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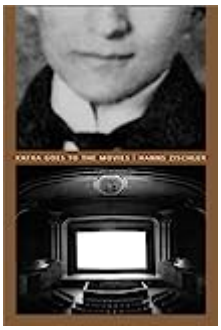

Hanns Zischler. *Kafka Goes to the Movies.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003. xiv + 143 pp. $30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-98671-5.

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Boundless Entertainment?

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There are at least three ways to read this book, which first appeared as *Kafka geht ins Kino* in 1996: as a discussion of the significance of film and new media for Kafka's writing; as a mission of cultural recovery, including never-before-published archival film footage; and as a "mad and beautiful project" (Paul Auster) that combines autobiography, detective novel, art collage, and literary scholarship. In the first sense the book fails, but in the other two it succeeds in surprising, original ways.

To begin with the last point: Zischler's book opens unusually, with a series of images including a spectacular 1914 photograph of Prague's Bio Lucerna cinema. The small "1" in the bottom right corner alerts us to the fact that this photograph has a footnote, and we thus begin Zischler's strange readerly trip. We start flipping pages, like the attendant Kafka noticed at the Kaiser Panorama, from front to back, image to word, and vice-versa. Zischler's intellectual collage develops toward metaphysical detective fiction–we can see why Auster liked it!–when the main text opens: "I was working on a television movie about Kafka in 1978 when I first came across the notes on the cinema in his early diaries and letters." This leisurely curiosity of the actor in a Kafka movie eventually developed into an obsession: into "regular detective work" that took Zischler on the route of Kafka's early bachelor trips with Max Brod (Munich, Milan, Paris) in search of old cinemas and films. Carrying out his literary sleuthing in "the shadow of my work as a movie actor," Zischler worked his way through the labyrinth of Prague's 1980s bureaucratic socialism to locate an apparently lost Zionist film; searched out an historically-minded Veronese baker who owned an image of the cinema in which Kafka cried in 1913; and descended into the "witches' cauldron" (the restoration library) of the Cinematheque Francaise to watch two women wearing enormous rubber gloves hook out the slimy negatives of *The Heartbreaker*–one of Kafka's favorites (pp. 3-5). Here we have the making of something other than another scholarly inquiry into Kafka: a suspenseful, cerebral literary detective story reminiscent of Auster's *New York Trilogy* (1985-86) and W.G. Sebald's *Schwindel. Gefuehle* (1990), which also takes place partly in Verona.

Perhaps it would have been best for Zischler to con-

tinue in this vein (playing the actor/detective obsessed with Kafka at the movies), because when he begins to perform more traditional literary scholarship his work becomes less convincing. That Kafka used the movies as a form of escape–Zischler's main biographical point–does not require much elaboration or defense because Kafka's pertinent diary entries are straightforward ("Went to the movies. Cried," "Boundless entertainment").[1] What is less evident and more significant is the role that this new medium might have played in Kafka's invention of his literary style. Many attempts have been made to answer this complex question, and it is surprising that–without a footnote!–Zischler bemoans the "strange lack of concern shown by scholars" (p. 3).[2] Zischler himself wavers on the relation between film and Kafka's style. On the one hand, film is unimportant for Kafka's literary technique (he uses it only to "forget"). On the other hand, film is central to Kafka's literary development, but in a way that Zischler does not clearly delineate: film is at once a catalyst for Kafka's "cinematic" style but also a technological rival to his own more "photographic" prose (pp. 91, 107, 37, 28, 61).

Zischler sees Kafka at his most "cinematic" (a term that remains vague) in the novel fragment Kafka wrote with Brod in 1911-12, *Richard and Samuel: A Short Journey through Central European Regions*. Here, Kafka turns a real-life automobile ride with a young woman into what Zischler terms "pure, cinematic fiction" (p. 37). But by insisting that Kafka's style in *Richard and Samuel*, which the friends wrote together under the fictional voices of "Richard" and "Samuel," is filmic whereas co-author Brod's is not, Zischler misses the radical point of the novel.[3] As Kafka and Brod both state in their diaries, the project's "avant-garde" goal was to subvert the very notion of individual style: each author was to attempt to describe "the other's perspective."[4] "Richard" is thus not "Kafka's alias," as Zischler would have it, but rather a cipher for double-impersonation: a *mise en abyme* of Kafka mimicking Brod mimicking Kafka mimicking Brod (p. 36).[5] As Brod points out, person "A" or person "B" did not separately compose individual segments that were later collated; rather, "A and B" were "indistinguishably involved" in the creation of "the *whole*." Even figuring out who held the pen is not easy since the writers transcribed the fair copy alternately, handing the pen back and forth in order to make this aspect, too, communal.[6] Thus, Zischler's attempt to locate a cinematic Kafka and an uncinematic Brod simplifies the anti-subjective spirit of the piece and, what is more, disregards Brod's attitude toward the cinema, which was generally more progressive than Kafka's.[7] Even if Richard's language is "cinematic," the most filmic aspect of *Richard and Samuel* remains its attempt–only partially realized–to efface the literary author and replace him with a mechanism that the friends referred to, in the novel's preface, as "contradictory stereoscopy."[8]

Kafka's interest in stereoscopy–a three-dimensional photographic technology that preceded film–brings us to his well-known fascination with the new media: specifically, to his attempt to relate both stereoscopy and film to his own writing.[9] As Zischler points out, Kafka loved the stereoscopic Kaiser Panorama in Friedland, claiming that its pictures were "more alive than in the cinematograph because they offer the eye all the repose [*Ruhe*] of reality. The cinematograph communicates the agitation [*Unruhe*] of its motion to the things pictured in it; the eye's repose seems more important."[10] Kafka thus rejects cinematography as anathema to "reality," yet borrows some of its techniques for *Richard and Samuel* and *The Man Who Disappeared* (*Amerika*).[11] Instead of fully rejecting or embracing film, then, Kafka dreams of a utopian technology that could mimic the cinema's sublime motion while, at the same time, holding fast to the photograph's authentic calm: "Why can't they combine the cinema and the stereoscope in this way?"[12] Zischler correctly views this technological fantasy as central to understanding Kafka's relationship to the new media, but he prematurely dismisses this vision as impossible (p. 27), thus overlooking the likelihood that Kafka understood his own writing as a "machinery" capable of rivalling film by creating a simultaneous effect of cinematic swiftness and photographic immobility.[13] I think here of "The Judgment," which rolled out of Kafka "like a real birth" or, better, like the movie of a real birth, but a movie that was interrupted by an ornate photographic gesture: the father's erect body, half-naked and threatening, on his bed.[14] Kafka's self-proclaimed 1912 literary breakthrough, then, hints at the invention of a new literary technology that supersedes film by uniquely merging its fluidity with the reality-effect of the still.[15]

If Zischler's book thus fails to offer new insights into Kafka's writing, it nonetheless succeeds as both an enthralling text-image collage and a project of cultural recovery. *Kafka Goes to the Movies* tells a suspenseful story of the early cinema by digging up images from films that were long thought to be lost (*Shivat Zion* [Return to Zion], 1920, and *La Broyeuse de coeurs* [The Heartbreaker], 1913). Zischler also presents photographs of old cinemas and of the elaborate advertising posters that fascinated Kafka as much as the films themselves. This

book offers those of us who grew up late in cinematic history a view into the simple plots and overstated physical comedy of film's primitive days. One prominent example is *The Thirsty Gendarme*, which Kafka recommended to Brod's wife: A gendarme arrests a drunken sailor who then escapes through the gendarme's legs and begins a madcap bicycle chase that ends with the now thirsty gendarme deciding to get drunk too (p. 12). Here, we see the aptness of Adorno's point that Kafka's characters–especially from *The Man Who Disappeared*–often resemble movie actors and thus contain the "last, disappearing textual links to silent film."[16] Supplying another historical insight, Zischler describes the role of the fin-de-siecle "explainers," who invented more or less fantastic stories to accompany silent films; the Yiddish term for them was *Versteller*, a word that fittingly "plays on both the German *verstellen*, to distort or disguise, and *vorstellen*, to imagine or present." Zischler is right to see in Kafka (or, better, in Kafka/Brod) a *Versteller* in the narrative of "Dora L." who, in *Richard and Samuel*, bears a startling resemblance to the heroine of the popular 1911 trash film, *The White Slave Girl* (pp. 15, 40).

Zischler's book ends as it began, delighting us with poetic speculation and enchanting images but perplexing us with less-than-persuasive argument. Kafka's terse 1921 diary remark, "Afternoon, Palestine film," is hardly enough evidence to support Zischler's notion that Kafka understood Palestine primarily as a "film," but the metaphor is suggestive enough: at the panorama and in the cinema, Kafka had already traveled virtually to Venice and Verona, to Paris and "the equator." Kafka longed for Palestine but, like Moses, never made it to the Promised Land. It remained for him, Zischler tells us, "near enough to touch and far away–an imaginary space, a film" (pp. 106, 115). Palestine as Kafka's movie? This goes a bit too far. But, as before, Zischler fascinates even if he does not convince, by leading us on an eccentric cinematic flight back into the disappearing space of Franz Kafka and the movies he loved.

Notes:

[1]. Franz Kafka, *Tagebuecher*, 3 vols., ed. Hans-Gerd Koch, Michael Mueller, and Malcolm Pasley (Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer, 1994), v. 2: p. 204.

[2]. Some of the works that deal with the importance of film for Kafka's (all published well before Zischler's 1996 German edition) are: Wolfgang Jahn, "Kafka und die Anfaenge des Kinos," *Schiller Jahrbuch* 6 (1962), pp. 353-68, and *Kafkas Roman "Der Verschollene" ("Amerika")* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1965); Malcolm Pasley, "Kafka als Reisender," in *Was bleibt von Franz Kafka?*, ed. Wendelin Schmidt-Dengler (Vienna: Braumueller, 1985), pp. 1-15 (especially 6-10); Bettina Augustin, "Raban im Kino: Kafka und die zeitgenoessische Kinematographie," in *Franz Kafka*, ed. Oesterreichische Franz Kafka Gesellschaft (Vienna: Braumueller, 1987), pp. 38-69; Mark Anderson, *Kafka's Clothes: Ornament and Aestheticism in the Habsburg Fin de Siecle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), especially pp. 115-22. Zischler's pilot article on Kafka and film preceded much of this work, but not Jahn's pioneering efforts (Zischler, " 'Masslose Unterhaltung": Franz Kafka geht ins Kino," *Freibeuter* 16 [1983], pp. 33-47).

[3]. Zischler writes: Kafka's "special trick, to deprive the scene of its reality by translating it into cinema," remained "obscure" to Brod (p. 41).

[4]. This is Brod's comment on "Kafka's suggestion," in Max Brod and Franz Kafka, *Eine Freundschaft*, 2 vols., ed. Malcolm Pasley (Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer, 1987-89), p. 73. On the same day, Kafka seems to want to recant his own idea, calling it "bad": "the bad idea: simultaneous description of the journey and our inward attitude [*innerlichen Stellungnahme*] toward each other concerning the journey" (Kafka, *Tagebuecher* v. 1: p. 943). Brod refers to this project as "avant-garde" in *Der Prager Kreis* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1966), p. 111.

[5]. Even if many of Richard's words do come out of Kafka's notebooks, some of Richard's words also come directly out of *Brod's* notebook. For example, Brod's "we really see only as far as the first floor of all the buildings" is attributed to Richard (Brod and Kafka, *Eine Freundschaft*, v. 1: pp. 74, 198). Moreover, many of Richard's (and Samuel's) words do not appear in *either* writer's notebook. See John Zilcosky, *Kafka's Travels: Exoticism, Colonialism, and the Traffic of Writing* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pp. 25-27, 210n23.

[6]. Brod, *Der Prager Kreis*, p. 110.

[7]. See Max Brod, "Kinematograph in Paris," *Der Merker* 3:1 (February 1912): pp. 95-98.

[8]. The German term is "widerspruchsvolle Doppelbeleuchtung" (Brod and Kafka, *Eine Freundschaft*, v. 1: p. 193).

[9]. For Kafka's interest in media technologies in general, see F. Kittler, *Discourse Networks 1800/1900* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990 [1985]); and *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999) [1986]); and Wolf Kittler, "Schreibmaschi-

nen, Sprechmaschinen: Effekte technischer Medien im Werk Franz Kafkas," in *Franz Kafka: Schriftverkehr*, ed. W. Kittler and Gerhard Neumann (Freiburg: Rombach, 1990), pp. 75-163.

[10]. Kafka, *Tagebuecher*, v. 2: p. 937. Cited in Zischler, p. 26.

[11]. For the filmic aspects of *The Man Who Disappeared*, see Jahn's *Kafka's Roman "Der Verschollene" ("Amerika")* and Anderson's *Kafka's Clothes*. Zischler blankly rejects these arguments (the "evidence" for the cinematic aspects of *The Man Who Disappeared* is "nowhere to be found"), but his criticism rings thin since he does not address any of the evidence that Jahn and Anderson present (p. 107).

[12]. Kafka, *Tagebuecher*, v. 2: p. 937.

[13]. Kafka considered his body to be a writing "organism" for which all basic human activities had to be sacrificed: "When it became clear in my organism that writing was the most productive direction for my being to take, everything rushed in that direction and left empty all those abilities which were directed toward the joys of sex, eating, drinking, philosophical reflection, and above all music. I dieted in all these directions" (Kafka, *Tagebuecher*, v. 2: p. 341). Following on this and other observations, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari speak of Kafka's writing "machine": "[Kafka] knows that all the lines link him to a literary machine of expression for which he is simultaneously the gears, the mechanic, the operator, and the victim. So how will he proceed in this bachelor machine?" See Deleuze/Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1986 [1975], p. 58). On Kafka's view of the new media (esp. gramophonic media) as literature's rival technology, see F. Kittler, *Discourse Networks*, p. 362, and *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, pp. 223-26.

[14]. Kafka, *Tagebuecher*, v. 2: p. 491.

[15]. See Zilcosky, *Kafka's Travels*, pp. 13-14.

[16]. Letter from Theodor Adorno to Walter Benjamin dated December 17, 1934, in *Theodor W. Adorno / Walter Benjamin: Briefwechsel, 1928-1940*, ed. Henri Lonitz (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1994), p. 95. Cited in Zischler, p. 58.

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