

A City of Kafka —Writing about the City and Modern Life in The Missing Person

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Abstract-This paper will directly use *The Disappeared* as the main text to be studied, and other works of Kafka such as *The Castle* as supplementary and background information. Mainly through the perspective of "writing about the city", it will focus on the description of urban life in *The Disappeared*, sort out the modern state of human life, and try to summarize Kafka's insights and answers to the dilemma of transcending modernity. This will provide a new perspective and possibility for the study of Kafka's works, and fill a part of the academic gap.

1 Introduction

"The earthly destinies and passionate needs of the heavenly and punished spheres between the two are rigorously expressed in another novel, *America* (or "The Missing" and "America", hereafter "The Missing Person")."[4] Benjamin defines *The Missing Person* as a novel that depicts the "earthly". Such a statement is apt for *The Missing*. At the beginning of the twentieth century, when modernity was emerging, the "city" had already become the most important environment for human life, and the two were interdependent and alienated from each other, and this was the landscape of modernity in the twentieth century. It is through his highly stylized descriptions that Kafka makes the "earth" a readable text. *The Missing Person* takes place in "New York", a "city that does not exist", which is constructed from its own experience and the memories of others. It is a landmark work in Kafka's oeuvre that directly depicts the modern city, and there is much room for exploration. *The Missing Person* is also considered Kafka's lightest and most optimistic work of fiction, and the American scholar Broder has said of *The Missing*: "This novel will reveal a new way of understanding Kafka." As a rare optimistic ending to Kafka's work, it must contain something of Kafka's transcendence of the dilemmas of modernity. It may also offer some insights for us in the modern era.

2 The City That Doesn't Exist-"New York"

In fact, Kraft never set foot in America. The "America" of the book is all imagined. Kafka's impressions of the United States come from a presentation on "The United States and its Official System" by the Czech politician Sokub, and from Sokub's book *America*. A mere passing acquaintance with the complex metropolis of New York

is simply not enough to provide a realistic portrayal. The "New York" of *The Disappeared* is also very different from the real New York. But it is these deliberate differences that create a unique set of "Kafkaesque" cityscapes.

Two important city features in this New World fantasy city cover almost the entirety of *The Missing Person*, the first being the almost insane instrumental rationality, and the inexplicable uncertainty that they are the source of the fear and anxiety that erupts when people face life in *The Missing Person*.

2.1 "Stoker, Machinery, Steam Hammer" - City of Tools

"These hands are, in fact, steam hammers".[4] The "United States" in *The Missing Person* is more like a giant factory, and everyone is or will be a cog in this factory. In this sense, the people in the book are no longer "people", and "New York" has become a city of tools.

This tendency towards dehumanization is already evident at the beginning of the essay. The first person Carl meets on the ferry is the "stoker", whose real name seems to be of little importance compared to the function behind this position. When Carl first finds him, he thinks he is "like something in storage".[1] And, most crucially, he himself seems to have acknowledged this identity, even to the point of being genuinely proud of the great ship that controls and suppresses him. The "stoker" has been transformed from the outside in to a real tool. At the end of the first chapter, he is replaced, like a part that has gone wrong.

The main character, Carl, works as an elevator attendant in Chapter 6, where all of his peers work in an extremely strict and harsh shift order, and his personal time is almost squeezed out of him. Carl is also given a very tight-fitting elevator uniform, and the Western hotel management model is similar to the state described by Foucault: "the body is controlled in a system of coercion,

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deprivation, obligation and restriction"[2]. The staff here are strictly assigned their respective jobs and are expected to think in relation to their work almost every second, yet this is not considered dedication, but merely normal duties and obligations. In order to be the perfect tool, all extra feelings such as compassion, kindness must be excluded from the body. "This tendency towards specialization leads to the human imperfection of the individual, who is merely a cog in the urban machine in the face of the trivial and complex organization of the city"[2] And ultimately Carl is swept off his feet because of his momentary kindness that briefly conflicts with his duties. At this point, the human being is seen as a replaceable tool, not a living "individual person", and Carl's useless kindness challenges the system's pride in its "efficiency". Out. This is just one example of Karl's conflict with the larger "American" environment, Karl did not deliberately conflict with others. But as Max Weber put it: "in strife with the iron cage woven by reason, in strife with the system, in strife with instrumental efficiency".[2] It is with these things that Carr is in conflict, and it is with these values of tool-worship and technocracy that he has embedded in every brick and mortar of "New York". But this was the only way to keep the modern pioneer of "America" running at high speed in the world. The American table that Carl saw in his uncle's house, a complex mechanism with hundreds of drawers, was an extremely functionalist invention. It reminded Carl of the shock of watching a nativity play as a child. The modern Jesus, born in "America", is transformed into a tool.

The city becomes a "city of no man" when the urban landscape of "man" becomes completely inhuman. Cars, roads, and squares, which were originally built for people, can function independently of people's presence. Kafka once described this power as "a speeding noise not caused by man, but by a strange force of nature".[1] The force of nature, here Kafka turns man-made objects into a natural phenomenon that is as uncontrollable as the wind and the rain, man becomes a tool, while the tool that is really invented is detached from man.

The whole city seems to be an empty city, where the machines form an order of their own, just like the migration of birds and other natural phenomena, where humans have withdrawn from the stage and the tools are the original inhabitants of the city. Kafka's "death of man" is precisely because the concept of "man" itself has become worthless in modern urban life. The city is of course a human city, but when man becomes non-human and the concept of man can be equated with tools, the crowds of New York will be no different from the "no man" (the city of tools). The city of tools will be no different, "A mixture of twisted human forms and the roofs of various vehicles that are reassembled again and again, from which new and more frenzied mixtures are reproduced"[1], until man and machine are no longer essential. until there is no more essential difference between man and machine. "America" had completely dissolved the notion of "man", and instrumental talent was the consensus of society as a whole, so that young "men" like Carr, who had not yet been replaced by this notion Therefore, young "people" like Karl, who had not yet been replaced

by such a concept, seemed to be out of place in "America" and repeatedly ran into walls. Because "New York" itself is not a city for "people", it is a city born for tools.

2.2 "Sentence, Exile, Float" - The City of Uncertainty

Kafka once said that he was a man standing on a tram, that is, he could not tell where he was and he did not know where the tram was going.[3] "Uncertainty" is another important feature of modern life. Kafka, on the other hand, reinterprets the causes of this phenomenon in his work in his own way.

"Judgment" has always been an important element in Kafka's work. In Kafka's view, "the verdict is not to determine who is the criminal, but to make a given victim never to be reversed".[2] Not only is the convicted person unable to defend himself, but the verdict is handed down, and he will change his life forever. It is this "verdict" that is metaphorically incorporated into the plot of The missing person, and is a major reason why Carl is forced to change his life and wander. In all, Carl is subjected to four changes of life, each of which completely expels him from the stability of his old life. In each case, Carl is "forced" to be convicted of a crime. Being seduced by the maid, inadvertently disobeying his uncle's will, touching the bureaucratic authority of the Western hotel keepers. Carl is given inexplicable charges in a state of complete ambiguity, and the sentencers are able to fabricate or create countless incriminating evidence around Carl's "innocence". As with the statue of the goddess Carl saw when he first came to America, the torch was replaced by a long sword, as if to judge all beings. Morality, will, and authority still seem to linger on earth, but in a completely new form of organization, as Max Weber mentioned: "The whole existence of the life of the state, its political, technical, and economic condition, depends absolutely and completely on a specially trained system of organization, the "iron cage." [2] The individual is powerless in the face of such a bureaucratic authority, just as the stoker remains dead silent in the face of his superiors, eager to redress his grievances. In the end, the captain sentenced him to be removed from his post. The "man" loses everything and has to wander around, suffering in the meantime the constant judgments of bureaucrats and the modern system, and then continues to wander.

Yet in addition to the judgments brought about by an external God, one is at the same time unable to defend oneself against oneself, as in the metaphor of the tram mentioned above, one is unable to determine one's place. This is also placed on the shaping of the landscape. In the environment where people at the bottom live, there are often no windows and it is difficult to determine one's place. For example, the cramped and dank ship's cabin, the completely enclosed elevator room, where the people at the bottom of the book work and live. Both are windowless, almost completely enclosed spaces, and the space itself is often in constant motion, making it more difficult for people in them to find their place and lose the power to "look out" and "see themselves". The top bureaucrats, however, are quite different, as their offices

or homes do have a full "view" of everything. For example, Carl's captain's room on the ferry, with a view of the entire ferry and the outside world; his congressman uncle's apartment, overlooking the streets of New York; or the concierge's office at the Western Hotel, with its huge glass walls overlooking every movement outside. These powerful men see every detail of the earth as if they were God in the sky, while the people on earth are exposed to the gaze of these bureaucrats, just as Karl sees New York, and here Kafka does not say that "Karl saw New York" but that New York "looked at Karl through the skyscrapers' Here Kafka does not say that "Karl saw New York" but that New York "looked at Karl through the millions of windows of the skyscrapers.[1] This strange treatment of the inverted object is an illustration of the common phenomenon . Because of the immense power of "seeing," bureaucrats are given the ultimate power to interpret "judgments. Individuals are unable to testify or defend themselves because they really do not know everything about themselves. It creates a circular pattern of "judgment-exile-judgment".

In the face of uncertainty it seems that people can only become part of the city, become the topmost machine with reason and a strong will, become gods to themselves and other tools, and become completely integrated with modern society. Or they could simply reject the modernization process brought about by the city and return to the embrace of primitive society. Carl, the "centrist", seems to have seen his destiny on the ferry, the float that was pounded up and down by the waves, rising and falling in "America".

3 "Oklahoma Amphitheater" - Kafka's Answer

The final section of *The Missing Person*, "Karl Sees on the Corner," shows a rare upward ending for Kafka, giving the character a more optimistic ending. In the final remnants of his manuscript, Kafka proposes a place of wonder called the Oklahoma Amphitheater. His tagline reads, "Anyone who thinks of his future is one of us, and we welcome everyone who wants to be an artist to come here, to our theater, where all kinds of talent are available, and where there is something for everyone!"[1] It is an almost heavenly existence where Kafka said, "The teenager will once again find a profession and a dependence, his freedom, even his parents, as if by magic in the underworld." [1] This is a place that will also provide people with all the occupations and positions they deserve, regardless of their origins and regardless of their past. This is the most surreal part of the book, and it may well have come from "Kafka's longing for that "free and distant" land." [6] The United States was entering its golden age, "a virgin land, a garden world, a new Adam to save everything." [6]. America" in this sense was a dream world that could resist life in Prague. This is a rather religious answer, and in fact there is a huge price to pay for entering the almost perfect "Oklahoma Amphitheatre", which, like all of Carl's experiences in the city, is more like a harsh religious ritual than an experience,

and the whole of *The Missing Person* is the story of a mortal's entry into the kingdom of heaven .

In 1921, Max Brod discovered a collection of Kafka's selected aphorisms, which recorded some of his explorations of the so-called "ultimate things" as a religious thinker. Brod titled it "Meditations on Sin, Suffering, Hope, and the Way of Truth." At the beginning of the story, Karl actually has a connection to the past, but as the story progresses, this connection becomes less and less. For example, Carl starts out living with his uncle, slowly ends up working with a fellow German female chef, and eventually becomes living with a fellow European, and by the time we reach the final chapter, we learn that Carl is back to wandering alone, turning around from job to job. The family photos Carl brought with him are also missing, and his luggage gradually disappears, even losing his name at the end. "No one will duty him because of his past," reads the sign-up sheet at the amphitheater clearly.[1] In a sense, he is absolved of the "guilt" he committed in Europe. But he was actually withdrawing, step by step, the things that made him Carl Rothman. Eventually, when all the marks were gone, Karl Rothman disappeared from the world and ceased to exist. Kafka also uses the Jewish imagery of the "Most Holy Place" in that collection of aphorisms[3] :

Before you enter the Most Holy Place you must take off your shoes, not just your shoes everything, the clothes you wear on the way with your luggage, then your nakedness, then what is underneath the nakedness what the nakedness hides, then the rest then what is left before the light that emanates from the flame that never goes out.

This is almost a religious representation of Karl's experience, as if the Oklahoma Amphitheater were a Jewish sanctuary, and Karl becomes a blank man. As for instrumental rationality and uncertainty, Kafka sees them as the excesses of life. Only through the constant disintegration of himself can Kafka truly enter the spiritual world and "rise to a higher life. Only through the constant disintegration of himself can Kafka truly enter the spiritual world and "rise to a higher life. "Kafka in 1914 was far from showing the same skepticism as when he wrote *The Trial* and *The Castle*, where the protagonist k desperately tries to prove himself, adding proof to himself so that he cannot become a blank slate. Nothing could be "more inviolable, more meaningless, more hopeless than such efforts." [5] Although Kafka's work has always been heavily religious, it is as if we can see an active Kafka in *The Disappeared*, but he increasingly begins to doubt his God and add "proofs" to himself, as the Ks do. In a later diary entry, he wrote that he had tried to finish *The Missing Man*, but "the force seemed beyond my reach today." [1]

4 Concluding remarks

The Missing Person finally presents us with a religious ritual in the forefront of modernity. But we hardly have the opportunity to complete in the modern era, as Karl Rothman is lost forever in "America". In the sequence of Kafka's works, *The Missing Person* can be seen as a transitional work, embodying both the excesses of Kafka's

writing and the excesses of modern life in the course of time. Since then Kafka's despair has become the dominant color of his work, and under this suspicion we can only ever gaze at the colorful landscape of the city, striding across into Ramses.

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