

## Book Review

**Albrecht, Nicola.** *Verschollen im Meer der Medien: Kafkas Romanfragment "Amerika": Zur Rekonstruktion und Deutung eines Medienkomplexes.* Heidelberg: Winter, 2006. 315 pp. i52.00 hardcover.

**By Helen Hughes, University of Surrey**

Franz Kafka's unfinished novel was first published as a fragment in 1927 with the title *Amerika* given to it by its first editor, Kafka's friend, Max Brod. *Der Verschollene* was Kafka's working title and chosen as more appropriate by the editors of the critical edition published in 2002. Nicola Albrecht embeds both in her own title for the publication of her doctoral thesis on adaptations of *Amerika*. Her task is to reconstruct part of the reception history of the work, a "media complex" that has built up from the first theater adaptation by Max Brod in the mid-1950s to Martin Kippenberger's installation "The Happy End of Franz Kafka's *Amerika*," first exhibited in March 1994. Her intention is to highlight the process of adaptation as an alternative to the process of interpretation in secondary literature, for the indeterminacy that provokes multiple interpretations is also what inspires the creative artist to use *Amerika* as material for new work. The result of her research, however, is not at all the idea that the novel is lost or dispersed in a media seascape. Rather, this alternative reception leads to a more consolidated understanding of how Kafka's novel continues to reverberate into the 21st century with its exploration of directionless youth, sexuality, power, class, and forced migration.

Albrecht is very careful to treat each medium appropriately and to find ways to explore the relationship between source text and target medium—to use the language of translation—in a way that does not place the adaptation at a disadvantage. This means that she devotes a lot of her work to the introduction of various structurally or semiotically defined methodologies, both to capture the nature of the fragmentary novel itself and its potential for adaptation, and to characterize its relationship to the stage play (Max Brod, 1957), the radio play (Ludwig Cremer, 1957), the television film (script by Heinrich Carle, directed by Zbynek Brynych, 1969), the Brechtian film (Jean-Marie Straub and Danielle Huillet, 1983), the experimental film (Hanns Zischler, 1979), as well as to opera (Roman Haubenstock-Ramati, 1965), painting (Tom Rollins and the K.O.S, 1984–1989) and installation (Martin Kippenberger, 1994).

This multifaceted approach, although it tends to fragment Kafka's work yet more into semiotic levels of narrative, linguistic style, character constellations, themes and motifs, works well when the adaptation is considered to be a successful work in its own right. The most enjoyable sections to read are those related to the slightly less systematically treated subject of the actors' performances of Cremer's radio play and Brynych's television film, where the description of the meanings generated by voice and gesture manage to convince one of the overwhelming importance of this aspect of the transformation.

Also full of energy and enthusiasm are the descriptions of the American teacher and artist Tim Rollin's work with the novel and his group the "Kids of Survival" inspired by an article about Straub/Huillet's film *Klassenverhältnisse*. Kippenberger's installation, made of 49 tables and 98 chairs arranged with a variety of other objects in formations for face to face conferences, is analyzed in a way that communicates its modern yet mysterious sense of imminent revelation.

When the adaptation is not considered successful, there is a tendency to express the failure in terms of the discrepancy between what is felt to be the achievement of Kafka's novel and the shortfall in terms of faithfulness of adaptation. Max Brod is often criticized for an overly authoritarian approach

to the interpretation of Kafka's texts, although his adaptation to the theatre established the idea of adapting Kafka's texts and forms the basis for three of the other *Amerika* adaptations. With Straub and Huillet—repeatedly accused of being an unusual *auteurist* couple who have produced an idiosyncratic film—Albrecht struggles, as, she writes, so many do. It is unusual and strangely alienating to read an evaluation of *Klassenverhältnisse* which is neither completely enthralled by the audacity and effectiveness of their techniques for delivering the text, nor entirely convinced by their political reading of Kafka, proclaimed as the greatest 20th-century writer on the consequences of industrialization.