Creators and Creatures: Visualizing Franz Kafka

by

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We acknowledge and respect the lək̓ʷəŋən peoples on whose territory the university stands and the Songhees, Esquimalt and W̱SÁNEĆ peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

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Abstract

Kafka's profound fascination with visual arts is evident through his extensive collection of drawings and the visual, evocative nature of his writings. Instead of considering Kafka as merely an author who occasionally dabbled in drawing, this perspective posits him as a *Zeichner* who also happens to write. This argument proposes that the unique visual characteristics present in Kafka's text can be traced back to his active involvement in the visual realm, an aspect that has often been overlooked in previous scholarly discussions. To bridge this gap, the present study aims to explore the dynamic relationship between Kafka's animal figures and the visual arts to demonstrate that Kafka's literature has not only captivated readers but has also served as a profound source of inspiration for artists, who strive to capture Kafka's visualizations beyond the confines of the written word. However, the act of creation for Kafka was a deeply wounding experience. In his diaries and stories, Kafka expressed his struggle with the creative process, depicting writing as an act of inscribing pain, violence and/or torture upon oneself, most famously in "In der Strafkolonie" ("In the Penal Colony," 1919). This notion is reflected in the etymology of the Greek word "graphein," which encompasses the ideas of writing, drawing, and inscribing, highlighting the inherent violence and intensity involved in the act of creation and the intertwinement of the written word and the drawn image. Particularly, this study examines the short stories "Der Geier" ("The Vulture," 1920), and "Der Bau" ("The Burrow," 1931), whose protagonists narrate their bodily suffering (pecking, piercing, scratching and digging). By analyzing these stories with and sometimes against their visual interpretations of contemporary artists, such as Yosl Bergner, Peter Kuper, and Robert Crumb, this thesis illustrates the connection between writing, suffering and animality. Kafka deploys these creature-themed narratives to explore the relationship between writing and suffering. Ultimately, the findings of this research offer a reading of Kafka's literature as a literature of wounds. It is a body of work that emerges from the realm of pain and suffering, which spills over the text and leaves a mark on those who engage with it.

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Acknowledgements

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1. The Ever-Present Kafka and An Analysis of Previous Studies on Kafka's Bestiary

Franz Kafka's literary works continue to resonate with readers and artists across generations, making him a truly timeless author. The fundamental human experiences of alienation, helplessness, and the struggle for individual identity are intricately woven into Kafka's narratives, allowing readers from diverse backgrounds and time periods to identify with his characters and their predicaments. Moreover, Kafka's penetrating analysis of the human condition reflects the enduring anxieties and dilemmas of contemporary society. His exploration of one's struggles against faceless institutions, the loss of autonomy, and alienation reflect contemporary concerns and offer valuable insights into the complexities of our present world.

Furthermore, Kafka's narrative style, characterized by suggestiveness, fragmentation, and open-endedness mirrors the uncertainties and ambiguities of the contemporary era. His works, intricately intertwined with his diaries and letters, offer a glimpse into his inner thoughts and creative process. While this intimate connection between his literary works and personal writings provides a rich and fruitful source for interpretation, it also presents challenges in disentangling the complexities of his thoughts and intentions, as both his private and personal writings and published fiction can be interpreted as "literature" in the broadest sense. In a time when narrative conventions are being challenged, Kafka's works actively engage readers, encouraging a dialogue between the text and the reader. This interplay between the literary work and its audience, fueled by its suggestiveness, has invited a rich and varied body of themed studies on Kafka, which demonstrates the diverse perspectives through which scholars have approached Kafka's works, showcasing the enduring interest and relevance of his writings in English-language contemporary scholarship. The present study aims to enrich the discourse on Kafka by exploring the presence of non-human beings within his narratives, followed by a discussion of

his profound connection with visual arts. Throughout his works, we encounter a diverse cast of non-human characters, from animals to hybrid and fantastical beings, which serve as powerful conduits for exploring existential themes and the human condition. Within this context, the act of creation acquires a profound dimension when analyzing Kafka's literature, offering glimpses into his innermost state by revealing to be a deeply wounding experience. In his diaries and stories, Kafka expressed his struggle with the creative process, portraying writing as an act of self-inflicted pain, violence, and/or torture. By beginning with Kafka's portrayal of creatures and their significance in his works, this study focussed on "Der Geier" and "Der Bau" embarks on a journey to uncover the intricate relationships between humans and the non-human world in Kafka's literary universe. Before embarking on the main arguments of this thesis linking art, animals and writing, it is crucial to provide an overview of recent scholarly contributions in order to situate this project within the broader context of Kafka studies.

In terms of psychological perspectives on Kafka's work, Stanley Corngold's *Franz Kafka: The Necessity of Form* (2018) and Sander Gilman's *Franz Kafka, the Jewish Patient* (1995) offer distinct yet complementary insights. Gilman investigates the importance of Kafka's Jewish background in the context of the pervasive anti-Semitism of his time, illuminating the psychological and cultural contexts in which his stories unfold. Similarly, Corngold acknowledges Kafka's struggles with his own identity and his tumultuous relationship with his family, emphasizing how these personal experiences inform the psychological complexities and existential themes found in his work.

There is also scholarly research on Kafka that explores the theological aspects of his writings. Works such as *The Animal in the Synagogue: Franz Kafka's Jewishness* (2019) by Dan Miron and *Kafka after Kafka: Dialogic Engagement with His Works from the Holocaust to*

Postmodernism (2019) by Iris Bruce and Mark H. Gelber, for example, contribute to a deeper understanding of the religious dimensions of his work.

Various scholars have also approached Kafka's work by exploring specific themes to gain deeper insights into his literary universe. Howard Caygill's *Kafka: In Light of the Accident* (2017) examines the significance of accidents, both literal and metaphorical, in Kafka's writings; while *Franz Kafka: The Office Writings* (2015) edited by Stanley Corngold, et al. offers a glimpse into Kafka's professional life through a collection of his writings related to his work in various office positions, while Pascale Casanova's *Kafka, Angry Poet* (2015) sheds light on the role of anger and frustration as a driving force in his literary creations.

Works like Marek Nekula's *Franz Kafka and His Prague Contexts: Studies on Language and Literature* (2016), Kaj Bernhard Genell's *Kafka: A Freudo-Structuralist Analysis* (2022), as well as Patrick O'Neill's *Transforming Kafka: Translation Effects* (2014) explore the linguistic and literary aspects of Kafka's writings. These scholarly works emphasize the role of language in shaping Kafka's narratives, the psychological dimensions within his works, and the impact of translation on the reception of his texts. Furthermore, the act of translation itself becomes significant in the reception and understanding of Kafka's texts, given his intricate interplay of words, syntax, and imagery. This project takes a distinct perspective from studies primarily focused on linguistic aspects by exploring how Kafka's visual language is conveyed through the medium of images. It aims to explore the unique perspective of interpreting Kafka's visual elements and symbolism into the visual realm.

In terms of studies on Kafka's significance in the present day, a significant study is *The Aphorisms of Franz Kafka* (2022) edited by Reiner Stach, which explores the enigmatic nature of Kafka's aphorisms, providing a fresh understanding of his letters, diaries, short prose, and novels. In addition, *Kafka for the Twenty-First Century* (2011), edited by Stanley Corngold and

Ruth Gross, is an insightful collection of essays that explore the ongoing relevance and resonance of Kafka's fiction in the contemporary world.

Recent explorations in multimedia studies have provided a dynamic platform for gaining a multidimensional understanding of Kafka's literary works. *Kafka and Noise: The Discovery of Cinematic Sound in Literary Modernism* (2019) by Kata Gellen Norberg, Shai Biderman and Ido Lewit's *Mediamorphosis: Kafka and the Moving Image* (2016) and *Kafka Goes to the Movies* (2002)[1] by Hanns Zischler exemplify the exploration of Kafka's engagement with the emerging mass media of motion pictures, their impact on his writing and his experience as a movie-goer. These studies also emphasize how Kafka's works intersect with emerging media forms and how they continue to inspire interpretations and adaptations in the multimedia landscape.

There is also a growing body of publications that seek to make Kafka more accessible and engaging for young readers. This includes Roee Rosen's film *Kafka for Kids* (2022), which adapts Kafka's *Die Verwandlung* for toddlers, Larissa Theule's book *Kafka and the Doll* (2021), *Baking with Kafka* (2017) by Tom Gauld and *My First Kafka: Runaways, Rodents, and Giant Bugs* (2013) by Matthue Roth. The examples mentioned above serve as compelling evidence of Kafka's remarkable ability to transcend the confines of "classic" literature and establish himself as an enduring phenomenon within popular culture. This cultural significance highlights his relevance to audiences of all ages, and the profound impact his narratives continue to have on our collective imagination.

Kafka's reception also extends to international shores, which is evident in *Borges and Kafka, Bolaño and Bloom: Latin American Authors and the Western Canon* (2022) by Juan De Castro, Yanbing Zeng's *Franz Kafka and Chinese Culture* (2022) and *Kafka's Italian Progeny*

[1] Originally published as *Kafka geht ins Kino* (1996).

(2020) by Saskia Ziolkowski. These studies reveal how Kafka's writings have resonated in diverse cultural and linguistic contexts, inspiring authors and scholars to engage with his works and recontextualize them within their own cultural traditions.

Of particular relevance to this study, recent scholarship on Kafka that has shed light on his lesser-known talent for drawing. A few significant contributions in this area are *A Great Artist One Day: Franz Kafka as a Pictorial Artist* (2007)[2] by Niels Bokhove and Marijke van Dorst and *Franz Kafka: The Drawings* (2022) [3] edited by Andreas Kilcher. These examples represent only a fraction of the extensive range of English-language studies on Kafka conducted in the past two decades. They showcase the ongoing scholarly interest in his works and the diverse and dynamic approaches taken to delve into his narratives from various angles and formats.

Finally, scholars and researchers have also recognized the significant role that non-human beings play in Kafka's literature. Some notable studies relevant to this research include *Kafka's Zoopoetics: Beyond the Human-Animal Barrier* (2020) by Naama Harel,[4] *Kafka's Creatures: Animals, Hybrids, and Other Fantastic Beings* (2010) edited by Marc Lucht and Donna Yarri, and Andrea Ebarb's *Investigating Franz Kafka's "Der Bau": Towards an Understanding of His Late Narrative in a Jewish Context* (2023). These works explore Kafka's unique portrayal of animals and fantastic beings, shedding light on the deeper symbolic implications and themes that these non-human entities represent in his literature. Notable studies have emerged that go beyond traditional literary analysis to engage with and perform Kafka's creaturely narratives by incorporating various forms of media such as film, visual art, and digital platforms. For instance, the Thailand-based contemporary art festival "Unfolding Kafka" provides a platform for artists

[2] Originally published as *Einmal ein grosser Zeichner: Franz Kafka als bildender Künstler* (2006).
[3] Originally published as *Franz Kafka: Die Zeichnungen* (2021).
[4] Another notable example is the ground-breaking book *Die Funktion der Tierfiguren im Werke Franz Kafkas* (1969) by Karl-Heinz Fingerhut, which, as noted by Harel, stands as the first dedicated exploration of animal representation in Kafka's oeuvre.

to reinterpret Kafka's works through installations, kinetic art pieces, and performances.[5] Further examples are Rebeca Bollinger's sculptural works and wall pieces derived from Kafka's short story, "Der Bau," and the dollhouse and video hologram sculpture by Victoria artist Allison Moore, which is also inspired by the burrowing creature of "Der Bau."

Kafka's incorporation of specifically animal figures in his writing has recently received considerable attention and resonates strongly with my personal interests. These animal figures serve as powerful motifs through which Kafka channels various aspects of the human nature, societal dynamics, and existential dilemmas. Throughout his body of work, non-human protagonists are pervasive, ranging from his earliest stories to his final literary creations. These non-human figures, whether they be animals, fictional creatures, or other entities, play pivotal roles in his stories, going beyond mere literary devices. It is no coincidence that Kafka's profound fascination with animality did not go unnoticed by discerning readers and scholars to explore.

As an attempt to explore the presence and profound significance of creatures in Franz Kafka's literary universe, Lucht and Yarri's *Kafka's Creatures: Animals, Hybrids, and Other Fantastic Beings* offers invaluable contributions to this area of research. Additionally, it draws inspiration from the remarkable insights offered by Harel in her ground-breaking work, *Kafka's Zoopoetics: Beyond the Human-Animal Barrier*. Through the integration of these influential sources, this thesis will attempt to shed light on the intricate relationships between human and non-human beings in Kafka's "Der Geier" and "Der Bau."

Kafka's Creatures presents a comprehensive and insightful examination of the diverse array of creatures and animals that inhabit his works. Comprised of a collection of essays from

[5] There is a vast array of theater and film adaptations of Kafka's work whose sheer number and variety are beyond the scope of this thesis.

diverse disciplines and encompassing a multitude of interpretive perspectives, the book discusses the presence and significance of animals and creaturely figures in Kafka's stories and diaries. Moreover, Yarri's invaluable analytical index provides readers with a comprehensive tool to explore the captivating beings that inhabit Kafka's literary world. This index serves as a guide, facilitating a thorough exploration and enhanced understanding of the multifaceted animals and creatures that populate the Kafka's narratives.

From a biographical perspective, Kafka's deep affinity for animals is also exemplified by his commitment to consciously abstain from consuming meat. This decision had a significant impact on his life and identity, as testified in some of his correspondence and personal writings. This dietary choice was motivated by his deep-seated ethical concerns as well as his considerations for health and well-being. For instance, in Ronald Hayman's *K: A Biography of Kafka* (1981), a compelling connection is drawn between Kafka's vegetarianism and his early exposure to slaughter as the grandson of a Jewish slaughterer (31).[6] In his biographical account of Kafka, Max Brod also discusses Kafka's dedication to vegetarianism. Brod recounts a particular incident at the Berlin aquarium where Kafka, in the presence of illuminated tanks housing fish, expressed his newfound tranquillity, stating, "[j]etzt kann ich euch schon ruhig anschaun, ich esse euch nicht mehr" (*Über Franz Kafka* 70).[7] These episodes highlight Kafka's profound shift in perspective and his conscious decision to refrain from consuming animal products, highlighting its integral role in shaping his values and beliefs. Thus, it is possible to argue that Kafka's empathy towards animals exerts a significant influence on his narrative

[6] The term "shochet" refers to a Jewish ritual slaughterer who is trained and authorized to slaughter by the laws of kashrut (Jewish dietary laws). A shochet is responsible for ensuring that the animal's throat is swiftly and accurately severed with a sharp knife, causing minimal pain and distress. The role of a shochet is significant within Jewish dietary practices, as their expertise ensures that the meat is prepared in a manner that meets religious requirements for consumption.

[7] "Now at last I can look at you in peace, I don't eat you anymore" (*A Biography* 60).

choices. Throughout his works, Kafka portrays non-human animals with a remarkable sensitivity and depth, often endowing them with distinct personalities, desires, and struggles.

Building upon the aforementioned exploration, Harel's analysis offers a fresh and distinctive perspective on the theme of non-human animals in Kafka's works. Harel draws upon the concept of "zoopoetics" [8] coined by Jacques Derrida in *The Animal that Therefore I Am* (2002) to critically revisit the representation of non-human animals in Kafka "as a mere allegory of intrahuman matters, such as Judaism and Zionism, modern alienation, metaphysical concepts, and psychoanalytic ideas" (3). By departing from traditional allegorical interpretations, Harel's zoopoetic analysis of Kafka's animal stories presents a remarkable and transformative perspective. It resists the reduction of non-human animals to mere reflections of human concerns, avoiding interpretations that solely focus on hidden meanings and symbolic representations.

Through this zoopoetic lens, Kafka's narratives reveal the complex interplay between humans and animals, unveiling a world where hierarchical divisions are questioned while inviting a deeper exploration of the interconnectedness and blurred distinctions between these realms by ultimately transcending the rigid boundaries of the human/animal binary. Harel's work offers a comprehensive overview of the scholarship surrounding Kafka's literary exploration of animals, serving as a guide for further scholarly investigations on the theme. Building upon Pietro Citati's biography of Kafka (1990), Harel further amplifies Kafka's profound connection with the animal realm by shedding light on how

[8] In *The Animal that Therefore I Am*, Derrida examines how animals are not merely passive objects in literature but active participants that generate their own forms of expression and signification. Animals, as literary figures, possess a unique agency that goes beyond their symbolic functions as metaphors or allegories. They bring forth alternative modes of communication and challenge human-centred perspectives. Harel's *Kafka's Zoopoetics: Beyond the Human-Animal Barrier*, therefore, encompasses the study of animals as meaningful beings within literary texts and encourages a re-evaluation of the intricate connections and interdependencies between humans and non-human animals in the realm of literary expression.

> [h]e sensed an animal within him. Again and again, composing with the figures of his unconscious a bestiary just as immense as a medieval one. He felt within him [an insect] or a hibernating cockchafer; a mole that dug tunnels through the ground; a mouse that fled the moment man arrives; a slithering snake; a worm squashed by a human foot; …. A dog that snarled and bared its teeth at anyone who disturbed him or barked nervously running around a statue; a twofold animal with the body of a lamb, the head and claws of a cat (Citati qtd. in Harel 1-2).

In Gustav Janouch's *Gespräche mit Kafka* (1968), the author refers to Franz Blei, a mutual friend of Brod and Kafka, and his work *Das große Bestiarium der modernen Literatur* (1922)[9], where he portrayed various writers and poets in the forms of fishes, birds, moles, hares, and other animals. According to Janouch's recollection, Blei described Kafka as "ein besonderer Vogel […], der sich von bitteren Wurzeln nähre" (131).[10] However, upon further examination, it is revealed that Blei's inventive satire from 1920 actually presents Kafka as a different creature entirely. Blei describes Kafka as "eine sehr selten gesehene prachtvolle mondblaue Maus, die kein Fleisch frisst, sondern sich von bitteren Kräutern nährt. Ihr Anblick fasziniert, denn sie hat Menschenaugen" (42),[11] which raises the question of whether Janouch might have been making a confused reference to "Der Geier" instead. In Blei's vivid and gentle portrayal, this extraordinary creature sustains itself on bitter herbs instead of meat, symbolizing a departure from conventional norms and practices. What truly captivates the observer is the profound gaze emanating from the mice's human-like eyes. These eyes, in their depth and expressiveness, hint at the profound understanding and sensitivity that Kafka possessed. The visual image created by

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[9] *The Great Bestiary of Modern Literature*.
[10] "a peculiar bird which feeds on bitter roots" (*Conversations with Kafka* 93)
[11] "THE KAFKA: The Kafka is a magnificent and very rarely seen moon-blue mouse, which eats no meat, but feeds on bitter herbs. It is a bewitching sight, for it has human eyes." (Blei qtd. in *The Dedalus Book of Austrian Fantasy* 71)

Blei captures the essence of Kafka's hybrid nature (a mouse with human eyes), his vegetarianism, and his exceptional rarity.

In parallel to the ongoing discussion, the insightful analysis of Modesto Carone, a prominent figure in the translation of Kafka's works into Brazilian Portuguese, accentuates how the profound significance of animals in Kafka's narratives sheds light on the human being:

> From a compositional point of view, it is better for Kafka to objectify the dehumanized condition of the world through an animal, since its obsessive behaviour is accepted by the reader as something natural. If it was a human, they would be immediately understood as having a compulsive neurosis or something similar, which would weaken the extraordinary power of strangeness within his texts. In fact, Kafka only uses anthropocentric categories to illuminate the novel by contrast (Carone 30; my translation).

From an alternative perspective, exploring the animal realm through literature presents us with a unique chance to re-examine our neglected or repressed animalistic essence, as the very notion of humanity has been historically shaped by the exclusion and denial of our innate animal nature.

With regard to the ongoing discussions surrounding the genre of Kafka's non-human stories, scholars have attempted to categorize them as fables, parables, or allegories. Fables typically feature animals as main characters conveying moral lessons, while parables are short stories teaching spiritual or moral insights, often centred around human beings. Allegories, on the other hand, establish one-to-one relationships between the story and its underlying meaning. Therefore, rather than confining Kafka's work within strict genre boundaries, this study seeks to embrace the inherent complexity and ambiguity in his narratives, which defy conventional expectations. The metatextual theme, evident in numerous works by Kafka, is exemplified in the fragment "Von den Gleichnissen" ("On Parables"), in which he portrays the struggle of

individuals attempting to find meaning in texts. He provocatively asserts, “Alle diese Gleichnisse wollen eigentlich nur sagen, dass das Unfassbare unfassbar ist, und das haben wir gewusst” (*Parables and Paradoxes* 10)[12]. This passage highlights Kafka's exploration of the limitations of language and the inherent challenge of grasping the incomprehensible. Through his writings, Kafka invites readers to question the very nature of interpretation and the pursuit of meaning in a world that often defies understanding.

On a literary level, Kafka’s unconventional creatures invite readers to visualize his imaginative creations. According to Sussman (2011), Kafka’s style of writing, which often includes vivid and detailed visual descriptions, anticipates and foreshadows the graphic novel form by means of visual storytelling techniques to convey complex narratives and explore abstract concepts. By incorporating visual elements into his literary works, Kafka plays with the tension between literature and visual arts, inviting readers to engage with his narratives on multiple sensory levels. Moreover, Kafka’s fragmented and non-linear narrative structures, alongside the recurring theme of non-human beings, resonates with the artistic sensibilities often found in the world of graphic novels. In line with this perspective, the forthcoming section delves into Kafka’s interest in visual arts, aiming to make a valuable and enriching addition to the emerging yet relatively underdeveloped body of research dedicated to exploring this theme.

By undertaking this exploration, this thesis presents a novel vantage point within the realm of Kafka’s scholarship, to illuminate the intricate interplay between his evocative language and captivating visual interpretations via non-human beings. The objective is to reveal how Kafka’s affinity with visual arts provided him with a heightened sensitivity to the visual aspects of storytelling. Through his direct engagement with the visual realm, this study sheds light on

[12] “All these parables really set out to say merely that the incomprehensible is incomprehensible, and we know that already” (*Parables and Paradoxes* 11).

Kafka's distinct visual quality as the driving force in his literature and how his artistic background informed his unique literary style. To accomplish this, the present study initiates its exploration by delving into Kafka's seminal work, *Die Verwandlung* (*The Metamorphosis*, 1915), as a foundational text and case study to unlock deeper insights into the profound and evocative depth of his narratives. Moreover, the study ventures into the realm of some of Kafka's less-known creaturely stories, namely "Der Geier" and "Der Bau."[13] By selecting these specific works for examination, this thesis opens up a pathway for deeper exploration into how a focus on visuality can significantly enhance the analysis of Kafka's literature.

The central theme that runs through my study revolves around the proposition that rather than being an author who happens to draw, Kafka is a *Zeichner*[14] who happens to write. As a result, numerous artists have been compelled to visually depict and illustrate his works, which reflects the depth and richness of imagery present within Kafka's narratives. By taking up on the artistic expressions by Israeli artist Yosl Bergner, American illustrator Peter Kuper and American cartoonist Robert Crumb, this study expands on visual interpretations of Kafka's creaturely stories (also referred to as "visual variants")[15] to shed light on the multifaceted dimensions and evocative nuances present within Kafka's works. In other words, the visual interpretations presented by Bergner, Kuper, and Crumb not only pay homage to Kafka's enduring legacy but also ignite a broader conversation on the boundless possibilities that emerge when literature and visual arts intertwine.

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[13] Given that the ambiguity is lost in the English translation, the German titles will be employed throughout this analysis.

[14] In the sense of not being limited to a painter, a draftsman or an illustrator but extending to anyone who wields the power of visual storytelling.

[15] On one hand, a visual variant refers to a variation or reinterpretation of an existing visual image or concept, often done by a different artist or in a different medium. It may involve changing certain elements or adding new ones to create a unique interpretation. On the other hand, an illustration is a visual representation that accompanies or enhances a written text, to clarify or emphasize certain aspects of the narrative. Unlike a visual variant, an illustration is typically created to closely follow the original text or story and may not involve significant changes or reinterpretations of the original concept.

In the introductory chapter of this thesis, we offered a brief overview of the vast amount of scholarly work that has been devoted to Kafka and his literary contributions. By exploring the existing body of research, we aim to highlight the richness and diversity of Kafka studies and the various angles from which his works have been analyzed. In addition, this thesis has a particular focus on a relatively overlooked aspect of his life – his profound connection with visual arts. While Kafka's literary works have been extensively studied and analyzed, his engagement with and influence on the world of visual arts have received comparatively less attention in academic discourse. Of particular interest in this regard are Kafka's non-human narratives, which offer a unique opportunity to explore the visual and artistic dimensions present in his works. By carefully analyzing *Die Verwandlung*, "Der Geier" and "Der Bau," we intend to identify instances where Kafka's prose evokes vivid imagery, evocatively blurring the lines between literature and visual art forms. Furthermore, we will explore the ways in which Kafka's non-human characters and settings have inspired or influenced visual artists Yosl Bergner, Peter Kuper and Robert Crumb, aiming to reveal the depth of his artistic vision and its influence beyond the written word.

The second chapter explores Kafka's connection with visual arts and examines how this influence manifests in his literary works. By closely analyzing the opening line of *Die Verwandlung*, which has etched its mark in literary history, **the study unravels the nuanced layers of meaning and profound artistic intention embedded within Kafka's choice of words. Furthermore, the investigation examines Kafka's deliberate avoidance of directly depicting the vermin protagonist, drawing parallels and distinctions with the artistic renditions presented by Bergner, Kuper, and Crumb.

In the third chapter, we build on Kafka's visual influences to expand the exploration on the inherent visual richness and complexity that permeates his literature. With a particular

emphasis on the short story “Der Geier,” we explore potential textual interpretations in order to closely analyze the visual variants offered by Bergner and Kuper.

The fourth chapter turns its attention to the intricate and labyrinthine structure of “Der Bau,” and the mole-like creature who inhabits it. The visual variants by Kuper and Crumb illustrate the challenges encountered when attempting to depict the enigmatic and frantic creature central to the narrative. This text encourages the reader to explore the nuances of translating Kafka’s literary world into the visual realm, emphasizing the difficulties in capturing his works in pictures.

Before exploring the artistic interpretations of Bergner, Kuper, and Crumb, it is essential to revisit the inspiration behind this project, Kilcher’s recent publication *Die Zeichnungen*. Kilcher’s insightful exploration of Kafka’s visual sensibility ignites a profound resonance within this thesis, as uncovers a new dimension of Kafka as both writer and artist while unveiling the symbiotic relationship between visual arts and literature in Kafka’s oeuvre. By understanding Kafka’s language of images and the world of visual arts, one gains valuable insights about Kafka’s artistic vision, illuminating how this engagement enriched the depths of his storytelling.

2. Beyond the Written Word: Kafka as *Zeichner*

The connection between drawing and writing is a longstanding tradition that can be traced back to ancient times. The ancient Greeks, for instance, used the term “graphein” to refer to both activities, recognizing the inherent link between visual representation and written expression (Harper). This connection has persisted throughout the centuries, with numerous artists embracing the fluid boundaries between writing and drawing and recognizing how these artistic practices can enrich one another.

Kafka is one artist who exemplifies the intricate relationship between drawing and writing. While primarily known as a literary figure, Kafka’s early interest in drawing played a significant role in shaping his writing. Drawing had been an expressive outlet for him, providing an additional means of reflection and self-expression alongside writing. Through an exploration of Kafka's intimate relationship with visual arts, this section seeks to offer valuable insights into how his profound appreciation for the visual realm profoundly influenced and enhanced his unique writing style, becoming a source of inspiration for generations of artists.

In addition, this chapter builds on *Die Verwandlung* as an initial case study to explore the complex challenge of adapting Kafka’s literature for visual mediums. We will analyze the visual variants created by notable artists Peter Kuper, Robert Crumb, and Yosl Bergner. Through their unique artistic interpretations, we witness the tension between preserving the essence of Kafka's language and introducing new artistic perspectives. The goal is to illuminate the visuality of Kafka’s text by highlighting his ability to inspire and engage artists across different mediums and time periods. Kafka’s narrative transcends the written word, inspiring visual artists to create their own interpretations, while also showcasing the figurative nature of Kafka’s literature. As we shall see in the case of the famous vermin, Kafka’s descriptive power (and his personal preferences) can also attempt to place limits on the artist’s range of expression.

Kafka's innate ability to imagine and create vivid images and translate them into words was already noted by Max Brod, his trusted friend and literary executor. According to Brod, Kafka's thinking process, as revealed in his diaries, predominantly unfolded in the form of images.[16] Furthermore, Brod shares a fascinating comment that adds another layer to our understanding of the writer: "Einige Jahre lang verkehrte ich mit Kafka, ohne zu wissen, daß er schrieb" (77).[17] Based on Brod's insights into Kafka's artistic abilities and his revelation about Kafka's apparently unnoticed writing activities, it can be hypothesized that drawing preceded Kafka's writing, serving as a foundational artistic practice that influenced his later literary works. By analyzing Kafka's early influences and his exploration of drawing as a formative artistic practice, one can illuminate the roots of his visual imagination. Arguably, these formative experiences laid the groundwork for his later literary works, where visual motifs and symbolic imagery would play a prominent role.

Beyond Brod's pivotal decision to disregard Kafka's final wish to have all his unpublished works destroyed, as stated in Kafka's well-known letter dated mid-September 1921[18], there is further evidence of Brod's recognition that Kafka's exceptional talent extended beyond the realm of literature. Brod's remarks and discussions in these letters regarding Kafka's drawings and visual art provide additional insight into his estimation of Kafka's abilities as a

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[16] "Denn sein Denken ging, wie die wundervollen Tagebücher zeigen, meist in Bildern vor sich" (*Franz Kafka: Eine Biographie* 67). ["For his thinking, as his wonderful diaries shows, was generally done in the form of images" (*Franz Kafka Biography* 52)].

[17] "I went about with Kafka for several years without knowing that he wrote" (Brod qtd. in Kilcher 230).

[18] "Liebster Max, meine letzte Bitte: alles, was sich in meinem Nachlass (also im Buchkasten, Wäscheschrank, Schreibtisch, zu Hause und im Büro, oder wohin sonstirgendetwas vertragen worden sein sollte und dir auffällt) an Tagebüchern, Manuskripten, Briefen, fremden und eignen, Gezeichnetem u.s.w findet, restlos und ungelesen zu verbrennen, ebenso alles Geschriebene oder Gezeichnete, das du oder andre, die du in meinem Namen darum bitten sollst, haben. Briefe, die man dir nicht übergeben will, soll man wenigstens selbst zu verbrennen sich verpflichten" (*Eine Freundschaft II* 365). [Dearest Max, my last request: Everything I leave behind me (in my bookcase, linen-cupboard, and my desk both at home and in the office, or anywhere else where anything may have got to and meets your eye), in the way of diaries, manuscripts, letters (my own and others), sketches, and so on, to be burned unread; also all writings and sketches which you or others may possess; and ask those others for them in my name. Letters which they do not want to hand over to you, they should at least promise faithfully to burn themselves (*The Trial* 265-266)].

Zeichner. For instance, Brod offered Kafka's drawings to his publisher Axel Juncker for his collection of short stories *Experimente* (Bokhove and van Dorst 93). Although Juncker initially showed enthusiasm for Brod's proposal, the project eventually fell through, and the publication did not materialize.

In the postscript of *Franz Kafkas Glauben und Lehre* (1948), Brod states that "Kafka ist auch als Zeichner ein Künstler von besonderer Kraft und Eigenart" (396).[19] Moreover, Brod laments the lack of attention given to Kafka's dual talent: "Niemand hat es bisher für nötig gehalten, sich mit Kafkas Doppelbegabung zu befassen, die Parallelen zwischen zeichnerischer und erzählerischer Vision zu verfolgen" (ibid.).[20] In this context, Wolfgang Rothe's *Kafka in der Kunst* (1979) also holds a significant place in the exploration of Kafka's connection with visual arts, particularly as a *Zeichner*. At the time, Rothe's book was notable for providing a rare and valuable glimpse into a collection of seventeen of Kafka's drawings, accompanied by numerous illustrative works by European artists inspired by Kafka's themes and/or writings. His examination supplement Brod's argument by revealing a fascinating aspect of the writer's creative sensibility: "Von den Weisen des Menschen, die Außenwelt sinnlich wahrzunehmen, bevorzugte Franz Kafka entschieden den Gesichtssinn, ja dieser scheint bei ihm einseitig zu Lasten der anderen Sinnesvermögen ausgebildet gewesen zu sein" (Rothe 9).[21] Brod's insightful observations and Rothe's pioneer catalogue allow us to delve deeper into the layers of Kafka's artistic expression, illuminating the lesser-known facet of Kafka as a *Zeichner*.

Building upon the foundational work of Rothe, *Einmal ein großer Zeichner: Franz Kafka als bildender Künstler* by Niels Bokhove and Marijke van Dorst unveils a broader collection of

[19] "As a *Zeichner*, Kafka is also an artist of special power and individuality" (my translation).
[20] "No one has considered it necessary so far to deal with Kafka's dual talent, to pursue the parallels between his artistic and narrative vision" (my translation).
[21] "Of the human senses for perceiving the external world, Franz Kafka distinctly preferred the sense of sight. In fact, it seems that he developed this sense disproportionately at the expense of the other faculties" (my translation).

Kafka's drawings, many of which have rarely been seen or discussed up to this point. This study notes how Kafka's drawing techniques remain largely unknown, although it is documented that many of his drawings were executed in ink or pencil (95). *Einmal ein großer Zeichner* includes an excerpt of a letter from Kafka to Brod dated March 12, 1910, in which he references a Soennecken fountain pen:

Fig. 1: Soennecken fountain pen drawing by Franz Kafka
Franz Kafka,"Das ist eine Feder von [*sic*] Sönnecken; die gehört nicht zur Geschichte." *Einmal ein großer Zeichner* p. 95.[22]

The volume also provides a unique glimpse into Kafka's personality and relationship with his writing tools. In this letter, Kafka goes beyond seeing the pen as a mere instrument and perhaps humorously elevates it to a significant entity in its own right.

[22] "This is a pen point from Soennecken; it's not part of the story" (Kafka, *Letters to Friends, Family and Editors* 63).

> "Und trotz des besten Willens - es muß die Feder sein, die in meiner Hand ihre eigenem bösen Wege geht" (*Briefe an Felice* 154).[23]
>
> Die dumme Feder! Was für Dummheiten sie sich niederzuschreiben nicht scheut, statt einmal etwas Vernünftiges zu schreiben, wie "Du Liebste!" und dann noch einmal "Du Liebste!" und dann wieder "Du Liebste!" und nichts als das (*Briefe an Felice* 233).[24]

This unique perspective sheds light on Kafka's complex relationship with his art, and the tools he used, revealing a deep sense of attachment to the tools that shaped his literary creations.

Furthermore, following upon the growing body of scholarship on Franz Kafka's artistic activities, the year 2019 marked the discovery of a batch of personal letters, drawings, diaries and manuscripts by Franz Kafka that for decades had been kept in a vault in Switzerland. In the recently published *Franz Kafka: Die Zeichnungen* Andreas Kilcher compiles with more than one hundred of those newly discovered Kafka drawings while establishing their place in the context of his personal life and body of work. It offers a chronological catalogue of the author's visual arts production, illuminating a previously uncharted side of Kafka as a visual artist. With essays by Kilcher himself and the theorist Judith Butler, Kilcher's edition broadens and deepens public understanding of Kafka's artistic output.

Butler's chapter embarks on an exploration of one of many of Kafka's enigmatic creations, the Odradek from "Die Sorge des Hausvaters" ("The Cares of a Family Man," 1919). Butler's analysis explores the intricacies of Odradek's representation, highlighting the inherent limitations of capturing its essence through visual means. She suggests that the deliberate decision to avoid a fixed image of Odradek is not simply a flaw in artistic depiction but rather an

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[23] "Yet despite the best of intentions—it must be my pen going its own wicked ways in my hand" (*Letters to Felice* 85).

[24] "This stupid pen! What stupidities will it not shrink from putting down on paper instead of writing something sensible for once, such as "Dearest one!" and then again "Dearest one!" and nothing else" (*Letters to Felice* 143).

intrinsic quality of both the character itself and Kafka's evocative literary practice. In Butler's words, "[t]he description fails to make the image it describes, and this failure to become a picture is not only part of what Odradek is, but a feature of writing itself" (290). By examining the Odradek's non-specific representation, Butler sheds light on the intangible aspects of Kafka's literary world, emphasizing the limitations of imagery in capturing the Odradek's profound complexity.

By mapping Kafka's involvement in visual arts throughout his life through university lectures, art exhibitions, drawing classes, and contact with the artistic circles of Prague, *Die Zeichnungen* investigates the period of Kafka's life when he was particularly engaged in drawing. In addition to *Die Zeichnungen*, there are other scholarly works that offer further evidence of Kafka's engagement with the visual arts. As noted by Kafka's biographer, Reiner Stach, in *Kafka: The Early Years* (2017), the young Kafka was drawn to the minimalist, Japanese-inspired drawings and colour woodcuts of Emil Orlik, a Jewish graphic designer and painter from Prague (217). In light of Orlik's belief that an artist should strive for simplicity as a means of achieving profundity, Kafka's figures can be seen as successful attempts to embody that principle.

Kafka's desire to be more refined in his drawing also bears a striking resemblance to many of his critical observations regarding his written works. In *Gespräche mit Kafka*, Janouch recounts an episode when he visited Kafka's office at the Accident Insurance Institution and came across some of Kafka's sketches. Curious, Janouch asked Kafka if he had been drawing, and in response, Kafka expressed his frustration, dismissing his own drawings as "nur so ein Geschmiere" ("only doodles"), "unleserliche Hieroglyphen" ("illegible hieroglyphs") and "keine

Bilder, sondern eine private Zeichenschrift" ("not pictures, but private ideograms").[25] Despite his critical view of his own artistic abilities, Kafka recognized that his drawings held a personal and profound connection to his inner world. He described them as "Spuren einer alten, tief verankerten Leidenschaft" ("remains of an old, deep-rooted passion"),[26] emphasizing the enduring nature of his artistic inclination. Kafka's own dissatisfaction with his drawings can also be observed in another conversation with Janouch, where he states: "Ich möchte so gerne zeichnen können. In Wirklichkeit versuche ich es auch immer wieder. Aber es kommt dabei nichts heraus. Es ist eine ganz persönliche Bilderschrift …" (180).[27] The examples below suggest that Kafka's pictographic writing encompass more than just the physical representation of the human body. They often create the effect of motion, with elongated limbs and distorted proportions that suggest a sense of movement and dynamism.

Fig. 2: "Läufer" ("Runner") drawing by Franz Kafka

[25] See *Gespräche mit Kafka* 58-60; *Conversations with Kafka* 34-35.
[26] See *Gespräche mit Kafka* 59; *Conversations with Kafka* 35.
[27] "I should so like to be able to draw. As a matter of fact, I am always trying to. But nothing comes of it. My drawings are purely personal picture writing …" (*Conversations with Kafka* 132).

Franz Kafka,“Läufer” (“Runner”). India ink on drawing or watercolour paper; 6.3×13, 1901-1907, *Einmal ein großer Zeichner* p. 21.

Fig. 3: “Fechter” (“Fencer”) drawing by Franz Kafka
Franz Kafka,“Fechter” (“Fencer”). India ink on paper; 5.9×10.9, 1901-1907, *Einmal ein großer Zeichner* p. 19.

This is particularly interesting, given Kafka’s belief that “Wir Juden sind eigentlich keine Maler. Wir können die Dinge nicht statisch darstellen. Wir sehen sie immer im Fluss, in der Bewegung, als Wandlung. Wir sind Erzähler” (Janouch 206).[28] In another conversation with Janouch, Kafka once commented on the art of Georg Grosz, describing it as “gezeichnete Literatur” (Janouch 197).[29] To Kafka, Grosz’s drawings were more than mere visual representations; they carried the weight and depth of literary expression. Similarly, this thesis aims to demonstrate Kafka’s unique language of images within his works.

[28] “In any case we Jews are not painters. We cannot depict things statically. We see them always in transition, movement, as change. We are storytellers.” (*Conversations with Kafka* 152)
[29] “literature in pictures.” (*Conversations with Kafka* 145)

The extent to which Kafka continued drawing in his later years remains uncertain. Nevertheless, his fascination with visual arts persisted and continued to leave an indelible mark on his writing. In the upcoming section, this thesis explores the visual background to the publication of *Die Verwandlung*. Building upon this foundation, it examines the visual variants associated with the story, providing deeper insights into how visual elements play a significant role in Kafka's storytelling.

2.1 *Die Verwandlung*: To Draw or Not to Draw

Having established Kafka's interest and involvement in visual arts, it becomes pertinent to examine a key instance which showcases his stance on the relationship between visual representation and the written word. The opening line of *Die Verwandlung* – which would later become an iconic line in literary history [30] – is a crucial example of Kafka's deliberate use of language to create powerful and unsettling imagery. By choosing the double negative expression "ungeheueren[s] Ungeziefer," Kafka immediately sets the tone for the rest of the story and establishes a sense of dread and horror in the reader. The expression, which has no literal translation in English, broadly suggests a monstrous or gigantic animal not suitable for sacrifice, a term commonly associated with vermin or plague. This carefully crafted choice of words reflects Kafka's effects and his ability to create images, evoke emotions, and spark curiosity in the reader. In other words, the deliberate ambiguity over Gregor's new form allows readers to imagine their own visual representation, making them co-creators of the story. This effect potentially fulfills Kafka's intention of leaving room for interpretation and debate, as the precise nature of Gregor's appearance continues to be a subject of discussion to this day.

[30] "Als Gregor Samsa eines Morgens aus unruhigen Träumen erwachte, fand er sich in seinem Bett zu einem ungeheueren Ungeziefer verwandelt" (*Die Verwandlung* 3) ["When Gregor Samsa woke up one morning from unsettling dreams, he found himself changed in his bed into a monstrous vermin" (*Complete Stories* 89)].

Kafka's intentional ambiguity regarding Gregor's transformation leaves the characters' appearances to the readers' imagination, as the metamorphosis of Gregor represents not just a physical change but also an exploration of the human condition. Kafka understood very well the impact that a representational depiction of the main character could have had on the book's cover. His skepticism is evident in his resistance to the publisher's plans to illustrate the protagonist of *Die Verwandlung.* In a letter to Kurt Wolff, dated October 25, 1915, Kafka states:

> Sehr geehrter Herr!
>
> Sie schrieben letzthin, dass Ottomar Starke ein Titelblatt zur *Verwandlung* zeichnen wird. Nun habe ich einen kleinen, allerdings soweit ich den Künstler aus "Napoleon" kenne, wahrscheinlich sehr überflüssigen Schrecken bekommen. Es ist mir nämlich, da Starke doch tatsächlich illustriert, eingefallen, er könnte etwa das Insekt selbst zeichnen wollen. Das nicht, bitte das nicht! Ich will seinen Machtkreis nicht einschränken, sondern nur aus meiner natürlicherweise bessern Kenntnis der Geschichte heraus bitten. Das Insekt selbst kann nicht gezeichnet werden. Es kann aber nicht einmal von der Ferne aus gezeigt werden. Besteht eine solche Absicht nicht und wird meine Bitte also lächerlich - desto besser. Für die Vermittlung und Bekräftigung meiner Bitte wäre ich Ihnen sehr dankbar. (*Briefe 02-24* 135-136)[31]

Kafka's well-known statement raises questions about its meaning and the implications of going against it. By objecting to Wolf's intention to illustrate the protagonist, Kafka demonstrated his deliberate choice to maintain the ambiguity and open-endedness of his work.

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[31] "Dear sir, You recently mentioned that Ottomar Starke is going to do a drawing for the title page of *Metamorphosis*. Insofar as I know the artist's style from *Napoleon*, this prospect has given me a minor and perhaps unnecessary fright. It struck me that Starke, as an illustrator, might want to draw the insect itself. Not that, please not that! I do not want to restrict him, but only to make this plea out of my deeper knowledge of the story. The insect itself cannot be depicted. It cannot even be shown from a distance. Perhaps there is no such intention and my plea can be dismissed with a smile–so much the better. But I would be very grateful if you would pass along my request and make it more emphatic" (*Letters to Friends, Family and Editors* 114-115).

> In the same letter, Kafka proposed to Wolff an alternative suggestion:
>
> Wenn ich für eine Illustration selbst Vorschläge machen dürfte, würde ich Szenen wählen, wie: die Eltern und der Prokurist vor der geschlossenen Tür oder noch besser die Eltern und die Schwester im beleuchteten Zimmer, während die Tür zum ganz finsteren Nebenzimmer offensteht (*Briefe 02-24* 136).[32]

Kafka's suggestion reflects his understanding that the power of his storytelling lies in the evocative nature of his words, transcending the limitations of direct visual representation. The open door to a darkened room represents indirectly the unknown or "ungeheuer" threat Gregor may pose. The readers are then encouraged to actively engage with his texts, delve into the depths of his characters' experiences, and construct their own understanding of his narratives.

Fortunately, Kafka's concerns and suggestions regarding the cover design were addressed by the publishing house, which produced the resulting cover page featuring a male figure in a dressing gown cowering in front of an open door. An interesting aspect to consider is Starke's own reading of the story, particularly in his portrayal of the character with black hair and a dressing gown, suggesting a younger figure who may not be Gregor's father. This raises intriguing questions about the nature of Gregor's transformation and whether it is a physical metamorphosis, or a realization that his family members are the true "monstrous" ones.

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[32] "If I were to offer suggestions for an illustration, I would choose such scenes as the following: the parents and the head clerk in front of the locker door, or even better, the parents and the sister in the lighted room, with the door open upon the adjoining room that lies in darkness" (*Letters to Friends, Family and Editors* 115).

Fig. 4: *Die Verwandlung* cover with illustration by Ottomar Starke
Ottomar Starke, "Cover of *Die Verwandlung*." *Franz Kafka: The Drawings,* p. 270.

As pointed out by Kilcher, "by limiting itself to mere insinuation, the visual art yields to the semantic openness and the parabolic ambiguity of the text" (269). In that sense, Kafka's visuality opens up rather than closes the text, which "concertedly avoids images that are mimetic, illustrative depictions (whatever from that may take), and instead employs allusion, transference, and abstraction to achieve a greater openness and incompletion in the work of art" (Kilcher 264). Thus, Kafka's texts deploy a careful balance of revelation and concealment, and of the concrete and the abstract.

While it is difficult to predict the result of portraying Gregor's final transformation on the original cover, one can ponder the risks associated with an overly direct representation of the vermin. In his essay on Kafka, Harold Bloom declares that nothing in Kafka's work should be interpreted literally, as his strategy often consists of misleading the reader. As simple as certain passages may seem, one may say that "[c]riticism is defeated by Kafka whenever it falls into the

trap he invariably sets for head-on interpretation, the trap of his idiosyncratic evasion of interpretability. In his kind of irony, every figure he gives us is and is not what it might seem to be" (*The Western Canon* 451). It becomes evident that attempting a direct and literal representation of Gregor's transformation risks oversimplification.

With regard to *Die Verwandlung*'s cover, by suggesting a slightly open door, Kafka acts as an illuminator who deals in the shadows, prompting the reader to step into the darkness and the unknown. In terms of being an elucidator of his imaginary scenario, the closest Kafka gets to an explicit depiction of Gregor's new form that would have guided the reader's perception only goes so far as to describe his "harten Rücken" ("armour-plated back"), "gewölbten, braunen, von bogenförmigen Versteifungen geteilten Bauch" ("domelike brown belly divided into stiff arched segments") and the lively "vielen … Beine" ("numerous legs")[33], which seemed to have a mind of their own. Kafka also teases the reader's imagination by reducing Gregor's voice to a "schmerzliches Piepsen" ("persistent horrible twittering squeak")[34], and providing him with the ability to defy gravity by hanging upside down from the ceiling. As Gregor undergoes his transformation, Greta's use of pronouns shifts from "er" (he) to "es" (it) after the violin episode, adding another layer of complexity to his changed state. This change in language symbolizes that he has become untied or disconnected from his previous human identity and is now perceived as something other than a human being, as an "Untier," who no longer considered deserving of the name Gregor.

Kafka's fragmentary description encourages readers to mentally piece together the narrative puzzle. In this context, as noted by Henry Sussman (2011), Kafka's style of writing, which often includes vivid and detailed visual descriptions, anticipates and foreshadows the

[33] See *Die Verwandlung 3*; *Complete Stories* 89.
[34] See *Die Verwandlung 6*; *Complete Stories* 91.

graphic novel by means of visual storytelling techniques to convey complex narratives and explore abstract concepts. Monika Schmitz-Emans's study (2004) also supports this argument, by stating that Kafka "intensely reflected upon the figurativeness of language, and this certainly is relevant to the transformations of his texts into painted images, because figurative expressions invite literal interpretations and the production of visible images" (487). Another way Kafka's texts approximate graphic novels are through his fragmented and non-linear narrative structures. His stories often unfold in a disjointed manner, with events and scenes presented in a seemingly haphazard order. In other words, Kafka's work challenges traditional narrative structures and invites readers to interpret the text visually, creating a sense of interactivity and immersion that is similar to that found in graphic novels.

Thus, it is evident that Kafka's rejection of an illustrated Gregor does not jeopardize the profound bond he shares with the world of visual arts. Rather, it serves as a catalyst, inspiring other artists to push the boundaries of creativity and embrace innovative techniques, unconventional media, and abstract forms to attempt to capture the essence of his narratives. Through their own unique artistic expressions, they engage with Kafka in ways that transcend conventional interpretations, breathing new life into his themes and inviting audiences to experience his literature through the lens of visual arts. The following section builds on one of Kafka's most famous creaturely creations in order to gain further insights into the evocative depth of his narratives, while expanding on some of the visual variants they inspired.

This section explores the realm of possibilities that Kafka's visual language creates in *Die Verwandlung*, which grants readers and artists alike with an opportunity to actively engage in the co-creation of his literary universe. Renowned North American cartoonists Peter Kuper and Robert Crumb, along with Israeli painter Yosl Bergner have ventured into their own unique visual adaptations of *Die Verwandlung*. While this section provides a glimpse into their

renditions of Gregor, we will examine their visual variants of "Der Geier" and "Der Bau" more deeply in the subsequent chapters, analyzing their artistic choices and exploring the ways in which they experience and envision these texts.

2.1.1 From Speech to Thought: Visualizing the Unspoken through Peter Kuper

Peter Kuper's visual variant of Kafka's *Die Verwandlung* is a testament to his artistic brilliance and his ability to reimagine Kafka's tale.[35] Published in 2003, Kuper's adaptation brings Kafka's haunting tale of Gregor Samsa's transformation into a visually immersive experience that transcends the boundaries of traditional storytelling. In his visual variant, Kuper presents Gregor not as a fully realized insect but as a human-like hybrid creature, which adds a layer of complexity to the narrative, challenging the reader's perception of the boundaries between the human and the non-human. Kuper's depiction of Gregor in *The Metamorphosis* presents a careful balance between his physical transformation and his essential humanity. By skillfully maintaining the somber and poignant tone of Kafka's narrative, Kuper avoids any inadvertent comedic elements that could undermine the story's depth and impact.

[35] As noted in an interview with Steven Heller for *Print Magazine* (2018), Kuper's original idea was to have a title printed on a translucent dust jacket (the paper cover that wraps around hardcover books) with the image of Gregor Samsa printed on the book itself, which was rejected due to cost.

Fig. 5: Excerpt from page 18 in *The Metamorphosis* by Peter Kuper
Peter Kuper, *The Metamorphosis*, 2003, p. 18.

In addition to Gregor's physical transformation, Kuper employs a subtle yet significant artistic technique. Initially, Gregor's speech is depicted through standard yet unsteady speech balloons, featuring wobbly outlines and a combination of uppercase and lowercase letters, which indicate his attempts to communicate verbally. However, as the story progresses Kuper transitions from speech balloons to thought balloons, represented as cloud-like shapes. This transition serves to highlight the disconnect between Gregor's physical transformation and his inner thoughts and emotions. It showcases the growing internal struggle and psychological turmoil experienced by Gregor, as he finds himself unable to effectively communicate with others due to the change of his appearance and voice. By combining the human and the verminous, Kuper adds depth and nuance to Gregor's character, emphasizing the profound alienation and isolation that accompanies his transformation.

Fig. 6: Excerpt from page 23 in *The Metamorphosis* by Peter Kuper
Peter Kuper, *The Metamorphosis*, 2003, p. 23.

Moreover, through the use of "speech" and "thinking" balloons, Kuper grants readers a glimpse into the character's internal world, and innermost desires, fears, and uncertainties. It invites readers to intimately connect with Gregor's psyche, enhancing the reader's engagement with the narrative. As stated by Kuper in another interview, with Renée Shea: "[I]n comics you can visually create a world and the parameters can be stretched and bent and still feel like a reality ... Kafka had already achieved this with his story" (1015). In this context, just as Kafka pushed the boundaries of reality in his story, Kuper's artistic interpretation pushes the boundaries of visual storytelling, creating a captivating and immersive experience for readers.

Fig. 7: Excerpt from page 44 in *The Metamorphosis* by Peter Kuper
Peter Kuper, *The Metamorphosis*, 2003, p. 44.

On the other hand, it is important to note that Kuper's interpretation of Kafka's story does indeed refer to Gregor Samsa as a six-legged beetle, which may inadvertently dilute the ambiguity of the metamorphosis itself. At the same time, Kuper's visual variant *per se* does evoke the essence of Gregor's transformation, which lies in his near-complete divergence from the human form, highlighting the stark contrast between his previous life and his newfound verminous existence. Furthermore, Kuper creates his own narrative by summarizing Kafka's version. Overall, while Kuper's variant undoubtedly offers a fresh and visually compelling perspective, it is crucial to approach it critically and reflect on the potential implications it may have on the intended meaning and impact of Kafka's narrative on the reader.

2.1.2 Robert Crumb's Crumbled Realism

Crumb's visual variant was published in *Kafka*,[36] a collaborative project with the writer David Zane Mairowitz, in which Crumb illustrates Mairowitz's account of Kafka's life as well as an artistic interpretation of his key works. In contrast to Kuper's practice, Crumb's reading of *Die Verwandlung* exhibits a concrete and naturalistic portrayal of his subjects. While both drawing styles can be connected to certain aspects of Kafka's writing, Crumb's attention to detail in *Kafka* is reminiscent of Kafka's own meticulousness, with a particular emphasis on capturing even the minutest details, such as the picture of the woman in furs hung on Gregor's bedroom wall.

Fig. 8: Excerpt from page 40 in *Kafka* by David Zane Mairowitz and R. Crumb
Robert Crumb, *Kafka,* 2007, p.40

[36] Titled *Kafka for Beginners* and *Introducing Kafka* in its first British and US editions, respectively, in 1993.

Fig. 9: Excerpt from page 48 in *Kafka* by David Zane Mairowitz and R. Crumb
Robert Crumb, *Kafka,* 2007, p.48

Crumb also utilizes speech and thinking balloons to depict Gregor's internal thoughts and emotions in his visual variant. On the one hand, while his realist depiction of Gregor showcases his skills and attention to detail, it can be argued the other that he falls short in allowing the full yet ambiguous essence of Kafka's narrative to manifest. Crumb's emphasis on realism may inadvertently limit the imaginative and symbolic aspects of Gregor's transformation, which is something Kafka had tried to avoid. By presenting Gregor as a meticulously rendered beetle, Crumb leaves little room for interpretation or ambiguity, reducing the potential for multiple layers of meaning that Kafka's work invites. Furthermore, the hyper-realistic portrayal of Gregor may detract from the psychological and existential themes that lie at the heart of Kafka's story, overshadowing the introspective journey of self-discovery and the experience of isolation.

In this respect, Crumb's visual variant has something in common with Vladimir Nabokov's lecture on the text, in which he asserts that Gregor is "merely a big beetle." Crumb's

version illustrates how having a highly representative and comprehensible image of Gregor's metamorphosis limits imagination. By directing the reader towards a particular species – regardless of what it might be – an explicit representation of Gregor not only robs the reader of the opportunity to fill in the blank within their imagination, but also takes the focus away from other implications within the story that are as important as Gregor's creaturely nature, such as alienation and family dysfunction. In other words, Crumb's example serves as a prime illustration of the potential pitfalls of a direct and straightforward portrayal of Gregor's physical state.[37]

Fig. 10: Excerpt from page 250 in *Lectures on Literature* by Vladimir Nabokov
Vladimir Nabokov's *Lectures on Literature*, p. 250.

[37] In the same vein of Crumb's drawing of a beetle in his interpretation of *Die Verwandlung*, Nabokov becomes entangled in a taxonomical perspective regarding Gregor's physical form, placing greater importance on determining the specific species of beetle he might be, rather than focusing on the profound impact his transformation has on both himself and his family. In his lecture, it is also important to note that Nabokov employs a humorous tone to discuss the nature of Gregor's transformation by dissecting the characteristics and physical attributes described in Kafka's text, dismissing the notion of Gregor being a cockroach and proposing him as a beetle instead. He also observes that Gregor remains unaware of his hidden wings, drawing a metaphorical parallel to individuals who are oblivious to their own potential and capabilities. In the original German text, the charwoman calls Gregor "Mistkäfer," which can be translated as "dung beetle." It is clear that the charwoman uses this term as a generalization or even a pet name, rather than a literal description of Gregor's species.

2.1.3 Storytelling through Brushstrokes: Yosl Bergner's Visual Narratives

The third artist under discussion is the Israeli painter Yosl Bergner, whose life and work will be further explored in the upcoming chapter. In Tuvia Rübner's thought-provoking introduction to *Yosl Bergner: Paintings to Kafka* (1990), Rübner argues that Bergner's paintings go beyond mere illustrations or interpretations of Kafka's texts; instead, they embody the profound impact that Kafka's work has on Bergner himself: "[t]hey are paintings of what Kafka does to Yosl Bergner" (9). To rephrase: Bergner's paintings immerse themselves in the suggestive power of Kafka's narratives and capture the essence of what Kafka evokes within the artist's own being. Unlike Kuper and Crumb, who retain the storyline, Bergner operates with visual impressions. Through his paintings, he ventures into a realm where Kafka's stories became a fertile ground for exploration and self-expression. He embraces the complexity and ambiguity inherent in *Die Verwandlung*, allowing these effects to intertwine with his own artistic vision. By doing so, he creates a unique visual language that bridges the gap between Kafka's literary world and his own personal experiences.

Bergner's visual variant uses a distinctive Expressionist style, bringing a captivating and evocative approach to this scene. As an Expressionist artist, Bergner creates bold, exaggerated forms, intense colours, and a powerful emotional presence. Despite being the oldest among the artists featured in this thesis, Bergner's interpretation of the narrative stands out for its ability to add a new dimension to the source material. Through his creative vision, he skillfully expands upon the story and introduces his own imagined passages, enriching the narrative with unique elements not present in Kafka's original work, such as Grete's bedside violin concert.

Fig. 11: Excerpt from page 99 in *Paintings to Franz Kafka* by Yosl Bergner
Yosl Bergner, "Was he an animal, that music had such an effect on him?" *Paintings to Franz Kafka*, 1987, 116x98, p. 99.

Bergner depicts a moment where Gregor's sister, Grete, plays the violin to him at his bedside, creating an intimate connection between the transformed Gregor and his sister. What sets Bergner's interpretation apart is his depiction of the vermin, adding an element of innocence and vulnerability through the facial features of the character. The image of Grete playing the violin to Gregor humanizes him, showcasing her apparent compassion and understanding amidst the unsettling aftermath of the transformation. Bergner's artistic choice to deviate from the original narrative and introduce this symbolic scene emphasizes his desire to expand the emotional depth of the story and the underlying themes of family, compassion, and acceptance. While it represents an explicit departure from Kafka's narrative, Bergner's interpretation invites viewers

to contemplate the profound emotional impact of Gregor's transformation and the potential for human connection.

By painting the main subject of *Die Verwandlung* in his own manner, Bergner aligns himself with artists who seek to establish their own artistic voice and to create a personal interpretation of Kafka's narrative. By diverging from the actual events, Bergner makes the story his own and conveys his unique response to Kafka's story through his artwork. For the most part, Bergner liberates himself from any constraints imposed by the author's intentions. However, it should be noted that unlike Kuper and Crumb, Bergner does take into account Kafka's description of Gregor's "numerous legs". He embraces the freedom to explore the story's characters, and symbolism in his own distinctive style, unhindered by the need to conform fully to Kafka's artistic vision. Bergner harnesses the language of colours, forms, and textures to evoke a profound sense of narrative and evoke an emotional response from viewers. "I'm a storyteller through paintings," Bergner stated to *The Jerusalem Post* in 2015: "I tell stories of how I feel." Bergner's statement resonates of artist principles deeply with the essence of Kafka's works, as both share the sensibility to capture the experience through their respective artistic mediums.

Through the artistic lens of Kuper, Crumb, and Bergner, *Die Verwandlung* stands as a prime example of the inherent complexity originating from Kafka's visual focus. Following our investigation of Kafka as *Zeichner* progresses, the subsequent chapter will explore the short story "Der Geier," and the artistic interpretations by Bergner and Kuper, by which they reimagine his work.

3. Vultures of the Mind: Dissecting Kafka's "Der Geier"

When considering the genre of Kafka's creature or non-human stories, scholars have offered various definitions, categorizing them as fables, parables, or even allegories. These classifications highlight the presence of animals as central characters conveying moral lessons, the inclusion of human beings in stories with spiritual or moral teachings, or the use of symbolic relationships between elements. However, instead of focusing on genre distinctions, the main concern lies in identifying the specific elements of these genres that manifest in Kafka's stories. Unlike the fable or parable, Kafka consistently explores alternative explanations of situations and even raises the possibility that there may be no explanation at all. To exemplify this, the current chapter undertakes a comprehensive exploration of the various readings of "Der Geier," analyzing potential interpretations and expanding the understanding of the story. Furthermore, it aims to establish a foundation for the analysis of the visual artwork inspired by it. The short text reads as follows:

> Es war ein Geier, der hackte in meine Füße. Stiefel und Strümpfe hatte er schon aufgerissen, nun hackte er schon in die Füße selbst. Immer schlug er zu, flog dann unruhig mehrmals um mich und setzte dann die Arbeit fort. Es kam ein Herr vorüber, sah ein Weilchen zu und fragte dann, warum ich den Geier dulde. „Ich bin ja wehrlos," sagte ich, „er kam und fing zu hacken an, da wollte ich ihn natürlich wegtreiben, versuchte ihn sogar zu würgen, aber ein solches Tier hat große Kräfte, auch wollte er mir schon ins Gesicht springen, da opferte ich lieber die Füße. Nun sind sie schon fast zerrissen.
>
> „Daß Sie sich so quälen lassen," sagte der Herr, „ein Schuß und der Geier ist erledigt."
>
> „Ist das so?" „fragte ich, »und wollen Sie das besorgen?"
>
> „Gern," sagte der Herr, „ich muß nur nach Hause gehn und mein Gewehr holen. Können Sie noch eine halbe Stunde warten?"

„Das weiß ich nicht," sagte ich und stand eine Weile starr vor Schmerz, dann sagte ich: „Bitte, versuchen Sie es für jeden Fall."

„Gut," sagte der Herr, „ich werde mich beeilen." Der Geier hatte während des Gespräches ruhig zugehört und die Blicke zwischen mir und dem Herrn wandern lassen. Jetzt sah ich, daß er alles verstanden hatte, er flog auf, weit beugte er sich zurück, um genug Schwung zu bekommen und stieß dann wie ein Speerwerfer den Schnabel durch meinen Mund tief in mich. Zurückfallend fühlte ich befreit, wie er in meinem alle Tiefen füllenden, alle Ufer überfließenden Blut unrettbar ertrank (*Nachgelassene Schriften II* 328-329).[38]

"Der Geier" originated as an untitled manuscript among a collection of 51 pages of texts written by Kafka during the autumn and winter of 1920, known as "Konvolut 1920." It is believed that the text was composed in November 1920 and was later published in 1936 by Max Brod, who assigned it the title by which it is recognized today. The chosen title for the story aligns with Kafka's inclination for wordplay. In German, "Der Geier" not only evokes the flight pattern of vultures but also connects to the Greek word *gyros* (Harper) meaning "gyre," widely

[38] A vulture was hacking at my feet. It had already torn my boots and stockings to shreds, now it was hacking at the feet themselves. Again and again, it struck at them, then circled several times restlessly around me, then returned to continue its work. A gentleman passed by, looked on for a while, then asked me why I suffered the vulture.
"I'm helpless," I said. "When it came and began to attack me, I of course tried to drive it away, even to strangle it, but these animals are very strong, it was about to spring at my face, but I preferred to sacrifice my feet. Now they are almost torn to bits."
"Fancy letting yourself be tortured like this!" said the gentleman. "One shot and that's the end of the vulture."
"Really ?" I said. "And would you do that?"
"With pleasure," said the gentleman, "I've only got to go home and get my gun. Could you wait another half hour?"
"I'm not sure about that," said I, and stood for a moment rigid with pain. Then I said: "Do try it in any case, please."
"Very well," said the gentleman, "I'll be as quick as I can."
During this conversation the vulture had been calmly listening, letting its eye rove between me and the gentleman. Now I realized that it had understood everything; it took wing, leaned far back to gain impetus, and then, like a javelin thrower, thrust its beak through my mouth, deep into me. Falling back, I was relieved to feel him drowning irretrievably in my blood, which was filling every depth, flooding every shore (*Complete Stories* 442-443).

used in literature as a description of any whirling, spiralling or circular motion.[39] One of the most striking things about the story concerns how its brevity is inversely proportional to the symbolic force contained in the plot. Notably, the narrative alludes to the myth of Prometheus, who, by defying the gods and having given humanity the gift of fire, is punished by being chained to a rock and having his liver devoured by eagles for eternity. Interestingly, Kafka had previously written the short story "Prometheus," which subverts and distorts the myth, capturing a sense of the myth's exhaustion in the context of modernity.[40]

In "Der Geier," the bird also appears as a paradoxical figure, as it behaves like a bird of prey instead of a scavenger creature, which leaves open the question of whether the narrator is alive or not. In fact, one could interpret the vulture as a superior transcendent force, the inquisitor, holder of the final verdict who observes and knows and understands everything; while the narrator already knows and accepts the fate that is yet to come. Having stories narrated entirely in the past tense marks a total and fatal finality, turning us back to Greek Mythology, in which the narrator acts as an embodiment of the prophet Tiresias, who provides the reader with the prediction imposed on the human condition: that you will never get out of it alive. Analyzing Kafka's works through an authoritarian lens, Michel Löwy has identified two significant features present in Kafka's work. Firstly, there is an element of arbitrariness, where decisions are imposed from above without moral, rational, or humane justification. These decisions often place excessive and absurd demands on the victims. Secondly, there is a prevailing sense of injustice,

[39] See A. Norman Jeffahes' "Gyres in the poetry of W. B. Yeats." According to Jeffahes, Yeats saw history as moving in recurring cycles, and that these cycles were represented by two interlocking spirals, or "gyres." According to Jeffahes, the gyres represented opposing forces or ideas that were constantly in conflict with each other.

[40] See György C. Kálmán. "Kafka's Prometheus." The distinction between "Prometheus" and "Der Geier" is that the former portrays a character who rebels against the gods and endures punishment, while the latter raises the question of whether a transgression has occurred at all. Despite their differences, both characters share a common trait of enduring the consequences.

where blame is unjustly assumed without the need for proof, and punishments are disproportionately severe for perceived "mistakes" that may be non-existent or trivial.

While the general argument presented above addresses broader themes of Kafka's work beyond the scope of this project, both themes of arbitrariness and injustice can be observed in "Der Geier." The vulture's attack can be seen as an arbitrary and unjust act, as it seems to be an unprovoked and inexplicable act of violence. The protagonist is portrayed as undeserving of the attack, and there is no discernible reason for the vulture's targeting or the protagonist's lack of action. In this sense, the attack can be seen as an expression of the arbitrary and capricious nature of the universe as perceived by Kafka, where individuals can be subjected to senseless and inexplicable suffering without any apparent cause or justification.

Given the general arguments outlined above, it is now possible to explore potential interpretations of the text. Notably, Kafka's deteriorating health due to tuberculosis has prompted most to also read the text biographically, in that the vulture can be viewed as metaphor for Kafka's illness, which afflicted him from 1917 until his death in 1924. The figure of the vulture itself is already synonymous with decay. Furthermore, it is known that tuberculosis causes its victim to spit blood, in addition to robbing its victim of their voice, perhaps alluded to at the end of the story, since the narrator's and the vulture's blood mix and they both drown. The idea of liberation through death is also expressed, as both perpetrator (disease) and victim (narrator) are "freed" (in German, *befreit*) from their afflictions (Brombert 636). The circling or flying movement ("Immer schlug er zu, flog dann unruhig mehrmals um mich und setzte dann die Arbeit fort")[41], reminiscent of scavengers in pursuit of prey, reinforces the notion that the narrator may be already "dead" inside from the illness, and is reporting the events posthumously.

[41] "Again and again, it struck at them, then circled several times restlessly around me, then returned to continue its work".

As yet another basis for an interpretation, Kafka's conflicted relationship with his father may also be unconsciously reflected in the story, by which the vulture embodies the narrator's cause of death by drowning in blood with another Kafka story. *Das Urteil* (1912),[42] also draws attention to this father-son relationship, since in the latter the main character, Georg Bendemann, submits to the father's authoritarian verdict and drowns himself in the river. Kafka's complex relationship with his father had a significant influence on his writing, particularly his depictions of authority figures and power dynamics. In the never delivered *Brief an den Vater*[43] written in 1919, the author directly expresses a theme that permeated his literature: the recurring presence of authoritarian father figures: "Ich war nicht oder allergünstigsten Falles noch nicht frei. Mein Schreiben handelte von Dir, ich klagte dort ja nur, was ich an Deiner Brust nicht klagen konnte" (*Brief an den Vater* 86)[44]. In "Der Geier," the character's lack of freedom and inability to act can be seen as an analogy for Hermann Kafka's oppressive and superior presence, as well as Kafka's feelings of guilt and hopelessness.

The story does not permit the reader to know if the main character's death is proportional or not to his guilt, or if he is guilty of some crime in the first place, or even why the vulture chose one man instead of another (as in the case of the passer-by). The matter-of-factness of an absurd situation allows the characters no moments of interiority, introspection, or search for meaning and the thread connecting the narrator to the vulture remains completely unknown to the reader. Kafka seems to suggest the certainty of suffering as a key feature that permeates the story, which invites readings in connection with religious motifs, such as sacrifice and redemption. In the parable "Das Kommen des Messias"[45] Kafka writes: "Der Messias wird erst

[42] Also translated in English as *The Judgment*, or *The Verdict*.
[43] Also translated in English as *Letter to His Father* or *Dearest Father*.
[44] "I was not, or, to put it most optimistically, was not yet free. My writing was all about you; all I did there, after all, was to bemoan what I could not bemoan upon your breast" (*Letter to His Father* 87).
[45] "The Coming of the Messiah."

kommen, wenn er nicht mehr nötig sein wird, er wird erst nach seiner Ankunft kommen, er wird nicht am letzten Tag kommen, sondern am allerletzten" (*Parables and Paradoxes* 80)[46]. In other words, if one were to view the gentleman in "Der Geier" as the Messiah, Kafka's negative theology requires acknowledging a specific belief that the arrival of the Messiah or rescuer will either not occur or, if it does, it will be too late for him, mirroring the events in the story.

After exploring the multiple interpretations of Kafka's "Der Geier," the next section explores the life experiences and influences that have shaped Bergner's distinct perspective as a storyteller through paintings. Furthermore, it unveils the cultural and familial factors that have significantly influenced his creative path, which has been widely defined by his early encounter with Kafka's works.

3.1 Portraying Entrapment: Bergner's Interpretation of "Der Geier"

Bergner's artistic journey finds its roots in the influence of his father, Zechariah Bergner, who played a crucial role in shaping his son's path as an artist. Writing under the pseudonym of Melech Ravitch, Bergner's father was a prominent figure in the Yiddish literary world and undertook the significant task of translating Kafka's writings from German into Yiddish. Unlike Kuper and Crumb's relatively ordinary first exposure to Kafka, Bergner's connection extends over two generations and calls for a more profound investigation.

Zechariah Bergner's first encounter with Kafka occurred in 1924, shortly after Kafka's passing, when he was commissioned to write an article for the literary journal *Literarishe Bleter* featuring the Yiddish translation of Kafka's "Ein Landarzt" ("A Country Doctor," 1919). Upon publishing his article, Bergner's father traveled to Tomaszów Lubelski to deliver a lecture. During his visit, he had a candid encounter with a woman he described as "thin and drab,"

[46] "The messiah will come only when he is no longer necessary; he will come only on the day after his arrival; he will come, not on the last day, but on the very last" (*Parables and Paradoxes* 81).

(Ravitch qtd. in Diamant 148) who candidly critiqued his translation, pointing out its triviality and poor quality. To his surprise, she revealed herself as Dora Diamant, Franz Kafka's wife. This unexpected meeting with Dora Diamant, along with her critique of his translation, might have acted as a catalyst for Zechariah Bergner's continued and dedicated engagement with Kafka's literature. In 1966, Zechariah published the Yiddish version of Kafka's *Der Prozess*[47] which provided a differentiated, arguably humorous, take on the story in contrast to prevailing Kafka scholarship so far. The edition displayed a cover dominated by Kafka's name in Hebrew characters – something would surely have pleased the author, who nourished a fascination for language [48]– followed by illustrations by Bergner himself.

Concerned with the escalating anti-Semitism in Europe, Bergner's father orchestrated their immigration to Australia in 1937. Once in Australia, Bergner commenced his studies at the National Gallery School (NGV). In Trevor Graham's "Painting the Town: A Film About Yosl Bergner" (1987), Albert Tucker, Australian artist and personal friend of Bergner, acknowledges the young painter's exceptional talent, noting that Bergner "was already a fully formed painter with a fully developed style unheard of for any Australians of the same age" (Graham 15:48-16:10). In Jan Minch's article for the NGV, which discusses an innovative and unrecovered period in Melbourne art, Bergner is recognized for introducing a new artistic consciousness influenced by "the dark expressive stream of European painting, found in the art of Munch and Kokoschka, van Gogh and Daumier" (*National Gallery School*). This infusion of Bergner's unique artistic language into the Australian art scene bridged the gap between different cultural

[47] For further insights, see Iris Bruce's "Der Proceβ in Yiddish, or The Importance of being Humorous".
[48] Although Yiddish was not spoken within Kafka's family, another form of contact between Kafka and the Yiddish language was provided through his encounter with the Yiddish theatre, as Kafka befriended Jizchok Löwy, a Jewish actor from the troupe, which gave Kafka the desire to explore more about Jewish tradition. Kafka's new interest led him to arrange an evening of Yiddish dramatic readings to be performed by Löwy in Prague, which took place in 1912 with an introductory speech in Yiddish by Kafka himself. See Ritchie Robertson's "Kafka's Exploration of Judaism: The Context of *Das Urteil*."

traditions and introduced a novel artistic consciousness, which garnered him recognition and acclaim within the local and international art community.[49] Driven by a desire to reconnect with his heritage, Bergner slowly made his way to Israel, propelling him to the forefront of the nation's art scene, where he earned a reputation as one of Israel's most esteemed and renowned artists.

Here he began to work on his paintings inspired by "Der Geier." Although Bergner's work could often be seen as dark and despairing, he also kept his sense of humour, given some of his most renowned imagery from the mid-century depicts anthropomorphic kitchen utensils, as below, which arguably evoke a dark, yet humorous absurdity present in some of Kafka's texts.

Fig. 12: Excerpt from Bineth Gallery's webpage of *Spice Containers* by Yosl Bergner
Bergner, Yosl. *Spice Containers.* 1965, Bineth Gallery, Tel- Aviv. Lithograph, 34×50 cm.

[49] Bergner received prestigious awards such as the Herman Struck Prize, the Dizengoff Prize, and the Israel Prize for painting in 1980. His exhibitions, such as the notable Kafka paintings showcased in the Czech Republic, hosted by the Franz Kafka Society of Prague, solidified his standing as one of the leading painters in the Czech Republic, despite never having resided there.

Fig. 13: Excerpt from Bineth Gallery's webpage of *Still Life* by Yosl Bergner
Bergner, Yosl. *Still Life.* 1974, Bineth Gallery, Tel- Aviv. Oil on canvas, 20×40 cm.

Fig. 14: Excerpt from Bineth Gallery's webpage of *Iron* by Yosl Bergner

Bergner, Yosl. *Iron.* 1965, Bineth Gallery, Tel- Aviv. Silkscreen, 76×53 cm.

By adding a surreal and fantastical quality to mundane objects, in a manner reminiscent of Kafka, Bergner encourages viewers to adopt a fresh perspective on the world by presenting the familiar in an unfamiliar manner and leaving room for personal interpretations. In this regard, Bergner's piece above bears a striking resemblance to Kafka's enigmatic creation: the Odradek, an object that defies easy categorization or understanding, inviting contemplation and reflection. These artworks were produced after Bergner had fully matured as an artist and had permanently relocated to Israel, where he worked with Yiddish Theatre along with the playwright Nissim Aloni, and designed theatre sets and costumes for Habima Theatre in Tel Aviv.

Both Kafka and Bergner found themselves drawn to the world of Yiddish theatre, and this shared passion played a vital role in shaping their artistic expression. As Ross Mellick highlights in his essay on Bergner's association with Kafka, their mutual passion for Yiddish theatre and literature was a profound source of inspiration (55) through their respective mediums. Kafka's involvement in the Yiddish Theatre in Prague from 1910 to 1912 is believed to have had a significant impact on the evolution of his literary style, being was marked by the writing of *Das Urteil* and by what scholars such as Brod, Klaus Wagenbach and Hans Politzer refer to as Kafka's literary breakthrough. Concerning *Das Urteil*, Politzer suggests that Kafka "succeeded in breaking through the disjointed style of his early works and created for the first time a coherent tale distinguished by concentrated imagery" (Politzer qtd. Beck 5). Prior to 1912, Kafka's prose exhibits loose structure, rambling sentences, excessive detailing, and diffuse effects, reflecting a writing style closely intertwined with the author's artistic growth and development. However, his works after 1912 are characterized by tighter construction, direct and focused narratives, well-defined and lifelike characters who take on independent identities,

restrained use of modifiers, reliance on exaggerated gestures and tableaux, heightened suspense, and an escalating intensity leading to climactic moments.

This change in style, with its emphasis on the dramatic, humoristic and gestural, bears the imprint of the performance techniques of the Yiddish theatre and can in large measure be traced to Kafka's engagement with it (Beck 8). One can posit that Kafka's awareness of the profound connotations in Yiddish influenced his approach to language, prompting him to embark on an exploration of words that carried intricate layers of meaning. Drawing from the theatrical realm, Kafka's prose takes on a dramatic essence, captivating the readers and transforming them into an engaged audience. As the readers immerse themselves in the text, they become participants in the unfolding narrative, experiencing the nuances and complexities inherent in Kafka's unique language of images. The interplay of linguistic elements with theatricality creates a dynamic literary experience, inviting an intimate engagement with the narrative. Bergner's artistic skill allowed him to pursue this vein of gesture and motion.

Bergner's first published illustrations of Kafka were found already in his father's version of *Der Prozess*, which, as previously mentioned, highlights the novel's humorous qualities as a way of reclaiming and re-appropriating Kafka by reconstructing by means of Yiddish Kafka's "Jewishness" (little as Kafka would claim there may be). Bergner then supplements the humour and gesture in the book by drawing on key aspects of the Yiddish theatre while retaining the underlying shared concerns that have been already infused in Kafka's writing. For instance, the following image depicts the painter Titorelli whirling a woman around himself, making the Yiddish translation and illustration a welcome *counter-translation* to the common readings of Kafka, by suggesting that this gesture has a comical feature.

Fig. 15: Excerpt from page 63 in *Paintings to Franz Kafka* by Yosl Bergner
Yosl Bergner, "The Trial." *Paintings to Franz Kafka.* Pen and Ink on paper, size unknown, 1957, p. 63.

Bergner's early illustrations of Kafka's *Der Prozess* are composed of thin lines skimming across white spaces to form weightless and shadowless figures whose hold on life seems fleeting and tenuous. One may argue that Bergner himself presents an artistic affinity with Kafka's dynamic line drawings. The scenes created by the artist evoke the essence of Kafka's writings through feelings of suffering, anxiety, fear and despair and also movement and gesture. "Initially he restricted his response to drawings, as though not wishing to exceed Kafka's own doodle-like illustrations" and "[o]nly in the 1980s did the fauvist colours flourish, and the canvases thicken with oil" (Sinclair 25). Eventually, Bergner established his own style. For instance, Bergner's illustration below of *Das Schloss* (*The Castle,* 1926) presents some of what would later become Bergner's signature images, such as human figures with featureless faces and non-specific birds circling in the air.

Fig. 16: Excerpt from page 84 in Paintings to Franz Kafka by Yosl Bergner
Yosl Bergner, "Illustration to Kafka's *Das Schloss." Paintings to Franz Kafka*. Pen and Ink on paper, size unknown, 1950, p. 84.

In addition to the visual variants above, Bergner also painted a number of images inspired by Kafka's short stories, including "Der Geier." This text holds particular significance as it has been a constant source of inspiration for Bergner, resulting in a numerous of visual interpretations throughout his career. At the same time, it is important to recognize that Kafka served as more than just a visual resource for the artist.

Bergner captures in his paintings the dark, and melancholic atmosphere of Kafka's stories, with their sense of anxiety and impending doom. They also bring out the humour and irony present in Kafka's writing, playfully subverting our expectations and challenging our perceptions of reality. Yet, Bergner's versions of "Der Geier" capture the onset of suffering and the depth of Kafka's story by invoking Neo-Expressionist features through his striking brush strokes, figurative imagery, dark colours and emotionally charged atmosphere. Most of

Bergner's frames display little open and indefinite space, in which the bodies of the man or vulture take up most of the canvas, embodying the sense of entrapment and enclosure so familiar to Kafka's readers.

Fig. 17: Excerpt from page 128 in *Paintings to Franz Kafka* by Yosl Bergner
Yosl Bergner, "Kafka's The Vulture." *Paintings to Franz Kafka,* 81x100, 1990, p. 128.

The visual variants created by Bergner evoke a nearly universal sense of timelessness, and the mood of melancholy and exhaustion depicted in Kafka's work, creating an atmosphere reminiscent of a purgatorial state, where sinners wander. Bergner composed this series of paintings inspired by the story in 1988, although there is little information available on their background. In the selected image below, Bergner skillfully captures the anthropomorphic vulture from Kafka's text by endowing the creature with expressive, human-like eyes. This striking addition of the human element contrasts with the depiction of the man in the painting, who is rendered somewhat impersonally with vacant black holes instead of eyes. This artistic

choice prompts the viewer to revisit the question of whether the man is already spiritually or emotionally dead and disrupts the human vs. animal binary.

Fig. 18: Excerpt from page 123 in *Paintings to Franz Kafka* by Yosl Bergner
Yosl Bergner, "Kafka's *The Vulture." Paintings to Franz Kafka.* 81x65, 1988, p. 123.

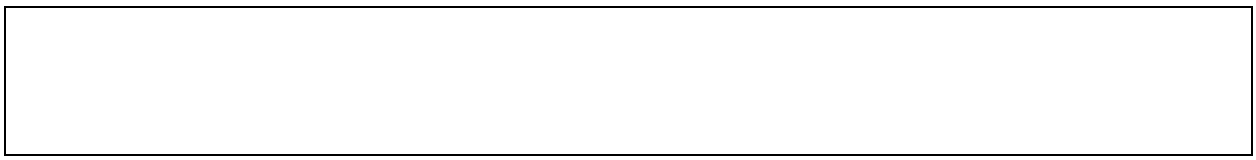

Fig. 19: Excerpt from page 133 in *Paintings to Franz Kafka* by Yosl Bergner
Yosl Bergner, "Kafka's *The Vulture." Paintings to Franz Kafka.* 65x81, 1988, p. 133.

As previously mentioned, the vulture's attack targes the feet, symbolizing movement and the possibility of mobility. This is visually represented by the contorted posture and pained facial expression of the depicted man in Fig. 18. The positioning of the hands further emphasizes the loss of control, as they appear impotent and powerless, signifying that the man's fate is no longer in his own hands but dictated by the vulture. In this portrayal, the suffering itself becomes the central experience rather than a mere consequence of the encounter with the vulture.[50]

Bergner's visual variants also incorporate elements of humour, reminiscent of the traditions found in Yiddish theatre, which may encompass irony, self-deprecation, physical comedy, social commentary, and wordplay. As noted by Beck, "[i]n several plays, laughter is provoked at the expense of a character who refuses to see his real situation and is not aware of the foolish figure he cuts. Something of this humour survives in the work of Kafka, whose attitude toward the tragedy of his heroes' situation is heavily ironic" (29). By incorporating dark humor into his visual works through the use of gestures and body language conveying surrender, all while having free hands that could have been used to stop the bird, Bergner adds depth and complexity to the narrative, offering a nuanced exploration of the human experience and the interplay between suffering and the absurd.

Kafka's work has also sparked religious readings that address themes of sin, redemption, and the search for meaning in a world plagued by suffering and injustice. Interestingly, in

[50] See Joel Michael Reynolds' "Feeding Upon Death: Pain, Possibility, and Transformation in S. Kay Toombs and Kafka's "The Vulture."

Bergner's variant, there is a gesture reminiscent of crucifixion (Fig. 19), further highlighting the potential connection between martyrdom and religious motifs in the story. What makes this connection thought-provoking is the unknown reason behind the character's martyrdom, adding another layer of complexity to the narrative. This enigmatic aspect invites the reader to contemplate the character's absurd circumstances without having enough information as to what caused the attack, offering a unique perspective from which the story can be seen as comic. In this context, the absurdity becomes a source of dark humour, highlighting the ironic and paradoxical nature of the character's situation.

Fig. 20: Excerpt from page 135 in *Paintings to Franz Kafka* by Yosl Bergner
Yosl Bergner, "Kafka's *The Vulture." Paintings to Franz Kafka.* 60x81, 1988, p. 135.

Towards the conclusion of the painting series, Bergner depicts the man submerged in a sea of blood, symbolizing his demise through exhaustion.[51] Notably, the portrayal captures an

[51] As noted by Reynolds, there is a large literature on the significance of "blood" in Jewish contexts, which exceeds the scope of this research.

intriguing visual connection between the eyes of both the man and the vulture, which are rendered in a manner that suggests a fusion, as if they have merged into a singular entity as the text suggests. An interesting aspect to highlight is that Bergner also explores the concept of negative space in his artwork. Similar to the use of negative space in comic art, Bergner employs scraping techniques to remove layers of paint, revealing the underlying canvas or layers beneath, creating a visually striking effect that adds depth and a three-dimensional texture to his compositions. Furthermore, the utilization of textual elements enriches Bergner's artistic expression and prompts viewers to engage with his work and Kafka's writings on multiple levels, establishing a dynamic dialogue between visual and written forms of expression.

Bergner's sequential art and skillful use of text lay the foundation for the next chapter of this study, which explores Kafka's narratives reimagined through the vibrant and dynamic medium of comics. By employing a unique blend of visual and literary elements at the time, Bergner paves the way for a fresh interpretation of Kafka's works, harnessing the multi-dimensional potential of the medium and the emotional properties of colour, which offers tremendous opportunities for creative experimentation and interpretation. As we turn our attention to the genre of graphic novels, the section below aims to dissect the thought-provoking visual interpretations of "Der Geier" by Peter Kuper.

3.2 Visual Riddles: Decoding Kuper's Secondary Imagery in "Der Geier"

Many cartoonists are identified with a specific piece, ongoing series, or graphic novel, or are known for the work they have undertaken within a single genre. This cannot be said of Peter Kuper (1958 -), a New York City-based artist, editor, and educator, who has been writing and drawing the popular feature *Spy vs. Spy* for *Mad* magazine for nearly two decades; he is the co-founder of *World War 3 Illustrated* magazine; he is also the first cartoonist to have published an ongoing comic strip in the *New York Times*. The sheer diversity of Kuper's output extends far

beyond the magazines and newspapers, and his contributions to the cartoon arts, whether measured in terms of format, technique, or subject matter, are striking. Some key features of his style include, but are not limited to intricate linework, which he uses to create a sense of texture and depth in his pieces, as well as a highly narrative style, with a focus on visual storytelling and the use of sequential art to convey complex ideas and emotions.

Besides *Kafkaesque*, Kuper's graphic books include *The System, Sticks and Stones, Speechless, Theo and the Blue Note, Drawn to New York, Diario de Oaxaca,* and *Ruins*, whose genres range from illustration, graphic novels, graphic journalism, comic books, adaptations of literary classics and animation to essays, and travelogues. Yet, Kuper adopts a style reminiscent of the wordless novels created by graphic novel pioneer Lynd Ward. With his use of intricate linework, bold and expressive contrasts, and dynamic layouts, Kuper's black-and-white visual style, achieved through scratchboard techniques, also strongly echoes the aesthetic of German Expressionism with its deeply etched lines, a movement that has been cited as one of his biggest artistic influences.

Kuper's illustrating style is almost aggressive and visually antagonistic, having scratchy and sharp features. The black-and-white contrast present in most of Kuper's graphic novels creates the dark and multi-layered atmosphere which Kafka's stories are known for. As Scott McCloud says in *Understanding Comics*: "In black and white, the ideas behind the art are communicated more directly" (McCloud 192), which evokes how Kafka's reality-bending scenarios are ideally suited to the comics medium.

When it comes to the question of "Why Kafka?," Kuper's introduction to Kafka's writing took place during his high school years when he first read *The Metamorphosis*. The dark and disturbing nature of the story made a profound impact on him at the time, leaving a lasting impression and sparking his interest in Kafka's literature. Nearly a decade later, Kafka's presence

once again intersects with Kuper's path, this time captivating him with the author's unique blend of dark humour and the intermittent sparks of joy amidst the darkness. This encounter becomes the catalyst for Kuper's desire to reimagine Kafka's stories in the form of comics. Kuper saw that creating a visual variant of Kafka was an opportunity to experiment with fiction adaptation – an uncharted area of comics that was interesting to him. This realization further fuels Kuper's passion for creating visual variants of Kafka's works, where he could engage with the inherent multiplicity of meanings that Kafka's literature offers.

In an interview for the Podcast *Virtual Memories Show,* Kuper reflects on his return to Kafka's works years after the publication of his first graphic adaptation of Kafka's short stories in 1995. During the conversation, Kuper alludes to the gatekeeper in *Vor dem Gesetz* (*Before the Law*, 1915). He draws a parallel between the gatekeeper's role as a barrier to accessing the law and the challenges faced by comics as a genre in the past, where it encountered limitations and restrictions from publishers due to its lack of popularity. "My first adaptation of Kafka took me eight years to produce because – for the most part – nobody's getting paid, not to mention the actual time it takes to produce such a work" (Kuper, *Virtual Memories* 05:00-05:10). Unlike the countryman depicted in Kafka's story, Kuper dares to take the risk of "entering into the law" by publishing what would later become the National Cartoonists Society (NCS) award-winning adaptation of *Die Verwandlung*. Moreover, Kuper demonstrates his continued commitment to Kafka's works by revisiting his previous short stories and releasing a new collection titled *Kafkaesque* (2018), featuring more than double of content compared to the 1995 edition, further solidifying Kuper's commitment to reimagining Kafka's narratives.

When examining the artist's visual variants of Kafka's narratives, Kuper's artistic interpretations are marked by their expressive, dark, and often frightening qualities. Through his skillful use of black and white, Kuper is able to create a stark contrast that enhances the

unsettling atmospheres that permeate Kafka's works. Moreover, Kuper's variants highlight the presence of Kafka's dark humor, a crucial element in his literary works. In his visual interpretations, Kuper expertly captures the essence of Kafkaesque moods while infusing the stories with his engagement with other artistic influences and his own distinctive flair.

An intriguing example of Kuper's technique can be observed in the following interpretation of Kafka's story "Die Bäume," ("The Trees", 1913) in which Kuper employs a powerful and ultimately political allegory for homelessness and its human cost.

Fig. 21: Excerpt from page 96 of "The Trees" in *Kafkaesque* by Peter Kuper
Peter Kuper, "The Trees." *Kafkaesque*, 2018, p. 96.

As mentioned in *Peter Kuper: Conversations* (2016), his concept of the skull-like doors comes from one of Alfred Hitchcock's earliest films, which "has a shot where a police van is pulling away, and the van has two big circular windows that almost look like eyes" (134). Kuper employs a narrative strategy he refers to as "secondary imagery," a technique that involves incorporating visual elements in his artwork that resemble familiar objects or symbols. By

incorporating these subtle visual cues, Kuper enriches the visual storytelling experience by infusing his own interpretative dimension into the narrative. This deliberate approach not only revisits the profound symbolic and ironic quality inherent in Kafka's stories but also creates a distinct visual language that resonates with readers, inviting them to participate in an interactive reading exercise. In Kuper's interpretation of "Die Bäume," the notion of rootedness is shifted from a literal forest setting to the city. The ambulance, in this context, no longer symbolizes salvation but instead represents death.

Another cinematic influence present in Kuper's *Kafkaesque* regards to separates the stories with black pages, one of them showing the title of the following episode from "The Vulture." "[T]his framework can be regarded as an associative link to the structure of movies, especially to the silent movies, so that it is just another means of creating a self-referential representation" (Schmitz-Emans 497). This artistic choice may evoke the significance of film and new media for Kafka's artistic and personal life, as discussed by German actor and film director Hanns Zischler in *Kafka Goes to the Movies* (2003). Zischler explores Kafka's fascination by the emerging cinematic medium during his lifetime, and how it likely influenced his own approach to writing.

In terms of "secondary imagery" employed in Kuper's art, his visual variant of "Der Geier" contains the bird's striking resemblance to a fountain pen, which adds a layer of symbolism to the narrative, where the vulture takes on the dual role of a menacing creature and a metaphorical representation of writing itself.

Fig. 22: Excerpt from page 156 of "The Vulture" in *Kafkaesque* by Peter Kuper
Peter Kuper, "The Vulture." *Kafkaesque,* 2018, p. 156.

The fusion of the vulture and the pen conveys a powerful message about the creative process, suggesting that the act of writing can be both captivating and destructive. The bird's swift and rapid downward dive arguably evokes the essence of Kafka's painful, relentless and almost instinctive pursuit of literary expression as described by Kafka in many of his letters.

When it comes to the texts employed in his visual variants, Kuper maintains a fairly strict adherence to the original material. For "The Vulture", he refrains as much as possible from introducing his own words, avoiding any attempts to modernize or adapt the text to fit the medium of comics. However, amidst this fidelity, there is one notable concession that Kuper occasionally makes - the shortening of texts. This artistic choice is prominently displayed in his adaptation of "Der Geier," where he incorporates a visually striking technique of attaching the text in cut strips of paper, giving the impression that they have been torn from the page. This artistic choice, although symbolically violent, encapsulates both the disruptive act of tearing and

the nostalgic reference to the comic's narrative structure. On one hand, it serves as a tangible representation of language that accompanies the visual elements, creating an interplay between the textual and pictorial components. On the other hand, it serves as an allusion to the "strip" format that is foundational to the comic narrative, evoking the inherent structure of the medium.

Fig. 23: Excerpt from page 154 of "The Vulture" in *Kafkaesque* by Peter Kuper
Peter Kuper, "The Vulture." *Kafkaesque,* 2018, p. 154.

In the world of comics, the eyes hold immense narrative power, enabling artists to evoke emotions, facilitate nonverbal communication, and enrich the visual storytelling experience. The incorporation of swirling spirals (the "gyres" mentioned before), and blank white eyes within Kuper's interpretation (see also Fig. 5), for instance, enhance the character expression, inject symbolic depth, and captivate readers, making the eyes a dynamic and indispensable aspect of his artistic vision. Kuper utilizes the blank white eyes to convey the character's profound emotional or physical state. As with Gregor's blank eyes, the absence of

detail within the eyes accentuates the impact of these transformative moments, leaving readers with a visceral impression of the character's vulnerability, taking advantage of a negative blank space to expand on the essence of Kafka's narrative. In addition, the swirling spirals in the witness' eyes create a sense of visual disarray, representing the mesmerizing effect of hypnosis on the character's consciousness. By manipulating the pupil's dilation with the vulture's silhouette, Kuper conveys the power dynamics at play within the storyline, as if the gentleman was also subject to its sway.

Fig. 24: Excerpt from page 157 of "The Vulture" in *Kafkaesque* by Peter Kuper

Peter Kuper, "The Vulture." *Kafkaesque,* 2018, p.157.

By incorporating a variety of panel arrangements, Kuper creates a distinctive layout for each page, resulting in a dynamic composition that evokes a sense of motion. Kuper's clean and unique stencil style in black-and-white adds more visual depth to the pieces while emphasizing the artistic independence of his composition from Kafka's text. While Bergner's interpretation of "Der Geier" demands a more careful and deliberate approach from the viewer as each work

stands on its own, Kuper's variant of the story provides a refreshing and fast-paced reading experience. In terms of reception, while both Bergner's paintings and Kuper's comics take liberties in their interpretations of Kafka's narratives, they provide audiences with distinct perceptions. For instance, Bergner's paintings are characterized by their substantial size, often featuring subjects positioned centrally on the canvas. Indeed, while Bergner's variants of Kafka's works are often intended to be part of a larger sequence or series, they can also be appreciated as individual pieces of art. In addition, Bergner's larger scale and compositional choices encourages viewers to explore the entire artwork without a predetermined path to follow. On the other hand, Kuper's medium of comics offers a different reception experience. The sequential nature of comics guides readers through a deliberate path, with panels arranged in a specific order to convey the narrative. Through his skillful integration of visual storytelling elements, Kuper brings a fresh perspective to Kafka's narratives, breathing new life into the stories while staying true to their essence.

Continuing our exploration of Kuper's artistic interpretation and its profound impact on Kafka's narratives, we now transition to the forthcoming chapter, which focuses on "Der Bau," another creature-themed story that provides fertile ground for artistic exploration. Once we expand upon Kuper's visual variant of the story, we also embark into the realm of another renowned artist: Robert Crumb. By closely examining Crumb's unique perspective and artistic choices in his interpretation of "Der Bau," we gain invaluable insights into the complex challenges faced by artists when visually capturing Kafka's narratives. This chapter will shed light on the strengths, limitations, and potential gaps that emerge as Crumb illustrates the enigmatic creature at the center of the narrative. Through this exploration, we will deepen our understanding of how the boundless creative possibilities offered by Kafka's literary universe can both inspire artists and lead them astray.

4. Creature as Artist in "Der Bau"

"Ich habe den Bau eingerichtet und er scheint wohlgelungen" (*Nachgelassene Schriften II* 576).[52]

Kafka's short story "Der Bau," was written in Berlin between the end of 1923 and the beginning of 1924. Believed to be one of his last prose pieces (Pasley 423), the story was named, edited, and published posthumously by Brod.[53] It has been conceived as "the most appropriate cipher for [Kafka's] work" (Politzer 321- 322), as the narrative seems to serve as a retrospective commentary upon Kafka's life and oeuvre. The story portrays an isolated and anxious being who retreats deeper and deeper into his burrow, shutting himself off from the outside world. This sense of detachment from the outside world and the struggle to connect with others (or avoid them) is a common motif that runs throughout Kafka's biography. The protagonist's obsession with building the perfect burrow can also be interpreted as a metaphor for Kafka's own writing process. Similar to the creature in the story, Kafka was often overwhelmed by his own sense of self-doubt and insecurity, which led him to constantly revise and rework his manuscripts.

Structurally, "Der Bau" divides into two main parts. After the preliminary pages introduce the creature and its underground creation, the story's first part describes how the burrowing creature relates to the outside world. It contemplates the difficulties of returning to it, above ground, and calculates the intentions of its enemies. The creature's obsessive thoughts on rebuilding its home are repeatedly expressed. Always alone, the creature thinks and rethinks everything it has already thought, giving the story an anxious, compulsive and even spiral-like quality. The story's second part consists of the creature's struggle with a potential enemy whose

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[52] "I have completed the construction of my burrow and it seems to be successful" (*Complete Stories* 354).
[53] As noted by Andrea Newsom Ebarb's study of the text, the story first appeared in the literary journal *Witiko* (1928) and then it was later published in *Beim Bau der Chinesischen Mauer* (1931).

presence is signaled by the distraction of a sound: “denn ein an sich kaum hörbares Zischen weckt mich” (*Nachgelassene Schriften II* 606).[54] With Kafka’s characteristic lack of specificity, the word whistling invites multiple interpretations. The word “whistling,” (from the German “zischen” or “pfeifen”) for instance, describes a high-pitched sound made by air passing through a narrow opening, as well as the sound produced by mice, marmots, or birds, which becomes interesting once paired with the words “almost inaudible,” to the extent that it has been barely loud enough to awaken the creature from its (un)settling dreams.

The text then describes the creature’s inability to think due to the constant whistling, at which point the narration about the specificity of the construction of the burrow is replaced by speculations on the origin of the sound. The contrast between the protected interior and the seemingly threatening outside world is thereby completely overturned by occupying an anxious intellect, as the perceived external danger may have penetrated into the burrow itself. However, it remains unclear to the very end whether the enemy and its hissing noise actually exist, or whether they have been generated by the story’s creature: at once a narrator, a protagonist, and an anti-hero.

While a number of Kafka’s texts remained unfinished at the time of his death, “Der Bau” is a curious case. As recalled by Max Brod[55] and Dora Diamant, the story was actually completed, ending with a scene that described “the fearsome beast killing the terrified creature” (Diamant 72). Unfortunately, the final pages were not published in his lifetime and seem to have been lost[56]. The German-language manuscript version of the text closes with these words: “aber

[54] “for an almost inaudible whistling noise wakened me” (*Complete Stories* 371).
[55] For further reference, see also Max Brod’s “Nachtworte des Herausgebers.”
[56] The last part of the story has been destroyed by Dora Diamant upon Kafka’s instructions: “he wanted to burn everything that he had written in order to free his soul from these ‘ghosts.’ I respected his wish, and when he lay ill, I burnt things of his before his eyes” (Diamant 84).

alles blieb unverändert, das" (*Nachgelassene Schriften II* 632).[57] That floating or amputated "das" is commonly removed in published versions, giving the story some semblance of closure.[58] As "the beast" was Kafka's nickname for his disease (*Complete Stories* 11), one can speculate that the unresolved ending might suggest that creature was surprised and killed by the hissing beast, mid-thought. As noted in Will Rees's article on the role of hypochondria as a commentary upon Kafka's writings, hypochondria was not simply a state of mind for Kafka, but "a way to endless dissection and interpretation," which raises questions concerning to what extent the creature's anxious act of digging is a coping mechanism for its own survival, or whether the whistling is a symptom originating from the creature's mental state. Rather than attempting to find a definitive answer, on could assume that it is difficult to imagine what more the narrator could have had to say – despite it being also perfectly conceivable that the creature might have gone on verbalizing for additional pages. On this inconclusive note, the narrator's self-thought stops, and the would-be story becomes a (structurally imperfect) fragment.

The story's title provided by Brod conveys the creature's incessant efforts in the underground structure, and the German verb "bauen" is a recurring term in Kafka's diaries.[59] In English, there is no direct equivalent for this verb, leading to loose translations that encompass meanings that could include "to dig or delve in the earth," "to build or construct" more generally,

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[57] "but everything remained unchanged, the" (KSH 189).

[58] See Michael Hofmann's translation of *The Burrow* and Charlie Louth's review of *Franz Kafka: The Burrow: Posthumously Published Short Fiction*.

[59] "Das Schreiben versagt sich mir. Daher Plan der selbstbiographischen Untersuchungen. Nicht Biographie, sondern Untersuchung und Auffindung möglichst kleiner Bestandteile. Daraus will ich mich dann aufbauen so wie einer, dessen Haus unsicher ist, daneben ein sicheres aufbauen will, wo möglich aus dem Material des alten. Schlimm ist es allerdings wenn mitten im Bau seine Kraft aufhört und er jetzt statt eines zwar unsichern aber doch vollständigen Hauses, ein halbzerstörtes und ein halbfertiges hat, also nichts" (*Nachgelassene Schriften II* 373) [The act of writing eludes me. Hence, the plan of autobiographical investigations. Not a biography, but an investigation and discovery of the smallest possible parts. I will then build myself up from this, like someone whose house is unsafe wants to build a safe one next to it, possibly using the material from the old one. However, it is terrible when, in the middle of the construction, one's strength gives out, and rather than a somewhat insecure but complete one, they end up with a house that is half-destroyed and half-finished, in other words, nothing" (my translation)].

and an extended metaphorical sense of "to develop" (Bloom 138). In his foreword to Kafka's *Complete Stories*, John Updike addresses the author's obsession with building and with "work that is never done, that can never be done, that must always fall short in perfection" (xi). We find such incompleteness in "Der Bau," both in its theme and structure.

Lukas Gloor has conducted a comprehensive analysis of the text, in which he examines Kafka's signals within the narrative that designate the structure and purpose of the burrow, the differences between inside and outside, as well as the narrator's nature (which is to say character). According to Gloor, "Der Bau" showcases the predominance of order (both thematically or semantically) in Kafka's life and literature. In his exploration, Gloor turns to the Brothers Grimm's dictionary, which displays multifaceted meanings associated with the word "Bau." Among the various definitions, "Bau" can refer to a dwelling place for both wild animals and humans, as well as a structure or construction. Additionally, the word is associated with concepts such as prison ("Gefängnis") and fortification ("Festungsbau") (Grimm and Grimm qtd. in Gloor 202).

Andrea Ebarb explores further the function and significance of ambiguity in the story. Ebarb further expands on the meaning of "Bau," highlighting additional interpretations. According to Ebarb, the term can also signify the make or structure of a novel, a hole in the ground, and a mine (3). This insight suggests that Brod's editorial decision to include the title "Der Bau" carries a suggestive quality that aligns with the highly stylized nature of Kafka's texts. The multiple meanings associated with "Bau" invite a plurality of readings and interpretations, offering a rich and multifaceted experience to readers.

Thematically, the burrow in which Kafka's story is set can be seen as an underground kingdom, where the enigmatic creature resides as its sole creator, master, and sole inhabitant, ruling over it without witnesses or subjects except for the readers of the story. One, if not the

most prominent aspect of the text, revolves around the inherent challenge of visualization, particularly when it comes to depicting the intricate architecture of the burrow or the narrator's appearance. Its seemingly extensive labyrinth contains a central "Castle Keep" known as the *Burgplatz*, surrounded by smaller interconnected chambers, intricate tunnels, and deceptive passageways designed to confuse and mislead potential intruders. At the same time, to the extent that it can be described, thought about, or named, the creature's labyrinthine home still diverts the reader with its deceiving complexity. In addition, the descriptive language of "Der Bau" poses a unique dilemma regarding how one visually imagines the narrator by raising a series of unanswerable questions that deepen the enigmatic nature of the story.

Similar to the "monstruous vermin" of *Die Verwandlung*, the creature of "Der Bau" provides clues that point to an animal. It has fur, claws, and sharp teeth. But the story's speaker also indicates the possession of human features. The creature is endowed with a degree of rationality and mentions "von meinen Händen geschaffenen"[60] ["created by my hands" (my translation)], and how "Tränen der Freude und Erlösung glitzern noch an meinem Bart" (*Nachgelassene Schriften II* 589).[61] The above passage demonstrates how Kafka purposely omits specific details within his stories, which creates a sense of unease and mystery. The creature evokes a sense of familiarity as a mole, but its human characteristics also make it unfamiliar. By leaving certain elements open to interpretation, Kafka invites readers to use their imagination to fill in the gaps and develop their own understanding of the creature.

With a view to the story's theme, Thomas Wegmann takes us back to antiquity and proposes an interpretation of the story as a metaphor for artistic creation itself. According to him, the Ancient Greek lyric poet Pindar seized on the concept of the "homo faber" (man as a maker

[60] Translated by Willa and Edwin Muir as "for which I am responsible" (*Complete Stories* 360).
[61] "Tears of joy and deliverance still glisten on my beard" (*Complete Stories* 361).

or creator) to articulate the notion of the "*poeta faber,"* namely, the writer as craftsman or builder (365). By blurring the boundaries between creator and a creature, and narrating the life of an "alleiniger Herr," (*Nachgelassene Schriften II* 589) ['sole master'] (*Complete Stories* 361) who lives in its own creation, Kafka seems to playfully expand on the etymological relation between the German "graben" (to engrave, to dig) and "schreiben" (to write).

Expanding on the idea of "Creature as Artist," which serves as the title for this chapter, additional material on the creator–creature relationship is found in Kafka's diaries. In a letter to Felice Bauer dated August 14, 1913, Kafka declares: "Ich habe kein literarisches Interesse, sondern bestehe aus Literatur, ich bin nichts anders und kann nichts anderes sein" (*Briefe an Felice* 444)[62]. This resonates with the creature's statement "[I]ch und der Bau gehören … zusammen" (*Nachgelassene Schriften II* 602)[63] leading one to think that the burrow may be interpreted as writing was to Kafka as an existential yet painful necessity. The creature's frantic digging could stand in for a writer's continuous and compulsive act of writing. Just as burrowing belongs to the life of this creature, in the same way writing is an existential necessity for authors such as Kafka, who crave isolation and inspiration. In a letter to Felice dated January 14-15, 1913, Kafka contemplates an ideal living arrangement. He envisions sitting at a desk, surrounded by writing materials and a lamp, deep within a spacious cellar. Meals would be delivered to him but placed far from his writing desk, requiring him to walk to reach them. This would be his sole form of exercise. The imagery evoked by this description encapsulates Kafka's solitary pursuit of artistic expression[64]. Through the exploration of the creature's burrowing and Kafka's own writing practices, "Der Bau" can be interpreted as an invitation to contemplate the profound connection between creator and creature.

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[62] "I am made of literature, I am nothing else, and cannot be anything else" (*Letters to Felice* 430).
[63] "I and the burrow belong … together" (*Complete Stories* 340).
[64] See *Briefe an Felice* 250 / *Letters to Felice* 156.

Heinz Politzer's interpretation of the short story associates the creature's compulsive tunnel-building with the author's compulsive writing in his final years; the act of writing delayed or warded off death: "Die ungeheure Welt, die ich im Kopfe habe. Aber wie mich befreien und sie befreien, ohne zu zerreißen. Und tausendmal lieber zerreißen, als in mir sie zurückhalten oder begraben" (*Tagebücher* 562).[65] The last sentence seems to capture Kafka's reasoning regarding the destruction of his texts as if the author had to externalize his thoughts through literature in order to seek freedom.

"Der Bau" seems to represent not a way out, but rather a self-dug grave, which according to Politzer's reading of the text, leads to an understanding of the burrow as an inverted Tower of Babel, a mythological building that failed to reach its goal, pointing into the image of the tomb, the grave – or a "Pit of Babel."[66] According to the biblical story the Tower of Babel collapsed because God sent different languages to the world so that the builders could no longer communicate and were forced to abandon the project.[67] "Kafka steadily sees that the Babel story is an urgent parable of the allure of overreaching and vain aspiration" (Alter 10), which more seems to lure the readers into a trap rather than provide answers.

For these reasons, "Der Bau" appears to be a veiled depiction of Kafka's personal limitations as a man and artist, capturing the perpetual struggle faced by many creatives caught between the realm of artistic creation and the tangible world. Like those who came before and after him, Kafka lived in the gap between realized and unachievable aspirations. Just as Kafka's

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[65] [t]he tremendous world I have in my head. But how free myself and how to free it without being torn to pieces. And a thousand times rather be torn to pieces than retain it in me or bury it" (*Diaries of Kafka 10-13* 288).

[66] As per the "Der Schacht von Babel" ["The Pit of Babel"] fragment, Kafka writes:
"Was baust du? – Ich will einen Gang graben. Es muß ein Fortschritt gechehn. Zu hoch oben ist mein Standort. Wir graben den Schacht von Babel" (*Parables and Paradoxes* 34).["What are you building? – I want to dig a subterranean passage. Some progress must be made. My station up there is too high. We are digging the pit of Babel" (*Parables and Paradoxes* 35)].

[67] See Genesis 11:1-9. The story of the Tower of Babel is often seen as a cautionary tale about the dangers of pride and the consequences of trying to achieve greatness through self-glorification.

writing presents a challenge that requires thoughtful exploration, readers find themselves embarking on a similar journey of excavation as they dig into the layers of meaning within his works.[68] This challenge extends beyond the realm of text, as artists like Peter Kuper and Robert Crumb have also ventured to excavate Kafka's narratives through the visual form. Having explored the intricacies of "Der Bau," it is now appropriate to return to Kuper's work. Through Kuper's visual variant of "Der Bau," we can further explore the ways in which he captures the essence of Kafka's narrative, examining the artistic choices he makes and the unique visual language he employs. As with Kuper's reading of "Der Geier", we are presented with a new lens through which to experience and interpret "Der Bau."

4.1 Visualizing the Unseen: Kuper's Exploration of the No-thing in "Der Bau"

Kuper skillfully incorporates the intricate structure of the burrow's labyrinth into his visual representations, depicting tortuous and uncertain paths that mirror the complexity and circularity of the narrative.

[68] In this sense, although there is no consistent relation to the Scriptures in Kafka's writings, the biblical text permeates some of his works. Kafka evokes Babel in *Das Schloss* and directly addresses the same in "The Great Wall of China," by stating that "the Tower of Babel failed to reach its goal [...] because of the weakness of the foundation" (Kafka 238-39) while "[…T]he Great Wall alone would provide for the first time in the history of mankind a secure foundation for a new Tower of Babel" (Kafka, ibid.)

Fig. 25: Excerpt from page 39 of "The Burrow" in *Kafkaesque* by Peter Kuper
Peter Kuper, "The Burrow." *Kafkaesque,* 2018, p. 39.

Kuper's artistic approach skillfully blurs the boundaries between writing and imagery, seamlessly blending visual and textual elements. Through his creative process, images take on the form of letters, while sentences acquire visual qualities, resulting in a captivating interplay between language and visuals. Kuper's choice of architectural motifs, such as labyrinths and skyscrapers, resonates with the constructivist style of his drawings, enhancing the cohesive aesthetic of his work. This creative act spans typography, and graphic design in a satisfyingly balanced but unconventional way, serving as another striking example of Kuper's unique use of "secondary imagery," a technique previously explored in his work on "Der Geier."

In this piece, Kuper effectively uses double-page spreads to portray the cross-sections of the burrow's underground network of passages. These expansive illustrations bear a resemblance to a frontal view of a skull or even Rorschach tests, commonly known as inkblot tests, which are employed to evaluate cognition, and personality traits, and diagnose certain psychological

conditions. By incorporating this element into his artistic interpretation, Kuper demonstrates keen sensibility to the psychological dimension of the story. Accordingly, Heinrich Henel's essay on "Der Bau" draws attention to the narrator's tendency to mistake the inner enemy for an external enemy (121), which is a key element of mental instability that Kuper skillfully captures in his visual interpretation. The narrator's psychological "structure" is as intricate and prone to collapse as the burrow itself.

Fig. 26: Excerpt from pages 40, 41 of "The Burrow" in *Kafkaesque* by Peter Kuper
Peter Kuper, "The Burrow." *Kafkaesque,* 2018, p. 40-41.

Within the burrow, we have the sense that "[r]ationality... used to dispel fear...actually makes it worse, for in devising defenses against danger the mind constantly discovers new dangers" (Henel 121). Whereas the vulture is an externalized symbol of the narrator's enemy, in "Der Bau" the enemy comes from *within.* Kuper's visual variant captures the battle between one's own self and a non-self. Similarly, Kafka shares how he was susceptible to being hunted by "the most detailed and precise imagining and invariably on the most inconvenient occasions,"

(*Letters to Felice* 425)[69] which inevitably leads to similarities with the burrowing creature, to which even an intelligible sound was significant, and everything was material for the ruminations of a frantic consciousness.

Kuper's images tend towards the psychological, where the artist portrays the creature becoming its own parasite by inhabiting the labyrinth within its brain. Kuper seems to play with the imagery of the creature's quest for security as a form of imprisonment. Ebarb argues that the labyrinthine entrance of the creature's structure bears resemblance to both the outer shape and inner outline of the Panopticon, an architectural concept conceptualized by the English philosopher and social theorist Jeremy Bentham (4). This comparison draws attention to the notion that the initial impression of the burrow as a place of freedom is, in fact, overturned. The very structure that the creature constructs to ensure its safety and security becomes the very thing that hinders it.

[69] "Soll ich darüber noch mehr sagen? Auch dieser Gesundheitszustand ist tauschend, tauscht selbst mich, zu jeder Zeit kommen, auf Nuancen genau, die gerade für die Zeit ungelegensten Uberzeugungen" (*Briefe an Felice* 600). ["This state of health is also deceptive, it deceives even me; at any moment I am liable to be assailed by the most detailed and precise imaginings and invariably on the most inconvenient occasions" (*Letters to Felice* 425)].

Fig. 27: Excerpt from page 42 of "The Burrow" in *Kafkaesque* by Peter Kuper
Peter Kuper, "The Burrow." *Kafkaesque,* 2018, p. 42.

Kuper also manifests Kafka's shift from sight to the aural within the text by capturing the excerpt of when the creature is suddenly woken up by a whistling noise, which it immediately attributes to an approaching predator. Kuper skillfully depicts the constant presence of the threat, while also showcasing the doubling of the creature through its entrapment in a labyrinth within its own mind. As noted by Wegmann, rather than fear, which "usually connotes an object at which that fear is specifically aimed" (365) one may argue that the creature in "Der Bau" suffers from severe anxiety as it "normally knows no object about which it is anxious" (ibid.). In other words, "[a]nxiety is fear of no-thing" (ibid.), namely, the unknown, which is essentially what the creature experiences as reflected by Kuper with the words "who" elongated to a ghostly echo.

Fig. 28: Excerpt from pages 56, 57 of "The Burrow" in *Kafkaesque* by Peter Kuper
Peter Kuper, "The Burrow." *Kafkaesque,* 2018, p. 56-57.

Kuper's visual variant also invites readings of the labyrinthine structure of the burrow as a resemblance of the twisting, turning internal organs of the body. Kuper creates a visceral and symbolic link between the creature and its environment. As explored in Verne P. Snyder's speculative analysis of the text, the burrow is "… a warm, moist place equipped with passageways that serve as ducts for foods and oxygen and resemble in function an umbilical cord" (115). The creature's fear of being exposed and a constant need to fortify its surroundings against outside threats may be interpreted as Kafka's hypochondria and preoccupations with physical affliction. This thematic connection adds depth to Kuper's visual variant and sheds light on the psychological dimensions of the story. The creature's obsession with protecting itself mirrors Kafka's own anxieties surrounding his health and vulnerability to external influences.

Kuper's portrayal also depicts the creature as a prisoner trapped within its own construction, seeking refuge and finding solace in its self-imposed isolation. The artist skillfully

captures the growing anxiety that emanates from within the creature, reflecting its increasing preoccupation with its own existence. In the final panel of Kuper's visual variant, he masterfully incorporates the essence of the original text's closing sentence. This powerful image portrays the creature haunted by a looming presence that appears to be Death itself. The impending spectre of Death, left unspoken by Kafka, creates an atmosphere of existential dread and serves as a haunting reminder of the creature's mortality.

Fig. 29: Excerpt from page 58 of "The Burrow" in *Kafkaesque* by Peter Kuper
Peter Kuper, "The Burrow." *Kafkaesque,* 2018, p. 58.

Within the glimmer of Kuper's visual variant, the image of a skull re-emerges, evoking the character's deep-seated fear of death. By capturing the essence of this pivotal moment, Kuper not only brings Kafka's words to life but also provides a visual representation of the unspoken themes that permeate the story. Furthermore, the creature's behaviour raises intriguing questions surrounding its choice to remain within the confines of the burrow rather than seek escape. This deliberate omission of escape as a viable option suggests that the creature is imprisoned *within* itself, bound by its own psychological and existential limitations. This notion may parallel

Kafka's own perception of himself, viewing his identity and creations as integral parts of his being. While Kuper externalizes the internal, Robert Crumb chooses other means to intertwine the psychological and existential depths within Kafka's work. By exploring Crumb's life and artistic approach to Kafka's narrative, we gain valuable insights into the complexities and risks of translating Kafka's narratives into visual form.

4.2 This is Not a Mole: Crumb's Blind Eye in "Der Bau"

A prominent figure in America's underground comic book movement, Crumb was born in 1943, in Philadelphia. His father was a sergeant in the Marine Corps and his mother was a housewife and practicing Catholic, which inevitably leads to drawing parallels with Kafka's life. Crumb had to deal with an authoritarian and oppressive father, which inevitably shaped his work. Charles Crumb, Sr. was a strict, conservative man, who would often beat his sons. Crumb's mother, Beatrice Loretta Crumb, had suffered an abusive childhood and took amphetamines, which gave her paranoid mood swings. Growing up in such an environment had a devastating effect on their five children. At the same time, whereas Kafka sought solace in writing as a compulsive and necessary activity, Crumb found his fundamental outlet in drawing.

The artist became interested in comics under the influence of his older brother, Charles, who was a comic book enthusiast highly influenced by "funny animal comics" and the Walt Disney brand through Carl Barks' illustrations. The Crumb brothers produced their own make-believe publishing company, Animal Town Comics, marking the beginning of the younger brother's long and successful career in the field.

After graduating from high school in 1961, Crumb got a job at the American Greetings Corporation, where he worked as a colour separator and, later, as a greeting card artist. Three years later, the artist joined Harvey Kurtzman's *Help!* magazine. There, he introduced what would later become one of his best-known characters, Fritz the Cat. The character was created by

Charles and Robert in 1959 in a homemade comic book story called “Cat Life” and based on the experiences of Fred, Crumb’s family cat. In a subsequent story entitled “Robin Hood” (1960) Crumb renamed the cat to Fritz and provided him with anthropomorphic features as well as a libertine lifestyle and countercultural beliefs. The Fritz comic strip seemingly leapt off the page in an adaptation by the director Ralph Bakshi, a 1972 animated film of the same name. Fully dissatisfied with the animated version, the artist produced “Fritz the Cat, Superstar.” It was published in *The People's Comics* that year, putting the character and pet project named “Fritz the Cat”[70] to death, which would likely be Kafka’s choice as well.

As mentioned earlier in the introductory chapter of this study, animals in stories act as catalysts for reflection. For instance, in Crumb’s anthropomorphic work, the artist states:

> I can express something [with animals] that is different from what I put into my work about humans ... I can put more nonsense, more satire and fantasy into the animals ... they’re also easier to do than people ... With people I try more for realism, which is probably why I'm generally better with animals.[71]

In that sense, one may argue that animals have the power to “put on display the darkest, most uncomfortable truths about the human condition” (Gardner). In a comparable manner, Kafka plays in his own crafted and crafty way with the imagined distance from his non-human characters.

From 1969 onwards, Crumb included signs of self-representation in his work. Some characteristics that would become pictographic elements of identification with the author are thickly framed glasses and distorted facial expressions.[72] Looking beyond physical traits, we see

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[70] Crumb repeatedly put several of his characters to death; the only long-lived character in his oeuvre is the artist himself. See Daniel Worden’s “R. Crumb in Comics History.”
[71] Cited on the back cover of R. Crumb. *The Life and Death of Fritz the Cat*.
[72] For further reference, see Crumb’s character Mr. Sketchum.

clues about the artist's personal life in his comics. For instance, starting in 1965, the artist's experiments with psychedelics, particularly LSD, had a direct effect on his creative work. They inspired him to create Mr. Natural and Mr. Snoid, which Crumb presented through less-than representative means. Their dream-like stylings emerge from the unconscious, the real of forbidden and taboo.

Therefore, it seems inappropriate in 2023 to discuss Crumb and his characters without addressing controversies regarding his life and his career, as much of his work invokes racist and sexist stereotypes. His comics represent sexualized violence, sexism, and racism, particularly when it comes to the controversial comic character Angelfood McSpade, which thankfully – is neither included in this study nor necessary for it. In light of his deployment of misogynistic and racist images, Crumb's work has been justifiably and widely criticized, rather than being defended as a "product of its time." The feminist writer and cartoonist Trina Robbins – who personally knows Crumb – laments the artist's tendency for "panels of rape, torture, and murder" of (usually) female characters by male ones (*The Transformation of Comics* 31). A decade later, a more formal response (rather than Robbins' comments to Crumb's portrayal of women) came in 2018 when the Massachusetts Independent Comics Expo (MICE) made an announcement regarding their "Crumb Room." It would be renamed for another honoree, another iconic (though less notorious) creator of independent comics and graphic novels. The "Crumb Room" took on that moniker in 2010. This small change offers one indication of how political and cultural standards over the 2010s underwent significant change. The organization's stated reasoning behind the decision refers to "the negative impact carried by some of the imagery and narratives that Crumb has produced." These had been "seriously problematic because of the pain and harm caused by perpetuating images of racial stereotypes and sexual violence" (Doherty). Echoing and affirming the rightness of that MICE decision, the present research acknowledges Crumb's

creative contributions to comics. Rather than be erased and disregarded, his countercultural work merits contextualization, analysis, and critical engagement.

An overview of on-going controversies connected with Crumb's work help set his career in a historical context. In 2023, that synopsis seems a necessary step before analyzing some of Crumb's Franz Kafka illustrations (without seeking to promote the artist). Arguably, Crumb's choice of themes represents the significant relationship he perceived to have had with Kafka. In the third part of an interview series entitled "Crumb on Others" produced by Alex Wood, a contributor to the R. Crumb website, Crumb comments on how the project on Kafka led him to discover "a very close kinship" (*The Official Robert Crumb Site*) and deep connection with the author. For instance, there are similar themes found in both Kafka and Crumb's works, such as feelings of inadequacy within one's own skin; struggles with religious heritage; as well as insecurities linked to sexuality and women.

At the same time, this affinity does not necessarily suggest that Crumb's personal life makes him necessarily well-suited to portray Kafka's biography and work visually. Despite their similarities, I argue that Crumb gets all too close to Kafka. Despite Crumb's skill, his visual variant provides a shallow interpretation, because the subterranean creature remains presents as a surface image. By over-identifying with his source texts, he creates a Crumb-ified version of Kafka. In the context of illustrating Kafka's female characters, Crumb also projects a harmful portrayal of women onto Kafka's complex sexual experiences. That depiction would seem to go against the writer's reserved (or possibly repressed) character[73] and Kafka's indirect descriptions of such events and encounters. In addition, Crumb's fantasies of forceful engagements with female bodies also contrast with the discreet glimpses of sexual urge that appears Kafka's

[73] Mairowitz himself supports this argument when referring to Kafka's approach to the topic. "Kafka's talent would mostly suggest erotic encounters, rather than indulging his characters in that act which he found 'repellent and perfectly useless'" (2007, 133).

writings. Rather than a stylized and elaborated Kafka, we have a Kafka dressed up in Crumb's edgy and disturbing costume. Some readers will find that Kafka's fame sits uneasily alongside Crumb's notoriety.

Having explored Crumb's life and artistic approach, the following section of this chapter expands on his graphic work *Kafka.* This graphic novel, written by David Zane Mairowitz[74] and illustrated by Crumb, offers a unique perspective on Kafka's life and literature. The book serves as a biographical account of Kafka's experiences, highlighting key moments and themes in his life, while also presenting Crumb's distinctive artistic interpretation of Kafka's key works, particularly "Der Bau."

Although Crumb and Kuper recognize the labyrinth and spiralling tunnels, Crumb's interpretation of the story offers a straightforward illustration of a mole with a hunched posture and sharp claws. In contrast to Kuper's recognition of the creature's non-specific hybridity, Crumb's realistic representation of an identifiable animal extinguishes the visual potentiality of the text.[75] The interpretation appears to overlook the suggestive atmosphere of Kafka's story, as there is no concrete evidence in the text that the creature described is specifically a mole.

[74] David Zane Mairowitz is a multifaceted creative professional and one of the founding editors of the *International Times*, a significant platform for underground culture in the United States. In 1986, Mairowitz launched his *Beginners* series, authoring the initial entry – a graphic novel into the life of psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich, with illustrations by German Gonzalez. In the early 1990s, Richard Appignanesi, a prominent Canadian writer and editor, approached Mairowitz, leading to discussions about prospective projects. It was during this time that the idea for the adaptation of Kafka's work took shape. As fate would have it, Mairowitz had relocated to the south of France, becoming neighbors with Robert Crumb. Recognizing Crumb's artistic prowess, Mairowitz extended an invitation to collaborate on the graphic novel, thus setting the foundation for *Kafka* (Hummitzsch).

Fig. 30: Excerpt from page 57 of "The Burrow" in *Kafka* by David Zane Mairowitz and R. Crumb
Robert Crumb, "The Burrow." *Kafka*, 2007, p. 57.

In a manner similar to the criticism directed at Nabokov's insistence on Gregor being a particular species of "Käfer" (beetle), Kafka deliberately avoids specifying the creature's exact nature in "Der Bau." For instance, in the unfinished "Der Dorfschullehrer" ("The Village Schoolmaster", 1931), [76] Kafka specifically uses the word "Maulwurf" ("mole") within the narrative. This demonstrates that if Kafka intended to have mole as the narrator in "Der Bau", he would have created a creature identifiable as such. In the letter below to Brod from August 28, 1904[77], Kafka's metaphorical description of humans as probing moles implies his deliberate decision to avoid invoking this species in "Der Bau." As a result, Crumb's portrayal of the creature as a mole falls short in capturing the elusive essence of Kafka's story.

[76] Alternative title by Max Brod: "Der Riesenmaulwurf" ("The Giant Mole").
[77] "Wir durchwühlen uns wie ein Maulwurf und kommen ganz geschwärzt und sammethaarig aus unsern verschütteten Sandgewölben, unsere armen roten Füßchen für zartes Mitleid emporgestrebt" (*Brief an Max Brod* 29) ["We burrow through ourselves like a mole and emerge blackened and velvet-haired from our sandy underground vaults, our poor little red feet stretched out for tender pity" (*Letters to Friends, Family and Editors* 17)].

Similar to Kuper, Crumb also employs various visual cues from the medium of comics to convey the creature's obsessive behaviour in "Der Bau." One notable aspect of Crumb's portrayal is his focus on the creature's eyes, which effectively communicates a sense of paranoia and anxiety through close-up panels. This cinematographic technique not only enhances the visual impact of the artwork but also captures the character's inner turmoil, reflecting the overarching theme of anxiety that permeates the narrative.

Fig. 31: Excerpt from page 58 of "The Burrow" in *Kafka* by David Zane Mairowitz and R. Crumb
Robert Crumb, "The Burrow." *Kafka,* 2007, p. 58.

In light of the profound impact of illness on Kafka's on creative process, Mairowitz explores the theme of the body as a source of anxiety and disquiet. He links Kafka's sense of alienation and isolation with a generalized sickliness: "No ordinary, run-of-the-mill hypochondriac, Kafka used illness, not merely as a metaphor for his troubled existence, but as yet another means of alienating himself from his family, and of course, from himself" (Mairowitz 59). This preoccupation with health is reflected in the accompanying image, in which Crumb shows a

naked, scrawny Kafka tightly twisted into a fetal position, alienated not only from the outside but from within. Instead of his usual well-groomed appearance, Kafka's hair is disheveled, and similar to the creature, he displays the wide-eyed look of someone enduring an unsettling trance.

Fig. 32: Excerpt from page 59 of "The Burrow" in *Kafka* by David Zane Mairowitz and R. Crumb
Robert Crumb, "The Burrow." *Kafka,* 2007, p. 59.

Crumb employs "circling birdies" to his interpretation, which adds depth to Kafka state of mind, emphasizing severe pain or disorientation. In the medium of comics, this artistic technique involves portraying a halo of twittering birds[78] or twinkling stars that encircle the character's head. The impression is that Kafka is permanently and agonizingly removed from the world, however, by attempting equate the burrowing creature as an analog for Kafka himself does not fully capture the depth and complexity of the narrative, as it disguises "Der Bau" as memoir of

[78] In "Der Geier," Kafka seems to masterfully take the metaphor of twittering vultures and infuses it with a haunting sense of reality. Rather than presenting a whimsical portrayal of birds encircling a character's head, Kafka transforms the imagery into a potent and unsettling representation of death. The vulture's circling movements and continuous attack evoke a sense of impending doom, emphasizing the inevitable confrontation with mortality that the narrator faces.

illness. It becomes evident that when it comes to adapting Kafka's works, the intricate layers and nuances of his writing prove challenging to convey solely through direct visual representation, causing Crumb’s adaptation to crumble apart.

5. Conclusion: Lingering Wound

In light of these findings, it seems fitting to consider reversing the perspective and delving into the essence of Kafka's literary works through the prism of an animal parable. In this exploration, I drew inspiration from the ancient parable of the elephant and the blind men, in which several blind men touch different parts of an elephant, with the result that none of them could become fully aware of its shape and form. In this parable, each person forms a different interpretation of this strange animal based on the specific part they have encountered. The first person, whose hand landed on the trunk, said: "This being is like a thick snake." For another one, whose hand reached its ear, it seemed like a kind of fan. As for another person, whose hand was upon its leg, said, the elephant is a pillar like a tree-trunk. The blind man who placed his hand upon its side said that the elephant, "is a wall." Another who felt its tail described it as a rope. The last felt its tusk, stating the elephant is that which is hard, smooth and like a spear. Fundamentally, just as the blind men were limited by their inability to perceive the entire elephant, our own interpretations of Kafka's literature are also bound by our unique perspectives and experiences. Although we may grasp certain aspects of his stories and themes, capturing fragments of meaning that resonate with us personally, it is crucial to recognize that our interpretations may also leave other dimensions unexplored.

This example serves as a poignant reminder of the significance of embracing multiple perspectives and acknowledging the inherent limitations of our individual understanding. In navigating through Kafka's narratives, we are confronted with the elusiveness of absolute truth, and it is precisely this openness that adds depth and richness to his literature. In this context, the introductory chapter of this study delves into how Kafka's narrative style, with its suggestive and open-ended nature, has been ahead of its time and continues to spark ongoing debates to this day. The chapter also offers an overview of recent scholarly contributions within the broader context

of ongoing Kafka studies, and expands on how Kafka's deliberate use of non-human characters serves as conduits for exploring the human experience. While his human protagonists' dream-like experiences are inherently fascinating, Kafka's portrayal of non-human beings add another layer of intrigue and complexity to his narratives, becoming not only captivating literary devices but also potent conduits through which he masterfully unravels the complexities of the human experience.

The second chapter builds on how Kafka's deep sensitivity to the visual realm has been greatly influenced and enriched by his writing style. The fusion of visual and written expressions allowed him to transcend conventional storytelling boundaries and challenge readers to engage with his work on a more profound and imaginative level. Just as the blind men cannot perceive the elephant in its entirety, Kafka's deliberate choice of words and his objection to a visual depiction of the insect protagonist in *Die Verwandlung* challenge readers to interpret the complex nature of Gregor's metamorphosis. By drawing parallels and distinctions with the visual variants of Peter Kuper, Robert Crumb, and Yosl Bergner, this chapter demonstrates that Kafka's surgical precision of language and unparalleled ability to evoke vivid imagery serve as a deliberate invitation to explore the depths of interpretation, shedding light on the multifaceted dimensions and evocative nuances present within his works while posing a dual challenge and opportunity for readers and artists seeking to interpret his texts.

In the third chapter, we explore "Der Geier" as an additional example that emphasize the interpretative complexity inherent in Kafka's visual literature. Bergner employs a Neo-Expressionist approach in his paintings through bold brush strokes and a somber colour palette to effectively convey the intensity of Kafka's narrative. Through the medium of comics, Kuper bridges the gap between the past and the present, offering fresh perspectives that engage modern readers while also remaining true to the essence of Kafka's narratives. Although "Der Geier"

may not explicitly allude to the act of writing, Kuper transforms the vulture into a stylus pen, highlighting a connection between ink and blood, while Bergner's partially concealed layers of text in his paintings become a kind of physical performance, a re-enactment of the physicality and even pain inherent in writing.

In a similar vein, the fourth chapter introduces "Der Bau," in which instead of the abrupt and forceful violence of the vulture's attack, the dwelling creature engages in an incessant scratching and digging within an intricate and labyrinthine structure. Through this artistic interpretation, Kuper effectively underscores the profound connection between the writing process and the looming shadow of death, where the act of creation becomes a confrontation with suffering and mortality itself. This chapter also critically examined Crumb's visual variant of "Der Bau," shedding light on his role as a mere illustrator. While Crumb's attention to detail and his realist style showcases the artist's technical skills, his emphasis on realism inadvertently restricts the imaginative and symbolic aspects of the narrative, undermining the potential for multiple layers of meaning and interpretation. By depicting the protagonist as a mole, Crumb leaves little room for ambiguity and open-ended exploration, which, as it has been explored, are integral to experiencing Kafka's oeuvre.

In navigating these various interpretations and artistic renditions, this study not only emphasizes the challenges faced by artists in capturing the essence of Kafka's literature, but also how the enduring quality of Kafka's texts lies in the potentiality to take his symbolic world and co-produce or expand it through one's own perspective. The fact that Bergner, Kuper and Crumb were inspired to engage with Kafka's narratives in their respective times highlights the timelessness of Kafka's themes and the depth of his impact on the artistic world. This intergenerational resonance serves as a testament to the enduring power of Kafka's literature, as it continues to evoke discussions and artistic creations across decades and artistic movements.

It becomes evident that Kafka's creation process played a significant role in his emotional and psychological struggles, serving as both a cause and a potential remedy for his inner turmoil. In this sense, similar to a serpent devouring its own tail, Kafka's characters and creatures exist within a perpetual cycle of influence and transformation, constantly shaping and being shaped. Throughout this thesis, my aim was to demonstrate how Kafka skillfully utilizes non-human beings as powerful symbolic representations to convey these profound struggles and emotional turmoil associated with the creative process of writing. In other words, his use of creatures transcends mere literary devices, offering valuable insights into the human condition. Drawing a parallel with the penal colony's writing machine, despite being torturous, it strangely offers a moment of clarity and enlightenment for its victims. Ultimately, the findings of this research offer a reading of Kafka's literature as a literature of wounds. As a body of work that emerges from the realm of pain, leaving an indelible mark on those who engage with it. Kafka himself notably stated, "man sollte überhaupt nur solche Bücher lesen, die einen beißen und stechen" (*Briefe 1902-1924* 27).[79] In this way, as we approach the centenary of Kafka's passing, the elephantine potentiality for interpretation in his narratives continues to captivate and intrigue readers, standing as a testament to their enduring impact. Such a dynamic process of exploration and re-examination ensures that Kafka's visual literature remains a living entity, in ever-evolving ways. And may the lingering Kafka-wound remain open.

[79] "we ought to read only the kind of books that wound and stab us" (*Letters to Friends, Family and Editors* 16).

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