

Kafka's Ruins in Popular Culture: A Story of Metamorphosis

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AT THE OUTSET OF THE NOVELLA *THE METAMORPHOSIS* BY FRANZ Kafka, Gregor Samsa thinks: “what’s happened to me?” The answer to this intriguing question has remained obscure—for Samsa, as well as for the novella’s readers. Almost 100 years after the publication of the novella in 1915, one may now pose the questions: what has happened to this novella in contemporary culture, the images of which are manipulated by unprecedented new technological media? How do the new digital media absorb or devour exemplary canonical texts such as Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis*?

The quest for answers initiates our journey into the Kafkaic images in contemporary popular culture, and concludes at an unexpected point: Lady Gaga and the clip of her mega-hit “Bad Romance.” The journey from Kafka’s ruins to Gaga’s creation reveals unexpected, sometimes unconscious connections between literature, psychology, archaeology, anthropology and popular culture. Following Freud’s use of the “archaeology metaphor,” we shall examine the footprints (and trademarks) that Gregor Samsa, the unforgettable protagonist of *The Metamorphosis*, has generated in contemporary culture. But first, let us turn to a basic concept: *ruins*.

Ruins

Imagine that an explorer comes to a region of which but little is known, and there his interest is aroused by ruins [...]. He

may content himself with inspecting what lies on the surface and with questioning the people who live nearby [...] about what tradition tells of the history and meaning of these monumental remains, and taking notes of their statements—and then go on his way. But he may act differently: he may have come equipped with picks, shovels and spades, and may press the inhabitants into his service and arm them with these tools, make an onslaught on the ruins, clear away the rubbish and, starting from the visible remains, may bring to light what is buried.

(Sigmund Freud, "Aetiology of Hysteria," 1896)

Ruins, the remains of old monuments and other constructions which have suffered much damage or disintegration, are in a state of continuous transition (Zucker 2). Materialized as rubble piled in odd, somewhat haphazard shapes, they may be reminiscent of the former grandeur of the monuments they once were. The disintegration that caused their roughened surface or grotesque form sometimes points to a specific process of decay, incremental or catastrophic, thus offering visible traces of historical derivation.

Ruins rarely exist in pristine form. More typical is a history of human intervention upon them, even in their present state. They are sometimes skeletons of former monuments, revealing fragments of the structural frame that underpinned them; some still contain objects, detritus, and decorations, bearing testimony to a history of inhabitation. Ruins therefore often become manifestations of construction, use, and decay. They are remarkable precisely because they expose layers of the past without pretense of representing them with any degree of verisimilitude. Relying on a gazing subject, they demand work of the imagination (Schönle).

Signifying decay and disintegration, ruins may have a creative, even provocative function. Yet by incorporating the architectural vestige into the surrounding nature, the transformation of a complete building into a ruin also makes it a bed for naturally thriving vegetation. The fact that pictorial renderings emphasize the vegetation—a motif that stands in sharp contrast to the dilapidation and collapse of the original building—shows that ruins were conceived as a symbol not only of transience, but also of renewal and regeneration (Barasch 210).

Canonical texts as ruins

Canonical texts are often conceived by later generations as *ruins*. Armed with picks, shovels and spades—or, for this matter, computer text and graphics-tools—we may certainly “make an onslaught” on the monumental cultural remains.

Later canonical texts appear as “monumental ruins.” Even when not well acquainted with these texts, we tend to assign to them a place of honor in our cultural milieu: they are judged, recognized and established as invaluable. Although they have often suffered damage or disintegration by the onslaught of the ignorant or the interest-pursuer, these constructs maintain a mighty potential, as they embody our most profound aesthetical and ethical values. We habitually expropriate from such remains central pillars, structural forms or ornamentation, and *reuse* them in our own contemporary monuments. In the context of modern archaeology and art-history, this practice is known as *spolia* (Latin, “spoils”) (Hansen Fabricius 14).

The term *spolia* has been used since the sixteenth century to designate material originally used in buildings turned into ruins by intention or by accident and reused for a second or third time (Bosman 9-10). Contemporary art historians use the term more loosely, to refer to any artifact incorporated into a setting culturally or chronologically different from that of its creation (Kinney 233) (Figure 1).

We shall examine here a particular case-study—the novella *The Metamorphosis* (1915) by Franz Kafka—representing the general modes in which our digital era utilizes the odd shapes and grotesque forms exposed on the roughened surfaces of shattered canonical ruins. Kafka’s novella—the canonical status of which is undisputed—is of special interest in this respect, as it was initially created as a shaky, almost crumbling architectural construct. This ingenious creation is not fundamentally faulty; rather, although it approaches perfection in its poetic functionality, its overall construction is remarkably fragmentary and fragile. Thus it denies any casual, haphazard interpretation. Kafka’s novella may be termed a preconceived *ruin*; but as such, it still contains the power to stir our imagination and resonate vigorously in our mind.

The term “architectural *spolia*” relates mostly to elements such as classical colonnades—spectacular posts and lintels—rather than to



FIGURE 1. “Spolia”— A Roman column inlaid in a sixteenth century wall, the Old City of Jerusalem.

regular building blocks (Kinney 233). In our case, the term is used to refer to the mysterious figure of the *Ungeziefer*: the “bug.” The true identity of this creature is arguable; its translations vary: “gigantic insect” or “monstrous vermin.” Most readers of the novella imagine a cockroach, probably based on an instinctual reaction of disgust. But one should not grasp the “bug” as a key for analogical or allegorical interpretation. Kafka himself insisted that published editions of *The Metamorphosis* contain no actual illustration of the bug (Figure 2).

The interpretative spectrum of the “bug” is endless, converging at a zero point—the “ground zero” of meaning, or endless meanings. The “bug” is first and foremost a “ruin” in a discourse of representations; no image or illustration can capture its essence. The “bug,” wrote Kafka in the *Blue Octavo Notebooks*, comes from a void. This is not an interpretive remark, but a technical one: the title—*The Metamorphosis*—suggests a doorway into the text, inviting us in, hinting at the treasures within. The process of metamorphosis—the actual transformation of Gregor Samsa’s body—is absent from the text. The story begins after the event: “One morning, as Gregor Samsa was waking up from anxious dreams, he discovered that in his bed he had been changed into a monstrous verminous bug.”

The reader must assume the task of tackling the metamorphosis before actually entering the text. The painful process of the physical



FIGURE 2. (Non)illustrations of the bug: First edition cover (1915), Vladimir Nabokov's illustration, Random House edition (2003).

transformation is portrayed as metaphysical, outside the domain of linguistic rationale or its governing rules. One may only speak of its *outcome*, with no insight about its *becoming*. The first sentence attests to the metamorphosis being de-fiction, maneuvering in the vacuum between the title and the text, invading the plot from its heterotrophic space and fundamentally disrupting it. *The Metamorphosis* is therefore an “iconoclastic” (image-breaking) text: it rejects an iconic representation of the “bug” or of the “metamorphosis” as such. The iconic, monumental ornaments are deliberately denied in it. From the moment of its conception, it is a *ruin* par excellence.

The Popular Twist—From Iconoclastic to Iconodulic Tendencies

Contemporary Western cultures share with psychoanalysis the active presence of the image. Pollock suggests that the reference to archaeology in psychoanalysis and the frequent use of the “archaeology metaphor” demonstrates profound engagement with both the function of the image in the structure of memory and the structure of mnemonic images in the formation of the subject.

The culture of the digital era is fascinated by the image. Restless, vital and impatient, it is often driven by the quest for fast-food. It represents a shift from the “abstract” to the “concrete,” an aspiration

to standardize, solidify and concretize all obscurities. When such texts as Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* are expropriated by the cultural means of the digital era, their "iconoclastic" tendencies most naturally turn "iconodulic" (image-serving).

The tendency toward the rehabilitation of any ruin, toward ensuring a reasonable physical form, may result in the erection of modernist concrete pillars in the midst of the glorious monumental ruin. This may even result in the outrageous claim that such pillars—like an actual bug—were present there in the first place (Figure 3).

Popular culture in its digital manifestation often extracts the image from the unmemorable, the unimaginable, the absent. In its building practices, it seems to be conditioned to closing gaps, cementing dualities and abolishing vagueness. In an attempt to construct "a fully experienced present," it destroys the formative "incomplete past," the splendid *destructivity* inherent in such classical texts as Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*.

The open and egalitarian encounter that occurs on the net—not bound by academic constraints or theoretical dictates—enables us to identify in contemporary popular culture the metamorphosis undergone by Kafka's opus. Scrutinizing the visual images found on the net using the keywords "Kafka + Metamorphosis" (over 200,000 in May 2012), we may discern the cultural processes just described. These images ignore abstract notions in the text, deconstructing them by way of materialization, concretization and commodification. Let us look at just a few of those new constructs which assumingly originate from the canonical Kafkaic text.



METAMORPHOSIS

FIGURE 3. Illustration of an actual bug.

The two illustrations presented below were created by Air Advertising Agency, under the titles “Las Vegas” and “Bollywood,” for the local Belgian Filigranes Bookstore. These advertisements translate the motive of the vermin into the image of a disgusting cockroach, and place it—as in the novella—in a bed within a “proper room for a human being, only somewhat too small.” The Kafkaic “nonimage” is recruited for a recognizable filmic *mise-en-scène*: a Hollywood “sex scene” depicting a sleazy motel, filthy and swarming with cockroaches, in which the protagonist (with his “numerous legs, pitifully thin in comparison to the rest of his circumference”) desperately wastes his remaining days and dollars on booze and hookers; and a Bollywood “catering scene,” in which a sensuous female entertains a lustful and hedonist male. Thus, the vermin—which is a *ruin* par excellence—is seemingly rehabilitated, rising out of the ashes and reappearing in a figurative manner in a commercial milieu. It becomes a central pillar for a new, materialized and concretized structure. Paradoxically, the image-serving (iconodulic) practice apparent here aspires to open the obscure creature to a plethora of interpretations (Figure 4).

Our main argument is not that of “fidelity” to the original text—assuming that popular culture is derivative and secondary to the canonical construct. We question specific modes of adaptation, rather than calling for “iconophobia” (suspicion of the visual) or adhering to “logophilia” (love of the word as sacred) (Stam 58). The transition from the “telling mode” to the “showing mode” generally necessitates

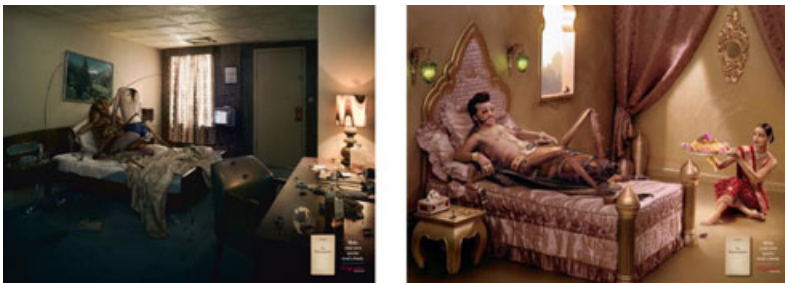


FIGURE 4. Advertising: Ads by “Air for Filigranes” Bookstore (Released: 2008. Executive Creative Director: Eric Hollander; Creative Director: Véronique Sels; Art Directors: Sophie Norman, Nam Simonis, Anthony Hirschfeld; Copywriter: Véronique Sels; Photographer: Marc Paeps).

transposition from the realm of imagination to that of direct perception (Hutcheon 22-23). The particular issue here is with the mechanisms of materialization, concretization and commodification manipulated in such a transposition. Adaptation at its best should not be vampiric: it should not draw the life-blood from its source and leave it dying; it should regenerate, not degenerate.

The cultural maneuver of digging in the buried past and salvaging meaningful images is the essence of archaeology. It is also apparent in a more earthly domain: that of consumer goods (Samsa himself, we should note, was a travelling salesman) branded with the name of Kafka and his *The Metamorphosis*, and directed at their admirers.

Some such goods are sold under the pretentious titles: "Kafka's Metamorphosis Shirts" or "Kafka's Metamorphosis caps." A distributor writes, for instance: "For those who read Franz Kafka, this unique collage item is the perfect Kafka gift! Using his novella 'The Metamorphosis' as inspiration, this original art collage looks great on numerous products!" All the items presented below most "naturally" depict a typical—more or less threatening—cockroach (Figure 5).

"Kafka's Metamorphosis Mugs," for example, are presented as follows: "The perfect size for your favorite morning beverage or late night brew; large, easy-grip handle; treat yourself or give as a gift to someone special." Their written texts most significantly range from "I love Kafka" to "live love insects" (Figure 6).

The use of such goods, which are most often detached from their creative and textual origins, attests to a cultivated taste and a sense of sophistication: enjoying the aura (and the aroma) of an honored



FIGURE 5. Kafka's Metamorphosis Shirts and Cap.



FIGURE 6. Kafka's Metamorphosis Mugs.

canon. These goods become a convenient means to acquire symbolic capital and a respectable status. The irony embedded in such consumer behavior is obvious: the very manifestations of adoration defy the insistence of Kafka—the very source of admiration—not to identify his creation with any consistent and concrete visual image. His request is bluntly disregarded by his consumers—or maybe better termed, “tomb robbers.” In this sense, the use of *spolia* is akin to the classical meaning of “things taken by force;” obtained by practices of despoliation (Kinney 233–234).

When the metaphor of the pest is carried to its limit of concretization—to the point of “ad nauseam” (annoying, tiresome and sickening as an actual cockroach appearing in our kitchen sink)—it seems high time to eliminate it. In the same manner in which we resurrected a nonliving creature, we can now celebrate its ritualistic killing. Thus, the Johnson County Library System exhibited an advertising campaign produced by Barkley Advertising Agency, featuring literary references as if they were local businesses. A sign on one of their courier trucks reads: “Kafka’s Pest Kontrol” (Figure 7).

The Counter-Current—Lady Gaga’s Fame Monster

We have observed the manner in which digital era culture utilizes canonical structural forms in order to create new—at times barely related—concretized constructs. This culture seemingly operates in the spirit of *archaeology*: the systematic recovery and interpretation of material culture or physical remains. Thus, it often finds no other way but to materialize the nonmaterial. It is restricted by its pretense



FIGURE 7. Kafka's Pest Control (The Johnson County Library System, exhibiting an advertising campaign produced by Barkley Advertising Agency).

to resemble Old World archaeology—tending to focus on the material remains themselves, rather than New World archaeology—tending to direct attention towards the subject matter and the deeper meaning of past life forms as part and parcel of *anthropology* (Darvill). In this respect, Lady Gaga seems to represent a New World founded by deeply penetrating anthropological—or if you will mythological—insights.

In her music video “Bad Romance,” Lady Gaga entertains with bestiality. Since ancient times the animal kingdom has been a lavish source of metaphors, similes and symbols. It also has a significant role in metamorphosis—the transformation of one being or of one species into another. All mythologies feature such stories of human-animal transformation (Figure 8).

Lady Gaga does not implicitly mention Kafka; but the narrative of the clip, the first single from the album “The Fame Monster,” represents the current version of the awakening of the freak from anxious dreams into a world which threatens to destroy it. At the outset, the twisted figure breaks out of the cocoon into the body of the clip in a similar manner in which Gregor Samsa awakes into the novella with his beastly body. The breaking image bursts with incoherent syllables, reminiscent of Samsa’s “irrepressible, painful squeaking, which



FIGURE 8. Lady Gaga—"Bad Romance." (Image from the album *The Fame Monster*).

left the words positively distinct only at the first moment and distorted them in reverberation, so that one did not know if one had heard correctly."

In her artistic endeavor, Lady Gaga uses numerous graven and molten images. In this respect, she seems as image-serving or iconodulic as any agent of popular culture. However, her art signifies in its deep structure a counter-current to the mainstream of popular culture: flowing from iconodulic to iconoclastic tendencies.

Lady Gaga's lyrics and videos have successfully touched on a hypermodern disenchantment and appetite for the raw. The cult formed around her arises from a retrospective vision as well as the use of very particular images. Lady Gaga does not only personify the trend, the movement, the *Zeitgeist*; she has also acquired her iconic, fetishistic status by regressing—or rather transgressing—into the archetypal past. Beyond the celebration of the "beast," the "monster," the "freak," she falls back to such basic cultural constructs as the "shape-shifter"—a common theme in mythology, folklore, and fairy

tales—or the “metamorphosis” (especially, in Lady Gaga’s case, transforming from human to animal and vice versa).

Such cultural constructs are deep-rooted in the genetic code of Western culture. Much like notions of the “Inferno” that have survived and intrigued humanity for thousands of years, “metamorphosis” has captured the imagination of humanity since ancient times (e.g., Ovidius in the first century; Apuleus in the second). Phrased differently, “metamorphosis” is a kind of *meme*—a postulated unit of cultural ideas or symbols transmitted from one mind to another through different communication media (in our case YouTube).

Thus, Lady Gaga is a New World anthropologist: she does not draw directly from the material remains, but turns to their founding myths and deeper meanings, their primal patterns and mimetic origins. Kafka formed the image of Samsa from these very inspirational “materials.” He did not succumb to materiality, retained his iconoclastic tendencies, and has thus maintained his status as one of the most evaluated canonical writers.

Freud points out particularly the fast bond between the “remains found in the debris” and the “fragments of memories” (Thomas 161–169). This bond has apparently become looser in contemporary popular culture; yet the reference to canonical remnants can hardly be avoided. Freud stated that although silent in themselves, “*Saxa Loquuntur!*”—“Stones Speak!” Canonical works, much like archaeological objects, act in both an animistic way—as a shared reference point—and a totemistic way, as mental signifiers for society to maintain a consistent sense of similitude or identity (Russell 195). Such profound potentials beg for cultural exploration.

In Freud’s archaeological fable, disruption of a seemingly unassailable surface distinguishes the actions of the traveler from those of the excavator. The same distinction, he argues, separates those satisfied with merely identifying the symptoms from more intrepid investigators who would be “willing to make themselves heard as witnesses to the history of the origins of the illness” (O’Donoghue 657).

Lady Gaga—much like Kafka—seems to be a true excavator, an investigator who attests to the foundational origins of our civilization. She is more than a witness of her epoch; she is an active reflection of it. Her profound intrapsychic dramas—disrupting the visible and recovering what has become virtually inaccessible—is a refreshing scene in our often shallow and superficial, commercialized pop(ular) culture.

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