


Agency and Political Engagement in Gide and Barrault's Post-war Theatrical Adaptation of Kafka's *The Trial*

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**Abstract:** In her article, "Agency and Political Engagement in Gide and Barrault's Post-war Theatrical Adaptation of Kafka's *The Trial*" Yevgenya Strakovsky considers the political themes of André Gide and Jean-Louis Barrault's *Le Procès* (*The Trial*, 1947), the first theatrical adaptation of Franz Kafka's *Der Prozess* (*The Trial*, 1914). Strakovsky demonstrates that *Le Procès*, written and staged in the immediate aftermath of World War II, levels a critique against the passive complicity of citizens in unjust persecution in both its script and its staging. The paper also considers the elements of Kafka's prose that lend themselves to a socially engaged adaptation, and demonstrates that the Gide-Barrault production perpetuates a call to action that is present in Kafka's novel formally and thematically. Strakovsky concludes by suggesting that political adaptations of Kafka's *The Trial* provide a vital discursive space to examine the nature of, and need for, postmodern agency.

## Yevgenya STRAKOVSKY

### Agency and Political Engagement in Gide and Barrault's Post-war Theatrical Adaptation of Kafka's *The Trial*

On June 4, 1942, the day before he was due to leave France for wartime exile in Tunis, French writer André Gide agreed to a lunch invitation from young actor and director Jean-Louis Barrault. They had recently collaborated on an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and Barrault now wanted Gide to write a script based on Kafka's *The Trial* (*Der Prozess*). Gide initially shied away from working with the novel, revered in French existentialist circles for its absurdist ambiguity: "I had the greatest admiration for this strange work" but "the difficulties facing such an adaptation seemed insurmountable to me" (Gide, *Le Procès*, "Prefatory Note" ii). However, Gide's experience in exile would transform his approach to Kafka. He would later recall the pain of rereading *The Trial* in Tunis: "the anguish this book breathes is at times almost intolerable, so that one ceaselessly tells oneself: this hounded being, it is I" (Malone, "Starring Josef K." 42).

Barrault, too, claimed that kinship with Kafka's protagonist Josef K. inspired his interest in adapting the novel. He once wrote that if war broke out, "we would be recognized...neither by the right nor by the left: on all sides we would be considered as felons and outlaws. It was with that future in view that I penetrated into the world of Kafka" (Barrault, *Memories of Tomorrow*, 102). When Gide returned to France in 1945, Barrault had already made an outline of scenes, and the two men worked closely for the next several months to co-write the first theatrical adaptation of Kafka's novel. Gide and Barrault's *The Trial* (*Le Procès*) was produced and performed by the 'Compagnie Madeleine Renaud-Jean-Louis Barrault' in Paris (1947) and New York (1952), with Barrault directing and playing the lead role of Josef K.

In this paper, I argue that *Le Procès* explores the nature of citizenship in a totalitarian regime, foregrounding the political themes that would dominate Kafka reception in the coming decades, exemplified in later adaptations like Orson Welles's film *The Trial* (1962). Traditionally, *Le Procès* is read as a product of the French existentialist and surrealist fascination with Kafka (Caputo-Mayr, "Kafka" 9), due to the black-and-white geometry of Felix Labisse's two-story set, the otherworldly sound effects, and the unnatural speech patterns of the actors. Emphasizing the historical and cultural context in which Gide and Barrault approach *The Trial*'s parable of unjust persecution, this paper rather suggests that *Le Procès* marks a turn toward politically cognizant interpretations of Kafka in the postwar era.

Beneath what Gide called the "waterfalls and surprises" ("cascatelles et l'étonnement," [Ravy 9, my trans.]) of Barrault's highly stylized staging, *Le Procès* draws our attention to the ethics of citizenship in a totalitarian regime. The same set design which earns *Le Procès* its stylistic reputation is an important tool for highlighting the role of observation and passivity in Josef K.'s trial. As action takes place in one part of the set, a figure or group is often visible elsewhere—ignoring, observing or commenting on the action. The play highlights the Courts' dependence on the ignorance, acceptance, and complicity of the citizenry by portraying the range of passive participants who contribute to Joseph K.'s demise, revealing our complicity in totalitarianism as ordinary bystanders. Ultimately, *Le Procès* urges the audience to confront their own responsibility as citizens of an oppressive regime. The significant changes that Gide and Barrault make to the storyline—rearranging the order of scenes and adding minor characters—further emphasize this civic element. Most prominently, Josef K.'s appearance before the Courts—which is at the beginning of Kafka's novel—is moved to the end of the play, directly before Josef K.'s execution, transforming from an expository satire to a climactic soliloquy in which K. defends human freedom.

As an interpretation of Kafka, *Le Procès* reveals the fundamental yearning for agency that is at the core of Kafka's novel. *Le Procès* confronts the audience with the emotional experience of political persecution, as well as the justice system's dependence on the ignorance and complicity of its citizenry. Moreover, *Le Procès* strives to transmit Kafka's call to agency onwards, urging those who witness Josef K.'s narrative to reject their own passivity. By engaging with the postwar implications of Kafka's parable, *Le Procès* replicates the experience of reading and being activated by Kafka's work, as well as the work itself. In exerting one's limited agency as an adaptor in the ambiguous and impenetrable narrative of Josef K., the adaptor struggles with the ambivalent helplessness and agency of the twentieth century subject.

Paul Claudel's review of *Le Procès*, which appeared in *Le Figaro Littéraire*, reveals *The Trial*'s potential as an allegory of modern citizenship: "we have seen it in Germany, and now again in Russia, we still see whole populations that live in a state of arrest for unspoken crimes and in constant anticipation of the unexpected. And tomorrow, without knowing why, we, too, could find ourselves arrested,

tortured, executed" (Claudel, "Le Procès" 13, my trans.) ("En Allemagne et aujourd'hui encore en Russie, nous avons vu, nous voyons des populations entières vivre sous le coup d'une condamnation constituant la sanction d'une faute inconnue et dans un état normal de surpris. Du jour au lendemain, il peut nous arriver, sans savoir pourquoi, d'être arrêtés, torturés, exécutés" [Claudel, "Le Procès" 13]).

Gide's choices as a script-writer similarly emphasize Josef K.'s role as a citizen in an unjust society. In the play, the scene of Josef K.'s arrest highlights the public nature of K.'s trial and encapsulates what becomes an underlying motif of public spectacle in Gide's script and stage directions. Let us consider the well-known opening passage of Kafka's novel, which forms the foundation of the play's first scene:

Someone must have been telling lies about Josef K., he knew he had done nothing wrong but, one morning, he was arrested. Every day at eight in the morning he was brought his breakfast by Mrs. Grubach's cook – Mrs. Grubach was his landlady – but today she didn't come. That had never happened before. K. waited a little while, looked from his pillow at the old woman who lived opposite and who was watching him with an inquisitiveness quite unusual for her, and finally, both hungry and disconcerted, rang the bell (Kafka, *The Trial* 2).

Jemand mußte Josef K. verleumdet haben, denn ohne daß er etwas Böses getan hätte, wurde er eines Morgens verhaftet. Die Köchin der Frau Grubach, seiner Zimmervermieterin, die ihm jeden Tag gegen acht Uhr früh das Frühstück brachte, kam diesmal nicht. Das war noch niemals geschehen. K. wartete noch ein Weilchen, sah von seinem Kopfkissen aus die alte Frau, die ihm gegenüber wohnte und die ihn mit einer an ihr ganz ungewöhnlichen Neugierde beobachtete, dann aber, gleichzeitig befremdet und hungrig, läutete er. (Kafka, *Der Prozess* 9)

In the source text, no action takes place until the last self-contained phrase – "rang the bell" ("läutete er"). Kafka conveys the transformation of a man from free to guilty through motionless observations: the absence of his landlady's cook and the unusual inquisitiveness of the neighbor. Gide's script transforms Josef K.'s interiority into a spritely monologue: "My breakfast! ... What happened to it? ... Where is it? ... oh, that Mrs. Grubach! She's forgotten to bring it! ... Now she'll make me late!...Imagine Mrs. Grubach forgetting about me!" (Gide and Barrault, *The Trial* 3). Gide's script exposes Josef K. to not only the curious eavesdropper, but also to Mrs. Grubach, whose "furtive appearance gives away the fact that she has been listening at the door" (Gide and Barrault, *The Trial* 18). Gide highlights the public nature of K.'s ordeal by repeatedly drawing attention to passive, curious, but ultimately indifferent observers. Throughout the play, bank workers, pedestrians, and nameless citizens witness K.'s struggle against the Law, sometimes observing, sometimes helping the authorities. K.'s trial is not an absurd nightmare, but the interplay between lawmakers and citizens who choose to allow and even facilitate oppression from a safe distance.

Recent scholarship has emphasized Gide's interest in overturning institutional oppression and urging the public to engage in social justice, allowing new insight into his reading of Kafka. Gide's scholar Tom Conner argues that "Gide's intention manifestly was to change society by changing the forces that shaped it, whether public attitudes or institutions like the law courts or the *compagnies concessionnaires* [sic] that exploited the Congo" ("Introduction" 1). In 1913, a year before Kafka wrote *The Trial*, Gide came into direct contact with the modern justice system, which he would later call a machine of justice ("machine-à-rendre-la-justice" [Gide, *Souvenirs* 177]). In his memoir, *Souvenirs de la cour d'assises*, Gide recalls his jury duty in Rouen as "twelve days of anguish" ("l'angoisse") that revealed the "murky and precarious" ("douteuse et précaire") landscape of the justice system (*Souvenirs* 8). Gide's memoirs condemn "the vagueness of the evidence, its lack of precision, its fragmentary quality, and its reliance on mere supposition" (Lambeth, "Gide and Justice" 16). Echoing Kafka's novel, Gide grows repeatedly frustrated by the manipulations of judges and authorities, who force defendants into uncomfortable situations, bully and interrupt witnesses, and control the jury's verdicts through complex questionnaires that interfere with a juror's conscience (Lambeth, "Gide and Justice" 78), and only serve to perpetuate the court's authority. Ignorance and confusion play a central role in maintaining this power. Gide writes that the Courts themselves create this confusion, enforcing logical constraints that prevent citizens from voicing their stories or drawing independent conclusions. This same cyclical nightmare is a defining feature of Kafka's novel.

While *Souvenirs* condemns the courts for using ignorance and confusion to prevent agency, *Le Procès* begins to shift the burden of responsibility onto the citizens who accept this power imbalance. Gide's Courts cannot change reality in the nightmarish way that they do in Kafka's novel. The Law is enacted by those who observe and condone K.'s trial. Echoing *Souvenirs*, the Inspector and the guards who arrest K. allow their ignorance of the Law to validate its power. The Inspector tells K. that he is merely following orders. "We have a very secondary function," the Inspector tells K.: "we hardly know

anything about your case" (Gide and Barrault, *The Trial* 15). The scene emphasizes that the Inspector and guards are only a few of those who participate in Josef K.'s arrest. As in the novel, the scene of Josef K.'s arrest is filled with bystanders. As guards invade K.'s bedroom, "the old woman, still curious" brings "an old man to look with her" (4). Josef K. himself invokes the neighbors as "witnesses," telling the guards, "if those two don't want to be dragged into this as witnesses, they'd better stop staring at me" (11). Merely by being present, the couple shares in the moral responsibility of upholding the truth, in this case K.'s innocence. In addition to the old couple, we see two guards, three gentlemen from the bank, and the figure of Mrs. Grubach listening curiously in the next room. These figures represent a range of neutral positions; yet all of them choose to witness Josef K.'s situation. By taking no action, everyone participates in K.'s arrest. We see that there can be no such thing as an uninvolved observer of the Law: everyone in the scene has a role to play in Josef K.'s demise, from the Inspector to the nosy neighbors in the next building. The scene of the arrest becomes a fugue of ignorance and passivity, as each figure relinquishes agency in favor of submitting to the Law's authority.

Barrault's *mise-en-scène* directs our attention instead to the anxiety of the politically vulnerable. In an interview with Sandra Solov, Barrault explained that his staging concept aimed to transpose Kafka's mental world into a physical space (Ravy, *Kafka* 13), mirroring the novel's interiority. The staging also encourages the audience to co-experience Josef K.'s helplessness as the victim of an oppressive political system. It is noteworthy that, in contrast to religious readings of *The Trial*, in which Josef K.'s guilt is a metaphysical truth linked to Kafka's own Jewishness, *Le Procès* emphasizes Josef K.'s innocence ("il n'est pas coupable" Barrault, qtd. in Ravy 12). Josef K.'s interaction with the unpredictable court system would have been especially resonant for Barrault in 1947, as the post-occupation purges became a witch-hunt of supposed collaborators. The Parisian Courts of Justice and Governmental Commission for the Purging of Entertainment were established to root out and try those who were convicted of collaboration or "national unworthiness" ("indignité nationale," [Malone, "Starring Josef K." 57]). Much like Josef K., the accused were labeled guilty rather than arrested, and in addition to his own trial, Barrault was involved in vast bureaucratic efforts to exonerate his friends, including actor-director Sacha Guitry and journalist Robert Brasillach. Like Josef K., Guitry was released to await trial just as Barrault was exonerated (Lottman, *The Purge* 92). Guitry's trial never took place; he eventually learned that the case had been dismissed. Barrault's petition also failed to save Brasillach, who was executed on February 6, 1945 (Lottman 139). Barrault wrote that "my guilt feelings were having a field day" (Barrault, *Memories for Tomorrow* 175) throughout the rehearsals for *Le Procès*; Barrault's own freedom was a constant reminder of the suffering endured by his friends and colleagues. Barrault's directorial choices emphasize K.'s constant state of uncertainty, a blurring between his perceptions and reality itself, and the resulting anxiety which further derails the persecuted defendant.

Stylistically, Barrault conveys the experience of persecution by turning the entire *mise-en-scène*, including acting and sound effects, into a projection of Josef K.'s mind ("projections personnelles du héros," [Barrault, *Cas de conscience*, 57]). Barrault's co-actors are directed to perform both as independent characters and as reflections of Josef K.'s subjectivity. By "orchestrating" the show's "elements, costumes, décor, acting, music...like a symphony" (White, "Legitimate" 43), Barrault aims to convey a unified subjectivity and immerse the audience in the nightmare of Josef K.'s inner torment. Aesthetically, Barrault's *mise-en-scène* draws on his studies with the surrealists and close relationship with Antonin Artaud, what Barrault called *le théâtre total* (Gordon, *Le théâtre* 85). Barrault's poetics of theater reflect Artaud's call for an immersive sensory experience that synthesizes "everything that occupies the stage...everything that manifests itself in the material expression of a stage, and which addresses first and foremost the senses, rather than the spirit, like language" ("Tout ce qui occupe la scène,...tout ce qui se manifeste et s'exprime matériellement sur une scène, et qui s'adresse d'abord aux sens, au lieu de s'adresser d'abord à l'esprit comme le langage" [Artaud, *Le Théâtre* 46, my translation]). Barrault's attempt to convey deep subjectivity can also be seen as a means of recreating the adaptation process. Like the reader of Kafka's novel, the audience of the play sees a dual reality: both that of Josef K. and its own. This mingling of realities mimics the pervasiveness of Kafka's prose, thus adapting both the psychological effects of persecution and the experience of immersing oneself in Kafka's work.

The script and staging highlight the unconscious complicity that condemns Josef K. K.'s dialogue with his landlady, Mrs. Grubach, reveals how the civic concerns of Gide's script work in tandem with Barrault's staging choices to augment the play's political commentary. In the novel, Mrs. Grubach is a neutral bourgeoisie to whom Josef K. apologizes for disturbing the peace in the building. In *Le Procès*, she becomes complicit with the Law. Like the Inspector himself, Mrs. Grubach uses her ignorance to

justify K.'s arrest. "This arrest of yours," she tells K., "there's something almost learned about it...Something learned that no one really understands...But after all, isn't it true, that we don't always have to understand" (Gide and Barrault, *The Trial* 25). Dismissing the trial as "learned" and herself as "foolish," Mrs. Grubach blindly places her faith in the Court's logic and begins to treat K. with skepticism, refusing to shake his hand (26). Mrs. Grubach is not any more ignorant than the Law's officials; exactly like the guards, she enables K.'s arrest by refusing to think independently.

Echoing Gide's characterization, the rehearsal notes for *Le Procès* indicate that, for Mrs. Grubach, "K. is already guilty because he is arrested," indicating that she buys into the Court's oppressive logic (Benmussa, "Notes" 88, my trans.). Barrault directed Mrs. Grubach (first played by Catherine Fonteney) to become increasingly threatening in her conversation with K., turning her into a *tricoteuse* whose knitting is an allegory of torture and death. As Josef K. speaks, the sock Mrs. Grubach is darn-ing swings in her fingers "like a marionette that she controls" ("pour simuler une marionette dont elle va jouer," [Benmussa 88-89, my trans.]), until she lets it fall on the word "tragique" (89), leaving it inert on the ground, mimicking decapitation. While some of Mrs. Grubach's actions reflect Josef K.'s own anxiety, in line with Barrault's depiction of subjectivity, others reveal her independence as a collaborator. Just before she leaves the stage, Mrs. Grubach explicitly turns to face the spectators ("s'arrête face au public," Benmussa 95), revealing her collaboration with the guards, saying: "They said – you understand, of course, we have our orders" (Gide and Barrault, *The Trial* 30). At the same moment, Benmussa notes, Josef K. drops defeated onto his bed (Benmussa 95). K.'s trial takes place only through the complicity of all those who give the Courts power: the Inspector, the guards, the bank employees, Mrs. Grubach, the old couple, Josef K. himself, and ultimately, the audience. By allowing an absent authority to direct their moral intuitions, all of these bystanders enable, perpetuate, and serve the Courts.

Juxtaposed with the passive bystanders in the play, Josef K. becomes a refreshing figure of resistance. Part II, scene III, which blends two scenes from the novel (Josef K.'s work at the bank with the Advocate's humiliation of the defendant Block), uses the multiple spaces of Felix Labisse's set to explore what it means to witness and allow oppression. As K. speaks with a bank client on the platform, he is constantly distracted by the Advocate's degradation of Block, who cowers in a begging posture at the Advocate's feet (Gide and Barrault, *The Trial* 86-93). "In his hole, like a dog, I can't believe it" K. cries out from his own desk, invoking the novel's famous last line several scenes too soon (92). By having K.'s workday and Block's mistreatment occur at the same time, the scene highlights that injustice is no less real when we do not witness it directly, or when we distract ourselves from it with other responsibilities. In "Feuillets," Gide writes that evil is the human ability to rationalize wrongdoing and injustice, allowing it to continue (*Journal* 609). As a witness to Block's mistreatment, Josef K. rejects this passivity. He jumps up and runs to the lower stage to dismiss the Advocate from his case and protest to the Great Judge on Block's behalf. In the script, K.'s refusal to work with the Advocate becomes a kind of boycott of the Advocate's tactics. This scene demonstrates that K.'s power in the face of the Courts comes from his ability to follow his conscience when confronted with injustice.

Josef K. reflects Gide's own ambivalence as a political activist. "Gide often said that his function was to disturb [*inquiéter*]" (Conner, "Introduction" 4), to use his writings as a "mirror which allows us to recognize and analyze ourselves" (Lambeth 86), and thus to raise awareness of social truths. He wrote extensively about his observations in Chad and the Congo, where he witnessed the barbaric practices of the colonial powers. His most infamous publication, however, was his *Retour de l'U.R.S.S.*, a 1936 travelogue of his visit to the Soviet Union, which publicly denounced Stalinism. This text provoked "an enormous scandal" and led to "a polemical exchange between Gide and Jean Guéhenno, who vigorously reproached Gide for his lack of political fidelity" during the revolution in Spain (Moutote, "The Meaning" 20). Although Gide was committed to engaging with society's moral concerns, it is questionable how much his personal commitment to truth empowered him to act against oppression or exert agency himself. With *Retour de l'U.R.S.S.* as a heroic exception, Gide's many socially engaged writings must be considered with a critical distance. As one critic scathingly wrote, André Gide "lived dangerously under three layers of flannel vests" (qtd. in Conner 4), with a pen as his primary weapon. Like Gide, K. is a herald of activism among a sea of passive onlookers; he alone seems to be aware of the oppressive nature of the Courts. However, Josef K. does not succeed in overthrowing or even altering the methods of the Courts. By the time the guards lead K. to his execution, Gide's directions note, he "offers no further resistance. In fact, he helps them" (Gide and Barrault, *The Trial* 138).

The conclusion of the play – Josef K.'s trial and execution – culminates in a powerful plea for social engagement. The dialogues leading to K.'s execution show that independent thought is the foundation of human life – that relinquishing this ability is tantamount to death. Josef K.'s defeat comes when he

gives up his right to question the Law, as the Inspector prevents him from debating: "Don't worry about principles; there are others here to take care of them" (Gide and Barrault, *The Trial* 137) When the Inspector then asks him, "What do you want to say?" K. responds, "Nothing" (138), and the stage directions indicate that from this point on, K. "offers no further resistance" (138). Rather than stripping K. of his clothing, as in the novel, the Courts strip K. of his voice and agency. K. becomes another body in the legal machine. Barrault's staging also evokes dehumanization in the penultimate scene, where Josef K. enters the Court with a chorus of defendants who march like automatons, carrying their own chairs with a "grande résignation" (Benmussa, "Notes" 97) to the beat of a metronome.

The resignation of this final scene reflects the play's historical moment. Fifteen years later, when Orson Welles undertakes his film adaptation of *The Trial*, he refuses to accept K.'s defeat (McBride, *Orson Welles* 141). Even though Welles kills K., he preserves K.'s human dignity by having K. fight back and refusing to show K.'s death: "All we see is the explosion and a black mushroom cloud" (Woods, *Kafka* 195). Even in death, Welles's K. has the dignity of privacy. Welles believed that Kafka would not have depicted the humiliation of dying "like a dog" if he could have foreseen extermination camps (Wheldon, *Orson Welles* <[http://www.wellesnet.com/trial\\_bbc\\_interview.htm](http://www.wellesnet.com/trial_bbc_interview.htm)>). Gide and Barrault do not have Welles's luxury of optimism. The wartime politics of humiliation and mechanized murder are not yet legacies of history, and presenting K.'s death in a dignified way is not a realistic option. Josef K.'s death in *Le Procès* is even more dehumanizing than in Kafka's novel, precisely because it is integrated into social normalcy. As the guards approach K., the stage directions note, "workers, with their tool-kits, pass by rapidly on the platform [above K.], indifferent to what is going on. Some revelers and loose women in evening clothes: a Baudelaire-like dawn" (Gide and Barrault, *The Trial* 138). While Kafka's execution is tragic because it is hidden and unceremonious, the play's depiction is even more disturbing because it seems public and acceptable.

The conclusion emphasizes the implications of Josef K.'s death for those who survive him by creating two characters who do not exist in the novel. As the guards position K., "a gentleman and his wife pass by. The lady stops for a moment, looking at the execution" (Gide and Barrault 138). Analogous to the older couple from the opening scene, this new generation stands poised at a decisive moment in K.'s story. A new awareness distinguishes this young couple from their predecessors. "Look! What are they doing to him?" the woman cries out, "It's very strange" (138). For the first time in the play, we see a figure who has the urge to intervene, a figure who represents engagement rather than indifference. It is the same feeble hope that Josef K. expresses in the novel: "Who was that? A friend? A good person?...Somebody who wanted to help?" (Kafka, *The Trial*, 272). In the play, the audience rather than K is invited to hope for redemption. But as in Kafka's novel, salvation is interrupted. The woman's husband, "who understands" (Gide and Barrault, *The Trial* 140), pulls her away: "Come, my dear. These are matters of the Law. They have nothing to do with us" (140).

Another opportunity for independent thinking is lost to the comfort of relegating moral authority to someone else. The young couple is as passive as every other bystander in the play, but the woman's question echoes powerfully as Josef K. is stabbed. We wonder if he could have been saved, had the couple intervened. Like the woman, the audience watches Josef K.'s unjust execution and allows it to take place. The audience has learned that the Law is as strong as those who believe in it. Having witnessed the story of Josef K., the audience no longer has the luxury of Mrs. Grubach's ignorance. The young woman, becomes a voice of hope – a plea that threatens to "outlive" Josef K. (Kafka, *The Trial* 272), that those who witness this execution do not follow its example.

To conclude, I would like to consider how Gide and Barrault intervene in critical reception of Kafka, both by emphasizing the themes of agency present in Kafka's novel and by exerting agency over the novel through the act of adaptation. As the first attempt to recreate Kafka onstage, *Le Procès* engendered much controversy about Kafka's adaptability, which continues to resurface "with every tentative new attempt" to adapt *The Trial* (Ravy 13). While the New York Times praised Barrault's "stunning production" of "technical splendor" (Savacool, "Barrault-Gide" X3), critics like Robert Rochefort insisted that even the most skilled adaptation of Kafka could never be adequate ("ne sera jamais satisfaisant" [Rochefort, "Une œuvre liée" 41]). Michel Cournot wrote that "if there is any art least compatible with Kafka's writing, it is most certainly theater" ("s'il est un art plus que les autres incompatible avec l'écriture de Kafka, c'est bien l'art du théâtre," ["Avant-critique" 106, my trans.]), because the stage would separate Kafka's unity of language and content. Adorno saw the staging of *The Trial* as sadistic, arguing that drama depicts the freedom of the individual, while Kafka's characters are caught in a *Fliegenklatsche* – a fly-trap, so it is tragic to drag them onto a stage and make us watch their torment (Adorno, *Prismen* 270).

These reactions echo the age-old fear that the act of adaptation will exert some agency over the original text – in this case, that it will take away from the novel's abstractness. Rochefort writes that

in choosing to bring the work onstage, one must depict one of a multitude of possible interpretations and thus negate Kafka's unique ambiguity ("Le choix qu'il faut bien faire, pour porter l'œuvre sur la scène, au milieu d'une multitude d'interprétations possibles, ne saurait échapper à l'arbitraire, il apporte nécessairement une limitation contraire au dessein général" [Rochefort, "Une œuvre liée" 41]). Scholar Peter Lev similarly measures Barrault and Gide's success according to their ability to "have preserved something of Kafka's thematic ambiguity" ("Three Adaptations" 181). As Michelle Woods points out, the mixture of ambiguity, anxiety, and nightmarish bureaucracy we associate with Kafka has evolved into an independent concept – the Kafkaesque. As Woods notes, adapters of Kafka are repeatedly evaluated according to their ability to create this particular affect, facing criticism when they channel Kafka's ambiguity into more defined allegories, and ultimately perpetuating a one-sided understanding of Kafka's work (9).

Responding to critics, Barrault argued that Kafka's ambiguity must not necessarily be an end in itself, but that it might instead be the starting point of adaptation. In his essay, "The Case of Conscience and Kafka," Barrault argues against the assumption that ambiguity must be recreated, proposing it as a catalyst rather than a feature of an adaptation: "is this kind of ambiguity...an obstacle which renders the transfer of these works to the theater impossible, or is it on the contrary one of the profound reasons which justify their transfer to the theater?" (128). Rather than exerting agency over the text, Barrault responds to a call to agency already in the text itself. Kafka's blend of realism and metaphor is agitating, encouraging one to resolve the dissonance inherent in the text and become an agent in co-creating the narrative. To borrow conceptually from Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition*, Kafka's ambiguity creates a space in which we can insert ourselves as agents, just as we must insert ourselves into the world. *The Trial's* inherent incompleteness actively fosters creative engagement, and the narrative's ambiguity creates space for infusing Kafka's metaphors into the reader's reality. In our case, Barrault and Gide's response to Kafka's ambiguity creates a political reflection on postmodern citizenship.

Scholars traditionally see Kafka as depicting the helplessness of the modern individual; most recently, for example, in *Freedom and Confinement in Modernity: Kafka's Cages* by Kordela and Vardoulakis. I argue that Kafka's work invites agency on a thematic and stylistic level. Kafka's works are imbued with an emancipatory challenge – a call for individuals to take agency over the symbols which constrain their identities and direct the course of their lives in some form. In "Before the Law" ("Vor dem Gesetz"), the parable embedded in *The Trial*, passivity is the protagonist's central flaw. Coming from the countryside to ask for "entry to the law" (Kafka 255), the protagonist of the fable waits for years for the guard to grant him entry ("Eintritt gewähren," 255). Until his death, he asks for permission which the guard never grants. The power of the guard seems immense on the surface, but in the last sentence, we learn that the door at which the man sat was always meant solely for him. The man's great failure, then, was not his ineligibility, but rather the decision he made on the day he arrived, to wait until he got permission to enter ("doch lieber zu warten, bis er die Erlaubnis zum Eintritt bekommt" [256]). The guard does not prohibit the man from entering; he states that he cannot grant entry. Indeed, it is up to the protagonist to enter through the door that was meant for him.

The courage to reject one's helplessness also appears in the parable "Give up" ("Gibs auf," 358]), whose narrator is faced with the world's refusal to direct him. Searching for the train station, the narrator believes that he "cannot find the way himself" (358), but the guard whom he asks for directions only laughs, telling him that his question is itself a failure. If he turns to others for answers, the narrator might as well give up ("gibs auf"). By contrast, the protagonist of the more affirmative parable "der Aufbruch," usually translated as "Sudden Departure," displays readiness to leave for a "thankfully monstrous journey" ("zum Glück wahrhaft ungeheure Reise," Kafka, *Erzählungen*, 321) without any knowledge of his future. Indeed, the word *Aufbruch* can also refer to "dawn" or "rupture." At a linguistic level, Kafka's texts do not necessarily express or accept helplessness. In fact, they criticize those who give away their decision-making agency.

Narrative and story-telling are themselves manifestations of agency in Kafka's oeuvre. In *The Trial*, the narrative of Josef K.'s guilt is enough to incriminate him ("someone must have been telling lies about Josef. K" [2]; "Jemand mußte Josef K. verleumdet haben" [Kafka, *Prozess*, 9]), highlighting the power of narrative to shape reality. Similarly, Kafka's "The Judgment" ("Das Urteil") explores how agency is thwarted through competing narratives. The protagonist Georg attempts to tell multiple narratives of his life to appease himself, his father, and his friend. His beliefs about his life, his words to his father, and his letters to his friend all represent different versions of his life; yet none of these adaptations reflect the true narrative. As Georg's father condemns him for his lies, we see that Georg's crime is one of bad story-telling. Even though Georg makes an attempt at narrative agency, writing



stories of what his life ought to be, he falls short of the true challenge of modernity: choosing a single, if imperfect, story.

Finally, Kafka's works engage readers as agents in a narrative space. In his letters, Kafka expresses concern about leaving room for his readers to interpret and recreate his texts. Kafka protested emphatically when his editors presented him with a book cover depicting the cockroach in "The Metamorphosis" ("Die Verwandlung"). "The insect itself cannot be depicted," Kafka wrote; "it cannot even be shown from a distance," because it would influence the reader's mental imagery (*Letters to Friends* 115). Rather than feeding the reader a pre-approved visual, Kafka's works highlight a desire for each reader's imagination to permeate the text and create an individualized inner adaptation of the story. Kafka's respect for interpretive creativity is reflected, too, in his reactions to drawings for "the Stoker" ("Der Heizer"). Kafka was initially concerned that "the picture had an advantage over my story since it produced its effect before my story did" (*Letters to Friends* 98), expressing a desire to have readers approach his narrative with a fresh mind, but validated the image once he came to see it as an interlocutor: "I feel my book has been definitely enriched by the print and that already an exchange of strength and weaknesses has taken place between picture and book" (98). The image is itself a reader's interpretation, and Kafka takes care to respect both works as equals. Like the guard in "Before the Law," Kafka does not grant a reader entry into the narrative, but requires that his readers, like his protagonists, exert agency to infuse his story with meaning.

Gide and Barrault take up this call to agency in the act of adaptation and transmit it onwards to their own audience. The parable of persecution in *The Trial* creates a space for both artists to grapple with the post-war meaning of agency. Through their different roles in the production, Gide and Barrault focus on different elements of the novel: while Barrault's staging highlights the emotional anguish of persecution, Gide's script problematizes the nature of citizenship in a totalitarian society. Nevertheless, both artists draw on the tension between observation and participation to examine the implications of action and passivity for postmodern citizenship.

In the decades following *Le Procès*, Kafka's *The Trial* would often become a springboard for explorations of the moral and political challenges of the postwar era. Only two years after the Gide-Barrault production, John F. Matthews's adaptation *The Scapegoat* would present an explicitly political reading of Kafka's novel. In 1962, Orson Welles's film *The Trial* would take up the themes of genocide in its references to death camps and nuclear bombing, facing criticism for turning *The Trial* into a "Wellesian morality play" (Naremore, *The Magic World* 198). In scholarly discourse, J. P. Stern's 1976 article, "The Law of the Trial," drew on Kafka's allegories to understand the Nazi legal system, while Eduard Goldstücker's fight for the recognition of Kafka's works made possible a new awareness of Stalinist practices in the Eastern Bloc in the 1960s.

Artistic adaptations of Kafka's novel have often encountered criticism for distorting Kafka. However, political adaptations of Kafka create a vital space to examine the injustice inherent to postmodern society. By thematizing observation and civic engagement, *Le Procès* and other political adaptations make us cognizant of our own role in facilitating injustice, and create a space in which we can reimagine our own agency. Fidelity "to the spirit of Kafka" (Welles quoted in Wheldon, 1962), one might venture, lies in the courage to allow nightmare to permeate our reality, reveal our helplessness, and take the first step on the "thankfully monstrous journey" ("zum Glück wahrhaft ungeheure Reise," [Kafka, *Erzählungen*, 321) toward agency in the post-modern landscape.

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