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Taylor - Encircling Kafka: A Review of the City of K. - JCRT 3.3

Encircling Kafka? *The City of K.: Franz Kafka and Prague*

a review of "The City of K.: Franz Kafka and Prague," The Jewish Museum, New York, August 11, 2002 to January 5, 2003.

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August 17, 1921

*Esteemed Director: I am writing this letter in bed. I wanted to return to Prague on the 19th of this month, but I am afraid that it won't be possible. For several months I have been almost free of fever, but on Sunday I woke with a fever which climbed to over 38 degrees and still continues today. It's probably not the result of a cold, but one of those chance things common to lung disease which one cannot avoid. The doctor who examined me and found my lungs to be in good condition except for a stubborn remnant considers this acute fever to have little significance.*¹

Kafka in 1923-24 ²

The City of K.: Franz Kafka and Prague is an ambitious and unsettling postmodern exhibition, with original documents, facsimiles, and materials relating to Franz Kafka's literary works, life, and cultural surroundings carefully presented in a series of thematically organized "districts": "The Primal Scene," "A Little 'Ravachol,'" "Life in a Circle," "The Civil Servant and the Artist," "The Theater of Purity," "The Constantly Postponed Marriages," "The God of Suffocation," "The Burrow," "The Endless Office," "The Castle," "In the Penal Colony," and "The Threshold." The alignment of such diverse items as photographs, audiovisual installations, letters, and music allow the exhibition space to simulate Kafka's or K.'s existential space by extending an opposition between surface and depth into the various aspects of the author's literary works and Jewish cultural life in early twentieth century Prague. Key passages from Kafka's diaries, novels, and short stories written in white block letters on dark, "muddy" walls, wooden pallets, or an ascending staircase leading nowhere interrupt the eye as one passes from exhibit to the next. Early on, photographs of the Old Town rest submerged on a rock bed against a wall length, portrait filled genealogy of the Kafka family. Of the several excerpts inaugurating the exhibit, a line from the "Third Octavo Notebook" seems to capture the spatial and existential tensions presented throughout the exhibition: "A cage went in search of a bird."

Audiovisual Traffic (Verkehr) ³

The Civil Servant and the Artist ⁴

Measures for the Prevention of Accidents ⁵

The Burrow ⁶

From the installation *In the Penal Colony* ⁷

¹See Sander L. Gilman (1995) *Franz Kafka: The Jewish Patient*. London/New York: Routledge, 265.

²Juan Insua, (2002) editor, *The City of K.: Franz Kafka and Prague*,. Barcelona: Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona/Institut d'Edicions de la Diputació de Barcelona, 131. Permission The Jewish Museum.

³*The City of K.*, 130. Permission The Jewish Museum.

⁴*The City of K.*, 131. Permission The Jewish Museum.

⁵*The City of K.*, 55. Permission The Jewish Museum

⁶*The City of K.*, 130. Permission The Jewish Museum.

⁷*The City of K.*, 130. Permission The Jewish Museum.

Prague Castle⁸
The Threshold⁹

3. *The City of K.* presents turn of the century Prague as a geographical and psychological enclosure, an endless and seemingly inescapable complex of literary, cultural, familial, and employment circles. For the exhibit's "Kafka," Prague becomes a "cage," a "fissure," a "vortex," a "crone" that will not yield. The city space, with its discrete parts, becomes an elusive territory, occupying both a literal and a figurative place throughout the exhibit:

This is not a city. It is a fissure in the ocean bed of time, covered with stony rubble of burned-out dreams and passions, through which we—as if in a diving bell—take a walk. It is interesting, but after a time one loses one's breath.¹⁰

Prague doesn't let go. Of either of us. This old crone has claws. One has to yield, or else. We would have to set fire to it on two sides, at the Vyšehrad and at the Hradčany; then it would be possible for us to get away.¹¹

4. The two primary surfaces of the exhibition, "Kafka in Prague: Existential Space" and "Prague in Kafka: Imaginary Topography," represent an attempt to reconcile or, perhaps, amplify the ambiguities of Kafka's creative works with the circumstances of his life. This "psychohistorical" approach is not new to Kafka scholarship. *The City of K.*, one observes, is clearly influenced by such landmark Kafka studies as, Ernst Pawell's *The Nightmare of Reason: The Life of Franz Kafka*, Stanley Corngold's *Franz Kafka: The Necessity of Form*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, Mark M. Anderson's *Kafka's Clothes*, and Sander L. Gilman's *Franz Kafka: The Jewish Patient*, one of the most detailed and insightful examinations of Kafka published in the last decade. The intriguing aspect of *The City of K.* is its "submerged" awareness of these and other recent scholarly writings and its self-conscious avoidance of reducing "Franz Kafka" to a literary or historical style—surrealism and political allegory. In this respect, *The City of K.* is much more than an elaborate author profile or a celebration of an artistic life. With its emphasis on producing an existential and intellectual "experience" of the subtle complexities of "Franz Kafka," the exhibition succeeds where the academy often has failed. For instance, "Life in a Circle" features an audiovisual installation, *Traffic (Verkehr)*, in which the score of Tema K. and distorted documentary footage of life in Prague provide a contrast to displays of documents from Kafka's university days along with copies of assorted influential magazines and books of the era, *Die Neue Rundschau*, *Der Kunstwart*, and G.W.F. Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. While these displays fill in informational details, *Traffic (Verkehr)*, with its mutating cityscape transforming into partially recognizable architectural shapes, illuminates the darkened room, causing a grid work or map of shadows to form on the floor beneath the circular display cases. Books, magazines, portraits, in a shadow-space, form circular maps. These distorted images on screen, encased historical documents, and shadow circles and grids prompt an awareness of depth and surface in connection with the mutability of experience that is so much a part of Kafka's legacy.
5. The traditional themes of person versus society, him/herself, nature, institutions, and machine run along the surface of "The Civil Servant and the Artist" and "The Endless Office." Oversized,

⁸*The City of K.*, 131. Permission The Jewish Museum.

⁹*The City of K.*, 131. Permission The Jewish Museum.

¹⁰Gustav Janouch's *Conversations with Kafka* quoted from *The City of K.*, 12.

¹¹*The City of K.*, 48.

perhaps coroner-sized, file cabinets and a makeshift desk containing facsimiles of Kafka's correspondences with his "superiors" point to the idea of Kafka as a critic of modern life. A copy of a report written by Kafka entitled "Measures for the Prevention of Accidents with Mechanical Planes" represents his encounter with a bureaucratic sensibility, with its detachment from the unsettling instances of workplace amputation. In addition, sketches of a languishing office worker also suggest an existential slicing away of collective humanity in the age of bureaucracies. Again, the exhibit draws attention to a complicated relationship between surface and depth. Resisting the temptation to overstate the observation that Kafka was first and foremost a "critic of modernity," "The Civil Servant and the Artist" advances a less tidy conflict between the artist Kafka and his administrative career: "Writing and office cannot be reconciled, since writing has its center of gravity in depth, whereas the office is on the surface of life. So it goes up and down, and one is bound to be torn asunder in the process."¹² "The Civil Servant and the Artist" portrays Kafka as a "double agent," serving two irreconcilable logics, business and literature. Were it simply the case of a conflict seeking resolution, Kafka would be just another writer in search of a few uninterrupted hours of work. Instead, the contrast between depth and surface allows for a more profound insight into Kafka's "process," a perpetuation of a steady and anxious tension in which one side of the contrast will be torn asunder by the other. From this perspective, writing or literature, as well as business, fully participate in a risk of annihilation.

6. "The Theater of Purity," "The Constantly Postponed Marriages," and "The God of Suffocation" all focus on the issue of identity in Kafka's life and writings. His interest in Yiddish theater¹³ are revealed through a well chronicled friendship with the actor Jizchak L'wry, which shows to have been critical in his re-examination of Jewish life. With theater programs, diary entries, and copies of influential readings such as M. Pines' *Histoire de la Littérature Jud'o-Allemande*, H. Graetz's *Volkstümliche Geschichte der Juden*, and, interestingly, Martin Buber's *Hundert Chassidische Geschichten*, "The Theater of Purity" establishes the biographical and intellectual context for Kafka's category of "minor literature," adopted and made famous by French theorists Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in the subtitle of their short theoretical study of Kafka. The displacements and margins reserved for Yiddish theater and minor literature are echoed in the subsequent exhibits on Kafka's failed romantic life. Occupying the transition from theater to romance is a "vortex" screen featuring floating images of his love interests. The spiral path through the vortex is completed by a series of letters and photographs documenting Kafka's struggle with his love of writing, self-hatred, and desire for romantic connection: "Without forebears, without marriage, without heirs, with a fierce longing for forebears, marriage, and heirs. They all of them stretch out of their hands to me: forebears, marriage, and heirs, but too far away for me. There is an artificial, miserable substitute for everything, for forebears, marriage, and heirs. Feverishly you contrive these substitutes, and if the fever has not already destroyed you, the hopelessness of the substitute will."¹⁴ The "fever," as desire, and the fever of disease (tuberculosis) unite in "The God of Suffocation," lending to the first part of exhibit's overarching feeling of despair before entering into the second division entitled "Prague in Kafka: Imaginary Topography." Inside Kafka one's finds the symptoms of organic and societal disease, with the silence brought on by laryngeal tuberculosis smothering his words and life. The theological issue, God as one who suffocates, especially as it relates to identity and death, appears as a fold in the exhibit, giving the installations devised around Kafka's later works an

¹²Letters to Felice Bauer quoted in *The City of K.*, 52.

¹³See Peter Sprengel's "Yiddish Theater in Prague: Kafka and Jizchak L'wry" in *The City of K.*, 172-79.

¹⁴Franz Kafka, *Diaries 1914-1923* quoted from *The City of K.*, 70.

important religious dimension.

7. "The Burrow," "The Endless Office," "The Castle," "In The Penal Colony," and "The Threshold" engage more directly with the theology of Kafka's works. Again, "The Burrow" and "The Endless Office" simulate the bureaucratic themes in Kafka's novels and short stories, loss of humanity through modernization. "The Castle" and "In The Penal Colony," however, transcend these earlier themes and the various acts of simulation by offering highly abstract "interpretation," perhaps critiques, of the corresponding later works. In particular, "The Castle," with its audiovideo montage, mirrored walls, white carpet and white cubes offers a view of the land surveyor K. making his way across a landscape. The overwhelming whiteness, mixed with the reflections of museum visitors sitting attentively on white cubes, brings together the familiar and the unfamiliar: "You're not from the Castle, you're not from the village, you are nothing. Unfortunately, though, you are something, a stranger."¹⁵ A stranger to whom? Others? Oneself? God? The ethereal space of "The Castle" proceeds to more abstract designs, such as the multi-surfaced panels of "In the Penal Colony" in which passages from the novella appear below each portion of the apparatus, leather straps, cotton, needles (harrows), and "flesh." These installations are more than inspired or clever inventions around literary themes. The exhibit's director, Juan Insua (CCCB), with Ruth Beesch (The Jewish Museum), has intelligently brought Kafka together with his many readers, producing layer upon layer of historical, cultural, biographical, and theoretical discourse for the viewer to experience. Finally, as one moves from darkness, to white, to cold gray concrete, "The Threshold" leaves the viewer with a number of choices, proceed to the exit, begin again, or remain still, on a threshold.
8. In the ambient light of the Museum's foyer the exhibition ends on a practical note, with many examples of Kafka's works in translation, illustrating the worldwide significance of his literary contribution. More importantly, however, the final portion of *The City of K.* suggests that "The City of K." is much larger than one may have originally thought, perhaps larger than one would like to admit. "Prague," "The Castle," "The Burrow," "The Office," and "The Penal Colony" are omnipresent, just one step away from where *you* are. This is the central point of the exhibition, as I see it. The collected works of Kafka have a connection to a time and place, but they also rupture, supersede, and exceed that time and place in unimaginable ways. After recently having taught a course entitled "Images of Power" in which texts by Kafka and Michel Foucault created the theoretical framework of the class, I've come to see Kafka as an ecstatic figure in literary history, theological in his desire for an unmediated intimacy with an ultimate certainty that presents itself as a rupture, as the "thetic" impulse.¹⁶ Leaving aside the details of critical theory for now, one could simply observe that *The City of K.* has within it an ecstatic desire insofar as it presents and withholds elements of Kafka's writings and life. For instance, the exhibition leaves aside Kafka's humor (central to his parables) and tends to move outward from a biographical core, but it just as easily could be experienced as a moving into Kafka; that is to say, moving toward a unity and difference in identity, a sense of self that goes beyond biography, a "self" that is in transformation—human, animal. The epigraph that begins this piece reveals Kafka as a reader of his own symptomology, however falsely optimistic. To this extent, Kafka is a reader of his own complexity, engaged in the same acts of

¹⁵Franz Kafka, *The Castle*, quoted from *The City of K.*, 112.

¹⁶See Julia Kristeva's *Revolution in Poetic Language*. New York: Columbia UP, 1984: "All enunciation, whether of word or of a sentence, is thetic. It requires an identification; in other words, the subject must separate from and through his image, from and through his objects. This image and objects must first be posited in a space that becomes symbolic because it connects the two separated positions, recording them or redistributing in an open combinatorial system" (43).

deciphering performed by Museum visitors in the space of the exhibition. Encircling Kafka or confining Kafka to a “city” is an impossibility. And, the exhibition in a variety of ways acknowledges Kafka’s “escape” from circumscription. This leads to a final observation: *The City of K.* is not a place but an evitable process, a logic in which the familiar is always, already strange and the surface is always, already deep.

The Exhibition catalogue contains several historical, biographical, and theoretical essays on Franz Kafka. In particular Mark M. Anderson’s essay provides an analysis of Kafka’s transformation of the modern. The Jewish Museum, 1109 Fifth Avenue at 92nd Street, New York, New York.

Notes

Victor Taylor is author of *Para/Inquiry: Postmodern Religion and Culture* (Routledge), *The Religious Pray*, *The Profane Swear: The Civil War Writings of Robert L. Drummond* (Davies Group Publishers) and editor of *The Encyclopedia of Postmodernism* (Routledge) and *Postmodernism: Critical Concepts* (Routledge). He is an assistant professor of comparative literature and humanities at York College of Pennsylvania and executive editor of the JCRT.

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