



Article

Metamorphosis as Origin—Koji Yamamura's Short Animation Franz Kafka's A Country Doctor

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Abstract: In the beginning was metamorphosis. This paradoxical thought, which the ancient Roman poet Ovidius and modern author Franz Kafka represented in their literary works, is visualized in Koji Yamamura's short animation *Franz Kafka's A Country Doctor*. Diverse metamorphoses that do and do not appear in the Kafka original are so elaborately and dynamically depicted in this animation that no live-action film could possibly represent them. In addition, the film itself can be seen as a metamorphosis, as it is an animation converted from a short story. Such a dominance of metamorphosis is also true for the transculturality and transnationalism of Yamamura's animation. In a sense, the film results from a cultural integration of foreign language and image. However, this integration is also part of the swirl of metamorphosis. The traditional performance art Kyogen, which the director uses to voice the main characters in the animation, could not integrate foreign culture without its own diversification. Yamamura's animation demonstrates that transculturality is another name for fundamental metamorphosis in which diversification and integration occur simultaneously.

Keywords: metamorphosis; animation; Franz Kafka; transculturality

1. Introduction

In the beginning was metamorphosis. This does not mean that there was first something, and then it metamorphosed. Rather, the origin was metamorphosis. The concept of metamorphosis as origin that I propose in this article refers to Jacques Derrida's criticism on the European tradition of metaphysics in which the origin is considered to be pure unity. I propose this paradoxical view of metamorphosis as origin because it seems to be useful in describing Koji Yamamura's short animation *Franz Kafka's A Country Doctor* (2007) as transnational cinema. In "Limiting Imagination of National Cinema", Andrew Higson called into question the paradigm of national cinema, pointing out that national identity and tradition are never "pure or stable" (Higson 2000, p. 67). He continued:

On the contrary, the degree of cultural cross-breeding and interpenetration, not only across borders but also within them, suggests that modern cultural formations are invariably hybrid and impure. They constantly mix together different 'indigeneties' and are thus always re-fashioning themselves, as opposed to exhibiting an already fully formed identity. (Higson 2000, p. 67)

What I want to show in this article is that Higson's observations on the hybridity and impureness of modern cultural formations are exactly true of Yamamura's transnational animation. The concept of metamorphosis as origin fits this purpose perfectly because it underlines the existence of radical difference in the very beginning.

Derrida demonstrates in *Dissemination* (Derrida 1981), for instance, that there is not a pure identity in the beginning, that difference is already at work in the origin.

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The transnationalism of this Japanese animation is quite obvious: As its title shows, this 21-min long work is an adaptation of Franz Kafka's short story *A Country Doctor*, which was written in 1917 and included in a short story collection of the same title.² Yamamura, an animator and short film producer³ whose experimental animations have received critical acclaim at international film festivals,⁴ adapted the narrative of the renowned early 20th-century Prague author who is especially well known for his novella, *The Metamorphosis*. Published in 1915, *The Metamorphosis* tells the story of Gregor Samsa's abrupt transformation into a grotesque unknown insect and his inability to return to his original form of a human being. The radical metamorphoses Kafka depicts are not merely unaccountable, they are irreversible. No one can control these changes and their resulting differences, so that all kinds of identities are destroyed. Irreversibility and uncontrollability are the principles of metamorphosis as origin, and as soon as one adopts this viewpoint, nothing in the world can remain the same. This means that there is only an endless dynamic process of metamorphosis.

The concept of "Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal, Becoming-Imperceptible" that Deleuze and Guattari write about in *A Thousand Plateaus* (Deleuze and Guattari 2004) can be seen as a postmodern version of metamorphosis as origin. "Becoming" is neither continuous development nor rational progress, but transformation as uncontrollable movement of difference. This "becoming", in other words, is contrary to the dialectical process described in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which overcomes differences through synthesis to achieve the identity of spirit in absolute knowledge. This thinking is far from specific to literature and philosophy in the 20th century, however; it can be found in ancient philosophy and literature as well. Friedrich Nietzsche, who speaks about "the innocence of becoming" (Nietzsche 1999b, p. 237), in later works, finds his own pioneer in the pre-Socratic philosophy of Heraclitus, for whom everything flows (*Panta rhei*) and the being is only "an empty fiction" (Nietzsche 1999a, p. 75). Another example is the *Metamorphoses*, a narrative poem by the ancient Roman poet Ovidius Naso. This literary work is the most representative of the aesthetic concept that regards metamorphosis as origin.⁶

2. Diverse Metamorphoses in the Animation

Yamamura's transnational animation draws on the aesthetic and ontology of radical metamorphosis in the European tradition. That is already clear in the opening sequence of *Franz Kafka's A Country Doctor*, in which the main character stands in a snowstorm at night. The country doctor in this scene is not an autonomous actor who can decide his own fate. He is a hopeless despairing subject whom nobody in the village helps, confronted with extremely bad weather and unable to reach a patient in a neighboring village because his horse is dead (Figure 1).

Besides Yamamura's animation, there are two German live-action adaptations of *The Country Doctor*: Cyril Tuschi's Nachtland (1995), 22 min, and Tobias Frühmorgen's Menschenkörper (2004), 17 min (Engel and Auerochs 2010, p. 237). For a discussion of the relationship between Kafka and cinema, see Bilderman and Lewit (2016).

For details of Yamamura's biography, see the official homepage: http://www.yamamura-animation.jp/e-prof.html (accessed on 15 September 2018)

⁴ His animation *Mt. Head* (2002) won the 2003 Grand Prize at the Annecy International Animation Film Festival. *Franz Kafka's The Country Doctor* won the 2007 Grand Prize at the Ottawa International Animation Festival.

⁵ For details of this concept, see the entry "Unschuld des Werdens" (Skirl 2011) in *Nietzsche-Handbuch*.

The Last World (1988) by Austrian novelist Christoph Ransmayr is a wonderful example of post-modern literature that inherits the aesthetic tradition of *The Metamorphosis*.

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Figure 1. ©YAMAMURA Animation/SHOCHIKU.

Exposed to the blizzard, the doctor stands alone in front of his house, like a small plant blown by the wind. Not for even for a moment does his body remain in a stable form. It is completely passive; it grows in an instant and sways violently, warped and deformed by the strong wind in a way that no live-action film could represent.

Only an animation independent of real-world principles could display such a drastically metamorphosing body. Thus, it is not surprising that Paul Wells, a specialist in media studies, writes in his book *Understanding Animation* that metamorphosis is "the constituent core of animation itself" (Wells 1998, p. 69). Japan studies scholar Susan J. Napier analyzes many patterns of metamorphosis in her book *Anime from Akira to Howl's Moving Castle* and notes that "animation can and does emphasize transformation in a way that simply no other artistic genre is capable of doing" (Napier 2005, p. 36). Napier deals with contemporary mainstream Japanese animation, not the kind of experimental animation that Yamamura produces. However, her work and that of Wells show that scholars agree that metamorphosis is a common motif in animated films. In this sense, Yamamura's avant-garde animation shares a core characteristic with mainstream Japanese animation.

The country doctor's metamorphosis into a helpless, passive, plant-like being in the opening scene is not an isolated event in the film. It is followed by multiple other metamorphoses. From the viewpoint of Yamamura, as for Kafka, metamorphosis occurs not in isolation but in succession. That is to say, it is neither ideas nor materials that are continuous in the world—it is transformations. For example, in the story of the country doctor, the metamorphosis of a human being into an animal is illustrated by the groom, who not only appears from an unused pigsty, but who also crawls out "on all fours" (Kafka 1988, p. 220). Yamamura faithfully reproduces this description of "becoming-animal". The groom as a bastard of human and animal plays an important role in the story because he pulls two horses out of the pigsty so that the country doctor can start for the neighboring village where his patient awaits. His bestiality is most obvious when he bites Rose, the country doctor's maid, on the face. In the original, Kafka describes this scene as follows:

Yet hardly was she beside him when the groom clipped hold of her and pushed his face against hers. She screamed and fled back to me; on her cheek stood out in red the marks of two rows of teeth. "You brute," I yelled in fury, "do you want a whipping?" (Kafka 1988, p. 221)

The groom appears as a "brute" whose uncontrolled desire the doctor will domesticate with a "whipping". He is not a human being to such a civilized man as the doctor, but an animal that must be tamed. Although the doctor thinks he should stay in his home to protect Rose, the groom starts

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up the carriage against the doctor's will because he wants to be alone with the maid. The bestial groom's active desire contrasts in a dynamic way with the passive, plant-like doctor at the mercy of the snowstorm. Yamamura's animation elaborately depicts this relationship, which is open to multiple interpretations.

The animalizing of the groom corresponds to a different type of metamorphosis, an anthropomorphosis of animals, in the story of the country doctor. When the doctor's carriage arrives at the village and the doctor sees the sick boy in bed, the two horses that had pulled his carriage poke their heads through the windows. Kafka describes this sight as follows:

These horses, now, they had somehow slipped the reins loose, pushed the windows open from outside, I did not know how; each of them had stuck a head in at a window and, quite unmoved by the startled cries of the family, stood eyeing the patient. (Kafka 1988, p. 251)

The horses "eye" the patient, as if participating in the medical examination. Such an anthropomorphosis of the horses is a striking type of metamorphosis which also appears in *The New Advocate*, the first narrative in the collection of short stories *A Country Doctor*. In this story, Dr. Bucephalus was once a horse of Alexander the Great but turned into an advocate who represents others in a court of law. "[F]ree and far from the clamor of battle" (Kafka 1988, p. 415), he can now concentrate on reading law books. Another example of anthropomorphosis of an animal found in Kafka is Red Peter, an ape in *A Report to an Academy* who can speak about his knowledge of human behavior and language. Kafka's narrative world is full of metamorphoses. The two main types, the animalizing of a human being and the anthropomorphosis of an animal, together form a swirl of transformations that deny creatures any solid identity in the post-Darwin age.

Drastic metamorphoses like those mentioned above cross the anthropological boundary between human being and animal. Kafka's world of radical metamorphoses contains a critique on traditional European anthropology. The circulating movement between animalizing of a human being and anthropomorphosis of an animal challenges the "anthropological machine" (Agamben 2004, pp. 33–38) of European philosophy, which defines the human being on the basis of the distinction between human and animal. The country doctor's involvement in the swirl of metamorphoses is strikingly represented in the animation when the doctor thinks of his own death. Kafka's corresponding text reads: "I had still to see that Rose was all right, and then the boy might have his way and I wanted to die too. What was I doing there in that endless winter!" (Kafka 1988, p. 222).

To reproduce the doctor's inner monologue, Yamamura introduces a series of radical metamorphoses that do not correspond directly with the original: The doctor catches the moon in his hands, the moon metamorphoses into a rope, and the doctor uses the rope to hang himself. The hanging doctor then metamorphoses into a horse swinging with its head in the rope. Yamamura understands the strengths of his medium. He himself notes the fundamental relationship between metamorphosis and animation in his book *Welcome to the Animation World [Animeshon no Sekai he Youkoso]* (Yamamura 2006). His animation is full of transformations so radical that no live-action film could possibly represent them. The sequence of the metamorphosing doctor is a typical example.

The film also reproduces other metamorphoses from Kafka's story. In the original, the country doctor undergoes a mild transformation, on top of the radical metamorphoses already depicted, when villagers undress him. How exaggerated the doctor's acrobatic movements are as he is being forcibly undressed in Yamamura's film! The animator creates this dramatic sequence not from a heroic body, but from a passive one. The doctor's resulting nakedness can be interpreted as a loss of the authority inherent in the social status of doctors. His authority continues to disintegrate until he is reduced to returning home naked, through the snow. Yamamura depicts with great care the absurdity and

Yamamura cites J. J. Grandville, a 19th-century French caricaturist, as a pioneer of animation who drew metamorphoses before the cinema was invented. He writes that he was greatly influenced by Grandville (Yamamura 2006, pp. 22–25).

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humor of the naked doctor riding his horse along the snowy road. The doctor's skinny, weak body emphasizes his passiveness; he cannot control his own body fluttering and flapping in the blizzard.

Another example of a mild metamorphosis, absurd and funny in nature, is the sick boy's very different responses to the doctor's first and second examinations. At the first examination, the boy pleads, "Doctor, let me die" (Kafka 1988, p. 222), even though the doctor finds nothing wrong with the boy. At the second examination, however, the doctor discovers that the boy is indeed sick. In his side is an open wound where worms are "wriggling from their fastness in the interior of the wound toward the light, with small white heads and many little legs" (Kafka 1988, p. 223). The wound is described in a surreal way, defying any logical explanation. Nobody can explain why the doctor missed this at the first examination. The boy also changes his attitude entirely, asking the doctor, "Will you save me?" (Kafka 1988, p. 224). Kafka's text does not explain why the second examination results in a completely different diagnosis and why the boy suddenly behaves differently, as if he had a split personality. The change in the boy is not as radical a transformation as the animalizing of a human being or the anthropomorphosis of an animal, but it is a metamorphosis of one personality into another. Yamamura probably chose this story because it contains many instances of metamorphosis that he could present visually through his animation.

3. Metamorphosis and Doubling

This animated film presents many metamorphoses, including both some that do and some that do not appear in Kafka's original story. Crucially, the film itself can be seen as a metamorphosis as it was created by converting a short story into an animation.⁸ For Yamamura's film, metamorphosis is origin not only because it presents diverse metamorphoses in the story of the country doctor, but because it is a product of dynamic media conversion: From written language to a more high-tech medium that includes moving images and sound. That is, in the film, the aesthetic of metamorphosis is realized not only at the level of content, but also at the level of the medium. In other words, for Yamamura, metamorphosis is not merely a motif; it is also a productive current that forms the film itself. The term "adaptation" by which Yamamura's animation is typically understood hides such metamorphosis as productive movement because it does not emphasize the aspect of change and difference. On the contrary, it implies mediation between different existences. Consequently, calling it an "adaptation" diminishes the dynamic aesthetic of metamorphosis, which characterizes *Franz Kafka's A Country Doctor*.

Yamamura must surely consider that the media conversion from literature to animation can also be understood as a dynamic process of metamorphosis. The self-reflexivity that characterizes Yamamura's animated film suggests this. However, we must first recognize that Kafka's short story is itself self-reflexive. Hans-Thies Lehmann, for example, noted that the narrative revolves around Kafka's writing itself (Lehmann 1984). The snow in which the doctor can hardly move can be read as a metaphor for white paper, while the carriage ride with uncontrollable horses is a metaphor for writing. The failure of the doctor, who must ride, completely naked, on the snowy road, unable to return to his daily life, suggests the fateful failure of Kafka as a writer who left his manuscripts to his best friend Max Brod with the instruction that they should be destroyed upon his death.

Yamamura transforms Kafka's self-reflexivity in his animation. To understand how he does this, the principle of doubling is significant. First, a self-reflection necessarily contains a moment of doubling, and second, the transformation of Kafka's self-reflexivity in the animation can also be seen as doubling. Yamamura emphasizes doubling as a motif throughout the film. Two horses neigh two times in the story; the doctor examines the boy twice; two naked men, the doctor and the patient, lie down on the same bed; and the main character rides the carriage twice as he goes to and returns from

⁸ Cf. Jochen Hörisch's media theoretical concept of conversions (Hörisch 2004, pp. 404–23).

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the patient's house. These doublings are also present in Kafka's text. However, Yamamura adds at least two new doublings, which are crucial to the self-reflexivity in the animation. The first is a pair of little black figures, absent from Kafka's story, which appear in the film to speak the doctor's inner monologue. The doctor's voice is split twice. First is a split between his internal and external voice. But the internal voice is further split between the two black figures, which resemble each other so closely that they appear to be twins (Figure 2).



Figure 2. ©YAMAMURA Animation/SHOCHIKU.

The second doubling that Yamamura adds to Kafka's story appears in the last sequence. The viewer momentarily sees two shadows appear from the doctor's house. One shadow is, of course, the doctor's. But whose shadow is the other one? This last shot is noteworthy because it recalls the beginning of the story where the doctor, who had heard the night-bell ringing, opens the door. ¹⁰ If the last sequence is thus connected to the opening of the film, this scene then creates a loop, which can be interpreted as a self-reference. Because of this self-referential structure, we can say that the second shadow is likely the filmmaker's. This last scene with two shadows suggests that the doubling—which encompasses not only many pairs and repetitions throughout the film but also the transformation of Kafka's short story into an animation—represents the beginning and the end of the narrative occurring at the same time. The doubling is never a simple copy but generates productive difference.

What is the relationship between doubling and metamorphosis? First, both appear in the content of Yamamura's animation and Kafka's story. And second, the media conversion from Kafka's literature to Yamamura's animated film can be understood not only as metamorphosis, but also as doubling. Doubling and metamorphosis may not initially seem to be similar, but they are related because they are two modes of difference. Both Yamamura's animation and Kafka's short story develop on the bases of metamorphosis and doubling, two principles that coincide with each other in the sense that they oppose the domination of identity.

4. Metamorphosis as Diversification and Integration

Finally, let us relate the above observations and reflections to the topic of transculturality and transnationalism. In Yamamura's film, one aspect that cannot be ignored is that the animation is mainly voiced by Kyogen actors from the Shigeyama family. Kyogen is a traditional form of comic theatre in

In his excellent article about Kafka's story, Joseph Vogl (Vogl 2006) argues that the doubling and the repetition that dominate Kafka's world are connected with the comic nature of his literature.

¹⁰ Cf. an interview with Yamamura about his animation: http://www.animations-cc.net/body-interview.html (15 September 2018).

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Japan that deals with daily, worldly, and humorous motifs, in contrast to Noh theatre (which Kyogen is often performed with), which focuses on the metaphysical, sublime, and serious. The Shigeyama Kyogen company in Kyoto is famous for its experimental works. In *Franz Kafka's A Country Doctor*, Shigeyama family actors voice all the principal characters except Rose. ¹¹ Yamamura's animation thus realizes a notable encounter between Kafka, a representative of modernist European literature, and traditional Japanese performance art. This short film is therefore an interesting case of transculturality, worth closer analysis.

There is no precedent for Yamamura's animation in the history of Japanese film in the sense that no Japanese movie adaptation of Kafka's literature had ever been made until *Franz Kafka's A Country Doctor* was released in 2007. This film is thus outside the existing domain of Japanese movie culture, as it deals with Kafka's short story and relates transculturally to the European aesthetic tradition of metamorphosis. Such a transcultural *diversification* at the level of film is accompanied by an opposite movement at the level of language: There is a dimension of cultural *integration* in the animation, because it translates Kafka's short story from German into Japanese. This means that Yamamura's transcultural animation, which unquestionably crosses cultural boundaries in terms of character, narrative, and motif, includes a contrary movement of cultural integration in terms of language.

There is another important verbal form of cultural integration in Yamamura's film as well. Kyogen as traditional performance art plays a central role in the media conversion of Kafka's story into Japanese animation. This results not in the usual naturalistic articulation of contemporary Japanese speech but in a theatrical and classical vocalization by the Kyogen actors as the film tells the strange story of the country doctor. In this way, the film surely contains a dimension of cultural integration that domesticates foreignness and reduces distance between cultures.

We must remember, however, that the tradition of Kyogen theatre does not remain the same when it interacts with the European aesthetics of metamorphosis. Kyogen changes irreversibly, swept up in the swirl of metamorphosis, to deal with modern themes from this non-Japanese cultural setting. Yamamura's media conversion from German modern literature to Japanese contemporary animation is accompanied by a diversion of Kyogen theatre from tradition to experiment. The traditional performance art could not integrate foreign culture without undergoing its own diversification. Looked at in this way, the last sequence of Franz Kafka's A Country Doctor can be seen in a new light. Kafka's story ends with the words, "Betrayed! Betrayed! A false alarm on the night bell once answered—it cannot be made good, not ever." (Kafka 1988, p. 225) This passage reveals the anger and anxiety of the naked doctor on the horse, who will probably never be able to return to his home, unlike the ancient hero Odysseus, the prototype of an intellectual in the European tradition. In this endless adventure, which takes place not on the ocean but in snow, the doctor must change irreversibly, losing all of what has heretofore constituted his identity. The ending, with the double curse "Betrayed! Betrayed!", is a curious mixture of comedy and tragedy. But the Kyogen performers may say "Betrayed! Betrayed!" as well, because they must leave their familiar domain to experience a dangerous adventure in their performance for Yamamura's animation.

The transculturality that Yamamura's animation achieves is a complex process; it is neither one-way integration nor one-way diversification, but rather chiastic. Transculturality is another name for a fundamental metamorphosis in which diversification and integration, two contradictory movements, occur simultaneously. Such a complex, chiastic transculturality makes it impossible to regard Yamamura's animated film as anything other than transnational cinema. The relationship between diversification and integration in Yamamura's film could be explained using the anti-psychoanalytical vocabularies of Deleuze and Guattari, who noted that deterritorialization and reterritorialization of desires are two sides of the same coin: "the one is the reverse side of the other" (Deleuze and Félix

Sensaku Shigeyama voices the country doctor, Shime Shigeyama the groom, Shigeru Shigeyama and Douji Shigeyama the inner voices of the country doctor, and Ippei Shigeyama the boy.

¹² Japanese film director Masao Adachi made Kafka's short story A Hunger Artist into a movie and released it in 2016.

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1984, p. 316). Such paradoxical movement is metamorphosis as origin, which Yamamura's animation brings to life.

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