Intellectus ex Machina

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Abstract

The essay interprets Franz Kafka's short story "*In der Strafkolonie* [In the Penal Colony]" (1914) not from the perspective of literary hermeneutics, but from the perspective of criticism: intents and allusions are attributed without any consideration or identification of the author's position, without reference to the tradition of researching his legacy. The machine depicted in the story and the events related to it are situated in the context of New Age island literature and are seen as a carnival inversion of the idea of technological progress. The interpretation is based on the hypothesis that Kafka's island containing a penal colony is in fact Bacon's Bensalem, inverted in the course of historical time (*New Atlantis*, 1623). What is considered and discussed is the very image of the island as a place of action, the parallelisms between the House of Solomon and the penal colony, between the perfect language that removes the idols of the market and the program code of the killing machine executed in the form of ethical maxims. Most importantly, the essay considers two versions of interpretating the destruction of the machine and the suicide of the officer who serves it. The first version is conditioned by a tradition of technophobia in public consciousness during the 19th and 20th centuries and is connected with the birth of existentialist philosophy of technology; the second version is connected with the loss of a vision for the role of science and technology in Western Europe in the early 20th century – with the *Decline of the West* expressing itself as a nascent information machine via the rejection of scientific and technological subjectivity and historical sovereignty in favor of the ideology of Nazism. The essay concludes with the thesis that it is necessary to look at today's events through the eyes of Kafka's "visionary": The information machine of Nazism is reviving and obviously requires an observer capable of breaking it down – if not destroying it, at least breaking it down again.

Keywords: Kafka; Bacon; Machine; Progress; Perfect Language; Nazism

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Аннотация

В эссе рассказ Франца Кафки "In der Strafkolonie" (1914) интерпретируется не с позиций литературной герменевтики, но с позиций критики: рассказу приписываются интенции и аллюзии без какого-либо учёта или выявления авторской позиции, без ссылок на традицию исследования его наследия. Изображённая в рассказе машина и связанные с ней события помещаются в контекст островной литературы Нового времени и рассматриваются как карнавальное перевёртывание идеи технического прогресса. Интерпретация строится на гипотезе о том, что остров с исправительной колонией у Ф.Кафки – это инвертированный в ходе исторического времени Бенсалем Ф. Бэкона ("New Atlantis",1623). Рассматриваются сам образ острова как место действия, параллелизмы между Домом Соломона и исправительной колонией, между снимающим идолы рынка совершенным языком и выполненным в виде этических максим программным кодом машины для убийства, обсуждаются две версии интерпретации разрушения машины и самоубийства обслуживающего её офицера. Первая версия обусловлена линией технофобии в общественном сознании XIX-XX веков и связана с рождением экзистенциалистской философии техники; вторая – с потерей наукой и техникой в Западной Европе начала XX века роли основной направляющей силы исторического развития, с "закатом Европы", выражающем себя в отказе от научно-технической субъектности и исторического суверенитета в пользу идеологии нацизма как нарождающейся информационной машины. Эссе завершается тезисом о необходимости взглянуть на события сегодняшнего дня глазами Кафки-провидца: информационная машина нацизма возрождается и очевидным образом требует наблюдателя, способного её если и не уничтожить, то хотя бы вновь сломать.

Ключевые слова: Кафка; Бэкон; Машина; Прогресс; Совершенный язык; Нацизм

NEW AGE ISLAND

In Francis Bacon's (1626/2020) *New Atlantis*, the place of action of techno-social progressive project is an island. This space, closed off from the general public, provides an opportunity to create pictures (visions) of ideal social systems, to change the relationship between imaginary representation and technical possibility, and to investigate the impact of technological progress. Unlike a castle [*Schloss*], the boundaries of the island are created not by social hierarchy, but by geographical location, the island is open to anyone who has the strength to be a traveller. The island is inherently democratic.

Franz Kafka's (1919/2017) *Strafkolonie* [Penal Colony] is located on an island, and the main attraction is the execution machine created by the "former superintendent" or, in the translation of Joyce Crick, "commandant" (Kafka, 1919/2017, 2009). The execution by the machine lasts 12 hours, during which time the body is textually inscribed with knives, then the knives finally pierce the body and throw it into the moat. The description of the killing machine, the form of expression of this description, the behavior and evaluation of the situation by the islanders and the traveller-narrator make up the plot of the novella. The basic conflict is traditional for utopia and consists in the opposition between tradition and innovation, the old and the new; its development in Kafka is a significant milestone in the development of the twentieth-century island dystopia.

PARALLELISMS

Solomon's House. Placing the place of action on the island, Kafka effectively uses the word "colony" to label the Order of Solomon, whose representatives in Bacon's „The House of Solomon" collect knowledge from all over the world, test it, conduct their own research, including experiments on animals – and animals only? – and they are in no hurry to share this knowledge with humankind. The place of progress in the proper sense of the word, circumscribed in the age of science and technology, turns out to be a penal colony: the temple of experiential knowledge of nature is nothing more than a closed space for the correction of the lost. The author's ethico-religious disposition is unmistakable: the "former superintendent," the "old man," in fact the high priest, who died before the traveller's arrival, "the [new] priest refused him a place in the graveyard," and he was buried near the back wall of the teahouse [*Teehaus*]; above his tombstone there is a table where poor people drink. The power of knowledge concentrated in Solomon's house expresses itself in a cunning killing machine, and nothing more. This is Kafka's assessment of the progressive project of the New Age: a cosmocentric scientific mind that concentrates on the inductive study of nature, an ethic of duty corresponding to this mind, and an aesthetics of death that is devoid of legal grounds. And this whole project, expressed in the machine as the embodiment of reason, is self-destructive due to poor maintenance and the presence of external and hostile observers in the form of the narrator-traveller and the new superintendent mentioned in the novel, who disapproves of his predecessor's approaches.

Indexical language. Kafka makes another reference to Bacon and, at the same time, to the tradition of searching for the perfect language (Eco, 1997), when he describes the

way the machine carries out the sentence. The machine carves a maxim or a script on the body of the condemned man, which he begins "to decipher […] he purses his lips as if he were listening." The maxims themselves are written down in the form of designs [blueprints, *Handzeichnungen*] by the former commandant, and they program the movement of the machine's knives in a complex way. The observer-traveller cannot understand this record in the form of a drawing, the speech is "a maze of criss-crossing lines covering the paper so closely that it was only with difficulty that one could make out the white spaces in between [*labyrinthartige, einander vielfach kreuzende Linien, die so dicht das Papier bedeckten, daß man nur mit Mühe die weißen Zwischenräume erkannte*]." The officer in charge of the machine explains that

> it shouldn't be a simple script; after all, it's not supposed to kill immediately, but only within a space of twelve hours on average […] So the actual script has to be surrounded by many, many flourishes; the real script encircles the body only in a narrow girdle; the rest of the body is intended for decoration.

Two of the maxims are mentioned in the text: the first "Honour thy superior" is intended for the condemned man, the second "Be just" – for the officer himself. The sanctioned murder carried out by the machine's ever-deeper carving of letters on the body of the condemned man is probably one of the most vivid images in the history of literature related to the attempts to construct an unambiguous scientific language. What is the essence of the perfect language project, whatever it may be? It is that all participants in communication should be reliably convinced that a particular word corresponds to a particular entity, a clearly defined meaning (Eco, 1997). Following Peirce (1878), the view of the meaning of an utterance as the use of that utterance, is becoming popular. What can stabilize referentiality better than machine application of an utterance to mortification? Clearly, Kafka is addressing in this novel the problem of understanding as it is formulated for technical knowledge. "I understand, so I can do it," this thesis of Maren Mersenne, a contemporary of Descartes (Maury & Taussig, 2003), defines the technical worldview of the early twentieth century, the activity or engineering knowledge as it is conceptualized in the early twenty-first century. What can I do to understand? I can, according to Kafka, kill with the help of a machine specially designed for this purpose, and thus realize not only an engineering-technical approach to understanding, but also remove for the condemned participant in this epistemic process the complexity of interpretation in the classical schemes of literary or historical hermeneutics: "Our condemned man dismantles [*entziffert*] it [the maxim that kills him, expressed in a simple sentence] by his wounds" or, in earlier passage: "It would be pointless to tell him. He will feel it in his own flesh. [*Es wäre nutzlos, es ihm zu verkünden. Er erfährt es ja auf seinem Leib*]." This hyperbolized irony of indexical language, in which there is an empirical fact behind every word, may also hint that the technical application of language, the New European engineering approach to the task of understanding perverts Revelation, turning the original Word into a program of mortification. This is indirectly evidenced by the description of the state of the condemned at the sixth hour of the execution:

> But how still the man becomes at the sixth hour! Understanding dawns upon even the most stupid. It begins with the eyes. From there it spreads further. A sight that

might tempt you to join him lying beneath the Harrow [*Verstand geht dem Blödesten auf. Um die Augen beginnt es. Von hier aus verbreitet es sich. Ein Anblick, der einen verführen könnte, sich mit unter die Egge zu legen.*]

In the Russian translation this state is rendered as "enlightenment of thought" (Kafka, 1991). The machine that gives enlightenment, and – by breaking down – deprives its last servant of enlightenment, is an instrument of the mind replacing God, and since the local Faust is deprived of grace, he dies without peace of mind, fulfilling the terms of the contract to the end.

AUTO-EUTHANASIA

The machine is a consequence and a tool of systemic rational thinking, "a compound of resisting bodies arranged in such a way as to force the mechanical forces of nature to act in order to perform certain movements" (Gorokhov, 2015, p. 120). According to the classical models of representationism, human consciousness against the background of reality should be arranged in such a way that reality is first cognized by the senses, then the data of the senses are expressed in language or categories of reason (ratio). Then the mind (intellectus) comes in and forms this or that system of concepts, intuitively grasping new ideas. The mind expresses these in terms of reason, then shares them with the skillfulness of hands that embody the idea and thereby change reality. Machines are such embodiments of the ideas that do the work for the human being, first the work of the hands and then of reason itself. Kafka depicts an upside-down House of Solomon that uses a perfect programming language to do the work of mortification. This temple has lost its former splendor even within the island. The new leadership, as well as the clergy, not only fail to support the ethical basis of machine extermination but send an influential observer-traveller from the larger world to pass judgment on the practice of extermination. The last servant of the old temple, after refusing support from the observer, commits suicide by machine, and the machine itself is pictorially destroyed in the process. Kafka's characteristic vividness and pathos in describing ethically unacceptable, monstrous (for the common sense) states of affairs shows the irrationality of the rational, the horror of the commonplace in the penal colony, which in fact turned out to be the temple of experimental natural science.

What does the destruction of the machine testify to within the context of utopia, the traditional New European conflict between the old and the new, its emphatic inability to give comfort to its servant, the collapse of the officer's illusions under the maxim "be just"? On the one hand, it may be an expression of commonplace technophobia, superimposed on a fear of the possibilities of reason and of the mind-generated technology. This is the existentialist philosophy of technology, which, with few exceptions, constitutes the mainstream direction of the first half of the 20th century and is devoted to the enslavement of humans by the machine. Thus, one could draw parallels between Nietzsche's dead god and the dead idol of the rationally organized machine, the corpse of each revealing some extra-intelligent and unencumbered self-conscious resources of the social psyche. This could be confirmed by the functional unity of the figures of the soldier and of the condemned as material for the machine, as well as by the

impossibility for them to leave the island together with the traveller. However, Kafka's characteristic problems of the subjectlessness of the human against the background of fate, the correlation between fate and sentence, the impossibility of understanding or at least somehow grasping the whole, the incommensurability of worlds and their inhabitants, who outwardly seem human, have little to do with technology or science as such.

On the other hand, therefore, the transformation of a temple into a penal colony and the destruction of its altar need a broader interpretation than whether or not they have anything to do with technology. Kafka, like many of the great talents, is a visionary. The collapse of the demonic mind together with the Mephistophelean false idea of enlightenment in death demonstrates the change of the subject of historical development: the bearer of progress in the 17th century turns out to be a dead, disintegrated idol at the beginning of the 20th century. The eventfulness of the New Age is the eventfulness of science and technology; they were "the force that changes the world." And this force in the form of discoveries, inventions and artifacts came down from the islands of ideal world order, and spread from these islands – accessible to anyone who can travel in thought – to the world at large. Thus, the world at large, the world of global social, economic, cultural processes was derivative of the New European island. But the situation has changed, subjectivity and eventuality have been transferred to the traveller to such an extent that his very gaze at the altar turns out to be destructive. Beyond ethical assessments, it should be stated that the Kafkaesque demonstration of the insignificance of scientific and technological reason, performed through the carnivalization of utopia, testifies to the fact that Europe in 1914 ceased to see science and technology as fundamental driving forces of social development, that is, it testifies to the end of the "age of progress," to its "decline."

WHAT ABOUT THE PRESENT DAY?

An artificial object is such that its essence precedes its existence. Once invented, it can only be destroyed by erasing the idea of that invention. The destruction of the physical machine does not cancel the machine: as we can see from the perspective of 2024, after 1914, the machines for sophisticated killing manifested and continue to manifest themselves not only in the physical world, but also in the world of intellect and even reason, erasing and rewriting the memory of individuals, nations and civilizations, destroying imagination, algorithms of goal-setting and goal-realization. What is it exactly in the conditions of "the decline of Europe" that has replaced the ideal of a sophisticated rational machine that performs physical work for a person? It is obvious that a vague but extremely active ideal of an information machine has come about, which removes human problems of self-consciousness and understanding for the masses, programming ethical evaluations and moral actions. In the interpreted story, one can see references to the difference machine, to the development of control algorithms, to the birth of technical cybernetics, but these are definitely not Kafka's themes. Rather, he anticipates the social information machines of ideology and propaganda as they would operate after the First World War.

One such social information machine predicted by Kafka is Nazism. It is a well-described ideological machine, operating in the realm of reason, influencing the mind, having its officers in service, its soldiers and its convicts. Once invented, it continues to exist in the space of ideas, whether it is Karl Popper's third world, Friedrich Dessauer's (1958) fourth realm, or Vladimir Vernadsky's noosphere. It is quite obvious that modern Western society needs an observer who can sight this machine and destroy its altar. The monstrous sacrifice of the twentieth century, made on the altar of Nazism after the decline of Europe, must not be repeated.

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