Kafka and Science Fiction

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This article addresses an aspect of Kafka's work and its influence that has not received much attention: its role in molding contemporary critical science-fiction. We are, by now, accustomed to reading Kafka with the lenses of almost all the so-called human sciences, and a good deal has been written about Kafka's formative influence on the leading fantasists of our time, from Bruno Schulz to Borges and Garcia Marquez.[1] Yet, surprisingly little has been written about the way Kafka's fiction contains an implicit critique of the ruling mythology of our culture -- namely, scientism: the faith that all knowledge worth having can be given adequate causal formulation through quantification, and hence, that the greatest human faculty is positive rationality, the capacity to know progressively more things for certain through an understanding of these formalized causal laws.

Many writers of scientific fantasy have not only recognized the critique of scientism latent in Kafka's fiction, but have derived models from it for writing critical science fiction appropriate for their social and national audiences. This has made Kafka perhaps the most important literary influence on modern scientific fantasy after H. G. Wells. In this paper, I will try to sketch the character of this influence, by describing how Kafka is present in the work of three of the most significant contemporary writers of science fiction: the Californian Philip K. Dick, the Pole Stanislaw Lem, and the Soviet Strugatsky brothers.

First, let me describe how Kafka can be read as a critic of scientism. Combing through his writings, we will find no outright references to natural science. Considering the philosophical ferment of his time, this seems almost a studied neglect. The German speaking world was exploding with immanent critiques of positive rationality: Mauthner's critique of science as a privileged language, Weber's critique of the universality of scientific rationalism, Freud's debunking of the bourgeois ego, Einstein's relativity theories and Heisenberg's uncertainty principle. Even the Austrian mystic, Rudolph Steiner, to whom we know Kafka was attracted, had embraced Einstein's theories in his Anthroposophical system by 1914.[2] All these critiques led to one conclusion: that the ideological axioms of scientism -- whether presented as positivism, objectivism, empirical determinism -- were false; that the physical universe is not a unitary object independent of human participation, and yet somehow available priori to a human reason capable of calculating nature's iron laws. Moreover, these critiques were not directed merely against certain methods of acquiring knowledge; they were attacks on the positivist ideology that preached that those who calculate the behavior of the physical universe will eventually be able to control it.

These immanent critiques had not come out of the blue, of course; their groundwork began to be laid by Goethe, and was completed by Nietzsche. But their successes in the early 20th century troubled even the critics themselves.

Positivist-objectivist science had, after all, produced the explosion of rational miracles of the 19th century. Few could accept the total discreditation of the idea of objective rationality. The fear that without the authority of positive science the world would fall apart into barbarism may well have inhibited many of the great relativists from following their relativism to its conclusions. I am thinking here of

Weber's ideal of value-free science, Freud's reification of the psyche, and Einstein's refusal to accept the principle of indeterminacy as structurally inherent in atomic research.

Even so, many of the intellectual elite of Kafka's day were convinced that the rationality of science had become debased as it was "applied" -- doubtless, in part, from the class-resentment caused by seeing the great abstraction of human Reason inherited from Pythagoras through Descartes, now at the service of merely technically educated engineers and technocrats. The rationality of objective science, when stripped of its ideal humanistic dignity, came to seem more and more like an enchanted mechanism, elaborating itself incessantly, autonomous of any particular subjective attempts at control, organizing ever more efficiently its ever more precise means of attaining ever narrower ends. Reason had become rationalization.

Kafka was the first great mythographer of this crisis. Walter Benjamin, one of the few who have compared Kafka's world to the world of quantum physics, wrote that Kafka tried to escape from "modern reality" by appealing to the "prehistoric" the world of tradition and mysticism.[3] For Benjamin, modern reality is "realized theoretically by physics and practically by modern warfare" -- a telling juxta-position, imputing to the so-called "pure science" the same sort of alienation from human need as technological mass warfare. Taking this a step further, it's clear that the escape attempt was quite as terrifying as the modern reality Kafka was running from. In Kafka's fiction, the terrors of modernity -- that is, the radical uncertainty of the spirit, and the mechanical certainty of death -- are merely new manifestations of an archaic reality which also has much older manifestations, such as the Law, the State, Religion, the Family: all the rational institutions of history. They are

rational, because they are governed by rules.

But because the meaning and value of the rules cannot be discovered, these institutions are also enchanted Castles. Without a key, the hero can never leave their ever-receding corridors. But there is no key. The corridors do recede forever. Of rationality, only the enchantment of forms and rules exists; its goal is either long dead, or forgotten, or hostile to inquiries from life. In Kafka's fiction, a demiurgic, deranged rationality appears to act autonomously, within the subject itself; with a logic independent of autonomous subjects who might be responsible for their thoughts, it transforms all subjects into functions and pieces of its own organization. Kafka's protagonists, all of them outcasts and escapees from "modern reality," are the investigators and explainers who try, through their own very rational cleverness, to discover the origins of this deranged state of affairs which has life and death significance for them. The other inhabitants of the fictional world accept the rules as nature, as Necessity, as “the way things really are,” even when they are manifestly self-contradictory.

This allegory of objectivist rationality can be read Oedipally and Existentially. Such a power to rule creation -- that is, to make it adhere to rules -- must surely require an Origin, an Authority, a Father. Kafka's investigator- victims choose and are forced to look for this Original Reason behind the rules, the source of rationality's <u>value</u>. But to use method to discover the origin of method leads to paradox: which, if it is truly felt, is death of method as a tool for living. And yet, as Kafka's beloved Kierkegaard maintained, to live a paradox is health in a diseased, frozen totality.

The further Kafka investigated in his own writings, the further his protagonists penetrated the enchantment. The worlds of *The Trial*, *The Castle*, "The Great Wall of

China," and the later parables especially, resemble the reified world of the schizophrenic, who freezes time and space to prevent change, but who nonetheless feels the world decaying under the weight of its aeons of senility. When the Great Authority that the schizophrenic projects into the cosmos is shown to be empty, the whole cosmos collapses, in what is classically known as the *Weltuntergangserlebnis*, or "world-catastrophe syndrome." Although Kafka's protagonists are too restless to accept the stagnation of the self-repeating system that passes for the world, and too proud to accept that they are not special cases (and only the special case can disprove the all-totalizing organization of enchanted reason), they sense the instability of the enchanted world. They treat the Enchanted Order gingerly, for unmasking its emptiness may only hasten its collapse, and destroy investigation and detective along with everything else.

This ambivalence and curiosity vis a vis the Authority of enchanted reason parallels the early modern critiques of objectivist science. Like Kafka's reified institutions, objectivist reason reifies consciousness -- and thereby "de-structs" it, in phenomenological terms -- by denying the subject's participation in creating value. The objectivist scientist is a tractable son of a Transcendental Father, of a Supersubject who sees all things as they really are, and who is unapproachable and unknowable in Himself. But as phenomenological psychoanalysts like Binswanger and Gabel imply, objectivism is rationality's schizophrenia.[4] For schizophrenia is, in part, obsession with method, morbid rationality. Objectivism has a world- catastrophe syndrome of its own: when mechanics reaches the origin of its method, it discovers entropy, the ultimate efficiency physics imputes to nature.

Kafka's work provides each of the three contemporary writers I will now dis- cuss with models for different sorts of critiques of scientism: for Dick, a deranged critique of

authoritarian universals; for Lem, a skeptical critique of human rationality's capacity to know anything beyond itself; for the Strugatskys, a utopian critique of the bureaucratization of the practice of science.

II.

Philip K. Dick is, technically, not a living author, since he died in March of last year. But it is not wise to banish the newly dead too hastily. Three years, at least, should be granted for half-life. Dick was the author of almost 40 novels. He had an enthusiastic cult following among science fiction readers in Europe and the U.S., but his name is almost unknown to readers unfamiliar with the genre. Many in the present audience will find him an odd writer to be mentioned alongside Kafka. His work suffers from obvious weaknesses: hasty composition, stylistic barbarities, vulgar effects -- all the flaws characteristic of U.S. science fiction writers working under constant pressure from exploitative publishers. Dick sometimes had to produce several books in a year to keep his family literally from starving. He was also subject to periods of manic-depressive derangement requiring hospitalization, five wretched marriages, and the many distractions of the California drug-subculture of the 60s and 70s, in which he was deeply embedded. And yet, despite his flaws, Dick stands out among U.S. science fiction writers; so much so, that the Polish writer Stanislaw Lem, the most implacable critic of the U.S. science fiction industry, has excepted only Dick from his excoriations, declaring him "a visionary among the charlatans."[5]

The influence of Kafka on Dick's work in unmistakable. Dick was intoxicated with the arbitrary transformations of ontological categories, the metaphysical double-binds, and the deadpan elaboration of paradoxical premises that are the typical traits of the Kafkaesque. Characteristically, a novel by Dick hinges on the sudden attack by a highly rational alien intelligence on a typical human community barely able to sustain its shared conceptionof reality. Anomie reigns everywhere in Dick's cosmos. Humanity endures only in the deserts of Mars; or a post-holocaust Earth from which most animals have been exterminated; or a future, half of whose population is schizophrenic; in the rubble of decayed metropoli; adrift in spaceships; or in the unstable zone between life and death. Dick's social groups are parodies of communities. They are held together by the habitual consumption of surrogate realities, most of them provided in object-fetishes and psychotropic drugs by a "friendly fascist" alliance of various interchangeable interplanetary corporations and superstates.

The object-fetishes and drugs are not sufficient to hold off the decay of the social construction of reality, and a hectic jockeying goes on among other fantastic forms of consciousness to acquire control. The categories of being soften; in Dick's world, the opposition breaks down between life and death, the animate and the inanimate, the authentic and the artificial, the alien and the human – time may even move backwards, or sideways, to reveal other universes. Into this struggle come the aliens with tremendous powers. Dick's aliens are more than mere creatures. In fact, they may remain invisible or appear as human beings. They embody the spirit of alienation, seeking human subjects to absorb into their solitude, expecting the subjective consciousness of human beings to provide their lives with value. The aliens are pathetically enchanted beings --instead of living vicariously through their manipulated subjects, as they wish, they destroy them, and thus mutilate themselves.

These alien spirits, and the diseases of identity they induce, are Dick's counterparts to the

archaic world of Kafka's fiction. Dick explicitly associates the superpowerful aliens with and autism. It is often observed that schizophrenics have a great talent for accommodating new technologies in their delusions. In Dick's novels, too, with the fantastic increase of technological alienation comes the tomb-world of universal entropy. The archaic powers in Dick's fiction favor the hard agency of machines.

Kafka showed Dick that escape toward the past and the self was the quickest way to dissociation. Escape, for Dick, could only come through collective effort guided toward the future, toward a recreation of communality. Being a Californian was for Dick much like being a Jew was for Kafka. It created an ambiguous background in which he could discern hope as well as fear. For Kafka, Judaism provided an infinite regress in memory, through the chain of generations, to mythic time. For Dick, California provided a seemingly infinite possibility of change, a variorum of parallel worlds. Beyond its obsessions with drugs, technologies and commodities, Dick saw California as the greenhouse of the future Gemeinschaft at the end of the dark journey of modern history. And certainly, in the 60s and 70s California was the West's most active mixing ground of world-attitudes, religions and life-practices.

In the end, however, despite his imaginativeness, Dick should not be compared too closely with his master. While Kafka increasingly gave his characters a heroic doggedness in opposition to death, Dick yearned increasingly for metaphysical certainty. Erich Heller's famous discussion of Kafka's gnosticism is even more appropriate for Dick's later work.[6] Dick became convinced in visions that the world was the product of a cosmic curse, and this led him to embrace an apocalyptic Manichean Christianity, which he allegorized in his last books. The longing for a collective human construction of reality against a totalizing, objectivizing force ultimately led Dick to hypostasize a totalizing force for the

good, with its own aliens and technologies. In Kafka's fiction, each new stalemate seems to be a new instance of endurance. In Dick, each new attempt at community seems an admission of defeat, like a happy ending tacked onto a tragedy; which is perhaps an appropriate confusion about the power of enchanted reason by a citizen of the Technological Empire.

Philip Dick elaborated one aspect of Kafka's ambivalent parables of enchanted reason: the absorption of a weak and fractious human subject by a powerful systematizing false-consciousness. But Kafka's works can also be read as self-critiques, satires of the Self's projection of its own weakness into the cosmos, and the self-glorified quest to conquer its own projection. This second way of reading was the choice of the Polish science fiction writer, critic and philosopher, Stanislaw Lem, probably the most highly regarded science fiction writer in the world.

The rationalist Lem is quite as indebted to Kafka as the mystic Dick. In his two-volume study, *Science Fiction and Futurology*, Lem argues that the traditional structures of literature have derived from ethical and religious concepts that antedate scientific rationality.[7] Empiricism had the effect of dissolving from within all cultural norms that were not based on comfort or utility. As a con sequence, modern artists lack any new axiogenic structures to replace the sacred-mythological ones that secular science has eroded. By rights, Lem believes, science fiction should be the genre most concerned with exploring ways of giving aesthetic form to new conceptions of reality. But instead, it has relied entirely on archaic forms of narrative, like the detective story and the adventure tale. Lem argues that the appropriate strategies of composition for an age of indeterminacy are those which produce a "semantic indeterminacy" in the reading. He mentions two models: the French *nouveau roman* and Kafka. The *nouveau roman*, by combining narrative structures that do not reinforce one another, but on the contrary interfere with, distort and damage one another's information, generates semantic noise that disrupts the reader's expectations of classical "sense."

Kafka, according to Lem, works in the opposite way to the same effect. Kafka gives "the total structure of the work a multidimensional indeterminacy," a technique Lem associates with *The Castle*.[8] In this approach, the writer seals up different modes of signification in the work's structure in such a way that the reader is given all the clues necessary to accept that the work signifies in a unified way, but not how to determine the significance of that unity. "Kafkas *The Castle*," Lem writes, "can be read as a caricature of transcendence, a Heaven maliciously dragged down to Earth and mocked, or in precisely the opposite way, as the only image of transcendence accessible to a fallen humanity.... Works like this do not expose those main junctures that could reveal their unambiguous ontological meanings; and the constant uncertainty this produces is the structural equivalent of the existential secret."[9] Since the Kafkian writer denies the reader an absolute system of relations by which to interpret

relative systems, the reader cannot tell which are the referents and which are the referring terms. Such hermetic indeterminacy is appropriate for science fiction, in Lem's view, because it embodies analogically the paradoxes of physical uncertainty and their social-historical implications.

Lem is in fact describing here the technique of his best-known work, the novel *Solaris,* published in 1960.[10] The Solaris of the title is a planet that shows extraordinary evidence of being a gigantic sentient being. What the planet really is can never be known. Hypotheses abound, but they can never be tested, for the planet is so alien to the categories of human reason that itreveals nothing to the community of inquirers. Its opacity merely mirrors the human scientists' deepest, and most energetically repressed, motives back at them. As a result, the Solarists are forced to entertain the possibility that positive rationality is only an anthropocentric projection of the human desire to dominate the universe, or, alternatively, a quest for the superrational Absolute that will transcend the paradoxes of human cognition. The tale follows the protagonist, Kris Kelvin (note the double Ks), a young psycho-Solarist, in his quest for contact with the alien planet -- a quest whose outcome is never certain.

Many quite precise correspondences to *The Castle* in *Solaris* show Lem's debt to Kafka. Kelvin is Lem's K. He comes to the Solaris Station, which hovers a mile above the surface of the planet, as K. comes to the village, as committed as K. to his quest for recognition by the Other, and to its mysterious validation at the expense of human society. Whether Solaris really has a secret to yield or not, Kelvin insists that it does, and that he can claim to plot its dimensions, like the land-surveyor.

That the Pole Lem was influenced by Kafka should not be surprising. Bruno Schulz's translation of *The Trial* had been available since the Thirties, and most of Kafka's work was translated into Polish between 1955 and 1965, the period of Lem's maturation into a major

writer. More surprising is Kafka's influence on the most important and popular writers of science fiction in the Soviet Union, Boris and Arkady Strugatsky.[11]

In their early works in the late 50s and early 60s, the Strugatskys adhered to the principles of heroic socialist realism, but they repudiated the "doctrine of limits" Stalin had imposed on science fiction, which discouraged writers from imagining the future beyond the fulfillment of the next five year plan. They were utopian socialists and uncommon artists: they claimed their subject was the conquest of human alienation through the scientific adventure, and their characters and situations were unprecedentedly complex, and even ambiguous, for Soviet science fiction. Because of this, they were the most popular writers of scientific fantasy in Eastern Europe during the 60s and 70s; and are said to be the first writers to have been read in space, where the cosmonaut Gherman Titov took a copy of one of their early novels.

During the "thaw" of the late 50s and the 60s, the whole Soviet scientific establishment believed Khrushchev's reorganizations of institutional science would destroy the cult of personality in the scientific institutes, and prevent future debacles like the Lysenko affair and the vilification of cybernetics. But the mood grew darker with each reorganization. Scientists were always held accountable to the direct political control of the party, and instead of fostering a new utopian science based oi new social relations, the directors of Soviet science never wavered from their old positivistic resolve to conquer material nature for the greater glory of the Party, nor from the doctrinaire anthropocentrism of vulgar Marxist ideology that had for decades prevented science fiction writers from depicting aliens in any but humanoid form.

In this environment, the Strugatskys' work also became dark. Their science fiction of this

period shows the influence of Weberian and Marcusian critiques of bureaucratic domination. It was also at this time that Kafka's work was published for the first time in the Soviet Union. In 1964, one year after the famous Liblice Conference in Czechoslovakia, on the life and works of Kafka, translations of *The Trial* and most of the parables and stories appeared in a Soviet anthology.[12] The influence of Kafka was immediate and great. Several of the Strugatskys' works blend aspects of Kafka's vision with the techniques of the Soviet satirical tradition. Their masterpiece in this mode, and their most symbolistic work, is the novel *The Snail on the Slope*, which was published in its entirety only by an émigré publishing house in Frankfurt in 1972.[13]

The Snail on the Slope is composed on two independent, alternating stories, that might be viewed as variations on *The Trial* and *The Castle*, respectively. One story centers on a pathetic, romantic humanist named Pepper, a visiting fellow at the Directorate, which is a weird scientific institute set on a precipice overlooking a vast, archetypal Forest. The Directorate's object is to study the Forest and rationalize it -- that is, to destroy its mysteries. Pepper had originally come to commune with the Forest, like a romantic coming to commune with untransformed Nature; but he discovers that, at the Directorate, only those who hate the Forest get permits to visit it. In frustration, Pepper tries several times to return to the unspecified "Mainland," but he is mysteriously prevented each time.

The Directorate is a fairly manifest satirical symbol of the Soviet bureaucracy of science, but also for much more: for the instrumental rationality which seeks to wipe out the Forest and pave it with asphalt; for the bizarre, entropy- producing official Soviet ideology; and for the masculine desire to dominate Nature from a distance. Pepper thrashes among the Directorate's absurdities: where special scientific methods are devised to decode the invisible Director's incomprehensible telephone addresses, and where every scientist must

have at least fifteen administrative coauthors for every article, or undergo a mysterious "treatment." Finally, Pepper too is crushed by the absurdity: without explanation, he himself becomes the Director, issuing at least one new order every day, including a proclamation declaring involvement with chance acrime.

Like most Marxists, the Strugatskys interpret Kafka's fiction as a fantastic, but essentially materialist, critique of the reificationof institutions. And this has been the Strugatskys' version of the theme ofenchanted reason: that a science so entangled in its methods of organization that it loses sight of the social purpose of its existence, degenerates into a system of meaningless forms and rules.

There is also another, utopian strain in the Strugatskys' work that runs parallel to the critique of corrupt science. These utopian themes begin in despair, but ultimately give hope that a completely new, as yet unimaginable, future is taking shape. This is the theme stated in the title of another of their novels published only in West Germany, *The Ugly Swans*: that the next phase of human evolution will seem as strange and unsympathetic to present humanity as homo sapiens must have seemed to its immediateancestors.

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In the chapters of *The Snail on the Slope* alternating with Pepper's tale, the protagonist is one Kandid (yet another K.!) -- a helicopter pilot from the Directorate's bioresearch station, who has crashed in the Forest, and is adopted by a community of natives. Like the stupefied villagers, Kandid must exert heroic efforts to maintain a train of thought from one minute to the next in the florid, humid Forest. Just as Pepper tries constantly to return to the Mainland, Kandid is always starting out for the biostation. In the particular journey that makes up his tale in the novel, Kandid discovers that the Forest is undergoing a mysterious transformation

known to the villagers as the "Accession" -- in which strange experiments in social engineering are carried out by organic machines directed by a new species of Amazons, who have altered Nature sufficiently to do without males. Thus the Forest, like the Directorate, is aconstellation of symbols: for Nature as a mode of subjective knowledge; for thefeminine power to mold the world organically; and for the despotism of an evolutionary advancement over the world it uses for material for its world-transformations. The moral of the fable seems tobe a familiar Kafkian one: that the "way" of the future is "not for us;" a few, separated by chance and courage from the institutions of reason, may try to understand the transformations of reality, but most of us -- villagers and research scientists -- are destined to internalize the domination of enchanted reason, to bureaucratize ourselves.

In conclusion, the works of the Strugatskys, Lem and Dick, science fiction writers of three very different socio-cultural contexts, were made possible by Kafka. Their critical science fiction parables make explicit Kafka's implicit critique of scientism. All three use Kafka's work as a model for articulating worlds in which the human capacity to understand and form the world becomes the be-all and end-all of species consciousness, finally hypostasizing itself into an enchanted rationality that steadily destroys the subjects upon which it depends for meaning and value.

Notes

1. See Edna Aisenberg. “Kafka, Borges and Contemporary Latin-American Fiction” and Leonard Orr, “The ‘Kafkaesque’ Fantastic in the Fiction of Kafka and Bruno Schultz,” both in the *Newsletter of the Kafka Society of America*, June and December, 1983.

2. Rudolph Steiner, *The Riddles of Philosophy* (Spring Valley, NY: The Anthroposophical Press, 1973). 442-4.

3. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1973). 141-2; 114ff.

4. See Joseph Gabel, *False Consciousness* and Ludwig Binswanger Harper&Row,1967)

5. Stanislaw Lem, "Philip K. Dick: A Visionary Among the Charlatans," trans. Robert Abernathy, *Science Fiction Studies* 5, March,1975. Among Dick's many novels -- which pass in and out print like mirages -- the most important are: *Eye in the Sky* (1957), *The Man in the High Castle* (1962), *Martian Time Slip* (1964), *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* (1965), *Dr. Bloodmoney* (1966), *Now Wait For Last Year* (1966), *Ubik* (1969), *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1969), A Scanner Darkly (1977).

6. Erich Heller, "The World of Franz Kafka" in *The Disinherited Mind* (New York: Meridian Books,1967).

7. As yet, only the final chapter of Lem's *Fantastyka i Futurologia* has been translated into English, as an independent essay: "Metafantasia: The Possibilities of Science Fiction," trans. E. de Laczay and I. Csicsery-Ronay, Jr., *Science Fiction Studies* 23, March 1981.

8. Ibid., p.64

9. Ibid.

10. An English translation of *Solaris* made from the French version by Joanna Kilmartin and Steve Cox appeared in 1970. Lem's other major works in English include *The Investigation* (1959), *The Cyberiad* (1967), *The Star Diaries* (1971), *Memoires Found in a Bathtub* (1971), *The Futurological Congress* (1971), *Mortal Engines* (trans.1977), and *His Master's Voice* (1978).

11. Other major works of the Strugatskys available in English include: *Noon: 22nd Century* (1962), *Hard to be A God* (1964), *Monday Begins on Saturday* (l965), *The Tail of the Troika* (1968), *The Ugly Swans* (1968), *Roadside Picnic* (1972), *Definitely Maybe* (1977).

12. For a discussion of this anthology, and the Kafka revival in Eastern Europe during the Sixties, see Antonin Liehm, "Franz Kafka in Eastern Europe," *Telos* 23, Spring 1975.

13. The English version of *The Snail on the Slope* includes an interesting introductory essay on the novel and the Strugatskys' career by Darko Suvin.