

ARTICLE

The Penultimate: Kafkaesque smile and absurdTürker Körük* 

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Abstract

Jonas Kærup Hjort's film *The Penultimate* examines the modern individual's helplessness against an invisible bureaucratic mechanism through a Kafkaesque lens. The narrative centers on an ordinary water inspector who becomes passive and loses his identity within a labyrinthine, inescapable structure. However, in keeping with Kafka's spirit, this portrayal is built not only on a gloomy atmosphere but also on grotesque humor and absurd dialogue. This study argues that the comedy in the film is not a mere lightening element but a critical tool that renders bureaucratic violence visible. By creating a disturbing experience of laughter—at times evoking guilt in the audience—the film reproduces the Kafkaesque aesthetic in a hybrid form. Consequently, the individual's loss within the system transcends a purely tragic experience; through this hybrid structure, it attains an ironic and absurd dimension. Thus, the dilemmas of modern existence find their resonance in contemporary cinema through both existential tremors and distorted humor.

Keywords: Kafkaesque cinema; Absurd comedy; Bureaucratic alienation; The Penultimate; Contemporary Danish cinema

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1. Introduction

Kafkaesque narratives can be regarded as a unique aesthetic form that reveals how bureaucratic systems, which appear rational, orderly, and functional at the heart of modernity, are fundamentally irrational and operate as closed-circuit systems of power. This aesthetic, which becomes apparent in Franz Kafka's texts such as *The Trial* and *The Castle*, revolves around themes such as the individual's attempts to make sense of legal and administrative structures constantly coming to naught, institutional transparency giving way to uncertainty, and the subject's influence over their own destiny gradually diminishing. In this context, Kafkaesque is not merely an atmosphere; it is also an artistic form of critical consciousness directed at the institutional functioning of the modern world. Where it intersects with absurdism, the tension between the individual's search for meaning and the structural meaninglessness of the world transforms into both an existential and a political plane of inquiry.

The visual nature of cinema provides a suitable medium for staging the fundamental components of Kafkaesque aesthetics. Elements such as closed, labyrinthine spatial constructions; rhythmic narration based on repetition; the anonymization of hierarchical authority figures, and the passivity of characters can be concretized through the language of cinema. Therefore, Kafkaesque aesthetics has moved beyond being a quality unique to literature and has become an important reference point in film theory

discussions. Indeed, within contemporary European cinema, many productions¹ that make the invisible violence of bureaucracy visible by embedding it within the ordinary flow of everyday life can be read as contemporary adaptations of the Kafkaesque narrative tradition.

In this context, Jonas Kærup Hjort's film *The Penultimate* offers a unique example that not only reproduces the Kafkaesque aesthetic but also intersects it with absurd comedy. The film tells the story of an ordinary water inspector who gradually gets lost inside a massive, enclosed, labyrinthine structure in a rural location he enters on official business. As the narrative progresses, the people, rules, and directives the character encounters become increasingly vague and illogical. Each new door opens onto a new layer of bureaucracy that demands more explanation than the last but never provides satisfactory information. Within this structure, the character begins to unravel both physically and subjectively; their existential equilibrium shifts, and their identity is reduced to a functionality defined solely by the system. The fundamental element that makes *The Penultimate* unique is that this existential confinement is not constructed solely through a dark and gloomy tone. Hjort creates a hybrid atmosphere that simultaneously amuses and unsettles the audience by employing grotesque humor, absurd dialogue, and alienating acting styles. Smiling in this atmosphere does not convey a sense of relief or catharsis; rather, it takes on the function of a critical gesture that makes the irrationality of the system more visible. Therefore, the comedy in the film ceases to be a secondary element accompanying the narrative and takes on a structural role in exposing bureaucratic violence. The metaphor of the "Kafkaesque smile" gains meaning precisely at this point: the smile does not suspend the pathetic; rather, it clarifies the pathetic with absurd clarity.

This article aims to examine how absurd comedy functions as an extension of Kafkaesque aesthetics in contemporary cinema in *The Penultimate*. The study primarily examines the film at the narrative level, exploring how themes such as Kafkaesque uncertainty, bureaucratic domination, and existential constriction are established. In this context, it argues that the humor employed in the film functions as a critical tool that renders visible the fragile and discordant position of the modern individual within the system. *The Penultimate* is regarded as a cinematic experience that not only reproduces Kafkaesque sensibility

but also reconstructs it on a hybrid aesthetic plane—both humorous and existential.

2. Methodology

This study addressed four research questions. It examined how traditional Kafkaesque aesthetics are reproduced and transformed within the formal and thematic structures of contemporary cinema. Building on this broader context, the study specifically examined how the film *The Penultimate* serves as a cinematic case study of the fusion of Kafkaesque uncertainty and bureaucratic alienation. Furthermore, it explored how absurd humor functions not merely as a secondary element of comic relief but as a primary structural and critical tool for exposing the bureaucratic violence within the film. Finally, the study examined how the film's hybrid aesthetic structure ultimately reflects the broader crises of modern subjectivity, alienation, and late-modern power dynamics.

The theoretical framework of this study is largely based on the Kafkaesque narrative tradition and the philosophy of absurdism. Themes such as bureaucratic power, uncertainty, and the dissolution of the subject within the system, as seen in the works of Franz Kafka, constitute one of the fundamental points of reference for this study. This study adopted a qualitative and interpretive research approach to examine Jonas Kærup Hjort's film *The Penultimate* within the context of Kafkaesque aesthetics and absurdism. The primary aim of this study is to reveal how the modern individual's vulnerable position vis-à-vis bureaucratic systems is represented through the film's narrative structure, visual language, and thematic organization. In this vein, the study approached the film not merely as a narrative object but as a cultural text that reflects the power relations, processes of subjectification, and existential tensions of modernity. Similarly, sociological and philosophical approaches that explain the modern individual's identity crisis and experience of uncertainty also provide a supportive perspective for interpreting the film. Built upon this theoretical framework, the bureaucratic order depicted in the film was evaluated not merely as a narrative element but as a critical representation of the modern social order. For this reason, the study's methodology is based not on quantitative measurement or audience reception research, but on a qualitative and hermeneutic (interpretive) analytical approach that examines the processes of meaning production within the film text. This method, widely used in film studies, aims to examine how a film's world of meaning is constructed through the various components of cinematic language. The analysis examined how elements characteristic of Kafkaesque aesthetics—such as uncertainty, bureaucratic labyrinths, institutional anonymity, and the experience of

¹ Such as Roy Andersson, *You, the Living* (2007), Roy Andersson, *A Pigeon Sat on a Branch Reflecting on Existence* (2014), Yorgos Lanthimos, *The Lobster* (2015), Cristian Mungiu, *Graduation* (2016), Aki Kaurismäki, *Le Havre* (2011).

delay and waiting—are rendered in the film’s language. In this way, the study sought to reveal the relationship between the film’s narrative structure and its aesthetic choices.

This study also employed the thematic analysis method. Thematic analysis is an interpretive technique that aims at identifying recurring patterns of meaning and conceptual themes within a text. By examining the scenes in the film, key themes such as bureaucratic alienation, existential uncertainty, the experience of waiting, spatial confinement, the dissolution of identity, and the normalization of violence were interpreted. These themes have been examined not only at the narrative level but also in a way that demonstrates how cinematic form functions. In this way, the study reveals how the film’s aesthetic choices operate as a representational strategy that renders visible the modern individual’s vulnerability in the face of the system.

In terms of research design, the film *The Penultimate* was treated as a case study. This approach allows for an examination of how a broader aesthetic and intellectual tradition is reproduced through a single film. In this context, the film was evaluated as a unique example of the reinterpretation of Kafkaesque aesthetics in contemporary European cinema. Consequently, this methodological approach aims to understand how the Kafkaesque narrative tradition is reproduced in contemporary cinema by revealing the relationship between the film’s thematic content and its aesthetic form.

The aim of this study is not to produce causal explanations or reach generalizable conclusions. Instead, it seeks to demonstrate how the Kafkaesque aesthetic intersects with absurd comedy in contemporary cinema through a critical interpretation of the film’s text. In this context, it is argued that the humor in the film is not merely an element that lightens the narrative but rather functions as a critical strategy that exposes the irrational and oppressive aspects of bureaucratic systems.

3. Kafkaesque aesthetics and bureaucratic violence

Kafkaesque aesthetics represents the effect of forms of power operating under modernity’s rational and regulatory discourse on the individual as an invisible yet deeply felt violence. The invisible bureaucratic violence and state of perpetual uncertainty revealed by the Kafkaesque aesthetic elevate the existential fragility of the modern individual beyond a mere political issue, transforming it into an ontological problem. When a meaningful explanation of how the system operates cannot be produced, the individual begins to lose the foundation of their connection to the world; this triggers a process of

self-analysis directed toward the subject’s own existence. This dilemma is not merely the result of external pressures, but an internal conflict that deepens as the search for meaning goes unanswered. This is the critical point where Kafkaesque representation meets absurdism: the discord between human consciousness and the world’s silence (or the incomprehensible language of bureaucracy) becomes the fundamental experience of modern subjectivity.

This aesthetic structure, evident in Franz Kafka’s works, such as *The Trial* and *The Castle*, centers on the individual’s gradual dissolution in the face of a system they cannot comprehend. In this universe, violence is not overt or dramatic; rather, it operates through regulations, procedures, control mechanisms, and constantly delayed decision-making processes. Therefore, the Kafkaesque narrative embeds the structural violence operating beneath the seemingly cold and impartial surface of modern bureaucracy into the ordinary flow of everyday life.^{1,2}

Kafkaesque aesthetics intersects with intellectual approaches that explain the functioning of modern power. Foucault’s³ analysis of disciplinary power showed that power operates not only through central institutions but also within a network of micro-relationships that regulate individuals’ lives. Agamben⁴ argued that at the core of the modern legal order lies a form of power based on the normalization of the state of exception. The uncertainty, sense of guilt, and unexplained authority figures encountered in the world of Kafkaesque narratives, when read within these conceptual frameworks, reveal the existential dimension of modern bureaucracy. The individual becomes not only the subject of a legal or administrative process but also the bearer of an unsolvable crisis of meaning.

This aesthetic structure also shares certain intersections with Camus’⁵ theory of absurdism. According to Camus, the absurd is the name given to the tension between man’s search for meaning and the silence of the world.

The influence of the Kafkaesque tradition in contemporary European cinema is particularly evident in the representation of bureaucratic violence in everyday life. The transformation of the seemingly neutral and technical functioning of modern states and institutions into a network of domination that envelops the individual’s life is made visible in many films through absurd narrative strategies. This emphasizes that violence is produced not directly, but through experiences such as delay, uncertainty, and constant surveillance. Thus, the Kafkaesque aesthetic, reshaped not only by a dark and gloomy atmosphere but also by absurd and occasionally humorous tones, produces a critical sensibility that questions modernity’s claim to “rationality.”

The invisible bureaucratic violence and constant state of uncertainty revealed by Kafkaesque aesthetics require us to consider the existential fragility of the modern individual not only as a political or social issue but also as an ontological problem. For when no meaningful explanation of the system's functioning can be produced, the individual begins to lose the foundation of their relationship with the world; this triggers a process of dissolution directed at the subject's own existence. This dissolution manifests not only as a result of external pressures but also as an internal conflict deepened by the lack of answers to the search for meaning. It is at this point that Kafkaesque representation intersects with the fundamental tenets of absurdism: the incompatibility between human consciousness and the silence of the world becomes the defining experience of modern subjectivity. In the next section, this context will be examined through the lens of the theory of absurdism.

4. Absurdism and the dissolution of the modern individual

Absurdism, as a theoretical framework conceptualizing the fundamental existential discord experienced by the modern individual in relation to the world, holds a critical place in understanding the experience offered by the Kafkaesque aesthetic. According to Camus⁵, the absurd is an ontological rupture that manifests itself not in a specific event but in the nature of the relationship between consciousness and the world. This rupture becomes more apparent as the gap between modernity's ideal of rational order and the existential insecurity experienced by the individual widens. Therefore, the dissolution of the modern individual is not merely the result of a psychological breakdown; it is also a direct product of modernity's epistemological and institutional logic. Bauman's⁶ conceptualization of "liquid modernity" sees the subject deprived of permanent points of reference and forced into a state of constant movement and adaptation as the main cause of the destabilization of identity. Because modern social institutions promise meaning and order, the subjective relationships that individuals establish with these institutions increasingly produce experiences of uncertainty, alienation, and displacement.

It can be said that the institutional labyrinths found in Kafka's novels and short stories represent the material-mental infrastructure of this very absurd experience. According to Deleuze and Guattari⁷, meaning in Kafka's world never reaches a final explanation; law, identity, and belonging are constantly deferred, and this deferral turns into an existential closure. Similarly, Foucault³ emphasized that modern forms of power do not directly oppress the individual, but rather turn them into the agents of control

over themselves within an invisible network of norms. This situation does not limit the absurd experience solely to the individual's inner world; rather, it defines it as a structural condition that is constantly reproduced within the subject's everyday life practices.

The representation of absurdism in cinema is often constructed through an aesthetic order dominated by anonymized characters, unsolvable narratives, and meaningless repetitions.⁸ Cinema produces an absurd experience not only on an intellectual level but also on a physical and emotional level; the viewer is invited to experience both cognitive and emotional uncertainty in the face of a world devoid of rational explanation. In this context, absurdity is not merely a mitigating element; on the contrary, it functions as a critical gesture that makes the collapse of meaning visible. The act of laughter created by the absurd often produces discomfort rather than peace. In contemporary cinema, the reproduction of the Kafkaesque aesthetic spreads the logic of uncertainty and dissolution inherent in absurdism across the layers of the film's language:

- (i) The disruption of narrative continuity: The classic cause-and-effect chain is replaced by random and cyclical events that never quite resolve.
- (ii) Anonymization and typology: The presentation of characters as figures without past, future, or depth; this emphasizes the individual's replaceability within the system.
- (iii) Disturbing humor and the grotesque: The fusion of the tragic with the absurd, presented with excessive seriousness, draws the viewer into an emotional state of uncertainty.

Recent research in the field of contemporary cinema is increasingly focusing on how 21st-century screen cultures reframe historical models of existential fear and structural violence. As Kovács⁹ and Bordwell¹⁰ argued in their analyses of modern European art cinema, the classical causal narrative chain is increasingly giving way to episodic, cyclical, and open-ended structural designs that mimic the alienation of late modernity. In this context, the experience of waiting and temporal suspension is no longer merely a stylistic pause; rather, as Majumdar¹¹ noted, it functions as a vital ontological condition in which the viewer can physically sense institutional pressure and individual powerlessness. Furthermore, recent research on dark humor and minimalist aesthetic strategies—such as King's comprehensive study on humor in independent and alternative cinema—emphasizes that the "expressionless" stance in modern cinema does not serve the traditional function of emotional release or catharsis.¹² Instead, contemporary film theory acknowledges that this

unsettling and highly formalistic humor functions as a defensive cognitive response to a relentless reality, thereby validating the conceptual premise that the “Kafkaesque smile” is a meticulous form of systematic criticism rather than a mere aesthetic embellishment.

At this point, this theoretical framework regarding the representation of absurdism in cinema becomes particularly decisive when analyzing examples of Kafkaesque aesthetics being reproduced in contemporary cinema. Kafkaesque narratives reproduce the logic of uncertainty and dissolution inherent in absurdism, not only at the thematic level but also in the organization of film language. Interrupting narrative continuity, positioning characters as anonymous figures lacking psychological depth, or using humor as a disturbing critical gesture are among the main strategies that constitute the cinematic counterpart of the Kafkaesque universe. Therefore, in the next section, which focuses on film language and representational strategies, the question of how these aesthetic and emotional dimensions of absurdism render visible the fragile existence of the modern individual in the face of bureaucratic order will become a central axis of discussion.

5. Kafkaesque representation in film language

The representation of Kafkaesque aesthetics in cinema becomes apparent primarily in the organization of film language rather than in the narrative. Bureaucratic domination, the unnerving transformation of ordinary spaces, and the subject’s imprisonment in a world they cannot comprehend are constructed primarily through space, *mise-en-scène*, and camera movements. In this context, cinema reproduces not only the thematic level of Kafka’s texts but also their “experiential structure of the world’s dissolution” on the visual-auditory plane.¹³ The cinematic representation of the Kafkaesque thus creates a sensory and perceptual atmosphere independent of the narrative. As Kracauer¹⁴ noted, while cinema serves the function of “rescuing physical reality,” Kafkaesque cinema distorts this reality to reveal the irrational horror lurking beneath modernity. These aesthetic strategies transform the subject not only into a passive victim but also into a carrier of an insoluble uncertainty. Kracauer noted that modern cinema possesses the capacity to render visible the peculiarities hidden within everyday life. Kafkaesque cinema radicalizes this potential further, transforming the ordinary itself into the source of an alienating experience. Thus, bureaucratic officials, files, forms, and regulations become not merely background elements but the fundamental material of the absurd. Gray¹⁵

also emphasized that bureaucracy in Kafka’s world is a fundamental structural element that blurs the boundary between the everyday and the extraordinary.

One of the elements that makes Kafkaesque representation unique is the deliberate suspension of narrative clarity. Bordwell¹⁶ defined classical narrative cinema as a system based on causal continuity, psychologically motivated characters, and a plot that moves toward resolution. In this model, the viewer is placed in a coherent universe of meaning by following the cause-and-effect relationships behind events. In Kafkaesque narratives, however, this structure is broken: the motivations of the characters become ambiguous, causality weakens, and the narrative consciously delays or completely cancels the promise of closure. As Naremore¹⁷ pointed out, modernist and Kafkaesque narratives employ structural strategies that force the audience to suspend their expectation of a “complete meaning.” This situation is also consistent with Lyotard’s¹⁸ observations regarding the dissolution of modernity’s “grand narratives”; Lyotard emphasized that the modern subject is no longer exposed to a holistic horizon of meaning, but rather to fragmented and local discourses. Thus, in Kafkaesque cinema, the viewer is consciously placed in a world where meaning dissolves spontaneously.

In Kafkaesque aesthetics, characters are often anonymous figures; the individual’s subjective identity becomes blurred within the controlling and disciplining structures of modern institutions.³ The viewer, meanwhile, settles into uncertainty alongside the character within a visual economy transformed by the subject-object relationships analyzed by Mulvey.¹⁹ This renders visible the conflict between the modern individual’s search for meaning and the silence of the world; the absurd, in Camus’s²⁰ words, emerges precisely from this rupture. This aesthetic manifests itself not only at the narrative level but also in the arrangement of space and framing. As Deleuze⁸ pointed out, in modern cinema, space is an active force field that constructs the subject’s existential condition.

In particular, space emerges as the fundamental determinant of the Kafkaesque experience. Augé’s²¹ concept of *non-lieux*², defined as “transitional spaces that do not produce identity or belonging,” makes visible the rootlessness of the modern individual within the bureaucratic order. In cinema, the excessive repetition of such spaces (corridors, waiting rooms, archives, counters) reinforces the subject’s sense of displacement. Thus, space becomes not merely a backdrop for events but an active component of alienation. The phenomenon described by Vidler²² as “architectural uncanny” manifests itself in

² Non-places.

Kafkaesque cinema through the sudden transformation of familiar homes or offices into alien, labyrinthine, and threatening structures.

Similarly, the camera perspective also reproduces the subject's fragile position. Andrew²³, while discussing cinema's construction of the subject through camera placement, emphasized that the gaze is always ideological and rule-setting. In Kafkaesque cinema, the camera is often positioned slightly above the character; this choice creates a sense of constant surveillance and embodies the invisible power of bureaucracy. At the same time, the use of wide-angle lenses compresses the character within the frame, creating an effect of existential confinement.²⁴

The use of sound plays a central role in establishing a Kafkaesque atmosphere. As Chion²⁵ pointed out, cinematic sound does not merely accompany the image; it always produces "extra meaning" and thus deepens the sensory and semantic intensity of the scene. In Kafkaesque narratives, echoing footsteps, keyboard clicks, or incomprehensible murmurs accompanying bureaucratic spaces reveal the threatening potential within the ordinary. Although these sounds appear to be natural parts of daily life on the diegetic plane, they produce unease and uncertainty on the semantic level. Thus, the viewer is confronted not only with the meaninglessness experienced by the character but also with a sensory unease that keeps them constantly on edge. As Chion²⁵ pointed out, cinematic sound transforms the viewer's perceptual position, creating a psychic intensity that the image alone cannot achieve.

The Kafkaesque film language plays a central role in establishing the intellectual and sensory foundation of absurdist aesthetics in cinema. This context allows for a discussion not only of the formal choices of the films under examination, but also of how they render visible an intellectual interrogation of the fragility of the modern subject. This framework is particularly evident in *The Penultimate*: The film reshapes the elements of Kafkaesque aesthetics discussed above within an original narrative and visual structure, making it possible to consider how the absurd has become embedded in the fabric of everyday life through a concrete example.

6. The Penultimate

Jonas Kærup Hjort made his feature film directorial debut with this film after graduating from the National Film School of Denmark; he was previously known for his masterful short film *In a Month* (2017), which won various awards. Hjort's experience in theater is evident in the stage-like positioning of the characters and the rhythmic repetition of the dialogue; the tension he creates between the rules of cinema and theater strengthens the film's

unique aesthetic structure. Hjort's film language draws on the theatrical roots of his directing. Stylized spaces reminiscent of stage design, unpredictable relationships between characters, and the theatrical arrangement of dialogue define the film's world-building strategy. This approach positions the characters as masks existing in interaction with the system, rather than presenting their individual histories or psychological depths to the viewer. Thus, the characters become elements of the absurd system signified by the film's aesthetic order, rather than individual consciousnesses. The director's approach to cinema does not merely use the absurd as a comic or grotesque element; it also transforms it into a critical tool that confronts the audience with the irrational and systematic contradictions of the modern world. This conscious style is also evident in the film's visual composition and rhythm: most of the frames are static, with extended durations and images that offer no dramatic resolution, evoking a sense of inescapability and repetition in the viewer. This is the concrete manifestation of the director's desire to create not just a narrative in cinema, but a space for thought and experience. The director uses the film not only to construct a narrative but also to test the viewer within the artificial and closed universe he has created from beginning to end. As seen in his interviews and previous works, he tends to treat his characters not for their psychological depth, but as experimental figures placed in specific situations. This approach reinforces the sense of distance in the film: the director does not allow complete identification between the viewer and the characters; instead, he ensures that the viewer remains in a position of constantly observing and questioning from the outside. Thus, the film opens up a space for critical observation rather than classic dramatic intimacy.³ Furthermore, the director's approach to the human figure reinforces the existential themes. The characters are defined not by their individual pasts, desires, or inner worlds, but by specific roles. The director's choice aligns with the idea that the identity of contemporary humans is increasingly determined by institutional roles. In his cinema, the "individual" often emerges as a being searching for their own voice but condemned to speak the language of the system in which they exist. In this respect, *The Penultimate* can be considered perhaps the most concentrated example of the director's creative line of inquiry into the fragility and directionlessness of modern man.

To fully grasp the aesthetic significance of *The Penultimate*, it is essential to situate Jonas Kærup Hjort's formal strategies within the broader landscape of contemporary European cinema, moving beyond purely

³ See <https://www.dfi.dk/en/english/news/jonas-kaerup-hjort-debut-absurd-baroque-black-comedy>

literary or historical traditions. Over the past 15 years, European film studies have increasingly identified a distinct stylistic paradigm characterized by detachment, deadpan humor, and systematic alienation; this trend has directly shaped Hjort's vision.

First and foremost, the visual language and minimalist tone of *The Penultimate* are deeply rooted in the spare, expressionless cinema of Swedish director Roy Andersson, particularly in his films known as the "Living Trilogy." Andersson's distinctive style—characterized by muted, monochromatic color palettes, static, painterly wide shots, and characters marked by a somnambulistic lethargy—serves as a key reference point for modern Scandinavian alienation. In *The Penultimate*, the story of an ordinary water inspector trapped inside a concrete labyrinth perfectly reflects this kind of Scandinavian melancholic existentialism. The characters function not as individuals with psychological depth but as stylized, mask-like archetypes; their rigid and repetitive interactions reveal the fragility of postmodern social structures.

Second, the film's narrative structure—set in a closed microcosm governed by highly irrational and unquestioned bureaucratic orders—aligns strongly with the "Greek Weird Wave" pioneered by contemporary directors like Yorgos Lanthimos. In groundbreaking works such as *Dogtooth* (2009) and *Alps* (2011), Lanthimos creates sterile, highly regimented spaces where human behavior is reduced to absurd social protocols and mechanical obedience. *The Penultimate* embraces precisely this contemporary strategy; by confining a civil servant to an abstract, rural facility where arbitrary administrative hierarchies overshadow human reason, Hjort reflects that "uncanny" (strange) unease that is a defining characteristic of the modern avant-garde. The film's strange, overly formalized dialogue does not diminish the narrative tension; on the contrary, by highlighting how modern subjects willingly internalize systemic absurdities, it serves a critical function characteristic of Lanthimos.

Finally, although the film adopts an extremely stylized, allegorical structure, its thematic focus on the crushing paralysis of administrative systems reflects the institutional critiques seen in the "Romanian New Wave," most notably in Corneliu Porumboiu's *Police, Adjective* (2009). However, while the Romanian movement grounds its bureaucratic critiques in hyper-realistic, post-communist socio-political contexts, *The Penultimate* radicalizes this thematic concern by transporting it into a surreal, timeless realm. The endless proliferation of forms, inspector protocols, and postponed decisions in Hjort's narrative underscores a widespread anxiety in 21st-century European cinema regarding the absolute control of the individual.

The film begins with an ordinary water inspector setting out on a routine inspection; however, this journey soon transforms into an experience of entering a closed structure with undefined boundaries and its own internal logic. The building the inspector enters to conduct his inspection appears at first glance to be an ordinary space resembling any public institution; however, as the scenes progress, it becomes increasingly clear that this place has transformed into a closed, cyclical universe that defies the logic of everyday reality (Figure 1). From the moment the character enters the building, the most fundamental problem is not how long he will stay there or how he will complete his task, but rather his attempt to understand how this space functions. However, this effort becomes increasingly unsolvable with each step forward. The film can be read as a contemporary interpretation of the Kafkaesque aesthetic tradition, with its structure that reveals the fragile existence of the modern individual through bureaucratic violence, spatial isolation, and narrative uncertainty. The character we observe is not so much a subject with a distinct social identity or consistent psychology, but rather a figure surrounded by the modern world's claims of order and rationality, yet left outside that order. His constantly deferred quest for access and approval aligns with the idea that modernity creates profound forms of insecurity while producing security. Therefore, the bureaucratic apparatus we encounter in the film is not merely a mechanism of governance; it emerges as an anonymous form of power, stripped of personal responsibility. The cold, standardized, and mechanical attitudes of the officials who interact with the character create an atmosphere where violence is normalized within the functioning of the rules, rather than a scene where violence is directly applied.

The people he encounters inside the building are figures defined by their duties, even reduced to their duties, rather than forming a vibrant community (Figure 2). Conversations are abrupt, cold, and often unnecessarily drawn out. The character's transformation also becomes apparent within this world. Initially acting like an ordinary civil servant just trying to do his job, he gradually begins to accept the language and workings of the building. Practices that he previously questioned or could not make sense of begin to seem natural. Thus, the film reveals not only external pressure but also the subject's process of adapting to this pressure. The most striking thing is this: even when the character manages to become fully integrated into the system, he is still not safe. Because the system does not promise shelter, meaning, or identity in exchange for loyalty or obedience, it merely perpetuates its own existence (Figure 3).

Throughout the film, the character's most frequent



Figure 1. *The Penultimate*. Reprinted with permission of the copyright owner. Copyright 2026, Rikke Tambo Andersen.



Figure 2. *The Penultimate*. Reprinted with permission of the copyright owner. Copyright 2026, Rikke Tambo Andersen.

activity is waiting. Waiting for an official to arrive, waiting for a door to open, waiting for a form to be approved... This state of waiting directly reflects the rhythm of the narrative. The tempo is neither completely static nor fully progressive; the viewer is left alone with the tension

created by remaining in the same place, under the illusion of constant movement.

The stretching of time becomes not only a psychological effect but also an ontological problem: When did the character arrive here? How long have they been here? More



Figure 3. *The Penultimate*. Reprinted with permission of the copyright owner. Copyright 2026, Rikke Tambo Andersen.

importantly, will they be able to leave? The way the space is constructed deepens this feeling. The building's corridors, rooms, and interior layout appear to be the product of a rational architectural plan; however, in practice, they create a labyrinthine effect that makes it difficult to determine direction. Doors open into each other, rooms repeat themselves, and no space forms a distinct center. As the character moves forward, they think they have arrived at a new place, but in fact, they have entered another variation of the same cycle. This spatial confinement is not only physical; the character's mental and emotional space also gradually narrows. The labyrinthine structure of the building functions not only as a spatial arrangement but also as an expression of the character's state of consciousness. The corridors that become identical at every turn, the doors that repeat themselves, and the procedures that blur the line between what is right and what is wrong deliberately weaken the viewer's sense of direction. After a while, the viewer can no longer be sure whether the character is actually progressing. This uncertainty directly connects to the feeling of displacement and directionlessness that individuals sometimes experience, even within the

seemingly planned and orderly flow of modern life. The boundaries between reality and representation, right and wrong, meaning and meaninglessness constantly shift within this spatial uncertainty. The film takes care not to leave the individual any solid reference points to hold onto on this slippery ground, and it is precisely for this reason that it produces an intensity that unsettles the viewer (Figure 4).

One of the key elements here is the functional use of comedy. While the film establishes a dark and oppressive atmosphere, it also creates unexpectedly absurd and comical moments. The officials' serious yet meaningless explanations, overly formal forms of address, or unnecessarily drawn-out procedural scenes create a hybrid tone that forces the audience to laugh but at the same time makes them feel uncomfortable. The moment of laughter is not a relief but, on the contrary, functions as a threshold that reveals how illogical the world in question operates. While laughing, the audience is confronted with the question: If it is this absurd, why does not anyone object?

The film's comedy emerges precisely from this sense of



Figure 4. *The Penultimate*. Reprinted with permission of the copyright owner. Copyright 2026, Rikke Tambo Andersen.

acceptance. Scenes set in a relatively serious and gloomy atmosphere become unexpectedly comical through absurd dialogue and interactions laden with unnecessary formality. However, this comedy is not a comedy that comforts the audience. The moment of laughter also produces embarrassment and unease. Because the audience realizes that laughter is also part of the meaningless violence to which the character is subjected. Thus, the film uses comedy not only as an aesthetic choice but also as a critical tool. The film's constant intertwining of the comical and the pathetic is particularly evident in its representation of violence. Even when the character is clearly confronted with violence, events unfold with a strange calmness. No one acts as if they bear the dramatic weight of the scene. This both normalizes the violence and makes it more disturbing. Because violence is not presented as an explosive moment, it is presented as a natural and inevitable extension of the proceedings. The representation of violence in the film is never melodramatic. On the contrary, violence is embedded in procedure. The character's exclusion, threat, or risk is presented not as a dramatic moment of rupture, but as the natural result of an ordinary process. The rules produce an anonymous power that no one owns, but everyone enforces. Therefore, no character is "bad"; but everyone serves the continuity of the system. This is precisely where the real darkness lies.

The film's visual language reinforces this existential confinement with its distinct dominance of dark and cold tones. Light rarely falls directly on the character's

face; shadows cover a significant portion of the frame. This suggests that the character cannot fully comprehend either themselves or the world. The camera often remains stationary, refraining from movement for long periods or resorting to tight frames, allowing the viewer to experience the feeling of being trapped in an inescapable space. These aesthetic choices enable the film to create an oppressive atmosphere not only through what it narrates but also through its very form. The viewer does not merely watch a story; they also feel the physical impact of this oppression. The use of sound deepens this effect. The echoing resonance of dialogue in empty spaces, footsteps fading in corridors, or prolonged silences that extend moments of waiting further emphasize the coldness and emotional distance of the setting. Occasionally, the withdrawal of sound exposes the viewer to the raw reality of the scene. Thus, the film constantly reminds the viewer of the feeling of "loneliness": Both physically and existentially (Figure 5).

Ultimately, the film leaves the viewer not with a resolved narrative but with an experience that perpetuates uncertainty. The character's fate is interpreted not merely as an individual sadness but as the destiny of a subject dissolving within modern bureaucratic systems. Thus, the film does not merely employ a Kafkaesque aesthetic as an atmospheric choice; it transforms it into an existential inquiry where humor, uncertainty, and institutional violence intertwine. Even after the narrative concludes, the viewer is compelled to ponder where the building begins and ends, and whether life outside this system is possible.



Figure 5. *The Penultimate*. Reprinted with permission of the copyright owner. Copyright 2026, Rikke Tambo Andersen.

7. Conclusion

This study examines Jonas Kærup Hjort's film *The Penultimate* within the context of Kafkaesque aesthetics, absurdism, and the fragile position of the modern individual in the face of bureaucratic order, discussing how existential alienation is re-represented in contemporary European cinema. The fundamental elements of the Kafkaesque narrative tradition—uncertainty, hopelessness, irrationality, and invisible forms of bureaucratic violence—are reproduced in the film both at the narrative level and through atmospheric elements. In this respect, the film positions the Kafkaesque aesthetic in contemporary cinema not merely as an extension of a literary legacy but as a tool for current existential and social inquiries.

The film shifts the focus away from bureaucracy as a technical mechanism and encourages us to rethink it as a form of power that shapes the individual's subjective world. Absurd humor serves a critical function precisely at this point: the act of laughing reveals the arbitrariness and irrationality of the system rather than normalizing it. The viewer is invited to experience a situation where the comical and the disturbing are inseparable. In this context, *The Penultimate* demonstrates that Kafkaesque representation in modern cinema is not merely an aesthetic choice but also a powerful critical opportunity. The film stages a world where the individual is increasingly anonymized and whose capacity for action is limited and

deferred by bureaucratic mechanisms, while amplifying the ordinariness of this world with a layer of fragile humor. Thus, the absurd experience becomes visible not only as a crisis experienced by the character but also as a structural quality of contemporary social existence. The film re-symbolizes the foundational elements of the Kafkaesque narrative tradition—ontological uncertainty, the loss of purpose, and rational-bureaucratic violence—through the distinctive audiovisual tools of contemporary European cinema. In this context, the work transcends a mere stylistic imitation of a literary legacy; it transforms the Kafkaesque aesthetic into a dynamic critique that exposes the institutional irrationality lurking beneath the “rational” mask of late modernity.

In conclusion, *The Penultimate* offers an important example of the reinterpretation of Kafkaesque aesthetics in contemporary cinema. Through its original narrative, which intertwines the pathetic and the comic, the film transforms the dissolution of the modern individual within the system not only into representation but also into a tangible experience. In this respect, the work demonstrates that Kafkaesque narrative remains a vibrant conceptual and aesthetic resource in contemporary cinema, offering a powerful foundation for contemplating the fragilities of modern existence, especially when combined with absurd humor. *The Penultimate* does not merely imitate Kafka's legacy; by reimagining it through the lens of 21st-century uncertainties, it invites the audience to confront its own absurd reality.

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