

Ben Kafka, *The Demon of Writing: Powers and Failures of Paperwork*, New York, Zone Books, 2012. 182 pp. ISBN 978 1 935408 26 0. US\$28.95

According to the *New York Times*, Ben Kafka is the ‘unofficial standard-bearer’ for the emerging discipline of paperwork studies.¹ Which, I guess, raises the question of why anyone is bothering to study something as seemingly old hat as paperwork in this digital age? Is it mere historical curiosity? Or does it provide a unique window into the deeper dynamics of societal power and Freudian psychoanalysis? While there is plenty of the former in this short book, it is the latter that excites Kafka – a Professor of Media History at New York University.

The obligatory heavyweights of postmodern discourse are name-checked: Derrida, Foucault and Barthes, together with a healthy blast of modernists and even pre-modernists: Marx, Rousseau, Weber, Balzac and de Tocqueville. Fortunately, Kafka (now there is a name to conjure with!) wears his erudition and philosophy lightly. In fact, if this book has a close cousin, it is German Cornelia Vismann’s *Files: Law and Media Technology*, reviewed in *Archives and Manuscripts* in May 2009. Both books subject record-making and recordkeeping to deep historical and theoretical analysis. While Vismann’s focus was on the legalities and technologies of recordkeeping, Kafka’s focus is on the inherent contradictions and unpredictability – the ‘psychic life’ – of record-making. As Derrida said, the record always works against itself.² These contradictions are perhaps best illustrated by the populist myth-making about bureaucracy, which portrays bureaucratic systems as sinister, rational, ordered, invisible, ruthless, uncaring and all-powerful and, at the same time, inefficient, careless, chaotic, feckless, indifferent, wasteful and self-justifying. Any system that can simultaneously match these various descriptions – at once both comedic and paranoid – must perforce be ridden with contradictions and unpredictability.

Where Kafka’s book suffers in comparison to Vismann’s is in the relatively narrow historical scope of the *New Yorker’s* book. While Vismann’s book traverses ancient Greece and Rome, the Middle Ages, Melville and the other Kafka, right through to the digital age, Ben Kafka, for the most part, satisfies himself with the French Revolution and the decades immediately following. There are four chapters. Chapter 1 examines how the French Revolution transformed the ethos of recordkeeping from a means of monarchical and absolutist control to a vehicle for societal accountability or for ‘disciplining the State’ (p. 38). Chapter 2 looks at how paperwork both supported and undermined the Reign of Terror over the period 1793–1794. The misdeeds of counter-revolutionaries needed to be documented within an inch of the lives of the alleged perpetrators, in order to feed the committee for Public Safety’s insatiable need for knowledge and power. Yet the sheer weight of record-making requirements soon caused the system to collapse under its own weight. Clever subversives working in the belly of the beast realised that the bureaucratic demands for paperwork could easily be used to derail or at least substantially delay the committee’s objectives. Paperwork could take lives, but it could also save them. A single misplaced file or report could make a world of difference. Indeed, Saint-Just lamented that: ‘it is impossible to govern without brevity’ (p. 54). ‘The demon of writing’ was waging war against the objectives of the Revolution (p. 54). In Kafka’s words: ‘national security was deferred and destabilized by the letters, notices, reports, tables, and registers upon which it depended’

(p. 56). In other words, one person's recordkeeping for accountability is another's 'red tape' or bureaucratic obfuscation.

In Chapter 3, Kafka puts the bureau back into bureaucracy. Both the word and concept emerged in the late eighteenth century. By 1850, it was everywhere, throughout literature, parody, popular culture and popular paranoia. As Kafka says: 'Total strangers suddenly had a strange and total power over you' (p. 82). This is developed further in the final chapter, where the theory and philosophy of bureaucracy and paperwork is explored. The young Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud and Roland Barthes all get to have a say in ways that favour the accidental and ironic over the structuralist and predictable. Kafka concludes with a few pages on the future of paperwork, asking whether it will ever be replaced by the computer. The author has his doubts, asserting that: 'Machines should work, but they frequently don't; people should think, but in this day and age they seldom have the time' (p. 150).

This book will not change your life or your outlook on recordkeeping. Nevertheless, it is an interesting brief rumination on its pleasures, surprises and failures; worth reading if you have a few spare hours.

Endnotes

1. Jennifer Schuessler, 'The Paper Trail through History', *New York Times*, 16 December 2012.
2. Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, University of Chicago Press, 1996.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01576895.2013.799425>