

# Aesthetic Uses of Psychoanalysis in Theodor W. Adorno's 'Notes on Kafka'

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## Abstract

This article argues that for Theodor W. Adorno psychoanalysis illuminates the nature of literary interpretation. Particularly, Adorno's metacriticism defines the interpretative procedures of literature and some affinities between the aims of literary and psychoanalytic interpretations. However, his arguments do not rest on a 'top-down' analysis but on a 'bottom-up' one. So, this article also argues that Adorno's interest in Franz Kafka's oeuvre focuses on literary criticism and defends some theses on metacriticism. Nevertheless, for Adorno, interpreting literature implies switching the reader's attention from ordinary meaning understanding to aesthetic appreciation. In this respect, my article finally argues that what Adorno called (literary) 'gestures' works as the resource for metacriticism, analogous to Freudian slips.

**Keywords:** *Adorno, Freud, Kafka, metacriticism, mimetic interpretation*

## Preliminary Remarks

Theodor W. Adorno's 'Aufzeichnungen zu Kafka' ('Notes on Kafka'), originally published in 1953, has received somewhat excessive attention from many Adornian scholars worldwide in the last twenty years. Diverse interests have driven these approaches. Theologically oriented interpretations constitute part of these interests.<sup>1</sup> Others have looked for the sociological perspectives implied in Adorno's interpretation of Kafka's oeuvre.<sup>2</sup> Finally, a last group has focused on Adorno's Kafka beyond the typical Adornian themes.<sup>3</sup> This article, however, focuses on a relevant problem for the

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<sup>1</sup> See Margarete Kohlenbach, 'Critical Theory, Dialectical Theology: Adorno's Case against Hans-Joachim Schoeps', *German Life and Letters* 63.2 (2010): 146-65; Matt F. Connell, 'Through the Eye of an Artificial Angel: Secular Theology in Theodor W. Adorno's Freud-Marxist Reading of Kafka and Walter Benjamin' in *Trajectories of Mysticism in Theory and Literature*, ed. Philip Leonard (London: Macmillan, 2000), 198-218; Roger Foster, 'Adorno on Kafka: Interpreting the Grimace on the Face of Truth', *New German Critique* 40.1 (2013): 175-98; Sebastian Truskolaski, 'Inverse Theology: Adorno, Benjamin, Kafka', *German Life and Letters* 70.2 (2017): 192-210; Stanley Corngold, 'Notes on Kafka: A Critical Reconstruction', *Monatshefte* 1.94 (2002): 24-42.

<sup>2</sup> See Daglind E. Sonolet, 'Literature and Modernity: Günther Anders, Hannah Arendt, and Theodor W. Adorno – Interpreters of Kafka', in *Bourdieu in Question: New Directions in French Sociology of Art*, ed. Jeffrey A. Halley and Daglind E. Sonolet (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2017), 426-41.

<sup>3</sup> See Anthony Phelan, 'Critical Theory', in *Kafka in Context* ed. Carolin Duttlinger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 267-74; Pedro Savi Neto, 'Obra de arte e filosofia: uma leitura de Franz Kafka a partir de Theodor Adorno', *Revista de Ciências Humanas* 51.1 (2017): 3-20; Antonio Valentini,

metacriticism, the role of psychoanalysis in literary criticism. Adorno's main intention behind the most obvious surface of his essay was to contend with Hans-Joachim Schoeps's theses on Kafka's literature. Most of his readers, however, have limited Adorno's arguments against Schoeps to thematic aspects. According to Adorno, Kafka's oeuvre deserves not a theological approach but a sociological one.

Nevertheless, 'Notes on Kafka' also tries to showcase the relevance of some specific literature to metacriticism;<sup>4</sup> namely, literature has to do not only with specific social issues of human interest but also with the ways authors write literature as well as the diverse ways by which readers interpret literary texts. Consequently, for him, literature has to do with other forms of rationality. Particularly, Adorno argued that, given certain affinities between Kafka's works and Freudian themes, interpreting dreams and parapraxes is a theoretical model for interpreting literary texts. However, a problem easily arises: the force of those analogies is not enough to immediately produce some conceptual transition from psychoanalytic interpretations to literary criticism. Adorno was very much aware of that because he actually attributed to Kafka's literature an enigmatic character (*Rätselcharakter*), which involves a clear gap between communicative everyday speech and literature. In consequence, a hinge element was necessary in order to approach literature from a psychoanalytic perspective. His response was what he called 'gestures'. By 'gesture', 'Notes on Kafka' means literary (and fictional) descriptions which are not reducible to thematic unities just as the psychoanalytic value of parapraxes is not reducible to semantic and syntactic dimensions of everyday speech (coherence and cohesion). Accordingly, this article aims to set out in clear terms Adorno's introduction of psychoanalysis into his metacritical perspective, the problems that have arisen, and, finally, Adorno's response. In each stage, some critical comments will be introduced.

## Adorno's Kafka and Psychoanalysis

'Notes on Kafka', originally published in 1953, aimed to discuss Hans-Joachim Schoeps's theological theses on Kafka in a veiled way. More specifically, Schoeps published one of his theologically oriented essays two years before Adorno's *prima facie* sociological approach to Kafka in the same journal, namely *Die neue Rundschau*.<sup>5</sup> Thus, Adorno gave some responses to theological interpretations of Kafka by publishing his 'Notes'. Indeed, although he used the term 'existentialism' to refer to the dominant readings of Kafka's literature at the beginning of his essay, Adorno meant not the so defined existentialists (Camus, Sartre, de Beauvoir, Merleau-Ponty, etc.) but particularly Schoeps's ideas on Kafka. From a present point of view, Schoeps could be seen as an unknown literary critic and intellectual; however, he was one of the first greatest editors of Kafka's writings along with Max Brod. It made sense for Adorno to contend with theological ideas in general by

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'Tra Benjamin e Adorno: il valore testimoniale del realismo di Kafka', *Aisthesis* 2.2 (2010); Fabio Bartoli, 'Adorno sobre Kafka. ¿Una lectura ilustrada?', *Tópicos* 65 (2022): 141-51; Léa Veinstein, 'Kafka photographe Le négatif et l'inversion dans les Réflexions sur Kafka d'Adorno', *Les Cahiers philosophiques de Strasbourg* 1.33 (2013): 179-95; Mario Farina, *Adorno's Aesthetics as a Literary Theory of Art* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 181; Timm Steenbock, *Kafka bei Adorno und Benjamin: Versuch über eine hermeneutische Konstellation* (Hamburg: Diplomica Verlag, 2014), 49.

<sup>4</sup> 'Metacriticism' means here a specific domain in the philosophy of literature, which wonders about the aim of literary interpretation, the principles of interpretative reasoning, and the criteria for the right interpretations. See Peter Lamarque, 'Appreciation and Literary Interpretation', in *Is There a Single Right Interpretation?*, ed. Michael Krausz (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania University Press, 2002), 285.

<sup>5</sup> Kohlenbach, 147.

questioning their major intellectual representative. Here are the central anti-thesis and thesis by Adorno against Schoeps's perspectives:

It is National Socialism far more than the hidden dominion of God that his work cites [Kafka's works]. Dialectical theology fails in its attempt to appropriate him [Kafka] not merely because of the mythical character of the powers at work [...] but also because in Kafka [...] ambiguity and obscurity are attributed [...] to human beings and to the conditions in which they live.<sup>6</sup>

The idea attributed to Schoeps was that the castle's literary description in the eponymous novel symbolically refers to God, allegedly limiting Kafka's scope from socio-political circumstances to theological themes. Nevertheless, to some extent, Adorno's comments on dialectical theology are, *prima facie*, misguided because

For those who still manage to use the word 'God', the absence of God coincides with the view that human society is in great trouble. In principle, dialectical theological readings of Kafka can accommodate the social critique inherent in Kafka's depiction of power and they can do so without having to dismiss, as Adorno does, Kafka's engagements with religion as irrelevant to his work.<sup>7</sup>

The entire debate on Adorno's questions to Schoeps reduces their scope to sociology and theological perspectives. Kohlenbach reasonably called into question the alleged mutual exclusion of these two domains laid out by Adorno since Schoeps did not advance an interpretation of Kafka's oeuvre in theological terms without mentioning social circumstances. On the contrary, Kohlenbach offered enough evidence to point out the Adornian hermeneutic biases. However, either way, contemporary readings of the 'Notes on Kafka' restrict the interpretative elements to these combinations: (a) a sociological reading, (b) a theological reading, and (c) an interwoven perspective between (a) and (b). This way, the whole discussion revolves around thematic divergences or complementarities. Three problems arise, though. The first is the plurality of perspectives involved in the Adornian conception of sociology not analyzed by scholars. The second problem is not recognizing other disciplinary dimensions introduced by Adorno in his interpretation of Kafka. The third is limiting the debate to thematic aspects of Kafka's literature, leaving aside what is more characteristic of his literary texts, namely how he wrote prose and how readers interpret it. Several Adornian paragraphs treat some almost immediate connections between Kafka's literature and the socio-political context, so focusing this dispute on theological or sociological motives makes sense anyway. Like many others, Adorno read *The Castle* and *The Trial* as images of totalitarianism. The sixth paragraph of 'Notes on Kafka' perfectly matches George Steiner's remarks on Kafka's historical potentials, where the latter said that a 'concrete fulfillment of augury, of detailed clairvoyance, attaches to his seeming fantastications'<sup>8</sup> Both intellectuals attributed to Kafka some 'clairvoyance' powers concerning the European Thirties.

However, instead of reducing Kafka to discussions on theology or sociology, Adorno accorded significant importance to psychoanalysis in his interpretation of Kafka. For him, there are many affinities between Freudian themes and those by Kafka. Moreover, Adorno pointed out some analogies between the alleged ways by which Kafka

<sup>6</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, 'Notes on Kafka', trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber, in *Prisms* (Cambridge: the MIT Press, 1988), 259. Hereafter *NK* with page references in the text.

<sup>7</sup> Kohlenbach, 153.

<sup>8</sup> George Steiner, 'A Note on Kafka's "Trial"', in *No Passion Spent: Essays 1978-1995* (London: Yale University Press, 1996), 252.

interpreted dreams and how readers interpret his literary works: (i) ‘The attitude that Kafka assumes towards dreams should be the reader’s towards Kafka. He should dwell on the incommensurable, opaque details, the blind spots’ (NK, 248). Likewise, Adorno advanced three remarks on the role of dreams and *déjà vu* in Kafka’s writing procedures: (ii) ‘Kafka himself interrupted *The Trial* at a decisive point with a dream [...] and by contrast confirmed the reality of everything else’; (iii) Freud is ‘thinking of psychic phenomena parapraxes, dreams and neurotic symptoms. Kafka sins against an ancient rule of the game by constructing art out of nothing but the refuse of reality’; (iv) ‘The permanent *déjà vu* is the *déjà vu* of all. This is the source of Kafka’s success, which becomes betrayal only when the universal is distilled from his writings and the labours of deadly seclusion avoided’. (NK, 248; 251) And finally, concerning thematic convergences between Kafka and Freud, Adorno stated that: (v) ‘In their conception of hierarchy, Kafka and Freud are hardly to be distinguished’; (vi) ‘Kafka, disparager of psychology, is abundantly rich in psychological insights, such as that into the relation between instinctual and obsessive personality’; (vii) ‘Is there anyone who has lived in boarding houses and has not felt himself observed by the neighbors in precisely the same manner?’; and (viii) ‘Personality is transformed from something substantial into a mere organizational principle of somatic impulses. In Freud, as in Kafka, the validity of the soul is excluded’. (NK, 250; 248; 249; 251)

Two remarks follow from these fragments. Firstly, passages from (i) to (iv) exclude any attempt to reduce Adornian theses on Kafka to thematic disjunctions. Indeed, (i-iv) points at analogical interpretative procedures between the psychoanalytic treatment of dreams (and parapraxes) and reading literature, on the one hand, and Kafka’s productive procedures on the other. Secondly, those fragments from (v) to (viii) are far beyond the sociological and theological dimensions. These remarks, however, merely add two problems to the philosophy of literature. On the philological level, it is clear that ‘Notes on Kafka’ not only works on sociological and theological themes. On the philosophical one, no matter what Kafka’s themes are, analogies between psychoanalysis and literary interpretations are not obvious. Are psychoanalytic interpretations analogical models for literary interpretations? Can we immediately read those psychoanalytic themes in Kafka’s literature? Before considering these questions, some comments on those fragments (i-viii) are necessary.

Fragments (i-iv) establish some analogy between literature and psychoanalytic interpretations. Actually, that common Adornian expression from (iii), i.e., ‘refuse’, was used by Sigmund Freud in his essay on the Moses of Michelangelo when he mentioned Giovanni Morelli, a famous art critic. For Freud, Morelli’s method for distinguishing forgeries from originals ‘is closely related to the technique of psychoanalysis. It, too, is accustomed to divine secret and concealed things from despised or unnoticed features, from the rubbish heap [*refuse*], as it were, of our observations’.<sup>9</sup> By defining ‘refuse’, parapraxes and dreams become worthy of psychoanalytic interpretation. Therefore, to some extent, Adorno suggested that Kafka’s literature is also worthy of interpretation because of his thematic materials as much as because of his ways of writing. Of course, an immediate question arises again: which are the literary parapraxes? Are they the same as everyday speech? Fragments from (v) to (viii) establish at least four themes from

<sup>9</sup> Sigmund Freud, ‘The Moses of Michelangelo’, in *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1989), 530. That detail on refuse is only obvious in the German edition: Sigmund Freud, ‘Der Moses Michelangelo’, in *Sigmund Freud Gesammelte Werke X. Werke aus den Jahren 1913-1917*, ed. Anna Freud (London: Imago Publishing, 1949), 185.

Freud's writings. The first was central to *Totem and Taboo*, namely hierarchical social relations. For Adorno, *The Castle* is full of thematic explorations of asymmetrical human interactions, particularly among officials from the castle and common people from the village.

In fact, fragment (vi) is related to (v) because the rich psychological Kafkean knowledge is based, for Adorno, on brief episodes like that of Amalia, Barnabas's daughter, and Sortini, a castle's official, in *The Castle*. In the novel, the castle donates a fire pump to the village and asks Sortini to watch it while the officials and inhabitants celebrate at the firefighters' party. Sortini's behavior takes the castle's order to such an extent, however, that he never abandons his position. *The Castle* even emphasizes the mental sense of 'abandon' since it refers not only to his physical position, i.e., literally *bei der Spritz* (beside the fire pump), but also to his duty mentally. Amalia's apparition confirms that because, according to the narrator, Sortini immediately got irritated by the *distraction*.<sup>10</sup> Adorno infers that Kafka is 'rich' in psychological intuitions, arguing that Sortini's ways of respecting his duty constitute a typical case of neurotic character. Sortini's disrespectful letter to Amalia and his obedience to the castle have the same psychological source.<sup>11</sup> In consequence, censoring pleasure and fantasy, following the superiors' orders obsessively, and reacting scornfully to the sources of pleasure and displeasure are all features of the authoritarian personality. For its part, fragment (vii) is on a succession of passages from *The Trial*.

'The Arrest', the first chapter of *The Trial*, describes an 'old woman who lived opposite watching with, for her, quite unusual curiosity'.<sup>12</sup> In the beginning, strange things happen to Josef K., for example, that old woman watching him from the opposite window while he is arrested or the breakfast that never came. Seven times *The Trial's* narrator introduces descriptions of that woman without any apparent connection between the central storyline development and the woman's incursion. For Adorno, however, these no-sense descriptions have to do with any of us 'who lived in boarding houses and [...] felt [...] observed by the neighbours in precisely the same manner' (NK, 249), which, in turn, has to do with not knowing the arrest's motives and introducing some paranoid atmosphere. To some extent, and in line with those remarks by Steiner, Adorno suggested that paranoia is part of totalitarian societies. It is not an individual psychological projection from the reader's mind into the novel but a specular image of a collective tendency that the reader faces reading Kafka.

Finally, fragment (viii) involves a subtle connection between interpreting literature and thematic convergence. The main idea is that Freud imploded the notion of personality or personal identity by questioning the transparency and unity of consciousness. Adorno extended that to Kafka's oeuvre since certain narrative qualities would produce experiences irreducible to conscious processes.

Some perspectives in the philosophy of literature can provide conceptual support for those complex affinities and analogies. Also, some literary theories centered their procedures on psychoanalytical theses. Robert Stecker's philosophy of literary interpretation is a clear case of the first. For Stecker, in 'the case of literary works, the meaning of a work [...] is identical to its utterance meaning. Utterance meaning specifies what someone has said or done by using language on a particular occasion'.<sup>13</sup> According

<sup>10</sup> Franz Kafka, *The Castle*, trans. Anthea Bell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 168.

<sup>11</sup> Actually, the reader can infer some kind of sexual proposal.

<sup>12</sup> Franz Kafka, *The Trial*, trans. Mike Mitchell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 5.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Stecker, *Interpretation and Construction: Art, Speech, and the Law* (Malden: Wiley, 2003), 59.

to him, the ‘occasion for literary works is the presentation of the work normally by means of publication’.<sup>14</sup> If literary writings work as everyday speech utterances, why should we not consider them sophisticated forms of everyday speech, as if they could produce parapraxes? Literary works, for Stecker, are not essentially different, after all, from any other discursive form which could manifest unconscious events through parapraxes or dream narrations. However, that translation from everyday speech to literature seems arbitrary for many reasons. The first one concerns the concept of ‘particular occasion’ because why not establish any stage of elaboration as a particular occasion instead of the publication? At least for most masterpieces, the time spent in their production is hardly reducible to the normal time spent in conversational utterances: usually, determining the utterance meaning in everyday speech seems clearer than determining the utterance meaning of a long text that may have gone through several editions (therefore, diverse decisions) over time. This first problem is what Noël Carroll called ‘linguistic fallacy’, consisting of thinking about art’s meaning as if it were capable of merely linguistic analysis.<sup>15</sup> The second problem is that even assuming the same nature between everyday speech and literature, one can wonder if the rules we follow when reading literature are identical to those in clinical practices.

This leads to some examples of literary criticism that apply ‘psychoanalytic models’ to literary texts. Maybe the clearest case is that by Meredith Anne Skura. According to her, literary criticism ‘ultimately derive[s], whether explicitly or not, from different aspects of the psychoanalytic process’.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, she understood that the most interesting implementation of psychoanalysis into literature is not theoretical but practical. In this sense, she said, ‘I am interested in psychoanalysis not so much for what it reveals about human nature, or even about the particular human being presently on the couch, but for the way in which it reveals anything at all’.<sup>17</sup> Some so-called ‘models’ are applied to read literature. So, for example, there would be, some relevant convergences between dreams and literature: ‘there is a common connection between dreams and certain kinds of literature that insist, like the dream, on a gap between what the text seems to mean and the deeper meaning it seems to imply’.<sup>18</sup> Literary texts and dreams’ major convergence consists in containing some kind of ‘meaning’ in a hidden way. Therefore, literary and psychoanalytic procedures would consist in discovering those concealed meanings. Likewise, Elizabeth Wright pointed out the importance of dream analysis to aesthetic matters: ‘All the arts deal in illusion and Freud’s exploration of the ruses and stratagems of the psyche is of immediate relevance to aesthetic experience, at the level of both the medium (the sounds and colours of the dream) and its interpretation’.<sup>19</sup> Her main metaphor for the relationship between the text and the reader is the following: ‘Readers do not only work on texts, but texts work on readers, and this involves a complex double dialectic of two bodies inscribed in language’.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Stecker, 59.

<sup>15</sup> Noël Carroll, ‘Art Interpretation The 2010 Richard Wollheim Memorial Lecture’, *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 51.2 (2011): 121.

<sup>16</sup> Meredith A. Skura, *The Literary Use of Psychoanalytic Process* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 5.

<sup>17</sup> Skura, 5.

<sup>18</sup> Skura, 149.

<sup>19</sup> Elizabeth Wright, *Psychoanalytic Criticism: A Reappraisal* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 17.

<sup>20</sup> Wright, 16.

Again, two questions emerge: should we read those themes mentioned by Adorno, Skura, and Wright the same way, regardless of whether they are literarily elaborated? Are the literary and psychoanalytic procedures identical? Adorno's response was clearly, 'No'. His interest in Kafka's literature concerned how some socio-political (and also theological) relevant themes. Inasmuch as Adorno recognized an 'enigmatic character' in Kafka's *oeuvre*, thematic commonalities are not suitable for claiming some psychoanalytic powers in literature. This way, fictionality (implied by Kafka's enigmatic character) undermines inferences from juxtapositions between textual information and psychoanalytical concepts to those textual literary qualities. Literary features, then, are not reducible, according to Adorno, to everyday speech's communicative characteristics or textual meanings. Thus, Adorno needed to put forward at least one literary element whose similarity with parapraxes concerning everyday speech and personal narratives could allow some adaptation of Freud's conclusions to literary interpretations. The solution was his notion of *gesture*. The next section precisely suggests some remarks on enigma, fictionality, and gesture.

## Enigma and Gesture

Adorno used the word 'enigma' at the beginning of 'Notes on Kafka' when he said that the popularity of Kafka's literature is the main factor behind hesitating whether to add another opinion on Kafka: 'Yet it is just this false renown, fatal variant of the oblivion which Kafka so bitterly desired for himself, that compels one to dwell on the *enigma*.' (NK, 245, my emphasis) There is a certain opposition then between an enigmatic character and seriousness, but what do 'enigmatic' and 'seriousness' mean in that context? The enigmatic character of literary works, for which Kafka's pieces are exemplary, designates the role of aesthetic problems in literary interpretations. In other words, the enigmatic nature of literary narratives is precisely the challenging switch from the principles of traditional cognitive practices and everyday comprehension to literary dispositions and principles. Let us consider then the notion of *enigma*, according to *Aesthetic Theory*. There are three ways by which Adorno defines that notion. The first is by employing metaphors; the second is by analyzing the conceptual relationship between comprehension and the aesthetic experience; and finally, by mentioning music as an exemplary case of enigmatic art. Due to space constraints, I only analyze the first, which is the most relevant to my demonstration.

The first way Adorno defined *enigma* is metaphorical: he used visual, spatial, and verbal metaphors, i.e., *literary works are entities that manifest and vanish, spaces that can be entered and exited, and literary works are talking entities*. Although these expressions take a propositional aspect, that theory conventionally understands them as expressions of mapped conceptual domains. In other words, there are 'ontological correspondences' between the properties of two domains, in this case between literary artworks and *visual comprehension, go in and go out, and finally speak and be silent*.<sup>21</sup> Using these metaphors, Adorno defined his notion of 'enigma', making some correspondences among different conceptual domains. An example for the first group is: 'if one participates in its immanent completion, this enigmaticalness makes itself

<sup>21</sup> See George Lakoff, 'Contemporary Theory of Metaphor', in *Metaphor and Thought*, ed. Andrew Ortony (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 207.

invisible'.<sup>22</sup> For its part, an example for the second group is: 'if one steps outside the work, breaking the contract with its immanent context, this enigmaticalness returns like a spirit.' (AE, 120) And an example for the last group is: 'That artworks say something and in the same breath conceal it expresses this enigmaticalness from the perspective of language.' (AE, 120)

According to the second fragment, through his metaphor, Adorno understood not merely spatial but practical movements. The aesthetic experience implies tacitly signing a contract or, in other words, knowing and following specific rules. If one does not follow these particular aesthetic rules; namely, in that fragment 'spirit' has to do with linguistic consciousness, which implies, in turn, that artworks can be thought literally or also translated. There is no particular conceptual obstacle to approaching a literary work's content, but it is clear to Adorno that that is not the game of literature.

The last fragment emphasizes the second. Translating what a literary work 'says' is more than possible; it is a necessary practice for the market because the public requires some general and basic information on fiction (audiovisual or textual) when buying tickets or books. However, taking that as a rule established by literary practice is a mistake. Again, it is possible to interpret literary works by translating contents literally but doing this dissolves how that work concretely presents its themes. Contents, then, are concretely perspectived according to the aesthetic 'contract', which demands that the reader pays special attention to these perspectivations or saliences. Finally, the first fragment involves switching the rules at play and a notion of *immanent connection* (*Immanenzzusammenhang*), which introduces a criterion for defining the literary work's meaningfulness. Accepting the challenge of literature requires a focus on the diverse connections among the elements within a literary work; also, the aesthetic experience is not reducible to each element in that plexus of descriptions. As Ricardo Ibarlucía points out, the visual model behind that metaphor is the *Vexierbild* – picture puzzle - whose most famous example is Arcimboldo's paintings.<sup>23</sup>

Keeping these fragments in mind, it is clear that Adorno could not agree with the immediate applications of psychoanalysis to literature. This way, Skura's and Wright's approaches to literary narratives are inconsistent with Adorno's theses. However, at the same time, his 'Notes on Kafka' explicitly mentions affinities, namely those on dreams, *déjà vu*, hierarchies, personal identity, and *refuse*. The obvious hypothesis is that Adorno contradicted his notion of fictionality involved in his notion of enigma. This hypothesis, however, is false. His theoretical challenge was recognizing a literary element whose analytic capabilities made it possible to extend psychoanalytic resources to literary interpretations. So, literary *refuse* gained a place in Adorno's literary theory. Since literary meaning has to do with aesthetic appreciation, i.e., following rules other than those of philosophy or psychoanalysis, looking for parapraxes immediately in literary works was a metacritical mistake. The only way, then, to recognize psychoanalytic powers in literature is by respecting the contract literature obliges us to follow.

This way, Adorno's challenge was translating into terms of criticism the notion of *refuse*. By speaking of *configurations*, his thesis on literary refuses tacitly implied a principle of *literary functionality*. The succession of descriptions of events in a narrative piece forces the reader to recognize the role that some details play in the global thematic

<sup>22</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann (London: Continuum, 2002), 120. Hereafter AE with page references in the text.

<sup>23</sup> Ricardo Ibarlucía, *Belleza sin aura. Surrealismo y teoría del arte en Walter Benjamin* (Bs. As.: Miño y Dávila, 2020), 136.



construction of the piece. In consequence, each literary detail has a specific function, according to the aesthetic saliences imputed by an interpretation.<sup>24</sup> The reader's expectations seek the recognition of global thematic unities. However, modernist literary works seem to undermine the possibility of reducing complex narrative successions into clear and simple thematic unities, as if, for example, Kafka's works were specular images of theological, sociological, or even psychoanalytic ideas. Adorno uses 'gestures' to refer to textual features irreducible to thematic unities, namely the specific psychoanalytic refuse of literature. Gestures, then, are dependent on the so-called 'configurations' interpretatively imputed to a literary piece. More specifically, Adorno said that: (i) 'sedimented in the gestures will eventually have to be followed by interpretation, one which recognizes in their mimesis a universal which has been repressed by sound common sense'; (ii) 'covered over by signification. The most recent state of a language that wells up in the mouths of sober diction tirelessly opposes, compels him to invert the historical relation of concept and gesture'; (iii) 'pre-linguistic that eludes all intention upsets the ambiguity, which like a disease, has eaten into all signification in Kafka' (iv); and 'momentaneous brought to a standstill' (NK, 249).

An example of a gesture given by Adorno is that of the old woman watching Josef K. from the opposite window. There are then two senses of gesture binding psychoanalytic and literary dimensions. Firstly, these fictional gestures are read simpliciter as real objects of psychoanalytic interest, i.e., the old woman's gaze. Secondly, that example goes toward irreducible fictional information: the interpretations cannot easily attribute to it some clear functions in the development of the general narration. According to Adorno, the double nature of Kafka's fictional gestures approaches his novels to Freudian memory traces, particularly collective ones, like individual dreams and parapraxes responding to collective processes. Those fragments (i) to (iv) presuppose the Freudian theses on Moses and Monotheism, which involved a polemic engagement with a Lamarckian conception of phylogenesis, somewhat inconsistent with Adornian theses. As Peter Schäfer pointed out, the 'main problem with Freud's reconstruction is, as he himself recognizes, the transference of concepts from individual to mass psychology',<sup>25</sup> or, in other words, 'the question of how forgotten or repressed elements are kept alive not just over centuries but over millennia, exerting an on-going influence on people's lives'.<sup>26</sup> Introducing a concept of collective memory traces tries to solve that problem; however, the non-developed character of a collective memory trace makes it entirely difficult to accept the transition from individual to mass psychology.<sup>27</sup> This way, Adorno faced two main problems: a fundamental one concerning the socio-historical value of literature as a memory trace and the other concerning the autonomous character of literature, which blocks any attempt to infer socio-historical remarks from literary narrative fiction immediately. Adorno's solution, however, consisted in precisely pointing out literary interpretation as a collective activity. By interpreting literature as a collective activity, Adorno claimed the recognition of social blind spots or, as he put it,

<sup>24</sup> 'Saliency' means all those prominent features of a work that capture the attention of the reader and play a key role in producing interpretations. See Michael Krausz, *Rightness and Reasons: Interpretation in Cultural Practices* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press), 23.

<sup>25</sup> Peter Schäfer, 'The Triumph of Pure Spirituality: Sigmund Freud's Moses and Monotheism', in *New Perspectives on Freud's 'Moses and Monotheism'*, ed. Ruth Ginsburg and Ilana Pardes (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 2006), 26.

<sup>26</sup> Schäfer, 26.

<sup>27</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism: An Outline of Psychoanalysis and Other Works. Volume XXIII (1937-1939)*, ed. James Strachey and Anna Freud (London: The Hogarth Press, 1981), 93.

‘incommensurable opaque details’. (NK, 247) Gestures, these incommensurable details, are socially read by interpreting Kafka’s literature. This way, literature becomes the collective trace of social problems because literary blind spots (fictional details irreducible to a storyline) allow the emergence of social traumas.

The old woman watching Josef K. as much as the episode of Sortini and Amalia are cases of gestures because their traces become manifest only by interpreting their contrasting role with the storylines; they are irreducible to their corresponding dominant plots but, at the same time, they illuminate the plots. Accordingly, for example, the necklace Olga gave Amalia does not seem to play any role in the development of chapter seventeenth in *The Castle*. However, a definite description of Amalia ultimately provides insights into the earlier one. Therefore, the earlier association of the necklace with her father’s expectations concerning a fiancé takes a completely different aspect at the end of the chapter. We can read from Olga’s narration: ‘The letter was from Sortini addressed to the girl with the garnet necklace. I can’t repeat the contents [...] The letter was couched in the vilest language, such as I had never heard, and I could only half guess its meaning from the context’.<sup>28</sup> While the initial expectations were derisively associated with a traditional institution (a marriage), the contrasting final showcases hierarchical asymmetries and gender-based violence: Amalia is not ‘Amalia’ through Sortini’s eyes but only a cosified girl with a garnet necklace. What is expected, then, when the necklace appears for the second time is turned completely upside down by the shocking switch from a fiancé to a disrespectful sexual proposal.<sup>29</sup>

So explained, the blind spots in *The Castle* work analogously to parapaxes for psychoanalytic elaborations. Interpreting the garnet necklace discovers what Adorno called in the fragment (ii) on gestures an *experience* ‘covered by signification’; in this case, ‘signification’ means the thematic unity of the chapter seventeenth’s general storyline of *The Castle* as well as the most obvious conceptual reader’s expectations. Therefore, literary gestures, as interpreting parapaxes, produce insights into some themes already mentioned, namely gender-based violence, authoritarianism, xenophobia, etc. Adorno, however, did not interpret these themes by immediately analyzing those characters as if they were real persons exerting violence against each other. On the contrary, Adorno’s procedures consist in recognizing the possible roles of mysterious fictional descriptions in Kafka’s works. In this sense, Kafka’s ‘attitude towards dreams’ to illuminate literary interpretations is just an analogy that Adorno advanced to recognize instances of literary and fictional *refuses*. Once the scope of that analogy is established, those fragments from (ii) to (viii) become clearer.<sup>30</sup> Kafka’s ‘Ein Traum’ was not a part of *The Trial*; however, Adorno’s point remains intact. Sometimes, certain anomalous literary fragments illuminate the entire aesthetic meaning of a work. Fragment (iii) is nothing more than the paraphrase of fragment (i) since Kafka’s literature contains blind spots (refuse) just as parapaxes are part of everyday speech. Fragment (iv) is a justification for fragments (i-iii). If *déjà vu* are ‘unconscious phantasies’,<sup>31</sup> Kafka’s

<sup>28</sup> Kafka, *The Castle*, 248.

<sup>29</sup> Adorno did not say anything clear about this episode of *The Castle*; however, some pages below he wrote: ‘In the suspension of its rules, patriarchal society reveals its true secret, that of direct, barbaric oppression. Women are reified as mere means to an end: as sexual objects and as connections’. (NK, 262) Precisely, Amalia is reified as mere sexual object by Sortini.

<sup>30</sup> Needless to say that fragment (i) precisely establishes the analogy.

<sup>31</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, ed. James Strachey, Alix Strachey, and Anna Freud (London: The Hogarth Press, 1981), 266.

gestures confront the reader with shared latent processes of the mind; however, readers do not realize these processes immediately but precisely by the specific ways a literary fiction is read. In other words, reading Kafka's works as if it were everyday speech, theology, sociology, or even psychoanalysis undermines its cognitive powers. Remarks from fragments (v) y (vi) are then examples of gestures or incommensurable details, not a psychoanalysis of the old woman's and Sortini's minds. Our conclusions on paranoia or gender-based violence follow from literary functional analysis, not an immediate psychoanalytic one. Fragment (vii) is the abstract formulation of experiencing gestures. Adorno wondered if anyone ever didn't feel like being seen by neighbors from the window across the street. The anomalous descriptions of the old woman produce a curious and concrete experience in readers as much as the contrast between a fiancé and a violent man.

Finally, 'personality is transformed' (fragment (viii)) from a unitary substance 'into a mere organizational principle of somatic impulses' (NK, 251) because, following the analogy of dreams, literary parapraxes make the readers conscious of being also constituted by blind spots. Concerning the epistemic status of dreams, Freud wrote that: 'what in the opinion of our authorities is supposed to be an arbitrary improvisation, concocted when at a loss, we have been treating like a sacred text';<sup>32</sup> he called this an apparent 'contradiction'. However, Freud's famous response consisted in discovering valuable patterns in the narrator's distortions associated with the resistance to his blind spots:

If the account of a dream appears difficult for me to understand at first, I ask its narrator to repeat it. He rarely does so in the same words. But the passages where he has altered his narrative are the ones revealed to me as the weak spots in the dream's disguise [...]. The narrator has been warned that I intend to take particular care in solving the dream; so under the pressure of resistance, he quickly protects the weak spots in the dream's disguise by replacing a revealing expression by one more remote. In this way he draws my attention to the expression he has dropped. From the trouble taken to defend the dream against being solved, I am able to infer how much care has gone into weaving the dream its cloak.<sup>33</sup>

Unconscious processes then become obvious to the analyst by virtue of the narrator's resistance. To some extent, and in analogy with dreams, Kafka's readers, from time to time, by reducing his literature to doctrinaire discourses, avoid confrontations with their own unconscious processes emerging from their encounters with literary parapraxes. Adorno's point is that Kafka's literature, like dreams to psychoanalysis, showcases the human unconscious, contradicting any substantial idea of the Ego. Thus, Adorno did not introduce psychoanalysis into the literary criticism by merely finding some thematic affinities. On the contrary, he suggested a more healthy aesthetic procedure: (i) recognizing the autonomous practice of literature and (ii) recognizing the resistances or blind spots of contemporary readers. Readers' resistance to some of Kafka's passages was, for Adorno, highly informative on repressed contemporary traumas. Therefore, the resistance to the specific literary contract Kafka obliges us to follow ties our gaze to social problems. That is the only way psychoanalysis could find a place in literary interpretations – specifically, through its procedures, rather than through the psychology of literary characters or authors

<sup>32</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. Joyce Crick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 334.

<sup>33</sup> Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 334.

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## **Utilizări estetice ale psihanalizei lui Theodor W. Adorno în 'Aufzeichnungen zu Kafka' [Note despre Kafka]**

Acest articol demonstrează că pentru Theodor W. Adorno psihanaliza clarifică natura interpretării literare. În mod particular, metacritica lui Adorno definește procedurile interpretative și stabilește câteva afinități între scopurile interpretărilor literare și psihanalitice. Însă argumentele lui nu se bazează pe o analiză de sus în jos, ci pe una de jos în sus. Așadar, articolul argumentează faptul că interesul lui Adorno pentru literatura lui Franz Kafka se bazează pe o polemică literară și pe apărarea unor teze ale metacriticii. Cu toate acestea, pentru Adorno, interpretarea literaturii înseamnă schimbarea atenției cititorului de la înțelesul ordinar al aprecierii estetice. În acest sens, articolul argumentează în cele din urmă că ceea ce Adorno a numit „gesturi” (literare) funcționează ca resursă analogă a metacriticii, similară unei scăpări freudiene.