

Kafka's "Gehilfen" — The Castle in between Nature Theater and Yiddish Theater

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ABSTRACT: If the actions of K.—who arrives as a stranger at the village and pretends to be the land surveyor—are taken seriously, *The Castle* has to be read as a theater play in which the protagonist is trying to achieve a role that was never made for him. When K. tries to create his own reality through speech acts and thus starts a fight with the center of meaning production—with the castle—he himself becomes the allegory of a minor, that means a revolutionary, writing. This article aims to accomplish a reading of Kafka's novel that reveals aspects of its relation to world theater as well as to the minor Yiddish theater—comparing *The Castle* with Kafka's diary entries in which he wrote down his observances of the performances of the Yiddish theater group which took place in 1911 and 1912 in Prague cafés ten years before Kafka began writing the novel.

IN DAVID DAMROSCH'S RECENTLY PUBLISHED BOOK *Comparing the Literatures*, Kafka appears only at the margin, most prominently in a diagram that sorts two dozen authors on whom Damrosch himself has worked in recent years, according to the frequency of their listing in the MLA bibliography.¹ Damrosch divides the examined authors into five groups: ultraminor, minor, lower major, upper major, and hypercanonical. While ultraminor authors in Damrosch's analysis appear to be authors from very small countries or language communities, the books of the hypercanonical authors are written in hegemonic languages, such as English, French, and German. In the diagram, Kafka occupies the third place after the English writing modernists James Joyce and Virginia Woolf in the section of the hypercanonical authors.

Minor in Damrosch's book, in his argument Kafka stands for something major. And this requires attention: How can it happen that an author who seems to include himself—as a

¹ David Damrosch, *Comparing the Literatures: Literary Studies in a Global Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020), 226 (figure 8) and 229.

Jewish writer—in what he defines himself as a “literature of small peoples,”² and whose literature through the theorization of Deleuze and Guattari even became famous as the prototype of a so-called *minor literature*, is revealed through statistics as being hypercanonical? Could it be that the crucial factor for determining the position of an author within world literature—apart from the language in which his or her literature is written—appears to be how his or her writing is received by the audience? And is Kafka’s major audience able to receive his literature as “small”? Might the fact that Kafka is received as a hypercanonical author tell us more about his readers than about his literature? Consequently, would a shift from literary studies of world literature to social studies of the world readership be required? The tension between the hypercanonical author and his literature being defined as a minor literature leads to the question of whether the aspects in Kafka’s writing which make his literature a minor one are actually paid attention to and revealed in the majority of the readings listed in the MLA bibliography. Is it possible that there are patterns in the reception of Kafka which make visible major aspects of his literature, defining them as essential, and which cover minor aspects, defining them as unessential? Which aspects of Kafka’s writing become visible thus depends on the context in which the reading takes place. A shift in the examination from author to reading could help to shift the focus from author to minor or major aspects in his or her writings.

While Damrosch himself—aware of conducting his research in a global age—is walking in between (he conducts case studies in a global context), this article in Damrosch’s manner aims to accomplish a reading of Kafka’s novel *The Castle* that reveals aspects of a relation to world theater as well as to the minor Yiddish theater—comparing *The Castle* with Kafka’s diary entries in which he wrote down his observances of the performances of the Yiddish theater group which took place between 1911 and 1912 in Prague cafés ten years before Kafka began writing the novel.

In Kafka’s novel fragment *The Castle* (*Das Schloss* [equivocal meaning: *The lock*]), K. appears as a dependent protagonist who can only appear within a frame, because to his right and left are—for almost the entire duration of the narrated time—*the assistants* (*die Gehilfen*). Initially mere inventions of the protagonist projected into the future, they become part of K.’s play-acting, which cannot be distinguished from reality and which seems to determine the entire plot of the novel. Kafka’s novel is thus revealed to be created through the protagonist’s acting and actions and in this way appears as a drama itself. It bears in its aspects of Kafka’s Theater of Oklahoma (called Nature Theater in the heading by Max Brod) from *The Missing Person*³ and thus of Walter Benjamin’s notion of world theater. But besides motifs of German Expressionism and silent film, there also becomes visible a trace of Yiddish theater. The assistants (in German: *die Gehilfen*) remind the reader not only of Robert Walser’s *Der Gehülfe*; they are similar enough to the “[ridiculous] extras”⁴ which Kafka saw at the performances of the Lemberg theater group around his friend Yitskhak Levi that a connection should be drawn. Thanks to the mutes, who by definition cannot be controlled—they cannot be directed because they are not trained theater actors—involuntary slapstick interludes find their way into the performances of the Yiddish acting group as well as into *The Castle*.

² Franz Kafka, *The Diaries*, trans. Joseph Kresh and Martin Greenberg, with Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1988), 148-153.

³ Franz Kafka, *Amerika: The Missing Person*, trans. Mark Harman (New York: Schocken, 2008), 287.

⁴ Kafka, *Diaries*, 106.

If one immerses oneself in Kafka's notes on the theater, it quickly becomes apparent that Kafka is less interested in the plays and performances themselves than in what is incidental to them, which often takes place off-stage, outside the context of the performance, or as a deviation from the planned process, as a glitch. The description of the content of a play by the Yiddish drama troupe from Lemberg, *Shulamis*, by Avrom Goldfaden, that Kafka saw, for example, takes up no more space in Kafka's diaries than the description of the stage mishaps, which are often triggered by the uncontrollable extras. Kafka is amused by the "ridiculous extras" who involuntarily become the focus of the action on stage, "traveling salesmen who weren't paid"⁵:

[Sie haben] meist nur damit zu tun, ihr Lachen zu verbergen oder zu genießen, wenn sie es auch sonst gut meinten. Ein rundbackiger mit blondem Bart, demgegenüber man sich kaum vor Lachen beherrschen konnte, lachte infolge der Unnatur des angeklebten sich schüttelnden Vollbartes der seine Wangen bei dem allerdings nicht vorgesehenen Lachen falsch begrenzte, besonders komisch.⁶

Most of the time they were concerned only with concealing their laughter or enjoying it, even if aside from this they meant well. A round-cheeked fellow with a blond beard at the sight of whom you could scarcely keep from laughing looked especially funny when he laughed, although he wasn't supposed to as a result of the unnaturalness of the trembling full beard that was glued on and wrongly delineated his cheeks (translation mine).

The extras motivate Kafka to make further notes, as they keep—with little awareness of the situation of the stage play—breaking out of the same:

Als Löwy singend starb, in den Armen dieser zwei Ältesten sich wand, langsam mit dem abschwellenden Gesang zur Erde gleiten sollte, steckten sie hinter seinem Rücken die Köpfe zusammen, um sich endlich einmal vom Publikum ungesehen (wie sie meinten) sattlachen zu können.⁷

When Löwy died, singing, in the arms of these two elders and was supposed to slip slowly to earth with the fading song, they put their heads together behind his back in order finally to be able to laugh their fill for once, unseen by the audience (as they thought).⁸

As it becomes clear when one reads his diary entries on the performances of the Yiddish theater group, Kafka was particularly interested in the extras, precisely because they are by definition of marginal importance, incidental. His interest in the subsidiary characterizes not only Kafka's writing on the Yiddish theater, but also his encounter with the German theater in Prague, his experience of cinema, and his visits to the circus, as well as the observation of his environment in general. It is Kafka's own minor way of observation (which can be found also in Walter Benjamin and Robert Walser) that serves the writing of *The Castle*. Not only the assistants, but

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Franz Kafka, *Tagebücher* [Diaries], ed. Hans-Gerd Koch, Michael Müller, and Malcolm Pasley (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer 2002), 229.

⁷ Kafka, *Tagebücher*, 230.

⁸ Kafka, *Diaries*, 106.

also K's missing identity resemble the actors of the Yiddish theater group who left their families and Hasidic communities, their traditional Jewish life in Lemberg, to become wandering actors.⁹

If the actions of K.—who arrives as a stranger at the village and pretends to be the land surveyor—are taken seriously, *The Castle* has to be read as a theater play in which the protagonist is trying to achieve a role that was never made for him. When K. tries to create his own reality through speech acts and thus starts a fight with the center of meaning production—with the castle—he himself becomes the allegory of a minor, that means a revolutionary, writing.

The assistants—who like extras belong neither to the actors nor to the director—appear as marginal figures. They are located on the border between the play and the outside of the play. They have one foot in the castle, that is off the stage, the place which is presented as the center of organization of life in the associated village. A reading that focuses on the relationship between K. and his assistants reveals a structure that seems to determine the plot of the entire novel. Through the action creating play-acting of the protagonist that could be interpreted as an attempt of re-acting his own non-belonging as well as as a political plot against the castle—the authority of producing meaning with the center of meaning production with its own means—the novel itself becomes dramatic. Analyzing the structural significance of play for the novel allows to further illuminate the fundamental narrative structure of *The Castle* which has already been characterized by James Rolleston: Unlike the “closed” narrative structure of earlier works like *The Heater* and *The Trial*, where the protagonist is thrown into a heteronomic structure which he seeks to understand, in the “open” narrative structure of *The Castle* and other late works of Kafka the protagonist “systematically deprived of the role he craves” thereby first generates the structure of the story in search of a role for himself.¹⁰

At the beginning of the novel, when K. is awakened in the middle of the night and identified as a “tramp” by a “young man [...] with a face like an actor's”¹¹ and thereupon shall be expelled not only from the tavern but from “the count's land,”¹² the protagonist of Kafka's novel fragment *The Castle* pretends to be a land surveyor in order to be able to continue his sleep in the tavern of the village belonging to the castle:

[...] lassen Sie es sich gesagt sein, daß ich der Landvermesser bin, den der Graf hat kommen lassen. Meine Gehilfen mit den Apparaten kommen morgen im Wagen nach.¹³

[...] let me tell you that I'm the land surveyor, and the count sent for me. My assistants will be coming tomorrow by carriage with our surveying instruments.¹⁴

In a dismissed version of the scene Kafka makes it explicit that K. and the employees of the castle are acting: Provoked by K. continuing to sleep the young clerk says:

⁹ Compare: Evelyn Torton Beck, *Kafka and the Yiddish Theater: Its Impact on His Work* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1971); Guido Massino, *Kafka, Löwy und das Jiddische Theater* [Kafka, Löwy, and the Yiddish theater], trans. Norbert Bickert (Frankfurt am Main: Stroemfeld, 2007).

¹⁰ James Rolleston, *Kafka's Narrative Theater* (University Park, London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1974), xv.

¹¹ Franz Kafka, *The Castle*, trans. Anthea Bell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 5.

¹² Kafka, *The Castle*, 6.

¹³ Franz Kafka, *Das Schloß* [The castle], ed. Malcolm Pasley (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer 2002), 9.

¹⁴ Kafka, *The Castle*, 6.

Das machte ihn nun wild, er vergaß die Schauspielerei.¹⁵

Now, that made him wild, he forgot the acting.

But Kafka strikes out this phrase. Instead the young clerk gets “out of mind” and shouts: “Tramp manners!” But this exclamation, too, shows that the clerk is not willing to recognize K.’s role as a land surveyor. Similarly while being with himself K. once says “remarkably quietly”: “Done with the comedy”.¹⁶ As Martin Kölbl remarked this resembles the anti-illusionary theatrical practice of speaking aside.¹⁷ The mere “claim”¹⁸ of K. to have come to the village as a surveyor employed by the count, however, becomes reality in the next section of the first chapter, entitled *Arrival*, when K., on telephone inquiry by the young man, is actually employed as a surveyor by the castle (which is later confirmed in writing by a letter brought by the messenger Barnabas):

K. horchte auf. Das Schloss hatte ihn also zum Landvermesser ernannt. Das war einerseits ungünstig für ihn, denn es zeigte, daß man im Schloß alles Nötige über ihn wußte, die Kräfteverhältnisse abgewogen hatte und den Kampf lächelnd aufnahm. Es war aber andererseits auch günstig, denn es bewies seiner Meinung nach, daß man ihn unterschätzte und daß er mehr Freiheit haben würde als er hätte von vornherein hoffen dürfen. Und wenn man glaubte durch diese geistig gewiß überlegene Anerkennung seiner Landvermesserschaft ihn dauernd in Schrecken halten zu können, so täuschte man sich, es überschauerte ihn leicht, das war aber alles.¹⁹

K. pricked up his ears. So the castle had described him as “the land surveyor.” In one way this was unfortunate, since it showed that they knew all they needed to know about him at the castle, they had weighed up the balance of power, and were cheerfully accepting his challenge. In another way, however, it was fortunate, for it confirmed his opinion that he was being underestimated, and would have more freedom than he had dared to hope from the outset. And if they thought they could keep him in a constant state of terror by recognizing his qualifications as a land surveyor in this intellectually supercilious way, as it certainly was, then they were wrong. He felt a slight frisson, yes, but that was all.²⁰

The interaction between K. and the bureaucratic apparatus of the castle, which generates a movement from K.’s untrue statement to its subsequent confirmation by the castle, which consequently actually transforms the untrue statement into a true event, opens up a scope that K. interprets as a “fight” (translation mine)²¹ between him and the castle—because he is certain that the castle knows he is playing the wrong role, which, however, the castle immediately converts into reality. The effect resulting from this movement is that K. can no longer separate his own behavior and the entire event resulting from it, which, albeit an absurd one, is the plot of the novel. (After that of the surveyor, K. tries to make his life assuming various other roles in the village, e.g., school caretaker.) The feeling that overcomes K. when his play, “his land surveyorship” (translation

¹⁵ Franz Kafka, *Das Schloss* (Basel, Frankfurt am Main: Stroemfeld/Roter Stern, 2017), fascile 1, 15.

¹⁶ Kafka, *Das Schloß*, 9

¹⁷ Martin Kölbl, *Die Erzählrede in Franz Kafkas 'Das Schloss'* (Frankfurt am Main: Stroemfeld/Roter Stern, 2006), 59–63.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁹ Kafka, *Das Schloß*, 12–13.

²⁰ Kafka, *The Castle*, 8.

²¹ *Ibid.*,

mine), is recognized as reality by the castle and with it by the villagers, does not reveal itself as a “constant state of terror,” as K. expected, but merely as a light “frisson.” As K. states, it, however, testifies to the intellectual superiority of the apparatus of the castle over him.

K.’s role and the resulting actions in the village are a play that has become reality and, in reverse, lets reality itself appear as a play. It seems as if Kafka’s novel would forestall the thesis of the historian and cultural theorist Johan Huizinga (developed in his book *Homo Ludens*, published in 1938), that sees play as a necessary condition for the creation of culture, and the thesis of the sociologist Erving Goffman, published in 1956 (“We all play-act”), that sees the world as a stage for the image cultivation of the individuum. Through K.’s play-acting, which alone drives the action forward, the plot itself appears to be a drama. K.’s play is immediately given two playmates by the castle. The assistants who initially appear as mere inventions in K.’s statement quoted at the beginning (“My assistants will be coming tomorrow by carriage with our surveying instruments”²²) and whom K. continues to describe for the innkeeper the next morning at breakfast (“Well, my assistants will be arriving soon. Will you be able to accommodate them here?”²³) arrive at the tavern, exactly as K. claims, when he returns to the tavern the next day from his first walk through the village, during which he was only able to see the castle from afar. Contrary to K.’s assertion, however, they do not come, as he does, from an area unknown to both the characters in the novel and the readers, from outside the count’s territory. Rather, the assistants come from within—they were sent from the castle:

Erst als er oben beim Wirt war, der demütig grüßte, bemerkte er zu beiden Seiten der Tür je einen Mann. Er nahm die Laterne aus der Hand des Wirts und beleuchtete die zwei; es waren die Männer, die er schon getroffen hatte und die Artur und Jeremias angerufen worden waren. Sie salutierten jetzt. In Erinnerung an seine Militärzeit, an diese glücklichen Zeiten, lachte er. “Wer seid Ihr?” fragte er und sah von einem zum andern. “Euere Gehilfen,” antworteten sie. “Es sind die Gehilfen,” bestätigte leise der Wirt. “Wie?” fragte K., “Ihr seid meine alten Gehilfen, die ich nachkommen ließ, die ich erwarte” Sie bejahten es. “Das ist gut,” sagte K. nach einem Weilchen, “es ist gut, daß Ihr gekommen seid.”²⁴

Only when he reached the top of the steps, to be respectfully greeted by the landlord, did he see two men, one on each side of the door. Taking the lantern from the landlord’s hand, he shone it on the pair of them; they were the men he had already met and who had been addressed as Artur and Jeremias. They saluted him. Reminded of the happy days of his military service, he laughed. “Well, so who are you?” he asked, looking from one to the other. “Your assistants,” they replied. “That’s right, they’re the assistants,” the landlord quietly confirmed. “What?” asked K. “Do you say you’re my old assistants who were coming on after me and whom I’m expecting?” They assured him that they were. “Just as well, then,” said K. after a little while. “It’s a good thing you’ve come.”²⁵

²² *Ibid.*, 6.

²³ *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁴ Kafka, *Das Schloß*, 31.

²⁵ Kafka, *The Castle*, 18–19.

K.'s question, "Who are you?"²⁶ which expresses the moment of not recognizing—recognition is not possible because the assistants only become K.'s "old assistants" in the course of the dialogue after their arrival—indicates K.'s surprise about the becoming reality of his second assertion. However, K. immediately accepts the two new characters sent by the castle as assistants and leads the two young men whom K. has already seen on the alley on his walk through the village, and whom the villagers know under the names Artur and Jeremias, through a speech act into the identity of the "old assistants" he was merely imagining:

"Ihr seid meine alten Gehilfen, die ich nachkommen ließ, die ich erwarte." Sie bejahten es.²⁷

"Do you say you're my old assistants who were coming on after me and whom I'm expecting?"
They assured him that they were.²⁸

With the transfer of the two into the identity claimed by K., the reality-generating play has already begun a third step, when K. then quite naturally addresses the assistants as his *old assistants*:

"Das ist gut," sagte K. nach einem Weilchen, "es ist gut, daß Ihr gekommen seid."²⁹

"Just as well, then," said K. after a little while. "It's a good thing you've come. [...]"³⁰

Once put into service, the assistants appear to be an uncanny doubled double of the protagonist.³¹ There seems to be too much of subjectivity on stage. The double doubling and thus the splitting of the protagonist into him and his two assistants create a threefold dialogue that appears itself as staging. It seems as if (like the actors of the Yiddish theater) the protagonist of *The Castle* somehow has forgotten the reality of being Jewish—just as the audience to whom Kafka's *Einleitungsvortrag über Jargon* is directed³²—and now appears as a Jewish fool who embodies a split that is not simply a role play or game, but represents his own crisis of identity, a crisis of Jewish subjectivity.³³ Kafka's protagonist becomes dramaturgical and enters the stage not without a certain Jewish experience, which is documented in the performances of the Yiddish theater group that Kafka encountered: wandering stars who left their homes, communities, and contexts. K. has left his life and with it his context and his history and now tries to establish himself in the village. But there he is surrounded by characters who seem to have even less context, history, and future than him—mere fools who don't even seem to have the goal to write their stories. A failure of K.'s attempt to establish himself seems to be inevitable.

But nevertheless, K. initiates a foolish play with his two assistants. It becomes clear that the play is already in full swing when K. immediately complains about the imaginary lateness of his old assistants:

²⁶ Ibid., 19.

²⁷ Kafka, *Das Schloß*, 31.

²⁸ Kafka, *The Castle*, 19.

²⁹ Kafka, *Das Schloß*, 31.

³⁰ Kafka, *The Castle*, 19.

³¹ Compare Sigmund Freud, *Das Unheimliche* [The uncanny], in *Gesammelte Werke* [Collected works], vol. 12 (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1966), 227–68.

³² Vivian Liska, "Shooting at the Audience," in *When Kafka Says We* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009), 26–33.

³³ Compare Galili Shahar, "Narrentum and Being-Jewish: Kafka and Benjamin," *Naharaim* 15, no. 1 (2021).

“Übrigens,” sagte K. nach einem weiteren Weilchen, “Ihr habt Euch sehr verspätet, Ihr seid sehr nachlässig.“ “Es war ein weiter Weg,” sagte der eine. “Ein weiter Weg,” wiederholte K., “aber ich habe Euch getroffen, wie Ihr vom Schlosse kamt.“ “Ja,” sagten sie ohne weitere Erklärung.³⁴

“What’s more,” he added after another moment’s thought, “you’re extremely late. That’s very remiss of you.” “It was a long way,” said one of them. “A long way?” K. repeated. “But I saw you coming down from the castle.” “Yes,” they agreed, without further explanation.³⁵

The motif of the assistants arriving late, not at all, or at the wrong time runs through the entire novel and does not only mirror the physical non-arrival of K. at the castle and the ongoing non-arrival in terms of the inability of gaining a stable identity in the village.³⁶ It almost appears to be a messianic gag. The idea of the ongoing postponement or fizzle of the messianic arrival seems to fit the diasporic, Yiddish theater.

The assistants seem to be part of a world that has lost its meaning. They seem as if they were students of Talmud who have lost their ability to understand.³⁷ A short scene from the play *Meshumed* appears to be the key scene for an understanding of the assistants in *The Castle*. The “two in caftans,” devout Jews, are missing the mezuzot on the doorpost of Seidemann’s room, the businessman who converted to Christianity for reasons of business advantage. The missing ritual object causes the caftan-clad two, deprived of the opportunity to do the mitzvah and act out their ritualized behavior, to perform an empty gesture in a desperate manner and with neurotic overextension:

Erster Auftritt der zwei im Kaftan. Sie kommen mit Sammelbüchsen für Tempelzwecke in das leere Zimmer Seidemanns. Sehn sich um, fühlen sich unbehaglich, sehn einander an. Fahren die Türpfosten mit den Händen entlang, finden keine Mesusas. Auch bei den andern Türen nicht. Sie wollen es nicht glauben und springen an verschiedenen Türen in die Höhe und schlagen, wie beim Fliegenfangen, sich erhebend und niederfallend immer wieder ganz oben auf die Türpfosten, dass es klatscht. Leider alles umsonst. Bisher haben sie kein Wort gesprochen.³⁸

First appearance of the two in caftans. They enter Seidemann’s empty room with collection boxes for the temple, look around, feel ill at ease, look at each other. Feel along the doorposts with their hand, don’t find a mezuzah. None on the other doors, either. They don’t want to believe it and jump up beside doors as if they were catching flies, jumping up and falling back, slapping the very tops of the doorposts again and again. Unfortunately all in vain. Up to now they haven’t spoken a word.³⁹

³⁴ Kafka, *Das Schloß*, 31.

³⁵ Kafka, *The Castle*, 19.

³⁶ Compare Judith Butler, “Kafka and the Poetics of Non-Arrival,” video, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ScqPf6rL_LY.

³⁷ Compare: Walter Benjamin, “Franz Kafka: Zur zehnten Wiederkehr seines Todestages,” in *Benjamin über Kafka. Texte, Briefzeugnisse, Aufzeichnungen* [Benjamin on Kafka. Texts, epistolary testimonies, records], ed. Hermann Schweppenhäuser. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1981), 9–38, 37; Walter Benjamin, “Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death,” trans. Rodney Livingstone, in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, part 2, ed. Michael W. Jennings et al. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1999), 794–818, 815.

³⁸ Kafka, *Tagebücher*, 67. Kafka calls the play *Meshumed* by the name of its protagonist *Seidemann*.

³⁹ Kafka, *Diaries*, 69.

First, feeling uneasy about the missing mezuzah, the two figures then start to search for the ritual object by running their hands along the doorposts. Not finding anything, they look at the other doors. When they don't find any mezuzot there either, "[they] don't want to believe it and jump up beside doors as if they were catching flies, jumping up and falling back, slapping the very tops of the doorposts again and again." Their gestures are not only drained by performing them without a ritual item, they are heightened to the grotesque by over-boosting, by jumping up, and banging on the wall so that it smacks. The actually silent and subtle gesture is thus not only heightened in exaggerated visibility and audibility, it is also perverted by exhibiting the obsession with mere observance of the law, which is no longer possible in the case of the missing mezuzot. The loud gesture, heightened into the grotesque and yet empty, transforms the two in the caftans themselves from figures representing pious Jews to "ridiculous extras," to foolish figures. They resemble the silly doubles from the silent movies. Exaggerating the gesture, detaching it from its object, the mezuzah, and repeating and intensifying it to the point of being unbearable, the figures play the originally Jewish-religious gesture into a new reference system, in which the missing ritual object refers to the abandonment of the Jewish law and its frame of reference. The figures performing the gestures become silly fools, just like the assistants. The assistants in *The Castle*, however, no longer refer to the absence of the reference system, as the two in the caftans do, but are already beyond the possibility of referring to what is missing. Not even the debris of the lost frame of reference can be tracked down. That the gestures in Kafka's texts have lost their meaning and now only "refer to emptiness" is alluded to by Benjamin when he speaks of the "cloudy spot"⁴⁰ and is shown by Werner Hamacher in his essay "The Gesture in the Name" in relation to Benjamin.⁴¹ The assistants play a Yiddish theater in the sense that they still refer to the lost tradition in their performances, even if only indirectly, namely in their playing fools without context, without history or future.

The fact that K. feels relatively secure in relation to his play, which has come to life, is shown when he begins to fill in the gaps that arise in the narrative due to the previous story that did not take place, which K. merely made up, and which are reflected in the silence of the assistants, in a playful way, i.e., by means of irony:

"Wo habt Ihr die Apparate?" fragte K. "Wir haben keine," sagten sie. "Die Apparate, die ich Euch anvertraut habe," sagte K. "Wir haben keine," wiederholten sie. "Ach, seid Ihr Leute!" sagte K., "Versteht Ihr etwas von Landvermessung?" "Nein," sagten sie. "Wenn Ihr aber meine alten Gehilfen seid, müßt Ihr das doch verstehn," sagte K. Sie schwiegen. "Dann kommt also," sagte K. und schob sie vor sich ins Haus.⁴²

"What have you done with the instruments?" asked K. "We don't have any," they said. "I mean the surveying instruments that I entrusted to you," said K. "We don't have any of those," they repeated. "What a couple you are!" said K. "Do you know anything about land surveying?" "No," they said. "But if you claim to be my old assistants, then you must know something about it," said K. They remained silent. "Oh, come along, then," said K., pushing them into the house ahead of him.⁴³

⁴⁰ Benjamin, *Franz Kafka: Zur zehnten Wiederkehr*, 37.

⁴¹ Werner Hamacher, "The Gesture in the Name: On Benjamin and Kafka," in *Premises: Essays on Philosophy and Literature from Kant to Celan*, trans. Peter Fenves (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1996) 294–336, 323.

⁴² Kafka, *Das Schloß*, 32.

⁴³ Kafka, *The Castle*, 19.

The nonexistent apparatuses indicate a gap in the past—because the shared past that K. claims to have with his old assistants does not belong to them—which is closed by K. reacting with ambiguous exclamations (“What a couple you are!”). Are the assistants playing their forgetfulness? Or have they actually forgotten their roles and their texts? Might the forgetting of the tools be eventually another sign for the lost and forgotten tradition?⁴⁴ Is this an indirect sign, since the missing ritual object (something such as the missing *mezuzot* of the Yiddish play *Seidemann*) that would be able to point to what is absent is already forgotten and lost in itself?

Just like K. can no longer distinguish his own being from his play after the playing along of the castle and the village community, he can no longer distinguish his two assistants from one another either. K.’s decision to treat both assistants “as a single man”⁴⁵ seems to reflect dealing with his own inner split between K., the stranger who just plays the surveyor, and K., the surveyor recognized by the castle, a drama of *doppelgänger* that is mirrored or doubled again in the two assistants who make it visible that K.’s game is itself a foolish one. Because playing the surveyor has become his being through the recognition by the castle, K. is placed in the position of the people who play themselves in the Theater of Oklahoma⁴⁶—a game in which there is no break and from which it seems that there is no way out. A further indication that the splitting up of the assistants can be used as a mirror for K.’s split inner life within the *Nature Theater mode*—the perfect play that can no longer be distinguished from non-playing—is the conflict that is carried out between the assistants after K. gives the order to leave early to set out toward the castle. While one of the servants acts in the mind of the *only played old* and therefore ignorant *clerk* and simply agrees to the execution of the order, the second clerk breaks the game by acting with the mind of the *knowing castle employee* who was only *sent to play the old clerk*. The difference that arises between him and his role in this way makes room for reflection and allows him to make his opponent aware that it is not possible for K. to reach the castle:

“Ich werde jetzt schlafen gehn und auch Euch rate ich das zu tun. Heute haben wir einen Arbeitstag versäumt, morgen muß die Arbeit sehr frühzeitig beginnen. Ihr müßt einen Schlitten zur Fahrt ins Schloß verschaffen und um sechs Uhr hier vor dem Haus mit ihm bereitstehn.” “Gut,” sagte der eine. Der andere aber fuhr dazwischen: “Du sagst: Gut und weißt doch daß es nicht möglich ist.” “Ruhe,” sagte K. “Ihr wollt wohl anfangen, Euch von einander zu unterscheiden.” Doch nun sagte auch schon der erste: “Er hat recht, es ist unmöglich, ohne Erlaubnis darf kein Fremder ins Schloß.” “Wo muß man um die Erlaubnis ansuchen?” “Ich weiß nicht, vielleicht beim Kastellan.” “Dann werden wir dort telephonisch ansuchen, telephoniert sofort an den Kastellan, beide.” Sie liefen zum Apparat, erlangten die Verbindung wie sie sich dort drängten, *im Äußerlichen* waren sie lächerlich folgsam und fragten an ob K. mit ihnen morgen ins Schloß kommen dürfe. Das “Nein” der Antwort hörte K. bis zu seinem Tisch, die Antwort war aber noch ausführlicher, sie lautete: “weder morgen noch ein anderesmal.”⁴⁷

“I’m going to get some sleep now, and I advise you to do the same. We’ve missed out on one-working day already, and work must start early tomorrow. You’d better find a sleigh to go up to

⁴⁴ Compare Hannah Arendt, “The Jew as Pariah: A Hidden Tradition,” *Jewish Social Studies* 6, no. 2 (April 1944): 99–122, 113–121.

⁴⁵ Kafka, *The Castle*, 20.

⁴⁶ Kafka, *Amerika*, 287.

⁴⁷ Kafka, *Das Schloß*, 35.

the castle and be here outside the inn with it at six in the morning, ready to leave." "Very well," said one of the assistants. But the other objected. "Why say 'very well,' when you know it can't be done" "Be quiet," said K. "I think you're trying to start distinguishing yourselves from each other." Now, however, the assistant who had spoken first said: "He's right, it's impossible. No stranger may go up to the castle without a permit." "So where do we have to apply for a permit?" "I don't know. Maybe to the castle warden." "Then we'll apply by telephone. Go and telephone the castle warden at once, both of you." They went to the telephone, made the connection, crowding together eagerly and showing that outwardly they were ridiculously ready to oblige, and asked whether K. might come up to the castle with them next day. The reply was a "No" that K. could hear all the way over to his table, but the answer went on. It ran: "Not tomorrow nor any other time either."⁴⁸

K.'s reaction to one assistant's breaking out of the game ("I think you're trying to start distinguishing yourselves from each other") which later causes the second to break out, too (even though both assistants quickly find their way back into their play role), appears as anticipation of K.'s impending loss of control. The separation of the performance of the assistants into external and internal ("outwardly they were ridiculously ready to oblige, and asked whether K. might come up to the castle with them next day") seems to correspond to the play on the one hand and the consciousness of the play on the other hand, and anticipates the break with the play that lies at the root of K.'s loss of control regarding his reality-creating speech acts and actions. It ultimately reveals K.'s powerlessness in the face of the castle, whose reality-creating power is much stronger than that of K., and whose reality increasingly breaks into his play that has become life and thus makes it collapse. The answer to the question "whether K. might come up to the castle with them the next day" which the assistants get from the castellan and which they surely have anticipated already—"No" [...] "Not tomorrow nor any other time either"—leaves the phone so loud and powerful that it comes directly to K.'s ear although he's sitting at a certain distance from the phone at a table and in this way makes him and his assistants become factually one recipient, and, at least for a moment, undoes the doubling also in relation to K. The negation that does not only disappoint K.'s request to come to the castle tomorrow but excludes the possibility that he ever might reach the castle belongs to the performative aspect of the castle insofar as it is essential to preserve the separation between castle and protagonist, between off-stage and stage, in order to prevent a collapse of the two separate levels, that of meaning production and that of plot.

When the assistants break out of the play, K.'s identity is also thrown into question retrospectively. This insecurity immediately tempts him to start a new game. While the assistants "outwardly" play again and appear as "ridiculously ready to oblige" as they follow K.'s order, and try to telephone the castellan to ask permission, "whether K. might come up to the castle with them next day" (knowing that permission will not be given), K. spontaneously creates a new role: he takes the place of the (in his eyes) useless assistants who do not bring him to success. K.'s contextlessness and his essential non-belonging allow him to change his roles without great effort. He acts like a writer who writes his own role and crosses out parts of it as soon as he realizes that a part of the created role does not motivate the progressing of the plot. Trying to find his role in a kind of childish trial-and-error method does make him appear similar to the actors of the Yiddish theater performances Kafka saw in Prague who had to change their roles fast and

⁴⁸ Kafka, *The Castle*, 21.

often, since they were only few and had few means. K.'s changing of roles also can be read as a reenactment of the essential diasporic non-belonging.

In a second attempt he then makes the telephone call himself:

Es entwickelte sich folgendes Gespräch: "Hier der Gehilfe des Herrn Landvermessers." "Welcher Gehilfe? Welcher Herr? Welcher Landvermesser?" [...] "Ich weiß schon. Der ewige Landvermesser. Ja, ja. Was weiter? Welcher Gehilfe?" "Josef," sagte K. Ein wenig störte ihn hinter seinem Rücken das Murmeln der Bauern, offenbar waren sie nicht damit einverstanden, daß er sich nicht richtig meldete. K. hatte aber keine Zeit sich mit ihnen zu beschäftigen, denn das Gespräch nahm ihn sehr in Anspruch. "Josef?" fragte es zurück. "Die Gehilfen heißen" — eine kleine Pause, offenbar verlangte er die Namen jemandem andern ab — "Artur und Jeremias." "Das sind die neuen Gehilfen," sagte K. "Nein, das sind die alten." "Es sind die neuen, ich aber bin der alte, der dem Herrn Landvermesser heute nachkam." "Nein," schrie es nun. "Wer bin ich also?" fragte K. ruhig wie bisher. Und nach einer Pause sagte die gleiche Stimme mit dem gleichen Sprachfehler und war doch wie eine andere tiefere achtungswertere Stimme: "Du bist der alte Gehilfe."⁴⁹

"This is the land surveyor's assistant speaking." "What assistant? What land surveyor?" [...] "Yes, yes, I know. That eternal land surveyor! Yes, yes, so what else? What assistant?" "Josef," said K. He was slightly taken aback by the way the locals were muttering behind him; obviously they didn't like to hear him giving a false name. But K. had no time to bother about them, for the conversation called for all his attention. "Josef?" came the answer. "No, the assistants are called" — here there was a pause, while someone else was obviously consulted — "are called Artur and Jeremias." "Those are the new assistants," said K. "No, they're the old ones." "They are the new assistants, but I'm the old one, and I came on later than the land surveyor and got here today." "No," the other man replied, shouting now. "Who am I, then?" asked K., still keeping calm. And after a pause the same voice, with the same speech defect, yet sounding like another and deeper voice, commanding more respect, agreed: "You are the old assistant."⁵⁰

With the sudden decision of K. to now play his own assistant, a change of strategy takes place. Since K. now appears as his old assistant, known as Josef, he changes the role of his assistants, Artur and Jeremias, who were *previously imagined as old assistants*, in such a way that he now designates them as his *new assistants*. The redistribution of roles also seems to be a side effect of the previous play which was still subject to the conditional "if," in which the *new assistants* — known to the village community as the castle officials Artur and Jeremias — who were not trained for land surveying, had to play the *old assistants*. The castellan on the other side of the phone is initially not at all fond of this incoherence in the play, the change of rules and roles, and responds to K.'s statement, which claims that K. himself would be the *old assistant*, with a blunt "no." However, when K. asks the castle official to define his role ("Who am I, then?") the latter replies after a short pause — by no means resigned, but with a voice "commanding more respect" — transcending a simple accepting of K.'s change of strategy, as if the rewriting of roles was initiated by the castle itself: "You are the old assistant." That the castle is forced to react in such a way — it actually authorizes K.'s rewriting of roles and thus of the plot — could be

⁴⁹ Kafka, *Das Schloß*, 36–37.

⁵⁰ Kafka, *The Castle*, 22.

interpreted as follows: K.'s intervention is, although it appears to be only a minor one, a revolutionary one, one that disturbs the center of meaning production in a way that it has to subject itself to K.'s idea of the play.⁵¹ The fight between K. and the castle makes visible how the writing and rewriting of the plot actually works. On the other hand, it could be interpreted as a victory of the castle: the castle realizes that K. and the assistants are simple mirrors of each other and decides that it is not important to have K. in the role of the land surveyor, but treats him as just another fool. Furthermore, that K. chooses Josef as his name points to the possibility that K. is not able to establish himself in the plot and at some point falls out of the novel, reappearing as the protagonist of the earlier novel fragment *The Trial*, as Josef K.

Despite the change in strategy, K., when he pretends to be his old assistant, ultimately gets the same answer from the castle employee as his assistants who have now been designated as "new" assistants:

K. horchte dem Stimmklang nach und überhörte dabei fast die Frage: "Was willst Du?" Am liebsten hätte er den Hörer schon weggelegt. Von diesem Gespräch erwartete er nichts mehr. Nur gezwungen fragte er noch schnell: "Wann darf mein Herr ins Schloß kommen?" "Niemals," war die Antwort. "Gut," sagte K. und hing den Hörer an.⁵²

K. was listening to the sound of the voice, and almost missed hearing the next question: "What do you want?" He felt like slamming the receiver down, expecting no more to come of this conversation. But he was forced to reply at once: "When may my boss come up to the castle?" "Never," was the reply. "I see," said K., and he hung up.⁵³

The dialogues in the castle belong to the dramaturgical aspects of the novel. The structure of these dialogues is asymmetrical from the very beginning. They reflect the power of the castle. But the fact that the castle answers K. and enters into a dialogue with him can already be considered a partial success, since through the dialogue of the protagonist—who tries to write his own story—with the actual instance of story writing, the border between writing and being written is unsettled. Since the protagonist develops his roles in his parts of speech, the negations of his requests at the same time appear to be negations of the role invented by himself. Since the assistants are the only figures in *The Castle* over whom K. seems to have some kind of power, the dialogues between K. and his assistants mirror the dialogues between the castle and K. In the conversations with his assistants, K. gives orders and in that way tries to create their roles. The persistence and the childish, useless behavior of the assistants, in defiance of all, mirror K.'s own stubbornness and foolishness in his relationship with the castle. It seems as if the hidden structure of the novel is based on the radical form of the *Trauerspiel* which Walter Benjamin analyzes in his study *Der Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, where the king's fool appears as a double-figure of the sovereign.⁵⁴ The assistants as doubled double-figures of K. make his madness obvious. There is a trace of political implication in this role playing. K. does not object to the sovereignty of the castle but plays with it, and in this way makes the reality of the castle visible.

⁵¹ For new studies on the meaning of interruption, see Freddie Rokem, "Editorial: On Interruptions," *Performance Research* 26, no. 5 (August 2021).

⁵² Kafka, *Das Schloß*, 37–38.

⁵³ Kafka, *The Castle*, 22.

⁵⁴ Walter Benjamin, *Der Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1996), 105; Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: Verso 1996), 126.

After the supposedly successful rewriting of the roles, K. becomes well aware of his inferiority to the castle when he has to realize that the reality invented by him gradually adapts to that given by the castle. The fact that K. is aware that he is in a bad way in the struggle with the castle is not made explicit in the dialogue. But the fact that, after his acceptance as *old assistant* by the castle, he was “expecting no more to come of this conversation,” indicates that K. already recognizes his impotence compared to the power of the castle. The subsequent, just “forced,” quick request for the permission to come into the castle, whose answer “never” is accepted by K. immediately and without objection, points to K.’s lack of power and at the same time to the end of the novel fragment.

This becomes clear in the dual function of the assistants. On the one hand, the entrances of the childlike, physical characters are limited to slapstick aiming at the visual: the novel’s plot is not advanced anyhow by their actions. On the other hand, they seem to use their childlike play to hide another function in it: they also take on the function of observers (or surveyors—if also not land surveyors) sent by the castle, who, rather than K. surveying them, seem to survey K. The assistants are only subordinate to K. within the play (which is apparently recognized by the castle), but in reality—behind the play that has become reality—they belong to the castle and act in the “fight” against K.:

Trotzdem aber wußte man leider aus den Erfahrungen bei Tageslicht, daß es [gemeint sind die Gehilfen] sehr aufmerksame Beobachter waren, immer zu K. herüberstarrten, sei es auch daß sie in scheinbar kindlichem Spiel etwa ihre Hände als Fernrohre verwendeten und ähnlichen Unsinn trieben oder auch nur herüberblinzelten und hauptsächlich mit der Pflege ihrer Bärte beschäftigt schienen, an denen ihnen sehr viel gelegen war und die sie unzähligemal der Länge und Fülle nach miteinander verglichen und von Frieda beurteilen ließen.⁵⁵

None the less, K.’s daylight experiences showed him that they [the assistants] were observing him very attentively and constantly staring at him, whether they made telescopes of their hands in an apparently childish game and played similar nonsensical tricks, or just looked his way while they devoted most of their attention to the care of their beards, of which they thought a great deal, each comparing his with the other’s time and again for length and profusion, and getting Frieda to judge between them.⁵⁶

Behind the game that has become reality, the reality of the castle shines through as outside. The fact that the assistants report to the castle about what K. is doing is not explicitly stated, but is hinted at several times by K.’s fiancée, Frieda, who probably, as the (former) lover of the castle official Klamm, was able to gain some insight into what was going on at the castle.⁵⁷

At the end of the novel, Frieda leaves K. and elopes with one of the assistants. In this way the assistant literally takes K.’s place. Just as in Kafka’s observations of the performances of the Lemberg theater group, the focus shifts from the center (from K. the protagonist) to the peripheral (the assistant). However, this shift does not only affect the protagonist K. *The Castle* itself appears as a displaced novel, in which the attention shifts from the *protagonist* to the *extras/assistants*, from the *castle* to the *sideshow/the village*, from the *created reality/meaningful action* to the

⁵⁵ Kafka, *Das Schloß*, 73–74.

⁵⁶ Kafka, *The Castle*, 43.

⁵⁷ Compare Kafka, *The Castle*, chapter 8.

failing attempt to create reality and meaning. Even if it seems as if it were only a small detail, Kafka's interest in the *off*, in the incidental, in the mishaps and the uncontrollable extras, seems to wander into the novel and finds its afterlife manifested not only in the characters of the assistants, but in the entire structure of play constituting the novel.

K.'s reality in *The Castle* is constituted by speech acts, which are subsequently verified bureaucratically by the castle apparatus. As a result, in K.'s life in the village, play and reality are indistinguishable. The result is an eerie role-playing game in which the player K. fights against the castle for the power to determine the next step in the play. K.'s goal of getting into the castle is tantamount to the struggle to direct the play, as whose protagonist K. appears at the same time. The castle is the place from which nothing short of reality—the reality of the novel—is created. As the place off of the play, it is not possible for K. to ever reach the castle. Although K. tries to approach the castle, he always stays at the same distance from the castle. It almost seems as if he were on a revolving stage, the disk turning in the opposite direction to his running. The castle—off the stage, where only the inscription can take place—cannot be reached by the character.

Just as the crypt guardian in *The Crypt Guardian*, Kafka's largest extant dramatic fragment, manages, at least temporarily, to switch from the position of the character in the dialogue to the director's room in the stage directions and to walk abroad there, K. also succeeds, albeit only sporadically and after acts of large effort, to get in touch with the castle officials and to bring them temporarily onto the stage, i.e., into the village. Even if the castle officials try to remain as invisible and inaccessible as possible, K. somehow manages to bring them onto the stage of the novel as something similar to characters. If the castle is understood as the place of stage direction, as the origin of the play *The Castle*, it also becomes understandable why the castle officials look different when they come into the village, i.e., when they switch from off-stage to the village, which is on-stage. Unlike the villagers, those coming from behind the stage do not appear on stage as costumed figures; without masks their faces remain unrecognizable, they remain just as the castle without sharp outlines, and appear only as half-characters, roleless, staying connected to their mere function as directors off-stage. When they interact with K., they resemble the bureaucrats of the Nature Theater from *The Missing Person*: employees who try to give roles to all the lost people who were forced to leave their homes and their lives, assembled by the Nature Theater. Leftovers of unfinished stories, figures without roles, serving as actors who shall play themselves: an impossible task, since without context there can be neither a self nor a role. The actors of the Nature Theater appear as empty figures, collected only to continue their travels, not as individuals anymore, but as a group of people who fell out of their stories. Assembled by the Nature Theater, they are now a group. Now there is hope that they might actually arrive somewhere, since now they have the power to create a new play, their own play, of which they are themselves the sovereigns.

Because K. keeps trying to act as a reality-generating entity himself, the castle's everyday, bureaucratic, reality-generating processes are disrupted and made visible, e.g., when the agents of the castle come on stage to interact with K. Ultimately, however, K. does not succeed in switching from the side of the player to the side of the game master. K. is not even able to control his assistants, the two figures who have been assigned to him personally by the castle. Although determined to be their master, he does not even succeed in taking over the direction of them. The assistants make his undertaking seem absurd and a failure from the start, and himself a powerless, silly figure.

After setting up the play in the first chapter, the frequent entrances of the useless but unexpellable assistants who try to follow K. at every turn throughout the novel are limited to small slapstick performances such as this one:

[...] und die Gehilfen drückten sich noch immer an ihn, so daß er sie mit dem Ellbogen wegstieß [...] Nun hatte überdies der eine ein Tuch um den Hals geschlungen, dessen freie Enden im Wind flatterten und einigemal gegen das Gesicht K.'s geschlagen hatten, der andere Gehilfe hatte allerdings immer gleich das Tuch von K.'s Gesicht mit seinen langen spitzen immerfort spielenden Fingern weggenommen, damit aber die Sache nicht besser gemacht. Beide schienen sogar an dem Hin und Her Gefallen gefunden zu haben, wie sie überhaupt der Wind und die Unruhe der Nacht begeisterte. "Fort!" schrie K., "wenn Ihr mir schon entgegengekommen seid, warum habt Ihr nicht meinen Stock mitgebracht? Womit soll ich Euch denn nachhause treiben?" Sie duckten sich hinter Barnabas, aber so verängstigt waren sie nicht, daß sie nicht doch ihre Laternen rechts und links auf die Achseln ihres Beschützers gestellt hätten, er schüttelte sie freilich gleich ab.⁵⁸

[...] and the assistants were still crowding K. so close that he elbowed them out of the way. [...] What was more, one of the assistants had wound a scarf around his neck, its free ends were fluttering in the wind and had blown into K.'s face several times. The other assistant kept removing the scarf from K.'s face at once with his long, pointed, nimble fingers, but that did nothing to improve matters. Both of them actually seemed to have enjoyed this going back and forth, and they were all worked up by the wind and the wild night. "Go away!" shouted K. "If you were going to come and meet me, why didn't you bring my stick? What am I going to use now to drive you home?" They ducked behind Barnabas, but they were not so frightened that they didn't first place their lanterns on their protector's shoulders to right and left. He shook them off at once.⁵⁹

But unlike the extras who come on stage with absolutely no awareness of the play, the assistants in *The Castle* seem to have a heightened awareness of the play as they don't play as extras, but, sent from the castle, just play extras with what Brecht termed the *alienation effect* (*Verfremdungseffekt*). The inscription of this difference, which creates space for reflection, corresponds to the *Nature Theater structure* of the entire castle novel: K. and the assistants only gain their existence in relation to this structure.

The gestures of the epic theater are put in quotation marks, with the actor doubling his play, exhibiting it himself. As they can be quoted, the gestures become fragments and are characterized precisely by the fact that they are missing something. This absence allows the gesture to leave the realm of the illusory to open up a space of critique for the viewer. Because the gesture, broken out of its context, is exposed, the question of its relationship to the same arises.

As forms of citation, the gestures of the epic theater maintain a connection to history, since one can only quote from history. If one draws on Benjamin's *Über den Begriff zur Geschichte*, the citation itself appears as a maneuver of the historical materialist: dialectics at a standstill as history that is still in the present, as time including the experience with the past "takes a stand

⁵⁸ Kafka, *Das Schloß*, 188.

⁵⁹ Kafka, *The Castle*, 106.

and has come to a standstill.⁶⁰ The historical materialist, as Benjamin describes himself, wants to “explode the continuum of history” by exploding the historian’s “Once upon a time,” i.e., the linearity of narration. Thus, by means of the immobilized “now,” when, as Benjamin says, “the past is charged with this explosive substance,”⁶¹ not only does it receive “life” from epochs, it also receives its gestures.

According to Brecht, Kafka fails in the transition from the poetic to the pedagogical. In contrast to Brecht, Benjamin assumes that Kafka very well “broke with a purely poetic prose (translation mine)”⁶² and that his plays, although not teaching themselves, can at least “be placed in proving contexts at any time.”⁶³ While, according to Benjamin, the “teaching/doctrine [Lehre] itself” is missing from Kafka, the “doctrinal content” appears in the form of the parable and its language of instruction, namely in the form of the Aggadah, i.e., in anecdotal form, which accompanies the teaching and actually serves to confirm it. However, without the presence of the teaching, the parable is not unambiguous and depends on interpretation. Thus, according to Benjamin, the Aggadah is “always in hope and fear at the same time, the halachic order and formula, the teaching could happen to her on the way” and armed with a paw, she lashes out at it if necessary.⁶⁴

Antinomically contrasted with this doctrinal content, which is not present in its entirety, Benjamin refers to the cloudy passage in the parable (what Brecht calls “secret mongering”),⁶⁵ which he ascribes to the gesture and from which, as he says, “Kafka’s poetry emerges.”⁶⁶ And it is precisely this “depth” of poetry that interests Benjamin in Kafka, because he assumes that “something was only ever comprehensible to Kafka in gesture.” At this point Benjamin speaks of the “symbolic content” that is expressed in the gesture, whereby a “certain symbolic meaning” is by no means meant, rather the gestures “are approached for such a purpose in ever different contexts and experimental arrangements.”⁶⁷ They are “repeatedly staged and labeled by the author without delivering their symbolic content to a specific point.”⁶⁸ Thus Kafka takes the traditional supports

⁶⁰ Walter Benjamin, “Geschichtsphilosophische Reflexionen / Von Walter Benjamin—Posthume Abschrift,” in *Werke und Nachlaß: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 19: “Über den Begriff der Geschichte,” ed. Gérard Raulet (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2010), 93–106, 103; Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” trans. Harry Zorn, in *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, ed. Michael W. Jennings et al. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2003), 389–400, 396.

⁶¹ Walter Benjamin, “Über den Begriff der Geschichte—Das Hannah-Arendt-Manuskript” [“On the concept of history—The Hannah Arendt manuscript”] in *Werke und Nachlaß: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 19: “Über den Begriff der Geschichte,” ed. Gérard Raulet (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2010), 6–29, 25.

⁶² Walter Benjamin, “Franz Kafka: Beim Bau der Chinesischen Mauer” [“Franz Kafka: During the Erection of the Great Wall of China”], in *Benjamin über Kafka. Texte, Briefzeugnisse, Aufzeichnungen*, ed. Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1981 [1931]), 39–46, 41; Walter Benjamin, “Franz Kafka: Beim Bau der Chinesischen Mauer,” trans. Rodney Livingstone, in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, part 2, ed. Michael W. Jennings et al. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1999), 494–500, 496.

⁶³ Walter Benjamin, “Aufzeichnungen im Tagebuch Mai–Juni 1931” [“Records in the diary May–June 1931”], in *Benjamin über Kafka*, 130–132, 131.

⁶⁴ Walter Benjamin, “Franz Kafka: Beim Bau der Chinesischen Mauer,” 42.

⁶⁵ Walter Benjamin, “Gespräche mit Brecht” [“Conversations with Brecht”], in *Benjamin über Kafka: Texte, Briefzeugnisse, Aufzeichnungen*, ed. Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1981 [1934]), 149–54, 151–52.

⁶⁶ Benjamin, *Franz Kafka: Zur zehnten Wiederkehr*, 27.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁶⁸ Walter Benjamin, “Entwürfe, Einschübe, Notizen zu einer Umarbeitung des Essays” [“Drafts, insertions, notes concerning a reworking of the essay”], in *Benjamin über Kafka*, 165–74, 173.

from the “gesture of the human being and then has in it a subject for reflections that never end.”⁶⁹ While the gestures in Brecht can either be taken directly into reality to serve communism or to present the situation clearly and distinctly, in Kafka it is precisely the incomprehensible passage that resists interpretation. Benjamin actively fragments such gestures, and Kafka’s gestures lend themselves to this fragmentation because, according to Benjamin, they are “too powerful for their familiar environment.”⁷⁰ This allows him to go through Kafka’s texts and to form series that he transfers to the Nature Theater of Oklahoma.

According to Benjamin, Kafka’s “smaller studies and stories” have to be transferred “as acts” onto the Nature Theater in order to let them appear in their full light and thus be made visible: “Kafka’s entire work represents a code of gestures.”⁷¹ The lowering of the load should happen in the Nature Theater. According to Benjamin, Kafka’s characters experience their “redemption”⁷² in this place, specifically because they are allowed to “play themselves”⁷³ and are thus “freed”⁷⁴ from imitation:

Kafkas Welt ist ein Welttheater. Ihm steht der Mensch von Haus aus auf der Bühne. Und die Probe aufs 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 Pirandello’schen einen Autor.⁷⁵

Kafka’s world is a world theater. For him, man is on stage from the very beginning. The proof is the fact that everyone is hired by the Nature Theater of Oklahoma. What the standards for admission are cannot be determined. Dramatic talent, the most obvious criterion, seems to be of no importance. But this can be expressed in another way: all that is expected of the applicants is the ability to play themselves. It is no longer within the realm of possibility that they could, if necessary, be what they claim to be. With their roles, these people look for a position in the Nature Theater the way Pirandello’s six characters seek an author.⁷⁶

The traditional relationship between piece and role is reversed here. The roles exist before the play. As in Pirandello’s *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, there is no context for the gestures of the players. Kafka’s characters find the setting for their lives in the Nature Theater. According to Benjamin, they are redeemed at the Nature Theater because there they have the opportunity to study the roles from their past lives, since there they are accessible as written

⁶⁹ Benjamin, *Franz Kafka: Zur zehnten Wiederkehr*, 20.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*, 35.

⁷³ Walter Benjamin, “Motive und Disposition zum Essay von 1934,” in *Benjamin über Kafka*, 133–137, 136.

⁷⁴ Walter Benjamin, “Entwürfe, Einschübe,” 171.

⁷⁵ Walter Benjamin, *Franz Kafka: Zur zehnten Wiederkehr*, 22.

⁷⁶ Walter Benjamin, *Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary*, 804.

ones.⁷⁷ From this perspective, gestures belong to the past; they are images of the story of the characters' individual experiences, "fragments [of their] existence that are still related to the role."⁷⁸ By assuming the position of the historical materialist, studying their lives and becoming script, the characters are redeemed.

Benjamin in his reflections thinks about world theater but ignores the trace of Yiddish theater in Kafka. What happens when the gestures and acts of Kafka's stories are projected onto the Yiddish wandering stages? Does Palestine appear on the horizon?

As a pure present without past and future that is mirrored in the past- and futurelessness of the protagonist as well as of his assistants, *Das Schloss* appears as a play about making theater and in this way makes visible how literary production works. The center is located in the *off* of the novel, inaccessible to the protagonist and the villager characters. K. can never reach the castle, because he himself is part of the play, the reality which is created through the castle. He cannot step from the stage into the *off*, namely the castle. K. has not fully arrived in the world of the novel, and with every step he fights to be inscribed there, to become part of the story. The novel ends when it becomes clear that K. not only won't make it into the castle—which means he won't direct the play—but even as a character he is thrown out of the play again. In this way the novel fragment does not appear as an unfinished novel, but as a necessary form.

The fact that *The Castle* has no end should thus not be interpreted as a failure of the attempt at writing. The fact that *The Castle* does not have an end is not a phenomenon that comes from outside of the novel; it is a logical consequence of the immanent structure of the novel. K., the stranger, intrudes into a context that does not belong to him. Like the actors in the novel's Yiddish theater, he is a wanderer: "That eternal land surveyor."⁷⁹ We do not know where he comes from, what his life was like before he came to the village. He does not have a past and seems to have no future. He himself appears without any context. Outside of the play that has become the reality of the village, he seems to have no life. Is that why he is so attached to his play, to the writing of his fictional story?

K. should never have been part of the play. Max Brod's end, which adds the death of K. to Kafka's novel, is therefore superfluous. K. does not die as a character on stage. He simply disappears from the stage, where there was never a place for his role, and goes back to the outside of the play, but not as part of the direction. He simply gets lost in the unknown, and finds—who knows—his place, maybe in another play? That could explain why there are K.'s in so many of Kafka's stories. Is it always the same K(afka) — just looking for the real role that is meant for him? Or a version, a double? Do Kafka's stories break off when K. drops out of his role, which was actually never intended for him? Are Kafka's stories so funny and absurd because the uncanny shifts result precisely from the fact that the prescribed role for their protagonists doesn't seem to quite fit them? Should someone else actually fill this role and would the stories then take a more natural, harmonious course? Is this precisely the small shift that Walter Benjamin speaks of when he speaks of the messianic time—the time in which role and person fit together one-to-one, that is,

⁷⁷ Compare Walter Benjamin, *Franz Kafka. Zur zehnten Wiederkehr*, 37; *Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary*, 815: "Umkehr ist die Richtung des Studiums, die das Dasein in Schrift verwandelt." "Reversal is the direction of study which transforms existence into script." On the relation of script and life, compare Walter Benjamin, "Benjamin an Scholem" ["Benjamin to Scholem"], in *Benjamin über Kafka*, 77–79, 78: "Schrift ohne den dazugehörigen Schlüssel, ist nicht Schrift, sondern Leben."

⁷⁸ Benjamin, *Franz Kafka: Zur zehnten Wiederkehr*, 36.

⁷⁹ Kafka, *The Castle*, 22.

without a difference that enables reflection—a counterpart to the Nature Theater? Do Kafka's stories make clear that this time has not yet come?

In his book *The Space of Literature*,⁸⁰ Blanchot reads Kafka's novel *The Castle* as a meta-narrative on the experience of writing. The surveyor appears as a hero, analogous to Blanchot's author, who has

renounced his world, his home, the life which includes wife and children, forever. Right from the start, then, he is outside salvation, he belongs to exile, that region where not only is he away from home, but away from himself. He is in the outside itself—a realm absolutely bereft of intimacy where beings seem absent and where everything one thinks one grasps slips away.⁸¹

He who goes “always in the direction of extreme error”⁸² appears in Blanchot's reading as being in the space of literature, trying to meet the demands of representation on the way to the oeuvre. The surveyor necessarily errs on the way to the castle in its infinite interpretations, because the “indefinite,” as which the oeuvre appears, must “never be put to an end.” The surveyor ignores the village, which still has a certain reality, but wants the castle, which, like the oeuvre, no longer has any. However, while he is going astray, the surveyor commits the “essential fault,” that of impatience, because he wants the direct route to the goal. He is not interested in the intermediary figures, who are, after all, “images of the goal.”⁸³ The castle also appears, when it appears, only as an image of the castle.⁸⁴ Blanchot concludes:

[...] all this powerful imagery does not represent the truth of a superior world, or even its transcendence. It represents, rather, the favorable and unfavorable nature of figuration—the bind in which the man of exile is caught, obliged as he is to make out of error a means of reaching truth and out of what deceives him indefinitely the ultimate possibility of grasping the infinite.⁸⁵

Blanchot probably would agree that Kafka's meta-narratives seem, even within the oeuvre, to be expressions of the interrelationship of author and oeuvre, traces of the author-oeuvre relationship within the oeuvre. The author “dies” writing, being split and becoming the stories' characters. When the main character dies or when the narration ends, albeit imperfectly, the author regains his reality as a person outside of the oeuvre. That is why Blanchot calls Kafka's writing *writing, dying*.

In *The Castle*, K. appears as the protagonist who is not able to fully strip off the traces of the subject who wrote him, who, like the castle officials inside the novel, appears outside the novel—i.e., in the off of the novel—as a writing subject with his initial K., and inscribes himself into the novel. What we get to see is a play that should never have taken place, a directorial glitch—a struggle for authority and bureaucratized stage direction—a failed play, or better: the failure of the play itself. A theater of writing, of failed meaning production in which gestures of writing turn into protagonists...protagonists who do not manage to inscribe themselves into the book in a stable way.

⁸⁰ Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 64, 78–80, 164.

⁸¹ Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, 77.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 78.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁸⁴ Kafka, *The Castle*, 11, 17.

⁸⁵ Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, 80.

A reading of Kafka's novel *The Castle* as a form of theater that oscillates between major and minor, between world/Nature and Yiddish theater, not only shows that there is a connection between both forms of theater, it opens doors in between Kafka's stories and in this way makes visible Kafka's minor—that means Kafka's revolutionary—writing, which affects the very structure of the narrative of his late work. [A]