

*Phantasms of the Mutated Body: Kafka's Critique of
Anthropocentric Reason*

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Abstract: This paper tries to propose an interpretation of Kafka's *Die Sorge des Hausvaters* and of the strange creature called Odradek. This useless, meaningless being that is part wooden spool, part human recalls the Dadaist practices and manifestos. One can easily see Odradek as a liberated senseless object and one can even detect a certain Dadaist humor of the useless machine in his figuration, even if Kafka rejected the dada movement: "Dada is – a crime [...] The spine of the soul has been broken. Faith has collapsed." More than this, even if in Odradek one can see a critical perspective on capitalism, Kafka's creature pushes at an extreme point the reflection on human and the non-human. This paper uses Bruno Latour and Jacques Derrida's views in order to better understand all the complex significations Odradek can assume in a critical discourse.

Keywords: Kafka, Odradek, dada, body, anthropocentric reason.

The idea that he is likely to survive me I find almost painful.
Kafka, *Odradek*

Imagine yourself leaving your apartment and meeting a strange being lurking in your hallway. It resembles a spool for thread and is made of pieces of wood that are patched together so that it can stand upright "as if on two legs." It can also move by rolling down the stairs and it periodically disappears but always comes back. Extraordinarily nimble, the creature escapes closer scrutiny. Strangely, it makes you feel inclined to speak to it as

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if to a child and when you ask questions, it gives short and polite answers. Undoubtedly, you have already identified Kafka's famous creature Odradek.

Written between 1914 and 1917, that is, shortly before the publication of Tzara's *Dadaist Manifesto*, Kafka's *Die Sorge des Hausvaters* tells the story of this useless, meaningless being that is part wooden spool, part human and calls himself Odradek. The narrator describes him as follows:

At first glance it looks like a flat star-shaped spool for thread, and indeed it does seem to have thread wound upon it; to be sure, they are only old, broken-off bits of thread, knotted and tangled together, of the most varied sorts and colors. But it is not only a spool, for a small wooden crossbar sticks out of the middle of the star, and another small rod is joined to that at a right angle. By means of this latter rod on one side and one of the points of the star on the other, the whole thing can stand upright as if on two legs. One is tempted to believe that the creature once had some sort of intelligible shape and is now only a broken-down remnant. Yet this does not seem to be the case; at least there is no sign of it; nowhere is there an unfinished or unbroken surface to suggest anything of the kind; the whole thing looks senseless enough, but in its own way perfectly finished. In any case, closer scrutiny is impossible, since Odradek is extraordinarily nimble and can never be laid hold of.

What or who is Odradek, this creature that defies all familiar categorization? "It" seems to have a gender because the narrator who is identified as a "family man" (*Hausvater*) identifies it as male. But how does he come to assume a male gender? From his own description the creature seems to defy any clear assignment of gender, which must lead us to assume that the assumption of Odradek's male gender is the family man's projection. He refers to Odradek as a creature or a thing or a "spool for thread," but only to insist that it is more than a thread. More importantly, the creature is alive, moves, speaks and even laughs, albeit with "the kind of laughter that has lungs behind it." From the perspective of an object-oriented ontology, Odradek certainly is "lively matter" but as matter it is also anthropomorphic or, inversely, as a humanoid, it is made of inorganic matter, that is, "dead wood." To the narrator "the whole thing looks senseless enough, but in its own way perfectly finished."

In the following, I will use this description of a senseless self-contained object for a reading of Odradek as a Dadaist object. This may seem strange given that Kafka wrote his story before the publication of Tzara's *Dadaist*

Manifesto and never identified himself with the movement that swept over Europe in the time after WWI. In fact, while Kafka was well aware of the huge impact of Dadaism at his time, he went out of his way to distance himself from the movement. In a recorded conversation about the controversies surrounding Dada, he issued the famous statement "Dada is – a crime." In the context of the conversation, his interlocutor invoked Dada as "a cultural and artistic disease." Kafka is reported as saying: "If Dada is diseased, even then it is only an outward symptom, nothing else. But you will not abolish the disease by isolating and suppressing the symptom. On the contrary, it will only become worse. [...] If there is to be a genuine improvement, you must go to the root of the diseased condition. Only then will the disfigurements resulting from the disorder disappear." Asked whether he considers "Dada as a mark of disease," Kafka replies: "Dada is – a crime [...] The spine of the soul has been broken. Faith has collapsed." (Janouch 1971, 165.)

In what follows, I will read Kafka's rather vehement defense against Dadaism as a defense against a threatening closeness he feels to some of the Dadaist aesthetic techniques. In particular, Kafka's work resonates with the Dadaist challenge to the boundaries of the human and with the movements' playful exploration of the precarity of human embodiment as well as the relationship between humans, animals and the emergent technological species. I see this closeness emerging from a particular *episteme* that both Kafka and the Dadaists respond to, albeit with very different aesthetic techniques. Foucault defines *episteme* as a range of common concerns that move across different cultural and disciplinary formations, that is, as a shared epistemological configuration at a particular time in history. Both the Dadaists and Kafka work in the shadow of WWI and the crisis of meaning in its wake. They share the rejection of realism and didactic art in favor of the dreamlike surreal or nonsensical; they delight in the abolition of logic and seek what Tzara calls the "interlacing of opposites and of all contradictions, grotesques, inconsistencies" (*Manifesto*); they celebrate the transgression of boundaries and the liberation of objects from their use value; they refuse the allegorical and allegorical readings; they seek the negation of the bourgeois family and of bourgeois life; and finally they practice a creative renewal of language etc.

And yet Kafka's use of the surreal and the fantastic in what I call phantasms of the mutated body differs radically from the Dadaist use of

experimental, willfully fabricated mutations of bodies. I will call Kafka's hybrids "humanimals" because, rather than a metamorphosis from human to insect, we witness in Gregor Samsa's case a transformation (*Verwandlung*) from a human to a human in an insect body or, in the case of *Report to the Academy*, from an Ape into an Ape that has been colonized as a human, that is, an "ape-man" (*Affenmensch*). I argue that the main difference between Dadaist figurations of surreal bodies and Kafka's mutant creatures resides precisely in relation to what Kafka called "the spine of the soul." I will attempt to trace Kafka's figuration of the human soul in stories of hybrid creatures that perform the transgression of the boundaries of the human. To support this argument, I will focus on two of Kafka's emblematic characters: Gregor Samsa and Odradek. Interestingly, Tristan Tzara's *Dada Manifesto* (1918) contains many resonances with Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1915). Written three years after the publication of Kafka's text, Tzara uses tropes of monstrosity and the merging of human and animal as well as the image of insects. Let art be "a monstrosity that frightens servile minds, and not sweetening to decorate the refectories of animals in human costume, illustrating the sad fable of mankind."

Note, however, that despite Tzara's defiant rhetoric and radical posture, Kafka's tale far exceeds the radicality of Dada rhetorically, aesthetically and epistemologically. Rather than imagining "animals in human costume," Kafka imagines not only the "human in animal costume" (the image of the woman/Venus in fur on the wall) but also the transformation of a human body into that of a magnified insect with a human mind." The monstrosity generated by this transformation pierces the very core of human ontologies and epistemologies and it generates an aesthetic that anticipates Surrealist explorations of dreamscapes and the unconscious. And to enhance the monstrosity, Kafka imagines a virtual mating scene between the Venus in Fur and Gregor the magnified bug when the latter crawls up the wall and glues itself onto the picture.

The manifesto also links the "negation of the family" to Dada:
 Every product of disgust capable of becoming a negation of the family is Dada; [...] **DADA**; abolition of logic, which is the dance of those impotent to create: **DADA**; of every social hierarchy and equation set up for the sake of values by our valets: **DADA**: [...] to spit out disagreeable or amorous ideas like a luminous waterfall, or coddle them – with the extreme satisfaction that it doesn't matter in the least –

with the same intensity in the thicket of core's soul pure of insects for blood well-born, and gilded with bodies of archangels. Freedom: **DADA DADA DADA**, a roaring of tense colors, and interlacing of opposites and of all contradictions, grotesques, inconsistencies.

According to Tzara's definition, Gregor Samsa as a "product of disgust capable of becoming a negation of the family" would incorporate the spirit of Dada. So would the "abolition of logic" and the subversion of realism from within Kafka's tale. As to the mysterious "soul pure of insects," Kafka portrays a human soul not purified of insects but literally captivated in the body of an insect. Interpreting Gregor Samsa in this way as a "surreal object" we could even say that his death at the end is an effect of "the spine of his soul being broken" ... to use the term Kafka used to describe the Dadaist crime.

So why then read the figure of Odradek as a Dadaist object? Perhaps the Dadaist obsession with what Hans Richter, the artist and filmmaker who helped start the Dadaist movement, called the "Invention of the Useless" provides the best entry point for such a reading (Hans Richter, 96). Dadaist artists delighted in the transformation of useful objects into useless ones in order to undermine the use value of objects and their instrumentalization for human use. "The Uselessness Effect shows us objects from what one might call their human side. It sets them free," writes Richter, "It was precisely because these things were useless that we found them moving and lyrical. The humor of the useless machine is Man Ray's discovery." (Richter, 96). Man Ray, moreover, set the goal for himself to "breathe ironic life into his inanimate surroundings" (Richter, 96). One can easily see Odradek as a liberated senseless object and one can even detect a certain Dadaist humor of the useless machine in his figuration. Richter concludes: "Objects are *beings*, like us, because they *are*." (Richter, 97).

With the figuration of Odradek, Kafka experiments with this animation of objects or, if you like, this object-oriented animism. With their notion of and artistic practice with animated objects, Dadaism and Kafka prefigured artistic and philosophical movements such as surrealist animism, the Neo-Dada Pop Art movement of the Sixties as well as the philosophical movements of Viveiros de Castro's and Bruno Latour's ecological animism and the object oriented ontology movement of the turn of the century that inspired, for example, Jane Bennet's concept of *vibrant matter*.

It is not surprising that Marxist critics ranging from Adorno to Zizek have interpreted Odradek's uselessness as an object as a critique of

capitalism and its commodity fetishism (Goetschel). Neither human, nor animal, nor cyborg (in a technological sense), Odradek is alive, perhaps vaguely – but only vaguely – reminiscent of the sense of “animated commodities” in Marx’s sense. In *The Fetishism of Commodities* Marx describes the process through which a table is becoming a commodity: “The form of wood [...] is altered, by making a table out of it. Yet, for all that, the table continues to be that common, everyday thing, wood. But, so soon as it steps forth as a commodity, it is changed into something transcendent. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas ...” (see web.stanford.edu) Despite the fact that critics have described Odradek as an allegory of Marx’s commodity, we need to realize, however, that he is decidedly not a commodity but, if at all, a “broken-down remnant” of a former commodity. His entire being is of a different order and we would need a different ontology and epistemology to grasp it. This is why critics such as Mauro Nervi, Anya Merksin and Philo Shrik have described Odradek in terms of an epistemological rupture.

On the other hand, Odradek certainly stands with its feet on the ground and as readers we are made to wonder, just like the family man, if it evolves grotesque ideas “out of its wooden brain.” The concept of animated commodities and objects has been widely used as an artistic technique if not a new animism in Dadaist and surrealist art. In *Mimetismo* (1960), a painting by surrealist painter Remedios Varo, a woman is “becoming chair,” her skin merging with the upholstery and her hands becoming wooden armrests. While she mimics the inanimate object she uses, the wooden furniture around her is “becoming animate”: the leg of her armchair turns into animal pincers to capture the leg of a nearby stool while another chair uses a leg to lift a silken cloth out of a drawer and a piece of fabric raises out of the sowing basket like a cobra.

Read through the lens of Marx’s *Fetishism of Commodities*, Varo’s surrealist animation of commodities in a bourgeois interior transforms them into something transcendent, and we could almost see them as material manifestations of the grotesque ideas that evolve out of their wooden brains. Unlike in Marx, this change, however, happens not in relation to other commodities but in a mimetic exchange between human and nonhuman agents during which the human is becoming furniture and the furniture human.

Kafka's Odradek, by contrast, seems to play with an ironical performance of animism, teasing the family man with his inevitable anthropocentric projections. The story of Odradek begs the question of how we can as humans relate to the radical alterity of objects that are nonetheless uncannily familiar. How can we account for the agency of objects and encounter them in an ethical way? We might see a certain resonance with the "new animism" Bruno Latour invokes in *The Politics of Nature*, except that Kafka's epistemological rupture seems more radical. Latour is concerned with how, in their relationship to and encounter with humans, objects have an impact that shapes humans. Kafka's narrator becomes obsessed with Odradek, almost to the point that the "wooden creature" becomes his alter ego.² Latour asks (Latour 2004, 69): "How can we grant nonhumans a voice and legal standing? How would this work? How would we learn to listen to nonhuman voices?" Reading of Kafka from the perspective of these questions opens up a radically new perspective on ontology and ontological insecurity as well as epistemological double binds. Kafka's texts about animals, ambiguous beings that combine human and animal (or "humanimals"), hybrid creatures like the kittenlamb or mutant creatures like Gregor Samsa and Odradek are concerned with the problem of the boundaries of the human and of giving voice to the nonhuman. Most importantly, in this context Kafka resists allegorization and anthropomorphization.

Latour's conceptual imperative is radically to de-anthropomorphize speech and to think in terms of an association of humans and non-humans or a "human-nonhuman pair" rather than conceiving the two as separate entities (Latour 2004; 73, 77). Latour calls this an "experimental metaphysics." No longer the sole property of humans, subjectivity is shared in a world in which other species and objects are endowed with agency and a voice. Latour's "politics of nature" however is still constrained by the order of things in the real world. Kafka's "experimental metaphysics" is free from such constraints. His radical intervention to an ontological and epistemological exploration of the boundaries between species and objects is that he invents radically incommensurable worlds and confronts his readers with the irreducible otherness of experimental characters without taming this otherness through allegorization. In "Ragged Bits of Meaning, Wound on a Star-Shaped Spool for Thread," Anya Meksin describes this epistemological rupture in connection to Odradek's ontological place in an unknowable universe:

² Psychoanalytic interpretations of Odradek have argued that he incorporates a "return of the repressed." I argue, however, that Kafka resists this type of allegorization.

Odradek stands for the entire physical world, not just manmade objects, but all of nature, which human beings incessantly probe for hidden, transcendent mystery, for some locked up higher truth, accessible to the human soul. But the physical world, like Odradek, is relentlessly cold and menacing—essentially, meaningless. There is a terrible incongruity between our yearning, grasping consciousness, and the impenetrable, eternal reality of the dead universe. In fact, the accident of our thinking, knowing minds in this barren world of objective physicality is just as improbable and shocking as Odradek's appearance in the family man's dwelling. In both cases, normality is undermined by an aberration that 'does no harm to anyone that one can see,' but that nevertheless represents a rupture of the greatest magnitude. [...] No matter how hard we try to integrate all empirical data into one coherent, knowable, classifiable system, we still come up against the limit of our consciousness, the limit of what we can know and understand about the lot that has been given us. Odradek stands at that very edge of knowability [...] (Meksin, kafka.org)

However playful Kafka's portrayal of Odradek as an experimental literary character may be at the surface level, this fundamental ontological and epistemological insecurity is why Odradek has fascinated philosophers and critical theorists from Adorno, Deleuze/Guattari and Žižek to Judith Butler. And it is precisely because of Odradek's opacity and irreducibility to any familiar categorization or species being as well as its tenacious resistance to allegorization, that he is a supremely evocative object (Bollas) that resonates with an entire range of familiar cultural objects without ever becoming commensurable with any of them.

Critics have, for example, explored Odradek's disruption of the familiar parameters of the bourgeois world, especially the structure of kinship and family. Roberto Schwarz writes:

Odradek is mobile, colorful, irresponsible, free from the system of obligations that bind the man to the family. More radically put: Odradek, as a construction, is the impossible of the bourgeois order. If, in a capitalist society, production for the market permeates the social order as a whole, then concrete forms of activity cease to have their justifications in themselves. Their end is external, their particular forms inessential. Now, Odradek has no purpose (i.e. he has no external end) but he is in his own way complete; therefore he has his end (without which we could not speak of his being complete) in himself. Odradek, therefore, is the

precise and logical construction of the negation of bourgeois life. Not that he is simply in a negative relation to it; he is rather the very schema of its negation, and this schematism is essential to the literary quality of the story. (Roberto Schwarz, "Worries of a Family Man")

In the context of the familial economy of bourgeois society, for example, Kafka's choice of a "family man" as narrator of the Odradek story is highly significant. For the family man, Odradek seems to belong to the margins of the family. Lingering in the hallways and staircases, he inhabits a transitional space between inside and outside. Her periodically disappears for long stretches of time, only to return with predictable regularity to the family house. As a "wooden spool" that routinely disappears for periods of time only to return to the family, Odradek betrays a certain family likeness to the famous other wooden spool Freud describes in his nephews legendary "Fort-Da" game. Entirely within the economy of the bourgeois family and its oedipal economy, Freud's nephew animates a wooden spool in order to control and cope with his mother's temporary absences. Odradek too plays a game of presence and absence, but his presence is annoying and his absence meaningless. Moreover, it is he who controls the absences. The object is thus liberated from the familial economy, all the more so because, despite of his periodic absence, he exerts an increasingly insistent presence in the mind of the family man.

This becomes particularly evident when the narrator contemplates the status of Odradek's "life," its temporal duration and its possible end. As a transitional object that hovers between life and death, Odradek confronts both narrator and reader with the question of mortality and the precarity of life and human embodiment. "Can he possibly die?" (*Kann er denn sterben?*) asks the narrator, only to discover that the very thought that Odradek's could be immortal causes him to feel distress. Despite Odradek's utter harmlessness, it is the idea of his transgenerational presence and legacy that disturbs the narrator: "Am I to suppose, then, that he will always be rolling down the stairs, with ends of thread trailing after him, right before the feet of my children, and my children's children?" Even though Odradek's harmlessness almost reminds one of the Dadaist "humor of the useless machine," for the narrator his utter incommensurability becomes a haunting presence.

Unable not to anthropomorphize this utterly surreal creature that moves and speaks and laughs, the narrator is also confronted with the

question of how we can (ethically) relate to the incommensurable alien. His reaction is subliminally hostile: if Odradek is alive, the narrator wants him to die. The possibility of immortal vibrant matter and the very idea that such matter could have a transgenerational life without us seems unbearable. It almost seems that the surreal animation of a piece of wood confronts the narrator with the ontological status of objects and their entanglement with humans. There is perhaps also the haunting sense that our commodities, even after they become useless “broken-down remnants,” will outlive us and populate the world with their obnoxious presence.

Another family-likeness (in the Wittgensteinian sense) exists between Odradek and a marionette. With his wooden humanoid body and its trailing ends of thread, Odradek bears certain affinities with the puppet figures we know from a marionette theater. In Volume I of *The Beast and the Sovereign*, Jacques Derrida reflects upon the ontology and possible life-form of a marionette in relation to its possible death. “How can one kill a marionette [...] without assuming it has some life, and therefore some psyche, some animality, some animate desire, and some stubborn, obstinate movement to remain in Life? [...] To have to kill it, even if it is inanimate, it must be already an other. And the question then is [...] ‘What is the other in me (dead or alive, animate or inanimate) that I want to annihilate so I can finally be myself [...]?’” (Derrida 2009, 191) While Odradek’s ontological status as a living creature seems to be much stronger than that of a marionette since he can speak and move about on his own volition, we must of course remember that he is only an imaginary literary character. In resisting the reader’s impulse toward allegorization in Odradek’s figuration, Kafka, however, does not let us get away with circumventing the literality of his imagined ontological status. Moreover, the family man does not want to kill Odradek; he only wants him to die in order to prevent this liminal creature from outliving him and from being part of his family after his own death. Can we then ask in the vein of Derrida: “What is Odradek in the family man that he wants to die?” Derrida argues that “to think the marionette *itself* is to try to think the living in life, and a living ‘being’ that perhaps ‘is’ not – a *living without being*.” According to Derrida, “living without being” is only a simulacrum of a being (Derrida 2009, 219). Is Odradek living without being? How would we know? What distinguishes him from the marionette? Kafka does not provide an answer to these questions but opens them as the horizon of our possible experience of Odradek.

What then is the philosophical challenge of Odradek as an evocative yet entirely incommensurable object that challenges any sense of ontological and epistemological security? Like the narrator, as readers we are confronted with how to ethically relate to such a creature with its ambiguous species being. In the process of our attempts at interpretation and our dead-end projections, we realize both the unavoidability and the traps of anthropomorphization. Kafka confronts us with the fact that our relationship to the world of others ... animals, plants and the entire world of objects ... is still fraught with the pitfalls of anthropocentric reason. In its tacit affinities with a Dadaist object, Odradek is the most playful character that resists our need to anthropomorphize and allegorize. Other characters, namely his animal or hybrid characters such as most prominently Gregor Samsa and Rotpeter, embody a more sinister critique of anthropocentric reason.

Like Lacan's phantasms of the fragmented body, Kafka's phantasms of the mutated body are figurations of precarious embodiment and ego boundaries. Both signal vulnerability to violence, illness and decay and more specifically, in case of the mutated body, of exposure to toxic environments. Just as mutations in nature are effects of toxic environments such as chemical and radioactive contamination, Kafka's phantasms of the mutated body are effects of a psychic toxicity that permeates the relationship between humans as well as between humans and other species. In Kafka, psychic toxicity is the effect of violent subjection and, in the case of his human-animal hybrids, the effect of the violence of anthropocentric reason.

Kafka resists the latter not simply on the level of narrative, that is, in the invention of incommensurable characters and their stories but also formally in his refusal of allegorical readings that refuses anthropocentric reason via an irreducible epistemological rupture.

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