

# THE INSURANCE MAN IN THE PENAL COLONY

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Entering the installation one is confronted by a set of stacked beds named in descending order as machinery, sleeping, marriage, office, hospital, writing—hooked up to a car battery—layered like an archaeology of consciousness descending into un-probed but electrified depths. Why isn't Freud's picture on the wall, that other German-speaking Jew from the Czech lands? His absence might open our presence in the same way as Kafka's machinery of the 20th century unconscious. Through the window there is a picture of Vancouver against the mountains. Where is the unconscious of our world? Has the insurance man shed his troubled baggage in the New World? The end of history without the history that brought the end? I bought a book of matches with Kafka's face on it in the kitschy Kafka museum in Prague. Perhaps money-making without anxiety is being imported back into Europe. Perhaps we will all sleep easy.

The native mask in the hatbox on top of the beds places the installation: Kafka read and knew the history of penal colonies made by Europeans in non-European lands. He imagines them coming home. This is how he sees the 20th century before it happens. When it happens it is merely Kafkaesque, an icon of itself. The Kafkaesque: "The 'K' word has become an adjective today, not Kafkan but Kafkaesque. The 'esque' is not the aura of Kafka but the need to eliminate him by the critic's assimilation of emancipatory modernism into mass culture by refus-

ing to recognize the referential contexts of his work. It is the very loss of reality, the loss of referentials, that has now become the norm for which Kafka's tales speak of their traditional repressive power of secular authority over our gooseflesh."<sup>1</sup> Not Kafka, too much Kafka, not enough Kafka, is Kafkaesque.

The reversal of Europe and colony works through the transcendental, the absent God, the God-position. Their connection is not merely reciprocal, dialectical, so that one could be exchanged for another. The relation between colonizer and colonized is established through a supervening relation of each and both to the used-to-be transcendental ground to their presence-in-relation, the opening through which they co-presence. The constant relation between (a) theology and social criticism in Kafka between which some readers think they need to choose is rooted in the opening which grounds the reversal: both the absent God and the critique of violence. Where is the God-position in Zaslove's installation? The filled in walls, the stuff everywhere, too much to read, the 1960s concrete of fortress SFU pressing in from all sides. The God-position, infinitely far away, appears outside, but the feeling of enclosure, of being closed in, not able to get out, is the absent God-position. The x-rays that hang from the ceiling mirror Kafka's mechanical diagnosis of an inside produced by the excesses of an outside: the name of one's crime written on one's back. Look out the window to sunny Vancouver: it's not a crime any more. One just needs to adjust. Therapy is about being normal, Kafkaesque.

The reversal of the penal colony, violence without the unconscious, steers Kafka's gaze from Central Europe toward the happy skiers above Vancouver. Who needs Kafka? Those possessed by the Kafkaesque. Zaslove's lecture accompanying the opening, "On Some Motifs in Kafka," was structured around taking the listener from the work in

1 Jerry Zaslove, "In the Spirit of 'Odradek': Cultural Icons and Recognition of the Person in Kafka, Adorno, Benjamin, Hillis Miller ... and Ivan Demjanjuk," *Journal of the Kafka Society of America*, 19 (1/2), June/December 1995, p. 63.

question, *In The Penal Colony*, back toward the experiential point from which Kafka could conceive and write the work. Several preliminary tasks therefore presented themselves: he had to undermine the pre-digested way in which Kafka and his works are now framed as Kafkaesque in order to allow a real confrontation with the work itself. He excavated the history of the penal colony until that time, and showed Kafka's awareness of it, in order to argue that the work is an anthropology of the present, of the emerging 20th century.

This is not history, at least not in the normal sense. It does not put Kafka "in the context of his time," but shows how Kafka's work becomes possible by tracing it back toward the point from which it could emerge. It is the emergence that is at issue not its prior conditions, and certainly not to reduce the emergence to its supposed conditions. It is a reading-back through history to encounter the emergence as an emergence, as new.<sup>2</sup> To the extent that the listener to the lecture, and viewer of the installation, is through this procedure confronted with the site from which Kafka's works could be written, s/he is able to experience 'originally' Kafka's work as an emanation of that site. This experience would allow a reading of the installation as also a return to that site and a commentary on it that, though influenced by Kafka, is nevertheless a commentary on the site rather than the text, ie. not on *In The Penal Colony* but on the anthropology of the 20th century. Thus, Vancouver is everywhere and nowhere in the installation, Simon Fraser University also. The 'method' of critical reading that Jerry calls 'radical contextualism' is at work here as "a theory of experience in regard to the way the novel [in this case the instal-

lation] 'phenomenalizes' the reader's engagement with his/her own life, but is historicized in terms of the novel's capacity to change how we think about our preconceptions and social conformist beliefs."<sup>3</sup> The Holocaust is everywhere and nowhere as well. After Kafka, it is even more urgent to return to Kafka, out of Kafkaesque normalization and back to the site from which Kafka wrote, to see the horrors around us as horrors, the penal colony in colours of institutional grey, the insurance man in his untroubled sleep.

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2 It seems to me that this procedure is a schritt zuruck in Heidegger's sense, a Destruktion or a deconstruction, in the sense that these derive from Husserl's Rückgang and Abbau (unbuilding). A going-backward that Husserl noted could only take a spiral form of expression: going back and coming forward while retreating back to the site from which the 'institution' (in this case the work) began.

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3 Jerry Zaslove, email communication to the author, 3/7/2001.