

Completeness and Coherence of Kafka's Worlds

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Abstract: The study offers a novel perspective on Franz Kafka's novels *The Trial* and *The Castle*. Unlike other analyses that emphasize the supernatural power of the court and the castle as embodied in dehumanized bureaucratic structures, this study highlights the role of the subjects in shaping and functioning within these structures. Methodologically, it examines the phenomena of missing or distorted information and analyzes how these types of information contribute to the specific semantic construction of the novels, resulting in their (in)completeness and (in)coherence.

Keywords: Franz Kafka, novels *Proces* (*The Trial*), *Zámek* (*The Castle*), completeness, coherence

The unique worlds crafted in Franz Kafka's novels, particularly *The Trial* and *The Castle*, have captured the attention of both literary scholars and the general public since their publication. The striking

originality of these unsettling worlds is evidenced by the widespread adoption of the term “Kafkaesque,” which refers to “frightening and confusing realms that echo the unsettling situations depicted in Kafka's prose” (Dictionary). Moreover, based on the general atmosphere Kafka's narratives evoke, they are often interpreted as allegories, presenting nightmarish visions of corrupted and authoritarian systems upheld by relentless, faceless bureaucracy.

This interpretation raises intriguing questions: What intrinsic qualities within Kafka's writing lead readers and scholars alike to perceive his fictional realms as representations of oppressive, bureaucratic regimes? And: What structural characteristics and semantic patterns define these worlds so distinctly, enabling them to resonate as allegories of systemic absurdity and existential dread?

It is a matter of fact that the surreal completeness of Kafka's worlds arises from a constant clash between natural and supernatural domains within a setting that outwardly appears unified. These fictional realms, initially perceived as cohesive, reveal upon closer examination a unique, hybrid nature, as Lubomír Doležel defines this types of worlds:

The hybrid world is a coexistence, in one unified fictional space, of the physically possible and physically impossible fictional entities [...]. All phenomena and events of the hybrid world, both those physically possible and physically impossible, are generated within this world, spontaneously and haphazardly. (Doležel, 2003, pp. 187–188)

These worlds oscillate between realism and surrealism, embodying the absurdity and alienation Kafka's works convey. This complex blend creates an environment where familiar social structures take on an eerie, distorted quality, enhancing the reader's sense of disorientation and helplessness within Kafka's unsettling, landscapes.

Moreover, these supernatural forces originating in the supernatural domain impose their influence through an all-encompassing, impersonal bureaucracy, which produces subjects who seem dehumanized, distant, and alienated. These particular subjects play an essential role, not only in the construction of the fictional worlds presented in Kafka's novels but also in shaping how readers perceive and interpret these worlds. Furthermore, as we will explore, these subjects significant



tly contribute to the formation and ultimate structure of the worlds they inhabit, suggesting that their roles go beyond passive existence and actively shape the narrative environment.

To uncover the essence of Kafka's worlds and the specific effect they exert on readers, we can propose a hypothesis that links this effect to the semiotic characteristics of these worlds. This hypothesis uses the concepts of (in)completeness and (in)coherence to describe the underlying structure of Kafka's fictional realities. According to fictional worlds theory, incompleteness is a fundamental quality of all fictional worlds: "Actual worlds appear to be undoubtedly real, complete, and consistent, while fictional worlds are intrinsically incomplete and inconsistent" (Pavel, 1986, s. 74). Fictional worlds, by their nature, are incomplete because they are founded on finite fictional texts; only an infinite text could conceivably create a fully complete fictional world.

However, for the purposes of this analysis, we can suggest that, beyond this inherent incompleteness of fictional worlds, other types of incompleteness should also be considered. These additional types can be grouped under the broader concept of *aesthetic incompleteness*. Aesthetic incompleteness can be further divided into two interconnected sub-types: *general aesthetic incompleteness*, which is determined by genre-based aesthetic norms shared among readers and writers, and *authorial aesthetic incompleteness*, which stems from the unique stylistic choices and idiosyncrasies of specific authors. Together, these sub-types influence and often significantly impact the reader's interpretation of the text, leading to an experience of incoherence within the fictional worlds.

This hypothesis asserts that both essential incompleteness and Kafka's specific, stylized incompleteness can be traced back to his texts, and both are rooted in the deliberate withholding of specific information. Missing information, therefore, emerges as the primary source of perceived incompleteness and incoherence. To understand this phenomenon in greater detail, we can differentiate between two categories: information that is "genuinely absent" and information that is "somehow obscured or distorted." The latter includes elements

that are complex, seemingly random, circular, redundant, chaotic, unverifiable, or even contradictory. This distorted information creates an effect similar to that of genuinely missing information – it behaves in the interpretive process as if it were absent, contributing to the reader's experience of an incomplete or incoherent world.

This effect can be achieved through various literary devices and narrative strategies. For the purposes of this analysis, we can hypothesize that missing or nearly-missing information generates substantial incoherence across multiple levels within Kafka's fictional worlds. This incoherence permeates the dimensions of time and space, disrupts the general narrative setting, and even affects the portrayal of the worlds' subjects, all contributing to the surreal and unsettling experience of reading Kafka.

In the work of Franz Kafka, missing information can generally be detected in almost every aspect of the fictional world. However, the primary source of this nearly-missing information is closely connected to an entity or quality that I refer to as the *System*. By System, I mean a complex, omnipresent structure embedded within the very fabric of the fictional world, functioning as a governing, regulating, and dominating force. This System possesses a supernatural or near-supernatural essence, forming a hybrid structure in conjunction with the world it shapes. Symbolically, the System is represented in *The Trial* by the Court, and in *The Castle* by the Castle itself. Both the Court and the Castle serve as emblems of a pervasive, overarching System imposed upon the world and its inhabitants.

A defining feature of this System is its inherent *uncertainty*. There is no manual, no set of clear guidelines that would grant access to the underlying *Meaning* of the world. As a result, the System remains perpetually obscure and ambiguous. All attempts to decipher its hierarchy, operational methods, or executive authority are muddled in a haze of conflicting terminology and varied interpretations. Thus, the essential question of the relationship between the embodiments of the System and the "outer" world must be posed and carefully examined to grasp its impact on the fictional environment in Kafka's works.

As previously suggested, the System under analysis is conventionally portrayed as an invisible, inhuman construct imposed from above onto its subjects. This inhuman structure appears to stand in stark contrast to the human characters – seemingly defenseless subjects who are subjected to the System’s all-encompassing, seemingly omnipotent power. The System’s bureaucratic apparatus seems designed to minimize or even nullify any space for individual free will, trapping the subjects in a network of procedures, rules, and decisions that they neither fully comprehend nor control. As a result, Kafka’s characters navigate a world in which their autonomy is constantly curtailed by the oppressive reach of the supernatural System.

This sense of limited agency and omnipresent oversight underscores the profound alienation that Kafka’s characters experience. Struggling to make sense of a System that is deliberately opaque and resistant to interpretation, they find themselves isolated within a world governed by forces that appear simultaneously random and meticulous, chaotic yet rigid. The characters’ interactions with the System illustrate their perpetual entrapment within an incomprehensible framework, reflecting Kafka’s broader themes of existential anxiety, isolation, and the search for meaning in an indifferent universe.

To illustrate the reach and dominance of this enigmatic force, let us consider two compelling examples where the System’s authority is exercised over the central figures in our respective books. In the first example, the System of the Court responds to a seemingly trivial action: Josef K. casually invents a name to justify his presence in the house of the Court. Remarkably, the System seizes upon this name and reacts in a positive, yet utterly inexplicable, manner. This minor, impulsive decision by Josef K. becomes a pivotal moment, as it sets him inexorably on the path toward his ultimate destiny. What begins as a random utterance evolves into an act laden with consequence, highlighting the System’s ability to transform even the most insignificant details into instruments of its overarching design.

This interplay between chance and inevitability underscores the pervasive and often inscrutable power of the System. It demonstrates

how individuals, regardless of their intentions or awareness, are subject to forces that operate beyond their understanding. Josef K.’s fate is no longer his own; from the moment the System acknowledges his excuse, his journey toward a predetermined outcome becomes unavoidable. The arbitrary yet calculated nature of the System’s response serves as a stark reminder of its omnipotence and the futility of resisting its grip:

“Is there a joiner called Lanz who lives here?” he asked. “Pardon?” said a young woman with black, shining eyes who was, at that moment, washing children’s underclothes in a bucket. She pointed her wet hand towards the open door of the adjoining room. (Trial)

In the second example, K. encounters Artur and Jeremias, two figures who assert that they are his “old assistants.” Strangely, K. has no recollection of them, and for good reason: these individuals were not part of his past but were rather created and inserted into the village by the mysterious and omnipotent authority of the Castle. Despite the glaring implausibility of their claim, K. eventually acquiesces, accepting both their presence and their alleged role in his life.

This moment serves as a vivid demonstration of the Castle’s ability to alter reality and impose its will on those within its sphere of influence. The sudden appearance of Artur and Jeremias, along with K.’s reluctant acceptance of their fabricated backstory, reveals the extent to which the Castle can manipulate perceptions and reshape personal histories. K.’s initial skepticism gives way to resignation, as he finds himself unable to challenge the Castle’s narrative. This submission illustrates a recurring theme: the subjects of the System are not only governed by external forces but are also compelled to internalize and adapt to the realities those forces construct.

Moreover, K.’s eventual acceptance of Artur and Jeremias can be interpreted as a testament to the psychological weight exerted by the System. Over time, the Castle’s dominance wears down even the most rational objections, leaving its subjects in a state of compliance, if not outright complicity. This surrender highlights the futility of resistance against an entity whose power extends beyond the physical realm into

the very identity and memory. Ultimately, this episode emphasizes the Castle's role as an omnipresent force that redefines truth and loyalty at its whim. K.'s submission to the fabricated narrative underscores the inescapable grip of the System and its ability to shape not only actions but beliefs, further entangling its subjects in a web of control from which there seems to be no escape.

Only when he reached the top of the steps, to be respectfully greeted by the landlord, did he see two men, one on each side of the door. Taking the lantern from the landlord's hand, he shone it on the pair of them; they were the men he had already met and who had been addressed as Artur and Jeremias. They saluted him. Reminded of the happy days of his military service, he laughed. 'Well, so who are you?' he asked, looking from one to the other. 'Your assistants,' they replied. 'That's right, they're the assistants,' the landlord quietly confirmed. 'What?' asked K. 'Do you say you're my old assistants who were coming on after me and whom I'm expecting?' They assured him that they were. 'Just as well, then,' said K. after a little while. 'It's a good thing you've come. What's more,' he added after another moment's thought, 'you're extremely late. That's very remiss of you.' 'It was a long way,' said one of them. 'A long way?' K. repeated. 'But I saw you coming down from the castle.' 'Yes,' they agreed, without further explanation. 'What have you done with the instruments?' asked K. 'We don't have any,' they said. 'I mean the surveying instruments that I entrusted to you,' said K. 'We don't have any of those,' they repeated. 'What a couple you are!' said K. 'Do you know anything about land surveying?' 'No,' they said. 'But if you claim to be my old assistants, then you must know something about it,' said K. They remained silent. 'Oh, come along, then,' said K., pushing them into the house ahead of him. (Castle)

In both examples, the supernatural powers of the Court and the Castle substantially determine the fundamental structure of the natural world. While these forces do not directly drive the progression of the plot, they underscore the limited agency of the subjects within this framework. The influence of the System over its subjects appears absolute and inescapable, leaving little room for individual autonomy. The subjects' fates seem predetermined, their roles reduced to mere instruments within a larger, incomprehensible design.

Yet, a paradox emerges: despite its seemingly omnipotent nature, the System is intrinsically tied to human beings. It is, to a significant extent, constructed, enacted, and explained by individuals from the

"outer" world. The officials, messengers, and assistants who serve the Court and the Castle act as intermediaries, channeling the System's power into the tangible realm. This raises a compelling question: is the System truly an autonomous, otherworldly force, or is it merely an extension of human will, perpetuated by those who operate within its machinery? And: Can the System exist independently of the people who sustain it, or is its authority dependent on their complicity and belief? These questions challenge the perception of the System as an all-encompassing entity and invite us to scrutinize the extent of its autonomy.

To investigate this hypothesis, let us now turn to a pivotal moment – a famous passage from the very end of *The Trial*. This excerpt provides crucial insight into the relationship between the System and its human agents, offering a deeper understanding of whether the power of the Court is truly supernatural or if it derives its strength from the very subjects it subjugates.

K. now knew it would be his duty to take the knife as it passed from hand to hand above him and thrust it into himself. But he did not do it, instead he twisted his neck, which was still free, and looked around. He was not able to show his full worth, was not able to take all the work from the official bodies, he lacked the rest of the strength he needed and this final shortcoming was the fault of whoever had denied it to him. As he looked round, he saw the top floor of the building next to the quarry. He saw how a light flickered on and the two halves of a window opened out, somebody, made weak and thin by the height and the distance, leant suddenly far out from it and stretched his arms out even further. Who was that? A friend? A good person? Somebody who was taking part? Somebody who wanted to help? Was he alone? Was it everyone? Would anyone help? Were there objections that had been forgotten? There must have been some. The logic cannot be refuted, but someone who wants to live will not resist it. Where was the judge he'd never seen? Where was the high court he had never reached? He raised both hands and spread out all his fingers.

But the hands of one of the gentlemen were laid on K.'s throat, while the other pushed the knife deep into his heart and twisted it there, twice. As his eyesight failed, K. saw the two gentlemen cheek by cheek, close in front of his face, watching the result. "Like a dog!" he said, it was as if the shame of it should outlive him. (Trial)

As can be interpreted, on the one hand, the subjects are unquestionably governed by the System – a force so pervasive that it holds the

ultimate authority over their lives, even to the point of sentencing them to death and carrying out their executions; this highlights the System's absolute power and its capacity to dictate the fate of its subjects with a finality that leaves no room for appeal or resistance. On the other hand, the situation is more complex. The subjects are not merely passive victims of this overarching authority; they are also relentlessly compelled to engage with the System on a personal level. They are forced to confront their position within its hierarchy, reflect on their role and perceived guilt, and adopt behaviors that align with the System's expectations. This dynamic creates a paradoxical relationship between the subjects and the System: while they are subordinated to its commands, they are simultaneously required to exercise agency, albeit within the narrow confines prescribed by the System.

The System imposes a psychological burden that extends beyond its direct actions. Subjects are not only judged by the System but are also coerced into judging themselves, constantly evaluating their own culpability and adjusting their conduct to fit the framework imposed upon them. This relentless self-scrutiny and forced decision-making deepen their entanglement with the System, as they become complicit in perpetuating its authority through their own actions and internalized guilt.

This duality – the coexistence of oppressive external control and enforced internal agency – reveals the true nature of the System's power. It operates not only through coercion and punishment but also by shaping the very thoughts and choices of its subjects, ensuring their compliance even as they struggle to assert their own identity and moral standing. The result is a cycle of subjugation in which the subjects, though apparently powerless, are made to bear the weight of their supposed autonomy within a system that ultimately denies them any real freedom.

Formally, the system is experienced, described, and explained by the subjects through their actions and reasoning within specific fictional worlds. These actions vary in origin, direction, function, and influence. Some can be characterized as perpetual, repetitive, or spiral in

nature, while others are marked by randomness and chaos. This element of unpredictability is inherently tied to the subjects themselves, serving as the primary source of their worlds' incoherence and instability.

However, actions alone do not encapsulate the entirety of what defines the subjects. Equally significant are their reasonings, which offer insights into their decision-making processes and perspectives. These two components – mind and action – are deeply interwoven, forming the essence of what it means to be a subject. The dynamic interplay between thought and behavior highlights the complexity of subjectivity, revealing a nuanced and multifaceted existence.

When analyzing Kafka's subjects, it is essential to emphasize the partial yet stark incongruence between their actions and reasoning – a disconnect that is occasionally thematized within his works. This misalignment plays a pivotal role in shaping the subject's motivation, ultimately influencing its sense of certainty and integrity.

To illustrate this, we can turn to one of the early passages in *The Castle*, where Kafka explicitly addresses K.'s motivation to confront a particular challenge. This passage sheds light on the inner workings of K.'s psyche, demonstrating how his reasoning often diverges from the actions he takes, and how this divergence impacts his ability to navigate the complex and opaque world of the Castle:

K. pricked up his ears. So the Castle had recognised him as the Land Surveyor. That was unpropitious for him, on the one hand, for it meant that the Castle was well informed about him, had estimated all the probable chances, and was taking up the challenge with a smile. On the other hand, however, it was quite propitious, for if his interpretation were right they underestimated his strength, and he would have more freedom of action than he had dared to hope. And if they expected to cow him by their lofty superiority in recognising him as Land Surveyor, they were mistaken; it made his skin prickle a little, that was all. (Castle)

While it is evident that K. is weighing his chances of challenging the Castle, the precise nature of this challenge remains ambiguous. Not only do the cause and purpose of the challenge stay unclear, but K.'s initial motivation also appears singular and is not revisited throu-

ghout the narrative. From his subsequent actions, it seems plausible to infer that K.'s ultimate desire is either to establish communication with the Castle or to gain recognition from it. This ambiguity serves as a striking example of the pervasive incongruence between the reasoning and actions of Kafka's subjects.

Furthermore, this complexity deepens when we recognize that similar inconsistencies can arise independently within the subjects' reasoning as well as within their actions. In other words, incongruence is not limited to the interplay between thought and behavior but can manifest separately in each domain. This phenomenon underscores the fundamentally subjective nature of the system.

First, the semiotics of the Court or Castle is interpreted and articulated through urban or village-based (inter)subjective mythologies developed by the subjects themselves. These myths, which are constructed, perpetuated, and applied to the "outer" world by the subjects, are inherently subjective and thus often inconsistent, alternative, and even contradictory.

As these myths are variably applied, they generate a plurality of subjective interpretations, which frequently clash and interfere with one another. This interference produces fragmented, incoherent, and contradictory streams of information about both the system and the "outer" world. The resulting cacophony of perspectives contributes to what can be described as the "missing information effect," where critical details about the system remain elusive, and the truth becomes an ever-shifting, elusive construct.

This effect is significantly amplified by the fact that the interfering information concerns not only the current state of the "outer" world but also its potential manifestations or actualizations. The process by which subjects make predictions and decisions embodies this phenomenon. This process emerges as a direct consequence of the imperative imposed on the protagonists and other characters by the existence of an elusive, self-concealing System. Simultaneously, it becomes a fundamental principle shaping the structure of Kafka's narratives.

Central to this is the protagonists' ongoing struggle to comprehend the System. Their understanding is constrained by limited and conflicting sources of information: The collective mythology of the city or village concerning the System, the social experience and lore passed down through the community, and their personal, subjective experiences with the System. These sources often clash, leading to a collision of narratives within the subjects' practical reasoning. As a result, any conclusions they draw become unstable and unreliable, shifting the narrative ground under both the characters and the readers.

This already convoluted process is further complicated by the subjects' approach to handling information in their reasoning. Individual pieces of conflicting information are dissected, questioned, and subjected to a form of dialectical distortion. This dialectical reasoning process fosters a recursive practice of deconstruction, whereby each assertion or conclusion is met with a counter-argument, and any seeming resolution is immediately destabilized. This forking of interpretations does not merely relativize the subjects' predictions about the System and the "outer" world; it fundamentally undermines any sense of narrative certainty.

For the reader, this recursive reasoning transforms the fictional world into a labyrinth of incoherence. The amplified subjectivity of the protagonists effectively divides the narrative reality, emphasizing a chasm between the System and the "outer" world. This narrative technique leads readers toward an interpretation that highlights the tension between ostensibly natural and supernatural realms, reinforcing the dominance of the latter over the former.

Consequently, Kafka's fictional universes, often interpreted as allegories of totalitarian or corrupt bureaucratic regimes, rest on a foundation of subjective distortion. The apparent objectivity of divided realms – between the natural and the bureaucratic or supernatural – is, upon closer inspection, deeply subjective. Kafka's worlds do not simply mirror external oppressive systems but reveal the inner workings of subjective perception and reasoning as the ultimate arbiters of their fragmented reality.

As we have established, the incompleteness and incoherence of Kafka's worlds can be understood as a consequence of missing or significantly distorted information. This not only contributes to the broader incoherence of the fictional world's setting (examples of which can be explored in the article) but, perhaps more critically, it also disrupts the coherence of the fictional characters themselves. Their "human qualities" – such as comprehension, motivation, and reasoning – are profoundly affected, rendering them fragmented and inconsistent.

This character-based incoherence functions as a core narrative technique in Kafka's work. By portraying characters whose understanding of their world is perpetually incomplete or contradictory, Kafka creates fictional universes that are inherently difficult to grasp, articulate, and explain. These worlds resist straightforward interpretation, leaving both characters and readers ensnared in a maze of ambiguity.

The narrative's complexity, therefore, stems not only from the systemic obfuscation and opacity of the world itself but also from the deeply flawed and subjective processes through which characters attempt to navigate their realities. This dual-layered incoherence – both environmental and personal – amplifies the challenge of making sense of Kafka's fictional worlds. As a result, these worlds become not only incomprehensible but also resistant to clear communication and definitive interpretation, underscoring the themes of alienation and existential uncertainty that pervade Kafka's work.

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