Digital Kafka: for better and for worse

In this chapter I return to Franz Kafka’s *The Castle* (1926/2009), in order to compare the fictive situations described in that near-century-old novel to actual situations in contemporary organizations. Before I undertake this endeavor, however, it is opportune to ask if such an enterprise makes sense.

Does fiction assist in the study of organizations and management?

The idea that the social sciences can be enriched through close contact with literary fiction can be traced to the very beginnings of social sciences and, more recently, to Lewis A. Coser’s 1963 book, *Sociology Through Literature*. Fiction, Coser claimed, is social evidence and testimony, a commentary on events and morals, more likely to be a source of sociological insight than the random comments of untrained informants. Recourse to literature cannot replace systematically collected scientific knowledge, but can complement and enhance it. The social sciences stem, after all, from the humanities. Although Coser did not state it explicitly, quotes from literary theorists show that they were his guides in his search for excerpts to illustrate central sociological topics.

In 1968, Dwight Waldo published *The Novelist onOrganization and Administration*. His argument was similar to Coser’s in the sense that fiction is to be complementary to science, but he was more interested in a psychological complement. Fiction can add to scientific writing that which was removed in the first place: the concrete, the sensual, the emotional, the idiosyncratic. He also called attention to the gains later emphasized by narratologists: Novels are a source of vicarious experience. Similarly, he was the first to indicate the possibility of genre analysis conducted from the point of view of organizational knowledge.

In 1989, *Harvard Business Review* published an article entitled »Reading fiction to the bottom line«, by literary theorist Benjamin DeMott. DeMott chose a 1945 story by Lionel Trilling and a 1980 story by Donald Barthelme to show how they captured the social character of their times and how they presaged metaphors and concepts that emerged much later in the social sciences. This claim had already been made by Russian post-Formalist Mikhail Bakhtin, whose works have become posthumously
influential. He claimed that novelists had a keen sense for emerging processes, partly because they did not have to be cautious, like scientists do (Bakhtin/Medvedev 1928/1985). Milan Kundera, novelist and literary theoretician, noted that the novel dealt with the unconscious before Freud did, discussed the class struggle before Marx did, and practiced phenomenology before the term was even invented (Kundera 1988).

From this perspective, novels are a source of both information and meaning. They are versions of the world, relevant and valid, not because they match the world exactly, but because they may contain appealing categories. It is the power of creative insight rather than documentary precision that makes novels both a potential competitor to and a dialogue partner for organization theory.

It was in this spirit that Pierre Guillet de Monthoux and I edited the collection, Good Novels, Better Management (1994); David Knights and Hugh Willmott edited Management Lives! Power and Identity in Work Organizations (1999), and Martin Parker and his colleagues edited a special issue of Organization dedicated to science fiction (1999). Fiction, in our eyes, accomplishes feats that organization theory often misses. It combines the subjective with the objective, the fate of individuals with the fate of institutions, and micro events with macro systems. Interest in fiction continues, and organization theorists are looking for inspiration in literary theory, but also trying their hand at the literary theory of organizing (see e.g. Czarniawska 1999, 2004; Gabriel 2000; Boje 2001; Rhodes 2001).

A question remains open, then: What kind of fiction can be of use in organization studies?

Why Kafka?

Milan Kundera was extremely vicious toward the »Kafkologists« in his Testaments Betrayed (1995). In his opinion, most of these authors examine Kafka’s books not in the context of European history of literature, but in the micro-context of his biography. The dominant way of treating Kafka’s biography was to make it into a hagiography. (Kundera’s text was written before Reiner Stach’s Is that Kafka? 99 finds, 2016.) The list of accusations was longer: The typical Kafkologist text excludes Kafka’s work from the domain of aesthetics, and generally focus on an exegesis of the texts rather than presenting a literary critique. Swedish historian Dick Harrison (2016) couldn’t agree more: They all tried to make him their own, he asserted. Kafka has been interpreted as a prophet, an absurdist, a psychoanalyst, a Marxist, a novel-watcher. And indeed, as his novels are so multifaceted, anyone can become a Kafka expert.
True, but in my opinion, management and organization scholars have an advantage over other Kafkologists: Kafka was a bureaucrat, so he knew what he was writing about. I am not alone in this opinion, as indicated by a continuous flow of articles inspired by Kafka’s work and written by organization scholars. Thus, Peter Pelzer (2002) delved with delight as he articulated his disgust of organizations, assisted by Kafka’s text, whereas Martin Parker (2005) promoted Kafka to a position of organizational Goth (in aesthetical terms). Martin Kornberger and his co-authors (2006) used Kafka’s examples to illustrate the Bakhtinian notion of a polyphonic organization, and Malcolm Warner (2007) compared Kafka to Weber. Iain Munro and Christian Huber (2012) suggested that Kafka presented a «counter-mythology» of organizations, and Randy Hodson et al. (2013) claimed that the Kafkaesque bureaucracy entered private-sector organizations. Darren McCabe (2014) supported their claim. On the positive side, Abigail Schoneboom (2014) reminded her readers that, at least in the past, humble clerks were often ambitious intellectuals, her examples being Fernando Pessoa, T.S. Eliot, Robert Walser, and Henry Miller. But Italo Svevo and Charles Bukowski also come to mind.

It was Tom Keenoy and Gustavo Seijo (2010) who anticipated my interest when comparing academic e-mail exchanges to those in The Castle. I have the same question as they did: Do so-called «Kafkaesque situations» belong to the past, or can they be found in our digital era?

«Kafkaesque» situations then and now

The adjective «Kafkaesque» is most often used to describe real or imaginary situations in which powerless people search in vain for a solutions to their problems created by a bureaucratic complex that slowly takes the form of a surrealistic nightmare.¹ Do they exist at present? Undoubtedly. When rereading Kafka for the conference,² I had an uncanny déjà vu experience: The text reminded me of excerpts from stories by me and by friends whom I asked to describe their adventures with the digital bureaucracy (Czarniawska 2018; all contemporary examples are taken from this text). In the following, I quote the most striking analogies.

¹ In assuming that there is a common understanding of the word, I ignore constant battles fought by Kafkologists on the Web.
² «Organization, Law, Writing – Kafka Symposium» Daimler-Benz Stiftung, Berlin, 10-12 November 2016; from which this text has originated.
The young man apologized very civilly for having woken K., introduced himself as the son of the castle warden, and added: ›This village belongs to the castle, so anyone who stays or spends the night here is, so to speak, staying or spending the night at the castle. And no one’s allowed to do that without a permit from the count. However, you don’t have any such permit, or at least you haven’t shown one.‹ ›And I need this permit to spend the night here?‹ asked K., as if to convince himself that he had not, by any chance, dreamed the earlier information. ›Yes, you need a permit,‹ was the reply, and there was downright derision at K.’s expense in the young man’s voice as, with arm outstretched, he asked the landlord and the guests: ›Or am I wrong? Doesn’t he need a permit?‹ ›Well, I’ll have to go and get a permit, then,‹ said K., yawning, and throwing off his blanket as if to rise to his feet. ›Oh yes? Who from?‹ asked the young man. ›Why, from the count,‹ said K. ›I suppose there’s nothing else for it.‹ ›What, go and get a permit from the count himself at midnight?‹ cried the young man, retreating a step. ›Is that impossible?‹ asked K., unruffled. ›If so, why did you wake me up?‹ At this the young man was positively beside himself. ›The manners of a vagrant!‹ he cried. ›I demand respect for the count’s authority! I woke you up to tell you that you must leave the count’s land immediately.‹ (...)

A mistake, then? This is very awkward for me. You say the office manager himself telephoned? Strange, strange. But how am I to explain it to the land surveyor now? (5–6)

Travellers do not have an easy life: They usually need a permit. Here is a story about how I tried to get one:  

X University in Australia has invited me for two weeks as a Visiting Professor. I have been to three Australian universities before, two in the same town, in a similar role. Usually, I gave a public lecture or a keynote at a conference, held a seminar for faculty, and advised doctoral students. All these activities fit precisely in the description of requirements for an eVisitor visa, which I had.

This was exactly what I was supposed to be doing at XU, with one difference; instead of reimbursing my actual costs on the basis of the documentation ex post, the University pays the visitor in advance. There is, however, no salary (the invitation specified it very clearly), and it is uncertain whether or not the sum designed for this purpose will cover the actual costs. An administrator – who evoked the authority of the Immigration Consultant – has informed me that I need to apply for a Temporary Working Visa. I presented my arguments, with quotes both

3 All quotes come from The Castle, 1926/2009.
4 This and following excerpts come from Czarniawska (2018).
from the immigration website and my invitation letter, claiming that eVisitor visa is enough. The administrator repeated the same statement several times, adding that, if in doubt, I can ask the Australian Embassy in Sweden for advice. I repeated that the immigration site suggests that the closest embassy (where I can possibly be called for an interview) is in Berlin. The administrator sent me Berlin’s embassy telephone number. I thanked her with a smiley (I assumed it was a joke). Later, however, she sent me information about the Australian Embassy in Stockholm. All in all, in 6 days (including a weekend) she sent me 6 mails, and I sent her 8 mails.

Having understood that nothing can be done, I went to the immigration website and started my visa application as instructed by the Immigration Consultant. I soon received information that the site will be closed for update for a week, exactly on my deadline date. After ten minutes or so, the website closed down.

I was instructed to come back later. I did, and, interrupted by close-downs every ten minutes or so, I arrived at page 6 of 20 in the Application. At that time, I was required to provide details about my host of which I did not have the clue. I wrote to the administrator. Having received no answer, I wrote to my direct host. She contacted the administrator who answered after four days (two of them the weekend, though). The first answer repeated the same text I received before, ignoring my specific question. I wrote again, limiting the letter only to the specification of the information I needed. I received an answer that, apparently, came from the Immigration Consultant him/herself (no name was ever given).

I went back to my account. Next page required even more details about my host university, and then the website went down. Totally resigned, I actually called the Australian Embassy in Stockholm. After the appropriate chain of choosing and pressing buttons, the automated response informed me that the Australian Embassy in Stockholm does not issue visas, and does not provide information about visas.

After the six-day process came to an end. I sent the completed application. Then a person from the immigration office called me from Australia (!) on my mobile to explain that the kind of visa I was applying for meant that I had to enter Australia within six months. I applied much too early! Thus, she suggested, she will now send me a request for additional information, which I need to send within one month, and the she will keep the application on hold until it is 6 months before my travel.

Thus an intervention of a »paper« bureaucrat saved me from the labyrinth of computerized bureaucracy. Like K., I was rescued by a telephone call – he temporarily, I permanently.
The Castle and the departments

I can explain how the misunderstanding may have come about. In such a large authority as the count’s, it sometimes happens that one department will arrange this matter, another that, and neither hears about it from the other. A higher supervisory department checks everything, and very closely too, but of its nature such supervision comes too late, and so a little confusion can still arise. To be sure, that is only in the tiniest of minor details, such as your own case, and to the best of my knowledge no mistake of the kind has ever been made in matters of real importance, but the minor ones often give trouble enough … Long ago … a decree came from I forget which department, saying in the categorical terms … that a land surveyor was to be appointed, and the village was directed to have all the plans and sketches necessary for his work ready … We replied to the decree I was talking about by sending our thanks, but pointing out that we didn’t need a land surveyor. However, that reply doesn’t seem to have reached the original department, let’s call it A, but by mistake went to another department, B. So Department A received no answer, but unfortunately Department B didn’t get our full answer either. Whether the contents of the file were left behind here or were lost in transit … well, anyway Department B also received the cover of a file bearing only the remark that the enclosed file (which in fact, unfortunately, was not enclosed) dealt with the appointment of a land surveyor. Department A, meanwhile, was waiting for our answer; it did have some preliminary notes on the matter, but as often and understandably happens, and indeed should happen, in view of the meticulous nature of all the official work done, the head of department was relying on us to send an answer, whereupon he would either appoint the land surveyor or, if necessary, correspond with us on the subject further. As a result, he neglected to look at the preliminary notes and let the whole affair lapse into oblivion. In Department B, however, the cover of the file reached an official well known for his conscientiousness, [S]. Even to me, and I’m in the know, it’s hard to understand why a man of his abilities is left languishing in one of the lowest-ranking positions of all. Well, this S naturally sent us back the empty cover of the file, asking for the rest of it. But many months, if not years, had passed since those first documents were drawn up for Department A, which is understandable, for when, as generally happens, a file is sent in the proper way it reaches the right department within a day at the latest, and is dealt with that same day. However, if it gets lost – and considering the excellence of the organization it really has to try very hard to get lost or it will never succeed in doing so – then it can indeed take a very long time. So when we received S’s note we had only the vaguest memory of the affair; there were only the two of us doing the work at the time, [my wife] and me (…). We kept copies only of the most important documents—in short, all we could reply, very uncertainly, was that we didn’t know anything about any such
appointment, and there was no need for a land surveyor here. (...) S, on the other hand, distrusted our answer at once. And then a long correspondence ensued. (56–58)

Speaking of a long correspondence between departments, here is correspondence between another academic migrant and his hosts:

From: AB Faculty Support  Sent: July 20, 2:08 PM  To: UY Computer Help Desk  Cc: CD [home mail address]  Subject: Netlink ID for CD

Good afternoon,
I approved a Netlink ID request for CD (cc’d above) on Friday, but he hasn’t received his Netlink ID yet. Can you send that to him and me as soon as possible?
Thanks so much, A
AB
Faculty Support, Z School of Business

The world looks different from here:

20 July, 2:46 PM UY Computer Help Desk wrote:
Hi AB & CD,
NetLink IDs are created by clients using a valid V-Number. As C is now an affiliate, their V-number should be available at ›sponsor‹ tab. To create a NetLink ID for C please utilize the ›application form‹ at the tool below: https://xxx
Once he’s got his Netlink ID he should be able to see his V-Number. Don’t hesitate to respond or give us a phone call if you have any questions or problems.
Regards, K ================ Computer Help Desk University of Y LIMIT. SECURE. REPORT. For information security and privacy tips, visit www. PLEASE INCLUDE THIS MESSAGE IN YOUR REPLY

From: CD  Sent: July 20, 2:53 PM  To: UY Computer Help Desk  Cc: AB Faculty Support  Subject: Re: Netlink ID for CD
Dear K,
thank you for your response. Am I or is AB expected to fill in the application form?
Kindly, C

20 July at 03:03 PM UY Computer Help Desk wrote:
Hi C,
Apologies for the lack of clarity. As the holder of the V-Number, it should be you (C) creating the NetLink ID. The NetLink ID will become
your primary identity (along with the V-Number) for all UY services. For example, when the NetLink ID is created, you will also have access to your account and your UY email address. Please let us know if you have any outstanding questions or concerns.

Regards, K

20 July at 03:58 Computer Help Desk wrote:

Hi C,
I just spoke with A on the phone and confirmed your V-Number. She indicated that she would pass it on to you when she got a chance. Please let us know if we can assist with anything else.

Regards, K

20 July at 03:59 PM AB Faculty Support wrote:

Hi CD,
Thanks for your patience! For some reason, your V-number wasn’t showing up on your account after I sent your application through. But luckily the computer help desk has passed it along to me. It is VXXXXXXX, and you will need that number when you fill in the Netlink ID application, which you can find here: https:
Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns. Talk to you soon,
A
AB
Faculty Support

From: CD
Sent: July 20, 4:15 PM To: AB Faculty Support
Subject: Re: Netlink ID for CD
Dear A,
thanks for this. I have now registered my netlink ID so it should be running.
Be well, C
In this case, the initials may be misleading: It is not K who is the petitioner, but C; and, unlike Kafka’s K, C eventually got what he needed. The difference can be explained by the fact that, after all, the bureaucracy that C was dealing with is milder than the one Kafka described almost one hundred years ago – or that fiction demands stronger effects than academic reports. Also, the time that passed is much, much shorter (acceleration effect? see Brose 2004), but the interdepartmental complications seem similar.

The Castle and the competent employee

Dear Sir, you are, as you know, taken into the count’s service. Your immediate superior is the village mayor as chairman of the parish council, who will communicate to you all further details concerning your work and your remuneration, and to whom you will be answerable. Nonetheless, I will keep an eye on you myself. Barnabas, the messenger who brings this letter, will make enquiries of you from time to time, find out what your requirements are, and impart them to me. You will find me always ready to oblige you as far as possible. I am anxious to have contented workers. The signature was illegible, but printed beside it were the words: Chief Executive, Office X.

To the Land Surveyor at the Bridge Inn. I appreciate the surveys you have carried out so far. The work of your assistants is praiseworthy too; you know how to keep them busy. Do not desist from your zealous labours! Bring the work to a happy conclusion! Any interruption would be irksome to me. Furthermore, rest assured that the matter of your remuneration will be decided very soon. I am keeping an eye on you. (23–24)

This is a misunderstanding. ... said K. ... The gentleman has been misinformed. I have not carried out any surveys, and you can see for yourself what my assistants are worth. I clearly can’t interrupt work that I am not doing, I can’t even be irksome to the gentleman, so how could I have earned his appreciation? And I feel I can never rest assured of anything.

This is the message: K, the land surveyor asks the Chief Executive, Office X, to allow him to speak to him in person; he undertakes from the outset to accept any condition attached to such permission. He is forced to make this request because so far all intermediaries have failed entirely, and as proof of this he would like to mention that he has not yet carried out any surveys at all, and from what the village mayor says he never will; it was therefore with despair and shame that he read the last letter from the Chief Executive, and only a personal interview with the Chief Executive can help him here. (108)
And here is a Swedish academic who received an invitation (or, rather, a request) to enter his data into the general system called Prisma, and who attempted to send a message to the Support:

Dear Support,
I have now spent 6–8 hours or so to get myself a decent profile on Prisma. And I can tell that this is the most user-hostile system that I have ever encountered. I say this as regular user of Science Direct, Academia, Google scholar profile, SSRN, Linkedin, CORDIS and a few other places where I regularly register my publications.
The procedure for importing references seems to follow a random function: a) some of my references in My University Publications came in and others not; b) chapters were imported as articles with the consequence that book editors become co-authors with no possibility of change; c) books too became articles. And all stuffs were registered as OA by default when the opposite is the case.
The system’s flexibility is zero. Can you tell me, for example, why I must register publications as yy-mm-dd when I register them properly? We out there register publications as yyyy, and that is it.
The quality of the output is zero. I have been sitting over 10 years in an appointment board where I have read over 1000 applications and I can say that I am very used at reading CVs and publication lists. But your output makes me unsure about my own publications. So the system cannot be reader-friendly either.
Kind regards,
Innocent Victim

Innocent Victim is far from the shame and despair experienced by K. Innocent Victim is angry. Still, it is easy to foresee that the results of both messages will be the same: nothing. Again, most likely, a face-to-face encounter would have helped, although it cannot happen in either situation. Does it mean that paper and digital bureaucracies are equally surreal?

Which bureaucracy is better?

[Reading Kafka] I think of a modern citizen who knows that he is at the mercy of a vast machinery of officialdom whose functioning is directed by authorities that remain nebulous to the executive organs, let alone to the people they deal with. (Benjamin 1938/1969: 139)

How similar is our situation, as modern citizens, to that of K.? Digital bureaucracy at least saves us kind of humiliation that K. had to suffer; although he was more often angry rather than humiliated. What is more,
when entangled in it, it is only humans who can help and repair the digital mistakes. Of course, in negative cases, the cooperation of digital and paper bureaucracy, becomes a true hell for the customer. So, why are most of us so angry with the digital bureaucracy?

Perhaps, like K., we still believe in the rationality of bureaucratic systems. Perhaps we truly believed that »virtual tape« would solve most of the problems typical of paper bureaucracy: The documents will be completed correctly, and no matter how many there are, there will be no overflow because there is no frame. Search and retrieval will be easy. The Enlightenment’s dream will be fulfilled.

When faced with a reality that differs from this wish, we feel helpless, powerless, and extremely frustrated – with no easy way of unloading our aggression on a human bureaucrat. In addition, digital documents seem to be unalterable, with no possibility of crossing wrong entries and replacing them with correct ones. The »digital immigrants« in particular may feel doubly uncertain when dealing with digital bureaucracy.

What can be done? At least one European politician believes that the procedures must stop being nebulous:

»The algorithms must be made public, so that one can inform oneself as an interested citizen on questions like: what influences my behavior on the internet and that of others?« said Merkel during a media conference in Berlin on Tuesday [2016-10-25].

»These algorithms, when they are not transparent, can lead to a distortion of our perception, they narrow our breadth of information.«

»The big internet platforms, via their algorithms, have become an eye of a needle which diverse media must pass through to reach users,« warned Merkel. »This is a development that we need to pay careful attention to.«

Here Merkel assumes that »an interested citizen« has sufficient digital competence to understand the workings of the algorithms and their impact on individual fates. No doubt some do and will explain the most important aspect of it to the rest of us. Yet I cannot help but feel that Keenoy and Seijo were right when they said that »[w]e are (...) all ›land-surveyors‹ measuring and crossing interminable boundaries only to discover that all we ever do is enter another territory inhabited by another set of illusory freedoms« (2010, 180). True, the instruments at the disposal of land-surveyors are becoming more and more sophisticated, but the »land« also becomes more and more opaque.

Literatur


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