

REACHING FOR THE VANISHING POINT

» KAIA SCOTT

“A cage went in search of a bird”*

The room housing the Kafka exhibit is yellowed, a bit like an image from an old book: it lends everything both a touch of warmth and an edge of brittleness. The simple trick of lighting gently tampers with the gallery’s atmosphere, setting the room ever so slightly off kilter from the world outside. It is a fitting light in which to be presented with turn-of-the-century Prague through the lens of Kafka’s tropical penal colony.

The penal colony in Kafka’s short story appears at first to be more than just slightly estranged from the narrow stone streetscapes of Prague or other Bohemian towns where he himself worked. And though he left the details of this exotic island setting imprecise, the hot, sticky atmosphere that he creates is heavy and palpable. As the readers of *In The Penal Colony* become increasingly panicky and short of breath, they start to recognize the feeling as one that Kafka has made them feel before in very different stories. A million miles away from his civilized quarters in Prague, Kafka has transmuted the same claustrophobia of Bohemian social formality that is found in works like *The Trial*, into the “wild” and stifling air of the penal colony. Both his descriptions of this island in the sea and a labyrinthine office building in Prague feel equally hazy, oppressive, and just out of reach. Characters as quotidian as clerks, attending offic-

ers, or salesmen, begin normally enough but soon begin to speak strange single-speaker languages or sprout papery wings, until they too, start slipping away from any imaginable reciprocal contact.

From the otherworldly spaces of Kafka’s stories, the exhibit shares with visitors a simple and important truth. It is a collection of objects from the Prague of Kafka’s era, images of tropical lands that would have been circulating around Europe at the same time, and Kafka mementos that have been gathered up from many times and places. It comprises an odd travelogue that wants to show us that Kafka’s writing room and the heavy social matrix that held it in place is not as far apart from a distant island of European exiles, military personnel, and natives as it may at first seem. It composes its collection of objects with the hope of communicating that Kafka’s stories of bureaucratic horror are not just unfathomable flights of genius imagination, but that they are inextricably bound to a brutally candid vision of the social machine that he lived in with all its pressures of work, love, family, politics, religion, class, race, and other social stratifications.

Kafka’s stories present us with the gruesome spectacle of human spirits twisting in painful directions between institutions that can do nothing but disfigure them. The doubly sad revelation is that these institutions remain our only point of contact. For him, the girl on the bus with whom he falls in love in an instant of eternity cannot fail to become anything more than a wife, a mistress, or a shopkeeper. Even his discipline-hungry officer from *In The Penal Colony* longs desperately for human contact on his own terms. Inevitably though, the institutions that shape us make contact a vanishing point that draws everyone deeper into their own design. Contact’s poor substitute becomes nothing more than a memorized affirmation and recounting of the institution’s syphilitic creation story.

From the walls of the exhibit, the portraits of Prague's cultural celebrities stare in from one side, those of working class people from the other. Some walls are decorated in the designs of the industrial machines that were amputating Kafka's clients, others with political decrees and manifestos, and all of these face in toward a "bed" of personal pressures that Kafka likely faced. The room creates a visual lecture that reminds visitors that Kafka did not exist in some absurdist fantasy, but in conditions that for all intents and purposes have not changed so very much. The images whisper suggestions of present incarnations of the same institutions that twisted the urge for contact in Kafka's characters back in war-torn Europe. Through the collected mementos of Prague and locales like a tropical penal colony, the exhibit reaches toward a picture of Europe's brutal industrialization, savage imperialism, and disintegrating social conventions, while building a shrine to the fallout that gathers around us as we chase the vanishing point of contact with a ruptured history.

To a patient observer, the exhibit articulates the thoughtful suggestion that *In the Penal Colony* is a perfect vehicle for attempting this fraught contact. All stories contain the imprint of their time, but as a dictionary of human behaviour, this one could be chanted over and over again, like a hymn, to conjure up all the pieces of a language of civilization.

Like one might imagine of a bedchamber in a bourgeois household, the exhibit wants us to hear the sounds of a nursery drifting through the walls. The children are reading aloud: they are learning the stories they have been given by rote. A peaceful and powerful pastime, the stories both mold and provide fantasy. They are delight disguised as work, and work disguised as delight.

In the stifling heat of the penal colony, as in the claustrophobic density of the bourgeois nursery, the children are pushed in close, bul-

lied by their surroundings to observe the strange customs of their world. As the puffing, sweating officer recalls, he used to personally see to it that the children were shuttled to the very front of the crowd so that they could take in, unobstructed, the deadly calligraphy of *The Harrow* at work.

When Kafka finally takes off the officer's sweaty gloves, and shows us *The Harrow's* obscene massacre, I cannot help but feel like one of the children: pressed in close, horrified, confused, amazed, and completely unable to look away. Of course the adult in me cannot help but breathe a secret sigh of relief, as the ladies in lace sitting safely behind the children must have also done after the punishments of the past: It was awful, but it had to be. Kafka has finally given us some narrative relief: the poor slave has been saved, the hideous torture-master slain, and the evil harrow has been destroyed. At least the mess is over, and justice has ultimately been served. The children however, remember that the ladies always feel this way at the end of punishment.

**The Zürau Aphorisms*, Trans. Michael Hoffman, *New York, Schocken Books*, 2004.



Anna Sedlackova 1911; Actress, Reproduced with permission Langhans Portrait Gallery.



Anny Ondrakova, 1921 1921; Screen Actress. Reproduced with permission Langhans Portrait Gallery.