

Sonja Boos “Reading Gestures: Body Schema Disorder and Schizophrenia in Kafka’s Modernist Prose.”
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K. of Franz Kafka’s *The Trial* has sensorimotor troubles. He makes, for instance, “a gesture as if he were tearing himself loose from . . . two men, who were, however, standing some distance from him” (qtd. Boos 844). In her article “Reading Gestures: Body Schema Disorder and Schizophrenia in Kafka’s Modernist Prose,” Sonja Boos explores such “failing sensory-motor processes” (830) in Kafka’s prose, enriching the attention that previous scholarship has given to Kafka’s animation of psychopathologies. Such a focus allows for a deepening of our understanding of pathology in Kafka’s texts, with the bodies he portrays complicating his descriptions of mental problems. Situating his texts within scientific questions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Boos article aims to show how “Kafka’s prose gives literary substance to the emergent knowledge about postural, tactile, kinesthetic, and vestibular dysfunctions explored by neuroscientists of his era” (830).

As the title of her article suggests, Boos focuses on the body as the site of two pathologies, both introduced in 1908: schizophrenia and body schema disorder. “Schizophrenia,” coined by Eugen Bleuler, refers to, in Boos’s words, a “‘splitting’ of the patient’s mind (i.e. experience) from reality, a rift between irreconcilable thoughts or impulses and the ordinary demands of ordinary life” (831). “Body schema disorder” refers to patients’ problems identifying body parts or the relations between them. What links these two diseases – a connection Kafka’s prose foregrounds according to Boos – is that they are both marked by a “lack of insight into or denial of one’s illness” (834). Such a lack of insight into one’s condition, or *anosognosia*, also becomes for Boos the primary place in which the modernist experience of “alienation, fragmentation, and loss of self” is located in Kafka’s writings.

Boos traces these “troubled bodies” through a selection of Kafka’s fragments, stories, and novels – quoting, unfortunately for the reader of German, in English only. She usefully chooses to read Kafka’s animals, for example in “The Metamorphosis” and “Researches of a Dog,” “allegorically and anthropocentrically—with a focus on bodies, not species” (836). In these two stories, the schizophrenia is implied by the characters’ full possession of animal dexterity and virtuosity but lack of awareness of themselves as skillful animal performers. By contrast, Kafka’s humans are often seen (as K.’s disconnected gesture that started this review shows) stumbling and bumping, or missing objects they aim for; they have lost part of their kinesthetic-proprioceptive integrity.

Boos connects these moments of physical difficulty in Kafka’s prose with modernist poetics. If schizophrenia is often understood as performed by modernist poetics, she argues that through Kafka’s attention to corporeal processes this pathology is not merely constituted by “literary, textual devices, but physically performed by the neurologically affected bodies of its fictional characters” (831). Thus, his oeuvre, she argues, “epitomizes and at the same time overcomes the illegibility of the modernist, schizophrenic text” (843). His staging of body schema disorder exactly makes the (still) poorly understood diagnosis of schizophrenia, often thought of as “unknowable, unnarratable” (831), commensurable.

It is thanks to Boos's clarity of argument, underpinned by an elegant and equally clear prose, that one can formulate focused questions. For example: if, as Boos argues via Jacques Rancière's notion of the "poetics of knowledge," "literature must be understood as a discourse that is constitutive of knowledge itself" (832), what then can Kafka's poetics teach the (neuro)sciences today? While Boos situates Kafka in the scientific questions of his period, her interests in reading Kafka also fit squarely in today's flourishing discipline of 4E cognition – that is, embodied, embedded, extended, and enacted cognition. Exactly because of Boos's clear analysis of Kafka's prose as illuminating questions about the embodiment of mental issues in the sciences of his time, I am left wondering what Kafka's knowledge would reveal when faced, in her hands, with questions asked by contemporary research into embodied cognition.

Boos's article offers an important reading of Kafka's literary bodies and gestures through neuro-scientific developments of his time. Her sensitive readings of characters' corporeal moments move elegantly and eloquently into her theoretical considerations about modernist literature. As Lucia Ruprecht has done recently in *Gestural Imaginaries: Dance and Cultural Theory in the Early Twentieth Century* (2019), Boos evokes the importance of thinking about the portrayal of movement and gesture in (German) modernism, as these physically ground the period's emphasis on experience and complicates its concerns with mind and language. The article also elicits questions about other German modernist literary texts and the dysfunctional bodies these put on display – e.g. Rainer Maria Rilke's *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910). The article is thus an evocative read for anyone interested in pathological bodies, modernist poetics, and their entanglement.

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