

Mysterious Illnesses of Human Commodities in Woody Allen and Franz Kafka¹

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The thought of helping me is an illness
that has to be cured by taking to one's bed.

—Franz Kafka,
“The Hunter Gracchus” (CS 230)

The good walk in step. Without knowing
anything of them, the others dance around
them, dancing the dances of the age.

—Franz Kafka,
Wedding Preparations in the Country (85)

Woody Allen's *Zelig*² (1983) satirizes the social and political movements of early twentieth-century society, in which the protagonist Leonard Zelig and everyone around him dance along. Leonard Zelig makes headlines in the late 1920s when he is out of step with his world and becomes famous as “the human chameleon” who takes on the personal and physical characteristics of individuals whom he encounters. Various attempts are undertaken to cure Zelig's “deviant” behavior and to reintegrate him into society, but there is little success. Instead of being cured, Zelig becomes a “performing freak” and is exploited by a sensation-hungry public and profit-seeking individuals. During the various stages of his struggle to both fit in and resist, there are echoes and correspondences with the work of Franz Kafka, many of whose protagonists attempt to retain a sense of selfhood in a commodified world. *The Metamorphosis* (1912) in particular serves as an intertext for *Zelig*, but links

can also be established between Zelig and Karl Rossmann (*Amerika* [1913/14]), the performing ape Rotpeter ("A Report to an Academy" [1917]), and the hunger artist ("A Hunger Artist" [1922]). All these protagonists are involved in a similar struggle for personal integrity which is time and again frustrated by repressive and exploitative societal norms and presuppositions. A major difference between the two artists, however, is that Woody Allen is recreating an earlier period from a late twentieth-century point of view, whereas Kafka is writing from within the social and racial discourses of his time. In addition, the very different social realities for each artist, as well as their use of different media (film and fiction), significantly affect the types of narratives they construct to deal with the problematic. Another fundamental distinction is the absence of a cure for Kafka's protagonists. Zelig, on the other hand, is eventually cured of his malady and finds happiness until the end of his days.

Mysterious Patients

Zelig is the story of an exceptional human being, Leonard Zelig, who suffers from a "unique malady" (Z 65). This is first noted in 1928 when a few individuals recall having seen the same man in entirely different social and ethnic environments and each time, they claim, he looked and spoke like the people around him. Zelig does not attract general attention at this point, but those who know him describe him as "an odd little man who kept to himself" (Z 13). "Suddenly," however, there is "increasingly strange behavior" (Z 21), which reaches a climax a year later when Zelig disappears from his home and is absent from work: "Police are investigating the disappearance of a clerk named Leonard Zelig. Both his landlady and his employer have reported him missing" (Z 13). Zelig is not only literally missing in person but has also lost his identity. He is found in Chinatown as a "strange-looking Oriental" and is immediately taken to Manhattan Hospital: "In the ambulance he rants and curses in what sounds like authentic Chinese. He is restrained with a straitjacket. . . . When he emerges from the car twenty minutes later, incredibly, he is no longer Chinese but Caucasian" (Z 15-16). The doctors are bewildered, "no two can agree on a diagnosis" (Z 25), and this bewilderment still characterizes people's responses after Zelig is dead. In hindsight everyone keeps saying that this whole case was "quite astonishing" (Z 4), "very strange" (Z 4), "a very bizarre story" (Z 5).

Gregor Samsa's story in *The Metamorphosis* is just as exceptional and equally bizarre. There are many correspondences between the two texts, but the transformations they depict manifest themselves in different ways. Gregor's metamorphosis is more sudden: it is simply a fact "one morning" (M 3) that he wakes up as a "monstrous vermin" (M 3). Gregor transforms only once and for good. Zelig, on the other hand, takes on various identities and physical characteristics of other people and afterwards always regains his original shape. In terms of signification, Gregor, who retains his new form, seems to have acquired a solid signifier, whereas Zelig's continual metamorphoses suggest that he is a signifier which is constantly changing, a sign constantly in search of a signified. Unlike Gregor, who throughout his transformation retains his "human" soul, Zelig's transformation encompasses both body and soul as he is searching for a container to hold his slippery, continually shifting self. In view of this, Gregor and Zelig can be said to represent two different poles of Jewish identity: Gregor, golem-like, is a body in search of his soul, whereas Zelig, dybbuk-like, is a soul in search of a body, trying to find a solid frame for his unstable self.³ Zelig's dybbuk-like attributes are also suggested by one of the signs which is displayed when Zelig is exhibited: "SEE ZELIG TURN INTO YOU" (Z 44). What both protagonists share again is that they belong to the lower middle class and have similar professions: Zelig is a clerk and Gregor a traveling salesman. Their employers start looking for them when they do not appear for work, and their first "abnormal" behavior which calls for public action is job-related. Signs of "illness" are perceived only after this fact: in both cases there is an immediate call for the doctor.

When Gregor's mother hears the "insistent, distressed chirping" (M 5) in his voice, she immediately thinks that her son is "seriously ill" (M 10) and calls for a doctor. Strangely enough, even after they see his vermin shape, the family still acts around him as if he were ill: in the living room "now there wasn't a sound" (M 16); they go to bed "on tiptoe" (M 17); the next morning his sister Grete again "[comes] in on tiptoe, as if she were visiting someone seriously ill or perhaps even a stranger" (M 17). Later the parents wait in front of Gregor's room for the sister's report about his condition, inquiring "whether he had perhaps shown a little improvement" (M 23). And when Grete and her mother are busy removing Gregor's furniture, the mother tries to stop her because otherwise "it looks as if we had given up all hope of his getting better" (M 24). Ironically,

though, Gregor is never helped by a doctor, and possible help in the form of medicine is not only out of reach but harmful: when a medicine bottle breaks, we hear that “a splinter of glass wounded Gregor in the face, some kind of corrosive medicine flowed around him” (M 27). The “corrosive medicine” symbolizes the beginning of Gregor’s bodily disintegration: immediately after this scene we see the father bombard Gregor with apples, one of which “literally force[s] itself into [his] back” (M 29), causes “unbelievable pain” (M 29), and later brings about his total bodily disintegration and death. As for Zelig, the first round of medical experiments in the hospital ends with him walking on the walls of his room—a clear intertextual allusion to Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*: “He undergoes severe mood changes, and for several days, will not come off the wall” (Z 42). The pun on “off the wall” suggests Zelig’s corrosive state of mind and also sums up Gregor Samsa’s whole existence after his metamorphosis, because “Ever since [Gregor’s] change, except for his two excursions into the living room, he has gone nowhere except up and down the floor, walls, and ceiling of his room” (Corngold, M 55). For Zelig, as for Gregor, medicine is equally harmful, since it is the “experimental drug Somadril Hydrate” (Z 41) in particular which is responsible for his reduction to this subhuman level.

The Indecipherable Sign

Susan Sontag establishes a useful link between the act of interpreting illnesses and the many functions these can have if they are seen as metaphors: “. . . it is diseases thought to be multi-determined (that is, mysterious) that have the widest possibilities as metaphors for what is felt to be socially or morally wrong” (*Metaphor* 61). Zelig’s “illness” is certainly perceived as “multi-determined” and “mysterious” by the world around him. In the eyes of the people who remember him, he was as much an enigma in his lifetime as he is now. Indeed, the many divergent interpretations in the movie can be likened to the many scholarly commentaries on Gregor Samsa’s metamorphosis. In Susan Sontag’s words, Kafka is one of those authors who has “attracted interpreters like leeches” (“Interpretation” 18), and Stanley Corngold uses the title *The Commentators’ Despair* for his collection of articles on *The Metamorphosis*. In 1937, Hans-Joachim Schoeps saw in these commentaries a type of modern midrash and wished for a new complete Kafka edition “in the form of old Talmud folios: the Kafka text in the middle—above, beneath, and

on the sides framed by exegetical commentaries and interpretations” (419; my translation). Similarly, in the film we hear many commentaries on Zelig’s peculiar illness, from average persons to well-known authorities and intellectual luminaries such as Susan Sontag, Irving Howe, Saul Bellow, and Bruno Bettelheim, beginning with Susan Sontag’s remark that Zelig was “*the* phenomenon of the . . . twenties” (Z 3-4). Zelig’s impact on contemporaries was felt in all areas of society, as testified to by Professor Blum, author of the fictive study *Interpreting Zelig*:

To the Marxists, he was one thing. The Catholic Church never forgave him. . . . The American people, in the throes of the Depression as they were, found in him a symbol of possibility, of, of self-improvement and self-fulfillment. And, of course, the Freudians had a ball. (*Gesturing*) They could, they could interpret him in any way they pleased. It was all symbolism—but there were no two intellectuals who agreed about what it meant. (Z 97)

As with Gregor Samsa, everyone is busy defining Zelig, commodifying him, fitting him into categories, appropriating him either as their enemy or friend, devil or saint, or using him as an object for intellectual speculation. The many interpretations of Zelig’s illness can be seen as another Midrashic commentary of a secular sort which is playing serious games with Zelig’s liminal existence, while he himself regresses and progresses, trying to find his identity.⁴

The fact that Gregor never sees a doctor (his window even faces a hospital [M 12]—so close and yet so far) and that Zelig becomes worse and worse while in the hospital does suggest that Gregor’s and Zelig’s metamorphoses are not physical diseases which require medical attention, but rather that they are illnesses, the causes of which are manifold. The very description of Gregor’s shape as that of a “monstrous vermin” (M 3) is an inherently contradictory, oxymoronic construction. In this light Corngold stresses that “Gregor’s opaque body is thus to maintain him in a solitude without speech or intelligible gesture, in the solitude of an indecipherable sign” (“Metaphor” 89). Indeed, Kafka expressly asked that the insect not be depicted when he wrote to the Kurt Wolff Publishing Company in October 1915:

Dear Sir, You recently wrote that Ottomar Starke is going to do an illustration for the title page of *The Metamorphosis*. Now I

have had a slight . . . probably wholly unnecessary shock. It occurred to me that Starke . . . might want, let us say, to draw the insect itself. Not that, please, not that! I don't want to restrict his authority but only to make this request from my own naturally better knowledge of the story. The insect itself cannot be drawn. It cannot even be shown at a distance. (M 70)

Gregor's metamorphosis is final, and as a result he is read differently by those around him. The reader, though, knows that Gregor still has a human consciousness. But his family is uncertain about this, and the fact that they literally cannot understand him (M 11, 19) suggests that they cannot read him. Still, it is as hard for them as for the reader to reduce Gregor to "one" signified only. Even though the very first sentence says that he was transformed into a "monstrous vermin," it is only towards the end of the story that he is referred to as an "it," like an animal, and only by his sister Grete: ". . . we have to get rid of it" (M 37). Even the cleaning woman, in her great mistrust of Gregor, credits him with "unlimited intelligence" (M 39), and when at one point she calls him "old dung beetle" (M 36), the narrator comments: "To forms of address like these Gregor would not respond . . ." (M 36).⁵ Significantly, after Grete calls Gregor "it," her father still hesitates and uses "he" (M 38), and then Grete herself seems torn again between the two pronouns: "Look father," she suddenly shrieked, "*he's* starting in again" (M 38; my emphasis). Gregor, then, seems neither insect nor human, existing as he does in a liminal space between human and animal signifiers. His metamorphosis is therefore best described figuratively as a metaphor representing a state of "dehumanization" (Fingerhut 97).

With Gregor the first signs of illness are *heard* (when his voice changes), whereas with Zelig they are *seen* (change in physical appearance). One might ask, is Woody Allen not making "visible" what Kafka did not want to be depicted? After all, *Zelig*, like any other film, is "both a visual text and a literary text, an integrated cinetext of visual and verbal images and signs" (Girgus 6) whose aim is to make Zelig's illness visible. Thus, Doctor Fletcher decides to record her sessions with Zelig on film: ". . . when a man changes his physical appearance, you want to *see* it. You can't read about it" (Z 65). David Cronenberg's movies, *The Fly* and *Naked Lunch*, are good examples of an art form which makes visible what Kafka did not want to be depicted: both films exploit the grossness of the insect metaphor for the thrill and horror which accompanies the shock-effects

on the viewer. Here, Walter Benjamin's remarks about modern film are particularly appropriate: "The film is the art form that is in keeping with the increased threat to his life which modern man has to face. Man's need to expose himself to shock effects is his adjustment to the dangers threatening him" ("Work of Art" 250). In contrast, Woody Allen's film emphasizes Zelig's dehumanization and his struggle to retain his humanity. When Zelig is reduced to Gregor Samsa's state, for instance, we literally *see* him in a standing (horizontal) position, upright, as he is walking up and down the wall nonstop (Z 41). The fact that he is not crawling on all fours like an animal indicates his struggle to cling to his humanity. In addition, Woody Allen, too, is concerned about retaining the mystery behind Zelig's illness. One of the commentators in *Zelig*, Susan Sontag, is identified as the author of *Against Interpretation*. In her essay by the same name, Sontag talks about interpretation as "this curious project for transforming a text" ("Interpretation" 15) where "[t]he interpreter, without actually erasing or rewriting the text, *is* altering it" ("Interpretation" 16). She warns that this "makes art into an article for use, for arrangement into a mental scheme of categories" ("Interpretation" 19) and asks "What would criticism look like that would serve the work of art, not usurp its place?" ("Interpretation" 22). The secular Midrashic commentary in *Zelig* with its multiple perspectives prevents this usurpation of art for the purpose of popular consumption.

Both Woody Allen and Kafka want to make "visible" the dehumanizing commodification of life in twentieth-century society. For Kafka, working with an exclusively literary rather than a combined visual/literary medium, this visibility is achieved largely through visual/figurative language, such as animal metaphors (from vermin to ape, mice, dogs, etc.) and "animal gesture[s]" (Benjamin, "Franz Kafka" 122), which represent various states of non-well-being. These metaphors for the most part exist in a "solitude of the indecipherable sign" (Corngold, "Metaphor" 89) because Kafka "divests the human gesture of its traditional supports and then has a subject for reflection without end" (Benjamin, "Franz Kafka" 122). The attempt to retain the ambiguity of the indecipherable sign is a conscious narrative strategy in many of Kafka's narratives;⁶ however, one could argue that Gregor's increasing bodily disintegration in *The Metamorphosis* indicates that Kafka is divesting "the human gesture" so much "of its traditional supports" that the originally ambiguous

signifier is gradually shifting towards an increasingly identifiable signified—the vermin.

As a matter of fact, retaining the ambiguity of the sign is necessary for Gregor to stay alive. When the ambiguity is abandoned, this amounts to a death sentence for him. Gregor's continual physical degeneration increases the family's willingness to make the sign "decipherable." Moreover, their readiness in the end to identify Gregor as vermin has serious consequences for the protagonist's reading of himself because Gregor's death occurs when he accepts the signified they impose on him. But the family's extinction of Gregor's human soul is possible only because Gregor accepts their verdict. For the reader, therefore, Gregor and his family remain "a subject for reflection without end" (Benjamin, "Franz Kafka" 122), and some of the questions that need to be asked are: who is this "family" and who is this "son"? Who is really "ill," the family or the son? Why does the son's metamorphosis take place in this particular social environment? In the following we will see that these questions are equally important for an understanding of Zelig's illness.

Twentieth-Century Stereotypes and Presuppositions

Susan Sontag argues that "... the modern metaphors suggest a profound disequilibrium between individual and society, with society conceived as the individual's adversary. Disease metaphors are used to judge society not as out of balance but as repressive" (*Metaphor* 73). The representations of illness in both Kafka and Woody Allen can be seen as social critiques which expose the repressive nature of stereotypes and presuppositions in the social environment. Zelig's family background, for instance, is described as a breeding ground for his later ailment. Common public opinion perceives his illness as grounded in the social/racial stereotype of the dysfunctional, lower-class Jewish immigrant family: Zelig is a New York Jew, son of a mediocre Yiddish actor—a descendant therefore of someone whose very profession involves multiple role playing. In addition, he shares the stereotypical lax morality associated with the acting profession since he is married for the "second" time already. He also suffers at the hands of his stereotypical cantankerous Yiddish wife: his home life consists of so much "violent quarrelling that even though the family lives over a bowling alley, it is the bowling alley that complains of the noise" (Z 19-20). Even though the ironic reversal here is used for comedy and deflects the racial

stereotypes, the presuppositions in society are nonetheless that this type of family breeds illness and criminality: Zelig's brother Jack has a "nervous breakdown" (Z 20), while his "sister Ruth becomes a shoplifter and alcoholic" (Z 21) and associates with her "dubious-looking lover, Martin Geist" (Z 42), who is a criminal, having been "in jail for real estate fraud" (Z 43). Allen here humorously deflects presuppositions about social-racial origins for disease and criminality, which surprisingly have had no effect on Zelig for a long time: "Leonard Zelig appears to have adjusted to life. Somehow, he seems to have coped. And then, suddenly, increasingly strange behavior" (Z 21). Suddenly the "human chameleon," the "lizard" (Z 33) is coming out in him, as if something were finally catching up with him, as if he were racially and/or socially predisposed "to become that which he must become" (Gilman, *Patient* 168).

Gregor, on the other hand, is not Jewish: his family is Christian. Like Zelig, he seems well adjusted before his metamorphosis: he manages to cope after the bankruptcy of his father's business and becomes the sole supporter of the family until the fateful morning of his metamorphosis puts an end to this. The cause for his illness is seen as largely work-related: Gregor's mother believes that overwork made him sick (M 8), and Gregor himself immediately identifies his "grueling job" (M 3) as responsible for his present condition. But just as Zelig cannot escape from the stereotyping engrained in the social environment, nor can Gregor. He describes how easy it is for a traveling salesman to become the victim of "prejudice . . . gossip, contingencies, and unfounded accusations" (M 13). And as with Zelig, some kind of stereotype eventually seems to be catching up with Gregor when he changes into vermin.

What is never mentioned in the movie or in Kafka's text is the link between the reptile/lizard or vermin metaphor and contemporary anti-Semitic discourses. Gregor's increasing filthiness, when he "drag[s] around with him on his back and along his sides fluff and hairs and scraps of food . . ." (M 35), intimates that there is no escaping from his fate either: in the end he literally becomes the stereotypical expression "dirty Jew." His metamorphosis from human to vermin, at least on one level of meaning, appears to be a regressive, backwards metamorphosis, a return to an essentialist original state. Similarly, read within the discourses of the period of the late 1920s, the rise of fascism and the fascist discourse on the Jew, Zelig's statement, ". . . I used to be a member of the reptile

family, but I'm not anymore" (Z 94), alludes to the common anti-Semitic stereotype of the Jew as reptile, lizard. Leroy Beaulieu writes:

There seems to be something of the reptile in him [the Eastern Jew], something sinuous and crawling, something slimy and clammy, of which not even the educated Israelite has always been able to rid himself. This is a quality that transforms him again . . . into an Oriental; it is a racial feature, an inherited vice, not always to be washed away by the water and salt of baptism. (qtd. in Gilman, *Patient* 17)

The Jew as Oriental is another stereotype mentioned, and it is no accident that Zelig's first "serious" transformation which draws the public's attention is into a Chinese person.

Kafka lived in a period when this anti-Semitic rhetoric was common and widespread. We see him employ this vocabulary in 1911 when he likens the Jews to lizards:

the convulsive starting up of a lizard under our feet on a footpath in Italy delights us greatly, again and again we are moved to bow down, but if we see them at a dealer's by hundreds crawling over one another in confusion in the large bottles in which otherwise pickles are usually packed, then we don't know what to do. (*Diaries 1910-1913*, 55)

This anecdote was written in response to a Zionist critique of his friend Max Brod's novel *The Jewesses*. Hugo Herrmann, the Zionist reviewer, rejected the novel out of hand because there was no ethnic specificity, not even one Jewish hero, and all Jews in it were therefore equally nondescript (2-3). Kafka is ridiculing here the reviewer's objection that we do not know who or what we are dealing with. More than that, by employing anti-Semitic rhetoric Kafka is parodying the racial Zionist discourse, thus giving a scathing commentary on the reviewer's dogmatic position.⁷ Given Kafka's dislike of racial stereotyping, it comes as no surprise that he avoided specific Jewish markers in his own work.

At the same time, though, Kafka remarks enigmatically that "vermin is born of the void" (*Wedding Preparations* 113)—which again seems to underline his insistence on the indecipherable signifier—and yet he then continues relating this statement to the negativity of his age which he says he has internalized and thus has a right to represent:

I have vigorously absorbed the negative element of the age in which I live, an age that is, of course, very close to me, which I have no right ever to fight against, but as it were a right to represent. . . . I have not been guided into life by the hand of Christianity . . . and have not caught the hem of the Jewish prayer-mantle—now flying away from us—as the Zionists have. I am an end or a beginning. (*Wedding Preparations* 114)

Surely, then, the vermin metaphor can be seen as a metaphor *representing* the “negative element of the age,” as a form shaped by anti-Jewish stereotypes, a sign that is both beginning and end.

Stanley Corngold argues that “the continual alteration of Gregor’s body suggests ongoing metamorphosis, the *process* of literalization in various directions and not its end state” (“Metaphor” 86). But the continual deterioration of Gregor’s body can be read through the racial stereotypes of the period because Gregor regresses over time and becomes ever more the “dirty Jew.” It is significant to point out in this context that he is not “born” into the Christian family as vermin, but that he “transforms” into vermin in a Christian family. Gregor’s family therefore represents more than his “real” family: they could be seen as the Christian family in a larger sense, an extension of Christian society, which of course created and propagated anti-Semitic stereotypes. Indeed, the family’s inhuman treatment of Gregor illustrates a wounding of the Other, both physically and psychologically.

Jewish Markers of Difference and the Christian Family

Despite his transformation, Gregor at the outset is certainly not “ill.” His desperate attempts to be with his family are tragic since he hurts himself when he falls out of his bed (M 8) and when he turns the key in order to open the door (M 11). The first sign of illness which is perceived by his environment is the change in Gregor’s voice, his “insistent, distressed chirping” (M 5). Eric Santner has related Gregor’s voice to the “obsession with the Jewish voice” (207) in the anti-Semitic discourses of the period and argues at the same time that Kafka’s discourse is “more than a literary version of a kind of Jewish self-hatred, more than the narrative and poetic elaboration of a series of internalized anti-Semitic prejudices” (209). In view of Kafka’s earlier parody of Zionist/anti-Semitic discourse in the lizard analogy, are we here not dealing with another parody as well, particularly when we consider that the “chirping”

comes, after all, out of the mouth of an insect? Kafka's parody of this "Jewish marker of difference" (Gilman, *Patient* 150) still underlines the fact that Gregor's inability to communicate with his environment may have a racial cause: the narrator emphasizes that Gregor himself has no problem understanding his family, but that they cannot understand him—indeed, they do not even try, since "it did not occur to any of them . . . that he could understand what they said" (M 19). Similarly, Kafka can be said to parody Gregor's acceptance of his vermin shape by exploiting its ironic, humorous, and liberating potential. Initially, Gregor simply ignores his transformation, and it is ironic that he blames only his job for the pain he feels (M 3-4) or that he ignores "the pains in his abdomen" (M 10) which he feels when he is standing upright. Moreover, we have a very humorous scene when Gregor lands on his feet again and for the first time has "a feeling of physical well-being" (M 14). This initiates a "chain of comic reactions that . . . suggest[s] a Chaplinesque tragi-comedy" (Bruce 116) and ends with Gregor's involuntary expulsion of his adversary, the manager of his company. This is a reversal of Gregor's initial submissive position in the firm and at the same time a revenge and an attack on formerly repressive structures of authority which his new form now allows him to challenge, albeit inadvertently.

Ironically, Gregor's newly found feeling of well-being is of very short duration because as soon as the manager is gone, Gregor's family begins to wound him. After his father attacks him for the first time, Gregor is "bleeding profusely" (M 14). He then passes out, awakens only in the evening from "his deep, comalike sleep" (M 15), and discovers that he "ha[s] to limp on his two rows of legs" (M 16). As Bluma Goldstein points out, these wounds close and have completely healed by the next day (209). In contrast, the father's second attack with apples causes a "serious wound" that never heals: the rotting apple which is from now on firmly lodged in Gregor's back leads to a further "deterioration of [Gregor's] situation" (M 29) and eventually to his death. It is striking here that the father's punishment of Gregor is associated with religion. The apples he uses to bombard Gregor with (and the one rotting apple in particular which remains stuck in his back as a reminder) most obviously point to Original Sin in the Old Testament. However, from the perspective of Christian anti-Semitism the most widespread "original" sin committed by the Jews was the killing of Christ: from the Middle Ages on "to the masses, the Jew was the worst infidel of all—the Christ killer in person" (Trachtenberg 167). The Christ im-

agery when the apple leaves Gregor paralyzed as if he were "nailed to the spot" (M 29) suggests that this association is relevant for *The Metamorphosis* as well. Moreover, in the family's reaction to Gregor we can see an allusion to another most common and tenacious stereotype in Christianity: the Jew as devil, demon, Antichrist (Trachtenberg 32-43).

From the very beginning the family's encounter with Gregor's vermin shape is accompanied by religious gestures that are so exaggerated that this must be a parody: Gregor's mother has her hands "clasped" (M 12) when she sees him for the first time, as if he were some kind of Antichrist, and we hear about his sister's "sighs and appeals to the saints" (M 19) when she is taking care of him. As a result of the family's inhuman treatment of Gregor, his life in exile amidst this Christian family, like the jackals' life among the Arabs in Kafka's story "Jackals and Arabs," increasingly brings out "all the Jewish markers of difference" (Gilman, *Patient* 150). The jackals have a peculiar smell, they whine, and they are "unable to truly alter their instincts" (Gilman, *Patient* 150). Gregor, too, becomes smelly, considering that his room in the end is a dumping ground for garbage (M 33), that he is covered with dirt (35), and that he has a rotting apple stuck in his back. In addition, his instincts burst out in the form of unnatural, sexual-incestuous desire: for the lady in the picture on his wall (M 3) against which he later presses his "hot belly" (M 26), and in his lust for his sister when she plays the violin (M 36). We can see that Gregor increasingly comes to embody common anti-Jewish stereotypes of the day. When he has been reduced to this "reading," Gregor is emptied of all other signification and dies.

From time to time, his family seems to be reminded that "Gregor was a member of the family . . . who could not be treated as an enemy; that, on the contrary, it was the commandment of family duty to swallow their disgust and endure him, endure him and nothing more" (M 29). But generally they do not pay too much attention to this "commandment of family duty," which can be seen as an ironic reminder of the Christian commandment to love one's neighbor. The "Christian" father's interpretation of Gregor's death as a sign from Heaven is not without a touch of irony when he exclaims, "'now we can thank God!' He crossed himself, and the three women followed his example" (M 40). Here, Gregor's loathsome nature is paralleled with the family's even higher loathsomeness, since their religious convictions are no more than an empty shell. Within this context, it is particularly ironic that Gregor's death should allude to

the death of Christ: "He remained in this state of empty and peaceful reflection until the tower clock struck three in the morning. He still saw that outside the window everything was beginning to grow light. Then, without his consent, his head sank down to the floor, and from his nostrils streamed his last weak breath" (M 39). Here we have a parody of Christ's death, the irony being that Gregor is suffering a similar fate at the hands of the Christian family. By depicting the fates of Gregor and Christ as interchangeable, Kafka underlines the common human denominator rather than racial distinctions. Furthermore, since Christ was Jewish and Gregor is supposedly Christian, the final irony is that in both cases the "family" is killing one of their own.

Given the differences in Woody Allen's and Kafka's respective socio-cultural and historical environments, it is not surprising that they use different narrative strategies for depicting common racial stereotypes. Kafka's European alienation must be contrasted with Allen's Americanization where a Jew is not nearly as much of an outsider. Both artists parody cultural realities, but unlike Kafka, who mostly alludes to racial discourses, Woody Allen makes them quite explicit, manipulates them, and more obviously deflects them humorously or ironically. Allen, too, like Kafka, neutralizes anti-Semitic discourse by replacing it with Fletcher's non-racial medical theory: "Like the lizard that is endowed by nature with a marvelous protective device that enables it to change color and blend in with its immediate surrounding, Zelig, too, protects himself by becoming whoever he is around" (Z 33). But Allen goes further than Kafka when he exploits the possibilities which his visual medium, the film, offers him. For one, he highlights the humorous side of the reptile stereotype by making it "visible" in the new dance "Doin' the Chameleon," which "sweeps the nation" (Z 35), thereby projecting the stereotype onto society: we see couples "clasping hands, looking pop-eyed at each other, and sticking out their tongues lizard-style" (Z 35). The original racial connotations have not entirely disappeared but now re-emerge in different form by including black racial problems. There is a clever juxtaposition between the "Chameleon Song" and a picture of "*a Harlem street corner. Four black children . . . dance to the song, to the delight of several watching adults. . . . They are in perfect form: hands clasped, eyes open wide, and tongues flicking out*" (Z 36). The words to the song which accompanies this picture are nicely ironic: "If you hold your breath till you turn blue/

You'll be changing colors like they do/And you're doin' the Chameleon. Vo-do-do-de-o" (Z 36). There are also many records made which become extremely popular, such as "Chameleon Days" (Z 49), "You May Be Six People, But I Love You" (Z 49/50), and "Leonard the Lizard" (Z 50). Another one of these songs, "Reptile Eyes" (Z 50), is juxtaposed with a picture of Zelig looking into the screen wistfully, "*trim but intensely sad*" (Z 50). Gregor Samsa, too, with his head "cocked to one side and peeping out at the others" (M 12) may have similar wistful eyes, and his transformation is certainly not devoid of humor (Bruce 114-16), but one cannot imagine a song called "Vermin Eyes" accompanying his first appearance in public, nor can one imagine Gregor and his family dancing a vermin version of the chameleon dance! Finally, in *Zelig*, the Chameleon Dance soon becomes popular all over Europe: in France, for instance, "Josephine Baker does her version of the Chameleon dance" (Z 54). By moving not only beyond racial boundaries but also beyond the North American continent, the joke is not on Zelig any more but rather on the whole world.

Woody Allen even humorously manipulates the stereotype of the Jew as demon, devil, Antichrist when Zelig suddenly appears out of nowhere, like a demon, and interrupts Pope Pius XI's blessing of the congregation in St. Peter's Square. The Pope literally hits him over the head with his "sacred decree" (Z 64), physically punishing him. In addition, there is an even more important subtext to this scene. We hear about the Pope's blessing that "[t]his is the first time this ritual has been performed . . . in sixty-three years, and brings to a climax on Easter Sunday the religious ceremonies of Holy Week" (Z 63). The historical context is that in 1929 the Pope blessed the crowds from a balcony in St. Peter's Square after discussions between Mussolini and the Church had come to a successful and mutually beneficial end which resulted in the Concordat between the Church and the fascist state: this is "the first time that a pontiff had shown himself in public since 1870" (Cheetham 279-280). Allen has consciously stretched the 59 year period of the Pope's absence to 63 years, so that we would be in the year 1933, the year of the Nazi rise to power. Zelig's disruption of the blessing, as well as the Pope punishing the Antichrist figure with the papal bull containing the agreement between the Church and the fascist state, points to the continuity of Christian anti-Semitism, foreshadowing the Church's abandonment of the Jews during the Nazi period.

Social and Political Illnesses

Zelig's illness, then, is quite specifically placed at the heart of the rise of fascism, manifesting itself at the end of the 1920s and becoming full-blown in the fascist movement. The various stages of his illness parallel the cultural trends and political movements of the early twentieth century and represent, as Irving Howe puts it, "the nature of our civilization, the character of our times" (Z 4). Ironically, as a Jew who lacks a personal identity, Zelig is a perfect case study for an individual drawn to fascism. In a reading of Paul Celan's poetry, Jacques Derrida refers to the Jew "who has nothing of his own, nothing that is not borrowed, so that . . . what is proper to the Jew is to have no property or essence. Jewish is not Jewish" (328). Similarly, Kafka identified this same perplexing situation for his own generation as the "frightful inner predicament of these generations" (*Letters* 288). Kafka and his friends saw the loss of a cultural identity as a consequence of the previous generation's assimilation into the dominant culture. Zelig clearly lacks a sense of self: when his doctor Eudora Fletcher asks him if he is Leonard Zelig, he replies, "Yes. Definitely. Who is he?" (Z 76). We also learn that Zelig more than anything else in the world wants to belong to a community: he wants to be "safe" which to him means "to be like the others," "to be liked" (Z 32). Irving Howe rightly perceives that he "wanted to assimilate like crazy!" (Z 97), and this makes Zelig a perfect vessel for holding the norms, values, and presuppositions of Western culture which produced fascism. Kafka obviously could not benefit from the post-war hindsight of Woody Allen and his many commentators. However, Kafka's representation of what turns human beings into commodities with no identity of their own complements Woody Allen's.

Before they show the first symptoms of illness, Gregor Samsa and Leonard Zelig find it difficult to feel comfortable in early twentieth-century capitalist society. Modernity is mostly preoccupied with the functioning of the system and expresses an overall indifference to personal fates.⁸ In *The Metamorphosis*, it is telling that Gregor hears his mother call for the "doctor" and his father for the "locksmith" (M 10). The mother-father dichotomy reveals the tension in twentieth-century society between the principle of nurturing and caring and the hegemonic patriarchal discourse, which has no room for this. Gregor himself cannot tell the difference: he "[feels] integrated into human society once again and hope[s] for marvelous, amazing feats from both the doctor and the locksmith, without really

distinguishing between them" (M 11). But the doctor never appears, and Gregor never learns "what excuses had been made to get rid of the doctor" (M 19). The tension between the medical/spiritual and practical needs of twentieth-century society remains unresolved and no cure can ever be found unless this split is overcome. As it is, Gregor's crawling up and down the walls of his room is symbolic of the "crawling" which characterizes his life. He would love to rebel at his workplace but cannot because he has to pay off his family's debt:

If I didn't hold back for my parents's sake, I would have quit long ago, I would have marched up to the boss and spoken my piece from the bottom of my heart. He would have fallen off the desk! It is funny, too, the way he sits on the desk and talks down from the heights to the employees, especially when they have to come right up close on account of the boss's being hard of hearing. (M 4)

Gregor has absolutely no spiritual fulfillment in his life, having "nothing on his mind but the business" (M 8). Given the demands of his job and his constant travelling, he does not have time to build up personal relationships: he complains about "constantly seeing new faces [and having], no relationships that last or get more intimate" (M 4). He has also never had a lasting relationship with a woman: he remembers "a chambermaid in a provincial hotel—a happy fleeting memory—and a cashier in a millinery store, whom he had courted earnestly but too slowly . . ." (M 31-32). The one time he is serious about a woman he is too slow and misses his chance. Similarly, in Zelig's world there is no spiritual fulfillment either. Under hypnosis Zelig identifies the lacking spiritual, family, and social support as a contemporary social disease:

My brother beat me . . . My sister beat my brother . . . My father beat my sister and my brother and me . . . My mother beat my father and my sister and me and my brother . . . The neighbors beat our family . . . People down the block beat the neighbors and our family . . . (Z 77)

The link between family and society is thus established: the system punishes individuals who deviate from its norm, the neighbors punish those who deviate from their norm, and a pattern is established which reaches right down to the family unit.

One would think that at least the medical institution should have the interests of the patient at heart and help individuals fit back into "normal" life. But the medical world is a microcosm of the world outside: both Kafka and Woody Allen caricature doctors because they are only out for their own self-interest. In *The Metamorphosis* Gregor reveals that the company doctor cares only about the interests of the company which employs him. In his last five years as a traveling salesman, for instance, Gregor has never been sick, because he knows full well what would happen if he were: "The boss would be sure to come with the health-insurance doctor, blame his parents for their lazy son, and cut off all excuses by quoting the health-insurance doctor, for whom the world consisted of people who were completely healthy but afraid to work" (M 5). This is indeed what happens on the morning of his metamorphosis when the office manager appears on his doorstep and insists that "we businessmen . . . very often simply have to overcome a slight indisposition for business reasons" (M 9). In the past Gregor had internalized this work ethic so much that he did not even want to be reminded of illness by the sight of the hospital right across from his room: he "used to curse [it] because he saw so much of it" (M 21). His metamorphosis finally gives him some breathing space: ". . . hanging from the ceiling . . . one could breathe more freely" (M 23). Gregor's transformation, then, is not only the result of but also an escape from the commodification of life at the workplace. When Saul Bellow says of Zelig that "his sickness was also at the root of his salvation" (Z 126), this applies to Gregor at this moment as well.

Gregor's feelings of elation are only momentary and his metamorphosis in the end is fatal. In contrast to Zelig, who receives medical attention, no one ever attempts to cure Gregor. However, since all attempts to cure Zelig fail equally, one must ask whether his illness runs its course despite or precisely because of the various attempts that are undertaken to cure him. The "cures" offered by the medical establishment are anything but cures. Initially, the doctors "claim to have the situation in hand" (Z 24) but do not take Zelig very seriously as a patient. One of them arrogantly dismisses his illness as "something he picked up from eating Mexican food" (Z 25), immediately resorting to stereotypes and presuppositions when he cannot explain the nature of his illness. The medical establishment does not understand, as psychologist Bruno Bettelheim does in hindsight, that Zelig's "feelings were really not all that different

from the normal, maybe, what one would call the well-adjusted normal person, only carried to an extreme degree, to an extreme extent. I myself felt that one could really think of him as the ultimate conformist" (Z 67). The doctors cannot see this because they are themselves caught up in a life of utter conformity, "dancing the dances of the age" (Kafka, *Wedding Preparations* 85), thoroughly aware that their medical careers are dependent on the whims of the market. When the newspapers "want [Zelig's] story on page one every day" (Z 34) and news about Zelig's condition spreads like wildfire, "Dr. Allan Sindell is forced to issue a statement: '... we're just beginning to realize the dimensions of what could be the scientific medical phenomenon of the age, and possibly of all time' " (Z 24). Now they desperately need to put a label on Zelig and must quickly construct an image of the patient to keep up an appearance of competence in the eyes of the public. Woody Allen caricatures their search for physiological causes and the certainty with which they pronounce their purely speculative diagnoses. Dr. Birsky is the most hilarious caricature when he insists there must be a brain tumor even though he has not found any evidence of one: "Ironically, within two weeks' time, it is Dr. Birsky who dies of a brain tumor. Leonard Zelig is fine" (Z 26). This reversal of the doctor-patient role indicates clearly that it is not the patient who is ill but rather the whole medical establishment.

This is further accentuated in the "series of experiments" (Z 22) organized by Dr. Fletcher; here one can see how "[t]he ostensible cure proceeds today by means of further commodification" (Corngold, "Melancholy" 33). Zelig is put on display and performs on command, turning into a psychiatrist in the company of psychiatrists, into a Frenchman in the company of Frenchmen, and "begins to develop Oriental features" when talking to a Chinese person (Z 22-23). These experiments have no scientific basis but are intended to feed the "thrill-hungry public" (Z 61). Soon the media describe him as "the strange creature at Manhattan Hospital" (Z 28), and the doctors willingly participate in the "myth-making about the disease" (Gilman, *Disease* 7) which "plays to the stereotypical perception of the public and has its desired effect" (Gilman, *Disease* 16). The doctors themselves believe the myth they have helped create because they treat Zelig ever more like a "creature" they can experiment on and are not overly concerned when their treatment makes him ill. For instance, they decide that his "malady can be traced to poor alignment of the vertebrae. Tests prove them wrong

and cause a . . . temporary problem for the patient" (Z 27). In the film we see Zelig sitting up on a bed with outstretched legs but with his toes pointing down to the floor. Other tests serve only sensationalist purposes and are humiliating, as when they make him perform with "a midget and a chicken" (Z 29), or put him into a room with two overweight men and wait for Zelig to puff himself up, or show how "in the . . . presence of two Negro men, Zelig rapidly becomes one himself" (Z 30). Even the reporter seems to suggest that this is a little too much: "What *will* they think of next?" (Z 30).

The film deliberately juxtaposes the discrepancy between the public's frenzy and Zelig's suffering and thereby emphasizes Zelig's humanity. While endless tests continue to be performed on Zelig, the public is going Zelig-crazy: he becomes "the main topic of conversation everywhere" (Z 34), everyone is dancing the new "Doin' the Chameleon" dance, and they are buying photos of him as "Chinese, Intellectual, Overweight . . ." (Z 37). In the midst of the hilarious hype, a scene is interjected where Zelig is enduring electroshock treatment which makes him look "like one of Dr. Frankenstein's creations" (Z 36). Like Frankenstein creating the monster, the doctors are literally molding him into a new personality: first they take his body apart by realigning his vertebrae and then they put him back together in such a way that he looks like a monstrosity; finally, they deprive him of his senses through electroshock. The last torture they inflict on him in the hospital is to treat him with the "experimental drug Somadril Hydrate" (Z 41) which turns Zelig into a golem-like Gregor Samsa figure who, deprived of his soul, mechanically continues his bodily movements as he is walking up and down the wall.

Melancholy: No Cure for Human Commodities

The eagerness with which the sensation-hungry public appropriates Zelig, exploits his "unique malady" (Z 65), and turns him into a celebrity underlines the "power of the media itself, especially as it can be used for propaganda" (Girgus 74). The power of the media affects everyone, including Zelig's immediate family. When they see the sensation Zelig is causing, Zelig's sister Ruth and her lover Martin Geist, "a businessman and ex-carnival promoter" (Z 42), take him out of the hospital, where the doctors "are relieved to be rid of this frustrating case" (Z 42). Motivated by self-interest, Zelig's sister and husband proceed to exhibit him alive as "THE PHENOMENON OF THE AGES" (Z 43). For consumer society, Zelig

is a "lucky find of capitalist raw material in the body of a distressed creature" (Corngold, "Melancholy" 24), and Zelig "does not disappoint, changing appearance over and over upon demand" (Z 44). Business is flourishing since "[o]vernight, [Zelig] has become an attraction, a novelty, a freak" (Z 45). Even Hollywood makes a film about him in 1935, "called *The Changing Man*, in which the atmosphere is best summed up" (Z 46):

They don't care about him. They'll exploit him—all they see in him is a chance to make money. . . . There were not only Leonard Zelig pens and lucky charms but clocks and toys. There were Leonard Zelig watches and books and a famous Leonard Zelig doll. There were aprons, chameleon-shaped earmuffs, and a popular Leonard Zelig game. (Z 47-48)

Ironically, the Hollywood film is an example of "how a certain 'anti-materialist' pathos . . . has itself in turn been commodified and marketed with a view to luring torpid clients onto the carnival grounds of consumption" (Corngold, "Melancholy" 23). And it is indeed "the goal of capitalism," "to foster ever stronger forms of need" (Corngold, "Melancholy" 23): in *Zelig* this takes the form of "endless exhibitions" (Z 51), many popular songs which "[sweep] the nation" (Z 50), and all of this in the end leads to a tremendously successful European tour. The result is that Zelig becomes a real commodity, "a curiosity with no life of his own" (Z 64), exploited, humiliated, and in the end forgotten by modern consumer society like Kafka's hunger artist.

The similarities between Zelig and the hunger artist are striking. The hunger artist is exhibited in a cage; Zelig is exhibited behind a fence (Z 44). The hunger artist's constant feeling is one of "melancholy" (CS 272), which is the "malady of depreciated soul-treasure, of the empty (coffered) subject"—the malady of commodities who are "without specific character, without aim, individuality, or aura" (Corngold, "Melancholy" 25). The hunger artist suffers from melancholy because there is no true art anymore: art has become a commodity because everything is geared to the attention span of modern consumer society. He is told to limit his fasting to forty days, because this is the longest period during which "the public could be stimulated by a steadily increasing pressure of advertisement, but after that the town began to lose interest" (CS 270). For a time, the hunger artist, like Zelig, is "honored by the world, yet in spite of that

troubled in spirit, and all the more troubled because no one would take his trouble seriously" (CS 272). Also like Zelig, he suffers from a "change in public interest" and "suddenly [finds] himself deserted one fine day by the amusement-seekers" (CS 273). In the end the hunger artist and Zelig are both forgotten. The hunger artist is literally passed by, as the circus visitors stream past his cage on their way to the menagerie without even looking at him (CS 274-75), and so is Zelig: "*A man walks by, ignoring him. Other people scurry past the camera*" (Z 56):

Zelig's own existence is a non-existence. Devoid of personality, his human qualities long since lost in the shuffle of life, he sits alone quietly staring into space, a cipher, a non-person, a performing freak. He who wanted only to fit in—to belong, to go unseen by his enemies and be loved—neither fits in nor belongs, is supervised by enemies, and remains uncared for. (Z 56)

Saul Bellow remarks that "it is ironic . . . to see how quickly he has faded from memory, considering what an astounding record he made" (Z 5); however, considering the fast pace of modern consumer society, this state of affairs is not so surprising, since "a population glutted with distractions is quick to forget" (Z 61).

The way in which the doctors, the media, as well as Zelig's family are exploiting the sensation-hungry public and their "thirst for thrills and novelty" (Z 24) reveals how several "discourse[s] of power use[] (or generate[]) images of illness for many ends, drawing on this wide repertory of images to isolate, stigmatize, and control" (Gilman, *Disease* 9). In fact all of these false and "[m]isapplied scientific remedies of society" (Pogel 176) are contrasted with Dr. Eudora Fletcher's personal approach. Susan Sontag remarks that Fletcher "sensed what was needed and she provided it, and that was, in its way, a remarkable creative accomplishment" (Z 97). As a woman, Eudora Fletcher knows what it is like to be excluded. She is in fact the only doctor who believes that "Zelig's unstable makeup . . . accounts for his metamorphoses. The governing board of doctors is hostile to her notion" (Z 26). When she presents her theory about Zelig's chameleon-like protection device, the camera ostensibly focuses on each one of the male doctors individually, all dressed in suits, skepticism written all over their rigid faces (Z 33). Despite her initial success with Zelig, they dismiss her ideas as "pipe dreams" (Z 41). Fletcher has as little a place in the medical profession as Zelig

has in the world. In terms of marginalization, his fate parallels hers. It is no wonder that Fletcher feels that "here was this unique case that I could make my reputation on—not that I knew how to cure him. But if I could have him alone and, uh, feel my way, and be innovative and creative, I felt that I could change his life if I only had the chance" (Z 63).

Fletcher and Zelig are both given this chance, and the story of Zelig's cure is reminiscent of Kafka's "A Report to an Academy," where an ape transforms into a human being.⁹ In his early days Rotpeter, like Zelig, was "more or less accompanied by excellent mentors, good applause, advice, and orchestral music, and yet essentially alone" (CS 250). He then made a living as a performing freak on a "variety stage" (CS 258), just like Zelig when he was in his hunger artist stage. Moreover, in both *Zelig* and "Report" a reversal of the patient-doctor/teacher role characterizes the beginning of their transformation into a human being. In *Zelig*, Doctor Fletcher becomes more and more irritated (Z 71), whereas Zelig, according to Fletcher's nephew Paul Deghueue, "was fine . . . napping, sitting in his chair reading. He used to refer to himself as Dr. Zelig. He was reading books on psychiatry" (Z 72). Fletcher's nephew in the end suggests that she "better get away for a day and relax. The strain is becoming too much for you" (Z 72). In Kafka's tale, the "first teacher was almost himself turned into an ape by it, had soon to give up teaching and was taken away to a mental hospital" (CS 258). And Rotpeter remarks ironically that he "used up many teachers, indeed, several teachers at once" (CS 258). Rotpeter never finds any fulfillment but is sarcastic and resentful about his experience. Zelig, on the other hand, finds love. Fletcher cures Zelig precisely because she falls in love with him and gives him the personal attention he needs: ". . . her love for Leonard . . . crosses over professional boundaries so that, in a sense, she ultimately shares his sickness with him. This serves to sustain the visual and thematic point about psychic illness and reality. Sickness and cure tend to fuse, especially in a society of explosive fluidity and volatility" (Girgus 75). After she cures him, she is granted the public recognition she never received before, and Zelig willingly participates in her glory. Neither Fletcher nor Zelig realize, though, that just like Zelig's illness earlier it is now his "cure" which is marketed for popular consumption.

Unlike Fletcher and Zelig, Kafka's ape Rotpeter is very aware of being put on display when he is asked to report to the learned acad-

emy. He describes his assimilation as “my forced career” (CS 250) and knows that he did “his best to meet this strange universe on *its* terms rather than on his own” (Weinstein 78). Herein lies precisely the problem, for Zelig as well as for Rotpeter. Not only is Rotpeter aping, i.e. copying, his environment (cf. the German ‘nachäffen’), but he pushes himself to internalize the values of the dominant society, which includes the stereotypes society projects on his kind. In Woody Allen’s film, too, Zelig’s own family is so assimilated that they have internalized the anti-Semitic prejudices of the day: “his parents, who never take his part and blame him for everything, side with the anti-Semites” (Z 20). And like Rotpeter, Zelig also distances himself from his origins:

Kids, you gotta be yourself. Ya know you can’t act like anybody else just because you think that they have all the answers and you don’t. . . . You have to be your own man and learn to speak up and say what’s on your mind. Now maybe they are not free to do that in foreign countries but that’s the American way. You can take it from me because I used to be a member of the reptile family, but I’m not anymore. (Z 94)

By saying he once belonged to the reptile family Zelig reveals that he “actively seek[s] to accept society’s sense of [his] own difference in order to create [his] sense of oneness with the world” (Gilman, *Disease* 5). The fact that he is adopting “the American way” unquestioningly also indicates that he has so fully internalized the values of the dominant culture that he is ironically not “himself” or his “own man” at all. He is simply reproducing the patriarchal hegemonic discourse of the period. In comparison, Kafka’s satire is much more bitter: this text is not a “masked or effaced discourse” (Gilman, *Patient* 9) but the very opposite in its desire to expose and “unmask” the existing psychological predicament of a whole generation. Indeed, Kafka feared that Max Brod’s wife, Elsa, who was scheduled to read the story in public, might want to leave some parts out and urged her to keep everything: “And should the text contain something dirty, don’t leave it out. If you really tried to clean up the text, there would be no end to it” (*Letters* 168). In sarcasm Kafka’s satire is similar to Mendele Moykher Sforim’s nineteenth-century Yiddish novel *The Mare*, a satire of assimilation and the Enlightenment, with which Kafka was familiar.¹⁰ Here the mare characterizes the process of assimilation as “pure theatre!” (*Mare*

617): she resents this "monkey business" which means being taught "some trick or other" and asks: "What's the use of lovely harnesses, expensive decorations ... all these rewards for clever performance?" (*Mare* 618-19). Unlike Zelig, who enjoys the attention lavished upon him, the Mare sneers, "Dance, little animals, dance!" (*Mare* 606). Zelig does not realize that he has learned to "dance the dances of the age," that instead of being cured he has become hollow at the core. This is why, when the public turns against him, he has nothing to fall back on, no sense of self which allows him to retain his equilibrium.

Zelig's "cure" is only on the surface and cannot last in this type of society. He may seem more stable, may even consider himself cured, but the deeper cause for his illness was always located in societal values and presuppositions, and society certainly has not changed. Public opinion still reflects the stereotypes of the day: Dr. Fletcher is still perceived as "a little girl from the backwoods" (Z 89) by the press; the newspapers write, "SHE'S PRETTY TOO!" (Z 85); and from the newsreel announcer we hear, "Who says women are just good for sewing?" (Z 87). The end of this brief harmonious interlude for Zelig and Fletcher comes suddenly, after the public finds out that Zelig was married to several women while under different personalities. The most threatening social disease which now appears on the horizon is Christian fundamentalism. The film mocks the very narrow and rigid Christian morality when a spinster-like Christian fundamentalist pronounces: "We don't condone scandals. Scandals of fraud, and polygamy. In keeping with a pure society, I say, lynch the little hebe" (Z 109). For the first time in the film do we see a connection between the playfully employed lizard motif and its original racial connotations: "OH YOU LIZARD!" (Z 103). For Zelig there is no escaping from Christian morality; it is proclaimed on posters everywhere: "ONE WIFE—EVEN FOR REPTILES" (104), or "ZELIG'S BIGAMY MAKES A MOCKERY OF THE SACRAMENT OF MATRIMONY. . . . POLYGAMY ATTACKS THE HEART OF A CHRISTIAN SOCIETY. LEONARD ZELIG MUST BE TRIED AND CONVICTED" (Z 108). This is only the beginning of a witch hunt directed against Zelig, a hunt which ends with his disappearance.

When the tide shifts in public opinion and society turns against Zelig, the only solution he sees for himself is Gregor Samsa's solution and he disappears. However, Zelig does not die but finds a home in Nazi Germany. Saul Bellow comments:

Yes, but then it really made sense, it made all the sense in the world, because, although he wanted to be loved . . . craved to be loved, there was also something in him . . . that desired . . . (Pauses) immersion in the mass and . . . anonymity, and Fascism offered Zelig that kind of opportunity, so that he could make something anonymous of himself by belonging to this vast movement. (Z 115)

This last stage in Zelig's illness must be considered a narrative necessity. Initially, Zelig tries to define himself by becoming like individual people. Then he identifies with a whole cultural set of values, the "American Way." Now he is defining himself by becoming one with a collective identity, by identifying with a large political movement. All the time, he is still identifying with everyone by identifying with the mass. It is a small step from his beginnings to his drowning in a fascist collective identity. Trained to be a commodity with no soul of his own, he is following the next historical movement, the emergence of fascism, as if it were the newest fad society had to offer.

Zelig's desire to lose himself in the mass resembles Karl Rossmann's longing, at the end of *Amerika* (significantly the literal translation of the German title *Der Verschollene* is *The Boy Who Sank Out Of Sight*), to enter the theater of Oklahoma where "Everyone is welcome!" (A 272). Karl Rossmann, after having been tossed about in the New World, has also tried unsuccessfully to escape from his liminal existence. When he needs to identify himself in order to be admitted to the theater, he Zelig-like adopts a new identity by giving himself "the nickname he had had in his last post: 'Negro'" (A 286). In Kafka's letters to Milena, Kafka uses the name "Negro" as a name for the Jew: "Naturally for your father there's no difference between your husband and myself; there's no doubt about it, to the European we both have the same Negro face" (*Milena* 136; Gilman, *Patient* 108). Like Gregor Samsa accepting the vermin label which is projected on him by the discourses of society, Karl Rossmann here takes the nickname which was earlier projected on him and makes it his own: it becomes his new identity. He enters the theater of Oklahoma with no illusions and under no pretexts: quite fittingly he is never seen again. Like Zelig, Rossmann at this point cannot go any further: the dissolution of his personality is a narrative necessity, and it is not surprising that the novel remained a fragment.

Zelig returns despite himself, but only because Dr. Fletcher keeps rescuing him, even out of the clutches of the Nazis. Eudora Fletcher remains true to her name, the "eu" in "Eudora" being associated with health and her full name referring to the "seat of honour," abode "of the gods" (thereby endowing her with godlike powers), "sanctuary," and also signifying "stability" (Liddell 478). In accordance with this, the ending in *Zelig* is blissful and sentimental: "In the end, it was, after all, not the approbation of many but the love of one woman that changed his life" (Z 129). However, the representation of Zelig's marriage to Eudora Fletcher is also ambiguous. As Nancy Pogel points out, "Zelig's entire narrative is fictional and unreliable. . . . Moreover, the last images of Zelig and his bride, even as (and because) they are portrayed in the amateurish and artless manner of old-fashioned flickering, grainy black-and-white home movies, are fading figures, receding memories" (185). Nonetheless, we have also seen that during the course of Zelig's illness, Woody Allen has time and again broken the rules of logical narrative necessity by allowing his hero to be rescued. Unlike Kafka's protagonists, Zelig is allowed to live out his modest existence outside of the limelight, giving talks from time to time about his experience (similar to Kafka's ape, but without the latter's sarcasm and resentment). And like Eudora, Zelig also lives up to his name and becomes what he is supposed to become: "selig" in the sense of finding harmony and satisfaction with himself and the world. Yet "selig" also refers to the "deceased," and Zelig is indeed long dead and forgotten when the movie begins. Why then is he resurrected for us?

One answer lies in the connection Irving Howe establishes between the 1920s and contemporary capitalist society: ". . . for a time everyone loved him, and then people stopped loving him, . . . and then everybody loved him again and that was what the twenties were like and you know when you think about it, has America changed so much? (*Shaking his head*) I don't think so" (Z 127). In the same vein, Stanley Corngold more specifically talks about the melancholy that accompanies the commodification of contemporary life and calls for "an exercise of radical political thinking" ("Melancholy" 33), "an attempt to think a way out of a capitalist melancholy only as 'universal' as our dependency on commodity cures" ("Melancholy" 34). For Kafka, though, no such cure is possible. His country doctor is frustrated because his patients want him to be "omnipotent" (CS 224), to be their physical and spiritual healer alike. Not only can the country doctor not cure his young patient's wound, he cannot even

understand the nature of his illness. In the end, the doctor is left naked, exposed to “the frost of this most unhappy of ages” (CS 225). Ultimately, the message in *Zelig* for our own time is no different. Girgus rightly calls the ending a “parody of the American dream” (128). It is a parody because a cure can only be envisioned in the realm of fantasy. Kafka, too, at times leaves open a window to “faery lands forlorn,” as in his “Imperial Message” where the dream remains hovering on the darkling threshold: “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 5).

Notes

1. I would like to thank the students in my “Kafka after Kafka” class, WLC 392 (1996), at the University of Western Ontario for their stimulating discussions about Kafka and Woody Allen. Many thanks also go to Ehud Ben Zvi, Don Bruce, Michael Greenstein, and Stanley Corngold for their inspiration, criticism, and encouragement.

2. Abbreviations will be used for the following texts by Woody Allen and Franz Kafka: *Zelig* (Z), *The Metamorphosis* (M), *The Complete Stories* (CS), *Amerika* (A).

3. I owe this insight to Michael Greenstein.

4. My thanks to Michael Greenstein for this commentary.

5. Corngold notes in this respect that Kafka had originally written here, “Did he have a bad day today, our old dung beetle” and then replaced this phrase with “Look at that old dung beetle!” (M 53). He suggests that Kafka changed the chattier former phrase to rule out “the muddled effect of the cleaning woman’s trivial, everyday attribution to the animal of a human soul, like a pet owner’s to his pet, when Gregor does in fact have a human soul” (M 53).

6. In *The Trial*, for instance, we see Kafka “parodying the aporia between doorkeeper and visitor as well as talmudic commentaries on the Law” (Greenstein 91), and in *The Metamorphosis* he highlights and problematizes the aporia which accompanies Gregor’s environment’s confused readings of the vermin signifier.

7. I disagree with Hartmut Binder who argues that Kafka’s critique “in its tendentiousness is identical with that of the reviews in ‘Selbstwehr’” (288; my translation). Binder ignores the ironic tone of Kafka’s review. To my mind Giuliano Baioni rightly stresses that Kafka’s review reveals his “disagreement with the Zionist position” (“Zionism” 95).

8. For a discussion of Gregor's alienation see Walter Sokel, "Von Marx zum Mythos."

9. "A Report to an Academy" was published in Martin Buber's journal *Der Jude (The Jew)* in 1917 and immediately perceived by his contemporaries as a satire on assimilation. Max Brod wrote in the Zionist paper *Selbstwehr (Self-Defence)*: "Is it not the most marvellous satire of assimilation that has ever been written? One should read it again in the last issue of *The Jew*. The assimilationist who does not want freedom, only a way out" (Max Brod, "Literarischer Abend" [my translation]).

10. *The Mare* is discussed in great detail in Meyer I. Pinès's Yiddish literary history, *L'histoire de la littérature judéo-allemande*, which Kafka read in January 1912 (*Diaries* 223).

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