***Deutlich und unsichtbar*: Kafka's Compulsion to Imitate**

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This essay investigates the notion of imitation in Franz Kafka. It asks how notions of mimesis, mimicry, and metamorphosis inform a concept of realism in Kafka's work which is irreducible to the aesthetic ideology of literary representation. For Kafka, mimesis is a corporeal process transforming the physiognomy of the writer, who is characterized by their facial expressions and gestures. Kafka's prose, based on what he calls a 'compulsion to imitate,' oscillates like a "Vexierbild," a picture puzzle, merging image and ground, identification and dissociation, reality and imagination. Its mimetic realism engenders grimacing texts, multi-stable images and riddles that leave the reader in a permanent state of confusion.

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I. Grimaces

In September 1911, two friends named Kurt – Tucholsky, a writer, and Szafranski, an illustrator – visit Prague and meet Max Brod and Franz Kafka. On September 30th, Kafka records this encounter in his diary: "Safranski, a student of Bernhard, makes faces [macht Grimassen] while drawing and observing that are connected with what is drawn" (Kafka, *Diaries* 23).[1] That which is drawn by Szafranski, appears only indirectly as a grimace. His face mimics – albeit in a grotesque form – what he draws. Drawing and observing leave a mark on the draftsman. He

appears as a "grotesquely grimacing face [Fratzengesicht]" (Kafka, *Blue Octavo Notebooks*, 92). Rainer Nägele notes: "A reversal of the usual direction of the mimetic process takes place. […] What is drawn does not appear as the mimesis of a model, but rather the illustrator mimetically adapts himself to what is drawn" (Nägele, *Literarische Vexierbilder* 26). In Kafka's description, Szafranski, like Gregor Samsa in *The Metamorphosis*, undergoes a transformation. His face becomes a grimace. "In the transformation that arise from imitation," Isolde Schiffermüller notes, "the identity of the self is broken by the grimacing of the other" (Schiffermüller, *Kafkas Gesten* 41). The grimace makes visible, as Michael Taussig remarks in *Mimesis and Alterity*, the "palpable, sensuous, connection between the very body of the perceiver and the perceived" (Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity* 21).

Kafka is fascinated by Szafranski, because, according to Nägele, "he literally transforms himself physiognomically into what he draws" (Nägele, *Literarische Vexierbilder* 26). The grimace does not reveal anything about the content of Szafranski's drawings, but instead, it indicates a peculiar, deformed transformation of the draftsman's body. A different type of sign – freed from the rigid logic of signification – appears on Szafranski's face. The *Zeichner* becomes a *Gezeichneter* – a medium for grotesque inscriptions. It is the grimace – not something identifiable in his drawing – that makes it possible for Kafka to observe a connection between *Zeichner* and *Gezeichnetem*. According to a remark by Jacques Derrida discussing Mallarmé's "Mimique,"

> we are faced then with mimicry imitating nothing; faced, so to speak, with a double that doubles no simple, a double that nothing anticipates, nothing at least that is not itself already double. There is no simple reference. It is in this that the mime's operation does allude, but alludes to nothing, alludes without breaking the mirror, without reaching beyond the looking-glass […]. This speculum reflects no reality; it produces mere 'reality-effects' (Derrida, "The First Session" 157).

Szafranki's grimaces *are* both impersonal and excessive, irreducible to a subjective faculty. It represents a moment, when, according to Giorgio

Agamben's essay "The Face," the human being's desire "to take possession of their own very appearance" (Agamben, "The Face" 92) fails. It appears as if something alien, perhaps not even human, occupies the face, distorting its expression. The corporeal reality of our face is, as Benjamin notes, "the most forgotten alien land" (Benjamin, "Franz Kafka" 132). The grimace as an expression of the experience of alterity becomes evident in Kafka's writings about the threat of the savage "peoples of the north" (Kafka, "Building the Great Wall" 113) in *Building the Great Wall of China*: "In artist's paintings, faithful to the truth, we see these faces of damnation, the gaping maws, the jaws equipped with long, pointed teeth, the scrunched-up eyes that seem to squint at the victim whom their maws will crush and rend" (118). In *A Page from an Old Document*, the narrator identifies the "peoples of the north" as nomads, which have invaded China and occupy the capital of the empire. Alien and almost non-human creatures disrupt the civilized life of the city-dwellers. Again, the nomads display beast-like grimaces: "They often grimace: then their eyes roll up in their heads and foam flows out of their mouths, but these are not meant either to convey anything or to frighten people; they do it because that is how they are" (Kafka, "A Page from an Old Document" 67). The nomadic grimaces resist any physiognomic reading. They convey nothing because what appears on their faces are not decipherable signs. Their facial expressions not a means of communication or expression and reject any sign language. Hence, it is impossible to communicate with them:

> You cannot talk to nomads. They do not know our language; indeed, they hardly have one of their own. They communicate with each other like jackdaws. Again and again we hear this screech of jackdaws. They are indifferent to our way of life, our institutions, and find them incomprehensible. As a result they are also ill-disposed to any sort of sign language (66-67).

Neither the physiognomic observation of faces nor sign language can establish a form of hermeneutic understanding. Grimaces, like the cries of a jackdaw, reject

their integration into a language of signification. They do not only disfigure human faces but also distort human language.

Following Werner Hamacher, one can read Kafka's "distortions related not to a natural body but to a name or a complex of names" (Hamacher, "The Gesture in the Name" 309). Against a "naïve realism," of which Hamacher detects traces in Benjamin's Kafka interpretation, this textual disfiguration does not presuppose a natural notion of normality which would serve as a realist background for Kafka's prose. The most obvious of these nominal distortions can be found in the way Kafka misspells the names of Szafranski and Tucholsky. He writes *Safranski* without the letter *z* and *Tucholski* with an *i* instead of a *y* at the end, slightly distorting their typeface. Like Szafranski's grimace, these misspellings introduce a moment of hesitation into the language of proper names, pointing to a peculiar and irregular relation of word and meaning in *drawing and observing*. It questions the ability of names to mark and identify individuals. As Davide Stimilli in *The Face of Immortality: Physiognomy and Criticism* points out: "We misspell words as easily as we mistake faces" (Stimili, *The Face of Immortality* 3). Neither names nor faces are authentic signs of essential traits. They are always threatened by distortions, misreadings, and confusion. Words as deformed *Wortkörper* undergo grotesque distortions of their face, scrambling the clear distinction between reality and fiction, original and copy, life and literature. For Stimilli, the language of physiognomy and the physiognomy of language merge. In this sense, Kafka's *codex of grimaces*, to slightly vary Benjamin's phrase, is an essentially linguistic phenomenon, exploring the limits of representation both in the visual and the textual field. Already Benjamin's and Scholem's friend Werner Kraft notes this precarious relationship between face and language in Kafka's writing: "The essence of man is revealed on the face and concealed in language. Because for man revelation is only possible as appearance [Schein], it can only be essentially recognized in language" (Kraft, *Franz Kafka* 60).

If it is true that observation, imitation, representation, and eventually criticism are connected to a physiognomic transformation, what does that mean

for Kafka's observation of Szafranski? Does the grotesque irregularity of Szafranski's grimace affect Kafka's *observing and drawing*? Can his writing provide a clear and undistorted view of Szafranski or is his text nothing else but an act of textual grimacing? Perhaps Kafka's observation is as distorted as Szafranski's face. It produces not clear images but distorted forms. Instead of a realist description of the scene of drawing, Kafka's *Betrachtung* transforms into a grotesque farce, marked and distorted as Szafranski's face: a "grimacing text" (Corngold, *Franz Kafka* 15), as Stanley Corngold calls it, that is *gezeichnet*. The misspelling of Szafranski's and Tucholsky's names introduces a moment of hesitation into the idea of proper names as identification markers. Between Szafranski and Safranski there is a minute difference. Grimacing names like Safranski and Tucholski do not identify, but undermine and delegitimate the language of signification. According to Hamacher, in Kafka's texts the name "does not represent a denomination of a singular substance or a marking of indivisible and incommunicable individuality without at the same time introducing the transference of this singularity and the division of its markings" (Hamacher, "The Gesture in the Name" 315-16). In a diary entry from January 27, 1922, Kafka narrates such an alienating effect of misnaming that happened to him while on vacation: "Although I wrote my name clearly for the hotel, although they too have now written my name correctly twice, downstairs on the board it says Josef K" (Kafka, *Diaries* 476). Despite his repeated attempts to correctly convey his proper name, Kafka is being misidentified. In the interplay between individual and name—between life and literature—the author transforms himself into the hero of his most famous novel: Franz Kafka becomes Josef K.

II. The Compulsion to Imitate

Reminiscing about his first reading of *The Metamorphosis* as a refugee in New York City in 1941, Walter Sokel describes his fascination with Kafka and his identification with Gregor Samsa: "The text literally captivated me, in the sense that it kept me emotionally glued to the deplorable position of its protagonist. I suffered and agonized in Gregor's place. Suppose, I asked myself, an analogous

fate should happen to me? Empirically, it was inconceivable, but the persuasive magic of Kafka's story made it appear by no means certain that something like it could happen to myself, or to anyone for that matter" (Sokel, "Beyond Self-Assertion" 33). Kafka's novel is so captivating, with such an appealing and 'persuasive magic,' that Sokel identifies with the protagonist of the *Verwandlung* and going along with him through his transformation. Eventually, Sokel is worried of becoming a "monstrous vermin [ungeheures Ungeziefer]" (Kafka, *The Metamorphosis* 3) himself.

Observing Szafranski's grimace triggers a similar reflection on the metamorphic effects of mimetic processes on the imitating subject in Kafka. In the diary entry from September 30, 1911, he continues: "Reminds me that I myself have a strong capacity for transformation, which no one notices. How often I have had to imitate Max?" (Kafka, *Diaries* 23). Kafka characterizes himself as being endowed by a "capacity for transformation." It is a metamorphosis that overcame him like a compulsion. Kafka had no choice but to imitate Brod. Six months later, in a diary entry from December 30, 1911, he speaks of his *mimetic faculty* as a "propensity" and an "urge to imitate"" (170). Imitation is the result of a transformational compulsion, a mimetic desire. In an essay on "Kafkas Verwandlungen," Gerhard Neumann notes: "For Kafka there is no exit from the dilemma that the self is inevitably experienced as other, the self-identical as radically different and transformed" (Neumann, "Kafkas Verwandlungen" 238). In a famous passage from "On the Mimetic Faculty," Walter Benjamin defines mimesis as the "capacity for producing similarities" (Benjamin, "On the Mimetic Faculty" 722). For him, it is a "compulsion to become similar and to behave mimetically" (722). Mimesis is not just a faculty but also a compulsion to become an Other. In his essay on Kafka, Benjamin notes: "For just as K. lives in the village on Castle Hill, modern man lives in his body; the body slips away from him, is hostile toward him. It may happen that a man wakes up one day and finds himself transformed into vermin. Exile [die Fremde] – his exile – has gained control over him" (Benjamin, "Franz Kafka" 806). Something alien beyond the control of the subject appears in the grimace. The ability to mimic or become

other is not a faculty in the sense of a capacity, a mental or physical power under the control of a sovereign subject. Szafranski's grimaces, which distort his 'normal' appearance, have an alienating effect. While drawing, his "body slips away from him." His face resembles a grotesque mask, a surface where the metamorphosis of self and other unfolds in a precarious dialectic of revelation and concealment.

In Kafka's "Description of a Struggle," the narrator reveals his inner state to his interlocutor, who is described as having a "sleepy grimace", through "involuntary twitchings" (Kafka, "Description of a Struggle" 34) of his face. While it is clear what the facial spasms represent—a feeling of uneasiness—Szafranski's grimace remains ambiguous. It is unclear what he draws, and how drawing and facial expressions relate to each other. Or more suspiciously, it is unclear if there is any relation between the two at all. In this context, Szafranski's grimace may be classified among neurotic tics, involuntary body movements, and other similar symptoms identified by late 19th-century psychology as Tourette syndrome, named after the neurologist Gilles de la Tourette.[2] In Sigmund Freud's discussion of this syndrome in his early essay "A Case of Hypnotic Healing" (1893) one finds an explicit connection between nervous tics and grimaces: "The picture of a severe *tic convulsif* is, as we know, made up of involuntary movements frequently (according to Charcot and Guinon, always) in the nature of grimaces or of performances which have at one time had a meaning of coprolalia, of echolalia, and of obsessive ideas belonging to the range covered by *folie du doute*" (Freud, "A Case of Successful Treatment by Hypnotism" 155). Early medical research on the phenomenon of the tic conceptualizes the human subject in terms of the unconscious and involuntary processes. Stefan Rieger observes:

> Knowledge does not organize itself around the enlightenment subject but focuses on the involuntary, unconsciousness, the reflex, the subject of distrust, and the loss of control […]. These shifts lead from the intentional speech act to the parapraxes of the slip of the tongue, from the nature of movement to its deformation, from the sovereign gesture to the

> unconscious tic, from the dignified stride to the intermittent limping (Rieger, *Ästhetik des Menschen* 75).

Knowledge of the human is not gained by observing what is normal but by focusing on the irregular, the abnormal, and the deformed.

Echolalia, defined as the compulsion to repeat, and coprolalia, the compulsion to curse, are types of *eruptive language*. Kate E. Brown and Howard Kushner note that “in volitional cursing as well as coprolalia, the body verges toward utterances that are culturally aware and responsive to circumstance, yet unattributable to any autonomous speaking self. The voice becomes eruptive rather than expressive, something that happens to a subject” (Brown, Kushner, “Eruptive Voices” 539). In echolalia and coprolalia the “presence of a disembodied voice” (Hollander, *The Figure of Echo* 7), as described by John Hollander, can be heard. Such utterances consist of nothing more than mere “fragmentary repetitions” (Hollander, *The Figure of the Echo* 7) through which words deteriorate to mere sounds, lacking semantic content, approaching babbling. According to Friedrich Schmidt, it is “precisely the mechanical repetition of the word, which hollows out its meaning and transforms its *Gestalt* into an empty husk” (Schmidt, *Text und Interpretation* 47). With language becoming eruptive rather than expressive, words are experienced as an outburst, threatening to shatter the coherence of discursive language. Writing is a process of coping with tics, spasms, and convulsions. For Kafka, these involuntary motions of the body and mind constitute both the condition of the possibility as well as the condition of the impossibility of writing. It is his inescapable and unsolvable dilemma to transform eruption into expression, sound into meaning, and interruption into cohesion. Like the language of the nomads in *An Old Manuscript*, which sounds like the cries of jackdaws, and the singing of the mouse Josefine in *Josefine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk*, resembling mere whistles, the words heard in echolalia and coprolalia traverse the distinction between sound and meaning, the animal and the human. Acoustic mimicry like the echo or involuntary cursing, question the idea of language as the medium of subjective expression. It is as if someone or something else speaks through the

mouth of the cursing subject. The voice, as “the privileged point of auto-affection, self-transparency, the hold in the presence,” as Mladen Dolar summarizes the metaphysics of Western logocentrism, is “tarnished by externality” (Dolar, “The Object Voice” 12). The self becomes the ventriloquist of an Other.

Analogously, the grimace is a face without a subject, it severs the immediate relation of inner self and outer appearance. Gestures and voices are inappropriable. They are hollowed out signs. Likewise, Jörg Häntzschel, in his analysis of gesture in Kafka’s *The Judgment*, states: “The existing semantic content of the gesture is almost completely and violently expelled from its linguistic representation. What remains is a neutral and therefore incomprehensible residue” (Häntzschel, “Gebärden in Kafkas ‘Das Urteil’” 156). Kafka’s writings present these “incomprehensible remnants” as subject-less and indecipherable movements—spasms and tics—whose sudden and violent appearance undermine the belief in a language of representation and signification. “The gesture is,” according to Agamben, “essentially always a gesture of not being able to figure something out in language; it is always a gag in the proper meaning of the term, indicating first of all something that could be put in your mouth to hinder speech, as well as in the sense of the actor's improvisation meant to compensate a loss of memory or an inability to speak (Agamben, “Notes on Gesture” 58). Echolalia and coprolalia as speech defects introduce a gag into human speech. What the voice expresses – if it is an expression at all – erupts. It is the spasmodic voice of an alien, nomadic, without identifiable origin.

Freud speculates whether the trigger for these tics might be the observation and eventual imitation of theatrical performances: “Patients reported that on some particular occasion they had seen a similar tic, or a comedian intentionally making a similar grimace, and felt afraid they might be obligated to imitate the ugly movements. Thenceforth they had actually begun imitating them” (Freud, “A Case of Successful Treatment by Hypnotism” 155). Tics, according to Freud, are at least partially the result of a peculiar fear of imitation. It is precisely the attempt to control the urge to repeat that leads to grotesque forms of

mimesis. The stronger the neurotic tries to suppress their compulsion to imitate the more likely it is that tics and other forms of distorted mimesis appear.

According to Agamben, tics delimit "a sphere of relationship to the body proper that eludes any possibility for the patient to clearly distinguish between the voluntary and the involuntary, the proper and the external, the conscious and the unconscious" (Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 85-86). This tension between the fear of imitation and the compulsion to imitate undermines any aesthetic theory grounded in an emphatic notion of identification, since it remains fundamentally unclear whether the observable motion functions as a sign. The question is not what the expression means but whether the expression is a carrier of meaning. The grimace, in Agamben's sense, is an emblem of the "inappropriability and externality that inhere ineliminably in the body" (Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 85). This inaccessibility of the body's expressions becomes clear in another sentence from "Description of a Struggle": "I knew I ought to nod assent but could not do it" (Kafka, "Description of a Struggle" 34). In the inability to turn the compulsion of an approving nod into an action, an essential aspect of Kafka's language of gesture comes to the fore. Between compulsion and action, intention and movement there appears a gap. It reveals, in the words of Werner Hamacher, an "*epoché* of praxis in gesture" (Hamacher, "The Gesture in the Name", 334). Because Szafranski's grimaces interrupt the direct connection between sign and referent, one must consider whether the tic is a meaningful symptom or a random body movement. It prompts a central question for Kafka's work: can his writing be distinguished from involuntary physical expression – a verbal *tic convulsif*? Ultimately, is it human language at work, or merely the echoing cries of a jackdaw?

In January 1922, Kafka reflects on his compulsion to grimace:

> Strange that playacting, if it is systematic enough, can turn into reality. My spiritual decline began with the childish albeit childishly conscious play. For example, I made my face muscles jerk artificially, I walked across the Graben with my arms crossed behind my head. Childishly repugnant but successful play. (It was similar with the development of my writing except

> that this development unfortunately later came to a halt.) (Kafka, *Diaries* 474)

The first sentence of this diary entry, almost verbatim, relays Freud's etiology of nervous tics, where comedy becomes reality, and theatrical performance leads to pathology. Like a "childishly conscious play," writing oscillates between intentional strategy and involuntary compulsion. It resists formalization. Kafka's failure as a writer results from the inability to transform the playful performance of tics, twitches, and gestures into a coherent aesthetic strategy. His ability to grimace does not become the foundation of a successful writing career. This type of failure resists its integration into a "heroic negativity" (Hamacher, "The Gesture in the Name" 294) of modernity, which eventually identifies failure as a form of success.[3] Hamacher notes: "Modernity must fail in order to stay modern. This belief in the heroic negativity of the new and newest has become […] a part of the theoretical and literary-theoretical investigations into modernity" (Hamacher, "The Gesture in the Name" 294). Conscious playacting produces successful results, but it remains a childish, essentially inappropriable and uncontrollable performance outside the modernist dialectics of success and failure, where, according to Hamacher, "failure is considered a victory, and foundering is understood as a sign of historical necessity" (Hamacher, "The Gesture in the Name" 294). One could argue that Kafka's infamous writing blocks consist of the inability to negotiate and make productive the tension between voluntary and involuntary gestures. Kafka's writing represents the desperate attempt to turn tics into language, involuntary motion and childish playacting into writing, mere mimicry into aesthetic mimesis. It is a wild, infantile game, which cannot be transformed into a poetics. While the child can artificially produce facial tics, Kafka, the grown-up writer, fails to translate gestures into literature. Mimetic behavior resists all attempts to be disciplined and turned into a repeatable and generalizable method. The development of Kafka's writing "comes to a halt", it stops in its tracks, and his compulsion never fully realizes itself as a literary form.

There is one feature of Kafka's compulsion to imitate that is especially vexing: its invisibility. Observing Szafranski reminds Kafka of his "strong capacity

for transformation, which no one notices" (Kafka, *Diaries* 23). While Szafranski's grimaces are visible, Kafka's own transformations remain unnoticed by others. Kafka returns to this peculiar invisible metamorphosis in the diary entry from December 30, 1911, differentiating his transformational imitations from those of professional actors: "But this very effortlessness, this thirst for imitation distances me from the actor, because this effortlessness is countered by the fact that no one notices my imitating" (Kafka, *Diaries* 170). His imitations are so effortless that they remain unnoticed. Only Kafka himself can retrospectively recognize them: "Far beyond this external imitation, however, goes the internal, which is often so convincing and strong that no room at all remains within me to observe and verify this imitation, but rather I first find it in imitation" (Kafka, *Diaries* 170). Kafka's imitation as transformation is so effective that the distinction between alter and ego, imitated and imitator, is lost. Nägele calls this metamorphosis an "intensive mimesis" (Nägele, *Literarische Vexierbilder* 24). It "blows up the space of theater," as Isolde Schiffermüller remarks, "and, by canceling the distance between observer and observed, erases the difference between play and truth, reality and fiction" (Schiffermüller, *Franz Kafkas Gesten* 49). Hence, there is no stable position from where a clear and distinct observation of mimetic transformations would be possible. Thus, it is impossible to clearly distinguish between imitation and imagination. While actors perform only a form of external imitation, focusing on the outer appearance, Kafka practices an *internal imitation*, fully transforming himself, collapsing the realms of fiction and reality.

What Kafka calls internal imitation echoes what Theodor Lipps calls "inner imitation." In his 1903 essay "Empathy, Inner Imitation, and Sense Feelings," Lipps writes on the experience of empathy:

> In a word, I am now with my feeling of activity entirely and wholly in the moving figure. Even spatially, if we can speak of the spatial extent of the ego, I am in its [the figure's] place. I am transported into it. I am, so far as my consciousness is concerned, entirely and wholly identical with it. Thus feeling myself active in the observed human figure, I feel also in it free,

> facile, proud. This is esthetic imitation, and it is at the same time esthetic empathy. (Lipps, "Empathy, Inner Imitation, and Sense Feelings" 375)

Lipps equates imitation with empathy. Both are based on a process of putting oneself in the place of the other, by creating an "interchange of self-mobility with the motions of an other" (Rieger, *Ästhetik des Menschen* 359). Imitation and empathy transport and transform the observer.

While for Lipps empathetic imitation produces a feeling of *freedom*, *facility*, and *pride*, other contemporary theoreticians like the philosopher and psychologist Max Dessoir emphasize the alienating effects of imitation. In "Objektivismus in der Ästhetik," he notes: "What happens [in empathy, J.K.], including the subject's own actions, appears to be purely automatic. Since everything happens as it should be, i.e. without the inner participation of the person, it is experienced as unliving and mechanical" (Dessoir, "Objektivismus in der Ästhetik" 8). One can read Kafka's reflections on the intensive mimesis of empathetic imitation as an illustration of these mindless, purely mechanic processes. Excessive internal imitation approximates a pathology—turning the living being into a dead object—instead of generating vivid aesthetic pleasure as claimed by Lipps's aesthetics of empathy. Instead, in the case of Kafka, empathy produces alienation. It radicalizes Diderot's paradox of the actor, which Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe summarizes as follows:

> The paradox lies, then, in the following: in order […] to imitate everything […] one must oneself be nothing, have nothing *proper* to oneself except an 'equal aptitude' for all sorts of things, roles, characters, functions, and so on. The paradox states a *law of impropriety*, which is also the very law of mimesis: only the 'man without qualities,' the being without properties or specificity, the subjectless subject (absent from himself, distracted from himself, deprived of self) is able to present or produce in general." (Lacoue-Labarthe, "Diderot: Paradox and Mimesis" 258-59)

Like this description of the "subjectless subject," Kafka's aptitude to imitate is so powerful that it eliminates his former self. It leaves him fully alienated and transformed into someone else. Effortlessly, the observer Kafka can become

Szafranski, become Tucholsky: “Yesterday evening on the way home, had I been a spectator, I could have mistaken myself for Tucholski” (Kafka, *Diaries* 23).

III. Picture Puzzles

The figure of the self as other in Kafka remains ambiguous—perhaps even contradictory —being both clearly visible and invisible. Kafka addresses this ambiguity in a diary entry from September 30, 1911: “The foreign nature must be in me then as clearly and invisibly as one of those pictures that is hidden in another [Vexierbilder], where one would also never find anything if one didn’t know that it’s there.” (Kafka, *Diaries* 23). The mimetic relation between alter and ego resembles a picture puzzle. Meaning is not hidden underneath the surface of phenomena but appears on their surface. Agamben stresses

> the fact that the face uncovers only and precisely inasmuch as it hides and hides to the extent to which it uncovers. In this way, the appearance that ought to have manifested human beings becomes for them instead a resemblance that betrays them and in which they can no longer recognize themselves. Precisely because the face is solely the location of truth, it is also and immediately the location of simulation and of an irreducible impropriety. (Agamben, “The Face” 93)

Like a multistable image, defined by W.J.T. Mitchell as the “co-existence of contrary or simply different readings in the single image” (Mitchell, *Picture Theory* 45), the face as a grimace is a surface where revelation and concealment, clarity and opacity, intertwine, expressing Kafka’s law of mimetic impropriety.

Seeing the transformational truth on the face of Szafranski is the result not of a more precise vision, but, as Kafka notes in the last sentence of the September 30 entry, a dulling of sight. “During these transformations,” he writes, “I would especially like to believe in a dulling [Sichtrüben] of my own eyes (Kafka, *Diaries* 23). The gaze becomes dull. It does not produce clear and distinct images. Instead, it becomes, in the words of Goethe’s *Doctrine of Colors*, a *turbid means*, a murky medium. “In the dull gaze of these men” (Kafka, “A Report to an Academy” 81), as Kafka writes in *A Report to an Academy*, another dimension of

reality becomes visible. Art resembles, as Kafka notes in a well-known passage from the *Blue Octavo Notebooks*, a form of bedazzlement, distorting the normal perception of reality: “Our art is a way of being dazzled by the truth; the light on the flinching, grimacing face is true, and nothing else” (Kafka, *Blue Octavo Notebooks* 92). What observing and drawing can represent is not a clear and distinct image of the truth but the light that emanates from a receding grimace. Truth as image or representation withdraws. It is never present but lingers on the threshold of appearance and disappearance vexing the observer. To the extent that it is without substance, it is fading figure, it cannot be named, identified, or designated.

Any writing about the writer Kafka therefore is irreducibly affected by this ambiguity of withdrawal. He remains a blurry figure receding into the background that is only observable by a “dull gaze”. Any revelation is inextricably linked to processes of dissimulation. Empathy dazzles without ever producing clear images. Kafka’s ‘truth,’ according to Derrida’s reading of Heidegger, recognizes that the “movement of withdrawal […] is indissociable […] from the movement of presence” (Derrida, “The *Retrait* of Metaphor” 64). It is a presence

> both perceived and not perceived, at once image and model, neither image nor model, a medium (medium in the sense of middle, neither/nor, what is between extremes, and medium in the sense of element, ether, matrix, means). [...] what is left is only the writing of dreams, a fiction that is not imaginary, mimicry without imitation, without verisimilitude, without truth or falsity, a miming of appearance without concealed reality, without any world behind it, and hence without appearance. (Derrida, “The First Session” 163)

Agamben echoes Derrida’s analysis of the mediality of mimesis when he states that the face “exposes and reveals […] not something that could be formulated as a signifying proposition of sorts, nor is it a secret doomed to remain forever incommunicable. The face's revelation is disclosure of language itself. Such a revelation, therefore, does not have any real content and does not tell the truth

about this or that state of being, about this or that aspect of human beings and of the world: it is only opening, only communicability" (Agamben, "The Face" 92).

In "Doctrine of the Similar" Benjamin develops a notion of the picture puzzle as it is related to the mimetic faculty and, crucially, as a linguistic phenomenon: "Everything mimetic in language is an intention which can appear at all only in connection with something alien as its basis: precisely the semiotic or communicative element of language. Thus, the literal text of the script is the sole basis on which the picture puzzle [Vexierbild] can form itself" (Benjamin, "Doctrine of the Similar" 697). For Benjamin, picture puzzles are essentially verbal phenomena. All texts are picture puzzles insofar as their reading can switch between the semiotic and mimetic dimensions of signs. These forms of *aspect seeing*, to use Wittgenstein's terminology, bring out, according to Nägele, "the appearance of an other in the apparent coherence of the identical" (Nägele, *Literarische Vexierbilder* 45). Szafranski's grimace as a picture puzzle can be thought of as expressing non-sensuous similarities in a Benjaminian sense. The connection of his face with what he draws is not one of depiction, figuration, or representation. Instead, it is disfigured and withdraws from sight. The ambiguous multistability of picture puzzles scrambling distinctions like ground and figure, original and copy repeatedly emerges in Kafka's writings, leaving the reader-as-observer disoriented. "Every artwork is a picture puzzle [Vexierbild]," as Adorno points out in *Aesthetic Theory*, "but this puzzle is constituted in such a way that it remains a vexation, the preestablished routing of its observer" (Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* 121). The wild ambiguity of picture puzzles can never fully be resolved. Its observer fails to designate meaning successfully. Although the images are clearly visible, they remain an enigma that cannot be solved. Hence, the observer feels routed, a failure. In a letter to Scholem from July 1934, Benjamin analogously characterizes Kafka as a "failed" writer: "Insight into his [Kafka's, J.K.] work is, among other things, bound with the simple realization that he failed" (Benjamin, *Correspondence* 449). But how can the reader Benjamin claim such an insight? Is his interpretation, based on a "simple realization," a success or a failure? Does he see Kafka's truth or only an uncontrollably vexing image?

Reading grimaces, like reading Kafka, means exposing oneself to the experience of being routed, while resisting modernity's "pathos of failure" (Hamacher, "The Gesture in the Name" 296). It means dwelling in ambiguity, where presence and absence, success and failure cannot be clearly distinguished.

For Adorno in his "Notes on Kafka," Kafka's gaze undermines the distinction between imagination and imitation, which he likewise compares to a picture puzzle: "In the eyes of the panic-stricken person who has withdrawn all effective cathexis from objects, they petrify into a third thing, neither dream, which can only be falsified, nor the aping of reality, but rather its enigmatic image composed of its scattered fragments" (Adorno, "Notes on Kafka" 263). Since picture puzzles do not mimic a deep, hidden truth but resemble riddles that need to be deciphered, they challenge the realist conception of art as an imitation of reality. They direct the observer's attention not to forms but to processes of formation, to the dialectics of structuring and restructuring the visual and textual field. Self and other, original and copy, dream and reality interact as two aspects of the same image. They are related via an unstable, wild oscillation of perspectives, a series of *Gestaltswitches*, leading to a radical "destabilizing of identity" (Mitchell, *Picture Theory* 57). In *Ort der Gewalt: Kafkas literarische Ethik*, Joseph Vogl notes: "The visible is not the expression of a concealed meaning, but on the contrary, the concealed is a surface effect" (Vogl, *Ort der Gewalt* 71). Kafka's obsession with surfaces differs from the cited medical research on tics and other forms of bodily parapraxes, which are based on a type of "attentiveness," which, according to Rieger, "does not focus on visible surfaces, but instead penetrates the inside" (Rieger, *Ästhetik des Menschen* 345). While the physician's gaze attempts to decipher symptoms, revealing an inner, underlying condition, Kafka's observations inhibit this type of gaze and remain *stricto sensu* superficial. Beate Sommerfeld connects this dialectic between the visible and the invisible to the relation of self and other: "The simultaneity of clarity and invisibility in the picture puzzle affords the observer an opportunity to adjust their gaze. It transforms the self by not only dissolving the belief in the evidence of visual perception but also by providing a means for the other to

appear" (Sommerfeld, "Ins Sichtbare hineingleiten" 183). Playing with the uncontrollable oscillation between figure and ground transforms the observer, thereby offering a model for recognizing the dialectics between image and meaning, self and other.

According to Mitchell, picture puzzles represent "a transaction between pictures and observers activated by the internal structural effects of multistability: the shifting of figure and ground, the switching of aspects, the display of pictorial paradox and forms of nonsense. We might call this the 'wildness' of the metapicture, its resistance to domestication, and its associations with primitivism, savagery, and animal behavior" (Mitchell, *Picture Theory* 57). Associations of primitivism, savagery, and animal behavior also appear in various discourses on mimesis. Taussig's seminal study on *Mimesis and Alterity* for example—following Benjamin's *Doctrine of the Similar*—discusses the proximity of "alterity, primitivism, and the resurgence of mimesis with modernity" (Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity* 57). Not only the process of mimesis itself but also the theoretical discourse about mimesis as a form of second-order observation is affected by a certain 'wildness.' Like the tic, the savagery of multistable images makes it impossible for the observer to establish a permanent relation between observer and observed, text and interpretation. Neumann's remark that "Kafka never gains a position from where the perception of a transformation would provide him with a form of orientation" (Neumann, "Kafkas Verwandlungen" 232) is also true for his readers. Kafka's work, like Szafranski's grotesque transformation, remains ambiguous and disorienting. Its modernity is not one of failure but of a mimetic compulsion that produces alterity, wild and vexing images, "puzzles without depth and mystery" (Neumann, "Umkehrung und Ablenkung" 736). Their meaning, oscillating between revelation and concealment, are simultaneously visible and hidden: *deutlich* and *unsichtbar*.

[1] For discussion on the image of the grimace in Kafka see Binder, *Kafka in neuer Sicht*; Schiffermüller, *Franz Kafkas Gesten*; Lack, *Kafkas bewegte Körper*.

[2] For a history of the Tourette syndrome see Kushner, *A Cursing Brain*. On the status of echo and echolalia in psychoanalysis see Kittler, *Echos Widerhall*.

[3] For a discussion of the notion of failure as an emblem of modernity cf. *Siegreiche Niederlagen. Scheitern: Die Signatur der Moderne*, ed. by. Martin Lüdke, Reinbek 1992.

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