

**Entropy of the Subject: Bureaucratic Absurdity in Zamiatin's *WE* and Kafka's *The Trial***

WLL 499: Capstone Project

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### Abstract

*WE* is Yevgeny Zamiatin's dystopian novel written in 1920 and published in English in 1924, while *The Trial* is Franz Kafka's novel written between 1914 and 1915. The first novel presents a literary critique of technocratic world and Taylorism through the chronicles of the protagonist D-503, where collective labor is prioritized and rationally planned out to achieve scientific precision in the work being done. The latter focuses on the absurdist and bureaucratic administrative system like that of the Austro-Hungarian Empire before World War I through the interrogations, trial hearings, and daily experiences of main hero K., a banker who is suddenly arrested and prone to experience existential crisis throughout.

These two novels became my research targets as I am interested in hero-centered and diary-like narratives, which appear to be central in both of the works. Although they seem to sustain different kinds of ideologies, I am the first to conduct a case study of *WE* and *The Trial*, tracing that similar internally oppressive outcomes can be achieved under different bureaucratic systems in the field of modernist dystopia. While Kafka's legalistic bureaucracy achieves control through instilling the hero a sense of guilt and depriving him of an credible agent, it creates an opaque system with the information being unavailable and a series of absurd trials. Zamiatin's technocratic system primarily gains control through a seemingly transparent and hyperrational environment, which appears to be natural and desired.

Zamiatin's essays, namely ideas of entropy and energy, pave the way for analyzing how the opposite directions of K. and D-503's paths embody physical entropy, which is the metaphor for conformity and order, and energy, which describes rebels who confront the established norms. If D-503 starts out as an engineer following "entropy" as his everyday routine is perfectly planned and ordered, his straight trajectory starts bending because of the disruptive desire through his relationship with another citizen I-330, where her revolutionary dreams "energetically" awaken him. It can be explained with the imagery of the novel

discussed by Proffer, where one outer shell fractures to let his innate personality open up. For instance, when D-503 actually recognizes that his feelings lead to an imagination, a sickness that must be cured, he notices a split into “the former” and “the other.”

It is opposite for Joseph K. since the sudden arrest makes him initially question the absurdity of the system he is trapped in and it aligns with what Zamiatin calls “energy,” although he becomes increasingly passive and “entropic” over time. Here, I rely on Kavanagh’s semiotic reading of the absurd and Ghosh’s existentialist interpretation to analyze how Kafka builds a system, which centralizes opacity and yet leaves the question whether opacity or transparency is more effective in the end. It is an important contrast because despite the trajectories starting either from entropy or energy, both systems ultimately achieve the same dehumanizing outcome as absolute compliance and death, and prove that modern systems of power do not rely solely on repression, but on reshaping the perception of reality and the surrounding.

## Introduction

Dystopian literature does not simply portray worlds where everything goes wrong. This type of literature captures the imperfect in those worlds and presents a nightmarish image of what is awaiting that world in the near future most commonly through disasters, wars, revolutions, rebellions, and oppressions. Beauchamp (1974) suggests that dystopian writing can demonstrate the “stultifying effect that the rigidly controlled society would have on how its citizens think and speak, and to create an imaginatively valid language reflecting the specific social and technological realities of the projected future.”<sup>1</sup> The effect turns dystopia into a literary technique to discuss reality as it oftentimes points out the issues that might happen in the future either through language or the imagery. Dystopian authors also express their concerns about the issues regarding humanity and society, and warn people about their weaknesses, while dystopia as a whole serves as a warning about the current state of affairs of a government, or of those in power. The reason that it is often called a critique is because authors point out the wrong-doings in a society or a system.

When reading dystopian literature, it is common to come across citizens conforming to uniform expectations, suppressing individuality and dissent behavior, and society being an illusion of a perfect utopian world. Hero-centered narrative is also a common feature of dystopian literature as it allows the reader to trace how systems of power are experienced at the individual level, especially to look at the specific turning points in the subject’s trajectory. This narrative builds an image of a typical dystopian protagonist and along with the “stultifying effect” in the trajectories of heroes, it means that individuals in the dystopian world typically lose the capacity to think and speak outside the logic imposed by the system.<sup>2</sup> In the case of Zamiatin and Kafka, what *WE* and *The Trial* share in common as dystopian novels is that the main heroes are typical dystopian protagonists fitting in this logic. Any

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<sup>1</sup>Gorman L. Beauchamp, “Future Words: Language and The Dystopian Novel,” *Style* 8, no. 3 (1974): 464, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42945221>.

<sup>2</sup>Gorman L. Beauchamp, “Future Words,” 464.

attempt to escape from that type of system makes the heroes feel trapped and helpless as if they believe or feel that something is terribly wrong with the society in which they live. The audience then recognizes the negative in the dystopian world through their perspective.<sup>3</sup> However, the ultimate collapse of the individual subject happens at different parts of their trajectories.

As Ron Bateman argues, Orwellian and Kafkaesque dystopias illustrate how power operates through rigid institutional structures, which often appear to be rational to sustain the social order.<sup>4</sup> In an Orwellian framework, institutions derive their technological efficiency from ongoing surveillance and their rationality from an ideology of transparency.<sup>5</sup> By contrast, Kafkaesque systems are distinguished by bureaucratic absurdity and opacity, where institutions appear rational in form, but, in fact, remain fundamentally inaccessible and unintelligible to the individual subject.<sup>6</sup> The regime promises stability precisely through the transformation of human subjects into functional units, achieved by standardizing daily routines and mechanizing everyday life. Either through hypervisible regulation or through the self-perpetuating bureaucratic power, the regime thrives when human life diminishes in its potential for both of these dystopias.

Bureaucratic systems in dystopias of Zamiatin and Kafka primarily appear as different because of the varying socio-political backgrounds of authors and ideas that they instill in the main characters, although laws and violently oppressive systems in those works are dehumanizing in nature. Each novel contains a hero-centered and diary-like narrative, which enables me to trace their paths through the chronicles of the protagonist D-503 and interrogations, trial hearings, and daily experiences of main hero K., a banker who is

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<sup>3</sup>Gorman L. Beauchamp, "Future Words," 470.

<sup>4</sup>Ron Bateman, 2025, "When Orwellian Becomes Kafkaesque," *The Orwell Society*, <https://orwellsociety.com/when-orwellian-becomes-kafkaesque/>.

<sup>5</sup>Zamiatin was a precursor for Orwell.

<sup>6</sup>Joseph P. Strelka, "Kafkaesque Elements in Kafka's Novels and in Contemporary Narrative Prose," *Comparative Literature Studies* 21, no. 4 (1984): 435, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40246504>.

suddenly arrested and prone to experience existential crisis throughout. Although they seem to sustain different kinds of ideologies, *WE* and *The Trial* have been extensively studied on their own and I will be synthesizing scholarship on both of them to be the first to perform an extended comparison of the two by creating my own methods to trace that similar internally oppressive outcomes can be achieved under different bureaucratic systems in the field of modernist dystopia.

Specifically, I examine how the difference in trajectories of D-503 and K. embodies the movement towards energy and entropy, dialectical metaphors which stand for “endless movement” and “happy equilibrium.”<sup>7</sup>

My research questions are the following:

- How do the trajectories of D-503 and Josef K.—understood as shifts between energy and entropy—reveal the absurdity of bureaucratic control?
- What does the movement from perfect order to energetic action mean in D-503’s trajectory?
- What does the movement from energetic action to perfect order indicate in K.’s trajectory?
- Why do different trajectories end up following the same mechanism of control that suppresses individuality?

While Zamiatin’s technocratic system primarily gains control over the hero through transparent and hyperrational environment, which is natural and desired, Kafka’s legalistic bureaucracy achieves control over the protagonist by creating an opaque system of law, instilling the hero a sense of guilt and depriving him of a credible agent from whom he can obtain information. Even if the mechanisms appear to be completely different, I will analyze why the experiences of heroes have to be different if both systems function to make

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<sup>7</sup>Yevgeny Zamiatin, “O literature, revoliutsii, i entropii,” in *Sochineniia*, 4 vols. (Munich, 1988), 292, [https://vitoraya-literatura.com/pdf/zamyatin\\_sochineniya\\_tom4\\_1988\\_text.pdf](https://vitoraya-literatura.com/pdf/zamyatin_sochineniya_tom4_1988_text.pdf).

resistance impossible and make the people under the system internalize the system's logic as the only feasible reality. If in *WE*, the subject moves from entropy to energy and back to entropy again through a transparent and hyperrational system, in *The Trial*, the subject moves from initial energy to entropy through an opaque legal bureaucracy that produces guilt and epistemic deprivation; despite these differences, both trajectories culminate in the internalization of control and the dissolution of individual agency.

### Theoretical framework

Zamiatin juxtaposes entropy and energy in his essay, where those dialectical metaphors stand for “cold outer shell” and “hot inner core” respectively.<sup>8</sup> These metaphors serve as my main theoretical framework for investigating both works, but there are various theories and scholarly works belonging to the foundations to each of the novels separately that I aim to synchronize.

Zamiatin creates a rationalized system of laws, which simplifies life under the principles of Taylorism, which is a scientific way to approach labor. Jeanne Murray Walker uses of liminality, drawn from van Gennep, and shows that the One State<sup>9</sup> in *WE* is not simply “orderly,” but hostile to transitional, unstable, or unclassifiable forms of being. By combining Jeanne Murray Walker’s analysis of liminal societies and a closer examination of Taylorist rationality principles, bureaucratic absurdity turns not to be a mere failure of systems, but rather a primary feature of control and domination over the consciousness of individuals. This becomes highly relevant to D-503’s trajectory since his crisis is not just a rebellion against the State, but an entry into a dangerous in-between condition where he no longer fully belongs to the official rational order.

On the other hand, energy represents the capacity for disruptively changing orderly and fixed patterns of D-503’s functioning every day. If the One State is represented like entropy, any events which D-503 moves towards in his trajectory can be understood as forms of energy as they transform him and open up many alternative realities. His reflections on the fragmented nature of bureaucratic power claim its simultaneous influence through a variety of ways as he continuously keeps records of his daily life, describing how holistically control sustains life in the ordered world of the state: through glass, papers, numbers, and thoughts. Zamiatin also becomes a translator of this atmosphere as it echoes in his prose through what

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<sup>8</sup>Zamiatin, “O literature, revoliutsii, i entropii,” 292.

<sup>9</sup>An urban place constructed almost entirely of glass, where D-503 and other citizens live and work.

Alessandro Niero calls “simultaneism,”<sup>10</sup> a montage-like expressions of experiences, images, sounds, and impressions described by the narrator D-503 simultaneously rather than step-by-step. In this way, change does not emerge from a single center but is sustained simultaneously across the entire fabric of life. In this context, the “environment” of alternative realities can also be one of the impressions in simultaneism as Zamiatin’s prose stages multiple impressions, sensations, and perceptions transforming D-503’s perception of entropy at once. It connects the style to politics, where the novel does not only describe a total system of control, but formally reproduces its simultaneous pressure. Niero helps move my analysis beyond thematic statements about surveillance into the level of narrative technique. His work, however, is narrower and more formalist, so it needs to be connected to criticism of psychology and ideology if simultaneism is to become part of a stronger argument about D-503’s fractured consciousness.

These principles of energy and entropy work in *The Trial* as well. In Kafka’s world, the process of arrest creates the appearance of entropy (perfect order) of the legal system through mechanisms that are actually chaotic and energetic. The Court embodies entropy as it is ingrained in the dead bureaucratic order, which exists to simply perform trial hearings and keeps up appearances of justice, although the procedures are dead equilibrium at its worst. Energy in *The Trial* is traced at the starting point for the trajectory of K., who attempts to find out the truth about his arrest and fights the injustice, which reinforces his movement. This is the trajectory in which *The Trial* goes the other way around than *WE* as it is not the energy that kills perfect order (the equilibrium of the entropy), but the equilibrium and perfect order which kills the energy by leading K. towards acceptance and making him internalize the system’s absurd logic.

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<sup>10</sup>Alessandro Niero, “‘Simultaneism’ in Zamyatin: From prose to film,” *Russian Literature* 51, no. 3 (2002): 310, <https://www.sciencedirect-com.ezproxy.nu.edu.kz/science/article/pii/S0304347902800059?via=ihub>.

Kafka introduces the type of absurdity in which the system can withhold information, but still demand compliance, at the same time being a power no one should ever challenge, but the reasons will always be unavailable and never explained. This idea is supported by Thomas Kavanagh's analysis on "epistemological crisis," which suggests that there is no agreement about reality: "Direct discourse becomes anti-function: telling nothing, it insists that all further inquiry be renounced."<sup>11</sup> The system maintains the forms of legal authority, that is arrests, interrogations, trial hearings, and documents, however all of them lack communicative content and systematically destroy K's energy for movement, that is to find out the truth and make the hero undergo an epistemological crisis.

Later, the Court even transforms K.'s ignorance into guilt. This type of "existential guilt" suggested by Rollo May in humanistic-existential psychology starts appearing when there is an "...inner warning or reminder that one is not utilizing one's potential."<sup>12</sup> If D-503 experiences existential guilt as he moves away from entropy towards energy once he encounters people and events, the ontological nature of K.'s guilt activates this "inborn guilt" even if it resists it from the start. May's ideas on existential guilt establish guilt as another mechanism of bureaucratic systems to deprive individuals of using the maximum of their full potential, that is aligning with the entropy. In *The Trial* the entropy is observed through various deceiving functions of law and inner guilt, which would be common for anyone encountering the absurdity of the system. Functional differences of mechanisms in those systems, either through law or social order, illustrate that both of the systems can achieve the dehumanizing effect and legitimize imperial control with different mechanisms, which embody two paths to the same entropy.

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<sup>11</sup>Thomas M. Kavanagh, "Kafka's 'The Trial': The Semiotics of the Absurd," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 5, no. 3 (1972): 243 <https://doi.org/10.2307/1345282>.

<sup>12</sup>Per-Einar Binder, "The Call of the Unlived Life: On the Psychology of Existential Guilt," *Frontiers in Psychology* 13 (2022): 2 <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.991325>.

### Entropy of the Subject: D-503

Serving as a naval engineer who was making ice breakers in the UK during the years after the Russian Revolution, Zamiatin simultaneously became both a witness and a victim of rationalized technocratic collectivism, which destroyed individuality on the way of achieving technological progress and synchronizing work schedules to facilitate the process. Zamiatin expresses his ideas on Taylorist management by creating a fictional engineer D-503, a builder of an immense spaceship called “The Integral,” who documents his daily life in a personal diary. The rules of the system is sustained by scientific rationalism, that is “a basic organizational principle of the One State that “everything is finite, everything is simple, everything is calculable”<sup>13</sup> that even the citizens of the system are named or even labeled with numbers instead of usual names.

In *WE*, the technocratic society of One State is built on Taylorist principles, where people are treated like machines and their tasks are broken into smaller ones to make work the most efficient. The State gains total control over even intimate relationships and pretends to give freedom by granting everyone a “pink ticket,” a sex card visit assigned sexual partners according to the schedule, and the election of “The Benefactor,” who is the head of the state, although it is never anonymous. Tied to technocratic collectivism, human life in this reality exists only to maximize the efficiency of the planned activities, achieve absolute transparency and mathematical precision for the legal authorities, and cease any form of individuality.

Alongside the desire towards technological progress, Soviet science fiction of the 1920s depicted the utopian imagination with particular focus on visions of heavens, hells, and dystopias. Many writers expressed their excitement on the promising rapid industrialization, which was then considered “the heaven” of 1917 Russian Revolution, while they feared that lives of ordinary people could be reshaped into mere cogs of a social machine, where “People

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<sup>13</sup>Tony Burns, “Zamyatin’s *We* and Postmodernism,” *Utopian Studies* 11, no. 1 (2000): 74, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25702458>.

are equalized to a high degree through unisex clothing, hairlessness, rotation of work according to desire, identical housing (but with individualized interiors and furniture), collective bathing, harmony, order, and gracious comradeship: a single communist family struggling to master nature.”<sup>14</sup> Placing *WE* in the wider imaginative and ideological atmosphere of the Russian revolutionary period, the discussion of utopian experimentation, collectivist aspiration, and the dream of reorganizing everyday life helps explain why Zamiatin’s critique of rationalized social engineering is historically grounded rather than abstract. Although technology and collectivism could indeed be potential sources of equality in a community, the social hierarchy would ultimately stabilize under strict control and no social differences.

Most importantly, the novel *WE* exposes the darker consequences of relying on the hyperrationality of such technocratic states and abusing mathematical order to overpower the nature of human life. More specifically, D-503’s simultaneous experience of control corresponds to the moral standards, conscience, and ideals learned from parents and society commonly referred to as “superego” in psychoanalysis: “...a unconscious mediator and translator of tradition and desire, and the ego as self-deceived recipient of defective information.”<sup>15</sup> Here, the system acts as a superego regulating thought, desire, and behavior through mathematical order and collective norms, although any emerging fantasies and attachments can be a part of ego, which is a destructive force of stability. Zamiatin’s use of simultaneism as both a stylistic and psychological principle reveals that the narrative form reflects a psyche structured by overlapping and conflicting impulses.

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<sup>14</sup>Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (Oxford University Press, 1989), 175.

<sup>15</sup>Peter M. Canning, “Kafka’s Hierogram: The Trauma of the ‘Landarzt,’” *The German Quarterly* 57, no. 2 (1984): 209, <https://doi.org/10.2307/405151>.

### Entropy: Engineer of the “Integral”

D-503's trajectory begins within a world that appears perfectly ordered, where absurdity does not initially register as such but he accepts it as the natural condition of life. As he explains, freedom would only be a stumbling block in the such system and any free movement could potentially disturb the equilibrium that is already complete in the sense of thermodynamic balance, making unfreedom a conscious choice: “When human beings still lived in the state of freedom, that is, in an unorganized primitive state.”<sup>16</sup> Freedom is considered primitive and non-compatible with happiness as only flawless and rational laws of the One State make the lives of other citizens, including his, absolutely happy in such entropy. Therefore, the system instills the idea that there is no need for “curves when the line is straight,” which means that no chaos and energy must disrupt the order, except for the energy that moves people progressively forward in working for the system and its well-functioning.

From the first record, it is obvious that D-503 finds his sense of self either inseparable from or completely absorbed by the engineering work that he does day by day and his enthusiastic spark for mathematics is what drives him for the movement towards entropy. He finds inspiration in this kind of morally correct and “natural” way of life as it is the only one he knows or, at least, the one he believes will make him happy in the end: “To unbend the wild curve, to straighten it out to a tangent-to a straight line! For the One State is a straight line, a great, divine, precise, wise line, the wisest of lines!”<sup>17</sup> He excessively emphasizes that the line appears to be “the wisest” because a line is a foundational geometrical form that also extends in opposite directions without endpoints. Just like the straight line, the metaphorical line of One State is unbending and linear with its own array of laws and rules that are fundamental for the ordinary life, but not an ordinary builder D-503 who finds precision and

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<sup>16</sup>Yevgeny Zamyatin, *We*, trans. Gregory Zilboorg, intro. Peter Rudy, preface by Marc Slonim (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1952), Record 3, 13.

<sup>17</sup>Zamyatin, *We*, 4.

undisturbed order to be beautiful, keeping the uncertainty, unpredictability, and beyond its straight borders. He feels happy at equilibrium.

### **Energy: Feelings for I-330**

While D-503 continually characterizes his everyday routine and even the clock hand of his timetable as “straight” and “precise,” his feelings for I-330 start bending that line, transforming his love for unfreedom into a curiosity for following a mysterious, dangerous, curvy path. D-503 first notices her edgy laughter before he becomes a witness to the tempting desire of I-330 to break the timetable rule: “I saw the resounding sharp curve of that laughter, flexible, tense like a whip.”<sup>18</sup> At this moment, D feels guilty for not being this “good number” as the laughter embodies an opposite of what the One State expects from ordinary cogs in the system because constant energy like in I-330’s laugh can challenge the state’s authority. This is where the revelation of differences between the “same” citizens of One State become a threat to the order of the system: “For brief periods, such homogeneity can be blissful, but as a constant matter, it fails, because it cannot account for actual differences between people.”<sup>19</sup> As perfect equilibrium of One State depends and feeds on absolute unfreedom of choices, the illusion of perfect entropy collapses when human individuality is not suppressed.

In a State where structure and order are the ideal, sexual desire poses a great threat and contributes to the divergence of behaviors even more. The energy and sexual charge of I-330 depict her aggressive self, implying that an untamed nature can bring unexpected chaos. Although D-503 attempts to distance himself from I-330 at the moment when he detects or suspects that kind of abnormal behavior, she keeps insisting on skipping a meeting in an auditorium and spending more time together: “...if I ask him, he will give you a certificate declaring that you are ill.”<sup>20</sup> She suggests faking a medical excuse to break free from mandatory duties, at the same time manipulating and paving way for his primary

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<sup>18</sup>Zamiatin, *We*, 29.

<sup>19</sup>Jeanne Murray Walker, “Totalitarian and Liminal Societies in Zamyatin’s ‘We,’” 118.

<sup>20</sup>Zamiatin, *We*, 29.

awakening. He starts considering that something might be wrong with her instead of the State and notices this “kind of odd irritating X”<sup>21</sup> almost every time they are together, which would be used to describe something mysterious and yet undiscovered, or be a blueprint of an emerging existential crisis, which he attempts to figure out as a mathematician. Even if he immediately thinks something is wrong with her, he starts to choose her over One State. Preslar highlights that “X” is traced by D in relation to I throughout the whole novel: “This symbolizes for D mystery associated with her. He is invariably drawn to solve her equation and figure her out.”<sup>22</sup> Amey connects forbidden knowledge, coercion, and D-503’s attraction to what the One State excludes. His reading is useful for my project not only because it treats I-330 as a disruptive force, but because it helps explain why D-503 experiences desire and imagination as dangerous knowledge rather than as freedom in any simple sense. D-503 becomes alienated not only from the State, but from himself.

### **Existential Guilt**

Even if this unknown variable troubles and intrigues D about I, it gradually flows into his understanding that something is wrong inside him and not her because what he perceives as her unpredictability is, in fact, the awakening of his own desires and impulses that the One State had previously suppressed. D-503 also notices “Two sharp points glowing with rosiness...”<sup>23</sup> While the “sharpness” reflects his attempt to interpret I-330 through his obsession with straight geometrical forms, the “rosiness” introduces an affective excess that cannot be reduced to calculation, making him choose the movement towards the energy into rather than entropic stability of the One State.

Transparency in *WE* becomes the most effective form of dehumanization and oppression not tied to sole bureaucratic control, turning glass walls and ceilings into sources

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<sup>21</sup>Zamiatin, *We*, 50.

<sup>22</sup>R. Mark Preslar, “Yevgeny Zamyatin ‘We’: Forbidden Knowledge and Coercion in Utopia,” *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 91, no. 1/2 (2008): 37, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41179177>.

<sup>23</sup>Zamiatin, *We*, 51.

of an outside control: “The true nature of transparency in architecture is, therefore, not merely to allow what is outside to be seen from the inside, or to allow whatever (or whoever) is inside to be seen from outside.”<sup>24</sup> Since in *WE* the narrative is presented in the form of a diary of the main character D-503, D-503’s subjective narrative illustrates glass not only as a physical material, but as the cognitive lens for D-503 to deeply reflect and analyze his trajectory from claiming one reality in the beginning and getting to know multiple realities. When he is looking at his “split” self in the mirror: “One, the former D-503, Number D-503; and the other...”<sup>25</sup> The split into “the former” and “the other” can be explained with the imagery of the novel, where one outer shell fractures to let his innate personality open up: “...the image of a cold outer shell (form, logicity, predictability) covering a hot, seething inner core (form-lessness, irrationality, unpredictability)...”<sup>26</sup> It indicates that the personality is not divided, but rather layered, where feelings of inner core are suppressed in the One State. He loses the illusion that he was ever fully unified or purely rational. It is not that now D-503 becomes two nor the emergence of something foreign, but rather the boundaries between layers of himself begin to crack and his inner energetic core reveals through the cold outer shell of entropy.

D-503 continues to experience existential guilt throughout his encounters with I-330 and convinces himself that he is seriously ill because of the emerging fantasies. In other words, his feelings fit Binder’s definition of existential guilt, where he “constantly interprets his life and possible actions through the lenses of how anyone makes meaning to” and “it alienates and disowns the specific possibilities.”<sup>27</sup> As these fantasies of D precipitate a disorder and develop a “soul,” they cannot be more than “merely a symptom of a diseased

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<sup>24</sup>Elizabeth Klosty Beaujour, “Zamiatin’s *We* and Modernist Architecture,” *The Russian Review* 47, no. 1 (1988): 59, <https://doi.org/10.2307/130443>.

<sup>25</sup>Zamiatin, *We*, 54.

<sup>26</sup>Carl R. Proffer, “Notes on the Imagery in Zamiatin’s *We*,” *The Slavic and East European Journal* 7, no. 3 (1963): 270, <https://doi.org/10.2307/305337>.

<sup>27</sup>Per-Einar Binder, “The Call of the Unlived Life,” 2.

fantasy.”<sup>28</sup> Amey helps clarify that the One State’s power is not simply repressive from outside, that is it works by shaping how the subject sees himself. This fits well with the psychoanalytic interpretation of the “soul” - unlike a cold mirror that “reflects and throws out,” D-503 “absorbs and keeps forever a trace of everything that touches”<sup>29</sup> him. The “soul” deepens his self-revelation as a flaw because D-503 recognizes his imagination and behavior to be a sickness that must be cured, so that his awareness and imagination could not confront his “numbered” identity.

Jeanne Murray Walker argues as D-503 needs both the entropy and the energy, and the character actually starts using his human consciousness to make a choice, although it becomes impossible because of the operation removing his “imagination” and his abilities being lost by the end: “There are two forces in the world — entropy and energy, observes I-330: “One leads to blissful quietude, to happy equilibrium; the other to destruction of equilibrium, to tormentingly endless movement.”<sup>30</sup> It can be practically observed from thermodynamics, where entropy stands for a state of maximum disorder and paradoxically leads to perfect stasis, that is a condition where different forces constitute a lifeless uniformity. At the same time, this movement beyond equilibrium is not only political, but psychological, since D-503’s awakening also takes the form of an existential crisis. As he becomes increasingly aware of his desires, fantasies, and possibilities that do not belong to the rational order of the One State, he begins to experience them as guilt and illness rather than as freedom. In this sense, the movement from entropy to energy is also a movement into self-alienation, where the recognition of one’s unrealized inner life produces anxiety instead of liberation.

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<sup>28</sup>Michael D. Amey, “Living Under the Bell Jar: Surveillance and Resistance in Yevgeny Zamyatin’s *We*,” *Critical Survey* 17, no. 1 (2005): 31, <https://research-ebsco-com.ezproxy.nu.edu.kz/c/6dm6eg/viewer/pdf/wndsgvl5aj>.

<sup>29</sup>Zamyatin, *We*, 86.

<sup>30</sup>Jeanne Murray Walker, “Totalitarian and Liminal Societies in Zamyatin’s ‘*We*,’” *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 20, no. 1 (1987): 114, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24777707>.

D-503's trajectory reaches a point where he no longer attempts to fully restore the rational order of his environment, but begins to move further away from it. He completely breaks from his "rationalized environment"<sup>31</sup> and accepts mysteries and doubts revolving around without facts or reasonings in one of episodes in Ancient House<sup>32</sup>:

"Thou lovest fog?"

"Yes, I love the fog, too. I love everything, and everything appears to me wonderful, new, tense; everything is so good! ..."

"What good do you find in that?...Have you heard about the new operation, which has been invented? I mean the surgical removal of fancy?...Merely this: if I were you, I should go and ask to have this operation performed upon me."<sup>33</sup>

Clarity is mostly perceived as "good," while spots, blotches, and fog are "bad." In this sense, fog marks a crucial shift in his trajectory since it introduces a space, where rational clarity no longer fully governs perception. Fog here acts as a symbol of blurry and cloudy states of the mind like D-503 experiences when he starts to energetically oppose the regime of One State, although it could not exist within the State's perfectly rational subject. At the same time, D-503 is not even concerned with the "removal of fancy," which might be the case when he must be afraid of death or his upcoming demise because what he has witnessed through his eyes might be revealed to the public eye. His fantasies, fear, and inability to control his thoughts are no longer his own, as they are gradually framed as symptoms that require intervention. In this sense, what he perceives as an inner conflict is already being absorbed by the logic of the State, where deviation is not resisted, but corrected through the "removal of fancy."

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<sup>31</sup>Alexander Angeloff, "The Relationship of Literary Means and Alienation in Zamiatin's *We*," *Russian Language Journal* 23, no. 85 (1969): 8, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43910320>.

<sup>32</sup>It is a private and enclosed space where I-330 brings D-503 to experience objects, and behaviours out of the rational order of the State.

<sup>33</sup>Zamiatin, *We*, 77.

## The Great Operation

Only after the Great Operation is performed, D-503 internalizes the system's absurd logic and recognizes himself as the real D-503. He does not escape the system, but is brought back into it through the operation that removes his imagination, effectively eliminating the source of his inner conflict of "selves." He accepts the operation as necessary, and even desirable, completely soaking up the logic of the One State: "I feel so light, so empty!"<sup>34</sup> Although he had previously experienced moments of doubt under the influence of his feelings towards I-330 and desires, these no longer persist in his mind as he realizes that certainty sustains rational order. Restoring him to a condition of an enforced equilibrium, where he has been turned into a "human tractor," the trajectory resolves into a state with no existing internal or external opposition.

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<sup>34</sup>Zamiatin, *We*, 217.

### Entropy of the Subject: K.

K. undergoes a “ridiculous” arrest one morning where, in fact, he has done nothing wrong, at least that the reader or he is aware of. As he is arrested and tried with unknown warders coming to him to tell they are not authorized to tell anything except for his arrest, the nature of the arrest remains unclear throughout the story and K. leads his ordinary life of a banker being put forward for a promotion. Acting like a metaphysician of his story, he starts questioning the nature of his arrest energetically, but then questions the human existence, the Court, the Law, and the system. Throughout the trial hearings he has to go through under unexplained circumstances, his inner experiences and psychology shift from active seeker, who wants to reveal the truth about his case and the structure, to that of a repressed, mechanised cog in the system: “In fact, he exhibits classic symptoms of such repression: rigid adherence to schedule, even after working hours, and irritation at interruption in that schedule.”<sup>35</sup> The repressed emotions explode and find a way out as the consistency of K.’s social life gets distorted and the capsule he lives in gets interrupted by the arrest. *The Trial* builds up an image of a perpetual guilt, surrounding K. throughout the novel, where he experiences an existential crisis resulting from this guilt and everlasting bureaucratic procedures indirectly. In order to overcome the sense of emerging guilt and anger, K. uses various coping mechanisms that aid in relieving guilt. He turns to religion to find reliable explanation to his predicament, pursues sexual encounters and physical intimacy to temporarily escape from his psychological burden, and revisits the Court’s spaces as if the source of his torment might grant him some measure of control or understanding over a process that remains entirely unknown.

Kafka writes *The Trial* as a reflective piece on his own experiences of being a lawyer, introducing a character Joseph K. from a closely mirrored setting that reflects his real-life

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<sup>35</sup>William F. Pinar, “The Trial (1976),” *Counterpoints* 2 (1994): 31, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42975621>.

background in a social hierarchy. His writing also exposes an example of another authoritarian system which made individuals work without caring about their personal needs. Bateman discusses the Kafkaesque in the *The Trial* as the direct adaptation of the scenes during Kafka's involvements in Prague: "Daily life was punctuated by an almost permanent atmosphere of suspicion, and a feeling of being watched."<sup>36</sup> Based on his work experience in Prague, Kafka eyewitnessed the ignorance of higher officials towards individuals with lower social standing and ineffectiveness of the court officials in an autocratic regime of the Habsburg Empire in the final decade before World War I.<sup>37</sup> Working under the conditions of Austro-Hungarian collapse and collapsing legal order, Kafka indirectly translated his real-life experience with unfairness of the legal system and its ignorance into the events in *The Trial*, meaning that he transformed his experiences within the Austro-Hungarian legal system to create the absurdist trial of Joseph K. From a passive viewer, Kafka turns into a narrator of individual suffering caused by the inefficiency of the court system and law officials.

The Court of *The Trial* is the main bureaucratic space that acts as a projection of K.'s inner guilt and external power exerted on K as it dictates the social norms and order. By studying his series of encounters with agents of the court and trial hearings, the narrative illustrates that this system mostly exists to cause confusion, uncertainty, and guilt. The superego of K. is an internalized structure of domination as the internal authority that exists inside distorts tradition and desire by confusing and guilt-producing messages that the ego cannot withstand. If Court functions as something like a superego of Joseph K., endless offices, closed spaces like dimly lit, attic-like cubicles might be read as manifestations of his inability to overpower this internalized authority authority, almost like a psychological self-persecution: "ego is looking for an opportunity to abdicate its precarious sovereignty."<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup>Bateman, "When Orwellian Becomes Kafkaesque."

<sup>37</sup>Bateman, "When Orwellian Becomes Kafkaesque."

<sup>38</sup>Simon O. Lesser, "The Source Of Guilt And The Sense Of Guilt – Kafka's 'The Trial,'" *Modern Fiction Studies* 8, no. 1 (1962): 49, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26277308>.

The Court can be read as both an externalized and then internalized structure of domination, one that confuses K. until his own agency begins to collapse. It gives me an insight that the bureaucracy of *The Trial* poses threat to the superego of K. and the ego seeks relief from this anxiety, which mirrors how Court's authority defines Joseph K. and dictates rules, making him give up agency. It can be contrasted with Zamiatin's *WE*, where surveillance and collectivist ideology also operate externally, however are aimed at reshaping internal subjectivity and one's self.

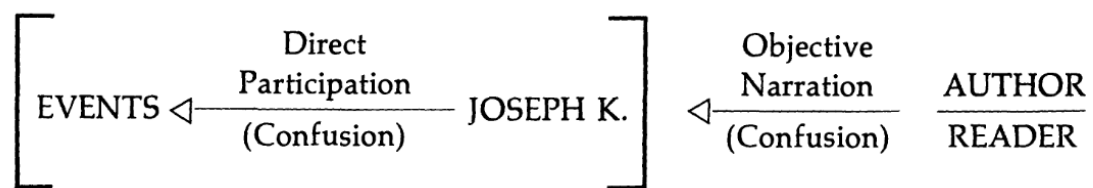


Figure 1. Epistemological crisis<sup>39</sup>

Unlike the simultaneism of *WE*, the narrative form of *The Trial* questions the objectivity, the statuses, and otherness of reality itself as the reader is detached from the situation at some point illustrated in the Figure 1. If in Zamiatin's case there are multiple impressions, sensations, and perceptions, which help in tracing the D-503's transforming perception of entropy, for the reader it is always confusing how K. is related to the events. Even if the author objectively narrates the story of K. and K. directly participates in certain events, the reader never fully understands what happens to K. and what is the objective truth behind the narration.

The article by Kavanagh helps to understand the layout of the narrative as not only third-person, but rather the effect, where the officials speak only to say that they cannot speak, that they do not know or that they cannot tell it as in response to K.'s concerns: "We are not authorized to tell you that."<sup>40</sup> It breaks down the traditionally communicative and

<sup>39</sup>Kavanagh, "Kafka's 'The Trial'," 243.

<sup>40</sup>Kavanagh, "Kafka's 'The Trial'," 243.

evident (clearly comprehensible) code of law because K. does not know who accused him, nor he knew about what he could have done wrong. It proves the absurdity of law and the intelligibility of such formal communication is, therefore, missing. The “law” becomes shallow form (absurd) with no content just like the cold outer shell of “entropy” as it does not communicate anything in essence. The law is reduced to an empty, absurd formality much like entropy’s cold outer shell as it leaves those subject to it with nothing to grasp or respond to.

### **Energy: A banker**

Joseph K.’s trajectory begins with a sentence that disrupts cause-and-effect logic. Looking at the claim that “someone must have been telling lies about Josef K., he knew he had done nothing wrong but, one morning, he was arrested,”<sup>41</sup> there is no clarity in who is spreading lies and who is justifying the arrest. And no clarity ever appears further. From the start, the hero faces an epistemological crisis, that is, the condition where he witnesses that “there is no agreement upon reality.”<sup>42</sup> It is a condition, in which no reliable or agreed-upon version of reality exists to orient him within the proceedings brought against him. This epistemological crisis sparks an energy for the resistance and truth K. wants to know more about as the sentence moves from uncertainty (“must have been telling lies”) to certainty (“he knew”) and then to action (“he was arrested”), but the action does not follow from either truth or proof. Instead, even in its most unstable and unverified form, accusation is enough to set the process in motion. In this sense, the system does not require confirmation as it operates on the mere possibility of guilt.

If there are 2 versions of reality D-503 is stuck in, for K. there are infinite versions of reality. Authority exists everywhere and nowhere at once. It makes K. not to subjugate to the idea of inborn guilt as he confuses, questions, and acts upon his arrest ontologically, that

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<sup>41</sup>Franz Kafka, *The Trial*, trans. Willa and Edwin Muir (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973), 7.

<sup>42</sup>Kavanagh, “Kafka’s ‘The Trial’,” 243.

means he is energetically driven to discover the nature of arrest from the beginning. He, from the very beginning, continuously questions what he sees: “None of you has a uniform, unless your suit...it’s more like a tourist outfit.”<sup>43</sup> By noting that there is no uniform, K. reveals that authority in *The Trial* is both present and undetectable. His attempt to classify it through familiar categories signals an early stage of resistance, where his “energy” is still directed toward making the system intelligible.

### **Epistemological crisis**

When K. goes to his first interrogation, the Court is no longer just an abstract authority as it reveals something material and oppressive. The system no longer just confuses K., but physically positions him and traps his resistance: “...filled a medium-sized two-windowed room, which just below the roof was surrounded by a gallery, also quite packed, where the people were able to stand only in a bent posture with their heads and backs knocking against the ceiling. K., feeling the air too thick for him...”<sup>44</sup> Unable to stand straight and upright, an overcrowded and structurally uncomfortable room suffocates K. and the air being “too thick” shifts his energetic spark to resist the reality towards submission to unnatural. Even something automatic as breathing becomes barely possible in a system, which attempts to work against K. from the start.

When he returns to the interrogation space and finds it empty, the absence of any official procedure does not resolve anything, but exposes how unstable the process is. K. realizes that the law of the system confuses the innocent to the extent that the unawareness itself will make them guilty: “These books are probably law books, and it is an essential part of the justice dispensed here that you should be condemned not only in innocence but also in ignorance.”<sup>45</sup> This marks a crucial shift in K.’s trajectory from making energetic enquiries towards the gradual collapse of meaning as he is not guilty because he doesn’t know the law,

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<sup>43</sup>Kafka, *The Trial*, 18.

<sup>44</sup>Kafka, *The Trial*, 45.

<sup>45</sup>Kafka, *The Trial*, 59.

but because he cannot know. The ambiguity of law here functions to intensify the sense of guilt and the subject is not meant to understand the process in which they are involved. What begins as a lack of information gradually develops into a mechanism of control, as the law no longer produces knowledge, but uncertainty, and this uncertainty begins to function as a form of pressure that K. cannot fully resist.

K. almost immediately notices the opaque and pretentious laws and stands up for his rights, however as the legal process progresses extremely slowly and seemingly “right,” it makes K’s inner battle towards the uncertainty and injustice meaningless: “The courthouse seemed like a rent house with “rooms where the beds were still being used, occupied by people who were sick, or sleeping, or lying on them fully clothed.”<sup>46</sup> The Court seems made up just as the laws of the system, which tries to sustain its imaginary order. By locating that “Law-Court Offices upstairs”<sup>47</sup> are in cramped suffocating attic spaces, Kafka demonstrates the higher authoritarian position within the system, and the system and the law does not need to justify itself in order to remain effective. K.’s oppression does not threaten the authorities as the only one who is threatened is unaware K. since the law and order deliberately withhold information from those subject to it. If any resolution exists, it may lie in entropy gradually wearing down the system’s energy, which is a similar pattern to empires that have historically sought to maintain control by constructing legal frameworks so opaque and labyrinthine, simply impossible for life. They are often contradictory as in *The Trial* even if pretending to be static, they still ask for the impossible: no movement (no energy) to subjugate the individuals, although they still have to move to exist, work, reproduce, and live.

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<sup>46</sup>Barbita Ghosh, “Absurdity of Law and Order: An Existentialist Reading of Franz Kafka’s *The Trial*,” *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences* 9, no. 4 (2024): 154, <https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels>.

<sup>47</sup>Kafka, *The Trial*, 69.

## Entropy: Punishment Room

K.'s stumbling upon the punishment room exposes the violence that the Bank's respectable facade conceals. Passing by what he would always assume to be a storage room in the bank, he hears "convulsive sighs"<sup>48</sup> behind the door and opens it out of curiosity. The room which used to be filled with "bundles of useless old papers and empty earthenware ink-bottles"<sup>49</sup> is revealed to be the place of punishment being carried out. These discarded administrative objects frame the scene, suggesting that human suffering is treated as another form of bureaucratic residue. The moment K. encounters two warders Franz and Willem are about to be flogged by the Whipper and finds out they are to be punished because of K.'s complain about their behavior during his initial interrogation, he immediately objects and says that "I never complained... I only told what happened."<sup>50</sup> The presence of the rod, repeatedly raised and lowered despite the sighs and whips, reduces justice to mechanical routine. Even Franz's cry is described as not human-like, but rather "some tortured instrument."<sup>51</sup> Being repeated even on the next day, the episode illustrates that the mere act of "defending a principle" by K. is translated into punishment. The repeated whipping scene reflects K's own hopeless situation as this repetition tortures K most. Thus, K. no longer confronts the system through language because he witnesses its operations as something material and repetitive. The scene also suggests a kind of "entropic stagnation" as if the system conserves its own energy and repeats itself rather than progressing toward evolution. K. observes how Franz, one of the convicted, suffers, but does not intervene. This is the turning point in his trajectory, which turns him into a passive viewer and signals the beginning of internalization. He no longer resists the system as he begins to adapt to its logic.

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<sup>48</sup>Kafka, *The Trial*, 94.

<sup>49</sup>Kafka, *The Trial*, 94.

<sup>50</sup>Kafka, *The Trial*, 95.

<sup>51</sup>Kafka, *The Trial*, 95.

## Execution

Since K. cannot extract any information from officials, any further attempts to make sense of his actions become absurd, which makes the whole meetings of the Inspector and the court offices a perpetual terrain of failure in communication. Therefore, as Joseph K. shifts from resisting the obscurity of his verdict to complete acceptance, he internalizes the system's absurd logic. It illustrates how bureaucracy achieves total control by making obedience seem an only rational choice.

The imagery of space as K. reinforces his epistemological pressure as he cannot locate the system he is in, cannot understand it, yet cannot escape it. In the end, K. still does not receive a verdict nor an explanation, but on the evening before his thirty-first birthday, two officials come for him and lead him out of the city. What is striking is that K. is not violently forced, rather submits voluntarily and completely internalizes the system's absurd logic: "K. now perceived clearly that he was supposed to seize the knife himself, as it travelled from hand to hand above him, and plunge it into his own breast. But he did not do so, he merely turned his head, which was still free to move, and gazed around him."<sup>52</sup> He manages to glance for structure, at one point wondering where the judge or the "high court" might be even briefly considering resisting, thinking that he should seize the knife himself. Even if he can still resist, it is no longer effective as it reaches the point where intention does not translate into action and reaches equilibrium.

He feels guilty not for being executed, but for not finding out the reason for his arrest and resolving it. The last thing he says is "Like a dog!"<sup>53</sup> and this simile shows not how much shame he sees in his death, but how he accepts it. By this point, no force is needed as the system is already inside him.

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<sup>52</sup>Kafka, *The Trial*, 250.

<sup>53</sup>Kafka, *The Trial*, 251.

## Conclusion

Science is used rather as a tool of a justified control over irrationalities like emotions, love, and art as it is easier to take hold of individuality and uniqueness when they are forbidden for common good. The central paradox of rationality is that what seems logical, scientific, and progressive produces outcomes that are deeply irrational in their suppression of human life in the end.

Citizens are turned into depersonalized soulless machines who seem to find happiness without struggle and suffering. Bureaucracy becomes just a part of those smaller tasks. Each of these two ways of killing people is achieved by planning a new social order as in the case of *Zamiatin*, and by a slow evolution from a seemingly decent system into something wicked as in the case of *Kafka*. In the literal and symbolic death of *K.*, whose execution demonstrates the final stage of entropy, any traces of resistance, meaning, and individuality are entirely erased.

They are two variants of the same irrationalism, whereas in *WE*, it is built that way from the start, in *The Trial* the system slowly becomes cruel from within, but both end up destroying the individual in the name of order. Such endings are not incidental, but keep characterizing dystopian narratives, which frequently resolve in the collapse or a complete erasure of the individual subject.

If D-503 gradually opens his eyes to his individuality and conscious desires with the discovery of imagination and abilities to resist the mathematical system internally, *K.* moves in the opposite trajectory as he loses the enthusiastic spark to uncover the logic behind his arrest, only to find that rationality was exhausted and defeated in the end. Both of them experience existential guilt, and this guilt is a disease that they have. In order to not have it, they have to internalize the system's absurd logic. Both produce the same outcome and prove that the absurd does not emerge in the system itself, but as soon as it is internalized by the

subjects, outside control is no longer needed. It becomes self-sustained. As dystopian literature functions both as a warning and a call to critically reflect on the systems we live in, the reason why people still read it today is that contemporary societies must recognize the oppressive systems before their logic becomes fully internalized and irreversible.

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<sup>54</sup>For the research, I used the photos from the Professor's book.

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