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Uncanny Animals in Kafka's Short Stories

RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores Franz Kafka's animal characters as a means of producing uncanny (unheimlich) effects in Kafka's short stories. Its analysis draws primarily on the works of Sigmund Freud and his notions of the uncanny, repression, and negation. Through close textual analysis, this paper argues Kafka's animals as a stage for the contradictions that would typically threaten the unity of human subjectivity. In his animal-centric narratives, Kafka defamiliarizes the familiar, through repetition and double-creation. The conclusions of this paper are limited by the assumption of a European history of associations with non-rational animals through the 20th Century as a ground for the 'familiarity' that Kafka's animal characters produce and reframe.

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In Franz Kafka's *The Vulture*, a scavenger is introduced as already hacking at the narrator's feet. The narrator is being attacked as though he were a carcass yet talks like a living human being. The vulture presents a problem that could not exist were it not for the import of the species' familiar eating habits. The narrator's shredded feet render him static and complicit in his own undoing, capable of only a feeble cry for help. His impotence, coupled with the presence of the vulture, evinces him virtually already dead. After a passing gentleman agrees to fetch his gun to fend off the bird, the vulture's roving gaze reveals to the narrator that it had been calmly listening to him the whole time. Just after an assumption about the vulture's rational capacity is subverted, the bird thrusts its beak through the narrator's mouth, "deep into him."[1] The bird targets an erotic orifice, the penetration, and mutilation of which perverts the sexual fantasy of a young Leonardo da Vinci.[2] Rather than the vulture's tail ('coda') which Leonardo remembered pressing itself repeatedly between his lips as he lay passively in his cradle, the narrator's lips are met with the force of a sharp beak. The vulture's mouth does not bear the force of language, but it deals a violence capable of threatening human life.[3] It is only after the narrator's language is understood by the vulture that its javelin-like attack befalls him.

In the narrator's blood, surfaces a buried death drive, a pull towards escape.[4] His death, which was already the case, confronts him with utmost immediacy. The vulture rends the human body apart, releasing the narrator from his earthly container. He feels liberated witnessing the bird drowning "irretrievably" in his blood as it overflows all banks. "*As I fell back*, I could feel a sense of deliverance," the narrator writes, a return to a non-embodied form.[5] 'Falling back' here might be understood as a spatial equivalent for the temporal regress involved in an uncanny experience. In this motion, a repressed death drive is seemingly fulfilled. Salvation, however, never comes.

The term "uncanny" or "unheimlich" contains a doubled nature. The word 'heimlich' means both that which is familiar and agreeable and that which is concealed from sight or withdrawn from knowledge.[6] The word is nearly identical to its opposite. For Schelling, "everything is *un*heimlich that *ought* to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light."[7] The prefix signifies what was already contained within its referent. It negates the agreeability of that which is familiar by insisting that it ought to have remained hidden. Freud calls the prefix 'un' a token of repression.[8] Everything uncanny fulfills the condition of something familiar which has undergone repression and returned from it. The uncanny involves the resurfacing of something that was once judged as preferable to be removed from oneself.[9]

The alienness of the uncanny, which strikes one with the strange severity of an animal's gaze, is in reality nothing new, "but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression."[10] It is a return of what should have been killed and as such bears the quality of a ghost.[11] The uncanny as described by Freud always invokes repetition and often specifically, the notion of the double.[12]

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1 Franz Kafka, *The Vulture* (1999), 1.

2 In Sigmund Freud's *Leonardo da Vinci*, Leonardo's written memory of the vulture is psychoanalyzed much like a dream. The vulture (evocative of the Egyptian goddess, Mut) presents a symbol of the male organ as an object to be sucked, reminiscent of the first pleasurable act, breastfeeding. The passive fantasy is part of a longer investigation of Leonardo's life and how he exemplifies the sublimation of sexual desire with intellectual thirst. Sigmund Freud, *Leonardo da Vinci,* (2001).

3 Agamben tells us that what defines man as a living being "is a being which puts at stake its own nature in its language." Giorgio Agamben, *Summer Lecture* (EGS 2011).

4 Contrasted with the life-drive suppressed by young Leonardo da Vinci.

5 Kafka, *The Vulture,* 1.

6 Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny,* (2001), 225.

7 Freud, 225 (emphasis added).

8 Freud, 245.

9 Sigmund Freud, *Negation,* (2001), 4141.

10 Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny,* 241.

11 In German, 'an unheimlich house' is an expression for 'a haunted house.' Freud, 241.

12 "The quality of uncanniness can only come from the fact of the 'double' being a creation dating back to a very early stage, long since surmounted, – a stage, incidentally, at which it wore a more friendly aspect. The 'double' has become a thing of terror, just as, after the collapse of their religion, the gods turned into demons." Freud, *The Uncanny*, 236.

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The double is at first created as a protective measure against extinction, yet later emerges as a threat. According to Otto Rank, "the 'immortal soul' was the first doubling of the body."[13] In *The Vulture*, we see the impetus towards liberation from the body confronted with the uncertain future of its eternal double. The threat of damnation looms over the narrator as he confronts his shamefully yearned for release from the skin. Death is at once a fact of the narrator, a fear of the narrator, and a negated desire of the narrator. These repressed associations resurface only in the face of a knowing bird with familiar symbolic content.

Kafka's animal characters provide a kind of translucent mirror for the unconscious, allowing for incongruencies to surface which would typically threaten the unity of a human subject. They are the "great fire in which" desires hidden "perish and rise up again."[14] The animal is part of the human being and yet consciously delineated from it. The language that asserts our being human must say, "I" and "you." [15] It assumes determinate individuality and turns the negative unity of our being into an object for the other.[16] Human perception, or conceptual engagement with the world, works to preserve the order of language by maintaining its subject. The unconscious, represented by the immediate knowing of the animal, has no such duty. In animals, impulses run free and meet no self-conscious resistance when they leap in opposing directions. While animals are adaptable, they are also marked by habituation. The animal presents a literary opportunity to illustrate unconscious repetitive behavior. Habitual loops, which often take the form of 'falling back,' act as segues to impressions long repressed in Kafka's short stories.

In Kafka's *In Our Synagogue*, a marten-like animal is witnessed flipping backward in a repeated motion during worship. It does this strikingly on a narrow ledge that springs from the wall between intervals of running back and forth around the three sides of the room that the ledge covers. Despite its old age, indicative of its vulnerability and finitude, the animal repeatedly lands daring somersaults in which "it turns around in midair… doubling back again the same way."[17] The creature finds comfort in exposing itself over and over again, yet remains "shyer than a forest animal."[18] It is said that fright causes the animal to emerge and perform its acrobatics. The animal's contradictory nature provides a way into the story's central tension between habituation and fear.

Martens are known to adopt the abandoned homes of other animals into their dens. Having moved into this synagogue long ago, the animal is now the same color as the building.[19] It is said the synagogue's men have grown indifferent to the animal's presence through repeated exposure across generations. The narrator judges the synagogue's women for performing alarm when presented with the animal after so many years. He appears to identify with the ambivalence of the men yet proves rather exasperated by the nervous creature. It is the animal's fright that frustrates the narrator most. Similar to the women, it is criticized for its inability to find comfort in the fact of ritualistic repetition. "While the religious service with all its noise may be very alarming to the animal, it is replayed day after day… always regularly… Even the most timid animal should have been able to get used to it by now," the narrator complains.[20] Instead of allaying the fears of the animal, the passage of time has only made it more nervous. Despite this, the animal has made itself a fixture of the building and is reportedly impossible to drive away. It exposes itself to the same shock over and over.

The narrator negates his own trepidation by condemning the fear of others with repeated puzzlement. Such negation is a way of cognizing the phenomenon repressed, as well as an

13 Freud, *The Uncanny*, 235.

14 Franz Kafka, *The Diaries of Franz Kafka, 1910–1913* (2015), 212–213.

15 Agamben 2011.

16 "Language and labor are expressions in which the individual on his own no longer retains and possesses himself, rather, he lets the inner move wholly outside of him and thus abandons the other…" Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (2018) 181.

17 Franz Kafka, *In Our Synagogue, Investigations of a Dog* (2017), 140.

18 Kafka, 141.

19 *Martes americana*, located in Southeast Alaska.

20 Kafka, 142.

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early moment in the lifting of repression.[21] Why fear? The narrator ponders, "is it a memory of times long gone or a presentiment of times to come?"[22] This superstitious question calls to mind the narrator's mention of the synagogue's worsening struggle to fund itself at the beginning of the text. The animal's fear, and the narrator's defensive response to it, provide a window into repressed anxiety surrounding the financial stability of the narrator's religious community. Through all his 'ought's, it is the narrator who appears most afraid, tormented by the reminder of his buried fright replicated in others. The narrator's question also underscores a knowledge of memory's tendency to resurface in future events.

The compulsion to repeat; as the women repeat their performance of shock, as the animal repeats its somersaults, and as the narrator repeats his questioning, can be read as the manifestation of the power of repression.[23] In the above question, the narrator demonstrates an awareness that the animal's cyclical behavior hinges on an unknowable temporal relation. Though one cannot remember what has been repressed in them, one is obliged to repeat the repressed material as a contemporary experience. Such unconscious repetition fails as an act of remembering in a therapeutic sense. Neither the women, the animal, nor the narrator is assuaged by the repetitive nature of the stimulus that sparks their irritation. They continue to act out in the same ways while attempting to maintain social normalcy through ritually practiced conventions.

This maps onto Freud's "conservative organic instinct," which is historically acquired and tends "towards the restoration of an earlier state of things."[24] Taken to its logical conclusion, the conservative instinct aims at returning to an inanimate state. In this way, like the vulture, the marten confronts the narrator with is own drive towards death.[25,26] Every modification which is thus imposed upon the course of the organism's life is accepted by the conservative organic instincts and stored up for further repetition. Those instincts are therefore bound to give a deceptive appearance of being forces tending towards change and progress, whilst in fact they are merely seeking to reach an ancient goal by paths alike old and new.[27]

In the animal, however, we also see the sexual instinct, one which strives to extend life. It takes pleasure in stretching itself in the women's section as much as it fears being exposed. Unlike the narrator, who is constantly qualifying or revoking his statements, the animal is not bound by consistency. It represents versatility, the ability to leap between conflicting instincts with a "vacillating rhythm."[28] The animal in *In Our Synagogue,* like that in *The Vulture*, draws the unconscious into the conscious realm, offering the possibility of a new relationship between the narrator and the repressed. We can interpret these short animal-centric narratives like dreams, as the narrator lacks control and causal explanations are withheld. Kafka's animals offer fresh pathways of exploring the painfully familiar. They do not aim at liberation, but they lay bare the terrain of the mind.[29]

In his 1912 Diaries, Kafka writes:

> In an autobiography one cannot avoid writing 'often' where truth would require that 'once' be written. For one always remains conscious that the word 'once' explodes that darkness on which the memory draws; and though it is not altogether spared by the word 'often,' either, it is at least preserved in the opinion of the writer, and he

21 "The content of a repressed image or ideas can make its way into consciousness, on the condition that it is negated." Freud, *Negation,* 4141.

22 Kafka, *In Our Synagogue*, 142.

23 Sigmund Freud, *Beyond The Pleasure Principle* (2001), 20.

24 Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle,* 38.

25 In *Investigations of a Dog*, the narrator repeatedly associates death with living dogs. For example, when he buries his nose in the fur of his companion, it smells of a carcass.

26 In *The Crossbreed,* the narrator suspects that a butcher's knife might come as a relief to the animal, which to him appears to be bursting out of its skin.

27 Freud, 38.

28 Freud, 41.

29 "The line of escape is part of the machine. Inside or outside, the animal is part of the burrow-machine." Non-human perspectives map a series of tunnels which prefer no one entrance or exit but offer a landscape of possibility. Felix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze, *Toward a Minor Literature* (1986), 38.

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> is carried across parts which perhaps never existed at all in his life but serve him as a substitute for those which his memory can no longer even guess at.[30]

From this entry, Kafka seems acquainted with the compulsion to repeat when memory fails. The familiar generality of the 'often' comes easier than the specificity of the 'once,' which has been lost to the dark recesses of time. The 'often' remains possible in the absence of the 'once' because the content of the missing memory springs up time and time again as a present experience. What was censored cannot be approached directly but is circled around until it is unearthed. Artistic imitation offers one way of reenacting an undesirable past. This life-thirsting gesture, most often exemplified in children, actively transforms pain into pleasure, allowing for mastery.[31] For Freud, the realm of literature is the most fertile ground for the uncanny. What is often uncanny in literature might not be so if it happened in real life, yet literature has far more means of creating uncanny effects than lived experience. To produce an uncanny effect in literature, the writer must pretend "to move in the world of common reality," and then betray this sense of realism.[32] Kafka does this by drawing on and subverting our expectations of familiar concepts in his work. Animals play an important role in this, as the subversion of expectation draws on their 'vacillating rhythm.' One example is the strange way that music functions in Kafka's writing.

For Réda Bensmaïa, "it isn't a composed and semiotically shaped music that interests Kafka, but rather a pure sonorous material."[33] In *Investigations of a Dog,* music defies form and causation. It arises from empty space and overtakes its narrator with an almost violent grip, forcing him religiously to his knees. The dogs are "musicians in the very depths of their bodies since they don't emit any music."[34] The music's harmony is that of bodily ritual, but it is also a rhythm of escape. Though first attached to the practiced movement of dogs who resist all questions, even their own, the characteristically curious narrator witnesses the music move beyond the canine musicians at the end of the story. Music, as a recurring experience, cannot be traced back to its origins. It floats "through the air following its own laws," moving through and past individuals, "as though it wasn't anything to do with" them.[35] Music in Kafka is often composed of the rhythms of daily life and is made absurd through the perspective of the animal.[36]

In *Josephine, the Singer, or the Mouse Folk*, a community of mice finds itself enraptured by a singer, who when examined, produces a "quite ordinary piping tone." Her voice emits a sound that is common among the species, though slightly more delicate or weak.[37] Josephine's song gathers the masses before her frail voice. In the moments when her song breaks, a rare silence is experienced among her audience, and in this, a moment for reflection. For Freud, silence and solitude are "elements in the production of the infantile anxiety from which the majority of human beings have never become quite free."[38] Josephine's singing recontextualizes silence for the mouse folk, allowing them to experience inner solitude. In her song, they experience "something of (their) poor brief childhood, something of lost happiness that can never be found again, but also something of daily life, of its small gaieties, unaccountable and yet springing up and not to be obliterated."[39] The mice join together in astonishment and withdraw into themselves to recognize something which was there all along. Piping is the people's daily speech, but it is said that one could pipe her whole life long and not know it. Josephine makes a ceremonial performance of doing the usual thing, which rouses a collective feeling of the uncanny in the narrator and the community. It is through her deliberate repetition of a quotidian act that they can see themselves for the first time.[40] In each assembly, Josephine allows the

30 Kafka, *Diaries*, 212.

31 Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 17.

32 Freud, *The Uncanny*, 250.

33 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (1986), *Foreword*.

34 Deleuze and Guattari, 21.

35 Kafka, *Investigations of a Dog*, 186–187.

36 In *Metamorphosis*, Gregor enjoys the music of his sister's violin long after his voice has deteriorated into a jumble of animal noises.

37 Franz Kafka and John Updike, *Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk* (1971), 261.

38 Freud, *Uncanny* 252.

39 Kafka and Updike, 370.

40 Kafka and Updike, 362 "…It turns out we have overlooked the art of cracking nuts because we were too skilled in it and that this newcomer to it first shows us its real nature…"

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mouse folk to admire what they could not know in themselves.[41] Her performance of something that was already part of them resonates deeply yet escapes their categories of expectation.

Much of this infatuated connection the mouse folk feel towards Josephine seems to hinge on a collective loss of childhood. The mice folk are forced to grow up quickly, despite their agreed-upon value of a carefree childhood. They are prematurely old, "too old for music."[42] Josephine allows them to relive a youthful fascination and in turn, the people protect Josephine, "as much as a father takes into his care a child."[43] In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud discusses the reenacting of events over which a child once had no control as an assertion of agency.[44] Through mimicry, children in the form of play, re-stage unpleasurable events as a way of mastering the experience, turning it into something enjoyable. The mouse folk perform the care they never received from their elders in exchange for a vicarious enjoyment of a repressed musical impulse.[45] Josephine believes she is protecting the people, while they believe themselves to be protecting her. Psychically, both are likely the case. The story ends with a meditation on Josephine's inevitable death after her singing has become only echo. The narrator wonders, "was it even in her lifetime more than a simple memory?"[46] Here, he considers vaguely that Josephine's singing was always already an experience of the past and ponders whether this is why the mouse folk prized it so highly. Even in death, Josephine remains a mirror of the mouse folk's collective fate. She will soon be lost in a vast and rolling history, redeemed and forgotten as the others by time.

"When all is said and done, the quality of uncanniness can only come back from the fact of the 'double' being a creation dating back to a very early mental stage… at which it wore a more friendly aspect," Freud writes.[47] Though created in defense of the ego, over time the double becomes a thing of terror. While Freud references a very direct manifestation of the double in Hoffman's *The Sandman*, we can find something of this character in the paternal relation. To the father, a child is its own kind of double-creation. As a parent, one repeats a role most prominent in their childhood and brings into the world a small version of themselves who may serve as a protection against extinction in the form of a legacy. The child wears a father's name and bears qualities that are reflective of him. However, the child poses a threat to the father in that once created, it cannot be controlled in the full trajectory of its development. The child double, which once served as an enforcement of the ego, grows to represent the possibility of the father's disrupted legacy. Oftentimes, resentment ensues.

For Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Kafka's personal idiosyncrasies and his writing "are completely positive motivations from a libidinal point of view," not derivative from a relation to the father.[48] While this may be the case, Kafka is aware of the father's structural compulsion to fear his double, the son. He does not blame the father for this and even finds humor in the situation. In Kafka's letter to his father, he locates the anxiety of the parent beyond the family triangle, in a larger set of societal roles. "You (Father) took on, for me, that enigmatic quality of all tyrants whose right to rule is founded on their identity rather than on reason," he writes.[49] The central force of identity to the father's defensive self-assertion draws our attention to an insistence on the unity of the subject as a motive for repression. As shown in *Anti-Oedipus*, psychoanalysis is made possible by a political moment that foregrounds individuality.[50] Like Freud, Kafka understands that the maintenance of one's ego can produce irrational behavior. Moving beyond Freud, however, Kafka does not assume that unity must be maintained. His animal-centric narratives push the boundaries of what can be considered a subject and beg us to question our methods of identification.

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41 Kafka and Updike, 362.

42 Kafka and Updike, 369.

43 Kafka and Updike, 365.

44 Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle,* 17.

45 Perhaps Kafka is performing something too in his act of writing; a familiar feeling, the memory of which has been long lost.

46 Kafka and Updike, *Josephine,* 376.

47 Freud, *The Uncanny*, 236.

48 Deleuze and Guattari, *Toward a Minor Literature,* 9.

49 Kafka, *Dearest Father,* (2017), 25.

50 A political economy which presupposes the alienation of individuals, as capitalism does, so that labor can be sold as a commodity is what I have in mind here.

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In Kafka's *The Care of a House Father*, often translated as "*The Cares of a Family Man*," there exists a strange creature composed of wood and tangled thread called Odradek. It is "extraordinarily nimble and can never be laid hold of."[51] It dwells in liminal spaces, such as the stairway, lobbies, or the entrance hall. The narrator has no determinate sense of Odradek's trajectory. The animal often leaves for months on end but always returns to the house in which we meet him. He is composed of collected remnants and broken-off bits, yet is said to be perfectly whole. The narrator cannot help but treat Odradek as a child. "He does no harm to anyone that one can see; but the idea that he is likely to survive me I find most painful," the narrator concludes.[52] Odradek could be read as either a metaphor for the narrator's offspring or as a metaphor for an art object that outlives its creator. Its tangled thread made of used threads is reminiscent of both DNA strands and of the tangled influences that weave a work of literature. Either would bear the interminable quality of a double that outlives its creator, particularly in the age of mechanical reproduction. The Odradeck produces uneasiness due to its lack of a discernable trajectory. In this way, it escapes the control of a conscious, goal-oriented mind.

At the beginning of the text, Odradek is referred to as an "it," but just before its interaction with the narrator, Odradek's object pronoun is replaced with "he." It is characteristic of the uncanny literature to offer contradictory clues as to a character's category of being. Ernst Jentsch writes,

> In telling a story, one of the most successful devices for easily creating uncanny effects is to leave the reader in uncertainty whether a particular figure in the story is a human being or an automaton and do it in such a way that his attention is not directly focused upon his uncertainty, so that he may not be led to go into the matter and clear it up immediately.

In *The Cares of a House Father*, Odradek performs human actions like standing upright, lurking, and speaking, but his laugh "has no lungs behind it. It sounds rather like the rustling of fallen leaves."[53] His aimless unpredictability could either be characteristic of a child's versatility or a more fundamental lack of rational capacities. Similar uncertainty is prominent in Hoffman's *The Sandman*, in the living doll.[54] Many of Kafka's stories offer uncertainty as to the existential status of animal characters, which evade the concept-laden phenomenology of human beings.

In Western culture, animals have been historically regarded as automatons.[55] In Christianity, the immortal soul is reserved for humans, rendering animals inferior in essence. For Kant, humans have the special ability to desire contrary to natural drives which renders them rational in opposition to their animal counterparts.[56] In all cases, conscious actors are morally permitted to make use of the animal world in pursuit of rational creative capacities. This paradigm has been upheld in the European canon for centuries. Kafka, however, tends to present his animals as engaged in complex thought and social activity. In *The Vulture*, a bird grasps the meaning of human language. In *In Our Synagogue*, the animal is imagined knowing something that three generations of humans do not. In *Josephine, the Singer, or the Mouse Folk*, the mice are often referred to as "people" and act almost accordingly, except for a few species-specific habits. In *Jackals and Arabs*, the jackals express hope, defer their gratification, and plot the downfall of their enemies. In *Investigations of a Dog,* the narrator shares with his species avidity, curiosity, and a sense of guilt, yet individuates himself through a deliberate investigation of the questions that plague him. In each of these cases, the animal's biological classification floats in the background of the story as a fact of the world, yet one inconsistent with familiar cultural associations. The unexplained existential status of these animal characters confuses the reader much in the way that Jentsch writes about.

Animals can be productively read in Kafka's short stories as a catalyst for the uncanny. As established, they are distinct from human beings in the separation of their existence from the maintenance of a unified subject. The lack of an ego makes animals an apt vehicle for

51 Franz Kafka and John Updike, *The Cares of a Family Man* (1971), 469.

52 Kafka and Updike, 469.

53 Kafka and Updike, 469.

54 Freud, *The Uncanny,* 233.

55 At least dating back to Descartes (1641).

56 Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology, History, and Education* (2007), 166.

surfacing the contradictory desires of the unconscious. In Kafka's animals, we are reminded of our human failures; to recall, to forget, and to overcome. This paper has explored Kafka primarily through Freud, which may give the impression of an overly allegorical interpretive act.[57] I would like to emphasize that this is only one way to enter Kafka's work. The route of the uncanny is a helpful path through Kafka's writing because we find something of progress in the 'falling back' laid forth by his use of repetition. As readers and re-readers, we see a way forward opened for Kafka's narrators through the jostling of unwanted memories. Kafka uses conflicts of expectation as a mirror to reflect our attachments to the familiar and the negated. His "work presents a sickness of tradition" that implores us to recognize the inconsistencies of what is known.[58] Kafka presents no direct solution to the dizziness of the human psyche but offers a subverting motion that leaves various escapes open to our discovery. Kafka's animals provide a field in which the security of the subject is no longer necessary; a place where the contradictory vestiges of desire are unveiled for our tracing.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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57 Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, *On Interpretation* (1982).

58 Walter Benjamin, *Some Reflections on Kafka, Illuminations* (Schoken Books).

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