

The influence of Franz Kafka's literature on aspects of critical cultural theory

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1.02 Pregledni znanstveni članek – 1.02 Review Article

V članku je pregledno obravnavana kritična interpretacija književnosti Franza Kafke. Intelektualci, ki pripadajo širokemu polju kulturnih študij, ustvarjajo kulturne, politično-filozofske in jezikovne teorije pod (ne)posrednim vplivom Kafkove književnosti, s tem pa utrjujejo ugled njegove književnosti. V preseku modernistične književnosti in postmoderne kulturne teorije so analizirane podobnosti in skupni problemi, ki se nanašajo na kritičen odnos do modernosti in idej napredka, na vprašanja kulturnih manjšin in identitet ter na vprašanja jezika. Članek poskuša izpostaviti recipročno vez med modernistično književnostjo in postmoderno kulturno teorijo.

In this article, we provide an overview of critical interpretations of Franz Kafka's literature by authors from the field of critical cultural studies. We show that many intellectuals in this field have created theories under the (in)direct influence of Kafka's literature and thus have consolidated Kafka as a canonical writer. We outline similarities and common problems in the field of cultural studies and Kafka studies including the relationship toward modernity, a critique of the idea of progress, the question of cultural minorities and identities, and the problem of signification. In this discussion, we attempt to show the reciprocal link between modernist literature and postmodernist cultural theory.

Ključne besede: Franz Kafka, kritične interpretacije, kulturne študije, modernistična književnost, podobnosti in skupni problemi

Key words: Franz Kafka, critical interpretations, cultural studies, modernist literature, commonalities and problems

1 Introduction

Franz Kafka remains one of the most enigmatic representatives of literary modernism. Moreover, the combination of dry bureaucratic language, grotesque atmosphere, liminal characters and ambivalent meaning makes his literature susceptible to seemingly countless interpretations. It was through cultural, theoretical, and ideological appropriations that Kafka's literature became a sort of "case-in-point" for many streams of cultural studies that have developed alongside the culturalist approach to literature, sometime simply called "theory" and defined as an epistemologically diversified and ".../ eclectic mixture of linguistics, poetics,

philosophy, sociology, anthropology, psychoanalysis, history, and other sciences” (Juvan 2006: 41).

This article provides an overview of critical interpretations of Kafka’s novels and other well-known prose works in connection with the theoretical premises of several twentieth-century intellectuals. On the basis of this overview and analysis, we show the relevance of the link between modernist literature and postmodern cultural theory, along with their common traits and problems. We explore critiques of modernity, law and language, and ideas of multiculturalism and otherness in order to discover commonalities between modernism and postmodern cultural studies. In the second section, we present Kafka’s literature as both a critique and product of modernity in the context of the interpretations of eminent critical cultural theorists such as Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Hannah Arendt and Giorgio Agamben all of whom were greatly influenced by Kafka’s work. In the third and fourth sections, we examine cultural aspects of political and social inequalities, questions of identity, minorities and otherness – elements central to the pursuits of cultural studies – in the context of the unnerving modern imperatives that influenced Kafka in both his personal life and his literature. The dialectical link between Kafka’s biography and literature is presented as a defence of multiculturalism. In contrast, Kafka’s personal eccentricity, reflected in his animal stories, is presented as the negative impact of cultural otherness as defined by Erving Goffman. Adorno, Arendt and Benjamin portrayed Kafka as a messenger of truth about the holocaust, modern bureaucracy and the atrophy of experience. In the final section, we show how, in a similar manner, post-structuralist theorists such as Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida portrayed Kafka as a messenger of truth about the nature of language.

2 Kafka’s Literature as a Critique and Product of Modernity

For the aforementioned authors of critical cultural theory, Kafka’s literature appeared to contain a profound critique of modernity and the notion of progress as a whole. They discerned pessimistic accounts of society and history as the golden age in the story “The Investigations of a Dog”, the portrayal of a world in which communication among people is disturbed by time-space compression in “A Message to the Emperor”, a cynical articulation of the poor socio-economic condition of the modern artist whose main act is metaphorically starvation in “The Hunger Artist”, a depiction of a world beyond redemption in “The Coming of the Messiah”, dispossessed people that find the promise of a happy future in the dramaturgical environment of the Nature Theatre of Oklahoma in the novel *Amerika*. Many of Kafka’s protagonists are bereft of hope, literary characters that possess almost no narrative past and aspire for little in the future.

Josef K. and K. are the two main protagonists of Kafka’s novels *The Trial* and *The Castle*. Together, the novels represent the great literary abstractions of bureaucracy in the Weberian sense of the “iron cage”. Like Weber, Kafka is critical of the dehumanising effects of the modern, depersonalised and reified system of bureaucracy. One could even argue that Kafka depicts something that resembles the postmodern crisis of knowledge and political engagement, since in a sense these

issues are the focus of these two monumental novels. The main protagonists of the novels lack knowledge both of themselves and of social relations. As a result, they are politically inhibited and this condition results in their gradual demise.

Theodor Adorno argued that Kafka's prose articulates the irrationality of hyper-rationality and the mythical side of domination (Adorno 1997: 256), and that by recognising the deformations of the modern age, Kafka depicted everything historical as condemned (Adorno 1997: 259). On the basis of stories such as "In the Penal Colony" and the portrayal of the inhumane and alienating bureaucracy in the novels *The Trial* and *The Castle*, Adorno inaugurated Kafka the prophet of the Holocaust (Adorno 1997: 258). Hannah Arendt argued that Kafka was a ruthless critic of bureaucracy and that his ".../ so-called prophecies were but a sober analysis of underlying structures which today come into the open" (Arendt 2005: 74). Arendt claimed that it was Kafka's dislike of the modern world that distanced him most from his contemporaries (Arendt 2005: 80). Walter Benjamin placed Kafka's work in between the mystical experience of tradition and the experience of the modern inhabitant of the large city who is at the mercy of the vast machinery of officialdom (Benjamin 2007: 141). Benjamin concluded that Kafka's work presented the sickness of tradition (Benjamin 2007: 143), but also urban purity and the beauty of failure (Benjamin 2007: 145).

All of the philosophers mentioned above discerned a critique of modernity and progress in Kafka's work. One could argue that Adorno, Benjamin and Arendt made use of Kafka's literature as a screen onto which they projected nuances of their own thought. In this sense, their theories bear the imprint of Kafka's literary influence. Because he built his defence of high art against more vulgar Marxist readings of Kafka's prose, Adorno's views of modernist literature as a shield against fascism would perhaps be different without Kafka, also because Adorno was not always sympathetic to complex art forms. For example, he condemned jazz for being linked to Oedipal infantility (Adorno 1977: 13) and pseudo-individualisation, regarding it as a misconceived avantgarde that was limited by the culture industry and conformism (Adorno 1977: 33–34).

Similarly, in the absence of Kafka, would there have been another writer, inclined towards Jewish tradition, to fuel Benjamin's melancholy and also his revolutionary philosophy and theology? Arendt was one of the first "American" editors of Kafka diaries and wrote two influential essays about Kafka that were crucial for ".../ the formulation of central categories of her political philosophy in the 1950s and 1960s" (Caygill 2011: 2). Arendt read Kafka's novels while writing *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) (Danoff 2000: 211). It seems a valid argument that some of the best known and most paradigmatic Arendtian flagships are symbolically related to Kafka – the uncanny resemblance between *Eichmann in Jerusalem: The Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963) and Kafka's *The Trial*, between Arendt's Kafkaesque portrayal of a Nazi sycophant and Kafka's depiction of the characterless Josef K. Both characters are paradoxically innocent and irrefutably guilty. Both faced a corrupt court, their trials infused with irregularities, abnormalities and legal complexity (Arendt 1963: 253), and finally both struggled to understand their verdict and ended up "dying like dogs" (Kafka 2009: 165).

Giorgio Agamben, a widely studied figure in cultural studies, was yet another avid reader of Kafka's literature. Although Agamben's political philosophy is theoretically grounded in the study of Roman law as well as the work of Arendt, Benjamin, and Foucault, it seems that the most unique and valuable segments of Agamben's theory are ideatically and eidetically indebted to Kafka's prose, which he analysed in a number of his works.¹ If one wants to understand Agamben one reads Kafka, and once one understands Agamben, it is impossible not to reread certain segments of Kafka's prose in a different light. Kafka's well-known parable "Before the Law" is an example of a piece of literature that has been thoroughly distorted by theory. In the story, a man from the countryside dies as he waits in front of an open door, a literary symbol of the modern law, interpreted by Agamben as "being in force without significance" (Agamben 1998: 169).

On the one hand, we could pose a daringly retroactive question: how much of the Western cultural theory that we know would exist were it not for Max Brod saving Kafka's literature from the flames? On the other hand, we could argue that all of these more or less striking literary-theoretical resonances might not be attributed to Kafka's ideatic and eidetic influence but rather to the inherent characteristics of modernity that have marked modernist literature and postmodern theory, both of which inevitably address the social antagonisms of modernity.

3 Struggling with Modern Imperatives in Kafka's Life and Cultural Studies

Kafka, a German and Czech-speaking Jewish resident of multicultural Prague in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, was educated as a lawyer and worked as an insurance officer. He spent most of his life in the Jewish Quarter of Prague, living in the midst of an increasingly anti-Semitic society. As a writer, he occasionally embodied this unwanted identity by transforming himself into an animal, into a dog among others.

Zygmunt Bauman convincingly argued that the project of modernity attempts to eradicate differences and create total order and pure categories through endless and rigorous acts of classification, quantification, labelling, segregation, division, allocation, and numbering, which in fact only produces greater ambivalence and disorder. Modernity strives to achieve a totality of the social universe, and yet since each inclusion presupposes exclusion, modernity necessarily functions through the use of oppressive means (Bauman 1993). In this sense, we could argue that Kafka's life and literature were a product of the ambivalence that modernity produces while at the same time an attempt to eradicate them. *The Castle* is a case in point, presenting how the difference between the village and the castle is progressively

¹ Agamben either vaguely addressed or extensively analysed Kafka in *Infancy and History: The Destruction of Experience* (1993), *Idea of Prose* (1995), *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (1999), *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy* (1999), *The Man without Content* (1999), *Means without Ends: Notes on Politics, Theory out of Bounds* (2000), *State of Exception* (2005), *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans* (2005) and *Profanations* (2007).

lost the more the land surveyor K. tries to delineate it. Another case in point is the already mentioned indifference between guilt and innocence in *The Trial*.

Franz Kafka's literature and cultural studies both provide a political defence of the idea of multiculturalism: illuminating on the one hand the fruitfulness of the coexistence of cultures and languages, and, on the other, the increasing impossibility of such an existence. Kafka also had some knowledge of Yiddish, Hebrew, English, Italian, Spanish, French, Latin and Greek (Nekula 2016: 71–107). Certain authors, including Marthe Robert, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, and Marek Nekula, attribute Kafka's highly enigmatic and aphoristic literary language to these biographical characteristics. The argument these authors make is that had Kafka not been divided between different cultures and languages, he could not have created either such unique literature or such unique literary language.

And yet there is also a dark shadow, the negative side of the spectrum of ambivalence attached to Kafka's life (Robert 1982; Deleuze and Guattari 1986; Nekula 2016). As much as the split between different cultures was productive, it was also suffocating and produced a level of anxiety that resulted in a crisis of identity. Kafka was an assimilated Jew who interpreted his position as somehow inferior or inauthentic in comparison with Eastern European Jews. He felt he belonged to no specific culture or people. In his posthumously published diaries, he addressed his loneliness and anxious existence as the product of the loss of community. Perhaps it is because of this that Kafka has come to be regarded as a universal author and also the reason why many scholars regard him as the epitome of modern man split between different authorities, between tradition and innovation, collectivism and individualism. However, his difference and his inability to identify was specific in terms of it having clear social and cultural causes.

In late nineteenth and early twentieth century Prague, as the Austro-Hungarian Empire began its slow collapse, intercultural conflicts arose as a result of Czech nationalism and anti-Semitism directed against Germans and Jews. Though a Jew, Kafka did not fully identify with either Jews, Zionists, Czechs or Germans (Robert 1982: 27), and as someone who was born into a Czech family that spoke predominantly German at his father's insistence, Kafka was the Other in his own environment, included in the symbolic order through his exclusion, to use Agamben's description of bare life (Agamben 2000: 43).

4 Kafka as an Outcast between Multiculturalism and Stigmatisation

To this day, Kafka serves as a prime example of and inspiration for several important arguments made by cultural studies scholars to better understand minority cultures and identities in a multicultural world. Many of the minority cultures in our common environment seem to be self-destructive and even destructive, but the character of nihilism, apathy and conflict that is often attributed to cultural minorities is not something primordially essential to people's language or culture. Conflict and destructive tendencies are not of an inherent or centralised nature. They are produced through social relations, social change and the power relations that cause social change. From the standpoint of the majority, minorities, such as Kafka's Jews, are often understood as anonymous, potentially dangerous, and

undesirable, and thus incite fear and resentment (Powell 2008). Minorities are without a doubt different, but their difference is stigmatised as unwanted Otherness by the cultural majority.

In this regard, Erving Goffman, often compared to Kafka, explored an extremely important aspect. In his seminal work *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1982), Goffman presents the logic of the production of stigmatised identities. Minorities become stigmatised because of their acceptance of their own otherness. If the cultural majority continuously applies pressure on minorities, the minorities internalise the image of the Other imposed upon them by the cultural majority. If the cultural majority deems a minority worthless or dangerous, the minority will enact the negativity projected on them by the majority (Goffman 1982).

Kafka's otherness and stigma manifest themselves through his literature, in particular in his animal stories that evolve around liminal, bestial or schizoid protagonists: a fearful, solitary, excommunicated dog in "Investigations of a Dog"; Gregor, a traveling salesman who turns into a giant insect during his sleep in the novella *The Metamorphosis*; Red Peter, a speaking monkey who is tired of performing humanness, in "A Report to the Academy"; Josephine, a singing mouse, in "Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk" (Kafka, *Essential*). Furthermore, Kafka's unfinished novels also portray otherness, especially his novel *The Trial*, in which the protagonist cannot learn what crime he allegedly committed or what charges led to his arrest.

Kafka's contemporary significance lies in what Adorno was the first to express: Kafka sides with outcasts (Adorno 1997: 245). Deleuze and Guattari gave this statement a rich theoretical background by merging literary studies and psychoanalysis. In their work, they developed, on the basis of Kafka's literature, the theory of minor literature as an original literary genre. Minor literature is literature whose language is not fixed in any particular time or space and is therefore deterritorialisated. It is literature written by the members of a minority in the language of a majority (Deleuze and Guattari 1986: 16–23), and literature that is by definition highly political and collective. Deleuze and Guattari labelled Kafka's work as a precedential case of revolutionary literature precisely because it portrays the struggles of the minority and opposes the monopoly of power. Although their account was not the first attempt to universalise Kafka as a humanist author – that was already accomplished by the French existentialist philosopher, Jean-Paul Sartre in the 1960s (Nekula 2016: 18) – it was certainly the most convincing.

Kafka's literature is not only inextricably connected with the contemporary understanding of (not only multicultural) identities as non-essential and relational, but also with power relations – social, economic, and political forces that influence the production of identities that are often beyond individual choice. Sometimes it is legal power, an implementation of a certain law, in other cases, practices that otherwise delegate meaning and legitimacy to the production of identities. Such a struggle was demonstrated in a Kafkaesque manner relatively recently during the legal battle over Kafka's manuscripts, which should have been destroyed by Max Brod as requested by Kafka. Brod preserved them and upon his death left the original manuscripts to his lover Dora Diamant. Kafka had revealed his ambivalence about his Jewish identity in his diaries, writing that he both admired and

was nauseated by Zionism (Kafka, *Letters* 423), and yet, despite this ambivalence, Dora Diamant gave the manuscripts to the National Library of Israel, a Zionist state. Thus, although Kafka was clearly not a Zionist, he may, because of the legal battle over his literary legacy (Balint 2019), end up being considered an exclusively Jewish author and his legacy subordinated to the political project of Israel.

Kafka's identity was defined by national and local political structures that are now obsolete. Judith Butler argued that the legal appropriation of Kafka's legacy by Israel, a state that many consider an illegal occupying force is scandalous precisely because Kafka, whose work “./.../ charts the vicissitudes of non-belonging” (Butler 2011), not only never having set foot in Palestine or written in Hebrew, continuing to write in German even after the First Czechoslovak Republic was founded in 1918, but also treating Zionism irreverently and satirically, a stance illustrated in his short story “Jackals and Arabs”.

As argued by Hansen (2012: 169), Kafka adopted this stance precisely because of Israel's colonial turn. Kafka, for better or for worse, symbolically belongs not to any nationalist political project, but rather to the history of the rich, lost and unfulfilled European tradition of multilingualism and multiculturalism. This statement can also be applied to cultural studies.

5 The Ambivalence of Poststructuralist Readings and Theories

Kafka's literature also became the subject of a number of post-structuralist, predominantly French, readings. His work has been situated among other European literary modernists, such as James Joyce and Samuel Beckett, whose literature serve as an example of the problem of signification, meaning and interpretation. Jacques Derrida used the Kafka's parable “Before the Law” as a template to create and elaborate his concept of *différance*, which became the core of his method of deconstruction. Derrida argued that any literary creation resembles Kafka's law: its meaning is arbitrary, without essence, always and perpetually *différing* and running late. In contrast, the reader functions as the man from the countryside. Only the reader has the power to attribute meaning to the law of a literary text, although, as is the case with Kafkologists, there is frequently a set of gatekeepers providing “correct interpretation” (Derrida 1991). Roland Barthes agreed with Derrida, concluding that the essence of Kafka's literature lies in the literary technique of allusion “./.../ that authorizes a thousand equally plausible keys – which is to say, it validates none” (Barthes 1972: 136).

Sanja Bahun elaborated her thoughts on Kafka's literary technique or more precisely what she called his “melancholy semantics” (Bahun 2014: 147). She observed that Kafka's sentences are “replete with concessionary words and phrases such as ‘indeed – yet’ (*zwar – aber*), ‘though’ (*allerdings*), and ‘it must be confessed/’indeed’” (Bahun 2014: 145). Bahun concludes that these phrases are the medium of meaning and emotions that are predominantly ambivalent, a point that has also been made in other academic theoretical works. When studied closely, it becomes clear that Kafka's works, in particular his novels, contain many “self-contradictory assertions and conclusions reached previously” (Bahun 2014: 143) and these inevitably lead to relativising conclusions. In contrast, in cultural studies,

the Kafka effect elaborated by Bahun (Bahun 2014: 67) is more often understood as part of the nuanced and non-partisan view that the intellectual subject establishes towards the object of research. We find one obvious case of Kafka's cultural relativism in the institution of the court in *The Trial*. The court employs a vast number of people, even painters and priests, and its legal power is omnipresent and all-encompassing. Nevertheless: "the court wants nothing from you. It accepts you when you come and it releases you when you go" (Kafka 2014: 167).

Modernist literary forms and techniques produce a plurality of meaning and interpretation. If form dominates content, it distorts and mystifies reality. As a result, bourgeois ideology and the hegemonic social order remain unreflected and are reproduced. This was also Georg Lukacs's interpretation of Kafka's literature: namely, that it is alienating, decadent and nihilistic (Lukacs 1963: 47–91). Marxist critique placed Kafka's literature between "larpurlartism" (art-for-art-sake) and socially engaged, but in a totalising way that recognised neither difference and ambivalence.

Kafka's modernist literature and cultural studies, under the influence of the French philosophers and linguists of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s and both increasingly fragmentary, share the following predisposition: "The cultural studies project has, from its inception, been premised on the critique of the idea of totality which is enacted in our socio-political life" (Zylinska 2005: 15). As suggested in the previous sections of this paper, cultural studies – from the founding fathers of British cultural studies, including Raymond Williams, to the Frankfurt school and postcolonial studies – have focused on demystifying the project of modernity. All put forward a critique of the dogma of progress and rationality (Calinescu 1987: 265). However, exposing the positivist, repressive repercussions of modernity can also backfire: "While science and 'proper literary studies' are undoubtedly both hard and wonderful, cultural studies, masquerading in 'the meaningless wordplays of modish francophone *savants*', seems to have no other function than to 'impress the gullible'" (Dawkins 1998 in Zylinska 2005: 26).

It could be argued that common features – for example, ambivalence, "undecidability", and "saturation of meaning" – are present in both Kafka's literature and Western postmodern cultural studies. In addition to the critique of the idea of totality, both give voice to people who exist in-between before the law, included only through exclusion, living the bare life to use Agamben's term once again (Agamben 1998). Cultural studies attempt to understand the world by deconstructing the binary oppositions that organise the social universe, but, as suggested by Stuart Hall (Hall 1996 in Zylinska 2005: 44–45), are only successful to the extent they avoid the impulse of relativisation and offer dialectical resolutions.

Like Kafka's literature, cultural studies have been criticised because of their openness to otherness and the inability to achieve final meaning. In addition, many critics believe the negative effect of Derrida's deconstruction to be a methodological condition of cultural studies. Juliana Schiesari argues that postmodern cultural studies are based on the melancholy "rhetorics of loss" (Schiesari 1992: 1). In any case, we must admit that modernist art, such as Kafka's literature, along with Western, and in particular post-structuralist, cultural theories both seem to ".../ voraciously feed on the lack of closure" (Bahun 2014: 14).

Kafka's literature and postmodern cultural studies have both been reproached for their supposedly lost criteria for moral judgement (Zylinska 2005: 30). Practitioners in the field of cultural studies have been accused of blind celebrations of difference and the oppressed, biased toward victimhood, unable to act politically, their work deemed as "meaningless wordplays" (Dawkins 1998 in Zylinska 2005: 20). But what is true of the orthodox Marxist criticism in Czechoslovakia that falsely condemned Kafka's literature during the reign of Communism (Nekula 13) is also true of the allegations against cultural studies: they are often unjust and unfounded (Zylinska 2005: 26).

6 Conclusion

Although it is impossible to evaluate all aspects of Kafka's influence on the theoretical writings of twentieth century intellectuals, this paper highlights Kafka's influence on postmodern critical thought and emphasises well-known interpretations of Kafka's prose as well as commonalities between and problems with Kafka's modernist literature and cultural studies.

In conclusion, although cultural studies and Kafka's literature are not identical to each other, they remain an important source of identification of the authentic universalities of human experience (that is, the experience of minorities and the self as the Other, as well as the more economically-based shared conditions that torment the homeless, the rightless, and other dubious people without luggage, who – like those who travel by train to the Nature Theatre of Oklahoma – are in search of an inclusive, albeit non-theatrical, participatory life) because they enable polysemic identification. Both fields provide a defence of the idea of multiculturalism through the rethinking of questions of minor identities and cultural otherness. Both Kafka's modernist literature and cultural studies also draw on structural semantic deficiencies that have immense interpretive power in terms of addressing the shortcomings of modern social structures. Finally, we established that both fields address the negative side of modernity and specifically the gap between its promises and reality

As demonstrated, Kafka's literature was used as an inspirational template to develop some tendencies of postmodern theory to an elusive, even Kafkaesque extent. It almost seems as if the discussed authors of related academic theory gathered their ideas from the interpretative originality of Kafka's prose, which presents a possible case against the Platonic treatment of literature as secondary to philosophy. Kafka's literature was able to depict the substance and truth of the modern world, which were later articulated in philosophy, linguistics or cultural studies.

The relation between Kafka's literature and cultural studies could be understood through an old Marxist analogy – as the relation between the modernist literary base and the postmodernist theoretical superstructure, meaning that modernist techniques of literary production ended up influence the development of cultural theory that, in return, legitimised the power of literature. On the basis of Kafka's literature, we provided an overview of the strong mutual link between literary and intellectual currents during the history of the twentieth century, a link that today seems to be more dispersed, non-reciprocal and possibly lost.

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VPLIV KNJIŽEVNOSTI FRANZA KAFKE NA NEKATERE VIDIKE KRITIČNE KULTURNE TEORIJE

V članku je pregledno obravnavana kritična interpretacija književnosti Franza Kafke s področja kulturne, politično-filozofske in jezikovne teorije, ki je danes uvrščena med kulturne študije. Gre za povezavo med modernistično književnostjo in postmoderno teorijo, za njune podobnosti in nekatere skupne probleme. V prvem delu so obravnavani protagonisti in motivi iz Kafkovih romanov in nekaterih kratkih zgodb, kot so jih predstavili Kafkovi klasični razlagalci: Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Hannah Arendt in Giorgio Agamben. Kafkovo književnost so interpretirali kot proizvod in kritiko modernosti, kot napoved holokavsta, reprezentacijo birokratskega nasilja, osiromašenja izkušnje in pravnega zakona.

V nadaljevanju so predstavljeni kulturni vidiki političnih in družbenih neenakosti v Kafkovem biografskem kontekstu dvojezičnega Juda, živečega v večkulturni Pragi, ki sta jo v prvih dvajsetih letih 20. stoletja zaznamovala antisemitizem, porojen iz imperativov modernosti, in razpad Avstro-Ogrske. Raziskana so vprašanja identitete, manjšin in kulturne drugosti, ki so skupna Kafkovi modernistični književnosti in kulturnim študijam. Dialektična vez med Kafkovo biografijo in književnostjo je predstavljena kot zagovor večkulturnosti, ki pa ji vseeno nasprotuje izgubljeni pravni boj glede Kafkovih osebnih zvezkov in rokopisov, ki zdaj pripadajo Izraelu. Po drugi strani pa je Kafkova ekscentričnost, ki se odraža v njegovih t. i. živalskih zgodbah, predstavljena kot negativen učinek kulturne drugosti v kontekstu izsledkov o stigmati Ervinga Goffmana.

Podobno kot so Adorno, Arendt in Benjamin obravnavali Kafkovo književnost kot znanilko resnice o modernosti, sta jo Jacques Derrida in Roland Barthes obravnavala kot znanilko resnice o jeziku. V zadnjem delu so prek ambivalentnega jezika in strukturne nedoločenosti, ki proizvajata pomensko raznovrstnost in nezmožnost dokončne interpretacije, predstavljene nekatere kritike, ki so skupne modernistični književnosti in kulturnim študijam. Gre za tezo o njihovi neutemeljenosti. Prav primer vezi med modernistično književnostjo in postmoderno teorijo nakazuje, da morda književnost ni nujno vedno sekundarna filozofiji.