribing these media into his narrated worlds.

Indeed, Kafka himself recognized the profound intricacies of bureaucratic systems. In a June, 1922 letter to his friend Oskar Baum, Kafka wrote,

Our fumbling interpretations are powerless to deal with the refinements of which the bureaucracy is capable, and what is more, the necessary, inevitable refinements springing straight out of the origins of human nature, to which, measured by my case, the bureaucracy is closer than any other social institution. (Kafka 1977, p. 327)

Kafka's own vision extends beyond institutional critique to examine how meaning operates within systems that process language—systems whose internal logic remains opaque to those outside them, much like today's algorithmic "black boxes". Where Kittler periodizes history through technological developments, Kafka's cosmic perspective reveals how meaning is transformed when processed through mechanical and bureaucratic structures—a transformation that feels increasingly relevant in our age of algorithmic communication. As Terry Winograd reminds us, "in the popular mythology the computer is a mathematics machine; it is designed to do numerical calculations. Yet it is really a language machine; its fundamental power lies in its ability to manipulate linguistic tokens—symbols to which meaning has been assigned" (Winograd 1984, p. 131). This understanding of computers as language machines invites us to reconsider Kafka's worlds as reflections of bureaucratic machinery and as explorations of how meaning operates within systems of mechanical reproduction.

And a contemporary corollary is found in an especially persistent figure: the cloud, which now simultaneously envelops and comprises text generators like OpenAI's ChatGPT and Google's Bard models. Before proceeding, it is important to clarify what "the cloud" typically denotes in computing contexts. Most readers will be familiar with "cloud com-

puting” as a model in which data storage and processing occur on remote servers—rather than on local machines—so that software and services are “delivered” over the internet. And there is already valuable work by scholars working at the nexus of the social sciences, humanities, journalism, and the arts critically related to the data center, “often thought of more generally as ‘internet infrastructure’, and more evocatively as ‘the cloud’” (Edwards et al. 2024). Strictly speaking, then, the “digital cloud” does not refer specifically to AI or large language models (LLMs); it simply underpins many forms of web-based computation and data access. However, there two other ways in which the “cloud” often re-appears in the current discourse on AI.

First, it re-appears as a metaphor for the immense but intangible swirl of text, images, and data that generative models rely on. Researchers sometimes speak loosely of “word clouds” or “data clouds”—though these phrases can misleadingly suggest the data are purely unstructured. In practice, LLMs ingest billions of words or tokens stored in physically distributed servers (the literal “cloud”), but they also transform that text into abstract, parametric spaces, a figurative cloud of partial patterns.

Second, diffusion models, in particular, operate from a cloudy spot. Within AI, a diffusion model adds noise to training data comprised of “word clouds”, gradually refining its outputs by recognizing semantic structures and patterns it has been instructed to identify, in turn reversing the training process by “masking” parts of sentences within vast datasets and learning to predict the missing words; diffusion has been the driving force behind the explosion of large language models and text-to-image generators (Higham et al. 2023; Deshmukh et al. 2024). Diffusion in the AI sense is akin to reconstructing fragments of a narrative instead of piecing together scattered ideas; rather than starting with a fully formed thought and breaking it down into individual words, the AI begins with language elements and searches for the underlying coherence and intent. For example, in text-to-image diffusion, the software first adds Gaussian noise to a training image, effectively breaking it into disordered fragments. During generation, it reverses this process by methodically “guessing” which visual features should go where, akin to how Kafka’s wall-builders fit stones together out of partial segments. This is the “reconstruction of fragments” that the partial-building system in “Beim Bau” so uncannily prefigures. Thus, “cloud” in my argument spans both the material infrastructure and the intangible, black-box dimension of AI—mirroring the uneasy interplay between solidity and diffusion that emerges in Kafka’s “Beim Bau”, with its towering walls and elusive “fog and vapor”.

Returning to Benjamin’s reflection on Shuvalkin, the herald that storms ahead in “Beim Bau” takes the form of the emperor and Peking who, so vast and so distant, are barely imaginable for the inhabitants of the south of the territory. Instead, it is easier to believe they are “[. . .] a single entity, say a cloud, peacefully voyaging beneath the sun through the course of the ages”¹⁸ (Kafka 2002, p. 136). I am interested in this cloud, “ruhig” [“peaceful”], and thus certainly without “Blitz” [“lightning”], in a linguistic sense, as a way of seriously engaging with this prognostic movement towards the cloud in a digital sense.

4. A Note on the Cloud as an Interpretive Framework

The “black-box” problem in AI diffusion algorithms, a long-standing point of contention between ethicists, computer programmers, and policy theorists, refers to the opaque nature of many AI systems, particularly neural networks, where the internal decision-making process is not easily interpretable (Wadden 2022). Brozek et al. (2024) argue that this problem comprises four interconnected issues, rather than a single “form”: the problems of opacity, strangeness, unpredictability, and justification. Certainly, the resulting lack of transparency raises valid ethical and epistemic concerns, especially in the kinds of sensitive applications for AI documented by Liu et al. (2022), like healthcare and embryo

selection. However, despite the reoccurrence of the black-box figure, it refers to a system in no way clearly defined, even as it is deployed by various stakeholders in the debate between opacity and explainability (Guidotti et al. 2018; Miller 2019). Regardless, all these contrasting problematizations of the “black box” share an attempt to put into material form a cloudy, diffuse place in the middle of complex systems like deep learning neural networks. This is because the processes through which these systems arrive at their predictions, their pattern recognition, and their production of language and imagery remain difficult or impossible to interpret “from the outside”. The input (training data) and the output (result) can be “seen”. But the “why” and “how” of the machine remain obscured.

It is worth noting that this “cloudy” opacity extends beyond diffusion models to other difficult-to-interpret AI architectures—particularly transformers, which power today’s largest language models (LLMs), as well as generative adversarial networks (GANs) and various graph-based neural networks. While diffusion models add noise to data and gradually “unmask” latent patterns during training, transformers often use the masking of textual input to learn context: the network withholds certain words or tokens, and it then attempts to infer what has been hidden. Despite divergent internal mechanisms—GANs pit two networks against each other, LLMs run vast self-attention layers—each of these architectures produces outputs from internal processes whose workings remain largely inscrutable to external observers. Nevertheless, these systems achieve striking coherence precisely by reassembling incomplete information in ways that defy simple explanation.

Such parallels help illustrate why “the cloud” is an especially apt figure for AI’s black-box quality. Whether via noisy diffusion, adversarial training, or masked self-attention, these neural networks extract coherence from fragmentary data and yield results that can seem almost magical to end users. The sense of partial knowledge and ephemeral, shifting form in Kafka’s clouds is thus echoed in how generative AI—of many flavors—assembles meaning from shards of text, images, or parameters. This resonance underscores the broader claim that interpretability in AI requires grappling with structural gaps and opaque systems, where the elaborate architecture (like the Great Wall itself) relies on segment-by-segment processes, always exceeding the viewer’s complete understanding.

And the cloud as an interpretative framework maps well onto this “black-box” problem. For if the black box is that hidden interior from which we cannot extract a clear chain of reasoning, the cloud functions as a figurative counterpart: it is dispersed, flickering, and only partially visible. Much like the thunderclouds in “Beim Bau” that gather over the horizon without ever striking, neural network weights and tokens remain in perpetual suspension: tangible enough to produce results, yet elusive to direct inspection. My argument, then, is that understanding Kafka’s notion of “cloud”—as a site of partial knowledge, ephemeral shape, and intangible authority—can help us see how black-box AI systems feel intangible and shape-shifting, even while existing on very real hardware. Just as one cannot straightforwardly “reach into” a thundercloud and retrieve meaning, the AI black box resists easy interpretive entry.

Here, we might consider Werner Hamacher’s proposition, emerging from his analysis of Benjamin’s notion of the “wolkige Stelle” and its role in language’s capacity for mimesis, that the word “cloud” itself presents a particularly useful framework for understanding this opacity. For Hamacher, the word functions simultaneously as “the medium of likeness” and as “the absolutely unlike”—a paradox that challenges any fixed meaning (Hamacher 1986, p. 150). This instability, where “likeness slips away from itself”, provides a compelling lens for understanding how meaning operates in diffusion models, which must navigate between coherence and chaos (Hamacher 1986, p. 153). If a language machine is built on layers of abstraction and stochastic models, its relationship to meaning becomes necessarily unstable. The cloud, as both organizing principle and computational structure, exists in the

realm of potentiality and relation, rather than as a fixed, self-contained entity. As already touched on above in relation to Kittler, much valuable ink has been spilled on examining what happens to (disappeared) writing in the age of the calculating machine. But the rise of generative AI re-emphasizes a certain lost primacy of language over mathematics, of letters [symbols] and words.

And this is where Kafka, especially as a literary text, becomes the basis for valuable critical insight in the Age of AI. By reading into that “wolkige Stelle in ihrem Innern” [“the cloudy spot in it”], Kafka brings us into the hermeneutic space where the organizing truth of the machine is at the core, rather than on the outside or on the surface. But is that core, that “Stelle”, made up of clouds, is it cloudy? If so, what does it mean that this organizing truth, like the enigma that “clouds” within Kafka, is placed so that, as clouds do, it is obscured and yet provides a symbol onto which to read meaning materially? Is “to cloud” also something that necessarily shrouds, since a cloud’s uncontainability means it will always be partly “outside”? What of the two other particles in Kafka’s “Beim Bau” that seed its cloudy figuration—the Great Wall itself and the “kaiserliche Botschaft” [“message from the Emperor”]? And how does Kafka’s writing on the cloud in “Beim Bau” organizationally enable a prognostic mode of thinking about GenAI’s challenge to the usual opposition between the material and the structural?

5. After-Babel: On Black Boxes and Black Crows

There are at least two parables in “Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer”. We have already considered the beginning of Kafka’s narrative, which, with its spatial and temporal unlocatability, might be the first parable, but a parable cast at scale on the ultimate impossibility of the manifold undertakings of humankind—including those of spoken and written communication, as becomes clear as the tale unfolds.

The second parable is connected to the first through this unfolding, and it is the excerpt that Benjamin uses to begin his essay, initially delivered as a radio broadcast in July 1931 on “Beim Bau” (Benjamin 1991): that of the “kaiserliche Botschaft” [“An Imperial Message”]. This parable recounts how the emperor in Peking, on his deathbed, sends a message specifically to you, “his solitary wretch of a subject”¹⁹ (Kafka 2002, p. 132). The emperor painstakingly entrusts a messenger with the task, emphasizing its importance in front of all his high officials. The messenger, strong and determined, begins his journey. Yet, despite his efforts, he faces an endless labyrinth of palace chambers, courtyards, and barriers. And even if he were to overcome all the inner obstacles, Kafka says, the messenger would still have to traverse the vast and impenetrable imperial city that surrounds the palace, teeming with people, houses, and never-ending streets. Ultimately, the journey becomes an impossible endeavor. The messenger will never reach you, the intended recipient, for “no one can force his way through here, least of all with a message from a dead man to a shadow. But you sit at your window and dream up that message when evening falls”²⁰ (Kafka 2002, p. 132).

This enigmatic tale at the center of Kafka’s short story has long been subject to interpretation, especially in a metaphorical sense, in order to “demystify” the text and construct parallel worlds to explain its secrets (Kopper 1983). But to “de-mist”, as it were, the parable with metaphor is to interpret Kafka in terms of what Benjamin calls “a [religio-philosophical] interpretation”²¹ (Benjamin 2002), asking questions like “What is the wall”, or “What are the clouds”? And this seductive quality dominated much historical engagement with Kafka, as is well documented by John Kopper in the work of Herbert Tauber and Clement Greenberg (Kopper 1983, p. 351). Of course, for Benjamin, “this approach amounts to a particular way of evading-or, one might almost say, of dismissing-Kafka’s world”²² (Benjamin 2002).

However, other, often more recent, scholarship provides a model for my focus on the digital “cloud” as both container and elusive black box in its analysis of the seemingly solid “Great Wall” in Kafka’s texts as an architecture of partial knowledge—much like modern networks. [Simona Moti \(2019\)](#), for instance, views it as a reflection of Habsburg Central Europe’s complex cultural and political discourses—foregrounding how Kafka’s “China” can serve as an allegory for contested imperial structures. Meanwhile, [Samuel Weber \(2019\)](#) emphasizes Kafka’s focus on the “singular” rather than merely the “individual”, illuminating tensions between the single protagonist and a broader collective—tensions that are dramatized by the narrator’s dual stance as both a participant in and chronicler of the wall’s construction.

One dimension that these diverse readings share is the recognition that Kafka’s text juxtaposes a seemingly “completed” structure (“beendet”) with a narrative vantage point in which closure remains perpetually out of reach. [Rignall \(1985\)](#) highlights precisely this tension, noting the gulf between “Historie und Bewusstsein” [“history and consciousness”] that arises from an opening where the Great Wall is declared finished, even as it remains full of gaps. Specifically, Rignall sees “Beim Bau” as dramatizing a persistent clash between historical vantage points—those official proclamations of completion—and a subjective, fragmentary awareness that questions such proclamations at every turn. In a related vein, [Nicolai \(1991\)](#) reads this “incompleteness” of the wall as emblematic of the fundamentally unstable barrier that culture erects against humankind’s natural impulses, suggesting that Kafka’s text exposes the frailty of such defensive mechanisms. For Nicolai, the narration underscores a deeper rift between being and consciousness, one that replays itself in the partial, never-truly-finished structures of both empire and the human psyche. And if we follow Rignall and Nicolai’s lead, that opening proclamation of “already-finished-ness” ironically exposes how official or external vantage points (the empire’s or a system’s) may never quite match an on-the-ground, user-level experience—be it in Kafka’s half-built wall or in today’s black-box AI. Together, these readings highlight the broader complexity and ambiguity of Kafka’s narrative, inviting further parallels to our contemporary digital “structures” that likewise oscillate between claims of completeness and the reality of systemic gaps. What remains is to engage in the “admittedly much more challenging task of interpreting a writer from the center of his image world”²³ ([Benjamin 2002](#)). And as we already know, at the center of Kafka’s “Bildwelt” [“image-world”] is the cloud.

Among a number of figures that populate “Beim Bau”, it is the eponymous wall that is the prime figure of the story. The cloud, which admittedly only appears a handful of times, might then seem to be incidental. But to read Kafka’s “Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer” into the Age of AI is to resist asking, “What does the wall symbolize in a regime of digitality”? Instead, if the cloud takes on an organizational function beyond only incidence, an organizational function it holds within the history and materiality of computer language and AI, there emerges a question about understanding the relationship between the Great Wall and the cloud in Kafka’s story, as well as a call to think in terms of their construction.

Important, too, is that thinking from the center of Kafka’s “Bildwelt” is necessary to assess its prognostic movement and requires attention to an inherently “wolkige Stelle” [“cloudy spot”]. This is because placement in this cloudy center enables Kafka’s work to be “ein prophetisches” [“prophetic”] ([Benjamin 1991](#)). In other words, when Kafka’s figurations place us in a position that requires looking for their reflection in the past, they simultaneously unfold in the opposite direction and must be sought in the future. “Beim Bau” features a protagonist that is both a historian in the story, writing about the Chinese people, and “their ‘reader’”, a scribe who both records and explicates the activity of his people [in the] construction of a wall” ([Kopper 1983](#), p. 352). Consequently, the notion of

the Great Wall, a supreme example of human construction, is recognizable in the past as (only) a foundation for another overreaching edifice, the hyperscaled Tower of Babel.

Indeed, the “first” thing one must tell oneself when considering the Great Wall is that the “achievements of those days were scarcely inferior to the building of the Tower of Babel”²⁴ (Kafka 2002, p. 124). And in the early days of the wall’s construction, an academic wrote a book “in which he drew the parallels in great detail. In it he attempted to prove that it was by no means for the reasons generally advanced that the Tower of Babel had failed to reach its objective, or at least that these well-known reasons did not include the most important ones of all”²⁵ (Kafka 2002, *ibid.*). Instead, the failure of the Tower of Babel lay in the weakness of its foundation, a failure bound to be corrected because “he claimed that the Great Wall alone would create, for the first time in the history of mankind, a secure foundation for a new Tower of Babel. First the Wall, therefore, and then the Tower”²⁶ (Kafka 2002, p. 125). In the Wall lies the past and future foundation for the Tower, both earth-bound structures encompassing horizontal and vertical dimensions of never-ending land, “the infinite [...] province”²⁷ (Kafka 2002, p. 128). But the thing above the earth, towards which both the notion of the Wall and the notion of the Tower are reaching, is the sky.

Is it fair to think of the Wall/Tower in an infrastructural relationship with the cloud that contains a contemporary figuration of hardware and software? And does this configuration dip back into a metaphorical reading of Kafka’s “Beim Bau”, or is there a way of seeing it as a prognostic reflection towards today?

In one of *Die Züräuer Aphorismen* [*The Züräur Aphorisms*], “Die Krähen” [“The Crows”], Kafka writes, “Crows claim that a single crow could destroy the sky. This is no doubt so, but it proves nothing about the sky for the sky signifies precisely: the impossibility of crows”²⁸ (Kafka 2006). The crow, as a corporeal entity, presents itself as an impossibility within the conceptual expanse of the “Himmel” [“sky/Heavens”]—an expanse that, while ostensibly infinite, paradoxically defines itself in the impossibility of the black body that would destroy it. Here, Kafka is interrogating not only the relationship between physical presence and metaphysical absence but also the fragile boundaries between figures and the spaces they occupy at their most rarefied. If a crow’s mere existence threatens the integrity of the heavens, then the very idea of an “empty” sky becomes contingent upon the exclusion of any form of matter, even that which might fleetingly traverse its expanse, such as clouds. Simultaneously, the sky, potentially in its metaphysical connotation rather than physical denotation, excludes any possibility of the existence of crows. In this figuration, and thus in the notion of the cloud in “Beim Bau”, the cloud is an intermediary—a figure that occupies the sky while simultaneously gesturing towards its own dissolution into the formlessness that is required for the sky’s metaphysical purity.

Thinking this reflection into the digital prompts a compelling dialectic between figure and absence, the body and the infinite. Perhaps the crows project a similar paradox onto the sky as the “black box” does onto, or rather, into, AI systems, both simultaneously affirming presence and absence. The black box’s outputs—seemingly precise, yet fundamentally inscrutable—are the crows that can/not populate the sky, challenging the assumption that our software “heavens”, populated by “word clouds”, are purely rational or transparent.

Yet, to reduce these algorithmic black boxes to mere analogs of crows overlooks a crucial aspect: their very materiality. The black box is not merely a hermetic void. Like Kafka’s crow, which embodies a corporeal reality even as it is cast as a metaphysical disruptor, the black box is a representation of the material containment of a function and a logic that is actually far more diffuse on the inside. Both the “crow” and “black box” are corporeal entities that challenge the purity of the informational “heavens” we

imagine—heavens where all data, all meaning, could theoretically be grasped, parsed, and understood.

Of course, being an aphorism, the paradox is in some ways the point, its structural pattern designed to challenge a sense of complacency and provoke new perspectives (Pagliaro 1964). Consequently, we can position ourselves either on the side of the crow or on the side of the sky. On the one hand, to align with the crow is to recognize the material density, the embodied opacity, of systems that resist transparent interpretation. On the other hand, to align with the sky is to long for a space devoid of obstruction, an ideal of complete intelligibility and seamless flow of meaning. But the cloud in “Beim Bau”, and thus the “wolkige Stelle” [“cloudy place in it”] that persists in all of Kafka’s stories, continually disrupt these aspirations through the material conditions of reality—whether the physical presence of crows in the sky or the dense layers of computation within AI systems. The digital cloud, with its diffusion models and “word clouds”, mirrors this paradox: it promises boundless knowledge while simultaneously embodying the opaque, intangible processes that govern its operations.

A further cautionary note in “Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer” concerns another of Kafka’s brief but striking parables, thought to be about the river Nile. It warns of the consequences when productive force—whether a river’s annual flood or our own intellectual/spiritual striving—goes too far beyond its proper bounds. Kafka writes,

Try with all your might to understand the decrees of the high command, but only up to a certain limit; then cease your reflections. A very wise principle, which moreover was further elaborated in a parable that has often been retold since: Cease from further reflection, but not because it might harm you; indeed it is by no means certain that it would harm you. It is not a question here of what is harmful or otherwise. It will happen to you as happens to the river in spring. It rises, it grows mightier, it gives richer nourishment to the land by the long reach of its banks, it retains its own character until it flows into the sea, it becomes ever more worthy of the sea and ever more welcome to it.—Thus far may you reflect on the decrees of the high command.—But then the river overflows its banks, loses outline and shape, slackens its course towards the ocean, tries to defy its destiny by forming little inland seas, damages the farmlands, yet cannot maintain itself at that width for long, but must run back again between its banks, indeed it must even dry up miserably in the hot season that follows.—Thus far do not reflect on the decrees of the high command²⁹ (Kafka 2002, p. 127)

This dialectic between containment and dissolution echoes the architectural and computational structures discussed earlier. Kafka’s river, like Kafka’s cloud, operates in this liminal space—promising boundless generative capacity while threatening formlessness when pushed beyond sustainable boundaries. Significantly, Kafka frames this parable as advice about understanding “die Anordnungen der Führerschaft” (“the decrees of leadership/high command”), suggesting that power itself operates through a cloudy medium of partial comprehension. Just as the emperor and Peking become “eine Wolke” [“a cloud”] for Kafka’s wall-builders, the command structures of digital systems—whether corporate decision making or algorithmic black boxes—remain partially opaque by necessity and design. We are encouraged to seek understanding, but only to a point, reflecting how power in cloud-based systems maintains itself through strategic opacity. The injunction to cease thinking (“höre mit dem Nachdenken auf”) beyond certain limits mirrors how contemporary AI systems position users in relation to their inner workings: we can engage with outputs but never fully penetrate their diffused, distributed decision-making processes. In the Age of AI, where models expand exponentially in size and capability, Kafka’s warning speaks directly to our anxieties about artificial intelligence systems that

might eventually exceed their intended functions and boundaries, only to collapse under their own diffused weight.

Bringing this parable into conversation with contemporary AI highlights precisely the tension between generative abundance and potential ruin. The “Age of AI” celebrates the torrent of generative outputs, yet it must negotiate the possibility that, if thought (or data) pours out heedlessly, it can dissolve boundaries (intellectual, ethical, legal) in ways that ultimately undermine its original flourishing. And in its modern digital sense, the notion of the cloud is tied to this parable of destructive boundlessness, as it remains caught between distribution and containment. On the one hand, “the cloud” is a pervasive metaphor for intangibility: data diffuse throughout networks, seemingly unbound by physical constraints, and can vanish or reconfigure at any time. On the other hand, the cloud is inseparable from the material infrastructure of servers and data centers, rigorously guarded and owned by corporations. In practice, therefore, meaning is neither purely dispersed nor wholly centralized but hovers ambiguously in a space that is at once intangible (as software) and tangible (as hardware). In the literal and figurative “cloudiness” of “Beim Bau”, truth, or meaning, is never entirely absent, yet it is never fully present either.

It follows, then, that the partial containment of meaning in digital “clouds” resonates uncannily with Kafka’s repeatedly fragmented universes, where “the real” and “the unreadable” intermingle. As with the Great Wall’s incompleteness in “Beim Bau,” the cloud’s vast promise of access and continuity is undercut by its opacity, and one remains perpetually uncertain how data move, where data reside, and if one’s access to data will be revoked or commercialized. This very opacity is at work in Kafka’s imperial cloud, enabling and thwarting attempts to find final clarity. In each case, the system’s architecture—be it digital or imperial—appears meticulously designed yet forever partial, concealing “gaps” whose content can only be guessed at.

By invoking Kafka’s crows and the metaphor of the black box, we find ourselves confronting the limits of transparency. Benjamin states that “Beim Bau” is paradigmatic of the ways in which Kafka’s shorter stories are like “the sower’s bag that is filled with seeds—ones which have the strength of the natural seeds that sprout from graves even after millennia, and that we know will still bear fruit”³⁰ (Benjamin 2002). In the figure of the cloud, in as far as a cloud can be a figure, lies the moisture that these seeds need to blossom. Even if it were possible to dispel the crows or crack open the black boxes, Kafka reminds us that in the center of these places, language/code and reading/image have long been “bewölkt”—not transparent, “clouded”—and are now engaged in a process of “sich wölken”—to gather or form like clouds in the sense of diffusion. AI is still a young technology. But “disruptive moments” where “reading no longer blinks at an image but rather is itself [...] an image in which it is exposed to its non-being” (Hamacher 1986, p. 161) can be moments not of peril but of unfolding.

6. Conclusions

Kafka’s writings challenge the very grounds upon which our engagements with meaning, communication, and technology are built. The particles of the Great Wall and the emperor’s message, both rooted in the impossibility of their own completion, gesture towards today’s digital landscapes, where the aspiration toward comprehensive understanding or perfect communication is perpetually deferred. The cloud as a computational structure crystallizes this deferral. In the Age of AI, with generative models operating through processes that remain largely opaque, we are reminded that the desire for transparency is perhaps less about clear understanding than about the comfort of control.

What Kafka offers us is an allegorical and conceptual framework that resists closure. The cloud, in its epistemological and phenomenological senses, yes, but more impor-

tantly, as a figurative notion, modulates the paradox of visibility and opacity, of form and formlessness, that Kafka's parables gesturally approach. The digital regimes of the present—predicated on vast networks of data, code, and algorithmic decision making—are not so different from the territory Kafka maps in “Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer”, where the most crucial messages never reach their destinations.

The Age of AI, in this sense, is tied to historical and ongoing crises of interpretation. As Kafka's works suggest, the very act of communication may be the obstruction, a labyrinthine structure that ensnares both the sender and receiver in its folds. Perhaps our role, like that of the subject of “Eine kaiserliche Botschaft”, is to sit at our windows and imagine what that message might have been. The question, however, is not whether the message can be deciphered, but whether it was ever intended to be understood.

In tracing the vaporous outline of the cloud in “Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer” and the diffuse architectures of contemporary AI systems, there emerges a particular resonance between Kafka's form and the digital age. The computational cloud and the machine learning algorithms based upon it, far from being purely technological phenomena, represent a continuation of the metaphysical quandaries Kafka explored. The tension between code and meaning, command and communication, remains as fraught in our age as it is in the territory Kafka maps in the story.

Kafka's prognostic thus serves as a reminder that the cloud has a systemic function that, by definition, can provide only the certainty that it will continue to change form. The significance of Kafka's writings in the digital age may be found in allowing them to disrupt our assumptions about the clarity of communication and the transparency of meaning. In this way, Kafka remains a necessary interlocutor in our ongoing conversation with the machines of our own making.

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Notes

- ¹ “Die Beliebtheit Kafkas, das Behagen am Unbehaglichen, das ihn zum Auskunftsbüro der je nachdem ewigen oder heutigen Situation des Menschen erniedrigt und mit quickem Bescheidwissen eben den Skandal wegräumt” (Adorno 1971, p. 254).
- ² “Die chinesische Mauer ist an ihrer nördlichsten Stelle beendet worden. Von Südosten und Südwesten wurde der Bau herangeführt und hier vereinigt. Dieses System des Teilbaues wurde auch im Kleinen innerhalb der zwei großen Arbeitsheere, des Ost- und des Westheeres befolgt [...] Nun würde man von vornherein glauben, es wäre in jedem Sinne vorteilhafter gewesen, zusammenhängend zu bauen oder wenigstens zusammenhängend innerhalb der zwei Hauptteile” (Kafka 1948, p. 9).
- ³ “Nachdem dann aber die Vereinigung vollzogen war, wurde nicht etwa der Bau am Ende dieser tausend Meter wieder fortgesetzt, vielmehr wurden die Arbeitergruppen wieder in ganz andere Gegenden zum Mauerbau verschickt” (ibid.).
- ⁴ “Ich habe mich, schon damals während des Mauerbaues *und nachher bis heute*, fast ausschließlich mit vergleichender Völkergeschichte beschäftigt” (ibid., p. 19; my italics).
- ⁵ “Es war das Imperium als solches, [...] auf dem der Zusammenfall von Befehl, Code, Nachrichtentechnik letzten Endes fußt” (Kittler 2015, p. 89).
- ⁶ “Dieses System des Teilbaues” (Kafka 1948, p. 9).
- ⁷ “Es gab—dieses Buch ist nur ein Beispiel—viel Verwirrung der Köpfe damals, vielleicht gerade deshalb, weil sich so viele möglichst auf einen Zweck hin zu sammeln suchten” (ibid., p. 15).
- ⁸ “die kaiserlichen Frauen, überfüttert in den seidenen Kissen” (ibid., p. 23).
- ⁹ “Aus den längst verflogenen Gewitterwolken zuckt kein Blitz mehr” (ibid., p. 17).
- ¹⁰ “[...] Diesen Nordländern [...] Gesehen haben wir sie nicht, und bleiben wir in unserem Dorf, werden wir sie niemals sehen, selbst wenn sie auf ihren wilden Pferden geradeaus zu uns hetzen und jagen,—zu groß ist das Land und läßt sie nicht zu uns, in die leere Luft werden sie sich verrennen” (ibid., p. 18).

- 11 “[...] only when they are, so to speak, put on as acts in the ‘Nature Theater of Oklahoma’. Only then will one recognize with
certainty that Kafka’s entire work constitutes a code of gestures” (Benjamin 2007, p. 120).
- 12 “die wolkige Stelle in ihrem Innern” (Benjamin 2012, p. 11).
- 13 Where “happenings” are “[dissolved] . . . into their gestic components” (Benjamin 2007, p. 120).
- 14 “Sollte es wirklich ein Dorf geben, wo Haus an Haus steht, Felder bedeckend, weiter als der Blick von unserem Hügel reicht,
und zwischen diesen Häusern stünden bei Tag und bei Nacht Menschen Kopf an Kopf? Leichter, als eine solche Stadt sich
vorzustellen, ist es uns, zu glauben, *Peking und sein Kaiser wären eines*, etwa eine Wolke, ruhig unter der Sonne sich wandelnd im
Laufe der Zeiten” (Kafka 1948, pp. 25–26; my italics).
- 15 “Der Dialekt der Nachbarprovinz ist von dem unseren wesentlich verschieden, und dies drückt sich auch in gewissen Formen
der Schriftsprache aus, die für uns einen altertümlichen Charakter haben” (ibid., p. 25).
- 16 “So bereit ist man bei uns, die Gegenwart auszulöschen” (ibid.).
- 17 “Diese Geschichte ist wie ein Herold, der dem Werke Kafkas zweihundert Jahre vorausstürmt. Die Rätselfrage, die sich in
ihr wölkt, ist Kafkas. Die Welt der Kanzleien und Registraturen, der muffigen verwohnten dunklen Zimmer ist Kafkas Welt”
(Benjamin 2012, p. 2).
- 18 “[...] eines, etwa eine Wolke, ruhig unter der Sonne sich wandelnd im Laufe der Zeiten” (Kafka 2024, p. 274).
- 19 “dem Einzelnen, dem jämmerlichen Untertanen” (Kafka 2024, p. 272).
- 20 “Niemand dringt hier durch und gar mit der Botschaft eines Toten. – Du aber sitzt an Deinem Fenster und erträumst sie Dir,
wenn der Abend kommt” (ibid. p. 273).
- 21 “ein religionsphilosophisches Schema” (Benjamin 1991).
- 22 “eine ganz eigentümliche Umgehung, beinahe möchte ich sagen Abfertigung der Welt von Kafka” (ibid.).
- 23 “[...] gewiß viel schwierigere [Methode] einer Deutung des Dichters aus der Mitte seiner Bildwelt” (ibid.).
- 24 “Leistungen [die damals] vollbracht worden sind, [...] wenig hinter dem Turmbau von Babel zurückstehen” (Kafka 2024, p. 266).
- 25 “[...] in welchem er diese Vergleiche sehr genau zog. Er suchte darin zu beweisen, daß der Turmbau zu Babel keineswegs aus
den allgemein behaupteten Ursachen nicht zum Ziele geführt hat, oder daß wenigstens unter diesen bekannten Ursachen sich
nicht die allerersten befinden” (ibid., pp. 266–67).
- 26 “[...] er behauptete, erst die große Mauer werde zum erstenmal in der Menschenzeit ein sicheres Fundament für einen neuen
Babelturm schaffen. Also zuerst die Mauer und dann der Turm” (ibid., p. 267).
- 27 “das endlose [...] Gebiet” (ibid., p. 269).
- 28 “Die Krähen behaupten, eine einzige Krähe könnte den Himmel zerstören. Das ist zweifellos, beweist aber nichts gegen den
Himmel, denn Himmel bedeuten eben: Unmöglichkeit von Krähen” (Kafka 2006).
- 29 “Suche mit allen Deinen Kräften die Anordnungen der Führerschaft zu verstehn, aber nur bis zu einer bestimmten Grenze, dann
höre mit dem Nachdenken auf. Ein sehr vernünftiger Grundsatz, der übrigens noch eine weitere Auslegung in einem später
oft wiederholten Vergleiche fand: Nicht weil es Dir schaden könnte, höre mit dem weitem Nachdenken auf, es ist auch gar
nicht sicher, daß es Dir schaden wird. Man kann hier überhaupt weder von Schaden noch Nichtschaden sprechen. Es wird Dir
geschehen wie dem Fluß im Frühjahr. Er steigt, wird mächtiger, nährt kräftiger das Land an seinen langen Ufern, behält sein
eigenes Wesen weiter ins Meer hinein, wird dem Meere ebenbürtiger und willkommener. Soweit denke den Anordnungen der
Führerschaft nach. Dann aber übersteigt der Fluß seine Ufer, verliert Umrisse und Gestalt, verlangsamt seinen Abwärtslauf,
versucht gegen seine Bestimmung kleine Meere im Binnenland zu bilden, schädigt die Fluren, und kann sich doch für die Dauer
in dieser Ausbreitung nicht halten, sondern rinnt wieder in seine Ufer zusammen, ja trocknet sogar in der folgenden heißen
Jahreszeit kläglich ein. Soweit denke den Anordnungen der Führerschaft nicht nach.” (Kafka 2024, pp. 268–69).
- 30 “[...] die Tasche des Sämanns mit Körnern, die die Kraft der natürlichen haben, von denen wir wissen, daß sie noch nach
Jahrtausenden, aus Gräbern zutage befördert, Frucht treiben” (Benjamin 1991).

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