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Intertextual Connections between Franz Kafka's *Before the Law* and Thomas Bernhard's *The Dictator*

Rosy Singh

Abstract

This paper seeks to compare and contrast Thomas Bernhard (1931-1989) and Franz Kafka (1883-1924) on the basis of their two texts "Der Diktator" and "Vor dem Gesetz". The intertextual connections between Bernhard's "Der Diktator" and Kafka's well known doorkeeper legend "Vor dem Gesetz" the text that precedes Bernhard's text by around 50 years, are too striking to be taken as a coincidence. In terms of form, genre, narrative techniques and the content there are lots of parallels. The fairy tale structure, absurd and grotesque elements, tragicomic technique of narration, motifs of death and futility of a happy end bind the two. The beginnings are somewhat similar. Yet the two texts proceed to tell different stories because the protagonists may be in similar situation but they respond to it differently. Both show two different possibilities of existence. The moot point is that the reader's awareness of the intertextual linkages could contribute to a better understanding of Bernhard's narrative. His familiarity with Kafka's conceptual world, specifically with the narrative text "Before the Law" written in 1915 is crucial to a better analysis of Bernhard's narrative.

Keywords: Absurd; Intertextuality; Man from the countryside.

Every creative work be it in art, literature, music, philosophy, films, advertising, fashion, architecture etcetera contains invariably traces of borrowing - in bits and pieces, in a fragmentary kind of way - a phenomenon that is now commonly referred to in literary criticism as intertextuality, a term coined in the sixties by the Bulgarian-French semiotician Julia Kristeva. (refer to Kristeva 1969) Around the same time, Claude Lévi-Strauss gave it an anthropological turn in the domain of mythical thought terming the phenomenon intellectual *bricolage*, a French word for a reconstruction

from whatever is available, the prior, the secondhand material and the one who carries it out (in opposition to a specialist like the engineer or the scientist) is the *bricoleur*:

> And in our own time the 'bricoleur' is still someone who works with his hands and uses devious means compared to those of a craftsman. The characteristic feature of mythical thought is that it expresses itself by means of a heterogeneous repertoire which, even if extensive, is nevertheless limited. It has to use this repertoire, however, whatever the task in hand because it has nothing else at its disposal. Mythical thought is therefore a kind of intellectual 'bricolage' – which explains the relation which can be perceived between the two.[1] (Lévi-Strauss 1962: 11)

In his *The Art of the Novel* (1988), a book which the Czech-French novelist Milan Kundera describes as "the reflections of a practitioner", Kundera elucidates that "the novel's spirit is the spirit of continuity. Each work is an answer to preceding ones. Each work contains all the previous experience of the novel." (Kundera 2005: 18-19) And elsewhere he augments his position:

> To my mind, great works can only be born within the history of their art and as *participants* in that history. It is only inside history that we can see what is new and what is repetitive, what is discovery and what is imitation. (Kundera 1995: 18)

All these propositions have a common bottom line that ideas received from the past enter into new narrative-discourses, consciously or unconsciously, the old signifiers combining with the new ones to create new formal and conceptual constructs. Informally it has also been called rehashing, appropriation, assimilation, inspiration, influence or simply mixing. There are no hard and fast rules. On the one hand the motifs of the past are loaded with meaning; on the other hand the redistribution, realignment and remixing of the same motifs in a different time and space emancipate them, not completely but to some extent, from the old contexts and meanings and invariably they end up generating new or partially new significations keeping in mind the unity of the new text as a whole, for the meaning in not to be found in the isolated signifiers but in their relations to others, in what Levi Strauss terms the "bundle of relations". In semiotic studies it is always emphasized that there can be no fixed, eternal and *a priori* interpretation of any signifier. Rather signifiers tend to shift in

1 *The 'bricoleur' has no precise equivalent in English. He is a man who undertakes odd jobs and is a Jack of all trades or a kind of professional do-it-yourself man, but, as the text makes clear, he is of a different standing from, for instance, the English 'odd job man' or handyman (trans. note).

their signification. This is not to say that they are not stable. The play with motifs lends new layers of meanings to the old, a kind of symbiotic understanding, one enriching the other and vice versa. The biblical parable of the Prodigal Son for example has been reinvented by so many writers including those by Rilke, Kafka and Gide. The same goes for the ancient Greek myths. The apples with which the father hits his son Gregor Samsa who finds himself transformed into a cockroach in Kafka's *Metamorphosis* do not have the same signification as the apples in *Snowwhite and the seven Dwarfs* or the fruit in the Original Sin. In each of these texts the signifier 'apple' produces an altogether different order of signification.

The extensive scholarship on Franz Kafka (1883-1924) compares Kafka's writing with that of many writers, some who wrote before him or his contemporaries or those who came after him. Fyoder Dostoevsky and Nikolai Gogol are two writers who share similarities in motifs and narrative techniques with Kafka. One only has to think of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and Kafka's *The Trial* or Gogol's *The Nose* and Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. (Struc 1971: 135-154) Kafka has also been compared with writers, particularly French existentialists who came after him like Samuel Beckett, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and Maurice Blanchot. (Sartre 1955: 41-60) In fact Kafka is often considered as a literary precursor of the French existentialism. This paper seeks to compare and contrast Kafka with the Austrian author Thomas Bernhard (1931-1989), a post-War writer on the basis of their two texts *Vor dem Gesetz* and *Der Diktator*. Some scholars like Gerald A. Fetz explored affinities and differences between Kafka and Bernhard way back in the eighties when Bernhard was still alive. He compares Kafka's story *Der Bau* (1923/24, The Burrow) with Bernhard's novel *Korrektur* (1975, Correction) taking into account motifs such as illness and disease, aging and death, hearing and seeing, and threshold situations. (A. Fetz 1988: 217-241) Much of the comparison is based on similar biographical details that is the hallmark of the positivistic approach. This study is more of a Close Reading of two other shorter narratives of Kafka and Bernhard.

The intertextual connections between Bernhard's *Der Diktator* (Bernhard 1994: 58-59) and Kafka's well known doorkeeper legend *Vor dem Gesetz* (Kafka 2006: 162-163) - the text that precedes Bernhard's text by around 50 years - are too compelling to be taken as a coincidence. In terms of form, genre, narrative techniques and the content there are striking parallels. The penchant for miniature forms of narration, fairy tale structure, absurd and grotesque elements, tragicomic technique of narration, motifs of death and futility of a happy end bind the two. The beginnings are somewhat similar. Yet the two texts proceed to tell different stories because the

protagonists may be in a similar situation but they respond to it differently. Both show two different possibilities of existence. The moot point is that the reader's awareness of the intertextual linkages could contribute to a better understanding of Bernhard's narrative. His familiarity with Kafka's world and universe, specifically the text *Before the Law* written in 1919 is crucial to a better analysis of Bernhard's narrative text.

Vor Dem Gesetz ('Before the Law')

Turn-of-the-century Prague, a provincial city overshadowed by vibrant European cities like Paris, Berlin and Vienna was home to a writer who led an "aesthetic revolution" (Kundera 2005: 81) in literature that however went unnoticed in a Europe caught up in world wars. Kafka died in 1924 more or less an unknown writer who was not published by any big publisher of his time, who never received literary awards or any recognition of sorts. Apart from the wars, another reason could also be the bias that existed in the beginning of the 20th century against the German spoken in Prague and surrounding areas cut off from the mainstream German. This regional German was considered somewhat retarded in vocabulary, lacking in talent and not taken as seriously as that from German majority areas. Kafka himself called Prague German in his characteristic laconic style *Zigeuner Deutsch* (Gypsy German).

Drawing on Kafka's reflections in his diary entry of 25. Dec, 1911 on what he called *kleine Literaturen,*[2] (Kafka 1976: 154) the French theoreticians Deleuze and Guattari coined and popularized the somewhat controversial term "minor literatures" (Deleuze, Guattari 1986) which is actually not really what Kafka intended. Besides Kafka's Jewish background did not exactly make publishing easy in an increasingly anti-Semitic Europe. It were the American and French translations of Kafka's works that first introduced Kafka in the non-German speaking world and his reputation as a writer burgeoned only when he was *discovered* by the existentialists and the absurdists in France and today Kafka, who in a moment of frustration dismissed his own writing as *Gekritzel* (scribbling), has joined the ranks of major or world literatures. Recognition and rehabilitation in his hometown Prague, lost behind the Iron Curtain of Communism till 1989, where the so called bourgeois artists like him were *persona non grata*, how-

2 Kafka was referring to Czech literature in the Austrian-Hungarian Empire where German was the official language and also to Jewish-Polish literatures. One of the important points Kafka makes is that "small" literatures enjoyed a certain kind of freedom as they do not develop under the shadow of big names; there was hence no reverence and no compulsion to imitate. Kafka goes into the essence of "small" literatures. Deleuze's post-colonial ideological position regarding marginalization of languages is not how Kafka intended it.

ever came much later with the collapse of communism. Lastly it took some time for the Czechs to acknowledge and make peace with their German past when they were part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Today Kafka has a cult following in intellectual circles in Prague as well as in other parts of the world.

One of his most popular works is a short but dense narrative *Before the Law* (first published 1915, i.e. during the lifetime of Kafka and also part of his novel *The Trial*) that provokes multiple interpretations of all orders. It has two protagonists, a man from the countryside and a doorkeeper. A man from the countryside arrives before an imposing structure, the Law and seeks permission from the doorkeeper to enter. The doorkeeper throws a spanner with a cryptic reply "not now", perhaps "later":

> Aber der Türhüter sagt, daß er ihm *jetzt* den Eintritt nicht gewähren könne. Der Mann überlegt und fragt dann, ob er also später werde eintreten dürfen. „Es ist möglich", sagt der Türhüter, „*jetzt* aber nicht." (Kafka 2006: 162)
>
> Er macht viele Versuche, eingelassen zu werden, und ermüdet den Türhüter durch seine Bitten. Der Türhüter stellt öfters kleine Verhöre mit ihm an, fragt ihn über seine Heimat aus und nach vielem andern, es sind aber teilnahmslose Fragen, wie sie große Herren stellen, und zum Schlusse sagt er ihm immer wieder, daß er ihn *noch nicht* einlassen könne. (ibid)
>
> But the doorkeeper says that he cannot grant admittance *at the moment*. The man thinks it over and then asks if he will be allowed in later. "It is possible," says the doorkeeper, "but *not at the moment*." (Kafka 1988: 3)
>
> He makes many attempts to be admitted, and wearies the doorkeeper with his importunity. The doorkeeper frequently has little interviews with him, asking him questions about his home and many other things, but the questions are put indifferently, as great lords put them, and always finish with the statement that he *cannot be let in yet*. (ibid)

The doorkeeper also warns him about other, more menacing doorkeepers inside. The man from the countryside is taken aback. He hesitates. He had not expected such obstacles. He decides to play it safe and wait. Over the course of time he makes several attempts to access the Law, appealing, pleading to the fleas in his overcoat that feed as parasites on him, bribing the doorkeeper with his modest assets, engaging with him in idle talk, all along trying to maintain his dignity. The doorkeeper neither turns him

away nor does he give him a clear go ahead. Like *groβe Herren* he does not really pay much heed to him and carries on with his work. The man from the countryside feels unsure, confused and lost, but he does not give up. Undeterred he waits patiently "days and years", practically all his life, at the entrance of the Law. Despite the existential impasse, his faith in the Law is unwavering. As he grows old and nears his end, he turns quirky and childish, mumbling to himself. The burly doorkeeper, who does not seem to have aged correspondingly, bends down to the shriveled, dying man and roars in his ear that the door was meant only for him and he is going to shut it "now". The man from the countryside, almost deaf and blind, dies without ever having set foot inside the door of the Law. It is left to the reader to decide whether the doorkeeper was exhibiting *Schadenfreude* or fulfilling the last wish of the man or simply responding nonchalantly to a query addressed to him. Whether the doorkeeper is a stickler for rules or he plays on the fear generated by the guardians of the Law is another point that can be debated endlessly. What is certain is that the wait was in vain. It is as if the light from inside the mysterious Law were mocking the man. The ubiquitous Law which Goethe's Mephistopheles in *Faust* disdainfully dismisses as "*ew'ge Krankheit*" (eternal or congenial disease) (Goethe 1976: 86) remains as pristine as ever.

"Waiting" is an important motif in Kafka's writing which some critics, obsessed with Kafka's Jewish background, triumphantly pinpoint as the eternal Jewish wait for the Messiah. Max Brod, the highly respectable Kafka critic in America Heinz Politzer and Hannah Arendt e.g. go down this path. So do many others. What they do not realise is that although Kafka often draws on mythological elements, be it the Greek, the Christian or the Jewish mythology, he invariably transforms them. What matters is how the mythical and religious motifs enter into new combinations with other signifiers within a given text to create a new discourse where the old signifiers get reorganized and reconstituted acquiring new significations in the process. Kafka is not just another Jew. He is a writer with his specific conceptual world and universe and there is also a specificity of how he articulates this universe in German. (Singh 2003: 233-248) Kafka's short prose *Heimkehr* (*Homecoming*, first published 1936) draws on the biblical story of the Prodigal Son who leave home and then returns after many years to reconcile with his father who welcomes him with open arms. In Kafka, the estranged son returns but he ends up "waiting" at the doorstep of his father's farm, stricken by threshold-Angst. Joseph K. and K. also keep waiting or are kept waiting indefinitely by the courts and the castle respectively. Waiting often turns into a modern existential experience in Kafka's works.

DER DIKTATOR ('The Dictator')

> Since the end of the Second World War, the two figures who have risen above the welter of competitions for attention in Austrian fiction remain Peter Handke and Thomas Bernhard. (Dowden 2002: 51)

Ereignisse (Events), a collection of extremely short literary pieces, 31 texts altogether, was written by Bernhard around 1957 and published first in parts in 1963 and then complete in 1969 with *Der Diktator* at number 25. This book is counted among his early works. "Events" is a neutral term that refers to an unbiased narration without taking sides as in a newspaper report or a protocol. Bernhard's text begins with the word in caps DER DIKTATOR which is also taken as the title of the text. The dictator selects out of a hundred odd applicants the *einfacher Mann vom Lande* (simple-minded man from the countryside), assigning him the singular task of polishing his boots and shoes daily. Both the dictator and the man from the countryside are introduced with the definite article. Shoes are an indicator of one's social status and it goes without saying that a dictator must be seen with polished shoes. It is an old practice in inns and hotels that guests leave their shoes outside the door of their room and next day they get polished shoes. The shoe shiner is accordingly assigned a vantage position "before" the door of the dictator.

Sitting and sleeping outside the door, the man adapts to the new surroundings and work. In no time the shoe shiner starts to gain weight developing the same fat nose and the same kind of hair loss as the dictator. He begins to resemble his boss. One reason for the uncanny resemblance could be that both eat the same diet. The shoe shiner transforms literally and metaphorically into the Doppelgänger of the dictator. The fantastic elements typical of fairy tales are self-evident here. The gain is weight is allegorical to the gain in all kind of confidential knowledge related to the dictator. All ministers and advisors of the dictator begin to fear him. In the evenings after his work is over, he plays a musical instrument. The supplicant transforms into the T*ürhüter*, the door guard, the bodyguard who is aware of all the little details in the dictator's life. The man from the countryside turned shoe shiner is *tatsächlich* (actually) the person closest to the dictator, physically and otherwise. The dictator remains behind the door, shrouded in mystery and the narrative gives no indication what happens behind closed doors. One day when the man from the countryside feels confident and prepared, he enters into the dictator's chamber killing him with a single powerful blow. Quickly he slips into clothes of the dead man. Satisfied with his reflection as he stands "before" the mir-

ror in the robes of the dictator, that he *tatsächlich* (actually) looks like the dictator, he decides that it is time for the big announcement. He storms out confidently, dashes into the passage and shouts that the shoe shiner attacked him. He declares that in self-defense he killed the shoe shiner. Instructions are issued that the shoe-shiner's body be disposed of and his family be informed.

'Before the Law' and 'The Dictator'

The common signifier "the man from the countryside" functions in both texts as a proper noun, as a semiotic sign that is evocative for the very reason that one is likely to criticize it, namely that it is clichéd. It works even better than a name or half a name like Joseph K. (*The Trial*) or a name in the form of just an alphabet K. (*The Castle*). Bernhard's man from the countryside is initially selected for the job because his profile as a villager is perfect for the job. Attributes such as simplicity, gullibility and transparency associated with villagers make him a suitable candidate for the job. He is supposed to be someone not familiar with the ways of the world which renders him harmless in the world of politics and power. Training him in shoe polishing is no big deal. The dialectics of "before" and "behind" the door dominates both texts. The world "behind" the door is opaque and mysterious, unknown and unknowable, abstract to the extent of being metaphysical. So far the two narratives proceed more or less on similar lines. That is where Kafka and Bernhard converge before parting ways. Kafka's protagonist remains steadfast in his character. He remains till the end what his name suggests, literally and metaphorically, the man from the countryside, simple-minded and naïve.

The resemblance to Fyoder Dostoevsky's idiot (*The Idiot*,1868), "a good man", some would insultingly call him a country bumpkin or simply meek, is striking. In contrast, Bernhard's man from the countryside undergoes a transformation. Literally living in the corridors of power, Bernhard's protagonist quickly learns the rules of the game. Gaining weight, losing hair and developing a fat nose over the years help him acquire the looks of the dictator. Unlike Kafka's protagonist, Bernhard's protagonist feels no threshold angst. Taking advantage of his proximity to the dictator, he one day enters his room and kills him. But this is not to demolish the hierarchical power structures and democratize them. He gets rid of the dictator only to take his place. Seizing power, he ensures the continuity of the tyranny. Power changes hands as the master-servant constellation is inverted but the structures of power remain firmly intact as everyone is on the same side of the power. The differences between the dictator

and the suppressed, the perpetrator and the victim, haves and have nots, the benefactor and the supplicant disappear because all are power-hungry and all seek power. They are attracted to and seduced by power. No wonder revolutions often end up replacing one form of dictatorship with another. Although both Kafka and Bernhard often pose in their writing the eternal questions of power structures and power dynamics and both can be highly political and provocative, the two absurdists have their own distinct conceptual worlds, alike yet diverse.

The seriousness with which writers like Brecht, Böll etc presented the power relations between the powerful and the powerless are very different from the humorous-grotesque, tragicomic worlds of Kafka and Bernhard. Moral judgment is suspended as both narratives eschew the traditional victory of good over evil. It is often said that Bernhard disliked Austria's indifference or silence over the Nazi crimes, its bureaucracy, provincialism etc. Kafka scholarship similarly reduces his work to the Jewish context, the father-son constellation and the Austro-Hungarian bureaucracy. But both transcend temporal-historical spaces to a universality of the human condition that anyone in any part of the world can relate to. Bernhard deliberately evokes Kafka's famous parable, pays in this manner Kafka a literary homage and then moves on to unfold his own universe. Both the protagonists are faced with choices: one chooses to wait at the threshold and the other chooses to cross the threshold taking matters in his own hands. It is all about the decisions and choices people make in life. In that sense, both are highly charged existential narratives.

Form and Narrative Techniques

The two seminal narratives demonstrate a characteristic and peculiar kind of writing, the Kafkaesque and Bernhardian, two adjectives followed by nouns. In terms of motifs there are similarities that have already been pointed out. In terms of form and narrative techniques too there are so many similarities be it the fondness for miniature texts, a peculiar kind of dark humour, the grotesque, the repetitions and exaggerations, the seamless fusion of the real and the fantastic. The Kafkan and the Bernhardian worlds are like two circles that intersect with a large area of intersection. The overall impression is that of aesthetic affinity. Let me elaborate it with an example of the structure. In their novels, both writers prefer a sweeping architectonic structure without speed breakers like paragraphs and punctuation. Bernhard even avoids making chapters. According to Milan Kundera, who has done commendable research on Kafka:

> [the] Kafkan imagination runs like a river, a dreamlike river that

> finds no respite till a chapter's end. That long breath of imagination is reflected in the nature of the syntax. (. . .) The texts are divided into very few paragraphs. This *tendency to minimize the articulation* few paragraphs, few strong pauses (on rereading a manuscript, Kafka often even changed periods to commas), few markers emphasizing the text's logical organization (colons, semicolons) is consubstantial with Kafka's style; at the same time it is a perpetual attack on "good German style" (as well as on the "good style" of all the languages into which Kafka is translated). (Kundera 2015: 116)
>
> You can see the long, intoxicating flight of Kafka's prose in the text's typographical appearance, which is often a single "endless" paragraph, over pages, enfolding even long passages of dialogue. (ibid: 117)

Similarly their short narratives, shorter than a short story, a more appropriate term would be miniatures or micro fiction, are marked by one uninterrupted piece of writing: a single long paragraph with long but few sentences and few punctuation marks, hyperbolic condensed forms like one solid rock. These miniature narratives are marked by absence of historiography, lengthy character sketches and reflections philosophical in nature. Rather they tend to follow the style of a factual report or protocol, devoid of sentimentality of sorts and are marked by brevity of narrative space. It is as if the authors were saying that "less is more". *Before the Law* and *The Dictator* are good examples of the same.

Bernhard's prose books *Ereignisse* (Events) and *Der Stimmenimitator* (The Voice Imitator) contain short narratives of a page or little more than a page with no title, no paragraphs, a couple of long sentences, no or very few punctuation marks and deliberate repetition in vocabulary, truly minimalistic writing. E.g. Bernhard repeats conjunctions like "und" (and) as in the below cited sentence:

> Das bekommt dem einfachen Mann vom Land, *und* er nimmt rasch an Gewicht zu *und* gleicht seinem Vorgesetzten *und* nur dem Diktator ist er unterstellt mit den Jahren um ein Haar. (italics by the present author) (Bernhard 1994: 58-59)
>
> … daβ der Schuhputzer *dieselbe* Kost iβt wie der Diktator. [. . .] Er hat bald *dieselbe* dicke Nase und, nachdem er seine Haare verloren hat, auch *denselben* Schädel. (italics by the present author) (ibid: 58)

Humour

The literary critic Mikkel Frantzen mentions, in addition to the three kinds of laughter that Bernhard explores, namely the bitter laugh, the hollow laugh and the mirthful laugh, "the demonic laughter" associated with despair in the Kierkegaardian sense. (Frantzen 2018: 89) The Bernhard critic Wendelin Schmidt-Dengler explains Bernhardian humour in terms of its combination with the tragic to create the tragicomic genre, a term that was earlier restricted to drama:

> The opposites of comedy and tragedy exist alongside rather than in mutually exclusive terms. Bernhard's virtuosity reveals itself in that he gives the reader the opportunity to re-enact this constant crossing of borders between the two genres. He appears to be a tap-dancer who, with the speed of lightning, dances on the border between the comic and the tragic. (Schmidt-Dengler 2002: 107)

In his speech on the occasion of receiving the prestigious Georg-Büchner award, Bernhard elaborates the same when he talks about life as theatre:

> Es ist absolut ein Theater der Körper in zweiter Linie der Geistesangst und also der Todesangst . . . wir wissen nicht, handelt es sich um die Tragödie um der Komödie oder um die Komödie der Tragödie willen . . . aber alles handelt von Fürchtbarkeit, von Erbärmlichkeit, von Unzurechnungsfähigkeit . . . (Bernhard 2010: 124)

> It is absolutely a theatre of the bodies then of the existential Angst and the Angst of death . . . we do not know, is it a tragedy for the sake of a comedy or a comedy for the sake of a tragedy . . . but everything revolves around fear, misery, insanity . . . (my translation)

The same is true of Kafka. According to the literary critic Roman S. Struc who undertakes a comparative study of Kafka with Nikolai Gogol (1809-1852), the Ukrainian-Russian writer who belonged to the generation before him, Kafka's works display a "macabre humour" developed with the help of the grotesque:

> The grotesque thrives on the vacillation between the ludicrous and the terrifying, on associating incompatible entities, on shuttling between the trivial and the impossible and, most of all, on the exploitation of diverse emotional responses in the face of that essential incongruity of world tainted by the grotesque imagination. (Struc 1971: 140)

Recent research on Kafka is also gradually but reluctantly acknowledging Kafka's pure humour. In the first volume of his monumental Kafka-biography *Kafka. Die Jahre der Entscheidungen* (2002), Reiner Stach highlights Kafka's slapstick comedy citing anecdotes from *The Trial*. (Stach 2014: 555) He concludes: "*Furchtbar ist das Ganze, komisch sind die Details*". (The whole of it is terrible, what is funny are the details.) (ibid: 554) Both Struc and Stach are right in their own way and both these kinds of laughter exist in Kafka's world. In an interview to the *Zeit Literatur*, the Nobel laureate Peter Handke, an avid reader of Kafka, however refutes the argument that Kafka could be funny. For Handke, it is the bitter truth in Kafka that evokes laughter:

> Kafka war nicht komisch. Es wird immer erzählt, Kafkas Zuhörer hätten gelacht, weil seine Prosa so humorvoll gewesen sei. Nein, sie haben nicht über den Witz gelacht, sondern über die Wahrheit. (...) Kafkas Kunst ist so rein, dass sie wahr ist. Darüber muss man lachen. (Handke 2010: 5-6)
>
> Kafka was not funny. It is always said that Kafka's audience would laugh, because his prose writing was so humorous. No, they laughed not at the joke, rather at the truth of it. (…) Kafka's art is so pure, that it is true. That is what makes one laugh. (my translation)

The Kafkan and Bernhardian worlds explore existential themes through comic and grotesque modes of presentation. Gallows humour is a term that would appropriately fit both the oeuvres. Bernhard's malicious glee at the turn of events to the point of turning it into a horror story and Kafka's dry humour at the hopelessness of the situation are close cousins. The grotesque imagination is at its best when horror and terror are presented with an exaggerated dark humour. It can appear in the fusion of real and the surreal but cannot be part of a typically exclusive realistic mode of presentation.

Conclusion

Bernhard's parody of Kafka's famous parable is so refined and subtle that only readers who do a close and attentive reading of narratives would recognize it. Bernhard starts with Kafka and then subverts the Kafkaesk motif to a chilling end. This intertextual comparison is not historical for history and historicity take a backseat in both these narratives as the motifs strive to be more universal than specific to time and space. Neither are the two writers contemporaries. The comparison is in that sense more structural than historical.

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