

JELENA ULRIKE REINHARDT

IN THE CAGE OF KAFKA AND CANETTI*The Metamorphosis of the Ape at the Origin of Culture*

ABSTRACT: This paper investigates anthropogenesis, which is the process of becoming human, from an interdisciplinary perspective, namely among science, theatre, and visual arts. The motif of animals locked in a cage – especially apes, but not only – is recurrent when talking about humans and their origin as cultural beings. Relying on some monkey portraits made by Gabriel von Max, in which the animals appear deprived of their freedom, the focus is on Kafka's short story *Ein Bericht für eine Akademie* (A Report to an Academy, 1917) and on Elias Canetti's novel *Die Blendung* (Auto da Fé, 1935), mainly on a chapter entitled "Ein Irrenhaus" (A Madhouse). In both texts we are confronted with an ongoing metamorphosis, with hybrid figures in which the boundaries between man and ape are blurred. Although in one case the ape becomes a man and in the other the man becomes an ape, so that both metamorphoses proceed in opposite directions, the ultimate goal is freedom. However, this freedom reveals all its problematic nature since escape from the cage does not always mean liberation. The two texts, which are presented as a reinterpretation of the myth of the origin of culture between nostalgia for a distant past and critique of human progress, are essential reflections on the power dynamics at the basis of civilization.

KEYWORDS: Kafka; Canetti; Von Max; Evolution; Science, Theater.

"Ursprung ist das Ziel" (Origin is the goal).

K. Kraus

"Wir wissen nichts von anderen, nichts von uns. Wir spielen immer, wer es weiß, ist klug" (We know nothing of others, nothing of ourselves. We always play, who knows it is smart).

Schnitzler

In the 19th century, the search for origins became a popular topic among various disciplines (Fischer-Lichte 2005, 17). In this regard, Charles Darwin's findings published in *The Origin of Species* (1859) and in *The Descent of Man* (1871) were striking. Through these works the author tries to explain the origin of the various species, and above all of man, on an evolutionary basis, thus going to undermine the solid beliefs held until then. Partly on the wave of the success of these studies, the search for origins became urgent also in other fields. Friedrich Nietzsche's *Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik* (The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music), published in 1872, marked a major

step in the debated question about the origin of ancient Greek theatre.¹ These different fields of investigation do not always stay separate², and indeed interesting results arise from the dialogue between science and theatre. Scientific and pseudoscientific knowledge along with theatricality from a performative perspective (Fischer-Lichte 2012) are the focus of many literary works and iconographic motifs. The topic of anthropogenesis – which is the process of becoming human – is very suitable for this interdisciplinary discourse: indeed, the origin of man as a cultural being is often presented as a true *mise-en-scène* (Neumann 2012, 173).³ It is no coincidence that this process often takes on theatrical forms. If, as Agamben writes, “man is the animal who must recognize himself as human in order to be human (l’uomo è l’animale che deve riconoscersi umano per esserlo)” (Agamben 2019 [2002], 33), this also means that man discovers himself only when he is able to see himself, as well as to come out of himself. In other words, the self exists only in relation to other people who confirm its existence (Lacan 2007, 26; Winnicott 2010 [1967]).

Based on these premises, the animal gaze on man plays an essential role since it represents otherness, that foreign and external gaze which can see what man alone does not grasp. Among all animals, apes undoubtedly occupy a special place, above all because of their similarity to man. This relationship is visible to the naked eye and is then further strengthened on scientific grounds by the studies of Darwin. At the same time, apes stand out for their difference: from an evolutionary point of view, apes seem to be closer to the origins than humans. But the ape’s gaze does not tell what it sees, it is disturbingly silent. In fact, language is the distinctive characteristic of humans, while animals are commonly defined exactly by this lack. However, paradoxically, from the point of view of man, the animal who lives in immanence is always missing something, just because it does not

¹ Nietzsche’s study introduces some disruptive aspects in an age which celebrates the cult of individual. Firstly, through his recourse to the Dionysian principle he annuls individuation. Secondly, he traces the origin of tragedy back to a ritual of dismemberment. In other words, he considers “the condition of individuation as the source and origin of all suffering and hence as something reprehensible” (1995, 52). On the same subject see also Fischer-Lichte 2005, 17-18.

² Such intersections occur both when scientific themes are communicated by resorting to artistic elements and when, on the contrary, literary-artistic motifs penetrate the scientific discourse. Some significant examples of this prolific dialogue among disciplines can be found in the narration of hysteria when addressed according to the most varied approaches. In this regard, see the study of Didi-Hubermann (2008) which shows how the use of photography strengthens the scientific reflection, although in some cases in the direction of falsification: the hysterical patients of the Salpêtrière were posed to highlight the signs of hysteria. In other words, Charcot presents himself not only as a doctor, but also as an artist through the staging of hysterical women. Reciprocal influences can also be found in the representation of the anatomical body in a scientific setting, which often draws from an artistic iconographic tradition and not purely medical (Reinhardt 2020a). More specifically, about the representation of animals between art and science, see Kemp 2007 and on Darwinism and its aesthetic implications, see Menninghaus 2013 and Lubbock 2008.

³ Neumann introduces the motif of the cage as a “cultural stage”. On the topic of the cage as theater, see also Foucault 2014 [1975], 218.

possess that characteristic (language) that makes man always longing (Cimatti 2013, 50-77).

From an iconographic point of view, the mute gaze of monkeys on man was brilliantly represented by Gabriel von Max (1840-1915), a painter originally from Prague who later moved to Munich. Through his works, the *Affenmaler* (monkey painter) investigated the theme of identity moving between science and art: as a convinced Darwinist he bred monkeys at his home in Starnberg near Munich. In doing so, he managed to develop a first-hand knowledge of his animals, which he portrayed over time in several paintings (Uhlig 2010). Unlike Darwin, he did not believe that man was at the top of the evolutionary chain;⁴ the monkeys depicted by von Max, mainly engaged in human activities, show their gaze on human beings. It is often a critical look both when as in *Affen als Kunstrichter* (Monkeys as Art Critics, 1889) it ridicules a certain human attitude, and when it bears traces of the violence exerted on the monkey by contact with man, with his culture and civilization. For example, the first two versions of *Schmerzvergessen* (Forgetting Pain) display a monkey locked in a cage, condemned to die. In this image, the cage, a human creation, just as human is the cause of its imprisonment and thus death, is concretely visible. In a third version of *Schmerzvergessen* (1904)⁵, the cage is missing, a suffering monkey is curled up on a bed, wounded in its right front leg as well as in its right hind leg. So, the monkey's pain is transferred into a human context, apparently welcoming since the hostile presence of the cage is absent. The little monkey has been granted the opportunity to escape from a condition of imprisonment, if willing to accept the rules of human social living. Therefore, the constraint remains, but has become more devious as the bars have now apparently disappeared.⁶

Franz Kafka masterfully depicts the fleeting boundaries between ape and man as well as all the violence of the anthropogenic machine in one of his short stories, entitled *Ein Bericht für eine Akademie* (A Report to an Academy, 1917). Here Kafka stages the metamorphosis of an ape into a man through narration.

In short, the plot is this: an ape was brutally captured during a hunting expedition. At first, he was locked in a cage from which he manages to get out deciding to become human. In this story, anthropogenesis starts from the wound, from the body in pain, from the cage that cuts the flesh. However, once released from his prison, the process of becoming human takes on forms of constraint that are just as violent as the previous ones, but do not seem to affect the body, at least at the beginning. The references to Darwinism

⁴ Canetti also points out the limits of the Darwinian theory, which consist, in his view, in making nature narrower and always putting humans at the center, when humans already hold overwhelming power over the earth (Canetti 1985 [1972], 66; Reinhardt 2020, 118). However, upon closer study, Darwin's view appears more complex. See in this regard Bredekamp 2005.

⁵ There are two versions of *Schmerzvergessen* with the same subject: from 1871 in Amsterdam and from 1873 in Hamburg. The third version is dated 1904.

⁶ On the closeness of the expression of animal and human emotions, see Darwin 2009 [1872].

are evident along with their problematization.⁷ The ape who is no longer an ape and not yet a man is called Rotpeter. In the meantime, with an exceptional effort he has reached “the cultural level of an average European” (Kafka 1983 [1917], 258). He is even invited to give a lecture before an unspecified Academy on his former life as an ape. Speaking in the first person, he begins by reducing expectations, unfortunately he does not feel able to fully meet this request. The motivation is embedded in time: almost five years have now passed since his previous life. However, he is aware of how relative the perception of time is: it is a short period according to the calendar but very long if one considers that it is the space in which the metamorphosis of the ape into man takes place; that is, the time of transition from nature to culture. Rotpeter is fully aware of the *sine qua non* that made his own ‘evolution’ possible: “I could never had achieved what I have done had I been stubbornly set on clinging to my origins, to the remembrances of my youth” (250). So, the only way to become human, is to give up remembering one’s origin: anthropogenesis requires sacrificing the memory of birth. The moment Rotpeter enters the world of culture, and thus loses his freedom as he submits to what he perceives as a “yoke”, memories become inaccessible. The possibility of turning back becomes more and more ephemeral as the transformation proceeds: the opening that would allow him to go back has become so narrow that entering it would mean “to scrape the very skin”. In fact, his metamorphosis has not been painless; it has caused wounds on his body, both external and internal.

Rotpeter is fully aware of the Academy’s true reason for being interested in his story. They hope to discover their own story of origins through the eyes and voices of others,⁸ however, Rotpeter dissolves all illusions:

To put it plainly, much as I like expressing myself in images, to put it plainly: your life as apes, gentlemen, insofar as something of that kind lies behind you, cannot be farther removed from you than mine is from me. Yet everyone on earth feels a tickling at the heels; the small chimpanzee and the great Achilles alike. (Kafka 1983 [1917], 250)

Despite the impossibility of remembering his own origin and consequently also the human one, the former ape has something to say to the Academy about the line he had to follow to enter the world of humans. Very significantly, Rotpeter feels comfortable to address the Academy, that is, that part of society that represents, at least formally, the highest expression of human culture. Moreover, the Academy is depicted in its apparent insubstantiality since direct references to it are minimal, but actually it exercises all its power over the speaker by influencing the construction of the speech itself.⁹ Indeed, Rotpeter points out why he feels worthy of speaking to such a distinguished audience.

⁷ Kafka’s interest in Darwinism dates back to his high school years (Norris 1980; Wagenbach 2006).

⁸ On the desire to receive from another the telling of one’s own story, see Cavarero 2007 [1997].

⁹ The Academy is only mentioned in the title and when the narrative self addresses the “HONORED MEMBERS of the Academy!” (Kafka 1983 [1917], 250) in his speech. It is exactly in this apparent absence that the full power of the institution emerges (Foucault 2014). Such a power structure is recurrent in Kafka’s work, see, for example his novel *Der Prozess* (The Trial; Shah 2014).

But what makes Rotpeter – and this is the important point – so confident? He tells us that over time he has earned a solid position on all the great variety stages of the civilized world¹⁰. The experience of the stage is crucial in order to speak before the Academy; thus, the essential role of theater and the performative moment in anthropogenesis emerges clearly. It is no coincidence that Rotpeter, at the peak of his career, can add “frankness in words to the frankness” (251) of his first handshake. The ape becomes truly human, not only when he says “I”, but when he accompanies this proclamation with bodily presence, all performed before an audience.¹¹ Hence, the performative moment requires the physical presence of the actor on stage, however, let us not forget that in this case he is still acting. Rotpeter plays a role in order to become part of human society, he is allowed to leave his cage and is finally accepted by humans just because he can move on stage. In other words, as long as he remains within fiction, he can do much more than only survive,¹² he can aspire to become fully human. The moment he steps onto the stage of the Academy, a place where the theatrical dimension is hidden and the cage even more invisible, he completes his transformation.

But let’s go back to the beginning of Rotpeter’s life. In order to reconstruct his origin on the Gold Coast and the circumstances of his capture, as well as the loss of his initial condition, he is forced to use second-hand information, thus finding himself in a tragically human condition. The only way to continue living after the loss of the paradisiacal dimension and the irruption of the trauma is to forget, to remove. After going down to the river to drink with his troop, Rotpeter is the only one to be hit by the men of the hunting expedition of the firm of Hagenbeck. He was hit in two places: on the cheek, where he now has a large red scar without hair. This first wound makes him a subject, an “I”, giving him the “horrible” (251) name of Rotpeter.¹³ This name was chosen for him in memory of another monkey who had recently died, also with a scar. The second shot hit him below the hip, because of this wound he still limps. When visitors come to see him, he takes off his trousers to show them the scar. According to some, this would be the sign of the persistence of his ape nature¹⁴. The ape’s memories begin only from the moment of his awakening after his capture, when he finds himself in a cage on the Hagenbeck steamer. The cage in which he has been confined does not fit his body; the bars of the grates saw through his flesh:

¹⁰ On the importance of mimicry and gestural details, that is on the centrality of the theatrical component in Kafka’s work, see Schiffermüller 2011.

¹¹ Becoming human means implanting an “I” into the body (Laplanche 1999). Kafka stresses the outstanding role of the body in this process.

¹² On simulation as a form of survival, see Nietzsche 2015 [1873], 12-13 and Canetti 1980 [1960], 447-451.

¹³ Reference is made here to the violence of naming. For a more in-depth study of this topic in Kafka’s work, see Treder 2013, 33.

¹⁴ Rotpeter’s lameness could indicate his being in a phase of transition since the metamorphosis has not yet been completed. On the symbolic meaning of lameness and monosandalism, see Ginzburg 2008 [1989].

It was not a cage with four bars: three walls were attached to a crate, thus forming the fourth wall. The whole cage was too low to stand upright. So I was crouching down with my knees bent and trembling all the time; moreover, probably not wanting to see anyone at first and wishing to stay in the dark, I was facing the crate, while behind it the bars of the gratings cut into my flesh. (Kafka [1917] 1983, 252)

As in von Max's paintings, Rotpeter's body becomes the tangible sign of man's power over the animal's body expressed through violence. So Rotpeter does not escape the brutality of anthropogenesis, he can only choose between two cages, the one made of real bars and its metaphorical version. Remembering the origin would mean, instead, remembering freedom and, therefore, the impossibility of living within human society. For this reason, Rotpeter does not recognize freedom in humans, but only captures their ridiculous attempt to imitate that of animals.

In passing: may I say that all too often men are betrayed by the word freedom. And as freedom is counted among the most sublime feelings, so the corresponding disillusionment can be also sublime. In variety theaters I have often watched, before my turn came on, a couple of acrobats performing on trapezes high in the roof. They swung themselves, they rocked to and fro, they sprang into the air, they floated into each other's arms, one hung by the hair from the teeth of the other. "And that too is human freedom," I thought, "self-controlled movement." What a mockery of Mother Nature! Were the apes to see such a spectacle, no theater walls could stand the shock of their laughter. No, freedom was not what I wanted. Only a way out [...]. (Kafka 1983 [1917], 253)

If on the one hand the removal of the origin allows him to survive, to preserve himself, on the other hand it is also his weak point, his "Achilles' heel". Remembering the origin implies knowledge of freedom and therefore recognizing the gap between nature and culture.

Finally, there is one aspect addressed in the *Report to an Academy* that leads us directly to the second text under consideration. While Rotpeter illustrates the process followed to stop being an ape and, thus, become human, he focuses on the pain that learning takes:

And so I learned things, gentlemen. Ah, one learns when one has to; one learns when one needs a way out; one learns at all costs. One stands over oneself with a whip; one flays oneself at the slightest opposition. My ape nature fled out of me, head over heels and away, so that my first teacher himself turned into an ape by it, had soon to give up teaching and was taken away to a mental hospital. Fortunately he was soon let out again. (Kafka 1983 [1917], 258)

Learning and madness, both perceived as "a way out", are at the heart of *Die Blendung* (Auto da Fé, 1935), the first and only novel written by Elias Canetti. This masterpiece of the twentieth-century literature was defined, among other things, as a "creation from chaos" (Wieprecht-Roth 2004, 51).¹⁵ Moreover, it can be considered as "a text that is

¹⁵ Wieprecht-Roth's study recognizes the central role of the myth of origins in Canetti's writing. In this regard, see also Neumann 1985. I recall that Chaos is the Greek name for chasm, abyss, that is, what exists

simultaneously a scientific treatise on human nature and a work of art” (Maestripieri 2019, XII). In the chapter entitled *Ein Irrenhaus* (A Madhouse), compared to the story of Kafka, the metamorphosis proceeds in the opposite direction¹⁶: a now nameless man has become a gorilla who nevertheless continues to wear human clothes (Reinhardt 2017; 2020). The gorilla is the lunatic brother of a banker who, for reasons of prestige, is kept segregated at home and is given out to be an eccentric artist who has “little attention left for the human race” (Kafka 1983 [1917], 399). The two rooms of the villa reserved for the gorilla are in fact his cage, but he transforms them into a place of freedom, escaping the yoke of social life with his madness and giving life to a sort of mythical world of origins in contrast to the civilized world.¹⁷

The gorilla-man appears strongly anchored to materiality, so much that he lives on a floor covered with a high layer of earth. It is indeed with the earth that he unites re-proposing in some ways the mythical love unions at the origin of the world (Canetti 1995 [1935], 458; Vernant 2014). He expresses himself through a language he has created himself, a sort of African dialect, a primitive and, to quote Lévy-Bruhl, pre-logical language in which objects live floating in emotions and change name according to the sensations in which they are immersed (Canetti 1995 [1935], 403). Exposed to such fluidity, the gorilla breaks that infernal mechanism of non-communication that is triggered by speaking only through stereotypes and masks. As in the case of Rotpeter, here too we are faced with a metamorphosis still in progress which, however, does not proceed in the direction of evolution, but always renews itself since in the world of the gorilla-man there is never a coincidence between meaning and signifier:

Objects [...] had no special names. They were called according to the mood in which they floated. Their faces altered for the gorilla, who lived a wild, tense, stormy life. His life communicated itself to them, they had an active part in it. (Canetti 1995 [1935], 403)

Released from the cage of identity, the gorilla no longer has a name and therefore is not subjected to violence. His body in space is also his language:

Each syllable which he uttered corresponded to a special gesture. The words for objects seemed to change. He meant the picture a hundred times and called it each time something different; the names seemed to depend on the gesture with which he demonstrated them. Expressed and accompanied by his whole body no sounds appeared indifferent. When he laughed he spread his arms out wide. (Canetti 1995 [1935], 401)

before the creation of the universe (Vernant 2014, 9). On the topic of madness in *Auto da fé*, see Reinhardt 2017.

¹⁶ Kafka’s influence on Canetti is well known: he was continually inspired by the work of the Prague writer, but at the same time he approached it in a critical way (Canetti 2019).

¹⁷ Evident is the reference to the thought of Lévy-Bruhl who had a great influence on Canetti especially in the years between 1930 and 1940. (Labessan-Malanda 2007, 90).

It is the gynecologist and future psychiatrist Georges Kien who studies this language with great admiration. In some ways we find here a similar pattern to that of the Kafkaesque story: the gynecologist could be like a member of the Academy who tries to grasp the secret of origins through the gaze and the voice of the ape-like being. To this purpose he devotes himself to learning the mysterious language of the gorilla. Georges is not confronted with a mask, but with a real body in which the boundaries between the semiotic and the phenomenal part are continually crossed.¹⁸

Once he learns his language “with infinite pains”, which is also a new way of being in the world, Georges understands the greatness of insanity. This consists in knowing how to take distance from the dimension in which the failure of reason occurs, which is also the failure of language. Healing the gorilla would mean turning him back into the swindled brother of a banker. In other words, the escape from what, according to the common categories of social living, would seem to be a cage does not mean freedom. The gorilla-man is free exactly because he is in a cage. Unlike Rotpeter, he does not experience origin as a necessary removal in order to survive. Since he is profoundly free, like God, he continually recreates his origin in every gesture, word, and emotion.

He had peopled two rooms with a whole world. He created what he wanted, and after the six days of creation, on the seventh took up his abode therein. Instead of resting, he gave his creation speech. All that was round him proceeded from him. (Canetti 1995 [1935], 403)

Once again unlike Rotpeter, who is forced to find private spaces to take comfort from a little, half-domesticated chimpanzee “as apes do” (Kafka 1983 [1917], 259), the gorilla-man lives his sexuality freely. There is no part of himself that needs to be concealed, not even those forms of dominance exercised over his mistress, as they recall the power relations underlying so many origin myths (Vernant 2014).

In conclusion, although the two metamorphoses proceed in opposite directions, in both texts the ape’s body and his gaze on man become, similarly to what is expressed in von Max’s paintings, the demonstration of a strong critique of society. Those who try to escape from the cage of social living and, therefore, from the dimension of fiction and simulation (Nietzsche 2015 [1873], 12-13),¹⁹ risk being considered insane and, therefore, according to the reasoning outlined so far, not completely human or, at least, differently human. But the otherness expressed in the mute gaze of the ape, which in these texts is endowed with speech, tells us a lot about how much the human animal is forced to exclude of itself in order to be defined human.

¹⁸ This is a characteristic of the so-called performative turn in which the contribution of the spectator’s reaction is essential. The spectator thus finds himself to have an active part in the performance (Fischer-Lichte 1997; Reinhardt 2020b).

¹⁹ According to Nietzsche in *Human, All-Too-Human* (2009 [1878]): “Many chains have been placed on man so that he may learn to behave like an animal; and indeed he has become milder, more spiritual, more joyful and more sensible than all animals. But now he still suffers from having worn chains for so long [...]”.

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