

# Kafka's shattering of the aesthetic distance

---

**Andabak, Ante**

**Master's thesis / Diplomski rad**

**2023**

*Degree Grantor / Ustanova koja je dodijelila akademski / stručni stupanj:* **University of Zagreb, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences / Sveučilište u Zagrebu, Filozofski fakultet**

*Permanent link / Trajna poveznica:* <https://um.nsk.hr/um:nbn:hr:131:710718>

*Rights / Prava:* [In copyright](#)/[Zaštićeno autorskim pravom.](#)

*Download date / Datum preuzimanja:* **2024-06-14**



Sveučilište u Zagrebu  
Filozofski fakultet  
University of Zagreb  
Faculty of Humanities  
and Social Sciences

*Repository / Repozitorij:*

[ODRAZ - open repository of the University of Zagreb  
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences](#)



SVEUČILIŠTE U ZAGREBU  
FILOZOFSKI FAKULTET  
ODSJEK ZA KOMPARATIVNU KNJIŽEVNOST

Ante Andabak

**KAFKA'S SHATTERING OF THE AESTHETIC DISTANCE**

Diplomski rad

Mentor: red. prof. dr. sc. Dean Duda

Zagreb, ožujak 2023.

## Content

1. (Don't) interpret at your own peril .....	3
2. Three divides and the collapse of aesthetic distance .....	11
3. The demolition of the aesthetic distance from a narratological perspective .....	29
4. Conclusion .....	41

## **Kafka's shattering of the aesthetic distance**

### **Abstract**

In this graduation paper, we are going to analyse the insightful remark Theodor W. Adorno made on more than one occasion about how Franz Kafka in his novels and short stories commands interpretation through the collapse of the aesthetic distance. Against the anti-parabolist approach which is staunchly opposed to any interpretative efforts, we are going to argue for the inevitability of, and indeed the need for, the detailed readings of Kafka's work, sketching meanwhile an ethics of interpretation which steers clear from a hermeneutical tyranny of searching for and claiming to find the "one true meaning" of a literary text. In dealing with aesthetic distance, and at least two distinct though interrelated meanings it has in Adorno's usage, we are going to attempt to explain why Kafka's destruction of aesthetic distance is a key to his literary powers and popularity both with the general audience and among the scholars. We will also show why despite many similarities Kafka's oeuvre doesn't belong to metaphysical detective fiction. A narratological analysis of Kafka's method for abolishing the aesthetic distance will also be provided.

Key Words: Kafka, Adorno, aesthetic distance, interpretation

## **Kafkino slamanje estetske udaljenosti**

### **Sažetak**

U ovom diplomskom radu analizirat ćemo pronicljivo opažanje Theodora W. Adorna koje je više puta izrekao o tome kako Franz Kafka u svojim romanima i kratkim pričama nagoni na interpretiranje zahvaljujući uništavanju estetske udaljenosti. Nasuprot antiparabolističkom pristupu koji se oštro protivi ikakvom pokušaju tumačenja, mi ćemo se zalagati za neminovnost kao i za potrebu za detaljnim čitanjem Kafkinih djela, skicirajući usporedno s time etiku interpretacije koja se kloni hermenutske tiranije koja traži i tvrdi da nalazi "jedan pravi smisao" književnog teksta. Baveći se estetskom udaljenosti, i barem dva različita ali međusobno povezana značenja u kojim ih Adorno koristi, pokušat ćemo objasniti zašto je Kafkino uništavanje estetske udaljenosti ključ za njegovu književnu moć i popularnost koju ima kod šire publike, kao i kod eksperata. Pokazat ćemo zašto usprkos mnogim sličnostima Kafkin opus ne spada među metafizičku detektivsku fikciju. Također ćemo priložiti naratološku analizu Kafkine metode ukidanja estetske udaljenosti.

Ključne riječi: Kafka, Adorno, estetska udaljenost, interpretacija

### (Don't) interpret at your own peril

Of what exactly did Josef K. stand accused? Was he really guilty? What was the nature of the court that presided over him? These questions are supposed to be decidedly wrong-headed for the encounter with the works of art – such are the ones of Kafka's groundbreaking genius – which confound comfortable comprehension structures and eschew easy or even any answers. More precisely, the error in seriously pursuing this line of inquiry with respect to *The Trial* could be said to lay in mistaking the metaphysical detective story for a conventional one. The latter is most often whodunit or more rarely but also notably whydunit, yet in those novels what has been *dun* is always by the end crystal clear in its criminal dazzle. In a metaphysical variety, however, some of the mystery stories' key ingredients are left elusive enough for philosophising to appear in their stead. Still, taking *Der Process* to a task guided by the puerile need to set down what's been deliberately left up in the air would likely find one sympathetic supporter at least – the author himself.

Kafka famously noted<sup>1</sup> while commenting on Ulysses's stratagem for surviving the siren call that it constituted 'proof that inadequate, even childish measures may serve to rescue one from peril.'<sup>2</sup> Similarly to the stopping of ears with wax and having oneself bound to the mast of the ship to circumvent the deadly allure of the Sirens' song, reading *The Trial* guided by our questions falls well within the domain of Captain Obvious. It should, moreover, be as plain to the presumptive enquirer that such a straightforward approach won't fly with Kafka as it should have been to Ulysses that 'his handful of wax and his fathom of chain'<sup>3</sup> are no shield against the all-penetrating Sirens' pitch and the frenzy it whips up in one who hears it. Ulysses, nevertheless, did his thing and got away with it.

---

<sup>1</sup> In the short story "Das Schweigen der Sirenen" ("The Silence of the Sirens"): 'a posthumously published parable written down in notebook "G" of the *Oktavhefte* in an entry dated 23 October 1917. Kafka's text contains no title, and it was first published as "Das Schweigen der Sirenen," the title given to it by Max Brod, in 1936 in volume 5 of Brod's edition of Kafka's *Gesammelte Schriften*.' *A Franz Kafka Encyclopedia*, ed. Richard T. Gray, Ruth V. Gross, Rolf J. Goebel, Clayton Koelb (Westport, Connecticut; London: Greenwood Press, 2005), 250.

<sup>2</sup> Franz Kafka, *The Complete Stories*, trans. Willa and Edwin Muir (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 431.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

As it turned out, that happened because the Sirens in Kafka's gloss on the famous episode of *Odyssey* remained silent on purpose. One thing 'still more fatal than their song'<sup>4</sup> is, in his iteration, their silence by which we are tricked into believing we mastered something we didn't. So, unbeknownst to Ulysses, when they saw his silly little scheme to outfox them, they decided not to sing. While deeming it highly improbable Kafka allows that 'someone might possibly have escaped from their singing' but none could from their silence. 'Against the feeling of having triumphed over them by one's own strength, and the consequent exaltation that bears down everything before it, no earthly powers can resist.'<sup>5</sup>

But even such winning self-assurance and puffed-up guile would break in an attempt to make sense of *The Trial*, would get bogged down in second-guessing every little clue and end up tiredly, fruitlessly wading through possible meanings behind the story. That Kafka provokes such condition<sup>6</sup> is not news; already Walter Benjamin, writing in 1934 an essay to mark the tenth anniversary of his premature passing, remarked how he 'took all conceivable precautions against the interpretation of his writings,' and how 'one has to find one's way in them circumspectly, cautiously and warily.'<sup>7</sup> We may immediately invoke what Kafka sardonically says of the right way in the opening entry of his *Zürcher Aphorisms*: 'The true path is along a rope, not a rope suspended way up in the air, but rather only just over the ground. It seems more like a tripwire than a tightrope.'<sup>8</sup> No matter how cautious we are, and how skilled in balancing, we are doomed to fail and get caught in a trap. In fact, the more trained we are to walk on a tightrope, i.e. to penetratingly contemplate, the harder we are going to fall. We would be looking at the sky to catch a glimpse of a slender thread we are to scale and show our worth on, while just above the ground the taunt tripwire awaits. In a way, it's the replay of the time-old legend about the philosopher watching the stars while walking in an attempt to grasp the meaning of the universe only to fall into the hole even the dim-witted would never end up in, with that difference that in Kafka there are no stars whimsically speckling the firmament and

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> 'When we speak of a situation as being Kafkaesque, we mean that we see this metaphorical activity going on—but without understanding what the connections are. For the (minor) characters in *The Castle* and *The Trial*, the situation is self-evident and normal; but for the protagonist and especially for Kafka's readers, it is not. He sees—and we see even more—a mass of bizarre details inexplicably brought together; but being a good hero, and we still more heroic readers, neither of us gives up. And neither of us succeeds, no matter how determined we may be, in making sense of this situation.' Anthony Thorlby, "Kafka's Narrative: A Matter of Form," in *Franz Kafka*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2010), 25.

<sup>7</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings – Volume 2: 1927-1934*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith. trans. Rodney Livingstone et al. (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 1999), 804.

<sup>8</sup> Franz Kafka, *The Zürcher Aphorisms*, trans. Michael Hofmann (London: Harvill Secker, 2006), 3.

the mere fact of being on the earth, even on the ground level, is already like finding oneself in a deep, unmountable pit.

Maybe the would-be interpreters should heed one of Kafka's ostensible pieces of advice when it comes to interpreting him - *give it up!* There's a short story of his<sup>9</sup> wherein the unnamed first-person narrator went very early in the morning to the station in the town with which he wasn't yet well acquainted. At one point he compared his watch with the tower clock and realised to his dismay that it was much later than what he had thought it had been. The shock of that discovery made him feel uncertain of the way, but fortunately, a policeman was close at hand so he ran towards him and breathlessly asked him. The policeman smiled and said: "You asking me the way?" "Yes," I said, "since I can't find it myself." "Give it up! Give it up!" said he, and turned with a sudden jerk, like someone who wants to be alone with his laughter.<sup>10</sup>

Interpreting Kafka very much follows this course. At first, we go through the unfamiliar terrain with our little pet theory (the watch) that gives a false sense of security. But then, unavoidably, we come across the unmissable and significant part of the text (the tower clock) that shows how wrong we've been. We feel shocked and unsure where to turn when we mercifully see the authority on Kafka (a policeman) nearby. And that's no surprise, around the carcass of Kafka's literary remains there swarms a legion of critics who swear by 'the method of a non-interpretive, anti-parabolic'<sup>11</sup> reading. When we asked them for the right way to interpret him, we should know by now the condescending answer and the sneering reaction that we are going to get.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> "Ein Kommentar" ("A Commentary"/"Give It Up!"). Short parable, written sometime between November and December 1922. [...] Max Brod first published this text in 1933 under the title "Die Auskunft" (Information). It was reprinted in 1936 in the volume 5 of Brod's first edition of Kafka's *Gesammelte Schriften*, where it bears the title "Gibs auf!" ("Give It Up!"), the title by which it subsequently came to be known. In Kafka's manuscript, however, it appears as "Ein Kommentar." *A Franz Kafka Encyclopaedia*, 166.

<sup>10</sup> Kafka, *The Complete Stories*, 456.

<sup>11</sup> Ruth V. Gross, "Hunting Kafka Out of Season: Enigmatics in the Short Fictions", in *A Companion to Franz Kafka*, ed. James Rolleston (Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2002), 260.

<sup>12</sup> Shortly after coming up with and writing down this interpretation, I found that Naama Hamel wrote in *Kafka's Zoopoetics - Beyond the Human-Animal Barrier*: 'The reaction of the policeman to the narrator's request for directions in the short story "A Comment" ("Ein Kommentar") may reflect Kafka's reply to his commentators [and then she went on to cite the last two sentences of the story we also cited]. (8) She didn't go into the story any further, but she emphasised that the anti-allegorical approach was of great help for better readings of Kafka's animal stories. In the case of her study that was the right choice because not-thought-through allegorical approaches (and those are, unsurprisingly, the most frequent) tend to do away with the animality of various Kafka's non-human characters treating them simply as humans in certain precarious positions.'

Nevertheless, giving up isn't an option, and wanting to interpret the text isn't an act of ignorance, but a coerced necessity. Most attentive and dedicated readers of Kafka know this well because interpretation isn't something foreign we try to impose on his works, it is their very backbone and the motor, the ornate but essential practice to which both the author and many of his characters are incessantly drawn. On top of that, Kafka puts his readers in a tough and unenviable position of having to take his tales beyond their literal meaning and dig beneath the surface to find their subterranean, true sense.

While his writings squarely belong to the peaks of so-called high modernism<sup>13</sup> – whose authors famously refused to serve in their novels any other interests except for those intrinsic to literature – Kafka made ample use of the story structures of the fables, parables and allegories.<sup>14</sup> By their very own design, those types of tales – and especially parable, conventionally understood as the most didactic of the bunch – treated their literary aspects as mere containers and expedients for getting across the true message of the work which was by and large of a moral and religious kind. The way out of this discomfiting impasse, one of the many Kafka sets up for his characters and readers alike, was traced by Heinz Politzer to whom

we owe the formula 'open parable' to describe the character of Kafka's stories, that is, a frank acknowledgment that in his work we are presented not just with a self-sufficient story but also with a meaning of some kind, analogous to that of a parable; and at the same time a meaning that eludes precise definition and may, indeed, assert a puzzle, not clarification. Since the novel itself, and literary criticism, had for so long sought to free the concept of story from the old didactic purpose, it was a great liberation when Politzer made it possible for us to treat Kafka without embarrassment within the old tradition of fable and parable.<sup>15</sup>

Even as it traces the way out of the difficulty, treating Kafka's texts as open parables don't get us out of the woods on its own. That's because, despite us knowing that Kafka self-consciously uses a two-tier system of meaning, the first that 'derives from recognising the formal self-

---

<sup>13</sup> See Joshua Kavaloski, *High Modernism: Aestheticism and Performativity in Literature of the 1920s* (Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2014).

<sup>14</sup> Fable is 'a brief tale in verse or prose that conveys a moral lesson, usually by giving human speech and manners to animals and inanimate things.' Chris Baldick, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 93. Parable is 'a brief tale intended to be understood as an allegory illustrating some lesson or moral.' (Ibid., 182.) Allegory is 'a story or visual image with a second distinct meaning partially hidden behind its literal or visible meaning.' (Ibid. 5.)

<sup>15</sup> Roy Pascale, *Kafka's Narrators: A Study of His Stories and Sketches* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 19.



sufficiency of the story,<sup>16</sup> and the second, hidden-but-systematically-hinted-at that prompts us to ask ‘what is it all about?’<sup>17</sup> and regardless of our correct understanding that this second layer stems from the adoption of the structure of fable and parable, ‘literary genres that postulate a meaning,’<sup>18</sup> we cannot for all that stay formalistically above the answer-seeking modalities of the text.

This is why Kafka interpretation is so dangerous a business. Most new studies ask the reader to abandon presuppositions and stick to the Kafka text; but soon they abandon their own intention. And this is unavoidable, since the texts offer obscurities (usually in the form of dislocations) which we can make sense of only by some hypothesis of the meaning. And this practice does not impose a distortion on the text if we remain ready to revise the hypothesis whenever the text should demand it.<sup>19</sup>

Returning to our reading of “Give It Up!”, with Kafka, we must continually set our watches to the new time we find on the various tower clocks, and in anticipation of the next subchapter, we might add that it’s pointless to worry about missing the train, given it is always hurtling straight at us. The kind of absolute attentiveness Kafka goads his readers into attempting to adopt before his texts is wryly juxtaposed with the repeated failures the main characters of all his narratives display in trying to wrest some meaning from the intransigently incomprehensible world around them. In his three novels and the majority of short stories, the protagonists are very explicitly either forced externally or driven internally (with every admixture of the two also present) to successfully interpret what’s going on around them, yet they never live up to that task.

This narrative template produces the effect of Kafka reading himself which probably reaches its most notable and obvious apex with the penultimate chapter of *The Trial* titled “In the Cathedral”. There a prison chaplain talks to K. and tells him he is deceived about the court, and that moreover ‘the introductory texts to the Law’<sup>20</sup> speak of that particular deception through a short story he then proceeds to recount. Afterwards, K. and the prison chaplain discuss it at length, putting forth various interpretations. Yet cut off from the extensive commentary that

---

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.,16.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.,17.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.,18.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Franz Kafka, *The Trial*, trans. Breon Mitchell (New York: Schocken Books, 1998), 215.

comes on its heels in the novel, the short story was published in its eminently enigmatic form during Kafka's life.

Precisely prompted by the last example, Benjamin urges us to be heedful of the exegetical efforts Kafka expended on the parables he devised for himself.<sup>21</sup> His writings, therefore, aren't simply obscure and intentionally impervious to the light of understanding; they also encapsulate, and to a significant degree, the shining examples of and enlightening ways how to read them carefully. Admittedly, to the unaccustomed eye, Kafka's light and darkness don't look all that different. His illuminations seemingly share the fate of the candles from the cathedral: instead of lighting, they 'actually increased the darkness'<sup>22</sup> with their flame. Yet that is so only if we seek to find the way out of the byzantine constructions, but if we want to go deeper and engross ourselves further, we are on the right track.

Fundamentally, there are two bifurcating paths for interpretations; one wants to exhaust the text by explaining it, liquidating to a certain extent the need to go through it by getting to the heart of the matter and presenting it neatly served on the platter – it is the way of subtraction and the bottom line. The other, the way of addition and considerable engagement, wishes to enrich the text through close scrutiny, obsessive rereads and extensive ruminations. It doesn't want to be done with the text, it wants to keep doing things to, and with, it. By the looks of it, it seems certain that for any earnest lover of literature, there is really only one way and that's the second, additivist way, but concluding that would be too hasty. The first type of interpretation isn't actually opposed to reading as we've so far made it to be, it only becomes so when it's made into a theoretical stance, whereas in everyday occurrences it is widely utilised by the avid readers who are hooked on the so-called page-turners and race through a book to get to where the tantalising answers to the convoluted mystery, or an outcome of a particularly nail-biting adventure, lie. This type of interpretation inevitably involved when we *read for the plot* is in fact opposite of what we think literary readings should be. 'Plot has been disdained as the element of narrative that least sets off and defines high art indeed, plot is that which especially characterizes popular mass-consumption literature: plot is why we read *Jaws*, but not Henry James.'<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> Benjamin, *Selected Writings – Vol. 2*, 804.

<sup>22</sup> Kafka, *The Trial*, 207.

<sup>23</sup> Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1984), 4.

Though there's more to those readers of popular, plot-driven narratives than it's often understood, even by themselves,<sup>24</sup> it's safe to assume that most of them wouldn't subscribe to Kafka's belief that 'we ought to read only the kind of books that wound and stab us,' nor would they be asking themselves like he did, 'if the book we're reading doesn't wake us up with a blow on the head, what are we reading it for?' only to double down with 'we need the books that affect us like a disaster, that grieve us deeply, like the death of someone we loved more than ourselves, like being banished into forests far from everyone, like a suicide. A book must be the axe for the frozen sea inside us.'<sup>25</sup> They would of course like all those thrilling stabbings, axes, suicides, forests banishments and frozen seas to happen in the books they read, but not to be subjected meanwhile to the excruciating affects that would accompany those events in real life and which story can arouse not by any content per se, but by being formally challenging.

But a curious thing happens with Kafka. For the first type of readers, he whets the appetite with allusive breadcrumbs of enticing plots but falls short of providing the meaty, nourishing, easily digestible, and ultimately serviceable piece of meaning. To the second, his writings constitute the gift that keeps on giving, but the peculiar one where there's no telling whether the packing is ever really unwrapped. By dint of that, he forces the second type of readers to walk a mile and then some in the shoes of their more literal-minded and plot-centric counterparts. Kafka so perfectly enacts for sophisticated readers how it feels not to be one because both types are left with the same taste in their mouths and the same questions on their minds. Stanely Corngold remarked that 'a critic as incisive as Erich Heller, addressing the question of the meaning of *The Trial*, throws up his hands in the end, asking "What is [K's] guilt? What is the Law?"'<sup>26</sup> Despite all the refinements and knowing full well that autonomous art is meaningful on its own terms as an aesthetic experience without the need for it to furnish us with the moral of the story or to proffer the neat resolution tying up all the loose plot threads, one winds up asking the kind

---

<sup>24</sup> 'A long time ago when I was writing for the pulps I put into a story a line like "He got out of the car and walked across the sun-drenched sidewalk until the shadow of the awning over the entrance fell across his face like the touch of cool water." They took it out when they published the story. Their readers didn't appreciate this sort of thing-just held up the action. I set out to prove them wrong. My theory was that the readers just thought they cared about nothing but the action; that really, although they didn't know it, the thing they cared about, and that I cared about, was the creation of emotion through dialogue and description.' Raymond Chandler, "Letter to Frederick Lewis Allen, May 7, 1948", in *Raymond Chandler Speaking*, ed. D. Gardiner and K. S. Walker (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1962), p. 219.

<sup>25</sup> Franz Kafka, "Letter to Oskar Pollak, January 27, 1904", in *Letters to Family, Friends, and Editors*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (New York City: Schocken Books, 1977), 19.

<sup>26</sup> Stanely Corngold, *Lambent Traces* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004), 1.

of questions fables elicit and hankering after the kind of resolutions popular detective fiction provides.

It is all due to Kafka's writing which Adorno describes as 'each sentence says "interpret me" and none will permit it.'<sup>27</sup> In legalese, apt given the novel we set out to interrogate, Kafka might be said to practise entrapment of his readers: making us read into his work by giving it unmistakably parabolic contours and then getting us punished – by frustrating our efforts and making us look like ignorant fools – for doing what the text sneakily prompted us to do. The first type of readers don't get the longed-after release the clean denouement brings after a sustained narrative build-up, the second ones get to viscerally feel what it's like not to be cultivated and be routinely left gasping for answers, reminding them in fact that they also had to start by taking the first interpretive way, as there's no other way to learn. Kafka said: 'I can swim as well as others, only I have a better memory than they do, so I have been unable to forget my formerly not being able to swim. Since I have been unable to forget it, being able to swim doesn't help me, and I can't swim after all.'<sup>28</sup> He throws us in at the deep end, as many great authors do, but he also does what no one else quite manages by causing the entire extent of frightening feelings around the bumbling beginnings to resurface in their full, grisly glory. What had to have disappeared because we wouldn't have been able to progress in learning given activity and attaining any modicum of skill if that initial anguish hadn't been slowly expunged,<sup>29</sup> is back in full swing.

Faced with such terror, even solutions of Odyssean cunning like admitting that the text is 'a parabolic system the key to which has been stolen' only to 'make this fact itself the key' would be bound, as Adorno warns, 'to go astray.'<sup>30</sup> The staunch detailedness and preciseness of writing don't lend itself to the platitude about artwork being deliberately bereft of meaning to showcase that the same also holds for human existence on the whole.<sup>31</sup> In other words, and to

---

<sup>27</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, "Notes on Kafka" in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981), 245.

<sup>28</sup> Franz Kafka, *The Lost Writings*, trans. Michael Hofmann (New York: New Directions, 2020), 12.

<sup>29</sup> Kafka speaks directly of such type of expunging in an aphorism: 'Death is ahead of us, say in the way in our classrooms we had a picture of Alexander the Great in battle. What must be done is by our actions to blot out or obscure the picture, in our lifetimes.' Kafka, *The Zürau Aphorisms*, 88.

<sup>30</sup> Adorno, "Notes on Kafka," 245.

<sup>31</sup> Adorno elaborated this point in his lectures on aesthetics from February 12th, 1959: 'So you would be entirely mistaken if, for example, as people tend to do in vulgar existentialist interpretations of Kafka [...] that this depicted the general lousiness of the world, as it were, and that these works, even Kafka's, were ultimately only about the general uncertainty surrounding the heroes of these novels and this general *non liquet* and *non sequitur* which the plots of these works of art repeatedly encounter. Rather, these works contain an infinite number of entirely

get back to our first hero, Kafka lets Ulysses have his victory in life but wouldn't extend him that favour with his tales. Echoing words from one of his last short stories<sup>32</sup> we might imagine him telling the king of Ithaca: in reality 'you have won,' while 'in parable you have lost.'<sup>33</sup> Really, given the story's compactness and brilliance, we ought to reproduce it in its entirety to fully appreciate the power of its closing line:

Many complain that the words of the wise are always merely parables and of no use in daily life, which is the only life we have. When the sage says: "Go over," he does not mean that we should cross over to some actual place, which we could do anyhow if the labor were worth it; he means some fabulous yonder, something unknown to us, something too that he cannot designate more precisely, and therefore cannot help us here in the very least. All these parables really set out to say merely that the incomprehensible is incomprehensible, and we know that already. But the cares we have to struggle with every day: that is a different matter.

Concerning this a man once said: Why such reluctance? If you only followed the parables you yourselves would become parables and with that rid yourself of all your daily cares.

Another said: I bet that is also a parable.

The first said: You have won.

The second said: But unfortunately only in parable.

The first said: No, in reality: in parable you have lost.<sup>34</sup>

The story spectacularly presents – in both a clear-eyed and vertiginous fashion, and at the same time no less – the great chasm separating daily life with its usual notions of utility and victory and the one of the contemplative living, fraught with fervent strivings for that which by all sensible accounts categorically eludes mental grasp. Though everybody, sooner or later, and to a greater or lesser degree, is worried about and enticed with the other side, we are stuck on this one and there's no going over but metaphorically, parabolically, allegorically, and that's of no use given the all too tangible and pressing cares we have to struggle with day-to-day. On this side, there's a world to win and more or less set and known rules about how to do it, on the

---

determinate aspects – be it the sphere of law firms or the sphere of sadism [...].’ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetics*, ed. Eberhard Ortland, trans. Wieland Hoban (London: Polity Press, 2018).

<sup>32</sup> “Von den Gleichnissen” (“On Parables”). A posthumously published metaparable, a parable about parables, contained in one of Kafka's literary sketchbooks and presumably written sometime between October and December 1922. The original manuscript bears no title, and the text was first published as “Von den Gleichnissen,” a title given to it by Max Brod, in 1936. *A Franz Kafka Encyclopedia*, 287.

<sup>33</sup> Kafka, *The Complete Stories*, 457.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

other, defeat supposedly awaits the winners with no triumph in store for losers. Followers of parables don't get anything substantial as that, the most they get is a hope that there's a limit to what stupidity, arrogance and craven violence can accomplish, even if all that curbs those earthly powers exists solely in parables they had devised themselves.

The short story also allows us to easily and fruitfully map our two types of readers onto it, only, and fittingly for the parable, the first is now the last and the last is the first; that is the practitioner of the first, subtractionist way is the second speaker, whereas the first speaker espouses our second, additivist method of interpretation. Jennifer L. Geddes makes a similar distinction between modes of interpretation. She reads some of Kafka's most celebrated works – the “purely” literary “The Judgment,” “The Metamorphosis,” and “In the Penal Colony,” and also his lauded “Letter to My Father,” – as depicting ‘the dangers and violence of engaging in interpretations as an activity of decipherment by which we aim to grasp the “one true meaning” of a text.’<sup>35</sup> So far, so widely accepted, but then she goes on to stress that Kafka's texts, far from avoiding or resisting interpretation, actually invite it, ‘but they do so in a way that reveals’ and strongly challenges ‘the fantasies of definitive interpretation and desires for completion with which we often approach texts.’<sup>36</sup> However, next to the all-too-familiar danger of hermeneutical tyranny (knowing what the story is really, actually and exclusively about), she sees another on the supposedly opposite side – refusal to engage with interpretations given every type of it is necessarily a violent intrusion, akin to jamming a wrong, old, overly big and rusty key into a delicate, minutely and exquisitely crafted, gilded lock. No matter how distant in attitudes those two mindsets may seem, they are really Scylla and Charybdis, and there is a narrowest of straits between them. Navigating that dangerous passage is what Kafka teaches us and what Geddes brings into relief by conceptualising his ethics of interpretation.

It is particularly remarkable to observe how she responds to those who swear by an anti-parabolist approach<sup>37</sup> as the only considerate one toward literary works. While she isn't denying ‘interpretation can be reductive or violent,’ she astutely points out that to understand interpretation solely on those terms ‘is itself reductive of what interpretive activity can be, and

---

<sup>35</sup> Jennifer L. Geddes, *Kafka's Ethics of Interpretation: Between Tyranny and Despair* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2016), 4.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>37</sup> The most direct and famous example of that approach is Susan Sontag who bemoans Kafka's ‘mass ravishment’ by ‘armies of interpreters.’ Susan Sontag, “Against Interpretation” in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1966), 8.

it is crucial to note' that its effective result is the same as with hermeneutical tyrants and our subtractionist readers seeing 'it brings an end to the process of interpretation.'<sup>38</sup> Ultimately, anti-interpretive commentators are guilty of the same sin they zealously castigate interpreters for, namely, painfully reductive and one-dimensional understanding (in their case, of what interpretations can be).

Geddes is absolutely right to go against the received wisdom which so pontificates that Kafka is simply inimical to interpretation, but wrong to place Benjamin and Adorno in that camp.<sup>39</sup> Both of them knew perfectly well that, as Robert Alter also underlined, Kafka 'founds a whole fictional world on the problematic of interpretation, exposing both its necessity and potential absurdity.'<sup>40</sup> It's impossible to approach Kafka without encountering interpretations, at the very least, his own – the aspect Benjamin, as we know, emphasised.<sup>41</sup> And Adorno, in particular, can't be accused of banning interpretations of Kafka because right after writing that text doesn't permit it despite prodding us into doing it he goes on to say:

Through the power with which Kafka commands interpretation, he collapses aesthetic distance. He demands a desperate effort of the allegedly 'disinterested' observer of an earlier time, overwhelming him, suggesting that far more than the intellectual equilibrium depends on whether he truly understands; life and death are at stake. Among Kafka's presuppositions, not the least is that the contemplative relation between text and reader is shaken to its very roots. His texts are designed not to sustain a constant distance between themselves and their victim but rather to agitate his feelings to a point where he fears that the narrative will shoot towards him like a locomotive in a three-dimensional film.<sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup> Geddes, *Kafka's Ethics of Interpretation*, 8.

<sup>39</sup> Dealing more extensively with Adorno, in particular, could have been of great help for Geddes because his dialectical approach to the second term of the subject-object dyad, which he also calls non-identical, provides the sophisticated philosophical underpinning for the type of interpretation she advocates.

<sup>40</sup> Robert Alter, *Necessary Angels: Tradition and Modernity in Kafka, Benjamin and Scholem* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 69.

<sup>41</sup> As did Geddes (see for example p.104 of *Kafka's Ethics of Interpretation*), though as a theoretical influence, she cites (p. 4) Naomi Schor who wrote that 'via the interpretant [the interpreting character] the author is trying to tell the interpreter something *about* interpretation and the interpreter would do well to listen and take note.' Naomi Schor, "Fiction as Interpretation / Interpretation as Fiction" in *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation*, ed. Susan Suleimani and Inge Crossman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 170.

<sup>42</sup> Adorno, "Notes on Kafka," 246.

In a moment we'll get back to Adorno's masterful paragraph, and properly try to unpack its many scintillating layers, but it would be good to first remind ourselves of the three key divides we've posited and encountered so far.



## Three divides and the collapse of aesthetic distance

They are:

1. the one between the mundane existence and the thoughtful *parabolic* living
2. the one between high art and popular works for massive consumption
3. the one between the first, subtractionist and the second, additivist mode of interpretation

The first and third divide already appeared in our text loud and clear, whereas the second wasn't stressed outright, but was unavoidably implied right from the outset when we counterposed a conventional detective story to a metaphysical one and later on when the difference was asserted between the popular novels meant to be read solely for the plot and the more artistically inclined ones that court detailed interpretation of their use of language, symbols, leitmotifs and the like. With all three divides, Kafka was thoroughly dialectical. Though with the first one, the argument can be made that Kafka occasionally slipped into one-sidedness and Gnosticism, there is still plenty of evidence to the contrary.<sup>43</sup> But with the other two divides, Kafka's supremely dialectical handling of them is beyond any doubt.

When it comes to the dreaded divide between high and low art, Max Brod reports on Kafka's preternatural ease and freedom in those thorny matters:

How remote from his way of looking at things was all the talk about the 'standards,' 'literary hallmarks,' 'distinction of rank.' In every case he hit upon the essential. He could be carried away by a turn of speech in a newspaper article; with passionate enthusiasm he would dilate on the crowded life, the eye for drama, in some novel by some author or other who was generally sneered at as 'cheap.' [...] Odd passages in a musical comedy or a conventional film [...] could move him to tears [...] He was an entirely independent explorer, who had not the faintest idea of being tied down by the insensitive classifications of histories of literature.<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>43</sup> See for example Franz Kafka, *Diaries, 1910-1923*, ed. Max Brod, trans. Joseph Kresh and Martin Greenberg (New York: Schocken Books, 1975), 402.

<sup>44</sup> Max Brod, *Franz Kafka: A Biography*, trans. G. Humphreys Roberts and Richard Winston (Cambridge, Massachusetts: De Capo Press, 1995), 50.

Besides the yet another confirmation of Kafka's genuine interest in popular culture, Pascale Casanova finds in this passage further proof for the hypothesis that 'Kafka made a precise and conscious use of literary genres,' among them not just the obvious ones of myth, parables and fables, 'but also the chronicle, the legal document, the *Erziehungsroman*, the detective novel, the thriller, stories of the supernatural, the folk tale, etc.'<sup>45</sup> Kafka's liberated and unabashed perusal of these kinds of stories coming from 'the most recent, the most deprived literary spaces' belonging to the then-budding popular fiction – which the vaunted educated taste summarily condemned for being an affront to literature – 'also reflected the professional interest of a man looking for narrative models elsewhere than among the range of possibilities offered by the Prague literary field.'<sup>46</sup>

And of course, we've already devoted ourselves to an examination of Kafka's unique and remarkable handling of the third divide. There, while he advocates for and enacts in his text the additivist way of reading – warning against believing in the univocity of meaning in literary activities or in life for that matter<sup>47</sup> – the reductionist way isn't for all that simply repudiated and dismissed, rather he incorporates it vividly and makes it all-present in his works as a constant shadow trailing his plots and characters and tripping them up painfully along the way. It's a mesmerising dialectic we described as the terror from the inept, inauspicious starts befalling the well-versed once again, and at the most hazardous moment, like forgetting how to swim in the middle of a shipwreck. And the answer to how Kafka accomplishes that feat is inextricably interwoven with his treatment of the second divide we just now briefly sketched: it is because he electrifyingly fused what is supposed to be poles apart – the experience of high, serious art, and that of lowly attractions like novels written for mass consumption, circus acts and the cinema in its beginning. The result is the short-circuiting and the collapse of the aesthetic distance, precisely the ability the connoisseurs of literature chided readers of popular fiction for not having.

Aesthetic distance has a half-dozen or so interconnected yet sufficiently distinct meanings, but we are going to explicate two Adorno uses. First aesthetic distance from the standpoint of the written work designates how the story is being narrated. The traditional novel of the 19th

---

<sup>45</sup> Pascale Casanova, *Kafka, Angry Poet*, trans. Chris Turner (Calcutta, India: Seagull Books, 2015), 228.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> "Naturally, things cannot in reality fit together the way the evidence does in my letter; life is more than a Chinese puzzle." Franz Kafka, *Letter to His Father / Brief An Den Vater*, trans. Ernst Kaiser and Eithen Wilkins (New York: Schocken Books, 1966), 81.

century 'can be compared to the three-walled bourgeois theater' where the technique is one of illusion and 'the narrator raises a curtain' for 'the reader to take part in what occurs as though he were physically present'<sup>48</sup> while the distance remains fixed and comfortable like sitting in the plush, crimson-upholstered box seats. But by the beginning of the 20th century, a new game was in town. Distance began to vary, 'like the angle of the camera in film: sometimes the reader is left outside, and sometimes he is led by the commentary onto the stage, backstage, into the prop room.'<sup>49</sup> Agitated away from his comfortable immobile position – that with some justification could be called the mercy seat<sup>50</sup> – the reader is made to do the legwork and traipse after some sense. Hannah Arendt, on the same track as Adorno, warns that 'the mere receptive reader of novels, whose only activity is identification with one of the characters, is at a complete loss when reading Kafka.'<sup>51</sup>

Speaking of which, the second and most common meaning of aesthetic distance denotes a relationship of readers to the written work. It functions in a large part as a spatial metaphor for an earlier and decisive Kantian concept of disinterestedness which in turn stands for taking pleasure in something because we judge it beautiful, rather than judging it beautiful because we find it pleasurable. Immanuel Kant makes his distinction, as always, by differentiating between the empirical, or what's acquired through senses, and the pure, or what's attained by reason. According to Kant, by using senses we can judge an object to be agreeable or disagreeable, but we can't call it beautiful. To determine whether something is beautiful, interest needs its *dis(tance)*; in a word, it has to be purified from sensual cravings clamouring for satisfaction. Or as Adorno has put it, disinterestedness means 'the emancipation of art from cuisine or pornography.'<sup>52</sup> But just as in Kant's ethics what falls under the heading of pathological is much wider than it is in common usage, so in aesthetics what counts as an illegitimate reason for finding something beautiful is significantly more expansive. Kant is a staunch formalist, to him deeming a painting beautiful because it uses the colour one likes, for

---

<sup>48</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, "The Position of the Narrator in the Contemporary Novel" in *Notes to Literature, Volume 1*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 33.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 34. With the advent of narratology, we gained ever more precise means to measure, understand and talk about these various distances in stories.

<sup>50</sup> The mercy seat was the gold lid placed on the Ark of the Covenant, with two cherubim beaten out of the ends to cover and create the space into which Yahweh was said to appear sitting. Given the omniscient narrator served the story up for the reader to pass their judgment on the characters and the world, the two split the traditional God's duties as it were, with a reader doing the sitting and judging, and a writer the creating.

<sup>51</sup> Hannah Arendt, "Franz Kafka: A Revaluation – On the Occasion of the Twentieth Anniversary of his Death," in *Essays in Understanding: 1930-1954*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1994), 77.

<sup>52</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London; New York: Continuum, 1997), 12-13.

example 'the green of a lawn,' or composition for relying upon a tone one prefers, 'say that of a violin,' signals slipping back into sensual and any part of artwork received in such manner, no matter how removed from immediate needs, 'on that account deserves to be called only agreeable.'<sup>53</sup>

Readers of popular fiction are famously averse to formalism and are upbraided from those supposedly in the know for being both too close and too far away from what they are reading. With no aesthetic distance, they approach works of literature too emotionally while having the eyes only for the story and its characters, in the process skipping over the most crucial, form, or more bluntly put, wording and sentences, the actual stuff novels are made of and where the difference in value between various works resides. Too close to characters and yet miles away from close reading, they fit the bill of Kant's proclamation: 'Taste is always still barbaric when it needs the addition of charms and emotions for satisfaction, let alone if it makes these into the standard for its approval.'<sup>54</sup> However, Adorno recognises that Kafka in his works produces such intense emotional involvement characteristic of "unsophisticated" readers' responses to detective and adventure stories and that focusing on their formal aspects – rather than creating hoped-for distance and alleviating affective strain – just serves to confirm the entanglement all the more decidedly. Wherever the disinterested experts would usually go to find the pure recesses of great literature – like in the close stylistic scrutiny or the bird's eye view of the organisation of the textual whole – they would find in Kafka the ghastly opposite of what they were after.

On the micro-level they would discover that 'everything is as hard, defined and distinct as possible; in this, his works resemble the novel of adventure,' and that 'nowhere in Kafka does there glimmer the aura of the infinite idea; nowhere does the horizon open. Each sentence is literal and each signifies.'<sup>55</sup> With this keen observation, Adorno anticipates Antony Easthope's findings about the difference between high art and popular works which the latter got by comparing 'two texts sufficiently alike to make their differences significant and generalisable— Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and *Tarzan of the Apes* (1912).'<sup>56</sup> While the works predisposed to be evaluated as high art trade in ambiguous descriptions, connotative galore,

---

<sup>53</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 108.

<sup>54</sup> Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, 108.

<sup>55</sup> Adorno, "Notes on Kafka", 245.

<sup>56</sup> Antony Easthope, *Literary into Cultural Studies* (London; New York: Routledge, 1991), 78.

deferred meanings, moral reflection and verbal, interior aspects dominating over external events, popular works are concrete and denotative with descriptions, putting forth straightforward, readily obvious meaning, and crucially are focused on physical action with the simple textuality not calling attention to itself and obsequiously serving the visual plane. After the terminology of the great semiotician Charles Sanders Peirce who defined ‘a sign as iconic if it depends on a relation of resemblance between signifier and signified, as for example in a photograph’<sup>57</sup> Easthope calls this dimension of the popular works iconic. It leads him to conclude that given the popular works of the 19th century – in whose lineage *Tarzan* novels are clearly placed – more than abounded in iconicity, it was their defining feature in fact, ‘the Victorians tried for fifty years to invent the cinema.’<sup>58</sup> Against the grain, he states: ‘it is not so much that the technology of the visual media was developed in the twentieth century and the masses then seduced by its novelty (the view of technological determinism) but rather that the discourses of popular culture were *already* iconic and so predisposed for visual representation.’<sup>59</sup>

Apart from the easily accessible meaning, Kafka’s works fit rather well within the logic of iconicity. His deliberate stylistic paucity and ‘extremely austere language’, especially in comparison with the overflowing aestheticism of the Prague Circle, was likely inspired by and ran parallel to Karl Kraus’s crusade against the prevailing ‘*fin de siècle* ornamentation’ and his fanatical striving for the expression unencumbered by the stodgy heapings of clichéd frills.<sup>60</sup> This explanation accounts for the stark directness of Kafka’s prose and additionally helps to explain its deep affinity with (silent) cinema, a characteristic which has been continuously remarked upon by everyone from Max Brod to modern scholars.<sup>61</sup> Kafka’s visual language is unmatched and he captures human gestures especially with cutting precision and disconcerting obliqueness the early films must have possessed for the first cinemagoers. That’s why Adorno repeatedly describes the way in which he abolished the aesthetic distance by using the quintessential image or better-put gesture of silent cinema – the train unstoppably hurtling towards the paralysed audience scared out of their wits. In a letter to Benjamin, he even says

---

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 90. -

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>60</sup> Casanova, *Kafka, Angry Poet*, 204. Casanova persuasively argues from pages 180 to 206 that Kafka was indeed Krausian.

<sup>61</sup> See Peter Beicken, “Moving Pictures – Visual Pleasures: Kafka’s Cinematic Writing”, in *Mediamorphosis: Kafka and the Moving Image*, ed. Shai Biderman and Ido Lewit (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2016).

that Kafka's writings represent 'the last and disappearing connecting texts of the silent cinema (and it is no accident that the latter disappeared at almost exactly the same time as Kafka's death).'<sup>62</sup> Incidentally, Adorno notices another poetic thing about the year of Kafka's death – demolition suddenly becoming the most popular word in society – when that is precisely where his power resides; 'he tears down the soothing façade to which a repressive reason increasingly conforms,' not stopping short in destruction but going to the ground.<sup>63</sup>

So much for the micro-level. On the macro-level there's similarly a lack of respite for the disinterested experts who faced with the fragmentary quality of Kafka's three large novels, would have to contend with the fact that 'Kafka forces the novel-form ever closer to the serialized adventure story,' which – Adorno remarks with no reprimand usually reserved for the popular – Kafka loved and whose technique he adopted and by doing so 'dissociated himself from the established literary mores.'<sup>64</sup> Adorno goes so far as to say that Kafka learned from the detective novel universal suspicion and finishes off by saying that 'in detective novels, the world of things has gained mastery over the abstract subject and Kafka uses this aspect to refashion things into ever-present emblems. The large works are rather like detective novels in which the criminal fails to be exposed.'<sup>65</sup>

Imagine the shock of mandarins to find in the majestic piece of writing something as frivolous as the detective novel deeply embedded in its crux. Kafka actually wrote the scene that could be viewed as roughly depicting it. On his second visit to the court, K. got the opportunity to sneak a peek into the books on an examining magistrate's table, expecting to find some deeper truths about the Law he was to be judged by. Instead, he was faced with lewd, cheap and ham-handed forms of titillation.

K. opened the book on top, and an indecent picture was revealed. A man and a woman were sitting naked on a divan; the obscene intention of the artist was obvious, but his ineptitude was so great that in the end there was nothing to be seen but a man and woman, emerging far too corporeally from the picture, sitting rigidly upright, and due to the poor perspective, turning toward each other quite awkwardly. K. didn't leaf through any further, but simply opened to the

---

<sup>62</sup> Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence, 1928-1940*, ed. Henri Lonitz, trans. Nicholas Walker (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999), 70.

<sup>63</sup> Adorno, "Notes on Kafka", 251.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 264.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

frontispiece of the second book, a novel entitled *The Torments Grete Suffered at the Hands of Her Husband Hans*. “So these are the law books they study,” said K. “I’m to be judged by such men.”<sup>66</sup>

Plenty of interesting insights can be drawn from finding the not just pornographic, but sadomasochistic content where the Law should be; from seeing 'an abstract, psycho-social conception – that the governing principle of the modern age is domination and submission –' as thereby being 'expressed in concrete image'<sup>67</sup>, to noting 'resemblance to a Talmudic passage on cherubim engaged in “sexual intercourse” atop the Ark of the Covenant,' and through the mediation of Hans and Grete, finding the scene to be a comedic 'reduction of Jewish tradition to Germanic stereotypes'<sup>68</sup> (instead of Talmudic heady mysteries, getting a manual for spousal abuse). For our present concerns, though, what is so remarkable about this scene is that the description of the pornographic picture it contains corresponds quite astonishingly with how Adorno describes Kafka's very own abolishing of the aesthetic distance. A man and woman, *emerging far too corporeally from the picture*, call the requisite distance into question the same way a three-dimensional locomotive does. It doesn't let a spectator occupy a single dimension on their own and be on account of that at a safe remove from what they are watching or reading.

One more correspondence ought to be noted, but to get to it first we must understand why Adorno praised the destruction of the aesthetic distance so highly. In yet another piece where he lauded 'Kafka's method of completely abolishing the distance' and where he explained how 'through shocks [Kafka] destroys the reader's contemplative security in the face of what he reads,' Adorno goes on to say that:

His novels, if indeed they even fall under that category, are an anticipatory response to a state of the world in which the contemplative attitude has become a mockery because the permanent threat of catastrophe no longer permits any human being to be an uninvolved spectator; nor does it permit the aesthetic imitation of that stance.<sup>69</sup>

---

<sup>66</sup> Kafka, *The Trial*, 57.

<sup>67</sup> Anna Katharina Schaffner, “Seasick in the Land of Sexuality: Kafka and the Erotic” in *Modernist Eroticisms – European Literature after Sexology*, ed. Anna Katharina Schaffner and Shane Weller (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 84.

<sup>68</sup> David Suchoff, *Kafka's Jewish Languages: The Hidden Openness of Tradition* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 140.

<sup>69</sup> Adorno, “The Position of the Narrator in the Contemporary Novel”, 34.

Adorno's permanent threats are still with us, the prospect of industrialised extermination and of nuclear armageddon are waiting in the wings, twitching to get to the stage; but there is also now a third threat, that of the climate catastrophe, which without a complete overhaul in the mode of production we won't be able to circumvent. While by the skin of our teeth, we managed to avoid further mushroom clouds and sinuous smoke reaching to skies in an attempt to carry entire ethnic groups to oblivion, somehow managing not to commit the greatest possible atrocities for half a century won't be enough. From not doing the very worst to prevent the looming disaster we now have to do our very best to steer the course away from it. In such a precarious situation, even in the realm of arts, aesthetic distance, with its familiar, classical look – maintained through the manner in which readers approach the work and the way in which the author narrates the story – cannot but conspire with our doom and serve as a safety blanket that will soon furtively smother us. Adorno continues to say something as significant as is surprising:

The distance is collapsed even by lesser writers who do not dare to write a word that does not apologize for being born by claiming to report on the facts. Their work reveals the weakness of a state of consciousness that is too shortsighted to tolerate its own aesthetic representation and can scarcely produce human beings capable of that representation.<sup>70</sup>

Here's the aforementioned additional correspondence: ineptitude and the lack of metier behind the pornographic picture K. finds in the examining magistrate's book is unsettling in the same way the works from lesser writers are. Brilliantly, Kafka is also capable of creating the same clammy unease bad writing gives rise to yet, unlike with the subpar authors, we cannot ward off that feeling by simply dismissing its cause out of hand as aesthetically unworthy. After all, we are in the hands of the acknowledged master, but the master is drawing on purpose the same poor perspective which can't be contained on a page and spills out, the poor perspective as a token of poor, squalid situation art finds itself in when the real world is beset with catastrophes. What failing writers unconsciously evoke – and what we fail to read from them, not wanting to waste our time by paying too close attention to unvarnished trash – Kafka also creates only knowingly, and in his works, we can't brush it off but become haunted by it.

---

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 35.



We already put our finger on the quality in question when we explained how Kafka makes additivist readers feel on their skin what it is to be a frustrated simple-minded subtractionist. Approaching the quality from the perspective of a reader's relationship to the text we noted how he slyly metamorphoses sophisticate into the bumbling, lost inept; while approaching Kafka immanently, from the perspective of nuts and bolts of writing, we get to know how he produces the same disquiet as bad writers do, only with excellent writing and by amplifying their inadvertent unease and making it into an indomitable part of the atmosphere. These two aspects – and we are talking about the second and the first meaning of aesthetic distance respectively – are two sides of the same coin with which Kafka purchased his place in the uppermost echelons of the literary canon.

There is a useful distinction between *hermeneutics* - 'readings which seek to interpret the signified and so ask *what can it mean?*' - and *poetics* as 'analysis directed mainly at the operation of the signifier which asks the question *how does it work?*'<sup>71</sup> It may seem that so far we've been solely in the land of hermeneutics, trying to plumb the depths of a possible meaning behind Kafka's treatment of aesthetic distance, but we also dealt with the question of poetics to some extent when we discussed micro and macro levels in Kafka's texts, in both instances mainly following Adorno's far-reaching train of thought. Yet, certainly more clarifications demand to be had if we are to satisfactorily answer the question of how Kafka does it.

To say, as we did, that the secret behind Kafka's storytelling power lies in his peerless bridging of the second divide between the high and low in art doesn't go deep enough. With that conjoining act, Kafka undoubtedly broke away from established literary mores of his time, but some half a century later mixing of the high and low became the defining feature of the postmodern period. While modernism, with a glaring and important exception of Kafka, was marked by 'an anxiety of contamination by its other: an increasingly consuming and engulfing mass culture,' postmodernism switched the force of repulsion for one of attraction and strove to blend together disparate parts and to annul the once unsurpassable great divide.<sup>72</sup>

Nevertheless, although the key to his success in getting under our skin has become a de rigueur literary move, Kafka's above-mentioned coin still remains the greatest rarity inflation can't

---

<sup>71</sup> Easthope, *Literary into Cultural Studies*, 35.

<sup>72</sup> Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide; Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (London: The MacMillan Press, 1986), vii.

touch. Even bad writers unwittingly collapse aesthetic distance, and many a modernist played with narrative distances to great effect, and there's no self-respecting literati who from the 70s onwards didn't mesh various popular genres with "serious" literature, yet no one like Kafka commands interpretation due to abolishing of distance, no one makes correctly understanding what is being read appear in such a dire light and immediate manner, as a matter of life and death even.

The typical Kafka text derives much of its powerful effect from the intensity with which it simultaneously invites and frustrates interpretation. The necessity to interpret engages the reader of Kafka at a particularly intimate level because it is exactly the Kafka protagonist's failure to interpret his situation successfully that leads to his destruction within the text. The existential implication of a failed hermeneutic is death, be it that of Georg Bendemann, Gregor Samsa, Joseph K., or the Land-Surveyor K.<sup>73</sup>

But on the level of content, plenty of postmodernist texts have much of the same narrative elements as Kafka's stories, and they all formally possess the same type of hybrid plot structure. So where's the difference?

To answer this question, let us first examine more closely the person who gave us the key to Kafka's effectiveness and pointed out that it was an alloy, made by combining the fine and base in literature. It was, at the face of it, the unlikeliest source for, if not detecting, then certainly for praising aspects of Kafka's work that welcome, mimic and adopt the workings of popular entertainment – Adorno. In common perception, he is an elitist curmudgeon whose one of the rare, but frequently indulged in pleasures consists in completely eviscerating and thoroughly exposing popular culture – or the culture industry as Max Horkheimer and he had termed it – as an extended and particularly perfidious arm of the capitalist system devised to continue subjugating and conditioning workers even in their ostensibly free time. However, some notable slips as with jazz notwithstanding, Adorno, and the Frankfurt school more broadly, cannot be put on the same page with the elitist, reactionary critics of the masses and their art, best exemplified by the likes of F.R and Q.D Leavis. The latter blame the split between serious and light literature on personal psychology and moral individualism. On their account, most

---

<sup>73</sup> Charles Bernheimer, *Flaubert and Kafka: Studies in Psychopoetic Structure* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 189.

people, unfortunately, prefer their art to be frivolous escapism devoid of any artistic quality and are loath to consider probing, masterful works seeking to understand the world as it is.

Consider on the other hand Horkheimer and Adorno: “‘Light’ art as such, entertainment, is not a form of decadence. Those who deplore it as a betrayal of the ideal of pure expression harbor illusions about society.’ Rather than blaming the individuals for not being cultured enough, they blame the officially sanctioned culture for being ‘bought from the outset with the exclusion of the lower class.’ Instead of cheap psychologising elitism invariably peddles, we get a penetrating, sociological understanding of the underlying material basis for the split between high and popular culture.

Serious art has denied itself to those for whom the hardship and oppression of life make a mockery of seriousness and who must be glad to use the time not spent at the production line in being simply carried along. Light art has accompanied autonomous art as its shadow. It is the social bad conscience of serious art.<sup>74</sup>

To conclude, as even some truly insightful theorists like Easthope have done, how at the end to both Leavis and Frankfurt school 'the same single objection can be made – they assume ordinary people are fools'<sup>75</sup> is patently false. There is a world of difference between seeing masses as feeble-minded people jostling for simple pleasures popular forms of art then duly provide, implicitly justifying the existence of the steep social stratification; and being mercilessly critical of the class system which takes up so much time and drains so much energy from the working people, leaving them understandably numbed and unfeeling for intricate, subtle and demanding art.

Setting aside, for now, this debate, there is another problem we need to attend to. After pithily stating that light art is a bad conscience of a serious one, our dialectical duo goes on to say:

The truth which the latter [high culture] could not apprehend because of its social premises gives the former [popular culture] an appearance of objective justification. The split between them is itself the truth: it expresses at least the negativity of the culture which is the sum of both spheres. The antithesis can be reconciled least of all by absorbing light art into serious or vice

---

<sup>74</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectics of Enlightenment: philosophical fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 107.

<sup>75</sup> Easthope, *Literary into Cultural Studies*, 77.

versa. That, however, is what the culture industry attempts. The eccentricity of the circus, the peep show, or the brothel in relation to society is as embarrassing to it as that of Schonberg and Karl Kraus.<sup>76</sup>

Far from being contemptuous of the “base” forms of culture, Horkheimer and Adorno put it in at least one respect on the same footing with the great art because both are thorns in the side of the culture industry the sharpness of which it seeks to blunt by blending the two. Some twenty years after his seminal work with Horkheimer, Adorno once more reflected in some detail on this topic and said yet again that 'to the detriment of both [the culture industry] forces together the spheres of high and low art, separated for thousands of years. The seriousness of high art is destroyed in the speculation about its efficacy; the seriousness of the lower perishes with the civilizational constraints imposed on the rebellious resistance inherent within it as long as social control was not yet total.'<sup>77</sup>

Given all this, how to explain Adorno's extolling precisely Kafka's singular blend of adventure-cum-detective stories with serious literature? As an about-face and change of heart? Hardly. Adorno is dead set against integration whereby the specificity of high and popular culture cancel each other out, but Kafka doesn't do anything of the sort. Rather, he dialectically sublates popular fiction inside his towering modernist writings, not allowing the former to lose its sting. Considering Kafka's distinct way of fusion, it is revealing to compare it to, by the looks of it, his dead ringers – postmodernist texts and their notable precursors that came to be known as metaphysical detective stories.

At the very beginning of our work, we repudiated our childish questions about K.'s guilt and the court as the wrong ones to put to a mystery story that could be called that only if we prefix it with the mighty label of metaphysical, placing Kafka tacitly in that category. In the meantime, we tried to justify the legitimacy of our wide-eyed queries and of the need to engage in the interpretation of Kafka's works. With that in mind, we should reconsider Kafka's putative belonging to metaphysicians of crime stories whose narratives are ‘composed in equal parts of parody, paradox, epistemological allegory (Nothing can be known with any certainty), and

---

<sup>76</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, 107-8.

<sup>77</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, “Culture Industry Reconsidered” in *The Culture Industry: Selected essays on mass culture*, ed. J.M. Bernstein, trans. Anson G. Rabinbach (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 99.

insoluble mystery – [where they] self-consciously question the very nature of reality.’<sup>78</sup> The description seems to capture Kafka's machinations quite well, however, there is a critical difference.

In metaphysical detective fiction, a husk bears the usual trappings of mystery stories – whether hard-boiled, soft or scrambled – while a kernel remains of the expected high order, dealing with ontological and epistemological conundrums. With Kafka though, it's the other way around: the shell is, despite notable and unusual iconicity for his time, pristine and of the first class, whereas the core, the very heart, rather than being hewed from the darkness as great literature aspires to do – aiming as it does at the ultimate horizon which due to its sheer density cannot but be draped in tenebrosity – the heart of Kafka's stories is bloody red instead like it slipped from the pages of penny dreadfuls and the stages of Grand Guignols.

The contrast we just laid out explains why authors that could come under the rubric of metaphysical detective story, while counting in their ranks some of the best writers of the 20th century (Vladimir Nabokov, Jorge Luis Borges and Georges Perec come immediately to mind), and being remarkable in myriad ways and an absolute joy to read and study carefully, simply don't jolt and jar as Kafka does. Though Kafka was tangentially name-checked a couple of times in, for now, a definite collection of essays on the topic, *Detecting Texts: The Metaphysical Detective Story from Poe to Postmodernism*, and though editors Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney, when they made a run-down of different ways the sub-genre in question has been called, mentioned Patrick Brantlinger's term “deconstructive mystery” and that he applied it to Kafka's *The Trial*; in the end, they decided not to include Kafka on the list of writers they understood to be writing that particular type of fiction. Though the genealogy they drew is self-professedly tentative,<sup>79</sup> it was obviously made with great care, and consideration and more than managed to be satisfactorily comprehensive. On our count, it contains 62 different names, including the 19th-century forerunners and significant postmodernists that came in their wake. Even Walter Benjamin was included because of his theorisation about flaneurs which ties in nicely with the gumshoe's peregrinations. In short, all the usual suspects were rounded up, everyone except Kafka. Editors didn't say why they so

---

<sup>78</sup> Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney, “The Game's Afoot: On the Trail of the Metaphysical Detective Story” in *Detecting Texts: The Metaphysical Detective Story from Poe to Postmodernism*, ed. Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 4.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

glaringly omitted him, but pace Brantlinger, we would agree with them. Even as the main progenitor of the crime genre(s), both common and metaphysical, Edgar Allan Poe, is rightly viewed as one of the Kafkian antecedents, and even as Kafka himself was one of the key influences on all the postmodernists, strictly speaking, he doesn't belong under that heading, his heart is in the different place.

The importance of this distinction is made clear if we take into account the effect those narratives have on the readers. While metaphysical detective stories congratulate us for being bookworms, raising the stakes for our reading and writing proclivities, yet not to diminish them in contrast to the vast existence, but to put the two literary activities on the pedestal and declare them the most potent encapsulations and the means of seizing the world at large, Kafka's writings, despite his fervent love of literature, exude the very opposite feeling. His works transmit burning shame about caring for something minuscule and irrelevant while the world burns, feeling guilty because of the egotistic, all-absorbing attention being paid to one's own little scribbles,<sup>80</sup> feeling worthless as a consequence and cut off from any meaningful endeavour or human relationship, but still ploughing on, with neck tied to the millstone of one's own pitiful and excessively laborious making. Or as Kafka puts it in the characteristically striking terms of unparalleled pugilistic force

God doesn't want me to write, but I—I must. So there's an everlasting up and down; after all, God is the stronger, and there's more anguish in it than you can imagine. So many powers within me are tied to a stake, which might possibly grow into a green tree. Released, they could be useful to me and the country. But nobody ever shook a millstone from around his neck by complaining, especially when he was fond of it.<sup>81</sup>

All this leads us to conclude that while it may appear that we ran a gamut of heterogeneous topics so far, it can all be tied back to and summed up with the Kafka's singular collapse of the aesthetic distance and the way it was being reflected through our three divides:

---

<sup>80</sup> Kafka declared that what's devilish about writing is 'the vanity and addiction to pleasure which constantly flutters around its own figure and enjoys it—or around some other figure, the movement then multiplies, it becomes a solar system of vanity.' Kafka, "Letter to Max Brod, July 5, 1922", in *Letters to Family, Friends, and Editors*, 396.

<sup>81</sup> Kafka, "Letter to Oskar Pollak, November 9, 1903", in *Letters to Family, Friends, and Editors*, 10.

1. parabolic vs. prosaic living – Kafka's writings impart constant guilt and shame about caring so deeply and devoting oneself so thoroughly to something as insular as one's little scribbles while the world burns.
2. high vs. low literature – popular and mass-audience friendly forms such as crime and adventure novels are in the kernel of Kafka's narratives, as opposed to being the mere husk, as is the case with their formally closest kin, metaphysical detective novel.
3. additivist vs. subtractionist readers – Kafka makes sophisticated readers feel like bumbling ignorants who, despite their better judgement, are forced by the stories' design to read for the plot and try to come to grips, doomed in advance to be unsuccessful, with what's going on.

## The demolition of the aesthetic distance from a narratological perspective

In this chapter, we are going to focus still more on the question of *how does Kafka do it?* when it comes to the shattering of the aesthetic distance, specifically in regard to narratology. We are going to continue using *The Trial* as an example. So let's take the first sentence, one of the most cherished and renowned in all of literature. 'Someone must have slandered Josef K., for one morning, without having done anything truly wrong, he was arrested.'<sup>82</sup> It revolves at first around the word *verleumden* which means 'to slander, to calumniate, to vilify, to defame, to denigrate, to malign, to backbite.'<sup>83</sup> Breon Mitchell translates it as *slandered*<sup>84</sup> while other translators have, somewhat unfortunately, opted for *traded* (Willa and Edwin Muir); *telling lies* (David Wyllie) and *telling tales* (Mike Mitchell). Unlike slander, the other three glosses on Kafka's *verleumden* don't have an obvious legal ring to them which was clearly indispensable for the story. With Breon Mitchell's translation, we have a slander – i.e. the most vicious, and indeed prosecutable form of rumour – rightfully reinstated at the beginning of *The Trial*. But when it comes to gossip, there's more to the first sentence than this. Namely, as Mladen Dolar insightfully stresses

the sentence doesn't maintain that there actually were rumours spread; rumours are subject to inference, conjecture, surmise, hypothesis. One could propose the paraphrase: 'Rumour has it that someone has been spreading rumours . . .' There is something like a meta-rumour involved. The sentence, simple as it appears, turns out to be mind-boggling.

The sentence appears simple because it is relatively short, especially in comparison with the winding juggernauts usually found in Kafka's works, and conveys three, at the face of it, perfectly understandable points: (1) *someone must have slandered Josef K.* [Jemand mußte Josef K. verleumdet haben] because (2) *without having done anything wrong* [denn ohne daß er etwas Böses getan hätte] (3) *one morning he was arrested* [wurde er eines Morgens

---

<sup>82</sup> Kafka, *The Trial*, 3.

<sup>83</sup> Mladen Dolar, "On Rumors, Gossip and Related Matters" in *Objective Fictions: Philosophy, Psychoanalysis, Marxism*, ed. Adrian Johnston, Boštjan Nedoh and Alenka Zupančič (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 151.

<sup>84</sup> Breon Mitchell, "Translator's Preface" in *The Trial*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1998), xix.



verhaftet].<sup>85</sup> The genius and the difficulty of the first sentence lies in the fact that it is itself structured like a rumour because we aren't really sure from whose perspective it is told and because, besides the undeniable fact that K. was arrested, two other points are shot through with ambiguities and conjectures characteristic of what happens to an event once it enters the grinding rumour mill.

Once we become acquainted with the original version and the problems it poses to the fastidious translator we become aware not only that *someone must be slandering Josef K.* isn't certain and might well be only a hearsay – a hasty jumping to a conclusion with no basis in facts – but that also the part about K. having done nothing wrong is also very much an open question. In German, the said second point in the sentence, even in the isolation from the other two, invites doubt. 'Although the narrator informs us that Josef K. was arrested, his use of the subjunctive form "hätte" suggests that it remains open whether this was with good reason or on thin evidence.'<sup>86</sup> The subjunctive constitutes 'a verb form or set of verb forms that represents a denoted act or state not as fact but as contingent or possible or viewed emotionally (as with doubt or desire).'<sup>87</sup> Despite English also possessing subjunctive forms, it can't do what German does without adding words not present in the original to render the second point in the sentence subtly suspicious. Mitchell warns that 'on a strictly literal level any English translation is forced to declare K.'s innocence.'<sup>88</sup> He professes to have tried, by reformulating the second point of the sentence as 'without having done anything *truly* wrong' to introduce, 'on a level corresponding to the almost subliminal use of the subjunctive in German, the question of truth,' but in the end, he decided to drop *truly* after all for fear of 'moving too strongly toward interpretation.'<sup>89</sup>

Interpreters, on the other hand, obviously need not be bound by these qualms. So Dolar, after already ad-libbing *rumour has it that someone has been spreading rumours*, also effectively turns 'ohne daß er etwas Böses getan hätte' into 'without *allegedly* having done anything

---

<sup>85</sup> Here we follow the original order of the sentence and reproduce it in full inside square brackets.

<sup>86</sup> Jakob Lothe, "The Narrative Beginning of Kafka's 'In der Strafkolonie,'" in *Franz Kafka: Narration, Rhetoric, and Reading*, ed. by Jakob Lothe, Beatrice Sandberg and Ronald Speirs (Columbus, Ohio: The Ohio State University Press, 2011), 150.

<sup>87</sup> "Subjunctive – Dictionary Definition," Merriam-Webster, accessed December 22, 2022, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/subjunctive>

<sup>88</sup> Mitchell, "Translator's Preface," xviii-xix.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, xix.

wrong.<sup>90</sup> Similarly, Ronald Speirs and Beatrice Sandberg state that ‘we are not reading the story of a man who is arrested despite the *fact* that he is innocent, but rather the story of a man who *maintains* that he has been wrongfully arrested’<sup>91</sup> In Kafka, not coming to grips with the subtlest layers of text, possible only through a prolonged interpretative effort, risks missing the point and completely misunderstanding the entire story.

Apart from the meta-rumour structure of *The Trial*’s opening, Dolar notices something else curious about it, namely that ‘the whole novel is written from the perspective of Josef K.; we see things only with his eyes – except for the first sentence.’<sup>92</sup> He gleans from it that ‘the supposition of someone spreading rumours is not presented as K.’s own assumption,’ but rather that it is ‘the suggestion of an objective narrator’ who is there ‘only to throw the first stone and then he disappears. From here on, we see things only through Josef K.’s perspective.’<sup>93</sup> Dolar doesn’t go into any more details nor does he explain how exactly the otherwise concealed narrator reveals himself in the first sentence.

Ritchie Robertson, however, does exactly that. The opening sentence ‘betrays the hand of the narrator only in the placing of the conclusion before the premises.’<sup>94</sup> More precisely, in the first sentence we learn that K. is under arrest, but from the second sentence on we follow K.’s point of view, and he is oblivious to the fact of his arrest for a few pages. Relatively soon into proceedings, he is told by guards he can’t leave the room and is ‘being held,’<sup>95</sup> but it takes a couple or more pages until he is finally informed that he is ‘under arrest.’<sup>96</sup> For Corngold, likewise, the first sentence is ‘a significant example of authorial prejudgment,’ seeing ‘the narrator supplies the idea of accusation before he supplies the fact of arrest.’<sup>97</sup>

With these considerations, we have found ourselves in the field of the narratological analysis of Kafka’s works. Arguably the first scholar who staked a claim there was Friedrich Beißner

---

<sup>90</sup> Dolar, “On Rumors,” 153, my emphasis.

<sup>91</sup> Quoted in Lothe, “The Narrative Beginning,” 150.

<sup>92</sup> Dolar, “On Rumors,” 153.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Joshua Kavaloski, “*Fabula Interrupta*: The Rupture of Narrative and the Arrest of Time in Franz Kafka’s *Der Proceß*,” *Modern Austrian Literature*, Vol. 36, No. 3/4, (2003), 43.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>97</sup> Stanley Corngold, *The Fate of the Self: German Writers and French Theory* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1994), 170-171.

who ‘in a trenchant public lecture given in 1952’<sup>98</sup> took up a serious narratological analysis of Kafka’s works in order to counter the variety of interpretations that rapidly sprang up in ‘the Kafka vogue of the early post-war years.’<sup>99</sup> Those interpretations summarily took Kafka’s fiction to be ‘encoded illustrations of various ideological positions (existential, religious, philosophical, psychoanalytic)’ without paying much heed to the fundamentals of a literary text – like the question about the perspective from which the story is being told – by simply assuming that ‘the stories were told by an authoritative narrator speaking from a position distinct from and superior to those of his characters.’<sup>100</sup>

Contrary to that, Beißner argued that ‘Kafka always narrated from a single perspective and that the narrative perspective, even when expressed in the third person, was always coextensive with that of the protagonist.’ He termed it *einsinnige Perspektive* (literally, “one-sided perspective”)<sup>101</sup> and it largely came to be known as monopolised narration. On top of that, he understood the narrator not only to be synonymous with the central figure but also with the events of the story, meaning ‘the distance between event and narration is cancelled [“aufgehoben”],’ due to the fact that ‘Kafka allows the narrator no space beside or above the figures and no distance from events.’<sup>102</sup> The dearth of space for a traditional narrator extends to the collapse of distance between the reader and the story: ‘If we understand things correctly, Kafka transforms not only himself but also the reader into the main figure.’<sup>103</sup>

When it comes to distance in the narrative, ‘the more covert the narratorial mediation and the more numerous details provided about the narrated situations and events, the smaller the distance that is said to obtain between them and their narration. Mimesis or showing, for example, is taken to institute less distance than diegesis or telling.’<sup>104</sup> Along these lines, for Beißner in Kafka, ‘there is only the sequence of events that is narrating itself (paradoxically in the past tense).’<sup>105</sup> While from these pieces of information we may gather that the best way to abolish aesthetic distance through narration is to have a limited perspective solely on the

---

<sup>98</sup> Subsequently published under the title *Der Erzähler Franz Kafka* (“The narrator Franz Kafka”).

<sup>99</sup> Jakob Lothe, Beatrice Sandberg and Ronald Speir, “Narration and Narratives in Kafka,” in *Franz Kafka: Narration, Rhetoric, and Reading*, 3.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> *A Franz Kafka Encyclopedia*, 194.

<sup>102</sup> Lothe et al., “Narration and Narratives in Kafka,” 3.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Gerald Prince, *A Dictionary of Narratology – Revised Edition* (Lincoln and London: The University of Nebraska Press, 2003), 22.

<sup>105</sup> Lothe et al., “Narration and Narratives in Kafka,” 3.

character who is directly involved in the action and who narrates in first-person and present-tense while relying on the showing as opposed to telling as far as possible, that's not the case.

What Beißner calls paradoxical when speaking about past tense Kafka's novels are written in, is in fact structurally necessary. Dorrit Cohn showed through Kafka's example the curious dialectic between first-person present tense and third-person past tense in regard to aesthetic distance. Obviously, a first-person story in the past tense, a typical form of first-person narration, simply doesn't work for destroying the distance. Rather, it creates more of it by introducing minimally two diegetic levels, one in which we follow the story in the past, and one from which the story is being told, e.g. the older person recounting the exploits, trials and tribulations of the younger self. In the first-person past-tense narratives, though, this manifest presence of two temporal planes and diegetic levels isn't always unavoidable. There is a group of Kafka's first-person tales where the current person of the narrator, as opposed to their former self, isn't key to the stories and past tense is rather used because 'the incidents that they relate are marked by their total and at times fatal finality, they are *faits accomplis* that lie in the past.'<sup>106</sup>

Nonetheless, when Kafka writes in the first-person, he more often uses the present tense and not without a good reason. After all, it is a grammatical form singularly suited for presenting a protagonist 'trapped in a lasting, insoluble situation, or an unalterable impasse,' Kafka's go-to state of affairs.<sup>107</sup> Regardless of that, Cohn warns against seeing Kafka's three unfinished novels, all written in the third person, as mere extensions of the first-person stories. Cohn takes the well-known case of Kafka starting *The Castle* in the *I* form only to change his mind and turn all the *Is* into *Ks*, to mean that he sensed the inadequacy of the first-person form for the novel he was trying to write.

First-person present-tense is often used as 'a means of heightening the tension or of achieving greater vividness in the narration,' – of destroying the distance, we might also say – but 'its effectiveness quickly wears off when used too extensively.' If used consistently and widely, first-person present tense rather tips into an interior monologue where dialectics rears its twisty

---

<sup>106</sup> Dorrit Cohn, "Kafka's Eternal Present: Narrative Tense in 'Ein Landarzt' and Other First-Person Stories," *PMLA*, Vol. 83, No. 1 (Mar., 1968), 145.

Example Cohn gives are "Die Brücke," "Schakale und Araber," "Der Geier," and others

<sup>107</sup> A number of Kafka's first-person fictions (some as brief as "Heimkehr," others considerably longer) are written entirely in the present tense: "Eine Kleine Frau," "Der Nachbar," "Der Bau," "Eine Kreuzung," and others.

head and distance is again introduced. Even if, on the face of it, nothing could be narratively nearer than ‘the technique for rendering a character's thoughts in direct discourse, referring to the self in the first person and to the present moment in the present tense,’ the distinction between inner and outer, and the resultant surreptitious distance from the outside events – no matter how dangerous or thrilling they are for the narrator – is inevitably introduced.<sup>108</sup>

Collapsing of the aesthetic distance over longer stretches of text, requires, counterintuitively, a third-person narrator and past tense.<sup>109</sup> The more distant narrative modes of third-person and past tense are more self-effacing and call less attention to themselves, therefore they lend themselves better to the cancellation of distance. ‘If the author limits his angle of vision entirely to the perspective of one of his characters, the fictional world is seen through the latter's thoughts and sensations. This character's vantage point in time and space becomes the reader's own, and the past tense of narration loses its past meaning.’<sup>110</sup> There is a wonderful Hegelian logic at play here, that which is more contradictory and incongruous – i.e. using the third person and past tense to get us into the *here* and *now* of some character – is much better positioned than a more straightforward and immediate approach of first-person present-tense to sublimate the distance.<sup>111</sup>

One more crucial caveat to Beißner's thesis on Kafka's destruction of the aesthetic distance needs to be added. While it is true the distance between the reader and the work is astonishingly demolished in Kafka's fiction, it doesn't follow that there's equally no distance between the narrator and the protagonist, and that, as Beißner would have it, ‘Kafka's narrator always identifies unreservedly with the protagonist.’<sup>112</sup> Quite the contrary, the conclusive proofs have been repeatedly provided, both by detailed analysis of the narrator's role in short stories and novels, and by external evidence found in diaries and letters, of the important difference between the narrator and main character, and moreover of Kafka's often aloof and sometimes even derisive attitude towards his protagonists, and towards Josef K. most of all. Critical consensus has been reached and the difference between the narrator and the protagonist –

---

<sup>108</sup> Cohn, “Kafka's Eternal Present,” 144.

<sup>109</sup> Third-person present-tense narrative, just like its first-person counterpart, calls too much attention to the problem of temporality to allow for the complete shattering of distance.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>111</sup> Recall that Beißner used the word *aufgehoben* to talk about cancelling the distance.

<sup>112</sup> Lothe et al., “Narration and Narratives in Kafka,” 6.

however subtle – and the narrator's presence in the novels and the stories – however slight – has been established as a matter of fact.<sup>113</sup>

Very briefly, we need to argue here against that commonest of errors when standing before *The Trial*: taking K. to be the author's surrogate and a simple stand-in for an audience as just another little man crushed by the repressive system. K. is no innocent 'everyman faced with an anonymous, inscrutable yet seemingly omnipotent power.'<sup>114</sup> Unlike with the everyman, K.'s social standing is firmly established. He is very high up the social ladder: a chief financial officer, no less, third in line behind the vice president and the president of the bank. Up until the fateful morning of his 30th birthday, he was ascending with speed and style, and cannot all that easily be made into a little man crushed by a senseless, sinister system. When two guards came into his room and informed him that he was under arrest, he wanted to know why. They retorted how they hadn't been sent to tell him that, and a bit later admitted 'we're lowly employees who can barely make our way through such documents [like an arrest warrant].'<sup>115</sup> Upon learning that K. became certain that 'a few words spoken with someone of my own sort will make everything incomparably clearer than the longest conversations with these two.'<sup>116</sup> In what a century or so later will appear as a particularly felicitous coincidence K. – channelling his inner Karen – demanded 'Take me to your supervisor,' to which they responded 'When he wishes it; not before'<sup>117</sup> and advised him to wait for him in his room since he was being detained and couldn't leave the boarding house he was a lodger in. He did as told and inside his room 'he felt confident and at ease: he was missing work at the bank this morning of course, but in light of the relatively high position he held there, that would be easily excused.'<sup>118</sup> Shortly after he was told to put on a black coat to be able to meet the inspector, he opened his wardrobe, 'took his time going through his many clothes, selected his best black suit, an evening jacket that had caused a small sensation among his friends because it was so stylish, then changed his shirt as well and began dressing with care.'<sup>119</sup>

---

<sup>113</sup> Richard W. Sheppard, "The Trial/The Castle: Towards an Analytical Comparison" in *The Kafka Debate: New Perspectives for Our Time*, ed. Angel Flores (New York: Gordian Press, 1977), 398.

<sup>114</sup> Espen Hammer, "Introduction," in *Kafka's The Trial - Philosophical Perspectives*, ed. Espen Hammer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 1.

<sup>115</sup> Kafka, *The Trial*, 8.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

He then met the inspector in the adjacent room, where, beside the two of them, there were three young men, who remained silent. K. began hopeful and managed to let slip how it had been ‘his lot’ to make his way on his own ‘in this world,’<sup>120</sup> and how ‘Hasterer, the public prosecutor, is a good friend of mine.’<sup>121</sup> It didn’t produce the desired effect and on top of that, the inspector also admitted to being a marginal figure in K.’s affair, knowing almost nothing about it except that he’s been arrested. Then he informed K. that he may go to his job and that being under arrest shouldn’t hinder ‘the course of your ordinary life.’<sup>122</sup> The inspector continued on an obliging note by saying how he assumed K. would want to go to the bank and so ‘to facilitate that, and to render your arrival at the bank as inconspicuous as possible, I’ve arranged for three of your colleagues here to be placed at your disposal.’<sup>123</sup> Only then did K. understand that the three men beside him ‘were indeed clerks from his bank, not colleagues, that would be an overstatement, and indicated a gap in the inspector’s omniscience, but they were certainly lower-level clerks from the bank.’<sup>124</sup> Fancy clothes; friends in high places; senior status, despite the relatively young age; being in a highly esteemed, influential and lucrative profession; and it goes without saying, a complete contempt for subordinates and less successful; how’s that for an average, little, everyman? And all of those examples come from a few pages of the first chapter.

Josef K. is proud of his rank and he freely uses the power at his disposal, and the use of power is always the abuse of power – there is no simple use of power which wouldn’t immediately translate into abuse. We learn, e.g., that he makes petitioners wait for a week before granting them an appointment, just to let them feel his superiority, just by some quirk and caprice. In a 1965 interview Welles will describe him as a ‘petty bureaucrat’ adding that he was guilty ‘because he belonged to a guilty society, he collaborated with it’ (Conrad, p. 289).<sup>125</sup>

Kafka quietly revels in depicting someone so haughty, hierarchy-obsessed and given to lording over underlings suddenly being out of his depth and up to his neck. He doesn’t make K. likeable and doesn’t try to get us to root for him. Even so, while watching what happens to K., readers

---

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.,13

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.,15.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.,17.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Dolar, “The Trials of Citizen K.,” 40. Dolar is citing Peter Conrad’s book *Orson Welles. The Stories of His Life*, in edition of London’s Faber & Faber from 2003.

don't get to experience schadenfreude, having already been thrown into the narrative fray with him.

Kafka doesn't foster active empathy from readers because of who his protagonists are, but rather through the dreary situation, they find themselves stuck in. As a result, an even more tense and ominously close relationship between the reader and the text is established. In another counterintuitive, topsy-turvy dialectic, the aesthetic distance is demolished even more thoroughly and the anxiety is that much harder to dissipate because we aren't asked to identify with K. due to his relatable behaviour or noble conduct. Rather, the sheer magnitude of the oppressive circumstances forces us into his perspective without K.'s beckoning or us, the readers, assenting.

In addition to the looming court process against K. which goes on outside, we feel deep unease with the protagonist in whose head we are stuck and behind whose eyes we must look at the world. If Josef K. was at all compelling in his own right or could inspire any sort of sympathy in readers without their being a nebulous criminal case against him, the strain Kafka puts us under would be markedly lessened. There would be a minimal refuge – at least in K.'s interior – from the punitive world of *The Trial*; a much-needed shelter, if not a full-blown way out of the oppressive edifice. The story would be more suspenseful in the traditional sense, we could dread what's in store for our beloved K., and the end would hit us hard like a tragedy.

Yet such narrative structure would leave plenty of breathing room for us, with ample time and space after the last full stop for the catharsis to be enacted so we could move on, with eyes all cried out but more clear-eyed for that. No mental hygiene of the sort is possible with Kafka. There's no end to muck, slime and dirt and there's nothing readers can do to wash away the all-enveloping foul stench and bitter taste in the mouth the novel leaves behind. By not being made to identify with the protagonist, the distance of the reader to the text – far from being increased – is in fact all the more forcefully shattered.

While the terrain of the collapsed aesthetic distance was shortly afterwards singularly explored by Adorno,<sup>126</sup> but otherwise not frequently ventured into by Kafka scholars, the first part of

---

<sup>126</sup> Notes on Kafka" is a translation of Adorno's essay "Aufzeichnungen zu Kafka," which appeared in the *Neue Rundschau* (Frankfurt), 64 (July- Sept. 1953).



Beißner's thesis about the monopolised narration became ubiquitous to the point that it was 'made by almost everybody who has written about Kafka's narrative technique.'<sup>127</sup> In 1963, Keith Leopold, for one, took Kafka's 'attempts to maintain a single, limited perspective' to be one of his 'most striking and individual features.' First, he clarified that 'third-person narratives in which everything is seen through the eyes of one character' has already been practised and consciously recognised as the preferred narrative model by Henry James,<sup>128</sup> and only became ever more common in literature from then on. Then he explained how Kafka's limited perspective radicalised and upped the ante for such type of narration in trying to 'maintain not only the single perspective of Josef K. but also the limited perspective of Josef K.'s present, a present that is filled to the exclusion of all else with the problems of his lawsuit.'

After the heyday of structuralism in the late '60s and early '70s and thanks in large part to Gérard Genette, narratology became equipped with a far better and stricter way to distinguish between these two types of limited perspective. It is the difference between internal focalisation with a fixed point and a classically conceived character point-of-view recounting only present events. Genette's foundational move was to firmly distinguish the question 'who is the character whose point of view orients the narrative perspective?' and the very different question 'who is the narrator – or, more simply, the question who sees?' and the question 'who speaks?'<sup>129</sup> The narrator is the one who speaks and they can be further specified in relation to their presence in the story as either *homodiegetic* if they appear as a character in the story they are narrating or *heterodiegetic* if they don't; and in relation to the story level they find themselves on as *extra-diegetic*, if no narrative frame encloses them, and *intradiegetic*, if it does.<sup>130</sup> *The Trial* is told mostly by an *extradiegetic* and *heterodiegetic* narrator, but when the prison chaplain tells *Before the Law* story he is an *intradiegetic* because he is a character in the larger story the novel unfolds in, and a *heterodiegetic* narrator because the story of the man from the country waiting before the door of the Law doesn't contain him as a character.

---

<sup>127</sup> Keith Leopold wrote this in 1963, citing, alongside Beißner, Fritz Martini. From then until now the list grew a thousandfold, but the basic point about the limited perspective in Kafka's works being regularly singled out stands correct. Keith Leopold, "Breaks in Perspective in Franz Kafka's *Der Prozess*," *The German Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (Jan., 1963), 31.

<sup>128</sup> Henry James, *Ambassadors*, also see in handbook of narratology under point of view references to James

<sup>129</sup> Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca and New York: Cornell University Press, 1980), 186.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 248.

Now, focalization tells us not only who sees, but also to what extent. There are three types of focalisation: 1) *Zero focalization* ‘corresponds to what English-language criticism calls narrative with omniscient narrator [...] and which Todorov symbolizes by the formula Narrator > Character (where the narrator knows more than the character, or more exactly, says more than any of the characters knows); 2) *Internal focalization* ‘Narrator = Character (the narrator says only what a given character knows); this is narrative with ‘point of view’ after [Percy] Lubbock; 3) *External focalization* ‘Narrator < Character (the narrator says less than the character knows); this is the ‘objective’ or ‘behaviorist’ narrative.’<sup>131</sup>

The question who sees is by far most applicable to *internal focalization* which has three subcategories: a) *fixed* in which focalization is on one character throughout, as with K. in *The Trial* b) *variable* in which focalization is on more than one character and c) *multiple* in which ‘the same event may be evoked several times according to the point of view of several [...] characters.’<sup>132</sup>

Internal focalization doesn’t mean we are only inside a character’s head in the fashion of interior monologue, but that we are solely privy to the information the character possesses, including external events. Even though Genette doesn’t always do it himself, it is crucial, ‘if focalization is to be more than a mere “reformulation” of point of view,’ to distinguish between the information-based model in which ‘the amount of narrative information is indicated by the formulas derived from Todorov; and a more traditional one based on the metaphors of vision and point of view,’<sup>133</sup> derived from Lubbock and the school of narratology that sprung up thanks to James’s approach and disciples.

Let’s take as an example the following sentence: ‘One afternoon—it was just before the final mail pickup and K. was very busy—K.’s Uncle Karl, a small landowner from the country, shoved his way between two assistants bringing in documents and entered the room.’<sup>134</sup> The part containing general information about uncle Karl isn’t a break in fixed internal focalization – K. undoubtedly knows that – but it is a break in the point of view because ‘to tell a story from a character’s point of view means to present the events as they are perceived, felt, interpreted

---

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 188–189.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 190.

<sup>133</sup> Burkhard Niederhoff, “Focalization,” in *Handbook of Narratology*, ed. Peter Hühn, John Pier, Wolf Schmid and Jörg Schönert (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), 115-116.

<sup>134</sup> Kafka, *The Trial*, 88.

and evaluated by her at a particular moment.<sup>135</sup> Following the psychological model of point of view, thinking about one's uncle as he enters the office as *a small landowner from the country* simply isn't feasible.

Leopold scrupulously tracks all the small breaks in point of view in *The Trial*, and it is truly interesting to see to what a large extent Kafka maintained a limited perspective on K. exclusively in the present. But for our purposes it is much more intriguing to attend to the far fewer breaks in focalization or 'departures from the single perspective of Josef K.,'<sup>136</sup> as Leopold calls them. The only unequivocal break in focalization, 'the only example in the book of the representation of something that happens outside K.'s range of vision, something he could not have seen or heard'<sup>137</sup> comes in the third sentence of the novel's final chapter titled "The End" and concerns two gentlemen who come to K. lodgings to take him away and carry out the death sentence. 'After brief formalities at the outer door over who would enter first, the same formalities were repeated more elaborately before K.'s door.'<sup>138</sup> The brief break in focalization superbly foreshadows the fast-approaching death of the protagonist who, apart from this comically courteous arrival of his executioners, processed every other information before it reached the reader.

The only other possible breaks in focalization, six in total on Leopold's count, all involve Frau Grubach, for example: 'she was a little embarrassed because she hadn't understood everything that K. was saying.'<sup>139</sup> Given that all the breaks concentrate on one relatively minor character Leopold thinks that any interpretation needs to take stock of it and we'll indeed proffer our own: the reason that Frau Grubach gets a "privilege" of being for a very few moments another focalized character has everything to do with the fact that fiduciary-minded K. thinks he more or less owns her because she owes him some money.

To get back to the original question about the potential presence of the extra and heterodiegetic narrator in the first sentence instead of K.'s limited perspective, we may conclude that it is the case of the liminal break in focalization. Given it consists so indefatigably of rumours, Genette's information-based narratological apparatus jams and is unable to strictly

---

<sup>135</sup> Niederhoff, "Focalization," 116.

<sup>136</sup> Leopold, "Breaks in Perspective," 38.

<sup>137</sup> Leopold, "Breaks in Perspective," 36.

<sup>138</sup> Kafka, *The Trial*, 223.

<sup>139</sup> Kafka, *The Trial*, 24.

compartmentalise it. Because of slander, the narrative begins startlingly and with a start, and then shifts into the fixed internal focalization gear and trudges along until the final chapter where another telling hiccup occurs with the non-focalized introduction to the two impossibly ceremonious gentlemen with top hats sent to spearhead the end of K.'s life and the overall narrative. We may conclude that in the first sentence the rumour fell from the heterodiegetic heights into the world of the story, and it left the narrator emptied of salacious details and therefore mostly inconspicuous from then on.

### Conclusion

While there was a good reason why in the post-war period defences had to be mounted against the army of interpreters who pillaged Kafka's texts without any literary scruples, the risk of erring on the side of caution took hold with the anti-parabolist approach becoming widespread. The most insightful readers of Kafka, however, repeatedly stressed why interpreting him is unavoidable and Adorno, by connecting it to the Kafkian method of abolishing aesthetic distance, gave the most precise explanation for the mystery of Kafka's enormous literary power. By way of conclusion, we may reflect once more on the term aesthetic distance. Though the main gist of the concept was already present in Kant's disinterestedness, the aesthetician Edward Bullough came up with the term and gave it a helpful spatial rendering. Moreover, Bullough introduces aesthetic distance through a very telling example. He asks us to imagine passengers on a ship observing fog at sea. For them, fog is the experience of 'the acute unpleasantness'<sup>140</sup> because of the potential peril it may put the voyage in. Now, if we are at a greater distance and aren't on the ship stranded in fog or tossed about by the furious sea but observe it from afar or in the work of art, the very same phenomena appear eminently beautiful.

Aesthetic experience is achieved only by 'separating the object and its appeal from one's own self, by putting it out of gear with practical needs and ends.'<sup>141</sup> Kafka, as Adorno keeps pointing out, turns this on its head, no distance is left in his art for readers to be at. From far off we can be transfixed by the astounding beauty of the raging sea all we want, but finding ourselves on the sea while the same beautiful but disastrous phenomenon takes place an entirely different attitude takes hold. From seasickness and nausea that grabs hold of one's body to the pressing

---

<sup>140</sup> Edward Bullough, "'Psychical Distance' as a Factor in Art and an Aesthetic Principle," *British Journal of Psychology*, No.5, (1912), 88.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

need to navigate dangerous waters, there is no time or space left for admiring the sea's sublime might. We pay respects and stay in tune with Kafka's work only by realising we are on the stormy sea with him, not on any firm ground and at a safe remove from what transpires in his stories. Only by interpreting his texts do we stay true to their power and don't run away from the calamitous consequence of Kafka's demolition of aesthetic distance.