

REALITY AND THE BUREAUCRATIC PHANTASMAGORIA

Spiritual Exercises and the Panopticon

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Abstract: Bureaucracy works through a thorough codification of collective consciousness. As the first step toward this enslavement of the spirit, the temporal dimension of human existence is deprived of its original meaning, and strictly regimented – as Kafka asserted following Arthur Holitscher’s argument in *Amerika Heute und Morgen*. Accordingly, law rises in this void as mere form without a content, a phenomenon which finds its equivalent in the subject’s fall into a state of inability. My aim is to sketch a conceptual genealogy of the contemporary bureaucratic triumph. Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises* introduce a strict discipline of existential time from a quantitative point of view, a preamble to the process of mechanization of life. Another important contemporary philosophical reference for the analysis of bureaucratic efficiency is Michel Foucault’s panopticon, an architectural model of power which enables the total permeability of interiority. Discussing these crucial authors, I argue that bureaucratic capitalism inherits only pervasive feelings of guilt, without any hopes for salvation. Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* is the perfect representation of this degeneration of life into a mechanism from hell, in which any gesture, in its endless repetitiousness, generates its own punishment.

Keywords: Bureaucracy, Kafka, Foucault, Panopticon, Ignatius of Loyola, Time, Spirit.

The bureaucratic codification of the collective unconscious has a derealizing effect on the images produced by our imagination: they become empty and lose all reference to reality, indicating completely fictitious and instrumental data which only serve the purpose of the administrative management of power and justice. Images can be mimetic, resembling what they are a copy of; in the bureaucratic world, instead, there is a clear gap between reality and imagination that can disorient us, as happens in Kafka's world. Now, the first step towards the bureaucratic codification of the unconscious has to do with religious discipline.

This is not, of course, an efficient causal derivation, but a process of ideal conditioning whose influence is indirect and variously mediated – in line with the model described by Max Weber with regard to the concept of vocation to work (*Beruf*) as a purpose in itself, as capitalism requires it to be. In accordance with this notion, which

reverts the causal link «suggested by the materialistic standpoint»¹, a certain type of economic-bureaucratic *ethos* can be considered to be conditioned by a certain religious conception of practice and time, such as to allow for a better understanding of the «disposition of men to adopt certain types of practical rational conduct»².

In this regard, the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola are of extreme interest, as they show the transition from the notion of *meditatio* to that of “spiritual exercise”. The *Spiritual Exercises* are a true anthropotechnical methodology, according to which religious life is structured as a path of iron self-discipline made possible by certain techniques or performing arts which concern human nature in its entirety: both the spirit and the practical attitudes³. These exercises, in other words, are the training ground for those who are given a certain amount of time to seek the will of God «in the disposition of our life for the salvation of our soul»⁴.

However, the full title of the work is the following: *Spiritual Exercises which have as their purpose the conquest of self and the regulation of one’s life in such a way that no decision is made under the influence of any inordinate attachment*. Just as running, walking or jogging are bodily exercises, similarly there are certain spiritual exercises that must be practiced and disciplined. These spiritual operations are designed to dispose the soul towards meditation, contemplation and both verbal and mental prayer. These are normalized activities, which result in the «intimate understanding and relish of the truth»⁵, so as to achieve the hoped-for result: that is to say, an integral discipline for the human being to be capable of an adequate *imitatio* of the figure and life of Christ. An indispensable tool for this purpose lies in «disposing the soul to rid itself of all inordinate attachments»⁶.

The exercises last a total of four weeks and are structured as follows: 1. Contemplation of sin; 2. the Life of Christ up to and including Palm Sunday (Easter); 3. the Passion of Christ; 4. the Resurrection and Ascension. A prerequisite for these thirty days of anthropotechnical operations is the desire to offer God one’s «entire will and liberty», assimilating the virtues of «obedience, poverty and chastity»⁷. Those who do these exercises, assisted by a spiritual guide, must therefore be able to identify «the

¹ Max WEBER, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. T. Parsons, Routledge, London and New York 2005, p. 20.

² WEBER, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, p. 39.

³ Cf. Peter SLOTERDIJK, *Du mußt dein Leben ändern*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a. M. 2009.

⁴ Ignatius of LOYOLA, *Spiritual Exercises*, trans. L.J. Puhl, Loyola Press, Chicago 1951, p. 60.

⁵ *Ibid.*.

⁶ *Ibid.*.

⁷ *Ivi*, p. 62.

various disturbances and thoughts»⁸ that afflict them, so that they can recognize with precision what obfuscates the transparency of their soul, that clear inner crystal that is both the premise and goal of the spiritual training.

This metaphor of crystal as the mirror of the soul, from the point of view of the paradigm of anthropotechnical discipline, has evolved with a trajectory of thought that goes from Eckhart's mysticism to the human window-shop of today's consumer market, realizing (through the marketing database and the calculated manipulation of bodies) the ideal of the «transparent» human body⁹. Finally, this same metaphor can be found in the idea of the panopticon (which, not by chance, arose from the link between visibility and power) as well as in George Orwell's telescreens.

In this stretch of the history of ideas, the theoretical model embodied by the metaphor of visibility tends to progressively translate into a device of biopolitical domination *tout court*: the trap of visibility, for which those who are seen, locked up in «a state of conscious and permanent visibility», do not see¹⁰. But also in Loyola there is an important semantic shift, which – by focusing on spiritual transparency – finally achieves the writing/inscription of the rule into the docile soul (which is the prerequisite for the bureaucratic codification of the unconscious). It is necessary to act in a certain way, *quia scriptum est*.

Indeed, the mystical-theological concepts can be replaced by those central to the bureaucratic paradigm: the divine archetype (the sun) by the dazzling Law of Kafka's parable (*Before the Law*); the translucent and crystalline soul by the docility of the unconscious codified in a bureaucratic sense. Instead of the divine generation in the clearest core of the soul there is the inscription of an extrinsic command in the soul's spotless and malleable porosity; the spiritual love (which blossoms like a “bright rose”) is replaced by the frantic competition against life (here the decisive concepts are those of *Aufpulverung* and *speedingup*, present in one of Kafka's most relevant sources, Arthur Holitscher, author of *Amerika Heute und Morgen*, 1912). The discipline of the body and spirit in a devotional sense is replaced by the military and heterocephalic regimentation that produces the mechanical and routine reactions typical of the efficiency-driven administrative apparatus (the new *officium* of the bureaucratic religion as a continuous ritual exercise, “sans trêve et sans merci”, Walter Benjamin would say).

Bureaucratic efficiency, whose objective is the capillary and hierarchical diffusion of the formal legal disposition, needs this total permeability of interiority, which

⁸ *Ivi*, p. 65.

⁹ Vanni CODELUPPI, *La vetrinizzazione del sociale. Il processo di spettacolarizzazione degli individui e della società*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 2007, p. 25.

¹⁰ Gustav JANOUGH, *Conversations with Kafka*, trans. G. Rees, New Directions, New York 1951, p. 201.

corresponds first to the transparency of the soul, and then to the *tabula rasa*. In this regard, it is interesting to note the double register of visibility-invisibility, which can be exemplified with the “paradigmatic figure” of Nicholas of Cusa: while the source of the law is obscure, its transmission takes place in the domain of the integral transparency of the soul. Mirroring Cusa’s heuristic figure – two juxtaposed pyramids interpenetrating each other: that of light and that of darkness –, the more the *piramis tenebrae* (the law) penetrates into that opposed to it, the more the latter (the *piramis lucis*, symbol of the human docile conscience) becomes legible and inscribable by the nomothetic device (be it a harrow or an official stamp), just like a wax tablet. The mixture of light and darkness is well represented in Kafka, in the last moments of the life of the countryman:

«Finally his eyes grow dim, and he no longer knows whether it's really getting darker or it's just his eyes that are deceiving him. But he seems now to see an inextinguishable light begin to shine from the darkness behind the door. He doesn't have long to live now».¹¹

Indeed, here Kafka echoes Bentham’s panopticon (even anticipating its biopolitical reworking according to the visibility paradigm proposed by Foucault)¹². We are not prisoners in a suffocating cell, made of iron and concrete, but in a suspended room in which «the fourth wall was completely open» and yet we cannot see beyond our noses¹³.

¹¹ Franz KAFKA, *The Trial*, trans. D. Wyllie, Dover, New York 2012, pp. 154-155.

¹² The architectural-political principle behind Bentham’s Panopticon, writes Foucault, is well known: «at the periphery, an annular building; at the center, a tower; this tower is pierced with wide windows that open onto the inner side of the ring; the peripheric building is divided into cells, each of which extends the whole width of the building; they have two windows, one on the inside, corresponding to the windows of the tower; the other, on the outside, allows the light to cross the cell from one end to the other. All that is needed, then, is to place a supervisor in a central tower and to shut up in each cell a madman, a patient, a condemned man, a worker or a schoolboy. By the effect of backlighting, one can observe from the tower, standing out precisely against the light, the small captive shadows in the cells of the periphery. They are like so many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible», Michel FOUCAULT, *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison*, trans. A. Sheridan, Random House, New York 1995, p. 200.

¹³ *Ibid.*. If the open wall were oriented towards the inside of the inspection house, that is to say towards the control tower inhabited by the guardian, we could certainly suspect that Kafka had read Bentham. The short story I am referring to, however, says nothing of the sort: everything is wrapped up in a «grey mist», and all that can be seen inside are two holes in the floor: «The hole in the one corner seemed designed for defecation; in front of the hole in the other corner there lay a piece of bread and a little wooden bucket with water». On the contrary, it is even insinuated that the prisoner, and not the guardian, is the one who is located in the center of the inspection tower: the condemned, writes Kafka, enjoys a view «such as one might have from a tower on an overcast day», Franz KAFKA, *A Starvation Artist*, in *Nachgelassene Schriften und Fragmente 2*, ed. J. Schillemeit, Fischer, Frankfurt a. M. 1992. But, on closer inspection, the reversibility of the act of observing and the reification of being observed,

The ultimate limit is the sky, the earth's atmosphere, nature itself (including human nature, which has assumed the heteronomic norm in its flesh). However, as Weltsch writes, in *Kafka* «the sky itself resembles an office, the fundamental natural forces are high-level employees, everything is played out in terms of acts, and man is in the hands of secretaries. In this sense [...] the world of destiny is transformed into that of bureaucracy»¹⁴.

On a narrative level, this imprisonment disguised as a “landscape” open to the gaze of the other is represented by the head porter of the hotel in *Amerika*, who, after firing the young lift attendant, drags Karl Rossmann by the arm. The head porter watches over all the hotel entrances – «this main entrance here, the three central and ten side entrances, not to mention the innumerable little doors and other exists»¹⁵. The walls of porter’s lodge are made up of «enormous glass panels, through which you could see the crowds of people flowing into one another in the lobby, just as clearly as if one were in their midst. Yes, there seemed to be no corner in the whole porter’s lodge where one could be concealed from the eyes of those outside»¹⁶.

Despite appearing to be perfectly transparent in its glass structure, the porter’s lodge is the place where the link between seeing (*videre*) and being seen (*videri*) expresses its dramatic non-reversibility (an asymmetry that takes the form of the legitimation of every abuse of power). In it, one *thinks* one can see the inside from the outside, but once entered – even while seeing the crowd of busy passers-by walking through the various doors in front of the lobby – one realizes that the exercise of power that takes place there (in the form of outspoken violence) is invisible to others.

«Did those people outside not see this violence by the Head Porter? And if they saw it, how on earth did they interpret it, because no one seemed at all exercised by it, no one so

whereby the vigilant is at the same time subject to the control discipline that applies in the system, is precisely the heart of the biopolitical interpretation that Michel Foucault offered of the panopticon. This reversibility of control mechanisms, whereby seeing and being seen are converted into each other in a perverse way, is the reason why e.g. N. Werber claims that *Kafka*, with *The Trial* (1915), written when «kings were still sitting on thrones, invented a novel about the post-sovereign form of power, under whose stigma we all still find ourselves today»; it is therefore a profound transformation of the mechanisms of domination that brings «from the old forms of sovereignty to modern biopolitics [...] and its indispensable corollaries of control, surveillance, intensification and organization», Niels WERBER, *Bürokratische Kommunikation: Franz Kafka Roman Der Prozeß*, in “The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory”, year 1998, volume 73, issue 4, p. 325.

¹⁴ Felix WELTSCH, *Religion und Humor im Leben und Werk Franz Kafkas*, Onomato Verlag, München 2008, p. 49.

¹⁵ Franz KAFKA, *Amerika*, trans. M. Hofmann, Penguin, New York 1996, p. 207.

¹⁶ *Ivi*, p. 202.

much as knocked on the window to let the Head Porter know he was under observation, and couldn't treat Karl as he pleased».¹⁷

Visibility, seen from within the panopticon/porter's lodge, also becomes concealing opacity, so that the power-to-see-all is transformed into being-invisible-to-all (on the part of those in power). This blind focal point is guaranteed by a lanyard, which, when pulled, allows the head porter to lower down some heavy black curtains onto the walls of the innermost part of the lodge, concealing his indiscriminate exercise of *Gewalt*. This dimension of occult violence is represented by the strong grip exerted by the head porter on Karl's aching arm. «Besides, as Head Porter I am in a certain sense put in charge of everything»¹⁸, because I see and control everything, while remaining invisible to the eyes of others.

To go back to the *Spiritual Exercises*, I wish to dwell on the practices prescribed by Ignatius for the first week. On a formal level, they are a true preamble to the spiritual codification typical of the bureaucratic person:

1. Early morning: commit to watching out for that particular sin that anguishes you, like a stain on the crystalline bottom of your soul.
2. Try to remember how many times you have fallen into that particular sin (called P), even just virtually: then draw a line G (representing a certain amount of time) and make a mark on it for every time you have fallen into that particular imperfection. The extremes of the line are therefore G and P: they define a temporal segment (Tx) which is the measure of the recurrence of the temptation up to its first repetition.
3. After dinner, do the same with the second line g (for a stretch of time Tx), which determines how many times - since the first examination - you have been tempted by that vice (P). If the unit of time P is greater than GP, there will have been a qualitative improvement in the life of the spirit (thanks to a state of greater moral immunization from the initial temptation).

Examinations of conscience, and the related g lines (g1, g2, g3...), which will hopefully grow longer and longer, continue until the end of the week, giving the sinner the opportunity to verify whether – in terms of the number of occurrences of P – there has been any further improvement (which, in fact, coincides with a decrease in the amount of P instances in the given time segment). The length of the time segment should increase in parallel to the progressive delay of the first occurrence of P. In fact, «it is a venial sin if the same thought of sinning mortally comes to mind

¹⁷ *Ivi*, p. 206.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*.

and for a short time one pays heed to it, or receives some sense pleasure, or is somewhat negligent in rejecting it»¹⁹.

$$\begin{aligned} G\dots\dots(P) &= T(\text{ime}) \times \\ g_1\dots\dots\dots P_2 &= T_x + 12 \\ g_2\dots\dots\dots P_3 &= T_x + 18 \\ g_3\dots\dots\dots(P_4) &= T_x + 24 \end{aligned}$$

Taken in the form of these schemes, life tends to simulate the disembodied perfection of geometry. It is a dream of deductive transparency, which comes with the transformation of experiences into algebraic points on a line, whose value lies in moving away from a qualitative phenomenon such as sin. The objective is the integral assumption – *corpore et anima unus* – of the rule, which imposes the defeat of the sinful temptation. The same “sight of the imagination” must be devoid of any opacity: in full transparency, as if it were readable against the light, it is purified thanks to an examination carried out “one hour after another, one period after another”, so as to enable a full codification of the *viva distensio animi*²⁰.

Loyola represents a substantial step forward towards the modern concept of *chronopower*: power over life through the conventional codification of the internal sense, i.e. the dimension where every representation and operation of the spirit take place (for Kant, this was time). This power is achieved through the erasure of every qualitative element from the temporal flow: memories are deleted, hope and expectations of the future are reduced to the mere dilation of a trivialized smooth present. In other words, time is translated into a spatialized «homogeneous, empty» succession of circumstances, which flow like the beads of a rosary between the devotee’s fingers²¹.

Space-time, naturalized time, time of myth and compulsion to repetition are all concepts that belong to the same philosophical family, which it would be useful to investigate in depth. Ludwig Binswanger, to give just one example, believed that psychosis was nothing but an alteration of the subject’s temporal constitution process, involving «the arrest not only of the flow of thought, but also of action in general» – the absolute lack of a «something on which» (*Worauf*) our existence can concretely focus on, a frustration leading to all «forms of self-accusation and guilt»²².

¹⁹ LOYOLA, *Spiritual Exercises*, p. 34.

²⁰ *Ivi*, p. 24.

²¹ Walter BENJAMIN, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, in *Illuminations*, ed. H. Arendt, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, Boston and New York 2019, p. 205.

²² Ludwig BINSWANGER, *Melancholie und Manie; phänomenologische Studien*, Neske, Pfullingen 1960, p. 50.

The bureaucratic exercise, indeed, has these same characteristics: lack of purpose, alteration of time as a qualitative dimension of existence, and impossibility of the task assigned. This leads to perennial frustration – indeed, the task can only be carried out *per exercitationem inefficacem*, so as to ensure that life unfolds in a regime of constant guilt. To follow Kafka's reflections on K.'s condition, «he did not know what the charge was or even what consequences it might bring, so that he had to remember every tiny action and event from the whole of his life, looking at them from all sides and checking and reconsidering them»²³.

To conclude: exercise is the liturgical device that renders duty fully effective, confusing it with the *habitus* inscribed in the unconscious (in the form of a *code*, used to «transmit or process» certain binding contents²⁴ both at level of consciousness, and at that of certain «action chains»²⁵). The *exercitum* achieves the coincidence between being and ought, operationality and effectiveness, potentiality and actuality, *habitus* (of ethical virtue) and obedience to the *regula* (in the form of an intimate command), ethical system and juridical paradigm. This convergence, however, can always and only be determined in a highly critical form; that is, to the extent that the ontology of the existence of *homo-horologium* is constitutively determined by being-in-debt (*Shuldig-sein*, as Heidegger would say²⁶): it is this gap that feeds the asymptotic tension of the convergence between being and ought, which is realized only in the form of *an obsessive and irreducible exercise*. This is the threshold of a veritable paradox, according to which the coincidence of *life and rule* takes place under the wretched sky of programmatic fault.

In the administered world, the rule is internalized in its essentially utopian value, so that a sense of irreducible inadequacy is determined in the spirit. This, moreover, is the most tangible sign of the perfect incarnation of the rule itself in the disciplined life of a person devoted to the liturgical inscription. The perfection of the exercise, in the formal-requirement perspective that is typical of bureaucracy, is realized as an act of accusation, reproach, blame, reporting *a constitutive fault in the realization of the disciplined operation*. And the clock-man embraces the *horologium*, but with a slight distance, a misalignment, a discrepancy – a gap that, in hindsight, determines Gregor Samsa's delay at the station, preventing him from catching the seven o'clock train that, every single day, takes him to work.

²³ KAFKA, *The Trial*, p. 93.

²⁴ Niklas LUHMANN, *Trust and Power*, trans. H. Davis, J. Raffan, and K. Rooney, Wiley, Chichester 1979, p. 125.

²⁵ *Ivi*, p. 133.

²⁶ Gianluca CUZZO, *La filosofia che serve. Realismo, ecologia, azione*, Moretti & Vitali, Bergamo 2017, pp. 112-114.

The more the *horologium* permeates human life, the more this gap becomes a bloody affair, ready to demand new scrupulous and urgent *officia*, which feed the – pragmatically incurable – tension between conformity and dissonance. This difference, ultimately, is the true content of the codification, which produces the dissonant effect of the validity of a contentless law; we could also say that the content of the prescription is the very urgency of the command/prohibition, which merely reiterates its own guilt-inducing ineffectiveness. The outcome of this continuous removal of content from the exercise prescribed is the feeling that time is inadequate for action, that it is never enough, so that the clock mechanism seems damaged «it read[s] “tardy”»²⁷.

In Kafka’s world, everything starts on the wrong foot, perhaps by waking up too late, troubled by “restless dreams”: as soon as you wake up, you are already guilty in the form of an indeterminate inadequacy, of a temporal dissonance which has no name and yet infects the characters as the disease/fate of delay and forgetfulness: *time is out of joint*. Consciousness, in other words, is already codified – in terms of the shape of time – in the way of non-compliance, of having missed a given appointment, of having been caught off guard or marked by a programmatic fault. This preventive form that digs into consciousness, in *The Metamorphosis*, manifests itself in the infringement of every temporal consecution, by which Gregor blames himself even before the situation is ontologically irretrievable (before time has “really” run out):

- At first, after all, it is still possible to reach the station in a hurry (if it weren’t for the chitinous shell that surrounds the protagonist).
- As if that were not enough, at a quarter past seven the public prosecutor appears at the front door, perhaps caught by the suspicion that Gregor did not want to go to work. This fact concerns the insidious possibility that the prosecutor has anticipated Gregor’s moves, being *able to read the intentions inscribed (codified) in his soul*. Bureaucracy has already affected the deepest parts of the condemned, leaving him neither time (to react) nor escape (any justification, like a simple sick leave, appears inadequate: why?).

The formula corresponding to the process of Gregor’s self-blaming can be borrowed from Benjamin’s fragment called *Capitalism as Religion*: according to it, such a temporal codification of life incessantly produces debt-guilt (the German term, *das Schuld*, covers the semantic area of both words: gambling debt, moral guilt, but also debt incurred for family financial difficulties, which clings «to the feet as they try to break free, held fast

²⁷ Walter BENJAMIN, *Berlin Childhood Around 1900*, trans. H. Eiland, Harvard University Press, Harvard 2006, p. 57.

as they are in the primeval slime»²⁸). This guilt-debt is the product of a «purely cultic religion, without dogma»²⁹, where the law (*regula*) is in force but has no content. It activates a *horologium* that rhythmically dictates *officia* devised to create guilt. No salvation is envisaged, no effective system to pay off the debt. According to Benjamin, this conception of life as guilt and debt is «presumably the first case of a blaming, rather than a repenting cult [...] not in order to repent for this guilt, but to make it universal»³⁰.

We are thus prey to the whims of an «immature deity»³¹ who is extremely volatile: the sheer randomness of economic and administrative processes. The circularity by which it is the cult itself that generates the guilty fault, upon closer inspection, is the atavistic law that applies in the relationship between father and son in Kafka's rotting universe: «Original sin, the old injustice committed by man, consists in the complaint unceasingly made by man that he has been the victim of an injustice, the victim of original sin»³². Father and son, evidently, are slaves to the same *horologium*: the success of one can only be the unhappiness of the other, because the time of devout exercises is the mere rhythmic space of competition, of reciprocal subtraction, of lack and of the protracted debt of all with all. This clearly emerges in the mutual accusations that, in the story *The Judgment*, father and son make against each other.

Franz Kafka's mystical vocation to spiritual exercise is rendered only in its negative aspect in his prematurely interrupted work: in it, we find a sort of nihilistic reverse of the mystical process of *Einbildung*, which is lost «on the nether side of [...] “nothingness”, in its inside lining», in the absence of a true *imago* of the divine³³. Indeed, Kafka experienced first-hand the nihilistic conversion of *devotio* as a perverse mechanism that – in the very incarnation/inscription of the juridical form – generates the ontological gap between *regula* and existence (a hiatus that leads to a forever guilty *habitus*).

From an act of consecration inspired by religious piety, devotion turns into the bloody parable of sacrifice (*sacrificium*) and into the immolation (*immolatio*) of «bare life» (*bloßes Leben*) to a strict administrative reality: «a dark nest of bureaucrats»³⁴ that cannot

²⁸ Franz KAFKA, *Letters to Felice (1912-1917)*, trans. J. Stern and E. Duckworth, Schocken Books, New York 1973, p. 525.

²⁹ Walter BENJAMIN, *Capitalism as Religion [Fragment 74]*, in *Religion as Critique: The Frankfurt School's Critique of Religion*, ed. E. Mendieta, Routledge, New York 2005, p. 260.

³⁰ *Ivi*, p. 259.

³¹ *Ivi*, p. 260.

³² Walter BENJAMIN, *Franz Kafka. On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death*, in *Illuminations*, ed. H. Arendt, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, Boston and New York 2019, p. 59.

³³ Walter BENJAMIN, *Letter to G. Scholem, 20 July 1934*, in *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1919-1940*, ed. G. Scholem and T.W. Adorno, New Directions, New York 1994, p. 449.

³⁴ JANOUCH, *Conversations with Kafka*, p. 23.

combine mystery with the salvific dimension offered by the exemplary truth (note that *sacrificium* and *immolatio* are both semantic variations present in the spectrum of possibilities of the Latin term *devotio*: both in the military and in the ritual spheres). Following Holitscher, Kafka compares the bureaucratized society to an infernal machine (*Höllenaschine*), which transforms human life into the grey mass of the damned to eternal punishment, whose hope of redemption «is blocked by their own frontal bones»³⁵. Moreover, when man tries to identify with his social image (as a worker, son, family man, etc.), rather than triggering the virtuous process of anthropotechnical transformation, he gives rise to the horrifying one of metamorphosis (*Verwandlung*).

Gregor Samsa, precisely through his prolonged working hours, becomes the obscene symbol of this aborted transformation, which causes the human being to regress to the level of an insect excluded from any process of assimilation and image self-formation (*Einbildung*). His epilogue is that of a parasite, which does not even dare to look in the mirror; the only home for such a being is not one surrounded by large windows through which light can make the soul crystalline, making love blossom in it like a flower inebriated by the sun, in the image of the Absolute. To make just one example, the cathedral where the dialogue between Josef K. and the court chaplain takes place – a building whose size “seemed to be just at the limit of what a man could bear” – is dark, desert, labyrinthine, occupied by empty niches (even the images of the saints are missing!) and pulpits that resemble hiding places or burrows in which obtuse court officials can hide.

But it is time that undergoes the most striking metamorphosis. According to the mystic Heinrich Seuse, in his *Horologium sapientiae* (c. 1335-38), it was divine wisdom that marked the time in which existence can be perfected, in the medium of the divine *imago*, through the liturgical moments of *oratio*, *meditatio* and prayer (according to which «whoever wishes to have eternal Wisdom as his intimate bride must devoutly say these prayers every day»³⁶). Instead, in Kafka, time has undergone a frightening degenerative metamorphosis, ending up being subjected to impure commercial interests and bureaucratic efficiency, and ultimately reduced to a “curse on life”.

In conclusion, even for Kafka, the time marked by the factory and by bureaucracy generates a dimension of prayer, as it did for Seuse and Loyola; however, it is a desperate and blasphemous prayer, which bears witness to the destruction of the divine image in the human being, the end of every mystical process of human transfiguration through the *speculum mundicie* of the divine³⁷. This prayer, at most, is nothing but a

³⁵ BENJAMIN, *Franz Kafka*, p. 71.

³⁶ Heinrich SEUSE, *Horologium sapientiae*, ed. E. Strange, J.M. Heberle, Köln 1861, p. 29.

³⁷ *Ivi*, p. 32.

«perpetual Day of Atonement»³⁸: the day of atonement set as a permanent condition. The cathedrals devoted to the codification of the imagination produce no longer well-formed people, but mere caricatures of human beings, half insects half hangmen. As Kafka put it, «the hangman is today a respectable bureaucrat, relatively high up on the civil service pay roll. Why shouldn't there be a hangman concealed in every conscientious bureaucrat? [Bureaucrats] transform living, changing human beings into dead code numbers, incapable of any change»³⁹.

But this is exactly the opposite of the human image that Seuse and Loyola wanted to realize: it is its parody, something that enables the instrumental codification of a human figure without content, free from any kind of inner life, from any spasm of rebellion. The new profiling techniques (to read facial writing), which accompany the recent wall-building policies and the ongoing strengthening of frontier demarcations, testify precisely to this loss of the traditional image of the human being. And nobody, putting these devices into operation, dares to look in the mirror: after all, we are becoming very similar to Gregor Samsa. We are content with our miserable human deformity: as Kafka writes, «in order not to rise to the human condition, men sink into the dark depths of the zoological doctrine of race»⁴⁰.

³⁸ Franz KAFKA, *The Diaries Of Franz Kafka 1914-1923*, Schocken Books, New York 1948, p. 107.

³⁹ JANOUGH, *Conversations with Kafka*, p. 19.

⁴⁰ *Ivi*, p. 74.

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