

*This article responds to an often dualistic debate in Kafka studies: is escape from his texts possible or impossible? Scholars have not fully considered how comparing Houdini's escape art with Kafka's 'In the Penal Colony' may offer a more nuanced approach. In response, this article offers three interpretations that read the escape artist's body in the story's imagery and form. The first two interpretations trace the existing debate on the (im)possibility of escaping Kafka's work. The final interpretation hopefully offers a productive perspective on this disagreement: that the failure to escape within and beyond Kafka's text is its very art.*

**Keywords:** Harry Houdini, Franz Kafka, escape art.

### **The Failed-Escape Artist: Kafka, Houdini and ‘In the Penal Colony’.**

In 1919, Franz Kafka addressed a letter to his father that embodies his “attempt at escape” from him (27 ‘Letter’). As a writer born into the German-speaking Jewish minority of Prague in 1883, Kafka contrasted with his Yiddish and Czech-speaking father (23). And yet this desire to escape the father registers a wider desire to escape the past at the turn of the century, especially for European Jews considering emigration. Broadly, this article explores how this contemporary attempt at escape is *embodied* in Kafka’s work.

Since Kafka’s letter, some of the most famous Kafka scholars have treated escape as an interpretive approach to his work: to find something *beyond* his texts. For example, Max Brod’s biography of Kafka [1937] argues that he escaped his father through religion (24). Similarly, Gershom Scholem identifies Kafka’s desire to escape into religion (specifically, Kabbalah) (*Gershom* n.p.). In a 1972 lecture, Phillip Roth fantasises about Kafka’s potential escapes abroad had he lived longer (281). In *Kafka* [1975], Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari identify a “line of escape” in his language (13). Whilst these approaches identify different routes, they all desire to find a ‘way out’ of Kafka’s work.

However, other scholars have concluded that escape is a failed approach to interpreting Kafka. David Foster Wallace [1998] tests Kafka’s humour as a way out of his stories, only to be left dissatisfied with this analysis (26-67). This ambivalence is partly explained by the fact that many Kafka scholars are sceptical of historical progress. Walter Benjamin’s essays on Kafka [1934, 1938], George Bataille’s *Literature and Evil* [1957], Theodor Adorno’s ‘Notes to Kafka’ [1967] and Aglaia Kiarina Kordela’s *Kafka’s Cages* [2011] problematise the idea of escaping the past in the wake of 20<sup>th</sup> century fascism. Consequently, these critics challenge the idea that one can simply escape out of Kafka’s texts.

But Kafka scholars have not fully considered how this debate between escape and its

failure may be informed by referencing the body of Harry Houdini,<sup>1</sup> the most famous escape artist in Kafka's lifetime and fellow European, secular Jew. Aside from countless Houdini biographies,<sup>2</sup> John F. Kasson's, Adam Phillips' and Matthew Solomon's academic studies agree that Houdini's escape artistry reflected a contemporary desire to escape the past *through* his body. Therefore, I propose to read Kafka and his (failed) escapes through recourse to Houdini's body. This will problematise Houdini scholars' more positive approach towards escape as a modern act that wrests itself from the past. Houdini scholars will then inform the more sceptical Kafka scholars to adapt the *failed* escape into a productive interpretation: that the failure to escape reflected in the story's image and form represents a wider contextual moment.

This article proposes that Kafka is a failed-escape artist because 'In the Penal Colony' *aestheticises* a contemporary inability to escape from the past through the human/textual body.

To address this, I will make three different close readings of 'In the Penal Colony' in relation to Houdini. This methodology was chosen to show that the debate on escape (and its impossibility) in Kafka scholarship has been considered in the first two readings, whilst offering a middle road in the third. This research is not an account of the extensive readings of 'In the Penal Colony'<sup>3</sup> but consolidates the image of Houdini's escape with the criticism on Kafka and escape. The structure is as follows:

1. In the first reading, I will explore how 'In the Penal Colony' can be read as a story about the escape artist in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. First, I will establish the historical implications of

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<sup>1</sup> One of the few studies to link them is Alessandro Fambrini's 'Tentativi di Evasione. Kafka e Houdini' [2003]. His paper is not available in English.

<sup>2</sup> I will refer to Walter Gibson [1976], Ruth Brandon [1993] and Kenneth Silverman [1997].

<sup>3</sup> For an account of 'In the Penal Colony' interpretations, please see Richard T. Gray's 'Disjunctive Signs "In Der Stafkolonie"' (213-217).

the vaudevillian escape in Kafka's stories and Houdini's tricks. I will then analyse how the image of the body in the machine is reminiscent of Houdini's constraint tricks. I will apply this to the text's body as a 'way out'.

2. In the second reading, I will argue that 'In the Penal Colony' is a story depicting the *failure* to escape. First, I will propose how death is the antithesis of escape art through reference to Houdini's near-death experiences. I will then problematise the idea that we can escape the past. I will propose that we cannot read the story as a tale of vaudevillian escape and, therefore, we cannot escape Kafka's work through this historical image.

3. In the third reading, I will argue that Franz Kafka's work is failed-escape art: there is something aesthetic about the failure to escape. First, I will argue that Kafka's work registers a historical image of the Jew who could not escape. I will then argue that the vaudevillian element can be brought back, but this time as part of a failed art. Finally, I will conclude that Kafka's art *is* the failure to escape because it captures that contemporary conundrum.

Owing to the breadth of Kafka's work and criticism, this article will focus on closely reading Houdini's tricks in Kafka's 'In the Penal Colony' because its form and content is reminiscent of escape artistry. I was unable to find evidence that Kafka knew of Houdini. Houdini performed in Bohemia and was a dominant figure in Germany (Kasson 110). He was one of the first celebrities, exploiting the world's rising mass media (Silverman 177). This suggests that Kafka could have been aware of Houdini as a cultural force in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nevertheless, both craft similar images of failed escapes that reflect the images of the vaudevillian body in their period (the vaudevillian being a type of variety entertainment in the *fin de siècle* heavily influenced by Jewish theatre).

## 1. The Escape Artist of ‘In the Penal Colony’.

### 1.1 Kafka and Houdini.

To understand the link between Houdini and ‘In the Penal Colony’, one should first consider Kafka’s vaudevillian texts which *embody* the theme of escape in their imagery and form. In particular, ‘A Report to an Academy’ [1917] has caught the attention of Kafka critics who are interested in the theme of escape.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps most famously, Deleuze and Guattari’s *Kafka* [1975] focuses on the ape Red Peter’s argument that he wanted to find, as Kafka puts it, “a way out” (286). Deleuze and Guattari’s interest in man’s metamorphosis into an animal (or, in this case, the inverse) locates within the imagery a physical ‘way out’ (13): Red Peter attempts to make his body act less ape-like and more human. This embodiment of escape is a wider theme in Kafka’s vaudevillian works. These stories are defined by their images of circus performance. For example, the rider in ‘Up in the Gallery’ [1919] struggles with her horse, the trapeze artist in ‘First Sorrow’ [1922] desires a second trapeze and the performer in ‘A Hunger Artist’ [1922] starves himself (Kafka 192, 241, 252). These vaudevillian protagonists depend on an object or state extraneous to their bodies, a performance that emphasises their desire to push their bodies beyond themselves. This physical escape may explain the critics’ interest in ‘A Report’; if one treats the body of the text like the bodies *within* the text, the desire for ‘a way out’ suddenly becomes an interpretive approach. If the form embodies escape, it points to something other and hints that the critic can escape out of it.

While Kafka was writing these stories, the escape artist Harry Houdini was embodying the era’s preoccupation with escape. In 1874, he was born Ehrich Weisz in Budapest. His

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<sup>4</sup> Some of the most recent accounts include Howard Caygill [2008] (141) and Dimitris Vardoulakis [2011] (95).

father Rabbi Mayer Sámuel Weisz moved the family to Wisconsin to lead a short-lived Jewish congregation in 1878. Mayer eventually moved to New York with Ehrich in 1887 to work in a necktie factory. Houdini would go on to be the most famous escape artist in history, performing escape tricks out of various constraints, containers and contraptions. John F. Kasson, author of the most comprehensive study of Houdini's body, argues that Houdini's escapes compensated for his father's failure in America (101). Indeed, like Kafka, Houdini was a Jew from the Austro-Hungarian Empire who could not adopt the same identity as his father. Whilst Houdini's father spoke Hungarian, Hebrew and German, devoted himself to his religion and died desolate, the young Weisz became a wealthy, secular and English-speaking performer. But his escapes were not merely responses to his father's weakness. More accurately, Houdini's strength over external objects registers a historical moment. Kasson concedes that Houdini's escapes were "deeply embedded in the cultural needs of his time" as acts of "modern mastery" (79-80). The tone of Kasson's choice of the word "mastery" can be qualified. His mastery did not grasp the past but eluded it. Although escape was nothing new, Houdini was novel because his body captured a contemporary desire to escape (Kasson 108). Like the reader of Kafka's texts, the spectator reads Houdini's body as something that potentially points *beyond* its past.

However, Kasson does not make enough of the Jewish roots of the vaudevillian escape. By emphasising the break from the father, Kasson's book characterises Houdini as one of the ideal *white* (read: non-Jewish) male bodies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (79). Whilst Houdini was secular in comparison to his father, this downplays the contribution of Jewish culture to Western vaudeville. As Carolin Duttlinger argues, Kafka was originally ambivalent towards Judaism until he saw a "Yiddish theatre troupe, whose performances Kafka attended in the winter of 1911–12" (15). Whilst Duttlinger's premise identifies the intertwined history of vaudeville and Judaism, her conclusion is more accurate in its inverse: Judaism informed the

contemporary America theatre. For example, Kafka's work *Amerika* almost describes Houdini's life. Kafka's intended title, *The Man Who Disappeared* ("Der Verschollene"), introduces a protagonist who disappears to America at the beginning and who joins the Theatre of Oklahoma near the end, with its actors dressed as angels and devils (12, 246). These themes correlate with the experience of Jews who migrated to New York in the 1880s. On one hand, Kafka's protagonist in *Amerika* and Houdini escape their Jewish-European past. However, the religious theatricality of the Oklahoma theatre correlates with the Yiddish theatre's influence on vaudeville.

Specifically, the *structure* of Jewish transcendence translated into attempts to escape the past *through* the body. In 'Ten Unhistorical Statements about the Kabbalah' [1958], Gershom Scholem asserts that Kafka's "writings are a secularised representation of the Kabbalistic conception of the world" (Gershom n.p.). The Kabbalah sect of Judaism characterises truth and God as ostensibly hidden from the individual. Scholem persuasively argues that Kafka's texts point beyond themselves. However, the term "unhistorical" privileges the metaphysical over the material; Scholem criticised Benjamin's combination of metaphysical tradition with historical materialism (Walter 169). Although he disparages the human world in comparison with God's perfection, this would disavow the link between body and history in 20<sup>th</sup> century vaudeville. Instead, one can read his interpretation of Kafka structurally rather than theologically. Scholem's desire for something beyond the body is secularised in Kasson's analysis. When Kasson argues that the body asserts its modernity through its very physicality, Scholem's emphasis on the 'beyond' is maintained on a solely material level.

To understand this position, I will explore how 'In the Penal Colony' [1919] is one of Kafka's vaudevillian texts because it fixates on the escaping body. Specifically, my first interpretation will argue that the story embodies the image of Harry Houdini's escapes. In

*Kafka's Narrative Theatre*, James Rolleston opposes this historical approach. Despite conceding that 'In the Penal Colony's' narrative structure is dramatic, he claims that this is not true of the imagery (89). He contends that one cannot read historical images in the work because it implies that one can escape the texts easily. Yet Rolleston neglects that Kafka's vaudevillian texts reflect his real-life interest in circuses.<sup>5</sup> Of course, 'In the Penal Colony' is not obviously vaudevillian. The colonial forced-labour camps provide its more obvious historical imagery. However, many Kafka critics have picked up on the story's theatricality, particularly the machine's theatricality.<sup>6</sup> My interpretation will not detail these critics' arguments here. Instead, it observes something that they have not yet explored: how the body in the machine uncannily mirrors Houdini's constraint tricks.

## 1.2 The Body's Metamorphosis.

At the centre of 'In the Penal Colony' is the image of the body escaping the machine. After disobeying a superior in a penal colony, a condemned man is sentenced to death by having a machine inscribe onto his body. The condemned man escapes and an officer enters the machine instead: "the officer's whole head disappeared into the engraver, so minutely did he have to consult the machinery" (173-4). It is tempting to see this as representative of an anxiety about the increasingly blurred line between man and machine. Importantly, the "engraver" makes the apparatus a writing machine. With the rise of occultism in the *fin de siècle*, automatic writing gripped the epoch with anxieties about machines controlling the body. Matthew Solomon's work on Houdini and the early cinema [2006] offers a Benjaminian<sup>7</sup> interpretation of the body in the machine. Solomon argues that new media

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<sup>5</sup> See Bianca Theisen's 'Kafka's Circus Turns' for detailed information on Kafka's interest in the circus.

<sup>6</sup> Please see Clayton Koelb (511), Andreas Gailus (230) and Stanley Corngold (71).

<sup>7</sup> See Walter Benjamin's essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' in *Illuminations* (229).



technology in the 20<sup>th</sup> century transformed the *image* of the body ('Mediated' 46). Solomon rightfully picks up on a new relation between body and machine in this period. However, the condemned man's escape from the machine qualifies this image. Instead of being mediated by the machine, he confounds the "apparatus" (Kafka, 'In' 159), making his *escape* from the machine a major plot point.

This echoes another contemporary image of the man escaping the machine: Houdini's constraint tricks. When the officer describes the machine's operation to the explorer, he explains: "the condemned man, naked, of course, is made to lie face down on the cotton wool; these are the straps to secure his hands, his feet, and his neck" (Kafka, 'In' 152). This description uncannily corresponds with some of Houdini's constraint tricks. Tired of only performing on stage, Houdini escaped from jails and asylums. In one asylum escape, he was bound in a straitjacket, "strapped to a mattress with leather round his middle, ankles and thighs; his arms were crossed over his chest then belted, his wrists strapped to the frame. His neck was strapped down with a leather collar, and tied to the bed" (Phillips 34-5). The images of the bed ("cotton", "mattress") and sadomasochistic confinement of body parts by "straps" represent the body's institutionalisation. This intensifies the significance of the penal colony setting – the condemned man's struggle out of the machine (Kafka, 'In' 172) mirrors Houdini's escape from old institutional authority (Phillips 35) which, as we have seen, has historical implications.

Kafka and Houdini therefore share the theme of bodily metamorphosis. When the condemned man escapes the machine, he swaps places with the officer in a "vast reversal in their roles" (175). Symbolically, this inverts the hierarchy between officer and prisoner. Physically, this echoes a Houdini trick that switched the performers' bodies. The Metamorphosis<sup>8</sup> was a typical cabinet trick in which "Harry, tied in a sack and locked in the

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<sup>8</sup> Coincidentally, this is also the title of Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* [1915].

trunk, changed places with [his wife] Bess outside, who was then found inside the same locked trunk, inside the sack” (Silverman 12). Although escape was not a new thing, this trick spoke to his audience. This switch between man and wife resonated with a contemporary desire for metamorphosis, to break from one’s past (and one’s identity). Whilst Solomon locates Houdini’s modernity in his “real world” escapes, he hints at an argument that he never quite arrives at. Solomon’s definition of the “real world” is mediated by the camera - he argues that only the *image* of the body transforms, not the body itself. However, in Houdini’s trick the focus on the different sexes implies that the metamorphosis had occurred physically. In Houdini’s tricks and Kafka’s stories, the body *literally* metamorphoses into something other than itself.

This reading is problematised by the otherness that constrained the Jewish body. In *The Jewish Patient* [1995], Sander Gilman argues that the stereotype of bodily difference was used to mark and oppress Jews and that this feminised, diseased and deformed body is inseparable from Kafka’s modernity (12). To some extent, Gilman’s thesis is difficult to test because it depends on something that is not present. The stereotypes of Jews were based on a physiognomic *lie* – that the socially constructed, racist stereotypes mark themselves on the body. In Kafka’s text, there is no explicit reference to Jews. However, the condemned man’s body is described as “lean” (Kafka, ‘In’ 161). Admittedly, this physically renders the condemned man as the opposite of the escape artist. The vaudevillian characters use their strength to grasp at what is beyond themselves. In contrast, the condemned man’s physicality confines him. This is intensified by the fact that he is called the *condemned* man. Otherness is therefore a potentially dangerous concept because it was used to mark Jews like a cage on the body, problematising Kafka and Houdini’s ability to escape.

Contrary to Gilman’s interpretation, however, the condemned man’s body mirrors a celebrated image in the *fin de siècle*: Houdini’s body. Gilman rejects the idea of

metamorphosis in Kafka's texts, maintaining that "the transformation of the Jewish body was desirable but inherently impossible." (13). Whilst Gilman's position is understandably anti-assimilatory, arguing that Kafka's Jewishness marked him even if he did not acknowledge it, how does this square with the fact that Houdini's contorted body became a celebrated image in Kafka's epoch? In *The San Francisco Examiner*, Houdini released five publicity shots of his bound, barely-clothed body that would become iconic photographs of his era (Kasson 108). These photos challenged anti-Semitic stereotypes with their vaudevillian skill, demonstrating that the Jewish body could be strong and beautiful. Kafka aestheticises the condemned man's lean body along these lines. Like Houdini, the condemned man is naked and in chains (Kafka, 'In' 161). Instead of constricting him, he willingly becomes a spectacle when he realises he is the "object of so much interest [he stands] at attention" (Kafka, 'In' 155). Here, he is admired for his body. Like Houdini, he later escapes his past identity by escaping his physical constraints (171). Now that I have established how the image of the escape artist is found in 'In the Penal Colony', I will suggest how this is embodied in the text.

### 1.3 A Way Out of the Text?

The potential 'way out' is registered in the text's body. Deleuze and Guattari identify a "line of escape" in Kafka's work in *linguistic* terms (13). The line of flight is the function of their concept of deterritorialisation, which describes the unbinding of energy in many different directions on one, non-hierarchical plane. Critically, they link Kafka's line of escape to his literary language. Whilst Deleuze and Guattari conclude that Kafka's language takes on a line of flight and becomes non-representational (22), their point of entry makes a very important statement about the historical influence on the text's body. They emphasise how Kafka wrote as a minority (a Jew in Prague) speaking in a language of a majority (German) (12). The initial step of their thesis (rather than their conclusion) inscribes Kafka's linguistic

and geographical situation onto the textual body. Here, the text's form potentially acts like the escape artist's body, performing the contemporary attempt to escape.

However, their rejection of signification suppresses the reading of the text as a body that escapes the past. Deleuze and Guattari criticise metaphoric readings of Kafka, arguing that he "deliberately kills all metaphor, all symbolism, all signification" (22). Admittedly, this failure of signification is present in Kafka's story. The explorer fails to read the template inscribed with the sentences that will later be inscribed on the officer's body (Kafka, 'In' 173). This failure of language and rejection of signifiers correlates with a school of thought that only reads Kafka literally, denying a historical reading that tries to go beyond the body of the text. In the context of Deleuze and Guattari's non-hierarchical treatment of language, the preposition "beyond" is understandably suspect because it is transcendental. However, their approach denies constructive interpretations that work on a 'higher' level than the immediate text: for example, historical readings. Indeed, this very vaudevillian reading does not fit the literal reading. By attempting to show how the text's body registers the image of the escape artist, it inevitably points *beyond* itself.

Therefore, one could view the text's escapes like Houdini's escapes: on a solely material level. After failing to communicate the message, the officer states: "As you've seen, it's not easy to decipher the script with one's eyes; our man deciphers it with his wounds." (160). Deleuze and Guattari's argument is strong where it supports the officer's desire to escape *through* the body. The officer's language transforms the idea of representation from a visual cipher or signifier ("script") to the flesh ("wounds"). Knowledge is not received in linguistic representation (for example, letters) but by bodily feeling. Deleuze and Guattari's line of escape becomes attractive in terms of understanding the text as a body that transcends itself on a material level. Their line of escape emphasises the body's flesh rather than its transformation on an abstract level. Although my own reading of Houdini's body in the text

works on a higher, historical level, the sheer corporeality of Deleuze and Guattari's analysis emphasises how escape from the text works within the textual body itself. This reading has attempted to show that the desire to escape one's past is enacted in Houdini's tricks. In turn, escapes like Houdini's are registered in the imagery and body of Kafka's story.

## **2 The Failure to Escape.**

### **2.1 Death: The Failed Escape?**

Reading 'In the Penal Colony' as a story of the 20th-century escape artist suggests there is a 'way out' of the text. However, the ending problematises this conclusion. Kafka called the story's ending "botched" in 1917 (*Briefe* 159), which suggests that he could not locate a satisfactory 'way out' of the textual body. The ending also problematises my first argument in another sense: instead of an escape *from* the machine, the reader is confronted with the dead body *in* the machine. Adam Phillips argues that the escape artist decontextualised torture devices because Houdini always emerged unscathed (32). Houdini's escapes incorporated chains, needles and nails into his skin and he would emerge "unscathed". This, however, does not describe the officer's death at the end of Kafka's story. The explorer witnesses how his "transfixed body[']s] blood flowed in a hundred streams" from the machine's pipes (Kafka, *Metamorphosis* 178). Kafka's torture device is not decontextualised from torture - it fulfils its intended purpose and lacerates the body. The "body" and the "blood[']s]" biological connotations are estranged and transferred into a cold, calculated context. The machine's pipes, needles and glass harrow contain the body and the fluid like vials and slides, reducing the body into a specimen. This reduces the vaudevillian prop into a crypt of dead matter. The image of the body's destruction contrasts violently with the escape artist's metamorphosis. This begs the question: are death and escape mutually exclusive?

Ruth Brandon attempts to collapse this dualistic treatment of escape and death. In *The Life and Many Deaths of Harry Houdini* [1993], she places death at the centre of Houdini's performances. She focuses on his iconography of death when he was buried alive in a grave in 1911 (145). Here, Brandon's thesis is not far from John F. Kasson's reading of Houdini's escapes as modern mastery. Brandon reads Houdini's obsession with death as a reflection of a personal and more general contemporary moment: specifically, she argues that Houdini's tricks emphasise the immortality of his body (148). The focus on immortality does not diminish the dualism between death and escape. However, her conclusion makes an intriguing turn: she suggests that "bodily imperviousness" does not transcend death but mediates and is mediated by the act of dying (Brandon 283). Whilst it is not clear how this works in practice, Brandon gives escape a dialectical character: death is performative.

However, Brandon neglects Houdini's distinction between the performed death and the body's actual death. In 'Nearly Dying for a Living' [1919], Houdini describes a close call in Battery Park, New York. In 1914, his constrained body was contained in a nailed box that was thrown into Battery Park's harbour. Houdini recalls how he nearly drowned: "even as I write of it now there comes to me a feeling of suffocation as I recall the moment of my discovery that the ropes had become entangled" (40). In the spectator's eyes, this image of the near-death experience is no different from Houdini's usual acts. Since 1908, "suffocation" by water had been central to Houdini's Chinese Water Torture Cell and Milk Can escape acts where he would submerge himself in a filled container (Gibson 123). Houdini was also known for entangling himself in rope since he performed the Metamorphosis in 1894. To Brandon and the spectator, the image of the theatrical death and the actual death appear identical. But this puts too much faith in death as a performance. Houdini's article does not describe a normal trick. It acknowledges that this trick was a near-*failure*. The sensory language is not merely visual – it is physical. The physicality of his escapes in the

“suffocation” emphasises that there is a mortal body hidden beneath the image that Brandon sees. For Houdini, the illusion of death and the bodily death he experiences are distinct.

To take this further: death is antithetical to escape art – the body’s literal destruction annihilates the ideal image of Houdini’s body. A few days before Houdini died in 1926, a McGill University student asked if he could punch the performer in the abdomen because he heard it “could resist the hardest blows” (Silverman 409). The student’s language invokes the image of the escape artist’s athletic body. The superlative “hardest” emphasises that Houdini could push his body beyond even the most violent transgressions. Just like Brandon, the student desires Houdini to escape, immortal, through an extreme violation of the body. This actually reveals how fleeting the image of Houdini’s vaudevillian escape was; Houdini died eleven days later from peritonitis due to a ruptured appendix (Silverman 414). This rupture not only destroys Houdini’s body, but it also ruptures the image of the 20th-century escape artist’s body along with its mastery. Whilst Houdini sketched out impossible tricks such as escaping from an ice-cube in his notebook (Phillips 33), the mortality of his body was exposed. Rather than enabling his escape, death signals Houdini’s ultimate *failure* to escape.

This suggests that Kafka’s story is not about escape artistry but about the body’s *failure* to escape itself. Initially, the officer claims that the machine’s penetration of one’s body will provide them with divine knowledge (Kafka, ‘In’ 155). However, when the explorer observes the officer’s dead face, he notes that: “it was as it had been in life; there was no trace of the promised transfiguration” (179). This “promised transfiguration” can be read on two levels. On one, the revelatory language of “understand[ing] and “transfigurations” tempts the critic to read the story as Howard Caygill does. He interprets the plot as a failure of the “messianic exit structure” because the characters misrecognise the explorer as a messiah and so cannot find a way out (129, 133). However, here Caygill overstates the “messianic” character of escape. By only fleetingly referencing Kafka’s first philosophical critics, Caygill does not

fully address how Kafka was sceptical of humanity's ability to escape into the metaphysical from the offset (qtd. in Bataille 152). Perhaps more devastating to my previous reading, this failed transfiguration occurs on a solely material level. Here, the explorer reads the "trace" on the officer's face like a text. Although the machine wounded the body, the explorer perceives that it has not physically metamorphosed. Unlike Houdini's constraint tricks, the explorer's body has failed to escape from itself into another body on both levels. I will now explore the historical implications of this point through a second interpretation: that it is not a story of escape, but the *failure* to escape.

## 2.2 'In the Penal Colony': An Escape into the Past?

The officer's failure to escape impacts the historical reading of the text, suggesting that one cannot progress from the past. Throughout the story, the explorer acts as the Western, enlightened man who opposes an old order (the machine) that eventually fails (Kafka 'In' 171). However, at the story's end, the explorer reads the old commandant's grave inscription that claims: "it is prophesied that after a certain number of years, the commandant will rise again" (Kafka, 'In' 180). What's more, the explorer has a cooler reaction than the sceptical men expect when he "feigned unawareness" (80). His indifference is telling. Suddenly, the explorer's scepticism of the old order is put into question; the machine's failure does not mean that the surviving characters can escape from the past. This historical reading is more in line with Walter Benjamin's scepticism of progress in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (*Arcades* 460). Benjamin problematised the definition of progress, which is characterised as a constant progression into the future (*Illuminations* 261). Like other Kafka scholars, Benjamin identifies escape as a fraught theme in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, a period when the wake of fascism, mysticism and other irrational phenomena contradicted the Enlightenment logic of constant progression. In this case, the explorer's transition throughout 'In the Penal Colony'



dramatises the failure to improve upon the past.

The psychoanalyst Adam Phillips contends that failure to escape the past *enables* the modern escape. In *Houdini's Box* [2001], Phillips thematises the vaudevillian escape in his clients' cases. His approach refuses to characterise modern escape only as a breaking from the father - he insists Houdini's escapes are enabled by a desire to be recognised by his father (30). Phillips is inspired by a psychological reading of tradition, which is demonstrated most clearly in T. S. Eliot's 1923 mythic method. Eliot argues that James Joyce's *Ulysses* was modern because it returns to Homeric myth (372). Similarly, Phillips argues that Houdini returns to the Oedipus myth which, in Freudian terms, describes a complex in which a child wants to escape *and* to be recognised by the father (30). Phillips' thesis is convincing where he gives failure a constitutive role: the failure to escape tradition, paradoxically, leads to the escape from it (16). In this light, the explorer's failure to escape the past is perhaps part of a didactic journey. Like Houdini's constraint tricks, his entrapment on an island that represents the old order enables his escape into a modern order when he jumps onto the boat (Kafka, 'In' 180).

However, Kafka's story presents the double bind: the past is just as inaccessible as the modern moment. When the explorer looks at the colony's buildings, he "sensed the might of earlier times" (179). Here, the penal colony acts as a site of *déjà vu*. Phillips argues that this is part of the modern escape, which he defines as the "repetition of the same thing unmodified" (34). However, this emphasises not only that the explorer cannot escape the past but also calls into question whether that past is accessible. Placing a modern explorer amongst the old houses throws the story's historical interpretation into crisis. Phillips' description of the "same thing unmodified" resembles what Walter Benjamin calls "homogenous, empty time" (*Illuminations* 261). Like *déjà vu*, there is no distinction between the past, present or future. They are equivalent to one another, like commodities that are

exchanged. Benjamin's work offers a compromise here; he asserts that Kafka's modernity was taking the image or "transmissibility" of Homeric myth (the Sirens from *The Odyssey*) without taking the original myth's "truth" (143-4). However, this means that the explorer is haunted by the buildings of the past *and* he cannot quite grasp them. Escape is therefore denied in both directions. I will now suggest what implications this has for the text's body and my interpretation of it.

### **2.3 The Failure to Escape the Text.**

The text's form does not necessarily provide 'ways out' to or from the past. In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler seizes Kafka's image of the body in the machine to argue that there is no body to escape from. She asserts that identity is not inscribed on the body like Kafka's machine inscribes on the victim's flesh (156). Here, Butler criticises the conflation of gender (a constructed identity) with sex (a biological construct). Historically, the idea that nature is destiny has been used to determine individuals with their own bodies. Butler's intervention in this debate is that nature is a performance (185-186). In other words, Butler rejects a teleological reading that leads back to the body. For her, there is no material body. Whilst Butler is determinist in her own way (she argues that one could come up with a genealogy of the body as a construct [165]), her rejection of the material origin can be applied to the text's body. Rather than providing an escape to or from the past, the body's instability throws the past into question. This problematisation of the past is evident in Butler's comparison of the machine with the law in Kafka's 'Before the Law' (202). By focusing on the preposition "before" in the title, she points out the ridiculousness of appealing to a time prior to the law to justify the law. By rejecting the idea that one can unravel the text to locate a material origin, this diminishes the idea that there are escape routes out of the physical text.

Contrary to Butler's reading, the failure to escape is inscribed onto the text's body.

Whilst Butler convincingly argues against bodily origin, her rejection of determinism and materialism in Kafka's story is less convincing if one compares the condemned man's body to the text's body. On the subject of determinism, Butler does not deal with the condemned man's title. Even when he escapes the machine, the condemned man's name stirs uncertainty in the reader (Kafka, 'In' 172). Why would Kafka inscribe the character who escapes the machine with a name that connotes entrapment? This paradoxical characteristic is confirmed when one looks at the subject of materialism. The condemned man's physicality ultimately condemns him - he is still stuck on the island, the site of the old order, when the explorer denies him entry on the boat (180). Therefore, one could conceive the textual body in the same manner – the body determines itself. The body of the text, like the condemned man, is physically inscribed with this failure – it is a self-contained body that cannot find a way out of itself.

Therefore, interpreting 'In the Penal Colony' as a story of vaudevillian escape seems like a dead end. As I mentioned at the start of this interpretation, Kafka conceived the ending of this work as botched. The term "botched" implies the body of the text is wounded. Indeed, the multiple alternative endings he wrote for the story in August 1917 testifies that Kafka could not find a satisfactory 'way out' of the text's body (*Briefe* 824-7). As we have seen with the escapologist's body, its destruction marks the failure to escape. Escape becomes problematised by new understandings of how the body and history were fractured in the 20th century. Therefore, vaudevillian escape artistry fails to provide an adequate escape route out of Kafka's text.

### **3. Kafka the Failed-Escape Artist.**

### 3.1 The Modern Failure to Escape.

My previous interpretation argued that Kafka's story is about the *failure* to escape, implicating my first reading because it suggests one cannot escape the text or the past. But could this conclusion be explored more productively? Although I previously argued that Kafka's work is plagued by the failure of progress, Walter Benjamin sophisticates this reading: he aestheticises this failure. In 'Some Reflections on Kafka' [1938], Benjamin argues that Kafka's stories have the "purity and beauty of a failure" (*Illuminations* 145). This definition is rooted in a biographical reading of Kafka – Benjamin points out that the writer considered many of his stories to be failures (129). By pointing to its "beauty", however, Benjamin aestheticises this failure. Benjamin's definition of failure complements his work on the failure to progress. In 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' [1940] Benjamin argues that the rise of fascism demonstrates that progress is not possible in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He points at an insidious link between art and fascism, alluding to Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's aestheticisation of politics (*Illuminations* 241). Marinetti, a major figure in the Futurist movement, created art that was complicit with Benito Mussolini's fascist regime. This complicity between art and violence emerged in other European regimes during the first half of the century, most notably in Hitler's rallies. Benjamin rightfully challenges the role of art in regressive, anti-Semitic politics. However, Kafka aestheticises this violence and this failure to be progressive without necessarily being fascist. This third interpretation will argue that 'In the Penal Colony' aestheticises this failure to escape from the past.

Paradoxically, the text's failure to progress is a mark of its modernity. In his interpretation of Kafka, Theodor Adorno echoes Benjamin's idea that progress is no longer progressive. He argues that Kafka's work is wounded with "ciphers of the social untruth" (*Prisms* 252). Just as fascism makes progress impossible, fascists wounded the text's body and, consequently, its representational abilities. In a characteristically dialectical fashion,

Adorno argues that these wounds are afflicted by National Socialism (259). By describing the textual wounds as ciphers, Adorno implies that one can *read* the text's fractured form because it exposes the untruth that has afflicted it. However, Adorno's contextualisation of Kafka is odd. This is not to suggest that Adorno advocates a prophetic<sup>9</sup> interpretation (although his position certainly comes close here). Instead, Adorno identifies tensions contemporary to Kafka that would later culminate into the Nazi death camps.<sup>10</sup> To counter Adorno's and Benjamin's scepticism of modernity in a fascist world, one could contend that Kafka's work is modern because it embodies this contemporary failure to progress.

The officer's hanging body echoes a historical image of the Jew who did not escape. When the officer dies, the reader sees that "the last thing failed too, the body did not come off the long needle spikes, it poured forth its blood and hung over the pit, but without falling into it." ('In' 178). Not only does the machine explicitly fail but the body fails to detach from the machine, still "[hanging] over the pit". This body echoes an old historical image Adorno invokes in his essay on Kafka. He compares the body of Kafka's texts with the violent punishment of the Jews who were "executed 'perversely' i.e. inversely [...] Offenders were hung head down" (*Prisms* 269). This 13<sup>th</sup> century practice of hanging a Jew upside down between two dogs pervades the story's imagery as a stand-in for many Jews' experiences in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Kafka's description of the condemned man as "doggishly submissive" ('In' 149) registers this conflation between the dog and the Jew. However, this does not capture a Deleuzian becoming animal [see the first interpretation] but the dehumanisation of those who could not escape persecution in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>9</sup> See Russell Samolsky [2011] who argues that Adorno does not take Kafka's prophetic vision far enough (3).

<sup>10</sup> Colonial penal colonies were prototypes for Nazi death camps.

It therefore seems strange that Houdini aestheticises this image of the dead Jew in his suspended straitjacket trick. In 1915, Houdini began performing a trick in which his body was bound in a straitjacket and suspended upside down in the air. As I argued in the previous reading, there is a difference between the performed and the actual death. However, this trick is not necessarily an escape act. It was particularly dangerous; several others who attempted the suspended straitjacket trick died and, on one occasion, Houdini injured his head on a window ledge (Silverman 197). Instead of consolidating the successful escape with death, this trick aestheticises the failure to escape. My final reading will be a compromise between the previous two: that the vaudevillian escape is central to the text because it fails, and that this failure to escape the text is critical in itself.

### **3.2 Kafka's vulgar vaudeville**

The officer's corpse remains vaudevillian because it mirrors the commandant's gallery scene. When the officer discusses a meeting to be held by the new commandant, he claims the leader is "turn[ing] such meetings into a personal charade. He has had a gallery built, which is always full of spectators" (Kafka, 'In' 169). The word "charade" betrays the officer's view that the new commandant is debasing politics by treating it as a circus performance, or an example of the aforementioned fascist aestheticisation of politics. However, the officer's dead body also resembles this gallery scene if one considers how the narrative focalisation gazes *up* at the dangling body over the pit (Kafka 'In' 178'). This scopophilic gaze upwards is echoed when the officer fantasises about the commandant looking up at the gallery, "shoot[ing] regular glances" (170). The gallery trope is centre-stage Kafka's story 'Up in the Gallery'. Although the story initially focuses on a lady on horseback, the story's title and ending shifts focus to a man crying in the gallery (Kafka, 'Up' 192-3). This shift of attention violates the transcendental look upwards, aestheticising his pain. In this way, the gaze up at the dead body suddenly mirrors the commandant's gaze up at

the gallery.

This characterisation of the vaudeville is less strange if one considers that Houdini was an escape *artist*. Whilst Stanley Corngold emphasises the machine's vaudevillian character in *Lambert Traces*, he argues that the machine is "ethical, not aesthetic" (68, 71). Here, the vaudeville's aestheticisation of death is not merely vulgar. Corngold's appeal to ethics implies that it is *wrong*. The text's vaudevillian element highlights why Corngold may not think that the machine is aesthetic. He emphasises its commercial, low-brow element in his claim that "[Kafka's] heroes are never artists but they are artistes" (70). Although Corngold's choice of *artiste* over artist successfully captures the vaudeville's baseness, this omits that performers like Houdini were called escape artists. Corngold's distinction between the *artiste* and the artist evokes an idealist, transcendental reading of aesthetics. In contrast, Houdini spoke to his time because he aestheticised escape. If we turn to the text, the explorer's observation of the officer's death is at odds with Corngold's anti-aesthetic reading: "this wasn't torture of the kind the officer wanted to achieve, it was crude murder" (Kafka, 'In' 178). The machine is not merely crude. By observing that the torture is of the wrong "kind", this implies that there is desirable kind of torture. The officer desires a paradox: a base aesthetics.

This very baseness constitutes Kafka's art. Although Corngold argues against the artistic interpretation, his essay provides us with the tools to link the base with the artistic: he emphasises the vulgar ("*excreta*") and the playful ("*allotria*"). The combination of *allotria* and *excreta* conjures a vulgar playfulness that describes the vaudeville. To reinforce this point, Corngold points out that Kafka uses the term *ein Spiel* ("a play") to describe the machine and that this is a word that can be interpreted in two ways: the theatrical play and childish play (70). Importantly, one of the theatrical yet playful art forms in this period was the Yiddish theatre, which was often understood as a debased parody of the synagogue

(Gilman, *Franz* 50-2). Whilst Yiddish theatre and the synagogue have an intertwined history, often the former's humour was deemed too dirty for the religious domain. It is precisely the dirtiness of this humour that is integral to understanding Kafka's vaudevillian aesthetic. The condemned man engages in slapstick humour which reaches its vulgar peak when he vomits "all over the machine" (Kafka, 'In' 163, 174). Although the officer maintains that it ruins the beauty of the machine, the vomit becomes a vulgar embellishment of the machine. The vaudeville's failure to be transcendental art *is* the art. In this light, I am going to examine how this failed art characterises Kafka as a writer.

### 3.3 The Failed-Escape Artist.

The machine's failure represents the beauty of Kafka's *failed* forms. The officer spends most of the story being overly conscious of the machine's form. When the machine starts, the narrative declares: "had it not been for the squeaking of the wheel, it would have been majestic" (159). Here, the reader is presented with a machine whose imperfect form is emphasised. This machine is also Kafka's text; its status as a structure translates to the structure of the work itself. Although the officer has an ideal machine in his mind, the squeaking cog ruptures its structure. At the height of the drama, however, the machine is destroyed and comes crashing down – cogs rain out of the machine and the condemned man is "mesmerised" by this destruction (177). In terms of Kafka's art, the failure of the machine as it crashes down is more majestic than the officer's perfect machine. Like the machine, the text becomes a piece of art in its destruction and, like the condemned man, the reader becomes an admiring spectator. The officer's failure to escape the structure, the self-proclaimed botched form, is aestheticised in Kafka's texts.

Specifically, Kafka aestheticises the contemporary failure to find 'a way out' in his texts. When the explorer views the old commandant's sketches, he "only saw labyrinthine criss-crossing lines that covered the paper so thickly that it was hard to see any white space at



all” (159). The term “labyrinthine” is part of a metanarrative: just like the explorer, the reader cannot find meaning nor a way out of the text. Significantly, the artistry of the commandant’s sketch is emphasised when the explorer describes him as an artist (154). Therefore, Kafka’s ‘In the Penal Colony’ playfully points to the aestheticisation of his readers’ ultimate failure to find a way out. Importantly, the reader’s failure to escape is the *contemporary* failure to progress, crystallised in the text.

Therefore, I propose that Kafka is a failed-escape *artist*. This combines the two interpretive approaches to Kafka as a writer from my preceding interpretations. First, I made a historical reading that suggested Kafka points beyond his texts. Second, I argued that Kafka wrote texts that cannot be escaped. Finally, there is a third way to understand Kafka as a writer: that the failure to escape *is* Kafka’s art. The hyphen in the description “failed-escape artist” is integral: Kafka’s work aestheticises the inability to escape in his contemporary situation. The work’s form parodies this moment by representing a textual body that cannot be escaped.

## Conclusion

This article suggested that Kafka can be fruitfully interpreted as a failed-escape artist. The first interpretation offered an optimistic reading of ‘In the Penal Colony’ as a story that registers Houdini’s escapes in its imagery and form. The second reading contradicted this, contending that the ending presents escape as a failure. Rather than dismissing this reading as a failure, I concluded that there is third reading: we could read our failure to escape from Kafka’s text as a mark of his epoch.

My position joins the debate about one’s (in)ability to escape Kafka’s texts and offers a mixed interpretation. As we saw, Kafka scholars often have contradictory attitudes towards escape. It is an attractive theme, particularly when his texts appear like labyrinths that cannot

be escaped. Yet the *successful* escape is at odds with the re-evaluation of progress in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It risks promoting an uncritical logic that the future is superior to the past. I have attempted to synthesise these two viewpoints. I found the vaudevillian imagery central to Kafka even if others find its historical implications reductive. My research also respects the textual body's boundary, an impenetrable border that paradoxically embodies Kafka's historical situation.

This article also attempted to problematise Houdini scholars' more positive approach to escape. It would be unfair to conclude that Houdini scholars do not have an equally nuanced approach; Phillips, Kasson and Brandon offer dialectical interpretations of Houdini's tricks. However, the relative infancy of academic Houdini scholarship allowed this research to question assumptions about Houdini's escapes by reading them *through* Kafka's text.

Overall, I intended to make a modest intervention in the Kafka debate on escape (and its impossibility) *through* Houdini's body. The dissatisfaction with escape in Kafka scholarship should not make us dismiss the topic wholesale. This dissatisfaction could inspire an interpretive methodology that sees the failure to read Kafka as a productive reading approach in itself.

Although this research focused on one story, it alluded to texts that may benefit from a similar analysis. The influence of Houdini's escape art on texts such as 'A Report to an Academy' or 'Up in the Gallery' has yet to be explored in detail. However, Kafka's 'non-vaudevillian' texts such as 'Before the Law' may benefit more from an analysis to justify the vaudeville as an implicit influence on Kafka's whole corpus. Finally, there is much room to investigate whether Houdini was a direct influence on Kafka.

Regardless of whether Kafka was aware of Houdini, perhaps the inability to interpret the body of Kafka's text is, paradoxically, a potential 'way out'?

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