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Research article

## Kafka's Speculative Technologies

Alfred Nordmann  

Technical University of Darmstadt, Karolinenplatz 5, Darmstadt, 64289, Germany

[nordmann@phil.tu-darmstadt.de](mailto:nordmann@phil.tu-darmstadt.de)

### Abstract

Franz Kafka's *In the Penal Colony* is known to be one of his most disturbing stories, and yet it offers solace in the perfect working of a perfect machine. For the most part it consists in the description of the machine that executes the condemned by slowly carving the verdict into their flesh, bringing them to a point of delirious agony where they understand that justice is carried out as the machine carries out its program. Due process or a right to defend oneself are not provided for. In the eyes of a visitor to the penal colony, this disqualifies the machine. For the officer and operator of the complicated apparatus, justice is not a procedural notion but resides in the power of the word, that is, in the verdict being the true name for the crime. This power is revealed as the word and with it the law is laid down. It does not require reading to be understood since it is experienced in the flesh. This archaic conception of the machine as executor of laws and rules, and thus executor of convicts fits the idea of the machine: It determines an outcome in a perfectly transparent manner, it is intelligible – except when it breaks as in the botched attempt of the officer to let the machine take his own life. If one looks for a machine that lacks specification and that is profoundly subversive of meaning and function, Kafka describes such a machine as well.

**Keywords:** Franz Kafka; Speculative technology; Killing machines; Technology and language

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Научная статья

## Спекулятивные технологии Кафки

Альфред Нордманн  

Дармштадский технический университет, Каролиненплац 5, Дармштадт, 64289, Германия  
[nordmann@phil.tu-darmstadt.de](mailto:nordmann@phil.tu-darmstadt.de)

### Аннотация

Рассказ “В исправительной колонии” Франца Кафки известен как одно из самых тревожных его произведений, и все же он предлагает утешение в идеальной работе идеальной машины. По большей части он состоит из описания машины, которая казнит осужденных, медленно царапая приговор на их плоти, доводя их до точки безумной агонии, где они понимают, что правосудие осуществляется по мере того, как машина выполняет свою программу. Надлежащая правовая процедура или право на защиту не предусмотрены. В глазах посетителя исправительной колонии это дисквалифицирует машину. Для офицера и оператора сложного аппарата правосудие не является процессуальным понятием, а заключается в силе слова, то есть в приговоре, являющемся истинным названием преступления. Эта сила раскрывается как слово, и вместе с ним устанавливается закон. Его не нужно читать, чтобы понять, поскольку оно переживается во плоти. Эта архаичная концепция машины как исполнителя законов и правил и, таким образом, исполнителя приговоров соответствует идее машины: она определяет результат совершенно прозрачным образом, она понятна – за исключением случаев, когда она ломается, как в неудачной попытке офицера позволить машине покончить с ним. Если кто-то ищет машину, которой не хватает спецификации и которая глубоко подрывает смысл и функции, Кафка также описывает такую машину.

**Ключевые слова:** Франц Кафка; Спекулятивная технология; Машины для убийства; Технология и язык

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## PLAIN TRUTH

In 1798 Georg Christoph Lichtenberg published a list of items to be auctioned off at the estate of an English gentleman. The list is inspired by Jonathan Swift and includes fabulous technical devices along with plain and simple ones. If the intricate devices include a model for the interaction of body and soul – with different settings for different theories – the list famously begins with a plain and simple one:

A knife without the blade and the handle missing. [*Ein Messer ohne Klinge, an welchem der Stiel fehlt.*] (Lichtenberg, 1972, p. 452)

An impossible object, speculative. Or, instead, an object that is all too possible, easy enough to comprehend since knives consist of two parts only, and each can fail, break off, come undone, go missing. Is it deeply unsettling or is it strangely reassuring that the knife without handle and blade will evaporate into nothingness, right in front of our eyes like Lewis Carroll's Cheshire cat which leaves nothing behind but his smile? This much is for sure, whatever happens to that knife, if there ever was one, it does not shake our solid conviction of what a knife is and that it consists of these main elements – blade and handle. The knife is fully determined, what it is and what it does, when it is not and does not.

So, there is nothing whatsoever wrong with the knife. The thought, however, of „a knife without the blade and its handle missing“ is deeply puzzling, and perhaps troubling as well: Does this thought refer to something – a knife – though evidently there is no thing there to be referenced? Indeed, Lichtenberg's knife is a cousin of John Locke's socks or the ship of Theseus – so often repaired that nothing is left of the original to which the name refers. It also evokes the infamous proposition that „the present king of France is bald“ (when there is no such king) and other instances from philosophy and art that showcase the paradoxical structure of non-referring reference.

## THE MACHINATIONS OF JUSTICE

Fast forward to 1919, Franz Kafka's „Penal Colony,“ and its killing machine. There is the visitor of the penal colony who is invited to observe and judge the complicated apparatus, finding it quite barbaric, deeply unsettling. And then there is the officer who speaks for the apparatus, its design and its performance. Shall we say again, that there is nothing wrong with the machine, but a lot wrong with the thought of the machine? As a working order of things, the machine invites neither judgement nor reflection while it stubbornly carries out its plan of action. What else is the machine to do, what else can it do but execute the motions it is designed to perform? There is something sublime to this unwavering determination of the machine and the intricate interplay of its gears and levers, bolts and pins. This apparatus cares not about changing values and fashions, it perpetuates its working order, the order of its creation, of its creator – it carries on. The machine delivers just as justice is delivered, there is no deliberation or judgement required in the performance or delivery of justice – it is carried out. The execution of a plan and the execution of a person become conflated in a serene, unquestionable procedure, a performance of what must be – it is carried through.



Kafka's killing machine, like all machines, shows „how the inscription is carried through in the body [*wie sich die Inschrift im Körper vollzieht*] (Kafka, 1952, p. 154): What is inscribed into the machine is executed by the machine and inscribes itself into the individual as well as the social body. The machine institutes a form of life that perpetuates itself far beyond the original intentions of an inventor or developer – the law of its operation is laid down in the machine and the working and using of the machine obeys that law for as long as the machine and its offsprings exist (Winner, 1983). Thus, by entrusting ourselves to the working order of machines we recall an archaic, pre-modern, religious sentiment that would acknowledge also the powerful word of God. That word is not an opinion, nor a thesis or contentious claim, but it is a given that realizes itself as it devolves into the fabric of our lives: The officer's praise of his apparatus amounts to yearning for a time when justice did not have to be administered or spoken but simply takes place – delivered ineluctably in the course of things, that is, when one thing leads to another in an unfolding chain of events. And of course, the officer continues, the prisoner does not need to be told what his judgement is, what he was found guilty of. He need not know even that he has been judged because he will „experience it on his flesh [*er erfährt es ja auf seinem Leib*]“ with a kind of immediacy that does not require any further justification (Kafka, 1952, p. 151). Indeed, despite all kinds of technical provisions, the machine's inscription is hard to read and recognized only at the sixth hour when the agony of death sets in and when the convict suddenly realizes and accepts the meaning of the verdict. So, what is written is not words that need to be interpreted and understood, but a death-sentence that reveals itself by way of its execution. The killing machine, in other words, speaks in an original language in which to know the names of things is to command and control and condemn them – a language long lost to humankind but preserved in the inexorable progression of the pins and wheels that leave their mark. This language and the machine thus serve as hallmarks of complete and utter determinacy – they seal the fate of the human subject and represent „the actual execution of the verdict [*die eigentliche Ausführung des Urteils*]“ (Kafka, 1952, p. 149).

Just take a look! See this apparatus! — the officer often employs the ostensive mode and appeals to the immediacy of sensory impressions (Kafka, 1952, pp. 143, 144). The machine can convince only by how it performs and what it can do. And indeed, the visitor appears quite bored at first and becomes intrigued only by the demonstration of the apparatus. At one point, the officer takes his hand and guides it across the machine's „bed.“ After this uncharacteristically intimate and tender moment, we read that „The traveller was already a little won over by the apparatus [*Der Reisende war schon ein wenig für den Apparat gewonnen*]“ (Kafka, 1952, p. 148). There is one more such moment of intimacy, this time between the officer and the machine as he readies it for his own execution.

But the officer had begun tending to the machine. Though it was evident all along that he understood the machine well, now one could nearly find oneself aghast at how he handled it and how it obeyed. He only approached the rake with his hand when it lifted up and lowered down, until it reached the right position to receive him. [*Der Offizier aber hatte sich der Maschine zugewendet. Wenn es schon früher deutlich gewesen, dass er die Maschine gut verstand, so konnte es jetzt*



*einen fast bestürzt machen, wie er mit ihr umging und wie sie gehorchte. Er hatte die Hand der Egge nur genähert, und sie hob und senkte sich mehrmals, bis sie die richtige Lage erreicht hatte, um ihn zu empfangen.] (Kafka, 1952, p. 180)*

But alas, throughout the story, again and again, the intimate attunement of deadly apparatus and condemned body breaks down: „If only the wheel hadn't screeched, it would have been glorious [*Hätte das Rad nicht gekreischt, es wäre herrlich gewesen*] (Kafka, 1952, p. 157). And thus, from the machinist's point of view, the officer's death at the hands of the self-destructing machine was the result of a botched operation. There was no sign in the dead man's face of a sixth hour blissful realization that „Be just! [*Sei gerecht!*]“ was indeed where he had failed (Kafka, 1952, pp. 177, 184).

The officer complains to the visitor that „[t]his procedure and execution which you now have occasion to admire, has no one nowadays in our colony who would openly support it [*Dieses Verfahren und diese Hinrichtung, die Sie jetzt zu bewundern Gelegenheit haben, hat gegenwärtig in unserer Kolonie keinen offenen Anhänger mehr*]“ (Kafka, 1952, p. 163). He suspects that this has to do with the new commander who represents a new political and social order while the machine, like any machine, perpetuates the old one. But is this really the reason for all this disenchantment with the apparatus? It seems that the visitor is slowly won over by the spectacular deliverance of the elaborate apparatus. This apparatus is doubly attuned and thus seductively persuasive: first, there is the perfect physical fit of the body and the machine, hand in glove, as the apparatus precisely adjusts to the topography of the skin, and second, there is the perfect fit of the punishment to the crime, secured by the power of the word which provides the true name, the one that nails down the convict's guilt. It would be unassailable, glorious, if only it worked beautifully.

Nothing wrong with the machine, except that a lot is wrong with this one. The convict vomits and the machine needs to be cleaned, a leather strap tears, the whirring sound of the wheel has become an unbearable screech, and finally, the program runs afoul as the machine disintegrates in the officer's dying moments. Instead of hitting the nail on the head and inscribing on his body the revelatory injunction „Be just!“, the apparatus drives a nail through the officer's head, and he dies grotesquely pierced. The machine dies along with its most ardent advocate. But even in death, the officer's „expression was calm and assured [*der Blick war ruhig und überzeugt*]“ (Kafka, 1952, p. 184) – the working order of the machine remained fully specified, its meaning unquestioned, as well as its capacity to determine a course of events that seals the convict's fate. It might be running out of spare parts, it might lose support, but its design remains intact, transparent, intelligible.

### **DISTURBINGLY HARMLESS**

Kafka's killing machine shares many features with all machines, present and past. „[H]ow the inscription is carried through in the body [*wie sich die Inschrift im Körper vollzieht*] (Kafka, 1952, p. 154) says as much as: „their performance is specified through their design“ or „their working order reflects their grammar of composition.“ The language of things that informs the operation of a machine is more powerful, archaic, than



the merely conventional, highly negotiated code by which humans coordinate and communicate with each other. If you know the name of a thing in that archaic language, you know how to command it: by specifying the settings not only of Kafka's killing machine, one specifies the execution of an act, perhaps the execution of a person who participates in the mechanical process or working order of the machine. These machines are as ordinary as the bureaucratic mechanisms which Kafka exposes and drastically accentuates in much of his writing.

But there is a technical device or machine in Kafka's stories that undercuts all this, that is far more disturbing than the killing machine in the penal colony. It also speaks and has a name but speaks quite differently than does the executioner's apparatus with its imposing imperatives, so differently in fact that many readers refer to it as a „creature“ rather than a „device.“ The story's narrator himself refers to it as a being or a something [*Wesen*], as a construction or configuration [*Gebilde*] and that it is usually „mute like the wood which it seems to be [*stumm wie das Holz, das er zu sein scheint*]“ (Kafka, 1920). Indeed, the small device is easy to make and easy to reproduce. If you know what those star-shaped spools for twine look like, you have an idea of a wheel that moves a bit unevenly, perpetually falling rather than rolling. Of course, one such spool won't keep itself upright, so one takes a small stick to insert as an axis, at its end adding an even smaller stick at a right angle. Now the spool can lean as if on a crutch – and is ready to go. The internet provides many images of what this little contraption looks like: obviously an invention of and for child's play, obviously an invention that predates Kafka's description. This thing has been around and will be around. (Since there are still rests of twine on the spool, one might take it for a leash and drag the creature around as it glides and tumbles into the furthest corners of the house.)

One would be tempted to believe that this construction previously had a somehow purposeful shape and only now it is broken. But this does not seem to be the case; at least one can't find any signs for this; nowhere to be seen are fissures or sockets that would point to such a thing; the whole appears senseless, yet finished in its way. [*Man wäre versucht zu glauben, dieses Gebilde hätte früher irgendeine zweckmäßige Form gehabt und jetzt sei es nur zerbrochen. Dies scheint aber nicht der Fall zu sein; wenigstens findet sich kein Anzeichen dafür; nirgends sind Ansätze oder Bruchstellen zu sehen, die auf etwas Derartiges hinweisen würden; das Ganze erscheint zwar sinnlos, aber in seiner Art abgeschlossen.*] (Kafka, 1920, p. 99)

The narrator evidently scrutinized the device carefully: If only it were a broken purposeful tool, it would be glorious. But this product of children tinkering with their mother's tools, this senseless thing that has been around and will be around, is clearly bothersome to the father of the house who is the narrator of this story: „It obviously doesn't harm anyone; but I find just about grievous the idea that on top of it all, it might outlive me [*Er schadet ja offenbar niemandem; aber die Vorstellung, daß er mich auch noch überleben sollte, ist mir eine fast schmerzliche*]“ (Kafka, 1920, p. 100).

This is, according to the title of the story, „*Die Sorge des Hausvaters*“ – a title that is almost impossible to translate into English. It announces „The Trouble, Disquiet,





Bother, Worry, Anxiety, Concern, or Cares of the Father of the House or Family Man.“ Odradek unsettles the father, adds insult to injury by being a senseless contraption that may well outlive a head of household who, by definition, is dedicated to a serious pursuit. It adds insult to injury, has the audacity even to carry a name, being a someone, a „he“ in Kafka’s story, namely Odradek.

A toy is underdetermined and thus distinct from the classical killing machine – now it is more like a spinning top that moves in a funny way, now it is a poodle on a leash or imaginary friend, and now it is a cunning, menacing thing that clutters the house and is ready to jump. „Sometimes, when one steps out the door and it is leaning down below by the banister, one gets the urge to speak to it. [*Manchmal, wenn man aus der Tür tritt und er lehnt gerade unten am Treppengeländer; hat man Lust, ihn anzusprechen*]“ (Kafka, 1920, p. 99).

The senseless contraption, precisely because it lacks purpose and awaits determination, invites questions and being talked to. By the same token, for the father of the house – and Kafka’s own father comes to mind – to follow this playful temptation is dangerous, indeed. It undermines his authorial voice: mature adults are known to become all silly when speaking to a child.

Of course one does not ask him any difficult questions but treats him – ensnared by his tininess – like a child. „So, what’s your name?“ one asks him. „Odradek,“ he says. „And where do you live?“ „Residence undefined,“ he says and laughs; but it is only the kind of laughter that one can produce without lungs; it sounds a bit like the rustling in fallen leaves. And with this, the conversation usually ends. [*Natürlich stellt man an ihn keine schwierigen Fragen, sondern behandelt ihn – schon seine Winzigkeit verführt dazu – wie ein Kind. »Wie heißt du denn?« fragt man ihn. »Odradek,« sagt er. »Und wo wohnst du?« »Unbestimmter Wohnsitz,« sagt er und lacht; es ist aber nur ein Lachen, wie man es ohne Lungen hervorbringen kann. Es klingt etwa so, wie das Rascheln in gefallen Blättern. Damit ist die Unterhaltung meist zu Ende.*] (Kafka, 1920)

The harmless device threatens a world where, according to its purpose, everything is assigned its place in the larger scheme of thing – and classical industrial technology of the 19th and 20th century embodies such a world. Re-purposing a spool of twine seems harmless enough, but where will it lead, worries the father who fails to see its point because there is none. Lichtenberg’s knife pales in comparison – it has a point but misses it.

Some argue that the world of devices has changed in recent history, that is has tilted towards non-classical apparatus of all kinds, that we deal with programmable machinery which hovers between the spheres of work and play, always yet to be determined, to be purposed and re-purposed (Kaminski, 2014). One can celebrate this shift and view it as a liberation of technology from the corset of functionality and purposiveness (Genc, 2024). At the same time one can share in the disturbing disquiet and profound anxiety of Kafka’s father-figure (Nordmann, 2008): the indeterminate device, residence undefined, retains an air of uncanniness, it is out-of-control, it speaks with a questioning whisper, does not lay down its law, and cannot be refuted.



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## СВЕДЕНИЯ ОБ АВТОРЕ / THE AUTHOR

Альфред Нордманн, nordmann@phil.tu-darmstadt.de  
ORCID 0000-0002-2173-4084

Alfred Nordmann, nordmann@phil.tu-darmstadt.de  
ORCID 0000-0002-2173-4084

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