

## Kafka and Cubism

Ivan Margolius



Even a hundred years after his death Franz Kafka, the modernist literary genius, still inspires to be studied in search of enduring ideas hidden in his complex oeuvre.

In my memoir *Reflections of Prague – Journeys through the 20<sup>th</sup> century* (Wiley 2006) I mentioned Kafka's interest in Cubism, which was a prevalent trend in the Czech lands between 1910 and 1924 – a contemporary art form ever-present in the writer's Prague location, which had a profound impact on Kafka's view of the world.

Those were momentous times. Albert Einstein was in Prague between 1911 and 1912, lecturing at the German University, where he began working on his general theory of relativity. He attended Berta Fantová's discussion salons held in U Bílého jednorožce house on the Old Town Square, which were also frequented by Kafka, Max Brod, Hugo Bergmann, Philipp Frank and others. In Prague, Einstein wrote eleven scientific works, five of them on radiation, mathematics and on quantum theory of solids. Karel Čapek wrote the play *R.U.R.* (*Rossum's Universal Robots*) in 1920.

The new artistic milieu came about as a reaction by artists to the era of scientific discoveries of the early 20th century – X-rays, radiotelegraphy, radium, four-dimensional geometry and the new view down from above afforded by aeroplane

travel. Cubism was a reflection of its time, simultaneous, immediate, composite, transparent, condensed, fragmented, reconstructed, operating in different space directions and in different speeds.

In Prague between 1902 and 1914 important influential exhibitions were staged of Rodin, Munch, the French Impressionists, Bourdelle, Les Indépendants, and of the Czech Osma Group and the Group of Creative Artists. These were further supported by illustrations and reproductions in the *Umělecký měsíčník* and *Volné směry* magazines. It is certain that Kafka was aware of the new artistic trends as his close friend Max Brod reviewed some shows, such as the Osma Group's first expressionistic exhibits in *Die Gegenwart* magazine in 1907.

By perception of his immediate surroundings, Kafka would be among the first writers who would get immersed in this modernistic view of the world around him that Cubism portrayed in response to the precise scientific era. The aim was not to abstract reality but to show simultaneously forms and space in relation to a constantly moving point in time. But Kafka's reflection of the times was not just in his own limited pictorial art creativity, in his pencil or ink sketches, but primarily expressed uniquely by the style of his writing. This has rarely been discussed.

Kafka's stories and novels did not reveal explicitly what they were about. His fiction contained many meanings and points of view, dissolving the primary significance into a multiplicity of possibilities: "But simply to get me away from the place they sent me out on useless errand. And they took care not to send me too far away, so that I had some hopes of being able to get back in time if I hurried. And there was I running as fast as I could, shouting the message through the half-open door of the office I was sent to, nearly breathless so that they could hardly make me out, and back



Left, the third  
Exhibition of the  
Group of Creative  
Artists,  
Municipal House,  
1913



Right, portrait of his  
mother Julie by  
Franz Kafka, circa  
1907, pencil



*Clockwise from left: Josef Chochol, Neklanova Apartment Building, Vyšehrad, 1913*

*Josef Gočár, 'At the Black Madonna' Department Store, Prague 1911-12*

*Gočár's double villa, entrance, Tychonova, Prague 6, 1913*



again at top speed, and yet the student was here before me, he hadn't so far to come, of course..." (*The Trial*, written in 1914-15, chapter 3, pp. 70-71, Penguin Books, 1953).

It is fascinating that Kafka tried uniquely to interpret Cubism by the style and formulation of his writing, its meanings, structure of sentences and flow of his words.

Kafka visited Paris in 1910 and 1911, but primarily he was enveloped daily by Prague's Cubism, not only by the contemporary paintings and sculptures by Bohemian and foreign artists shown in exhibitions, but by the extraordinary Cubist architecture designed by Czech architects having been erected in the Bohemian capital city, as such a phenomenon hardly flourished elsewhere. Examples of this are Josef Chochol's 1913 houses at Vyšehrad or the department store 'At the Black Madonna', which included the famous Grand Café Orient, designed by Josef Gočár and built between 1911 and 1912 on the corner of Celetná and Ovocný trh. This was on Kafka's doorstep. He must have frequently passed by on the way to his favourite André bookshop located by the Powder Tower. At that time, Kafka lived in Mikulášská (Parižská) 36, later moving to Staroměstské náměstí 5 (6) and then to Bílková 10. Interestingly also, the exhibitions of the Group of Creative Artists were staged in interiors designed in Cubist style by Pavel Janák and Josef Gočár.

Yet this important Prague Cubist architectural landscape input into Kafka's consciousness of the times as well as his specific texts exploring cubist perception of space failed to be mentioned in the recent study *Očima Franze Kafky* (Marie Rakušanová et al., Kant 2024), which surveyed Kafka's connection with Cubist art in Bohemia during his lifetime. Detlev Schöttker in *Vielfältiges Sehen: Franz Kafka und der Kubismus in Prag* (in *Zeitschrift für Ideengeschichte*, Heft IV/4 Winter 2010, pp. 85-98), mentioned the additional effect of Prague Cubist architecture on Kafka and commented on his stories *On the Tram* (*The Passenger*) and *Absent-minded Window Gazing in Meditation* collection (1913) that described scenes similarly to the structure of Cubist artworks. But there is much more complexity in Kafka's writing than these brief glimpses.

In fact, there are many more numerous instances of Kafka's output based on the Cubist, fractured vision, multi-perception of space and objects and representation of movement in the field of vision inspired by Cubist architectural façades and multi-



layered interiors in his published novels and fragments.

Here follow just three further examples. In *The Castle* (written in 1922, p. 17, Penguin Books, 1957) he illustrates the puzzling disjointed approach to the castle:

“...He felt irresistibly drawn to seek out new acquaintances, but each new acquaintance only seemed to increase his weariness. If he forced himself in his present condition to go on at least as far as the Castle entrance, he would have done more than enough. So he resumed his walk, but the way proved long. For the street he was in, the main street of the village, did not lead up to the Castle hill, it only made towards it and then, as if deliberately, turned aside, and though it did not lead away from the Castle it got no nearer to it either. At every turn K. expected the road to double back to the Castle, and only because of this expectation did he go on; he was flatly unwilling, tired as he was, to leave the street, and he was also amazed at the length of the village, which seemed to have no end; again and again the same little houses, and frost-bound window-panes and snow and the entire absence of human beings – but at last he tore himself away from the obsession of the street and escaped into a small side-lane, where the snow was still deeper and the exertion of lifting one's feet clear was fatiguing; he broke into a sweat suddenly came to a stop, and could not go on ...”

In one fragment from Kafka's *The Lost Writings*, assembled by Reiner Stach (pp. 17-18, New Direction Books, 2020) Kafka describes the multi-faceted situation the protagonist found himself in:

“...Sometimes when I came home at night, with my head bonging with the din of the big city, I was unable to find the hotel entrance right away. It's true, the entrance does seem to have been very small, it's even possible – though this would have been odd – that there was no proper entrance as such, but to go into the hotel you first had to make your way through a restaurant. It may have been that way, but then even the door of the restaurant wasn't always easy to find. Sometimes I thought I was standing in front of the hotel, but I was actually standing in front of the barracks, in a completely different square, quieter and cleaner than the one in front of the hotel, yes, deathly quiet and awesomely clean, but somehow it was able to be taken for the other. Then you had to go around the corner to find yourself in front of the hotel. It

seems to me now that sometimes, only sometimes admittedly, you could get from the quiet square – say, with the help of an officer who was going the same way – and find the hotel entrance right away, and not a second or back entrance either, but the one through the restaurant ...”

In the second fragment (p. 62) Kafka observes:

“...You entered the outer courtyard, and from there two arches roughly ten yards apart led into a second courtyard, you passed through an archway, and then, far from being, as expected, in a further large expanse, you found yourself in a dark little space with walls reaching up into the heavens, it was only way up that you saw some illuminated balconies. So you thought you had taken a wrong turn and wanted to return to the first courtyard, and chanced not to go back through the arch you had entered by but the one next to it. Only to find you weren't in the original courtyard at all, but in a different one, much larger, full of music and noise, and the lowing and bleating of animals. You had made a mistake, so you went back into the dark little courtyard and then through the first archway. It was no use, again you were in the second courtyard, and you had to ask for directions through a whole series of other courtyards before you were back in the original courtyard, which it had taken you just a few steps to leave ...”

These writings are expressions of confusion, chaos and bewilderment, a modernistic futuristic view of the world from a hundred years ago. And we still endure the same perplexing concept of the world nowadays, which is reinforced by continued unsettling political events that pursue us presently. Thank you, Franz Kafka, for your deep foresight.

And how appropriate that architect Leopold Ehrmann, who was on friendly terms with the author, and is mentioned in Kafka's last letter, chose a Cubist form for Kafka's gravestone.

*Kafka's gravestone  
by Leopold Ehrmann,  
New Jewish Cemetery,  
Prague, 1924*



**Ivan Margolius is an architect and writer**