

# On Re-reading Kafka

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## INTRODUCTION

In the recent past, there has been an enormous amount of inter-disciplinary interest on the writings of Walter Benjamin. Benjamin's commentary on the modern metropolis – the activities surrounding growth and the effects of overpopulation both on the individual as well as on society – remain significant to both architecture and urbanism as well.

Of course, Benjamin often delivers the image of the city through his *reading* of others' writings, through his *seeing* through others' eyes, thus posing a valid model for subsequent *re-readings* in turn.<sup>1</sup> He has offered extensive critique through his recasting of perspectives as offered by, for example, the philosopher Hegel, the modern French poet and prose writer Charles Baudelaire, and the American literary figure Edgar Allan Poe. In *On some Motifs in Baudelaire*, Benjamin makes a distinction between those who internalize the crowd – seen as a mass and regarded as an entity in itself as opposed to a collection of individuals – and those who are able to stay aloft, to view it from the outside. He addresses the idea of man as a singular element set against, or placed within, the crowd – the individual in danger of being swept up and ingested by the (object) crowd consciousness.<sup>2</sup> The struggle of the self then becomes the resistance to the objectification of that same-self: a resistance, par excellent, to be seen in the work of Franz Kafka.

Benjamin describes the city as having a capacity to be both a landscape, which opens itself to the flaneur, and a room, which encloses him. Contemporary critique, within the disciplines close to architecture, has focused heavily on reading the city as landscape (or *cityscape*), as exterior and thus as urban. Kafka, however, operates within the enclosed space of the interior.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, it is a space of the fray – where the conflict between the experience of tradition and that of the metropolis resides. An attempt to explicate the resistance of the mystical framework to the thrust of modern progress forms respectively both an immanent and imminent tension throughout the body of Kafka's work. Perhaps it is Kafka's inability to resolve this

tension, which Benjamin, in conversations with Bertolt Brecht, refers to as "Kafka's failure."<sup>4</sup>

It is an interest in this idea of 'failure' that motivates my reading of Kafka. For it is, precisely this irresolution that leaves open a door into a contemporary space in which the discourse on resistance and relinquishment continues to be relevant. Moreover, it is arguable that Kafka's work poses itself as a model, a model that predicts (as it exhibits) conditions that have, over the past decade or so, been discussed in terms of reflexivity. In this paper I begin to re-read Kafka through a few prevalent thematic filters. These filters cross over certain conditions as well as contemporary trends in architecture, but due to the limited length of this paper these links will not be elaborated but will remain only side-ways glances.

## THROUGH THE EYES OF THE CROW

What is it to assign a name to a thing, to a person? Further, what is it to *own* that name – to possess it or have it possess you? The act of naming is, without doubt, an act of exhibiting power and propriety; yet, equally, and inversely, it is an action leading to empowerment and agency. To name an object, to signify a thing with a noun, is to give it a value, a value primarily of exchange. To name a place is to give it coordinates, to bring it forth from the ethereal matter of space. It is also to establish a limit, a line that can be crossed, transgressed or violated. To give a name to a living thing, such as an animal, is that action which converts it from an object into an essence: it is to endow it with life. In the book of Genesis, place is named before man. Eden gives name to the location, to the manifestation of the six days of work. Adam was named as the first man and was subsequently endowed with the power of naming, for he was given the task of naming all animals. In fact, it was Adam, not God, who named woman: Eve. However, her name derives from an action, for she has, through the act of disregarding the word of God, become this – "the mother of all living" (Genesis 3:20).

In moving beyond this biblical reference to that of man and his formation of society, we find a similar power structure at work. Socially a name is that which also indicates action and order, moreover it can identify a person within a class structure. Without a proper noun (name), which can point to its own history or genealogy, its own etymological meaning, a person cannot be said to exist. Conversely, the common noun is seen only in abstraction as an a-historical condition, as a commodity as mentioned just above. To possess a name is moreover to accept responsibility for values, which are incumbent with/in the proper noun ascription. To reiterate, to assign a name to a thing is both to take possession *of* and to issue agency *to* that thing.

It has been argued that this focus on the name, or the absence thereof, the *problem* of naming in Kafka's work issues first from the circumstance of Kafka's own name.<sup>5</sup> Kafka's surname is related to the Czech word *kavka*, which means 'black-bird' or 'crow'. His given name in Hebrew was Amschel; a name associated with the term *amsel*, which in Hebrew also translates to 'black-bird'. Thus, he was given not only a name, but also a double name, or a doubling of the name of the 'crow'. This *action* imposed upon Kafka not merely a family history and responsibility (common in all surname inheritance), but also an abstract identity. An identity subsumed as a condition (both conditional and conditioning), which Kafka inevitably attempted to mediate within his literary work. This mediation of the imposition of history with the contemporary sense of self-identity returns us to the idea of 'failure' as it relates to the battlegrounds between tradition and modernity.

Anyone familiar with architecture will know the name of Charles-Édouard Jeanneret as Le Corbusier or simply Corbu (Crow). The distinguishing factor between Franz Kafka and Charles-Édouard Jeanneret is that while the former was consecrated with a given name, the latter chose his name and was thus self-anointed. By virtue of choice, Jeanneret inverted the inherent position of culpability. Kafka's 'crow' is caged, while Corbu's 'crow' flies free. Thus, we see the interiorized conditioning of one and the exteriorized positioning of the other through the respective frames of traditional man as reflective and modern man as visionary.<sup>6</sup>

### THE DIS-EMBEDDING OF MEANING

Kafka operates fluidly in the field of proper noun displacement, a displacement that implicates an entity rather than a being. His stories are recognized as stories of Prague; yet he never names this city, he never ascribes action within the limits of place.<sup>7</sup> The characters in his novels are often identified with only initials; anyone familiar with Kafka will recognize "Joseph K" as an appellation that reveals only the minimum quantity necessary to identify the protagonist in his novel *The Trial*, or simply "K" as the protagonist of *The Castle*. Kafka's characters,

thus represented, do not however constitute an abstraction that reduces them to that of sameness, often associated in modernism as the *every-man*. The (subject) 'I' without a name does not automatically convert to the 'we', the 'us' – the automaton – defined by similarities (repetition) as opposed to singularities (difference). For his characters are always presented through action, always in expression of individual needs and desires. They, in fact, pose themselves in the framework of relative possibility as an *any-man*. In other words, Kafka does not revel in generalities of modern *consciousness* he explicates conditions and particulars of *action*. Further, Kafka confronts the ambiguity inherent in the absence of naming, inherent in anonymity, with the positioning of man as both productive and produced through his action.

Several years ago, a group of architects and theorists, as well as a few invited philosophers, produced a conference and publication series with titles such as 'any one', 'any way', 'any where', 'any how' (the 'any's' go on in an 11 part series concluding full circle with another 'any one').<sup>8</sup> With this titling, they simultaneously ascribed name and denied signification to the proper function of naming. In other words, they refused the framing device of naming its power to issue meaning. They actively, if not (self)consciously, determined their domain as not only ambiguous but, moreover, they abated culpability through the non-appellate of *anonymity*. The conference results evidenced a forum in which possibilities of discourse were free, unrestricted by any singular, imposing, or self-determining agenda. This freedom of discourse, of course, seems potentially very fruitful. Members of the conference could say anything; pose anything, anything that is as long as it did not posit a principle which inferred any form of causal relationship, or propositional logic, let alone meaning. Arguably, questions of meaning are profoundly problematic in Kafka's work. However, what of cause and effect as it is expressed through a theory of action? As a consequence of the *free for all* forum produced by the 'Any' organizers, a hermetically sealed framework resulted. Yet, did they not marshal a system that was totally self-referential, one that imposed, or at the very least self-supposed, total freedom? Is not such a 'freedom' an example of illusion, moreover, a modern (and enlightenment) chimera par excellent? Further, without action, without the particular determinants of the individual? is it not the *every man* that the 'Any' fraternity actually invoked. Of course, this inquiry on freedom leads to the next theme.

### THE FORMLESSNESS OF THE LAW

The *Law* must be seen as an ever-present force in Kafka's writing; equally and inversely, however, the law is that which can never be *seen*. We can witness the law only in terms of that which it produces. We are aware of its presence only through the limits, which it imposes (not unlike Foucault's concept of transgression).<sup>9</sup> Thus, we often meet the law only by means of

restriction and collision, and often through violence. We address it face to face, yet always and only merely at face value. For Kafka, we can never actually know the law for it is not only without form it is without content. At best, we can approximate it by gaining knowledge as to *how* it works. However, to understand it in terms of the *why* of its workings is necessarily a futile endeavor. Kafka is chronicling the irrelevancy of man's action when he operates in a structure that is discordant with his own time.<sup>10</sup> A structure which, though obsolete, continues by the force of sheer necessity; for man must have laws, as Georg Simmel suggest, in order to be free. Of course, it is the essence of this idea of freedom that Kafka continually interrogates. The distance between men and their *bodies* of governance, the battle of modernity with tradition is suffuse in Kafka's work. What then happens to the man who operates outside the law? His position remains in constant peril of moving beyond the frame of irrelevance to that of futility, and in Kafka, subsequently death.

As the law can be seen as the system upon which all activity transpires, trespassing can be seen as a violation upon the nature of any such system. The thrust of the late 19th & early 20th centuries-modern progress upon traditional frameworks is an example of such trespassing. This concept establishes the position of the *outlaw*: the one who stands outside the world. Further, as Simmel reminds us, he who does not stand under the law is by traditional definition not a 'free man'.<sup>11</sup> Most often the protagonist in Kafka's work stand in this position of *outsider*. In fact, they ultimately never recover from their confrontations with the law. This inability to recover is a consequence of their own inability to admit, or submit to, the framework in which they inevitably perform: It is the denial of culpability. This denial typically takes the form of either an active model of arrogant self-assertion – as in the example of Joseph K. in *The Trial*, or a passive model of ignorance – as in the case of the prisoner in *The Penal Colony*.

Conversely, many characters also seem to have found a method of coping: they have mastered the regulatory actions necessary to proceed within the system without trespass. A few years back, at the architecture faculty of the TU Delft, during an 'InDeSem' workshop, a small confrontation seminar was arranged between Adrian Geuze of West 8 architects and Michael Speaks. Geuze, (like many of the contemporary Dutch architects such as MVRDV as well) took a firm stance against theory in arguing that his main task as an architect was to merely take the rules and requirements of various (and numerous) governing ordinances and compile them into a model that could be built in the form of architecture. Geuze thus operates within the law and in so doing he is extremely effective. However, just like the attorneys who operate within the system (inside the law) in *The Trial*, it is of no import to consider if he *understands* the system in which he is obliged to act. The only point is that he has learned to function within it. He has accepted the position of resistance by refusing the quest for meaning. Under a Kafka-

esque model, irrelevancy is inherent in the fact that man cannot understand the system in which he functions for it is a system that is itself only relevant while in the act of engaging it (this should not be confused with a self-referential system). The act is thus the *enactment*, and within this limiting and ordering framework the architect is seemingly 'free'. Within this reading it is therefore clear that Geuze, as well as similarly such aligned practitioners, operates not as a progressive architect (as critique of this so named 'neo-pragmatist' camp typically claims) but as a new form of conservative<sup>12</sup>, or with Kafka one could say simply as a neo-traditionalist.

### THE DISTANCIATION OF TIME

Baudelaire's *flâneur* is caught up in the flow, the motion of the crowd – resisting yet becoming a part of this gesture. Kafka's 'K' does not in anyway address movement, for he does not frame himself in time. Kafka seems to remain connected to one task, that is the task of describing, or spatially one could say of circumscribing, action, of clarifying the relentless interrogation of the law: the neurosis of rational man. Le Corbusier produced models for living – to meet the 'needs' of modern man – environments that contain action as a rational necessity. Kafka produced the essence of the productive forces themselves – the rationality of the law made irrational by its inaccessibility. The positive or teleological visionary still saw man as rational agent. In Kafka, agency is lost in the absence of flow, in the silencing of all possibility of discourse. Le Corbusier's internalized blocks, his denial of the urban street as a legitimate domain of the masses precisely edifies the breach between tradition and progress. His visionary city turns itself inwards; but it does so not with the strength of Kafka's interiorized model of the 'any-mans' potential for individual self-reflexive becoming.

In the rush of progress understanding has been displaced by knowing, belief has been profoundly subjugated and without belief man, for Kafka, is destined to operate in a system to which he can never belong. Modern man's sense of *being* in the world returns violently to that of *becoming* – a process of becoming – exemplified in the act of metamorphosis.<sup>13</sup> Thus, he produces a temporal condition where any sense of chronological sequence is disavowed, where there is *no goal*, *no direction* towards and there can therefore be no sense of linear time. Le Corbusier's towards is totally annihilated in Kafka's here and now: the architecture of promenade is absorbed in the relative blindness of the flâneur.

### PROCESS AS (DIS)COURSE

To read Kafka is to witness Kafka *writing*. His gift: a method that in itself is both the expression of its structure and simultaneously an example of its form. If Benjamin chronicles

the effects (psychological and moral) that the *progress* of modernization has on man, Kafka provides us with a glimpse of the system (both physical and expressive) that produces these effects.

- <sup>1</sup> See Walter Benjamin, *Reflections: Conversations with Brecht* (London: Fontana Press, 1973).
- <sup>2</sup> For a thorough etymological survey on the name of 'Kafka' see: Jayton Koehn, *Kafka's Biomechanics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).
- <sup>3</sup> This aspect of the 'serious' work as opposed to the 'visionary' work of a writer is discussed by Walter Benjamin in correspondence with Bertolt Brecht (see note 4 above). Kafka's capacity as visionary has been phrased as such by Brecht in writing that Kafka saw what was to come without seeing what is.
- <sup>4</sup> This condition of naming, or the absence of naming, can be also seen in the work of Charles Baudelaire, as his writings on Paris never actually name the city itself. On this point see: D. Hauptmann, 'The past which is the present that was', in *Cities in Transition* (Rotterdam, 010 publishers, 2001).
- <sup>5</sup> The 'Any' conferences and publications were initiated by Peter Eisenman. Michael Foucault, *Language, counter-memory, practice: A preface to 'Transgression'* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1977).
- <sup>6</sup> This irrelevancy is not necessarily a nihilistic negation of meaning for, like Nietzsche, he also assigns a positive value to irrelevance. On this idea of the positive function within seemingly nihilistic frame works see Friedrich Nietzsche: *This spoke Zarathustra* (Penguin Books, 1964).
- <sup>7</sup> Georg Simmel, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life', 1903.
- <sup>8</sup> A contemporary Dutch theorist, Roemer van Toorn, refers to this concept as 'fresh conservatism'.
- <sup>9</sup> This condition of 'becoming' is highly complex in Kafka when one understands that the theory of action belongs more properly to the discourse on being. Deleuze and Guattari discuss this process (in fact of perpetual becoming) in terms of de-territorialization. See Deleuze and Guattari's, *Kafka, Toward a Minor Literature* (note 3 above) & *A Thousand Plateaus, Capitalism & Schizoanalysis* (Minnesota Press, 1987).
- <sup>10</sup> Self-referential frameworks such as the one created within the 'any' series transpire into an idiosyncratic system – a system that can only be monitored by its members (its self). For general reference see: Ciddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity* (Cambridge, Polity, 1991).
- <sup>11</sup> Much of what we see occurring today in the architectural debate parallels this struggle. On one side we see the work of architects and theorists who retain the belief that architecture can serve as a resistance to the overwhelmingly subjugated or 'post-humanist' subject. While on the other we see practitioners who have fallen into a numbing relinquishment to what K. Michael Hays refers to as the 'degraded status quo of consumer culture' or those who '... accept a certain determination by cultural forces outside architecture' over which, it is assumed, architecture has no control; see: K. Michael Hays, 'Ideologies of Media and the Architecture of Cities in Transition', in *Cities in Transition*, ed. D. Hauptmann, (Rotterdam, 010 Publishers, 2001).
- <sup>12</sup> This idea of 'reading' and 'writing' has occupied much space in literary analysis not to say that Benjamin's investigations since the 1970's. Of course, this is not as interdisciplinary investigations since the 1970's. Of course, this is framework of literary analysis.
- <sup>13</sup> The very issue of individuality against collectivity, private identity vs. the social responsibility, is a concern that surfaces as peculiarly 'modern' in Kraauer and Max Weber (to name only a few).
- <sup>14</sup> Deleuze and Guattari present an excellent model of Kafka's interiors in *Kafka, Toward a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis: London, 1986) (originally, *Kafka: Four une literature mineure*, 1975).
- <sup>15</sup> This idea of 'reading' and 'writing' has occupied much space in literary analysis not to say that Benjamin's investigations since the 1970's. Of course, this is not as interdisciplinary investigations since the 1970's. Of course, this is framework of literary analysis.

## NOTES

Kafka's model displaces meaning with function, he manipulates the predicative structure of language to the degree that there can exist no meaning beyond that which his writing so explicates. The *content* of the work is simply the *as is* of the text. The 'face to face' model returns as the condition of readability not as a metaphor in want of decipherment. The Kafkaesque trope necessarily leads not to an external system of representation, but to an internal and self-referential structure of revelation. Of course, the Kafkaesque frame of the self-referential operates differently from the one cited above in relation to the 'Any' series, it is, in fact, much more productive.<sup>11</sup> I propose that with Kafka, the *self-referential* is replaced by the *inter-referential*. Where the body( self) no longer poses a subject/object relationship, but itself becomes the embodiment of an *inter-referential*, and aesthetically assertive *reality*. It performs, as suggested in introduction, as a *reflexive* as opposed to self-reflexive, machine. It produces a machine of both transcription and inscription within the incision that abruptly separates tradition and progress. It functions as resistance while simultaneously it announces relinquishment.<sup>15</sup>