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Volume 5, numéro 2, 2e semestre 1992

Kafka pluriel : réécriture et traduction

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/037128ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/037128ar>

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Éditeur(s)

Association canadienne de traductologie

ISSN

0835-8443 (imprimé)

1708-2188 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Kerckhoff, A. (1992). Interpreting and Translating Gestures for Power Play in Kafka's "In the Penal Colony". *TTR*, 5(2), 195–222.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/037128ar>

Interpreting and Translating Gestures for Power Play in Kafka's "In the Penal Colony"

Annette Kerckhoff

Foreword

Action, movement, glance, stance, gesture... Their effects in the narrative "In der Strafkolonie" by Franz Kafka will be the focus of the present article.^a They include a play between the verbal representation of the visual bodily motions^b and the possible significations of this representation. The research leading to this paper has worked on plays of meaning arising from narrated gestures and has found "In der Strafkolonie" to be a radically open piece of writing.

The open, puzzling nature of Kafka's textual mechanisms is not easily brought into light, because, just as one is drawn to a puzzle, we are continuously grasped by the desire to fit together pieces of his text into a coherent whole: it is difficult to resist filling in the incoherences. Critics continuously solicit "In der Strafkolonie" as "an allegory of ..."^c Ironically, even though the short story readily lends itself to allegorization, the fact that new interpretations of Kafka's short story keep presenting themselves is also an affirmation of the text's resistance to synthetic theorization. In no way does my analysis pretend to avoid imposing, to a certain extent, its interpretation upon these pages. Even if it is simultaneously questioned by illustrating the fact that another interpretation will always be possible, a commitment of this sort is a necessary step in working with Kafka's story. This gestural analysis will explore the dimensions of "In der Strafkolonie" where differences in interpretation are sustained, in specific, the active

moment when reading and then interpretation or translation of gestures, actions, movements, stances and glances takes place.

The terms reading, interpretation and translation are used here with specific definitions. I borrow the term "reading" from Paul de Man in "The Resistance to Theory," where he opposes reading to the act of theorization^d. Reading is the process of identifying figures within the text. It is an on-going process which continually discovers different facets of the fiction. When theorizing, however, one works from select elements in the text in a way that they support a limited dimension of a captured moment within the otherwise continual process of reading. Instead of relating the act of reading to the notion of theorization, as is the case in de Man's essay, reading, in our shared context of this article, will gain meaning in contrast to the acts of interpretation and translation.

This study has helped me to define interpretation as the process which begins when Demanian reading stops, when the reader stops looking for the infinite figurations in the text and, instead, works with chosen aspects of the text to construct a coherent meaning. The development of this coherent meaning leads to the writing of a new text, here constituting the main body of this article.

There are several English translations^e of Kafka's short story, and their treatment of gestures has led me to propose a parallel between the act of translating text and that of interpreting narrated bodily motions. The translations, especially in some key passages, re-write the German text in such a way that the English versions take on very different possibilities in meaning. To arrive at their new form, the translated passages have already undergone at least one interpretation: they constitute a different text, though, of course, showing a strong parallel to Kafka's German version. I visually illustrate this position here by placing them in the parallel, yet separated location of footnotes to the article. The division is a visual reinforcement of the notions I aim to convey.

The zone of translation shows one way in which I have worked on the form of this article in order to let it "speak." Just as the characters' movements signify within the fiction, my gestures of inscription are able, on a visual level, to support the article's argument. This self-consciousness on the part of my own gestures of inscription is an attempt at realizing the significance of my own actions. The form will illustrate aspects of the

reading process by visually separating or connecting different passages in the text such as endnotes, headings and sections.

The endnotes can be read as showing the more subtle aspects of reading fiction and then writing about it: the spontaneous birth of ideas, theories and cross-references; the supplementary nature of critical comments; the possibly endless process of discussing a text. Because the reader must continuously flip to the last pages of the article, the endnotes interrupt the flow of the text and in so doing support a certain spontaneous tone, a tone which resembles that set by the birth of theories or interpretations during the reading of fiction. Accompanying the main text, they are a supplement both physically and in terms of content, just as literary theory adds to the fictional text and introduces it into a new context. The open, unpolished tone which the endnotes give to the article reinforces the notion that the reading is not complete, and that many more endnotes, many more views, cross-references, figures of rhetoric, etc., could be evoked.

The five different sections represent the cornerstones of my central argument which is that "In der Strafkolonie" can be read as an allegory of reading gestures. The first section, "Reading Gestures" (where reading is taken in the Demanian sense), will begin by introducing the unlimited process of finding meaning in gestures, showing how they signify and where and how ambiguities occur. Then, in "The Officer's Explanations," the officer's discourse will be analyzed in order to show how he formulates an initial interpretation of gestures. However, the traveller's perspective on the actions surrounding the machine of justice will soon put into question the officer's beliefs and allow us to examine, in the section "Through the Eyes of the Traveller," how the difference in opinion occurs. The tension caused by the differing positions will carry us into a discussion of "The Power Play of Two Discourses" in the penal colony. The conclusion, "The Allegorical Dimension," will attempt to bring to light the paradox of the gesture of writing about written gestures in the story "In der Strafkolonie."

Reading Gestures

[...] die Hand zum Schutz gegen die Sonne über den Augen, sah er an dem Apparat in die Höhe. (p. 102)¹

"Nun liegt also der Mann," sagte der Reisende, lehnte sich im Sessel zurück und kreuzte die Beine. (p. 103)²

Der Reisende wollte sein Gesicht dem Offizier entziehen und blickte ziellos herum. Der Offizier glaubte, er betrachte die Öde des Tales; er ergriff deshalb seine Hände, drehte sich um ihn, um seine Blicke zu fassen, und fragte: 'Merken Sie die Schande?' (p. 112)³

An analysis of the above three excerpts describing corporal motion in "In der Strafkolonie" will commence this article. In the first gesture quoted above, it is due to the qualitative information, "zum Schutz gegen die Sonne," that the gesture signifies quite narrowly: the hand over the eyes represents the need to shield from the sunlight.

1 "[...] using his hand to keep the sun out of his eyes, he stared up at it [the machine]." (J.U., p. 152)

2. "'All right, the man's lying there,' said the traveller; he leant back in his chair and crossed his legs." (J.U., p. 152)

3. "The traveller wanted to conceal his face from the officer and looked aimlessly about him. The officer, thinking [thought] he was contemplating the desolation of the valley, [...] [he therefore] seized his hands, moved round him to look into his eyes, and demanded, 'You see the shame of it?'" (J.U., p. 164) We do however find a translation which transforms the actual motion described in Kafka's text: "so he seized him by the hands, turned him round to meet his eyes, and asked..." [my underline] (W. & E.M., p. 204)

These first three passages from "In the Penal Colony" serve as an introduction to gestural interpretation, but they also illustrate, through the changes I have added to the English versions, how they differ from and are parallel to the German. In this way, their English versions introduce the problem of translation, the focus of this zone.

In the second example however, the qualitative information is missing. It is not written why the officer leans back and crosses his legs and when we reflect, many possible interpretations come to mind: the officer merely wants to get comfortable while telling the traveller about the machine; he leans back to imitate partially the position of the condemned man; he crosses his legs to show that he is superior to the condemned man who must spread his legs in the machine, etc. It becomes apparent that the interpretations will vary widely according to the point of view taken by any interpreter of the text.

In the third example, the two characters actually play out the open-ended dimension of gestural interpretation. First, the narrator narrows the meaning of the gesture in telling us that the traveller glances aimlessly around in order to pull away from the officer. But then the officer, who is not guided by the narrator in his perception of the glances, understands them differently and acts upon his own interpretation. He thinks the traveller is recognizing the disgrace to the old system and so he circles around him trying to capture his gaze. The two interpretations of the traveller's glances create a humorous, ironic tension.

However, the consequences of realizing that gestures can signify both narrowly and widely are quite serious in terms of judging the value of each of these interpretations. After all, could we not say that the narrator himself is also merely interpreting the gesture of the character he is describing?^f With this in mind, we are driven to question the qualitative information accompanying the description of the visual: could the hand over the eyes or the aimless glances mean something other than what the narrator suggests? Is the narrator to be trusted as having full insight into the meaning of the various bodily descriptions, or is he sometimes no more qualified than the next observer?

This is of course reading. A moment of "undecidability," the moment where the possibly infinite configurations of meanings come to play and where one inevitably disfigures the boundless play by interpreting in order to write about it. The literary critic's gesture is necessarily disfiguring because it "monumentalizes" one or more textual figures while leaving out others. "Such monumentalization is by no means necessarily a naive or evasive gesture, and it certainly is not a

gesture that anyone can pretend to avoid making," writes Paul de Man⁵. Not the officer, the narrator, the traveller, nor the readers, as we attempt to gain insight into the effects of narrated gestures in "In der Strafkolonie."

The Officer's Explanations

"[...] Und nun begann die Exekution! Kein Mißton störte die Arbeit der Maschine. Manche sahen nun gar nicht mehr zu, sondern lagen mit geschlossenen Augen im Sand; alle wußten: Jetzt geschieht Gerechtigkeit." (p. 111)⁴

"Gerechtigkeit," states the officer while explaining the machine of justice to the traveller, was the goal in the penal colony. The fact that people were lying in the sand with their eyes closed illustrates, according to the officer, that they had full faith in the workings of colonial justice. 'Alle wußten,' they all knew that justice was being done.

As he identifies parts of the machine to the traveller, the officer explains: "Es haben sich im Laufe der Zeit für jeden dieser Teile gewissermaßen volkstümliche Bezeichnungen ausgebildet." (p. 101)⁵ With time, the spectators of the execution process have learned to distinguish between the machine's parts, the result being that certain parts have been identified as distinct, named or, in other words,

4. "And then the execution began! No jarring note interfered with the work of the machine. Many people stopped watching altogether and lay down in the sand with their eyes closed; they all knew: Justice was being done." (J.U., p. 163) In the Muirs' translation, we find that the people's action of lying down and closing their eyes has been transformed into the demonstration of their desire not to watch: "Many did not care to watch it but lay with closed eyes in the sand" [my underline] (p. 203).

5. "Over the years each of those parts has acquired a popular name, as it were." (J.U., p. 151)

monumentalized. The monumentalization of the parts has facilitated communication about the machine within the colony and shows that the colonial code and the penal code have interacted. "Bett," "Zeichner," "Egge"⁶ are terms which allow the machine to be integrated into the inhabitants' vocabulary and daily order.

Through the officer's tale, we come to realize that the influence of society on the machine works also in the reverse: the machine has an impact on society and can actually be seen as a structuring force within colonial life. During the life of the old Commandant, every member of the colony was drawn in to witness the executions. The officer reminisces:

— Wie war die Exekution anders in früherer Zeit! Schon einen Tag vor der Hinrichtung war das ganze Tal von Menschen überfüllt; alle kamen nur um zu sehen; früh am Morgen erschien der Kommandant mit seinen Damen; Fanfaren weckten den ganzen Lagerplatz; ich erstattete die Meldung, daß alles vorbereitet sei; die Gesellschaft — kein hoher Beamte durfte fehlen — ordnete sich um die Maschine; dieser Haufen Rohrsessel ist ein armseliges Überbleibsel aus jener Zeit. (p. 111)⁷

Around the machine, the witnesses organized themselves according to their social order. The presence of certain prominent members was strictly required. The execution drew together the social and the penal mechanism to the point where, in the machine's court yard, one became an extension of the other.

6. Bed, scribe, harrow. (J.U.)

7. "How different it all used to be! A full day before the execution the entire valley would be crammed with people, all there just to watch; early in the morning the commandant appeared with his ladies; fanfares roused the entire camp; I reported that everything was ready; the top people — and every high-ranking official had to be there — took their places ["organized themselves" would be a more literal translation] around the machine; the pile of cane chairs over there is a pathetic reminder of those days." (J.U., p. 163)

It is via the officer, eyewitness and key player in the execution process, that we, the readers, are introduced to the machine of justice. Through his eyes, we learn to interpret the reactions of the condemned man as a coming to terms with absolute justice. The officer's observations at the sixth hour of the procedure are as follows:

Wie still wird dann aber der Mann um die sechste Stunde! Verstand geht dem Blödesten auf. Um die Augen beginnt es. Von hier aus verbreitet es sich. Ein Anblick, der einen verführen könnte, sich mit unter die Egge zu legen. Es geschieht ja nichts weiter, der Mann fängt bloß an, die Schrift zu entziffern, er spitzt den Mund, als horche er. (p. 108)⁸

The deep, enviable understanding begins in the eyes. It is a look "der einen ver-führen könnte," a look which tempts and could lead astray, a look whose reason for being is not self-evident and is thus dependant upon additional information in order to be understood. The description of the look on its own has an undecidable meaning which the officer then attempts to draw into his own story by giving it a very precise meaning. For the officer, the look in the condemned man's eyes, no

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8. "How quiet the man becomes, though, around that sixth hour! The dimmest begin to catch on. It starts around the eyes. From there it gradually spreads. A sight to make you feel like lying down beside him under the harrow. Nothing else happens; the man is simply beginning to decipher the text, pursing his lips as if listening." (J.U., p. 159) Underwood translates the word "Anblick" as "sight," but the Muirs prefer a different formulation of the sentence: "A moment that might tempt one to get under the Harrow with him." (p. 198). I propose a third translation which is derived from the second degree of the definition of "Anblick" which is a look or glance at something or someone. In this meaning of the word, the sentence would read as follows: "It is a look that could tempt you into lying down beside him under the harrow." The variations on the translations of the word "Anblick" each present a different reason for the officer's desire to lie under the harrow himself. In the first version, it is the general sight of the condemned man; in the second, it is something quite intangible about the "moment," and in the last version, it is the look in the condemned man's eyes. The importance of the condemned man's eyes is lost in the first two.

matter what his intellect, somehow reflects the recognition of a wonderful truth and the sharpened mouth means an intense effort at listening to the machine and its "voice" of justice. In this way, he reads the condemned man's gestures as a confirmation that the machine administers justice.

Without being guided by the officer however, we could not read the process and its accompanying gestures as he does. The same is true for the cryptic verdict inscribed on the condemned man's body, as well as for the old commandant's labyrinthine plans of the machine. The traveller's inability to decipher the old commandant's plans bears witness to this fact. The officer presents him with the sacred papers allowing him to discover for himself the legitimacy of the "machination" against the condemned:

Er zeigte das erste Blatt. Der Reisende hätte gerne etwas Anerkennendes gesagt, aber er sah nur labyrinthatige, einander vielfach kreuzende Linien, die so dicht das Papier bedeckten, daß man nur mit Mühe die weißen Zwischenräume erkannte. 'Lesen Sie,' sagte der Offizier. 'Ich kann nicht,' sagte der Reisende. 'Es ist doch deutlich,' sagte der Offizier. 'Es ist sehr kunstvoll,' sagte der Reisende ausweichend, 'aber ich kann es nicht entziffern.' 'Ja,' sagte der Offizier, lachte und steckte die Mappe wieder ein, 'es ist keine Schönschrift für Schulkinder. Man muß lange darin lesen.' (p. 107)⁹

The writing is difficult to decipher and the traveller, not understanding the "labyrinthatige einander vielfach kreuzende Linien," does not even seem to identify them as writing. To be able to recognize markings as writing, the traveller would need to be able to differentiate between

9. "He held up the first sheet. The traveller would have liked to say something appreciative, but all he could see was a maze of criss-cross lines covering the paper so closely that it was difficult to make out the white spaces between. «Read it,» said the officer. 'I can't,' said the traveller. 'But it's quite clear,' said the officer. 'It's most artistic,' the traveller said evasively, 'but I can't decipher it.' 'Right,' said the officer, putting the wallet away with a chuckle. 'This is no copybook calligraphy. It takes a lot of reading.'" (J.U., p. 158)

them and know what they each represent. This scene illustrates that interpreting is, to a certain extent, an act of recognizing what one actually already knows: the traveller is not familiar with the penal code and must renounce reading the old commandant's papers for looking at them.^h

It is the officer who is the expert with respect to the penal code, he understands the machine better than anyone. He is making adjustments to the machine and the narrator remarks: "[...] [der Offizier] kletterte eilig hinunter, um den Gang des Apparates von unten zu beobachten. Noch war etwas nicht in Ordnung, das nur er merkte; [...]" (p. 107)¹⁰ It becomes evident that the officer has full understanding of the operation: he is the master of the penal mechanism.

If the officer is clearly a better "reader" of the old commandant's judicial apparatus, then why does he judge the traveller to be influential in the debate with the new commandant? The officer believes in the power of the traveller to the extent that he asks him for assistance in his fight to resist the new outlook of the new commandant: " — Das ist mein Plan; wollen Sie mir zu seiner Ausführung helfen?" (p. 116)¹¹ In the next sections of this paper, I will present my interpretation of how the traveller gains the power which is here attributed to him.

The traveller does not seem aware of the power behind his own point of view. He states: "Sie überschätzen meinen Einfluß; der Kommandant hat mein Empfehlungsschreiben gelesen, er weiß daß ich kein Kenner der gerichtlichen Verfahren bin." (p. 113)¹² But the officer explains that the fact that he is an outsider to the colony puts

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10. "[...] [the officer] came hurrying down the ladder to observe the operation of the device from below. Something was still not right, though only he was aware of it; [...]" (J.U., p. 158)
 11. "That's my plan; will you help me carry it out?" (J.U., p. 169)
 12. "You overestimate my influence; the commandant has read my letters of recommendation and knows I am no authority on legal procedures." (J.U., p. 166)

him in a very special position: "Sie stehen ihm [dem Kommandanten] und uns allen — verzeihen Sie den Ausdruck — gewissermaßen harmlos gegenüber; Ihr Einfluß, glauben Sie mir, kann nicht hoch genug eingeschätzt werden." (p. 114)¹³ This statement does not have a simple meaning: the traveller is harmless yet influential. But while creating the paradox, the officer also tries to resolve it by imposing his own desire which is to see the traveller take action for him against the new commandant. He creates an ambiguous statement which could be seen as paralleling the apparently noncommittal position of the traveller and then gives it the exemplary direction he wants the traveller to take. He manipulates his own words in an attempt to show how his will can, once again, dominate.

In a close analysis of the officer's account of the judicial process, we realize that he is trying to manipulate gestures in a similar way. Let us analyze the following passage:

Erst um die sechste Stunde verliert er das Vergnügen am Essen. Ich knie dann gewöhnlich hier nieder und beobachte diese Erscheinung. Der Mann schluckt den letzten Bissen selten, er dreht ihn nur im Mund und speit ihn in die Grube.

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13. This passage presents a problem to its translators: it calls the traveller "harmless" yet states that he is in a very influential position. The contradiction devoids the statement of any clear meaning. Neither Underwood nor the Muirs chose to preserve this perfect ambiguity. The Muirs formulate the sentence in a different way altogether: "[...] you feel yourself — forgive the expression — a kind of outsider so far as all of us are concerned; yet, believe me, your influence cannot be rated too highly." (p. 207) But Underwood, on the other hand, takes sides with the officer's interpretation (as developed in the referenced paragraph above) by resolving the semantic tension of the German version and showing the traveller in an influential, untouchable position: "[...] as far as he and all of us are concerned you're as it were — if you'll pardon the expression — untouchable; believe me, your influence cannot be rated too highly." (pp. 166-167)

Ich muß mich dann bücken, sonst fährt es mir ins Gesicht. (p. 108)¹⁴

In the officer's interpretation of the condemned man's spitting out the rice pudding, we could say that the machine has won the condemned man over and that he accepts his death by realizing he no longer needs to eat. Therefore, he does not even finish his last bite but spits it into the ditch.

On the other hand, we as readers can question the explanations which the officer gives for the condemned man's actions and then form our own interpretation of the actions. We could say that as the officer kneels down in front of the machine, the condemned man finally has the opportunity to take a bit of revenge for the torture the officer is putting him through. His spat-out rice pudding is not at all aimed for the ditch, but for the officer's face.

In the light of this second reading, the condemned man is not experiencing any wonderful insight into "Justice" — to this point in the process his is an experience of torture, disgust and hatred. We could continue to draw our own meanings from the gestures of the condemned as the officer describes the magical moment during the sixth hour. It is here that, as already quoted above, the officer understands the pursed lips as a sign of illumination; but to us, they could also be a warning of a repeated attempt at spitting into the officer's face. Following the latter idea through to its logical end, the sixth hour has now passed and the condemned man is still filled with hatred for the officer. A consequence of this interpretation is of course that the machine does not work.¹

The condition of the machine itself puts even further into doubt its operating proficiency. When it operates, one of the wheels makes a horrible noise (p. 107), the stub of felt badly needs to be replaced (p. 110) and the wrist strap breaks as the soldier pulls on it. The officer, in

14. "Not until around the sixth hour does the man lose his pleasure in eating. I usually kneel down here at that point and observe the phenomenon. The man seldom swallows the last bite; he simply turns it round in his mouth and spits it into the pit. I have to duck then, otherwise I get it in the face." (J.U., p. 159)

reaction, tries to cover up for the flaws by telling the traveller: "Die Maschine ist sehr zusammengesetzt, es muß hie und da etwas reißen oder brechen; dadurch darf man sich aber im Gesamturteil nicht beirren lassen." (p. 109)¹⁵ The officer, in attempting to suppress the flaws of his machine, is also defending the once dominant social discourse of the old commandant which is based on the supposed truth that the machine does the work of justice. In order for the structure to maintain dominance, its weaknesses must be filled in or covered up. Once exposed, the faults inevitably undermine the structure and lead to its dismantling.

Another fact which the officer defends is the practice of not telling the condemned man the verdict of his trial. The condemned man is supposed to learn of it as it is inscribed upon him. The officer states: "Er erfährt es [das Urteil] ja auf seinem Leib." (p. 104)¹⁶ But "Leib" means at once stomach and body. This ambiguity troubles us when we read the officer's distinction between the decorations and the verdict, a necessary distinction if one is to understand the verdict: "Es müssen also viele, viele Zieraten die eigentliche Schrift umgeben; die wirkliche Schrift umzieht den Leib nur in einem schmalen Gürtel; der übrige Körper ist für Verzierungen bestimmt." (p. 107)¹⁷ If the "wirkliche Schrift"¹⁸ is written on the "Leib" (stomach/body), and the rest of the body is covered in decorations, the distinction between writing and decorations becomes blurred: how can we tell what the sentence says

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15. "The machine is extremely complex [I would prefer the more literal: "pieced together"]; something's bound to give here and there; one shouldn't let that cloud one's overall judgement." (J.U., p. 160)
 16. "He experiences it [the verdict] on his own body [Leib]." (J.U., p. 154)
 17. "So the actual lettering has to be accompanied by a great deal of embellishment. The text itself forms only a narrow band running round the waist [Leib], the rest of the body being set aside for flourishes." (J.U., p. 158) In his translation, Underwood resolves the semantic play present in the German version, by choosing the word "waist."
 18. "The real writing."

or if it is even right/write(ing)? We cannot and the markings, decorative scroll and sentence, remain open for interpretation and not fixed, as the officer prefers to see them, by a legal, binding truth.

Through the Eyes of the Traveller

While observing from his perspective, which often coincides with the narrator's, the traveller goes through his own process of interpretation of the officer's explanations of the machine and its process. Pascal writes: "If we are told by the narrator what the Officer is thinking or feeling, we find that usually this can be inferred from his behaviour as seen by the Traveller. [my underline]" (Pascal, p. 128) The traveller is watching the gestures of the officer as well as the soldier's and condemned man's, and then deducing meaning from them. In a passage where the officer uses a surprised, questioning tone and bites his lips, Pascal writes: "[we] are told that he is astonished. But actually the lip-biting tells us this, so that we understand the hearer knew the Officer was astonished because of the tone of the question and the biting lips. The statement is an induction from external evidences, not a fictional licence." (Pascal, p. 130)^y

In fact, the results of a search in the compiled database of gestures in "In der Strafkolonie" have shown that the traveller does at least twice as much looking as any other character. The officer invites him to look: "Nun sehen Sie [...]" (p. 100), "Wie Sie sehen [...]" (p. 105), "Wollen Sie nicht näher kommen und sich die Nadeln ansehen?" (p. 106)¹⁹. Or the narrator describes his glances: "[...] einen flüchtigen Blick [in die Grube] warf" (p. 101), "[...] sah er an dem Apparat in die Höhe" (p. 102), "[...] sah mit gerunzelter Stirn die Egge an" (p. 105)²⁰. The traveller plays the role of observer during the officer's explanation

19. "Now take a look [...]" (J.U., p. 150), "As you can see [...]" (J.U., p. 155), "Come over here, won't you, and have a closer look at the needles." (J.U., p. 156)

20. "[...] cast a quick glance [into the pit]" (J.U., p. 150); "[...] he stared up at it [the machine]" (J.U., p. 152); "[...] was looking at the harrow with a frown." (J.U., p. 156)

of the penal code. His many observations actually result in blurring the distinction between the roles of the traveller and narrator.^k Throughout the officer's explanations, it is often through the eyes of the traveller that we "look at" the writing, or discover characteristics of the officer and the machine. In this way, through an analysis of the visual, the traveller constructs his own opinion of the machine and its process. The conclusion of which finally manifests itself in his refusal to support the old commandant's machine.

The traveller reads the gestures of the condemned man, for instance, in such a way that they support an attitude which queries the procedure he is witnessing. In this example, the traveller has just learned that the condemned man does not know his own verdict. The narrator tells us:

Der Reisende wollte schon verstummen, da fühlte er, wie der Verurteilte seinen Blick auf ihn richtete; er schien zu fragen, ob er den geschilderten Vorgang billigen könne. Darum beugte sich der Reisende, der sich bereits zurückgelehnt hatte, wieder vor und fragte noch: 'Aber daß er überhaupt verurteilt wurde, das weiß er doch?' (p. 104)²¹

Through the narrator's comments, we are presented with the traveller's reading of the condemned man's look: "er schien zu fragen[...]"²² Described as a sort of reminder of the trial's consequences, the look seems to encourage the traveller to continue his line of questioning and the traveller does in fact respond by leaning forward again and asking another question. The answer to the question uncovers a surprisingly unfair aspect of the trial procedure: no, the condemned man does not know that he has been judged. It is probably one of the factors

21. "The traveller, who would have said no more, became aware that the condemned man was looking at him, apparently to ask whether he was able to sanction the process being described. The traveller therefore bent forward again, having leant back in his seat, and asked another question: 'But he knows he has been sentenced?'" (J.U., p. 154)

22. "[The condemned man or it, his look] seemed to be asking [...]"

eventually contributing to the traveller's decision which is to disapprove the proceedings.

But depending on how we judge the narrator's position, his explanation for the traveller's leaning forward when he had just leaned back can be attributed to the narrator's privileged, omniscient position, or we can see it as his own interpretation of the traveller's repositioning. We have no way of knowing which view of the narrative's truth factor is more acceptable: it is a question of interpretation.

From the point of view of the narration, the following example is also fascinating. The condemned man is being placed under the harrow: "Als ihn die Spitzen berührten, ging ein Schauer über seine Haut; er streckte während der Soldat mit seiner rechten Hand beschäftigt war, die linke aus, ohne zu wissen wohin; es war aber die Richtung, wo der Reisende stand." (p. 109)²³ Across the distance of a semi-colon, the narrator changes focalizations: "er streckte die linke aus, ohne zu wissen wohin" shows the narrator focalizing from the condemned's point of view, but "es war aber die Richtung, wo der Reisende stand" is the narrator suggesting the effect of this gesture on the traveller. The additional information about the direction of the stretch implies that the traveller interprets the condemned man's gesture as a reaching out to him for help.

The traveller's feelings with respect to the officer are apparent through his reactions and interactions with him. In the heat of his emotional recall of the old commandant's times, the officer approaches the traveller:

Der Offizier hatte offenbar vergessen, wer vor ihm stand; er hatte den Reisenden umarmt und den Kopf auf seine Schulter gelegt. Der Reisende war in großer Verlegenheit, ungeduldig sah er über den Offizier hinweg. Der Soldat hatte die Reini-

23. "As the points made contact a shudder ran over his skin; he stretched out his left hand — the soldier was busy with his right — not knowing in which direction; but it was towards where the traveller was standing." (J.U., p. 160)

gungsarbeit beendet und jetzt noch aus einer Büchse Reisbrei in den Napf geschüttet. (p. 112)²⁴

It is our turn to interpret the traveller's impatient gaze. The narrator takes on his focalization: we are told what is going on behind the officer's back instead of what the traveller perceives next to his body. We can deduce, from the described contents of his gaze that, confronted with the officer's deep emotions, the traveller remains very cool and indifferent. Our understanding of the gesture is that the traveller does not share in the officer's sorrow toward the passing of the old ways.

If the traveller does not focus on the officer's softer gestures, he is very careful to observe his more violent ones. As the officer is trying to convince the traveller to help him in his fight to preserve the machine, he becomes quite emphatic : "'Sie können es,' sagte der Offizier. Mit einiger Befürchtung sah der Reisende, daß der Offizier die Fäuste ballte." (p. 114)²⁵ The traveller zooms in on and is alarmed by the officer's aggressive gesture of making fists. This gesture is consistent with the behaviour which the traveller seems to expect of a man who unfairly tries and executes unsuspecting men.

It becomes apparent, that the traveller's reading of the actions, gestures, etc. are very much intertwined with the narrator's. Since the traveller rarely speaks directly himself, unlike the officer, we cannot always be sure to distinguish between his interpretation and the narrator's. But they agree on this point: the traveller's judgement upon the trial was set before even meeting with the officer and his machine. First the narrator explains how the traveller denies the officer his

24. "The officer had evidently forgotten who was standing there; he had taken the traveller in his arms and pressed his face to the man's shoulder. The traveller, deeply embarrassed, was looking impatiently over the officer's head. The soldier had finished cleaning up and had just shaken some rice pudding into the bowl from a tin." (J.U., p. 164)

25. "'You can,' said the officer. The traveller saw with some alarm that the officer's fists were clenched [I prefer the more active "the officer was clenching his fists]." (J.U., p. 167)

support: "Die Antwort, die er zu geben hatte, war für den Reisenden von allem Anfang an zweifellos; er hatte in seinem Leben zu viel erfahren, als daß er hier hätte schwanken können; [...] Schließlich aber sagte er, wie er mußte: 'Nein'." (p. 116)²⁶ And in the next paragraph, the traveller himself says: "Ich bin ein Gegner dieses Verfahrens, [...]" (p. 116)²⁷. Before even arriving in the penal colony, the traveller was an opponent of these proceedings.

Based on his personal principles which are in opposition to the proceedings of the machine, the traveller, throughout the officer's explanations, saw the gestures of the officer and condemned man in a way that supported his own view. He only recognized those elements that fit into his vision of a fair trial: he did not understand the documents explaining the mechanisms of the machine, he was not able to tell if the machine was running properly or not, he seemed to identify the condemned man's gestures as cries for help and, finally, he was disinterested in the officer's sorrow but focused on his displays of brutality. We said earlier that the traveller was not understanding the officer's explanations, but was merely observing his gestures. Now we can conclude that the traveller was actually understanding the scenes at a different level, within a different perspective or con-text, within a different interpretation.

The Power Play of Two Discourses

The dominant discourse during the time of the old commandant was based, according to the officer, on the belief that the machine did justice. We have read "In der Strafkolonie" as the story of the once dominant discourse's confrontation with a new discourse, one that is less defined but nonetheless threatening merely by its opposition: it is the discourse which the new commandant represents.

26. "The answer he must give had, as far as the traveller was concerned, been beyond doubt from the very beginning; he had been through too much in his life for there to have been any question of his wavering here; [...]. But eventually he said, as he had to, 'No'." (J.U., p. 169)

27. "I am an opponent of these proceedings." [my translation]

We have shown in the above analyses that it is often the description of gestures, with their capacity to be interpreted in widely varying ways, which allows the text to support the two rivalling discourses. But only one discourse can dominate the penal colony. At the beginning of the story, the old commandant's system is already on the decline and the officer tries hard to gain the traveller's support for it. The traveller's rejection of the officer's proceedings has an accelerating effect on the destruction of the old system: the officer, the master of the proceedings, gives his own life to the machine.

Once set into motion, the machine collapses onto its master who has willingly laid himself onto the bed. The machine undoes itself from within the inner mechanisms, from within the "Zeichner," "das Wichtigste" (p. 107)²⁸ of the whole process. Wheel after wheel comes rolling out. There is a great force applying pressure to the structure, pressure which the weaknesses of the mechanism can no longer withstand. In my interpretation, the exterior force is the traveller's decision to support the new commandant and the machine's collapse is the crumbling of the old commandant's power:

Langsam hob sich der Deckel des Zeichners und klappte dann vollständig auf. Die Zacken eines Zahnrades zeigten und hoben sich, bald erschien das ganze Rad, es war, als presse irgendeine große Macht den Zeichner zusammen, so daß für dieses Rad kein Platz mehr übrig blieb, das Rad drehte sich bis zum Rand des Zeichners, fiel hinunter, kollerte aufrecht ein Stück im Sand und blieb dann liegen. [my underline] (p. 120)²⁹

The affirmation of the traveller's supposedly more humane view thus carries a very violent consequence: the destruction of the penal colony's

28. "The scribe," "the most important [component]."

29. "Slowly the lid of the scribe rose higher and higher until it fell open completely. The cogs of a gear-wheel became visible, rising up, soon the whole wheel could be seen, it was as if some mighty force were squeezing the scribe, there was no room for this wheel, the wheel turned till it reached the edge of the scribe, tumbled down, rolled a little way in the sand, then fell over and lay still." (J.U., p. 175)

former structuring mechanism and the death of a formerly influential man. Allegorically, the final scene involving the officer acts out the power play between the two discourses: the power of the new discourse crushes the strength of the old.

But as soon as the base, the former centre of action, is dismantled, our attention is led away from the valley. The traveller is taken to the Tea House where the Old Commandant is buried and where the clients smile when the intruder reads the inscription on the gravestone. The narrator tells us: "Als der Reisende das gelesen hatte und sich erhob, sah er rings um sich die Männer stehen und lächeln, als hätten sie mit ihm die Aufschrift gelesen, sie lächerlich gefunden und forderten ihn auf, sich ihrer Meinung anzuschließen." (p. 122)³⁰ The narrator states that the laughing reflects the fact that the men found the inscription comical. To us, however, because we are in the process of developing the power play between the two discourses, the laughter can indicate that the teahouse clients are keeping the memory of the old commandant alive and are even tempting people to take sides with them. At some point when the new system becomes vulnerable, they will, in turn, organize its capitulation. The traveller has announced his judgement. Knowing that he himself now stands for the new system and therefore constitutes a fair target, he flees the island.

It is at this point that we come to the moral issue of making a choice which was referred to earlier by Pascal. The story traces the traveller's moral dilemma: he must judge the penal mechanism and decide on the fairest verdict. The problem is, of course, that both possible judgements, on the one side, will help either the officer or the condemned man and, on the other, will also carry an evil consequence: either the condemned man or the officer will be killed. It is an ethical dilemma. We have found a parallel dilemma in the reader's action of interpreting the text: choosing to focus on one textual aspect or meaning prevents the reader from doing justice to the others within the text.

30. "When the traveller, having read this, rose to his feet he saw the men standing around him and smiling as if they had read the inscription with him, found it ridiculous, and were inviting him to share their view." (J.U., p. 177)

Taking a stand, affirming one's own position necessarily creates a conflict with the ever-absent, ever-violated other.

The transition between the two discourses can also be shown through the actions of the traveller and of the officer. A search in the compiled database of gestures in the story has shown that the officer does more than twice as many actions (for practical reasons, the database excludes "looking" from the realm of actions) in the story as the traveller. The narrator describes his work to us: "[...] während der Offizier die letzten Vorbereitungen besorgte [...]" (p. 100)³¹, "[...] der Offizier führte sie [die Arbeiten] mit einem großen Eifer aus [...]" (p. 100)³², "[...] mit einem Schraubendreher noch hier und da an einer Schraube sich zu schaffen machte" (p. 101)³³. It is interesting to note that, as the story progresses and the traveller begins to take action, the officer slips from acting, to accepting a more passive role to finally being incapable of acting at all. This transition happens as the officer gives himself to the machine. The officer's last action is described as follows: "Dieser [der Offizier] hatte schon den einen Fuß ausgestreckt, um in die Kurbel zu stoßen, die den Zeichner in Gang bringen sollte; da sah er, daß die zwei gekommen waren; er zog daher den Fuß zurück und ließ sich anschnallen." (p. 120)³⁴ The officer could have activated the machine himself, but upon seeing the two approaching he pulls back into passivity. In the next sentence, he is no longer able to act himself: "Nun konnte er allerdings die Kurbel nicht mehr erreichen; [...]" (p.

31. "[...] while the officer attended to the final preparations [...]" (J.U., p. 149)

32. "[...] the officer performed them [the tasks] with enormous enthusiasm [...]" (J.U., p. 149)

33. "[...] screwdriver in hand, also busying himself with the odd screw here and there." (J.U., p. 151)

34. "The officer had already stretched out a foot to kick at the crank handle that would start the scribe, but when he saw them coming he withdrew the foot and allowed himself to be strapped down." (J.U., p. 174)

120)³⁵ The story ends with the officer in a completely helpless position.¹

The traveller, on the other hand, changes from a perfectly passive role in the first two-thirds of the story, to desiring action, and then to acting himself. First he himself tells the officer that he has a plan of action: "Sie wissen noch nicht, was ich tun will," [my underline] (p. 117)³⁶ and then, the narrator tells us of his will to act: "Der Reisende sah, daß Befehle hier nichts halfen, er wollte hinüber und die zwei vertreiben." [my underline] (p. 120)³⁷ He finally takes action when the officer is already dead: "'Helft doch!' schrie der Reisende zum Soldaten und zum Verurteilten hinüber und faßte selbst die Füße des Offiziers." [my underline] (p. 121)³⁸

In the final scene, the once passive observer is shown in an active role, where he defends himself from his pursuers:

Während der Reisende unten mit einem Schiffer wegen der Überfahrt zum Dampfer unterhandelte, rasten die zwei [der Soldat, der Verurteilte] die Treppe hinab, schweigend, denn zu schreien wagten sie nicht. Aber als sie unten ankamen, war der Reisende schon im Boot, und der Schiffer löste es gerade vom Ufer. Sie hätten noch ins Boot springen können, aber der Reisende hob ein schweres geknotetes Tau vom Boden, drohte

35. "Now, of course, he could no longer reach the crank handle; [...]" (J.U., p. 174)

36. "You don't know yet what I intend to do," (J.U., p. 170)

37. "Realizing that orders were useless here, the traveller was about to go over ["wanted to go over" is a more literal translation] and chase the pair of them away [...]" (J.U., p. 175)

38. "'Come and help!' the traveller shouted to the soldier and the condemned man as he himself took hold of the officer's feet," (J.U., p. 176)

ihnen damit und hielt sie dadurch von dem Sprunge ab. (p. 123)³⁹

As a known opponent of the old commandant's system, the traveller is now at risk himself of being challenged. In his new vulnerable position, he feels the need to defend himself. And he succeeds: it is not yet the moment for the new, "more humane" system to be conquered. The new commandant's is a discourse which has only just gained its dominance, it still maintains much of its self-confident momentum. Therefore the story ends at a moment where the traveller retains control and authority: it looks as though he is successful in leaving the new penal colony.

The Allegorical Dimension

We can conclude that the textual representation of gestures contributes to the open-ended nature of Kafka's "In der Strafkolonie." The moments of undecidability in the meanings of the corporal descriptions, some of which this paper has brought to light, furnish the building blocks for interpretations. As I stated by quoting Paul de Man at the outset of this article, no reader can resist the temptation of giving shape and direction to such malleable textual elements. In fact, I chose "In der Strafkolonie" as the subject matter for this article precisely for the reason that I could interpret it as an allegory of reading and interpreting narrated gestures.

While analyzing gestures in Kafka's works, we have become sensitive to the fact that when an interpretation gives to a gesture a specific meaning, its potential meaning within the context of Kafka's writing is actually being limited. Even though the deduced meaning will give rise to another level of play in meaning, it cannot do justice to the

39. "While he was negotiating with a boatman at the foot of the steps to take him out to the steamer, the other two came racing down the steps in silence, not daring to shout. But by the time they reached the bottom the traveller was already in the boat and the boatman was casting off. They could have leapt into the boat, but the traveller, picking up a heavy length of knotted rope from the floor of the boat and threatening them with it, prevented them from making the attempt." (J.U., p. 178)

significations possible through different points of view of the work of fiction.

In "In der Strafkolonie," we saw that the officer's interpretation of the machine justified the death of many men; and in his opinion, the traveller thought that the officer was correct in giving his life to the machine. This shows that the prioritization which accompanies the process of interpretation causes certain elements, structures or characters to be devalued to the point where their exclusion or, as in this case, death becomes acceptable. It is a strong metaphor illustrating the power which a specific interpretation can execute: in extending the tone established by the machine's brutality, one could say that tracing an interpretation throughout the story so that it dominates the deduced meaning of the text does "violence" to the figurations to which the text might otherwise give rise. In this context, "In der Strafkolonie" takes on the form of an allegory warning of the possible danger of analyzing gestures.

But as the story becomes an allegory of reading and interpreting gestures, the allegorical figure suppresses other possible figurations. To achieve understanding of the depth of meaning created by the narrated gestures, I had to commit myself to this allegorical figure. I had to make a selection if I was to indicate that gestures are about more than my own selection. The conclusion is paradoxical. In stating the danger of interpretation, I myself am very much caught within an analytic system where interpretation is a necessary step. It is impossible to step outside of my own interpretation, in order to do justice to all others, since⁴⁰

.../...

40. in stepping out of the system, I would simply be transposing the problem into another dimension...ⁿ

Endnotes

a. This article has been written in the context of a Laval University research project on gestures in Kafka's fiction, a project which is directed by Monique Moser-Verrey and funded by the S.S.H.R.C.C. The gestures in Kafka's works have been identified, analyzed and entered into a database to aid in the compilation of data for the use in studies such as this. The unusual form of this article with respect to its play on footnotes and endnotes will be explained in the foreword.

b. For further insight into the topic of verbal representation of the visual, or ekphrasis, see Monique Moser-Verrey's lecture "Die Wirkung des ekphrastischen Prinzips in Kafka's Erzählprosa," C.A.U.T.G. Conference (Kingston, Canada, May 1991).

c. Just to list a few examples of existing interpretations, Leah Hadami, in "The Utopian Dimension of Kafka's 'In The Penal Colony'," *Orbis Litterarum*, 35 (1980), pp. 235-249, reads the text through the definitions of the utopian and dystopian worlds; Roy Pascal reads "In der Strafkolonie" as an allegory of a moral dilemma. He "conclude[s] that Kafka presents us with [the] general moral problem" of making a choice (in "Kafka's 'In der Strafkolonie': Narrative Structure and Interpretation," *Oxford German Studies*, 11 (1980), pp. 144). Erwin Steinberg analyses the elements of the story which seem to him to reflect the Jewish religion and he describes the malleable nature of Kafka's writing as follows: "Most critics agree that 'In The Penal Colony' — and Kafka's works generally — beg for interpretation. Thus, for example, Warren says of this story that it is 'pretty persistently and consistently allegorical'; and Greenberg adds, 'that is, it refers one directly to ideas.' Indeed, he says, 'Ideas obtrude in the story with unusual distinctness and in the end the reader is confronted with an intellectual dilemma rather than a living mystery.'" ("The Judgement in Kafka's 'In the Penal Colony'," *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 5, no. 3, Sept. 1976, pp. 495-496.)

d. Paul de Man, *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1986). Although de Man does establish certain characteristics relating to the two terms: reading and theorization, he does not, throughout the essay, limit their use to those characteristics. He does indeed use the terms in such varying contexts, that it would be impossible to define their Demanian sense once and for all. I have chosen to filter out

one dimension of the reading — theorizing opposition in de Man's text in order to draw from it a working definition of reading. The depth of play and flexibility inscribed in de Man's text has been traded here for desired theoretical clarity.

e. *I have worked with three translations of "In der Strafkolonie": In the Penal Settlement: Tales and Short Prose Works, trans. Ernst Kaiser and Eithne Wilkins (London, Secker & Warburg, 1949, 1973); The Penal Colony: Stories and Short Pieces, trans. Willa and Edwin Muir (New York, Schocken Books, 1948, 1968); Franz Kafka: Stories 1904-1924, trans. J.A. Underwood, foreword by Jorge Luis Borges (London, MacDonald & Co., 1981). I use the first two, which seem to be identical, less than the later Underwood translation. When cited, the Muirs' version is indicated with the initials W. and E.M. The more recent translation is cited more frequently, since it re-writes more literally than the others the passages where Kafka uses gestures to carry the narrative. The initials J.U. identify quotes from this version.*

f. *In fact, Roy Pascal has concluded from his narratological study of Kafka's works that the narrators' perspectives resemble the limited view of a main character more than the omniscient insight of a classic, heterodiegetic narrator. He writes that the narrator does tell us how: "[...] the main characters move [...] what they see and hear and also what they think, feel and plan, ie: processes inaccessible to fellow human beings. But the Kafka narrator, far from being omniscient, is almost totally unable to inform us about the hidden processes in the other characters; in this respect, he is as limited as the main character and dependent simply on observation and speculation." (Pascal, p. 125)*

Sensing this in "In der Strafkolonie," we will find it difficult to fully trust the narrator's judgement and will thus be led, at certain moments in the text, to understand the described gestures differently from him. At those moments, the heterodiegetic narrator strangely becomes just another interpreter of gestures.

The standpoint we are taking with respect to the narrator is a self-fulfilling prophecy, because if we doubt the narrator's judgement, he will be seen as an unstable source of information and we will therefore allow ourselves to read the gestures differently. Rejoining the original statement, our circular argument "proves" in this fashion that there are ways of judging the gestures which differ from those of the narrator. The usefulness of such a standpoint is however, that it exposes the mechanisms of textual descriptions of gestures: the central objective of this paper.

g. Paul de Man, "Shelley Disfigured," *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1984), pp. 121.

h. The fact that finding meaning within the text relies strongly on the knowledge, context or even frame of mind of the interpreter opens up a reflection, in this endnote, based on a passage in Steinberg's article. He states that the "story is, for this reader at least, [...], a powerful story, but a flawed one." (Steinberg, p. 514) Steinberg interprets the story as a religious allegory where the explorer plays the central role of judge either of the old commandant or of the choice between the old world and the new. He finds however, that structurally, the explorer is overshadowed by both the old commandant and the officer, an imbalance which leads to aesthetic and intellectual flaws (Steinberg, p. 512).

But how can writing be flawed? Writing is a creative process which, in my view, does not fall into the categories of right or wrong until it is judged, that is, interpreted. It seems that Steinberg's is a case where the reader's interpretation and the textual mechanisms do not coincide to an extent which satisfies the critic. But then perfect coincidence between an interpretation of a text and its potential references and configurations probably never occurs: it seems possible to find textual residue surrounding all interpretations. In addressing the faulty alignment between text and derived meaning, would not Steinberg thus need to say that fiction in general is flawed?

Roy Pascal, on the other hand, argues that "the whole narrative structure (in the sense of the perspective from which the story is related) requires an ending of this kind [...]." [my underline] (Pascal, p. 124) The word "requires" brings us once again to question whether it is the text which has a right or wrong ending, or if it is not Pascal, within his context as a reader, who is satisfied with the alignment between his interpretation and the aspects of the text which he has identified as salient.

i. The meaning which I derive here from the condemned man's gestures is one which fits with my interpretation of the short story: I use "In der Strafkolonie" as an allegory of imposing meaning on gestures. But the officer's explanations of the gestures as a reflection of a deep, complete, corporal understanding of justice still constitute a very interesting possibility. His notion of reading through the penetration of the text into the body is a very powerful and rich image. It evokes the physical phenomenon of the act of reading, since when we read with our eyes, the text is momentarily imprinted on the retina. This process causes a chemical chain

of reactions within our bodies. The story's metaphor of reading as a literal incorporation of text is biologically quite real.

j. It is interesting to note that Pascal supports some of his narratological work on "In der Strafkolonie" with gestural analyses such as this one. He seems sensitive to the fact that the reading of gestures is an action which takes place within the text on the characters' and the narrator's level.

k. Roy Pascal has also found that the narrator seems at times to work from the traveller's perspective: there is a sort of merging of focalizations. He writes: "[...] [the narrator] describes all the events as they impinge on the Traveller's consciousness, interprets the intentions or motives of Officer and soldiers as they are accessible to the Traveller's intelligence and not otherwise, and on the other hand tells us directly much of what is going on in the mind of the Traveller." (Pascal, p. 127)

l. Significantly however, the officer is evoked one last time when the soldier tells the traveller: "Er [der Offizier] hat sogar einigemal in der Nacht versucht, den Alten auszugraben [...]." (p. 122) ["Once or twice he [the officer] even tried to dig the old man up at night [...]." (J.U., p. 177)] Strategically placed in the final part of the text, this gesture summarizes the reason behind the officer's actions leading up to his defeat. His attempt at uncovering the old commandant's grave becomes a symbol of the officer's role in the story, as well as a reminder that the old discourse could still be recovered.

n. I have tried to show in this article, by the means of its content as well as its form, that reading gestures in Kafka's "In der Strafkolonie" is an action which remains to be done. The extensive description of gestures is a feature which helps to characterize Kafka's writing and, as we have seen here, structures the text in such a way that widely varying interpretations persist. It is partly due to the radical openness of gestural interpretations that we are caught in Kafka's vicious circle: without interpretations, the text would not be significant and without re-interpretation, justice would not be done to the inexhaustible textual figurations.