Room for Interpretation in Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*

Jordy Pellemans

Introduction

In her 1964 landmark essay *Against Interpretation* Susan Sontag's contends that "in place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art," suggesting that perhaps we ought to prioritize on experiencing form, rather than merely converging on interpreting a work of art's meaning. Her reason for claiming so is rooted in the idea that to interpret is to translate, and to translate is to change the work into something else entirely. After all, what is the purpose of art if it remains largely unexperienced in its original form or if, as Sontag puts it, the work of art gets 'excavated', a metaphorical expression of her disapproval of conscious and deliberate codified attempts to adhere meaning where, in her view, none exists.

Her essay most certainly features deeply valid points and observations, such as that ''The earliest experience of art must have been that it was incantatory, magical." This, of course, rings very true with many of us as we are all likely to have a gut feeling that art should be first and foremost experiential, and is supposed to trigger us emotionally, aesthetically and socially. One could, however, doubt the matter-of-factness of some her statements. For example, is it at all possible to just 'set aside' meaning? Is it even possible to not interpret at all? With regard to interpretation, Sontag suggests that our goal ought be to "show *how it is what it is,* even *that it is*

what it is, rather than to show *what it means"*. However, in doing so, she appears to be encouraging people to solely adopt a superficial perspective on art, whereas perhaps to occasionally provide people with scaffolding in terms of possible meanings, may help art be better understood, less in need of defense, as well as enhance the experience rather than destroying it.

In this essay I would therefore like to propose that starting with a work of art's meaning, as opposed to starting with the experience – or form, may similarly represent a point of departure for (some) people and potentially instill curiosity as to *how it is what it is*, or alternatively put, how artists have succeeded in shaping – quite literally in the case of figurative art – their work using specific terms. Sontag clarifies her thesis by referring to Franz Kafka's work in general which, in her view, has been "subjected to a mass ravishment (…)". For the purpose of this essay, I would, therefore, like to take Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* and posit that perhaps any interpretation or analysis as to what the novella means may carry the potential to enhance people's appreciation of the story's shape and create aesthetically pleasing, emotionally enriching or otherwise meaningful experiences.

Experience vs. Interpretation in *The Metamorphosis*

Franz Kafka's The Metamorphosis recounts the story of Gregor Samsa, the narrative's protagonist who, one day, wakes up being transformed into "a horrible vermin"[1]. Initially horrified, Gregor, throughout the story, gradually comes to terms with his new state of being, despite the fact that his family's support seems to be slowly but undeniably on the wane.

[1] German to English translations occasionally differ from each other. E.g. in Cronenberg and Bernofsky's translation (Kafka, Bernofsky, & Cronenberg, 2015), the originally German phrase *ungeheures Ungeziefer* is translated as "some sort of monstrous insect".

Eventually, as his family grows apathetic about him, Gregor is left severely neglected, up until to the point where he passes away. The Metamorphosis has been the subject of extensive scrutiny ever since its reception (Gans, 1998; Pezzini, 2018; Sparks, 1973; Axelrod-Sokolov, 2018), even to the point where it has been suggested that psychotherapeutic sessions might actually benefit from studying the Metamorphosis (Johnson, 1993; Gans, 1998; Harris Williams, 2017). It is indeed these types of Freudian-based, modern style analyses Sontag so vociferously deplores in her essay. To go about a work of art this way, is not the way to go, according to her as it "digs 'behind' the text, to find a sub-text which is the true one", or so these literary critics think.

Reading Kafka's the Metamorphosis, readers may consciously or unconsciously be aware of its literary shape and structure. For example ,the story's beginning is much discussed as it essentially features a climax or, better, *factum brutum*, i.e. Gregor's transformation has already taken place (Kafka & Wyllie, 2011, p. 8). Unfortunately, not all readers of Kafka may be as literate in the arts as someone with a degree in literature as to able to immediately and effectively appreciate its form. Consequently, if they [the general audience] fail to analyze the event as a 'fronted' climax, and thus a, then, unusual way of structuring a story, they might miss out on a lot of meaning. Indeed, this is where Sontag's adage "how it is what it is" might actually be of great value to assist readers in helping them appreciate the story's beginning. And how right she is since as, to quote the late linguist and philosopher Alexander Potebnya: "Without images, art – including poetry – is impossible." But to create imagery in the mind of the reader is, of course, something that Kafka unquestioningly does beyond perfectly:

> He lay on his armour-hard back and saw, as he lifted his head up a little,
> his brown, arched abdomen divided up into rigid bow-like sections.
> From this height the blanket, just about ready to slide off completely,
> could hardly stay in place. His numerous legs, pitifully thin in comparison
> to the rest of his circumference, flickered helplessly before his eyes.

(Kafka & Wyllie, 2011)

Surface and Deep Interpretations vs. Sontag

At this point, it may be of value to introduce a helpful differentiation between types of interpretation as proposed by art critic and philosopher Arthur C. Danto. They are *surface interpretations* and *deep interpretations*. Danto calls interpretations over which the artist has authority and which are based in his/her actual or historically reconstructed intentions "surface interpretations." Interpretations over which the artist has no authority and which are in no way governed by what the artist intended or could have intended, Danto calls "deep interpretations" (Danto, 1985). In other words, 'surface interpretations' can only be construed in a single way, which is the way in which the artist originally intended them, comparable to a linguistic speech act[2]. 'Deep interpretations', on the other hand, are not tied to what the artist intended. In other words, there are no clues nor is there any factual evidence that these type of interpretations would stand their ground. This dichotomy between the types of interpretations reminds one of the distinction between *langue* and *parole*, later reworked by Roman Jakobson to describe features of poetry (Jakobson, 1960).

In Sontag's essay, 'deep interpretations' based on Marxist and Freudian doctrines are part and parcel of the interpretation style she antagonizes. An example of this would be the maternal bond which is richly featured in many a critical review, as in Edith H. Krause's work on aspects of abjection in the Metamorphosis:

> "Understood in this sense, the picture portrays the archaic phallic mother in the guise of the femme fatale. Her presence signals both desire and danger and thus contributes to the pervasive sense of instability that is associated with the abject (Krause, 2019, p. 310)."

[2] A speech act in the sense that if a receiver of a message were to incorrectly interpret the sender's intentions, communication breakdown would follow. Cf. Jakobson, R (1960).

However, earlier on in *Against Interpretation* Sontag also explicitly states that she excludes "interpretation in the broadest sense", thereby - following Danto's line of thinking – contradicting her own premise. In fact, Susan Sontag would have been pleased to learn that, according to Danto, *Deep Interpretation* "leaves the world as it finds it" (Danto, 1985, p. 66). If so, then, there is no 'excavation' at all and, consequently, no need for defense. Daniel Kaufman puts it well when he says that, "Being overdetermined and unfalsifiable, they [deep interpretations] are entirely attitudinal and thus, have no tangible effect on the artworld or the art historical landscape (Kaufman D. A., 2012; Kaufman D. , 2020). This type of attitude toward interpretation is also reminiscent of literary theorist Wolfgang Iser's views, who is slightly more accommodating toward interpretation than is Sontag. In his book, The Range of Interpretation, Iser even goes as far as to boldly recoin Descartes' *We think, therefore we are'* as '*We interpret, therefore we are*' (Iser, 2000, p. 1).

Surface and Deep Interpretation and the Beginning of The Metamorphosis

Following the distinction between surface and deep interpretation, the climactic beginning of *The Metamorphosis*, ought to be classified as a *surface interpretation,* since it must evidently have been a highly conscious choice – and therefore in the realm of Kafka's authority - to horrify his readers. On the other hand, a *deep interpretation* with regard to the event is proposed by Michaelides Pavlos, in the following sense: "That our body in a certain way is 'ourselves' should be subject to all the vicissitudes of a physical world that follows biological laws which seemingly have nothing to do with our personal law, is an evidence of fatality which is capable of shattering our every hope of giving some meaning to our personal lives. (Pavlos, 2017, p. 105)" Differently put, it is the idea that even though as human beings we generally consider ourselves to have agency over our identity and self, it is ultimately our corporeal existence that determines a great deal more than we would like to admit. Thinking of this *reductio ad absurdum*, of course, our body *is* our mind, and, logically then, *there's no mind without the body*. Admittedly, by categorizing this

as a deep interpretation, in line with Sontag, one could argue that the deep interpretation by Pavlos 'excavates' the story. More specifically, it 'translates' the *fait accompli* of Gregor's completed transformation into a ready-to-consume, take-away message, i.e. your bodily state dictates who you are rather than presumably your mind. Yet it is through this type of interpretation, precisely the one that Sontag deemed "excavating", that a general audience may develop a sense of meaningful curiosity. By the latter I am referring to the mere thought and cognitive dissonance[3] that it creates – perhaps exactly the kind of 'capacity to make us nervous' proposed by Sontag - which may very well spark an existential and ontological debate in the reader's mind. For instance, they may start to perform thought experiments themselves: "What if *I* were a 'horrendous vermin', what would that be like? How would I react if I were in Gregor's place? Even if the critic had insisted on their interpretation being the only fitting one, the true 'sub-text', this might just as well be considered evidence of the overwhelmingly powerful effect of the author's authority; that even without clear historical evidence, people will readily and exhaustively read between the lines and attempt to construct meaning. Having said this, in the case of Franz Kafka, of course, quite a number of factoids are known through his diaries. A case in point may be that Kafka vehemently resisted the idea to have the 'monstrous vermin' visually represented on the book cover (Brod, 1988).

Conclusion

In all, Sontag's essay is refreshing and of immensely great value, even today. She has taught us that the experience of art is sacred and, if anything, at the heart of what art – however difficult to define – essentially is: something to be experienced. Works of art, such as Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, are in the first place to be experienced and undergone. This must have been Kafka's main objective: to have his readers undergo a transformation themselves. Yet, as I have argued, we, people, are beings of meaningfulness. We continuously search for meaning as it is

[3] The idea that if a person knows various things that are not psychologically consistent with one another, he will, in a variety of ways, try to make them more consistent. (Festinger, 1962)

meaning that captures our attention when seeing, reading or hearing something beautiful. Therefore, sometimes when we do not *get* art, it does not need defending, but rather, its features need to be pointed out to us, e.g. with a "really accurate, sharp, loving description". However, occasionally, in some cases, it may also be necessary to point out the possible meaning and provide some untethered interpretations from well-meaning critics.

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