

Aaron Schuster

Enjoy Your Security: On Kafka's "The Burrow"

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This text was co-commissioned by Katia Krupennikova and Inga Lāce as part of four special contributions to e-flux journal – two texts published in the present November 2020 issue, and two more in the upcoming February 2021 issue. (The other November text in this series is "The Bureau of Care: Introductory Notes on the Care-less and Care-full" by iLiana Fokianaki.) This collaboration aims to expand on the themes raised in the contemporary art festival Survival Kit 11. Titled "Being Safe Is Scary," after a piece by artist Banu Cennetoğlu for Documenta 14, Survival Kit 11 took place in Riga from September 4 to October 4, 2020. It was organized by the Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art and curated by Katia Krupennikova.

Exploring the mechanisms shaping the politics of safety, and taking the heavily charged title "Being Safe Is Scary," the festival aimed to establish a continuity of urgent discourse on security and political violence. At the same time, the festival sought to explore how it might be possible to transform the suppositions that undergird this discourse – reconnecting safety to practices of love, intimacy, sharing, commonality, mutual support, attention, care for each other, and care for the environment.

– Editors

The Unbearable Joy of Safety

One of the remarkable things about Franz Kafka's short story "The Burrow" is how much it speaks about pleasure. The words *Freude* (joy), *Lust* (pleasure), *Glück* (happiness), and *genießen* (to enjoy) pulse through the narrative. From: the "joy in labor" procured by burrowing to the "pure joy" afforded by moments of silence and stillness; "the sheer pleasure of the mind in its own keenness" to the "infinite pleasure" of keeping watch over the burrow's entrance; and the "happy but dangerous hours" spent glutting himself on his stores to the "furious lust" of the approaching beast, "The Burrow" can be read as a kind of treatise on enjoyment. Or to speak like Kafka's philosopher dog, an investigation into the burrow is the surest pathway to the science of enjoyment.

One of Kafka's last stories, written between 1923 and 1924, published posthumously, "The Burrow" is about an unspecified animal – let's call him a mole, for reasons I'll explain later – who digs an elaborate underground fortress to keep himself safe from predators. The burrow is his gated home, but much more than that, it's intimately bound up with the mole's being. To use Kafka's expression from another story, "Blumfeld, An Elderly Bachelor," the burrow is his "life companion." And indeed, at times they seem to form the perfect couple: "I and the burrow belong so indissolubly together"; "You belong to

me, I to you, we are united; what can harm us?"¹ At one point the mole even literally embraces the burrow, hugging the outer walls of a special inner chamber, a burrow-within-the-burrow that he calls the "Castle Keep." Yet this ecstatic union betrays a painful split. In fact, the burrow that is meant to keep him safe only multiplies the possible dangers. Despite his concerted efforts, the defenses can never be perfected, there is always more work to be done, new threats to be countered; the longed-for peace is perpetually postponed. What is more, mole and burrow are so closely identified that the latter becomes something like a second skin, the protective armor an extension of his own body. But, this only serves to make him newly vulnerable since "any wound to it hurts me as if I myself were hit."² The protection itself needs protection. Safety measures must be safeguarded. Yet even the mole's meta-defensive plans are ultimately futile, since the Enemy is already inside. Evil has penetrated the burrow, in the form of a persistent whistling sound, a slight but extremely disturbing noise that won't go away, and that drives the mole crazy with his attempts to locate its source, even causing him to tear apart his own abode. The burrow is at once himself, his closest companion, and his fiendish enemy. The burrow is unbearably the mole who digs himself deeper into it.

Reading the story today, it's hard not to think of those luxury "burrows" being built in decommissioned missile silos for the protection of the ultrarich, or other gated palaces in which elites plan to sequester themselves from coming calamities. More generally, what *The Trial* and *The Castle* are for bureaucracy and legal procedure, "The Burrow" is for security architecture and surveillance: it dramatizes the will-to-safety, and its obverse, the anxiety of precarity and risk, that so dominate modern life and politics. Kafka analyzes, with clinical precision, what might be called the neurosis of security (a Freudian will recognize here a model of obsessional neurosis), with its fear of the enemy, its insatiable need for defenses and its imperative of constant vigilance – as well as its agonizing uncertainty, its postponed grand plans, and its vacillation. If someone were to ask point-blank "What is the burrow?," I believe there are four possible responses: it's an architectural edifice, a psychic structure, a speculative system, and a social-political diagnosis – one could add others: it's also a sound laboratory, and a pleasure machine. For the mole, however, it's simply "home." Although, in what will be a series of uncanny reversals, his mania to defend the homeland dominates and destroys his very sense of home.

Like many of Kafka's stories, nothing much

happens in "The Burrow" – yet a whole universe is compressed into this "nothing much." The text consists of the unrelenting monologue of the narrator-mole, whose feverish rationality and speculative drive never slacken, even when contemplating rest and silence. It's almost as if the text were trying to bury the reader under its sheer rigor. You might start to worry that this discourse will never end – why should it? – and that you'll be trapped within the labyrinthine cogitations of the mole for eternity, like the Hunter Gracchus condemned to non-death. In fact, the text does end: it suddenly breaks off, mid-sentence. The original reads: *aber alles blieb unverändert, das* (no period). Usually the last floating "das" is removed, giving the story some semblance of closure: "But all remained unchanged (period)," in the Muirs' rendition.³ Yet it also feels uncannily appropriate that the story is simply broken off, unfinished, as if this were the only adequate non-ending to its nonstop neurotic reason. On the other hand, it is said that Kafka did write an ending for the story, a final showdown with the beast. Critics usually reject this as implausible since it is far too literal, mistaking a psychodrama for actual combat. If one wanted to think along these lines, however, there's one other possibility. No one ever suggested, to my knowledge, that the mole was surprised by the beast and killed, mid-thought.

The Impossible Gaze

"The Burrow" can be divided into two main parts, with some preliminary pages that introduce the mole and his burrowing project. In the first, the mole exits the burrow, and gazes upon his creation from the outside. The second consists in the mole's struggle with an Enemy or enemies whose presence is signaled by a troubling sound.

Let's take these up in turn. Leaving and returning to the burrow are major ordeals, which bring up all sorts of questions, doubts, reveries, and conundrums concerning the mole's relation to his beloved abode. Exiting and entering raise the thorny issue of the boundary, the border between inside and outside, which reanimates the mole's anxieties and puts under pressure his defensive system. The mole leaves only with trepidation, but once outside he finds it even more difficult to come back in; the whole drama accentuates his inner conflict or division. Of course, the mole needs to make "occasional short excursions" to review the burrow's exterior and carry out improvements, plus he can also hunt while outdoors, but these pragmatic motivations are the pretext for a more devious and perilous game.⁴ The question is: Why should he ever exit the burrow? "Can there be any reasonable grounds for such a step?"⁵ "You live in peace, warm, well nourished, master, sole

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Wenceslaus Hollar, *Dead Mole*, 1646. Etching; 2 3/4 x 5 1/2 in. Photo: CC0/Wikimedia Commons

master of all your manifold passages and rooms, and all this you are prepared – not to give up, of course – but to risk it, so to speak.”⁶ The mole acknowledges there is something irrational and extravagant in his behavior, which cannot be explained by practical considerations or a utilitarian calculus.

What drives the mole is the fascination of the burrow’s moss-camouflaged entrance; he installs himself in a nearby vantage point and watches over it “for whole days and nights.”⁷ This constant surveillance, he says, “gives me infinite pleasure and reassures me” (“an unspeakable joy,” *eine unsagbare Freude*, in the original).⁸ Furthermore: “At such times it is as if I were not so much looking at my house as at myself sleeping, and had the joy of being in a profound slumber and simultaneously of keeping vigilant guard over myself.”⁹ He continues: “Sometimes I have been seized by the childish desire never to return to the burrow again, but to settle down somewhere close to the entrance, to pass my life watching the entrance, and gloat perpetually upon the reflection – and in that find my happiness – how steadfast a protection my burrow would be if I were inside it.”¹⁰ The mole enjoys in a peculiar conditional mode. From outside the burrow, he *enjoys the enjoyment* he imagines he would feel if he were safe inside the burrow. The peculiar thing is that this second-degree enjoyment is better – *unspeakably* more enjoyable – than the mere experience of enjoyment. He would rather “gloat perpetually” on his hypothetical happiness than actually be happy, even though this means exposing himself to danger. We are squarely in the realm of fantasy.

Enjoying enjoyment is better than the thing itself – why? What fantasy offers that mere life cannot is the added (or surplus) joy of *possessing* one’s enjoyment. One of the essential features of enjoyment is self-loss; pleasure involves a surrender of the self, the absorption of the ego within an anonymous stream of sensations and impulses, a giving way to something that is beyond one’s conscious control. To enjoy is to lose yourself in whatever it is you are enjoying. In every pleasure there is a dimension of passivity and a relinquishing of self-mastery. In fantasy, this loss is itself objectified and visualized in a *mise-en-scène*. What is possessed in fantasy is not only some dreamed-of enjoyment but, more profoundly, one’s dispossession. The self becomes the witness to its own disappearance, it stages and controls its own loss of control, and this *impossible* gaze is what is so fascinating and enjoyable (and itself can become compulsively uncontrollable). Pleasure can only be “infinite” or “unspeakable” when it touches on the impossible. To see oneself enjoying is to capture,

from the outside, what cannot be captured and what spells the disappearance of the self. Kafka’s mole expresses this with great lucidity. Gazing at the entrance of the burrow, he imagines himself nice and cozy – asleep – inside it. In the mole’s fantasy he is simultaneously present and absent, awake and asleep; more precisely, he is present to witness his absence. He is both the vigilant guardian, ever on the lookout for dangers, and the slumbering civilian, lost in unconsciousness and without a care in the world. Fantasy is the bridging of this split. Total surveillance and blissful disappearance are magically united; feverish activity coincides with absolute restfulness; watchful self-presence goes together with peaceful oblivion. In fantasy, you can have it all – not in the sense of having all the goods you can imagine, but of synthesizing the contradiction. And while this fantasized enjoyment is totally extravagant, it also has an *ascetic* quality. For the sake of this pleasure, the mole willingly sacrifices the comfort and safety of his burrow; he even imagines never returning to the burrow, but dreamily spending his days in a makeshift ditch beside it.

Now the mole is a bit embarrassed by all this. He admits, again quite lucidly, that his is a “childish desire,” and that inevitably he’s “roughly awakened” from these “childish dreams.”¹¹ Taking his self-criticism one step further, the mole observes that not only is there something infantile about his fantasy, but dangerously deceptive as well.

No, I do not watch over my own sleep, as I imagined; rather it is I who sleep, while the destroyer watches.¹²

This is a haunting line, one of the most powerful in the story. Let me cite some other translations: “No, I’m not watching over my own sleep, as I thought I was; rather I’m the one who’s asleep, while my destroyer awaits” (Michael Hofmann); or “No, I’m not the one, though I thought I was, who watches me sleeping; rather I am the one who sleeps while the one who wants to deprave me watches” (Stanley Corngold); or else “No, I do not watch over my sleep, as I imagined, it is me who is sleeping while the spoiler lurks with wakeful vigilance” (Peter Wortsman).¹³ Who or what is this strange entity that gives the lie to the mole’s *vigilant somnolence*, the “destroyer,” the “depraver,” the “spoiler,” *der Verderber*? Kafka never uses this term again in the story, it’s a *hapax legomenon* that stands out as a name (the best name?) for what will be otherwise referred to as the enemy or the beast. The mole doesn’t watch himself (sleeping), but is watched by something else, and the presence of this other gaze “spoils” his enjoyment. Safety turns to

vulnerability, pleasure to anxiety. There is a sense of corruption, ruination, spoliation; something's rotten in the state of the burrow. But this does not so much spell the end of fantasy – the mole's supposed awakening – as the continuation of fantasy in another form. What starts as the mole's impossible gaze morphs into the evil eye of the Other; the mole now envisions himself asleep while being spied on by the Spoiler. These two fantasies are intertwined. Underlying the imagined scene of self-surveillance is the mortal threat, the danger against which all the burrow's defenses are deployed. No enjoyment of security without a threat. Who or what is the Spoiler? It could be any of the creatures traipsing by, oblivious to the burrow's disguised entrance, or maybe just feigning obliviousness, waiting for the right moment to strike. The Spoiler can't be pinned down to a particular figure. The gaze of the enemy also has a fantasmatic quality: it is a floating gaze, both everywhere and nowhere.

System and Subject

It's almost painfully comical: the mole leaves his elaborate and carefully constructed fortress only to install himself in an "experimental burrow" next door, which is nothing more than a hole barely big enough for him to squeeze into.¹⁴ The whole episode reads like an illustration of Kierkegaard's great line about the futility of philosophical systems (where he refers, of course, to Hegel): "In relation to their systems most systematisers are like a man who builds an enormous castle and lives in a shack close by; they do not live in their own enormous systematic buildings."¹⁵ Interestingly enough, Kafka's biographer Reiner Stach hit on the same idea in his description of the scene: "There is a touch of insanity here. It is like constructing a magnificent mansion, then camping next to it."¹⁶

Kafka's burrow is a "burrow of thought," a speculative system. The mole is like the Hegelian philosopher who constructs an all-encompassing system but lives outside it; there's no place for him in the absolute. That is the fatal flaw in the grand design. The system can comprehend everything, except for the singular subjectivity who builds it. It's a Kierkegaardian either/or: one must choose, either system or subject, either system or life, either system or humanity – or, in other words, either Hegel or Kierkegaard. "In the confessional a Hegelian can with all due solemnity say: I do not know whether I am a human being – but I have understood the system. For my part, I would rather say: I know that I am a human being and I know that I have not understood the system."¹⁷ (This opens up a third possibility, which is perhaps more conducive to the contemporary *Zeitgeist*: I

haven't understood the system, and I don't know whether I'm a human being; indeed, maybe I'm a mole). Now, this is rhetorically effective but it's not Kierkegaard at his most philosophically sophisticated. Kafka was a great admirer of Kierkegaard, and it might be tempting to see the story as a demonstration of the folly of system-building, which it surely is. (One wonders if Kafka knew this passage from Kierkegaard's journals). But I would argue that Kafka goes a step further than Kierkegaard, outlining a more complex and nuanced – one could say, dialectical – relationship between system and subject. Ironically, it's precisely where system and life radically diverge – at the point of their impossible intersection – that enjoyment insinuates itself, gets its grip on the subject – without this underlying impossibility, enjoyment would lose its delectable sting, its electric charge. It's where life doesn't fit into the system that it becomes most attached to the system.

This is spelled out more clearly in a later scene. The logic of the episode outdoors is repeated after the mole has descended back into the burrow. The division between inside and outside is now transposed *inside* the burrow itself, through its splitting into an inner sanctum – the Castle Keep – and the outer labyrinth. Between these two there is a little "free space," *ein Hohlraum*, a hollow or cavity, and it's this *gap* that is the mole's most cherished abode. "I had always pictured this free space, and not without reason, as the loveliest imaginable haunt."¹⁸ This space between-two-walls, *l'entre-deux-murs*, to echo Lacan's *l'entre-deux-morts*, is key to the burrow's topology. The mole situates himself neither inside nor outside but in a null zone, the wiggle room of the limit. And like the famous play-within-a-play, it's in the mole's relation to the burrow-within-the-burrow that his true relation to the burrow is revealed.

What a joy to lie pressed against the rounded outer wall, pull oneself up, let oneself slide down again, miss one's footing and find oneself on firm earth, and play all those games literally upon the Castle Keep and not inside it; to avoid the Castle Keep, to rest one's eyes from it whenever one wanted, to postpone the joy of seeing it until later and yet not have to do without it, but literally hold it safe between one's claws, a thing that is impossible if you have only an ordinary open entrance to it; but above all to be able to stand guard over it, and in that way to be so completely compensated for renouncing the actual sight of it that, *if one had to choose between staying all one's life in the Castle Keep or in the free space outside it, one*

would choose the latter, content to wander up and down there all one's days and keep guard over the Castle Keep.¹⁹

This is the secret of the drive for security: its goal is not the calm and peacefulness granted by a sense of safety, but the surplus enjoyment generated by the security apparatus itself. To gaze upon it, to contemplate it, to hold it in your paws, to play little seductive games with it, to slide one's body against it. Kafka's mole quite literally makes love to a wall. On a political level, it's hard to imagine a sharper parody of contemporary wall-building enthusiasts than this little scene of architectural fornication.

Freud famously described the drive as a force that is initially bound up with an instinctual need but spins off from it and becomes independent. In the example of the baby feeding at the breast, the satisfaction of hunger gives rise, as a kind of by-product, to a pleasure localized in the lips and tongue, what Freud calls "sensual sucking." The oral drive then breaks free from its initial context and searches for sucking pleasure irrespective of any vital exigency. The mole's burrowing pleasure is the security equivalent of sensual sucking – Kafka gives us a portrait of "sensual security," as it were. The security drive breaks away from its putative purpose – namely, providing safety – to become an autonomous end in-itself and a self-reflexive pursuit. Hence the mole's funny obsession with guarding that which is meant to guard him. Protected and protector trade places. He is the one to safekeep the Castle Keep. And the mole is even willing to expose himself to danger to defend his defenses. He expresses this in the form of a hypothetical choice (which, again, repeats his "childish" outdoors fantasy, though without the embarrassment): would it be better to stay forever within the safety of the Castle Keep, or to be forever banished from it and keep vigil on its border? The mole chooses exile. This has a certain theological resonance: the lesson is that it's better to be the gatekeeper of paradise than one of its inhabitants – for keeping watch over paradise already *is* paradise. The Kafkian universe is typically identified with the image of the man whose access to the Law, the Castle, or the Sovereign is blocked by a guardian or gatekeeper, but here we get the guardian's perspective. Paradise is the name for an (inaccessible) emptiness whose Idea we enjoy by protecting it against the (imagined) Spoiler. We cannot enjoy paradise directly; *renunciation* is the pathway to enjoyment.

This brings us back to the question of the relationship between system and subject. The subject creates an elaborate and all-encompassing system, but its place inside it is a

non-place, an internal cavity or space "between the walls." It's only from this gap that the subject can fantasize about the loveliness of the absolute. This is the duplicitous structure of fantasy, which is both the crack and the concealer, the hole and the whole. (And indeed, the status of this gap is purely virtual, it does not actually exist; the margin of "free space" between the burrow and the Castle Keep is a dream, it's how the mole pictures his homiest "home"). What cannot be contained by the system is the enjoyment that is secreted by it. Not because this enjoyment is too dynamic, too vibrant, or too vital to be captured within its confines – the *becoming* of life versus the *being* of the system – but because enjoyment is rooted in the system's null-point, its void. Kafka's metaphysical principle: no system without a gap, no castle without a shack. System and subject are not so much counterposed as they are paradoxically entangled. The enjoyment of the Absolute-System, which is *possible* only from the *impossible* (de-absolutizing) point within it, is precisely what binds system and subject together. Instead of either/or, we have *both* Hegel and Kierkegaard – if read through Kafka.

Barely Audible, or From Gaze to Voice

But the danger is still out there. Back in the burrow, after taking a long nap, the mole's peace is soon disturbed by a peculiar sound, "an almost inaudible whistling noise."²⁰ It is "a faint whistling, audible only at long intervals, a mere nothing."²¹ But this mere nothing won't go away, and its very faintness makes it all the more present and disturbing. Indeed, the way it comes to completely dominate the mole's existence, turning his carefully constructed world inside out, it's as if the sound were deafening in its near-inaudibility. This is the mole's new obsession, studying the noise, dissecting its nuances, speculating about its meaning, and trying to pin down its source. "The Burrow" traces a shift from the visual to the sonic register. If the earlier part of the story turned around the impossible gaze, the mole's fantasy of watching himself sleeping, the subsequent and most extended part concerns the mole's fantasy of the Other, insofar as this Other is manifested by a minimal sound, an almost imperceptible voice, that cuts through the burrow's defenses in a single stroke. From gaze to voice: this is the structuring principle of the story, its conceptual arc. The Spoiler now takes the form of an uncanny acoustic phenomenon that destroys the mole's tranquility and reveals the vanity of the burrow and its protective architecture. Before its fading tone "the great burrow stands defenseless."²² This also confirms a key element of Lacan's dialectic of desire, namely that the

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voice is the partial object (*object a*) closest to the unconscious.

"I start on my investigations."²³ How does the burrower proceed? Interestingly enough, much of his investigatory work is done in the conditional mode – he thinks a tremendous amount about what he *could do* and what the likely results of these various strategies *would be*. The mole's investigations (like the bulk of his life) are a massive thought experiment, a "burrow of thought." His thinking about the noise can be summarized in six logical steps. First, he posits that the sound is produced by the "small fry," annoying little creatures that scurry about in the burrow, and which make up part of his diet. But he quickly dismisses this possibility, since the small fry have always been around, and the noise is something new. Second, he decides the sound must be coming from "some animal unknown to me," and not a single animal but a "whole swarm."²⁴ He imagines that these animals are a bit bigger than the small fry; yet if that's the case, it's strange that he's never encountered them. This leads to the third hypothesis: the invading animals must be much smaller than the small fry, and it's their tininess that makes them so hard to detect. Here the mole does act, he starts defacing his home, digging up the rooms and passageways and sifting through the clump of dirt, looking for evidence of these almost imperceptible invaders. But the search for the "very tiny fry" proves fruitless, and so he envisions a new tack. Fourth, he will dig a single trench, leading in a beeline outward from the Castle Keep, not stopping till he hits the noise's source. This could be called the Cartesian option: like the philosopher's advice that when lost in the forest, the best method is to choose one direction to walk in and stick to it unwaveringly, so the mole will hunt down the sound along a single decisive path. However, this rationalist solution gets postponed and he's diverted by another idea. Fifth, the mole declares a wildly ambitious project: he will redesign the entire defensive architecture of the burrow, for only such a total renovation could hope to counter the security breach. Of course it's "too late" for this – it's always been too late.²⁵ The time is never right for the masterpiece, everything conspires against its possibility, it persists precisely as a missed chance. One is left with provisional projects, flawed attempts, minor experiments: life takes place in a gaping "meanwhile," in the interim time of the regrettably unachieved masterpiece. This is the neurotic fantasy of perfection, the dream of "a completely perfect burrow."²⁶ Finally, sixth, the mole comes to a definitive conclusion about the sound's origin. It is emanating not from a swarm of animals, but from "a single big one."²⁷ This unknown beast is

"dangerous beyond all one's powers of conception" – instead of a multiplicity, he is the sum of all fears.²⁸ This fiendish animal is like a massive boring machine, furiously tunneling through the earth, and it's his gulps of air that produce the indelible whistling sound.

With "The Burrow," Kafka – an enormously talented and prolific complainer – composed one of the greatest noise complaints in the history of literature. Even as he loathes it, the mole is the aficionado of this noise, which, as he says, "is always a matter of the subtlest shades."²⁹ He is yearning for stillness and silence, yet captivated by a "mere nothing" (which, at the same time, is everything) posed at the very limit between sound and silence, flickering at the edge, one could say, between being and non-being. This could be a fruitful starting point for reflecting on the nature of noise, sound, music, and voice – Mladen Dolar has magisterially developed this line, proposing a new ontology of the border or the edge based on Kafka's "burrow of sound."³⁰ The whistling sound also connects "The Burrow" with other stories, notably "Investigations of a Dog," with its concert of the dogs and its science of music, and "Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk" – the mole also characterizes the whistling sound as a "piping" (*Pfeifen*), exactly the same word used to describe Josephine's peculiar singing. These three stories, from Kafka's final period, form a sort of unmusical-musical trio. But the mole is neither an artist, like Josephine, nor a theorist, like the dog. He's an *architect*, that is, a system builder. And the "old architect" is faced with both his deep attachment to and the endemic failure of his system – or better, his attachment to its failure.³¹

Let us come back to the question of the mole's enjoyment, the way *he loves his security as himself*. Who is the mole's life companion? Clearly, it's the burrow, but the mole's relationship to the burrow is complicated, and involves a number of other (hypothetical or fantasmatic) figures. For example: during his escapade outdoors, he imagines having someone whom he could trust to keep watch over the entrance. On second thought, however, this hypothetical helper creates more problems than he solves. Would the mole have to perform a counter-service for him? Or, invite him as a guest into the burrow (horrible prospect)? And wouldn't he need supervision? "It is comparatively easy to trust anyone if you are supervising him or at least can supervise him; perhaps it is possible even to trust someone at a distance; but completely to trust someone outside the burrow when you are inside the burrow, that is, in a different world, that, it seems to me, is impossible."³² (The problem of the supervisor and the office

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assistant, treated in “Blumfeld, an Elderly Bachelor” returns here). Later there’s another phantom companion: at one glorious point, the mole thinks that the whistling has stopped, and, overjoyed, he runs into the Castle Keep as if to tell someone the good news. “I want first to find someone to whom in all good faith I can confide it.”³³ Joy needs a confidant: this is itself an interesting proposition, another mystery for the science of enjoyment. Why do we need to tell our happiness to one another? Is there something about intense joy that requires a witness to verify its veracity, to confirm that it really happened? Or is this confiding of joy even more enjoyable than joy itself? There’s one more instance of a neighbor: when reflecting on the nature of the intrusive sound, the mole recalls a precedent for it in the past. Early on, at the beginning of his construction work, he also encountered a strange whistling noise, which he attributed at the time to “some kind of burrowing similar to my own.”³⁴ A remarkable thought occurred to him: “Perhaps I am in somebody else’s burrow.”³⁵ Suddenly there appears a topological reversal, a displacement of inside and outside; his burrow could be enveloped by another’s. Is the Other outside him, or is he inside the Other? The subject and the Other are entangled in a dizzying Escher-like loop.³⁶

The assistant, the confidant, the other burrower – these are the virtual characters that populate the mole’s solitude. But they are also rejected by him, in the name of a self-satisfied self-sufficiency. He is a lonely bachelor-mole who admits that “I have no right to complain that I am alone and have nobody that I can trust.”³⁷ “I can only trust myself and my burrow.”³⁸ But can he even trust the burrow? No: the beast, or the noise of the beast, is already inside, his most “trustworthy” of defenses has betrayed him. His self-sufficiency is a fake. Ironically, it’s in the solitude of the burrow that the mole encounters the ultimate Other, his most fiendish enemy and his most intimate companion. What is the mole’s relation to the beast? The crux of the problem is summed up in the line: “The decisive factor will be whether the beast knows about me, and if so what it knows.”³⁹ Knowledge is key. Is the beast oblivious to the mole? Indifferent? Hostile? Does it know of the existence of the burrow? Its layout? What does it want? Or does it want nothing? Is it playing with the mole? Planning an attack? Will it just pass by? Would it be possible to come to an understanding with the beast? To make a treaty with it? Although “The Burrow” would seem to evoke a paranoid world of suspicion and conspiracy, the mole’s uncertainty and indecisiveness place him in the universe of neurosis.⁴⁰ If certainty is the hallmark of madness, uncertainty, hesitation, and doubt are

the (dubious) privilege of the neurotic. Kafka identifies knowledge – the knowledge of the Other – to be the battlefield of neurosis; this problem of knowledge will be treated in a more theoretical manner by the philosopher dog. But Kafka’s mole is not too neurotic. There is even a moment when he experiences a kind of reconciliation: “I have reached the stage where I no longer wish to have certainty.”⁴¹ He doesn’t know the Other’s intentions or desire, but he can also live with this not-knowing and not be completely overwhelmed or paralyzed by it.

What, then, is the mole’s blind spot? To put it simply, his own complicity or investment in the forces he is struggling against. Is this not the secret behind the weird noise: the insistent whistling sound is the echo of the mole’s own uncanny animation, that is, his enjoyment? (Critics like to point out the autobiographical reference to Kafka’s tubercular wheezing; he named his cough “the beast”). That is why I proposed calling the narrator of “The Burrow” a mole: the story has the shape of a spy hunt, where the infiltrating “mole” turns out to be the agent investigating him. The mole is the beast, and the beast is the mole (or the mole is the beast’s “mole”). Security is the invader it fights against. This uncanny identity is hinted at early on in the story, when the mole prowls around the entrance “as if I were the enemy spying out a suitable opportunity for successfully breaking in.”⁴² This doesn’t necessarily mean that the beast is not real – there may very well be a predator out there. But the beast’s existence or non-existence would not change the fact that the beastly Other is a structural component of the mole’s security-complex. The burrow is not merely a reactive phenomenon but a self-organizing reality (i.e. a drive). In the end, subjectivity is the danger “beyond all one’s powers of conception.” The subject is the Spoiler. There is no “completely perfect burrow,” the burrow can never be whole and unspoiled. But, and this is the crucial point, the burrow is not looking for the perfection it purportedly seeks; it thrives on its crises, its failures, its gaps. (Perhaps this is also the secret behind Kafka’s “Great Wall of China,” with its seemingly senseless and self-defeating gaps). The mole is a kind of victim, but not in the way he imagines. It’s as if he were the prey and the burrow were the predator. Like Kafka writes in one of the stunning turnabouts that characterizes his style: “A cage went in search of bird.”⁴³ Or in this case, a burrow went in search of a mole. An uncanny reversal takes place at the heart of enjoyment: it’s the burrow that uses the mole for *its* enjoyment. The system enjoys in and through the subject.

While many, indeed most, of Kafka’s texts are unfinished, “The Burrow” is a curious

exception. It supposedly was finished, but the last pages have been lost. Let's speculate a bit: how could the story have ended? On the one hand, and as much as this sounds like pure Kafka-fandom, it's hard to shake the impression that it's perfect as it is; i.e., as imperfect. "The Burrow" could only be interrupted, broken off; unfinishedness is the burrow's very condition. The abrupt stop might then be viewed as a *Sopranos*-like ending, a sudden cut to black – maybe the answer is that the mole was blindsided by the beast (we'll never know). Another possibility is indicated in the scene where the mole, searching for the swarm of tiny animals supposedly behind the noise, starts digging up and destroying the burrow. Peter Szendy pointed out the link between this scene and the melancholy ending of Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation* (1974), where the sound surveillance expert Harry Caul tears apart his own apartment in a failed bid to uncover a hidden "bug."⁴⁴ Isn't Coppola's solution the right one? We could imagine a final passage where the mole calmly surveys the ruins of his self-destructed home, with only the whistling to keep him company. According to the "official" version, reported by Max Brod, as told to him by Dora Diamant, the story ends in a bloody combat with the beast, and the mole's death.⁴⁵ Critics generally disregard this ending, as it wreaks of an un-Kafkian realism plus "the death of the narrating consciousness is a narrative impossibility in a first-person story, and Kafka was generally aware of the limitations of the forms in which he wrote."⁴⁶ What if, however, this impossibility were the whole point? In the final battle, the mole would be in the position of *narrating his own death*, that is, he would become the impossible voice of his own demise, just like the fantasized gaze by which he impossibly watches himself sleeping. Instead of a turn to vulgar realism, the end would fully transpose us into fantasy. And isn't the fantasy of living one's death the ultimate fantasy, the fantasy-of-the-end-to-end-all-fantasies? But in order to pull this off, the narrator would no longer have to speak (neurotically) *about* his fantasy, but (psychotically) *from* it: he would have to become the partial object, the unspeakable voice itself would speak. This would approach the style of Beckett.

Building on these ideas, there's still one more possibility. It is suggested by another text, the conclusion of Clarice Lispector's very Kafkian novel *The Passion According to G.H.* What if the mole were to do what Lispector's narrator does and take the "inverse path" through his life-construction? He too could then say "I head toward the destruction of what I built, I head for depersonalization."⁴⁷ *The Passion According to*

G.H. is usually seen as being in dialogue with "The Metamorphosis," as the two are connected by the figure of the cockroach, but its philosophical-poetic reflections on the system, as well as the voice, place it in the orbit of "The Burrow." This would be a "happy ending," not in the sense that mole is finally safe and secure, but that he finds a way out of his deadlock, the security impasse. "My destiny is to search and my destiny is to return empty-handed. But – I return with the unsayable. The unsayable can only be given to me through the failure of my language. Only when the construction fails, can I obtain what it could not achieve."⁴⁸ Lispector, like Beckett, inherits the theme of failure from Kafka, but one further twist would need to be added to this. Something must break not only the endless perfecting of the burrow, but the enjoyment of its systemic failure. It's the whole destructing-construction of the burrow that needs to be destroyed. *The failure itself must fail.* If "failing better" means anything, this is it.

x

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- 1
Franz Kafka, "The Burrow," *Complete Stories*, trans. Willa and Edwin Muir (Schocken, 1971), 340, 342. Unless otherwise noted all quotes from the story come from this edition.
- 2
Kafka, "The Burrow," 355.
- 3
Stanley Corngold's translation is more accurate: "but everything remained unchanged, the * * * . (Here the story breaks off.)" Kafka, "The Burrow," in *Kafka's Selected Stories*, trans. Stanley Corngold (W.W. Norton, 2007), 189.
- 4
Kafka, "The Burrow," 331.
- 5
Kafka, "The Burrow," 333.
- 6
Kafka, "The Burrow," 333.
- 7
Kafka, "The Burrow," 334.
- 8
Kafka, "The Burrow," 334.
- 9
Kafka, "The Burrow," 334.
- 10
Kafka, "The Burrow," 335.
- 11
Kafka, "The Burrow," 335.
- 12
Kafka, "The Burrow," 335.
- 13
Kafka, "The Burrow," in *Investigations of a Dog and other creatures*, trans. Michael Hoffman (New Directions, 2017), 212; "The Burrow," in *Kafka's Selected Stories*, trans. Stanley Corngold, 171; "The Burrow," in *Konundrum: Selected Prose of Franz Kafka*, trans. Peter Wortsman (Archipelago Books, 2016), 346–347.
- 14
Kafka, "The Burrow," 336. He sums up his life in the neighboring hole: "I creep into my hole, close it after me, wait patiently, keep vigil for long or short spells, and at various hours of the day, then fling off the moss, issue from my hole, and summarize my observations."
- 15
Søren Kierkegaard, *The Journals of Kierkegaard*, ed. and trans. Alexander Dru (Harper and Brothers, 1959), 98.
- 16
Reiner Stach, *Kafka: The Years of Insight*, trans. Shelley Frisch (Princeton University Press, 2014), 22.
- 17
Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, ed. and trans. Alastair Hannay (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 260.
- 18
Kafka, "Burrow," 346.
- 19
Kafka, "Burrow," 346. Emphasis added.
- 20
Kafka, "The Burrow," 343.
- 21
Kafka, "The Burrow," 348–349.
- 22
Kafka, "The Burrow," 357.
- 23
Kafka, "The Burrow," 343.
- 24
Kafka, "The Burrow," 347.
- 25
Kafka, "The Burrow," 352.
- 26
Kafka, "The Burrow," 339.
- 27
Kafka, "The Burrow," 353.
- 28
Kafka, "The Burrow," 353.
- 29
Kafka, "The Burrow," 351. A study of Kafka's noise complaints, on par with, if not exceeding Proust's, would be a worthwhile endeavor in its own right. To give a characteristic sample: "How I longed for silence yesterday – complete, impenetrable silence! Do you think I shall ever achieve it as long as I have ears to hear with and a head producing within itself a profusion of the inevitable clamor of life? Silence, I believe, avoids me, as water on the beach avoids stranded fish." Franz Kafka, *Letters to Felice*, ed. Erich Heller and Jürgen Born, trans. James Stern and Elisabeth Duckworth (Schocken, 1973), 496; postcard dated September 8, 1916.
- 30
See Mladen Dolar, "The Burrow of Sound," *differences* 22, no. 2–3 (2011).
- 31
Kafka, "The Burrow," 357.
- 32
Kafka, "The Burrow," 338.
- 33
Kafka, "The Burrow," 350–351.
- 34
Kafka, "The Burrow," 356.
- 35
Kafka, "The Burrow," 356.
- 36
This topological reversal is what interested Jacques Lacan in "The Burrow"; in his words, "man is a burrow animal." See Lacan, *Seminar IX L'identification* (unpublished), session from March 21, 1962. Mladen Dolar comments on this in *A Voice and Nothing More* (MIT Press, 2006), 166–167.

37
Kafka, "The Burrow," 338.

38
Kafka, "The Burrow," 338.

39
Kafka, "The Burrow," 359.

40
Lorenzo Chiesa made this point in his "The Trojan Castle: Lacan and Kafka on Knowledge, Enjoyment, and the Big Other," *Crisis and Critique* 6, no. 1 (April 2019), 34–35.

41
Kafka, "The Burrow," 358.

42
Kafka, "The Burrow," 337.

43
Franz Kafka, *The Blue Octavo Notebooks*, ed. Max Brod, trans. Ernst Kaiser and Eithne Wilkins (Exact Change, 1991), 22.

44
See Peter Szendy, *All Ears: The Aesthetics of Espionage*, trans. Roland Végső (Fordham University Press, 2017), 55.

45
See Max Brod, "Nachtworte des Herausgebers," in Franz Kafka, *Beschreibung eines Kampfes: Novellen, Skizzen, Aphorismen aus dem Nachlass* (S. Fischer Verlag, 1980), 259.

46
Richard T. Gray, Ruth V. Gross, Rolf J. Goebel, and Clayton Koelb, *A Franz Kafka Encyclopedia* (Greenwood Press, 2005), 27.

47
Clarice Lispector, *The Passion According to G.H.*, trans. Idra Novey (Penguin, 2012), 183.

48
Lispector, *The Passion According to G.H.*, 186.

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