

## Kafka Betrayed: Or Reflections on Kafkology

I HAVE NEVER STUDIED KAFKA, AND TO BORROW JOSEF SKVOERCKY'S encounter with Kafka, "I only read *some* of his books."<sup>1</sup> The little I know of Kafka's work is about as original as the insights into Kafka's Oedipus complex by Sidney, the insurance man from Alan Bennett's play *Kafka's Dick*. Aware of my limitations as a Kafkologist, I began carrying home bundles of books from the library, and soon my study began to resemble Sordini's workroom with "every wall . . . covered with pillars of documents tied together, piled on top of one another." Since there was no end to these bundles arriving from the interlibrary loan office, and "as bundles of papers are continually being taken away and brought in, and all in great haste" the piles of books were always falling on the floor, and the "perpetual crashes, following fast on one another,"<sup>2</sup> came to distinguish my experience of immersion into Kafka scholarship. As my self-serving example illustrates, Kafka is often appropriated to make individual experience seem more exaggerated and complex. While this response on the part of a subjective reader may be relatively innocuous, critics who position Kafka into various ideological and cultural camps are fingered by Milan Kundera as Kafkologists. Kafkology is defined as tautological "discourse for Kafkologizing Kafka" with the sole purpose of producing and sustaining "its own image of Kafka, to the point where the author whom readers know by the name Kafka is no longer Kafka but the Kafkologized Kafka."<sup>3</sup> The intent of this exploration is to examine the process by which Kafka became Kafkologized both in literary criticism and popular culture, film, and drama.

The intertextual loop that places Kafka and the Kafkaesque in a dialogic relationship also reveals how texts enter "the discursive space of culture"<sup>4</sup> and are thereby transformed. According to Kundera and Bennett, it is Kafkology that plays the role of transmitter of Kafka into the intertextual loop of the Kafkaesque. As Bennett observes, the Kafkologized Kafka has been garrisoned by armies of critics, for if "there is a Fortress Freud so is there a Fortress Kafka, Kafka

his own castle.”<sup>5</sup> Kafka’s castle has been constructed out of ideological stones, and his texts have been held hostage within these walls. Both Kundera and Bennett trace the laying of the first stones of “Fortress Kafka” to Max Brod. According to Kundera, the roots of Kafkology emerged from under “the castrating shadow” of Saint Garta, the *roman à clef* published in 1926 by Brod shortly after Kafka’s death. “Savor the title,” Kundera instructs us, “*Zauberreich der Liebe [The Enchanted Kingdom of Love]*,” a novel that would have been forgotten were it not for Garta, a fictional portrait of Brod’s close friend Kafka, in the novel described by Brod as a “saint of our time.” “What a marvelous paradox,” Kundera observes, “the whole image of Kafka and the whole posthumous fate of his work were first conceived and laid out in this simpleminded novel, this garbage, this cartoon-novel concoction, which, aesthetically, stands at exactly the opposite pole from Kafka’s art.”<sup>6</sup>

Even Kafka’s very portrait has been appropriated in the service of the image of the suffering artist, who because of his neurosis and anorexia was unable to find meaning in relationships. The extent to which this image precedes Kafka is all-pervasive, and the Japanese have even adopted Kafka as an adjective; thus a picture of Kafka is very *Kafka*. Kafka has been forever imprisoned by the image of the black and white poster with his photograph in the foreground and Prague in the fog in the background, the fog concealing the labyrinthine space of what is considered to be the Kafkaesque. One of my students compiled a dictionary of words misunderstood *à la* Kundera as a basis for our study of Kafka’s *The Trial* in which he defined the Kafkaesque as “the image of an immense, three-dimensional labyrinth with constantly changing paths, wherein a pasty-skinned, nervous little bank clerk in a gray suit opens his mouth with an unuttered scream.” Thus the evocation of the Kafkaesque has become a cliché categorizing anything that is remotely offensive to our sensibilities, and often this term can be overheard in coffeehouses, particularly in conversations about the scary outside world. David Zane Mairowitz adds that in Prague “you can buy a Kafka TEE-SHIRT on every streetcorner in the tourist quarter, or his image on porcelain plates or artisanal wood carvings. You can take a ‘Kafka’ tour (‘Have lunch with Kafka’—no joke) and visit all the Prague landmarks where his ghost walks. Soon like Mozart in Salzburg, you’ll be able to eat his face on chocolate.”<sup>7</sup>

“Before even becoming the ADJECTIVE,” writes Mairowitz, Kafka was an assimilated Jew from Prague:<sup>8</sup>

The ADJECTIVE has come to stand for many things, not all of them having to do with Franz Kafka. He is often thought of as spooky. Or as a

writer of mysteries, or a kind of pre-Orwellian visionary mapping out the boundaries between bureaucracy and dictatorship. . . . There is now a literary science called “Kafkology,” and professors who vaunt themselves as “Kafkologists.” The literature ABOUT Kafka alone runs into thousands of volumes. A lot of it tells about his search for God and meaning in an Absurd universe, or the search for individuality in the Age of Bureaucracy. One American psychologist, ascribing every conceivable sexual fantasy to Kafka, including the wish to be sodomized by his father, interprets the Door of the Law in THE TRIAL as the unattainable entry to Mother Kafka’s vaginal canal.<sup>9</sup>

Consequently, Kafka as a cultural icon has become lost in the representation of K/KAFKA, for as Jean Baudriillard comments, “we are in a logic of simulation which has nothing to do with a logic of facts. . . . Simulation is characterized by a precession of the model, of all models around the merest fact—the models come first, and their orbital circulation constitutes the genuine magnetic field of events.”<sup>10</sup> Thus Kafka’s name has been absorbed as a bankable tourist attraction by the kitsch of representation. As Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari observe in their study of Kafka, the letter K “no longer designates a narrator or a character but an assemblage that becomes all the more machinelike, an agent that becomes all the more collective because an individual is locked into it in his or her solitude.”<sup>11</sup>

Long after the *roman à clef*, Brod went on to write a biography of Kafka in 1937 in which Kafka’s books were examined “almost exclusively in the *microcontext* of biography.”<sup>12</sup> Brod’s biography initiated an industry in which Kafka’s texts became allegories of Kafka’s religious, philosophical, existentialist, or Marxist views. In turn, biography was frequently reduced to hagiography, both religious and secular, and declarations such as “Kafka a martyr to his solitude” or “Kafka lived and suffered for us” become “mythomaniacal assertions” in the service of the “sainthood” of Kafka. To illustrate the collapse of critical priorities in Brod’s lyrical speculations about Kafka’s private life, Kundera cites that in a randomly chosen essay the letters are quoted fifty-four times, the diary forty-five, the stories twenty, *The Trial* five, *The Castle* four, and *Amerika* not once.<sup>13</sup>

Maurice Blanchot agrees with Kundera’s view of Kafka as a victim of inordinate interest particularly since his works “came into our possession not by life, but by the death of the author.” And even Blanchot’s voice resembles Kundera’s remonstrations: “One would like to recommend to writers: leave nothing behind, destroy everything you wish to see disappear; do not be weak, have confidence in no one, for you will necessarily be betrayed one day.”<sup>14</sup> Since one

focus of Kafkology is “biographical archeology,” that work is already doomed, for as W. G. Kudzus comments, “certainly there is no current method for finding a dead man, let alone for actually interacting with his aliveness.”<sup>15</sup> The selfless ardor of Kafkologists stems in part from the fact that the more a work comments on itself, the more it calls for commentary. “Who will not remember adding something to the reading of *The Castle*,” asks Blanchot, “and feeling guilty for having done so?”

What an abundance of explications and a frenzy of interpretation; what exegetical fury, be it theological, philosophical, sociological, political, or autobiographical; how many forms of analysis, allegorical, symbolic, structural, and even (anything can happen) literal! And so many keys: each employable only by the one who forged it, each opening one door only to close others. Where does this delirium come from? Why is reading never satisfied with what it reads, incessantly substituting for it another text, which in turn provokes another.<sup>16</sup>

Bennett in his play *Kafka's Dick* not only addresses Brod's culpability but also illustrates the ideological appropriation of Kafka as “prophet” of the coming of the Nazis. At the same time, he reveals to what extent the appropriation of Kafka's name is a consequence of commercial interests as well. The first scene, whose “date is immaterial, though it is around 1919,” shows the “dying” Kafka and Brod, “his friend” in a parody of the conversation about the “burning” of Kafka's books as Bennett piles on all the clichés that adhere to what has been designated as the Kafkaesque:

*Brod:* Can I just let you in on my thinking? We're in 1920 now, right? You're going to die soon . . . give a year, say 1924 at the outside. Well, less than ten years later we get the Nazis, right? And, as prefigured in some of your as yet unrecognizable masterpieces (which I'm going to burn, I know, I know), the Nazis seize power and put into operation the full apparatus of totalitarian bureaucracy.

*Kafka:* Max, I saw it coming.

*Brod:* You did.

*Kafka:* Would that history had proved me wrong, Max.

*Brod:* Would that it had. Only, tragically it didn't. Because in 1933 the Nazis are scheduled to stage their infamous Burning of the Books . . .

*Brod:* I can see it now: a shot of flames licking round a book jacket, the name Kafka prominently placed.

*Kafka:* Dreadful.

*Brod:* Sure, but burn one and you sell ten thousand. Believe me, if the Nazis hadn't thought of it the publishers would.

*Kafka:* Max, I'm not sure. Do I want to survive?

*Brod.* Of course you do. I'm a successful novelist, so I'm headed that way myself. I know you've got talent. You haven't made it big yet, in fact you haven't made it at all, but once you're dead I've a hunch your fame is going to snowball. Who knows, you could end up as famous as me. Whereas, you burn everything, you've squandered your life.<sup>17</sup>

Bennett's opening scene also illustrates Alan Udoff's observation that the majority of Kafka's writings stand

under the two fold homonymy of Kafka's signature: 1) the Kafka of Brod's citation, who authorizes the existing texts, confers canonicity on them, and installs them in their future existence as literature; and 2) Kafka's own citation of his name, or more precisely, the limits that he sets to Brod's citation, by which Kafka intends the utter destruction of the contested writings.

In reoriginating Kafka's name by means of claiming to save Kafka from KAFKA, or Kafka against his negative self, Brod "thus claims to speak authoritatively on the very alternation of desire central to the Kafkan complex."<sup>18</sup>

While Bennett's play reveals Kafka's enlistment by Brod into the ranks of an underground resistance to the Nazis, since World War II the reception of Kafka has been complicated and conditioned by the Cold War and has resulted in the garrisoning of Kafka into two ideological castles. In the West, the word *Kafkaesque* became synonymous with the annihilation of liberal individualism by the impersonal, all-penetrating mazes of totalitarian power, and *The Trial* in particular became an "illustration" of the horrors of totalitarian regimes. Communist critics, on the other hand, judged his fiction as prefascist documents showing the consequences that emerge from "blind obedience and sacrifice of intellect."<sup>19</sup> The slippage of Kafka into the word derived from his name, *Kafkaesque*, suggests the extent to which the word has entered the language to denote "an all-pervasive, menacing incomensurability between the experience and the reality of social relations."<sup>20</sup>

Jean-Paul Sartre's address to the Moscow Congress on Peace and Disarmament in July 1962 was the first forum that opened the discussion for the need "for disarmament in the cultural sphere." The reception of Kafka was identified by Sartre as the primal sin of the consequences of using "culture as a weapon," for in the West he was "distorted and misconstrued" and in the East "passed over in silence." For both Western and Soviet critics Kafka became exclusively the writer "who derided and exposed bureaucrats," and both sides used that central truth for creating their own versions of

Kafka.<sup>21</sup> Fearing that a subversive connection could be made that bureaucracy was an “inevitable sin of socialism,” the Czechoslovak Union of Writers approached Kafka as “a decadent antirationalist, as a divisive force out of place in a society intent on building socialism.”<sup>22</sup> Consequently, Kafka’s texts were considered as potential explosives that might detonate in the hands of socialist readers. While the international symposium at Liblice Castle on 27–28 May 1968 led to Kafka’s “rehabilitation” in the Soviet Bloc countries, and his works were finally published and acknowledged to be of artistic merit, they were at the same time condemned ideologically.<sup>23</sup> Thus in the service of the two dissenting ideologies Kafka the author was split asunder from what he had written. But even in his own time Kafka, in a letter to Felice Bauer, observed the makings of Kafkology as each critic attempted to imprison him in an “ethnic” fortress:

And incidentally, won’t you tell me who I really am; in the last *Neue Rundschau*, *The Metamorphosis* is mentioned and rejected on sensible ground, and then the writer says: “There is something fundamentally German about K’s narrative art.” In Max’s article, on the other hand: “K’s stories are among the most typically Jewish documents of our time.” A difficult case. Am I a circus rider on two horses? Alas, I am no rider. I lie prostrate on the ground.<sup>24</sup>

Kafka’s insight into his disappearance by means of interpretation represents the tendency in the broad social dimension that produces what has been designated as the Kafkaesque. Among the characteristics assigned to the Kafkaesque are shifts towards a progressive concentration of power, the bureaucratization of social activity that turns all institutions into boundless labyrinths, and the depersonalization of the individual. Ultimately, *The Trial* has become the symbolic text of the oppression of the individual on both sides of the Cold War. Thus on one side the Kafkaesque has come to correspond to the definition of oppressive totalitarianism and on the other as a description of the anti-individualistic preoccupation of capitalist market economies with money, property, and social status.

An example of a Marxist interpretation of Kafka is visible in the attempt by Peter Weiss to exorcise the spirit of Kafka from his consciousness, for Weiss sees Kafka as the star witness of futility, the representative of what Weiss calls “the twisted guilt-laden doomed and damned bourgeoisie.”<sup>25</sup> In a self-pitying chapter in his autobiography, Weiss feels himself to be as victimized as Joseph K., and he accuses himself for blindly accepting the verdict that has sentenced him to exile. Not until he “exorcised” Kafka from his consciousness was he able to develop as an artist:

Kafka was always in front of that wall which finally destroyed him; he was constantly running up against this wall which was, after all, no broader than himself. This wall was composed of the traditional laws and I needed to move only one step to the side in order to stand in front of an open space. But to be capable of this simple step I had to first abandon the chimera under which I was struggling. . . . The world where I stood alone with Kafka received its death blow. It was still near, it still existed, but it was a sepulchral vault in which I ran my head against a wall. Kafka had never dared to revise the verdict of the judges; he had exalted their superior force and constantly abased himself before it. Whenever Kafka was on the verge of seeing through it he sank to his knees and apologized.<sup>26</sup>

In his second variation on *The Trial*, Weiss places Kafka on “trial” for presenting Joseph K. in service of the dehumanizing, capitalist system that covers up its program under such labels as social responsibility, humanism, belief in progress, and support of the peace process.<sup>27</sup> Thus, in Weiss’s interpretation, K. is condemned for not recognizing the nature of the class struggle by those oppressed by the system he continues to serve while under the illusion that he is doing something positive in writing his “idealistic” monthly reports, in which he champions “a different kind of order, a greater order, a universal order” that will overcome pervading poverty, misery, and fear.<sup>28</sup> Despite his disgust with his immediate supervisors, K. hopes that he can change the system from within. In Weiss’s characterization, K. is a reactionary, who by the time that he begins to recognize how he has been absorbed into the multinational capitalist system finds that it is too late. Since K. can’t commit himself to join the “revolutionaries,” Leni and Titorelli, he is wounded in the crossfire between the two forces. Willem and Franz in the leather uniforms of the “regime of lies”<sup>29</sup> come upon K., and, as Franz kicks K.’s body aside, Willem comments, “Wie ein Hund.”<sup>30</sup> The last image of the play presents Leni kneeling over the dead K. as she raises her fists and lets out a horrible scream.

Weiss insists that the purpose of his “new process or trial” is to show a way out of Kafka’s serpentine twists of hidden power. Though he uses Kafka’s title, some of the events, backgrounds, and names of characters, these are used only as “quotations,” or as what Weiss designates as “homages” towards Kafka to whom his play is dedicated.<sup>31</sup> Despite his mark of obeisance towards Kafka, Weiss calls on his intertextual “other,” Bertolt Brecht, whose portrait hangs on stage alongside that of Kafka in Titorelli’s picture gallery, as his alternative voice. In his interview with Anita Brundahl, Weiss explains that he agrees with Brecht, who called the ineffectual intellectual as

a “tui,” one who has solutions for all problems, but despite his intellect, cannot act. The alternative to neurotic individualism is represented in Weiss’s play by a Greek chorus composed of workers, who are the only ones capable of bringing about social change. Not only does Brecht present the ideological counterargument to Kafka’s in Weiss’s play but also Brecht’s theatrical aesthetics of *Verfremdung* is called upon to elicit “not emotion” but reflection on the part of both the actor and spectator, for according to Weiss, it is preferable to play emotional content “demagogically” rather than with “pity and fear.”<sup>32</sup>

The portrait Weiss paints of Kafka is similar to that of Georg Lukács, who in his argument for “positive heroes” dismissed Kafka’s heroes as embodiments of a decadent type: “the isolated, melancholy bachelor who is cut off from nature and prone to highly aestheticized, subjective visions of reality.”<sup>33</sup> While Weiss’s and Lukács’s evaluations of Kafka represent the limits of ideological interpretations, more recent shifts in cultural studies on Kafka’s interest in clothes, body culture, exercise, sun-bathing, and health reform contextualize Kafka in “an aestheticized relation to the urban world,” for clothes in particular insert “the individual into a social context of set values, beliefs, activities.”<sup>34</sup> Mark M. Anderson notes that Kafka’s rejection of naturalism had to do with “his conviction that the substance of modern urban life has migrated to the surface of things.”<sup>35</sup> Thus yet another image of Kafka as the narcissistic aesthete has been added to Kafka the prophet and Kafka the lonely artist. Ultimately, the difference between Lukács’s designation of Kafka as a decadent and Anderson’s interpretation of an aestheticized Kafka reveals a shift in evaluating decadence as a negative by Lukács to the appreciation of decadence as a new aesthetics by Anderson.

Though the ideological battles between the critics of the two Cold War fortresses illustrate the problem of the Kafkologized Kafka in easily understood binary terms, the more aesthetic interpretations, particularly the appropriations of Kafka by the film industry and popular culture prove to be more subtle, and hence more treacherous. Orson Welles’s *The Trial* (1962) with its sudden shifts in perspective, bands of shadows and violent stripes of light, strange architectural spaces, and temporal distortions serves as an appropriate example of an aestheticized interpretation of Kafka that veils the more hidden project of an ideological interpretation. For example, Welles’s image of the hundreds of automaton typists in the huge space of the old Gare d’Orsay is framed aesthetically in such a way that the spectator is convinced that this image represents Kafka’s critique of the mechanization of the individual, despite the fact that



this image of mechanization belongs more to Karel Capek's vision than to Kafka's. Similarly the image of blindfolded justice surrounded by masses of victims with numbers on their arms stands out as a post-Holocaust indictment of "the trial."

Lawrence Langer ironically comments on Kafka's "fearful premonition of the Holocaust": "Someone must have been spreading rumors about Franz Kafka, for without having done anything wrong, he was proclaimed one fine morning the prophet of the Holocaust."<sup>36</sup> Holocaust analogies infiltrate the critical imagination of many Kafka scholars, particularly that of George Steiner, who asserts about *The Trial* that it "exhibits the classic model of a terror state": "It prefigures the furtive sadism, the hysteria which totalitarianism insinuates into private and sexual life, the faceless boredom of the killers. Since Kafka wrote, the night knock has come on innumerable doors, and the name of those dragged off to die 'like a dog' is legion."<sup>37</sup>

A closer reading of Kafka shows that both Steiner and Welles use Kafka for their own agendas, for as Kundera insists, Kafkology never focuses on the work itself but on its exegesis. Nor does Kafkology "look to Kafka's novels for the real world transformed by an immense imagination; rather, it decodes religious messages, it deciphers philosophical parables."<sup>38</sup> As K. "howls hysterically"<sup>39</sup> against the absurdity of existence, Welles rebels against Kafka's "pessimism" by interpreting Joseph K. as a mid-twentieth-century existentialist declaring his freedom as he rejects the abject submission of "dying like a dog." Thus, Joseph K., much like Albert Camus's Sisyphus, the hero of the absurd, finally "knows himself to be the master of his days,"<sup>40</sup> for when "agents" in trench coats throw a hand grenade into the pit in which Joseph K. is being held, he picks up the grenade and throws it back at them. Though he dies, the explosion mushrooms into an atomic cloud, and the spectators are left with the message that only the force of an atomic bomb can quell Joseph K.'s final insurrection against authority. As with Sisyphus, one must imagine Joseph K. "happy in that moment."<sup>41</sup>

The extent to which Kafka has entered a magnetic field of simulation, a field which according to Baudrillard requires proving "the real by the imaginary,"<sup>42</sup> is evident in the recent representations of the Kafkaesque, and one only has to note the actors who represent not K. the character but Kafka "as the real thing": Anthony Perkins in Welles's *The Trial* (1962); Jeremy Irons in Steven Soderbergh's *Kafka* (1991); Kyle MacLachlan in David Jones's *The Trial* (1992); Woody Allen as Kleinman, the Kafka *manqué* figure in his film *Shadows and Fog* (1992); and Daniel Day Lewis in Alan Bennett's *The In-*

*surance Man*, directed by Richard Eyre for BBC, Channel 2 (1986). Other recent representations include a “film within a film” by Beda Docampo Feijoo’s *The Loves of Kafka* (1991), with Jorge Marrale as Kafka in a drama about a screenwriter who travels from Argentina to Czechoslovakia to find a producer for a film about Kafka. More recently a short fantasy by Peter Capaldi, *Franz Kafka: It’s A Wonderful Life* (1995), with Richard E. Grant as Kafka, described in the reviews as more Capra than Kafka, presents Kafka’s seeming inability to complete the first sentence of his *Metamorphosis*. At the same time one can add to these representations of the Kafkaesque the Brothers Quay’s puppet animations, in particular *Nocturna Artificiale* (1979), in which a Kafka-like puppet with hollow eyes and dark eyebrows watches the strange city at night from the solitude of his room.

If Alfred Hitchcock’s observation that “casting is character” is true, then the actors representing K./Kafka already bring to their performances from other films established personae of the neurotic, the paranoid, the psychotic, the obsessive, the intellectual, and the insomniac, and in this manner their previous embodiments “precede” Kafka. One only has to note that Perkins was the psychotic of *Psycho*; Irons is the very embodiment of neurosis in films from *Reversal of Fortune* to *Damage*; MacLachlan’s image is wedded to his phenomenal career as the obsessive FBI Agent Cooper from David Lynch’s cultist television series *Twin Peaks*; Daniel Day Lewis is well known for his performances as the alienated outsider in such films as *My Beautiful Laundrette* and the womanizing intellectual Tomas from *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*; and Woody Allen represents the quintessential New York Jewish neurotic artist.

The compendium of quotations from the Kafkaesque in the films based on Kafka as text serves to illustrate the extent to which Kafka has been gulped down by the popular imagination. In *Shadows and Fog*, a film that might be described as Bertolt Brecht and Federico Fellini meet in Zentropa/Prague of the Astoria Studio’s imagination, the Kafkaesque and Allenesque collide in a whole range of self-conscious quotations: “At heart I’m a clerk,” “You filthy vermin,” “A family is death to the artist,” “I don’t know my function,” “I was unsure,” and “No one’s told me what to do.” Not only has Kafka been appropriated but also the cultural colonization of Prague as a symbol of the Kafkaesque has been taken over by the film industry’s desire for authenticity. In fact, with the exception of Jones’s *The Trial*, film representations of the Kafkaesque are flagrantly dependent on the clichés of early film noir, retaining thus the empty frame of the pathological nightmare of the genre. Both Allen’s and Soderbergh’s films open with a shot of a man running down narrow, shad-

owy, cobblestone streets, pursued by other men in long overcoats and wide-brimmed hats. And Bennett's opening shot in *The Insurance Man* refers to the genre as well, for it is night in a "foreign city" and a body is hanging from a lamppost while in the distance one can hear the sound of gunfire and bombs falling. With baroque Prague backdrops and expressionistic images, the films intentionally quote from old German expressionist films like Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari* (1919) or F. W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922), and in fact Soderbergh, in a playful tribute to the period, names the evil doctor in his *Kafka* "Murnau."

While Allen's film is a self-conscious farce on the themes of Lars von Trier's *Zentropa* (1991), Soderbergh's *Kafka* is a postmodern collage that erases the essential difference between Kafka and K.; they are both simultaneously Kafka/K. caught in *The Trial* and attempting to reach *The Castle*. Kafka is investigating the mysterious death of a friend and discovers that the dead man left behind some serious political enemies. At the same time, Kafka stumbles on a conspiracy linking officials at the insurance company with a body-snatching enterprise operating out of Hradcany Castle, the seat of the Czech government. But as Werckmeister observes, in Soderbergh's film, "social conflict transpires only in the actions and gestures of bureaucrats, terrorists, killers, and police officers, but what it is about remains unclear."<sup>43</sup>

In literary criticism, Kafka's solitude opens him up to endless interpretation of everything going on in history, but in Soderbergh's posthistorical interpretation, the clichés associated with the hollow-eyed hunger-artist are playful signifiers presented as self-conscious traces from Kafka's texts: "You're a lone wolf—you keep too much to yourself"; "I write by myself for myself"; "The terrible toil of the insurance office"; "You need to put some color in your cheeks"; "Please burn everything that I've written; a true friend would." Other references relate flippantly to his works: "*The Penal Colony*—it's so new!" "*The Castle* can look quite majestic from here!" At the same time Soderbergh combines the mood of film noir's shadowy streets filled with impending dread with that of the disorienting confusion of international political and criminal plots of films like Carol Reed's *The Third Man* (1949), and even the theme music, played on a cimbalom, suggests the famous zither music of the earlier film. Soderbergh, however, disrupts this noir vision of Prague by inserting a color sequence borrowed from science fiction. Kafka/K. penetrates "the castle," represented as a maze of interconnected corridors, and destroys the medical records division. He returns to the black and white representation and capitulates by confirming the

“suicide verdict” of the political martyr Gabriela Rossman. “You are very helpful, Kafka,” the police inspector commends him, and Kafka retreats to completing his “letter to his father.” Thus, despite the acrobatic “Kafka OO7” liquidation of Dr. Murnau, the film ends with “the betrayal of resistance, cooperation with the authorities, reconciliation with the tyrannical father.”<sup>44</sup>

Though all of the representations of Kafka may be easily relegated to the Kafkaesque, Jones’s *The Trial*, with a screenplay by Harold Pinter, is an exception. This may have to do with Pinter’s basic respect for Kafka, for if Walter Benjamin represents the critic who approaches Kafka with a great deal of tact, taking “all conceivable precautions against the interpretation of his writings,” then Pinter approaches the writing of his screenplay by finding his way in Kafka’s text, as Benjamin cautions, “circumspectly, cautiously, and warily.”<sup>45</sup> Pinter’s own attitude towards interpretation suggests a similar circumspection, and his advice for those seeking to find meaning in his own elusive plays is that “the more acute the experience the less articulate its expression.” He writes that the desire for verification on the part of readers is understandable “but cannot always be satisfied. There are no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what is false. The thing is not necessarily either true or false; it can be both true and false.”<sup>46</sup>

Jones’s version of *The Trial* does not strive for Kafkaesque effects; it is filmed in Prague and set in the period that Kafka wrote the novel. Rather than the depopulated versions of the renderings of the *Kafkaesque*, Jones’s early twentieth-century Prague is presented as teeming with merchants, hawkers, and people going about their business. In Kafka the institution is a mechanism that obeys its own laws; no one knows who programmed those laws or when. But no one said that this mechanism had to play itself out in dark shadows, and it is a shock to see the sunlit morning on which Joseph K. is arrested. Thus the lively throngs and sunlit buildings in Jones’s film bracket what Skvorecky describes as the *kafkarma* of Joseph K.’s daily encounters with bureaucratic *Besserwissers*.<sup>47</sup> The fact that these events in Jones’s film take place in the representation not of a dream but a “real” world is what brings out the essence of the quality Kundera calls *Kafkan*. “This term,” he writes, “determined solely by the novelist’s images, stands as the only common denominator in situations (literary or real) that no other word allows us to grasp and to which neither political nor social nor psychological theory gives us any key.”<sup>48</sup>

The absorption of Kafka’s very name by popular culture has at the same time repositioned him within that twilight zone that exists be-

tween popular entertainment and “serious” art. As Bennett comments, in “de-nominating himself Kafka was to make his name and his letter memorable,” for in diminishing it he augmented it. Having now reduced the name to K, “he docks it, curtails it, leaves its end behind much as lizards do when something gets hold of their tail.”<sup>49</sup> The absolute reduction of the name to the logic of mass production is evident in the packaging of Kafka for the Broadway stage. Steven Berkoff’s dance drama *Metamorphosis* (1989), with Mikhail Baryshnikov as Gregor Samsa, and Marthe Clarke’s dance drama interpretation of *The Hunger Artist* (1987) illustrate the extent to which Kafka’s name has become a mere garnish that will assure these intrepid explicators of texts a place in the contemporary avant-garde. In both productions, movement, textual readings, scenic imagery, and musical accompaniments converge into one seemingly contradictory vision of Kafka. In Clarke’s interpretation, lyrical dance passages and dramatic extracts both from the story and Kafka’s letters to Felice Bauer are composed to create an impression of Kafka’s emotional starvation, his incompatibility with Felice, and his “hunger for relationships.” Earth mounds on the dance floor, cabbages, a nineteenth-century rocking horse, bentwood chairs, a portrait of Kafka purposefully hung askew serve as “contrapuntal” effects that appropriate Kafka as “one” of the stage effects. Berkoff, in his staging of the story about the insect that Kafka himself insisted could not be represented, acts somewhat like Kafka’s publisher, who thought that a cover illustration for the story was essential.

Fortunately there is no insect costume; instead Baryshnikov as Gregor Samsa appears in a three-piece, pin-striped suit, the contemporary equivalent of a costume for bureaucratic insects. The set is composed essentially of black metal bars with a cage for Gregor’s room on which Baryshnikov “performs” the giant insect. Though *Metamorphosis* strives for the effects of high art in the form of a “spoken” ballet, the reviews suggest a “failed” musical. The adapter’s solution is to distribute the narrative fragments among the characters, and thus the characters step in and out of their roles, and in the same tone of voice describe their actions from without. Their speech and actions are robotic, and only Gregor is individualized through Baryshnikov’s performance. That Baryshnikov is the STAR of the performance is without question, for the program announces Baryshnikov’s name in letters that are immense in comparison to Kafka’s, with “Franz” amputated altogether, and thus Kafka is literally swallowed up by the “name” that for the moment can sell more tickets.

Contemporary critical theory shares with Kundera the contempt

for the reader's constant desire for verification and explication. Jacques Derrida cautions that "reading a text might indeed reveal that it is untouchable, properly intangible *precisely because it can be read*, and for the same reason unreadable to the extent to which the presence within it of a clear and graspable sense remains as hidden as its origin. Unreadability thus no longer opposes itself to readability."<sup>50</sup> Similarly Michel Foucault describes the desire to interpret as "a way of reacting to enunciative poverty, and to compensate for it by a multiplication of meaning; a way of speaking on the basis of that poverty, and yet despite it. But to analyze a discursive formation is to seek the law of that poverty, it is to weigh it up and to determine its specific form."<sup>51</sup>

The theme of betrayal in *Testaments Betrayed*, "An Essay in Nine Parts" is not a new venture for Kundera, for "betrayal" is central to Kundera's novels, and there is hardly a character in his novels who doesn't betray someone or something. Sabina from *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* immediately comes to mind, for not only does her very name refer to the nineteenth-century Czech poet Karel Sabina, who betrayed the cause of the Czech nationalism. Sabina represents the quintessential betrayal of country and ideology, but also she is the voice that associates sentimental cover-ups of human existence as kitsch, defined by Kundera as the privileging of feeling in order to cover up the truth. For as Kundera observes, "When the heart speaks, the mind finds it indecent to object. In the realm of kitsch, the dictatorship of the heart reigns supreme." In a catalogue to an exhibit of Sabina's paintings she discovers that her biography "read like the life of a saint or martyr: she had suffered, struggled against injustice, been forced to abandon her bleeding homeland, yet was carrying on the struggle."<sup>52</sup> Sabina's fate is the very same fate that Kafka has endured as Saint Garta in Brod's novel. However, there is a profound difference between the betrayals that Kundera explores in his novel, for they represent the existential predicaments of the modern world in which we can only improvise our lives, while the "testaments betrayed" have to do with the insensitivity of readers who want to promote their own sensitivity. One only has to read a short passage from Brod's biography of Kafka to become aware that his main concern is not to describe Kafka's works but to show off his own lyrical linguistic sweeps:

There you have fire, the completely restless fire and blood of a tense childhood, full of forebodings; but the walls of fire obey the baton of an invisible conductor; they are not ragged sheets of flame but a palace, whose every stone is a roaring blaze. Perfection—and just for that reason

*outré* and not extravagant. . . . If the angels made jokes in heaven it would have to be in Franz Kafka's language. This language is fire, but it leaves no soot behind. It has the sublimity of endless space, and at the same time it palpitates with every palpitation of things created.<sup>53</sup>

This passage was chosen randomly, for in reading Brod's hagiography one is struck by the many passages which are in essence tributes to himself, to his sensitivity in recognizing Kafka's greatness. Note also Kundera's reminder: "No one is more insensitive than sentimental folk. Remember: 'Heartlessness masked by a style overflowing with feeling.'"<sup>54</sup>

In *Testaments Betrayed* the theme of the betrayal of Kafka's legacy is only one of many variations on betrayals; other themes include the betrayals of composers Igor Stravinsky and Leon Janáček by the naive critics who "feel" that their music reflects a romantic sensibility. We can see how Kundera's thematic explorations of Stravinsky and Janáček ultimately lead back to Kafka when he quotes Stravinsky that music is "powerless to express anything at all: a feeling, an attitude, a psychological state."<sup>55</sup> He insists that understanding comes from paying attention to the structure of their music, and that the only way to understand Kafka's novels is to read them within the context of the history of the art of the novel. "Rather than search the character K. for a portrait of the author and K.'s words for a mysterious coded message, to pay careful attention to the behavior of the characters, their remarks, their thoughts. . . ."<sup>56</sup>

Betrayal by mistranslation is yet another variation that allows Kundera to take one sentence from Kafka's *The Castle* in the many mutations that reveal the desire of "bad poets" to add to Kafka's simplicity by eliminating his transgressions against good style. These thematic variations allow Kundera to lay out his great theme: the independence of art, not only from the encroachments of morality but also from politics, from history, from uncomprehending champions of their art as well as uncomprehending critics—not to mention, uncomprehending translators. The collection of essays is not, however, a mere catalogue of Kundera's pet peeves, for Kundera avoids the very didacticism that he sees rooted in nineteenth-century realism, which according to him leads to the "grand march" of Socialist Realism, by using the polyphonic form he so admires in Jacques Diderot's *Jacques the Fatalist*. Kundera is not a system maker; instead he gathers bits and pieces of Kafka, Janáček, Rushdie, Stravinsky, Hemingway, Céline, and others and brings them together thematically in order to reveal what he calls "the spirit of the trial" to induce "guilt," which pervades much of contemporary literary criticism.

Kundera also suggests that contemporary psychological, sexual, and gender interpretations share the same spirit as good-old Socialist Realism for putting the artist on trial, not so much for social omissions but for betraying his own “transgressive” self. As an example, Kundera uses the sentence in the third chapter of *The Castle* in which Kafka describes the coition of K. and Frieda to reveal the substantial differences in the “translation” of the sentence when authority over the text becomes the central purpose. Using translations by Alexandre Viallette, Claude David, and Bernard Lortholary, Kundera illustrates the dissatisfaction on the part of the translators with Kafka’s repetition of *Fremde* twice and its derivative *Fremdheit* once by ignoring the repetition and adding their own words: “where one must suffocate from exile” or “abroad, in a country where.”

“The metaphor,” writes Kundera, “loses the element of abstraction it has in Kafka, and its ‘touristic’ quality is heightened rather than suppressed.”<sup>57</sup> While the choices by Viallette, David, and Lortholary appear to be purely aesthetic choices, they also suggest dissatisfaction with Kafka’s interplay of multifaceted meanings in the repetition of *Fremde* and instead attempt to unravel meaning and significance from the simple sentence. On the other hand, *Fremde* is interpreted by Anderson as evidence of “precisely these ‘disgusting’ heterosexual relations that Kafka repeatedly characterized as a violation of his identity, as a journey away from the strange or *eigentümliche* [belonging exclusive to; peculiar; characteristic; original; specific; queer] self that marked him as a writer.”

Whatever he may have thought of “male culture,” Kafka was never able to conceive of heterosexual *Verkehr* [traffic; sexual intercourse] as anything but a betrayal of his *eigentümliche* self, as a journey into *die Fremde*.<sup>58</sup>

In arguing “against interpretation” Kundera focuses on the “betrayed” writers and composers in his *Testaments Betrayed* as variations on his grand theme of the independence of art. He revisits old territory since for him variations “constitute a journey, but not through the external world.” He writes in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, “You recall Pascal’s *pensée* about how man lives between the abyss of the infinitely large and the infinitely small. The journey of the variation form leads to the second infinity, the infinity of internal variety concealed in all things.”<sup>59</sup> Thus we find in Kundera’s novel *Immortality* Hemingway complaining to Goethe, much as Kundera himself castigates Brod:

I must have told people a thousand times to leave my life alone. But the more I pleaded the worse it got. . . . When I won the Nobel Prize I re-



fused to go to Stockholm. Believe me, I didn't give a damn about immortality, and now I'll tell you something else; when I realized one day that it was holding me in its clutches, it terrified me more than death itself. A man can take his own life. But he cannot take his own immortality. As soon as immortality has you aboard, you can't get off. . . .<sup>60</sup>

Kundera's Goethe recognizes the paradoxical nature of the death of the author: "Man doesn't know how to be mortal. And when he dies, he doesn't know how to be dead."<sup>61</sup> Kafka of course has his own problems with immortality, for when Brod published Kafka's diaries, Kundera comments, "he censored them somewhat" by deleting not only the allusions to whores but anything else touching on sex. Since that time, Kundera writes, "Kafkology has always expressed doubts about its subject's virility" and "delights in discussing the martyrdom of his impotence." Kafka has thus become "the patron saint of the neurotic, the depressive, the anorexic, the feeble; the patron saint of the twisted, the *préceieuses ridicules*, and the hysterical."<sup>62</sup>

The metaphoric search for Kafka's penis is played up in Bennett's witty comedy *Kafka's Dick*, performed at the Royal Court Theatre in London in 1986. In taking on the owner of the best-known initial in literature as the protagonist of his farce, Bennett is also commenting on the nature of Kafkology:

The theory these days (or one of them) is that the reader brings as much to the book as the author. So how much more do readers bring who have never managed to get through the book at all? It follows that the books one remembers best are the books one has never read. To be remembered but not read has been the fate of *The Trial* despite it being the most readable of Kafka's books.<sup>63</sup>

The main character in Bennett's play, Sydney, a minor executive in an insurance firm in Leeds, is precisely the kind of reader who knows all about Kafka but has never read his books. Though Sydney has accumulated a myriad of biographical facts on everyone from Ludwig Wittgenstein to F. Scott Fitzgerald, his particular specialization is Kafka, and as we find him relaxing in the living room, he is examining a book by two psychologists at the University of North Carolina, "who having analyzed everything Kafka ever wrote, deduce that one of his problems, of which there were many, was a small penis" (13). Linda, his wife, asks innocently, "No pictures?" This desire to see "nude photographs" (13) of the famous author reveals the extent to which that desire is titillated by publishers who while showing no "picture" nevertheless produce an endless flow of

letters, biographies, and critical interpretations on Kafka, for as Sydney informs an incontinent Max Brod who appears on their doorstep looking for a bathroom: "I believe the Library of Congress catalogue lists some fifteen thousand" (41).

Bennett's play "around" Kafka shows that he shares Kundera's aversion to kitsch and hagiography, and to a large extent his play addresses Kundera's contempt for academic sleuths. "I assure you that rifling through someone's intimate correspondence," writes Kundera, "interrogating his former mistresses, talking doctors into betraying professional confidences, that's rotten. Authors of biographies are riffraff, and I would never sit at the same table with them." This protest unfortunately has no effect, for the "spectacle of public executions" of authors is the prime entertainment of the day.<sup>64</sup> In Bennett's play, Sydney, whose only qualification for doing research seems to be a distressing fondness for psychobabble, is busy digging around in Kafkology for his "case study" on Kafka's Oedipus complex, which he hopes to publish in *The Journal of Insurance Studies*. As he works on his project, Sydney comes to resent Kafka, for as Bennett comments, "biographers are only fans after all, and fans have been known to shoot their idols."<sup>65</sup> The desire to "shoot" the author is reflected by an irate reader in Kundera's *Immortality* as well:

It was necessary to say out loud at last that reading *about* Hemingway is a thousand times more amusing and instructive than reading Hemingway. It was necessary to show that Hemingway's work is but a coded form of Hemingway's life and this life was just as poor and meaningless as all our lives. It was necessary to cut Mahler's symphony into little pieces and use it as background music for toilet-paper ads. It was necessary at last to end the terror of the immortals. To overthrow the arrogant power of the Ninth Symphonies and the *Fausts*.<sup>66</sup>

Sydney, like Kundera's reader, shares that compulsion to defame the immortals. He does this by concentrating on nothing but the facts: "I'm an insurance man, I prefer facts. Biography. I'd rather read about writers than read what they write" (13). His storehouse of facts includes such recently acquired trivia "that Hitler went to the same school as Wittgenstein" (11), a connection he considers quite provocative, "for one of the functions of literary criticism is to point up unexpected connections" (15). Linda, a former nurse, does not share her husband's literary interests. But she has picked up one or two tidbits from him; she knows that Auden wore no underpants, that Mr. Right for E. M. Forster was an Egyptian tram-

driver, and that Kafka's father "used to rummage in his ears with a toothpick then use it to pick his teeth" (13). Some day, she says, she'll read and "learn the things in between" (14). Sydney explains that biographical facts are more important than the "things in between." "This is England. In England facts like these pass for culture. Gossip is the acceptable face of intellect" (81). As he explains to Linda the "essential" Kafka, we find that Sydney's interest in Kafka is entirely self-serving, for in finding parallels with Kafka's life, he ennobles himself:

He was never short of symptoms. You could at least have nursed him. You wouldn't like his stories. Not what you'd call "true to life." A man turns into a cockroach. An ape lectures. Mice talk. He'd like me. We've got so much in common. He was in insurance. I'm in insurance. He had TB. I had TB. He didn't like his name. I don't like my name. I'm sure the only reason I drifted into insurance was because I was called Sydney. (14)

A deft parodist, Bennett is the inventor of the most intricate play within a play on the modern English stage. He complicates the structure of *Kafka's Dick* by using a number of framing devices while at the same time creating a simultaneity that allows for the contemporary period to gradually catch up with the time frame of the first, the years 1900–1926. The play is framed by a brief biographical interlude dramatizing Brod's promise to burn Kafka's work and the consequences of the broken promise when Kafka is forced to enter the playroom of the immortals where Wittgenstein dances with Betty Hutton and Dostoevsky chats with Noel Coward (82). As Kafka enters the hall of immortality, the gatekeeper Brod/St. Peter points out God, who is at the same time the POLICEMAN and Hermann K., and the play ends with Kafka's realization that "heaven is going to be hell" (85).

The two different time periods are united not only by the apparitions of Kafka, Brod, and Hermann K. in the contemporary period but also by the theme of the fathers: Sydney is threatening to put his rather sweet father into a nursing home, but the father is thwarting this by memorizing the necessary facts that determine identity. "Somebody's been telling lies about me" (39) he tells Brod, whom he suspects as being one of the "they" who are coming to take him away. When Hermann K., who is at the same time the POLICEMAN, appears, Sydney's father recognizes him: "This is him. He's got authority written all over him" (47). Hermann K. in turn demands that his son "sink to his knees in abject remorse" (52). At this point Bennett produces the repertoire of clichés on Kafka's emaciation and

Kafka's inadequacies and puts them into Hermann K.'s mouth: "Still as thin as a tram ticket. Did he eat?" (52). But of course Kafka's hidden penis is really the source of the Oedipal struggle: "There is one fact about my son and his . . . old man that has never got into print. . . . The long and the short of the matter is . . ." (61). If fathers in Kafka, as Stanley Corngold observes, "exist as the fiction of an exculpatory authority empowered by errant sons born to be ruined by their hope of real fathers,"<sup>67</sup> then Bennett provides the mirror image of contemporary society's exculpatory authority of weak sons over decrepit, feeble fathers.

By the time we meet Brod on Sydney and Linda's doorstep carrying a turtle who later emerges from his shell as Kafka, Bennett has already developed his theme of betrayals. The culprit in Bennett, as the first scene already established, is Brod, but his second appearance confirms first impressions; Sydney quickly reassures Brod that though he's read half a dozen biographies of Kafka, he always returns to Brod's. "Of course you do," replies Brod. "I knew Kafka. They didn't" (18). For Brod "knowing" Kafka is tantamount to being Kafka, for as he says of Kafka's novels, "I practically wrote them" (51).

But Kafka's sudden transformation from the turtle forces Brod to become more circumspect. Kafka is not aware of his fame, for he still thinks Brod burned all his manuscripts. In Brod's words: "He knows he's Kafka. He doesn't know he's *Kafka*." The consequent game Sydney is forced to play is "I don't know him, I've never heard of him" as he rushes to his bookshelf to hide all his books on Kafka. As the piles of books come tumbling down, Bennett reveals that they consist entirely of the Kafkological canon: *The Loneliness of Kafka*, *Kafka: The Debate Continues*, and *The Agony of Kafka*, and so on. When Kafka discovers Brod's betrayal, Sydney reassures Kafka that the proliferation of studies interpreting his life are the basis for his current fame as an icon of resistance to "fascism, communism, the totalitarian state" (72):

Your reputation today, at least among those who know your name but haven't read you (which is the measure of literary reputation after all) . . . stands high as a man who protested (though don't ask in what respect precisely), a man who shook his fist (helplessly, no doubt) against authority, officialdom, the law. You were, if not an enemy of the state, a friend of the enemies of the state. (73)

Kafka protests that he would like to find a community of outcasts who would read him "furtively, with discretion and behind locked

doors.” The ideal readers, according to Bennett’s Kafka, would be those who read him but don’t name him, know him but do not speak of him, study him but do not teach him. “That would be my ideal state” (73).

In this debate between the two insurance men, the essence of Bennett’s critique of Kafkology surfaces, but his critique is based on the deconstruction of such clichés that Sydney has appropriated: “You see, try as we will, we can never quite touch Kafka. He always eludes us. We never do know him” (79). All these clichés are built on the myth of the artist’s life, “how one struggled for years against poverty and indifference only to die and find himself famous. Another is a prodigy finding his way to the public’s heart to be celebrated while still young, but paying the price by dying and being forgotten. Or just dying” (81). But these myths have to conform to what we have convinced ourselves an artist’s life should be, and Kafka’s life has turned into the stuff that created *St. Kafka* written by Brod and a farce in which Kafka is reduced to his penis by Bennett. “The process goes on,” Sydney comments, “articles, books . . . every day is—” as Kafka interrupts “—a day of judgment. I know” (73).