

Bodies- Discuss the use of bodies in the works of Franz Kafka

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In his works, Franz Kafka repeatedly turns to the body as a method of analysing the human condition, increasingly using it to destabilize notions of humanity as a transfigured species existing on a spiritual plane above that of the physical. This essay will look initially at Kafka's first novel *Amerika*, written between 1911 and 1914 and published posthumously, tracking Karl Rossman's struggles to realise his social ambitions due to his embarrassing corporeality. *Die Verwandlung* (1915), perhaps the most obvious case of Kafka's fascination with bodily form, will then be analysed as a further, more explicit, example of the relationship between humanity and carnality. The influence of Gregor Samsa's externally animal presence will be particularly important in drawing connections between the seemingly civilised Samsa family and an unconscious primality. Finally, Kafka's later short story "Ein Landarzt" (1917), belonging to an eponymous collection, will be read against these two longer works with an emphasis on the human's position within the animal kingdom, as opposed to above it.

In his earliest novel, *Amerika*, Kafka begins to take an interest in bodies as a vehicle for accessing the base nature of man which lurks beneath the veneer of civilised society. Repeatedly, Karl's aspirations are thwarted owing not to a lack of talent, but as a result of his physical weakness. Johanna Brummer's sexual exploitation of him, the inciting incident of the narrative, is depicted with a disturbing offset between the physicality of Karl and Johanna. She is always the active agent: first she 'führte ihn [...] unter Grimassen seufzend in ihr Zimmerchen,' then she asks him, 'sie zu entkleiden,' but in fact '[sie] entkleidete [...] in Wirklichkeit ihn.'¹ Throughout, Karl is the subject of action and utterly helpless. As the scene develops, the sexual abuse becomes more explicit as she 'drückte ihren nackten Bauch an seinen Leib, suchte mit der Hand, so widerlich, daß Karl Kopf und Hals aus den Kissen herausschüttelte, zwischen seinen Beinen.'² The corporeal nature of this description, referring to specific body parts and their role, reduces Karl to a set of component parts to be used for Johanna's pleasure. As a result, he comes to feel Johanna has become 'ein Teil seiner selbst' causing a feeling of 'entsetzliche Hilfbedürftigkeit.'³ Through Johanna's physical use of him,

¹ Kafka, Franz. *Amerika* in *Franz Kafka: Gesammelte Werke* Vol. 8 (Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1989), p.29.

² Ibid, pp.29-30.

³ Ibid, p.30.

Karl's sense of self is interrupted, decentring his sense of self as a complete whole. Owing to his corporeality, Karl as an individual being is undermined, suggesting the authority the body has over the being. The pairing of disgust and helplessness here establishes the body as a constant hinderance for Karl. Regardless of his internal state, his physical body is something he is intractably tied to and cannot leave behind, something which will frequently upset his attempts at social progress.

Karl's respectable position at the Hotel Occidental is shattered through a doubling of himself with Robinson, depicted through parallel physical suffering, which ultimately causes Karl to be thrust from his stable situation. Robinson's arrival at the hotel is marked by his grotesque bodily functions as, 'schon ergoß es sich aus Robinsons Mund in die Tiefe.'⁴ With this he throws himself at Karl, thus binding the pair physically and corporeally in a disgusting image framed by Robinson's vomit, recalling the former physical amalgamation with Johanna which disgusted Karl so viscerally. In the resulting confrontation with the Oberportier, Karl's physical suffering is doubled with Robinson's, drawing further associations between the two. While the Oberportier presses Karl's arm, 'so stark, daß ihm selbst vor Anstrengung die Tränen in die Augen trat,'⁵ Robinson is 'einfach niedergeboxt worden,' in the dormitory.⁶ Although Karl conceives of himself as a far more civilised being than Robinson, the pair become unified in their bodily suffering. While Karl can portray Robinson as nothing more than a 'lebendige Schuld,' their parallel suffering draws unavoidable links between the pair, indicating their similarities which Karl seeks to avoid.⁷ Robinson becomes for Karl not only a marker of guilt within the hotel, but, through their shared suffering and joint expulsion back into the outside world, an inescapable reminder of his own weakness and inability to escape from his own physical limitations. Heinz Politzer reads Karl as a figure of 'the conformist morality of the lower middle class,' who seeks to avoid humanities 'rough edges,' and remain civilised in the bourgeois sense.⁸ With this bodily intrusion of Robinson into Karl's professional environment, Karl is forced into contact with these 'rough edges.' His conception of Robinson as nothing more than a physical symbol of guilt, a hinderance in his own story, is rendered irrelevant as

⁴ Ibid, p.136.

⁵ Ibid, p.152.

⁶ Ibid, p. 154.

⁷ Ibid, p.141.

⁸ Politzer, Heinz. *Franz Kafka: Parable and Paradox*, (Cornell University Press, New York, 1962), p.125.

both are thrown out of the hotel together and any social advantage he held over Robinson is levelled out by their doubled suffering.

After being returned to Robinson's world of social indignity, Karl continues to be controlled physically, making redundant any sense of him as an intellectually superior figure in Brunelda's apartment. Victimised alongside Robinson, Karl tells himself, 'bleibe ich noch länger hier, gehöre ich schon zu ihnen.'⁹ Retaining his powers of reason, which throughout are unquestionably greater than those of Robinson, Karl identifies the danger he is in and thus the need for him to escape. This self-communication, however, proves futile in the face of Brunelda's 'unregelmäßig dicken Körper.'¹⁰ At the procession the following day, Brunelda restrains Karl with his head being 'auf ihrer Brust eingebettet[...],' forcing him to look through her opera glasses, meaning he sees 'nun tatsächlich nichts.'¹¹ Here, Brunelda uses her physical presence not only to restrict Karl physically, but also to inhibit his vision, suggesting a more complete form of control. Regardless of his desires and complaints, Karl is entirely at the mercy of Brunelda because of her bodily dominance over him. Thus, Kafka challenges the notion of the human as transfigured from its physical state. Although Karl internally constructs himself as transcendent of his material situation, his body frequently returns him to his corporeal limitations. Read through Michel Foucault's conception of the body as 'the inscribed surface of events [...] the locus of a dissociated Self,' we can perceive Karl as suffering because of his own corporeality.¹² His body is constantly 'inscribed' by others, denying him the fulfilment of his attempted process of self-transfiguration and conformity to bourgeois ideals.

In *Die Verwandlung*, Kafka develops his interest in the body with the explicit de-centring of the human which takes place in Gregor Samsa as he is transformed into 'einem ungeheuren Ungeziefer.'¹³ Although this transformation does not immediately alter Gregor's work-oriented disposition, his non-human state ultimately enables him to recover some sense of his spiritual humanity. Emerging from his room following the transformation, Gregor announces, 'ich werde mich gleich anziehen, die Kollektion zusammenpacken und wegfahren,' expressing his desire to carry on with his normative life regardless of his new bodily

⁹ Kafka, *Amerika*, p.202.

¹⁰ Ibid, p.188.

¹¹ Ibid, p.207

¹² Foucault, Michel. *Language, Counter- Memory, Practice*, Donald F. Bouchard ed., Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon trans. (Cornell University Press, New York, 1996), p.148.

¹³ Kafka, Franz. *Die Verwandlung in Franz Kafka: Gesammelte Werke* Vol. 5 (Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1989), pp.57-107, p.57.

condition.¹⁴ Inhibited by his non-human body, this option is rendered impossible, forcing Gregor into an isolated life of solitary contemplation. Within this isolation, dissociated from his physical humanity, he nonetheless manages to discover elements of spiritual humanity. Listening to his sister play the violin, Kafka relates Gregor's thoughts through *erlebte Rede*, asking, 'war er ein Tier, da ihn Musik so ergriff?'¹⁵ Despite his animal body, music transfigures his experience of life such that it seems to provide the 'Nahrung' necessary to sustain his soul.¹⁶ Once rendered unable to use his body for the fulfilment of his socially proscribed labour obligations, his appreciation of music is able to develop. Thus, Kafka posits the human body, because of its ability to be exploited for work, as something that is in fact inhibitive of spiritually transcendent notions.

His family around him, however, serves as a metonym for society in its rejection of the animalised Gregor, betraying the instinctive self-protective impulses of the human faced with the other. As Gregor's animal-state persists, the limits of Grete's sympathy are reached as she eventually announces to her father, 'du mußt bloß den Gedanken loszuwerden suchen, daß es Gregor ist,' portraying Gregor as a pest who 'so verfolgt uns [...] vertreibt die Zimmerherrn.'¹⁷ Because of his inability to work, Gregor becomes for Grete a fiscal burden and predatory figure. Taking Melissa de Bruyker's understanding of the body as a 'metaphoric border between the self and the society,' Gregor's non-human body functions as a literal wedge that divides him and his family.¹⁸ According to Grete's reasoning, once Gregor dies her family will be able to forget the embarrassment of Gregor's animal body, forming the transformation within the text which Carolin Duttlinger identifies as the 'true horror' of the narrative.¹⁹ However, as the focus shifts to the family following Gregor's death, Grete is described as a newly sexual being who, 'zu einem schönen und üppigen Mädchen aufgeblüht war.'²⁰ This image of Grete as an 'üppige[s] Mädchen' ties her to her corporeality. Indeed, Kafka ends his narrative by inverting the positions of Grete and Gregor as suggested by their bodily states. While Gregor, as 'Ungeziefer' comes to appreciate the transfiguring power of music by the end of his life, Grete,

¹⁴ Ibid, p.69.

¹⁵ Ibid, p.98.

¹⁶ Ibid, p.98.

¹⁷ Ibid, p.101-102.

¹⁸ De Bruyker, Melissa. *Who Identified the Animal? Hybridity and Body Politics in Kafka's "The Metamorphosis" and Amerika (The Man Who Disappeared) in Kafka's Creatures: Animals, Hybrids, and Other Fantastic Beings*, Marc Lucht and Donna Yari eds. (Lexington Books, Plymouth, 2010), pp.191-209, p.192.

¹⁹ Duttlinger, Carolin. *The Cambridge Introduction to Franz Kafka* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2013), p.38.

²⁰ Kafka, *Die Verwandlung*, p.107.

ostensibly the image of human civility, ends the narrative defined by her sexuality, her body becoming a material object to be used for the betterment of her family situation.²¹ Thus, by the end of the narrative, it is the human body, not the animal, that comes to represent the seemingly paradoxical relationship between carnality and social conformity.

In his dream-narrative “Ein Landarzt”, Kafka uses the human body in a similar way, dislodging mankind from its presumed dominant position in the world. The ‘großer Verlegenheit’ the doctor finds himself in at the outset of the narrative is caused by the physical distance between himself and his patient, necessitating the aid of a horse.²² Immediately, the doctor’s practice and command over the human body relies entirely on the non-human body of the horse. Forced into the animal realm of the ‘Schweinstall[.]’, in which the ‘Pferdeknecht’ predominates, the doctor begins to descend from his position of assumed authority as ‘Landarzt.’²³ Resulting from his need of animal help, his agency is supplanted by the Pferdeknecht. After insulting him in animal terms, ‘du Vieh,’ he quickly realises ‘daß er mir aushilft, wo alle andern versagen,’ forcing him to drop this line of attack and instead submit to the animality he is faced with.²⁴ Indeed, the Pferdeknecht, in his desire to remain ‘bei Rosa,’ appears to inspire a sense of duty in the doctor- something which will haunt him for the rest of the narrative- which he is unable to fulfil.²⁵ He is then transmuted instantaneously to the place he needed to travel. His uncomprehending simile, ‘als öffne sich unmittelbar vor meinem Hoftor der Hof meines Kranken,’ betrays the complete lack of control the doctor has over his situation, now dictated to him by the mysterious power of the horses.²⁶ In this warped dream, the doctor cedes his bodily authority, suggesting an unconscious fear. His need to control his patient leads him into this situation whereby his own bodily limitations are laid bare: his interest in Rosa is sparked yet cannot be satiated, and his own ability to act becomes entirely reliant on animal assistance.

Once with the patient, this degradation continues as the doctor fails to command the human body and even yields to the influence of the horses in his practice. About to abandon his patient, the doctor is alerted to his wound only by his horses: ‘ach, jetzt wiehern beide Pferde; der Lärm soll wohl, höhern Orts angeordnet, die Untersuchung erleichtern – und nun

²¹ Ibid, p.57.

²² Kafka, Franz, “Ein Landarzt” in *Franz Kafka: Gesammelte Werke* Vol. 5 (Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1989), pp.112-17, p.112

²³ Ibid, p.112.

²⁴ Ibid, pp.112-113.

²⁵ Ibid, p.113.

²⁶ Ibid, p.113.

finde ich: ja, der Junge ist krank.’²⁷ By this point, the horses not only perform their function of transporting the doctor at incomprehensible speed, but now encroach upon his own, uniquely human occupation. The wound’s proportions are described using the human body as ‘handtellergröße,’ associating the human body with ailment and disfunction.²⁸ Rosa’s image appears, ‘so aus der Entfernung,’ at the detection of the wound, so that the two become amalgamated as a sort of hybrid.²⁹ Read through this doubled image of the wound and Rosa, the doctor’s reaction, ‘wer kann das ansehen ohne zu pfeifen?’ becomes ambiguous as simultaneously his inability to treat his patient and his unfulfilled yearning for Rosa here betray his weakness.³⁰ Faced with an inability to perform his practice, despite the help of the horses, his unconscious desire for Rosa is revealed. Using the freedom offered by the dream narrative, Kafka draws links between the professional failings of the doctor and his sexual impotence with Rosa, uniting the two to produce a representation of human weakness. Unable to fulfil either his professional role or private desire, the doctor comes to exist as an entirely inadequate figure.

This degradation of human authority reaches its apotheosis as the doctor is stripped of both his physical and symbolic humanity, ending the narrative entirely at the mercy of the horses. After failing to treat their relative, the doctor describes how the family, ‘entkleiden mich,’ and ‘tragen mich ins Bett’ with his patient.³¹ This undressing serves metonymically as an identifier of his no longer civilised human state, while his being placed alongside his patient does the same for his position as doctor. Turning to the horses for salvation, the doctor trusts that they will carry him home as quickly as they brought him to his patient. However, this trust is ultimately misplaced; as he cries ‘Munter,’ in emulation of the Pferdeknecht, the horses do not accommodate his wishes but rather wander aimlessly through the ‘Schneewüste.’³² Severed from both his profession and his unconscious sexual desire, the doctor is rendered a purely physical being defined by his weakness. He is by now completely helpless, ‘nackt,’³³ and bound to the horses, unable even to reach literally now reduced to ‘the compromise figure of a Horse Man,’ as Andrew J. Webber imagines him. Yet this hybridised body is not one balanced between human and animal traits.³⁴ While the doctor lies ‘betrogen’ and unable to reach his ‘Pelz’ in the

²⁷ Ibid, p.115.

²⁸ Ibid, p.115.

²⁹ Ibid, p.115.

³⁰ Ibid, p.115.

³¹ Ibid, p.115-116.

³² Ibid, p.117.

³³ Ibid, p.117.

³⁴ Webber, Andrew J. *The Doppelgänger: Double Visions in German Literature* (Oxford University Press,

cart, the horses roam at will.³⁵ Thus, bound to the horses and lacking even his animal's 'Pelz,' the doctor is relegated beneath the level of the animal, resulting in this 'compromise figure' being led entirely by the horses. With this concluding image, Kafka unveils the human as a being worth less than its constituent parts, naked and lacking even the 'Pelz' of the animal world to protect itself.

By having his human bodies abused and associated with carnal desire, Kafka dislodges the human from its transfigured position in the world. As Karl's body inhibits his ambition, the human body contradicts man's civilised pretensions. This is developed as, by the end of *Die Verwandlung*, Gregor appears more spiritually free than Grete, who becomes tied to her physical sexual potential. Finally, the bodily degradation of the *Landarzt* to the point that he ends his narrative at the mercy of the horses ultimately subsumes the human into the animal world, occupying within it a position of total impotence. Overall, then, Kafka comes in his works to view the human body as a vehicle for attacking mankind's pretensions to higher consciousness than that which their corporeality resist.

Oxford, 1996; online edn, Oxford Academic, 3 Oct. 2011), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198159049.003.0006>, p.331.

³⁵ Kafka, "Ein Landarzt", p.117.

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