

Paper Chase

COLBY CHAMBERLAIN

THE DEMON OF WRITING: POWERS AND FAILURES OF PAPERWORK

BY BEN KAFKA BROOKLYN, NY: ZONE BOOKS. 208 PAGES. \$29.

Let's reject the knee-jerk assumption: Paperwork is not dull. Time consuming, vexing, and prone to error, yes; but, as chronicled by Ben Kafka, never dull. Paperwork deserves our derision, but, Kafka argues, it also warrants our consideration, since it holds inordinate sway over our politics and psyches. As proof, Kafka sets his study of paperwork's powers and failures around the French Revolution, when the application of Enlightenment principle became inseparable from the implementation of clerical protocol. Circa 1789, paperwork—which Kafka defines as documents produced by demand of the state—became the civil contract's material support. Paperwork made modern government both noble and irksome, by shuffling together the exaltation of standing equal before the law with the enervation of standing in line.

Literature already furnishes characters who dramatize administrative drudgery, from Bartleby to the savage gatekeeper in "Before the Law." (One wonders how persistently that *other* Kafka has dogged our author down bureaucracy's corridors.) *The Demon of Writing* locates similarly vivid office archetypes in France's archives. The hapless victim is Edme-Etienne Morizot, an unemployed functionary of the Old Regime who—for sixteen fruitless years—petitioned the revolutionary government to restore his position. Accustomed to a world of privilege, where power clustered around personal connections, Morizot was flummoxed by the new dispensation of rights, where power was dispersed across departments. The loss of documents thwarted his appeals, and the rotating membership of France's myriad committees constantly redirected his case. Morizot thus encountered bureaucracy's most galling quirk: Not only do we stand in line, but often it's the wrong line.

The book's folk hero is Charles Hippolyte Labussière, a clerk at the Committee of Public Safety. During the Terror, Labussière purportedly saved the Comédie Française's acting troupe by destroying the paperwork necessary for their execution. Bureaucracy's dispersion of power had granted functionaries a repertoire for resistance: sabotage, logjam, and loafing. Labussière's method of surreptitiously soaking documents in buckets of water exemplifies what Kafka calls his "literal-minded version of Derridean *différance*." Quills split, ink blotches, sheets tear. The very materiality of paperwork can disrupt its ability to communicate.

From these historical footnotes, Kafka moves on to novel readings of canonical texts. Alexis de Tocqueville roams the United States bemoaning the new country's deficient record keeping. Marx explains how good intentions undergo distortion when refracted through "the bureaucratic medium." Freud enters the wrong sum on the withdrawal slip of a Viennese bank and attributes the error to an unconscious wish; Kafka invites us to test the hypothesis by photocopying an image of the bank slip, included in the book, and reenacting the episode ourselves.

Kafka acknowledges that paperwork studies are familiar fixtures for academic audiences. In the United States, it's a subfield

of book history, which reconstructs the aggregate of presses, paper mills, and wagon routes that facilitated knowledge's production and distribution. In Europe, recent influential volumes by Bruno Latour and Cornelia Vismann plumb bureaucracy by lavishing attention on its rubber bands and binder rings. The concept that Kafka introduces is the psychic life of paperwork. Instead of dwelling on its technical details, Kafka listens to paperwork's surrounding "chatter," the compulsive jokes and complaints that, to a trained ear, reveal bureaucracy's emotional impact. Kafka betrays a psychoanalyst's preoccupation with desire when he repeatedly asks, "What do we want from our paperwork?"

By pledging to a psychoanalytic model, Kafka—who describes himself as "the in-house historian in a media-studies department"—is covertly quarreling with a figure whom he mentions only once: Friedrich Kittler, the recently deceased father (or creepy uncle) of German media theory. In an essay adapted into the book's second chapter, Kafka was less coy about his target, head-on refuting the notoriously terse opening of Kittler's *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*: "Media determine our situation." For Kittler, "so-called Man" is the epiphenomenon of recording and transmission technologies; psychoanalysis simply reconfigures the human mind into a media apparatus. Kafka has little patience for this brand of antihumanism. He insists that subjects don't lose their agency to media—whether that "media" be film or files—but remain ruled by an unconscious and animated by an interior life.

Yet passages in Kafka's book call out for a Kittler-type reading. When in 1826 the French critic Philarète Chasles imagines clerks as "man become a piece of writing furniture, a telegraph of administration," can't we discern the precursor to our own apprehensions that mobile-office technology has reprogrammed our concentration, memory, and, indeed, desire?

A telling discrepancy between *The Demon of Writing* and its previously published excerpts occurs in the closing discussion of *Paperwork Explosion*, an IBM-sponsored film directed by Jim Henson in 1967. The incessant refrain of Henson's short is "Machines should work, people should think." Kafka concludes his book by responding, "People should think, but in this day and age, they seldom have the time," whereas in an earlier essay he asserted, "People *should* think, but they seldom do." Saying paperwork makes us busy is less provocative than suggesting it stifles our thoughts. Perhaps Kafka jettisoned the stronger claim because thoughtlessness is Hannah Arendt's principal charge against Adolf Eichmann, the embodiment of bureaucracy's dehumanizing effects.

That said, *The Demon of Writing's* core virtue is Kafka's fidelity to his theoretical model. "What do we want from our paperwork?" inaugurates an innovative approach to modern bureaucracy, though it hardly dispels the paranoid rejoinder, "What does our paperwork want from us?" □

Colby Chamberlain is a Jacob K. Javits Fellow in the art-history department at Columbia University and a senior editor for the online magazine *Triple Canopy*.



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