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The photograph on the Journal cover comes from Hartmut Binder's turn-of-the-century photograph collection of Prague.

ALTHUSSER METONYMY CHINA WALL

George Hartley
Ohio State University

Kafka's *The Great Wall of China* opens with an enclosure, a definition of a political space: The Great Wall of China, the narrator explains

. . . was finished off at its northernmost corner. From the southeast and the southwest it came up in two sections that finally converged there. This principle of piecemeal construction was applied also on a smaller scale by both of the two great armies of labor, the eastern and the western. It was done in this way: gangs of some twenty workers were formed who had to accomplish a length, say, of five hundred yards of wall, while a similar gang built another stretch of the same length to meet the first. But after the junction had been made the construction of the wall was not carried on from this point, let us say, where this thousand yards ended; instead the two groups of workers were transferred to begin building again in quite different neighborhoods. Naturally in this way many great gaps were left, which were only filled in gradually and bit by bit, some, indeed, not till after the official announcement that the wall was finished. In fact it is said that there are gaps which have never been filled in at all, an assertion, however, that is probably merely one of the many legends to which the building of the wall gave rise, and which cannot be verified, at least by any single man with his own eyes and judgment, on account of the extent of the structure. (CS 235)

I want to explore a certain resemblance between Louis Althusser's description of ideological terrain in *Reading Capital* and Franz Kafka's description of the production of ideological terrain in *The Great Wall of China*. Let me assure you from the start, however, that while I propose to engage one text in dialogue with the other, I do not mean to imply some *necessary* relationship or influence between the two. In other words, I am not proposing to unearth a set of pre-existent connections which makes Kafka somehow Althusserian or vice versa, but to stage those connections as an examination of the ideological value of the horizontal or metonymic enclosure of a certain terrain and the related question of a vertical or metaphoric transcendence. While both writers demystify the gesture toward transcendence in much the same way Marx had in his discussion of religion as an opiate, their explanations differ as to the exact relationship between the constructions of horizon and transcendence.

But I first want to pose a strategic distinction between metaphor and metonymy. Metaphor might be seen as a transcendent movement; through metaphor we translate the terms from one field into the terms of another, the relationship or positioning between these terms seen as vertical, a substitution from above to below, inside to outside. Metaphor assumes a certain equivalence, a reduction of differences, between the two terms in order for this substitution to be possible. Metonymy, on the other hand, works laterally, establishing relationships of contiguity through pairings and displacements. This shift from metaphor to metonymy moves us from transcendence to immanence. As both Althusser and Kafka will suggest, metaphor is inherently theological in its structuring of mediation itself as a relationship to something outside or above the structure or terrain, and by its positioning of the mediator as one who inhabits a space or opening between us and some external power.

One of Althusser's major goals in *Reading Capital*, in fact, is to show that by the time Marx wrote *Capital* he no longer operated within a Hegelian discourse marked by metaphoric gestures of transcendence; Marx instead had developed a properly Marxist discourse operating along differential, metonymic lines. Marx had not simply inverted his earlier Hegelian discourse; such an inversion would have left him with a mirror image of the same ideological terrain. Marx, so Althusser argues, actually shifted terrains, had taken up a position in a new field where new problems were now visible that had remained invisible on the terrain of Hegel or Smith or Ricardo or Feuerbach. But Althusser warns that this question of visibility and invisibility should not be thought of in terms of individual capability; Hegel and others could not see the objects Marx sees because they inhabited a different terrain which made those objects invisible. "Any object or problem" Althusser claims, "situated on the terrain and within the horizon, in the definite structured field of the theoretical problematic of a given theoretical discipline, is visible. . . . The sighting is thus no longer the act of an individual subject . . . [but of the field's] structural conditions, it is the relation of immanent reflection between the field of the problematic and *its* objects and *its* problems. Vision then loses the religious privileges of divine reading: it is no more than a reflection of the immanent necessity that ties an object or problem to its conditions of existence, which lie in the conditions of its production" (RC 25). The invisible, on the other hand, "is defined by the visible as *its* invisible, as *its* forbidden vision: the invisible is not therefore simply what is outside the visible, the outer darkness of exclusion—but the *inner darkness of exclusion*, inside the visible itself because defined by its structure" (RC 26).

Right now I want to suggest that Kafka's concerns are quite similar, that he will interrogate a structure much like Althusser's inner darkness of exclusion, and that such inquiry will lead to a meditation on the presence and absence of the high command who orders the building of the wall. His tale itself—if it can be called that—must also be seen as a metonymic structure, a series of answers which reveal more urgent questions than the previous ones, a continuous displacement of frames and strategies of closure—such as historical narratives, childhood reminiscences, secret maxims, and parables—which, like the Imperial Messenger, never reach their intended end but continue the lines of flight Deleuze and Guattari identify as the crucial political gesture of Kafka's texts.¹

The building of the wall presents an enigma: why would the high command, if its intention is to safeguard us from the fierce nomads of the North, plan this piecemeal method of construction which leaves gaps in the protective structure? The answer to this leads to more enigmas. The high command, in its infinite wisdom, really intended to produce the side-effects of the wall-building process—the sense of purpose, the unity, the cooperation, the willful, even enthusiastic, submission to the dictates of the high command—rather than the wall itself. Or, as the scholar in the story explains, they really wanted to build a foundation for a tower that would complete the abandoned project of the Tower of Babel. But how can a quarter-circle structure with extensive gaps provide such a base? Hence the conclusion that the tower must be meant spiritually, metaphorically. Which raises the next question, Why then build the wall itself if the tower is only a metaphor? The narrator's answer, which comes later in the tale and with no explicit connection, is that the tower is a metaphor for the "superficial culture mounting sky-high around a few precepts that have been drilled into people's minds for centuries, precepts which, though they have lost nothing of their eternal truth, remain entirely invisible in this fog of confusion" (CS 242). The building of the wall, the enclosure of a political and ideological space, somehow provides a base for the installations of the high command itself in the tower, elevating them above the people like the mysterious and absent gods they appear to be to the common people. The building of the wall, in other words, maintains and constantly reproduces the conditions of hierarchy which make the high command, the imperial sun itself, possible in the first place in its metaphoric transcendence beyond the

world of the village. "But it is precisely this question of empire," the narrator tells us, "which in my opinion the common people should seek to answer, since they after all are the empire's final support" (CS 242). The support of the tower, then, is not the wall at all but the people in their process of building it as an enclosure.

The tower is the answer, but no one besides the narrator seems to recognize the question itself, the question of empire. The people, in building the wall, thus provide an answer to a question they are unable to ask. In his discussion of symptomatic reading Althusser asks: "Why is political economy necessarily blind to what it produces and to its work of production? Because its eyes are fixed on *the old question*, and it continues to relate its new answer to its old question; because it is still concentrating on the old '*horizon*' within which the new problem '*is not visible*'" (RC 24). So long as the people in Kafka's tale look to the wall, thought to exist in its totality as the empire's horizon, rather than look to the production which makes the wall and indeed the tower possible—in other words, so long as the people take the old terrain as a given—they will not be able to provide themselves with the terrain which will make the question of empire visible. As Althusser explains, the whole function of the field is not to see these questions, to forbid any sighting of them (RC 26).

Kafka's narrator tells us that we may be certain that in the office of the high command, forever absent from view, "through the window the reflected splendors of divine worlds fell on the hands of the leaders as they traced their plans" (CS 240). But the question remains, as we have seen, how could this command, tracing the plans of the divine, deliberately command something so inexpedient as the piecemeal construction of the wall? In answer the narrator relates an ancient maxim: "Try with all your might to comprehend the decrees of the high command, but only up to a certain point; then avoid further meditation" (CS 240). This interdiction seems to imply that there is some danger in going beyond that certain point; but it implies as well that it is *possible* to do so. We might be able to travel out to the margins of the empire and see for ourselves the condition of the wall; we might be able to follow the imperial messenger home and discover the location of the high command. But perhaps the danger lies not in what we might find in the borderlands or in the tower, but in the recognition that we will never know, no matter how hard we search, even where the center or the margins are, not because we did not look long or far enough but precisely because it is impossible to reach those points: "The limits that my capacity for thought imposes on me are narrow enough," the narrator explains, "but the province to be traversed here is infinite" (CS 241).

Thus the parable of the Imperial Messenger, which reads as follows:

The Emperor, so [the parable] runs, has sent a message to you, the humble subject, the insignificant shadow cowering in the remotest distance before the imperial sun; the Emperor from his deathbed has sent a message to you alone. . . . The messenger immediately sets out on his journey; . . . he cleaves a way for himself through the throng; if he encounters resistance he points to his breast, where the symbol of the sun glitters; the way is made easier for him than it would be for any other man. But the multitudes are so vast; their numbers have no end. If he could reach the open fields how fast he would fly, and soon doubtless you would hear the welcome hammering of his fists on your door. But instead how vainly does he wear out his strength; still he is only making his way through the chambers of the innermost palace; never will he get to the end of them; and if he succeeded in that nothing would be gained; the courts would still have to be crossed; and after the courts the second outer palace; and once more stairs and

courts; and once more another palace; and so on for thousands of years; and if at last he should burst through the outermost gate—but never, never can that happen—the imperial capital would lie before him, the center of the world, crammed to bursting with its own sediment. Nobody could fight his way through here even with a message from a dead man. But you sit at your window when evening falls and dream it to yourself. (CS 244)

This horizon-value, this pure infinite opening that Kafka describes in the parable of the Imperial Messenger, keeps us from making any progress simply because there is no beyond proper to the empire where we now stand, amid all its dense populace and its sedimentation. The empire's horizon is not the demarcation of a field outside our own but the internal effect of our own, its presence forever at a distance as the horizon-value of our own dream work as we sit at the window at nightfall when the horizon will fade into darkness. Nevertheless, this very illusion, Kafka's narrator tells us, "this very weakness [is] one of the most unifying influences among our people; indeed, if one may dare to use the expression, the very ground on which we live" (CS 247). And it is for this reason that the narrator decides to follow the ancient secret maxim and refuse to disillusion the people: "To set about establishing a fundamental defect here would mean undermining not only our consciences, but, what is far worse, our feet. And for that reason I shall not proceed any further with my inquiry into these questions" (CS 247-8).

Kafka, on the other hand, did proceed further in that inquiry by writing "The Great Wall of China." But what are we to make of this politically? What is the meaning of agency in a territory such as Kafka's or Althusser's where the plane continually falls away as the surface of the globe or falls in on itself as the inescapable interiority of the Imperial Capital? The implication in both Kafka and Althusser is that this ungrounding is a necessary antidote to mystification and transcendence. What is needed, Althusser claims, is a change of terrain, the discovery of a new continent not out beyond the horizon but right here, on the spot, as an articulation of the possibilities manifested within the absences or lapses of the first continent. He points out that we can't ignore that "this 'change of terrain' which produces as its effect this metamorphosis in the gaze [the production of an informed or demystified gaze] was itself only produced in very specific, complex and often dramatic conditions; that it is absolutely irreducible to the idealist myth of a mental decision to change 'view-points'; that it brings into play a whole process that the subject's sighting, far from producing, merely reflects in its own place; that in this process of real transformation of the means of production of knowledge, the claims of a 'constitutive subject' are as vain as are the claims of the subject of vision in the production of the visible; that the whole process takes place in the dialectical crisis of the mutation of a theoretical structure in which the 'subject' plays, not the part it believes it is playing, but the part which is assigned to it by the mechanism of the process" (RC 27).

Here we see a problem with characterizing the social and the ideological in terms of a single monolithic terrain or field. While this topography escapes an essentialist conception of the inside/outside terrain implied by the term "false consciousness," it nevertheless reduces the social to an enclosed, sutured totality, and reduces agency purely to the effect of a position within this unilinear terrain. But politics depends by definition on the possibility that the production of subject-positions is not restricted so totally to assigned points in a structure. While the palimpsestic image of the superimposed terrains complicates and appears to open up the univocity of this model, Althusser's insistence on the mechanical processes nevertheless restricts us at a given point to only one of the two terrains. But there is no reason to restrict ourselves to this singular model. We need instead to think the co-existence of multiple open-ended terrains which merge and repulse and cancel each other out in various ways according to very specific local conditions. The

margins of these various ideological fields will thus be the sites of articulation and contestation, the local instances of struggle made possible and limited no longer by the closure of a single field but precisely by the contiguity of these multiple fields.

If we borrow some terms from Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's book, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, we might be able to see the terrains proposed by Althusser and Kafka quite differently.² A first distinction of theirs is that between moments and elements: *moments* are differential positions that are articulated into a discourse or ideological field; *elements*, on the other hand, are those differential positions that are not articulated, that function within a discursive field as floating signifiers. A second distinction is between a logic of equivalence and a logic of difference. Like metaphor, *equivalence* works as a point of condensation where the differences between moments are dissolved to the point that the social breaks down into two opposing camps; the identities of these two camps are established through a relation of negativity, the one defined simply as the negation of the other, as with colonizer versus colonized, black versus white, or male versus female. Like metonymy, on the other hand, *difference* works as contiguity and displacement, and a moment's identity derives from its differential position in a given field. Neither logic is ever complete unto itself, however, for then there could be no floating elements and thus no space for articulation, rupture, and change. What becomes crucial here is to recognize the proliferation of non-articulated spaces, interstitial spaces at the limits of the established fields. These sites provide the potential for local struggles as nodal points of articulation which can subvert the established fields at their margins.

Althusser's terrain, both social and ideological, resembles that governed by Laclau and Mouffe's logic of difference. The pure interiority Althusser's field assigns to each moment its necessary position and function within that seamless space of the totality. To be sure, he tried to reinsert the political in his later work by positing the reproduction of the conditions of production by Ideological State Apparatuses and even later in his insistence on the essential role of class struggle in the functioning and construction of these "ISAs", but these after-the-fact additions still failed to explain how class struggle could ever operate within what remains a unilinear model of the totality. Thus a certain exteriority is necessary for political change. This nevertheless cannot be a positive exteriority demarcating a different terrain outside the present one, but instead a negative exteriority which exists simply as the limit of the social and the impossibility of its complete closure: "It is in this terrain," Laclau and Mouffe explain, "where neither a total interiority nor a total exteriority is possible, that the social is constituted. . . . Thus, neither absolute fixity nor absolute nonfixity is possible. . . . A system only exists as a partial limitation of a 'surplus of meaning' which subverts it. . . . *The practice of articulation, therefore, consists in the construction of nodal points which partially fix meaning; and the partial character of this fixation proceeds from the openness of the social, a result, in its turn, of the constant overflowing of every discourse by the infinitude of the field of discursivity*" (HSS 113; emphasis theirs).

Interestingly, it is Kafka's *China Wall* rather than Althusser's *Reading Capital* that shows this hegemonic process at work in the production of a Chinese imaginary. The Great Wall, after all, has to be built; it does not already lie there as the border between the Chinese people and the fierce nomads of the north. And its construction is by no means guaranteed; the Chinese are prepared, molded, scripted from infancy to recognize their roles within the social structure. We see the conditions of their interpellation as wall-building subjects in their education, when the teacher makes them build miniature models of the wall, and then smashes them as a lesson in the need to build the wall ever better. The building of the wall is in fact the constant structuring and articulation—in Laclau and Mouffe's terminology—of the free-floating Chinese *elements* into *moments* of the totality.

By structuring the equivalence of all Chinese as the negation of the nomads from the north—who have never actually been seen, I might add, but have simply been "represented" in the legends about them—the dominant powers construct and maintain the metaphorical transcendence of the tower. The conclusion Kafka seems to imply is that once the wall ceases to exist, only then will the tower cease. The nonclosure of the horizon—which denies the reduction to equivalence necessary for transcendence—is precisely that which the wall serves to contain. It is this negative exteriority that makes antagonism and articulation—and thus political action—possible. While Althusser's conception of the social terrain subverts the metaphorical move outside the structure, it nevertheless denies these antagonistic nodal points of negative exteriority which reveal the limits and impossibility of the social. Althusser attempts to produce a pure metonymy within a single enclosed terrain, without recognizing, it seems, that it is enclosure itself that makes the gesture toward metaphor so tempting. Kafka, on the other hand, points to horizon-building, the attempt to limit or redirect the displacements and combinations of metonymy, as the necessary condition for hegemony.

Notes

¹ See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*.

² See chapter three of *Hegemony and Social Strategy* for these distinctions.

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