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Research article

## Judging Executing Writing: The Theater

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### Abstract

Although there are a number of attempts in contemporary theater practice to claim Kafka's texts for the stage, this attempt to deal with the subject of “Kafka and the theater” is more concerned with the anti-theatrical force in Kafka's deep and central orientation towards the scene, the staging and the theatricalization of our entire manageable life. In all his texts, Kafka opens up theatrical scenarios that reduce representation to the non-representable. Just as the characters in Kafka's “dramas” are withdrawing their appearance, the author removes the protagonists from his theater by making them incapable of acting and victims of circumstance, who in turn never stop questioning themselves. – “*In der Strafkolonie* [In the Penal Colony]” can serve as an example of this profoundly deconstructivist production of self-canceling artistic writing. Author (writer), main character (writer), and second main character (protecting and preserving the writing process) cancel each other out in the process of narration.

**Keywords:** Kafka; Theater; Walter Benjamin; Typewriter

**Acknowledgment** This paper is dedicated to Manfred Pienemann and our unforgettable bond with regard to Kafka.

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Научная статья

## Суд, исполнение, написание: Театр

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### Аннотация

Хотя в современной театральной практике есть ряд попыток сценически освоить тексты Кафки, данная попытка разобраться с темой “Кафка и театр” больше касается антитеатральной силы в глубокой и центральной ориентации Кафки на сцену, постановку и театрализацию всей нашей управляемой жизни. Во всех своих текстах Кафка открывает театральные сценарии, которые сводят репрезентацию к нерепрезентируемому. Так же, как персонажи в “драмах” Кафки отказываются от своего появления, автор удаляет главных героев из своего театра, делая их неспособными к действию и жертвами обстоятельств, которые, в свою очередь, никогда не перестают задавать себе вопросы. – “In der Strafkolonie [В исправительной колонии]” может служить примером этого глубоко деконструктивистского производства самоотменяющего художественного письма. Автор (писатель), главный герой (писатель) и второй главный герой (защищающий и сохраняющий процесс письма) нейтрализуют друг друга в процессе повествования.

**Ключевые слова:** Кафка; Театр; Вальтер Беньямин; Пишущая машинка

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## SETTING

Kafka stages his life by writing on an imaginary theater stage. Everything is a scene. His work is staging himself as the leading actor everywhere and always. His gesture is the written word.

All writing is a gesture – gesture in the sense of *gestus* or *habitus* and as a mode of exhibiting or revealing things. As a gesture, it is representation. So all writing is representation:

For Kafka, something could only ever be grasped in gesture. And this gesture, which he did not understand, forms the cloudy part<sup>1</sup> of the parables. Kafka's poetry emerges from it. It is known how he held back with it. [*Etwas war immer nur im Gestus für Kafka fassbar. Und dieser Gestus, den er nicht verstand, bildet die wolkige Stelle<sup>2</sup> der Parabeln. Aus ihm geht Kafkas Dichtung hervor. Es ist bekannt, wie er mit ihr zurückhielt.*] (Walter Benjamin, 1977a, p. 427)<sup>3</sup>

How is writing to become visible as representation? It is the performer, the writer, showing himself, “quick as a flash, responding to his cue (*blitzschnell, auf sein Stichwort aufpassend*)“ (Walter Benjamin, 1977, p. 435).

The writer does not hide behind the words, the stories, the novels, the sketches, the diary entries. He creates an undeniable presence for himself. How does he achieve this? He refuses to allow the word to duplicate reality. He denies it unambiguity. He creates a state of suspension out of words, which otherwise only dreams, fantasy, everything spiritual can create. Through creating this state of suspension the “cloudy”, the writer places himself at the center. I always discern him in his words.

## IN THE PENAL COLONY

We already entered the stage. The scene is “in the deep, sandy valley surrounded by bare slopes [*in dem tiefen, sandigen, von kahlen Abhängen ringsum abgeschlossenen kleinen Tal*].” But it could also be “at the edge of an open, deserted place [*am Rand eines freien menschenleeren Platzes*]” (Kafka, 2007, pp. 164, and 1965, p. 441).

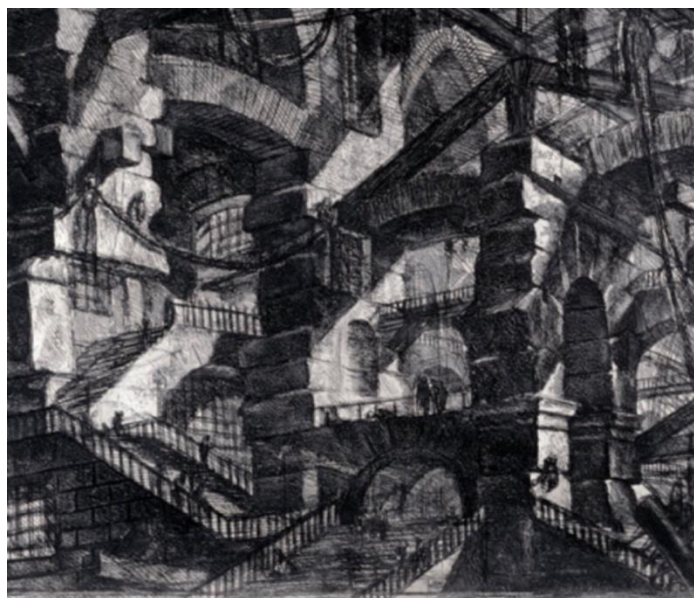
Places that were probably painted by an artist, probably an Italian. We do not know whether Kafka knew Piranesi and his dungeons. In any case, these dungeons belong to his world which consists of inscrutable, multiply branched, incomprehensible constructions that reach to infinity and turn the human being into a tiny, barely perceptible signature (fig. 1).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> „[...] und also heißt wolkige Stelle, daß sie nicht heißen, nicht benennen und bedeuten kann. Sie ist nicht Metapher für etwas anderes, sondern für die Unmöglichkeit der Metapher selbst [...]“ (Hamacher, 1998, p. 287).

<sup>2</sup> “[...] der Leser stieß vielleicht auf die wolkige Stelle in ihrem Inneren” (Benjamin, 1977a, p. 420) referring to the parable “Before the Law [*Vor dem Gesetz*].“

<sup>3</sup> Most quotes are given in the original German with translations into English by the author.

<sup>4</sup> “Die sichtbaren Elemente dieser abgeschlossenen mächtigen Welt, das sind Gewölbe von kolossalen Ausmassen, mit Stangen und Balken vergitterte Mauerdurchbrüche, Treppen in alle Richtungen, Wendeltreppen, Leitern, im Leeren endende, frei hängende Brücken, über Seilscheiben herablaufendes Tauwerk, riesige Galgen und Räder, die an ungewöhnliche Folterungen denken lassen, erloschene Lampen” (Bacou, 1975, p. 11).

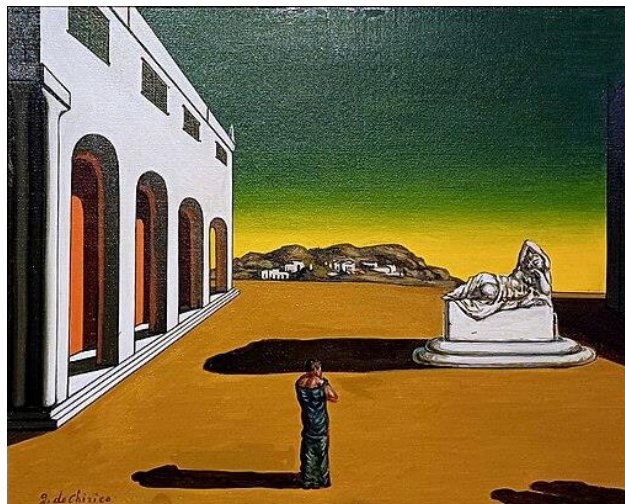


**Fig. 1** Giovanni Battista Piranesi, Carceri no. XIV: The Gothic Arch (1761), compare <https://artmuseum.princeton.edu/object-package/giovanni-battista-piranesi-imaginary-prisons/3640>

Giorgio de Chirico later opened up these already peculiarly open dungeons into a metaphysical openness and reverses their ramification and complexity into empty surfaces that are no less constricting (fig. 2). (Is this a way of imagining the “nature theatre,” which is inconceivable, since it exists only as something spiritual?<sup>5</sup> Is this the empty “writing scene” that the theater of the penal colony has become?) Everything that happens in Chirico’s scenarios tends to cancel itself out.

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<sup>5</sup> „The Nature Theater of Oklahoma which Karl encounters in Kafka’s *America* is probably the most frequently cited version of such an open theater landscape. It presents itself as an immense fairground at the Clayton recruitment site. Not only the openness of the whole – after all, everyone is accepted there, as the poster advertises – but also its immense size quickly come to the fore. Karl already notes the size of the company. This impression deepens in conversation with Angel Fanny, who describes it not only as ‘the largest theater in the world,’ but even calls it ‘almost limitless.’“ [Das Naturtheater von Oklahoma, dem Karl in Amerika begegnet, ist wohl die meist zitierte Variante einer solch offenen Theaterlandschaft, die sich auf der Claytoner Anwerbestelle als immenses Jahrmarkttreiben präsentiert. Nicht nur die Offenheit des Ganzen – schließlich wird dort jeder aufgenommen, wie das Plakat bewirbt – sondern auch dessen immense Größe treten schnell in den Vordergrund. Schon Karl konstatiert die Größe des Unternehmens. Dieser Eindruck vertieft sich im Gespräch mit Engel Fanny, die es nicht nur als „das größte Theater der Welt“ bezeichnet, sondern es sogar „fast grenzenlos“ nennt] (Mosse, 2017, without page number)



**Fig. 2** „Autumnal Meditation“ (1958/59) by Giorgio di Chirico, Museo Soumaya, Mexico, © José Luiz Bernardes Ribeiro

### **BEING (DASEIN, EXISTENCE)**

Which leads us to Being itself: Being that is dedicated to the search for answers to itself and while doing so passes away and ends. Giving answers to itself is the highest, inner structure of (epic) theater. This is where Kafka and Brecht meet: “This awareness [that it is theater] enables it [the theater] to treat the elements of the real in the sense of an experimental arrangement and at the end, not at the beginning of this experiment, is the state of things” (Benjamin, 1977c, p. 522). The play shows itself as a game, cut out of reality, highlighted, framed, exposed, exhibited. It is the recurring attempt to evoke or conjure up reality in or behind a text that is drawn in front of reality (the truth?) like a wrinkled curtain. To make the experiences recorded in it audible, visible and tangible. Kafka (1992) describes this in a picture puzzle:

This is life between scenic backdrops. It is bright, it is a morning outside, then it is about to get dark and it is evening. This is not a complicated deception, but you have to submit as long as you are standing on the stage-boards. You can only break out if you have the strength to cut through the canvas towards the background and escape between the shreds of the painted sky, over some junk into the real narrow alley, which is still called theatre alley because of the proximity of the theater, but which is true and has all the depths of truth. *[Das ist ein Leben zwischen Kulissen. Es ist hell, das ist ein Morgen im Freien, dann wird es gleich dunkel, und es ist Abend. Das ist kein komplizierter Betrug, aber man muß sich fügen solange man auf den Brettern steht. Nur ausbrechen darf man, wenn man die Kraft hat, gegen den Hintergrund zu, die Leinwand zu durchschneiden und zwischen den Fetzen des gemalten Himmels durch, über einiges Gerümpel hinweg in die wirkliche enge Gasse sich flüchten, die zwar noch immer wegen der Nähe des Teaters*



*Teatergasse heisst, aber wahr ist und alle Tiefen der Wahrheit hat.] (Kafka, 1992, p. 358)*

Out of the text emerges a state of things. This is the image which the theater presents. For Kafka there is a way out of the limits of the theater which is made of backdrops and curtains and stuff. He steps outside these limitations of the theater into a theater which is open and populated by the images he invents through writing.

The theater always comes up against its own limits, since it is finite, temporally, spatially and spiritually. Kafka's text, however, which is staged as a theatrical scene, is infinite, open, meaningless, oriented towards the creation of states of things. His „Wish to be a Red Indian [*Wunsch, Indianer zu werden*]“ dissolves the corresponding image in the gesture of writing; the desire, bound to its embodiment, detaches itself from the image into an absolute flawlessness, bodilessness, imagelessness.

The theater functions ponderously. Everything about it is made, manufactured (materials, texts and agreements). The persons playing in and with this fabrication question themselves through their play. In acting, people answer the question that their existence, their ex-istence, poses. Acting means nothing else but bringing into light what is hidden, letting the soul speak, aiming to find out the truth about oneself.

Kafka's theater is light, translucent, immaterial. It is flexible and agile, it quickly changes track when necessary and always ends in the catastrophe of incomprehension.<sup>6</sup> It consists of words. The words stage the glimpses into the abyss of a misunderstood world.

An absolute theater,<sup>7</sup> a theater of the unconditional.<sup>8</sup>

Since Kafka is only interested in finding out what the ground of existence is, what the truth of and his existence would be, his theater is his abode.

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<sup>6</sup> „Literally *automotive* appears to be everything one tries to cling to when reading Kafka's texts, and this from the very beginning and especially concerning the place and practice of beginning – *automotive* as, according to Kafka, the sentences of his story about a small car accident in Paris and their intonation by Max Brod that he described in his diary. Breaking off as they do, the beginnings refer to some other, literally displaced, elusive beginning, to an an-archic origin of Kafka's prose, which could perhaps be compared to that origin which Walter Benjamin tried to grasp in his *Trauerspielbuch* [On Tragedy].“ [*Buchstäblich automobil, wie Kafka zufolge die Sätze seiner Geschichte über einen kleinen Autounfall in Paris und ihre im Tagebuch beschriebene Intonierung durch Max Brod, scheint alles zu sein, woran man sich bei der Lektüre von Kafkas Texten zu klammern versucht, und dies von Anfang an und gerade den Anfang und das Anfangen betreffend: Abreißend, wie sie sind, verweisen die Anfänge auf einen buchstäblich versetzten, sich entziehenden anderen Anfang, auf einen an-archischen Ursprung von Kafkas Prosa, den man vielleicht mit jenem Ursprung vergleichen könnte, den Walter Benjamin in seinem Trauerspielbuch zu fassen versuchte.*] (Müller-Schöll, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> Nikolaus Müller-Schöll calls Kafka the “most radical theatrical theorist of modernity,” as he removes the theater from the theater and elicits a media discomfort with the basic gesture of aesthetic production in general. Kafka's reference to representation is therefore always a commentary on the ambiguity of existence itself, which in turn is deprived of its framework of meaning (Müller-Schöll, 2003, p. 196-197).

<sup>9</sup> The special nature of Kafka's theater was comprehensively discussed and illuminated in a master class held by the Institute for Theater, Film and Media Studies at Goethe University in Frankfurt (Gesellschaft für Theaterwissenschaften, 2017). Many of the contributions collected there make it clear how essential and significant the connection between Kafka and theater is and how important theater and a specific concept of theater were for Kafka's life and writing.



Kafka's world is a world theater. For him, humans are inherently on the stage. And the test of the example is: everyone is employed at the natural theater of Oklahoma. It is not possible to unravel the standards by which they are accepted. Acting aptitude, which is the first thing to come to mind, doesn't seem to play a role at all. But you can also put it this way: the applicants are not expected to do anything other than play themselves. The fact that they could be what they say they are in a real-life situation eliminates them from the realm of possibility. With their roles, the characters seek a place in the natural theater like the six Pirandellos seek an author. This place is the last refuge for both; and that does not exclude the possibility that it is salvation. Redemption is not a premium on existence, but the last refuge of a person for whom, as Kafka says, "his own frontal bone ... has laid the path." [*Kafkas Welt ist ein Welttheater. Ihm steht der Mensch von Haus aus auf der Bühne. Und die Probe auf das Exempel ist: Jeder wird auf dem Naturtheater von Oklahoma eingestellt. Nach welchen Maßstäben die Aufnahme erfolgt, ist nicht zu enträtseln. Die schauspielerische Eignung, an die man zuerst denken sollte, spielt scheinbar gar keine Rolle. Man kann das aber auch so ausdrücken: den Bewerbern wird überhaupt nichts anderes zugetraut, als sich zu spielen. Daß sie im Ernstfall sein könnten, was sie angeben, schaltet aus dem Bereich der Möglichkeit aus. Mit ihren Rollen suchen die Personen ein Unterkommen im Naturtheater wie die sechs Pirandelloschen einen Autor. Beiden ist dieser Ort die letzte Zuflucht; und das schließt nicht aus, daß er die Erlösung ist. Die Erlösung ist keine Prämie auf das Dasein, sondern die letzte Ausflucht eines Menschen, dem, wie Kafka sagt, »sein eigener Stirnknochen ... den Weg weist.*"] (Walter Benjamin, 1977a, p. 422)

Kafka's theater is the Nature Theater of Oklahoma which is not a theater but a place of release from the yoke of worldly tasks and only for one spectator, who sits and waits there in his enormous box.<sup>9</sup> This is the theater of execution in the penal colony, which was a theater when it still had spectators, but has lost its purpose nowadays.

Kafka's theater is a place of redemption from the agonizing incomprehensibility of existence (*Dasein*). This is because actors are supposedly the only beings "for whom a hammering (is) a real hammering and at the same time a nothing – if it is in their role. They study this role, he would be a bad actor who forgets a word or a gesture from it. For the members of the Oklahoma troupe, however, it is their former life. Hence the nature of this natural theater. Its actors are redeemed," Benjamin analyzes (1977a, p. 435).

<sup>9</sup> „At first sight, one might have thought it was not a box, but the stage, so broadly curved did the balustrade project into the open space. [...] white, yet mild light revealed the foreground of the box, while its depths appeared as a dark, reddish shimmering void behind red velvet that folded under many shades [...]. One could hardly imagine people in this box, everything looked so autocratic.“ [*Beim ersten Anblick konnte man denken, es sei nicht eine Loge, sondern die Bühne, so weit geschwungen ragte die Brüstung in den freien Raum. [...] weißes, doch mildes Licht enthüllte den Vordergrund der Loge, während ihre Tiefe hinter rotem, unter vielen Tönungen sich faltendem Samt [...] als eine dunkle, rötlich schimmernde Leere erschien. Man konnte sich in dieser Loge kaum Menschen vorstellen, so selbstherrlich sah alles aus*] (Kafka, 1965, p. 233).



## PRESENTATION

This is the outcome of the execution the main character in the penal colony will experience: he will be redeemed, even though he is “a dull, broad-mouthed man with neglected hair and face,” canine, completely unaware of what will happen to him, and why what will happen does happen, and therefore probably also unreceptive to any idea of guilt and redemption.

Apparently he is an inhabitant of the village, and of that village from a Talmudic legend cited by Walter Benjamin, which is the body that holds or houses the soul, and in which to live is to be sinful or to become sinful. This body is the burden that the soul has to bear because it carries the soul.

The air of this village blows with Kafka [...] This village also includes the pigsty from which the horses for the country doctor emerge, the stuffy back room in which Klamm, Virginia cigar in his mouth, sits in front of a glass of beer, and the courtyard gate, knocking against which brings destruction. The air in this village is not clean of all the unrealized and overripe things that mingle so corruptly. Kafka had to breathe it all his life. (Benjamin, 1977a, p. 424)

This main character is thus a kind of puppet,<sup>10</sup> interested, curious about what is being described in a language he does not understand, but a thoroughly animalistic being, ready to accept what is offered to him by his master.

This actor qualifies to be the main actor because he understands neither guilt nor sentence. A perfect figure for the theater, whose only flaw is the presence of the human body:

As a result, drama in its highest development slips into an unbearable humanization, which it is the task of the actor to draw down, to make bearable, carrying the role prescribed to him loosened, frayed, waving around. The drama thus floats in the air, but not as a roof carried by the storm, but as an entire building whose foundation walls have been torn up from the earth with a force that is still today very close to insanity. [*Dadurch gerät das Drama in seiner höchsten Entwicklung in eine unerträgliche Vermenschlichung, die herabzuziehn, erträglich zu machen, Aufgabe des Schauspielers ist, der die ihm vorgeschriebene Rolle gelockert, zerfasert, wehend um sich trägt. Das Drama schwebt also in der Luft, aber nicht als ein vom Sturm getragenes Dach, sondern als ein ganzes Gebäude, dessen Grundmauern mit einer heute noch dem Irrsinn sehr nahen Kraft aus der Erde hinauf gerissen worden sind.*] (Kafka, 1954, p 124)

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<sup>10</sup> The traveler “was even leaning right across the Harrow, without taking any notice of it [*ohne sich um sie zu kümmern*],” thus following a caring activity, *sich kümmern*, that humanizes the Harrow. Similarly, the officer’s exclamation: “*Behandle ihn sorgfältig!*” employs a vocable, *sorgfältig*, not typically used in reference to human beings, but to artefacts, perhaps an animal, or, indeed, a baby, an infant, which in German, unlike in English, is explicitly neuter, a thing. It is in this vein that Kafka invokes the image of the officer catching the prisoner under the shoulders [“und stellte ihn . . . mit Hilfe des Soldaten auf”] like a marionette, it appears, whose inanimate “feet . . . kept slithering from under him.” The interrelatedness of law and life is thus translated into a converse rhetoric, humanizing the machine and dehumanizing the prisoner (Blumenthal-Barby, 2013).





Kafka's theater prevents the humiliation of the text by the actor, who exists only as a written text; there is no text that has to be spoken, the text is absolutely and only existent in its written form and shape. The actor acts without any motive of his own, is purely an executive organ, a puppet in the hands of the justice system that theatricalizes the law.

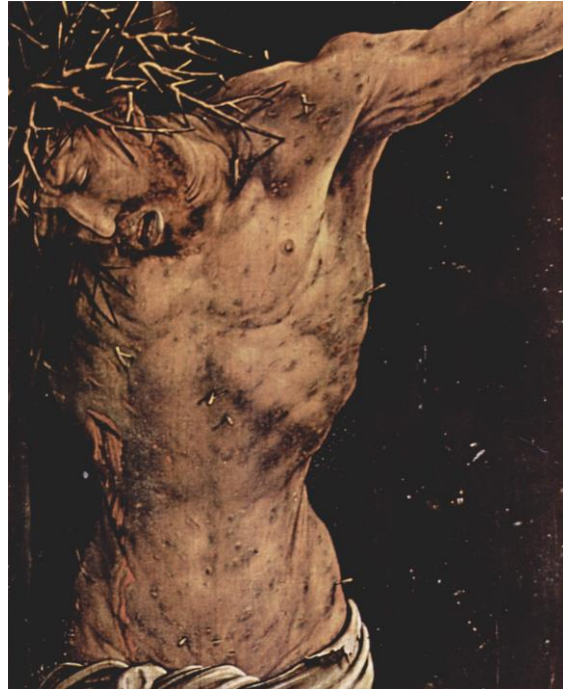
This juridical apparatus or construct appears remarkable in its emphasis on technological details. Kafka employs an entire discourse of technological vocabulary: “Harrow,” “Designer,” “electric battery,” “disturbances,” “needles,” “acid fluid,” a “ladder,” a creaking “wheel,” “screw,” “spanner,” “machinery,” “cogwheels,” “mechanical instruments,” “chemist,” “draughtsman,” and so forth. In the light of the officer's idealization of the mechanical parts of the juridical apparatus, the emphasis on the technological seems to be at odds with the higher cause of justice – that dimension to which every juridical apparatus characteristically aspires, a dimension generally considered to be the sine qua non of jurisdiction. By contrast, the officer's obsession with the apparatus's innate beauty – his meticulous maintenance of the machine – seems to follow a logic of its own and serve some immanent law yet to be explored. (Blumenthal-Barby, 2013, p. 57)

There are plans, but like everything that is described in this world, these are incomprehensible to the general public, unreadable and require interpretation by experts. The ability to read is a prerequisite for performing the roles. Interpretation is prevented by the privileged status of reading. The officer does not hand over the paper with the notes of the inventor of the machine.

The protagonist alone will learn and understand absolute reading in the context of his execution – absolute understanding in the dissolution and destruction of the apparatus of understanding, of the whole body. Understanding is a physical process, not an intellectual one. Is this not where the absolute theater takes place, the theater of death, in which there is no repetition, in which writing, reading, performing, surrendering form an absolute unity and dissolve in the act of their interplay? (So that the soul, liberated and redeemed from the body, can ascend and detach itself?)

In the “penal colony”, however, the rulers of violence make use of an ancient machine that engraves ornate letters on the backs of the guilty, increases the engravings, piles up the ornaments until the back of the guilty becomes clairvoyant, can decipher the writing itself, from the letters of which it must extract the name of its unknown guilt. So it is the back on which it rests. (Benjamin, 1977a, p. 432)

The Savior has suffered, has died suffering. His death shows what redemption is: detachment from, detachment of the body, it shows the lowliness of existence, its inherent violence, murder, torture, vileness (fig. 3).



**Fig. 3** Matthias Grünewald, Isenheim Altar, detail from “crucifixion”

It is shown and it was shown, the execution takes place in public, it is exhibited and thus becomes legible and a sign for the survivors. Nowadays, however, there is no audience in the penal colony. No one is interested in the performances that were once obviously extremely popular here. There is no public, no audience, but a new authority, the rationalizing, questioning, researching, and judging traveller. He, who is from somewhere, will be the one to decide about the continuation or ending of this deadly writing and reading process. The modern reader is enlightened, secularized. The public and its modes of operation have shifted. The rituals and actions of the past have lost their meaning and appeal, are to be replaced by other practices or are disappearing. What happens when formerly meaningful and seemingly necessary actions lose their rationale due to the lack of a counterpart? What is a theater without an audience? It runs empty? Does it become a form of madness? It becomes art, it becomes pure text. Or it abandons itself to the cruel laughter of the universe: comedy (fig 4).



**Fig 4.** Charlie Chaplin in *Modern Times*

When the officer puts himself into the execution machinery to complete what can only be described as a downfall, we finally come to Charlie Chaplin and his desperate struggle with the automation of work. The machine takes over the work, becomes autonomous and finally destroys itself (and with it the author who creates and sustains it).

Is all comedy derived from horror, i.e. from myth - and did Greek comedy find the first object of laughter in horror? That all horror can have a comic side, but not necessarily can all comedy have a horror side. To discover the first devalues the horror, not so to discover the second the comedy ... [Ob alle Komik dem Grauen, d.i. dem Mythos abgewonnen ist – und ob die griechische Komödie den ersten Gegenstand des Gelächters am Grauen gefunden hat? \_ Dass alles Grauen eine komische Seite haben kann, n i c h t n o t w e n d i g auch alle Komik eine Grauenhafte. Die erste zu entdecken, entwertet das Grauen, nicht so die zweite zu entdecken die Komik... ] (Benjamin, 1977b, p. 1220)

## SCRIPTURE

The force that shaped and determined the whole, that conceived and realized this redemption machine theater was a comprehensive creator: Soldier, Judge, Engineer, Chemist, Sketch Maker (Writer?). A divine machinist, so to speak, determining the law and the definition of guilt, condemning and punishing, thus granting redemption and absolution.

The fact that he is dead (his grave under a pub table in the teahouse) has left an unfillable void. The creator is dead, how is the heir supposed to be able to keep this superhuman machine running? He has inherited the knowledge, but not the power.

His privilege is to be the only one left to decipher the “script” and keep the machine running.<sup>11</sup> But the apparatus loses its ability to function, no public interest contributes to

<sup>11</sup> s. Bucephalus, Alexander’s horse, s. Eine Kaiserliche Botschaft, s. Ein altes Blatt, etc.etc.



its preservation, the form of execution through writing disappears. Writing loses its meaning. So all that remains is the confrontation with the inexplicable, the ambiguous of a world to be interpreted, the acceptance of the task of writing oneself, and thus filling the void that has been gaping since the death of God, his word only unheard mumbling, illegible writing, scribbles, hatchings. Once, in ancient times, there was something like the clarity of the word. Into this situation, Kafka reinvents writing. His writing needs no audience. His writing is an exposure to himself. His writing is the transcendence of the body in favor of a body of writing and this body of writing is simultaneously the creation of a textual stage on which this process takes place. Writing takes the place of writing. The writing that emerges from this writing is then to be destroyed:

Dearest Max, my last request: to burn completely and unread everything in my estate (i.e. in the bookcase, linen cupboard, desk at home and in the bureau, or wherever else anything should have been carried and come to your attention) of diaries, manuscripts, letters, other people's and my own, drawings, etc., as well as everything written and drawn that you or others you should ask for in my name. Letters that are not handed over to you should at least be burned by yourself. Your Franz Kafka. (Brod, & Kafka, 1989, p. 365, probably fall/winter 1921)

## WRITING

It is generally known that Kafka struggled with the question of what writing is and whether he himself can and must really write. “Writing is a form of existence”, he calls it, but not so “living in writing” and “I have no literary interest, I consist of literature, I am nothing else and can be nothing else” (Kafka, 2024, p 444). A deep sense of unease concerns the physicality of existence. „I am certainly writing this from despair about my body and about the future with this body“ and: ”...this heap of straw that I have been for five months and whose fate seems to be to be set alight this summer and to burn faster than the spectator blinks his eyes“ (Kafka, 1954, pp. 11-12).

Reading while writing or writing while reading is Kafka's work, which constantly thematizes itself. It consists in detaching poetic writing from the terrain of poetry and establishing its own status. Benjamin calls this his great “attempt to transfer poetry into teaching” (1981, p. 172) but one could also be tempted to say that this is what Kafka suffered from, as he himself wrote in a diary entry on December 6, 1921: “The independence of writing, the dependence on the maid who heats the stove, on the cat who warms herself by the stove, even on the poor old man, writing is helpless, does not dwell in itself, is fun and despair” (Kafka, 1992, p. 875). The problem of writing, in contrast to the simplest of other activities, is that it has no rule of its own, no law of its own such as those that characterize even the simplest activities.

Kafka fails to establish this. Nothing else can follow from this but abolition, annihilation.

As long as there is writing, i.e. living, there is writing. A physical process that torments and tortures. Perhaps the machine can help? Kafka was highly interested in all



things technical, he was familiar with flying machines and measuring apparatus (Poppelreuther's working clock, for example, see Flüh, 2019). He wrote essays on “automobile companies” and “agricultural machine companies” for the workers' compensation insurance, he owned a typewriter,<sup>12</sup> he had a fiancée whom he used as a typewriter<sup>13</sup> (Felice Bauer) and he probably understood writing as an almost mechanical necessity, not as a choice.<sup>14</sup> This proximity of Kafka to machines and their functions in general is examined in unique detail by Thorsten Flüh in his blog entry “Franz Kafka and his typewriters,” with special focus on the story “In the Penal Colony” (Flüh, 2019).

What does writing do? How does writing?

Kafka's technique could best be compared to the construction of models. Just as a man who wants to build a house or evaluate its stability would draw up a blueprint of the building, Kafka practically devises the blueprints of the existing world [...] which sometimes in a page, or even in a single phrase, expose the naked structure of events. (Arendt, 2007, pp. 94-110)

In Kafka's narrative, in what he encircles here, reading and writing become identical. And this process of writing is theatricalized, so that reading, writing and performing merge into one another. Reading, we witness the process of writing and the content of writing inherent in all – writing: Writing is judgment, experience of its content and, in the course of this experience, death, which gives writing an ephemeral form of existence. Here (and, incidentally, as expressed and demanded in his will), Kafka constructs a new form of existence for writing that is contrary to its original function of preserving, defining and passing on, a uniqueness that only the spoken word has in the context of language.

Writing and reading is a physical, sensual, unique process of subjugation; naked and bound, the reader, the convict, is described, reads on and above all with his own body as a writing surface, which is the truth of guilt, “which is beyond doubt.”

This “ideal” writing scene of the penal colony, in its uniqueness and execution related to the individual subject (like every execution), was once a common reading

<sup>12</sup> A brief history of Kafka's word processing technologies, including a discussion of the „Penal Colony“ can be found at <https://blog.hnf.de/franz-kafka-und-seine-schreibmaschinen/> The blog about „news from the past of computer history“ is part of the Heinz Nixdorf MuseumsForum computer museum.

<sup>13</sup> “from the first to the last letter, the impossible gender relationship ran as text processing in an endless loop. Again and again, Kafka avoided traveling to Berlin with his hand, the one that had once held Fräulein Bauer's hand. In place of the absent body came a whole postal system of letters. Registered letters, postcards and telegrams to describe this hand with the very ‚hand that now struck the keys“ [vom ersten bis zum letzten Brief lief die unmögliche Geschlechterbeziehung als Textverarbeitung in Endlosschleife. Immer wieder vermied es Kafka mit seiner Hand, die einmal Fräulein Bauers Hand gehalten hatte, nach Berlin zu reisen. Statt des abwesenden Körpers kam ein ganzes Postsystem aus Briefen. Einschreiben, Postkarten und Telegrammen, um mit eben der ‚Hand, die jetzt die Tasten‘ schlug, diese Hand zu beschreiben] (Kittler, 1986, p. 323).

<sup>14</sup> „The explorer's disbelief, having set the prisoner free from the obligation of reading the deadly script-writing *en tei psuche* [to be wise] – seems simultaneously to liberate the narration from the obligation of verisimilitude and the machine from the dead world of the mechanical. Up to this point the machine, like Freud's Mystic Pad, could not run by itself; now it begins to develop or manifest its own volition, its own animus. It does so only now because the system of writing and reading in which it was a crucial figure could not allow a machine that runs by itself or a narration in which the word and the world diverge. Now that that system is no longer credited, the machine may act on its own – though that act must needs be one of self-destruction“ (Koelb, 1982, p. 517).



process; there was a highly responsive public interest in participation. Now, in this empty, neglected theater of writing, the infinitely large, multiply populated space of reading has been lost. As a result, although it is only about the guilt and judgment of the individual, the process itself seems to have become empty and meaningless. For the individual who experiences his guilt can only become a representative, example, admonition, redeemer through the audience. Without being perceived, writing becomes a process that cancels itself out. This resembles absolute writing, which refuses to be read by eyes other than those of the writer.

Kafka is not oriented towards a readership, this process of theatricalization of writing (writing/reading) is withdrawn, folded into the ego, which consumes itself in this double multiple contradiction.

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