

‘Living with Kafka’ Abstracts

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Tuesday, 1 September 2026

09.30–11.00 Panel A: Work, Life, and Writing in Kafka’s Worlds (Chair: Ian Ellison)

Dirk Oschmann — The Idea of Work in Kafka’s *The Missing Person* (*Der Verschollene*)

Abstract: The planned contribution reconstructs Kafka’s portrayal of work with regard to the major stories and novels, while also examining its anthropological relevance and highlighting lines of work concepts that lead to the neoliberal ways of organizing work in our present day. Whether work should be a subject of literature was still a controversial question in the 19th century. Romantic authors would not have thought of depicting working people because it was not considered worthy of art. When the paradigm of realism began to prevail around 1850, work also came into focus, which at the time still attracted sharp criticism. For Kafka, however, who as an insurance clerk was very familiar with the working world of his time, it was already obvious to portray it as a dominant feature of modern human existence. This applies not only to bureaucracy,

but also to a wide range of other work contexts, most notably in his first novel fragment, *The Missing Person*, in which work, especially in its physical dimension, often appears as a mode of human destruction. Everything here must serve the increase of efficiency. All who work are rushing around, greetings have been abolished at the uncle's company, the telephone operators are forced into a human-machine-symbiosis, etc. The ruthlessness and harshness with which workers are exploited and humiliated here makes the text appear to be a decidedly social novel and also foreshadows what the neoliberal world of work demands of low-paid people in particular in our present day.

Clemens Dirmhirn + Alice Stasková — Leben und Lebenswelten in den „Paralleltagebüchern“ Franz Kafkas und Max Brods

Abstract: Das Führen eines Tagebuchs gilt im 20. Jahrhundert als privilegierter Modus, Alltagserfahrungen zu dokumentieren, Lebenswelten zu reflektieren und wechselnde mentale Zustände festzuhalten. In diesem Beitrag werden Kafkas und Brods „Paralleltagebücher“, die nach Brod entscheidend für Kafkas beginnende literarische Ambitionen waren, als Speichermedien für gemeinsam erlebte Räume und Praktiken gelesen. Er geht den spezifischen Modalitäten nach, in denen diese Räume und Praktiken reflektiert, reimaginiert und dargestellt sind: Im disparaten Festhalten der Wirkungen des gleichsam seismographisch Erfassten auf den Betrachter manifestiert sich im Falle Kafkas ein gleichermaßen literarischer wie phänomenologischer Blick auf ein Alltägliches, auf Gemeinplätze, die nicht zuletzt zur ausgeprägten Assoziationsfähigkeit seiner Texte beitragen. Um dies zu verhandeln, werden Kafkas Notate mit denjenigen von Brod konfrontiert, wobei auch Ergebnisse aus dem laufenden Projekt einer kommentierten digitalen Edition der teilweise unveröffentlichten Notate Brods aus dessen Nachlass genutzt werden.

Konkret wird das Spezifische an Kafkas Darstellung der gemeinsam erfahrenen Lebenswelten mit Brods Perspektive eingeführt, und zwar anhand der jeweiligen Notate zu ihren gemeinsamen Reisen. Das Besondere an *Reise*-Tagebüchern dürfte sein, dass sie Orte und Zeiten im Fremden und als Fremdes festhalten und – als Gegenstand der Reflexion – erfahrbar machen. Die Konfrontation der Aufzeichnungen Kafkas mit jenen aus dem Brod-Archiv (NLI) eröffnen neue Perspektiven auf das Verhältnis von Leben/Welt und deren Erschreibung sowie auf Kafkas „Legacy“ im doppelten Sinne von Erbe und Nachlass. Sie bringt somit neue Aspekte der Beziehung von Leben/Welt und Schreiben zum Vorschein.

Peter Zusi — Equilibrium: Kafka and Richard Weiner Performing Modernism

Abstract: Kafka and his contemporary, the Czech-language author Richard Weiner (1884-1937), both used metaphors of acrobatic performance to explore not simply the creative process, but the fundamental ability to survive in a world perceived as threat. Counter-intuitively, both Kafka and Weiner express that threat not through images of accidents or catastrophes, but through the notion of equilibrium. Balance and harmony are indelibly shot through with the threat of their loss. The presentation will examine key passages in both authors expressing this dynamic, and will then

consider some of the implications of the unnervingly parallel formulations in these two contemporaries who, as far as the historical record tells, had no direct knowledge of each others' work.

11.30-13.00 Panel B: Spaces, Things, and Technics in Kafka's Worlds (Chair: Barry Murnane)

Eva Haude — Kafka in Hellerau

Abstract: When Franz Kafka and Felice Bauer were choosing furniture for their future home following their engagement, they could not quite agree. The solid wooden sideboards, which Felice Bauer preferred, depressed Kafka. She, in turn, could not warm to the machine-made furniture from the *Deutsche Werkstätten*, which Kafka considered to be „the best – I mean, the most decent and simplest“.

The paper takes a closer look at the furniture in question, the aesthetic principles and practical considerations behind it, and follows Kafka to Hellerau, a „garden city“ (based on the English model) near Dresden and home to the *Deutsche Werkstätten*. When Kafka visited Hellerau on the eve of World War I in June 1914, it was a meeting place of the European avant-garde. This was owed largely to Émile Jaques-Dalcroze and his pioneering *Educational Institute for Music and Rhythm* which greatly impressed Kafka. Reiner Stach speculates that Hellerau exerted such an attraction on Kafka that it “would certainly have been shortlisted” if “he had been free to choose where to live”. (Stach 2002, 492) The paper outlines the cultural and historical relevance of the garden city and traces its influence in the letters and diaries of Franz Kafka.

Hendrik Blumentrath — Tragische Haushaltung. Kafkas *Die Verwandlung*

Abstract: „Die Verwandlung“ entwirft eine minutiös arrangierte Architektur, deren Raumordnung die Grundlage einer kammerspielartigen Dynamik bildet: Wände strukturieren Akustik und Kommunikationsverhältnisse, das Öffnen und Schließen von Türen regelt Bewegungsmöglichkeiten, Zugänge und Sichtbarkeiten. Zugleich verlieren Gegenstände ihre Zuhandenheit – Tür, Bett und Kanapee werden zu Hindernissen und widerständigen Dingen; der sukzessive Umbau des Zimmers sowie das Heraustragen der Möbel markieren die endgültige Desubjektivierung des Protagonisten.

Diese detaillierte räumliche Beschreibung ist keine biographische Referenz, sondern eine theatrale Konstellation: „Die Verwandlung“ rekuriert auf eine tragische Dramaturgie, in der der Auftritt als solcher thematisiert wird, und übersetzt dramatische Materialitäten in Prosa. Doch während die Tragödie das Scheitern des Auftritts als konzentrierten Moment inszeniert, entleert Kafkas oikos diese Struktur zur Dauerform: Gregor Samsas Metamorphose vollzieht sich als scheiternder Auftritt, an dessen Ende kein Opfer, sondern die Fortsetzung des Haushaltens steht.

Rolf Goebel — Kafka: Artificial Intelligence and the Metaphysics of Aesthetic Truth

Abstract: What questions does Kafka raise for our age of digital media and Artificial Intelligence? In our late capitalist consumer culture, A.I. promises an infinite cyberspace of big data, intricate network communication, and media couplings. At the same time, A.I. undermines traditional boundaries between authenticity and simulation, human autonomy and machine consciousness.

These issues can be traced back to an intriguing tension in Kafka's writings between modern media technologies and metaphysical truth. On the one hand, Kafka was fascinated by the potentials of the telephone and the gramophone, which promised to perfect technological communication while displacing the autonomy of the human subject. On the other hand, he held on to a radically modernist, transgressive version of the Idealist aesthetics focussing on the artwork as a distorted reflection of transcendental truth and an exploration of language's ambiguous capacity for world-disclosure. Reconstructing aspects of this highly fragmentary tension opens up new ways of interrogating the promises and dangers of Artificial Intelligence today.

Thus, rather than integrating Kafka's writings into our life-world, my presentation will suggest how we can submit some of our most pressing uncertainties to being scrutinized by the questions that Kafka's texts themselves raised but left behind unresolved.

14.00-15.30 Panel C: Care, Lived Experience, and Life Lessons 1 (Chair: Carolin Duttlinger)

Isak Winkel Holm — One Must Intervene: Caring and Hosting in *The Castle*

Abstract: In this presentation, I examine the dialectic of care in Franz Kafka's *The Castle*, focusing on Gardena, the landlady of the Bridge Inn. Gardena, an ambiguous representative of care in the novel, remarks that she cannot restrain herself and "must intervene" when she sees the newcomer K. wandering uncertainly through the village. I use the concept of the dialectic of care to argue that care is not a stable ethical category but a practice shaped by unresolved tensions. In Kafka's authorship, care is not just a kind of goodness. In particular, I focus on the dialectical tension between mastery and the relinquishment of mastery, between capacity and incapacity — and, in Gardena's case, between the ability to intervene and the inability to restrain herself. I argue that this dialectic is better understood not through the framework of contemporary care theory but in light of Jacques Derrida's reflections on the relationship between care and hospitality in his recently published lecture courses on hospitality.

Conor Brennan — Du mußt deine Ernährung ändern: Kafka's Iconic Vegetarianism

Abstract: This paper considers Kafka's specific form of vegetarian diet — born from the late 19th-century *Lebensreform* movement — in relation to later discourses and literary depictions of vegetarianism, veganism and 'plant-based' lifestyles. Kafka's 'iconic' status extends to

vegetarian and vegan communities, among whom Max Brod's anecdote of Kafka addressing the fish in a Berlin aquarium ('Nun kann ich euch in Frieden betrachten; ich esse euch nicht mehr') has proved enduringly popular. Yet his rejection of meat is far from straightforward, appearing to sit at the nexus point of restricted eating, health regime and interspecies empathy. Its relationship to Kafka's literary output – including animal stories and depictions of fasting – is equally ambiguous.

Reading sections of Kafka's diaries and letters alongside works by later writers including J.M. Coetzee and Olga Tokarczuk, the paper asks what it means to read Kafka as a vegetarian writer today. A particular focus of the talk will be on gendered aspects of this discourse; whereas Laura Wright proffers Kafka's *Hungerkünstler* as evidence that veganism and restricted eating are read symbolically in the case of male writers and characters, and pathologically when coded female, Heather Benbow and others read Kafka's vegetarianism as a rejection of traditional masculinity, in line with Carol J. Adams's view of the 'sexual politics of meat'. Addressing common objections to vegetarianism that chime with Kafka's life and work – among them its associations with disordered eating, purity and disgust – the talk ultimately asks what Kafka's vegetarianism can tell us about the relationship between literature and life.

Emily Troscianko — Kafka as Methodological Ally: What 'Ein Hungerkünstler' Lets us Ask About Experience

Abstract: Kafka has shaped my thinking and my career as a researcher, writer, and recovery coach. In research mode, I have theoretically and empirically examined how Kafka's writing style works, in particular what readers do when confronted with its striking minimalism.

In this talk, I take "Ein Hungerkünstler" as a case study to show how empirical approaches can offer traction on live questions explored across cognitive literary studies, psychology, and education. Rather than advancing a new interpretive angle on the text, I showcase the kinds of question that Kafka allows us to ask about narrative style, embodiment, and readerly experience.

I outline five complementary angles of investigation:

1. Connecting the cognitive realism of Kafka's description of starvation with his enactive evocation of the hunger artist's body, to explore the phenomenon of "triggering" in readers with differing food- and body-related histories.
2. Using drawing—employed as a method for accessing imaginative experience in empirical literary studies and as an assessment tool in clinical contexts—to develop drawing-based experiments and interventions involving representations of the hunger artist and readers' own bodies.
3. Linking such pictorial responses to phenomena like identification, self-recognition, comparison, and emulation, which remain theoretically under-specified.
4. Outlining how a tailored reading guide could modulate readers' mental imagery and cognitive-emotional responses, especially in relation to the text's central aporia: the apparent absence of any experienced hunger.

5. Exploring how Kafka's manuscript revisions offer an ecologically valid control condition, giving insight into both authorial intention and text–reader interactions.

Taken together, these approaches illustrate the value of Kafka's "Hunger Artist" as a springboard for investigating how the stylistic qualities of the Kafkaesque shape embodied reader experiences in the 21st century.

16.00-17.30 Panel D: Care, Lived Experience, and Life Lessons 2 (Chair: Katrin Kohl)

Valentín Díaz — Saeculum Kafka. Theoretical Life and Survival

Abstract: Jorge Luis Borges ("Kafka and his Precursors", 1951) made Kafka more than just an author: he became an anachronistic paradigm for the reconfiguration of literature, thereby synthesising the global impact of the Kafkaesque on 20th-century theory. Literary history (as well as its future) was irrevocably inscribed in the orbit of the Kafkaesque. Now, what kind of force is at play in this gravitational power? Traditionally, it was thought of as a purely literary force. A universal and timeless game of clean fictions. But if we pay attention to the theoretical function that Kafka plays (from Benjamin to Deleuze, from Borges to Canetti, from Lukács to Derrida, from Blanchot to Agamben, from Piglia to Sebald, etc.), it becomes clear that it is precisely the vital scope (anthropological, ethical, political, theological) that is the point at which the Kafkaesque coincides with the reinvention of the readability of contemporary fiction, as a moment of hesitation of secularisation and, at the same time, as an unprecedented interplay between the global (imperial) and the local (translation, appropriation, exile). There would therefore be a way of *living with Kafka* of theory. A cycle in which theory sets out to live with Kafka, turning that work into an experience of its own limits: a new readability of the unreadable. The presentation exposes the general characteristics of this Kafkaesque century of theory and analyses some of these theoretical thresholds – instances in which a "philological excess" emerges, revealing the unfolding of a theoretical life and survival of the Kafkaesque.

Lennart Bentler — Identifying Kafka? Kafka's Cultural Legacy in German Secondary Schools

Abstract: Kafka's texts hold a firmly institutionalized place in German secondary education, featuring prominently in centralized exams and in a wide range of teaching materials. For many students, school constitutes the primary environment in which they first encounter Kafka's work. Intensified by the post-PISA reforms around 2000, this encounter unfolds within a habituating space shaped by standardisation, assessment, and outcome-oriented models. Such conditions cultivate a habitus of identifying reading: a practice that stabilizes meaning, foregrounds transferable skills, and ultimately domesticates Kafka's unsettling literary force.

My paper situates the contemporary German schoolroom as a key site of Kafka's cultural legacy, examining how institutional reading practices mediate the reception of his work today. Drawing on a selection of recent teaching materials, the paper shows how these frameworks reconfigure Kafka as a predictable object of knowledge and mute the critical and messianic dimensions of his

writing—dimensions highlighted by Derrida and Agamben—that resist instrumentalization and challenge the logics of assessment and curricular control.

By approaching schooling as a space of habituation, the paper asks how Kafka's legacy is shaped by the interpretive dispositions cultivated in educational institutions, and what possibilities emerge for rethinking this legacy beyond stabilising, outcome-oriented models.

Lawrence Ratna — Kafka's Brain: Reading Kafka Neurodivergently

Abstract: This presentation introduces a new way of reading Franz Kafka by situating his lifelong sense of ontological bewilderment within contemporary research on autism. Across his diaries, correspondence, and fiction, Kafka repeatedly describes the world as opaque, unpredictable, and resistant to intuitive interpretation, an experiential stance that closely parallels how many autistic individuals articulate their own modes of being-in-the-world.

Departing from earlier retrospective diagnostic proposals, which relied on selectively chosen traits or interpretive extrapolations from Kafka's fiction, this analysis applies all DSM-5 diagnostic criteria systematically, using his personal writings as the sole evidentiary base. This method avoids the polysemy of literary texts and reduces the confirmation bias that has shaped previous claims. On this more rigorous foundation, the analysis demonstrates that Kafka meets the full DSM-5 diagnostic profile for autism. Within the inherent limits of posthumous diagnosis, this all-criteria evaluation, grounded entirely in Kafka's own words, offers a stronger basis for re-examining both his lived experience and the interpretive possibilities of his work.

This finding opens a fresh interpretive pathway: Kafka's writing can be understood not only through existential or modernist frames but also as expressing a phenomenology consistent with autistic cognition and perception. Drawing on research into the narrative writings of autistic individuals, the presentation shows for the first time that Kafka's fiction shares many of their characteristic features.

Far from pathologising Kafka, this perspective enriches our understanding of his creative imagination and provides a new conceptual framework for engaging with his texts and his life.

Wednesday, 2 September 2026

09.00–10.30 Panel E: Tradition, Time, and History (Chair: Carolin Duttlinger)

Wolf Kittler — The Tower of Babel

Abstract: I plan to talk about the old problem of the tower of Babel which John Wilkins, the warden of Wadham College and a founding member of the Royal Society, had tried to solve and to which Kafka referred repeatedly in his writings. In his book *An Essay Towards a Real Character and a Philosophical Language*, 1668, Wilkins devised a universal language that would lift the curse of Babel, align words and things in a perfect order of the world, and, thereby, unify us all. Kafka was less ambiguous. In his speech about jargon, that is, the Yiddish language, he conceded “that no sensible person would even consider turning the jargon into a world language,” but then concluded, “as obvious as this might actually seem,” because the jargon, a hybrid of many languages, “consists of nothing but loanwords.” – I will try to show that the tower of Babel is a key motive in Kafka’s work. It informs his thinking about the function of the metaphor, about naming, community, and politics.

Seong-Sook Mok — Die endlose Schwelle der modernen Zeitlichkeit: Chronos, Aion und aufgeschobener Kairos bei Kafka

Abstract: Dieser Vortrag untersucht die zeitliche Struktur der Werke von Franz Kafka anhand des begrifflichen Rahmens von Chronos, Aion und Kairos, um Kafkas Kritik an der modernen Zeitlichkeit zu beleuchten. Während die moderne Gesellschaft das Leben durch Chronos organisiert, also durch eine messbare und prozedurale Zeit, die von Institutionen wie Bürokratie, Recht und Arbeit strukturiert wird, zeigen Kafkas Erzählungen immer wieder das Scheitern dieser zeitlichen Ordnung. In Werken wie *Der Prozess* und *Das Schloss* führen institutionelle Verfahren nicht zu einer Auflösung, sondern zu endloser Verzögerung, wodurch der chronologische Ablauf in einen schwebenden Zustand des Wartens umschlägt.

Der Vortrag schlägt den Begriff der ‚endlosen Schwelle‘ vor, um diesen besonderen zeitlichen Zustand zu beschreiben. Kafkas Protagonisten bleiben an jener Schwelle gefangen, an der Chronos eigentlich in Kairos, den entscheidenden Moment des Urteils oder der Verwandlung, münden sollte. Stattdessen werden Entscheidungen immer wieder aufgeschoben, und die erzählte Zeit verschiebt sich hin zu einer Form der Dauer, die dem Aion ähnelt und durch Wiederholung, Stillstand und unbestimmtes Warten gekennzeichnet ist.

Durch die Analyse zentraler Szenen bürokratischer Verfahren, des Wartens und der aufgeschobenen Entscheidung argumentiert dieser Vortrag, dass Kafkas Erzählungen ein grundlegendes Paradox moderner Zeitlichkeit offenlegen: Die rationalen Systeme, die Zeit ordnen und beschleunigen sollen, erzeugen letztlich eine Welt, in der die Zeit selbst zum

Stillstand kommt. Kafkas Literatur bietet daher nicht nur eine Kritik bürokratischer Macht, sondern auch eine tiefgehende Reflexion über die zeitliche Krise im Zentrum der Moderne.

Klaus Mladek — Living with Ghosts: Hyperobjects, Anxiety and the Rot of History in ‘The Warden of the Tomb’

Abstract: At the end of 1916, Kafka wrote his only proper drama, *The Warden of the Tomb*, a piece that remained a fragment. Kafka conceived of this text as a “philosophical drama” and dramatic it is, although in a taciturn fashion. It might have been Kafka’s life-long dream to be a playwright of such a drama, but it would have to be radically different from the “*unerträgliche Vermenschlichung*” of the actors and the stage in the grand state theaters of his time. In *The Warden of the Tomb*, Kafka attempts to unleash the most inhuman force the theater contains within itself, one that borders on “madness” that uproots the whole dramatic edifice from its foundation. Inhuman characters and natural historical powers increasingly enter Kafka’s stage. The play prompts a pervasive anxiety that can be analyzed as a hyperobject in Morton’s sense; it clings to the characters and knows no specific space or time, but rather “inter-objectively” determines the affects and the entire spatiotemporal structuration of the drama. The *Warden of the Tomb* distills in this sense a *Gespensterkunde*, but one different from Derrida’s hauntology, a form of living and struggling with ghosts, as well as an exposition of what is stageable: the inhuman, natural historical forces, dream language and the dreg of imperial history. This drama also marks the transition to the later Kafka who puts other, more extensive communities to the test and increasingly invents objects and spaces that reorient customary concepts of the political.

11.00-12.30 Panel F: Environments and Ecologies (Chair: Meindert Peters)

Elliot Sturdy— Kafka’s Non-Consolatory Ecologies

Abstract: During a period of convalescence, Kafka went to stay at his sister Ottla’s house in the country from 1917 to 1918. It was in Zürau that Kafka wrote what would become known as his Zürau Aphorisms, a collection of writings that have become a focal point for those seeking to understand his theological and philosophical worldview (Calasso 2006, North 2015). In one of his aphorisms, Kafka asks if it is possible to think in a way that is not also a form of consolation. By asking this question, Kafka places the authority of thought in question and draws our attention to the ways in which thoughts cannot be separated from the emotional impulses that give rise to them. Kafka’s further reflections unground the relationship between thought and truth and ask if thinking might be little more than a pathological tendency.

Taking Kafka’s aphorism about the problematic nature of consolatory thinking as its starting point, this presentation will ask if contemporary Ecocriticism has overcome the insufficiencies of consolatory thinking, or if it still seeks to “solve” the problematic relationship between humans and the more-than-human world in a manner that merely lessens human fears and anxieties, offering us only illusory forms of hope and freedom.

Kafka's letters from this period address the problem of seeking a consolatory understanding of our relationships with animals in a direct manner. Plagued by the nightly activities of mice, Kafka wrote a series of letters that sought to describe the ways in which he found their presence troublesome. Using this correspondence as a starting point, this presentation will seek to explore the ways in which Donna Haraway and Jacques Derrida manage to "stay with the trouble" of their interactions with animals, and to what extent they prioritise their own consolation. It will also ask if Kafka found a way to conceive of his relationship with animals that preserves the trouble of the non-consolatory.

Caroline Torra-Mattenklott— Temperatures in Kafka's Roman *Das Schloss*

Abstract: Kafkas besondere Sensibilität für energetische Zustände ist sowohl durch zahlreiche Tagebucheinträge als auch durch seine Romane und Erzählungen belegt. Sie manifestiert sich in seinen Beschreibungen der eigenen Körperwahrnehmung ebenso wie in der Gestik seiner Figuren und in seinen Darstellungen von Raumdispositionen und Heizungsroutinen. In meinem Vortrag möchte ich zeigen, dass die in der Forschung bereits eingehend untersuchte Topographie des Romans *Das Schloss* von einer bisher wenig beachteten Dramaturgie der Temperaturen überlagert wird, die an seiner atmosphärischen Gestaltung einen wesentlichen Anteil hat. Als elementare Bedingung menschlichen Lebens und Wohlbefindens ist Wärme für die Protagonisten ein Gegenstand existenzieller Sorge. Darüber hinaus bedingen und reflektieren die Temperaturen psychophysische Befindlichkeiten wie Geborgenheit und Intimität, erotische Anziehung, Müdigkeit und Erschöpfung. Die ubiquitäre Kälte in *Das Schloss* steht aber auch metaphorisch für ein unterkühltes, d.h. durch Xenophobie und Immobilität gekennzeichnetes gesellschaftliches Klima.

Der amerikanische Literaturwissenschaftler Barri J. Gold hat die Austauschprozesse zwischen literarischen und wissenschaftlichen Diskursen über Thermodynamik im viktorianischen Zeitalter unter den Begriff der ‚Thermopoetik‘ gefasst. Die erkaltenden Öfen und zugigen Innenräume in Kafkas *Schloss*, so meine These, können ebenfalls als Elemente einer Thermopoetik beschrieben werden. Ausgehend von den Prozessen der Energiediffusion, die dazu führen, dass K. und seinen Gehilfen niemals richtig warm wird, lassen sich Analogien zwischen Episoden des Romans identifizieren, die scheinbar nur durch das Syntagma der Erzählung miteinander verbunden sind. Als Erscheinungsformen einer thermodynamischen Denkfigur, der Entropie, weisen sie ein gemeinsames Kompositionsprinzip auf und lassen sich zugleich mit einem zeitgenössischen kulturellen Diskurs in Verbindung bringen.

13.30–15.00 Panel G: Forms of Intimacy and Irritation (Chair: Juliane Blank)

Kata Gellen — Living Without: Bachelor Writing in Kafka from *Betrachtung* to ‘Der Bau’

Abstract: This talk explores the idea of Kafka living without—that is, bachelorhood as a state of living and mode of writing in his oeuvre. Though critics have written a great deal about solitude and loneliness in Kafka's writings, far less has been said about the condition of bachelorhood that

runs through much of his work, from the early sketches in 1913 to his last unfinished story in 1924. I begin by demonstrating the prevalence of the theme of bachelorhood in Kafka's writings, especially *Betrachtung*. I then turn to bachelorhood as an existential condition for characters such as Blumfeld and the burrower: these figures desire solitude, but actually require a radically reduced, non-human form of companionship, which they either find or invent. The final section of the talk argues for a mode of "bachelor writing" in Kafka, whereby narratives are shaped by the constant deferral of the departure of the indeterminate and ambivalent other—for example, the ghost in "Unglücklichsein" and the noise in "Der Bau." For Kafka, bachelorhood in all its implications (i.e., loneliness, misery, childlessness, independence, creative forms of sociability) was not only a state of living that held personal significance. It was also a mode of writing simultaneously threatened and sustained by acts of deferral, digression, and distraction. These are familiar features of Kafka's narration, and I hope to show their inextricability from bachelorhood as a state of living and mode of writing.

Kiyoko Myojo & Yoshiki Tajiri — Kafka's Pseudocouples: Rethinking 'Blumfeld, an Elderly Bachelor'

Abstract: While writing 'Blumfeld, an Elderly Bachelor', Kafka made the enigmatic diary remark: 'I am writing my Bouvard and Pecuchet very prematurely'. Although this note has long puzzled Kafka scholars, it suggests that Flaubert's unfinished novel occupied an important place in Kafka's imagination while he was composing 'Blumfeld'. This paper approaches the remark through the concept of the pseudocouple.

Originally introduced by Samuel Beckett and later theorized by Fredric Jameson, the concept of the pseudocouple is reconsidered in the first part of the paper. Revising Jameson's formulation, we distinguish the pseudocouple more clearly from the traditional double and propose four defining characteristics: it is not a Doppelgänger; it is mechanical and comic; it functions as an instrument of institutional power; and it tends to form a homosocial structure.

The second part of the paper argues that all four characteristics converge in 'Blumfeld, an Elderly Bachelor'. At the same time, Kafka does not simply reproduce the pseudocouple found in Flaubert or later exemplified by Beckett. Rather, he reshapes the configuration in distinctive ways, showing both important affinities with and significant departures from the revised definition.

By examining these points of convergence and divergence, the paper suggests that the concept of the pseudocouple provides a productive framework for rereading 'Blumfeld' while also drawing attention to features that are distinctive to Kafka's treatment of paired figures.

Elizabeth Ramsey — The 'allzuohohes Spiel': Play and resistance in Kafka's narratives

Abstract: Kafka's playing protagonists have been underappreciated. In a world of immense pressure and, often, persecution, many of his characters play, evade, dawdle and prevaricate. This includes well-known moments such as Gregor Samsa using his new body to crawl across his

ceiling (a moment of ‘Unterhaltung’ in the narrative), but is also the way the nameless protagonist of the Bau describes their occupation, as well as characterising the actions of minor characters, most notably the ‘tänzen’ of the two apprentices in Blumfeld and the antics of the Gehilfen in the *Schloss*. Recent scholarship has read prevarication, hesitation and small movement as forms of resistance to oppression (Vogl 2008, Därmann 2020, Colvin 2025). In this paper I will suggest that *Spiel* in Kafka spans both the world of work and dwelling places, representing a strategy for avoiding or delaying uncomfortable realities, if only temporarily. In this *Spiel* can stand for the role of creativity and the creation of literature as a prevarication, and link with Kafka’s thought on the difficulties of making art and of making true connection with other minds.

15.30-17.00 Panel H: Kafka after Kafka (Chair: Ian Ellison)

Corinna Sauter — Living and Writing with Kafka: On Ozan Zakariya Keskinçelik’s Novel *Hundesohn*

Abstract: Franz Kafka occupies a seminal position in contemporary German-language literature, serving as a significant literary and existential reference point. This is exemplified by Ozan Zakariya Keskinçelik’s recently published debut novel, *Hundesohn. Roman* (2025) which has received widespread attention and has already won an award. This commemorative text recounts a homoerotic love story between Muslim men from the viewpoint of the ‘post-migrant’ protagonist, Zakariya, who resides in modern-day Germany and shares his first name with the author. The autofictional text deals with reflection and transgression of boundaries, combining a ‘story’ of sadomasochistic eroticism with multilingual passages reflecting on the relationship between language, social inclusion, and the preconditions for intersubjective understanding. It also reflects on the power relations to which the post-migrant subject is exposed in an Islamophobic society. Kafka as a literary figure and his work play a key role in Keskinçelik’s intertextually rich text. Beginning with a motto from *Das Schloss* preceding the novel, *Der Process*, *Die Verwandlung*, *In der Strafkolonie*, *Forschungen eines Hundes*, Kafka’s diaries and letters, among others, are mentioned, alluded to, paraphrased or quoted within the text. Kafka has a leitmotif function on several levels, fundamentally on the level of both the *histoire* and the *discours*: with regard to Kafka’s name poetics, to the poetics of ‘minor literature’ (Deleuze), to the representation of eroticism in the context of hunger, to the so-called Freudian ‘Familienroman’ and the figurations of sonship, to the role of animality and the political dimension of the subject’s search for identity on the margins of society in a system that is not transparent to him, and not least with regard to the question of religion. I would like to explore this multifaceted adaptation of Kafka in my paper as part of a *Poetics of Living and Writing with Kafka*.

Kyunghwa Lee — Precarity, Guilt, and Environmental Violence in Huh Su-gyeong’s *Kafka Weather*

Abstract: This paper examines how Korean writer, translator, and archaeologist Huh Su-gyeong (1964–2018) *lives with Kafka* in her poem trilogy *Kafka Weather* (2016). Rather than treating

Kafka simply as a source of literary influence, the poems draw on his aesthetic logic to address contemporary conditions across linguistic, national, and historical boundaries. They depict violent political crises marked by suspended accountability, including the water-cannon assault on the Korean activist-turned-farmer Baek Nam-gi, the mass displacement of refugees into Europe, the closure of Eastern European borders, and ISIL terrorist attacks in France and Syria.

Writing from a position of linguistic and institutional displacement as a foreign intellectual worker who spent much of her adult life in Germany, Huh engages Kafka as a lived framework for navigating bureaucratic opacity, delayed belonging, and everyday forms of anxiety. Reading *Kafka Weather* alongside *The Trial*, *The Castle*, *In the Penal Colony*, and *The Metamorphosis*, this paper argues that the trilogy reworks Kafka's inversion of guilt, in which suspicion precedes explanation and violence operates without clear or accountable cause. Across three poems that move from false accusation, to war as atmosphere, to procedural mourning after catastrophe, Kafka's logic is rendered as an environmental condition rather than a discrete event.

Drawing on Huh's experience as an archaeologist in the Levant, the paper also attends to motifs of erased languages and damaged monuments. It concludes that *Kafka Weather* demonstrates Kafka's continuing relevance as a way of inhabiting crisis, precarity, and waiting in the contemporary world.

Sushree Routray — Cruel Optimism and the Kafkaesque Ordinary: Exhausted Attachments, Bodily Attrition, and Motherwork in *Burnt Sugar* and *A Life's Work*

Abstract: This paper reads motherhood as a Kafkaesque condition of living, shaped by habit, fatigue, spatial confinement, and psychic ambivalence. Although Franz Kafka does not write motherhood directly, his sustained attention to exhaustion, insomnia, bodily vulnerability, and the oppressive rhythm of everyday life offers a powerful framework for understanding maternal existence as an embodied and mental state formed within regimes of duty, care, and deferred selfhood. Bringing Kafka into dialogue with Avni Doshi's *Burnt Sugar* and Rachel Cusk's *A Life's Work*, the paper examines how contemporary maternal narratives articulate lives structured by repetition, affective strain, and constrained agency. In *Burnt Sugar*, maternal care unfolds through dementia, resentment, and emotional claustrophobia, producing a relational space saturated with fatigue and moral ambiguity. *A Life's Work* renders early motherhood through scenes of bodily depletion, sleeplessness, and the relentless monotony of care, exposing maternal life as an everyday condition governed by obligation and self-surveillance. These experiences are read through Lauren Berlant's concept of cruel optimism, in which attachments to normative ideals of fulfillment become obstacles to flourishing. Motherhood emerges as a cruelly optimistic relation, sustained by promises of meaning and moral worth yet lived through endurance and exhaustion. Kafka's Diaries repeatedly document insomnia, bodily disgust, and the sense of being worn down by routine, while his Letters register intimate anxieties about obligation, relational demand, and the fear of being consumed by forms of life he cannot escape. Literary figures such as Gregor Samsa in "The Metamorphosis" and the self-denying performer of "A Hunger Artist" further crystallise themes of bodily attrition, familial duty, and disciplined suffering that resonate uncannily with maternal experience. Reading motherhood through Kafka's life of the mind and his afterlives in contemporary debates on mental health and productivity, this paper reframes maternal ambivalence not as private dysfunction but as a structurally produced condition of

living. Living with Kafka, it argues, also means recognising motherhood as one of the most pervasive and unacknowledged forms of Kafkaesque existence.

17.00-18.00 Panel I: Translation, Reception, Survival (Chair: Syamala Roberts)

Susanne Cadera — Franz Kafka's Reception through Translation in Spain: The Case of *Die Verwandlung*

Abstract: The present proposal aims to be an approach to Franz Kafka's reception and canonization in Spain through the translations of *Die Verwandlung* [*Metamorphosis*]. The extremely high number of translations of this work, thirty-three different versions, indicates the profound reception that this work had since the publication of its first translation in 1925 up to the present day in the Spanish culture system. To examine the reception during the last hundred years, background information such as mentions in newspapers of different historical periods, book reviews or studies about the work and its translation and Spanish writer appreciations about the influence of Kafka in their work are examined apart from the publication dates, reeditions or revisions of the different translations. Taking together all this information shows that the work is not only received passively; it is studied by Spanish young people, commented on continuously by critics and its special narrative techniques and particular symbolism survives through Spanish writers taking the Spanish versions of *Die Verwandlung* as an example. Another piece of evidence of Kafka's presence in the Spanish culture system, but directly related to the great number of translations, is the fact that the Spanish term *kafkiano* in its two meanings –both 'belonging to Kafka' and 'in Kafka's style'– has been accepted in the official dictionary of the *Royal Academy of Spanish Language (DRAE)* and belongs to current Spanish language use.

Evelyn Beck — Art Keeps Hope Alive: Survival Strategies of Kafka and Kahlo

Abstract: This paper juxtaposes the life experiences, creative work and survival strategies of two iconic 20th century artists, Czech writer Kafka, and Mexican painter Kahlo. This is a study of confluences—the unexpected, pervasive and insistent coming together of themes and images across multiple lines of difference. This understanding came as I was teaching Kafka in Comparative Literature and Kahlo in Women's Studies over a period of years.

In this process of simultaneous immersion in their work, I saw how gender, physical disability, and sexual identity were similarly central to their art, despite their many differences in language and culture. Parallel themes in their work include isolation, imprisonment, confined spaces; mutilation, images of blood and wounds; animal figures as alter egos; split selves; merged selves; and significantly, the search for healing and wholeness.

Despite suffering from physical pain, anxious depression, and suicidal ideation, these artists were able to use their creativity to make visible the wounds they experienced in their lived lives. Ironically, their deeply unsettling art clearly speaks to the anxieties of our time. In presenting these histories and images, I ask, what might I understand about Kafka's writing while looking at Kahlo's art? About Kahlo's art while reading Kafka? How might this juxtaposition open

possibilities of different or deeper understanding of the other? How might their strategies be of use to us in this most difficult moment in history?

Thursday, 3 September 2026

10.00–11.00 Panel J: Performance, Voice, and Sound 1 (Chair: Andrew Webber)

Meindert Peters — Kafka's Physical 'Failures': The Ballets Russes, Adaptation, and Queer Performance

Abstract: On Saturday the 18th of January 1913 in Prague, Kafka went to an evening of the Ballets Russes, the legendary dance company of Sergei Diaghilev. Here Kafka will have seen *Le Pavillon d'Armide*, *Carnaval*, and *Schéhérazade* – three very different pieces in turn inspired by a short story by Théophile Gautier (*Le Pavillon d'Armide*), the commedia dell'arte (*Carnaval*), and Alf Laylah wa-Laylah, or *One Thousand and One Nights* (*Schéhérazade*), but all 'emphasis[ing] dramatic and formal consistency' (Garafola). The following day, in a letter to Felice Bauer, Kafka mentions the dancers Lydia Kyast and Vaslav Nijinsky as 'zwei fehlerlose Menschen ... und es geht von ihnen die Beherrschung aus'. Nijinsky is especially interesting because he is at the heart of modernism's legacy of queer performance – not merely through his affair with Diaghilev, but equally through the content and forms of his roles which stray from heterosexual and gendered norms (see, e.g., Farfan 2017). I take Kafka's visit to the Ballets Russes therefore as a starting point to situate Kafka's work within a modernist context of queer performance showing how this contextualisation draws out and complicates queer physical movement in Kafka's texts.

Furthermore, I will show how recent contemporary adaptations of Kafka's life and work to dance, as an artform rooted in the body and movement, bring forth readings that are especially sensitive to these queer physicalities of Kafka's protagonists. Such adaptations by for example Arthur Pita and Kor'sia – highly indebted to the male-centric ballets of the Ballets Russes and its star Nijinsky – ask us to expand our understanding of the supposed failures at the heart of movement in Kafka's texts (see, e.g. Boos 2019), expanding these supposed failures away from 'sensory-motor' failures (Boos 2019), that is, failures to physically achieve intended goals, towards their failures to adhere to heterosexual, gendered norms of behaviour. And finally, we can move away from failure itself, towards, in Kafka's words, 'Beherrschung': mastery in and of heterotopias, mastery that exposes the social norms that underlie the very notions of queerness and physical disability as failure.

Dasha Baryshnikova — The Vanishing Voice: Habit, Effort, and Collective Attention in Kafka's *Josephine the Singer*

Abstract: *Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk* has often been read as an allegory of artistic exceptionalism, community, and the precarious autonomy of art (Adorno 1955, Sokel 1964). While these approaches productively illuminated the novella's concern with aesthetics and collectivity, they tend to frame Josephine's singing as an aesthetic problem rather than as a question about the conditions of attention under which creativity becomes perceptible in daily life. This paper

proposes a complementary perspective by drawing on 4e cognition and enactive approaches to embodied and collective sense-making (Gallagher 2017, Noë 2004), foregrounding habit, effort, and fatigue as structuring features of the mouse folk's mental life. This life organised around labour, vigilance, and the minimisation of wasted energy, produces social norms and a distinct economy of attention. Josephine's performances do not transcend this economy; instead, they reconfigure it by redistributing bodily effort and shared focus. What the 4e cognition framework reveals is that attention itself functions as the medium through which collective identity is negotiated and made perceptible. Whether Josephine 'really' sings is thus less significant than the fragile, embodied shift in attention her performances enable. Drawing on enactive accounts of participatory sense-making (De Jaegher and Di Paolo 2007) and cognitive theories of attention as coordination (Mole 2011), the paper reads Josephine's disappearance as a return to habitual modes of perception rather than as a judgment on art's value.

11.30–12.30 Panel K: Performance, Voice, and Sound 2 (Chair: Kata Gellen)

Berenike Herrmann, Emilie Sitter — Oneiric Soundscapes? On the Creative Potential of the Auditive Modality in Franz Kafka's Prose

Abstract:

Dieses ununterbrochene Telefonieren hören wir in den hiesigen Telefonen als Rauschen und Gesang, das haben Sie gewiß auch gehört. (Das Schloß)

Research on Kafka's narrations states that these are typically constructed according to patterns of realistic storytelling, but are then creatively transformed into dream-like settings. Assuming that descriptions play a key role in (re-)constructing narrative worlds, accounts between Cicero's 'enargeia' and the psychology of arts suggest that among the sensory modalities (visual, tactile, olfactory, auditive), the most dominant one is the visual, followed by the tactile.

In an exploratory mixed-methods design using manual and automatic annotation, we examine Kafka's fictional prose (45 full texts) at sentence level (N=14,344 sentences) for diction representing sensory modalities. Departing from a posited rank order of sensory modalities, we ask: *Is Kafka's literary prose more 'conventionally' visual (and tactile) or is it more 'creatively' auditive (or olfactory)?*

We find that almost a third of all sentences comprises aspects of 'sensory diction' (n=4,045). Of these, more than half (n=2,095) refer to visual, but only a quarter (n=1,023) to tactile stimuli. Meanwhile, almost 40 % (n=1,505) are acoustic references, including 'negated acoustics', such as „Die Bälle folgen zwar, aber er hört sie fast nicht, noch ein Nachschub von Watte macht sie ganz unhörbar" (*Blumfeld*). In addition, 1% (n=45) are olfactory. Zooming in on particular textual examples, we will discuss whether and how Kafka's composite creative potential is created by reference to sensory modalities, invoking a near-real, 'oneiric' effect.

Samantha Heinle — Kafka on Murakami's Playlist

Abstract: Haruki Murakami's 2002 novel, *Kafka on the Shore*, probes the essence of selfhood as souls search for corporal vessels to the soundtrack of Beethoven, Schubert, Coltrane, and—unexpectedly—Kafka. Two intertwining narratives revolve around the eponymous fictional song (“Kafka on the Shore”), whose mystical harmony enables the characters to transcend the limitations of a rational world. In storyline, a boy who adopts the mononym “Kafka” runs away from home in order to escape a curse and find his familial roots; in another, an elderly man, Nakata, talks to cats, kills a shadow, and embarks on an unknown journey. As Kafka and Nakata's storylines converge, their encounters become increasingly bizarre: fish fall from the sky, spirits detach from their bodies, and identities become blurred.

In Murakami's tale of magical realism, “Kafka” becomes a talisman that enables the protagonists to cross realities, physical boundaries, and temporalities. I follow Kafka—in all senses of the name—as he guides the quest for metaphysical and existential solidity that pervades the novel. The titular song gives form to Kafkaesque identity; it is the red thread leading the protagonists to the truth of their surreal existence and the readers through the byzantine tangles of the narrative, even as the world dissolves around them. And as “Kafka on the Shore” collapses categorical distinctions, *Kafka on the Shore* reveals itself as musical fiction, inhabiting the liminal space between music and literature in which its eponym—Franz Kafka—resounds.