

On the Pointlessness of Observation

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What are we to do with these spring days that are now fast coming on? Early this morning the sky was gray, but if you go to the window now you are surprised and lean your cheek against the latch of the casement. The sun is already setting, but down below you see it lighting up the face of the little girl who strolls along looking about her, and at the same time you see her eclipsed by the shadow of the man behind overtaking her. And then the man has passed by and the little girl's face is quite bright.¹

Franz Kafka, "Absent-minded Window-gazing,"
Translated by Willa and Edwin Muir

In the mass consciousness, Franz Kafka will forever remain the oppressive ruler of a reality built on absurdity, the same reality that in fact creates illusory forms impenetrable to human perception. I have in mind here such canonical works as *The Trial*, *The Castle*, "The Metamorphosis," "The Verdict," and even "The Penal Colony." To put it simply, each of these texts sublimates the structure of Kafka's mythology, in which the human being is deprived of the possibility of understanding what is going on around him. Against the background of the works mentioned above, the texts that make up Kafka's *Journals* look quite different, as do those in the collection of his miniatures. It is those works, however, or rather, to be precise, one of those miniatures, entitled "Absent-minded Window-gazing," that will serve as the basis for my attempt to isolate those features that, in my understanding, constitute the core of Kafka's conception of the subject, and will also allow us to situate this micro-prose work in the area of issues that fall within the broad concept of the poetics of the moment.

At first glance, "Absent-minded Window-gazing" does not appear to be a text that would present interpretative obstacles. On the contrary, this short impressionistic piece seems to be a clear, one might say, limpid text. The short form would seem to confirm these assumptions, also giving the impression of Kafka writing down some observations in the form of a literary exercise, a kind of literary calisthenics. This impression is augmented by the theme, which we may perceive to be distant from that of the writer's canonical texts.

¹ Franz Kafka, "Absent-minded Window-gazing." Franz Kafka Stories. <http://franzkafkastories.com/index.php>. Last accessed December 17, 2015.

It is worthwhile now to consider the content of the miniature quoted above. The narrator, due no doubt to boredom, looks through a window while walking down the street. It is a spring day, graciously free of the aura of rain, approaching its end – the sun inclining toward the west. It is those remnants of the sun's rays that become the object of the narrator's observation. He does not, however, look straight into the sun. Aside from the obvious health risk to the human eye,² we can surmise that buildings in the area get in the way; in fact, the narrator never says that the window he looked through was facing west. Looking through a window is in its essence a specific kind of activity, which in principle imposes certain limits, mainly on the field of vision. The area we are looking at is always bounded by the window frame. That is an obvious, even banal fact, such a commonplace thing that it is easily forgotten. Aside from the fact that the picture remains relatively static, this feature, while imposing a certain rigor, leaves room for modification. People passing on the street and rays of sunlight incapable of remaining motionless can, as in the case of Kafka's narrator, become objects of passionate observation. The structure has a temporary, even momentary nature, since it is more than certain that the same constellation will not present itself in the window to be observed a second time.

Let us return to the content of the miniature. The observer's sight fastens on the face of a girl walking down the street. The sun's rays do not fall undisturbed on her face; there is a man standing on their path, whose shadow does not permit the girl's face to be fully lit. The description subtly underscores her innocence, at the same time creating the impression that the man's shadow is something sinister, as Kafka writes: "and at the same time you see her eclipsed by the shadow of the man overtaking her."³ Is it not the case that among readers, more than one suspicious mind will find a portent of some grim future in such a phrase? A relationship crammed with menace between the man and the woman, whose potential to materialize imposes its presence in this moment,⁴ only to be dispelled in the next, final sentence of the miniature, disappearing from view like the man and his shadow? To be dispelled, leaving the girl's face, whose fullness is now brightened by the rays of the setting sun, as the center of interest.

That is enough, as much as was necessary to complete the task of summarizing the content of "Absent-minded Window-gazing." Perhaps even too much, since the volume of the summary exceeded the volume of the text itself by a considerable amount. The question thus arises: do texts the size of a Kafka miniature require interpretation at all? Is a literary analysis justified in such cases? Are they not merely (or even) a certain kind of mirroring of a segment of reality, whose essence and meaning lie in its surface?

The title itself gives us some clues. The narrator is observing absent-mindedly. That word, crucial to uncovering the nature of the text, already at the start shows the futility of the act of interpretation, endows the entire work with a momentary nature and brings to mind photography, though the window in its frame might create a temptation to invoke the metaphor of

² Though Georges Bataille would no doubt applaud the idea of looking into the sun's face – it is a kind of borderline situation, which leads through the anticipated suffering to the limit experience so highly valued by that thinker as it invariably constitutes a goal of inner experience.

³ Kafka, "Absent-minded Window-gazing."

⁴ This is obviously an over-interpretation, but my use of it at this time is utterly and totally deliberate.

a painting, as might the interest in sunlight, unambiguously evoking the work of the Impressionists. The act of painting, however, requires time – that necessity negates the momentary nature of the view caught in an instant, and photography is incapable of doing more than registering a momentary constellation, of anything beyond catching the moment. That act, it is true, is always determined by the intention of the photographer, who decides both where to turn his lens and at what moment to release the shutter, but is not capable (especially when taking photographs outside the studio) of having complete control over each of the elements that make up the frame.

In 1966 Michelangelo Antonioni made a film in which photography plays a uniquely important role. I am referring of course to *Blow-Up*, now a cult film, for which Antonioni drew inspiration from Julio Cortázar's story "Las babas del diablo" (subsequently published in English translation as "Blow-Up"). I have some particular reasons for referring to the source material in the context of discussing the film. Despite the shared central concept, Antonioni modifies the nature of the main character's photography, about which more will follow shortly. Cortázar's protagonist reveals a tendency toward overinterpretation: overactive analysis of the photographs he has taken. He has a strong justification for doing so, as he tells us: "One of the many ways of contesting level-zero, and one of the best, is to take photographs...",⁵ and what follows from this is that the flow of words, its excess of literariness, is a supplement to his photography. In this, the protagonist of *Blow-Up*, a much sought-after fashion photographer, differs in nature from his literary prototype. Let us consider the event that in the film functions as a catalyst: Thomas (the character's name in the film) takes a seemingly ordinary photograph one day of a pair of lovers in the park. While working in his darkroom he discovers a small detail which earlier, while snapping his shutter, he was unable to perceive. It is a hand holding a gun, the shape of which becomes apparent only after a major enlargement of the exposure. This reality revealed in a fragmentary gleam becomes an obsession with him. Not grasping its meaning, he attempts to penetrate to a wider context (while being essentially deprived of access to it), and maniacally surrounds himself with increasingly large prints of this fragment, which yet do not bring any clarity to his overall view of the situation. A temptation arises here to use the category of epiphany in explicating this plot. Not epiphany in the primary, religious sense, but in its modern variant. It is worth keeping in mind that according to Ryszard Nycz, a modern epiphany gives the person experiencing it a sense of proximity to full recognition of reality.⁶ However, the aspect of the photograph revealed in the blow-up does not provide the character with such knowledge; on the contrary, it deepens his ignorance by revealing a mystery whose explanation is inaccessible to him. Furthermore, the character's gesture of surrounding himself with successive prints contradicts the singular and unrepeatable nature of the modern revelation. It should be underscored that he reaches this revelation only by means of the medium of the print – only that makes his perception possible. And that should be enough for us to discard any attempt to consider the problem in terms of the category of an epiphany. The flash of reality explains nothing, it merely proves its own existence, the proof being photography. A proof, we should take note, that has the potential to be reproduced.

⁵ J. Cortázar, "Blow-Up," in *Blow-Up and Other Stories*, Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group 2014. Kindle edition. Translator uncredited (probably Paul Blackburn).

⁶ R. Nycz, *Literatura jako trop rzeczywistości (Literature as a Trail of Reality)*, Kraków 2001.

In the case of Kafka's miniature, we are dealing with a similar situation. The description of the view from the window, perfectly insipid in a sense and at the same time unusually rich, constitutes a kind of literary photography that presents us with proofs of the existence of a certain fragment of reality. On the one hand, this statement does not lead us toward an interpretation deeper than the surface; on the other, it represents the ground for a free (if not frivolous) act of rendering meaning. But none of the interpretations that arise in this way has any chance of finding an anchor in the text that would not allow it to be undermined and, as a result, thwarted.

For the purpose of ordering my reasoning and detaching it from the somewhat overused figure of the modern epiphany, it is appropriate to introduce a separate category that will permit us to bring into relief the constitutive traits of the poetics of the moment in a form similar to that which it takes in Kafka's micro-prose. We might use the title of the film mentioned earlier and call this category the **blow-up**. It would thus draw together in itself the following suggestions that have emerged from the preceding analyses:

- 1) Reality constitutes an aggregate of momentary constellations which, remaining in constant motion, cannot be directly observed more than once;
- 2) Fragments of reality observed in a momentary flash can find confirmation of their existence in media such as literature or photography involving processes of reproduction, which create the possibility of experiencing that flash multiple times;
- 3) Due to their fragmentary nature, they hinder the effectiveness of the act of interpretation, as a result of which they disorganize the subject's form and its capacity for meaning-creation;
- 4) They possess their own meaning, which is realized in the perception of their superficiality, their surfaceness – this meaning being simply being.

These theses lead inexorably to an acknowledgement that reality can manage very well without the subject as creator of meaning. Returning to the miniature under discussion, the narrator's situation appears to correspond to that described by Kafka's contemporary Fernando in his famous *Book of Disquiet*: "The long street crowded with human creatures is like a fallen inn sign on which the jumbled letters no longer make any sense. The houses are merely houses. Although one sees things clearly, it's impossible to give meaning to what one sees."⁷ In spite of some features indicating a certain kind of excess, or rather the borderline nature of the case, in both the writings of Pessoa (especially the *Book of Disquiet* mentioned above) and Kafka we see a particular treatment of subjectivity, which in essence is deprived of the right to exist. This is undoubtedly a sign of the crisis of the subject, grappled with by modernity from its beginnings, and which eludes the accepted framework defined on the one hand by the philosophy of Nietzsche and on the other by the Post-Structuralist episode. Whereas Nietzsche declares the death of God, undermining his authority to guarantee meaning, and Barthes, Derrida and Foucault symbolically mark the death of the author, denying him that

⁷ F. Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet*, trans. Margaret Jull Costa, Serpent's Tail Classics, London, 2010, 35.

same authority, authors of Kafka and Pessoa's stamp appear to go considerably further. They consistently deny everyone, particularly those who claim the right to participate in the act of interpretation, their semasiological jurisdiction. They become not so much prophets of the death of the subject as messengers proclaiming the fact that subjectivity as such does not exist (perhaps it never existed) and "that imaginative episode we call reality"⁸ has little in common with the actual state of things. In this formulation subjectivity is merely an illusion and we should posit the identity of what we are accustomed to calling the subject with the object, hitherto illusorily ranked below it in a hierarchy. In other words, the subject loses its subjectivity and adds to the aggregate of objects.

To find evidence for this thesis, it would be necessary to search within a philosophy that clearly corresponds to it. I have in mind *object oriented ontology* – a philosophy oriented toward objects that Graham Harman has developed in numerous works. In Harman's words: "there is the difference between the real and the intentional... and second there is the difference between objects and qualities,"⁹ though Harman states his preference for the term "sensual" over the term "intentional." This sensuality is characterized by a subjective reception of reality, with the potential for meaning-creation being realized precisely within the act of interpretation. What is real thus becomes – allowing for the difference of which Harman speaks – far from subjectivity, and simultaneously deprived of the possibility of submitting to the act of endowment with meaning. It is a reality of objects in which there is no place for the subject.

It might seem that making reference to the thought of Harman, representative of the relatively young movement of speculative realism, could weaken the theses postulated above, mainly in terms of the lack of distance from which to affirm the solidity of a particular philosophical current. Yet a premonition of Harman's way of thinking can be found in a somewhat older work, Georges Bataille's *Inner Experience*. Bataille is often called an heir to the legacy of Friedrich Nietzsche and a forerunner of postmodernism, an inspiration to the thought of Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, and Michel Foucault. The essence of inner experience is revealed in the conclusion that "experience attains the fusion of the object and the subject, being as subject nonknowledge, as object the unknown,"¹⁰ and thus its main purpose is fulfilled in loss, or rather in the conscious deprivation of its own subjectivity. For Bataille, however, this loss is not a process of transformation of subject into object. "Suppression of the subject and the object [is the] sole means not leading to the possession of the object by the subject, which is to say avoiding the absurd rush of *ipse* wanting to become everything."¹¹ This passage must be understood as a suppression of the difference on the basis of which the subject-object opposition can be built, not as a suppression of subjectivity and objectivity themselves. The result is to annul that excess which the subject possesses in relation to the object – it being the potential to create meaning. The necessity of endowing with meaning results from the desire for knowledge. This means that if one wants to experience the fullness of being, it is imperative to sacrifice that desire, to overcome what Bataille calls the desire to

⁸ Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet*.

⁹ Graham Harman, "Object-Oriented Philosophy vs. Radical Empiricism," in Harman, *Bells and Whistles: More Speculative Realism*, John Hunt Publishing, 2013. Kindle edition.

¹⁰G. Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. Stuart Kendall, SUNY Press, 2014, 16.

¹¹Bataille, *Inner Experience*, 57.

become everything, overcome knowledge and open oneself to the acceptance of nonknowledge. “NONKNOWLEDGE LAYS BARE. This proposition is the summit, but should be understood in this way: lays bare, therefore *I see* what knowledge was hiding up to there, but if I see *I know*. In effect, I know, but what I knew, nonknowledge again lays bare. If nonsense is sense, the sense that is nonsense loses itself, becomes nonsense again (without possible end).”¹² The situation essentially involves moving outside of language, which is no longer understood as the substance of reality. The result is an experience of a domain not subject to the process of symbolization. Lacan defines it as the order of the Real, lying beyond the field of the collision between the orders of the Imaginary and the Symbolic, which shape subjectivity.

To recapitulate: the poetics of the moment that is expressed in this Kafka miniature involves particularly sensitive areas that constitute the borderline between, as Harman defined it, what is real and what is intentional, or, as Lacan might define it, the Real and what constitutes the content of our consciousness. “Absent-minded Window-gazing” directs our attention towards what does not demand an interpretation connected with intentionality. In the case of this miniature, language seems to touch only the surface, the general shape, without access to that which situates meaning underneath the surface. The modern poetics of epiphany is replaced by the category of the blow-up, which will constitute the means of description of a revelation that exceeds the possibilities of categorization as epiphany, that is, a revelation in the face of which the category of epiphany loses its utility due to the revelation’s mediated reception through media of mechanical reproduction, making possible the repetition of their reception many times over. The most essential, the most fundamental change here to the modern concept of the epiphany, however, is the renunciation of its potential to be endowed with knowledge. In the case of the poetics of the moment we may rather speak of the receiver’s endowment with Bataillean nonknowledge, which brings with it a constant oscillation between the grasping of meaning and its loss, which in essence makes the act of interpretation impossible.

In light of the above, we would appear to be justified in proposing the thesis that the protagonists we know from Kafka’s canonical texts are not so much unable to understand the oppressive reality that surrounds them as deprived of the ability to endow it with meaning. The reason for that is the condition of their subjectivity – in fact, its absence. Kafka’s characters must thus be described using the same categories with which we might describe each element of the world they inhabit, endowing them at the same time with the condition of being an object. This statement is merely a small contribution, intended to encourage more penetrating studies of prose works by the author of *The Trial* than this sketch has offered.

¹²Bataille, *Inner Experience*, 57.

KEYWORDS

nonknowledge

poetics of the moment

ABSTRACT:

This article attempts to perform an analysis of Franz Kafka's prose miniature "Absent-minded Window-gazing" geared toward examining the oeuvre of the author of *The Trial* from the perspective of a poetics of the moment. The text analyzed both provides us with information about how the construction of the subject in Kafka diverges from the modern understanding of subjectivity, and allows us to hone the precision of a scholarly method that breaks with the modern formulation of the category of an epiphany.

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F R A N Z K A F K A

blow-up

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