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The Issue of Repetitiveness in Kafka

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THE ISSUE OF REPETITIVENESS IN KAFKA

The paper inquires into the phenomenon of repetition in the works of Franz Kafka and in what ways it might characterize his way of writing (and his understanding of writing). I begin by making a distinction between three different planes of repetition, or repetitiveness: (1) as a ‘method’ of production; (2) as a symptom of the characters’ situations; and (3) as a representation technique. First, there are different versions of the same text, equivalent in terms of finality, but perhaps also a certain existential rhythm (as exemplified by Kafka’s famous ‘schedules’). I suggest that a comparative reading of Heinrich von Kleist’s *Michael Kohlhaas* (1810) could provide an insight into this feature of ‘productivity’. Second, repetitive characters’ situations create certain patterns and beg the question of their complex reader effects. Finally, and in addition to ‘classical’ discursive repetitions, there are minor textual recurrences (as in his ‘breakthrough’ story, “The Judgment”) and the question whether these can be related to an analogy in technical reproduction. Are they part of an experimental narrative method? Is there a ‘sense’ to repetition in Kafka and can these provisional distinctions help us understand it? How should their entanglement be described?

KEYWORDS:

Repetition — Franz Kafka — writing — disorientation — technical reproduction

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My inquiry does not emerge from the question of what theory or concept of repetition¹ should be employed to do justice to its function in Kafka’s writing, but rather:

1 E.g. Deleuze (1969; the generalized distinction between clothed and naked repetition). More specialized approaches are exemplified by Kawin 1972 (with a focus on literature and film); Kazalarska 2012 (the ‘emotional-textual’ approach); Kivy 1993 (the ‘ornamental’ approach). (On ornament and aestheticism in Kafka from the literary and art historical point of view see Anderson 1993.) For a short general comparative overview I am indebted to Josef Šebek and his 2016 unpublished paper “The Blurred Space In-Between: Repetition in Fiction and Affectivity” presented at the XX1st Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association in Vienna.



What approach to repetition does Kafka's writing invite and, indeed, require, and within what structure of distinctions? What is the 'sense' of repetition in Kafka?

I would like to start by making a few introductory general remarks. Repetition, whether concerning elements, events, situations, acts, rhythms, or repetitions themselves, seems, first of all, phenomenally ambivalent. One might associate repetition with predictability, sustainable processes, structure, and thus also growth, reproduction, and even will, resolution, and courage (later I will talk about von Kleist's *Michael Kohlhaas* in this connection), but also exhaustion, dissipation, deprivation of meaning, overgrowth, fatigue, mechanism, and other negatively connoted phenomena.²

The relationship of repetition to meaning — or a lack of relationship — is decisive. Repetition can be seen as a basic temporal phenomenon which *gives*, or *deprives* things of *meaning*, but also, let us admit, as something that *just occurs* without any direct relationship to intention, will, or orientation. The grounds for the last case are put forward, for instance, by Friedrich Nietzsche as he brings into focus the universe and natural 'laws' where "there is no one who commands, no one who obeys, no one who transgresses".³ Let us consider, then, that repetitions might *repeat themselves*, resulting in the production of certain basic forms of recursion, and, moreover, that repetitions themselves can be seen as *failures not to repeat*. If it seems that my observations are too abstract, or associative, let me point out that they are actually grounded in the generalization derived from situations spanning not a small ambit of Kafka's textual universe. The perspective of failure seems particularly prominent. Walter Benjamin's words to Gershom Scholem in a letter from 12th June 1938 support this observation: "To do justice to the figure of Kafka in its purity and its peculiar

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- 2 When words in verse structure are repeated (as in anaphora or epizeuxis, for instance), meaning and figuration are effected (giving rise to 'structure'). When one keeps repeating the same difficult passage on the violin, the disposition of its reproduction takes root in mind and body, and the process is possibly experienced as pleasurable (exerting 'will', effecting 'growth'). When Titorelli in *The Trial* presents to K. a series of exactly the same paintings of a heathscape, a sense of exhaustion and mindless replication is strengthened as similar situations seem to repeat themselves and pervade the storyworld (resulting in 'dissipation', 'fatigue', deploying 'mechanism').
- 3 Nietzsche's critique of conceiving the 'universe' antropomorphically is articulated in the aphorism "Let us beware" (*Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, 1882) thus: "The total character of the world, by contrast, is for all eternity chaos, not in the sense of a lack of necessity but of a lack of order, organization, form, beauty, wisdom, and whatever else our aesthetic anthropomorphisms are called. Judged from the vantage point of our reason, the unsuccessful attempts are by far the rule; the exceptions are not the secret aim, and the whole musical mechanism repeats eternally its tune, which must never be called a melody — and ultimately even the phrase 'unsuccessful attempt' is already an anthropomorphism bearing a reproach. But how could we reproach or praise the universe!" (Nietzsche 2001, p. 109). Not without a certain continuity with Nietzsche's thought and pertinence to our topic, it has been argued by Gernot Böhme that there are certain entities such as 'atmosphere' that belong neither solely to the object (even if they consist of its features) nor solely to the subject (even if they are only co-constituted by the subjectivity of a perceiver), but "are situated on the borderline between object and subject" (Böhme 2001, p. 54). On 'atmosphere' see also Gumbrecht 2012, on 'atmosphere and repetition' see Kazalarska 2012.



beauty, one must never lose sight of one thing: it is the figure of a failure”.⁴ With that in mind, we can recognize that repeating failures to repeat as well as (repeating) failures not to repeat constitute *first-* or *second-*, or *first- and second-order repetitions*. (It is only when a failure to repeat fails to repeat itself, so to speak, that no repetition occurs.)

failure not to repeat fails to repeat itself = first-order repetition = situation of discontinuity: the child inherits a certain psychic trait from his/her parent and decides to avoid becoming a parent him/herself

failure to repeat repeats itself = second-order repetition = repeated failures, ‘Chinese whispers’: a messenger fails to repeat message A to a recipient and the recipient fails to repeat message A’ to another recipient

failure not to repeat fails not to repeat itself = first- and second-order repetition = repeated repetitions, the situation of encroachment: a slip of tongue keeps recurring and then repeats itself again during an attempt at correcting it

Without a doubt, these types of repetitions, in the sense of paradoxical recursion (even if not necessarily symmetrically, formally organized), are especially significant in Kafka’s writing. For instance, in “The Judgement” (Kafka’s ‘breakthrough story’), Georg lets himself fall from the bridge and thus ultimately fails to replicate the trajectory of his father (taking over the business, getting married), which is repeated, on some level, in some sense, by Kafka’s recurring failure to follow in his father’s footsteps, which he famously reflects on in the *Letter to the Father* and in other writings.⁵ What Kafka deemed a continuing series of failures in life — his unsuccessful attempts to get married, to finish his texts, to make decisions of various kinds —, however, should not be viewed as *mere* failures in the usual sense of the word.⁶ (Think, also, of Nietzsche’s deconstruction of the so-called ‘unsuccessful attempts.’) What are these failures, then, if their significance is not meant to be simply reversed and taken for success? Perhaps motifs, not scarce in Kafka’s texts, of trying to find a way out or break free from a circle point us in the right direction.⁷ Here a hypothesis presents

4 Benjamin — Scholem 1997, p. 226.

5 Notice the motif of literal steps: “It is as if one person had to climb five low steps and a second person only one, but one which is, at least for him, as high as those five put together; the first person will not only manage the five but hundreds and thousands as well, he will have led a great and very strenuous life, but none of the steps he has climbed will have had the significance for him as that one first, high step had for the second, which for all his strength was impossible to climb and which he cannot get up onto and which he naturally doesn’t get past, either” (Kafka 1998, p. 57).

6 A similar observation — of Kafka’s ungrounded self-criticism — has been expressed many times (beginning with Brod); see Stach 2013, for instance, or Koch — Wagenbach 2002.

7 In “Decisions” from *Contemplation*: “But even when it turns out this way, with every mistake — and mistakes are inevitable — the whole thing, the easy and the difficult, will break down, and I will have to turn back into the circle” (Kafka 1997, unpaginated). In “A Report to an Academy”: “No, it was not freedom I wanted. Just a way out [Ausweg]; to the



itself: Do repetitions and failures combine to create a possibility of achieving some kind of solution or transcendence in an otherwise hopeless situation? Do repetitions entangled with failures paradoxically amount to finding a way out of an impasse, to break free from a cyclic repetition, from a vicious circle?⁸ The question then is: Which levels or connection of levels may then establish such a *way out* (*Ausweg*)?

Proceeding from these observations, I will make a distinction between three major *functions* of repetition and repetitiveness in Kafka: (1) as a ‘method’ of production; (2) as a symptom of the characters’ situations; (3) as a representation technique and experimental narrative method. Such a combination of ‘functions’, spanning different ontic levels, seems to correspond to the peculiar character of the relationship between Kafka’s writing and life, which I will discuss further below.⁹

1. REPETITION AS A METHOD OF PRODUCTION

As the critical and manuscript editions of Kafka’s works make apparent,¹⁰ textual fragments and variants tend to be characterized by potential sameness, a lessened (if not negated) sense of hierarchy in terms of their proximity to completion. This concerns primarily, but not exclusively the texts unpublished during Kafka’s time. Even if this impression might arise only in hindsight, as a consequence of the unusual ratio between the number of works published by the author during his lifetime and those published posthumously by editors, the fact that Franz Kafka tended to hesitate over publication¹¹ suggests that this feature is part of a specific approach to writing. It is something that Kafka himself reflects on in terms of failure, but it can also be seen as a certain *feature of productivity*. Sometimes, different versions have a similar status (for example, the three versions of “Preparations for a Wedding”, the two versions of “Description of a Struggle”), while ‘fragments’ are not necessarily more distant from completion. Sometimes, fragments seem to be equally related to a published text (the three fragments connected to “A Report to an Academy”), at other times (and depending on our interpretation), crossed-out passages seem equally important as those which tend to remain (e.g. a crossed-out passage on the crossbreed’s communication by silence is often retained in readers’ editions);¹² unfinished, apparently related texts span different notebooks. All this contradicts text canonically

right, to the left, wherever; I made no other demands; even if the way out should only be a delusion; my demand was small, the delusion would not be greater” (Kafka 2007b, p. 80).

8 On such circle, think of the author’s remark on ‘original sin’: “Original sin, the old injustice committed by man, consists in the complaint unceasingly made by man that he has been the victim of an injustice, the victim of original sin” (quoted in Benjamin 2007, p. 114). The vicious circle connects the father and the son as *both* perpetrators of sin (sinful complainants) and its (innocent) inheritors.

9 See also Koch — Wagenbach 2002.

10 As representative, consider, for example, Kafka 1990a, b, c (S. Fischer publishing house’s critical edition of *The Diaries*), or Kafka 1990d (the manuscript edition of *The Trial*).

11 See Brod 2009.

12 Kafka 1995a.



understood in modern written cultures — defined, as it is, by a series of oppositions, such as, and primarily, text for publication versus variants and preparatory notes. In this respect, the so-called *Diaries* are characteristic: They contain a variety of texts making no distinction between fiction and non-fiction, recordings of everyday experience, thoughts, ideas, excerpts, recordings of dreams, drafts of letters, drafts of fictional texts, notes on future work and the final-version texts, or at least something very close to it. Symbolically *and* materially, these texts create a *continuum*: quarto and octavo notebooks filled with several independent texts written *in parallel*; texts repeatedly brought to a halt and resumed again, rewritten on different material supports; parts of the material medium extracted from the whole. This is the case of *The Trial* manuscript, for instance, which was scribed on 160 pages ripped from ten octavo notebooks, where pages do not contain only the text of *The Trial*, but many other recordings and types of recordings.¹³

Underlying this is an *understanding of writing as an existential activity*,¹⁴ whose products *need not* pass through the filter of publication. Writing and life are not in opposition, it is more as if life constituted a kind of shadow zone of writing capable of providing material to it with its shades and hues. A parasitical relationship between both, which can be switched depending on the perspective. (This, by the way, marks the situation in “The Metamorphosis”: Of all people, one might expect a social parasite, such as, perhaps, an artist or writer, to be associated with an insect. Instead, it is the heretofore provider for a family who transforms overnight into “a monstrous vermin”, “ein ungeheueres Ungeziefer”).¹⁵ Writing thus creates a continuity on the predicament of life, and it is *exactly this continuity* that turns every work into a fragment, an incomplete part of a whole, while constituting the very possibility of making sense. The continuity of writing is unhappily dependent on the continuing condition of life’s intermittence (the ‘bottom side’ of writing). By ‘life’s intermittence’ I mean that life interferes with, disturbs the power and purity of writing, the concentration needed to achieve such purity, and also that it is subject to definitive interruption, to end. This constitutes a paradoxical kind of ‘rhythm’ where, as in *The Diaries*, different forms acquire similar functions in a continuous space, which is not a space simply opposed to life, but where life is its reverse side, its shadow.

In most simple terms: what Kafka so often asserts — I’m nothing but literature, I cannot be anything else (to Felice Bauer),¹⁶ I dieted in all directions but writing (diaries),¹⁷ and so on — should be taken as part of a specific understanding of, or approach to writing. His ‘last will’ notes, which are sometimes understood in terms of

¹³ Pasley 1989.

¹⁴ On this, see also Koch — Wagenbach 2002.

¹⁵ Cf. Anders 1951.

¹⁶ “I have no literary interests, but am made of literature, I am nothing else, and cannot be anything else.” A letter from 14th August 1913, Kafka 1999, p. 341.

¹⁷ “When it became clear in my organism that writing was the most productive direction for my being to take, everything rushed in that direction and left empty all those abilities which were directed towards the joys of sex, eating, drinking, philosophical reflection, and above all music. I atrophied in all these directions.” A diary entry from 3rd January 1912, Kafka 1976, p. 163.



a semantic or pragmatic contradiction (as saying one thing and meaning another, or as meaning one thing and doing another), should be taken more literally: When the continuity of writing is interrupted once and for all by the inherent intermittence of life, the relationship is irredeemably reverted, and fragments turn into what they always appeared to be — i.e. mere fragments. They simply cease to subsist on a certain process. Max Brod only briefly acknowledges and immediately rejects Kafka's objection that "the publication of work he had done would lead him astray in his future work". These are Kafka's words: "What sense would there be in reviving such [...] bungled pieces of work? Only if one hoped to create a whole out of the fragments, some complete work to which one could make a final appeal, a breast on which I could beat in my hour of need. But I know that is impossible here. So what am I to do with the things?"¹⁸ At the very least, Kafka makes a sort of global endnote: What you are reading is only part of something that is not present; a general condition of literature, of writing, of course, but by making these last will notes a matter of written record, Kafka marks his papers with the stigma of being destined to disappear.

Through such lenses, one might perceive Odradek as the appropriate figure of such 'suspended completeness': "One is tempted to believe that the creature once had some sort of intelligible shape and is now only a broken-down remnant. Yet this does not seem to be the case; at least there is no sign of it; nowhere is there an unfinished or unbroken surface to suggest anything of the kind; the whole thing looks senseless enough, but in its own way perfectly finished" [*das Ganze erscheint zwar sinnlos, aber in seiner Art abgeschlossen*].¹⁹

Fragmentariness is thus the reverse side of the continuity of writing and a symptom that the wall between life and literature has been broken. Repetitiveness does not simply mean that life fails to sustain the continuity of writing (while writing has always failed to pass beyond the irrevocable intermittence of life), but also that writing stubbornly continues to fail — *a will to the repetition of failure* if you like.

Repetitiveness also manifests itself in the temporal organization of Kafka's life between 'work', 'entertainment' and 'scribbling'. I am referring to Kafka's famous schedules as outlined in his letters to Felice: office, lunch, sleep, exercises, walk, dinner, writing, (lack of) sleep.²⁰ Even if this description is a function of Kafka's (unsuccessful) attempt to persuade Felice to accept Franz's terms of their future life together and is not to be taken too literally, the rigidity of this iterative structure is supposed to serve a positive function: in the first place, to sustain the activity of writing.

Repeatedly beginning and returning thus signifies something else than a mere failure to finish a text, but is a function of a 'beautiful' stubbornness, an unrelenting effort to reduce, that is, to concentrate life's activity on textual creation.

It can be argued that this is what attracts Kafka to Heinrich von Kleist's *Michael Kohlhaas* (1810).²¹ There, a stubbornness in the form of a thirst for justice is provoked

18 Brod 2009, p. 215.

19 Kafka 1995b, p. 428.

20 Kafka 1999, pp. 33–34, 477.

21 Kafka read von Kleist's letters and his *Anecdotes* and he was interested in the way Kleist reflected on his life decisions. Kafka also (uncharacteristically) gave a public reading of *Michael Kohlhaas* in the Toynbee Hall, and (characteristically) considered it 'a complete and



by the absence of a legal warrant (a text), which sets the plot in motion. Before making some observations on the iterative situations in Kafka's texts, let me briefly comment on Kleist's novella. The Brandenburg horse dealer Michael Kohlhaas is illegally deprived of two horses when on his way to Dresden he passes through Junker Wenzel von Tronka's fiefdom. He is told that he needs transit papers and is forced to leave two of his horses behind as collateral; when he arrives to Dresden, the capital of Saxony, his suspicion is confirmed that this claim for transit permission was false; upon arriving at von Tronka's castle he finds his two horses gaunt and mistreated; his servant whom he had left there to take care of them was badly beaten and driven out. He files a lawsuit in Dresden against von Tronka, but after a year finds out the suit was suspended due to the influence of Wenzel von Tronka's relatives (Hinz and Kunz) who are attendants to the Elector of Saxony. Kohlhaas persists and demands his rights, and is turned down; he gradually gathers a private army around him after his wife is struck down by a guard when she tries to deliver a petition to the Elector; later she dies of the injuries. New and new attempts by violence and written demands to answer the injustice are made by Kohlhaas, *repeatedly* returning to the basic claim: Make von Tronka feed my horses and pay for the medical treatment of my servant. Kohlhaas provisionally admits all other collateral damage and agrees that the whole case should be subject to legal proceedings. It would be a breach of civil agreement, to his inclusion in the community of the state, to his access to law, according to Kohlhaas, if his initial claim was not answered. Martin Luther intervenes on behalf of Kohlhaas, the matter reaches higher and higher circles, including other Electors and Princes until it reaches the court in Vienna, while the reputation of Kohlhaas as a leader of rebellion is becoming wider and wider.

The recurrence of Kohlhaas's attempts to achieve justice and his failures to do so is driven by his will to justice (in psychiatry, the behaviour is sometimes called 'Michael Kohlhaas syndrome')²² the character of which, in this story, but also in recognized psychiatric cases of litigious paranoia is almost *impersonal* or *nonhuman*: this will is a 'force' which makes him pursue justice in spite — or rather exactly because — of the *growing disbalance* between gains and losses in the process; Kohlhaas loses everything in the course of his crusade. The stubbornness, the sense of principle is preconditioned on the continued suspension of written legal settlement. The continuing repetitive rhythm of claims to recovery and their denial begins with an absent document (the permit to demand the collateral by von Tronka) and ends with the disappearance of a prophetic text (a paper given to him by a soothsayer, a prophecy on the fate of the House of Saxony, which Kohlhaas reads and swallows before he is executed). In his essay "Incorporating the Text", Clayton Koelb compares this logic of perpetuation by absence to Kafka's story "An Imperial Message" claiming that in both cases "the ultimate guarantee of a text's transcendent authority is unavailability".²³ Perhaps by denying the Elector the scriptural, legal verification of the fate of his dy-

utter fiasco'. "One of [the boys in the front row] tries to overcome his innocent boredom by carefully throwing his cap on the floor and then carefully picking it up, and then *again, over and over* [emphasis mine]" (a diary entry from 11 December 1913, Kafka 1976, p. 246).

²² See Gerevich — Ungvari 2015, Ward 2021.

²³ Koelb 1990, p. 1105.

nasty, Kohlhaas seals the doom of the House of Saxony, becoming the maker of its further undisclosed fate. The denial of verification by written law is an aspect that the novella shares with Kafka's *The Trial*.



2. REPETITIVENESS FOR CHARACTERS

In fact, a series of parallels and displacements characterizes the relationship between Kleist's *Michael Kohlhaas* and Kafka's unfinished novel. The connotation of rebellion which pervades the world of Kohlhaas is ironically dispersed by the *displacement* of repetition to a *bureaucratic* mode. Both Josef K. and Kohlhaas are exactly thirty when their 'process' begins; but if Kohlhaas is an 'außerordentliche[r] Mann' (an extraordinary man)²⁴ (as we learn in the second sentence of the novella), K. (the alliteration marks another association between them) is perfectly unremarkable exactly until that moment when "he [is] arrested one fine morning" "without having done anything wrong".²⁵ The monotony of his previous life is only given a hint in the first chapter, and yet is unmistakable: it seems to have spanned between work, weekly visits to Elsa (an intimate companion to multiple clients), and beer-hall evenings at the regulars' table — a schedule even more modest than that of the historical man. The arrest seems to institute a *disruption* to this routine (K., 'a man without qualities', scarcely even exists until that 'unique' moment); and yet no sooner has the arrest been executed than K. leaves to work in the company of three colleagues that he is incapable of distinguishing, Rabensteiner, Kaminer and Kullich. A series of further 'singular events' follows: the first interrogation, the visit to the Law-court offices, the whipper scene, the visit to the advocate, the inadvertent meeting in the cathedral. However, these seeming singularities are immediately entangled with motifs of replication: thus interrogations are announced to take place regularly (but fail to do so, thus paradoxically also failing to become the awakening singularity in K.'s life); K. witnesses how the guards are whipped in the lumber room of his bank and this 'event' strangely replicates itself a few days later; he meets the advocate, but the encounters with him turn into an exhausting, endless sequence of meaningless expositions on the difficulties of behind-the-scene proceedings; in the cathedral, the chaplain tells him the story of a man whose life is wasted by not being able to enter the door leading into the Law, where "from hall to hall, keepers stand at every door, one more powerful than the other". The attempts to break free from the tendency of singularities to revert into repetitive series themselves acquire a repetitive character. The only singular event, to put it somewhat radically, free from this recursive structure is the final execution.

The unbreathable, corrupt air that fills the Law-court offices in Chapter Four recurs in Titorelli's studio, suggesting the omnipresence of the law. At the end of K.'s visit to Titorelli's studio the painter presents a heathscape painting for sale; when K. accepts it, Titorelli presents another, and then yet another, and then a whole heap of them: "there was not the slightest difference that one could see between it and the other", "it as not merely a similar study, it was simply the same wild heathscape

24 Kleist 1967, p. 3.

25 Kafka 2009, p. 7.



again”.²⁶ Titorelli informs K. of the only two possible ‘outcomes’ of his trial: the apparent acquittal, or the indefinite postponement: in the context of the first, the trial begins always anew, again and again, with the second, the case is suspended in an early phase and there perpetuates itself. The definite acquittal is merely a legend, and as in the case of Michael Kohlhaas, it is preconditioned by the default non-existence of written documents (there are only rumours of their existence).²⁷

The (mental) mechanism of the law seems to be that the more K. struggles to escape from its tentacles, the more deeply he is implicated and entwined with it. As Hermann Cohen notes on the idea of fate in antiquity (and Benjamin reminds us): “the very rules of fate seem to be what causes and brings about the breaking away from them, the defection”²⁸. Moving between the ominous habit of marginalizing the trial (“[t]his legal action was nothing more than a business deal”) and the feeling of being consumed by it (“[t]he thought of his case never left him now”)²⁹ defines K.’s horizon.

A similar principle of repetitively thwarted attempts to reach the space of an obscure promise, or meeting piling-up obstacles that annul the possibility of progression can be found in many other works by Kafka such as *The Castle*, “The Hunter Gracchus,” “An Imperial Message,” etc. In “Poseidon,” the near infinity of little calculations and figures that the god of waters needs to process prevents him from seeing the seas in other than the most fleeting fashion and he postpones his quick round-the-seas tour to just before the end of the world.

Repetitiveness or repetitive motion, of course, is neither an overall storyworld principle nor a global technique of presentation in Kafka. The motif or theme of reaching dead ends or stases is particularly weighted, but it may avoid repetitive elements, or employ them to various degrees. For example, in “A Country Doctor,” movement is suspended as the narrator realizes he will never “reach home” in his “earthly vehicle” drawn by “unearthly horses”³⁰ — an aimless, but not repetitive motion. The Hunter Gracchus, half-dead, half-alive, astray on his boat to the underworld, in contrast, sails from city to city, being brought “the morning drink of the country whose coastline [they] happen to be passing at the moment”.³¹ There are also, as we have already noted, ‘singular’ failures to repeat, so to speak: For instance, when the Officer in “In the Penal Colony” strips naked and offers himself to the apparatus, he is plainly killed by it, and the denial to experience the epiphany, or transformation, he craved

26 Kafka 2009, p. 152.

27 As Walter Benjamin writes, “the written law is contained in books, but these are secret; by basing itself on them the prehistoric world [*Vorwelt*] exerts its rule all the more ruthlessly” (Benjamin 2007, p. 115). This seems to reflect, indirectly, the importance of the rabbis’ oral teachings in Judaism, the halakha (legal teachings authoritative for religious life) and haggadah (amplifications of biblical texts in the form of stories, parables, allegories, and poetry); even if both traditions found their way, in part, into writing in the form of various biblical commentaries, or were codified in the Talmud and Mishnah, halakha especially is recognized as the means by which the written Torah is interpreted to new generations and remains to be referred to as oral law as binding as the Torah.

28 Benjamin 2007, p. 115.

29 Kafka 2009, p. 119, p. 107.

30 Kafka 1995c, p. 225.

31 Kafka 1995d, p. 229.

for amounts to the failure to repeat the manifestation of justice that others have supposedly experienced. Such failure is emphatically ‘final’.



3. REPETITION AS AN EXPERIMENTAL NARRATIVE METHOD

Repetition on the discourse level may also serve the classical purpose of providing the text with a certain rhetorical and semantic organization. The most simple example might be “A Report to an Academy,” when the humanized ape begins and ends his ‘report’ or talk by repeating the same formal address “Exalted gentlemen of the Academy”, thus also signalling a genre. Repetition gives form and closure to his speech, even if, admittedly, the ape’s existence results in a new form of entrapment.

There are, however, specific cases when discursive repetition serves an entirely different purpose, and to this case I turn to now. One may call it *disorienting quasi-repetition* — or variation with minimal difference — and it might be considered as a technique which creates a specific *reader effect*, an experimental narrative method. We find an example in “The Judgement”. The bone of contention between Georg and his father in “The Judgement,” at least apparently, is the friend in St Petersburg: Georg writes him one of his letters (“lying little letters”),³² and goes to his father’s room. But the father first denies the existence of the friend altogether, and then, when the conflict between him and Georg openly breaks out, he claims that the friend keeps a truthful contact only with himself, the father. While Georg is still in his room, we learn (the focalization approximates Georg’s thoughts) that the friend “had not been home over three years now” (*schon über drei Jahre*), “attributing this, rather lamely, to the unstable political situation in Russia”. Several pages (and twenty-four paragraphs of description and dialogue) later, speaking to the father, Georg says: “Just try to remember, Father [...], it’s been almost three years since my friend visited us here” (*bald drei Jahre*).³³ The almost imperceptible difference between both pieces of information could be explained in personalizing terms: For instance, is Georg subtly lying to his father? Is he losing his memory? Has the reader been deceived by the narrator? Has Kafka overlooked the discrepancy? And yet these possible explanations seem unsatisfactory. Rather, we might say that the inconsistency is a sign of both Georg’s and his father’s lack of objectivity — an inconsistency similar to those we find in the ‘text’ of a quarrel. For a quarrel, its oral quality is foundational, for instance in the sense that statements cannot be verified because they are not written down. By projecting some of the characteristics of a quarrel onto the text as a whole, Kafka transforms the usual constellation (‘the text of a quarrel’ is a paradoxical notion) and creates (perhaps a subliminal) disorienting effect whereby the reader is potentially compelled to apply an evidence procedure, or legal consultation — in other words, careful repeated reading. Quarrels about the same matters might repeat themselves, but never, unlike texts, word for word, to the letter; by making the text slightly deviate (a general principle of minimal variation), Kafka fulfills, in terms of the reader’s subliminal perception, both conditions (to repeat, and not to repeat) simultaneously.

³² Kafka 2007a, p. 10, 4, 8.

³³ Kafka 1994, p. 45, 54.



What is interesting about this disorienting quasi-repetition is its potential relationship to the new technical analogue media of the discourse network 1900 such as the phonograph, the gramophone and the film.³⁴ While the early analogue recordings need to be navigated by a laborious rewinding in order to confront their different places, the written and printed text enables navigation by smaller or larger steps (by turning one or many pages). The evolutionary advantage of the codex, according to Kittler, was its ability to attribute to every place in the text a certain set of ‘addresses’, making information more rapidly accessible.³⁵ The technique of disorienting quasi-repetition thus opens up the texture of the text in an implicit contrast to the emerging principle of different temporal flows established by the mechanical inscription of periodical signals enabling its replay and rewinding.

We can see the same technique in the Cathedral chapter in *The Trial* where two conflicting pieces of temporal information occur: K. and the Italian, whose dialect is almost incomprehensible to K., make an arrangement to meet at ten o'clock in front of the Cathedral (this datum is recounted in free indirect discourse uncharacteristically focalized through the Manager and his speech). Just a few paragraphs below we read: “K. had been punctual, [eleven] [elf] o'clock was striking just as he entered, but the Italian had not yet arrived. He went back to the main entrance, stood there undecidedly for a while, and then circled round the building in the rain, to make sure that the Italian was perhaps not waiting at some side door. He was nowhere to be seen. Could the Manager have made some mistake about the hour? How could anyone be quite sure of understanding such a man?”³⁶ While Max Brod and most subsequent standard editions³⁷ corrected this place to “ten o'clock was striking”, Malcolm Pasley in a passage on emendations in his 1989 paper argues that the conflicting time might be intentional, signaling the discrepancy between internal and external time so that K. thinks it is ten (and his watch later shows eleven, after spending an hour in the cathedral), but the narratorial ‘voice’ tells the correct time. In other words, K. might imagine it is ten o'clock, experiencing the passage of time subjectively as short (or fast), while external evidence (but not *his* watch) suggests a much longer lapse of time. Interestingly, the situation corresponds to his first intimate interaction with Leni when his uncle states that K. has been with her “for hours”, while to the reader and to K. it feels much less. Similarly in Chapter Two, a short interval of time seems to

34 I use this Kittler's concept (discourse network, or rather *Aufschreibesystem* 1900) for its economic convenience without the implications of its (partly Lacanian and cybernetic) antihumanism (Kittler 1999).

35 Kittler 1993.

36 Kafka 2009, p.187, with the alteration based on the manuscript and the critical edition as prepared by Pasley (Kafka 1990e).

37 E.g. Kafka 2009, p. 146–7 (Oxford edition), with a note by the editor Ritchie Robertson: “Kafka must have forgotten that K. was supposed to meet the Italian at ten” (ibid., p. 190). In contrast, the German critical edition maintains the original “hatte es elf geschlagen” (Kafka 1990e, p. 279). A seemingly similar case appears in the “K.'s Uncle — Leni” chapter when the uncle Karl suddenly becomes Albert. I would argue these two instances are different in kind, and in the first case analyzed here the discrepancy should be considered as deliberate (see further).

have passed between K.'s arrival and the actual interrogation, even though the clock shows that almost an hour has gone by in the meantime.³⁸ The "eleven o'clock" in the Cathedral chapter might, however, represent an *internal distortion* as well. This would also be supported by the fact that Leni calls K. before the cathedral meeting, 'causing' a distortion in his perception of time; only this time talking to her feels "too long". "Eleven" would be part of the free indirect discourse and K.'s focalization, indicating that K. thinks "eleven", despite knowing the meeting was set to ten; he cannot see through his error — an equivalent to a slip of the tongue. In external reality, by contrast, it is actually ten o'clock; the planned encounter may have been a pretense orchestrated by the court, or it might be that the Italian simply failed to show up. In any case, it is not repetition that occurs, but a failure to adhere to the same framework; this, however, takes place within the same interest in disorientation effect — an effect that is itself repeated, since a similar temporal disjoint happens, as mentioned, in the First Interrogation and then the Leni chapter.

ENTANGLEMENT (CONCLUSION)

What conclusions can be drawn from these observations? Kafkaian repetitions tend to create an atmosphere of exhaustion,³⁹ turn recursive and participate in the representation of encroachment, no-way-out and 'Chinese whispers' situations. They tend to cross different ontological (or ontic) levels (those of characters, readers, the author, and discourse, or presentation), corresponding to a peculiar understanding of the relationship between 'life' and 'writing' in Kafka, and translate themselves into the mode of failure (repetition seen as a 'failure not to repeat'). First- and second-order repetitions are implied by the recurrence of equivalent fragments: the text repeats itself (even if with considerable alterations), and this 'failure' repeats itself;⁴⁰ similar repetitions tend to characterize the situation of K. as well. As mentioned, an atmosphere of dissipation and fatigue is created. Such repetition might be seen as equivalent to a psychological mechanism similar to the Kohlhaas syndrome, or also to the mechanism of trauma and death drive, as famously and early described by Sigmund Freud,⁴¹ which could be internally modelled by an analogy to technical reproduction (the technology of the phonograph and the early film).⁴² At the same time, however, the 'considerable alterations' might represent a deviation, a deflection from this mechanistic impasse —

38 Pasley also notes this: "In that chapter K. makes every effort to attend the hearing at nine o'clock, and apparently reaches the building at that hour; but, when he finds the meeting-room, the clock — this fact is given special emphasis in the text — 'already pointed to ten', a circumstance which despite K.'s search through the building seems hard to account for" (Pasley 1990, p. 117).

39 Cf. Gumbrecht 2012 and Kazalarska 2012.

40 The fact that the text repeats itself with a (considerable) difference might signal an alteration, or even certain remedy of the sense of 'failure'. See below.

41 Freud 1962.

42 For an account of how discrete intervals of early cinematic machines might have come to represent something like the 'mind' see Kirkwood 2022.



the fact of functional equivalence of the fragments matters less than the textual minutiae — much like the Kohlhaas syndrome might represent the bravery of repeatedly facing insurmountable obstacles. The second-order repetition — for example, Georg failed to repeat his father's status, and the same destiny befalls the author — also seems to constitute one of Kafka's specific narrative techniques (disorienting discrepancy in temporal data) implicitly *contrasted* to the reproduction logic of the early technical media mentioned earlier (repetition with a difference). The recursion of the second-order type (second-order repetition) might be seen to characterize the reader's situation as well, this time again in a benign sense, if one understands such repetition as repetition of the 'failure' to repeat the same reading.

Thus while the metatextual level is marked by repeated openings, a progression of different readings, the storyworld level is often marked by stasis, a failure to find a way out, but also a shift in the situation, a kind of internal metalepsis: Georg's fall in "The Judgement," the Traveler's departure from the island "In the Penal Colony," etc. In fact, this metalepsis has an 'external' equivalent in the metalepsis between the narrative world and the world of the reader. It is by switching between (communication and ontic) levels that repetition might be seen, after all, as something that establishes a kind of a way out of an otherwise hopeless situation. — This provides a possible key to Kafka's words about hope: "[There is] plenty of hope, an infinite amount of hope — but not for us."⁴³ Perhaps such hope can be found by, and within, the reader in terms of a certain entanglement of the levels where repetition occurs.

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⁴³ "We are nihilistic thoughts, suicidal thoughts that come into God's head," Kafka said. This reminded me [writes Brod] at first of the Gnostic view of life: God as the evil demiurge, the world as his Fall. "Oh no," said Kafka, "our world is only a bad mood of God, a bad day of his." "Then there is hope outside this manifestation of the world that we know." He smiled. "Oh, plenty of hope, an infinite amount of hope — but not for us" (quoted in Benjamin 2007, p. 116).

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