

How does Kafka present the trial as a bodily experience in *Der Prozess* to materialise bureaucratic legal authority?

Kafka's bureaucratic legal system in *Der Prozess* is depicted as an abstract, incomprehensible, and unidentifiable entity. To translate the oppressive and ruthless weight of the system upon the protagonist Josef K. into a sensory experience, Kafka imposes the system's bureaucratic weight upon the body. In this way, the author adroitly metamorphoses the law into a physical experience, allowing the reader to grasp the otherwise impalpable nature of the reimagined system. An astute utilisation of architectural spaces positions the body within the law's impenetrable authority. Through corporeal discomfort and other disorientating aspects, the text offers a perceptible anchor through which to experience the story. Lastly, sensual temptations recurrently present themselves within spaces relating to the trial, revealing a supplementary sphere of bodily perception.

With the work's memorable opening assertion, Kafka deprives the reader of any hope of ascertaining a reasoned foundation upon which to observe Josef K.'s story: 'Jemand musst Josef K. verleumdet haben, denn ohne daß er etwas Böses getan hätte, wurde er eines Morgens verhaftet'¹. As the following scenes unfold, a comparable deprivation of information continues. There are no clear charges explained to Josef K. prefiguring the arrest, there is no one identifiable authority figure with which to discuss the case, and those who are involved with his initial arrest even explain: 'Wir sind nicht dazu bestellt, Ihnen das zu sagen' when K. questions the grounds for his arrest². Furthermore, an absence of court documents prevails. At his first court 'Untersuchung' appearance, the examining magistrate mistakenly believes that

¹ Kafka, Franz. *Der Prozess Roman*. Wallstein Verlag, Göttingen, 2024, p.7.

² Kafka, Franz. *Der Prozess Roman*. Wallstein Verlag, Göttingen, 2024, p.9.

K.'s profession is that of a 'Zimmermaler' and his notes consist of a small 'Anmerkungsbuch [...]'. Es war schulheftig, alt, durch vieles Blättern ganz aus der Form gebracht'³⁴⁵. To exemplify how absurd the examining magistrate's note file is, K. is able 'kurzerhand das Heft dem Untersuchungsrichter wegzunehmen und es mit den Fingerspitzen, als scheue er sich davor, an einem mittleren Blatte hochzuheben, so dass beiderseits die engbeschriebenen fleckigen, gelbrandigen Blätter hinunterhiengen'⁶. Kafka utilises the tattered, compact nature of this notebook as a physical manifestation of Josef K.'s case to ridicule the lack of substance behind these legal proceedings, even to the very person examining them. The repercussions of K.'s unspecified crime follow him ubiquitously. From its very inception, the arrest manages to penetrate both his private life – at his home where he is arrested in front of his landlady Frau Grubach – and his professional life – embodied by the three clerks Rabensteiner, Kullick, and Kaminer, who are similarly present at the scene of K.'s initial arrest. Yet whilst this bureaucracy is seemingly omnipresent, it lacks any centre: oxymoronicly, it is concurrently everywhere and nowhere. There is no single authority figure or official location where the proceedings take place. Rather, bureaucracy takes the form of a multitude of individuals across a motley array of locations. Before long, it becomes clear that understanding the system is impossible, so that the reader and K. must instead rely on sensation rather than meaning. The system's material deficiency creates a vacuum which bodily experience endeavours to fill. As in so many of Kafka's works, the protagonist must accept the given situation as fact and work within its incomprehensible parameters. Whether it is Gregor Samsa's almost farcically mundane reaction to his overnight transformation into an *Ungeziefer* in *Die Verwandlung* or how a reader of *Das Urteil* must simply accept the notion of an invisible supernatural force which

³ Kafka, Franz. *Der Prozess Roman*. Wallstein Verlag, Göttingen, 2024, p.47.

⁴ Kafka, Franz. *Der Prozess Roman*. Wallstein Verlag, Göttingen, 2024, p.56.

⁵ Kafka, Franz. *Der Prozess Roman*. Wallstein Verlag, Göttingen, 2024, p.56.

⁶ Kafka, Franz. *Der Prozess Roman*. Wallstein Verlag, Göttingen, 2024, p.57.

mercilessly pushes Georg physically to his death, the reader is progressively enveloped by the surreal strictures of the Kafkaesque realm.

In *Der Prozess*, it is the human body that emerges as the only stable referent in a system which otherwise refuses explanation. The reader absorbs Kafka's ideas in an experiential, rather than analytical, way. Throughout his life and works, the author effectively executed this technique by acutely fixating upon the body. His lifelong preoccupation with corporeal matters is palpable. For instance, in his *Brief an den Vater*, Kafka recounts episodes in which he is taken swimming by his father. He describes his bodily insecurities when compared to the robust stature of his father and the significant mental impact this exerted upon him. He explains, 'Ich erinnere mich z.B. daran, wie wir uns öfters zusammen in einer Kabine ausgezogen', lamenting, 'Ich mager, schwach, schmal, Du stark, gross, breit. Schon in der Kabine kam ich mir jämmerlich vor und zwar nicht nur vor Dir, sondern vor der ganzen Welt, denn Du warst für mich das Mass aller Dinge'⁷. In his *Tagebücher*, there are various moments which focus on the body, including the bodily experience of writing. In his entry from 23rd September 1912, Kafka describes a night in which he feverishly wrote *Das Urteil*. In a fragmentary description, Kafka conveys that the process inflicted upon him 'vom Sitzen steif gewordenen Beine', 'Die leichten Herzschmerzen', 'Die in der Mitte der Nacht vergehende Müdigkeit', ascertaining, 'Nur so kann geschrieben werden, nur in einem solchen Zusammenhang, mit solcher vollständigen Öffnung des Leibes und der Seele'^{8,9,10,11}. As these passages illustrate, bodily experience emerges as the dominant theme which Kafka analyses with his habitual refined precision.

⁷ Kafka, Franz, *Brief an Den Vater: Mit Einem Unbekannten Bericht über Kafkas Vater Als Lehrherr Und Anderen Materialien*. Berlin: Wagenbach, 2004, p.17.

⁸ Kafka, Franz, *Tagebücher 1910 – 1923*. S. Fischer Verlag, Austria, 1967, p.209.

⁹ Kafka, Franz, *Tagebücher 1910 – 1923*. S. Fischer Verlag, Austria, 1967, p.210.

¹⁰ Kafka, Franz, *Tagebücher 1910 – 1923*. S. Fischer Verlag, Austria, 1967, p.210.

¹¹ Kafka, Franz, *Tagebücher 1910 – 1923*. S. Fischer Verlag, Austria, 1967, p.210.

Kafka embeds his protagonist within carefully selected architectural and spatial environments in order to convey bodily experience. It is recognised within some relevant technical publications that architecture can have a palpable effect on behaviour¹². For instance, banks utilise grandiose spaces and substantial materials such as marble to convey values of ‘security, trust, and reliability’¹³. Similarly, Shah and Kesan explain that such spatial positioning choices are present in the field of law, from the layout of a courtroom to the design of courthouse exteriors shifting over time from a classical style to a modern setting ‘akin to corporate headquarters’¹⁴. In *Der Prozess*, Kafka even makes the process of reaching the courts physically demanding. K. must undertake a labyrinthine navigation through the court building; the protagonist must even assume a particular guise to locate the correct room. Similar unfathomable physical entities also appear elsewhere in Kafka’s works. Despite an extensive description of the torture machine ‘Apparat’ in *In der Strafkolonie*, its portrayal is written in highly specified fragmentations, disintegrating its overall image in the mind of the reader. Equally, the appearance of the *Ungeziefer* into which Gregor Samsa is transformed; the reader is instead left grappling with descriptions of individual parts, without a comprehensible image of the creature which the protagonist has become.

Once Josef K. eventually locates the correct courts, they are physically oppressive: ‘die Sonne brennt hier auf das Dachgerüst’ and ‘das heisse Holz macht die Luft so dumpf und schwer’ whilst the business means the air is ‘kaum mehr atembar’, added to the damp from ‘vielfach

¹² Shah, Rajiv C., and Jay P. Kesan. “How architecture regulates.” *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research*, vol. 24, no. 4, 2007, p.351. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43030813>. Accessed 9 Jan. 2026.

¹³ Shah, Rajiv C., and Jay P. Kesan. “How architecture regulates.” *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research*, vol. 24, no. 4, 2007, p.351. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43030813>. Accessed 9 Jan. 2026.

¹⁴ Shah, Rajiv C., and Jay P. Kesan. “How architecture regulates.” *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research*, vol. 24, no. 4, 2007, p.352. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43030813>. Accessed 9 Jan. 2026.

Wäsche zum Trocken ausgehängt wird’ by the tenants¹⁵. This culminates in a force referred to as ‘das Drückende’¹⁶. These claustrophobic elements of the architecture manifest themselves in physical discomfort and sickness. In a scene in the court chambers, the atmosphere causes K. to have a spell of dizziness, experiencing a worrying ‘plötzliche Schwäche’ which those surrounding him account to the court condition described above¹⁷. He finds he can barely stand upright and ‘wie seekrank’. It is ‘als schaukle der Gang in der Quere und als würden die wartenden Parteien zu beiden Seiten gesenkt und gehoben’¹⁸. This fit of dizziness is clearly caused by the courts; those in the building confirm ‘das Unwohlsein des Herrn geht auf die Atmosphäre hier zurück, es wird daher am besten und auch ihm am liebsten sein wenn wir ihn nicht erst ins Krankenzimmer sondern überhaupt aus den Kanzleien hinausführen’¹⁹. By way of confirmation, the moment he leaves the building ‘Ihm war als wären alle seine Kräfte mit einem mal zurückgekehrt’²⁰. The endless corridors are so labyrinthian that Josef K. loses his way and cannot locate the exit. Architectural commentators suggest that the physical environment can mould perceptions or behaviour to such an extent that it may even be utilised to reduce criminal activity²¹. Kafka applies physical spaces to cultivate his image of an unidentifiable bureaucracy. The trial’s dizzying bodily effects are felt before mental effects. Additionally, acoustics play a role in the overall physical experience expounded in *Der Prozess*. Whitney draws on a sentence from Kafka’s posthumously titled *Fürsprecher* in which the author draws a connection between the ‘legal court’ and a ‘disorientating auditory

¹⁵ Kafka, Franz. *Der Prozess Roman*. Wallstein Verlag, Göttingen, 2024, p.84.

¹⁶ Kafka, Franz. *Der Prozess Roman*. Wallstein Verlag, Göttingen, 2024, p.85.

¹⁷ Kafka, Franz. *Der Prozess Roman*. Wallstein Verlag, Göttingen, 2024, p.85.

¹⁸ Kafka, Franz. *Der Prozess Roman*. Wallstein Verlag, Göttingen, 2024, p.89.

¹⁹ Kafka, Franz. *Der Prozess Roman*. Wallstein Verlag, Göttingen, 2024, p.86.

²⁰ Kafka, Franz. *Der Prozess Roman*. Wallstein Verlag, Göttingen, 2024, p.90.

²¹ Katyal, Neal Kumar. “Architecture as Crime Control.” *The Yale Law Journal*, vol. 111, no. 5, 2002, pp. 1039–139. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/797618>. Accessed 4 Apr. 2026.

experience'²². Kafka writes about 'ein Dröhnen, das unaufhörlich aus der Ferne zu hören war, man konnte nicht sagen aus welcher Richtung es kam, es erfüllte so sehr alle Räume'²³²⁴. This mirrors the disorienting incidents which the protagonist encounters within the courtroom precincts in *Der Prozess*. As the trial proceeds, the spaces into which K. enters become progressively more oppressive, ranging from the painter's suffocating studio to the intimidating setting of the vast cathedral and, ultimately, the desolate quarry where K is executed.

Domestic spaces also create physical vulnerability in *Der Prozess*, rendering the *heimlich* into an *unheimlich* setting²⁵. A significant example of this is the reimagination of beds as sites of vulnerability, rather than their habitual characterisation as safe havens of rest. At the very start of the novel, Josef K.'s arrest unfolds whilst he is, at first, still in bed. This setting amplifies the scale of intrusion by the authorities as they enter perhaps the most vulnerable and private space which humans have. Later in the novel, Josef K.'s uncle takes him to the advocate, who is lying in bed at home. This underscores the pervasive intrusion of the law into all spheres of private life. Here, the advocate is in bed due to illness, perhaps symbolising the weakness of forms of defence against the ruthlessness of law in the Kafkaesque literary world. Similar experiences take place in other of Kafka's works. In *Die Verwandlung*, Gregor Samsa's transformation happens after a night of restless sleep: 'Als Gregor Samsa eines Morgens aus unruhigen Träumen erwachte, fand er sich in seinem Bett zu einem ungeheueren Ungeziefer

²² Whitney, Tyler, "Listening to the Law: Acoustical Embodiment and Industrial Space in 'Der Proceß.'" *Colloquia Germanica*, vol. 46, no. 4, 2013, pp. 343–65. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44110832>. Accessed 9 Jan. 2026.

²³ Whitney, Tyler, "Listening to the Law: Acoustical Embodiment and Industrial Space in 'Der Proceß.'" *Colloquia Germanica*, vol. 46, no. 4, 2013, pp. 343–65. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44110832>. Accessed 9 Jan. 2026.

²⁴ «Fürsprecher.» *Die Erzählungen und andere ausgewählte Prosa*. Ed. Roger Hermes. Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 2006. 389–91 referenced by Whitney, Tyler, "Listening to the Law: Acoustical Embodiment and Industrial Space in 'Der Proceß.'" *Colloquia Germanica*, vol. 46, no. 4, 2013, pp. 343–65. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44110832>. Accessed 9 Jan. 2026.

²⁵ Extrapolated from verbal remarks made in a University of Oxford lecture by Professor Carolin Duttlinger for the German Undergraduate Preliminary Examinations in the academic year 2023/24.

verwandelt'²⁶. In *In der Strafkolonie*, Kafka's 'Apparat' comprises three distinct segments, with the lowest part being named 'das Bett'. The juxtaposition of a homely object, which one usually associates with safety and security, placed within a torture setting creates an *unheimlich* feel²⁷. Kafka carefully cultivates spaces to impress upon the body a material embodiment of oppression. This technique is identifiable in other Kafka works, whether it be the door motif apparent in *Die Verwandlung* or the stage-like setting in which the 'Apparat' is placed in *In der Strafkolonie*. By trapping bodies in uncomfortable or vulnerable spaces, Kafka mirrors the psychological imprisonment which his stories exert upon his protagonist.

Alongside the physical effects which the spaces in which the body is placed in the novel, *Der Prozess* also expresses legal power through its impact on how humans are physically presented. Though K. is informed that 'Sie sind verhaftet, gewiss, aber das soll Sie nicht hindern Ihren Beruf zu erfüllen. Sie sollen auch in Ihrer gewöhnlichen Lebensweise nicht gehindert sein', the trial's presence does not just hang over him mentally²⁸. After his arrest, the *Wächter* accompany him to his place of work, encapsulating the constant presence of the law in Josef K.'s life. During the chapter referred to as *Der Prügler*, Josef K. discovers the guards Willem and Franz being brutally flogged in the lumber-room at the bank²⁹. This scene exemplifies the physical effect which the law can exert even upon those who work within its system. The guards' uniforms also provide a visualisation of how the legal system may turn bodies into extensions of the bureaucratic order: the lengthy description of their uniforms renders them orderly and official. The first guard who appears wears an embellished suit which 'ohne dass man sich darüber klar wurde, wozu es dienen sollte, besonders praktisch erschien'³⁰. The court officials

²⁶ Kafka, Franz. *Erzählungen*. S. Fischer Verlag (Lizenzausgabe Von Schocken Books), New York, 1946, p.7

²⁷ Extrapolated from verbal remarks made in a University of Oxford lecture by Professor Carolin Duttlinger for the German Undergraduate Preliminary Examinations in the academic year 2023/24

²⁸ Kafka, Franz. *Der Prozess Roman*. Wallstein Verlag, Göttingen, 2024, p.21

²⁹ Kafka, Franz. *Der Prozess Roman*. Wallstein Verlag, Göttingen, 2024, p.91

³⁰ Kafka, Franz. *Der Prozess Roman*. Wallstein Verlag, Göttingen, 2024, p.7

recount how they purchased a suit for their colleague in order that he create a positive impression of the first court official one would meet. Similarly, the guards insist K. changes from his shirt into a dark jacket before meeting their superior.

The bodily effects of spatial and bureaucratic pressure accumulate unpleasantly distressing experiences, ranging from breathlessness and fatigue to dizziness and loss of control. This primal violence culminates in the execution depicted in the final chapter. Josef K.'s final words "Wie ein Hund!" show that the system's physical oppression has been so harsh it has managed to take away his physical human identity and, instead, reduced him to an animal form³¹. He cries, 'als sollte die Scham ihn überleben'³², showing the profound effect of this physical attack. The timing of this event allows Kafka to emphasise the mortal effects of the system in the form of the trial. Josef K. is first arrested on his thirtieth birthday and is executed on his thirty-first. The juxtaposition between a celebration of life and an untimely death on the same date emphasises the extremes to which this physical effect can extend. Additionally, the timing underlines our mortal bodily state, with Josef K. helplessly awaiting his fate during the ensuing year-long period. Just as Josef K.'s body is rendered lifeless at the end, so too is his soul. Through this final bodily reduction of Josef K., Kafka exemplifies how his version of the law's true authority lies within the corporeal sphere. This echoes the justice system observed in *In der Strafkolonie*, where the crime is inscribed onto the body physically by the torture machine. In *Der Prozess*, the manifestation of the law is also written onto the body, albeit it in a different form.

³¹ Kafka, Franz. *Der Prozess Roman*. Wallstein Verlag, Göttingen, 2024, p.243

³² Kafka, Franz. *Der Prozess Roman*. Wallstein Verlag, Göttingen, 2024, p.243

Kafka fuses K.'s sensual experiences involving women with his interactions with the legal system, creating a disorderly synthesis of feelings. Women in the novel appear almost exclusively within court-related spaces. The advocate's maid Leni removes him from a unique opportunity to discuss his case with the *Kanzleidirektor*; the washerwoman shapes his time at the courts; and K.'s interactions with fellow lodger Fräulein Bürstner become more intense following his arrest³³. Seemingly, the female figures' bodies are intertwined with judicial power. Perhaps Kafka is suggesting here that seduction is another form of entrapment: sensualism becomes a way in which the law succeeds in pulling K. back into the system or distracting him from resolving the issue of his case. Kafka exemplifies how desire becomes another form of vulnerability, rather than a form of freedom.

In conclusion, Kafka's bureaucratic system is intangible and impenetrable. The author adroitly materialises the bureaucratic legal system in *Der Prozess* by employing three key methods. First, he utilises architecture and spaces to position the body into the legal realm. Secondly, he demonstrates the physical effect legal spaces have upon the body, to mimic the effects of the trial upon the body. Finally, female figures are deployed to present sensual temptations relating to official bureaucratic spaces. As a result, the reader is compelled to rely on sensation to transform the otherwise impalpable trial into a concrete experience.

[Word count: 2478]

³³ Kafka, Franz. *Der Prozess Roman*. Wallstein Verlag, Göttingen, 2024, p.121

Bibliography:

Primary sources:

Kafka, Franz. *Brief an Den Vater: Mit Einem Unbekannten Bericht über Kafkas Vater Als Lehrherr Und Anderen Materialien*. Berlin: Wagenbach, 2004.

Kafka, Franz. *Der Prozess Roman*. Wallstein Verlag, Göttingen, 2024.

Kafka, Franz. *Erzählungen*. S. Fischer Verlag (Lizenzausgabe Von Schocken Books), New York, 1946.

Kafka, Franz, *Tagebücher 1910 – 1923*. S. Fischer Verlag, Austria, 1967.

Criticism:

Church, Margaret. “Time and Reality in Kafka’s The Trial and The Castle.” *Twentieth Century Literature*, vol. 2, no. 2, 1956, pp. 62–69. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/440948>. Accessed 4 Apr. 2026.

Cumberland, Ruth. “Inscribed Bodies: The Cruel Mirage of Imperialistic Idealism in Kafka's ‘Penal Colony’”, *Papers on Language and Literature*, vol. 49, no. 2, Spring 2013, pp. 203–222

Goetschel, Willi. „Franz Kafka's ‚In Der Strafkolonie‘ .“ *The Germanic Review*, vol. 90, no.2, 2015, pp.81-86

Jayne, Richard. „Kafka’s *In Der Strafkolonie* and the Aporias of Textual Interpretation.“ *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte*, vol.66, no.1, 1992, pp.94-128

Katyal, Neal Kumar. “Architecture as Crime Control.” *The Yale Law Journal*, vol. 111, no. 5, 2002, pp. 1039–139. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/797618>. Accessed 4 Apr. 2026.

McElroy, Bernard. "The art of projective thinking: Franz Kafka and the paranoid vision", *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 31, no. 2, 1985, pp. 217–32. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26281491>. Accessed 4 Apr. 2026.

Morris, Joel. "Josef K.'s (A + x) Problem: Kafka on the Moment of Awakening." *The German Quarterly*, vol. 82, no. 4, 2009, pp. 469–82. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25653615>. Accessed 4 Apr. 2026.

Pascal, Roy. *Kafka's Narrators*. Cambridge, 1982.

Politzer, Heinz. *Franz Kafka: Parable and Paradox*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1962.

Preece, Julian, editor. *The Cambridge Companion to Kafka*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002.

Ryan, Michael P. "The Aggregate Character in Kafka's 'In Der Strafkolonie'", *Symposium (Syracuse)*, vol.55, no.4, 2002, pp.213-27.

Shah, Rajiv C., and Jay P. Kesan. "How architecture regulates." *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research*, vol. 24, no. 4, 2007, p.351. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43030813>. Accessed 9 Jan. 2026.

Sizemore, Christine W. "Anxiety in Kafka: A Function of Cognitive Dissonance." *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 6, no. 3, 1977, pp. 380–88. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3831182>. Accessed 4 Apr. 2026.

Whitney, Tyler, "Listening to the Law: Acoustical Embodiment and Industrial Space in 'Der Proceß.'" *Colloquia Germanica*, vol. 46, no. 4, 2013, pp. 343–65. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44110832>. Accessed 9 Jan. 2026.