

FRANZ KAFKA IN SIGHT OF POPCULTURE

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Abstract: The paper deals with the research of elements of popular culture in Franz Kafka's oeuvre from the aspect of the relationship between society and popular culture in the 20th century. The research leads to several examples in which, while building popular culture, the heroes of Kafka's works try to solve their own emotional, family, religious and social problems. In this regard, this paper demonstrates how popular culture in Kafka's works manifests itself through the interaction of the broad masses of people with government structures, up to his personal relationship with his father, which grows into rebellion. In this way, this work points to a theme that runs through almost all of Kafka's works, which is the problem of modern man. Relying on the theory of John Fiske, this paper aims to present the importance of the elements of popular culture in the broader plan of the analyzed segments, that is, on the level of their modernist character. Since in the era of simulation and representation, any kind of authentic and original culture is virtually impossible, this paper tries to point out Kafka's unique way of resisting the imposed way of life and a view of the world through literature.

Keywords: society, popular culture, Fiske, everyday life, struggle, adaptation

Introduction

The concept of culture has been defined in numerous studies, mainly from the fields of sociology, anthropology and psychology. Kloskovska (2001:11) points out that culture considered from a genetic point of view is achieved through tradition, i.e. by transferring cultural achievements between individuals and generations. A special role in the overall culture is played by language as the art of expressing ideas by using sounds, marking objects by using sounds, and the art of ruling the world by using words that flow from the mouth. In the middle of the 20th century, a phase of the development of cultural anthropology followed, which is closely related to the point of view that culture is the product of various forms of human social activity, because culture is acquired through social transmission, has an ideational character and is accepted through norms and patterns. Kloskovska (2001:14) emphasizes that culture represents a key apparatus for satisfying human

needs, but it is also an impulse braking instrument, subject to changes of adjustment. Although it has the form of a system, that system should be understood as open, directed towards integration, which has not been completely reached.

Mass culture as a form of society developed under the influence of the development of mass media, primarily television, film, press, radio, and all in the context of mass production and mass consumption. In this connection, it should be emphasized that it cannot be understood without its two fractions - folk culture and high culture, within which popular culture also developed. From an etymological point of view, according to the Latin word from which *populus* - the people - was born, we see that culture is not a concept that can be viewed simply and without a close connection with the national basis. John Fiske (2001:28) defines popular culture as a part of power relations, "it always bears traces of the constant struggle between dominance and subordination, power and resistance." It is not consumption, but culture - an active process of creating and transmitting meaning and pleasure within a certain social system.

In his study *Popular Culture*, Fiske gives a whole series of elements that reflect the process of creating popular culture, and which are highly represented as central motifs in almost all of Kafka's works, namely: popular pleasures, spectacle, popular texts in relation to the use of language, popular productivity, everyday life, adaptation, manipulation, excess, contradiction, complexity as well as the struggle between the dominant and subordinate classes.

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By the examination of popular culture, Fiske means the study of the circulation of the text, explaining that the meaning of popular texts can only be reached intertextually, more precisely from following the way of their commercial promotion, through the interpretation of the users themselves, to the meaning derived from them by the media (2001:200). This continuous circulation of meaning in popular culture marks its tendency to repeat and shape the time of everyday life.

By publishing his cult works such as *the Metamorphosis* and *America*, Kafka became a unique representative of the popular culture of the 20s of the last century, in which the technique of stream of consciousness is masterfully connected with traditional storytelling procedures and which is considered the most significant pledge for the future of Kafka's art. In this regard, it should be emphasized that an outstanding work of world literature, *the Process*, a novel that will push the boundaries of the written word, was created on those

foundations. On the other hand, it should be emphasized the connection between *the Process* and *the Castle*, which complement each other in a way, because the Process does not pose a problem, but only describes it, but does not conclude, while the *Castle* resolves things to a certain extent, but does not remove the problem - it only helps to let's accept it, because each chapter is a new defeat and at the same time a new beginning. In *the Process*, the main protagonist Jozef K. accepts the indictment, although no one informs him of it, although he does not know what he should defend himself against, although he encounters evil, immorality and depravity at every step, precisely wanting to prove all the absurdity of the accusation, he thus allows it is he who gets drawn into the general vortex of nonsense. In his desire to prove that the accusation is baseless, he clashes with an unknown force, which is stronger because it is mysterious. It is precisely the awareness that he is addressing someone, that he will influence the understanding of the one with whom he communicates through the text, that makes Kafka an active part of the process of creating popular culture, because if cultural material offers the possibility of connecting with everyday life, if it is relevant to the social situation of the reader, then it can be consider that it is suitable for participation in the process of creating popular culture.

Kafkaesque style, space and atmosphere

In Kafka's works, the focus is on specific relationships in space-time categories, that is, on the concept of relating space, time and identity, where space is often disputed. Three types of time appear in his works: individual, historical and collective, and the space in which the individual lives in his works is undefined. For example, the reader is first in the building where Jozef K lives, then in the building where the trial is held, and the courtroom is entered from the kitchen, there are also tenants in the offices, everything changes and moves from one to the other. This space often resembles a labyrinth in which an individual loses his own identity and has no right to a personal life and thus loses his dignity, because it is a space that swallows the individual, where discomfort, caution and fear are felt on every page. In such area, there are no signs, no streets, no parts of the city, we do not know the country or the city where the action takes place. There are only partial indications that carry certain symbolism. On the other hand, we can see that Kafka is very realistic in his descriptions of urban space, i.e. pictures of the city as a crucial representation of popular culture, where he gives a detailed description of the house, yard, and even details such as clothesline, children playing, stairs, offices, people meeting each other, etc. By

reading Kafka's works in detail, the average reader can conclude that this space is often full of banalities, unbelievable, and very often surreal. That's probably why Kafka uses allusion and allegory in his works, which gives every reader the opportunity to interpret the idea and meaning of his works in his own unique way, but above all, Kafka is quite specific in his views on the world and human rights. In his works, the personality disappears, its self and everything is uncertain and indefinite in duration, as an individual who is completely unable to integrate into the world of popular culture. Hidden in those labyrinths in which the individual moves is the accusation of powerful forces that have priority over everything and very often are against the individual and even the people themselves, for the sake of their own interests and actions, which always leave an indelible mark (Aisenberg, 1986:11).

Fantastic elements

Fiske (2001:212) emphasizes that the elements of fantasy lead to the exaggeration and distortion of conventional meaning, thereby mocking it in a way. This means that in the study of popular culture, the focus shifts from the question of what people read to the question of how they read it. Attention is directed not so much to the structure of the original text, but more to its role in shaping the consciousness of the readers. They may act as "fans", who will not accept one-way communication, but will tend to be part of the "process" that implies a new use of the offered cultural product. Fiske calls this process popular productivity, alluding to the fact that language is a special medium of mediating popular culture.

In this connection, the famous short story *the Metamorphosis*, which was published in 1912, is certainly one of the best and most representative examples from Kafka's oeuvre, in which elements of fantasy can be recognized, which arose from family relationships. It is common knowledge that he had an extremely strict and authoritative father, so he himself felt like an insect next to him, which has armor and many legs and represents something insignificant that can be easily crushed. This work Kafka begins "in medias res", with the iconic first sentence when Gregor Samsa woke up one morning from restless dreams and found in his bed transformed into a large insect (original in German: ungeheurer Ungeziefer), which can literally be translated as a monstrous monster, with the word "Ungeziefer" primarily means unwanted and dirty animals. This story follows the life, or rather the living, but also the decline of the main protagonist Gregor Samsa, as well as his gradual alienation, first from the outside world, and then from his family and his own life. Therefore, many critics consider this work, which

is full of symbolism and metaphors, to be one of the most important works of the 20th century, because it depicts popular culture as a tendency to penetrate further and to use the energy of a fairy tale, folk tale or myth, while at the same time retaining strong contemporary social significance (Wünsch, 1991:17).

Kafka's family relations

Fiske (2001:233) explains that: "popular culture is not a culture of the submissive. People who are subordinated in white patriarchal capitalism are not hopelessly shackled by it. Their economic and social deprivation did not rob them of their diversity, or the ability to resist or evade the forces that make them subordinate; on the contrary, it is precisely this deprivation that motivates them to create constantly adaptive tactics of daily resistance". This daily resistance is primarily reflected in Kafka's relationship with his father, and in this sense we can talk about another element of popular culture, which is the struggle between dominance and subordinates.

It is quite clear that Kafka in *the Matamorphosis* reveals the family as a community in which everything functions on the basis of interests, because the modern family largely suffers from egoism, hypocrisy and envy, and the basic principle that is present both in the family and in society is the principle of benefit. What was Kafka's father in his childhood, later becomes a society that stifles personality and prevents the development of individuality, which is one of the most important motifs of contemporary literature and popular culture (Dettmering, 1995:26). Such a person cannot lead a life the way he wants, because society somehow sets rules and boundaries for him. The enormous authority of his father, but also the fear that he would reach or even exceed his father, limited Kafka in terms of emancipation. In a word, in relation to his father, even when he observed all his father's flaws, bad character traits, his injustice and tyranny, Kafka still remained a man transformed into an insect, a convict in a prison colony, a forced expert in starvation, a badger who his pit, that is, from behind and secretly, he shows his teeth, never daring to publicly confront his father, and in this way expose himself to the risk of complete defeat or victory, which opens completely new perspectives and possibilities.

A sense of freedom and rebellion

Getting out of control creates a sense of freedom, rebellion inspires riotous behavior and proves the vitality of popular forces. In considering the everyday and its role in the formation of popular culture, Fiske refers to the interpretations of Eco, De Certeau and other cultural theorists. He

emphasizes that in a capitalist society, consumption is the only way to obtain things necessary for life, but every act of consumption is also an act of cultural production of meaning. The strategy of power, as he states, is particularly visible in places such as large shopping centers, squares, schools, workplaces, authorities, where power holders try to establish control over the everyday lives of ordinary people. Fiske further emphasizes De Certeau's idea that popular culture can be found in "adaptation" or more precisely "ways of using imposed systems" through manipulation and tricks (Fiske, 2001:215). If we look back at these statements, we can understand better the essence of his two main novels: *Process* and *Castle*. The heroes of these novels can certainly be interpreted as tragic figures, who frantically strive to achieve not only the possibility of entering the life of someone close to them, but also contemporary society, which rejects them and instills fear in them even before God himself, instead of striving to achieve a close contact with heavenly forces (Engel, 2002: 256). Therefore, we can say that almost all "processes" in Kafka's works are processes that resulted from a rebellious relationship with his authoritative father, and that relationship between an authoritative father and a submissive son is actually the equivalent between an ordinary man and God, which Kafka especially evokes in *the Process* and in *the Castle*.

Religion and politics

The influence of religion and politics on people's behavior, on their everyday life, undoubtedly leads to the understanding that these are two extremely strong elements of popular culture. On the one hand, the church wants to shape people's behavior within the framework of its sermons, which often include political views. The following examples best illustrate the relationship between politics and partly religion in the *Process*:

No," said the priest, "you don't have to consider everything true, you just have to consider it necessary."

"He wants to free himself, but freedom is impossible, for how can one free oneself when one does not know what they are guilty of?"

"Nevertheless, above all, it is the lawyer's connections that matter most, and they are, for the most part, the value of one's defense."

" He had suffered defeat only because he sought to do battle."
(Kafka 1998)

From these examples, the average reader can conclude that the whole world, although it is very often absurd, unclear, and even funny, is woven from a series of rules that participate in the creation of reality,

which often do not allow anyone who does not fit into its framework, to find his place under the sun. Such is the case with Jozef K., who is a proud loner, who leads a senseless struggle, trying to reject the rules imposed on him by modern society. In this connection, a key question arises, how can popular culture resist the ruling system, modern society, and even church dogmas? Namely, popular culture is focused on the everyday life of an ordinary individual, which means that it first of all manifests itself at the micro-political level. Only if change occurs within ourselves, is it possible for things to change in the long term, because unlike radical social upheavals, popular culture is progressive. In this regard, David Danov, the author of important studies on the process of carnivalization and the grotesque in the works of writers, as was Kafka himself, emphasizes a specific view of life that exudes a sense of energy and vitality in a world that promises not only joy, but also a certain amount of suffering. Kafka's reader is rewarded with a view of the world that still contains much that has been lost elsewhere, i.e. a place where "possible" instantly turns into "probable", while the text takes us from the realm of the "real" to the realm of the "spiritual real" through the equally unexpected wiles of the artist's imagination (Carter, 1966:3-4).

A picture of the city

If we look back at *America*, we will realize that it has not been adequately studied. This stems from the understanding that Kafka does not reach the essence in his thoughts, because he focuses on imagery and even pathos, which distance him from the main flow of the work. In this way, the average reader cannot easily distinguish what is important from what is not. Reading this work, the reader can get the impression, based on the detailed descriptions that Kafka was in America several times, but that he never actually set foot on American soil. This work was created when the writer was fighting an internal struggle with his own identity and when his life in Prague was unbearable and painful. Looking for an escape from that hopeless situation, he thought of America, which at that time had the epithet of the Promised Land. Max Broad¹ emphasizes that Kafka was obsessed with collecting various reports, guides, travelogues, and even attended various lectures given by world travelers who stopped in Prague. His only desire and thought was to disappear into the distance, to go to a big city and never return, because only in America can he find peace and freedom, which is best illustrated by the following example:

¹ friend and biographer of Franz Kafka who published many of his works posthumously

„As the sixteen-year-old Karl Rosman, who had been to America by his poor parents because a servant-girl had seduced him and had a child by him, entered New York harbor in the already slowing ship, he saw the statue of the Goddess of Liberty which he had been observing for some time as though in sudden blaze of sunlight. Her arm with the sword stretched upward as though newly raised and the free breezes wafted around her” (Kafka, 2012:32).

Although visibly more humorous and realistic than Kafka's other works, this novel, which follows the wanderings of the European emigrant Karl Rossman in America, shares the same motifs of an oppressive and untouchable composition that puts the protagonist in various bizarre situations. There, first of all, the elements of a big city are known, which shows the action, space and time in a realistic way, and in addition, they offer rich factual, historical or documentary material, where the popular appears in certain details, while the narrative text remains predominantly realistic. However, it is precisely through realistic descriptions that "double" worlds similar to the ones we live in are created, and the protagonist reaches from the primary to the secondary world through various modal limitations, which is best illustrated by the following example:

„And from morning to evening and amid the dreams of the night there passed along this street an incessant bustle of traffic, which looked from above like a confused, constantly self-renewing medley of distorted human shapes and the roofs of all kinds of transport vehicles, from which arose a new, manifold, yet more savage medley of noise dust and smells, and all this was grasped and permeated by a powerful light that kept being diffused, dispersed and eagerly restored by the innumerable objects, and that seemed to the bedazzled eye physically palpable, as though as glass pane covering the entire street where being repeatedly smashed every moment with the utmost force.” (Kafka, 2012:49).

As Fiske (2001:204-206) emphasizes, the city is a symbol of entrepreneurial capitalism. As such, it is designed to promote certain ways of behaving, moving and thinking. One of the functions of the city is to suppress all physical, mental and political irrationalities. Also, the city should suppress history and tradition because they encourage experiences that are contrary to the rational organization symbolized by the city and that are difficult to manage. The city has the potential to develop into a universal and anonymous subject whose inhabitants are

actually its subjects. Fiske claims that the city plan does not only include architecture, but that this plan also includes the people-subjects of the city devoid of historical and social specificities. The city needs to subtly and covertly discipline the lives of the people who live in it, and numerous structures are aimed at creating a certain way of life that citizens should strive for (Bachelard, 1975:37). Kafka in America suggests that city life has a negative effect on the individual and the community in general. However, it should be emphasized that the very complexity of the city results in the city being the place where the greatest chaos reigns, especially if we bear in mind that huge systems are extremely difficult to control completely. That is why the city is at the same time a place that limits us and that gives us freedom.

Popular pleasures

Another type of manifestation of popular culture are popular pleasures, which can be observed in America as well as in *Process* and *Castle*: they can be physical and refer to social identity, more precisely to social relations. In this regard, Fiske (2001:68) bases his division into pleasures of interpretation and pleasures of meaning production on Barthes' distinction between *jouissance* (ecstasy, bliss, occurs in the reader's body when reading) and *plaisir*. In this sense, it should be emphasized that by avoiding the dominant ideology, people lose their own being and become active participants in the construction of popular culture, because the orgasmic pleasure of the body that is beyond control is actually an escape from self-control, that is, social control, by which people manage themselves and others. This form of "popular pleasure" occupies a central place in *America*, when an overweight singer with a failed career gets a job in a "mysterious institution" or rather a brothel and introduces the reader to the further course of the novel. On the other hand, if we look back at *the Castle*, such roles belong to Frida and Peppa, who are bewitched by the main protagonist K, and he, on the other hand, does not care about them at all. In this way, we can come to the conclusion that all those ladies who appear in his works and want to be with him, are exactly those ladies from the taverns and even public houses that Kafka visited as a young man in Prague, with whom he spent the nights, whom he never loved or wanted as wives. For this reason, we can conclude that *America* is in an internal relationship with *The Process* and *The Castle*, which it chronologically precedes, and that it is a trilogy about loneliness in a big city dominated by alienation and isolation among people, because of which Kafka's heroes often resort to popular pleasures (Pape, 2011:133).

Conclusion

If we look back at the previously mentioned works of Franz Kafka, we can come to the conclusion that the works are somehow mutually intelligible, i.e. that in his works it is about fitting the individual into the human community that is popular culture imposed by modern society. From this point of view, we can classify Kafka's works as works of popular culture, or more precisely, as works of productive popularity, because Kafka introduced popular attitudes into his text, which was made available to the general public, and gave a personal interpretation in a way. In this connection, it is concluded that the elements of popular culture in these works are of great importance because, being built in the meeting of the outside world and individual personalities as its main creators, popular culture contributes to a truer representation of human consciousness - one of the greatest efforts of modern man. Analyzing the various previously explained segments such as: Kafka's space, fantasy, image of the city, family relations, religion and politics and finally popular pleasures, we come to the conclusion that one of the features that make Kafka a significant contemporary writer is undoubtedly his ability to through his novels present an entire culture in all its complexity. In the rich oeuvre that Kafka left behind, we see how his works exude comprehensiveness, which is why many of them are considered masterpieces and credible representatives of popular culture, because they put the attitude of the common man in the foreground. As long as such an attitude exists, there is hope that man has not surrendered and can rebel against the system that seeks to turn him into a robot and reduce life to playing imposed roles.

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Der Beitrag befasst sich mit der Erforschung popkultureller Elemente im Werk Franz Kafkas unter dem Aspekt des Verhältnisses von Gesellschaft und Popkultur im 20. Jahrhundert. Die vorliegende Arbeit stellt mehrere Beispiele dar, in denen die Helden von Kafkas Werken beim Aufbau der Popkultur versuchen, ihre eigenen emotionalen, familiären, religiösen und sozialen Probleme zu lösen. In diesem Zusammenhang zeigt diese Arbeit, wie sich Popkultur in Kafkas Werk über die Interaktion der breiten Volksmasse mit staatlichen Strukturen manifestiert, bis hin zu seiner persönlichen Beziehung zum Vater. Damit weist diese Arbeit auf ein Thema bzw. das Problem des modernen Menschen hin, das sich durch fast alle Werke Kafkas zieht. Aufbauend auf der Theorie von John Fiske zielt diese Arbeit darauf ab, die Bedeutung der Elemente der Popkultur im breiteren Plan der analysierten Segmente darzustellen, d. h. im Plan ihres modernistischen Charakters. Da im modernen Zeitalter jede Form authentischer und ursprünglicher Kultur praktisch unmöglich ist, versucht dieser Beitrag, Kafkas einzigartige sprachliche Schreibweise aufzuzeigen und sich der aufgezwungenen Lebensweise und Weltanschauung durch Literatur zu widersetzen.

Schlüsselwörter: Gesellschaft, Popkultur, Fiske, Alltag, Kampf, Anpassung.