



Københavns Universitet



Stormløb mod grænsen

Holm, Isak Winkel

Publication date:
2015

Document Version
Tidlig version også kaldet pre-print

Citation for published version (APA):
Holm, I. W. (2015). Stormløb mod grænsen: Det politiske hos Franz Kafka. København: Gyldendal.

Summary in English

Assault on the Border: the Political in Franz Kafka

Franz Kafka found fame in the years after World War II. In the shadow of the short 20th Century, with its totalitarianism and impending nuclear war, it felt natural to interpret Kafka's works as depictions of a world determined by destiny. The well-known notion of the "Kafkaesque" is imbued with a political ontology, a fundamental image of the order of things, drawing a border between the powerless human subject and indifferent objective forces. On the one hand we find nurturing, breathing, concrete human life; on the other hand we find the cold and abstract rigidity enforced by sinister bureaucratic organisations. The majority of Kafka critics disagree about how to interpret these objective forces – whether they are divine, moral, psychological, existential, disciplinary, or simply bureaucratic. Yet they more or less all agree that such forces are irrational, unpredictable, and immutable, just like destiny. According to this *destinalizing* image of Kafka, his works bear witness to a social world in which political change is impossible.

In *Assault on the Border*, I attempt to save Kafka from the shadows of the Cold War. Paradoxically, I argue, Kafka's literary works are not Kafkaesque. Accordingly, as a substitution for the concept of the Kafkaesque, I suggest the concept of *unease*: the fundamental affective tone of Kafka's works, their organizing affective atmosphere, is not a feeling that the world is meaningless and immutable but, rather, a feeling that something is wrong and ought to be fixed.

In a famous diary entry from January 1922, two years before his death, Kafka tried sum up his entire authorship in a single sentence: "All such writing is an assault on the border." In the light of this sentence, I explore the political in Kafka by asking what his literary works *are about*, what they *are*, and what they *do*.

1) Kafka writes that his authorship is an assault on the *border*. In the same diary entry, he also writes about "an assault on the last earthly border ... launched from below, from mankind." In other words, the political is pre-

sent in Kafka's literary works as a question of the border of mankind understood as a political community. As to what literature *is about*, I suggest that the feeling of unease in Kafka has to be understood as a reaction to a fundamental problem in the constitution of the political community. Kafka's literary works do not depict the citizens' political debates about the rules that are effective within the borders of their community; rather, the works explore the fundamental constitutive process that draws a line around the political community and decides who is cast outside the social contract's circle of concern.

2) Kafka writes that his authorship *is* an assault on the border. He does not write that all such writing *is about* somebody launching an assault on the border. In other words, Kafka focuses on the essence of literature, the specific being of the literary work and of the reader's aesthetic experience of it. As to what literature *is*, I claim that the uneasy affective tone in Kafka's works has to be understood as a product of Kafka's stereoscopic style. Repeatedly, he juxtaposes two different perspectives on the same social practise, a rule bound and an unruly perspective that view the world, at the same time, as a normal situation and a state of exception, as real life and as a dream world. Kafka's literary works are not just aesthetic representations of political events; owing to their stylistic double exposure, they produce a kind of uneasy and reflective aesthetic experience.

3) And finally, Kafka writes that his authorship is an *assault* on the border. The German word *Ansturm* denotes a military action, a charge that tries to alter the very order of things. In other words, Kafka is concerned with the function of literature in the extra-literary world. As to what literature *does*, my contention is that the feeling of unease, a kind of sense of injustice, contains an impulse to change the constitution of the political community. In Kafka's literary works, the political event is not just *pictured* by the literary work but, first of all, *prompted* by its stereoscopic style.

What I want to argue, therefore, is that the uneasy feeling in Kafka's literary works makes it possible to approach his original ideas about the relationship between literature and the political. And, when broadly viewed, the question of art and politics.