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Crossing the Kafka Network: Schulz, Blecher, Foer, and the Repositioning of the Human

Abstract: Major writers belonging to what Christian Moraru calls the “Kafka network” are, as the critic argues, behind watershed realignments and redistributions in the literary and conceptual makeup of modernity. Specifically, the critic proposes that these rearrangements have been part and parcel of aesthetic modernism’s transforming intervention in the structure of the modern *onto-ecological imaginary* – in how we see our humanity and its place in the “continuum” of human and nonhuman, organic and inorganic life. As Moraru shows, inside the domain in question, Schulz, Foer, and others like them reshuffle the pieces on the ontological chessboard into a new, eye-opening scenario and web of material life.

Keywords: Human; Animal; Thing; Vital Materialism; Co-presence; Ontology; Ethics; Franz Kafka; Bruno Schulz; Max Blecher.

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In his foreword to the Penguin edition of Bruno Schulz’s *The Street of Crocodiles* and *Sanatorium under the Sign of the Hourglass*, Jonathan Safran Foer latches onto a metaphor pivotal to Schulz’s art as well as to a whole tradition of aesthetic inscription and critical description and without which there would be no writing and reading as we know them, nor would we ourselves be who we are.¹ The trope in question is “rubbing,” and it epitomizes operations inherent to both poetics and hermeneutics.² It captures, on one side, form making, the encoding of the human into graphic symbols, into a text or a drawing by moving a marking tool or finger across paper, canvass, walls, or keyboards, and, on the other side, the cracking of the code, the breaking open of form, and with it understanding, perchance revelation, mystical or less so. Rubbing, then, encloses *and* discloses, to oneself and others, present or not, nearby or faraway, according to a formal and cultural protocol that can be called tradition – production, retrieval, comprehension, reception, recycling, transmission, the heart and soul of the Kabbalah. Rubbing, the writerly and pictorial formal enclosure that unveils,

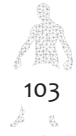


encoding-cum-decoding – and vice versa – is what Schulz does, according to Foer. But it is also what others have done to Schulz, including Foer himself, who rubbed out or, more exactly, cut whole words and passages out of the English version of *The Street of Crocodiles* to author his 2010 “novel” *Tree of Codes*.³

This writing method – unwriting or, better yet, unwriting as rewriting composition principle – is “die cutting.” Obviously not a Yiddish phrase, “die cutting,” Foer ventures in an interview, is “almost like a Yiddish word” because it is “onomatopoeic.” It sounds, he explains, like its meaning, like that which it designates.⁴ Foer does want, indeed, to rub our nose, as it were, in the material and oftentimes brutal physicality of intertextual mechanics, into all the “dying,” the killing, the cutting, and the Oedipal aggression built into the homage, *rewriterly* reanimation, appropriation, and sheer love that make up the complex symptomatology of the anxiety of influence. As Foer acknowledges in the afterword to *Tree of Codes*, composing his “see-through” book by decomposing its matrix and dislodging its textual units was, to him, a narrative recovery comparable to pulling a scrap of paper out of the Wailing Wall. And “[a]t times,” he also confesses, “I felt that I was making a gravestone rubbing of *The Street of Crocodiles*.”⁵ So rubbing, he submits, has therefore its creative, critical, historical, and curatorial ambiguities and shortcomings, its incentives, risks, and caveats. The bottom line, though, is that both Schulz and Foer took this ethical-formal mix as a challenge. They did not shy away from it, literally, metaphorically, and in other ways that would set in train, as I argue in what follows, watershed

realignments and redistributions in the literary and conceptual makeup of modernity. More to the point, I propose that all these rearrangements have been part and parcel of aesthetic modernism’s transforming intervention in the structure of the modern *onto-ecological imaginary* – in how we see our humanity and its place in what Henry Sussman has identified, in his Schulz analysis, as the “continuum” of human and nonhuman life, but also, I might add with a nod at the skyrocketing popularity of Franz Kafka’s *Odradek* with “flat ontology”⁶ critics, in how we picture the existential domain subtending organic *and* inorganic life alike.⁷

As I will show, inside the continuum or domain in question, Schulz, Foer, and others like them reshuffle the pieces on the ontological chessboard into another scenario and web of material life. Furthermore, fueled by the two-pronged metamorphic impetus of Kafka’s oeuvre, that is, by a mutating thrust that runs on the intersecting tracks of thematic and intertextual reiterations, this multiauthorial terrain unfolds across and by means of another, literary network and throws a “crisscrossing set of pathways” over “deep” space and time, as Wai Chee Dimock might say.⁸ This network is built in the proximity of the master and less so, in direct and indirect, explicit and implicit contact; it comes about as a plural relation of kin, kind, location, community, and tradition, as well in the absence of the relative, out of the *correlative* pathos of influence and being influenced, of telling and retelling, of transforming and being transformed by the already formed. This is, as Dimock might also put it, a cultural and intertextual network born in and outside “nonadjacency”



and “nearness of blood,” an “alchemical overcoming of distance” that, I would emphasize, *spatializes*, projects topologically, in space, the creative and re-creative alchemy of rubbing, the contagious aesthetic of haptics, of the writer’s magical touch. This distance, we shall note later on, does have a geocultural core but ends up bringing together that which can be viewed as a truly spaced-out and vastly heterogeneous Kafka family of kindred if distanced spirits. It encompasses Kafka himself, his “precursors” – in the strong sense of the term but also in the T. S. Eliotian sense rehearsed by Jorge Luis Borges in his 1951 essay “Kafka and His Precursors” – and it comprises Kafka’s heirs as well.⁹ The latter are authors who rehearse Kafkaesque themes or make references to Kafka and his works but also writers who, more obliquely, force us to consider, à la Borges, Kafka as their precursor. Besides the Jewish-Polish Schulz, Jewish-American Foer, and the Jewish-Romanian Max (or M.) Blecher, the “[Jewish]-Romanian Kafka” – the trio that concerns me here¹⁰ – they are legion, from Philip Roth and Cynthia Ozick to Nicole Krauss, in whose 2017 novel *Forest Dark* a Zionist Kafka is imagined making *Aliyah*, and further away, to J. M. Coetzee, Haruki Murakami, Borges himself, Latin America’s magical realists, and Romania’s greatest Blecherian, Mircea Cărtărescu.¹¹ Yet again, the network is not one but at least two and closely related. They are joined at the hip of the Kafka corpus and spread out at different angles or along different axes, with “Kafka” the intersection or the hinge on which two ontological charts of the living or two genealogical trees of being – and of being Kafka – turn: on the one hand, Kafka’s human family of literary forerunners

and followers; on the other, his nonhuman, animal family, as Foer and, before him, Walter Benjamin suggest, one that I would supplement, also under Benjamin’s tutelage, with the most “forgotten” among the family members: the humbler branch of inanimate – yet far from “dead” – things.

One family is by and large known to us. The other and its network with it are, as Foer echoes Benjamin, Kafka’s “unknown family.”¹² Inside the former – that is, within the network of writers where the “Kafkaesque” variously rubs off on others across continents and national literatures – Schulz takes up a singular place, close to the Kafka node. True, he may not have been extensively involved in the Polish translation of *The Trial* that came out under his name in 1936, but he was a dedicated reader of Kafka in the original. Furthermore, some of the discrepancies uncovered by Jerzy Ficowski between the two in his Schulz biography make more sense than others, while still others are trumped by undeniable kinship of form and theme, immediate ethno-religious and cultural context, and historical tradition.¹³ The differences, in brief, do exist, and it is understandable why all the talk about the “Polish” and “Romanian Kafka” rubs some Polish and Romanian critics the wrong way. But this resistance takes little away from the productive and reproductive rubbing in which Schulz and Blecher pointedly engaged and to which they have been in turn subject inside the Kafka network. I hope you will indulge my abuse of the verb a few more times because Schulz, for instance, was a gifted draftsman too and turned to rubbing, if unsuccessfully, not only to write and thus make, side by side with Witold Gombrowicz, a major contribution to Polish and world modernism,

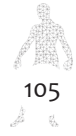


but also to stay alive – Scheherazade-like, glosses Foer – by painting murals in the house of Felix Landau, the Gestapo officer supervising Jewish labor in the Polish (now Ukrainian) town of Drohobycz.

The kinds of rubbing involved here – not of but *off* Kafka in Schulz's fiction, then *on* Kafka in the Polish translation of *The Trial*, as it was, and once more *on* Landau's walls – are intertwined, for they all occur under the Kafkaesque sign of the ontological flux across the boundaries separating life forms in the post-Cartesian imaginary underpinning modernity, as we shall see momentarily. In Schulz, rubbing is, Foer observes, what the narrator's father, before morphing into a crab, does to the pages of his ledger to "reveal plumes of color" in Schulz's short story, "The Book," the opening fragment of *Sanatorium*.¹⁴ As a Kabbalist hunched over the Torah, Joseph N.'s father "rub[s] with a wet fingertip until the blank pages grew opaque and ghostly with a delightful foreboding and, suddenly, flaking off in bits of tissue, disclosed a peacock-eyed fragment, ... a virgin dawn of divine colors, ... a miraculous moistness of purest azure." "Rustl[ing] through [The Book's] pages," a form-eliberating and trans-forming wind would "fre[e] from among the letters flocks of swallows and larks, ... a colored peacock's heart, or a chattering nest of hummingbirds."¹⁵ Of course, the tradition of transmuted rubbing – the tradition *tout court*, perhaps, ever a matter of making and unmaking, rubbing in and scratching off palimpsests, of peeling away the textual onion's layers in rabbinic reading to unearth deeper containers of meaning – goes on. For what the father does inside Schulzian form, what the son does on the walls in Landau's house, and

what later owners of the place will do to the shapes and hues on those walls as they repaint them white will be done – or undone, done in an opposite direction and before Foer himself will take on the narrative walls of Schulz's book – by somebody else, who took it to the actual walls in Landau's place. Sixty years after Schulz was shot dead by another Gestapo officer, Karl Günther, "whose Jew" Landau had murdered, documentary moviemaker Benjamin Geissler "rubbed," as Foer reminds us, "at one of the walls with the butt of his palm, and colors surfaced. He rubbed more, and forms were released. He rubbed more, like doing the rubbing of a grave, and could make out figures: fairies and nymphs, mushrooms, animals, and royalty..."¹⁶

Kafka, Schulz, Blecher and storytellers like them rub at the walls, pages, and paper-thin walls of worldliness, of the rationality that leaves its imprint on our habits and worldviews, "at the facts of our lives," writes Foer, to "give us access ... to what's beneath," fantastic, magical, strange, absurd, and surreal as this new and hidden world logic might seem.¹⁷ But because of the magnitude of the all-important impact of this onto-logic, of this unrevealed "big magnificence," rubbing is, thinks the American author, "too gentle a word for Schulz's writing."¹⁸ This gentleness leads in Foer, though, a bit contradictorily, to an incomplete digging – hence *Tree of Code* and its digging and cutting into the very body of Schulz's book – while it also supplies an instrument for further digging, cutting, or slicing open by others, as well as a provocation do so and change in the process. "His books," Foer tells us, "still have that effect on me. Good writers are pleasing, very good writers make you feel and think, great



writers make you change. ‘A book must be an ice-axe to break the seas frozen inside of us,’ Kafka” – Foer’s self-acknowledged foremost role model – “famously wrote. Schulz’s two slim books are the sharpest axes I’ve ever come across. I encourage you to split the chopping block using them.”¹⁹ In *Tree of Codes*, Foer himself wields the ax, or its robotic and computerized versions, along with the cognate techniques of cutting, amending, and emending on the very block of Schulz’s text; he does so also on his own, in the 2002 novel *Everything Is Illuminated*, which features a prolonged journey through Ukraine, as well as in the 2005 masterpiece *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, in which father, son, and narrator, like in Schulz, edit and report fragmented pages and pieces of the *New York Times*, World War II survivors’ memories, and overheard conversations.

But rubbing, digging, peeling off, or whatever you might call the Schulzian insight cutting through the surface of books and reality to the quick of another, seemingly illogic onto-logic does work like an axe or, better yet, scalpel, carrying out a “gentle,” perhaps stylistically deceptive exfoliation of the father’s folio and of the world as we know it or think we do, a *lecture-écorché*, as French critics might dub it. This “flaying reading” applies itself to the Talmud-like Book – the Book with capital “B” – that haunts him in *Sanatorium* and to the world, two isomorphic entities between which Schulz’s narrator makes no distinction. Akin to the father’s ledger, the stamp album is a Book-in-the-Book, a *mise-en-abyme* instantiation of Schulz’s own world-opening project and, by the same token, of the Talmudic book, as David A. Goldfarb has underscored.²⁰ The

“nature” of the contingent spring morning becomes “legible,” observes the storyteller, in the album while the latter turns into a seasonal Midrash, the “great commentary on the times, the grammar of [spring]days and nights” that parses the provincial syntax of Schulz’s hometown to bring to light the planet to which even a boredom emporium such as Drohobycz belongs.²¹ For “[s]tamps,” writes Schulz, “introduce” one to more “complex” games of the imagination and to its world of worlds. Thus, “[f]rom the reddish mists of the ninth hour, the motley and spot-red Mexico with a serpent wriggling in a condor’s beak is trying to emerge, hot and parched by a bright rash, while in a gap of azure amid the greenery of tall trees a parrot is stubbornly repeating ‘Guatemala, Guatemala’ at even intervals.” Then, “[i]n May,” with its days “pink like Egyptian stamps,” “[t]here sailed across the sky the great Corvette of Guyana... amid storms of gulls,” with Haiti, Jamaica, and other faraway places following suit and pushing the boundaries of the Galician market square farther and farther so as to signal that “no Mexico is final” and every final point is a way station, a “point of passage which the world will cross, that beyond each Mexico there opens another...”²²

In the hands of the “narrow-minded,” however, the album is worthless, illegible. For it is, as Schulz maintains, “a universal book, a compendium of knowledge about everything human.”²³ A key aspect of Schulz’s literary project is here in a nutshell. Most fundamentally, this undertaking works like the two arms of the same scissors as it envisions a twin onto-topological reconstruction of the human, of the human geographical and cultural place *and* of the place of the human inside the



lattice work of all that exists, human or not. For one thing, this repositioning is at loggerheads with the tunnel vision of isolated and self-sufficient parochialism, exceptional nationalism, and ethnocentrism. For another, this relocation pushes against anthropocentrism and the similar isolationism and exceptionalism modernity's anthropocentric imagination has often deployed to center the human ontological hegemon and unplug it from the horizontal grid of the same life energy that, at various junctures across this "vitalist" playground, looks like an object, or a bird, or an aging father, only to become something else, which may or may not exist or behave according to the available descriptions, definitions, or habits of things, humans, animals, and their bodies.²⁴ This is because, Schulz remarks, "[m]ost things are interconnected, most threads lead to the same reel. Have you ever noticed swallows rising in flocks from between the lines of certain books, whole stanzas of quivering pointed swallows?" "One should read the flight of these birds," he concludes.²⁵

Weaving together echoes of Neoplatonism, *Sefer Yezirah*, the later Kabbalah, and Hasidic tales of animals and transformations, this reading follows in the footsteps of Kafka's rubbing off and flaying of the habitus both ingrained in and rendered invisible by human sociality, a condition or conditioning protocol that Kafka *makes* visible in his "becoming-other" or behaving-like-an-other "minor" literature to which Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have attended so revealingly. This writing or rewriting of the human into vaster and more humane worlds geoculturally and ontologically is a top priority of early-mid-twentieth-century experimentalism and lies at

the core of a modernist, revolutionarily non- or post-humanist agenda keen on extending "an invitation to us humans to enter into a different relation with the world, ... to rethink the human globally" at the Darwinian cost of "toppling it" from its "central and fixed position."²⁶ The lynchpin of this reading is Schulz's multifaceted "interconnectedness." This is the operator that opens up locations and the location of the human to bigger worlds, assemblages, and understandings where one is present with others and must live up to the exigencies of this *co-presence* as well. This operator does its job, and its operations are both "fantastic" and precisely "historicized," much like in *The Trial*, "The Metamorphosis," "In the Penal Colony," "Report to an Academy," "Investigations of a Dog," "The Cares of a Family Man," and elsewhere because it is activated at a precise historical and geographical point of modern Europe, to which Kafka, Schulz, and Blecher belong, an intersection to which they bear witness and in which they discern both the death of sociocultural forms and potential for their rebirth. Franz Joseph I, the ruler of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, who died in 1916, twenty-one years prior to the publication of *Sanatorium*, passed through Drohobycz in 1880, twelve years before Schulz's birth, and was indirectly present in the writer's life in many ways, marks this moment and place according to a logic that Schulz's jocular-associative style hides and lays bare simultaneously. As Schulz writes in his 1937 book, when Franz Joseph I "appeared on the world stage,"

the world reached a happy point in its development. All the forms, having exhausted their content in endless



metamorphoses, hung loosely upon things, half-wilted, ready to flake off. The world was a chrysalis about to change violently, to disclose young, new, unheard-of colors and to stretch happily all its sinews and joints. It was touch and go, and the map of the world, that patchwork blanket, might float in the air swelling like a sail. Franz Joseph took this as a personal insult. His element was a world held by the rules of prose, by the pragmatism of boredom. The atmosphere of chanceries and police stations was the air he breathed. And, a strange thing, this dried-up dull man, with nothing attractive in person, succeeded in pulling a great part of creation to his side. All the loyal and provident fathers of families felt threatened along with him and breathed with relief when this powerful demon laid his weight upon everything and checked the world's aspirations. Franz Joseph squared the world like paper, regulated its course with the help of patents, held it within procedural bounds, and insured it against derailment into things unforeseen, adventurous, or simply unpredictable... He standardized the servants of heaven, dressed them in symbolic blue uniforms, and let them loose upon the world, divided into ranks and divisions – angelic hordes in the shape of postmen, conductors, and tax collectors.²⁷

We are here in Robert Musil's *Kakania – Kafkania?* –, an overbearing paternalist imperial bureaucracy of uniforms, overall uniformity, and prosaicism. Kafka, his world, his “inoperative” community, his

human and nonhuman ancestors, and his critique of the nipped-in-the-bud blooming of sons, young talents, and fresh forms are all here. The Talmudic album “un-reads” the Empire's cloistral apprehensions and, through the aviary world imaginary, reinscribes the godforsaken market town into bigger worlds, reiterating a transposing routine, a transport and a transmutation in which humans, animals, plants, and things – natural or manufactured – morph continuously into one another and erect in the process portals to another reality. Where stasis and status quo, complete with their panoply of sociopolitical and cultural practices, freeze matter, forcing it to gel unduly into the late-imperial prosaics of ossified forms, the narrator's father, we learn in *The Street of Crocodiles* – and we relearn *ad litteram* in *Tree of Codes* – is, unlike Franz Joseph, a true Demiurge and poet who believes that “[t]here is no dead matter,” and “lifelessness is only a disguise behind which hide unknown form of life.”²⁸ Matter is a life continuum that can be mapped out as God – or, more likely, its self-appointed uniformed deputies – did. But the father insists that matter can also be redistributed into a new, planetary ecology of togetherness in which energy, thought, affect, value, resources, and rights can be allotted according to a less anthropocentric dispensation system. With an eye to the latter, the father lectures us about the “priority” trash deserves, about tailors' dummies within which a vital force is held hostage, and about “races of wood” and their “suffering” in the forms the humans imposed on them such as wardrobes. But he also talks about transformations that can be either reparatory or damning, and he puts his mouth where his money



is by undergoing several metamorphoses himself, into a bird, a cockroach, and a many-legged, crab-looking *Kreatur*, alongside countless other instances of quasi-fantastic yet realistically described transmogrification, cross-species transgression, personification, animalization, humanization, and objectualization or thing-becoming, with which Schulz's fiction crawls – all puns intended.

But, much as the metamorphic imaginary at play in the stamp album episode and in Kabbalistic textual maneuverings more broadly leans on the very imperial apparatus of the postal service to render Drohobycz a gateway to the planet and thus appoint the local and local humanity as nodes in and passages into much broader geographies and life schemes, Kakania too is more than it meets the eye. For there is an ethno-cultural flipside to the bureaucratic-militaristic Empire's forlorn Galician corner, to this place plagued by chronic *ennui*, monotonous, insecure in its provincialism, apologetic about its rural fabric and visited by fantasies of metropolitan sophistication. This reverse is an unprecedented multi- and cross-ethnocultural dynamic. This dynamic, this sociocultural modality of being with an other and of experimenting with life and culture, of "rubbing" at surfaces and habits, some would argue, still has a lesson to teach the struggling EU. Imperial nostalgia or not, wishful thinking or less so, this lesson falls back on an existing and extraordinarily fertile geocultural region in the agonizing Empire's northwest. Spanning an area historically claimed or currently administered by a number of nation-states born on the ruins of Austro-Hungary – Poland, Ukraine, Romania, and their ruthless invaders, Germany and

the former USSR – this zone roughly extends from Central-Southern Galicia to northeastern Romania's region of Moldova, whose eastern half became a Soviet Republic once re-annexed by Stalin before the end of World War II and then the "independent" state of today. Lying in the middle of an expanse that a century ago functioned as a loose cultural entity that gives to this very day literary historians wedded to the "methodological nationalism" model – as Ulrich Beck named it – big headaches is Bukovina. The region is nowadays split between Ukraine and Romania, with Czernowitz (Cernăuți in Romanian) its urban center.²⁹ Inside and outside Bukovina, to the South all the way to Southern Moldova and to the East hundreds of miles into the Pale of Settlement, the throbbing heart of this unique geocultural system is what one might define, by Western standards, as a half-urban, half-rural small town, a thriving and expanding village of the *shtetl* type feeding its human and cultural energies into bigger cities such as Czernowitz and Lviv (in Ukraine), Iași (in Romania), Chișinău (in Bessarabia, today's Republic of Moldova), and further into Europe and the world beyond. Indeed, the modestly urbanized enclave for which Drohobycz is typical has been seminal for the earth-shattering changes at the beginning of the twentieth century across European and world arts. Bringing together a plethora of coexisting ethnic, religious, and linguistic communities and their time-honored, multicontinental traditions, the Drohobycz microcosm, again and again reinstated throughout this region of the crumbling Empire, yielded stunning syntheses that would alter the course of modern literature and art history.



It is well known that the birth of the avant-garde and some of its “isms” – or, at the very least, one of its births – took place around here. There would be no Dadaism without Tristan Tzara, who was born Samuel Rosenstock in the northern Moldavian town of Moinești in 1896. And, incidentally, there would be no Tzara without his Romanian precursors Urmuz (Demetru Dem. Demetrescu-Buzău), without whom, I might add, there would be no Eugène Ionesco either. For Tzara and Urmuz – the *Ur-model* of all Romanian avant-gardists – were, alongside Marcel Iancu, Victor Brauner, Ilarie Voronca, Gherasim Luca, and other Jewish-Romanian “geniuses,” as Andrei Codrescu calls them, so instrumental to the rise and dissemination of absurdist-Surrealist arts in Romania and beyond during and after World War I.³⁰

Blecher was one of these geniuses. Like them, and as with Kafka, Schulz, and Foer, as with Ionescu/Ionesco and Czernowitz-born Paul Celan, Blecher compels us to rethink – also in a context marked by personal and collective tragedy – the machinery of tradition and innovation, place, language, belonging, and affiliation, minority and majority status, and thus also what makes one a Romanian, Czech, Polish, Ukrainian, German, Jewish, or American writer and anything in between all these classifications and designations in urgent need of scrutiny in the era of World Literature. The world and the literature projecting it are important here, and not only because the default unit of modern literary-historical analysis, the nation-state in its ethno-linguistic and territorial embodiment, proves reductive in the face of the region’s sub-, cross-, a-national, and programmatically cosmopolitan

deployments and exchanges of creative energies. Also to be taken into account is that if few Romanians are aware that Blecher was born in 1909 in Botoșani, a Romanian Drohobycz just east of Romania’s Bukovina (he died only twenty-nine year later in another Moldavian Drohobycz, Roman), they do learn in school that the country’s “national poet” and foremost claim to “universality,” the anti-Semitic and nationalist poet Mihai Eminescu, was born in Botoșani in 1850. So different in many ways, the two are both plugged in transnational networks of textuality at the crossroads of empires old and new, and, equally remarkable, they both peel back imaginatively the veneer of present reality. In so doing, the belated Romantic Eminescu harks back nostalgically to a fictional past and passé style, whereas Blecher, decades later and under the sign of Kafka, Salvator Dali, Urmuz, rising Existentialism, and burgeoning Jewish-Romanian avant-gardism, is a harbinger of a new world.

As in Kafka and Schulz, this world is not entirely revealed. It is not completely hidden either. This is why Schulz describes it as a “semireality” that exists and beckons the visionary writer through the cracks in the visible everyday.³¹ It is the writer’s perception that forces this reality’s whole body to surface. The *empirical* world is *all* surface, but it is the world Schulz and Blecher are after. “Reality,” writes Schulz in *The Street of Crocodiles* – and Foer repeats in *Tree of Codes* – “is as thin as paper,”³² a cover to rub off. A half-reality in Schulz, the *papier-maché* surroundings that camouflage something else, another logic and flow of life, are deemed a “surreality” in most of Blecher’s critics, a “hyperreality” in commentators like Codrescu,³³ and “irreality”



by Blecher himself. Published in 1936, his most important book forefronts the “irreality” concept in the title, *Adventures in Immediate Irreality* (*Întâmplări în irealitatea imediată*), one followed, the next year, by *Scarred Hearts* (*Inimi cicatrizate*). Both books, as well as *The Lighted-up Burrow* (*Vizuină luminată*) – which Blecher’s own Max Brod, Jewish-Romanian avant-garde poet and archivist Sașa Pană, published in a volume as late as in 1971 – are relentless and “authentic” explorations of this “irreality,” but I should probably say *authenticist*, for two reasons. First, because the term, intensely used by Romanian critics, implies a reference to André Gide and his uncompromised analysis and self-analysis; and second, because it is in relation to this brutally “sincere” and “immoralist” art that Blecher develops a presentation modality allowing him access to an invisible world via a *realistic* canvas of the immediate and the visible. As in Kafka and Schulz, the fantastic, the absurd, the things’ “new existence,” as Blecher writes in *Adventures*, “nest in the plain sight of “normal” reality or right underneath it; it is “only the flimsiest of membranes” that “separate[s]” the “certitudes” the book’s narrating protagonist “live[s] by” from the “world of incertitudes” beneath.³⁴ In an important sense, then, Blecher’s is an amphibious existence, partaking as it does, like Schulz’s, in multiple ontological registers, in worlds that do not register socially but exist and in a world that does register socially but harbors others that do not. As Blecher rubs at surfaces and conventions clothing and shaping the most banal things, as he “flays” the material repertoire of the familiar, these objects spring into a life outside their habitual ontological regimen, modify

their state or behavior, and transform to awe and unsettle. Like “leather-bound” books, “these true-to-life details, perceived from the distance of my swoon, stupefied and stunned me like a last gulp of chloroform. It was what was most humdrum and familiar in the objects that disturbed me most. The habit of being seen so many times must have worn out their skins, and they sometimes look flayed and bloody to me – and alive, ineffably alive.”³⁵ Once the “transparent paper they had been wrapped in till then” was “removed,” things did not only seem ready to be “put to new, superior uses,” but they were “seized by a veritable frenzy of freedom, and the independence they declared of one another went far beyond simple isolation to exultation, ecstasy. Their enthusiasm for living in a new light encompassed me as well: I felt powerful bonds linking me to them, invisible networks making me every bit as much of an object, a part of the room, as they were, the way an organ grafted onto a living organism goes through subtle physical metamorphoses until it becomes one with the body once foreign to it.”³⁶

The keywords here are “they” (the “objects”), “network,” “body,” and “metamorphoses,” and it is important to point out that, in Michael Henry Heim’s superb translation, the original *anastomoze* – anastomoses or connections occurring between originally separate body parts such as blood vessels – become “networks.” Thus, Heim bolsters the connection idea while losing the organicist connotation that is, however, reinforced right thereafter to suggest the human’s equal-footing integration into the animal-objectual “flat,” non-hierarchical, and more humane co-dependence of organic and inorganic life. This is, indeed,



hyperrealism, an intensification rather than evasion of reality, much like the Blecherian absurd is an exacerbation of a logic animating life in the ever-reiterated pantomime of the little Polish, Ukrainian, and Romanian towns Jews left for Dachau, for Romania's Transnistria death factories, or for Israel later on.

These are "humble towns," as Foer characterizes them in *Everything Is Illuminated*. So is Foer's *shtetl* of Trachimbrod, scene of unspeakable horrors during the Nazi invasion, and so is Drohobycz or Roman. Before being decimated in the Holocaust, during the decades between the two World Wars, throughout the half-century of Soviet rule, and in the post-Cold War era as well, they have remained places of unbearable boredom, monotony, and unremarkable, wilting life showcasing its automatism to the fullest, but also sites of unparalleled creativity, of a visionarism capable of plumbing reality's irreality. To this day, these are drab worlds of damnation and revolt, of blindness and illumination. Here, to paraphrase Foer, nothing is illuminated yet everything can be. Here people, animals, and things live out their pedestrian lives or take flight over rooftops as in Chagall or like the narrator's father in Schulz, only to come down, sometimes tragically, like most things that go up in modernism, with Foer's September 11 postmodern Kaddish, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. Little happens here, or so it seems. For a lot in fact happens, but only the highly observant few notice. In other words, the nonsensical, the fantastic, the surreal, the absurd, and the illogical are not a matter of invention but of discovery. The dog-becoming men, the shape-changing buildings, the machine

(rubber tube)-becoming in Schulz and the cockroach-becoming and the tree-becoming of the narrator, the human-becoming of police dogs and their uprising *Planet of the Apes*-like, the shops made out of and like what they sell (such as sausages) in Blecher, as well as the mannequins whose bodies without organs are more "real" than reality because, in both, they do not hide their artificiality – all this need not be "invented" or sowed into reality.³⁷ It only has to be harvested. More than in Kafka, tuberculosis – Pott's disease, in Blecher's case – heightens the senses to alert the narrating patient in his own, French sanatorium to other worlds, whether it is the surrounding world of the "lava of matter"³⁸ in *Adventures* or the world of the self, sealed inside the carapace of its plaster cast, as in *Scarred Hearts*.³⁹ For, as a character of the 1937 book offers, if the healthy are "monotonous animal[s],"⁴⁰ the ill may lean on the body in pain to get a new purchase on the living continuum, with illness accruing the kind of "oblique animal perspective" on the world for which the protagonist of *Adventures* envies a dog.⁴¹

On this flattened-out *Zauberberg*, suffering is an eye-opener physically and metaphysically or, more precisely, ontologically. In one sense, *my* suffering is irreducible to somebody else's. In another, though, it equalizes. It teaches me about the horizontal ontology in which, as we suffer, we share in the world's common physicality, and, as we are threaded by the same vitality in crisis, we find ourselves anthropologically decentered and repositioned within the spectrum of an animality stretching beyond the human and the animate. This space is a pedagogical ecology because inside it we stand to learn fundamental



things about ourselves. Across the Kafka family, animals oftentimes teach humans what it means to suffer, the meaning of suffering, and with it the very meaning of being human. "Animals!" exclaims Schulz in *The Street of Crocodiles*, "the object of insatiable interest, examples of the riddle of life, created, as it were, to reveal the human being to man himself..."⁴² In crucial moments of somatic, mental, and emotional distress, individual or collective, animals just *present* themselves to us to embody exemplarily – and teach, as I say – both presence and its loss, the importance of being present for another, human or nonhuman, the Levinasian duty of ethical *Mitsein*, the strictures of being-with and of co-presence in the "flat" ontology of *ta onto*, of things that are.

Foer's 2016 novelistic tour de force *Here I Am* encapsulates, already in its title, both this ethical presence and its animal derivation, and here I can only gesture toward a more adequately comprehensive untying of the thick knot that this landmark accomplishment of twenty-first-century American and world fiction constitutes in the Kafkian web of material imagination and literary-cultural intertextuality. To be sure, Foer goes back to Kafka in all sorts of ways. Directly, he does so in *Eating Animals*, which is very much in dialogue with Kafka's vegetarianism and quotes, for the purpose of this conversation, the famous passage in Brod's book where the biographer reproduces the words his friend reportedly spoke to a fish from the Berlin aquarium: "Now at last I can look at you in peace, I don't eat you anymore." It is noteworthy, as Foer says, that Kafka is no longer ashamed to look at the fish because he can now sustain the animal's gaze, and

so he does not look away, ashamed of his meat-eating habits;⁴³ once more, the animal looks at us, and that look de-fines us, humans, for ourselves, carries us over our limits and shortcomings, and ultimately empowers. Indirectly, Foer answers Kafka's call through Schulz. *Extremely Loud* takes up the same indirectness via Günther Grass, with Oskar Schell, his tambourine, his invention of Surrealist objects such as airbag-fitted skyscrapers in response to a traumatic post-9/11 world, and the key meant to unlock a door *not* meant, however, for Oskar's access to the solution for his problem, for healing the void left by the death of the father in one of the Twin Towers, and more broadly for "the cancer of never letting go."⁴⁴ *Extremely Loud* is thus about post-traumatic "letting go," about mourning and survival, and so is *Here I Am*. Both reference, more than Philip Roth's 1962 novel and the marital troubles of its plot, the letting go *Ur-szene*, if you will – the Akedah story of Genesis 22.1-18. "Here I am," Abraham answers God's call: I am present and ready to let go of Isaac in the name of my duty to you, which trumps everything, including my basic obligations to the human world, to my family even. The comments Kafka made on the Mt. Moriah episode in response to Søren Kierkegaard's Abrahamic glosses from *Fear and Trembling* are well-known, but it is here helpful to remember that Kafka dwells on Abraham's "worldliness," on what, in human society, holds Abraham up and back, preventing him from hearing the divine call at all, deferring or even deterring his "here I am," his unconditioned submission to God, and Isaac's sacrifice.⁴⁵ In *The Gift of Death/Literature in Secret*, Jacques Derrida is keen on the same worldly context



and case against the sacrifice, but he also alludes to the sacrifice that *is* being performed in Genesis 22.13. Displaced onto the ram caught in the thicket of the same world in which familial obligations entangled Abraham, the sacrifice does occur on Mt. Moriah and is and perpetuated, Derrida reminds us, throughout world history. Both “human and... nonhuman,” the French philosopher stresses, this sacrifice makes this world history possible literally in its true, worldly, cross-faith, Abrahamic, and trans-ecumenic sense.⁴⁶ And yet we humans so easily forget this, or prefer not to remember the presence and the gaze of

the animal actor in this scenario, ignoring the “beast”’s central role in the very production of the human. The voiceless ram *is present* so that humans may build a world, a structure of planetary co-presence. The fish *was there*, looked and was looked at, so that Kafka may relearn his humanity and thus look one more time the other – the animal – in the eye. And the family dog in *Here I Am*, Argus – the “all-seeing,” Panoptes – is there, about to be euthanized, if not sacrificed, in the vet’s office so that Jacob and his family may learn the lesson of letting go while being present for one another in a world that must go on.

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NOTES

1. This essay is the slightly modified version of a lecture I gave at Yale on December 7, 2017 before members of the Department of Germanic Languages and Literatures and the Department of Comparative Literature. The title of the talk was “Kafka at a Distance: Schulz, Blecher, Foer.” The hospitality of the Yale colleagues is gratefully acknowledged here one more time. I also want to thank Doris Mironescu, the editor of the recently published definitive edition of M. Blecher’s works, for answering my queries.
2. Jonathan Safran Foer, “Foreword,” in Bruno Schulz, *The Street of Crocodiles and Other Stories*, Translated by Celina Wieniewska, Foreword Jonathan Safran Foer, Introduction by David A. Goldfarb, New York, Penguin, 2008, pp. vii–x.
3. VisualEditions, “The making of *Tree of Codes* by Jonathan Safran Foer. Watch the last three months of production in just three minutes,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r0GcB0PYKjY> (accessed November 29, 2017).
4. “Jonathan Safran Foer: Die Cutting a Novel,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WPW6hMIHQNA> (accessed November 29, 2017).
5. Jonathan Safran Foer, *Tree of Codes*, London, UK, Visual Editions, 2010, pp. 137–139.
6. On this subject, see Ian Thomas Fleishman, “The Rustle of the Anthropocene: Kafka’s Odradek as Ecocritical Icon,” *The Germanic Review* 92, no. 1 (January–March 2017), p. 44. In his essay, Fleishman critiques ecocriticism and new materialist interpretations by Timothy Morton, Jane Bennett, and J. Hillis Miller.
7. Henry Sussman, *Idylls of the Wanderer: Outside in Literature and Theory*, New York, Fordham University Press, 2007, p. 162.
8. Wai Chee Dimock, *Through Other Continents: American Literature across Deep Time*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2008, p. 3.
9. Jorge Luis Borges, *Selected Non-Fictions*, Edited by Eliot Weinberger, Translated by Esther Allen, Suzanne Jill Levine, and Eliot Weinberger, New York, Viking, 1999, p. 357.



10. Blecher has been called “the Romanian Kafka” by numerous writers and critics inside and outside Romania. See, for example, Andrei Codrescu’s essay “Max Blecher’s Adventures,” in Max Blecher, *Adventures in Immediate Reality*, Translated by Michael Henry Heim, New York, New Directions, 2015, p. xi.
11. Dimock, *Through Other Continents*, pp. 144-145.
12. On Kafka’s “unknown family” of animals, see Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, Edited and with an Introduction by Hannah Arendt, New York, Schocken Books, 1985, p. 132. Foer draws from this place in Benjamin’s essay “Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death” in *Eating Animals*, New York, Little, Brown and Company, 2009, pp. 36-37.
13. Jerzy Ficowski, *Regions of Great Heresy – Bruno Schulz: A Biographical Portrait*, Translated and Edited by Theodosia Robertson, New York, W. W. Norton, 2003.
14. Foer, “Foreword,” p. viii.
15. Schulz, *The Street of Crocodiles and Other Stories*, p. 116.
16. Foer, “Foreword,” p. viii.
17. *Ibidem*, p. ix.
18. *Ibidem*, p. ix.
19. *Ibidem*, pp. ix-x.
20. David A. Goldfarb, “Introduction,” in Schulz, *The Street of Crocodiles and Other Stories*, p. xix.
21. Schulz, *The Street of Crocodiles and Other Stories*, p. 166.
22. *Ibidem*, pp. 165-166.
23. *Ibidem*, p. 167.
24. On this vitalist energy and “vitalist materialism” in general, see Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2016.
25. Schulz, *The Street of Crocodiles and Other Stories*, p. 167.
26. Efthymia Rentzou, “Animal,” in Eric Hayot and Rebecca L. Walkowitz (eds.), *A New Vocabulary for Global Modernism*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2016, p. 30.
27. Schulz, *The Street of Crocodiles and Other Stories*, p. 174.
28. *Ibidem*, p. 31; Foer, *Tree of Codes*, p. 88.
29. Ulrich Beck formulated his critique of “methodological nationalism” first in a 2002 article, then he reformulated it in “Toward a New Critical Theory with a Cosmopolitan Intent,” which came out in *Constellations* 10, no. 4 (2003), pp. 453-468.
30. Codrescu, “Max Blecher’s Adventures,” p. x.
31. Schulz, *The Street of Crocodiles and Other Stories*, p. 230.
32. *Ibidem*, p. 67; Foer, *Tree of Codes*, p. 92.
33. Codrescu refers to Blecher’s “hyperrealism” in “Max Blecher’s Adventures,” p. x.
34. Max Blecher, *Adventures in Immediate Reality*, Translated by Michael Henry Heim, New York, New Directions, 2015, pp. 8-9.
35. *Ibidem*, p. 9.
36. *Ibidem*, 9.
37. On Blecher’s “body without organs,” see Cezar Gheorghe’s article “Max Blecher’s Body without Organs,” <http://www.romanianliteraturenow.com/uncategorized-ro/download-and-watch-movie-john-wick-chapter-2-2017>.
38. Blecher, *Adventures in Immediate Reality*, p. 77.
39. Blecher, *Scarred Hearts*, p. 194.
40. *Ibidem*, 130.
41. Blecher, *Adventures in Immediate Reality*, p. 85.
42. Schulz, *The Street of Crocodiles and Other Stories*, p. 42.
43. Max Brod, *Franz Kafka: A Biography*, Translated from the German by G. Humphreys Roberts and Richard Winston, New York, Schocken Books, 1975, p. 74. Foer responds to this scene in Brod’s biography in *Eating Animals*, New York, Little, Brown and Company, 2009, especially pp. 36-41.



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44. Jonathan Safran Foer, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 2005, p. 17.
45. Franz Kafka, *Parables and Paradoxes*, In German and English, New York, Schocken Books, 1976, pp. 40-45. On Kierkegaard, Kafka, and the time-honored tradition of interpreting the Akedah story in all Abrahamic religions and philosophies, see Bradley Beach and Matthew T. Powell (eds.), *Interpreting Abraham: Journeys to Moriah*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2014.
46. Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death* (Second Edition) and *Literature in Secret*, Translated by David Wills, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2008, p. 71.