

Prof. Erik Roraback, Universita Karlova

Midterm Essay, Kafka in Prague YBAU03

April 5th, 2016

Kafka revisited

On funny scenes, comic gestures and odd characters
in *The Trial*

Steinunn Inga Óttarsdóttir

„I will just laugh if I’m condemned.“
(*The Trial*)¹

Introduction

When the opportunity came to me to stay and study in a university abroad for one semester I didn’t have to think twice where to go. Prague had always been on my bucketlist, being the birthplace of Franz Kafka where he strolled on cobblestone streets with his hat and stick on a sunny day. I had read Kafkas novels before, starting with *The Metamorphosis*, first translated in Icelandic in 1960 (with a new translation in 2006), *The Trial* was translated in 1983 on Kafkas centennial, and *The Castle* first came out in Icelandic in 2015.

Kafkas works have had a deep influence on me. I always find it fascinating when literature reflects the deepest, desperate emotions; like anxiety, solitude, power and desire, guilt and subjection; and when in a book human existence is explored. I was drawn to Kafka’s fictional world from the start, to his clear style of language and symbolic imagery, and to the strict rules and codes of conducts his characters live by; the hierarchy and machinery, the authority and the struggle with the endless repetitive work, finding no meaning in it all. Of course all this was something that really bothered Kafka himself in his personal life. He, who wanted the most to lock himself up in a hole somewhere far away, ended up being one of the most famous authors in the world.

Reading *The Trial* once again, now in an English translation by Mike Mitchell (2009), it surely took me by surprise to still be able to find new aspects to this artwork; from

¹ Kafka, Franz. 2009:49

this Prague Jew who wrote in the beginning of last century - in high class minority German „paper-language“² - a book his friend lined up from drafts. So now Kafka has been revisited and what a joyful reunion.

1. Is Kafka deadly serious or deadly funny?

I have always considered Kafka a very modern and serious writer, with misery and beauty twisted together; like some tormented, submissive messenger bringing us bad news from an distant office. But probably that is just an old cliché. As David Foster Wallace (1998) points out about humour and irony in his article „Laughing with Kafka“, he is also a funny author.³ His horrific and hopeless novel, *The Trial* is perhaps the most funny of Kafkas work. „Kafka's friend, Max Brod, talked of how Kafka found humour in his dark works - especially the chilling "The Trial", which he thought a hoot, laughing so hard while reading the first chapter aloud, that he repeatedly had to stop to collect himself.“⁴

The narrator in *The Trial* gets us absorbed in the story by creating an experience that is just as absurd and exhausting for the reader as it is for K.⁵ Black humour, sophisticated and ironic, is one of the characteristics and reasons why the novel is so catchy. In Kafka's short stories and parables he is dancing on the edge of the tragic and comic, one might even think some of them are just jokes, for the „pressure and

² Deleuze and Guattari. 1986:19

³ David Foster Wallace. 1998. p 23-27.

⁴ Connolly, Kate. 2008.

⁵ Shmoop. Editorial team. November 2008. „Analysis: Narrator Point“

release-effect inside the reader “as Wallace describes it⁶, when the reader hardly knows whether to laugh or cry.

2. Humorous effects

Kafka's style of writing is „dramatic, unadorned prose style that would be at once classical and modern.“⁷ It plays a part in the humorous effect in his works. His peculiarly modern writing, pure and existential, somehow represses and minimizes the events described and the tension make you laugh, according to Wallace's theory. He also points out that „Kafka's funniness depends on radical literalization of truths we tend to treat as metaphorical“. From a literary perspective *The Trial* represents a break with the realist mode of signifying descriptions and charactererization, which Kafka saw as tautological and deceptive.⁸ . One aspect in Kafka's humour is how he makes fun of his characters and their scary and sad circumstances through replicas in strict language and by divert gestures. In Kafkas works, „The reader is removed from the fictional world by being presented with a riddled narrative that compels but resists interpretation.“⁹ And all this is done in a „tight, cool, detached, sparse, logically constructed language.“¹⁰

2.2. Funny Scenes, comic Gestures

The reader has a mixed feeling for Josef K. One can't help feeling some compassion for him in his difficult position that is articulated by his faults, like arrogance f. ex.,

⁶ Shmoop. Editorial team. November 2008. „Analysis: Narrator Point“

⁷ Anderson, Mark M. 1992:9

⁸ Anderson, Mark M. 1992:171

⁹ Calafiore, Shiobhan. 2014.

¹⁰ Connolly, Kate. 2008.

and also his embarrassments. The scenes after the arrest, when he is talking to the ladies of the house, are under pressure that is released in a strange way. When K. is in Frau Grubachs room, she is darning a stocking late in the evening. He is absent minded and she is busy, the two of them are seated at a table talking and as the conversation goes on, there is this line saying: „from time to time K. buried one hand in the pile of stockings“. What is that?! It is a good example of how a comical gesture is disconnected from the dialogue to make it strange and funny:

„Rather than reveal meaning, the comical gesture is disconnected from the dialogue and thwarts understanding. For Kafka gesture is representative of the very problem of language. Through the decomposition of characters and the use of gesture, Kafka resists access between the fictional and empirical universe so that meaning can't be transferred and remains concealed within the text.“¹¹

It is a common Kafka style to ridicule his characters. The same evening K. gets furious with Frau Grubach, he stands up and leaves the room and the old woman staggers after him but he shouts at her „through the crack of the door“¹² and then slams it in her face! This is a comical scene, visually bringing out the state of mind and the relation between these two characters.

In the dialog (or monolog) of K. and Fraulein Burstner, K is so absorbed in telling her about the arrest, that he puts on a funny demonstration that makes her laugh and despite that she tries to shut him up, he has, „unfortunately“, to shout like the supervisor, because he is so „immersed in his role“ (24). That is hilarious! And shows his egocentric and inconsiderate behaviour towards the Fraulein.

¹¹ Calafiore, Shiobhan. 2014.

¹² Kafka, Franz. 2009: 20-21.

And of course, there are scenes where the authority, the court and the law procedures in *The Trial*, are so far out that the pressure becomes intolerable at the precise instant that it is released.¹³ Just to mention a small example, when the lawyer once describes the process of a submission in the system, in a very dignified and deadly serious way:

„...it sometimes happened that first submissions to the court were not read at all. They were simply filed... the first submission was usually mislaid or completely lost, and even if it was kept right to the end it was hardly read, though he, the lawyer, had only heard rumours to that effect...”

(81)

And the three possibilities for K.'s release, both the acquittals and the protraction of proceedings, have so many shortcomings and legal difficulties that they can hardly be understood at all. It is a farcical picture of bureaucracy at its worst, depicted with brisk irony.

2.3. Odd Characters

Kafka also makes you laugh when he is describing the actions of his characters.

Uncle Karl/Albert is extremely funny, he is an awfully excited man and noisy, almost every sentence is cried, shouted or exclaimed and he is so nervous that when he looks out of the window he is „crumpling up the curtains in his hands“ (67)! And he has to wipe tears from his eyes when he reads a letter from his daughter, and „he seemed to be reading it again“! (66). All this underlines him as comical character. He is from another world, not the world of clerks and hierarchy, he lives in the countryside and is also of another generation. He is all for family honour and emotions whereas K. is

¹³ Wallace. 1998:23

cold and stiff and very ambitious, „well liked and respected“ (17). K. feels ashamed for his noisy and savage uncle and desperately wants to get rid of him and restore the order in his life (17).

The scene with the student and the usher is amusing too. When the student and K. are fighting over the secretary's wife, the struggle goes out of control, K. is shouting and placing his hand on the shoulder of the student he snaps at it with his teeth! (46). And the usher, running around with pointless messages just has to make you laugh. Isn't this description just absurd, portraying the maximum futility and alienation?

„...just to get rid of me they send me off with a pointless message. But they don't send me far, so that I can still hope that if I'm very quick I might get back in time. So I run as fast as I can, open the door of the office where I've been sent just a crack, shout my message so breathlessly it can hardly be understood, then run back.“
(48)

The whole visit to the crazy painter Titorelli is like a funny play or a farce, with K. sunk on the bed in a warm and messy room, covered up by sheets, pillows and blankets, the girls screaming and knocking on the door and the painter crawling under the bed asking from underneath if K. would like to buy one of his awful pictures from him (116). And when K. finally manages to run away through the stuffy hallways of the Court and is getting in to the cab, the secretary is so eager to be of assistance „that he tried to get up on the box seat, but K. forced him down“ (118). Here K. is so close to despair that he even gets in a physical fight with this comic, trivial man. „The scene

is quite humorous – one of the few in which Kafka's depiction of the Court as the grotesque repetition of the same slides into a comic mode.¹⁴

2.4. The Theater

„Kafka's world is a world of theater. For him, man is on stage from the very beginning,“ Walter Benjamin once said about Kafka.¹⁵ Detailed descriptions of gestures, postures, clothes, movements and appearances (a beard f.ex.) play an important part in Kafka's writing and most of them are quite humorous. The characters are fighting for their existence, their life is at stake, and the conclusion is determined by the way they act and look.¹⁶

The theater element and emphasis on gestures and staging become quite obvious in the end of *The Trial*. In the final scene the two „actors“ (161) look like they have been cut out from a black/white silent comedy. The irony is icecold and edged like a knife, when K. says to himself: „They are not prepared for questions, ... and went to fetch his hat“ (161). And of course the famous gallows-humorous quote: „Perhaps they are tenors“ (163)! In the end the two men are trying to find a posture for K. that isn't „strain and unconvincing“ but „Finally they left K. in a position which wasn't even the best of those they had already tried“ (164). How odd is that! And horribly hilarious! This „combination of laughter and discomfort unsettles us, leaves us unsure.“¹⁷ The barbaric scene is so violent that laughing is the only way to endure it.

14 Anderson, Mark M. 1992:166

15 Benjamin, Walter. 1968, p. 124

16 Eysteinnsson, Ástráður, Þorvaldsson, Eysteinn. 1995.

17 Gardner, David. 2010. <https://www.wilmatheater.org/blog/its-okay-laugh-kafka>

3. Why is Kafka funny?

Humour has not been a big issue in the humongous pile of modern Kafka studies so Wallace's point of view is refreshing. It is almost like a circus watching Josef K. run around in dark rooms and twisted stairs in slum quarters, meeting strange people talk mostly nonsense. No wonder he is confused and exhausted and no wonder the reader also is confused and exhausted by the strange representation of the world:

„Literary modernism is an experimental method of writing that rejects conventional elements and structures and by doing so, challenges realism's representation of the world. There are many ways in which modernists can achieve this, most notably through experimentation with language use, plot structure and narrative perspective. Modernists focus on the experience of the world by making what has traditionally been treated as background, such as perspective and framing, the subject of their work. There is an emphasis on the chaos and incoherence of subjective experience, which produces more questions for the reader than answers.“¹⁸

But on the other hand, if Kafka's character's situations are hopeless, they are also laughably absurd, approaching their ludicrous fates with a calm earnestness that can strike us as both frustrating and hilarious.¹⁹

As a modernist Kafka creates a creepy, chaotic and comic world with a mystical atmosphere and produces more questions than answers. He uses details and symbols you could play with endlessly and through experiments in language and plot, structure and perspective, a murky story is produced that stays with you forever.

¹⁸ Calafiore, Shiobhan. 2014

¹⁹ Gardner, David. 2010.

Conclusion

Poor, wretched K. is thrown to one absurd element after another with random comic touches, from the arresting guards' obsession with his underwear in his arrest, to the examining magistrate's pornography book.²⁰ His twisted conscience gradually loses itself in Kafka's long paragraphs and ironically complicated difficulties of the law, where there is no cause and effect and no hope in sight. And in the background Kafka is laughing so joyfully that he can hardly stop to recollect himself.

Of course humour is always a matter of taste, as David Foster Wallace argues in „Laughing with Kafka“ (1998). However Kafka can be seen in yet another dimension: „Never has there been a more comic and joyous author from the point of view of desire; ... Everything leads to laughter, starting with *The Trial*...“²¹

²⁰ Shmoop. Editorial team. November 2008

²¹ Deleuze and Guattari. 1986:42

References

- Anderson, Mark M. 1992. Kafka's Clothes. Ornament and Aestheticism in the Habsburg Fin de Siècle. New York, Oxford
- Benjamin, Walter. 1968. Illuminations. New York, Schocken Books.
- Calafiore, Shiobhan. 2014. „Woolf versus Kafka. A Look at the Different Literary Modernism.“ <http://the-artifice.com/woolf-versus-kafka/>. Retrieved: 3. March 2016.
- Connolly, Kate. 2008. „Kafka's jovial side revealed.“ The Guardian. <http://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2008/jul/03/post26>. Retrieved: 2. March 2016.
- Gardner, David. 2010. „It's okay to laugh at Kafka.“ <https://www.wilmatheater.org/blog/its-okay-laugh-kafka>. Retrieved: 15. March.
- Eysteinnsson, Ástráður and Þorvaldsson, Eysteinn. 1995. „Réttarhöldin og veröld Kafka“. Morgunblaðið, 11. júní. <http://www.mbl.is/greinasafn/grein/206905/> Retrieved: 17. March.
- Kafka, Franz. 2009. The Trial. Translated by Mike Mitchell. Oxford, Oxford University Press
- Scmoop. Editorial team. November 2008. „Narrator point of view“. <http://www.shmoop.com/the-trial-kafka/narrator-point-of-view.html>. Retrieved: 1st of March 2016.
- Scmoop. Editorial team 2008. „The World as Stage“. <http://www.shmoop.com/the-trial-kafka/world-as-stage-symbol.html>. Retrieved: 3. March 2016
- Wallace, David Foster. 1998. „Laughing with Kafka“. Harpers Magazine, July. P. 23-27.