2i REVISTA DE ESTUDOS DE IDENTIDADE E INTERMEDIALIDADE

# VICE VERSA: HUMAN AND APE IN KAFKA

## VICE–VERSA: O HUMANO E O SÍMIO EM KAFKA

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This article reads Kafka's *Ein Bericht für eine Akademie* (1917) [*A Report to an Academy*] as an exemplary threshold narrative in which anthropogenesis coincides with captivity, training, and the internalization of surveillance. Through the motifs of the wound, the gaze, and liminal spaces (doors, bars, cracks), Red Peter's self-narration stages a 'way out' that is not freedom but a strategic passage into a second nature. Kafka thereby destabilizes the human/animal border: becoming-human appears as an artifice, while animality persists as an irreducible remainder that returns in memory, body, and intimacy.

**Keywords**: Kafka; animality; anthropogenesis; liminality; mimesis; wound.

Este artigo analisa *Ein Bericht für eine Akademie* (1917) [*Um Relatório para uma Academia*], de Kafka, como uma narrativa limiar exemplar em que a antropogénese coincide com o cativeiro, o treino e a interiorização da vigilância. Através dos motivos da ferida, do olhar e dos espaços liminares (portas, grades, frestas), a autonarrativa de Pedro Vermelho encena uma 'saída' que não é a liberdade, mas uma passagem estratégica para uma segunda natureza. Kafka destabiliza, assim, a fronteira humano/animal: o tornar-se humano surge como um artifício, enquanto a animalidade persiste como um resíduo irredutível que regressa na memória, no corpo e na intimidade.

**Palavras-Chave**: Kafka; animalidade; antropogénese; liminaridade; mimese; ferida.

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> *Even though I have always hated zoological gardens […] I still could not avoid going out to Schönbrunn on one occasion and, at the request of my companion, a professor of theology, standing in front of the monkeys' cage to look at the monkeys, which my companion fed with some food he had brought with him for the purpose. The professor of theology […] had, as time went on, fed all the food he had brought with him to the monkeys, when suddenly the monkeys, for their part, scratched together all the food that had fallen to the ground and offered it to us through the bars. The professor of theology and I were so startled by the monkeys' sudden behavior that in a flash we turned on our heels and left Schönbrunn through the nearest exit.*
>
> — Thomas Bernhard, *The Voice Imitator*

## 1.

Rotpeter [Peter the Red], the protagonist of the short story *Ein Bericht für eine Akademie* [*A Report to an Academy*], is one of the many animal figures – almost-animals, no longer/not yet animals – that populate Franz Kafka's pages. Yet the fact that he is a chimpanzee – par excellence a transitional figure between human being and animal – makes him especially significant. And it is precisely the motif of the threshold that plays a central role for Kafka, as this story shows with exemplary clarity.

The plot of *A Report to an Academy* (Kafka, 1971, pp. 250–259), first published in 1917 in Martin Buber's journal *Der Jude*, can almost be read as moving in the opposite direction from the far better-known *Die Verwandlung* (1915) [*The Metamorphosis*] (Kafka, 1971, pp. 89–139). The first text is organized around anthropogenesis: the passage from the bestial dimension to the human sphere, from ape to man, from nature to culture – but also from freedom to confinement. The metamorphic path traced by Kafka is by no means smooth: it is rather a broken track strewn with precipices, holes, interruptions, traps. The story reactivates Darwinian motifs, but also several central and recurrent Kafkaesque themes: the already mentioned threshold (arch, door, gate, grille, fence), the wounded body (scar, bump, cut, red stain), and the gaze (animal/human, self/other, imitation/surveillance, horizontal/vertical). Rather than treating these motifs separately, the present reading approaches them as interconnected moments of a single process. The wound, the gaze, and the search for a way out, structure Peter the Red's transition from animality to humanity. The gunshot wound that marks his body inaugurates a transformation that unfolds through captivity, training, and the gradual internalization of surveillance. Kafka's story thus presents anthropogenesis not as a natural development, but as a disciplinary process whose traces remain visible in memory, in the body, and in the persistence of animality itself.[1]

Here the vicissitudes of the former ape – now a human being (yet still an ape), Peter the Red – are narrated in the first person by the protagonist himself, before an unspecified "Academy". If human identity is defined by the capacity for recognition – by the

[1] Several interpretations of *A Report to an Academy* have frequently emphasized questions of mimesis, education, acculturation, posthumanism, and the anthropological boundary. Without discounting these perspectives, the present essay concentrates on the relation between wound, surveillance, and anthropogenesis, treating them as interconnected dimensions of Peter the Red's transformation. See, among others, von Jagow (2002), Harzer (2011), Neumann (2010), Neumeyer and Steffens (2013), Grimm (2023).

possibility of giving an account of one's own life – then the ape, through the almost Warburgian ritual of the public report, makes his official entrance into the human world: he proclaims himself human by the analogy of the speaking subject, that is, by saying 'I' (von Jagow, 2002, p. 597). In presenting himself with a name that marks his individuality, the chimpanzee nonetheless stresses that this very name already speaks alterity. The name Peter the Red – meant to distinguish him from another Peter – is an epithet that refers to the red spot on his simian body and that recalls the violence the nonhuman animal suffered at the hands of the 'human animal'. In other words, the human being Peter the Red has become carries on his body the stain of his origin (an ape-origin). But there is more: the Academy's men listen because they know that this story concerns them – that on stage what is being narrated is their own 'autobiography' (in the sense of *de te fabula narratur*), and therefore that wound is, in the end, also one of their traces.

It is no accident that what has been cut off from what is one's own belongs to the past that the ape seeks to reconstruct through human language. Peter the Red in fact becomes aware of the 'irrecuperability' of his story: a lack, a hole in memory; the resistance of a void, a latent space – or perhaps a leap, an irreconcilable break in the evolutionary chain.

It is worth pausing over the meaning of this gap in Peter the Red's testimony, over the 'forgetful memory' that circulates through his discourse. For, if we look closely, this absence is the true knot of his report: Peter the Red's testimony concerns the ape and his impossibility of saying – of testifying (perhaps of remembering) – his own life. From the very first lines he declares his inability to recall his origin, his primitive simian existence. What makes this retrograde journey impracticable is "an infinitely long time" (Kafka, 1971, p. 250) and this not according to the calendar – where it occupies only five years – but according to the explosiveness of the event. Memory is too fragile a device (and too human) to contain the leap, 'at a gallop', between bestial nature and human nature. Kafka writes: "To cast off apehood in five years and gallop through the whole evolution of mankind!" (Kafka, 1971, p. 261). The door to the ape world, which Peter the Red has left behind like a vast arch, has become smaller and smaller in the course of evolution, until it has turned into a slit that makes return impossible. It is a hole through which the storm of his past experience can only brush his heels like a draught. This is exactly the boundary point, the 'limit passage' between the offended body of the ape and valiant Achilles: "your life as apes, gentlemen, insofar as something of that kind lies behind you, cannot be farther removed from you than mine is from me. Yet everyone on earth feels a tickling at the heels; the small chimpanzee and the great Achilles alike" (Kafka, 1971, p. 250). Peter the Red understands that his homeland, the Gold Coast, is now a lost paradise, a foreign land, and that the first step toward a possible evolution is to tear oneself free from the memory of origin, from the bond with the *Heimat*.

What remains of his 'past life,' or pre-life [*Vor-Leben*], is a sign, a scar: the trace of the wound the ape received when men from the Hagenbeck company captured him during a hunting expedition, striking him with a "wanton shot" (Kafka, 1971, p. 252).

It is therefore no accident that Peter the Red shows everyone the scar of that wound – which is also the seal of sovereignty, of human power over the animal.[2] And in a kind of crossed step, the hairless scar (thus closer to the human) is the sign of his being an animal: it signals that his being human is an artifice. Of course, the red spot is not only a brand

[2] It may be useful to note that the motif of the wound also returns in Kafka's *Der Bau* (1923) [*The Burrow*], when the unnamed creature of the story tears its head while digging the burrow's passages (that is, while 'thinking,' understood here as a specifically human activity). More pointedly, it also recalls those passages in *The Metamorphosis* in which Gregor Samsa's father strikes his son – now almost entirely insect-like – by throwing apples at the back of his "offended body". Along these lines runs the interpretation of Kafka's work and of its animal dimension developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1986).

that points back to the 'pre-life'; it is also a healing, and hence a kind of working-through of memory, according to the modalities of forgetting Kafka sketches in the beautiful parable *Prometheus* (1918) – a sort of 'paramyth', *i.e.* a quasi-mythic miniature that reframes a traditional myth: "There are four legends concerning Prometheus: […] According to the third his treachery was forgotten in the course of thousands of years, forgotten by the gods, the eagles, forgotten by himself". (Kafka, 1971, p. 432).

Memory is one of the nodes of this story. When Peter the Red recounts the stages of his life as a 'stranger,' he is forced to rely on the words of others:

> I belong to the Gold Coast. For the story of my capture I must depend on the evidence of others. A hunting expedition sent out by the firm of Hagenbeck – by the way, I have drunk many a bottle of good red wine since then with the leader of that expedition – had taken up its position in the bushes by the shore when I came down for a drink at evening among a troop of apes. They shot at us; I was the only one that was hit; I was hit in two places. (Kafka, 1971, p. 251)

The wound is thus the fracture that divides the world from its redemption. It marks expulsion from the Eden of the Gold Coast, the exit from innocence, but also the passage from drinking (together with the troop) to sipping (in company) good wine.

The cut also has the value of a beginning – understood both as the origin of the individual and as the origin of the species. It is a birth trauma (to borrow Otto Rank's phrase) that veils and reveals the violence suffered. In the continuation of his existence, Peter the Red performs on himself a true miracle of training, aimed at overcoming estrangement within the self. Yet something remains. The scar, on the one hand, is the caesura between human existence and bestial existence, between the 'world of yesterday' (the *Vor-Welt*) and that of today. But it is also the trace of a past, of an alterity that refuses to be reduced to the identical and that erupts, claiming its presence (as the memory of the homeland always does). From this perspective, Peter the Red's narrative anticipates a conception of identity that is not given but produced. In a way that resonates with Paul B. Preciado's reflections on subject formation, identity emerges here as the effect of techniques of training, repetition, and self-discipline, rather than as the expression of an inner essence (Preciado, 2021).

And it is precisely this wound that initiates the process leading toward the search for a way out. The scar left by the hunters' bullet is not merely the trace of a past violence; it becomes the starting point of a disciplinary transformation. From captivity and exposure to the human gaze emerges the necessity of training, imitation, and self-control. The path toward humanity thus begins not with freedom, but with a wound.

## 2.

Learning language – and with it 'the human way' – is the only solution that presents itself to Peter the Red when, after his capture, he is shut in a cage in the belly of a ship (a *Zwischenraum*, a 'space in-between,' almost a non-place) and deported from the Gold Coast to Europe. In this 'intermediate realm' Peter the Red decides to stop being a chimpanzee, to exit the slavery to which he has been reduced, and to penetrate the human world. And he reaches that solution in the only possible way: by inventing it in desperation. The viable path does not seem to him to be a flight (that would be an animal's solution), but imitation – emulation of the Other (see Ziad, 1995), of the many men (to his eyes all apparently alike, since the Other is 'the same as itself') who stand beyond the

bars of the cage, in the hold of Hagenbeck's steamer.[3] To the red-coated ape in Kafka's story there remains only the sensation of having no escape: "For the first time in my life I could see no way out; at least no direct way out; directly in front of me was the locker, board fitted close to board." (Kafka, 1971, p. 252).

Like the panther in Rainer Maria Rilke's well-known poem (Rilke, 1987, pp. 25–26), Kafka's ape, locked in a cage, now has in front of him only a thousand bars. Where earlier innumerable routes could present themselves as ways out (in the forest every path can become a flight path), now the crate proves inadequate both horizontally and vertically: it is "too low for me to stand up in and too narrow to sit down in." (Kafka, 1971, p. 252). Hence, he explains, a feeling of anguished impotence – an animal feeling that can only be partially rendered through human *logos*:

> Of course what I felt then as an ape I can represent now only in human terms, and therefore I misrepresent it, but although I cannot reach back to the truth of the old ape life, there is no doubt that it lies somewhere in the direction I have indicated. (Kafka, 1971, p. 253)

Segregated in a cage whose iron bars cut into his flesh (another wound!), Peter the Red realizes that he is subjected to the human gaze of control, condemned to live blocked within the frame of that gaze (see Agamben, 2004). The cage is not merely a physical enclosure. It is also a visual dispositive that constantly exposes the ape to the eyes of others. Peter the Red finds himself trapped within a field of observation from which there is no escape: he is watched, examined, and evaluated long before he is accepted. Significantly, his education begins not through speech but through looking. He studies the sailors who stand beyond the bars, observing their gestures, habits, and routines. Yet the more attentively he observes them, the more he learns to see himself through their eyes. The process culminates when external surveillance is transformed into self-surveillance: in order to become human, Peter the Red must internalize the gaze that disciplines him. Kafka entrusts the ape's way out to the gaze and to the capacity for imitation directed toward the human: "Now, these men in themselves had no great attraction for me (…) It was so easy to imitate these people!" (Kafka, 1971, p. 255). The gaze of the human animal and that of the nonhuman animal meet across the cage bars, and the sharp demarcation between the two domains is unsettled by the ape's gesture – ready to return, through the handshake, the 'vice versa.' The first step in the forced process of humanization is thus the acquisition of greeting through a handshake, and only thereafter the acquisition of language.

One of the first things the chimpanzee learns is the principle of reciprocity: "The first thing I learned was to give a handshake." (Kafka, 1971, p. 251). In that tactile contact between human and animal, exchange is condensed: a possible reversal of the border, a mobile threshold. Only later does language enter. It is worth noting that, under constraint, the ape chooses to learn – by emulating the human – but also, more precisely, to learn coercion itself: the mechanism of coercion, the ABC of the human tongue. And the sailors of the crew: "Listen, he's talking!" (Kafka, 1971, p. 257). Like a 'magic word' – "Hallo!" – this cry admits the ape into a community that is anything but culturally elevated: the circle of the ship's crew who, in the scant time left free from their duties, go down into the ship's 'belly' to drink themselves insensible on schnapps. Their behaviour, as Red Peter describes them, does little to ennoble the human species: they clutch the bottle, belch, spit, grunt, smoke, and – above all – do not speak so much as mutter. Kafka's ape,

[3] Kafka's reference to "Hagenbeck" is by no means accidental: Carl Gottfried Wilhelm Heinrich Hagenbeck (Hamburg, 1844–1913) was an animal trader and an especially innovative zoo director who helped to revolutionize the architecture of zoological gardens.

by contrast, forces himself to become human not in the name of a fantasized ascent on the natural scale, but simply to find a way out [Ausweg] – unlike Milo, the ape in E. T. A. Hoffmann's tale *Nachricht von einem gebildeten jungen Mann* (1814) [*Report of an Educated Young Man*], whose trajectory is framed as a different kind of 'elevation' (Hoffmann 1989, pp. 136–144).

This way out has nothing to do with freedom; indeed, here freedom takes the form of a renunciation: "No, freedom was not what I wanted. Only a way out." (Kafka, 1971, p. 253). By choosing 'the human way,' Red Peter leaves one cage only to enter another. He renounces the slavery of the crate in order to submit himself to a different kind of servitude: that of the 'star,' whose existence is meticulously planned and regulated by the rhythms imposed by the impresario.[4]

The spectacle of freedom offered to his ex-ape gaze by variety acrobats, as they swing and swoop in imitation of nature, appears as a mockery of venerable, "holy Mother Nature" (Kafka, 1971, p. 253). Yet it is precisely this mockery – this falsification – that makes the human path possible, since Peter the Red must learn not to remain on the ground but to climb. From this point of view, human verticality is a climb away from nature, and the ape must learn to stand upright, become self-identical, and thus become a stable target for the human gaze. Here it is the humans who imitate the primates, with a result so comical that it would make the whole ape world burst into derisive laughter (Kafka, 1971, p. 253).

Becoming human is certainly no easy task, because Peter the Red must overcome his initial aversion to human beings, participate in the mimesis of human existence, and overcome the sensation of repulsion and disgust. He decides to become human only in order to find a way out, despite this aversion – and even though he has perceptively noted the "trüber Blick" [heavy face] in their eyes: "Had I been devoted to the aforementioned idea of freedom, I should certainly have preferred the deep sea to the way out that suggested itself in the heavy faces of these men" (Kafka, 1971, p. 255).

After a long work of self-discipline, harshness toward himself, and very hard training, he manages to speak, to drink the beverages preferred by men, and finally even to write the report he is now reading. Yet the story makes clear that the acquisition of human language is bought at the price of loss: it entails the abandonment of the "truth of the old ape life" (Kafka, 1971, p. 253), the cutting of the tie with origin. The humanization the ape imposes upon himself is a humanization through acculturation: a desperate, self-punishing attempt at assimilation and integration.

Comic in its tragedy is the episode in which the ex-ape recalls the efforts he made to gulp down brandy, honoring an offer previously made to him by a sailor who urged him to clutch the bottle. Peter the Red's struggle against his ape nature reaches a jubilant moment when, before a circle of spectators – but far from their 'murky' eyes – he seizes a bottle left behind through inattention, and drains it in one gulp without grimace, "not this time in despair but as an artistic performer" (Kafka, 1971, p. 257), that is, with

[4] On this point, it may be helpful to recall another of Kafka's remarkable stories, *Erstes Leid* (1922) [*First Sorrow*], in which the protagonist – human and an acrobat – declines from the paradisal state of an artistic vocation freely chosen into a condition of isolation, largely through the force of habit. Kafka's acrobat has renounced life for art and is now compelled to live 'up above', suspended over the questions of existence. The artist's despair is especially evident when, during a train journey in which he is forced to occupy the space reserved for luggage (or animals), he tearfully asks the impresario (who, by contrast, sits on the train seat) to be granted a second trapeze. In this story, the second trapeze functions as a threshold-place, a mobile boundary (Kafka, 1971, pp. 446–448). This tragic figure of the artist can be read in the light of Red Peter's reflections, since he explicitly derides the illusion of freedom inhabited by human acrobats when they whirl 'for work' in the circus. See Nicolai (1974).

artifice; and then, his senses in turmoil, he emits a human sound: "Hallo!" – The cry marks a true entrance into the community of men.

And so, by imposing upon himself – almost as a categorical imperative – the learning of a rudimentary form of language, Peter the Red performs the decisive tear that allows him to survive: not a jailbreak – the ripping of the bars, or the ripping himself away from them in escape (which he insists he could have tried) – but a rending of the self. His reflections are revealing: "Ah, one learns when one has to; one learns when one needs a way out; one learns at all costs. One stands over oneself with a whip, one flays oneself at the slightest opposition." (Kafka, 1971, p. 258).

The gaze that initially came from outside has now been fully internalized. One begins to surveil oneself; one becomes – as in a marvelous aphorism by Kafka himself – an animal that "twists the whip out of its master's grip and whips itself to become its own master – not knowing that this is only a fantasy, produced by a new knot in the master's whiplash" (Kafka 2006, p. 29).

Man is the master who whips, who controls, whereas the animal (animality) stands for what cannot be controlled or predicted – what eludes the forecast of calculation. And indeed, when the ape decides to become human, he does so with the whip of the 'categorical imperative', as a totalizing task.

## 3.

Peter the Red's story displays the centrality of the anthropological boundary in Kafka's work. In Kafka, the frontier between humans and animals is never clear-cut; rather, it is uncertain, exposed to continual bargaining, and subject to repeated landslides. And Kafka's story does not contemplate only the ape's 'becoming-human', but also the equal and opposite movement of a man's becoming-ape: "My ape nature fled out of me, head over heels and away, so that my first teacher was almost himself turned into an ape by it (…)" (Kafka, 1971, p. 258).

As it is well known, in Kafka the boundary between human animal and nonhuman animal is never fully abolished, but is continuously redefined. For this reason, crossing the threshold between so-called 'man' and the animal necessarily calls into question the very concept of the "anthropological machine" (Dick, 2015, pp. 271–292). One proof is Kafka's short piece *Ein altes Blatt* (1917) [*An Old Manuscript*] where the dividing line between the two domains reaches as far as the Empire's main square. The "nomads from the North" appear as a threat not so much to the imperial citadel and its customs as to the very concept of humanity (Kafka, 1971, pp. 415–418). And the reasons are telling: not only because they turn the square into a stable, nor merely because they live in symbiosis with beasts, but because they lack the use of language. The 'misunderstanding' Kafka speaks of here – which fundamentally concerns human nature – becomes clear when the nomads begin tearing raw flesh from a living ox. Across the imperial city one hears the victim's cries, the animal's bellow that underscores human violence. The sound of pain traverses the boundary between human and bestial. The theme of the boundary to be crossed also lies at the center of Kafka's *Wunsch, Indianer zu werden* (1909) [*The Wish to Be a Red Indian*]. In this very brief text, Kafka's Indian aspires to overcome the boundary between himself and the horse: the protagonist's desire is to become one with the animal, in a kind of crossbreed (to cite another Kafka title[5]) – or, as one might say, –

[5] *Eine Kreuzung* (1917) [*A Crossbreed*] (Kafka, 1971, pp. 426–427).

a 'riding-together' of forms of life in which the borders between human being and animal are transgressed (Kafka, 1971, p. 390).

But let us return to the threshold in *A Report to an Academy*. That Peter the Red's metamorphosis into a human being is not once and for all is shown by the fact that he still clumsily scratches his heel (Achilles returns!), and on every occasion pulls down his trousers to show curious visitors – and anyone interested in his strangeness – the scar of the gunshot wound. Moreover, in an especially beautiful passage from the unpublished fragments connected in Kafka's notebooks to the project of the Report, the overlapping of the two natures (human and bestial) takes on an unpleasant olfactory connotation for the chimpanzee: "Actually, it's not the smell of human beings that repels me so much, it's the human smell which I have contracted and which mingles with the smell from my native land" (Kafka, 1971, p. 261). What is at stake here is not the smell of the other, but the crossing of the two smells, the persistence and re-emergence of the "native land" within the new form – in short, the alterity that is in us.

Not only that: as we know from the story's final lines, what testifies to the survival of the earlier ape form in Peter the Red is his private life, the fact that at night, when he returns to his apartment, he keeps company with an ape. By day, however, he avoids confronting his fiancée from the pre-world, because in her eyes he recognizes the sad expression of trained animals and cannot bear it. In that gaze lies the sense of guilt Peter the Red has internalized in acquiring the upright posture. The ape has entered the world of power, and at the same time the world of 'guilt culture' (to borrow a phrase from the anthropological vocabulary). He knows this guilt, feels it, but he also knows he is partially innocent – and that he may seek redemption.

The wound, the gaze, and the search for a way out ultimately converge in the same process. What Peter the Red calls becoming human is inseparable from captivity, discipline, and self-transformation. The scar remains as the visible trace of that passage, marking the persistence of animality within the very form of the human.

We began (because Peter the Red began) with a forgetting. It is precisely in this fault-line of memory – in the impossibility of verbally reconstructing one's own story (or our story) – that Peter the Red (and we with him) can recover hope in the true 'line of flight'. Horizontality offers the right distance and the best vantage point, as Elias Canetti explains with striking clarity:

> One must lie down with the beasts in order to be set free, or redeemed (*erlöst*). Standing upright signifies the power of man over beast; but precisely in this most obvious attitude man is exposed, visible, vulnerable. For this power is also guilt, and only on the ground, lying among the animals, can one see the stars, which free one from this terrifying power of man. (Canetti, 1974, p. 88)

Perhaps Walter Benjamin was right, then, when he wrote of Kafka: "Forgetting always involves the best, for it involves the possibility of redemption" (Benjamin, 1968, p. 136). The possible redemption, then, lies in recognizing the animal dimension intrinsic to our being human, and in seeking the enigmatic meaning of our nature precisely in the unforeseen – in that red spot which, on closer inspection, is present in each of us.

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