

The Interface as Door:  
On the Problem of Access to the Image in Kafka's *Das Schloß* and Interactive  
Media

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## **Abstract**

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(Under the direction of Dr. Richard Langston)

Is the interface a door into the image? In order to enter an image, the image must offer space. By juxtaposing two very different texts, Franz Kafka's *Das Schloß* and the video game *Wonderboy in Monsterworld*, this thesis asks what kind of space we access through the interface. A reading of doors in *Das Schloß* as a metaphor of the interface shows that Kafka considers the image uncontrollable, creating the illusion of depth when, in fact, there is none. In comparison, video games allow control over and access to a *Bildraum*. The video game player accepts the depth of the virtual landscape and enters the image via virtual doors. Has Kafka's concept of the image become obsolete or does a reading of video games through the lens of his critique reveal that the video game image is even more deceptive than its non-digital predecessor?

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## Chapter 1:

### The Image in Franz Kafka's *Das Schloß*

#### Introduction:

Can we enter a *Bildraum*? In order to enter an image we have to access it via an appropriate door. The interface is such a door into the space of an image. Susan Sontag argues that photographs are “attempts to contact or lay claim to another reality” (16). What kind of space awaits us when we enter such a new reality and why do we want to enter it at all? Sontag argues that a photograph helps “people to take possession of space in which they are insecure” (9). The reason for the exploration of an image is the urge to gain control over a space. This implies that the spaces outside the image have become increasingly difficult to control and that the access to images helps us to reconfigure our bodily experience of space through the image. Access to a *Bildraum* is a means of control of this space.

In order to access an image, it must offer depth. Roland Barthes states that the “photograph belongs to that class of laminated objects whose two leaves cannot be separated without destroying them both [like] the windowpane and the landscape [...]” (6). Barthes never contests that photographs show a flat image, similar to the landscape framed within a windowpane (106). Barthes calls this the *spectrum* and the spectator “can either desire the object, the landscape, [or] the body it represents” (19). This is the look out of the window and

what Barthes calls *studium*, which, for him, is an “order of liking, not of loving” (27). However, the *studium* never reveals the photograph itself, which “is always invisible: it is not it that we see” (Barthes 6). What constitutes the essence of the photograph cannot be accessed via the *studium*. Barthes points out that this essence is accessible only through the “extension of a field,” which expands the photograph beyond the two-dimensions of its *spectrum*. Now the window opens and the viewer connects to the *Bildraum* and its extended field. This extended field is linked to what Barthes terms the *punctum*, the element in the field that “rises from the scene” and pierces the viewer’s body (26). This piercing element exceeds the two-dimensions of the image, the *spectrum*, and is able to affect the body. Through this extension, body and image are linked via an umbilical cord. Still the *Bildraum* offers the *punctum* to the viewer, which means that although body and image are connected it is not the viewer who actively controls the image. Rather, the image offers a possibility to extend the field of the image into meaning.

This extension is not identical with the image, but a supplement of the image that opens the “depth of any possible meaning” (106). The *punctum* is freed from any cultural context. The point of departure into the essence of the photograph is located in the tension between the *spectrum* and the autonomy of the *punctum*.<sup>1</sup> The *punctum* for Barthes is a detail, both spatial and temporal, within the *spectrum* that does not stand in direct relation to the *studium* of the image. It allows the viewer to experience an extension of the *Bildraum*. Barthes’ concept of the photograph, as the first new media image and the basis for the moving-image in film, advocates an understanding of the image that exceeds its fixed

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<sup>1</sup> As Barthes remarks, “the *studium* is ultimately always coded, the *punctum* is not” (51). This observation demarcates the content of the image from the extended field which the *punctum* opens up.

flatness.<sup>2</sup> The extension of the photographic image is located outside of the flat representation of the picture or the screen. Does this extension open up a *Bildraum*? If so, it is clearly not a Euclidean space.<sup>3</sup> An image can open up in order to extend itself so that the viewer can attach new meaning to the photograph. This process is reciprocal, meaning that the *punctum* pierces the body in the same way the body reaches out into the *Bildraum*. This creates a direct connection between image and body.<sup>4</sup> Barthes' *punctum* is a connection to an image, although he does not tell us whether we can enter the image through this connection. To be able to do so, the image needs to have space. In order to control this space, i.e. to navigate it, we must enter it and know what its qualities are.

If an image has space, we can think of the interface as a door into this space. The image already is a space in so far as the viewer immerses himself in the image and belongs to its space. Following Barthes, it is far from being a Euclidean space, but nevertheless exceeds the two dimensions of the *spectrum* in which the only depth is depth of field.<sup>5</sup> It is a *Bildraum* that functions differently from the three-dimensional space we are used to navigating. If navigational patterns of Euclidean space are mistakenly applied to the space of an image, navigation in the image-space cannot be controlled. In order to adapt our system of navigation to the space of an image, we need the mediating element of the interface - the door into the image. The interface is a door through which we enter into what Susan Sontag

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<sup>2</sup> Barthes distinguishes between cinema and photography in that the latter captures something that has been, whereas the former reenacts fiction that was (79). Nevertheless, Barthes considers photography the "raw material" of cinema (89).

<sup>3</sup> Euclidean space is defined as a set of points in a three-dimensional environment which can be expressed in terms of distance and angles. Euclidean space presents object after object after object. To qualify as Euclidean space, this alignment of objects has to have the faculty of translatability onto an idealized flat surface without any breaks. This thesis sets Euclidean space in contrast to the space of the image.

<sup>4</sup> Barthes finally concludes that he "passed beyond the unreality of the thing represented [and...] entered crazily into the spectacle, into the image" (117).

<sup>5</sup> This is a purely visual concept of depth, in contrast to one which can be explored physically.

calls the composite units of the “image-world that bids to outlast us all” (11). I will argue that the image has depth and can be accessed as a space, although the latter poses difficulties and can lead us astray. Since doors are intended to penetrate an otherwise impenetrable structure, it is only through sensory-motor interaction with the door that the image can be accessed as space. The difficulty of the accessed space we encounter lies in its properties, which differ from those of Euclidean space. Once we stepped through the door, the question is if it is possible to navigate securely within the space of an image and thereby control it.

To answer this question we must understand the “doorness” of the interface and the properties of the space to which it grants access. Therefore, this thesis juxtaposes two texts that deal with the question of doors as markers of access, depth, and control. A close reading of these texts helps us to understand whether the image can be controlled. Both texts present non-Euclidean spaces and tell us something about our relation to these spaces. Kafka’s *Das Schloß* and Sega’s *Wonderboy in Monsterworld* both focus on doors and their function as markers of access to depth in relation to control. Walter Benjamin famously remarked that there “are two ways to miss the point in Kafka’s works. One is to interpret them naturally; the other is the supernatural interpretation” (1969 127). Following Benjamin’s claim then, this thesis is neither a theological nor a psycho-analytical reading of Kafka – it is a video game reading of *Das Schloß* and vice versa. These readings allow us to answer the question how the image is a space and if it is possible to navigate within these image-spaces. The point of departure is a place in front of the door and the first step is to cross the threshold of the image. The journey starts with the interface.

## **Kafka and Cinema: From Movie Screen to Interface**

Kafka's life was shaped by the advent of cinema as part of the modern experience. He was highly interested in cinema and the reactions of audiences in movie theatres. These reactions were shock-like, because the audience had difficulties in dealing with the new relationship between subject and object. Hanns Zischler informs us that audiences during Kafka's lifetime fell into stupor when a train passed on the screen (15). Bianca Theisen writes that people in Kafka's time tried to run away from the screen when a train seemed to move at them (543). Parts of the audience could not comprehend that the close-up of a hand did not mean that it was severed from the body. This shock results from the viewer's interaction with the movie screen, or more precisely a non-interaction, triggered through a loss of control. The processes which take place within the moment of mediation between a single viewer and the interface influence our understanding of the world. The interface carries the potential to reconfigure our understanding of space. This reconfiguration can lead to an unsteady relation between the body and the space it occupies.

Lutz Koepnick defines the interface as "a device not merely framing and ordering our view of the world but also allowing for reciprocal sensory contact between the human body and a world of unsteady representations" (17). This is the interface Kafka would have experienced, because the term itself only gained its importance in relation to the rise of digital media. Koepnick's definition helps us to understand that the interface works well outside of its usual digital connotation.<sup>6</sup> Norie Neumark interviewed cultural theorists

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<sup>6</sup> Christina Zimmer argues that cinema changed the relation between human beings and their environment. "Insbesondere die Entwicklung neuer Medien wie Telegraf, Telefon, [...] und die Entdeckung des stroboskopischen Effekts, der für die Entwicklung von Kino entscheidend war, führten zu einer tiefgreifenden Veränderung des Welterlebens und des menschlichen Zusammenlebens, die Kafka hautnah miterlebte" (13).



regarding how they imagine an interface outside of the digital domain.<sup>7</sup> During these interviews, cultural archeologist Albert Liu named scuba-gear as a non-digital interface since it allows access to an “unnatural, inhuman experience” (Neumark 303). Wardrobe consultant and cultural critic Celeste Olalquiaga envisioned gliding on rollerblades as a “protective, fluid and robotic [...] moment of the interface between the city and the machine” (Neumark 303). Finally, cultural historian Klaus Theweleit named nakedness as a non-digital interface (Neumark 304). These associations make clear that the interface is deeply linked to ideas of immersion and the exploration of “foreign” spaces, movement and the physical experience of a given topography. Skin is defined as the closest possible distance to the outer world. All of the aforementioned associations are in more or less abstract terms related to the idea of lines of demarcation. In other words, they are all versions of the threshold.<sup>8</sup> These thresholds are links to the outside world and set in reciprocal relationship to the body and the movie screen is such a threshold. To cross such a threshold is an act of control.

The interface of the movie screen can produce effects of spatial destabilization during moments of immersion. Parts of the audience experienced space as unstable because the lines of demarcation were blurred and the foreign places and their topography were not clearly defined in relation to the space the single viewer physically occupied. As a result, people assumed that the aforementioned train might hit them.<sup>9</sup> Kafka as a second-order observer was

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<sup>7</sup> These interviews were done during a radio show hosted by Neumark. Three examples, by Liu, Olalquiaga, and Theweleit, are given here. The pages refer to the article in which these interviews were transcribed and published (Neumark 303-304).

<sup>8</sup> Chapter Two defines the interface within its “natural” environment, namely digital media.

<sup>9</sup> In addition, space is destabilized even further. As Merleau-Ponty points out, “the train coming towards us, at the cinema, increases in size much more than it would in reality” (303). Control over the act of perception is rendered difficult through this recalibration of visual relations.

well aware of these effects. Although he was an avid movie-goer, Kafka understood cinema, to quote Hanns Zischler, as a “fast dämonische Technik, die an das erworbene Sehen, die Seh- und sie Schreibkraft des Autors sehr hohe, qualvolle Anforderungen stellt” (22). The reaction of the audience is caused by a break with quotidian patterns of perception. This effect imprinted itself on other forms of media. In relation to Kafka, it is Adorno who links this reaction and its effects to literature.<sup>10</sup>

[Kafka’s] texts are designed not to sustain a constant distance between themselves and their victim but rather to agitate to agitate his feelings to a point where he fears that the narrative will shot towards him like a *locomotive in a three dimensional film*. Such aggressive physical proximity undermines the reader’s habit of identifying himself with the figures in the novel. (246)

What the “victim,” according to Adorno’s understanding, experiences both in film and literature is a phenomenological crisis that spatially cuts off the individual from its surrogates on the screen and in the text, abolishing any form of control. The individual has to leave normative patterns of perception behind, in which the space occupied by the subject stands in stable relation to the perceived object. Instead, the subject has to deal with a disconnection that creates shock-like experiences, such as the “three-dimensional” train that moves towards the subject although he never placed himself in its way.<sup>11</sup>

Christina Zimmer argues that Kafka dealt with this experience by creating a “mediale Lebensform” whereby literature acquires the status of reality (12).<sup>12</sup> The resulting text does

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<sup>10</sup> This argument found its way into media theory. Lev Manovich states that “the printed word and cinema have indeed become interfaces – rich sets of metaphors, ways of navigating through content, ways of accessing and storing data” (73).

<sup>11</sup> Of course, any movie-goer places himself in front of the screen, but the image on screen can move from a perspective in which the train does not move towards the viewer to a perspective in which this is the case, without the viewer himself significantly changing his position.

<sup>12</sup> This life-form is meant as a proxy, a “medialer Stellvertreter” (Zimmer 137). Once created, it utilizes its respective medium as a “Schutzraum,” in which interaction can take place without face to face communication (Zimmer 141). Zimmer argues that Kafka hoped to hide behind the proxy in order to avoid any traumatic

not allow the reader to identify himself with the protagonist, because it simulates the disconnect.<sup>13</sup> However, Kafka's literature does grant access to the phenomenological experience of the protagonist, even without offering direct identification or control. Kafka tried to overcome the crisis of the subject-object relationship by attempting a direct literal translation of his cinematic experiences into literature. In conclusion, it must be possible to salvage these experiences from his writings. Following Adorno, we can argue that Kafka's works have a similar impact as moving images on screen; they convey feelings of dislocation and instability. Literary construction in Kafka's work then is not a purely literary process, but rather includes modes of perception that go beyond the medium of literature. Literary construction is dialogically influenced by cinema, and thereby incorporates the interface and the image-spaces that accompany it. A close reading of Kafka and his, what William J. Dodd terms, "word-images" reveals Kafka's understanding of a *Bildraum* (7).

### **Space in Kafka: Instable Representations and Restricted Spaces**

Space or, more precisely, movement through space plays a vital role in Kafka's work. The relation of the subject to a given space is a crucial factor of space in Kafka. However, referential self-localization becomes problematic as soon as spaces are not stable in their relation to the body. An analysis of spatial structures in Kafka's works reveals that space is utterly unstable in this respect.

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impacts on the body (143). A photograph, following Zimmer, erases the threatening quality of a real body and is simultaneously banned from a temporal progression and stored "im Augenblick" (144).

<sup>13</sup> Clayton Koelb explains both the crisis of disconnection and the resulting "mediale Lebensform" as follows: "The 'real' Franz Kafka remains at home [...] snug as a bug. Meanwhile creatures named Raban or Gracchus or Samsa pace out their moments of pain in some distant literary space" (30).

The messenger in “Eine kaiserliche Botschaft” moves from one spatial structure to another in order to deliver the late Emperor’s messages.<sup>14</sup> The narrator concludes that even if the messenger made it through the first chamber, he would never be able to reach his goal.<sup>15</sup> Space for Kafka then is a paradox phenomenon. It is a barrier, while at the same time, it is impossible to arrive at the limits of this barrier.<sup>16</sup> If the messenger arrives at such a barrier against all odds, another space opens up, until the spatial dimensions surpass the temporal boundaries of human life.<sup>17</sup> Kafka writes that

wenn der Weise sagt: ‘Gehe hinüber’, so meint er nicht, daß man auf die andere Seite hinüber gehen solle, was man immerhin noch leisten könnte, wenn das Ergebnis des Weges wert wäre, sondern er meint irgendein sagenhaftes Drüben, etwas, das wir nicht kennen, das auch von ihm nicht näher zu bezeichnen ist und das uns also hier gar nichts helfen kann. (*Erzählungen* 252)

Kafka generates a space that is not located on this plane of existence. Traversal through space does not lead us onto this plane. Instead, the space the sage talks about is located beyond Euclidean space and is ultimately alien, unknown, and difficult to comprehend. Kafka’s

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<sup>14</sup> Ritchie Robertson sums up how the messenger traverses “through the royal palace, and the inner chambers, the stairs, the courtyards, the outer palace [...]” (105).

<sup>15</sup> The paradoxical nature of space in Kafka is exemplified in the following quote. „Aber statt dessen, wie nutzlos müht er sich ab, immer noch zwingt er sich durch die Gemächer des innersten Palastes; niemals wird er sie überwinden; und gelänge ihm dies, nichts wäre gewonnen; die Höfe wären zu durchmessen; und nach den Höfen der zweite umschließende Palast“ (*Erzählungen* 188). The subjunctive in the second part of the quote takes into account a phenomenon that, according to the first part of the quote, is not possible in the first place.

<sup>16</sup> The concept of the barrier is explicitly mentioned in *Das Schloß*. Olga explains to K. that her brother, the messenger Barnabas, has access to the chambers, “aber es ist doch nur ein Teil aller, dann sind Barrieren, und hinter ihnen noch andere Kanzleien” (*Schloß* 198). These barriers are unstable demarcations. Olga tells K. not to believe that these barriers signify a clear border. “Diese Barrieren darfst du dir auch nicht als eine bestimmte Grenze vorstellen [...]. Barrieren sind auch in den Kanzleien, in die [Barnabas] geht; es gibt also auch Barrieren, die er passiert, und sie sehen nicht anders aus als die, über die er noch nicht hinweggekommen ist, und es ist auch deshalb nicht von vornherein anzunehmen, daß sich hinter diesen letzteren Barrieren wesentlich andere Kanzleien befinden als jene, in denen Barnabas schon war“ (*Schloß* 198). These barriers are not clearly defined but they can still fulfill their function of denying access.

<sup>17</sup> Kafka makes this biological limitation very clear in “Das nächste Dorf”, saying that “schon die Zeit des gewöhnlichen, glücklich ablaufenden Lebens für einen solchen Ritt bei weitem nicht hinreicht“ (*Erzählungen* 187).

aphorism resembles Ernst Bloch's concept of the gate. Bloch argues that some gates lead to more than just another earthly space, from one plane of existence to another.<sup>18</sup> Space in Kafka is constructed of planes which are not necessarily connected as purely Euclidean spaces. For example, the biologically determined life-span of a human being stands in relation to spatial limits. This becomes clear in *Der Proceß*. The topography created in the novel leads Josef K. from one space to another, but in the end leads to death. Death is a non-Euclidean dimension, which shows that space for Kafka exceeds the three geometrical dimensions that are usually related with our understanding of space. Death, in Kafka, means progress.

Even three-dimensional space is in itself unstable. The architectural space in *Der Proceß* is a presentation of multiple connected buildings and floors leading from one level to another through doors. This architecture creates spaces through which the reader accompanies Josef K. *Der Proceß* consists of episodes set in distinct surroundings, such as the bank, the court, and Josef K.'s home, spaces that, as Martin Walser argues, grant "no pauses, no digressions and no possibilities of escape" (126). If one, for whatever reason, wants to traverse but cannot leave the space he occupies, then by definition a barrier of some kind stands in the way. This barrier can be a physical boundary, a barrier within a subject, or something in between. We must say then that traversal through space in Kafka is often restricted through barriers.

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<sup>18</sup> Bloch describes his motif of the gate as follows: "Geht einer aus der Türe, so kann man ihn zwar gleichfalls nicht mehr sehen. Auch er verschwindet, als ob er stürbe, mit einem Male, der Zug biegt um die Ecke. Dennoch besteht, selbst bei weiten und gefährlichen Fahrten, der einleuchtende Unterschied, daß der lebend abreisende auf unserer Ebene bleibt, und zwar buchstäblich: man kann ihn auf unserm Plan ohne Auf oder Ab der Bewegung wieder erreichen. Jedoch der Sterbende wechselt die Ebene" (44).

For Kafka's narratives, barriers create outsides and insides. This distinction impacts the way in which space presents itself. Kimberley Sparks points out that the outside "landscape is clearly a dead abstraction" in stories such as *Das Urteil* (123). She explains that when Georg Bendemann accesses the outside world after being sentenced to death by his father, "the houses constitute a long, segmented, repetitive image, physically parallel and visually analogous to the river" (122). The houses are either flat images like a stage set or stretch infinitely into the open, never meant to be fully explored. The exploded outside world is, although seemingly larger, of lesser importance than the confined inside spaces. The crucial encounters of Kafka's protagonists take place in the restricted rooms behind the doors. Space in Kafka, then, is divided into infinite open exteriors and restricted interior spaces.<sup>19</sup> This dichotomy plays into the question of control within a *Bildraum*. We can look at the exterior landscapes and toy with them, but the inside spaces of the image are restricted.

In order to further explain what restricted spaces are for Kafka, it is helpful to look at philosophical influences. As Judith Ryan observes, Kafka was influenced by a mode of thought, "in which the external world is understood as a projection of the perceiver's subjectivity" (68). Ryan makes a comparison between Kafka and Robert Walser. Ryan argues that Walser depicts a poet "who believes that his fantasy is more powerful than external reality" (69). Ryan then calls the fat man in "Beschreibung eines Kampfes" a parody of Walser's poet, because the fat man actually reshapes the surrounding landscape, when he makes the path steeper. Ryan concludes that "while Walser's poet is clearly trapped in his own narcissistic dream of creative potency, Kafka's fat man actually does influence the

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<sup>19</sup> Jeong-Suk Kim calls the restricted spaces "Enge" (106). She argues that the closer K. in *Der Prozeß* comes to the court, the stronger the "Enge" becomes (Kim 106). Kim interprets "Enge" as a symptom of "Schuldbewußtsein" (106). Space in Kafka, for her, is therefore an expression of the protagonist's state of being.

landscape around him” (69). However, this only goes half the way. This control over space in Kafka’s story only functions in relation to open space, space that is not restricted through doors. Agency in Kafka is indeed immense in such open spaces, but as soon as a protagonist must enter a restricted space this agency is not only drastically limited but completely reversed. Restricted spaces, created by opposing forces, render agency futile.

In order to utilize the more important restricted spaces, many of Kafka’s writings, like *Der Prozeß* and *Das Schloß*, focus on one main protagonist. Cyrena N. Pondrom argues that this technique creates a consciousness that is part of the world “by restricting the narrative to a single character” (74). This enables the reader to connect vision to a body traversing through space, a connection in which the reader is never separated from but at the same time never sutured to the protagonist. This style of narration, which Judith Ryan calls the “limited third person point of view,” is the only one suitable for the proper application of restricted spaces (66). Friedrich Beißner calls this perspective “uni-mental” which means “that the entire content of a narrative, all events, actions, characters, and scenes represented in it, are perceived by a single consciousness” (28). If the text allowed movement completely independent from the protagonist, to roam the attics and castles alongside multiple characters, the very idea of spaces demarcated from each other by barriers would collapse.

The topographies through which Josef K., as such a uni-mental character, moves in *Der Prozeß* are examples of internal and restricted space in Kafka. The worlds in which Kafka places his protagonists in his fiction are networked structures in which, as Theodor W. Adorno observes, “the time-space continuum of ‘empirical realism’ is exploded” (261). Concepts of time and space overlap, their demarcations blur, thereby creating a space which is also measured in time or the lack thereof. The chambers in the attics are prime examples of

such temporarily “exploded” topographies. The seemingly coherent topography is spatially fragmented in the chambers that exist in the attics of almost every house.<sup>20</sup> Space and time, as exemplified in the episode with the *Prügler*, are no longer stable. Josef K. discovers spaces which affect time. One of these doors is the one behind which the *Prügler* punishes the clerks. Josef K. opens the door, observes the spectacle, and interacts with the *Prügler* and his victims (*Proceß* 75). Unable to save the two officials from their punishment, he leaves the chamber. When he returns the next day and opens the door a second time, the scene unfolds again, as if the first encounter had never happened. Time loses its importance and the space of the room is demarcated from any progression outside of Josef K.’s perception.<sup>21</sup>

Als er auf dem Nachhauseweg wieder an der Rumpelkammer vorüber kam, öffnete er sie wie aus Gewohnheit. Vor dem, was er statt des erwarteten Dunkels erblickte, wußte er sich nicht zu fassen. Alles war unverändert, so wie er es am Abend vorher beim Öffnen der Tür gefunden hatte. Die Drucksorten und Tintenflaschen gleich hinter der Schwelle, der Prügler mit der Rute, die noch vollständig angezogenen Wächter, die Kerze auf dem Regal und die Wächter begannen zu klagen und riefen: >Herr!< Sofort warf K. die Tür zu [...]. (*Proceß* 81)

Another example of exploded spaces is the small door in Titorelli’s bedroom, which is linked to the court and the attics. The attics are connected in an impossible way. They all are accessible from every other entry point in the chambers. These connections create a maze of floors, doors, and connecting staircases and exits that move beyond the physical structure of

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<sup>20</sup> The chambers are located in places where one does not expect them. Titorelli, for example, lives in a rundown apartment building to which the chambers are secretly attached. “‘Was ist das?’ fragte er den Maler. ‚Worüber staunen Sie?’ fragte dieser, seinerseits staunend. ‚Es sind die Gerichtskanzleien. Wußten Sie nicht, daß hier Gerichtskanzleien sind? Gerichtskanzleien sind doch fast auf jedem Dachboden, warum sollten sie hier gerade fehlen? [...]’“ (*Proceß* 150).

<sup>21</sup> Martin Walser argues that Kafka’s figures only fulfill a “functional role vis-à-vis the hero” (118). Paradoxically, the active and urging land-surveyor K. in *Der Proceß* runs in circles without getting closer to any final destination. His range of movements is strictly limited, since he not only never clarifies his status as land-surveyor, but also never gains physical access to the Castle. The village is a restricted microcosm in which K. oscillates between the inns, the school, and some other dwelling places. We shall see later how this oscillation is achieved by doors and the means to use them as pathways or to pierce them by employing certain devices. For now it suffices it to say that K. could go on forever, even though Kafka once disclosed to Max Brod that he envisioned the death of K. in the last chapter of *Das Schloß* (Brod 411).



the respective building. Due to the sheer inconceivable size of the irritating maze in which Josef K. enters, his world spatially distorts into what Adorno terms “labyrinthian descriptions” (256). These spaces are no longer stable and larger inside than they appear from the outside. The protagonist loses control over these spaces. In order to find an exit, he is dependant on the guidance of others who at least pretend to know how to navigate within these spaces.

Conclusively, space in Kafka signifies an absence of stability and control. The examples imply that space in Kafka is not a representation of Euclidean space. Like the space presented on a movie screen, space in Kafka is not the space we experience every day. If space in Kafka is not Euclidean space, then what is it? We can read space in Kafka as a representation of a *Bildraum* since it shares certain properties with an image. Kafka’s *Das Schloß* tackles the problem of the spatiality of the image and the role the interface plays in this. A dominant metaphor of the interface to image-space in Kafka’s writing is the door. What we need to do, then, is to understand what doors are and what function they fulfill as interfaces in relation to the image.

### **Doors in Kafka: Control and Spaceless-Space?**

Controlling space is, for Kafka, to a large extent a question of movement, albeit movement which exceeds the notion of traversal through Euclidean space. The keyword “control” demands an interface that enables the subject to traverse space in order to access another space. The door is one such interface through which moving bodies pass. What is it

that a door does and how is it different from a window? Lutz Koepnick declares the role of doors easier to understand than that of windows (1).

A door's threshold marks a fixed and clearly defined point of separation. We can maneuver our bodies in either direction across a doorstep, we can kick doors in to enter a building or shut them for good to live somewhere else. Windows, by contrast, enable much more fluid and unstable relations. While a window's opening invites us to immerse ourselves in another world's allure, its frame at the same time reorders spatial arrangements and demarcates competing zones of distance and proximity. Doors leave us with little to wonder about: they situate us either on this or that side of a physical border, and with some effort, luck, or cunning we can exchange one place for another. (1-2)

We must take into consideration the fact that the door as an interface, i.e. a means of access and ultimately control, is not always as simple as Koepnick suggests. Whereas windows surely fulfill the functions Koepnick assumes, they rely first and foremost on seeing.

Accessing doors and traversing space demand a considerably higher involvement of the body's motor functions than looking out a window. Doors can close and lock. Although windows can be closed as well and made opaque with the help of shutters and blinds, they are in themselves intended as open interfaces; gateways for looking onto the world. Doors, of course, are also open interfaces, since doors integrated into a wall provide a way of access for a moving body. But if the door is closed or locked, physical action is necessary to proceed. Doors are often not constructed in a way that gives access to what sight alone cannot access. Doors are the interface to depth and depth in turn is a prerequisite of access.

The interface is a door into the image. In Kafka's writings doors cannot only close and lock, but also conceal what lies behind them. What is located behind a door is not only demarcated from sight, but can, at the same time, also be distorted, inaccessible, or, just lead to another door. In his essay on Kafka, Adorno calls this hermetic space a "raumloser Raum," a "spaceless-space," which can without difficulty incorporate whole countries, but hardly

allows anything within its perimeters that runs counter to Kafka's world (319).<sup>22</sup> Traversal through spaceless-space transpires, but it is a traversal that connects such a spaceless-space with other spaceless-spaces. An examination of spaceless-spaces in *Das Schloß* reveals whether or not Kafka considered spaceless-spaces as accessible and controllable. This allows us to apply this understanding of spaceless-space to what they stand in for: the image.

Contrary to what Koepnick states about doors, there is plenty left to wonder about the door as an interface. In order to take this metaphor of the door as image to its limit, any (open) door enables the viewer to look outside or inside the same way windows do, if one wishes to do just this. It is, however, in the opening of and passing through doors and accessing the next space that they offer a different mode of experiencing the world than is offered by windows. This is explicitly the case when there is nothing located behind the door but another door, i.e. another interface. Norbert Fürst further elaborates on the complexity of doors in Kafka's work.

[M]an sieht von ferne das Licht durch viele offene Türen fallen, an denen man vorher vorbeigekommen war, ohne es zu merken. Denn sie sind nicht angelegt, um bemerkt zu werden, sondern nur um den Schein durchzulassen. Und so kommt es, daß alle diese offenen Türen doch eine Zeitlang Geheimtüren bleiben. Wir können durch sie nicht eigentlich in die Geschichte hineinkommen, sondern nur wieder heraus (8).

Following Fürst, doors in Kafka do not primarily focus on the dichotomy of here and there, or on the status of perspective *per se*, but rather on the question whether there is anything to access behind the door at all. They are secret doors, simultaneously concealed and illuminated. It is because of this illumination that the subject misses them, even when they are open. In fact, their purpose is to allow only the illumination to shine forth from the

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<sup>22</sup> From now on the term "spaceless-space" is used to denote a special version of the *Bildraum*, i.e. a space that is definitely not a Euclidean-space but nevertheless offers an extension of its field. This extension allows control over the image. The term is not meant to connote a positive or negative evaluation of image-space. It stands as a neutral proxy for any non-Euclidean space that might or might not offer an accessible space.

spaceless-space they conceal. Here, the ambiguous nature of the German word *Schein* comes into play. *Schein* cannot only be translated as “glow,” but also as “semblance.”<sup>23</sup> These doors pretend to be doors and are not a means of access anymore, but instead signify a space behind the door when in fact there is nothing to access. They achieve this fallacy by framing an image and at the same time signaling possible access into the image. Doors thus become mere illusions and the stable separation Koepnick attributes to the threshold becomes destabilized in Kafka through the putatively straightforward use of doors.

The interface frames the threshold of these false doors.<sup>24</sup> There are many thresholds (and doors) in Kafka’s works.<sup>25</sup> For Kafka the question of the threshold is not so much about whether the transition is marked by a clear line or by a zone, but what kind of space, if any,

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<sup>23</sup> This idea is taken to its extremes in „Die Bäume.“ “Denn wir sind wie Baumstämme im Schnee. Scheinbar liegen sie glatt auf, und mit kleinem Anstoß sollte man sie wegschieben können. Nein das kann man nicht, denn sie sind fest mit dem Boden verbunden. Aber sieh, sogar das ist nur scheinbar“ (*Erzählungen* 43). The twofold use of the word *scheinbar* creates a paradox that leaves nothing that is not “*scheinbar*.” “*Scheinbar*” is the default state of our experience. The image is the representation of this state since it puts into question its own realness. First, the trees are labeled as seemingly movable, which they are not. But even this is only seemingly the case, which leaves us with trees which at the same time can and cannot be moved. There is no third solution left that would solve the paradox.

<sup>24</sup> Every door by definition frames a threshold. “Threshold,” for which the German word is *Schwelle*, is, as Samuel Weber defines it, a “transition or interval, situated between two fixed points or places” (26). Walter Benjamin reconfigures the concept significantly. Explaining the threshold in relation to his term “awakening,” Weber interprets Benjamin’s concept of the *Schwelle* not as “a linear transition *from* one state to another, [...] but rather an *experience* that traverses a zone no longer bounded by the familiar oppositions of sleep and wakefulness, which are no longer mutually exclusive but rather overlap” (28). This expansion of the linear transition is already included in the German “schwelle” and this swelling leads to a break-down of linearity, for example in the dichotomy “public/private.” According to Weber, the dominant element of a space, to which the threshold is the linear transition then becomes movement itself (23-24). In other words, clear demarcations and transitions collapse and make way for an expanding zone. For both Benjamin and Kafka, leaving one space and entering another is a problem of the threshold. It is only that Kafka questions whether there is something to enter behind the threshold at all.

<sup>25</sup> One might object that the word “door” appears because it is a common word. By taking a closer look on Kafka’s particular usage of doors it becomes apparent that they have indeed a great significance. In his short prose “Großer Lärm” Kafka mentions the word several times in relation to the “rooms” they grant access to. In “Großer Lärm” the opening and entering of doors produces noise. The intrusion of the noise of the modern world happens via doors and not windows. Doors are “broken through” by family members who intrude the space of the narrator from within the structure of his home, and the boundaries between public and private space collapse. There is no place of refuge left for the narrator, who in turn considers opening his door a little bit in order to slither into the room next door like a snake. A feeling of the world as encompassing everything without any chance of escape, establishes itself in these lines. The reading of “Großer Lärm” supports the assumption that doors have a function in Kafka’s works that goes beyond their sheer physical existence (*Erzählungen* 23).

one enters. A smooth transition into restricted space is difficult and if the threshold swells at all, then it only swells to block the way. The threshold instead pretends to limit one space from another, but is in fact useless when the space on the other side is a spaceless-space. Doors are interfaces which K. in *Das Schloß* attempts to access through bodily movement in order to gain control over the Castle. The image in Kafka's work is, however, a trick, a seemingly stable space when it is not. The door signals passage into the image. A close reading of the doors in Kafka's novel *Das Schloß* will help us get closer to the question, whether Kafka understood spaceless-spaces as distracting illusions or as powerful tools in the re-conceptualization of space.

### ***Das Schloß*: The Inaccessibility of the Image**

When analyzing *Das Schloß* in relation to image, control, and access, the first thing to encounter is the eponymous castle. The protagonist K. gains access to the hermetically sealed area of the Castle by crossing a wooden bridge that leads him from a "Landstraße" into emptiness (7). The transition leads him from a clearly demarcated realm outside of the village, which can be understood as Euclidean space, into the "city limits." These city limits, which include the castle and the village, become the center of existence and impress themselves on any inhabitant of the village. The village then is the position in front of the interfaces, the doors, and the castle ultimately promises to await K. behind the interface.

The first door that exemplifies the metaphor of the interface is not the first one mentioned in the novel.<sup>26</sup> When K. leaves the inn for the first time, he gains access to the

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<sup>26</sup> The first door in the novel confronts K. with the landlady with whom he has a rocky relationship during the course of the narrative. The landlady fills out the whole frame like a village version of the doorkeeper from *Der*

space of the village through a door.<sup>27</sup> This door grants access to further parts of the topography of the village. After crossing the threshold, K. starts interacting with the village via the interface of its doors.<sup>28</sup> This is when Euclidean space is abolished and the spaceless-spaces come into play. Right after he leaves the inn, he perceives the castle looming above.

Kafka describes the castle's features at some length and whereas windows and rooms are mentioned as "zum Teil von Efeu verdeckt, mit kleinen Fenstern, die jetzt in der Sonne aufstrahlten," doors are not a part of the structure (15). Although K. assumes doors or gates lead to the Castle when he asks, „sollte das Unglaubliche geschehen sein, und sie waren schon im Schloß oder vor seinen Toren," neither he nor the reader ever learns anything concrete about them (37). When K. gets "closer" to the Castle, it changes from an "ausgedehnte Anlage" into a "recht elendes Städtchen" (14). This shift in designation – the Castle's denigration – infers that vision is unreliable and manipulative. The Castle is physically inaccessible and the only relation is a visual one.<sup>29</sup> K. tries to overcome this inaccessibility by using interfaces. The problem is, as Karoline Krauss points out, that "the Castle's elusiveness symbolizes the impossibility of a textual relation to objective truth"

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*Proceß*. Although the door is open, access would be difficult because her mighty form denies it. "Die Tür der Küche hatte sich geöffnet, türfüllend stand dort die mächtige Gestalt der Wirtin [...]" (*Schloß* 9, my italics).

<sup>27</sup> This is the moment in which K. activates the interface. "Er gab [dem Wirt] also noch einen Wink, ihm die Tür zu öffnen, und trat in den schönen Wintermorgen hinaus." (*Schloß* 13).

<sup>28</sup> Henry Sussman calls the interface a "shifting border" with which K. collides several times when he tries to "penetrate" the village (114). From my point of view K. does not collide with this border, since he is never able to reach the barrier at all. It is not possible to control what one cannot reach. Still, this is exactly what K. attempts.

<sup>29</sup> The inaccessibility is emphasized in the following quote. "Die Straße nämlich, die Hauptstraße des Dorfes, führte nicht zum Schlossberg, sie führte nur nahe heran, dann aber, wie absichtlich, bog sie ab, und wenn sie sich auch vom Schloß nicht entfernte, so kam sie ihm auch nicht näher" (*Schloß* 17).

(Krauss 1).<sup>30</sup> What this translates into is the question about the image and the interfaces into its space.

These interfaces are mainly doors. They usually enable K. to enter certain parts of the village without ever leading him anywhere nearer to the Castle. In other words, the only doors he is able to enter are set within the perimeters of the village. K. oscillates between these doors. By oscillating between them, K. traverses through space, but makes no progress toward the image. Progress is a mere illusion and K. only moves between a limited number of places, such as the inn, Barnabas' house, or the school building. These places are connected by streets and alleys which network the different spaceless-spaces of the village. If the Castle is read as the space behind the interface, Kafka implies that interfaces do not allow us to control a spaceless-space.

There are doors in the Castle that define the spaceless-spaces further, since these doors can be pierced through visually by using some sort of tool. This form of the interface addresses the question of mediators. Frieda, the bar maid and former lover of Klamm's, shows K. the "Guckloch" which allows him to perceive Klamm (45). The "Guckloch" is a window in a door. According to Koepnick, windows clearly signal the involvement of sight. The window disregards movement and relates on sight alone, thereby marking itself as a visual device. Later K. admits that he could not have endured Klamm's powerful aura without that visual device between them, which consequently means that the impact of the spaceless-space on K. is reduced through the interface. Another example of how the

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<sup>30</sup> This elusiveness is even addressed a couple of times in the text. The *Vorsteher* berates K. and hints at the problem of inaccessibility. "Sie sind eben noch niemals mit unseren Behörden in Berührung gekommen. *Alle diese Berührungen sind nur scheinbar*, Sie aber halten sie infolge Ihrer Unkenntnisse der Verhältnisse für wirklich" (*Schloß* 84, my italics). The elusiveness turns into K.'s main concern. He still hopes to be able to meet the officials in person. The face to face communication would label his interactions as true. "Das wichtigste ist doch für mich, daß ich ihm gegenüberstehe. Ich habe nämlich noch mit keinem *wirklichen* Beamten *unmittelbar* gesprochen" (*Schloß* 99, my italics). K. never tries to communicate with the image differently than he would with a real person.

separating and demarcating effect of doors and rooms can be circumvented by sight is the *Herrenhaus*. The walls do not reach up to the ceiling so that it is possible to peek into the room behind the door. “Der Diener ließ sich von K. auf die Schulter heben und sah oben durch den freien Spalt ins Zimmer“ (*Schloß* 274). It is possible to look at an object, but looking at the object seems to bring the subject in close proximity to it, when in fact the whole validity of this mode of perception is put into question by Kafka. The relation between the viewer and the object is one of disconnect, but the window communicates that this disconnect is only due to the sole focus on sight. This mode of viewing allows the subject to acknowledge the disconnect between himself and the image but at the same time fuels the hope of accessing the spaceless-space through physical movement.

The object represented through the interface, Klamm, carries further implications on the status of the image. Klamm inhabits a spaceless-space. In other words, he only exists as an image.<sup>31</sup> Klamm can be observed through the keyhole, but K. never meets him without utilizing an interface. K. lacks the possibility to encounter the force that holds power over him. Klamm, as the image of bureaucracy, is an embodiment of power that does not work on the basis of face-to-face communication, but rather through the mediation of the interface. There is no real Klamm beyond the image and this means the image, for Kafka, has no depth. However, although Klamm is an image, he holds power over K. Spaceless-space then is not accessible, but still impacts K.’s experience of the world, while he is not able to control the image. K. only thinks in terms of Euclidean-space in which physical movement means

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<sup>31</sup> Olga even informs K. that Klamm’s real appearance is “veränderlich” (200). His gestalt is not stable. Klamm himself appears as an image. He sleeps with his eyes open, never even blinking, like a freeze frame. “‘Er schläft? Als ich ins Zimmer gesehen habe, war er doch noch wach und saß bei Tisch.’ ,So sitzt er immer noch immer’, sagte Frieda, ,auch als Sie ihn gesehen haben, hat er schon geschlafen.’“ (*Schloß* 48). Olga says a similar thing about Klamm. „Von Klamm ist es bekannt, daß er sehr grob ist; er spricht angeblich stundenlang nicht, und dann sagt er plötzlich so eine derartige Grobheit, daß es einem schaudert. The Castle has similar qualities. „Wenn K. das Schloß ansah, so war es ihm manchmal, als beobachte er jemanden, der ruhig dasitze [...]. Es rührte sich nicht im geringsten [...]“ (*Schloß* 114).



progress. The spaceless-space of the Castle, in which doors are not a means of physical access anymore, disorients K., since he still reads doors as facilitators of movement in space. In other words, K. accepts the experience of three-dimensional space as normative and inadequately applies this experience to the *Bildraum*.

After defining doors in Kafka's works as interfaces through which the subject deals with the spaceless-space of the image, we have to focus on the sequences which utilize doors most explicitly. When K. interacts with Bürgel and Erlanger in chapter 18 and later witnesses the distribution of the files in chapter 19, space turns into one big interface. The topography is full of doors. K. is able to enter some of the rooms again to no avail. We have to take into account that these scenes take place in the *Herrenhof*, and not within the castle. The officials who are working behind the doors are not identical with the Castle. They are removed from the Castle and "transferred" to the village as images presented on the interface. They are what Barthes calls the *spectrum*. Although the closeness to the interface suggests to K. that he finally makes progress, the problem remains that he is still only dealing with an interface, albeit an interface that now disavows its status as interface.<sup>32</sup> When we read *Das Schloß* as a rumination on the image, it signifies that Kafka's answer to the question of access to and control over spaceless-space is ultimately one of impossibility. Kafka understands modern media as a means to signify that spaceless-spaces are subject to the same rules than Euclidean space. What happens is not that new media erase reality, but that it tricks the subject into the belief that traversing spaceless-space follows the same rules as traversal

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<sup>32</sup> In media theory the interface is considered most skillfully executed when the user does not recognize the interface. Neumark reminds us that "the cleaner and simpler the interface looks, the better, because it is less likely to bedazzle the user away from his or her main aim of following the well laid navigational paths as quickly and efficiently as possible" (305).

through Euclidean space. Kafka tells us that there is a *Bildraum*, but we cannot gain access to it.

While trying to enter the spaceless-space behind the door, K. gets confused by the sheer number of doors. He cannot remember through which of the indistinguishable doors he was summoned and again K. holds no control over his situation.<sup>33</sup> This multiplication of doors can be thought of as the multiplication of interfaces. Whereas K. navigates very slowly through the village at first, the assumed closeness to the Castle not only offers a multiplicity of interfaces, but also seemingly facilitates and accelerates access. K. traverses through space and utilizes interfaces, only to be eventually referred to the next room and then the next room. Erlanger bangs on the walls and commands K. to come over. Bürgel, one of the secretaries, reacts to this order as follows:

Nun gehen Sie, ich weiß nicht, warum Sie mich so ansehen. Wenn Sie noch lange zögern, kommt Erlanger über mich, das möchte ich sehr gern vermeiden. Gehen Sie doch; wer weiß, was Sie drüben erwartet, hier ist ja alles voll Gelegenheiten. Nur gibt es freilich Gelegenheiten, die gewissermaßen zu groß sind, um benützt zu werden, es gibt Dinge, die an nichts anderem als an sich selbst scheitern. (*Schloß* 304)

This sentence carries several ideas about how the interface seems to allow the subject, K., to enter spaceless-space, when in fact it does not. The focus of the interaction is on physical movement, as K. is urged to “go” and traverse from here to “there.” By traversing through space K. is able, according to Bürgel, to gain access to an abundance of “opportunities,” which ultimately are of no use. Again, the rules of Euclidean space are mistakenly applied to spaceless-space. This scene ushers in the distribution of files which K. witnesses. Files, as a representation of data, are placed in front of the doors, submitted to officials, and sometimes even negotiation and trickery must be applied to carry the files over the threshold (*Schloß*

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<sup>33</sup> The interaction with the interface takes place as follows. “Er suchte Erlangers Zimmertür, aber da der Diener und Gerstäcker nicht mehr zu sehen und alle Türen gleich waren, konnte er sie nicht finden“ (*Schloß* 288). The uniformity of the interface turns the interaction into a random choosing of options.

310-313). When the interfaces are accessed, it resembles a “Kampf mit den Zimmern” (*Schloß* 312). The threshold turns into a physical barrier, which allows access only through bodily force, for example when the clerk puts his “Fuß zwischen Tür und Pfosten” (*Schloß* 313). For K., this signifies that the utilization of the body is a means of accessing the world of the castle through doors. Kafka makes it clear that K. enters some of the rooms behind the door. K. now believes that he has physically entered the *Bildraum* through the interface. Still, he is nowhere near the Castle, which represents the space of the image.

Ultimately, the image and its spaceless-space in *Das Schloß* remain inaccessible. It is typical of Kafka to point out that spaceless-space exists, but that it is, however, inaccessible to us. Erich Heller writes that Kafka felt “separated from the all things by a hollow space,” not able to “reach to its boundaries”(82). The inclusion of sensory-motor functions creates movement through space, but a form of movement which is meaningless in terms of progression in spaceless-space. The more the interface hides its interfaceness, the more it suggests that involvement of the body grants access to the space of the image. While traversing through a *Bildraum* the same way K. would through Euclidean space, he is unable to accept the fact that there is a goal, but unfortunately no possible way to reach it.

Space is in crisis, *Das Schloß* tells us. For Kafka it is not stable matrix for experience. Consequently in a world full of images, Euclidean space is replaced by spaceless-space. This spaceless-space is akin to the image and represented through interfaces. These interfaces can be doors, which evoke the possibility of passage into the image. Reading Kafka clarifies that the image is not accessible, at least not in the same way as Euclidean space. If it is accessible at all, we have to find different means of access. The rise of the moving image, from early cinema to video games, has posed new challenges to our interface with the world. In *Das*

*Schloß*, K. fails because he attempts to gain access to the Castle through movement. He misinterprets the interface and does not adapt to the properties of the moving image. K. fails to acknowledge that the characteristics of Euclidean-space are not valid anymore and tries to utilize the interface in the same way he would utilize a physical three-dimensional door. Thereby, he relinquishes all forms of control for himself. The image can be a door and the spaceless-space behind this door is not inferior to Euclidean space, but rather different. Kafka tells us that we cannot enter the image as long as we do not adapt to the changed qualities of our environment. This environment is full of images we need to understand in order to proceed. Refusing this learning process will bring the idea of progress to a halt, since the inappropriate utilization of spaceless-space is distractive. Spaceless-space can consume energy without producing any effects. Inherent in spaceless-spaces is the danger of taking this energy away from dealing with the given status quo.

Kafka's spaceless-space challenges our understanding of what it means to traverse through space, since a *Bildraum* has to be accessed differently. These spaces, according to Kafka, are part of the topography of the modern world, although they cannot be measured by moving through space. They might be embedded in or hidden behind images, they might even be the images in themselves, but they are accessible only when we reconfigure our understanding of space and find a way to gain access to the restricted spaces of the image.

## Chapter Two:

### *The Image in Wonderboy in Monsterworld*

#### **Introduction:**

Franz Kafka understands the *Bildraum* as inaccessible and control over it as impossible. Nevertheless the image in photography and cinema signifies the possibility of access via its respective interface. The application of non-Euclidean space to these spaceless-spaces, according to Kafka, created the fallacious impression that we can enter into and thereby control the image. However, one of the most popular digital media, the video game, is a spaceless-space that allows us to do just this. The player of a video game can enter and navigate through the image. The player exerts control over an avatar and thereby enters a video game.<sup>34</sup> Control is indispensable when it comes to playing video games. Without the control of the player, all that remains is an algorithm that cannot be executed because of a lack of input. The physical input of the player is crucial in order for an avatar to traverse through space, albeit a space that is ultimately flat. Even 3-D games are, of course, two-dimensional images on a screen which produce depth of field. Relevant for the

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<sup>34</sup> “Avatar” is a concept in Hindu mythology that describes the descent of a deity to the earth in a manifest shape. In a video game, the “avatar” is the manifestation of the player on the screen. Technically, the collection of pixels which can be directly controlled by the player and fulfills a representative function is termed the avatar. The original meaning of the word already hints at the difficulty to pinpoint the avatar. Both the religious component and the transformation of something abstract into something concrete show that the relation between player and game is not a simple one.

contextualization of Kafka's thoughts on space in relation to video games is how the bodily involvement of the gamer challenges the alleged inaccessibility of the *Bildraum*.

This chapter examines the interfaceness of doors in video games. I shall argue that the video game space is a modern rumination on Kafka's spaceless-space, albeit a spaceless-space which, at first sight, can be accessed and controlled. The video game interface is a door through which the image can be entered. Reading video games through Kafka shows what an effect the access to spaceless-space of the image has on the relation between the individual and the space in which he navigates. This chapter combines Gilles Deleuze's taxonomy of cinematic images with Mark Hansen's concept of technology as an extension of the body. The main part of this chapter illustrates the relation of body and image through a close reading of a video game against Kafka's critique of non-Euclidean space.

The focus of this chapter is on the video game *Wonderboy in Monsterworld*. It was released by Sega in 1992 on the Genesis game system. It is a narrative in which the avatar Shion has to save his homeland from an evil force and rescue the princess. The player's manual includes a section entitled "The Story so Far" and sets the direction for this action-adventure game that adopts dominant elements from fantasy novels and films. The game also includes short episodes set within the game world in which a story is revealed step by step. *Wonderboy in Monsterworld* is a set of horizontally and vertically scrolling jump and run screens in a fantastic fairy-tale-like world. The game features occasional montage techniques, for example when the avatar enters doors. The avatar is able to "talk" to certain inhabitants of *Monsterworld* (i.e. scripted written text is presented on screen) in order to gain information about his task. The player must solve puzzles by collecting certain hidden items which must be later used in the right situation. While proceeding through the narrative, the avatar gains

new skills and improves its status. Since it is not divided into traditional levels but rather includes thematically and graphically distinctive but connected areas, such as castles and deserts, *Wonderboy in Monsterworld* is structurally fluid. However, areas which are filled with hostile creatures are at times demarcated from each other by village-like structures, in which the avatar can roam without being attacked. In these villages the player can purchase items, restore the avatar's life energy, and gain pieces of information.

The reason for choosing this game lies in its reliance on clearly two-dimensional and non-realistic landscapes as immanent in most of the games from its era. The emphasis on two-dimensionality gradually waned in the era of 16-bit technology and is trumped today by more immersive, i.e. three-dimensional, surroundings that followed the release of Sony's PlayStation in 1995.<sup>35</sup> Due to the limited potentials of the medium at the time *Wonderboy* emerged, the bulk of published games epitomize the centrality of a sensory-motor schema in video games. This means that the sprites<sup>36</sup> are placed within two-dimensional landscapes which offer a *mise-en-scene* in which a third-person avatar moves through the virtual setting, literally overcoming the obstacles of a narrative.<sup>37</sup> The skills needed to master the narrative are sufficient hand-eye co-ordination and familiarity with the conventions of video games, and a general knowledge of the interface of a given game. The interface enables the player to traverse a *Bildraum*. Any movement executed by the player via a controller according to certain sensory stimuli emanating from the screen leads to a motor representation of this

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<sup>35</sup> For an overview on video game history consult Steven L. Kent's [The Ultimate History of Video Games](#).

<sup>36</sup> A sprite is any accumulation of pixels that create a moving image on the screen which can have a direct effect on the avatar. The avatar is a sprite in itself. Obstacles, opponents, and platforms for example are sprites, but not avatars, since they are not directly controlled by the player.

<sup>37</sup> Narrative is meant here in a very broad sense. The discussion on the term itself and its validity in the context of video games is an important debate in the field of video game theory. For an overview see Jesper Juul 156.

movement by the avatar. This in turn creates a feedback loop between the real world and the game-world. In other words, the video game image is a space that can be entered.

### **A Different Image: The Video Game and the Body**

The image on a movie or television screen is two-dimensional. Nevertheless, it depicts three-dimensional space. Consequently, there exists a discrepancy between three-dimensional spaces and the image. This discrepancy triggers notions of absence. Theories of the new media image are dominated by notions of absence. Walter Benjamin analyzes the loss of aura and Marshall McLuhan examines the gaps between pixels produced by the cathode tube in a television set.<sup>38</sup> Paul Virilio mourns the loss of entire dimensions, which creates the non-dimension of the pixel while Jean Baudrillard assumes a full scale loss of reality itself.<sup>39</sup> The consensus suggests that the new media image is an image that is incomplete. McLuhan delivers a clue where to find the means for a completion of the image.

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<sup>38</sup> Benjamin's main interest in terms of the moving image is on cinema. What is lost is the „aura“ of a work of art and cinema. For Benjamin, the fragmented technical structure compensates for the absence of aura. “[W]as im Zeitalter der technischen Reproduzierbarkeit des Kunstwerks verkümmert, das ist seine Aura” (1963 13). McLuhan's concept of hot and cold media compares cinema to television. For McLuhan, the gaps between pixels on a television screen have to be actively filled by the viewer. “The TV image offers some three million dots per second to the receiver. [...] The TV image is *now* a mosaic mesh of light and dark spots [...]. As in any other mosaic, the third dimension is alien to TV, but it can be superimposed” (313). “The TV image requires each instant that we ‘close’ the spaces in the mesh [...]” (McLuhan 314). For McLuhan, the image is about the apparatus and the viewer, and not about its content.

<sup>39</sup> Paul Virilio writes specifically about the digital pixel. He argues that the digital image not only loses one but rather all dimensions. “Finally the fractionary dimensions are the heirs to that Lost Dimension, the informatic punctum, the pixel that allows the instantaneous projection of data, the representation of a synthetic, digital form-image, which [...] is also a presentation in true size of the form-object” (109). Interestingly, Virilio, like Barthes, uses the word *punctum*. Whereas for Barthes the *punctum* is an extension, Virilio labels it as the residue of absence. Jean Baudrillard assumes the absence outside or behind the image. “Such would be the successive phases of the image: it is a reflection of a profound reality; it masks and denatures a profound reality; it masks the *absence* of a profound reality; it has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum” (6). The question of what to expect “behind” the interface is very relevant in Baudrillard's argument.



His famous phrase “the medium is the message” and its appendix that “the content of every medium is always another medium” eventually labels thought as the first (or last, depending on the point of view) medium in this chain (8). Thought creates movement, and movement, in turn, creates control over an image traversing through spaceless-space. In other words, video games offer a possibility of reversing the notion of absence by allowing the user to link his body to spaceless-space. The infusion of the body into the image fills the absence inherent in the image. The diegetic landscape is accepted as a stable space.<sup>40</sup> Has the image perhaps never been deficient, but rather waiting for an infusion of physical agency? Have video games unmasked Kafka’s lessons on spaceless-space as a fallacy?

To answer these questions we need to understand what it is that enters the spaceless-space of the video game. Deleuze’s taxonomy of images provides a set of terms helpful for defining the video game image and its relation to the body. What he calls the “movement-image” is especially applicable to video games until the early nineties.<sup>41</sup> According to Deleuze, the movement-image is “the acented set [...] of variable elements which act and react on each other” establishing a common ground to start from since it perfectly describes the relation of the objects within video games (217).<sup>42</sup> These objects act and react to each other, because the idea of a video game is to keep the actions and reactions on a level that

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<sup>40</sup> This term makes a distinction between “diegetic activity (what the player’s avatar does as a result of player activity) and extradiegetic activity (what the player is physically doing to receive a certain result)” (Wolf and Perron 15). The terminology also includes non-diegetic elements, which are not part of the narrative’s world, such as the credits or the score. In this thesis, the diegetic world is the game world presented on screen in which the avatar navigates.

<sup>41</sup> The creation of images similar to Deleuze’s time-image is hard to achieve on 8 and 16-bit systems, due to the demanded graphical complexity of image-types such as the crystal image.

<sup>42</sup> Jacques Ranciere explains the movement-image further: “The movement-image, the image organized according to the logic of the sensory-motor schema, is conceived of as being but one element in a natural arrangement with other images within a logic of the set [...] analogous to that of the finalized of *our perceptions and actions*” (107, my italics)

sets an avatar into a favorable relation to other objects on screen. The relation is ideal when the avatar does not touch obstacles that would prevent the player from continuing and touches objects which facilitate and allow for the intended progression. However, not every subcategory of the movement-image is necessarily equally applicable, nor is the movement-image in general the perfect match since the problem of the acentred system of relations poses the following difficulty. Although the avatar might not necessarily be located in the center of the screen, it definitively is the center of the diegetic world, because the avatar is linked with the player in the most direct way.

As for the subcategories of the movement-image, technological limitation renders a concise application of the affection-image almost impossible. The overall simplicity and artifice of the sprite stifles any possibility to “refer [...] to its object by internal characteristics,” which Deleuze defines as an essential part of the affection-image (217). The perception-image seems to be more closely linked to the visual component of video games, but is actually difficult to apply, too. Since Deleuze defines it as “a perception in the *frame* of another perception,” it can work only in three-dimensional simulations (217). This leaves us with the action-image and yet another sub-category, the impulse-image. The action-image and its “reaction of the centre to the set” are as close as possible to the representations on the screen (217). The problem of the acentred set that is important because the movement-image *per se* dissolves due to the now possible existent center. In *Wonderboy in Monsterworld*, the avatar’s directive (as the centre of the set) is to fulfill various tasks which are placed within the *mise-en-scene*.<sup>43</sup> In order to accomplish this task the avatar has to move (walk, climb ladders, jump) and react appropriately to obstacles, pitfalls, and doors. These are precisely

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<sup>43</sup> These tasks can be relatively simple, for example when the avatar has to cross a huge gap by jumping from one solid block to another. Other tasks are more complex and demand the finding of an important item in a maze-like structure in order to open the gate to another level.

what Deleuze calls a “set of qualities and powers as actualized in a state of things, thus constituting a real milieu around a centre” (1). Other properties of the action-image, such as being an “internal link between situation and action,” are self-evident in the logic of video games (Deleuze 218).

Deleuze’s impulse-image, which “designates the qualities or powers related to an *originary* world (defined by impulses),” includes the idea of player activity (218). It is clear that Deleuze had cinema in mind when he created his taxonomy. For this reason, the concept of the impulse-image has to be adjusted for it to fit the context of video games. The aforementioned “originary world” is related to the game-world of the video game in which the qualities (i.e. the rules of the game and the affordances) and the powers (for example the imitation of the laws of nature specified within this world) take shape. These qualities and powers are then linked to the extradiegetic space of the user in front of the screen. The result is a modified version of the movement-image that is heavily dependent on the sub-categories of the action-image and a modified version of the impulse-image. This modification takes place because the movement of the image is induced from the outside. It is altered by an external force, which sets up complex feedback loops between cognitive and bodily actions and reactions formulated against a background of sight, sound, and tactility.

A critical language for reading video games must be a Frankensteinian construct. Given video games’ likeness to cinema, this language must be pieced together from modified parts of Deleuze’s movement-image and action- and impulse images, which are then fueled by human input. Having established this type of image by cutting away parts of different image-concepts, the crucial involvement of the human body and mind in the creation of a genuine type of image has to be validated as a factor that actually determines the properties

of the new image. Mark Hansen establishes a connection between the player and the video game image which exceeds the notion of the video game controller (or the system as such) as being a “mere vehicle for translating the real into a form,” but rather being an “operation of the real itself” (2000: 200). Exactly because the movements on screen are either directly controlled (the avatar by the player) or at least indirectly influenced (appealing to the obstacles’ looped subroutines), the screen presenting the game is not an intermediary, but located more closely to the human agent. Video games are not demarcated from the world. Rather they are a medium of immersion into an environment of active bodily experience within a spaceless-space. Hansen terms these bodies which experience technology as an extension rather than a limitation “bodies in code.” Bodies in code are defined as mediators which use the

concrete technology of virtual reality *to stage a disconnection of the (fundamentally motile) body schema from the (fundamentally visual) body image*. [...] Such technical mediation of the body schema (of the scope of body-environment coupling) comprises [...] a body in code (Hansen 2000: 20).

Hansen argues that embodiment is realized in “conjunction with technics” (2006, 20). Virtual realities expand the scope of bodily (motor) activity, instead of confining them. The immersion in virtual realities broadens human perception and the range of experience. Hansen declares every reality a “mixed reality” and states that “motor-activity [...] holds the key to fluid and functional crossings between virtual and physical realms” (2006, 2). The key word here is “crossing” and it hints at the concept of the threshold discussed in chapter one.

How is this externally induced movement-image different from other images? It is different because the video game image enables a user to reach into and access a spaceless-space. Roland Barthes argues that posing in front of a camera transforms one “in advance

into an image” (10). Any player of the video game not only transforms into an image but also occupies two spaces at the same time, both being the “I” and the “Other.” This new experience clearly marks video game space as different from Euclidean space. Furthermore, the digital image erases the certainty Barthes finds in relation to the photo and what he terms the *that-has-been* is not given in the digital image (77). There need not be a referent in the world since the digital image, like painting, “can feign reality without having seen it” (Barthes 76). Technically, the digital image can perfectly copy reality it has never seen. Where a photograph is, according to Susan Sontag, a privileged “slice of space as well as time,” the moving image of the video games is an eternal flow of present tense (22). The video game image makes sense only in relation to a player who perceives it. It cannot be stored in albums and fulfills its original purpose only in relation to the body.<sup>44</sup> Although the following is partly due to the technological limitations of the time, the video game discussed in this thesis, clearly signals its being a digital image. Whereas the photograph, according to Barthes, has its *punctum* linked to a past *that-has-been*, the video game opens its *punctum* only to the now. The *punctum* of the photograph is a coincidence of two unrelated events which creates an extension of the field.<sup>45</sup> The video game *studium* is not a coincidence, but rather a prefabricated spaceless-space which leaves no room for these types of coincidences. The difference between photograph and video game then lies not only in the video game’s

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<sup>44</sup> Or more precisely, it can only do these things when it is transformed into another medium, such as a photograph or a video recording.

<sup>45</sup> Barthes gives the example of a picture by Koen Wessing. (24-26) Two nuns pass behind a group of soldiers in Nicaragua. For Barthes, the *punctum* is the coincidence that these nuns were there, exactly at the moment when the photograph was taken. Their non-relatedness to the soldiers is what extends the field for Barthes and thereby opens up the image.

strong signaling of its spatial difference, but also in its focus on space instead of time.<sup>46</sup> Both images are accessible, but only the video game image is accessible in the moment without referring to a history. By omitting the past, the *punctum* opens in a different way in video games than it does in photography. For the photograph, the actual entering of the extended field is only explained through access to meaning, but not through access to the *Bildraum* itself. The video game opens into the present and this extension of the field allows the body to enter the image in the here-and-now. This creates the spaceless-space of the video game image.

The inaccessibility of the image as critiqued by Kafka is contested through video game space which is clearly not three-dimensional but, nevertheless, controllable. The juxtaposition between *Das Schloß* and the video game allows a rethinking of the concept of both spaceless-space in digital media and print. To a certain extent, the video game image reproduces the spaceless-space described in Kafka but labels them accessible.<sup>47</sup> What are the effects when spaceless-space becomes physically accessible and ultimately controllable?<sup>48</sup> To answer this question, we first have to understand how the video game image functions in terms of control.

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<sup>46</sup> Spatialization is a prominent concept in video games. It privileges “space over time” and flattens “historical time” (Manovich 78). For Manovich “time became a flat image or a landscape, something to look at or navigate through” (78).

<sup>47</sup> The video game not only reproduces spaceless-space but also openly marks it as a simulacrum.

<sup>48</sup> As stated in Chapter 1, Susan Sontag argues that overcoming a feeling of insecurity is the main reason for trying to take control over an image.

## Space in Video Games: On Control in Video Games

Let us return to Franz Kafka in order to find a precursor of the moveable image on screen. In “Die Verwandlung,” Gregor Samsa defends a picture of a woman clad in a fur boa against his mother and his sister.

Er wußte wirklich nicht, was er zuerst retten sollte, das sah er an der im übrigen schon leeren Wand auffallend das Bild der in lauter Pelzwerk gekleideten Dame hängen, kroch eilends hinauf und preßte sich an das Glas, das ihn festhielt und seinem heißen Bauch wohltat. (*Erzählungen* 102)

This framed picture is a flat image similar to the one we find in video games. Although this image does not move, it tells us something about the depth of and control over the image. A woman in furs is depicted and Gregor rubs his body against her image. The fact that they stay separated through a layer of glass does not decrease the level of affection Gregor feels towards this image. We learn earlier in the novella that his prior social interaction with women was very limited. The picture is not a photo of a lover, but rather frames an unknown woman. This fact does not keep him from trying to have physical contact with the image. Gregor Samsa tries to access a two-dimensional space, an image behind glass to which he attributes corporeality and which he hopes to possess and control. However, the cold glass atop the picture clearly demarcates Gregor’s hot body. Is this image behind the glass comparable to the image of the video game?

The interaction between an avatar and a player resemble the narrative style of the “uni-mental” perspective that binds the reader to the protagonist.<sup>49</sup> In video games, the

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<sup>49</sup> The avatar is a version of the “mediale Lebensform,” which we discussed in Chapter 1. In video games, and especially in online role-playing games, the avatar is the most recent development of such life-forms. The anonymity of the internet (or the game world) creates the *Schutzraum* in which the player can avoid interaction

player controls the avatar so that the perspective of the player is to a certain extent “uni-mental” as well. But the player of video games holds control over the avatar and the navigable spaces.<sup>50</sup> The apparatus allows the player to access the spaceless-space on the screen and experience it as navigable. Video games signal control over spaceless-space through the conventions of Euclidean-space; a method that Kafka labels inadequate.

Space in Kafka is marked by a disconnect between reader and protagonist in order to emphasize this inadequateness. Is this disconnect also a feature in video games such as *Wonderboy*? In most video games the player controls one avatar at a time.<sup>51</sup> The resulting effect then is not a feeling of fragmentation but rather one of connection. The avatar on screen becomes a proxy of the player, but stays clearly demarcated from the subject in control.<sup>52</sup> Although the perspective in video games is structurally similar to Kafka’s “uni-mental” perspective, with the exception of the control the player exerts, its result is not a disconnect. Player and avatar traverse space simultaneously and always occupy the same space in the text. Otherwise, the player does not interact with the text and control is completely abolished for the time being. The result of this specific feature is a stronger connection of the player with the avatar, since the avatar cannot roam the game world alone

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with other human beings. The avatar as a proxy navigates the medium and thereby erases any chance of traumatic events. Still, the activities on screen affect the player.

<sup>50</sup> Alexander Galloway reminds us that video game space is explorable. Film never requires “the construction of full spaces” (63). The director holds full control over what appears in a *mise-en-scene*. “By contrast, game design requires the construction of a complete space in advance that is than exhaustively explorable” (64). In video games the course within game space is, although not unlimited, not completely pre-determined.

<sup>51</sup> Although it is the case especially in newer Internet games in which players can create avatars which cross racial, gender, and species boundaries, more traditional video games suture the player to one particular avatar. Only in certain multiplayer online games, Norie Neumark reminds us, “body parts are interchangeable, one can ‘re-spray- one’s color, one can change one’s sex. And one will find lots of men cross-dressing as woman” (302-303). These possibilities don’t even include the “cross-speciing” that takes place between female humans and male elves. Traditional video games rarely allow for a creation of such a customized character.

<sup>52</sup> The avatar is a representative and not a representational image.



while the player scans the playing field. This stronger connection reduces the critical distance of the player to the text. Where Kafka equips the reader with the chance of critical distance, despite the reader's proximity to the protagonist, the space of the video game is more encompassing and immersive. Critical distance inside the system is a difficult feat. Space in video games is able to reduce critical distance for the player when involved in the game via control. What is it about technological control that so significantly changes the relationship between user and text?

Control, in relation to technology, can be described twofold. Firstly, as David Lyon points out, control can mean the "social control inherent in these technologies" in general (51). This ultimately deals with the distribution of access to these technologies and the resulting social and economical inequalities. The question here is one of availability of access to technology of certain groups. Secondly, once one gains access to a given technology, how does technology itself influence the individual's relation to virtual space? The latter element is of importance for the relation between spaceless-spaces and three-dimensional bodies. This concept of control splits again into two diametrical variants, which in this form only apply to digital media and, moreover, video games. The first strain asks how video games are used to produce meaning and exert control. The second strain is the control that is exerted by the player. In relation to Kafka's writing it is the second variant of the second strain in which there is a common ground for an analysis. By utilizing the human-computer-interface (HCI) the player gains a very specific form of control over a spaceless-space. This control is, at first sight, undeniable, since any player who masters the interface of a functional system is able to control the avatar as far as his gaming skills allow. In Kafka, control over restricted spaces is signified, but remains in fact an illusion. Video games offer a blatant form of control in order

to master spaces which are clearly not Euclidean. This control is exerted via interfaces. How do interfaces function in a digital environment?

### **Control over Spaceless-Space: Digital Interfaces and Diegetic Landscapes**

Let us define the interface in relation to digital media. For Lev Manovich “the interface acts as a code that carries cultural messages in a variety of media” (64). The human-computer-interface “describes the ways in which the user interacts with the computer. HCI include physical input and output devices” (Manovich 69). Manovich also argues that the appearance of the interface “shapes how the computer user conceives of the computer itself” (65). It thereby communicates an understanding of the world. Any interface that uses windows arranges access in a well-ordered grid and stays true to “modernist values of clarity and functionality” (Manovich 63). But, as Mark J.P. Wolf points out, other interfaces efface the clearly drawn line between man and machine and try to be as invisible as possible.

The interface bridges the gap between the diegetic world and that of the player. Whether by mouse, joystick, [...] or keyboard, some additional means of inputting player actions must be integrated into the design of the game. Informational graphics and nondiegetic displays are combined with game play in a variety of ways [...]. Likewise, the way players’ actions are transmuted to their on-screen surrogates are often designed to be as transparent or intuitive as possible [...]. (3-4)

Accordingly, the interface of the video game is defined through two interrelated characteristics. One is the physical device of the controller and the other is the representation of the player’s input on the screen. The player gains access to the surface structure of the game through a combination of these two features. Since the player “enters” the image via the interface, the metaphor of the door is quite tenable for video games. As Wolf and Perron argue, “the interface [...] is really a junction point between input and output, hardware and

software, and the player and the material game itself, and the *portal* through which player activity occurs” (15, my italics). Norie Neumann rhetorically asks whether doors are “such popular images on the interactive interface” because the move into an interface is a movement from materiality into information where doors open that could not open in Euclidean space (304). We can infer two effects of the interface from this question. First, the interface is a means to leave a certain space behind in order to enter another space. Second, it shows that the space behind the interface is marked as different from Euclidean space. Virtual doors in video games are still images, but they transform a spaceless-space into a pseudo-Euclidean one. Doors in video games do not only look like doors, but they are also representations of access to the *Bildraum*. Doors in video games are graphic metaphors of the depth of images that can be entered and controlled.

In *Das Schloß*, different types of doors represent different types of interfaces. A more straightforward version of the interface is the key hole through which K. perceives Klamm. The more covert interfaces are the doors in the *Herrenhaus* since they make K. believe that he could in fact access the Castle. The interface of a video game such as *Wonderboy in Monsterworld* incorporates both overt and covert interfaces. On the one hand, it makes it very clear that there is an interface, the controller, and that the player has to learn the conventions of the game. These conventions are usually presented on screen in a straightforward visual manner. Pushing the crosskey of the controller up will trigger some form of upward movement. On the other hand, the notion of the mediating interface is removed after some time and replaced by a feeling of “natural” control, through which the mediation of the interface is forgotten and one navigates naturally. Of course, the interface remains, but the player accepts it as a normative relation to video game space.

By controlling the interface the avatar moves through the *Bildraum*. Time is presented via movement through space in a landscape that has no depth. How is it possible to create “depth” in video games and even more so in 2-D video games? The answer is that the diegetic landscape incorporates elements which “create” depth where there is none. In this respect, space in video games is similar to the spaceless-spaces in Kafka’s writing. Before we further compare *Das Schloß* to *Wonderboy in Monsterworld* against the background of space, we need to analyze closely the role of doors as interfaces to depth in video game space.

### ***Wonderboy in Monsterworld: Virtual Doors into Spaceless-Space***

Doors, in one form or another, have been an important signifier of depth in video games from the start.<sup>53</sup> The longing for depth stems from the normative experience of space as three-dimensional, since depth is, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty argues, the “most ‘existential’ of all dimensions” (298). The user only assigns meaningfulness to space if it, at least, simulates depth. For Merleau-Ponty, depth experienced on flat surfaces is already an instable concept, “through which the whole of the drawing strives towards its equilibrium by delving in depth” and “depth is born beneath [the] gaze because the latter wants to see *something*” (305-306).<sup>54</sup> The heavy reliance on depth as a signifier of “realness” is also evident in *Das Schloß*. K.’s focus on movement through space comes from the overall notion

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<sup>53</sup> One of the most door-heavy games is Gremlin’s *Westbank*. The game presents no avatar at all and the player looks directly at three doors on the screen. The task is to watch who opens these doors and react accordingly, i.e. to either collect money from customers or eliminate villains who try to rob the bank. Here the notion of depth is less important than the notion of the threshold.

<sup>54</sup> Merleau-Ponty rhetorically asks the following about images which create depth when there is none: “Since in this case I imagine that I see depth when there is none, is this not because misleading signs have given rise to a hypothesis, and because generally the alleged vision of distance is always an interpretation of signs” (305). Merleau-Ponty critiques the acceptance of depth as normative.

that the value of space stands in direct connection to its depth. K.'s powerlessness is rooted in his inability to enter into the unstable space of the image which he hopes to navigate. Since video games create a notion of depth that has no equivalent in reality, it is arguable that they resemble the exploded spaces in Kafka's writing. When an avatar leaves the screen through an exit on the left of the screen and then immediately reappears on the right side of the screen, video game space is marked as independent of the Euclidean rules of space and time as experienced outside of the diegetic world. Video game space thus functions similarly to Kafka's topographies insofar as the avatar triggers actions in the same way K. does in *Das Schloß*. This triggering, which Walser calls the "vis-à-vis role," is strongly embedded in the logic of the video game (126). A door that conceals an object is opened by the player and the object is retrieved only then.

Since the topography of *Wonderboy in Monsterworld* is an accumulation of images without depth, it has to pull off a trick to accomplish a sense of depth. The trick is achieved by doors, through which the avatar is able to enter buildings and places. In *Wonderboy*, the player places the avatar in front of a door and pushes the controller up to enter the place that lies beyond. Two optical effects visualize this action. The first effect removes the outer structure of a building, leaving just an ephemeral outline of the door and giving the player insight into the building's interior. The second effect takes place when the avatar enters an "invisible" door or a portal to larger spatial structures and utilizes montage. The scene fades to black for a second and, when it returns, the avatar finds itself located at some other place in the diegetic game world. This is one of the rare moments in which the fluid structure of the game is broken by cinematic montage.

The aforementioned “invisible doors” stand in close connection with the notion of depth. Scattered all over the game world are doors which have no visual representation in the game world. These doors can sometimes be found by virtue of their absence. For example, there might be a visible area of the game which seems inaccessible, but includes a visible door. This allows the player to assume, when familiar with the conventions, that an invisible door exists in the vicinity thereby granting access to the seemingly inaccessible section of the game where a reward awaits the player.<sup>55</sup> This use of doors adds layers to the architectural structure of the diegetic world. They are located “behind” the space on screen, exceeding the depth of field, whereby the player gains control over the *Bildraum*. These layers strongly signify that the spaceless-space of the video game can be accessed by the avatar which is physically linked to the player.

Within the layers of video game space, the avatar fulfills a vis-à-vis role and space features exploded structures similar to those in Kafka’s writing. The result, however, differs from what K. experiences in *Das Schloß*. In Kafka’s writing, the actions that are triggered by the protagonists do not amount to anything.<sup>56</sup> In video games, the agency leads toward the completion of the game, but is also quickly met by an opposing force.<sup>57</sup> Usually any Easter-

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<sup>55</sup> What is called by insiders an “Easter-egg,” was first used in Warren Robinett’s video game *Adventure* (1978), which was released on the Atari 2600. Through a complex array of actions, involving a ‘Gray Dot’, the player is technically able to discover a secret room, which displays nothing else than the author’s name “like a throbbing, multicolored movie marquee” (Robinett xviii). Atari’s company politics were the reason for the secret room, since they did not allow their programmers to give credit to themselves in the games or on the cartridge boxes. *Adventure* gives no direct hint at this hidden part of the game. A player may only stumble across it by chance or draw indirect feedback from the fact that there is an item, the ‘Gray Dot’ that seemingly has no practical value in the course of the game’s completion. Robinett calls finding the secret room “the meta-level, the way to truly beat the game and get to the real conclusion” (xviii).

<sup>56</sup> Klamm evades K. precisely in those moments in which K. triggers an action, exemplified in the scene in which K. is waiting for Klamm outside and inside of the *Kutsche* (*Proceß* 118). K is told that he is going to miss Klamm anyway, whether he waits or leaves (*Proceß* 121).

<sup>57</sup> Let me briefly elaborate on the term “agency.” Jonathan Culler states that the question of “agency” is “the question of how far we can be subjects responsible for our actions and how far our apparent choices are

egg facilitates progress or at least gives the player the satisfaction of having truly beaten the game. Whereas space in video games is as fragmented and vis-à-vis activated as it is in *Das Schloß*, the video game signals a stronger possibility of access and depth, despite the presence of non-Euclidean space. Where Kafka's space is dominantly unstable despite its very stable appearance, video games mark themselves as non-Euclidean spaces, whose depth the player, in spite of their flatness, accepts.

Space in Kafka exceeds the three geometrical dimensions. Applying Ernst Bloch's concept of the gate allows a reading of Kafka in which traversing from one plane of existence to another takes place in order to leave a certain space behind. Often, death is the decisive step that allows protagonists to cross the threshold and achieve progress.<sup>58</sup> Video games connect the idea of progress to the concept of levels. Video games are already spaceless-spaces and players deal with a traversal from one plane to another spaceless one, the moment they activate the interface. Where Kafka's topographies exceed three-dimensionality, video games necessarily reduce space to two dimensions and still convey depth. The game offers virtual thresholds that allow the same understanding of progress that many of Kafka's protagonists have to achieve through death. "Death" in a video game runs counter to the idea of escape in Kafka. In video games, death means failure and not progress. Whenever an avatar "dies" it was unable to follow the game's trajectory. Death is almost always followed

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constrained by forces we do not control" (45). The notion of constraining forces in relation to control on the subject is apparent in the structure of video games.

<sup>58</sup> However, not even the instability of space is stable. "Der Jäger Gracchus" is dead, but still cannot proceed. His "Todeskahn verfehlte die Fahrt, eine falsche Drehung des Steuers, [...] daß ich auf der Erde blieb und daß mein Kahn seither die irdischen Gewässer befährt" (*Erzählungen* 220-221). He traverses space without making any progress although he is dead and even able to travel "durch alle Länder der Erde" (*Erzählungen* 221). Gracchus also mentions a gate which he can see but never arrive at. "Auf dieser unendlich weiten Freitreppe treibe ich mich herum [...]. Immer bin ich in Bewegung. Nehme ich aber den größten Aufschwung und leuchtet mir oben schon das Tor, erwache ich auf meinem alten, in irgendeinem irdischen Gewässer öde steckenden Kahn" (*Erzählungen* 221). Death does not fulfill its purpose of allowing the dead to move on to the next plane of existence.

by a resurrection through the “continue” function. Furthermore, the possibility of replays is existent as long as the player is present. Only by not dying can the avatar move on to the next level and ultimately fulfill its digital death drive at the completion of the game. In *Wonderboy*, these levels are very large structures which are not necessarily demarcated from each other by montage. Although the levels differ in the challenges they pose and their design, they are constructed in a fluid line of succession. Space in video games is a reduction of dimensions, whereas space in Kafka is an extension of dimensions. Paradoxically, this reduction is responsible for a notion of access to the spaceless-space. This paradox has its roots in the control the spaceless-space of a video game signifies.

In *Das Schloß*, the protagonist has no control over access to restricted spaces. K. is only granted access to spaces that are open spaces, which contribute nothing to his search. Video games signal absolute control, at least for the player. In order to understand how a player controls the diegetic landscape, doors are again helpful. An invisible door exists in an area of the game which represents the capital of *Monsterworld*. This door is located within the city’s architecture, among various visible doors. The invisible door grants passage to a shop in which “charmstones” can be traded for useful items which facilitate progress.<sup>59</sup> In comparison to Kafka’s writing, the doors in *Wonderboy* appear to be a means of access. Although progress has to be negotiated at some of these doors, they are ultimately meant to be entered. Nevertheless, some doors are “invisible” or even locked, and the task of the player is to find the different “keys” in order to open these doors so that the avatar can proceed. In other words, the moment of the threshold in video games is one that signals

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<sup>59</sup> To make a long story short: charmstones are items that have seemingly no meaning in the game world. They can be discovered at hard to reach places, but they fulfill no purpose in the completion of the game. The player can finish the story without ever having to use or even find one. Still, when found, they facilitate progress and give the player the satisfaction of having discovered a secret.



access to the image. It keeps its promise as a threshold. Doors, as used in *Wonderboy*, evince progress.

The control of the player enables the avatar to move past the barrier and enter the space behind the door, the message being that there is no door that cannot be opened. Otherwise it would not be possible to complete the game. Such a situation can only come up as the result of an error in the code, a so-called glitch. Kafka's concept of space allows for another less affirmative reading of video game space. Similar to K.'s belief that traversal through space ultimately allows him to progress within spaceless-space, the video game communicates the presence of control over the *Bildraum*. The video game protagonist, the avatar, is literally guided by a higher force. Control in video games signifies that the player is in the same position as the Castle's officials.<sup>60</sup> However, the player's control, read through Kafka's critique, is in fact limited by a code that is only indirectly accessible via the interface. The code is the one door that leads to no image and to which we have no access. The player enters the space of the image and traverses through it towards a goal, but never arrives at the code. The image is only a representation of spaceless-space that can be controlled by relying on the rules of Euclidean space. This possibility conceals that there is still an invisible force at work within the image-space: the code of the game.

There exists a code in *Das Schloß*. Like the invisible doors in *Wonderboy*, it can be assumed by its absence in the *Herrenhof* episode in *Das Schloß* in which K. has access only to representations of the code. Images are mere representations of the code. The officials are crystallizations of the operating algorithm and are clearly disconnected from the castle at that moment of their appearance in the interface. In analogy, the code of the video game presents

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<sup>60</sup> If we pursued a theological interpretation of *Das Schloß*, the game would designate the player an almost God-like position.

the possibility of a player as images on the screen, but never reveals itself. It dwells as invisible and inaccessible “behind” the interface just as the Castle authorities do in relation to the village.<sup>61</sup> The code in *Das Schloß* is not even the Castle itself since the architectural structure is visible. The Castle is a representation of the code but it is not the code *per se*. The code in Kafka’s novel remains hidden. It is a non-visible structure of power-relations that is only expressed through interfaces and images. The inaccessible and confined spaces, to which K. either gains no true access or in which he is trapped resemble the limitations of the code in video games. These limitations are concealed by what McKenzie Wark terms a “perfect unfreedom,” the effect by which control over open spaces conceals the fact that other spaces are restricted (40).

The code in video games presents colorful images as its representation on the screen, which hide the fact that the underlying structure is not accessible. In *Das Schloß*, K. does not accept the special qualities of the image and tries to gain access to it. He fails to realize that traversal through three-dimensional space loses its importance since he does not deal with a Euclidean space anymore. The video game player usually acknowledges the image of the virtual world as such, but is willing to accept the image on the television screen as a Euclidean space over which he holds control. The reading of *Wonderboy* against Kafka’s critique allows two diametrically opposed conclusions. First, video games critique the privileging of Euclidean space and allow the individual to rethink the possibility of traversing other non-Euclidean spaces. Images, *Wonderboy* tells us, are spaces which can be accessed. Second, video games strengthen the dominance of three-dimensional space by simulating

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<sup>61</sup> Other individuals tell K. about the access they gained to the Castle. The uni-mental perspective of the novel renders such accounts unreliable. K. has no way to prove that these reports are true, since he never accesses the Castle. Olga, for example, disseminates the same message as the doors themselves. She tells K. that there are doors, “Barrieren, die man durchschreiten kann, wenn man das Geschick dazu hat” (208). Olga herself only relies on Barnabas’ report and promotes the idea of the body and its “Geschick” as a means of progress.

Euclidean space when, in fact, there is none. In the “three-dimensional” space of the video game, control seems possible. In analogy, the video game image implies that control over three-dimensional space is always possible as a means of progress.

This first reading of video games is only possible after the second reading is countered. In order to do so, the concept of control in video games has to be reconfigured. Video games are said to exceed traditional texts through control that allows for alteration. Theorists in the field of video game culture often deploy this argument and correctly assume that no game sessions are identical and whereas “narrative authors [...] have one shot in their gun – a fixed sequence of events,” video games resemble a machine gun (Frasca 227). The avatar can be moved at a different speed, in different directions, and it is possible for the player to discover multiple ways that lead toward the goal. Although this is a valid point, the alteration of the text is a means to create an illusion of control granted to the player. Whereas it is true that many games feature diverse ways toward their completion, they stay within the predetermined course of the code. Even if there are infinite ways of navigating the avatar through the diegetic landscape, the code of the game is fused into single corrective nodes. These nodes, in which the infinite possibilities of the game play are pinpointed into one single strain, are usually located between levels. These foci often use montage to structure the game’s progression. Consequently, although the alteration of video games as texts cannot be denied, it is a tenable assumption that the nodes of a video game significantly lower the player’s control over the game’s progression. Therefore, control in video games is linked to the “open” spaces in Kafka, which indeed signal infinity and control. Open spaces are mere stage-sets whose limits the individual cannot overcome. Control over these open spaces is as possible as it is useless, since for Kafka the restricted spaces, the code, are relevant for the

modern experience.<sup>62</sup> Ultimately, the image is created by language, the programming code of the video game. This language remains inaccessible while signifying a possible entrance via the image. Structurally, this is exactly how doors work in *Das Schloß*.

Space in video games is divided into open and restricted spaces. On the one hand, space in video games offers the player control, but, on the other hand, this control only reaches as far as the code allows. The code signals that completion is possible as long as the player follows the rules. The game's "value and its relation to other values," says Wark, "can be discovered through trial and error" (30). The code of the game is, depending on the angle, clearer or even more fallacious than the one in *Das Schloß*. The video game at least offers rules to follow, even though its language remains hidden in the *Bildraum*. Nevertheless, it conceals the fact that to win means to "know the system" and follow its rules (Alexander Galloway quoted in Wark 30).<sup>63</sup>

Kafka's critique and understanding of modernity triggers a notion of space in crisis. Space for Kafka is no longer stable that the subject of the modern experience must deal with the disappearance of demarcations in the world that are nonetheless signified. Space in Kafka exceeds three-dimensional space and adds various dimensions, such as time and death. Whereas the individual has no means of defense against the destabilization of space, (i.e. the lack of access to restricted spaces) the dominant forces in a power discourse declare spaces open and restricted. While open space is easily accessible, restricted space limits the possibilities of any individual agency. Through bodily involvement the subject strives to enter the image, though he is, in fact, cut off from it. For Kafka, doors show how space denies access. Doors function as interfaces which signal the possibility of access.

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<sup>62</sup> Control is not however necessarily easy. This depends on the difficulty level of the game.

<sup>63</sup> This is taken from a non-published manuscript from which Wark quotes Galloway.

Traditionally, the appearance of doors communicates the invitation to cross a threshold in order to traverse space. In Kafka's writing, they lose this capacity and infuse the individual in an eternal loop which never arrives at any goal.

Video game space appears to be more stable and goal-oriented. It is more stable because it reduces space to two dimensional landscapes and attests to a higher degree of control. Apart from programming errors, there is no door that cannot be opened. Usually, the player manages to access any space within the diegetic game world and the threshold always signals progression as long as the sensory-motor skills of the player are sufficient. What Kafka allows a reader of video games to acknowledge is the video game image as structurally similar to the images in *Das Schloß*. Through an image that is accessed via an interface, the player, unlike K., experiences the illusion of control.<sup>64</sup> The image signals that traversing virtual space allows the exertion of power, when, in fact, the power-creating authority, the code, is concealed by the image and thereby remains as inaccessible as the code we never get to enter – that which invisibly demarcates the Castle from the village.

### **Areas for Further Research:**

Control, in the video game sense of the word, is not *per se* a means of reversing the absence felt in media theory as long as this control takes place within the machine. Control has to be taken outside of the machine, beyond the interface and out of the *Herrenhaus* in order to regain critical distance. Control cannot be achieved by moving a body directly towards the castle, but by leaving the village first and looking for different pathways.

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<sup>64</sup> At the same time we should not forget that there is a form of control inherent in video games. This control allows the player to access and control images via an interface.

The *Bildraum* exists, although Kafka sees no way to reach it. Further research will be able to take more steps toward the image in order to enter it through a door. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari already point the way. In their book on Kafka, Deleuze and Guattari suggest that a reader of Kafka's works does not simply follow the main protagonist. Instead, they see the structure of the topography in Kafka's works as a rhizome through which the reader accesses what Deleuze and Guattari label the "Kafka-machine" (7). The reader enters the machine and becomes part of it, thereby abandoning all hope for interpretation since it is not possible to look at the machine from the outside (7). The machine sets up a cramped space in which all individuals have "to connect immediately to politics" because Kafka refrains from establishing a true narrator (17). The impossibility of interpretation within the closed system of the machine creates an environment that makes it difficult to connect to politics. The reader can roam within a restricted space, but, like the protagonist, is limited by the next barrier as long as he stays within the machine. The video game image is the next step toward spaceless-space, but in order to enter it, we have to leave the closed system of the machine behind and connect to politics from the outside.

Where is the outside of the system located? The answer to this question goes beyond the scope of this thesis. But in order to tackle this question, we need to come to terms with the extensions the image creates and their relation to power. Susan Sontag argues that "a capitalist society requires a culture based on images [...] in order to stimulate buying and anesthetize the injuries of class, race, and sex" (178). However, it is not the *spectrum* of the image that carries these powers, but rather its link to the viewer, Roland Barthes' extension of the field. Just as the code of the Castle controls K., the image exerts power over the subject. The "perfect unfreedom" inherent in video games is strikingly similar to Sontag's

concept of freedom in photography where “freedom to consume a plurality of images and goods is equated with freedom itself” (178). Similar to Kafka’s open spaces, it is a freedom only in relation to the image. We have to accept the image as a space, albeit a *Bildraum* that has depth, which the viewer, then, might be able to control. “Images,” Sontag says, “are more real than anyone could have supposed” (180). The acceptance of depth reconfigures our evaluation of the image as real. Once we accept the image as such, it is easier to comprehend that images convey “real” power. The acknowledgement of images as elements within a power discourse allows us to take them seriously, to contest them, and to enter them through a different door than the ones they so blatantly offer.

These alternative doors have properties similar to those of video games. They exist only in relation to the individual in the present tense. Already for the photograph, Barthes states that the true image gains its “truth” always in relation to a given subject, as “the truth for me” (110).<sup>65</sup> In his doorkeeper legend, “Vor dem Gesetz,” Kafka makes a similar statement. The door to the law is only meant for a single person.<sup>66</sup> Thus, access to the image is a question of time as much as it is a question of space and the body. If even the present tense is not sufficient in order to enter spaceless-space, the image might point toward the future. Perhaps there, we will finally be able to cross the threshold. This thesis read a video game through Kafka. Kafka, in turn, has to be read through the video game and new media. Time might be the key to the door into the image.

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<sup>66</sup> It is the doorkeeper who tells the man at the end of his life that the gate was exclusively meant for him: “Hier konnte niemand sonst Einlaß erhalten, denn dieser Eingang war nur für dich bestimmt. Ich gehe jetzt und schließe ihn” (*Erzählungen* 178). The gate closes now which infers that it has been open all the time. The man dies without ever having accessed the law because he, in contrast to K., never strove for the door at all.

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