EDITORIAL

ONE OF GOD'S "BAD MOODS": KAFKA'S SOCIAL DIAGNOSIS AND ITS MULTIPLE INTERPRETATIONS

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Someone must have traduced Joseph K., for without having done anything wrong he was arrested one fine morning. (Kafka 1973, 1)

We are nihilistic thoughts that came into God's head [...] only one of his bad moods. (Brod 1960, 75)

If the book we're reading doesn't wake us up with a blow on the head, what are we reading it for? (Kafka 1977, 16)

1. Introduction

The following special issue of *Labyrinth*, dedicated to the 100th anniversary of Franz Kafka's death, is a kind of continuation of the previous volumes, which dealt with the intersection and mutual influence of philosophy and literature. But it can also be seen as a continuation of some of the themes discussed in the previous special issue on Nietzsche, and as a prelude to the next issue on Derrida, who offered a deconstructivist reading of Kafka (cf. Derrida 1992 and 2002). Although Max Brod – the savior and editor of Kafka's literary legacy – explicitly emphasizes that Nietzsche is the "exact opposite of Kafka" (Brod 1966, 259) and that the two authors should not be placed side by side, various scholars have identified certain common themes in their texts (Ries 1973; Bridgwater 1974; Grimm 1979; Engel/Auerochs 2010, 60-62) In the following, I will point out some that are particularly relevant from the axiological perspective.

As an author, Kafka is difficult to categorize, perhaps even more difficult than Nietzsche. Nietzsche is generally recognized as a writer and philosopher, and his work is often located in the philosophy of life. Kafka is not a philosopher, but there seems to be no consensus on whether his literary work contains certain philosophical ideas. Although it is proven that he was interested in Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, it is also known that he had no profound knowledge of

philosophy (cf. Lamping et al. 29-36, 59-64). Nevertheless, even today Kafka is associated with certain currents of thought such as existentialism, psychoanalysis, surrealism, expressionism, nihilism, and anarchism. As I have always advocated a cautious approach to the legacy of great thinkers and writers, I would rather see this as a sign of the complexity of Kafka's work than as a necessity to categorize him within a school of thought. What is indisputable, however, is the influence that Kafka has had on a number of philosophers, including Camus, Sartre, Adorno, Arendt, Benjamin, Barthes, Deleuze, Guattari, Derrida, and Agamben, to name but a few. This has led to very different receptions and interpretations. Albert Camus and Theodor Adorno have both pointed out the difficulties and inappropriateness of an unequivocal reading of Kafka.

For Camus, Kafka's ambiguity and multi-perspectivity are the key to Kafka's work, which therefore requires constant re-reading:

> The whole art of Kafka consists in forcing the reader to reread. His endings, or his absence of endings, suggest explanations which, however, are not revealed in clear language but, before they seem justified, require that the story be reread from another point of view. Sometimes there is a double possibility of interpretation, whence appears the necessity for two readings. This is what the author wanted. (Camus 2018, 124)

Adorno, in turn, points out that although so much has been written about Kafka, little of it actually makes sense and Kafka's work remains more of a mystery:

> Kafka's popularity, that comfort in the uncomfortable which has made of him an information bureau of the human condition, be it eternal or modern, and which knowingly dispenses with the very scandal on which his work is built, leaves one reluctant to join the fray, even if it is to add a dissenting opinion. Yet it is just this false renown, fatal variant of the oblivion which Kafka so bitterly desired for himself, that compels one to dwell on the enigma. Of that which has been written on him, little counts; most is existentialism. He is assimilated into an established trend of thought while little attention is paid to those aspects of his work which resist such assimilation and which, precisely for this reason, require interpretation. (Adorno 1963, 245)

Kafka's importance for twentieth-century philosophy, especially Marxism, psychoanalysis, existential philosophy, poststructuralism, and Jewish philosophy, has been overwhelming, according to Wolfgang Müller-Funk, who has written extensively on Kafka's influence on philosophers: "His texts prove themselves along the shifts and changes of modernity: they can be read as a symbol for totalitarianism, colonialism, for the law of the symbolic order as well as for the play

of the unconscious or for the highly paradoxical absence of God." (Müller-Funk 2013, 133)

The various receptions and interpretations of Kafka's work have been studied in great detail, but the secondary literature continues to grow and it is almost impossible to keep track of it all[1]. However, that is not what we are concerned with here. Below, I would like to draw attention to the thematic similarities with Nietzsche already mentioned, in order to emphasize the differences, and also to show that Kafka's "inverted" world represents a social diagnosis that proves itself again and again, and thus reinforces Kafka's actuality and impact to such an extent that one is almost compelled to reread his works.

2. "Where are we?" About the labyrinth of the inner and outer world

Like Nietzsche, Kafka can be seen as a "great master of suspicion" who questions everything. Our perceptions, the outside world, interpersonal relationships, society with its values and institutions – everything in Kafka's work is characterized by uncertainty; since it is not what it seems to be, the question arises repeatedly as to whether perhaps everything is just an illusory reality behind which another one is concealed or just a delusion of our consciousness, which is possibly in a kind of sleep. In many places in Kafka's work, this uncertainty is depicted as a labyrinthine wandering. Particularly striking examples of this can be found in the posthumously published novel fragment *The Castle*, which I would like to briefly recall here.

The novel begins as the protagonist, K., arrives tired at a village inn one winter evening and, in order to obtain permission to spend the night, introduces himself as a land surveyor who is expected at the nearby castle. His appointment as surveyor is initially denied, but then confirmed, allowing him to stay in the village for the time being. His various attempts to get to the castle to clarify the employment relationship fail, and he becomes more and more entangled in far-

[1] Particularly noteworthy with regard to Kafka's reception and the various interpretations are the two-volume Kafka Handbook (cf. Binder 1979a, 1979b), Franz Kafka. Kritik und Rezeption zu seinen Lebenszeiten (Born et al. 1979) and Kafka in Kontext (cf. Duttlinger 2017). Kafka's biography has been examined in detail in Reiner Stach's trilogy, which has also been published in English (cf. Stach 2013, 2015, 2017).

fetched stories. In one of the fragments, a messenger named Barnabas comes to him and hands him a letter from a high official telling him to contact messenger if he needs anything. Since K. believes that the Barnabas is on his way back to the castle, he suggests that he accompany him.

> They went on, but K. did not know whither, he could discern nothing, not even whether they had already passed the church or not. The effort that it cost him merely to keep going made him lose control of his thoughts. Instead of remaining fixed on their goal, they strayed. Memories of his home kept recurring and filled his mind. [...] Of the road they were following, all that K. knew was that to judge from its surface they had not yet turned aside into a bystreet. [...] By day the Castle had looked within easy reach, and, of course, the messenger would take the shortest cut. At that moment Barnabas stopped. Where were they? Was this the end? [...] Or had the incredible happened, and were they already in the Castle or at its gates? But they had not done any climbing so far as K. could tell. Or had Barnabas taken him up by an imperceptibly mounting road? "Where are we?" asked K. in a low voice, more to himself than to Barnabas. "At home," said Barnabas in the same tone. "At home?" "Be careful now, sir, or you'll slip. We go down here." "Down?" "Only a step or two," added Barnabas, and was already knocking at a door. A girl opened it, and they were on the threshold of a large room almost in darkness, for there was no light save for a tiny oil lamp hanging over a table in the background. [...] So it was only Barnabas who was at home, not he himself. But why had they come here? (Kafka 1959, 37-40)

As can be seen from this passage, K.'s confusion is both spatial and temporal, both in terms of his external life and his internal state of mind. It is surprising that K., who claims to be a surveyor, has such poor perception that he cannot remember the streets in the village. He gets tired quickly and his thoughts become confused. He can't remember if they just passed the church – maybe because it's dark and stormy outside, or maybe because he can't concentrate – but old memories from home come back to him, and he suddenly indulges them. Disorientation, the loss of the familiar and home, and wandering as a stranger in a foreign land are themes that recur in his relationships with the villagers, the officials, the two assistants sent to him, and Frieda, a barmaid who becomes his lover. K. repeatedly tries to get closer to the people, hoping that they will help him to get into the castle, but the relationships, as far as they occur, remain fleeting and soon break down because he does not understand the people and the prevailing circumstances, and also because the villagers perceive him as eccentric and alien and treat him with hostility. As a result, he does not reach the upper echelons of the

ruling class, nor does he find his way among the lower class of the common people. K.'s unwantedness and insecure position are evident in almost every sequence, for example in his conversation with the landlady, who tells him that she only allows him to stay in the inn because of her protégé Frieda.

> But what are you, for whose marriage we are humbly considering here ways and means of getting permission? You are not from the Castle, you are not from the village, you aren't anything. Or rather, unfortunately, you are something, a stranger, a man who isn't wanted and is in everybody's way, a man who's always causing trouble, a man who takes up the maids' room, a man whose intentions are obscure, a man who has ruined our dear little Frieda and whom we must unfortunately accept as her husband. [...] But you're sitting here, keeping my Frieda, and being kept yourself—I don't see why I shouldn't tell you—by me. Yes, by me, young man, for let me see you find a lodging anywhere in this village if I throw you out, even it were only in a dog-kennel." "Thank you," said K., "that's frank and I believe you absolutely. So my position is as uncertain as that, is it, and Frieda's position too?" (ibid., 63-64, 68)

This insecurity becomes K.'s undoing. Frieda accuses him of wanting to take advantage of her, of not choosing her, of betraying her, and of chasing after other women to take advantage of them in the same way. He tries to prove her wrong: "Everybody's relations have their blemishes, even ours, we came together from two very different worlds, and since we have known each other the life of each of us has had to be quite different, we still feel insecure, it's all too new." (ibid., 327) Frieda hesitates, but realizes that the only way she can regain her security is to break away from him, and so she says with regret: "If we had only gone away somewhere at once that night, we might be in peace now, always together, your hand always near enough for mine to grasp." (ibid., 328)

The fact that *The Castle* remained unfinished and was in fact only made up of fragments (which is very well represented in Michael Haneke's film by the abrupt ending of the scenes with a black screen, see Haneke 1997) adds to its fragility and thus brings it closer to the later *nouveau roman*. As unrealistic and absurd as the fragments of the novel may seem, they are connected to a certain reality, namely to situations, events and conditions that Kafka himself experienced and artistically processed. Richard Sheppard explains the connection between *The Castle* and Kafka's private life as follows:

> The emotional and spiritual turmoil caused by Kafka's happy-unhappy relationship (late 1919-May 1923) with Milena Jesenská-Polak, the Czech

> translator of his stories, was crucial to the creation of *The Castle*. According to many critics, this remarkable woman was the model for the character of Frieda. (Sheppard 1979, 442)[2]

If one examines not only Kafka's letters to Milena, but also Milena's exciting life and her feuilletons, reportages, translations, and letters (cf. Jesenská 2003, 2020; cf. Bubner-Neumann 1988), it is difficult to compare this highly educated woman with the simple barmaid Frieda and to perceive her as a "role model" or "template" for this character. However, a closer reading reveals certain similarities. For example, Milena wrote the following to Brod in early 1921, after Kafka had asked her to interrupt their correspondence:

> Had I gone to Prague with him back then, I would have remained the person I was for him at the time. But I was also planted with two feet here, infinitely firmly in the ground; I was incapable of leaving my husband, and perhaps I was too much a woman to have the strength to subject myself to a life that I knew would demand the most rigorous asceticism, for the rest of my days. [...] I was too weak to be able to fulfill this task, to do the one and only thing I knew would help him. This is my fault. (Jesenská 1990a, 248-249)

The first sentence recalls Frieda's sigh quoted above: "If we had only gone away somewhere at once that night, we might be in peace now, always together…" However, the relationship between Kafka and Milena is almost mirror-inverted compared to the relationship between K. and Frieda: it is K. who does not want to emigrate but to stay in the village and build his life there, and it is Frieda who breaks with K. because he did not commit to her. In other words, it would be wrong to equate the artistic with the biographical and autobiographical. One should rather ask oneself: What distinguishes art, i.e., Kafka's texts as art, from ordinary writing or "whistling"? – a question that Kafka himself masterfully addresses in his last story, "Josephine the Singer or the Mouse People" (Kafka 1988, 361-362). At the same time, the writer's lived experience is always important, because on the one hand, what he processes in literature is never without reference to reality, and on the other hand, biography often plays an important role in the interpretation of the story's content. In the present case, it makes a difference whether we assume, as Sheppard does, that *The Castle* was deeply marked by the failed love of a woman or, as Brod does, by the search for "connection with the grace of the divine" (Brod 1926, 496; cf. Brod 1966, 148-170).

[2] This and the few other translations from German sources are mine.

Some have more or less followed Brod and interpreted not only *The Castle* but also other works by Kafka in a religious, Jewish or even Christian direction (cf. Einser 1950; Schoeps 1985; Hoffmann 1972; Glatzer 1958; Neider 1962; Ulf 1994; Grötzinger 2014; Haring 2021). One of the first to question Brod's theological interpretation was Walter Benjamin. According to Benjamin, one should not impose a "religious-philosophical scheme" on Kafka, as Brod had done, or moralize him, but rather try to understand Kafka from the center of his own, pictorial world:

> Doubtless, it is impossible to refute the assertion that in his novel *Das Schloß* Kafka wished to depict the higher powers, the realm of grace, whereas in *Der Prozeß* [*The Trial*] his aim was to portray the lower world of the law courts, and in his last great work, *Amerika*, he described earthly existence-all of these topics to be understood in a theological sense. The only problem is that such methods are far less productive than the admittedly much more challenging task of interpreting a writer from the center of his image world. (Benjamin 2005, 495)

These two interpretative tendencies of Kafka's novels, the religious and the secular, are related not only to the fact that some texts were unfinished and lacked an ending, but also to Kafka's literary style, which often leaves words and actions in limbo and avoids clarity. The conversations and events lead the reader through winding paths and trains of thought, as if through a labyrinth from which it is impossible to find a way out. The protagonist, whether human or animal, asks questions but receives no satisfactory answers. He looks for explanations but does not get them. The theme of the labyrinth, which is alluded to in *The Castle* mainly through K.'s external and internal wanderings, reminds me – at least – of the book by the famous Czech pedagogue Johann Comenius, *The Labyrinth of the World and the Paradise of the Heart* (1663). Comenius defines his writing as "a clear description of how in this world and all its things there is nothing but disorientation and confusion, uncertainty and distress, lies and deception, fear and misery, and finally disgust of everything and despair; and how only he who dwells at home in his heart and closes himself in it with God alone attains true and full peace of his soul and joy" (Comenius 1908, 3).

Kafka's novels and some of his stories are indeed about "disorientation and confusion, uncertainty and distress, lies and deception, fear and misery," but they

mostly lack the happy endings of Comenius's consolation writings[3], so that one can rightly doubt that Kafka was concerned with grace and religious redemption. It may be that Kafka longed for a different, "purer" and more beautiful world and, in this sense, for "grace," as Brod argues and as can be interpreted from Kafka's correspondence and diaries. However, it is the inner demons – fear, loneliness, and above all pain – that plague him and lead to dark visions. Brod himself recounts a conversation in February 1920 in which he asked Kafka about the hope of God or a better life after death, and Kafka revealed his nihilistic thoughts to him:

> He [Kafka]: "We are nihilistic thoughts that came into God's head." I quoted in support the doctrine of the Gnostics concerning the Demiurge, the evil creator of the world, the doctrine of the world as a sin of God's. "No," said Kafka, "I believe we are not such a radical relapse of God's, only one of his bad moods. He had a bad day." "So there would be hope outside our world?" He smiled, "Plenty of hope—for God—no end of hope—only not for us." (Brod 1960, 75)

Two years later, on February 1, 1922, Kafka wrote in his diary:

> Looked at with a primitive eye, the real, incontestable truth, a truth marred by no external circumstance (martyrdom, sacrifice of oneself for the sake of another), is only physical pain. Strange that the god of pain was not the chief god of the earliest religions (but first became so in the later ones, perhaps). For each invalid his household god, for the tubercular the god of suffocation. How can one bear his approach if one does not partake of him in advance of the terrible union? (Kafka 1975, 410)

In other words, *the only truth* is "physical pain," the rest is deception or lies. With this theme, Kafka once again encounters Nietzsche, who explains truth as an illusion – "truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are; metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power; coins which have lost their pictures and now matter only as metal, no longer as coins" (Nietzsche 1976, 46-47) – and therefore ties knowledge to the body as the primary thing (Nietzsche 1988, 285). But unlike Kafka, for Nietzsche pain is something sacred, a necessary moment of every birth, of every creativity and self-conquest (Nietzsche 1976, 561-562).

In her 1924 "Obituary," Milena Jesenská, who was very familiar with Kafka's work as a translator of his stories into Czech, reports the following:

[3] Comenius wrote a total of 11 consolation writings (*útěšné spisy*). The *Labyrinth of the World and the Paradise of the Heart* is the fifth of them.

> He was shy, anxious, meek, and kind, yet the books he wrote are gruesome and painful. He saw the world as full of invisible demons, tearing apart and destroying defenseless humans. He was too clairvoyant, too intelligent to be capable of living, and too weak to fight. He was weak the way noble, beautiful people are, people incapable of struggling against their fear of misunderstanding, malice, or intellectual deceit because they recognize their own helplessness in advance; their submission only shames the victor. (Jesenská 1990b, 271)

In my opinion, this description fits very well the final scene of *The Trial*, in which the protagonist surrenders defenselessly to the executioners, who are stabbing him, with the words: "'Like a dog!' he said; it was as if the shame of it must outlive him." (Kafka 1973, 229) The difference – and it is not a small one – is that in the novel "the victors" are not shamed at all; on the contrary, it is the protagonist himself who blames himself for everything, even if he does not know what it consists of, and does not resist the unfair trial, the court, or the blind power of the state.[4] Thus the original accusation, which bursts into K.'s life like an unexpected thunderstorm from outside, is transformed into self-accusation and passive acceptance of the death sentence.

According to George Bataille, the renunciation of resistance serves to justify the hostility of the Communists, who did not really understand Kafka's texts. Communist rationality, based on a system of effective activity (*activité efficace*), was precisely the opposite of the meaning of Kafka's work: "the inexplicable, childlike mood of the adult Kafka," his "inability to act," since "there was nothing on whose behalf he could have acted," were all incomprehensible and unacceptable to the Communists. (Bataille 1979, 285-286) As original and in many ways accurate as Bataille's interpretation may be, Kafka's novels and stories are not only about an "inability to act," but also about powerlessness. And in my opinion, this is one of the reasons for the great interest in Kafka in the former communist countries, as people became aware of their own powerlessness as individuals in the face of the bureaucratic and authoritarian system of the party apparatus.

The dialectical interplay between institutional power and individual powerlessness is not only one of the central themes of *The Trial*; it is also taken up

[4] I must note here that Orson Welles, in his 1962 film version of *The Trial*, offers a slightly different interpretation in which K., the protagonist, does not accept death as unresistingly as in the novel. In the final scene, he laughs at his executioners, throws back the piece of dynamite they threw next to him in the pit, causing an explosion, and refuses to stab himself with the knife, forcing them to do it themselves (Welles 1962).

again and again in Kafka's stories, in a variety of forms and contexts. In my opinion, Sartre gives one of the most exciting interpretations of this dialectic by presenting Kafka's work as the "inverted world" of the fantastic. In this world, the places of body and soul are reversed, the means rebel against the ends, everything follows logic or law, but this is unclear, perhaps even meaningless:

> The fantastic presents a reverse image of the union of body and soul. In it, the soul takes the place of the body, and the body that of the soul, and we cannot use clear, distinct ideas in pondering this image. We are forced to resort to blurred thoughts which are in themselves fantastic. In short, we have to indulge, though wide awake and fully mature and in the midst of civilization, in the magical 'mentality' of the dreamer, the primitive and the child. […] The fantastic is the revolt of means against ends; either the object in question noisily asserts itself as a means, concealing its end through the very violence of its assertion, or it refers back to another means, and this one to still another, and so on ad infinitum, without our ever being able to discover the ultimate end, or else some interference in means belonging to independent series gives us a glimpse of a composite and blurred image of contradictory ends. (Sartre 1957, 58, 61)

Kafka's protagonists do not understand the "inverted world" as inverted, which is why they search for clear answers, for meaning and truth. But if we follow Sartre's interpretation, there is no "right" or "wrong" in the world of the fantastic, and therefore no truth. There is, however, the opposite of truth – lies and deception. When K. can't find his way to the castle because he gets only fragmentary and contradictory information, when Josef K. never finds out why he is arrested and what he is accused of, when the dog in "Investigations of a Dog" (Kafka 1970a) gets no information and no explanation for certain events during his inquiries, this may remind us of Nietzsche's assertion that there is no truth. The main difference here is that Nietzsche is speaking as a philosopher when he argues that there are no facts, only interpretations, and therefore a truth that is supposedly based on a fact is not actually one. Kafka's stories, on the other hand, are those of an artist: the stories of his protagonists are fictional, they place us in situations that could not happen in reality in the way he describes them. The prime example of this is the famous story *The Metamorphosis* of Gregor Samsa, who wakes up one morning as "monstrous vermin." (Kafka 1995, 69) As in *The Trial*, so in *The Metamorphosis*, a force suddenly and unexpectedly enters from outside, which from then on determines the person and from which there is no escape. This is why Sartre rightly says: "For Kafka [...] transcendental reality certainly existed,

but it was beyond our reach and served only to give us a sharper feeling of man's abandonment in the realm of the human. (Sartre 1957, 59)

3. Who is afraid of Franz Kafka?[5]

3.1. On Kafka's Reception in Eastern Europe

Regardless of the countless Kafka interpretations and textual analyses that have been published in the meantime, and regardless of the fact that a number of authors believe that their interpretation of Kafka is the only correct one, almost every reader has his or her *own Kafka*. This begs the question: How did Kafka, who doubted himself and had few publications and no particular success during his lifetime, achieve such worldwide fame posthumously? Of course, there are different answers to this question, but mine is quite simple: many people were overwhelmed by Kafka's stories because they experienced the Kafkaesque themselves in various contexts. Kafka's texts often seem like déjà vu, or, to put it another way, they have a "prophetic" power. Many have pointed this out, most notably Walter Benjamin, who wrote:

> Kafka's work is prophetic. The precisely registered oddities that abound in the life it deals with must regarded by the reader as not more than the little signs, portents, and symptoms of the displacements that the writer feels approaching in every aspect of life without being able to adjust to the new situation. (Benjamin 2005, 496)

Some may see such interpretations as simplifications, but the fact is that Kafka's novels and stories were banned by the Nazis and later by the Communists because they obviously struck a chord with these totalitarian regimes. The reactions they provoked, from silencing and censorship to outlawing, have gone down in history.

The novels *The Trial* and *The Castle* as well as stories like "In the Penal Colony" played a special role during the Cold War, both in the East and in the West. While Kafka's work was embraced by various schools of thought in the

[5] "Who's Afraid of Franz Kafka?" became a slogan against ideological criticism and the banning of Kafka's works in socialist countries after the Second World War. (See Index on Censorship 1975, 76-77 Tall 1976, 484 ff) The origin of this slogan is the Czech premiere of Edward Albee's "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" in 1963, the title of which was renamed "Who's Afraid of Franz Kafka?" (Kdopak by se Kafky bál?) (see Time 1964; Goodmann 2023, 23).

West, such as psychoanalysis, surrealism, existential philosophy, critical theory, etc., it was rejected by the Communists as defeatist and anti-revolutionary. The debates in the Czech Republic and the former East Germany in the 1960s are particularly noteworthy in this regard. These are now very well documented and researched, so I will only briefly highlight a few important moments.

During World War II, Kafka was banned not only in Nazi Germany but also in the Czech Republic, according to Jaroslav Dresler, former head of the Czech cultural department at Radio Free Europe (Dresler 1960, 473). After the war, the echo of his posthumous worldwide success reached Prague, but apart from a few essays by his Czech interpreter and translator, Pavel Eisner, Kafka did not fit into the preliminary stage of the new people's democracy.

> They [the Communists] probably also wanted to suppress the memory of his girlfriend Jesenská, who perished in the Ravensbrück concentration camp; Jesenská was a Communist for years after Kafka's death, but was expelled from the party in the 1930s as an alleged Trotskyist. This was another reason, albeit an indirect one, to keep quiet about Kafka. The year 1948 brought another strict ban, and from then on Kafka's name appeared only occasionally as an example of a "decadent, capitalist writer hostile to popular democracy." It was not until 1957, when the brief thaw in Czechoslovakia was at its height, that the first studies on Kafka and several of his prose works appeared in Prague. (ibid.)

This "thaw" was also helped by the fact that prominent intellectuals such as Hannah Arendt, Georg Lukács and, a little later, Jean-Paul Sartre became interested in Kafka's work around this time. Arendt compared Kafka's work, especially "The Penal Colony," to the reality of the gas chambers[6]. Lukács, while not denying Kafka's anticipation of Nazism, portrayed his work as a kind of modern nihilism, substantially inferior to the realism of Thomas Mann (Lukács 1969). Most significant, however, was Sartre's speech on the demilitarization of culture at the World Peace Congress in Moscow in 1962, in which he described Kafka's prose as a weapon of the West and called for cultural demilitarization between the Eastern and Western blocs:

[6] Arendt wrote: "Without a doubt Kafka's world is a terrible one. We can probably tell more easily today than we could have done twenty years ago that it is more than just a nightmare, and that in terms of its structure it is uncannily adequate to the reality that we were forced to live through. The greatness of this art lies in its capacity to unsettle us as much today as it did then, and that the horror of *In der Strafkolonie* (*In the Penal Colony*) has lost none of its immediacy in the face of the reality of the gas chambers. (Arendt 2007, 100-101)

> They [Western intellectuals] began by declaring that bureaucracy was a necessary defect of socialism – as if this vice were not inherent in all industrial societies – and then made Kafka the denunciator of bureaucrats. All that's left is to send him, as it were, to the Russians, in the hope that each reader will recognise his own country in the world of *The Trial*. This would be nothing if this deliberate aggression did not provoke a defensive reflex in the Soviet Union, which is perfectly understandable, but which is also a war reflex: since these books insult us, they say in the Soviet Union, we have no need to translate them. The result: almost half a century has passed since Kafka wrote *The Trial*, and the public in this great country, at the forefront of social, scientific and technical progress, often doesn't even know his name. This author suffers double damage: in the West he is distorted and twisted; in the East he is ignored. But conversely, we suffer everywhere from the damage we do to him: we distort him in the West and in the East by our partisan passions, and nowhere do we benefit from his true universality. (Sartre 1965, 326)

Sartre's address was immediately published in German in the GDR magazine *Sinn und Form* (see Sartre 1962). The fact that this publication cost the editor-in-chief, Peter Huchel, his job proves how dependent culture in the GDR was on the party leadership and its directives. This became evident the following year at the Kafka conference at Liblice Castle near Prague.

The conference organized by the Czech Academy of Arts, the Faculty of Philosophy of Charles University and the Writers' Union on the occasion of Kafka's 80th birthday took place on May 27 and 28, 1963. It brought together an international circle of literary scholars, philosophers and writers. France was represented by Roger Garaudy, Poland by Roman Karst, Hungary by Jenö Krammer, Austria by Ernst Fischer, Yugoslavia by Dušan Ludvík, the GDR by Anna Seghers, Helmut Richter, Werner Mittenzwei, Klaus Hermsdorf, Kurt Krolop and Ernst Schumacher, and Czechoslovakia by the organizers Eduard Goldstücker and Paul Reimann, as well as František Kautman, Alexej Kusák, Dagmar Eisnerová, Ivan Sviták and others. Only Marxists were invited so as not to be "disturbed" and so as not to upset the "Soviet comrades." Nevertheless, a discussion soon broke out, mainly on the themes of realism and alienation in Kafka's work, which became increasingly political.

While the Czech scholars pointed to the enduring importance of Kafka's work, the GDR delegates countered that there was no reason to revive a bourgeois writer like Kafka, whose prose depicted the insurmountable alienation of man and therefore could contribute nothing to the development of socialism. Eduard Goldstücker and others countered that the alienation depicted by Kafka was by

no means limited to capitalist societies, but could be even more pronounced in the transition to socialism. Ernst Fischer supported his Czech colleague by emphasizing that the alienation of human being, which Kafka had portrayed with maximum intensity, had reached a terrible extent in the capitalist world, but had by no means been overcome in the socialist world either. Instead, it must be overcome step by step through the struggle against dogmatism and bureaucratism for socialist democracy, initiative and responsibility. Fischer ended his speech with an impressive appeal:

> We should no longer deny a visa to a poet who has portrayed the alienation, reification and dehumanization of the late capitalist world in a more original and alarming way than many others. [...] I appeal to the socialist world: Bring back Kafka's work from involuntary exile! Give him a permanent visa! (Fischer 1965, 168)

Kafka's defenders thus showed that he did indeed have a place in socialist society and culture, and consciously supported Sartre's thesis of the universality of Kafka's work. However, Kafka was not granted a permanent visa, neither in his home country nor in other communist countries. It was no coincidence that Ana Seghers, then president of the GDR Writers' Association, left the conference after only one day. She had realized where the discussion was leading and quickly returned to East Berlin to avoid getting into trouble with the state apparatus. Her premonition was correct, as can be seen today in the declassified Stasi documents. In 1964, the Central Information Group (ZIG) of the Ministry of State Security prepared a report on the major events of the year in order to get a picture of the mood of East German society. In this report, special reference was made to the "negative" effect of the Kafka conference:

> Influenced by the "Kafka Conference" in the fall of 1963 in Prague 25 (in which some students of the Institute of Literature participated), a group of third-year students of the Institute of Literature in particular [...] oriented themselves in internal discussions toward the philosophical, aesthetic, and artistic views of Kafka. (The same group had also appeared in 1962/63 with 'thaw' discussions and unprincipled views on the 'angry boy' Yevtushenko and on Peter Hack's 'Worries and Power'). In their discussions of Kafka, the students misinterpret Kafka's anarchistic individualist "indignation," his individual "protest" as an artist who, they believe, in his despair over the "grayness of the day," becomes completely acceptable to capitalism. Among other things, they interpret Kafka in such a way that the problem of the "alienation of the individual from society and the state" (Alexander Abusch) reflected in his works "out of fear of life" also applies to socialism - especially to the GDR. (ZIG 1964)

While Kafka was silenced in the GDR, the conference in Liblice contributed to the formation of a critical public sphere in which Kafka could be used to discuss the reform of socialism. According to Jürgen Danyel, after the conference the critical Marxists interested in reform followed the Western Kafka interpreters, but remained among themselves. Nevertheless, the impact of the conference as an early preparatory event for the Prague Spring of 1968 should not be underestimated, as can be seen in Heinrich Böll's essay "'The tank aimed at Franz Kafka'," which describes the invasion of Prague by Warsaw Pact troops. (Danyel 2018; cf. Böll 2018) Danyel explains also the reasons for the interest in Kafka's work in the Eastern Bloc, using the example of the already mentioned Czech Germanist Eduard Goldstücker.

> Their own experience of the irrationality of Stalinist persecution is probably one of the reasons why this generation of communist intellectuals developed a special affinity for the poet Franz Kafka. It seemed as if the author of *The Trial* had foreseen in an almost visionary way the absurdities of Stalinist rule and bureaucratic domination, to which the isolated and lonely individual was defenselessly exposed, and described them in his stories. For Goldstücker and others, the story of Josef K., who was apparently traduced and arrested one morning "without having done anything wrong," was more than a text of literary or philosophical interest. It was a description of their own nightmares and of a political system that had developed into the opposite of its original intentions. (Danyel 2018)

I can attest to the accuracy of the above description from my own experience during the period of so-called "real socialism," although it was not as dramatic for me (thank God) as it was for Goldstücker. This first sentence of *The Trial* was a real "blow on the head" (Kafka 1977, 16) for me, as it was for many others: "Someone must have traduced Joseph K., for without having done anything wrong he was arrested one fine morning." (Kafka 1973, 1)[7] The danger of traducement, or denunciation, was something we had to fear constantly under real socialism. We were continuously under surveillance – at school, at university, at work, or in our free time – and there were secret service agents everywhere (often

[7] Kafka's novels and short stories were published in Bulgaria in the early 1980s – *The Trial* in 1980, *The Castle* and *The Metamorphosis* in 1982, and *America* in 1985. This was made possible by Lyudmila Zhivkova, daughter of the head of state, Todor Zhivkov. As President of the Committee for Art and Culture (from 1975 until her death in 1981), Zhivkova pursued a policy of promoting Bulgarian cultural heritage and, at the same time, opening up Bulgarian culture to the world, which was at odds with the policies of the Soviet system and other communist regimes. After her death in 1981, the situation changed; her father and the communist apparatus became increasingly authoritarian.

among our fellow students or colleagues) who reported on everything that happened or didn't happen. I remember how, as soon as I arrived at the Institute of Philosophy of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, two research assistants filed a complaint against me with the Institute's Party Office. A colleague who was sympathetic to me told me about it privately, but I never found out what I was accused of by these two people, whom I didn't even know personally. Two years later there was a similar incident: a professor, this time from my department, had filed a denunciation against me to the Department of Science and Education of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party. In this denunciation, I was accused of being under the influence of bourgeois French philosophers and of having deviated from Marxism-Leninism. This was not the last complaint. After the fall of communism in 1989, the Presidium of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (BAS) was flooded with denunciations that took the madness of the supposedly collapsed system to its extreme. The reason for this was the reforms that had begun in the BAS, which aimed, among other things, at eliminating philosophy and thus the Institute of Philosophy in the Academy, and which took on the character of a Kafkaesque "trial": those responsible for the politicization, ideologization, and consequent institutional and personal repression began to blame others. It may sound absurd, but the Institute of Philosophy of the BAS was closed and reopened twice under contradictory pretexts – at the end of 1988 on the grounds that it was a nest of dissidents agitating against the communist government, and in 1995 on the grounds that the Institute was a scum of totalitarian Marxism-Leninism (see Raynova 2024, 12-13). In response to the last accusation made against us by the then President of the BAS, Blagovest Sendov, I wrote, together with some colleagues, an open letter to him, which was published in the journal *Kultura*. In this letter we asked him why, as President of BAS during the communist era, he had not questioned Article 1 of the BAS' Statutes, which states that the BAS "assists the Bulgarian Communist Party and the socialist state to carry out the scientific leadership of society in accordance with the Marxist-Leninist theory" and "participates in the struggle for socialism and communism." We also asked why it was that the Presidium of the BAS followed the instructions of the Communist Party and actively supported the closure of the Institute in 1988. Finally, we stated that we strongly reject the attempt to place the responsibility for the ideologization and politicization of the BAS exclusively

on the Institute of Philosophy, and that we do not want its fate to continue to depend on the political conjuncture, but to become a politically independent center of fundamental research within the Academy. (Raynova et al. 1990, 2).

In sum, the collapse of the "old system" had changed the balance of power in society and its institutions, but not the people. In this sense Jaroslav Dresler was right: "The revolution in 1989 was imperfect and unfinished, the old decay and dilapidation only got a new facade." (Dresler 2019) Therefore, Kafka was and should remain relevant both before and after 1989.

3.2. "Kafka 2024": The Villa Stuck Exposition

Jürgen Born, director of the Historical-Critical Edition of the Writings of Franz Kafka, emphasizes that Kafka's novels and stories defy any attempt to pin them down to ideological statements: "They resist – and half a century of Kafka interpretation has proven this – with admirable tenacity any direct 'translation' into the language of philosophical, theological, sociological, or psychoanalytical discourse. One may say: fortunately!" (Born 2000, 138) I do not fully share this assessment. I agree that a "direct translation" of Kafka's works into philosophical, psychoanalytical, political, and especially ideological language would alienate them. Kafka was not completely apolitical, he sympathized with libertarian socialism, for example, which is why some rightly or wrongly portray him as an anarchist (cf. Löwy 1997), but of course he cannot be regarded as a "committed" writer in the Sartrean sense, so that his novels and stories can be attributed to political or ideological ideas. Nevertheless, I am not convinced that Kafka's work can be interpreted and evaluated only in terms of literary studies, because it raises institutional questions that have led to socio-critical and political associations and that are just as urgent for us today. In this context, I would like to refer to some of the artworks on socio-political themes that were shown in the major exhibition commemorating the 100th anniversary of Kafka's death at the Villa Stuck in Munich.

The exhibition "Kafka 2024," which took place at Villa Stuck from 26.10.2023 - 11.02.2024, was part of an international project (see Buhrs and Marr 2024), which received a lot of attention. Dozens of artists presented their own artworks and installations on various themes based on Kafka's stories.

Some of these subjects – "In the Labyrinth," "The Office," "Shame," "Guilt," "Under Interrogation," "Torture" – were dedicated to the threatening issues of Kafka's work, highlighting and reinterpreting its socially critical aspects from a contemporary perspective.

Kafka's theme of bureaucratic constraints was depicted particularly vividly in Andreas Gursky's photograph "Passport Control," which shows the unfriendly faces of two officials behind a checkpoint. The picture could be seen as a modern illustration of various texts from "The Trial," but also from "Before the Law," in which a gatekeeper refuses or denies entry.

The kinetic mixed-media installation "The Killing Machine" by Janet Cardiff & George Bures Miller was presented at the beginning of the exhibition under the motto "Sharp Needles." The installation was inspired by Kafka's peculiar apparatus, which, as a torture machine, writes the sentence with fine needles into the skin of the condemned and thus "artfully" kills him. Cardiff & Miller's machine was designed so that visitors could switch it on themselves by pressing a red button. After pressing the button, robotic arms with needles began to move around an imaginary victim over a dentist's chair to the sound of sinister music. The spectacle, which was reflected in a hanging disco ball, represented a strange dance of death that drew the observer into an audio-visual horror reminiscent of modern-day torture techniques. It was precisely such techniques and methods that were presented in films and video installations under the theme "Under Interrogation."

Kafka's interrogation scenes, in which the guilt of the interrogated is always predetermined, were visualized in the films of David Rych and Franz Wanner, which deal with interviews with migrants and asylum seekers characterized by the arbitrariness of the authorities and the abuse of power. In the video "Border Act" David Rych shows different perspectives of the interviews and their psychological mechanisms of force. The starting point for the project was an improvisation theater with refugees. Initial interviews with the authorities were staged, with the refugees taking on not only their own roles, but also those of the interviewer. "Where the staging goes hand in hand with the personal position and history of a protagonist and thus explores real circumstances," explains Rych, "it opens up a new space for the critical questioning of the present world, for the investigation of existing conditions in politics, the media, and the public." (Cited in Buchsenhausen 2016) It also becomes clear that, in view of

the brutality that people generally experience on their way as refugees, the truthfulness of the stated reasons for fleeing is hardly suitable as an evaluation criterion for granting asylum: traumatization and repeated incidents of abuse during the flight make the original reasons for fleeing appear secondary. (Ibid.) Like Rych's video, Franz Wanner's "The Interrogation" also deals with asylum seekers, but focuses on the interrogation system of the German intelligence service, the *Bundesnachrichtendienst* (BND). The film questions the BND's interrogation methods, which pressure asylum seekers by telling them that they will receive a residence permit if they cooperate and provide "useful information." Although the secret service's practice of "siphoning off" refugees was declared over in 2015 and the responsible Central Interrogation Center with locations in several German cities was closed, the intimidation tactics and interrogations continued in other locations. (Cf. Wanner 2018)

The themes and works presented in the Kafka exhibition at the Villa Stuck show that art is not only a matter of aesthetics, but that it can also raise ethical, political, and legal questions. And the fact that Kafka's writings continue to inspire such questions should be seen as a strength, not a weakness.

3.3. Kafka's Actuality

When we watch the news on television or in other media, associations with Kafka's novels and stories arise almost daily, inundating us with questions about power and powerlessness. What can political prisoners expect from trumped-up charges and fabricated trials, aren't they as lost as K.?[8] What hope is there for Afghan women who, after the Taliban's morality laws came into force, are denied the right to education and work, forced to wear the burqa at home, forbidden to speak or even look out of the window? Will Ukrainians or Palestinians who have been forcibly displaced from their land ever be allowed to return to their destroyed homes?

[8] Countless examples could be given here. We have probably all seen the movie *The Report* (Burns 2019; cf. Mazzetti 2014), and we know what happened to Navalny. But perhaps few know that Navalny's lawyers were recently sentenced to years in a Russian penal colony for "extremist activities" simply because they were his defense lawyers (see Trevelyan 2025).

The world around us is becoming increasingly Kafkaesque. It is characterized by uncertainty and the disintegration of everything that used to be considered secure, at least in the West – the rule of law, human rights, liberal and democratic values on which stable alliances used to be based. It is the age of "strong men" who bend laws, history, and geography to their will and get what they want, whether through "deals," violence, or war. It is the technological age in which not only "too much" information of all kinds leads to a loss of truth, but also targeted disinformation and fake realities that are so easy to produce and spread so quickly that it is almost impossible to distinguish between appearance and authenticity, truth and deception. An "inverted world," where violence and helplessness meet at the precipice of human existence, is increasingly becoming the norm. More and more we are confronted with questions like "Where am I?," "Where are we?" and "Do we do it like K. and accept it defenseless like a dog?" or "How should we defend ourselves?

Kafka was accused by Günter Anders of being a "moralist of conformity" (*Moralist der Gleichschaltung*) and self-abasement, who "tried to justify the 'immoral' demands of the ruling class" (Anders 1951, 28). But even if his novels seem hopeless and his protagonists resigned, one must not forget that some texts, such as "Before the Law," can be understood as a wake-up call or a "fist bump," as an appeal not to remain seated in eternal expectation until death, waiting for a special invitation or some favorable changes "from outside," but to get up and take one's destiny into one's own hands. Perhaps this is what Nietzsche meant by *amor fati*. In any case, this is exactly what our civil societies and our European Community, which is in a dangerous state of hesitation and enfeeblement, need most today.

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