

Michele Cometa

## The Anxious Storyteller

Narrative as Unburdening

A Reading of Kafka's *The Burrow*

Anxiety is the price tag on human freedom

Louis Menand

### 0. Premessa

What I wish to offer today is one of the possible interpretations of a single story by Franz Kafka, *Der Bau*, usually translated *The Burrow*.

Therefore I will offer not a general discussion of the anthropology of anxiety as introduced in my book on the evolutionary and cognitive meaning of narrative *Why Stories Help us to live* but a “simple”, basic, **Darwinian reading** of *The Burrow*.

*The Burrow* is the story of a mole-like, or badger-like animal, or **human-animal**, who builds his/her/its burrow to defend, to protect him/her/itself against real and hypothetical enemies, but at the end realizes, that all efforts are in vain... an enemy is to hear, somewhere in the burrow, a whistling, a sound, which destroys all his/her/its **certainties**. As one can see there are many Darwinian ingredients in this story: an animal with human intellectual skills and emotions, a shelter, an environment, the fear of being-eaten, the daily struggle for existence and survival etc...

Before introducing Kafka's text, I will make some statements, which I ask you to accept without further elaboration.

Aware of the enormous complexity of Kafka's spiritual testament, and also aware that we cannot reduce any of Kafka's texts to the illustration of a thesis, I will nevertheless try to read *The Burrow* from the perspective of a Darwinian approach to anxiety, studying the adaptive and maladaptive aspects of this emotion. We will find that Kafka seems to be well aware of these mechanisms – the significance of Darwin and his German successors (Haeckel, Bölsche) for Kafka's work is now a critically established fact – and Kafka's work can be considered a “phenomenology of anxiety” or, as

has been said, a “**poetology of anxiety**,” a kind of **literary DSM** that intercepts many of the psychological mechanisms of anxiety and related emotions as fear, worry, panic, distress etc.

### 1. *Mängelwesen*

**First statement:** *Helplessness and Uncertainty* characterise *Homo Sapiens'* evolution. Therefore anxiety, fear, worry and distress are hallmarks of its condition. They are outcomes of its instinctual inadequacy both on a phylogenetic level (upright position, obstetrical dilemma, etc.), and on an ontogenetic level (altriciality, neoteny etc.).

This is why (German) philosophical anthropology, from Johann Gottfried Herder to Arnold Gehlen, from Helmut Plessner to Hans Blumenberg and Odo Marquard, has described humans as “defective beings” (***Mängelwesen***) and has focused on two types of behaviour that allow them to cope with these “affective states” (Freud: *Affektzustand*): **compensation** (*Kompensation*) and **unburdening** or *relief* (*Entlastung*).

**Second statement:** It is not difficult to read the philosophical concepts of *compensation* and *unburdening* through the lens of evolutionary theory. Odo Marquard actually founded his philosophy of the “defective being” on evolutionary arguments:

Man... is not the undisputed champion... but the **repeater** of evolution, the **retarded** living being who has not succeeded yet, but must hold on fast with his **inadequate physical condition**, his known **mortality**, his pain at being “homo sapiens” and the neverending return of the dissimilar, of history (Marquard, 2000).

*Compensation* and *unburdening* are two form of adaptation which consist primarily of the capacity to cope with human biological lacks by resorting to various techniques, cultural and cognitive strategies. Philosophical anthropology and, today, cognitive neurosciences confirm that *Homo Sapiens* compensate its instinctual lacks through tool-making, language and cultural endeavours.

However, at the same time, the rapid development of technology and the parallel complexification of cultural and social life curtail a whole series of instinctive responses, and accumulating exponentially, frustrate the endeavours humans undertake to compensate their impotence.

To put it briefly: techniques, tools and language do not protect *Homo Sapiens* from the most burdensome collateral effects of the rapid growth of consciousness: **the awareness of future and of**

**the human finiteness.** Therefore a *distance* has to be taken from the world of the new and unexpected, and conversely, totality and the absolute must be kept at a safety distance, suspending, delaying and weakening the pressures of reality.

It is the famous thesis of the **unburdening** (*Entlastung*) that constitutes the underlying thread in twentieth-century philosophical anthropology.

In this strategy of unburdening the role of a particular technique, **art**, is central, and especially the role of **narrative** strategies that make the world more **controllable**, if not merely because they “simplify” the answers that humans give to it, unburdening themselves from an excessively challenging and exhausting confrontation with reality.

As Edward O. Wilson has written – note well, not a philosopher but the father of sociobiology! – the repetitive and ritualising procedures of art (and narrative) *abbreviate* such confrontation and, at the same time, they *banish* it at a safe distance (E. O. Wilson, *Consilience*, 1999).

For Odo Marquard philosophy of history, novel and *Geisteswissenschaften* as such are strategies, which provide humans with “unburdenings”:

Men cannot bear the absolute, like reality or God: they have to maintain **distance** from it; and their vital task (culture) is the establishment of this distance, which at the same time is always the weakening of unity with multiplicity, with the unburdening of that absolute which, like reality and God, we cannot bear in its indivisible power and we withstand only by distancing it with a plurality of forms of relationships (Marquard, 2000).

*Helplessness or impotence* characterise *Homo Sapiens* as a “*natural*”, physical and biological (including psychological) being. It is this instinctual inferiority or deliberate reduction of drives that has caused *Homo Sapiens* to produce tools that implement its physical abilities and to search for further opportunities to compensate for its unfitness through cooperation with conspecifics.

To compensate for their deficits humans have resorted to a whole series of “actions” and strategies of “control” that have increasingly and rapidly honed their capacity to create objects, tools, rituals, narratives and artworks (M. Cometa, *Perchè le storie ci aiutano a vivere. La letteratura necessaria*, 2017; M. Cometa, *Letteratura e darwinismo. Introduzione alle biopoetica*, 2018).

*Uncertainty*, on the other hand, characterises *Homo Sapiens* as “*historical*” being.

Man is the only animal aware of his finiteness, and therefore he is constantly suspended between past and future, both harbingers of uncertainty and existential instability. All these experiences produce **anxiety** and this anxiety must be immediately scaled down, so as not to transform it from an eminently adaptive phenomenon to one which disables or even becomes fatal:

Anxiety is a response to uncertainty as regards either the outcome of events, or the action to be taken, or one's power to foresee or to act upon reality, or one's ability to bear injury (M. Miceli, C. Castelfranchi, *Expectancy and Emotion*, 2015)

As Andrew Newberg, Eugene d'Aquili and Vince Rause have written in a famous study on the biological need for religion and myth, **narrative** is the most effective tool to coping with uncertainty:

This process is automatic: **uncertainty** causes anxiety, and anxiety must be resolved. Sometimes resolutions are obvious and causes are easy to spot. When they are not, the cognitive imperative compels us to find plausible resolutions **in the form of a story**... These stories are especially important when the mind confronts our existential fears. We suffer. We die. We feel small and vulnerable in a dangerous and confusing world. There is no simple way to resolve these enormous uncertainties. In such situations, the explanatory stories that the mind creates take the shape of a religious myth (Newberg, d'Aquili, Rause, 2002).

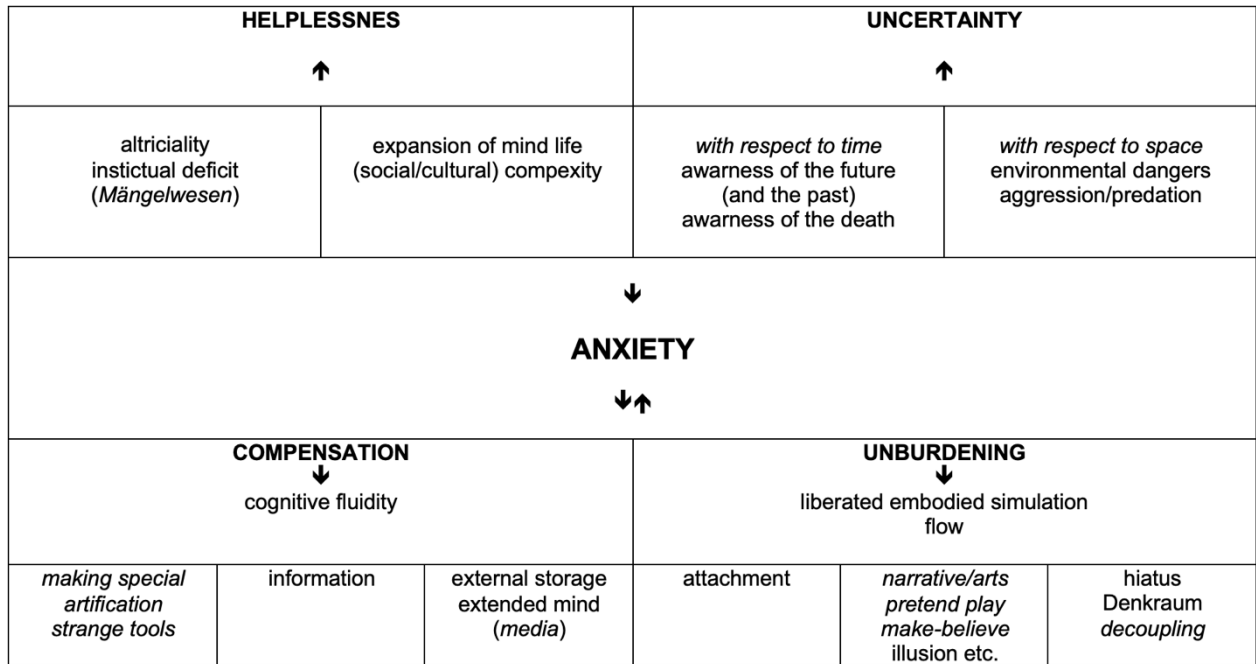
To have relief from anxiety also, technical strategies (tools, devices) are not sufficient. It is necessary to introduce a series of psychological *unburdenings* that simply *distance* reality and grant humans a truce in the daily struggle for survival.

Narratives and the arts supply the first sources of relief.

Narrative works to *coping* with anxiety and to *unburdening* us, albeit temporarily, from a direct confrontation with a reality that is supposed to be the cause of this anxiety.

It is worth noting that the relationship between anxiety and narrative is ambiguous. Narrative constitutes a sort of "homeopathic" remedy for anxiety, in that it is a cure through the use of the similar (*similia similibus curantur*). So narrative not only **defeats** anxiety but in some way it **produces** it – as I will try to illustrate through my interpretation of Kafka's story *The Burrow* (1924) – "**inoculating**" anxiety or "**exposing**" us to anxiety in order to **reduce** it, giving us the feeling of being able to **control** it.

What I have outlined in my book can be summarized, without further elaboration, in the following diagram:



## 2. The Concept of Anxiety

What has already been argued by philosophical anthropology is presented today, appropriately updated and supported by experimental evidence, in modern research on anxiety. And for a range of reasons that are not difficult to relate back to the philosophical classics on anxiety, tracing an itinerary that starts around the middle of the nineteenth century, and which, via psychology and psychoanalysis, comes to the most recent achievements of modern cognitive neuroscience.

In short: a single common thread links together the first reflections on *Angest* (Søren **Kierkegaard**) with Sigmund **Freud's** studies on anxiety and neurosis or with Jacques **Lacan's** *angoisse*; Paul **Tillich's** theology of anxiety with Carl Friedrich von **Weizsäcker's** narrative approach to cope with anxiety; Martin **Heidegger's** anxious condition of "being-in-the-world" with **Blumenberg's** «Entlastung vom Absoluten».

I list here only some definition of anxiety between philosophi and psychology which can be useful to follow Kafka's concept of anxiety.

Darwin considered anxiety as eminently human:

Our early progenitors, when suffering from grief or anxiety, would not have made their eyebrows oblique, or have drawn down the corners of their mouth, until they had acquired the habit of endeavouring to restrain their screams. The expression, therefore, of grief and anxiety is eminently human (Ch. Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotion in Man and Animals*, 1872)

And twenty years before Kierkegaard considered human freedom the cause of anxiety:

The concept of anxiety is hardly ever seen treated in psychology, so I must point out that it differs altogether from fear and similar concepts that refer to something definite; whereas anxiety is freedom's actuality as the possibility of possibility. For this reason anxiety will not be found in the beast (S. Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, 1855).

It is no coincidence that Heidegger radicalized this idea by positing anxiety as the specifically human:

That about which one has Angst is being-in-the-world as such. How is what *Angst* is anxious about phenomenally differentiated from what *fear* is afraid of? What *Angst* is about is not an innerworldly being... What *Angst* is about is completely indefinite. ...Nothing of that which is at hand and objectively present within the world, functions as what *Angst* is anxious about (M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 1927).

But having posited this link between anxiety and human freedom it fell to psychology to understand the biological motivations of anxiety and especially to distinguish between the innate responses of fear and the **not-only-innate** responses of anxiety. In the last version of the DSM we read this definition:

*Fear* is the emotional response to real or perceived imminent threat, whereas *anxiety* is anticipation of future threat. Obviously, these two states overlap, but they also differ, with fear more often associated with surges of autonomic arousal necessary for fight or flight, thoughts of immediate danger, and escape behaviors, and anxiety more often associated with muscle tension and vigilance in preparation for future danger and cautious or avoidant behaviors (DSM V, 2013).

Again, it is no coincidence that Hans Blumenberg sees the whole history of culture as the attempt to transform anxiety into fear, the unknown into the known, the unpredictable into the predictable. And this happens through the narrative:

Anxiety must again and again be rationalized into fear, both in the history of mankind and in that of the individual. This occurs primarily, not through experience and knowledge, but rather through devices like that of the substitution of the familiar for the unfamiliar, of explanations for the inexplicable, of names for the unnameable... What has become identifiable by means of a name is raised out of its unfamiliarity by means of metaphor and is made accessible, in terms of its significance, by telling stories (H. Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*, 1979).

In order to understand the relationship between anxiety and narrative, we have to consider what a theory of anxiety might be in the age of neurosciences, and, generally speaking, what can distinguish this “emotion” from its “parents” such as *fear, worry, distress, displeasure* etc. Obviously, it is not just a matter of lexical choice, although this choice is important to understand and define the transcultural meaning of anxiety and, eventually, the cultural differences among anxieties.

The linguist Anna Wierzbicka offers us a verbal description of the phenomenon that is worth bearing in mind.

Distinguishing between fear, worry, panic, horror etc. Wierzbicka states the following conceptual grid for anxiety:

*Anxiety* (X felt anxiety)

- (a) X felt something because X thought something
- (b) sometimes a person thinks for some time:
- (c) “I don't know what will happen
- (d) maybe something bad will happen to me
- (e) I don't want this to happen
- (f) I want to do something because of this if I can
- (g) I can't do anything now”
- (h) when this person thinks this, this person feels something bad
- (i) X felt something like this
- (j) because X thought something like this (Wierzbicka, *Emotion Across Languages and Cultures*, 1999).

What counts in this sequence is that anxiety is something **personal** because it represents the **awareness** that something is about to happen **just to us**, unlike fear, which we can also feel about events that do not involve us directly.

The other fundamental characteristic of anxiety lies in the awareness that “I” absolutely **want to do something**, even though I do not know whether I will manage to do it. This is why anxiety is considered a *state*. It is described as such in the conceptual history that Anna Wierzbicka dedicates to the German concept of *Angst*, a *state*, indeed an *existential* condition, since it confronts us with the unknown and the uncertain.

Therefore anxiety in Martin Heidegger, Paul Tillich or Jean-Paul Sartre’s view is the condition of “being-in-the-world”; something that is not referred to an object, as Freud had already brilliantly clarified. More precisely, the only certain *object* of anxiety is *uncertainty*, or *anxiety itself*.

Combining the semantic analysis of the word “anxiety” with Heidegger’s philosophy, the linguist Anna Wierzbicka in her book *Emotion Across Languages and Cultures* emphasises:

To be *sicher* in that characteristically German sense does not mean to be immune from dangers but rather to be, so to speak, free from *Angst*; it implies not only that one is safe, but also that one can be *certain* of being safe. To put it differently, *Sicherheit* is an opposite of both danger and doubt: it suggests a deeply satisfying sense of being free from danger and doubt at the same time (Wierzbicka, *Emotion Across Languages and Cultures*, 1999).

It would not be difficult to translate these ideas in evolutionary terms.

Fiction is a tool that allows humans to **govern** anxiety and, through poetic devices, that have always been present in literature (*catharsis, suspense, Furcht und Mitleid*), allows us **to turn anxiety into fear**, to control the unpredictable through the hypostasis of something predictable.

Heidegger himself had actually done so, albeit cryptically, when he used the German term ***Geborgenheit*** (to be sheltered in a refuge) as a synonym of “safety”. In my talk I will come back to the idea of *Geborgenheit* which is central to understand Kafka’s story.

#### 4. Narrative as compensation

How do humans create forms of **compensation** through narratives and arts?

The anthropologist Ellen Dissanayake starts from a typical consideration of modern philosophical anthropology: «the recognition by humans of their existential helplessness or vulnerability ... resulted in the predisposition to devise cultural beliefs and practices that are commonly called “religion”» (Dissanayake, *Fons et origo: a Darwinian View of Selfobject Theory and the Arts*, 2006). An awareness that is exacerbated in moments of change and growth (hence the compensatory strategies of the “rites of passage”), and in moments of ecological and social stress (compensated by even more complex ceremonies, aimed at recovering, often magically, control over the situation).

When *Homo Sapiens* meets a difficulty against which there is no direct action worth taking (flee, dissimulation, immobility), then it tends to “do something”. Artistic activity (but also play and rituals in a broad sense) helps him to react through the release of anti-stress and pro-social hormones, as demonstrated by the psychobiology of maternal attachment, and the existence of hormones such as oxytocine and vasopressin:

Non-human animals in uncertain or conflicted circumstances frequently engage in “displacement activities”, behaviors whose components are drawn from ordinary bodily movements used in everyday contexts such as grooming (scratching, preening) or locomotion (moving back and forth, pacing). In the new, uncertain context, these ordinary movements become stereotyped – that is, exaggerated, patterned in space and time, and regularized (repeated). Such “ritualized” movements reduce tension in the displaying animal at the same time as they signal its mood and intentions to conspecifics... Humans show displacement, sometimes called “comfort movements”, when they repeatedly tap a foot, wiggle a knee, or wind a strand of hair around a finger. Caged animals pace. I suggest that in uncertain circumstances that did not call for immediate, pragmatic action (that is, were not matters of immediate fight, flee, or freeze responses), our ancestors at some point found that performing simplified or stereotyped, repetitious, exaggerated sounds and movements (already part of the “behavioral reservoir” exhibited in mother-infant interactions and children’s play) felt comforting and ultimately eased tension – particularly when performed in a coordinated fashion among members of a group. The behavioral phenomenon of individuals engaging in highly coordinated actions is widespread in pairs and groups of both humans and animals. Even without deliberate orchestration, individuals tend to “behaviorally match” the actions or postures of others... (Dissanayake, *The deep structure of Pleistocene rock art: the “artification hypothesis”*, 2012).

The cognitive explanation of this feeling of *relief* is given by the fact that in these situations of stress or uncertainty we are allowed to re-acquire a kind of **virtual control over the situation** in which we find ourselves. These are situations in which we entrust ourselves to a coordinated movement such as that of a dance or an artistic activity organised in repetitive *patterns* (*rhyme* in poetry or *rhythm* in a performance) that follow fixed rules. Controlling our physical movement or responding to rhythm is a way to psychologically re-appropriate the capacity to control “something”. Alternatively, as in the case of rites of passage and rituals, uncertainty about the future or possible environmental stress in the present are included in a bigger system which, by virtue of its very cyclicity, guarantees that the unforeseen contingency will be overcome.

This **illusion of control** is the specific purpose of storytelling.

It should be remembered that the first form of **artification** or **making special** goes back to the first strategies a mother adopts to calm the anxiety of the newborn. As we know, the first forms of *bonding* are based on the constant vocal, gestural and musical interaction between mother and infant. Following Dissanayake’s hypothesis the condition of being altricial provides the space for the **co-evolution of anti-anxiety strategies and those of artistic creativity**. There is no reason to believe that this link does not remain throughout the whole human life.

## 5. Narrative as unburdening

However, narrative does not just fulfil only *compensatory* tasks like those derived from the use and efficient transmission of patterned information, from the *making special* developed through mother/infant interaction or from the implementation of memory through *external storage*.

Narrative is the most effective instrument for *unburdening* reality and the overwhelming weight of the absolute.

The classic definition of *unburdening* is that found in the masterpiece of the controversial German anthropologist Arnold Gehlen, *Man. His Nature and Place in the World* (1940):

Man's special biological conditions make it necessary that **he sever his ties to the world** from the immediate present. For this reason, he must experience life on his own, laboriously and actively so that he can avail himself of these experiences by means of highly developed (*hochgezüchteten*) variable skills based on allusions (*Andeutungen*) (A. Gehlen, *Man. His Nature and Place in the World*, 1988).

What are these "allusions" (*Andeutungen*)?

They are the "great symbolic fields of seeing, speaking and representing" (*ibid.*), that is, the various forms of **imagination** that humans transform into narratives and arts.

Man is *liberated* from real motor activity, elaborating concepts that *unburden* him from acting and therefore creating a *space* within his consciousness for other activities, especially *imagination*.

I suggest that an appropriate blend between the tradition of philosophical anthropology from Johann Gottfried Herder to Arnold Gehlen, Helmut Plessner and Hans Blumenberg and the recent neuroscientific interpretation of "embodied simulation", could help us to refine the concept of imagination.

Johann Gottfried Herder, one of the founding fathers of modern philosophical anthropology, stated that «phantasy» (i.e. imagination) was «still by far the least researched and perhaps the least researchable of all spiritual faculties of the human being» (quoted by Gehlen, 1988).

My argument is: the space of imagination – from the point of view of biology and cognitive sciences – can be located starting from the notions of *hiatus* and *unburdening*, which are the core categories of Gehlen's anthropology.

The whole purpose of what Herder defined a "defective being" consists infact in **disjoining** *Homo Sapiens'* actions from his impulses and drives, in creating an «intermediate world of conscious praxis and objective experience, which is conveyed through hands, eyes, sense of touch, and language», in

restraining instincts and producing a space «independent of his own elemental needs and drives» (*ibid.*). In one word, creating a *hiatus*.

The hiatus «opens up an extraordinary possibility of a change in the direction of the drive» (*ibid.*), which is another way to think human freedom and uniqueness: «The hiatus is, to be exact, the vital basis for the phenomenon of the soul (*Geist*)» (*ibid.*).

Without the hiatus neither **memory** nor creative **imagination** could exist.

Memory and imagination are also complementary but different: «In children memory is most vigorous, and imagination is therefore excessively vivid, for imagination is nothing but *extended or compounded memory*» (Vico, *La scienza nuova*, 1968).

Memory alone would be a *burden* if not mobilized by imagination: «when we consider the imagination (*Einbildungskraft*) from the point of view of the future, we call it expectation, planning or active imagination (*aktive Phantasie*) in a narrower sense» (Gehlen, *Man. His Nature and Place in the World*, 1988). Imagination is therefore the most effective instrument for *unburdening* reality and the overwhelming burden of the absolute.

Unfortunately it represents at the same time the space of human uncertainty.

Fiction is the device that allows humans to govern this ambiguity and, through poetic mechanisms that have always been present in literature (*catharsis, suspense, fear* in fairy tales), allows us to turn anxiety into fear, to control the unpredictable through the hypostasis of something predictable.

## 6. Kafka and anxiety

Why anxiety?

First, because we live in the age of anxiety as the American poet Wylan Hugh Auden stated in a wonderful poem of the middle of last century and as Leonard Bernstein has reaffirmed in his Symphony nr. 2 entitled *The Age of Anxiety*.

Already at the beginning of the last century Freud understood that the *riddle* of anxiety would have conditioned the whole psychology and even at the «end» of this story, Vittorio Gallese connected the whole aesthetic experience with anxiety and uncertainty.

That we live in the **age of anxiety** is demonstrated by the flood of books on this subject, especially selfhelp books and recently apps to cope with anxiety, but also by books in diverse disciplines... the wonderful **autopathography** of Scott Stossel, the reactionary approach of Jonathan Haidt's bestsellers that considers social media to be the absolute evil... but also scholarly researches: Casetti's

book on **media fear**, or *Iconoclasm* by David Freedberg are a profound reflection on fears and anxieties of our age... Not to speak of the second version of the popular animation film *Inside out*, whose main character is precisely anxiety...

That Kafka and Kafka's works are **the emblems, the devises of our age of anxiety** is an almost trivial statement, a truism. However, I would like to stress this concept saying that Kafka's work can be considered a **darwinian literary DSM**.

Althought Kafka – who read the Baltic German biologist Jacob von Uexküll – had a critical position with respect to Darwinism, his knowledge of Darwin and his German followers, scholars like Ernst Haeckel or Wilhelm Bölsche, and, of course, Jacob von Uexküll, was profound and went back to his student education.

We can study Kafka's relation to anxiety at least on three levels, three layers, which complement each other:

- 1) a **biographical level**, especially the obsessive discussion of his personal anxiety with Milena Jesenská and other correspondence partner;
- 2) the **literary sources**, such as Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, which is a kind of literary description of anxiety *avant la lettre*;
- 3) and the **philosophical sources**... Kierkegaard, of course, and not only his wellknown *Concept of Anxiety* but the *Seducer's Diary*.

In Kafka's letters and diaries we find many passages that connect Kafka's personal anxiety to figurations that would later find a narrative precipitate in *The Burrow*. In the letters to Milena we read:

I also hear your laughter but I keep digging into your letters, burrowing between your words and your laughter—until I then hear one single word, one word which is, moreover, my very essence: anxiety (F. Kafka, *Letters to Milena*, Meran, June 12, 1920)

So now I have to turn back, again with all my soul, slowly return through the passage I had dug so quickly, and fill it in. That hurts a little, you see, but it can't be all that bad, since I'm able to write about it in such a tedious manner. In the end one always finds new tunnels to burrow, old mole that one is (F. Kafka, *Letters to Milena*, Prague, August 4-5, 1920)

And this self-awareness is always connected with being a Jew:

«After all, you're Jewish and know what it is to be fearful and anxious» (F. Kafka, *Letters to Milena*, Meran, June 2, 1920)

The animal in the burrow could be considered also the symbol of the persecuted Jew, like in the case of the famous *Beilis affaire*, the story of the imprisonment of Mendel Beilis in Kijiv with the charge of having perpetrated a ritual mord of a 13-year-old boy named Andriy Yushchinskyi (the grave of Mendel Beilis is in New York at the Mount Carmel Cemetery in Queens!).

Kafka's anxiety grew of course after the diagnosis of the tuberculosis, as already Walter Benjamin underlined, referring to the fact that Kafka called his coughing **the «animal» in the burrow of his lung**.

But also the literary sources play a role... like the story of Robinson Crusoe that spend a life on the island building his «burrow», his refuge, his shelter, and fearing enemies that do not exist... Defoe's text is a perfect **phenomenology of anxiety** with psychological observations, which challenge even the modern approaches to this disorder:

I was come Home again, while the Apprehensions which had so over-run my Mind were fresh upon me, and my Head was full of Vapours, as above: **Thus Fear of Danger is ten thousand Times more terrifying than Danger it self**, when apparent to the Eyes; and we find the Burthen of Anxiety greater by much, than the Evil which we are anxious about; and which was worse than all this, I had not that Relief in this Trouble from the Resignation I used to practise, that I hop'd to have (D. Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 1719).

Anxiety in Defoe's novel is always connected with **ruminaton** and **overthinking**, also with **imagination**:

I slept none that Night; the farther I was from the Occasion of my Fright, the greater my Apprehensions were, which is something contrary to the Nature of such Things, and especially to the usual Practice of all Creatures in Fear: But I was so embarrass'd with my own frightful Ideas of the Thing, that I form'd nothing but dismal Imaginations to my self, even tho' I was now a great way off of it.

My imagination will not rest... (D. Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 1719)

However, the source of inspiration for the main character in *The burrow* should perhaps be sought in a philosophical source, and in particular in Søren Kierkegaard's *Seducer's Diary*, rather than in the classic work *The Concept of Anxiety*. the idea of a burrow with **a double exit** seems to come from a passage in *Seducer's diary* describing the lover's despair:

I can think of nothing more tormenting than a scheming mind that loses the thread and then directs all its keenness against itself as the conscience awakens and it becomes a matter of rescuing himself from this perplexity. **The many exits from his foxhole are futile**; the instant his troubled soul already thinks it sees daylight filtering in, it turns out to be a new entrance, and thus, like panic-stricken wild game, pursued by despair, **he is continually seeking an exit and continually finding an entrance** through which he goes back into himself (S. Kierkegaard, *The Seducer's Diary*, 1843).

Last but not least: the darwinian sources, in which we can find a focus on the behavior of the mole. Already in Darwin' *The Origin of Species*, we read:

The eyes of moles and of some burrowing rodents are rudimentary in size, and in some cases are quite covered up by skin and fur. This state of the eyes is probably due to gradual reduction from disuse, but aided perhaps by natural selection (Ch. Darwin, *The Origin of the Species*, 1859).

And even Jakob von Uexküll insists on the chasing behavior of the mole:

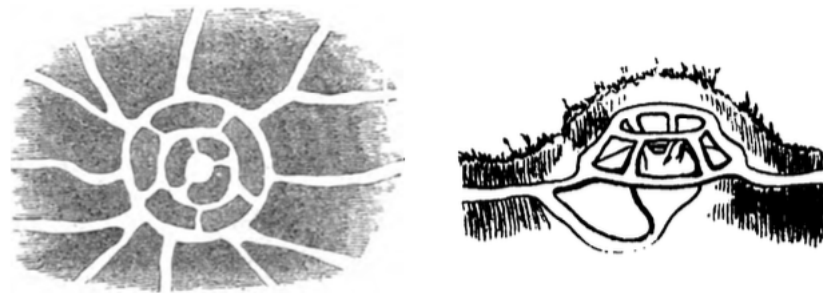
Just behind the worm, however, a mole emerged from the same hole in the ground, and despite being several meters ahead, the former was caught, grabbed and eaten by the latter, right in front of me. Only after it had swallowed its prey did the mole retreat back into its gallery (J. von Uexküll, *Umwelt und Innerwelt der Tiere*, 1909).

A source of inspiration are von Uexküll's essays in *Die neue Rundschau*, a journal that Kafka knew well, where the Baltic biologist elaborates his theory of the **Umwelt**, the natural and specific environment of each animal that determines **its entire perception** of the world as in *The Burrow* or in *The Metamorphosis*. It is no coincidence that today Kafka's criticism focuses on issues central to understanding the Prague writer such as animality, zoopoetics, biopoetics etc.

Kafka always carefully concealed his visual sources, but a comparison with two natural history treatises that Kafka had known since his adolescence – Alfred Brehm's *Tierleben* and Pokorny's *Naturgeschichte des Tierreiches* – is enough to realize that one of the most clear descriptions of the relationship between the burrow and its inhabitant, a sort of staging of the embodiment<sup>1</sup>, is inspired by a representation of mole's burrow in Pokorny's treatise:

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<sup>1</sup> The burrow is an extension of the animal's body: « and the burrow belong so indissolubly together that in spite of all my fears I could make myself quite comfortable out here, and not even need to overcome my repugnance and



Bau des gemeinen Maulwurfs (verkl.).  
Links wagrechter Grundriß, rechts Seitenansicht.

Fig. 2

Its presence in one place can always be recognized by numerous mounds of earth thrown up during the construction of the hunting tunnels. Under one of these, quite large, is its home, consisting of a spherical cave padded with grass, moss etc., a padded cavity, a vessel. From here, numerous branching tubes lead through the often extensive hunting area, which it does not allow anyone else to enter (A. Pokorny, *Naturgeschichte des Tierreiches*, 1904).

I quote the longest description of the central space of the burrow, what is significantly called «the castle keep» (*der Burgplatz*):

One of these favorite plans of mine was to isolate the Castle Keep from its surroundings, that is to say, to restrict the thickness of its walls to about my own height, and leave a free space of about the same width all round the Castle Keep, except for a narrow foundation, which unfortunately would have to be left to bear up the whole. I had always pictured this free space, and not without reason, as the loveliest imaginable haunt. 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 (F. Kafka, *The Burrow*, 1923-1924).

This quote is a bit long – and we could introduce many others in which Kafka paraphrases Brehm's and Pokorny's texts – but it allows us to get an idea of the continuous alternation between **states of**

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open the door; I could be quite content to wait here passively, for nothing can part us for long, and somehow or other I shall quite certainly find myself in my burrow again» (F. Kafka, *The Burrow*, 1923-1924).

**anxiety and the perception of a possible safety**, that feeling of *Geborgenheit* that Martin Heidegger placed at the centre of his reflections on dwelling.

### 7. Fear and anxiety as adaptive emotions

My reading hypothesis is based on the assumption that the text describes the passage (or rather several passages) between forms of fear and anxiety that are eminently **adaptive** to **pathological** and therefore **maladaptive** anxiety despite the implementation of various compensation and unburdening strategies.

You will allow me to use, in order to make the turning points of the narrative intelligible, the simplification offered by Peter Kuper's graphic narrative, *Kafkaesque. Fourteen Stories* (2018), who is forced by the medium itself to reduce the text to a few fundamental scenes. I am aware that this is much more than "a mortification of the work" – to quote Walter Benjamin's *Origin of German Tragic Drama*<sup>2</sup>– because in this way a "mortification" of a text is carried out, which is constructed precisely to make the reader lose all orientation, spatial and temporal, and what's more, a recourse is made to a **visualization** of the narrative that Kafka would have violently rejected.

However, sometimes even these "mortifications" and these "perverse" readings can reveal hidden energies in the text and intercept new issues, precisely by doing violence to the text.

Kafka seems to know that art, in this case architecture, is a way to compensate the lack of defenses of the defective being – our human animal – and to create an *Umwelt*, an environment, which determines the being-in-the world of the animal in von Uexküll view, a place for **survival**. Indeed the first evolutionary need is to build or to find a shelter.

I have completed the construction of my burrow and it seems to be successful... But you do not know me if you think I am afraid, or that I built my burrow simply out of fear (*Feigheit*)... (F. Kafka, *The Burrow*, 1923-1924).

Because this activity produce a pleasure and **doing-something** is the natural antidote against anxiety:

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<sup>2</sup> «Criticism means the mortification of the works. By their very essence these works confirm this more readily than any others. Mortification of the works: not then - as the romantics have it - awakening of the consciousness in living works, but the settlement of knowledge in dead ones. Beauty, which endures, is an object of knowledge» (W. Benjamin, *Origin of German Baroque Drama*, 1928).

All this involves very laborious calculation, and the sheer pleasure of the mind in its own keenness is often the sole reason why one keeps up... (F. Kafka, *The Burrow*, 1923-1924)

The burrow is, at the beginning of the story, a **shelter**, a building that produce the adaptive feeling of *Geborgenheit*, of dwelling, in Heidegger's terms:

When autumn sets in to possess<sup>3</sup> a burrow like mine, and a roof over your head, is great good fortune for any one getting on in years. Every hundred yards I have widened the passages into little round cells; there I can curl myself up in comfort and lie warm. There I sleep the sweet sleep of tranquillity, of satisfied desire, of achieved ambition; for I possess a house ((F. Kafka, *The Burrow*, 1923-1924).

Heidegger's famous essay on *Building, dwelling, thinking* seem to be a parafrase of Kafka's text:

The Old Saxon *wuon*, the Gothic *wunian*, like the old word *bauen* mean to remain, to stay in a place. But the Gothic *wunian* says more distinctly how this remaining is experienced. *Wunian* means: to be at peace, to be brought to peace, to remain in peace. The word for peace, *Friede*, means the free, *das Frye*, and *fry* means: preserved from harm and danger, preserved from something, safeguarded (M. Heidegger, *Building, dwelling, thinking*, 1951).

Moreover the burrow is the space of **creativity**, a place wher to be extemped from the dangers of the world. The animal, we could say, dwells **poetically** the space between imagination and reality:

Poor homeless wanderers in the roads and woods, creeping for warmth into a heap of leaves or a herd of their comrades, delivered to all the perils of heaven and earth! I lie here in a room secured on every side – there are more than fifty such rooms in my burrow – and pass as much of my time as I choose between dozing and unconscious sleep (F. Kafka, *The Burrow*, 1923-1924).

The typical unburdening of the sublime, following Kant.

And last but not least the place where **collecting, rythms, pattern** and **rituals** and **order** give the creature a relief and the illusion of control:

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<sup>3</sup> Even the possibility of being eaten by another animal becomes in the den more bearable, that death would make sense in nature's plan: «Yet the burrow is not a mere hole for taking refuge in. When I stand in the Castle Keep surrounded by my piled-up stores, surveying the ten passages which begin there, raised and sunken passages, vertical and rounded passages, wide and narrow passages, as the general plan dictates, and all alike still and empty, ready by their various routes to conduct me to all the other rooms, which are also still and empty – then all thought of mere safety is far from my mind, then I know that here is my castle, which I have wrested from the refractory soil with tooth and claw, with pounding and hammering blows, my castle which can never belong to anyone else, and is so essentially mine **that I can calmly accept in it even my enemy's mortal stroke at the final hour, for my blood will ebb away here in my own soil and not be lost**» (F. Kafka, *The Burrow*, 1923-1924).

In the Castle Keep I assemble my stores; everything over and above my daily wants that I capture inside the burrow, and everything I bring back with me from my hunting expeditions outside, I pile up here. The place is so spacious that food for half a year scarcely fills it. Consequently I can divide up my stores, walk about among them, play with them, enjoy their plenty and their various smells, and reckon up exactly how much they represent. That done, I can always arrange accordingly, and make my calculations and hunting plans for the future, taking into account the season of the year (F. Kafka, *The Burrow*, 1923-1924).

Twenty years later Martin Heidegger connected *legein*, *logos*, *lesen*, dwelling, gathering and *Geborgenheit* in his interpretation of Heraclitus, which can be read as a poetical paraphrase and at the same time a philosophical interpretation of Kafka's short story:

In order to find the foothold for an answer, we need to reflect on what actually lies in *legein* as laying. To lay means to bring to lie. Thus, to lay is at the same time to place one thing beside another, to lay them together. **To lay is to gather [*lesen*].** The *lesen* better known to us, namely, the *reading* of something written, remains but one sort of gathering, in the sense of bringing-together-into-lying-before, although it is indeed the predominant sort. The gleaning at harvest time gathers fruit from the soil. The gathering of the vintage involves picking grapes from the vine. Picking and gleaning are followed by the bringing together of the fruit. So long as we persist in the usual appearances we are inclined to take this bringing together as the gathering itself or even its termination. **But gatherings more than mere amassing. To gathering belongs a collecting which brings under shelter. Accommodation governs the sheltering; accommodation is in turn governed by safekeeping. That "something extra" which makes gathering more than a jumbling together that snatches things up is not something only added afterward.** Even less is it the conclusion of the gathering, coming last. The safekeeping that brings something in has already determined the first steps of the gathering and arranged everything that follows. If we are blind to everything but the sequence of steps, then the collecting follows the picking and gleaning, the bringing under shelter follows the collecting, until finally everything is accommodated in bins and storage rooms... The sheltering [*Bergen*] comes first in the essential formation of the vintage (M. Heidegger, *Logos (Heraclitus, Fragment B 50, 1951)*, .

However imagination and creativity, id est the plasticity of human brain and mind, have also their dark side, because human ability to foresee the future, to project ourselves into the future could produce anxiety. It is no coincidence that the animal continues to improve its defenses, building and building again the burrow and even going out from time to time in order of experiencing anxiety, which is a way to reduce its aggressiveness.

A contained exposure to anxiety, even in the form of narratives – the legends about the enemies – is a way of coping with anxiety:

But then I find myself beneath the mossy covering, which has been left untouched for so long – for I stay for long spells in my house—that it has grown fast to the soil round it, and now only a little push with my head is needed and I am in the upper world. For a long time I do not dare to make that little movement, and if it were not that I would have to traverse the labyrinth once more, I would certainly leave the matter for the time being and turn back again. Just think. Your house is protected and self-sufficient. You live in peace, warm, well-nourished, master, sole master of all your manifold passages and rooms, and all this you are prepared, it appears, not merely to give up, but actually to abandon; you nurse the confident hope, certainly, that you will regain it; yet is it not a dangerous, a far too dangerous stake that you are playing for? Can there be any reasonable grounds for such a step? No, for such acts as these there can be no reasonable grounds. But all the same I then cautiously raise the trap-door and slip outside, let it softly fall back again, and fly as fast as I can from the treacherous spot (F. Kafka, *The Burrow*, 1923-1924).

Experiencing anxiety is a way to appreciate the advantage of being-sheltered, and a particular form of **pleasure**: to be aware of this advantage from the vantage point of the outside, of a **simulation**:

I seek out a good hiding-place and keep watch on the entrance of my house – this time from outside – for whole days and nights. Call it foolish if you like; it gives me **infinite pleasure** and **reassures** me. 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. I am privileged, as it were, not only to dream about the spectres of the night in all the helplessness and blind trust of sleep, but also at the same time to confront them in actuality with the calm judgment of the fully awake. And strangely enough I discover that my situation is not so bad as I had often thought, and will probably think again when I return to my house (F. Kafka, *The Burrow*, 1923-1924).

it is a simulation, through a kind of decoupling, an experience very similar to that of someone contemplating a work of art and being transported into it. It is the experience of the movie theater in which we are living a dream -- as the ancient theorists of dream screen (Eberwein) used to say -- but we are awake. From this position the animal can see its “enemies”:

Here enemies are numerous and their allies and accomplices still more numerous, but they fight one another, and while thus employed rush past my burrow without noticing it. In all my time I have never seen any one investigating the actual door of my house, which is fortunate both for me and for him, for I would certainly have launched myself at his throat, forgetting everything else in my anxiety for the burrow (F. Kafka, *The Burrow*, 1923-1924).

“These excursions of mine are truly indispensable,” the animal thinks, as any unburdening.

Looking at the entrance of the burrow from this outside position, «passing... life watching the entrance» gives not only a pleasure (an aesthetic pleasure), «half-experimenting» fear in order to control it, but is a position reminiscent of the **looking at and dwelling at the threshold**, as in the apologue *Vor dem Gesetz (Before the Law)*.

Even a controlled overthinking or rumination can be a way to cope with anxiety. Gazing at the two entrances to the burrow, as in Kierkegaard's metaphor of the foxhole, the animal finds his/its/her peace:

I lose myself in a maze of technical speculations, I begin once more to dream my dream of a completely perfect burrow, and that somewhat calms me; with closed eyes I behold with delight perfect or almost perfect structural devices for enabling me to slip out and in unobserved. While I lie there thinking such things I admire these devices very greatly, but only as technical achievements, not as real advantages, for this freedom to slip out and in at will, what does it amount to? It is the mark of a restless nature, of inner uncertainty, disreputable desires, evil propensities that seem still worse when one thinks of the burrow, which is there at one's hand and can flood one with peace if one only remains quite open and receptive to it... Now the truth of the matter – and one has no eye for that in times of great peril, and only by a great effort even in times when danger is threatening – is that in reality the burrow does provide a considerable degree of security, but by no means enough, for is one ever free from anxieties inside it? These anxieties are different from ordinary ones, prouder, richer in content, often long repressed, but in their destructive effects they are perhaps much the same as the anxieties that existence in the outer world gives rise to (F. Kafka, *The Burrow*, 1923-1924).

A close-reading of this phenomenology of anxiety would need much more time than the time accorded me for this conference. So I move right on to comment on the turning point in the story when the experience of adaptive fear and contained anxiety become pathological (as always in Kafka's short stories there are no definite turning points, because Kafka exasperates every situation by contradicting himself, denying what was stated a moment before etc., so that the reader loses all orientation, with obvious growth of the reader's anxiety)

Suddenly an «almost unaudible whistling noise» is heard in the burrow, a sound which is perhaps «audible only to the ear of the householder», again a reference to *Before the law*, but also a reference to the tuberculosis bacterium which resonates inside Kafka's lung.

Uncertainty takes over, overthinking and rumination **paralyze** the animal, who cannot find any explication, and begins to hypothesize a neverending series of explications. I list a few, but no list can return the semantic complexity of these pages of pure anxiety:

The nature of the noise, the piping or whistling, gives me much food for thought... One could play with hypotheses of course... (F. Kafka, *The Burrow*, 1923-1924)

1st hypothesis	Current of air, ventilation
2nd hypothesis	Small fry, little creatures
3rd hypothesis	Two noises
4th hypothesis	Unknown animal
5th hypothesis	Whole swarm, huge swarm of little creatures
6th hypothesis	Swarm of unknown creatures
7th hypothesis	Tiny creature, almost invisible
8th hypothesis	Water Burst
9th hypothesis	A single great one, the indraw of his breath

The whistling is perhaps in the burrow, or in the animal's mind or body.

The animal can't find any explication, any casual nexus between the whistling and the creatures in the burrow, any interpretation. Not only is the immediate future filled with uncertainty, even the **past** – the history of the construction of the burrow – is undermined by a series of recriminations... "if only I had"... Uncertainty is as much about the future as it is about the past.

The animal remembers that it may have heard a similar sound when he was young but felt more curiosity than fear, and this probably allowed the "enemy" to grow silently by his/it/her side. And now it is possible to imagine **that it is not the enemy who is in the animal's burrow but the animal who is in the other's burrow**: «Perhaps I am in somebody else's burrow» (F. Kafka, *The Burrow*, 1923-1924). Thus he realizes he has not seriously considered the risk and instead considered fear and anxiety the space for mere mental experiments:

Not the slightest attempt have I made to carry out such a plan, nothing at all has been done in this direction, I have been as thoughtless as a child, I have passed my manhood's-years in childish games, I have done nothing but play even with the thought of danger, I have shirked really taking thought for actual danger. And there has been no lack of warning (F. Kafka, *The Burrow*, 1923-1924).

The only way for coping with this pathological anxiety could be to-do-something, as we know, to regain through the construction of new tunnels and spaces that **illusion of control** that had always characterized the animal's behavior, but by now it is too late, the animal no longer knows what he/she/it wants:

The thing to do, really to do now, would be to go carefully over the burrow and consider every possible means of defending it, work out a plan of defense and a corresponding plan of construction, and then start on the work at once with the vigor of youth. That is the work that would really be needed, for which, I need not say, it is now far too late in the day; yet that is what would really be needed, and not the digging of a grand experimental trench, whose only real result would be to deliver me hand and foot to the search for danger, out of the foolish fear that it will not arrive quickly enough of itself... I hurry on, I do not know what I want (F. Kafka, *The Burrow*, 1923-1924).

At the end, even a **deadly surprise** – to be eaten by the enemy – would be better than this uncertainty, even **the end** would be better than this never-ending waiting and thinking.

As Maria Miceli and Cristiano Castelfranchi have written in their book *Expectancy and Emotion*, on anticipation-based emotions like anxiety or hope, «hopelessness may be “embraced” as a way to cope with anxiety – an active reduction of uncertainty through negative certainty... when uncertainty becomes (subjectively) unbearable, some people may “prefer” to give up any positive prospect and associated hope, and deal with negative certainty» (M. Miceli, C. Castelfranchi, *Expectancy and Emotion*, 2015). This is exactly what the animal hopes: an encounter with the enemy which «will bring him either peace or despair». It is aware of course that the struggle for existence admits no exception:

For the rest I try to unriddle the beast's plans. Is it on its wanderings, or is it working on its own burrow? If it is on its wanderings then perhaps an understanding with it might be possible. If it should really break through to the burrow I shall give it some of my store and it will go on its way again. It will go its way again, a fine story! Lying on my heap of earth I can naturally dream of all sorts of things, even of an understanding with the beast, though I know well enough that no such thing can happen, and that at the instant when we see each other, more, at the moment when we merely guess at each other's presence, we shall both blindly bare our claws and teeth, neither of us a second before or after the other, both of us filled with a new and different hunger, even if we should already be gorged to bursting (F. Kafka, *The Burrow*, 1923-1924).

Kafka's story has significantly no end... And it really doesn't make sense to assume a corruption of the manuscript.

The last word of the story, Kafka's last words are: «Aber alles blieb unverändert, das», «But all remained unchanged, the...» (F. Kafka, *The Burrow*, 1923-1924).

Anxiety is this condition of a neverending, endless repetition of the same.

I apologize for reducing this very complex text to a few basic scenes. We have certainly lost many of the meanings of the burrow: the burrow as **panopticon**, the burrow as **womb**, the burrow as **thoughtform**, the burrow as **body** (Kafka's body), the burrow as **war trench**... we have lost even the possibility to see anxiety itself from other points of view, but above all, we have certainly lost that entanglement of contradictions, repetitions, pauses and slowdowns to which Kafka's rhetoric exposes the readers, feeding their anxiety.

But this exposure is exactly what matters most, because the goal of Kafka's prose lies **not** in the description or illustration of an emotion, in this case of anxiety – as might have appeared from these scattered notes – but in the narrative elicitation of the feeling of anxiety. Somehow we readers are also placed in the position of the animal in the burrow.

Beyond the anxiogenic and certainly desperate ending, this story may lead to a form of anxiety **containment**, to the **inoculation** of a reduced form of the disease – an idea well present to the classics of German literature such as Schiller or Goethe, as Johannes Türk and Cornelia Zumbusch have shown – for the purposes of **immunization**. This therapeutic, cathartic use of narratives constitutes another aspect of Kafka's timeless appeal.