“Somewhere in their Middle”
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Two years (and counting) after the centennial of Franz Kafka’s death, critical reflection on his work remains very much alive. This special issue of *Konturen* focuses on two major strands that continue to deepen and challenge our understanding of a writer whose prose has been the subject of so much extant writing already. These two broad approaches to Kafka’s work could be understood as sustaining each other in a diametrically opposed way.

On the one hand we are still learning more about the ways in which Kafka’s writing, as much it has stood apart to readers as singular and stridently non-historical, does entertain important connections to the world and the time in and out of which it arose. As the contributions included here show, referential links that can contextualize Kafka’s fiction range from world-historical events (World War I) to socially embedded forms of family organization (involving binary choices regarding marriage and fathering children) and the intensely personal experience of writer’s block.

On the other hand, Kafka’s writing, as ever, continues to challenge the very notion of stable meaning itself, which would include any meaning derived from referential links such as ones just mentioned. The character of Kafka’s texts as strictly *open* works—which Umberto Eco described as a “dialectic between form and the *possibility* of multiple meanings” (Eco 60)—arguably remains the motor of readers’ continued interpretive efforts. One does not necessarily have to subscribe to Susan Sonntag’s famous characterization of Kafka’s oeuvre as one that particularly attracts “interpreters like leaches” (Sonntag 99) in order to conclude that reading Kafka is to come to terms, always and again, with semantic indeterminacy. Whether we understand openness as accumulation of more information, as Eco does, or as an ongoing challenge to the very formation of semantic coherence as such, learning more about Kafka and his times is not the primary path along this critical axis.

We might say that these two readerly strategies, without ever collapsing fully into each other, cross right around the point where signifiers in Kafka's texts accrue meaning: in the middle. Kafka himself comments on his perceived inability to write in an early diary entry as follows:

> And I believe I understand this [inability to write] without knowing its cause. That is, all the things that occur to me do not occur to me from the root, but only from somewhere in their middle.[1]

That which prompts Kafka to write is not properly rooted—in the ground, in reality, in his life. Nevertheless, things *do* occur to Kafka. And he does write some of them down, if perhaps not as swiftly as he would have preferred. As **Evan Parks** elegantly shows in his reading of "Die Bäume" [The Trees], to the extent that there *are* roots and attachments in Kafka's texts, they do not readily anchor either the writing or the reading subject. If a thing occurs or falls (*einfallen*) not from the ground up—which stands to reason—nor from the sky, it dwells in a middle position where it is perceptible but does not lend itself readily to support ladders (as Kafka points out in his entry), let alone concepts. In this middle position, removed from origin and telos on either end, the things that emerge are not fully separate from the one to whom they occur, nor are they fully determinate in where they may grow, and what to make of that growth.

Things that do fall from the sky, as **Richard Block** demonstrates in his reading of the Disney short *Chicken Little* in conjunction with Kafka's *A Country Doctor*, are just as likely to be misused for purposes of ideological misdirection as they are reliable signs of a larger framework of meaning. The political dynamic that may unfold under such conditions, Block shows, proceeds from the middle of what is already at hand: the collapse of socially sanctioned and shared meaning has already occurred and radiates outward. Figures like Kafka's country doctor are the denizens of this middle ground, and Kafka's exposition of his plight maps a landscape across which perpetrators that would be victims move in a world devoid of readily identifiable meaning.

The path from bodily expression—the movement of gesture or of a facial distortion, or the verbal eruption of involuntary speech—to its imitation in Kafka's writing is the topic of **Jörg Kreienbrock's** essay in this volume. Here, too, writing does not attach to the world in the form of its representational doubling. Originating in Kafka's observations—here we could substitute *auffallen* [to notice] for *einfallen* [to occur to]—of grimaces, spasms, or tics, Kafka's writing seeks to transform these not by attending to any root they might have in a self. The truth of these expressions, Kreienbrock points out, "lingers on the threshold of appearance and disappearance," it dwells in the middle space between observer and observed, a sign that, although clearly perceptible, is not equally clear in its legibility.

The middle register with which **Annie Pfeiffer** deals in her piece on Kafka's childless bachelors is one of time. The presumption of continuity into the future may undergird the notion of paternity as the ultimate root of the real. Not only was Kafka ambivalent about this promise in his own dealings with marriage and family life; Pfeiffer details in her analysis of several of Kafka's texts that it is withheld from his childless protagonists as well. The figure of the ghost child that the narrator encounters in "Das Unglück des Junggesellen" [The Bachelor's Misfortune], suspended in the middle as it is between the natural and the supernatural, between the real and the imaginary, between smallness and an adult demeanor, is an example of Kafka's rejection, in Pfeiffer's reading, of the future as a reproduction of a past, and of the uncertainty that comes with such a rejection.

Seth Thomas forges a connection in his contribution between the violence that Kafka directed towards himself in pursuit of his writing goals, and violence as writing (or vice versa) in "The Penal Colony." The preoccupation with an inability to write—taking place in writing, of course—recurs here as a dilemma of self-actualization that eventually transforms into a divestment of self. With legal writing becoming a mechanical process in "The Penal Colony," the application of discipline that would split the self into two parts is exposed as a regime fit to turn the self into a machine, a word processor. Kafka's ultimately

unresolved struggle, in Thomas' description, with how to end this story also exemplifies the notion that the grounding of his work in writerly experience—one of perceived failure in this case—tends towards the opposite of fixing the meaning of what is written.

[1] "Und diese [Unfähigkeit zu schreiben] glaube ich zu verstehn, ohne ihren Grund zu kennen. Alle Dinge nämlich, die mir einfallen, fallen mir nicht von der Wurzel aus ein, sondern erst irgendwo gegen ihre Mitte." (Kafka 15)

Works Cited

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