

DAS ERDBEBEN (THE EARTHQUAKE)

Karl Kraus

Analysis by Benedetta Rosi

Essay, Non-Fiction

Karl Kraus’s 1908 essay *Das Erdbeben (The Earthquake)* satirises the exaggerated and sensationalist chronicles of minor earthquakes in Austrian territories, as reported by the Viennese press. By parodying scientific and journalistic styles through a combination of rhetorical and syntactic strategies, Kraus exposes the moral and intellectual decay of Austrian society.

Year of Publication	1908
Publication Place	Unspecified
Editor	Unspecified
Entity	1908 Austrian earthquake
Collection	Collection of essays: Die chinesische Mauer (The Great Wall of China), 1910, München, Langen
Magazine	Die Fackel (The Torch), Vienna, 28th February 1908

GEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Earthquake 1908 Austrian earthquake

REAL EVENT

Time	19th February 1908 (10:11 p.m. local time)
Location	Lower and Upper Austria, Vienna Basin, Styria, Western Hungary Austria and Hungary
Coordinates	48.242739, 14.172043
Impacted Areas	Lower Austria, most of Upper Austria, the southernmost part of Bohemia and Moravia, part of western Hungary bordering Lower Austria, and the border area in northern Styria. The total number of shock points recorded in this report is 363, including Vienna, Linz, and Prague, and their suburbs (Noë 11). In most cases, two successive shocks were recorded, the first of which is the main shock; the main quake lasted only a few seconds. The different tremors followed each other at intervals of only a few seconds (15).
Seismic Fault	Alpine seismic region
Magnitude	Estimated: 3.5-4.5 Richter. Mercalli intensity levels V and VI (Noë)

Tectonic Earthquake

The earthquake is associated with the geodynamic features of Alpine region (Allgemeiner Bericht). The epicentral zone extended from western Hungary across the inner Alpine Vienna Basin to the Alpine escarpment at the thermal line. The axis of the Pleistocene area forms an acute angle with the one of the entire debris field (Noë; Kautsky 5–6).

Anthropization Level

River Shores

south of the Danube (Noë 4)

Remote Dwellings

Alpine region (Noë 11)

Cities

Vienna, Lienz, Prague (Noë 4)

Houses

Public Buildings

Squares

Streets

Social Impacts

Destruction Of Dwellings

• In Lower Austria, the vast majority of collision points are located in the inner Alpine Vienna Basin south of the Danube. The seismic wave penetrated the Alpine region itself at a greatly reduced intensity, but it spread strongly along the northern part of the thermal fault line. In contrast, the southern part of this fault line, leading towards Semmering, affected only a reduced area (Noë 4). Since the earthquake was widely observed in the imperial capital of Vienna and in the provincial capital of Linz, it generated a great deal of interest. (Noë 1). The Viennese press described the earthquake as violent (Neue Freie Presse 10). In Vienna the earthquake was felt in all districts of the city, but with varying degrees of intensity. The tremors were felt most strongly in the lower-lying districts II, III, IX, and XXI (2).

Destruction Of Public Buildings

The earthquake was felt more strongly on the upper floors of buildings than at ground level and on the street. Furniture moved several centimetres. Bowls and other dishes fell from tables and cabinets. Chandeliers, hanging lamps, and hanging lights swayed violently, as did tall indoor plants. Doors shook violently. Doorbells rang. Standing objects swayed. Beds, chairs, and tables shook. In Vienna's 20th district, some people were thrown out of bed, as were sleeping children in the 2nd district. In the 9th district, there were reports of figurines falling over. Birds fluttered up or fell from their perches. The tremor was barely perceptible on the street or in ground-floor buildings (Noë 2–3).

Earthquake 1908 Vienna Earthquake

LITERARY EVENT

Time	February 1908
Location	Vienna Austria
Emphasis Phase	Pre-disaster (causes / context), Disaster (phenomenal and social dynamics), Post-disaster (consequences)
Seismic Risk Ref.	Without reference

Anthropization Level

Houses

Cities

Public Buildings And Sites

INDIVIDUAL REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Reactions

Name	Karl Kraus
Age	34
Gender	Male
Native Place	Bohemia (austria-hungary)
Nationality	Austrian

Reactions

Pragmatism

COLLECTIVE REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Affects/Reactions

Name	The population
Reactions	FearSharing Of InformationAnxietyCuriosity
Name	Geologists
Reactions	Sharing Of Information
Name	Journalists
Reactions	Sharing Of InformationCuriosity

LINGUISTIC & STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

Keywords	<p>“Erdbeben” ‘Earthquake’ (120; My Trans.), “Erdbebenunglück” ‘Earthquake Disaster’ (133; My Trans.), “Beben” ‘Tremor’ (133; My Trans), “Stoßen” ‘Shocks’ (133; My Trans.), “Erschütterungen” ‘Vibrations’ (133; My Trans.), “Zittern” ‘Shake’ (132; My Trans.)</p> <p>“Dummheit” ‘Stupidity’ (128; My Trans.), “Intelligenz” ‘Intelligence’ (128; My Trans.)</p> <p>"Seismologen" ‘Seismologists’ (130; My Trans.), "Geologen" ‘Geologists’ (131; My Trans.), "Fachmann/Fachmännisch" ‘Expert (N/Adj.)’ (133; My Trans.), “Magnetnadel” ‘Magnet Needle’ (132; My Trans.)</p> <p>“Beobachtung” ‘Observations’ (130; My Trans.), “Mitteilung” ‘Communication’ (133; My Trans.), “Erdbebenbeobachter” ‘Earthquake Observers’ (130; My Trans.), “Mitteilungsbedürfnis” ‘Need For Communication’ (135; My Trans.)</p> <p>“Untergehen” ‘To Decline’ (128; My Trans.), “Weltuntergang” ‘End Of The World’ (135; My Trans.)</p> <p>“Redaktionen” ‘Editorial Offices’ (130; My Trans), “Abonnenten” ‘Subscribers’ (130; My Trans.), “Bericht” ‘Report’ (128; My Trans.), “Gutachten” ‘Expert Opinion’ (130; My Trans.), “Spalten” ‘Columns’ (129; My Trans.), “Blatt” ‘Journal’ (129; My Trans.)</p>
Metaphors	<p>“Und doch war es nur das dumpfe Rollen einer Ahnung von dem, was kommen wird” ‘And yet it was only the dull rolling of an hint of what was to come’ (128; my trans.)</p> <p>“das Weltgebäude zusammenkracht” ‘the world building collapses’ (130; my trans.)</p> <p>“Der Himmel fällt auf die Erde, Berge fallen in Meere” ‘The sky falls to earth, mountains fall into seas’ (135; my trans.)</p>
Motifs, Topoi, Mythologemes	ProphecyThe End Of The WorldThe Downfall Of Society
Syntax	Parataxis, Simple Sentences, High Frequency Connectives, Complex Verbal Phrases
Punctuation	High Frequency Punctuation Marks

Das Erdbeben (The Earthquake) is an essay written by the Austrian writer, poet and journalist Karl Kraus. First published in his magazine *Die Fackel* (The Torch) in February 1908, it was later reprinted in his second collection of essays, *Die chinesische Mauer* (The Great Wall of China, Munich: Langen, 1910). Kraus is regarded as a highly influential figure in early 20th-century literature, one of the most important voices in German-language satire. He is best known for his sharp critique of Austrian society and politics, focusing on the moral and intellectual decay of his time. His works often examine the role of the media in shaping public opinion, criticising how it manipulates the truth: through his typical ironic lens, Kraus mocks the trivialisation of significant as well as catastrophic events and criticizes media's tendency to sensationalise the mundane (Kohn 47). The sensationalism of newspaper reports becomes a subject of satire in *Das Erdbeben*. In this essay, Kraus targets the extensive coverage and exaggerated chronicles of minor earthquakes occurred in Vienna and the Austrian territories at the beginning of 1908. This tendency was typical of the era:

The circulation of earthquake stories in the daily press was the lifeblood of nineteenth-century seismology. Scientific researchers gathered testimony from witnesses of earthquakes from local papers, placed advertisements to solicit observations, and used major newspapers as a forum to communicate their research to the public. (Coen 45)

According to communications from the Earthquake Commission of the Imperial Academy of Sciences in Vienna, published by the Directorate of the Imperial Royal Central Institute for Meteorology and Geodynamics, there was a significant increase in seismic phenomena in Austria in 1908 compared to 1907. Eighteen earthquakes were observed in 1908, whereas during the previous year only seven were reported. The first months of the year in particular were characterised by a higher frequency of seismic phenomena, which were predominantly local and of low intensity. The main earthquake occurred on 19 February. This event was recorded at approximately 10:10 p.m. (Noë 1). Two successive shocks were observed; the first one was the main shock. The main tremor lasted only a few seconds. The different tremors followed each other at intervals of only a few seconds, one after another. (15). The seismic event was associated with the geodynamic features of the Alpine region (Allgemeiner Bericht). The epicentre extended from western Hungary across the inner Alpine Vienna Basin to the Alpine escarpment at the thermal line (Kautsky 5–6). The affected area included: Lower Austria, most of Upper Austria, the southernmost part of Bohemia and Moravia, and part of western Hungary bordering Lower Austria, Linz and the border area in northern Styria, Prague, and the Vienna Basin located south of the Danube: In Vienna, the earthquake was felt in all districts of the city, but with varying degrees of intensity; the tremors were felt most strongly in the lower-lying districts II, III, IX and XXI. A total of 363 shock points were recorded in this report (11). The estimated intensity corresponded to Mercalli levels V and VI (Noë).

Considering the low intensity of the tremors, no significant damage was reported in the affected areas. The earthquake was felt more strongly on upper floors than at ground level/on the street. Pieces of furniture moved several centimetres. Bowls and other dishes fell from tables and cupboards. Chandeliers, hanging lamps and tall indoor plants swayed violently. Doors shook violently. Doorbells rang. Standing objects swayed. Beds, chairs, tables trembled. In Vienna's 20th district, few people were reportedly thrown out of bed. In the 9th district, there were reports of objects falling over and birds fluttering up or falling from their perches (Noë 2–3).

Although the earthquake itself had a limited geological impact, it generated considerable interest in terms of eyewitness accounts and press coverage, since it was perceived in both the imperial capital, Vienna, and the provincial capital, Linz (1). Reports from experts and non-experts proliferated. A paradigmatic example is the extensive coverage provided by the Austrian newspaper *Neue Freie Presse*. The 20 February 1908 issue devoted two full pages to the earthquake's impact on Vienna, describing it as *heftig* (violent) (10). The newspaper published a large number of *Mitteilungen*

(reports) and *Beobachtungen* (observations) received from local people. They described the impact on private homes, public buildings, hotels, and train stations. These reports, organised by geographic area, offered detailed insights into the strength, timing and intensity of the tremors, as well as their impact on people and structures, including falling objects, loud noises and widespread confusion. Here are two examples:

Ein Freund unseres Blattes, der in der Inneren Stadt wohnt, erzählt uns: Ich saß gerade an meinem Schreibtisch. Plötzlich verspürte ich einen heftigen Stoß, der aus der Tiefe nach oben zu bringen schien und nach meiner Empfindung mehrere Sekunde dauerte. Unmittelbar darauf kam ein zweiter, längerer dauernder Stoß, bei welchem ich das Gefühl hatte, als ob die Grundmauern des Hauses wandten und das Haus, wenn sich die Erscheinung wiederholen sollte, einstürzen würde. (10)

A friend of our paper who lives in the inner city, tells us: I was just sitting at my desk. Suddenly I felt a violent shock that seemed to come from the depths and lasted several seconds. Immediately afterwards there was a second, longer lasting shock, which made me feel as if the foundation walls of the house were toppling and the house would collapse if the phenomenon were to repeat itself. (my trans.)

Herr Baron saß in der Richtung des Stoßes, der von Norden nach Süden ging, und hatte das Gefühl, als wäre er in einer Schaufel. Kurz vor dem Stoß machte der Baron die Beobachtung, dass der Mond eine eigentümliche Rote zeigte. (10)

Mr. Baron was sitting in the direction of the shock, which went from north to south, and had the feeling that he was in a shovel. Shortly before the bump, the Baron observed that the moon was showing a peculiar red colour. (my trans.)

These *Mitteilungen* and *Beobachtungen*, published in the *Neue Freie Presse*, were the specific target of Kraus's satire in *Das Erdbeben*. The earthquake that gives the essay its title refers to the actual geological event reported in the contemporary press, but it also has a symbolic meaning. It carries strong metaphorical connotations in relation to the decline of Viennese society. These literal and symbolic layers develop in parallel throughout the text.

The essay opens with a brief description of the pre-earthquake phase, introducing the social-historical context in which the earthquake occurred. 1908 marked the sixtieth anniversary of Emperor Franz's reign. From Kraus's perspective this jubilee was a shameful display of hypocrisy, in consideration of the fractious nature of imperial politics (Timms). In the days immediately preceding the earthquake, at the beginning of the year, newspapers reported on the *Faschingsabend* (Carnival Evening) organised by the *Männergesangsverein* (Men's Singing Club) in Vienna. Kraus considered the event and its portrayal in the newspapers to be a parade of foolishness and a *tableau* of frivolity: "die Ausdehnung der Berichte schwankte an jedem Tag zwischen zehn und fünfzehn Spalten" 'the length of the reports varied between ten and fifteen columns each day (Kraus 129; my trans.). The articles focused on the hall's decorations and the participants' bizarre carnival outfits: "Man hatte beobachtet, wie auf einem Eislauffest ein Ehepaar 'als Gemüse verkleidet' erschien, und zwar die Frau 'als gelbe Ruab'n' und der Gatte 'als schwarzer Radi'" (129) 'People had observed a couple appearing 'dressed as vegetables' at an ice skating festival: the wife 'as a yellow turnip' and the husband 'as a black radish' (129; my trans.). Kraus found the nature of the event, the language used by some journalists, and the calm attitude of the Viennese people in the face of impending political conflict to be intolerable: "Sind's Bilder jenes Grauens?" (129) 'Are these images of that horror?' (129; my trans.).

This fair of hypocrisy and the calm attitude of the Viennese were shook, with perfect timing, by a minor earthquake tremor: "Ich finde einigen Trost bei der Vorstellung, daß wenigstens ein leises Zittern des Bodens die Antwort auf die Enthüllungen war, die dieses Fest den entsetzten Blicken geboten hat" 'I find some comfort in the idea that at least a slight trembling of the ground was the response to the revelations this feast offered to horrified gazes' (130; my trans.). After such a rude interruption of their festivities, would the Viennese finally feel chastened? (129). The answer is: no, not at all. They seemed delighted. The earthquake allowed for another level of sensationalism and hypocrisy. The disaster phase was described through the parody of the countless observations sent by Viennese people to the *Neue Freie Presse* editorial office. Indeed, the earthquake triggered a rush of

comments: everyone felt the urge to share his experience, specifying where they were and how objects and animals reacted to the tremors. This absurd multiplication of *Beobachtungen* inspired Kraus. He decided to write his own earthquake report for the *Neue Freie Presse*, signing it as Civil Engineer J. Berdach from Leopoldstadt:

Ich las gerade Ihr hochgeschätztes Blatt, als ich ein Zittern in der Hand verspürte. [...] Während ich nämlich sonst ein Abschwanken der Nadel nach Westsüdwest wahrnehmen konnte, war diesmal in unzweideutiger Weise eine Tendenz nach Südsüdost feststellbar. Allem Anscheine nach handelt es sich hier um ein sogenanntes tellurisches Erdbeben (im engeren Sinne), das von den kosmischen Erdbeben (im weiteren Sinne) wesentlich verschieden ist. Die Verschiedenheit äußert sich schon in der Variabilität der Eindrucksdichtigkeit [...]. Hochachtungsvoll Zivilingenieur J. Berdach, Wien II., Glockengasse 17. (132)

I was reading your esteemed paper when I felt a tremor in my hand. [...] While I usually noticed the needle swinging to the west-southwest, this time there was an unmistakable tendency to the south-southeast. It would seem that this is a so-called telluric earthquake (in the narrower sense), which is essentially different from a so-called cosmic earthquake (in the broader sense). The difference is already expressed in the variability of the impression density [...]. With the highest regards, Civil Engineer J. Berdach, Vienna II, Glockengasse 17. (my trans.)

Kraus rightly predicted that his letter would be printed. Despite the clues deliberately disseminated by the author, the newspaper failed to detect the inauthentic nature of the message and published it alongside other observations. Die *Neue Freie Presse* had ignored Kraus writing for ten years, but after this letter they had acknowledged him — as an engineer (Coen). The minor earthquake and its aftermath further revealed the absurdity of both the Viennese public and the press in Kraus's view. The pre-earthquake and earthquake phases in the essay are framed by premonitions of an apocalyptic scenario. These references allude to the world's decline, which may be the result of human stupidity.

At the lexical level, each phase of the event is associated with recurring words or phrases. As regards the presentation of the prophecy, Kraus succeeds in conveying a sense of imminent and inevitable disaster through the use of specific adjectives and nouns combined with verb forms in the future tense: "Schreckliches wird geschehen" 'terrible things will happen' (128; my trans.), "ähnliche Vorboten" 'similar premonitions' (129; my trans.), "die nahende Katastrophe" 'the imminent catastrophe' (128; my trans.), "das Unabwendbare" 'the inevitable' (129; my trans.). The apocalyptic scenario to which society is destined is conveyed through complex nouns and verbs such as "untergehen" 'to decline' (128; my trans.) and "Weltuntergang" 'world's end' (135; my trans.), as well as figurative strategies including metaphor and personification. These allow Kraus to create vivid images: "Und doch war es nur das dumpfe Rollen einer Ahnung von dem, was kommen wird" 'And yet it was only the dull rolling of a hint of what was to come' (128; my trans.); "das Weltgebäude zusammenkracht" 'the world building collapses' (130; my trans.), "Der Himmel fällt auf die Erde, Berge fallen in Meere" 'the sky falls to earth, mountains fall into seas' (135; my trans.).

The description of the pre-earthquake festivities foregrounds the lexical opposition between *Dummheit* and *Intelligenz* (stupidity and intelligence) This dichotomy characterises the entire essay. The first part of the essay also reveals the contrast between the *Ruhe* (calm) that is typical the Viennese and the *Unruhe* (agitation) that emerges from the historical context. During the earthquake phase, recurring word choices relating to different semantic fields can be observed, primarily those linked to the concepts of tremors and instability. The earth shakes, objects shake, people shake. Viennese society shakes, too. Examples include: "Erdbeben" 'earthquake' (120; my trans.), "Erdbebenunglück" 'earthquake disaster' (133; my trans), "Beben" 'tremor' (133; my trans), "Stoßen" 'shocks' (133; my trans.), "Erschütterungen" 'vibrations' (133; my trans.), "zittern" 'shake' (132; my trans.).

In the presentation of the earthquake phases, technical terms from the field of geology are frequently used: "Seismologen" 'seismologists' (130; my trans.), "Geologen" 'geologists' (131; my trans.), "Fachmann/fachmännisch" 'expert (N/Adj.)' (133; my trans.), "Magnetnadel" 'magnet needle' (132; my trans.). Such terminology was commonly adopted by non-experts who self-identified as experts in the newspaper's observations. There are also several terms related to the semantic sphere of journalism: "Redaktionen" 'Editorial offices' (130; my trans., "Abonnenten" 'subscribers' (130; my

trans.), “Bericht” ‘report’ (128; my trans.), “Gutachten” ‘expert opinion’ (130; my trans.), “Zuschrift” ‘letter’ (130; my trans.), “Meldungen” ‘reports’ (132; my trans.), “Spalten” ‘Columns’ (129; my trans.), “Blatt” ‘journal’ (129; my trans.), “Inseratenagenten” ‘advertising agents’ (131; my trans.).

In portraying the reactions to the earthquake, Kraus focuses on different groups: the Viennese people, the journalists, the experts. These three groups are all characterised by an urge to share information (*Mitteilungsbedürfnis*, 135) and participate in a form of collective triviality (Coen). As for scientists, Kraus suggests ironically that their superficial observations and reports might have been motivated by commercial interests: “Man könnte ja argwöhnen, die Geologen der Neuen Freien Presse seien Inseratenagenten und jede Null habe sich erst einen Fünfer zulegen müssen, um verewigt zu werden” ‘One might suspect that the geologists of the Neue Freie Presse are advertising agents and that every zero must first buy a five to be immortalized’ (131; my trans.).

In the case of the Viennese population, the rush to share data and news may be driven by anxiety, confusion, curiosity, and a desire for attention. The following excerpts illustrate the Viennese’s agencies in this context: “Die Dummheit stürzt auf die Gasse, rafft an »Beobachtungen« zusammen, wessen sie habhaft werden kann, und läuft in die Redaktionen, um zu melden, daß sie erschrocken ist. Daß sie auch dabei war!” ‘Stupidity rushes into the street, gathers up whatever ‘observations’ it can find, and runs to the editorial offices to report that it is frightened. That it was there too!’ (130; my trans.); “Kinder jammern, Mütter irren, und die Väter schreiben Briefe an die Neue Freie Presse” ‘Children whine, mothers wander and fathers write letters to the Neue Freie Presse’ (130; my trans.); “Ein alter Abonnent gibt zu, er sei sogleich ans Telephon geeilt und habe die Nummer der geschätzten Redaktion verlangt” ‘An old subscriber admits that he immediately rushed to the telephone and asked for the number of the esteemed editorial office’ (130; my trans.); “Tausende umlagern die Redaktion, heben die Hände empor zum Mirakel des lokalen Teils und rufen: Ich auch! Ich auch!” ‘Thousands of people surround the editorial office, raise their hands to the miracle of the local section and shout: Me too! Me too!’ (131; my trans.).

Kraus did not simply scoff at the people’s need to be quoted on such banalities. Even more contemptible was their obsession with the least significant effects of the earthquake, while they completely ignored its deeper meaning (Coen 61): “Die Wiener begrüßen den Weltuntergang mit einem Hallo, Hallo!” ‘The Viennese greet the apocalypse with a ‘Hello! Hello!’ (Kraus 134; my trans.).

The people’s urge is encouraged by the press. In Kraus’s view, journalists are tireless mediators of anecdotal discourse. They constantly seek to provide their readers with a simulacrum of expert commentary, which is often rhetorically inflated or devoid of empirical evidence: “Die Journalisten lassen sich in ihrer irdischen Sicherheit nicht bange machen” ‘Journalists do not allow themselves to be alarmed in their earthly security’ (132; my trans.).

The press welcomes all kinds of messages, even those with no scientific basis, to satisfy people’s curiosity. This is shown by the fact that they did not question the reliability of Kraus’s *Mitteilung*. They even edited it to make it sound more scientific: “Die Neue Freie Presse hat ihn redigiert. Sie hat aus den Stößen, die meine Frau gespürt hat, ‘Erschütterungen gemacht, weil man eben in so ernster Sache jede Zweideutigkeit vermeiden muß’” ‘The Neue Freie Presse edited it. They changed the tremors my wife felt into “shocks” because you have to prevent any ambiguity in such a serious matter’ (133; my trans.); “Die Neue Freie Presse hat peinlich darauf geachtet, daß in dem Wort ‘kosmisch’ kein Buchstabe verloren gehe” ‘The Neue Freie Presse took meticulous care to ensure that no letter was lost in the word ‘cosmic’ (133; my trans.).

The attitude of the Viennese people and the journalists differs from Kraus’s attitude. The author believed that the press prefers entertainment and superficiality to truth-seeking, rigour and moral integrity. The result is widespread stupidity. Kraus conveys his critical stance by using evaluative language, such as nouns and adjectives with a moral connotation (Timms 234): “Banalität wird aus ihrem Versteck gelockt, das Durchschnittsmenschentum im Triumph eingeholt.” ‘Banality is lured out of its hiding place, average humanity is caught up in triumph’ (131; my trans.); “Eine verzehrende Gier hat sich des Herrn Niemand bemächtigt, genannt zu werden” ‘Mr Nobody has been consumed by an insatiable greed’ (131; my trans.); “Das war die Dummheit!” ‘That was stupidity!’ (135; my trans.);

“Eine Schlamperei wird herrschen, die ohne Beispiel sein dürfte” ‘The level of sloppiness will be unprecedented’ (135; my trans.).

He uses rhetorical and parodic devices, such as contrasts and exaggerations, to shape his critique and satire: “Der Wiener wird sehn, daß doch kein Verlaß auf die Geduld des Erdbodens ist, er wird Bescheidenheit lernen und sich darauf einrichten, erforderlichenfalls so unterzugehn, daß kein Aufsehen entsteht ... Gar keine Spur! Jetzt gehts erst los” ‘The Viennese will realise that he cannot rely on the earth's patience. He will learn modesty and prepare to perish if necessary, in order to avoid causing a stir. Not a trace! Now we're just getting started!’ (130; my trans.); “Und kaum war der Bericht im Deutschen Volksblatt erschienen, gab's ein Erdbeben ... Nun, dachte ich, aber jetzt wird für ein Weilchen Ruhe sein” ‘No sooner had the report appeared in the Deutsches Volksblatt than there was an earthquake. ‘Well,’ I thought, ‘there will be peace for a while now.’ (129; my trans.); “hochgeschätztes Blatt, Hochachtungsvoll” ‘esteemed paper, with the highest regards’ (129–130; my trans.); “Die Dummheit ist ein Elementarereignis, mit dem es kein Erdbeben aufnimmt” ‘Stupidity is an elementary event; no earthquake can compete with’ (132; my trans.)

The parody of the language used by experts particularly contributes to the satirical effect, for example in the fake-observation published by Kraus under the false identity of Civil Engineer J. Berdach. Kraus employs pseudo-technical terms that resemble geological nomenclature but have no scientific basis, such as the dichotomy between cosmic and telluric earthquakes or the image of the shaking hand: “es handelt sich hier um ein sogenanntes tellurisches Erdbeben (im engeren Sinne), das von den kosmischen Erdbeben (im weiteren Sinne) wesentlich verschieden ist” ‘This is a so-called telluric earthquake (in the narrower sense), which is essentially different from cosmic earthquakes (in the broader sense)’ (132; my trans.); “ich las Ihr hochgeschätztes Blatt, als ich ein Zittern in der Hand verspürte” ‘I was reading your esteemed paper when I felt a tremor in my hand’ (132; my trans.).

At the syntactic level, the rush, the excitement to share news about the earthquake is conveyed through a paratactic and linear (non-hierarchical) style, as well as through syntactic parallelisms, as it is shown in the following contexts: “Pfosten stürzen, Fenster klirren, Kinder jammern, Mütter irren, und die Väter schreiben Briefe an die Neue Freie Presse” ‘Children whine, mothers wander and fathers write letters to the Neue Freie Presse’ (130; my trans.); “Der Himmel fällt auf die Erde, Berge fallen in Meere. Die Sternenbanerstierer gehen um. *Wiener Pülcher, Wiener Wursteln, Wiener Mädeln*, alles liegt durcheinander. Die wachsende Kohlennot erscheint” ‘The sky falls to the earth and the mountains into the sea. The star-banner-starers are on the loose. Everything is mixed up: *Wiener Pülcher, Wiener Wursteln, Wiener Mädeln*. A growing coal shortage appears.’ (135; my trans.).

The frequent use of the connective ‘und’ (and) to link sentences or text portions contributes to the fast-paced narrative rhythm: “*Und* daß ein Papagei unruhig wurde. *Und* daß in einer Kegelbahn ein Rollen vernehmbar war. Ich auch! Ich auch! Wer in diesem Sommer nicht geimpft wurde, darf jetzt einen Stoß verspüren. *Und* wenn die Redaktionstelephone besetzt sind, teilen sie sich untereinander mit” ‘*And* that a parrot became restless. *And* that a rolling noise could be heard in the bowling alley. Me too! Me too! Anyone who hasn't been vaccinated this summer may now feel a jolt. *And* if the editorial telephones are busy, they'll tell each other’ (134; my trans.).

In passages where the narrative shifts into philosophical commentary on the moral meaning of the earthquake, the typical strategies of argumentative discourse can be observed, for example the use of the causal connective *denn* in the following example:

Ihre inneren Gewalten müssen sich einmal in einer Katastrophe entladen, die das Antlitz dieses Weltkörpers entstellen wird. *Denn* nie zuvor kann es eine Kulturperiode gegeben haben, in der die Menschen, durch Rasse und Religion getrennt, sich mit solch einiger Begeisterung zur Dummheit bekannt hätten! (128)

One day, their inner forces will unleash themselves in a catastrophe that will disfigure the world. For never before has there been a period of civilisation in which people, divided by race and religion, have embraced stupidity with such enthusiasm! (my trans.).

At the syntactic level, the text passages devoted to the commenting on the event also show an alternation of different sentence types. There is a shift from assertions to rhetorical questions or

exclamations, used to convey Kraus's sense of perplexity: “Wie soll das werden? Was wird geschehen, wenn eines Tages die Stöße so rasch aufeinanderfolgen, daß die Presse nicht mehr nachkommen kann? Die Journalisten lassen sich in ihrer irdischen Sicherheit nicht bange machen” ‘What will happen? What will happen if one day the tremors follow each other so quickly that the press can no longer keep up? The journalists will not allow themselves to be frightened in their earthly stability’ (132; my trans.).

Another syntactic-textual feature can be described as polyphonic layering, which involves an interplay of several voices within the text. This feature adds an acoustic dimension to Kraus's language. Through the use of acoustic quotations (Canetti 208), Kraus enables earthquake witnesses to speak in the first person in the Viennese dialect: “Dazu werden Ausrufe hörbar werden, die einem die Freude am Untergehn verderben könnten. Der Krach, der is zwida!, wird es heißen. Und einer ruft: Da bleib i not, da geh i ham — Kein Entrinnen!” ‘There will be exclamations that could ruin the enjoyment of perishing. ‘The noise! That's too much!’ people will say. Someone will shout: ‘I’m not staying here, I’m going home’ (134; my trans.).

In this way, the rush to share information about the event is not only narrated but also reenacted. This discursive dramatisation is enhanced by rhythmic effects, achieved through lexical repetition and syntactic parallelism: “Ich auch! Ich auch!” ‘me too! Me too’ (130; my trans.).

In conclusion, Kraus articulates his critique through a complex combination of rhetorical, syntactic, and lexical strategies that parody scientific and journalistic registers. The result is a linguistically refined satire that unveils the dynamics of grotesque sensationalism.

Bibliography

Kraus, Karl. “Das Erdbeben”. *Die chinesische Mauer*. Suhrkamp, 1987, pp. 128–135.

Canetti, Elias. *Die Fackel im Ohr. Lebensgeschichte 1921-1931*. Fischer, 2005.

Coen, Deborah R. *The earthquake observers. Disaster science from Lisbon to Richter*. The University of Chicago Press, 2013.

K. K. Zentralanstalt für Meteorologie und Geodynamik. *Allgemeiner Bericht und Chronik der im Jahre 1908 in Österreich beobachteten Erdbeben. Fortsetzung der gleichnamigen Publikation der Erdbeben-kommission der Kaiserl. Aus der kaiserlich-königlichen Hof- und Staatsdruckereimitteilungen*, 1910.

Kautsky, Fritz. “Die Erdbeben des östlichen Teiles der Ostalpen, ihre Beziehungen zur Tektonik. und zu den Schwereanomalien”. *Mitteilungen der Erdbeben-Kommission*, no. 58. Österreichischcn Statsdruckerei, 1924.

Kohn, Caroline. *Karl Kraus*. J.B. Metzler, 1966.

Müller, Burkhard. *Karl Kraus: Mimesis und Kritik des Mediums*. J. B. Metzler, 1995.

Neue Freie Presse. 20. Februar 1908, pp. 10-11. <https://alex.onb.ac.at/cgi-content/anno?aid=nfp&datum=19080220&seite=10&zoom=33>. Accessed 29 July 2025.

Noë, Franz. “Bericht über das Erdbeben vom 19. Februar 1908”. *Mitteilungen der Erdbeben-Kommission der kaiserlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften in Wien*, no. XXXIV. Aus der kaiserlich-königlichen Hof- und Staatsdruckereimitteilungen, 1908.

Timms, Edward. *Karl Kraus Apocalyptic Satirist. Culture and Catastrophe in Habsburg Vienna*. Yale University Press, 1986.