

FRANZ KAFKA'S WORDSCAPES AT CAFÉ ARCO

Two theatre directors, one senior Kafka scholar and two young researchers in the field, one dramaturg, an actress, two interlocutors and a specialist on Kafka's life in Prague are all going to share their interpretations of Kafka's words with us at the recently renovated Café Arco – where Kafka used to meet with his friends. This summer, a century ago, Kafka was diagnosed with tuberculosis and had seven years to live before he died at the age of forty. But to the best of his abilities he very much lived in the present and in the city of Prague.

In which sense can Kafka's Prague become ours? And what do his words mean for us today?

Each participant will present a short text by Kafka, reflecting on the potentials of Kafka's words – between the indulgences of life in the city and the inevitability of his approaching death – to inspire and inform a philosophical idea or a work of art, illuminate our own dramatically changing world and even give us inspiration to resist injustices and violence. Walter Benjamin's observation in his essay on the tenth anniversary of Kafka's death from 1934 can serve as an initial model:

Kafka's entire work constitutes a code of gestures which surely had no definite symbolic meaning for the author from the outset; rather, the author tried to derive such a meaning from them in ever-changing contexts and experimental groupings. The theatre is the logical place for such groupings.

This is one of the many possible paths for reflecting on Kafka's texts in a broad range of creative/artistic, performative, philosophical, cultural, theological and ideological contexts, becoming inspired by these texts into unexpected and innovative constellations and encounters.

With presentations by: Andreas Kilcher, Ruthie Abeliovich, Ruth Kanner and Adi Meirovitch, Aida Bahrami, Bernhard Siebert, Walter Meierjohann

Interlocutors: Alan Read and Alan Street

Finale: Vera Koubova: Performative Walk with Kafka

Andreas Kilcher, "The Theatre of Writing: Kafka's Desk"

This introductory presentation will discuss the basic question of Kafka's own understanding of his writing as practice, as performance. In a series of diary entries, he reflects this symptomatically and tangibly by observing and describing his *writing desk* as the actual stage of his writing, while drawing a distinction between two desks: the one of the clerk and the one of the writer. Of special interest is the passage from December 24-25, 1910, where Kafka perceives of and reflects on his writing in an emphatic theatrical tableau. This may also lead to a more general understanding of the theatrical in his writing.

Bio:

Andreas Kilcher is Professor of Literature and Cultural Studies at the Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule (ETH) Zurich. His main fields of research are the relation between literature and knowledge, German-Jewish literature and culture, and Kabbalah and esotericism. Among his numerous publications are also several on Kafka as well as the Prague Jewish context.

Ruthie Abeliovich, "Listening with Kafka: The Sonic Imagination In-Between Words"

In one of his last stories “The Animal in the Synagogue” Franz Kafka introduces an undefined animal that dwells in the Thamühler synagogue and listens to its sounds. This story, written during his recuperative time in the sanatorium in Matliary in 1922, is the only one amongst many short stories Kafka’ wrote that is set in a recognizable Jewish world. My presentation will engage with Kafka’s depiction of the experiential dimension of listening to the Jewish sonority of the Synagogue. From Kafka’s short story I extract the affect of listening from the position of marten-like animal—as both listener and participant in the synagogue ceremony in order to interrogate listening as a social practice, and sound organization as dramatic constructs that generates cultural imaginations.

Bio:

Ruthie Abeliovich is a Postdoctoral fellow at the Martin Buber Society of Fellows at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Next year she will be joining the Theatre Department at Haifa University. Ruthie’s research focuses on sound and voice in theatre and Performance-art. She is currently completing a monograph devoted to theatrical manifestations of the Hebrew language during the interwar period.

Ruth Kanner and Adi Meirovitch, "*HIMALET/ESCAPE*: Playing with the Hebrew words of Franz Kafka"

If only it were enough to lay down one word and if it were possible to quit with the quiet realization, that that particular word was totally full of your very essence.

Franz Kafka, Diaries, 1910

'Himalet' /המלט/escape) is one of the words in a list, written in Kafka's handwriting which can be found in his Hebrew notebook – a thin blue notebook kept in the depths of the archive of the National Library in Jerusalem. Director Ruth Kanner and actress Adi Meirovitch of the Theatre Group will invite the participants of Kafka’s Wordscapes to taste some of these words, to learn the ancient echoes of the Hebrew language from Kafka’s notebook. The unexpected, dense vocabulary of the Hebrew Notebook constitutes a starting point for a short spoken word composition in which the actress Adi Meirovitch will create an interpretative arena for Kafka's world of Hebrew words, interweaving them with a fragment from the Octavo Notebook.

Bio:

Ruth Kanner is a creator of experimental theatre. The core of her work is theatrical research, conducted with her theatre group which is based in Tel Aviv. Ruth Kanner Theatre Group is a unique experimental theater team, specializing in adapting literary and documentary texts for the stage, using a variety of innovative Storytelling Theater and movement techniques. The group performs in Israel and worldwide – Wroclaw, Zagreb, Aberystwyth, London, New Delhi, New York, Cyprus, Frankfurt, Beijing and more. Besides the productions created with her group, Kanner is a guest director of Theatre X-Cai in Tokyo, Japan. Kanner is a Professor at the Department of Theater Arts of Tel Aviv University.

Bio:

Adi Meirovitch who is a graduate from the Department of Theatre Studies at Tel Aviv University is a member of the Ruth Kanner Theatre Group since 2004.

Aida Bahrami, " The Animal Avatar in Franz Kafka’s “Investigations of a Dog”
and Sadegh Hedayat’s “The Stray Dog”

To the primitive man, Bataille maintains, animals were not so different from human beings, indeed they were considered to be superior in their divine approximation to nature. In the modern age, our ability to observe the animal as a dynamic agent is often restored through a transgressive redefinition of the boundaries that separate the human from the animal.

My presentation revisits "Investigations of a Dog" and "The Stray Dog" to explore how Kafka and Hedayat utilize animal avatars in order to venture beyond the human/animal divide and enter the creative realm of textual animality. I draw upon various theories on what constitutes animality from philosophical, mythological, and virtual perspectives, with the aim of uncovering an agency that is both beastly and godly in an Aristotelian sense.

Bio:

Aida Bahrami is a PhD candidate in the Department of Theatre and Performance Studies at the University of Warwick. Her thesis undertakes an intertextual analysis of theatrical intersubjectivity in the writings of the Marquis de Sade and contemporary European theatre. Bahrami's research interests include: theatrical interpretations of the nonhuman, dramatic representations of the utopian/dystopian condition, and the agency of paradoxical discourse, among other themes.

Bernhard Siebert, "Seeing technology in the work and in the effect: Kafka, Quesne, and the ethics of showing artistic procedures"

In his diaries, Kafka takes notes on a play by Oskar Baum in which, in his words, "dramatic force can be seen in the work and in the effect as uninterruptedly as in the production of a living craftsman" (October 30, 1911). My presentation addresses this very idea of a certain visibility of the artistic techniques and the technologies – "in the work and in the effect" – when as Bojana Kunst claims, the vanishing dividing line between artistic work and the work itself needs to be rethought (Kunst 2015). It also addresses the ethical implications of this visibility (Adorno, Latour). This will be illustrated by Philippe Quesne's "Pièce pour la Technique du Schauspiel de Hanovre" (2011), whose protagonists are stage workers and theater machines, only to revisit Kafka's very own working with words: How can the literary procedure he applies be already regarded as theater?

Bio:

Bernhard Siebert works as a research assistant at the department for Applied Theater Studies in Giessen, Germany. He studied theater in Wien (A), Rennes (F), and Frankfurt (D), and worked in theater administration in Berlin (D) and Zurich (CH). He is currently working on a Ph.D. that contextualizes the use of stage machinery in contemporary theater and performance.

Walter Meierjohann

As I have directed *Kafka's Monkey* ("Ein Bericht für eine Akademie") in 2009, it makes a lot of sense for me to talk about another famous "artist story" by Kafka. I have always been fascinated how deep Kafka's understanding of the psyche of the performer is – and "A Hunger Artist" (Ein Hungerkünstler) is perhaps the most radical and upsetting story as it very clearly questions the relationship between the performer and his audience (and the impresario). Here, a performer is willing to starve himself to death, overlooking the signs of the times which have lost interest in this art form.

Bio:

Before joining HOME in 2013, Walter Meierjohann was the International Associate Director at the Young Vic in London

where his productions included the European premiere of *In the Red and Brown Water* by Tarell McCraney, and *Kafka's Monkey*, which toured to Sydney, Melbourne, Athens, Paris, Tokyo and New York. The production, which starred Kathryn Hunter, also showed in HOME's 2015 opening season, with Hunter reprising her lead role. At HOME, Walter has directed the inaugural production *The Funfair* (Simon Stephens/ Odon von Horvath), the first Christmas show *Inkheart* (Cornelia Funke), *The Emperor* (Colin Teevan/ Ryszard Kapusinski) a co-production between the Young Vic, HOME and Teatre de Luxembourg, and the site specific production of *Romeo and Juliet* in The Victoria Baths (Manchester)