

“The Castle” by Franz Kafka as a Prefiguration of Dystopia

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Abstract: The paper focuses on the work of the Austrian writer of Jewish origin in the context of space studies. A particularly interesting example is *The Castle*, the writer's last novel and one of the most difficult subjects for interpretation. The classic reading of *The Castle* is emphasising the hero's loneliness and mysterious laws that govern the entire reality of the novel (Max Brod). However, in postmodernist interpretations, the disintegration and nonsense of the world portrayed by Kafka (Maurice Blanchot) is much stronger. Reading *The Castle* from the perspective of dystopia allows us not only to notice the negative aspects of the novel, but also the positive ones: symbolism, mythologising, hyper-semantics of literary images. Kafka, as the author of the novel from 1922 about the lost man in a lost village in a lost time, thus becomes through his work one of the inspirers for the next generation of contemporary prose creators using the motives of dystopia.

Keywords. Franz Kafka, German literature XX, space studies, dystopia

Franz Kafka is certainly one of the most frequently interpreted authors of modern literature. This very fact is documented by all bibliographies concerning the reception of his works which simply overwhelm with the sheer number of studies published in different countries and languages (e.g. Järv 1961; Flores 1976; Binder 1979; *Franz Kafka* 1979; Born 1997; Caputo-Mayr, Herz 2000; Kalinowski 2006; Sommerfeld 2007; *Franz Kafka* 2008). The greatest number of studies, in the context which appears most obvious, are published in the discourse of German studies; however, the specific nature of his short stories and novels is such that--for a long time now--they have been interpreted beyond the sphere of the German language: inspiring, in a loose way, a whole variety of reinterpretations in diverse methodologies of the literary research. Therefore, it seems entirely possible today to publish studies focusing not only on a novel such as *The Trial* (Gräff 1990; Eschweiler 1990), *The Castle* (Sheppard 1973; Gottwald 1990), but also those delving into stories as short as *The Judgement (Kafkas “Urteil”* 2007) or *Before The Law (Neue Literaturtheorien* 1993).

When we analyse *The Castle*--which was created in 1922 and published only after Kafka's death in 1933--we are faced with a somewhat puzzling situation: his most extensive prose text is, in the research tradition, the one which is studied the least. One might even speculate that it is, in a way, ignored or simply met with an insignificant number of interpretative ideas. The oldest of them can be traced back to Max Brod who believed that it is an allegorical work, specifically, one concerning the man's search for God (Brod 1948; Brod 1951; Brod 1982). Albert Camus offered an extensive interpretation--seeing the work as a symbolic story about loneliness of people who fail to find fulfilment in their existence (Camus 1991). There are also other interpretations: *The Castle* as a record of psychological complexes (Pawel 2003; Bloom

2003) or a work on nothingness (Foulkes 1967; Hilsbecher 1972; Göhler 1982; Grözinger 2006) and last not least metaphoric description discussing about assimilation Jews in west Europe (Neumann 2012).

In view of all those previous takes on Kafka's last novel, it may, however, be worthwhile to respectfully attempt to interpret the work from the perspective of the study of the category of space. In literary research, this discourse has been known for several decades, but although it was adopted successfully in English and French traditions (Anderson 1997; Said 2005, White 2011; Bourdieu 2001; Foucault 2005)--the Slavic literary studies perceive it with something resembling suspicion (Rybicka 2012; *Nowy regionalizm w badaniach literackich* 2012). In reference to the creative output of Franz Kafka, the study of the category of space can be applied in several dimensions. It is possible to interpret his works on the plane of realistically depicted reality--based on the prose from *Contemplation*--and attempt to locate on the map of the real Prague given components of Kafka's narration (Salfellner 1998). It is equally possible, while focusing on the metaphorical or mythical dimension, to describe figures of the symbolic space (the figure of a bridge, island or a maze) in later short stories or novels by Kafka (Slochower 1966; Robertson 1987; Fromm 1998). Finally, the third interpretational avenue which today is worth considering is the study of the category of space and, more specifically, the literary construct of "non-place." It was characterised by Marc Augé and is associated with the terms such as: atopy or dystopia (Augé 2012; Lem 1970; Szacki 2000; Bauman 2009; Willke 2002). Non-place is, therefore, a space which is repeatable in its typicality and functionality--and, it would seem, a safe and obvious one. However, due to the fact that it is so common and temporary it also inspires alienation. Non-places are locations like a bus or railway station, air-port, government office, shopping malls and retail stores (Vieira 2010; Gordin, Tilley, Prakash 2010). In a non-place certain people might feel happy; regardless of the fact where they currently are--they can recognise the same interior design or the same uniforms of people working there. Other people, however, can feel alienated or lost in a non-place as they do not recognise in this given space something characteristic or unique--something which would grant it an individual status (Walsh 1962; Aldridge 1984; Booker 1994; Sisk 1997; Moylan 2000; Kumar 2000; Kumar 2013).

The Castle and the Category of Place

The act of reading those several hundred pages of Franz Kafka's novel is an experience which can hardly be classified as easy. This difficulty is caused not so much by a very complicated plot or formal tricks obstructing its perception, but rather by a specific excess of "realistically" introduced details regarding the behaviour of characters, never-ending conversations, descriptions of attempts undertaken by the main character who strives to assume the position of a surveyor in a village belonging to the castle's owners. Of course, the realistic nature of the novel's prose is subject to a convention as--in view of the accumulation of the elements of the external reality surrounding the literary figure or providing numerous nuances of manner of thinking of K. and villagers--the purpose behind the existence of the presented world remains unrevealed. It is, therefore, not realism or psychologism which constitute the main artistic motivation behind *The Castle*, but rather the value of--updated for the 20th century literature--

ancient aesthetic categories such as irony or grotesque (Heller 1954; Kassel 1969; Morawiec 2000; Kasperski 2008).

In what way, then, given such an aesthetic context of this work by Kafka, can one apply the category of place--and especially--of dystopia? Let us refer to several fragments of the novel ... Here, as early as in the very first chapter there is a problem of the presence of K., a surveyor, in a space which needs to be named, specified and put in order--and yet, this very space escapes unambiguous description:

It was late evening when K. arrived. The village lay deep in snow. There was nothing to be seen of Castle Mount, for mist and darkness surrounded it, and not the faintest glimmer of light showed where the great castle lay. K. stood on the wooden bridge leading from the road to the village for a long time, looking up at what seemed to be a void. (Kafka 3)

The main character of the novel, then, is supposed to perform a task. It is, however, unclear who this task was given by and according to what principles.... Thus, before K. starts the work, he intends to sign the employment contract with his employers residing in the castle located in a distance from the village. And so he plans to get to the place of residence of the rulers--one which is barely visible in the distance within the winter country-side landscape. As we know from the novel, K. never manages to get there, and even if he approaches something, it is farming buildings or less important offices--and never the actual castle. K.'s life, then, unfolds in waiting for a sign from a burgrave or a high-ranking clerk. K. is on the constant look-out for the castle's clerks as he stays at a tavern, school building or a house of a family which is unpopular in the village.

Those researchers of Kafka's creative output who ground it in the historical and geographic context of the world believe that *The Castle* was created as a specific artistic reaction to the writer's visit at his father's born village Wossek, castle of Friedland or his sister's place in the village of Matliary and as a transformation of the actual look and location of a nearby castle or other places (Wagenbach 1984; Wagenbach 2006; Binder 2008). However, we need to refer to the novel itself which undercuts such interpretations--for we can read as follows:

Altogether the castle, as seen in the distance, lived up to K.'s expectations. It was neither an old knightly castle from the days of chivalry, nor a showy new structure, but an extensive complex of buildings, a few of them with two storeys, but many of them lower and crowded close together. If you hadn't known it was a castle you might have taken it for a small town. K. saw only a single tower, and could not make out whether it was a dwelling or belonged to a church. Flocks of crows were circling around it. (Kafka 11)

Kafka's description, then, does not depict something which might be considered a historical building or some impressive example of architecture. What appears instead is an accumulation of identical elements of poor, neglected houses which seem entirely the same and create the

atmosphere of the ordinary, common and nondescript--and it all brings us closer to the category of dystopia.

Even the greatest achievement on the part of K.--when he manages to stay slightly longer on the area of the castle--fails to grant him any knowledge whatsoever regarding his location and who decides in matters of his fate. The reasons for the existence of such a building remain even less clear. Instead, one might argue that what occurs is merely a larger confusion as the castle seen from a closer distance seems rather trivial:

after all, it was only a poor kind of collection of cottages assembled into a little town, and distinguished only by the fact that, while it might all be built of stone, the paint had flaked off long ago, and the stone itself seemed to be crumbling away. [...] In his mind, he compared the church tower of his childhood home with the tower up above. [...] The tower up here--the only visible one--now turned out to belong to a dwelling, perhaps the main part of the castle. It was a simple, round building, partly covered with ivy, and it had small windows, now shining in the sun--there was something crazed about the sight--and was built into the shape of a balcony at the top, with insecure, irregular battlements, crumbling as if drawn by an anxious or careless child as they stood out, zigzag fashion, against the blue sky. It was as if some melancholy inhabitant of the place, who should really have stayed locked up in the most remote room in the house, had broken through the roof and was standing erect to show himself to the world. (Kafka 11)

And so, the building of the castle from Kafka's novel seems to bring exclusively disappointments... There is chaos instead of order, poverty instead of dignity and a melancholic owner instead of a resourceful ruler. The very place which for K. was meant to be a destination point providing stability in his life turned out to be a mere illusion.

If Not the Castle Then, Perhaps: The Castle Boroughs...

The main character of the novel, unable to get to the coveted castle, needs to content himself with the life in the village entirely which belonged to the castle. K. takes advantage of every opportunity, through his connections or the promised professional position, to show off his self-perceived importance in the local community. He believes that the status of a surveyor, a man familiar with mathematics and logic, will grant him respect and esteem. However, it turns out that even the village lacks clearly codified rights, correlations and human relationships. K. promised himself that even if he would fail to penetrate the castle with his intellect, he would still conquer the space of the village with his work. Even here, however, he was met with disappointment and worse: mental confusion, which was symbolised in the novel by the fact that K. is unable to understand the most basic topography of the area:

For he was in the main street of the village, and it did not lead to Castle Mount but merely passed close to it before turning aside, as if on purpose, and although it moved no further away from the castle, it came no closer either. K. kept thinking that the road must finally bring him to the castle, and, if only because of that expectation, he went

on. Because of his weariness he naturally shrank from leaving the road, and he was surprised by the extent of the village, which seemed as if it would never end, with more and more little houses, their window-panes covered by frost-flowers, and with the snow and the absence of any human beings—so at last he tore himself away from the road on which he had persisted and struck out down a narrow alley where the snow lay even deeper. (Kafka 14)

Just as K. keeps getting lost on village streets, he behaves in a virtually identical fashion in a much smaller space of one of the local houses. It turns out that even in those houses nothing seems clear. Although the rooms seemingly contain familiar elements of interior design--those elements exist in completely surprising configurations. They appear deceptively logical, but, in reality, they belong to a certain--unfamiliar to the main character--supra-logical order.

To illustrate this, let us focus on the following description of one room of a village house:

It was a large, dimly lit room. Coming in from outside, he could see nothing at first. K. staggered and nearly fell over a washing-trough; a woman's hand caught him. He heard a number of children shouting in one corner. Steam billowed out of another, turning the twilight into darkness. K. might have been surrounded by clouds. [...]

At last some of the steam drifted away, and gradually K. was able to get his bearings. This seemed to be wash-day for everyone. Clothes were being washed near the door. But the vapour came from the left-hand corner, where two men were having a bath in steaming water in a wooden tub larger than any K. had ever seen before; it was about the size of two beds. But even more surprising, although it was hard to say just why, was the right-hand corner of the room. Through a large hatch, the only opening in the back wall of the parlour, pale snowy light came in, no doubt from the yard, and cast a sheen like silk on the dress of a woman almost lying, for she looked so tired, in a tall armchair far back in that corner. She had a baby at her breast. A few children were playing around her (Kafka 12-13)

The village room fulfils several functions in the house. One part serves as a laundry--an area to remove dirt. At the same time, what is washed here are not ordinary clothes but underwear: items which, by definition, are most intimate--not likely to be exposed for the sake of the general public. In a scene of Kafka's novel, however, washing bed linen, sheets, singlets, long johns or panties hardly surprises or shocks anyone living in this world. The second corner of the room is even weirder to the reader: there are two men bathing in big tubs. And likewise, nobody appears to be embarrassed by this very private activity of bathing. Despite the nakedness of the men and the formerly mentioned act of washing which is performed nearby by other people--the situation seems utterly normal to all the participants. However, the most atypical of them all is another part of the room in which K. discovers a woman breastfeeding a child. The spatial arrangement of this character is significant: the woman is half-lying in an arm-chair which looks dignified, slightly resembling a throne. The character's exposition is enhanced by the children who surround her. On top of it all, there is a light reflection which

falls on the woman's dress--lending her a supernatural appearance. As a result, the feeding woman resembles some goddess of maternity, an otherworldly phantom. And, just like in the previous cases, the very fact of her breastfeeding a baby does not seem to make anyone uncomfortable or bothered.

Those three actions in the above scene of *The Castle*: washing underwear, the bath and breast-feeding occur simultaneously--in the same fashion emerging from smoke or clouds of steam. As a result, it leads to specific consequences for the semantics of space. One can hardly interpret this scene in terms of realism or even symbolism in that house's description. It is much closer to the grotesque in which what seems to be an ordinary interior of a village house turns out to be a weird laundry or bathing place where the dignity of a woman breastfeeding a baby is contrasted by naked men who are bathing in a nearby tub. The space presented in this manner inspires contexts of the sphere of *the sacred* and, as a result, the categories of order or sense. At the same time, however, the scene is connected to the sphere of *the profane* and the categories of chaos and nonsense (Binder 1976; Arendt 1982; Alt 2005).

While studying other descriptions of space in the village belonging to the castle, it is also worthwhile to consider the existence of another, equally intriguing form of space. For example, the "Under the bridge" tavern--inside which, in a big dining room, takes place a typical village life--at the same time has very mysterious rooms:

where everything was built on a small scale but delicately designed. The best possible use was made of the space. You could only just walk upright along the corridor; door after door opened off the sides of it, all the doors close to each other, and the walls did not go all the way up to the ceiling, presumably for ventilation, since there were probably no windows in the little rooms off this low-lying, cellar-like passage. The disadvantage of the gap at the top of the walls was that the corridor and inevitably the rooms too were noisy. Many of the rooms seemed to be occupied. (Kafka 213)

Thus, the tavern fulfils its service function exclusively on the ground floor. Its basement becomes a sort of a hotel for the castle clerks. Similarly, the attic of the tavern can be simultaneously a room for servants and an additional sleeping space for guests of the castle. On the other hand, the traditional residential part of the tavern is used for the private life of the owner but--unexpectedly --it can turn into an interrogation room. Therefore, the tavern has the appearance of a safe space--imitating a real home and authentic human relations.

The same can be said in reference to the school building into which K. moved with Frieda. At certain times before noon there are indeed lessons for children, but after lunch the class-rooms are turned into residential rooms in which the private and home life of K., the surveyor, takes place. In the school space the children have normal lessons and gymnastic exercises--and keep their notebooks on school desks. In the evening, however, K. can put on those desks his private items and treat them as typical house furniture. When viewed as an overall dimension of space creation, what Kafka constructs here is a dystopian illusion of temporariness, conventionality and changeability of functions and meanings. K. cannot construct anything permanent in the

school building. Even his sleeping place has to be arranged on the floor since he was forbidden to bring a bed inside the school. This “hostility” of the interior design is typical for non-places in which it is impossible to find space for privacy; chairs are uncomfortably hard and artificial flowers constitute the pinnacle of aesthetic taste.

Dystopia as a Cognitive Category

In the research tradition concerning the creative output of Franz Kafka, it has been noted on numerous occasions that he approached the categories of irony and grotesque (created in the Greco-Roman ancient culture) in an inventive and original fashion (Walser 1972; Blanchot 1996; Kasperski 2008a). The irony in Kafka’s works, therefore, is not a pretension of the lack of knowledge used so that he can show the presence of knowledge in a stronger fashion--a convention taken from the ancient tradition--and it is not a way to distance himself from the existing poetics so that he can emphasise all the more his own style of expression (as was typical for romantic irony). The irony employed in Kafka’s prose concerns, in fact, each and every element of human cognition, experience or existence (Weinberg 1963; Sokel 1976).

Grotesque is treated in a similar fashion. For Kafka, it is not merely a love for forms of contradictory values of beauty or ugliness or for chimerical constructions as was the case in the European tradition until 19th century. It is, in fact, anthropo-grotesque: enigmatic, fragmentary, illusory experiencing of the fragmented identity of the modern human being (Philippi 1966; Wimmer 2007). The true artistic achievement of Kafka is, therefore, the emphasis placed upon processuality, infinity and inexpressiveness inherent in learning about the world and oneself (Berger 2000; Lipszyc 2011).

What does dystopia bring along in such a situation then? Above all, the fact that it reveals before our eyes the disapproval on the part of Kafka--the writer of the possibility of a successful description of the external world. What all the authors representing realistic or naturalistic literature attempted to imitate from the world of politics or society was considered by Kafka to be a futile effort--one completely doomed to failure. The artist can only try to create a reality and not to imitate it. Whatever appears to be valid, logical and meaningful in the historical and psychological world--when perceived through the prism of Kafka’s writings, it reveals entirely different, even agnostic dimensions.

Let us, for example, consider movement--something typical in everyday experience. In *The Castle* movement of various characters understood as a planned activity is virtually non-existent. Their efforts seem to resemble more the paradox of Zeno of Elea:

He certainly goes into the offices, but are the offices really the castle? And even if the castle does have offices, are they the offices which Barnabas is allowed to enter? He goes into offices, yes, but that’s only a part of the whole, for there are barriers, and yet more offices beyond them. He is not exactly forbidden to go any further, but he can’t go any further once he has found his superiors, and when they have dealt with him they send him away. (Kafka 154)

As a result, K. will not successfully complete his trip to the castle--nor will it be done by the envoy who specifically works for him. K. shall not make it to the castle even if he seduced more than one tavern-keeper or more than one mistress of some clerk.

The surveyor is also unable to put in order anything regarding his emotions. Even in matters as fundamental as sexuality, what dominates this sphere in Kafka's novel is a specific sort of confusion. Human needs and intimacy are equated with not what is most basic, but rather with things which are alien and removed from the self. K. and Frieda are not lovers who could be enriched by their sexuality. It is the other way around: they were virtually becoming travellers through a foreign land--unable to find happiness or satisfaction in each other:

They embraced one another, her little body burned in K.'s hands, they rolled, in a semi-conscious state from which K. tried constantly but unsuccessfully to surface, a little way on, bumped into Klamm's door with a hollow thud, then lay there in the puddles of beer and the rubbish* covering the floor. Hours passed as they lay there, hours while they breathed together and their hearts beat in unison, hours in which K. kept feeling that he had lost himself, or was further away in a strange land than any one had ever been before, a distant country where even the air was unlike the air at home, where you were likely to stifle in the strange-ness of it, yet such were its senseless lures that you could only go on, losing your way even more. (Kafka 40)

The two quoted examples illustrate that in this novel by Kafka--both in the movement outside, towards the castle, and in the movement inside, towards one's own body--everything is dominated by strangeness, non-obviousness and secrecy. The true reality and the real world shall not be offered for the sake of a human being to notice and comprehend...

What remains, then, is the castle itself... Not as one impressive building. Not as a collection of village cottages--and not as an optical illusion. Is it, though--in its essence--one specific place...?

The castle, its outline already beginning to blur, lay as still as always. K. had never seen the slightest sign of life there. Perhaps it wasn't possible to make anything out from this distance, yet his eyes kept trying and wouldn't accept that it could lie so still. When K. looked at the castle, he sometimes thought he saw someone sitting quietly there, looking into space, not lost in thought and thus cut off from everything else, but free and at ease, as if he were alone and no one was observing him. He must notice that he himself was under observation, but that didn't disturb him in the slightest. (Kafka 88)

What is the castle, then? Or perhaps: who is the castle? The most significant value of Kafka's novel seems to be that no questions can be answered here with anything resembling conviction...

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