Franz Kafka and Films

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There is probably no art form or medium on which Franz Kafka's works have not left their traces. He has inspired visual artists and filmmakers, composers, playwrights and novelists from around the world, and his influence crosses the boundary between high and popular culture. Thus his writings have had a particularly strong influence on graphic artists, and Kafka is omnipresent on the World Wide Web, where a search brings up countless websites devoted to his life and works, to his drawings and photographs, and to Kafka research, as well as more quirky and imaginative sites such as blogs and adventure games. Kafka's huge influence on the arts is the result of two factors. His texts are odd and disturbing, and their simple but brilliant storylines lend themselves well to be adapted and developed. Irrespective of their strangeness, however, his texts portray moods and experiences that are universally recognizable. At heart, they are concerned with the pitfalls of modern life in ways which still seem fresh and relevant today. Kafka is a truly global author, and although his texts are rooted in their time and context, they do not – at least at first reading – require in-depth historical knowledge but continue to resonate with people from all walks of life. This, arguably, is both strength and a weakness. Since the term 'Kafkaesque' was coined in 1936 by the British poet Cecil Day Lewis, it has become a neat shorthand for all manner of alien or unsettling situations, but the ubiquity of the term is also symptomatic of a problem, suggesting that we are somehow familiar with Kafka's works even if we have never read a word of them (Duttlinger 120). Although the challenges faced by artists responding to Kafka are very different from those of Kafka scholars, there are many points of contact between the two. Kafka's reception in different art forms has become an important part of Kafka research, while artists' responses are often informed by critical debates. Both forms of

response revolve around similar questions, most importantly the problem of interpretation, which in the creative arts feeds into the challenge of adapting or 'translating' Kafka into a different medium. To illustrate these cross-connections, I will now turn to three landmark films based on Kafka's novels, which give an insight into different methods of adaptation across four decades. Orson Welles, *The Trial* Orson Welles's *The Trial* (France, Italy, Germany 1962) is a modern classic and the most celebrated of all Kafka film adaptations. Welles stated in an interview that he regarded *The Trial* as his best film, although audience responses were mixed. Kafka purists disliked the liberties Welles took with the novel, and film critics, looking for a second Citizen Kane, were disappointed by its abstract quality. *The Trial* is the earliest of the three adaptations discussed here, and the one where the director exerts his creative authority most freely, although by amending the storyline in the way he did, Welles was arguably trying to bring out the essence of Kafka's novel. Welles turns *The Trial* into a McCarthyist thriller about surveillance and (political) persecution. The theme of sexual guilt looms large at the beginning; Fräulein Bürstner's name is mentioned in the very first sentence, and K. asserts unprompted that the policemen will not find any pornographic material in his room. Subsequently, however, K. hints that his arrest might have a political cause, a revelation that triggers a shocked response in his conversation with Fräulein Bürstner. Welles wrote the screenplay and also played the advocate, Albert Hastler, a character based on the novel's advocate, Huld. In the film, his role is expanded, for after K. has dismissed him, he makes another appearance just before the end, after K.'s meeting with the priest. Anthony Perkins is a handsome, sinewy Joseph K. and bears a striking resemblance to Kafka as we know him from photographs. He invests his part with a sense of black comedy, though in the course of the film his initial hysterical surprise gradually gives way to more aggressive behavior (Ardent 71-77).

The setting of Welles's film is more sleekly modern and yet more dilapidated than Kafka's novel. Joseph K.'s workplace at the bank is in a vast open-plan office filled with the deafening noise of hundreds of typists, and Welles also adds a scene in which K. takes his uncle to see the bank's central computer, which, as the uncle suggests, might have the answer to his case. The scenes set at the law offices were filmed in the (then disused) Gare d'Orsay in Paris, a space both vast and labyrinthine. Other parts of the film were filmed in Zagreb; the apartment

block where K. lives is a Soviet-style housing estate surrounded by an urban waste dump, evoking inhuman living conditions at the height of the Cold War. The film alludes to the political witch hunt of the McCarthy era, as well as the more general anonymity of modern life, but it also contains a brief, cryptic scene which has more specific resonances. On his way to his first hearing, K. passes a large group of dishevelled-looking elderly men and women, who are waiting outside, wrapped in sheets, with numbered signs around their necks – a sight which recalls the deportations of the Third Reich. The revised ending, in turn, marks an attempt to update Kafka's novel and imbue it with contemporary relevance. Rather than slaying K. with a butcher's knife, his executioners throw him a bomb, which K. picks up before it explodes in a mushroom cloud – *The Trial* for the nuclear age.

As viewers, we are either too close to the action or not close enough, but never at the 'right' distance. This sense of disorientation is enforced by the repeated disjuncture between sound and image. In dialogues between two characters, the camera does not switch between the two but remains focused on the more passive character while the voice of the speaker off-screen is recessed, forcing us to concentrate hard on what they are saying. In an interview, the directors declared that their aim had been to do 'the opposite of what Orson Welles did; we didn't want to show in any way what Kafka described'. This is borne out in their screenplay; in adapting Kafka's novel, they leave out all the 'cinematically' animated scenes which in the text convey the disorienting dynamism of American life. Thus the film misses out the brief 'cuts' to the moving ships in the harbour, which in the novel are interspersed with the discussion in the captain's office, as well as the panorama of the bustling streets of New York City, in which Karl gets absorbed when standing on the balcony in his uncle's house. In the film, this latter scene is replaced by a long tracking shot of tall town houses filmed from below, suggesting Karl's dwarfed perspective. The scenes set in New York City were shot in Hamburg, a reflection of the fact that Kafka himself had never travelled to the United States and that his protagonist is weighed down by his (literal and metaphorical) European baggage (Gilman 221). At this early point, the camerawork suggests, Karl's journey is still wide open, but in the second half of the film the scenes are shot mostly in claustrophobic interiors. In the part set at the Hotel Occidental, the bustle of the large hotel, which is such a prominent theme in Kafka's novel, is completely

missing. Instead, we get many close-ups of Karl standing alone next to his elevator, and when he carries the drunken Robinson to his bed, he takes him to a small, quiet room rather than the crowded liftboys' dormitory. The film is beautifully shot, but sparse and empty. By focusing on the impassive protagonist, a character drained of all emotion, it depicts not the unceasing traffic of American life but its underlying solitude. This is underlined by another aspect of the camerawork. The camera often lingers on empty rooms or spaces after characters have left. Spaces and objects gain an eerie life of their own, which is inaccessible to the people living among them. Indeed, the long, lingering shots of empty spaces, which also include desolate landscapes and motorways, suggest a world devoid of human beings; in this, they encapsulate the notion of 'disappearance' in the novel's title and anticipate what is not actually depicted in the text: the protagonist's death. As the directors remark, 'What Kafka has written could only have come from a young man, but to really sense or discover what Kafka is all about you have to be close to the grave.' Class Relations is radically, provocatively different from mainstream cinema. Watching the film is not an enjoyable experience but requires considerable endurance. Straub/Huillet are not inspired by philological reverence for the original; they adapt and alter the novel in ways that make it more appropriate to the cinematic medium and bring out its unique qualities, not as a medium of illusionist immersion, but as a visual object – strange but strangely beautiful – which challenges our viewing habits and expectations (Osborne 85).

Michael Haneke-The Austrian director is known for his stark, disturbing films, such as Benny's Video (1992), Funny Games (1997) and Caché (2005). *The Castle* (Das Schloss, Austria 1997), which was produced for television, is a much more low-key affair and lacks the graphic violence which characterizes much of his work. Haneke's *The Castle* is the most textually faithful of the three adaptations discussed here, though it has been criticized as rather 'tame' and unimaginative. That said, Haneke does subtly add his own emphasis, and his use of sound and camerawork is reminiscent of Straub/Huillet's Brechtian adaptation. To emphasize the film's proximity to the novel, an off-screen narrator (Udo Samel) reads out excerpts from the text, which provide a commentary on the unfolding events. As in Class Relations, the visual and auditory channels are often separated. Thus Olga's dance with the coarse servants, which is described in detail by the off-screen narrator, is barely visible in the background, and in

dialogues the camerawork is disorientatingly asymmetrical. In some scenes, the person K. is talking to can only be heard from the off, and even where two characters are shown in conversation, the camera lingers on one of them rather than following the rhythm of the dialogue. Haneke's adaptation closely follows the plotline of the novel, but he places his own emphasis through shortening and omission. Olga's account of how her family came to be ostracized from the village community, which in the novel takes up about fifty pages, is summarized in a few sentences, and K.'s conversations with the landlady Gardena, and with the secretaries Momus and Bürgel are also shortened. The actor Ulrich Mühe effectively conveys K.'s mixture of vulnerability, cunning and aggression. Overall, though, the storyline of his struggle against the castle authorities is toned down to make more room for his personal relations, most notably the relationship between K. and Frieda (Susanne Lothar), which is traced in close, psychological detail.

There are, however, some instances where Haneke departs from the novel in more obvious ways. The film contains no shots of the castle, which in the novel is clearly visible above the village, and likewise there are no shots of Klamm when K. observes him through the peephole. The film thus edits out all visual evidence of the castle's and Klamm's physical existence, transforming them into figments of K.'s, and the viewer's, imagination. Another intervention are the thirty fade-outs into black which are inserted into the film, lasting about three seconds each. They are used to separate scenes from each other, but are sometimes placed in the middle of a scene, thus highlighting the inherent fragmentation of a novel that was written as one continuous text (Osborne 28). This emphasis on the novel as fragment is most apparent at the very end. The soundtrack of the film ends abruptly, with the narrator reading out the final, unfinished sentence of the manuscript. Interestingly, though, here image and soundtrack once again diverge. The passage read out by the narrator describes K.'s arrival at Gerstäcker's cottage, where he is about to have a conversation with Gerstäcker's old mother (Gray 25). The final shot, however, lags behind the storyline, for it shows K. and Gerstäcker on their way to the cottage, but fades out before their arrival. The sudden finality of Kafka's novel is thus counterbalanced by the film's open-ended journey, its potential to reach beyond the confines of the text. The three film versions discussed here, then, are as diverse as the methods of Kafka criticism. Kafka's

enduring fascination for readers of all backgrounds is rooted in his resistance to interpretation, translation and adaptation, a resistance which continues to spark fruitful, ongoing engagement and deliberation.

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