Munich Social Science Review, New Series, vol. 9(2025)

Probing the Ethernity in *The Trial:* Comments and Review of Airaksinen's PataKafka Paper

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Abstract: There are many interpretations of Kafka's work. But what happens to Joseph K. is comical, and this review wonders if Kafka's reality, coupled with the surreal life of Joseph K., is no more than an imaginary dream. Albeit, through the good office of his friend Max Brod, *The Trial* was published posthumously, obtaining for Kafka, immortality in a world that is increasingly Kafkaesque.

1. An Interpretation

Airaksinen's (2024) paper is a pataphysical commentary on *The Trial* a novel that was not published by its author Franz Kafka, who died in 1924. The relevance of this point will be addressed later. The narration of the novel has always encouraged multiple interpretations. His work is open to interpretation. According to Susan Sontag (1961: 18f) Kafka's work "attracted interpretations like leeches." In this patapaper we have another interpretation, a pataphysical interpretation. Alas, for this reader, "by my green candle, I don't understand" or fully comprehend the theme of this patapaper other than as an exemplar of another interpretation of an interpretation, a pataphysical interpretation, adding to an already burgeoning literary criticism of this novel. As Franz Kafka had intended!

ISSN 0170-2521
ISBN 978-3-88278-318-6
www.accedoverlag.de

Should scholars, readers and academics continue to interpret and re-interpret Kafka's narrative in *The Trial*? Isn't it just an absurd tale of Joseph K.? Airaksinen's PataKafka paper does not really answer the question but its "pataphysical perspective" is noteworthy. However, in trying to understand the neologisms of Jarry then in my opinion there is a better candidate in Kafka's novella *The Metamorphosis*, published in 1915, an early literary example of surrealism. It provides ample space for interpreting Jarry's philosophy, a novella in which the character Gregor Samsa awakens one morning from a dream to find that he has been transformed into an insect, a giant insect. In this narrative we clearly find reality mingling with the absurd, a mingling theme carried into *The Trial* but devoid of pata-purpose.

From the real puppetry of Jarry, one could argue that Joseph K. is like a cartoon character suspended over an abyss, about to fall to his death except that in the dream world of Kafka, Joseph K. is suspended in permanent animation hanging to a thread of interpretations of what could possibly happen next. He could die, maybe he died, or his fictional character has achieved immortality. I agree with Airaksinen that K.'s execution is "an ethernity". What happens to Joseph K. and what he does is comical and, I believe that Kafka did not intend for us to take it seriously.

So, for the purposes of this review then I'll assume that Kafka is playing the pataphysician in the fantasy land of imagination (this is, paradoxically, yet another interpretation by this reviewer). In order to re-acquaint oneself again with the novel, first read in 1970s as an undergraduate, it was a quixotic trial for the reviewer in re-reading *The Trial* as a retired academic. As an undergraduate we were all aware of Kafka's existentialism and the theatre of the absurd. But now, on re-reading the novel, I am in an imagined pataphysical universe in 2025, wherein the anarchy of the world and its pataphysics of dreams can be framed within the infinite boundaries of a Kafkaesque world of injustices, justice delayed, justice denied.

Therefore, I believe that one should go back to read the 1915 novella *The Metamorphosis* published at the beginning of WWI with the threat of disorder and hopelessness. The disorder that Kafka experienced continues in 2024 but when it is coupled with a magical understanding of the 21st century threat of war and disorder, a Kafkaesque anxiety returns for humans today. This anxiety has been built into the escapist theme of modern science-fiction literature with the terror and dystopia from extra-

terres*trial*s. Pataphysically, Kafka's despair has penetrated our whole age. We explore this later on.

2. Theatre of the Absurd

I agree with Airaksinen that pataphysics is about the absurd, and that *The Trial* could be described as absurd. Time is non-linear in the novel. However, in a world that is post-pandemic, our own understanding of reality in 2025 is as limited and relative as it was for Franz Kafka in early twentieth century Europe. So, it was for Kafka in Prague, Kingdom of Bohemia, and, later in Berlin and Vienna. Old empires were crumbling, disorder and chaos were everywhere and Kafka's struggle with the anxiety and despair of the unknown is channelled into his autobiographical letters and diaries.[1] So what happens in the unpublished novel *The Trial* is not real at all, but, I believe, it is a figment of Kafka's vivid imagination. I accept that in his career as a lawyer in Prague (1908 - 1917) he witnessed that the law was not justice, not fair justice. We no longer know what Kafka himself was thinking – we will never know. We could glean from letters and diaries published[2] in Czech. But many are lost, believed confiscated during the WWII years.

Nonetheless, the distribution of justice in 1920s and today in 2020s, 100 years later, is as random as the selection of a staircase by Joseph K. in the courtyard of the novel. Haunted by Willem's comments on guilt and shame, Joseph K. ascends a random staircase and realises that the location of the inquiry room is at the top of whatever staircase he ascends. It is a bad dream, a nightmare, the distribution of justice is so random as to be unfair. In the penultimate chapter of this unpublished novel Joseph K. realises the disturbing truth that 'lies are made into a universal system'. That system is the justice system; it is an extensive organisation, a vast judicial ecosystem with The Court at the centre operating like Descartes' Evil Genius.[3]

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[1] In particular his letter to his father published in 1919 *Brief an den Vater* but never delivered, based on an early story *Das Urteil* published in 1913 about struggles with everyday life.

[2]The letters that Kafka wrote to Milena Jesenska between 1920-1923 were originally published in 2001 by Franz Kafka Publishing House, translated from Czech to English by Vera Koubova.

[3] Rene Descartes *Mediations on First Philosophy* 4th edition.

Now, there is a pataphysical conundrum that the patapaper ought to address. Kafka, who died 100 years ago this year, was duped posthumously by his trusted friend Max Brod whom he instructed, as the executor of his will, to destroy all his literary work – letters, diaries, novels that could have remained unpublished. Some do remain lost. Without Max Brod there would have been no *trial* for Joseph K., indeed no *castle* in which to locate a Borgesian labyrinth of Kafka's literary letters and novels.

The pataphysical conundrum: what if Kafka deliberately chose Max Brod knowing that he would not honour his wishes to destroy his letters and novels after his death. The unreality in the novel has been immortalised forever as Kafkaesque. Therein lies the absurdity of the unpublished novel. Did Kafka draft *The Trial* as published or have we all been reading an edited version in the form and style of Max Brod, himself a German language essayist? We do not know; we cannot grasp this possibility as critics; we become anxious as readers and commentators.

What if Kafka really preferred not to publish? I agree with Airaksinen that scholars are "not honest" about *The Trial* but pataphysically Max Brod's published text in 1926 *sic* "may not allow what the author (Kafka) wants to say". We know that Max Brod re-edited *The Missing Person* and renamed it *Amerika* on publication in 1927. Significantly, given Brod's edits, is the published draft of *The Trial* really Kafka's draft as intended? Many believe that *The Trial* is about something else – religion, philosophy, mathematics, infinity, threat to human race, injustice *inter alia*. I doubt if it is pataphysical novel or a novel with a pataphysical meaning. Yes, a pataphysical meaning can be imposed upon it for interpretation, but ultimately it is not a pataphysical novel in the parody tradition of Jarry[4]. There is no deliberate exaggeration of Joseph K.'s life for comic effect. Rather, Franz Kafka toyed with interpretations of reality combining semiotics in fiction with absurd analysis and literary theory.

3. Pataphysics of Evil

The Court like the Evil Genius perverts justice in infinity. I can accept that Airaksinen's paper is a pataphysical essay that focuses on the

[4] Jarry's *Ubu Roi*, it has been argued, parodies many Shakespearean plays, notably Macbeth.

penultimate chapters of *The Trial*. In the critical acclaim of his work there is the fantasy of what Kafka represents rather than on Kafka himself. So, it is in this patapaper too. After 100 years, it is the unreality in Kafka's work that attracts us to review and comment. That type of unreality Franz Kafka described in *The Trial* is *Kafkaesque* rather than pataphysical. It is that *The Trial* enables us, as readers, to realise evil virtually, at a distance, by making evil both real and spectral. This is Kafkaesque but I'd require more convincing as to how this article can shed light on a pataphysical interpretation of *The Trial,* Airaksinen focuses on the penultimate chapters. But we all have the nightmares and dreams that haunted Joseph K. in those chapters. In order to fully support this pataphysical commentary a key question remains unanswered: is it evil or misfortune that besets Joseph K. when he is arrested and interrogated? By his own actions he appears and acts guilty. The "physick-candle" does not really clarify this point sufficiently. There is no magic wand. Maybe in the penultimate chapters we have entered Baudrillard's dialectic of reality and appearance, his "integral reality" – the realization of the world in its immediacy.

The "inward turning spiral" that haunted Joseph K. as he tried to get a distance between reality and imagination is an inward collapse of the mind as we dream of electric sheep. Are Joseph K. in *The Trial* and K. in *The Castle* identical like Rachael and Pris,[5] each looking for information and understanding of the world in order to believe in their own identity? So, in the search for an answer we have to ask: where is Joseph K. as he circumvents the cathedral with the Priest speaking ex-cathedra? Is he dreaming in a hyper-reality?

4. Fantastic Ethernity

I agree with Airaksinen that there is a religious undertone to *The Trial*. Max Brod ensured that to be the case by his re-editing. But there remains a pataphysical question unanswered: does the Devil exist, or does he want the reader to think that s/he exists? Is it the Prince of Darkness or the Priest? Could Joseph K.'s struggle be a portrayal of the Devil? Isn't *Ubu*

[5] Rachael and Pris are the identical characters in Philip K Dicks (1968) dystopian novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*? And later in Ridley Scott's 1982 film *Blade Runner*.

Roi a playful commentary on the greed and corruption in society at a moment in time? But are all our achievements reduced to a farce, a comedy of errors? Can we escape these nightmares? Yes. Introduce a story about an ordinary Joseph K., a story that confounds and surprises. In the pataphysical world of imagination, stories abound.

Airaksinen points us to Kafka's *Amerika,* 20th century novel. But if we are pointed to *Amerika* in non-linear time then we are dreaming of a new life as Kafka was himself, dreaming of a new world in the future. A world to which Joseph K. could escape. So, in the Borgesian infinity of dreams then we should also read a 21st century novel[6] *Alchemy* as we travel back in time to 16th century Prague where the hunt for immortality and infinity ends in death - not dissimilar to Joseph K.'s hunt that had him wandering around the cathedral in 20th century Prague. Kafka ensured that, through the good offices of Max Brod, both Kafka and Joseph K.'s hunt for immortality would be realized.

Early on in his paper Airaksinen (2024: 75) comments: "This chapter is exceptional even for Kafka because it contains such a surreal exchange between Joseph K. and the Priest. I treat this chapter as paradigmatic pataphysics. I will show that its patamethod allows us to understand this curious chapter in a new light, or we can understand why it cannot be understood and why it is inconsistent with the end of the narrative, which looks like the death of K." While I can agree with Airaksinen that *sic* "such inconsistencies are food for pata-analysis" I would go further in my commentary and suggest that there is a fantastical interpretation about the novel, a form of magic realism in the sense that Brod's divine punishment was to ensure his own immortality with his own[7] writings and editions of Kafka's unpublished work. The impossible exchanges between Joseph K. and the Priest can be explained. It could be about immortality. But there is only one God. The death of K. was the beginning of Franz Kafka's and Max Brod's immortality. This should be a candidate for the "fantastic ethernity" addressed in the patapaper? Or is this a nod to Kafka's letter to Milena,[8] wherein he searches for an eternity - the *ether* in *ethernity*

[6] The historical thriller novel *Alchemy* (2023) by S.J. Parris.

[7] Notably the publication in 2008 of *The Office Writings*, supposedly a set of short stories written by Kafka when he was a young insurance lawyer

[8] Read https://medium.com/@sakafle/the-timeless-beauty-of-kafkas-letters-to-milena-4b1c92f5fd3a and also https://withagreenscarf.wordpress.com/2017/10/18/franz-kafka-letters-to-milena/

providing immortality, as he writes: "I am tired, can't think of anything and want only to lay my face in your lap, feel your hand on my head and remain like that through all eternity."

Max Brod achieved immortality, as did Joseph K. and Kafka himself, a humble lawyer in 1910s/20s Prague. Name another lawyer, name his superior at the Worker's Accident Insurance Institute in Prague where he imposed new regulations on safety and social policy on unwilling employers. He was not popular, as a bureaucrat. So, the passages in the novel, the exchanges between Joseph K. and the Priest are dreams, what-ifs, contorted images that we the reader have to walk inside, tormented as readers of the novel as we too have to experience the exchanges to be scary but pataphysically benign.

5. Waiting in Parallel Worlds

So, Airaksinen's patapaper does achieve what was the intention *sic* "my article is an exercise in pataphysically understood psychology applied to literature." It is the psychology of the mind, where there is despair and anguish as Joseph K. faces his executioners. However, in Airaksinen's article we have a conundrum, an absurdity in the tradition of Beckett's question: why wait for Godot?

Airaksinen comments on how K. expects his executioners to arrive, although nothing in the earlier chapters of *The Trial* justifies this. Why is he expecting them? The reader does not know. The solution: The last chapter is K.'s bad dream, which results from the horror of meeting the dark priest in the cathedral. His two executioners are comic characters and the whole narrative is ridiculous.

But do we ever manage to understand what Kafka is trying to say? The whole narrative may not be ridiculous; it is a pataphysical manifestation of a world of dreams and imaginations. Indeed, in the surrealist tradition it could be described as anti-bourgeois. The comic characters are like Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*, it is an illusion. This is not a critique of reality but a critique in the faith of reality. What Baudrillard (2004) calls "the vital illusion." We can see this more clearly within the narrative of the article as Airaksinen comments as follows: "The priest in the cathedral implicitly defines the trial as a waiting game, which should explain the ethernity, as described above. He tells K. a parable of the peasant. All this is pure pata. It is detailed, suggestive, and nonsensical. Its syzygies are plentiful, and its clinamen swerve in the darkness of verbal

space only to gather to form the fantastic ethernity, which does not illuminate the plot of *The Trial*." (page 8)

I'd disagree here, the parable does illuminate the plot, and it is not *sic* "pure-pata" but rather provides an existentialist perspective to the narrative. But more importantly, Adorno warned against[9] this external interpretation of "an inward life." The parable may have had a personal meaning to Kafka. Why do we assume a Biblical parable? There is forgiveness in a Lukan parable but there is a check on power in Kierkegaard's philosophical fragments originally published in 1844.[10] The free will of Kierkegaard may have influenced a young Kafka attending lectures at Charles University in Prague. There's no evidence. However, there is a link between the opening scenes in *The Trial* and from newly translated text from the philosophical fragments of Kierkegaard's in which Johannes Climacus "in his ignorance does not even know what provided the occasion for his questioning." The central issue of Johannes Climacus is doubt, he doubts everything, he despairs, and his life is wasted...Isn't that Joseph K.'s dilemma? From *The Trial* opening chapter *sic* "someone must have traduced Joseph K. for without having done anything wrong he was arrested." This is Kierkegaardian.

But the narrative in *The Trial* is also a form of magical realism and dreaming as described in the sentence *sic* "the law and its courts are, ultimately, totally indifferent regarding K. and K.'s criminal case: when he comes, they admit him; when he leaves, they dismiss him – he can come and go as he likes." Precisely, as in any game that can be characterised as 'waiting' the players have an allergy to collaboration as each as "can come and go as he likes."

Airaksinen (2024: 87) presents a sharper focus on pataphysics: "This is pure pata that tolerates and even invites textual anomalies, ambiguities, inconsistencies, and especially the identity of opposites. The result is aporia or truth we cannot comprehend or find." But, in my opinion, it is the comment *sic* "pataphysics is the science of alternate worlds" that elevates the ambiguities and inconsistencies in *The Trial* to the realm of science-fiction.

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[9]In the review of Orson Welles film adaptation of *The Trial* and cited by Alexander Duttman (2011).

[10]Citing a new translation of Philosophical Fragments/Johannes Climacus https://www.goodreads.com/en/book/show/95266

6. Science-Fiction

Science-fiction is a thought experiment that places humans in a surreal place. Franz Kafka placed Joseph K. in a surreal place. Yet what resonates most about *The Trial* is its ambivalence about the prospect of imagination and irreality transcending reality itself. Yes, I agree with the author that there is no fixed interpretation of *The Trial*, but I would suggest that it could be more meaningfully understood from a pataphysical point of view if it was portrayed as a science fiction novel - but in the strictest sense of Chinese science fiction. I'd recommend and suggest, for example, that Jarry's *clinamen* from the cosmic space might help to explain the unpredictability and, negotiations in the "3-Body-Problem", a new televised adaptation of how science-fiction emerged from the Chinese cultural revolution.[11] Scientists struggle with bureaucracy as lawyers struggle in *The Trial*. Again, it's absurd.

At the opening page Airaksinen reminds the reader that *sic* "pataphysics means surrealism applied to science or surrealistic science''. Science-fiction is surreal. There are parallels with Jarry's pataphysical philosophy. In particular, the "3-Body-Problem" is part of a *first-contact* genre in science-fiction where humans contend with extra-terrestrial threat to life on Earth. Like the sword of Damocles there is also a threat hanging over Joseph K. and, over all of humanity. The threat is the legacy of evil. Then we could argue that it is naïve for an interpretation of *The Trial* to be anchored to a pataphysical genre in the tradition of *Ubu Roi* with evil-minded bad guys, the Court, the Priest, masquerading as puppets or cartoon characters from dreams. The theme of *The Trial* is one of apathy, entirely consistent with the definition of Weltschmerz. Did Kafka really care about real people experiencing life as portrayed in the novel? Are real people the puppets of his imagination or is Joseph K. a puppet actor in an incredible story of fantastical imaginens?

Furthermore, *The Trial* is dense, and cleverly written, dense with surrealist images, mathematical undertones with time bending prose and elements of philosophy. Imagine that a naively innocent bank clerk, Joseph K., wakes up one morning only to learn that he has been arrested

[11] *Remembrance of Earth's Past* is the Chinese science-fiction trilogy by Liu Cixin published in 2006 but adapted by Netflix for March 2024 release as *3-Body Problem.* Check https://www.netflix.com/ie/title/81024821

for an unspecified crime. But he does things that makes him appear guilty so his executioners assume that he must be guilty. As Kafka said in Chapter IX *The Cathedral*: 'the proceedings gradually merge into the judgement'. The three different staircases in the courtyard confused Joseph K. and the memory of Willem's remark about guilt created a bad dream experience for him. The room for the inquiry would be located at the top of whatever staircase he selected. It's absurd.

7. Final Commentary

I am not entirely convinced about a pataphysical interpretation of *The Trial*. It is not the stage to illustrate "how pata is done and what its results are like." The patapaper is an attempt to adapt Jarry's neologisms. But they could easily be adapted within the language and narrative of parallel universes that is shaping from modern science fiction. *The Trial* pataphysically speaking, leaves a *trail* of evil and chaos, an imaginary universe of memes and fictional characters. So, maybe *The Trial* is simply nothing more than a parable about a frustrated man or a great example of Baudrillard's "integral reality". In that reality, the world as described by Kafka and, what has been described by many as Kafkaesque, is nothing more than "the world as it is and as it has been". It's absurd. On that point *The Trial* is a pataphor: *The Trial* is lost in the trail of fantastical imaginens. I doubt if Jarry would have understood Kafka. He would have been indifferent to the suffering of Joseph K.. Pataphysically, they could have overlapped in the 1890s in a theatre reading of HG Wells *The Time Machine* in the company of Gide and Lautrec. It's absurd.

Airaksinen's PataKafka paper proffers an interesting perspective on *The Trial*. I agree there is no fixed interpretation. I doubt if Kafka himself had an interpretation other than to funnel his surrealism in a posthumously published novel in order to achieve immortality. Kafka was a humble lawyer, a bureaucrat who had terrible guilt about the decisions he had to make. The bad dreams and nightmares are codified in *The Trial* as an unreality, an evil awakening of the brutal reality of life. It's absurd. It's a dream, contorted images of bad dreams that sit on your shoulder like the Christian Angel – there are always ghosts in "the vital illusion."

No doubt the novel's endurance and continuous interpretations owes in part to Franz Kafka's trust in Max Brod. It reads like a dream "in which

reality is entangled with imagination."[12] In real life neither Franz nor Max would have identified with a character like Joseph K.. It's absurd. But they all achieved immortality. I agree with Airaksinen (2024: 89) that "only the common sense of a nonsense thinker" searches for an interpretation or identity with Joseph K..

The absurdity and imaginary of the pataphysical narrative is best captured in a painting by the surrealist Leonora Carrington entitled[13] 'Are You Really Syrius?' It is a complicated image. Have a look online. Do you think Franz Kafka was really serious? Franz Kafka placed Joseph K. in a surreal place. *The Trial* is a gripping and complicated account of K.'s helplessness. So, it is for Harry Haller in Hermann Hesse's *Steppenwolf*,[14] also published in 1927, described by *New York Times* as "a gripping and fascinating story of disease in a man's soul." Our individual purpose in life, its meaning, and our identity is not given by an Evil Genius, or by a God, or by a Priest or by a Court, nor is it threatened by the Devil or extra-terrestrials – we, alone, are responsible, you, and me, the reader, and Joseph K..

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[12] Quoting from the dust jacket of a 1966 edition of *The Trial* published as Penguin Modern Classics Number 907: England.

[13] Pataphysically, the word "syrius" and derivations like "serious" have a Polish-Czeck etymology.

[14] In 1946, Hesse was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature for his entire body of literature including *Steppenwolf*.

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