

Justifying the Esthetic in Kafka's "Josephine the Singer"

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Franz Kafka's "Josephine the Singer, or The Mouse Folk" follows the attempts of a member of a community to understand and explain the art of their only singer, Josephine, and the powerful effect that her singing has on the community that ordinarily has no use for song or diversion. To the Narrator, Josephine's "art" does not appear to be exceptional in itself and does not provide a satisfactory explanation for the power it has to draw the community together and capture its attention so thoroughly. In fact, the Narrator cannot distinguish anything about Josephine that makes her or her singing superior to others in their community. In sound, the Narrator feels that her singing is identical to if not weaker than the normal piping or squeaking that the other members emit constantly and without effort, yet they go out of their way to convene around Josephine when she performs, and there is no denying that her performances have an exceptional, almost drug-like effect on the crowds that form around her. Even in moments of intense danger, if Josephine begins to sing, the perpetually overworked creatures (the title suggests that they are mice, rather than humans) will pause and divert their energies, gathering around her to convene in rapt attention and silence through her performance.

Kafka's story raises some key questions, bringing to mind the delicate and sometimes strained relationship between modern artists and their audience: what criteria are necessary for a performance or piece to be recognized as art, and who is qualified to validate it as such? What is the true source of Josephine's power, and what function does it serve in her community? Should the reader believe the Narrator's suggestion that the artist and her songs are truly unexceptional; that the attention she receives is an act of charity or protection rather than a direct response to her talents? Or, is Josephine correct in thinking that she is the one who protects and serves her community through the "sacrifice" she makes by singing to them? Why does the community acknowledge the effect her songs have on it but collectively refuse to give her the recognition of her art that she requests of them? Using Eric Gans' theory of Generative Anthropology, I will seek to explain the ethical

and esthetic function of Josephine's art in the community as well as the Narrator's apparent resentment towards her and the community's unwillingness to grant her the "permanent recognition of her art" (Kafka 372) that she desires.

The Narrator goes to great pains to lay out the numerous difficulties the community has with understanding both the meaning of and the power behind Josephine's song. That she and her song possess power over the others is undeniable, but nobody can define what, if anything, differentiates her from the rest of the community. If their enchantment was with the beauty of her voice, it "would have to give one an immediate and lasting feeling of being something out of the ordinary, a feeling that from her throat something is sounding . . . something that Josephine alone and no one else can enable us to hear" (Kafka 360), which it doesn't do. The sound of her piping alone holds no power; "to comprehend her art it is necessary not only to hear but to see her" (Kafka 361). The community suspects that the art lies in her ability to show them the beauty in something so commonplace that they would not notice or appreciate it without her. The Narrator wonders if "[p]erhaps . . . [they] admire in her what [they] do not at all admire in [them]selves" (Kafka 362). But she insists that her song is a unique, high art that the others are simply unable to understand, and she scorns any comparison between her singing and the ordinary piping of the others. She is encouraged when a distraction from her performance occurs and she is given the opportunity to overcome it and regain the center of attention, proving her power to the onlookers and teaching them "awed respect" (Kafka 363). "Josephine likes best to sing just when things are most upset" (Kafka 364), in moments of heightened danger and distress, and the mouse people invariably exert themselves to meet her excessive demands. The Narrator suggests that perhaps the community cares for Josephine as they would for a frail child entrusted to their care, and puts great emphasis on "the difference in strength between the people and the individual" (Kafka 365), suggesting that the notion of Josephine being somehow stronger than the masses would be impossible. Josephine, on the contrary, views herself as the people's savior and believes that the gift of her singing is a great sacrifice. She becomes increasingly demanding of the community to relieve her of her everyday duties-to acknowledge her role among them as solely that of their artist-while they stand strong against her on this one aspect, unable to grant her this unheard-of distinction. Despite the Narrator's attempts to appear credible and objective, the only thing we can be sure of is that Josephine's relationship with the community is tense and enigmatic.

Generative Anthropology operates under the hypothesis that all "essentially human" cultural phenomena such as divinity, esthetics, desire and resentment originated at once with the development of language in what Gans calls the "Originary Scene." Signs are exchanged in order to defer violence during this scene, and the human ability to re-create these signs later in time with an understanding

of their abstract meaning is born. The esthetic exists in the originary scene when the periphery accepts a sign as a supplement for the centralized object which is the focus of their attention. Esthetics and art function as a way to “transcend the resentment” that the periphery feels when the center appears to deny itself to them (Gans 21). The esthetic object both reproduces the transcendent abstract quality of the central object by referring to and evoking its image within the viewers’ imagination, and defers the resentment towards the center as the viewer recognizes the esthetic object as an artificial construction. If the esthetic object is effective, the viewer will continue to oscillate between resentment and deferral, imbuing the object with desirable power each time they witness its transcendent abilities, and demystifying this effect each time they recall its human origin (*Chronicle* 369). The esthetic object will only function if it is deemed to be sacred or significant by the viewer, since it is only a representation of what is desirable in the sacred center and depends upon the audience’s ability to experience or imagine the transcendent using the art as a medium. The viewer cannot be ordered to accept or believe the supplement, making art vulnerable to the reaction of the audience.

The tension between the audience and Josephine is not unlike that of any society trying to understand the hype around a new type of art they don’t understand. The audience can at once be enthralled and resentful, seeing no reason for the art to be so exalted or important, but feeling excitement or catharsis in its presence nonetheless. It is threatening to observe something occupying the center of attention, the sacred center, if you don’t understand why it is there. Often the public’s negative reaction is the very reason an artist will rise to fame. Think of the initially negative public reaction to the rise of the impressionists, abstract expressionists, or Duchamp’s subversive “Fountain,” a found urinal signed with a pseudonym and labeled as “art”. While people were initially offended by the works-feeling that their precious conception of high art was being perverted-their views towards the artwork quickly changed. The more attention the works got, the more significant they became, the more artists copied their style, and the more central they became in the public sphere. In an article on fame, Gans explains that celebrities gain power simply by being “asymmetrically known and therefore significant” (*Chronicle* 321). While the initial source of attention may or may not be for a skill or talent that the celebrity possesses, people’s attention to, desire of, and subsequent resentment towards the object increase its power, pushing it even further away from the periphery and towards the transcendent (*Chronicle* 321). For an artist who truly believes in the artistic merit of their his or her work, this type of popularity can be maddeningly invalidating. Likewise, a public who suspects that the object occupying their sacred center is there purely because it is popular and not because it has earned its status can be a similarly frustrating experience. While the Narrator of “Josephine the Singer” acknowledges that Josephine’s song produces a pleasurable effect for the community, there appears to be an underlying

fear that she does not deserve the popularity or central position that she has been given. Josephine, on the other hand, seems to believe that the public does not appreciate her for the right reasons, but her devotion to her art compels her to press on with her performances.

Despite the confusion over the validity of her song or the source of its power, Josephine's singing does—for whatever reason—serve the ethical function of the esthetic. While the community and the Narrator equivocate over its validity, they continuously experience the very power and effect of the song that make it valid. It functions as a release from daily tension and as a central object upon which they can all focus: the audience, normally constantly in motion and chatter, "sits in mouselike stillness; as if [they] had become partakers in the peace [they] long for" (Kafka 362), and even those who oppose the validity of her art "are soon sunk in the feeling of the mass, which, warmly pressed body to body, listens with indrawn breath" (Kafka 364). Gans explains, "the pleasure of the esthetic effect is . . . implicitly shared by the human community; the peaceful sharing of the esthetic experience is a guarantee of communal harmony, in contrast with the mimetic rivalry provoked by the "'shared'" desire for a real object" (*Chronicle* 261). The collective appreciation of the moments of peace that surround Josephine is the closest her people come to transcending their rigorous, stressful realities. They are able to collectively enjoy an effect without competing with each other for it, and experience the "'pleasure' of the deferral of violence" (*Chronicle* 260) that is inherent to the esthetic effect. Josephine's insistence that "she is singing to deaf ears" (Kafka 363), and the similarities between her "singing" and the ordinary "piping" that the other members of the community have noticed help to re-create the "paradoxical structure of identification with and alienation from the central figure" (Gans 156). The community's alienation from her art, caused by their sense that they do not understand or have access to the importance or highness of Josephine's song in the way that she perceives it, increases the mystery surrounding what appears to be a divine center. In this case they believe that her art is capable of transcending their basic understanding or comprehension, therefore it appears mystical and obtains more importance than it originally had. This is evident in the Narrator's fixation on her art, despite his hesitancy to validate it as such. At the same time, the identification with the center and the similarities the community sees between Josephine's singing and their own piping and squeaking maintain the periphery's fantasy and illusion of the possibility of obtaining the space in the sacred center, or at least attaining a level of understanding about the art that no one else has. The danger of this is that if the audience identifies with her too well, they will begin to question her central position.

Despite her insistence that she be acknowledged as different and separate from the other members of the community, Josephine depends upon the acceptance of her

art by the public. She attempts to guard the validity of her song against any scrutiny or challenge to its value that may threaten its continued effectiveness: “she denies any connection between her art and ordinary piping. For those who are of the contrary opinion she has only contempt and probably unacknowledged hatred. . . . Josephine does not want mere admiration, she wants to be admired exactly in the way she prescribes” (Kafka 362). This does not mean that Josephine’s art is not actually art, but it does mean that she recognizes the threat of disillusionment. René Girard helps us to understand Josephine’s resentment towards the public she depends on through his theory of mimetic desire: “Only someone who prevents us from satisfying a desire which he himself has inspired in us is truly an object of hatred” (Girard 10-11). The audience (which in this case is the object of hatred) at once makes Josephine’s art possible by recognizing it as such, and threatens its continued existence through possessing the capacity to evaluate it and deem it unworthy. Her authority and importance are mediated through the public view of her, which puts her in competition with them since they also exist as the only thing preventing her from achieving her goal of ultimate recognition and validation.

The Narrator in “Josephine the Singer” struggles over whether to give Josephine’s singing the power and authority of a valid sacred center. He recognizes her apparent ability to create a moment in which the community reconvenes to appreciate and rally around a central focus, but he is not convinced that Josephine or her song are in actuality worthy of the place they occupy (or the place that she demands to be elevated to). He asks: “It is her singing that enchants us or is it not rather the solemn stillness enclosing her frail little voice?” (Kafka 362). Is her song really worthy of the attention and reverence it receives? Or is it the process of convening, of watching, the “ceremonial performance” (362) and the communal experience of the song that gives it power? Despite his apparent efforts to present an objective and academic examination of Josephine’s role in the community, the Narrator relays her story with a negative slant (Mahlendorf).

The Narrator’s “equivocation [which is] so noticeable in his presentation of the people’s position was necessary to preserve the fact, or myth, if you will, of his impartiality . . . however, it becomes quickly obvious that our narrator’s perspective is limited, despite his posture of omniscience” (Sattler 412). He describes Josephine as “sarcastic and arrogant . . . vulgar . . . [and] frail” (Kafka 362). He believes that her demands are “excessive,” (Kafka 364) and unworthy of the physical danger they pose to the community. While he admits that Josephine is quiet among her generally noisy people the Narrator “pretends an omniscience he does not have” (Mahlendorf 203). His explanations of Josephine’s motivations appear to be purely speculative, so that the negative, power-hungry portrait he paints of her winds up saying more about himself than it does about Josephine. One explanation for this is

that Josephine poses a particular threat to the Narrator himself, who is the only other individual character within the story. "Amid an a-cultural, a-historical species that ostensibly practices neither music nor history, the singer and the Narrator stand as diacritically marked ciphers. Both constitute difference . . . and create difference. . . . But as a member of the mouse folk the Narrator can no more maintain difference than can [Josephine]" (Norris 377). "The ulterior motive is differentiation; [Josephine] wants to be regarded as a goddess; i.e. to have her difference acknowledged" (Norris 373). Similarly, Ursula Mahlendorf suggests that the Narrator wishes to define himself as "an intellectual interested in exploring in thought the nature of music (art), of mousehood, and of the role of the artist and art in an oppressed people" (Mahlendorf 221). While the Narrator may believe that his main motivation is that of intellectual exploration, the underlying resentment in his narration suggests that Josephine's position as an individual puts her in direct conflict with him, and her position of power mediates his own desire to occupy the center scene. The community as a whole may resent and question Josephine for attempting to occupy the center without specific proof of distinction, but the Narrator who views her as an internal rival appears to resent her on a more personal level. In "No More Masterpieces?" Gans explains that "[t]oday we no longer believe in masterpieces, because we have no desire to admire those who produce them" (*Chronicle* 27). Our unwillingness to grant social distinction to artists inhibits our ability to grant their artwork or performance a similar distinction. It is this unwillingness that Josephine attempts to combat within her community.

The mouse folk are a community in danger. The stress and tension of impending violence will tear their community apart unless they can find a way to re-create the effect of the originary scene, with its resulting deferral of violence and release of tension. Josephine's piping in the midst of "grave decisions, is almost like [their] people's precarious existence amid the tumult of a hostile world" (Kafka 367). Her struggle mirrors and validates their own struggle against the ever-present threat of violence and death. Through observing her they can mediate and justify the value of their own perseverance in the face of opposition. A similar phenomena happens to any country or community under siege; in moments of danger, an individual who embodies the ideals of the nation (for America it is often the underdog) will function to inspire a sense of unity and solidarity among the people. The people identify with her struggle; they feel that it is an emblem of their own national struggle, like a metaphor for the mousefolk's own "precarious existence." The Narrator explains: "Josephine exerts herself, a mere nothing in voice, a mere nothing in execution, she asserts herself and gets across to us; it does us good to think of that" (Kafka 367). But the identification with her is too close for them to grant her a position that is higher than theirs. It is their sameness that gives them strength; to elevate her would be to remove the element of closeness they feel to her at the center of the scene and break the fantasy of occupying the space themselves. If Americans were

to reward a glorified everyman by giving him money and prestige, he would cease to be an equal and would therefore lose his function. Josephine is central purely by the fact that she is able to get through to the community in moments of crisis and that she is willing to try, but not because the community is able to recognize anything inherently sacred or powerful in her song. Josephine is a compelling folk artist demanding the recognition and elevation of a classically trained musical genius.

Ultimately, Josephine faces the same problem of esthetic expression that any artist of the modern era faces. Gans believes that Christianity, through its “foregrounding of the moral equality of all” (Gans 148) challenges the audience’s willingness to accept the authority of an individual purely because of their public status. If every man is deemed equal and worthy of the love of god, a justification from the center of why he deserves to be in the sacred position more than any other member of the audience becomes necessary. Why has he alone been elected to occupy the center? The lack of distinction between Josephine and the Narrator explains the undercurrent of resentment throughout the narration. The community as a whole “surrender[s] unconditionally to no one” (Kafka 371), but Josephine’s need for distinction drives her to demand recognition and release from her day to day responsibilities entirely. She believes that her art is something powerful and unique, but she depends upon the community to validate her artwork and mediate her own importance for her. Since she doesn’t believe that her listeners understand her art for what it is, she instead asks them to acknowledge her as their national artist—an honor and position that would solidify her role as protector and savior. “She reaches for the highest garland not because it is momentarily hanging a little lower but because it is the highest” (Kafka 373); if the community were to recognize her singing as equal in value to the physical labor she can provide, she would entirely transcend the laws and customs of the community, therefore justifying her position in the sacred center. If Josephine cannot adequately convince the Narrator or community that she belongs in the sacralized position (whether she does in reality belong there or not), the audience will resent her for attempting to fill it; she becomes their internal rival and apparent equal who stands in the way of their appropriation of the center. “Josephine the Singer” appears to be an account of this careful game modern artists must play with their community in order to achieve the esthetic effect necessary to gain public acceptance and ethical function (a game that Kafka himself was all too familiar with).

In his other works, tortured, misunderstood or ignored artists such as the Hunger Artist or even the character of the land surveyor in *The Castle* either cannot receive or cannot maintain acknowledgement or recognition for the skills they know they possess. Kafka’s artists are devoted to their art with their entire being, much as he was. Writing consumed his life, his body, and his mind as he adopted a rigorous

lifestyle of near starvation and gymnastics to support it (Anderson 141). Josephine is not insincere in her performance as an artist:

[I]t is as if from everything in her that does not directly subserve her singing all strength has been withdrawn, almost all power of life, as if she were laid bare, abandoned, committed merely to the care of good angels, as if while she is so wholly withdrawn and living only in her song a cold breath blowing upon her might kill her. (Kafka 363)

Artists know within themselves that their art is true, but without public interest they cannot achieve their goal, whether it is to produce the aesthetic effect, or to have this effect recognized to the extent that they feel is appropriate. “The claims of the artist are not denied; rather they are put into perspective.” The artist’s desire to occupy or knowledge of belonging in the center of the scene may be valid, but society will not necessarily agree—a predicament that Kafka struggled with throughout his career as a writer (Sattler 417). While Josephine’s art does seem to have served a pleasant if not necessary function among the community, she is unable to convince them that she or her art are entirely worthy of her desired position in the sacred center. Despite her demands for “public, unambiguous, permanent recognition of her art, going far beyond any precedent so far known” (Kafka 372), the community cannot grant her this position when they have no proof of her superiority beyond the fact that she chooses to perform.

In the end, when their refusal of her demands forces Josephine to flee from the public eye, the community acknowledges that her presence will be missed: “how can our gatherings take place in utter silence?” (Kafka 376), they ask. But their inability to validate Josephine’s position in the central scene render them unable to recognize the ethical function of the esthetic that her performance serves. Josephine represents the struggle of the modern artist to justify the value and position of his or her art amidst a community of democratic equals. While the community can feel the power of her song, they cannot rationalize it, and refuse to grant her the position of the divine center for her apparent ability to possess it alone.

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