Kafka's Systems on Screen: Power, Suffering, and the Illusion of Choice

Serena Park

Middlesex School

Abstract

This paper examines how contemporary films extend the anxieties in Franz Kafka's fiction by giving elusive systems visible forms. Kafka's "A Hunger Artist," The Castle, The Metamorphosis, and The Trial are read alongside The Platform, Snowpiercer, Parasite, and The Truman Show. The comparisons follow four recurring problems: suffering whose meaning remains uncertain, movement that does not guarantee progress, identities made conditional by economic value, and realities defined by inaccessible authorities. Film allows viewers to see a prison, a train, a house, or a television set, but that visibility does not fully explain how power operates within those spaces. Across literature and film, the characters' search for purpose or recognition can lead them to repeat the rules that confine them. These narratives remain unsettling because their institutions shape ordinary behavior even when no one can justify their authority.

Introduction

A game can begin before anyone knows what winning means. Hundreds – more precisely, four hundred fifty-six people – step into a brightly colored arena and agree to play a series of children's games. Although separated by almost a century, Squid Game echoes the same anxiety that is present in Kafka's fictions. The rules are simple, the rewards are clear, and the participants enter willingly. Yet beneath the surface that seems too good to be true lies a larger structure whose true logic remains concealed. What begins as a competition gradually reveals itself as something far more inhumane and unsettling – a system sustained not simply through force, but through participation, hope, and the illusion of choice.

Kafka's works are filled with similar structures. A man is arrested without being told his crime. A surveyor spends his days attempting to reach a castle that remains perpetually inaccessible. A traveling salesman awakens transformed into an insect and discovers that his value depended solely upon his usefulness. In each case, the source of power remains difficult to identify, yet

its effects are impossible to escape. Rather than confronting a single villain, Kafka's protagonists find themselves navigating networks of bizarre rules, expectations, and institutions that shape their lives while refusing explanation.

The enduring relevance of Kafka's fiction lies in this paradox. His worlds often feel surreal, yet their underlying anxieties remain remarkably familiar. Modern films repeatedly return to these same concerns, transforming Kafka's abstract systems into visible environments defined by hierarchy, surveillance, deprivation, and performance. Rather than simply reinterpreting Kafka's vision, contemporary narratives extend it, translating distant and abstract systems into forms that appear more visible and structured, yet remain just as elusive in their logic and control. These stories place their characters on quixotic quests for a justice, freedom, or recognition that keeps receding.

Suffering Without Meaning in A Hunger Artist and The Platform

People rarely question a system they believe has a purpose. Even when it inflicts suffering, there is comfort in assuming that someone, somewhere, understands the rules. Kafka's "A Hunger Artist" and Galder Gaztelu-Urrutia's The Platform expose the danger of this assumption. Neither protagonist simply endures hunger; they spend their lives searching for the meaning behind it. Ironically, that search becomes the very mechanism that keeps each system alive.

Kafka's hunger artist believes his fasting is a form of truth. Every day without food is another attempt to prove that his suffering possesses value beyond the ordinary human experience. Yet, the audience watching him is interested less in his art than in the spectacle of his body. They measure his performance with clocks, question whether he secretly cheats by eating, and eventually wander away altogether. The hunger artist spends his entire life believing that one day he will finally be understood and admired by the public. Instead, his dying confession dismantles everything he had built his identity around: he fasted because he "couldn't find the food" he liked (Kafka, "A Hunger Artist"). This revelation is devastating not because it explains his suffering, but because it doesn't. Kafka strips away every grand interpretation until only an ordinary absence remains. The tragedy in the story is not starvation itself but a man who devoted his entire life to finding meaning where none had ever existed to begin with.

The story makes the body a message that no audience can read in the same way. The artist's emaciation seems to him proof of discipline and artistic achievement. For spectators, it is first a novelty, then an inconvenience, then a relic of a style of entertainment that has passed. Christian Baier argues that the hunger artist turns his body into a sign, but the sign does not guarantee understanding (Baier 197–211). That distinction clarifies why the artist's effort fails. He can control the physical fact of fasting, but he cannot control what the public believes that fact means. His body is visible, yet his intention remains inaccessible.

The audience's suspicion that he may be secretly eating also reveals how completely his art depends on the rules imposed by spectators. They claim the right to verify his deprivation, while his private experience becomes less important than the public ritual around it.

The hunger artist's suffering is self-imposed, but that does not make it independent of society. He chooses to fast, yet he performs inside a structure that turns the choice into a job. The cage, the watchmen, the impresario, and the audience give his deprivation a public form. When fasting loses popularity, the artist is not freed from the system; he is simply transferred to a circus and displayed beside the animals. He remains in a cage because the institution can still use his body, even after the public no longer understands his art. As Emily Troscianko observes in her account of the story's bodily perspective, starvation is not an abstract symbol alone; it is an embodied experience that changes how the artist can think and act (331–48). Kafka's point is not that the artist's physical pain is unreal. It is that pain cannot guarantee the meaning he wants other people to see.

The Platform transforms Kafka's personal tragedy into a social one. Goreng enters the prison convinced that its cruelty must conceal some larger moral logic. Surely, he reasons, people who have experienced starvation will choose compassion when given abundance. Instead, every month the cycle repeats in a devastating manner. Victims become oppressors. Hunger becomes a habit and a norm. The administrators remain almost entirely absent because they no longer need to intervene; the prison functions precisely because its inhabitants have accepted this perverse logic as inevitable. Like Kafka's hunger artist, Goreng assumes the system must ultimately make sense; if only he can discover the correct rule, the prison can be redeemed. But every attempt to impose justice exposes another contradiction. The system offers procedures, routines, and hierarchy without ever revealing its true purpose.

Goreng's effort to persuade the prisoners to ration food resembles a moral experiment. He assumes that the problem is a failure of coordination: if the people above agree to take only what they need, food can reach everyone below. His plan is sensible, but the structure turns every act of restraint into a risk. A person who leaves food may be punished by the next level; a person who eats quickly may survive at someone else's expense. The system encourages each prisoner to treat the others as immediate threats and keeps the institution itself out of sight. The platform makes inequality tangible, but the rules governing the prison remain unexplained. Goreng cannot discover whether the arrangement is a punishment, an experiment, or a demonstration of human nature. He can only observe its effects.

The film's most important resemblance to Kafka is not the prison's strange architecture. It is the way characters keep searching for an authoritative explanation that never arrives. Goreng believes the administration might respond to a message if he can send one clear sign upward. The panna

cotta and the child become possible messages, but their significance is not guaranteed by the act of sending them. His final choice to send the child upward can be read as an appeal to innocence and hope, yet the film does not show that this appeal changes the institution. The ending gives Goreng a purpose without confirming that the purpose has been recognized. Like the hunger artist, he acts as if suffering can be made legible to a distant audience. The possibility of meaning survives, but its delivery cannot be verified.

The film's allegory can be read as a critique of inequality, but it also resists reducing the problem to individual selfishness. People make brutal choices, yet the prison distributes opportunity so unequally that each new level begins with different conditions. A prisoner's willingness to share is not enough to dismantle the machinery that sets the platform in motion. The structure shapes behavior, and behavior in turn preserves the structure. At the same time, the film shows that the institution's power is not wholly external: the prisoners enforce its logic when they use their temporary advantage to consume everything available. In both Kafka's story and the film, a system reaches stability when it no longer needs to justify itself. Its participants repeat its routines because the routines have become the only form of action they can imagine.

Movement Without Progress in The Castle and Snowpiercer

Kafka's The Castle and Bong Joon Ho's Snowpiercer make social hierarchy visible through space. In The Castle, the village lies beneath the institution that governs it, while access to the castle remains uncertain and mediated by messengers, officials, and conflicting accounts. In Snowpiercer, the last survivors of a frozen world live on a train whose cars divide them by class. The difference is striking: Kafka's authority is distant and difficult to locate, while Bong's is concentrated in a moving machine. Yet both works turn movement into a promise that never quite becomes freedom.

K., the land surveyor in The Castle, arrives expecting that his employment will give him a legitimate place in the village. Instead, he spends the novel trying to confirm what his appointment means and whether the castle recognizes him at all. He approaches the institution through phone calls, letters, assistants, and local intermediaries, but each apparent connection generates new uncertainty. The castle is not simply physically distant. Its authority reaches into the village through procedures that no one can explain completely. K. is continually told that he may have a place, that a message has been sent, or that an official may see him, but every opening produces another delay.

K.'s persistence has something quixotic about it. He continues to pursue access even as each attempt demonstrates that the goal may be unattainable. But the novel does not present him as foolish for wanting recognition. His desire is reasonable: if an institution has summoned or employed him, he should be able to learn the terms of that relationship. The irrationality

belongs to a system that can make decisions about him while denying him a stable account of those decisions. Torben Beck Jørgensen describes Kafka's bureaucracy as a place where inscrutability becomes a condition of life and people can be left "walking on the spot" (194–210). This captures K.'s motion. He is always doing something, but his actions do not produce dependable progress.

Michael Löwy's reading of The Castle emphasizes bureaucratic despotism and the way people may submit to an authority that remains remote and opaque (49–58). K. does not simply obey. He questions officials, challenges their claims, and tries to make the institution answer him. Still, his resistance takes place within the castle's own channels. Every attempt to escape the system's terms requires him to ask the system for permission or clarification. Authority is not just the castle building; it is the shared assumption that the castle has the right to define the village's reality. K. remains caught because he cannot step outside that assumption long enough to make his own status secure.

Snowpiercer turns this uncertain bureaucracy into a literal train. The passengers in the tail endure overcrowding and deprivation, while the front cars contain education, entertainment, gardens, and abundance. Curtis and the people with him fight their way forward, one compartment at a time. Their movement has a clear direction and visible milestones. Unlike K., Curtis can see the barriers he must cross. The train gives rebellion a map: move toward the engine, seize it, and take control of the system that determines the passengers' lives.

That clarity is also an illusion. Each car reveals a different part of the train's social order, but the forward journey does not simply replace oppression with liberation. Wilford has anticipated the rebellion and treats it as a mechanism that can help preserve the train's balance. Curtis learns that the system has incorporated revolt into its design. The revolution seems to promise a new beginning, yet it risks installing another ruler in the same engine. The train's movement around the frozen earth resembles social progress: it continues without arriving at a different world. The passengers advance through space while the structure that defines their roles remains intact.

The ending refuses an easy victory. The train is destroyed, leaving Yona and Timmy outside in a landscape where survival is uncertain. Their escape breaks the train's authority, but it does not provide a stable replacement society. The polar bear glimpsed in the distance suggests that life may continue beyond the institution, though the film cannot promise that the children will survive. Here Snowpiercer moves beyond Kafka's unresolved access: it lets its characters exit the system, but the exit carries them into risk rather than certainty. The distinction matters. The film imagines that a structure can be broken, while refusing to pretend that freedom immediately supplies food, safety, or a just social order.

Both works therefore complicate the idea of

progress. In The Castle, K. keeps moving toward authority but cannot establish that he has arrived. In Snowpiercer, the rebels do reach the front, but the very structure they hope to overthrow has already accounted for their movement. Kafka presents a hierarchy whose center remains out of reach; Bong presents one whose center can be reached and still fail to deliver freedom. In both, power operates through people's investment in the idea that the next step will finally settle their place. The desire to advance can keep a person moving even when movement reproduces the conditions of captivity.

Conditional Identity in The Metamorphosis and Parasite

The most unsettling line in The Metamorphosis isn't the one where Gregor finds himself transformed into "some sort of monstrous insect." It's the sentence right after it, where Gregor's first coherent thought isn't horror at his own body, but anxiety about missing his train to work. That small, almost throwaway detail exposes everything about what Kafka is actually diagnosing. The transformation doesn't create Gregor's alienation, but just drags into daylight an alienation that had already been quietly running the household for years. Gregor was never valued as a son or a brother in any sense separate from his paycheck. His entire identity within that family had already been converted into a mere function – a role defined by output rather than personhood – long before his body caught up to that truth. He mistook his own exhaustion for devotion. What the insect shell exposes is that the devotion running the other direction was never unconditional to begin with. It was contractual, and the contract required continuous employment.

In the beginning of the novella, the family's reaction feels so eerily procedural instead of monstrous. Nobody in the Samsa household is written intentionally to be portrayed as the antagonist – however, they're something quieter and much more morally disturbing: ordinary people slowly recalibrating their love in real time as Gregor's economic value drops towards zero. Grete, Gregor's sister who once brought him food with something that resembled tenderness, is eventually the one who insists he has to go, and she phrases it the way one would discuss clearing out furniture that no longer fits or suits the room. Kafka isn't interested in cruelty for its own sake here. He's actually interested in how effortlessly love can collapse into logistics the second a person stops producing. And that's the real horror of the novella. Not the bug, but the logic underneath the whole thing. Identity, in that house, was never something Gregor owned outright. Instead, it was something he leased, month to month, on the condition that he kept earning it back through labor nobody ever thanked him for.

Gregor's father also returns to work after Gregor can no longer provide for the family. That detail complicates the idea that the household simply falls into helplessness. The family adapts, but its adaptation also makes Gregor increasingly unnecessary. His room becomes storage; his presence is treated as a burden; his needs become

difficult to accommodate. The family's new economic arrangement does not cause his transformation, but it changes how they interpret it. The insect body gives them a visible reason to exclude the person whose labor had once supported them. The shift from provider to dependent reveals that the family's affection had been entangled with economic usefulness all along.

Bong Joon Ho's Parasite takes that same architecture of conditional selfhood and stretches it across an entire social order, swapping one family's living room for a whole city's class hierarchy. The Kim family's poverty isn't a failure of intelligence, ambition, or work ethic – if anything, the film goes out of its way to make one notice how sharp, adaptive, and resourceful every single one of them is. Their real problem is structural: the systems that decide who gets trust, employment, and access were simply never built to recognize people like them as legitimate in the first place. So they do the very thing Gregor never got the chance to do – they build a version of themselves the system is willing to accept.

Ki-woo becomes a fabricated Yonsei-educated tutor. Ki-jung invents an art-therapy credential overnight, complete with confident jargon she picked up from a five-minute internet search. They rehearse vocabulary, posture, and even the deliberate absence of a smell, because they've learned something Gregor discovered too late in the novella: legitimacy has almost nothing to do with who you actually are. It has everything to do with how convincingly you can perform an identity that a more powerful class is willing to recognize as valid.

When put side by side, the two stories almost move in opposite directions: Gregor begins with an established place in the system and slowly loses it when he can no longer work, while the Kims begin outside of that system and have to invent entirely new versions of themselves just to gain access to it. Gregor loses the identity that once made him useful, whereas the Kims construct identities that make them appear useful, but both ultimately reveal the same uncomfortable reality—that acceptance depends less on who someone actually is than on what they are capable of providing.

Parasite makes this visible through the Kim family's constant performance. Their fake degrees, rehearsed manners, and carefully constructed professions are not simply acts of deception, but responses to a world whose standards they already understand remarkably well.

The film's sensory details make that boundary difficult to cross. The Kims can change clothes and speech, but smell is treated as something that clings to the body. Mr. Park's reaction to the smell becomes especially painful because it exposes a distinction that employment is supposed to conceal. He can employ the Kims and still regard them as fundamentally separate. MoonJu Kim reads smell in Parasite as a sign through which class difference becomes visible and aversion toward the other is expressed (597–610). The

detail is not simply a marker of poverty; it shows that the boundary follows the Kims into the space where they have temporarily been invited.

The title's parasite metaphor also complicates easy judgments. The Kims deceive the Parks and depend on their wealth, but the Park household depends on hired workers to sustain its comfort. The metaphor can therefore point in more than one direction. Farahbakhsh and Ebrahimi connect the film's recurring images, including smell, insects, and the scholar's rock, to its depiction of class and limited social mobility (Farahbakhsh and Ebrahimi). The film does not claim that the two families are morally identical. It shows that the arrangement makes their lives interdependent while preserving a sharp distinction in power. The Kims can enter the house, but they do not own it; they can perform respectability, but they cannot decide what counts as respectable.

The final fantasy in which Ki-woo imagines earning enough money to buy the Park house gives the story a painfully clear ending. For a moment, the film seems to grant him a route from the semi-basement to the hilltop home. But the imagined reunion is revealed as a wish, not a plan supported by the conditions around him. The distance between the two homes is not closed by optimism. As in Kafka, the dream of recognition survives, but the system does not confirm that the dream can become reality. Gregor's family moves on after his death; the Kims remain divided by class and by the violence that has entered their lives. Their performances let them cross a threshold. They do not let them choose the terms of the world on the other side.

Uncertain Reality in The Trial and The Truman Show

The question of who defines reality connects Kafka's The Trial to Peter Weir's The Truman Show. Josef K. is arrested and prosecuted without learning what law he has broken or who has the authority to judge him. Truman Burbank lives inside a constructed town whose actors, cameras, and producer shape what he believes is real. The comparison might seem to place Kafka's darkness beside a Hollywood escape story. Yet both works begin with a character whose surroundings are organized by a hidden authority, and both ask what knowledge is possible when the world itself withholds its terms.

In The Trial, the arrest does not lead to a clear investigation. Josef K. remains free to go to work, yet the accusation follows him through courtrooms, offices, and conversations. The legal process is real because it changes how he lives, even though no one gives him a stable explanation of its rules. The court occupies obscure rooms and depends on intermediaries who speak as though they know how it works. K. responds by trying to reason his way through the accusation, but every source of information leads to another partial account. His guilt is never established in a way that would allow him to answer it. The process seems to define reality before K. can understand what reality it claims to represent.

In The Truman Show, the hidden system is far more legible to the audience. We see cameras concealed in ordinary objects, actors playing neighbors, and Christof directing the fictional town of Seahaven. Truman does not know that his life is a television program, and the people around him have been hired to reinforce the appearance of normality. The audience has information that Kafka's reader is denied: there is a control room and a person who claims to be in charge. This visibility might appear to make the system easier to oppose. Truman can eventually recognize the constructed world and sail toward its edge.

Yet the film's clarity comes with a different uncertainty. Christof can explain the show, but his explanation does not make his power legitimate. He describes Seahaven as a safer and more authentic world than the one outside, treating Truman's captivity as protection. The producer's ability to name the arrangement does not resolve its moral contradiction. Truman's choice to leave is meaningful because he acts without knowing what waits beyond the door. His freedom does not arrive as a full account of the world; it begins as a refusal to let another person decide what he is allowed to know.

The difference between these endings helps refine the paper's central claim. Kafka's characters rarely gain access to an external vantage point from which they can see the whole system. In The Truman Show, the viewer sees the apparatus and Truman eventually reaches its edge. But a visible system can still control a person by shaping what seems safe, familiar, or possible. Kafka's fiction also tests the limits of our ability to understand organization itself, since no single explanation of the castle can account for its effects on K. The Truman Show turns that problem outward: we can identify the set and its director, but the film cannot guarantee that life outside the set will be free from systems of control.

Together, The Trial and The Truman Show show that reality is not only a question of what a character can see. It is also a question of whose account is accepted and what consequences follow from challenging it. Josef K. cannot make the court explain itself, while Truman can uncover the machinery but cannot make Christof release him by argument. The one faces invisible law; the other confronts visible production. In both cases, resistance begins when the character stops treating the institution's version of reality as final. Neither story offers complete certainty after that refusal. The possibility of escape matters, but so does the risk of leaving the only world a character has known.

Conclusion

Across these stories and films, suffering, hierarchy, identity, and reality appear as separate problems, but they are joined by a common question: how does a person live inside a system that can shape a life without explaining itself? The hunger artist's body is visible, but the meaning he hopes it will carry is not. Goreng can see the platform, yet cannot discover what purpose it serves. K. approaches the castle without securing

recognition. Curtis reaches the engine only to learn that rebellion has been anticipated. Gregor's transformation exposes a family identity already tied to labor, while the Kims perform identities that class society is prepared to recognize. Josef K. and Truman live under authorities that claim power over the truth of their lives.

The differences between Kafka and the films matter as much as their similarities. Film gives a system a shape that can be seen: a prison with levels, a train with cars, a house on a hill, a town surrounded by a dome. These spaces make hierarchy and control concrete. They also invite the viewer to believe that seeing the structure means understanding it. But the films repeatedly frustrate that belief. The prison's administrators remain remote; the train's revolution repeats the logic it opposes; the Park house preserves a class boundary even when the Kims enter it; Seahaven's visible edge cannot tell Truman what the outside world will demand of him.

That is why these works remain Kafkaesque even when they offer their characters more visible routes of resistance. A system does not require everyone to approve of it. It needs only to make its terms seem unavoidable, or to make alternatives too uncertain to attempt. The people inside Kafka's fiction and these modern films are not trapped simply because they fail to understand the rules. They are trapped because the rules, purposes, and final meanings remain uncertain, while the consequences are immediate and bodily. Their suffering grows from the human desire to find order, justice, and purpose in worlds that refuse definitive answers.

A system reaches its most stable form when it no longer needs to justify itself. It can survive through the habits of people who have learned to accommodate it, the performances they use to obtain a place within it, and the hope that the next step will finally make its logic clear. Modern film may make Kafka's worlds more visible, but visibility does not dissolve their mystery. It only gives the mystery walls, levels, compartments, faces, and doors. What remains unsettling is the possibility that those structures feel natural because people have been taught to live inside them.

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