

K. Stays in the Picture – Filming the Novels of Franz Kafka

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Why Kafka?

Ever since their rediscovery after the Second World War, Franz Kafka's (1883, Prague - 1924, Vienna) works have enticed filmmakers to adapt them for the screen:

“Visual” Writing

Kafka's use of sober, uncomplicated prose belies the deeply bizarre scenarios his protagonists encounter. But beyond a handful of sketches, these tales were unaccompanied by illustrations; indeed, Kafka called images “a source of much anguish.” Nevertheless, his lack of extensive description of these strange happenings practically begs for imaginative visual interpretation (whether Kafka would have liked it or not).

A Medium for a Message

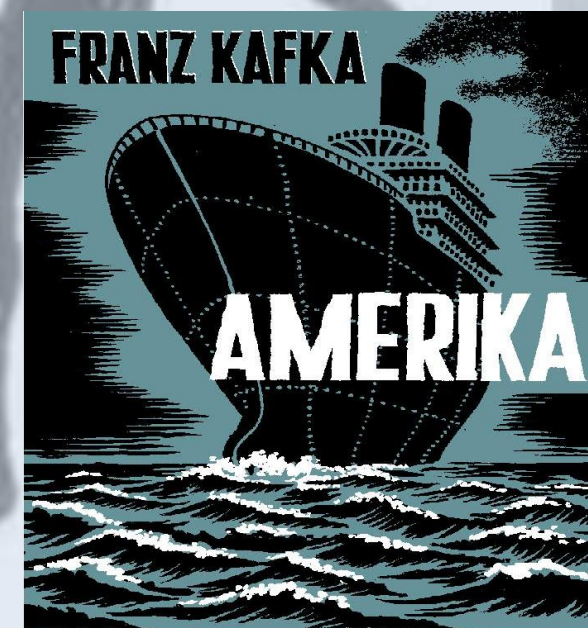
Kafka's open, often uncompleted plots, packed with allusion and subtext allow plenty of space for an adapter's own ethos or agenda to augment the source material, thus the appeal of the material to “auteurs” such as those presented here. Additionally, this richness of content allows adapters to highlight certain aspects of the source material in service of their own themes; Kafka is adaptable to adaptation.

The Art of Adaptation

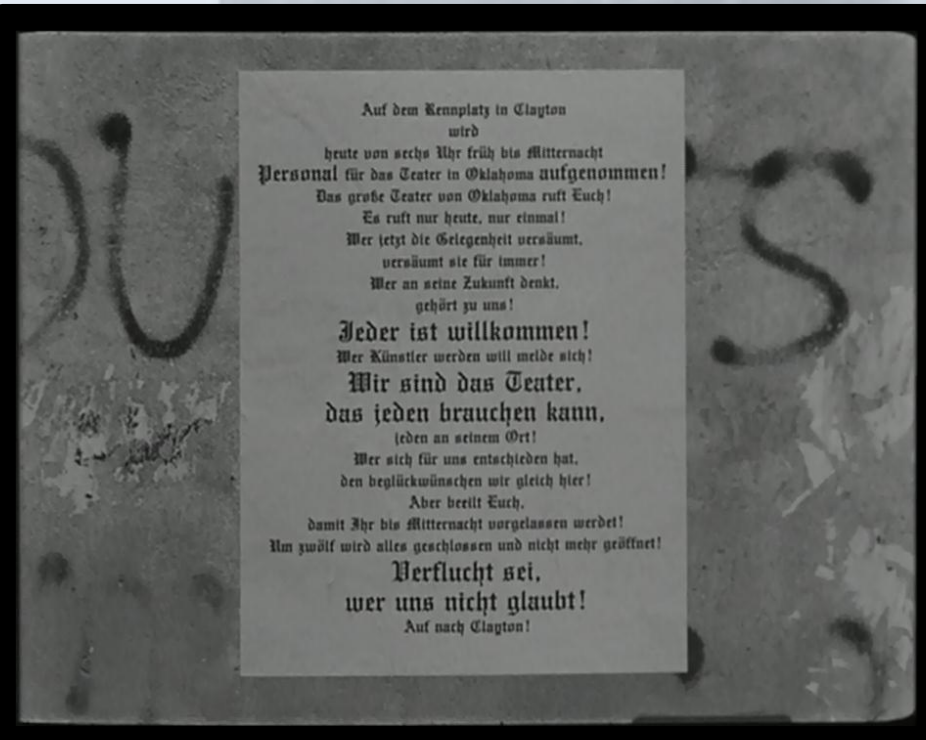
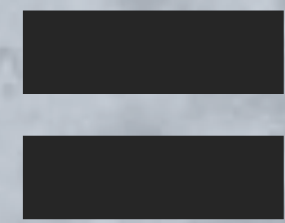
Retelling and adaptation are the foundations of cultural transmission. The better we understand the mechanisms and rules behind this process, the deeper our understanding, not just of literature or film, but of what it means to experience the world as a human being.



Jean-Marie Straub & Danièle Huillet
1933 - 1936 - 2006



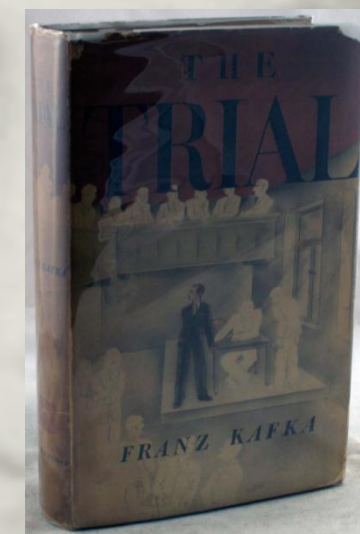
Amerika (*Der Verschollene*), 1927



Class Relations (Klassenverhältnisse), Germany/France 1984: This adaptation examines the subtexts of political power and hierarchical relationships in Kafka's novel about “Amerika.” A highly conceptual film in which the rigid, sometimes amateur, actors speak in unnatural blocks of dialogue, it was filmed entirely in Europe to reflect the fact that Kafka himself never traveled to the United States.



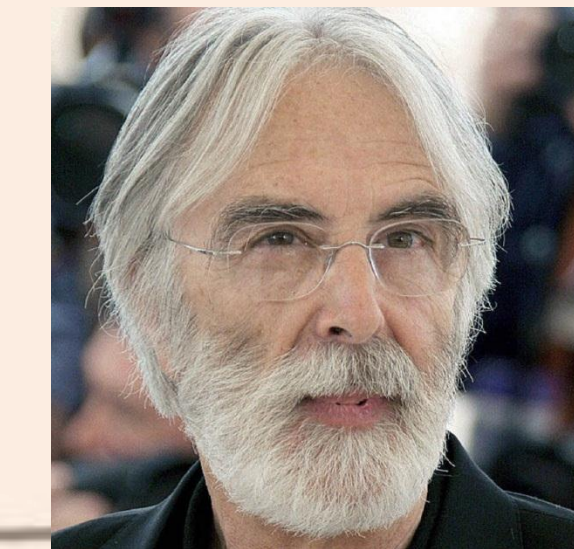
Orson Welles 1915 - 1985



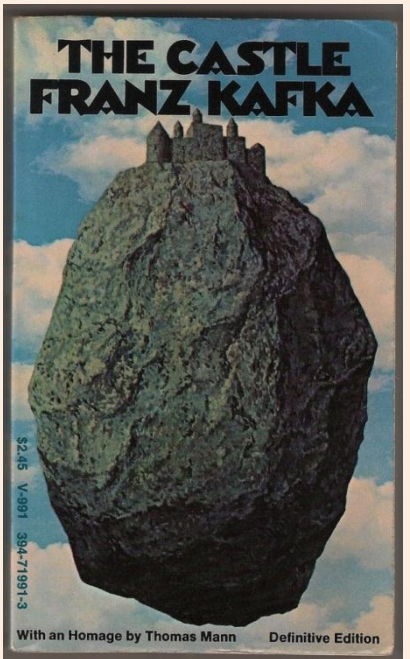
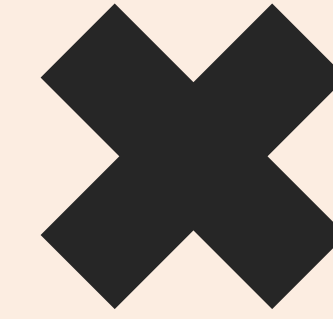
The Trial (*Der Proceß*) 1925



The Trial, France/Italy/Germany 1962: Faithful more to the spirit than to the letter of the source novel (cf. Haneke and *Das Schloß*), Welles succeeds in establishing a classically “Kafkaesque” atmosphere, while updating Kafka for the 1960s by adding computers and filming on location in Communist Zagreb. The screenplay also drastically changes the ending of the story, firmly applying Welles' stamp to this adaptation.



Michael Haneke 1942 -



The Castle (*Das Schloß*) 1926



The Castle (Das Schloß), Germany/Austria 1997: A made-for-TV adaptation announcing itself as “after the prose fragment...,” the film is almost slavishly faithful to the incomplete novel. Scenes – and the film itself – break off abruptly, and the clear, straightforward *mise-en-scène* still conveys the confused, disoriented nature of the plot, “adapting” the style of Kafka's actual prose to film.