
MORE ON KAFKA

On Adapting Kafka

How does one adapt a story that has no ending?

Both *Amerika*, written near the beginning of Kafka's career, and *The Castle*, written near the end of his life, come to no final conclusion. The strands of the plots weave in too many (astonishing) directions, the center cannot hold. In trying to say everything, they arrive at points that are (like life) unresolvable. Still, a dramatic performance cannot end in such a manner. A choice has to be made.

What you are going to see takes definite liberties, emphasizing certain aspects of the story, embellishing some while downplaying others, shaping the story to theatrical ends, and most audaciously (or impertinently for some) contriving an ending. Whether Kafka would have approved of these changes is anyone's guess.

When making his 1961 adaptation of *The Trial* (the one Kafka novel that reaches a conclusion), Orson Welles famously refused to film the original ending, in which Josef K allows himself to be executed with the shameful dying thought, "Like a dog". If he had lived through the Holocaust, Welles thought, Kafka would never have ended the story in such shocking surrender, and so instead Welles contrived a climax in which K defies his executioners, scaring them off so that they are forced to hurl back a bomb to accomplish the deed.

But I am not so sure that is indeed the choice Kafka would have made had he lived to adapt the work himself. (Indeed, that novel's ending was, along with its opening, the first part he wrote, and the inspiration for the story is thought to have been personal rather than political.) We can all individually conjecture, like Welles, but who can actually say? I only know that the Kafka who speaks to me personally is the one whose protagonists seesaw between defiance and passivity, courage and shame, sometimes with seeming randomness, and often in exact opposition to the action the moment requires. And I know I cannot be the only one who has at times found myself seesawing at crucial moments in a not dissimilar manner. It seems one of the conditions of being human. But I also know that this feeling may not be universal.

Still, one of the blessings of adaptation is that the book itself remains intact. The dissatisfied viewer can always go back to it, or read it for the first time. It is a stone tablet that adaptation cannot destroy. A testament that can be endlessly discussed and interpreted or even trashed, but whose words will long outlive their mangling.

Which is to say that there have been many adaptations of Kafka's works, including many adaptations of *Amerika*—this is merely one of them.